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The Origin of the Ethiosemitic Verb *hlw* ‘to be present’

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The Ethiosemitic verb *hlw* ‘to be present’ is strange in three regards: it shows an unusual alternation between *-o* and *-awa* in Classical Ethiopic; it is formally Perfect, but used in the present tense; and it has no verbal cognates in other branches of Semitic. This is because it is originally not a Perfect, but a presentative particle, to be connected with other Semitic presentatives reflecting **hallaw*. Due to the leveling of the second person object suffixes to the Perfect endings in Ethiosemitic, suffixed presentative forms like *hallo-ka* could be reanalyzed as consisting of a verbal stem *hallo-* and a subject ending *-ka*. Other forms of the paradigm, including the 3M.SG Perfect *hallaw-a*, were then created by analogy with III-w 0₂-stem verbs like *fannawa* ‘to send’.

One of the few shared innovations uniting the Ethiopian branch of Semitic is the occurrence of an existential verb with the root **hlw* (Hetzron 1972: 18; Weninger 2011: 1115). In Classical Ethiopic, which provides us with the oldest evidence of its use, the third person masculine singular perfect form is attested as both *hallo* and *hallawa* (both referred to as *hallo* in this paper unless indicated otherwise). When used alone, this verb most commonly means ‘to be present’, indicating the subject’s location (Bombeck 1997):¹

- (1) *ʔayte hallo-ø baggəʕ-u la=mašwaʕt-u*
 where *hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S sheep-3M.SG.POSS to=sacrifice-3M.SG.POSS
 Where **is** the sheep for the sacrifice? (Gen. 22:7)

It may also be used with a closely preceding or following Imperfect. The use of *hallo* does not alter the meaning of the Imperfect, which expresses an event that concurs with or is later than the reference time (Weninger 2001: 314–19; Tropper 2002: 186–91):²

- (2) *wa=hallo-ø muse yə-rəʕi-ø ʔabāgəʕ-a yotor*
 and=*hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S Moses 3.S-pasture\IPF-M.SG.S sheep\PL-POSS Jethro
 And Moses **was pasturing** the sheep of Jethro (Exod. 3:1)
- (3) *wa=yə-naddəd-ø dabr-u*
 and=3.S-burn\IPF-M.SG.S mountain-3M.SG.POSS
 And the mountain **was burning** (Deut. 4:11)

Author’s note: The content of this paper was first presented at the 44th North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics, held at the University of Texas, Austin, on February 13–14, 2016. I thank the attending audience for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to Julien Dufour, Marijn van Putten, Hilde Gunnink, and other commenters for their very useful remarks on a draft version of this paper. Throughout, capitalized terms like *Perfect* and *Imperfect* refer to specific verbal tenses that may be used differently than their name would indicate, while lowercase terms like *perfect* and *present* refer to tense and aspect values. The examples are glossed according to the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

1. See also the detailed analysis of the lexical meaning of *hallo* and other Classical Ethiopic verbs meaning ‘to be’ in Cohen (1984: 210–32).

2. In other words, it marks imperfective viewpoint aspect (Meyer 2016: 199–209).

- (4) *wa=loṭə=ssa* *hallo-ø* *yə-nabbər-ø* *wəsta* *ʔanqaš-a*
 and=Lot=DISC *hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S 3.S-sit\IPF-M.SG.S in gate-POSS
sadom
 Sodom
 Now Lot **was sitting** in the gate of Sodom (Gen. 19:1)
- (5) *wa=māy-a* *ʔayḥ* *yə-maššəʔ-ø* *hallo-ø* *diba*
 and=water-POSS flood 3.S-come\IPF-M.SG.S *hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S on
kʷall-u *madr*
 all-3M.SG.POSS earth
 And the water of the Flood **will come** over all the earth (Enoch 10:2)
- (6) *ʔə-damassəs-o* *la=ʔəgʷāl-a* *ʔəm-a-ḥəyāw*
 1SG.S-wipe_out\IPF-3M.SG.O to=offspring-POSS mother-POSS-living
I will wipe out mankind (Gen. 6:7)

Examples (2), (4) and (5) show *hallo* + Imperfect or Imperfect + *hallo* constructions expressing the same meaning as a bare Imperfect, as seen in (3) and (6). In many cases, the choice of a construction with *hallo* in these translated texts is motivated by the presence of a form of the verb εἶμι ‘to be’ and a Present participle in the Greek source text, where this can be ascertained, as in (2) (Weninger 2001: 269). The other cases where *hallo* is used with an Imperfect in the past all involve the verb *nabara* ‘to sit, dwell’, also ‘to be’; the use of *hallo* then serves to unambiguously indicate the more concrete meaning of *nabara*, as in (4).

Finally, *hallo* may occur in two somewhat rare constructions involving a Jussive, as in examples (7) and (8) (Weninger 2001: 271–78):

- (7) *wa=hallow-a* *yə-rkab-ø-kəmu* *fərhat*
 and=*hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S 3.S-find\JUSS-M.SG.S-2M.PL.O fear
 And fear **will find** you (Enoch 100:8)
- (8) *za=tə-gbar-u* *hallow-a-kkəmu* *gəbar-u*
 REL=2.S-make\JUSS-M.PL.S *hlw*\PF-3M.SG.S-2M.PL.O make\IPV-M.PL
 Make what **you want to make** (Exod. 16:23)

These constructions consist of an inflected form of *hallo* + Jussive, as in (7); or of *hallo*, always in the third person masculine singular, followed by an object suffix agreeing with the subject of the preceding or following Jussive, as in (8). Both of these constructions express future events, often with deontic or volitional modality.

In modern Ethiosemitic languages, the lexical meaning of ‘to be present’ may be preserved. Furthermore, *hlw* develops into an auxiliary verb that is used to form progressives and perfects. These uses are illustrated in the following Tigrīña examples, taken from Mulugeta Girmay Melles (2001):

- (9) *ab=ət-i* *gäza* *ət-i* *kalbi* *all-o*
 in=DEF-M.SG house DEF-M.SG dog *hlw*-3M.SG.S
There is a dog in that house
- (10) *tə-bälləʕ* *all-a*
 3F.SG.S-eat\IPF *hlw*-3F.SG.S
She is eating

- (11) *bäli^é-u* *all-o*
eat\GER-3M.SG.S *hlw*-3M.SG.S
He has eaten
- (12) *däqqis-a* *all-a*
sleep\GER-3F.SG.S *hlw*-3F.SG.S
She is sleeping

The lexical use is shown in (9). In (10), *hlw* combines with an Imperfect to form a progressive, while the combination with a Gerund in (11) and (12) results in either perfect or stative semantics based on the verb's lexical aspect.

Besides the central role that *hallo* and its cognates play in the Ethiosemitic verbal system, this verb is remarkable for several other reasons. Morphologically, the Classical Ethiopic interchange between the third person masculine perfect forms *hallo* and *hallawa* is unique: no comparable verbal forms end in *-o*, and *o* and *awa* do not alternate within the same form anywhere else in the language. Syntactically, the use of the Perfect form *hallo* with a present meaning, as in (1), is exceptional; normally this meaning is expressed by an Imperfect.³ And etymologically, no verbal cognates with the meaning 'to be (present)' or anything similar are attested outside of Ethiosemitic: verbs for 'to be' in other Semitic languages include reflexes of **kwn* (throughout West Semitic), **hwy* (Northwest Semitic), and **btý* (Akkadian), but nothing like **hlw*. All three of these problems, I will argue, point to the same solution: *hallo* is not originally a verbal form at all, but rather a presentative.

Presentatives are a class of particles occurring in most if not all Semitic languages. Given the lack of a corresponding category in English (but cf., for example, Latin *ecce*, Italian *ecco*, French *voilà*), they are often mechanically translated as 'behold', 'see', or something similar. Their function is quite different from that of an imperative verb of vision, however. For the Biblical Hebrew presentative *hinneh*^h, Van der Merwe (2007) identifies several different uses. The most important are what we may call indications of spatial or temporal proximity:⁴

- (13) *lek-ø* *ʔəmor-ø* *l=a^odön-ə^ykø*
go\IPV-M.SG.S say\IPV-M.SG.S to=master-2M.SG.POSS
hinneh^h *ʔeliyyəhu^w*
h. Elijah
Go tell your master: Elijah **is here** (1 Kings 8:8)
- (14) *wa-yy-o^omr-u^w* *ʔel-ə^ww* *ʔayye^h* *šərw^h*
IPF.CS-3M.S-say\IPF.CS-PL.S to-3M.SG.POSS where Sarah
ʔišt-əkø *wa-yy-o^omer-ø* *hinneh^h* *ḥ=ə-ʔohel*
woman-2M.SG.POSS IPF.CS-3M.S-say\IPF.CS-SG.S *h.* in=DEF-tent
And they asked him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "**There** in the tent."
(Gen. 18:9)

3. The same use of a Perfect form with present meaning occurs with the verb *kona* 'to be', especially frequent in its negated form *ʔi-kona* 'he is not'. This may be understood as a development from the well-attested lexical meaning of this verb, 'to become': "he has (not) become" → "he is (not)." Hypothetically, the present-tense meaning of *hallo* 'he is present' could have developed from an older meaning *'he has arrived' or similar, but no such meaning is attested for this verb.

4. The transliteration used is that of Johnson and Goerwitz (1995).

- (15) *hinne^h* [?]no^hk^v me^t-ø
h. I dead-M.SG
I am about to die (Gen. 50:5)
- (16) *hin-ni^v* mašl^vah-ø b-k^o ... [?]e^t=he-^orob^o
h.-1SG.O send\PTC-M.SG in-2M.SG.POSS DO=DEF-swarms_of_flies
I am about to send swarms of flies on you . . . (Exod. 8:17)

In (13) and (14), we see that *hinne^h* is used to direct the listener's attention to something (or, in these cases, someone) nearby. (15) and (16) illustrate the use of *hinne^h* to refer to an imminent event. The particle is also used to indicate ongoing states or past events with currently relevant effects (i.e., perfect aspect):

- (17) z^ont-^o^h t^om^or kall^ot-^ek^o w=^gam *hinne^h*
 prostitute\PF-3F.SG.S Tamar bride-2M.SG.POSS and=also *h.*
 h^or-^o^h li=znu^wn-^vm
 pregnant-F.SG to=prostitution-PL
 Your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself, and **now** she is pregnant from her prostitution, too (Gen. 38:24)
- (18) *hinne^h* š^ok^oar-ø š^ol-^e'nu ... [?]e^t=malk-^e'
h. hire\PF-3M.SG.S on-1PL.POSS DO=king-PL:POSS
 ha-^hitti^v-^m
 DEF-Hittite-M.PL
 [He] **has** hired the kings of the Hittites against us (2 Kings 7:6)

Similar meanings are found with presentatives in other Semitic languages.

The variation in attested forms makes it difficult to arrive at one regular Proto-Semitic reconstruction, but like Biblical Hebrew *hinne^h*, many presentatives reflect an element **hVn*, often with gemination of the **n* and a following vowel, like Amarna Canaanite /annû/ (Rainey 1988), Ugaritic *hn* (Tropper 2000: 749), Classical Arabic *?inna* and Akkadian /anna/ (Kouwenberg 2012), or at least a consonant *n*, like Classical Ethiopic *na-* (Tropper 2002: 150). However, forms reflecting **hVl* rather than **hVn* also occur, normally without a clear difference in meaning with **hVn* presentatives. Biblical Hebrew *hālo^(w)'* may be analyzed as a combination of the interrogative prefix *hā-* and the negation *lo[']* 'not'; together, these would then mark rhetorical negative questions.

Synchronically, however, it unambiguously functions as a presentative in some cases, at least (Sivan and Schniedewind 1993). Nor does the negative interrogative analysis hold for the apparently cognate forms: Amarna Canaanite /allû/, Ugaritic *hl*, Old Aramaic *hlw* (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: s.v.), Yemeni Arabic *hall-* and *hallō-* (Piamenta 1991: s.v. ٱ hall- and references given there), and Akkadian /ulla/.⁵ If we consider the possibility that the vocalization of Biblical Hebrew *hālo^(w)'* does not reflect the original pronunciation, all the West Semitic forms, at least, may tentatively be traced back to a reconstruction like **hallaw*.

The semantic resemblance between these presentatives and Ethiosemitic *hlw* is striking. Both the presentatives and *hlw* may express physical proximity, as in (1), (9), (13), and (14), while the development of compound tenses involving *hlw* shown in (7), (8), (10–12) recalls the use of presentatives to indicate temporal proximity, as in (15–18). Moreover, *hlw* shows a

5. Cf. Brown (1987) for the Northwest Semitic forms.

close formal match to the West Semitic presentatives reflecting **hallaw*, as was also already noted by e.g., Corriente (2012); in fact, *hallo* (*sic*, excluding *hallawa* in this case) would be the regular Classical Ethiopic reflex of such a word.⁶ But the fact that it appears as a verb in Ethiosemitic rather than as a presentative has not yet found a convincing explanation, nor have the morphological and syntactic peculiarities associated with it.

Suppose *hallo* was originally a presentative particle, cognate with the **hallaw* presentatives found in other Semitic languages. Based on the behavior of its cognates, we should expect that it would have frequently occurred with a following noun or pronoun, as in the following reconstructed examples:

- (19) **hallo* *kalb* *ba=bet*
hlw dog in=house
***Here** is the dog in the house
- (20) **hallo-ka* *ba=bet*
hlw-2M.SG.O in=house
***Here** you are in the house

Example (19) would originally have been a nonverbal sentence, lacking an overt copula, like the Hebrew examples (13) and (14). In (20), the pronominal object is expressed by a suffix, as in the Hebrew example (16). Unlike in, e.g., Hebrew or Arabic, however, forms with a second person object would be ambiguous in Ethiosemitic. Whereas most branches of Semitic have two separate sets of pronominal suffixes in the second person, one for subjects of Perfects and one for objects, Ethiosemitic has leveled the object suffixes (2M.SG *-ka*, 2F.SG *-ki*, 2M.PL *-kəmu*, 2F.PL *-kən*) to the Perfect endings:

	2M.SG Perfect	presentative + 2M.SG object
Biblical Hebrew	<i>qəḥar-tə</i> 'you buried'	<i>hinn-kə</i> 'here you are'
Classical Arabic	<i>qabar-ta</i> 'you buried'	<i>ʾinna-ka</i> 'surely you are'
Classical Ethiopic	<i>qabar-ka</i> 'you buried'	<i>hallo-ka</i> 'you are'

In fact, this leveling of the second person suffixes would have made forms like *hallo-ka* identical in form to second person forms of III-w 0₂-stem verbs, e.g., *fanno-ka* 'you sent'. This would have enabled speakers to reanalyze originally nonverbal sentences like (19) and (20) as containing a verb:

- (19') *hallo-ə* *kalb* *ba=bet*
hlw\PF-3M.SG.S dog in=house
Here is the dog in the house
- (20') *hallo-ka* *ba=bet*
hlw\PF-2M.SG.S in=house
Here you are in the house

The original presentative particle *hallo* would then have been reinterpreted as an irregular third person masculine singular form. Other parts of the paradigm could be created through analogy with III-w 0₂-stem verbs; besides the first person singular form *hallo-ku* 'I am' (cf. *fanno-ku* 'I sent') and plural forms like *hallaw-u* 'they are' (cf. *fannaw-u* 'they sent'), this

6. Cf. III-w Jussives like *yəfto* 'that he desire' < *yəftaw*, which also occurs with analogically restored *-aw*.

resulted in the other Classical Ethiopic third person masculine singular form of *hlw*: *fanno-ka* ‘you sent’ : *fannaw-a* ‘he sent’ = *hallo-ka* ‘you are’ : *hallaw-a* ‘he is’.⁷ Note that this analogy led to the creation of new, third person forms based on normally less frequent, second person forms; although third person forms tend to be more resistant to analogy, the lack of morphological transparency in inherited forms like **hallo-hu* would have provided sufficient motivation for their replacement.

This account solves the three problems with *hallo* identified above. The unique interchange between *hallo* and *hallawa* is the result of the secondary creation of the latter. The former is unlike any other Perfect form, because it was not originally a Perfect to begin with. The present-tense use of Perfect *hallo* arises from the origin of sentences containing *hallo* as nonverbal sentences, which are unmarked for tense in Semitic. The frequent present-tense meaning was preserved even after *hallo* was reinterpreted as a Perfect verb. And finally, although no verbal cognates of *hlw* are apparent, the proposed reanalysis allows us to connect this root with the many Semitic presentative particles reflecting **hallaw*, providing an explanation for their formal and semantic resemblance to *hallo*.

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7. As pointed out to me by Julien Dufour, the homonymy of the Perfect ending and the object suffix in the first person plural, both *-na*, would already have resulted in the seemingly verbal form *hallo-na* ‘(here) we are’. This homonymy is shared by other West Semitic languages, cf. Biblical Hebrew *qabar-nu*^w ‘we buried’ besides *hin-nu*^w ‘here we are’ and Classical Arabic *qabar-nā* ‘we buried’ besides *inna-nā* ‘surely we are’.