

# Ke'o Language

Subjects: [Language & Linguistics](#)

Contributor: HandWiki

Kéo is an Austronesian language belonging to the Kéo ethnic group ('ata Kéo, 'Kéo people') that reside in an area southeast of the Ebu Lobo volcano in the south-central part of Nusa Tenggara Timur Province on the island of Flores, eastern Indonesia. Kéo belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian, Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, Bima-Lembata subgroups of the Austronesian language family and there are approximately 40,000 speakers. Kéo is sometimes referred to as Nage-Kéo, the Nage being the name of a neighbouring ethnic group that is generally considered culturally distinct from Kéo, however whether or not the two languages are separate entities is ambivalent. Uncommon to Austronesian languages, Kéo is a highly isolating language that lacks inflectional morphology or clear morphological derivation. Instead it relies more heavily on lexical and syntactic grammatical processes.

[inflectional morphology](#)

[malayo-polynesian](#)

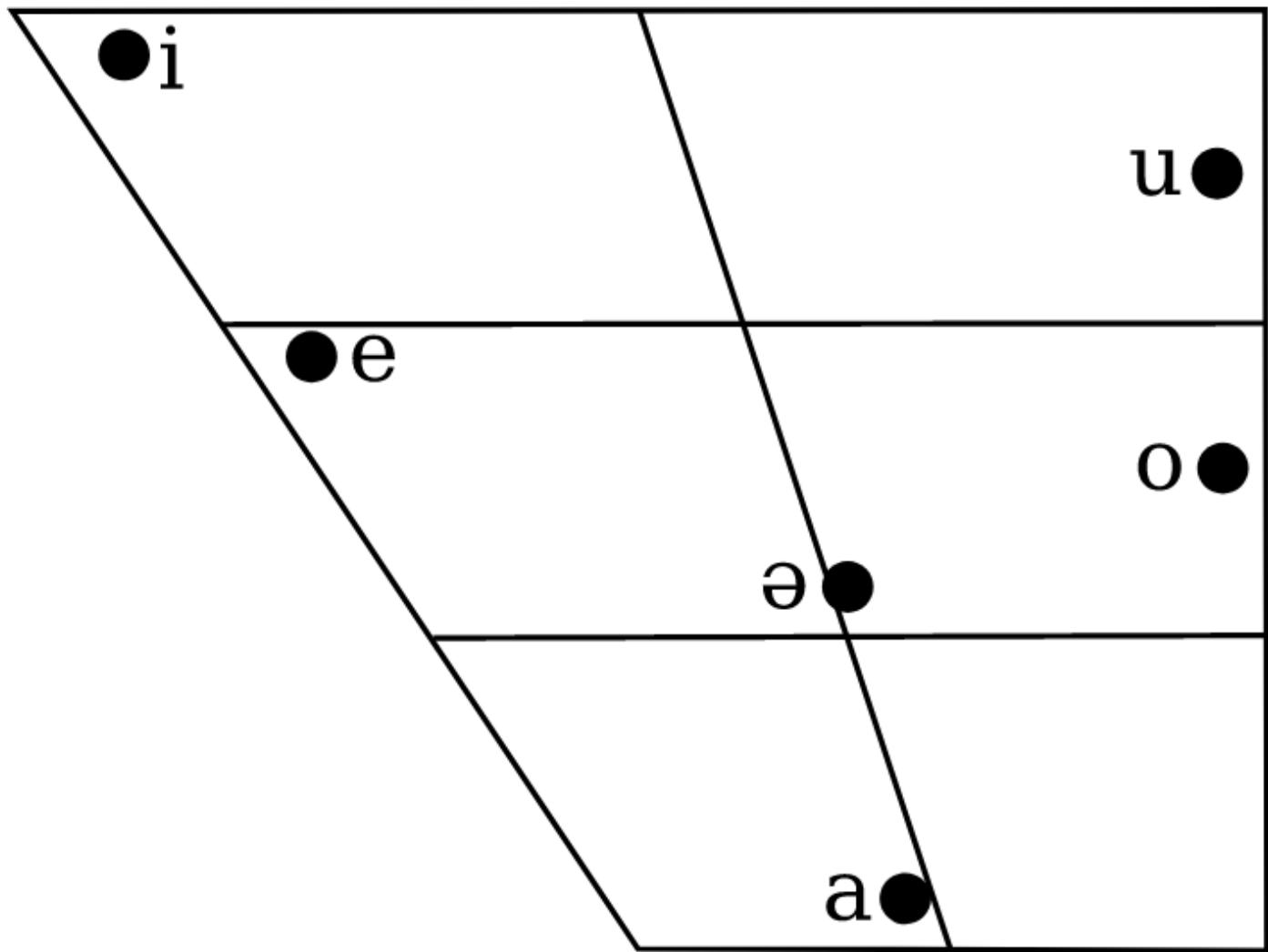
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## 1. Sociolinguistic Situation

Kéo (referred to locally as sara kita 'our language' or sara ndai 'the language here' as well as Bahasa Bajawa 'The Bajawa Language' by people not from central Flores) has distinct dialectal variation between villages. Kéo speakers are able to determine where someone is from based on pronunciation and word use.<sup>[1]</sup>

Overall, the attitude towards Kéo by its speakers is unfavourable. It is considered more economically beneficial to speak Indonesian or English. Despite this sentiment, a sense of respect for the language remains through its oral traditions.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Phonology



Ke'o vowel chart, from Baird (2002b:94). <https://handwiki.org/wiki/index.php?curid=2029586>

The Kéo spoken in the village of Udiworowatu (where the majority of data has been collected on the language) has a phonemic inventory of 23 consonants.

Place → Manner ↓	Labial	Alveolar Apicall	Palatal Laminal	Velar Dorsal	Glottal
Voiceless Stop	p	t	tʃ	k	?
Voiced Stop	b	d	dʒ	g	
Preglottalised Stop	?b	?d			
Prenasalised Stop	mb	nd		ŋg	
Nasal	m	n		ŋ	
Fricative	f	s		x	

Rhotic	r
Lateral	l
Approximant	w

There is a four-way stop distinction for manner of articulation: voiceless (unaspirated), voiced, preglottalised and prenasalised. This is atypical for an Austronesian language.<sup>[3]</sup>

Kéo does not have a contrastive distinction between bilabial and labio-dental, hence the term 'labial' has been used for the place of articulation.<sup>[4]</sup>

There are 6 vowel phonemes in Kéo.<sup>[5]</sup>

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e	ə	o
Low		a	

## 3. Morphology

### 3.1. Pronouns

In Kéo there are 7 standard pronoun forms that form a closed word class.<sup>[6]</sup>

'Standard' Pronoun Form	Person and Number
ngā'o	1st person singular
kau	2nd person singular
'imu	3rd person singular
kita	1st personal plural inclusive
kami	1st person plural exclusive
miu	2nd person plural
'imi-ko'o	3rd person plural

Kéo pronouns have the same form irrespective of their syntactic behaviour. They can function as independent pronouns, as subjects, objects or as possessors. There are also no grammatical gender distinctions.<sup>[6]</sup>

In the examples below we can see the 1st singular pronoun *nga'o* used across four different scenarios: as the subject of an intransitive verb (1), as the subject of a transitive verb (2), as an object, (3) and in the possessor slot of a possessive construction (4).

### Examples:<sup>[7]</sup>

(1) ***Nga'o mbana.***

1sg walk

I'm walking

(2) ***Nga'o bhabha 'imu.***

1sg hit 3sg

I hit him.

(3) ***Kepa kiki nga'o.***

mosquito bit me

A mosquito bit me.

(4) ***Dima nga'o lo.***

arm 1sg hurt

My arm hurts.

## 3.2. Alternate Pronoun Forms

The alternate pronoun forms in Kéo are *ja'o*, *miu*, *kita* and *sira*. Their usage can depend on dialectal variants, politeness and taboo avoidance rules and specificity with quantity of people involved in the utterance.<sup>[8]</sup>

### ***ja'o***

*Ja'o* is an alternate pronoun for *nga'o* in the first person singular. In the past, the two terms were used as a dialect-identifying feature for the Kéo speaking areas. Nowadays, both pronouns are used and personal preference appears to dictate usage. It has also been noted that a child will apply the term that is used by their mother.<sup>[8]</sup>

In an example from a Kéo storyteller, both first person pronoun forms are used stylistically to distinguish the main characters during a passage of direct speech, Wodo Bako *nga'o* and the sorcerer *ja'o*. This distinction can reflect

the storyteller's partiality towards a character depending on which form they themselves identify with.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Examples:<sup>[9]</sup>

5) *Négha kéké Wodo Bako simba si'l*, "Ata podo kau kema wado 'ari **nga'o**."

already that W. B then say person sorcerer 2sg work return younger sibling 1st

After that Wodo Bako then said, "Sorcerer you bring back my younger brother."

6) 'Ata podo si'l, "Modo **ja'o** kema wado"

person sorcerer say ok 1sg work to return

The sorcerer said, "Ok I'll bring him back."

### ***miu***

*Miu* as shown in the 'standard' pronoun form table above is used to address more than one person, yet it can also be used to show a level of respect and politeness when speaking to someone.

### Example:<sup>[10]</sup>

7) *'Iné miu ta ndia*.

ma'am 2pl REL here.

Ma'am, you stay here (while I go).

### ***kita***

*Kita* is the pronoun used for first person plural inclusive. In some cases *kita* is used to replace *kami* (first personal plural exclusive) when talking about belongings or possession. This switch in pronoun to include the addressee(s) makes the speaker appear more community-minded and generous opposed to being arrogant or selfish.<sup>[10]</sup>

### Example:<sup>[10]</sup>

8) *kamba ko'o sai? Kamba **kita***.

buffalo POSS who buffalo 1pl.incl

Whose buffalo are these? Our water buffalo.

## sira

*Sira* is the archaic third person pronoun plural form that can replace the standard second and third person pronouns *kay* and *'imi*. *Sira* is used to avoid certain taboos in Kéo culture that include addressing parents-in-law or people held in high regard. *Sira* is also used when addressing a large group of people.<sup>[11]</sup>

### 3.3. Pronoun + Numeral

Kéo pronouns can be followed by numerals to indicate the exact number of referents. The pronoun-numeral sequence is the only time a number can be used without a classifier. The most common numeral used is *rua* 'two' (9) to create dual pronouns,<sup>[11]</sup> yet it also acceptable to use any other numeral (10).

Examples:<sup>[11]</sup>

9) *Mama né'e bapa ko'o Henri itu tungga **kami** rua weta nala.*

mum and dad POSS H. that only 1pl.excl two sister brother

Me and Henri's dad, only us two were siblings.

10) *Rembu **miu** dima mbana.*

All 2pl five go

All five of you go.

## References

1. Baird (2002a), pp. 9, 28.
2. Baird (2002a), p. 9.
3. Baird (2002a), p. 29.
4. Baird (2002a), p. 34.
5. Baird (2002a), p. 48.
6. Baird (2002a), p. 108.
7. Baird (2002a), p. 110.
8. Baird (2002a), p. 111.
9. Baird (2002a), p. 112.

10. Baird (2002a), p. 113.

11. Baird (2002a), p. 114.

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