



HAL
open science

Onomatopoeia in Babanki

Pius W. Akumbu

► **To cite this version:**

Pius W. Akumbu. Onomatopoeia in Babanki. Lívia Körtvélyessy; Pavol Štekauer. Onomatopoeia in the World's Languages: A comparative handbook, De Gruyter Mouton, pp.105-116, 2024, 10.1515/9783111053226-009 . hal-04250300v1

HAL Id: hal-04250300

<https://hal.science/hal-04250300v1>

Submitted on 19 Oct 2023 (v1), last revised 21 May 2024 (v2)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

ONOMATOPOEIA IN BABANKI

Pius W. Akumbu, LLACAN (CNRS – INALCO), Paris

1. Introduction

This chapter presents onomatopoeia in Babanki (ISO 639-3: bbk, Glottocode: baba1266), a Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language of the Northwest Region of Cameroon (Hyman 1980; Akumbu and Chibaka 2012). The language is spoken mainly in two settlements: Babanki Tungo and Big Babanki, but also to some extent in diaspora communities outside of Cameroon. Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2022) state that the number of speakers is increasing; however, the figure of 39,000 speakers they provide likely overestimates the number of fluent speakers in diaspora communities. The two main settlements' dialects exhibit slight phonetic, phonological, and lexical differences but are mutually intelligible. The variety of Babanki described in this study is the Babanki Tungo variant spoken by the author. Most speakers of Babanki also speak Cameroon Pidgin English, which is increasingly used in all domains, even in the home (Akumbu and Wuchu 2015). The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale level of Babanki is 5 (Developing), and its Agglomerated Endangerment Status (Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, & Bank 2022) is 'not endangered'.

Babanki is a largely isolating language with free lexemes in all word categories and very little morphology.

I generated most of the data used in this study, based on my native speaker competence, but further checked and supplemented them during two WhatsApp conversation sessions which lasted approximately two hours in January 2022 with four other native speakers.¹

2. Position of onomatopoeia in the language system

The major lexical word classes in Babanki are nouns and verbs. There is only a small group of five adjectives, and qualities or properties are expressed either by stative-inchoative verbs or nouns of quality (Akumbu and Kießling in preparation). There are also minor lexical categories of adverbs, prepositions, coordinators, interjections, and ideophones. Although a dictionary of 2,000 items (Akumbu 2008) exists, there is no entry identified as onomatopoeia. Even the

¹ Many thanks to Vivian Ba-ah, Regina Phubong, Cornelius Wuchu, and Benjamin Nkwenti for sharing their knowledge of Babanki.

grammatical description of the language (Akumbu and Chibaka 2012) does not include onomatopoeia, meaning that onomatopoeia are not recognized as an independent word class. However, some sound imitative words, i.e. primary onomatopoeia exist in the language and are recognized and used by community members. Onomatopoeia is clearly not an open class and the process of coining new words by imitation of sounds does not appear to be productive in the language. It is unclear whether the language employs borrowed onomatopoeia but it seems that certain animal cries such as *myāwú?* ‘meow of a cat’ or *kókólikö* ‘crow of a rooster’ are universal.

There is no published linguistic work that is devoted to the study of Babanki onomatopoeia. The only study that relates to onomatopoeia is Akumbu’s (2016) identification and description of ideophones, although it does not recognize and label any of the items as onomatopoeia.

The grammatical criteria proposed in Akumbu (2016) to set Babanki ideophones apart as a word class generally apply to the onomatopoeia. The phonology of onomatopoeia, like that of ideophones contains sounds such as the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ and the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ that are not part of the prosaic system.

Onomatopoeia and ideophones share similar morphological characteristics. They cannot be inflected like nouns and verbs and may be repeated for emphasis as many times as a speaker deems necessary.

In the syntax, both onomatopoeia and ideophones are integrated by means of a quotative marker *lá*, and occupy clause-final position except when followed by a question or negation marker.

Ideophones, therefore, constitute a word class in Babanki where the smaller subset of onomatopoeia belong.

3. Description of onomatopoeia

This section contains a description of Babanki onomatopoeia. It examines their phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics in relation to the prosaic system.

3.1 Phonology

Since Babanki is a tone language, the discussion covers vowels, consonants, tones, and syllable structure.

3.1.1 Vowel and consonant inventory

Babanki has eight vowel phonemes /i, i, u, u, e, o, ə, a/. Diphthongs occur only in a few interjections in the language, and vowel length is not contrastive.

Onomatopoeia make use of diphthongs although they are extremely rare in the prosiac system, as in the following examples.

(1) Unexpected vowels (diphthongs) in onomatopoeia

- a. *yà kù kāvú á wàyn lá pái?*
3SG give hand to child QUOT ONOM
'She slapped the child *pái?*'
- b. *kàmpfí ká wì? ká tù? ntsíη lá gèìn*
fat AM person SM smash step QUOT ONOM
'The big person made a step *gèìn.*'

Another peculiarity of Babanki onomatopoeia is vowel lengthening, used to lay emphasis, as shown in the following examples.

(2) Vowel lengthening in Babanki onomatopoeia

- a. *yà bwà? nántô mfǎη á kǎkí lá bwà:?*
3SG be.tired much fall on chair QUOT ONOM
'He became too tired and fell *bwà:?* on a chair.'
- b. *byá yì fǎη lá byì:m*
avocado P1 fall QUOT ONOM
'The avocado fell *byì:m.*'
- c. *zù á gǎ?-à fá fě (lá) fyì: á*
snake SM say- PROG from where QUOT ONOM QUES
'Where is the snake hissing *fyì:* from?'

A speaker can lengthen a vowel for as long as they need to lay emphasis.

Regarding consonants, Faytak and Akumbu (2021) note that Babanki has twenty-five

consonant phonemes /b, t, d, k, g, m, n, ɲ, ŋ, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, ʧ, ʤ, ɬ, ɮ, l, w, y²/. The six coda consonants are /m, n, ŋ, f, s, and k/. In this position, /k/ is realized as a glottal stop [ʔ].

A peculiarity of Babanki onomatopoeia is the presence of sounds that are not part of the phonemic inventory of the language. It is well known that “languages typically exploit sounds not part of the regular phonemic inventory for expressive purposes” (Childs 1988: 170), and Babanki is no exception. The two sounds that are not found elsewhere in the language but occur only in onomatopoeia are the voiceless bilabial plosive [p] and the voiceless glottal fricative [h].

(3) Non-phonemic consonants (*p, h*) in onomatopoeia

a. *mántù tòŋ āsóŋ lá pím pím ...*

car blow horn QUOT ONOM

‘The car hooted *pím pím*’

b. *fâɲín fǎ yì ɣòm tàvó tá wén lá fâp fâp ...*

bird SM P1 beat wings AM 3SG QUOT ONOM

‘The bird flapped its wings *fâp fâp*’

c. *wàyn tǎ? mō lá hyà hyà ...*

child laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM

‘The child laughed at me *hyà hyà*’

Unexpectedly, [b] and [k] occur as coda consonants in onomatopoeia. Recall that in the prosiac vocabulary, /k/ is realized in coda position as the glottal stop [ʔ]. Since [k] occupies the coda position of some onomatopoeia, both the velar plosive and glottal stop are coda consonants in onomatopoeia.

(4) Unexpected coda consonants (*b, k*) in onomatopoeia

a. *mántù dèm lá tìb tìb ... fá fě*

car rumble QUOT ONOM from where

‘Where is the car rumbling *tìb tìb* ...?’

² The symbol /y/ is used for the palatal approximant that is usually transcribed with /j/ according to IPA conventions.

- b. à fɔm / gà? ndà lá mpyìk á
 it sigh / say who QUOT ONOM QUES
 ‘Who has sighed *mpyìk*?’

While some sounds that are not part of the prosiac system are used, it has also been observed that the two Babanki bilabial affricates [pf, bv] are not used in any of the onomatopoeia identified so far.

3.1.2 Syllable structure

Noun and verb roots are predominantly monosyllabic with a CV, CGV, CVC or CGVC shape, where *G* stands for *glide*. All of these syllable types are found in onomatopoeia although the CV and CVC types appear to be more frequent.

The peculiarity of onomatopoeia with regards to syllable structure is the presence of diphthongs (cf. examples in 1) and long vowels in rhymes (cf. examples in 2). No onomatopoeic syllables or words contain only vowels or consonants exclusively. Also, there are no onomatopoeic words that violate the phonotactic principles of the language by employing illicit sound combinations.

3.1.3 Stress

Babanki is not a stress language and there is no indication that stress plays any role in onomatopoeia in the language. The next sub-section focuses on tone since Babanki is a tone language.

3.1.4 Tones

There are two tonemes /L, H/ in Babanki. Contour tones are rare in the language (Akumbu, Hyman, and Kießling 2020: 3 fn 3).

In onomatopoeia, contour tones are commonly used, as seen in the following examples.

(5) Unexpected contour tones in onomatopoeia

- a. à yì bwùf bú kɔɔ (lá) wǔf/wǔh á
 it P1 bark dog which QUOT ONOM QUES
 ‘Which dog barked *wǔf/wǔh*?’

- b. *ɲkàʔ yì tòn lá kókólikǒ*
 rooster P1 blow QUOT ONOM
 ‘The rooster crowed *kókólikǒ*.’
- c. *byí yì dì / gàʔ lá mǛʔ*
 goat P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM
 ‘The goat bleated *mǛʔ*.’
- d. *bùfí yì dì / gàʔ lá myáwúʔ*
 cat P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM
 ‘The cat meowed *myáwúʔ*.’

The high-mid tone in (5d) occurs only in the sound of a cat whereas rising tones are more frequent and generally on the final syllable.

3.2 Morphology and syntax

3.2.1 Word-formation

Babanki has very little morphology since it is an isolating language. A few affixes can be added to the roots of major word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). For example, in the nominal system, noun classes are marked either by prefixes, e.g. *kà-kím* ‘crap’ vs. *à-kím* ‘craps’ or a suffix, e.g. *ndzám* ‘axe’ vs. *ndzám-sá* ‘axes’. In the verb system both prefixes and suffixes can be added to the root to mark different forms such as the infinitive, e.g. *á-kùm* ‘to touch’ or the imperative *kùm-á* ‘touch!’.

Babanki onomatopoeia are non-inflecting and occur only with a root without any prefix or suffix. This is unlike nouns which can take either a prefix or a suffix to mark their noun class, nominal modifiers, such as adjectives which can take agreement markers, or verbs which can take verbal extensions or aspect and mood markers such as the progressive, infinitive, or imperative.

As noted in Akumbu (2016: 6) noun and verb roots can only be repeated once. While verb suffixes can be repeated, it is not possible to repeat noun prefixes and suffixes.

(6) Babanki nominal and verbal reduplication

- a. *fà-bóbó* ‘kite’
- b. *gyégyé-sá* ‘beards’
- c. *kúʔ* ‘go up’ → *kúʔ-tá* ‘go up a bit’ → *kúʔ-tá kúʔ-tá* ‘GO UP a bit (contrastive focus)’

There are some onomatopoeia that describe sounds that are produced in an extended or continuous manner. One way to capture this is to repeat the onomatopoeia. Such onomatopoeia are repeated at least once and the single form never occurs. Repetition is also used to lay emphasis and a speaker can repeat as many times as they wish. Repetition is shown by the ellipsis marks in the examples in (7) and throughout the chapter.

(7) Repetition of Babanki onomatopoeia for emphasis

- a. àyú ú ʒúʒá tá mǎʃíʔì lá tʃêʔ tʃêʔ ...
rain SM spend day only descend.PROG QUOT ONOM
‘Rain has been drizzling the whole day tʃêʔ tʃêʔ....’
- b. fâmbúm fǎ yì gǎʔ fá āŋgàŋ lá ʃíká ʃíká ...
mosquito SM P1 say from house QUOT ONOM
‘A mosquito hissed ʃíká ʃíká ... in the house.’
- c. wàyn tʃǎʔ mō lá kyìʔ kyìʔ ...
child laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM
‘The child laughed at me kyìʔ kyìʔ’

Notice that not all onomatopoeia can be repeated, since it depends on the sound involved and the manner of its production. Thus, onomatopoeia that describe sounds that are produced as a single complete act cannot be repeated, e.g. *mɸyík* ‘sighing’. In addition, the onomatopoeia whose vowels can be lengthened cannot also be repeated.

There is no evidence that onomatopoeia can serve as a word-formation base to derive new words, and there do not seem to be any agent names derived from corresponding onomatopoeia.

3.2.2 Syntax

Babanki is an STVO language, where the tense marker (T) occurs between the subject and the verb, and the object, whether nominal or pronominal, follows the verb.

Onomatopoeia can be licensed by the verb *gǎʔ* ‘say’, and integrated by means of the quotative marker *lá*, as in (8).

(8) Use of the quotative marker to introduce onomatopoeia

- a. *mbví yì yèn āsáŋ ŋgá? lá kò kò kò ...*
 chicken P1 see corn say QUOT ONOM
 ‘The chicken saw corn and cackled *kò kò kò ...*’
- b. *fə́nín fə́ gà?-à fá fə́kò? lá tfwí tfwí ...*
 bird SM say-PROG from where QUOT ONOM
 ‘The bird is chirping on the tree *tfwí tfwí ...*’
- c. *bùfí yì dì / gá? lá myáwú?*
 cat P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM
 ‘The cat meowed *myáwú?*.’

If an intransitive verb introduces an action, the verb *gà?* ‘say’ is not needed to license the onomatopoeia, as in the following examples.

(9) Intransitive verbs and onomatopoeia

- a. *wàyn tǎ? mō lá kyì? kyì? ...*
 child laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM
 ‘The child laughed at me *kyì? kyì? ...*’
- b. *byá yì fə́ŋ lá byì:m*
 avocado P1 fall QUOT ONOM
 ‘The avocado fell *byì:m*.’
- c. *yà bwà? nántô mfə́ŋ á kākí lá bwà:?*
 3SG be.tired much fall on chair QUOT ONOM
 ‘He became too tired and fell *bwà:?* on a chair.’

It appears that the quotative marker can be omitted when the speaker assumes that the onomatopoeia context is evident. The optional presence of the quotative marker is clearly seen in questions.

(10) Optional presence of quotative marker in questions

- a. *à tù?-ù ndə́ (lá) bà̀m bà̀m ... á*
 it smash-PROG who QUOT ONOM QUES
 ‘who is walking energetically?’

- b. à dʒè? ndà ntʃó (lá) fɪb fɪb ... á
 it walk-PROG who pass QUOT ONOM QUES
 ‘Who has walked pass fɪb fɪb...?’
- c. zù á gàʔ-à fá fě (lá) fyì: á
 snake SM say- PROG from where QUOT ONOM QUES
 ‘Where is the snake hissing fyì: from?’

The examples in (10) also illustrate that onomatopoeia occur at the end of a clause unless they are followed by the *á* question marker. This also happens in negative declarative constructions where the second part of the discontinuous negation marker occurs clause-finally just after the onomatopoeia.

(11) Negation marker in clause-final position after onomatopoeia

- a. bùfí kó yì dì / gàʔ lá myáwúʔ bwén
 cat.SM NEG P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM NEG
 ‘The cat didn’t meow myáwúʔ.’
- b. wàyn á kó tʃàʔ mō lá kyìʔ kyìʔ ... bwén
 child SM NEG laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM NEG
 ‘The child didn’t laugh at me kyìʔ kyìʔ’
- b. jààm á kó yì dì / gàʔ lá mǔʔ bwén
 animal SM NEG P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM NEG
 ‘The cow didn’t moo mǔʔ.’

3.3 Semantics

3.3.1 General

Babanki onomatopoeia come from all the four categories of sound sources (elements, animals, human, and artifacts) although very few are found in the ‘artifacts’ domain.

The sound source of ‘elements’ contains nine onomatopoeia that describe the sound of rain and water, in general, pouring, swashing, drizzling, or dripping. Five other onomatopoeia describe the sound vegetation objects, such as stones and trees make when they crash, break, or fall down. Only one onomatopoeia describes the blowing of wind or swift movement of a person, and one other onomatopoeia describes the rising of fire flames.

The source domain of ‘animal’ sounds contains onomatopoeia for the sounds of the most common domestic animals of the Babanki. They include the sound of a dog barking, a cat meowing, a goat or sheep bleating, and a cow mooing. The only domestic animal whose sound is not described by an onomatopoeia is the pig which is said to grunt. In addition, the cackle of a chicken, the crow of a rooster, and the chirping of birds are all described by onomatopoeia. Other common animals or insects whose sounds are described by onomatopoeia are snakes, crickets, mosquitoes, and any other tiny insects. There are no onomatopoeia for the sound of fish and sea creatures because of the geographical location of Babanki in the Cameroonian mountainous highland Grassfields region.

The ‘human’ source domain has the largest number of sound imitating words. At least 14 onomatopoeia describe ‘voice’ sounds while 14 describe ‘body’ sounds.

The ‘artifacts’ category is the one with the fewest number of onomatopoeia. There are two words that imitate the sound of guns, two others that imitate the sound of an engine and one that imitates the sound of a horn. This is understandable because machines and transportation by modern devices is quite recent in Babanki and not many sound imitative words have been created.

3.3.2 Semantic relations

The most evident semantic relationship between onomatopoeia is the possibility to use more than one form for a sound from a single source. For example, the sound of a dog barking, has two forms which differ only in the coda consonant, i.e. *wūh/wūf* ‘dog barking’, the chirping of a bird *tfwí tfwí .../ tswí tswí ...* differs only in the initial consonant of the two forms and the flapping of wings *fāp fāp .../ bàb bàb ...* uses only labial consonants, even though they differ slightly in place and manner of articulation. The sound of laughter can be described using seven different onomatopoeia *hyì hyì ...*, *hyàk hyàk ...*, *hyà hyà, ... hà hà, ... hyì hyì, ... kyì? kyì? ...*, *tì? tò? ...* and it is unclear what differences these encode. Other onomatopoeia that appear to be synonymous signal differences in manner or intensity of the sound. Thus, *tfê? tfê? ...* ‘rain drizzling’ describes light rain that continues for a long period, *tfà? tfà?...* ‘rain drizzling’ describes slightly heavy rain that continues for a long period, *dzàb, dzàb...* ‘rain pouring’ describes heavy rain that continues for a long period, *dzà:?* ‘rain drizzling’ is used when light brief rain stops abruptly, *dzà:?* ‘rain

pouring’ when slightly heavy rain stops abruptly, and *wà:ʔ* ‘rain pouring and stopping abruptly’ when heavy rain stops abruptly.

No semantic changes in onomatopoeia-based derivation have been found. Likewise, there are no polysemous onomatopoeia in the language. The lone form in ‘elements’ with two slightly different meanings emanating from the object that produces the sound is *dʒà:ʔ* ‘rain pouring (water)’, ‘corn, beans pouring (earth)’. Since the onomatopoeia describes the same sound irrespective of the source object, it is not considered to be polysemous.

Conclusion

In this study, properties of Babanki onomatopoeia or words that specifically imitate the sound associated with the source have been examined. It has become evident that onomatopoeia are a subset of the word class of ideophones with their divergent phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Onomatopoeia contain sounds use sounds and sound combinations that are not part of the prosaic system. Emphasis is achieved through the lengthening of vowels or repetition of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia are introduced by a quotative marker and are clause-final unless they are followed by a question or negation marker that normally occupies clause-final position. The lack of onomatopoeia for the sound of fish and sea creatures is due to the geographical location of Babanki in the mountainous highland Grassfields region of Cameroon.

Abbreviations

1SG	first person singular
3SG	third person singular
AM	associative marker
C	consonant
G	glide
IDEO	ideophone
NEG	negation
O	object
ONOM	onomatopoeia
PI	immediate past tense

PROG	progressive
QUES	question
QUOT	quotative
S	subject
SG	singular
SM	subject marker
V	vowel/verb

References

- Akumbu, Pius W. 2008. *Kejom (Babanki)-English lexicon*. Bamenda: Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.
- Akumbu, Pius W. 2016. Babanki ideophones. *California Linguistic Notes* 40(1). 1–15.
- Akumbu, Pius W. & Evelyn Fogwe Chibaka. 2012. *A Pedagogic grammar of Babanki – a Grassfields language of Northwest Cameroon*. Köln: Köppe.
- Akumbu, Pius W. & Cornelius W. Wuchu. 2015. *Kejom (Babanki) Linguistic Practices in Farming Economies*. Kansas City: Miraclaire Academic Publications.
- Akumbu, Pius W., Larry M. Hyman & Roland Kießling. 2020. The segmental and tonal structure of verb inflection in Babanki. *Phonological Data and Analysis* 2. 1–33.
- Akumbu, Pius W. & Roland Kießling. In preparation. The expression of qualities / properties in Grassfields Bantu.
- Childs, Tucker G. 1988. The phonology of Kisi ideophones. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 10(2). 165–190.
- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons & Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2022. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- Faytak, Matthew & Pius W. Akumbu (2021). Kejom (Babanki). *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 51(2): 333–354. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100319000264>.
- Hammarström, Harald, Robert Forkel, Martin Haspelmath & Sebastian Bank. 2022. *Glottolog* 4.6. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6578297> (Available online at <http://glottolog.org>, Accessed on 2022-08-15.)
- Hyman, Larry M. 1980. Babanki and the Ring group. In Larry M. Hyman & Jan Voorhoeve (eds.), *Noun classes in Grassfields Bantu*, 225–258. Paris: SELAF.

Appendix

Natural Sounds

4 Elements

Sound type: Water

- 1 *tfù:m* 'water spashing'
- 2 *dʒə:ʔ* 'rain drizzling'

Sound type: Air

- 3 *fyéf* 'wind blowing; fast movement or speed of person or object'
- 4 *fyi:ʔ* 'sound of fart'

Sound type: Earth

- 5 *dʒwà:ʔ* 'tree, wood, sugarcane breaking; dry leaves crashing'
- 6 *byì:m* 'object crashing'

Sound type: Fire

- 7 *lwàʔ ...* 'fire rising'

Animals

Sound type: Mammals

- 8 *wǔh/wǔf* 'dog barking'
- 9 *myāwúʔ* 'cat meowing'

Sound type: Birds

- 10 *kókólikö* 'rooster crowing'
- 11 *kə ...* 'chicken cackling'

Sound type: Reptiles and amphibians

- 12 *fyì:* 'snake hissing'

Sound type: Insects

- 13 *zì:* 'bees, flies, wasp hissing'
- 14 *fíká ...* 'mosquito'

Human

Sound type: Voice

- 15 *hyàk ...* 'sound of laughter'
- 16 *tfùʔ ...* 'murmuring'

Sound type: Body

- 17 *gìŋ ...* 'sound of heavy steps during movement'
- 18 *bwàʔ ...* 'hand clapping'

Artifacts

Sound type: Vehicles

- 19 *pím ...* 'hooting'
- 20 *tìb ...* 'sound of engine'

Sound type: Instruments of war and destruction

21 *bù:m* 'sound of a gun'

22 *pàʔ ...* 'sound of a gun'