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Exploring Language Contact Phenomena: The Interplay of French and Arabic in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines French–Arabic language contact in Nigeria, addressing a notable gap in scholarship where both languages have largely been studied in isolation despite their coexistence within shared sociolinguistic spaces. While Arabic has sustained a centuries-long presence through Islamic scholarship, Qur’anic education, and trans-Saharan intellectual traditions, French has gained strategic relevance due to Nigeria’s proximity to Francophone states and its participation in regional institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, the nature of their interaction within Nigeria’s multilingual ecology remains under-theorised. Drawing on language contact theory, linguistic capital theory, and multilingual ecology perspectives, this study argues that their relationship is characterised not by structural convergence or competition but by functional complementarity across differentiated domains. Arabic operates primarily as a language of religious authority and intellectual heritage, while French functions as a medium of commerce, diplomacy, and regional mobility. The findings demonstrate that their coexistence produces layered linguistic repertoires shaped by identity negotiation, institutional structures, and geopolitical positioning. The paper contributes to broader debates on transnational language dynamics and linguistic stratification in West Africa.

Keywords: Language Contact, French–Arabic Interaction, Multilingualism in Nigeria, Transnational Languages, Sociolinguistic Ecology

Introduction

Nigeria’s linguistic landscape is widely recognised as one of the most complex in Africa, with over 500 indigenous languages coexisting alongside English as the official language. Beyond this internal diversity, Nigeria’s position within West Africa has fostered sustained contact with transnational languages that circulate across political, religious, and economic networks. Among these, Arabic and French occupy distinctive yet intersecting roles. Arabic has maintained a continuous presence in what is now northern Nigeria for centuries, largely through Islam, Qur’anic education, and trans-Saharan intellectual exchanges (Hunwick, 1992; Loimeier, 2013). French, by contrast, entered the Nigerian linguistic space primarily through colonial boundaries that left Nigeria surrounded by Francophone states such as Niger, Benin, Cameroon, and Chad. This geopolitical configuration has positioned French as a strategic language of regional diplomacy, trade, and mobility (Bamgbose, 2000). While English remains dominant in formal administration and national communication, the coexistence of Arabic and French reflects Nigeria’s layered historical trajectories. Arabic’s influence predates colonial rule, embedded in Islamic scholarship, manuscript traditions, and judicial systems that operated across the Sokoto Caliphate and other precolonial polities (Hunwick, 1992). Its functions extend beyond liturgy to include theology, jurisprudence, poetry, and intellectual production. French, on the other hand, gained prominence in Nigeria through cross-border commerce, migration, and regional institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which recognizes French as one of its working languages. As Nigeria deepens its engagement with Francophone neighbors, French has become increasingly visible in education policy, diplomatic practice, and border economies.

Despite the visibility of both languages, scholarly attention has often treated them in isolation: Arabic within the framework of Islamic studies and historical scholarship, and French within foreign language education and regional integration discourse. Limited research has examined their interaction within Nigeria’s multilingual ecology, particularly among communities and institutions where bilingual or multilingual repertoires include both

languages. Language contact theory emphasises that when languages coexist within shared sociocultural spaces, they generate patterns of borrowing, code-switching, functional specialisation, and identity negotiation (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). However, the French–Arabic interface in Nigeria presents a distinctive configuration in which contact is frequently mediated through education, religion, and cross-border mobility rather than widespread structural convergence. This study, therefore, investigates the interplay between French and Arabic in Nigeria, situating their relationship within broader sociolinguistic and geopolitical contexts. It asks how historical trajectories, regional economics, religious networks, and language policy frameworks shape the domains in which each language operates, and whether their coexistence produces competition, complementarity, or hybridisation. By approaching the topic through language contact theory and political economy perspectives, the paper contributes to discussions on multilingualism in West Africa and challenges monolithic narratives of linguistic dominance. In doing so, it highlights the need to reconceptualise Nigeria’s language ecology not only as internally diverse but also as dynamically connected to transnational linguistic systems.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Language Contact in Multilingual Contexts

Language contact scholarship provides the central analytical lens for understanding the coexistence of French and Arabic in Nigeria. Foundational studies define language contact as the interaction between speakers of different linguistic systems, often resulting in borrowing, code-switching, convergence, or functional specialization (Weinreich, 1953; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). Crucially, these scholars emphasize that contact-induced change is socially conditioned: power relations, institutional support, and patterns of mobility determine the nature and intensity of linguistic outcomes. In multilingual African societies, contact does not always produce structural blending; instead, it frequently generates domain-based differentiation shaped by historical and political forces (Auer, 2007). This insight is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where languages operate within layered hierarchies influenced by religion, state policy, and regional economics. The interaction between French and Arabic must therefore be examined within a broader sociolinguistic ecology rather than as an isolated bilingual phenomenon.

Arabic in Nigeria: Historical Continuity and Symbolic Authority

The presence of Arabic in Nigeria predates colonial rule and is deeply embedded in Islamic scholarship, manuscript traditions, and religious education. Historical research demonstrates that Arabic spread through trans-Saharan trade and intellectual networks, consolidating its influence during the Sokoto Caliphate (Hunwick, 1992). Over centuries, it developed as a language of theology, jurisprudence, poetry, and historiography, establishing enduring symbolic authority (Loimeier, 2013). From a theoretical standpoint, Arabic in Nigeria embodies what Bourdieu (1991) conceptualises as “symbolic linguistic capital”, a form of prestige rooted in religious legitimacy and intellectual heritage. Its value is not primarily economic but spiritual and scholarly, sustained through Qur’anic schools, Islamiyya institutions, and university programs. Despite this rich body of scholarship, existing studies rarely situate Arabic within broader frameworks of inter-foreign language contact in Nigeria.

French in Nigeria: Geopolitical Strategy and Instrumental Capital

Unlike Arabic, French entered Nigeria’s linguistic environment through colonial boundary formations that left the country surrounded by Francophone states such as Niger, Benin, Cameroon, and Chad. Nigeria’s participation in regional institutions, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), further elevated French as a language of diplomacy, commerce, and regional integration (Bamgbose, 2000). Research on French in Nigeria has largely focused on foreign language education, curriculum implementation, and policy advocacy (Ajiboye, 2013). Within Bourdieu’s (1991) framework, French represents instrumental linguistic capital, valued for its economic utility, cross-border mobility, and diplomatic relevance. However, as with Arabic scholarship, studies on French often treat it independently, without examining its interaction with other transnational languages operating within the same sociolinguistic space.

Multilingual Ecology and Functional Complementarity

To bridge these separate strands of scholarship, this study adopts an ecological perspective on language (Haugen, 1972), which views languages as interacting components within dynamic sociocultural systems. In multilingual ecologies, languages frequently assume complementary rather than competitive roles, each occupying specialized domains. Heller (2007) similarly argues that bilingual and multilingual practices are shaped by institutional structures and identity negotiations rather than purely linguistic proximity. Applying this perspective to Nigeria suggests that French and Arabic coexist within overlapping but differentiated spheres. Arabic predominates in religious and theological domains, while French is mobilized in economic, diplomatic, and regional contexts. Their interaction is thus often indirect and mediated through bilingual speakers who navigate both religious networks and cross-border mobility.

Identified Gaps and Analytical Integration

The literature reveals three notable gaps. First, Arabic and French in Nigeria are predominantly examined in isolation. Second, studies often privilege either historical narratives (in the case of Arabic) or policy-driven discussions (in the case of French) without integrating sociolinguistic theory. Third, limited empirical attention has been given to how speakers who command both languages negotiate their linguistic resources across domains.

To address these gaps, this study integrates:

1. **Language Contact Theory** (Weinreich, 1953; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988) to analyze patterns of interaction and functional differentiation.
2. **Linguistic Capital Theory** (Bourdieu, 1991) to explain the distribution of symbolic and instrumental value attached to Arabic and French.
3. **Multilingual Ecology Perspective** (Haugen, 1972; Heller, 2007) to situate both languages within Nigeria's broader sociopolitical and regional environment.

Through this combined framework, the interplay between French and Arabic is conceptualized not as direct structural convergence but as a dynamic process shaped by religious authority, regional integration, institutional policy, and identity negotiation. This harmonized approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how transnational languages coexist within Nigeria's multilingual ecology and contributes to broader debates on language contact and linguistic stratification in West Africa.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design that integrates sociolinguistic field inquiry with limited quantitative analysis. The qualitative component provides an in-depth exploration of language use, identity negotiation, and the functional distribution of Arabic and French in selected contexts. Quantitative elements are used primarily to identify patterns of language usage across domains and to summarize participants' self-reported language proficiency. This exploratory design is appropriate for examining language contact situations that have received limited scholarly attention, particularly within multilingual environments where linguistic practices are shaped by religion, education, commerce, and regional mobility. The study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Language Contact Theory (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988), Linguistic Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1991), and the Multilingual Ecology framework (Haugen, 1972). These frameworks guide the identification of key analytical variables such as domain of language use, forms of linguistic interaction, and the social value attached to different languages.

Study Area and Population

The research focuses on selected urban and border-proximate areas in northern Nigeria, where Arabic and French are most likely to intersect through religious scholarship, higher education, and cross-border economic activity. These locations include university communities offering Arabic and French language programs, Islamic educational institutions with connections to Francophone West Africa, and commercial centres that maintain sustained trade relations with neighbouring countries such as Niger and Benin.

The study population consists of individuals who engage with either or both languages in their academic, professional, or religious activities. Four main participant categories were included:

1. University students enrolled in Arabic or French language programmes
2. Lecturers and instructors in Arabic and French departments
3. Religious scholars with exposure to Arabic-based scholarship and cross-border networks
4. Cross-border traders and professionals who interact with Francophone communities

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants with demonstrable experience in Arabic–French contact environments.

In total, 52 participants were involved in the study:

- 32 university students
- 8 university lecturers
- 6 religious scholars
- 6 cross-border traders

This composition allowed the study to capture perspectives from both academic and community-based language users.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were gathered using three complementary instruments.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants (lecturers, religious scholars, and traders). These interviews explored language choice in different contexts, perceptions of linguistic value, and experiences of interaction with speakers of French and Arabic. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that key themes relevant to the research objectives were addressed.

Structured Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires were administered to 32 university students. The questionnaire collected demographic information, self-assessed proficiency levels in Arabic and French, patterns of language use across domains (religious, academic, commercial, and social), and attitudes toward the perceived usefulness of each language.

Document Analysis

Documentary materials were examined to understand the institutional positioning of Arabic and French. These included university curriculum outlines, departmental course descriptions, language policy documents, and regional cooperation materials related to Nigeria's participation in organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The use of multiple instruments enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place over a three-month period. Institutional approval was obtained from relevant academic departments and community authorities before data collection commenced. Questionnaires were distributed both physically and electronically to selected student participants. Interviews were conducted primarily in person, although a small number were carried out through online communication platforms due to scheduling constraints. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis. Prior to full deployment, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in sociolinguistics and language policy to ensure clarity and relevance. A pilot test involving six students was conducted to identify ambiguous questions and refine the instrument.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded according to key analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework, including symbolic linguistic capital, instrumental linguistic capital, domain specialization, and identity negotiation. During the coding process, additional themes that emerged from participant narratives were also incorporated. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequency counts and percentage distributions. These statistics helped identify patterns of language use across different social and institutional domains. The qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during interpretation, allowing statistical trends to be contextualised through participants' explanations and experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent before participating. Personal identities were protected by assigning coded identifiers to participants rather than using names. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Methodological Limitations

Although the study offers valuable insights into Arabic–French interaction in Nigeria, it is limited by its focus on selected communities and purposively sampled participants. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than comprehensive national trends. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods design and triangulation of data sources enhance the reliability of the results and provide a strong foundation for further research on transnational language contact in West Africa.

Results

This section presents and interprets the empirical findings of the study. The results are organised around three analytical themes: domain-based language distribution, forms of linguistic contact, and linguistic capital and identity negotiation.

Domain-Based Functional Distribution

The findings indicate a clear functional differentiation between Arabic and French within the Nigerian context.

Among the 32 student respondents, 87% reported using Arabic primarily in religious or theological settings, including Qur'anic recitation, Islamic jurisprudence classes, and manuscript study. Interviews with religious scholars similarly emphasized Arabic as the principal language of religious scholarship and intellectual authority.

One interview participant, a senior Qur'anic instructor, noted that Arabic remains "the language through which religious knowledge is accessed and transmitted," highlighting its strong association with religious legitimacy.

French, in contrast, was more strongly associated with economic and regional interaction. Approximately 68% of student respondents indicated that French proficiency was valuable for employment opportunities, particularly in areas connected to diplomacy, translation, or cross-border trade.

Cross-border traders interviewed in the study reported using French regularly when conducting business with partners in Niger and Benin, especially during negotiations and logistics coordination. These participants emphasized the practical importance of French for regional mobility and economic engagement.

The data therefore suggest that Arabic and French occupy distinct but complementary domains. Arabic functions primarily within religious and scholarly spaces, whereas French operates in domains linked to regional commerce, diplomacy, and education. This pattern supports Haugen (1972) multilingual ecology framework, which posits that languages in multilingual societies often develop specialized functional niches.

Forms of Linguistic Contact

The interaction between Arabic and French in Nigeria appears to occur primarily through institutional and functional contact rather than direct structural borrowing.

Three principal forms of interaction were identified:

1. **Mediated lexical interaction** In many contexts, communication between Arabic and French speakers occurs indirectly through English or Hausa, which often function as intermediary languages in academic or commercial environments.
2. **Limited code-switching** Among bilingual university students, occasional code-switching was observed during informal discussions. For example, students sometimes introduced Arabic terms when discussing religious concepts within otherwise French-based academic conversations.
3. **Transliteration practices** Religious scholars with exposure to Francophone audiences reported adapting Arabic religious terms into French orthographic forms when writing or presenting to French-speaking communities.

These patterns indicate that while the two languages coexist within overlapping social spaces, the contact between them does not typically produce extensive structural integration. Instead, the interaction can be described as institutionally mediated bilingual coexistence.

Linguistic Capital and Identity Negotiation

The findings also reveal a dual system of linguistic valuation consistent with Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital.

Arabic carries significant symbolic capital, particularly within Muslim communities. Participants consistently associated Arabic proficiency with religious scholarship, intellectual authority, and social respect.

French, however, was widely viewed as possessing instrumental capital. Many participants described French as a practical resource that facilitates economic advancement, regional mobility, and access to international opportunities.

Interestingly, participants who possessed competence in both languages often described their linguistic repertoire as advantageous rather than conflicting. For these individuals, the ability to navigate both religious and regional spheres enhanced their social and professional opportunities.

This observation aligns with Heller (2007) argument that multilingualism often functions as a strategic resource shaped by institutional and economic structures.

Emerging Patterns of Complementarity

Overall, the findings indicate that the relationship between Arabic and French in Nigeria is characterised by structured coexistence rather than linguistic rivalry. Arabic retains strong cultural and religious authority, while French continues to gain importance as a language of regional communication and economic interaction.

The interaction between the two languages is most visible in universities, border communities, and transnational religious networks, yet their functional roles remain largely differentiated.

Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Arabic–French interaction in Nigeria is shaped primarily by functional complementarity, institutional mediation, and differing forms of linguistic capital. Rather than competing for dominance, the two languages occupy distinct but intersecting domains within Nigeria’s multilingual landscape.

By integrating insights from Language Contact Theory, Linguistic Capital Theory, and the Multilingual Ecology perspective, this study highlights how transnational languages can coexist within complex multilingual societies without necessarily undergoing structural convergence.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the constructive coexistence of French and Arabic within Nigeria’s multilingual ecology and to maximize their complementary potentials:

1. Higher education institutions should explore structured academic intersections between Arabic and French studies, particularly in universities offering both programs.
2. Professional training programs should encourage dual proficiency pathways. Targeted scholarships and exchange programs involving Francophone West African countries such as Niger and Benin could enhance practical competence.
3. Language policy frameworks should formally recognize the complementary roles of Arabic and French rather than treating foreign language promotion as isolated initiatives.
4. Government and educational stakeholders should establish community-based language centers offering practical communication training tailored to cross-border trade, migration processes, and religious mobility.
5. Research funding bodies and academic institutions should prioritise studies on transnational language contact in West Africa.
6. Specialised translation training programs should be developed to prepare professionals capable of mediating between Arabic religious discourse and French diplomatic or commercial communication.

Conclusion

This study has examined the interplay between French and Arabic in Nigeria through the lenses of Language Contact Theory, Linguistic Capital Theory, and the Multilingual Ecology perspective. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between the two languages is best understood not as direct competition or structural convergence, but as a system of functional complementarity shaped by historical depth, regional geopolitics, religious authority, and economic pragmatism. Arabic sustains strong symbolic capital rooted in centuries of Islamic scholarship, theological discourse, and manuscript traditions, while French derives its instrumental value from cross-border trade, diplomacy, and Nigeria’s regional engagement within West Africa. The research shows that contact between French and Arabic is largely institutionally mediated, occurring in universities, religious networks, and border economies rather than through widespread grassroots blending. Patterns of interaction, such as limited code-switching, transliteration practices, and domain-based specialisation, indicate structured coexistence within stratified yet intersecting spheres. Individuals proficient in both languages strategically mobilise them according to context, thereby enhancing their social, economic, and intellectual positioning. By integrating sociolinguistic and political economy frameworks, this study contributes to broader debates on transnational language dynamics in multilingual societies. It challenges monolithic narratives of linguistic dominance and instead highlights the layered and negotiated nature of language coexistence in Nigeria. Ultimately, the French–Arabic interface reflects the country’s embeddedness within both Islamic intellectual networks and regional Francophone systems, underscoring the importance of policy recognition, academic integration, and sustained research into evolving patterns of language contact in West Africa.

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