

# Determiner Phrase Internal Agreement Asymmetries in Grassfields Bantu: A Morphological Approach

Leonel Fongang  
Universität Leipzig

A considerable number of Grassfields Bantu (GB) languages instantiate DP-internal re-ordering for modifier focus that, in turn, affects the spell out of noun class markers. In this talk, I present a detailed description and analysis of this phenomenon in selected languages. I show that GB can be sorted into at least five different groups, based on the behaviour of noun class prefixes in modifier-focus contexts. In the first, focus has an effect on the presence of the nominal prefix, in the sense that a possessive pronoun in information-structure-neutral context (post-nominal word order) requires the drop of the nominal prefix. In focus (pre-nominal word order), dropping it is not allowed (see, e.g., Aghem). The second contains languages in which the agreement prefix is replaced in specific noun classes, and the ‘new’ prefix does not realize any semantic information (e.g., Medumba and Ghomala’). In Shupamem-type languages, singular and plural agreement markers are always replaced, as they become a single glide (*j*-) that is also not sensitive to the semantics of the head noun. In the fourth group, agreement prefixes are only replaced in the singular, and the ‘new’ prefixes reflect the animacy specification of the head noun (e.g., Ngemba). The last group contains languages in which no segmental changes are visible on nominal and agreement prefixes (e.g., Bafut and Limbum).

I argue that a unified account of languages in which modifier focus affects the form of the agreement prefix (Medumba-type, Ngemba-type and Shupamem-type languages) is possible, in an approach that assumes that the relevant changes happen in the morphology. In the syntax, probes on agreeing modifiers always copy the features they need to spell out regular class markers. In the morphology, however, the  $\bar{A}$ -feature on the focus head triggers impoverishment rules in specific contexts and, as a result, give rise to the observed changes (see also [Lahne 2009](#); [Baier 2018](#); [Fongang 2025](#); [Ershova To appear](#)).

For Aghem-type languages – in which modifier focus has an effect on the presence of the nominal prefix – I first develop an account of class drop that relies on the idea that the phenomenon is an instance of haplological dissimilation (see [Nevins 2012](#) for an overview) that is sensitive to strictly local repetition of identical phi-features. I propose that the repetition is avoided by obliterating ([Arregi & Nevins, 2012](#)) the head that spells out inherent class features. To derive the fact that prefix drop is not allowed in focus contexts, I show that modifier focus in Aghem involves two DPs, and one of the two is deleted for economy (c.f., [Landau 2006](#)). Prefix deletion is blocked because it would otherwise lead to a scenario where information about class membership is lost altogether.

Overall, I argue that a unified account of class exponence asymmetries in Grassfields Bantu languages is possible if the relevant changes happen in the morphology.