

*Original Research Article*

# Language Shift among the Babur/Bura speakers of Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

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Several of the world languages are threatened since they are at risk of fading out or out of use as their speakers die out, or abandon their languages. At a glance however, it seems illogical to assume that Babur/Bura - a language spoken by the second majority of people in southern Borno – Nigeria is considered threatened considering its status as one of the major native languages in the far north east State of Nigeria, coupled with its size. However, there are a lot of factors which are visible that language is at risk. This paper examines the extent and manner in which Babur/ Bura is being threatened. The paper employed what is referred to as random vocabulary and questionnaire test as well as interview. The paper indicated that some Babur/Bura rarely used their language in all situations even when all interlocutors were Bura speakers. Additionally, the paper discovered that religion, economy and social values were some of the causes of the people's linguistic shift to the wider language – Hausa.

**Keywords:** Language, Shift, Threatened, Communities, Multilingualism

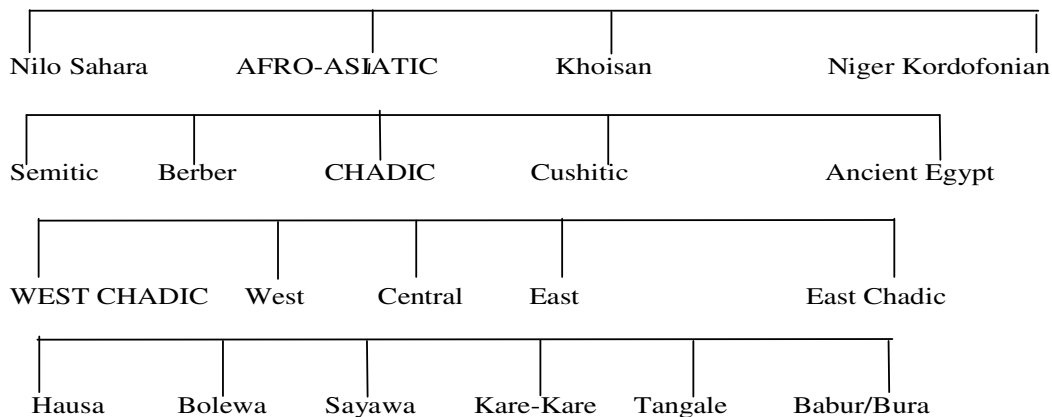
## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how the Babur/Bura language is seen as a threatened language. The paper is a highlight on the deliberate steps taken by the speakers to shift their linguistic allegiance to the language of the wider environment – Hausa. This new attitude has created a paradigm in which most young Bura people are unable to produce a complete sentence without any trace of code-mixing or code switching. As a result, the paper adopts a multi dimensional approach that involves religious, sociolinguistic, etc. aimed at unveiling the consequential effects and implications on the future socio – culture of the people. Also, the paper intends to offer a logical explanation on the rate and the manner in which Hausa language has dominated smaller languages for religious, social, and economic benefits.

Threatened language is a serious concern to which linguists and language planners have turned their attention in the last several decades. For a variety of reasons, speakers of many smaller, less dominant languages stop using their heritage language and begin to use another language. Similarly, parents may begin to use only the

second language with their children and gradually the intergenerational transmission of their heritage language is reduced and may even cease. As the consequences, there may be no speakers who will use the language as their first or primary language and eventually the language may not be used at all.

Presently, Babur/Bura is described as a threatened language with high propensity of extinction of their in the future, probably hundred years, unless some deliberate and positive steps are taken to reverse the situation. Babur/Bura is spoken by a pocket of communities in northern eastern Nigeria. The speakers occupy a vast land in the south of Borno – Nigeria. The language is a member of the Chadic family of the Afro-asiatic phylum. By this statement, this language is language of the Bole group of West Chadic which is surrounded by Niger-Congo languages, a fact that may explain a number of features which distinguish them from their Northern sisters' languages. Below is the diagram of Afro – Asiatic languages (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** African Languages

### Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with a colonial past that has left her with an additional language, English that is foreign, the multiplicity of language has given rise to a situation where the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria and national policy on education have classified languages as major, minor and official. Three Nigerian languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba- are classified as major while the other languages estimated at about 452 Jowitt, (1995: 38), are described as minor. English and the three major Nigerian languages are classified as official language but English has remained the primary official language and plays a dominant role in all official matters in the nation.

### Statement of the problem

Several researches which investigate threatened language in some major Nigerian languages do exist, but research on comparative study on threatened languages of Tangale and Babur/Bura have not been extensively carried out. This indicates vacuum existence which the present study intends to address.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method of data collection comprised questionnaires meant only for the literate group of the population. Observation technique was equally employed. The bulk of the sources of materials for this paper were obtained in the course of six months trips made to some major Bura speaking communities in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states of Nigeria. They include: Azare, Biu, Bularafa, Miringa, Marama, Shaffa, Kwajaffa, Yimirshika, Kida, Mandaragrau, Debero and Garkida. While on this fruitful trip mission to these areas, the present researcher had the opportunity to meet and share information with people from all the aforementioned towns and villages. As a

result, a large number of native speakers of these languages: Babur/ Bura and were gracious enough to allow the researcher to access various places in order to retrieve certain information.

An accidental sampling method was used to select respondents within each cluster, at a random selection. However, the current researcher did not use a completely random sample because such a sample would have produced subjects who were not natives of the areas under investigations as they could be immigrants among the people. The researcher used stratified sample, i.e. one chosen for specific representatives of all groups which made up the population. The researcher made sure that stratification was unbiased and was typical of the total population. The researcher initially collected data from 1005 informants, respondents and observers in the areas under investigations. However, the actual data used for the analysis came from only 100. They were presented with a list containing 150 Babur/Bura their equivalents in both English and Hausa. Each respondent was asked to answer a polar question which has just a 'yes' or 'no' answers, on whether they indigenous language - Babur/ nouns or their equivalence any time such words came up in their day - to - day interactions.

In, the following people made up the entire population: civil servant, students, entrepreneurs, hawkers, job seekers, drivers, farmers, automobile mechanics/ technicians, recreational centers, motor parks, family settings, and schools.

### Theoretical framework

The framework adopted in this paper is Fishman (1964) model. It is a way of measuring language use in relation to domains which comprises three domains: home, market, and association. The home domain covers the immediate family setting where parents, children brothers/sisters interact. The market domain includes the realm of commercial activities and transactions of buying and selling. The association domain comprises the

linguistic interactions in social, political or professional setting where people interact.

## Literature review

Although languages have always become extinct throughout human history, they are currently disappearing at an accelerated rate by the processes of globalization and neocolonialism, and the economically powerful languages dominate other languages as more commonly spoken languages dominate the less commonly spoken languages and so the latter eventually disappear. The total number of languages in the world is not known. Estimates vary depending on many factors. The general consensus is that there are between 6000 and 7000 languages currently spoken, and that between 50 and 90% of them will have become extinct by 2100. The 20 most common languages, spoken by more than 50 million speakers each, are spoken by 50% of the world's population, but many of the other languages are spoken by small communities, most of them with fewer than 10,000 speakers.

According to Crystal (2000), only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages in the world are 'safe' from the threat of extinction. Furthermore, 6,703 separate languages were spoken in the world in 1996. Of these, 1000 were spoken in the Americas, 2011 in Africa, 225 in Europe, 2165 in Asia, and 1320 in the Pacific, including Australia, and very often it is hard to distinguish between languages and dialects. But most linguists agree that there are well over 5,000 languages in the world. A century from now, however, many of these languages may be extinct. Some linguists believe the number may decrease by half; some say the total could fall to mere hundreds as the majority of the world's languages—most spoken by a few thousand people or less give way to languages like English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili, and Hindi. By some estimates, 90% of the world's languages may vanish within the next century.

Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory, and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity. Furthermore, language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the

intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hope of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood, enhance social mobility, or to assimilate to the global marketplace. Raising awareness about language loss and language diversity will only be successful when meaningful contemporary roles for minority languages can be established, for the requirements of modern life within the community as well as in national and international contexts. Meaningful contemporary roles include the use of these languages in everyday life, commerce, education, writing, the arts, and/or the media. Economic and political support by both local communities and national governments are needed to establish such roles.

Edwards (2010: 6) notes, 'the forces acting upon a minority-language community may be such that a shift to the overarching variety becomes inevitable'. In such circumstances, it may indeed make economic sense for minority language speakers to shift to the majority language, for the sake of future generations, if nothing else. As outside observers, it is important that we refrain from making value judgments about such decisions. Who does not want to see his or her own children benefit from modernization? Of course, culturally speaking, the loss of the communicative use of a minority language may weaken the sense of group identity a language community has, but it should be noted that 'a language that is no longer regularly spoken may yet have a role to play in the maintenance of group boundaries' (Edwards *ibid*: 6). Language shift may not always be viewed in such tragic terms by members of the language community in question as it is by outside commentators. If 'the price of original-language retention is geographical and cultural isolation' (Edwards 2010: 11), then in some cases, this may be too high a price to pay. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in many cases, speakers of endangered languages *do* wish that it could all be different. The following clip is by a speaker of Akélé (or Kélé, spoken in Gabon), explaining how she regrets the decline in the use of the language:

Harrison (2007: 5) says that 'languages do not literally "die" or go "extinct", since they are not living organisms. Rather, they are crowded out by bigger languages. Small tongues get abandoned by their speakers, who stop using them in favour of a more dominant, more prestigious, or more widely known tongue.' According to Crystal (2000: 77), this crowding out is facilitated by urbanization, whereby rural populations move into the cities and the learning of the dominant language is more likely. Thus the three key factors in one language being replaced by another appear to centre on the associated power a language has (its status), on its association with elite groups in society (its prestige) and how widely

**Table 1.** Age group (15 – 35) No. Of respondents

Language Used	Domains							
	Home	%	Market	%	Association	%	Freq.	%
ENGLISH	5	13.89	4	11.11	17	47.22	6	16.67
HAUSA	16	44.44	32	88.88	11	30.56	21	58.33
Babur/Bura	15	41.62	-	-	8	22.22	9	25
TOTAL	36	100	36	36	36	100	36	100

**Table 2.** Age group (36 – 55) No. Of respondents

Language Used	Domains							
	Home	%	Market	%	Association	%	Freq.	%
ENGLISH	1	20	1	20	2	40	-	-
HAUSA	1	20	4	80	1	20	2	40
Babur/Bura	3	60	-	-	2	40	3	60
TOTAL	5	100	100	100	5	100	5	100

**Table 3.** Summary of language use by respondents in the various domains by all age groups

Language Used	Domains							
	Home	%	Market	%	Association	%	Freq.	%
ENGLISH	6	14.63	5	12.19	19	46.34	6	14.63
HAUSA	17	41.46	36	87.80	12	29.26	23	56.09
Babur/Bura	18	43.90	-	-	10	24.39	12	29.26
TOTAL	41	100	41	100	41	100	41	100

spoken it is and by how many people (its distribution and its demography).

### Data analysis and interpretation

Table 1. shows that sixteen respondents used Hausa at home, while fifteen communicated in Babur/Bura and five in English. At market domain, four respondents used English while thirty two used Hausa frequently. In association domain, eight respondents used Babur/Bura, eleven spoke in Hausa and seventeen English. Only six respondents used English frequently, nine Babur/Bura and twenty one used Hausa in their communication.

From table 2. above one respondent used Hausa at home domain, one English and three Babur/Bura. Among the five respondents, four used Hausa at the market domain and one English. Only two respondents used English and Babur/Bura respectively in the association, while one respondent used Babur/Bura. Two respondents used Hausa as the language and three used Babur/Bura respectively.

Table 3 shows that seventeen respondents used Hausa at home domain, eighteen Babur.Bura while sixteen English. Thirty six respondents used Hausa and English had just six but Babur/ Bura had none at the market domain. At association domain, English was more preferred than Hausa with nineteen respondents while only eleven used Hausa while Babur/Bura had only ten

respondents. Twelve respondents used Babur/Bura while Hausa has just six respondents.

The analysis of the comment section of the questionnaire holds economic factor was primarily responsible for lingual conversion of 30% of the respondents. Next to economic factor are social and religious factors with 20% respondents. These respondents spoke Hausa, read Hausa literature and newspapers, watch Hausa movies and listen to Hausa songs. The least among the number of respondents is institutional factor which has 10% of the respondents. The consequential effects of this trend of language use among the Babur/Bura is off course language death which the chart shows with 45% (Figure 2)

### RESULTS

As explained earlier, Nigeria is a multilingual country with over 500 languages spread across the nation, but only three Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are considered major languages. Due to fear of linguistic and ethnic domination as well as ethnic rivalry among the major ethnic groups, English has received a strong Constitutional protection as both the lingua franca and official language of the country. However, these so – called major languages enjoy regional recognition as Hausa is widely spoken in the north, Igbo in the east and Yoruba in the west.

Among the three languages, Hausa enjoys a distinc-

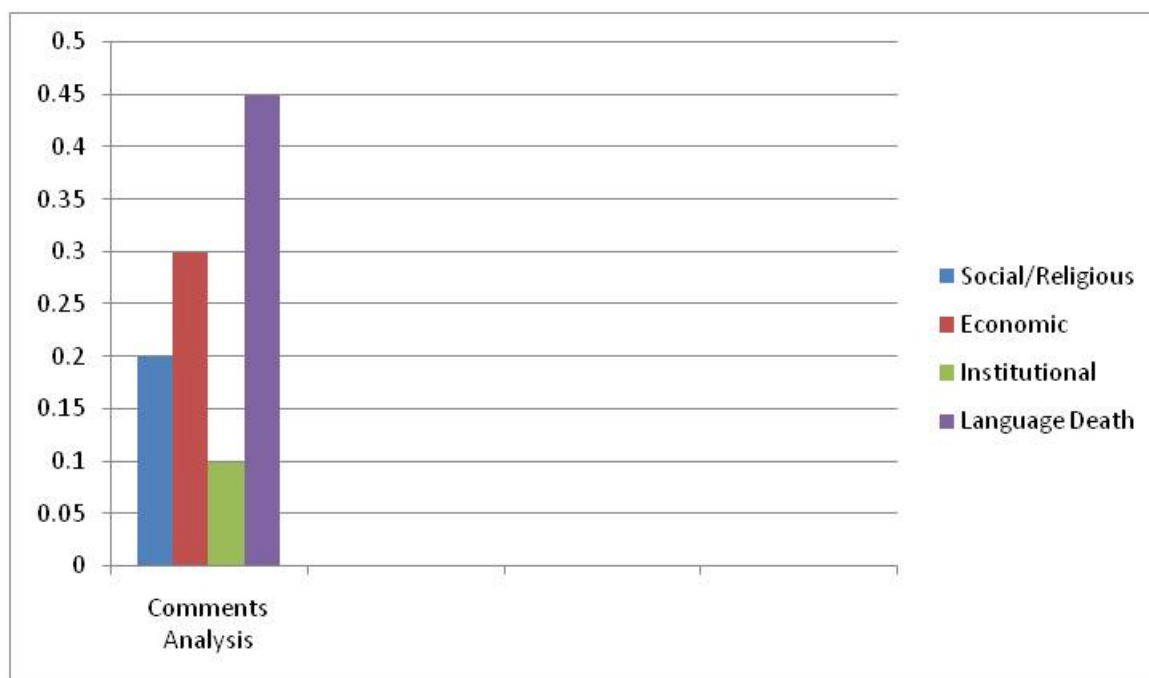


Figure 2. Comment analysis

Table 4. Hausa loan words from Arabic and their equivalence in English

Arabic	Hausa	English
Al - Sama	sama	sky
Al - Qalam	Al - kalami	pen
Mu'alim	Malam	teacher
Al - jaibu	aljuhu	pocket
sukhar	suga	sugar
Al -shayu	shayi	Tea
mamu	mamu	flowers
lahamun	nama	meat
Adu'au	Adu'a	supplication
Al -sana'a	Sana'a	career
Al -khadi	Al -kali	judge
Al-khasara	asara	loss

tive unifying status – one in which most speakers take a pride. The results show a near – complete shift to Hausa by virtually all natives of the areas under investigations. This is because Hausa is very close to Arabic language and it is the language of Islam and my interactions revealed that the Bura people at least in the population under study are predominantly Muslims and religion is a system of beliefs based on humanity's attempt to explain the universe and the fundamental role of language plays in the expressions and interpretation. Furthermore, Hausa has intelligibility, capable of conveying message of different kinds, more detailed and more successfully than any other languages at least in the north. Since religious understanding is a function of knowledge and experience of the people, there is the need for the people to shift to the language which explains their experience. This

function is successfully be carried out by Hausa because there is a close affinity between a particular language and a particular religion. For instance, the long contacts with the Arab Muslims led to the promotion of Islamic intellectual, legal knowledge in Arabic. Consequently, there are several loan words from Arabic to Hausa. (Table 4)

These and many other words could be found in Hausa which were originally Arabic. The implication is that the understanding of many Arabic words helped to prevent dangerous misinterpretations of the Holy Koran. In other words, to successfully become an Ullama (Islamic teacher) or any Islamic scholar or preacher in the northern Nigeria, one must acquire the communicative discourse in Hausa, because acquiring Islamic religious knowledge involves learning the learning in which Islam

is being interpreted to the followers.

Hausa over the years has undergone tremendous changes through borrowing which are quite distinguishable for a while. These changes from a language that conveys religious concepts tend to be more acceptable without reservation and hesitations. Therefore, speaking Hausa to many people in northern Nigerian (at those informants) is synonymous with identifying with a particular faith because language is a convener of religion.

A rich and lengthy comment from one of the interviewees offered a powerful discourse on the contact between Hausa and Islam. Thus, early Islamic tradition, the primary source of knowledge, the Quran was embodied in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. His action, saying and legislature were later organized into the second source of Islamic knowledge called the Sunna. The Sunna represents for Muslims, the Prophetic implementation of God's revelation to humanity. These principles and practices were taken from them by Muslim outside Arabian Peninsula to the whole earth. The task of interpreting and implementing were entrusted to the scholars. On the other hand, gradual teaching by example or through local symbolism could eventually lead to peaceful transition into Islamic lifestyles. From the numerous ethnic stock of the Sahara region, the Sahel, and the Savannah, clerical brotherhood and mystic orders developed. Some of these groups were to play a decisive role in the movement of Islam into the Western Sudan and beyond. Hausaland near the centre of the Western Sudan which was strategic for the pilgrimage and trade routes became one of the primary inheritors of Islamic traditions.

With Hausa co-existing along with Babur/Bura and other smaller languages, the Bura people inevitably became multilingual emerging from religious factor, emigration necessitated by recent Boko Haram insurgency, the search for fertile land for farming and crazing of animals, inter-marriages, and trade. As a result, some of their children were born in communities with the child's father being a Bura person, the mother another tribe (speaks another language), other women in the family (in case of polygamy) another language. This scenario makes it necessary for the people to suppress other languages for Hausa; it is essentially seen as a source of unity for it enables speakers of these divergent communities to maintain family and communal ties. In other words, with Hausa in use, the people see themselves as one, although some informants told the researcher that they receive Hausa with mix feelings as their identities are in jeopardy. One said Hausa is a monster that eats up all languages and traditions of the northern minority tribes/languages. People most often than not, engage in what is termed as metaphorical code mix even in short conversations. Metaphorical code-mixing is noticed as speakers change their initial language and redefine the situation. This discourse use is

common in all contexts – formal, and casual, intimate relationships.

Speakers from the semi-rural communities of Miringa, Mandaragrau, Kida and Debero revealed that some of the negative attitudes towards their mother tongue may be growing stronger than ever as some respondents rightly pointed out that their willingness to accept Hausa was due to great social values the language has. This problem is however, not limited to the towns/villages mentioned above.

In the areas under investigations, old people mostly use Babur/Bura in giving instructions to workers in the farmlands, cattle ranches, etc. Similarly, most women are noticed giving orders to their young ones in Babur/Bura. However, rarely does one see parents engage their children in any form of folklores despite their crucial roles in preserving cultures. Many respondents confirmed that Hausa is a prestigious and powerful language while Babur/Bura lacks prestige and power. In rare cases, some young people acknowledge their denial of speaking the language. Associated with prestige valuation for Hausa is addition to religion is probably appropriate for literary use for religious purposes, etc. For instance, the Holy Bible, some Hymns and Church bylaws are translated in classical Babur/Bura; only a pocketful of Babur/Bura people can read those texts. Similarly, culture and folklore in Babur/Bura do not have equal status with Hausa literature as Hausa is taught in virtually schools in the areas under investigation. This is made easy because teaching requires the availability of grammars, dictionaries, standardized texts and widely accepted views about what to teach and how to teach. These off course Hausa possesses. These are lacking in Babur/Bura, and in few cases where these exist, there written by non natives – foreigners whose linguistic usage and comprehension may not reflect the cultural and linguistic standard of the language.

An investigation showed that the rate of language shift is not gender-based as both male and female have indicated a positive change towards the larger language – Hausa. The result further indicated that density of population and the influence of larger population centers appeared to be important factors. This gradual model shift holds that larger, culturally important cities influence smaller towns; they dominate and eventually influence the areas that surround them because of benefits accrued as a result of contacts. Based on this fact, Babur/Bura people tend to align their linguistic allegiance

While speakers' ability willingness to choose the appropriate language type is not a random exercise, but highly determined by aspects of the social organization of the community and the social situation where the discourse takes place, religion, the paper unveils that most of the language choice pattern among the Bura people is triggered by a dominant language which is used as a medium of communication since the language – Hausa provides them with a wider acceptance and

favour. This means that language is considered as an entering point into the 'bigger world'.

My observation has shown that there is a synergy between social class and language choice in the Buraland as Babur/ Bura is mostly spoken by many peasant farmers and during intra – village trades. However, this trend of language use does not proceed at a uniform rate throughout the areas under investigation. Instead, speakers from smaller community tend to have a weaker shift. Thus, Hausa in this context developed as a consequence of population emerging from migration or trade purpose.

## CONCLUSION

The correlation between humans and language is such that one cannot be divorced from the other without serious negative impact on each. This is particularly so because the two are mutually interdependent on each other without a serious bound that determine the completeness of each other. When human are devoid of language, they have being rendered less human because language plays pivotal role in their existentialism. Likewise, it becomes totally difficult if not impossible for a language to exist without human being making adequate use of it in their daily activities. A significant negative effect with a deadly impact on the survival of a language happens when the functions performed by a language is reduced to some meager event in the community. This condition comes up when other languages considered being of higher prestige is used to substitute the varied role previously played by the former language. These

situations as have been discussed earlier mitigate the efficacy of the former language which subsequently leads it to threatened position. Consequently, all threatened languages like Baur/Bura need to be revitalized and put back to track by their very people, so that its full utility will be well harnessed and exploited not only for the benefit of sons and daughters of the immediate language users but also for the benefit of the world linguistic canon.

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