

A synchronic study of nominal prefix tone in selected Bantoid/ Grassfields Bantu languages: A comparative study

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The classification of Bantoid languages and their distinction from Bantu languages is challenging. This paper examines nominal prefix tone in Bantu and Bantoid languages in the quest for distinctive features between the two. Determining the underlying tone in Grassfields Bantu and some Bantoid languages has been controversial with an underlying L tone postulated for Ngemba languages like Bafut (Stallcup, 1977; Mfonyam 1989 and Neba, 2004); Nkwen (Awambeng, 1992), Pinyin (Neba, 1996), Mankon (Leroy, 1977) given that the prefix in these languages, surfaces with a homogeneous L tone in citation form. Neba (2015) demonstrates that in non-citation forms, Bafut exhibits such a complexity that rather suggests a basic toneless prefix. Languages of the Momo and Ring branches of Grassfields on their part, generally alternate H and L tones in citation forms and most grammatical contexts. Therefore, many researchers have analysed this prefix in such languages as either underlyingly H toned (Asongwed and Hyman, 1976) or some classes as underlyingly H toned while others are L toned (Hombert, 1976). Hyman (2005) approaches the phenomenon from a historical perspective for Kom (a Ring language) and argues that whether the tone of a noun prefix will be H vs. L depends on a number of factors, one of which is a lost pre-prefix. Similarly, Watters (1990) noticing the citation alternation of H and L on the nominal prefix in Ejagham, concludes that the L tone is underlying, while the H tone originates from a lost reduplicated CV syllable. This paper revisits synchronic data in mostly Grassfields Bantu languages of the Ring (Kom for example), Momo/Menemo (Obang/Ngie) and Ngemba (Bafut) clusters and some none Grassfields Bantoid languages: Ekoid (Ejagham), Nyang (Kenyang) to investigate if a unified synchronic account can be achieved with the nominal prefix as underlyingly toneless or whether some should be considered toneless, others L toned. In so doing, the paper seeks to answer the question whether synchronic tone patterns of the nominal prefix can shed light on Blench's (2015) question on distinctive features between Bantu and Bantoid languages. The data analysed are secondary (from the literature) and primary (collected using communicative events and staged communicative events). Acoustic evidence is provided to address a second concern raised in Blench (2015) with regards to evidence.