



Pidgin English as a Social Cement for *Le vivre Ensemble* in Cameroon since Reunification

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ABSTRACT

Language is the most crucial element for nationhood. The Cameroon nation with about 250 indigenous languages, with French and English as official languages has been sustained since the 1961 reunification of the Southern Cameroons and La République du Cameroun by Pidgin English. Pidgin is spoken by almost all Cameroonians. This has been so despite the unofficial status of the language and the scorn and disdain with which many "educated" Cameroonians treat the language. Using primary and secondary sources, this paper attempts a historical survey of the evolution of the language with emphasis on its role as a unifier or social cement between the many linguistic communities in Cameroon and especially its promotion of *le vivre ensemble* between Francophones and Anglophones in Cameroon.

Keywords: Cameroon, Pidgin English, National Unity, *Le vivre Ensemble*

Résumé: La langue est un élément fondamental d'une nation. Le Cameroun avec plus de 250 langues locales et ayant le français et l'anglais comme langues officielles a été soutenu par le pidgin depuis la réunification de 1961. Ceci a été le cas malgré le mépris dont cette langue a subi parmi les intellectuels et le fait que cette langue n'a ni le statut ni la codification. Se basant sur des sources primaires et secondaires, cette étude présente une évolution historique du pidgin avec l'emphase sur son rôle d'unificateur ou de lien social. Ce lien est celui de beaucoup de communautés linguistiques au Cameroun et qui spécifiquement promeut le "vivre ensemble" entre les Francophones et les Anglophones.

Mots Clés: Le Cameroun, Le pidgin, l'unité nationale, le "vivre ensemble"

1. INTRODUCTION

Nation building and *le vivre ensemble* in Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa after independence was a hideous task. This was not only because of the multi ethnic and multilingual character of the country but much more because of the triple colonial heritage and the adoption of the English and French cultures and languages as national languages at independence. The Germans who annexed Cameroon in July 1884 were forced out of the territory by an Anglo-French force during the First World War. This was followed by the partition of the protectorate in 1916 with France gaining four-fifth and Britain one-fifth. The partition was endorsed by the League of Nations few years later in 1922 and the two powers introduced their different colonial policies in their respective portions.

The Cameroon people were therefore placed under different linguistic, administrative, judiciary and political influences. This new episode retarded the emergence of what could have become a Cameroon nation from the German culture and boundaries. Worse still in 1922, Britain further partitioned British Cameroons into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. Cameroon therefore evolved as three distinct administrative and political entities between 1922 and 1961 as Mandate territories of the League of Nations and later Trust territories of the United Nations. The two British territories were part of West Africa while the French administered territory was part of Equatorial Africa. During this period, zonal, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences were

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accentuated by the colonial powers or administering authorities and by contacts with the different peoples of the two geographical zones of Africa (West and Equatorial Africa).

In February 1961 the British Southern Cameroons voted in a United Nations organised Plebiscite to gain independence with the French administered Cameroon which had gained independence in January 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon. On October 1, 1961 the Federal Republic of Cameroon was born following the reunification of British Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon (Nfi,2014). The reunification of Cameroon was expected to serve as an example for African Unity and convince sceptics that French and British cultures could cohabit in Africa. Unfortunately this was not the case. The Federation was abolished in 1972 and in 1984, the name of the country was changed from the United Republic of Cameroon adopted with the 1972 constitutional reform to the Republic of Cameroon, the name the French administered territory adopted at independence in 1960. These reforms, bad governance, Biya's prolonged stay in power since 1982, social distress, Anglophone marginalisation etc provoked the Anglophone crisis. The crisis became violent and bloody from November 2016 when Anglophone Lawyers and Teachers protested against the francophonisation of the judiciary and education systems in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon, the North West and South West Regions.

With the crisis, the unity of the nation was questioned and *le vivre ensemble* threatened more than ever before. The political stability and social cohesion long enjoyed by Cameroon gave way to chaos, ghost towns, assassinations and gun battles between the regular army and separatist fighters called "Amba" boys. Pidgin English which had contributed to the calm and stability and peaceful co-existence between Anglophones and Francophones since 1961 was unfortunately ignored by policy makers and even scholars. This study brings out the historical importance of the language and argue that it was this language that united Cameroonians whenever other issues divided them. The encouragement and popular use of Pidgin reduced if not erased in some areas the geophysical and psychological boundaries of *Francophonism* and *Anglophonism*.

11. History of the Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE)

The CPE started along the coast of Cameroon in the last quarter of the 15th century when Portuguese sailors and traders came in contact with the Duala and Bimbia communities. The contact was forced to produce a new language, a blend of Portuguese and some local words because the Europeans could not understand the numerous indigenous languages. So many Portuguese words were borrowed and adulterated by the new language, Pidgin. Words like 'mimbo' (drink), Pikin from Portuguese 'Piqueno' (child) and 'Palaver' from Portuguese Palava (trouble) are still common CPE words today.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade years (1400-1800) contributed in increasing the vocabulary and influence of the language as Spanish, Dutch, German and English words were borrowed by the speakers of pidgin. In 1844, the Baptist Missionaries arrived Fernando Po and set up mission stations in Duala and Bimbia. They introduced formal education as a method of evangelisation and consequently learned pidgin. The slave Trade, Legitimate Trade, Missionary works and the presence of European traders/officers of the British Naval Squadron along the coast of Cameroon before 1884 led to the birth of pidgin as these foreigners attempted to interact with the indigenes.

When the Germans annexed Cameroon in July 1884, the official policy was the eradication of English Language and all its varieties. The teaching of English language was banned in all schools in favour of German (Rudin, 1931, p.107). Unfortunately for the Germans, CPE survived in trade centres, ports, mission stations and plantations where the indigenous traders, converts and forced labourers converged from the hinterlands speaking different languages. The construction of roads like the Yaounde-Kribi road and railways like the Nkongsamba-Bonaberi and the Douala-Yaounde rail lines served as fertile ground for the growth and development of CPE given that these work sites brought together people from diversified ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Kouega,2007,p.6) The arrival of some newly freed slaves in Victoria and in the German plantations from Fernando Po, Liberia and Sierra Leone increased the use of Pidgin along the coast of Cameroon (Ekanjume-Hongo,2016,p.156). Pidgin was more used than German given that those who were introduced to the German Language were mostly the pupils and the few Cameroonians who benefited from German scholarships to study in Germany. CPE therefore served as a social cement in German Kamerun more than the official language and despite the ban.

During the First World War (1914-1919), Germany was defeated and sent out of Cameroon. The war was largely fought by British, Nigerian and other West African soldiers who used Pidgin to interact with the people during the wartime years (Nfi, 2017). For this reason, Pidgin survived even in the territory that was to become French Cameroon. When the war ended, Britain and France divided Cameroon into two unequal territories. British Cameroon had English as the language of education and administration while French Cameroon had French as the language of education and administration. In both British and French Cameroons, the use of German was banned as part of the de-Germanisation of Cameroon (Lang, 2017,p.124). This favoured the spread of CPE

Although English and French languages and the different cultures divided Cameroonians, CPE continued to unite them. It was the language used whenever people from diverse background came together. This was seen in the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) plantations at the coast of British Cameroons where workers from Nigeria, French Cameroons and the British Southern Cameroons were employed by the colonial planters. Here in the plantations, Pidgin English developed new varieties with the introduction of Igbo, Bamileke, Bassa and Ewondo words and accents.

In the Mungo District in French Cameroon where workers came from both sectors of Cameroon and along the Anglo-French borders from Dschang to Douala, Pidgin became a common medium of communication widely used by divided ethnic groups for trade and socio-cultural intercourse. About 70 percent of the people from Dschang to Douala in French Cameroon used Pidgin effectively (Nzume, 2004, p.116). Long distance trade between Nkongsamba and Bamenda or Kumba continued in pidgin. Trade between Douala/Victoria and Port Harcourt/Calabar remained significant and in pidgin. This was also promoted by a colony of Nigerians in Douala who dominated *marché* Lagos.

The missionaries in French Cameroon were not left out in the use of Pidgin for evangelisation. Some missionaries in French Cameroons continued with evangelisation in pidgin. It should be recalled that the partition line divided some Mission Stations from their out stations but the missionaries continued to visit these out stations which were politically out of their sphere of evangelisation. For example, the Basel Mission in British Cameroon continued to depend on the pastors in the French territory until 1925 when the British authorities lifted the restriction on, and allowed the German Basel to go back to their missions stations in the Southern Cameroons (Nzume, 2004,p.206). Christians and Catechumens of Bakossi Land under Pius Epie continued to trek to Dschang or Douala to pass their confession or be baptised by French clergy (Nfi, 2017, p.1121).

The Catholics more than any other group promoted the use of Pidgin for evangelisation in French Cameroon. It was even in French Cameroon that Rev. Father Joseph Plisoneau of the Nkongsamba Diocese, 1920-1930 wrote the first Pidgin English series of the Gospel books with commentaries, a catechism and a bible history book. At one time in Dschang, the use of Pidgin English by the Catholic clergy in the churches developed to such an extent that the French Colonial authorities intervened to save the French Language. In a sternly worded letter the French Governor warned the *Vicaire Apostolique de Dschang* to stop the use of Pidgin at the detriment of French (Nfi,2017,p.1122) Generally therefore indigenous traders, converts and workers resisted the artificial Anglo-French boundary as cross border movements and socio-cultural intercourse increased with pidgin as their vehicle of communication.

It was from this resistance to the borders and the Anglo-French balkanisation of Cameroon that the idea of reunification was initiated by French Cameroonians settled in the British Cameroons. Pro-reunification meetings in Kumba in 1951, 1952 and 1958 that had participants from both Cameroons were all in pidgin. Foncha's Plebiscite campaign speeches and declarations in 1959 and 1960 in Kumba, Douala, Loum, Nkongsamba, Dschang, Santa and Bamenda were all in pidgin. Pidgin therefore united and socially cemented the relationship between a people divided by the Anglo-French cultures, languages and borders. It was on this foundation that the Cameroon 'nation' was built in 1961 when the two Cameroons reunited at independence to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

111. CPE, Nation Building and *le Vivre Ensemble* Since 1961

The birth of the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961 following the reunification of the British Southern Cameroons and French administered Cameroon already independent as the Republic of Cameroon gave CPE fresh impetus. The increase in the movement of people and volume of trade between West and East Cameroon promoted the use of CPE and brought to it influences from French

Language and other local languages in East Cameroon. Trade and population/labour movements in the 1960s led to the rise of heterogeneous settlements in both rural and urban areas with CPE as the mother tongue. This was the case with New Bell in Douala, Kemkem in the West Region, Makenene in the Centre Region and many others.

In 1972 the political elite in West Cameroon made use of Pidgin English as a unifying language when they went out to campaign for a massive vote in favour of a unitary state. Foncha, Muna, Jua and others toured the territory convincing the electorate in Pidgin to accept Ahidjo's proposed unitary state. The 1970s was also a decade of Pidgin English because a popular Nigerian musician of Cameroon origin Prince Nico Mbarga used Pidgin to pass a series of social messages in songs like "Sweet Mother", "Aki Special", "Family Movement" and others. His music was consumed all over Cameroon because of the language used². In fact Mbarga made a great impact in West and Central Africa with his Pidgin as both Francophones and Anglophones identified with his music. He was the pride of all Cameroonians from 1975 to 1981 when he dominated the music scene

The most noticeable development or integrative use of the CPE came in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the economic crisis and reintroduction of multiparty democracy when popular social and political figures used the CPE to mobilise the masses or win sympathy for their courses across the linguistic divide. This was the case with the popular musician Lapiro de Mbanga *alias Ndinga man*. He did not only introduce new words into the CPE (like *Ndinga* meaning guitar) he used it to reawaken the conscience of the people, condemn vices like corruption and prostitution and castigate the egoism, favouritism and tribalism that characterised the ruling CPDM oligarchy. His use of CPE in songs like "Mimba We", "Na Foua", "Kop Nie", "Na Wou Go Pay" and "Na You" was able to educate the masses across the natural and official linguistic divide and teach them to cope with changing times in their society and to resist bad leadership (Toh, 201, p.254). In fact CPE gained a new momentum in the 1980s with the popularity of the songs of Lapiro de Mbanga

Lapiro de Mbanga's version of the CPE became very fashionable amongst the youths especially in the motor parks, train stations, markets and drinking spots. Many Cameroonians identified with Lapiro and their nation Cameroon regardless of the linguistic divide. With the unifying nature of Lapiro's Pidgin songs, many other musicians copied his example and CPE became the national music language. This was the case with Petty Pays, Elchik Echedong, Prince Afoa Kom, Prince Eyango, Moni Bile. Regardless of the musical genre (Makossa, Bend Sin, Njang, Bekutsi etc), Pidgin united the entire nation behind these artists. CPE was therefore used by musicians because it was a national emblem (Nguefak, 2013, p.86)

The political class did not remain indifferent to the use of CPE. With the social distress and economic crisis that ravaged especially the urban centres, John Fru Ndi founder of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) decided to use CPE as his vehicle of communication as he addressed crowds of Cameroonians in the major towns in the 1990s. His party the SDF was even given a pidgin name "Suffer Don Finish" meaning the end of distress and sufferings (Krieger, 2008, p.5). There is no doubt that the use of CPE contributed significantly to the popularity and nationwide support for Fru Ndi and his party in the 1990s. In 1992 he was second in the official results of the presidential elections and his votes were from all the ten provinces of Cameroon.³ Given the importance of CPE in political propaganda, the SDF decided to use the language during all its audio-visual media campaigns and political party slots at the Cameroon National Television (CRTV). This example was copied by many other political parties as the political competitions became intense with frequent legislative and presidential elections.

With the liberty laws of 1990, many private audio-visual media also moved rapidly in to broadcasting in CPE in order to capture listeners and viewers who for long were only used to the state owned CRTV. Spectrum Television (STV), Equinox Television and Radio, Canal 2 International Television and many other televisions and radio stations started broadcasting programs in CPE in the 1990s.

² Nico Mbarga was born in Nigeria the 1st of January 1950 of a Nigerian mother and a Cameroonian father. He escaped to Cameroon during the Nigerian Civil War and learned music. He is renowned for his hit song "sweet mother" which is also called "African anthem" as it was voted Africa's favourite song by BBC readers and listeners in 2004. Mbarga sold over 13 million copies of this song. He died on the 24th of June 1997 as one of Africa's most influential performers

³ According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) an American NGO that observed the elections, Fru Ndi won the elections but the incumbent Paul Biya was declared winner.

Today News broadcast in CPE in these television and radio stations are amongst the most popular audio-visual programs in Cameroon. This indicates the accessibility of CPE and its role as a federating language

Reforms in the education sector especially from 1992 also favoured the emergence of CPE as a factor of unity and *le vivre ensemble*. There was the proliferation of bilingual primary and secondary schools that brought together pupils and students from many ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds. At the level of the university, the creation of Anglo-Saxon type universities in Buea in 1992 and Bamenda in 2010 and the multiplication of professional or vocational schools all over the country increase contact amongst the youth. This was more so because the Francophone community became more interested in the Anglophone subsystem of education. Many Francophone parents therefore send their children to these English medium schools (Atechi, 2015, p.25). The rush for English medium schools in Douala, Yaounde, Buea, Bamenda, Garoua, Maroua, Bafoussam and other towns did not only lead to the emergence of what Atechi (2015) calls Cameroon Francophone English. The contact between students from diverse linguistic backgrounds led to the emergence of a new variety of CPE. The schools in the urban centres and the universities therefore became save heavens for a variety of CPE which linguists have called *Camfranglais*⁴. The students spoke a language that was a mixture of some Cameroon languages, French and English in and out of the campuses thereby ensuring unity and *le vivre ensemble* despite the official linguistic divide. In fact *Camfranglais* became a new language for a Cameroon divided by linguistic differences and multiparty politics (Neba, 2007).

It should be mentioned here that this campus variety of CPE despite its popularity was forbidden by the official regulations in the schools and universities. In most of the campuses there were bill boards and notices emphasising the importance of either English or French as languages of success and prosperity. This could be seen in the University of Buea which was considered as a save heaven for Standard English. Here, anti-Pidgin bills read as follows "succeed at university by avoiding Pidgin on Campus", "Pidgin is like AIDS-Shun it", "English is the password not Pidgin", "Commonwealth speak English not Pidgin," and "If you speak Pidgin you will write Pidgin" (Tande, 2004) The authors of the anti-Pidgin bills claim that the use of Pidgin by pupils and students interferes with their acquisition of English, the language that guarantees upward social mobility. This opinion ignored the relevance of CPE as a social cement necessary for unity and *le vivre ensemble* given that any claim to an identity is incomplete if it has no language through which it is manifested.

Apart from schools and universities, *Camfranglais* was also used by musicians to reach the youthful population. This was the case with those involved in street music or rap. In 2014 Koppo composed a song "Si tu vois ma go" which became very popular with both Anglophone and Francophone youths because of his perfect blend of French, English and Pidgin in the song. The rallying character of this language convinced some companies especially mobile telephone companies like MTN and ORANGE Cameroon to use *Camfranglais* to advertise their products. Brewery companies like *Les Brasserie du Cameroun* and *Union Camerounaise de Brasserie* also made quick promotions of their new products like "Mayang", "Kadji Beer" through the use of adverts in CPE. This was at the time of liberalisation, competition and boom in the telecommunication and other sectors of the economy. *Camfranglais* therefore continued to unite Cameroonians despite their more than 250 local languages and the official use of English and French.

The Prime Minister of Cameroon Joseph Dione Ngute appointed in February 2019 seem to have understood the need for the use of CPE as a family or unifying language when he visited Bamenda and Buea in June 2019. Appointed to secure a peaceful solution to the Anglophone crisis, his message to the populations could be summarised in this his Pidgin phrase "*Papa Biya don send me say make i can talk say dan dialogue weeh all man di askam so igo be*" which means I have been sent by Biya to confirm the holding of an inclusive dialogue. He used the language understood by all to talk of an upcoming inclusive dialogue seen by many as the road to peace. The political class and observers of the political scene accepted that unlike his predecessor Philomom Yang who distanced himself from the commoners and who hardly use the CPE, Dione Ngute was the man of the moments. Like in the

⁴ The birth of this language could be traced back to the 1970s with the Unitary State and later with the Music of Lapiro de Mbanga but it gained prominence in schools in the 1990s.

1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the use of CPE greatly contributed in reducing the divide between the minority-majority or oppressor-oppressed hitherto created by the linguistic divide⁵.

1V. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that linguistic identity is a prerequisite for cultural/national identity and political stability. With 250 national languages and English and French as Official languages, Cameroon needed a language that had no borders. As Neba et al (2006) have rightly put it, CPE has not been a curse but a blessing to Cameroon as it brought many Cameroonians under one umbrella language. The CPE is amongst the languages of wider communication in five out of the ten regions of Cameroon. The Francophone-Anglophone divide fashioned on English and French languages were overcome in the plantations, worship houses, trade centres and public works sites in the 1930s and 1940s because of the proliferation of CPE. Foncha's reunification messages West and East of the Mungo in the 1950s yielded the desired fruits because of his use of CPE. In the 1980s and 1990s musicians and political actors attracted sympathy and followers because they united the divided people through the use of CPE. It can therefore be concluded that CPE has been the major factor of unity in Cameroon since 1961 despite its unofficial status and the disdain with which practitioners and promoters of the official languages treat it. It is therefore time for the promotion, standardisation, codification and official recognition of CPE.

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⁵ During the violent days of the Anglophone crisis 2017-2019, French language was not welcomed in the two Anglophone Regions. It was seen as a "colonial" language.

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