

Focus in Ring Grassfields Bantu languages: variation, grammaticalization and development

Numerous studies on focus in African languages shed significant light on the peculiarities of the phenomenon and on the interaction it has with other linguistic phenomena. For example, the subject versus non-subject asymmetry in focus constructions is widely attested and described in African languages as well as non African languages (Hyman & Watters 1984, Aboh 2007, Aboh et al. 2007, Cypionka 2007, Fiedler et al. 2010 among others). However, this type of generalisation could be difficult to make for Ring Grassfields Bantu languages, a severely underdocumented group of languages spoken in Western Cameroon. However, with the recently increasing descriptions, especially in Aghem (Anderson 1979; Hyman 1979; Watters 1979), Babanki (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012), Babungo (Schaub 1985) and Wushi (Hodieb 2020), it is possible to examine in what ways and to what extent they converge or diverge and from there to make inferences about their development. As far as focus is concerned, one striking discrepancy is the use of focus particles: Babungo has about ten of them, while Aghem has two and Wushi has none. Moreover, in Wushi focus is almost exclusively expressed in situ, so that no linguistic clue signals focus, except when the focus constituent is the subject. In this case, a rightward dislocation occurs. On the other hand, the subject versus non-subject asymmetry does not apply in Aghem. All term focus are treated the same, i.e. they move to the position immediately after the verb, and they might be followed by the completive focus marker *maa*. Clefting, which is deemed a good if not the best candidate for a reconstructed focus construction in Bantu (Van der Wal, personal communication) as well as in most African languages (Heine 1984) is also attested as a focus strategy in Babanki, Aghem and Wushi, but not in Babungo, where I assume its loss has been compensated by the emergence of focus particles. Based on the theory of grammaticalization, in this paper I propose an evolution path of Ring languages regarding focus marking. I argue that Wushi and Babanki are the closest to the proto form, while Babungo is the farthest, with a strongly grammaticalized focus system. Yet, at a different level of grammar, namely the tense-aspect system, Wushi and Babanki are miles apart: the former is aspect-prominent, with no morphological tense (Hodieb 2021), whereas there are up to seven tense distinctions in the latter (Akumbu, Hyman & Kiessling 2020). This corroborates Peiros' claim that at any given period of time, related languages can represent various stages of development (Peiros 1999:274) but moreover, these stages can exhibit variation at different levels of the grammar.

Key words: Focus, Ring Grassfields Bantu, Grammaticalization, Variation, Language change

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