



# Language use and linguistic variation in multilingual urban groups

## A micro-perspective on professional networks in Ngaoundéré (Cameroon)

### Linguistic situation

Ngaoundéré, the capital city of the Adamawa region in northern Cameroon, provides a linguistic situation that may be considered as a rather prototypical case of a multilingual urban environment in sub-Saharan Africa. People here live with a great diversity of linguistic repertoires: the official language French, the lingua franca Fulfulde, many regional vernacular languages (especially of the "Adamawa" group) and other African languages of wider communication like Kanuri and Hausa. The repertoires are hardly subjected to or regulated by any norm-enforcing institutions so that they display a wide range of variation.



Rush hour in Ngaoundéré, Avenue Rue Ahidjo, archive R. Kramer

### Professional networks

In the project, three professional groups are targeted, i.e. motorcycle taxi drivers, motorcycle garage mechanics, and cookshop employees. Motorcycle taxi drivers, the so called "attaquants" or "benskineurs", can be considered the backbone of public transport in urban centers all over northern Cameroon. The drivers are only men who are generally in their twenties. Due to the high unemployment rate and the lack of qualified jobs the levels of education and social backgrounds among the drivers differ a lot. Mostly, motorcycle taxi drivers are considered as a societal problem in public as they are often associated with banditry, drug use, neglect of traffic rules and tax evasion.



Motorcycle taxi driver transporting a family on Women's Day, March 8th 2015 in Ngaoundéré, archive R. Kramer

Motorcycle mechanics work in roadside open-air garages. Such garages are informally organized associations of men who received their apprenticeship mainly as 'training on the job' with more experienced mechanics. They usually crystallize around a skilled mechanic who occupies a small inner-city terrain and owns some tools and working materials. The garages scatter all over the urban area in order to satisfy the high demand for repair services especially from taxi drivers.



Open-air garage and stationary cookshop in Ngaoundéré, close to the catholic cathedral, archive R. Kramer

The group of cookshop employees is a professional network dominated by women with various ethnic backgrounds. Stationary cookshops are often located in direct neighborhood of the roadside garages and are places where mechanics and customers of the garage (especially motorcycle taxi drivers) spend their pauses. The women running such a cookshop usually live in nearby housing areas.

### Project aims and methodological approaches

The project focuses on language use, variation and change in multilingual groups taking a micro-perspective by applying Social Network Analysis. Based on the description of diagnostic variations detected on all levels of linguistic structure, it will be shown how group membership, social network structures and individuals' network positions influence linguistic behavior. Thereby, theories and questions mainly based on observations of Global North speech communities are reflected. It will be investigated whether the propagation of innovations is conducted through strong- or loose-knit networks, or how correlations between network structures (dense/loose, uni-/multiplex, clustered/non-clustered) and different patterns of language use look like in the professional groups of Ngaoundéré. Prospective data collections in Ngaoundéré yield very promising first findings: Group membership in the dense network of a motorcycle garage affects speakers' language use to a high degree and differentiates it from language use of group outsiders. And, longitudinal data sets hint to a close correlation between changes in the social network structure of this group and linguistic variable use.

### The team

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