LANGUAGE ATTITUDE AND EDUCATION IN MULTILINGUAL SETTINGS: THE CASE OF CAMEROON

STEPHEN A. MFORTEH
UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDÉ 1

Abstract
By limiting the language of formal education to the colonizers’, a de facto prejudice was built around the several mother tongues that the colonized people used for their own formal and informal education and development. Cameroonian gave up efforts to develop their own languages because the foreign languages gave varied opportunities to the learners, and as a consequence, the wealth of anthropological, philosophical and scientific knowledge stored up in these Mother tongues (MTs) was debased. With time, both the government and educationalists found it easier to depend on the more advanced languages and cultures to educate the nationals. The startling effects of this benign neglect is that subsequent generations have seen MTs as an extra hurdle, the state has highlighted financial and pedagogic constraints and finally, ethnicity is treated as an impediment to national unity which is fostered by the use of only official languages, French and English.

The paper uses the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis not only to show the magnitude of the problem but also to argue that the neglect of these MTs did not give the users of the respective languages the opportunity to use them to segment their world, which things they hold in high esteem, which things they aspire for and seek to adopt and propagate.

The paper concludes that using the colonizers’ languages gave learners an early opportunity to get to the core of current knowledge in the different fields but at the same time it produced in the colonized people a negative attitude towards indigenous talent.

Introduction
Colonialism has been erroneously blamed for the complex ethno-linguistic nature of Cameroon rather than the colonialists’ failure to give the indigenous languages the opportunity to gain an acceptable status. Contemporary findings (Mufwene 2001, Makoni and Meinhof 2003, Anchimbe 2006) have given us a basis to challenge and to rectify certain facets of this prejudice. What is evident is that the colonial masters have added two foreign languages to an existing complex situation resulting from the complexity in ethnic groups, the intertribal wars, the search for agricultural land, good climate, protective boundaries, the attacks of the Arab fighters especially in Northern Africa, and the resettlement of freed slaves among other things, which occurred long before the arrival of the colonialists.

This paper identifies as the major problem, the role of the colonialists in compounding the complexity through the arbitrary boundaries they
created thereby compressing semi-autonomous multilingual and multiethnic states with identified languages and social structures that would probably have continued to grow were they not stifled. Secondly, the introduction of the imperialists’ languages (German, English, French, etc.) and educational programs tactfully ignored the fact that the aboriginal inhabitants were already multilingual. Rather than seek to educate the indigenes in their home languages (HLs), the learners were made to believe that their languages were for savages, and to be educated meant abandoning their own system for that of the colonial master. This is the basis for a language attitude that affected and still affects education in these multilingual settings.

Taking the cue from Makoni and Meinhof (2003), I want to show in this paper that the institution of new and foreign languages and the subsequent sidelining of home languages, often assigning social rather than formal and academic functions to them is the force that determines our attitude to education.

**Sociolinguistic Context that Causes the Problem**

On the one hand, the emphasis on the foreign languages leaves the learner with the impression that learning is most effective in the foreign languages while our Home Languages are the media for cultural and social empowerment. Apart from French, English, and Pidgin English, which are used for wider group transactions, Cameroon has over 240 Home or National Languages, Breton, R. and B. Fohtung (1991) and Grimes, B.E. (ed.) (1999) which are spread all over with varying numbers of speakers. The supremacy/muscle of these Home Languages is aided by the demographic evidence where 70% of Cameroon’s population is found in the rural areas while only 30% is in the major towns and cities.

While the inhabitants of the major towns may exhibit common linguistic, social and professional traits, Koenig (1983), the inhabitants of the rural areas are more segmented. The administrative partitioning of the country into 10 provinces 52 divisions, subdivisions, subdivisions, and districts often takes ethnicity into consideration i.e. linguistic and cultural affinities determine the regrouping of people, for example, the Bui Division of the North West Province or the South Province, where Lamso'o and the Bulu languages are spoken respectively. The raison d’être for this sort of regrouping is a recognition of the semi-autonomous states that existed, and the desire to enable identified entities plan, work, develop and live together. These indigenous languages can be used by their respective communities without bias. On the contrary, the Catholic Church’s maintenance of Ewondo as one of the liturgical languages in the Center Ecclesiastical Province has continued to meet resistance, (Massanga, 2006) with some identified groups like the Anglophones building their own place of worship where English is exclusively used. This supports the cultural innovations discussed by Mforteh S. (2006a).

The examples of the South Province and the Bui Division of the North West Province show that Cameroonians not living in the urban areas may find no use for French or English except when they do business with outsiders. As a result, informal education, business transactions and
professional activities in the rural and sub-urban areas are essentially in the respective Home Languages or dialects. In fact, the missionaries used Bulu and Lamso'o for education in the respective regions. The failure of this novel attempt is seen in the reticence of surrounding tribes’ to amass knowledge in a language that is not theirs, not to talk of the problem of domination raised by Chumbow (1980) and the personnel to train trainers in the selected language(s). I rather want to see this as a result of poor motivation on the part of the learners.

Having identified this as the problem, I want to use the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to show the magnitude of the problem of education in a multilingual setting. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stipulates that a language determines how its users segment their world, which things they hold in high esteem, which things they aspire for and seek to adopt and propagate. Because each ethnic proclivity takes pride in its culture and education, the speakers of Language A do find it degrading to give up on certain aspects and to learn new ones expressed in Languages B, C, and/or D. How many people to whom “Achu, Eru, okru soup” are indigenous meals will tolerate others using a spoon or fork instead of their fingers? How many will eat the protein rich snails, grasshopper, lizard and snakes? It is observed that many people will not easily give up their eating habits even if research shows that the alternatives have the same or a better value. The reason I can advance for such intolerance is attitude, compounded by artificial boundaries.

The Quandary
The expansion of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in the preceding paragraph leads me to conjecture that the historical, anthropological, literary and to some extent the intellectual assets of most countries are concealed in the language(s) used by the different people that make up the nation. This means that Cameroon with over 240 languages, (Dieu et al. 1983; Breton 1991; Grimes, B. 1999) can be said to exhibit such potential, with each language community not only possessing but also struggling to preserve and to sparingly pass on to posterity, knowledge in diverse domains as medicinal herbs, music, the manufacture of tools, practical tips related to academic excellence, athletics etc. expressed in proverbs, wise sayings, and allegory among others. In most cultures, the preservation and passing on to posterity of the wealth of knowledge is protected from the outsider. This means that only an individual growing in the community, who masters the language, the sacred rites, and the proverbs, will have the knowledge pertaining to his existence gradually divulged to him, facilitated by the improvement of his linguistic skills. This suggests that failure in the mastery of the techniques of communication will ruin the chances of an individual eventually interpreting the profound meanings encoded in song, allegory, myth and legend of his or her Mother Tongue, (MT) because this knowledge is transmitted essentially through informal education, although special sessions are sometimes organized at initiation rites. In as much as the different linguistic districts are self-contained, and protecting their possessions through the restricted use of their language, they equally close their eyes and ears to new knowledge, that is, their limited horizons is a weakness. Let us take the simple example of genital mutilation that is
practiced by some tribes in Cameroon. The reasons advanced for propagating this are couched in their customs that have been historically tested but which are now being challenged by western medical theories and practice. These new theories and practices are brought in when no one has taken the pains to understand why the particular people practiced mutilation. Very often, when new theories and practices do not coincide with the existing belief system and practices of a particular people, these new ideas will be rejected or accepted only after pressure. In fact, there must be some instrumental motivation for learning these new things. This explains why people learnt the language of the colonizers, their culinary art, history and ideology among other things. Actually, changing their attitudes and acquiring these new skills offered jobs and the opening to propagate these imported models was bright.

Paradoxically, government language policy sees the use of the mother tongue (MT) as leviathan. Although certain aspects of education and culture go across linguistic barriers, it is possible to view each language as a carrier of anthropological variation and the modus operandi par excellence to educate Cameroonians. The MT is used by group members to transmit economic, political, social information and strategies to the exclusion of the outsider. This maintained the semi-autonomous states that existed before colonialism and gave the different ethnic groups their identity and to some extent professions. Archaeological sources reveal that certain areas of Cameroon were knowledgeable in the extraction and manufacture of metal tools, others in the manufacture of cloth, others in therapeutic plants and still others in diverse fields as agriculture. For the outsider to acquire these skills, he started by integrating himself in the new environment, learning the language and then the particular skills. While in training for a particular trade, the learner often mastered the language and culture of his mentor and occasionally brought in something new from his own background. In the North West Province of Cameroon, many people have gone to Oku to acquire skills in the use and practice of curative herbal medicine. On completion of the training, they go back to their areas of origin. In other tribes, young men have been apprenticed to professionals. There were no formal teaching/learning contexts but as the professional moved from one place to another, or exercised his profession in a specific locality, the learner sought to overcome the language barrier and pick up the essentials of the trade or profession. In the informal sector, this is still very current but I will at this point focus on the changing tides, signalled by the arrival of the colonial masters with their language and cultural values. I will examine the observed attitudes of learners using the colonisers’ languages and the Home languages in formal education. In this paper, I will examine three groups of learners: the learners before 1960; learners in the primary and secondary schools and lastly those in higher education after 1960.

The Learners before 1960 and Shortly After 1960

It is predictable that most of the people who travelled beyond their ethnic boundaries required extra linguistic skills to cope with the communicative exigencies. The missionaries found a solution to this by adopting some of the prominent languages alongside English, as the
languages of education, for example, Bassel Missionaries who started the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon used the Mungaka and Bakossi languages for the Grassfield (actual North West Province) and Forest Regions (actual South West province) respectively. This meant that for anyone aspiring for a lucrative employment with the colonial administration, one required above anything else linguistic skills. One could aspire for the position of a language teacher, a translator, a clerk, police constable etc. provided the individual, depending on whether he was in West or East Cameroon, could ignore his HL and learn or acquire English or French. Many of those who earned scholarships to study in the United Kingdom or France had merely completed their basic education programmes. Many Anglophones who joined the army, or gendarmerie gave up English and adopted French and with time, not only for themselves but also for their children who often grew up as Francophones.

Learners in the Primary and Secondary Schools (1960-2006).
The second group of learners is crushed by the French and English versus Pidgin English quandary. Attempts by the government to harmonize educational systems have not been very successful, one can here cite the General Certificate of Education (GCE) crisis of 1993, the creation of the GCE and Baccalauréat (BAC) Boards, the duration in the programmes for First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC)/ Certificat d’Etudes Primaires Élémentaires (CEPE); and the BAC/G.C.E. Advanced Level. If the learners were however asked to work for the certificate issued in the other language, that is, Anglophones for the CEPE and Francophones for the FSLC, they would refuse or become less motivated even if the programmes are the same. The prevalence of English internationally led to the ending of the discriminatory tendency of Francophone Cameroonians to link English to an optional component that they can do without. There has been a considerable change in attitudes towards the language and as Anchimbe (2005) says, English is no more considered as the identity marker of les anglos là or les anglofou but is that bridge to international success that everyone, irrespective of the official language background wants to cross. Francophone children have literally invaded English-speaking schools at all levels. Privately owned English-medium and also bilingual nursery and primary schools abound in Yaoundé. Many former French-medium schools have hurriedly added a bilingual option to their curricula, even if all they do is to include the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The reports of pedagogic inspectors reveal that 80% of newly created schools introduce the teaching of the English language to pupils as young as four years but none has attempted the introduction of a MT.

Beyond the level of the nursery and primary schools and particularly at the level of the secondary schools and post secondary institutions, there is also a strong demand for English. The enrolment of Francophone children in nursery and primary schools in francophone towns like Yaoundé and Douala might be a normal procedure since the parents also live in the same city. But the recent trend among Francophone parents to send their children to English-medium secondary schools in Anglophone towns, indicates how desperately they want their children to be educated in English. This is a
clear indication of the changing attitudes of Francophones although it is not matched by a corresponding inclination of the Anglophone to learn French.

Learners in Higher Education and Professional Schools (1960-2006).

Learning a new language and new concepts at the same time devastates learners in this third group. At the creation of the lone university, the Federal University of Cameroon, English and French speaking Cameroonians converged there for different degree courses. Because structures and programmes were grafted or copied from the French system, many English speaking Cameroonians did not fare very well and sought refuge in English speaking universities in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya among others but in recent years, the situation has changed. As Mforteh (2006b) points out, globalisation has weakened the monopoly power of French and revalorised English medium educational systems and certificates. As Anchimbe (2005) had earlier commented, several developments in the relationships between the different sets of languages spoken in Cameroon have resulted in the change of attitudes especially towards English and the indigenous languages, the most visible being the French-speaking Cameroonians flooding English-medium schools both in French-speaking and English-speaking towns, and in a strong desire to reassert the value of the indigenous languages through standardization and the derivation of writing systems for them.

Considering the three groups discussed above, one can make the following generalisations. After initial difficulties, essentially to change their attitude towards a new language and culture, the Cameroonians in the first group realised enormous gains in learning a new language and amassing new knowledge or education. This was immediately rewarded through openings for study abroad and jobs (teaching, translation, administration etc.). The second group was confronted with the Home Language, Foreign Language and Contact Language dilemma or impasse. Because of the imbalance, Anglophones made a greater linguistic sacrifice in their effort to obtain education. To get out of the ethnic context, they learnt Pidgin English (P.E) but as soon as they got into formal education, it was replaced with British English. It is worth noting that some Cameroonians in the rural areas move from the HL to English without learning or acquiring PE. By the end of the century, the learners in the second group had received a lot of attention, considering that the number of schools opened by the state and the private sector, and the abundance of pedagogic material at all levels. For those who attended the lone university of Cameroon, 1963 to 1993, it was a sordid tale, especially the Anglophone who had to give up English and learn French. The effects of this situation have persisted and the most obvious consequence is the absence of certain English equivalents to the adopted French expressions. Some examples to buttress this point are: “I am going to the scolarité for my relevé des notes”* instead of “I am going to the admissions office for my transcripts”. These have followed them into the civil service where we find the following examples in contemporary use: Requête for complaint; Mandat for money order; commissaire de police for senior
superintendent of police, *commissariat* for charge office, *Procureur* for state counsel among many others. To the Cameroonian student, (1963-1993), education was a double hurdle, as he had to understand the language before retaining the subject taught in that language. The attitude was definitely negative but the absence of any alternative pushed many to become functionally bilingual (French/English) but multilingual when you add the HL and PE to their repertoire. For the French speaker, it was easier because after the HL he moved to French in primary school, through secondary school right up to the university or professional schools, which for the most part were in the French part. This led to the discriminatory treatment of Anglophones, considered for the most part as deficient partners in the linguistic union, people whose opinions were not sought because they were expressed in a language that was not understood by the leaders.

The prevalence of English internationally led to the ending of the discriminatory tendency of Francophone Cameroonian students and even to link English to the post-presidential election violence of 1992. There has been a considerable change in attitudes towards the language where it is attributed to determination and links to the world beyond France and the Central African region. The positions of America, Britain on the international scene has disillusioned many who had thought of France as the penultimate destination for talented people in Cameroon. Looking for alternative routes to the international scene is one of the causes for Francophones changing their attitude towards English. For the Anglophone who already considers English as an asset, no further effort in the learning of foreign languages is being made. Rather, attention is directed towards the recognition of Pidgin English and the standardization of the HLs. Until lately, the native Cameroonian languages existed basically as *home language*, Breton and Fohlung (1991) but having upgraded them to national languages has added communicative value to them. This explains the cultural revival that Mforteh (2006a) tries to explain. However, there is no clearly defined procedure for using the HL at any level of education. The educational system still propagates a discriminatory system because it alienates the HL from the official languages. Even in 2006, English and French, the so-called official languages in which Cameroonians ought to be bilingual (see Fonlon 1969) are still taught as second languages, (L2) or FL as the case may be.

**Conclusion**

The multilingual context is like a double-edged sword that is both an asset and a liability. Cameroonians who have braved the situation have considerably benefited from it but the overwhelming majority has found considerable frustration. The languages of the colonisers did not create the multilingual setting of Cameroon, it only became more complex with the addition of the languages which created a functional ladder for the languages in contact. This hierarchy places French and English, the official languages at the top, the languages of wider communication in the middle and the indigenous languages at the bottom. The indigenous or home languages carry with them a very high number of dialects created by migration, intermarriage, and urbanisation (Koenig et al. 1983). These home languages have a functional value that is not compensated for by French
and English, the colonial languages. It is this functional value that is currently being promoted and is at the base of a cultural innovation experienced in Cameroon today, Mforteh (2006a). This value is founded on the ethnic identity, which above anything else, is the most profound level of group unity and in-group communication and solidarity. It is in this group that informal education succeeds at its best.

As mentioned above, the coexistence of several languages though in varying degrees of usage in education in Cameroon is both a wealth and a misfortune in the sense that the use of these languages reflects the global view of Cameroonians, who consider their acquisition a pre-requisite for studying and settling abroad (that is, away from their areas of origin), as well as for qualifying for and getting international jobs. The misfortune is that it creates within the national territory a class of second grade citizens identified by their inability to get good jobs because they have not received their training in English or French and can therefore not be recruited into the government civil service where proof of knowledge of one of the official languages is required.

This should not lead the reader to think that the policy of official bilingualism (French/English) is systematically enforced. As research findings have revealed, the policy of bilingualism has been more on paper than in practice, (see Tchoungui 1983, Kouega 2001, Anchimbe 2005, among others). For Anglophones, French and German (the latter in a few schools only) are taught as foreign languages while for the Francophones, English, Spanish and German are taught as foreign languages. Although Cameroon inherited English and French from colonialism and declared them as the official languages of the independent state, and despite being a member of both the Francophonie and the Commonwealth, some factors support the French domination over English in national administrative services. The foremost of these factors is geographical. Cameroon shares borders mainly with French-speaking countries (Chad to the North, Central African Republic to the East, Congo and Gabon to the South) of the Communauté des Etats Membres de l’Afrique Centrale (CEMAC). On her left flank, Cameroon shares borders with only one English-speaking country, Nigeria a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Furthermore, the demographic distribution of Cameroonians along the lines of the official languages put in place by colonialism gives French more speakers as a consequence of France annexed 70% of this former German territory and Britain only 30% after the First World War. Of the ten administrative provinces, eight are in the Francophone part and only two in the Anglophone part. Because of this unequal distribution in the number of users of the different languages, French basically became the language of power and leadership, (administration, military, diplomacy, professional training). The home languages were restricted to ethnic or tribal settings and for the transmission of the cultural heritage of their respective communities. The functions and purposes of these home languages were therefore not included in the elaboration of the language curricula.

The first and most far-reaching consequence of the linguistic context, described in the preceding paragraph, is the attitude that people have
adopted. French was and is still regarded, as the language to be learnt if one wants to survive and succeed within Cameroon. For the Cameroonian who has learnt or acquired English, probably after his/her MT, French is seen as another imperial hurdle. It is supposed/speculated that because of the language barrier most English-speaking Cameroonians have at their best, only been assistants to French-speaking Cameroonians. This has definitely had a negative effect on those willing to excel in their fields because the language issue is a sort of ladder, that is, no degree of learning in English equates what is taught in French. Such a situation seems more complex when we observe that certain tribes/regions in Cameroon have a reputation for certain skills, for example, academic excellence, commerce, athletics and/or weaknesses like poor adaptability to modern schooling, low morals, detrimental cultural practices particularly the belief systems among others. Such an attitude influences the new things that are taught and learnt because the users of any language have both logical and emotional explanations for their choices.

Notes
1. Achu, Eru, okru soup. These are Cameroonian dishes with regional proclivity. Achu is a form of cocoyam paste served with sauce; Eru is a vegetable dish common to the people of forest region. These dishes are eaten with bare fingers and people sometimes frown at those who use a spoon or fork. This is often the test for the outsider.
2. Outsider. Language is the main distinguishing factor. If one can understand and speak any of the Home languages, such a person can be accepted to share the secrets of those concerned. The failure to speak a people’s language give you the status of a stranger with implicit exclusion from valuable information.

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