

The homorganic nasal and VP structure in Grassfields Bantu

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In many constructions in a large number of Grassfields Bantu languages, a homorganic nasal consonant is often inserted in the initial position of specific words. We find this homorganic nasal consonant in the noun class system, in derived nominals, tense marking, infinitive verb forms, serial verb constructions, consecutive structures, same subject coreference, coordinate constructions, and syntactic repetition. Earlier scholars (e.g. Hyman and Voeltz 1971, Watters 1979, Leroy 1977, Ambe 1989, Mfonyam 1989, Tanda 1993, etc.) have attributed over eight different functions to the homorganic nasal consonant: noun class marker, nominalization prefix, tense marker, infinitive particle, logophoric pronoun, serialisation morpheme, coordinating element, and default consonant. Using data from the seven sub-groups of the Grassfields Bantu languages, the present paper demonstrates that these functions of the homorganic nasal consonant can be subsumed under two major roles: a noun classifier and a verb embedding particle. Beginning with the most controversial case which concerns tense marking, the paper provides evidence that tense markers in the Grassfields Bantu languages are historically derived from verbs through desemanticisation and subsequent analogy. As verbal derivatives, these tense markers are endowed with the ability, like all other verbs in these languages, to provoke a homorganic nasal consonant on subsequent verbs in a series. This treatment of the homorganic nasal consonant in the tense system then extends very easily over to the other construction types involving verbal elements. An interesting consequence of this analysis is that it begs a revision of the structure of the VP as currently conceived in respect of Grassfields Bantu languages. If the homorganic nasal consonant serves to embed verbs, a function that is similar to that of ordinary subordinating elements which function to embed clauses, then it is logical to revise the architecture of the lexical projection layer in clauses to include the possibility of an embedding sub-unit. A proposal in this respect revises Larson's VP-shells to incorporate a second light verb projection.