

Variation in the realization of /t/ in Babanki

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In Babanki, a Grassfields Bantu language of Cameroon (Hyman 1980, Akumbu and Chibaka 2012), the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ is realized before high vowels either as [t], [tʃ], or [ty], as in the following words.

(1) àtí	‘grinding stone’
tím	‘send’
tú	‘pierce’
(2) kètʃí	~ kètyí ‘stick’
ètʃù	~ ètyù ‘mouth’
tʃùŋ	~ tyùŋ ‘tie’

While this kind of variation has been reported in Medumba, another Grassfields Bantu language (Belew 2021), the social variables such as age and gender that condition the variation in Medumba do not show any significant effects in Babanki. WhatsApp recordings of the realization of 12 lexical items containing the alveolar plosive in various environments by 56 native speakers from the two Babanki villages in December 2023 were coded impressionistically and examined. Additional data were taken from existing literature and from conversations with native speakers. The study suggests that the speakers’ place of birth, residence and socialization (contact with speakers of the next Babanki village, and family) play a greater role in conditioning the form produced. An examination of the conditions that determine the choice of one or the other variable suggests that the sociophonetic variation in the realization of Babanki /t/ has spread widely through the community overriding the social factors such as gender and age that may have been at its origin. It is unclear whether the change was originated and led by men or women (see, for example, Labov 2001) or whether there are any social meanings to the change (e.g., Feldman-Savelsburg 2003).

Keywords: Sociophonetic variation, Voiceless alveolar plosive, Babanki, Grassfields Bantu, Cameroon

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