Creissels, Denis & Konstantin Pozdniakov (eds.). 2015. *Les classes nominales dans les langues atlantiques*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

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Book reviews

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This volume edited by Denis Creissels and Konstantin Pozdniakov comprises 16 papers dealing with noun class systems in Atlantic languages (Niger-Congo phylum). It is part of the typological results of five years of collaborative work within the project Sénélangues (2009–2014).[1] The aim of this project was to document and describe in-depth little or undescribed Senegalese languages of which most belong to the Atlantic branch. The importance of this project is reflected in the selection of the languages: of the 25 languages that were covered by the researchers, about 40% are considered endangered. Since most of these languages have been integrated into the volume under discussion, this one does not only make a major contribution to the typology of Atlantic languages, but it also conduces to the reconstruction of the noun class system of Proto-Atlantic.

The foremost goal of this collection is to provide a synchronic description of the noun class systems in selected Atlantic languages. In total, it covers fourteen single languages and one dialect continuum. These very detailed and accurate descriptions are completed by one contribution highlighting variations and typological traits of different noun class systems within Atlantic, as well as by one paper presenting a diachronic analysis of noun classes in this branch. There are no articles dealing with a diachronic study of the noun class system within a single language. However, since many of the languages under investigation have received only little or no attention in the past, any diachronic approach might be secondary at the moment.

Apart from the fact that this volume accounts for the understanding of poorly documented languages within Atlantic, it essentially closes an important gap in the documentation of this particular aspect of this branch. For the first time, the noun class systems of a range of

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1 The project "Sénélangues : documentation, description et typologie des langues du Sénégal" included the institutions LLACAN and DDL of the CNRS, as well as the participation of Sorosoro. It has been supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR-09-BLAN-0326). http://senelangues.huma-num.fr/.

smaller and bigger Atlantic languages are comprehensively examined and presented in a way that allows a synchronic comparison of single aspects. Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that the vast majority of papers on single languages use first hand data (except for one). Some of the data might not be new; however, they have never been presented in such rigour and detail, as the editors point out in the preface.

The preface is followed by the 16 papers briefly mentioned above. In the first contribution, Denis Creissels gives a thorough synchronic typological overview of noun class systems within Atlantic. After some definitions and terminological remarks, the author takes a closer look at variation with respect to agreement with depending elements, class marking on nouns, class alternation, verbal nouns, reduction processes, and the semantic content of classes. The second paper by Konstantin Pozdniakov deals with the challenging enterprise of a diachronic analysis and the reconstruction of the systems within this branch of Niger-Congo. Pozdniakov discusses specific phenomena in single languages and sub-branches in impressive detail, and relates them to a possible reconstruction thereof.[2] These two global papers are followed by the descriptions of single languages (or dialect continua): Keerak/Joola of Kabrousse (Guillaume Segerer), Bayot Kugere (Mbacké Diagne), the Joola dialect continuum (Alain-Christian Bassène), Manjaku (Guillaume Segerer), Balant Ganja (Séckou Biaye & Denis Creissels), Palor and Ndut (Anna Marie Diagne), Laalaa/Léhar (El Hadji Dieye), Kobiana (Sylvie Voisin), Nyun Gunyamolo (Sokhna Bao Diop), Nyun of Djifanghor (Nicolas Quint), Biafada (Alain-Christian Bassène), Sereer (Marie Renaudier), Basari (Loïc-Michel Perrin), and Wolof (Konstantin Pozdniakov & Stéphane Robert), in that order. Two papers are noteworthy since they diverge from the simple description of noun class systems. Firstly, the discussion of Palor and Ndut (Diagne) shows that despite the possible presence of nominal affixes there are no agreement classes being associated with these affixes. Thus, speaking of noun classes in these two languages does not seem to be justified (cf. Creissels, p. 49). Secondly, the paper on the Joola dialect continuum (Bassène) focuses on

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2   The first two papers by Creissels and Pozdniakov define the two major branches within Atlantic as *Atlantique-nord* and *Atlantique-centre*. Newest research based on lexicostatistics by Segerer (2016), who uses the labels *North* and *Bak* instead, proposes a slightly different internal classification.

the relation between generic nouns and agreement rather than on a global description of its noun class system.

The single languages that are discussed in this volume are from almost all subgroups of Atlantic. About one third of these languages are spoken uniquely in Senegal, while about two thirds additionally spread onto the territories of the neighbouring countries Guinea-Bissau, Mauretania, and Gambia. The only exception is Biafada which is spoken exclusively in Guinea-Bissau. When it comes to the number of speakers, this one ranges from 200 (Nyun of Djifanghor) to over 5 million (Wolof). Although some languages have a couple of thousands of speakers, they are of course not necessarily well documented. Therefore, I truly welcome the decision to concentrate on such poorly or undocumented languages in this volume in the first place. Not only do these data represent new information on these languages, they also contribute to a better understanding of the controversial group of Atlantic on a more global level. In this respect, the choice of leaving apart Senegal's second largest language Pulaar which is – compared to other languages – already well documented, is beyond doubt appropriate.[3] Furthermore, the languages that are part of this volume display different degrees of complexity of noun class systems. While some languages have no agreement classes at all (Palor and Ndut), some have ten or less agreement classes (Balant Ganja, Laalaa, Wolof) and some even 26 or more (Biafada, Kobiana, Nyun). This wide range gives a very good impression of the diversity of systems within the branch.

The structure of the individual papers has not been stipulated by the editors. The authors were thus free to organise and present their data in a way that they find suitable for the system of the language under discussion. On the one hand, this approach allows the highlighting of specific phenomena that might be present in one language but not necessarily in another, resulting in considerable variation of length of the papers (from Joola on 11 pages to Wolof on 84 pages). On the other hand, a uniform "skeleton" of the papers would help the reader to compare different languages more easily.

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3 Pulaar is the Senegalese variety of the macrolanguage Fula. Fula – which is spoken in 18 countries on the continent being thus the most widespread language in Africa – can be split into ten major dialects (cf. Harrison 2003). The noun class systems of particular varieties, including Pulaar, are well described in numerous contributions (e.g. Arnott 1970, Breedveld 1995, Leger 1998, Sylla 1982).

However, the labelling of the noun classes was standardised in that numbers were excluded and letters – mostly reflecting noun prefixes or affixes on agreement targets – have been used instead. This is a highly useful strategy because any identical number would suggest cognacy of classes, especially within one volume. Since the reconstruction of the noun class system of Proto-Atlantic still faces different serious problems in accounting for synchronic phenomena in individual languages, indeed, class numbers do not seem to be an advantageous tool.

In my final remarks, I shall address some issues related to the terminology used in this volume. Primarily, the term "noun class systems" has been coined by Africanists who basically define complex systems of nominal classification. In other languages outside of Africa the term "gender systems" is much more common. In general, the papers in this volume deal with three concepts related to gender: (1) class markers – usually affixes – that indicate the (head) noun class on the respective (head) noun (*marqueurs nominaux de classe* or *affixes nominaux*), (2) agreement classes that define agreement between the (head) noun and different types of targets, e.g. determiners and pronouns (*schèmes d'accord* or simply *accord*), and (3) the singular-plural pairings of nouns marked by an affix (*appariements*). Although the first paper contributed by Denis Creissels provides transparent definitions of these different concepts, there is not always a clear-cut use of these terms throughout the volume. At numerous places, it remains ambiguous whether an author defines noun class by the noun affixes or whether he or she rather relates to agreement that the nouns establish. Also, the term *appariement* is not used homogeneously. Sometimes it refers to the singular-plural pairing of noun affixes and sometimes to the singular-plural pairing of agreement classes. The inclusion of some terminological remarks at the beginning of each article, as done by Nicolas Quint on Nyun of Djifanghor, could have considerably increased the transparency in this respect. Last but not least, more frequent cross-reference between articles and/or a summarising paper at the end of the volume would have nicely rounded off this great contribution to the understanding of Atlantic languages.

In conclusion, this volume represents an overall valuable input to the description of Atlantic languages in general and to nominal classification therein in particular. It not only covers little or undocu-

mented languages, but also provides detailed studies of noun classes of these languages, including class marking on nouns and agreement targets, the semantic content of classes, and in some cases also the classification of loan words, verbal nouns, and generic nouns. This, together with the two synchronic and diachronic descriptions provided by the first two contributions, makes the current volume a significant resource for any further research on this topic.

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