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Historicizing the Semantic Relationship between Hausa and their Neighbours in Niger State

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Abstract

Niger State, Nigeria, represents a complex linguistic mosaic, serving as a primary contact zone between the Afro-Asiatic and Niger-Congo language families. This study explores the semantic relationships and lexical exchanges between Hausa (a Chadic language) and the diverse indigenous languages of Niger State, including Nupe, Gbagyi, Kamuku, Kambari, and Dukawa. Historically, Hausa has functioned as a lingua franca across Northern Nigeria, leading to profound semantic convergence—a process where languages in close proximity begin to share meanings and conceptual structures despite different genetic origins. Using a comparative descriptive framework, this research analyzes a corpus of shared vocabulary and idiomatic expressions collected from multilingual speakers in the Bida, Minna, and Kontagora axis. However, preliminary findings indicate that Nupe and Hausa exhibit the highest degree of semantic mirroring due to long-standing political and religious ties. Gbagyi maintains a more distinct semantic core but shows heavy Hausa influence in the domains of modern technology and governance. The semantic relationship is asymmetrical; while Hausa influences the "prestige" vocabulary of local languages, the indigenous languages often influence the "substrate" semantics of the Hausa dialects spoken natively within Niger State (e.g. the Western Hausa dialect).

Keywords: Semantics, Hausa, Niger State, Language Contact, Lexical Borrowing, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Nigeria is home to one of the most complex linguistic landscapes in the world, boasting over 500 indigenous languages. While these languages are often categorized into distinct families, primarily Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan, they are bound by deep-rooted semantic relationships. These connections are shaped by shared ancestry, geographical proximity, and centuries of socio-cultural exchange. The majority of Nigerian languages belong to the Niger-Congo phylum, particularly the Benue-Congo branch. This shared genetic origin results in a "semantic DNA" that dictates how reality is structured. In many Cross River and Bantoid languages, nouns are categorized into classes (e.g., humans, liquids, long objects). This creates a semantic relationship where the world is categorized through shared physical or abstract attributes, influencing how speakers perceive the relationship between entities.

Cognates and Core Meanings: Even as languages diverge, core concepts often remain semantically linked. For example, the terms for "water," "eye," and "person" frequently exhibit phonetic and semantic parallels across the Middle Belt and Southern regions, reflecting a shared ancestral worldview.

It is important to note that geographical proximity has led to significant lexical borrowing, where words from a dominant lingua franca enter other languages, bringing their semantic nuances with them. As a major Afro-Asiatic language, Hausa has historically influenced many "Minority" languages in Northern and Central Nigeria. Terms related to commerce, governance, and religion (many originally from Arabic) have created a shared semantic layer across diverse linguistic groups. In the South, languages like Yoruba, Edo, and Itsekiri exhibit semantic overlaps due to the historical influence of regional empires. This is particularly evident in the terminology used for kingship (Oba), traditional medicine, and agricultural cycles. A profound semantic relationship exists in the way Nigerian languages use metaphor to describe human experience. Many Nigerian languages semantically map emotions onto internal organs. For instance, the "stomach" or "belly" is often the seat of patience or anger. In many languages, "happiness" is literally expressed as the "stomach being sweet." The Body parts are frequently used to describe spatial relations. The "head" is often semantically linked to "top" or "front," while the "back" represents the "rear" or "past." This shared metaphorical logic suggests a unified way of perceiving the human body in relation to the environment.

The Nigerian Pidgin acts as a modern semantic bridge. It blends the grammatical structures of indigenous languages with English vocabulary, creating a unique semantic space. Words like "fall" (to fail or disappoint) or "reach" (to arrive or be sufficient) carry semantic weights that are directly translated from indigenous logic rather than standard British English. This hybridization ensures that even as speakers move between languages, the underlying semantic intent remains consistent.

Theoretical Approach

The theory of Culture Fusion is an acculturation model postulated by Eric Kramer in 2000. The theory suggests that as a migrant or new comer enters a community,

there is mutual adjustment or Co-Evolution, and not merely cultural coercion for the individual to assimilate. Kramer's theory is actually a reaction to the earlier theory of intercultural adaptation proposed by GudyKurnst and Kim in 1997. Gudykurnst and Kim (2003) argue that acculturation involves a psychological process of disintegration and reintegration of the migrant so that he/she will evolve and begin to behave, think and feel like his/her host community. Disintegration involves gradually abandoning the migrants' culture while reintegration involves gradually adopting the new culture. Thus they stress that it is not sufficient to 'do as Romans when in Rome', but they posit that to be functionally fit the new comer must think and feel like Romans. The consequences of failure to adapt in this way are irrationality, immaturity, mental illness and maladjustment. They maintain that acculturation is a single variable where the migrant becomes acculturated only to the extent that he/she de-culturates and unlearns with equal but opposite measure.

Kramer's theory of Cultural Fusion (2000) counters Gudykurnst and Kim's stance by arguing that it is not possible for individuals to deculturate or unlearn themselves, and secondly that growth is not a zero sum process that requires the dissolution of one form for another to come into being, but rather a process of learning new languages and cultural repertoires like thinking, playing, working, worship etc. Kramer posits that a migrant need not unlearn his indigenous language in order to learn a new one. Nor does the migrant have to unlearn who he is in order to learn new ways of doing things. Therefore Kramer suggests that cognitive complexity involves the ability to code switch between repertoire, not a zero-growth, zerosum process as Gudykurnst and Kim claim. In Kramer's perspective, the old is not lost (that is, the new comer does not need to shed his culture) but is preserved and the migrant has the cognitive capacity to add to his learning by incorporating the host community culture.

As a result, migrants can learn new ways of life without jettisoning their indigenous cultural baggage. The consequence of the contact of two unique cultures is the enrichment of the migrant and the host community, as difference accrues. Kramer's theory had been supported by Berry (2001) in his strategies of acculturation. Berry posits that there are two central issues involved in acculturation: the degree to which individuals have contact outside their group and the degree to which individuals want to give up or maintain their cultural attributes. Berry outlines four acculturation strategies.

1. Integration strategy/Biculturation: An integrated person reflects the desire to retain important features associated with his or her cultural group, while at the same time being willing to adopt aspects of the dominant culture. This strategy is theorized as being the most balanced of all the strategies.
2. Assimilation strategy: An assimilated person rejects his or her ethnic values or ethnic identity or avoids any contact with members of his own group for the purpose of adopting rapidly the culture of the host country and being accepted by it.
3. Separation strategy: A separation strategy is followed when a person rejects the dominant group culture, with the objective of pressing only his or her own heritage culture and being most of the time in contact with members of his or her ethnic group.
4. Marginalization strategy: A marginalization strategy is adopted when a person

rejects both the dominant culture and his/her own heritage culture, and avoids any contract with members of either group. These four strategies (incorporate Kramer's Cultural Fusion) represent a holistic platform for the consideration of migrations and non-nationals who live in another ethno linguistic group. It is evident that all sojourners in an alien community adopt one of these strategies in terms of their socio-cultural relationship with the host community.

Language and Cultural Integration

Kuran and Sandholm (2007) define cultural integration as a form of cultural exchange in which one group assumes the ideologies, practices and rituals of another group without sacrificing the features of its own culture. The two cultures involved are usually a minority and a dominant culture. As a healthy intermingling of the ways and beliefs of two unique cultures, it is generally seen as positive because the individual does not lose anything. Language proficiency in the host language has been proven to be a significant positive integrative instrument as it serves as a bridge across two different cultures (CEC, 2005; Markova and Black, 2007; Putnam, 2007). Hall (1993) had earlier posited that language serves as a veritable means of unlocking access to wider social networks and provides a platform for negotiating and transmitting between two cultures. He predicted that the 21st century will be faced with the challenge of living with difference –different people, different cultures, and different languages. In order words, language is a medium for imbibing and instilling cultural knowledge which gives non-nations or visitors (as the case may be) the opportunity to engage with associated values, heritage, morals and norms. A crucial European policy framework for integration states that basic knowledge of the host society's language is indispensable to integration and specifically identifies poor language proficiency as a barrier to successful integration (CEC, 2005).

The stance of the European Union has been corroborated by scholars who emphasize that low levels of proficiency in the state language adversely affects migrants' ability to access social services in the host community (Waters and Jimenez, 2005; Alexander et al, 2004). Furthermore, although, it is acknowledged that without the host language migrants can negotiate through strong social networks (Losifides et al 2007; Ryan et al, 2008). It is recognized that lack of proficiency in the new language can result in family tensions, downward assimilation, failure to naturalize and restriction to co-ethnic enclaves (Portes et al 2009; Duncan and Waldorf, 2009; Tardif-Williams and Fisher, 2009). The overall purpose of integration is social cohesion, inter-ethnic bonding, understanding and peaceful co-existence between the guest culture and the host culture. As duly stated in the resolution 1437 (2005) of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, the concept of integration aims at ensuring social cohesion through accommodation of diversity. To this end, language has long been perceived as transcending communication, but a vital instrument of any migrant's integrative repertoire, enhancing mobility and social capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Pfeffer and Para 2009; Ryan et al 2009; McAreavey 2009). One of the consensus adopted by the council of Europe is the capacity for action, sometimes referred to as Social Competences.

This is the capacity to live with others, to cooperate, to construct and implement joint projects, to take on responsibilities. This capacity contributes to interculturalism, particularly the need for people to learn several languages. Languages are regarded here not just as tools for communicating with other individuals, but above all, as openings to other modes of thought and ways of understanding other cultures… It is paramount to emphasize that linguistic integration consists of two elements: the language of the guest and the language of the host community. Kruman and Plutzar (2009) explain that in several resolutions and recommendations the Council of Europe encourages member States to take definite steps to enable migrants to learn the language of the receptive country and to develop their mother tongues as cultural instruments to maintain their link with their culture of origin.

Krumen and Plutzar (2009) posit that learning the host language is most effective if it builds upon the existing (linguistic) identity of migrants–that is to say treating them as bilinguals for whom learning a new language does not threaten the status and usage of their first language. They therefore conclude that integration programmes which focus solely on the language of the host community will miss their goal because they fail to take into account the specifics of language acquisition in the course of integration. These specifics relate to the dynamics of negotiating two identities with all its implications for loyalty. Thus Hall (1996) conceives of cultural hybridity as constituting the relative positioning of social groups which relates to displacement and the process of delineation between the centre and the periphery. The centre represents the core culture expressed by the first language which Krumen and Plutzar (2009) see as the kernel of the identity; the language in which people started to see themselves as persons (personal identity), as members of a family and social group (social identity), and through which they developed values important for their lives (cultural/religious identity).

On the contrary, the periphery represents the host's language which serves as a gate way to the host community. Porters (1997:3) sees hybridity as being "neither here nor there" but in both places simultaneously. However, Gowricharn (2005:16) opines that "there is no zero sum game where detachment from the sending country means an attachment to the receiving country". Rather there is constant interplay between the two. On the whole, as stipulated by Gatawa (2013), the question of obtaining an adequate measure of social integration is one of the pressing issues in the contemporary political debate. This is largely on account of the fact that integration as a symphonic coexistence and cooperation between different ethnic groups is essential for the purposes of cushioning potential conflicts while preserving valuable synergies by the admixture of culture.

Language and Identity

To a degree unusual in societies where one or two languages predominate,many ordinary citizens in Nigeria are multilingual and operate with a number of languages on a daily basis. With some 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, Hausa as a lingua franca, particularly in the north of Nigeria, brings together people from many different language backgrounds. Switching languages and cultural styles is a commonplace for many Nigerians. In such circumstances any individual may have a portfolio of fragments of

identity that they may deploy according to the demands of the moment-Nigerian English, Fela and suit in the morning; Hausa, Shata and *babbar* riga 'long gown' in the afternoon; and Igala, drums and wrapper at night. Cosmo-politan culture is increasingly the order of the day in the cities and towns of Nigeria. In this environment 'being Hausa' is not necessarily a fixed attribute: identity is by no means convergent with language, for example.

Simply to say that someone speaks the Hausa language is to say as little about identity as saying that someone speaks English or Serbo-Croat. Determining whether you are Serb or Croat depends not on the language you use, because it is the same language, but on what you say in Serbo-Croat and which heroic epics you subscribe to, and your life may depend upon it. Being Hausa is, in addition to a myriad other social factors, a question of what you hear, know and understand of parts of 'Hausa culture' and what you yourself contribute. Nevertheless, it is manifestly the case that many different people are concerned to put such a jigsaw map together. Trading in such manufactured commodities, as well as in those such as livestock, slaves, salt (Lovejoy 1986) and kola nuts (Lovejoy 1980), were specialized occupations. Long-distance trade through the whole savanna region, across the Sahara and down to the sea produced both a rich merchant class and a cosmopolitan heterogeneity to Hausa cities. After the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century, a class of Islamic clerics emerged in the major northern cities whose activities had a lasting influence upon the direction of state administration and upon popular adherence to Islam. The pre-existing indigenous religion involving spirit-possession, bori, came under strong pressure from the new religion adopted at the centre.

Maguzawa, non-Muslim Hausa speakers, who adhered to the earlier religious beliefs, became more and more isolated in remote rural areas. Bori in the cities became relegated to the social margins. An Islamic religious reform movement, led by the Fulani cleric Usman Dan Fodio at the begin-ning of the nineteenth century, began both a centralisation of Hausa states into the Hausa/Fulani 'Sokoto Caliphate' and a more widespread popular conversion to Islam. From 1804, fifty years before Bismarck united the thirty-nine German principalities, the leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate were beginning the process of uniting the Hausa states under one flag. The descendants of the reform movement of 1804 were faced with the arriva1 of the British and the French at the end of the century. Lord Lugard's forces inflicted a measure of military defeat upon northern cities such that a complex pattern of some resistance, some withdrawal and more accommodation emerged in the establishment of British rule in Northern Nigeria. The deal struck between Lugard and the leaders of the Hausa states involved confirmation, and often reinforcement, of the position of the chief in exchange for allegiance to the crown through acceptance of direction from a local British political officer, the Resident. One important component in this origin deal was the agreed exclusion from the North of Christian missionaries. This was in contrast with the situation in Southern Nigeria where Christian missionaries and their schools had been operating for a considerable period of time.

Hausa and other languages in Niger State

The emergence of a lingua franca in Northern Nigeria is a complex historical phenomenon shaped by the intersection of British colonial administration and the pre-existing cultural hegemony of the Hausa language. While the British introduced English as the official language of government, their "Indirect Rule" policy unintentionally fortified Hausa as the region's primarymedium of communication.

1. The Policy of Indirect Rule. Lord Lugard's system of Indirect Rule relied on the existing socio-political structures of the Sokoto Caliphate. To streamline administration, the British adopted Hausa as the official language of the colonial bureaucracy in the North.
    a) **Administrative Efficiency:** Colonial officers were required to pass Hausa language proficiency exams.
    b) **Standardization:** In 1930, the Hausa Translation Bureau (later the Literature Bureau) was established in Zaria to standardize the orthography, shifting from the Arabic-based Ajami script to the Latin-based Boko script.
2. **While Southern Nigeria:** Saw a rapid proliferation of English through missionary schools, education in the North was more controlled. Primary education in much of the North was conducted in Hausa, reinforcing its status among theeducated elite. The Barewa College had a greater Influence in the spread Hausa Language especially among the Nupe and other tribes that attended the school. Institutions like Katsina College (now Barewa College) trained the region's future leaders, creating a "Northern identity" that was linguistically rooted in Hausa rather than the diverse local dialects.
3. **Urbanization and "Sabon Garis":** Colonialism spurred the growth of urban centers and railway hubs. The creation of Sabon Garis (new towns) brought together diverse ethnic groups Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, and others who used Hausa as a "bridge language" for trade and daily interaction. Commercial Dominance: Hausa's long history as a language of trans-Saharan trade made it the natural choice for the emerging colonial economy.
4. **The Role of Mass Media:** The British utilized media to disseminate wartime information and colonial policies, which further entrenched the lingua franca. Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo: Established in 1939, this was the first major Hausa-language newspaper. It played a pivotal role in developing a modern political consciousness across the North.
5. **Broadcast:** The introduction of the Radio Kaduna services solidified the prestige of the "standard" Kano/Sokoto dialects over others.

Niger State, often referred to as the "Power State," serves as a unique microcosm of Nigeria's ethno-linguistic diversity. Situated in the Middle Belt, it acts as a transition zone between the predominantly Hausa north and the diverse linguistic groups of the central and southern regions. The relationship between Hausa and the indigenous languages of Niger State such as Nupe, Gbagyi, Kamuku, Kambari, and Dukawa is not merely one of proximity, but a complex historical evolution shaped by trade, religion, and administrative shifts. Historically, the

relationship began through the Trans-Saharan trade and the expansion of the Hausa Bakwai (the seven original Hausa states). As Hausa traders (the Fatake) moved south in search of kola nuts and gold, they established "Zango" (settlements) within Niger State.

It should be noted that the 19th-century Sokoto Jihad led by Usman dan Fodio radically altered the linguistic landscape. The establishment of emirates in Bida, Kontagora, and Agaie brought a wave of "Hausanization. "During this period, Hausa served as the vehicle for Islam. Consequently, many Niger State languages adopted Hausa-corrupted Arabic terms for religious concepts (e.g., Salla for prayer, Azumi for fasting).

There was also semantic Shift in Governance. Titles of authority in many Niger State cultures shifted toward Hausa structures. Words like Sarkin (King of) became prefixes used even by non-Hausa speakers to denote leadership within their own communities. Also the British colonial administration adopted Hausa as the official language of administration in Northern Nigeria. This institutionalized Hausa as the "Language of the Law" and "Language of the School" in Niger State. For many groups that historically resisted the Caliphate, the colonial era forced a linguistic compromise. To engage with the "Native Authority," one had to speak Hausa. This period birthed the high level of bilingualism seen today. It is common to find a Gbagyi speaker who utilizes Hausa for "high-status" functions (legal, religious, formal trade) while retaining their mother tongue for "low-status" or intimate functions (family, traditional rituals).

The semantic relationship is characterized by asymmetric convergence, where indigenous languages absorb Hausa structures more frequently than the reverse.

Conclusion

The semantic bond between Hausa and the languages of Niger State is not merely a product of lexical "borrowing" but a deeper conceptual hybridization. This interaction reflects a historical trajectory of integration, trade, and shared identity, illustrating how language contact shapes the cognitive and cultural map of a multi-ethnic region. The effect of this biculturalism or linguistic syncretism is a positive attitude towards the language of the hosts as well as their own language of origin (objective two), in addition to a positive perception of their hosts (objective three). It could be drawn from this result that migrants who speak the host language have scaled the barrier called difference and so tend to have a better understanding, better mental disposition and better perception of their hosts and by extension, a better relationship. Otherwise, inter-cultural cohesion and co-existence will be marred by ethnocentrism, prejudice, mutual suspicion, fear, tension, and complicated by difference and boundaries

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