CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF COMPARATIVE/HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST: WHAT BORROWED AND INHERITED WORDS TELL US ABOUT THE EARLY HISTORY OF HAUSA*

Philip J. Jaggar

1. Introduction

Hausa, with perhaps as many as 40 million first-language speakers (within the Afroasiatic/Afrasian phylum only Arabic has more), is by far the largest of the 130 or more languages which constitute the Chadic family. Hausa covers most of the northern and western extent of the family, across northern Nigeria and into southern Niger. Chadic languages also extend into northern Cameroon and western and south-central parts of the Chad Republic, and hitherto unknown languages are still occasionally discovered. This area is one of the most linguistically complex in Africa, and is the location of languages belonging to three of the four great phyla as postulated by Greenberg (1963)—Afroasiatic (among which Hausa), Niger-Kordofanian (among which Fula(ni)), and Nilo-Saharan (among which Kanuri).

The two major subclassifications of the Chadic family have been advanced by Newman (1977, 1990) (both refinements of Newman and Ma 1966), and Jungraithmayr and Ibriszimow (1994), and between them they classify Chadic into four branches: West Chadic-A (including Hausa, Bole/Bolanci) and West Chadic-B (Bade, Ngizim, etc.), Biu-Mandara or Central Chadic (including languages in northeastern Nigeria, such as Tera, Margi, and northern Cameroon), East Chadic (western Chad Republic, e.g., Kera), and the closely related Masa group (western/central Chad Republic and northeastern Cameroon) (Map 2.1.).

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Map 2.1. The Chadic languages (Schuh 2002).