

“Definite” and “indefinite” in the common noun in Wolaytta

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0 Introductory notes

Wolaytta is one of the main languages of the Ometo group of the Omotic family of the Afro-Asiatic language phylum.

In this paper, I will consider semantic differences between the so-called “definite” and “indefinite” forms of the common noun in the language. As regards transcription, abbreviations, and other background, see Wakasa (2005).

1 Common noun

Most Wolaytta words are divided into two parts: lexical stem and grammatical suffix. The common noun in Wolaytta shows distinctive sets of grammatical suffixes.

Although there are “singular” and “plural” forms, only the former will be dealt with in this paper, since I could not find any opposition between “definite” and “indefinite” forms for the latter, despite the description of Adams (1983: 252).

Five main grammatical cases can be established for the Wolaytta common noun: the nominative (expressing a subject), the oblique (modifying another nominal), the vocative (used for addressing), the interrogative (used as a predicate of a positive interrogative sentence), and the absolutive (used elsewhere). In the singular, each case shows two forms. They have been called “definite” and “indefinite” forms respectively, and are the topic of this paper. However, the vocative and the interrogative are not dealt with in this paper, since I do not have sufficient data for them and, what is more, it does not seem that they are in parallel relation with the other three cases in terms of morphology and semantics.

In (1-1), I will show the extracted paradigm of the Wolaytta common noun, where only the suffixes that are pertinent to the discussion here are given. Note that tone is completely ignored, although “definite” and “indefinite” nominative forms of Masculine Class E and O are only distinguished by tone. As regards tone, I will discuss it in other papers in the future.

Hereafter, I use the term “short form” for the so-called “indefinite” forms found in the upper table in (1-1), and the term “long form” for the so-called “definite” forms found in the lower table in (1-1). This is to introduce semantically neutral terms in the

following discussion.

(1-1) Suffixes of the Wolaytta common noun (partial)

Short forms (= so-called “indefinite” forms)

	ABS.	OBL.	NOM.
Masculine Class A	-a	-a	-i
Masculine Class E	-e	-e	-ee
Masculine Class O	-o	-o	-oi
Feminine	-o	-e, -i	-a

Long forms (= so-called “definite” forms)

	ABS.	OBL.	NOM.
Masculine Class A	-aa	-aa	-ai
Masculine Class E	-iya	-iya	-ee
Masculine Class O	-uwa	-uwa	-oi
Feminine	-iyo	-ee	-iya

For example, the Masculine Class O common noun *gaamm-úwa* ‘lion’ inflects as follows:

(1-2)

gaamm-ó (ABS.short) gaamm-ó (OBL.short) gaamm-ói (NOM.short)
 gaamm-úwa (ABS.long) gaamm-úwa (OBL.long) gaamm-ói (NOM.long)

2 Uses of the long form

Adams (1983) regards our long form to be a “definite” form, and Azeb (1996), Hirut (1999), and Hayward (2000) also follow him, at least in terms of terminology.

Adams’ distinction between the “definite” and “indefinite” forms seems to be similar to that of the definite and indefinite articles in English, since a) in his English glosses he uses the definite article for long forms, and the indefinite article for short forms, b) as for nominalizers (but not common nouns) he says that the definite form is used when a referent is specific and the indefinite form is used when a referent is not specified (Adams 1983: 232).

This claim seems to be correct in some cases. For example, to express the nominal phrase ‘my horse’ the long form can be naturally used, while the short form can not be used naturally.

(2-1a)

<u>ta-par-ái</u>	ʔáwan	deʔ-íi?
my-horse-NOM.m.sg.long.	where	exist-INTER.IMPF.3m.sg.

‘Where is my horse?’

(2-1b)

?? <u>ta-par-í</u>	ʔáwan	deʔ-íi?
my-horse-NOM.short.	wher	exist-INTER.IMPF.3m.sg.

Demonstratives usually co-occur with the long form.

(2-2)

hegáá	<u>maTááp-aa</u>	ʔimm-ité.
that	book-ABS.m.sg.long.	give-IMPR.2pl.

‘Give (me) that book.’

However, Wolaytta long forms can often be used where the English counterparts would not use the definite article. For example, the following is taken from the beginning of a text.

(2-3)

ʔissí	<u>mant-íya-n</u>	ʔissí	<u>keett-áa-n</u>
one	district-OBL.m.sg.long-in	one	house-OBL.m.sg.long.-in

<u>ʔaayy-íya-nne</u>	<u>ʔaaw-ái</u>	dííshin
mother-NOM.f.sg.long.-and	father-NOM.m.sg.long.	while they live

<u>ʔimatt-ái</u>	yíín	...
guest-NOM.m.sg.long.	when he came	...

‘In one district, in one house, while a mother and a father were living, there came one guest, and . . .’

The long form can be used when the referent is known only to the speaker. The following is an utterance when there has been no mention about the cat in question.

(2-4)

táání	hácci	maalládó	ʔissí	gitá
I	today	morning	one	big

<u>garaw-áa</u>	beʔ-áas.
cat-ABS.m.sg.long.	see-PF.1sg.

‘I saw a big cat this morning.’

The following is an answer to the question ‘What kinds of animals are there in Wolaytta?’ Note the use of the long forms.

(2-5)

<u>dors-ái</u>	d-ées,	<u>par-ái</u>	
sheep-NOM.m.sg.long.	exist-IMPF.3m.sg.	horse-NOM.m.sg.long.	
d-ées,	<u>mízz-ai</u>	d-ées,	...
exist-IMPF.3m.sg.	cattle-NOM.m.sg.long.	exist-IMPF.3m.sg.	...

‘There are sheep, horses, cattle . . .’

The following is an answer to the question ‘What is your job?’

(2-6)

<u>ʔash-úwa</u>	KanT-áis.
meat-ABS.m.sg.long.	cut-IMPF.1sg.

‘I cut meat (i.e. I am a butcher).’

The long form can often be found in proverbs.

(2-7)

<u>kap-ói</u>	<u>kap-úwa-ppe</u>	<u>yétt-aa</u>
bird-NOM.m.sg.long.	bird-OBL.m.sg.long.-from	song-ABS.m.sg.long.

7er-ées.

know-IMPF.3m.sg.

‘One bird knows songs better than another bird (i.e. Ability differs from person to person).’

Long forms (in the absolutive) were those encountered in the course of lexical investigation of mine. This coincides with the fact that two Wolaytta dictionaries edited by native speakers list common nouns as headword in the long absolutive.

We observed that the long (or so-called “definite”) form of the Wolaytta common noun are widely used even where the English counterpart would not use the definite article.

3 Uses of the short form

There are some cases where the short form of a common noun is used. The most outstanding of them is a case where only the notion or category expressed by a stem is concerned. Compare the following pair.

(3-1a)

<u>haakím-iyá</u>	keett-áa	
doctor-OBL.m.sg.long.	house-ABS.m.sg.long.	‘the house of a doctor’

(3-1b)

<u>haakím-é</u>	keett-áa	
doctor-OBL.short.	house-ABS.m.sg.long.	‘clinic’

In the former, where the long form *haakím-iyá* ‘doctor’ is used, a concrete doctor is presupposed and what is his property is expressed as a whole. In the latter, where the

short form *haakím-é* ‘doctor’ is used, a concrete doctor is not presupposed, but the word *haakím-é* modifies the following nominal *keett-áa* ‘house’ with the meaning ‘relating to doctorship or doctorness’. The following are a similar pair.

(3-2a)

7aayy-ée boin-áa
mother-OBL.f.sg.long. yam-ABS.m.sg.long.

‘the mother’s yam, the yam that belongs to the mother’

(3-2b)

7aayy-é boin-áa
mother-OBL.f.short. yam-ABS.m.sg.long.

‘mother yam (i.e. yam that is the nucleus)’

In the following too, only the category is concerned.

(3-3)

7á 7áMM-é.
she widow-ABS.short.

‘She is a widow.’ ‘She is classified as widow.’
not ‘She is the widow in question.’

(3-4)

hageetí kan-á.
these(NOM.pl.) dog-ABS.short.

‘These are dogs.’ ‘These are classified as dog.’
not ‘These are the dogs in question.’

In the same way, so-called “adjectives” can be regarded as (parts of) common nouns used in the short form, being only concerned in the notion or category relating to the stem. For example, *7aduss-á* in (3-5a) is a Masculine Class A common noun in the short

oblique, and that in (3-5b) is a Masculine Class A common noun in the short absolutive.

(3-5a)

<u>7aduss-á</u>	7og-íya	
long-OBL.short.	way-ABS.m.sg.long.	‘long way’

(3-5b)

7í	<u>7aduss-á</u> .	
he	long-ABS.short.	‘He is tall (lit. long).’

Of course, there exists the long counterpart *7aduss-áa*, which refers to a concrete ‘long one’.

Thus, both *haakím-íya* ‘doctor’ in (3-1) and *7aduss-á* ‘long’ in (3-5) are regarded as common nouns, which follow the paradigm in (1-1).

The short absolutive of a common noun may modify a verb adverbially. Such examples can be explained in the same way as above.

(3-6)

<u>dár-ó</u>	galat-áis.
much-ABS.short.	thank-IMPF.1sg.

‘I thank a lot.’

(3-7)

mandád-óí	ba-micc-ée-ppe
(person name)-NOM.	his own-sister-OBL.f.sg.long.-from

heezzú	<u>láítt-á</u>	bairat-ées.
three	year-ABS.m.short.	be older-IMPF.3m.sg.

‘Mandado is three years older than his sister.’

(3-8)

núuní	<u>sííK-ó</u>	d-íída.
we	love-ABS.short.	live-PF.1pl.

‘We lived with love.’

Interestingly, the short form is not often used in the nominative. Actually almost all the attested examples are found in sentences that express non-existence of something, or rather non-existence from the beginning, not a disappearance or temporal absence. Compare the following pair.

(3-9a)

tá-u	<u>miissh-í</u>	báawa.
me-for	money-NOM.m.short.	not present

‘I have no money (i.e. I am poor).’

(3-9b)

tá-u	<u>miissh-ái</u>	báawa.
me-for	money-NOM.m.long.	not present

‘I did not bring the money.’ ‘I do not have the money at hand now.’

The following also express non-existence from the beginning.

(3-10)

tá-u	<u>par-í</u>	díyakko
me-for	horse-NOM.m.short.	if it existed

táání	guyy-é	átt-iyana?
I	back-ABS.short.	remain-INTER.IMPF.1sg.

‘If I had a horse, would I remain behind? (But actually I do not have a horse.)’

(3-11)

7ái	<u>dó7-í-kká</u>	ínténá
what	wild animal-NOM.short.-too	you

be7-énná.

see-NEG.IMPF.3m.sg.

‘No wild animal sees you.’

Although the actual attestation is relatively rare, the short form can be used in a sentence that expresses a very abstract or general proposition.

(3-12)

táání	<u>kais-ó</u>	dos-íkke.
I	thief-ABS.m.short.	like-NEG.IMPF.1sg.

‘I do not like thieves.’

(3-13)

<u>baKúl-ó</u>	milat-ées.
mule-ABS.m.short.	resemble-IMPF.3m.sg.

‘It resembles a mule.’

4 Semantics of the long and short forms

In this section, let us first consider the semantics of the short form. As we have seen in section 3 above, the short forms are used in different situations. But, I think, we can conclude from the various examples that the short form of a common noun is a form that is used when a concrete referent is not presupposed. In (3-1b), (3-2b), and (3-3) to (3-8), only the notion, category or attribute of a stem is concerned, and thus no concrete referent is presupposed. In (3-9a), (3-10) and (3-11), the short nominative forms expresses what does not exist from the beginning, thus no concrete referent can be pointed out. In (3-12) and (3-13), the speakers would have used the short forms to indicate that the utterances are general statements which presuppose no concrete referent.

On the contrary, we can describe the long form of a common noun as a form that is used when a concrete referent is or can be somehow presupposed. We have to note that the long form can be used not only when both the speaker and hearer can specify the

referent (e.g. in (2-2)), but also when only the speaker can do so (e.g. in (2-3), (2-4)). Furthermore, the long form can be used even when an example of a concrete referent can be pointed out if needed, as seen in (2-5) to (2-7).

Thus, I think the terms “definite” and “indefinite” forms are very misleading in the case of Wolaytta. Instead, I would like to suggest the terms “concrete” for the long or “definite” form, and “non-concrete” for the short or “indefinite”.

Note that in some cases whether a concrete referent is presupposed or not hardly affects the resultant meaning. In such cases, the judgment of whether a concrete or non-concrete form should be used depends on the speaker. In the following, both the long (concrete) and short (non-concrete) forms are used interchangeably.

(4-1a)

<u>7óós-uwa</u>	máNN-iyá	
work-OBL.m.sg.long.	place-ABS.m.sg.long.	‘workshop’

(4-1b)

<u>7óós-ó</u>	máNN-iyá	
work-OBL.short.	place-ABS.m.sg.long.	‘workshop’

Likewise, in sentences that express general statements, sometimes we find the long (concrete) form (as in (2-5), (2-6), and (2-7)), and sometimes the short (non-concrete) form (as in (3-12), (3-13)).

As mentioned in section 2 above, the long absolute was used as a representative form in the course of lexical investigation. But the corresponding short forms seem to be natural as representative forms in, for example, the following Wolaytta contexts.

(4-2)

woláítt-á	biitt-áa-ni	<u>goromóót-é</u>
(place name)-OBL.	land-OBL.m.sg.long.-in	evil eye-ABS.short.

gíyo	harg-ée	de7-ées.
that one says	disease-NOM.m.sg.long.	exist-IMPF.3m.sg.

‘In the Wolaytta land, there is a disease that is called *goromoot-e*.’

(4-3)

7amaarátt-ó	Káál-aa-ni	“Tencal”
Amharic-OBL.short.	word-OBL.m.sg.long.-in	rabit (Amharic)

giyobi	7áíba	g-éétett-ii?
what one says	what	say-PASS.-INTER.IMPF.3m.sg.

harbainn-ó.

rabit-ABS.short.

‘What is what is called *Tencal* in Amharic called (in Wolaytta)?’

‘*harbainn-ó*’

There are a few words that behave in a special manner. For example, *Tooss-áa* ‘god’ is very often used in the short (non-concrete) form even when the long (concrete) form is expected.

(4-4)

paránj-au,	nénáá-rá
white man-VOC.m.sg.long.	you-with

<u>Tooss-í</u>	de7-ó.
god-NOM.m.short.	exist-JUS.3m.sg.

‘Oh the white man, the god be with you!’

The above is taken from an improvised song. In the part that precedes this, the long (concrete) form *Tooss-ái* ‘god’ is used in a similar construction.

7as-áa is also a special word in that it means ‘a person’ or ‘people’ in the short form, but it only means ‘people’ in the long form.

There might be differences depending on the type of sentence, case, etc. It may worth noting that there are native speakers who do not tell any differences between the long (concrete) and short (non-concrete) nominative. The semantic distinction might be disappearing now.

5 Further prospects

Here I would like to position the suffixes of the common noun in the whole nominal system of Wolaytta.

In the Wolaytta person-name noun, there is no distinction between the long (concrete) and short (non-concrete) forms (see Wakasa 2005). Because the person-name noun always refers to a specified referent, there is no need to establish the two forms and only one unmarked or default form will do. In terms of morphology (and tone), the suffixes of the person-name noun are more similar to the short suffixes of the common noun. In other words, if a nominal has only one default form for a given case and number, it is a short form. Thus, we might hypothesize that historically the short form is an unmarked and older form in the case of the common noun too, and that the long form is an innovation for a special purpose (i.e. to clarify concreteness).

On the other hand, the long suffixes of the common noun can be attached to a stem of a word of other word class. If we take the numeral as an instance, it shows its own sets of suffixes, and they are used when only the notion of number is concerned.

(5-1a)

naa77-ú	lágg-eta	
two-OBL.	friend-ABS.m.pl.	‘two friends’

But if a numeral stem refers to concrete countable objects, the long suffix of the common noun is used.

(5-1b)

naa77-ái	baaná.	
two-NOM.m.sg ¹ .long.	they will go	‘The two will go.’

In other words, the long suffixes found in the lower table in (1-1) are not only those for the common noun, but those used when a concrete referent is or can be somehow presupposed irrespective of the stem to which they are attached.

Thus, the so-called long and short suffixes of the common noun are not opposed to each other on an equal footing. To sketch the whole nominal system, however, lies outside the scope of this paper. It would be a very difficult task because we have to

¹ In this context, both the “singular” and “plural” forms are used.

properly assess the nature of and the relation between the plural form, the feminine form, the other nominal forms including the pronoun, the vocative case, the interrogative case, etc. I hope this small paper can be a first step to this profound task.

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