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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 24(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.5070/F7241016684

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THE ABSENCE OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: A CASE STUDY OF CAMEROON

Thierry Ngoufan Happi

Introduction

Cameroon, a central African nation just slightly to the north of the equator, borders Nigeria, Chad, CAR, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and has a vast western coastline on the Atlantic ocean. Cameroon is one of Africa's most intriguing countries. As many eminent authors have demonstrated, Cameroon is truly "Africa in miniature."¹ Geographically, it comprises very different regions; economically, it covers a broad mix of products and sectors; and ethnically, it includes an amazing number of groups living within a fairly small territory. In effect, within a very heterogeneous population of about 14.5 million persons, one can find almost 110 ethnic groups with more than 250 different Cameroonian languages.²

However, it is important to note that this ethnic and linguistic diversity, instead of being complimentary to Cameroon's economic and cultural development, is in fact a disturbing factor. One immediate consequence is the absence of Cameroonian languages in the educational system as well as of a national language spoken throughout the country, regardless of ethnic origin, such as Ewe in Togo and Ghana, Fon in Benin, Sango in CAR, Lingala in Congo and Zaire, Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania etc.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze some problems related to the absence of a national language in Cameroon. An analysis of the difficulties of teaching Cameroonian languages in schools and a review of possible solutions will precede an overview of the characteristics of the newly created and already most popular Cameroonian language, the "Camfranglais."

The Absence of Cameroonian Languages in National Education

The goal of education generally speaking is to prepare youth to

¹ See DeLancey, M. and M. Mbella, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon* 2nd edition, (London: Scarecrow Press, 1990) p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3

live in a broad community as informed citizens. During colonization³ by the French and British, education had a goal which was closely related to the general policy of the Whites as stated by Hazoume:

[I]nstruire les indigènes est assurément notre devoir... mais ce devoir fondamental s'accorde de surcroît avec nos intérêts économiques, administratifs, militaires et politiques les plus évidents....⁴

(It is our duty to teach the natives...but this important mission must be carried out in conjunction with our most critical economic, administrative, military and political interests....)

After Independence, the new objective of many African countries was to make education accessible to all members of the population. In order to achieve this goal, the use of national languages seemed appropriate because colonial languages were spoken by only a small minority, living primarily in segregated urban areas. Moreover, these independent African countries opted for a policy of rehabilitation of national languages in a unique official educational policy. Advocates believed that citizens could achieve better education in their native tongues. To this end, many national and international meetings devoted to the revivalism of African languages and culture via education were organized and their advice considered by policy-makers. However, only a few African countries have implemented these resolutions. Tanzania, whose national language is Swahili, is the prime example.

Cameroon has never moved beyond the writing of resolutions. The difficulty in implementing these resolutions lies in the complexity of political, economical, pedagogical and psycho-sociological dimensions. I will discuss these aspects following a review of barriers

³ Cameroon was not really a French/British colony. These two countries inherited this territory after Germany lost World War II.

⁴ See Hazoume "Afrique: un avenir en sursis" in *Unesco: Enseignement et Langue Maternelle en Afrique Occidentale* (Paris: Unesco, 1976) pp. 37-45.

to the introduction of national languages in education and a discussion of possible solutions.

Barriers to the Introduction of Cameroonian Languages in National Education

During the colonial period, seven Cameroonian languages were developed under a remarkable educational program promoted by European missionaries. The following languages were included: Duala, Mungaka, Bamun, Bulu, Ewondo, Bassa, and Bagangte. They were used in schools, and bibles were translated into those languages and used in churches. However, the French policy of assimilation initiated the first phase of decline in this development as French was imposed in schools, government offices, churches, etc. Nevertheless, shortly after independence, a second phase promoting local languages was witnessed with the development of new programs in Dschang (language of west Cameroon) and the Bamileke FE'EFE'E.⁵ A newspaper and a dictionary have been developed in FE'EFE'E, making it the only Cameroonian language thus documented. It is important to note that the FE'EFE'E language has survived over time. The policy promoting its use is called NUFU (which means news) and it currently serves as a model to similar programs. However, this second reviving phase also went into decline in 1975 with the elimination of Cameroonian languages from high schools such as College Liberman of Douala and College de la Retraite of Yaounde, which were considered the vehicles that popularized Cameroonian languages through education. Secondly, during the academic year 1976-77, a political decision was taken to stop all programs including or using Cameroonian languages in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics at the University of Yaounde. Today, only a very few number of schools have Cameroonian languages in their educational programs, once again, these are predominately religious schools. Even in rural areas, academic programs emphasize the study of French and English. This situation was the result of an absence of official support,

⁵ This is one of the most developed education programs in a native language in Cameroon. Unfortunately, it did not receive political support or interest, and therefore experienced the same misadventure as the others.

a lack of financial means, an absence of interest on the part of the general population, as well as technical and pedagogical barriers.

Absence of Official Support

Both religious and private schools have made efforts to promote the study of Cameroonian languages. Unfortunately the implementation of such programs did not lead to the creation of official examinations in these languages, and this fact alone is enough to discourage both students and teachers who might be interested in learning or teaching national languages.

Thus far, the governmental officials of Cameroon have shown no interest in supporting private projects to promote national languages, nor do they provide public schools with such an opportunity. Therefore, it is not surprising that research and propositions from the 1970s have not yet been implemented.

It appears clear from this point that the first problem faced by the development of Cameroonian languages in education is the lack of political will. At the political level there is no favorable atmosphere to the development of national languages, in contrast to French and English. Perhaps, another cause of this deficiency is the so-called "geopolitics" explanation provided by the Cameroonian government. In effect, for many years Cameroon was involved in a policy of ethnic and regional balance, a sort of Affirmative Action, which created difficulties in choosing which language out of the 250 would be taught. However, as Tadadjeu states, the fear that the study of national languages would lead to a blooming of "micro-nationalism" based on ethnic and linguistic affinities, seems to be the real reason that national languages were avoided.⁶

Lack of Financial Means

Cameroonian authorities believed that the study of national languages would weigh heavily on the State budget. The training of qualified instructors, as well as the development of adequate resource materials, were considered expensive ventures which the country could not afford. Parents thought this policy would engender more school

⁶ See Tadadjeu, M. & E. Sadembouo (1978), *Propositions d'un Alphabet General des Langues Camerounaises*. ONAREST, Etudes et Documents, no 15.

expenses when, at the same time, their standard of living was decreasing.

The Lack of Cameroonian Interest

Speaking French, English, Spanish or German⁷ has always been considered by Cameroonians as a source of pride. Asking them to study their own national languages would therefore be perceived as obliging them to lower themselves. I can remember an anecdote when I was a high school student some years ago. If someone from the same village or ethnic group approached me, I would first greet him in French as fast as possible, otherwise he would greet me in our native language (FE'EFE'E) which, at that time, was considered shameful.

On the other hand, parents' reservation about supporting this new policy is principally based on the fact that, according to them, national languages aren't yet able to express concepts in science, history, or in other words, the real concepts of "civilization." These same parents are frustrated because they believe that a new school including or using national languages is prone to develop disparities among children from "privileged" strata of the Cameroonian society (who can be sent for study abroad), and children from "ordinary" families.

Technical and Pedagogical Problems

Technical and pedagogical barriers to teaching national languages were cited for the first time in the 1970s and are still without any solutions. Our languages are not prepared to be taught in schools, no sufficient curriculum has been developed, and very few of these languages are written and/or have an adequate alphabet. In light of these barriers to the use of Cameroonian languages in national education, I will now focus on some consequences of the lack of national languages.

Consequences of the Absence of Cameroonian Languages in Education

A critical consequence of the lack of a national Cameroonian language in education is that, unlike many African countries, there exists no language spoken by anyone, anywhere, regardless of their

⁷ These four languages are officially taught in Cameroon schools as of 7th grade.

ethnic origin. Other consequences can be observed at the cultural, economic, and political levels.

Cultural Consequences

Cameroon's music and musicians were among the very first African artists to cross the border of the continent. But today, in my opinion, their popularity is decreasing, because their music was modernized.⁸ Many great names of Cameroon's music, such as Jean Bikoko Aladin and Salle John⁹ of the past generation, were not able to read and speak in French or English, but their music was appreciated worldwide. Nowadays, because the young generation cannot speak their native languages they are obliged to copy either from French, English, or some African languages say Lingala (Congo and Zaire).

With respect to theater, the percentage of plays written in national languages is very low in Cameroon, in contrast to what is being done in Togo, Senegal, Benin, etc. Even in rural areas and villages people prefer watching films or attempting theater in French or in English.

In contrast to countries such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, where news is given in several of each country's national languages, Cameroon does not have any information program on TV, radio, or newspaper in a national language, only in French and English.

Consequences for the National Economy

To discuss this dimension, I will use examples from Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, etc. In effect, these countries make a lot of money every year because of "intellectual and cultural tourism." People coming from America, Europe, Australia, Asia and even some neighboring African countries to learn either Ewe (language) or Akpesse (very prestigious traditional dance in Ghana and Togo); Wolof (language) or Mbalax (dance in Senegal); Kiswahili (language in Kenya and Tanzania) etc. The fact that Cameroon has not instituted a policy of language development has had consequences on its cultural

⁸ With the introduction of modern materials and imitation of western popular music, African music is no longer "African" in terms of its originality.

⁹ Promoters of "Assiko" and "Ambassy Bey" respectively, two famous traditional and very popular music in Cameroon.

evolution as well, and thus the country's income of tourism has declined dramatically.

Political Consequences

In theory, modern politics requires the effective participation of populations. Now, in the case of Cameroon, when politicians are campaigning in their villages they address their people in French with help from a translator, or in English if the speaker is an Anglophone. It is important to point out the fact that in this particular case, the problem is critical in Francophone Cameroon because in Anglophone Cameroon anyone comprehends the orator, as long as he speaks Pidgin English. Nonetheless, in both cases, legislation, newspapers and other official documents are issued in French or in English. Therefore, it is evident that the masses are disconnected from the government and governance.

Review of Proposed Solutions

As previously stated, these problems are not new. Sixteen solutions have been proposed since the mid-1970s, but the government has done nothing to implement them. This may be one reason that researchers are not interested in conducting research on the issues of Cameroonian languages in education. However, I believe that there is still a lot to investigate, especially in the case of "Camfranglais." It seems to be excessive to produce new proposals while those dating back to the 1970s are still not implemented. Therefore I will begin first by reviewing some of the past propositions and their chances for success.

Proposed Solutions to the Reticence of Parents.

Botbadjock and Binam Bikoi proposed that the reticence of parents could be overcome with a heavy campaign of sensitization showing good examples of how national languages can be used to interpret "Civilization." In my opinion, this solution is too simple insofar as many campaigns of sensitization were organized before in Cameroon calling people to support a given motion, but nothing has changed so far. Moreover, because the Cameroonian government has control of all communication systems, (radio, TV and newspapers), Cameroonians are not interested in hearing news from their country,

since anyone can own cable TV with foreign channels, as well as foreign newspapers or radio. Because the money needed for these campaigns could be used to develop the first step in the national language program itself, I do not think this is a practical approach.

Proposed Solutions to Political Problems

Emile-Lesage Dalle, wrote in 1981:

...plutôt que de favoriser l'éclosion de micro-nationalismes, l'étude méthodique de nos Langues sera le terrain solide à partir duquel les diverses ethnies de notre pays se découvriront des raisons d'unité réelle....

(...rather than facilitating the rise of micro-nationalism, the study of our languages will be the foundation from which different ethnic groups of our country could better understand the reasons of a real unity....)

I argue that Cameroonian authorities of the 1970s and those of the 1990s as well, hide themselves behind this pretext of "micro-nationalism," in order to refuse both the introduction of our national languages in education and the officialization of a common language spoken by the majority of Cameroonian: the so-called "Camfranglais."

At this particular point I will like draw to attention to the fact that political leaders like Jerry J. Rawlings of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania have managed to use national languages in their respective countries, to consolidate both the unity of their people and the progress of their Economic Development.

It is therefore clear that the use of our national languages will be a supplementary factor in the development policy, because farmers could be instructed on modern farming techniques in their native languages instead of having a translator to do so.

Proposed Solutions to Economic Problems

All researchers and authors who worked on this topic have proposed that in order to pay for such projects the government should request financial aid from international organizations such as UNESCO,

UNICEF, UNDP, etc. Although I agree with them that these organizations could be supportive, I must express my reservations.

Cameroon, as well as many other African countries, has several budget allocations, such as that of the military, which, I believe, could be utilized towards the promotion of a national language in the country. If the government decides to cut down some of these allocations reserved to buy new expensive cars, organize expensive dinners, etc. and assign this part of the budget to the promotion of national languages, within a few years the shortfall could be recovered.

Proposed Solutions to Technical and Pedagogical Problems

If financial problems are solved, then there will be no more technical and pedagogical problems, because it will be taken care of. However, Tadadjeu's proposition regarding the choice of the languages to be taught appears to be interesting. He argues that in elementary schools, children will be taught three languages; two required (that is to say one's native language, one other Cameroonian language), and the third one will be chosen between French and English. This sounds good initially, because it could help for the common use of national languages. Then, at secondary school level, the system could be reorganized to permit anyone to learn and speak at least five national languages.

However, the problem of a common language spoken by anyone regardless of his ethnic origin is still pending, and this paper proposes that the newly created Cameroonian language; "Camfranglais" be officialized.

Camfranglais and Officialization

Camfranglais is a new mode of speech and language in contemporary Cameroonian society. Developed since the mid-1970s, Camfranglais has become even more popular in the late 1980s, and early 1990s. It is the direct consequence of both the country's bilingual heritage and the lack of a common language spoken by all. Camfranglais consists of a mixture of Cameroonian languages, French and English in the construction of words in day-to-day conversations. Some rumors said that the language was created by a group of Cameroonian students in France to communicate with each other when they are in the company of foreigners, because, in contrast to

Senegalese, Togolese, they do not have a common language. However, the new language was first of all predominant in the more heavily populated and urbanized regions of the country where people usually interact, for example in marketplaces, sport stadiums, etc. Today it is spoken everywhere, in cities, villages, buses, trains, streets, elementary, secondary, high schools and universities, even in some administrative offices of Douala and Yaounde.

Some music stars in the country, especially Lapiro de Mbanga (the pope of homeless), have utilized this new way of expression for their songs and gained national and international popularity and prominence. Meanwhile, despite the fact that Camfranglais is so widely spoken, its officialization still faces many problems.

Constraints on the Use of Camfranglais

The first problem faced by this language is that of its officialization. Since Camfranglais was originally spoken by the "underprivileged" people of the Cameroon society, and the so-called "high society," including Ministers, Directors, General Managers, University faculties, secondary and high schools teachers, expressed their disapproval to use what they consider as being a "street language", as the national language of the country, taught in schools. Secondly, Camfranglais is not too popular in northern Cameroon, where Hausa and Ffulde are well implemented. Thirdly, this language, even without the skepticism of Cameroonian authorities could not be used in education, because: it is not a conventional language, that is to say it has no alphabet, no vocabulary, in brief, it is not a formal language. In addition, it has many disparities and is spoken in different ways, by using different words, according to the location where it is spoken.

With this in mind, one can foresee how difficult it would be to bring together these disparities and institute a common national language, and to introduce it to in Cameroon's national education system. However, I remain optimistic that Camfranglais has the best chance for success, under the condition that the Cameroonian government encourages researchers to improve their study of this language and propose its conventional form including, grammar, and vocabulary for its future use in schools and administrations.

Conclusion

The issues of the problem of teaching Cameroonian languages in schools and the lack of a communicative language are complex as I tried to demonstrate in this paper, because it comprises many different aspects: cultural, political, financial, and psycho-sociologic.

I believe that the reform of the whole educational system, in order to introduce national languages, includes a certain number of constraints or exigencies which requires a sustainable and common action of all Cameroonian, both politicians from whom the initiatives should be raised, and the populations to whom these projects may concern.

With respect to a common language, I believe that the government should help those who are interested in conducting research on this topic to do so and propose an educational formula for Camfranglais. Such a policy is the best chance for the country to develop a common national language, so that everyone can use it to communicate.

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