

---

# Phonological deformation of the “Asho” (“Az mari”) argot in Tigray

Abraha Girmay Hagos

Department of Tigrigna language, Literature and folklore, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia

## Email address:

abrahagirmay@gmail.com

## To cite this article:

Abraha Girmay Hagos. Phonological Deformation of the “Asho” (“Az mari”) Argot in Tigray. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 2, No. 3, 2014, pp. 232-240. doi: 10.11648/j.ijll.20140203.22

---

**Abstract:** This research focused on the phonological deformation of “Asho” argot in Tigray. The objective of the research is to describe the phonological deformation of Asho argot from standard languages. To achieve this objective, the researcher used purposive method sampling to select the informants. And, elicitation, interview and participant observation method were used to collect the data. The data have been recorded by using an audio-taperecorder. Qualitative method is employed to analyze the collected data. The findings of this research are: “Asho” argot is derived from Tigrigna and Amharic words through form change (phonological deformation), such as addition, metathesis, reduplication, substitution, deletion, vowel deformation and degemination as well as free variation and depalatalization of sounds. The “Asho” argot uses the phonological structure of the Tigrigna syllables, consonant + vowel and consonant + vowel + consonant.

**Keywords:** Argot, Asho, Az mari, Phonological Deformations

---

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Sociolinguistics is the empirical study of language in relation to society. There are numbers of specialists who investigate some aspects of the interaction of language and society. They have been studying about how language relates to social categories of various kinds, such as social class, age, sex, gender, ethnicity, speech situation, social network (family members, friends, colleagues, customers, neighbors and other regular or occasional interlocutors) as well as social aspects in general [1],[2]. Therefore, to be a member of a certain language group, usually, there is an association between language and culture. Historical circumstance, social hierarchy, patterns of internal and external interaction and ideology help to determine the construction of ethno-linguistic identity more than the basis of structural linguistic parameters [3].

Throughout the world, people have invented secret languages and language games. They have been using these special languages as means of identifying with a special group, for fun or to prevent others from knowing what is being said [4].

Society is classified into different groups according to various social factors such as types of occupation,

generation, economic status, kinship etc [5]. In Tigray, there is one societal group of minstrel called Az mari in Amharic or ገላገዕ in their secret language. [6]and [7] indicated that the word Az mari is derived from the Ethiopian Semitic word zmr means “sing”, zəmərə “sang” and the noun form of this word is Az mari means “a person who sings a song”. According to [8], Az mari people had been also called ገላገዕ “a person who praises” because a long time ago Az mari people had praised for emperors or princes, their events and heroes. They have cultural music played by a traditional instrument called masink’o which is made from the hair of horse’s tail, goat’s skin and wood [9]. As [7] denoted, Az mari group of Amhara region particularly Debre-Markos have secret language (argot) which they use it to communicate with each other in the group. [10] defined argot as follows.

A secret language...used by beggars and thieves in medieval France, more broadly, argot may refer to any specialized vocabulary or set of expressions...used by a particular group or class and not widely understood by mainstream society.

This definition is related to the historical development of the secret language of the criminal people in France. However, secret language is not only used by criminal people but also non-criminal people use it in Ethiopia. [5] describes the Az mari argot of Gondar as follows:

Communication through a secret argot allows Enzata [Az mari group] to share a sense of community and exclusivity.... it helps as a means of exchanging information they do not want outsiders [Buga] to know.

From the above quote, argot is not only spoken by criminal people but it is spoken by non-criminal people like Az mari group. The main objective of this article is to survey the phonological deformation of the Az mari argot of Tigrinya speakers who are found in Temben- Begashexa of Tigray region. The ṙṙṙṙ people are found in the central zone of Tigray district of K'olatemben-Begashexa.

### 1.2. Objective of the Research

The general objective of the research is to analyze phonological deformation of the Az mari argot of Tigrinya speakers. This research has the following specific objectives.

- To elicit az mari argot words;
- To analyze the phonological disguising of the az mari argot words and
- To show the origin of the az mari argot words.

### 1.3. Significance of the Research

This research may have different significances: such as it may serve as an important material to save the linguistic properties of the Asho argot, and it may help readers who want to know the historical linguistic features of asho (Az mari) secret language and people

### 1.4. Research Methodology

This research was conducted in district (woreda) Kolatemben kebele Begashxa. The research area of the study is sub-district (kebele) Begashexa found in the central zone of Tigray, southern part of the woreda Kollatemben. This research is studied Asho(Az mari) group. However, the actual number of the Az mari group in Begashexa is unknown due to lack statistical data that indicates the specific number of the group (source from statistical workers of Kolatemben kebele districts).

The researcher employed purposive method sampling to select informants. The purpose of the researcher was first, to collect reliable data from informants who have better knowledge then to collect data about the linguistic features of the argot. Totally, the researcher collected the data from five elders, five youngsters and four children, the researcher, however, was not concerned about the number among the three groups of informants intentionally.

The processes of collecting the raw data were facilitated procedurally by the researcher himself through elicited method was employed to easily understand the same isolated words (elicited words), phrases and sentences of the "Asho" argot initially. Participatory observations in line with elicited method and recording through audio-tape recorder were also employed. To analyze the collected data, the researcher mainly used descriptive (qualitative) approach to describe data about the linguistic properties.

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) has been used to transcribe the linguistic data.

## 2. Data Analysis and Interpretation

### 2.1. Phonological Deformation

Phonological deformation means distortion of words form of Tigrigna, Amharic or other in order to create incomprehensible communication. Formation of the secret language is formed from a standard language through sound changes systematically or unconditionally. Thus, this may lead to language diversification. [11] supported this idea as "On the whole, linguists still seem to be confronted with the principle the diversification of language is due to the systematic and destructive effects of sound change ... and the breakdown in communications between isolated groups." The Asho argot uses different phonological deformations such as addition, reduplication, reduplication with addition, substitution, metathesis and deletion from Tigrigna and Amharic words.

#### 2.1.1. Addition of Speech Sounds

According to [12], "words can be augmented by addition of an external element". These additions of the external elements may be single or group of speech sounds. For instance, /r/ is added in several words of the Asho argot. It can be added in monosyllabic, bisyllabic, trisyllabic words or more and in different positions of the words. When /r/ is added to the word of the language, it shows two properties. First, there are enormous Asho argot words, when /r/ is added to the words; there is no change of other consonants or vowels of the words. Second, when /r/ is added to the words, some consonants or vowels of the words will be changed into other consonants or vowels.

In the following data, /r/ is added without changing any other consonants. When /r/ is added to the word, the number of syllables of the words does not increase. Rather, the light forms of syllable of the words whose initial part of the word CV<sup>1</sup> becomes heavy form of syllable of the words CVC<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1. The Asho words added /r/

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
wədəx'ə	wərdix'u <sup>3</sup>	he failed down
dəfəṙə	dərfiṙu	he pushed
gəzəṙə	gəzriṙa	she bought
xəfətə	xərfitu	he opened
s'əbəbə	s'ərbibu	it came narrow
fətəhə	fətiṙhna	we divorced/untied
Bəzəhə	bəzriṙu	it became much
t'əfəṙə	t'ərfəṙə	it is disappeared
t'əx'əmə	t'ərx'əmi	Important

As mentioned in the above data, the first and fourth

<sup>1</sup> CV is consonant vowel pattern.

<sup>2</sup> CVC is also consonant vowel consonant pattern.

<sup>3</sup> wərdix'u also means it became cheaper in price.

columns indicate the words of the standard language (Tigrigna). The Asho argot column is the derived words of the Asho argot from the standard language Tigrigna and in the gloss column the meanings of the words of the standard languages as well as the Asho argot is given. All the above words of the Asho argot are formed from Tigrigna by adding /r/ sound. From the above data, we can observe that the number of syllables of words does not change in the Asho argot. Rather the initial light form of the syllable-/CV-/ becomes heavy form of syllable-/CVC-/. Besides, /r/ is inserted into the empty coda of the first syllable of the words.

/r/ is also added into Amharic words. For example, /r/ is added to Amharic words in the derivation of the Asho argot words as:

**Table 2.** The Asho words added /r/

Amharic	Asho argot	gloss
wəddədə	wərdidu	he liked
t'əbbək'ə	t'ərbix'u	he kept
dəkkəmə	dərkimu <sup>4</sup>	he got tired

Based on the above data, we can deduce that the Asho argot words are also formed from Amharic words by degemination the geminated consonants of the words because all the above Amharic words are geminated, but when they came to Asho argot, they are changed into degemination words. /r/ is also added with some systematic changes of consonants of the words of the languages. From these changes, while /r/ is added to words whose consonants consist of alveolar, fricative and ejective speech sound /s'/, /s'/ becomes /t'/. The numbers of syllable of the words in the Asho argot are similar with the Tigrigna words. But the light form /CV/ of the initial syllable of the words is changed to heavy form /CVC/ of syllables as we have seen listed below.

**Table 3.** The Asho words added /r/ and changed /s'/ sound to /t'/ sound.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
wəs'əṛə	wərt'iṛu	he got out
ṛəs'əwə	ṛart'iwu	he closed
s'ənəhə	t'əniha	she waited
bəs'əhə	bərt'ihu	it was arrived

From the above examples, we can deduce that when /r/ is added to the words whose consonants consist of /s'/, then /s'/ becomes /t'/. It is known that /s'/ and /t'/ have a common feature of ejective manner. Hence, the change is only manner of articulation from fricative to stop.

There is dissimilation process in words of the Asho argot which have /r/ consonant. Dissimilation is taken as the loss of a certain feature specification which is triggered by the presence of the identical feature in the environment [13].

**Table 4.** The Asho words added /r/, and the dissimilated /r/ to /t'/

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
nəbərə	nəbət'ə	it was
həfərə	həfənə	he is ashamed of

As we can see from the above data, when /r/ is inserted into the words, the position of /r/ consonant of the word is dissimilated into /t'/ or /n/ speech sounds, and /r/ is added in the coda of the first syllable. For instance, the Asho argot word, nəbət'ə “it was” is derived from Tigrigna nəbərə that the consonant /r/ is substituted by /t'/ and the addition of /r/ is inserted in the coda of the first syllable of the word. The Asho argot word həfənə “he is ashamed of” is also formed from Tigrigna həfərə where the consonant /r/ is replaced by /n/ and the addition of /r/ is placed in the coda of the first syllable of the words. We can also understand that the CV structure in the word initial turns into CVC structure because of the addition of the /r/ to the coda of the CV of the word initial.

/r/ can also added with other types of additional speech sounds to the words. For instance, gərbitu “he got in” taken from Amharic word gəbba by adding /t/ and /r/ speech sounds as well as degemination of /bb/ to /b/. And gəbba Amharic structure is restructured to Tigrigna structure gərbitu. təbərəṛisu “he fought” is also derived from Tigrigna təbəṛasə by adding /ə/ and /r/ speech sound. Moreover, /r/ is also inserted within geminated words and with addition of /r/ used as epenthetic vowel in the Amharic words as the in following:

**Table 5.** The Asho words added /r/ and changed /s'/ sound to /t'/ sound.

Amharic	Asho argot	gloss
səddəbə	səṛṛddəbə	he insulted
səddədə	səṛṛddədə	he sent away
wəddədə	wəṛṛddədə	he liked/loved
təfəṛṛə	təfəṛṛṛəṛə	it was finished

From the above examples, we can understand that /r/ is inserted before geminated consonants of Amharic words. /r/ is also used as epenthetic vowel because Asho argot does not allow consonant clusters as Tigrigna language. When /r/ is added into geminated words, the numbers of the consonants of the words syllable increase. For instance, səddəbə is changed to səṛṛddəbə from CVCCVCV to CVCVCVCV.

In other instances, velar, stop and voiced speech sound /g/ is also used in the formation of the Asho argot words by adding it to Tigrigna words as the following examples.

**Table 6.** The Asho words added /g/ sound.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
wələdə	wəlgida	she gave birth
mələsə	məlgisu	he answered
wəsədə	wəsgidu	he brought
dələjə	dəlgiju	he wanted
mələṛə	məlgiṛu	he filled
fələhə	fəlgihu	it is boiled

<sup>4</sup> dərkəmə also means very thinnest flour

As it has been indicated in the above table, /g/ is added to CV of the second syllable of the word and the consonant of the onset of the second syllable of the words become coda of the first syllable of the words. And their first syllable changes from CV- to CVC- due to the addition of /g/. For instance, CVCVCV syllable structure of Tigrigna word wələdə becomes CVCCVCV syllable structure of the Asho argot word wəlgida, and the second onset syllable of the word /l/ becomes the first coda syllable of the word. It should be noted that some of these verbs have Ethiopic Semitic roots. Moreover, /g/ is added after /l/ and /s/ sounds that are alveolar sounds as the above data.

When /g/ is added to words whose consonants include /s'/, /s'/ becomes /t'/. But the syllable structure of the words is similar with the above examples. These include t'əlgɪɾu "he disliked" is formed from s'ələɾə, and bəlgit'u "he becomes better" is derived from bələs'ə. These terms are derived from Tigrigna words. We can derive the following rule from these examples.

/m/ is also added to the Asho argot words taken from Tigrigna and Amharic words. These include tɾɪmbo "linseed" formed from Amharic təba through substitution of the vowel /a/ by /o/ and addition of /m/, and x'urumbɾt "leather, skin" is derived from Tigrigna term x'orbət through addition of /m/ and vowels change. From this data, we can estimate that /m/ sound was /n/ sound but later /n/ sound became /m/ sound because of the influence of the bilabial sound /b/.

The addition of /n/ is also inserted into different Tigrigna words to form vocabularies of Asho argot. The addition of /n/ in Asho argot verb is common as shown below:

Table 7. The Asho words added /n/.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
harəsə	harnisu	he ploughed
dərəx'ə	dərnix'u	it became solid
fərəhə	fərnihu	he feared

The above examples of Asho argot words are verbs derived from Tigrigna trisyllabic words. When /n/ is added, there is no change of vowels and consonants. But the nature of the initial syllables of the words becomes CVC from CV, and then the initial consonant (onset) of the second syllable of the words comes back to the coda of the initial syllable of the words. For instance, the CVCCVCV syllable structure of the Asho argot word harnisu is derived from CVCVCV syllable structure of Tigrigna word harəsə.

/n/ is also inserted into the Asho argot terms along with to additional changes such as fənziɟu "farted" is derived from Tigrigna fəsəjə through voicing /s/ to /z/. The change from voiceless to voiced speech sound (s → z) is displayed probably because of the addition of voiced /n/. Moreover, the Asho argot word dərnəgə "made" is derived from Amharic ɾadərəgə with deletion of /ɾa/ syllable and addition of /n/ by restructuring to Tigrigna. /n/ is also added

in dɾɪngussɾna<sup>5</sup> "small millet" formed from Tigrigna daguɾa by consisting of the double /n/ and substituting the initial syllable /a/ by /ɾ/. In this word, /ɾ/ is changed to /s/ that means the change is from palatal to alveolar place of articulation may be because of assimilation of palatal /ɾ/ with alveolar /n/ to alveolar /s/ in case of Tigrigna. The /n/ is also added to noun bərnəxa "desert" which is formed from Tigrigna bərəxa.

Another addition of sound like is /t'/ as in həlfət'ə "passed" taken from Tigrigna hələfə, and /t/ as in təngi<sup>6</sup> "tomorrow" which is formed from Amharic and some dialects of Tigrigna nəga through the addition of /i/ and movement of /ə/.

We have almost seen the addition of voice consonants such as /r/, /g/, /m/ and /n/, and rarely ejective and voiceless consonants such as /t'/ and /t/ respectively. In general, we can conclude that adding consonants are easy to pronounce and to make disguise speech than vowels [12], [14].

Still now, we have seen the addition of individual sounds. But, the addition of a syllable or group of sounds is also exhibited in the Asho argot terms derived from Tigrigna words. For example, x'urmuz "sweet, delicious" is derived from Tigrigna mɾɾuz by deleting /ɾɾ/ and adding /x'u/. in addition to this, hɾmɾto "vegetable" is formed from Tigrigna hamli by adding /-to/ syllable and substituting /a/ by /ɾ/, and deleting /i/ vowel. dɾim "place, country" is derived from Tigrigna word rim "one's share (land)" by adding /dɾ/ syllable.

In the formation of the Asho argot words, one or more than one phonological deformation may happen. To clarify this point, the addition and metathesis are very important in the formation of Asho argot words. The subject pronouns of the Asho argot are derived from Tigrigna subject pronouns through metathesis of /ns/ to /sn/ and addition of /k/ consonant as revealed in the following examples:

Table 8. The Asho words added /k/ and reordered /sn/

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
nɾsxa	sɾnkɾxa	you(SgM)
nɾsxi	sɾnkɾxi	you(SgF)
nɾsən	sɾnkən	they(F)
nɾsu	sɾnku	he
nɾsxum	sɾnkɾxum	you(Pl)
nɾsom	sɾnkɾom	they(M/N)
nɾsa	sɾnka	she

As it has been shown in the above data, sɾnkɾxa "you (SgM)" is taken from Tigrigna nɾsxa "you (SgM)" through metathesis of /nɾs/ to /sɾn/ and addition of /k/. /ɾ/ is inserted sound of the consonant clusters of the Asho argot and Tigrigna. And sɾnka "she" is also formed from the Tigrigna word nɾsa "she" by reordering /ns/ to /sn/ and adding /k/ sound. The pronouns "we" and "I" are represented by nɾhna and ɾanə in Tigrigna differently from

<sup>5</sup> Millet may also be termed dɾɪnguɾɾɾuɾ from ɾaɾo children conversation

<sup>6</sup> tang means tomorrow in Azmari argot of Amharic speakers[6].

the Asho argot pronouns s<sub>ɾ</sub>nk<sub>ɾ</sub>na “we” and s<sub>ɾ</sub>nkəj “I”. Therefore, the Asho argot word s<sub>ɾ</sub>nk<sub>ɾ</sub>na “we” seems that formed from Tigrigna 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> subject pronouns Tigrigna stem /n<sub>ɾ</sub>s/ by generalizing it as the stem of the all subject pronouns, and addition of /k/ as well as 1<sup>st</sup> person plural marker /-na/. Similarly, s<sub>ɾ</sub>nkəj<sup>7</sup> “I” is taken from Tigrigna 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> subject pronouns stem /n<sub>ɾ</sub>s/ by generalizing the stem as it is stem of all subject pronouns and addition of /k/ and /əj/ first pronoun marker.

The other types of metathesis and addition are included in the Asho argot terms like the Asho argot word wə<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾit’u “he passed the day” is derived from Tigrigna word wə<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾilu through metathesis of /ɾ/ consonants to /lɾ/ consonants and addition of /t’/ speech sound. In addition to this, x’<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾumb<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾ “chickpea” is formed from Tigrigna word ɾ<sub>ɾ</sub>mb<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾa by moving the initial consonant /ɾ/ to the final position of the word and the final consonant /ɾ/ of the word to initial position of the word, and addition of /x’<sub>ɾ</sub>/ syllable to the beginning of the word.

**2.1.2. Reduplication**

“Reduplication is a process which copies all or part of the phonological representation of a stem” (Spencer, 2007:4). Reduplication is a common process in languages. Argot also has reduplication process in its formation. The Asho argot consists of partial reduplication, change of vowels and addition of new speech sounds the follows:

*Table 9. The Asho words added /k/ and reordered /sn/*

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
ɾəbəna	ɾɾb <sub>ɾ</sub> nb <sub>ɾ</sub> n	coffee pot
k <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾɾst <sub>ɾ</sub> nna	k <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾɾst <sub>ɾ</sub> nt <sub>ɾ</sub> n	baptism
kətəma	k <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾt <sub>ɾ</sub> mt <sub>ɾ</sub> m	town
h <sub>ɾ</sub> d <sub>ɾ</sub> mo	h <sub>ɾ</sub> d <sub>ɾ</sub> md <sub>ɾ</sub> m	Traditional house of Tigray

Therefore, we can understand from the above data, the final syllable CV(C)CV of the Tigrigna words is reduplicated to CVCCVC and the vowels of the words became /ɾ/. For instance, ɾ<sub>ɾ</sub>b<sub>ɾ</sub>nb<sub>ɾ</sub>n “coffee pot” is formed from ɾəbəna by repeating the final syllables /bəna/ to /b<sub>ɾ</sub>nb<sub>ɾ</sub>n/ and vowel changes, and the final vowels of the words are deleted. In addition to this, CVC of the word final is copied to /CVCCVC/ of the word final in the Asho argot as the following:

*Table 10. The Asho words reduplicated.*

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
hamat	h <sub>ɾ</sub> m <sub>ɾ</sub> tm <sub>ɾ</sub> t	Mother- in- law
mahbər	m <sub>ɾ</sub> hb <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾb <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾ	religious ceremony
gu <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾɾ	gu <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾɾɾɾɾ	type of ‘tella’ in igray
səjt’an	sijt’ <sub>ɾ</sub> nt’ <sub>ɾ</sub> n	devil, Satan

As it is stated in the above data, the final syllable /CVC/ of the Tigrigna words became /CVCCVC/. For example, h<sub>ɾ</sub>m<sub>ɾ</sub>tm<sub>ɾ</sub>t “mother-in-law” derived from hamat by

reduplicating the final syllable /mat/ to /m<sub>ɾ</sub>tm<sub>ɾ</sub>t/. And sijt’<sub>ɾ</sub>nt’<sub>ɾ</sub>n “devil, Satan” taken from səjt’an by repeating the final syllable /t’an/ to /t’<sub>ɾ</sub>nt’<sub>ɾ</sub>n/.

Reduplication and addition are used together in the formation of the Asho argot. Partial and complete reduplication and addition of consonants such as /n/ and rarely /m/ as well as some substitution or changes of vowels are included in the Asho argot as stated below:

*Table 11. The Asho words with reduplicated and added.*

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
k <sup>w</sup> ada	kudunkud	water container
ɾ’ <sub>ɾ</sub> wa	ɾ’ <sub>ɾ</sub> w <sub>ɾ</sub> n <sub>ɾ</sub> ’ <sub>ɾ</sub> w	urbane, or a person who is not slave”
gu <sub>ɾ</sub>	gu <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾngu <sub>ɾ</sub>	green pepper
ɾ <sub>ɾ</sub> g <sub>ɾ</sub> o	ɾ <sub>ɾ</sub> ng <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾg <sub>ɾ</sub> ɾ	yoghurt
kuta	kut <sub>ɾ</sub> nkut	toga(white cotton loose garment)
d <sub>ɾ</sub> k’ <sup>w</sup> a	d <sub>ɾ</sub> x’ <sub>ɾ</sub> undux’	type of t’əlla

In the above data, the reduplication and addition simultaneously work together. The consonants of the Tigrigna words are reduplicated completely and /n/ is added to the final part of the words. For instance, ɾ’<sub>ɾ</sub>w<sub>ɾ</sub>n<sub>ɾ</sub>’<sub>ɾ</sub>w “urbane” is taken from Tigrigna and Amharic word ɾ’<sub>ɾ</sub>wa by copied it to ɾ’<sub>ɾ</sub>w<sub>ɾ</sub>’<sub>ɾ</sub>w and addition of /n/ to word final ɾ’<sub>ɾ</sub>wa.

The Asho argot also includes reduplicated words from Amharic words like what it takes from Tigrigna words. For instance, t’<sub>ɾ</sub>nk’<sub>ɾ</sub>urk’<sub>ɾ</sub>ur “black” and s<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾɾns<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾ “job” formed from Amharic words t’<sub>ɾ</sub>k’<sub>ɾ</sub>ur and s<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾra by reduplicating /k’<sub>ɾ</sub>ur/ to /k’<sub>ɾ</sub>urk’<sub>ɾ</sub>ur/ and s<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾra to s<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾɾns<sub>ɾ</sub>ɾ, and adding /n/.

**2.1.3. Substitution**

**2.1.3.1. One to One Syllable Substitution**

There is a one to one syllable substitution in the Asho argot to the words of the standard languages. Leslau (1964b:59) notes that some substituted consonants are in phonetic relation to the original consonant in m<sup>w</sup>ɾjət argot. In relation to this, in Asho argot especially, one syllable whose consonant is coronal consonants such as /l/, /t/, /t’/ and labial /m/ and central vowel /ə/ are substituting the syllable whose consonant is dorsal speech sounds such as /k’/, /k/, and /ɾ/ and back vowels /o/ and /u/ like the following:

*Table 12. The Asho words syllable substitution.*

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
ɾuk <sup>w</sup> i	t’ək <sup>w</sup> i	bad, wicked	ɾu → t’ə/ -## <sup>8</sup>
k’ojmu	ləjmu	stood up	k’o → lə/ -##
kojnu	təjnu	become, happened	ko → tə/ -##

From the above data, substitution of initial syllable is included in the Asho argot word t’ək<sup>w</sup>i<sup>9</sup> “wicked, evil” formed from Tigrigna ɾuk<sup>w</sup>i “evil, wicked” by replacing /ɾu/ by /t’ə/ syllable. /ɾ/ is not coronal. Rather, it is nearest

<sup>7</sup> s<sub>ɾ</sub>nk’<sub>ɾ</sub>e means “I” in the Azmarī argot of the Amharic speakers [6].

<sup>8</sup> -## shows that the change happens before the word.

<sup>9</sup> ɾk<sup>w</sup>i means “foot” in Kemantney [15].

to dorsal sounds. As the above rules and data indicates, the dorsal consonants are changed to the coronal or labial consonants, and the back vowels are changed to mid vowels. The other type of substitution of one to one syllable of initial part of the Amharic and Tigrigna words is taken place systematically or rule governed as:

Table 13. The Asho words one to one syllable substitution.

Amh./Tig.	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
tṛnnṛṛ	māniṛ <sup>10</sup>	small	tṛ→mə/-##
moṛṛ	ləṛṛi	foolish	mo→lə/-##
ḥṛmbəṛṛa	labiṛṛa	flat bread	ḥṛm→la/-##
ṛamarṛṛa	ṛamark <sup>wa</sup>	Amharic	ṛṛ→k <sup>w</sup> /##- <sup>11</sup>
wṛḥa	waṛṛo	water	ḥṛ→ṛṛo/##-
gṛṛm	gṛṛtṛ	good	tṛṛm/##-

From the above data, there are substitutions of phonemes of the word initial by other sounds. For instance, the Asho argot word māniṛ “small” and ləṛṛi “foolish” are taken from Amharic words tṛnnṛṛ and moṛṛ through substitution of /tṛ/ by /mə/ as well as /mo/ by /lə/ respectively. labiṛṛa “flat bread” is derived from Tigrigna ḥṛmbəṛṛa or from Amharic ṛambəṛṛa by replacing /ḥṛm/ or /ṛam/ by /la/ syllable and vowels substitutions. In ṛaṛo secret language, there is not only the substitution of initial syllables but substitution of final syllable like ṛamark<sup>wa</sup> “Amharic” formed from Amharic word ṛamarṛṛa by substituting /ṛṛa/ by /k<sup>w</sup>a/ syllable. And waṛṛo “water” formed from Amharic wṛḥa by substituting of /ḥṛ/ by /ṛṛo/ (cf Leslau,1952), and gṛṛtṛ<sup>12</sup> “good” also formed from Tigrigna term gṛṛm “good” by substituting /ṛm/ by /tṛ/. The other type of speech sounds substitution are ṛamuṛ<sup>13</sup> “salt” is probably formed from ṛamole “a type of salt which has square structure (bar salt)” by substituting /ole/ by /uṛ’/ speech sounds. Substitution of mid consonant of the word is included in the Asho argot like x’aziju “he left or remained” derived from Tigrigna x’ariju “he left” by substituting /ṛ/ by /z/ and /a/ by /ə/. And x’ax’ədə “he imprisoned” formed from Tigrigna x’əjədə through substitution of /j/ by /x’/ and /ə/ by /a/ and bi-articulating /x’/ to /x<sup>w</sup>/.

2.1.3.2. Two to Two Syllables Substitution

In Asho argot, the words are derived by substituting the syllables of the Tigrigna words. Then the similarity between Tigrigna words and Asho argot terms is very distant because the Asho argot and Tigrigna terms have few similar phonemes. Therefore, the possibilities of the formation of the Asho argot words are very doubtful because of their dual deformation as it has been mentioned in the sub-section “simple and complex form of the argot”.

Table 14. The Asho words two to two syllables substitution.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss
bəliṛu	baṛiju	he ate
bəxiju	wəṛṛiju <sup>14</sup>	he cried
x’əttilu	x’əṛṛiwu	he killed
səməṛə	sənkəṛə	he heard

As it is shown in the above data, baṛiju “he ate” might be taken from Tigrigna word bəliṛu. From the above words, baṛṛə “eat” “drink” is found in Azmari argot of Amharic speakers (Leslau, 1952:105).

2.1.3.3. Substitution of Individual Sounds

Substitution of sounds like /g/, /z/, /k/, /s/ by /l/, /w/ and /t/ respectively is displayed in the Asho argot. From the examples given below ləbəja and lənfo are formed from Amharic words but others are from Tigrigna, Geez or Semitic words.

Table 15. Substitution of Individual Sounds of asho words.

Tig./Amh.	Asho argot	gloss
gəwəz	ləwəz <sup>15</sup>	youngster, strong
gənzəb	lənzəb	money, animal
gənfo	lənfo	porridge(of wheat)
gəmbə	ləmbə	clay pot
gəbəja	ləbəja	market

As mentioned in the above, the /g/ sound is substituted by /l/ on the initial syllable of the words, but the vowels are not changed. Similarly, the Asho argot used substitution of /z/ and /s/ by /w/ as well as /k/ by /t/ as stated below:

Table 16. Substitution of Individual Sounds of asho words.

Tig./Amh.	Asho argot	gloss
kullu	tullu	all
səfər	wəfər	residential
zəffənə	wəffinu <sup>16</sup>	he sang
səkkərə	wəkkiru	he intoxicated

From the above data, /s/ and /z/ which are fricative and alveolar sounds have been changed by glide and bilabial sound /w/ as in wəffinu “he sang” is derived from the Amharic word zəffənə, and wəkkiru “he intoxicated” formed from Amharic word səkkərə. wəfər “residential” is also formed from Tigrigna and Amharic word səfər through substitution of /s/ by /w/. tullu “all” is derived from Tigrigna kullu by replacing /k/ by /t/. As we have seen in the literature review, the tullu “all” and wəkkərə “get drunk” are found in the Azmari argot of Amharic speakers.

The Asho argot also has substitution of sounds in different position of the following words.

<sup>10</sup> mānis means “small” in the Azmari argot of Amharic.

<sup>11</sup> ##- shows that the change happens after the word.

<sup>12</sup> ga.ri: means “good” in Oromo [16].

<sup>13</sup> ṛamuṛ’ may come from Maṛ’uṛ’o “type of bush whose test is sour” through /ṛ’o/ syllable substitution by /ṛ/ sound, metathesis of /ṛa/ and metaphoric expression.

<sup>14</sup> Tigrigna word waj bələ “said woe” may be a base of wəṛəjə “cried”.

<sup>15</sup> ləwət “youngster, strong is thought as complex form of ləwəz in this argot.

<sup>16</sup> wəffənə “singing” is noun form of wəffənə “he sings” in the Asho argot.

Table 17. Substitution of Individual Sounds of asho words.

Tig./Amh.	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
x'ələjə	ɾəliju	he roasted	x' → ɾ/##
x'olo	ɾolo	roast	x' → ɾ/##
ɾ'əwəta	ləwəta	playing	ɾ → l/##
h <sup>w</sup> ala	tala	later	h <sup>w</sup> → t/##
kəɾalə	ɾɾɾilu	he could do	k → ɾ/##
ɾasɾɾ	waɾir	ten	w → ɾ/##

From the above data, substitution is made between /x'/ and /ɾ/ in ɾolo “roast” or ɾəliju “he roasted” from Tigrigna words x'olo or x'əliju respectively. There are replacement of /ɾ'/ by /l/ as in ləwəta “playing” which is derived from the Tigrigna and Amharic word ɾ'əwəta/. Substitution of /h<sup>w</sup>/ by /t/ is practiced in tala “later” from Amharic h<sup>w</sup>ala. Moreover, /w/ and /ɾ/ are also replaced each other in the Asho argot waɾir “ten” from Amharic ɾasɾɾ by palatalizing /s/ to /ɾ/, or deleting /tə/ from ɾasəɾtə Tigrigna as well as there is replacement of /k/ by /ɾ/ in ɾɾɾilu “he could do” that taken from Tigrigna kəɾalə.

2.1.4. Substitution and Metathesis

Substitution and addition are two different phonological processes. Substitution is the replacement of sounds of the standard language words to create unintelligible words in the argot. In addition to substitution, the transposition of the substituted sounds or others is also a basic tool to deform the words of the standard language in the creation of the secret language. Substitution and metathesis process are taking place in Asho argot simultaneously as the following:

Table 18. Substitution and metathesis of asho words.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
zəbət't'ə	zət't'iwu	he hit	bt't' → t't'b/## and b → w/word medial
wəssadi	ləwwasi	thief	d → ##/##- and d → l/##-
gəza	məga	house	gz → zg/##- and z → m/##-
mɾns'af	wɾs'fa	carpet	af → fa/##- and mɾn → wɾ/##-
ɾ'oma	ɾabɾ'a	meat	ma → ɾab/## and a → o/word medial

Based on the above data, zət't'iwu “he hit” is formed from Tigrigna zəbət't'ə by reordering /bt't'/ to /t't'b/ and replacing /b/ by /w/. məga “house” is probably taken from gəza Tigrigna term by reordering /gz/ to /zg/ and replaced /z/ by /m/. ləwwasi “thief” is also formed from Tigrigna wəssadi “a person who takes something” by reordering /d/ from final part of the word to initial part of the word and substituting /d/ by /l/. Furthermore, wɾs'fa “carpet, mat” is derived from Tigrigna mɾns'af by substitution of /mɾn/ by /wɾ/ and reordering /af/ to /fa/. ɾabɾ'a “meat” also is taken from Tigrigna word ɾ'oma “fat (meat)” by reordering /ɾ'oma/ to /maɾ'o/ and substituting /ma/ by /ɾab/, and /a/ by /o/.

The other possibility of substitution and metathesis is that tələbbinu “he received” is derived from təx'əbbilu through substitution of /x'/ by /n/ and reordering of /l/ from the final consonant of the word to second consonant and /n/ from second consonant to final position of /l/. ləngi “very large pitcher used in making beer” is also formed from

Tigrigna word gənɾi by reordering /gn/ becomes to /ng/, substitution of /ɾ/ by /l/ and then /l/ moved to the initial position of the word. There could be a possibility to take it from the Amharic word gan through metathesis of /gn/ to /ng/, addition of /l/ and vowel change.

2.1.5. Substitution and Addition

Substitution and addition mean that there is substitution between or among sounds as well as addition of extra sounds to the standard language words to construct argot words. The ɾaɾo (Azmarī) argot of the Tigrigna speakers has the following replacement and addition of sounds:

Table 19. Substitution and Addition of asho words.

Amh/Tig.	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
bərgəd bələ	təbərgəjə	he woke up	Ø → tə/## and d → jə/##-
təgənaɾɾə	təgənaɾɾəjə	he met, greeted	Ø → jə/##- and ɾɾ → ɾɾ/ word medial

As the above data elaborates, substitution takes place with addition such as təbərgəjə<sup>17</sup> “woke up” probably from the Tigrigna phrasal verb bərgəd bələ “becomes stand up” or bərgəg bələ “becomes wake up” by changing the phrasal verb to non-phrasal verb, addition of /tə/ syllable and substitution of /d/ by /jə/. And təgənaɾɾəjə “he met, greeted” is derived from the Amharic word təgənaɾɾə by replacing /ɾɾ/ by /ɾɾ/ and by adding extra syllable of /jə/.

2.1.6. Substitution and Deletion

Deletion is the removing of the sounds from the words of the standard languages (Tigrigna, Amharic) to form the secret language words. Deletion and substitution processes may come together in one word of the argot. In the Asho argot, substitution and deletion are used to deform the Tigrigna and Amharic words as stated in the following examples:

Table 20. Substitution and deletion of asho words.

Tigrigna	Asho argot	gloss	sound changed
kɾlɾə	gitti	two	l → t/-t and k → g/##
s'əggəbə	t'əbbənə	he was full	g → Ø/word medial and Ø → nə/##-
hɾruf	ruɾ	selfish	hɾ → Ø/## and f → ɾ/##-
tahtəwaj	tatɾmmɾɾ	lower, under	h → Ø /word medial and waj → mmiɾ/##-
laɾləwaj	lalɾmmɾɾ	upper	ɾ → Ø/ word medial and waj → mmɾɾ/##-

As mentioned in the above data, gitti “two” is formed from Tigrigna word kɾlɾə through deletion of /l/ or assimilation of /l/ to /t/ completely and then gemination of /t/, substitution of /k/ by /g/ and change of vowels. t'əbbənə can be derived from Tigrigna s'əggəbə by changing /g/ to zero, substitution of /s'/ by /t'/ and addition of /n/. t'əbbənə “he was full, he was satiated” probably is also formed from

<sup>17</sup> təbərəgga means “get up” in the Azmarī argot of Amharic speakers[6]

Amharic t'əggəbə by using deletion of /g/ and then its gemination feature is replaced by /b/ and addition of /nə/ syllable. Similarly, ru<sub>r</sub> "selfish" is possible to be formed from Tigrigna word h<sub>r</sub>ruf through /h<sub>r</sub>/ becoming zero and replacing /f/ by /r/. Moreover, la<sub>r</sub>mm<sub>r</sub>r "upper" is derived from Tigrigna la<sub>r</sub>ləwaj by /r/ becomes zero, and /waj/ becomes /mm<sub>r</sub>r/, and relatively, ta<sub>r</sub>mm<sub>r</sub>r "lower, under" may be formed from Tigrigna tahtəwaj by deleting /h/ and substituting /waj/ by /mm<sub>r</sub>r/.

In addition to this, deletion of consonant and addition of vowel exists in asho argot. For example, səmo "sorghum" is formed from Tigrigna word s<sub>r</sub>gəm by shortening /g/, and replacing /r/ by /o/. The Asho argot word dəngob "stone" is also formed from Tigrigna word dəngola "stone" by removing /a/ final syllable of the word and substituting /l/ by /b/ or dingaj "stone" is possible by dropping /j/ consonant and changing of vowels of the word.

Deletion and substitution have also taken place in compound words of the Asho argot such as tatinka "what did you happen" derived from Tigrigna phrase r<sub>r</sub>ntaj kojnka "what happen to you?" through deletion of /r<sub>r</sub>n/ and /j/, and substitution of /k/ by /t/. And k<sub>r</sub>nd<sub>r</sub>m<sub>r</sub>nki "how many" is formed from Tigrigna k<sub>r</sub>nd<sub>r</sub>m<sub>r</sub>ntaj "how many" through deletion of /j/ and substitution of /ta/ by /ki/ syllable. Moreover, substitution and change of vowel exists in the Asho argot like b<sub>r</sub>r<sub>r</sub>l "mule" from Tigrigna bəx'li by replacing /x'/ by /r'/ and deletion of /i/ vowel and replacement of /ə/ by /r/.

### 2.1.7. Deletion

Deletion is the removing of sounds from word. It may be at the beginning, end or medial part of the word. In the Asho argot, deletion of syllable is occurred while deforming Tigrigna words. The deletion process can take place by deleting the initial, medial or final syllable of the word. For example, hatto "sediment in beer or alcohol" is derived from Tigrigna hatəla through gemination of /t/, shortening of /la/ at word final and replacing the second syllable /ə/ of the word by /o/ vowel.

In addition to deletion of syllable at word final, the removing of initial syllable of Tigrigna words has also taken place in the formation of the argot. For instance, the Asho argot word t'əffī "full" is formed from Tigrigna word r<sub>r</sub>s'əffī "double" by deleting the initial syllable /r<sub>r</sub>/, replacing fricative /s'/ by the stop /t'/ as well as relating meaning of size between "double" and "full". t'əffī "full" may also be taken from Tigrigna word h<sub>r</sub>l'əffī "extra" through the deletion of /h<sub>r</sub>/ syllable at word initial and substitution of /l/ by /t'/.

Furthermore, in relation to the deletion of sounds at word medial, t'ax'iru<sup>18</sup> "he knew" is formed from t'ənk'wəro "knew (lit. pressed)" in Tigrigna by shortening /n/ and becoming fricative sound /x'/ from the non-fricative sound

/k'w/.

### 2.1.8. Deletion and Addition

These two processes can take places simultaneously in the Asho argot. For instance, k'urunk'ur "steel" is derived from Tigrigna word k'ork'oro by adding /n/, removing /o/ final vowel and substituting /u/ by /o/. In addition to this, the words of the Asho argot are derived from Tigrigna words through addition and deletion of consonant or vowel together. For instance, the Asho argot word w<sub>r</sub>r'rtt<sub>r</sub>mma<sup>19</sup> "pan" is formed from Tigrigna w<sub>r</sub>n<sub>r</sub>'rhti "type of pan" through deletion of /n/ , /h/, addition of /-mma/ and some vowel changes.

### 2.1.9. Vowel Deformation and Degemination

In the Asho argot, vowel change is important in creating disguise speech as hajmo "physically well matured girl or young girl" is derived from Tigrigna term hajjam by degeminating /jj/ to /j/, reordering /a/ from central syllable /jam/ to the final syllable /jma/ and substituting /a/ by /o/ at word final position.

## 3. Conclusion

In this article, the researcher analyzed the phonological deformation systems of the Asho/azmari argot. Based on the discussions made so far, the researcher came up with the following conclusions. The words of the Asho argot are formed from Tigrigna and Amharic words through form change. In the phonological deformation processes, the Asho argot uses the addition of the individual speech sounds like voiced consonants: /r/, /g/, /m/, /n/, and ejective and voiceless consonants: /t'/ and /t/ rarely into Tigrigna and Amharic words. The addition of cluster of speech sounds or syllables are also included in some words of the Asho argot. The transposition and addition of the speech sounds of Tigrigna and Amharic words are one way of phonological deformation of the Asho argot. In addition to this, the Asho argot words are derived through reduplication of consonants of the words, and reduplications and addition of speech sounds like /n/ usually and /mə-/ rarely to the reduplicated words. Substitution of one to one, two to two syllables and individual speech sounds in the Tigrigna and Amharic words are important in the derivation of the Asho argot words. Substitution of individual or group of speech sounds also come in line with metathesis, addition and deletion processes to construct the Asho argot words from Tigrigna words. Moreover, the Asho argot uses deletion, deletion and addition, vowel deformation and degemination of the speech sounds of Tigrigna and Amharic words.

## Acknowledgment

I heart fully wish to thank Dr. Zelealem Leyew for his

<sup>18</sup> t'ax'ari means magician and t'ax'ari z<sub>r</sub>rna "a person who knows zar" in Asho argot.

<sup>19</sup> Pan is termed w<sub>r</sub>r'rtt<sub>r</sub>:ti in Oromo.

invaluable guidance, constructive comments and encouragement. I want to say thanks all the informants of the study for their willing to render data about their secret language. I would also like to express my gratitude to my friends- Niguss Weldezgu, Bahre Areaya, Gebrekiros Hailu, Teweldebirhan Mesgebe and Teklay Kahsay for their constructive comments and suggestions.

---

## References

- [1] Coulmas, Florian. (2005). *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Chambers, J. K. and Trudgill, P. (2004). *Dialectology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Wolfram, W. (2007). *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*. New York: Routledge press. Retrieved from <http://www.routledge.com> on 16 /01/2003 E.C.
- [4] Fromkin, V. Rodman, R., and Hyams, N. (2003). *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Ward worth.
- [5] Simeneh, Betreyohannes. (2010). Scholarship on Ethiopian Music: Past, Present and future prospects. In *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. pp 19-34.
- [6] Leslau, Wolf. (1952). An Ethiopian Minstrels' Argot. In *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 72(3), pp. 102-109.
- [7] Ashenafi Kebede. (1975). The 'Azmari', Poet-Musician of Ethiopia. In *Journal of The Musical Quarterly* .61(1), pp. 47-57.
- [8] Binyam Getachew. (1995). “bəkəzan ገገጽ akəbabi jəmmigə ገገu azmari beto ገገ at'ək'alaj gəs' rta. bə-etjop'ija k'wank'wawo ገገnna s ገገnə-s' ገhuf k ገገfl lə-artis d ገገgri mamoja jək'ərəbə”. addis abəba junivərsiti. BA thesis (unpublished).
- [9] Nurhsen Mehamed. (1986). “bəfəgərə akəbabi jəmmisəmu jə-azmari g ገገt't' ገገmo ገገ j ገገzətawī t ገገntəna. jə-etjop'ija k'wank'wawo ገገ ገገnna s ገገnə-s' ገhuf tək'wam”. addis abəba junivərsiti. BA thesis: (unpublished).
- [10] Bussmann, Hadumond. (1996). *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. New York: Routledge press.
- [11] Labov, William. (1966). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics Press.
- [12] Leslau, Wolf . (1964). *Linguistic Principles of the Ethiopian Argots*. Manchester University: Manchester University Press.
- [13] Marlett, Stephen .(2001). *An Introduction to Phonological Analysis*. University North dakota:(no place).
- [14] Chesterton, G.K. (2010). “Jargon, Slang, Argot and ‘Secret Language’”. In Blake, Barry (Editor). *Secret Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 195-211.
- [15] Zelealem Leyew (2006). “The Kemantney Language: A Sociolinguistic and Grammatical Study of Language Replacement”. Addis Ababa University: PhD dissertation.
- [16] Mahdi Haamid, Muddee. (1995). *Hamid Muudee's Oromo Dictionary: English- Oromo (vol.I)*. Atlanta: Sagalee Oromoo publishing co, Inc.
- [17] Appleyard, David. (2006). *A Comparative Dictionary of the Agew Language*. Koln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag.