

# What French for Gabonese French Lexicography?\*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a response to Mavoungou (2013a) who has pleaded for the production of a dictionary of Gabonese French as variant B of the French language. The paper intends to comprehend the concept of "Gabonese French". It gives an outline of the situation of French within the language diversity of Gabon as a contribution to the theoretical perspective toward the inception of Gabonese French lexicography. Answers are given to the following questions: What French is described in existing Gabonese French studies? What French is and should be presented in Gabonese French dictionary production?

**Keywords:** GABONESE LEXICOGRAPHY — FRENCH — GABONESE LANGUAGES — LANGUAGE DIVERSITY — DICTIONARIES

**Résumé:** *Quel français pour la lexicographie du français gabonais?* Cet article est une réponse à Mavoungou (2013a) qui plaide pour la production d'un dictionnaire du français gabonais en tant que variante B de la langue française. Il vise à comprendre le concept de « français gabonais ». Il donne un aperçu de la situation du français au sein de la diversité linguistique du Gabon comme une contribution à la perspective théorique vers la création de la lexicographie du français gabonais. Des réponses sont données aux questions suivantes: Quel français est-il décrit dans les études existantes du français gabonais? Quel français est-il et devrait-il être présenté dans la production des dictionnaires du français gabonais?

**Mots-clés:** LEXICOGRAPHIE GABONAISE — FRANÇAIS — LANGUES GABONAISES — DIVERSITE LINGUISTIQUE — DICTIONNAIRES

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## 1. Introduction

According to Lafage (1993: 216), in Africa, *there does not appear to be any challenge in the foreseeable future to the role of French in the functions for which it is used: administration, international relations, teaching, the media, trade, transport, tourism, science and technology, literature and so on, despite sociolinguistic and socioeconomic situations and political options being very different*. This description perfectly suits the current position of the French language in Gabon, an African country where language studies are experiencing a fast-growing and emerging discipline of lexicography.

Although it has its origins as a foreign language, being the sole official language, French has been granted the rank of national language through socio-political, economic and contextual means in Gabon (cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2004, 2005a and 2011, and Pambou 1998). This leads to ask the question whether Gabon should stop importing French dictionaries in order to make its own. In his attempt to circumscribe *a lexicographic plan for Gabon within the Gabonese language landscape*, Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b: 132) explicitly asked the same question in these words: *Should Gabon keep importing its French dictionaries from France, or should the Gabonese compile their own French dictionaries, including French words and expressions exclusively used in Gabon?* The answer to such a question inevitably leads to another important one, which is to define and comprehend the place of French in the emerging Gabonese lexicography.

The paper covers the following topics:

- (i) a brief outline of the issues that present the current Gabonese French dictionaries,
- (ii) an outline of the status and the characterization of the French language within the Gabonese language landscape and Gabon's language planning perspectives, and
- (iii) a perspective toward the development of Gabonese French lexicography.

Although this article is set to respond to Mavoungou (2013a), it however aims at contributing to the theoretical foundations for the inception of Gabonese French lexicography. It comes within the framework of the strategic planning of Gabonese lexicography as developed by Emejulu (2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003), Mavoungou (2001 and 2010) and Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b).

## 2. Problems in Current Gabonese French Dictionaries

In his survey of Gabonese French dictionaries and prospects for Gabonese French lexicography, Mavoungou (2013a: 255) indicated that *the modern era of Gabonese lexicography has witnessed the production of various dictionaries focusing on this African variety of French*. In fact, five monolingual Gabonese French dic-

tionaries (including wordlists and lexicons) had been published by the time of Mavoungou's survey, i.e. Boucher and Lafage (2000), Dodo-Bounguendza (2008 and 2010), Ditougou (2009) and Moussounda Ibouanga (2011). These dictionaries which have been recently followed by two others, i.e. Dodo-Bounguendza (DB2013) and Mavoungou et al. (2014), contrast with the majority of dictionaries produced in Gabon: they are monolingual and solely focus on the Gabonese variety of the French language, whereas Gabonese dictionary production has always been bilingual or multilingual including French and native African languages (cf. Nyangone Assam and Mavoungou 2000, Mihindou 2001).

The current Gabonese French dictionaries present a number of common problematic grounds. In this paper, attention will only be given to a few of these metalexicographical and methodological issues in the production of these dictionaries.

## 2.1 Theoretical and Structural Shortcomings

It is unfortunate that, except for Mavoungou et al. (2014), none of these Gabonese French dictionaries was based on a theoretical planning. Although the current Gabonese French dictionaries have never been theoretically assessed or reviewed — except for the work by Ditougou (2009) which was reviewed by Ondo-Mebiame and Ekwa Ebanega (2011) —, it can be admitted that the lack of prior theoretical planning might explain the number of metalexicographical shortcomings that can be observed in these dictionaries.

Among others of these metalexicographical insufficiencies, one can for instance notice the numbering of the lemma entries of the dictionary as shown below in **Figure 1**. The figure displays two dictionary articles from the dictionary (DIT2009) by Ditougou (2009).

436- **Haoussa** : N. immigrants ouest-africain ou musulman. ☞  
Aofien.

437- **Haut** : N. m. chemisier. *Change de haut, celui-là ne convient pas avec ce pantalon.*

**Figure 1:** Numbering of headword on the lemmata (DIT2009: 75)

A limited microstructure denoted by the shortness of dictionary articles can also be found in most of these dictionaries as seen below in **Figure 2**. It is also a display of two dictionary articles extracted from DIT2009.

443- **Hein non ?** *Expres. N'est-ce pas ?* ☞ *Ha bon hein ?*

444- **Houe** : N. f. Honte.

**Figure 2:** Very short dictionary articles and limited microstructure (DIT2009: 75)

Ondo-Mebiame and Ekwa Ebanega (2011: 356) assert that the DIT2009 presents a number of shortcomings that may require the revision of the entire dictionary for better quality.

Figure 3 below presents a dictionary article from Dodo-Bounguendza (2010)'s dictionary (DB2010) where the shortness of the article is also a reflection of a limited microstructure.

**Midi** - ↓ *Je veux déjeuner avec toi ce midi* .↑ *Je veux déjeuner avec toi à midi*  
**.Fréquent, oral, citoyen ordinaire.**

Figure 3: Very limited microstructure (DB2010: 63)

An unaware reader of such an article from this dictionary would not know whether the word "Midi" is a noun, an adjective or an adverb if he/she does not understand the sentences given as examples in the dictionary article. The reader would also struggle to understand the meaning of the downward and upward arrows, and the difference between the bold-marked *midi* and the underlined *midi* without a comprehensive user guide.

Other deficiencies that can be found in the Gabonese French dictionaries are the lack of a user's guide or the inconsistency of the cross-references. Figure 4 below shows that the signs = and **Syn.** seem to denote the same meaning in the dictionary (DB2013) by Dodo-Bounguendza (2013) according to these three dictionary articles.

**Reums** n.f.inv. *Mère. Même ma Reums est alamaba. 'Ma mère est aussi de là-bas'. Syn. Match.*  
**Ribi** (Pluriel *des ribis*) n.f. *Paire de lunettes. Ta ribi est de couleur noire. 'Ta paire de lunettes est de couleur noire'. Syn. Ribande, riby.*  
**Rick-ross** n. m.inv. *Grosse personne. J'ai vu le gars de ta sœur, c'est un rick-ross'. 'J'ai rencontré l'ami de ta sœur il est gros (=énorme)'.*

Figure 4: Inconsistency of cross-referencing (DB2013: 113)

Moreover, although it also contains a few theoretical weaknesses, the dictionary by Mavoungou et al. (2014) was an attempt grounded on a metalexicographical planning by Mavoungou (2002a and 2011), Nsa Ndo (2010) and Nsafou (2010) as clearly stated in the preface of the dictionary (Mavoungou et al. 2014: 10). It appears to be a fact that when the compiler or one of the compilers is a trained and professional lexicographer, the dictionary is often based on some theoretical grounding and shows little metalexicographical discrepancies.

## 2.2 Influence of the Compilers' Initial Training and Occupation

Speaking about the dictionary by Mickala Manfoumbi (2004), Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2006a: 299) believes that the author's occupation and initial training influenced the quality and the structures of the dictionary. It is likely the case with Gabonese French dictionaries in particular, and most of Gabonese dictionaries in general. None of the authors of available dictionaries for Gabonese languages has a formal training in theoretical and practical lexicography, except for Professor Paul Achille Mavoungou who jointly compiled and published the Yilumbu dictionary with Bernard Plumel (cf. Mavoungou and Plumel 2010), and the latest Gabonese French dictionary to date (cf. Mavoungou et al. 2014) with two of his colleagues.

In addition, most of the compilers of the Gabonese French dictionaries are by no means professional lexicographers. Professor Moussounda Ibouanga, a co-compiler in Mavoungou et al. (2014) and who has a dictionary of his own previously published (i.e. Moussounda Ibouanga 2011), is a trained sociolinguist and teaches sociolinguistics and dialectology at Omar Bongo University in the Department of Language Sciences. Apart from the two dictionaries (i.e. Moussounda Ibouanga 2011 and Mavoungou et al. 2014), most of his research work is related to language variation in Gabonese French and native Gabonese languages.

Doctor Jean-Aimé Pambou, also a co-compiler in Mavoungou et al. (2014), has formal university training in sociolinguistics and didactics. He teaches sociolinguistics and didactics in the Department of French Studies at *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (Teachers' Education College) in Libreville. His research works focus on French didactics and use in the Gabonese school context. Doctor Eric Dodo-Boungouenza is also a trained linguist with no known formal education in lexicography. He has so far published three Gabonese French dictionaries (DB2008, DB2010 and DB2013), but most of his available research works focus on language description and language planning. He teaches research methodology and historical linguistics at Omar Bongo University in the Department of Language Sciences. As for Doctor Lucien Ditougou, he has no known training in lexicography or linguistics. His available research outputs are mainly concerned with French-speaking African literature. He has been the Head of the Department of African Literatures at Omar Bongo University for the past four years.

A few common grounds can be found among the authors above who are the compilers of the current Gabonese French dictionaries. First, except for Lucien Ditougou, they are all trained linguists and teach linguistics-related subjects at higher education level. Second, except for Paul Achille Mavoungou and Eric Dodo-Boungouenza, they deal with subjects related to French for their research works and/or teaching subjects. Thus, it can be assumed that their research works and teaching subjects exposed these authors to the lexical particularities of Gabonese French to the point of compelling to work on such dictionary projects.

### 2.3 The French Language of the Current Gabonese French Dictionaries

The third major problem of available Gabonese French dictionaries and that leads to the present article in response to Mavoungou (2013a) is what it is understood as "Gabonese French". Gabonese French has actually been the topic of many linguistic studies. These studies were conducted in various linguistic sub-fields such as

- (i) *dialectology* (Mouloungui Nguimbyt 2002, Italia 2011),
- (ii) *didactics* (Ompoussa 1998, Itembo 1999, Makanga Mboumba 2005, Pambou 2011a and 2011b),
- (iii) *language situation* (Couvert 1982, Ogden 1984, Blanchon 1994, Mitchell 2004, Van der Veen 2006, Idiata 2008),
- (iv) *lexicology* (Bagouendi-Bagère 1999, Boucher 1997, Ompoussa 2008, Ondo-Mebiame 2008),
- (v) *morphology* and *syntax* (Ntsaga-Oyouni 1998, Mbondzi 1998, Italia 2000 and 2006, Mitchell 2009, Italia and Queffélec 2011),
- (vi) *phonology* (Tomba Moussavou 2001) as well as
- (vii) *pragmatics* (Boutin-Dousset 1989, Boucher 1998, Ompoussa 2011), and
- (viii) *sociolinguistics* (Moussirou Mouyama 1984, Boucher 1999, Bangouendi-Bagère Bonnot 2007, Moussounda Ibouanga 2008a).

From most linguistic studies on Gabonese French and from the lemmata contained in currently available Gabonese French dictionaries, it appears typically clear that the concept of Gabonese French is understood as the set of particular lexical items, collocations and locutions displayed in the French language spoken in Gabon, which are known as Gabonese particularisms or "*Gabonismes*", including *Toli-bangando* (a variety of Gabonese French to be presented further below). Mavoungou (2013a: 260) seems to support such a definition when he states that Gabonese French *is a repertoire of a variety of lexical items and expressions*. He further indicates *the idiosyncratic features of Gabonese French in vocabulary and syntax* (Mavoungou 2013a: 260) as being archaic, obsolete or old usage, abbreviation, modification of fixed expressions, usual graphic modification, change of connotation, change of denotation, loanwords from Gabonese native languages, Anglicisms and neologisms.

The present study refutes such as reductive definition of what Gabonese French is comprised of. It is herein believed that the French language that is the official language of the Republic of Gabon (according to its Constitution), the second language of the current political, intellectual and administrative elites of Gabon, and the mother-tongue of the majority of the Gabonese youth cannot be a form of language made only of lexical, phrasal and pronunciation particularisms. As it tries to give an accurate understanding of the concept of Gabonese

French, this paper suggests reconsidering the place of the French language within the Gabonese lexicography with a conception of what Gabonese French is in reality.

### **3. The French Language of Gabon: Status, Variants and Characterization**

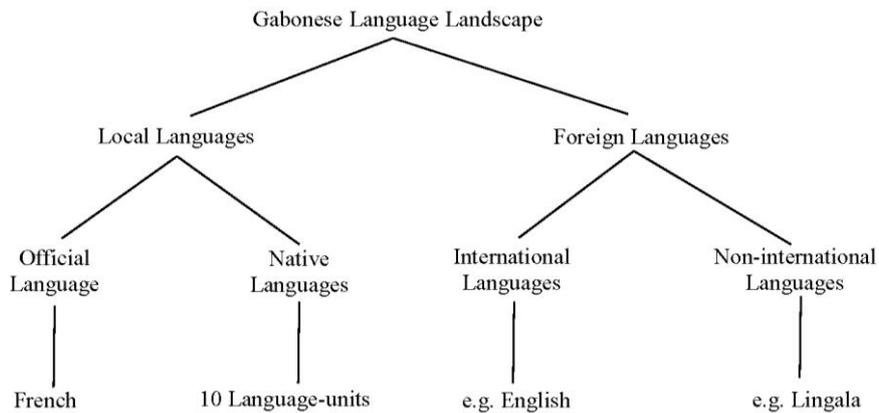
As stated earlier, the French language, as it is spoken in Gabon, has been the topic of various research studies, especially in the sociolinguistic domain. The most comprehensive are notably studies by Couvert (1982), Moussirou Mouyama (1984), Itembo (1999) and Mindze M'Eyeghe (2001). It is known that the language was introduced in Gabon by French colonialists and catholic missionaries in the first half of the 19th century (cf. Moussirou Mouyama 1986). This section will try to describe the Gabonese French in the three following aspects. First, it is a national and local language of Gabon. Second, it is at the centre of Gabon's language policy and language planning perspectives. And third, it is absolutely a variety of a major language, but it is also a local language with its own structural varieties.

#### **3.1 A National and Local Language**

The status of French as a Gabonese language or as a language spoken in Gabon has been scrutinized on various grounds (cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2011 and 2004, Makanga Mboumba 2007, Pambou 1998, Blanchon 1994, Moussirou Mouyama 1984 and Ogden 1984). The language has always been a language with multiple statuses in Gabon. Pambou (1998) tries to summarize these in indicating that French is simultaneously in Gabon a second language, a foreign language, a mother-tongue, first language or initial language, a real initial language, and the official language and language of education. However, Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2011) suggested a revision of these statuses as being the following:

- (i) initially a foreign language,
- (ii) the second language of a portion of Gabon's population, comprising the colonial generation, the post-colonial generation and the younger vil-lager generation,
- (iii) the official language for all public affairs, business and administration,
- (iv) the mother-tongue and initial language of another portion of Gabon's population (mainly the youth, cf. Makanga Mboumba 2007, Mabika Mbokou 2008 and 2012, Idiata 2009), and
- (v) the national and local language, for its role as the language of intercultural and interethnic communication (between Gabonese various ethnic groups as well as between nationals and foreigners in the absence of a lingua franca, cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2006b and 2007).

The present paper adheres to the view by Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2011: 146) who pointed out that French *has become a 'Gabonese language' and it is no longer a foreign language per se* in Gabon. French has gained a national status in Gabon. This status is strengthened by the fact that French is actually the sole dominant language at national level (cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2007: 107-108) in a country that has been inventoried with 62 native speech forms, including languages and dialects (cf. Kwenzi Mikala 1998). Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b and 2007) pointed out the existence of what he coined as the Gabonese language landscape (GLL), i.e. a countryside picture of *the languages, both foreign and native, used in Gabon* (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005b: 133). According to Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b: 134 and 2007: 113), the GLL can be schematized as follows in **Figure 5** with French as one the local languages.



**Figure 5:** Schema of the Gabonese Language Landscape

The schema reflects the view that French is a Gabonese language with the same rights (or even more rights in this specific case) as a native language.

### 3.2 Language Policy: All Rise and Fall on French

Gabon is one these Francophone countries where the sole language policy statement is to adopt French as the official language of the nation. In fact, the Constitution (Act 2, paragraph 8) clearly stipulates: *The Republic of Gabon adopts French as the official language. Furthermore, it endeavors to protect and promote the national languages.* Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2007: 108) believes that this statement is the *entire language policy* of Gabon.

This is true on the account that no other official, constitutional or administrative document exist in connection with languages. For instance, there is no

legal or administrative document which would define the process, the procedures or the actions which Gabon intends to implement in order to *protect and promote the national languages*. The government willpower to promote any other language than French limits itself to public speeches and support to linguistics workshops and seminars (cf. Dodo-Bounguendza 1999 and 2008). Thus, it can be argued that if Gabon's language policy does exist, French is certainly at the centre of it.

Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005a: 67) states that the current language policy of Gabon is indeed a continuation of the language policy implemented by the colonial government of France in the entire French colonial empire, especially in Africa. In fact, it is only with the constitutional amendment of 1994, i.e. thirty-four years after attaining independence, that the provision to *protect and promote the national languages* was added to the Act 2, paragraph 8, of the Constitution (cf. Idiata 2002: 74).

Thus, before 1994 the language policy was constitutionally more like in the colonial era when language use in French territories was organized according to two government decrees of the French government of the time (cf. Kwenzi Mikala 1990: 123). The first was the Villets-Cotterêts decree of 1539 which forbid the use of any other language than French in all official and administrative domains in the French territories (cf. Trudeau 1983, Fumaroli 1992, Boulard 1999 and Cohen 2003).

The second decree, the decree of the 14th February 1922 (cf. Spencer 1971, Garcia 1971 and Wakely 2000), was concerned with language in education making the difference between government public education, i.e. formal general education, and private education which comprised only religious education. In all African territories of the former French empire, the formal general education ought to be exclusively in French and the religious education regarding Bible teaching and any religious training ought to be in native languages (cf. Spencer 1971, Garcia 1971, Judge 1993a and 1993b and Wakely 2000).

In the specific context of Gabon, which attained international sovereignty in 1960, the language in education policy has in practice been a continuation of the colonial regime policy (cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005a: 66-70, 2005b: 139 and 2007: 108; Kwenzi Mikala 1990: 122-123). This is due to the fact that, as mentioned by Moyo (2002: 149), *after the attainment of independence, most African governments, for functional purposes in official circles, found it easier to retain their colonial masters' languages as official languages*.

Despite the constitutional amendment of 1994 to *protect and promote the national languages* (Constitution of the Republic of Gabon, 1994, Act 2, paragraph 8), the dispensations of the 1539 and 1922 decrees of the French colonial government are still in full implementation in the current Gabon's language policy and education system.

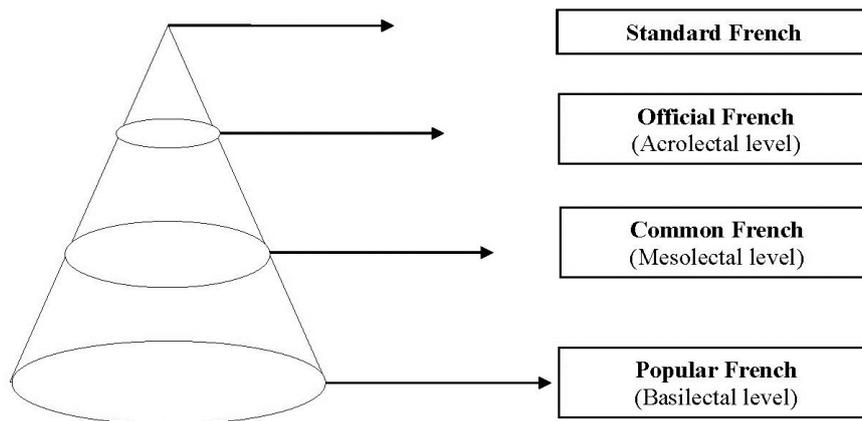
It has been shown that this key position of the French language, despite the fact that the language is now a Gabonese language per se, has caused seri-

ous damage to the survival of Gabonese native languages (cf. Idiata 2008, Mitchell 2004 and Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2004). Thus, French has arisen to becoming a nationally-dominant Gabonese language at the expense of native languages due to a historically-kept favorable language policy.

### 3.3 A Language Variety with its Own Varieties

Mouloungui Nguimbyt (2002) has shown the existence of dialectal variations within the French language as it is spoken in Gabon. This is true in the sense that linguistic markers are found in the way Gabonese speak French (cf. Minko 2008): Respective Gabonese mother-tongues do have an influence on the French fluency of a number of Gabonese speakers. It is often popularly said that Fang speak French with Fang accent, Punu with Punu accent, Myene with Myene accent, Nzebi with Nzebi accent, etc. (cf. Moussirou Mouyama 1998, Itembo 1999).

However, varieties within Gabonese French are not limited to the influence of local mother-tongues in the speaking proficiency. Varieties for which this study is concerned are those of linguistic forms as sociolinguistically identified (cf. Mesthrie et al. 2009: 294, Stockwell 2007: 24), i.e. the acrolect, the mesolect and the basilect. The acrolect is referred to as the *prestige or standard variety (or lect) to which it is possible to compare with other lects* (Crystal 2008: 8). The mesolect is the *intermediate linguistic variety* (Crystal 2008: 302) whereas the basilect is the *most remote language variant from the prestige language* (Crystal 2008: 51). These variants have been identified in Gabonese French as seen in **Figure 6** by Mavoungou (2013a: 259).



**Figure 6:** Gabonese French variant levels (Mavoungou 2013a: 259)

The view in this article does not agree with this stratification of the way the French language presents itself in Gabon. First, the term "official French" cannot be identified with a sociolect. In fact, what is known as "official language" in any country is not a language variety *defined on social (as opposed to regional) grounds, e.g. correlating with a particular social class or occupational group* (Crystal 2008: 440).

Second, it appears possible to make a distinction between upper mesolect and lower mesolect within Gabonese French. In fact, the concept of mesolect can cover a range of varieties. The upper mesolect is the closest variation to the acrolect and the lower is closer to the basilect (cf. Crystal 2008: 302). This distinction is suitable for understanding the differences within the mesolectal variety of Gabonese French.

In the context of Gabonese French, the acrolectal level is indeed standard French, also known as Parisian French. The variety is well used in Gabon in all official spheres including administration, education and business. It is best found in official written documents, various newspapers, academic essays and school textbooks. Administrative notes, minutes, reports as well as exam papers are required in standard French. This is one of the reasons why it is often said that Gabonese French is closer to standard French than a number of other French varieties in Africa (cf. Pambou 2011a, Ntsaga-Oyouni 1998). This has been indeed proven in the study by Mitchell (2004) who showed that most Gabonese adults and young adults perceive the form of French they speak as close to the standard form.

Furthermore, from the definition of Gabonese French by Mavoungou (2013a: 260) and from the contents of currently available Gabonese French dictionaries, it appears that what is often called as Gabonese French is merely the mesolectal form of the French language used in Gabon. It comprises the upper mesolectal level and the lower mesolectal level. The upper mesolectal form, as it is close to the acrolect, can be found in official circumstances, especially in public speeches. A form of language which late President Omar Bongo and his regime had often made use of in public circumstances (cf. Ndenguino Mpira 2005, Mebiame-Akono 2008a and 2008b). It was also the form of language used by the then Prime Minister in his obituary speech at the official funeral ceremony of Omar Bongo (cf. Mebiame-Akono 2009). The current President also makes use of the same linguistic strategies in the same circumstances (cf. Mebiame-Akono 2011, Engoung Nsi 2013). The upper mesolect is also the form of language used in most talk-shows on TV and radio (cf. Alves 1994, Artigues 1995) and a number of private newspapers (especially satirical newspapers). It is also found in various academic circumstances.

**Table 1<sup>1</sup>** below displays a few examples of the differences between the acrolect and the upper mesolect in Gabonese French (extracts from DB2010<sup>2</sup>). The first column contains words in the mesolectal form of Gabonese French. The second column presents words in the acrolectal form. The third and last column shows the translation of the words in formal English.

<i>Upper Mesolect</i>	<i>Acrolect</i>	
Aboyer. <i>Ce chiot aboie très fort.</i>	Japper. <i>Un chien aboie, un jeune chien n'aboie pas, mais il jappe.</i> (DB2010: 26)	<i>To yap</i>
Etre allergique à. <i>Les personnalités politiques sont <b>allergiques</b> aux critiques.</i> (DB2010: 19)	Ne pas apprécier. <i>Les personnalités politiques n'apprécient pas les critiques.</i> (DB2010: 19)	<i>To resent</i>
Bénéfique. <i>L'augmentation du prix du baril de pétrole est <b>bénéfique</b> pour l'économie gabonaise.</i> (DB2010: 26)	Favorable à/Avantageux pour. <i>L'augmentation du prix du baril de pétrole est <b>favorable à</b> l'économie gabonaise.</i> (DB2010: 26)	<i>Beneficial to</i>
Blessé grave/blessé léger. <i>On a enregistré six <b>blessés graves</b> et deux <b>blessés légers</b> lors de l'accident qui a eu lieu au P.K. 13.</i> (DB2010: 26).	Grièvement/légèrement blessé. <i>On a enregistré six personnes <b>grièvement blessés</b> et deux <b>légèrement blessés</b> lors de l'accident qui a eu lieu au P.K. 13.</i> (DB2010: 26).	<i>Seriously/slightly injured</i>
De rien du tout. <i>C'est une petite maison <b>de rien du tout.</b></i> (DB2010: 45)	Sans importance. <i>C'est une petite maison sans importance.</i>	<i>Insignificant</i>

**Table 1:** Acrolectal vs. upper mesolectal differences in Gabonese French

The differences from one variety to the other — from the acrolect to the upper mesolect, from the upper mesolect to the lower mesolect and from the lower mesolect to the basilect — can be identified at four levels of the speech, i.e. at lexical, morphological, syntactical and at phonetic levels. At lexical level, there are lexical creations through neologisms, collocations as well as loanwords from African languages. The items below in **Table 2** are few examples of the lexicon of Gabonese French. Columns 1 to 4 respectively present the acrolectal, the upper mesolectal, the lower mesolectal and the basilectal lexica. Lastly, column 5 records the English translations. Data contained in this table were extracted variously from available dictionaries of Gabonese French.

<b>Acrolect</b>	<b>Upper Mesolect</b>	<b>Lower Mesolect</b>	<b>Basilect</b>	
Beignet	Gâteau	Gâteau farine	Bédoume	<i>fat cake</i>
Bidonville	Ghetto	Matiti	Mapane	<i>township</i>
Friperie	Marché	Moutouki	Assamsè	<i>Frippery</i>
Gâteau	Gâteau	Gâteau au four	Cake	<i>cake</i>
Sans importance	De rien du tout	De rien	Au balango	<i>insignificant</i>

**Table 2:** Lexical differences in Gabonese French varieties

At morphological and syntactical levels, there are also neologisms, but most morphological creations are from an influence of native African languages (cf. Italia 2006). **Table 3** below shows an example of the syntactic differences between the four levels of language in Gabonese French. The differences are shown from a single sentence extracted from a dictionary article by Mavoungou et al. (2014: 69). The basilectal sentence is presented in the dictionary as the headword of the dictionary article. The last row of the table below presents the sentence translation in formal English.

<b>Acrolect</b>	Ce ne sont pas des ragots.
<b>Upper Mesolect</b>	Ce ne sont pas des racontards.
<b>Lower Mesolect</b>	Ce n'est pas le kongossa.
<b>Basilect</b>	C'est pas on a dit.
	<i>This is not gossip</i>

**Table 3:** Syntactic differences in Gabonese French varieties

The influence of the native African language is also responsible of linguistic markers from pronunciation and prosodic structures, as detailed and analyzed in Minko (2008). For instance, in the difference between the acrolect and the upper mesolect, Dodo-Bounguendza (2010) indicates that the last consonant in the words **août** "August" (DB2010: 22) and **baril** "barrel" (DB2010: 25) are not pronounced in standard French. These consonants are ordinarily pronounced in Gabonese French upper mesolect.

Furthermore, unlike most previous studies (Boucher 1998, Bagouendi-Bagère Bonnot 2007, Moussounda Ibouanga 2008b and 2011, Mitchell 2009, Mouélé 2011 to mention a few), the current study makes a distinction between the basilectal form of Gabonese French and Toli-bangando. In fact, although Toli-bangando is considered as a social variety of Gabonese French, it rather bears the characteristics of slang than of a language basilect. In the distinction between basilect and slang, although they are both language varieties that are the most remote from the prestige variety, it is true that the basilect has more the status of common variety while slang is more *an in-group language for a particular set of people such as teenagers, army recruits, pop groups*, etc. (Richards and Schmidt 2002: 490). Thus, in places where a creole is spoken, the creole is the basilect of the language and it is often spoken by the maximum majority of the population. For instance, Irvine (2004) and Sand (1999) show that Jamaican creole is the basilect while Standard Jamaican English is the acrolect in Jamaican English. Likewise, Jamaican creole is different from Jamaican English slang (cf. Chang 2014, Patrick 1999).

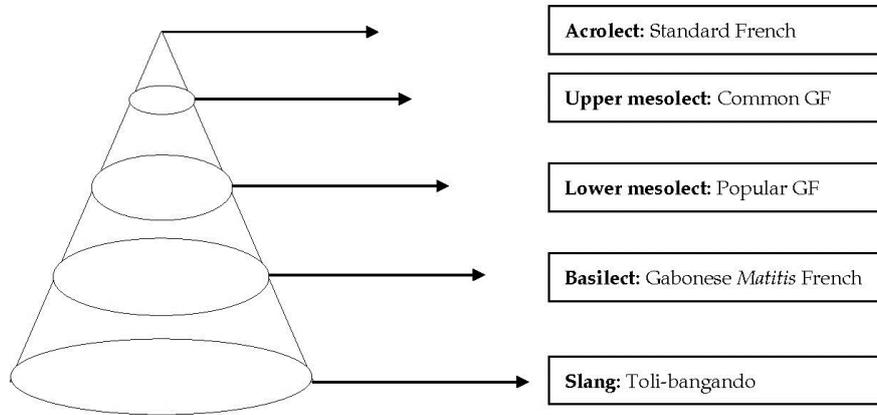
The basilect of Gabonese French was brought to written form and litera-

ture by Ndong Mbeng (1992)<sup>3</sup>. In his well acclaimed novel, Ndong Mbeng (1992) mixes narration and description to report on life in the slums of Libreville, the capital city of Gabon. The narrative is given through a lexical, syntactic and stylistic structure that is proper to the populations of Libreville's shantytowns. The language variety that reads in Ndong Mbeng (1992)'s work ignores norms of standard French. Yet, the novel was acclaimed not only for its depiction of shantytowns' living conditions, but mainly for its use of the Gabonese French basilect, a language variety understandable by the population's majority, especially the people depicted in the novel (cf. Van den Avenne 2001 and 2004).

As for Toli-bangando, it is actually a jargon of teenagers and a certain youth of popular neighborhoods, as described by Moussounda Ibouanga (2008b and 2011). It is also the most common language variety used in Gabonese pop music. Dodo-Bounguendza (DB2013: 8), who acknowledges it as slang, indicates in the pretexts of his Toli-bangando dictionary, that the language variety leans on distortion, incomprehensibility, a peculiarity to young people and a trait marked by complication for the grown-ups. It is indeed an informal and original language invented by young Gabonese. It is mainly based on direct creation of words. This allows to conceive or to imagine words from scratch.

The language variety is also marked with extensive use of metaphors, semantic extensions and shifts and with words from various other languages than French, notably English, Spanish and native languages. For instance, the term *Toli-bangando* itself derived from two Gabonese native languages (*toli* "language" from Myene and *bangando* "caimans" from Punu) to mean "language of gangsters". From its meaning and from the description that can be made of it, Toli-bangando is more like Tsotsitaal (this glossonym also means "language of gangsters" in Afrikaans) in the South African context (cf. Slabbert and Myers-Scotton 1996, Satyo 2001 and Ntshangase 2002) as shown in the Tsotsitaal dictionary by Molamu (2013).

A few of characteristics of linguistic shifts and norm distortions in Toli-bangando are shown in the following illustrative sentence: *Coince moi mon bag, je vais d'abord check avec l'élément là* (Dodo-Bounguendza 2013: 39). Two English words are recorded in the sentence, i.e. *bag* and *check*. The meaning of the latter word is shifted to mean "to talk". The French words *coince* and *élément* also have meanings different from what they have in standard French. The latter word is borrowed from the military jargon where it means "an individual". Finally, the meaning of the sentence in formal English is: "Would you please carry my bag, I need first to talk with this person". Ultimately, the levels of variation indicated by Mavoungou (2013a: 259) in **Figure 6** further above do not reflect the actual sociolectal stratification in Gabonese French. **Figure 7** below is an attempt to schematize a more actual stratification with all identified sociolectal variants of Gabonese French.



**Figure 7:** Sociolectal stratification of Gabonese French

The schema above has the advantage of displaying both the diastratic and the diaphasic variation of the Gabonese French, which contains varieties highly differentiated between the standardized and the popular poles (cf. van den Avenne 2004: 45). Subsequently, the distinction made by Mavoungou (2013a) between variant A and variant B, where variant A is supposedly the variety of France and variant B the Gabonese French, does not apply in the actual context of Gabon.

As a matter of fact, the distinction would not apply in any French-speaking country, because every country has indeed its own phonetic, lexical, morphological and syntactical particularities that diverge from Parisian French. It is for instance specifically the case in Belgium (Belgicism, e.g. *bourgmestre* "mayor" rather than Parisian French *maire*), Cameroon (e.g. *frère de famille* "cousin" instead of standard French *cousin*), Senegal (Senegalism, e.g. *essencerie* "petrol station" rather than Parisian French *station d'essence*) and Switzerland (e.g. *bordier* "neighbor" instead of standard French *voisin*).

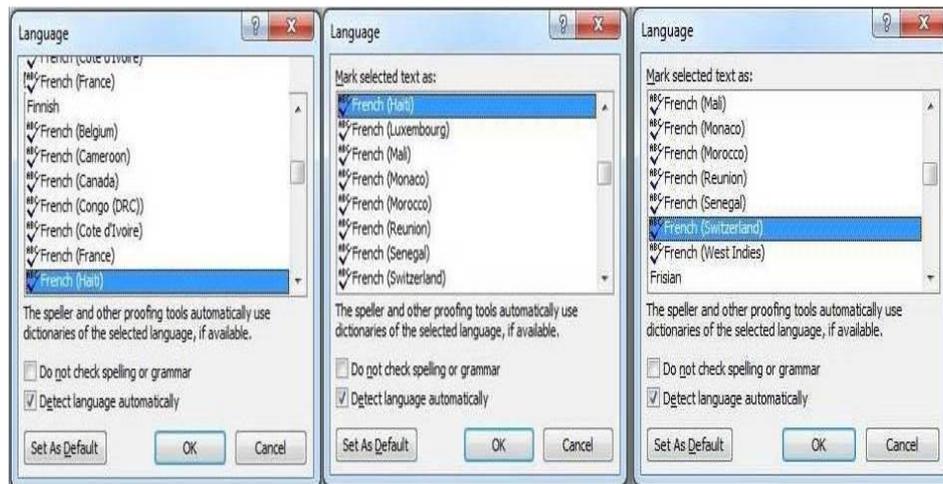
One would note that even in France, there is not one variety of French as shown in France's French regional varieties dictionary by Rézeau (1999). Although, French is the national and official language in France with Parisian variety as the standard norm, the language still has many varieties which differentiate themselves not only regionally (north versus south of France, and west versus east of France) but also historically from the influences each variety gained from neighboring languages as well as from languages of ancient ethnic tribes that inhabited France long before French was formed as a language.

Thus, there should be no hierarchy such as variant A versus variant B, because there exists only one French language which does have a number of varieties not only within France, but also beyond the borders of France and overseas. It is the view of this paper that each French variety in a given country be legitimized, i.e. accepted as one of the various speech-forms of a particular

language following the codification of such a variant in a determined country (cf. Klinkenberg 2002).

Examples of such legitimization and codification exist in English where American English is a different norm from British English, and from South African English. For the specific case of French, one may notice that most codified French variants are worldwide recognized as specific varieties of the French language. Like for most major world languages (e.g. Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Spanish, etc.), the codified varieties can be found in the language repertoire of the Microsoft Office (Ms Office) applications package.

**Figure 8** presents the French varieties codified and included in the Ms Office applications package for spelling and grammar checks. These are Belgian French, Cameroonian French, Canadian French, Congolese (DRC) French, Ivorian French, France's French (i.e. Parisian French), Haitian French, Luxembourg French, Malian French, Monaco French, Moroccan French, Reunion French, Senegalese French, Switzerland French and West Indies French.



**Figure 8:** Codified varieties of French available on Microsoft Office

#### 4. Grounding Gabonese French Lexicography

The previous two sections have tried to give a clear and actual definition of Gabonese French in terms of its sociolectal variants and its relationship with Parisian French. It is herein assumed that such a definition can be an important step towards Gabonese French lexicography, lexicographic activities (metalexigraphic research and dictionary production) which would have Gabonese French as sole object.

This section will now focus on few relevant matters related to metalexico-

graphical research and dictionary compilation in the theoretical inception of Gabonese French lexicography. In fact, in addition to the prospects and challenges for French lexicography in Gabon as outlined by Mavoungou (2013a: 268), it appears relevant to reflect on the purpose and objectives of Gabonese French lexicography and the necessary phases towards establishing Gabonese French lexicography as both a research focus and professional activity in the Gabonese context.

This section will thus be concerned with a brief outline on current trends in Gabonese lexicography since its first mention by Emejulu (2000) and inception by an important literature that followed suit (e.g. Nyangone Assam and Mavoungou 2000, Mavoungou 2001 and 2010, Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005b) and the suggestion of a strategic focus for Gabonese French lexicography. Prior to the above concerns, the section is introduced with a tentative definition of what it should be understood as Gabonese French lexicography.

#### 4.1 What is to be called Gabonese French Lexicography?

In their attempt to determine the scope of lexicography as an independent discipline, Bergenholtz and Gouws (2012) suggest that lexicography is *the discipline dealing with theories about recently completed and also older existing dictionaries but also about future dictionaries as planned and produced by lexicographers* (Bergenholtz and Gouws 2012: 39).

A language-specific practice of this discipline is called the lexicography of that specific language. It can thus be understood that the lexicography of a language or a group of languages is the set of lexicographic traditions and activities (theoretical research and reference works compilation) conducted in or for that language or that group of languages. This is seen in the recent encyclopedia of lexicography (Gouws et al. 2013) where, for instance, the following chapter titles are found: *Lexicography of the Nguni languages* by Gauton (2013), *Lexicography of the Sotho languages* by Prinsloo (2013), *Lexicography of Shona* by Chabata (2013) and *Lexicography of Fang* by Afane Otsaga (2013) to mention just a few.

In the light of this understanding, what is to be called Gabonese French lexicography has then to be the set of theoretical and practical works done on the French language as it is spoken in Gabon within the research discipline defined above according to Bergenholtz and Gouws (2012: 39). It should also be herein said that Gabonese French lexicography is of course a component of Gabonese lexicography.

A comparison with other French-speaking African countries, and particularly in Central Africa and West Africa, shows that the inception of Gabonese French lexicography is a first of its kind in Francophone Africa. This is clearly observable in the survey of lexicographic activities in Central (cf. Mavoungou 2013b) and West Africa (cf. Mavoungou 2013c). In fact, Mavoungou (2013b and 2013c) shows no lexicographic activities for the French varieties spoken in these African countries. It should equally be noted that in most African countries sur-

veyed *these lexicographic reference products are translation dictionaries* (Mavoungou 2013b: 956) pairing with one or two colonial European languages (e.g. Dutch, English, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish). This however does not elude the fact, despite the absence of particular focus on lexicographic works in French, the language varieties have variously been codified in a number of these countries (cf. Boutin 2003, Ploog 2000 and 2001, Cissé 2005, Wamba and Noumssi 2003, Zang Zang 1998 and 2013, Mendo Ze 1999) as seen on **Figure 8** earlier in this paper.

#### 4.2 A Note on Current Trends in Gabonese Lexicography

After more than fifteen years of activity, one would hardly argue that Gabonese lexicography is still "embryonic", as Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b: 136; 2006a: 302) had once claimed. It has actually emerged into an important research and teaching discipline at Omar Bongo University. This is seen through the different survey works that have been made of Gabonese lexicography since its inception as a research discipline early in the 2000's.

The first survey was published by Nyangone Assam and Mavoungou (2000). It is a comprehensive account of lexicographic works and studies in Gabon. By the time of this survey most available dictionaries of Gabonese native languages were works compiled by religious missionaries and colonial administrators during the colonial era with reprints and/or new editions published by the Raponda-Walker Foundation. It is also learnt from this survey that most of these dictionaries *are bilingual dictionaries and biased towards French* (Nyangone Assam and Mavoungou 2000: 269).

Following the survey by Nyangone Assam and Mavoungou (2000), within the framework of defining a lexicographic plan for Gabon, Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b) suggested a short review analysis of trends in Gabonese lexicography which he estimated as "embryonic" at the time. One of the major lessons learnt from Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b)'s survey is the distinction between "earlier era" and "modern era" of dictionary production in Gabonese lexicography. According to Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b: 138), the "earlier era" of Gabonese dictionary production is that of religious missionaries and colonial administrators, while the modern period *coincides with the completion of the first theses on metalexicographic planning of dictionaries in the Gabonese languages* (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005b: 138) in the 2000's<sup>4</sup>. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005b: 136) then outlined five development simultaneous phases of Gabonese lexicography. These phases are lexicographic training, metalexicographical accounting for dictionaries, circumscribing lexicography as an academic discipline and a career, formulating a coherent general framework for Gabonese lexicography, and updating reference works inherited from missionaries and colonial administrators.

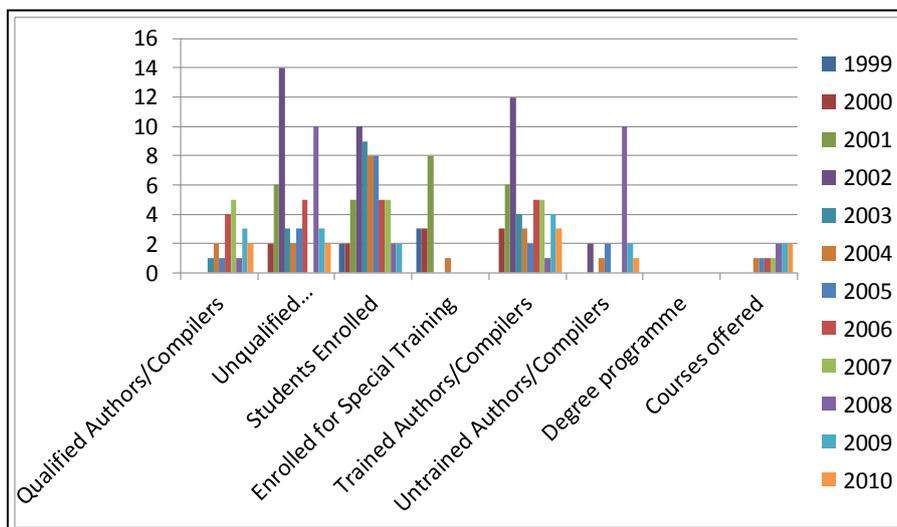
For the present overview of the current trends in Gabonese lexicography, it can be appropriate to review these same phases into two aspects, i.e. lexicographic training and lexicographic domains of publications in Gabonese lexi-

cography. The aim of this short overview is mainly to answer the question of the place of Gabonese French in all that has been done or is being done in Gabonese lexicography.

#### 4.2.1 Lexicographic training in Gabonese lexicography

Training is the one aspect where the strategic planning for Gabonese lexicography has been quite successful for a country that has just fewer than one million and half inhabitants. Following the ten Gabonese students who obtained their respective Ph.D. degrees in lexicography at Stellenbosch University under Professor Rufus Gouws between 2002 and 2010, lexicography is now one of the major disciplines taught from undergraduate to postgraduate levels in two departments at Omar Bongo University, namely the Department of Language Sciences and the Department of German Studies.

Although a Master program in lexicography has not yet been launched, there has been since 2005 an average of two to three students every year graduating in language sciences with a Master thesis topic related to lexicographic issues. At present, five other students are enrolled for doctoral degree with lexicography research topics at Omar Bongo University under Professor Mavoungou. **Figure 9** below shows a survey of lexicographic training in Gabon between 1999 (when the first Gabonese enrolled for lexicography studies at Stellenbosch University) and 2010 (when the two last Gabonese Ph.D. students graduated from Stellenbosch University). The survey was conducted by Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2010) in the prospects for an objective assessment of the lexicographic plan for Gabon.



**Figure 9:** Survey of lexicographic training for Gabonese scholars

It can be seen from **Figure 9** above that the number of students enrolling for lexicography-related courses is increasing throughout the year while the number of lexicography modules offered is quite stagnant.

However, three recent developments allow hoping and expecting for new courses and more student enrollment and supervision in the near future in the Department of Language Sciences and the Department of German Studies at Omar Bongo University. First, both departments have been engaged into a process of restructuring in terms of study programs as from the year 2016. Second, the seven trained and qualified lexicographers who are the teaching staff in these two departments have been promoted to senior teaching roles: Apart from Professor Mavoungou who is an Associate Professor in both departments, there are now three lexicographers who are Senior Lecturers in the Department of Language Sciences, and three other lexicographers are Senior Lecturers in the Department of German Studies.

Third, the newly founded Research Centre for Germanic and Intercultural Studies<sup>5</sup> (CREGI) headed by Professor Mavoungou within the Department of German Studies has recently established a division for lexicography research and courses. The division was launched at the occasion of the international colloquium on Gabonese dictionaries hosted by the CREGI at Omar Bongo University on 25–27 November 2013. The lexicography division of CREGI is indeed expected to contribute to increasing research outputs in Gabonese lexicography.

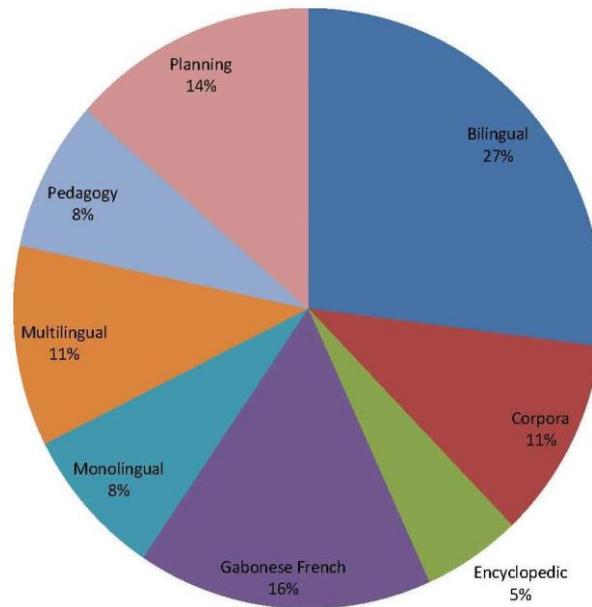
#### 4.2.2 Lexicographic domains of publications

In terms of research outputs and dictionary compilation, Gabonese lexicography has experienced a fast-growing crop of publications since 2000 (cf. Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005b: 136). From the survey by Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2010), it is learnt that domains of publications in Gabonese lexicography includes pedagogical lexicography (i.e. learners' lexicography), planning, bilingual lexicography, multilingual lexicography, monolingual lexicography, encyclopedic lexicography, corpora and Gabonese French.

It is shown in **Figure 10** below that the second top domain with the most research outputs in Gabonese lexicography is Gabonese French (16%), behind bilingual lexicography (27%), for the period between 1999 and 2010 in Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2010)'s survey.

Two significant points can be drawn from **Figure 10**. First, although Gabon still lacks a formal degree program in lexicography, the crop of Gabonese lexicography literature is in constant progress. This is the consequence of not only the number of highly-trained lexicographers, but also of an affirmed trend to produce metalexigraphically-accounted dictionaries and to update with theoretical bases reference works stemming from the early era of Gabonese dictionary production (cf. Mavoungou 2001, Mihindou 2001, etc.). Second, despite the lack of an asserted intention to produce dictionaries for Gabonese

French, there has been an interest in lexicographic research on Gabonese French within the emerging Gabonese lexicography. This is an undoubtedly an important step towards a formal inception of Gabonese French lexicography.



**Figure 10:** Survey of domains of publications in Gabonese lexicography

#### 4.3 Strategic Focus for Gabonese French Lexicography

It is the view of the present study that the development of Gabonese French lexicography without a specific goal or a strategic theoretical framework might run the risk of some methodological inadequacy. It is for instance hard to find the genuine purpose of any of the currently available dictionaries of Gabonese French. Most of these dictionaries were made within what Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2006a: 298) referred to as the *epistemology of the missionaries*<sup>6</sup>. According to Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2006a: 298), the main point of the epistemological framework of the religious missionaries and colonial administrators who were the pioneers in scientific research in Gabon was to expose indigenous languages and cultures by means of linguistic and anthropological studies and dictionary compilation (most of them were not even acquainted with theoretical concepts and research methods of these disciplines). The purpose of such an epistemological framework was simply to make the indigenous languages and cultures known to their Western compatriots.

Equally, it is likely plausible to say that the current dictionaries of Gabonese French have no other aim than the exposition of some part of the Gabonese French lexicon (as described in most sociolinguistic studies) in lexicographic manners. A theoretically-conceived aim for Gabonese French lexicography is crucially needed in view of its scientific sustainability.

Such an aim can be conceived within what it should be called as the **strategic focus for Gabonese French lexicography**. It is actually a twofold focus. First, it will have to make a stand for only monolingual lexicography and monolingual dictionary production. One of the reasons for this choice is because the maximum majority of Gabonese research and dictionary production activities focus on bilingual lexicography with French as one of the members of the language pair. This will definitely help to avoid unnecessary duplications.

A second reason for such focus choice is that Gabonese French lexicography can also give itself the contribution to the codification of the French variety of Gabon (with its cultural and local inputs part of the French language as it is known worldwide) as a research objective with a societal implication. This will indeed help the Gabonese French lexicographers to step in the experiences of French-speaking African countries such as Cameroon (Zang Zang 1998, 2013), Senegal (Ndao 2002) and Cote d'Ivoire (Ploog 2000, 2001).

Second, as part of the strategic focus, Gabonese French lexicography will have to be a corpus driven lexicography. Thus, building a corpus of Gabonese French will be one of the most important steps in Gabonese French lexicography. The Gabonese French corpus will have to take into consideration the different sociolectal variants of the language the way it is spoken in Gabon. The dictionary production will have to stem not only from an annotated and clean corpus, but also from sound metalexicographic research setting theoretical guidelines for all necessary types of French dictionaries in the Gabonese context.

Moreover, the strategic focus for Gabonese French lexicography should include the setting up of a lexicography unit for Gabonese French. In fact, the South African experience (cf. Gouws and Prinsloo 2005, Alberts 1996), or more particularly the Afrikaans lexicography (cf. Gouws 2013), has shown the importance of a language lexicography unit for the development of both lexicography research and dictionary production for a specific language.

Based on the South African experience, Emejulu (2001: 50-52) has suggested the establishment of lexicography units for Gabonese languages as a key factor for the development of Gabonese lexicography. Emejulu (2001: 50) suggests that lexicography units have to be made for Gabonese languages according to the 10 language-units identified by Kwenzi Mikala (1998: 217) from the 62 speech-forms (including languages and dialects) of the native Gabonese languages. Unfortunately, such a planning of lexicography units for Gabonese languages does not take Gabonese French into account. Meanwhile, the inception of Gabonese French lexicography will definitely take an important turning point with the launch of a lexicography unit for Gabonese French.

## 5. Conclusion

The current emerging Gabonese lexicography presents an interesting position for the French language, especially in terms of metalexicographical research. At the same time, while Gabon is experiencing a modern era of dictionary production in general, current Gabonese French dictionary production has solely focused on popular French and slang which are not the sole representatives of the Gabonese French variety. Gabonese French lexicography should target all the variants of the French language spoken in Gabon, including the acrolect.

Suggestions have been made in this paper to ground Gabonese French lexicography on a strategic focus. This strategic focus will have to include metalexicographic research and corpus building for all types of monolingual dictionaries production of Gabonese French as the main activities of a Gabonese French lexicography unit. As Lafage (1993: 215) puts it: *It seems to be increasingly accepted that the survival of French as an international language depends on its development in Africa.* This is where Gabonese French lexicography can play a significant role.

In conclusion, within the strategic planning for Gabonese lexicography, French should be as important as any Gabonese local language.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that the lexicographical data contained in Table 1 are dictionary articles from the DB2010. The page number where the article was extracted is duly indicated. The headwords of these dictionary articles are genuine examples of Gabonese French which can variously be found in popular Gabonese newspapers, magazines, etc. (cf. Ondo-Mebiame 2008, Mindze M'Eyegehe 2001). However, a proper corpus of Gabonese French still has to be built. All English translations are our own in this paper.
2. This dictionary by Dodo-Bounguendza (2010) is an important resource book for distinguishing between the acrolect and the upper mesolect in Gabonese French. It identifies the shortcomings of Gabonese French and recommends the proper usage according to standard French. It is aimed at politicians, journalists, administration staff and academics.
3. Van den Avenne (2004: 45) argues that the language used in the narrative can be a mixed of Gabonese popular French and slang. However, by the time the work of Ndong Mbeng (who was 19 years old when his book got published) Toli-bangando, which was unnamed then, had not gotten the structural form known nowadays as the speech variety of the Gabonese youth and hip-pop singers. Toli-bangando indeed draws an important deal of lexicon from the Gabonese popular French.
4. The first two doctoral theses on metalexicographical planning of dictionaries for Gabonese languages are Mavoungou (2002b) and Afane Otsaga (2004). They were followed by eight other doctoral theses on various metalexicographical issues for Gabonese languages (cf. Mabika Mbokou 2006, Nyangone Assam 2006, Mihindou 2006, Ella 2007, Ekwa Ebanega 2007, Tomba Moussavou 2007, Saphou-Bivigat 2010 and Soami 2010).

5. Our translation from *Centre de Recherche en Etudes Germaniques et Interculturelles*.
6. Our translation from *l'épistémologie des missionnaires* (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2006a: 298).

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