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# **Noun class 9/10 tone in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu: An overview**

Pius W. Akumbu

## **Abstract**

Singular and plural noun roots in Grassfields Bantu languages may have different phonological shapes, be them segmental, tonal or both (e.g. Bafut (Tamanji 2009: 33), Bamoun (Watters 2003: 243, Mmen (Kiessling 2010: 10-13)). However, it becomes fascinating when such a variation proves to be complex and difficult to describe. Central Ring Grassfields languages (CRGL) of Northwest Cameroon are subject to a variety of complex tonal changes and present an intricate relationship particularly between the tones of the singular nouns (class 9) on the one hand and those of the plural (class 10) on the other. In this study, I attempt a unified analysis of the tonal intricacies within Autosegmental Phonology using data collected directly from native speakers and from existing literature. The study provides support for the claim that floating tones are central to the analysis of Grassfields Bantu languages (Hyman & Tadadjeu 1976).

## **1. Introduction**

It is possible to have different tones on singular and plural forms of nouns in Grassfields Bantu languages. While this is not unique to this group of languages, the variation here proves to be complex and difficult to describe. Central Ring Grassfields languages (CRGL) of Northwest Cameroon are subject to a variety of complex tonal changes and present an intricate relationship particularly between the tones of the singular nouns (class 9) on the one hand and those of the plural (class 10) on the other. Previous descriptions have raised the issue and discussed the complexity in some of the languages (e.g. Babanki (Hyman 1979a, 1980a, 1980b, Akumbu & Hyman 2017), and Oku (Davis 1992, 1997, Hyman 2014)), yet it remains unclear why and how the tonal differences manifest in the rest of the CRGL. I attempt a unified analysis of the tonal intricacies within Autosegmental Phonology. Some of the data presented come from existing literature while the rest have been collected directly from native speakers. The study provides support for the claim that floating tones are central to the analysis of Grassfields Bantu languages (Hyman & Tadadjeu 1976). The languages under study are presented in §2 followed by the review of related literature in §3. Class 9/10 tone is discussed in §4 and a brief conclusion is given in §5.

## 2. Central Ring Grassfields languages

The CRGL on which the present study focuses are a sub-group of Grassfields Bantu (a branch of Benue-Congo and a sister of the Narrow Bantu languages). Although closely related to Narrow Bantu, Grassfields Bantu languages show remarkable differences in nearly all parts of their grammar. The CRGL themselves have many features in common and a comparison of shared vocabularies between immediate neighbors, such as Babanki and Kom (Brye 2001) show that they share at least 70% of their vocabulary. Until recently, only five languages (Kom, Oku, Babanki, Mmen and Bum) have been listed as Central Ring languages (Dieu & Renaud 1983, Breton & Fohitung 1991, Watters 2003). However, it has now been proposed that Kuk and Kung also belong to this subgroup (Tatang 2016, Simons & Fennig 2017). There are nearly 400,000 people who speak the languages, as follows: Kom 233,000, Oku 40,000, Babanki 39,000, Mmen 35,000, Bum 21,000, Kuk 3,000, and Kung 1,750 (Simons & Fennig 2017).

## 3. Previous studies on noun classification in Central Ring

A lot is known about Grassfields Bantu languages in general and the noun classes in particular (Hyman & Voorhoeve 1980, Hyman 1980b, 1980c, Stallcup 1980, Williamson 1993, Watters & Leroy 1989, Watters 2003, Piron 1995, Kießling 2010, etc.). Studies on Central Ring languages have also identified and described different aspects of the noun class systems.

As shown in Table 1, CRGL can have 11, 12 or 13 noun classes marked by either prefixes and/or suffixes. Hyman (1980b), Yuh (1986), Jones (1997), and Shultz (1997) have identified 13 noun classes in Kom with class 9 marked by  $\emptyset$ , or *N-*, and class 10 by the *-sé* suffix. Mmen also has 13 noun classes with  $\emptyset$ , or *N-* for class 9 and the *se-* prefix for class 10 (Chiatoh 1993, Kießling 2010, Möller 2012, 2014). The other language in this subgroup with 13 noun classes is Oku as seen in Hyman (1980b), Davis (1992, 1997), and Mbibeh (1996). Class 9 is also marked by  $\emptyset$ , or *N-* while class 10 takes the *-sá* suffix. Babanki on its part has 12 noun classes with  $\emptyset$ , or *N-* prefix for class 9 and *-sá* for class 10 (Hyman 1979a, 1980b, Akumbu 2011, Akumbu & Chibaka 2012). Hyman (1980b) and Akumbu (2009) reveal that Bum also has 12 noun classes. Class 9 in this language can be marked by one of the following:  $\emptyset$ , *N-*, *â-* while class 10 can take either a prefix or a suffix: *sà-*, *sí*. Kießling (in preparation) shows that Kuk has 12 noun classes with class 9 marked by  $\emptyset$ , or *N-* while class 10 takes a *sá-* prefix. Finally, Kung has been shown to have only 11 noun classes with class 9 also marked by  $\emptyset$ , or *N̂-* and class 10 by the prefix *sà-* or suffix *-sá* (Tatang 2016).

The only noun class marker that is a suffix in many of these languages is the class 10 suffix *-sí* also found in several other Western Grassfields Bantu languages of the Ring subgroup, e.g.

Vengo, Lamnso, etc. Hyman (1980b: 254) argues that

...one of the characteristics of all of the Ring group except West Nkom is the \*-sí suffix of class 10 ... it probably originated as a device to make explicit the plurality of class 10 nouns. As such it is found only on class 10 nouns in isolation, or in constructions where the plurality would not be evident from surrounding forms.

It should be noted that -sí attaches in Babanki, Kom and Oku as a suffix while it is prefixed in Kuk and Mmen but can be either a prefix or suffix in Bum and Kung. It will be seen in §4 that, depending on the language, the tone of -sí can be realized H, <sup>4</sup>H, M, L<sup>o</sup> (i.e. non-gliding final low) or L. The following table shows the noun classes and their affixes in Proto-Ring and in CRGL.

Class	PR	Babanki	Bum	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Mmen	Oku
1	*ù-	Ø, Ñ-	Ø, (à)	Ø, w-	Ø-	Ø-	Ø, u-	(εb-)
2	*bá-	và-	-á	Ø, gh(e)- <sup>1</sup>	ʌ-	à-	Ø, ʌ-	(ε-)
3	*ú-	ə-	ù-	e-( <sup>w</sup> )	u-	ù-	e- - <sup>w</sup> -	εb-
4	*í-	--	--	i-	i-	--	e-	(i-)
5	*í-	à-	ì-	i-	i-	ì-	e-	i-
6	*á-	à-	à-, -á	a-	ʌ-	à-	ʌ-	ε-
6a	*mà-	mà-	m̃-, -mú	me-	m-	m-	m-	m-
7	*kí-	kà-	à-	a-	kà-	kà-	a-	ke-
8	*bí-	à-	ù-, -ú	e-( <sup>w</sup> )	u-	ù-	e- - <sup>w</sup> -	εb-
9	*Ñ-, *Ø	Ø, N-	Ø, N-, (à)-	Ø, N-	Ø, N-	Ø, N-	Ø, N-	Ø, N-
10	*'...-sí	-sá	sà-, -sú-	Ø ...-sé	sà-	sà-, -sá	se-	-sá
13	*tá	tà-	tà-, -tú-	te-	--	--	te-	tà-
19	*fá	fà-	fà-	fe-	fà-	fà-	fe-, fà-	fà-

Table 1: Noun class affixes in PR and Central Ring languages<sup>2</sup>

Class 9/10 nouns fall into two categories in these languages with slightly more than half of the

<sup>1</sup> The IPA symbols for the following orthographic symbols used in this paper are given in square brackets: ny [ɲ], sh [ʃ], zh [ʒ], gh [ɣ], ch [tʃ], j [dʒ], y [j].

<sup>2</sup> The numbering in the first column is according to the Bleek-Meinhof reference system (Katamba 2003). The Proto-Ring reconstructions in the second column are from Hyman (1980b: 251). Babanki data have been taken from Akumbu & Chibaka (2012), Bum data from Hyman (1980b), Kom data from Hyman (2005), Kuk data from Kießling (in preparation), Kung data from (Tatang 2016), Mmen data from Kießling (2010) and Oku data from Hyman (1980b). Ø indicates that the respective class is present but its nominal prefix is zero. ( ) indicate marginal classes or marginal alternants. -- means that the class is absent from the language.

nouns beginning with a NC cluster e.g. Kom: *ngvī* ‘hen’, *ndòŋ* ‘potato’, and *njàm<sup>o</sup>*, ‘axe’ while the rest lack this nasal: *lòm* ‘dry season’, *káyŋ* ‘monkey’, and *gwén* ‘farm’ (Hyman 2005: 315). In addition, “the identity of the nouns falling in one vs. the other category is relatively stable from language to language within WGB. Thus, ‘dog’, ‘goat’ and almost all other animals occur without a nasal, while non-animal 9/10 nouns such as ‘axe’, ‘horn’ and ‘message’ usual take a nasal (Hyman 1980a: 184)<sup>3</sup>.” Synchronically, the nasal is considered to be part of the stem (Akumbu & Hyman 2017). As it will be seen in the next section, the distinction between the two categories can be relevant because the nouns without a nasal sometimes behave differently from a tonal point of view than those with a nasal.

#### 4. Class 9/10 tone

CRGL distinguish two underlying tones, L(ow) and H(igh). On the surface, they have a level low tone (L<sup>o</sup>) contrasting with the normal, falling L tone, but only before pause. In addition, a M(id) tone occurs in all the languages while Babanki also has a downstep (<sup>4</sup>H) entity.<sup>4</sup> Tonal alternations in class 9/10 in CRGL are pervasive and complex. A few phonological variations can also be spotted in class 1/2 in these languages, but it is possible to make generalizations about them, as in the following Babanki nouns that undergo segmental and/or tonal changes:

(1)	sg. (class 1)	pl. (class 2)	gloss
	wìʔ	víʔí	‘person(s)’
	wàyn	vúnó	‘child(ren)’
	chì	və-chí	‘in-law(s)’
	tsòŋ	və-tsóŋ	‘thief(ves)’

A straightforward remark that can be made here is that the L tone of class 1 noun stems in (1) becomes H in class 2. Segmental and/or tonal alternations in class 1/2 are also seen in other CRGL as follows:

(2)	a.	Oku:	wān	ghón	‘child(ren)’
	b.	Mmen:	wùḶ	ghí	‘person(s)’
	c.	Kuk:	wù	ghí	‘person(s)’

<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by Hyman (1980a: 14), “a homorganic nasal is sometimes found on a few nouns sporadically in other classes, but nowhere near the frequency with which it is found on 9/10 nouns”.

<sup>4</sup> See Akumbu (2018) for a discussion of M and <sup>4</sup>H in Babanki.

d.	Bum:	wùt	ghítá	‘person(s)’
e.	Kung:	wò	éghíé	‘person(s)’

The tendency is for the tone of the stems in (2) to be high in the plural class 2. The situation in class 9/10 is more complicated as shown in Table 2 where the tone of the plural form differs from that of the singular form in six of the seven languages.

Class	Babanki	Bum	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Mmen	Oku	Gloss
9	nyàm	ānyâm	nyám	nyàm	nyàm	nyàm	nyâm	‘animal’
10	nyám’sé	nyám’sú	nyámsī	sényâm	sényâm	sényâm	nyámsē	‘animals’

Table 2: Realization of \*nàm` ‘animal’ (Hyman 2007)

Of the seven languages, only Kom has an identical tone on the stem in both classes in Table 2 whereas the tone of the class 10 affix is different from the underlying H in all the languages.<sup>5</sup> This reveals the pervasive nature of the tonal variations, some of which are further illustrated and discussed below.

#### 4.1 Identical class 9/10 tone

The Central Ring language that shows the most correspondence between class 9/10 tones is Mmen. Apart from the three nouns found so far and mentioned below (7c) the rest have identical tones in the singular and plural:

(3)	kílé	sé-kílé	‘flying ant(s)’
	ɲgó	sé-ɲgó	‘termite hill(s)’
	pīyn	sé-pīyn	‘locust(s)’
	mbī	sé-mbī	‘world(s)’
	pìŋ	sé-pìŋ	‘year(s)’
	mbà?	sé-mbà?	‘cloud(s)’

In the other languages, there are sets of nouns that have the same tones in the singular and plural forms. In Babanki (4a), Bum (4b) and Kung (4c), NC initial stems with L tone maintain the L in both classes as well as the H affix in class 10:

<sup>5</sup> Even in Kom, the H of nyám (class 9) goes away as subject of a sentence (Hyman 2005).

(4)	a.	Babanki:	mbàyn	mbàyn-só	‘fence(s)’
			ɲkyè	ɲkyè-só	‘basket(s)’
			ɲkwə̀ɲ	ɲkwə̀ɲ-só	‘hole(s)’
	b.	Bum:	njàm	njàm-sú	‘axe(s)’
			njàɲ	njàɲ-sú	‘song(s)’
			mbàk	mbàk-sú	‘cloud(s)’
	c.	Kung	mbàɲ	só-mbàɲ	‘walking stick(s)’
			njè	só-njè	‘flesh’
			ɲgùʔ	sə̀ɲgùʔ	‘mortar(s)’

In Oku (5a), Kom (5b) and Kung (5c), H tone stems in class 9 remain H in class 10 alongside the suffix or prefix H:

(5)	a.	Oku:	má	má-sé	‘lake(s)’
			sói	sói-sé	‘caterpillar(s)’
			njáɲ	njáɲ-sé	‘xylophone(s)’
	b.	Kom:	njáɲ	njáɲ-sí	‘xylophone(s)’
			ɲgɔ́ʔ	ɲgɔ́ʔ-sí	‘termite(s)’
			mbíɲ	mbíɲ-sí	‘maggot(s)’
	c.	Kung:	ífú	sə́-fú	‘axe(s)’
			íkóy	sə́-kóy	‘termite(s)’
			ndzɔ́ɲ	sə́-ndzɔ́ɲ	‘thorn(s)’

Oku (6a) and Kom (6b) also have certain M tone stems in both singular and plural as well as the H suffix:

(6)	a.	Oku:	njɔ́ɲ	njɔ́ɲ-sé	‘moon(s)’
			ɲgɔ́k	ɲgɔ́k-sé	‘termite(s)’
			ndāi	ndāi-sé	‘cloth(s)’
	b.	Kom:	ɲgvī	ɲgvī-sí	‘chicken(s)’
			mbām	mbām-sí	‘snake(s)’
			ndōɲ	ndōɲ-sí	‘horn(s)’

These data show that it is possible to have identical tones in class 9/10 stems in Central Ring Grassfields languages. However, as seen next, this is not always the case as a certain number of nouns exhibit tonal differences between the singular and plural forms in this gender.

## 4.2 Tonal variation in class 9/10 stems

There are stems that have a L tone in class 9 but a H tone in class 10, as seen in Babanki (7a), Kung (7b) and Mmen (7c)<sup>6</sup>:

(7)	a.	Babanki:	jòm	jóm-'sǎ	'dream(s)'
			nyìŋ	nyíŋ-'sǎ	'hair(s)'
			dzè̀m	dzé̀m-'sǎ	'back(s)'
	b.	Kung:	tsàm	sǎ-tsám	'dream(s)'
			zǎ	sǎ-zǎ	'snake(s)'
	c.	Mmen:	pfiyn	sē-pfiyn	'mountain(s)'
			kyǎ	sē-kyǎ	'voice(s)'

The change from root L tone in class 9 to H in class 10 shown in (7a-c) is clearly predictable from Proto-WGB. As pointed out by Akumbu & Hyman (2017: 8), "Class 9 was originally marked by a L tone prefix, while class 10 still shows the effects of an original H tone prefix. Synchronically, we can posit corresponding floating tones." In other words, positing a floating L tone before the singular and a floating H tone before the plural forms would account for the changes. As in Babanki (8), when the class 10 /H/ prefix associates to the /L/ root, the L delinks, conditioning the downstep on the suffix /-sǎ/:

(8) H tone grounding (HTG) in class 10



In Kung (7b) and Mmen (7c) the delinked L tone undergoes Stray Erasure (Steriade 1982, Snider 1999) as it has no observable effect in the phonetics.

Certain L tone stems maintain the L in the plural but the H suffix becomes L<sup>o</sup> in Kom (9a) and Oku (9b):

(9)	a.	Kom:	bò	bò-sì <sup>o</sup>	'bag(s)'
			bèŋ	bèŋ-sì <sup>o</sup>	'rainy season(s)'

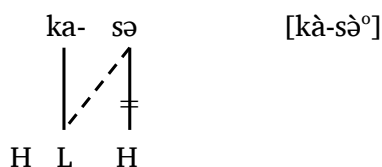
<sup>6</sup> The noun roots in this category lack an initial NC and all begin with a simple consonant.



		njàm	njàm-sì°	‘axe(s)’
b.	Oku:	kà	kà-sè°	‘basket(s)’
		bìŋ	bìŋ-sè°	‘rainy season(s)’
		mbàn	mbàn-sè°	‘fence(s)’

Historically these nouns were \*L and synchronically they can be analyzed as /L-L/ in class 9 and /H-L/ in class 10. Unlike in Babanki (as in 8 above), the floating H- prefix fails to link but the L spreads to the suffix, converting the H to L°:

## (10) Low Tone Spread (LTS) in class 10



It is unclear why the floating H doesn't associate but the L spreads. A similar situation is found in Kuk where the floating H- fails to link and the L tone of the root is maintained in class 10:

(11)	ŋmgbà?	sè-ŋmgbà?	‘mountain(s)’
	t̀	sè-t̀	‘pot(s)’
	ndzàm	sè-ndzàm	‘axe(s)’

On the other hand, the non-gliding L° roots which are historically \*H can be analyzed as /L-H/ in class 9 and /H-H/ in class 10 in Babanki (12a) and in Oku (12b) they are analyzed as /L-H/ in class 9 but /H-LH/ in class 10. In both languages the suffix remains H:

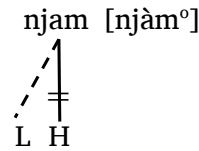
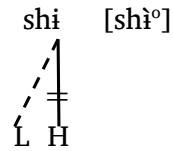
(12)	a.	Babanki:	shì°	shí-só	‘hoe(s)’
			zhù°	zhú-só	‘bee(s)’
			nyì°	nyí-só	‘machete(s)’
	b.	Oku:	njàm°	njàm-só	‘axe(s)’
			ŋkfù°	ŋkfù-sé	‘rope(s)’
			ntèk°	ntèk-só	‘quarter(s)’

The L prefix (of class 9) docks onto the root and delinks the H which floats and prevents the L from gliding:

(13) LTG in class 9

Babanki

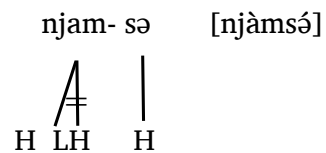
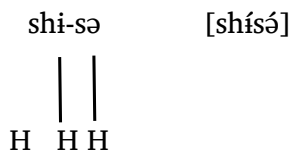
Oku



In class 10 the H prefix is deleted in Babanki by Stray Erasure since its grounding would have no effect. The presence of the nasal in the NC initial cluster in Oku prevents the H from linking (See Akumbu & Hyman 2017 for a discussion of the relationship between NC clusters and tone in Grassfields Bantu) and the LH stem simplifies to L:

(14) a. HTG in class 10 (Babanki)

b. LH simplification (Oku)

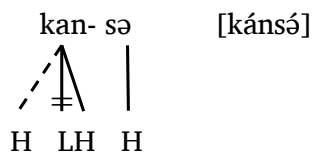


High Tone Grounding is seen in Oku in certain stems that lack an NC initial cluster:

- |      |      |         |             |
|------|------|---------|-------------|
| (15) | kān  | kán-sə  | ‘monkey(s)’ |
|      | səə  | səə-sə  | ‘fish(es)’  |
|      | kfən | kfən-sə | ‘hill(s)’   |

The L-H in class 9 becomes M while the floating H- prefix of class 10 goes into the stem and delinks the L which is eventually deleted by Stray Erasure:

(16) HTG in class 10 (Oku)



A slightly different outcome is found in Kuk where HTG results to a contour tone on /H-L/ stems in class 10:

(17)	nyàm	só-nyâm	‘animal(s)’
	ghàm	só-ghâm	‘mat(s)’
	zùghù	só-zùghù	‘snake(s)’

While the other languages simplify their contour tones, Kuk allows one in this context. It is possible that these nouns are doubly prefixed by só- and the floating prefixal H that merge and then spread onto the root L. While HTG results to L tone delinking, HTS results to a contour tone.

High tone roots, on their part, cause downstep of the suffix H in class 10 as in Babanki (18a), or create a M tone as in Kom (18b) and Bum (18c):

(18)	a.	Babanki	byí	byí- <sup>+</sup> só	‘goat(s)’
			bú	bú- <sup>+</sup> só	‘dog(s)’
			ndzɔŋ	ndzɔŋ- <sup>+</sup> só	‘thorn(s)’
	b.	Kom:	dzí	dzí-sī	‘road’
			bí	bí-sī	‘dog’
			bzí	bzí-sī	‘goat’
	c.	Bum:	ājéŋ	jéŋ-sē	‘hunger’
			ānjáŋ	njáŋ-sē	‘xylophone(s)’
			ājóm	jóm-sē	‘back(s)’

Downstep or M suggests that these nouns were \*HL historically (e.g. Proto Bantu \*búà ‘dog’). Synchronically, they can be modeled as a linked H followed by a floating L which triggers either downstep of the suffix H (Snider 1999, Akumbu 2018) or lowers it to M:

(19)	a.	byi-	sə	[byí <sup>+</sup> só]	b.	dzi	si	[dzísī]
		HL	H			HL	H	



Finally, a falling tone in the stem of class 9 nouns becomes H in class 10 and the H suffix is M as in Oku (20a) and Kom (20b):

(20)	a.	Oku:	fê	fé-sē	‘hoe(s)’
			nûŋ	núŋ-sē	‘hair(s)’
			nyâm	nyám-sē	‘animal(s)’
	b.	Kom:	jîm	jím-sī	‘back(s)’
			kû	kú-sī	‘nut(s)’
			nyûŋ	nyúŋ-sī	‘hair(s)’

Nouns like those in (20) might have had a H prefix which goes onto the root and creates a falling tone in the singular but delinks the L in the plural. As seen, the L that floats in the plural produces a M in these languages that have a general M tone (Hyman 1976). In Bum and Kung, the H prefix goes onto the root in both the singular and plural forms creating a falling tone:

- |      |    |       |       |         |             |
|------|----|-------|-------|---------|-------------|
| (21) | a. | Bum:  | nyâm  | sə-nyâm | ‘animal(s)’ |
|      |    |       | nyûŋ  | sə-nyûŋ | ‘hair(s)’   |
|      |    |       | bvû   | sə-bvû  | ‘goat(s)’   |
|      | b. | Kung: | ífü   | sə-fû   | ‘leaf(ves)’ |
|      |    |       | ínyûŋ | sə-nyûŋ | ‘hair(s)’   |

The grounding of the H tone to produce a falling tone in Bum and Kung is modeled as follows:

- |      |    |   |    |  |
|------|----|---|----|--|
| (22) | a. | HTG in class 9  | b. | HTG in class 10  |
|      |    | nyam  |    | sə-nyam  |
|      |    | [nyâm]  |    | [sə-nyâm]  |
|      |    |  |    |  |

## 5. Conclusion

Singular (class 9)/plural (class 10) tonal alternations are common in all Central Ring Grassfields languages although the behavior of the tones differs significantly from language to language. The discussion in this paper supports the reconstruction of L tone for class 9 and H tone for class 10 as the Proto-Grassfields singular/plural prefixes (Hyman 1980b: 252-254). In other words, positing a floating L tone before the singular and a floating H tone before the plural forms accounts for most of the cases. It is therefore evident that the floating tones that have resulted from the loss of the vowels of these prefixes are responsible for the observed tonal changes in the noun stems.

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