

## 2

# Aghem

(Bantoid, Grassfields Bantu)

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### 2.1 General

Over 2.5 million people speak over fifty Grassfields Bantu languages, nearly all in the mountainous region of Cameroon's West and Northwest Provinces. The more southerly Grassfields Bantu communities adjoin Zone A of Narrow Bantu, particularly A10, A40, and A50. The average size of a Grassfields Bantu language community is some 50,000: this is raised by eight larger (100,000 to 300,000) communities, the others being quite small. Watters (2003), citing Stallcup (1980)), notes the average community occupies twenty square kilometers or less. 20,000 to 25,000 people speak Aghem, 300,000 Bamileke-Dschang, the largest Grassfields community.

Syllables in Grassfields Bantu languages are open or end in sonorants, depending on language and level of analysis. Lexical stems are commonly monosyllabic: most lexical stems in Aghem are of CV shape, whereas many affixes consist of a single vowel. Grassfields Bantu languages have seven, eight, or ten vowel qualities: Aghem has ten short and eight long vowels, and eleven diphthongs<sup>1</sup>. They also have very complex tone systems, partly because when segmental substance was lost, tones were in general retained and realized on an adjacent syllable.

Despite much work since the 1960s, Grassfields Bantu languages are not well described. What follows is an analysis of Anderson and Watters' work on Aghem in Hyman (1979). At the end we also look briefly at Hyman's (1980) analysis of Bamileke-Dschang, and depend on Watters' (2003) general overview, which also cites other analyses.

### 2.2 Word order

The characteristic word order in main and subordinate clauses in Aghem is S AUX V O X, or, as Watters (1979:143) puts it: S AUX V DO IO LOC TEM<sup>2</sup>. Objects, nominal and pronominal, follow the verb. Examples:

(1) a      **fɪl**      **á**      **mɔ**<sup>3</sup>      **zí**      **kí-bé**<sup>4</sup> **án**      **'sóm**

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<sup>1</sup>We have used (ɪ) for Hyman's (1979:5) (i) and (ɔ) for his (θ). For simplicity's sake, with the exception of certain floating tones (as in §2.3), low tone is generally unmarked. The symbol (') indicates down-stepped tone.

<sup>2</sup>Abbreviations unique to this chapter: DS 'dummy subject', TEM 'temporal (adverb or phrase)'. Other abbreviations appear in the general List of Abbreviations.

<sup>3</sup>Surface tones are not necessarily underlying tones. For instance, in this and following examples (and in Table 2.1), the underlying high tone on the P<sub>2</sub> morpheme **mɔ** has moved rightwards. See Anderson (1979:133-135).

<sup>4</sup>The nouns for 'fufu' and 'compound' are segmentally and tonally identical, and in the same noun class. Nouns consist of root and affix – the affix (the class marker) may be prefixed (e.g., **kí-bé**) or suffixed (**bé-**

friends they P<sub>2</sub> eat fufu in farm  
 ‘Friends ate fufu at the farm.’

b **bvó tí má'á á kíbé á'zso ñíŋ**  
 dogs they P<sub>2</sub>.FOC in compound yesterday run  
 ‘Dogs ran in compound yesterday.’

c **fíl á mɔ́ fúo kíbé â bvó'tó**  
 friends they P<sub>2</sub> give fufu to dogs  
 ‘Friends gave fufu to the dogs.’

d **fíl á mɔ́ nzaŋ zóm â ba?tom**  
 friends they P<sub>2</sub> nzang sing for chief  
 ‘Friends sang Nzang for the chief.’

This basic order may change, principally by the application of focus (as in (2b)), primarily by placing focused elements immediately after the verb<sup>5</sup>. *Wh*-words are always focused, and also other elements (underlined) may be focused:

(2) a **fíl á mɔ́ zí ghé bé'kó**  
 friends they P<sub>2</sub> eat where fufu  
 ‘Where did friends eat fufu?’

b **a mɔ́ zóm á-fín nzaŋ â ba?tom**  
 DS P<sub>2</sub> sing friends nzang for chief  
 ‘Friends sang Nzang for chief.’

c **fíl á mɔ́ zí án 'sóm bé'kó**  
 friends they P<sub>2</sub> eat at farm fufu  
 ‘Friends ate fufu at the farm.’

### 2.3 Verb structure

The verb string appears to contain eleven positions, not all of which co-occur. Finals are suffixed to the root; all other elements are self standing, so, morphologically, only Root-Final is part of the verb, the rest being clitics or independent elements. All are exemplified below, or in §2.4, §2.5, or §2.6. Word order plays a major role in focus (see §2.5.3, below, and (1) and (2), above) and the positions immediately before and after Root-Final are central to focus. Consequently, other sentence constituents can occur in these positions.

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<sup>1</sup>**kó** depending on its focus value. The same obtains with the word for ‘mat’, which, depending on focus value, may be either **fí-ghâm** or **ghâm-fɔ** (as in Table 2.1). See also Hyman (1979:16).

<sup>5</sup> “There are a number of Grassfields languages including Mankon, Dschang, and Aghem, where S AUX O V occurs, either with specific auxiliaries and/or the focus” (L.H. Hyman p.c.). See (1b), where P<sub>2</sub>.FOC would represent the AUX.

(3) HYP SM CFL NEG<sub>1/3</sub> T SBJ ROOT-F HAB NEG<sub>2</sub> FOC

Morphemes occurring in these positions are listed below and exemplified in examples (4)-(8):

HYPothetical: **tʂ** ‘would/should (have)’

SM: subject marking is obligatory. Subject pronouns are: 1s **N**´, 2s **wo**, 3s **o**, 3s logophoric **é**, 1p **ghaʔ**´, 1p inclusive **se**´, 2p **ghe**´, 3p´ **ghé**. Object pronouns are identical except 1s **muo**´ and 3s **wín**. Inanimate objects are usually represented through zero anaphora.

Counterfactual: **fe**´ CFL<sub>1</sub>, **fi**´ CFL<sub>2</sub>. These indicate that the statement which the sentence affirms is not really true. They derive from demonstratives for ‘here’ and ‘there’, respectively. Since these and NEG<sub>1</sub> are not shown co-occurring, it is not clear which comes first. (See example (5) in §2.6).

NEG<sub>1</sub>: **ka**, with two different tone patterns; NEG<sub>3</sub> non-main clause NEG. (See §2.6);

Tense (Aghem): **Ø** present/Factative (see footnote 6), **mɔ** P<sub>1</sub>, **mɔ**P<sub>2</sub>, **si** F<sub>1</sub>, **lɔ**F<sub>2</sub>, **ń** (H+L) present+FOC, **máa** P<sub>1</sub>+FOC, **má**´**á** P<sub>2</sub>+FOC, **fi** ‘once upon a time’, **me** SBS (subsecutive) ‘then’ (the commonest realization of the SBS is a homorganic nasal, making it tonally and segmentally homophonic with the present non-focus form). (See §2.5.3).

Tense: (Dschang: this includes only time reference, so is not complete): **á** P<sub>1</sub>, **áa**, P<sub>2</sub>, **ke** P<sub>3</sub>, **le** P<sub>4</sub>, **le+láʔ** P<sub>5</sub>, **á** F<sub>1</sub>, **á piŋ** F<sub>2</sub>, **á lu/ʃoʔ** F<sub>3</sub>, **á láʔ** F<sub>4</sub>, **á fú** F<sub>5</sub>. Hyman also shows a “CNS” (consecutive) nasal, identical with the reduced SBS (subsecutive) form in Aghem.

SBJ: underlying /é/. The vowel deletes in perfectives, leaving the tone. (See §2.5.1).

F: Anderson (1979:77) divides verbs into three classes. Class 1, containing half of all verbs, contrasts PFV (with a zero FV) and IPFV (-a). IPFV -a has many allomorphs, including vowel copy. Class 2, the smallest of the classes with only five percent of verbs, reverses zero and -a, for reasons that are unclear. Class 3 has no PFV/IPFV distinction, but has three other FVs, apparently lexically arbitrary: **-nɔ** **-so** and zero. Each has two shapes, depending on position in the sentence. **Sɔ** appears to be the relic of an archaic causative. There is no overall distinction between extension and final, found elsewhere in Niger-Congo.

HABitual: **tsɪgha**.

NEG<sub>2</sub>: **yɔ**

FOCUS: **no**. See §2.5.3, following.

- (4) HYP **tɔ́ o bo-ó figham**  
 HYP 3 hit-IPFV mat  
 ‘3 could be hitting the mat.’
- (5) CFL ...**é fí 'lɔ́ baʔtóm odzɪŋ**  
 ...3 CFL<sub>2</sub> be chief good  
 ‘(X thought that) he was a good chief (and X was wrong because he wasn’t).’
- (6) FV Class 1 (PFV, then IPFV): **bó – bo-o** ‘hit’, **bɔ́ – bɔ-ɔ** ‘be bad’, **pú – pu-u** ‘die’, **tá – ta-a** ‘sew’, **ná-m – na-a** ‘cook (fufu)’, etc. Class 2 **nó – nɔ-m** ‘grow’. Class 3 **moo – moo-n** ‘live, stay’, **yɔs-ɔ – yɔs-i** ‘3p, yawn’.
- (7) Object pronouns: **o mɔ kɔʔ wo** ‘3s saw you.’  
**o mɔ nam kíbé â wo** ‘3s cooked fufu for you.’
- (8) Focus: a **énáʔ mɔ ñíŋ nô** but **a mɔ ñíŋ énáʔ**  
 Inah P<sub>2</sub> run FOC DS P<sub>2</sub> run Inah  
 ‘Inah ran.’ ‘Inah ran.’ (Inah focused)
- b **fɪl á mɔ bé'kí zí án 'sóm**  
 friends SM P<sub>2</sub> fufu eat in farm  
 ‘Friends ate fufu in the farm.’ (fufu preposed, in farm focused)
- c **fɪl á mɔ án 'sóm zí kíbé**  
 friends SM P<sub>2</sub> in farm eat fufu  
 ‘Friends ate fufu in the farm.’ (in farm preposed, fufu focused)

## 2.4 Tense, aspect

The data presented by the authors, especially Anderson, in Hyman (1979), shows three aspects and five tenses. P<sub>1</sub> and F<sub>1</sub> represent hodiernal, F<sub>2</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> beyond hodiernal. Whether they are absolute or relative is not mentioned. The PFV is unmarked, IPFV is marked for the largest verb class by -a, and HAB builds on IPFV.

Table 2.1 Tense, aspect in Aghem

	Perfective	Imperfective	Habitual
P <sub>2</sub> <b>mɔ</b>	<b>o mɔ bó fíghâm</b> 3s hit the mat	<b>o mɔ bóo fíghâm</b> 3s was hitting the mat	<b>o mɔ bóo tsíghá fíghâm</b> 3s used to hit the mat
P <sub>1</sub> <b>mɔ</b>	<b>o mɔ bo fíghâm</b> 3s hit the mat	<b>o mɔ boó fíghâm</b> 3s was hitting the mat	

Present Ø	<b>o bo fǵhâm</b> <sup>6</sup> 3s (has) hit the mat	<b>o boó fǵhâm</b> 3s is hitting the mat	<b>o boó tsǵha fǵham</b> 3s hits, is hitting the mat regularly
F <sub>1</sub> <b>si</b>		<b>o si boó fǵham</b> 3s will hit the mat	
F <sub>2</sub> <b>lǵ</b>		<b>o lǵ 'bóo fǵham</b> 3s will hit the mat	<b>o lǵ 'bóo tsǵhá fǵhâm</b> 3s will hit the mat regularly

The gaps are not accidental. Indicative perfectives only occur in the non-future. Imperfectives occur with all five tenses. Habitual only occurs with distant past and future, which Anderson explains by saying that one day/today is not sufficient time for a situation to become habitual<sup>7</sup>.

## 2.5 Other categories

### 2.5.1 Mood<sup>8</sup>

Subjunctive, indicated by /é/, occurs only in non-pasts. Unlike the past, the future has perfective and imperfective variants, and /e/ deletes in perfectives ((9d)):

- (9) a     **o e bó-o ghâmfo**  
          3s SBJ hit-IPFV mat  
          ‘3s should be hitting the mat (now).’
- b     **o sé-e bó-o ghâmfo**  
          3s F<sub>1</sub>-SBJ hit-IPFV mat  
          ‘3s should be hitting the mat (later today).’
- c     **o e bóo tsǵhá 'ghâmfo** ‘3s should hit the mat regularly.’
- d     **o si bó fǵhâm** ‘3s should hit the mat later today.’ (underlying **si + é**), vs:
- e     **o si boó fǵham** ‘3s will hit the mat later today.’

The first three examples are imperfectives, with an underlying and a surface subjunctive. The fourth form is a perfective, with underlying subjunctive /é/ deleted but its tone transferred to the [bó]. The fifth form is a future indicative (so no /é/), necessarily imperfective. This is complicated and set out in Anderson (1979).

<sup>6</sup> This unmarked form is a Factative, in the sense of Welmers (1973) or Faraclas (1996), where an otherwise unmarked form represents the past with active verbs, and the present with stative verbs: cf. (13b)

<sup>7</sup> Anderson’s remark would also apply to other Niger-Congo languages, e.g. the Bantu language Haya (E22), where the habitual suffix only occurs in Far Past and Far Future.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson (1979:103-11) treats “hortative” (our SBJ), IMP, HYP, and CFL as moods, all marked in comparison to the unmarked indicative. See §2.3.

### 2.5.2 Imperative

Imperatives, when used alone, not followed by an object, are in the IPFV form, so: **bó-o** ‘Hit (it)’, **bó-o tsigha** ‘Hit (it) regularly’. Compare SBJ **é bó-o** ‘Hit’, said to be “almost synonymous” with the imperative.

### 2.5.3 Focus

Focus in Aghem is an elaborate and unusual system, and its analysis occupies a lot of space in the source<sup>9</sup>. What is here called ‘focus’ is similar to ‘emphasis’ in accounts of other languages, e.g. Yoruba. This short section does not attempt to summarise the whole system but concentrates only on the parts expressed by the verb.

Focus is defined in general as “that information in the sentence that the speaker believes, assumes or knows the hearer does not share with him or her” (Watters 1979:137). Watters (1979:137,177) recognizes as focus types in Aghem: unmarked, assertive, counter-assertive, polar, counter-assertive polar, and exhaustive listing, to which Anderson adds “completive”. Five strategies are associated with focus marking: noun shape, word order, cleft sentences, verbal morphology, and the “particle” **no**. We discuss only the last two here.

Anderson (1979:97) says of completive focus that it “is used to insist that something has indeed taken place in the context of someone having denied or questioned its completion”. Completive focus only co-occurs with the two perfective pasts and the perfective present. It asserts that the situation did occur. Thus:

**Table 2.2 Completive focus in Aghem**

	Factative, non-focus	Factative, with focus
P <sub>2</sub> (Pre-hodiernal)	<b>o mɔ bó fǵhâm</b> 3s hit the mat	<b>o má<sup>1</sup> á bó ghâmfo</b> 3s <u>did</u> hit the mat
P <sub>1</sub> (Hodiernal)	<b>o mɔ bo fǵhâm</b> 3s hit the mat	<b>o máa bó ghâmfo</b> 3s <u>did</u> hit the mat
Present	<b>o bo fǵhâm</b> 3s has hit the mat	<b>o ím<sup>1</sup> bó ghâmfo</b> 3s <u>has</u> hit the mat

Comparing the focus and non-focus forms here suggests that the former results from a fusion of two morphemes. The consonantal part of the present factative focus is a homorganic nasal, identical in form to the subsecutive mentioned in §2.3 above.

Another focus marker, **no**, occurs to the right of the constituent which it marks as focus. It may indicate various types of focus. If it occurs after the verb, as in the first sentence below, it will be formally different but functionally identical with sentences whose focus is indicated in other ways. If it occurs as in (10a), it may focus on the entire sentence or just the verb. As the other examples show, it may follow other constituents:

<sup>9</sup> One of three chapters, plus other pages, over a third of Hyman (1979).

- (10) a      **fú kí mō ñ̃ñ nō**  
              rat SM P<sub>1</sub> run FOC  
              ‘The rat ran.’ (Hyman 1979:166)
- b      **fú kí mō ñ̃ñ nō á kí bé** ‘The rat ran (i.e. not walked) in the compound.’
- c      **fú kí mō ñ̃ñ á kí bé no** ‘The rat ran in the compound (not the house).’
- d      **a mō fuo á-wé nō bé'kó â f̃nghó**  
              DS P<sub>1</sub> give children FOC fufu to friends  
              ‘The children gave fufu to the friends.’ (1979:168)

## 2.6 Negation

Aghem has four negative formatives: 1. **ka** and **'ká**, 2. **yó**, 3. **ke'** and **táke'**, and 4. **dzi**. They vary in segmental shape, tone, position, and function. Low-toned **ka** (NEG<sub>1</sub>), placed between subject and verb, occurs with perfectives (past, present) and imperatives. High-toned **'ká**, occurs with subjunctives. The second formative, high-toned **yó** (NEG<sub>2</sub>), occurs between verb and object in imperfectives (present, future, habitual). The third formatives (NEG<sub>3</sub>) characterize negatives in non-main clauses. The first member of the pair, **ke'**, a “consecutive”, joins two clauses with the same subject, preceding and negating the second; the second member **táke'** occurs with relatives, conditionals, and subsecutives with different subjects, immediately preceding the verb. The fourth marker, **dzi**, is relatively minor. When it occurs with NEG<sub>2</sub>, it always precedes it. It has to co-occur with NEG<sub>1</sub> or NEG<sub>2</sub> and provides contrastive emphasis to a previous affirmative statement. Focus plays a role in negation. Object nouns with a class prefix are “in focus”, while those with suffixed or postposed class markers are “out of focus”. Examples of all the above:

- (11) a Past      **o kaa bó ghâmfo**  
                      3s NEG hit mat  
                      ‘3s didn’t hit the mat.’
- b Imperative      **ka bó ghâmfo** ‘Don’t hit the mat!’
- c Subjunctive      **o ká bó ghâmfo** ‘3s shouldn’t hit the mat.’
- d Imperfective      **o bo-ó      'yó ghâmfo**  
                      3s hit-IPFV NEG mat  
                      ‘3s isn’t hitting the mat.’
- e Future      **o ló 'bó-o      'yó ghâmfo**  
                      3s F<sub>2</sub> it-IPFV NEG mat  
                      ‘3s won’t hit the mat.’

- f Habitual **ghé bó-o tsɪgha yɔ ghâmfɔ**  
 3p hit-IPFV HAB NEG mat  
 ‘They don’t habitually hit the mat.’
- g “Completive consecutive” **o mɔ zɔm ke bɪm**  
 3s P<sub>2</sub> sing NEG dance  
 ‘3s sang and didn’t dance.’
- h Relative **wu wɪl a o mɔ táke nám kɪbé**  
 person this REL 3s P<sub>1</sub> NEG cook fufu  
 ‘The person who didn’t cook fufu...’
- i Consecutive (with different subject) **o mɔ nam kɪbé yia n mɔ táke zí**  
 3s P<sub>1</sub> cook fufu and 1s P<sub>1/2</sub> NEG eat  
 ‘3s cooked fufu and I didn’t eat (it).’
- j Contrastive emphasis **o ka bo dzi ghâmfɔ**  
 3s NEG hit NEG mat  
 ‘3s DID NOT hit the mat.’

Watters (2003:250) points out that in Grassfields Bantu in general the use of a discontinuous negative marker, not found in Aghem, is common. The first marker is placed as **ka**, above, while the second morpheme is placed at the end of the clause or sentence. This final morpheme often has the shape **bɔ́/wɔ́** (also Narrow Bantu C85).

## 2.7 ‘Be’ and ‘have’, and sources for other formatives

Copula ‘be’ is rendered by **ló** (12a), which is slightly irregular. It is inherently IPFV, not varying in shape for IPFV vs. PFV, as many other verbs. Otherwise, it takes tense and HAB markers. ‘Have’ is rendered by **kí** (12b).

- (12) a **o mɔ lo kɪkɔ́**  
 3s P<sub>1</sub> be servant  
 ‘3s was a servant.’
- b **o ki fɪghâm** ‘3s has a mat.’

The two counterfactuals derive from locative demonstratives; HAB from a verb (é)-**tsíghá** meaning ‘(to) pass’.

In Dschang, the four more distant futures consist of the F<sub>1</sub> /-a-/ marker, followed by other morphemes, which derive from auxiliaries (F<sub>2</sub> ‘return’, F<sub>3</sub> ‘get up/come’, F<sub>4</sub> ‘pass the night’, respectively). The nasal preceding the main verb in at least P<sub>2</sub>, P<sub>5</sub>, and F<sub>2</sub> is a consecutive marker. Possible sources for past markers are not given.



## 2.8 Bamileke-Dschang

Watters (2003:247) observes that Bamileke languages (a subset of Mbam-Nkam) have the largest set of tense contrasts in Grassfields Bantu. One of them is sketched here as an illustration, based on Hyman (1980). Dschang has five contrastive pasts and futures (some phonetic details are omitted in this display). See under §2.3 for tense morphemes.

Table 2.3 Dschang tenses

Past	Future
P <sub>1</sub> <b>aá 'tán</b> '3s bargained'	F <sub>1</sub> <b>a' á tán</b> '3s will bargain'
P <sub>2</sub> <b>a áa ntán</b>	F <sub>2</sub> <b>aa 'piŋ ŋ tán</b>
P <sub>3</sub> <b>a ke tán' ŋ</b>	F <sub>3</sub> <b>aa 'lu'ú tán</b> or <b>aa 'fu?'é tán</b>
P <sub>4</sub> <b>a le tán' ŋ</b>	F <sub>4</sub> <b>a' á lá?é 'tán</b>
P <sub>5</sub> <b>a le lá? n'tán</b>	F <sub>5</sub> <b>a' á fú 'tán</b>

When used absolutely, with the day of speaking as the reference point, these represent reference to: 1. just have/just about to, 2. same day, 3. hesternal/crastinal, 4. a few days away, and 5. a long time away, respectively. But they can also be used relatively, where the first verb establishes a time other than the present, and the second verb represents the time of an action relative to that. In a sentence such as '3s said (P<sub>3</sub>) that you will see (F<sub>3</sub>) the child', the P<sub>3</sub> refers to yesterday, and the F<sub>3</sub> may be used absolutely or relatively. If used absolutely, it will refer to the day following today, i.e. tomorrow, and if used relatively, it will refer to the day after yesterday, i.e. today. There are certain restrictions on the co-occurrence of tenses. Speakers may manipulate the system and deliberately "misuse" combinations in order to communicate a subjective point of view. The tense system of Aghem and its morphemes differ significantly from those of Bamileke-Dschang.

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