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Solange Mekamgoum^a  & Roland Kießling^b 
Universität Hamburg^{ab}
solange.mekamgoum@uni-hamburg.de
roland.kiessling@uni-hamburg.de

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Solange Mekamgoum^a & Roland Kießling^b

University of Hamburg^{ab}

solange.mekamgoum@uni-hamburg.de

roland.kiessling@uni-hamburg.de

Abstract:

While interrogative pronouns, adverbials, and determiners seem to constitute universal word categories (Ultan 1978), interrogative verbs are rather rare worldwide (Hagège 2008). One of the languages to attest this rare category is Ngəmba, a Ghomala’ variety of the Eastern Grassfields Bantu group in Cameroon. This article provides a first descriptive outline of the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of the Ngəmba interrogative verb *ghě* ‘do what?’. Based on comparative evidence from micro-variation across closely related neighbouring Ghomala’ varieties, it fleshes out a historical model that traces the Ngəmba interrogative verb back to a fusion of a prior verb meaning ‘do’ with an interrogative element.

Keywords: Grassfields Bantu, Bamileke, Ghomala’, Ngəmba, interrogative verb, interrogative system, content questions

1 Introduction

Cross-linguistically, inventories of question words frequently include interrogative pronouns such as ‘who’ and ‘what’, interrogative adverbials such as ‘how’, ‘where’ and ‘when’, interrogative quantifiers such as ‘how many’ and interrogative determiners such as ‘which’ (Velupillai 2012: 358). They possibly constitute universal word categories (Ultan 1978, Siemund 2001). In contrast, interrogative items that take the place of verbs are rather rare worldwide, as pointed out by Idiatov & van der Auwera 2004 and in the seminal article of Hagège 2008. It is striking that interrogative verbs seem to be absent in European languages, while they have been reported for various language families scattered throughout the world including Australian, Amerindian, Austronesian, Altaic, Papuan and Sino-Tibetan. The only unambiguous African attestation in Hagège’s survey of 28 languages

is Rundi.¹ To what extent the rarity of interrogative verbs is a product of a research paradigm that is biased by standard average European expectations is still to be explored.

Interrogative verbs are special in that they perform two jobs at the same time, i.e. they establish a predication, while at the same time, they question the very predication they express (Hagège 2008: 2). Thus, an “important feature of a sentence in which an interrogative verb appears as the main predicate is that the question asked concerns neither an argument [...], nor an adjunct, an adverbial modifier, or an adnominal modifier [...], but the very state, process, or action which is expressed by the predicate” (Hagège 2008: 4).

Interrogative verbs cover some of the most basic functions in everyday communication, denoting meanings such as ‘be who’ / ‘be what’, ‘do what’ / ‘what happened’, ‘be how’ / ‘do how’, ‘say what’, ‘be where’ / ‘go where’ (Hagège 2008: 18). This is also precisely where the Ngəmba interrogative verb *ghě/ghyě* meaning ‘do what? / what happened?’ fits.²

Ngəmba is an under-researched variety of the Eastern Grassfields Bantu group in the West region of Cameroon, classified by Dieu & Renaud (1983: 124) and Eberhard et al. 2022 as a dialect of Ghɔmálá? called Ghɔmálá?-West and Ghɔmálá?-Ngemba, respectively.³ Ngəmba subdivides in five varieties named after the settlement areas where they are spoken as shown in figure 1, i.e. Bamendjou and Bameka in the Upper-Plateau division, Bansa in the Menoua division, Bamougoum in the Mifi division and Bafounda in the Bamboutos division.

While Ngəmba definitely remains an under-researched variety of the Ghomala' cluster, it has received some attention both by local language activists and professional linguists. Beside a primer (kě ɲgəmba⁴ 2014), there are descriptive efforts in the domains of verbal morphosyntax (Soh 2008), morphophonology (Fossi & Ouafu 2012), nominal morphosyntax and semantics (Fossi 2015; Mekamgoum 2021; Mekamgoum & Kießling 2022) and basic lexical compilations (Soh 2017; Deeh Ségallo 2015, 2016), supplemented by in-depth studies of anthroponyms (Mensah & Mekamgoum 2017) and cultural scripting of speech acts such as rebuking (Mekamgoum 2013) and advising (Mekamgoum 2022).

The present article is organized in six sections. The introduction in section 1 is followed by a brief outline of the Ngəmba interrogative system, arranged along the major division of content vs. polar questions in section 2. Among the content questions, section 3 zooms in on the interrogative verb *ghě* 'do what?' and explores its morphosyntactic properties. Section 4 widens the perspective to equivalent items and constructions in closely related Bamileke varieties. This prepares the ground for developing a historical model in section 5 to account for its emergence in Ngəmba. Section 6 concludes the study and suggests avenues for further research on interrogatives in Grassfields languages and beyond.

2 The interrogative system of Ngəmba

The Ngəmba interrogative system is characterized by the following typological profile: polar questions are formed by clause final enclitics which "combine with a specific interrogative intonational pattern" (Tadjo Fongang 2020: 99). Content questions are formed by question words which include pronouns, adverbials, adjectives, and an interrogative verb. The basic array of primary, i.e. monomorphemic question words, namely, *wó* 'who?', *kɔ* 'what?' and *hó* 'where?', *CPX-é* 'which', *llá* 'how much (price)', *sú* 'when', *sú?ú* 'how many, what amount of', is considerably expanded by secondary and tertiary question words, most of which are derived from primary *kɔ* 'what', e.g. *ɲji?* *kɔ* 'when?' (< 'moment what?'), *ɲgə kɔ* 'how?'

4 *kě ɲgəmba* is the scientific committee for the development of the Ngəmba language. It comprises language activists who speak the different Ngəmba dialects.

(< ‘that what?’) and *ndɔŋ/ndzin ŋgə kə* ‘how much/many precisely?’ (< ‘quantity that what?’).

In a wider comparative perspective, Ngəmba stands out by three properties: (a) all question types, including polar questions, are morphologically marked, i.e. interrogative status cannot be expressed by intonation alone; (b) the question word *súʔú* ‘how many, what number of?’ stands out in that it entails a complex construction involving an elaborate set of numeral classifiers both of the sortal and the mensural type (Mekamgoum & Kießling 2022); (c) the presence of an interrogative verb *ghě* ‘do what?’.

3 The interrogative verb *ghě*⁵

The Ngəmba item *ghě* [ɣě]⁶ ‘do what?’ qualifies as an interrogative verb in that, like any other verb, it “functions as the main or secondary predicate of the sentence where it appears; but at the same time [...] questions the very state of affairs denoted by the predicate itself” (Hagège 2008: 2). In other words, it performs two jobs at once, i.e. it establishes a predication, while at the same time it questions the very predication it expresses. Therefore, a more adequate translation equivalent would actually be ‘to what?’ instead of ‘to do what?’. This can be seen in the two following examples. In (1) the Ngəmba equivalent is actually “If we walk together, it will what?” and (2) rather expresses “You spent the day in school today whatting?”

(1) Interrogative verb *ghě* as main predicate⁷

5 The data used in this article have three sources: (a) spontaneous interactions recorded between 2015 and 2021 for Mekamgoum 2022, (b) elicitation through interviews and (c) the intuition of the first author as proficient native speaker of Bamendjou-Ngəmba. In more detail, primary Ngəmba utterances are extracted from the recorded and transcribed spontaneous multimedia data. To obtain these primary utterances in further categories of tense, mood, aspect and polarity, other Ngəmba native speakers were consulted, namely, Jean Fokam and Soh Ta (Bamendjou) and Maman Micheline (Bameka). Examples (7c), (8c) (17a) and (19d) came from our own native speaker proficiency. As with the data in section 4, table 1, the following native speakers were consulted: Georgette Djoukouo for Baham, Bahouan and Bandjoun, Kouamou Nadine for Bangou, Batoufam and Bandjoun, Wega Simeu for Batie and Bandjoun, Solange Mekeng for Fotouni, Suzanne Buekam for Babouantou, Stelle Kameni for Baleveng and Keungne Joseline for Bamendjou.

7 The transcription used throughout this contribution follows the conventions of the Alphabet for Cameroonian languages (Tadajeu & Sadembouo 1984) which

pòghò pónca n-jin mbǎ ghě
 2+1.DU together CS-walk and.3SG.F0 do.what
 ‘What would happen, if we walk together?’

(2) Interrogative verb *ghě* as second predicate

pǔ tsók səkút lé?-à ŋ-gě'ě^s
 2PL spend.day school day-PROX CS-do.what.QINT
 ‘You spend the day in school today doing what?’

The verbal status of *ghě* is corroborated by the fact that it shares all crucial properties of a full-fledged verb, i.e. it participates in verbal inflection, derivation and negation.

The following examples show that *ghě* ‘do what’ can be fully inflected for all Ngəmba tense and aspect categories, i.e. the continuous (3b), habitual (3c) and frequentative (3d) aspects of the present tense (4a–d), the past tenses (5–8), and the future tenses (8–11). In the course of inflection, *ghě* ‘do what’ combines with the continuous proclitics (*ssí*) *mbóó* (3b, 4–7c) and the habitual proclitic *khi?í* (3c). For the continuous and the frequentative, it receives the consecutive prefix *N-* that triggers the regular permutation of the fricative *gh* to the plosive *g*. In the continuous aspect, the verb undergoes further suprasegmental alternations with respect to tone.

(3) Interrogative verb *ghě* in various inflectional categories of the present tense

deviates in the following respects from IPA: c [tʃ], sh [ʃ], gh [ɣ], bh [β], j [dʒ], zh [ʒ], ɰ [y, ɥ], ' [ʔ]. Aspiration [ʰ] and palatalisation [ʲ] are coded by h and y, respectively. Unfortunately, this results in the rather clumsy graphemic representation of the aspirated voiced velar fricative [ɣʰ] as ghh, as it occurs in *Batie* (see section 4). Apart from the common tone symbols [´] for high tone, [̀] for low tone, [ˇ] for a contour tone rising from low to high level and [ˆ] for a contour tone falling from high to low level, the mark [˘] is employed for a tone falling from high to mid level and absence of tone marking on vowels denotes a mid tone, even in environments where the unmarked vowel follows another one with a different tone, as in (3b) or (4b) for example.

8 The alternation of *gh* ~ *g* observed in the initial consonant of the interrogative verb reflects a morphophonological process in Ngəmba by which fricatives such as *gh*, *bh* and *zh* and sonorants such as *l* undergo hardening to plosives or affricates, i.e. *g*, *b*, *dʒ* and *d* in postnasal position, respectively. In a historical perspective, the process must probably be viewed the other way round, i.e. the postnasal alternants retain the more archaic plosive that has undergone lenition elsewhere.

(a) Simple present

ð *ghě* *ndô*
 2SG do.what house.QINT
 ‘What do you do in the house?’

(b) Present continuous

ʃ *ssí* *m-bóó* *ŋ-gěe* *ndô*
 2SG LOC CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF house.QINT
 ‘What are you doing in the house?’

(c) Present habitual

ð *khiŋí* *ghě* *ndô*
 2SG HAB do.what house.QINT
 ‘What do you usually do in the house?’

(d) Present frequentative

ʃ *ŋ-gě* *ndô*
 2SG.FRQ CS-do.what house.QINT
 ‘What do you frequently do in the house?’

In (4–7), *ghě* is inflected for the past tenses of Ngəmba, i.e. the immediate past (P0) in (4), the hodiernal past (P1) in (5), the hesternal (P2), and the distant past (P3) in (7).

(4) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the immediate past tense (P0)

(a) Perfective immediate past (P0)

ʃ *ghě* *ne* *ndô*
 2SG.P0.PF do.what about house.QINT
 ‘What have you just done about the house?’

(b) Imperfective immediate past (P0)

ð *ghěe* *ne* *ndô*
 2SG do.what.IPF about house.QINT
 ‘What did you just do about the house?’

- (c) *ŝ (mbá ssí) m-bóó ŋ-gěe*
 2SG CS-be LOC CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF
ndô
 house.QINT
 ‘What were you just doing in the house?’
- (5) (a) Perfective hodiernal past (P1)
ŝ nə ŋ-gě'é ndô
 2SG P1.PF CS-do.what house.QINT
 ‘What have you done in the house?’
- (b) Imperfective hodiernal past (P1)
ŝ ke ŋ-gěe ndô
 2SG P1.IPF CS-do.what.IPF house.QINT
 ‘What did you do in the house?’
- (c) Continuous hodiernal past (P1)
ŝ kě' m-bóó ŋ-gěe ndô
 2SG P1.IPF CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF house.QINT
 ‘What were you doing in the house?’
- (6) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the hester-
 nal/distant past tense (P2)
- (a) Perfective hesternal past tense (P2)
ŝ kwě ŋ-gě ne ndô
 2SG P2.PF CS-do.what about house.QINT
 ‘What have you done about the house?’
- (b) Imperfective hesternal past tense (P2)
ŝ kə ghěe ne ndô
 2SG P2.IPF do.what.IPF about house.QINT
 ‘What did you do about the house?’

9 The reasons of the tonal alternation in the hodiernal past marker, as seen in (5b) and (5c), is not well understood so far.

(c) Continuous hesternal past tense (P2)

ð *kǎ* *m-bóó* *ŋ-gěe* *ne*
 2SG P2.IPF CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF on
ndœ
 house.QINT

‘What were you doing on the house?’

(7) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the distant past tense (P3)

(a) Perfective distant past tense (P3)

ð *lwǎ* *ŋ-gě* *ne* *ndœ*
 2SG P3.PF CS-do.what about house.QINT

‘What have you done about the house?’

(b) Imperfective distant past tense (P3)

ð *lâ* *ghěe* *ne* *ndœ*
 2SG P3.IPF do.what.IPF about house.QINT

‘What did you do about the house?’

(c) Continuous distant past tense (P3)

ð *lǎ* *m-bóó* *ŋ-gěe* *ne*
 2SG P3.IPF CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF about
ndœ
 house.QINT

‘What were you doing about the house?’

In (8–11), *ghě* is inflected for the future tenses of Ngəmba, i.e. the immediate future (F0) in (8), hodiernal future (F1) in (9), crasternal (tomorrow’s) future (F2) in (10) and the distant future (F3) in (11).

(8) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the immediate future tense (F0)

(a) Simple future tense (F0)

ð *ghǎ* *ghě* *ndœ*
 2SG F0 do.what house.QINT

‘What will you just do in the house?’

- (b) Continuous immediate future tense (F0)
 ð *ghǎ bhóó ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 CONT do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you just be doing in the house?’
- (9) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the hodiernal future tense (F1)
- (a) Simple hodiernal future tense (F1)
 ð *ghǎ pǐ ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 F1 do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you do in the house?’
- (b) Continuous hodiernal future tense (F1)
 ð *ghǎ pǐ bhóó ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 F1 CONT do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you be doing in the house?’
- (10) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the crasternal future tense (F2)
- (a) Simple crasternal future tense (F2)
 ð *ghǎ cwǎǎ ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 F2 do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you do in the house?’
- (b) Continuous crasternal future tense (F2)
 ð *ghǎ cwǎǎ bhóó ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 F2 CONT do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you be doing in the house?’
- (11) Interrogative verb *ghě* in inflectional categories of the distant future tense (F3)
- (a) Simple distant future tense (F3)
 ð *ghǎ fǎ ghě ndê*
 2SG F0 F3 do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you do in the house?’

(b) Continuous distant future tense (F3)

ð *ghě* *fó* *bhóó* *ghě* *ndê*
 2SG F0 F2 CONT do.what house.QINT
 ‘What will you be doing in the house?’

The interrogative verb *ghě* undergoes negation just like any other ordinary verb, i.e. the immediate past perfective of the indicative mood is negated by the circumclitic *kà ... bhó* (13), the simple present of the potential mood by the circumclitic *là ... bhó* (14) and all other TAM categories are negated by the circumclitic for general negation *cà ... bhó*, e.g. in the simple present (12a), the immediate past (12b–c), the hodiernal past (13d–f) and the hodiernal future (12g–h), as detailed in Mekamgoum (2022).

(12) Interrogative verb *ghě* under general negation with *cà ... bhó*

(a) Negative simple present

ð *cà* *ghě* *nè* *ndé* *bhò*
 2SG NEG do.what about house NEG.QINT
 ‘What do you not do about the house?’

(b) Negative imperfective immediate past (P0)

ð *cà* *ghěe* *nè* *ndé* *bhò*
 2SG NEG do.what.IPF about house NEG.QINT
 ‘What did you not just do about the house?’

(c) Negative continuous immediate past (P0)

ð *câ* (*m-bá ssi*) *m-bóó* *ŋ-gěe*
 2SG NEG CS-be LOC CS-CONT CS-do.what.IPF
ndé *bhò*
 house NEG.QINT
 ‘What were you not just doing in the house?’

(d) Negative perfective hodiernal past (P1)

ð cǎ nà ŋ-gě'é nè ndóé
 2SG NEG P1.PF CS-do.what.? about house
 bhò
 NEG.QINT

'What have you not just done about the house?'

(e) Negative imperfective hodiernal past (P1)

ð cǎ kè ŋ-gěe ndóé bhò
 2SG NEG P1.IPF CS-do.what.IPF house NEG.QINT

'What did you not do in the house?'

(f) Negative continuous hodiernal past (P1)

ð cà kě (m-bá ssi) m-bóó
 2SG NEG P1.IPF CS-be LOC CS-CONT
 ŋ-gěe bhò
 CS-do.what.IPF NEG.QINT

'What were you not doing?'

(g) Negative hodiernal simple future (F1)

ð cǎ pǐ ghě nè ndóé bhò
 2SG NEG F1 do.what about house NEG.QINT

'What will you not do about the house?'

(h) Negative hodiernal continuous future (F1)

ð cǎ pǐ bhóó ghě nè ndóé
 2SG NEG F1 CONT do.what about house
 bhò
 NEG.QINT

'What will you not be doing about the house?'

(13) Interrogative verb *ghě* under specific negation with *kà ... bhó*

Negative immediate perfective past

ð kà ŋ-gě'é nè ndóé bhò
 2SG P0.PF.NEG CS-do.what.? about house NEG.QINT

'What have you not done about the house?'

(14) Interrogative verb *ghě* under specific negation with *lè ... bhó*

Negative simple present potential

mbé ɔ *lè ghěe ne ndóé bhò*
 POT 2SG NEG do.what.IPF about house NEG.QINT

‘What can you not do about the house?’

The interrogative verb *ghě* can also be subjected to verbal derivation. It may derive a pluractional stem *ghěncà* (15)¹⁰ by the regular pluractional suffix *-ncà* that corresponds to the cognate repetitive-attenuative markers *-ti* in Yemba (Harro 1989) and *-tə* in Ghomala’ (Mba 1997).

(15) Interrogative verb *ghě* subjected to pluractional derivation

pù ghě-ncǎ¹¹ tsǎǎ pá cchá
 2PL do.what-PLUR place.NH.QINT 2PL pass.IMP

ŋ-kwá ndô ndì?-ǎ
 CS-enter house moment-PROX

‘What are you (guys) doing there? You, pass and enter the house now!’

Just like any other ordinary verb, the interrogative verb *ghě* can be nominalised by prefixation of the infinitive marker *nà-* as in (16a–b).

(16) Interrogative verb *ghě* under nominalisation

(a) *nà-ghě páŋ*
 INF-do.what be.good.QINT

‘Doing what is good?’

(b) *ò pé zhwó ná-ghě*
 2SG take.T0 thing-MED INF-do.what

‘What are you going to do with that thing that you take?’

The interrogative verb *ghě* may be used in an intransitive construction with an agent in subject position as in (2) above for the meaning ‘do what?’. It may also feature without any participant in an atransitive construction such as (1) with a dummy subject marker in which case it yields the meaning ‘what happen(ed/s)?’. Furthermore, it also

¹¹ The applicability of the pluractional extension to the interrogative verb to form *ghě-ncà* seems to present a recent development restricted to the juvenile register of the Mánjjwó (Bamendjou) variety.

accepts recipient objects encoded by applicative pronouns such as *zhzhí* ‘to X’ (17b) or beneficiary objects introduced by prepositions such as *mbbó* ‘to, for’ (17a) which has grammaticalized from the plural form of *ppó* ‘hand’.

(17) Interrogative verb *ghě* with indirect objects

(a) *nít* ‘*mán* ɔ, *á* *ghě* *mbbó-ǔ*
let.IMP child NH 3SG.P0.PF do.what to-2SG.QINT
‘Let that child alone! What has he/she done to you?’

(b) *ɔ* *ghě̀̀* *zhzhí* *ǎa*
2SG.P0.PF do.what.? APPL.3SG 3SG.CONT
n-dé-lǎ
CS-cry-cry.QINT
‘What have you done to him/her for him/her to be crying?’

The interrogative verb *ghě* ‘do what?’ can combine with other question markers, e.g. with markers of polar echo questions *léε* (18a) and *nè*¹² (18b, d), alternative question marker *ke* (18c) and question words *hó* ‘where’, *nji?* *kò* ‘when’ and *ndòŋ* *ŋgà* *kó* ‘how much’ (18d).

(18) Interrogative verb *ghě* with other question markers

(a) *ŋgà* *má* *ghě* *léε*
QT 1SG.P0 do.what QEQ
‘(Are you asking) what I have done?’

(b) *ŋgà* *mà* *lwǎ* *ŋ-gě* *nè*
QT 1SG P3 CS-do.what QES
‘What do you say I had done?’

(c) *ò* *ghǔ* *nít* *ke* *ò* *ghǔ* *ghě*
2SG F0 leave AQ 2SG F0 do.what
‘You are going to leave it or what are you going to do?’

(d) *ŋga* *ghě̀̀* *nji?_kó* *ndòŋ_ŋgà_kò*
QT.3SG do.what.P0.IPF when how.much

¹² The enclitic *léε* echoes a previous interrogative utterance, while *nè* echoes a previous statement. There is a third enclitic *á*, which echoes a previous order (imperative).

bhǎʔǎ hó nè
like.NH where QES

‘When and where has s/he done what that much?’

The evidence presented above clearly shows that the Ngəmba item *ghě* shares all properties of a verb, i.e. it inflects like a verb for tense, aspect, mood and polarity, it accommodates arguments and adjuncts, it can be nominalised and even derives a pluractional stem, so that it qualifies indeed as a full-fledged interrogative verb. More so, it is an established category with a special status in Ngəmba grammar that cannot simply be derived from properties resulting from the merger of an erstwhile verb *do* and the interrogative pronoun *kɔ* ‘what’. The special status of the interrogative verb *ghě* resides in the fact that it has the potential to trigger a unique set of applicative pronouns used for introducing a recipient role, presented in table 1 in contrast to major other sets of Ngəmba pronouns (taken from Mekamgoum 2022: 82).

Table 1. Ngəmba pronoun sets

	subject	direct object	PREP1	PREP2	applicative
1SG	<i>mə</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>mò</i>	<i>mmò</i>	<i>mmò</i>
2SG	<i>ɔ̃</i>	<i>ɔ́</i>	<i>ɔ̃</i>	<i>wwɔ̃</i>	<i>wwɔ̃</i>
3SG	<i>à/i°</i>	<i>í</i>	<i>í</i>	<i>zhzhí</i>	<i>zhzhí</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>pə</i>	<i>wə</i>	<i>pə</i>	<i>pə</i>	<i>wə</i>
1PL.EXCL	<i>pək°</i>	<i>wák</i>	<i>pək°</i>	<i>pək°</i>	<i>wák</i>
2PL	<i>pɛ°</i>	<i>wú</i>	<i>pɛ°</i>	<i>pɛ°</i>	<i>wú</i>
3PL	<i>wóp</i>	<i>wóp</i>	<i>pó(p)</i>	<i>pó(p)</i>	<i>wóp</i>

Apart from subject and direct object pronominals, there are specialised pronoun sets that are governed by certain prepositions, i.e. prepositions such as *mbbó* ‘to, for’, *mbè* ‘beside’, *tthwó* ‘on top of’, *né(t)* ‘on’. They require the set labelled PREP1, whereas the comitative preposition *pánà* and its free alternative forms *pwâ* and *pâ/pê* ‘with’ require the set labelled PREP2. What is remarkable about the applicative set in the last column of table (1) is that it only collocates directly with the interrogative verb as in (18b) and (20a). Combining it with any other verb than *ghě* ‘do what’ (20d) or as complement of any preposition (20c) results in ungrammaticality. As an alternative to the applicative pronoun, the recipient role may also be expressed via a

prepositional phrase headed by *mbbó* ‘to’ (20b). In that case the pronoun of set PREP1 has to be used instead of the applicative pronoun.

(20) Interrogative verb *ghě* in collocation with applicative pronoun

- (a) *má ghěè wwǎ*
 1SG.P0.PF do.what? APPL.2SG.QINT
 ‘What have I done to you?’
- (b) *má ghě mbbó ǎ*
 1SG.P0.PF do.what to PREP1.2SG.QINT
 ‘What have I done to you?’
- (c) **má ghě mbbó wwǎ*
 1SG.P0.PF do.what to APPL.2SG.QINT
 ‘What I have done to you?’
- (d) **má hò wwǎ zhwò ná*
 1SG.P0.PF do APPL.2SG thing QES
 ‘Have I done anything to you?’

The potential of *ghě* to select an exclusive set of applicative pronouns proves that the Ngəmba interrogative verb, while being both a verb in its own right and an interrogative word, also establishes a unique grammatical category in terms of the syntactic structure it triggers.

4 Comparative evidence in Bamileke

A cross-Bamileke comparison of coding strategies for the meaning ‘do what?’ allows for insights into micro-areal dynamics and the etymology of the Ngəmba interrogative verb, as could be gleaned from table 2 that presents the forms of ‘do what’ in contrast to the form of the verb ‘do’ and an interrogative item ‘what / how about?’ across Eastern Grassfields Bamileke closely related to Ngəmba.

Table 2. The Ngəmba interrogative verb and its cognates in Eastern Grassfields Bamileke¹³

¹³ Abbreviations used for language names in this table: Gh Ghəmálá’, F Fe’fe’, Nd Nda’nda’, Y Yemba, Ngo Ngomba, Ngə Ngemba.

	language	‘do’	‘what/how about?’	‘do what (about)?’	status
I	Gh-Bahouan, Gh-Baham, Gh-Banjoun	<i>ghà</i>	<i>lá</i>	<i>ghà lá</i>	analytic construction: DO + WHAT
	Gh-Batie	<i>ghhè</i>	<i>lá</i>	<i>ghhè lá</i>	
	F-Fotouni	<i>xhè</i>	<i>lé</i>	<i>xhè lé</i>	
	F-Babouantou	<i>xhú</i>	<i>(mà) lá</i>	<i>xhú mà lá</i>	
	II	Gh-Bafoussam	<i>ghà</i>	<i>(l)á</i>	
III	Y-Baleveng	<i>ghì</i>	-	<i>ghǎ < ghĩ = á</i>	transparent interrogative verb from fusion of DO + WHAT
	Ngo-Bamendjo	<i>gèt</i>	-	<i>gě < gè = á</i>	
	Nd-Bangou	<i>ghà</i>	<i>(mà) ndè?é</i>	<i>ghyě < ghà = á</i>	
	Nd-Batoufam	<i>ghà</i>	<i>(pá?) ‘lyé</i>	<i>ghě < ghà = á</i>	
IV	Ngə-Bamendjou	<i>hò</i>	-	<i>ghě < *ghè = á</i>	interrogative verb
	Ngə-Bamou-goum, Bameka, Bansoa, Bafounda	<i>xhò</i>	-	<i>ghyě < *ghè = á</i>	

Table 2 above arranges expressions of ‘do what’ for their semantic transparency, and figure 2 below plots their geographical distribution in the West region of Cameroon. The varieties grouped under (I) all show analytic constructions based on the combination of an interrogative item ‘what / how about?’ and a verb meaning ‘do’. Ghomálá’-Bafoussam, the only variety under (II), presents a stage of incipient fusion of the analytical construction, as marked by the optional omission of the initial consonant *l* in the interrogative item *lá*. The varieties assembled under (III) present an interrogative verb that clearly derives from a fusion of both components, i.e. the verb ‘do’ and the interrogative item *lá*, both items undergoing various types of vowel coalescence, triggered by erosion of intervening consonants, i.e. the initial consonant of the interrogative marker *lá* and the final consonant in the Ngomba-Bamenjo verb *gèt* ‘do’. Furthermore, the interrogative component can be seen to have undergone separate types of development outside its fusion with ‘do’, e.g. deviating formally by vowel raising to ϵ or e , attachment of additional markers such as the homorganic nasal *N-* that triggers a hardening of

the liquid to the plosive *d*, combination with additional items such as *mà* (Bangou) and *pá?* (Batoufam) or eventually dropping out altogether (Baleveng, Bamendjo). The Ngəmba varieties under (IV) are the only ones with an interrogative verb that cannot be derived from a fusion of two elements meaning ‘do’ and ‘what’ on a synchronic level, since the contemporary verb forms *hò* and *xhò* ‘do’ do not seem to be cognate to the verb forms *ghà* ~ *gèt* ‘do’ in the other varieties. Ngəmba rather seems to retain the initial consonant *gh* of the cognate in the interrogative verb, whereas the non-interrogative verb ‘do’ presents another root (*x*)*hò*, either a more archaic retention or an innovation.

The map in fig. 2 shows these four types roughly arranged along the north-south axis. The analytical constructions of group (I) form a south-western cluster marked by blue in fig. 2, while the spread zone of the dedicated interrogative verb of the Ngəmba group (IV), marked by green, is in the north – with the transitional type (II), manifest in Ghomálá’-Bafoussam and marked by red, in between. Two zones marked by yellow, one in the north-west and another one in the south east, can be identified for type (III), i.e. dedicated interrogative verbs that are synchronically transparent for their etymology.

5 A historical model for the emergence of interrogative verbs in Eastern Grassfields

In a historical perspective, the four coding types for the meaning ‘do what?’ identified in section 4 above can be interpreted as stages in a development from a plain interrogative verbal phrase to a fully lexicalised interrogative verb via condensation and fusion, as detailed in table 3.

Table 3. Eastern Grassfields Bamileke genesis of an interrogative verb

(a) <i>*gèt lá</i>	analytical construction	(Ngo-Bamendjo)
(b) <i>*gè-lá</i>	dental erosion	
(c) <i>*gà-lá</i>	vowel reduction	
(e) <i>*ghà-á</i>	liquid elision	Gh-Bafoussam
(f) <i>ghǎ ~ ghě ~ ghě</i>	vowel coalescence	Ngə-Bamendjou

Starting point is the analytical construction in (a) that simply consists of two separate components, i.e. a verb **gèt* ‘do’¹⁴ and an independent interrogative element **lá* ‘what, how’. Subsequent steps of reduction and fusion in (b–f) finally produce the interrogative verb *ghě* attested in Ngəmba. In more detail, dental erosion (b) deletes the terminal consonant in the verb, vowel reduction (c) and initial lenition (d) reducing the verb to the form *ghà*, attested in most of the modern forms. Only Ngombamba-Bamendjo retains the initial plosive, while the Fe’fe’ reflexes must have undergone additional devoicing. Elision of the initial liquid in the interrogative item *lá* (e) brings the remaining vowel *á* and the schwa of the reduced verb in direct contact, preparing the ground for the final step, i.e. coalescence (f) in forms such as *ghǎ* ~ *ghě* ~ *ghě*. The rising contour tone in the resulting vowel actually testifies to its origin in the fusion of two prior tone bearing units, low and high. These steps account for the form of the interrogative verb in all Ngəmba varieties. What makes the Ngəmba situation special, though, in contrast to the other varieties, is that the ordinary verb ‘do’ does not seem to be cognate to the item which got fused in the interrogative verb. Instead, Ngəmba innovated or retained another item *hò* or *xhò* which cannot, by Ngəmba internal criteria, be linked etymologically to the interrogative verb.

6 Conclusion

Interrogative verbs, such as Ngəmba *ghě/ghyě*, are universally quite rare. Hagège 2008 presents a total of 28 cases and only slightly more (10%) of Idiatov and van der Auwera’s (2004) sample of 350 languages across the world have interrogative verbs. One of the reasons for their universal rarity may be their non-compositional structure, i.e. it seems uneconomical to condense the notions of DO and WHAT

¹⁴ In the absence of robust Proto-Eastern Grassfields reconstructions for the meaning ‘do’ to rely on, we interpret the most elaborate form synchronically attested, i.e. the Bamendjo reflex *gèt*, as the most archaic one on which the preliminary model in table 2 is based. Moreover, this form actually suggests an etymological link to Proto-Bantu **gèd* ‘try’.

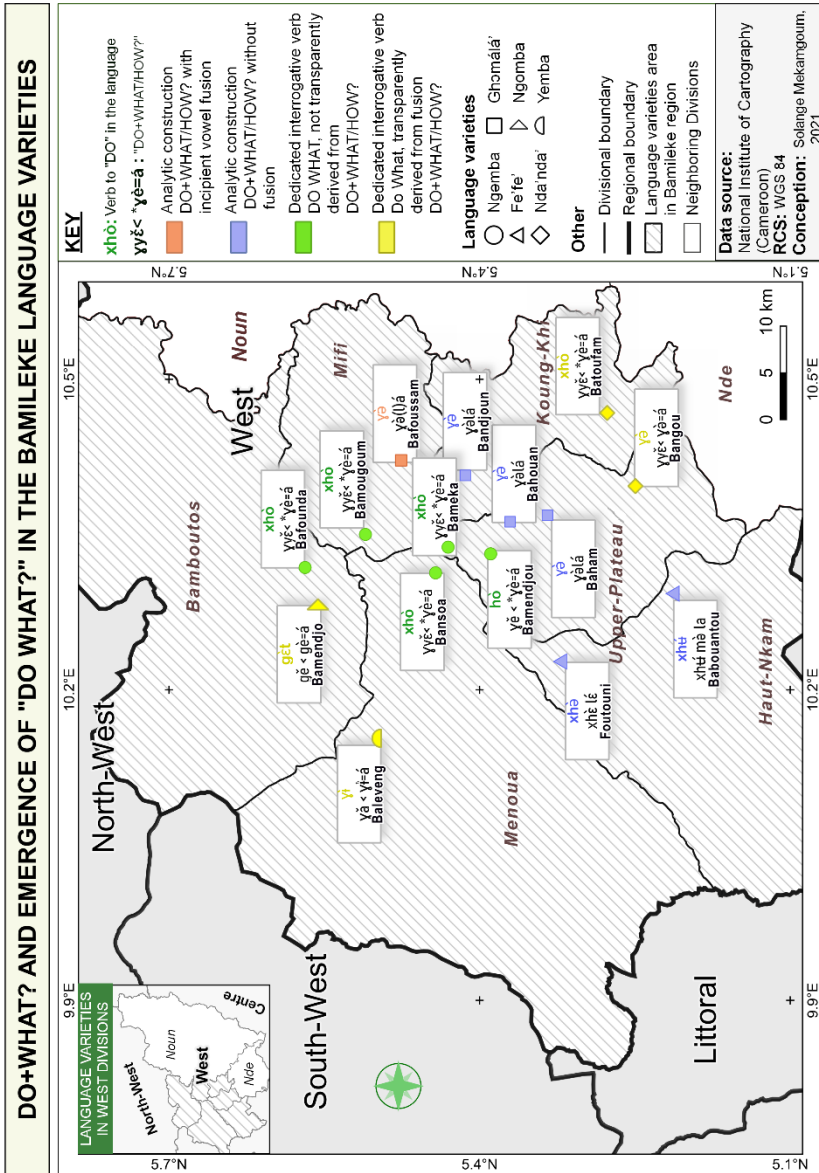


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the interrogative verb and its equivalents

“in a single unanalysable unit, instead of using a succession of two very frequent elements, meaning, respectively, ‘do’ and ‘what’” (Hagège 2008: 30).

While Hagège (2008: 8) seems to assume an origin of interrogative verbs in a process of grammaticalization from two distinct elements, he does not provide a clear case in point. The present contribution attempts to remedy this situation by a case study that allows for fleshing out a historical model that accounts for the rise of interrogative verbs. The Ngəmba evidence shows that an interrogative verb such as *ghě* ‘do what?’ may actually arise from an erstwhile analytical construction by contraction and fusion of a prior independent action verb meaning ‘do’ and an interrogative complement meaning ‘what’. Comparative evidence from neighbouring Eastern Grassfields Bamileke varieties attest to various intermediary stages of reduction and coalescence of both components in the course of the emergence of a single synthetic interrogative verb.

In generalizing on typological properties of interrogative verbs and their possible socio-historical motivations, Hagège 2008 points out that most languages with interrogative verbs had a late exposure to contact with European colonial languages and observes a trend for them to retain complex derivational morphology. While Ngəmba clearly belongs to the group of languages that have been in contact with European colonial languages relatively late, i.e. definitely not before the 17th century, it is certainly not a language that preserves “complex and relatively conservative derivational and/or compositional morphology” (Hagège 2008: 36). As member of the Ghomala’ cluster of Bamileke Eastern Grassfields it has rather gone a long way to reduce morphological complexities of inherited noun class and verbal derivational systems (Hyman & Voeltz 1971, Hyman, Voeltz & Tchokokam 1970, Hyman 2017, 2018). In sum, the Ngəmba case study confirms Hagège’s structural source model for interrogative verbs, while it provides counterevidence for his assumptions about the sociohistorical conditions of their emergence.

Abbreviations

APPL applicative, AQ alternative question, CONT continuative, CS consecutive, DU dual, EXCL exclusive, F0 immediate future, F1 hodiernal future, F2 crasternal future, F3 distant future, FRQ frequentative, HAB habitual, IMP

imperative, INCL inclusive, INF infinitive, IPF imperfective, LOC locative, NH near hearer demonstrative, NEG negative, O object, P0 immediate past, P1 hodiernal past, P2 hesternal past, P3 distant past, PF perfective, PL plural, PLUR pluractional, POT potential, PROX near speaker-proximal demonstrative, QEQ question marker echoing question, QES question marker echoing statement, QINT question intonation, QT quotative, S subject, SG singular

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