

# **The Linguistic Situation in Northern Nigeria and the Plights of Minority Languages: A Study of Hausa and Gbagyi Languages**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic situation of minority languages in the northern part of Nigeria and the dominance of Hausa language on small group languages using Gbagyi as a case study. The paper is aimed at identifying the aspects of the language that the people have maintained or lost over time. In doing so, we examine the attitudes of the native speakers of Gbagyi towards their language and Hausa by succinctly studying the factors responsible for the gradual disappearance or decline in the use of Gbagyi. A wordlist of 400 hundred (nouns and verbs) was used with their Hausa equivalents to determine the extent of encroachment into Gbagyi vocabulary. Also, we elicited samples of everyday sentences from competent speakers of Gbagyi as well as the speech patterns of both Hausa and Gbagyi in order to ascertain the degree at which Hausa affects Gbagyi speech form. Findings from this study reveal that more than 40% of Gbagyi vocabulary is either of Hausa origin or borrowed from Hausa; that a relatively low percentage of Gbagyi speakers (about 30% or less) are still in full grasp of the language and perhaps 50% are of the older generation. Factors such as family and home, lack of Gbagyi literacy programs, inter-tribal marriages, lack of language loyalty (language attitude), and lack of intergenerational transmission among others are revealed as factors and actors responsible for the endangerment of Gbagyi or the decline in the use of Gbagyi. To this end, our focus has been to investigate into the sociolinguistic situation hence the study proffers explicit and dimensional solutions so as to prevent the language from extinction. This paper, among other things, recommends that language awareness be created at all levels of education on the importance of minority languages.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, endangerment, dominance, attrition, Hausa, Gbagyi

## **Introduction**

Africa with over a thousand languages has a very complex language situation. Adekunle (1972) says that Africa is inhabited by countries whose indigenous languages range between ten and over a hundred. Nigeria, for example, according to Elugbe (1990), has over four hundred languages which made the country a multilingual nation and for communication to be effective, there is the need for some languages according to regional division by the colonial masters, as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, apart from English to be assigned roles to be national languages, that is, languages of communication since most indigenous people do not understand English. In the Northern Nigeria, our area of interest in this study, Hausa is a prestigious language like English which according to Okwudishi & Lydia (2006) assures the speakers the much desired opportunity for economic mobility and integration into the Northern part of country. The dominant role played by the Hausa language in Northern Nigeria places most minority languages in a difficult situation. It is in the light of this that we consider it important to do a survey of borrowed words and sentence patterns of Gbagyi, one of the minorities in northern Nigeria so as to determine the extent of Hausa influence on it as well as to find out the means of preserving it from total extinction. Attempt is made to examine some of the factors that affect the Gbagyi language and the degree of influx of words from Hausa or are of Hausa origin.

## **The Place of Hausa in Northern Nigeria Language Situation**

The Hausa native speakers since 1931 census till date are said to be one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and occupy most of the northern parts of Nigeria. The Hausa people were never politically unified

until they were conquered by the Fulani in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mabogunje (1965:19) admitted that the Hausa, if not an obscure history through Bayajidda Abuyzida, the son of Abdulla, King of Bagdad in the present day Iraq. They share a common language and profess the Islamic religion, except for the certain dialectal variation. Although, the indigenous Hausa called Maguzawa are not Islamized. The Islamic teachings to which they subscribe, confer on them, the literature, culture and the use of Arabic language which are culturally linked with North Africa. They are largely people of Negroid origin, but certainly a mixture of many tribes and possess a will to resist any stubborn and strong invasion no matter who conquered them. Even though the Fulani defeated them, nonetheless, the Hausas assimilated them to the extent that now, we have a distinct group of Hausa- Fulani whose pedigree was Hausa and Fulani. They are excellent farmers, skilled artisans, great blacksmiths and silversmiths, iron smelters, mat and iron basket weavers, great merchants and much travelled traders. Williamson, (1982) describes the Hausa thus:

Whatever his origin is, it is best in the series of amalgamations with many tribes which have made him what he is. There is in fact, no such thing as Hausa, and yet, the Hausas are a nation, due perhaps, to the fact that the Hausa is reasonably simple to learn. It is an old language, certainly over one thousand years old and is Hermitic, though the people are now seen much Negroid than as hermit. Williamson (1982).

The only explanation, however, for the dominance of Hausa, as a language and as a group, is not the simplicity of their language and culture, nor even the fact that it could be written (other Northern Nigeria languages have been codified) but because of the evolution of an extremely complex Hausa- Fulani system of political organization with attendant economic power. Thus, Hausa has gobbled-up other cultures and languages in Northern Nigeria; cultures and languages too weak to resist the pressures from within and without. Kanuri stands out as different with a successful resistance of the Fulani jihad in 1809, thus carving out their own traditional feudal system. But since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kanuri speakers have caved in to the pressures of Hausa- even though it has a standard orthography and perhaps a course of study at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. One major question to ask is 'why has the Kanuri language and indeed other Nigerian languages that resisted Hausa for political and historical reason suddenly caved in? One can isolate five reasons for this development:

First, it is the relative advantage accrued to Hausa as a language since the colonial period leading to the establishment of the Hausa Translation Bureau in 1930. Hausa has been developed and promoted by this measure and added to this a pass in Hausa language test is highly encouraged for career advancement and upward social mobility. Kuju (1998) reported that bonuses were often paid to the British expatriate officers for passing both the highly rated Hausa examinations. There was then no need to promote other northern Nigerian languages since the communicative needs of the colonial overlords, their Nigeria surrogates and the helpless masses were served in Hausa and English respectively. Secondly, the supposed inferiority of other northern Nigerian languages often painted as lacking is the subtleness of Hausa. This psychological pressuring result in the minority language speakers' learning and using Hausa at the expense of their mother tongues. Instrumental to this was the attitude fostered by rising bilingual elites, the colonialists, and the deliberate policy of not developing other indigenous languages.

Thirdly, the fact that Hausa is the language for commercial and political activities have also meant that the indigenous people of northern Nigeria learn and use it. This ensures the vitality and spread of Hausa into other domains of the indigenous languages. Kuju (1998) asserts that Hausa became the veritable factor for political ascendancy of the ruling class and the social structure largely remains the same today. Fourthly, the Hausa use to their advantage, the fact that there is an intricate link between Hausa as a language and Islam, a religion, which Hausa serves as a vehicle for its spread to assimilate other indigenous tongues and people, some of whom were adherents to other religions. Most often than not, adherents of Islam speak Hausa and the social harmony that a common religious faith guarantees, is exploited to the advantage of Hausa.

Lastly, we may agree that the fortunes of Hausa as a subtle language have been guaranteed by its innate 'assimilative' tendencies which are as a result of all the above factors. Adamu Mahdi in Kuju (1998) asserts that;

*... The Hausa ethnic unit has shown itself as an assimilating ethnic entity and the Hausa language a colonizing one to the extent that many people who were not originally Hausa later became Hausa through assimilation. Kuju (1998).*

There is, thus little wonder about the mortality rate of indigenous languages and depletion of their speakers in Northern Nigeria. Our focus, in this paper, is tailored towards the antecedents and factors examined above.

### **Gbagyi People: Their Language and Origin**

The Gbagyi, according to linguistic evidence is said to belong to the Kwa subgroup of Benue-Congo languages, which is spoken since 6000 years ago and are still occupying their places (Filaba, 2008). The Gbagyi people are believed to be one of the largest ethnic group in north central Nigeria with about 10,000,000 population today. Gbagyi is closely related to the Nupe which is spoken in the south of Gbagyi kingdom.

The origin of Gbagyi is fully documented. The most accepted account, however, says the people originated from former Borno Empire in the North East of Nigeria. Temple (1919) says it is possible that they are indigenous to Zamfara district stretching down to the Southern part of Zaria province. This makes it easier for them to be influenced by other groups with whom are considered to be influential than them. For example, the Hausa are always neighbours to the Gbagyi wherever they are found and this made the Gbagyi and its culture to be greatly influenced by the Hausa. Nadel, as quoted by Filaba (2008), believes that the Gbagyi came originally from Borno and speak Kanuri. This assertion was supported by Backwell (1932), also quoted in Filaba (2008). He said that *Borno is their (Gbagyi) traditional country of origin, and the Gwari Genge of Abuja claim to be of Egyptian descent and treasure a substance resembling a lapis lazuli which is said to have been brought from Egypt.*

Historians like Ishaku Baraje, as quoted in Filaba (1990:44), also supported the above assertion but added that the Gbagyi lived in Saudi Arabia and later migrated into Africa because the Islamic religion spread in the country. They crossed into Africa in small groups. They later settled in Borno with the kanuri (Beriberi) and other ethnic groups. This is strongly supported by many Gbagyi oral traditions and histories. This group believes that the Gbagyi and the Kanuri have common facial marks and other similar cultural practices although this claim is not supported by linguistic evidence.

There are other postulations of the origin of the Gbagyi. Bmyanyiko (1997) wrote that the Gbagyi migrated from the Chadian region into Borno about 1400 AD, but later migrated into Kano and further into Zaria by 1700AD which might be the only connection that exist between Hausa and Gbagyi. The two languages are only related aerially but linguistically, there is no basis for either regarding both languages to be genetically related. Yet paradoxically, the Hausa eroded the Gbagyi culture and language in such a way that Gbagyi is rarely used in many areas of human endeavours. Gbagyi buffeted on all sides by the dominant Hausa and culture has therefore yielded so much grounds for Hausa such that her people have somewhat become acculturated, therefore leading to a total shift to Hausa. This is the focus of this research also.

### **Procedure and Methodology**

In this section, the paper focuses on the various means employed to gather materials from the field. Although, Gbagyi may be spoken in other parts of Northern Nigeria, the focus of this paper is on Gbagyi spoken in Karu, Nasarawa and Toto, all in Nasarawa state of Nigeria.

### **Research Population**

The total research population of this work was envisaged at 600 respondents although only 336 Gbagyi participants responded due to the rigours involved which range from the uncooperative attitudes, especially the uneducated women to the fear that responses were going to be used for ritual purposes. This number excludes 40 Hausa indigenous speakers whose responses were used for verification purposes

Approximately, half of the total population is moderately educate with a good number of the youths still in school. The other half cannot be said to be educated since none went beyond the primary education level.

### Method of Data Collection

A word list of about one thousand words was collected to determine the extent of Hausa encroachment into Gbagyi vocabulary. This enables us to find the degree to which Hausa words are currently used in Gbagyi language as well as to determine how these foreign words are predominately used among the youths, adults or the aged. A word list of four hundred (nouns and verbs) was constituted with their Hausa equivalents. Also, 36 everyday utterances were elicited from 150 subjects; 75 males and 75 females, per age brackets i.e. the youth, the adult and the aged. It will, apart from being used to confirm what was stated above, be used to compare the speech patterns of both Hausa and Gbagyi in order to ascertain to what extent the Hausa language affects Gbagyi utterances. Approximately, half of each of the first two age brackets were moderately educated with 70% of the first age group in the post primary institutions and 30% in the primary institutions while 60% of those in the second age group in the post-secondary levels and the 40% not in any academic institution but are either into farming, vocational trainings, businesses or are civil or public servants while those in the third age group are retirees, farmers and complete housewives.

### . Method of Data Analysis

The descriptive statistical method approach and the simple percentage tool were used in this work. It involves the qualification of the data obtained in simple percentage for comparative purposes. Results obtained were used to determine the different group behaviour which can be generalised in response to the questions raised in this paper.

### Analysis and Description of Findings

Table 1. Borrowed Hausa words in Gbagyi

Hausa Words	Gbagyi	English Gloss
Asibiti	Asibiti	Hospital
Anfani	Anfani	Useful
Ayaba	Ayaba	Banana
Abarba	Abarba	Pineapple
Akara	Akala	Bean cake
Alheri	Alheli	Pcacc
Alkawari	Arkawali	Promise
Amma	Amma	But
Banmi	Banmi	Palm wine
Banda	Banda	Bundle
Kyauta	Chauta	Gift
Chacha	Chacha	Gambling
Cita	Chita	Ginger
Ciwo	Chiwo	Sickness
Dukiya	Dukiya	Wealth
Dogara	Dogara	Dcpnd
Dansada	Dansada	Police
Doka	Doka	Law
Fili	Firi	Field
Gada	Gada	Bridge
Girma	Girma	Respect
Goro	Goro	Kola nut
Gwanda	Gwanda	Pawpaw
Gaya	Gaya	Together
Godiya	Godiya	Gratitude
Gem	Gem	Gum
Ilimi	Irimi	Sense
Jinya	Jinya	Nurse
Kalma	Karma	Word
Kokolwa	Kokorwa	Brain
Katako	Katako	Wood
Kuma	Kuma	Again

Kaka	Kaka	Granny
Kosa	Kosa	knot/matured/r
Kudu	Kudu	South
Kondo	Kondo	Basket
Karatu	Karatu	Reading
Lada	Rada	Gain/interest
Leifi	Reifi	To do wrong
Lafiva	Rafiva	State of health
Lemu	Remu	Orange
Leke	Reke	Sugarcane
Majingara	Majingara	Rake
Mulki	Murki	Rule
Molo	Moro	Thumb Piano
Majalisa	Majarisa	Meeting
Mugunta	Mugunta	Wickedness
Mudu	Mudu	Measurement
Nasara	Nasala	Victory
Nono	Nono	Cow Milk
Pete	Pete	Porridge
Rai	Layi	Life
Rubutu	Lubutu	Writing
Ruwa	Nuwa	Water
Rijiya	Lijiya	Well
Sanma	Sanma	Up
Sawara	Sawara	Advice
Sujada	Sujuda	Service
Sati	Sati	Saturday
Safe	Safe	Day
SaiKuma	Saikuma	And also
Tunda	Tunda	Since
Tunani	Tunani	Thinking
Taba	Taba	Cigarette
Taki	Taki	Fertilizer
Taro	Talo	Gathering
Tolotolo	Torotoro	Turkey
Tuta	Tuta	Banner
Takarda	Takarda	Book
Wada	Wada	Judge
Wahala	Wahara	Hardship
Yisa	Yisa	Jesus
Zinaria	Zinalia	Gold

From the table above, it is seen that several Hausa words have crept into Gbagyi vocabulary thereby affecting the learning and using of Gbagyi words, since they have alternative borrowed words which can be used in expressing themselves.

The question that arises from the above therefore is: does it mean that these words do not exist in Gbagyi? The answer could be, Yes and No! Yes, because of the linguistic inadequacies of Gbagyi which make it possible for the language to accommodate new experiences and practices that never existed in Gbagyi. Hence, there is the need to borrow words from other languages like Hausa and English to bridge the gap and meet the needs of the new change that has taken place and for easy communication which is a positive aspect of language shift.

No, because of the negative attitude of Gbagyi speakers who prefer speaking Hausa for prestige, political, social and economic reasons, hence forsaking their language.

Most Gbagyi speakers that exhibit this attitude of borrowing on the ground of prestige do this to show off their superiority or their literacy level over others who are illiterates. This trend tilts more towards the younger generation than the older generation; average of 77% for the younger people as against 33% for the older generation. The reason for this according to the youths is that the first Hausa, like English a language of elites or more privileged, a language of growth and a harmonious language. Therefore, in order to have a sense of belonging, they prefer to speak Hausa more frequently. They also reported; ... You can read Hausa but you cannot read Gbagyi (excerpt from an 18 year old school informant) for the more elderly ones, Gbagyi is preferred because it is their own language which they will also want their children to speak. A few of them retorted; ... Bature has spoilt things for us. They teach them Hausa in school and ignore our own ...

The above information can be analysed thus:

(a) The aged people because of their position and influence in the society; as custodians of power, are capable of exercising authority which can turn around the situation. Concerted efforts are now being made; in the face of apparent partial bilingualism which culminate in endangering Gbagyi, to stir up awareness for the enlistment of Gbagyi culture, (Gwamna 2002:1-5). As stakeholder of Gbagyi cultural revival, it is possible that the Gbagyi cultural and language studies will be introduced in schools to compete with and possibly displace Hausa in due course, if the enthusiasm, the will, the human and material resources and also the backing from political powers are available.

(b) This is directly opposite of the first because here the enthusiasm and the necessary back up are not there. Here, the youths, after having not found their grounds and empowerment, will assume a *laissez faire* posture. This invariable can lead to a further deterioration of the situation, resulting in a complex agglutination process in favour of Hausa.

(c) The second is the direct opposite of the first where the enthusiasm and the necessary back up are not there. In this case, the youths, having not found their grounds and be empowered, will assume a *laissez faire* posture. This invariably can lead to a further deterioration of the situation, resulting in a complex shift process in favour of Hausa.

Quite sadly linguistically, and curiously too, none of our respondents agrees to assess him/herself as rating excellent in the possession and use of Gbagyi. Many of the respondents, about 55% locate their competence as being 'fair' while 30% agree theirs to be good, and none paradoxically agree to be graded as very poor in the use and acquisition of Gbagyi. This in no doubt shows and indicates that there is a possible acculturation process which could lead to an impending total loss of Gbagyi language.

It was discovered that the youths between the ages of 12-24 are greatly affected by the encroachment of Hausa on Gbagyi. This is due to the fact that these youths are mostly in schools or are involved in one thing or the other close to Hausa speakers. Most parents do not speak Gbagyi, preferably, they speak Hausa and sometimes English; for the educated ones, in their homes. This makes them more prone to the use of Hausa than Gbagyi. On the other hand, 40% of the adults who are predominantly public servants, farmers etc, are more closely inclined to the use of Hausa in which they communicate with others on daily basis. It is worthy of note that this preference for Hausa has affected many areas of life, one of which is religion. There is tendency to switch to a more widely accepted and convenient medium of communication which, in this case is Hausa, to the detriment of the mother tongue.

It was also discovered from the 36 everyday Hausa utterances that the Hausa has greatly encroached into Gbagyi and that there is so much lexical borrowings in Hausa which either results from deficiency or lack of cognate/ lexis in Gbagyi since both languages are not genetically related in anyway. Gbagyi has so much been buffeted in all sides by the dominant Hausa and culture and therefore has yielded so much grounds to Hausa such that the people have somewhat become acculturated. If serious attention is not paid to this turn of events, this work feels that the Gbagyi may be led into extinction in no distant time.

One of the reasons, discovered during the course of this research is that why the younger generation of Gbagyi speakers prefer to use the Hausa was because they found the speech patterns of Gbagyi more complex than that of the Hausa, e.g. the following sentence patterns in both Gbagyi and Hausa proves this:

HAUSA	GBAGYI
Ya/yi/baban/kuskure	Wo la bwi abanmwa
S V A A	S(AV)OA
Ya/na/asibiti	Wotu lo nasibiti
S V O	SV(AV) O
Mu/na/bakin/ciki	Yi Zhnibughazhizhiyi lo
S V A A	SVO(pl) adj(Intensifier)
Karfihal/igare/shi	Won bughakalayi
A V S	S V O A

From the analysis above, it can be seen that the speech pattern of the Gbagyi follows the same way with that of the Hausa and English languages. However, the Gbagyi speech pattern is made more complex by having many singular phonemes acting as conjunctions and intensifiers. This will really have to take a patient and delighted learner to pay attention to those details. The implication of this complicated nature of Gbagyi endangers her younger generation speakers to Hausa which has simplified speech pattern.

Apart from the complexity of the Gbagyi speech pattern, there are other factors that are responsible for the language being threatened for her predicaments. These include,

- i. The absence of a deliberate government policy aimed at developing the Gbagyi language in line with the National policy on education.
- ii. The educated Gbagyi elites have not taken it as a challenge to develop the language. This could be explained by the absence of Literature on the language to serve as a source of encouragement to them.

This too, many ears will sound unbelievable, knowing that the Bible was first translated into Gbagyi in 1957. It would have been expected that irrespective of the Hausa encroachment, the people's interest in the preservation of their language and culture should have involved greater participation in the production of texts and other literature, pursuant to the adoption of Gbagyi as a language of instruction in Gbagyi land.

Our investigation has been on the Gbagyi scattered over the central region of Nigeria. This work has dealt with the Gbagyi spoken in Nasarawa State. The findings have demonstrated that Hausa has so much influenced the minority groups linguistically, politically, culturally and economically, that they had to conform to certain dominant Hausa culture thus abandoning their own cultural values and language.

Gbagyi is one of the endangered Nigerian minority languages owing principally to the influence of a dominating Hausa language in the Northern part of Nigeria. This as been alluded to, has pre-colonial as well as post-colonial support. If efforts are not made, as earlier stated, to find a solution to this threat of endangerment, Gbagyi language and culture may eventually die or go into extinction. For example, in the Northern Nigeria, Hausa has been so upgraded to so such prestigious height, that it has almost completely overwhelmed other minority languages whose speakers do not only learn Hausa but also often unconsciously abandon their own languages and cultures for no reason.

One major exponent of this domination is that there is a flagrant borrowing of words into these minority languages without similar borrowing into Hausa. Therefore, while these minority languages are being depleted as their scope of use is limited, Hausa gains more speakers daily.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are given to help in saving the Gbagyi language and other minority languages:

1. There is need for the creation of language awareness programmes at all levels of governance and education. If this is done, it will go a long way in developing the languages that are being encroached into:
2. At home, churches, mosque, offices, gatherings etc, people should be made to speak their mother tongues. What Hausa is doing to Gbagyi today may happen to any other two languages.
3. Educated persons who speak these languages should start to put down a few things on paper in these languages. This, in one way or the other, could excite speakers of these languages and increase their enthusiasm in studying them. By so doing the reading culture in Nigeria could be re-awakened.
4. One of the greatest problems encountered by Linguistics and the study of Nigeria languages is the fact that most trained Linguists do not seem to be interested in translating their paper qualification into functions for which they are meant. In the guise of diversifying into other areas, graduates of linguistics completely abandon this discipline. As a result, this discipline itself seems to be heading towards extinction. This issue must be addressed and too fast too.
5. Another important factor to be addressed is the issue of the meaning which the average Nigeria attaches to development. For the average Nigeria, development connotes shifting from the rural areas to the metropolitan dwellings where own languages and cultures are abrogated in favour of English or the languages of the immediate environment. Consequently, parents no longer speak mother tongues to their children. The consequence of this trend is better imagined than said. People should be able to speak their mother tongues to their children.
6. The leaders of the local government where these affected languages are found should be willing to sponsor research works on how to save their languages from going into extinction.
7. Media houses should join the campaign against the endangerment of the so-called minority languages by the majority languages through publications and having slots for language programmes.
8. Finally, when we imagine the magical effect it produces to hear someone speak one's mother tongue in a big city or in a different country, it might perhaps be good if we learn 'to speak your language, not kill it' Kuju (1998)

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