

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

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Abstract

Since Stallcup (1980) the claim that most noun prefixes carry a /H/ tone in Western Grassfields Bantu (WGB) languages has largely gone unchallenged. It has rather been taken up and propagated by Grassfields scholars particularly as an isogloss that sets WGB apart from Eastern Grassfields Bantu. However, in both the Ring and Momo branches of Grassfields, evidence of L tone prefixes in various grammatical contexts including when a noun occurs after an associative marker in 'N1 of N2' constructions is widespread. In this study, I illustrate that cases of L tone prefixes are prevalent in both Ring and Momo languages and argue that the L tone of N2 prefixes in those languages which exhibit H tone prefixes is a reflex of the Proto-Grassfields Bantu (PGB) historical prefix *L tone, in line with Hombert (1976) and Williamson (1993). On the other hand, the H tone on prefixes results from speakers selecting and using the PGB concord *H tone in lieu of the *L in some noun prefixes. This diverges from Hyman's (2005: 313) view that the Ring and Momo H tone may be "an additional morpheme, perhaps related to the Proto-Bantu H tone V-/CV-augment".

References

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