

Multilingualism and the Choice of a Language for Anglophone Education in Cameroon

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This paper seeks to do three things: (1) examine the linguistic situation of Cameroon; (2) identify the language(s) used in education; and (3) discuss whether in the light of the social linguistic evidence, the current choice of language for education (English) is well motivated. The methodology employed is a socio-linguistic survey of some randomly selected urban centers in Cameroon for example, Buea, Bamenda, Kumba, etc.. The results suggest among other things: (1) that Cameroon is a highly multilingual country with over 280 home languages; and (2) that while English is the language for Anglophone education, Pidgin English is actually the predominant language and the first language for most Anglophones. Based on these findings, the author proposes Pidgin English as the choice language for early education in Anglophone Cameroon (the southwest and northwest regions). Pidgin English is the only language which expresses Cameroonian reality. It is spoken by more than 70% of the population. It is the only language that is not associated with a particular tribe, religion, or with a specific colonial government.

Keywords: multilingualism, Anglophone, Pidgin

Introduction

Richards, J. Platt, and H. Platt (1992) defined multilingualism as “the use of three or more languages by an individual or by a group of speakers such as the inhabitants of a particular region or nation” (p. 238). Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most multilingual areas of the world in terms of the ratio of population to languages.

Although Cameroon has been loosely referred to as a bilingual country, the reality is that Cameroonian bilingualism refers only to the use of two official languages, French and English. As a nation, Cameroon, like several African countries is actually multilingual.

The number of languages spoken in Cameroon is not known for certain. Several figures have been bandied about: Koenig, Chia, and Povey (1983, p. 23) suggested 123 mutually unintelligible languages. According to the linguistic atlas of Cameroon, there are 239 indigenous languages belonging to many totally different families (Chumbow & Bobda, 1996, p. 44). Lewis (2009) put the number of indigenous languages for Cameroon at 286. What such disparate figures demonstrate is that there are many languages in Cameroon, and the disadvantages of having such a diversity and multiplicity of languages within a single country are palpable.

Problems of Multilingualism

The first is that there is no unity. Like the biblical story of “The Tower of Babel”, when a country speaks with 200 or more different voices, mutual-understanding becomes extremely difficult. This has been a major cause of bitterness and suspicion among the different linguistic groups in the country, as it is very easy to misinterpret what the other person has said. It has also encouraged favouritism, nepotism, tribalism, and other social ills because many Cameroonians in position of influence—which positions they obtained largely because of their provenance, not merit—naturally tend to favor those who can speak their language and who usually come from the same ethnic group(s). This happens at the expense and to the annoyance of other competing linguistic groups.

Only about 10% of the population speaks English or French, the two official languages. Although PE (Pidgin English) has been very useful as a language of communication between persons who do not share the same language, the masses of our people, situated at over 70%, have no means of communicating with one another. Communication between the government and the people breaks down easily, thereby giving room to tribalists and others who have an axe to grind, to mislead the people. It inhibits the communication of new ideas and techniques from the government to the masses thereby slowing down the economic, political, social, and cultural development of the country. Innovation in agriculture, industry, and health, which would have helped the masses of the people to combat disease, ignorance, want obscurantism and superstition, are rendered impossible through the barriers created by the multiplicity of tongues in the country. Some researchers have even suggested a correlation between multilingualism and underdevelopment.

Above all, it makes the use of indigenous languages in Cameroon education difficult, as it is not possible to use all the languages spoken in the country, nor is it easy to decide which of them to choose and which to ignore without triggering civil war. Owing to our mutual suspicion and jealousy, no linguistic group would like to give up its own language in favour of another in the interest of the nation. Every linguistic group wants its own language to be chosen as the natural language, and if that is not done, then no other language must be chosen.

The government’s approach to the problem of linguistic multiplicity has been to settle for foreign languages (French and English in that order). Ironically, the choice of French and English has not been without its problems, not least the perennial suspicion between francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians.

The Choice of a Language for Anglophone Education

Cameroon government policy prescribes English as the language for Anglophone education. The choice of English is well motivated. English is one of the official languages per the constitution. English is the language of science and technology. It is a passport to educational advancement and prestigious employment. It is the language of commerce, law administration, and a means of national and international communication. English at the end of the 20th century is more widely scattered, more widely spoken and written than any other language has ever been. It has become the language of the planet, the first truly global language surpassed, in numbers though not in distribution only by the speakers of the many varieties of Chinese. Three-quarters of the world’s mails and their telexes, SMSs (short message services), and cables are in English. English is the language of technology from the Silicon Valley to Shanghai. English is the language of technology from the Silicon Valley to Shanghai.

English is the medium for 80% of the information stored in the world's computers. Nearly half of all business deals are conducted in English. It is the language of sport and glamour. The official language of the Olympics and the Miss Universe competition. English is the official voice of the air, of the sea, and of Christianity. It is the ecumenical language of the world council of churches. Five of the largest broadcasting companies in the world (CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), NBC (National Broadcasting Company), ABC (American Broadcasting Company), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), and CNN (Cable News Network)) are English. English has a few rivals, but no equals. Neither Spanish nor Arabic, both international languages, has the global sway of English. Germany, Japan, and China recently have, in matching the commercial and industrial vigour of the United States, achieved the commercial precondition of language power, but their languages have also been invaded by English.

English is even used by three or four hundred million people for whom it is not a native language. It has become a second language in countries as diverse as India, Kenya, Nigeria and of course, Cameroon. In these countries, English is a vital alternative language, often unifying huge territories and diverse populations.

For the above reasons and more, English should be taught and learnt in our schools.

However, the importance of English as a global language should not blind us to sound pedagogic and linguistic policy: The best medium for teaching children at the initial stages of their education is their mother tongue, and it is after a firm linguistic foundation has been laid in it that there should be a change to the use of English as a medium of instruction at later stages. The importance of the first language in the education of a child especially at the early stages cannot be overemphasized. Psychologically, the proper development of the child is closely bound with the continued use of the language he has spoken from birth, the language of his parents, his brothers and sisters, and friends he is used to. It is the language in which he has acquired his first experience of life, the one in which he dreams and thinks and in which he can easily and conveniently express his feelings.

For the vast majority of Anglophone Cameroonians that language is PE. Koenig et al.'s (1983) sociolinguistic survey of the major urban centres of Cameroon (1977-1978) led to the discovery of the following percentages of children who acquired English and PE as their first languages respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1

English/Pidgin English Use in Anglophone Towns

	English (%)	PE (%)
Bamenda	1	22
Mamfe	0	25
Kumba	1	19
Buea	7	26
Limbe	4	31

Alobwede's (1998) survey used the principles in the 1977-1978 survey and came out with the following figures (see Table 2).

Table 2

English/Pidgin English Use in Both Anglophone and Francophone Towns

	English (%)	PE (%)
Bamenda	3.5	24
Mamfe	1	25
Kumba	3	22
Buea	13	28
Limbe	9	30
Douala	6	10
Yaounde	8	15

They contrast the geometric progression of the acquisition of English as a first language, with the arithmetical progression of the acquisition of PE as a first language. In the words of Alobwede (1998, p. 59), PE is the only language in Cameroon which expresses Cameroonian reality without provoking vertical or horizontal hostilities. Secondly, it is conveniently flexible and as such can be acquired at not cost. Finally, because of its horizontal spread, it is the language of consensus... It is estimated that more than 70% of our population speaks PE. Sadly not only is the constitution silent on the existence of PE, active steps are taken by Cameroonian schools to discourage PE. A common warning, with the threat of severe punishment is “Don’t Speak Pidgin”. At the University of Buea for example, one finds several billboards discouraging the use of PE. The government is in denial as regards its language policy vis-à-vis PE. If 70% of the population speak PE, it surely means PE is quite popular and to discourage PE is to alienate 70 % of the population from that basic collective identity.

To ignore this familiar language and begin to teach a foreign and unfamiliar language when children come to school is like taking them from their homes and putting them among strangers. Most of what is said they cannot understand. They cannot express what they want to say and become tongue-tied and inhibited. While take the British pupil in England for example, they have only one problem to contend with—subject content, on the other hand, the Cameroonian pupil have two problems to cope with: (1) English; and (2) the subject content.

Educationally, too, children cannot learn the most elementary facts until they have understood the foreign language in which those ideas are expressed. As language is the most powerful tool of learning, children will learn very little until they have mastered the language of instruction. There is also considerable linguistic confusion on the part of these children who in spite of official attempts at dissuading them confess that they think in PE but try to express themselves in English.

Another reason why our children’s education should begin in PE is that although PE started as a contact language, it has become the language of Anglophone Cameroon culture. It is the first language for a good majority of our children. In fact, PE is fast assuming the status of a Creole. Language and culture are inseparable, and to separate children from their language and culture at an early stage of their education is to make them have no regard for their culture. This does not only create a barrier between them and their less educated parents, but what is worse, it may cause them to despise the language of their community in our case, PE, in favour of a foreign one, English.

Conclusions

The success claimed for the experiment at Ife (see Afolayan, 1982) of teaching the whole of primary education through the medium of the first language Yoruba, while English is taught as a subject on the curriculum could be instructive. A child is not likely to forget forever the language he is born into, the language of his parents and the language of his youth, especially if he has learned to read and write it at the beginning of his school education and he continues to use it as the occasion demands after school. Waudhaugh (1987) quoted a 1953 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) report entitled "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education" which stipulated: "The mother tongue is a person's natural means of self expression, and one of his first needs is to develop his power of self expression to the full... every child should begin his formal education in his mother tongue" (p. 168). This notwithstanding, we have to admit that in the Cameroonian context, this would demand among other things: not being in denial about the popularity and importance of PE, the standardization of PE, the training of teachers, and the preparation of teaching materials.

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