

# HAUSA BASICS FOR HUMANITARIANS

This factsheet is designed for humanitarian responders in northeast Nigeria and other humanitarian and development staff who require information about the Hausa language. It aims to provide a brief overview of the dialects, speakers, and geographical distribution of Hausa and of the ways to effectively communicate with Hausa speakers.

## Overcoming the language barrier

**There are several ways to reduce misunderstandings and establish trust with Hausa speakers:**

- Know if your audience speaks Hausa as a first language.
- Know if your audience uses and understands the Latin-based Hausa script for written communication, and be prepared to use the Arabic-based Hausa script if not.
- Use pictures, graphics, and audio messages to help comprehension. This is particularly important for less literate individuals and second-language Hausa speakers.
- Check that field staff, translators and interpreters are familiar with the form of Hausa commonly used in the relevant area. If that is not possible, use simple, widely understood words and avoid slang, idiomatic expressions and academic or technical terms.
- Support field staff to use consistent, accurate, and easily understood Hausa words.
- Allow Hausa speakers to communicate their needs and concerns in their preferred language and format

## Facts you need to know about Hausa

1

Despite the basic uniformity of written Hausa, there are at least seven mutually intelligible dialect areas:

**Kano Hausa.** This is usually referred to as standard Hausa and is based on the dialect spoken in the city of Kano, Nigeria. It is used in print and broadcast media by both Nigerian and international Hausa language outlets.

**Northern Hausa.** This is spoken along the Nigeria-Niger border.

**Western Hausa.** This is spoken in northwest Nigeria and southern Niger, and considered the classical form of the Hausa language.

**Eastern Hausa.** Also known as Guddiri Hausa, it is spoken mainly in Hadejia, Azare, Katagum, and Potiskum local government areas in northeast Nigeria. Some consider it a subdialect of Kano Hausa.

**Ghanaian Hausa.** This is spoken by first-language Hausa speakers in Ghana.

**Non-native Hausa.** The Hausa spoken as a second language in the northeast, particularly among people who have not received much or any formal education in Hausa, is substantially different from formal or Kano Hausa. Non-native Hausa speakers are likely to use a number of loan words from Kanuri and other local languages, their syntax may be simplified and their vocabulary simpler. To be understandable, humanitarian communication in Hausa needs to take those aspects of non-native local language use on board.

**Southern Hausa.** This is spoken mainly in Zaria and Bauchi local government areas in northeast Nigeria. Some consider it a subdialect of Kano Hausa.

- 2** Hausa is one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa. Estimates vary widely, but it is likely spoken by at least 60 million and as many as 150 million people.
- 3** Hausa is a Chadic language, part of the Afroasiatic language family, and widely used as a trade language across many parts of West and Central Africa. Hausa is spoken commonly in northern Nigeria and southern Niger. It is also used as a lingua franca across much of West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger) and parts of Sudan.
- 4** Hausa is a tonal language; this means that saying a word with different tones changes its meaning even if pronunciation is otherwise the same. For example, the word *zagi* can mean 'abuse' or 'emir's counselor' depending on how it is pronounced.
- 5** Hausa was written first in a modified Arabic script known as *ajami*. Since the early 20th century, written Hausa has adopted a Latin-based script known as *boko*. While *boko* is the main Hausa script, *ajami* is still used mainly in Islamic schools or madrassas and also by some media outlets.
- 6** Although Hausa is not an official language in Nigeria, it is one of the main languages of instruction in primary and secondary schools. Educated people in northeast Nigeria are therefore likely to be confident using written Hausa and its Latin-based script. However, **people whose highest level of education is a madrassa might only be able to read the Arabic-based Hausa script.**
- 7** Many people in northeast Nigeria are not literate. According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, in 2010 the literacy rates were 40.5 percent in Adamawa, 14.5 percent in Borno and 26.6 percent in Yobe, with female literacy levels much lower. **TWB's research indicates that written Hausa (Latin-based script) is largely ineffective with less educated and non-native speakers unless combined with audio communication.**

## How TWB can help

- Hausa translations of written, audio, and video materials by trained translators
- Comprehension-testing research to determine the best combination of language, format, and channel for communicating with crisis-affected people
- Training on the basics of interpreting for humanitarian staff
- Practical tools, online glossaries, and good practice guides for humanitarian field staff, interpreters, and translators are available at  
[translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-response-nigeria](http://translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-response-nigeria)

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