

Converbs in Borana Language: A Syntactic and Semantic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the function and role of converbs within the Borana language, a Cushitic language primarily spoken in Kenya and Ethiopia. Converbs are non-finite verbs that express an adverbial relation, such as temporal, cause, or manner, and are crucial for clause chaining and complex sentence formation. Though converbs are a feature in many Afro-Asiatic languages, no studies have been done on their syntactic and semantic functions in the Borana language. It investigates the morphological markers of converbs in Borana and discusses their syntactic structures and semantic functions in discourse. The data is elicited from interviews with native speakers, recorded narratives, and selected texts to provide a corpus for data analysis. Specific topics of inquiry will be the relationship between converbs and main clauses, the degree of clause dependency, and the pragmatic functions of converbs in storytelling and everyday communication.

Keywords: *Converbs, Aspects, Clause chaining, Foreground and Background*

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1. Introduction

The concept of the converb plays an important role in the syntactic and semantic structure of certain languages. A converb is a form of a verb that cannot function as the main predicate of an independent clause, but it modifies the main verb of the sentence, offering additional information concerning the situation of the main action described by the main verb

The study of converbs has attracted attention from linguists due to their unique morphosyntactic and semantic properties. Haspelmath (1995) morphologically defines converbs as non-finite verb forms, which are generally not inflected for person, number, tense, aspect, or mood. Syntactically, he describes them as dependent verbs lacking subordinating conjunctions. According to him, morpho-syntactically, converbs function to mark adverbial subordination (Haspelmath, 1995). Semantically, they modify verbs, clauses, or sentences without modifying nouns or noun phrases. As outlined by Haspelmath (1995), their primary function is to establish adverbial relationships, especially in clause-chaining constructions that express sequences of events.

Ebert (2008) supports Haspelmath's definition, adding that converbs are prevalent in clause-chaining in SOV languages, such as those found in Asia, Ethiopia, and South America. According to Ebert, (2008), converbs are integral in connecting multiple events where only

the final verb carries finite markers. This syntactic structure highlights the significance of converbs in encoding relationships like subordination, condition, and progression of actions.

Several scholars have explored converbs within typological and cross-linguistic frameworks, illustrating their grammaticalization and functional versatility. Haspelmath (1995) and Nedjalkov (1998) have emphasized the role of converbs in discourse cohesion, facilitating temporal, causal, and conditional relations. Ebert (2008) and Slater & Franco (2017) investigated their morphosyntactic structures in Tibeto-Burman and Turkic languages, respectively, showcasing how converbs maintain narrative flow and coherence in communication and texts

From a typological perspective, Bisang (1994) observed the grammaticalization of converbs in East and Southeast Asian languages, where they often mark aspects or modalities in addition to inter-clausal relations. Anderson (2007), focusing on Khalkha Mongolian, demonstrated how converbs contribute to syntactic cohesion by supporting purpose and conditional clause relations without reliance on explicit conjunctions.

Despite their prominence, no linguistic research has been done on converbs in Borana, a major Cushitic language spoken in Kenya and Ethiopia. The available studies on Borana's grammar and syntax have either overlooked or inadequately described converbs' forms, functions, and syntactic behavior.

This gap poses problems for both linguistic scholarship and practical applications. For instance, without the right understanding of converbs, it is hard to conduct a proper analysis of Borana syntax to develop appropriate literacy materials with depth. The same is true for an effective translation of the Bible. Furthermore, without such systematic documentation, insight into how converbs contribute to discourse cohesion and communication in Borana is limited.

The insufficient documentation and analysis of Borana converbs are seriously hindering linguistic understanding and the development of language resources. This study tries to fill this gap by describing the morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties of Borana converbs in a way that lays a foundation for further studies and practical applications in translation and literacy efforts. This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on converbs by analyzing Borana converbs' semantic and syntactic characteristics and seeks to elucidate their functional roles and typological significance.

The analysis draws on comparative data from previous studies on converbs and incorporates new insights from the Borana narratives analysis. The verbs within these narratives were analyzed to observe morphological variations. Through this investigation, the paper will provide a detailed account of how converbs operate within Borana syntax and discourse, contributing to the broader understanding of converbs in the world's languages. Data was collected for converbs in Borana through recordings of three narrative stories by native speakers.

2. Converb in Ethio-Semitic languages

Ethio-Semitic languages are part of the Afro-Asiatic branch, including Amharic, Tigrinya, and Ge'ez. Studies such as Meyer (2006), Appleyard (2001), and Mulungeta (2012) have examined the presence of converbs in some of these languages.

In Meyer, (2006), a close investigation into the status of converbs in Amharic is provided; it is shown that in general, they cover temporal, causal, and concessive relations. Meyer's

research illustrates that converbs in Amharic are morphologically marked non-finite verbs often occurring in clause-final positions independent clauses. For example, converbs in Amharic are usually morphologically marked by the suffix *-m*, which functions to signal temporal simultaneity or sequential action. Meyer (2006) points out that though the Amharic converbs are mostly used in spoken discourses for narration or description, they are also frequently found in formal written texts.

Appleyard, (2001) deals with converbs in Tigrinya and Ge'ez, with special attention to historical development and syntactic functions. According to Appleyard, (2001), converb usages in these languages represent a grammaticalization process whereby an independent verb develops into a marker of temporal and causal relations. Converbs in Tigrinya are normally made by adding the suffix *-na* or *-ti* and are widely used either to tell sequences or to form causative expressions. The research draws attention to the fact that in Tigrinya, converbs are at the center of the narrative structures to provide cohesion that joins sentences without further conjunctions. Mulugeta (2012) discusses the syntactic functions of Gurage converbs, in comparison with converbs in Amharic and Tigrinya. According to Mulugeta (2012), Gurage converbs are formed using suffixes such as *-wa* and play an important role in indicating temporal and concessive relations. Mulugeta (2012) research provides a comparative overview of the grammatical and semantic functions of converbs, showing how they adapt to specific syntactic requirements of particular languages while continuing with their work of clause linking.

3. Converbs in Cushitic languages

Studies such as Saeed, (1999), Crass, (2005), and Zalalem, (2014), indicate that converbs, in the different Cushitic languages spoken mainly in the Horn of Africa, are instrumental in expressing complex sentence structures, clause chaining, and different kinds of temporal and causal relations. The difference between languages would be through different forms, given the typological features and grammatical trends in these languages; Somali, Oromo, Afar, and Sidamo.

Saeed, (1999), discusses Somali converbs, focusing particularly on how these forms are used to convey the relationship between temporally linked or causally dependent actions. Saeed's work indicates that Somali converbs are typically marked in dependent clauses by verbal suffixes, most of them ending in *-so* or *-do*. Saeed, (1999) notes that by using converbs, the speaker can easily provide the timing and causation of actions without adding any other words for time or cause. He further remarks that Somali converbs are very important in narration and descriptive situations because they allow fast-tempo narration and hence contribute to cohesion at the discourse level as a whole (Saeed 1999).

Mous, (2004) discusses Afar converbs with a focus on their syntactic and semantic functions. Mous, (2004) explains that, in Afar, converbs are non-finite verbs, usually marked by the suffix *-ma*, and are used to indicate actions that are concurrent or sequential to that of the main clause. According to Mous, (2004), converbs in Afar are multifunctional given that they are not only applied to link actions but also to express intention, purpose, and contrast. His research highlights the Afar converbs' flexibility in how they promote complex sentence structures, both in formal and informal discourses, by facilitating not only brevity but also clarity in communication.

Crass, (2005) discusses converbs in Sidamo, a South Cushitic language, and points out how Sidamo converbs, often ending in *-ne* or *-ye*, provide continuity and coherence in longer

narratives through clause chaining without conjunctions. His work suggests that Sidamo converbs are versatile in showing temporal relations, particularly in narrating past events. Moreover, Crass notices that the use of converbs in Sidama exemplifies a typological feature of many Cushitic languages, namely that non-finite verb forms permit economy in sentence structure when employed in narratives (Crass 2005).

4. Converbs in the Borana language

The following section explains the syntactic and semantic aspects of the converbs in the Borana language.

4.1 The syntactic perspective of converb

Before devolving into converb, it is necessary to provide some background information on the aspect of the Borana language. Converbs are by nature very closely connected to the aspectual nuances of actions in subordinate clauses. Borana is an aspectual language, which means that, in its grammatical system, it places considerable emphasis on the expression of aspect, that is, how an action unfolds in time, rather than tense, which looks at when the action occurs. The verbal morphology encodes the aspect, through suffixes.

4.1.1 Imperfective aspect

The imperfective aspect is a grammatical aspect that emphasizes the ongoing, continuous, or repeated nature of an action. Comrie (1976) states that the imperfect aspect is a category that considers the internal temporal structure of an action or event. It indicates an event or situation from within in a sense of progressive or repetitive. In the Borana language, the imperfective aspect is marked through different verb suffixes for different persons. See the table below.

Table 1: Imperfective Aspect

Verbs	Person	Singular	Plural
<i>Duf-</i> 'come'	1 st Person	<i>duf-a</i>	<i>dum-n-a</i>
	2 nd person	<i>duf-t-a</i> (F) <i>duf-a</i>	<i>duf-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>duf-an-i</i>
	3 rd person	<i>duf-t-i</i> (F) <i>duf-a</i>	<i>duf-a</i> <i>duf-a</i>
Dug 'drink'	1 st Person	<i>dug-a</i>	<i>dun-n-a</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>du-th-a</i> <i>dug-a</i>	<i>du-th-an-i</i> (F) <i>dug-an-i</i>
	3 rd Person	<i>du-th-i</i> (F) <i>dug-a</i>	<i>dug-a</i> <i>dug-a</i>

Raf- 'sleep'	1 st Person	<i>raf-a</i>	<i>ram-n-a</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>raf-t-a</i>	<i>raf-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>raf-an-i</i>
	3 rd Person	<i>raf-t-i</i> (F) <i>raf-a</i>	<i>raf-a</i> <i>raf-a</i>
Qor 'write'	1 st Person	<i>qor-a</i>	<i>qor-a</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>qor-t-a</i> (F) <i>qor-a</i>	<i>qor-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>qor-an-i</i>
	3 rd Person	<i>qor-t-i</i> (F) <i>qor-a</i>	<i>qor-a</i> <i>qora</i>

Based on the table provided, it is apparent that within the Borana language, the imperfective aspect is consistently indicated by the verb suffix *-a*, with the exceptions of the 2nd person masculine and feminine plural and the 3rd person feminine singular forms, both of which are denoted by the suffix *-i*. This pattern underscores a systematic approach to aspectual marking within Borana, wherein the majority of imperfective instances adhere to the suffix *-a*, while specific grammatical contexts necessitate the utilization of the suffix *-i* to delineate the 2nd person plural and the 3rd person feminine singular conjugations. The plural form is always marked through *-n*, and *-an*, the feminine through *-t*, and the masculine remains unmarked form.

4.1.1 Perfective Aspect

The perfective aspect refers to a grammatical situation that indicates the completion of an action without specifying the duration. It emphasizes the result or endpoint of an action rather than its ongoing nature. Comrie (1976) defines the perfective aspect as: "The perfective aspect is characterized by the viewpoint of the speaker on the situation as a whole. From the speaker's point of view, the situation is viewed as a complete whole, without reference to its internal temporal structure".

Therefore, in summary, the perfective aspect focuses on actions viewed as complete or bounded in time, with emphasis on the endpoint or result of the action. It is characterized by the speaker's viewpoint of the situation as a whole, without consideration of its internal temporal structure. In the Borana language, the perfective aspect is expressed by a verb suffix *-e* or *-i* in 1st person, 2nd person, and 3rd person. See the tables below.

Table 2: Perfective aspect

Verbs	Persons	Singular	Plural
<i>Duf-</i> 'came'	1 st Person	<i>duf-e</i>	<i>dum-n-e</i>
	2 nd person	<i>duf-t-e</i> (F) <i>duf-e</i> (M)	<i>duf-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>duf-an-i</i> (M)
	3 rd person	<i>duf-t-e</i> (F) <i>duf-e</i> (M)	<i>duf-e</i> <i>duf-e</i>
<i>Dug-</i> 'Drunk'	1 st Person	<i>dug-e</i>	<i>dun-n-e</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>du-th-e</i> (F) <i>du-g-e</i> (M)	<i>du-th-an-i</i> (F) <i>du-g-an-i</i> (M)
	3 rd Person	<i>du-th-e</i> (f) <i>dug-e</i> (m)	<i>dug-e</i> <i>dug-e</i>
<i>Raf-</i> 'sleep'	1 st Person	<i>raf-e</i>	<i>ram-n-e</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>raf-t-e</i>	<i>raf-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>raf-an-i</i>
	3 rd Person	<i>raf-t-e</i> (F) <i>raf-e</i>	<i>raf-e</i> <i>raf-e</i>
<i>Qor</i> 'write'	1 st Person	<i>qor-e</i>	<i>qor-e</i>
	2 nd Person	<i>qor-t-e</i> <i>qor-e</i>	<i>qor-t-an-i</i> (F) <i>qor-an-i</i>
	3 rd Person	<i>qor-t-e</i> (F) <i>qor-e</i>	<i>qor-e</i> <i>qor-e</i>

In the analysis presented above, it is evident that within the Borana language paradigm, the perfective aspect is consistently denoted by the verb suffix *-e*, with the exception being the 2nd person plural form, which is indicated by the suffix *-i*. Consequently, it can be deduced that in Borana, the perfective aspect is uniformly signified by the verb suffix *-e*, with the sole deviation being the 2nd person plural form, which is distinguished by the suffix *-i*. The plural form is always marked through *-n* and *-an*, the feminine through *-t* and the masculine remain unmarked form.

Now on converb, in the Borana narrative framework, the analysis of converbs reveals distinct morphological and functional patterns tied directly to the suffixes used. These patterns correspond to the aspectual nature of the verbs, which is foundational for understanding how

actions are sequenced, related, or emphasized in discourse. The verbs with the suffix –*ee*, signify perfective converbs, indicating completed actions and the verbs suffixed –*aa* denote imperfective converbs, suggesting ongoing actions. Additionally, verbs that end with the suffix –*naan* are indicative of habitual converbs.

4.1.2 Imperfective converbs

In the Borana language, imperfective converbs express actions that occur concurrently with the main verb's action. They emphasize simultaneity on a sentence level and describe the continuous state of the verbs. These converbs are marked by the suffix –*aa*, which is attached to the verb stem. See the examples below.

1. *Inni* *nyaat-aa* *gara* *hojji* *dem-a*
 He.Nom eat-IPFV.CVBto work go-3SG.IPFV
 'He goes to work while eating'

In the example above, the converb *nyaat-aa* 'eat' describes the ongoing action that occurs concurrently with *dem-a* 'go'. The main verb depends on the converb to specify the context of movement, while the converb relies on the main verb to situate the action in a broader event.

2. *Boru-n* *farda* *guluf-aa* *dhuf-a*
 Boru-NOM horse gallop-IPFV.CVB come-3SG.M.IPFV'
 'Boru will come galloping a horse'

The converb *guluf-aa* 'gallop' conveys the manner of the subject's arrival, occurring simultaneously with *dhuf-a* 'come' which is marked with the perfective marker –*a*. The actions are intertwined: the main verb describes the primary event, while the converb adds detail about how the action unfolds.

Therefore, imperfective converbs in Borana, which are marked by –*aa*, are essential for indicating simultaneous actions and ongoing states within a narrative. It constitutes a meaningful and structural dependency upon the independent verbs, with an interplay ensuring temporal clarity and cohesion of a narrative. Given their attribute of simultaneity and dependency, imperfective converbs are a good example of the interdependence that is present in linguistic structures in Borana, creating a vital part of its grammar and storytelling.

4.1.3 Perfective converbs

Perfective converbs in the Borana language are used in subordinate clauses, adverbial clauses, or in combination with main verbs to indicate the temporal relationship between two actions. The action expressed by the perfective converb is subordinate to and dependent on, the action of the main verb. The converb provides contextual or temporal background to the primary event in the sentence. It precedes the main verb syntactically.

Perfective converb in Borana is marked through the verb suffix –*ee* as shown in the examples below.

3. *Guya* *lameso debit-ee,* *akkuma* *kaan* *jeten-i.*
 day second return-PFV.CVB same way said-PFV
 'She returned the second day and told her the same'

(NAR 1, Line 4)

Here, *debit-ee* ‘return’ sets the stage for the main action *jeten-i* ‘told’. The telling depends on the prior completion of returning, as indicated by the converb.

4. “*Ayy Simpiree, maaf akana lalefat-ee teeta*” *jedh-e gaf-at-e*.
 mrs Bird, why this sad-PFV.CVB sit said-PFV ask.3SG.PFV
 ‘“Mrs bird why are you sitting here this sad,” he asked.’

(NAR 1, Line 7)

The converb *lalefat-ee* ‘sad’ explains the emotional state that informs the questioning *gaf-at-e*, ‘ask’. The main verb draws on narrative context presented in the subordinate verb.

5. *Bakuli ban-ee qitaa fudhat-e*
 plate open-PFV.CVB bread take-PFV
 ‘He opened the plate and took the bread’

The action *fudhat-e* ‘took’ cannot logically occur without the prior completion of *ban-ee* ‘open’. The converbial action justifies and enables the main verb's action. Therefore, the bread is taken only after opening the plate.

The perfective converbs in Borana are marked by *-ee* and are very crucial in establishing temporal and logical relationships between actions in structuring narratives. Perfective converbs present an interesting analysis of the dual nature they play in their dependence on main verbs to complete the meaning, while at the same time informing and supporting the narrative flow. Perfective converbs, therefore, are an essential tool in Borana storytelling in linking completed actions with ongoing or subsequent ones, supporting the notion of interconnectedness in events and the coherence of linguistic expression.

4.1.4 Habitual converbs

The habitual converb alludes to previous occurrences, and the entire state described by such sentences is regarded as habitual or recurring. In the Borana language, habitual converbs are realized through the suffix *-naan* in a sentence.

6. *Jalaa-naan hin bit-a*
 loves-HAB.CVB FOC buy-3SG.IPFV
 ‘Once he loves he buys’

The habitual converb *jalaa-naan* ‘loves’ describes the recurring condition under which the main verb *bit-a* ‘buy’ occurs. The habitual action of loving precedes or prompts the action of buying, showcasing a conditional dependency.

7. *Inni qarsii argan-naan imbad-a*
 He.NOM money gets HAB.CVB disappear.M.IPFV
 ‘Once he gets the money he will disappear’

The habitual converb *argan-naan* ‘happiness’ signals a frequent situation whereby getting money habitually leads to the action expressed by the main verb *imbad-a* ‘disappear’. The converb creates the expectation of a highly predictable, frequently repeated causative relation with the main action.

Therefore, in Borana, the habitual converbs are marked by *-naan* and occur with the main verbs that describe recurring or habitual actions and dependency on the foreground and

background information. These constructions are characteristic of regularity and form a temporal or a conditional relation between the converb and the main verb.

Zelalem (2014) also confirms this with his research on converbs in Oromo languages. He considers verbs with a lengthened verbal-final vowel *-ee* or *-aa* as generalized converbs and verbs attached with the suffix *-naan* as equivalents of converbs specialized converbs. However, in my analysis, these forms represent perfective, imperfective, and habitual converbs respectively.

Linguistically, the perfective and imperfective aspects are fundamental distinctions in grammatical systems, affecting how events are construed temporally. The choice of converbs marking can reflect this temporal perspective, with *-ee* aligning with perfective interpretations and *-aa* with imperfective ones. Furthermore, the habitual converb marked by *-n-aa-n* in Zelalem's analysis reinforces the imperfective interpretation. Habitual actions are inherently ongoing or repeated, akin to the imperfective aspect.

Therefore, while Zelalem's analysis presents generalized and progressive marked by *-ee* and *-aa*, respectively, these forms more accurately represent perfective and imperfective converbs. This interpretation aligns with the broader understanding of aspectual distinctions in linguistic theory.

4.2 Functions and Semantics of Converbs

As pointed out earlier, Ebert (2008) highlights the functions of converbs as to mark adverbial subordination, conditional expression, progressive actions, and clause chaining. Converbs play a pivotal role in clause chaining, which is a syntactic strategy employed across numerous languages to link multiple clauses together. According to Aikhenvald (2006) & Dixon (2006), converbs function as markers of subordination, allowing for the expression of temporal, causal, concessive, and conditional relationships between clauses within a discourse. Aikhenvald (2006) further highlights the significance of converbs in facilitating the cohesion of narrative sequences, emphasizing their ability to encode both event sequencing and causal connections.

Furthermore, Dixon (2006) underscores the versatility of converbs across diverse language families, illustrating a wide array of syntactic and semantic nuances in clause-chaining constructions. These two scholars give a thorough analysis of functions converbs as connectors in clause chaining, enabling the coherent expression of complex events and relationships within discourse.

4.2.1 Clause chaining

In the Borana language, converbs play a significant role in facilitating clause chaining, and in linking multiple clauses together. This includes temporal sequences (while, after), causality (because), simultaneity (while), and conditionality (if, when). See the example below:

- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 8. | <i>Namich-i</i> | <i>man-a</i> | <i>dhaq-ee,</i> | <i>hare</i> | <i>fa'at-ee,</i> |
| | man-NOM | house-ACC | went-PFV.CVB | donkey | load-PFV.CVB |
| | <i>deem-ee</i> | <i>baadiyyaa</i> | <i>ga'-ee,</i> | <i>walga'ii</i> | |
| | went-PFV.CVB | countryside | arrive-PFV.CVB | meeting | |
| | <i>tolch-e.</i> | | | | |
| | hold-3SG.M.PFV | | | | |

The man went home, loaded his donkey, traveled to the countryside, and held a meeting.

For instance, in the sentence above, the converbs *dhagee* ‘went’, *fa’atee* ‘loaded’, *deemee*, ‘traveled’, and *ga’ee*, ‘reached’ link the actions sequentially. These dependent verbs lead up to the main clause *walga’ii tolche* ‘held a meeting’, which carries the sentence’s primary focus and indicates the aspectual time relation of the events.

9. *Namich-i* *diram* *ka’-ee,* *hark-a* *isaa*
man-NOM morning rose-PFV.CVB hand-ACC his
dhiqat-ee, *nyaat-a* *qopheeffat-ee,* *nyaat-ee,*
clean-PFV.CVB food-ACC ready-PFV.CVB ate-PFV.CVB, *gara*
obboles-a *deem-ee,* *is* *arg-e.*
to brother-ACC went-PFV.CVB him see-3SG.M.PFV

‘The man got up in the morning, washed his hands, prepared food, ate, went to see his brother’

In the above example, each action naturally leads to the next, maintaining logical and temporal order. All actions are syntactically dependent on the main inflected clause ‘see’, showing how converbs function as supporting to order the sequences of actions.

4.2.2 Adverbial subordination

Converbs also function to represent adverbial subordination whereby they modify the main verb adverbially. Such converbs fulfill the function of giving more contextual information on the manner, time, or circumstantial execution of the action of the main clause. This is evident in the actions that describe simultaneity with imperfective converbs. See examples below. See the examples below.

Simultaneity

10. *Atho* *isii-n* *lalefat-ee* *muka-a* *iraa* *teett-uu*
while she-NOM sad-CVB tree-ACC over sit-INF

Hillens-i *deem-aa* *dhuf-e.*
hare-NOM walk-CVB came-3SG.M.PFV

While she sat on the tree sad, a hare came walking

(NAR 1, Line 6)

In this example, the converbs *lalefat-ee* ‘sad’ and *deem-aa* ‘walk’ express simultaneous actions, where the hare’s arrival coincides with the protagonist’s sadness sitting on the tree.

11. *Atho* *karaa* *yaa’anii* *makiinaa* *arga-ta.n-i* *yaabba-ta.n-i.*
while way walk car get-3.PL.PFV board.3PL.PFV

While they were walking on the way, they got a car and they boarded

This example demonstrates simultaneity, with *yaa’anii* ‘walk’ indicating the ongoing action of walking, which overlaps with the subsequent actions of spotting and boarding the car.

Temporal anteriority

12. *“atho ani-ni muka-a kan ol kor-ee ilmaan tee*
 before I-NOM tree-ACC this.M up climb-CVB children your

t-an cufaa nyan-ee toko naa buus-i”.
 F.this all eat.CVB one I.ACC drop-PFV

Before I climb this tree and eat all your children, give me one child.

Here, the converb *kor-ee* ‘climb’ marks a temporal anteriority, with the hypothetical act of climbing the tree and the consumption of the children preceding the command.

Manner of Action

13. *Inni nyaat-aa gara hojji dem-a*
 He.Nom eat-IPFV.CVBto work go-3SG.IPFV
 ‘He goes to work while eating’

Here, the converb *nyaat-aa* ‘eat’ provides an adverbial clause that explains how the subject *Inni*, ‘he’, acts like going to work *dem-a*, ‘go’. The imperfective converb establishes how the main action is undertaken, emphasizing the syntactic simultaneity and semantic manner of the subject's multi-tasking behavior.

14. *Boru-n farda guluf-aa dhuf-e*
 Boru-NOM horse gallop-IPFV.CVB come-3SG.M.PFV
 ‘Boru came while galloping a horse’

In this sentence, the imperfective converb *guluf-aa* ‘gallop’ creates an adverbial clause that modifies the manner of the main verb *dhuf-e* ‘came’. The subordinate clause *Farda guluf-aa* describes how *Boru* performed the primary action of coming. The imperfective converb specifies the mode of Boru's arrival by providing additional descriptive details. It tells the listener or reader not just that Boru came but also how he came, by galloping a horse.

Reason and Result

15. *Hoola-n quuf-ee lafa irratti ciis-e.*
 Sheep-NOM ate-PFV.CVB land on lie-3SG.M.PFV.
 ‘The sheep lay down because it had eaten and was full’.

The converb *quuf-ee* ‘ate’ explains the reason behind the main action *ciis-e* ‘lay down’. The subordinate clause describes the sheep's satisfaction from eating as the cause for it lying down. The converb *quuf-ee* ‘ate’ establishes the cause or reason for the main action *ciis-e* ‘lay down’. The subordinate clause indicates that the sheep's act of eating led to its state of satisfaction, prompting it to lie down.

Purpose Clauses

16. *Gurba-n bisa-a-n worabatu barbad-aa dhuf-e.*
 Boy-NOM water-ACC fetch search.IPF.CVB came-

3SG.M.PFV

‘The boy came to search for water to fetch’.

The verb *barbad-aa* ‘search’ functions as the converb, indicating the boy’s preparatory action. The purpose is expressed in the main clause with *dhuf-e* ‘came’, showing his intent to fetch water.

Conditional expressions

Converbs in Borana can express conditional relationships, indicating the circumstances or conditions under which the main action takes place. In particular, converbs convey conditions of ‘if’ or ‘when’ in Borana. For instance, in the example below, the construction of the converb expresses a hypothetical condition, showing the relationship between an action in the past and its possible future results. See the example below.

17. *Kalee* *atho* *silaa* *deem-ee* *Namich-a* *hin-argi-t-a*
 Yesterday if HYP go-PFV.CVB man-ACC FOC-see-2SG-IPFV
 “If you had gone yesterday, you would have seen the man”

In this sentence, *deem-ee* ‘go’ is the converb, expressing the condition that needed to be met ‘going yesterday’ for the result *hin-argi-t-a*, ‘you would have seen the man’ to occur. The use of the converb indicates that the main action ‘seeing the man’ depends on the completion of the action in the subordinate clause ‘going yesterday’.

4.2.4 Foreground and Background

Schroeder (2013) writes on the relationship between foreground and background information in discourse, particularly in the Toposa language. She illustrates how clause-chaining languages structure their narratives by dividing between main events that move the plot along and secondary details that provide context. Background information consists of supporting details such as time, cause, or manner, often appearing in the form of converbs. These background clauses help frame the narrative but do not introduce new, independent events. Foregrounded clauses, on the other hand, contain the main events and are always marked by a finite verb. This organization ensures that the main actions of a story or discourse remain clear and easy to follow.

In the Borana language, background information appears with converbs, while foreground information does not. This distinction aligns with the nature of clause chaining, where background clauses provide supporting details and foreground clauses carry the main events of a narrative. Foreground verbs are always finite, which carries aspect marking in the Borana language. Therefore, since converbs are inherently dependent, they cannot function as foreground verbs.

5. Conclusion

The insufficient documentation and analysis of Borana converbs are seriously hindering linguistic understanding and the development of language resources. This study tries to fill this gap by describing the morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties of Borana converbs in a way that lays a foundation for further studies and practical applications in translation and literacy efforts. This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on converbs by analyzing Borana converbs’ semantic and syntactic characteristics and seeks to elucidate their functional roles and typological significance.

In conclusion, converbs in Borana bear crucial roles in sentence construction, that is, to show various temporal relationships, and to express causal links, simultaneity, conditions, purposes, and results. The different verb suffixes used to mark converbs are *-ee-*, *-aa-*, and *-naan-*, marking the different kinds of actions and how they interrelate in a sentence.

The perfective converb, which is marked by the suffix *-ee*, denotes an action that is completed about another and provides a temporal time relation of completion, emphasizing that one event is finished before or while another occurs. The imperfective converb, on the other hand, is marked by *-aa*; it provides the incomplete ongoing time relation and is often used for simultaneous action, where two actions happen concurrently. On the other hand, the habitual converb with the suffix *-naan* refers to regular, recurring actions about the habitability of the action being described.

Converbs also play a central role in Borana's clause chaining, which allows multiple clauses to be chained together in one sequence of events. Converbs also facilitate subordination relationships, ordering the subtle differences in meaning like 'while,' 'after,' or 'before,' and also causal and conditional relations. For instance, Borana converbs can indicate whether one action happens as a result of another, whether they occur simultaneously, or whether one event is dependent on a condition or purpose.

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