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Variation in Central Ring: Convergence or divergence?

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Abstract

Central Ring (CR) Grassfields Bantu languages of Cameroon seem to form a distinct subgroup within Ring that can be delimited from the West Ring subgroup by some isomorphs (e.g., absence of noun class 4, presence of a contrast of plural noun classes 10 vs. 13, absence of a fully morphologized aspectual focus system), a couple of isoglosses such as **m-lám* (6a) ‘blood’, **m-fú(k)* (6a) ‘pus’, **kə-bvôl* (7) ‘ashes’, **fî / *kòl* (9/10) ‘rope’, **kə-fûk* (7/8) ‘farm’ and gender affiliations of nominal concepts, e.g., **ú-lûə* ‘bridge’ in (3/13 vs. 3/6a).

The standing challenge is to sort out the precise motivations for these divergent developments, i.e., to what extent they have been inspired by the felt need to accommodate to a target external to CR in the first line, or to what extent the ultimate driving force could rather have been the desire to dissociate from CR neighbours and increase linguistic distinctions as symbolic consolidation of sociopolitical independence.

Keywords: Ring languages; Cameroon; variation; convergence; divergence.

1. Introduction

The Central Ring (CR) languages of the Cameroonian Grassfields form a distinct subgroup within Ring that can be delimited from the West Ring (WR) subgroup by various isomorphs and isoglosses¹, as listed in Table 1.² The isomorphs are the following: absence of noun class 4, presence of a contrast of plural noun classes 10 vs. 13, absence of a fully morphologized aspectual focus system. The most salient isoglosses are: **m-lám* (6a) ‘blood’, **m-fú(k)* (6a) ‘pus’, **kə-bvôl* (7) ‘ashes’, **fî / *kòl*

¹ In accordance with established practice in dialectology and historical linguistics, we use the term “isomorph” to refer to a line indicating the limit of the spread of a morphological feature shared across a given area, in distinction to an isogloss that refers to such a line for lexical phenomena (Bussmann 1996, Beekes 1995, Händler & Wiegand 1982).

² The data used in this study have mostly been taken from the following sources: Babanki (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012), Kom (Jones 2001), Oku (Yensi 1996, Blood & Davis 1999), Men (Chiatoh 1993, Mua 2015, Möller 2012, Björkestedt 2011, Bangha 2003), Kuk (Kießling 2016, Pleus 2015) and Kung (Kießling 2019: 149; Schlenker 2012). Babanki data have been supplemented by the first author. Men, Kuk and Kung data have been supplemented based on fieldnotes by the second author.

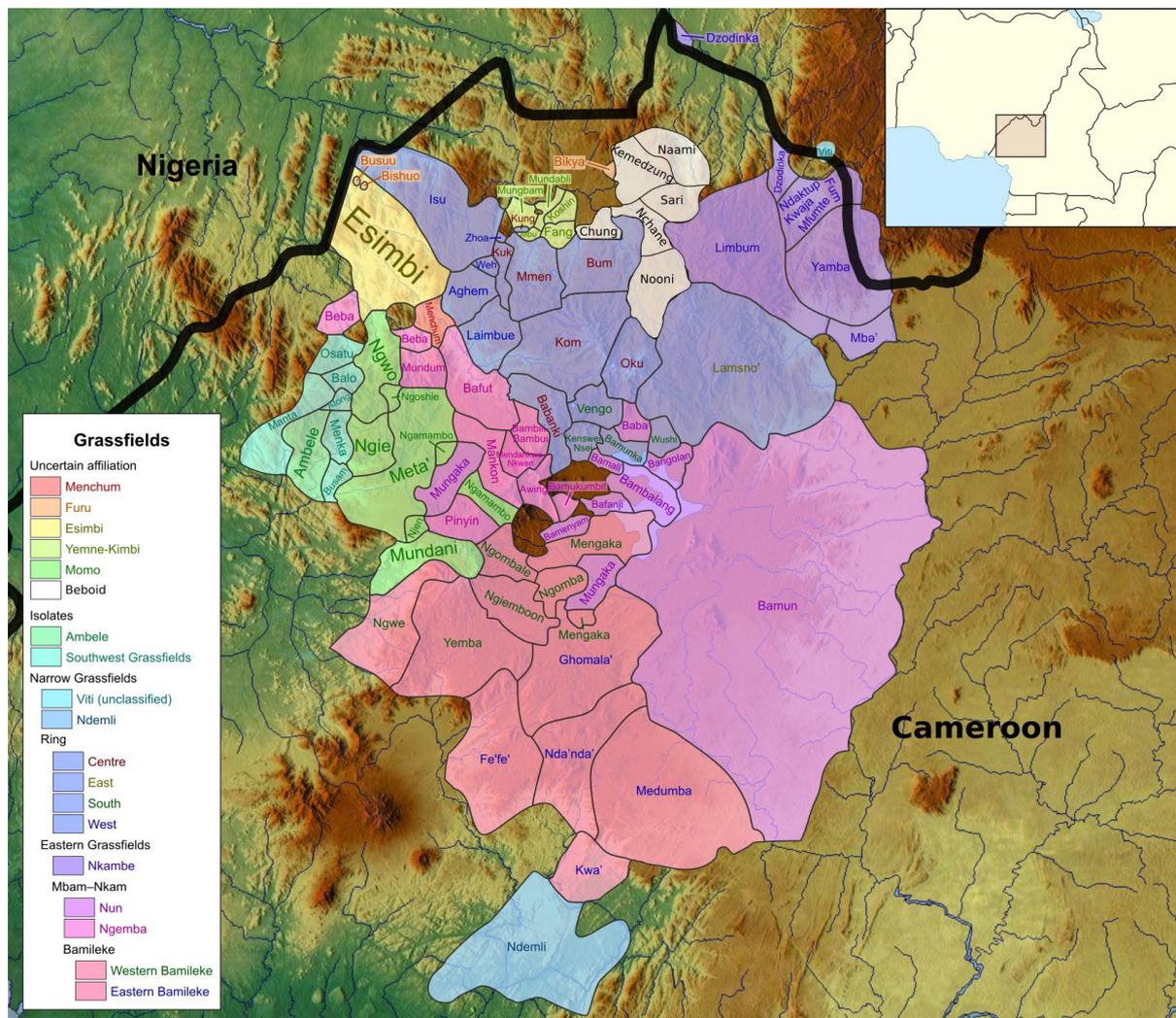
(9/10) ‘rope’, **kə-fúk* (7/8) ‘farm’³. Another type of isomorph is constituted by the gender affiliation of various nominal concepts, e.g., **ú-lúə* ‘bridge’ in (3/13 vs. 3/6a).

	CR	WR
class 4	-	+
class 10 vs. 13	+	-
morphologized aspect focus	-	+
gender of * <i>ú-lúə</i> ‘bridge’	3/13	3/6a
‘blood’	* <i>m-lám</i> (6a)	* <i>tə-kâŋ</i> (13)
‘pus’	* <i>m-fú(k)</i> (6a)	* <i>u-dzúđ</i> (3)
‘ashes’	* <i>kə-bvól</i> (7)	* <i>u-dzîm</i> (3)
‘rope’	* <i>fîi</i> / * <i>kòl</i> (9/10)	* <i>kə-bá?</i> (7/8)
‘farm’	* <i>kə-fúk</i> (7/8)	* <i>ú-súm</i> (3/4)

Table 1: CR vs. WR isomorphs and isoglosses.

Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2023) identify seven CR languages, namely, Babanki, Bum, Kom, Kuk, Kung, Men, and Oku. The following map shows the languages of the Grassfields region discussed in this study.

³ Other WR/CR isoglosses include ‘all’: WR *dzèm* (+Babanki) vs. CR *kím*; ‘road, path’: WR *dzid* (+Babanki, Kom, Oku) vs. CR *únóm* (Bum, Kuk, Kung, Men); ‘salt’: WR *ńtsò?* vs. CR *ńgbáj* (+Bu).



Map 1: Grassfields Bantu languages (Wikimedia Commons 2022) modified by Pierpaolo Di Carlo

While the delineation of CR is far from established and complete, owing to serious lacunae in documentation, various trends of divergence crystallize, setting apart individual CR languages from the common CR core.⁴ Thus, Babanki, on the Southern fringes of CR, seems to have acquired various Eastern Grassfields Bantu (EGB) features such as general low tone on noun class prefixes, reallocation of several nouns from gender 9/10 to 1/2, consecutive multiverb constructions for the expression of path notions rather than asymmetrical verb serialisation which seems to be standard in CR otherwise.

⁴ See Watters (2003), Tatang (2016), Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, & Bank (2022), Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2023) for divergent classifications of Central and West Ring languages.

Kuk and Kung on the Northwestern fringes of CR, diverge from the CR standard by their complete merger of plural class 13 (*tə) with plural class 10 (*sə). This can be seen as an instance of partial approximation towards WR standards in that the contrast of plural classes 10 and 13 is given up, as in WR. Yet, distinction to WR is maintained by the fact that the merger generalizes class 10 *sə which is precisely the form that WR has given up in favour of class 13 *tə. Additionally, an affinity of both Kuk and Kung to WR can be seen in the gender assignment of various nouns that pattern with WR rather than with CR, e.g., ‘tail’ (3/4 or 3/6 vs. CR 3/13 or 3/6), ‘compound’ (7/8) vs. CR 7/6a~13), ‘neck’ (3/4~6a vs. CR 3/6~5/13). As a standing challenge, the task remains to sort out the precise motivations that underlie these divergent developments, i.e., to which extent they have been inspired by the felt need to accommodate to a target external to CR in the first line, i.e., WR (Aghem, Zoa) in the case of Kuk and Kung or Bafut in the case of Babanki – or to which extent the ultimate driving force could rather have been the desire to dissociate from CR neighbours and increase linguistic distinctions as symbolic consolidation of sociopolitical independence.

In this study we explore these divergences under the perspective of their potential direction and underlying motivation. While some of the linguistic facts may be explained by convergence to external targets, others appear to be a manifestation of naboopposition (Larsen 1917). We begin in §2 with Babanki which shares various features with Eastern Grassfields Bantu (EGB) languages, and proceed in §3 to Bum whose causative extension shows a remarkable deviation from CR standards in shifting proto *s to *h*. In §4, the devoicing of initial Proto-Ring stops and affricates in root initial position in Men, Kuk and Kung is discussed, followed by the merger of plural Classes 10 and 13 in Kuk and Kung in §5. In §6, the affinity of both Kuk and Kung to WR is evoked by examining the gender assignment of various nouns that pattern with WR rather than with CR. The difficulty to sort out the precise motivations that underlie these divergent developments is pointed out in the conclusion in §7.

2. Babanki

Babanki deviates from general CR by what looks like the acquisition of EGB features, as compiled in Table 2. These features are: general low tone in noun class prefixes (section 2.1), re-allocation of a few nouns from gender 9/10 to 1/2 (section 2.2), consecutive multiverb constructions via a homorganic nasal prefix N- for the expression of path notions rather than asymmetrical verb serialisation (ASVC) which seems to be standard in CR otherwise (section 2.3).

	CR	Babanki	EGB
NPx tone	H	L	L
gender of loanwords	9/10	1/2	1/2
same subject clause linkage	ASVC	N-	N-

Table 2: Babanki deviation from CR and alignment with EG

2.1. Low tone in noun class prefixes

As in the Ring and Momo sub-groups of Western Grassfields Bantu generally, noun class prefixes (NPx) in Central Ring languages have high tone underlyingly. However, Babanki singles itself out as the only Ring language that rather has L tone NPx, matching with EGB, as well as Narrow Bantu where NPx have low tone (Akumbu and Hyman 2017: 1–2). As shown in the following examples involving the noun ‘fufu’, the high tone in Oku *ká-bân* (1a) and Kom *á-báyn* (1b) contrasts with the low tone in Babanki cognate *kà-báyn* (1c).

(1) NPx in selected Ring languages

a. Oku

má nà kùm ká-bân
 1SG P2 touch 7-fufu
 ‘I touched fufu.’

b. Kom

má làe kùm á-báyn
 1SG P2 touch 7-fufu
 ‘I touched fufu.’

c. Babanki

mà t̀ k̀m̀ k̀-̀b̀á̀ỳn
 1SG P2 touch 7-fufu
 ‘I touched fufu.’

In isolation, the high tone in these noun prefixes is generally lowered to mid, as is shown in Table 3, while the low tone in Babanki noun prefixes is maintained as such without being affected by any further lowering.

Tone	Babanki	Bum	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Men	Oku	Gloss
H ₁ (H _H)	̀-̀fẁín	̀-̀fẁén	̀-̀fẁén	k̀-̀f̀á̀í	k̀-̀fẁéí	̀-̀fẁé(i)n	̀-̀f̀ín	‘leg (tibia)’
H ₂ (HL _L)	̀-̀kẁá̀ŋ	̀-̀kp̀éŋ	̀-̀kẁé	k̀-̀kp̀ái	k̀-̀kp̀ái	̀-̀k̀ó(i)n	̀-̀k̀í	‘arm’
L ₁ (L _H)	̀-̀ỳóŋ	̀-̀ẁóŋ	̀-̀ỳóŋ	̀-̀ẁóŋ	̀-̀ỳóŋ	̀-̀ỳóŋ	̀-̀ỳóŋ	‘spear’
L ₂ (LL _L)	f̀-̀k̀ò?	f̀-̀k̀ák	f̀-̀k̀á?	f̀-̀k̀á?	f̀-̀k̀á?	f̀-̀k̀á?	f̀-̀k̀ák	‘tree’

Table 3: NPx tone of nouns in isolation

Now it might be argued that this general CR trend of NPx lowering of H to M produces a situation which is half-way towards the Babanki L tone. So, there may not be much of a difference, since it could be assumed that Babanki simply presents the final stage in a development with the rest of CR lagging behind by one step. This scenario, however, will not explain another crucial difference between CR and Babanki here, which is obvious in nouns such as ‘tree’. In all of CR, it bears a HL falling contour tone in the root, while in Babanki it is low throughout. This actually reveals that in all of CR the original high tone of the NPx must have spread to the nominal root to produce a falling tone with the lexical low tone of ‘tree’ before its lowering to mid (Hyman 2005: 318). This is illustrated by the Oku (2a) and Kom (2b) examples where spreading of the NPx H creates HL falling contour tones on underlying L roots in both languages. Having spread to the root tone, the NPx H is then realized as M in isolation. In Babanki (2c), however, the absence of such a falling tone attests to the fact that there was no prior high tone in the NPx which could have affected the lexical low tone.

(2) NPx high tone spread and NPx lowering in Kom and Oku vs. Babanki

- a. Oku
 /fé-kàk/ → fékâk → fēkâk ‘tree’
- b. Kom
 /fĕ-kàʔ/ → fĕkâʔ → fĕkâʔ ‘tree’
- c. Babanki
 /f̃-kàʔ/ → f̃kàʔ ‘tree’

The low-toned Babanki NPx is also subject to modification, i.e., it is raised to M under high tone influence, i.e., in constructions where it appears between two H tones (Akumbu 2019) as a result of partial assimilation, as indicated by underlining in (3b). The last example in (3b) shows that the NPx tone is not raised to M if not directly followed by a H tone.

(3) Babanki prefix tone

- a. *kàkím* ‘crab’
vàtsóŋ ‘thieves’
vàlàmə ‘brothers’
- b. *kàkím ká v̄àtsóŋ* ‘crab of thieves’
vàtsóŋ vá k̄àkím ‘thieves of crab’
kàkím ká v̄àlàmə ‘crab of brothers’

The Babanki low NPx reflects the original situation, as reconstructed for Proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1967). The high NPx of the other CR languages appears to have been acquired from the augment which is reconstructed with a high tone (Hyman 2005). Following Hyman’s argument, we assume that the H tone in the NPx of CR languages is a result of the augment H tone spreading to the NPx and ousting its L tone in most contexts before the augment was finally deleted, following the processes formulated in (4) and spelt out explicitly with an Oku example.⁵

⁵ The NPx L is retained in N2 position as complement of various prepositions or as modifier in associative constructions, e.g., Oku *i-ŋŋ á kè-kàs*. This L prefix on N2 nouns ‘is characteristic of all or most of Western Grassfields Bantu’ (Hyman 1979: 36).

(4) CR derivation of H tone prefixes from augment H

a. Augment high tone spreading:

$/\acute{V}-(C)\grave{V}-R/ \rightarrow \acute{V}-(C)\acute{V}-R$, e.g., Oku $/\acute{V}-f\grave{e}-y\grave{a}m/ \rightarrow \acute{V}-f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m$
AUG-NP_x-R

b. delinking of NP_x low tone

$\acute{V}-(C)\acute{V}-R \rightarrow \acute{V}-(C)\acute{V}-R$, e.g., Oku $\acute{V}-f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m \rightarrow \acute{V}-f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m$
AUG-NP_x-R

c. deletion of augment

$\acute{V}-(C)\acute{V}-R$, e.g., Oku $\acute{V}-f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m \rightarrow f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m$
AUG-NP_x-R

Regarding the retention of the low NP_x in Babanki, one could argue that the high tone augment in Pre-Babanki was simply deleted before it could spread its tone to the NP_x, but it remains unclear why only Babanki would have been affected by this process. We suggest that high tone spreading (HTS) from the augment to the NP_x must have occurred in CR after the split of Babanki from the rest of CR and its association with Bafut, an EGB community (Yenshu Vubo 2001). Pre-Babanki, on its part, would then have retained the low NP_x under pre-Bafut influence, deleting the H tone augment without any trace.⁶ Babanki's preference to keep low NP_x like their current neighbour could be justified by the fact that "all noun prefixes have a low tone" in Eastern Grassfields languages (Watters 2003: 240), e.g., Bafut (Mfonyam 1989, Tamanji 2009). The low NP_x might also result from a high influx of Bafut L1 speakers imperfectly learning Pre-Babanki. Both situations, nevertheless, suggest some type of contact induced convergence. On the other hand, a hypothesis of divergence is also possible, in the event that the Babanki were deliberately attempting to dissociate from Kom or the rest of Pre-CR. We currently do not have evidence to determine whether the Babanki low tone NP_x was motivated by convergence or divergence. Such evidence might be hidden in the undocumented migration history and socio-political relations as they happened before the 17th century between various Grassfields communities.

⁶ If loss of the high tone augment had been inspired by contact to EGB, it must have occurred before the high tone spreading to the NP_x. If it had been later, it would be hard to account for the absence of high tone effects in low tone roots such as Babanki $\grave{a}-y\grave{a}m$ in (2).

2.2. Re-allocation of gender 9/10 nouns to gender 1/2

Babanki deviates from the rest of CR by re-allocating various nouns that refer to borrowed nouns and some miscellaneous items to gender 1/2 instead of 9/10, as is common in the rest of CR and WR, exemplified in Table 4.

Language	'orange'	'pot'	'potato'	class
Proto-EG	*?	*tòn`	*?	1
Bafut	<i>lâmsì</i>	<i>àntò</i>	<i>àndòηà</i>	1
Mankon	<i>lâmsì</i>	<i>àntò</i>	?	1
Babanki	<i>lâmsà</i>	<i>ntòn</i>	<i>ndòη</i>	1
Kom	<i>lâmbâs</i>	<i>ntòin</i>	<i>ndòη</i>	9
Oku	?	<i>ntòn</i>	<i>ndòη</i>	9
Men	<i>lâmâs</i>	<i>tòin</i>	<i>ndòη</i>	9
Aghem	<i>lâmá</i>	<i>tè</i>	<i>ndóη</i>	9

Table 4: Cognates of CR class 9 nouns assigned to Babanki class 1

In this regard, Babanki aligns with neighbouring EGB languages, e.g., Bafut which does not only show the same tendency to assign borrowings to 1/2 (Mfonyam 1989: 124, Tamanji 2009), but also often matches on the level of the individual concepts assigned to 1/2, independently of cognacy of the lexical root, e.g., RAT, HORSE, FLOWER, TABLE, LOCK, ORANGE, RADIO, MOON/MONTH. Two other items also assigned to 1/2 in Bafut, i.e., 'moon, month' and 'potato', have been dragged along and reassigned to 1/2 for the same reason. A comparison of the relevant nouns in Bafut and Babanki is provided in Table 5, where Babanki non-cognate items are given in square brackets.

	Bafut		Babanki	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
orange	<i>lâmsì</i>	<i>bìlâmsì</i>	<i>lâmsà</i>	<i>vèlâmsà</i>
radio	<i>rēdyō</i>	<i>bìrēdyō</i>	<i>lédyò</i>	<i>vèlédyò</i>
table	<i>tábèrì</i>	<i>bìtábèrì</i>	<i>tábàlè</i>	<i>vètábàlè</i>
lock	<i>lógì</i>	<i>bìlógì</i>	<i>lók</i>	<i>vèlók</i>
flower	<i>fláwà</i>	<i>bìfláwà</i>	<i>fàláwà</i>	<i>vèfàláwà</i>
pig	<i>kúnàm</i>	<i>bìkúnàm</i>	<i>ηkúnàm</i>	<i>vèηkúnàm</i>
rat, mouse	<i>fórē</i>	<i>bìfórē</i>	<i>[tʃòkà?]</i>	<i>[vètʃòkà?]</i>
cock	<i>àηkàgì</i>	<i>bàηkàgì</i>	<i>ηkà?</i>	<i>vèηkà?</i>

horse	<i>lɔŋá</i>	<i>bìlɔŋá</i>	<i>lən</i>	<i>vələn</i>
cat	<i>búfí</i>	<i>bìbúfí</i>	<i>bùfí</i>	<i>və̀bùfí</i>
co-wife	<i>fúʔù</i>	<i>bífúʔù</i>	<i>fɪf</i>	<i>və̀fɪf</i>
friend	<i>ɲfúkàʔà</i>	<i>bìfúbíkàʔà</i>	<i>[wùndɔŋ]</i>	<i>[və̀ndɔŋ]</i>
witch	<i>sɔ̀rɛ, ndì</i>	<i>bìsɔ̀rɛ, bìlì</i>	<i>[zɛ]</i>	<i>[və̀zɛ]</i>
moon, month	<i>sàŋ</i>	<i>bìsàŋ</i>	<i>sàŋ</i>	<i>vəsàŋ</i>
pot	<i>àntɔ̀</i>	<i>bàntɔ̀</i>	<i>ntɔ̀yn</i>	<i>və̀ntɔ̀yn</i>
potato	<i>àndɔ̀ŋà</i>	<i>bàndɔ̀ŋà</i>	<i>ndɔ̀ŋ</i>	<i>və̀ndɔ̀ŋ</i>

Table 5: Bafut and Babanki nouns in Gender 1/2

Table 5 shows that in many cases it is not the forms themselves that have been borrowed from Bafut to Babanki, but rather the noun class assignment of a substantial number of nominal concepts has been streamlined with Bafut, independently of their formal expression. This is evident from (a) the non-cognate forms marked by square bracketing, i.e., ‘rat, mouse’, ‘friend’, and ‘witch’, and (b) cognate forms that show a considerable degree of formal divergence, e.g., Babanki *ntɔ̀yn* ‘pot’ (vs. Bafut *àntɔ̀*) or *ɲkàʔ* ‘cock’ (vs. Bafut *àŋkàgì*) (Akumbu and Wills 2022). Notice, for instance, that the Bafut item for ‘cock’ retains a root-final velar stop that has been shifted to glottal stop in most of CR including Babanki. Also, the Bafut item for ‘pot’ seems to have compensated the loss of the root final nasal by vowel lengthening, and installed an extra vowel, which might have been a prefix historically.⁷

This suggests that the agents of change may have been bilingual Babanki speakers orienting towards the Bafut model - either with an aspiration to align with their Bafut allies or else to dissociate from their CR neighbours – or even both.⁸

2.3 Consecutive multiverb constructions

Babanki also deviates from the CR standard in its expression of verb linkage in various types of same subject multiverb constructions, aligning with EGB languages by using a homorganic nasal prefix N- for verbal consecutivisation. In contrast, all the other

⁷ The loss of the root final nasal and compensatory lengthening analysis needs further checking especially because Bafut coda consonants are only nasals.

⁸ While specific alliances are not discussed in this study, it helps to point out that some historical accounts of migration in the Grassfields area report wars between Babanki vs. Oku, Babanki vs. Kom but none between Babanki and Bafut (Chilver & Kaberry 1967, Geary 1980, Yenshu Vubo 2001), suggesting greater political ties between these two.

- c. Path/vector: *fāsá* ‘take out’ (< *fā* ‘exit’), *kɔ́ʔsá* ‘lift’ (< *kɔ́ʔ* ‘ascend’)
wǔá ^h*kúw* *sàì* *fāsá* *kɔ́ʔsá* *mē* *ā* *búʔ* *kə*
 SM.1:P0.FOC catch pull take.out lift 1SG at hole(s) OF.7
 ‘S/he has dragged me out of the hole.’
- d. Path/vector: *kɔ́ʔ* ‘ascend, climb; up’
bɔ́ŋ ^h*kɔ́ʔ* *mwàʔlè* *k-ê*
 pick.IMP ascend.IMP book 7-D2
 ‘Pick up that book!’

(7) Men: asymmetrical SVCs with various co-verbs

- a. Completion with co-verb *mìsè* ‘finish’
è *vá* *fìàʔ* *mìsè*
 3SG 1.PF work finish
 ‘S/he has finished work.’
- b. Detrimental effect with *màʔà* ‘throw away’
è *vá* ^h*tsúintê* *máʔà* *kàʔ* *m-ê*
 3SG 1.PF chop.PF throw trees 6a-D3
 ‘S/he has cut down and thrown away those trees.’
- c. Deictic orientation: centripetal *pèin* ‘come’
má *kúlâ* *pèin*
 1SG.PF return.from.farm come
 ‘I have come back from the farm.’
- d. Path/vector: *ndzísé* ‘insert’ < *ndzì* ‘enter’
má *ndàm* *ndzísé* *féin*
 1SG.PF put insert bag
 ‘I have put it into the bag.’

For the expression of the same functions, i.e., path/vector in motion events (8), results (9) and comparison (10), Babanki refrains from using serialization, but rather resorts to a consecutivising construction formed by prefixing all non-initial verbs with a homorganic nasal linker N-. In this Babanki aligns with Bafut (and other EGB languages) where the same nasal prefix is used for consecutivising function. Historically, two interpretations are possible: either Babanki acquired the pattern from Bafut, or all of CR lost an erstwhile consecutivising homorganic nasal prefix and only Babanki retained it – under EGB (i.e., Bafut) influence. The underlying motivation might have been either a desire by the Babanki to accommodate to Bafut standards or to distinguish themselves from CR neighbours, an issue that could best be retraced from historical records which we lack.

(8) Locatives/Directional constructions

a. Babanki

nám sà-tsèm sá yì kú? n-dzú á ̄-kàŋ
 animal 10-all SM P1 climb N-go to 5-heaven
 ‘All the animals went (up) to heaven.’

b. Bafut (Tamanji 2009: 203)

nàà dzá tsìm dzí kóʔó ŋ-yèê á àbùrì
 animals the all SM climb N-go to heaven
 ‘All the animals went (up) to heaven.’

(9) Resultative constructions

a. Babanki

wùbúm yì tèm nyàm n-zwí
 hunter P1 shoot 9-animal N-kill
 ‘The hunter shot the animal dead.’

b. Bafut (Tamanji 2009: 204)

ŋùbòò w-á à kì túmâ n-àà j-á n-zwítâ
 hunter 1-the SM P2 shoot 9-animal 9-the N-kill
 ‘The hunter shot the animal dead.’

(10) Comparative constructions

a. Babanki

tòlkyí yì n-ŋíŋ n-tfó ŋgó
 1.tortoise P2 N-run N-surpass 1.deer
 ‘Tortoise ran faster than Deer.’

b. Bafut (Tamanji 2009: 205)

kwímánkòʔò à lé ŋ-kxǎ n-tfǎ n-gyâ
 1.tortoise SM P3 N-run N-surpass 1-deer
 ‘Tortoise ran faster than Deer.’

Tracing the reasons for this influence requires going back to historical events approximately three to four hundred years back when the Babanki and Bafut are believed to have been related or a single Tikari group living in the Ndop plain (Chilver & Kaberry 1967: 19, Yenshu Vubo 2001, Ngwa 2022: 623). According to Bafut legend, they fled from Fulani warriors in Foumban and lived in the Ndop plain for many years. Ritzenthaler (1967: 11–12) reports that “when their Fon died, three of his stronger sons wrangled fiercely over which should succeed him. The argument seemed about to flare into open battle until one son suggested that they divide the tribe and that two of them move elsewhere to establish new villages”. The group was divided into four parts so as to give two parts to the son who made the brilliant suggestion and one part to each of the other sons. One of the sons with one part decided to stay in Ndop and form present day Bamunka while the other moved to form present day Bafut. The one with two parts moved to form present day Babanki. It is not known with certainty whether the Babanki and Bafut ever lived together again or as direct neighbours thereafter but it is known that to get to their present sites, each group went through diverse migratory routes and fought many wars along the way.

3. Bum

Another CR puzzle pertains to the isolated innovation of the phoneme /h/ in Bum. Remarkably, the innovation of /h/ is restricted to the causative extension *-hi* as reflex of the the Proto-Ring **-sV* suffix that retains its sibilant in all other CR languages, as shown in (11).

(11) Causative suffix *-hi* (Bum) vs. *-sV* (rest of CR)

- a. *mwɔ̀m-hì* ‘try’, but Kom *mwɔ̀m-sì*, Oku *mwɔ̀m-sè*, Mbizinaku *mwɔ̀m-sà*, Babanki *mwɔ̀m-sà*, Men *mwɔ̀m-sè*
- b. *līm-hì* ‘extinguish’, but Kom *līm-sí*, Oku *līm-sê*, Mbizinaku *lām-sâ*, Babanki *lém-sá*, Men *ndīm-sé*, Babungo *nú-sá*
- c. *yūy-hì* ‘perspire’ but Kom *yōʔ-sí*, Oku *zvōk-s-în*, Mbizinaku *zvōk-sâ*, Babanki *zúʔ-sá*, Men *zúʔ-sé*

The restriction of Bum glottal spirantisation to the causative suffix can be inferred from the retention of prior *s in lexical roots (12) as well as in other affixes, e.g., the adnominal prefix *sə-* for class 10 (13) and its corresponding enclitic =*su* (14).

(12) Bum retention of *s in root-initial/final position

- a. *ī-sê* ‘eye’, cf. Kom *ī-sít*, Men *ē-sí*, Oku *ī-fíê*, Mbizinaku *ī-fít*, Babanki *à-fí*
- b. *ū-wús* ‘fire’, cf. Men *ē-wūs*, Mbizinaku *ā-vás*

(13) Bum retention of *s in the nominal prefix of class 10 *sə-*⁹

- a. *sā-bvú* ‘goats’, cf. Kuk *sā-byí*, Kung *sā-bā*, Men *sē-pfí*
- b. *sà-kòl* ‘ropes’, cf. Kung *sà-kòl*, Men *sē-kwìl*

(14) Bum retention of *s in the nominal enclitic of class 10 =*su*

- a. *nám* = [#]*sú* ‘animals’, cf. Babanki *nám* = [#]*sá*, Kom *nám* = *sē*, Oku *nám* = *sā*
- b. *ndzàm* = [#]*sú* ‘axes’, cf. Babanki *ndzàm* = *sá*, Kom *ndzàm* = *sè*, Oku *ndzàm* = *sá*

Bum may have acquired the glottal fricative from South Ring languages such as Bamessing (DeVries 2008), Bamunka (Ngeloh Takwe 2002), or Yemne-Kimbi languages (Good et al. 2011). Since Bum and South Ring do not have any geographical contact (as can be seen in Map 1), unless it happened during the migratory period or through trade connections, the most likely source would be a geographically closer Yemne-Kimbi language. Support for this possibility comes from the word for buttock, i.e., Bum *isâh* and Buu (a Yemne-Kimbi language) *ésâh* which both have the glottal fricative in final position. Whether such cognates were simply borrowed or not, the underlying motivation might have been either a Bum strategy to align with the speech of some Yemne-Kimbi allies or to create a distinction with CR neighbours. Again, it

⁹ Bum class 10 aligns with all other classes in having an adnominal prefix, i.e., *sə-*. However, as in Kung (Kießling 2019), all nouns seem to provide the option of replacing their prefixes by noun class enclitics (not suffixes) under specific syntactic and pragmatic conditions. The details of these conditions remain to be clarified for Bum and other Ring languages in which this NPx vs. enclitic variation is found.

remains uncertain which of these options could have been responsible for the current situation.

4. Men, Kung and Kuk devoicing of plosives and affricates

Men, Kuk and Kung break away from CR by devoicing of initial Proto-Ring stops and affricates in root initial position: **b, *bv, *d, *dz, *g, *gb* > *p, pf, t, ts, k, kp*, as summarized in Table 6 and exemplified in Tables 7–9. Devoicing of labials is restricted to Men, as seen in Table 7. Devoicing of the dental series **d* and **dz* is illustrated in Tables 8-9. West Ring Bu (sometimes) seems to pattern with Kuk and Kung in devoicing non-labial stops and affricates.

PGr	<i>*b</i>	<i>*d</i>	<i>*dz</i>	<i>*g</i>	<i>*gb</i>
PB	<i>*b</i>	<i>*d</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*g</i>	<i>*?</i>
Babanki	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dz~dʒ</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>?</i>
Bum	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dʒ</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>?</i>
Kom	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dʒ</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>?</i>
Kuk	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ts (~tʃ)</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>kp</i>
Kung	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ts (~tʃ)</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>?</i>
Men	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ts (~tʃ)</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>kp</i>
Oku	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dʒ</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>?</i>
Aghem	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dz</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gb</i>
Bu	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ts</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>?</i>
Isu	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dz</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gb</i>
Weh	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dz</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gb</i>
Zoa	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dz</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gb</i>

Table 6: Central / West Ring devoicing of initial stops

Language	‘fufu’	‘thigh’	‘hole, pit’	‘red’	‘bad’	‘dance’	‘tired’	
PB	<i>*b</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*-bèdè</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*-bèŋg</i>	<i>*-bíp</i>	<i>*-bód</i>	
PGr	<i>*b</i>	<i>*-bán`</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*-bùk`</i>	<i>*-bàŋ</i>	<i>*-bíp</i>	<i>*-bód-ɪ</i>	
Aghem	<i>b</i>	<i>kíbé</i>	<i>kíbí</i>	<i>kíboʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>bó</i>	<i>bín</i>	<i>búo</i>
Bu	<i>b</i>	<i>kábái</i>	<i>kúbí</i>	<i>kábóʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>bá</i>	<i>bái</i>	<i>bów</i>
Isu	<i>b</i>	<i>kábá</i>	<i>kábí</i>	<i>kábwoʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>béb</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>bwí</i>
Kuk	<i>b</i>	<i>kābá</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>kābúʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>báb</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>búo</i>
Kung	<i>b</i>	<i>kābáe</i>	<i>kābê</i>	<i>kābúʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>báy</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>búo</i>

Men	<i>p</i>	<i>āpáin</i>	<i>āpî</i>	<i>āpû?</i>	<i>pàŋ</i>	<i>póf</i>	<i>péin</i>	<i>pó</i>
Babanki	<i>b</i>	<i>kàbáin</i>	<i>kàbî</i>	<i>kàbû?</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>byf</i>	<i>bén</i>	<i>bwá?</i>

Table 7: Men devoicing of *b

Language		‘long’	‘cry’	‘heavy’	‘get old’	‘sit’	‘cross’
PB	<i>*d</i>	<i>*dà, *dèepù</i>	<i>*-dìd</i>	<i>*-dìtù, *dìtò</i>	<i>*-nùnù</i>	<i>*-dìàd</i>	<i>*?</i>
PGr	<i>*d</i>	<i>*-dàb</i>	<i>*-ddìl</i>	<i>*-ddìd</i>	<i>*-dùn</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*?</i>
Aghem	<i>d</i>	<i>dà</i>	<i>dii</i>	<i>din</i>	<i>dwìn</i>	<i>dò?ò</i>	<i>dàŋ</i>
Bu	<i>t</i>	<i>tàh</i>	<i>tii</i>	<i>tì</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>tàŋ</i>
Isu	<i>d</i>	<i>dàb</i>	<i>dii</i>	<i>dld</i>	<i>dzùn</i>	<i>dò?ò</i>	<i>dàŋ</i>
Kuk	<i>t</i>	<i>tàb</i>	<i>tii</i>	<i>təkə</i>	<i>tìn</i>	<i>tà?l</i>	<i>tàŋ</i>
Kung	<i>t</i>	<i>tyàf</i>	<i>tì</i>	<i>tìl</i>	<i>tyìn</i>	<i>tè?è</i>	<i>?</i>
Men	<i>t</i>	<i>tyàf</i>	<i>tfi</i>	<i>tìl</i>	<i>tjìn</i>	<i>tà?ə</i>	<i>tyàŋ</i>
Babanki	<i>d</i>	<i>dyàf</i>	<i>dì</i>	<i>dì?</i>	<i>dwìn</i>	<i>[jɛ́?má]</i>	<i>dyàŋ</i>

Table 8: Men/Kuk/Kung (*Bu) devoicing of *d

Language		‘hunger’	‘back’	‘say, tell’	‘bunch’	‘voice’	‘path’	‘nice’
PB	<i>*j</i>	<i>*-jádà</i>	<i>*-jìmà</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*-júi</i>	<i>*-jìdà</i>	<i>*?</i>
PGr	<i>*j</i>	<i>*-jè(ŋ)</i>	<i>*-jìm</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*?</i>	<i>*-gì[l]`</i>	<i>*-jì[l]`</i>	<i>*bòŋ</i>
Aghem	<i>dz</i>	<i>dzìŋ</i>	<i>dzim</i>	<i>dzè</i>	<i>dzìyà</i>	<i>dzì</i>	<i>dzì</i>	<i>dzò</i>
Bu	<i>ts</i>	<i>tsəŋ</i>	<i>tsim</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>tsì</i>	<i>tsìy</i>	<i>tsò</i>
Isu	<i>dz</i>	<i>dzóŋ</i>	^u <i>dzím</i>	<i>dzài</i>	<i>dzì</i>	<i>dzì</i>	^u <i>dzád</i>	<i>dzwàb</i>
Kuk	<i>ts</i>	<i>tsìŋ</i>	<i>tsim</i>	<i>tsàa</i>	<i>tsò</i>	<i>tsə</i>	<i>[ùnóŋ]</i>	<i>tsòbà</i>
Kung	<i>tʃ</i>	<i>tʃàŋ</i>	<i>tʃlɛm</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>tsò(m)</i>	<i>kìə</i>	<i>[ùnóŋ]</i>	<i>tsòf</i>
Men	<i>tʃ</i>	<i>tʃáŋ</i>	<i>tsim</i>	<i>tsàin</i>	<i>tsè</i>	<i>kyì(ɣ)</i>	<i>[èndóŋ]</i>	<i>tsòf</i>
Babanki	<i>dʒ</i>	<i>dʒìŋ</i>	<i>dzəm</i>	<i>gà?</i>	<i>gə</i>	<i>gì</i>	<i>dʒì</i>	<i>[bòŋ]</i>

Table 9: Men/Kuk/Kung (*Bu) devoicing of *dz

Babanki *bòŋ* ‘be nice’ may present a PGr retention under influence of contact to EGB, whereas CR + WR have innovated **dzòb* throughout.

Instances of **g > k*, **gb > kp* (tables 10-11) are rare and patchy, probably due to the low frequency of **g* and **gb* in initial position.

Language	‘skin, hide’	‘grind’	‘fall’
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PB	*g	*-gòbò, *-gòbì	?	*-gù, *-bù
PGr	*g	*-gòb`	*-gòk	*-gùa
Aghem	g	gù	gùo	bvù
Bu	k	[tsàŋ]	kùa	[və̀]
Isu	g	dzóŋ	gùɔ	[bvə̀]
Kom	g	gví	gvà	[fé]
Kuk	?	?	[tsám]	[bà]
Kung	k	kù°	[tsám]	kù
Men	k	[pfĩ]	kùɔ	[pfò]
Oku	g	gùo	gùo	[fè]
Babanki	g	gwù	[bvù]	[fáŋ]

Table 10: Men/Kuk/Kung (*Bu) devoicing of *g

Language	'cut off, fell'	
PB	*g, *b	*?
PGr	*g	*?
Aghem	gb	gbə̀
Bu	?	?
Isu	gb	gbùw
Kom	gv	gvèl
Kuk	kp	kpà
Kung	?	?
Men	kp	kpè
Babanki	?	[bvàʔ]

Table 11: Men/Kuk/Kung (*Bu) devoicing of *gb

5. Merger of plural classes 10 and 13

Kuk and Kung on the Northwestern fringes of CR, diverge from the CR standard by their complete loss of plural class 13 (*tə̀) in favour of plural class 10 (*sə̀). This means that nominal concepts assigned to 10 in Kuk and Kung may either correspond to 10 in the rest of CR or to 13. This is schematically shown in Table 12 with the full nominal forms themselves given in Table 13 below. The nouns in the upper half of both tables above the division line are assigned to class 10 in CR and continue as such

in Kuk and Kung, whereas the nouns in the the lower half below the division line are assigned to class 13 in CR and continue in class 10 in Kuk and Kung.

Meaning	Central Ring	Kuk	Kung	West Ring
‘axes’	10	10	10	13
‘animals’	10	10	10	13
‘goats’	10	10	10	13
‘hoes’	10	10	10	13
‘buffaloes’	10	10	10	13
‘cows’	10	10	10	13
‘rashes, scabies’	10	10	10	13
‘soot (under pot)’	10	10	10	13
‘locusts’	10	10	10	13
‘pots’	10	10	10	13
‘maize plants’	10	[6]	10	[6]
‘mountains’	13	10	10	13
‘feathers’	13	10	10	13
‘charcoals’	13	10	10	13
‘hearthstones’	13	10	[10]	13
‘he-goats’	13	10	10	13
‘wings’	13	10	10	13
‘blood’	[%]	10	10	13
‘chiefs’	13	10	?	13
‘cutlasses’	13	10	10	[%]
‘leaves’	13	10	10	13
‘roots’	13	10	10	13
‘lakes’	13	10	10	13
‘places’	13	10	10	13

% non-cognate root

Table 12: Assignment of nominal concepts to class 10 vs. 13 in Central / West Ring

Meaning	Central Ring	Kuk	Kung	West Ring
‘axes’	<i>sē-ndzàm (Men)</i>	<i>sà-ndzàm</i>	<i>sā-fú</i>	<i>tí-ndzâm (Agh)</i>
‘animals’	<i>sē-nâm (Men)</i>	<i>sā-nâm</i>	<i>sā-nâm</i>	<i>tá-nâm (Isu)</i>
‘goats’	<i>byí^u-sá (Bab)</i>	<i>sā-byí</i>	<i>sā-bā</i>	<i>tá-byí (Isu)</i>
‘hoes’	<i>sē-fíy (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fíy</i>	<i>sā-fā</i>	<i>tí-fú (Agh)</i>
‘buffaloes’	<i>sē-fūy (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fúy</i>	<i>sà-fùy°</i>	<i>tá-fóy (Isu)</i>
‘cows’	<i>mbòy-sì (Kom)</i>	<i>sà-mbòl?</i>	<i>sā-mbòy</i>	<i>tà-mbòy (Isu)</i>
‘rashes, scabies’	<i>sē-kwàs (Men)</i>	<i>sà-kpāl</i>	<i>sà-kpäs</i>	<i>[tì-kpìy (Agh)]</i>
‘soot (under pot)’	<i>sē-lā? (Men)</i>	<i>sà-lì?</i>	<i>sà-lā?</i>	<i>tá-lák (Isu)</i>
‘locusts’	<i>sē-píy (Men)</i>	<i>sā-bāi</i>	<i>sā-bāi</i>	<i>tí-bé (Agh)</i>

‘pots’	<i>ntòn-sà (Oku)</i>	<i>sà-tǝ</i>	<i>sà-tǝe</i>	<i>tà-ntǝ (Zoa)</i>
‘maize plants’	<i>sē-sǎf (Men)</i>	<i>[ā-sǎb]</i>	<i>sà-sǎf</i>	<i>[à-sǝ (Agh)]</i>
‘mountains’	<i>tē-kwá?à (Men)</i>	<i>sà-ŋmgbà?</i>	<i>sà-ŋgbà?</i>	<i>tà-ká?à (Isu)</i>
‘feathers’	<i>tí-vǐl (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-vǎ</i>	<i>sā-wúlà</i>	<i>tá-wǎt (Zoa)</i>
‘charcoals’	<i>tē-k’í (Men)</i>	<i>sā-kéi</i>	<i>sā-kía</i>	<i>tá-kái (Isu)</i>
‘hearthstones’	<i>tē-tsís (Men)</i>	<i>sā-tsúl</i>	<i>[sà-tsùŋǎ]</i>	<i>tá-tsuát (Zoa)</i>
‘he-goats’	<i>tē-fǎf (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fǎb</i>	<i>sā-fǎf</i>	<i>tá-fǎb (Weh)</i>
‘wings’	<i>tēy-yáa (Oku)</i>	<i>sā-yá?lǎ</i>	<i>sā-yéé</i>	<i>tí-y(w)ǝ (Agh)</i>
‘blood’	<i>[mí-lúnj (Kom)]</i>	<i>sā-kâŋ</i>	<i>sá-kâŋ</i>	<i>tá-kâŋ (Isu)</i>
‘chiefs’	<i>tà-fǝyn (Bab)</i>	<i>sà-fǝ</i>	<i>sā-fǝ</i>	<i>tà-fǝ (Zoa)</i>
‘cutlasses’	<i>tí-fô (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-fǝta</i>	<i>sā-fé</i>	<i>[ú-kûm (Weh)]</i>
‘leaves’	<i>tà-fú (Bab)</i>	<i>sā-fúw</i>	<i>sā-fú</i>	<i>tí-fú^u (Agh)</i>
‘roots’	<i>tī-yáŋ (Bum)</i>	<i>sā-yáŋ</i>	<i>sā-yáŋ</i>	<i>tá-yá^uŋá (Isu)</i>
‘lakes’	<i>tī-lúe (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-ní</i>	<i>sā-ní</i>	<i>tí-ní (Agh)</i>
‘places’	<i>tā-lúk (Bum)</i>	<i>sā-lú?</i>	<i>sā-lú?</i>	<i>tá-l^u? (Isu)</i>

Table 13: Class 10 vs. 13 in Central / West Ring

This neutralisation in Kuk and Kung can be seen as an instance of partial approximation towards WR standards in that the contrast of plural classes 10 and 13 is given up, as in WR. Yet, a clear distinction to WR is maintained by the fact that the merger in Kuk and Kung generalizes class 10 *sǎ which is precisely the form that WR has given up in favour of class 13 *tǎ, as seen in the last column of Tables 12-13.

6. Gender assignment in Kuk/Kung

Additionally, an affinity of both Kuk and Kung to WR can be seen in the gender assignment of various nouns that pattern with WR rather than with CR, e.g., ‘tail’ (3/4 or 3/6 vs. CR 3/13 or 3/6), ‘compound’ (7/8) vs. CR 7/6a~13), ‘neck’ (3/4~6a vs. CR 3/6~5/13), as indicated in Table 14 where matching gender affiliation is highlighted by absence of greying.

	Language	‘hand’	‘foot’	‘arm’	‘leg’	‘thigh’	‘tail’	‘neck’	‘compound’	
West Ring	Aghem	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/4	3/4	3/4	7/8	
	Bu	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/4	3/6a	3/6a	7/8	
	Isu	7/6	7/6	7/4	3/4	7/8	3/4	3/6a	7/8	
	Weh	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/4	3/4	3/6a	7/8	
	Zoa	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/8	3/6a	3/6a	7/8	
C	e	= Kuk	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/4	3/6a	3/4	7/8

Kung	7/6	7/6	7/4	7/4	7/4	3/4~6a	3/4~6a	7/8
Men	7/6	7/6	7/13	7/13	7/13	3/13	5/13	7/8
Bum	7/8	7/8	3/6	3/6	?	3/13	3/13	7/13
Kom	7/8	7/8	3/6	3/6	7/8	3/6	3/6	7/6a
Oku	7/6	7/6	3/4	3/4	7/8	3/13	[7/8]	7/8
Babanki	7/6	7/6	?5/6	3/6	7/8	3/13	3/13	7/6a

Table 14: Kuk/Kung (and Men) affinity to WR in gender assignment

7. Conclusion

It has been shown in this study that Babanki shares at least two features with Bafut: Noun class prefixes have L tone in both languages and Babanki re-allocates various lexical items that refer to borrowed nouns and some miscellaneous words to gender 1/2 instead of 9/10, as is common in the rest of CR and WR. Furthermore, Bum's remarkable deviation from CR standards in shifting proto causative extension *s to *h* has been examined. In addition, the devoicing of Proto-Ring stops and affricates in root initial position in Men, Kuk and Kung, as well as the merger of plural classes 10 and 13 in Kuk and Kung have been discussed. Finally, the affinity of both Kuk and Kung to WR has been evoked by examining the gender assignment of various nouns that pattern with WR rather than with CR. As a standing challenge, the task remains to sort out the precise motivations that underlie the above divergent developments, i.e., to which extent they have been inspired by the felt need to accommodate to a CR-external target in the first line, i.e., WR (Aghem, Zoa) in the case of Kuk and Kung, and Bafut in the case of Babanki – or to which extent the ultimate driving force could rather have been the desire to dissociate from CR neighbours and maximize linguistic distinctions as symbolic consolidation of sociopolitical independence.

Abbreviations

1...13 = noun classes	EXCL = exclusive	P0 = present/perfect tense
1PL = 1 st plural	F2 = hodiernal future tense	P1 = immediate past tense
1SG = 1 st person	FOC = focus	P2 = hodiernal past tense
2SG = 2 nd person	H = high tone	P3 = distant past tense
3SG = 3 rd person	HTS = high tone spread	PF = perfective
AUG = augment	IMP = imperative	PGR = Proto-Grassfields
ASVC = asymmetrical verb serialization	IPF = imperfective	PL = plural

CR = Central Ring	L = low tone	R = root
D1 = near speaker demonstrative	M = mid tone	SVC = serial verb construction
D2 = near listener demonstrative	N = nasal	SG = singular
D3 = distal demonstrative	NPX = noun class prefix	SM = subject marker
EGB = Eastern Grassfields Bantu	OF = out of focus marker	WR = West Ring

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