

ON THE ASPECTUAL SYSTEM OF WUSHI (BABESSI), A RING GRASSFIELDS BANTU LANGUAGE OF CAMEROON

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Abstract: One of the characteristics of Bantu languages, including Grassfields Bantu languages, is their multiple time distinctions. Within the Ring Grassfields group, multiple tenses are also well attested. For example, Aghem has three past and two future tenses (Anderson 1979), Babanki has four past tenses and three future tenses (Akumbu & Fogwe 2012), as well as Lamnso' (Yuka 2012). Oku has three past tenses and two future tenses (Nforbi 1993) and Babungo has four past and two future tenses (Schaub 1985). These tenses represent different degrees of remoteness in time such as hordienal, immediate, distant, etc. However, in spite of the indisputable lexical unity of Ring Grassfields Bantu languages (Stallcup 1980; Piron 1997), Wushi strikingly stands apart: it does not mark tense morphologically. As a matter of fact, the aspectual system of Wushi is based on five aspects: perfective, imperfective, retrospective or anterior, potential, and the distal or dissociative marker *kà* that is analyzed in the light of Botne & Kershner (2008). This paper sets out to analyze these verb forms.

Key words: verbal system, aspect, tense, Ring Grassfields Bantu, Bantoid, Wushi

1. Introduction

Since the time of Ancient Greek, and even earlier than that, tenses have been conceived as points located on a time line. There has been this old and widespread idea received from the Indo-European tradition that the most obvious division of time is between present, past and future (by Binnick 1991: 3). Yet, the study of language families like Niger-Congo revealed that Proto-Niger-Congo is likely to have been

an aspect-prominent language and not a tense-aspect language (Nurse 2008: 260), and many other languages in the world have no tenses but only aspect, suggesting that aspect is more fundamental than tense (Nurse 2008: 177; Nurse & Devos 2019: 210). Thus, the multiple time distinction attested in Bantu languages including (Ring) Grassfields Bantu was deemed to be an innovation (Nurse 2008: 22). In this respect and despite the indisputable unity of the Ring group – they share 57 per cent of lexical similarity according to (Piron 1997: 579) – Wushi (also known as Babessi), a South Ring Grassfields Bantu language spoken in the northwest region of Cameroon, strikingly stands out for its aspect-prominent character. By its tenseless system, Wushi closely resembles Proto-Niger-Congo and early Niger-Congo (Nurse 2008: 68), as well as most western Bantoid languages and some Mambiloid languages.¹ Indeed, tense is not marked morphologically in Wushi. It has five aspectual distinctions: perfective, imperfective, retrospective,² potential and dissociative or distal, whether toward distal past or toward distal future.

In this paper I will first introduce the Wushi language and the structure of the verb in Wushi. I will then turn to each aspectual morpheme and conclude by proposing possible historical paths that led to the current aspectual system of Wushi.

2. The Wushi language

2.1. The context and data

Wushi is an underdescribed language spoken in the Babessi village of the Ndop plain, in the northwest region of Cameroon which is part of the Grassfields. Together with the southwest, these two regions constitute the Anglophone Cameroon. I undertook the description of Wushi as a PhD candidate a few years ago, after realising the critical

¹ Personal communication from John Watters.

² Retrospective or Anterior or Perfect.

paucity of documentation on or in the language, as compared with other Grassfields Bantu languages. At that time, there was not a single document on Wushi. It is only recently that I discovered a phonological sketch of Wushi written in 2018 by Robinson – who sent it to me personally – and produced by SIL Cameroon, but it has never been published. Apart from that, a short wordlist is included in the internal classification of Bantoid languages published by Piron (1997). Due to the civil war going on in the Anglophone region of Cameroon, the field is inaccessible since 2016. Many Cameroonians went to seek refuge in Nigeria. Consequently, I have been working remotely (i.e. using different means of telecommunication including email and phone) with my language assistant, who is a native speaker of Wushi. He used to live in the village, then in Bamenda, the capital of the northwest region. Since the war broke out, he lives in Yaounde.

The data consists of a wordlist of 1500 words and about 500 sentences all elicited. It also comprises the translation (about 1500 words long) from English to Wushi of an extract of the narrative biblical flood (Story of Noah), taken from the book of Genesis. It was translated and recorded by my language assistant. In the course of data collection, transcription and analysis, I have had several discussions with my language assistant on various points in the data for clarification. Therefore, the examples are taken from personal notes and from my PhD dissertation which should soon be published. The scarcity of documentation on Wushi as well as the socio-political crisis ravaging the Anglophone region of Cameroon makes the language to be definitely threatened.

2.2. The structure of the verb

The canonical verb in Wushi, like in other Grassfields Bantu languages, is monosyllabic. The only verbal prefix is *ì-*, discussed in section 3.3, whereas three productive suffixes are attested, which are the verbal extensions *-sà* (causative), *-tà* (iterative) and *-nà* (quality, state). For most verbs the suffix is frozen to the root, so that the suffixless form of those verbs is no longer used. For example see (1).

(1)	-sà		-tà	-nà
<i>dà:</i>	<i>dà:sá</i>	<i>twà:</i>	<i>twà:tà</i>	– <i>tʃwà:nà</i>
‘to be long’	‘to lengthen’	‘to burn’	‘to roast’	‘to be fierce’
–	<i>bísá</i>	–	<i>pàʔtà</i>	– <i>twòbó:ná</i>
	‘to soften’		‘to clap’	‘to be angry’

The hyphen means the verb base, i.e. the form without the suffix, does not exist. Most of the verbs have the suffix frozen with the base and therefore carry the meaning implied by the suffix. However, no verb displaying *-nà* has its base form attested. So, concerning this verbal extension, the freezing process seems to be complete. Besides these suffixes, the structure of the verb is very analytical. In other words, what is expressed by affixes in Bantu languages is expressed by separate morphemes in Wushi and in Ring Grassfields Bantu languages in general (Kießling 2011). This is particularly manifested through the extensive use of auxiliaries, prepositions and adverbials, with a CV shape. The verbal structure is as follows in (2).

(2) Subject + Mood/Negation + Aspect + Verb + Object

As the structure in (2) reveals, there is no tense marker in Wushi. Only aspect is morphologically marked. In the following sections, we will see how the aspectual system is organized and then conclude by considering the significance of this feature for the understanding of Bantoid languages.

3. Aspect

3.1. Perfective (PFV)

In Bantoid languages without tense, perfective is commonly the least marked³. It is unmarked in most Bantu languages (Nurse 2008: 24), just like in Wushi. Perfective widely is used in two senses: “(1) to contrast with imperfective or progressive, (2) to represent a situation as a single

³ Personal communication from John Watters.

bounded complete whole” (Nurse 2008: 314). These two senses are attested in Wushi. Thus, unlike imperfective aspect whose focus is on the internal constituent phases of the event, perfective aspect is concerned with the discrete or unified nature of the situation. Moreover, “perfective is similar or identical to [what others call punctual], factitive (Welmers 1973), performative (Hewson & Bubenik 1997), accompli (Francophone writers), completive (Bybee et al. 1994: 57)” (Nurse 2008: 314). Therefore, perfective aspect can be expressed with situations referring to past, present or future time, depending on the adverbials and/or context. However, the default reading is past time reference as seen in the following examples.

- (3) *ŋə ɲĩ kà⁴*
ŋə ɲĩ kà
 3SG run fast
 ‘He ran fast.’

In the sentence in (3), we do not know whether the person ‘he’ ran fast habitually or whether he did so repeatedly. What is conveyed here is simply the fact that he ran fast. Now, generally speaking, the presence of an adverbial may provide additional information on the process. However, in this case the adverb ‘fast’ does not inform us about the constituent phases of the process, but only qualifies or describes it as a whole.

The following examples further illustrate the default past tense reading emanating from the absence of marker, thereby indicating perfective.

- (4) *wú bvə fáā jáŋgə mvō*
wú bvə fáá` já-ŋgə mvō
 people give.birth twins year-CL8 ten
 ‘The twins were born ten years ago.’

⁴ In examples where the second line is identical to the first, it means there is no difference between the underlying and surface forms.

- (5) *wú bvá fáā ndóʔsá*
wú bvǎ fáá` ndóʔsá
 people give.birth twins yesterday
 ‘The twins were born yesterday.’

It is also evident from (4) and (5) that the zero marker is not a past tense marker, since it remains zero whatever the distance in the past. We can also see that passive does not exist in Wushi.

In addition, depending on the context, the present tense reading is possible in (6).

- (6) *ɲá ɲwě ndzásá*
ɲá ɲwě ndzá-sə
 3SG open cloth-CL10
 ‘She unfolds the clothes.’

We have no information about the process of unfolding, i.e. whether it is progressive, anterior, or habitual for example. The event is presented as punctual and completed. Also, what follows from the examples above is that a consistent LH tone on the verb is actually the perfective marker; thus, it is tonally marked rather than segmentally marked.

3.2. Imperfective (IPFV)

The imperfective aspect is concerned with the internal situation of an event (Comrie 1976: 4), whose boundaries are therefore not precisely stated. The imperfective can take many different values according to the language. For example, in Babanki it includes the progressive, habitual, repetitive and anterior (Akumbu & Fogwe 2012: 159). In Babungo (South Ring), within the imperfective we have the continuous, besides the habitual and progressive. Moreover, with the progressive and continuous, there is a further distinction between persistent and non-persistent aspects in Babungo (Schaub 1985: 225).

As far as Wushi is concerned, the imperfective aspect includes habitual, progressive and imperfective itself, i.e. as opposed to perfective.

They are all expressed through a single morpheme, *nǎ*, whose specific meaning is provided by the context. In the following example, *nǎ* denotes the imperfective aspect.

- (7) *ŋá nǎ ɣóá kúà píà*
ŋá nǎ ɣóá kúà píà
 3SG IPFV work for Peter
 ‘He works for Peter.’

Indeed, the event does not express progressive, nor habitual, nor a general truth, but imperfective, meaning that its boundaries are not stated. In other words, whether the subject ‘he’ just started working for Peter or is currently working for Peter or is just finishing working for Peter is not indicated.

Inchoative forms (“start to do something”) are expressed by using the verb *lí?* ‘to start’. In the following example it is preceded by the imperfective marker *nǎ* meaning that the action has started but is not completed.

- (8) *ŋá nǎ lí? mǎ twǎ?*
ŋá nǎ lí? mǎ twǎ?
 3SG IPFV start INF walk
 ‘He starts walking.’

In (9) *nǎ* functions as the progressive marker.

- (9) *mǎ nǎ nâ mbà*
mǎ nǎ nâ mbà
 1SG IPFV cook meat
 ‘I am cooking meat.’

Again, it immediately precedes the verb. As for its tone, it is interesting to note that it never fluctuates, it is always LH.

Another use of the morpheme *nǎ* is to express the habitual aspect of an event, as shown in (10).

- (10) *věmbwá nǎ nû mbú:mā*
věmbwá nǎ nû mbú:mā
 children IPFV drink milk-CL6a
 ‘Children drink milk [habitually].’

nǎ here indicates that the event ‘children drink milk’ is precisely a usual event, a habit, rather than a punctual fact. Nevertheless, according to the context, the sentence could also mean ‘children are drinking milk’, i.e., a progressive event.

Lastly, *nǎ* may be used to mark gnomic or generic aspect, i.e., a general truth. For example see (11).

- (11) *γū tǎʔtú tí nǎ pfā mbà: kùbúj̀kù*
γū tǎʔtú tí nǎ pfā` mbà: kùbúj̀kù
 people Muslim NEG IPFV eat meat pig
 ‘Muslims do not eat pork.’

From the explanations of my language assistant, if *nǎ* was omitted, the statement would no longer have the habitual meaning, but would be produced in the context where Muslims being assembled, pork would be offered to them but they would not have eaten it. In this case, let’s say the child, who was sent to propose the pork to a group of Muslims, would go back to their parents with the pork and say (12).

- (12) *γū tǎʔtú (mē) tí pfā mbà: kùbúj̀kù (mē)*
γū tǎʔtú (mē) tí pfā` mbà: kùbúj̀kù (mē)
 people Muslim (DET) NEG eat meat pig (DET)
 ‘(The) Muslims do not eat (the) pork.’

The statement in this context will be construed as perfective, and consequently, could also be translated in the past: ‘(the) Muslims did not eat (the) pork’ or put differently, they refused to eat it. The

determiner *mê* would be added as a specifier, to signify ‘the Muslims in question’, as well as ‘the pork in question’.

In other words, the various imperfective aspects expressed through different morphemes in Grassfields and Narrow Bantu languages are all encompassed into a single morpheme in Wushi, *nǎ*. And, depending on the context, it marks progressive, habitual, gnomic, or imperfective aspect. Note that progressive and habitual are often considered as two categories of imperfective (Comrie 1976: 26).

3.3. Retrospective (RET)

Retrospective (or Anterior or Perfect) is the aspect describing a past event with current relevance with respect to the reference time, i.e., the time in relation to which events are interpreted. It may be the time of speech but not necessarily. We will come back to it when commenting the examples in (16) to (18). To say a little more about the retrospective aspect, it represents “a situation that is completed but relevant” (Nurse 2008: 73). Sometimes, it expresses a recent past, with perfective nature, referring to an event that occurred earlier in the day. In Wushi, the retrospective aspect is marked by the morpheme *nâ(?)* preceding the verb. Note that the tone on *nâ(?)* varies according to the environment, as we can see in (13) and (14): in (13), the retrospective carries a L tone, which we postulate as its underlying tone. As for the glottal stop, there is no strict rule determining its appearance. Put differently, it occurs frequently that the same word is pronounced sometimes with the glottal stop and sometimes without it, in the same context. Historically, it is likely that the glottal stop corresponds to the proto **k*, at least for some lexical items. For instance, the Proto-Bantu verb **tâk* ‘to want’ is realised as *tâ?* in Wushi. So, here **k* > *?*. In addition, the glottal stop may be the only sound that distinguishes two words, for example in *tʃʃ* ‘to drip’ and *tʃʃ?* ‘to curse’. More generally, the glottal stop seems to have developed another function in Wushi, that of syllable demarcation, hence its ubiquity especially at coda position. Therefore, we write it as optional.

- (13) *ŋá nà? yò m̀ gẁ mb̀à?s̀*
ŋá nà yò m̀ gẁ mb̀à?-s̀
 3SG RET finish INF grind seed-CL10
 ‘She has finished grinding the seeds.’

ǹà? indicates that she finished grinding seeds, and although the event is completed, it is still relevant at the time of speech. We have another example in (14).

- (14) *m̀ ǹ yò yúé j̀*
m̀ ǹ yò yúé j̀
 1SG RET finish work my
 ‘I have finished my work.’

The tone on the retrospective marker is HL. As mentioned earlier, its underlying tone is L as displayed in (13). There is a constraint in the language that prevents more than two L tones from occurring successively. H-tone insertion therefore takes place in (14) in order to avoid three successive L tones. There is another constraint on the sentence-initial tone of subject pronouns: it must be a level tone. In other words, contour tones on subject pronouns are not permitted. Given this restriction, the appropriate target for H-tone insertion target (from left to right) is *ǹà*.

To summarize, in (13) and (14), *ǹà(?)* indicates that the event took place recently. Thus, in these two instances it carries recent past meaning, with current relevance. The same obtains in (15).

- (15) *v̀mbẁá ǹá? ìgb̀: k̀ tá j̀*
v̀mbẁá ǹá ìgb̀: k̀ tá j̀
 child RET PRED-beat by father his
 ‘The child has been beaten by his father.’

The perfect aspect is indeed perceptible in (15), especially when we consider the English translation. As for the literal meaning, it is

actually: ‘the child has the quality of being beaten by his father’, where the particle *i* prefixed the verb *gbo* ‘to beat’ allocates to the subject – here ‘the child’ – a specific *quality*, that derives from the meaning of the verb. It should be made clear that this is not a passive, as passive forms do not exist in Wushi. Indeed, passive sentences in English are in most cases translated with their corresponding active forms in Wushi, or, where possible, the particle *i* is used. In other words, *i* is prefixed to lexical items to signal a quality, ‘the quality of being + the meaning of the lexeme’. It is often involved in nominalization. For example, we have *fó* ‘to be white’, *ifó:ná* ‘the white one’, with both the prefixation of *i* and the suffixation of *-nə* (class 4 suffix) producing a deverbal noun. It is also interesting to note that *i* in Wushi is reminiscent of the Bantu augment or pre-vowel which is also *i* in many Bantu languages such as Nande (JD45) and equally functions as a tool for nominalization (Van de Velde 2019: 13). So, in (15) *nà(?)* indicates that the child has effectively acquired the quality of being beaten, and that the acquisition of this quality is relevant at the time of speech.

The retrospective aspect in *nà(?)* shows more when we compare the following sets of sentences:

- | | | | | | | | |
|---------|--------------|-----------|-----------|----|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| (16) a. | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>kà</i> | <i>ɕù</i> | b. | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>nâ?</i> | <i>ɕù</i> |
| | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>kà</i> | <i>ɕù</i> | | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>nà</i> | <i>ɕù</i> |
| | 3PL | DST | come | | 3PL | RET | come |
| | ‘They came.’ | | | | ‘They have come.’ | | |
| (17) a. | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>kà</i> | <i>zɔ</i> | b. | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>nâ?</i> | <i>zɔ</i> |
| | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>kà</i> | <i>zɔ</i> | | <i>ɲwɛ</i> | <i>nà</i> | <i>zɔ</i> |
| | 3PL | DST | eat | | 3PL | RET | eat |
| | ‘They ate.’ | | | | ‘They have eaten.’ | | |

As we can see, what distinguishes (16a) and (17a) from (16b) and (17b) is that the retrospective aspect is added in the examples in (b) through *nà(?)*. On the other hand, *nà(?)* can also be interpreted as the recent past marker with an aspectual nature, suggesting the reading: ‘the child just has got the quality of being beaten’. In his study of

tense and aspect in Bantu language, Nurse (2008: 94–95) already highlighted not only the close connection between recent past and anterior (i.e. retrospective), but also the difficulty of distinguishing the two meanings.

Concerning reference time, as Botne & Kershner (2008: 147) explain, “the typical reference locus in natural language is the time of speech event itself, with events construed as situated temporally before, after, or simultaneously with it”. Nevertheless, the reference locus can be located in a different time than the time of speech. Botne & Kershner (2008: 150) decompose the concept of reference locus into two further concepts: 1) reference anchor, and 2) reference world or (cognitive) domain.

The reference anchor constitutes a locus of orientation with respect to which an event may be temporally related, as in the English past perfect, for example *she had sung*, in which the singing occurred prior to some other time or event which itself preceded the moment of speaking [...]. On the other hand, reference worlds — or, as we will label them since we are speaking of mental activity, cognitive domains — constitute temporal time spans within which events are asserted to occur. (Botne & Kershner 2008: 150).

Below we have a similar example, with the reference locus being different from the moment of speech.

- (18) *ŋá ɕǎ mú tǔkǎ tá fùà ná? (ká) gè*
ŋá ɕǎ mú tǔkǎ tá fùà nà (kà) gè
 3SG come in time REL chief RET (DST) go
 ‘When he came, the chief had already gone.’

In (18), the reference time is not the time of the speech event but is located in the past ‘when he *came*’. Then, the event reported ‘the chief *had* already *gone*’ happens in the past, in relation to the posited reference time or locus. Accordingly, we have an example denoting a ‘past-in-the-past’ or ‘ante-past’ (Botne & Kershner 2008: 168), where

the event ‘the chief had already gone’ displays the retrospective marker *nà(?)*, indicating that this event is relevant with respect to the event ‘when he came’ previously stated, and representing the reference time. Here, *kà* plays a central role in situating the event in time. We will come back to this point later. The retrospective (‘anterior’) aspect is also found in Babanki (Central Ring), where it is included in the imperfective (Akumbu & Fogwe 2012: 159).

3.4. Potential (POT)

Potential, in aspectual systems, refers to future events, or more specifically those that have not happened but are able to, can or would happen (Nurse 2008: 315). Potential relates to irrealis, which is the mood indicating that an event or a situation has not happened at the moment of speech. Irrealis may be realized with different meanings, including conditional (the event depends on some condition), and potential (the event is likely to occur). In Wushi this is expressed through the morpheme *wà(?)*, as we can see from the examples below.

- (19) *ɣú wā sà*
 ɣú wà sà
 rain POT fall
 ‘It will rain.’
- (20) *ŋá wā ɕù mú bà kàjá*
 ŋá wà ɕù mú bà kàjá
 3SG POT come in two year
 ‘He will come in two years.’

wà(?) is used irrespective of the distance in the future, as well as the degree of certainty. However, the absence of *wà(?)* can equally indicate that an event has not occurred, but will. More specifically, in the presence of an adverbial, the potential marker is omitted. This is because the adverbial already carries the future meaning. In other words,

the adverbial reinforces the potential meaning, and even the degree of certainty. Something similar happens for example, in English, where a sentence like ‘I leave tomorrow’ clearly expresses an event to come, yet without any temporal, aspectual or modal marker to be involved. The same obtains in French, in *Je pars demain* ‘I leave tomorrow’, without the inflected future marker (*partirai*) to appear.

- (21) *mà ɕũ kùŋkù*
mà ɕù kùŋkù
 1SG come tomorrow
 ‘I am coming tomorrow.’

In (21), the adverb *kùŋkù* ‘tomorrow’ is the only element signalling the future occurrence of the event. In other cases, the construction *kĩʔ* + verb[infinitive], which literally means ‘have + to-verb’ can also express potentiality.

- (22) *mà kĩʔ mà gè vó*
mà kĩʔ mà gè vó
 1SG have INF go market
 ‘I will go to the market.’ [Lit. ‘I have to go to the market.’]

Interpreting the event stated above as potential is very possible and natural in Wushi. Nevertheless, a particular context may force the literal interpretation, i.e. ‘I *have to* go to the market’, carrying the sense of obligation, rather than something ‘I *will* do [later]’.

4. Distal or Dissociative (DST)

Past tense is probably the most marked tense within the Bantu family. From the solely aspectual system of Proto-Niger-Congo, many Bantu languages developed multiple time contrasts, leading to immediate past, hordienal past, near past, remote past, etc. – such a multiple division of time can be equally found in the future tense, but sometimes less

extended though. The same occurs in Grassfields Bantu languages, but not in Wushi, however. Consider the following sentences.

- (23) *ŋá kà tǎʔ ŋù nà bvà*
ŋá kà tǎʔ ŋù nà bvà
 3SG DST want jump and fall
 ‘He wanted to jump but fell.’

The scope of the past time perfective reading in this sentence goes from the first verb *tǎʔ* ‘want’ to the last *bvà* ‘fall’. *kà* seems to express past time, whatever the distance (recent or remote past). This is indeed clearly observed in the Genesis flood narrative.⁵ The sentence below is taken from the story told by a Wushi native speaker.

- (24) *jò: kà sà lâ wíndò*
jò: kà sà lâ wíndò
 sky DST open like window
 ‘The sky also opened like windows.’

Knowing that the Genesis flood happened long ago, we can see that the same *kà* appears. Also note that we have *kà* whether in narrative or in discourse. Like with the potential, this past time reference marker becomes unnecessary in the presence of an adverb indicating time. For example see (25).

- (25) *ŋwē ɕũ ndóʔsà*
ŋwē ɕũ ndóʔsà
 3PL come yesterday
 ‘They came yesterday.’

Looking at the above examples, the most obvious analysis might be to consider *kà* as the past tense marker. If so, then how could we explain the co-occurrence of *kà* with the potential as seen in (26)?

⁵ See Genesis 7:10–11 in the Bible (Easy-to-Read version).

- (26) *wá ɕɛ̃ mû tǃkâ tá ɲá wò? kà zá*
wá ɕɛ̃ mû tǃkâ tá ɲá wò kà zá
 2SG come in time-CL7 REL 3SG POT DST eat
 ‘When you come, he will be eating.’

The co-occurrence of *wò?* and *kà* actually shows that there is more than mere past tense marking in the purpose of *kà*.

One way to explain how *kà* can be used with reference both to past and future event is by analyzing it, following Botne & Kershner (2008), not as tense marker, but as a morpheme whose purpose is to shift discourse to domains that are cognitively dissociated from the present “world”. Botne & Kershner (2008) distinguish two domains or “cognitive worlds”, which they call “P-domain” and “D-domain”. The former is the world of “inclusivity”, the here-and-now, whose deictic center is anchored in the time of speech, i.e., at S. In the latter domain, on the other hand, “the deictic center at S is external to, or dissociated from, the cognitive world [i.e., the present world]” (Botne & Kershner 2008: 152–153). As they explain, “[t]hese domains are grounded in the fundamental dichotomy that exists between basic and dissociated deictic views of realis, space and time” (Botne & Kershner 2008: 150). The differences between the two concepts are observable in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Cognitive domains
 (slightly adapted from Botne & Kershner 2008: 159)

	Inclusive (P-domain)	Dissociative (D-domain)
Reality	real	not real
Temporality	contemporal (now)	not contemporal (not now)
Spatial position	here	not here

Since it has to do with a cognitively separate or distant world, the Dissociative Domain or D-domain may manifest itself as a past tense

or a future tense, which both belong to a dissociated, “not contemporal” reality or world. *kà* precisely situates the event in a D-domain, whether past or future. When *kà* is involved, the future time expressed is relative to a reference locus different than S (i.e., the time of speech), and thus belongs to the D-domain, hence the use of *kà* in such contexts. Take another look at (26). In this example, we do not have an absolute future. Rather, the event is located in a future relative to another event that is dissociated from the here-and-now world, i.e., “when you come”, or if we translate literally from Wushi, “you come in the time that...” This literal translation even makes the location of the event in a dissociated world to appear more obviously.

Moreover, the dissociative function of *kà* is evident in the modality POSSIBLE. Here, the hypothetical marker *là*, which could also be translated as ‘if’ is used.

- (27) *yá là sǎ? ɲá tì wɔ́ ɕù*
yá là sǎ ɲá tì wɔ́ ɕù
 rain if fall 3SG NEG POT come
 ‘If it rains, he will not come.’

- (28) *věmbwâ? (mê) là gwě? wá wɔ́ kà mbú:mə mē tà ɲá*
věmbwá (mê) là gwè wá wɔ́ kà mbú:mə mē tà ɲá
 child (DET) if cry 2SG POT give milk-CL6a DET to 3SG
 ‘If the baby cries, you will give him milk.’

In (27) and (28), *là* denotes the conditional mode, hence its position, immediately after the subject. To express the modality ‘possible’ in Wushi, we use *là* in composition with *kà* (we write *làkà*) at sentence initial position. For example:

- (29) *làkà ɲá tì ɕù*
là-kà ɲá tì ɕù
 if-DST 3SG NEG come
 ‘She cannot come.’

The conjoint use of *lâ* (if) and *kà* (distal) here is interesting, so is the structure of the rest of the sentence which remains SVO just like typical simple sentences. If we look at the literal meaning, the sentence could be translated as follows: “If we place ourselves in the domain/world of possibilities (*lâkà*), she does not come (*ŋá tì ǝá*)”. This type of structure as a means of expressing possibility is, according to Hagège⁶, quite unusual in the languages of the world. We can clearly see that Wushi uses *kà* to place the event in a separate cognitive domain, before stating the event itself which is thus understood to belong to that dissociated domain in question and not the current one. Interestingly, the verb *kà* means ‘to give’. Given that in many Bantu languages it is common for verbs of movement, direction and position to develop into tense-aspect-modality markers (Nicolle 2003), it is not implausible that the distal marker *kà* derives from the verb *kà* ‘to give’. In Babungo for example, the verb ‘to give’ is *kó*, and is also used to express anterior-duration. It is translated in this context as ‘until’: “until Monday = giving to Monday” (Schaub 1985: 169).

Botne & Kershner (2008: 204) note that in a number of Bantu languages as well, the distal marker is the same segmentally in both D-domains (past and future), and they are generally distinguished by their tone. Also, it is interesting to see that the distal marker in Wushi has a similar form to that attested in some Bantu languages. Both in Totela (K41), a language spoken in Zambia (Crane 2015) and in Chindali or Ndali (M301), a Bantu language of Tanzania and Malawi (Botne & Kershner 2008: 159), the distal marker is *-ka-*.

The question that arises from what precedes is why all Grassfields languages have multiple past and future tenses but not Wushi. I propose that the aspectual system of Wushi is a retention from Proto-Niger-Congo, while the rest of Grassfields languages have followed the path of Narrow Bantu languages by developing tense. As a matter of fact, Nurse (2008: 68) points out that Proto-Niger-Congo had no tense, it was aspect-prominent. Accordingly, the multiple tenses attested in Bantu languages

⁶ Personal communication.

are considered as an innovation. A subsequent question is why is this retention found only in Wushi? In other words, why did the innovation not reach Wushi? When we compare Wushi with other Ring languages, it is surprising to see how unique Wushi is at different levels.

At the phonological level, it is notable that Wushi is the Ring language with the highest rate of spirantization, particularly with an abundance of affricates, indicating that the spirantization process is not complete (Janson 2007), contrary to the other Ring languages where the majority of fricatives denotes the completeness of the process. This is observed in Table 2. Data on other Ring languages were provided to me by Larry Hyman, and were collected by the Grassfields Bantu Working Group led by Larry Hyman and Jan Voorhoeve in the 1980s.

Table 2

Comparison of spirantization in some Ring Grassfields languages

Proto-Grassfields	Wushi	Aghem	Babanki	Babungo	Kom	Gloss
*gŭm	vó [~]	íYim	əwóm	èwúŋ	ìvām	‘ten’
*g(w)é	vī	wizí	wùwì	wəzw		‘woman’
*kǐ’	ndzɔ?	múú	múú	múmá	əmú	‘water’
*kŭ(a)	pfá	íkú	pfí	pfə	pfó	‘die’
*kùn`	ntsá	íkó	əŋkw	nsaí	ənkō	‘tail’
*bŭ`	bvə?	ódzɛ	kəbá	vəb ^h	əbvá	‘ashes’
*bám	ʃuə	mbìY	kəmb	mbà	kəmb	‘bag’
*bóm	ɣɔ:	íbóm	buóm	bɔŋ	bōm	‘do pottery’
*tŭk	ntsó	ətsó	nənt	vətu	nɔnt	‘night’
*di, k’	ndzə?	kilú	kəjí	ʃí	kəlɔ	‘place’
*tíd	sé	íkpe	bòmá	faín	kwaí	‘meet’
*táb	ʃu?	itúY	tó	wé?	kədə	‘to be strong’

At the morphological level, Wushi is the Ring language with most noun class suffixes, whereas the others have a majority of prefixes. Some languages like Aghem have only prefixes and no suffix, as the Table 3 shows.

Table 3

Noun classes (adapted from Hyman (1980))

Classes	PR	Wushi	Babungo	Babanki	Aghem	Kom
1	*ù-	∅	∅	∅-	∅-	∅-
2	*bá-	wù-	və-	və-, ∅-	á-	∅-/(yá-)
3	*ú-	∅	∅	ə-	ó-	ā-
4	*í-	-nà	yí-	--	é-	(ī-)
5	*í-	--	yí-	ə-	é-	ī-
6	*á-	--	∅	a-	á-	ā-
6a	*mà-	-mà	mə-	mə-	--	mā-
7	*kí-	-kà	∅	kə-	kí-	ā-
8	*bí-	-ŋgà	və-	ə-	ó-	ā-, Ñ-
9	*∅-, Ñ-	--	∅	∅-	∅	∅-, Ñ-/ Ñ-, ə-
10	*'..-sí	-sə	-sə	-sə	ít-	-sē
13	*tá-		tə-	tə-	--	tā
19	*fá-	-fà	fə-	fə-	--	fā

The differences exhibited in Wushi in comparison with the other Ring languages, namely the aspect-prominent system and the highly suffixal noun classification could be the result of contact, probably with neighbouring Mambiloid languages such as Wawa or Vute, also highly suffixal (Martin 2012 – unpublished; Thwing 1987 – unpublished). Also, in Wawa tense is only used in discourse, while only aspect is marked in narratives (Martin 2012: 278). However, it would be too hasty to say that Wushi copied its aspect system from there. Concerning the suffixal system, Wawa may have copied it from Fulfulde, with which

there is a daily contact. Actually, Wawa people are bilingual with Fulfulde (Martin 2012: 35). And Fulfulde noun classification consists of suffixes only (Mohamadou 1991).

All these questions certainly need to be elucidated with further analysis. For now, considering 1) the phonological criterion of spirantization, which as mentioned earlier reveals an intermediate stage in the process through the abundance of affricates in Wushi vs. the completeness of the process in other Ring languages where fricatives are dominant, and 2) the fact that multiple tense distinction is an innovation, this would suggest that Wushi is in an earlier stage of development, in other words, it would be closer to the Proto language than the other Ring languages. Consequently, the aspectual system would be a retention from the Proto-language.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we saw that the verbal system of Wushi is unique among the Ring Grassfields Bantu and Narrow Bantu languages which have multiple time distinctions, particularly several past and future tenses. Wushi is an aspect-prominent language, where tense is not marked morphologically. We discussed the five aspect markers: the perfective is marked with a rising (LH) tone, *nà(?)* is the retrospective (or perfect or anterior) marker, *nǎ* includes the imperfective, progressive, habitual and gnomic, *wǎ(?)* is the potential marker, and the distal or dissociative marker is *kǎ*. It shifts discourse to domains that are cognitively dissociated from the present world, whether in the past or in the (relative) future. Finally, I argued that the unique aspectual system of Wushi within Grassfields and the Ring group in particular is likely to be a retention from Proto-Niger-Congo.

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Abbreviations

1SG – first person singular	DST – distal or dissociative	LH – rising tone
2SG – second person singular	H – high tone	NEG – negative
3SG – third person singular	HL – falling tone	POT – potential
3PL – third person plural	INF – infinitive	PRED – predicate
CL – noun class	IPFV – imperfective	REL – relative
DET – determiner	L – low tone	

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