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Variation in Central Ring: Convergence or divergence?

PIUS W. AKUMBU[1], ROLAND KIEßLING[2]
[1]LLACAN (CNRS – INALCO – EPHE), [2]UNIVERSITÄT HAMBURG

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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 morphologicized aspectual focus system), a couple of isoglosses such as **m-lám* (6a) 'blood', **m-fú(k)* (6a) 'pus', **kə-bvôl* (7) 'ashes', **fɨ̀ / *kʊ̀l* (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 isoglosses[1], 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 morphologicized aspectual focus system. The most salient isoglosses are: **m-lám* (6a) 'blood', **m-fʉ́(k)* (6a) 'pus', **kə-bvôl* (7) 'ashes', **fɨ̂ / *kʊ̀l* (9/10) 'rope', **kə-fûk* (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	+	-
morphologicized aspect focus	-	+
gender of **ú-lûə* 'bridge'	3/13	3/6a
'blood'	**m-lám* (6a)	**tə-kâŋ* (13)
'pus'	**m-fʉ́(k)* (6a)	**u-dzʉ̂d* (3)
'ashes'	**kə-bvôl* (7)	**u-dzɨ̂m* (3)
'rope'	**fɨ̂ / *kʊ̀l* (9/10)	**kə-bá?* (7/8)
'farm'	**kə-fûk* (7/8)	**ú-súm* (3/4)

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

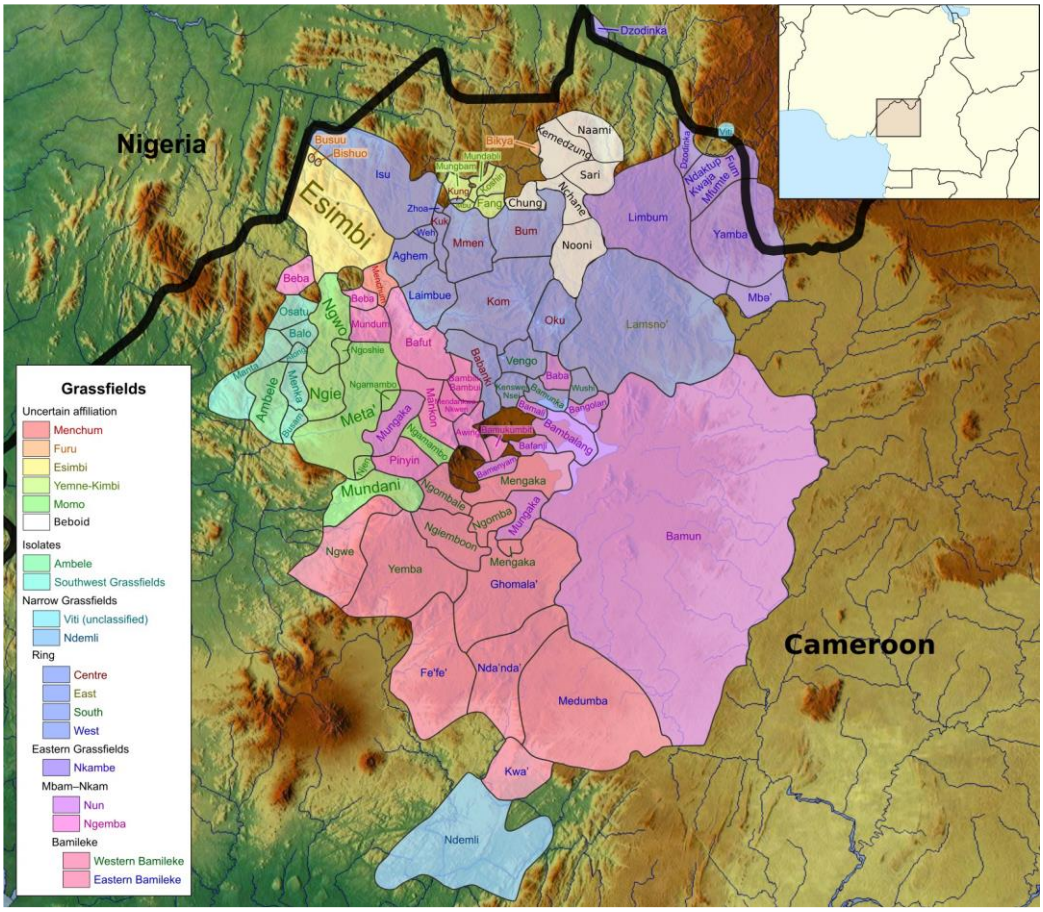
Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2023) identify seven CR languages (Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring), listed here with their Glottocodes (Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, & Bank 2022): Babanki (baba1266), Bum (bumm1238), Kom (komc1235), Kuk (kukk1239), Kung (kung1260), Men (mmen1238), 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 *dzɛ̀m* (+Babanki) vs. CR *kɨ́m*; 'road, path': WR *dzɨd* (+Babanki, Kom, Oku) vs. CR *ūnɔ́m* (Bum, Kuk, Kung, Men); 'salt': WR *ḿtsò?* vs. CR *ḿgbáŋ* (+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 *kə̀-báyn* (1c).

(1) NPx in selected Ring languages (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring)

a. Oku
má nə̀ 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 tə̀ kùm kə̀-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$_{\underline{H}}$)	*ə̀-fwín*	*ū-fwén*	*ī-fwɛ́n*	*kə̄-fʌ́i*	*kə̄-fwéi*	*ā-fwé(i)n*	*ə̄b-fín*	'leg (tibia)'
H_2 (H$_{\underline{L}}$)	*ə̀-kwə́ŋ*	*ū-kpə̂n*	*ī-kwɔ́*	*kə̄-kpʌ́i*	*kə̄-kpʌ́i*	*ā-kɔ́(i)n*	*ə̄b-kɔ̂i*	'arm'
L_1 (L$_{\underline{H}}$)	*ə̀-ɣɔ́ŋ*	*ī-wɔ̄ŋ*	*ī-ɣɔ̄ŋ*	*ī-wɔ̄ŋ*	*ī-ɣɔ̄ŋ*	*ē-ɣɔ̄ŋ*	*ī-ɣɔ́ŋ*	'spear'
L_2 (L$_{\underline{L}}$)	*fə̀-kɔ̀ʔ*	*fū-kə̂k*	*fī-kâʔ*	*fə̄-kâʔ*	*fə̄-kâʔ*	*fē-kâʔ*	*fē-kə̂k*	'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* —› *fēkâk* 'tree'
b. Kom
   /fɨ́-kà?/ —› *fɨ́kâ?* —› *fɨ̄kâ?* 'tree'
c. Babanki
   /fə̂-kɔ̀?/ —› *fə̂kɔ̀?* '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.	*kəkɨ́m*	'crab'
	vətsɔ́ŋ	'thieves'
	vəlàmà	'brothers'
b.	*kəkɨ́m ká vətsɔ́ŋ*	'crab of thieves'
	vətsɔ́ŋ vá kəkɨ́m	'thieves of crab'
	kəkɨ́m ká vəlàmà	'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:
/Ý-(C)Ỳ-R/ —› Ý-(C)Ŷ-R, e.g., Oku */Ý-fè-ɣàm/* —› *Ý-fê-ɣàm*
AUG-NPx-R
b. delinking of NPx low tone
Ý-(C)Ŷ-R —› Ý-(C)Ý-R, e.g., Oku *Ý-fê-ɣàm* —› *Ý-fé-ɣàm*
AUG-NPx-R
c. deletion of augment
~~Ý~~-(C)Ý-R, e.g., Oku *Ý-fé-ɣàm* —› *fé-ɣàm*
~~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 *ī-ʃɔ́ŋ á kè-kɔ̀s*. 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-ɣàm* in (2).

Language	'orange'	'pot'	'potato'	class
Proto-EG	**?*	**tòǹ*	**?*	1
Bafut	*lâmsɨ̀*	*àntɔ̀ɔ̀*	*àndɔ̀ŋə̀*	1
Mankon	*lāmsɨ̀*	*àntò*	?	1
Babanki	*lâmsə̀*	*ntɔ̀n*	*ndɔ̀ŋ*	1
Kom	*lámbās*	*ntɔ̀in*	*ndɔ̀ŋ*	9
Oku	?	*ntɔ̀n*	*ndɔ̀ŋ*	9
Men	*lámâs*	*tɔ̀in*	*ndɔ̄ŋ*	9
Aghem	*lámá*	*tɔ̀e*	*ndɔ́ŋ*	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'	*lâmsɨ̀*	*bɨ̀lâmsɨ̀*	*lâmsə̀*	*və̀lâmsə̀*
'radio'	*rɛ̄dyō*	*bɨ̀rɛ̄dyō*	*lédyò*	*və̀lédyò*
'table'	*tábɛ̀rɨ̀*	*bɨ̀tábɛ̀rɨ̀*	*tábə̀lə̀*	*və̀tábə̀lə̀*
'lock'	*lógɨ̀*	*bɨ̀lógɨ̀*	*lɔ́k*	*və̀lɔ́k*
'flower'	*fɨ̀láwà*	*bɨ̀fɨ̀láwà*	*fə̀láwà*	*və̀fə̀láwà*
'pig'	*kúŋàm*	*bɨ̀kúŋàm*	*ŋkʉ̆ŋàm*	*və̀ŋkʉ̆ŋàm*
'rat', 'mouse'	*fórə̄*	*bɨ̀fórə̄*	*[tʃʊ̆kʉ̀ʔ]*	*[və̀tʃʊ̆kʉ̀ʔ]*
'cock'	*àŋkə̀gɨ̀*	*bàŋkə̀gɨ̀*	*ŋkə̀ʔ*	*və̀ŋkə̀ʔ*
'horse'	*láŋə́*	*bɨ̀láŋə́*	*là̰ŋ*	*və̀là̰ŋ*
'cat'	*búʃɨ̀*	*bɨ̀búʃɨ̀*	*bùʃí*	*və̀bùʃí*
'co-wife'	*fúʔù*	*bɨ̀fúʔù*	*fɨ̂f*	*və̀fɨ́f*
'friend'	*ǹʃúkàʔà*	*bɨ̀ʃūbɨ́kàʔà*	*[wùndɔ́ŋ]*	*[və̀ndɔ́ŋ]*
'witch'	*sɔ̀rɨ̀, ndɨ̀ɨ̀*	*bɨ̀sɔ̀rɨ̀, bɨ̀lɨ̀ɨ̀*	*[ʒɛ́]*	*[və̀ʒɛ́]*
'moon', 'month'	*sàŋ*	*bɨ̀sàŋ*	*sàŋ*	*və̀sàŋ*
'pot'	*àntɔ̀ɔ̀*	*bàntɔ̀ɔ̀*	*ntɔ̀yn*	*və̀ntɔ̀yn*
'potato'	*àndɔ̀ŋə̀*	*bàndɔ̀ŋə̀*	*ndɔ̀ŋ*	*və̀ndɔ̀ŋ*

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

bracketting, i.e., 'rat, mouse', 'friend', and 'witch', and (b) cognate forms that show a considerable degree of formal divergence, e.g., Babanki *ntɔ̀yn* 'pot' (vs. Bafut *àntɔ̀ɔ̀*) or *ŋkə̀ʔ* 'cock' (vs. Bafut *àŋkə̀gɨ̀*) (Akumbu & Wills 2022). Notice, for instance, that the Bafut item for 'cock' retains a root-final velar stop that has been shifted to glottal stop in most of CR including Babanki. Also, the Bafut item for 'pot' seems to have compensated the loss of the root final nasal by vowel lengthening, and installed an extra vowel, which might have been a prefix historically.[7]
This suggests that the agents of change may have been bilingual Babanki speakers orienting towards the Bafut model - either with an aspiration to align with their Bafut allies or else to dissociate from their CR neighbours – or even both.[8]

2.3 Consecutive multiverb constructions

Babanki also deviates from the CR standard in its expression of verb linkage in various types of same subject multiverb constructions, aligning with EGB languages by using a homorganic nasal prefix N- for verbal consecutivisation. In contrast, all the other CR languages seem to lack such consecutivising nasal prefix N-, simply juxtaposing the verbs without any formal linking device in asymmetrical serial verb constructions for various functions, e.g., deictic orientation, path/vector indication, aspect, result, detrimental effect, manner and comparison, as is common in West Ring (Kießling 2011), and in Kuk (5), Kung (6), and Men (7).

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

a. Completion with co-verb *mʌ̀nì* 'finish' (iterative: *mʌ̀lkə̀*)

ù	*pfíʌ*	*mʌ̀lkə̀*	*tʃʊ̄ɔ́*	*wéá*	*kə̀ᵘ̈bó*	*pát*[7]
3SG	chew	finish	descend	2.children	N2:7.lion	completely

'He ate all the children of the lion - finish!'

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

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

b. Detrimental effect with *màʔà* ‘throw away’
m̄ *kə̂* *sʉ̀lə̀* *màʔà* *m̀múɔ̄*
1SG F2 scatter.IPF throw.away.IPF 6a.water
‘I will be scattering water.’

c. Comparison with co-verb *tsùɔ* ‘pass’
má *tàb* *tsùɔ* *ɣò*
1SG:P1.FOC tall pass 2SG
‘I’m taller than you.’

d. Deictic orientation: centripetal *bɛ̀* ‘come’
ù *nèi* *bɛ̀* *ɣò* *m̀* *tsə̌mbī* *m̀*
3SG take come 2SG with 6a.groundnuts OF.6a
‘She brings you groundnuts.’

e. Path/vector: *tʃúɔ* ‘descend; down’
kpʌ́ *tʃúɔ* *tú* *k-ɨ́ŋ*
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 *mʌ̀sə̀* ‘finish’
ɣàsə́ *khìa* *mʌ̀sə̀* *ɣɛ́* *ʌ́* *náe*
1PL.EXCL P0 slice finish matter at today
‘We have finished discussing the topic for today.’

b. Detrimental effect with *màʔà* ‘throw away’ (imperfective: *màʔkə̀*)
ù *tīnə́* *màʔkə̀* *mē*
3SG push.IPF throw.IPF 1SG
‘He is pushing me uselessly (e.g., in bullying).’

c. Path/vector: *fə́sə́* ‘take out’ (< *fə́* ‘exit’), *kɔ́ʔsə́* ‘lift’ (< *kɔ́ʔ* ‘ascend’)
wŭə *ᵑgúɔ* *sʌ̀i* *fə̄sə́* *kɔ̄ʔsə́* *mē* *ʌ̄* *bûʔ* *kə̀*
SM.1:P0.FOC catch pull take.out lift 1SG at hole(s) OF.7
‘S/he has dragged me out of the hole.’

d. Path/vector: *kɔ́ʔ* ‘ascend, climb; up’
bɔ́ŋ *ᵑgkɔ́ʔ* *mwàʔlə̀* *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 *mɨsɛ̀* 'finish'
è *və́* *fià?* *mɨsɛ̀*
3SG 1.PF work finish
'S/he has finished work.'

b. Detrimental effect with *mà?à* 'throw away'
è *və́* *ˈtsʊ́intê* *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'
mʌ́ *kʊ́lə̂* *pèin*
1SG.PF return.from.farm come
'I have come back from the farm.'

d. Path/vector: *ndzɨ́sé* 'insert' < *ndʒí* 'enter'
mʌ́ *ndʌ̀m* *ndzɨ́sé* *ʃéin*
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)
ɲám *sə̀-tsɛ̀m* *sə́* *yì* *kú?* *n-dʒʉ́* *á* *ə̄-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 dʒá tsɨ̀m dʒí kɔ́ʔɔ́ ŋ-ɣɛ̀ɛ̂ á àbùrɨ̀
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 tɛ̀m nyàm n-ʒwí
hunter P1 shoot 9-animal N-kill
'The hunter shot the animal dead.'

b. Bafut (Benue Congo, Bantoid, Narrow Grassfields, Ngemba; Tamanji 2009: 204)
ŋùbóò w-á à kɨ̀ túmə̂ n-àà j-á n-ʒwítə̂
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)
tɔ̀lɔ̀kyí yì ɲ-ɲɨ́ŋ n-tʃó ŋgó
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)
kwímáŋkɔ̀ʔɔ̀ à lɛ́ ŋ-kxə̌ n-tʃə̌ n-gyâ
1.tortoise SM P3 N-run N-surpass 1-deer
'Tortoise ran faster than Deer.'

Tracing the reasons for this influence requires going back to historical events approximately three to four hundred years back when the Babanki and Bafut are believed to have been related or a single Tikari group living in the Ndop plain (Chilver & Kaberry 1967: 19, Yenshu Vubo 2001, Ngwa 2022: 623). According to Bafut legend, they fled from Fulani warriors in Foumban and lived in the Ndop plain for many years. Ritzenthaler (1967: 11–12) reports that "when their Fon died, three of his

stronger sons wrangled fiercely over which should succeed him. The argument seemed about to flare into open battle until one son suggested that they divide the tribe and that two of them move elsewhere to establish new villages". The group was divided into four parts so as to give two parts to the son who made the brilliant suggestion and one part to each of the other sons. One of the sons with one part decided to stay in Ndop and form present day Bamunka while the other moved to form present day Bafut. The one with two parts moved to form present day Babanki. It is not known with certainty whether the Babanki and Bafut ever lived together again or as direct neighbours thereafter but it is known that to get to their present sites, each group went through diverse migratory routes and fought many wars along the way.

3. Bum

Another CR puzzle pertains to the isolated innovation of the phoneme /h/ in Bum (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. *mwɔ̀m-hì* 'try', but Kom *mwɔ̀m-sì*, Oku *mwɔ̀m-sè*, Mbizinaku *mwɔ̀m-sə̀*, Babanki *mwɔ̀m-sə̀*, Men *mwɔ̀m-sè*
b. *līm-hî* 'extinguish', but Kom *lɯ́m-sɨ́*, Oku *līm-sê*, Mbizinaku *lə̄m-sə̂*, Babanki *lɛ́m-sə́*, Men *ndɨ́m-sé*, Babungo *nú-sə́*
c. *yūɣ-hî* 'perspire' but Kom *yō?-sɨ́*, Oku *zvūk-s-în*, Mbizinaku *ʒvūk-sə̂*, Babanki *ʒú?-sə́*, Men *zú?-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-sɛ̂* 'eye', cf. Kom *ī-sɯ́*, Men *ē-sɨ́*, Oku *ī-ʃiɛ̂*, Mbizinaku *ī-ʃɯ̂*, Babanki *ə̀-ʃɨ́*
b. *ū-wús* 'fire', cf. Men *ē-wʊ́s*, Mbizinaku *ə̄-və́s*

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

a. *sə̄-bvû* ‘goats’, cf. Kuk *sə̄-byí,* Kung *sə̄-ʙə̄*, Men *sē-pfɨ̄*
b. *sə̀-kʊ̀l* ‘ropes’, cf. Kung *sə̀-kʊ̀l*, Men *sē-kwɨ̀l*

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

a. *ɲám=꞉sú* ‘animals’, cf. Babanki *ɲám=꞉sə́,* Kom ɲám=*sɨ̄*, Oku *ɲám=sə̄*
b. *ndʒàm=꞉sú* ‘axes’, cf. Babanki *ndzàm=sə́,* Kom *ndʒàm=sɨ̀*, Oku *ndʒàm=sə́*

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 *īsâh* and Buu (buuu1246; Benue Congo, Bantoid, Yemne-Kimbi) *ésáh* 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	*b*	*d*	*dz~dʒ*	*g*	*?*
Bum	*b*	*d*	*dʒ*	*g*	*?*
Kom	*b*	*d*	*dʒ*	*g*	*?*
Kuk	*b*	*t*	*ts (~tʃ)*	*?*	*kp*
Kung	*b*	*t*	*ts (~tʃ)*	*k*	*?*
Men	*p*	*t*	*ts (~tʃ)*	*k*	*kp*
Oku	*b*	*d*	*dʒ*	*g*	*?*
Aghem	*b*	*d*	*dz*	*g*	*gb*
Bu	*b*	*t*	*ts*	*k*	*?*
Isu	*b*	*d*	*dz*	*g*	*gb*
Weh	*b*	*d*	*dz*	*g*	*gb*
Zoa	*b*	*d*	*dz*	*g*	*gb*

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	*b*	*kɬbɛ́*	*kɬbî*	*kɬbô?*	*bàŋ*	*bɔ́*	*bín*	*búo*
Bu	*b*	*kábái*	*kúbî*	*kábô?*	*bàŋ*	*bá*	*bái*	*bów*
Isu	*b*	*kábá*	*kábî*	*kábwɔ̂?*	*bàŋ*	*bɛ́b*	*bán*	*bwí*
Kuk	*b*	*kābá*	*?*	*kābû?*	*bàŋ*	*bʌ́b*	*bʌ́n*	*búɔ*
Kung	*b*	*kābáe*	*kābê*	*kābû?*	*bàŋ*	*bʌ́f*	*bʌ́n*	*búɔ*
Men	*p*	*āpáin*	*āpî*	*āpû?*	*pàŋ*	*póf*	*péin*	*pɔ́*
Babanki	*b*	*kàbáin*	*kàbì*	*kàbù?*	*bàŋ*	*byɨ́f*	*bɛ́n*	*bwá?*

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, *dèepù*	**-dìd*	**-dìtù, *dìtò*	**-nùnù*	**-dìàd*	**?*
PGr	**d*	**-dàb*	**-ddìl*	**-ddìd*	**-dùn*	**?*	**?*
Aghem	*d*	*dà*	*dìi*	*dɨ̀n*	*dwɨ̀n*	*dɔ?ɔ̀*	*dàŋ*
Bu	*t*	*tàh*	*tɨ̀i*	*tɨ̀*	*?*	*?*	*tàŋ*
Isu	*d*	*dàb*	*dìi*	*dʌ̀d*	*dzòn*	*dɔ?ɔ̀*	*dàŋ*
Kuk	*t*	*tàb*	*tɨ̀i*	*təkə̀*	*tɨ̀n*	*tʌ?ʌ́*	*tàŋ*
Kung	*t*	*tyàf*	*tì*	*tɨ̀l*	*tyɨ̀n*	*tè?è*	*?*
Men	*t*	*tyàf*	*tʃì*	*tɨ̀l*	*tɥìn*	*tà?ə*	*tyàŋ*
Babanki	*d*	*dyə̀f*	*dì*	*dì?*	*dwìn*	*[ɲú?mə́]*	*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*	*dzɨ̀ŋ*	*dzɨ̀m*	*dzɛ̀*	*dzɨ̀yà*	*dzɨ́*	*dʒɨ́*	*dzɔ̀*
Bu	*ts*	*tsə̀ŋ*	*tsɨ̀m*	*?*	*?*	*tsɨ́*	*tsɨ̀ɣ*	*tsɔ̀*
Isu	*dz*	*dzɔ́ŋ*	*ⁿdzím*	*dzài*	*dzɨ́*	*dzɨ́*	*ⁿdzʌ́d*	*dzwàb*
Kuk	*ts*	*tsɨ̀ŋ*	*tsɨ̀m*	*tsàa*	*tsò*	*tsə̀*	*[ūnɔ́m]*	*tsɔ̀bə̀*
Kung	*tʃ*	*tʃʌ̀ŋ*	*tʃʌ̀m*	*?*	*tsɔ̀(m)*	*kìə*	*[ūnóm]*	*tsɔ̀f*
Men	*tʃ*	*tʃə́ŋ*	*tsɨ̀m*	*tsàin*	*tsɛ̀*	*kyɨ̀(ɣ)*	*[ēndúm]*	*tsɔ̀f*
Babanki	*dʒ*	*dʒɨ̀ŋ*	*dzəàm*	*gà?*	*gə̀*	*gɨ̀*	*dʒì*	*[bɔ̀ŋ]*

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

Babanki *bɔ̀ŋ* ‘be nice’ may present a PGr retention under influence of contact to EGB, whereas CR + WR have innovated **dzɔ̀b* 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*	**-gùbò, *-gòbì*	*?*	**-gù, *-bù*
PGr	**g*	**-gùb̀*	**-gòk*	**-gùa*
Aghem	*g*	*gù*	*gùo*	*bvò*
Bu	*k*	*[tsəŋ]*	*kùa*	*[và]*
Isu	*g*	*dzɔ́ŋ*	*gùɔ*	*[bvɔ̀]*
Kom	*g*	*gvɨ́*	*gvà*	*[fé]*
Kuk	*?*	*?*	*[tsʌ́m]*	*[bʌ̀]*
Kung	*k*	*kù°*	*[tsʌ́m]*	*kù*
Men	*k*	*[pfɪ̄]*	*kùɔ*	*[pfù]*
Oku	*g*	*gûo*	*gùo*	*[fɛ̄ì]*
Babanki	*g*	*gwʉ̀*	*[bvù]*	*[fə́ŋ]*

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

Language		**'cut off', 'fell'**
PB	**g, *b*	**?*
PGr	**g*	**?*
Aghem	*gb*	*gbɔ̀*
Bu	*?*	*?*
Isu	*gb*	*gbùw*
Kom	*gv*	*gvèl*
Kuk	*kp*	*kpʌ̀*
Kung	*?*	*?*
Men	*kp*	*kpɨ̀*
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’	*sē-ndʒàm (Men)*	*sə̀-ndzə̀m*	*sə̄-fú*	*tɨ́-ndzə̂m (Agh)*
‘animals’	*sē-ɲâm (Men)*	*sə̄-ɲâm*	*sə̄-ɲâm*	*tə́-ɲâm (Isu)*
‘goats’	*byɨ̰́-sə́ (Bab)*	*sə̄-byí*	*sə̄-вə̄*	*tə́-byí (Isu)*
‘hoes’	*sē-fɨ́ɣ (Men)*	*sə̄-fɨ̃ɣ*	*sə̄-fə̃*	*tɨ́-fû (Agh)*
‘buffaloes’	*sē-fūŋ (Men)*	*sə̄-fúŋ*	*sə̀-fʊ̀ŋ˚*	*tə́-fʊ́ŋ (Isu)*
‘cows’	*mbòŋ-sɨ̀ (Kom)*	*sə̀-mbɔ̀lɔ́ʔ*	*sə̄-mbɔ̀ŋ*	*tə̀-mbɔ̃̀ŋ (Isu)*
‘rashes, scabies’	*sē-kwàs (Men)*	*sə̀-kpə̀l*	*sə̀-kpə̀s*	*[tɨ̀-kpɨ̀ŋ (Agh)]*
‘soot (under pot)’	*sē-ləʔ (Men)*	*sə̀-lɨ̀ʔ*	*sə̀-lə̀ʔ˚*	*tə́-lə́k (Isu)*
‘locusts’	*sē-pīŋ (Men)*	*sə̄-bʌ́i*	*sə̄-bʌ́i*	*tɨ́-bé (Agh)*
‘pots’	*ntòn-sə̀ (Oku)*	*sə̀-tɔ̃*	*sə̀-tɔ̃̀e*	*tə̀-ntɔ̃̀ (Zoa)*
‘maize plants’	*sē-sʌ̀f (Men)*	*[ʌ̄-sʌ́b]*	*sə̀-sʌ̀f*	*[à-sɔ̀ (Agh)]*
‘mountains’	*tē-kwáʔà (Men)*	*sə̀-ŋmgbàʔ*	*sə̄-ŋgbàʔ*	*tə́-kâʔà (Isu)*
‘feathers’	*tɨ́-vɨ̂l (Kom)*	*sə̄-və̂*	*sə̄-wúlə̀*	*tə́-wʌ̂t (Zoa)*
‘charcoals’	*tē-kʲí (Men)*	*sə̄-kéi*	*sə̄-kíə*	*tə́-kái (Isu)*
‘hearthstones’	*tē-tsís (Men)*	*sə̄-tsúl*	*[sə̀-tsʊ̀ŋə̀]*	*tə́-tsʊʌ́t (Zoa)*
‘he-goats’	*tē-fə́f (Men)*	*sə̄-fʌ́b*	*sə̄-fʌ́f*	*tə́-fə́b (Weh)*
‘wings’	*tēy-ɣâa (Oku)*	*sə̄-ɣâʔlə̀*	*sə̄-ɣɛ̂ɛ*	*tɨ́-ɣ(w)ə̂ (Agh)*
‘blood’	*[mɨ́-lúŋ (Kom)]*	*sə̄-kâŋ*	*sə́-kâŋ*	*tə́-kâŋ (Isu)*
‘chiefs’	*tə̀-fɔ̃yn (Bab)*	*sə̀-fɔ̃*	*sə̄-fɔ̂*	*tə̀-fɔ̃̂ (Zoa)*
‘cutlasses’	*tɨ́-fô (Kom)*	*sə̄-fʲîa*	*sə̄-fɛ̂*	*[ú-kûm (Weh)]*
‘leaves’	*tə̀-fɯ́ (Bab)*	*sə̄-fúw*	*sə̄-fú*	*tɨ́-fúᵑ́ú (Agh)*
‘roots’	*tɨ̄-ɣáŋ (Bum)*	*sə̄-ɣáŋ*	*sə̄-ɣáŋ*	*tə́-ɣáᵑ́ŋə́ (Isu)*
‘lakes’	*tɨ̄-lûe (Kom)*	*sə̄-ɲî*	*sə̄-ɲî*	*tɨ́-ɲɯ̂ (Agh)*
‘places’	*tə̄-lúk (Bum)*	*sə̄-lʊ́ʔ*	*sə̄-lʊ́ʔ*	*tə́-lɔ́ᵑ́ʔɔ́ (Isu)*

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
1PL = 1st plural
1SG = 1st person
2SG = 2nd person
3SG = 3rd person
AUG = augment
ASVC = asymmetrical verb serialization
CR = Central Ring
D1 = near speaker demonstrative
D2 = near listener demonstrative
D3 = distal demonstrative
EGB = Eastern Grassfields Bantu
EXCL = exclusive
F2 = hodiernal future tense
FOC = focus
H = high tone
HTS = high tone spread
IMP = imperative
IPF = imperfective
L = low tone
M = mid tone
N = nasal
NPX = noun class prefix
OF = out of focus marker
P0 = present/perfect tense
P1 = immediate past tense
P2 = hodiernal past tense
P3 = distant past tense
PB = Proto-Bantu
PF = perfective
PGr = Proto-Grassfields
PL = plural
R = root
SVC = serial verb construction
SG = singular
SM = subject marker
WR = West Ring

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CONTACT

pius.akumbu@cnrs.fr
(Roland.Kiessling@uni-hamburg.de)