

Reconstructing a Grassfields Bantu nominal prefix low tone: Evidence from associative constructions

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Background: Proto-Bantu NPx tone

- Greenberg (1948: 201): “It will be noted from the examples that the nominal prefix morphemes are all low-toned”.
- Meeussen (1954) confirmed Greenberg’s low-toned nominal prefixes and mixed-tone pronominal reconstructions for Common Bantu, and then discussed verbal prefixes (high for all classes).
- De Wolf (1971) diverges: nominal prefixes with low tone for those that correspond to PB classes 1, 2, 6, 6a, 8, 9, 12, 14, but high for classes 3 and 10; variants of concord prefixes low for those that correspond to PB classes 1, 9, 6a, but high for classes 5, 10; others unmarked for tone.

Grassfields Bantu scenario

Kom: Central Ring Grassfields Bantu

(1) á-kòs 'slave'

a. *má làe kùm á-kòs*

má làe kùm á-kòs

1SG P2 touch 7-slave

'I touched the slave.'

b. *mī-ghām mī à-kòs*

mī-ghām mī à-kòs

6a-mat 6a 7-slave

'mats of the slave'

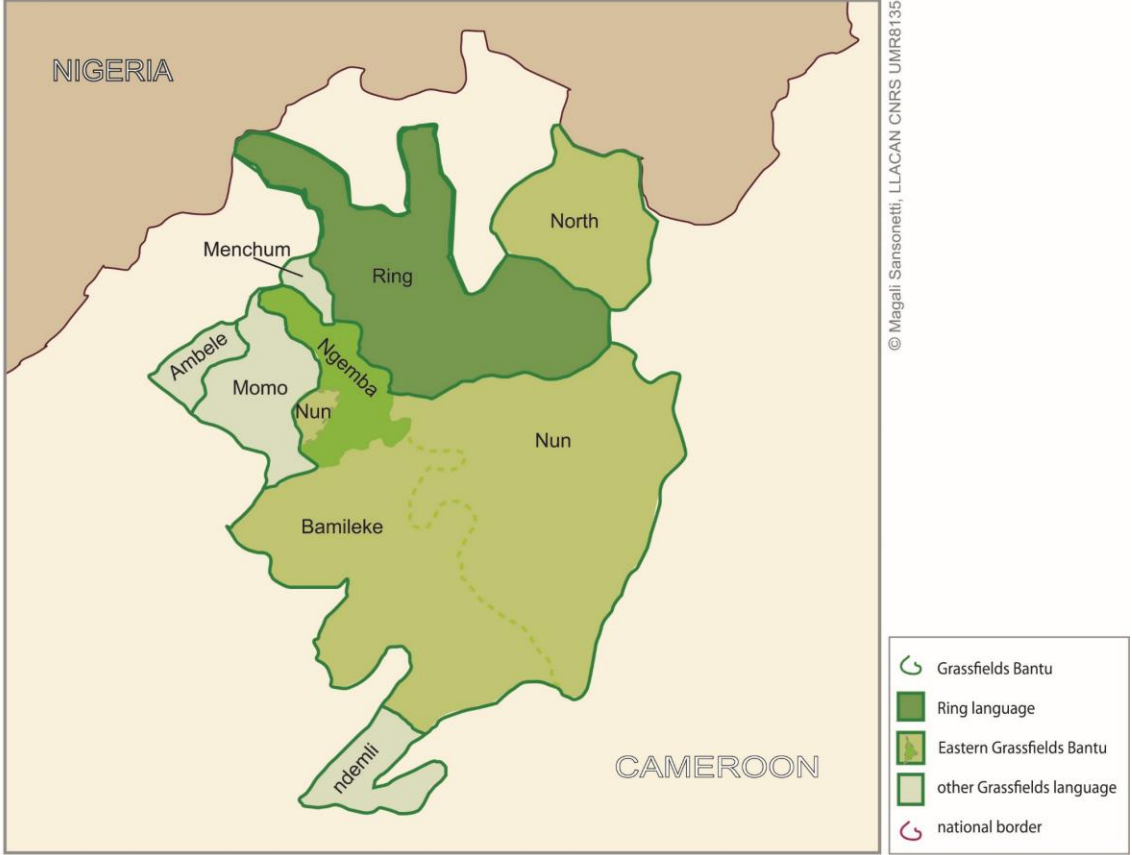
c. *sóyn sí tī-wù*

sóyn sí tī-wú

10.friend 10 13-rock

'friends of rocks'

Grassfields Bantu



Significant differences between Eastern Grassfields Bantu (EGB) and Western Grassfields Bantu (WGB) (Stallcup 1980: 55)

- (2)

Eastern Grassfields Bantu	Western Grassfields Bantu
a. nasal prefix in class 1 and 3 nouns	absence of the nasal
b. no distinction between class 6 and class 6a	distinction between class 6 <i>a-</i> and class 6a <i>mǝ-</i>
c. nasal prefix on all 9/10 nouns	nasal prefix only on some 9/10 nouns
d. absence of classes 4 and 13; class 19 rare	presence of classes 4 and 13; class 19 frequent
e. noun prefixes all carry a /L/ tone	most noun prefixes carry a /H/ tone
f. no noun suffixes	many noun suffixes, e.g. plural <i>-tí, -sí</i>
g. class 2 or 6a generalizes to mark plural	class 10 or 13 generalizes to mark plural
h. innovation of <i>-síŋǝ</i> 'bird', <i>-kǝǝ</i> 'water'	maintenance of <i>*-nǝní</i> 'bird', <i>*-díbá</i> 'water'
i. maintenance of <i>-úmǝ</i> 'thing'	<i>*-úmǝ</i> is lost, other roots come in

Outline

- *H tone nominal prefixes in WGB
- *L tone nominal prefixes in WGB
- *L nominal prefix in N2 of WGB associative constructions
- Influence of PGB *H concord tone on *L nominal prefix tone
- Conclusion

H tone NPx in WGB: Ring

(3) West Ring: Aghem and Isu (Akumbu & Hyman 2017: 1)

Aghem	gloss	Isu	gloss
<i>é-bóʔ</i>	‘bundle (cl.5)’	<i>í-bí</i>	‘kolanut (cl.5)’
<i>kí-ghó</i>	‘bone (cl.7)’	<i>á-sáy</i>	‘corn (cl.6)’
<i>tí-dzím</i>	‘backs (cl.10)’	<i>fá-nyí</i>	‘matchet (cl.19)’

(4) Central Ring: Kom (Akumbu & Hyman 2017: 2)

<i>ā-tâʔ</i>	‘snail (cl.7)’	<i>/á-tàʔ/</i>
<i>fē-ghâm</i>	‘mat (c.19)’	<i>/fé-ghàm/</i>
<i>ā-lóm</i>	‘husband (cl.1)’	<i>/á-lóm/</i>

H tone NPx in WGB: Momo

(5) Ngamambo (Asongwed & Hyman 1976: 2)

fá-bûm 'belly (cl.19)'

má-nyíp 'water (cl.6a)'

ḡ-kân 'message (cl.3)'

ā-tsám 'home (cl.7)'

(6) Oshie (GBWG)

é-fók 'leaf (cl.3)'

í-kîn 'pot (cl.5)'

á-ywók 'foot (cl.7)'

í-mbī 'forest (cl.5)'

Exceptional L tone NPx in WGB: Ring

(7) a. Aghem

tì-mbó? 'banana'

tì-njì 'sheep'

tì-ndzàm 'axes'

• b. Kom

à-ntàs 'spoon'

à-ntfès 'cricket'

ì-ŋgvìn 'grasshopper'

Exceptional L tone NPx in WGB: Momo

(8) a. Ngamambo

ḥjìm 'back'

tḥ-ḥgwánḥ 'salt'

m̀bàp 'rat'

• b. Oshie

à-mbàʔ 'tobacco'

ò-ḥgwánḥ 'salt'

ì-ḥgā̀ 'antelope'

Mixture of H and L NPx depending on morphology

Central Ring: Isu (Anderson 2014: 13, Kießling 2024)

H in classes 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 (with one exceptional lowering before a nasal in class 3: *ù-ηkəm* 'leprosy' and another where the root has an extra low tone in class 7: *kəd̩̀η* 'ruler, king')

L in classes 1a, 6a, 6b, 6ab.

Implication: apart from phonology where lowering of H to L is conditioned by the nasal, morphology also plays a role.

1. H tone nominal Prefixes in WGB

(9) PB, PEG, Proto-Ring and Proto-Momo nominal formative tones

	PB/Proto-EGB		Proto-Ring/Proto-Momo	
Class	<u>NPx</u>	Concord	<u>NPx</u>	Concord
1, 9	*L	*L	*L	*L
Others	*L	*H	*H	*H

- NPx reconstructed with *H tone in all classes except 1 and 9 in Proto-Ring and Proto-Momo.

2. Evidence of *L tone NPx in WGB: Languages with L tone NPx

- There are languages with L tone prefixes, such as Lamnso? (East Ring), Bamessing and Babungo (South Ring), Mundani and Njen (Momo). The distribution of these L tones across Ring and Momo languages makes it hard to explain as an independent innovation.

(10) Lamnso? (East Ring)

<i>f̄ɔ̀n̄</i>	<i>à-f̄ɔ̀n̄</i>	‘chief, fon (1/2)’
<i>kì-fú</i>	<i>vì-fú</i>	‘medicine (cl.7/8)’
<i>ìgwâv</i>	<i>ìgwá v-⁺sí</i>	‘chicken (9/10)’
<i>shì-lív</i>	<i>mè lív</i>	‘heart’ (19/6a)’

Languages with L tone NPx

(11)a. Bamessing (South Ring)

<i>yè-lôŋ</i>	<i>bà-lôŋ</i>	‘friend (cl.1/2)’
<i>kwé⁻</i>	<i>tà-kwé⁻</i>	‘arm (5/13)’
<i>kà-ncé</i>	<i>bà-ncé</i>	‘day (cl.7/8)’
<i>ñjǎŋ</i>	<i>ñjàŋ-sá</i>	‘axe (9/10)’
<i>fà-ndôh</i>	<i>fàndó-⁺sá</i>	‘horn (19/10)’

b. Babungo (South Ring)

<i>shí?</i>	<i>và-shí?</i>	‘nobleman (cl.1/2)’
<i>kí</i>	<i>tà-kí</i>	‘boundary (cl.3/13)’
<i>yì-sí</i>	<i>sí</i>	‘eye (cl.5/6)’
<i>káy</i>	<i>và-káy</i>	‘dish (cl.7/8)’
<i>fà-nsí</i>	<i>mà-nsí</i>	‘tear (cl.19/6a)’

Languages with L tone NPx

(12) a. Mundani (Momo)

<i>è-pân</i>	<i>è-pân</i>	‘tin (cl.3/6a)’
<i>è-bí</i>	<i>à-bí</i>	‘breast (cl.5/6)’
<i>è-bí</i>	<i>tè-bí-tsá</i>	‘pit (cl.5/13)’
<i>à-bù?</i>	<i>è-bù?</i>	‘slave (cl.7/8)’
<i>kèfú?</i>	<i>tè-fú?-tsé</i>	‘cockroach (cl.19/13)’

b. Njen (Momo)

<i>m̄b̄ɔ̄ŋ̄d̄</i>	<i>bè-mb̄ɔ̄ŋ̄d̄</i>	‘God, idol (cl.1/2)’
<i>ì-ghí</i>	<i>à-ghí</i>	‘eye (cl.5/6)’
<i>ì-gwíli</i>	<i>tì-gwíli</i>	‘eye (cl.5/13)’
<i>à-fà?</i>	<i>ì-fà?</i>	‘work (cl.7/8)’
<i>fì-jǐ</i>	<i>tì-jǐ</i>	‘fly (cl.19/13)’
<i>ì-sí</i>	<i>m̄-sí</i>	‘face (cl.5/6a)’

*L NPx in N2 of WGB associative constructions

- In GB, including those languages that regularly have H NPx, when nouns with such prefixes occur as N2 in associative constructions, the prefixes consistently exhibit L tone (Hyman 2005, Kießling 2016).

(13) N2 L NPx in Kom (a), Aghem (b) and Meta? (c)

a.	<i>mā-ghâm mî à-kòs</i>	‘mats of the slave’	/má-ghâm mî à-kòs/
	<i>múú mè tè-bāl</i>	‘water of valleys’	/mùú mè tè-bâl/
	<i>sóyn sé tê-wù</i>	‘friends of rocks’	/sǒyn sé tè-wú/
b.	<i>mùu ìj kî-kò</i>	‘water of servant’	/mùu ìj kî-kò` /
	<i>mùu ì fî-nwìn</i>	‘water of the bird’	/mùu ì fî-nwìn` /
	<i>kâ? fí kî-kò</i>	‘tree of servant’	/fí-kâ?` fí kî-kò` /
c.	<i>̀njìm ì fî-bùm</i>	‘back of absomen’	/̀njìm ì fî-bùm/
	<i>̀njìm ì fî-tām</i>	‘back of seed’	/̀njìm ì fî-tām/
	<i>á-tú í fî-bùm</i>	‘head of abdomen’	/á-tú í fî-bùm/

*L NPx in N2 of WGB associative constructions

“Noun prefixes in both the Ring and Momo subbranches of Grassfields Bantu (GB) generally have underlying /H/ tone in citation forms and most grammatical contexts. At the same time, however, and **without exception, nouns exhibit a low (L) tone prefix when occurring after an associative marker in an ‘N1 of N2’ construction**” Hyman (2005: 313) .

- **Aghem** (Hyman 1979: 36), **Kom** (Hyman 2005: 320), **Kuk** (Kießling 2016: 7), **Babungo** (Schaub 1985: 320), **Meta?** (Sprea 1986), **Ngamambo** (Asongwed & Hyman 1976: 46)

*L NPx in N2 of WGB associative constructions

- How to account for H NPx in citation form and other grammatical contexts, but L NPx in N2 of associative constructions?
- Hyman (2005: 313) proposed that the H tone in WGB was “an additional morpheme, perhaps related to the Proto-Bantu H tone V-/CV- augment reconstructed by Meeussen (1967)”. This proposal was based on Grégoire & Janssens (1999) who show that in an augment-prefix sequence, either one can drop out.
- Kießling (2016: 7) adopts Hyman’s view and argues that “in a historical perspective, the L reflex links up directly with the L noun class prefixes in other Grassfields Bantu languages and in Bantu, while the H reflex might reasonably be analysed as trace of a prior augment, as argued by Hyman 2005.”

*L NPx in N2 of WGB associative constructions

- This speculation about a possible augment in WGB has not been developed in detail.
- In Kom, the distribution of the initial vowel linked to the augment “is very limited, appearing only in (some) initial environments, and it is not clear whether its presence vs. absence has any grammatical or semantic function at all” (Hyman 2005: 325).
- In Bantu at least, augments are based on old concord markers and vary by class (except in fully reduced paradigms that have the same augment vowel in all classes (Van de Velde 2019: 248)) whereas in Grassfields languages the initial vowel is invariant.

*L NPx in N2 of WGB associative constructions

- My suggestion: The L tone prefix that follows the AM is a direct reflex of the historical *L tone prefix (see Hombert 1976).
- Williamson's (1993) suggestion that noun prefixes may have been *L in all classes in Proto-Benue-Congo.
- *H tone involved is that of the concord, not augment.

3. Influence of PGB *H concord tone on *L NPx

- Possible influence of the concord system on nominal prefixes (Akumbu & Wills 2022)

(14) PWG nominal prefixes and concords (Hyman 1980b: 182)

class	NPx	concord
1	ù(N)-	ù-
2	bǎ-	bǎ-
3	ú-	ú-
5	í-	í-
6	á-	gá-
6a	mǎ-	mǎ-
7	kí-	kí-
8	bí-	bí-
9	ì(N)-	ì-
10	í(N)-	Cí-
13	tí	tí
19	fí-	fí-

Influence of PGB *H concord tone on *L NPx

- The high frequency of the concord markers (e.g., used before and after an adjective) could easily have an impact on the nominal prefixes.

(15) Kom: *ā-fā-tám fā-bú=fá* ‘bad fruit’

ā-fā-tám fā-béná=fá ‘big fruit’

- This is clearly what happened with the Proto-Ring class 10 nominal suffix *-sə which was originally a concord marker.

(16) Babanki: *ndzàm sá-fí=sá* ‘new axes’ > *ndzàm-sá* ‘axes’

Influence of PGB *H concord tone on *L NPx

- Some WGB languages innovating noun class suffixes

H and L suffixes in Babessi (Hodieb 2023)

<i>bvǎʔ-ká</i>	‘dust, ashes (cl.7)’	<i>kûʔ-kà</i>	‘cocoyam (cl.7)’
<i>tú-ŋgā</i>	‘heads (cl.8)’	<i>nt̀:-ŋgà</i>	‘elephants (cl.8)’
<i>nyú-sā</i>	‘hair (cl.10)’	<i>ŋkà-sà</i>	‘maggot (cl.10)’
<i>vǒʔ-tā</i>	‘fat (cl.13)’	<i>bôʔ-tà</i>	‘wing (cl.13)’
<i>ncí-fá</i>	‘day (cl.19)’	<i>nj̀à-fà</i>	‘stone (cl.19)’

Influence of PGB *H concord tone on *L NPx

- Therefore, I reconstruct a *L and explain the H as a substitution. The PB and Proto-Grassfields Bantu *L prefixes seen in EGB must have also been in Proto-WGB (Hombert 1976, Williamson 1993).
- Individual WGB languages adapted differently, with many choosing to substitute the *L prefix tones with *H concord tones (except in NPx of N2 in AC where the original *L is retained), since both were available and often merged with one another.

Concluding remarks

- H NPx tone in Ring and Momo languages is due to the influence of concord tones on prefix tones. Based on analogical influence of the concord system, speakers tend to replace prefixes (both segments and tones) with concords, e.g., just as the PB class 2 noun prefix **ba-* parallels the class 2 concord **ba*, a speaker can also expect other noun prefixes to parallel concords.
- Supporting evidence comes from associative constructions, where without exception, nouns exhibit a low tone prefix when occurring in N2 position.

Concluding remarks

- The influence of concord tones on nominal tones is just one of the manifestations of the interaction of concord and prefixes in Bantoid and the discussion in this paper provides support for Akumbu & Wills' (2022) proposal that the lack of nasal prefixes in WGB is due to the influence of the concord series.

Other evidence of concord influence

Class 5

	concord		nominal prefix	
Proto-Bantoid	*d _l		*i	
Proto-Bantu (+ some Bantu, Beboid)	*d _l		*ĩ	(preserve)
Proto-EGrassfields (+ some Bantu)	*l _i	>	*l _i	(concord wins)
Proto-WGrassfields (+ some Bantu)	*i	<	*i	(NP _x wins)
some Bantu langs	i	< >	l _i	(reverse > i-l _i = V-CV)

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