'Promouvoir la Culture Loma'

Literacy, convenience, and multilingual choices on the Guinean internet

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Abstract

Guinean speakers of Loma, domestically and in the global diaspora, use the internet to connect with family and friends and engage in digital spaces organized around celebrating Loma heritage and identity. Yet in almost all cases, they only write in French, Guinea's official—and formerly colonial—language. Drawing on observation of online language use and speaker interviews, I trace this practice to the history of Guinean national language policies and contemporary ideologies of convenience. While speakers know that familiarity with Loma's official orthography is limited, they assume French to be easily and universally understood and therefore more practical. Moreover, French is ethnically neutral and therefore does not contradict pride in a Loma identity. This study affirms the characterization of West African language ecologies as displaying niche-based multilingualism, highlights literacy's role in shaping digital language practice, and challenges some common assumptions in the study of language vitality.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Speaking Loma, writing French

On October 29, 2024, a Facebook account whose profile describes its mission as the promotion of unity among the Loma people of the Republic of Guinea posted a complaint to its timeline. Fellow Loma people in Guinea's capital, Conakry, it claimed, were behaving as if they were ashamed of their ethnic identity:

> À Conakry tu peux être dans le même véhicule que ton frère Lomagui. Il te voit parler loma au téléphone mais ne te salue pas..
>
> *In Conakry you can be in the same vehicle as your brother Lomagui [Loma person]. He sees you talking loma on the phone but doesn't greet you..*

Some urban Loma people, the account lamented, were unwilling to use their language, which is spoken by a little over a percent of the Guinean population, particularly in Macenta Prefecture in the country's forested southeast. Its followers seemed to share the sentiment: within a few days, the post had received over 150 comments, most expressing agreement. One user, a resident of Conakry, described his own experience in a comment:

> J'ai rencontré un toma BEAVOGUI nous travaillons dans la même entreprise il est chauffeur mais depuis notre rencontre j'ai essayé par mille manières pour qu'on parle toma notre langue mais hélas il ne parle que SOUSSOU ET MALINKÉ parfois FRANÇAIS il me dit qu'il a honte de parler toma .... le pauvre me fait pitié car les gens me disent que c'est mon parent pourtant il n'en est rien

> *I met a Loma [person named] BEAVOGUI we work in the same company he is a driver but since we met I have tried a thousand ways to make him speak our language but alas he only speaks SOUSSOU AND MALINKÉ sometimes FRENCH he tells me he's ashamed to speak Loma .... the poor guy makes me pity him because people say he's my relative yet he's nothing [to me]*

Several commenters defined themselves in opposition to the supposedly ashamed Loma people who only spoke Susu or Maninka, two other local languages of Guinea, or French, the country's official—and formerly colonial—language. In contrast to this alleged betrayal, they expressed their own stalwart pride in the Loma language:

> Moi je parle langue partout je suis mais certains de nos amis qu'ils refusent même communiquer avec moi dans notre langue, moi j'insiste avec eux
>
> *Me I speak the language everywhere I am but some of our friends they refuse to even communicate with me in our language, me I insist with them*

For others, this belief took the form of a call to action:

> Oui c'est vrai et il faut qu'on change, nous devons valoriser nos langues partout et devons êtres fier de parler çà par tout, c'est notre identité ont ne doit pas la fuire plutôt la mettre public
>
> *Yes, it's true and we have to change, we have to value our languages everywhere and we have to be proud to speak them everywhere, it's our identity we shouldn't run away from it, we should rather make it public.*

The complaint and its comments were a festival of shared Loma pride, centered around the feeling that the Loma language should be raised up and used "everywhere." But to the outside observer, it is hard not to notice the overriding irony of the situation, increasing with each additional comment and each additional word the participants type: even as they write about the importance of using the Loma language, they do so entirely in French.

This is no isolated occurrence. Most of the posts by the account that wrote the initial message above, as well as the contents of several Facebook groups for Loma people, are odes to Loma culture and language that are nevertheless written in French. One video from January 2025, for example, shows a woman performing a traditional Loma dance in brightly colored clothing. Its caption reads "cette culture que j'adore"

[*this culture that I love*], and responses include phrases like "notre belle culture" [*our beautiful culture*] and "félicitations" [*congratulations*]. Only one comment of the 40 on that video appeared to contain Loma text: "Wôh mamah nah," one user wrote—*thank you guys*. In another case, a December 2024 interview with a Loma singer by a Facebook video-news channel was conducted mostly in Loma, but none of the 45 comments it received were in the language. No matter the content or the context, the Loma internet is mostly written in French.

This essay is an attempt to explain that apparent paradox. Why, even in spaces that would seem to support Loma heritage and identity, is there little written Loma to be found? What do these internet users' exhortations about the importance of "speaking" the language really mean, and why do they evidently not encompass writing on the internet? What are the ideologies or beliefs that lead them to this kind of language practice? And, ultimately, what are the effects on the Loma language and its continued vitality?

There are several hypotheses that we could imagine might explain the absence of Loma. Are many or all of the participants in these spaces not actually fluent speakers of Loma in the first place, or conversely, do they think others are not fluent speakers? Do they believe they cannot write Loma themselves—perhaps because they do not know a sufficiently "pure" or "complete" form—or do they believe that others around them cannot write it, or that it is impossible to write it altogether? Do they think Loma cannot or should not be used on a digital medium? Are they simply habituated to using French on the internet because they have many non-Loma-speaking friends, or is using French instead of Loma an active political claim? These are all arguments that have been made about languages in similar contexts elsewhere around the world (cf. Paolillo 1996; Sperlich 2005; Androutsopoulos 2006; Mazrui 2008; Deumert 2014), and it would not be too surprising if they applied here as well. The task of this paper is to investigate these possibilities and piece together a story about how Loma speakers navigate language choices and identity in online spaces—and what that navigation reveals about African local languages in the digital age.

In the following chapters, I argue that Loma's absence online cannot be attributed to a lack of fluency among internet users or an active belief in its unsuitability for being written on the internet. The people who comment on posts like the one above, or

who share clips of their favorite Loma-language music with Facebook groups organized to promote Loma culture, are proud of their heritage—sometimes even chauvinistically so—and want to maintain a virtual connection to it. But while most are Loma speakers and use the language without reservation in oral contexts, they are also largely urbanites and members of the diaspora with far more formal education than the average Guinean. Here speakers' contemporary language choices become inseparable from the histories of language policy that precede them. As I will examine, since the colonial period, high school and university education in Guinea has been conducted exclusively in French—meaning that it is safe to assume that anyone participating in one of these spaces is comfortable reading and writing in French. In contrast, an official Loma orthography was promulgated in primary schools only for a decade and a half between the 1960s and 1980s, leaving Loma speakers aware that familiarity with it is quite limited. The result is an ideological framework that labels written French as convenient and written Loma as inconvenient or impractical. Furthermore, as members of a small-minority language community in a country where most speakers are multilingual but language identity remains highly ethnicized, speakers value French as a marker of modernity that is uniquely non-ethnic and therefore not in conflict with pride in a Loma identity.

The case of Loma is not merely a story about one particular minority indigenous language among the hundreds spoken across Africa, but a claim about the importance of class, ethnicity, education, and history in shaping language practices more broadly. The particular choices made by Loma speakers are not necessarily representative of other contexts, as they are deeply embedded in Guinea's specific historical trajectory and contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Nevertheless, many of the structural forces influencing these choices—most notably the legacy of colonial language dominance in education and the promotion of French as a supposedly neutral, uniting lingua franca—exist in some form across the continent. In this sense, Loma's situation is not exceptional, but instead may reflect a common pattern for local languages in Francophone Africa and possibly beyond (cf. Mafu 2004; Mazrui 2008). Examining one case in depth allows us to better understand how such forces operate in practice and shape linguistic behavior at the ground level.

Yet, as Lexander (2020a: 953) observes, there remains a relative scarcity of stud-

ies that directly investigate the use of African languages online (as opposed to, say, applied research on technologies to facilitate it). This essay aims to enter that lacuna by offering a form of "sociolinguistic documentation" of digital spaces, following the approach advocated by Childs et al. (2014), which emphasizes the interplay of codes, contexts, participants, and communicative norms over the analysis of any single language in isolation. Indeed, in a sense, because the question at hand requires studying a language precisely through its absence—by examining the spaces where it is *not* used—it compels this sort of approach.

This study brings together several theoretical tools to accomplish this task. First, it relies on the concept of language ideologies, or "sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein 1979: 193; see also Woolard 1998). Thinking in terms of language ideologies allows us to consider not just what behaviors users of a language express in relation to their language, but also how they themselves make sense of those behaviors—and then, potentially, how that sense-making in turn shapes further language use. Second, at the societal level, the concept of linguistic ecology is useful in order to study languages in context (Haugen 1972; Mühlhäusler 1996; Lüpke 2015). The core metaphor of this approach is to biological ecology, and as such, it takes the view that "one can study languages as one studies the interrelationship of organisms with and within their environments" (Mühlhäusler 1996: 2). As with the biological concept of ecology, a linguistic ecology may involve a certain language occupying a particular set of domains—such as face-to-face interaction between family members, interactions in a marketplace, or ceremonial contexts—which taken together constitute its niche. Languages are imagined as a sort of "living beings", relying on resources for support and constantly interacting with each other. The societal context in which Loma is used is one characterized by widespread multilingualism, and an ecological approach is especially suited for dealing with the complexities of multiple languages interacting because it opposes the concept of "language as a rigid, monolithic structure" (Haugen 1972: 325). My findings, which reveal that the languages used by Loma speakers often depend more on the nature of the domain rather than its subject matter, also fit nicely within the ecological framework. Finally, language *choices*—typically involving decisions about what language or code to use in what

context—are what link ideologies and ecologies. Speakers' language ideologies drive them to make choices, and those choices then combine at mass scale to construct ecologies. Because they are the crucial nexus between individual meaning and societal patterning, language choices will be the subject of much of my discussion in this essay.

What does this study ask us to pay attention to? First, it underscores the importance of taking writing and literacy seriously. "Literacy" here is used following its conception in New Literacy Studies, "not as an autonomous skill residing in our mind … but as a concrete ideological and social practice" (Juffermans 2015: 2; see also Barton & Hamilton 1998; Abdelhay et al. 2014). Writing is often dismissed as merely an epiphenomenon—a secondary representation of spoken language—but such a view overlooks its distinctiveness and its potential social effects (Mühlhäusler 1996: 212). As a modality of language use, writing may be more "costly" than speech in terms of resources required, but it can also enable greater planning, permanence, and creativity (Lüpke & Storch 2013; Lüpke 2015). Because literacy is closely linked to formal education, it is also often especially implicated in the historical and political dimensions of language use. The importance of Loma speakers' experiences with literacy and writing to their language's (non)appearance online underscores that language ecologies cannot be fully understood without close attention to the literacy practices and ideologies embedded within them.

Second, this study draws attention to low-salience language choices—ones that are notable precisely because they appear unremarkable or uncontroversial. In examining the motivations for these choices, I explore how "convenience" is constructed in language practices, and how social class can silently shape the norms and expectations surrounding them. This approach reveals how ostensibly neutral language choices can still be deeply political, even when they are not experienced as such by the individuals making them.

Finally, this study offers new data on how African local languages are interacting with the internet, contributing to our understanding of how digital media might reshape prospects for their continued vitality. Drawing from my conclusions about the case of Loma, I engage with a variety of claims about how ex-colonial languages and local languages interact in multilingual ecologies like those in much of Africa. I ar-

gue that the expanding use of the internet introduces a new collision point between the two, with still-uncertain implications for the future.

The remainder of this essay will proceed as follows: first, in chapter 2, I will provide background—both in relevant theory and basic facts about the situation of Loma. chapter 3 will describe my methodology. In chapter 4, I then begin my analysis by examining the phenomenon of interest, including its participants and their language practices, in greater detail. chapter 5 follows with the core of my argument about how Loma speakers' beliefs about writing and convenience translate into widespread patterns of language choice. chapter 6 answers a final question that explains how the findings of the previous two chapters can be consistent with each other. Lastly, in chapter 7, I reflect on the consequences of my results for the theorization of language choices, language ecologies, and language vitality in Africa.

CHAPTER 2

History and context: Language, literacy, and the internet in Guinea

In this chapter, I will introduce what we already know and what has been claimed about language and the internet in Guinea. While the subsequent chapters present this study's original analysis, this chapter establishes the conceptual and empirical scaffolding that supports those claims. I focus in on the situation of Loma by moving through each field or topic that it touches on one by one. I begin by reviewing key concepts in the theorization of multilingualism and language ecologies in Africa, then turn to a basic summary of the linguistic situation and the distribution of Loma, a brief history of language policy and education in Guinea since the colonial period, and a description of the internet in Guinea and Loma's place on the Guinean internet.

2.1 Repertoires and multilingualism in Africa

Studies of language and society are no longer dominated by conceptualizations of languages as discrete monoliths. Instead of thinking of a "language" as an analytic unit, scholars have turned to the idea of language repertoires to re-center their focus on the individual in social context (Spotti & Blommaert 2017). In this view, individuals are not simply categorizable as speakers of one language or another; rather, they

are agents with abilities that may differ across domains and shift across time, who are constantly making choices about which of the codes accessible to them to use, in what ways, in a given context. This view dovetails well at the macro level with the framework of language ecology, which highlights languages' domains of use in relation to each other and the coexistence and competition of multiple languages in a society (Haugen 1972; Mühlhäusler 1996).

This more contingent, less rigid understanding of language in society is particularly well-suited to explaining the patterns of language use that dominate in much of Africa, where multilingualism rather than monolingualism is frequently the norm (Lüpke & Storch 2013; Childs et al. 2014). African speakers not only may be able to speak many languages, but they may be hard-pressed to name a "first" or "native" language, instead making decisions about both what language they use and what language they associate identity with depending on domains, contexts, addressees, and so on (Lüpke 2015). One individual, for instance, might speak a one language to their parents, another to their childhood friends from a certain ethnic background, a third in the marketplace, and a fourth when they are in school. This idea of "niche-based multilingualism" allows us to construct better profiles of speakers and recognize the fluidity, flexibility, and room for agency in the alignment of language practice to identity (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 2).

Niche-based multilingualism is not interchangeable with a typical diglossic analysis of a bilingual or multilingual language ecology. Diglossic models have previously been central to work on African multilingualism, often positing a sort of three-tier ranking composed of ex-colonial languages at the top, local languages of wider communication in the middle, and local minority languages at the bottom—really a sort of "stable triglossia" (Carlo et al. 2019). While this goes some way to recognizing key aspects of the language situation, including the fact that multiple languages can coexist in the same environment, it tends to assume that "a society's linguistic space can be cleanly subdivided into externally defined 'compartments'" (Carlo et al. 2019: 6). In reality, speakers often make language choices that cannot be cleanly compartmentalized or ranked on a scale of prestige, and may use more than one language in the same "compartment."

Urban and rural language contexts are also important to differentiate in con-

structing an accurate model of African multilingualism. Urban and rural Africa have undergone, in many cases, significantly different versions of the colonial and post-colonial experience (Mufwene & Vigouroux 2008: 2). Urban individuals' language repertoires may look more like the typical diglossic model, with ex-colonial languages, local lingua francas, and minority local languages each having fairly defined roles. In rural Africa, however, scholars have found that local languages may not either have associations on a scale of prestige or fixed associations to distinct social domains, but rather may be used flexibly to manage social networks and relationships (Childs et al. 2014; Carlo et al. 2019; Lüpke 2016). Any study of language choices in Africa, therefore, must be clear about distinguishing the specific environment about which it is drawing conclusions, and keep in mind that interactions between urban and rural environments may produce yet more complexities.

The niche-based multilingualism framework has allowed scholars who have adopted it to gain further insights into the interactions between languages. One argument that has gained much traction is that, in contrast to much of the assumed common-sense logic in work on language vitality and endangerment, colonial languages are not necessarily the primary threats to the vitality of local minority languages in much of Africa (Mufwene & Vigouroux 2008; Bokamba 2008; McLaughlin 2008; Lüpke & Storch 2013; Lüpke 2015 among others). The historically dominant narrative in this field globally has drawn heavily on experiences of language endangerment in settler-colonial contexts like North America and Australia, where speakers have shifted in large numbers and often under great pressure from indigenous languages to English. McLaughlin (2008: 143) argues that "this model has fed a widespread popular belief that the spread of colonial languages such as English and French spells the demise of indigenous languages in all corners of the globe." However, scholars of multilingualism in Africa have pointed out, the African continent has sustained the institutional dominance of colonial and later ex-colonial languages for a century or more, and yet they are still spoken regularly by only a small minority of the population in most countries. Bokamba (2008: 105) articulates this problem straightforwardly with an example from the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

> If the dominant literature on language endangerment were correct, the predominance of French, an almost exclusionary privilege, since at least 1958 as the of-

> ficial language of administration, education and international business in DRC should have been leading to massive language shift to it from the national, sub-regional and local/ethnic languages because of the centrality of these agencies, especially education.

Bokamba and others claim that in reality, though, French has come to coexist apparently somewhat stably in certain domains, while leaving other domains to be occupied by local languages. If anything, minority local languages—languages like Loma—are claimed to be likely to be at risk due to encroachment by other local languages, not a colonial language like French (Lüpke 2015). Understanding languages as codes used by speakers in distinct niches and for distinct purposes allows us to see why this is the case—the dominance of French in one domain does not mean speakers will shift to using French in all domains.

The adoption of a niche-based multilingualism framework has also enabled insights into the nature of writing specifically in African contexts. Several scholars have reported on the instances of what Lüpke (2011: 318) calls "exographia," a practice in which speakers of one language write exclusively in another language. She contends that exographia is common among communities that speak minority local languages, who may choose to write instead in a local language of wider communication or an ex-colonial language (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 53). Others highlight how this phenomenon can lead to strikingly different auditory and visual landscapes of language. Juffermans (2015: 124), for instance, describes The Gambia as "audibly very multilingual, but multiliterate or visibly multilingual only to a limited extent." The situation of Loma speakers on the internet—who, as we will see, speak one way and write another—is thus not exceptional, but rather is part of a broader phenomenon with parallels and equivalents around the region.

2.2 Loma and the linguistic situation in Guinea

Like many of the languages spoken in Guinea, the Loma language goes by many names and reliable quantitative data about it is scarce. Along with "Loma," which is the term I choose to use for both the ethnicity and the language throughout the essay, the language's name is sometimes spelled as "Looma", "Lɔma", "Löma", "Löghöma",

or "Lorma", and it can also be referred to by its endonym, "Lomagui", "Löghömagooi", or "Löömagooi" (among other spelling variants). The ethnicity and sometimes the language itself are also occasionally referred to, including by speakers themselves when using French, as "Toma", a term held over from colonial-era ethnic classifications. Loma is a Southwestern Mande language spoken predominantly in a small region that spans the border between the western part of southern Guinea, primarily the administrative unit of Macenta Prefecture, and the northeastern Liberian division of Lofa County. Ethnologue—which divides the language into two codes, Loma [lom] for Liberia and Toma [tod] for Guinea—reports that there are approximately 552,000 speakers of the language overall, split into 261,000 in Guinea and 299,000 in Liberia as of 2017 and 2020 respectively (Ethnologue 2025a,b). Those figures constitute about 1.8% of the total population of Guinea and 5.5% of the population of Liberia. However, as others have noted, there is reason to be cautious about the empirical significance of "speaker counts" in this region given the complexities of who identifies as a speaker of a given language, which may vary according to context (Lüpke 2015: 75). Even the exact numbers given in fact vary widely; Guinea's 2014 census, for instance, reported only 178,000 first-language speakers of Loma in the country (Translators without Borders 2021), while a source from 2010 reports 250,000 speakers across both countries (Everson 2010).

The uncertainty of numbers that is true of Loma also pervades estimates of the division of languages across Guinea in general. In the popular imagination, there are four ethnic blocs, corresponding to four main linguistic regions, that divide up the country (McGovern 2017: 43-44). Along the coast are speakers of Susu (also spelled Soussou, Soso, or Sosso), who are said to make up around 20% of the population. This area includes the capital, Conakry, and its suburbs, and as migration to the capital increases, the use of Susu as a vehicular language in addition to as the language of the Susu identity is likely increasing (Ousmane Barry 2014: 8). In the Fouta Djallon highlands of Middle Guinea are the 40% who speak Pular (also called Fulani or Peulh), and in Upper are the 30% who speak Maninka (also called Malinké or Mandingo). Finally, the southeast of the country, known as *Guinée forestiere* or Forest Guinea, comprises the remaining 10% of the population, who are speakers of a large number of less-spoken languages. Loma speakers are included among the *Forestiers*, or inhabitants

Figure 2.1: The Republic of Guinea, with the predominantly Loma-speaking area highlighted in blue.

of Forest Guinea, along with speakers of Kpelle and Kissi. (In addition, there are many smaller languages—perhaps up to 15 or more—also spoken within the country's borders that are not represented in this typology.)

Language use across the country is, of course, more complicated than this simple division would make it seem. For example, even in Macenta Prefecture, the region of Forest Guinea often equated with "the Loma heartland", residents are far from solely Loma-speaking. Many rural areas and small villages are mostly inhabited by Loma speakers, but there is also a sizable Maninka-speaking minority. The prefectural center, the eponymous city of Macenta itself, is a contact zone in which most residents both were in the past and remain in the present multilingual in both languages (McGovern 2012: 30, 44). Since Loma speakers in the region traditionally occupied agricultural occupations while Maninka speakers were prominent in business and trade, Maninka is often the language of the market even for people who speak mostly Loma at home.

While the simple model of the distribution of languages across Guinea is therefore both empirically and theoretically questionable, it has formed the basis of both

popular knowledge and governmental recognition. The six languages listed above today are legislated as Guinea's six national languages, though this status affords them no particular governmental benefits. Guinea's official language, meanwhile, is French, which about 30% of the population is estimated to be able to speak (Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone 2025).[1] Guinea is thus somewhat distinct from many of the countries that surround it (including both Francophone countries like Senegal, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire as well as Anglophone ones like Sierra Leone and Liberia) for the fact that no language is spoken by a substantial majority of the population.

2.3 From French to *coco-lala* and back again: Language policy and education

Since Guinea took on its modern form as a single political unit, it has passed through three principal stages of state language policy: support for French only, a period of support for local languages, and a reversion to French only again. This history, especially the unique middle period that distinguishes Guinea from most other former French colonies in Africa, will prove integral to my argument in chapter 5 in particular.

Between the 1890s and 1958, Guinea was a colony of France. The language policy of the French administration, like many other aspects of its colonial governance, was characterized by an emphasis on assimilation. Enforcement of the French language in public contexts was central to the empire's *mission civilatrice* (Tinsley 2015). All education—which was often provided by the Catholic Church—was offered exclusively in French (Straker 2008; Connell 2015). In fact, in 1944 the colonial government banned the teaching of local languages in both public and private schools (Tinsley 2015: 242).[2]

[1] In this essay, I will refer to French as the "official language", its legislated designation, and the other languages spoken in Guinea as "local languages" (though "indigenous languages" would be an equally suitable term).

[2] The colonial period did also see some development of indigenous language awareness, however. In the 1930s, a script for the Loma language was invented by a speaker named Widɔ Zoɓo in Liberia

In 1958, when France offered a referendum on independence across all of its territories in Africa, Guinea was the only colony to vote for immediate and unconditional independence. Charting its new course was the socialist Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG) led by Ahmed Sékou Touré, who became the country's first president. Touré's regime embarked on a program of decolonization that sought to develop and standardize indigenous arts, promote interethnic harmony, and eliminate French influence. In 1968, amid Guinea's "Socialist Cultural Revolution", it introduced a policy known as *Langue Nationale*, which replaced French with local languages across the country's education system. Intending to re-establish the value of indigenous culture, the government chose the eight most widely-spoken local languages—Susu, Maninka, Pular, Kissi, Kpelle, Loma, Wamey, and Oneyan—and divided the country up into regions in which each language would be used to teach school (Benson & Lynd 2011: 116).[3] Macenta Prefecture, for instance, was designated as the region for the Loma language, meaning that primary education in the prefecture—with the exception of a few schools in the city of Macenta—would be conducted in Loma. From first through third grades, the local language was used exclusively in all subjects, and from third through seventh grade, it was used alongside one course in French. Education in higher grades remained fully in French (Tinsley 2015: 246).

The introduction of the *Langue Nationale* policy, which came to be popularly known by the term "coco-lala," necessitated the rapid development of resources and teaching materials for languages that had previously received virtually no recognition or support.[4] The national government chose standard dialects for each language

(then independent, but dominated by an English-speaking Americo-Liberian elite who also afforded little recognition or support to local languages). A syllabary conceptually similar to several others in invented for languages in West Africa around the same time (e.g. the Vai, Mende, Kpelle, and Bassa scripts), it was used sporadically in the 1930s and 1940s but has fallen largely out of use since then (Everson 2010). A few Loma speakers still know the script, and others are aware of its existence. However, it largely does not feature in discussions of Loma writing today, which tend to refer to writing Loma in the Latin script (especially in digital contexts, since the Loma syllabary has not been incorporated into Unicode). In this essay, therefore, unless otherwise specified, "written Loma" refers to exclusively to Latin-orthography writing.

[3]The regions designated for education in Wamey and Oneyan were later merged into the much larger Pular-education area (Benson & Lynd 2011).

[4]The term "coco-lala" referenced to two Susu words ("coconut" and "paddle") that were commonly used in repetition-based spelling lessons in Susu-language schools (Pauthier 2012: 13).

to be used across the entire region using that language—for Loma, the northern Koimei dialect was selected to become the new standard—and published an official set of Latin orthographic conventions for each of the national languages. These orthographies, disseminated by teachers across the country, formed the basis of new literacy in local languages for children who attended school during this period.

In 1984, however, the death of Sékou Touré meant the end of socialist governance in Guinea and the demise of teaching in national languages. The military junta that seized control from the PDG, led by president Lansana Conté, quickly sought to eliminate the various cultural programs of the socialist period, including by reintroducing education exclusively in French across all grades. While the end of the *Langue Nationale* policy was sudden, though, it was not entirely without foreshadowing. In fact, many students and parents celebrated its elimination and the return of French to schools (Sylla 1997: 149). Local language education had not developed its own, but rather had come to be tied to other educational philosophies of the Touré regime. This included an emphasis on vocational education, manual labor in schools, and heavy-handed instruction in political ideology, none of which were especially popular (Ousmane Barry 2014). Forestiers, including many Loma people, also resented the fact that the language policy had especially isolated them and reduced their perceived opportunities by requiring them to learn in languages spoken by only tiny parts of the national population (McGovern 2017: 81). Even before Touré's death, enrollment in schools had fallen over the course of the sixteen years between 1968 and 1984 from 29% to under 20% (Benson & Lynd 2011: 118). Today, the policy's legacy is complex. While some Guineans express positive views of the period and the accompanying promotion and standardization of local languages, others are more ambivalent. Teaching in local languages and encouraging linguistic diversity were commendable goals, one common narrative holds, but the policy ultimately failed because it posed a threat to national unity, risking the exacerbation of ethnic divisions and antagonism.

Since 1984, local languages have sometimes appeared in broadcast media, including radio programs and television news (McGovern 2012; Ousmane Barry 2014). Education, though, has remained entirely in French up to the present, as have all official and government contexts, including administration, courts, and hospitals. Yet

literacy remains stubbornly low: while about half of urban Guineans are literate in French, this figure drops to as low as 10% among rural Guineans (Bergere 2017: 79). In other words, French education both remains largely unsuccessful and perpetuates an ever-larger gap between urban and rural areas in Guinea.

2.4 The internet in Guinea

Guinea's history online is, in contrast, much shorter. The internet has rapidly grown in the country over approximately the past decade, with estimates of the internet penetration rate rising from 3.1% in 2012 to 26.8% in 2023 (International Telecommunications Union 2025). Internet access is now common among urban youth across lines of class (Bergere 2017: 2), though it remains far less widespread among older Guineans and in rural areas. While statistics offering age breakdowns of Guinean internet users are unlikely to be especially exact or reliable, one estimate suggests that nearly half of all Guinean internet users are under 18—and only around 13% fall into the age categories (45 and above) encompassing the those who would have been in school during any part of the *Langue Nationale* period (Kemp 2024).

Simply operating a mobile phone is an activity easily accessible to literate and illiterate Guineans alike, but the internet, which remains scaffolded by a text-based interface, is likely more limited to those who have gained some literacy. While the roughly quarter of the population online is probably mostly contained within the slightly larger proportion of the population that is literate in French, though, Bergere (2017: 81-82) notes that some Guineans who are not literate may still access social media platforms, often when introduced to and guided through the technology by friends or family.

The most popular social media platform is almost certainly Facebook (Bergere 2017: 35). In addition, considering a somewhat broader definition including chat applications, Loma speakers I interviewed repeatedly cited WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger as also commonly used.[5] On these platforms, Guinean internet users par-

[5]Unless otherwise specified, in this essay I use "online", "internet", and "social media" relatively interchangeably to refer to the same cluster of sites of digitally-mediated linguistic interaction; while these terms are not equivalent in general, this study is mainly concerned with activities that lie at

ticipate in many different kinds of online groups, not unlike those studied elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Androutsopoulos & Lexander 2021). For instance, Balla Koevogui, a Loma speaker, former Guinean schoolteacher and emigrant to the U.S., described to me a selection of different chat groups he has joined: a WhatsApp group for overseas Loma people in North America; a Facebook group and associated Messenger group for people from Koyamah, the town in Macenta Prefecture where he grew up; and a Telegram group for the members of a local agricultural cooperative in Macenta. These platforms also host pages for fans of Guinean musicians, pages where comedians and local influencers distribute their content, and of course private communication among individuals' personal networks of friends and family.

The Guinean internet is also a site of interaction and linkage between diasporic Guineans who live around the world and those who live in the country. John Dopavogui, a Loma speaker who moved to the U.S. four years ago and runs a Facebook page with over 289,000 followers, estimated that 60% of his page's followers live in Guinea and the remainder are overseas, especially in the U.S. and France. He described one of his strategies for increasing viewership on the content he produces as being to help "reconnect" the diaspora:

> Up to now, the main content of our channel is "discovery". You go to places, you discover culture, you discover people, you discover places. … [O]ur focus is to show the good stuff and to discover places, to help people to reconnect to their source. Like, for instance, somebody is in the United States for ten years, for 20 years. He hasn't seen his village for 10, 15, 20 years. And through our video, he just—I remember one day, a guy did a screenshot of his house in our video. He was watching the video and he saw his house in his village! And he did a screenshot and sent it to me. So that's the main focus. … We started in Macenta. We went to almost 80 villages, and now we left Macenta. We are now going to other places in the country. And maybe after six months, we come back to Macenta again, showcase villages we have not been to, and then maybe do a couple of villages in Guinea before we start going into other countries.

John's Facebook page began with an audience of mostly Loma people, making content like "discovery videos" of towns in Macenta Prefecture that mostly appealed to Loma viewers. Over time, however, he broadened his content to appeal to a wider Guinean

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their intersection.

public and began producing videos explicitly oriented toward members of the diaspora. His example illustrates how the Guinean internet operates across multiple scales and for diverse purposes—linking not only Loma speakers, but also Guineans more broadly, members of the diaspora, and, at times, wider African audiences.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Documenting and analyzing a phenomenon that involves not just one language, but the interactions and choices speakers make between multiple languages, necessitates a method that can get at questions of agency (who is making choices) and meaning (what value they assign to those choices). It must also be suited to analyzing the form in which this phenomenon manifests—through the everyday linguistic expression of interacting users. For this sort of challenge, the model of ethnography has gained widespread acceptance among sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists (Varis 2016; Varis & Hou 2019). As Androutsopoulos (2008: 3) notes, an ethnographic approach to linguistic research enables scholars to examine the "richness of the social context of language use" by attending not only to what is said, but to who says it, to whom, in what setting, and with what social stakes. Similarly, Childs et al. (2014: 171) argue that "effective sociolinguistic documentation almost certainly requires adoption of various ethnographic methods both for research and applied purposes," particularly when the goal is to understand dynamic, multilingual practices rather than static codes. An ethnographic approach, then, provides the necessary tools for investigating the nuanced, socially embedded language choices that characterize Loma speakers' online communication.

For studying the internet specifically, while corpus and big-data techniques are "now widely seen as the approach to studying online communication" within linguistics for their apparent comprehensiveness and objectivity, small-scale qualitative techniques offer an alternative that can get at fine-grained questions of practice, con-

text, and meaning (Varis 2016: 65). There is now a voluminous body of work to this end, uniting ethnography with the study of digital technology under labels including "virtual ethnography", "digital ethnography", "internet ethnography", "online ethnography", and "cyberethnography" (Varis 2016; Hine 2015). While these labels in reality belie a vast range of focuses, interests, and methods, they share an interest in "the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies" (Varis & Hou 2019: 230).

Androutsopoulos (2006, 2008) adopts digital ethnography specifically for linguistic research in his formulation of "discourse-centred online ethnography," a method which "combines the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors" (Androutsopoulos 2008: 2). The first component, systematic observation, involves continuous monitoring of selected sites of discourse to gain "insights into discourse practices and patterns of language use" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 526). This then forms a backdrop for the second component, interviews with individual participants, which are conducted to gain greater insight into their motivations and understandings of their own and others' behavior. This study follows the basic principles of that method, though with a greater emphasis on large-scale patterns of language choice by platform and context rather than detailed discourse analysis of the structure of individual conversations. As such, my research involved two essentially simultaneous steps: first, an observation component, and second, an interview component.

3.1 Observations

To observe the online language practices of Loma speakers, I focused primarily on communication occurring within Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, and Facebook Messenger threads—platforms widely used by Loma individuals, as discussed in section 2.4. I began by identifying and joining several initial Facebook groups that appeared to have significant numbers of members with Loma ethnic backgrounds,

drawing on both prior knowledge and simple keyword searches.[1] I then began to observe and take notes on what people were posting and how they were interacting, checking in on the same groups every day to every few days in order to "develop a 'feel'" for their particularities (Androutsopoulos 2008: 6). At times, in addition to following live posts, messages, and comments, I also read further back into the history of certain groups with the aim of expanding my corpus of observations, with similar note-taking practices to my "live" observations. In total, observation took place for a period of approximately six months, from October 2024 through March 2025.

Rather than selecting a single fixed "field site" from the outset, I adopted a more dynamic approach that followed participants across platforms in a way that mirrored their own communicative trajectories, following Varis & Hou (2019: 234). After joining the initial groups, I expanded my observation network by following links and references shared within posts—for instance, joining WhatsApp groups linked in Facebook posts, participating in Messenger chats associated to Facebook groups, and reviewing the comments of YouTube videos shared by participants. In this way, my observation strategy sought to emerge naturalistically out of my engagement with the data and reflect the inter-platform fluidity of users' online engagement. However, since Facebook groups tended to be more publicly visible and accessible to outsiders, whereas chat groups are rarely advertised publicly in the first place and often circulate through closed networks, the majority of my observational data ultimately came from Facebook groups.

I chose to focus specifically on groups that explicitly identified themselves as relating to Loma identity or culture. This is certainly not to suggest that such spaces constitute the entirety of Loma speakers' online activity. On the contrary, many Loma speakers participate in a broad range of digital spaces where ethnic identity is less salient or entirely irrelevant, and several individuals I spoke with noted that their networks on platforms such as Facebook include substantial numbers of non-

[1] I was able to identify people from Loma backgrounds with reasonable confidence by their surnames, which typically follow a totemic clan-naming system and end in *-vogui* ("totem"), such as Béavogui, Koivogui, Sakouvogui, or Guilavogui. This naming pattern is not shared with any other group in Guinea, and is thus a useful heuristic for whether a user might have a Loma background in some form, even if it is hard to verify whether a given individual is actually a *speaker* of Loma.

Loma friends. However, my decision was guided by the assumption that if the Loma language were to be used anywhere in digital contexts, it would most likely appear in spaces where Loma identity is foregrounded; in other words, these spaces would be the most hospitable to Loma language use. Limiting myself to these sites also allowed me to be more confident that the majority or at least a substantial proportion of the participants would in fact be speakers of Loma or at least individuals with Loma backgrounds, given the challenges of verifying linguistic or ethnic affiliation through online profiles alone. There is in fact a wide range of social media groups for Loma people focused on celebrating Loma identity in various ways, both on Facebook and elsewhere: Facebook and WhatsApp groups for the fans of musicians who sing in Loma, pages for sharing materials about Loma history and traditions, and a few explicitly ethnonationalist pages where participants discuss politics and ethnic relations in Macenta Prefecture and beyond. Several were completely public, permitting any Facebook user to view and contribute; a few others were not fully public, but only required only minimal action—such as clicking a "join" button—to enter.

Overview profiles of the primary sites of observation are provided in Table 3.1. These included Facebook groups, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp chat groups, as well as individual Facebook pages affiliated with organizations or media content creators producing Loma-related content. For the purposes of this research, all observation sites have been anonymized and assigned code labels. With a few exceptions, the majority of these sites were explicitly oriented toward Guinean Loma identity and cultural expression.

Table 3.1: Main groups and pages observed.

Group or page	**Number of members or followers**	**Common topics of discussion or post types**
Facebook Group A	15,800	• Videos of traditional dances and ceremonies • Guinean politics and news

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Group or page	Number of members or followers	Common topics of discussion or post types
Facebook Group B	16,800	• Music videos, clips from concerts, and interviews by Loma musicians • Guinean politics and news • Advertisements for local cultural festivals
Facebook Group C	8,700	• Music videos, clips from concerts, and interviews by Loma musicians • Advertisements for local cultural festivals • Personal updates
Messenger Group C	183	• Messenger group attached to Facebook Group C • Greetings, selfies, and introductions • Congratulations and condolences • Sharing advertisements about music concerts and business opportunities
Facebook Group D	10,000	• Posts expressing Loma pride • Inactive after 2021
Facebook Group E	28,600	• Nostalgia posts for city of Macenta • News reports from Macenta • Minority Loma participants
Messenger Group E	1,535	• Messenger group attached to Facebook Group E • Greetings, selfies, and introductions • Sharing advertisements about business opportunities • Relatively low activity and little sustained conversation

Continued on next page

Group or page	Number of members or followers	Common topics of discussion or post types
WhatsApp Group F	42	• Loma musicians from Macenta and their fans and friends sharing music • Discussions about upcoming concerts and events
Facebook Group G	74,400	• Focused on Liberian Loma community, mostly written in English • Politics, business, and sports news about Lofa County, Liberia • Human-interest stories from Liberia
Messenger Group G	3,559	• Messenger group attached to Facebook Group G, focused on Liberian Loma community • Greetings, introductions, and sharing of Bible passages
Facebook Page H	289,000	• Channel run by John Dopavogui • Updates about business projects • Interviews and motivational videos about local entrepreneurship • "Discovery" videos of villages around Macenta and Guinea • Sharing links to Loma music and performances
Facebook Page I	23,000	• Photos and videos of Loma food and music • Ethnonationalist commentary on social relations in Macenta and Conakry • Sharing Loma vocabulary, sayings
Facebook Page J	744	• Posts expressing Loma pride • Videos of traditional dances and ceremonies • Ethnonationalist commentary on social relations in Conakry

Continued on next page

Group or page	Number of members or followers	Common topics of discussion or post types
Facebook Page K	7,600	• Interviews and video programs with Loma musicians and artists

Facebook page H is the account operated by John Dopavogui (see section 2.4) and thus is one such exception. While he initially focused on content relating to a heavily Loma user base, and has featured posts related to the Loma language, the page's current audience has broadened considerably. John estimated that the original core now constitutes approximately 20% of his followers, and the page's content has expanded to include a wide array of topics not specifically related to Loma culture or language. Facebook group E, meanwhile, describes itself as aimed at all Guineans who consider Macenta their hometown, and thus includes a large and linguistically diverse user base, with significant participation from both Loma and Maninka speakers. One post in that group from December 2024, which included a photo of *Aframomum* fruits and asked about what they were called, conveniently provided evidence for the number of speakers of different languages among the participants by the distribution of answers in the comments: out of 172 comments on the post that offered an answer, 72 (41.9%) provided the Maninka word (*yaya*), 46 (26.7%) provided the Loma word (*ponigui*, *fonigui*, or *taghizegui*, among other spelling variants), 22 (12.8%) provided the Susu word (*gogué*), and the remaining 32 (18.6%) were in other languages, including Pular, Kissi, Kpelle, Lélé, Landouma, Swahili, and Lingala. A final site worth remarking upon is Facebook group G, a Liberian Loma group which is primarily included for completeness, as I initially planned to conduct comparative observation among Liberian Loma speakers. However, this component of the project was not ultimately pursued in depth.

3.2 Interviews

In addition to the observational component, I conducted five interviews with Loma speakers who are active internet users. Interview participants were initially iden-

tified through existing contacts developed during previous linguistic consultation work, including Balla Koevogui, John Dopavogui, and Robert Beavogui, who are Guinean Loma speakers residing in the U.S. diaspora. Further recruitment was conducted via posts in Facebook groups in which I was conducting observation, written in either French or English depending on the primary language of the group.[2] These outreach efforts yielded two additional interviewees: Christine Koly, also a member of the Guinean diaspora in the U.S., and Beyan Koikoi, who currently lives in Liberia but spent his childhood in Guinea. Unfortunately, no individuals based in Guinea responded to interview recruitment posts. A summary profile of each interviewee is provided in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Overview information about interviewees.

Name	**Location**	**Background**
Balla Koevogui	U.S.	• Born in Macenta Prefecture in 1960s • Attended school in Macenta Prefecture through *Langue nationale* period • Attended university near Conakry and later worked as an elementary school teacher and teacher trainer in the area • Lived in the U.S. since 2004
John Dopavogui	U.S.	• Born in Macenta Prefecture in 1988 • Lived in Dinguiraye (northern Guinea) during middle school and high school (*collège*, *lycée*) with holidays spent in Macenta • Attended university in Conakry and post-graduate studies in Ghana • Videographer and content creator who has produced several films set in Macenta • Lived in the U.S. since 2021

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[2]At that time, the scope of the project still included an interest in Liberian Loma speakers.

Name	Location	Background
Robert Beavogui	U.S.	• Born in Liberia to Guinean family, but grew up between Koyamah village in Macenta Prefecture and Macenta city from ages 2–18 • Attended university in Conakry • Lived in the U.S. since 2023
Christine Koly	U.S.	• Born in Conakry in the 1970s • Attended school in Conakry until age 10, taught in Susu under the *Langue nationale* policy • Spent later childhood intermittently in Conakry and overseas, as the child of a diplomat, as well as visiting family in Macenta • Lived in the U.S. since 2000
Beyan Koikoi	Liberia	• Born in Lofa County, Liberia in the 1990s • Moved to southern Guinea (including Macenta, N'zérékoré, Lola) as a child during Liberian Civil War • Subsequently attended school in Guinea (10 years) and Liberia (5 years) • Attending university in Monrovia; parents still live in Guinea

The decision to interview individuals based overseas was a necessity both because of the lack of responses from within Guinea and the practical constraints of my own language proficiency. The pool of interviewees was consequently shaped by preexisting personal connections and limited to individuals fluent in English. Given these biases, I treated the interviews primarily as supplementary sources, intended to provide additional confirmation and context to the observational data.

Three interviews were conducted in person, and two took place via phone call. I took live notes, and all interviews were, after obtaining consent, recorded, transcribed and manually edited. The interviews followed a semi-structured format: although I prepared a set of guiding questions in advance, I frequently deviated from this framework in response to the flow of conversation. Interviewees were informed

that their responses would be anonymized unless they expressed a preference to be identified by name. All participants elected to be named, and thus no interviews were ultimately anonymized.

CHAPTER 4

Proud, educated speakers: Characterizing Loma spaces online

In order to understand why Loma speakers have adopted certain language practices online, it is necessary to know what the spaces in which they participate look like. Who are the participants? And how do they interact? These two context-setting questions provide facts that allow us both to situate this particular situation within the broader Guinean linguistic ecology discussed in chapter 2 and to narrow our focus for the following chapters.

Participants in the Facebook pages and messaging groups that I followed, it turns out, cannot simply be assumed to be representative of all Loma speakers. Rather, they are generally more educated, more urban, and more globally-oriented than the overall population. This background is complemented by widespread pride in Loma ethnic identity and language. In their patterns of language choice, however, they behave drastically differently between different modalities, sending written messages almost entirely in French but audio messages frequently in Loma. These three observations bring the object of inquiry into greater focus, centering our attention on social class, modality of communication, and the contrast between linguistic practice and ideological attachment.

4.1 Describing typical participants

Who participates in online groups devoted to Guinean Loma culture? The obvious answer is simply "Loma people from Guinea." But beyond that apparent tautology, the reality is less than self-evident. Loma people live everywhere from small villages among rice fields and forest in Macenta Prefecture to the sprawling suburbs of Conakry to the United States and beyond. They are all ages and engage in all manner of livelihoods. Assuming that the Loma internet is equivalent to all Loma people or speakers risks obscuring meaningful—and, in this case, crucial—internal distinctions.

In fact, Loma presence online reflects patterns and biases that are likely consistent with those of Guineans on the internet in general. Internet users mostly live in urban areas, especially Conakry. An informal sample of the most recent contributors to a selection of the Facebook groups I regularly followed, shown in Figure 4.1, indicates that between a third and three-quarters of participants who included their residence location on their profile currently live in Conakry. Since residents of Conakry are estimated to number only approximately one-sixth of the total Guinean population, they constitute a disproportionate share of the participants in all of these groups. A small portion of users in every group, though, live in Macenta Prefecture or other parts of Guinea, most commonly the cities of N'zérékoré or Kankan, and a few live in the diaspora.

While the plurality or majority of Loma Facebook group users live in Conakry, "Macenta" is by far the most-listed hometown (Facebook records this field as "from…", in contrast to "lives in…"). In all sampled groups, a majority of users who listed a hometown set it to Macenta—probably referring to the prefecture in general—as shown in Figure 4.2. What exactly one means by indicating one is "from Macenta" may not be consistent: users might utilize the field to record anything from where they lived throughout childhood to merely where their family originates from. Nevertheless, the preponderance of "lives in Conakry, from Macenta" profiles that I observed in these groups allows us to draw a distinctive picture of their demographic makeup. The typical participant is an urban resident who maintains close ties to the more rural Loma heartland of Macenta Prefecture. One can speculate that many par-

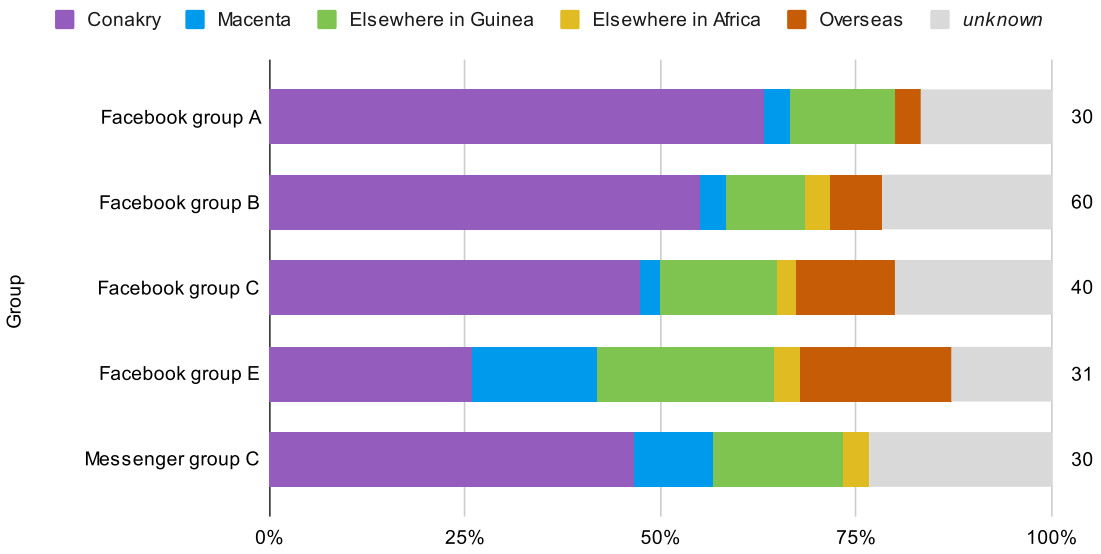

Figure 4.1: Users' residence locations. *For each group, the authors of a certain number of the most recent posts and comments as of April 2, 2025 were selected. The location of residence listed on each user's public profile was recorded. Users marked "unknown" did not make a residence location public. Total number of users sampled for each group is shown to the right of the plot.*

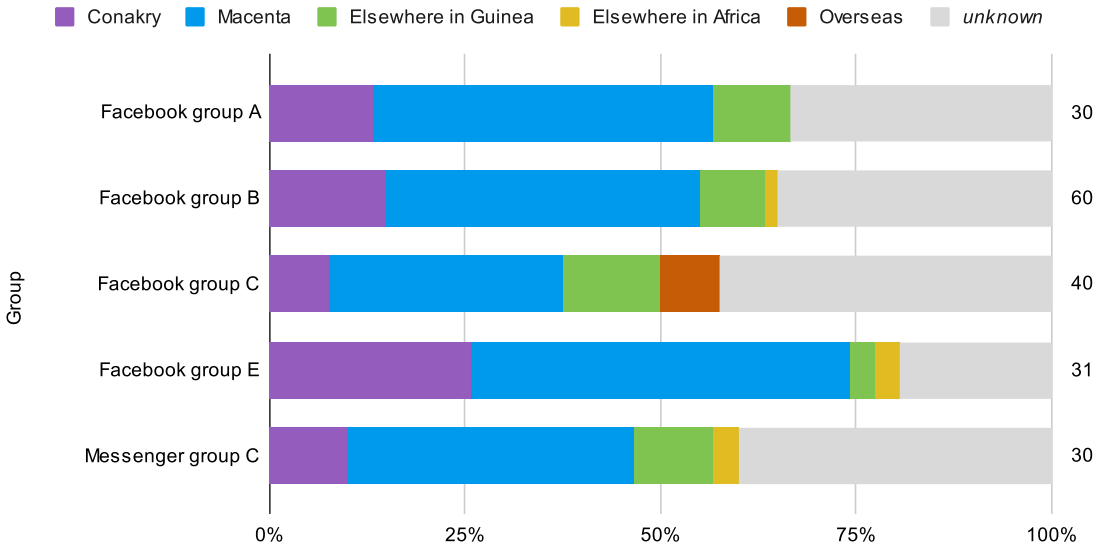

Figure 4.2: Users' hometown locations. *Sampling same as Figure 4.2.*

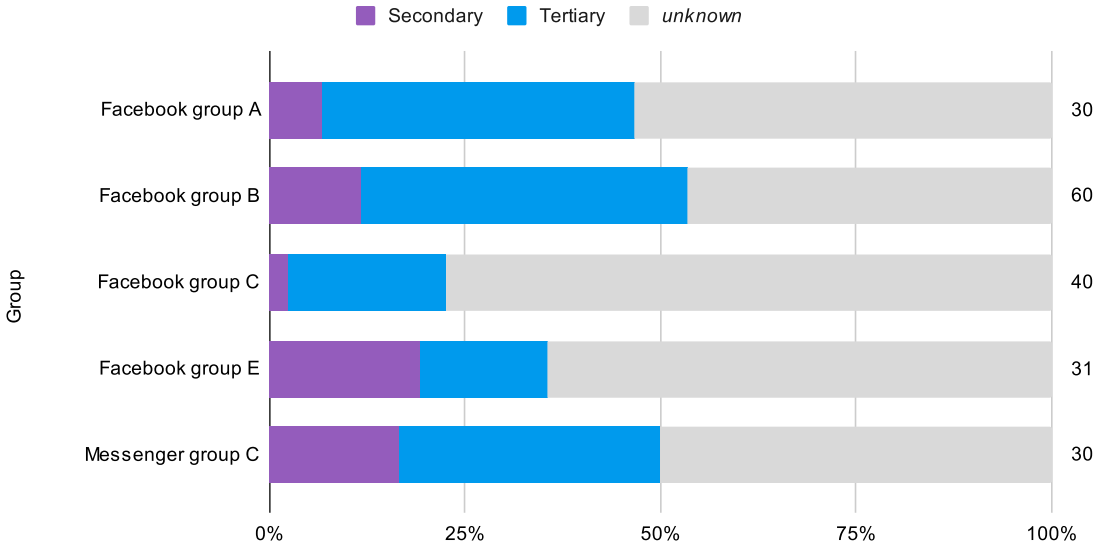

Figure 4.3: Users' highest level of education. *Sampling same as Figure 4.2.*

ticipants probably grew up in Macenta, later moving to Conakry or another larger city for higher education or work; others may have lived mostly outside of Macenta but maintain family connections there. But whatever their particular trajectory, they likely do not live in a Loma-majority area themselves, and their surrounding linguistic environment is an urban rather than a rural one even though Loma is a mostly rural language overall.

A third piece of demographic information fills out the portrait of Loma Facebook group members: their reported educational backgrounds, shown in Figure 4.3. Facebook allows users to include schools that they have attended on their public profile. While many fewer users did so than listed a place of residence or hometown, those who did include a school most frequently listed a university or other form of post-secondary education (such as a technical or artistic *institut*). It is hard to estimate the true distribution of educational backgrounds among those who did not list any schooling; users who attended only primary school are probably less likely to list their education at all, though some users with higher education almost certainly also choose to leave the field blank. But even if all of those in the "unknown" category were assumed to have attained no more than a primary education, the percentage of

users with tertiary education in every group would still far exceed that of the general Guinean population. The national average for secondary completion is 12%, and for tertiary education only 9% (UNESCO 2019). In comparison, 30% of sampled participants in these Facebook groups reported tertiary education, substantially outnumbering those who only reported a secondary education—and likely still far below the true proportion. All interviewees, likewise, had attended university.

The fact that participants in online Loma spaces are both so heavily urban and so highly educated suggests that they represent a social, if not necessarily economic, elite. One of the most relevant consequences of a higher education in Guinea is the exposure to French that it entails. University-educated Guineans today will have completed more than a decade of schooling entirely conducted in French, and even those who attended lower grades during the *Langue Nationale* period still received instruction past the seventh grade in French. The disproportionately high levels of educational attainment among the participants in these groups thus suggests that being on the internet in the first place implies proficiency in the official language (cf. Mazrui 2008: 199). Beyond formal education, higher class status and urban identity may entail language ideologies and practices that differ from the norm in other ways as well. For example, John explained that, when he was growing up, his father would insist on speaking French to him:

> Isaiah: *When you were at home, of Loma and sometimes French, when would you speak one versus the other?*
>
> John: I used to speak French, basically, when speaking with dad. And you speak Loma when you're speaking with everyone else. … Because my dad always wanted you to be fluent in French, to speak very good French so you can do well in school. …
>
> Isaiah: *Did your father speak Loma?*
>
> John: Very well, yes. But up to now, we speak French.

Multiple interviewees remarked similarly that a member of their family would speak French within the home, usually their father. In a country where only a third of the population speaks French in the first place, that background is certainly not common to most children. Such patterns of in-home French use reflect not only access to ed-

ucation but also class-based language ideologies that set these speakers apart from the linguistic experiences of the broader population.

However, it is worth noting that most participants in Guinean Loma internet spaces do still seem to speak the Loma language themselves. While it is hard to generalize across all sites of observation, Balla affirmed that most of his own followers were fluent speakers:

> Isaiah: *Do you think many people, for example, who follow you, who might comment on that kind of post, don't speak Loma?*
>
> Balla: They speak Loma, yeah, but they just don't write.

The situation in Guinean spaces stood in sharp contrast to the one Liberian Loma group I observed, Facebook group G, where many participants seemed to not be fluent in the language. Posts asking for translations of common sentences into Loma and discussing the idea of finding an expert to teach members the language were repeated occurrences there. In contrast, neither appeared in the Guinean groups. Though posts asking about Loma vocabulary appeared everywhere, there were notable differences: those in the Liberian group were usually about more basic terms (e.g. the days of the week, kin terms) and often received a only couple responses, while those in Guinean groups were usually about less common terms (e.g. the name of the baobab tree or the *Aframomum* fruit, as mentioned previously) and routinely received a hundred or more responses, despite the fact that the Liberian group has more than twice as many members as even the largest of the Guinean groups. These patterns suggest a comparatively higher degree of fluency in Loma within the Guinean groups, which may account for both the focus on more specialized lexical items and the large number of participants able to provide responses.

4.2 'Fier d'être Lomagui': Loma pride, on and off the internet

Fluency in a language does not necessarily entail positive affect or allegiance toward it in a given social context. Moreover, speakers' attitudes—whether affirming, am-

bivalent, or negative—can play a significant role in shaping their decisions to use or avoid a language, especially in public and online spaces. To better understand the social positioning of Loma internet users, it is therefore worth investigating their broader affective orientations toward the Loma language. Do they express pride in the language? Embarrassment? Indifference?

Other cases in Africa suggest that use of local languages can be stigmatized. Nyamekye & Uwen (2024), for instance, find that "Kumasiano Guys" in Ghana, who choose to write on Twitter mostly in Twi, are the targets of ridicule by other Ghanaians, who stigmatize their use of a local language as indicative of limited English proficiency and "primitiveness." The stereotype of "illiteracy" in the official language makes for potent political imagery. Bergere (2017: 87) likewise finds that Guinean youth online wield "illiteracy" in French as a criticism of elite politicians, correcting the politicians' errors when speaking or writing French to show their own sophistication in contrast.

Moreover, there is a long history of other Guineans stereotyping Loma people, among other groups from *Guinée forestière*, as backwards, immobile, peasant, or uncivilized. This "discourse of disgust" (McGovern 2017: 59)—in which *Forestiers* are stigmatized as people who will eat anything, or, in socialist times, as practicers of rituals in need of "demystification"—has remained salient in Guinean society for over sixty years. McGovern (2012: 40) explains that this has created a "double double consciousness" among Loma speakers, who "understood and understand themselves as the 'others' others,' a group whose objectification as primitive was a necessary foil to creating modern Guinean national identity." It would thus be no stretch of the imagination to think that the highly educated Loma speakers online might be reluctant to foreground their connection to an identity sometimes denigrated as primitive.

Despite this potential for stigmatization, the Loma speakers I observed consistently expressed pride in Loma culture and, more specifically, in the language itself. All interviewees affirmed that they would speak Loma when they encountered another Loma speaker:

> Isaiah: If you met, for example, a Loma person who you didn't know before here—what language would you speak to them when you first met them?

> Balla: Well, if I know you are Loma, right away I would just be speaking Loma to you. "How are you? What's your name?" Like, I met somebody before from Liberia to work. I was told he is from Liberia, he is Loma. "Oh, I'll start talking Loma with him."
>
> Isaiah: And what about if you were in Conakry, what would you—
>
> Balla: Even in Conakry, with Loma, we speak Loma.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, many online Loma spaces are filled with users expressing pride in Loma ethnic identity and language. One striking example is a video posted to Facebook in November 2024, featuring a teenage girl delivering a high school graduation speech in Loma. Titled "Beauté de ma langue: le LOMAGUI" [*Beauty of my language: The LOMA LANGUAGE*], the video garnered over 117,000 views and 200 comments, a selection of which are excerpted in Table 4.1. In addition to numerous messages congratulating the speaker, many commenters specifically praised her choice to speak in Loma and explicitly expressed their pride to be Loma.

Vraiment merci beaucoup félicitations *Truly thank you so much congratulations*
Vraiment merci ma princesse et je suis fière d'être Toma *Truly thank you my princess and I'm proud to be Loma*
Très important.tu m'a rappelé sur l'historique de l'étude de la langue lomaguoé! Congratulations à toi Soeur. *Very important. You reminded me of the history of the study of the Loma language! Congratulations to you sister.*
Vraiment merci pour la valorisation de notre langue *Truly thank you for valuing our language*
C'est vraiment génial ma sœur et je t'adjure de bien vouloir continuer à sensibiliser nos parents, d'apprendre leurs enfants à la langue loma. *That's really great my sister and I advise you to continue raising awareness for our parents, to teach their children the Loma language.*
Que dieu te bénisse *God bless you*
Merci vraiment d'avoir organisé cette présentation dans votre langue . Je suis fier d'être loma *Thank you so much for organizing this presentation in your language. Am proud to be loma*

Table 4.1: Selected comments on a video of a high school graduation speech in Loma.

Ne pas parler sa langue où que soit c'est ne pas connaître qui tu es ou d'où tu viens *Not speaking your language anywhere is not knowing who you are or where you come from*
Moi je suis fière d'être LOMA *Me I am proud to be LOMA*
Attention…En Guinée, dans les lieux de service, la langue parlée est le français. La langue Löma comme les autres sont utilisées en famille. Notre combat est d'apprendre à nos enfants, à nos frères nés à Conakry d'apprendre la nôtre en plus du Français. C'est un travail individuel et collectif…Mais arrêtez de jeter en pâture nos frères qui n'ont pas eu la chance d'être nés au village et qui ne parlent que Français en Famille…Nous qui parlons notre langue, nous sommes pas plus Toma qu'eux et c'est idem pour les autres *Attention… In Guinea, in service places, the language spoken is French. The Löma language like others is used in the family. Our fight is to teach our children, our brothers born in Conakry, to learn ours in addition to French. It's an individual and collective effort… But stop throwing our brothers who were not lucky enough to be born in the village and who only speak French as a family… We who speak our language, we are not more Toma than them and it's the same for others*

Table 4.2: Selected comments on a post entitled "pourquoi avoir honte de parler notre langue dans les lieux publics??" [*why be ashamed to speak our language in public places??*].

Sometimes this ethnolinguistic pride extends to the point of actively bemoaning the existence of others who are supposedly ashamed of their Loma heritage. A post by Facebook page J in July 2023, asking "pourquoi avoir honte de parler notre langue dans les lieux publics??" [*why be ashamed to speak our language in public places??*], received a slew of comments deploring a lack of pride in being Loma—as well as one cautioning to not be so quickly disparaging of Loma people who did not grow up speaking the language (shown in Table 4.2).

In fact, this too has a documented history: according to McGovern (2012, 2017), in the 1990s, new Loma cultural and media organizations, along with interactions with speakers from Liberia, promoted a sense of Loma ethnic identity that was "robust and sometimes aggressive[ly] ethnonationalist," creating a sense of "being part of a community of suffering" (McGovern 2012: 230). In 1995, Loma elite in Conakry founded the cultural organization *Gilibaye* ("tied together") to promote greater unity between the Loma heartland in Macenta and the capital through music, dance, and backstage facilitation of political connections (Højbjerg 2005; McGovern 2017). While *Gilibaye* declined by the 2010s, many of these Loma social media groups are in spirit, if not in organization, its successors, featuring a mix of sharing Loma

arts and occasionally complaining about alleged Loma losses—whether in terms of language, land, or marriage—at the hands of other Guinean ethnic groups.

Of course, I cannot claim that the pride expressed by Loma speakers in these online groups is representative of all Loma speakers more broadly. The very presence of online complaints about the supposed 'problem' of Loma people in Conakry not speaking the language suggests that there are indeed Loma individuals who may feel less strongly about their ethnic identity or linguistic heritage. Nonetheless, the online spaces under study are overwhelmingly characterized by expressions of ethnic pride, which often extend to pride in the language itself. In these groups, such sentiments appeared consistent across age, geographic location, and educational background, serving as a unifying feature. Although Loma may be subject to stigma in other contexts, these digital spaces were clearly ones that participants had chosen precisely because they aligned with messages of Loma pride. As a result, there is little indication that participants were hesitant to associate the Loma language with online spaces. We can therefore tentatively reject the hypothesis that these users avoid writing in Loma due to feelings of shame, fear of discrimination, or beliefs that the language is inappropriate for digital platforms. Instead, we must look elsewhere to understand why these speakers, not because of but *in spite of* their pride in Loma, rarely use it on social media platforms.

4.3 Little writing, but plenty of speaking

Up to this point, I have carefully left unspecified a signficant attribute of language in context: its modality. I have mostly chosen to talk about Loma speakers "using" the language, without always clarifying whether this use is oral or written. However, modality is actually fundamental dimension of language practice. Spoken and written forms of language operate under different constraints and affordances, and must therefore be analytically disambiguated. Having established a basic understanding of who the interlocutors in online Loma spaces are, we need to now turn to the communicative practices themselves. Doing so will highlight a key observation: participants' patterns of language choice differ drastically between different modalities.

4.3.1 Text messages

In the written medium, as previously established, there is very little Loma at all. As with the Niuean forums studied by Sperlich (2005), even digital spaces explicitly dedicated to discussions about the Loma language rarely feature Loma written for its own sake. The low frequency of written Loma is not entirely surprising given the generally limited digital presence of most African languages, but even within that cohort, it appears to be at the lower end of the spectrum. Unlike isiXhosa, which is reported to be "common in Facebook groups dedicated to Xhosa-ness" (Deumert 2014: 507), written Loma appears only marginally more often in the Loma-focused social media groups that I followed than in general Guinean digital spaces. While I did not have access to private SMS (texting) conversations, I did not find it written to a greater extent in chat-style messaging as Lexander (2020a) asserts. Nor did I observe frequent instances of code-switched writing combining Loma and French, which has been claimed as a common way African local languages appear online (Mazrui 2008; Velghe 2012; Lexander 2020a).

A comparison with data from another African language context helps illustrate the contrast. In data from Androutsopoulos & Lexander (2021), a chat exchange between a Senegalese-Norwegian adolescent and her uncle in Senegal features not only significant amounts of French but also extensive use of Wolof, often interwoven with the French text (reproduced in Table 4.3). By contrast, Table 4.4 presents a typical excerpt from WhatsApp group F, a group chat for fans of Loma musicians based in Macenta. In this interaction, selected mainly for its representative ordinariness, there is no Loma present at all—the exchange is conducted entirely in French. In fact, the French used in the interaction looks remarkably standard, not only lacking any code-switching but also showing very little localization or modification according to local practices (Lexander 2020a). While a private SMS exchange between family members is not the same as a public WhatsApp group, the difference in content is striking for what otherwise seem like conversations with similar levels of formality and information exchanged. While much of the Senegalese example is nearly balanced between Wolof and French, the "Loma" example is only "Loma" in the sense that it is an interaction between people with Loma surnames who are fans of music sung in the Loma language—the interaction itself is simply a conversation in French.

D:	Merci mais **yama gueuneu Bax** *Thanks but you are better than me*
U:	Ohhh vraiment merci **contana troppp** *Oh, thanks so much, I am so happy*
D:	**Contana** parce que **mangi wakh akh yow** ☺ *I am happy because I chat with you* ☺
D:	**Mangi dem tedi**, bonne nuit *I'm going to bed, good night*
D:	**Ngou fanane ak jam, noyoulma njep ci gallé bi** *Spend the night in peace, greet everyone in the house from me*
D:	*Goos night*
U:	*Good night*
D:	*Good night*
U:	*Bye bye*
D:	*Byeeeeee*

Table 4.3: Exchange between D, an adolescent Senegalese-Norwegian, and U, her uncle in Senegal. Reproduced from Androutsopoulos & Lexander (2021: 727). Typographic notation: French | **Wolof** | *English*

That said, Loma does appear in written form sometimes, if rarely. There are two main situations in which written Loma is used. The first is in short, standardized or quasi-standardized phatic expressions, creating an effect similar to what Androutsopoulos (2007: 214) calls "minimal" or "emblematic" multilingualism. An example of this is shown in Table 4.5, a selection of comments on a Loma-language singer's music video on YouTube. Three out of the 59 comments on the video—all included in the excerpt—contain some Loma. One comment refers to the singer with the title *massagui*, or "king"; another refers to him as *na artistegui*, a mixed French-Loma construction incorporating the Loma first-person possessive *na* and nominal suffix *-gui*. The only comment entirely in Loma is *gallah mama* "thanks to god," a common fixed expression of gratitude that is also the standard response to *emama* "thank you." Most written Loma online is limited to these sorts of phrases, with *emama*, *gallah mama* (or alternative spellings), and the epithet *massagui* by far the most common.

The other main situation in which Loma is written is in discussions about the language itself, usually to share information about vocabulary and grammar. One

A:	Bonjour mes meilleurs attriste [*sic*] *Hi my best artists*
B:	Oui tu vas *Yes are you doing [okay]*
A:	Oui très bien et vous *Yes very well and you*
B:	Ouais tranquille *Yeah chill*
C:	Comment allez vous *How are you*
A:	Envoyer nous ls nouveaux son *Send us the new tracks*
B:	On attend d'abord *Let's wait first*
C:	Les nouveaux sons viennent au fil du temps. Puis que tu n'as pas précisé un titre ou mentionné un artiste pour avoir ses sons *New tracks come over time. Since you didn't specify a title or mention an artist to get their songs*
B:	Effectivement *True*
C:	Merci *Thanks*

Table 4.4: Exchange in a WhatsApp group for fans of Loma musicians from Macenta, March 18, 2025.

Une très belle hommage à nos mamans africain je te kiffe depuis Bruxelles frérot fière d'être forestier *A very beautiful tribute to our African mothers I love you from Brussels bro proud to be a forestier*
Force à toi **massagui**. Le ciel est la limite ❤❤❤ *Strength to you king. The sky is the limit* ❤❤❤
Tu fais la fierté de la forêt ❤❤❤❤ *You are the pride of the forest* ❤❤❤❤
Tu es fort **na artistegui** *You are strong my artist*
Gallah mama *Thanks to god*

Table 4.5: Selected comments on a music video posted to YouTube by a Loma musician. Typographic notation: French | **Loma**

particularly common type of post on several of the Facebook groups I followed asked for the name of a certain object and usually received hundreds of replies. Table 4.6 shows some excerpted comments from one example of this phenomenon, a post in Facebook group D that received over 150 comments in response to the question "Son nom en Toma ?" *[Its name in Loma?]* and a photograph of the flowers of the *Bombax buonopozense* tree.

It is striking just how many people decide to respond to posts like this and the richness of dialectal variation the comments contain. Even in the excerpt in Table 4.6, at least four different potential variants are cited (*gogoe*, *vaghai*, *kondoi*, *vönhöngui*). The variation in orthographic choices made by the commenters is also notable: there are a few common spellings, but in the excerpt each answer is spelled at least four different ways. This indicates that orthographic choices here are largely being improvised, based not on a known standard but on speakers' intuitions based on their understanding of other languages' orthographies. This is particularly evident in the choice of several commenters to indicate diphthongs with a diaeresis on the second vowel (e.g. *vaghaï*), a practice likely adopted from French, where the diaeresis is used over a digraph to specify that the vowels should be read in hiatus or as a diphthong rather than as a monophthong. Likewise, the *-gui* on *vönhöngui* likely represents the nominal suffix pronounced /gi/, with the <u> inserted to fit French orthographic conventions. As other scholars have argued, spelling local languages in West Africa

Kondoï
Gogoï
Kondoï, Gogoë,Vahaii
Vhayae
Vaghaï
Vaghaï, vönhöngui
Gogoë
Gogoé
Gogui
Vahaï
Condoï
Vahai vahai en loma *Vahai vahai in Loma*
Kodöï en loulama **vahaï** en wolibalagaye *Kodöï in loulama [dialect and] vahaï in wolibalagaye [dialect]*
Oui c'est vrai.**kondoï,vaghaï** *Yes it's true.kondoï,vaghaï*
vous êtes faibles en toma on appel **Goungoë** ok *you are weak in loma we call [it] goungoë ok*
Gahyéma gogoè. *We call it gogoè.*
Gogowe
Il a deux noms en loma..**kondoii** et **vaghaii** *It has two names in loma..kondoii and vaghaii*

Table 4.6: Selected comments on a post asking about the name of a flower, May 14, 2021. Typographic notation: French | **Loma**

often means spelling the presence of French (Juffermans 2015; Lüpke & Storch 2013; Lüpke 2015; Lexander 2020b), and Loma is no exception. As will be discussed in section 5.2, though, the perception of improvised Loma writing as being practically written in French contributes to its lack of status as "real" writing.

4.3.2 Audio messages

Up to this point, I have primarily examined Facebook posts, where text is the only available mode of communication. However, the dynamics shift considerably when we turn to chat groups on platforms such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. While text messages remain common—and continue to be written almost exclusively in French—these platforms introduce an additional communicative modality: audio messages. In chat applications that support audio messages—which typically appear in the chat formatted like text messages, except with a "play" button where the text would be—many participants regularly communicate by sending recordings of speech to each other. Chat conversations, like the one shown in Figure 4.4, often consist of pages and pages of audio messages sent back and forth with a couple interspersed written messages in French.

Crucially, though, in this oral modality, Loma use is widespread. All of my in-

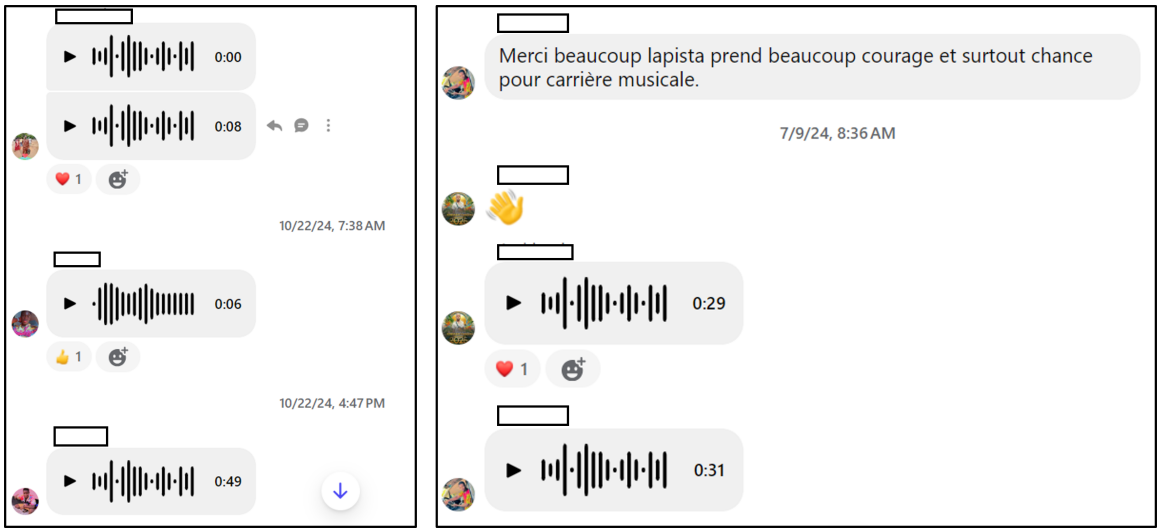

Figure 4.4: Audio messages in a Facebook Messenger chat attached to a Loma-focused Facebook group.

terviewees affirmed that audio messages are both frequently used by Loma speakers and are often composed in Loma. For instance, Balla illustrated the prevalence of this practice by scrolling through a Telegram group associated with an agricultural cooperative based in Macenta, of which he is a member:

> Balla: They don't write in Loma, but when they leave a message, usually it's in Loma. *[playing audio message]* That's Susu. Okay, this … *[playing another audio message]*. Most of the messages here are in Loma. But this is not Gizima [dialect]. … I think this is Woi-Balagha [dialect]. … *[playing another message]* So many. *[playing another]*
>
> Isaiah: *Is that French?*
>
> Balla: Yes, that's French. *[playing another]* "*Dèè neki ni*"—"my mother and dad, good morning." That's Woi-Balagha [dialect]. … So, yeah, here, most people, when they write, it's all in French. But when they leave messages, mostly they do that in Loma. … So in these groups, that's usually how we use Loma sometimes. When they write? No. That will be mostly in French. But when you leave a voicemail, that's most of the time in Loma."

Of the audio messages that Balla played, five were in Loma, one was in Susu, and three were in French or mixed Loma and French. Loma is therefore far from absent online—rather, it is absent from online *writing* specifically. In spaces where audio messages are possible, they often equal or even surpass text messages in number, and while not all of them are in Loma, a majority typically are.

When I asked John about the use of audio messages in Loma group chats, he also took out his phone and pulled up a WhatsApp group to which he belonged, describing what was on his screen:

> Let me just give you a very good illustration so you understand what I'm trying to say. Okay, like you see? This is a Loma WhatsApp group. But you see, everything is in French. So if you want to speak Loma, this is what you do. You record audio. So in in many groups, you will notice that there is so much audio recording.

To John, audio messages were the sole way for a Loma speaker to communicate in Loma, and their use was necessitated by people's desire to use Loma with each other. He continued, pulling up another group:

> Like see this group, you see? People just speak Loma. Most people communicate in Loma by audio, because you can't type Loma, and we want—we don't want French, we want Loma. But there is no way we can do [that], except to record audio.

Others framed the use of audio messages less as a consequence of wanting to use Loma than as a matter of technological ease, especially for older people. Christine, for instance, remarked that she often used audio messages with her mother:

> Christine: Yeah. My mom sometimes doesn't like to type, so she will just record her voice and send it to me. Sometimes I have to reply, because if I'm busy, I don't have time to text her, so I will just record it and send it back. It's just something that we do nowadays [...] some we just [...] record your voice and send it rather than typing.
>
> Isaiah: *Do you use the same languages that you would use if you were just talking to her directly, [when you're] on the phone?*
>
> Christine: Yeah. I speak with my mom or [...] my cousin. If, with her, I'm sending a message, I'm going to send in Toma [Loma], because I will speak that when we're talking.

For Christine, audio messages were essentially a form of phone call, more like a voicemail than a text message. The language choice that would apply to a phone call or in-person conversation extended naturally to an audio message, meaning that she would speak in Loma "because I will speak that when we're talking."

The concept of technological affordances (Gibson 1979: 127) is particularly useful in this context. It highlights how the design of a given technology can enable certain actions while constraining others. Indeed, John was adamant that the only reason people were not using Loma on Facebook was that it does not support audio messages:

> Isaiah: *So if Facebook had audio recording, do you think people would post audio recording comments?*
>
> John: Yes and yes.

His assertion was supported later when I encountered a comment on a Facebook post from May 2023 containing a video of a Loma speaker explaining proper Loma greet-

ings:

> Malheureusement y'a pas de commentaire vocal sur Facebook je voulais amender (Expression toma de Akaye, toma de la sous-préfecture fassankony précisément Makabou-tilibaye- Nobowouata)
>
> *Unfortunately there are no voice comments on Facebook I wanted to add (Loma expressions from Akaye, loma from the sub-prefecture of fassankony specifically Makabou-tilibaye- Nobowouata)*

The commenter evidently was hoping to demonstrate some dialectal features of the Loma variety he speaks, but was unable to due to the lack of voice messaging support on Facebook. If Facebook had the capability to send voice messages, this user would certainly make use of it to share linguistic information—but also, if John is to be believed, plenty of other Loma speakers would also use it simply to converse in all sorts of contexts.

It is not, then, that Loma speakers use little Loma in Facebook posts and comments because they believe it unsuited for Facebook in particular. Rather, there is some kind of association between oral communication and Loma, and written communication and French, that means that the lack of support for the oral modality precludes the use of Loma nearly altogether. When both modalities are available, though, speakers preferentially choose Loma for voice messages and French for text messages, a pattern of "mode-switching" that is consistent with findings elsewhere in Francophone West Africa (Androutsopoulos & Lexander 2021: 727).

4.4 Summary and reflections

Examining the backgrounds, attitudes, and language practices of the participants in Loma internet spaces in greater detail has allowed us to refine our understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Firstly, these speakers tend to be urban, highly educated, and relatively fluent in both French and Loma. They often maintain ties to the rural Loma-speaking heartland, and this is perhaps also reflected in the extent to which they see themselves as distinct from multigenerational or "assimilated" Loma people in Conakry in their pride in Loma culture and language, which is presumably what drives them to join these groups in the first place. But in both their education and

this preoccupation with promoting Loma culture, they are at some level elites—and their day-to-day linguistic and social environments and their beliefs likely reflect their positions in a very particular social world within the broader Loma-speaking community.

The urban bias of the Loma internet should come as no surprise given the recency of internet proliferation in the region. Yet, given the importance of distinguishing urban and rural language repertoires and choices in Africa (Mufwene & Vigouroux 2008; Carlo et al. 2019) and the fact that even among urban speakers, active participants in Loma internet spaces are a rarefied group, it is especially important to keep in mind that they are far from representative of Loma people on the whole—even as they do represent the most visible instantiation of "Loma-ness" online. More broadly, this result is a reminder that digital spaces can rarely be taken to stand in for a speaker community as a whole, especially in the African context where internet connectivity is still far from universal.

The other main lesson from this section is that the apparent absence of Loma online is not truly an absence across the board, but rather an absence in the written modality. Far from being opposed to having Loma online, speakers in fact use it regularly when sending audio messages, which are common and even favored when the ability to use them is afforded by the technology. However, when speakers mode-switch to writing, they also simultaneously code-switch to French. The broader lesson here is that we cannot think of written and oral language as simply two sides of the same coin. Just because someone speaks in a language does not mean they write in it, and vice versa. It would be a mistake to conclude from the lack of written Loma on the internet that Loma internet users do not speak the language. In fact, the repeated exhortations by ethnonationalist Loma internet users about "speaking" Loma are just that—about "speaking" (and a particular ideological orientation toward language), but evidently not about writing.

Knowing that Loma internet users' language choices are intimately tied to the modality they are operating, we can refine our objective somewhat. More specifically, we have to ask, what is special about the written modality such that pride in speaking does not translate to widespread writing? What leads French monopolize not digital language in general, but the written modality in particular?

Chapter 5

‘We have to write in French’: Logics of audience and convenience

In informal conversations about this project, the question of why Loma speakers rarely write their language online is often met with a suggestion: “Well, is it because it doesn’t have a writing system?” Despite the intuitive appeal of this answer—if there’s a writing system, people will write; if not, they won’t—the reality is not so straightforward. The mere existence of a standardized written form of a language is not the same thing as people actually knowing that standard—and knowing a certain standard is not the same thing as actually practicing writing. After all, many languages are not often written despite “having” an orthography, and many others are often written despite lacking formalized orthographies.

For its part, Loma straddles several of these gaps: it *does* in fact have an orthography (as discussed in section 2.3), but forty years without official sanction have made mastery of that system a relatively rare commodity. Rather than ask simply whether people have learned that orthography, it is more insightful to ask what they know *about* it and what value they assign to it. Moreover, it is impossible to answer questions of language choice without reference to the broader linguistic ecology. Whether people write Loma is not just about the qualities of Loma and its writing practices, but also equally—and perhaps even more—about the qualities of French.

In this chapter, I argue that Loma speakers’ choices about what language to write are defined by a desire to accommodate their perceived audience. No matter whether

or not an individual internet user has learned how to write Loma, writing French to communicate with a group or another Loma individual is always a safe and sure way to be understood. In contrast, writing in Loma is risky: those who learned the orthography when it was in widespread use know that most younger people were never taught it, and younger people in turn are aware of their own lack of knowledge of the once-official standard. This mutual recognition of deficit, brought about by the brief history of Loma standardization, makes speakers particularly aware of the potential inconvenience of writing Loma. It also affords little space for improvised Loma orthographies to gain traction as serious writing systems.

I start by examining how internet users rely on assumptions of written French as easy and universal in section 5.1. The other side of the coin, their presentation of written Loma as more challenging and less accessible, follows in section 5.2. Finally, section 5.3 offers a brief exploration of the few counterexamples—cases of fully-fledged written Loma usage on the internet—as the exceptions that prove the rule.

5.1 French is known to be known

In the course of explaining to me why he preferred to write in French when participating in chat groups, Balla drew a contrast between written French and written Loma: "...when I write in French, everybody can—it's easy for everybody to understand that. But if you're doing it in Loma, it's not easy, not everybody can get it." The assertion of Loma as challenging is interesting in its own right, and will be discussed in the following section. But his statement that French is "easy for everybody to understand," which he framed almost as a background assumption, is worth considering as well. After all, this is far from obviously true if the "everybody" in question refers to all Loma speakers, most of whom do not speak or read French.

Balla's claim allows us to see an assumption made by Loma internet users even if it rarely becomes salient or controversial enough to express explicitly: everyone knows French. A short chain of logic makes this assumption sensible, though. Our investigation in section 4.1 made clear that higher education is widespread on the Loma internet. Since higher education in this context entails comfortableness reading and writing French, internet users can therefore assume that French is a safer

and surer way to communicate with anyone they would be likely to encounter online. Within this restricted class domain, then, French in fact *is* easy.

When I asked Robert about what languages were used in what settings online, his justifications said even less explicitly about French than Balla's, but made similar assumptions:

> Isaiah: *So do you have, like, WhatsApp groups, that kind of thing?*
>
> Robert: Yes, we have groups, WhatsApp groups, but we speak French basically. Because most of the people in the group, they don't—they speak Loma well, but we don't have—typically if you write in Loma, it's not easy for people to understand what you want to say in Loma. Because most of the people are the new generation, so some of them don't even speak Loma. So we have to write in French or English.

Robert's explanations for why Loma people in WhatsApp groups would not write in Loma are wide-ranging; he offers both that people could speak Loma but simply found it hard to understand when written, and that some people in the "new generation" could not speak it at all. But in either case, his conclusion is that writing in French (or English, presumably depending on how diasporic the context is) is a necessity. Implicit in this claim is that French and English are the unmarked, non-exclusive defaults; if no other language is possible, then at least they are sure to be accessible to everyone.

In other words, as Mazrui (2008: 206) finds about English use on the internet in Kenya, proficiency in an official, educational language is a "common denominator" for Internet users. For Loma speakers, internet use is intimately entwined with literacy in French, with the latter practically a prerequisite for the former. Lexander (2011: 429), writing on internet users in Senegal, notes that this dynamic is not just true of the internet, but common to any written domain. Facility in writing, which comes through education, tends to be one and the same as facility in French. As she astutely observes, "French is the first written language. It is the language in which they first learnt to read and write and the dominant language of the written environment." As described in section 2.3, of course, Guinea differs from Senegal in that, for the cohort of students who began education under the *Langue Nationale* policy, French is not their first written language. But the idea of a "first written language"

that may not be the same as a speaker's first spoken language is a crucial insight, and for most Guineans today, French almost certainly fits that label. Robert, for instance, explained, "Usually, I speak in French or write in French, because French is what I learned." Even if a speaker is most comfortable speaking in Loma, they may simultaneously be most comfortable writing in French. If this is scaled up to a majority of the community, as is the case online, then, French becomes the unmarked default, since it is likely to be the most comfortable and most widely shared written language for the most speakers.

As an added benefit, French also accommodates for the potential—even if unintended or unexpected—presence of non-Loma people or Loma people who are not fluent in the language. It is unclear how many non-Loma speakers regularly interact with social media groups that are focused specifically on Loma culture; both Robert and John expressed that there were some number of non-fluent Conakry Loma people in these spaces, even as they affirmed that most participants were speakers. Beyond these groups, though, many people have cross-ethnic friendships, and these friends, while unlikely to know Loma, are likely to be able to read French—especially if what they share with the Loma speakers is their level of education. Robert, for instance, cited these interactions with non-Loma speakers as an additional reason he writes in French: "...my friends are not just Loma, I have multiple friends that [are] from Loma, Maninka, mixed. So you have to speak French if you want to—I have to write in French for everybody to get what I want to say." Even if there are a limited number of non-Loma speakers in specifically Loma-oriented spaces, the networked structure of a platform like Facebook entails a certain degree of "context collapse" (Marwick & Boyd 2011), the "process by which various offline networks with different sociodemographics and types of relations to ego are 'virtually' co-present in virtual space" (Androutsopoulos 2015: 190). Someone like Robert—a Loma speaker who grew up between village and city, attended university in the capital, and now lives in the United States—may simultaneously face networks of Loma-speaking family and childhood friends, Guinean schoolmates from other ethnic backgrounds, and English- and French-speaking American adult friends and colleagues whenever he opens up Facebook. In that situation, language choice becomes more complicated and uncertain, which may reinforce the value of the "common denominator" for safe

use across the board.

5.2 Loma is known to be unknown

The logic described above—that French is convenient because anyone online can be assumed to have already been taught to read and write it—is probably enough to make people mostly choose French on its own. But the preference for French is also exacerbated by various factors that affect people's impressions of written Loma, causing them to doubt its viability as a serious form of communication. In particular, while Loma speakers cite many different reasons for not writing Loma, many of them can be traced back to the history that makes Guinea unique: the 16-year period between 1968 and 1984 when local languages *were* taught as standardized, official written languages.

Perhaps the greatest effect of the *Langue Nationale* period is that it has created a mutual understanding among Loma speakers that knowledge of how to write the language in the community is limited. Unlike the many local languages in Africa that have never received official state sanction or formalization, and for which the notion of "correctness" is thus still very much a subjective matter, Loma speakers can point to the fact that there was for a period a defined "correct" way to write Loma in Latin script—but that that writing later ceased to be taught. As the gap between the First Republic generation who studied under the *Langue Nationale* policy and the youngest generations grows wider (Benson & Lynd 2011), literacy only in French has become the norm even as the memory of literacy in Loma remains.

For the older generation, the result is that, though they may have been taught a standardized written Loma, they hesitate to use it anymore because they know that everyone younger was not taught it as they were. Balla, for example, spent his childhood education under the Touré regime and, since he grew up in Macenta, learned Loma in school:

> I was born in Macenta. I grew up with my grandfather. … He was serving in N'Zébéla—that's another sub-prefecture. And so then that's where I started going to school in 1973. So when I was going to school at that time, were studying in Loma for seven years. From first to seventh grade I studied in Loma. So I

> was in N'Zébéla for three years, and when I passed the fourth grade, I went to Koyamah, because my grandfather was retired, so he moved back to the village. So that's where I stayed until I went to 11th grade. From first to seventh grade, I studied in Loma, only Loma.

To this day, Balla remains a confident writer in Loma, and noted that he is happily willing to share his knowledge of Loma writing (which also includes Loma's indigenous syllabary) if requested. But he limits what Loma he would regularly write to others in contexts with wider audiences:

> Isaiah: *If you're writing yourself on Facebook, or writing in a group like this, what language would you use?*
>
> Balla: Usually I'd use French or English, sometimes, a few times Loma with friends who—when we know each other, sometimes we can do that. Sometimes I will say "vabèsu?" [*how are you?*]—sometimes I will do that.
>
> Isaiah: *Is it like greetings or do you read and write anything?*
>
> Balla: No, no, no. Not details, like long—no, no, no. Just those few word greetings, just those. Because not a lot of people know how to write Loma. People in Guinea who were born in the 80s, they started school in French. Because me, I started schooling in 1973, that's when they started studying in Loma or local languages.

Even though he has the technical knowledge, he consciously chooses to only write at most the kinds of phatic expressions discussed in subsection 4.3.1, presumably because those are more likely to be widely recognized. He believes, though, that everyone other than speakers in the same generation as him would have a harder time reading "details" if he chose to write them. As a result of his desire to accommodate younger speakers, therefore, even his confidence in writing does not entail significant actual use.

Meanwhile, younger generations know that a standard written form of Loma previously existed, but are often also aware that they are not familiar with it themselves. Beyan, who is a university student in Liberia but received most of his primary and secondary education in Guinea, expressed this sentiment perhaps most succinctly when I asked what he would think if he saw written Loma on Facebook:

> It would give me a hard time to pronounce it, because I have not been taught that. As I said, if I see it in Loma, I won't be able to pronounce it because I haven't been taught the writing. … I won't be able to pronounce it, because I don't have that knowledge to write it.

Beyan talks about his ability to read Loma—literally to pronounce the letters—in terms of education: having been taught or not. The issue is not whether Loma is possible to read and write in the first place; he is confident that it is. But it requires special knowledge to be able to do so, which he has not attained. While I was not certain whether he was intentionally contrasting his own experience to the history of Loma literacy education in Guinea or simply referring to the notion of "teaching" in general, Robert was more direct in drawing a connection when I asked if he had ever been taught Loma in school:

> In school? No, I didn't. The president before the president that was in power when I was growing up—before him, all of the previous presidents made people to speak their languages everywhere, like in school. They were learning in their languages in school. That's why Balla went to school in Loma. That's why he has some academic Loma words that we don't know, because he went to school Loma, before French. Because when that president passed away, then the other one came, and then they changed the system. It was French now, no more dialects. It was French in general now.

Robert's response turns to the history of policy changes to explain why he had only learned to read and write in French, and shows that he is quite conscious of the difference between his literacy education and that of Balla, whom he also knows. It also shows that he considers people who went to school during the *Langue Nationale* period to have not only literacy in Loma but also additional knowledge of the language. Balla, he says, has extra knowledge of "academic words"—presumably such as terms introduced for science and mathematics—because of his schooling. This belief in *Langue Nationale* students as especially aware of their language showed up elsewhere, such as in a post in Facebook group A in February 2021:

> Vous qui avez étudié en loghoma au temps du coco-lala: Quelle est la signification de Zazazia en loghomagoï ?
>
> *Those of you who studied in loghoma [Loma] in the time of coco-lala: What is the meaning of Zazazia [fishing weir] in loghomagoï [the Loma language]?*

The poster, looking for the definition of a probably somewhat less common word in Loma, turned to not just the older generation in general, but specifically those with backgrounds of standardized language education, to provide an answer. This helps further establish that, to younger speakers, the history of *Langue Nationale* education remains salient in their estimations of their own knowledge.

Interestingly, both older and younger Loma speakers expressed that Loma text was not especially challenging to grasp, at least in theory. When I asked if Robert thought he could understand something written in Loma if he saw it, he was firm: "Yes. Yes, I could read it and understand it." He explained that, since Loma was written in the Latin alphabet, as long as someone knew the Latin alphabet, they would be able to sound it out. Balla echoed this belief, claiming that the Loma orthography was "easy," even though he still chose not to write it:

> Isaiah: *If you, for whatever reason, wrote something longer in Loma, do you think people would not understand it, or how would they react?*
>
> Balla: Some will, they will understand. Because it's easy, you just sound the letters, you put them together and they can read them and understand.

Avoidance of written Loma is thus not necessarily done out of a belief that it would be impossible for younger speakers to read, but out of a sense of something closer to convenience. Given that French is already easy for everyone involved, writing in Loma, even if possible, could only be an extra inconvenience for some without making things particularly easier for anyone else.

In my interview with John, his ideas about why Loma internet users rarely wrote the language seemed to diverge substantially from what other people said, and I initially was unsure what to make of this. While others stated that Loma was not hard to write, but they and others around them merely lacked the knowledge, John claimed that "there is no way you can type in Loma" or even "if you do, no one can read" (despite this claim, I found at least one Facebook comment John posted in which he himself responded in written Loma to another user's greeting). On further investigation, though, his concern began to make more sense within the context of others' beliefs. His claim that Loma was impossible to write did not mean he thought the language was simply unsuited for writing, but was rather out of a sense that if it was not being

written in a standardized orthography, it was not really "writing in Loma" at all:

> What makes it impossible to write is like, there is no consensus on words. Like for instance, if I want to say "pèlè" [*house*], how will I write "pèlè"? You see what I mean? If I want to say "mazage" [*banana*], how would I write "mazage"? Maybe even if I tried to write "mazage", it would still be the French alphabet, or the English alphabet! You see? And, yeah, it's—it doesn't make a lot of sense.

How do we make sense of this argument that, without consensus, writing Loma would simply be writing in the alphabet of another language? After all, Loma writing, even when standardized, typically uses the Latin alphabet, just as English and French do. John is not suggesting that a Latin orthography altogether is necessarily French or English. Rather, he seems to be pointing to the importation of spelling conventions from other languages when speakers improvise Loma writing strategies (as discussed in subsection 4.3.1). For John, the improvised Loma orthographies that crop up in the absence of a standard are not sufficient substitutes, but simply an attempt to wrangle Loma sounds into French. We can speculate to what extent this, too, is derived from his knowledge of the history of education: since there used to exist a writing system whose conventions diverged more substantially from French, the contrast is all the more obvious with improvised orthographies that follow the French conventions younger speakers were taught.

Both John's belief in the insufficiency of non-standardized writing and the knowledge of lack of knowledge among younger speakers more broadly have the effect of disallowing space for alternative literacies that might otherwise gain traction in the absence of formal local language education. Even if younger speakers might otherwise be willing to experiment with writing, they perceive themselves as being at a loss, lacking the necessary tool—knowledge of the standard orthography—to be able to do so. The *Langue Nationale* policy thus has effects that have extended far beyond what we might otherwise assume given the brevity of its implementation. Its legacy has been not just to afford some older speakers local language literacy, but to have created, to put it strongly, "entire communities of guilty analphabets" (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 57). It has instilled in Loma speakers' collective memory the knowledge that only some of them can write, further disadvantaging Loma's prospects of being convenient to write in comparison to French. This finding therefore confirms

an argument that has previously been made by Mühlhäusler (1996: 215) and others: the existence of an accepted written form of a language does not necessarily increase the utility of the language.

5.3 Who *is* writing in Loma?

Now that we have constructed a model of why Loma internet users choose French over Loma when writing in the previous two sections, it is useful to test that model against the available counterexamples—the rare but occasional instances where people *do* write Loma online in a sustained, substantial way. By showing where the limits of the general pattern are, and that they correspond to what we would expect, we can confirm the suitability of the arguments that apply in the majority of cases.

The most common occurrences of Loma online are, as discussed in subsection 4.3.1, discussions of vocabulary and grammar and short, formalized expressions. These categories are exceptional because neither requires their readers to feel comfortable reading Loma in general or, in the case of the latter, even necessarily be fully fluent in Loma in the first place. Someone who does not normally consider themselves literate in Loma may still feel able to sound out a single word shared by another user as a vocabulary item, or even attempt to transcribe it from their own speech informally. Even someone who is not a fluent speaker of Loma may be able to recognize or even produce a phrase like "emama" (*thank you*) or "massagui" (*king*) which have wide cultural significance. We should therefore expect somewhat separate behavior around these kinds of usages.

More substantial writing in Loma—on the order of at least full phrases or sentences in the language—is of course even rarer, but I did encounter a few examples of it. The first group of contexts in which I found written Loma is in spaces consisting of small numbers of older speakers, particularly when they seem to already know each other and know that they all experienced the education of the *Langue Nationale* period. Some of the most striking examples of this pattern are from the very early history of Facebook group A, which first became active around 2012. Table 5.1 shows the comments on a post from 2014 by a Facebook user who lives in the United States, captioned "Daseïgui löghömagoï zu???" [*What is its name in the Loma language???*] with

B:	**molohili.**
C:	**kodazogui (molo ghodazogai)**
D:	**he he he, bhè na mologhili gha? bha nono levhegi vhede? kèkè ni böh bè?**
A:	Dia <user D> **gé mèniga.**
E:	**Mologhili lagani dè, zéavégui vhé, sawagoï bha nanigoï gha éga mologhili!!!!**
E:	ahahahahahahahah <username> oublier de telles choses c'est oublier son existence de plusieurs années donc une insulte aux honnêtes personnes qui ont pris tout leur temps pour nous éduquer dans ce sens!!! *ahahahahahahahah <username> to forget such things is to forget one's very existence of many years so an insult to the honest people who took all their time to educate us in that regard!!!*
C:	**Nou ghawaisso** **félé nagha éga zélavegui, zélavé désita ba dossavha** **gha éga mologhili. Zédabéi ghaga lé , wa kpala kenoui wa lazoma, da tévhé**
F:	**Ni lè monissèoh**
A:	<User F> **to gha zé kogui ki zu nina.**
G:	**awa keni nina adeli massata kpalagavè**

Table 5.1: Selected comments on a post captioned "Daseïgui löghömagoï zu???" [*What is its name in the Loma language???*], March 20, 2014. The author of the post is marked as A in the conversation. Typographic notation: French | **Loma**

a photo of a fonio plant. The language choices of commenters are flipped from the norm: written Loma dominates, with only a few comments in French. The Loma here is also not merely single words—even though, like previous examples, the point of the post is to ask about vocabulary—but rather full sentences and even back-and-forth conversation, with several users tagging and responding to each other.

It seems reasonable to conclude that most of the participants in this interaction probably know each other to some extent. While I cannot verify the size of Facebook group A at the time of this post, it seems likely that it would have been much smaller than it is today, given that internet use was far more limited in Guinea at that time. In addition, more of the participants in this interaction are probably diasporic Loma speakers with global connections than in the average Loma-focused Facebook space today, making this an even more limited demographic. Most of the posts in the group from its early few years are by the same set of users, many of whom are involved in this conversation. Furthermore, the fact several of the participants comment mul-

tiple times, responding to each others' messages, suggests that they may be at least regular acquaintances—and in fact several show up as each others' Facebook friends. If this is the case, we can surmise that they probably are aware of each others' literacy backgrounds, and know that everyone involved is comfortable writing and reading Loma.

Another property that many of these situations share is that the initial post or message is written in Loma, which seems to license commenters to respond and interact further in Loma as well. The example in Table 5.1 shows this property, for example; the initial post, although it asked about Loma vocabulary, was itself written only in Loma, thereby already selecting the post and its comments as a space for people who know how to understand written Loma. This pattern was also especially apparent in a much more recent Facebook post from December 2024, shown in Table 5.2, in which the author—a Loma speaker working in Senegal—posted a photo of the majority-Loma village of Koyamah in Macenta Prefecture and captioned it "Allons à koyamah / Adi kogna, taa sa pélé bètèsé" [*Let's go to koyamah*]. Of the 53 comments responding to the post—most of which expressed nostalgia or praise for the village—four were in Loma, and the rest in French. While the Loma comments still constitute a small minority here, this is a greater proportion than normal—perhaps because the caption on the initial post was already half written in Loma.

The most notable thing about this post, though, was that the author of the post responded directly to most comments, and did so each time in the language that the comment was posted in—French for French comments, Loma for Loma comments. This pattern provides evidence for the notion that Loma internet users are actively making language choices based on what they know about the other users with whom they are interacting. If they are someone who is confident writing both French and Loma, as seems to be the case for the author of the post in Table 5.2, they may decide on which language to use based on what they perceive is most convenient for their interlocutor. If the commenter has already chosen to write in Loma, they choose to respond in Loma, but otherwise will respond in French. Likewise, I observed several instances in which posts— even within groups where most written content was in French—were composed entirely in Loma, with the subsequent comments also predominantly in Loma. This suggests that once a post establishes a space accessible

B:		**Eh kèlê ,bah nah solowoguele**
⇒	A:	**baa ungo, té na woula bö nö héni...**
⇒	B:	**soukouloubebe**
⇒	A:	**guè bo iyé**
C:		Koyama , la sous préfecture carrefour est notre fierté. Avis à ma Parente. *Koyama , the crossroads sub-prefecture is our pride. A word to my Relative.*
⇒	A:	merci mon cher parent *thanks my dear relative*
D:		**Galamama. Gassawoulossodanowoguiso**
⇒	A:	**gamazé .**
E:		La dernière ville occupée par les troupes françaises en Afrique *The last city occupied by French troops in Africa*
⇒	A:	eh oui !! *Oh yes!!*
⇒	E:	c'est là-bas pour tracer la frontière avec le Libéria *it's over there to mark the border with Liberia*

Table 5.2: Selected comments and responses to comments on a post about the town of Koyamah, December 9, 2024. The author of the post is marked as A in the conversation. Responses to comments are indented and marked with arrows (⇒). Typographic notation: French | **Loma**

only to those literate in Loma, it becomes acceptable, and even expected, for those individuals to continue writing in Loma within that thread.

A final situation in which I noticed Loma written was when it was necessary to directly quote someone's speech. The following comment appeared on a Facebook post containing another music video by the same artist as in Table 4.5:

> il y'a une partition qui me fait actu dans le son là eehh 《 **Ézama zogué éghè podignalé** 》
>
> *there's a part that really hits me in that song eehh 《 Ézama zogué éghè podignalé 》*

The author of the comment appears to be quoting a line from the song, which is in Loma. While the comment itself is written in French, the quoted material is rendered in written Loma. This supports the notion that people do not generally perceive Loma as unwriteable or unreadable, but rather as requiring more effort to write and to read

than French. I did not observe this commenter writing in Loma in other contexts, but in this case, the "extra work" involved in writing Loma—and asking others to read it—may be seen as justified by the need to quote the lyrics directly.

5.4 Summary and reflections

This chapter has argued that we can explain the dominance of French in the writing of Loma internet users as a result of their decisions to choose the language that is most convenient for their audience. Even if Loma is theoretically possible to write, and some Loma speakers even know how to write a written standard, nevertheless because Loma internet users are virtually all educated in French, the "common denominator" in most contexts is French, and it is therefore the most convenient choice. As Mazrui (2008: 201) finds for Kenyan internet users, whatever their or their interlocutors' absolute knowledge of either language, it is the relative balance of ease in writing one versus the other that makes the difference. The most important explanations for language choice traffic in notions of the official language being "easier," "simpler," and more comfortable, while the local language, even if not impossible, is "too difficult to understand" or simply too slow to read and write.

In particular, in the case of Loma, speakers make judgments based on their perception of others' comfort. This a characteristic example of what has been termed accommodation (Giles 2016) or the "convergent choice principle" (De Houwer 2018), the idea that multilinguals' language choices are often determined by the comprehension abilities of their interlocutors, since they know that there is little point in speaking a language to someone who will not understand it or will even have trouble understanding it. In contexts like public social media groups, where a user's "interlocutor" may not be a single individual but rather a whole group whose limits are not always clearly defined, accommodation means choosing a language that is most widely understandable with the least effort.

If accommodation is the primary force driving language choice in digital writing, this also draws our attention to what such choices are not—namely, politically charged. Loma internet users appear to choose French over Loma primarily for reasons of convenience, rather than as a political act or a deliberate expression or rejec-

tion of particular identities or beliefs. In other words, the choice of French over Loma seems to have relatively low salience, existing passively in the background rather than ever taking the foreground. The following chapter will investigate why this is the case.

Chapter 6

Niches without overlap: Language, identity, and perceived threats

Thus far, we have established that Loma speakers online choose to use French in most of their written interactions by operating under logics of convenience that prioritize French as more broadly comfortable for internet users given their presumed class backgrounds. We have also established, though, that Loma speakers online—or at least those who participate in spaces focused on sharing and uniting around Loma culture—express great pride to be Loma and speak the Loma language. One question thus emerges with particular urgency: Why does the strong sense of pride in a Loma identity not conflict with—let alone override—the convenience-based logic that appears to drive the use of French in writing? It is not difficult to imagine that, if Loma speakers perceived writing in French as detrimental to the vitality of their language, they might actively resist doing so, even at the cost of convenience. Why, then, does this not appear to be the case, and instead the choice to write in French rather than Loma is seemingly experienced as apolitical for internet users?

By way of answering this question, I want to turn to an insightful segment of my interview with Robert. Looking to understand how he understood the relationship between French and Loma, I asked him how he would feel if he encountered a Loma person who only spoke French with their family and no Loma. (I chose the context

of spoken language in the home because Loma, as a local language, would typically be assumed to dominate there.) He responded:

> Yeah. Not—I would say, it's better to speak your language, but French also is important because it's an international language and we get the knowledge through that language. Like in school, it's the French that we speak at the school.

His response was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, he stated that he preferred, in some abstract sense, for the hypothetical individual to speak Loma. But on the other hand, he recognized that there were also meaningful benefits to speaking in French, since French is associated with global connections and educational opportunities. Both choices had legitimate cases to be made for them.

I then followed up with a slightly adjusted question, asking how he would feel if he encountered a Loma person who spoke no Loma with their family and instead only spoke Susu, the local language spoken in and around Conakry as a lingua franca. His response was strikingly different:

> I would feel very bad because—you're Loma, you need to speak Loma. You can speak Susu, of course, it's not a big issue, it's not a big deal. But I would rather prefer you to speak Loma if you are speaking with someone who understands Loma.

When Loma was contrasted against French, he framed the value of choosing Loma as a relative benefit—it was perhaps better, but either choice made sense. When Loma was contrasted against Susu, though, he framed choosing Loma as a "need" and choosing Susu as practically a rejection of Loma identity. Loma was clearly the right choice in this context, and Susu was the wrong one.

Clearly, then, French and Susu do not have the same relationship to Loma; while French may be apolitical, Susu is not. Christine, for instance, described growing up in Conakry with well-educated parents who allowed her to speak either Loma or French in the household, but never Susu:

> You are not allowed to speak Susu in the house. You could only speak it outside … But when you come to the house, you have to speak in either Loma or French.

> …because my parents used to see a lot of families from Macenta, and sometimes the children don't speak the language because they were not forced to do that. So my parents were very big on that. With my parents today, when I'm talking to them, it's either French or Loma.

Loma speakers, I found, repeatedly directed their worries about Loma's vitality at Susu and other Guinean local languages to a greater extent than they did at French. When I asked Christine about whether she thought the Loma language needed "maintaining," she responded by pointing to what she perceived as language shift to other local languages among younger generations:

> It does need maintaining. Just like I was saying at the beginning, a lot of people in Conakry that are originally from Loma—their parents are originally from Loma, but the kids were born in Conakry, raised in Conakry … they are not speaking Loma at home. Like in my own family, like I was telling you, my cousins, they speak Mandingo [i.e., Maninka] because they were raised in Kankan. And I have seen a lot of people like that.

This sentiment is nothing new. In the mid-1990s, at around the same time as urban Loma elites began to develop the sense of ethnic identity and pride discussed in section 4.2, with organizations like *Gilibaye* intended to foster connections between Conakry residents and the Macenta heartland, they also developed concerns that younger urban generations were losing a sense of Loma "culture" (McGovern 2017: 61). Instead of speaking the Loma language, they worried, younger generations were choosing to speak more and more Susu as they assimilated into Conakry's urban and cosmopolitan environment. The focus of their cultural and linguistic preservation efforts, therefore, were on preventing shift to other local languages rather than shift to French.

To understand why local languages might be seen as more threatening than French, we must look to the roles that each language plays in the language ecology surrounding these speakers. In Conakry, for instance, Susu has increasingly become a vehicular language, used by Conakry residents of all ethnic backgrounds to communicate with each other, even as it also remains the language of the Susu people specifically (Ousmane Barry 2014: 8). It is used in daily, informal contexts: on the street, between friends, and—in many families, certainly ethnically Susu ones—

within the household. French, meanwhile, as the official language of the country, is mandated in administration and education, and is essentially the only language occupying those domains, but it traditionally has not extended into the domain of the home except in some elite families. Since the home is the primary domain in which Loma would be used by a speaker in Conakry, Susu is therefore the more direct "competitor" to Loma—and moreover, given Susu's associations to a particular ethnicity, can be construed as having implications for one's ethnic self-identification. Even for elite speakers like Christine's parents, who themselves use a mix of French and Loma in the home, Susu remains more threatening because it occupies many of the same domains that Loma does and is expanding in those domains. French, in contrast, exists largely in domains that are complementary to those that support Loma, and is not perceived as threatening to expand beyond them unless actively encouraged. Mixing French and Loma in the household, as some elite families do, may be variously seen as good or bad, but it is not a wide-ranging threat.

There are of course some Loma speakers, including some in online spaces, who *do* take issue with Loma families speaking French in the home. But even when they do, it is not a complete dismissal of French but a complaint about French being used in contexts where it does not belong. A comment on a Facebook post from October 2024 demonstrates this complex sentiment:

> Laisse-les, ils se font comme des petits blancs à Conakry. Quand tu rentre dans la maison d'un loma c'est le français alors que nous les petits villageois nous les corrigeons dans la langue de Molière pourtant on parlait loma à la maison quand on était à l'école.
>
> *Forget them, they act like little white people in Conakry. When you enter the house of a loma it's all in French meanwhile we village kids correct them in the language of Molière even though we spoke Loma at home when we were at school.*

The commenter here simultaneously complains explicitly about the overuse of French among Loma people in Conakry, uses French to write himself, and indirectly touts the fact that he and other "village kids" are skilled French speakers themselves. The difference between him and the target of his attacks is seemingly not pride in French fluency, but knowing when it is appropriate to use French and when it is not. Loma speakers like him may be less sanguine about French use than, say, Christine's

family, but this does not entail a negative opinion of French across the board.

Even for these speakers, there is no problem with using French in domains in which it does not compete with Loma (or any other local language). Using French, after all, has its benefits: as Robert identified, it offers international connections and is the language through which people will be most familiar with science and academic concepts. It can even take on a role as a political statement of anti-ethnocentrism, modernity, and cosmopolitanism (Bergere 2017). As Skattum (2008: 115) finds about francophone elites in Mali, "French is not used for identity purposes, but as an instrument of social promotion." When its instrumental functions are demanded, therefore, speaking French is fully legitimized.

What does all of this tell us about Loma internet users' writing practices? If speaking French is already perceived of as less conflicting with Loma pride, at least when compared to speaking another local language, as Robert and Christine demonstrated, then writing is certainly unlikely to be any different. In fact, writing, since it is something learned from and originating in the school environment, is a domain naturalized as entirely appropriate for French. As a result, even the more aggressive Loma promoters, like the commenter above, show no hesitation towards writing everything in French. While the choice of local language spoken in the home has great political salience, and is the site of endless argument and worry among Loma speakers, the written modality is simply not a contested domain, and French is simply not Loma speakers' biggest worry. Being proud of Loma identity and writing in French are therefore largely compatible.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Rethinking language vitality in a digital age

At this point, the apparent paradox I presented at the beginning of this essay has hopefully been unraveled. The reason Loma speakers on the internet seem to use only French and little Loma does not have to do with a lack of fluency, shame or hesitation to use the language online, or a belief that it is impossible to write. Rather, it is grounded in the fact that Loma internet users are mostly members of a very particular demographic subset of the Loma-speaking population—urban residents with extensive exposure to formal education—and that group's attitudes toward the written modality in particular. Users choose to write French over Loma propelled by assumptions about convenience: their French-language education means they can assume French to be easy and universal, while Guinea's back-and-forth history of literacy education in local languages means they think of Loma as difficult and less convenient. And while the more ethnically chauvinist Loma speakers on the internet may preach about the importance of "speaking" the Loma language, those arguments are mostly aimed at other local languages and rarely engage with the question of written language, which is automatically assumed to be a French-dominant domain and therefore out of conflict with pride in a Loma identity. When contextualized within a multilingual ecology in which both French and Loma have distinct niches and roles

to play in these speakers' repertoires, as well as within a particular history of education policy, Loma speakers' practice of exographia makes complete sense.

7.1 Literacy and convenience

We can draw several lessons from these findings that have significant implications for the study of language choices in multilingual environments. First, Loma speakers' drastically different patterns of language use between written domains (text messages) and oral domains (audio messages) compel us to recognize that linguistic repertoires, ideologies, and choices can differ substantially across modalities. This study thus supports the argument made by Lüpke & Storch (2013: 48) that research on multilingualism must not fall into the trap of assuming a "one-to-one link between spoken and written language." Instead, any understanding of a group of people's linguistic ecology must include a recognition that niches are divided not just by environment, formality, individuals involved, and so on, but also by modality.

Simply recognizing this goes a long way to explaining the case of Loma: it allows us to see that there is no reason why beliefs that speakers hold about spoken language necessarily extend to written language, and also directs our attention toward histories and repertoires of writing specifically to explain phenomena in the written domain. In doing so, it also highlights that we cannot think of writing and literacy as merely a representation of "real spoken language". Literacy and beliefs about literacy, in the case of Loma, are crucial forces behind how language is being used. This lesson also has relevance for language revitalization efforts that might seek to use written evidence as a proxy measurement for the vitality of a language in general. Without a recognition of the nonalignment between written and oral modalities, it would be easy to conduct a study of Loma Facebook groups, for instance, and conclude that because Loma is nowhere to be found, the language is barely spoken and must be severely endangered. Yet that is of course far from the truth.

Second, our investigation of the accommodation logics that privilege written French above written Loma prompt us to complexify the idea of "convenience" and question its universality. For Loma-speaking internet users, convenience means writing in French; it makes their interactions not only with the world but with

each other more reliable and accessible. But others, including many linguists, have framed ex-colonial official languages like French as a major *in*convenience to fostering literacy and smooth, widespread communication in African countries—obstacles that make resources less accessible and equitable. They identify the use of local languages, instead, as a necessary step towards making the internet convenient to use for Africans (e.g. Lexander 2020a: 955).

Neither of these perspectives is wrong *per se*, but it is important to recognize the partiality of both. A linguist who naïvely assumed that, for example, an effort to localize the internet into written Loma would automatically make things easier for Loma internet users might find themselves sorely mistaken. Such efforts might actually make Loma internet users' interactions less convenient, as writing in a local language may exclude portions of the non-Loma-speaking population with whom they wish to communicate. Additionally, it might be seen as coming at the expense of promoting facility a local language of wider communication or a language like French—which would have the effect of limiting users' social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, simply assuming that French is naturally the most convenient language to write on the internet would ignore the fact that it completely excludes the participation of two-thirds of the Guinean population. French might make things easier for current Loma internet users, but not necessarily for the vast number of potential Loma internet users who are currently excluded from digital spaces, if not by insufficient technological access, then by insufficient literacy. At times, making communication more accessible to one group can simultaneously make it less accessible to another, and individuals are continually negotiating what and whom to prioritize. In analyzing such a situation, therefore, it is essential to consider the various interests involved, and particularly afford greater attention to the role of class, among other contextually-specific social distinctions within a community. These factors should be central to any assessments of what is "good" or "bad" for speakers of a language.

The fact that Loma speakers' writing practices are determined by notions of convenience also calls for a greater recognition of the variation in salience or markedness that a language choice in a given context can have. Overly simplistic ecological theories of language risk assuming that all language choices are straightforward

and ideologically meaningful given particular contexts, as if they are "if-then" statements whose acceptance or contravention necessarily constitute assertions of identity. But the difference between the way Loma speakers think of choosing French over Loma in writing online versus the way they think of choosing another local language like Susu over Loma in speaking in the home shows how choices in different contexts vary vastly in their ideological salience and the degree to which they are socially enforced. What language a Loma speaker uses to write on the internet is a question of convenience and considerateness at most, whereas what language they use to speak in the home is much more likely to be perceived as a statement about their values and acceptance or rejection of a certain politics and identity.

In fact, even when great pride and positive sentiment seems to exist towards speaking a language, it does not necessarily change the salience of a certain language choice in a particular context. While many Loma speakers online show strong interest in the language as a symbol of identity, this does not entail much practical effort to expand its domains of use or pressure to disrupt the logics of convenience that guide those same speakers' language use in written domains. All of my interviewees expressed that they liked the idea of Loma speakers writing more often in Loma, at least in the abstract—but none expressed a sense of urgency around the idea, and multiple noted that they thought that, as Balla put it, "people are not really interested in it." Lüpke (2011: 319, 351) finds a similar phenomenon for the Jalonke language in northern Guinea and the Baïnounk language in Senegal: speakers expressed strongly positive attitudes towards the development of orthographies, literacy materials and literacy classes, but actual use of the orthographies and materials or attendance of the classes was far less popular. Pride expressed in one domain can coexist with completely separate attitudes in another, seemingly "firewalled" off from each other. Even if speakers' linguistic pride is sometimes spoken about in generalized terms that seem to project across the language as a whole, that is no guarantee that it is actually universal across all domains.

7.2 Ecological dynamism and the expanding internet

While the first half of this conclusion has focused on the ways Loma points us to a better understanding of the structure of multilingual language ecologies, it is equally important to consider how such ecologies evolve over time and what consequences their evolution has for the vitality of languages within them. Mühlhäusler (1996: 322) points out that we have to ask: "What is the support system that sustains a language ecology over time?"—or, alternatively phrased, how do changing support systems change a language ecology? We cannot think of the structure of the ecology as prior to the forces that develop it, letting structure ontologically precede process. Indeed, the very fact that this study has focused on the internet as its site of investigation already points toward questions of change: the internet is not only a medium of communication but also a dynamic and rapidly shifting space that can accelerate processes of linguistic transformation. Although this project did not directly focus on diachronic change, it nevertheless has interesting implications for how we think about the future of multilingualism and language vitality in Africa and beyond.

At the most basic level, it must be acknowledged that this study does support the arguments of voluminous sociolinguistic scholarship on Africa that the dominant models of language endangerment and revitalization, which have been developed for settler-colonial contexts like the Americas and Australia, cannot be productively applied to much of Africa. For Loma speakers, French is far from a "killer language" whose use in any domain is a threat to the stability of Loma, as colonial languages are often framed globally. Rather, speakers stably use French in some domains and Loma in others, and the two languages rarely "compete" over a single domain. If there is any competition over domains between Loma and another language, it is with the third, but perhaps underattended to, category of local languages of wider communication. Models that posit speakers of a minority language simply shifting across the board to a dominant colonial language are insufficient to account for the phenomena occurring among Loma speakers.

However, the fact that global models do not apply well to the African situation does not mean that ex-colonial languages are entirely without risk. The absence of competition between French and Loma in specific domains does not mean that there

will be no change in the relationship between them. Even if the languages used in particular domains remain stable, the relative prominence of these domains—their "size," so to speak—can change, thereby altering the broader structure of the language ecology. As urbanization accelerates, education levels increase, and internet usage becomes more widespread, more Guineans will engage with French and French-dominant, or even English-dominant, domains such as higher education, international media, and, of course, writing. This could lead to an expansion in the prominence of domains associated with French, even if the language does not become used in any new domains.

Many scholars seem to assume that as long as there are domains that continue to support a minority local language's use, it is stable. For example, (Mufwene & Vigouroux 2008: 10-11) argue that even if, as Connell (2015) finds, urbanization is increasing the amount of simpler bilingualism or even monolingualism in cities, this is not a major crisis for minority languages because the situation remains more advantageous for them in secondary urban centers and rural areas. Similarly, Lüpke (2011: 318) writes ambivalently about exographia, suggesting that it may not be a problem for a minority language if its speakers write entirely in another language because those languages are often spoken in small-scale rural communities where use in the home and community spoken domains remain strong. This specific claim is somewhat convincing, and should not be rejected out of hand; the Loma case clearly demonstrates that a lack of written language does not necessarily indicate broader linguistic endangerment. The idea that, while some contexts may not support minority languages, they can still thrive in other domains, and that our focus should be on sustaining their vitality in those contexts, therefore certainly *may* hold true. However, we cannot simply assume it to hold true across the board, as we cannot take for granted that the overall structure of a language ecology will remain stable or that existing domains will always exist at their current prominence to "offer a home", so to speak, for the languages they host.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that we should not assume it to be true, and that in reality domains are closing and opening up with particular rapidity in the contemporary moment. Local concerns, first of all, suggest that change is occurring. Robert, for instance, commented to me on what he sees as the younger generation of

Guineans' drastically different forms of communication and interaction:

> The new generation is different because—before, at the time we grew up, there was no social media like Facebook or WhatsApp or whatever. … So we'd have more time together, to play together, do a lot of stuff together. But actually now it's different because people are too much focused on the phone. … That's one of the things that's making things get worse also, because before, if we are here, there's no phone, we're just set out like this, we have to say something. We used to say something, either say or talk about stories, or just talk about something. But now … there's no more of that, everybody's just on the phone.

Whether this is an empirically verifiable truth or not, reflects an awareness that changes are occurring, particularly due to the internet, and that stability cannot be assumed. Hypothetical Loma speakers who behave as Robert describes may not necessarily speak less Loma at home; however, as they are increasingly exposed to online spaces dominated by written French, the significance of French is likely to rise considerably. Moreover, the internet brings language use in cities closer to language use in rural areas by connecting people across geographic distances. Consider the content that a mobile phone user in Guinea would be likely to consume on social media—it seems very likely to be heavily influenced by media from urban areas. It therefore raises into question the claim about contexts being separate and that urban changes will leave rural and small-city dynamics untouched.

In other words, there is a significant shift occurring in the linguistic ecology, with the relative size of domains changing dramatically due to the rise of the internet. Especially prominent in this, as this study's attention to modality shows, is that the internet is bringing written language rising dramatically along with it, introducing it to new domains that previously did not support it. After all, the internet is not just one domain of language use, but supports a wide range of social contexts, from ones that seem to parallel "publics" or "friend groups" to ones that closely mirror home environments. Across the board, though, even despite the presence of audio messages, much of the internet remains predominantly text-based. As a result, new domains are forming with combinations of characteristics that did not previously exist—particularly spaces that are informal but written (McCulloch 2019; Seargeant & Tagg 2014). In these new domains, then, decisions have to be made about what language to use. For instance, does a friends group chat of Loma speakers write to each

other in Loma because it is the language they would use if speaking to each other orally in that social context, or French because it is the language they would use if engaging in another kind of writing, which is typically more formal? Currently, because French writing is perceived as "safer" and "easier" for those who are online, and receives little ideological opposition, the fact that this sort new domain is a written one is prevailing over the fact that it is an informal in shaping language choice. This situation does mean, though, that Guinean internet users may find themselves, for example, writing French in spaces like family group chats even if their family does not have any particular affinity for French.

Given the significant consequences of this issue, it is essential to remain attentive to what happens in this new collision point. My study of Loma has shown that at present, most internet users in a country like Guinea are still elites who are comfortable enough in both local languages and the official language that the stakes in the choice of which to use in the informal-writing domains of the internet are quite low. But what will happen when non-urban, non-elites finally end up on the internet en masse, which is bound to start happening soon? An optimistic view would be that, if the internet expands faster than urbanization, as rural people come online, they may have less reason to use French and may find ways to extend even smaller local languages like Loma into the written domains to parallel how they use it in speech. Encouraging evidence for this possibility comes from Lexander (2011: 432)'s work on Senegal, who documents cases in Senegal where older adults with limited proficiency in French nonetheless engaged in SMS communication by reading and writing in Pulaar. A more pessimistic outlook, though, would caution that the increasing necessity of accessing the internet may apply even greater pressure on non-elite speakers to acquire written proficiency in French and acculturate to using it so they can interact with the spaces that already exist—or that, for those who do not do so, they will remain excluded from the internet for even longer due to their lack of knowledge of French.

Regardless of which trajectory ultimately unfolds, we cannot afford to assume that digital integration will naturally support language maintenance. It is insufficiently cautious to presume that the internet constitutes "another sphere where the putatively endangered languages can be used, as long as some graphic system has

been developed for them and their users can access the new technology" (Mufwene & Vigouroux 2008: 15). This raises a pressing question: What should be done if we aim to support the continued vitality of a language like Loma—let alone an African language that is already demonstrably endangered? If we accept that the internet, and by extension the written modality, is critical to the future of language vitality in increasingly digital societies, then it becomes necessary to develop concrete strategies for enabling a target language to be used online. (This need not necessarily imply universal use, but rather ensuring its presence in digital contexts that align with existing patterns of spoken use—such as those analogous to the home.) What, then, might such a strategy entail?

One relatively straightforward intervention would be to expand support for oral modalities of communication online. For instance, platforms like Facebook could implement features that allow users to post audio messages in comment threads. Such functionality could make digital spaces more accessible to users who are not literate in French, thereby reducing linguistic barriers to participation. However, this represents only a partial solution; it does not address the challenges posed by the dominance of written modalities, which continue to be pervasive across most internet platforms.

As we have seen, in domains of multilingual ecologies where language choice carries low salience or markedness, such as writing among Loma speakers, individuals tend to rapidly move to accommodate to the least common denominator. This dynamic makes it especially important to create spaces in which everyone can be assumed to be confident in write the target language. Merely providing technological affordances or making resources available is unlikely to suffice.[1] Broadly speaking, there appear to be two viable pathways by which a "local" language could achieve stable usage online. The first is if that language can assume the social role that French currently plays in the Guinean context: namely, functioning as a non-ethnic language of the urban educated class, presumed to be widely known and broadly acceptable across group boundaries. In practice, this possibility is limited to only a

[1]However, there were several instances where I found that Facebook had hidden comments in written Loma as "irrelevant" (presumably tagging them as spam)—it would be nice if this issue were addressed!

few languages—perhaps one per country. A number of such cases exist in Africa, including Wolof in Senegal and Lingala in the Congo, where languages that are not formally taught in schools have nonetheless gained traction in online written communication due to their association with modernity and urban youth culture (McLaughlin 2008; Bokamba 2008, 2019). Crucially, in these cases, youth prestige rather than official schooling has driven expansion into the written modality. However, in Guinea, despite the growing use of Susu as a lingua franca in Conakry, no language has yet achieved the fully de-ethnicized, cosmopolitan, nationally integrative status necessary to rival French in this role. As discussed in chapter 6, this is precisely why French has managed to retain its role online: it remains the only language in the ecology that is not strongly associated with a particular ethnic identity.

Practically speaking, therefore, no Guinean local language is large enough to become widely used on the internet in this way at present, and neither is that pathway particularly viable for Loma, a minority language that will certainly never become a default national language of broader interethnic communication. To overcome the barrier of convenience—if the goal is to increase the use of written Loma—formal education is likely the only viable solution. Schooling in Loma literacy would enable speakers to assume, at least in certain contexts, that those around them can read and write in the language, potentially even with greater ease than in French. Of course, though, local-language schooling comes with its own problems—in many cases, the very same ones raised against the national language policies of Guinea's socialist regime fifty years ago. Lüpke (2015: 77) expresses skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of such policies, arguing that:

> ...it is entirely unfeasible, in the linguistically heterogeneous communities that prevail, to invest in the development of literacy and educational materials in local and minority languages. Such an attempt would not only be extremely divisive and exclude many of their inhabitants, it would also be beyond the resources available for education in the multilingual African states.

Ultimately, the key takeaway is that no single approach to language revitalization or maintenance—particularly in complex ecological contexts such as those found in Guinea and across much of Africa—can serve as a universally appropriate solution. Speakers' motivations and interests are often multifaceted and even contradic-

tory. As the Loma case illustrates, for instance, those who express strong pride in the language—typically interpreted as support for its wider use—are the same individuals who, for reasons of convenience, choose not to use it in practice. This complexity underscores the need to examine language use within the context of a broader sociolinguistic ecology rather than focusing narrowly on individual languages in isolation. Only through attentiveness to local dynamics, including careful listening and contextualized understanding of speakers' own beliefs about language, can efforts toward language vitality hope to be both meaningful and enduring.

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