

# The lexicographic treatment of West African kinship terminologies

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the treatment of kinship terminologies in lexical descriptions of West African languages. Lexical descriptions of African languages show a general disconnection between the terminology being compiled (and the kinship system that the terminology represents) and the translation provided by the lexicographer, who provides correspondences of the terms of the language described that are based on the terminology and kinship system that are most familiar to the compiler or the user the compiler is addressing. In the case of minority languages, kinship terms are often excluded or poorly represented within lexical descriptions. The loss of semantic and cultural information can be traced back to four main causes: 1) the compiler's lack of training in anthropology, 2) the consideration of the kinship system as being secondary within the lexical corpus, 3) the (more or less unintentional) disregard of the lack of interlingual isomorphism, and 4) a precise choice made by the compiler, who identifies the audience of the lexical description and adheres to the end users' cultural framework and needs.

**Keywords:** *kinship terminologies, West Africa, Hausa, minority languages, bilingual dictionaries*

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## 1. Introduction and organisation of the paper<sup>1</sup>

This article stems from a negative observation: kinship terminologies as they are found in the lexical descriptions of West African languages are treated inconsistently, non-systematically, and with a degree of variability that rarely allows the user to extract a minimal amount of information about the kinship system underlying its terminology in a given language.

The basic assumption is that kinship terms are special terminologies. They represent networks of fundamental relations that not only are constitutive of societies, but are also subject to cultural variation. Precisely because of their importance in the construction of human societies and their cultural variation, we would expect them to be given appropriate space – at least to some extent – in lexical descriptions. Although this expectation may seem trivial and somewhat self-evident, it is contradicted by the state of affairs: as we shall see, lexical compilers tend to ignore (for a whole series of reasons) kinship terminologies.

The issue has been addressed in a small number of studies (among others SIBOMANA 1981 and WANGIA and AYEKO 2016), and its consideration still remains

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<sup>1</sup> A first version of this text was presented at the *4th Symposium on West African Languages* (Naples, 21-23 September 2022). The lively discussion that followed the presentation benefited from the presence of a significant number of dictionary compilers. I am grateful to the participants for their considerations and remarks on why kinship terms are not given proper consideration in certain types of lexical descriptions. Section 4 of this article reflects and integrates the points raised during the discussion.

at the margins of lexicographic practice. This article, therefore, seeks to frame critically the treatment of kinship terminologies in lexical descriptions of West African languages, i.e., the quality and quantity of their presence in the different types of dictionaries available to users. Parallel objectives consist, on the one hand, in outlining the causal framework that determines the lexicographic treatment under scrutiny, and, on the other hand, in suggesting an answer to the current situation. In order to do so, the paper is organised as follows: first, a description and categorisation of the lexical descriptions under consideration will be offered, both from a structural and empirical point of view. Next, the cultural nature of the lexicographic product will be illustrated. The cultural variability of kinship terminologies will be exemplified with the case of Hausa, and the types of lexicographic treatment given to kinship terminologies will then be outlined. In the final section, the reasons for the current state of affairs will be discussed, also from the perspective of the compilers themselves.

## 2. Lexicographic products

This section is devoted to (a) the definition of the lexicographic product under consideration, i.e., the bilingual dictionary, as well as of its inherent bidirectionality; (b) the empirical categorisation of dictionaries as commercial, scientific and academic products; and (c) the inalienable cultural dimension of lexical descriptions.

### *2.1 Properties of bilingual dictionaries*

The lexicographic product relevant to our discussion is the bilingual dictionary, i.e., a dictionary L2-L1 where “the source language (SL) is the foreign language (L2) for the dictionary users and [the] target language (TL) is either the user’s native language (L1) or a foreign language better known to [the user] than the dictionary’s source language” (ADAMSKA-SAŁACIAK 2016: 144).

The salient property of bilingual dictionaries is bidirectionality: they address two groups of speakers at the same time and for different purposes. An A-B dictionary will be used by speakers of language B as an L2-L1 dictionary for reception, while it will be used by speakers of language A as an L1-L2 dictionary for production. A-B/B-A dictionaries, i.e., bilingual dictionaries with a reverse section, are intended to serve two groups of speakers for both purposes. However, in the context of lexical descriptions of African languages, these dictionaries are often asymmetrical, i.e., the reverse section consists of an index or glossary without examples or definitions and with minimal grammatical information. Even if dictionaries are organised upon the identification of a primary group of users, such as in L2-L1 dictionaries where the intended user group of the lexicographic work is constituted mainly by L1 speakers, usually the compiler recognises and promotes the bi-directionality of the work. See for example the following statements on the intended uses of three dictionaries (Hausa-English, Hausa-English-Hausa, and English-Hausa):

“[...] for use in Nigeria by Nigerians wishing to learn about one of the major languages of their country. [...] as well as for speakers of other languages who are trying to improve their present knowledge of Hausa or who are just beginning to learn it” (NEWMAN 1977: v)

“This dictionary [...] intended to assist Hausa speakers to learn English. Such is still its main intention. It can, however, be used by English speakers wishing to learn Hausa [...]” (SKINNER 1965: iii)

“This dictionary [...] is especially geared to the needs of speakers of both languages, be they student, business traveler, or tourist.” (AWDE 1996: back cover)

## 2.2 Dictionary as products: format and context of use

Dictionaries have been defined on the basis of their intended user groups, i.e., on the basis of the different language competence of the user groups with respect to the languages covered by a dictionary. However, I would like to propose another type of categorisation, and frame dictionaries in terms of products defined on the basis of their format as well as their intended purpose or scope of use, rather than on the structure and L1 or L2 competence of the users. This type of categorisation, far from being formal or formalizable, is based on the quantitative characteristics of the lexicographic product.

We can distinguish three types of dictionaries: 1) reference dictionaries, 2) compact dictionaries, and 3) dictionaries of minority languages. By reference dictionaries, we intend those L2-L1/L1-L2 dictionaries characterised by a certain completeness of information: they are generally available for major and well-documented languages, such as languages that enjoy official recognition on a macro-regional or national level or vehicular languages. Reference dictionaries describe vocabulary extensively, make systematic use of examples and definitions, and include a variety of grammatical information. The ‘classic’ Hausa-English dictionaries of ABRAHAM (1946) and BARGER (1934) and the more modern ones of MA NEWMAN (1997, English-Hausa) *plus* NEWMAN (2007, Hausa-English) and NEWMAN & MA NEWMAN (2022, Hausa-English/English-Hausa) fall into the category of reference dictionaries thus defined.

Then there are those dictionaries that can be labelled ‘compact’. They are offered as quick reference works and are designed upon criteria of practicality. This type of product is also generally available for the dominant or most widely used languages, but unlike reference dictionaries, the amount of grammatical information is minimal, as is the use of definitions and examples. Dictionaries with a commercial vocation fall into this category, such as the *Hausa-English/English-Hausa Dictionary* by AWDE (1996) and the *Wolof-English / English-Wolof Dictionary* by KANTOREK (2006).

Finally, there is a third type of lexicographic product: bilingual dictionaries that have a minority language (SL) as their source language. Dictionaries that fall into this category are essentially academic products with limited circulation: they have no commercial potential and their presence is generally confined to university libraries. The amount and type of grammatical information, as well as the presence or absence of definitions and examples, varies from product to product. A dictionary of this type is generally the only lexicographic product available for the source language and the likelihood of others being compiled is minimal. Moreover, despite our best intentions, or those of our collaborators and local language boards, one cannot ignore the fact that most lexical descriptions of minority languages are only potentially bidirectional and that their nature is that of an L2-L1 product used only by speakers of the TL (i.e., L1, where L1 is an Indo-European language).

These three categories, especially if individual features are considered, are prone to a certain overlap. Some compact dictionaries, for instance, do not neglect grammatical

aspects and, although geared mainly for practical use, pursue the highest scientific rigour. There are dictionaries that have a non-dominant language as source language, and yet have all the characteristics of a reference dictionary in terms of the extent and treatment of grammatical information.

### 2.3 *The cultural dimension of dictionaries*

The main purpose of a dictionary, be it ‘of reference’, ‘compact’ or ‘(purely) academic’, is to provide the equivalent of an SL term in the TL language. The treatment of cultural context in providing the equivalent of a term is partly influenced by the type of reader/user the dictionary wants to reach. However, this is only one of the secondary aspects that lead to a particular treatment of cultural information. Whatever the format assumed by a bilingual dictionary, the formulation of equivalents and the quality and quantity of information included in an entry, as well as the information that is excluded from it, depend primarily on the fact that dictionaries (bilingual or not) are inherently cultural products. Przemysław Łozowski considers the entry ‘fungus’ and discusses the cultural dimension of its lexicographic treatment in this way:

“[...] whether the plural of *fungus* is *funguses* or *fungi*, and, if it is the latter, whether it is pronounced with /g/ or /dʒ/, and whether or not one knows and uses fungus in one of its possible extended senses as “someone who is lazy and does nothing all day” (*urbandictionary.com*) – this is a matter of cultural considerations because it reflects the user’s expected preferences, choices, values, ideologies, knowledge, experience, and mentality, which is all that we typically call culture. So, if your dictionary specifies only one plural form of the singular *fungus*, or it insists on only one of the two pronunciations of *fungi*, or conceals slang meanings of *fungus*, this shows what group of speakers the dictionary makers want you to identify with and what forms and meanings they consider to be (in)appropriate, (un)desirable, (dis)agreeable, or (non)standard, be it in terms of meaning or grammar.” (ŁOZOWSKI 2018: 166)

Łozowski refers to monolingual pedagogical EFL dictionaries, but the same could be said about any lexical description or lexicographic work. Lexicographic descriptions and lexicographic products, however, are ‘cultural’ in two different ways. On the one hand, there are the “cultural considerations” of the compiler, who makes choices of inclusion and exclusion on the basis of what has been said above. These considerations are consciously made and functional to the author’s objectives. On the other hand, there are the choices that the compiler makes unconsciously because he or she operates within a network of background cultural assumptions that reduce cultural differences to the compiler’s reference culture alone.

A first rough-grained observation is that the three types of lexicographic product described in the previous section handle cultural information in distinct ways. More precisely, they operate different choices in providing the TL equivalent of an SL term when the cultural context of the SL group and that of the TL group do not overlap. Consider, for example, the equivalent of the Hausa lexeme *kunu* in the Hausa-English dictionaries by AWDU (1996) (a compact dictionary) and by ABRAHAM (1946) (one of the earliest reference dictionaries, still unmatched):

- (1) a. “gruel [...] N.B. gruel is made preferably with guinea-corn flour, but if none available, then with *maiwa*, and failing that with *gero*. It is flavoured with tamarind juice (*tsamiya*) and honey or sugar. As seen from its epithets above, *kunu* is disliked and is substitute for tuwo or fura for the sake of speed. [...]” (ABRAHAM 1946)
- b. “gruel” (AWDE 1996)

Regardless of the specific reason for the inclusion or exclusion of certain cultural information in providing the TL equivalent of the SL term (e.g. priority given to compactness, access to cultural data, methodology followed in the lexicographic compilation process, etc.), it is evident that the equivalent of *kunu* given in (1b) with a discrete lexical unit (‘gruel’) does not take into account a whole range of culturally related information that is instead given in Abraham with a certain depth of detail.

From the point of view of the result, i.e. the effect caused by the exclusion of cultural information, ‘explanatory’ and ‘defining’ dictionaries (cf. ŠĆERBA 1940 [1995]) deal with anisomorphism, that is, the lack of interlingual isomorphism, in an opposite manner: Abraham’s dictionary acknowledges that the SL and the TL have two distinct cultural referents and addresses anisomorphism by providing exhaustive definitions, examples, epithets and proverbs; Awdu’s dictionary, on the other hand, overlaps the two different cultural contexts through univocal lexical correspondences, i.e., anisomorphism is not considered ‘by design’ since it falls beyond the scope of the dictionary.

### 3. Kinship terminologies

Difference in cultural context is relevant in a large number of domains. Terms indicating practices or experiences in two different languages are rarely superimposable with univocal lexical correspondences without loss of cultural information. Beekeeping, hunting, cooking techniques, traditional medicine, and belief systems: these are just some of the domains in which cultures differ and for which ‘explanatory’ lexical equivalents will have to resort to definitions and examples. Some of the aforementioned domains, when productive in a given culture, are included in lexical descriptions; others, either because they are not relevant or because they are not taken into account by the compiler, are excluded. There is one domain, however, that we would expect to find in any lexical description, and that is kinship terminology. This section will discuss the cultural relevance of kinship terminologies and their lexicographic treatment.

#### 3.1 Kinship systems and terminologies

Kinship systems are culturally relevant: they are not universal and exhibit a certain degree of cultural variability. However, as anthropologists soon realised, kinship systems are ascribable to a limited number of nomenclature patterns. Although, as noted by BERNARD (2011: 223), KROEBER’s (1909) 8 features can generate (depending on how many of the eight features are considered and the choice made on the two options provided for each feature) 3,561 different systems, the patterns adopted across human societies – minus the variants – total 6. The studies of SPIER (1925), LOWIE (1928), KIRCHHOFF (1932) and MURDOCK (1949) led to the definition of the well-known Hawaiian, Sudanese, Omaha, Eskimo, Crow, and Iroquois systems. This is not the place to go over the discussion on the classification of kinship systems and I will limit myself

to a general formulation, whereby a kinship system consists of classificatory terms (i.e., terms that minimise kin distinctions) and descriptive terms (i.e., terms that maximise kin distinctions), and what differentiates the systems is the distribution and assignment of these types of terms to the different elements of the kinship structure. Furthermore, the following must be pointed out:

- a) a kinship system is understood here as a naming system, i.e., how a member of the kinship network named Ego (the centre of the kinship map) refers to the other members of the network;
- b) the naming system is a psychological and cultural reality, and is anchored in a system of roles, rights and duties specific to the kinship structure;
- c) kinship terminology collects the kinship system's designations and refers to a position within the kinship network. Since kinship systems identify roles and positions within the kinship structure (which is culture-specific), kinship terms cannot be understood through a simple translation of the lexeme.

### *3.2 The case of the Hausa Kinship Terminology (HKT)*

I will exemplify here the lexicographic treatment of kinship terms by examining the case of Hausa. Hausa, with its numerous lexical descriptions, will allow us to observe the spectrum of solutions formulated by different compilers. The Hausa kinship terminology (HKT) has the typical features of the Sudanese system, i.e., it includes a significant number of descriptive terms that maximise kin distinctions. The system also includes classificatory terms, that is, terms that group components posited at different distances from Ego. In Figure 1, a mapping of kinship terms is proposed based on an algebraic representation of the system (READ 1984, 2013; LEAF and READ 2021). A certain density of terms is observed in the Ego generation and the parental generation. The significant number of terms in the two bands reflects the production relations within the system. In the Ego generation, one distinguishes the terms that Ego will use to address the children of his father and mother (i.e., both parents in common), the children of either parent (i.e., one parent in common), the children of his father (i.e., the parent in common is the father), and so on. In the parental generation, on the other hand, the terms with which Ego will address the children of his parents are indicated; there are four terms, determined by line (maternal/paternal) and gender.

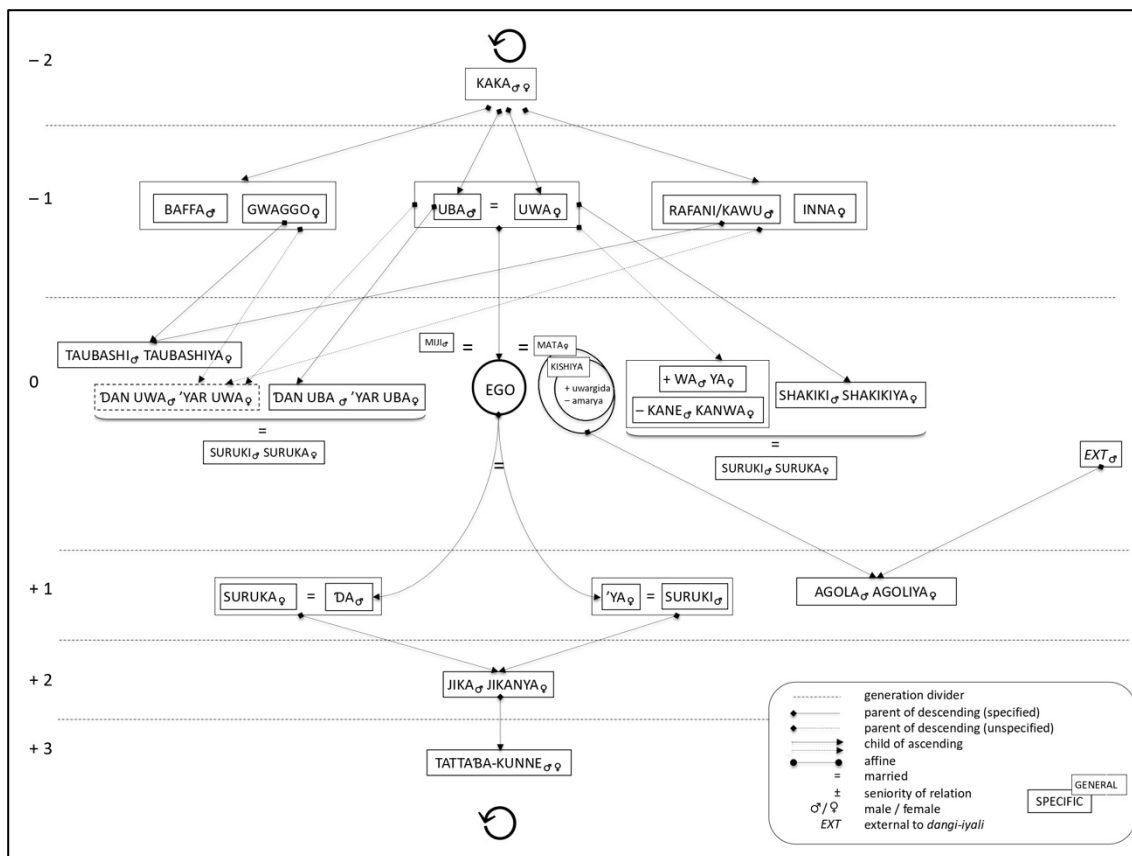


Figure 1 – A kinship map for the HKT

The terms *taubashi* ‘cross-cousin’ and *dān’uwa* ‘same-generation relative, sibling’ exemplify descriptive and classificatory terms, respectively:

- (2) *taubashi*
  - a. “*Cousins*, but only children of a brother and a sister, not of two brothers or two sisters. [...]” (BARGER 1934)
  - b. “cousin(s) or their descendants (but *taubashi* refers only to children of a brother and a sister, not those of brother and brother nor sister and sister)” (ABRAHAM 1946)
  - c. “cross-cousin, i.e., children of one’s mother’s brother(s) or one’s father’s sister(s)” (NEWMAN 2007)
  
- (3) *dān’uwa*
  - a. 1. “Brother (whether full (vide *shakiki*); or by same father only; or by same mother only).”  
2. “Any relation by blood or marriage.” (BARGER 1934)
  - b. “Brother (*strictly* full brother, *but commonly used* for any brother, relative, fellow-country man” (ABRAHAM 1946)

Examples (2) and (3) demonstrate how the translation of *taubashi* and *dān ’uwa* with a label term is not effective in providing an equivalent. Terms such as ‘cousin’ and ‘brother’, used as label equivalents in a translating dictionary, would provide a partial equivalence: the SL kinship system and the TL kinship system are not isomorphic.

The case of *taubashi* is particularly interesting. In the definitions given in (2), only Newman provides the term used in anthropological science, i.e., ‘cross-cousin’. In other dictionaries, different solutions have been adopted. AWDE (1996) does not include *taubashi* in his dictionary and the equivalents of the English term ‘cousin’ given in the English-Hausa section are “*dān uwa*” and “*’yar uwa*”. BALDI’s dictionary (2015), which is also a compact dictionary with a high number of entries, provides an equivalent that conveys the notion of first cousin, but not that of cross-cousin:

- (4) *taubashi*
- a.  $\neg\exists$   
(AWDE 1996, L2-L1 Hausa-English / English-Hausa)
  - b. “cugino germano”  
(BALDI 2015, L2-L1 Hausa-Italian / Italian-Hausa)

Dictionaries with Hausa as target language show the same variability. Example (5) shows the two equivalents of the term ‘cousin’ given by SKINNER (1965) and CARON and AMFANI (1997). Skinner provides a definition, whereas Caron and Amfani prefer to organise the entry with numbered label terms. Caron and Amfani, as also seen in (4), confuse the notion of cross-cousin with that of first cousin.

- (5) *cousin*
- a. “*dān’uwan mutum wanda ya ke ko dān kawu ko dān inna ko dān babani ko dān gwaggo*” [relative who is the child of a maternal uncle or maternal aunt or paternal uncle or paternal aunt]  
(SKINNER 1965: 37, L2-L1 English-Hausa)
  - b. “1. (germain) *tobashi*; 2. *dān’uwa*”  
(CARON and AMFANI 1997, L2-L1 French-Hausa)

### 3.3 Kinship terminologies in minority language dictionaries

The heart of the problem, as we shall see, lies in the treatment of kinship terminologies in minority language dictionaries. In this type of academic product, a striking discrepancy can be observed between the compiled terminology (and the kinship system that the terminology represents) and the translation provided by the lexicographer, who often neglect kin terms *tout court* or provides correspondences of the terms of the language described that are based on the terminology and kinship system that are most familiar to the compiler or the user the compiler is addressing.

The analysis of a number of publications allows us to outline three scenarios.<sup>2</sup> In the first scenario, kinship terms are not included in the lexical compilation. Possible reasons

<sup>2</sup> Most of the publications consulted are L2-L1 dictionaries with an L1-L2 section (often in the form of a glossary). Apart from a few exceptions, the kinship term was searched in the L1-L2 section and, based on its presence or absence, in the L2-L1 section. The languages and compilations consulted are as follows: Afro-Asiatic (Chadic): Bade <bde> (TARBUTU 2000, DAGONA 2004); Bole <bol> (GIMBA 2009), Bure <bhv> (BATIC 2014, glossaries following the grammatical sketch); Hdi <xed> (FRAJZYNGIER et al. 2015), Karekare <kai> (TIKAU and YUSUF 2009), Muyang <muy> (SMITH 2017), Pero <pep> (FRAJZYNGIER 1985), Mwaghavul <sur> (FRAJZYNGIER 1991), Tangale <tan> (JUNGRAITHMAYR 1991); Atlantic-Congo: Balanta-Ganja <bjt>



for such a choice are discussed in the next section. In the second scenario, the compiler only provides some generating terms (in the sense of READ 2013), such as ‘mother’, ‘father’, and ‘son’. In the third scenario, alongside these generating terms, some sibling terms such as ‘brother, sister’ and ‘brother-in-law’ are also included.

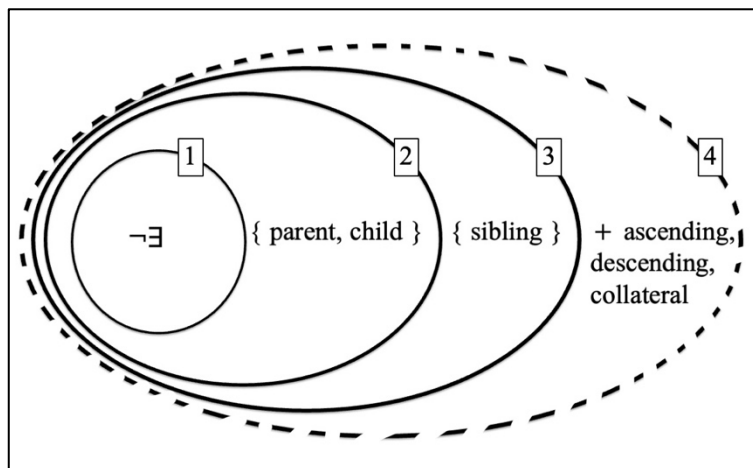


Figure 2 – Inclusion and exclusion of kinship terms in minority language dictionaries:  
3 + 1 scenarios

The three scenarios represented in Figure 2 only indicate trends within lexicographic production. It is observed that kinship terminology suffers from little consideration and is included unsystematically. Equivalents, when present, are rendered through label terms; while this does not create any particular problems in the case of terms such as ‘father’ and ‘mother’, in the case of ‘brother’ it is not possible to know what exactly is meant by brother (full-brother, brother apart from mother/father, same-generation relative, etc.).

The presence of some terms and the exclusion of others does not follow a pattern. The assumption we can make is that the compiler included what was at hand, i.e., what emerged during the elicitation work. Elicitation, in turn, is often based on lists/questionnaires compiled in the working language (English, French, or vehicular/areal language), thus on label terms used – erroneously – as meta-terms.

#### 4. Why do we disregard kinship terminologies?

What are the reasons why such an important semantic and cultural domain as that constituted by kinship terms is ignored or underrepresented in the lexical descriptions of minority languages? The causes are various and sometimes concomitant, and I will try to summarise them in four main points. First, there is a methodological deficit in the collection of kinship terms due to the compiler’s lack of training in anthropology. Terms are collected unsystematically, often using lists of basic lexemes (the so-called basic and cultural vocabularies) designed for comparative purposes such as the *SIL African Comparative Wordlist* (ROBERTS and SNIDER 2006) and JUNGRAITHMAIR’s

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(SADIO and MANSALY 2017); Mande: Boko <bqc> (JONES 2004a), Bokobaru <bus> (JONES 2004b), Busa <bqp> (JONES 2004c).

*Proposed bilingual Chadic word list* (1979).<sup>3</sup> These lists, organised by semantic and cultural domains, are culture-independent: they employ English and French terms as meta-terms and are therefore not suitable for the collection of kinship terminology. A second cause is to be found in the compiler's consideration that the kinship system is not a priority, i.e., fieldwork should be spent on maximising the number of dictionary entries and collecting grammatical data. The systematic collection of kinship terms is thus postponed to a possible later stage (a stage that, however, rarely takes place). The third cause is a selective disregard for the cultural relevance of kinship terms: if for some cultural areas languages are treated with the lack of interlingual isomorphism in mind, the cultural distance of the systems is simply not recognised when describing kinship terminology. Finally, one might also want to consider the precise choice of the compiler, who decides to crush the cultural diversity of the kinship system on the end-user's kinship system, therefore relying on label terms. This motivation, which as we have seen is openly followed in compact dictionaries, is difficult to detect in 'purely' academic products, and is probably the least common of the causes discussed.

It is certainly true that a description of the kinship nomenclature system requires an anthropological study, that is, a study conducted using the techniques of anthropological science. And it is equally true that a lexical description cannot be the tool adopted to reconstruct a kinship system. However, that being said, it is certainly surprising how widely dictionaries of minority languages ignore kinship terminologies. To the causes already mentioned, we must add three factors related to the fieldwork and the psychology of the relationship between the researcher and the language community. There is certainly one factor determined by the researcher's need to act within defined time limits: collecting data on specific terminologies is time consuming (as well as being energy consuming for both the researcher and the native speaker collaborator), and collecting data on the kinship system itself requires a different approach from the one adopted to elicit other sections of the lexicon. A second factor has to do with the feeling of 'violated intimacy' that the researcher projects onto his or her collaborators: precise questions about the nomenclature system with the collaborator in the position of Ego are often perceived as invasive or inappropriate, and therefore avoided. The last factor concerns the frequency with which the data occur: as much as kinship structures are foundational to social organisation, their terminologies rarely emerge in orature texts. The different genres that are the subject of linguistic documentation (fables, legends, autobiographical narratives, prescriptive texts, etc.) tend not to include non-nuclear kinship terms, and even if they are present, the equivalent suggested by the native speaker is likely to take the form of a label term borrowed or calqued from a contact language (e.g., the vehicular language or the working language used within the project).

Time table and sensitivity apart, a possible solution that could easily be adopted by the compiler would be to structure the collection of kinship terms in algebraic form. The kinship terms would be derived as products of generating terms according to the principle for which "If ego knows what term to use for alter A, and also knows what term A uses for alter B, he can easily work out what term he himself should use for B" (GOOD 1981: 113). In Read's formalisation, the principle is realised as follows: "If ego (properly) refers to alter 1 by the kin term L and alter 1 properly refers to alter 2 by the kin term K, then by the product of K and L, denoted K o L, is meant a kin term (if any)

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<sup>3</sup> Jungraithmayr's list will form the basis of the Cultural Vocabulary and Basic Vocabulary adopted in the 1990s in the SFB 268 project "History of Culture and Language in the Natural Environment of the West African Savannah" (Goethe University Frankfurt).

ego properly uses to refer to alter 2” (READ 1984). This method would allow the compiler to derive kinship terms consistently from a number of generating terms (e.g. parent, child) without first having to resort to the construction of a genealogical space. Ultimately, the evaluation and choice pertain to the compiler, who will ask him or herself the question: is it really so important to include kinship terms in a lexicographic product?

## 5. Conclusions

This article has addressed the lexicographic treatment of West African kinship terminologies. The object analysed (the bilingual dictionary) has been defined and categorised in terms of the extent of lexical information and its intended use. The three categories identified are the reference dictionary, the modern and compact dictionary, and finally the ‘academic’ dictionary. These three products differ in their treatment, quality and quantity of lexico-grammatical information. The reference dictionary aims at a comprehensive description of the lexicon: definitions and examples are used extensively, and entries also include grammatical information (part of speech, plurals, verb classes, etc.). The modern, compact dictionary makes inclusion and exclusion choices based on a practicality criterion: instead of definitions and examples, label terms are used. The lexical descriptions of minority languages almost always take the form of an ‘academic’ dictionary, without a commercial vocation and intended almost exclusively for the scientific community. All lexicographical compilations are cultural: they provide equivalents of non-isomorphic languages and cultures and therefore any solution adopted in providing an equivalent has a bearing on the cultural information the terms carry. Reference and compact dictionaries are available for official and dominant languages, that is, for languages that are widely used and with a relative high number of speakers, and the case study of Hausa allowed us to analyse the type of solutions adopted by different compilers in dealing with kinship terminology. There is a stark contrast in the treatment of cultural information in reference dictionaries on the one hand, and in modern, compact dictionaries on the other. Culture-specific terms such as *taubashi* ‘cross-cousin’ are treated unevenly, yet (with a few exceptions) are included in the different compilations. In the lexical descriptions of minority languages, on the contrary, there is a partial or total absence of kinship terminology. This situation is caused mainly by 1) the compiler’s lack of training in anthropology, 2) the consideration of the kinship system as being secondary within the lexical corpus, 3) the (more or less unintentional) disregard of the lack of interlingual isomorphism, and 4) a precise choice made by the compiler, who identifies the audience of the lexical description and adheres to the end users’ cultural framework and needs.

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