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MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDE: THE "CAMEROONIAN PARADOX"

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ABSTRACT: The colonial past of Cameroon has serious consequences on its present, positive as well as negative. As a positive consequence, French-English bilingualism is perhaps the most noteworthy, resulting from the shared governance of the colony between France and Britain. However, while the British administration adopted the 'Indirect rule', the French colonists were led by a policy of assimilation which aimed at turning the colonized people into French individuals, particularly in their mind and education. This process involved relegating the numerous indigenous languages (about 250 in Cameroon) to the background, for the benefit of the French language whose prestige was high enough to subjugate Cameroonians. Thus, parents gradually ceased to pass down their language to their children. The younger generations, therefore inherited French as their mother tongue, but now they feel the need to recover their lost inheritance, i.e., indigenous languages. This is what we call here the "Cameroonian paradox". This paper presents the results of a sociolinguistic survey of 32 Cameroonians living in France. The Postcolonial theory helps us understand this paradoxical phenomenon while raising issues of identity and language endangerment.

Keywords: Cameroon; indigenous languages; postcolonialism.

MULTILINGUISMO E ATITUDE LINGUÍSTICA: "O PARADOXO CAMARONÊS"

RESUMO: O passado colonial dos Camarões tem consequências graves no seu presente, tanto positivas como negativas. Como consequência positiva, o bilinguismo franco-inglês é talvez o mais notável, resultante da governação partilhada da colónia entre a França e a Grã-Bretanha. No entanto, enquanto a administração britânica estava orientada para permitir ao povo desenvolver os seus recursos - incluindo as suas línguas -, os colonos franceses eram liderados por uma política de assimilação que visava transformar o povo colonizado em indivíduos franceses, particularmente na sua mente e educação. Este processo implicava relegar as numerosas línguas indígenas (cerca de 250 nos Camarões) para segundo plano, em benefício da língua francesa, cujo prestígio era suficientemente elevado para subjugar os camaroneses. Assim, os pais deixaram gradualmente de transmitir a sua língua aos seus filhos. As gerações mais jovens, herdaram portanto o francês como língua materna, mas agora sentem a necessidade de recuperar a sua herança perdida, ou seja, as línguas indígenas. Isto é o que aqui chamamos o "paradoxo camaronês". Este documento apresenta os resultados de um inquérito sociolinguístico a 32 camaroneses que vivem em França. A teoria pós-colonial ajuda-nos a compreender este fenómeno paradoxal ao mesmo tempo que levanta questões de identidade e de perigo linguístico.

Palavras:chave: Camarões; línguas indígenas; pós-colonialismo.

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INTRODUCTION

When I started my Ph.D., I had a conversation with a Cameroonian fellow who was doing a Ph.D. in physics. He asked me about my research project and I told him that I was working on the description and the documentation of an endangered Bantu language spoken in Cameroon. He then asked me: "what's the point in that?" to which I replied: "what do you mean?" And he said: "those languages are useless". That statement left me dumbfounded, but it also made me think a lot. I had heard this kind of statement before, when I was younger and living in Cameroon, but I thought things had changed since that time. So, I decided to conduct a survey on young Cameroonians' attitude towards French on one hand, and towards indigenous languages on the other hand. The purpose was to assess the extent of the issue I had detected in this young man, which was the obvious manifestation of language rejection and even identity rejection. In order to achieve this, I drew up a questionnaire. Thirty-two people responded. All of them grew up in Cameroon, their average age is 31, and they arrived in France at the average age of 23. In this paper, I will first briefly introduce Cameroon geographically, historically and linguistically. Then we will consider the survey, and I will explain what I call the "Cameroonian paradox". Based on the postcolonial theory, I will show that an inferiority complex is the core of this pervasive problem. Finally, I will propose some ways to remedy it.

PRESENTATION OF CAMEROON

GEOGRAPHY

Located in Central Africa, Cameroon shares its border with Nigeria to the west, the Central African Republic to the east, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo to the south, and Chad to the north. It is sometimes referred to as "Africa in miniature" due to the richness and diversity of its fauna and flora, but also its languages.

Figure 1: Map of Cameroon (Wikipedia)

HISTORY

In the 15th century, a group of Portuguese discovered the Wouri River, full of shrimps. They called it Rio dos camarões, hence the name Cameroon given to the entire land. Before the arrival of the colonial powers, British missionaries were already present.

They started literacy and evangelism programs in Duala, a Cameroonian language, and were prosperous, until the arrival of Germans who governed Cameroon from 1884 to 1914, when the First World War broke out. Being defeated, Germans had to yield the territory to the French and the British. Cameroon was now divided in two: France had the biggest part which therefore became the French Cameroon, while the British took the rest, also called the British Cameroon. On 1 January 1960 the French Cameroon became independent. One year later, the British Cameroon also became independent. A part of it decided to join Nigeria, whereas the remaining part chose to join the French Cameroon.

Together they formed the Federal Republic of Cameroon, which in 1972 became the United Republic of Cameroon. English and French were – and still are – the two official languages (BILOA, 2012).

LANGUAGES

Three of the four language phyla of Africa are found in Cameroon: Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan. There is no unanimity concerning the number of languages spoken in Cameroon. Mba (2010, p.151) talks about 230 indigenous languages, for others they are 285 (LEWIS; SIMONS; FENNIG, 2016) (cited by ATINDOGBE; GROLLEMUND, 2017), while for Mutaka and Chumbow (2001), they are more than 240. The most numerous ethnic groups are particularly the Fang/Beti and the Bamileke and Bamoun. Within the latter group, about 50 languages are spoken. They are originally from the western region, and have undergone a great expansion across the country and abroad. Another major group in terms of number and economic and political power is the Duala ethnic group. During the colonial era, the indigenous languages were forbidden in the public domain, especially in schools. Those who were caught speaking their mother tongue were severely punished. And such was the case in every colonized territory. In Decolonizing the Mind, Ngugi wa Thiong'o shares his own experience as a Kenyan pupil in the following words:

> It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education … Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. (NGUGI, 1986, p.11).

Such persecution occurred not only in Kenya but throughout Africa. Indeed, similar testimonies have been shared by Cameroonians, who told how they were beaten up for speaking their mother tongue at school. So, the colonial languages represented the language of power and civilization. This consequently saddled the indigenous languages with qualities such as backwardness, foolishness, and absolute inanity, so much so that, even by the indigenous people themselves. This is why Ngugi, speaking of colonialism, goes on saying that "its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the

world … To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." (ibid., p.16). This psychological violence gave birth to an inferiority complex, which in turn led to the rejection of their identity, which implies language and culture. One of the most tangible proofs of this is the break in the transmission of the indigenous languages from parents to children, as the survey reveals.

THE QUESTIONNARIE: WHAT DOES IT THELL US?

The questionnaire[2] consists of 26 questions. 32 people participated. Most of them arrived in France to pursue higher education. The survey was conducted in 2019. I have selected ten questions, the most relevant to this paper. Most of the participants are from the French-speaking Cameroon, they all grew up in Cameroon and arrived in France at the average age of 23. 68.8% are women while 31.3% are men. The questionnaire and the responses are in French, a translation in English is provided in the legend.

1) Question: What is your mother tongue?
Answers: English, Bafoussam, Bamileke, Bangu, Cameroon, French, French, Mbouda, Ngnieup

[2] The responses were written by the participants themselves. I directly reported them here.

2) Question: Do you speak a Cameroonian language?
Answers:
Blue: Yes, very well
Red: No
Yellow: I manage

3) Question: If you don't speak a Cameroonian language, would you like to learn one?
Answers:
Blue: Yes
Red: No
Yellow: Other

Pourquoi ?

15 responses

C'est agréable à entendre

Pas d'intérêt.

Ce serait dommage de perdre cette richesse culturelle. Ça fait parti de qui je suis.

C'est indispensable.

Pour ne pas perdre mon héritage

Pour se sentir parmi eux

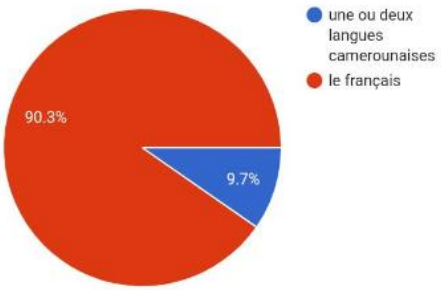
Car j'aimerais bien apprendre à parler la langue maternelle de ma mère

M'integrer Plus dans la communauté

4) Question: Why?
Answers:
It is pleasing to the ear.
No interest.
It would be a pity to lose such cultural wealth. It is part of who I am.
It is indispensable.
So I will not lose my inheritance.
In order to feel close to them.
Because I would like to learn my mother's language.
In order to fit in into the community.

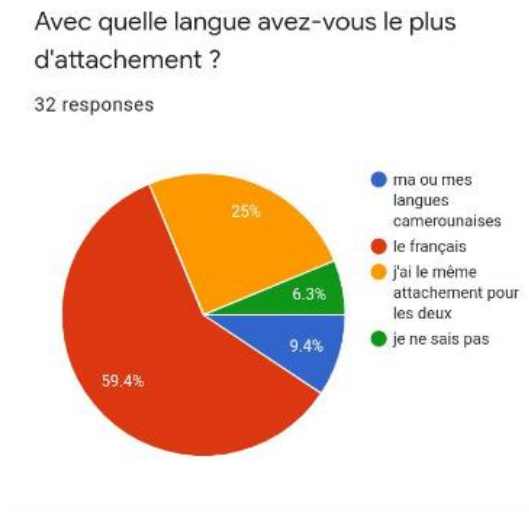
Quelle langue parlez-vous le plus avec vos parents actuellement ?

31 responses



5) Question: What language do you speak the most with your parents now?
Answers:
Blue: one or two Cameroonian languages
Red: French

6) Question: What language did you speak the most at home when you were a child?
Answers:
Blue: one or two cameroonian languages
Red: French



7) Question: Which language do you feel the most attached to?
Answers:
Blue: one or two Cameroonian languages
Red: French
Yellow: I have the same attachment with French and Cameroonian languages
Green: I don't know

8) Question: Would you like your children to speak a Cameroonian language?
Answers:
Blue: Yes
Red: No

Pourquoi ?

29 responses

Pour ne pas perdre ma culture

Garder son héritage

C'est bien

J'aimerais qu'il aient la grâce de connaître leurs origines. Ne sachant pas parler la langue maternelle de mon père, j'espère qu'ils pourront l'apprendre de mon père.

Pour leur transmettre cette culture même si je ne parle pas parfaitement.

Preservation de la culture

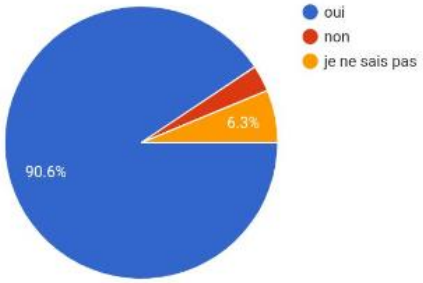
Ce n'est pas une nécessité

Ca sera enrichissant pour eux

9) Question: Why?
Answers:
In order no to lose my culture.
To keep the inheritance.
It is good.
I would like them to have the grace to know their origins. Since I cannot speak my father's mother tongue, I hope they could learn it with my father.
In order to pass them down the culture even though I don't speak the language perfectly.
It is not a necessity.
It is enriching for them.

Que pensez-vous du développement des langues camerounaises (production de livres, manuels d'apprentissage, applications etc.) ? D'après vous, est-ce utile ?

32 responses



10) Question: What do you think about the development of cameroonian languages (production of books, teaching and learning materials, applications, etc.) Do you think it is useful?
Answers:
Blue: Yes
Red: No
Yellow: I don't know

DISCUSSION

These data confirm the study Messina carried out in 2013. According to this study, 71.25% of young Cameroonians living in Yaoundé and 69.75% in Douala do not speak the language of their parents or any other Cameroonian language (ABEGUE, 2018, p.85). This is what we can see from the first two questions of our survey. What we can also see from the graphs above is that there is a discrepancy between the participants' attitudes towards Cameroonian languages on the one hand, and towards French on the other hand: they have a stronger attachment to French, but at the same time feel a sense of belonging to the indigenous languages although they don't speak them. This is what I call the "Cameroonian paradox". The most plausible explanation of this phenomenon which again is conveyed by the graphs is the dismissal of the indigenous languages from the hearth, in aid of the French language already dominant in all the spheres of life together with English: schools, administration, politics, media, etc. There has been a pervasive belief, especially among the older generations, that indigenous languages are indeed useless, that they have no future, hence the necessity of preserving them even as a cultural heritage has been clearly discarded by many parents. As extraordinary as it appears, responses to question 1 above show that 25% of the participants acknowledge French as their mother tongue, while only 12% claim to be able to speak at least one indigenous language. This is not surprising, since French has taken over homes, and eventually has become the mother tongue of the young generation. Accordingly, we understand why 59% of the participants feel most attached to French, which is the first language they discovered and grew up speaking. Moreover, it is the language they use the most in their daily lives.

The first conclusion drawn from this survey is that many young Cameroonians cannot speak any indigenous language, and therefore have French as their mother tongue, certainly because many parents did not consider the linguistic heritage useful or worthy enough to be preserved. The terrible consequence is that in time, these languages being no longer spoken will eventually die out, as languages stay alive through their dynamic use, at least spoken

(HAGEGE, 2000). In *Stop the death of languages*[3], Hagège highlights the different stages leading to language extinction, among which are the lack of education in the language, be it partial or total, and the absence of children speaking the language, in other words, if only adults can speak the language, this is a sign of its coming death (ibid., p.90-91).

However, the survey reveals that the great majority of the participants (80%) are willing to learn a Cameroonian language and 96% would like their own children to learn one as well. Besides that, as responses to question 9 indicate, many are sensitive to culture preservation. Consequently, there seems to be an awareness among the young generation who begins to realize that they need to recover that part of their identity. This also means that the negativity once attached to the indigenous languages seems to be fading away, although a minority still thinks they are unnecessary (see questions 8 and 9). As a matter of fact, African languages have suffered for a long time from a profound disdain from Africans themselves. They did not only disregard their languages but their whole "africanity", i.e., their identity as Africans. As the French Martinican psychoanalyst of the colonial times Frantz Fanon explained in *Black skins*, *white masks*[4] (1952), this is one of the disastrous consequences of colonialism.

THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

The Postcolonial theory was defended by authors such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who claim that there should be a shift. In Moving the Center, Ngugi mentions the need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world (1993, p.xv). Colonialism gave birth to an inferiority complex by annihilating local cultures and exalting European values which were gradually adopted by the colonized people. Consequently, they no longer identify with their original culture but with that of the civilizing nation (FANON, 1952, p.38). Talking about Africans, Bjornson (1991) mentions a hybrid culture, underlining the conflict between European and African values that can cause serious identity crises.

[3] *Halte à la mort des langues* (HAGEGE, C. 2000).
[4] Peaux noires masques blancs (FANON, F. 1952).

Fanon's clinical study of a number of Black patients suffering from neurosis reveals that most of them either dream about themselves becoming White, or about a White person appearing in a sort of angelic aspect. This and many other events lead the author to the conclusion that the identification of Black people with the White culture is complete. In the same way he cites Westermann who writes in The African Today (1934) that there are a number of strategies put in place by Africans whose ultimate goal is to feel equal to the Europeans. Such strategies include mastering their language, adopting their style of dress and manners. Fanon also rightly emphasizes that to speak a language is to accept the related culture, to bear the weight of its civilization (FANON, 1952, p.37). Furthermore, "…a man who possesses language possesses as a result the world expressed and implied by that language…"[5] (ibid.). In other words, language is power.

For Ngugi (1993, p.30), every language has two aspects:

> One aspect is its role as an agent that enables us to communicate with one another in our struggle to find the means for survival. The other is its role as a carrier of the history and the culture built into the process of that communication over time…The two aspects are inseparable. They form a dialectal unit. However, either of these two aspects can become more pronounced than the other, depending on the circumstances surrounding the use of a language.

The problem is that the encounter between European languages and African languages was based on dependence and inequality. The supremacy of European languages brought about the abandonment of African languages, first in the public sphere, then in homes.

Shifting the center is definitely a process that requires several decisions and actions on the part of the African individual on one hand, and from state institutions on the other.

This will be achieved particularly through the acknowledgement of indigenous languages as valuable resources and part of their history and identity. Interestingly, the survey tells us that this is what is actually taking place, at least as far as Cameroon is concerned: the young Francophone generation wants to recover their cultural heritage.

According to Bamgbose (1994, p.31) indigenous languages are also an essential

[5] "… un homme qui possède le langage possède par contrecoup le monde exprimé par ce langage…" (FANON, 1952, p.37).

component of sustainable development. Indeed, contrary to a widespread idea, he considers multilingualism not as a barrier to national unity and integration but rather as a strength.

Besides acknowledgement, there is a great need for documentation in indigenous languages. Admittedly, writing in African languages is a challenge due to many factors which are to name a few: literacy, orthography, publishing, lack of commitment on the part of governments. Nevertheless, we have been witnessing a sort of revival among a generation of Cameroonians utterly involved in the promotion of indigenous languages, especially through the creation of applications and websites designed for the teaching and learning of these languages. This is a positive sign that can only be encouraged and supported.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at discussing about the Cameroonian paradox. Based on a survey conducted in 2019 on 32 Cameroonians living in France and whose average age is 31 and who arrived in France at the average age of 23, we discovered that the majority consider French as their mother tongue, since they don't speak any Cameroonian language. At the same time, they are willing to learn one and to have their children learn one as well. The survey also revealed that the passing down of indigenous languages at home from parents to children is being broken, due to an inferiority complex originating in colonialism. The Postcolonial theory helped us to understand this problem and to propose some ways to remedy it, so that Africans would reappropriate and rehabilitate their indigenous languages.

The good news conveyed in the survey is that the young generation of Cameroonians acknowledges indigenous languages as part of their identity and culture, hence their desire to get them back. It would be interesting to carry out a similar survey on Anglophone Cameroonians in further research.

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