Structured respect vocabulary in the kingdom of Bafut, Cameroun Grassfields

Sculpture of Zintgraff, the first German officer to reach Bafut

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ACRONYMS

    *   regular reconstruction

    V   vowel

1. Introduction

The notion of a hierarchically-structured lexicon and grammar which reflects vertical authority relations in society is familiar from East and Southeast Asia; Japanese and Javanese are well-known examples. Within Africa, there are some examples of register, the use of a particular speech-form to express aspirations (Ma'a/Mbugu is a well-known example; Mous 2004). There are also court languages, or hierolects, where an incoming royal dynasty retains the speech or elements of speech from their original ethnicity. Examples are the archaic Kanuri maintained by the Bade (Schuh n.d.) and the Samba Leeko elements in Balikumbat (Kiessling n.d.). But a specialised lexicon reflecting vertical power relations seems to have been little studied in Africa. Nonetheless, it seems that in the Grassfields of Cameroun, a number of chiefdoms have developed a replacement lexicon marking particular strata of society. These include Bafut (Bìfìɨ) in Ntumgia (2003) and Tamanji (2009), Limbum (Ntumgia 2003) and Chufie (Bafanji) in Nkweti (1987). A distribution like this suggests that this practice is probably more widespread but has simply not been reported. Hamm (p.c.) reports that Bamali and Bamunka are also likely to have royal vocabulary, although no examples are to hand.

This paper[1] describes the replacement lexicon in Bìfìɨ[2] and relates these to the overall social structure of Bafut. For comparative purposes, we give some examples from the more restricted respect lexicon among the Limbum people, near Nkambe in the NE Grassfields (Ntumgia 2003) and from the Chufie', checked in Bafanji in January 2010. Where possible, the paper also presents etymologies for some of the words or phrases in royal vocabulary. Replacement lexicons may well have implications for lexical variation on a larger scale in Bantoid, as there is evidence for some respect terms in Bìfìɨ being cognate with 'usual' terms in other Grassfields languages. The paper also considers links with other types of replacement vocabulary, for example, for animal names and within secret societies.

2. Bafut society, language and culture

The Bafut people form part of the complex of chiefdoms which make up the Cameroun Grassfields. Although small in geographical extent, these chiefdoms are characterised by elaborate political hierarchies, a highly distinctive material culture and a great diversity of languages (Warnier 19xx; Knöpfli 2008). Bafut social hierarchy may be broadly described as consisting of both ascribed and achieved levels, with a hereditary royal family and a nobility composed of wealthy and powerful individuals. Bafut society is interpenetrated by secret societies at every level, mostly organised around masquerade dances. Table 1 shows the levels of authority in the Bafut social hierarchy;

Table 1. Bafut social hierarchy

Title	Gloss
Mfò	Fon
ŋkùm	Nobility
?	Prince
àtaŋtso	Village head
Tanɨkurɨ	Village leader

There is some evidence for a separate 'palace' speech, ways of speaking confined to the palace, used between members of the royal family but not with outsiders.

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[1] The paper is based on fieldwork in Bafut in January 2010. We had an opportunity to check the material with the current Fon, His Majesty Adumbi II, to whom our thanks.
[2] This paper will refer to the language as Bìfìɨ and the town, people and culture as Bafut.

All the languages of this region are Bantoid, with the exception of the intrusive Chamba peoples and the majority belong to a macro-grouping referred to as Grassfields (Watters 2003). A major subgroup of Grassfields is the Eastern or Mbam-Nkam languages (Voorhoeve, Elias and Leroy 1981). Eastern Grassfields divides into Bamileke, Ngemba, Nkam and Nun (ALCAM 1983). Bafut is part of the Ngemba group, along with Mankon, Awing and several other languages. Bafut has been described by Bila (1986), Ambe (1989), Mfonyam (1986, 1989, 1990, 1994), Ayu'nwi (1997) and Tamanji (2009) and there is a literacy programme associated with a New Testament translation. Despite this, disagreements persist over the phonology of the language and even the number of underlying tones. The present transcription adapts the analysis presented in Mfonyam (1989).

3. The context of respect terminology in the family

Bafut society has some elements of respect vocabulary even within the household, for example terms used between fathers and their families. Substitutions are employed for some common terms when speaking to a father. These are shown in Table 2;

Table 2. Respect terminology towards a father

English	Usual	pl.	Father	pl.	Etymology
toilet	àkɔ̀'ɔ́		ŋ̀gɛ̀ɛ̀		'grass'
food basket	ŋ̀kjɛ̀		ŋ̀kàà		'basket of the Fon'

The avoidance terms are drawn from other parts of the Bafut lexicon.

4. Respect terminology in the court

4.1 General

Respect terms in Bafut can be broadly divided into three categories, objects and places, body parts and verbs. All of these are lexical replacements; there is no evidence for distinctive syntax or morphology. The vocabulary of objects and places has a significant level of diverse terms used with the nobility, whereas body parts are confined to the Fon. Verbs used in speaking to the Fon have a couple specialised forms for speaking with princes.

4.2 Things/Places

Table 3 shows the respect terminology for objects and places.

Table 3. Respect terminology for objects and places

English	O sg.	O pl.	Fon	Fon pl.	Chief	Chief pl.	N sg.	N pl.
calabash	fìtɔ̄ɔ̀, dàà, bà'à[3]		ká'á					
chair/stool	àlə̀ŋ		àbə̀rī̄					
compound	ǹdùgə̀		ǹtɔ̀'ɔ́		ābɛ̀ɛ̀		ǹdùgə̀/ ābɛ̀ɛ̀	
cup	ǹdò̃ŋ		ānɔ̀̃					
door	àbà'à		àbù'ù				àbù'ù	
dress	àtʃə̀'ə̀		ǹvì					
food	àtʃūgə̀/àtʃú'ù		àkɔ̄ɔ̀				ndʒòò	
grave	nìsjɛ̀		nìfùm					
gun	mɔ́'ɔ́/ŋ̀gārə̀		kwàrə̀				táfán	
house/residence	ǹdâ		àtʃùm				fì'ìndâ	

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[3] All names for different kinds of calabash, i.e. their proper names

English	O sg.	O pl.	Fon	Fon pl.	Chief	Chief pl.	N sg.	N pl.
parlour	ǹtīì bù'ù		múm tʃàà				tʃàà	
relaxing place/ courtyard			àyɔ̄'ɔ̀				bɔ́ŋ	
shoes	ǹtām/àbā'ākòrɘ̀		(àbā'ā) ǹtʃā'à					
umbrella	àkōŋ		àtʃī̆rɘ́					

4.3 Body parts

A number of common body parts have a replacement vocabulary. There is no evidence for similar words relating to princes, chiefs etc. Table 4 shows the respect terminology for body parts;

Table 4. Respect terminology for body parts

English	O sg.	O pl.	Fon sg.	Fon pl.
ear	àtɔ̀ŋnɘ̀		mìrɘ̀dʒwòrɘ̀	
eye	nìlí'ì	mí'ì	bìtâmfɛ́ɛ́	
foot	àkòrɘ̀		ǹtʃā'à	
hand	àbɔ̃̀			
head	àtũ̀		àyóó	
mouth	ǹtʃù		ŋ̀gɘ̀	
neck	ǹtɔ̄ŋ		àmì	
nose	nìlúì		àlùmsɘ̄	

4.4 Verbs

The richest area of respect vocabulary appears to be in common verbs. In this case there are some three-way contrasts with vocabulary used for princes. Table 5 shows the verbs so far identified with etymologies where known;

Table 5. Verbs used in respect terminology

English	Commoner	Fon	Princes	Etymological commentary
to ask for s.t.	bétɘ̂	kwéentɘ̂		F 'to appeal'
to bury	twíŋɘ̂	lɘ̂ɘ̂	lɘ̂ɘ̂	F/P 'to keep'
to carry a person	bì'ĩ́	lɘ́r		
to dance	bénɘ̂	mɔa??		
to die	kwô	bwɛ̂		F 'to be missing/lost'
to drink	nô	tʃà'ã̀		F 'to go look for fruit'
to eat	dʒĩ́	ntʃà'ā	mù'ũ̀	P 'to put into mouth'
to go out	fɛ̀'ɛ̀	bɘ́rɘ́		
to laugh	wùɛ̀	tʃɛ̀'ɛ̀		
to leave people	àlɔ̃̀	àbɘ̀ŋɘ̂		F 'to turn'
to reproach	ɣààntɘ̀	bwárɘ̂		F 'to talk angrily'
to see	jɘ́			
to sit	tʃú̀è	náŋnɘ̂		
to sleep	bwíí			the Fon is a piece of wood that lies
to speak	ɣàa	tʃũ̀		F The same verb used when the two most important secret

English	Commoner	Fon	Princes	Etymological commentary
				societies in the palace make music
to wear clothes	wɛ́ʼɛ̂		kɔ́ʼɔ́sə̂	F 'to raise/beautify'

The idea that the Fon is 'lost' when he dies is widespread in the Grassfields.

5. Where do these words come from?

Bafut respect vocabulary is usually derived from lexical material already present in the language and does not reflect any external origin for the kingship system. Not all the sources of the terms have yet been identified, but most either reflect related semantics or are small phrases. Table 6 shows the etymologies for terms so far identified;

Table 6. Etymologies for respect terms

English	Bafut	Etymology	Compare
eye	bìtâmfɛ́ɛ́	'shines bright'	
ear	mìrə̂dʒwòrə̀	'elephant ear'	
foot	ǹtʃā'à		Aten *ʧwá*. This is rather remote geographically, but it is possible that this is an affricate version of the more widespread #-ta, which is sporadically attested in nearby languages, for example Nde [Ekoid] *ɛ̀-tâ*, Yemba *n-tá*.
neck	àmì		Bu *ə́mì*, Cha *emi*, Mundani *āmī* etc.
mouth	ŋ̀gə̀		Kwaja *gə̀*,
head	àjóó		
nose	àlùmsə̄	'sniffing thing'	
grave	nìsjɛ̀	nìfùm	

6. Comparative data from other languages

The Limbum language is spoken around Nkambe in the northeastern Grassfields. Its grammar has been described by Frantsen (1995) and its phonology in Fiore (1977). Table 7 shows some terms recorded by Ntumgia (2003) for royal vocabulary. As the column of English equivalents shows, this is not exactly parallel to Bafut, since the actual differences in material culture for royal objects are likely to attract replacement terms.

Table 7. Limbum respect terms

Gloss	Commoner	Royal	English
House	ndab	ntɔ̂	Palace
Reception room	ndab	kibo'	
Chair	di', nta'	kabra	Throne
Cap	ta	ntɔ̂ tsi	Crown

Source: Ntumgia (2003)

The case of Chufie', a Nun language spoken east of Bamenda, appears to be more similar to Bafut. Nkweti (1987) refers to the existence of a respect vocabulary and it proved possible to collect some examples of this in January 2010[4].

Table 8. Chufie' respect terms

Gloss	Commoner	Royal	Literal translation
head	tùò	ŋjɔ́ ŋ̀gwò	thing of the village
eyes	líì sg.		
	mɛ̃́ŋ pl.	pɑ́j hɔ̌ ntʃɔ̂	stars
belly	pɔ̃̂	ŋ̀kíæ̀ ŋ̀gwò	village drum
bed	kɔ́ŋ	pə̀gɔ́ ffɔ̃̀/	canoe of Fon/
		kɔ́ŋ ŋgɥ̂ê	bed of leopard
courtyard	sɔ́sɛ̀ɛ́	tɔ̀tɑ̃̀ŋ	
water	ŋ̀kǐ	m̀bwá	cf. Ngwo *mwa,*
house	ǹdə́gæ̀	ǹdʒá'à jùʼɯ́	side of place
ill	wǔɔ́	mbíæ̀ ǹtúʼà	fish hook of palace
dead	kwûì	múó pjɛ̂	lost fire
yes	ɔ́ə̀	m̀bɛ́ɛ̀	
no	ŋgá	ŋgɯ́ə̀	

None of the actual terms encoded show any similarity with Bafut, and they all appear to be metaphorical expressions, except perhaps for 'yes' and 'no'. These terms for 'yes' and 'no' to be used when speaking to a Fon appear to be widely known in the Grassfields.

7. Implications for lexical variation in the broader context of Bantoid

Bantoid languages often show multiple roots for even quite basic lexical items. The sources of such lexical variation are not always clear. The etymologies of respect vocabularies presented in this paper suggest that at least some innovative lexical items may well reflect lexical substitutions in royal vocabularies. It seems likely that this type of vocabulary was more prevalent and extensive in the past, and thus may have played a significant role in the evolution of the Bantoid lexicon. Other types of replacement vocabulary occur with animal names; for example it becomes problematic to call the ordinary name of the snake and so it becomes the 'rope of the bush'. Similarly, secret societies may use lexical replacement; in Bafut some societies use 'cock' and 'hen' to refer to a man and a woman.

8. Conclusions and further research

This paper presents a preliminary description of respect vocabulary in the Bìfɨ̀ɨ̀ (Bafut) language of the Cameroun Grassfields. It is quite possible that these lexicons are more common than has been recognised. The structuring and hierarchical nature of this vocabulary is strongly reminiscent of the respect languages of East Asia, but presumably evolved quite independently. Further work should focus both on more detailed analysis of Bafut as well as seeking similar respect lexicons elsewhere in the region.

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