

THE LIMINAL SYSTEM OF BABANKI

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Abstract

Despite being essential tools in linguistic interaction across languages and cultures, interjections and liminal signs (non-word sounds with a communicative function) are most of the time left out of language descriptions, or at best confined to a short appendix, and consequently rather poorly documented. This trend has started to change in recent years (e.g., Ameka 1991, 1992a, b, Amha 2013, Dingemanse 2020a, 2021). This paper is meant to contribute toward the inflection of this trend by offering the first description of aspects of the liminal system of Babanki, a Grassfields language of the Ring sub-group in North-West Cameroon. This study is based mostly on the introspective knowledge of the first author, a native speaker of Babanki, supplemented by WhatsApp discussions with five other native speakers. Following Jakobson (1960), Ameka (1992a), and Dingemanse (2021), we classify the Babanki liminal signs in three types of semantico-pragmatic functions, namely, phatic, conative, and expressive. The use of clicks and various phonotactically odd structures in the liminal system implies that they are part of the phonological system of the language and should be included in its grammatical description. They clearly serve a different function from the contrastive sounds of the language, and consequently ought to be presented as a separate inventory.

Keywords: Babanki, interjections, liminal signs, phatic signs, conative signs, expressive signs

Ànyù òtíntá wá

Jísó bésò ànyù sátsén sá dí' tá kàdìŋ á ví'í gá'à fá tsú nà ètémá ònú á wá títà títá, dzì'ì nà àvú ú, sù'là sù'là, témtá témtá, kèn lá ví'í nyò'è wà'wà'là ná nyò'è byì wéná wá. Òngés à kànyù ká dí' lá ví' wátséwá á nà Ameka (1991, 1992a, b), Amha (2013), Dingemanse (2020a, 2021), zítè lí sá nyò'è byì ànyù ná wóná. Ònkà yès á kóná lá yès kwúsá gí è yès tsú tí gyàmtà. Á òshè' yéná yès gá' byì jísó á ví'í Kàjóm fá mbí' è kwí òt' á Kàmálún. Ànyù á yès nyò'è á shè á dí' jì á byì wù nyò'è wà'wà'là yèn é gá'à fá tsú, bènà jì á ghè mbèsá fá tsú wéná ví'í Kàjóm wátséná wá lá wàtáyn. Tà á nà Jakobson (1960), Ameka (1992a), bènà Dingemanse (2021), yès gètà ànyù é títá wá gá'à Kàjóm á ntémá ètá': ànyù é sù'là wá, ànyù é témtá wá, bènà ànyù é jì'ì wá. Òshí é gá' ètséwá á nà vyí á wí' ób'í' èchù ówén bènà àshí èntú àtséghá á wí' é kó zàŋsá yéná dí' á Gá'à Kàjóm, ká mbón lá sátsén wí' é nò'ò byì Gá'à Kàjóm ghàé kwú'sà àshí nàwéná tsú. Vèwé kí'í àshè' é nànkwoŋ, ká mbón lá wá wúyú wèwé à wèwé àshè' nànkwoŋ.

Ètyú ànyù: Kàjóm, ànyù é títá wá, ànyù é sù'là wá, ànyù é témtá wá, ànyù é jì'ì wá

1. Introduction

There has been an increase of interest in recent years in words and utterance types usually considered to occupy a peripheral region in grammar, e.g., interjections (Jespersen 1922, Ameka 1992a, Evans 1992, Wilkins 1992, Hofstede 1999, Ameka & Wilkins 2006, Elffers 2007, Poggi 2009, cf. Dingemanse 2021 for a recent discussion), or non-word sounds with a communicative function such as sighs, clicks, whistles, etc. The latter category is called “verbal gestures” by Grenoble (2014), because they seem to have the same function as hand or face gestures in linguistic communication. Dingemanse (2020a) coins the term “liminal signs” to refer to these signs that are “in the borderland between language and non-language,” and “derive interactional utility from being ambiguous with respect to conventionality, intentionality, and accountability”. Heine (2023) describes both as a subset of what he calls “interactives”. The main distinction between interjections and liminal signs is thus one of conventionalization and

accountability: interjections are more entrenched and conventionalized and are associated with higher accountability – that is, one cannot unpronounce an interjection, while a liminal sign such as a click or sigh can always be interpreted after the fact as a mere meaningless bodily action. The distinction is blurry, and liminal signs and interjections can be considered the canonical ends of a conventionality and accountability continuum in linguistic interaction. In this paper, we subsume interjections and liminal signs under the umbrella term “liminal system”. We will use the term “sign” to refer to anything on the continuum.

Despite being essential tools in linguistic interaction across languages and cultures, liminal signs and interjections are most of the time left out of language descriptions, or at best confined to a short appendix, and consequently rather poorly documented. This trend has started to change in recent years (e.g., Ameka 1991, 1992a, b, Amha 2013, Dingemanse 2020a, 2021). This paper is meant to contribute toward the inflection of this trend by offering the first description of aspects of the liminal system of Babanki, a Grassfields language of the Ring group of North-West Cameroon. This study is based mostly on the introspective knowledge of the first author, a native speaker of Babanki, supplemented by WhatsApp discussions with five other native speakers.¹ This explains the focus on highly conventionalized signs – speakers are often less aware of less conventionalized ones. Further corpus-based work might reveal other signs not included in the present study.

We begin by a description of the form and function of the individual signs of the Babanki liminal system. Following Jakobson (1960), Ameka (1992a), and Dingemanse (2021), we classify these signs in three types of semantico-pragmatic functions: phatic function (section 2), conative function (section 3), and expressive function (section 4). These three functions are not mutually exclusive. In cases where a sign has more than one function, functions deemed to be secondary are described with the first occurrence of the sign in question. Section 5 summarizes the findings and highlights a few general characteristics of the Babanki liminal system, as well as interesting typological features.

2. Phatic signs

Phatic signs are a subset of interjections and liminal signs (or ‘interactives’ in Heine’s 2023 terminology) used to establish and maintain social and linguistic interaction: responses to questions (positive or negative), continuers (backchanneling), repair initiators, expressions of news receipt, requests for confirmation, etc. Each of these has at least one dedicated sign in Babanki, as shown below.

2.1 ‘Yes’ and ‘no’

2.1.1 Yes: [ʔə̀ə̀] ~ [ò] and [ʔḡʔḡ] ~ [ʔḡ]

Four markers correspond to the general meaning of “yes”: [ʔə̀ə̀] ~ [ò] are used strictly as answers to a yes/no question, while [ʔḡʔḡ] and [ʔḡ] have the additional function of expressing acceptance of a request.

A positive response is provided by a long, nasalized, hypoarticulated central vowel, with L-falling tone. An alternative is the low toned vowel [ò]. Uttering this response is normally accompanied by nodding. It can be the response to a yes/no question, or simply a response to a call or approval.

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(1) Positive response to a yes/no question

Mother: wù yì zì kǎ-báyn kyì à
 2SG P1 eat 7-fufu DEM QUES
 ‘Did you eat that fufu?’

Child: ʔə̃ə̃ ‘Yes.’

(2) Approval

Mother: dzàŋə wāyn ɣəŋ zí kǎ-báyn kyì
 call.IMP 1.child 2PL eat 7-fufu DEM
 ‘Call the child for the two of you to eat that fufu?’

Child: ɔ ‘Yes.’

The syllabic nasal, interrupted by the glottal stop, having a L-tone on the first syllable, and a H-tone on the second syllable is used to issue approval or confirmation. The respondent usually uses this interjection if in a good mood. It is even possible to repeat the entire sign once.

(3) Answering affirmatively with ʔŋʔŋ

Mother: à myètə wù m-myétə kǎ-báyn kyì
 DS finish 2SG N-finish 7-fufu DEM
 ‘Is it you who has finished the fufu?’

Child: ʔŋʔŋ ‘Yes.’

If the respondent is not in a good mood, they are likely to use [ʔŋ] instead of the [ʔŋʔŋ] in their affirmative answer.

(4) Bad mood response using [ʔŋ]

Mother: dzàŋə wāyn ɣəŋ zí kǎ-báyn kyì
 call.IMP 1.child 2PL eat 7-fufu DEM
 ‘Call the child for the two of you to eat that fufu?’

Child: ʔŋ ‘Yes (negative attitude).’

2.1.2 No: [ʔə̃ʔə̃ə̃] ~ [ʔŋʔŋŋ] ~ [ʔmʔm̃m̃], [ʔáíʔ]

A negative response can take the form of a nasalized central vowel or syllabic nasal, interrupted by a glottal stop. The first syllable is H-toned and the second syllable L-toned, with L-falling realization of final L, i.e. [ʔə̃ʔə̃ə̃] ~ [ʔŋʔŋŋ] ~ [ʔmʔm̃m̃]. Uttering a negative response with this HL pattern is always accompanied by sideways movement of the head. The following response by a mother to a child who requests to join others and play illustrates the use of this sign.

(5) Refusal with ʔə̃ʔə̃ə̃

Mother: wù dʒú fé á ʃən
 2SG go.PROG where to Shen
 ‘Where are you going, Shen?’

Child: mà dʒú ɔ-dém yúwū wāyn yì
 1SG go.PROG INF-play 1PL.DUAL 1.child DEM
 ‘I am going to play with that child.’

Mother: ʔə̃ʔə̃ə̃, ə-ʃè? ɔ dí? á ʃə
 INTER 5-work SM COP at here
 ‘No, there is work here to do.’

Alternatively, **ʔàíʔ** with a final glottal stop release and LH tonal pattern is used, as in (6). Issuing a negative response using **ʔàíʔ** is generally accompanied by shrugging, i.e., raising of shoulders.

(6) Negative response to a yes/no question

Mother: **wù yì ʒì kē-báyn kyì à**
 2SG P1 eat 7-fufu DEM QUES

‘Did you eat that fufu?’

Child: **ʔàíʔ** ‘No.’

2.2 Continuer (backchannel) [ʔə̃ə̃] ~ [ʔḡʔḡ]

Either **ʔə̃ə̃** or **ʔḡʔḡ** which have been shown to be used for positive responses and approval can be used as a continuer. In other words, any of the two forms can be uttered by the listener to convey to the speaker that they are paying attention and are willing to hear more of the information being provided.

(7) Continuer (backchannel)

Mother: **tə̀lɔkyí mwòm kə̀-nù à ḡgó kó fwàyn-sə̀**
 1.tortoise try 7-thing to 1.antelope 7.it fear-CAUS

‘Tortoise did something terrible to Antelope’

Child: **ʔḡʔḡ** ‘go on (backchannel).’

2.3 Repair initiator

If a listener misses some information and would like the speaker to repeat what has been said, the listener can use a repair initiator (Enfield et al. 2013): **ʔḡʔḡ** or **ʔă**.

(8) Repair initiator

Mother: **kú kə̀-mbò à mò**
 give.IMP 7-bag to 1SG

‘Give me the bag.’

Child: **ʔḡʔḡ** ‘huh?’

Mother: **lá wù kú kə̀-mbò à mò**
 QUOT 2SG give.IMP 7-bag to 1SG

‘That you should give me the bag.’

Alternatively, the speaker can use any of the following full clauses: **lá (ʔə̀)** ‘(COMP/QUOT) what?’, **wù gə̀ʔ lá (ʔə̀)** ‘what did you say?’, **mă kô ʒú** ‘I haven’t heard.’

2.4 Request for confirmation [múló] ~ [mwō] ~ [à bwén á lì]

Any one of the question tags **múló** ‘as such?’, **mwō** ‘right?’, and **à bwén á lì** ‘isn’t it’ can be used to issue approval or seek confirmation.

(9) Question tags

a. **mà yì gə̀ʔ lá wù ʒí kē-báyn mwō**
 1SG P1 say QUOT 2SG eat 7-fufu right
 ‘I said you should eat fufu, didn’t I?’

b. **wù yì dzàḡ mò, múló**
 2SG P1 call 1SG as such
 ‘You called me, didn’t you?’

- c. **wù** **yì** **wyù** **à** **mò**, **à** **bwén** **á** **lì**
 2SG P1 keep for 1SG DS NEG as such
 ‘You kept it for me, didn’t you?’

2.5 News receipt [ē?é?] ~ [wúù] ~ [éì?] ~ [ʔḡʔḡ]

News receipt markers are used following an informing turn, to mark the respondent’s acknowledgment of the receipt of the new information provided by their interlocutor (e.g., English ‘Oh, I see.’). News is generally received with varied reactions depending on whether it is considered to be good, bad or neutral. Good news is accompanied by positive facial expressions, shouts of joy, singing and dancing, etc. and it is possible to hear interjections such as **ē?é?** and **wúù**. Bad news is received with sorrowful facial expressions, crying, etc. and interjections such as **éì?** and **ʔḡʔḡ** can be uttered. When the receiver is indifferent with respect to the news item they might simply sigh, shrug their shoulders or say **èṣ?** while closing their mouth.

3. Conative signs

Conative signs are directed at others, meant to trigger a response from another participant in the interaction (Ameka 1992a). This includes human-directed attention signals (section 3.1.1) and calls for silence (section 3.1.2). Conative signs are often directed at animals (section 3.2). All of these have dedicated markers in Babanki.

3.1 Human-directed conative signs

3.1.1 Call/attention seeker: [(w)ǒ] ~ [s:p̣]

One way to summon someone who is not in view is to say (w)ǒ. Depending on the distance involved, the speaker may speak normally or even raise their voice considerably.

(10) Catch phrase: (w)ǒ

A: (w)ǒ ‘hey there’

B: **mà** **vì-ì**
 1SG come-PROG
 ‘I am coming.’

If the person summoned is in view, they are either asked to come or beckoned by lifting an open hand and then closing the fingers.

The interjection (w)ǒ is also used to signal one’s presence, for example, if approaching a compound and wishing the occupants to know that someone is approaching. It is also possible to get someone’s attention using the catch phrase, i.e., interjection (lá) **mbò** ‘(COMP/QUOT) **mbò**’.

(11) Catch phrase: (lá) **mbò**

A: (lá) **mbò** ‘hey there’

B: **ò** ‘yeah.’

Another way to catch the attention of people is to use the interjection **s:p̣**, consisting of a long syllabic sibilant, followed by an abrupt labial closure. It is the widespread way of calling a waiter, and also commonly used by boys to catch girls’ attention. Whistling also performs the same function, i.e., getting attention and also

commonly used by young people to communicate over long distances. To whistle in this manner, air is blown out through the thumb and index finger which have been brought together and sent under the tongue. A long high-pitched melody with a final sharp and higher release is produced. The procedure can be repeated only after a pause which allows the whistler to recover and build up more air in the lungs.

3.1.2 Call for silence: [ʃ:]

Calling for silence is done with a loud, elongated syllabic postalveolar fricative [ʃ:], often accompanied by a hand gesture consisting in a vertically extended finger against the lips. This interjection, together with its accompanying hand gesture, is found in numerous languages and societies around the world (see, for example, English “sh” and “hush”).

3.2 Animal-directed conative signs

Communication with animals in Babanki as in other cultures is essentially accomplished by the use of interjections, liminal signs, and gestures. All Babanki homes have some domestic animals, the most common being chickens. Chickens are used in ceremonies either for sacrifices or entertainment and all families prefer to raise theirs and buy only when necessary. Cats, goats, dogs, and pigs are also commonly found while sheep and cattle are quite rare, having been introduced only recently by the Fulbe migrants. Chickens, cats, and dogs are allowed into houses although dogs have lesser access privileges. Goats, sheep, and pigs may come close to the door when not tethered but they are not allowed access into the house. Cattle remain far away from homes as they are fed only in the fields. The most prominent instances of human-animal communication are when the Babanki people summon (3.2.1) or chase (3.2.2) animals. Some of these signs are specific to one animal species, while some are more general. For this reason, the presentation in this section is form-based rather than function-based.

3.2.1 Animal summonses

The choice of interjection to call an animal depends on which animal is involved and the purpose for which it is being called. In general, chickens, cats, and dogs are summoned more frequently than pigs, goats, sheep and cattle since the former interact more closely with people than the latter. The three clicks used to summon animals that have been identified are the kiss click (3.2.1.1), the dental click (3.2.1.2), and the retracted lateral click (3.2.1.3). The postalveolar fricative ʃ is also used (3.3.1.4), as well as ʔʃ (3.2.1.5), whistling (3.2.1.6), and the nominal forms *ɲàm*, *mòsɔʔ*, *mèéʔ*, *mùús* and *myáwúʔ* (3.2.1.7) (see Andrason & Akumbu 2024).

3.2.1.1 The kiss click [⦿ʷ]

The kiss click is made with lips kept rounded, pressed together and pursed after a sharp noisy release. It has been noted in studies of conative animal calls as [↓Bʷ] (Poyatos 1993, 2002, Andrason & Karani 2022, Andrason & Akumbu 2024). The click is made repeatedly to call cats, dogs, goats, and sheep specifically when luring these animals to touch them, e.g., when one needs to check if there are ticks on their bodies. If made once, it will not be sufficient to catch the animal’s attention and convince them to move towards the one calling.

3.2.1.2 The dental click [ɿ]

The dental click is made by placing the tip of the tongue near the upper teeth while rounding the lips and then forcefully releasing or lowering the tongue. It is made repeatedly to invite cattle, cats, dogs, goats, and sheep to eat. In the case of goats, and sheep the most common item to consume is salt, done approximately once a week before taking them out to the fields to eat grass. The click is generally accompanied by stretching one's hand with the food item in it towards the animal or by pointing to the item on the ground. A single dental click would not have any effect unless the animal is close enough to immediately notice the food. If it is a daily routine at a specific time and place, the animal can approach the food or salt without any invitation.

3.2.1.3 The retracted lateral click [ɿ]

The retracted lateral click is made with an open mouth, and abruptly. The airstream is released near the palatal region either at one or both sides of the tongue, but not in the middle. It sounds more grave/low-pitched than a dental click. The purpose of this click is to call chickens and cattle and it is repeated until the animal arrives. To call chickens, the click is combined with the spreading of corn to the ground since the intention is either to feed the chickens or to catch one or more of them. This retracted lateral click is an insult if made once and directed to a human being.

3.2.1.4 [ʔʔʔʔʔʔ]

Another way to invite cats, goats, and sheep to consume food items is to use the interjection [ʔʔʔʔʔʔ], which can be repeated as many times as needed to get the animal to the desired spot. This interjection is generally accompanied by stretching one's hand with the food item in it towards the animal or by pointing to the item on the ground.

3.2.1.5 Whistling

Whistling is generally used to invite a dog, especially when it is not in sight. This technique is commonly used during hunting expeditions. The hunter whistles to orient the dog towards himself or the game he is trying to capture. As mentioned in section 3.1.1, young people also use whistling to communicate over long distances. Whistling to a dog involves protruding one's lips and blowing out air in repeated high-pitched intervals.

3.2.1.6 Nominal forms

Nominal forms (nouns or onomatopoeias) are also used to summon animals. The nominal forms identified so far are used to summon specific animals. A **bùsì** 'cat' is called by the word **mùús** or **myáwú?** which do not have any other known meanings in the language, although **mùús** appears to be a general name for cats. Since these two forms are used in the entire community, all cats recognize and respond when they hear the sounds. The cat is the only animal Babanki people cuddle and while doing so, they can repeatedly say **mùús** or, to a lesser extent, **myáwú?**. The form **mùúsì** is used occasionally to express admiration for the cuddled cat.

The word **jàm** 'animal, cattle, meat' is used to call a **ḡkùújàm** 'pig'. Pigs born in Babanki or which have lived in the community for a while recognize and respond to this appellation. Of interest is the fact that the only animal that can be called using **jàm** is a

pig, but not cattle which are actually named **ɲàm**, while the word for ‘pig’ is the compound **ŋkàúɲàm**.

Cattle are called using the word **mòsɔ́**, while **mèéʔ** is used to call goats. These are onomatopoeic imitations of the sound used by these animals to express themselves.

Dogs are the only animals that may have personal names, and where these exist, they are used to call each dog. Dog names commonly heard in Babanki include **blāk** ‘black’, **dʒàpān** ‘Japan’, **dʒìmí** ‘Jimmy’, **lókì** ‘lucky’, **ràmbō** ‘Rambo’, and **wískì** ‘Whisky’. As seen, these names are English personal and common names selected by the dog owner based on specific features, social trends, or experiences. For example, only a black dog can be named **blāk** ‘black’, and **dʒàpān** ‘Japan’ coined by someone who experienced the effectiveness of Japanese products and wishes their dog to become efficient and maybe useful as a hunting dog.

3.2.2 Chasing animals

All domestic animals, wild animals and birds can be sent away using specific interjections and verb forms. Non-verbal gestures such as picking up an object such as a stick, whip, or stone can cause an animal or bird to flee. The interjections are presented first, followed by the verb forms.

3.2.2.1 [ʃ:]

To send away chickens or birds this hissing sound consisting of a long syllabic postalveolar fricative is made without a glottal stop at the beginning. The sound can be lengthened and made repeatedly until the objective is attained. In general, the sound is accompanied by swinging the arm towards the chicken or bird.

The use of sibilants to chase away animals, especially chickens, is very frequent cross-linguistically, as pointed out by Dingemanse (2020b: 397), who shows that this is not due solely to common inheritance or cultural diffusion accompanying the diffusion of the domestic fowl. Instead, Dingemanse hypothesizes that “some sounds are more effective than others for the goal of shooing birds, and come to function as cultural attractors biasing the transmission of shooing words – a form of convergent cultural evolution.” Babanki is yet another illustration of this convergence.

3.2.2.2 [tʃɛ̀ɛ̀ɪʔ]

This interjection is used to send away cattle. The glottal stop release is realized with glottalized voice quality. There is a gradual degree of glottalization from onset of the vowel to the final glottal stop. The tone seems to be a super-high tone followed by a gradual falling low tone. When not used to chase cattle, this interjection can express shame, lament, surprise, shock, and disbelief, as described in 4.2.8.

3.2.2.3 Verb forms

Finally, a common strategy to send away animals is to use specific verb forms. Like the nominal forms and onomatopoeias used to call animals described in 3.2.1.7 above, these are used as interjections, as evidenced by the fact that they function as full utterances (cf. Dingemanse 2021, and references therein).

In contrast to nominal forms used to call animals, only verb forms are used to send them away. Of the four verb forms found so far, three, i.e., **tʃòó** ‘pass!’, **fòó** ‘go out!’, and **lùú** ‘leave!’ are commands while one, i.e., **wàf** ‘scare’ is a simple verb root. The commands are issued by means of the imperative which is marked by a final high tone

(Akumbu, Hyman & Kießling 2020). All domestic animals can be sent away using the command **tʃòó** ‘pass!’ which derives from the verb root /tʃò/. Dogs and cats which are allowed into the house may be sent out using the command **fòó** ‘go out!’ which derives from the verb root /fò/. If goats, sheep and pigs accidentally enter the house they would also be sent out using this form. If any animal is lying close to a person or on their way, they will chase it by ordering the animal to **lùú** ‘leave!’ based on the verb /lù/. Lastly, to scare away birds, especially those that destroy crops, the verb form **wàf** ‘scare’ is used. The imperative form **wàfá** is rather used to order someone to send away a bird while the verb root is said to the bird. Ordinarily, the same is done to scare a human being.

3.2.3 Animal calls: Summary

The interjections and words used to call or chase away animals are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. A few generalizations emerge. First, non-word forms are more frequent in calling (four) than in chasing away (two) animals. More specifically, clicks are exclusively used to call animals, while only voiceless fricative or fricated sounds (ʃ: and m^w) are used to chase them away.

The same tendency can be observed in word-like forms (i.e., interjections that do not constitute independent lexical items), which include mostly onomatopoeic interjections: out of four that are used for communication with animals, three are centripetal (**myāwú?**, **mèé?**, and **mòó?**), and only one is centrifugal (**tʃèè?**).

Actual words, on the other hand, are more frequently used to chase away (four) than to call (two) animals. Interestingly, animal calls are exclusively nouns, while words used as interjections to chase away animals are all verbs. These also tend to be less animal-specific: **tʃòó** ‘pass!’, **fòó** ‘go out!’, and **lùú** ‘leave!’ are used with virtually all domestic animals -- the restriction on **fòó** ‘go out!’ is simply due to the fact that this verb is used to chase animals out of a house, in which only cats and dogs are regularly found. To chase a chicken out of the house, one uses ʃ: rather than **fòó** ‘go out!’.

Table 1. Animal-oriented centripetal interjections

	‘Come’ Non-word	Word-like/Onom.	Word (noun)	‘Come eat’ Non-word
chicken				
cat	⊙ ^w	myāwú?	mùús	^w , ʔʃ
dog	⊙ ^w			^w , ʔʃ
goat	⊙ ^w	mèé?		^w , ʔʃ
sheep	⊙ ^w			^w , ʔʃ
pig			ɲàm	
cattle		mòó?		
insect				

Table 2. Animal-oriented centrifugal interjections

	‘Go away’ Non-word	Word-like /Onom.	Word (verb)	‘Go out’ Word (verb)	‘Out of my way’ Word (verb)
chicken	ʃ:		tʃòó ‘pass!’		lùú ‘leave!’
cat			tʃòó ‘pass!’	fòó ‘go out!’	lùú ‘leave!’
dog			tʃòó ‘pass!’	fòó ‘go out!’	lùú ‘leave!’
goat			tʃòó ‘pass!’	(fòó ‘go out!’)	lùú ‘leave!’
sheep			tʃòó ‘pass!’	(fòó ‘go out!’)	lùú ‘leave!’
pig			tʃòó ‘pass!’	(fòó ‘go out!’)	lùú ‘leave!’

cattle	tʃɛ̀ɛ̀:ì?	tʃòó ‘pass!’	lùú ‘leave!’
bird		wàf ‘scare’	
insect	m^w		

4. Expressives

Expressive signs are “primarily symptoms of a producer’s cognitive or emotive state.” The nature of the state being expressed can be sensory, i.e., related to one of the five senses (section 4.1), or evaluative, i.e., expressing a judgment or an opinion (section 4.2).

4.1 Sensory state/reaction

Gustatory (taste) and olfactory (smell) perception are expressed in Babanki by the alveo-palatal click (4.1.1) or the interjections [ɪːʃ] (4.1.2) and [fɪː] (4.1.3).

4.1.1 Alveo-palatal click [ɪ]

This click is made just like an alveolar click in languages with phonemic clicks (e.g., in !Xoon, Traill 1985). A sealed pocket of air is formed between the tongue and the roof of the mouth by a double velar and alveo-palatal closure. The tongue is then pulled down while maintaining the seal, thus causing the air pressure in the air pocket to decrease. Finally, the front, alveo-palatal closure is released, producing a sharp noise caused by a sudden rush of air into the mouth to equalize air pressure.

This click is articulated once to indicate that food is delicious, whether the person is just tasting or actually eating. It can be repeated after a while to reinforce the feeling of satisfaction. One context where this click is commonly heard is when someone is trying to feed a baby who is not really interested or willing to eat the specific food. The person feeding the child may take a bite or just pretend to do so and then produce the click to convince the baby that the food is delicious.² In general, the click is accompanied by a prolonged nodding of the head. The nodding can be repeated a few times, probably to reinforce the click which is made only once.

4.1.2 [ɪːʃ]

This sign is made when the smell of a place or thing is unpleasant. It is also used to indicate that food is not delicious, or to signalize disapproval and disgruntlement. For example, a young man was walking through a yard, inadvertently stepped on excreta and screamed:

- (12) **ɪːʃ, à nù ndó á ʃə á**
 INTER DS defecate who at here QUES
 ‘Who has defecated here?’

² Sometimes, young people can make the alveo-palatal click to hurt their peers or raise anxiety in them. This happens when the person is eating something they do not wish to share or would share only after the other participant begs. It might even be that the food item concerned is not really delicious, in which case the aim is simply to cause the other person to desire the food.

4.1.3 [m^w:]

When places or things emit an unpleasant smell, someone can blow air through their nostrils in intervals while maintaining rounded and protruded lips to indicate their displeasure.

4.2 Emotional signs

The signs identified so far and presented here express negative emotions and feelings, such as shock, disbelief, disappointment, and regret. It seems that positive emotions such as joy and happiness are generally expressed by facial expressions, actions of various sorts such as shouting, singing, and dancing.

4.2.1 The tchip/suckteeth

The tchip³ or suckteeth is made by sucking in air through the teeth, while pressing the tongue against the upper teeth and pursing or slightly flattening lips (see similar descriptions in Agwuele 2014: 90 (Yoruba), Grenoble 2014 and Grenoble et al. 2015 (Wolof), Lionnet 2020 (Laal), among others). It is used to express anger, disappointment, boredom, resignation, or tiredness. For example, a woman received three phone calls from an unknown number and each time she answered the call, the connection failed. When it happened the third time, she made the tchip and dropped the phone on a nearby chair. After a while, the phone began to ring again and when she saw that it was the same number, she made two tchips and ignored the phone. This click is characteristic of a wide area in West and Central Africa, but also communities of African descent in Europe and the Americas, where it sometimes acts as a cultural and identity marker (see, for example, Rickford & Rickford 1976).

4.2.2 Back-released velar click [ɣ]

The back-released velar click is produced exactly like a dental or alveolar click, except it is the back (velar) closure that is released first, with sudden air influx from the back of the vocal tract into the mouth (see Lionnet 2020 and references therein for an acoustic and impressionistic articulatory description). It is repeated several times to express shock or disbelief. It can also be made by a person who uncovers a secret that had been concealed from them. For example, a father sees his son who has been instructed to abandon hunting and embrace schooling returning with a giant deer from a hunting expedition whereas the father thought the boy was in school. The father simply makes the back-released velar click and welcomes the boy home since he realizes that the boy prefers hunting and it is difficult for him to abandon it.

4.2.3 [wéméi] ~ [ʔéiʔ]

The signs **wéméi** and **ʔéiʔ** are used to express shock, fear, and lament. For instance, someone could make any one of these interjections if they suddenly come across a snake or if they receive news of an imminent enemy attack. The following conversation between a wife and husband is illustrative.

³ As it is known in the French-speaking African diaspora, from the Wolof noun *ciip* referring to this click (Diouf 2003).

(13) Expression of shock

Wife:	wémèì				
	INTER				
Husband:	à	dì?	yō		
	DS	COP	what		
	'What is it?'				
Wife:	à	dì?	kā-mpfí	kó	zù
	DS	COP	7-big	7.AM	snake
	'It is a big snake.'				
Husband:	mà	vì-ì			
	1SG	come-PROG			
	'I am coming.'				
Wife	?éì?	zàṅsè	vì		
	INTER	hurry	come		
	'Hurry up!'				

4.2.4 [úúú:ʔ]

The sign **úúú:ʔ** whose tone goes from high to low before going back to high is used to jeer at someone for doing something unusual. The vowel is lengthened before the glottal stop release. This sign can be made if a person is caught in an immoral act such as stealing, committing adultery or practicing witchcraft. It can also be made when one team defeats another and supporters of the winners wish to inflict more pain on those of the losers.

4.2.5 [é:è] ~ [ó:ò] ~ [ú:ù]

Any of the vowel sequences [é:è] ~ [ó:ò] ~ [ú:ù] can be used as an exclamation, to express surprise, shock, or regret. The first vowel can be lengthened for as long as desired. For example, if someone is handing over a piece of yam to another person and it accidentally falls down both of them may say **é:è**, **ó:ò**, or **ú:ù**.

4.2.6 [h̀m̀m̀]

The sign [h̀m̀m̀] is used to express doubt. Consider, for example, a situation where a child tells the mother that while she was working in the field her father cooked the food she was to return from the field and cook. The mother could say **h̀m̀m̀** because it is not expected that her husband would cook and he has not done it before, resulting in her expression of doubt.

4.2.7 [ē?éʔ]

The sign [ē?éʔ] is used to express surprise, disappointment, or shock. One scenario where this interjection can be used is when someone boils beans for a period of time, they expect it to be ready but when they check the beans is still not cooked.

4.2.8 [tʃ̥èè:ìʔ]

This is the same sign as that used to chase cattle, described in 3.2.2.2. When not directed at cattle, it expresses shame, lament, surprise, shock, and disbelief.

- (15) **tʃɛ̀ɛ̀:ɪ?** à ʒì wáyɲ n-ʒí kǎ-báyɲ kèn nɔ́ʔə kə-tsəm lə
 INTER DS eat 1.child N-eat 7-fufu DEM really 2-all such
 ‘tʃɛ̀ɛ̀:ɪ?, is it the child that has eaten all this fufu?’

4.2.9 [ɪ:]

While this sign expresses sensory state/reaction (4.1.2), it can also express an emotive state, such as when someone does something mean or unacceptable, e.g., if someone lies, another person could use this sign to express their disappointment.

5. Generalizations and typological overview

From the presentation in the previous sections, a number of generalizations about the Babanki liminal system emerge. As it is expected, some signs are polysemous and fulfill more than one semantic function (5.1). We also find that some signs contain phonotactic structures and phonemes that are not part of the inventory of the language (5.2). An examination of the tones and functions of some signs reveal a correlation between certain tones and functions of the signs (5.3). It is also seen that some signs are onomatopoeic (5.4), while others are lexical items from other word classes (5.5).

5.1 Functions and polysemy / polyfunctionality

A number of liminal signs are polysemous and capable of fulfilling more than one function. One click and two interjections have been found to display this kind of polyfunctionality – a feature that is cross-linguistically frequent for interjections (cf. Dingemanse 2021: 4). The retracted lateral click (section 1.1.3) is used to call chickens and it is repeated until the chickens arrive. It can also be used as an insult if made once and directed to a human being.

The interjection **tʃɛ̀ɛ̀:ɪ?** (section 1.2.2) is now used to send away cattle but its primary function is to express shame, lament, surprise, shock, and disbelief. The use of **tʃɛ̀ɛ̀:ɪ?** is certainly an extension from the primary function of the expression of feelings since cattle were introduced to the Babanki community only in 1916 with the coming of the Fulani cattle rearers (Akumbu & Asonganyi 2020).

The interjection **m^w** (section 1.2.3) is used to blow away a fly or insect from someone’s body. This sound is also made, while closing one’s nostrils with the hand, when a smell of a thing or place is perceived.

5.2 Use of phonotactically odd structures and sounds not in phonemic inventory

5.2.1 Non-canonical phonotactics

Previous studies, e.g., Akumbu & Chibaka (2012), Faytak & Akumbu (2021) have shown that Babanki has 25 consonant phonemes /b, t, d, k, g, m, n, ɲ, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, ɣ, pf, bv, ts, dz, tʃ, dʒ, l, w, j/ and eight vowel phonemes /i, ɪ, u, ʊ, e, o, ə, a/. Note that in syllable final position /k/ is realized as the glottal stop [ʔ], vowel length is not contrastive, diphthongs are not allowed, and the preferred structure of syllables is CV(C).

Some Babanki liminal signs display phonotactic structures that are not typical of the language. While the glottal stop normally occurs only in syllable final position in the language, it is found at the beginning of syllables in several interjections, e.g., **ʔʃ ʔʃ ʔʃ** used to invite cats, goats, and sheep to eat (section 3.2.1.4), and **ʔəʔəʔə** given as a negative response (section 2.1.2).

It has also been observed that some liminal signs have syllables made up of consonants only, e.g., the negative response ʔḡʔḡḡ / ʔḡʔḡḡḡ (section 2.1.2), and ʃ: used to chase chickens or birds (section 3.2.2.1). This is unique to liminal signs in the language since Babanki syllables usually contain a vowel nucleus, and neither sonorants nor fricatives, although phonetically salient enough, can occupy this position.

While vowel length is not contrastive in Babanki, many liminal signs display vowel lengthening, e.g., the vowel sequences é:è ~ ó:ò ~ ú:ù used as exclamation, to express surprise, shock, or regret (section 4.2.5).

Diphthongs also occur in interjections in Babanki, e.g., the interjections wéméi and ʔéiʔ expressing shock, fear, and lament (section 4.2.3), and the interjection ʔàíʔ used to provide a negative response (section 2.1.2).

Interjections and liminal signs also employ sounds that are not part of the phonemic inventory of Babanki – in particular clicks, used to call animals, i.e., the kiss click (section 3.2.1.1), the dental click (section 3.2.1.2), and the retracted lateral click (section 3.2.1.3); that used to express perception, i.e., the alveo-palatal click (section 4.1.1); and affective signs, i.e., the tchip/suckteeth (section 4.2.1), and the back released velar click (section 4.2.2).

The fact that these clicks and all the phonotactically odd structures are used in the liminal system implies that they are part of the phonological system of the language and should be included in its grammatical description. They clearly serve a different function from the contrastive sounds of the language, and consequently ought to be presented as a separate inventory (which might include sounds otherwise attested as contrastive sounds, e.g., [ʃ] or [s] in Babanki).

5.2.2 Clicks

As we saw earlier, Babanki uses six clicks in its liminal system: [ᵀʷ], [ʷ], [ʘ], [!], [Ɂ], and tchip/suckteeth. We show in this section that this liminal click system is not aligned with most West and Central African systems.⁴

Gil (2015) shows that clicks are very commonly used in languages around the world as interjections and/or liminal signs. Preliminary documentation (including Gil's 2015 survey from fieldworkers and linguists, Grenoble 2014, Grenoble et al. 2015, Pillion et al. 2019, Lionnet 2020) shows that, despite the presence of such non-phonemic clicks on all continents, areal tendencies can be discerned. Gil proposes a tentative typology of liminal clicks based on their functional load. Elaborating on Gil's initial three categories (logical and affective function vs. affective function only vs. neither), Lionnet (2021) proposes a five-way typology, summarized in (16) below.

(16) Functional-load-based typology of liminal clicks (Gil 2015, Lionnet 2021):

- a. Type 1: Phonemic use (highest functional load);
- b. Type 2: Logical use, contrastive clicks for 'yes' and 'no';
- c. Type 3: Logical use, only 'yes' or 'no';
- d. Type 4: Affective use only;
- e. Type 5: Neither logical nor affective.

Gil's preliminary survey seems to indicate that these five types are not randomly distributed. The highest functional load is represented by languages with phonemic clicks (16a), concentrated in southern Africa with the Kalahari Basin languages (formerly known as 'Khoisan', cf. Güldemann 2014) and neighboring Bantu languages (Sands and

⁴ Gil (2015) characterizes these usages of clicks as "para-linguistic". We see no reason to exclude these from the purview of linguistics, and thus prefer the term "liminal clicks".

Gunnink 2019), with small pockets in East Africa (as well as Damin, an extinct register of the Lardil language in Australia). The second highest functional load is represented by languages which use two different clicks with logical semantics: one for ‘yes’ and one for ‘no’ (16b). In Gil’s sample, these seem to be largely limited to an area in West and Central Africa corresponding approximately to the Macro-Sudan Belt (Güldemann 2008, 2010, 2018) – although the dearth of information on most of Eastern Africa and the Congo basin does not allow at this time for a clear delineation of this area. Next are languages with only one click for logical use, either ‘yes’ or ‘no’, most of the time a dental click (16c). These extend from Northwest Africa to Southeast Asia. The fourth category consists of languages where clicks only have affective value (16d). These are found elsewhere. In fact, affective use seems to be a kind of default that is shared by most languages which have liminal clicks. Finally, the lowest functional load for liminal clicks is represented by languages where clicks have neither logical nor affective functions (16e), and are used only as onomatopoeias, animal calls, etc. These are mostly attested outside of Africa and Eurasia, mostly in Northeast Asia, the Americas, and Australia. As can be seen, functional load seems to be inversely correlated with distance from southern Africa, the hotbed of phonemic clicks.

From the point of view of this typology, Babanki seems to belong to the fourth category, since there does not appear to be any clicks with logical function. Three clicks have affective function: the alveo-palatal click [!] expressing satisfaction caused by delicious food (section 4.1.1), the back released velar click [Ɂ], which expresses shock, disbelief, or disappointment (section 4.2.2), and the *tchip*/suckteeth, which expresses very strong negative affect such as anger or disapproval (section 4.2.1). The other three clicks [ʘ^w], [Ɂ^w], [Ɂ̥] are all used in animal communication (sections 3.2.1.1, 3.2.1.2, 3.2.1.3). This is not expected, given the geographical position of Babanki: one would expect it to belong to category 2 (logical use, contrast between ‘yes’ and ‘no’), like so many West and Central African languages from Senegal to Sudan.

The Babanki liminal click system stands out in other respects as well. Lionnet (2021) tentatively proposes to define the area in West and Central Africa (at least from Senegal to Chad) where one finds systems of type 2 as characterized by a particular liminal click system unattested elsewhere, and defined by the five criteria in (17).

(17) Features of the West and Central African liminal click system:

- a. highly conventionalized clicks (closer to deeply entrenched interjections than to ambiguous liminal signs subject to possible intra- and interspeaker variation);
- b. clicks with logical meaning;
- c. contrast between a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ click
- d. presence of the back-released velar click with a positive logical function (equivalent of ‘yes’ or backchannel)
- e. presence of the *tchip*.

Of these, only criteria (17a) and (17e) are met in Babanki: clicks do seem to be highly conventionalized, and the *tchip* is part of the inventory, with exactly the same function as elsewhere. However, as we saw, there are no clicks with logical meaning (criteria b and c), and the velar click, although attested, has a very different function in Babanki: negative affective rather than positive logical (criterion d).

This seems to confirm an observation by Pillion et al. (2019) that languages spoken in the southern half of Cameroon have liminal click systems that tend to include fewer or different click types than languages further West. Additionally, the further south the language, the lower the degree of conventionalization, and the more different the click inventory (e.g., Ngoshie, in the Grassfields, and Basaá, East of Duala, both have a velar click with positive logical meaning Bakoko and Bulu, spoken further south, do not). This

is a possible indication that Southern Cameroon might constitute the southern margin of West & Central African area. This is at this point mostly speculative, in the absence of further data from languages spoken south and east of southern Chad which would allow one to delineate the limits of this area.

5.3 Tone-function correlates

In the expression of positive and negative interjections, we find a correlation between tone and semantico-pragmatic function. In general, negative interjections are predominantly HL while positive ones have a L or LH pattern, as illustrated by the responses in (18b) and (18c) to the question in (18a).

- (18) a. **wù** **yì** **dzàŋ** **mò** **à**
 2SG P1 call 1SG QUES
 ‘Did you call me?’
 b. **?ŋ?ŋŋ** ‘no’
 c. **?ŋ?ŋ** ‘yes’

Other denial and approval signs also display a similar pattern, i.e., HL and L(H) respectively, as in (19) although we also find **?ǎi?** ‘no’ with a LH pattern.

- (19) a. **mà** **zí** **kā-báyn** **à**
 1SG eat 7-fufu QUES
 ‘Should I eat the fufu?’
 b. **?ǎ?ǎǎ** ‘no’
 c. **?ǎǎ** ‘yes’

The L or L falling pattern seems to mark completion, while the LH pattern represents both a marker of completion of what precedes and an indication that the producer is expecting something to follow (as in the continuer **?ŋ?ŋ**, repair initiator **?ǎ**, or call for attention (**w**)**ǎ**), and the falling HL pattern very often associated with negative phatic or evaluative signs, an expression of a dead end, or interrupted course (see Dingemanse 2021: 6 for similar hypotheses).

5.4 Onomatopoeic expressions

A number of Babanki signs are onomatopoeic expressions which imitate the sounds of certain animals since these expressions appear to be used only when calling animals. The sounds that are made by cattle, goats, and cats, i.e., **mǎǎ?**, **měé?**, and **myáwú?** respectively are also used to call them.

5.5 Lexical items

While several signs are used in the Babanki liminal system, a few lexical items are also employed (Andrason & Akumbu 2024). The nominal forms that can be used to summon animals are **jàm** ‘animal, cattle, meat’, **mùús** ‘cat’, **blāk** ‘black’, **dzàpān** ‘Japan’, **dzimí** ‘Jimmy’, **lókì** ‘lucky’, **ràmbō** ‘Rambo’, and **wískì** ‘Whisky’. As noted in section 3.2.1.7, the only animal that can be summoned using **jàm** is **ŋkàújàm** ‘pig’, while **mùús** is used only for **bùjí** ‘cat’. The rest of the nominal forms borrowed from English are used exclusively for **Bá** ‘dog’.

As pointed out earlier, nominal forms are used to call animals, while verb forms are used to send them away. The four verb forms discussed in section 3.2.2.3 are the only

lexical verbs that have been found to be used to send away animals. The verbs **tʃò** ‘pass’, **fò** ‘go out’, and **lù** ‘leave’ are used to send away animals while **wàf** ‘scare’ is used for birds.

The last set of lexical items and phrases in this category are the question tags **múló** ‘as such?’, **mwó** ‘right?’, and **à bwén á lì** ‘isn’t it?’, used as back channels to seek confirmation, as mentioned in section 2.4.

The fact that Babanki speakers draw a few items from other word classes to use in the liminal system allows them to integrate and link up the liminal system with the rest of the grammatical system of the language.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have presented the first description of linguistic ‘signs’ standing on the interjection-liminal sign continuum in Babanki, a Central-Ring Grassfields language of North-West Cameroon. These fall into the three well-established categories of phatic signs (‘yes’, ‘no’, continuer, repair initiator, request for confirmation, news receipt), conative signs (directed at humans or at animals), and expressive signs (expressing either sensory or emotional state).

We have shown that polysemy/polyfunctionality is frequent among these signs, confirming a noted cross-linguistic tendency. These signs consist in independent, dedicated signs, but also of onomatopoeias, and secondary uses of lexical items (mostly imperative forms of motion verbs). Many of these signs also use non-canonical phonotactics, including the use of consonantal sounds that are not part of the phonemic inventory of the language – another feature typical of interjections and liminal signs. One such class of sounds is clicks. Interestingly, however, the liminal click system of Babanki stands out when compared to other languages of West and Central Africa, in that the inventory is slightly different, and the functions of the attested clicks are radically different. This seems to be in accordance with data from other Cameroonian languages, and could be an indication that central/southern Cameroon constitutes an areal boundary in terms of the distribution and functions of liminal clicks, separating a coherent West and Central African area to the north, and an area to the south in which interjections and liminal signs are still too poorly documented to allow for any generalization.

It is our hope that this description will improve our understanding of the nature, functions, and typology of interjections and liminal signs in this part of Africa, and in the world’s languages generally.

Abbreviations

1, 5, 7 = noun classes, 1PL = first person plural, 2PL = second person plural, 1SG = first person singular, 2SG = second person singular, AM = associative marker, CAUS = causative, COP = copula, DEM = demonstrative, DS = dummy subject, IMP = imperative, INTER = interjection, N = nasal, NEG = negative, P1 = immediate past tense, PROG = progressive, QUES = question, QUOT = quotative, SM = subject marker

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