2
Aghem
(Bantoid, Grassfields Bantu)

Derek Nurse

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 diphthongs1. 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 TEM2. Objects, nominal and pronominal, follow the verb. Examples:

(1) a fɓ̃ á mɔ̀ zí kɓ̃ɓ̃ ɗ́á n sɒ̀m

1We have used (i) for Hyman’s (1979:5) (i) and (ʊ) for his (ʉ). 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.
2Abbreviations unique to this chapter: DS ‘dummy subject’, TEM ‘temporal (adverb or phrase)’. Other abbreviations appear in the general List of Abbreviations.
3Surface tones are not necessarily underlying tones. For instance, in this and following examples (and in Table 2.1), the underlying high tone on the P2 morpheme mɔ̀ has moved rightwards. See Anderson (1979:133-135).
4The 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., kɓ̃ɓ̃) or suffixed (ɓ̃-
friends they $P_2$ eat fufu in farm
‘Friends ate fufu at the farm.’

b $bvò$ tí $ma'$ á $kí'bè$ á$'zò$ $nì$í
dogs they $P_2$:FOC in compound yesterday run
‘Dogs ran in compound yesterday.’

c $fìl$ á $mò$ $fù$ $kí'hè$ á $bvò'tò$
friends they $P_2$ give fufu to dogs
‘Friends gave fufu to the dogs.’

d $fìl$ á $mò$ $nzaŋ$ $zóm$ á $ba?tom$
friends they $P_2$ 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$^5$. $Wh$-words are always
focused, and also other elements (underlined) may be focused:

(2) a $fìl$ á $mò$ zíghè bèkò
friends they $P_2$ eat where fufu
‘Where did friends eat fufu?’

b a $mò$ zóm á-fìn $nzaŋ$ á $ba?tom$
DS $P_2$ sing friends nzang for chief
‘Friends sang Nzang for the chief.’

c $fìl$ á $mò$ zí án $'sòm$ bèkò
friends they $P_2$ 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.

$^5$depending on its focus value. The same obtains with the word for ‘mat’, which, depending on focus
value, may be either $fìg'hàn$ or $g'hàn-fò$ (as in Table 2.1). See also Hyman (1979:16).

$^5$“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 $P_2$:FOC
would represent the AUX.
HYPSM CFL NEG₁/3 T SBJ ROOT-F HAB NEG₂ FOC

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

HYPothetical: \[ tó \] ‘would/should (have)’

SM: subject marking is obligatory. Subject pronouns are: 1s N \( \acute{\text{e}} \), 2s wo, 3s o, 3s logophoric é, 1p gha? \( \acute{\text{e}} \), 1p inclusive `se \( \acute{\text{e}} \), 2p ghe\( \acute{\text{e}} \), 3p `ghé. Object pronouns are identical except 1s muo \( \acute{\text{e}} \) and 3s `wín. Inanimate objects are usually represented through zero anaphora.

Counterfactual: fe \( \acute{\text{e}} \) CFL₁, fi \( \acute{\text{e}} \) CFL₂. 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 NEG₁ are not shown co-occurring, it is not clear which comes first. (See example (5) in §2.6).

NEG₁: ka, with two different tone patterns; NEG₃ non-main clause NEG. (See §2.6);

Tense (Aghem): Ø present/Factative (see footnote 6), mə P₁, `məP₂, st F₁, lʃF₂, Ñ (H+L) present+FOC, máa P₁+FOC, máá P₂+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): \( \acute{\text{e}} \) P₁, áa, P₂, kẹ P₃, le P₄, le+lá? P₅, á F₁, á pìg F₂, á lu/ʃə? F₃, á lá? F₄, á fú F₅. 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: -nọ -sọ and zero. Each has two shapes, depending on position in the sentence. Sọ appears to be the relic of an archaic causative. There is no overall distinction between extension and final, found elsewhere in Niger-Congo.

HABitual: tszgha.

NEG₂: yọ

FOCus: no. See §2.5.3, following.
(4) HYP tó o bo-ó fgham
HYP 3 hit-IPFV mat
‘3 could be hitting the mat.’

(5) CFL …é fí ló baʔtóm odzm
…3 CFL2 be chief good
‘(X thought that) he was a good chief (and X was wrong because he wasn’t).’


(7) Object pronouns: o m k wo ‘3s saw you.’
o m nam kíb ø ‘3s cooked fufu for you.’

(8) Focus: a éná? m mɨ ɲ ño but a m mɨ ɲ ña?
Inah P2 run FOC DS P2 run Inah
‘Inah ran.’ ‘Inah ran.’ (Inah focused)

b fi á m békí zi án ɬsóm
friends SM P2 fufu eat in farm
‘Friends ate fufu in the farm.’ (fufu preposed, in farm focused)

c fi á m án ɬsóm zi kíbè
friends SM P2 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. P1 and F1 represent hodiernal, F2 and P2 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perfective</th>
<th>Imperfective</th>
<th>Habitual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2 mọ</td>
<td>o mọ bó fghám</td>
<td>o mọ bóo fghám</td>
<td>o mọ bóo tsîghá fghám</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s hit the mat</td>
<td>3s was hitting the mat</td>
<td>3s used to hit the mat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 mọ</td>
<td>o mọ bó fghám</td>
<td>o mọ bóó fghám</td>
<td>o mọ bóó tsîghá fghám</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s hit the mat</td>
<td>3s was hitting the mat</td>
<td>3s used to hit the mat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

2.5 Other categories

2.5.1 Mood

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  ghámfo
    3s  SBJ hit-IPFV  mat
    ‘3s should be hitting the mat (now).’

    b  o  sé-e  bó-o  ghámfo
    3s  F₁-SBJ  hit-IPFV  mat
    ‘3s should be hitting the mat (later today).’

    c  o  e  bóó  tsghá  ghámfo  ‘3s should hit the mat regularly.’

    d  o  sî  bóó  fğhám  ‘3s should hit the mat later today.’ (underlying sî + é), vs:

    e  o  sî  bóó  fğham  ‘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).

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6 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)

7 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.

8 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: bo-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. 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Factative, non-focus</th>
<th>Factative, with focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2 (Pre-hodiernal)</td>
<td>o mo bó figh âm 3s hit the mat</td>
<td>o má ṣ bó gh âm fọ 3s did hit the mat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 (Hodiernal)</td>
<td>o mo bo figh âm 3s hit the mat</td>
<td>o má bó gh âm fọ 3s did hit the mat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o bo figh âm 3s has hit the mat</td>
<td>o ṣ bo gh âm fọ 3s hit the mat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

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9 One of three chapters, plus other pages, over a third of Hyman (1979).
(10)  

a  

\[ \text{áfu} \text{kí mò ŋŋ̃ nò} \]  
rat SM P₁ run FOC  
‘The rat ran.’ (Hyman 1979:166)

b  

\[ \text{áfu} \text{kí mò ŋŋ̃ nò á kíbè} \]  
‘The rat ran (i.e. not walked) in the compound.’

c  

\[ \text{áfu} \text{kí mò ŋŋ̃ á kíbè no} \]  
‘The rat ran in the compound (not the house).’

d  

\[ \text{a mo fuo á-wé nò bé’kò á fínghó} \]  
DS P₁ 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. dz.  
They vary in segmental shape, tone, position, and function. Low-toned ka (NEG₁), placed  
between subject and verb, occurs with perfectives (past, present) and imperatives. High-  
toned ‘ká, occurs with subjunctives. The second formative, high-toned yó(NEG₂), occurs  
between verb and object in imperfectives (present, future, habitual). The third formatives  
(NEG₃) 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 take ‘ occurs with relatives, conditionals, and subjunctives  
with different subjects, immediately preceding the verb. The fourth marker, dz, is  
relatively minor. When it occurs with NEG₂, it always precedes it. It has to co-occur with  
NEG₁ or NEG₂ 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  

\[ \text{o kaa bó ghámfo} \]  
3s NEG hit mat  
‘3s didn’t hit the mat.’

b  

\[ \text{ka bó ghámfo} \]  
‘Don’t hit the mat!’

c  

\[ \text{o ká bó ghámfo} \]  
‘3s shouldn’t hit the mat.’

d  

\[ \text{o bo-ó yó ghámfo} \]  
3s hit-IPFV NEG mat  
‘3s isn’t hitting the mat.’

e  

\[ \text{o ló bó-o yó ghámfo} \]  
3s F₂ it-IPFV NEG mat  
‘3s won’t hit the mat.’
f Habitual ghé bó-o tsígha yo ghàmfó
3p hit-IPFV HAB NEG mat
‘They don’t habitually hit the mat.’

g “Completive consecutive” o mò zám ke bỳn
3s P2 sing NEG dance
‘3s sang and didn’t dance.’

h Relative wu wrl a o mò tâke nám kỳbá
person this REL 3s P1 NEG cook fufu
‘The person who didn’t cook fufu…’

i Consecutive o mò nam kỳbá yia n mò tâke zí
(with different subject) 3s P1 cook fufu and 1s P1/2 NEG eat
‘3s cooked fufu and I didn’t eat (it).’

j Contrastive emphasis o ka bo dzì ghàmfó
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 bỳ/wỳ (also Narrow Bantu C85).

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

Copula ‘be’ is rendered by lò’ (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 mò lò kükô
3s P1 be servant
‘3s was a servant.’

b o kí fíghàm ‘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 F1 /-a/- marker, followed by other morphemes, which derive from auxiliaries (F2 ‘return’, F3 ‘get up/come’, F4 ‘pass the night’, respectively). The nasal preceding the main verb in at least P2, P5, and F2 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P₁ aá táŋ ‘3s bargained’</td>
<td>F₁ a'á táŋ ‘3s will bargain’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₂ a áá ntán</td>
<td>F₂ aa 'piŋŋ\’ táŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₃ a ke táŋŋ</td>
<td>F₃ aa 'lu'ú táŋ or aa 'ju'é táŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₄ a le táŋŋ</td>
<td>F₄ a'á lá'é 'táŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₅ a le lá? n'táŋ</td>
<td>F₅ a'á fú 'táŋ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 (P₃) that you will see (F₃) the child’, the P₃ refers to yesterday, and the F₃ 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.

References


