Interrogative Zero-Marking in Some Ometo Languages

ABSTRACT
According to Dryer (2005: 470-471), only four (Zaysé, Dinka, Kabardian and Puquina) out of the 842 languages in his sample mark interrogative sentences by the absence of declarative morphemes. However, recent analyses of some Northeast African languages (see Köhler (in preparation)) have shown that not less than eight languages from this area have the so-called “morphological reduction of interrogative sentences as compared to declarative sentences”. This means that in each of these languages, declarative sentences are marked by a certain morpheme, whereas interrogative sentences can be considered zero-marked.

Interestingly, five of the eight languages belong to the Ometo group within Omotic; these languages are Zaysé, Koré, Malé, Welaitta and Gemu. As can be recognized in typical examples from these five languages (see the Appendix), the forms and functions of the “declarative” morphemes missing in interrogative sentences vary from language to language. Furthermore, the range of morphological reduction is very different, too: For example, Zaysé exhibits this phenomenon in all known verb forms, whereas in Welaitta, only a few person-number forms in just a few verbal paradigms are affected.

The present paper will make an attempt to account for these formal, functional and distributional differences within Ometo. For this purpose, all occurring “declarative” morphemes, their shapes and their (possible) meanings will be looked at systematically. Then, some facts from the three African non-Ometo languages – Gedeo (Cushitic), Zay (Semitic) and Dinka (Nilotic) – shall be added. The present paper should be regarded as a starting point for theoretical discussions of the phenomenon in future.

REFERENCES
APPENDIX
Note: Full interlinear versions of the examples are not given here due to lack of space. However, the elements present in the declarative sentences and missing in the interrogative ones are marked by hyphens, and their approximate meaning is given if available.

Example 1: Morphological reduction in Zaysé (Hayward 1990: 307)
(a) hamá-tte-sen “he will go”
(b) hámasen “will he go?”
-tte = copula (see Hayward 1990: 280-283)

Example 2: Morphological reduction in Koré (Hayward 1982: 252, 254)
(a) geha-kko ne gehe “you sleep” (singular)
(b) geha ne gehe “do you sleep?” (singular)
-kko = copula (see Hayward 1982: 232-234)

Example 3: Morphological reduction in Malé (Amha 2001: 212-213)
(a) nèekó máccá ?ajko kàtsàndá-nè “your wife will cook meat”
(b) nèekó máccá ?ajkó kàtsàndá “will your wife cook the meat?”
-nè = declarative marker (see Amha 2001: 148)

Example 4: Morphological reduction in Welaitta (Lamberti & Sottile 1997: 155, 182)
(a) ii uttee-së “he sits down”
(b) ii oottii “does he work?”
Unfortunately, there are no examples with the same verbal stems; in (a), the stem is uttt- “sit down”, whereas in (b), oott- “work” is used.
Meaning of -së unknown (same morpheme as in Gemu in Example 5?)

Example 5: Morphological reduction in Gemu (Hompó 1990: 390)
(a) Ḷotj?ide-s “he hit” (past)
(b) Ḷotj?idee “did he hit?”
Meaning of -s unknown (same morpheme as in Welaitta in Example 4?)