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# Atlantic noun class systems: a typological approach

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims at giving a typological overview of the noun class systems found in two major groups of Atlantic languages. In addition to the already available literature,<sup>1</sup> it is based on investigation of the noun class systems of individual languages carried out by participants in the collaborative project ‘Sénélangues’ on the languages of Senegal:<sup>2</sup> Balant Ganja (Séckou Biaye and Denis Creissels), Basari (Loïc Perrin), Bayot (Mbacké Diagne), Bedik (Adjaratou Sall), Biafada (Alain-Christian Bassène), Bijogo (Guillaume Ségerer), Joola Banjal (Alain-Christian Bassène), Joola Keerak (Guillaume Ségerer), Kobiana (Sylvie Nougulier-Voisin), Laalaa (alias Lehar) (El Hadji Dièye), Manjaku (Guillaume Ségerer), Djifanghor Nyun (Nicolas Quint), Nyamone Nyun (alias Guñaamolo) (Sokhna Bao-Diop), Pepel (Dame Ndao), Sereer (Marie Renaudier), and Wolof (Konstantin Pozdniakov and Stéphane Robert).

## 2. THE LANGUAGES AND THEIR GENETIC AFFILIATION

The opinion that prevails now among specialists is that the Atlantic family as it was proposed by Greenberg is not a genetically valid grouping within Niger-Congo, but rather an areal grouping of two or more independent branches of Niger-Congo. According to Pozdniakov (2012), the Atlantic languages investigated within the Sénélangues project belong to two major groups of Atlantic languages, for which I will simply use the labels *Atlantic 1* and *Atlantic 2*.<sup>3</sup> All the languages belonging to these two groups have noun class systems, with

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, unless otherwise indicated, the languages involved in the Sénélangues project are quoted from papers written by participants in the project that will be published in a volume on Atlantic noun class systems edited by Konstantin Pozdniakov and myself. In addition to the descriptions elaborated within the Sénélangues project, there is abundant documentation on the noun class system of Fula – see in particular Arnott (1970), McIntosh (1984), Paradis (1992), Breedveld (1995). Several Joola languages are also relatively well documented – see in particular Bassène (2007) and Sagna (2008) on Joola Banjal, Sambou (2007) on Joola Karon, Sapir (1965) on Joola Fooñi. The following sources provide more or less detailed information on the noun class systems of some other languages: Cobbinah (2013) on the Gubéeher variety of Nyun, Lopis-Sylla (2010a & 2010b) on Noon (Cangin), Ferry (1991) and Ferry & Pozdniakov (2001) on Tenda languages, Sachot (1996) on Konyagi (Tenda), Ducos (1971) on Jaad, Trifkovic (1969) on Mankanya, Doneux (1984) on Balant Kentohe, Ségerer (2002) on Bijogo.

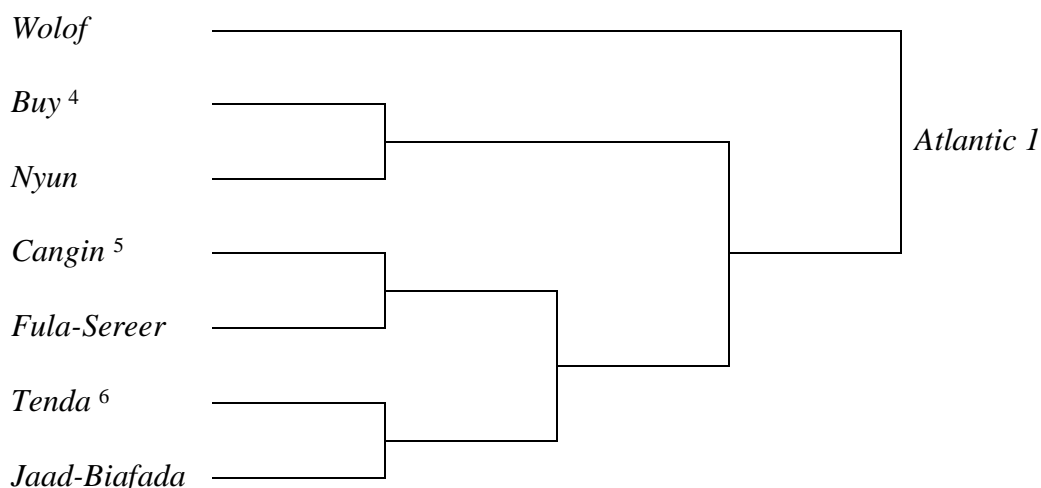
<sup>2</sup> This project (ANR-09-BLAN-0326) has been funded with support from the French National Research Agency (ANR).

<sup>3</sup> I leave open the question of the genetic relationships that may exist between Atlantic 1 and Atlantic 2, or between these two groups and other languages traditionally included in the Atlantic family (for example, between Atlantic 2 and Nalu, Baga Fore, and Baga Mboteni, as proposed by Pozdniakov (2012)).

the only exception of two of the five Cangin languages: Palor and Ndut. The internal structure of Atlantic 1 and Atlantic 2 can be schematized as follows:

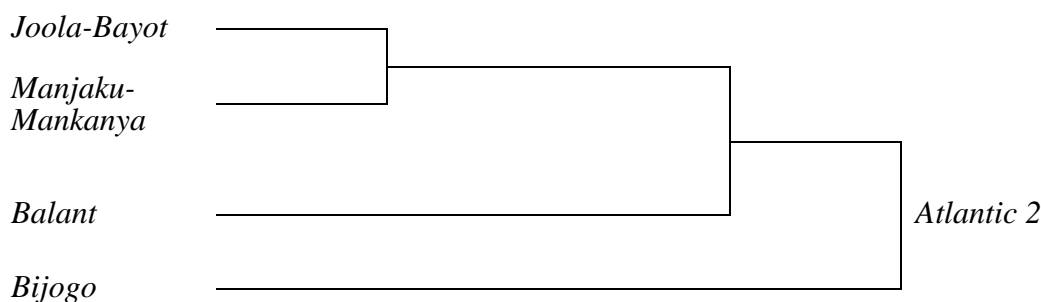
**Figure 1**

Genetic relationships between Atlantic 1 languages (Pozdniakov 2012)



**Figure 2**

Genetic relationships between Atlantic 2 languages (Pozdniakov 2012)



### 3. ATLANTIC NOUN CLASS SYSTEMS AS TYPICAL NIGER-CONGO NOUN CLASS SYSTEMS

#### 3.1. Niger-Congo noun class systems as gender systems

As argued by Corbett (1991), Niger-Congo noun class systems are gender systems, in which noun forms divide into classes reflected in agreement mechanisms that cannot be analyzed as triggered by independently expressed

<sup>4</sup> Kobiana, kasanga.

<sup>5</sup> Noon, Laalaa (alias Lehar), Saafen, Ndut, Palor.

<sup>6</sup> Basari, Bedik, Konyagi (alias Mey).

grammatical features such as number or case. The agreement mechanisms that reflect the division of nouns into classes operate in the combination of head nouns with various types of modifiers, in the relationship between pronouns and their antecedents, and in the indexation of arguments on verbs.

### 3.2. Agreement properties of nouns and class markers attached to noun forms in Niger-Congo noun class systems

In typical Niger-Congo noun class systems, nouns include an obligatory marker correlated to their behavior as controllers of agreement. This class membership marker (henceforth CMM) is often (but not always) similar to the corresponding class agreement markers (henceforth CAMs), as illustrated by ex. (1).<sup>7</sup>

(1) Balant Ganja<sup>8</sup>

- |     |                   |                 |                |     |                              |
|-----|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----|------------------------------|
| (a) | <u>à</u> -nínà    | <u>à</u> -wóódl | <u>h</u> -ómbò | (b) | <u>À</u> -góbù.              |
|     | CLha-woman        | CLha-one        | CLha-DEM       |     | CLha-fall                    |
|     | ‘this only woman’ |                 |                |     | ‘She fell down (the woman).’ |
|     |                   |                 |                |     |                              |
| (c) | <u>b</u> -tá      | <u>ɔ</u> -óódl  | <u>b</u> -ómbò | (d) | <u>B</u> -góbù.              |
|     | CLb-arbre         | CLb-one         | CLb-DEM        |     | CLb-fall                     |
|     | ‘this only tree’  |                 |                |     | ‘It fell down (the tree).’   |

Among Atlantic 1 and Atlantic 2 languages, Fula has CMMs suffixed to nouns, whereas the CMMs are prefixed in all the other languages.

There is not always a one-to-one relationship between the CMMs and the agreement properties of nouns: nouns showing the same CMM may divide into two or more agreement classes, and nouns belonging to the same agreement class may divide into two or more subsets with respect to their CMMs, as illustrated by the agreement of the definite article with nouns in Sereer – ex. (2).

<sup>7</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are CAM = class agreement marker, CL = noun class, CMM = class membership marker, CMPL = completive, DEF = definite, DEM = demonstrative, HAB = habitual ID = identification marker, INCL = inclusive, PL = plural, PRF = perfect, REL = relativizer, SG = singular.

<sup>8</sup> In the Balant examples, underlining signals vowels that have been modified by a liaison process operating at word boundaries.

- (2) Seerer (Sine variety) : 7 possible CMMs for nouns, 11 possible CAMs for the definite article *CL-e*, and 15 possible combinations

CL-noun	CL-DEF		CL-noun	CL-DEF	
o-kiin	ox-e	'person'	fo-soow	ol-e	'sour milk'
o-ngoor	onq-e	'child'	rew	w-e	'women'
o-fox	ol-e	'dog'	pis	k-e	'horses'
a-cek	al-e	'hen'	a-cek	ak-e	'hens'
japil	f-e	'knife'	xa-fox	ax-e	'dogs'
bil	l-e	'stone'	fo-mbaal	n-e	'lambs'
lip	n-e	'fish'	pa-niig	k-e	'elephants'
fa-noox	f-e	'crocodile'			

In several Atlantic 1 languages (Fula, Sereer, Kobiana, Tenda languages, Biafada), class marking on nouns and class agreement marking involve not only affixes, but also stem-initial alternations, as in ex. (3).<sup>9</sup>

- (3) Sereer (Mar Lodj variety)

go-	faam	'donkey'
a-	paam	'donkeys'
ga-	mbaam	'big donkey'

### 3.3. Class membership marker inventories and agreement pattern inventories in Niger-Congo noun class systems

In Niger-Congo noun class systems, the number of possible CMMs and of possible agreement patterns is generally comprised between 10 and 20, but systems with a number of CMMs or agreement classes close to 30 are not exceptional. Among Atlantic languages, particularly large inventories (more than 25) are found in Fula, Nyun, Kobiana, and Biafada, whereas relatively small inventories (less than 10) are found in Wolof, Cangin, Jaad, and Balant.

### 3.4. Noun classes and number

In most Niger-Congo languages with noun class systems, as illustrated by ex. (4), number is not expressed independently. The number value of noun forms is carried by their class marker, and no dedicated number marker can be isolated.

<sup>9</sup> Stem-initial alternations contributing to the expression of class distinctions in Atlantic languages typically involve a division of consonants into three series, do not affect the place of articulation of the stem-initial consonant, and operate on features such as  $\pm$ stop,  $\pm$ fortis, or  $\pm$ prenasalized.

(4) Balant Ganja

(a) <b>ǎ-nínà</b> <b>ǎ-mṵɔn</b> CLha-woman CLha-black 'dark-skinned woman'	pl. <b>bi-nínì</b> <b>bì-mṵɔn</b> CLbi-woman CLbi-black 'dark-skinned women'
(b) <b>b-sùlì</b> <b>ɔb-háamè</b> CLb-mortar CLb-new 'new mortar'	pl. <b>Ø-sùlì</b> <b>Ø-háamè</b> CLu-mortar CLu-new 'new mortars'

Moreover, as illustrated by ex. (5), there is rarely a one-to-one relationship between singular classes and plural classes.

(5) Balant Ganja

(a) <b>gi-fúnà</b> 'nose'      (class GI)	pl. <b>Ø-fúnà</b> (class U)
(b) <b>gì-ló</b> 'ear'      (class GI)	pl. <b>g-ló</b> (class G)
(c) <b>b-tá</b> 'tree'      (class B)	pl. <b>Ø-tá</b> (class U)
(d) <b>b-wíl</b> 'cloth'      (class B)	pl. <b>g-wíl</b> (class G)

3.5. Human classes in Niger-Congo noun class systems

Niger-Congo noun-class systems typically include a singular-plural class pairing showing the following characteristics: (a) all of the nouns that fall into this pair of classes denote human beings, (b) most nouns denoting humans are found in this pair of classes, and (c) personal names do not show CMMs, but as agreement controllers they behave like common nouns belonging to this pair of classes. Classes showing these properties are commonly referred to as human singular class and human plural class.

4. THE RANGE OF CLASS AGREEMENT IN ATLANTIC LANGUAGES

In Atlantic 1 and Atlantic 2 languages, the demonstratives, the numeral 'one', the adjectives, and the interrogative determiner ('which?') are the noun modifiers most commonly treated as class agreement targets. As regards argument indexation on verbs, Balant – ex. (6) – illustrates a paradigm of subject indexes expressing class distinctions in the third person. However, in some other languages, as illustrated by Wolof – ex. (7), no class distinction is reflected in the subject indexes.

(6) Balant

(a) <b>ń-góbù</b>	1SG-fall	‘I fell down.’
(b) <b>bá-góbù</b>	1PL-fall	‘We (excl.) fell down.’
(c) <b>bán-góbù</b>	INCL-fall	‘We (incl.) fell down.’
(d) <b>ú-góbù</b>	2SG-fall	‘You (sg.) fell down.’
(e) <b>bà-góbù</b>	2PL-fall	‘You fell (pl.) down.’
(f) <b>à-góbù</b>	CLha-fall	‘He/she/it (class HA) fell down.’
(g) <b>b-góbù</b>	CLb-fall	‘It (class B) fell down.’
(h) <b>gi-góbù</b>	CLgi-fall	‘It (class GI) fell down.’
(i) <b>f-góbù</b>	CLf-fall	‘It (class F) fell down.’
(j) <b>ù-góbù</b>	CLu-fall	‘It (class U) fell down, they (class U) fell down.’
(k) <b>bi-góbù</b>	CLbi-fall	‘They (class BI) fell down.’
(l) <b>g-góbù</b>	CLg-fall	‘They (class G) fell down.’

(7) Wolof

(a) <b>Daanu naa.</b>	fall PRF.1SG	‘I fell down.’
(b) <b>Daanu nanu.</b>	fall PRF.1PL	‘We fell down.’
(c) <b>Daanu nga.</b>	fall PRF.2SG	‘You (sg.) fell down.’
(d) <b>Daanu ngeen.</b>	fall PRF.2PL	‘You (pl.) fell down.’
(e) <b>Daanu na.</b>	fall PRF.3SG	‘He/she/it fell down.’ <sup>10</sup>
(f) <b>Daanu nañu.</b>	fall PRF.3PL	‘They fell down.’ <sup>11</sup>

## 5. CLASS MEMBERSHIP MARKERS ON NOUNS IN ATLANTIC LANGUAGES

The general rule among the Atlantic languages that have noun class systems is that nouns include an overt class marker reflecting their class membership, but Wolof constitutes a well-known exception to this rule, and Laalaa is an interesting case of a noun class system in which nouns belonging to some classes are overtly marked for class, whereas those belonging to some other classes are not.

## 6. THE EMERGENCE OF NUMBER MARKING INDEPENDENT FROM CLASS MARKING IN ATLANTIC LANGUAGES

In Nyun languages and in Biafada, nouns divide into two subsets with respect to the expression of number: a subset of nouns that follow the canonical Niger-Congo pattern according to which number is expressed via class alternations in which no independent number marking can be isolated, and a subset of nouns whose plural is formed via the addition of a dedicated plural marker.

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<sup>10</sup> The understood subject of **daanu na** may belong to any of the eight singular classes: K (**nit k-i** ‘the person’), B (**xaj b-i** ‘the dog’), W (**fas w-i** ‘the horse’), X (**xar m-i** ‘the sheep’), G (**kuddu g-i** ‘the spoon’), J (**jigéen j-i** ‘the woman’), L (**cin l-i** ‘the pot’), **xorom s-i** ‘the salt’ (class S).

<sup>11</sup> The understood subject of **daanu nañu** may belong to any of the two plural classes: Ñ (**nit ñ-i** ‘the people’) or Y (**xaj y-i** ‘the dogs’, **fas y-i** ‘the horses’, etc.).

As illustrated by ex. (8) and (9), the general rule for the nouns belonging to this second subset is that, in the plural, they show the same class prefix as in the singular and trigger the same class agreement, but in addition to that, they trigger plural agreement with agreement markers identical to the plural marker.

(8) Nyun Guñaamolo

- |     |                 |                 |     |                    |                   |
|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-----|--------------------|-------------------|
| (a) | <b>ka-taama</b> | <b>kɛ-denne</b> | (b) | <b>ka-taama-aŋ</b> | <b>kɛ-denn-eŋ</b> |
|     | CLka-river      | CLka-big        |     | CLka-river-PL      | CLka-big-PL       |
|     | ‘big river’     |                 |     | ‘big rivers’       |                   |

(9) Biafada

- |     |                  |                 |               |     |                    |                    |                  |
|-----|------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| (a) | <b>sá-dɛ</b>     | <b>sá-təbbá</b> | <b>sa-ggɛ</b> | (b) | <b>ba-sá-dɛ</b>    | <b>ba-sá-təbbá</b> | <b>ba-sa-ggɛ</b> |
|     | CLsa-house       | CLsa-big        | CLsa-DEM      |     | PL-CLsa-house      | PL-CLsa-big        | PL-CLsa-DEM      |
|     | ‘this big house’ |                 |               |     | ‘these big houses’ |                    |                  |

Interestingly, in Nyun languages, the dedicated plural marker is a suffix also used with personal names as an associative plural marker, as in **Asan-aŋ** ‘Assane and other people associated with him’, and comparative evidence confirms that, at least in Nyun, the emergence of number marking independent from class marking results from the reanalysis of an associative plural marker.

## 7. HUMAN CLASSES IN ATLANTIC LANGUAGES

Not all Atlantic languages have a pair of classes meeting the criteria posited in section 3.5 above for identifying human classes. For example, in Wolof, the noun **nit** ‘human being’ belongs to the class pairing K—Ñ, and noun modifiers marked for class K or Ñ can be used as pronouns referring to persons (**k-an?** ‘who?’, **k-enn** ‘somebody’, **k-eneen** ‘somebody else’, **k-épp** ‘everybody’, etc.). However, **nit** is the only member of this class pairing, and nouns denoting humans can be found in almost all the other class pairings. Moreover, personal pronouns and personal names trigger class M agreement, which is somewhat unexpected, since very few of the common nouns belonging to this class denote humans. In such a system, it is clearly not possible to identify a single class pairing as having an exclusive relationship with the feature [human].

## 8. MORPHOLOGICAL AGREEMENT AND SEMANTIC AGREEMENT

### 8.1. Semantic agreement triggered by humanness/animacy

As a rule, in the Niger-Congo languages that have otherwise prototypical noun class systems, with overt CMMs on nouns and two classes that can be identified as ‘human singular’ and ‘human plural’, a minority of common nouns denoting humans show CMMs other than those of the human classes. In some languages, the behavior of such nouns in agreement mechanisms is fully consistent with their



CMMs (morphological agreement), but in some other languages, their agreement properties are partially or entirely identical to those of nouns showing the CMMs typically found with human nouns (semantic agreement). In such cases, the tendency towards selecting semantic rather than morphological agreement is generally stronger in argument indexation and in the agreement of pronouns with their antecedents than in head-modifier agreement within noun phrases. In some languages, a similar behavior is also found with nouns denoting non-human animates: their CMMs are not those typically found on human nouns, but as agreement controllers, they partially behave like human nouns.

In Joola Banjal (Bassène (2012), Sagna (2013)), semantic agreement is only found with nouns denoting humans that do not show the class prefixes typical for human nouns. In Balant Ganja, semantic agreement is also found with all of the nouns referring to non-human animates. In this language, in the singular, the nouns denoting non-human animates may show the prefix of the singular human class or the prefix of a non-human class, in the plural, all of them show prefixes of non-human classes, but the agreement properties of those showing the human prefix *à-* in the singular are partially those of the non-human class U, and the agreement properties of those showing non-human prefixes are partially those of the human classes HA (singular) and BI (plural). Interestingly, in Balant Ganja, nouns denoting mechanisms such as ‘watch’, ‘car’, or ‘bicycle’ show the same hybrid agreement patterns as nouns denoting animals.

### 8.2. *Semantic agreement triggered by the referential status of nouns*

In Joola languages and Bijogo, genericity in the sense of reference to kinds is reflected in class agreement between subject nouns and subject indexes.

The way Bijogo uses class agreement to express generic reference is reminiscent of the French construction illustrated by *Les chiens, ça aboie* ‘Dogs bark’ (litt. The dogs it barks’), where a plural masculine noun is resumed by the neuter pronoun *ça*, typically used to carry vague reference. In Bijogo, the class used to carry vague reference is class *ŊO*, which includes in particular the noun *ŋoo* ‘thing’ as one of its members, and one of the possible functions of the subject index of class *ŊO* is to indicate that a noun belonging to another class and fulfilling the subject function must not be understood as referring to an individual, but to a kind – ex. (10).

(10) Bijogo (Ségerer 2002: 109 and pers. com.)

- (a) **Kɔ-kpɛñ**                      **kɔ-tɔkɔŋ.**  
 CLko-silk\_cotton\_tree CLko.CMPL-be\_tall  
 ‘The silk cotton tree is tall.’ (deictic or anaphoric reference to an individual).
- (b) **Kɔ-kpɛñ**                      **ŋɔ-tɔkɔŋ.**  
 CLko-silk\_cotton\_tree CLŋo.CMPL-be\_tall  
 ‘Silk cotton trees are tall.’ (reference to kind)

The way Joola languages use class agreement to specify that a noun in subject function refers to a kind rather than to an individual is more surprising. For example, in Joola Banjal, when singular nouns that do not denote humans are used in subject function and do not carry generic reference, they can only be indexed by means of the index corresponding to their CMM. When they carry generic reference, it is still possible to have morphological agreement (in which case there is no overt indication pointing to generic reference), but it is also possible to cross-reference them by the human singular index, as in ex. (11). This deviation from morphological agreement can only be interpreted as indicating that the subject noun does not refer to an individual, but to a kind, since in Joola Banjal, non-human nouns normally follow morphological agreement.

(11) Joola Banjal

**Fu-kun            undɪ            a-bugɔr            ga-pɔrɔk.**  
 CL<sub>fu</sub>-fish<sub>sp</sub> HAB.NEG CL<sub>a</sub>-beget CL<sub>ga</sub>-fish<sub>sp</sub>  
 ‘*Fúkun* fishes do not beget *gaporok* fishes.’ → ‘Children are what they are made.’

## 9. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the variation found in the noun class systems of the languages belonging to the Atlantic 1 and Atlantic 2 groups shows that the typological diversity is greater among the noun class systems of Atlantic 1 languages than among those of Atlantic 2 languages, and that, as a rule, the noun class systems of Atlantic 2 languages stand closer to the Niger-Congo prototype than those of Atlantic 1 languages. Several deviations from the prototype that are relatively common among Atlantic 1 languages are not found among Atlantic 2 languages:

- Argument indexation mechanisms that do not reflect class distinctions are very common among Atlantic 1 languages, whereas all Atlantic 2 languages have argument indexation systems sensitive to class distinctions.
- Noun class systems in which (part of) nouns are not overtly marked for class are only found in two subgroups of Atlantic 1 (Wolof and Cangin).
- Noun class systems dissociating number marking from class marking are only found in three subgroups of Atlantic 1 (Buy, Nyun, and Jaad-Biafada).
- Noun class systems in which it is not possible to unambiguously identify two classes as ‘human singular’ and ‘human plural’ are only found among Atlantic 1 languages.

Two additional features reinforce the typological contrast between the noun class systems of these two groups of Atlantic languages:

- Systems in which stem-initial alternations participate in class marking and class agreement are very common among Atlantic 1 languages, but are not found among Atlantic 2 languages.

- Semantic agreement triggered by humanness/animacy is more common among Atlantic 2 languages than among Atlantic 1 languages, and semantic agreement triggered by the referential status of nouns has only been found in Atlantic 2 languages.

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