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► **To cite this version:**

Pius W. Akumbu. Onomatopoeia in Babanki. Lívia Körtvélyessy; Pavol Štekauer. Onomatopoeia in the World's Languages: A comparative handbook, 10, De Gruyter Mouton, pp.105-115, 2024, Comparative Handbooks of Linguistics [CHL], 9783111051550. 10.1515/9783111053226-009 . hal-04250300v2

**HAL Id: hal-04250300**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04250300v2>**

Submitted on 21 May 2024

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Pius W. Akumbu

# Onomatopoeia in Babanki

## 1 Introduction

This chapter presents onomatopoeia in Babanki, 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, and 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 that lasted approximately two hours in January 2022 with four other native speakers.<sup>1</sup>

## 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 grammatical description of the language (Akumbu and Chibaka 2012) does not include onomatopoeia, meaning that onomatopoeia is not recognized as an independent word class.

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

However, some sound-imitative words, i.e., primary onomatopoeias, 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 *kókólikǒ* ‘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 by Akumbu (2016) to set Babanki ideophones apart as a word class generally apply to onomatopoeias. The phonology of onomatopoeias, 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.

Onomatopoeias 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.

Syntactically, both onomatopoeias and ideophones are integrated by means of the 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 to which the smaller subset of onomatopoeias belongs.

## 3 Description of onomatopoeia

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

### 3.1 Phonology

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

#### 3.1.1 Vowel and consonant inventory

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

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

(1) Unexpected vowels (diphthongs) in onomatopoeia

- a. *ɣà kù kǎnú á wàyn lá pái?*  
 3SG give hand to child QUOT ONOM  
 ‘She slapped the child, *pái?*’
- b. *kǎmpfi ká wi? ká tú? ntsíj lá gèin*  
 fat AM person SM smash step QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The big person made a step *gèin.*’

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

(2) Vowel lengthening in Babanki onomatopoeia

- a. *ɣà bwà? nántô mfǎŋ á kǎkǎ lá bwà:?*  
 3SG be.tired much fall on chair QUOT ONOM  
 ‘He became too tired and fell *bwà:?* on a chair.’
- b. *byá yi fǎŋ lá byi:m*  
 avocado P1 fall QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The avocado fell, *byi:m.*’
- c. *zù á gǎ?-à fá fé (lá) fyi: á*  
 snake SM say-PROG from where QUOT ONOM QUES  
 ‘Where is the snake hissing *fyi: 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, ɳ, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, ʎ, pʰ, bʰ, ts, dz, tʃ, dʒ, l, w, y/.<sup>2</sup> The six coda consonants are /m, n, ɲ, f, s, k/. In this position, /k/ is realized as a glottal stop [ʔ].

A peculiarity of Babanki onomatopoeias 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 onomatopoeias are the voiceless bilabial plosive [p] and the voiceless glottal fricative [h].

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

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

- a. *mántù tòŋ āsòŋ lá pím pím . . .*  
 car blow horn QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The car hooted, *pím pím . . .*’
- b. *fàjín fá yì yòm tàvó tá wén lá fàp fàp . . .*  
 bird SM P1 beat wings AM 3SG QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The bird flapped its wings, *fàp fàp . . .*’
- c. *wàyn tʃə? 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 onomatopoeias. Recall that in the prosaic vocabulary, /k/ is realized in coda position as the glottal stop [ʔ]. Since [k] occupies the coda position of some onomatopoeias, both the velar plosive and glottal stop are coda consonants in onomatopoeias.

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

- a. *mántù dèm lá tìb tìb . . . fá fé*  
 car rumble QUOT ONOM from where  
 ‘Where did the car rumble from *tìb tìb . . .*?’
- b. *à fòm/gà? ndà lá mpyìk á*  
 it sigh/say who QUOT ONOM QUES  
 ‘Who sighed *mpyìk*?’

While some sounds that are not part of the prosaic system are used in onomatopoeias, it should also be observed that the two Babanki bilabial affricates [pf] and [bv] have not been used in any of the onomatopoeias 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 onomatopoeias, although the CV and CVC types appear to be more frequent.

The peculiarity of onomatopoeias with regard to syllable structure is the presence of diphthongs (see examples in (1)) and long vowels in rhymes (see examples in (2)). No onomatopoeic syllables or words contain exclusively vowels or consonants. 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.

### 3.1.4 Tones

Babanki has two tonemes: /L, H/. Contour tones are rare in the language (Akumbu, Hyman, and Kießling 2020: 3 fn 3). In onomatopoeias, however, contour tones are common, as seen in the following examples.

- (5) Unexpected contour tones in onomatopoeia
- a. à yì bwìf bú kɔɔ (lá) wǐf/wǐh á  
it P1 bark dog which QUOT ONOM QUES  
'Which dog barked wǐf/wǐh?'
  - b. ηkǎ? yì tɔŋ lá kókólikǒ  
rooster P1 blow QUOT ONOM  
'The rooster crowed kókólikǒ.'
  - c. byí yì ò/gà? lá mǛ?  
goat P1 cry/say QUOT ONOM  
'The goat bleated mǛ?.'
  - d. búfǐ yì ò/gà? lá myāwú?  
cat P1 cry/say QUOT ONOM  
'The cat meowed myāwú?.'

The high-mid tone occurs only in the sound of a cat in (5d), whereas rising tones are more frequent and generally occur 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, e.g., *kùm-á* 'touch!'

Babanki onomatopoeias 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 by 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. *fə-bóbó* ‘kite’
- b. *gyégyé-sá* ‘beards’
- c. *kú?* ‘go up’ → *kú?-tá* ‘go up a bit’ → *kú?-tá kú?-tá* ‘GO UP a bit (contrastive focus)’

There are some onomatopoeias that describe sounds that are produced in an extended or continuous manner. One way to capture this is to repeat the onomatopoeia. Such onomatopoeias are repeated at least once, and the single form never occurs. Repetition is also used to lay emphasis, and a speaker can repeat the form 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 onomatopoeias for emphasis

- a. *àyú ú zúsá tá mǎfí?ì lá tǎ? tǎ?...*  
rain SM spend day only descend.PROG QUOT ONOM  
‘Rain has been drizzling the whole day, *tǎ? tǎ?...*’
- b. *fǎmbúm fǎ yì gǎ? fá ǎngǎ? lá fíkǎ fíkǎ...*  
mosquito SM P1 say from house QUOT ONOM  
‘A mosquito hissed *fíkǎ fíkǎ...* in the house.’
- c. *wǎyn tǎ? mǎ lá kyì? kyì?...*  
child laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM  
‘The child laughed at me, *kyì? kyì?...*’

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

There is no evidence that onomatopoeia can serve as a word-formation base to derive new words.

### 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 *gà?* ‘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 āsáj ηgá? lá kò kò kò...*  
 chicken P1 see corn say QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The chicken saw corn and cackled *kò kò kò...*’
- b. *fàjín fə gá?-à fá fəkò? lá tfwí tfwí...*  
 bird SM say-PROG from tree QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The bird is chirping on the tree, *tfwí tfwí...*’
- c. *bùfí yì dì /gá? lá myāwú?*  
 cat P1 cry /say QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The cat meowed *myāwú?*’

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

- (9) Intransitive verbs and onomatopoeia
- a. *wàyn tfə? mō lá kyì? kyì?...*  
 child laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The child laughed at me, *kyì? kyì?...*’
- b. *byá yì fəη lá byi:m*  
 avocado P1 fall QUOT ONOM  
 ‘The avocado fell, *byi:m.*’
- c. *yà bwà? nántō mfəη 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 ndə (lá) bəm bəm... á*  
 it smash-PROG who QUOT ONOM QUES  
 ‘Who is walking energetically?’
- b. *à dʒè? ndə ntʃó (lá) fīb fīb... á*  
 it walk-PROG who pass QUOT ONOM QUES  
 ‘Who has walked past *fīb fīb...*?’
- c. *zù ə gá?-à fá fě (lá) fyi: á*  
 snake SM say-PROG from where QUOT ONOM QUES  
 ‘Where is the snake hissing *fyi: from?*’

The examples in (10) also illustrate that onomatopoeias 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 ò/gà? lá myáwú? bwén*  
 cat.SM NEG P1 cry/say QUOT ONOM NEG  
 ‘The cat didn’t meow *myáwú?*.’
  - b. *wàyn á kó tǝ? mō lá kyì? kyì? . . . bwén*  
 child SM NEG laugh 1SG QUOT ONOM NEG  
 ‘The child didn’t laugh at me *kyì? kyì? . . .*.’
  - c. *nàm á kó yì ò/gà? lá mǝ? bwén*  
 animal SM NEG P1 cry/say QUOT ONOM NEG  
 ‘The cow didn’t moo *mǝ?*.’

### 3.3 Semantics

#### 3.3.1 General

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

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

The source domain of animal sounds contains onomatopoeias 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 onomatopoeias. Other common animals or insects whose sounds are described by onomatopoeias are snakes, crickets, mosquitoes, and other tiny insects. There are no onomatopoeias for the sound of fish and sea creatures because of the geographical location of Babanki in the mountainous highland region of Bamenda, Cameroon.

The ‘human’ source domain has the largest number of sound-imitating words. At least fourteen onomatopoeias describe ‘voice’ sounds, while fourteen describe ‘body’ sounds.

The ‘artifacts’ category has the fewest number of onomatopoeias. 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 are quite recent phenomena in Babanki and not many sound-imitative words have yet been created.

### 3.3.2 Semantic relations

The most evident semantic relationship between onomatopoeias 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*, the chirping of a bird *tʃwí tʃwí . . . / tswí tswí . . .* differs only in the initial consonant of the two forms, and the flapping of wings *fàp fàp . . . / bàb bàb . . .* uses only labial consonants, even if they differ in place and manner of articulation. The sound of laughter can be described using seven different onomatopoeias – *hyi hyi . . . , hyàk hyàk . . . , hyà hyà, . . . hà hà, . . . hyi hyi, . . . kyi? kyi? . . . , ti? ti? . . .* – and it is unclear what differences these encode.

Other onomatopoeias that appear to be synonymous signal differences in the manner or intensity of the sound. Thus, *tʃé? tʃé? . . .* ‘rain drizzling’ describes light rain that continues for a long period, *tʃà? tʃà? . . .* ‘rain drizzling’ describes slightly heavy rain that continues for a long period, *dʒàb, dʒàb. . .* ‘rain pouring’ describes heavy rain that continues for a long period, *dʒà:?* ‘rain drizzling’ is used when light brief rain stops abruptly, *dʒà:?* ‘rain pouring’ is used when slightly heavy rain stops abruptly, and *wà:?* ‘rain pouring and stopping abruptly’ is used when heavy rain stops abruptly.

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

## 4 Conclusion

This study has examined the properties of Babanki onomatopoeias or words that specifically imitate the sound associated with the source. It has become evident that onomatopoeias are a subset of the word class of ideophones with their divergent phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Onomatopoeias use sounds and sound combinations that are not part of the prosaic system. Emphasis is achieved through the lengthening of vowels or the repetition of the onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeias are introduced by a quotative marker and are clause-final unless they are followed by a question or

negation marker that normally occupies the clause-final position. The lack of onomatopoeias for the sounds of fish and sea creatures is due to the geographical location of Babanki in the mountainous highland region of Bamenda, 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, P1 immediate past tense, PROG progressive, QUES question, QUOT quotative, s subject, SG singular, SM subject marker, v vowel/verb

## Appendix

	SOUND TYPES	ONOMATOPOEIA	MEANING
4 ELEMENTS	WATER	<i>tjù:m</i>	water spashing
		<i>dʒà:ʔ</i>	rain drizzling
	AIR	<i>fjéʔ</i>	wind blowing; fast movement or speed of person or object
	EARTH	<i>dʒwà:ʔ</i>	tree, wood, sugarcane breaking; dry leaves crashing
NATURAL SOUNDS		<i>byi:m</i>	object crashing
	FIRE	<i>lwàʔ . . .</i>	fire rising
	MAMMALS	<i>wǔh/wǔf</i>	dog barking
		<i>myāwúʔ</i>	cat meowing
	BIRDS	<i>kókólikǒ</i>	rooster crowing
		<i>kǒ . . .</i>	chicken cackling
	REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS	<i>fjì:</i>	snake hissing
	INSECTS	<i>ʒi:</i>	bees, flies, wasps hissing
		<i>fíkǎ . . .</i>	mosquito
		FISH AND SEA CREATURES	

(continued)

SOUND TYPES		ONOMATOPOEIA	MEANING	
NATURAL SOUNDS	HUMAN	VOICE	<i>hyàk</i> . . .	sound of laughter
			<i>tʃù?</i> . . .	murmuring
	BODY		<i>gìŋ</i> . . .	sound of heavy steps during movement
			<i>bwà?</i> . . .	hand clapping
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS				
ARTIFACTS	VEHICLES		<i>pím</i> . . .	hooting
			<i>tib</i> . . .	sound of engine
	MECHANICAL AND ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT AND DEVICES			
	INSTRUMENTS OF WAR AND DESTRUCTION		<i>bù:m</i>	sound of a gun
			<i>pà?</i> . . .	sound of a gun
	BELLS, GONGS AND OTHER SIGNALING EQUIPMENT			

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