Introduction

semlang4 is a conlang created for the 22nd speedlang challenge. It is set somewhere vaguely in eastern Africa.

Classification

semlang4 is a Semitic language, but its exact placement is unclear. It possesses the morphological isoglosses of West Semitic and lacks those of Central Semitic. It has some features in common with northern Ethiopian Semitic, such as the development of a converb in *CaCi:C-, but lacks some of the vowel developments common in the branch. Given its unique treatment of the short prefix conjugation, using it as an imperfective past tense rather than a jussive or subjunctive, semlang4 may represent a separate branch of southern West Semitic alongside Eastern South Arabian and Ethiopian Semitic.

Sound Changes

*s₁ s₃ > s
*ɣ > ʕ
*ay aw > eː oː

i u > e o in non-penult syllables (before loss of cases, restored by analogy in verbs)
Geers' law (dissimilation of emphatics)

#hV -> #V low tone
#ʔV -> #V high tone

Vh# -> V low tone
Vʔ# -> V high tone

*zV Vz -> sV Vs low tone
*ðV Vð -> θV Vθ low tone

*ÇV VÇ -> CV VC high tone

Phonology

Consonants		Labial	Dental	Alveolar Central	Alveolar Lateral	Palatal	Velar	Phar.	Glottal
Nasal		m		n					
Stop	Tenuis			t			k		'
	Voiced	b		d			g		

Fricative	f	θ	s	λ		x	ḥ	h
Continuant			r	l	y	w	c	

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
Close	i i:		u u:
Mid	e e:		o o:
Open		a a:	

Allophony

Coronal fricatives are pronounced as affricates word-initially and after nasals.

Accent and Tones

Each syllable is assigned either the slightly rising high tone, marked with acute, the slightly falling low tone, marked with grave, or the unmarked neutral tone. The neutral tone may be pronounced slightly falling when prominent, such as in monosyllables or in the penultimate syllable of a word lacking high or low tones.

Phonotactics

Syllable structure is (C)V((C)C). Coda clusters follow a sonority hierarchy, so the inner consonant of the cluster cannot be a stop or fricative if the outer one is a sonorant. Stop-stop clusters are not found either.

Glottal consonants are not found at word edges; short vowels are not found word-finally. Suffixes that take the form of short vowels are often not present when not followed by an additional suffix.

Morphology

Verbs

Verbs inflect for four tense/aspect categories as well as the imperative mood, as well as six "stems" that indicate voice and valency distinctions. The paradigms for each form in the basic stem, called G by convention, are given first, followed by the full paradigms for each stem. [Full descriptions and paradigms for all six stems may not be present in the version of this grammar presented for the speedlang challenge. Semitic has a lot of verb forms. So sue me.]

Templatic Morphology

Every verb root, as in other Semitic languages, consists of 2 to 4 consonants that have infixes inserted among them to form a verbal stem, plus a "theme vowel" that is inserted into the second syllable of the stem. Suffixes and/or prefixes are added to this stem, which may cause syncopation of a vowel from the stem.

Unlike in other Semitic languages, one of the three consonants in the root may have a floating low or high tone associated with it, which will be realized on the following vowel if possible, or otherwise the preceding vowel.

The Past Perfective

The past perfective is used for completed events in the past. The 3rd person singular masculine form of the past perfective is also used as the citation form of the verb. It uses its own set of suffixes for agreement and thus can also be called the "suffix conjugation." The stem takes the shape $C_1aC_2VC_3$ by default; some verbs have a theme vowel /a/ while others take /i/. The following examples illustrate the paradigm.

kátal 'to kill'	Singular	Plural
1st Person	kátalku:	kátalna:
2nd Person Masculine	kátalk	kátalkem
2nd Person Feminine	kátalki:	kátalkema:
3rd Person Masculine	kátal	kátlu:
3rd Person feminine	kátlat	kátla:

labis 'to dress in, wear'	Singular	Plural
1st Person	labisku:	labisna:
2nd Person Masculine	labisk	labiskem
2nd Person Feminine	labiski:	labiskema:
3rd Person Masculine	labis	labsu:
3rd Person feminine	labsat	labsa:

The Past Imperfective

The past perfective is used for habitual or continuous events in the past or leading up to the present. It uses the same prefixes and suffixes for agreement as the nonpast and can thus be

called the "short prefix conjugation." Verbs that have the theme vowel /a/ in the suffix conjugation take /i/ in the prefix conjugations and vice versa. The following examples illustrate the paradigm.

kátal 'to kill'	Singular	Plural
1st Person	áktil	náktil
2nd Person Masculine	táktil	táktilu:
2nd Person Feminine	táktili:	táktila:
3rd Person Masculine	yáktil	yáktilu:
3rd Person feminine	táktil	yáktila:

labis 'to dress in, wear'	Singular	Plural
1st Person	albas	nalbas
2nd Person Masculine	talbas	talbasu:
2nd Person Feminine	talbasi:	talbasa:
3rd Person Masculine	yalbas	yalbasu:
3rd Person feminine	talbas	yalbasa:

The Nonpast

The nonpast can have a present or future meaning. It uses the same agreement affixes as the past imperfective and can thus be called the "long prefix conjugation." The following examples illustrate the paradigm.

kátal 'to kill'	Singular	Plural
1st Person	akáttil	nakáttil
2nd Person Masculine	takáttil	takáttilu:
2nd Person Feminine	takáttili:	takáttila:
3rd Person Masculine	yakáttil	yakáttilu:
3rd Person feminine	takáttil	yakáttila:

labis 'to dress in, wear'	Singular	Plural

1st Person	alabbas	nalabbas
2nd Person Masculine	talabbas	talabbasu:
2nd Person Feminine	talabbasi:	talabbasa:
3rd Person Masculine	yalabbas	yalabbasu:
3rd Person feminine	talabbas	yalabbasa:

The Converb

The converb form of the verb is used to indicate an action that takes place previous to that signified by the verb of the main clause. It modifies a preceding noun and agrees in number and gender like an adjective, but governs its own clause.

kalb, bawí: la=fondúk, aθ la: naθár wa=θà:t afattaḥà: sáwa:.
dog enter\CVB PREP=inn INDEF NEG see\PFV and=DEM.F.SG 1SG-open\NPST=F.3SG say\PST
A dog, having entered an inn, did not see anything, and it said, "I'll open this one!" (SMOYD 1948).

The converb can also serve as the main verb as a clause, in which case it takes on a perfect meaning, emphasizing the relevance of a previously completed event to the frame of reference. Syntactically, the converb used as a finite verb takes the form of a subject complement, and thus agrees in gender and number but not person with the subject, comparably to finite verbs derived from active participles in other Semitic languages.

Auxiliary Constructions with the Converb

The converb can also be placed before the finite verb, in which case it acts as a verbal auxiliary. Some verbs are only used in this context, e.g. *ca:d* 'to still be, to be even then.'

falg sábi:b ca:d b=aya:m ullu:.
river flow\CVB still\PFV PREP=day\PL DEM.M.PL
The river still flowed in those days (SMOYD 2101).

The D-Stem

The lengthened /a:/ in the nonpast form may be adapted from a former L-stem form marked by a long /a:/ in the first syllable. This stem is present in multiple southerly branches of the Semitic family but its origin is unclear.

Nouns

Gender

Nouns distinguish two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine. Feminine nouns, especially those with masculine counterparts, are often marked by the suffixes *-at*, *-t*, or *-e:*. Some feminine nouns, however, have no morphological indication of gender, especially ones referring to female animals, the word *um* 'mother', and certain words for parts of the body.

Number

Nouns distinguish two grammatical numbers: singular and plural. Plurals, especially animate plurals, feminine nouns ending in *-at* and many adjectives, are sometimes marked simply with suffixes, but many plurals are instead marked with templatic alterations referred to as "broken" plurals. Broken plural formations include:

Singular Noun Shapes	Plural Form
$C_1VC_2(V)C_3$	$aC_1C_2a{:}C_3$
$C_1VC_2C_3VC_4$	$C_1aC_2a{:}C_3iC_4$
$C_1V{:}C_2$	$aC_1a{:}C_2$

Pronouns

Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns have both unbound forms and bound forms that cliticize to prepositions and verbs to indicate their object.

Unbound forms are used when the pronominal subject is topicalized. When a pronominal object is topicalized, a preposition with a suffixed bound pronominal form is used. Bound pronouns can also cliticize onto verbs, in which case slightly different forms are used.

Independent Subject Pron.s	Singular	Plural
1st	ana:	niḥin
2nd masc.	att	attem
2nd fem.	atti:	attema:
3rd masc.	baλλù:	ìm
3rd fem.	baλλà:	ìma:

Prepositional bound pron.s	Singular	Plural
1st	-y/-i:	-na:
2nd masc.	-k	-kem
2nd fem.	-ki:	-kema:
3rd masc.	-ù:	-ìm
3rd fem.	-à:	-ìma:

Object bound pron.s	Singular	Plural
1st	-ni:	-(a)n
2nd masc.	-(a)k	-kem
2nd fem.	-ki:	-kema:
3rd masc.	-ù:	-ìm
3rd fem.	-à:	-ìma:

Demonstrative Pronoun

There is no distinction between proximal and distal deixis. The paradigm of the demonstrative is as follows.

Demonstrative pronoun	Singular	Plural
Masculine	θù:	ullu:
Feminine	θà:t	ulla:t

Syntax

Topic-Prominence

The verb is by default the first element in a clause, but the most salient nominal argument, whether subject or object, is invariably fronted before the verb in main clauses. Whether this is the subject or direct object can often be determined from context or by verbal agreement: when a direct object is fronted, it is usually also marked with a bound pronoun on the verb. Additionally, animate direct objects are differentially marked with the preposition **la=**.

Prepositional phrases can also be fronted. Question-word phrases and their answers are always fronted.

bay taḥattíbù: Le:le:.
PREP-1SG F.3SG-chop.up\NPST=M.3SG Lele
It's on my account that Lele will chop it up (SMOYD 1711).

Occasionally the topic will not be resumed syntactically in the rest of the sentence.

θà:t esat, atu: min reḥmat bama:bir fatú:n.
DEM.F.SG fire arrive\PFV-M.3PL from mercy firefighter\PL fast
That fire-- by grace the firefighters arrived quickly (SMOYD 2097).

Nominal Sentences

Semantics

Verbs of Separation and Cutting

semlang4 inherits a rich vocabulary of verbs relating to cutting, breaking, perforating, separating, picking off, etc., often with highly specialized usages. A few selected examples follow.

ḥatáb is used to indicate splitting a solid material into smaller pieces by chopping, usually wood, but incidentally also meat or other foods.

cíλ yaḥattíbù: ḥattá:b ba=ḥuruλ ba=ḥasí:n.
wood M.3-chop.up\NPST=M.3SG woodcutter PREP=forest PREP=axe
The woodcutter is chopping up wood in the forest with an axe (SMOYD 946).

nakáb means to put a hole in something by cutting around its perimeter, to cut out or to punch out a shape; the pluractional form, **nakkáb**, means to perforate, cut multiple holes in.

gasàc means to cut shorter by removing the end, crop, clip, prune, trim. Conversely, **kasáb**, meaning to cut or pluck off, places the focus on the end part that is removed.