

## 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):

*xhà-là ə dḁ-mì*                      ‘tail of a tiger’<sup>1</sup>  
 tiger    nP    tail

*ḡàq ə àma*                              ‘my mother’  
 I        nP    mother

### 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: “zḁ ə - áḡ 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:

*xhà-là nɛ thì poq dzà djí ə tshḁ-hà míɛ atjhḁ áḡ sàq-dḁ*  
 tiger    nP    once        eat    all    vP    person    as        other    nP    shy  
*nja lé ɛ ḡà djé*  
 sP    fP    say        sP    fP

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this article:

aP	Adverb particle	AUX	Auxiliary
fP	Final particle	CLF	Classifier
nP	Noun particle	EXCL	Exclamation
sP	Sentence particle	PN	Proper name
vP	Verb particle		

“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:

*ŋà nɛ gà ə à* ‘what I have heard’  
I nP hear vP 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. *ə* is often followed by *lé*, which is otherwise a final particle for direct quotation:

*dje-dje áŋ kòq lé ə lé xhà-mé ín ŋa ŋà djé*  
PN nP bite go vP fP mouth make open sP fP  
‘(The tiger) opened its mouth to go and bite Dje-dje.’

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

*tjhú-tjhú àgá i bjoq ə mà shì lé*  
PN where go disappear vP not know fP  
‘I don’t know where Tjhú-tjhú has disappeared to.’

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

*àjé àhà ámjaŋ nɛ oq dzə ə mà ŋáa*  
PN that when return pass vP not sP  
‘I don’t know (didn’t see) when that (guy) Ajé returned.’

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

*xhó náa tjhé dyq dyq ə kəq lá ŋà djé thè*  
then rice soak vP arrive come sP fP fP  
‘Then the time comes to soak rice.’

*jùq ə phá kəq lá*  
sleep vP again arrive come  
‘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:

<i>jɔ-sỳq</i>	<i>phá</i>	<i>dja</i>	<i>phá</i>	<i>ə</i>	<i>má</i>	<i>thè</i>
new	further	tell	change	vP	sP	fP

'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.:

*míe* or *míne* 'because', also *míne ə*  
*V ηe* 'while V', also *ηe ə*  
*V ɔ ne V* 'based on V1, then V2', also *ɔ ne 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 (*ηa, ηaa*), hearing (*mia*) or feeling (*ηja*); 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 (*njá*), doubt (*ín*) 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

	+c -d	-c +d	+c +d	-c -d
+a -b	a	nja	e	ɲa
-a+b	mɛ	mia	ma	ɲaa
+a+b	tha	njá	the	má
-a -b	la	á	le	ín

(From Egerod and Hansson, 1977)

Let's look at some contrasting usages:

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

<i>hò mèq mía</i>	'I am hungry.'	(It's evening, why isn't food ready)
<i>hò mèq é ɲja</i>	"	(Even though I had food a while ago) <sup>2</sup>

<i>hò dzà má</i>	I'll eat.	(Yes, I will, or: let's eat)
<i>hò dzà mé</i>	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:

<i>má áɲ í e</i>	'I'm going to town.'
<i>àgó gá í e</i>	'Where are you going?'

<i>dzà má ló</i>	'Are you eating?'
<i>dzà má</i>	'Yes, I am.'

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

<sup>2</sup> *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.

é	nè	má						'I'll tell you.' (Yes, I will)
tell	AUX	sP						
ŋá	ε	nè	má					'I will tell you.' (not somebody else)
I	tell	AUX	sP					
é	nè	ŋjá						'I'll tell <b>you</b> .' (kind of threat)
tell	AUX	sP						
ŋá	ε	nè	ŋjá					'I will tell <b>you</b> .' (I'm the one who really is going to tell you, you just listen to me)
I	tell	AUX	sP					
ŋá	nò	aŋ	ε	nè	ŋjá			'I will tell <b>you</b> .' (I'm the one who really is going to make it clear to you, nobody else can, you haven't understood it at all yet)
I	you	nP	tell	AUX	sP			

There is a problem in distinguishing the two sensorial particles for visual knowledge, i.e. between *ŋá* and *ŋáa* and *ŋà* and *ŋàá*. The tone is affected by a following final particle or—if there is none—by a tendency for a falling intonation at the end of the sentence.

An Akha narrative, or any kind of connected speech, usually consists of rows of verbal clauses, connected with e.g. the verb particle *ɔ* showing continuation, or a conjunction (very often *náa* 'and then'), with finally a sentence particle. Questions and answers usually end with a sentence particle, followed in questions by an interrogative final particle:

<i>lá ma ló</i>	'Are you coming?'
<i>lá ma</i>	'Yes, I am.'

Negative answers may use a sentence particle (with some restrictions) but often the bare verb is used:

<i>dzà má ló</i>	'Are you eating?'
<i>mà dzà</i>	'No, I won't.'

This is regarded as a bit terse though; it is more polite to add a sentence particle.

Now, as mentioned above, it is not uncommon for the verb particle *ə* (high tone for non-past, low for past) to intervene between the verb and the sentence particle.<sup>3</sup> So far, the dominant sentence particle in this construction type is *ŋá* (51 of 76 examples from a small text corpus), then *má*, *má* and *mé* (about 10 examples each). There are—also so far—no examples with the particles of

<sup>3</sup> This sentence particle is always under the high tone; i.e. the past/non-past distinction is marked only on the verb particle: *ə* vs. *ɔ*.

prediction, none with *é* (first person prime mover), and only one sure example with *á* (non-first person prime mover).

So what can be the difference between verb + *ə* + SP and verb + *ə*, i.e. between:

*lá ma* 'I'm coming.'

*lá ə má* 'I'm coming.'

My theory is that the first is a plain statement, a reaction to a simple question:

*lá ma ló* 'Are you coming?'

*lá ma* 'Yes, I am.'

The second, on the contrary, implies that the 'coming' is stressed, that it is what is happening in contrast to some other activity. This construction is then used for stressing the verb, in contrast to stressing the noun—whether it functions as subject, object, place etc. The language has other devices for stressing, or topicalizing the noun, as e.g. by means of a contrastive pronoun (above), or by the topic particle *à*:

A noun can be placed in absolute initial position, or last as an afterthought, marked with *à*:

*hò dzà má lé, ý tshó à* 'They eat rice, the Mlabri.'

*ìm-maq hìm à, jə-hỳ njá thə, ý tshó à, ìm-maq phù tshè i*  
 stomach CLF nP big sP those Mlabri nP stomach swollen very  
 'As for their stomachs, they're big ones—as for the Mlabri, their  
 stomachs are swollen.'

*bù-hà mà ö jà a, hǒ ɲɛ poq a*  
 PN not come happen sP that time nP  
 'Bù-hà didn't happen to come, at that time.'

\* \* \*

Let's now look at some examples of *ə* + sentence particle and contrasting ones without *ə* when available. All examples are from tape-recorded texts (one story and one conversation):

1. *mí-tjìq* *ŋá* *ɛ* *mə* *lɔ* 'I said so yesterday.'  
 yesterday I say sP fP
- é* *ə* *mé*, *asəq* *a* 'He did say so, Asəq did';  
 say vP sP PN nP 'He did say so, that Asoq.'

The first sentence is a plain statement, reminding me that he had told me yesterday. Then another person present confirms his statement, pointing out that he actually had told me.

- 2a. *é náa*, *hə* *à*, *àdjè* *ə* *ín-mjə* *djáj* *ə* *mà* *ŋá* *é*, *hə* *bə*  
 then this nP what nP thing make vP not sP fP this one  
 'Then, as for this (photo), what kind of things they are making I don't know, this one.'
- 2b. *da-lé* *lé* *ə* *ŋá* *le*  
 star make vP sP fP  
 'They are making (ritual) stars.'
- 2c. *da-lé* *lé* *ə* *ŋá* *è*  
 star make vP sP fP  
 'Do they make stars?'

In 2a we have a negated sentence particle,<sup>4</sup> implying that he doesn't know—he can't figure it out from the photo. In 2b the answer comes, pointing out what kind of activity is going on, and in 2c the first speaker repeats the answer, still being in doubt, and asks to have it confirmed that he has got it right. *da-lé lé* 'make stars' is a cognate object structure, so common in Akha (Hansson 1996).

One possible way of analyzing this would be to say that a noun head is deleted after *ə*, i.e. to look upon it as a relative clause. The problem with this analysis is that in most cases there is no obvious noun to relate to, apart from very general ones. E.g. in the following example:

3. *hə-dje* *sha* *dáj* *thà* *ɔ* *nɛ* *hə* *dzà* *dzà* *ə* *ŋá*  
 table prepare keep vP vP rice eat vP sP  
 'Having prepared the table, they eat.'

<sup>4</sup> In this sentence (unlike the example in 3b above) there is no overt verb *shì* 'know'. The fact that sentence particles are negatable makes negatability insufficient as a criterion for verbhood in Akha (unlike the case of many languages like Chinese, Thai, Lahu, etc.) [Ed.]

The situation is that when looking at pictures of other people of Thailand, they try to figure out who it is, and what they are doing, and whether it looks like the way the Akhas do things. So these people, like us, prepare a table to sit down to eat. Here I suppose one could imagine a deleted noun head like *tshó-hà* ‘people’ = a kind of people who eat, having prepared a table. But I think in the context the stress is on figuring out what kind of activity is going on.

Let’s look at some more examples:

4. *gá-thán phá nɛ loq ra ó nǎ ó e*  
 New.Year change while have.fun vP sP EXCL  
 ‘During New Year’s they (=Lisu) have fun, oh my!’
5. *hə gá làq nǐ ja bǐn ə mǎ, làq nǐ ja pjaq*  
 here outside must divide vP sP outside must butcher  
*ə mǎ lé é ó nɛ à, làq nǐ phi thà nǎ djé thè*  
 vP sP fP say vP vP vP outside carry keep sP fP fP  
 “We must divide (his body) here outside, we must butcher him  
 outside,” he said, and then they put (the body) down.’

Here we see that in the first two clauses, the focus is on what is to be done with the body. The body is not mentioned in this sentence, and it is neither the body or who is doing something with it that is in focus but rather what kind of activity it is that has to take place. In the third clause, after the direct quotation, a plain fact is stated: they put the body down—in order to do the dividing and butchering. The final particle *lé* marks direct quotation.

The unmarked sentence seems to be verb + sentence particle, and all connected nouns, while the sentence with verb + *ə* + sentence particle focuses on the activity.

6. *àgá phi kəq ó mà nǎ lé dú ə nǎa ló hǒ bə*  
 where carry arrive vP not sP fP think vP sP fP that one  
 “I don’t know where they carried me,” he thought, that one.’

The sentence particle is negated in the first clause and implies not knowing, not feeling. The man was carried away in a basket by spirits and didn’t realize where he was brought. It is rather common to have *dú* ‘think, seem’ followed by *ə* + sentence particle after a direct quotation.

- 7a. *àdy njàq ə mì-jà dì sèq má lé tshò ə nǎ, àdzò áŋ*  
 we two nP wife beat kill sP fP urge vP sP PN nP  
 “Let’s beat our wives to death,” he urged Adzò.’



- 7b. àdzò áŋ ny-ma phé ə tóq lóq é phá tjhò nè ə ɲá thè,  
 PN nP heart angry vP like that further urge to vP sP fP  
 àdzò áŋ mà dì tjhó é, ánjàq ə mì-jà dì sèq má dzò  
 PN nP not beat able P we two nP wife beat kill sP PN  
 à lé ə, phá tjhò ɲá djé  
 nP fP further urge sP fP

'He further urged like that, being angry at Adzò, not being able to beat Adzò, he further urged him: "let's beat the wives of the two of us to death.'"

Here in the direct quotations first only the SP *má* is used, then twice ə + SP, stressing the fact that he urged and the reason for his urging, and then, the third time, it is plainly stated that he urged again.

8. nòq ə mì-jà shí ɲáá lé ə, uxhà pjhè ə mà ɲá a,  
 your nP wife dead sP fP fart release vP not be sP  
 jɔ-bùq bèq làq í míá, ja bi dze ɓ ɲá, é nè  
 rotten smell go sP must cause discard vP sP say to  
 í ə mé lɔ, àjé ne  
 go vP sP fP PN nP

"Your wife is dead, it is not that she is farting, she smells rotten, she must be thrown away," he went to tell him, Ajé.'

As a result of the first three statements comes the proposal what to do about it, focusing on the action. There seems to be a tendency for the clause following a direct quotation, initiated with a verb like 'say, tell, urge, think', to be a V + ə + SP construction.

Some further examples:

9. hɔ lé ə mfa hɔ lé, ɲá ye hɔ lé ma  
 look go vP sP look go I also look go sP  
 '(They) would go looking, go looking, I also would go to look.'

This first stresses the general urge to go and look—at a Mlabri being brought to Chiangmai—and then stressing that I, for my part, would do the same—with the personal pronoun present.

10. nɔ shím adjɔq é jɔ nja ɓ ɲá  
 you iron how fly can vP sP  
 'You, how can iron fly?'

This does not stress 'iron' but the possible activities of iron.

11. *njèq ja ó dè à, mà pjhè xòq ə njá le, hõ gó kuq*  
 catch get vP group nP not release back vP sP fP there pen  
*áj kàq láj thà ə njá lé*  
 nP encircle keep vP sP fP

‘As for the group that was caught, they weren’t released but kept in the pen there.’

This is not a mere statement of facts but contrasts two lines of action.

12. *ý ə lé mà njá njá lé, thə à, ýó jí ə njá lé*  
 laugh vP fP not be sP fP that nP growl vP sP fP

‘It is not so that they are laughing, those (on the picture), they are growling.’

The first clause contradicts somebody else’s statement, the second tells what is really going on.

- 13a. *thè ló shànj ó, thè, gànj hə gá djaq njáa é, ý-tshó ə*  
 there fP uncle fP there spear here be sP fP Mlabri nP  
*gànj, hə shá e nó*  
 spear look ask sP you

‘There, uncle, there, there is a spear here, the Mlabri’s spear, please look, you!’

- 13b. *mái, è njá è*  
 EXCL

‘Oh, my, is that so? (they really have spears?)’

- 13c. *hə lóq é ýe ó gəq lùq ə njá le, djò djò é djò ə djè*  
 this like do vP use keep on vP sP fP throw aP throw vP kind  
*thè ló*  
 there fP

‘They are using (them) like this, throwing, a kind to throw, there.’

- 13d. *thə ýe ýtshó ə mé ló, thə ýe*  
 that also Mlabri nP sP fP that also

‘Also that, is it also the Mlabri’s, that also?’

In this conversation, the VP ə is not used in the initial statement (13a), but in 13c the action is focused, followed by an explanation of what the thing is in a relative clause—V + ə + Noun head—and in the last sentence, 13d, we have a genitive construction with deleted noun head.

- 14a. *ásòq òq le lé é ə gà lá mfa ló, sòq ó*  
 PN return go fP say vP hear come sP fP PN fP  
 'Oh Asòq, did you hear it was said "Asòq go back"?''
- 14b. *òq le lé é ə ɲá ló*  
 return go fP say vP sP fP  
 'Do they say "go back"?''
- 14c. *òq le lé é mfa ló, abjeq*  
 return go fP say sP fP PN  
 'He says "go back," Abjeq.'
- 14d. *òq le lé é mfa ɲà pjhà ne é nè ə djè mfa*  
 return go fP say if my wife nP say to vP kind sP  
 'If he says "go back," it's something that my wife has told him.'

14a is a plain question, 14b repeats and wants a confirmation, 14c makes a new statement, and 14d explains the reason for it all.

To sum up, the tone on ə can only partly be a help for the analysis. As a noun particle it can only have a low tone, /ə/; as a verb particle it has high tone /ə́/ for non-past and low tone /ə̀/ for past. But both in its NP and VP functions, the article has a mid tone sandhi variant /ə̃/. So only with the high tone (and its mid sandhi tone) can we rule out the interpretation of a deleted head.

Lahu has to a certain extent the same problem, discussed by Jim Matisoff in *The Grammar of Lahu* (pp. 481-485). The difference is that Lahu doesn't have the sentence particle system of Akha, and the particle corresponding to Akha ə, i.e. Lahu *ve*, doesn't have a tone difference in its various functions. Matisoff rules out the interpretation of a deleted head in this kind of construction, but there are of course cases where two analyses are possible.

So for Akha it seems to work in this way:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>γə̀-ɲjǒ zə́ í ma</i><br>vegetables buy go sP | 'I'm going to buy vegetables.'  |
| <i>γə̀-ńó zə́ ə́ í ma</i>                       | 'I'm going in order to buy vegetables<br>(that is the reason for my going).'  |
| <i>γə̀-ɲjǒ zə́ í ə́ má</i>                      | 'I'm going to buy vegetables (that's<br>what I'm doing, not something else).' |

*tóq lóq é dú ə́ má* — That's how I'm thinking—so far!

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