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► **To cite this version:**

Pius W. Akumbu, Roland Kiessling. Variation in Central Ring: Convergence or divergence?. Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads, 2023, 3 (1), pp.19-42. 10.6092/issn.2785-0943/16312. hal-04250289v2

HAL Id: hal-04250289

<https://hal.science/hal-04250289v2>

Submitted on 1 Dec 2023

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Variation in Central Ring: Convergence or divergence?

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Submitted: 23/01/2023 Revised version: 19/06/2023

Accepted: 15/07/2023 Published: 30/11/2023



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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* / **kùl* (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. The isomorphs are the

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).

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* (9/10) ‘rope’, **kə-fúk* (7/8) ‘farm’². Another type of isomorph is constituted by the gender affiliation of various nominal concepts, e.g., **ú-lûə* ‘bridge’ in (3/13 vs. 3/6a).

	CR	WR
class 4	-	+
class 10 vs. 13	+	-
morphologized aspect focus	-	+
gender of <i>*ú-lûə</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-dzûd</i> (3)
‘ashes’	<i>*kə-bvôl</i> (7)	<i>*u-dzûm</i> (3)
‘rope’	<i>*fî / *kòl</i> (9/10)	<i>*kə-báʔ</i> (7/8)
‘farm’	<i>*kə-fúk</i> (7/8)	<i>*ú-súm</i> (3/4)

Table 1: CR vs. WR isomorphs and isoglosses.³

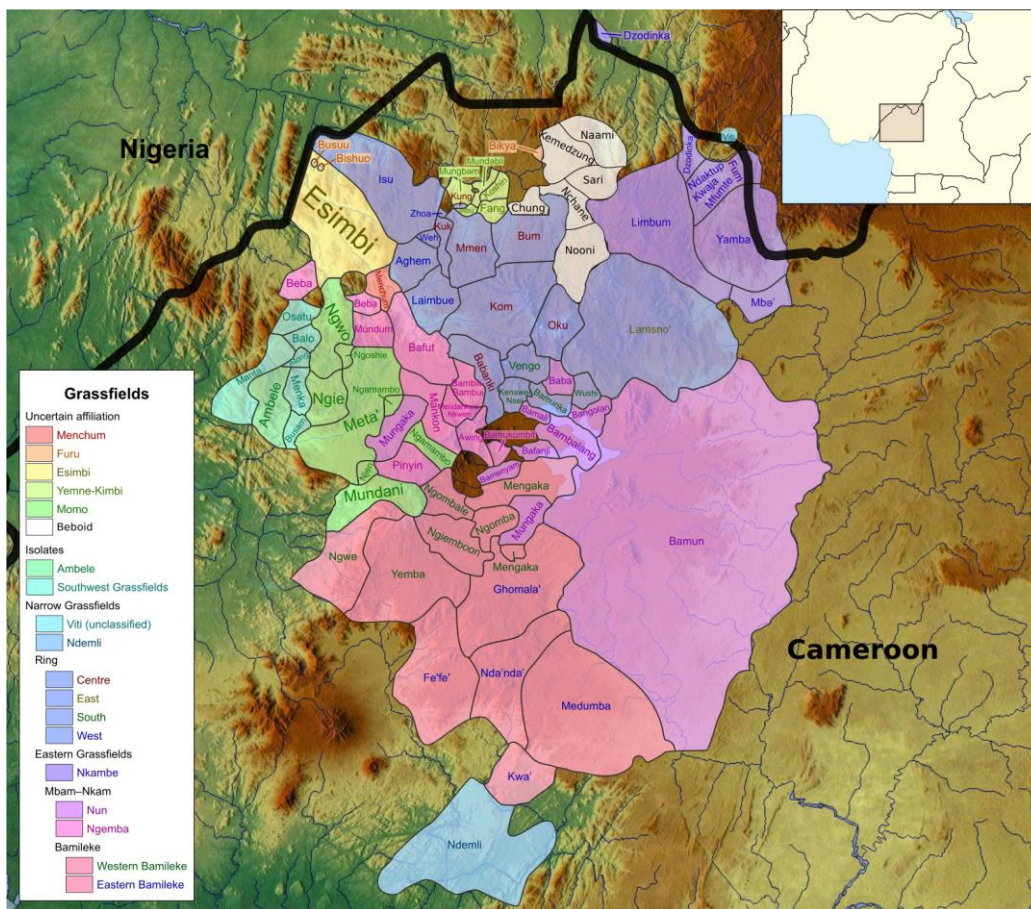
Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2023) identify seven CR languages (Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring), listed here with their Glottocodes (Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, & Bank 2022): Babanki (baba1266), Bum (bumm1238), Kom (komc1235), Kuk (kukk1239), Kung (kung1260), Men (mmen1238), and Oku (okuu1243). The following map shows the languages of the Grassfields region discussed in this study.

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

² Other WR/CR isoglosses include ‘all’: WR *dzêm* (+Babanki) vs. CR *kím*; ‘road, path’: WR *dzid* (+Babanki, Kom, Oku) vs. CR *únóm* (Bum, Kuk, Kung, Men); ‘salt’: WR *ńtsòʔ* vs. CR *ńgbáj* (+Bu).

³ 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.

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



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

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.

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 [aghe1241; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, West Ring], Zoa [zhoa1238; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, West Ring]) in the case of Kuk and Kung or Bafut (bafu1246; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Ngemba) 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 EGB

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 (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

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 tà kùm kà-báyn
 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 _ḡ)	à-fwín	ū-fwén	ī-fwén	kā-flí	kā-fwéi	ā-fwé(i)n	āb-fín	‘leg (tibia)’
H ₂ (HL _ḡ)	à-kwóŋ	ū-kpén	ī-kwóé	kā-kpái	kā-kpái	ā-kó(i)n	āb-kói	‘arm’
L ₁ (LH _ḡ)	à-γóŋ	ī-wóŋ	ī-γóŋ	ī-wóŋ	ī-γóŋ	ē-γóŋ	ī-γóŋ	‘spear’
L ₂ (LL _ḡ)	fā-kò?	fū-kāk	fī-kâ?	fā-kâ?	fā-kâ?	fē-kâ?	fē-kāk	‘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
(Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

- a. Oku
/fé-kàk/ → fékâk → fékâk ‘tree’
- b. Kom
/fĩ-kâ?/ → fĩkâ? → fĩkâ? ‘tree’
- c. Babanki
/fâ-kâ?/ → fâkâ? ‘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 (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

- a. *kàkím* ‘crab’
vàtsóŋ ‘thieves’
vàlà̀mà ‘brothers’
- b. *kàkím ká vā̀tsóŋ* ‘crab of thieves’
vàtsóŋ vá kākím ‘thieves of crab’
kàkím ká v̀là̀mà ‘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

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

- a. Augment high tone spreading:
 $/\acute{V}-(C)\grave{V}-R/ \rightarrow \acute{V}-(C)\hat{V}-R$, e.g., Oku $/\acute{V}-f\grave{e}-y\grave{a}m/ \rightarrow \acute{V}-f\hat{e}-y\grave{a}m$
 AUG-NPx-R
- b. delinking of NPx low tone
 $\acute{V}-(C)\hat{V}-R \rightarrow \acute{V}-(C)\acute{V}-R$, e.g., Oku $\acute{V}-f\hat{e}-y\grave{a}m \rightarrow \acute{V}-f\acute{e}-y\grave{a}m$
 AUG-NPx-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-NPx-R~~

Regarding the retention of the low NPx in Babanki, one could argue that the high tone augment in Pre-Babanki was simply deleted before it could spread its tone to the NPx, 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 NPx

⁵ The NPx L is retained in N2 position as complement of various prepositions or as modifier in associative constructions, e.g., Oku $i-f\acute{ó}ŋ \acute{a} k\grave{e}-k\grave{a}s$. This L prefix on N2 nouns “is characteristic of all or most of Western Grassfields Bantu” (Hyman 1979: 36).

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 NPx under pre-Bafut influence, deleting the H tone augment without any trace.⁶ Babanki's preference to keep low NPx 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 NPx 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 NPx 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.

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.

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.

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 NPx. 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 *ə-yàm* in (2).

Language	‘orange’	‘pot’	‘potato’	class
Proto-EG	*?	*tôn`	*?	1
Bafut	<i>lāmsì</i>	<i>àntòò</i>	<i>àndòḡà</i>	1
Mankon	<i>lāmsì</i>	<i>àntò</i>	?	1
Babanki	<i>lāmsə̀</i>	<i>ntòn</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	1
Kom	<i>lāmbās</i>	<i>ntòin</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	9
Oku	?	<i>ntòn</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	9
Men	<i>lāmās</i>	<i>tòin</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	9
Aghem	<i>lámá</i>	<i>tə̀</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	9

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

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>lāmsì</i>	<i>bìlāmsì</i>	<i>lāmsə̀</i>	<i>vəlāmsə̀</i>
‘radio’	<i>rēdyō</i>	<i>bìrēdyō</i>	<i>lédyò</i>	<i>vələ́dyò</i>
‘table’	<i>tábèrì</i>	<i>bìtábèrì</i>	<i>tábàlè</i>	<i>vətábàlè</i>
‘lock’	<i>lògè</i>	<i>bìlògè</i>	<i>lók</i>	<i>vəlók</i>
‘flower’	<i>fìlávà</i>	<i>bìfìlávà</i>	<i>fəlávà</i>	<i>və̀fəlávà</i>
‘pig’	<i>kùḡnàm</i>	<i>bìkùḡnàm</i>	<i>ḡkǎḡnàm</i>	<i>və̀ḡkǎḡnàm</i>
‘rat’, ‘mouse’	<i>fórə̀</i>	<i>bìfórə̀</i>	[<i>tʃòkù?</i>]	[<i>vətʃòkù?</i>]
‘cock’	<i>àḡkàgè</i>	<i>bàḡkàgè</i>	<i>ḡkə̀?</i>	<i>və̀ḡkə̀?</i>
‘horse’	<i>lòḡá</i>	<i>bìlòḡá</i>	<i>lə̀ḡ</i>	<i>vələ̀ḡ</i>
‘cat’	<i>bùfì</i>	<i>bìbùfì</i>	<i>bùfì</i>	<i>və̀bùfì</i>
‘co-wife’	<i>fùḡù</i>	<i>bìfùḡù</i>	<i>fìf</i>	<i>və̀fìf</i>
‘friend’	<i>ḡfúkà?à</i>	<i>bìḡfúbíkà?à</i>	[<i>wùndòḡ</i>]	[<i>və̀ndòḡ</i>]
‘witch’	<i>sòrì, ndì</i>	<i>bìsòrì, bìdì</i>	[<i>zì</i>]	[<i>və̀zì</i>]
‘moon’, ‘month’	<i>sàḡ</i>	<i>bìsàḡ</i>	<i>sàḡ</i>	<i>vəsàḡ</i>
‘pot’	<i>àntòò</i>	<i>bàntòò</i>	<i>ntòyn</i>	<i>və̀ntòyn</i>
‘potato’	<i>àndòḡà</i>	<i>bàndòḡà</i>	<i>ndòḡ</i>	<i>və̀ndòḡ</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

- b. Detrimental effect with *mà?à* ‘throw away’

m̄ kâ sùlâ mà?à m̄múõ
 1SG F2 scatter.IPF throw.away.IPF 6a.water
 ‘I will be scattering water.’

- c. Comparison with co-verb *tsùɔ* ‘pass’

má tàb tsùɔ yò
 1SG:P1.FOC tall pass 2SG
 ‘I’m taller than you.’

- d. Deictic orientation: centripetal *bè* ‘come’

ù nèi bè yò m̄ tsǒmbī m̄
 3SG take come 2SG with 6a.groundnuts OF.6a
 ‘She brings you groundnuts.’

- e. Path/vector: *tʃúɔ* ‘descend; down’

kpà tʃúɔ tú k-íŋ
 chop.IMP descend.IMP 7.head 7-D1
 ‘Chop off this head!’

- (6) Kung (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring): asymmetrical SVCs with various co-verbs

- a. Completion with co-verb *màsà* ‘finish’

yàsá khìa màsà yé í náe
 1PL.EXCL P0 slice finish matter at today
 ‘We have finished discussing the topic for today.’

- b. Detrimental effect with *mà?à* ‘throw away’ (imperfective: *mà?kà*)

ù tīná mà?kà mē
 3SG push.IPF throw.IPF 1SG
 ‘He is pushing me uselessly (e.g., in bullying).’

- c. Path/vector: *fāsá* ‘take out’ (< *fá* ‘exit’), *kǒ?sá* ‘lift’ (< *kǒ?* ‘ascend’)

wǔá ʰkúɔ sàì fāsá kǒ?sá mē ā bú? kǎ
 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: *kǒ?* ‘ascend, climb; up’

bǒŋ ʰkǒ? mwà?là k-ê
 pick.IMP ascend.IMP book 7-D2
 ‘Pick up that book!’

(7) Men (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring): asymmetrical SVCs with various co-verbs

- a. Completion with co-verb *mìsè* ‘finish’
 è vǎ fià? mìsè
 3SG 1.PF work finish
 ‘S/he has finished work.’
- b. Detrimental effect with *mà?à* ‘throw away’
 è vǎ ‘tsúintê má?à kà? 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’
 mǎ kúlâ pèin
 1SG.PF return.from.farm come
 ‘I have come back from the farm.’
- d. Path/vector: *ndzísé* ‘insert’ < *ndzǐ* ‘enter’
 mǎ ndlǎm 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 (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)
 nǎm sà-tsèm sǎ yì kú? n-dzú á ā-kàŋ
 animal 10-all SM P1 climb N-go to 5-heaven
 ‘All the animals went (up) to heaven.’

- b. Bafut (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Ngemba; Tamanji 2009: 203)

nàà dzá tsìm dzí kʒʒ ɲ-yèê á àbùrì
 animals the all SM climb N-go to heaven

‘All the animals went (up) to heaven.’

(9) Resultative constructions

- a. Babanki (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

wùbúm yì tèm nyàm n-zwí
 hunter P1 shoot 9-animal N-kill

‘The hunter shot the animal dead.’

- b. Bafut (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Ngemba; Tamanji 2009: 204)

ɲùbòò w-á à kè 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 (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

tòlòkyí yì ɲ-ɲíɲ n-tfó ɲgó
 1.tortoise P2 N-run N-surpass 1.deer

‘Tortoise ran faster than Deer.’

- b. Bafut (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring; Tamanji 2009: 205)

kwímáɲkʒʒ à lé ɲ-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 Fouban 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 (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring). Remarkably, the innovation of /h/ is restricted to the causative extension *-hi* as reflex of the Proto-Ring **-sV* suffix that retains its sibilant in all other CR languages, as shown in (11).

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

- a. *mwòm-hì* ‘try’, but Kom *mwòm-sì*, Oku *mwòm-sè*, Mbizinaku *mwòm-sà*, Babanki *mwòm-sà*, Men *mwòm-sè*
- b. *līm-hî* ‘extinguish’, but Kom *līm-sí*, Oku *līm-sê*, Mbizinaku *līm-sâ*, Babanki *līm-sá*, Men *ndīm-sé*, Babungo *nú-sá*
- c. *yūy-hî* ‘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-sú*, Men *ē-sí*, Oku *ī-fîê*, Mbizinaku *ī-fî*, Babanki *è-fí*
- b. *ū-wús* ‘fire’, cf. Men *ē-wūs*, Mbizinaku *ē-vás*

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

- a. *sā-bvû* ‘goats’, cf. Kuk *sā-byí*, Kung *sā-bā*, Men *sē-pfĩ*
- b. *sà-kül* ‘ropes’, cf. Kung *sà-kül*, Men *sē-kwìl*

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

- a. *nám* = ^u*sú* ‘animals’, cf. Babanki *nám* = ^u*sá*, Kom *nám* = *sē*, Oku *nám* = *sā*
- b. *ndzám* = ^u*sú* ‘axes’, cf. Babanki *ndzám* = *sá*, Kom *ndzám* = *sì*, Oku *ndzám* = *sá*

Bum may have acquired the glottal fricative from South Ring languages such as Bamessing (Kens1251; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, South Ring; DeVries 2008), Bamunka (bamu1256; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, South Ring; 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 (buuu1246; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Yemne-Kimbi) *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 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.

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.

PGr	*b	*d	*dz	*g	*gb
PB	*b	*d	*?	*g	*?
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	*b	*?	*-bèdè	*?	*-bèŋg	*-bíp	*-bín	*-búd
PGr	*b	*-bán`	*?	*-bòk`	*-bàŋ	*-bíp	*-bín	*-bód-ɪ
Aghem	<i>b</i>	<i>kíbé</i>	<i>kíbi</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>kábôʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>bá</i>	<i>bái</i>	<i>bów</i>
Isu	<i>b</i>	<i>kábá</i>	<i>kábí</i>	<i>kábwôʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>béb</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>bwí</i>
Kuk	<i>b</i>	<i>kábá</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>kábúʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>báb</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>búo</i>
Kung	<i>b</i>	<i>kábáe</i>	<i>kábé</i>	<i>kábúʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>báf</i>	<i>bán</i>	<i>búo</i>
Men	<i>p</i>	<i>ápáin</i>	<i>ápí</i>	<i>ápúʔ</i>	<i>pàŋ</i>	<i>póf</i>	<i>péin</i>	<i>pó</i>
Babanki	<i>b</i>	<i>kàbáin</i>	<i>kàbí</i>	<i>kàbùʔ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>	<i>byíf</i>	<i>bén</i>	<i>bwáʔ</i>

Table 7: Men devoicing of *b

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.

Language	'long'		'cry'	'heavy'		'get old'	'sit'	'cross'
PB	*d	*dà, *dèpù	*-dìd	*-dìtù, *dìtò		*-nùnù	*-dìàd	*?
PGr	*d	*-dàb	*-ddìl	*-ddìd		*-dùn	*?	*?
Aghem	d	dà	dìi	dìn		dwìn	dò?ò	dàŋ
Bu	t	tàh	tìi	tì		?	?	tàŋ
Isu	d	dàb	dìi	dìd		dzòn	dò?ò	dàŋ
Kuk	t	tàb	tìi	təkə		tìn	tà?à	tàŋ
Kung	t	tyàf	tì	tìl		tyìn	tè?è	?
Men	t	tyàf	tʃi	tìl		tʃìn	tà?à	tyàŋ
Babanki	d	dyàf	dì	dì?		dwìn	[jɛ́?má]	dyàŋ

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

Language	'hunger'	'back'	'say, tell'	'bunch'	'voice'	'path'	'nice'	
PB	*j	*-jádà	*-yìmà	*?	*?	*-júì	*-jìdà	*?
PGr	*j	*-jè(ŋ)	*-jìm	*?	*?	*-gì[l]`	*-jì[l]`	*bòŋ
Aghem	dz	dzèŋ	dzìm	dzè	dzìyà	dzì	dzì	dzò
Bu	ts	tsèŋ	tsìm	?	?	tsì	tsìy	tsò
Isu	dz	dzóŋ	^u dzám	dzài	dzì	dzì	^u dzáld	dzwàb
Kuk	ts	tsèŋ	tsìm	tsàa	tsò	tsè	[ūnóm]	tsòbà
Kung	tʃ	tʃèŋ	tʃìm	?	tsò(m)	kìə	[ūnóm]	tsòf
Men	tʃ	tʃèŋ	tsìm	tsàin	tsè	kyì(ɣ)	[ēndóm]	tsòf
Babanki	dʒ	dʒèŋ	dzəm	gà?	gè	gì	dzì	[bòŋ]

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.

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 (**tə*) in favour of plural class 10 (**sə*). 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.

Language		‘skin’, ‘hide’	‘grind’	‘fall’
PB	*g	*-gòbò, *-gòbì	?	*-gù, *-bù
PGr	*g	*-gòb`	*-gòk	*-gùa
Aghem	g	gù	gùo	bvù
Bu	k	[tsàŋ]	kùa	[və̀]
Isu	g	dzóŋ	gùo	[bvù]
Kom	g	gví	gvà	[fé]
Kuk	?	?	[tsám]	[bà]
Kung	k	kù°	[tsám]	kù
Men	k	[pfɛ̀]	kùo	[pfù]
Oku	g	gúo	gùo	[fɛ̀]
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	gbò
Bu	?	?
Isu	gb	gbùw
Kom	gv	gvèl
Kuk	kp	kpà
Kung	?	?
Men	kp	kpè
Babanki	?	[bvà?]

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

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 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

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 *sə which is precisely the form that WR has given up in favour of class 13 *tə, as seen in the last column of Tables 12-13.

Meaning	Central Ring	Kuk	Kung	West Ring
'axes'	<i>sē-ndzām (Men)</i>	<i>sà-ndzām</i>	<i>sā-fú</i>	<i>tí-ndzām (Agh)</i>
'animals'	<i>sē-nâm (Men)</i>	<i>sā-nâm</i>	<i>sā-nâm</i>	<i>tá-nâm (Isu)</i>
'goats'	<i>byí^h-sá (Bab)</i>	<i>sā-byí</i>	<i>sā-bā</i>	<i>tá-byí (Isu)</i>
'hoes'	<i>sē-fǿy (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fǿy</i>	<i>sā-fā</i>	<i>tí-fú (Agh)</i>
'buffaloes'	<i>sē-fūŋ (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fúŋ</i>	<i>sā-fùŋ^o</i>	<i>tá-fóŋ (Isu)</i>
'cows'	<i>mbòŋ-sì (Kom)</i>	<i>sà-mbòlɔ?</i>	<i>sā-mbòŋ</i>	<i>tà-mbòŋ (Isu)</i>
'rashes, scabies'	<i>sē-kwàs (Men)</i>	<i>sà-kpāl</i>	<i>sà-kpàs</i>	<i>[tì-kpèŋ (Agh)]</i>
'soot (under pot)'	<i>sē-lā? (Men)</i>	<i>sà-lì?</i>	<i>sà-lā^o</i>	<i>tá-lák (Isu)</i>
'locusts'	<i>sē-pīŋ (Men)</i>	<i>sā-bāi</i>	<i>sā-bāi</i>	<i>tí-bé (Agh)</i>
'pots'	<i>ntòn-sà (Oku)</i>	<i>sà-tǔ</i>	<i>sà-tǔe</i>	<i>tà-ntǔ (Zoa)</i>
'maize plants'	<i>sē-sǎf (Men)</i>	<i>[ā-sǎb]</i>	<i>sà-sǎf</i>	<i>[à-sǔ (Agh)]</i>
'mountains'	<i>tē-kwá?à (Men)</i>	<i>sà-ŋmgbà?</i>	<i>sā-ŋgbà?</i>	<i>tá-ká?à (Isu)</i>
'feathers'	<i>tí-vīl (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-vâ</i>	<i>sā-wúlà</i>	<i>tá-wât (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-tsulát (Zoa)</i>
'he-goats'	<i>tē-fǎf (Men)</i>	<i>sā-fǎb</i>	<i>sā-fǎf</i>	<i>tá-fáb (Weh)</i>
'wings'	<i>tēy-yáa (Oku)</i>	<i>sā-yá?lǎ</i>	<i>sā-yéé</i>	<i>tí-y(w)ô (Agh)</i>
'blood'	<i>[mí-lúŋ (Kom)]</i>	<i>sā-kâŋ</i>	<i>sá-kâŋ</i>	<i>tá-kâŋ (Isu)</i>
'chiefs'	<i>tà-fǿyn (Bab)</i>	<i>sà-fǿ</i>	<i>sā-fǿ</i>	<i>tà-fǿ^h (Zoa)</i>
'cutlasses'	<i>tí-fô (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-fǿta</i>	<i>sā-fê</i>	<i>[ú-kûm (Weh)]</i>
'leaves'	<i>tà-fú (Bab)</i>	<i>sā-fúw</i>	<i>sā-fú</i>	<i>tí-fú^hú (Agh)</i>
'roots'	<i>tē-yáŋ (Bum)</i>	<i>sā-yáŋ</i>	<i>sā-yáŋ</i>	<i>tá-yá^hŋá (Isu)</i>
'lakes'	<i>tē-lúe (Kom)</i>	<i>sā-ní</i>	<i>sā-ní</i>	<i>tí-nú (Agh)</i>
'places'	<i>tā-lúk (Bum)</i>	<i>sā-lú?</i>	<i>sā-lú?</i>	<i>tá-lú^h? (Isu)</i>

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

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
Central Ring	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	P1 = immediate past tense
1PL = 1 st plural	F2 = hodiernal future tense	P2 = hodiernal past tense
1SG = 1 st person	FOC = focus	P3 = distant past tense
2SG = 2 nd person	H = high tone	PB = Proto-Bantu
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
	P0 = present/perfect tense	

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