

Subjunctive marking in Grassfields languages that lack verbal subject markers

Virginia Beavon-Ham, Cameron Hamm & Rachel Robinson
SIL Cameroon

Proto-Bantu reconstructions describe the subjunctive as formed by a combination of several elements: a replacive high (H) tone on the subject marker that is prefixed to the verb, a verb root realized with surface low (L) tone, and a final vowel [-e] (Marlo 2013; Meeussen 2014). In many Bantoid languages, morphology on the verb has been reduced. In some Grassfields languages, the subject marker is no longer present as a segmental prefix to the verb; similarly, the final suffix vowel is absent in many verbal forms, including the subjunctive. This means that tone on the subject marker is no longer available as a means of marking the subjunctive. This study attempts a typology of the means used by these languages to mark the subjunctive.

Twelve languages from four sub-families of Grassfields (South Ring, Nun, Bamileke, and Ngemba) meeting the criteria (absence of subject markers) were examined. For some of the languages, data was obtained from the available literature and for others, primary data from the authors was used.

Three primary ways of marking the subjunctive were observed, sometimes in combination: a clause-initial segmental morpheme (often historically derived from a complementiser), a H grammatical tone (GT) preceding the subject noun, and a H GT preceding the verb. The most interesting of these is the H GT preceding the subject noun – found in the Nun and Bamileke subfamilies. In Bafanji and Bamali, epenthetic segments have been innovated to provide a place for the docking of this tone, while in Ngomba, docking occurs on the noun root. Pronominal forms provide exceptional realizations of this H GT in several languages.

Although the Proto-Bantu reconstructions include surface L tone on the verb root, the GT associated to the verb was found to be H in those languages where GT on the verb was observed. This H GT preceding the verb either dissociates the lexical tone of the verb or it docks without dissociation, resulting in a HL surface realization on lexical L verbs.

This study was limited to affirmative utterances not marked for tense or aspect; broadening these parameters and the scope of languages studied would likely increase the range of observations. The results of this study contribute to a better understanding of innovations in Bantoid languages, particularly innovations involving tonal phenomena.

References

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