Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities

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11.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to establish how important language identities are to residents of the multilingual capital cities of Togo in West Africa and Gabon in Central Africa. This will be done by analysing the relationship between language identity construction ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ – by establishing state language policy in each city and subsequently by focusing on people’s narratives regarding language in each city. How these narratives were obtained is discussed in appendix A (see also chapter 2 on qualitative research methodology). Both countries within which this research was carried out are former French colonies, although Togo was a German Protectorate from 1884 until the First World War (see chapter 4).

By language identity construction ‘from above’, we mean the process of state policy formulation typically aimed at building a shared national language community and at facilitating commercial exchanges both within the country as well as with external partners through the use of a vehicular language. A national language serves the purpose of state nation-building whereas a vehicular language serves as an ‘instrument of communication within and beyond the territorial limits and the socio-cultural borders of [the] national community of origin’ (Sow, 1977: 20). In both Togo and Gabon, French was adopted as the official national language at independence in 1960. Two kinds of explanation have been offered for this choice in the two countries. In the first place, it is argued that neither country has a vernacular language widely enough spoken and understood to be able to act as lingua franca, as is the case with Swahili in Tanzania or Lingala in both the Congos (Brazzaville and Kinshasa). Accordingly, the selection of one indigenous language above others as official national language could easily have led to shared sentiments of exclusion among, and conflict between, sub-national linguistic
groups. In the second place, elite attitudes of prejudice toward local languages, together with elite sentiments of cultural alienation from indigenous cultures, led to the selection of the former colonial language as the only official national language. In the words of Moodley (2002), ‘the mental colonisation of the post-colonial elites led to a perception of non-English [speaking], non-French-speaking rural compatriots as uneducated and backward, thereby devaluing indigenous languages, while equating foreign language fluency with modernity’ (2002: 108).

It is therefore apparent that collective identities are fashioned by such dominant institutions which ‘extend and rationalise their domination vis-à-vis social actors’ through such identity construction (Castells, 1997: 8). On the other hand, they become identities only if and when social actors internalise them – only if and when they are experienced as meaningful by these actors themselves. Our aim here is to establish the extent to which the institutionalisation of French as official language has been accepted by residents in these two cities or, inversely, the extent to which this policy is resisted by residents who may feel deeply about the loss of their indigenous languages or who believe these vernacular languages ought to be used more frequently in the public sphere.

There is a prevalent conviction that vernacular languages are globally threatened and marginalised by dominant – mainly Western – languages and that minority languages ought to be protected, particularly through promoting their use in the public sphere and through their allocation of ‘high-status’ functions. The United Nations 1993 declaration on minority rights is an apt example. Similarly, the South African linguist Neville Alexander recently proposed a declaration of ‘The Decade of the Indigenous Languages of Africa’, ‘whose task must be the efficient and effective promotion of the development of the languages of the African people for use in high-status functions locally, nationally, regionally and – where appropriate – internationally’ (Alexander, reported in Moodley, 2002: 114). Similar concerns have been expressed by linguists in both Gabon and Togo. In Gabon, Idiata (2002: 76, our translation) argues that ‘the use of Gabonese languages is decreasing due mainly to the fact that French occupies all the prestigious functions and that the use of Gabonese languages is normally reserved for a few family, religious, interpersonal activities within the community’. In Togo, according to Lebikaza (1999: 5), ‘the imposition of a European language as the official language and the only language of work poses the risk that indigenous languages lose progressively all their importance’. Calls to protect such vernacular languages are often accompanied by a conception that ‘languages are in some sense natural and primordial’ (Kriel, 2003: 163) and that people are forced against their will to give up their languages in order to adopt the socially dominant language, thereby forfeiting a critical element of their identity.

In our conception of language identity, however, shared meanings around
language are neither essential nor immutable but social constructions open to change as circumstances, strategies, and interactions change. Identity, in short, is a matter of social context. Furthermore, while it is clear that each identity defines elements of similarity (the ‘We’) and of difference (the ‘They’ or the ‘Other’) (see Martin, 1995), this need not necessarily lead to conflict. Where an identity leads to experiences of stigmatisation and exclusion, the ‘Other’ may well be rejected, but where an identity leads to experiencing pride and growing self-esteem, the ‘Other’ may well be viewed in inclusive terms (Martin, 1999). Language identities, accordingly, may be of more or less meaning to urban residents and may be more or less inclusive (or exclusive) of other urban residents.

11.2 Lomé and Libreville: Language demographics and official language policy

Situated between Anglophone Ghana to the west and Francophone Benin and Burkina Faso to the north and east, Togo had an estimated population of 5.2 million inhabitants in 2001. Its territory covers some 57 000 square kilometres. Lomé itself has a population of one million inhabitants (Danioue, 2004). There are 37 ethnic groups, speaking about 30 languages in the country (Lebikaza, 1997). These language groups may be categorised into two main families, the Gur group in the north and the Kwa group in the south (Takassi, 1983). The major ethnic groups are the Ewe (23.19%) (a southern ethnic group), the Kabiye (13.79%) (the President’s ethnic group from the north), the Ouatchi (10.30%), and the Tem (5.75%) (1981 Census). Lomé, which is located on the coast, includes a population made up of 70% of the ethnic group Adja-Ewe (Danioue, 2004). As a consequence, Ewe-Mina (Mina being a form of Ewe) is ‘the commercial language of South Togo’ and of Lomé (Lebikaza, 1997: 157).

Situated between Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinea and bilingual Cameroon to the north and Francophone Congo-Brazzaville to the east and south, Gabon has a population of 1.2 million inhabitants (Census 1993), including 200 000 foreign migrants (mostly migrants from neighbouring African countries and about 15 000 French expatriates). Its territory covers some 268 000 square kilometres (Idiata, 2002). There are 62 ‘linguistic entities’ (parlers) in Gabon (Kwenzi Mikala, 1998), most of which include fewer than 10 000 members and which can be regrouped in ten bigger groups due to mutual understanding. The vast majority of these languages belong to the Bantu linguistic family. Fang forms the largest language community and is spoken by 30% of the population. Ipunu and Inzebi are the two next largest language communities in the country (Idiata, 2002). Libreville itself has a population of 420 000 inhabitants, representing some 40% of the country’s
total population. In contradistinction to Lomé, there is no city vernacular language in Libreville. The Fang form the largest minority language community (38%), followed by the Shira Punu (28%) and the Nzebi (12%). It is worth noting that 24% of Libreville’s population is of foreign origin, thereby increasing the likely use of French as a vehicular language in Libreville.

It is difficult to assess accurately the number of people who are able to speak French in Togo and in Gabon. While the French colonial power favoured a policy of cultural assimilation in its colonies (Sow, 1977), no more than a small local colonial elite was encouraged to learn its language. In both countries, the use of French as a vehicular language only spread after independence when access to education was democratised by new national governments (François, 1993) and when the process of urbanisation which had been fuelled by economic activities (phosphate and petroleum exploitation in particular) created a burgeoning urban population in the two capital cities. However, both countries have high rates of school attendance (reaching more than 90% in the capital cities). In addition, non-literate urban residents acquire French through contact rather than through schooling (Lafage) and speak what is called ‘Ivorian French’ or ‘Moussa French’, a pidgin mixing French words and grammatical structures with those of vernacular languages.

Language policy

Neither Lomé nor Libreville has a municipal language policy that applies at city level. Rather, urban dwellers, together with their rural counterparts, are party to national language policy. While differing on paper, in practice they are very similar in Togo and in Gabon. Both countries adopted French as their official language after independence. However, in Togo, two additional languages, Ewe-Mina and Kabiye, were declared national languages in terms of the ‘authenticity policy’ advocated by the government in the 1970s. This addition was intended to ‘revalorise’ Togolese cultures and languages. This was to be done by using these two languages as medium of instruction in state schools while French was intended to become a taught subject. The lack of implementation of such a policy was put down to material difficulties (e.g., teacher training and writing of adequate material) and to ‘a lack of political will’ from the elite. This policy has thus remained ‘virtual’, and these languages ‘are taught (as subjects) in state schools, have access to half a page in the governmental newspaper, to 15 minutes a day on TV and a time share superior to the one allocated to the other Togolese languages on the radio. Not more’ (Lebikaza, 1997: 159).

Similarly, in Gabon, while the inclusion of Gabonese languages in the education system has been on the government’s agenda since 1983, to date this has not come
about and these languages are taught only in a few private – mostly confessional – institutions, (Idiata, 2002). State actions have not moved beyond the inclusion of an article in the 1994 constitution recognising the need to promote vernacular languages (1994 Constitution, Article 2, section 8), the creation of a Department of National Languages in the education ministry, a few state radio programmes in vernacular languages, and their occasional use during electoral and health campaigns (Idiata, 2002).

In both countries, accordingly, French is the language of the public service, of schooling and of the formal economy – in short, French is used for all ‘high-status’ functions – while vernacular languages are left for the private domain. Two qualifications need to be made, however. First, in practice, the main impact of this national policy is felt in urban rather than in rural areas since urban areas are de facto multilingual and multi-ethnic environments lacking a vernacular lingua franca and since their residents enjoy high literacy rates. Rural areas in both countries remain largely monolingual and the use of indigenous languages remains widespread. Since Gabon has an urbanisation rate of 73%, significantly higher than that of Togo (35%), the impact of the national language policy in that country is probably more invasive. In the second place, commercial activities for rank-and-file residents in both cities are largely informal and take place in a series of open marketplaces (les marchés). Languages that tend to be used here are indigenous rather than French.

11.3 Language identity ‘from below’: Analysing the narratives of members of the language communities resident in Lomé and Libreville

Before turning to our research data, we identify three hypotheses that will be used to analyse the narratives collected. We have constructed these hypotheses from a literature focused on the role of language as capital and as an important element in social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1991; Alexander, 1999; Moodley, 2000; Prah, 2002). The first hypothesises that French as the official language in a multilingual population may be experienced as imposed and may lead to resentment since it is a foreign language – the language of the former coloniser – mainly acquired through the formal education system. Accordingly, particularly among poorer urban residents, this imposition may lead to sentiments of exclusion. The second hypothesises that the use of French as lingua franca is bound to diminish the use of vernacular languages and that this may lead to fears of the undermining of traditional cultural practices, especially in capital cities where foreign and western influences are widespread. In reaction, a cultural backlash rooted in linguistic
community may take place and be especially strong where residents tend to live in ethnically homogeneous neighbourhoods. In the third place, we hypothesise that such linguistic tensions might be felt more strongly among minority language communities since majority vernacular languages may be perceived to maintain a strong presence not only in the private sphere but also in the informal sector of the urban economy. The fact that Ewe-Mina in Lomé, for example, plays this role of a vehicular language at the biggest market (le Grand Marché) of the city is a test case in point.

To test such hypotheses, however, is no simple matter. Our use of focus groups to gather appropriate data was not only guided by the virtual absence of any relevant published work in these cities but also by the need to establish residents’ views of how language and linguistic issues inform their everyday lives in general. Accordingly, the analysis of their focus group narratives addresses not only these narrower hypotheses but also seeks to tease out those more general shared social representations of residents that relate linguistic issues to their residential neighbourhoods, to the job market, and to their cities. It is perhaps appropriate at this point to introduce the dimension of language and state power in multilingual societies. As Crawford Young puts it,

reason of state beckons to the choice of a single medium for the conduct of public business; thus language becomes tied to hierarchies of power and privilege. If access and exclusion are measured by mastery of the language of the state, then the stage is set for conflict. (Young, 1994: 21)

Results
In both cities, for different income levels and ethnic groups alike, residents remain attached to their specific ethnic and linguistic community. This attachment is found most clearly in patterns of residential settlement and appears to hold as much for established residents as for new urban migrants. In effect, a preference to live in a neighbourhood where the majority language is one’s own, as well as a preference to shop at a market place where one’s language is dominant, is widely expressed. The outcome seems to be circular in its logic: Residents use ethnic and linguistic social networks to find accommodation and the resultant largely linguistically homogeneous neighbourhood in turn conditions socialisation and linguistic practice in that neighbourhood.

In Lomé, for instance,
land towards Kpalimé. Those who come from the North are going to buy towards the North. It makes it easier for us regarding certain things … like social life, community life, people are attached to community life. When they meet each other, they are used to certain things, they organise themselves, they get on well with each other, they practice their traditions, their ancestral culture. When they are together, they practice it, they feel at ease living in community. It’s a kind of cultural attraction. People are attracted to each other. (Kabiye, middle income)

I live in Amoutive. That’s where I grew up and that’s where I still live and it’s a big joy to stay next to people who saw me growing up. (Ewe-Mina, middle income)

As noted earlier, ethno-regionalist tensions experienced in Lomé during the political crisis of the 1990s have accentuated such a situation:

Before we didn’t really have this [ethnic] problem but since 1990 … now people often say ‘ah, this neighbourhood is inhabited by this ethnic group, they live there, it can create problems, etc … ’ but it’s a problem we tried to overcome. (Kabiye, middle income)

Similar preference for homogeneous neighbourhoods was asserted in Libreville:

In Libreville, people live in neighbourhoods according to their ethnic group, each ethnic group has a specific neighbourhood. You’ll see that in Nkembo, they are Fang … In Pont-Akebe over there, it’s people from the Haut-Ogooué … So people settle where their elders are, the first to arrive settled there and then others followed. (Fang III, low income)

In daily life, the Fang person will go to a specific market place, he won’t go to all the markets of the city so by definition when he arrives at a market, he knows he can discuss prices in Fang. (Fang I, middle income)

You have for instance Akebe Plaine which has ‘a connotation’ Obamba/Teke, you have Akebe … which is majority Kota, you have ‘the five’ which is majority Nzebi, you have Nkembo, Cocotie ‘derriere la prison’ which have a Fang connotation … It’s due to the arrival of the parents, there is a parent who arrives and settles somewhere. If you are at the village and you arrive here, you will be told ‘listen, don’t go far, X is in such neighbourhood’, when you arrive X gives you a room today, tomorrow, you have a small job, what do you do? X tells you ‘listen, the house is a bit small, you should take next door’s plot’ and if I myself come, it would be the same thing and so on. So you’ll see after five or 10 years, it’s almost a small neighbourhood which
has ‘a family connotation’ and with weddings and so on, you have a Fang or Nzebi community which is settled. (Nzebi, low income)

Such a preference for living in ethnically and linguistically homogeneous neighbourhoods does not appear to prevent harmonious interaction with people from other ethnic groups or with foreigners. Nor, in fact, does it appear to lead to a rejection of French as the official language of these two cities. Rather, it seems that each language is regarded as having a specific generally accepted function. Vernacular languages are used in the private sphere with family, friends, and within community:

I don't have any trouble speaking Nzebi in my neighbourhood because most residents are Nzebi, we all come from the same area so I don't have any difficulties speaking Nzebi, my father speaks Nzebi, my mother speaks Nzebi. (Nzebi, low income)

Us Kabiye, we're all the same. Kabiye is important for us because it's our language. When we're at home, we speak our language. (Kabiye, low income)

French, on the other hand, is used as a vehicular language with people of other groups, particularly when residents have not mastered the others’ languages. This point was made by several focus groups both in Lomé and Libreville. The following is an illustration:

We meet together in the neighbourhood … If I am with my brother, I am at ease speaking my mother tongue with him but if I am with an Ewe friend, I speak Ewe or if I can't speak Ewe, I’ll speak French. (Kabiye, middle income)

A similar relaxed attitude toward other languages was expressed in Libreville by the Nzebi focus group where French appears to be accepted (and re-appropriated) as the national language:

If I speak Nzebi and the person in front of me can understand, that’s fine but if he speaks Fang, and I haven't been into contact with Fangs, I won't be able to speak, I won't be able to understand, so we speak our national language, French. (Nzebi, low income)

French is also considered to be the language of the public domain, especially in the educational sphere:

French should be the vehicular language between teachers and children, it would be more rational because outside of school, at home, when they come back, they are
in contact with their mother tongues. At home, we are the teachers of the mother tongue so at school, we need the teachers to speak in French and they must not speak the mother tongues. (Kabiye, low income)

Accordingly, people seem to develop a form of comfortable code-switching, using one language or another according to the demands of the situation. The need for such multilingualism is stated as a fact of life, without resentment regarding the role of French or of a regional vehicular language (Ewe-Mina in Lomé and to a lesser extent Fang in Libreville):

The dominant language is Lomé’s language, Ewe. Everybody speak Ewe because the indigenous people don’t understand our language, so we must learn their language … because we are in their home. But if there are Ewe in the North, they learn Kabiye when they arrive in the North. (Kabiye, low income)

French really remains a dominant language but one must also say that beside French, the second language is Mina. Mina is also necessary especially when you go to the ‘Grand Marché’ … If you don’t speak Mina, they are going to cheat you, if you speak French, they’re going to say ‘here comes the foreigner’. Whatever they sell for CFA500, they’re going to sell to you for CFA2 500 now. (Kabiye, low income)

At the market, some Fang people, I don’t know why, they would speak to you in Fang but if you have been in the North, where they come from, you can speak Fang. (Nzebi, low income)

One language group, however, the Fang language community, developed a significantly different narrative about language identity. This shared difference, moreover, was found in different income classes. In the first place, sentiments of language discrimination were distinctly expressed in all Fang focus groups:

It’s a general trend, it’s not recent that more than 80% of the administration is from the Haut-Ogooué [a province which is in majority Mbede-Teke]. If you arrive and speak Obamba or whatever, it isn’t abrasive but if you speak Fang, they look at you badly and you can be sure that you won’t be able to advance in your investigations the way a person from the Haut-Ogooué would. (Fang I, middle income)

Such sentiments appear to lead to perceived difficulties regarding sharing neighbourhoods with non-Fang speakers:
This neighbourhood is originally Fang, but unfortunately there's a fact that is happening: people who come here don't want to consider Fangs as autochthonous [i.e., indigenous], they see them as human targets and don't want to see them as simple cohabitants. (Fang I, middle income)

There is a mix here because in my neighbourhood around here, I cohabit with people from Togo, from Nigeria and a few Cameroonianians. The mixing between these residents and us is a bit difficult … There is a big linguistic problem, it's people who refuse to speak others' language … (Fang III, low income)

These sentiments and fears are accompanied by expressions of concern regarding the loss of Fang as a mother tongue:

I speak French despite myself because it became more or less a national language here. It's the national language but a national language which is imposed on us while making sure that we ignore our own languages. (Fang I, middle income)

In contradistinction to the narratives of other language communities, the Fang appear uncomfortable with regular code-switching as an acceptable way of urban life:

Can the Fang accept it if the authorities suggest a language which is not Fang as a national language? It would be very difficult. The Fang man is very proud, I stayed in four provinces, I can't even make three sentences in another language so we don't really like speaking another language, we'd rather see somebody speaking our language. (Fang III, low income)

As a consequence of these strongly held sentiments and attitudes, Fang narratives move toward demands for the recognition of their language in the public domain:

‘Francophonie’ doesn’t bring anything to Africa … Is it specific to Gabon? Yes, because next door in Congo, Punu is spoken and Punu is taught at school … On the side of East Africa, from Congo downward, I'd say even from Congo-Brazzaville, in Central Africa, the Sango and Lingala are spoken and it goes down until Rwanda even, so it's a question of political will. If one day a specific vernacular language was chosen to be a national language that one could learn at school in Gabon, everybody would adapt to it in the same way as we learn French but it's a question of political will. It's a problem of inferiority feeling if I may say. Why not choose the Fang language, I am Fang, but since everybody already learn our language in private in any
case … because every migrant decides to learn how to speak Fang in the first place … (Fang I, middle income)

And this sense of linguistic discrimination against the Fang language appears to be linked to a sense of wider ethnic discrimination regarding access to jobs, to promotion, to bursaries, to plots of land, and so on:

Today, there are ethnic groups where you simply have to be from this ethnic group to know that tomorrow you’ll get a job that’s waiting for you, whether you work for it or not. There are even study bursaries which are ethnically given … (Fang I, middle income)

One mustn’t hide it, we endure a lot of things in our [public] services because we are Fang, you can’t be as easily promoted as others. (Fang II, middle income)

The Fang and the Punu live together, we’ve cohabited without problems, we are brothers but when one knows how the distribution of positions takes place in this country, even if we want to live with the Punu, we are not able to do it, why? Because we’ll see that today the Punu has a position that he doesn’t deserve and myself, the Fang, I deserve that position and I don’t have it. What does it bring about? Simply conflicts. Outwardly we just pretend to accept each other but in the heart, we have this fear. (Fang III, low income)

If you take the case of state-allocated leases, 80% of these are used by people who are today in power but the rest of us don’t have access to them. We don’t have access to state subsidised housing we must go and manage for ourselves in the periphery, in the Savannah. (Fang I, middle income)

These shared perceptions of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and language are not found in the narratives of the Nzebi group in Libreville or of residents in Lomé:

There are sectors which at the beginning had been reserved [to certain ethnic groups] a long time ago. I remember, when we were in our villages, we were told that to go into the presidential guard, you had to be Obamba or Teke … but after a while, it changed, they had to take a Nzebi and so on … In the hospitals, it was a connotation for instance Fang. In the education system, it was a connotation Punu/Nzebi and the industrial sector was dominated by Fangs, especially in the Estuary. But at a certain time, with the evolution … everybody made his position somewhere and that’s how the other ethnic groups came in and people with degrees also made an impact, one
can't prevent someone with a degree … if for instance Sobraga needs an engineer … whether he is Fang or Nzebi or Punu, we can't prevent him from working … (Nzebi, low income)

In Lomé, in fact, though complaints of a socio-economic and state service-delivery nature were frequent, they were not linked in the narratives to ethnic or linguistic discrimination. Rather, respondents perceived themselves as urban citizens, and ethnic tensions were explained as the product of political manipulation. The example below is drawn from a focus group of the state president’s ethnic group:

Those [ethnic] problems in fact didn’t use to exist but it’s our political problems which entail these types of antagonism. Politicians, for them, it's a question of ‘divide and rule’. That’s their philosophy … to want to oppose community groups … the one says this community group is mine, the other one says that one is mine, I come from this and that, I am the leader, etc. and at the end of the day, community groups who used to live in peace and good understanding end up having bad relationships. That’s what we experienced especially those last 10 years, we saw situations where people from the South said they didn't want people from the North and … vice versa and it created tensions but it is because of politicians. It is not because of individuals themselves, they don’t have this kind of spirit. (Kabiye, middle income).

11.4 Conclusion

The research conducted among residents in Libreville and Lomé is exploratory. As such, the interpretations above need to be treated as suggestive of results rather than as definite conclusions. The three hypotheses have guided these interpretations. Simultaneously, more general shared representations within focus groups have been teased out.

In both cities, official language policy appears largely to have been accepted: French is perceived to be, and is used as, the vehicular language. No difficulties with speaking French were expressed, not even by urban residents with lower educational and socio-economic backgrounds. While in both countries anti-French sentiments were expressed, this did not extend to language, which seems to have been accepted as a national asset. Simultaneously, with one exception, few sentiments of anxiety and fear regarding the loss of vernacular languages were expressed. These languages appear to be widely used in neighbourhood interaction as well as in private. This appears as true in minority as in majority language settings – that is, groups other than the Fang in Libreville or the Ewe-Mina in Lomé. Residents from these groupings appear to have developed high
levels of individual situational multilingualism (or code-switching), which entails speaking their mother tongue, the local lingua franca, and the official language according to the demands of the urban situation in which they find themselves. This finding does seem to question at least the main thrust of the argument that continued language use depends on the maintenance of ‘high-status’ functions of that language in the public domain.

Linguistic resentments were expressed by one group only, the Fang community in Libreville, and these resentments appeared to translate into exclusive feelings towards other linguistic groups – into a rejection of French as official national language, and into claims for the recognition and use of Fang in the public sphere. These sentiments also appeared to be rooted in shared ethnic representations beyond language. Narratives pointed to common sentiments of multiple exclusion, often in the socio-economic domain.

In conclusion, then, it may be that language-based identity politics is better seen as a symptom of other resistance identities rather than as a sense of discrimination and exclusion in itself. This appears to be the case with the Fang in Libreville and with isiXhosa-speakers in Cape Town (see also chapter 9 in this book). As Kriel has pointed out, ‘the problem is that language struggles are hardly ever about language alone; they have been and continue to be nationalist struggles (and as such power struggles) at heart’ (Kriel, 2003: 164) and accordingly, ‘language differences are not responsible for important conflicts, they simply serve to identify enemy groups’ (Lebikaza, 1999: 6).
Appendix A: Focus group data and how they have been used

Research involved discussions with rank-and-file groupings selected either on the basis of living together in a neighbourhood or on the basis of sharing a common home language (or both). Each focus group was requested to discuss how they ‘felt’ as members of their linguistic community about living in their local residential area, in Lomé or in Libreville and in Togo or Gabon. Discussions were conducted in the preferred language of each group (French, except in part of one focus group discussion – Fang I) and transcriptions were subsequently translated into English for analysis. Choice of non-directive focus group methodology was based on the hypothesis that people, through collective discussions or narratives, construct social representations that would not have been accessible to us by using quantitative research methods such as surveys. The disadvantage of such methodology, however, revolves around issues of representivity and potential generalisation. Given the number of languages in both countries (between 30 and 40), it was difficult to be representative in terms of language groups. Focus group discussions were organised with the largest linguistic groups country-wise (Ewe-Mina and Kabiye in Togo; Fang and Nzebi in Gabon). Table 11.1 summarises the make-up of the focus groups in Lomé, Togo and Libreville, Gabon.

Table 11.1: Sketch of focus groups from which data have been drawn

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<th>Lomé</th>
<th>Libreville</th>
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<td>Kabiye I</td>
<td>Fang I</td>
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<td>Low income Kabiye-speakers, Agbalopédogan, Lomé</td>
<td>Mixed-income Fangs, Nzong-Ayong, Libreville</td>
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<td>Kabiye II</td>
<td>Fang II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle-income Kabiye-speakers, Agbalopédogan, Lomé</td>
<td>Middle-income/upper-middle income Fangs, near Lycée Léon Mba, Libreville</td>
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<td>Mixed languages (Losso, Anan, Kabiye, Ewe-Mina)</td>
<td>Fang III</td>
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<td>Low-income residents, ‘quartier administrative’, Lomé</td>
<td>Focus group with low-income Fangs, Nkembo (Deux Rivières), Libreville</td>
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<td>Ewe-Mina</td>
<td>Nzebi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle-income Ewe-speakers, Amoutive, Lomé</td>
<td>Focus group with low-income Nzebi, Ancienne Sobraga, Libreville</td>
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<td>29/06/2004</td>
<td>Nzebi</td>
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Research took place in Lomé in November 2003 and in Libreville in June 2004. The constitution of the focus group began with the identification of a coordinator within the milieu of the focus group. This milieu coordinator was requested to approach between six and 10 potential adult participants from the milieu. The coordinator was also requested to select participants with varying ages as well as approximately equal numbers of women and men. The focus group venue was selected on the basis of a location known to the participants. Discussions ranged from 40 to 90 minutes and were, in some cases, followed by face-to-face discussions with a few individual participants. Though three prompts were used, participants were not discouraged from pursuing a particular theme. Accordingly, few focus groups allocated equal discussion time to each theme. While all groups allowed recording, confidentiality was an important issue.