

## Multifunctionality of the Schwa /ə/ In the Məta Language of the North-West Region of Cameroon

**FOKWA Ruth ENI-ENIH**

Department of African studies and Globalization  
University of Dschang

**TANGYIE EVANI** (Corresponding author)

University of Dschang, Department of General Studies,  
Institute of Technology- Bandjoun -Cameroon

**Annie Carelle DONJI TEUFACK**

Department of African studies and Globalization  
University of Ds Chang

**Nadege Ngala**

Department of African studies and Globalization  
University of Dschang

### Abstract

*This paper investigates the function and distribution of the schwa /ə/ in Meta', a Grass-fields Bantu language of the Momo subgroup (Cameroon). The schwa diagraph is a common sound in African languages. It is represented phonetically as the [ə] sound. In phonology, morphology and syntax of the Meta' language, the schwa plays different functions and thus cannot be ignored. Its variational function has motivated us to carry out a dual morphological analysis in that; is the schwa a phoneme or a morpheme in the Meta' language? Is it a lexical or phrasal particle? In this study, we argue and demonstrate that, the schwa is both a phoneme and a morpheme, and that, it is equally a lexical and phrasal particle that affects the nominal and verbal morpho-syntax of the Meta' language invariably.*

**Keywords:** Phonology, Meta' language, morpheme, morpho-syntax, schwa.

### Introduction

Partial studies of the schwa in Meta' can be traced back to some authors like Ngum (2004), Spreda (2000a; 2000b), and (Fokwa 2020). Even though the literature on the Meta' language has clearly evolved and several works have been developed in the field of description, the literature on the study of the schwa is minor and always linked to the description of some other elements. There is no pure description of schwa in the Məta language and other Grass-field Bantu languages. This study therefore aims at examining the function and distribution of the schwa /ə/ in Meta' through a descriptive analysis of words and sentences in Meta'.

The data presented in this article was gotten through documentary research and participant observation methods. The data is transcribed using the general alphabet for Cameroon languages. The main questions that this paper addresses are centred around the functionality of the schwa as a phoneme and as a morpheme in Meta' and its connectivity usage as lexical or phrasal particle.

In this light, this article begins with a detailed description and analysis of the schwa as a sound and a letter of the Meta' alphabet. In this section we present the lexical distribution of the phoneme in words where it occupies either the initial, median or final position. We later on present its distribution in inflectional and derivation morphology where it is a bound affix (prefix and suffix) in a particular context and a full word in another context. In the last section, we present the schwa as a free particle that functions at one point as a locative particle, at another as an imperative particle, and at another again as an interrogative particle that can still function extensively as an associative particle.

### 1. Phonology

The schwa is one of the 28 letters of the Meta' alphabet and also one of the 8 vowel phonemes of the language, it can be phonetically represented as a central mid vowel [ə]. Below are the letters of the Meta' alphabet as well as the vowels of the language.

A b c d e ə f g h i j k l m n o ɔ p r s t u v w y z '

The 8 vowel graphemes in Meta are;

a e ə i i o ɔ u

The schwa is one of the most highly used vowels of the language. These vowels can be exemplified in the following words:

ənǎŋ	<b>cocoyam</b>	wəd	<b>person</b>	gwə	<b>belch</b>
əzéd	<b>tree</b>	tɪŋgəŋ	<b>lizard</b>	idwə	<b>to bark</b>

From the examples above, we notice that the schwa can occupy the word initial position as in column 1, word median position as in column 2, and word final position as in column 3.

## 2. Morphology

The schwa plays a vital role in the morphology of the language. It can be an Inflectional particle, derivational particle, class marker or a morpheme on its own

### 2.1. As an inflectional particle

Verb roots in Meta' are inflected for temporal reasons. The above central vowel /ə/ is also a tense marker which marks the continuous tense usage when it is attached to the verb root as a suffix. It is bound to the verb root as illustrated below.

1)	Verb root	Gloss	Conjugated verb	Gloss
	Jig	<b>eat</b>	jig-ə	<b>eating fig</b>
	Bu'	<b>break down</b>	bu'-ə	<b>breaking down</b>
	Sùŋ	<b>pull</b>	Sùŋ-ə	<b>pulling</b>
	san	<b>split</b>	san-ə	<b>splitting</b>
	fà'	<b>work</b>	fà'-ə	<b>working</b>

The schwa is used as a continuous tense marker in the present and past tense. This gives us the present continuous tense and the past continuous tense as seen in example (2a) (2b) and (2c) respectively.

2a) Ma wiə fà'ə  
*Mah is working*

**Mah is working**

2 b) Tifu' wiə kə'ə soə ikaŋ  
*Tifuh is had washing plates*

**Tifuh was washing plates**

2c) mə kə'ə jigə  
*I was eating*

**I was eating**

The examples above show that the verbs are in the continuous tense and the schwa is the continuous tense marker. In all the examples, the schwa is bound to the verb root. In example (2a), the schwa represents the continuous tense marker meanwhile wiə represents the present tense marker. In example (2b), the schwa also represents the continuous tense, wiə represent the present tense meanwhile kə' is the past tense marker and it has been inflected with the suffix -ə to indicate the continuous tense thus having the surface form kə'ə. In example (2c), kə' is the past tense and the verb has been inflected to mark the continuous tense. Thus, the verb and the tense marker are inflected for the continuous tense.

If the tense is inflected and the verb is not inflected, it will result to ungrammatical sentences. Ungrammatical sentences are marked by an asterisk (\*) in front of the sentence or phrase. Consider the following examples:

3a) \*Ma wiə fà  
*Mah is work*

**Mah is work**

b) \*Tifu' wiə kə'ə so ikaŋ  
*Tifuh is had wash plates*

**Tifuh was wash plates**

- c) \*Mə kè'ə jìg  
I was eat

**I was eating**

If the verb is inflected and the tense is not inflected, the resulting sentence will be ungrammatical. Consider the following sentences:

- 4a) \*Ma wì fà'ə  
Mah is working

**Mah is working**

- b) \*Tifu' wì kə' soə ikaŋ  
Tifuh is had washing plates

**Tifuh was washing plates**

- c) \*mə kè' jìgə  
I was eating

**I was eating**

The examples in (4) above are ungrammatical and show that the schwa is obligatory and must be added to the verb root and tense in order for the continuous tense to be realized. If one of the two are not inflected as in example (3) and (4) above, the resulting sentences will be ungrammatical.

## 2.2. As a derivational particle

The schwa is the most productive derivational affix as far as nominal derivation is concerned. It is more productive than the other nominalisers when deriving nouns from verbs (Fokwa 2020:79). The nouns derived from verbs with this affix or nominaliser are classified as Subgroup A nouns by Spreda (2000b). This affix is sometimes realized as a prefix or a suffix in the nominalization process. Subgroup A. contains nouns denoting people who habitually carry out the action depicted by the verb. These nouns are formed by attaching to the verb root the nominaliser affix which is the schwa (ə). This is illustrated by the following examples of verb roots with low tone, mid tone and central tones. When it precedes a verb, it changes the verb to a noun.

On the table below are some infinitive verbs that become nouns with the presence of /ə/ sound.

	Verb root	derived noun	Affix pattern	type of affix
a)	ī + cà' 'to search'	ə + cà' + ə 'searcher'	ə-ə	prefix and suffix
b)	ī + t̄ 'to carve'	ə+t̄ + ə 'carver'	ə-ə	prefix and suffix
c)	ī + kywī 'to forge'	ə+kywī 'smith'	ə-	prefix
d)	ī + dān+dì 'to train'	ə+dān+dì 'trainer'	ə-	prefix
e)	ì-cùm 'to whisper'	ì-cùm-ə 'whispering'	-ə	suffix

## 2.3. As a class marker

Affixes indicate noun class of nouns and their modifiers in Meta'. All proper nouns in Meta' have bare stems with no prefix. But the majority of nouns in Meta' are made up of a stem and a prefix. This prefix is what makes it possible to regroup nouns into classes of singular and plural. The noun root sometimes takes a suffix. Some prefixes are attached to nouns both in the singular and plural. Meta' has 11 regular noun classes and the criteria used for establishing them are the noun class prefix (Npf) and the concord element (CE) (Spreda (2000b)). Some noun classes have more than one class prefix (see Spreda 2000b). The table below shows the noun class system of Meta' that has the schwa as an affix. , indicating the different associative markers, connectors, numeral prefix, noun prefix and concord element. This section was taken from Klaus Spreda 2000b.

**Table1: Noun Classes in Meta'**

Noun class number	CE	Underlying tone of concord element	AM	Con	Numeral prefix	Noun class prefix	Example
1	w-	Low	ì	ì		ə- ə-	ə-yì <b>woman</b> ə-dandì <b>teacher</b>
2	Mb -	High	ì	ì	Mì-	mə- mè-	mə-yì <b>woman</b> mè-dandì: <b>teachers</b>
6	z-	High	ə	ə	ə-	ə-	ə-ghə <b>eyes</b>

						ə-	ə-gwì <b>fishes</b>
7	z-	High	ə	ə		ə-	ə-goŋi <b>caterpillar, sp.</b>
						ə-	ə-ŋwaŋi <b>book</b>
9	z-	Low	i	i		ə-	ə-cùmə <b>whispering</b>
10	t-	High	tì, rì	tì, rì	tì-, rì-	mə-	mə-cùmə: <b>whisperings</b>

Each singular noun class is paired with a plural class noun class. With noun-class 1, 7 and 9. The schwa prefix is the singular noun class marker meanwhile with noun-class, the schwa is a plural noun marker. Normally, nouns that belong to a specific noun-class have the same morphological elements regarding number, making it possible for a singular noun-class to be grouped with a plural noun-class to form a gender.

#### 2.4. As a morpheme

Apart from being a particle, /ə/ is also a one letter word in Meta'. It refers to the preposition *at* or *to* in meta' depending on the context of occurrence. Consider the following examples.

6a) Mə wiə wo ə nəb.

*I am go to house*

**I am going to the house**

b) Mama wiə ə nəb  
*mother is at house*

**Mother is at home.**

The examples in (6) above show the distribution and interpretation of /ə/ in the sentences above. In both examples, the preposition comes precedes the noun. In example (6a), the schwa means *to* and in example (6b), the schwa means *at*

### 3. Syntax

The schwa has many functions in the syntax of the Meta' language. In some cases, it is a locative, in other cases, it is a referential particle, genitive, exclamation marker and/or an interrogative marker. These functions depend on the kind or phrase and on the environment in which the phoneme is found. The environment in this case is the exact position in which the schwa is found in the sentence or phrase. Most of the examples used in this section were taken from Ngum (2004).

#### 3.1. As a Locative particle

A locative is a form of a word that expresses location. In Meta' the locative is /ə/. It always precedes the noun it refers to in Meta'. The locative is abbreviated as LOC in this paper. Consider the following examples

7a) Nuŋ əghi ze iban ə tən  
*Keep thing that beside LOC chair*

**Keep it beside the chair.**

b) Saŋgi əmari we əgun ə bam  
*Dry beans that on LOC bag*

**Dry the beans on a bag.**

Looking at example (7) above, the locative particle is placed in between the prepositions and the nouns. This shows that the locative particle is not a preposition. In example (7a) and (7b), the locatives accompany the preposition to indicate the location.

#### 3.2. As an associative marker

The schwa in Meta' also functions as an associative particle between two nouns. It brings out the genitive relation between the nouns. Consider the following example

8a) ətam ə ŋgab  
*trap of antelope*

**The antelopes trap**

b) ənû ifən ə ɔwiə  
*concept king of God*

**God's kingdom**

In the examples above, the /ə/ is the associative marker that links ətam “trap” and ŋgab “antelope” in example (8a) and ənũ ifɔn “kingdom” and ŋwiə “God” in example (8b).

### 3.3. As an imperative marker

One of the ways used to express authority or a command in the Meta’ language is by adding /ə/ behind the noun as a separate morpheme. The presence of the schwa immediately transforms the verb to an imperative one (an order). Consider the following examples extracted from;

9)	<b>verb</b>	<b>gloss</b>	<b>imperative</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a.	Tum	shoot	tum ə!	Shoot!
b.	Bu’	break	bu’ ə!	Break!
c.	Jig	‘eat’	jig ə!	Eat!
d.	Kon	‘serve out’	kon ə!	Serve out!

### 3.4. As an interrogative marker

In the Meta’ language, the schwa functions as a question mark. The Latin question mark (?) Indicates a question in written form but the schwa as an interrogative mark in Meta’, bears a tone that indicates that the utterance is a question. Even with the absence of the Latin question mark, if the schwa is used in both oral and written form, a native speaker will know it’s a question. The Latin interrogative marker was adopted in the orthography of Meta’, for the sake of universality (Spreda 1995). Consider the following examples:

- 10a) A wo əyi ə?  
You go where QM  
“Where are you going to?”
- b) Mama wi ə?  
Mother where QM  
“Where is mother?”

The examples above show that the interrogative marker /ə/ is at sentence final position as in example (10a), and in phrase final position as in example (10b). Even with the use of WH- question markers, the interrogative marker is still used to emphasize on the question. In the above examples, the interrogative is optional because of the presence of the WH-question morphemes.

In a sentence or phrase in which the WH –question morpheme is absent, the interrogative marker /ə/ is obligatory. Consider the following examples:

- 11a) Awɔ fiə jɪg ə?  
You have eat QM  
**Have you eaten?**
- b) Awɔ fiə jɪg.  
you have eat  
**You have eaten**

The examples in (11) above show the same sentence that has an interrogative reading and an affirmative reading due to the presence and/or absence of the interrogative marker /ə/. In example (11a), the interrogative marker is present thus indicating that it is a question. In example (11b), the interrogative marker is absent thus indicating that it is an affirmative sentence and not a question. In a nutshell, it is the presence or absence of the interrogation marker in sentences without WH- question morphemes that indicates if the utterance is a question or not.

### Conclusion

In juxtaposing and analysing the functional variation observed in the usage and distribution of the schwa /ə/ in Meta language, we were able to demonstrate and justify that the schwa /ə/ in the Meta’ language possesses a multifunctional linguistic property with a variegated role. We have been able to assert that, the nature, the position and function of the schwa/ə/ in the Meta’ language depends on the environment in which it finds itself. Equally, we were able to present a clear view of the multifunctionality of this phoneme/morpheme duality through a descriptive analysis of words and sentences in the Meta’ language. Within this perspective it would be proper to assert that the various forms of the schwa /ə/ in the Meta’ language are semantically fixed as to form and their meaning come from the lexicological combination encapsulated in the internal structure of the Meta’ language.

**References**

- Fogwe, Chibaka Eveline (2006), A Grammatical Description of Metta (Cameroon) in Relation to Focus Parametric Variation, Rudiger Koppe, 1st edition.
- Fokwa, Ruth E. (2020), *The Structure of Derived Nominals in Meta'*. University of Dschang.
- Ngum, Comfort (2004), *Verbal extensions in Meta'*. Master thesis, University of Yaoundé 1.
- Spreda, Klaus W. (1986), *Tonologie des Metta* (Western Grassfield): Eine autosegmentale beschreibung des einfachen unabhängigen satzes, SIL Language and Culture Archive.
- Spreda, Klaus W. (1990-1991), *Linguistic Notes in Metta*, SIL Cameroon.
- Spreda, Klaus W. (1995) *Draft and notes towards a sketch grammar of Meta'*. SIL Cameroon
- Spreda, Klaus W. (2000a), *The Noun in Metta*, SIL Cameroon.
- Spreda, Klaus W. (2000b), *The Associative Noun Phrase in Metta*, SIL Cameroon.
- International de Linguistique.
- Tunviken, Jonas (2010), *Meta'-English Dictionary and English-Meta' Index* incl, Yaoundé: CABTAL Yaoundé