

PREDOMINANT USE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN THE MASS MEDIA IN CAMEROON: A TENTATIVE RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

Simplice Simeu

University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon,
currently at Stendhal University of Grenoble 3, France
simplice.simeu@e.u-grenoble3.fr / s_simeu@yahoo.fr

The integration of African languages in the mass media has been examined since the implantation of these media in the continent. Some parts of Africa (North, West and South) have efficiently understood the necessity of using national languages on their radio, television and in the written press. Meanwhile, this has been given less attention in Central Africa especially Cameroon. Since independence, the Cameroonian linguistic legacy has been exempted from all vital domains of life, including the media, as a result of the acceptance of English and French as official languages. People from within different local communities are still not accustomed to those “imported languages” even when they found themselves as town dwellers. How do communicators relay messages to beneficiaries of their services in such a complex setting? This paper sets out to explore such problems and suggests a number of solutions.

Cet article traite de l'intégration des langues africaines dans les mass media depuis leur implantation sur le continent. Certaines régions de l'Afrique, notamment le Nord, l'Ouest et le Sud, ont compris de manière efficace la nécessité d'utiliser les langues nationales à la radio, à la télévision et dans la presse écrite. Par contre, en Afrique Centrale et particulièrement au Cameroun, cela n'est pas le cas. Depuis la période de l'indépendance, l'héritage linguistique camerounais n'a pas réussi à percer les domaines vitaux tels que les media, à cause de l'adoption de l'anglais et du français comme langues officielles. Pourtant, les gens de différentes communautés locales ne sont pas encore habitués à ces langues importées quand bien même ils résident en ville. Dès lors, comment est ce que les communicateurs transmettent leurs messages aux bénéficiaires de leurs services dans un tel environnement complexe. L'objet de cet article est justement d'explorer ce type de problèmes et d'en suggérer des solutions.

0. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to point out how the predominant use of English and French in the Cameroonian school system has led to the flooding of those languages in the mass media. It is made up of four parts, the first section focuses on the evolution of mother tongues practice in the school system and on the media landscape in Cameroon. The second chapter analyses the reasons underlying the copious use of the official languages (English & French) as put forward by politicians or scrutinized by linguists. The third articulation highlights the consequences of such practices in a highly multilingual milieu like Cameroon. The last section suggests solutions to the disarray resulting from the misuse of English and French in Cameroon.

The theoretical framework here is related to linguistic ideology, especially the status planning. That idea gains support from the fact that till today there is no law, which either appeals to the insertion of the Cameroonian languages or bans them from the mass media (Mohaman, 2004). Meanwhile the situation seems obviously controversial in many parts of the continent. We should start this investigation by casting a glance at the dynamic use of mother tongues in school and in the media in Cameroon.

1. EVOLUTION OF CAMEROONIAN LANGUAGES IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND THE MASS MEDIA

1.1. THE FATE OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES IN SCHOOL DURING COLONIALISM

The situation here is analysed considering the German administration, the French occupation and the English rule.

1.1.1. The German administration

Under the German rule, national languages were nearly prohibited in schools in Cameroon. Nevertheless, missionary schools used them against the law (Nghoh 1990). Subsidies were withdrawn from schools that kept teaching national languages. Duala and Bali were the Cameroonian languages involved. They were later on proposed to be set aside in favour of Ewondo and after by Swahili (Tabi Manga 2000). However none of these languages was retained in the policy of the Germans. No substantial result was proposed indeed. Therefore the debate continued to be handled during the French protectorate.

1.1.2. The French occupation

During the French administration, missionaries continued worrying about the education of the Cameroonian people in the right way. In this, local languages were used even though the administration did not give such an audience. Duala and Bulu were the languages used in rural schools by catholic and presbyterian missions. Those languages were systematically banned by the French master, in order to let spread the French language. Sad enough, the first autonomous government of Cameroon also kept quiet towards the linguistic situation of the country. No legislation was proposed in regard to the linguistic issue so the school system remained unchanged till 1960. The same situation was observed in East-Cameroon ruled by the British.

1.1.3. The British rule

The British administration proposed to choose Duala and Bali in official duties, including school curricula, but they failed to do so (Tabi Manga 2000). In effect, the above two languages were used in non formal contexts while only English was used in the instruction that led to the preparation of diplomas. So far, we have observed that local languages were not welcome in schools in Cameroon during colonialism. Our next step involves inquiring about how those languages were perceived in the mass media in the previous decades and how they are currently being treated.

1.2. OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA IN CAMEROON

The use of national languages in the media in Cameroon has shifted from the written presses to broadcasting. This second practice is however not yet well implemented. In the past we had a lot of written presses using mother tongues. We can quote amongst these:

<i>Language</i>		<i>Gloss</i>
(1) Duala	Mulee Ngea	The Guide
	Ngengeti	The Sky
	Dikalo	The Bell
(2) Ewondo	Nleb be kristen	Christians' Adviser
	Bebela ebug	The True Word
(3) Bulu	Nkul zambe	The Tomtom of God
(4) Basaa	Njel lon	The Voice of the People
(5) Fe'efe'e	Nufi	The News

(Tabi Manga 2000:107-108)

Motivation was the main pretext that led to the using of local languages in the presses. Another reason includes religious, ethnic or political purposes. But because of

lack of readers, those presses disappeared. The distribution of those presses were also not regular and not always available (Zang Zang 2004). This immediately gave the chance to the radio. We all know what the facilities of a radio are, especially when it is well planned and well managed in the process of development be it urban or rural. On the basis of this, many people argue that radio is nowadays in the limelight of the process of rural development in Africa (Tudesq 2007). There still lie problems however in regard to the actual situation of radios in Cameroon. These concern the efficient use of national languages on radio. National languages are used both in public services and community radios but the rate is quite minimal. It is the community radios that somehow endeavour to use mother tongues.

In a nutshell, we can say two things at end of this section: One is that the act of refraining from using local languages in schools in Cameroon is a historical attitude generated by the megalomaniac posture of the colonial master. Another thing, which is somehow linked up to the previous observation, is to notice that at this era of globalisation, Cameroonian languages have shifted from written language to oral use only in the media, thus from written press to radio. What could be the pretexts or the conditions on the basis of these mutations?

2. THE GROUNDS OF THE ABUNDANT USE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

The reasons laid down by the Cameroonian government vis-à-vis the overuse of English and French in the entire country and consequently in its media should be subsequently examined. They range from political, economical to social considerations.

2. 1. POLITICAL POINT OF VIEW

With regard to this aspect, the use of English and French are preferable because they help to maintain “*National Unity*”, in face of many national languages.

This idea ignores that the multitude of languages that Cameroon has is, above all, one of the features that distinguishes our nation amongst other countries in the world. That multiplicity of languages implies an extension of cultures, which can easily help to develop our soil. The above suggestion falls in line with an idea contained in Biya’s (1987: 104):

“I rather regard our linguistic diversity as cultural privilege [...] We should encourage the development of national languages which are the privileged mediums of ethnic cultures. It is important for each language to express the culture it embodies [...]”.

From the above, having many languages is no longer a source of any disarray in a country. On the contrary, the presence of many languages enriches the country culturally, socially, economically, politically, etc. This is to a certain extent what enthused Tadadjeu (1990) in his book entitled *Le défi de Babel au Cameroun* in which he describes the historical pathway of integration of local languages in the school system in Cameroon.

Furthermore, according to Crystal (2000), monolingual environments are not equal to peace. Otherwise, monolingual countries are not safe enough from social problems that arise in countries where many languages are in contact. In the last decade, recent civil wars have been counted in major monolingual countries - Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda and Burundi. The following statement amplifies the author’s ideas on the present issue: “*It is, in short, a total myth that the sharing of a single language brings peace, whichever language it might be*” (Crystal 2000:27). For David Crystal then, a world where everyone speaks at least two languages notably one ethnic language and an international lingua franca should be more profitable than confining ourselves in a single language, whichever might be that language. Joseph Poth, former director of the language division at Unesco in Paris, goes further by proposing a trilingual scheme in education made up of a mother tongue, a neighbouring language and an international language. This, somehow,

cope with the “*extensive trilingualism*” or the “*quadrilingualism*” respectively developed in the context of Cameroon by Tadadjeu (1985) and Tabi Manga (2000). On the one hand, Maurice Tadadjeu sets to build up the ideal profile of a person living in such a complex environment and on the other hand, Jean Tabi Manga looks at a functional approach of tackling the languages involved.

So the point of view of the Cameroonian administration to wrongly limit the number of languages to the two colonial ones does not tie at all with this ideology, which to the best of our knowledge, is very practical and is of high social benefit. Sadly enough, even the bilingualism that was supposed to be promoted by the state have followed a “*slippery pathway*” (Anchimbe 2006). Many contrasts were found between the political and the sociolinguistic motivations for the policy of French-English bilingualism. The approach observed to this is rather a “*state bilingualism*” instead of “*individual bilingualism*” sought by Fonlon (1996). For sure this does not contribute to increase the number of bilinguals which remains exceedingly low in spite of the strategies that have been used for the purpose (Anchimbe 2006) What can we say about the economical arguments also set forth?

2.2. ECONOMICAL MOTIVE

The claim here is that since English and French are already taught and massively used in the Cameroonian society (school, mass media, and so on.), any change will be expensive for the nation.

First of all, this argument does not however take into consideration the fact that any education system, whatever we do, costs a lot of money to be implemented. The most essential thing to be done is to strongly root the system to some theoretical considerations and then pay a constant follow-up to it, so as to allow it to meet the needs of a target population. Thus, any school system is subject to adjustment as time goes by. This helps in contextualising its content otherwise the system will not bear desirable fruits in the long run. We have accepted that it is when a language is taught in school that it can be really used in the media. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Cameroon where less attention is paid to the linguistic conditions in which media operate. English and French are regarded as the supra-languages whilst nobody actually worries about the situation of local languages. The convenient using of Cameroonian languages both in school and in the media would have surely prevented from making such an unreasonable statement.

Secondly, one of the shortcomings of the above assertion dwells in the fact that the population of Cameroon who have access to education in either English or French or both of them is very limited. Educated people are in many cases the urban dwellers and many of those living in the rural areas are unacquainted with English and French. While pointing out that situation, Onguéné Essono (2001) said that about 42% of Cameroonians live in the rural areas. This marginal part of the citizens do not know how to read or to write English and French. Thus, tackling the use of English and French as economical compared to Cameroonian languages is similar to a lure, in the sense that local languages have never been offered a real chance to compete with them. Local languages are always considered as low opposite to the “so-called” official languages.

The third reason is that language is a marketable product. And being a product, its promotion (standardization & diffusion) and the place (where it should be sold) or the price (how much it should be sold) has to be taken into account for its maintenance. These are the strategies that should be wrought up for the long life of our cultural identity via the school system (Mba 2001). If this policy is overdone for the case of English and French in Cameroon, there is however less efficient organisation or legislation reserved to Cameroonian languages which, still, do not benefit from any social attraction.

2. 3. SOCIAL PRESTIGE

The Cameroonian authority thought that the use of English and French would gain Cameroon favours from colonial masters and secure foreign aids from them. The feeling was also that this practice would allow Cameroon to be opened to the world. Beyond all these, Cameroon did not join the Commonwealth and the Francophonie and this gesture denied the chance to enjoy the fruits of these two Clubs. It is only later (1991) that Cameroon was integrated into the Francophonie and even much later (1995) into the Commonwealth.

So far, the above mentioned did not think, *mutatis mutandis*, that the promotion of national languages could be a job opportunity. Developing mother tongues could create jobs ranging from language practitioners to language industrialists. This includes: translation, elaboration of didactic materials, teaching opportunities, publishing, and so on. Those opportunities will favour genuine interaction between rural dwellers and the others owing to the language facilities that will emerge. The development and the promotion of the Cameroonian languages are likely to contribute to the easiness of interaction between urban and rural dwellers, the rich and the poor, native and non native speakers, nationals and non nationals, in short, between language practitioners of all types and the politicians. It is useful to refer again to Crystal (2000: 31) in this light when he avers:

“Local languages are seen to be valuable because they promote community cohesion and vitality, foster pride in culture, and give a community (and thus a workforce) self-confidence.”

The interdependence between language, culture and education drawn by Tadadjeu (1988) is more obvious to argue against the fact that using only English and French in Cameroon could lead to some benefits from abroad. Indeed, the paper points out that language is the key to the vault of each culture and as well, each culture is transmitted by a given school system. Thus, every educative project is automatically a linguistic project. In that way, every linguistic project in a given community is absolutely a cultural and educative project. At this point, it is judicious to note that the pretexts whether politically, economically or socially oriented to explain the overuse of English and French in Cameroon media was not efficient enough to cope with the needs of the population. Therefore, it is important to raise the question of the implication of this overuse.

3. CONSEQUENCES OF THE OVERUSE OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH

Following constitute the implication of the abundant use English and French in the Cameroonian society in general and more specifically in the mass media.

3. 1. DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WRITTEN PRESS IN LOCAL LANGUAGES

Press written in Cameroonian languages has died as a result of lack of motivation and due to the absence of subvention to support them. It was mainly created either for religious, ethnic or political purposes. Political parties in Cameroon, for example UPC (Union pour le Progrès du Cameroun) with Njel long "*The Voice of People*", once chose written press as their means of conveying news to the different members spread nationwide. Toady, English French and, to certain extend, Pidgin-English are the codes massively in use. Local languages are scarcely called upon. This happens only during political campaigns in the rural areas. Ethnic communities also used written press in bringing together their members but today they prefer radio instead of the written press. The languages used is most of the time either English or French rather than local languages. Community radios appear as the only media that broadcasts in Cameroonian mother tongues even though the service is not yet of a high quality.

3. 2. SHADE OUT OF LOCAL LANGUAGES IN SOME RADIOS

If on one hand local languages seem to be spread on community radios, on the other hand they are shaded out by French and English, thus are assimilated to colloquial languages. It is no longer a surprise to hear that the national radio of Cameroon does not make use at all of any Cameroonian language. Mother tongues look as if they were just tolerated in broadcasting. Only community radios seek to make use of local languages. A negligible total of eight hours and forty minutes par week is reserved to almost thirty languages nationwide via the Provincial stations. Actually, no more than 25% of the programme is broadcast in Cameroonian languages. In general, the use of these national languages is meant for transmitting government messages to non literates. At times, news, educative and agricultural programmes are broadcast in Pidgin English. In short, Cameroonian languages are neither really used in the administration, the written press, the advertisement, the national television nor the formal education. However the example of countries like Algeria where French is used alongside with Arabic and Berber, the case of Madagascar which uses both Malagasy and French and the illustration of Nigeria where Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo cohabit with English are sufficient enough to inspire a practical use of Cameroonian languages in the media in general and in particular on the radio.

4. PROSPECTS FOR THE REHABILITATION OF MOTHER TONGUES IN THE MASS MEDIA IN CAMEROON

We are going to discuss some guidelines on how to overcome this situation where national languages are shaded out by English and French:

A follow-up of mother tongue teaching in schools (formal and informal) through subventions and training of teachers, etc. could stimulate motivation towards reading and writing. This is at first the duty of the government and other organizations for example SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) and NACALCO (National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees). These two NGOs and some others like CABTAL (Cameroon Association of Bible Translation and Literacy) have been trying their best to promote Cameroonian languages. Their tasks include the elaboration of didactic materials, the training of trainers, and the translation of Bible into many local languages, the designing of new school curricula and so on. PROPELCA (Programme de Recherche Opérationnelle pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun) have developed and experienced a pedagogic method of teaching Cameroonian languages as well as other African languages: "*the extensive trilingualism*", which stands today as one of the most practical methodologies for the teaching of local languages. The time has come now for the political authority not only to continue setting out laws but also to be active in the field.

The time schedule reserved to mother tongues should be increased, where it already exists (like in Provincial Stations and Community radios). Mother tongues should also be broadcast on the National Broadcasting channel. This will contribute to the promotion of local languages and foster the pride in culture.

Programmes broadcast in the national languages should be conceived in those languages and not always translated from other languages mainly the European ones. This is because once a text is translated its content hardly remain the same. For this to be effective, the presence of a linguist or/and a member of a language committee is necessary when conceiving programmes for a radio that is meant for a rural area. The creation of a language committee and its maintenance is the responsibility of the community concerned.

Listeners should either be involved or taken into account in the conception and treatment of broadcasting tasks. Simeu (2003) showed that one of the major problems that impinge the smooth broadcasting in community radios is due to the non-involvement of the listeners in the broadcasting tasks.

Appropriate sites should be indicated to the promoters of radios, especially community radios. This will enable the instrument to better cover the geographical space expected.

Adequate structures (schools and training centres) for the training of journalists/animators as well as training standards (curricula) should be set.

The choice of the language(s) to be broadcast also constitutes a big stake. This question is not new at all but it needs to be tackled following some linguistic guides and principles.

Visibly, the list of the principles stated above should not be considered as exhaustive. More so, those principles will certainly be at the source of some problems, especially for readers who are unaccustomed to debating on language policy. That was not however our objective when pursuing this present quest. Rather, we were searching for paths via which national languages could go by to being used as efficient tools of communication. This being said, prospects should mainly stick to the staff, including experts like linguists and members of the language committees. The structures of training as well as the building-up of curricula are also of high importance here.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, we have done an overview of mother tongues handling both in school and in the media where we have discovered that local languages are rather shaded out by English and French that are copiously used. We have also explored the reasons that lead to the present situation and motives were tackled politically, economically, and socially to show that these do not cope with the needs of the population. Consequences of such practices were presented and we noticed that national languages are neither really used in the mass media nor in other domains like administration, the school curricula, etc. We finally proposed that more attention should be drawn on the staffs of the radio, the languages used, the training centres and the elaboration of curricula for the rehabilitation of national languages in the media. At the end, we should remark that the act of refraining from using local languages in either schools or the media in Cameroon is traced back to the megalomaniac attitude of the colonial master. Thus, based on the above propositions, an adequate policy towards languages in the media could be built up in order to change from the tentative project presently in use in Cameroon to an efficient tool for the development and social transformation.

REFERENCES

- Anchimbe, E.A. 2006. Slippery Pathways in the Implementation of English-Bilingualism in Cameroon. *Language, literature and Identity*, 191-199.
- Biya, P. 1987. *Communal Liberalism*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Crystal, D. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fonlon, B. 1996. The language problem in Cameroun: A Historical Perspective. *ABBIA*, 22, 5-40.
- Mba, G. 2001. Planification et marketing linguistique du bilinguisme L1-LO1 au Cameroun. *African Journal of Applied Linguistics (AJAL)*, 2, 31-41.
- Mohaman B. 2004. Place des langues nationales dans la grille des programmes de CRTV Centre. *Mémoire, ESSTIC, Université de Yaoundé 2*.
- Ngoh, V. 1990. *Cameroun 1884-1985, Cent ans d'histoire*. Yaoundé: CEPER.
- Onguéné Essono, L. M. 2001. Langues camerounaises et langues étrangères: à qui profite la cohabitation ? *Patrimoine*, 10, 8.
- Simeu, S. 2003. *De la Communication en langues nationales dans les radios rurales au Cameroun*. *Mémoire de maîtrise, Faculté des Arts, Lettres et Sciences Humaines (FALSS), Université de Yaoundé 1*.
- Tabi Manga, J. 2000. *Les politiques linguistiques au Cameroun: Essai d'aménagement linguistique*. Paris: Karthala.
- Tadadjeu, M. 1988. Langue, culture et éducation dans la recherche d'un modèle social africain. *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines (FLSH) de l'Université de Yaoundé*, 4/2, 3-18.
- _____. 1985. Pour une politique d'intégration camerounaise. *Le trilinguisme extensif*. Actes du

colloque sur l'identité culturelle camerounaise, Yaoundé, MINFOC: 187-201.

_____. (sous la direction de). 1990. Le défi de Babel au Cameroun. Yaoundé: Propelca, 53.

Tudesq, A-J. 2007. L'émergence des radios de proximité en Afrique. CEMIC.

<http://www.msha.fr/cemic/publications2007-tudesq.htm>

Zang Zang, P. (Ms.). Cohabitation du français et des langues partenaires dans les médias au Cameroun: Vers l'hypothèse d'un français subventionné et d'un français non subventionné. Paper presented at the University of Yaounde 1, 2004.