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# A Comparative Study of Nominal Pronoun Marking Systems in Kordofanian Languages of the Niger-Congo Language Family

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### Abstract

This article explores the nominal pronoun marking systems in Kordofanian languages, which are a branch of the Niger-Congo language family predominantly spoken in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. Kordofanian languages exhibit unique grammatical features, including noun classification systems and the avoidance of pronouns in favor of affixes that mark various elements in a clause. While there is some controversy regarding the inclusion of Kordofanian within the broader Niger-Congo family, evidence suggests that they are indeed a branch of this language family. The article delves into the classification and characteristics of Kordofanian languages, highlighting the three main branches: Lafofa, Talodi, Kadu and Heiban. It discusses the use of noun classes to express gender and number, as well as the distinct marking of pronouns and nouns in terms of plurality and case. In Kordofanian languages, subject and object pronouns are marked differently, following a nominative-accusative case marking system. Additionally, the article explores the broader concept of nominal pronouns, discussing their characteristics in various languages and their role in linguistic typology. It emphasizes the need for further research into the nature of pronouns and their impact on language boundaries. Analysis of Kordofanian nominal pronoun marking systems enhance linguistic diversity, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

**Keywords:** *Nominal pronoun marks, Kordofanian languages, Niger-Congo family, Linguistic typology*

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## 1. Nominal Pronoun Marking Systems in Kordofanian Languages

The Niger-Congo languages, one of the world's largest macrofamilies of spoken in the world, predominantly of which are distributed along the basins of the Niger and Congo rivers. The name of the Niger-Congo areal is reflected in the denomination of this genetic association proposed by Greenberg (1949). The macrofamily of Niger-Congo languages

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corresponds in many respects to the composition of the “Western “Niger family” of Westerman (1927). For Greenberg, Niger-Congo languages formed part of the Niger-Kordofan (“Congo-Kordofan”) macrofamily (see Niger-Kordofan languages). In contemporary African studies, Greenberg’s Niger-Kordofanian macrofamily is used to designate the Niger-Kordofanian macrofamily. Greenberg macrofamily, the name “Niger-Congo languages is used to refer to the Niger-Kordofanian macrofamily, since Kordofan languages are no longer considered to be the first isolated Niger-Congo languages family”. The Mande or Dogon languages are given the same status in the classification as the Mande or Dogon languages are given the same status in the classification as the Kordofan languages, which means that the designation of the latter at the highest taxonomic level is no longer considered to be the first family of the N-C. L. to the highest taxonomic level has lost its meaning.

### ***1.1. What are Kordofanian Languages?***

Kordofanian languages are a set of minor languages spoken around the Nuba Mountains in south-central Sudan. The geographic grouping is named after the Kordofan region, and it is estimated that about 100,000 people speak these languages, according to 1980s estimates (Jakobi, 2013). Every noun in Kordofanian languages is marked by one of a set of affixes, and other elements in a clause such as numerals and adjectives are also marked by an affix determined by the respective noun class. This feature indicates that the Kordofanian languages have noun class systems and are a branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Ibrahim, 2013; Jakobi, 2013). However, there are some controversies regarding the Kordofanian branch’s inclusion within the broader Niger-Congo family. Glottolog 3.4 does not accept that the Kordofanian branches are Atlantic-Congo languages (Jakobi 2019; Dimmendaal 2019). Some researchers disagree with the inclusion of Kordofanian within the Niger-Congo family, while others agree with it (Jakobi 2019; Dimmendaal 2019). The Kordofanian branch is generally included in the Niger-Congo languages, but its inclusion within this family is not accepted by Glottolog 3.4 (Jakobi, 2013). Kordofanian has three branches: Lafofa, Talodi, and Heiban. While Laal language is difficult to classify, Talodi branch of Kordofanian has cognate noun classes, suggesting that Kordofanian is not a unitary group (Jakobi, 2013). Traces of noun classification can be found in the Kordofanian branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Many classifications continue to place Kordofanian as the most distant branch, but mainly due to negative evidence (fewer lexical correspondences), rather than positive evidence that the other languages form a valid genealogical group. Therefore, Kordofanian is presented as one of several primary branches rather than being coordinate to the Niger-Congo family as a whole (Jakobi, 2013).

### ***1.2. What are Nominal Pronouns?***

Pronouns are a type of function word that stands in for a noun or noun phrase. In many languages, it is not necessary to have a pronoun in subject position, as they have the same distribution as other noun phrases (Greenberg, 1963). Personal pronouns are more likely to have accusative case marking and less likely to have ergative case marking. Additionally, personal pronouns, especially of the first and second persons, are higher on the animacy hierarchy than full noun phrases (Greenberg, 1963). In some languages, person-number marking on the verb is used to express the person-number of the subject, agent, or patient of a clause (Greenberg, 1963). Moreover, personal pronouns are impossible in some positions of the clause in some languages (Greenberg, 1963). Nominal pronouns are a subcategory of pronouns that encode pronominal features such as person-number (Greenberg, 1963). In French, clitic pronouns are treated as relevant instances of pronouns. French has a nominative-accusative case marking system for pronouns based on clitic oppositions (Greenberg, 1963). However, pronouns have a different case marking system from full noun phrases in many languages, creating uncertainties in assigning languages (Greenberg, 1963). In English, full noun phrases have a neutral case marking system, while pronouns have a nominative-accusative system (Greenberg, 1963). Despite different languages’ varying approaches to using pronouns, more research into their nature may require redrawing boundaries (Greenberg, 1963).

### ***1.3. How do Kordofanian Languages Mark Nominal Pronouns?***

Kordofanian languages are a branch of the Niger-Congo language family that are spoken mainly in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. These languages have unique grammatical features, including their nominal pronoun marking system. Unlike some languages that use accusative case marking for personal pronouns, Kordofanian languages tend to avoid the use of pronouns altogether (Ibrahim, 2013). Instead, they rely on a system of noun classification, which is marked by prefixes or occasionally suffixes (Ibrahim, 2013; Jakobi, 2013). In many Niger-Congo languages, gender and number are expressed through a system of noun classes (Alamin, 2015). Pronouns in these languages typically mark plurality differently from nouns, often by using different affixes or other forms of marking (Babaev, 2009). In terms of case marking, Kordofanian

languages use nominative-accusative systems, where the subject and object of a sentence are marked differently, with the subject typically being unmarked and the object receiving an accusative marker (Greenberg, 1963). The case marking system in Kordofanian languages has been described as intricate, with subject placement playing an important role in determining the appropriate case marking for pronouns and nouns (Ibrahim, 2013). Overall, the nominal pronoun marking system in Kordofanian languages is a complex and unique feature that sets them apart from other language families.

The Kordofanian languages (Central Sudan) are inflective in their grammatical structure, whereby the significance of the verbal subject is generally characterized by a prefix (Brench, 1995). In several languages, an autonomous pronoun can also occur in the denotation of the unmarked subject of a verb, but it is more typically used only in the meanings of the focal/topical of the subject or the subordinate of a non-verbal sentence. Object indicators are affixal and predominantly follow the verb base but may be preceded by the verb base in some languages. Nominative possessive indicators are ubiquitously suffixal; in some Talodi languages they are circumfixal (Blench, 2013). The pronouns of the independent series are syntactically autonomous and can form an utterance. By their structure, they are compositions of several morphemes, with the actual element marking person and number usually located at the end of such a compound indicator. Other constituent elements of compound pronouns express focal and/or topical meanings and are employed either in the whole paradigm or in all forms of the same number. Schadeberg has reconstructed the focalizing morpheme \*ŋɔ- at the level of the Talodi pronominal language, and it is possible to concur with his view; furthermore, there is a possibility to correlate it with forms with the forms of such morphemes in Moro (Heiban group) and Tagoi (Rashad group), thus presuming a proto-Kordofanian marker of the independent personal pronouns \*ŋɔ/\*gɔ. In Tagoi its reduplication performs in a suffixal manner, suggesting that in proto-Kordofanian, the pronominal marks of the pronoun \*ŋɔ/\*gɔ might have been used in proto- Kordofanian (Dimmendaal, 2010). To imply that this morpheme had an autonomous status in the primordial language status. The initial personal indicators in the proto- Kordofanian paralanguages, consequently, must be considered without the suffix.

During the reconstruction we have relied on the existing analysis of Schadeberg (1981a; 1981b) and published synchronous data. It can be concluded that the system of personal indicators of the Kordofan languages has not lost the evidence of its genetic links with other languages of the NC macro-family at the paradigmatic level, and the cognate relationship is confirmed on the pronoun basis. The reconstructed system of personal indicators is given in Table 1.

1 <sup>st</sup> person singular	*ɲi/*ɲi
2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular	*(ɲ)a/*(ɲ)O
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	*(ɲ)u ?
1 <sup>st</sup> person plural	*-ri (inclusive), *-ni (exclusive).
2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural	*nO
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural	ɲE

It is expedient to reconstruct personal indicators of the Kordofanian pronominal languages in the form of autonomous or clitic pronouns. In particular, this is indicated by the correspondences between the prefixes in Heiban and suffixes in Talodi: their loss of their autonomous status should have occurred irrespectively of each other following the disintegration of the pra-linguistic cohesive units.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, the similarity of forms in the Heiban and Talodi languages indicates the possibility of reconstructing the Proto-Kordofanian form \*ɲi/\*ɲi, which may have been subjected to denazalization in some Tagoi dialects, hence yi- in the materials of Schadeberg and Elias, but ɲi in the work of Greenberg. The palatal character of the anlaut sonant may quite possibly be the outcome of the realization of the velar phoneme \*ɲ - before the front vowel: in other forms of the paradigm, we find \*ɲ - all over the whole paradigm. The comparison of Kordofanian \*ɲi with \*mi of other Niger-Kordofanian languages is quite intriguing. Greenberg identifies a quite regular correspondence between Kordofan neo-degenerate nasals and Niger-Congo \*m, citing as justifications the prefixes of several nominal classes, in particular the modal mass/liquid nominal class: \*Kordofanian. \*ɲw- vs. Niger-Congo \*ma/\*mu, as well as a lexeme with the meaning ‘language’: Niger-Congo leme, lema, lima, lembe vs. Kordofanian. loɲe, liaɲi, liɲ, liɲala.

In 2010, the Tagoi language community found a ray of hope when they reached out to the Department of Linguistics at the University of Khartoum. After years of searching for assistance, they finally discovered a potential solution to their long-standing struggle—documenting their language and culture and developing an orthography.

The Tagoi community strongly believes that developing an orthography is crucial in preserving their language for future generations. They recognize that it is not merely a writing system but also a means to maintain and celebrate their unique identity.

This initial interaction with the Department of Linguistics marks the beginning of what promises to be an invaluable journey for the Tagoi people. With this preliminary study, they have taken a significant step towards ensuring the longevity and vitality of their language.

By partnering with experts in linguistics, the Tagoi community can tap into a wealth of knowledge and resources that will aid them in accurately documenting their language’s grammar, vocabulary, and cultural nuances. This collaboration will not only provide them with essential tools but also empower them to take control over how their language is represented and studied.

As we delve further into this section, we will explore how this partnership between the Tagoi community and the Department of Linguistics unfolds, shedding light on its potential impact on linguistic research, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

The indicators of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person suggest variants of \**na* and \**nO* reconstruction. It is supported by the possessive suffix \*-al-o in the Heiban languages, where the proper personal element is -O, and by the forms with a back-row vowel in the Rashad languages. At the same time, pronouns in Talodi, Katla, and subject prefixes in Heiban assume the protoform \**na*. In any case, the reconstruction is rather promising, given several probable external correspondences: compare the forms \**mo*/\**mu* in Senufo, Adamawa, Ubangian, South Atlantic languages, and some Gur languages. At the same time, the extension of the initial velar nasal to the whole paradigm in Kordofan languages could be a correlative product of analogy; if so, the correspondence between \**o*/\**ɔ* and Niger-Congo \**O*/\**U* is also very promising.

The indicators of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, which in Kordofan languages presumably originate from \**nu* or \**u*, can be analyzed in the same way. It is \**u*/\**U*/\**o* that is usually reconstructed as a singular nominative affix of the class of persons in Niger-Congo languages, also performing the function of a 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronoun for person referents (cf. Bantu \**U*-, South Atlantic \**o*/\**ɔ*, Fula Serer \**?o*, Gur (oti volta) \**U*-). The 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronouns similar to this form have been reconstructed by us in both Kru \**ɔ̃* and Idjoid \**ʔ* languages.

The first-person plural pronouns suggest two possible antecedents: \**ri* and \**ni*. The distinction between them in pronominal languages, as well as in modern languages of the Heiban and Talodi groups, may lie in the sphere of the category of clusivity. In this case, the inclusive pronoun \**ri* can be compared with \**ti* in other Niger-Congo languages. Besides the compliance between the silent dental and tremulous phonemes is quite typical of Sub-Saharan Africa, it is necessary to take into account the form \**ri* in Talodi, phonetically closer to \**ti*. In the second person plural, one should reconstruct the variants \**no*/\**nɔ*, which correlate favorably with the indicators in other NK languages. On the vocalization of the subordinate prefix in Heiban could be influenced by the close in meaning forms of the second person singular. forms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular. However, there is little certainty about these forms because of the lack of material from the languages of the Katla and Rashad groups.

It seems that there are distinctions in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular forms, such as an inclusive/exclusive distinction in 1<sup>st</sup> person plural and a masculine/feminine distinction in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. These distinctions have been documented in the first five groups for the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural and the last two groups for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular.

	<b>Talodi (Nashid and Abeer 2015)</b>	<b>Heiban Laru (fieldnotes)</b>	<b>Tagoi (Alamin 2015)</b>	<b>(Hellwig 2013)</b>	<b>Kadu (Waag 2016)</b>	<b>Lafafa (T&amp;B1966)</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> person singular	* <i>ɪŋ</i>	<i>ɛp, p-</i>	<i>y-</i>	<i>ɲɔŋ, ɲA-</i>	<i>aʔa, k-ede</i>	<i>ɲe</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular	* <i>oŋ, *aŋ</i>	<i>ŋa, a--ŋ-</i>	<i>w-</i>	<i>ɲAŋ, ɲA</i>	<i>ɔʔɔ, k-udu</i>	<i>ŋwɔ-ji</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	<i>ɔk</i>	<i>ŋmɛ, (ŋ-)</i>	<i>Ø-</i>	XXX, <i>Ø</i>	MASC <i>ɪʔi, k-imɪ</i> <i>ɔno-k, ɔgɔɔ</i>	MASC <i>bu-ji</i> FEMN <i>a-ji</i> NEUT <i>ɪr</i>

Table 2 (Cont.)						
	Talodi (Nashid and Abeer 2015)	Heiban Laru (fieldnotes)	Tagoi (Alamin 2015)	(Hellwig 2013)	Kadu (Waag 2016)	Lafafa (T&B1966)
1 <sup>st</sup> person plural	NCL.DU *trt  INCL.PL *trt nɔn	INCL.DU ndaŋa, nd  INCL.PL araŋa, INCL.PL araŋa, ar EXCL jaŋá, jí	INCL ad- EXCL n-	INCL ηε̄, ι EXCL nen nr	INCL aŋŋa-kaca EXCL ɔŋŋɔ, k-idi	e-ji
2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural	*nɔn	ηá, á~η-	nɔ-	nnɔn, n-	aaga, k-ada	ɔ-ji
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural	*gɛn	ηíndé (ar-	t-	ηrŋ nI-	εεε, k-εεε	(ɿ rja-i)

## 2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the contrastive analysis of nominal pronoun marks in the Niger-Congo language family, including the Kordofanian groups, highlights the rich linguistic diversity and intricate features present within this expansive language family. This exploration not only deepens our understanding of specific languages but also provides valuable insights into linguistic typology, cultural and historical relationships, and potential practical implications for language education and translation efforts. As research continues to unravel the nuances of nominal pronoun marks in Niger-Congo languages through contrastive analysis, our understanding grows deeper, promoting cultural appreciation while facilitating effective cross-linguistic communication. This study contributes to broader insights into human cognition, communication patterns, and cultural diversity within the Niger-Congo language family.

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