

# THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGLESS MORPHEME *kè* IN IKWERE

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The multifunctional morpheme *kè* in Ikwere can be said to be meaningless in as much as it does not refer to any known physical or abstract element. The question then is: How do we account for such a morpheme? From the classical point of view, *kè* could, however, be analysed as a polysemous or homonymic morpheme depending on what one means by these terms. The approach we propose here is quite different from these traditional views. First, we hypothesise that *kè* has a meaning that is not readily accessible, though invariant. And drawing from the theory of markers within the theoretical framework of the predicative and enunciative operations, elaborated by the French linguist, Antoine Culioli and his research team, we claim that the abstract invariant meaning of *kè* can be sorted out if we are able to grasp how this morpheme functions in utterances.

Le morphème polyfonctionnel *kè* de l'ikwere semble ne pas avoir de sens puisqu'il ne renvoie à aucun élément physique ou abstrait. La question est alors la suivante : comment rendre compte d'un tel morphème ? On peut prétendre, d'un point de vue traditionnel cependant, que *kè* est polysémique. Dans ce cas, on cherchera le sens prototypique et le lien entre ce sens et les sens dérivés. Ou alors, on postule l'homonymie. Cet article propose une approche un rien différent : en nous inspirant des travaux réalisés dans le cadre théorique des opérations prédictives et énonciatives, élaboré par Antoine Culioli et son équipe, nous soutenons que *kè* a un sens, bien que ce sens soit tellement abstrait qu'il est inaccessible a priori. Nous soutenons également que ce sens relève d'un invariant. Notre travail consiste alors à cerner le mode de fonctionnement de *kè* dans les énoncés afin de dégager cet invariant.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

The morpheme *kè* in Ikwere<sup>1</sup> is found at two different syntactic levels: in phrases and at the sentence level. This morpheme has a varied set of uses. It can be used to form question-words, ordinal numbers and fixed expressions. It can combine with deictics and verbs, occur in the initial position, in the middle or towards the end of a sentence. Besides, the use of *kè* brings about contrast between two elements.

To study this kind of morpheme from the classical semantic point of view, one is usually left with two traditional approaches. The first approach posits homonymy, suggesting that over time two or more totally different items might have come to be pronounced and written the same way. This position can hardly be defended in the case of *kè*: First, because data show that in all its uses *kè* bears the same low tone. Second, it requires historical evidence to support the homonymic view. And we do not have any such evidence in Ikwere at the moment. The other approach is that of polysemy, implying that *kè* is a lexical item with a prototypical meaning and a range of derived or slightly different meanings.<sup>2</sup>

But it can also be argued that *kè* has no meaning, since it does not refer to any known physical or abstract element. Consequently, in a dictionary, it might at best be

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<sup>1</sup> Ikwere [ik<sup>w</sup>éré] is a Benue-Congo language of the Igboid group. It is spoken in the Rivers State in south-east Nigeria. The exact number of Ikwere speakers is as yet unknown. However, some authors mention 370,000 people (cf. Nduka 1993).

Tones are indicated as follows: *á* for High, *à* for Low, *ǎ* for Rising, *â* for Falling, and *'á* for Downstep High. The tilde under a vowel indicates nasalisation. IPA symbols are used in Ikwere examples except that *dʒ* is replaced with *j*; *tʃ* with *c*, and *j* with *y*.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion of the question of homonymy and polysemy, see de Vogüé (1985; 1986-87); and for polysemy, see Kleiber (1999).

entered as a grammatical formative; or it might be given a meaning derived from a prototypical context.

We maintain however that *kè* does have a meaning. And we argue that this meaning is invariant and so abstract that it is no longer readily accessible. To put it differently, *kè* is a marker<sup>3</sup> with several uses which, to use Culioli's terms, "are dynamically deployed around an invariant meaning element" (Culioli 1999:37). Our position is strongly evidenced by the fact that *kè* influences the meaning of sentences. Compare *ètó*, 'three', with *kè ètó*, 'the third one'.

Further, we think that the meaning of *kè* cannot be separated from the functioning of this morpheme. It will be the task of this article to sort out this invariant meaning element through a detailed analysis of how *kè* functions, as we draw on its diverse uses, its conditions of use, and the different contexts in which sentences with *kè* are grounded.

We draw attention to the fact that the syntactic or pragmatic functions of a morpheme are not to be confused with how the morpheme functions. For instance, *kè* is used to form ordinals. But that does not mean that it functions as an ordinal. In fact, when we talk of how it functions, we mean its specific contribution to the formation of ordinals.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theory of predicative and enunciative operations encourages the search for the invariant meaning element of linguistic markers that make up utterances,<sup>4</sup> and therefore it provides grounds for a satisfactory account of *kè*. We set out an overview of the basic ideas of this theory below.

Culioli and his research team began elaborating this theory within the Language Invariants model *Invariants langagiers* in the mid-70s. According to Culioli (1990, 1995) "[L]anguage," a meaningful representational activity, is only accessible through texts, that is, through patterns of markers, which are themselves traces of underlying operations". We have no direct access to these operations. If we call these inaccessible operations Level I, then the patterns of markers, that is to say texts, are Level II. *They* are observable elements. It is then supposed that though there is no term-for-term relationship between the two levels, Level II observable elements are the representatives of operations at Level I. Text obviously has some relationship with Level I even though the nature of this relationship is not specified. We must construct metalinguistic operations at Level III, which will result in formal textual sequences, equivalent to

<sup>3</sup> The way the term 'marker' is used here is made explicit in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of utterance is directly linked with that of well-formedness, as the latter notion determines to a very large extent the kind of data considered, and forms the peculiarity of the theory under discussion. In fact, utterances are themselves viewed as a product of operations and not just as an individual speech act that is then grounded in a context by a speaker. This means that these processes do not equate with real world conditions that surround the production of an utterance in a given context. Hence the theory of predicative and enunciative operations must be distinguished from pragmatic approaches. 'Utterance' differs from 'sentence', even though they are sometimes used as synonyms. For instance, the sentence 'Two men are in the garden' is syntactically well-formed. However, it is not a well-formed utterance. To make it a well-formed utterance, one has to add something like 'there are', as in: 'There are two men in the garden'. (For further discussion, see Bouscaren & Chuquet 1992:155; Guillemin-Flescher 1999:159ff; Milner 1992:22; Franckel & Paillard 1998:53)

Level II observable elements. Consequently, we obtain representatives of representatives. By so doing, it is surmised that the link between the Level II traces and the Level III metalinguistic operations may provide useful clues about the link between Level I processes and Level II markers (a short form for markers of operations).

Culioli further states: "The goal is not to construct a universal grammar, but to re-construct by a theoretical and formal process of a foundational sort, the primitive notions, elementary operations, rules and schemata which generate grammatical categories and patterns specific to each language. In short, the goal is to find the invariants which found and regulate language activity, as this activity manifests itself through the meaningful configurations of different languages" (1990:72). The operation of location is one of these fundamental operations. It makes it possible to construct an elementary relationship of location. The basic idea is that a linguistic object only acquires a determined value (otherwise called qualitative and quantitative determinations) by means of a dynamic scheme of location. Thus, a located term is one that has been situated, specified or determined. Take a process (or in a broader perspective, a predicative relation) for instance. It acquires a determined value if located relative to a complex system of enunciative co-ordinates  $Sit_0$  (for situation of uttering).  $Sit_0$  is composed of two parameters: (inter-)subjective  $S$  for the class of subjects (enunciator, represented as  $S_0$ ; co-enunciator, represented as  $S'_0$ ; or speaker, represented as  $S_1$ ; and the grammatical subject, represented as  $S_2$ );<sup>5</sup> and the spatial-temporal  $T$  for the class of instants (the moment of uttering, represented as  $t_0$ ; the moment of locution represented as  $t_1$ ; and the moment of the event referred to, represented as  $t_2$ ). The concept of location is linked to the idea of locating one term<sup>6</sup> relative to another. To say that  $x$  is located relative to  $y$  means that  $x$  is situated with reference to  $y$ , whether the latter, which is thus a locator, is itself located by another location, or whether it itself is an origin. There is nothing to prevent a term from being located relative to itself, or a term which was the locator in one relationship from then becoming the locatum (the located element) in a reciprocal relationship of location. (For example, 'I am I', 'you are you', 'God is God', etc.)

Furthermore, the relationship of location is always binary. If one has three terms, for example, there will be a second binary relationship on top of the first one. To construct a binary relationship we use a unary operation, 'is located by' or 'has as a locator'. The operator of locations is represented as  $\underline{\in}$  (which is read 'epsilon' or, in ordinary language, 'is located by'). Therefore  $\langle x \underline{\in} () \rangle$  means that  $x$  is the locatum in a relationship which is being established. From  $\langle x \underline{\in} () \rangle$  we can construct

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<sup>5</sup> To be more specific, the ENUNCIATOR ( $S_0$ , pronounced 'S zero'), in contrast to the traditional syntactic view of the SUBJECT, refers to a concept. It is the locator-origin of any utterance. The CO-ENUNCIATOR ( $S'_0$ , pronounced 'S zero prime') is constructed and defined with respect to the enunciator. The SPEAKER and the INTERLOCUTOR refer to real speakers. Enunciator and co-enunciator can however, correspond to speaker and interlocutor, respectively. In that case, we find a trace of the operation of identification. Hence, if  $x$  is the pronoun for the subject of the utterance (grammatical subject) and  $y$  stands for the enunciator, 'I' is obtained by a process of identifying  $x$  with  $y$ .

However, since the present study does not require distinguishing the speaker from the enunciator, we shall use 'speaker' for both of them.

<sup>6</sup> The word 'term' is used in a broad sense to refer to any object which is constructed within the system, as long as it enters into a relationship, whether one is dealing with notions, relationships or utterance coordinates. (Culioli 1990:75)

a locator, say  $y$ , and thus have the relationship  $\langle x \in y \rangle$  or: 'x is located relative to y'" (Culioli 1990:75).

Within this framework, linguistics is regarded as a programme of which the goal is to apprehend language through the diversity of natural languages and texts, both oral and written. And the term 'diversity' is understood both in terms of multiplicity and difference. According to Franckel and Paillard (1998:58), this definition implies at least two things:

- a. It shows that the search for generalisable properties cannot be based on the characteristics of one specific language or a limited number of languages. The description of languages and the tools that make it possible to do that cannot be made out of universal cognitive principles independent of the properties of languages, but rather out of a rigorous observation of the structure of each and every language.
- b. It serves as a basis for further development of the fundamental question of linguistic variation, viewed precisely as regulated variation, of which the process of regulation is entirely based on invariants. Thus, specific languages can be considered, on the one hand, as specimens of Language (this is supported by the mere fact that we are able to change from one language to another, translate from one language to another, and that children acquire languages found in their environment); and on the other, as individual languages (for every language is specific because no one unit in a given language functions exactly the same way in two languages despite their resemblance to one another).

The claim is that generalisable properties can only be accessible through a thorough analysis of the specific characteristics and components of each and every language. As such, the objective is no longer to search for universals through a theoretic model grounded in metalinguistic categories and/or pre-established cognitive categories of which each language serves as a specific illustration, but to map out the invariants while articulating both specificity and diversity.

To accomplish this, one has to go beyond mere classificatory properties and labelling, free oneself from intuition by constructing a system of metalinguistic representation, construct a theory of observables, formulate problems and construct reasoning procedures based on classes of phenomena (in particular by constructing paraphrastically related families of utterances (*énoncés*)). To set oneself this goal means not laying down, on principle, the limits between prosody, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The boundary which must be drawn lies between what is regular and representable and what is heterogeneous in terms of the metalinguistic rules which one has set up. (See Culioli 1990:72-73).<sup>7</sup>

Since utterances are patterns of markers with referential values and markers are traces of operations, the task of a linguist includes, inter alia, a rigorous study of markers in order to define their specific role in the basic enunciative processes, operations, phenomena, mechanisms; and the mode of constructing these referential values. To study a given marker means working out how such a marker functions in the language, and giving it a formal representation liable to generate other forms. In other

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<sup>7</sup> See also Culioli 1995:13-26

words, such a study should reveal “formal properties that make for stability and plasticity”<sup>8</sup> (Culioli 1995:23).

The remainder of this article is devoted to a detailed description of **kè**. We first examine the various uses of this morpheme and propose situational contexts in which the sentences examined can be produced, while considering possible syntactic, interpretive and lexical constraints. We finally propose an abstract characterisation of the invariant meaning element of **kè**.

## 2. DIFFERENT USES AND FUNCTIONS OF **kè**

The morpheme **kè** is encliticised in a sentence if its ‘zone of influence’ is limited to a specific constituent of the sentence. The element on which it depends is either introduced overtly (cf. example (3) below) or not. The morpheme **kè** then links the element that follows it to the preceding one. But where **kè** occurs in the initial position of a sentence, it has a zone of influence which extends to the entire sentence. The sentence is then linked to another sentence, explicitly introduced or not, or to a given situation, mentioned previously. Most importantly, the two positions of **kè** outlined above seem to correspond to its two basic functions, which can roughly be expressed as follows:

1. Distinguishing an element from a class (or singularisation);
2. A change of orientation

Each function will be examined in detail below.

### 2.1 DISTINGUISHING AN ELEMENT FROM A CLASS

The term ‘class’ should be understood here as comprising objects, entities, or occurrences (to use Culioli’s term) conceptualised as having the same properties. A given occurrence of the class is similar to any other occurrence of the same class but qualitatively different from them.

This function covers a good portion of the uses of **kè** within the scope of a phrase. In this case, **kè** combines mainly with nominal elements and deictics to form diverse expressions.

The primary characteristic of this kind of use is that **kè** is syntactically preceded by an element that needs to be specified with the help of a property; and it is followed by another element which designates the property required. Thus **kè** marks the fact that the designated property is distinguished from a set of properties (or class). However, the terms that combine with **kè** can give rise to a slight change in this basic configuration.

#### 2.1.1 Use of **kè** in question-words

Preceded by a clause, **kè** can combine with words like **nyê**, ‘who’, as in **kè nyê**, ‘whose’; and **èlé**, as in **k’èlé**, ‘which one’, to form question-words. Consider (1) below:

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<sup>8</sup> Stability and plasticity are synonyms of invariants and variation.

(1) *Osi's mother wants to peel an orange.*

- a. **Mother:** zě g<sup>w</sup>è-yá-nú-m èlèkè  
 go to.bring-return.CENTRIPETAL<sup>9</sup>-BENEFICIAL-me kitchen.knife  
 Go and bring me a kitchen knife.
- b. **Osi:** mé g<sup>w</sup>è-yá k'-èlé?  
 I to.bring-return.CTP kè-marker.of.unspecified.quality  
 Which one should I bring?
- c. **Osi:** mé g<sup>w</sup>è-yá èlé?  
 I to.bring-return.CTP marker.of.unspecified.quantity  
 How many should I bring?

The question in (1b) is about singling out a property such that it will enable Osi to identify a knife as the one he should bring to his mother. If we delete *kè* (as in (1c)), the question now focuses on the quantity of knives to be brought. What we need to know is what exactly does *kè* do in (1b)? Note the ellipsis of 'knife' in (1b,c). The pattern in (1) can be represented as follows: Ø + [*kè* quality/quantity determiner].

*Kè* refers to 'knife to be brought', which it links to an abstract set of properties introduced by *èlé*, and tends to single out a property such that the exact knife to be brought is identified. We can put this in a different way: *kè* links <knife to be brought> to a class of properties liable to specify it and signifies that a property is marked out of this class so that <knife to be brought> is specified. Thus, *kè* draws a distinguishing line between the property ( $x_i$ ) introduced to specify <knife to be brought> and other possible properties ( $x_j, x_k, \dots, x_z$ ), which do not specify <knife to be brought>.

But the term *èlé* is used in Ikwere to form question words in which it indicates that the quality (property, characteristic) or quantity of an element is unspecified. Added to the question signalled both by the situational context and intonation, it is understood that the property in question has to be specified. This is particularly the case with expressions like *nhè èlé*, 'which place', 'where?', which indicates that the property that would enable the place in question to be identified, is unspecified and needs be specified; *mbúru èlé*, 'when', 'which time?', which indicates that the property that would enable the instant in question to be identified, is unspecified and needs to be specified; and (in the dialect of Obio) *nyè èlé*, 'which person', 'who?', which indicates that the property that would enable the person in question to be identified, is unspecified and needs to be specified. The question in (1b) is therefore asked so that the person to whom it is addressed will provide the property required in order to identify the knife which he is asked to bring. In fact, (1b) can be restated as: the property which will enable me to identify the knife I should bring is as yet unspecified, and needs to be specified.

### 2.1.2 Use of *kè* in possessive constructions

The morpheme *kè* can also occur in possessive constructions, as exemplified in (2) and (3). Contextually *kè* is preceded by a noun, represented as Noun + [*kè* pronoun]. This noun can, however, be elided.

<sup>9</sup> Hereafter abbreviated CTP.



- (6) **ò vù-g<sup>w</sup>ù èrèkpà kè wór'í**  
 s/he to.carry-STATIVE bag kè Wori  
 He went with Wori's bag (and not yours, I'm sorry).

Typically, (5) is used in a situation where a person thinks that Osi, who is sent to borrow some gari from a neighbour, has forgotten to take a container with him. And the speaker informs the person that Osi went with a bag which happens to belong to Wori. In that case, the mention of Wori's bag does not amount to a deliberate elimination of any other bag. In contrast, (6) is used in a situation where the person thinks that Osi has gone with his (the person's) bag. With **kè**, the speaker presents Wori's bag as the one Osi has gone with. Since **kè** implies selecting an element at the expense of another, any other bag than Wori's is eliminated.

### 2.1.3 Use of **kè** in ordinal numbers

The morpheme **kè** is also used to form ordinal numbers, as in (7) and (8) below, where we find the following pattern: Noun + [**kè** numeral].

- (7) *Osi wants to join a club. The rules and regulations are read to him in order, as follows:*  
**ìwú k'-ètó, k'-ènó,... kè òrì**  
 law kè-three, kè-four,... kè ten  
 The third law, the fourth,... the tenth.
- (8) *Osi has been talking about Wori to a group of people, until somebody asks, "Who is Wori?"*  
**wór'í bú ñwèrè m k'-ìsè**  
 Wori be wife me(weak form) kè-five  
 (Sorry, I didn't introduce her to you), Wori is my fifth wife.

The process involved in these examples is not very different from the one observed in the previous examples. However, it differs from the others in that the numbers introduced by **kè** refer back to a position (place, space). How then does **kè** operate in this context? In (7), the mere use of **ètó** 'three' calls to mind other possible numbers, arranged or not, in a given order. And **kè** signifies that **ètó** (**ènó,...òrì**) is singled out as the number relative to which the position (place, space) occupied by the subject is defined. Consequently, a position is assigned to the person or thing in question. In a similar way, **kè** in (8) entails a process which can be expressed as follows: Wori occupies a position that is defined relative to <5>. This implies that the same position is not defined relative to another number (3, 4, 6, etc.). Therefore, the interaction of **kè** with a number gives the following: (i) In a set of possible numbers with respect to which a position is liable to be defined, (ii) a number is designated as the one with respect to which the position is defined, and therefore, (iii) the position is not defined with respect to any other possible number.

The distinguishing line between <5> on the one hand, and other numbers on the other, is thus retained.

In (9), **ìsè** 'five' refers to the total number of wives that Osi has. This means that each wife is considered and added to the others without constructing any of them

explicitly as singularised or, on the contrary, excluded. This analysis can also apply to (10).

- (9) ò lù-g<sup>w</sup>ù                      ñwèrè ìsê  
 he to.marry-STATIVE wife five  
 He has five wives.
- (10) ò z-álàzí                      àbàlì ètós  
 s/he PROSPECTIVE-to.sit night three  
 He (or she) will stay three days.

#### 2.1.4 Use of *kè* in demonstratives

If we examine (11), (12), and (13), we notice that *kè* combines with *â* in (11), *ém* in (12) and *éí*, in (13), giving the following pattern: Noun or Ø + [*kè* deictic]. In (13), there is ellipsis of the noun.

- (11) òtútú k'-à                      n-ègérìsì                      n'-áyùýò b'ómà  
 tale kè-DEICTIC CONT-to.show that-cheat be.NEG.goodness  
 This folktale shows that cheating is not good.
- (12) ñyé wé ñgàdà k'-ém?  
 who have chair kè-DEICTIC  
 Who owns that chair?
- (13) ñyé wé k'-éí?  
 who have kè-DEICTIC  
 (And) Who owns the other one?

The deictic marker *â* defines a spatial or temporal zone with respect to the speaker. It contrasts with *ém*, which defines a zone as *different* from the one defined relative to the speaker, and *éí*, which defines a zone as *disconnected* from that of the speaker, such that together they constitute a class. But these deictics never occur alone. Combined with *nhè* 'place', we obtain *nh'â*, 'this place, here'; *nh'ém*, 'that place, there'; *nh'éí*, 'other place, elsewhere'. Combined with *mbúró*, 'moment', we obtain *mbúró'â*, 'now' (of which *kínà* is a dialectal variant in some dialects such as Ogbakiri); *mbúró'ém*, 'then'; *mbúró'éí*, 'some other time', which cannot refer to any of the previous two. The marker *kè* singles out the zone in which a given element is situated. Combined with *â*, we obtain the form *k'â*, 'this one' which signifies that the element in question is situated within the zone defined relative to the speaker. Thus *k'â* 'this one' functions as a demonstrative form, and can contrast with *k'ém*, 'that one', and *k'éí*, 'the other one'.

In conclusion, *kè* in (11) signifies that the tale in question is defined by its being situated within the zone defined with respect to the speaker and that this zone is singularised to the exclusion of any other zone. In (12), *kè* signifies that the chair is defined by the fact that it is situated in a place different from that defined relative to the speaker. Any other place is excluded. And in (13), *kè* signifies that the chair referred to is defined by the fact that it is disconnected from the zone defined relative to the speaker. Once again, any other zone is excluded.

### 2.1.5 Summary

We can summarise the main points observed in this first category of uses as follows. The morpheme **kè** signifies that an occurrence is distinguished from a class of occurrences. This occurrence is thus distinguished because it validates a property that other occurrences of the class do not validate. Stated briefly, **kè** draws a distinguishing line between  $X_i$  on one hand, and  $X_j, X_k, X_z$  on the other, by a process which consists of singularising  $X_i$ .

## 2.2 CHANGE OF ORIENTATION

This second function covers the uses of **kè** both within the scope of the verb, where it occurs mainly in the pre-verb position, and at the level of the sentence, where it is either preceded by a clause Q (a predicative relation), or nothing. But **kè** is always followed by P (another predicative relation). It implies that given Q, there is a change of orientation such that instead of Q, there is P. ORIENTATION is a cover word for situation, event, opinion, position, state or action.

### 2.2.1 Use of **kè** in pre-verb positions

The pattern is as follows:  $\emptyset + [\mathbf{kè} \text{ verb}]$ . What is elided here is the first verb indicating the action from which the change of orientation is made.

(14) *If I am asked "What is your mother doing?", I can answer like this:*

ò n-èrí wírí  
she CONT-to.eat food  
She is eating.

The morpheme **n-** implies that an instant, i.e. 'now', is qualified as locating <to eat>; and that this is to the exclusion of another possible process (specified in context) with which <to eat> has been in competition.<sup>10</sup>

(15) *If I have to give account of what Osi, placed under my care, did on a given day—i.e., if I have to answer the question "What did Osi do today?"—I can say:*

ò tú-lém míní... ò zà-lém órò...  
he to.fetch-PERF water he to.sweep-PERF house  
He fetched water... he swept the house...

As can be observed, I simply name the activities as I remember them. There is no specific order, at least no element in the sentence to allow us to say that Osi fetched water before sweeping or the reverse. The morpheme **-lém** signifies that <to fetch water> and <to sweep the house> are things he is expected to do. Notice the absence of **kè** in these two sentences.

(16) *If I'm asked: What did he do with the fish he caught yesterday? I can say:*

ò rè-rù à y-éré  
he to.sell-AORIST it EPENTH<sup>11</sup>-REDUP  
He sold it.

Once again, **kè** does not occur. But assuming I say:

<sup>10</sup> See Osu 1998 for further discussion of the verbal prefix **n-** and the suffixes **-lém** and **-ru**.

<sup>11</sup> EPENTH = 'epenthetic element'.

- (17) *ò k'èrè-rù à y-éré*  
 He *kè*-to.sell-AORIST it EPENTH-REDUP  
 He finally sold it (instead of giving it out).

It means he had planned to do something different with it, like “giving it out”. In other words, *kè* signifies that the person changed his mind in course of time: he moved away from a first activity, such as “giving it out” (recall that this process is only planned and not realised); and went on to “selling it” (the latter is realised).

Let us consider another pair of sentences.

- (18) *b' òbù élé írô*  
 they to.be them hatred  
 They are enemies.

- (19) *bò k'-òbù élé írô*  
 they *kè*-to.be them hatred  
 They are now (or have become) enemies.

Example (19) is a portion of a folktale. The story is about why cats eat mice. Cat and Mouse were once very good friends, living together. As the Ikwere people put it, they were good friends so much so that one could not eat without the other. But a day came when Mouse offended his friend Cat. Since then, they have become enemies.<sup>12</sup>

Notice the change of state in this example: they who were good friends are now <(worst) enemies>. Their previous relationship is totally different from the present one. Of course, this analysis cannot be made of (18), where only their present relationship is given to us, without making reference to their previous one. It is this change of state, going from one state to another state totally different, that we describe as drawing a distinguishing line between two states.

- (20) *ò hyá-k'ó-lém éh, ò kè-n-èrí wírí.*  
 she to.bathe-finish-PERF body she *kè*-CONT-to.eat food  
 She has finished having her bath, now she is eating.

In (20), <to have bath>, <to eat> are introduced to indicate how far a person preparing to go out has progressed with their preparations. Thus, the context is such that <to eat> is linked with <to have bath>. As already seen, the continuative marker *n-* implies that <now> is qualified as locating a process <to eat>. The de-verbal affix *-k'ó* indicates that <to have bath> is quantified intrinsically, and that the quantity has been exhausted. Also, <to eat> comes after <to have bath>. This might suggest that the former is the consequence of the latter. *Kè* signifies that though the two processes are contextually linked together, each process has to be viewed as independent of the other. In that way, the distinguishing line is drawn between the two

<sup>12</sup> Here is the full story: One day, they decided to cook and eat. But after cooking, Cat suggested that they go swimming before eating. On their way to the river where they would swim, Mouse lied to his friend that he (Mouse) had forgotten his hat at home. He immediately ran back for it. When he got home, he pounced on the food. Unluckily for him, the pot fell on him and covered him. When Cat had waited and could not see him, he decided to find out what was happening and went to look for Mouse. Now, when he arrived, he discovered the pot of soup turned upside down with Mouse underneath. Cat pursued Mouse, caught him, killed him, and ate him.

processes (or events). And therefore, <to eat> is not the consequence of <to have bath>.

### 2.2.2 Use of *kè* in injunctive constructions

We use the term INJUNCTIVE in contrast with ASSERTION. While with assertion it is stated that a certain situation is or is not, in the injunctive one says: may/let a certain situation be or not be. Injunctive constructions include orders or commands, pleas, wishes, requests and suggestions. Let us compare (21) and (22) on one hand, and (23) and (24) on the other.

#### *Positive commands*

- (21) **kè-zě**  
       **kè-to.go**  
       Do go. *Or:* This time, go.
- (22) **zě**  
       to.go  
       Go.

#### *Negative commands*

- (23) **í kò-k\*ú-mà**  
       you **kè-to.speak-no.more**  
       Do stop talking. *Or:* This time (you should) stop talking.
- (24) **í k\*ú-mà**  
       you to.speak-no.more  
       Stop talking.

In (22) and (24), the speaker simply sets P, <to go>, <to interrupt speaking>, as something to be realised and asks somebody else to realise it. He does not say whether or not P has been planned or delayed. Note that **kè** does not occur in these examples. On the other hand, in (21) and (23) where **kè** is used, the request to realise P is made with reference to a prior plan to do so. In actual fact, there has been a delay in realising P. And **kè** marks a break between this situation where P is not realised and another situation where it is taken that P will be realised. The sentence in (21) can then be phrased as follows: may you realise <to go>, so that there will be an end to the situation where <to go> is not realised. The break between both situations is what we have earlier named 'a distinguishing line'.

### 2.2.3 Use of *kè* in the initial position of a sentence

As we have already mentioned, **kè** can also occur in the initial position of sentences:  $\emptyset + [\mathbf{kè} \text{ sentence}]$ . A slight difference from the preceding examples is that here the elided element is the situation from which the orientation is made. The problem raised in (25) is to understand how we get the interpretation 'her good looking state is unusual'. However, we shall limit our investigation to understanding how **kè** functions in this kind of sentence.

- (25) *kè wór'í nù                      òmá kp'á*  
*kè* Wori to.look.like good as this  
 How come Wori is looking so beautiful?

This sentence expresses surprise, because the speaker has noticed something unusual. Wori can be said to have deviated from her habit, which consists of <not looking so beautiful>. Once again, we observe that this sentence cannot make sense if we do not take Wori's usual habit into account. One interesting thing with this example is that it is not natural without the phrase *kp'á*, 'like this'. Our assumption would be that *kp'á* reinforces the contrast between the present situation and the former. But we admit that a thorough investigation needs to be carried out on this phrase.

#### 2.2.4 Summary

The major characteristics of this second type of use can be summarised as follows. The morpheme *kè* signifies that P, introduced with reference to Q, is not in a relation of interdependency with Q (as opposed to cases where P depends on or is the result of Q, as in causal or consecutive relations for instance). In other words, P and Q are interconnected, but they are not interdependent. In this way *kè* draws a distinguishing line between P (a predicative relation, a situation or an event) and Q (another predicative relation, situation or event). Recall that P and Q represent a situation, event, state, view, or position.

### 2.3 USE OF *kè* IN FIXED EXPRESSIONS

Since a fixed expression is formed with several terms, it can be argued that its meaning is the result of the interaction of the different constituents. Having seen that the use of *kè* is systematically connected with the notion of drawing a distinguishing line between elements, we set out once again to understand the specific role *kè* plays in such fixed expressions. We shall underline the role of other constituents where possible.

#### 2.3.1 *Kè nò kè*

This expression can conveniently be translated in English as 'what' or 'whichever'. In (26), a person is asked to bring a chair. But he in turn, asks to know which one to bring. The speaker replies:

- (26) *kè nù                      kè ó màsì-rù                      ì                      vù-yà*  
*kè* addition *kè* it to.please-DAT you carry-CTP  
 Whichever one it pleases you (to bring), bring (it).

In (26), the sole property of the chair to be brought is that of pleasing the person who is to bring it. One then wonders what the difference would be if the speaker were to say something like (27).

- (27) *ó dú-lé                      kè ó màsì-rù                      ì                      vù-yà*  
 it to.reach-PERF *kè* it to.please-DAT you carry-CTP  
 The one it pleases you (to bring), bring (it).

The major difference is indicated to us by the fact that in (27), *kè* occurs only once whereas in (26) it occurs twice. In (26), the person is overtly asked to consider the

chairs with reference to one another in order to sort out the one that may please him. In (27), on the contrary, there is no question of considering the chairs with reference to one another, at least not overtly. It is assumed that one of them will please the 'bringer'. And it is the one that pleases him that he should bring. The statement in (27) can therefore be expressed as: the one that is defined relative to the property <it pleases you> is the one you should bring.

Now, let's consider (26) in detail. This sentence implies that in a class of occurrences of chair, every occurrence of chair is defined with respect to another occurrence of chair. We derive this interpretation from the interaction of **kè** with the coordinating morpheme **nu**. Indeed, **nu** in some of its uses marks the addition of one element to another. In that case, it sets the second element as something to be considered in the process of determining the first element<sup>13</sup>. In the example under consideration, the first occurrence of **kè** implies that there is a property relative to which the chair to be brought is specified. This chair is linked to a second chair, introduced by the second **kè**. The morpheme **nu** implies that the property relative to which the second chair is specified (i.e., it pleases you) has to be considered in order to define the property relative to which the first chair is specified. The result is what we have already seen: consider a chair, consider another chair (a third one, and so on); the property <it pleases you> relative to which one of them is specified, is the sole property that specifies them all.

### 2.3.2 *Kè èzí*

The phrase **kè èzí** (contracted **k'èzi**), meaning 'very much', 'a lot', and formed from **kè** and **èzí**, 'big', is used to express the manner in which a process is realised, as exemplified in (28).

- (28) **ì mé-ném k'èzí**  
 you to.do-PERF **kè**.big  
 You have done big, i.e. Thank you very much.

The idea expressed in (28) is that of "beyond what could be expected". However, this idea is the result of the interaction of the different constituents of the sentence, and therefore must not be regarded as that of one particular constituent. Consistent with our objective in this article, the question we need to answer is: What specific role does **kè** play in the construction of the meaning "beyond what could be expected"? And what is the role of the other constituents?

The expression **ì méném** signifies that what the person has done corresponds with what one could expect him to do. The term **èzí** designates the domain of <big>. Then **kè** signifies that **ì méném**, "what you have done corresponds with what one could expect you to do", is again defined relative to the domain "big" while excluding any other possible domain. The result of this exclusion is that "big" turns to "very big"; and we obtain the semantic effect that what the person has done is beyond what could be expected of him.

<sup>13</sup> See Osu (to appear) for details.

### 2.3.3 *Kè òbò*

The phrase **k'òbò**, formed from **kè** and **òbò**, 'to be (identification)', is mainly used to express contrast between two predicative relations P and Q, as in (29).

- (29) **ówù nù átúrú nù òcìcì k'wé èzè ìk'ù. bè sík'ũ élé**  
 goat and sheep and fowl refused to.go meeting they called those  
**íbè bé zèg'ù ìk'ù, kànú bé nù bílé zèg'ò**  
 similar they going meeting said.to they that themselves not.going  
**k'òbò níhé nù níhé bè yìsìrù ónú n'ótù kpébí,**  
 however thing and thing they put mouth in.one decide  
**nù bílé zì nù yá.**  
 that themselves are in it

Goat, Sheep and Fowl refused to attend. They called their neighbours and told them that they were not attending that meeting, but that they agreed in advance with whatever decision would be made during the meeting.

The example in (29) is part of a story of how human beings came to use Goat, Sheep and Fowl for their sacrifices. The Chief of all the animals called a meeting. But this trio decided not to attend. They told those who were going that they would accept whatever decision was taken. When the meeting began, the Chief explained why he had called the meeting. He told them that human beings wanted animals they could use for their sacrifices. They all deliberated and decided that to punish the absentees, they would give them to human beings.

The verb **òbò** 'to be (identification)' identifies P (whatever you decide) as referring to the situation under consideration; while **kè** implies that P is in connection with an antecedent, i.e. Q (we are not attending the meeting), but that one has moved away from this. Thus, **kè** indicates that P is dissociated from Q.

### 3. IS **kè** A FOCUS MARKER?

Several examples have shown that the use of **kè** is consistently associated with contrast: an element is singled out of a set of elements, with the result that any other possible element is eliminated. This might lead to an analysis of **kè** as a focus marker. Indeed, the general traditional understanding of focus (Firbas 1964; Halliday 1967; Jackendoff 1972; Hyman and Watters 1984; Lecarme 1991) holds that focus is that part of the information that is new in a given sentence, as opposed to the part that is given or presupposed, also called topic. However, in a particular understanding of this notion (Givon 1990; Bearth 1999), contrast is put at the core of focus. According to Givon (1990:699ff.), contrastive focus can be coded by (a) word order, because focused elements tend to be fronted (this applies mostly if the element in question is normally in a non-initial position in the clause); (b) intonation, i.e. stress or tone, because focused elements tend to be stressed; and (c) morphology. He distinguishes in English three devices characterised by strong contrastive stress on the focused constituent, as follows: Stress-focus, cleft, and pseudo-cleft devices. Givon further underlines the fact that the word-order tendency is manifest in the universality of cleft and Y-movement constructions, while the intonation tendency is manifest in the universal

association between contrastive focus and stress. As for morphology, it all depends on what is known about the diachrony of focus constructions and the rise of their morphology out of copular verbs.

A major problem with Givon's conception of focus is that it seems to allow an overlap between focus and several other parts of grammar, such that it becomes very difficult to draw a line between which elements actually mark focus and which do not. Givon himself writes, "in the discussion of contrastive focus, a considerable overlap with other topics of grammar is unavoidable...partly because functional domains are not fully exclusive of each other but often overlap" (p. 699). Thus, negation, yes/no questions, WH-questions and some contrastive quantifiers are analysed as focus-attracting grammatical devices.

Besides, contrast also characterises such other grammatical devices as topic, emphasis, and stress, among others. Should we consider them all as different realisations of the same device? If so, how do we establish the peculiarity of each and every one of them? In short, how do we distinguish between them?

If we consider **kè** relative to the criteria provided by Givon (i.e. fronting, stress and morphology in relation to diachrony), we are not likely to define it as a focus marker. This morpheme, as examples show, does not trigger fronting in any way. It does not involve moving an element from one position to another, or from a non-initial position in the clause to the initial position. And the constituent that comes after it is not realised with any special stress or intonation.

Furthermore, in a bid to understand the specific property of focus and how it works in languages, it is likely that reference to contrast or to the notion of 'new information' will be too unsatisfactory. Hence, in a recent publication (Caron (ed.) 2000), a reassessment of focus together with topic, using the theoretical concepts of preconstruct and assertion as they are defined within the theory of predicative and enunciative operations, is proposed. The term PRECONSTRUCT implies that a predicative relation is construed as validated with respect to a moment different from and preceding the moment of utterance (cf. Caron 2000). The reassessment is based on a more than five-year detailed investigation of ten African languages. The conclusion it reaches is that "Focus consists in the imbrication of two propositions within a single speech unit: a predicative relation and the identification of one term of this predicative relation, the focused term. What is asserted is the identification of the focused term, while the predicative relation is given the status of a preconstruct" (Caron 2000:7).

It was discovered in the case of Ikwere (see Osu 2000:209–227), that a typical focus construction has two basic parts: a nominal constituent such as **ńhê** '(some)-thing' that occurs at the beginning of the sentence; and the verb **bu**, 'be', which occurs towards the end, giving the following structure: **ńhê...bu...** 'the thing...is...'. However, the nominal constituent precedes a preconstructed predicative relation and denotes an unspecified entity, while the marker **bu** links a newly introduced element to the predicative relation such that it specifies the unspecified entity. Indeed, this structure involves contrast since it portrays a specific way in which the speaker selects an element (or a term) at the expense of one or several others, and qualifies it as the right term. This structure is even more in line with Givon's analysis than those involving **kè**. It corresponds with what he calls verb-cleft pattern. We illustrate focus marking in Ikwere with the examples below.

(30) *Unfocused:*

**ákòm n-ògbú á**

malaria to.kill-PROG him

He is suffering from malaria. (Malaria is killing him.)

(31) *Focused:*

**ńhê n-ògbú á bú ákòm**

thing to.kill-PROG him be malaria

What he is suffering from is malaria. (It is malaria that is killing him.)

(32) *Focused:*

**ńyé byá-lé bú jí**

person to.come-PERF.NEG be you.EMPHATIC

It is you who did not come. (The one who did not come is you.)

Thus examples with *kè* do not meet focus marking requirements. Secondly, though the functioning of *kè* sometimes brings about contrast, we consider it necessary to distinguish between what is specific to a linguistic unit such as *kè*, and the effect of its functioning. Coming back to the question asked at the beginning of this section—‘Is *kè* a focus marker?’—based on the above discussion, our answer must be ‘No’.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This analysis has shown that the apparently meaningless morpheme *kè* has in fact a meaning of its own, and that this meaning is invariant and plastic, albeit abstract, so that it can adapt in different ways to different contexts. We propose to phrase this invariant meaning element as follows:

(33) The morpheme *kè* implies that a given element (X; P) is introduced with reference to another element (Y; Q) and draws a distinguishing line between the two elements.

Interestingly, the fact that *kè* draws a distinguishing line between elements very much reminds one of the verb *èkě*, ‘to share’. Could it be that *kè* is derived from *èkě*?

As part of our concluding remarks, we set out below a recapitulation of the various uses of *kè*.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Context/Position</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Phrase</i>	Noun Phrase	Singularisation		
	question-word	✓	clause + [kè determiner]	(1)
	possessives	✓	noun + [kè noun]	(2)–(6)
	ordinal numbers	✓	noun + [kè numeral]	(7)–(10)
	demonstratives	✓	noun/Ø + [kè deictic]	(11)–(13)
<i>Phrase</i>	Verb Phrase			
	pre-verb	Change of orientation	Ø + [kè verb]	(14)–(24)
<i>Sentence</i>	Sentence			
	initial position	Change of orientation	Ø + [kè sentence]	(25)
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	Fixed Expressions			
	kè nù kè	Singularisation	kè Ø + kè Ø + clause	(26)–(27)
	k'ězí	✓	clause + [kè noun]	(28)
	k'òbù	Change of orientation	clause + [kè verb]	(29)

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