

# Socio-pragmatic Constraints to Native or Indigenous Language Education in Cameroon

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last four decades, many researchers have paid attention to the language issue in the Cameroonian educational system. From the early days of independence (1960-1965) to the present, the topic of how well native Cameroonian languages could be used in education (alongside or in place of the official French and English languages) has been central (see Fonlon 1963, 1969, Njock 1965, Tadjadjeu 1975, 1981, Chumbow 1980, Essono 1981). In spite of the many findings published in books, journals, mimeographs and monographs around the world, there is still no government-approved scheme for the use of native Cameroonian languages<sup>1</sup> in education. The major reasons advanced for this state of affairs have been the lack of government support and the impracticability of some of the language teaching schemes proposed. However, it can also be claimed that the government has deliberately played down the issue due to its topicality and relatedness to national unity – which the government seeks to preserve. Aside of these politically motivated factors there are other hindrances that do not ultimately depend on political projects but rather on the socio-economic and pragmatic relevance of these languages as media of education. These socio-economic and pragmatic factors constitute the major focus of this paper.

According to Part 3, Chapter 1, Section 16, Paragraph 1 & 2 of Law No. 98/004 of 14<sup>th</sup> April 1998, which lays down guidelines for education in Cameroon, “The educational system shall be organised into two-sub-systems: the English-speaking sub-system and the French-speaking sub-system, thereby affirming our national option for bi-culturalism” (Paragraph 1). “The above mentioned educational sub-systems shall co-exist, each preserving its specific method of evaluation and award of certificates” (Paragraph 2). The languages of education, therefore, are English and French. For a new language to be added to them, new laws would have to be made. In an effort to consolidate its national unity promise through bilingualism, the government has instituted certain educational programmes that award maximum teaching time to these languages. According to the Ministry of National Education (MINEDUC) (2001:5), 41.67% of a total of 30 hours per week for level three of primary education is dedicated to language teaching only. Table 1 shows the time allocation.

Table 1. Time allocation for the teaching of English and French (adapted from MINEDUC 2001:5)

Time allocation	Hours a week	Percentage
Teaching of French	8	26.67
Teaching of English	4.5	15.00
Other subjects	17.5	58.33
Total	30	100.00

The objectives of the increase in the number of hours for language teaching are to further promote French-English bilingualism and to guarantee a national identity that could “transform our country [Cameroon] into the catalyst of African unity” (Ahidjo 1964). Although it is claimed that national

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<sup>1</sup> By native Cameroonian languages reference is made here to typical Cameroonian ethnic, tribal or indigenous languages. I have used the terms interchangeably. In some instances, I have referred to them simply as native languages. I tried not to use other terms such as ‘home languages’ and ‘national languages’ because they are motivated by given (colonial and political) ideologies that are not dealt with here.

integration is necessary through English and French, these languages have been set against each other in the system of education. This system is based on biculturalism through two completely different sub-systems – French and English sub-systems. However Kouega (2003) finds the amount of time allotted to the teaching of the official languages too much and rather calls for more time to be allocated to the core subjects. If part of the time dedicated to these two languages could be re-allocated to the teaching of native Cameroonian languages, then *official trilingualism* (Tadadjeu 1975, Gfeller 2000) and other native language teaching schemes could be easily realised.

## 2. Overview of languages in education in Cameroon

The integration of the over 270 native languages in Cameroon into the educational system is practically difficult, if not impossible. To randomly pick out one or two to be taught in all regions of the country would generate political feelings of superiority that may endanger national unity. This, in part, could be the reason why Njock's (1966) "linguistic zones" language policy was not adopted. It could also explain why the teaching of certain Cameroonian languages at the university of Yaounde was stopped in 1977. In all, several well-intentioned language policies that included native Cameroonian languages in educational curricula have not been applied. In spite of this, certain non-Cameroonian (European) languages are taught as foreign languages both at the high school and university. This is the case with foreign languages like German and Spanish that are taught in secondary schools within the French sub-system. At the University of Yaounde 1, the department of foreign languages offers degrees in German, Spanish, and Arabic languages and literatures. Although there are no immediate employment opportunities within the country for graduates with degrees in these languages, the government still encourages their acquisition and their teaching at the university. The German, Spanish and Arabic sections of the department of foreign languages are most affected by shortage of staff than many other departments of the university.

As mentioned above, French and English are the languages of education. Besides being the medium of education in Anglophone Cameroon, English is also an obligatory subject on the curriculum. It is an obligatory subject in all examinations (except the GCE Advanced Level) in pre-university education. Similarly, French is medium of education and an obligatory subject in the French sub-system. It is also a compulsory subject in the English sub-system in the same manner as English is a compulsory subject in the French sub-system. The state universities<sup>2</sup> practise immersion education. But here again, French and English are promoted through a compulsory course, bilingual training (*formation bilingue*). This course teaches francophones English and anglophones French. Like many of the other bilingualism schemes that lack practical focus, bilingual training is predominantly an examination-inclined course. Students consider it, more or less, an obstacle to their early completion of a degree. They therefore put much more effort in succeeding in the course rather than actually speaking the other official language.

## 3. Government attitude towards indigenous languages

As early as 1962, barely two years after independence, the government's attention was fully directed at increasing the number of literates in the official languages. This was done through foreign assistance. For instance, after the Ebolowa Conference of 1962, UNESCO funded a nationwide English and French literacy programme. This programme had 7.500 literacy centres and was generally known by its French name "l'Ecole sous l'Arbre"<sup>3</sup> (SIL 1987, Bird 2001). Unfortunately the programme collapsed around 1969 due to the lack of further external funding. Beside this, education in the indigenous languages faced a more challenging set of problems. These problems were made even worse by the general preference by the people (especially in the former British colony) for education in a foreign language rather than in a native language (see Wardhaugh 1987, Amvela 2001, Anchimbe 2006). Todd (1983:163) upholds that British Cameroon used indigenous languages for educational

<sup>2</sup> The only exception is the University of Buea. Apart from the department of French-English bilingual studies, all lectures are done in English. The university is styled on the Anglo-Saxon system of education.

<sup>3</sup> "School under the tree" – Certainly designed to reflect the folk tradition of story telling under trees.

instruction during the first four years of primary education, and English during the last four years. Nevertheless, education in the indigenous languages was still on a steady decline during the British mandate. For example, a total of 7.155 children were enrolled in 299 indigenous language schools in 1927. But thirty-two years later, i.e. in 1959, the number of schools had drastically fallen to six (6) and the number of children had dropped to 191 (Todd 1982:10). This may be taken as an indication that the promotion of indigenous languages was a threat to the colonial administration. It also shows that the colonised people were losing interest in having their children educated in these languages. The colonial administration and the later post-colonial governments therefore found it easy to halt education in these languages. Consequently, as early as 1957 the use of native Cameroonian languages was banned in the British colony, which, contrary to the French colony, had used English together with indigenous languages as medium of education. In the French colony, French was introduced as medium of education right from the primary level. The independent Cameroon, however, returned to the teaching of these languages especially in religious missionary and private high schools and the University of Yaounde.

The use of native languages in education between 1920 and 1957 (colonial period) and 1970 and 1977 (postcolonial period) enhanced the creation and consolidation of tribal identities on them. These identities posed a threat to national identity and the life of the (colonial and postcolonial) state. Since the indigenous languages were taught in schools, the post-independence government – in a bid to check the threat they posed – increased its control over the educational system and thereafter stopped the teaching of these languages (Bird 2001). This control was in some cases violent. In Dschang in 1966, for instance, government authorities seized books, typewriters, a duplicator, and other material from an indigenous language school established by chief Djoumessi. Momo (1997:13) describes the government’s action as “an act of vandalism in a period when the government did not take account of cultural treasure.” The negative attitude of governments towards indigenous languages was similar in much of Africa. According to the Ethiopian king Haile Selassie, ethnic languages constituted a barrier to the successful implementation of “nation-building” projects in Ethiopia. To clear the way, he declared literature in Afaan Oromoo illegal and ensured that existing literature in this language was destroyed (see Bulcha 1997).

Since the late 1990s, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), National Association of Cameroonian Language Communities (NACALCO) and other private and parastatal organisations have paid a lot of attention to native Cameroonian languages. There are over 30 literacy centres now in which indigenous languages are taught to both children and adults. Also, in private and mission-funded schools the indigenous languages of those communities are taught. According to the Operational Research Program for Language Teaching in Cameroon (PROPELCA) 2004 annual report, 193 government schools have already joined in the scheme. As table 2 shows, the number of government schools in which indigenous languages are taught increased from 34 in 2000 to 193 in 2002. As the report insinuates, “if today, the number of public schools in the programme is still 193, this is not really due to a lack of awareness but rather to slow administrative procedures in formally authorising the programme” (p.7). So at all levels, the government is involved in regulating the pace at which instruction in these languages progresses. The role of the government cannot however, be the major reason why these languages are not completely accepted as educational languages. Other reasons (see section 4), which are more determined by the people, are also responsible.

Table 2. Public schools teaching indigenous languages

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of public schools</b>
2000	34
2001	62
2002	193

Although the number of government schools involved in indigenous language education (table 2) is encouraging and the number of children enrolled in these programmes (table 3 below) also fast growing, it is difficult to predict that these languages will be preferred in the near future as sole or major educational languages in place of, or together with, the official languages. Parents and

educational institutions view them differently from linguists. Linguists want to preserve and protect the languages from endangerment and extinction by spreading them to younger speakers. But whereas linguists are preoccupied with the future of the languages, parents, schools, and the state on the other hand are interested in the future of the children who learn them. If the non-Cameroonian languages can help the state achieve its goal of national unity, provide jobs for the youths, then it would normally promote them in spite of the impact this might have on the indigenous linguistic heritage. The difference in the understanding of the relevance of native languages between linguists on the one hand and parents, schools and the state on the other makes the issue an everlasting preoccupation. Until this difference is resolved, emotional statements like Checole's (2000),<sup>4</sup> which actually do not have as great an impact as they are made to appear, would continue to be issued – "If you take away my right to speak my own language by mandating another language as the official language, you pull me out of circulation, you take me out of the dialogue." For several reasons, the main medium of research on African languages has been in the 'mandated' official languages, which contrary to the many African languages rather 'put African researchers into circulation and into the dialogue' internationally and even nationally. This indicates that there are certain other socio-pragmatic obstacles that hinder the complete integration of native languages into the educational system and in the broader spectrum of national and international transaction. Some of them are discussed below.

#### **4. Constraints to native language education**

The first part of this paper provided, although in brief, some of the obvious constraints to the effective use of native Cameroonian languages in education. Among such constraints are: the difference between political and linguistic understanding of the promotion of indigenous languages, the quest for national unity, lack of native language teachers, and the lack of finances for the implementation of the several promising schemes proposed since the 1970s. Previous research (see Chumbow 1996, Mba and Chiatoh 2000, Echu 2003, etc.) has laid the blame on the government for its unmotivated reaction to the issue of indigenous language education. The present paper does not return to the role of the government, but rather dwells on other factors, which caused the government to adopt the position it has taken. These factors are socio-pragmatic and are directly linked to the socio-economic lives of the people.

##### *4.1 The conception of native languages as non-prestigious*

The linguistic impact of colonialism in Africa is felt on two fronts, through "the 'imposition' of colonial languages and [through] the redefined role of African languages" (Makoni and Meinhof 2003:2). The redefinition of the roles of African languages was modelled on similar lines as the redefinition of the African identity by the colonialists. Africa was considered the Dark Continent; blank as a white sheet of paper on which European civilisation had to be written. Similarly, African languages were redefined as media for the transaction of local, home, and primitive culture. The more 'refined' duties of education, law, administration and politics were assigned to the 'educated' colonial languages. And since the colonialist's country served as the model or ideal for the young nation states, this redefinition was carried over and still prevails today in debates on African languages. This is what Samarin (1984:436) refers to as the "linguistic cultural baggage" brought along by colonialists. The indigenous languages are generally treated as low, inadequate, non-prestigious and local languages best suited for use at home, in ethnic or tribal contexts, and in other remote situations; and as odd-sounding noises that can "call the rain" when spoken in public.

Much ink has been spent on this issue, but much of it focused on buying back the prestige of these languages from this colonial-inspired conception. It has ceased to be an issue of social practicality and

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<sup>4</sup> Kassahum Chicole made this statement during the Asmara, Eritrea 2000 conference titled "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literature into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". He was the organiser and publisher of the conference that produced the highly publicised *The Asmara Declaration*, which provides a list of recommendations for the promotion of African languages and literature (see Omoniyi 2003). Although many governments supported the *Asmara Declaration*, very few of its recommendations have been implemented.

has become one of emotional defence of the linguistic heritage. This defence could be seen in the 'prestigious' names given to these languages. In Cameroon, for example, the indigenous languages are called 'national languages' – although none plays any role of national importance; semi-official languages, local official languages – even though none has been declared official. The issue of the potential use of these languages in some of the domains in which the official (ex-colonial) languages are now employed is one of mere speculation. For this reason, the ex-colonial languages are generally termed 'killer languages' whereas the speakers themselves could well be considered 'language killers' because they shift, for socio-economic and pragmatic reasons, to other languages. This brings us to the hapless conclusion that "arguments for the use of 'indigenous' languages are equated with moral uprightness, while the use of English [or any non-African language] is practically necessary, but morally suspicious" (Makoni and Meinhof 2003:9). This limits prospects of, and attempts at, their complete adoption in the educational system even at the primary level to unrealistic requests, especially because as Anchimbe (2006) explains, no functions are clearly dedicated to these languages. Learning them is like learning dead languages (Latin for instance), which serve no real purposes except for research.

#### *4.2 Functional relevance of native languages*

The social stigma on native Cameroonian languages as horrible, unattractive and dangerous elements that can easily "call the rain" when spoken could only disappear if these languages are attributed national or source-of-life functions. As mentioned earlier, these languages have been reduced basically to tools for in-house and intra-tribal communication. Because of this, speaking them out of these contexts is socially and also 'ethically' inappropriate. Even in local communities where the literacy rate in the official languages is low, indigenous languages are not used in such formal contexts as customary courts, hospitals, administrative units, and the media. If no clear attempt is made to integrate them into the socio-economic life of the immediate language community or of the country, then no one will find the need to learn them or recommend them for their children. Alphabets may be designed for them, but like other written languages that got extinct, they would still be endangered and may face extinction.

#### *4.3 Horizon expansion and international promise in ex-colonial languages*

According to Mufwene (2003:1) "languages do not kill languages; speakers do." When speakers give up their languages for more economically and socially promising ones, the languages fall into attrition. It is like "having a population whose members refuse to produce offspring" (Mufwene 2003:1). Many reasons could explain why speakers give up their languages or fail to hand them down to their offspring: lack of teaching facilities, unavailability of other speakers, political or ethnic conflict, identity concealment, and above all the quest for economic survival. Due to the economic strength of certain languages, many speakers of other languages drift towards them. This is exactly what is happening to many Cameroonian languages. Parents prefer to offer their children a broader horizon of international opportunities through education in the ex-colonial official languages rather than 'limiting' them to the indigenous languages. Some of these indigenous languages are spoken only by a few thousand people, are not used in any employment domain, are symbols of inter-ethnic conflict, do not seem to have any chances of becoming officialised given the huge numbers of different indigenous languages, and are generally treated as low and non-prestigious languages (see Adebija 2000, Echu 2003). Chumbow (1996:5) proposes from a psycholinguistic perspective that "the early use of the mother tongue in education has significant long term benefits with respect to maximising the development of the intellectual potential of the child." Although it is not clearly stated how the intellectual potential of the child could be maximised, parents have generally demonstrated negative attitudes towards the use of indigenous languages in the education of their children, especially at an early stage (see Tadadjeu 1996).

Besides the absence of international prospects for these languages, parents fear to have their children taught in an indigenous language different from their own mother tongue. Since the indigenous languages, now reserved for home and ethnic functions, have acquired strong ethnic identities, it

becomes difficult convincing one ethnic group to accept the language of the other. This makes it practically impossible for the over 270 living languages (see *Ethnologue*) to be taught in schools within their specific language communities. On this basis, Njock's (1966) model of "linguistic zones" becomes unacceptable since it calls for the adoption of certain languages to be taught within what he called "linguistic zones". Tadjadjeu's (1975) "extensive trilingualism" also becomes a huge burden given that each language will have to provide teachers for it to be taught within its community. It will be tantamount to spreading these languages each only among its regular speakers who could normally acquire them at home. As a result, there will be no impact on both the educational system and the state at large. Considerations of this nature, which are based on ensuring peaceful cohabitation of different ethnic groups within the same country, simply show how difficult it is to achieve indigenous language education not only in Cameroon but in most other Sub-Saharan African countries.

#### *4.4 Political priority – not strengthening an ethnic group by promoting its language*

The adoption of ex-colonial languages as official languages by African countries at independence was not so much a matter of choice but one dependent on the immediately available language. All of those who assumed administration of the former colonies were trained in the colonial languages and in most cases in the colonial countries. They were not trained or educated in any of the African languages that could at this point be adopted as official language. The school, government, political system and even the linguistic map were all built on colonial foundations. It therefore became difficult, even decades after colonialism ended, to pick one or more African languages to assume the role of first official language. This difficulty is fuelled by the desire to maintain, especially in the case of Cameroon, political stability, regional equilibrium and national unity and integration. According to political thinking, the teaching of certain indigenous languages in schools could empower their ethnic groups thereby raising them above other groups.

This firm position which led to the abolition of indigenous language education in Cameroon was perhaps ignited by certain factors. As early as 1966, College Libermann, a private secondary school in Douala, taught indigenous languages – particularly Duala and Basa'a. A few years later, other private and mission schools like Chevreuil, Retraite, Mimetala and Le Sillon, followed. Between 1970 and 1977, Duala, Basa'a, Ewondo, Bulu, Fulfulde and Fe'efe'e were taught in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics of the University of Yaounde. By the end of 1977, the teaching of these languages was abruptly suppressed due to increasing fear that groups whose languages were not taught could revolt (Chumbow 1996:6-7). Such a revolt could put to risk the up-to-now successful coexistence of the over 200 ethnic groups found in the country. To completely annihilate prospects of one or more indigenous languages rising above the others, the recommendations of the National Council for Cultural Affairs held in Yaounde (18-22 December 1974) were adopted. The indigenous languages of the country were henceforth to be called 'national languages' since they were the heritage of the country and not of the particular ethnic groups that used them. The message borne in this label is basically that these languages are equal in status, have equal status within the institutions of state and deserve equal attention. This is evident in the attribution of time-space for broadcasts in these languages over the provincial radio stations of the Cameroon Radio and Television Corporation (CRTV). This essentially shifted focus from the teaching and promotion of these languages in education to their status as national heritages.

#### *4.5 Quest for ethnic equality in the choice of neutral languages*

The government's strategy to avoid empowering ethnic groups by adopting their languages in official functions, teaching or using them as medium of education in schools was also aimed at achieving equality between ethnic groups. It was intended to level all social mountains and stifle all complexes that this could provoke. In order to make this more effective, the government progressively supported and ensured the spread of the official languages, which being foreign to the country, are neutral in this potential linguistic battle. The national integration scheme through bilingualism received much support from the state. As table 1 above indicates, almost half of the weekly teaching time (41.67% of 30 hours) is allocated to the teaching of the official languages. This extensive promotion of

the official languages is intended, as Kouega (2003:419) points out, to force education in the indigenous to stall. The official languages are used at all levels of education, are examination subjects (both written and oral) for school leaving certificates, and are above all medium of education.

The promotion of English and French is consistent with the policy of state bilingualism adopted at independence. This policy according to Ahmadou Ahidjo (1964) was “an acquirement of the universal civilisation to which we belong [...] and [...] could transform our country into the catalyst of African unity.” Bilingualism, although inconsistently pursued (see Fonlon 1969, Tchoungui 1982, 1983, Kouega 1999, Echu 2003, Anchimbe 2006) reduced tremendously chances of multilingualism models being implemented. To Chumbow (1980:297) “there has been no clear knowledge of the destination of English-French bilingualism in Cameroon and consequently no clear knowledge of the best way to get there.” This aside, more government decrees have been signed in favour of these official languages than the in support of the indigenous languages.

#### *4.6 Impracticability of pedagogic and language planning schemes*

Many schemes have been designed to include indigenous languages in the educational system in Cameroon. These include the “extensive trilingualism”<sup>5</sup> of Tadadjeu (1975), the creation of “linguistic zones” proposed by Njock (1966), and the early vernacular education model of Chumbow (1980). Unfortunately none of them has been officially adopted by the government. In Cameroon, the promulgation of proposed bills into laws and decrees is only an administrative procedure. Such laws or decrees do not get applied until texts of application are signed for them. This makes it possible for laws to be applied sometimes a decade after they are signed or promulgated. It also becomes possible for many plausible schemes to be abandoned on the shelves even though they have been approved. As far as education in the indigenous languages and the teaching of these languages are concerned, two of such laws or decrees can be quoted. In 1998 the national assembly passed a bill reorganising education in Cameroon. This bill recommended the teaching of indigenous languages in schools in the country. The bill was successfully promulgated into law N° 004 of April 1998 by the Head of State (see Mba and Chiatoh 2000, Echu 2003). Unfortunately, it has not yet gone operational due to the absence of texts of application, which generally lay down the practical modalities for their implementation. It cannot be predicted when the Ministry of National Education will come up with such a text. In a similar vein, the recommendations of the 1995 *Etats Généraux de l'Education* (General Conference on Education) about the teaching of indigenous languages are still to be applied. This conference, it should be noted, was attended by language planning experts from both the public and private sector and was expected to propose lasting changes to the educational system of the country. Unfortunately, all of the recommendations made then are still waiting, ten years after, for texts of application.

### **5. Outcome of some native language literacy programmes**

In spite of the somewhat gloomy picture above, there is some light inside the tunnel. The Operational Research Program for Language Teaching in Cameroon (PROPELCA) schools around the country get more and more children each year. Already in its Generalisation-2 phase, the PROPELCA project has ensured among other things, the harmonisation of writing systems of Cameroonian languages (in 1979), the implementation of several projects on Experimental Mother Tongue Literacy and Education (1983-2001), and the standardisation of many Cameroonian languages. It is gaining ground in its adult literacy schemes, teacher training projects, and school projects. As table 3 shows, the number of children enrolled in schools offering PROPELCA indigenous language literacy has constantly increased. Except for 2002 the other years have witnessed significant increases. If only a third of the children who enrol in primary schools nationwide is exposed to indigenous language

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<sup>5</sup> This model calls for the development and subsequent inclusion of most Cameroonian languages in education. According to it, all children who pass through the education system should normally be literate in a native Cameroon language and the two official languages. It classifies the native languages into three groups: the major languages – those with more than 100.000 speakers; the medium languages – 50.000 and 99.000 speakers; and the peripheral languages – less than 10.000 speakers (see Tadadjeu 1975 and Gfeller 2000:134).

education over a period of ten years, then these languages will have higher chances of being adopted at least partially as medium of instruction.

Table 3. Children enrolled in PROPELCA schools

Year	Number of children
2000	25.525
2001	35.776
2002	22.961
2003	38.190
Total	122.452

If the other PROPELCA programmes like “Discover Your Language” (DYL) launched between 1988 and 1990 are taken into account, then the number of people learning to read their native languages will be quite high. It would mean therefore that prospective schemes for the use of native languages in education would have adequate grass root backing – if at all government priorities will not drown them.

## 6. Conclusion

Although many things have been touched lightly in this paper, it is important to signal that the Cameroonian native languages face several socio-economic and pragmatic constraints that make it difficult for them to be adopted fully as instruction languages in education. Besides the political quest for stability and national integration, these languages have to be adapted to the needs of the people who must use them. In spite of the many languages, if some were to be empowered with socio-economic opportunities, speakers of other languages would eventually drift towards them. There might be a period of protest or rejection but when the economic importance of these languages definitely becomes clear, people will learn them and accept them as icons of national life. Identities are built on indigenous languages because these languages serve as borderlines for the ethnic groups that use them. If these borderlines are shared through the spread of these languages to other groups, such reclusive identities may disappear or submerge into larger ones. Multilingualism in itself is not *dangerous* to national unity. It is how it is interpreted that makes linguistic groups to compete and conflict with one another. Languages as tools for communication could coexist peacefully if speakers accept them as normal facets of the society and not as possessions of given groups, whose values they may or may not share. If this conception prevails in Cameroon, then the inclusion of indigenous languages in education would be more realistic.

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edited by Olaoba F. Arasanyin  
and Michael A. Pemberton

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