

Typologically unusual properties of nominal copular clauses in Mande languages

The Mande language family includes about 70 languages spoken in 12 West African countries, from Senegal to Nigeria, with a total of more than 50 million speakers. It shows a high degree of typological homogeneity. The most striking characteristic of Mande morphosyntax is the extreme rigidity of the typologically unusual constituent order Subject(-Object)-Verb(-Obliques) in verbal clauses, with obliques in postverbal position and the object of transitive clauses in immediate preverbal position.

Non-verbal predication in Mande languages is characterized by very strong predominance of the copula strategy (Schreiber 2008, Vydrin 2020, Creissels 2026), with either verb-like copulas or non-verb-like copulas differing from intransitive verbs by their total lack of TAM inflection and derivational potential, and incompatibility with the auxiliary-like words that contribute to the expression of TAM in verbal clauses.

In most Mande languages, verb-like copulas are almost exclusively used to compensate for the impossibility to express TAM variation constructions involving non-verb-like copulas, and their text frequency is very low. The configuration with two distinct positive non-verb-like copulas (one for nominal predication, the other for locational predication and other types of adverbial predication in the sense of Bertinetto & al. 2026) and a single negative non-verb-like copula for both nominal and adverbial predication is particularly common, cf. (1).

- (1) a. *Fàatú bé fàróo tó.* (Mandinka)
PRN AdvCOP rice.field.D LOC
'Faatu is at the rice field.'
- b. *Fàatú té fàróo tó.*
PRN COP.NEG rice.field.D LOC
'Faatu is not at the rice field.'
- c. *Yáayàa mú kàràndirilâa lè tí.*
PRN NomCOP teacher.D FOC as
'Yaayaa is a teacher.'
- d. *Yáayàa té kàràndirilâa tì.*
PRN COP.NEG teacher as
'Yaayaa is not a teacher.'

The four aspects of nominal copular clauses in Mande languages I will comment in more detail in my presentation at the SyNCC conference are as follows:

(1) In Mande languages, nominal copular clauses are the only predicative construction in which the argument can be left unexpressed (as in (2), to be compared to (1c) above).

- (2) *Kàràndirilâa lè mú.* (Mandinka)
teacher.D FOC NomCOP
'S/he is a teacher.'

(2) In Mande language, the important cross-linguistic variation in the order of the core terms of nominal predication sharply contrasts with the absolute uniformity of linear ordering patterns in verbal and adverbial predication across Mande languages.

(3) Nominal predication constructions with either the argument or the predicate NP flagged like oblique NPs in verbal predication are uncommon in the world's languages, but very common in Mande, cf. (1c-d) above.

(4) In some Mande languages, nominal predication shows a type of alternation, characterized in Creissels (2022, 2026) as “argument-predicate reversal”, that has not been signaled so far outside Mande. It is cross-linguistically common that the two terms of constructions expressing REFERENTIAL IDENTITY can exchange their roles as argument and predicate, as in English *John_{ARG} is my father_{PRED}*. vs. *My father_{ARG} is John_{PRED}*, but in some Mande languages, a SUPERFICIALLY SIMILAR alternation also occurs in INCLUSION statements. For example, both (3a) and (3b) are inclusion statements expressing the same predicate-argument articulation and differing only in their discursive implications, which means that *Làamini* and *màndìnkôo* exchange their CODING CHARACTERISTICS, but not their ROLES as argument and predicate. This alternation involves the obligatory presence of a focus marker immediately after the noun in predicate role (contrasting with the syntactic optionality of the focus maker in all other clause types), which implies that, in such clauses, this focus marker does not fulfill its usual function related to information structure, and rather acts as a nominal predicate marker.

- (3) a. *Làamini mú màndìnkôo lè tí.* (Mandinka)
 PRN NomCOP Mandinka.D FOC as
 ‘Laamin_{ARG} is Mandinka_{PRED}.’
 b. *Màndìnkôo lè mú Làamini tí.*
 Mandinka.D FOC NomCOP PRN as
 ‘He_{ARG} is Mandinka_{PRED}, Laamin (that is).’

Abbreviations: AdvCOP = adverbial copula, COP.NEG = negative copula, D = definite, FOC = focus marker, LOC = locative, NomCOP = nominal copula, PRN = proper name,

References

- Bertinetto, Pier Marco, Luca Ciucci & Denis Creissels (eds.). 2026. *Non-verbal predication in the world's languages* (2 volumes). Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Creissels, Denis. 2017. Copulas originating from the imperative of ‘see/look’ verbs in Mande languages. In Walter Bisang & Andrej Malchukov (eds.), *Unity and diversity in grammaticalization scenarios*, 45–66. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Creissels, Denis. 2022. A typological rarum in Mande languages: Argument-predicate reversal in nominal predication. *Mandenkan* 68. 3–42.
- Creissels, Denis. 2026. Non-verbal predication in Mandinka and other Mande languages. In Bertinetto, Pier Marco, Luca Ciucci & Denis Creissels (eds.), *Non-verbal predication in the world's languages*. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. 915–954.
- Schreiber, Henning. 2008. Copula constructions in Mande: An overview. *Mandenkan* 44. 63–77.
- Vydrin, Valentin. 2020. Non-verbal predication and copulas in three Mande languages. *Journal of West African Languages* 47(1). 77–105.