

The expression of qualities in Babanki

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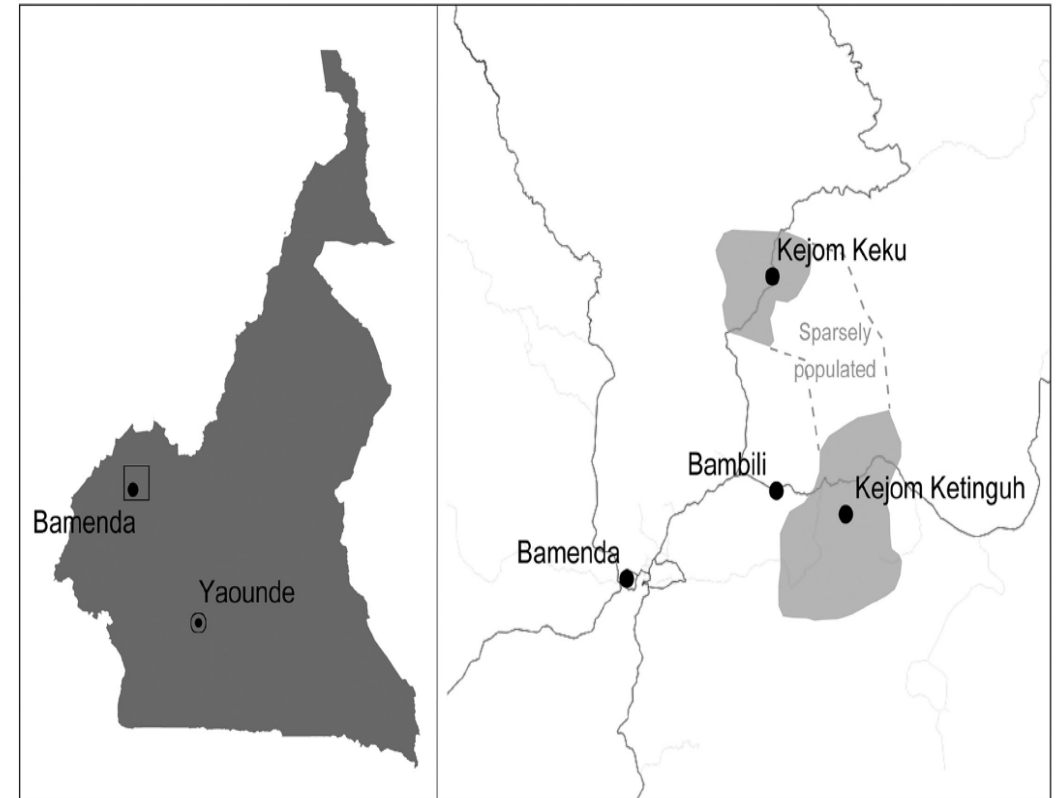
Introduction

- Universality of the lexical category of adjectives (Dixon 1982, Dixon & Aikhenvald 2004).
- Yet adjectives found to be weakly grammaticalised as a closed word class; rather marginal (Segeer 2008, Ameka (unpublished))
- How are qualities expressed in languages with few adjectives?
- The aim of this paper is to explore the expression of qualities and their primary distribution across lexical categories in Babanki.

Babanki

A Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language of Northwest Cameroon

39,000 speakers (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2021))



Semantic domain of property concepts: Dixon (2004: 3-5)

1. DIMENSION: big, small, long, tall, short
2. AGE: old, new, young
3. VALUE: good, bad, lovely, atrocious
4. COLOUR: black, white, red
5. PHYSICAL PROPERTY: hard, soft, heavy, light, wet
6. HUMAN PROPENSITY: jealous, happy, kind, clever
7. SPEED: fast, quick, slow
8. DIFFICULTY: easy, difficult, hard, simple
9. SIMILARITY: similar, different, unlike
10. QUALIFICATION (speaker attitude): true, definite, probable [...]

Primary encoding in lexical classes

- Many languages worldwide dispose of an open word class of adjectives dedicated to the expression of property concepts
- Others rather distribute the expression of these concepts in specific ways across major lexical classes, i.e. verbs and nouns, while adjectives only play a very minor role as a distinct word category.

Marginal status of adjectives in African languages: Seegerer (2008)

In a sample of 72 languages distributed across all four families of Africa only 12 have a total of more than 15 (but less than 30) adjectives, with no clear correlations emerging between the relative size of an adjective inventory on the one hand and genetic affiliation or areal location on the other hand.

Encoding qualities in Babanki

Beyond a small class of full-fledged adjectives whose primary function is to modify nouns, qualities are expressed by a larger class of inchoative-stative verbs and by a class of nouns for concrete embodiments of qualities which are typically used as heads in associative constructions under dependency reversal for attributing qualities.

Encoding qualities in Babanki: Overview

(1) Word classes used for encoding qualities in Babanki

word class	examples
adjective (closed)	<i>fí</i> 'new', <i>mú</i> 'old', <i>dzùŋ</i> 'nice', <i>kú</i> 'raw', <i>zì</i> 'open'
inchoative- stative verbs (open)	<i>bàŋ</i> 'red', <i>fén</i> 'black', <i>fɛf</i> 'white', <i>dzàf</i> 'long', <i>bòŋ</i> 'good', <i>byíf</i> 'bad' [...]
nouns of quality (open)	<i>kàmpfí</i> (7/8) 'big', <i>kàntámá</i> (7/8) 'short', <i>fàndé?</i> (19/6a) 'tiny', <i>fàwán</i> (19/6a) 'little' [...]

Five primary adjectives

Attributive usage of adjectives

(2)	(a)	<i>kà-fó</i> 7-thing	<i>ká</i> 7	<i>fí</i> new	<i>ká</i> 7	'new thing'
	(b)	<i>nàm</i> 9.meat	<i>á</i> 9	<i>kú</i> raw	\emptyset 9	'raw meat'
	(c)	<i>à-ló?</i> 6-house	<i>á</i> 6	<i>zí</i> open	<i>yá</i> 6	'open houses'
	(d)	<i>fà-nín</i> 19-bird	<i>fá</i> 19	<i>dzú</i> [↓] nice	<i>ηá</i> <i>fá</i> 19	'nice bird'
	(e)	<i>tà-yón</i> 13-spear	<i>tá</i> 13	<i>mú</i> old	<i>tá</i> 13	'old spears'

Five primary adjectives

Cannot be used predicatively (unless nominalized and fit into a predicate slot by means of the copula (4)):

(3) *(a) *kà-fó* *ká* *fí* *lí* *‘a thing has become new’
7-thing 7 new P0

*(b) *tà-yón* *tá* *mú* *lí* *‘spears have become old’
13-spear 13 old P0

(4) *kà-fó* *ká* *dí?* *ká-fí* ‘A thing is new’
7-thing 7 COP 7-new

Inchoative-stative verbs for encoding qualities

Many Babanki property concepts are encoded primarily by inchoative-stative verbs, i.e. verbs which denote a gradual transition to a state in their basic lexical meaning:

(4) Predicative usage of inchoative-stative verbs encoding properties: *bàŋ* ‘be(come) red / ripe’

(a) Past tense reference:

<i>à-ŋgòm</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>tâ</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>
5-banana	DJ	P2	become.red

‘The banana became ripe.’

(b) Non-past tense reference:

<i>à-ŋgòm</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>né</i>	<i>bàŋ</i>
5-banana	DJ	F2	become.red

‘The banana became ripe.’

Nouns for encoding qualities

- Nouns of abstract quality such *kàmfé́m* ‘poverty’ <*fé́m* ‘be poor’, *àbòṅ* ‘goodness’ <*bòṅ* ‘be good’, *àsáṅlá* ‘happiness’ <*sáṅlá* ‘be happy’
- A host of nouns which encode concrete embodiments of specific qualities, e.g. *kàntámá* ‘short thing, short person’, *kàmpfí* ‘big thing, huge thing’, *fàndé?* ‘tiny person / thing’.
- Some are derived from verbs, e.g. *kàntó* ‘something tough’ from *tó* ‘be(come) strong, be(come) tough’, .

Nouns for encoding qualities: Dependency reversal

Although they act as qualifiers or modifiers they typically take the position of syntactic heads in associative constructions whereas the syntactically modifying (possessor) nouns rather encode more specific concepts and must therefore be considered the semantic heads (van der Velde 2013)

Nouns for encoding qualities: Dependency reversal

(5) Nouns of concrete embodiments of properties in associative constructions with dependency reversal

(a) <i>kà-mpfi</i> 7-large	<i>ká</i> 7.AM	<i>wì?</i> 1.person	'big person'
(b) <i>kà-ntú</i> 7-blunt	<i>ká</i> 7.AM	<i>ñi</i> 9.machete	'blunt machete'
(c) <i>fà-ndé?</i> 19-tiny	<i>fá</i> 19.AM	<i>ñi</i> 9.machete	'small machete'
(d) <i>fà-wán</i> 19-little	<i>fá</i> 19.AM	<i>mbàŋ</i> 9.stick	'tiny stick'
(e) <i>ngés</i> 9.nice	<i>à</i> 9.AM	<i>wàn</i> 1.child	'beautiful child'
(f) <i>ngòn</i> 9.young	<i>à</i> 9.AM	<i>wùwì</i> 2.woman	'young girl / virgin'

Encoding qualities in Babanki: Overview

(6) Primary coding of quality concepts in Babanki

	adjective	verb	noun
Dimension	OPEN?	BIG, LONG, TINY, TALL, SHORT	LARGE, HUGE, LITTLE
Age	NEW, OLD	-	OLD, YOUNG (animate)
Value	NICE	GOOD, BAD, LOVELY	BEAUTIFUL
Colour	-	RED, BLACK, WHITE, GREEN, YELLOW	-
Physical property (objects)	RAW	HARD, SOFT, LIGHT, HEAVY, WET, HOT, SHARP, CLEAN	BLUNT
Physical property (human)	-	STRONG, HEALTY, FAT, WEAK,	-
Mental and emotional	-	STUPID, HAPPY, SAD, INTELLIGENT	-
Propensity of humans	-	HATE, LAZY, DRUNK	-

Some remarks

General observations on the distribution of lexical encoding strategies across the conceptual space of qualities in Babanki

- Overlap of adjectival lexicalisation of property concepts in the domains of AGE and VALUE in Babanki tends to confirm some of Dixon's (1982: 3) generalisations on languages with small closed classes of adjectives.
- However, the domains of COLOR and DIMENSION are exclusively expressed by inchoative-stative verbs, contrary to Dixon's generalisation.

Some remarks

- Furthermore, only a single antonymic pair of adjectives, i.e. OLD vs. NEW has been found.
- Antonymic pairs, e.g. GOOD vs. BAD, OPEN vs. CLOSED, RAW vs. COOKED are rather expressed heterogeneously with respect to primary lexical encoding.

Some remarks

- Only a few studies of the expression of qualities in Grassfields languages (Isu: Kießling 2018, Bamunka: Anderson 2019).
- Nouns of quality considered NP-initial „adjectival“ modifiers in Ngiemboon (Anderson 1980: 50-52), Yemba (Harro & Haynes 1991: 36), and Ejagham (Watters 1980: 456-461).

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Thank you