Cultural distinctiveness and linguistic esoterogeny: The case of the Fang language of Lower Fungom, Cameroon

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Abstract

The Fang language of the Lower Fungom region of Northwest Cameroon is spoken in a single village by around 5,000 people. Research on the language has established the presence of grammatical complexities that are not found in any of the nearby languages and has also revealed ways in which Fang is culturally distinctive from other societies in Lower Fungom. On the grammatical side, for instance, like other Bantoid languages, Fang makes use of a noun class system involving the coding of noun class directly on the noun and in nominal modifiers which agree in class with the noun that they modify. However, its patterns of agreement in the possessive system are highly unusual in both formal and structural terms. On the cultural side, there are a number of traits of Fang society which result in physical and social separation from other nearby villages, such as the fact that brideprices for Fang are exceptionally high in local terms, thereby discouraging intermarriage. The purpose of this paper is to introduce some of the features that distinguish the Fang language and culture from nearby groups and to suggest that Fang grammar has been affected by processes of esoterogeny where the language has been deliberately changed in ways that make it harder to learn in the local context in order to facilitate the maintenance of social distinctiveness.

1. Grammatical patterns and social structure

The Fang language (ISO 639-3 code [fak]) of the Lower Fungom region of Northwest Cameroon is associated with a single village inhabited by around 5,000 people.[1] It is part of the Yemne-Kimbi referential language group, a label used to refer to a number of Bantoid languages found at the northwest periphery of the Grassfields Region whose precise affiliation is still unclear (Good et al. 2011). Relatively little linguistic work has been published on Fang to this point. However, the research that has been done on the language has established the presence of

[1] The language that is the subject of this paper should not be confused with a language often referred to by the same name spoken in the southern part of Cameroon with ISO 639-3 code [fan]. This work was supported by U.S. National Science Foundation Award No. BCS-1360763. The first two authors of the paper contributed most of the data and developed its initial analysis. The third author did most of the writing of the text and contributed to the theoretical interpretation of the data. The final author did the field research that formed the basis of the discussion in Section 4 of the paper and also contributed to the theoretical interpretation. We would like to thank our Fang consultants for their patience in providing the data that forms the basis of this paper.

grammatical complexities that are not found in any of the nearby languages. Ethnographic research has also revealed ways in which Fang is culturally distinctive from other societies in Lower Fungom.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize some of the features that distinguish the Fang language and culture from nearby groups and to suggest that its grammar has been affected by processes of *esoterogeny* (Thurston 1989, Ross 1996), a term for cases where a language has been changed in a way which makes it harder to be understood and learned by speakers of other languages spoken in its primary area. While most work on language change views it as emanating from processes that are largely unconscious in nature, patterns of esoterogenic change suggest that some kinds of language change may be deliberate (see Thomason 2007), meaning that models of change should account for this possibility. Clear examples of esoterogenic change do not appear to have been described for African languages. By providing an example of a possible case, this paper hopes to show that this phenomenon should be considered seriously as a force in language divergence on the continent.[2]

In Section 2 of this paper, further background information on Fang is provided. Section 3 presents data illustrating some unusual morphological complexities in Fang. Section 4 introduces some features of Fang society which appear to be consistent with the idea that the language underwent deliberate esoterogenic change. Section 5 briefly considers lessons learned from the Fang case for models of language change.

2. The Fang language

As discussed in Section 1, Fang is spoken in a single village in the Lower Fungom region of Northwest Cameroon. Figure 1 provides a map of Lower Fungom and surrounding areas. Lower Fungom shows an exceptional level of linguistic diversity, and, as part of the Grassfields region, it is also believed to be part of the Proto-Bantu homeland. Its languages are also among the closest relatives of the Bantu languages (see Good 2013). While the grammar of Fang shows clear connections to other Bantoid languages, it has not yet been shown to be closely related to any other language of its area. However, in the Lower Fungom context, it does show notable grammatical similarities with Koshin, a language associated with a single village to the north of Fang (see Good et al. 2011). Further information on Fang grammar can be found in Good et al. (2011: 146–152).

[2] Dimmendaal (2009) considers differences found between the Tima and Katla languages spoken in the Nuba Mountain region of Sudan and explores whether they could be explained as the result of esoterogeny, but he ultimately concludes that this is unlikely.

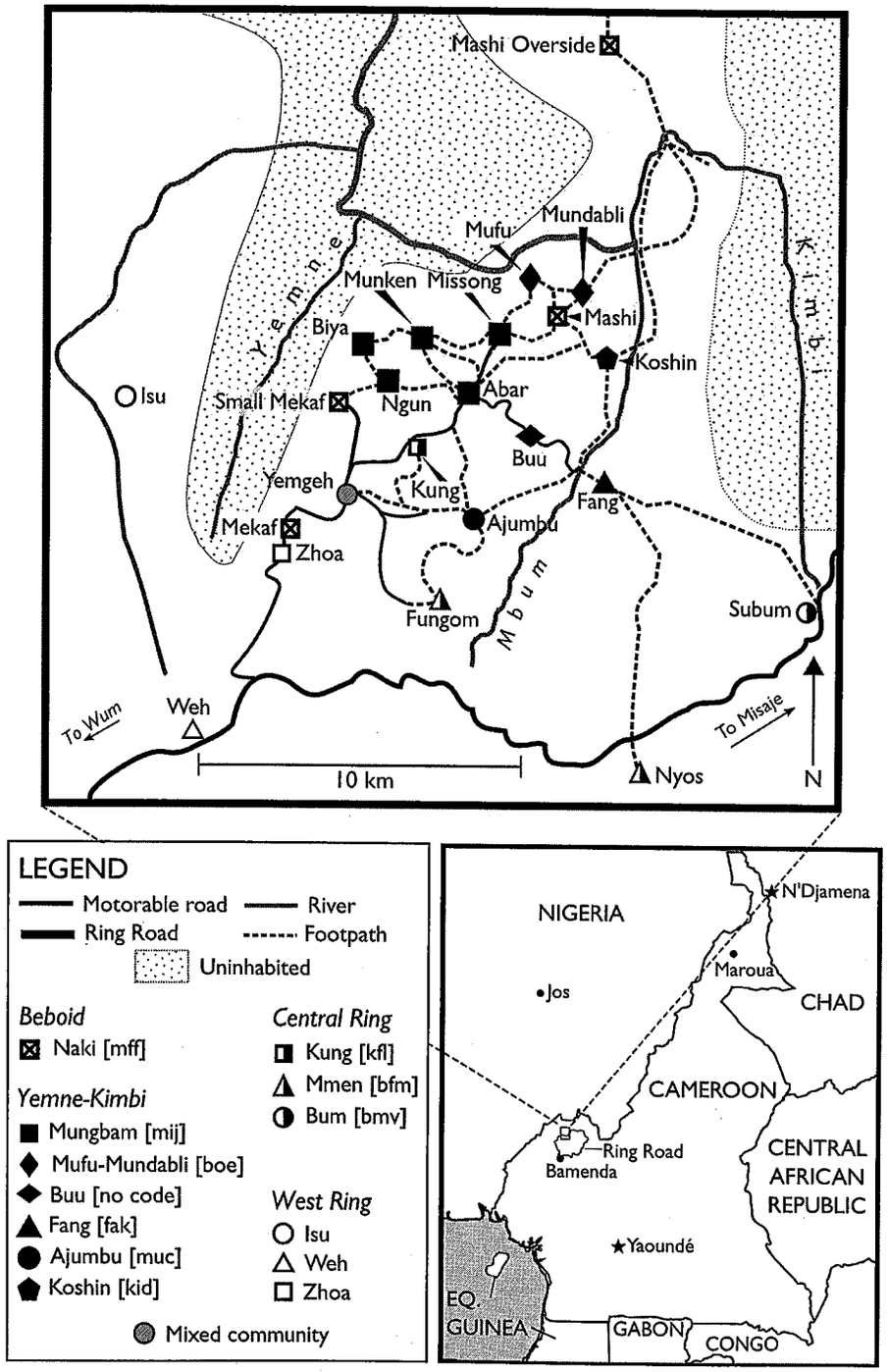

Figure 1: Lower Fungom and surrounding areas

	SINGULAR			PLURAL	
1	Ø-	*wɔ̀ŋə̀*	2	*bə-*	*bɔ́ŋə̀*
3	*ʷ-*	*wɔ́ŋə̀*	4	*ʸ-*	*yɔ́ŋə̀*
5	Ø-	*wɔ́ŋə̀*	13	*tə-*	*tɔ́ŋə̀*
7	*Ø-/kə-*	*kɔ̀ŋə̀*	8	*bə-*	*bɔ́ŋə̀*
9	*ˋ-*	*yìə̀* (distal)	10	*ˊ-*	*yíē* (distal)
19	*fə-*	*wɔ̀ŋə̀*	18a	*mə-*	*mɔ̀ŋə̀*
6a	*N-*	*mɔ̀ŋə̀*			
14	*bə-*	*bɔ́ŋə̀*			

Table 1: Simplified overview of Fang noun class systems, including illustrative demonstrative forms

Table 1 presents a simplified overview of the Fang noun class system, adapting common Bantuist numbering conventions, which will be relevant for the discussion in Section 3.[3] The table provides an overview of the typical noun class prefixes on nouns, singular and plural class pairings, as well as the form of a medial demonstrative, except for Class 9/10, where the distal form is shown due to the fact that it shows a tonal contrast seen in some parts of the Class 9/10 paradigm where Class 9 forms tend to have a lower tone and Class 10 forms tend to have a higher tone. Some of the details of the data in Table 1, in particular the tones, should be considered tentative. The demonstrative forms in Table 1 do not justify all the listed classes, but, as will be seen in Section 3, there is evidence for them when the entire concord system is analyzed. In fact, the entire concord system suggests the possibility of classes beyond those listed above, as well as complexities in singular and plural pairings that cannot be indicated in a simple table. While Bantu and Bantoid noun class systems are generally known to show deviations of different kinds from the simplified representations provided in overview tables such as the one seen in Table 1, what is seen in Fang goes well beyond the norm, especially in the Lower Fungom context. Descriptions of relevance here include those found for Mungbam (Lovegren 2013), Koshin (Ousmanou 2014), and Mundabli (Voll 2017), three other languages of Lower Fungom. Each of these systems shows various grammatical complications in its agreement system, but nothing comparable to what is seen in Fang.

[3] The Fang data seen in this paper is based primarily on work conducted by Patrick Mve, Nelson C. Tschonghongei, with work conducted by Jeff Good also supporting the analyses.

3. Unexpected complexities in Fang morphological paradigms

3.1 Complexity in nominal and verbal domains

Two kinds of morphological data from Fang have been encountered which are relevant in the present context, drawn from the nominal and verbal domains. The nominal domain is better studied and will be the primary focus of this section. More limited data from the verbal domain will be used to suggest that processes of esoterogeny are not limited to merely one part of Fang grammar. Section 3.2 will provide an overview of what is known about the noun class agreement system, and Section 3.3 will discuss the forms of perfective and imperfective verb stems. Work on Fang is ongoing, and some details of the data presented in this paper remain to be verified. However, we expect the core features of the Fang data of interest here are accurately presented.

3.2 Complexity in the Fang agreement system

As is typical of Bantoid languages, certain Fang nominal modifiers show agreement with the noun class of the noun that they modify. Bantoid languages may show more or less elaborated forms of agreement, and, even within the compact area of Lower Fungom, significant variation is present. In Mungbam, for instance, the forms of possessive pronouns fall into two different tone classes depending on whether they are modifying a noun whose class is associated with a low tone in other agreement contexts or a high tone (Lovegren 2013: 170–171). Thus, a system with over fifteen noun classes is reduced to a two-way inflectional opposition in this part of the agreement paradigm.

Mundabli, by contrast, exhibits less reduction in its possessive pronoun paradigm, while still showing significant syncretism. Possessive forms in Mundabli are given in Table 2, taken from Voll (2017: 108). Agreement is found with noun classes in most of the paradigm, except for the invariant third person plural possessive. Agreement is coded primarily via segmental morphology, but tonal distinctions are also involved in agreement coding, as can be seen across some of the forms. There is some syncretism in the paradigm, but the overall noun class system is visible in the collected patterns. The morphological structure of the possessive is also relatively transparent on the whole, with complications for first person singular forms. Moreover, as seen in Table 1, the demonstrative forms pattern in a way very similar to the possessive forms in terms of their initial consonant and relative tones. They all share the same initial consonant as the second singular, third singular, first plural, and second plural possessive forms and show the same pattern of Class 1 and Class 9 forms having a lower tone than forms in the other classes.

	POSSESSIVE						DEMONSTRATIVES	
CLASS	1S	2S	3S	1P	2P	3P	PROX	DIST
1	*ŋgɛ̄*	*wā*	*wū*	*wī*	*wɛ̄n*	*bɔ̌*	*wɛ̄n*	*wɔ̄*
2	*mű̄ŋ*	*bā́*	*bɔ́*	*bɪ́*	*bɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*bɛ́n*	*bɔ́*
3	*ŋgɛ́*	*wā́*	*wú*	*wɪ́*	*wɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*wɛ́n*	*wɔ́*
7, 7a	*ŋkű̄ŋ*	*kā́*	*kɪ́*	*kɪ́*	*kɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*kɛ́n*	*kɔ́*
8, 8a	*mű̄ŋ*	*bā́*	*bɪ́*	*bɪ́*	*bɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*bɛ́n*	*bɔ́*
9	*ŋgɛ̄*	*yā*	*yī*	*yī*	*yɛ̄n*	*bɔ̌*	*yɛ̄n*	*yɔ̄*
10	*ŋgɛ́*	*yā́*	*yɪ́*	*yɪ́*	*yɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*yɛ́n*	*yɔ́*
19	*mfű̄ŋ*	*fā*	*fɪ*	*fɪ́*	*fɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*fɛ́n*	*fɔ́*
18a, 6	*mű̄ŋ*	*mā́*	*mú*	*mɪ́*	*mɛ́n*	*bɔ̌*	*mɛ́n*	*mɔ́*

Table 2: Mundabli possessive pronouns and determiners

While we have not examined the issue systematically, our impression is that systems like the one described for Mungbam above and presented for Mundabli in Table 2 are largely representative of the range of agreement patterns that one might find in the Grassfields area—that is, the system is either highly reduced or relatively regular in its formation, but with some morphophonological complications. In Fang, however, the picture is very different. Sample forms are provided in Table 3, which illustrate part of the overall system.

		POSSESSIVE						DEMONSTRATIVES			
CL	NOUN	1S	2S	3S	1P	2P	3P	PROX	MED	DIST	GLOSS
1	*ŋkúŋ*	*vù*	*ŋgɛ̄*	*ŋgì*	*ŋgàsɔ́*	*ŋgànɔ́*	*Bún*	*wɔ̂n*	*wɔ̀ŋɔ̂*	*yīɔ̄*	'chief'
2	*bàŋkúŋ*	*kpú*	*kpɛ́*	*pí*	*kpɔ́sɔ́*	*kpɔ́nɔ́*	*bàbún*	*bûn*	*bɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*byɔ̀*	'chiefs'
3	*kpún*	*vù*	*ŋgɛ̄*	*ŋgì*	*ŋgɔ́sɔ́*	*ŋgɔ̄nɔ̄*	*Bún*	*wɔ̂n*	*wɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*yīɔ̂*	'tree'
4	*kwun*	*vú*	*ŋgɛ̄*	*ŋgí*	*ŋgɔ́sɔ́*	*ŋgɔ́nɔ́*	*būn*	*yɛ̂n*	*yɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*yīɔ̂*	'trees'
5	*fínɔ̄*	*vú*	*wɛ́*	*ví*	*wɔ́sɔ̄*	*wɔ́nɔ̄*	*Bún*	*wɔ̂n*	*wɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*vyɔ̂*	'rib'
13	*tàfínà*	*tû*	*tɛ́*	*tí*	*tɔ́sɔ̄*	*tɔ́nɔ̄*	*tàbún*	*tɔ̂n*	*tɔ́ŋə̄*	*tyə̄*	'ribs'
7	*kàmbàŋ*	*kfî*	*kɛ́*	*kî*	*kɔ́sɔ́*	*kɔ́nɔ́*	*kàbún*	*kɔ̂n*	*kɔ̀ŋɔ̂*	*kyɔ̂*	'jaw'
8	*bàmbàŋ*	*kpû*	*kpɛ́*	*pî*	*kpɔ́sɔ́*	*kpɔ́nɔ́*	*bàbún*	*bɔ̂n*	*bɔ̀ŋɔ̂*	*byɛ̄*	'jaws'
9	*sɔ̄ŋ*	*vú*	*ŋgɛ́*	*ŋgí*	*ŋgɔ̄sɔ̄*	*ŋgɔ̄nɔ̄*	*Bún*	*yɔ̂n*	*yɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*yìɔ̄*	'sheep'
10	*sɔ̂ŋ*	*vû*	*ŋgɛ̂*	*ŋgî*	*ŋgɔ́sɔ̄*	*ŋgɔ́nɔ̄*	*Bún*	*yɔ̂n*	*yɔ́ŋɔ̂*	*yīɔ̄*	'sheep'
19	*fənɔ̄ːn*	*fú*	*fɛ́*	*fí*	*fɔ́sɔ́*	*fɔ́nɔ́*	*fəbún*	*fɔ̂n*	*fɔ̀ŋɔ̂*	*fyɛ̄*	'bird'
18a	*mənɔ̄ːn*	*ŋmú*	*ŋmɛ́*	*mí*	*ŋmɔ́sɔ́*	*ŋmɔ́nɔ́*	*məbún*	*mɔ̂n*	*mɔ̀ŋɔ̂*	*myè*	'birds'

Table 3: Sample Fang noun class agreement patterns

The key forms of interest in Table 3 are those of the possessive paradigm.[4] The demonstrative forms represent variations of common patterns in Bantoid languages where agreement is primarily encoded via changes in the initial portion of the word with a following stem that is more or less constant in its realization. This is comparable to what was seen for Mundabli in Table 2. There are some semi-opaque vocalic alternations in these forms (e.g., alternations between *ə* and *u* in the proximal demonstratives), but these are relatively minor.

The possessive forms, by contrast, do not allow for an analysis that is as straightforward. While there are some relatively transparent aspects to the system, such as the fact that the Class 7, Class 13, and Class 19 forms all begin with the same consonant as the corresponding nominal prefix, it also has many opaque features. In Class 1, for instance, there is an interesting difference between the first singular possessive form and the third plural form against the other forms with respect to whether or not they begin with a velar nasal. However, there is no obvious morphophonological account for this pattern.

Class 2 is even more unusual. A number of its forms begin with a labial-velar *kp*, which, while present elsewhere in Fang and widespread in other languages of the area, is not a sound commonly associated with functional morphemes. The *p* sound is also unusual for the language. It was not encountered in the basic vocabulary used as the basis of the consonant chart for Fang presented in Good et al. (2011: 147), but, as seen in Table 3, it is present in the possessive system for certain third singular possessives. Class 18a is also unusual in that some of its forms also begin with a labial-velar, in this case the nasal labial-velar *ŋm*. Fang is the only language of Lower Fungom known to make use of nasal labial-velars and, again, it is unusual to see a labial-velar of any kind in a function word.

The system is, of course, not completely chaotic. A *-u* appears identifiable as part of the stem of the first person singular possessive, a *-ɛ* as part of the stem of the second person singular, and an *-i* for the third person singular. In the plural, an *-əsə* is associated with first person possessives, *-ənə* with second person possessives, and *bun* with third person possessives. Moreover, there are commonalities among the possessive series of the various classes. For instance, Classes 1, 3, 4, 9, and 10 show the same segmental forms in the possessives. This correlates with the fact that these are also the classes without segmental prefixes on the noun. Nevertheless, overall, at least in the Lower Fungom context, the lack of analyticity and the presence of unusual consonants in the possessive pronoun system is striking.

Another significant property of the morphological system outlined in Table 3 that is a further sign of the system's complexity is the fact that, for many nouns, their class assignment is difficult to be sure of without reference to specific forms in a paradigm due to widespread syncretism.

[4] The data in Table 3 were collected by the second author. Transcription conventions differ in some ways from what is found in Good et al. (2011), but these are not relevant to the issues of interest here. Tonal transcription should be considered less reliable than segmental transcription. Another area where the transcriptions should not be considered especially reliable is the distinction between *e* and *ə* after *y* or *i* word finally.

There are some noun classes—for instance, Class 19—where membership can be straightforwardly determined by any form. In the case of that class, this is because the initial *f* sound is only associated with that class in the morphological paradigm. However, for others, such as the opposition between Class 1 and Class 5, the distinction is only clearly signaled segmentally in some forms. At the present stage of investigation, we cannot say to what extent tone patterns can reliably distinguish classes since the tonal transcription is less reliable. Even if tone did play a significant disambiguating role, it would be a fairly subtle way of making a noun class distinction that would, presumably, be hard for those without great familiarity with Fang to reliably produce or perceive.

The presentation of the Fang nominal agreement in Table 3, in fact, oversimplifies the system in a crucial respect. While it represents what are believed to be the major noun classes, in the sense that each contains a relatively sizable number of nouns, there are also nouns that have been found to have "blended" agreement patterns, associated with a possessive series linked to one of the classes provided in Table 3 and a demonstrative series associated with a different class. Relevant data is provided in Table 4 involving the nouns *mbɔ̀lə́* 'cow', *bɛ̀* 'bag', and *lûm* 'husband'. The possessive series for 'cow' appears to be the same as that associated with Class 5, while the demonstrative series appears to match that seen for Class 1. The possessive series for 'bag' appears to be the same as that associated with Class 7, while the demonstrative series appears to match that seen for Class 9. A further unusual feature of this noun is that its singular and plural forms are not distinct in their form or their agreement series. The possessive series for 'husband' appears to be the same as that associated with Class 18, while the demonstrative series seems to overlap partly with that of Class 1, except for the distal demonstrative which is unique to this word. The "~" symbol is used in Table 4 to indicate a noun whose paradigm appears to be formed from more than one major class. Each of these words is provided with their associated plural forms for purposes of comparison.

		POSSESSIVE						DEMONSTRATIVES			
CL	NOUN	1s	2s	3s	1p	2p	3p	PROX	MED	DIST	GLOSS
5~1	*mbɔ̀lə́*	*vù*	*wɛ̀*	*vì*	*wə̀sə́*	*wə̀nə́*	*bún*	*wə̂n*	*wɔ̀ŋə̂*	*yìè*	'cow'
2	*bə̀mbɔ̀lə́*	*kpú*	*kpɛ̄*	*pí*	*kpə́sə́*	*kpə́nə́*	*bə̀bún*	*bə̂n*	*bɔ́ŋə̂*	*byɛ̄*	'cows'
7~9	*bɛ̀*	*kfí*	*kɛ́*	*kí*	*kə́sə́*	*kə́nə́*	*bún*	*yə̂n*	*yɔ̀ŋə̂*	*yíé*	'bag'
7~9	*bɛ́*	*kfî*	*kɛ̄*	*kî*	*kə́sə̄*	*kə́nə̄*	*bún*	*yə̂n*	*yɔ̀ŋə̂*	*yíé*	'bags'
18a~1?	*lûm*	*ŋmū*	*ŋmɛ̄*	*mī*	*ŋmə̀sə́*	*ŋmə̀nə́*	*bún*	*wə̂n*	*wɔ̀ŋə̂*	*mē*	'husband'
2	*bə̀lúm*	*kpû*	*kpɛ̄*	*pí*	*kpə́sə̀*	*kpə́nə̄*	*bə̀bún*	*bûn*	*bɔ́ŋə̂*	*byé*	'husbands'

Table 4: Fang nouns showing mixed agreement patterns

The distal demonstrative form for 'husband' in Table 4 is of special interest here since it is not found in the major classes. The Class 1 form of the distal demonstrative is *yìə̄*, and the Class 18a

form is *myè*, which is somewhat similar to the form *mē* found for 'husband', as seen in the table. This is an area of the data where it would be of clear interest to work with further consultants to see if there might be any noteworthy variation.

The word for 'husband' represents just one term for a human relationship with unusual agreement patterns. Two additional ones are 'friend' and 'wife', whose forms are presented in Table 4, along with the forms for 'traditional robe'. These three forms appear to show uncommon agreement patterns that do not otherwise fit comfortably in to the rest of the noun class system. Their singular possessive forms each appear with a distinct consonant series, not otherwise seen in the agreement system. The same initial consonant is found in the first person and third person singular forms and a phonetically similar consonant in the second singular forms. For plural possessives, the word for 'friend' shows a possessive series comparable to nouns in Class 1 and the word for 'traditional robe' shows a possessive series comparable to nouns in Class 9. The word for 'wife', however, shows a set of forms not otherwise attested for the first and second person plural. The demonstratives also show unusual patterns. The word for 'friend' is associated with a distal demonstrative that is otherwise unattested, while 'wife' has forms comparable to Class 1 and 'traditional robe' has forms comparable to Class 9. The plurals of these words are included for comparison, and each can be associated with a major noun class. The words for 'friend' and 'traditional robe' are the only attested forms showing the agreement patterns seen in Table 5. The word for 'female' *məkpĕŋ/bəkĭŋ* shows the same agreement pattern as 'wife', and the plural form of the word for 'eye' *ʒí* (singular *wə̄sə̄*, Class 5) shows the same agreement pattern as the singular for 'wife'.

		POSSESSIVE						DEMONSTRATIVES			
CL	NOUN	1s	2s	3s	1p	2p	3p	PROX	MED	DIST	GLOSS
1?	*sʊ̄n*	*ɲū*	*nɛ̄*	*ɲí*	*ŋgə̀sə́*	*ŋgə̀nə́*	*bún*	*wə̂n*	*wɔ̀ŋə̂*	*nē*	'friend'
2	*bə̀nsʊ́n*	*kpû*	*kpɛ̂*	*pî*	*kpə́sə̄*	*kpə́nə̄*	*bə̀bún*	*bûn*	*bɔ́ŋə̂*	*byə̂*	'friends'
1?	*kpə́*	*ʃū*	*sɛ̀*	*ʃì*	*sə̀sə́*	*sə̀nə́*	*bún*	*wə̀n*	*wɔ̀ŋə̂*	*yìè*	'wife'
2	*bə̀kĭŋ*	*kpū*	*kpɛ̄*	*pí*	*kpə́sə́*	*kpə́nə́*	*bə̀bún*	*bûn*	*bɔ́ŋə̂*	*byɛ̄*	'wives'
9?	*dàlə́*	*ʒù*	*yɛ̀*	*ʒì*	*yə̀sə̂*	*yə̀nə̂*	*bún*	*yə̂n*	*yɔ̀ŋə̂*	*yìə̄*	'robe'
8	*bə̀dàlə́*	*kpú*	*kpɛ́*	*pí*	*kpə́sə́*	*kpə́nə́*	*bə̀bún*	*bə̂n*	*bɔ́ŋə̄*	*byɛ̄*	'robes'

Table 5: Fang nouns showing uncommon agreement patterns

As can be seen in the data presented in this section, the Fang possessive system presents a number of complications that are not seen in more canonical possessive systems, such as the one presented for Mundabli in Table 2. As will be seen in Section 3.3 below, a noteworthy exceptional pattern has also been found for the verbal system.

3.3 Exceptional verbal affixation and nominal parallels

Like other languages of Lower Fungom, verbs in Fang show stem alternations as part of the expression of perfective/imperfective opposition.[5] The formal realization of this alternation involves adding material to a perfective stem in order to form an imperfective stem. Examples are provided in Table 6. Two verbs whose perfective stems consist of open syllables are found at the beginning of the table, each of which takes a suffix with the shape *-nà*. For the verbs whose perfective stems end in a closed syllable (whose coda consonants are restricted due to independent phonotactic constraints), the imperfective is formed via the addition of a suffix with the shape *-tə̀* after *n*-final stems and the shape *-kpə̀* after *m*-final stems.[6]

In the Lower Fungom context, a pattern of imperfective marking involving the addition of material to the perfective stem is not particularly unusual. The Fang pattern, for instance, is similar in some ways to what is seen for Naki, which is spoken in Lower Fungom and adjacent areas (Good et al 2011: 156). However, there are two points of interest about the forms in Table 6. The first is the fact that an imperfective suffix contains a *kp* in *m*-final forms. As mentioned in Section 3.2, a labial-velar sequence in a function morpheme is unusual. This data shows that this unusual pattern is present in both the nominal and the verbal system of Fang. More striking is the way that this verbal pattern parallels patterns of nominal morphology in some nouns which appear with suffixal elements in their plural forms. Relevant examples are provided in Table 7.

PERFECTIVE	IMPERFECTIVE	GLOSS
gɛ́	*gɛ́nə̀*	'speak'
dɪ́	*dɪ́nə̀*	'cry'
kɔ́n	*kɔ́ntə̀*	'love'
ngwə̀n	*ngwə̀ntə̀*	'sleep'
kyə́n	*kyə́ntə̀*	'look'
tɪ́n	*tɪ́ntə̀*	'cut'
gɔ́n	*gɔ́ntə̀*	'be sick'
bwə́n	*bwə́ntə̀*	'plant'
fwɔ́n	*fwɔ́ntə̀*	'clear'
wɔ̀n	*wɔ́ntə̀*	'hustle'
gbɪ́m	*gbɪ́mkpə̀*	'hunt'

[5] The verbal data in this section of the paper was mostly collected by the first author. Key nominal forms were collected by the second author.

[6] These patterns do not exhaust the descriptive generalizations relevant to understand the coding of the perfective/imperfective opposition in Fang. Rather, they focus on what is most significant for the consideration of the possibility that the language has been shaped by esoterogeny.

tsyə́m	*tsyə́mkpə̀*	'drop'
yə́m	*yə́mkpə̀*	'sing'
fə́m	*fə́mkpə̀*	'suffer'
fúm	*fúmkpə̀*	'dirty'
bɪ́m	*bɪmkpə̀*	'answer'
lúm	*lúmkpə̀*	'bite'
kúm	*kúmkpə̀*	'knock'

Table 6: Fang aspectual verb stems

CL	SG	PL	GLOSS
6/2	*nə́m*	*bə̀nə́mnə́*	'stingy man'
6/13	*gwə̀n*	*tə̀gwə̄ntə̀*	'feather'
7/8	*ʤyə̄*	*bə̀ʤyə́ŋkə̀*	'mouth'
6/13	*gbúŋ*	*tə̀búŋkə̀*	'mountain'
6/13	*sə́m*	*tə̀sə́mkpə̀*	'palm'
6/13	*lɪ̄m*	*tə̀lɪ̄mkpə̄*	'tongue'
6/13	*tɪ̄m*	*tə́tɪ́mkpə̄*	'axe'
6a/6a	*ŋgə̀m*	*ŋgə̀mkpə̀*	'root'

Table 7: Suffixed plural nouns in Fang

There are relatively numerous plural forms in Fang whose shape cannot be completely predicted on the basis of the knowledge of their singular form plus the plural noun class. These include those in Table 7 which appear with an extra suffix in the plural. This pattern of circumfixal coding of the plural is not unique to Fang within Lower Fungom. For instance, Lovegren (2013: 137–141) describes a comparable pattern for a noun class that he also labels Class 13 in Mungbam. However, Fang is again unique in showing a labial-velar consonant in a functional morpheme in this construction. Just as is the case with the verbs presented in Table 6, the suffix beginning with a labial-velar appears after stems ending in *m*. This is almost certainly not coincidental, and it prompts the question of how this striking morphophonological pattern developed.

A possible explanation is that the verbal pattern of allomorphy exemplified in Table 6 was analogically extended to nouns in Table 7. If so, this would be an instance of morphophonological analogy applying across the major morphosyntactic category of word class, an unusual process. Analogical processes extending morphophonological patterns are attested, for instance, in Bantu languages (see, e.g., Hyman 2003 and Good 2007). However, these cases happen within a word class, not across them. In the scope of the present paper, this proposal of analogical extension of a verbal pattern to the nominal system will have to remain speculative. However, we briefly

discuss why, if an analogical change occurred, it is more likely that the source pattern was from the verbal system rather than the nominal one.

First, a possible etymological source for the Fang imperfective suffix *-kpə̀* is available. Specifically, it can potentially be linked to the Proto-Bantu imperfective form **-ag-*, which Nurse (2007: 263–264) suggests is the source for *-kV* iterative forms found in Grassfields Bantu languages, which dominate the region just to the south of Lower Fungom. The Fang imperfective *-kpə̀* could be analyzed as having the same source if one assumes it was affected by a *k* > *kp* sound change. While there is no apparent phonetic motivation for such a change, Fang must have undergone changes like this, in order to account for the surprising presence of labial-velars in functional morphemes in various places in the language.

By contrast, the circumfixal suffixation pattern for plurals seen in Table 7 is almost certainly innovative. Evidence for this can be found, in particular, by examining the singular/plural pair *lɨ̄m/tə̀lɨ̄mkpə̄* for 'tongue'. The root *lɨ̄m* can be straightforwardly analyzed as etymologically connected to the Proto-Bantu form **-dímì*, also meaning 'tongue', with reconstructed plural in Class 10.[7] It therefore represents an old form rather than some Fang-specific innovation, pluralized using a different strategy than what is seen in Fang today. Moreover, circumfixal plurals are not reconstructed for Proto-Bantu (see, e.g., Maho 1999), suggesting this plural strategy is itself innovative. Therefore, while existing reconstructions provide a plausible source for the Fang imperfective verbal suffix, they do not for the nominal plural suffix, meaning that, if an analogical change did take place, verbal morphology is more likely to have provided the source pattern.

At this point, the parallels in the morphophonological patterns seen across verbs and nouns in Table 6 and Table 7 cannot be considered fully explained. However, the discussion above has hopefully made clear that they should be considered in more detail as they relate to understanding unusual aspects of the development of Fang grammar. They also suggest that such patterns are not found only within the agreement system.

4. Fang society in contrast with other Lower Fungom societies

The previous section has clarified that there are unusual grammatical patterns in Fang, especially when compared to what is found in nearby languages. In parallel with this, there are also a number of noteworthy ways that Fang sociopolitical culture is divergent from what is found elsewhere in Lower Fungom. Di Carlo (2011) presents relevant data. Fang stands out from the other villages in the following ways (among others): (i) the spatial organization of the village, in particular the fact that it lies within a region covered by much more forest than any other Lower Fungom village, (ii) the fact that its system of village-wide secret associations, the most important political institutions within Lower Fungom, follows a different model from most of the other Lower Fungom villages, and (iii) the high costs associated with matrimonial rights of Fang

[7] This reconstruction is drawn from Bastin et al. (2002).

women. What is important about these features in the present context is their apparent function as devices of separation of Fang society from neighboring societies.

The first two points mentioned above are covered in Di Carlo (2011) and are relatively self-explanatory as indicators of separation. The presence of extensive forest around Fang is a clear spatial signal of separation.[8] Secret societies in Lower Fungom (and, in fact, the entire Grassfields Region) are not only important institutions within villages but the same societies can often be found across villages and, as such, they serve as a device for political interaction above the village level. Having distinctive secret societies from most other Lower Fungom villages, therefore, reduces Fang's potential for political connections.

The third characteristic, the nature of matrimonial rights, is another factor in the separation of Fang from the other villages due to the high literal cost of marriage and attaining the rights to children produced within a marriage.[9] In addition to having to pay a bride price, a son-in-law has strong obligations to his in-laws—stronger than in other villages of the region—and he can be fined a high amount if he fails to fulfill those obligations. For instance, if an in-law dies, the son-in-law must pay five goats to the family, and the fine for failing to provide proper assistance to his father-in-law can amount to more than 100,000 CFA, a very high sum in a region characterized by a subsistence farming economy. Even more striking are payments associated with female children produced through a marriage. For instance, if a father wants to obtain the rights to a daughter, he must pay his father-in-law twelve goats. (Nothing is given for a boy.) When his daughters become married, he also has commitments to an elder brother of his wife for portions of the bride prices he may receive. This system almost certainly has an important role in explaining why relatively few Fang woman marry men outside of the village. If a man outside of Fang marries a Fang woman, he will have significant obligations to his in-laws with little chance to gain from the marriages of his own daughters or other female relatives. This system therefore, in effect, results in Fang women being more likely to remain in Fang, creating another way in which Fang is socially separated from the other villages, especially given that intermarriage among the other villages is otherwise quite common.

A final aspect of Fang identity of relevance here is the fact that the village's own oral histories, as well as other strands of evidence including some of the distinctive sociocultural traits just mentioned above, suggest that the Fang people are relatively recent entrants to Lower Fungom, and that they arrived to the region as a unit rather than, for instance, having been formed via the coalescence of existing groups in the area. Furthermore, they consciously link their history to communities outside of Lower Fungom rather than within it (Di Carlo 2011: 79–80).

[8] Another factor in the spatial separation of Fang from the rest of Lower Fungom is that it lies on the other side of the Mbum river (see Figure 1) from the other villages, which inhibited travel between them before the creation of a bridge over the river around fifty years ago (Di Carlo 2011: 63).

[9] The information provided in this paragraph derives from the last author's field notes.

In the next section of the paper, we discuss how the grammatical patterns discussed in Section 3 and the social patterns discussed in this section can be connected to each other.

5. Magnetic dynamics in Lower Fungom

The correlation between the unusual grammatical patterns of Fang and its distinctive cultural traits could, in principle, be coincidental. However, we believe that it is more likely that they should be seen as manifestations of a single underlying sociopolitical pattern that stresses the separation of Fang from the other villages of its region. Lower Fungom is exceptionally linguistically diverse and characterized by high levels of multilingualism (Esene Agwara 2013). Local language ideologies facilitate maintenance of this diversity by stressing the importance of each village as having its own "talk" (see Di Carlo & Good 2014). In more standard linguistic terms, this situation can be described as one where each village is associated with a named lect. These lects are clearly linguistically distinctive, though some are probably best classified as dialects of each other from a scholarly perspective while others are clearly distinct languages. (As implied by Figure 1, Fang should be considered a distinct language in both local and scholarly linguistic understanding.)

In fact, language, understood as a lexicogrammatical code, is the most salient marker of village identity in the local context and the primary overt means for an individual to signal that they should be treated as belonging to the social group associated with a given village. This, in turn, means that one way in which a village can signal closer or more distant relations to nearby villages is through linguistic convergence and divergence with the languages of the other villages. Schadeberg (2003:158) makes a relevant observation for the Bantu area broadly that seems readily applicable to Lower Fungom as well: "Bantu speakers have long lived in a multilingual continuum, where many speakers master not just their own variety of speech but also those of their neighbors. Linguistic differentiation and convergence are actively pursued, one serving to establish group identities, the other to forge alliances and to foster good neighborship." He further remarks on how the "almost willful selective adoption of new features is facilitated by structural similarities between Bantu languages (Schadeberg 2003: 158)".

In the case of Fang, the distinctive features presented in Section 3 quite clearly could not have been adopted from the neighboring villages. Instead, they add to the distinctiveness of the Fang language within Lower Fungom and, moreover, inhibit the mastery of Fang by outsiders. For instance, the nature of the agreement paradigms in Table 3 are such that one could not simply adapt patterns from another language of the area, such as those exemplified by Mundabli in Table 2, but would, rather, have to master a new kind of system where the possessive paradigm shows a relatively "exotic" set of alternations when compared with the demonstrative paradigm. Moreover, the data discussed in Section 3.2 suggests that relatively active historical processes have been at work involving a mix of unusual sound change and analogical extension in order to increase Fang's distinctiveness. The esoterogenic nature of these changes seems quite clear. It

is difficult to prove that they were also deliberate. However, it seems hard to believe this range of unusual patterns would affect just one language in a region and not any others if there were not at least some semi-conscious motivation to make the Fang language difficult for outsiders to learn and understand. The case for deliberate change on linguistic grounds only becomes stronger when paired with the points discussed in Section 4 which establish patterns of separation for Fang in spatial, cultural, and social terms from other Lower Fungom villages.

Kopytoff (1987: 6–7), in his discussion of the dynamics that lead to the formation of African social units, evokes the metaphor of a magnet, which can both attract and repel groups to and from each other. In the case of Fang, the repulsion side of this metaphor seems most relevant: We can view it as a village where both cultural and linguistic characteristics act in a complementary fashion to strengthen boundaries between Fang and its neighbors.

Of course, it should be recognized that the data and arguments presented here are only suggestive of this hypothesis rather than proving it to be true. Nevertheless, we believe that the evidence is compelling enough for further investigation to be warranted. Moreover, we think the patterns described here underscore the importance of paying attention to fine-grained features of local African cultures (as seen, for instance, in Mutaka 2011) when trying to understand the sources of grammatical patterns in African languages.

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