

# Realisations of the Particle *kV* in the Tarok Language of Plateau State, Nigeria

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**Abstract**  
The Tarok particle *kV* has diverse roles in the language. The variability of its syntactic positions in the sentence and wide semantic domains makes it appear as a kind of mystery particle. However, a close attention given to the working of tones and semantic realisations will disambiguate the segment as clear polysemes, homonyms and allomorphs. This should help curtail the much energy and ink spent on how to write it in the Tarok orthography. The semantic uses of the morph include: preposition and locative roles; coordinators; genitive constructions; aspect and mood markers in subordinate clauses, including conditional ones; verb; adverbs; part of some interrogative phrases, pronoun, postposition and politeness marker. These will be described and examples provided. The paper attempts to fill the lacuna that largely remains. Our methodology is simple. A search is made of how the particle is in use in a variety of Tarok texts and documents as Lar (1983) folktales; Tarok New Testament (1988) of wide genre; Longtau (1997) children songs; Lar (2015) children songs; Lar et al. (1994) trilingual wordlist; and Longtau et al. (in progress) Tarok dictionary. Participant observation of several years is the major source of knowledge in the study of the semantics and sociolinguistics of the particle. The particle is defined as a CV unit where C is a voiceless velar plosive [k] and V is [ə], a close central vowel with spread lips and accompanying tones. This is the vowel in the deep structure but it may simply be elided or assimilated in the shallow structures at junctures depending on syntactic positions and tones. The particle in the environments of some locativised nouns gives rise to new forms due to obligatory vowel elision thereby making grammaticalisation a productive process in the language. However, it remains stable in the environment of a word with a consonantal onset and in a number of archaic vowel-prefixed nouns. The unpredictability of both vowel elision and especially of assimilation makes the roles of the particle perplexing. We shall be preoccupied more with characterizing the grammatical realisations of the variants of the morph rather than orthographic matters.

**Key words:** prepositions, homonyms, allomorphs, semantics and word boundary

## 1. Introduction

The particle *kV* ~ *kə* plays principal roles in the Tarok language as prepositions and locatives; coordinators; part of a genitive construction; postpositions, pronoun; verb; adverb; tense, aspect and mood markers in

subordinate clauses, including conditional ones; part of some interrogative phrases and politeness marker. Each role is defined by the modifications of the morph through tones, juncture features, syntactic positions and sociolinguistics of mother language speaker's perceptions of meaning. Longtau (1993: 34) treated the phonology of the particle only in passing. Blench et al. (in progress) discusses the prepositional and locative functions of the morph.

The bulk of works on the subject are plethora of unpublished write-ups using mainly phonological principles for the purpose of fine-tuning the 1977 Tarok orthography without much unanimity. Longtau (2008: 198-202) noted the semantic diversities of the particle for a good orthography without any discussion. Aaron (in a mimeograph, 1997:4, based on an earlier version of Longtau 2008) suggested the need for a constant word image for the particle and consistency throughout any written text. This was reiterated by Gambo (in a mimeograph, 2012: 5-11) that took a swipe at the myriads of 'inconsistencies' in the Tarok New Testament. He proposed how the orthographic challenge of its changing contexts should be resolved. Longtau (in a mimeograph, 2012:10-11) gave a catalogue of motions for adoption in revising the Tarok writing system. Longtau (2014: 24; 2015: 46; 2016a: 2; 2016b: 9) advanced evidence that the 'inconsistencies' are not inconsistencies at all but rhetorical devices to capture emotive meanings as well as concealment of surface meanings to avoid shame from a sociolinguistic angle. Longtau (2014:23-25) contains further recommendations on how the Tarok orthography can be revised using insights from lexical phonology in a wider Nigerian context.

However, an in-depth study of the semantics and sociolinguistics of the particle largely remains a lacuna that this paper hopes to fill. Osu (2002) undertook a similar study of the 'meaning of the meaningless Ikwere -kè-'. In the case of Tarok a reference to *kV* ~ *kə* as a 'mystery particle' may be more apt due to its chameleonic nature. Moreover, the particle can be dropped in certain constructions, although it is optionally present. However, we shall be preoccupied with characterizing the grammatical realisations of the variants of the morph rather than orthographic and phonological matters. Transcription of texts is basically according to IPA values with some modifications in line with Longtau (1993) and not the Standard Tarok Orthography of 1997 via the following conventions for these cases;

Gh	Ng	ny	sh	Zh	c	j	y	'	e	ə'	ɪ	o
ɣ	ŋ	ɲ	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	j	ʔ	ɛ	ə	ɪ	ɔ

ɪ and ɪ are included here for the sake of completeness because in the STO the sounds have counter-intuitive representation of ɪ and ə. However, these are retained as ɪ and ə only in quoted excerpts.

Tarok has 3 level tones and 2 rising and falling contours. The particle can carry only the level tones marked in this way:

// for a high tone mid tone is shown by an absence of a tone mark or +  
/ for a low tone.

The symbol ' marks vowel elision in transcription of examples as found in Longtau et al. (in progress); and Lar (2015). Writing the words in the non-elided forms in a situation where the particle is followed by a grammaticalised noun will be unnatural, because even in slow speech such forms are never heard.

In this Babel of an example (1), the particle is highlighted for us to begin to appreciate its wide context and the challenge if tones are left out:

kə	n	la	a	bu	kə	nlam	pə	u	lɔp	uyen	a	tā
perfective	I	tell	to you	on-of	yesterday	thatyou-imperative	tie	child	it	that		
marker												
kə	'sɪm	ka	awa	na	u	ga	kə	na	kə	'tak	anɪnang	tə
at	Back	with	skin	so-that	you-imperative	go with him	at-of	place	mother-his	so		
u	Lep	u	ga	ce	kə	na	kang	nna	mma	bu	kə	nsat
you	branch	you	went	where	withhim	and	Then-focus	you-emphatic	of	standing	zete	
kə	Ta	ki	lpyang	bu	və	ta	ya?					
at	there	with	Mucous	yours	it	that	interrogative					

I told you yesterday that you should take the baby to the mother, where did you branched to that you are still standing there lackadaisically, you clumsy one!

## 2. Perceptions on the particle in different works

The perception of different authors on the range of meanings of the particle is revealing. Table 1 is culled from Lar et al. (1994) entries of the trilingual wordlist to summarise what might define the range of meaning of the particle.

Table 1 – Lar et al. (1994) perceptions of the meanings of *kV*

Head entry	Definition	Cf. plausible source of grammaticalised noun		
		Noun	Gloss	Page reference
ka+ ci ya?	where?	-	-	p. 47-48
ka+ co	over there	co	there, demonstrative is more accurate	p. 21
ka+ mbəp	at the side of	mbəp	side	p. 53
ka+ mpyal	in front of	mpyal	front	p. 60
kā nlam	yesterday	nlām	yesterday	p. 68
ka+ nsəm	at	-	-	p. 47-48
ka+ nvañ <sup>2</sup>	behind	nvañ	behind	p. 72
ka+ ta	there	-	-	p. 47-48
ka+ ta	here	-	-	p. 47-48
ka+ zumo ya?	when?	-	-	p. 47-48
kadi+	again	-	-	p. 47-48
kadof+	Instead	-	-	p. 47-48
kəgbai+	Outside	agbai	outside	p. 5
kakul+	Because	-	-	p. 47-48
kapal+	on (top of)	apal	up	p. 12
kapəpal+	on it	-	-	p. 47-48
kashe+	Inside	ashe	inside	p. 14
kashishe+	inside it	-	-	p. 47-48
katətak+	at his place, with him	atak	place and adverb for specificity (sic)	p. 14
kəvañ+	Under	avəñ	underneath	p. 15

Source: Lar et al. (1994: 47-48, and as cited above).

I have marked the tone on the particle since they were lacking in the original text. + stands for mid tone.

Table 2 – Longtau et al. (in progress) perceptions of the meanings of *kV*

Head entry	Definition
k- conj.	The vowel shows concord and tonal agreement with the following noun-prefix. <b>UJultit yár ngbət kə ndakal.</b> Jultit carried a pot and a mat. <b>ÚTáli wur ngbət ko ován.</b> Tali and the children carried the pots.
k- part.	conditional marker that occurs in secondary clauses. The vowel agrees with the vowel of the pronoun of the dependent clause. <b>ki i ga Abuja kə nlam té, ki i ya imwa bet.</b>
k- part.	emphasises politeness in imperatives. If immediately following the head-verb the vowel shows concord and tonal agreement with the following noun-prefix. <b>'Ba ka akwàp a mi</b> bring me shoes. <b>'Ba kə mmi a mi.</b> Bring oil for me. If placed at the end of the clause, it is always <b>kà: 'Ba mmi a mi kà.</b> This syntactic change overtly marks politeness.
k- part.	particle that precedes measures of time to modify them. e.g. <b>kə ñda</b> 'today'. If it immediately follows the head-verb the vowel shows concord and tonal agreement with the following noun-prefix. <b>Uzə ku kə ñda.</b> He died today <i>but</i> <b>uzə ku ki ipin.</b> He died in the morning.
k- part.	combines with interrogative pronouns to form questions. <b>u ɓa ki ize?</b> How did you come? <b>u ɓa ku ude</b> who (sg.) did you come with? <b>u ɓa ko ode</b> who (pl.) did you come with? <b>u ɓa kə nza nnap è?</b> What issue brought you?

Source: Longtau et al. (in progress)

Table 2 considers *kV* both as conjunction and particle.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1977 orthography is the velar nasal.

3. Locative roles of *kV*

The particle *kV* in Tarok is basically an unbound locative or prepositional morph in deep structure but bound in surface structure to nouns it precedes with low, mid or high tone. The wide variety of contexts *kV* can occur as a locative or preposition or postposition is perplexing. Therefore an overarching 'locative' terminology may be more accurate but a prepositional/postpositional versus locative disparity is still maintained in this paper to enable us highlight better some aspects of grammaticalisation in Tarok.

The principal locative particle in Tarok is *kV*, meaning 'at, on, in'. It is clearly both prepositional and 'adverbial' in interpretation. Mid tone *kə* seems to be the default form. Examples of the prepositions are:

(2a) <i>líp</i>	<i>Ùyèn</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>'sím</i>	<i>Ná</i>	<i>í</i>	<i>gà</i>
carry	Child	on	back	So	we-should	go

Carry the child on your back and lets go.

An elision of the prefix *a-* in the locativised body part noun 'back' has taken place.

(2b) <i>nàr</i>	<i>Ùyèn</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>m̩bín</i>	<i>ná</i>	<i>í</i>	<i>gà</i>
lay	Child	on	ground	so	we-should	go

Keep the child on the ground and let's go.

(2c) <i>ùwa</i>	<i>sàr</i>	<i>ikpàl</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>m̩bíp</i>
he-is	tie	knife	at	side

He has a knife by his side.

(2d) <i>avivik</i>	<i>Kér</i>	<i>ná</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>iwú</i>
splint	pierce	him	in	eye

A splint has chucked him in the eye.

(2e) <i>ùyèn</i>	<i>Kú</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>ná</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>'she</i>	<i>afu</i>
child	Die	with	her	at	inside	womb

She has a still birth.

In (2e) the tone on the particle meaning 'with' and 'at' is the same and mid. In the next example at/against' the tone is also mid.

(2f) <i>ùyèn</i>	<i>yár</i>	<i>ikpàl</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>ná</i>
Child	carry	knife	at/against	him

The child went after him with a knife.

The vowel of the particle is stable in the environments of pronouns and nouns with consonant-initial stems. However, in the environments of pronouns and nouns with vowel prefixes, assimilation takes place on the surface both for the vowel and tone as in:

(2f) <i>ùyèn</i>	<i>Yár</i>	<i>ikpàl</i>	<i>kù</i>	<i>ùwan</i>	<i>wò</i>
Child	Carry	knife	at/against	peer	his

The child went after his colleague with a knife.

(2g) <i>ùyèn</i>	<i>Yár</i>	<i>ikpàl</i>	<i>kì</i>	<i>ìnà</i>	<i>wò</i>
child	Carry	knife	at/against	cow	his

The child went after his cow with a knife.

However, unassimilated *kə* has high and low tone allomorphs/homonyms as in the following examples;

(2h) <i>nak</i>	<i>Ìsò</i>	<i>nak</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>mì</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>m̩m̩ín</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>tā</i>
Put	malt	put	for	me	In	gruel	it	that

Please do help me put the processing malt in the gruel dough.

(2i) <i>ó</i>	<i>Ḃá</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>m̩m̩ín</i>	<i>və</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>tə</i>
you-should	Bring	with	gruel	that	at	Here

Please bring the gruel here.

(2j) <i>ipín</i>	<i>té,</i>	<i>î</i>	<i>Gà</i>	<i>ìLàntáng</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>Nnà</i>
Tomorrow	then,	we-will	Go	Langtang	at	it-is-still

We will still go to Langtang (in spite of the challenge).

(2k) <i>ó</i>	<i>gà</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>ŋmgbət</i>	<i>Á</i>	<i>tà</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>Có</i>
you-should	go	With	pot	It	that	at	There

Please take that pot away!

Where *kV* is clause-final a variety of tonal outputs are also possible. In sentences such as those below it can be treated as a standalone locative, corresponding to English 'inside, within, for it' etc;

(2l) <i>nak</i>	<i>M̩m̩ì</i>	<i>Á</i>	<i>ná</i>	<i>kə</i>
Put	Oil	For	him	at

Put oil on it for him

(2m) <i>nak</i>	<i>M̩m̩àn</i>	<i>kə</i>
Put	Salt	in (it)

Season it with salt

(2n) <i>Ḃá</i>	<i>kə</i>
Bring	it.

Bring it.

(2o) <i>Ḃá</i>	<i>kə</i>
come	for-it

Come for it.

(2q) <i>Ḃá</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>ipín</i>
come	for-it	tomorrow

Come for it tomorrow.

4. Homophonous *kə* particles

The locative particle can easily be confused with other particles with the same form but different functions. These include:

## Dative markers

(3a)	má	yár	ikəm	má	lɪp	ná	kə	pə	kak
	someone	carry	club	someone	hit	him	with	of	kak
	He was hit heavily with a club, kak!								
(3b)	yɪŋ	ki	iyəm	ɓú	áyen	mi			
	Cry	for	thing	your	child	mine			
	Cry, my child, so your thing will be given to you.								
(3c)	áyen		mi		yɪŋ	kə			
	child		mine		cry	for (it)			
	Cry for it my child								

*kə* as in 'progressive marker'

(4a) ùzə	kə	mma	iyəm
He	progressive	measuring	things
He is buying grains.			

*kə* as in 'perfective marker'

(4b) ùzə	kə	Ma	ikùr	kə	nlám
He	perfective	measure	sorghum	at	yesterday
He bought sorghum yesterday.					

*kə* as in 'with'

(4c)	mi	yár	akum	ŋmkpán	asəl	anyín	ság	ka	afú	alílák	yá?
	I-will	carry	type	going	way	farm	how	with	stomach	empty	Q
How will I set out for the farm on an empty stomach?											
(4d)	ùzə	kə	mbəl	Kl					iwú		
	He	with	tears	At					eye		
He is mourning.											

*kə* as in 'by means of'

(4e) má	ɓit	nɛŋkɛŋ	á	mi	kə	mmək	imār
someone	mould	bread	for	me	with	flour	millet
They made bread with millet flour for me							

*kə* as in 'in spite of'

(4f) má	dàŋ	ná	kə	mbwài	kə	nnà	kpáté,	ùzə	gà	acèn	kə	nnà
	refuse	him	with	money	still	that-so	too	thathe	go	journey	still	that-so
They												
He was not given money to travel still yet he embarked on the journey.												

*kə* as in 'after, later'

(4g) kə	nvəŋ	və	í	cú	té,	í	ya	ná	kət
At	after	that	we	reached,	then	we	see	him	not
We did not see him when we had arrived.									

*kə* as in 'again'

(4h) ùzə	gà	acèn	cít	kə	dí
He	go	journey	already	at	different
He had gone on a journey again.					

*kə* as in 'alone'

(4i) ùzə	gà	kə	n(ku)kwa
He	go	of	alone
He went alone.			

*kə* as in 'instead'

(4j) ùwà	gà	kə	(a)ɗor	mi
he-it-is-one	go	of	instead	me
He went in place of me.				

*kə* as in 'would'

(4k) ùDwàl	kə	Yár	awá	áyen	wò	kə	lɛp	(ná)	kə'sim,	ùDwàl	kə	waŋkat	kwəŋkat
Tel	would	carry	skin	child	hers	would	tie	(him)	on-back,	Tel	of	kwəŋkat	kwəŋkat <sup>3</sup>
A Tel woman would take a child skin to back it and she would show off <i>kwəŋkat kwəŋkat</i> .													

The polite marker *kə* has a different and unchangeable tone and so is not a homonym.

5. *Kə* in interrogative contexts

*kV* has a high tone allomorph which occurs in interrogative expressions and follows the noun to which it refers. Where a further interrogative marker in sentence-final position is dropped, it is meant to achieve emotive force. The

<sup>3</sup> Ideophone of the noise made by a dry skin.



following examples show the main interrogative expressions, with the vowel of the introducer particle copying the prefix of the question word.

(5a) í	nak	akál	və	kə	cě?
We	place	charcoal	that	at	where?
Where should we keep the charcoal?					
(5b) u	ḡá	kí	izè?		
You	come	with	what		
How did you come?					
(5c) u	ḡá	kí	izè?		
You	come	with	what		
What did you bring?					
(5d) u	ḡá	kí	izè?		
You	come	for	what		
Why did you come?					
(5e) u	ḡá	kú	ùdè?		
You	come	with	who		
Who (sg.) did you come with?					
(5f) u	ḡá	kú	ùdè?		
You	come	for	who		
Who (sg.) did you come for?					
(5g) u	ḡá	kó	òdè?		
You	come	with	who		
Who (sg.) did you come with?					
(5h) u	ḡá	kò	òdè?		
You	come	for	who		
Who (sg.) did you come with?					

Where the interrogative expression carries a formal final question morpheme as in the examples below it is for the purpose of focus;

(5i) ùzə	le	ká	Azumò	yà?
He	returned	at	When	Q
When did he return?				

In transitive verbs, no pronoun is required and the interrogative expression almost behaves like a dummy object;

(5j) í	nim	kə	sáng	yà?
We	do [it]	with	how	Q

What should we do with it?

(5k) u	nim	kə	Sáng	káng	à	lar	yà?
You	do [it]	with	How	that	it-did	lost	Q
What did you do with it that it got lost?							

(5l) u	nim	kə	Sang	Wa	acár	yà?
You	do	at	How	Like	woman	Q
Why are you behaving because of it like a woman?						

(5m) ùPài	yáp	kə	m̀pícìng	yà?
Pai	sold [it]	at	how much	Q
How much did Pai sell it for?				

(5n) u	ḡá	kə	nzə	ǹnàp	è?
You	come	With	what	matter	Q
What issue brought you?					

This question form expresses surprise;

(5l) ó	dyang	ǹding	və	á	mi	kə	cè	yà?
You	fetch	water	It	for	me	at	where	int.?
Where did you keep the water I asked you to fetch?								

## 6. Time contexts

*kV* is a particle that precedes measures of time to modify them, e.g. *kə ndá* 'at today'. If it immediately follows the main verb the vowel shows concord and tonal agreement with the following noun-prefix as these examples;

ùzə	kú	(kə)	ndá
He	die	at	today
He died today.			

ùzə	kú	kí	ipín
He	die	in	morning
He died today			

When the particle is articulated, there is tonal change *ndá* instead of *ndá*.

## 7. Demonstrative contexts

*Kə* can also precede the demonstratives *tə* [here], *tà* [there] and *có* [yonder, remote distal] with the meaning 'to' as a referential demonstrative as in:

ḡá	Kə	kə	tə
Bring	it	to	here
Bring it here.			

ḡá	kə	kə	tà
Go	(with)-it	to	there
Take it away there.			

ḡá	kə	kə	có
Go	(with)-it	to	yonder
Take it over there.			

## 8. Conclusion

Our attempt here has amply demonstrated the richness and diversity of the semantic roles of the particle *kV*. This description will not only help to inform how to write it in the orthography, but it sets the stage for comparative studies with related languages. It will be of historical interest to have a foundation from which to launch out for the reconstruction of such grammatical particles. Its potential as data for theoretical abstracts is the real strength of the paper.

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## The Semantics of Yoruba Slangs

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the semantic structure of a variety of language use that is presently pervasive among the Yoruba's younger generation. This language variety is known as 'slang'. Three semantic modules: idiom, euphemism and paraphrase, are employed as eclectic conceptual frameworks for the study. The data analysed in this paper were obtained principally via researchers' observation and unstructured oral interview. The observation which spanned over a period of three months (February - April, 2017) was carried out by the researchers at football viewing centres, club houses and salons within the Ilorin metropolis during conversations involving the target language users. Ten (10) participants (7 illiterate youths and 3 students) were randomly selected for unstructured oral interview. Their conversations and responses were tape-recorded; the recorded data were eventually extracted, translated and analysed using a descriptive approach. From its findings, the paper establishes that virtually all the Yoruba slangs are idiomatic because their overall meanings cannot be predicted from the meanings of their component words. Also, it is found out that some of the slangs are euphemisms in themselves, as the speakers employ them to avoid taboo or unpleasant expressions in certain communication contexts. Finally, many of the slangs are synonymous with one another; hence, they are used to express paraphrase relations. Because of the semantic uniqueness of Yoruba slangs, the paper concludes that slangs, though are ephemeral linguistic expressions, often give a language a new look whenever they evolve. Hence, Yoruba is not an exception in this regard. The study therefore recommends a linguistic documentation of the contemporary Yoruba slangs as well as teaching them to foreign learners of the language in order to intimate the learners with the informal aspect of Yoruba communication.

**Keywords:** Yoruba slangs, idiom, euphemism, paraphrase, linguistic documentation.

### Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a field which concerns itself with the study of the interconnectivity between language and society. It principally delves into how social forces influence the use of language among different social groups and in diverse communication situations. In the human society, one of the phenomena that diachronically evolve is slang. Slangy expressions have a way of connecting language users particularly the younger group. The youth tend to favor this medium of communication in order to entrench group