

A Study of Linguistic Solecisms in the Medium Version of the *Gə'əz* Acts of Saint Mark the Evangelist

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Abstract

This article investigates linguistic solecisms in the Ethiopic *Acts* of Saint Mark the Evangelist, with particular attention to the medium version of the text. Linguistic solecisms, understood here as a departure from accepted linguistic norms, particularly orthographic, lexical and grammatical aspects, serves here as a valuable insight through which we examine the processes of translation and transmission in *Gə'əz* literature. The *Acts of Saint Mark*, preserved as a hagiographic narrative and mediated through centuries of scribal activity, contains a number of constructions that diverge from classical *Gə'əz* conventions. These deviations not only point to the linguistic and interpretive challenges encountered by translators working from Greek or Coptic sources but also illuminate the evolving character of *Gə'əz* as a literary and liturgical language shaped by regional, temporal, and scribal contexts. Through close textual analysis, the article categorizes and interprets various types of awkward expressions, such as irregular verbal forms, disrupted syntactic patterns, and unexpected lexical combinations. While traditionally viewed as errors, such features can be understood as markers of translation strategies, indicators of linguistic adaptation, or evidence of scribes negotiating foreign idioms within an indigenous literary framework. Situating these findings within the broader tradition of Ethiopic hagiography, the article argues that solecisms contribute to the distinctive character of the *hagiographic text* and reveal important aspects of its historical development. This study mainly demonstrates that the analysis of solecism not only enriches our understanding of the *Gə'əz* text but also provides valuable insights into

the cultural adaptation that formed the Ethiopian *Gə'əz* literary tradition.

Key words: Linguistic solecism; Acts of saint mark; *Gə'əz* grammar; Ethiopic literature; Textual analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Saint Mark the Evangelist, one of the Four Evangelists and counted among the Seventy/Seventy Two¹ Disciples (cf. Lk. 10:1, 17), occupies a significant place in both Biblical tradition and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāhədo Church (EOTC). Born in Cyrene² around the first century CE, St. Mark is identified in the New Testament as the son of Mary, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ who hosted the early Christian community in her home (Acts 12:12), and as the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10). Patristic and Ethiopic traditions, particularly the *Mäqdmä Wāngel* (the prefatory text of the Ethiopic Commentary of the Four Gospels), further develops his identity by associating

¹ As to Andualem Ermias (2025, 87a), the number of Disciples is stated to be 70 in the Bible, but it is sometimes recorded as 71 and 72 in some Ethiopic literatures including the Acts of St Mark. The acts reads as “ወእምክ: እርእዮ: እግዚእነ: ካልእነ: ሰብዓ: ወክልኤተ: እርድእተ:” *And after this, the Lord appointed other 72 Disciples*” (A: f.7r_b; B: f. 5v_a; C: f.5r_b; D: f.4r_a; E: f. 5v_b; F: f. 8v_a; G4r_b)

² It refers to one of the Five Western Cities (Pentapolis) of North Africa, specifically the present day Libya. His *Gə'əz* Acts proves this as: “ወእቱኩ: ቅዱስ: ማርቆስ: ቀደመ: ወበጽሐመ: ቀሪኔ: ሀገረ: ጸንጠጶሊስ: እስመ: ውእቱ: ብሔረ: ፍጥረቱ:” *Now St Mark came first to and reached Cyrene, a city in Pentapolis, for it was his native land*” (Budge 1899, 257; 1901, 309; Lusini 2009, 31/37); cf. Getatchew Haile 1981, 124/129).

his name with the symbolic meaning of 'lion'³, with key events such as the Last Supper and the Passion narrative (Ermias, 2023, p.30).

St Mark was a close companion of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter. Despite moments of tension with Paul (Acts 13:13; 15:36–41), later reconciliations portray him as a valued collaborator (Col. 4:10–11; 2 Tim. 4:11). Peter likewise regarded him as a spiritual son (1Pet. 5:13), and his household provided a central gathering place for the early Christian community. These interwoven Biblical and Ethiopic traditions highlight Mark's importance not only as an Evangelist but also as a foundational figure in the spread of Christianity (Ermias, 2023, pp.33–34). Within this context, the *Gə'əz Acts of Saint Mark* represent a crucial witness to his veneration in Ethiopia. This study examines the **Medium Version** of the text with a particular focus on its linguistic solecisms. By analyzing these irregularities, the article sheds light on the processes of translation, scribal transmission, and the broader dynamics of Gə'əz literary tradition.

2. THE ACTS OF ST. MARK THE EVANGELIST

The *Acts* of St. Mark the Evangelist, which is the primary concern of this study, is generally thought to have been first composed in Greek and later translated into Gə'əz, probably during the fourth century, in the decades following the Christianization of the Aksumite kingdom. The text was not transmitted to Ethiopia merely as a pious story for the faithful but also as part of a broader cultural and political project. On the religious side, it introduced Ethiopian readers to the figure of St. Mark, regarded as the founder of the Alexandrian Church, thereby reinforcing Ethiopia's spiritual ties with one of the most influential centers of early Christianity. At the same time, however, the *Acts* functioned as a subtle instrument of political diplomacy. Drawing a direct connection between the Aksumite court and the Alexandrian tradition, the narrative provided a framework for legitimizing both ecclesiastical authority and royal power within a wider Christian world (Lusini, 2003, pp.5–7; Tamrat, 1972, pp.22–23)⁴.

³ There is a traditional story in the relation between Mark and a lion. Once, while John Mark and his father Aristopolus were traveling near the River of Jordan, a lion and a lioness appeared to them. The father was very frightened and begged his son to escape, while he awaited his fate. John Mark assured his father that Jesus Christ would save them, and began to pray. The two beasts fell dead, and because of this miracle, the father believed in Christ and baptized by the hand of his son Mark (Malaty 1993, p.19; Shenouda 1995, pp.16–17).

⁴ Aksum reached the height of its glory as the main military partner of the Byzantine Empire, specifically in the early 6th century, when South Arabia had also been under the Aksumite control for some decades; cf. Bausi 2014, 39; Selassie, 1972, 92–95.

Currently, the Gə'əz Acts of St Mark the Evangelist is found in three groups: Short, Medium, and Long recensions. The short group is found in multiple-text Mss, whereas the middle and the long group are found in separate or single-text Mss (Ermias, 2025, pp.87b–88b). Getatchew Haile (1981, p.118) notes that the short recension of the *Gə'əz Acts of St Mark the Evangelist* is preserved in three different multiple-text manuscripts: (1) the *Gə'əz Synaxarium (Sənsar, ስንክሳር)*⁵, in the entry for St Mark on Miyaziya 30 (08 May); (2) the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (Gädlä Hawarəyat, ገድለ: ሐዋርያት)*; and (3) the *Acts of the Saints (Gädlä Qəddusan, ገድለ: ቅዱሳን)*. The version preserved in the *Acts of the Saints* may represent a direct translation from Greek into Gə'əz, while those found in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and the Book of the Saints* appear to be derived from Arabic sources (Ibid, pp.117–118).⁶

The various recensions of the *Acts of St Mark the Evangelist* found in separate manuscripts differ both in size and in content. In terms of content, they narrate the struggle and martyrdom of the Saint in divergent ways; in terms of size, they fall into two main categories, medium and long. The miracle accounts embedded in each version are likewise entirely distinct. The medium recension⁷ is preserved in seven manuscripts, while the long one is in nine extant witnesses. In contrast to the medium version, the long version is divided into 202 sections (*kəfl*), a structural feature that suggests the two groups of texts stem from different antecedent traditions (Andualem Ermias 2025:87b). Since this article focuses on the medium version, the Metadata of the Mss is displayed in the table under:

⁵ Originally translated from Arabic into Gə'əz around the 14th century, it is one of the most cherished books in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church. Sənsar is a collection of stories about the Orthodox Saints, their lives, struggles, and miracles, arranged according to the Church calendar. For scholars, it is a rich record of Ethiopia's spiritual heritage, showing how global Christianity was woven into the rhythms of Ethiopian life and language.

⁶ Getatchew Haile (1981, pp.117–118) indicates that the text included in the *Acts of the Saints* could be directly translated from Greek into Gə'əz, while in the text in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* and in the *Book of the Saints* seem to be translated from Arabic. The Metropolitan Sälama, also known as "Mätärg"¹⁰, the Translator" (1348–1388), is regarded to have translated many texts from Arabic into Gə'əz, such as Gəbrä Həmammat (Lectinary for Passion Week), the funeral ritual (Māshafä Gənzät), *Filkəsyos* (one of the trilogy of the monastic book) are some of the translation works attributed to him (Haile, 2014, pp.737a–737b; Tamrat 1972, p.108; & Sellasie 1972, p.120).

⁷ This version seems to be recompiled based on the short Acts in the medieval period, for there are sections dealing with issues related to the medieval time stories. For instance, in the reading "አባ: ሚካኤል: ወአባ: ገብርኤል: ጳሎሶ: ከመ: ይአተ: እገተ: በርናባስ: አመ: ለማርያስ: *Abba Mika'el and Abba Gäbrə'el have written that the mother of Mark is Barnabas's sister*" (A (f. 24r_a), B (f. 18r_a), C (f. 18r_a), D (f. 10r_c), E (f. 10r_b), F (f. 27v_b), G (f. 14v_a), The two fathers (*Abba Mika'el and Abba Gäbrə'el*) could be the Egyptian Metropolitans who were sent together into Ethiopia in medieval time, specifically during the days of King Zär'a Ya'əqob (1434–1468), for they are well known in the Ethiopian medieval literature (Ermias, 2010, p.18).

Table 1
The Metadata of the Mss

Sigla1	Location	Code Number	Quire/Folio	Year (Cent.)	Material
A	Institute of Ethiopian Studies	IES -2160	9/85	19th	Parchment
B	Mänbärä Lə‘ul St Mark Church	EMML 87	8/75	20th	Parchment
C	Mänbärä Šäba‘ot Holy Trinity	EMML 1208	4/66	19th	Paper
D	Däbrä Šähay St Mark Church	UNESCO 6/38	7/53	19th	Parchment
E	‘Addi ‘Abun Täklä Haymanot	AATH- 072	11/72	19th	Parchment
F	‘Addi ‘Abun Täklä Haymanot	AATH- 071	15/136	20th	Parchment
G	Sälla Dəngay St Mark Church	008	6/63	20th	Paper

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Grammatical Solecism

As the grammar rule of many languages, the Gə‘əz grammar rule allows that the subject should agree with its verb and the modifier in number, gender and the likes. However, several sentences that break this grammatical rule are found in the Gə‘əz Acts of St Mark the Evangelist:

ወኮነ፡ ይራኢ፡ ተአምራተ፡ ወመንክራተ፡ እንተ፡ ትትገበር፡ በእዳሁ።
He was observing miracles and wonders that was being performed by his hand ((A: f. 43v_a), (B: f.35v_b), (C: f.34r_b), (D: f.19r_c), (E: f.37v_a), (F: f.52r_a), (G: f.28v_a)).

In this expression, the grammatical irregularity lies in the mismatch between the plural subject “ተአምራተ፡ ወመንክራተ፡ / *miracles and wonders*” and the singular feminine relative clause “እንተ፡ ትትገበር / *that was being performed.*” According to Gə‘əz grammar, subject and verb must agree in both number and gender; here, however, a plural subject is paired with a singular predicate. While this appears to be a straightforward grammatical error, it may also reflect deeper tendencies in scribal practice. In many Ethiopic manuscripts, the feminine singular verb form is frequently employed in relative clauses as a kind of “default” construction, regardless of strict agreement. Thus, the scribe may have unconsciously relied on this conventional form, even when grammatical concord demanded otherwise. A more precise rendering would have been “እንተ፡ ይትገበሩ / *that were being performed*” or alternatively “እንዘ፡ ይገብር / *that he was performing,*” if the focus was intended to remain on the agent. This type of inconsistency, therefore, offers more than evidence of scribal inattention; it points to the dynamic tension between the inherited rules of Gə‘əz grammar and the pragmatic realities of translation and textual reproduction in Ethiopic literary culture.

ወይቤሉ፡ ተዐቀቡ፡ አጋዮነ፡ በዕለታተ፡ በዓላት፡ እንተ፡ ይእቲ፡ በዓለ፡ ልደተ፡ እግዚእነ።
And they say, “Our brothers, be curious on the feast days that is the Nativity feast of Our Lord” ((A: f. 63r_b), (B: f. 55v_a), (C: f. 52v_b), (D: om), (E: f. 53v_a), (F: f. 78v_b), (G: f. 45r_a)).

A similar grammatical solecism is evident in this expression, where the plural noun phrase “ዕለታተ፡ በዓላት፡ / *feast days*” is modified by the singular feminine clause “እንተ፡ ይእቲ፡ በዓለ፡ ልደተ፡ እግዚእነ / *that is the Nativity feast of Our Lord.*” The clash arises because the grammatical form of the modifier assumes a singular referent, while the noun it qualifies is explicitly plural. To resolve the inconsistency, the scribe could have employed the singular form “ዕለተ፡ በዓል / *the feast day*” to correspond with the Nativity, or else adjusted the clause to a plural form that aligned with “feast days.” Yet the choice to juxtapose a plural referent with a singular predicate is not without significance. It may reflect an attempt to preserve the conventional liturgical phrasing of “feast days” while simultaneously highlighting the singular importance of the Nativity among them. In this light, the solecism is less an accidental breach of grammar and more a window into the interpretive and theological priorities of the scribe. Such irregularities illustrate how linguistic form was sometimes subordinated to doctrinal emphasis, and they underscore the complexity of Gə‘əz as both a grammatical system and a medium for theological expression.

3.2 Lexical Solecism

ወበጊዜሃ፡ ወጠነ፡ ጽሑፈ፡ ወንጌሉ፡ ቅዱስ፡ በልሳነ፡ ሮማይስጥ፡ ዘአፍርንጊ።
And at that time, he started writing his Holy Gospel... in the tongue of the Romans of the Afrāngi... ((A (f. 45v_a), B (f. 37v_a), C (f. 36r_a), D (f. 20r_c), E (f. 39v_a), F (f. 54r_a), G (f. 30r_a)).

In the Ge‘əz manuscripts of the *Acts*, the term አፍርንጊ (**Afrāngi**), the plural form of ‘Fārāngǝ, ፈረንጅ’, appears when describing the language in which Mark composed his Gospel: “Mark wrote in the language of the Romans of the Afrāngi” (ዘአፍርንጊ). This term is not originally Gə‘əz; rather, it is a loanword, likely derived from the Arabic *al-Faranj*, and was used in Ethiopia to refer to Western Europeans in medieval times (Pankhurst 2014, 492a-493b). Hence, from a strictly linguistic perspective, the term ‘**Afrāngi**’ constitutes a lexical solecism within the Gə‘əz text.

ወአመ፡ ተፈጸመ፡ መዋዕለ፡ [ጳንጠቆስጤ]፡ መጽኦ፡ ግብተ፡ ድምፅ፡ እምሰማይ። *And when the day of Pentecost had fully come ...there came a sound suddenly from Heaven.*

In the Gə'əz literary tradition of the *Acts*, the Greek term *Pentecost* is rendered and preserved as 'ጳንጠቆስጤ (pänəṭäqosəṭe)'. However, a close examination of the manuscripts reveals that almost every scribe copied it differently, producing a remarkable variety of forms: ጳንጠቆስጤ፡ (pänəṭäqosəṭé, A: f. 17r_b); ጳንጠቆስጤ፡ (pänəṭäqosəṭ; B; f. 13v_a; F: f. 20v_a); ጳንጠቆስጤ፡ (pänəṭäqosəṭi, C: f. 14r_a); ጳንጠቆስጤ፡ (pänəṭäqosəṭé, D: f. 7v_b); ጳንጠቆስጤ፡ (pänəṭäqosəṭé, E: f. 14r_b). This multiplicity of forms constitutes a clear **lexical solecism**: the term, originally foreign, is repeatedly adapted in slightly divergent and inconsistent ways, reflecting the scribes' attempts to reconcile the lexical item with the phonological and orthographic conventions of Gə'əz.

3.3 Morphological Solecism

• ወፈጸሞሙ፡ ኩሎ፡ ሕገ፡ አተው፡ (sic) ሀገሮሙ፡ ናዝሬት። *Fulfilling all the law, they returned into their city Nazareth* (A: f.3v_b; C: f.3v_a).

• ኢይሌብው፡ (sic) ስሕተተ፡ ዘይበውኦ፡ ውስተ፡ ሐሳብ። *They don't understand the error that comes into the calculation* (E: f. 49v_a; F: f. 71r_a).

• ወመጠው፡ (sic) ለሕዝብ፡ እምሥጢር፡ ቅዱስ። *And they gave to the faithful from the Holy Eucharist* (C: f. 59v_b; D: f. 33v_c).

In the standard Gə'əz affixation, the suffix “-u / -እ” is used to mark the past tense of third-person plural masculine verbs, like ‘ቀዳሱ = qäddäsu’, ‘ነበሩ = näbäru’, and ‘ሐሩ = ḥoru’. However, as we can see from the bolded characters, in the *Acts of St. Mark*, this expected marker is often replaced by “-ə / -እ” or by “-wə / ው” instead of the canonical “-wu / ዉ”. This substitution represents a clear **morphological solecism**, as it deviates from the established rules of Gə'əz verbal morphology. While the meaning remains intelligible, the forms reflect a systematic irregularity that suggests the phonological influence of these sounds.

3.4 Orthographic Solecism

• U → ሐ

• ወይቤሎ፡ ወልድዮ፡ ጽናዕ፡ በጸጋሁ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ ዘላዕሌከ፡ ከመዝ፡ [መሐር]፡ ወገሥጽ። *And he said to him “My son, be strengthened by the grace of God that is upon you, and [forgive] and rebuke”* (B: f. 36r₁; E: f. 38r; G: f. 29r_a).

• ወይቤልዎ፡ ኩሎሙ፡ ኦሆ፡ ንገብር፡ ዘእዘዝከነ፡ ወባሕቱ፡ ጸሐፍ፡ ለነ፡ ትምህርተከ፡ [ዘመሐርከነ]። *And all they said Him: “Okay, we will do what You ordered us, but write us Your lesson what You [forgave] us”* (F53r_a; G: f. 29r_b).

In Gə'əz orthographic tradition, the distinction between **U** (hā) and **ሐ** (hā) is crucial, as the two characters, though phonetically similar, carry different semantic implications. A notable orthographic solecism occurs in the *Acts of St. Mark*, where scribes repeatedly employ the verb መሐር

(mähar, “forgive”) in contexts that clearly require መሀር (mähar, “teach”). For instance, in B (f. 36r_b), E (f. 38r), and G (f. 29r_a), the text reads: “...be strengthened by the grace of God that is upon you, and [forgive] and rebuke”, while in F (f. 53r_a) and G (f. 29r_b), the disciples respond: “...write us Your lesson what You [forgave] us.” In both cases, the semantic environment calls for “teach” rather than “forgive.” The orthographic confusion between **U** and **ሐ** not only produces a lexical error but also alters the theological nuance of the passages. This misuse of characters exemplifies an **orthographic solecism**, where a script substitution changes a meaning and reflects the scribal error in cases of phonological proximity.

• O → እ

• ወይደሎ፡ እምእሎ፡ [እደው]፡ እሎ፡ ነበሩ፡ ምስሌነ፡ ንኅረይ። *And it is worthy to choose from these [hands] who are with us* (A: f. 17r_a; C: f. 13v_b; D: f. 7v_a).

• ወውእቱ፡ በሐሳብ፡ ሮም፡ በካልእ፡ [እመት]። *And it is in the second [maid] in the Romans' calculation* (E: f. 51r₁).

In the traditional Gə'əz orthographic system, the graphemes **O** (‘a) and **እ** (‘a), are semantically distinct though phonetically proximate, and their interchange can significantly alter meaning. A striking instance of this orthographic solecism appears in the *Acts of St. Mark*. In A (f. 17r_a), C (f. 13v_b), and D (f. 7v_a), the text records: “It is worthy to choose from these [እደው, hands] who are with us”, where the expected form is **ዕደው** (‘ədaw, “men”), since the narrative clearly refers to companions rather than literal hands. Similarly, in the second case, the text E (f. 51r_b) reads: “And it is in the second [እመት, maid] in the Romans' calculation”, where the sense demands **ዓመት** (‘āmat, “year”) to mark chronology, not a female servant. In both cases, the substitution of **እ** for **O** creates semantic distortions, and such **orthographic solecisms** demonstrate how a minor orthographic slip could cause semantic distinction. These instances could highlight the interpretive challenges innovated by scribal inconsistency in the Ethiopian textual tradition.

4. CONCLUSION

The main subject of this article was exploring the linguistic solecisms of the Ethiopian *Acts* of St. Mark the Evangelist, with particular attention to the medium version. Looking closely at the linguistic solecisms allows us to see far beyond the surface of “errors” in the text. These irregularities in grammar, word choice, and spelling are not simply mistakes to be corrected or dismissed; rather, they reveal the very human struggle of scribes and translators as they sought to carry sacred stories from various languages, like Greek, into the Ethiopian context. Every unusual form or awkward expression tells us something about the pressures they faced, how to remain faithful to foreign sources while making the text meaningful in Gə'əz, a language that was itself constantly

developing through centuries of worship and scholarship. In this way, the supposed defects or solecisms become small but powerful witnesses to Ethiopia's participation in a much wider Christian tradition, showing how global ideas were absorbed, reshaped, and re-expressed through local voices. The medium recension of the *Acts* of St. Mark, therefore, is not only a hagiographic story of a Saint but also a record of cultural encounter, scribal creativity, and the enduring resilience of Gə'əz as a living literary language. Ultimately, these linguistic details remind us that Ethiopian Christian literature is not a static inheritance but a dynamic tradition, one that grew out of translation, adaptation, and the determination to make the faith speak in the rhythms and words of its own people.

ABBREVIATIONS

EMML = Ethiopian Manuscript and Microfilm Library

F = folio

CE = Common Era

IES = Institute of Ethiopian studies

Ms/s = Manuscript/s

UNESCO = United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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