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Understanding linguistic diversity in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group: A holistic approach

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Although the genetic unity of Ring Grassfields Bantu languages has been well demonstrated, intriguing discrepancies appear within the group. Such differences align with the theory of diversity. According to this theory, an accurate description and explanation of the structural diversity of a genetic group combines linguistics, geography, history, sociology, and typology; hence the holistic approach assumed here. This paper analyses linguistic diversity in five Ring languages (Aghem, Babanki, Babungo, Lamnso', Wushi) based on four structural features: head/dependent marking, morphological complexity, word order, and alignment of the subject-object relations in the clause (accusative, ergative, etc.). An aspect of phonology, namely, spirantisation, is also brought into discussion. The analysis reveals convergences and divergences both within each subgroup and within the entire Ring group. One salient feature subject to convergence includes a generalised suffixal noun class system in the South Ring; as for divergence, the absence of subject-verb agreement typical of Proto-Niger-Congo is retained in Babungo and Wushi (South Ring) but not in the other languages. Wushi stands out in a way that suggests that it is the most archaic language of the group. Further research on sociolinguistic features and social behaviour is needed to deepen our understanding of the linguistic configuration of the region.

1. Introduction

No language is completely stable across generations (Bickel 1999: 103). According to the theory of diversity (as outlined in Nichols 1992), even within a genetic group, the lack of homogeneity is anything but unusual. As Peiros (1999: 274) explains:

> "Each stage of a language development has its own duration which is not necessarily identical across the family, and at any given period of time related languages can represent various stages of development…"

In addressing the question of how and why languages diverge, various factors need to be taken into consideration, particularly: geography, historical events, economics, ecology, linguistic typology, as well as social factors such as speakers' attitude. On a strictly linguistic level, diversity is described and explained based on four structural features: head/dependent marking, morphological complexity, word order, and alignment of the subject-object relations in the clause (Nichols 1992: 45).

> "[P]revious typological work has shown that all of them have a certain amount of stability[1]… and … information on these four structural points give one a good sense of the overall type of a language."

This paper sets out to investigate diversity in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group from a holistic approach, that is, one including the different aforementioned

[1] "These three familiar situations illustrate three kinds of what I will call stability: structural autonomy or the ability to function as typological predictor; diachronic persistence or conservatism; and areal consistency" (Nichols 1992: 1).

factors. A phonological factor, namely, spirantisation, is also considered. Hammarström et al. (2022) (*Glottolog*) lists eighteen languages in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group; they are distributed in Central Ring, South Ring, West Ring, and East Ring. They are spoken in the north-west region of Cameroon, and most of them are under-described and under-documented. This study focuses on Aghem, Babanki, Babungo, Wushi and Lamnso', which are some of the languages of the group having some documentation (at least one description, and/or a number of studies on different aspects of the linguistic systems). In Section 2, I present the geography of the Grassfields region. An overview of its history and sociocultural context is provided in Section 3. In Section 4, I examine linguistic diversity in the Ring group based on the five aforementioned features. In Section 5 I discuss the major outcomes of the present research, providing a tentative explanation of diversity in the Ring group. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Geography

The Grassfields or Grassland is a region of highlands of volcanic origin. The soils are very fertile and it is one of the most populated areas in Africa with 30 to 80 inhabitants per square kilometre. This mountainous area is surrounded on its western and southern sides by lowland rain forest (Warnier 1979: 409; Lavachery 1998: 19). From several sources, in particular Stallcup (1978: 3), it used to be a refuge area and historical data corroborate this idea. Moreover, the Grassfields is the region with the highest linguistic fragmentation, what David Dalby calls "Africa's fragmentation belt", "a band of high language density running roughly along the southern savannah from Guinea, across West Africa to the Middle Belt of Nigeria, through Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Southern part of Sudan to the highlands of Ethiopia" (Stallcup 1978: 3). Its population is about 2 million and about sixty languages are spoken (including Eastern Grassfields) (Hyman and Voorhoeve 1980: 35). The concurrence of geographical, linguistic, cultural and socio-political boundaries in the region suggests that the Grassfields people have lived in relative isolation for a long period of time (Warnier 1979: 412).

It is recognised that "environmentally unsuitable situations" such as dry grasslands, continuous forests or semi-deserts, are areas of great structural diversity, what Nichols (1992: 13) refers to as "residual zones", and Bellwood (2001) as "friction zones" (Campbell & Poser 2008: 341). According to the *principle of the centre of gravity* in linguistic palaeontology, which derives from the geographical distribution of languages, the region of greatest linguistic diversity must be considered as the centre of dispersion of a language family (or group of languages). Linguistic diversity is not assessed in terms of the greatest number of languages, but according to the differences and similarities calculated by comparing cognates or structural features. The place where the percentage of common cognates or structural features is the lowest is often identified as the

nucleus (Mouigiama-Daouda 2005: 13). This is indeed the reason why the Grassfields zone is considered by linguists as the centre of dispersal of Bantu languages.

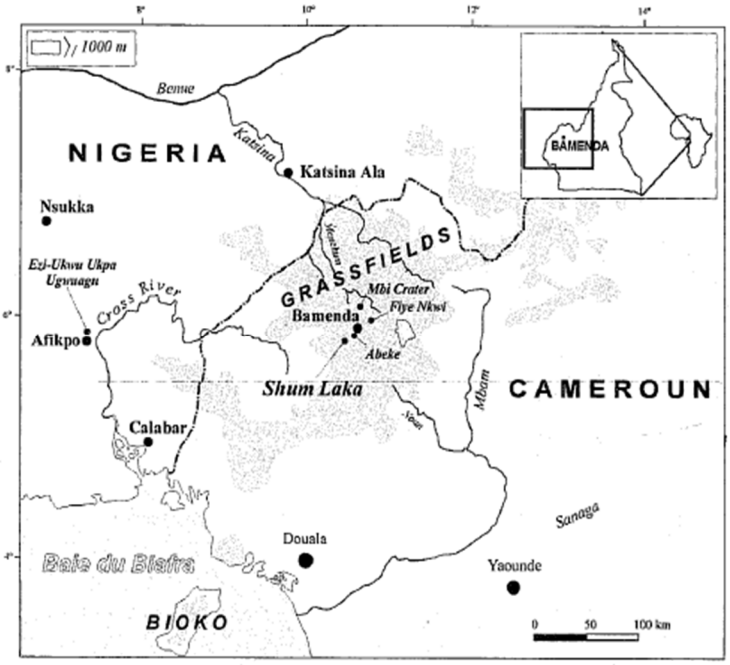

Figure 1: Localisation of Grassfields in Cameroon (Source: Lavachery 1998: 18)

Linguistically, Grassfields are classified into two groups, based on their noun class systems: Eastern Grassfields or Mbam-Nkam, and Western Grassfields to which the Ring subgroup, the concern of this paper, belongs. The map in Figure 2 locates the Grassfields as well as the various linguistic groups spoken in their vicinity.

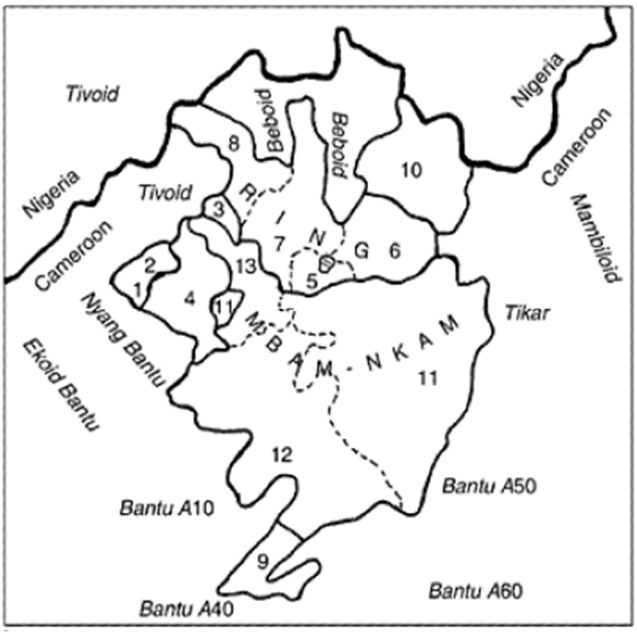

Figure 2: Grassfields languages (Source: Watters 2003: 227)

3. History and socio-cultural context: an overview

Ring Grassfields languages are located in the north-west region of Cameroon. According to several sources, including Mohammadou (1990), Stanley (1986), and Nduki (personal communication), the inhabitants of the Ndop plain are thought to be descendants of Tikar, who settled in this region following the Bare-Chamba invasion going from the second half of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century. Mohammadou's research on the historical traditions of the peoples of central Cameroon reveals that there was an intermingling of cultures and languages that extended to the west, the home of the Grassfields. In the 19th century, the great migratory and commercial route linking the Adamawa plateau (in Central Cameroon) and the Grassfields was a crucial area. Stallcup (1978) mentions a number of loan words from Chamba, an Adamawa language into Grassfields languages. He also notes that Mambila, located in the north-eastern part of the Tikar plain, probably had a considerable influence on Tikar and Grassfields languages. What is more, Warnier (1979) points out that due to intense contact favoured by internal trade, interethnic marriage and adoption, multilingualism was not only widespread in the 19th century, but it was also promoted and considered as an asset of critical importance.

The arrows on the map in Figure 3 indicate the migratory movements responsible for the above-mentioned intermingling of cultures in the past centuries, involving the Tikar people from the east, the Mambila from the north-east and the Bamileke from the west.

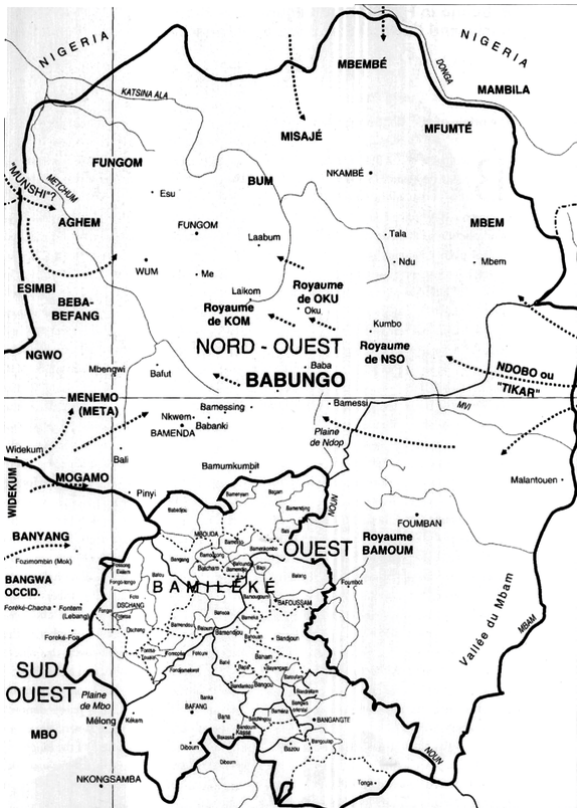

Figure 3: Migratory movements in the Grassland region (Source: Perrois & Notué 1993: 215)

It is worth noting that the languages of larger diffusion that spread since the early 20th century, especially Pidgin-English, German, English and French, replaced the short-range nineteenth-century multilingualism. Their hold on homes or rather on minds is such that today many Cameroonians, especially from the French-speaking part of the country do not speak any indigenous language (Hodieb 2020).

Accounts from oral traditions are also interesting resources, although their reliability is questioned. Most of them recount that family members separated after an argument and eventually formed independent villages. For example, the people of Bamunka believe that they left Tikar "after the death of their Fon (chief) following a difference of opinion during the enthronement of the new chief" (Ingle 2013: 11). On the other hand, Babessi people, whose mother tongue is Wushi, claim they originate in the Mbam village in the Adamawa plateau of Cameroon. They migrated downward to the Tikar region, and after several disputes with different peoples, further escaped in the Grassfields region where they have settled until today. Thus, according to oral accounts, some of the Ring groups are originally Tikar. If this is proven, many mysteries related to the structure of their languages, as compared to the other Ring languages, would be solved. But, as Campbell and Poser (2008: 341) put it: "[t]here are two difficulties with relying on initial migration. The first is that we just do not know the real history of colonization and replacement in most of these areas … Thus, reference to the period of time between original colonization and today's distribution of languages leaves far too much unknown and open for speculation". Another problem is that not much is known about Tikar, for which there is only one description (Stanley 1986) and a grammatical sketch (Hagège 1969). Ironically, the present state of the language, coupled with shortage of data, does not allow linguists to link it to any Bantoid group. In other words, the Tikar group is a sort of isolate as we can see in the classification by Blench (2015: 5) in Figure 4.

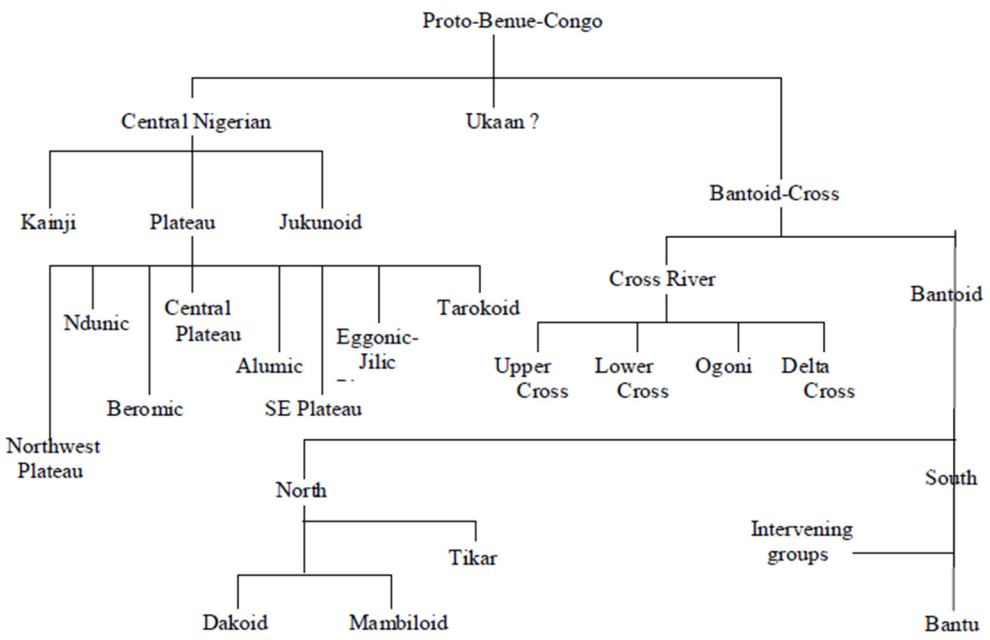

Figure 4: Benue-Congo classification (Blench 2015: 5)

The first archaeological surveys in the Cameroonian Grassfields were carried out in 1978 and 1980 (Lavachery 1998: 18), that is, the 20th century. Accordingly, there is no historical information about the medieval times, apart from what can be inferred from oral traditions, "cross-checked by linguistic evidence and evidence taken from the social and political organization in the 19th century" (Warnier 1979: 416).

In short, despite intense contact which often leads to linguistic convergence, surprising differences are observed within the Grassfields group and particularly among Ring languages. I now present some of these differences as regards head/dependent marking, morphological complexity, word order, alignment and spirantisation.

4. Linguistic diversity in the Ring group

Eighteen Ring languages are known today. There may be a few more which are yet to be discovered or some others which have probably died before researchers could record them. Following *Glottolog* (Hammarmström et al. 2022), they are distributed in four groupings, based on geolinguistic factors:

-Center Ring: Babanki, Kom, Bum, Mmen Oku, Mbessa, Kung

-West Ring: Aghem, Isu, Kuk, Laimbue, Weh, Zhoa

-East Ring: Lamnso' (or Lamnso or Nso')

-South Ring: Vengo (Babungo), Kenswei Nsei, Bamunka, Wushi (Babessi)

In this study we focus on five of them, which are the ones for which some documentation is available and which are taken here as "prototypes", that is, we

assume that they are representatives of the four groupings mentioned above. These are: Babanki (Center), Aghem (West), Lamnso' (East), Babungo and Wushi (South). The analysis is based on five structural features: head/dependent marking, morphological complexity, word order, alignment (subject-object relations in the clause) and spirantisation, which are discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Head/dependent marking

Ring languages, like Bantu languages and many Niger-Congo languages, are dependent-marking in phrases. However, in a clause, an interesting variation exists within the Ring group.

In Aghem (West), Babanki (Center) and Lamnso' (East) there is an agreement marker between the subject and the verb as seen in the following examples:

Aghem (Anderson 1979: 81)

(1) kɔ̂ kɨ́ mɔ̀ bó fɨ́ghâm

kɔ̂	kɨ́	mɔ̀	bó	fɨ́ghâm
servant	SM[2]	P2[3]	hit	mat

"The servant hit the mat. " [today]

Babanki (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012: 127)

(2) mènyín ə́ kə́dì lúwɛ̀n

mə̀.nyín	ə́	kə́	ə́.dì	lúwɛ̀n
6a[4].bird	6a.SM	want	INF[5].cry	now

"Birds want to cry (chirp) now."

Lamnso' (McGarrity & Botne 2001: 8)

(3) mi-nen-mi ki yoov luŋ

mi	nen	mi	ki	yoov	luŋ
6	bird	SM	PST[6]	sing	song

"The birds sang a song."

In Wushi and Babungo, both members of the southern Ring, there is no agreement marking between the subject and the verb.

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2 SM = subject marker

3 P2 = today's past

4 The numbers found with noun roots indicate the nominal class. In Bantu languages, each noun belongs to a morphological class which is part of the larger system called the noun class system. Each class is associated with an affix (generally prefixes, but in some languages there are suffixes) and a number.

5 INF = infinitive marker

6 PST = past

Wushi (Author, personal notes)

(4) bvʉ́ŋgʊ̄ (kə̀) náʔ pfə́ʔ mbàʔ (mɛ̂)

bvʉ́ŋgʊ̄	(kə̀)	náʔ	mbàʔ	(mɛ̂)
dog	(DST[7])	eat	meat	(DET[8])

"The dog ate the meat."

Babungo (Schaub 1985: 108)

(5) bú ndɔ̀ŋ Làmbí

bú	ndɔ̀ŋ	Làmbí
dog	bite-PF[9]	Lambi

"A dog bit Lambi."

Thus, in these two languages, what indicates the relationship between the subject, the object and the verb is solely their position. In Wushi only[10], further instances of no marking are attested in noun phrases (NP), such as the numeral phrase.

(6)

ndìʔ	øfùà	bá	wù-fúá	tsiɛ̌ʔ	wù-fúá
one	1-chief	two	2-chief	three	2-chief
"one chief"		"two chiefs"		"three chiefs"	

Besides the absence of agreement marking, the fact that the numeral precedes the head noun is another surprising fact. Such a parataxis construction suggests that we might not actually have a phrase, but simply an apposition of two lexemes, which is unique in the Ring group – and in Bantu languages at large - where the most common pattern is a dependency structure, in which the relationship that holds between the head (the noun), coming first, and its modifier, is visible through agreement. Influence from English or French, characterised by the canonical order NUMERAL NOUN could be another explanation for the unusual structure observed in Wushi. Such explanation would suggest that the change from NOUN NUMERAL to NUMERAL NOUN occurred not long ago, given the rather recent contact with European languages. However, this needs to be further investigated. To illustrate the discrepancy in this regard, consider first the examples in Babungo where agreement obtains in the numeral phrase.

Schaub (1985: 74)

(7)

a. fə́ntɨ́ fə̀mù	b. və́ŋkáw vəbɔ̀ɔ	c. və́ŋkáw tɛ̂ɛ
fə-ntɨ́ fə̀-mù	və́-ŋkáw və̀-bɔ̀ɔ	və́-ŋkáw tɛ̂ɛ
19-stick 19-one	8-chair 8- two	8-chair five
"one stick"	"two chairs"	"five chairs"

7 DST = distal (or dissociative)

8 DET = determiner

9 PF = perfective

10 "Outside the Ring subgroup but still within the Grassfields group, the order NUMERAL NOUN is also attested in Ngyemboon (Bamileke, Eastern Grassfields) (Anderson 1979: 49)"

In Babungo, only the numbers 1 to 3 and the indefinite quantifiers "many" and "all" are marked for noun class according to the head noun. Number 4 only concords in one noun class; "that is… it has a class 4 prefix with nouns of all noun classes except with nouns of class 6" (Schaub 1985: 73). Numbers above 4 are not marked, hence the absence of the agreement marker on the numeral in (7c); a situation similar to Babanki (Central Ring) and Lamnso' (East Ring) where concord is marked on the numbers 1 to 5 (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012: 104, McGarrity & Botne 2001: 6).

As far as Aghem (West Ring) is concerned, the prefix of the head noun is deleted when modified except by a numeral, and only the numerals 1 through 5 show agreement.

Hyman (1979:34)

(8) kɨ́wú kɨ̀mɔ̀ʔ
kɨ́-wú kɨ̀-mɔ̀ʔ
7-foot 7-one
"one foot"

To summarize, agreement in sentences is marked on the subject, object and verb in Center (Babanki), East (Lamnso) and West (Aghem) Ring, and not in South Ring (Babungo and Wushi). Concerning NPs, the numeral phrase manifests several peculiarities: it displays an unusual order in Wushi where the dependant (the numeral) precedes the noun and besides, does not exhibit concord at all – it is also the only noun phrase in which the affix of the noun is not deleted; in addition, concord is limited to the numbers 1 to 3 in Babungo, 1 to 4 in Lamnso' and 1 to 5 in the latter two). In Aghem, the numeral phrase is the only type of modification which does not involve the deletion of the head noun prefix. So, at least two issues arise: the first one concerns the true nature of numerals in these languages, that is, whether they are modifiers per se, and the second one, which ensues from the former, is their exact grammatical relation with the noun. It is probably the case that numerals above 3/4/5 do not function as modifiers in Babungo, Babanki and Lamnso' but are rather in a sort of a paratactic construction with the noun. In other words, only the numbers 1 to 4/5 may be true modifiers. From another perspective, it is likely that agreement was once marked on all the numerals and gradually faded away until it was completely lost in Wushi, while it remained on a few numbers in the other languages. In neighbouring languages, the absence of agreement is also attested in Ngyemboon (Easter Grassfields, Bamileke), especially with the numeral "one", and the quantifier of degree for "many" (Anderson 1979: 49). Numerals (and quantifiers) thus have a particular status in these languages, which would be enlightening to study in depth in future research.

4.2 Morphological complexity

It is probably at the morphological level that Ring languages diverge the most from other Grassfields languages, particularly in their noun class systems. Whereas the prefixed noun class system is the norm in Bantu and Niger-Congo and dominant in Eastern Grassfields languages, Ring languages exhibit several suffixes along with prefixes. According to Creissels (2015), Van de Velde (2019) and Watters (personal communication), noun class suffixes originate from demonstratives. In some languages, their function as noun class markers seems to be evolving, especially in Wushi where they tend to express pluralisation solely (instead of noun class agreement). As an illustration, consider the following examples.

(9) a. ntɔ̌ wùŋgákə́ndió
ntɔ̌[-ká́] wù-ŋgákə́ndió
elephant[-7] 2-farmer
"the elephant of the farmers"

b. ntɔ̌ wùŋgákə́ndió-ŋgə́
ntɔ̌[-ŋgə́] wù-ŋgákə́ndió-ŋgə́
elephant[-8] 2-farmer-8
"the elephants of the farmers"

In 9b, the two nouns forming the genitive phrase are in the plural, and the corresponding noun class affixes appear: the suffix *-ŋgə́* (class 8) for *ntɔ̌* "elephant" and the prefix *wù-* (class 2) for *ŋgákə́ndió* "farmer". One of the strategies employed in Wushi to mark agreement in the genitive phrase is by suffixing N_1's suffix to the entire phrase, that is, to the right end of the phrase. This is why *-ŋgə́* does not appear with its base *ntɔ̌* "elephant" but rather after N_2. However, in 8a N_1 is in the singular and yet its suffix is completely deleted. Only the prefix of N_2 which is in the plural is expressed. This informs us that noun class affixes, beyond (or instead of?) marking agreement, serve a pluralisation purpose, the singular being the unmarked form, while the plural is marked. Along these lines, Bostoen (personal communication) considers that the prefix *wù-* is a pluralisation morpheme.

Still in Wushi, the noun class suffix *-ngə* (class 8), untypical and unique in the whole Bantu family, looks very much like the noun class affix in Fulfulde *-nge* (Paradis 1985:2). Since noun classes are not exempt from being copied from one language to another, and given that from a historical account there has been intense contact between Fulani and Grassfields, we probably have a case of borrowing here. As a matter of fact, a Fulani dialect of Babanki emerged due to contact (Akumbu & Asonganyi 2010). The pervasiveness of the schwa in Ring languages could equally be the result of contact not only with Fulfulde but also with Adamawa languages like Samba Leko where the schwa is omnipresent (Fabre 2004).

Noun class suffixes observed in South Ring languages are clearly an innovation, given that Proto-Bantu and even Proto-Niger-Congo had only prefixes. Nevertheless, despite this shift to a suffixal system, it is worth noting that the original phonological form of noun class affixes have been maintained to a certain extent, particularly in classes 6a to 19 which show a remarkable consistency across the five languages, unlike classes 1 to 6 which are rather unstable, as seen in the table below.

CL	PR	Wushi	Babungo	Aghem	Babanki	Lamnso'
1	*ù-	ø	ø	ø-	ø-	ø
2	*bá-	wù-	və-	á-	və-, ø-	a-
3	*ú-	ø	ø	ó-	ə-	ø
4	*í-	-nə̀	yi-	é-	--	--
5	*í-	--	yi-	é-	ə-	ø
6	*á-	--	ø	á-	a-	--
6a	*mə̀-	-mə̀	mə-	--	mə-	mi-
7	*kí-	-kə̀	ø	kí-	kə-	ki-
8	*bí-	-ŋgə̀	və-	ó-	ə-	vi-
9	*ø-, Ǹ-	--	ø	ø	ø-	ø
10	*´..-sí	-sə	-sə	tí-	-sə	-si
13	*tə́-	--	tə-	--	tə-	--
19	*fə́-	-fə̀	fə-	--	-fə	ši-

Figure 5: Noun classes (adapted from Hyman 1980: 251 – Suffixes are in blue; the double dash means the absence of a class).

Even though they are "quite unusual in Cameroonian Bantu and in Bantu in general" (Hyman 1979: 56), A-forms ("in focus") and B-forms ("out of focus") of nouns found in Aghem (West) – and in Bamunka[11] (South Ring) – are most likely an innovation, an innovation that perhaps arose in the west and spread to the south. An illustration of this variation is seen in (10).

Aghem (Hyman 1979:56)

(10) a. m̀ mɔ̂ zɨ̀ kɨ́-bɛ́ nɛ́
I P1 ate fufu today
"I ate fufu today."

b. ŋ̀ kâ zɨ̀ bɛ́-'kɔ́ nɛ́
I NEG ate fufu today
" didn't eat fufu today."

In (10a) the noun "fufu" is in its A-form *kɨ́-bɛ́,* which is also its citation form, characterised by a noun class prefix, while the B-form consists of the stem followed by a suffix.

[11] Ingle (2013: 14). This is the only work available on Bamunka and it is about the noun phrase. The paucity of data on its syntax compelled us not to include it in the present study.

Another morphological variation in Ring languages is in their tense-aspect systems. While most of them exhibit multiple tense distinctions with five, six, even seven past and future tenses – for instance, Babanki has four present/past and three future tenses (Akumbu, Hyman & Kiessling 2020: 4) – Wushi is aspect-prominent, (Hodieb 2021). In this respect, it is more Proto-Niger-Congo-like than the rest and even than Bantu languages, which have extremely elaborated tense systems as well (Nurse 2008: 68). Therefore, the aspect-prominent feature of Wushi might be a retention from the proto language, whereas the other languages have followed the Bantu path of development and innovation in this regard.

4.3 Word order

Ring languages have the canonical order of Bantu and Niger-Congo languages, which is SVO – although with some variation related to information structure such as focus constructions and in other contexts like interrogative constructions. In both cases, the subject is treated differently (syntactically) from the other constituents of the clause. The peculiarity of the subject in syntactic contexts like focus constructions has been widely studied (see for example Watters 1979; Aboh 2007; Fiedler et al. 2010), therefore, we will not discuss it here. In phrasal constructions, the order of constituents is quite rigid within the group, with the head preceding its dependent(s). But this order, too, sometimes varies. For example, as seen in 4.1, Wushi is the only language in the group where the numeral precedes the noun instead of following it.

4.4 Alignment

Nominative-accusative is the dominant type of alignment in Ring languages and in Bantu languages at large, and the verb carries the agreement markers linking it to the subject (and sometimes also with the object). However, Lamnso' has innovated an oblique case.

Lamnso (McGarrity and Botne 2001: 13)

(11)	ŋtaŋ	fo	vi-faveyi	i	ʃi-nən-ʃi
	Ntang	give	8-food	to	19-bird-?
	"Ntang is giving food to the bird."				

In their paper, McGarrity and Botne (2001) identify a suffix attached to the indirect object noun – besides the subject marker suffixed to the subject noun – as a case marker. They argue against the possibility of it being an agreement marker, based on its syntactic behaviour (it appears on obliques only, i.e., indirect objects or objects of a preposition and not direct objects) and on the Case and Agreement Hierarchies expressed as follows:

(12) Case Hierarchy (Whaley 1997: 154)
other > indirect object > direct object > subject

(13) Agreement Hierarchy (Whaley 1997: 154)
subject > direct object > indirect object > other

As Whaley remarks, when languages use both case and agreement strategies, they are typically employed in a "maximally economical fashion" (Whaley 1997: 168; McGarrity & Botne 2001: 17). In other words, there is little or no overlap between agreement and case marking: where the one stops, the other starts. According to McGarrity and Botne, this is what we find in Lamnso', where subjects are marked for agreement whereas obliques are marked for case.

In the majority of African languages, subjects and objects are unmarked for case. Some East African languages and Western Bantu languages are mentioned as having case expressed by tone (König 2008: 3-4). So far, Lamnso' is the only Ring language with grammaticalised case. It is also, let us recall, the only language classified in the East Ring, meaning that it is very likely to behave as an "isolate" in several respects, not only morphosyntactically. At the phonetic level as well, Lamnso' has "highly unusual" (Anderson 2015: 6) variants of the phonemes /t/ and /d/, which are the retroflexes /tʂ/ and /dʐ/ respectively, occurring before /ə/. Before other vowels, they are realized as [t] and [d]. To date, no retroflex has been recorded in any other Grassfields language (ibid.).

4.5 Spirantisation

A last feature, though not included in the framework of the theory of diversity, is phonological: spirantisation. The distribution of this phenomenon in the Ring group is indeed meaningful. As already pointed out by Hodieb (2021), there is a striking difference between Wushi which has an abundance of affricates and the other languages where fricatives are predominant. Given that the final stage of spirantisation is fricatives (stops > affricates > fricatives) (Janson 2007), a majority of fricatives signals an incomplete or intermediary process of change. Accordingly, the pervasiveness of affricates in Wushi alone reveals that the language is closer to the proto-language than the other languages. In other words, Wushi is arguably in a more archaic state. The following table taken from Hodieb (2021) shows a list of twelve words in five Ring languages – including Kom (Central Ring) but without Lamnso' – in which spirantisation is patent.

Proto-Grassfields	Wushi	Aghem	Babanki	Babungo	Kom	Gloss
*gÙm	vó¯	íɣɨ́m	èwóm	èwúŋ	ìvəm	ten
*g(w)é	vī	wizɨ́	wùwì	wəzw		woman
*kÌ´	ndzɔ́ʔ	múú	múú	múmə́	əmú	water
*kÚ(a)	pfə́	íkpú	pfʉ́	pfə̂	pfó	die
*kùn`	ntsá	íkɔí	ènkw	nsaí	ə̂nkɔ̄	tail
*bÚ`	bvə̂ʔ	ódʒɨ́	kəɓə́	vəbʰ	əbvə́	ashes
*bàm	ʃʉ̀ə	mbɨ̀ɣ	kəmb	mbà	kəmb	bag
*bóm	ɣɔ́:	íbɔ́m	buɔ́m	bɔ́ŋ	bɔ̄m	do pottery
*tÚk	ntsó	ə̂tsó	nənt	vətu	nʌnt	night

*di, k´	ndzə́ʔ	kɨlú	kəʃí	ʃɨ́	kəlɔ́	place
*tíd	sɛ́	ikpé	bòmə́	faín	kwaí	meet
*táb	ʃûʔ	itúɣ	tó	wɛ́ʔ	kədá	to be strong

Figure 6: Spirantisation in Ring languages (Source: Hodieb 2021: 61)

4.6 Summary table

Before discussing the implications and research perspectives following from this analysis of linguistic diversity in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group, a summary of the above is provided in the table in Figure 7.

	Features	Babanki (Center)	Aghem (West)	Babungo/Wushi (South)		Lamnso' (East)
Head/dependent marking	Agreement (clause)	+	+	-	-	+
	Concord (NP)	+	+	+	-[12]	+
	-with all numerals	-	-	-	-	-
	-with numerals 1-3/4/5	+	+	+	-	+
Morphology	A-form & B-form	-	+	-	-	-
	Generalised Noun class suffixes	-	-	-	+	-
Word order	SVO except in particular constructions such as focus constructions	+	+	+	+	+
Alignment	Nominative-accusative	+	+	+	+	-
	Oblique case	-	-	-	-	+
Complete Spirantisation	Predominance of fricatives	+	+	+	-	+

Figure 7: Summary table ("+" indicates the presence of a feature and "-" its absence)

[12] This is actually more complex than "no concord". For lack of space we will not go into further detail.

5. Discussion

It follows from the above that knowing the historical background of a region is crucial to understanding the structural features of its languages, especially when these languages are genetically related, but yet diverge in surprising ways. Extensive contact with languages belonging to different families, Fulfulde, Mambila and Chamba, and thus displaying particular structural features, is one plausible explanation for the variation in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group. For example, one phonological feature widespread in Samba Leko, a variety of Chamba spoken in Adamawa, and to a lesser extent in Fulfulde, is the schwa. This vowel is pervasive in most Ring languages, suggesting its spread due to contact, but I believe it is also the effect of analogical change. Analogical change is likely to be responsible for the regularity of the schwa in the noun class system of several Ring languages (namely Wushi, Babungo, Bamunka and Babanki – see figure 5) where noun class affixes have aligned with class 6a (*mə-* or *-mə*), resulting in a series of changes including *u > ə, *i > ə, *a > ə. In Lamnso's, analogical change in the noun class system follows from class 6 (*mi-*), so that the rest of the classes have the pattern C*i-*, except class 9 which has a zero affix (McGarrity & Botne 2001: 3). Furthermore, Stallcup (1978) mentions the borrowing of the word for "bird" (*nua* in Wushi, *nuɔ* in Bamunka, *nyin* in Babanki) from Ndagam (where bird is *nua*), an Adamawa language whose people had a prolonged contact with Grassfields.

The geographical distribution of languages is another important factor to be seriously taken into account. For example, noun class suffixes are pervasive, instead of prefixes, in the noun class system of South Ring languages, Wushi and Bamunka in particular; in the other languages only a single class exhibits a suffix, namely class 10, which itself is reconstructed as a suffix. Still in South Ring, Babungo and Wushi are the two languages of our sample where subject-verb agreement is not marked. If we consider the type of subject-verb agreement seen in Bantu languages to be the result of "shallow grammaticalization" as has been suggested (Güldemann 2003: 183-187) – even though this is a quite "robust" feature in Bantu languages (Good 2012: 8) – then its absence in the South is a retention from Proto-Niger-Congo, whereas the rest of the languages have followed the grammaticalisation path of Bantu languages. Likewise, Lamnso' is geographically secluded in the East, and this must have impacted its structural outline, especially in the way it has developed in an original manner a grammaticalised oblique case marked by suffixes as well as retroflexes.

However, even within a given subgroup (Center, West, East or South Ring) there is no perfect homogeneity. For instance, Babungo, like the other languages, has maintained concord in all NPs including numeral phrases, unlike Wushi where concord is apparently "decaying", starting with numeral phrases where there is no concord at all. Yet, Babungo and Wushi belong to the South Ring.

As we can see, languages of the same family may develop in different directions, and a synchronic description could reveal different stages of development. In other words, linguistic variation is not necessarily the product of migration or contact, it can also constitute what Peiros (1999: 266) refers to as "internally triggered" changes, that is, changes that take place as the result of development. He adds that "… at any given period of time related languages can represent various stages of development …" (ibid. 274), hence the differences in the degree of grammaticalisation or evolution at different levels of grammar. At the syntactic level, Babungo and Wushi (South) are more "archaic" than the rest, especially regarding the absence of subject-verb agreement, while morphologically, they have developed noun class suffixes, unattested elsewhere in the Ring group – except in class 10 of some languages - or in Proto-Niger-Congo.

In understanding and explaining diversity, the social factor is often neglected, yet the social behaviour of Ring languages towards each other might provide a significant explanation to the configuration of divergences and convergences and even to the singularity of the Wushi language within the group – I will come back to this point later in this section. Maybe some speakers intentionally and consciously acted on their languages in order to mark a distinction from the others in a rather conservative way? Although we lack historical evidence in favour of such a hypothesis, conducting a survey on today's social attitudes towards neighbouring languages could shed some light on the motivations and processes of divergence. The civil war that broke out five years ago in the Anglophone region of Cameroon nevertheless constitutes a major threat to field work. Hagège (2005) cites a number of cases where the speakers of a language deliberately decide over the structure of their language. In this sense, acting "consciously" or "deliberately" on the language entails teleological motivations for language change. Such a differentialist interpretation of divergence is adduced, *inter alia*, by Thomason (2007) in other parts of the world. On the other hand, François proposes that linguistic differentiation between groups is an epiphenomenal effect of a "fundamental push for in-group homogeneity" (François 2011: 230), through convergence toward particular speech habits. It is indeed the result of events of convergence on the micro scale that appears to be an effect of divergence on the macro scale (Ibid.: 231): "innovation starts with an individual or a group of individuals, diffuses to larger social groups, moving across age classes …" (ibid.) within the "focus of convergence", that is, "the social unit encompassing speakers of "the same language "" (ibid.: 233). If we were to transpose this to Ring languages, then East, West, South and Center Ring would be each converging to features peculiar to their group. For instance, in the West subgroup we would expect the feature A- and B-forms to spread to other languages within the group such as Kuk and Laimbue; within the South Ring subgroup, the diffusion of noun class suffixes could be anticipated – this is actually the case in Bamunka (Ingle 2013) which displays a generalised suffixal system like Wushi. Yet, A- and B-forms are also found in Bamunka, implying

that, either the focus of convergence, that is, the groupings West-East-Center-South need to be revised, or innovations arising in one group tend to spread farther to neighbouring groups, suggesting an amount of contact and multilingualism as described by Warnier (1979) (cf. section 3) that has been maintained in the region (François 2011: 233).

This being said, the general outline of Wushi shows that the language is the most diverging first through retention in the morpho-syntax, where the other Ring languages have developed a case system (Lamnso'), multiple tense systems, and even conjoint-disjoint alternations (in Babanki, see Akumbu, Hyman & Kiessling 2020), to name a few innovations also found in Bantu, but that were not originally in Proto-Niger-Congo (Nurse 2008). Apart from being aspect-prominent, Wushi particularly stands out from the other Ring languages in the unusual order of the constituents of the numeral phrase (NUMERAL NOUN); the suffixation of N_1's suffix to the genitive phrase is another atypical phenomenon in the whole Grassfields group and probably a sign of decay of the concord system.

Finally, according to the theory of diversity (Nichols 1992: 232):

> "[t]he modern levels of diversity have three obvious diachronic sources:
> 1) diversity can increase over time [due to structural innovations that arise in daughter languages of a proto-language] ...
> 2) … modern distributions of structural features can result from stabilization of more uniformly distributed initial diversity. The result is segregation of different patterns into different areas …
> 3) … diversity can decrease over time in a variety of ways … A language that spreads in an area displaces or absorbs its predecessors …"

Diversity is unlikely to decrease over time in the Grassfields area, notably because there is no dominant *indigenous* language threatening the others – Pidgin English serves as a lingua franca in the region but it does not seem to be a threat to indigenous languages. Therefore, the third source mentioned by Nichols does not appear to be relevant here. The first source is undeniably responsible for the present state of the Ring group: diversity is conspicuous, and in all probability, increasing.

6. Conclusion

It would be difficult to explain diversity in a genetic linguistic group from a single factor; rather, it requires a holistic approach, having recourse to a combination of factors including history, geography, and sociology, besides linguistic facts, all taken together. Based on the theory of diversity, the aim of this paper was to examine linguistic diversity in the Ring Grassfields Bantu group, and the possible factors responsible for it. We looked at Aghem, Babanki, Lamnso', Babungo and Wushi, as prototypes of their respective subgroups, namely, West, Center, East, and South for the latter two languages. Five linguistic features have been analysed: head/dependent marking, morphological complexity, word order, alignment and spirantisation. We saw that there are some convergences

within subgroups, such as shared innovations like noun class suffixes in the South, but also retention of the Proto-Niger-Congo syntax (or less grammaticalised syntax) manifested through the absence of subject-verb agreement in this same subgroup, while subject-verb agreement is attested in the other languages. In the East, where Lamnso' is a sort of isolate, the development of an oblique case as well as retroflexes – both features found only in this language – might be due to its geographical seclusion. Other factors such as contact, especially with Fulfulde (Atlantic), Ndagam and Samba Leko (Adamawa), and English, provide insight into phenomena like the peculiar noun class suffix *-ŋgə* and the unatypical NUMERAL NOUN order observed in Wushi, as well as the widespread occurrence of the schwa. Moreover, internal factors such as analogical change play an important part in the process of divergence and convergence. One notable inconsistency within the South Ring is the absence of concord marking on numeral phrases in Wushi as opposed to its presence in Babungo. The social factor of speakers' attitude is an interesting avenue which, due to scarcity of information, could not be explored in the present study. Thus, an in-depth investigation of the current social behaviour and sociolinguistics of the region is strongly suggested for future research, as it is the synergy of various factors including sociology, geography and language contact that allows us to formulate fine-tuned hypotheses about the linguistic configuration of the Ring Grassfields Bantu group, instead of considering these factors in a discrete manner. Ultimately, the present study corroborates the idea that convergences and divergences are inherent in any linguistic group (family, group, subgroup, etc.) as predicated by the theory of diversity. Wushi stands out from the rest in that it displays more Proto-Niger-Congo retentions, namely the aspect-prominent system and the absence of subject-verb agreement. As for spirantisation, there is a preponderance of affricates in Wushi versus a majority of fricatives in the other languages. This indicates that Wushi is the most archaic language in the group.

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