

# Divergent Dialects or Similar Languages: A Case Study of Nabit and Gureɛ

Robyn Giffen

University of British Columbia Okanagan  
3333 University Way, Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7 Canada

[robyn.giffen@alumni.ubc.ca]

## Abstract

Frafra, a language spoken in the Upper East Region of Ghana, is considered to have five dialects, which are Gureɛ (regarded as the main dialect), Booni, Nankani, Talene, and Nabit. However, according to previous research, Nabit, the dialect spoken in the Nabdam District, is closest to Talene, and these two dialects are quite distinct from the other three. In fact, Robert Schafer (1975) suggested that Nabit might not actually be a dialect of Gureɛ and instead could be classified as a separate language. Speakers of both Nabit and Gureɛ also report that the languages are so different that they cannot understand each other. This paper compares the Nabit Swadesh wordlist, which I collected in the summer of 2012, with the Gureɛ Swadesh wordlist, which was collected by Robert Schafer in 1975, to determine if Nabit and Gureɛ can be considered separate languages based on linguistic differences. I also consider the social and political differences between Nabit and Gureɛ and whether or not Nabit could or should use the already established Gureɛ alphabet so that there is standardization across the dialects or whether the linguistic, social, and political differences between Nabit and Gureɛ require Nabit to have its own writing system.

## Résumé

Frafra, une langue parlée dans la région Upper East du Ghana, est considérée comme étant constituée de cinq dialectes: le gureɛ (considéré comme le dialecte principal), le booni, le nankani, le talene et le nabit. Toutefois, selon des recherches antérieures, le nabit – dialecte parlé dans le district Nabdam – est le plus proche du talene, et ces deux dialectes sont assez distincts des trois autres. En fait, Robert Schafer (1975) a suggéré que le nabit pourrait ne pas être un dialecte du gureɛ mais pourrait plutôt se classer comme une langue distincte. Des locuteurs du nabit et du gureɛ signalent d'ailleurs que ces variétés sont si différentes qu'ils ne peuvent pas se comprendre. Cette communication compare la liste de mots Swadesh que j'ai établie en été 2012 avec celle du gureɛ, établie par Robert Schafer en 1975, pour déterminer si le nabit et le gureɛ pourraient être considérés comme langues distinctes à partir des différences linguistiques. Je considère également les différences sociales et politiques entre le nabit et le gureɛ et si le nabit pourrait ou devrait employer l'alphabet déjà établi pour le gureɛ afin qu'il y ait un standard pour tous les dialectes, ou bien si les différences linguistiques, sociales et politiques exigeraient que le nabit ait sa propre orthographe.

## Introduction

Ghana is a linguistically diverse country, with 81 recognized languages and even more dialects. The classification of dialects can be problematic, though, as some minority dialects that have a small speaker population and lower status may have less representation in studies of the language, less representation in writing systems, and may be left out during standardization of spelling. This lack of representation can contribute to the endangerment of these dialects. This has been the case for Nabit, a language spoken in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Nabit is classified by the Ethnologue as a dialect of a language called Frafra.<sup>34</sup> Frafra has five dialects which are Gureɛ, Nankani, Booni, Talene, and Nabit. Frafra was originally an ethnic term used to refer to speakers of all five dialects, but currently is most closely associated with Gureɛ, and the other dialects are more closely associated with their own ethnic group name such as Nabdam for Nabit speakers.

Together these five dialects make up a speaker population of 820,000 (Ethnologue, 2013), but the dialect of Nabit in particular has only 40,000 speakers.

Nabit is spoken specifically in the villages in the Nabdam district of the Upper East Region, but the main dialect Gureɛ is widespread and spoken in several districts including Bolgatanga Municipal district, which is home to the region's capital city of Bolgatana (Atintono, 2004). As well, the Gureɛ dialect has an official orthography and it is used in the education system. Nabit, on the other hand, prior to my research, had no writing system and is not used in formal education. While it is clear that there are social and political differences between the dialects, in this paper I aim to explore these differences as well as the linguistic differences between Nabit and Gureɛ. Speakers and researchers alike suggest that there are distinct linguistic differences between Nabit and Gureɛ and I will compare them using a Swadesh 100 word list. I will also compare the phonology of the dialects and their respective orthographies. After examining the linguistic differences I will discuss the social, political, and geographic differences between the dialects. I will then propose what these differences mean for the status of Nabit as a dialect of Frafra.

My involvement in this project began as a result of Project GROW's work in the community. Vida Yakong is a Ph.D. student at UBC's Okanagan campus but is originally from the Nabdam district and is a fluent speaker of Nabit. Vida came to UBC to acquire a Master's of Nursing degree examining barriers to women's reproductive health care, and in her time at the

<sup>34</sup> The Ethnologue uses the spelling "Farefare" and other variations exist such as "Farefari" but I have chosen the spelling "Frafra" as it was the term used by my collaborator Vida Yakong.

school has also developed Project GROW, which stands for Ghana Rural Opportunities for Women. Project GROW is a non-governmental organization which provides economic opportunities to women to help empower them. One of the Project GROW committee members, Cindy Bourne, visited the villages in Nabdam in the summer of 2010 to complete a needs assessment to see what Project GROW could be helping with in the community. Both men and women told Cindy that they wanted a writing system for Nabit so that they could learn to read and write. Cindy and Vida approached my supervisor, Dr. Christine Schreyer, a linguistic anthropologist, to ask if she could help them create a writing system as she has experience developing orthographies. Christine recommended me for the project and since the summer of 2012 I have been researching Nabit. Vida has been my collaborator in this project and it is my work with her that is the source of all of my Nabit data. To date we have created a preliminary alphabet for Nabit and made alphabet books, which we have sent to the community in Ghana for feedback on the writing system. Through my work with Vida I became aware of the distinct differences between Nabit and Gurene and through further research discovered that other scholars have also noticed the differences between the “so-called” dialects.

## Linguistic Differences

### Past Linguistic Research

Mary Kropp Dakubu, a scholar of Gurene and numerous other Ghanaian languages, suggests that both Nabit and Talene are more like Kusaal and Mampruli than the other three dialects of Frafra. Kusaal is a language spoken in the Bawku district, which borders the Nabdam district to the East. Mampruli is a language spoken in the Northern Region, which borders the Nabdam district to the south. One reason she gives for her belief is that Talni,<sup>35</sup> Nabit, and Kusaal all tend to weaken and drop the final vowel in a trisyllabic CVCVCV word, whereas Gurene usually weakens the second vowel (e-mail, July 19, 2012).

Dakubu is not the only scholar to suggest that Nabit is actually quite different from Gurene. Robert Schaefer, an earlier scholar of Frafra, also proposed that Nabit might not be a dialect of Frafra and that both Nabit and Talene could potentially be better classified with either Kusaal<sup>36</sup> or Mampruli (1975:3 footnote). Schaefer and Naden (1974) also conducted intelligibility testing of the five dialects of Frafra and found that Nabit speakers had a difficult time understanding the other four dialects, and that Nabit was poorly understood by speakers of the other dialects. Only speakers of the Talene dialect could

---

<sup>35</sup> Talni is an alternate spelling of Talene.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on Kusaal see Spratt, David and Nancy 1968. Through my own comparisons of the phonology of Kusaal and the phonology of Nabit I found the two languages to be quite different.

easily understand Nabit, which prompted Naden and Schaefer to suggest that “Nabit and [Talene] are either more divergent dialects or closely-related languages” (1974:10). Naden and Schaefer also noticed in their intelligibility testing that many speakers of the Gurene, Nankana, and Booni dialects claimed to not be able to understand the Nabit dialect, but when they tried they reached a high level of understanding (1974). This suggests that some differences may be extra-linguistic, as I discuss below. Similarly, Vida echoed the sentiment that there are intelligibility issues between Nabit and Gurene but she also explained to us how she believes that some Gurene speakers pretend that they cannot understand Nabit, because Gurene holds a high status and they do not want to be linked with the poor Nabdam (Giffen, field notes, May 9, 2012).

Finally, while Nabit is currently classified as a dialect of Frafra, earlier reports showed that Nabit has also been classified as its own language separate from Gurene. According to Westermann and Bryan’s classification of the Gur languages, Talene, Nabt,<sup>37</sup> and Nankane (Gurene) are all separate languages (1970).

This research by Dakubu, Schaefer, and Naden, as well as the early classification by Westermann and Bryan suggests that Nabit’s status as a dialect of Frafra might not be accurate. As a result of this previous research and Vida’s perspective I decided to further investigate the differences between Nabit and Gurene.

### Current Linguistic Research

One way to compare the linguistic differences between languages or dialects is to compare a Swadesh word list of each of the languages. Traditionally, Swadesh word lists were used in glottochronology to establish family trees and examine the divergence of dialects from languages, and the divergence of languages from proto-languages (Heggarty, 2010). In this case I am not interested in establishing a family tree or measuring the exact divergence of the dialects. Instead I will be using the Swadesh word list as a data set which I use to compare Nabit and Gurene. This data set is ideal because I am able to compare the exact same words in the two perceived dialects. As well, these words are considered to be slow-changing words, which means that the words are less likely to be influenced by other languages or to be borrowed, so they accurately reflect the language (Sullivan and McMahon, 2010). Therefore, my comparison helps to show the linguistic differences of Nabit and Gurene. I compared a Swadesh 100 word list of Gurene collected by Robert Schaefer in 1975 with the same Swadesh 100 word list, which I collected in Nabit the summer of 2012. The comparison of these word lists shows significant linguistic differences between Nabit and Gurene. Of the 100 words 6 were exactly the same, 63 were different, and 31 were “close”.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Nabt is an alternate spelling of Nabit.

<sup>38</sup> See tables 1, 3, and 4 for examples of each type of word.

English	Gurene	Nabit
I	[mam]	[mam]
dog	[baa]	[bà:]
blood	[ziim]	[zi:m]
eat	[ñeʔ]	[ñeʔ]
kill	[koʔ]	[koʔ]
rain	[saa]	[sa:]

Table 1: Same Words

For the purposes of this analysis I define “close” as combinations of three or less of these differences:

1. the same basic consonant is used in both Nabit and Gurene but differs in voicing;
2. the same basic vowel is used in Nabit and Gurene but differs in nasality;
3. the same vowel but long/regular;
4. different vowels but are similar in placement;
5. a vowel is dropped either in the middle of or at the end of the word;
6. a change in [l] / [ɹ] / [r] / [n];
7. the addition of glottal fricative [h] at the end of the Nabit word;
8. different consonants but same manner of articulation;
9. a dropped [ʔ] in the middle of or at the end of the word; and
10. an additional vowel in the Nabit word.

Of these differences some occur more frequently than others and most of them occur in combinations. The following examples demonstrate each of the ten differences but many of the example words have more than one difference. Difference 1, a change in consonant voicing, occurs only once, which can be seen in the word ‘white’. The Gurene word [pelɪga] has a voiced velar plosive [g], and the Nabit word [pelɪk] has a voiceless velar plosive [k]. Difference 2, a change in nasalization of a vowel, is quite common and occurs eight times. This can be seen in the word ‘big’ which in Gurene is [kãti] with a nasalized vowel, but in Nabit the vowel is not nasalized and is [kat]. Difference 3, a change in vowel length, occurs three times. It can be seen in the word ‘tree’, which in Gurene is [tia] with a regular vowel and in Nabit is [ti:] with a long vowel. Difference 4, in which the Nabit and Gurene words have different vowels that are still similar, is the most common difference, and occurs twelve times. For example in the word ‘man’ the Gurene version [bora:] has a close mid back vowel, but the Nabit word [bura:] has a close back vowel. Difference 5, the lack of a vowel in the middle of or at the end of a Nabit word, when the vowel exists in the Gurene word, is the most common difference occurring 25 times. This occurs in

the word ‘knee’ which in Gurene is [dūni] and in Nabit is [dun], without the final [i] that is seen in Gurene. It also occurs in the word ‘fire’ which is [bugum] in Gurene and [bugm] without the second [u] in Nabit.

Difference	Occurrence
1	1
2	8
3	3
4	12
5	25
6	8
7	4
8	4
9	2
10	1

Table 2: Occurrence<sup>39</sup> of Differences

Difference 6, a change of [l] or [ɹ] or [r] or [n], is one of the four most common differences and occurs six times: for example, in the word ‘stone’ which is [kugurɪ] in Gurene and [kugul] in Nabit. Differences 7 and 8 are both uncommon occurring only 4 times each. Difference 7, the addition of a glottal fricative [h] to the end of a Nabit word, occurs in the word ‘who’, which in Gurene is [anĩ] and in Nabit it is [onih]. Difference 7 often occurs with difference 5, in which Nabit does not have the end vowel that Gurene does. For example, the word ‘small’ in Gurene is [bila] and in Nabit is [bilh] where the final letter in Nabit is [h] instead of [a]. Difference 8, where a consonant in Nabit is different from the Gurene consonant but has the same manner of articulation, occurs in the word ‘drink’. In Gurene it is [ɹuʔ] which has an initial palatal nasal consonant but Nabit [ɹmuʔ] has an initial labial velar alveolar nasal consonant in the word. Difference 9, in which a Nabit word does not have a glottal stop where Gurene does, only occurs twice. For example in the word ‘die’ in Gurene is [kiʔ] and in Nabit is [pi], which does not have a glottal stop [ʔ] in the word final position. Difference 10, the addition of a vowel, occurs only once. It occurs in the word ‘eye’ which in Gurene is [nĩhu] and in Nabit is [nĩuh], where a [u] has been added after the [ĩ].

<sup>39</sup> I define occurrence as number of times the difference happens in the “close” words.

English	Gureɛ	Nabit	Difference
white	[pɛlɪgɔ]	[pɛlɪk]	1, 5
eye	[nɪhu]	[nɪuh]	5, 10
die	[kiʔ]	[pi]	8, 9
stone	[kugurɪ]	[kugul]	5, 6
tree	[tia]	[tɪ]	3, 5
who	[anɪ]	[onɪh]	2, 4, 7
drink	[ɲuʔ]	[ɲmuʔ]	8
big	[kãti]	[kat]	2, 5
man	[bora:]	[buuɑ:]	4, 6
knee	[dũni]	[dun]	2, 5

Table 3: “Close” Words

In sum, difference number five shows what could be a significant difference in Nabit and Gureɛ morphology. There are 23 words that I have considered “close”, in which the Gureɛ word has a word final vowel but the Nabit word does not. This is not conclusive; however, it strongly suggests that Gureɛ favors words that end in vowels whereas this word structure may not be as common in Nabit. Difference number 7, the addition of an [h] to Nabit words also shows an important difference in Nabit and Gureɛ word structure. Of the 100 words compared none of the Gureɛ words ends in [h], but 10 of the Nabit words do.

Moreover, most of the words which I have considered “close” between Nabit and Gureɛ have combinations of at least two or three differences, and only five of the thirty-one words have only one difference such as the word ‘egg’ which in Gureɛ is [gɪɪ] and Nabit is [gɪ]. There are words, however, which have more than three differences and these words I considered too different to be considered “close”. For example the word ‘sit’ in Gureɛ is [ziʔiri] but in Nabit there are four differences – numbers 2, 4, 5, and 6 – to make it [ziʔɪn]. Other words like moon have even more differences appearing as [ɲãɪŋga] in Gureɛ and [nwaɪk] in Nabit, which has five differences: numbers 1, 2, 5, 6, and 8. Of the “different” words, there are approximately ten words which have between four and six differences, and the remaining 53 different words are distinctly different, such as the word for ‘swim’ which in Gureɛ is [bum] and in Nabit is [dugɪh].

In comparison, what do these differences in words mean? If we compare the same words (6) to the different words (63), we see that there is significantly more linguistic difference between Nabit and Gureɛ than there is similarity. Even if the “close” words (31) and the same words (6) are taken together to be the same, the ratio of same to different would still be 37:63 in favor of different. And then, even if the words which I have classified as different but could be considered “close” (10) are taken with the same words (6) and “close” words (31), the ratio of same to different would

be 47:53, meaning more than 50% of the words are still different. Therefore, this clearly demonstrates that linguistically there are significant differences between Nabit and Gureɛ.

English	Gureɛ	Nabit
sit	[ziʔiri]	[ziʔɪn]
moon	[ɲãɪŋga]	[nwaɪk]
long	[woko]	[wãʔã]
hair	[zõ]	[zabok]
cold	[tulɪga]	[maʔa]
swim	[bum]	[dugɪh]

Table 4: Different Words

### Social, Political, and Geographic Differences

Aside from the linguistic differences, there are social, political, and geographic differences between Nabit and Gureɛ. Geographically, Nabit is spoken in a very small area, only in the newly created Nabdám district in the Upper East Region. The Nabdám District was created in June of 2012 when the Talensi-Nabdám District split into two separate districts, Talensi and Nabdám (Ghana Districts, 2013). Gureɛ, however, is spoken in five of the districts in the Upper East Region, including the Bolgatanga Municipality, which is home to the region’s capital city (Asola and Atintono, 2009). As a result of the larger geographical area, Gureɛ speakers total approximately 500,000 (Atintono, 2004). Since Nabit is spoken only in the villages in Nabdám, anyone seeking an education or a job outside of the region must learn a lingua franca, English, or a larger language, often one from the South, to be able to communicate. This means that Nabit as a dialect does not provide economic or social benefits to its speakers outside the communities where it is spoken. However, it is the only language spoken at home and in the communities and it is an ethnic marker, which is a point of pride for the Nabdám.

In his research on the Nankani people, the ethnic group who speak the Nankani dialect of Frafra, Aaron Denham notes that, “dialects vary strongly by clan and locality, quickly changing as one travels even a few miles in any direction” (Denham, 2008:41). This again suggests that geography is an important aspect to understand the dialects of Frafra. Denham also points out that Nankani speakers do not consider themselves Frafra, but rather Nankana, and would only refer to speakers in the Bolgatanga and Bongo areas as Frafra (2008). Vida also echoed this sentiment when she told me that Nabit speakers consider themselves Nabdám not Frafra.

In the academic sphere, Gureɛ has been the focus of a significant body of research, and, though it is not extensive, it has clearly been researched more than Nabit (Schaefer, 1974; Atintono, 2004; Nsoh, 2002). Prior to my research, Nabit had only been included in

research done on Gurene (Naden & Schaefer, 1973; Schaefer, 1975) and was the focus of one vowel analysis (Adongo, 2011).

Together these factors of geography, dialect size, and more academic research combine to make Gurene a higher status dialect than Nabit. Another one of the main differences in the status of these dialects is the Gurene writing system. Gurene has an official orthography, which is used in schools, the University of Education in Winneba, and the teacher training college (Dakubu, 2006). The researchers developing the orthography included all five of the dialects, meaning that each dialect would be able to use the writing system, but Dakubu says that Nabit and Talene were included for social and political reasons. When the orthography was being developed Nabit and Talene speakers lived in the Bolga district, but now speakers of both dialects have districts of their own, the Talensi district and the Nabdram district. As well, some of the District Assembly members were Nabit speakers and were particularly interested in the project. While the orthography may be intended to be used for all dialects, it is clear that it is most closely associated with Gurene since it is quite commonly called the Gurene alphabet; Atintono states that Gurene “is the dialect that has received literary status” (Atintono, 2004:2).

Once the orthography was established, a team of researchers started working on a Gurene dictionary, which was published in 2007. Although the orthography was meant to be used by speakers of all five dialects the Gurene-English dictionary is not. The dictionary uses mainly Gurene and also includes dialect forms from Bongo<sup>40</sup> and Nankani, but only “a few words from Nabit and Talni are included” (Dakubu et al., 2007:ii). Nabit may perhaps be excluded from the Gurene dictionary because one of the main editors considers them to be quite linguistically different (see above).

### Phonological and Orthographic Differences

While the Swadesh word list comparison demonstrates clear linguistic differences between Nabit and Gurene, there are even more phonological differences which are not documented in the Swadesh word lists. I became aware of these differences while I was working on developing the preliminary orthography with Vida Yakong. To begin I will compare the phonology of the two perceived dialects, Gurene and Nabit. The Nabit phonological information provided here is based on my documentation of Nabit in the summer of 2012. The phonology of Gurene is based on Samuel A. Atintono’s Master’s thesis (2004), as well as a document about the Gurene orthography (Dakubu, n.d.). Although Schaefer provides an analysis of the phonology of Gurene in his work, which I source for the Swadesh word list, I use Atintono’s phonology of Gurene as his research is more recent.

<sup>40</sup> Bongo in this instance refers to the dialect Booni.

Beginning with the consonant sounds, I note that Gurene has two consonants that Nabit does not have, the alveolar trill [r] and the velar fricative [ɣ]. The velar fricative is in complementary distribution with the voiced velar stop [g]. The alveolar trill is in complementary distribution with the voiced alveolar stop [d]. On the other hand, Nabit has two consonants that Gurene does not have: the alveolar flap [ɾ]<sup>41</sup> and the alveolar central approximant [ɹ].

Nabit and Gurene also have differences in their vowels. Gurene has nine oral vowels [i] [ɪ] [e] [ɛ] [u] [ʊ] [o] [ɔ] [a], each of which can be short or long, and both the short and long versions can be nasalized. Nabit, however, has ten oral vowels [i] [ɪ] [e] [ɛ] [æ] [u] [ʊ] [o] [ɔ], and all of them except [ʊ] have a long counterpart. Only seven of the vowels are nasalized [ĩ] [ĩ̃] [ẽ] [ũ] [õ] [õ̃], and only four of the seven nasal vowels are also long [ĩ̃:] [ũ̃:] [õ̃:] [õ̃̃:]. Since I only worked with one speaker, Vida Yakong, the Nabit orthography is only preliminary. This means there is the potential that more Nabit vowels exist but have not been documented yet. These differences in vowels, as well as the other phonological differences, are reflected in the differences between the respective Nabit and Gurene orthographies.

The Gurene orthography was developed by a team of researchers in collaboration with other community stakeholders. Dr. Mary Ester Kropp Dakubu and Avea Ephiram Nsoh proposed an orthography, and it was approved by the Gurene Language Development Association, the Bolga and Bongo district assemblies and other stakeholders and officially published in 2000 (Dakubu, 2006). The creators of the orthography mainly used the Gurene dialect when they were developing the writing system but propose that the other dialects can still make use of it.

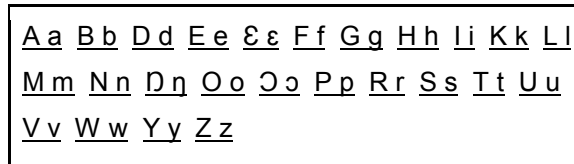


Figure 1: Gurene Alphabet

Along with these symbols, the orthography also uses digraphs to represent single sounds such as ny [ɲ], ŋm, ŋw, kp, gb, ky, and gy. The diacritic [-̃] is used to mark nasalization, but is normally not necessary since all vowels which follow a nasal consonant are always nasalized. Long vowels are marked by duplicating the vowel. This is quite different from the preliminary Nabit alphabet.

<sup>41</sup> Although the alveolar flap [ɾ] appears in Schaefer’s work on Gurene from 1975, Atintono does not include it in his phonology of Gurene.



Overall, the phonology of Nabit and Gurene are quite similar with nearly all the same consonants and vowels. There are only five consonants which are different between Nabit and Gurene, and only one additional vowel in Nabit although there are differences in vowel length and nasalization. Despite these similarities between Nabit and Gurene, the phonological differences, along with social and cultural differences resulted in very different orthographies. Not only does the preliminary Nabit alphabet have more letters than Gurene, the Nabit orthography also utilizes diacritics regularly. In discussion about the dialect differences in the Gurene orthography, Dakubu states that “if all the changes are made part of the spelling, the dialects may seem much more different from each other than they really are in speech” (N.d.) and this is exactly what the Nabit orthography does. The different symbols and spellings clearly separate Nabit from Gurene so that all of the differences in phonology, morphology, and pronunciation are explicit.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, throughout this paper, I have demonstrated that there are clear differences between the dialects of Nabit and Gurene. Linguistically the dialects are quite different with different phonology and morphology. The Swadesh word list comparison demonstrated that more than 50% of the words are different between Nabit and Gurene. The comparison of phonologies also showed some linguistic differences, with each dialect having a few consonants that the other did not as well as differences in how many long and nasal vowels both Nabit and Gurene have. As well, there are social, political, and geographic differences between the dialects that also make them distinct, such as the size of each dialect and its domain of use. Lastly, the dialects each have their own orthography, which are quite different in the number of letters and symbols used. While further studies, such as intelligibility testing, could be done to compare Nabit and Gurene, and which might show different results from the work of Naden and Schafer in 1973, I believe there is enough difference between Nabit and Gurene to recognize them as separate languages. For instance, in comparing linguistic differences alone there are enough differences to say that Nabit is not a dialect of Gurene. In addition, in light of all of the social, political, and geographic differences between Nabit and Gurene it becomes quite clear that Nabit should be considered a separate language. There is no doubt that there are similarities between Nabit and Gurene, and at one time they might have been dialects that have now diverged significantly, or they could have always been separate languages that were grouped together as dialects because of their similarities and geographic proximity, but either way, at this point in time Nabit should be classified as its own language, not a dialect of Frafra.

In conclusion, I would like to discuss one final factor in the consideration of Nabit’s classification as a dialect of Frafra or as a separate language. SIL International uses a

system called the ISO 639 to code languages and classify them in the Ethnologue, an encyclopedia of the world’s languages. Each language has its own ISO 639 code, but dialects of a language are all listed under the same code. The SIL’s ISO 639 code lists three main considerations that they use to classify two varieties as the same languages. If dialects fit these criteria they can be classified with the same language code, but if they do not then the dialects should be classified as separate languages. Firstly, in order to be a dialect of a language, speakers of one variety must be able to understand the other variety without having to learn it. Secondly, if spoken intelligibility is marginal but a main dialect has common literature or ethnolinguistic identity which both dialects share, they should be considered varieties of the same language. Thirdly, if speakers of the varieties can communicate with each other, but have distinct ethnolinguistic identities, then they should be considered different languages (SIL, 2013). Therefore, according to these criteria Nabit should be classified as a language separate from Gurene because the dialects are not mutually intelligible, they do not share a literature as each language has its own orthography, and the ethnolinguistic identities of Nabit and Gurene speakers are quite different.

Although I, and other academics, think that Nabit could be classified as a separate language, the final say ultimately rests with the Nabit speakers and they can choose to pursue independence or to remain linked to Gurene. When I conduct my fieldwork in 2014 I intend to survey the community to determine if they would like recognition as a separate language from Gurene, and if they do we can work towards official recognition as a distinct dialect from the Ethnologue. In sum, one of the benefits of community-based language documentation and revitalization projects is that decisions regarding the status of a language, whether it is a dialect or a language, do not rest in the hands of the researcher alone, but provide opportunities for community members to let their own voices be heard.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the Undergraduate Research Award Program and the Irving K. Barber Endowment Fund, which allowed me to collect data used in this paper. I would also like to acknowledge SSHRC for the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship. I am grateful to Vida Yakong for her work on this project and would like to thank her for being a spokesperson on behalf the Nabdam community. Thank-you, as well, to my supervisor Dr. Christine Schreyer for her insight on this research and paper.

### **References**

Adongo, H. (2011). Acoustic Analysis of Vowels of the Boone and Nabit dialects of Fafari. Poster presented at the 42nd Annual Conference on African Linguistics, University of Maryland.

- Asola, E.F. & Atintono, S.A. (2009). Making Gurene an Examinable Subject at the BECE: Facts and Reflections. *Modern Ghana: Opinions*, June 21, 2009. Accessed June 30, 2013.  
<http://www.modernghana.com/news/223170/1/makin-g-gurene-an-examinable-subject-at-the-bece-fa.html>
- Atintono, S. A. (2004). *A Morpho-syntactic Study of the Gurene Verb*. Master's Thesis. Department of Linguistics, University of Ghana.
- Bird, S. (1999). Strategies for Representing Tone in African Writing Systems. *Written Language and Literacy* 2(1), 1-44.
- Dakubu, M.E. Kropp. (N.d.). *The Principles of Farefare/Gurene Orthography* (ms.).
- Dakubu, M.E. Kropp. (2006). Statement on the Gurene Language, Presented to the Bonaboto Congress. Accessed June 30, 2013.  
<http://www.bonaboto.com/documents/gurene.pdf>
- Dakubu, M.E. Kropp, Atintono, S.A., & Nsoh, E.A., eds. (2007). *Gurene-English Dictionary*. Legon: Linguistics Department, University of Ghana.
- Denham, A. (2008). *The Spirit Child Phenomenon and the Nankani Sociocultural World*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Edmonton.
- Easton, C. (2000). Alphabet Design Workshops in Papua New Guinea: A Community Based Approach to Orthography Design. Accessed June 30, 2013.  
[http://www-01.sil.org/asia/ldc/parallel\\_papers/catherine\\_easton.pdf](http://www-01.sil.org/asia/ldc/parallel_papers/catherine_easton.pdf)
- Ethnologue. (2013). Farefare: A language of Ghana. Accessed June 30, 2012.  
<http://www.ethnologue.com/language/gur>
- Ghana Districts. (2013). A Repository of All Districts in the Republic of Ghana. Upper East. Accessed on June 30, 2013.  
<http://www.ghanadistricts.com/districts/?news&r=8&=220>
- Heggarty, P. (2010). Beyond Lexicostatistics: How to Get More out of 'Word List' Comparisons. *Diachronica*, 27(2), 301-324.
- Naden, A.J. & Schaefer, R.L. (1973). The Meaning of 'Fra-Fra': Interim Report on NE Ghana Intelligibility Survey. *Institute of African Studies: Research Review* 9(2), 5-12.
- Nsoh, A.E. (2002). Classifying the Nominal in the Gurene Dialect of Farefare of the Northern Ghana. *Journal of Dagaare Studies* 2, 1-15.
- Ottenheimer, H.J. (2001). Spelling Shinzwani: Dictionary Construction and Orthographic Choice in the Comoro Islands. *Written Language and Literacy* 4 (1), 15-29.
- Sebba, M. (2007). *Spelling and Society: The Culture and Politics of Orthography Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schaefer, R.L. (1974). Tone in Gurene. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 16(9), 464-469.
- Schaefer, R.L. (1975). *Collected field reports on the phonology of Frafra*. Collected Language Notes 15. Accra: Institute of African Studies. 43.
- SIL. (2013). Scope of Denotation for Language Identifiers. Accessed June 30, 2013.  
<http://www-01.sil.org/iso639-3/scope.asp>
- Spratt, D. & Spratt, N. (1968). *Collected Field Reports on the Phonology of Kusal*. Collected Language Notes 10. Accra: Institute of African Studies.
- Sullivan, J. & McMahon, A. (2010). Phonetic Comparison, Varieties, and Networks: Swadesh's Influence Lives on Here Too. *Diachronica*, 27(2), 325-340.
- Westermann, D. & Bryan, M.A. (1970). *The Languages of West Africa*. Folkstone, England: International African Institute.
- Yakong, V.N. (2008). Rural Ghanaian Women's Experiences of Seeking Reproductive Care. M.A. Thesis. The College of Graduate Studies (Nursing), The University of British Columbia Okanagan.