

Remnants of nasal prefixes in Western Grassfields Bantu

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Introduction

- Varying presence or absence of nasals in the noun prefixes of certain classes of Niger-Congo languages.

Proto-Bantu reconstructed with nasals in cl. 1, 3, 4, 6(a), 9, and 10 (Meeussen 1967)

Benue-Congo reconstructed with a nasal only in class 6a (de Wolf 1971).

- Evolution of these nasal prefixes under discussion for a long time (Hyman 2018 summarizes the problem and its history)
- proposal to reconstruct nasals as far back as Proto-Niger-Congo (Miehe 1991)



Introduction: Grassfields Bantu internal division into Eastern and Western Grassfields Bantu

- Nasal consonants reconstructed for Proto-Bantu and Proto-Eastern Grassfields are typically missing in the prefixes of Western Grassfields Bantu languages today and accordingly in Proto-Western Grassfields (Hyman 1980).
- Presence of nasal prefixes in Eastern Grassfields Bantu and their absence in WGB used to establish the distinction between the two Grassfields groups and to point to what looks like a shared innovation of Eastern Grassfields and Bantu.



Introduction: Noun class Prefixes

(1) Reconstruction of relevant noun class prefixes

Class	Proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1967)	Proto-Benue-Congo (de Wolf 1971)	Proto-EGB (Hyman 1980)	Proto-WGB (Hyman 1980)
1 (sg.)	*mù-	*ù-, *ò-	*Ñ-	*ù(N)-
3 (sg.)	*mù-	*ú-	*Ñ-	*ú-
4 (pl.)	*mì-	*í-	---	*í-
6 (pl.)	*mà-	*à	*mà-	*á-
9 (sg.)	*Ñ-	*è-, *ì-	*Ñ-	*ì(N)-
10 (pl.)	*Ñ-	*í-	*Ñ-	*í(N)-
6a (-)	*mà-	*mà-, *nà-	*mà-	*má-
7 (sg.)	*kì-	*ki-, *ke-	à-	kí-

Goals and outline

- Examines numerous WGB nouns which preserve in various ways the inherited nasal prefixes of cl. 1, 3, and 9.
- Presents frequent parallels from other languages to demonstrate that this situation holds true for the entire WGB group.
- Discusses some of the ways the noun class system was restructured through the loss of some classes and nouns subsequently reassigned to various classes.



Nasal prefix in Babanki Class 9

- The distribution of gender 9/10 onsets makes it clear that both classes inherited the Proto-Grassfields prefix N^- seen in Eastern Grassfields.
 - Of 120 Gender 9/10 Babanki nouns
 - 33 begin with n ,
 - 28 begin with m ,
 - 26 begin with η
 - 5 begin with η ,
- Non-nasals** on the same basic wordlist add to only **28**



Nasal-initial nouns in class 9

(2) Examples of class 9 nouns that maintain nasals from Bantu-Grassfields stems

Language	'animal'	'back'	'horn'	'house'	'sheep'	'thorn'
PG	*nàm`	*jìṃ	*ndóŋ	*ndáb`	*jì(e)l	*njóŋ`
PB	*nyàmà	*jùmà	*tóngɔ	*dábò	*gú	*jí(n)gùà
Fe'fe'	nəə	ndzàm	ndēʔ	nd̥a	nʒàa	ndʒwēʔ
Mankon	ɨnàmè	̀ndzùmè	̀ndóŋè	̀ndá`	̀ndzìè	̀ndzóŋè
Babanki	nàm	dzèm	̀ndóŋ	—	̀ndzù	̀ndzóŋ
Lamnso'	nám	ndzèm	lōŋ	lāv	̀ndzì	̀njôŋ
Babessi	nò:	nzò	nduó	ndóʔ	ndzỳ	ndzuó
Isu	nàm	dzēm	̀ndóŋ	n̄dāw	̀ndzò	—
Moghamo	nâm	̀indzìṃ	̀ndóŋ	nəp	̀indzək	̀indzəŋ
Oshie	nî	̀indzùm	̀indóŋ	̀iní	̀indzək	̀indzéh



WGB class 9 nouns without nasal prefixes

(3) Examples of WGB class 9 nouns without nasal prefixes

Language	'bee'	'dog'	'goat'	'fish'	'skin'	'snake'
PG	*yú´	*bùà	*bùjì	*sù`	*gùb`	*yól
PB	*jíkì	*bùà	*bùdì	*cúí	*gùbò	*jókà
Fe'fe'	?	<i>mv̄a</i>	<i>mv̄i</i>	—	<i>ngòp</i>	<i>nū</i>
Mankon	<i>ɪnúè</i>	<i>m̄bv̄úò</i>	<i>m̄bȳè</i>	<i>ɪfúè</i>	<i>ngòbè</i>	<i>ɪn̄ó`</i>
Babanki	z̄ɛ	b̄ɛ	byí	ʃ̄ɛ	gw̄ɛ	z̄ù
Lamnso'	yúū	d̄z̄wí	bv̄li	sá	wūn	yô
Babessi	<i>mpfú?</i>	bv̄é	bv̄ém	t̄já	ɣâ	d̄zuè
Isu	zú	bv̄ē	bī	ít̄jí	ɣû	z̄ɛə
Moghamo	d̄zók	bók	`ḡwí`	ʃú	gôp	d̄zók
Oshie	èdzógó	èbók	èbwí	èswí	àzòbí	d̄zúé



Possible account for the loss of nasals

- **Phonological change**, e.g. Mankon where the nasal is lost before fricatives and other nasals, e.g. *ɨfúà* ‘fish’
- **Class change**, e.g.
Babanki *fɨ* ‘hoe’ class 9
but Lamnso’ *kisô* and Isu *kádʒɔ* class 7,
and some EGB languages, e.g. Bafut *àsó* 7/8 ‘hoe’.



Reassignment of original class 9 nouns

1. To Class 1

Babanki has reassigned some of the original WGB cl. 9 nouns to cl. 1, as in (4)

(4) Nouns in WGB class 9 but in Babanki class 1

Language	'antelope'	'cane rat'	'dwarf cow'	'pig'	'pot'	'potato'	class
Kom	ŋgwó	ndzīlì	mbòŋ	ŋkfíɲàm	ntòin	ndòŋ	9
Oku	ŋgà	ndzīwìl	mbòŋ	nfā:ɲàm	ntòn	ndòŋ	9
Aghem	ŋgwó	ndzìlò	mbòŋ	—	tèe	ndóŋ	9
Men	dzìŋ	ndzīlè	mbòŋ	—	tòin	ndòŋ	9
Babanki	ŋgó	ndzè	mbòŋ	ŋkwǎɲàm	ntòn	ndòŋ	1



Reassignment of original class 9 nouns

- **To Class 19**

Babanki has reassigned some of the original WGB cl. 9 nouns to cl. 19 as seen in (5)

(5) Babanki class 19 nouns with class 9 origins

fàṅín ‘bird’ (also Kom *f̄ṅúyn*, Oku *fēnán*, Babungo *fànwá*) — PB **jòni* cl.9

fàndzìndzì ‘fly’ (also Kom *f̄ndzêndzè*, Oku *fèmbâṅ*, Babungo *fàníndì*) — PB
**gì* 9/10, **gìngì* 9/6, 9/10 (reduplication)

fàjìtə ‘path, road’ (cf. Fe'fe' *mánzì*) — PB **jìdà* 9

fàmbvánṅ ‘salt’ (also Kom *f̄ṅgvánṅ*, Oku *féṅgwànṅ*, Babungo *fàṅwáí*) — PG
**gwánṅ`* 9



Babanki *fàkòʔ/ɲkòʔ* 19/6a ‘tree, firewood’ creates a cl. 19 singular but keeps the apparently old cl. 10 form for the collective or plural, without adding the new cl. 10 suffix or the cl. 6a prefix *mà-*.

Also Kom *fɪkâʔ / ɲkâʔ* 19/6a,

Weh *fɪkâʔ / ɲkâʔ* 19/6a,

Bafut (EGB) *fɪkwēē / ɲkwēē* 19/10 (cf. PB **kóni* 9/10, 11/10).



Nasal prefixes in Babanki classes 1 and 3

Class 1 preservations

A few Babanki cl. 1 nouns have a nasal that could reflect the PB **m* prefix:

(6) Various Babanki class 1 nouns with nasals

*n*ìṅgòṅ/và-*n*ìṅgòṅ 'god'

*m*bàsà/và-*m*bàsà 'soup'

*m*bàṅ/và-*m*bàṅ 'hammer'

*m*bwàṅsà/và-*m*bwàṅsà 'savior'

*m*bvám/và-*m*bvám 'python'



Loss of nasal in class 1 nouns

Babanki and Lamnso'

(7) Examples of WGB class 1 nouns without nasal prefixes

Language	'child'	'husband'	'man'	'woman'
PG	*án`	*lúm	*báŋà	*g(w)é'
PB	*jánà	*dómè	*dómè	kadí
Fe'fe'	mūu	ndhū	mbā?	mfà?
Mankon	múè	ndómè	m̄baŋè	m̄aŋḡyé
Babanki	wàn	lím	wùlóm	wùwì
Lamnso'	wān	lûm	lúmèn	wîi
Babessi	věmbwà?	ndó	mbô	vì
Isu	wā	ŋŋl̄m	wìŋl̄mè	wìȳéŋí
Moghamo	ŋwán`	ínóm	m̄baŋè	āyí
Oshie	èŋwó	wènóm	wènóm	wèȳyí



Class 3 preservations

- Babanki retains the nasal in a few cl. 3 words shown in (8), which are also cl. 3 in Proto-Bantu.

(8) Examples of Babanki class 3 nouns with nasals

Language	'branch'	'tail'
PG	*táb`	*kùn`
PB	*tábì	*gòndó
Fe'fe'	—	ḥkwèn
Mankon	ḥdzáʔà	ḥkùḥé
Babanki	èntám	èḥkwìn
Lamso'	tâm	kún
Babessi	ntáʔ	—
Isu	—	úkwē
Moghamo	fítáp	íkōn
Oshie	ḥzáʔ	ókōn



Class 6a developments

- Insertion of nasals in addition to the cl. 6a *mà-* prefix in Babanki:

(9) Babanki class 6a nasals

mà-n-lyúŋ ‘blood’

mà-n-té ‘spittle’

mà-n-zí? ‘oil’

mà-n-sò ‘witchcraft’

- Spread of homorganic nasal into two other Babanki nouns

(9) Babanki nouns in class 7/6a

a. *kà-tsí* / *mà-n-tsí* ‘day(s)’ (also Kom *ā-tfí/mī-tfí*)— cf. PB **jící* 3 ‘day’

b. *kà-fú* / *mà-m-fú* ‘medicine(s)’ (also Kom *ā-fū/mī-fū*, Oku *kā-fúu/ām-fúu*)

c. *kà-kúm* / *mà-kúm* ‘juju(s)’ (also Kom *ā-kúm/mī-kúm*, Oku *kā-kúm/ām-kúm*)

d. *kà-báŋ* / *mà-báŋ* ‘compound(s)’ (also Kom *ā-bé/mī-bé*, Men *ā-pwéyn/mī-pwéyn*)

f. *kà-lú* / *mà-lú* ‘wall’



Evidence of nasal prefixes in Babanki deverbatives

- Gerunds and result nouns derived by cl. 5 and 7 prefixation plus a nasal prefix

(10) a. Babanki nouns derived with class 7 prefix

Verb root	Gloss	Gerund	Gloss
zɪ́	'eat'	kə-zɪ́	'eating'
ɲíŋ	'run'	kə-ɲíŋ	'running'
bén	'dance'	kə-bén	'dance'
bàn	'hate'	kə-bàn	'hatred'
tám	'plot'	kə-tám	'trap'

b. Class 7 prefix and a N- prefix

Verb root	Gloss	Gerund	Gloss
bwóm	'build'	kə-m-bwóm	'building'
lón	'beg'	kə-n-lón	'begging'
tʃá	'kick'	kə-n-tʃá	'kicking'
lè	'lose'	kə-n-lè	'losing'
ɲòʔ	'write'	kə-ɲ-ɲòʔ	'writing'
kù	'snore'	kə-ŋ-kù	'snoring'
fáʔ	'shave'	kə-m-fáʔ	'scissors'
pfí	'die'	kə-m-pfí	'cadaver'
ʃwìn	'lock'	kə-n-ʃwìn	'lock'
zàs	'loosen'	kə-n-zàs	'key'

Nasal prefix also in Kom cl. 7 noun

āmbūʔsĩ 'drill' from *bùʔ* 'bore a hole'.



Result nouns in class 9

(11) Babanki

Verb root	Gloss	Result	Gloss
táʔ	'reward'	n-táʔ	'reward'
tím	'send'	n-tím	'message'
sán	'split'	n-sán	'sprout'
kóʔ	'chop'	ŋ-kóʔ	'gap, a cut'
tjé	'sting'	n-tjé	'sting'



Agent deverbatives in cl. 1 with *N-* in related languages

(12) Kom (Central Ring) agent nouns in class 1 (Loh 2001: 102)

Verb root	Gloss	Agent	Gloss
gùf	'drive'	ŋ-gùf	'driver'
gwò	'share'	ŋ-gwò	'sharer'
tòʔ	'support'	n-tòʔ	'supporter'

(13) Ngêmbà (Eastern Grassfields) agent nouns in class 1

Verb root	Gloss	Agent	Gloss
pó	'build'	m-bò	'builder'
tsó	'eat'	n-tsó	'one who eats'
yà	'speak'	ŋ-gà	'speaker'



Relics of agent deverbatives in Babanki cl. 1

(14) Babanki agent nouns in class 1

Verb root	Gloss	Agent	Gloss
bá?lǎ	'sell'	m -bá?lǎ	'seller'
bwòŋsà	'save'	m -bwòŋsà	'saviour'
zén	'buy'	n -zén	'buyer'
dzè?	'walk'	n -dzè?tə	'prostitute'
gyàmtə	'help'	ŋ -gyàmtə	'helper'
γá?	'hold'	ŋ -γá?	'one who initiates'
gùf	'drive'	ŋ -gùf	'driver'



Variation in Eastern Grassfields

The Nun, Nkambe and Ngemba subgroups of EGB regularly have nasal prefixes, which might have formed the basis for the claim that “Mbam-Nkam languages have nasal consonants in the prefixes of classes 1 and 3, all nouns in classes 9/10 have a nasal consonant in the prefix” (Watters 2003: 228). Within Mbam-Nkam, however, there is a mixture of reflexes.

- Fe'fe' *mv̄ā* 'dog', *ndzàm* 'back', *ndàk*° 'bamboo', *ndē?* 'horn'
but
- Bangangte *vút* 'body',
- Bangu *dzà* 'back', *bv̄* 'dog', *dók* 'horn', *dyā ~ pà?* 'house', *dzók* 'thorn',
- Bazou *pà?à* 'house',
- Balengou *pà?à* 'house'.



Variation in Eastern Grassfields class 1, 3, 9

(15) Presence vs. absence of nasals in EGB classes 1, 3, 9

Language	'hen'	'house'	'rain'	'fly'	'thief'	'heart'
Fe'fe'	ŋgōp	nd̥ā	mbàk	nžìnžì	ncwē?	ntām
Baleng	mégáp	pà?	mbòŋ	nzúnzwè	ncúŋ	nètúm
Bafoussam	ŋgwóp	ndá ~ pà?	bòŋ	dzédzè	cwóŋ	nètsám
Baham	góp	dyǎ ~ pà?	bàŋ	jwəjwə	šŭŋ	lǎm
Bahouav	góp	dyǎ ~ pà?	bàŋ	jwəjwə	šŭŋ	tǎm
Bangou	gēp	dyē ~ pà?	mbək	žèžè	cók	ntí
Batie	gép	dyé ~ pà?	bàŋ	jùnjwè	cwóŋ	tám



Summary

In sum, generalizations about the presence or absence of nasal prefixes in various Grassfields branches need to be carefully crafted. A combination of phonological changes, borrowings and class re-assignments may play a role in some Eastern Grassfields languages, as they apparently did in Babanki. The loss or merger of classes and the not infrequent reassignment of nouns to alternative classes is a topic that needs more consideration in all these languages.



Conclusion

- Presence of nasal prefixes in the common ancestral languages of Proto-Grassfields and Proto-Bantu-Grassfields.
- The WGB loss of nasals in some cl. 9 nouns and the loss of some classes contributed to a restructuring of classes and reassignment of nouns that obscured the original nasal class prefixes.
- Divergence observed among and within various sub-groups of Grassfields
- Variation in a language or groups of languages over a period of more than 2,000 years is usual and WGB is no exception.
- This pattern of reduction or restructuring may be found elsewhere, as suggested by the occasional presence of nasal prefix relics in various Niger-Congo languages (Miehe 1991).



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