This investigation of southern Nigeria’s Edoid language Emai examines a subset of its serial verb constructions. They have in common the identification and coding of a co-participant that is obligatorily human but not required by core verb argument structure. All reflect classic serial verb properties (Aikhenvald and Dixon 2006): a verb sequence sharing tense, aspect and polarity under a single intonation contour acting as a single predicate with no overt marking of clausal dependency. Each construction consists of a core verb (vbaye ‘chat’, e ‘eat’, ken ‘share’) preceded by a co-participant predicate (kpaye ‘accompany’, kpaye ‘replace’ and de baa ‘join’): ójé kpayé olólò vbáyé [Oje accompany Ololo chat] ‘Oje chatted with Ololo’; òjè kpayé olólò è óli émàè [Oje replace Ololo eat the food] ‘Oje ate the food instead of Ololo’; and òjè dē’ báá olólò kên émàè [Oje reach add.to Ololo share food] ‘Oje shared food with Ololo / joined Ololo and shared food’.

Co-participant constructions were highlighted as part of the Leipzig Valency Project (LVP), where we identified lexical equivalents for a predetermined set of verb meanings and assessed their valency profile. Initially, co-participants were considered as possible core verb arguments. This was rejected since a co-participant was not entailed by core verb meaning. Subsequently, co-participant phrases were evaluated as possible adjuncts. This, too, was rejected since the co-participant corresponded neither to semantic notions typically associated with adjuncts, e.g. location, time or manner (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2000), nor to Emai question types reflecting such notions, e.g. ébé ‘where’, éghè re ‘when’ and ébé i ‘how’, respectively.

Despite their common co-participant coding, these constructions contrast in some key temporal, discourse and event properties, with kpaye ‘replace’ and de baa ‘join’ at opposite poles. For instance, kpaye serials answer the subject action question émè’ S ú-i? ‘What did the Subject do?’, while de baa serials do not. Similarly, kpaye can co-occur not only with a lexical verb but Emai’s pro-verb u ‘do’ (òjè kpayé olólò ú òi [Oje replace Ololo do it] ‘Oje did it instead of Ololo’), although de baa cannot (*òjè dē’ báá olólò ú òi [Oje reach add.to Ololo do it] ‘Oje did it with Ololo / joined Ololo and did it’). kpaye serials allow each associated grammatical relation, subject and direct objects, to occur in left periphery focus position (e.g. émàè lí òjé kpayé olólò è [food my PF Oje replace Ololo eat] ‘It was my food that Oje instead of Ololo ate’), whereas de baa in this regard absolutely constrains its grammatical relations (e.g. *émàè lí ójè dē’ báá olólò kên [food PF Oje reach add.to Ololo share] ‘It was food that Oje joined Ololo and shared’). Finally, kpaye constructions show imperfect continuous (C) aspect (òjè ő ő kpayé olólò è óli émàè [Oje SC C replace Ololo eat the food] ‘Oje is eating the food instead of Ololo’) but de baa constructions do not (*òjè ő ő dē’ báá olólò kên émàè [Oje SC C reach add.to Ololo share food] ‘Oje is sharing food with Ololo / is joining Ololo and sharing food’).

Subsequently, we consider kpaye ‘accompany’ construction behavior, which tends toward kpaye ‘replace’, although not absolutely so.

We conclude with a brief discussion of how these data fail to mesh with functions conventionally attributed to serial verbs, expression of verb arguments or creation of lexical items (Comrie 1995), and, instead, highlight functions related to information and aspectual structure.