THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE VERB PARTICLE ‘ə’ AND THE SENTENCE PARTICLES IN AKHA* 

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The tiny syllable ə has many functions in Akha:

A. Noun particle
It connects two nouns marking possession. Tone is low (or mid because of sandhi):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tiger} & \quad ə \quad \text{dɔ-mi} & \quad \text{‘tail of a tiger’}^1 \\
\text{I} & \quad ə \quad \text{àma} & \quad \text{‘my mother’}
\end{align*}
\]

B. Verb particle
1. Verb + ə is the quotation form of a verb, i.e. when asking: “how do you say ‘to buy’ and ‘to sell’ in Akha”, the answer will be: “zə ə - àŋ ə”. Tone is always mid.

2. Connects a verb or a verb phrase to a noun, i.e. marks a relative clause. Tone is high for non-past, low for past. Both have a mid sandhi tone:

\[
\begin{align*}
xhà-là & \quad nə \quad \text{thi poq} \quad dzà \quad djì \quad ə \quad \text{tshɔ-hà} \quad mǐe \quad atjɔ \quad àŋ \quad sàq-dɔ \\
tiger & \quad nP \quad once \quad eat \quad all \quad vP \quad person \quad as \quad other \quad nP \quad shy \\
njà & \quad lè \quad ə \quad nə \quad djë \\
sP & \quad fP \quad say \quad sP & \quad fP
\end{align*}
\]

* This article is a revised version of my paper presented at the 27th Sino-Tibetan Conference, Paris, 1994.

1 Abbreviations used in this article:

\[
\begin{align*}
aP & \quad \text{Adverb particle} \\
fP & \quad \text{Final particle} \\
nP & \quad \text{Noun particle} \\
sP & \quad \text{Sentence particle} \\
vP & \quad \text{Verb particle} \\
\text{AUX} & \quad \text{Auxiliary} \\
\text{CLF} & \quad \text{Classifier} \\
\text{EXCL} & \quad \text{Exclamation} \\
\text{PN} & \quad \text{Proper name}
\end{align*}
\]
"As I am a person, who has once been eaten all up by a tiger, I feel ashamed towards others", she said.

The head may be omitted:

\[ \text{pā ne̱ gā e̱ à} \quad \text{‘what I have heard’} \]
\[ \text{I̱ nP̱ hear vP̱ nP} \]

The noun particle à is a topic marker.

3. It may intervene between two verbs—or verbs in series—where:

a) The first verb is the reason or purpose for the second. e̱ is often followed by le̱, which is otherwise a final particle for direct quotation:

\[ \text{dje-dje áŋ kāq lē e̱ lē xhà-mé m̱ ṉ ḏ dje} \]
\[ \text{PN nP̱ bite go vP̱ fP} \quad \text{mouth make open sP} \quad \text{fP} \]
\[ \text{‘(The tiger) opened its mouth to go and bite Dje-dje.’} \]

b) A very common structure is: verb + e̱ + mà shì ‘not know...’:

\[ \text{tjhu-tjhu ágá i̱ bjoq á̱ m̱ shì lē} \]
\[ \text{PN where go disappear vP not know fP} \]
\[ \text{‘I don’t know where Tjhu-tjhu has disappeared to.’} \]

c) The verb + e̱ may also be followed by a negated sentence particle, giving the notion of ‘I didn’t see/hear/feel/...’:

\[ \text{àje̱ āhā āmjan ne̱ oq dzō e̱ m̱ ṉ áa} \]
\[ \text{PN that when return pass vP not sP} \]
\[ \text{‘I don’t know (didn’t see) when that (guy) Ajé returned.’} \]

d) If the second verb is kāq ‘arrive’, it gets the meaning ‘time has come to ...’:

\[ \text{xhō nāa tjhé dyq dyq á kāq lā ṉ ḏ dje thē} \]
\[ \text{then} \quad \text{rice} \quad \text{soak vP} \quad \text{arrive come sP} \quad \text{fP fP} \]
\[ \text{‘Then the time comes to soak rice.’} \]

\[ \text{jūq e̱ phā kāq lá} \]
\[ \text{sleep vP} \quad \text{again} \quad \text{arrive come} \]
\[ \text{‘Again came the time to sleep.’} \]
In these types, i.e. 3a-d above, the presence of ə seems to be obligatory.
4. In most cases, the verb or verb phrase is directly followed by a sentence particle without an intervening ə. There are though many cases of verb + ə + SP:

\[ \text{jə-sỳq phá dja phá ə má thè} \]
\[ \text{new further tell change vP sP fP} \]
\[ \text{‘I will further change to tell something new.’} \]

C. Other usages
a) It is used—with variation in tone and length—as an affirmative answer: ‘yes’.

b) It sometimes creates longer forms of other particles or conjunctions with no apparent difference in meaning, as e.g.:

\[ \text{míe or míne ‘because’, also míne ə} \]
\[ \text{V ə́e ‘while V’, also ə́e ə} \]
\[ \text{V ə́e V ‘based on V1, then V2’, also ə́e ə} \]

In this paper I would like to look further into the difference between the presence and absence of the verb particle ə between a verb and a sentence particle (B.4 above).

In Akha, most of the sentence particles can follow both a nominal and a verbal predicate. They carry quite a lot of information: first person prime mover contra non-first person prime mover; expectation contra non-expectation or statement versus reaction; kind of knowledge, i.e. know for sure (a, me, e, ma) or infer from seeing (ŋa, ŋaa), hearing (mia) or feeling (ụja); excluding (le, la) or emphasizing (the, tha) an assumption. All these occur with high tone for non-past, low tone for past. Interacting with these are four particles of prediction, only with high tone, expressing fear (á) or threat (ŋá), doubt (ńń) or certainty (má). All these particles can be shown in a pattern (disregarding the different tone manifestations):

a) speaker’s statement
b) speaker’s assurance, positive reaction
c) speaker’s knowledge
d) speaker’s involvement
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(From Egerod and Hansson, 1977)

Let's look at some contrasting usages:


dèkhà á  'He is an Akha.'  (I state it plainly)
dèkhà mé  "  (I confirm or positively react, yes, he is)
dèkhà lá  "  (He is, not what you say)
dèkhà thá  "  (Yes, he is, the others are wrong)
dèkhà ñáa  "  (I can see it on his clothes)
dèkhà mía  "  (I can hear him speak Akha)
dèkhà á nja  "  (I feel he is, even though he wears Thai clothes)

dò mèq mía  'I am hungry.'  (It's evening, why isn't food ready)
dò mèq é nja  "  (Even though I had food a while ago)\(^2\)

dò dzà má  I'll eat.  (Yes, I will, or: let's eat)
dò dzà mé  He'll eat.  (Yes, he will)

The particles with the feature +c (=non-sensorial) differ in having first person as prime mover (+d) or non-first person as prime mover (-d). The particles are reversed in questions:

má áj í e  'I'm going to town.'
ágó gá í e  'Where are you going?'

dzà má ló  'Are you eating?'
dzà má  'Yes, I am.'

This also means that a personal pronoun is not necessary. If it is present, it is stressed or contrasted:

\(^2\) nja requires a high tone on the preceding syllable, which means that if that syllable doesn't have a high tone, the vowel has to be repeated.