

The Effects of French on English L2 in Cameroon

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Introduction

This paper discusses the effects, at the lexical level, of French on English in Cameroon, a Central African state. The work is divided into three sections, labelled use of English in Cameroon (1), survey instrument and data (2), and analysis and discussion of findings (3).

1. Use of English in Cameroon

Cameroon, a Central African state sharing a long border with Nigeria to the west and the Central African Republic to the east, is a medium-sized state of some 475,000 km² where live over sixteen million people. In the New Englishes literature, it is classified as a West African country together with Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Gambia (Todd 1982, Gortlach 1991, McArthur 1999). In this country, several scores of languages co-exist, namely two official languages, that is French and English, three major lingua francas, namely Pidgin English, Fulfulde and Ewondo Populaire (Koenig 1983) and a multitude of over 200 diverse indigenous languages (Chia 1983). Historically, the country was a German territory; after the First World War, the colony was divided between France and England, which were called upon to administer and develop their respective share. Expectedly, French became the language of administration in the francophone region, which represented 4/5 of the territory, and so did English in the anglophone region.

When French Cameroon became independent in 1960, it maintained French as its official language. In 1961, anglophone Cameroon decided in a referendum to reunite with francophone Cameroon as they were in the German period, and the two states therefore adopted both French and English as the joint official languages of the federal state. Since then, the two languages have maintained their official status, and have been co-habiting in all official domains within the community (Kouega 1999). In the domain of education, for example, anglophone children attend English-medium schools where they take up French as a compulsory subject, and francophone children go to French-medium schools where English is a compulsory subject. Since the year 2000, the second official language is taught as a subject from the first day of primary education. In the media, radio and TV programs as well as newspaper articles in French alternate with those in English. This same pattern is likely to be observed in other domains of public life. One consequence of this co-habitation between French and English in the country is the fact that each of these languages is affected by the other in various ways, which have not as yet been investigated fully. The present paper focuses on the effects of French on the lexis of English in the country.

2. Survey instrument and data

The textual material collected for this study is both written and spoken. The written material comes from five major sources namely private and official correspondence, past dissertations and research articles on Cameroon English (Mbangwana 1989, Simo Bobda 1994, Menang 1991 to name only these few), private and official newspapers, literary productions by Cameroonian writers (like Bate Besong, Kemjo Jumban), the Official Gazette (which is a magazine recording the daily activities of the State in French and English) and the Cameroon English Corpus, compiled in 1993 as part of the International English Corpus (ICE). The spoken material comes from a variety of regular radio and TV programmes. With the assistance of English language experts in the country, the present researcher identified several hundreds of lexical items in this impressive material, some of which had already been

cited in past research works. The words thus identified were classified into their respective semantic fields such as army, education, sports and the like.

The next stage in the exercise consisted in checking the degree of integration of the items in the Cameroon variety of English. The technique adopted was that of sentence construction: informants were given a small sample of five to ten words and were asked to construct sentences with them. An inspection of the first returns showed that there was a need to control a number of variables such as level of education, gender, place of residence in the country, province of origin, age and occupation. It was observed that level of education and occupation were the most significant variables for this study. Consequently, all informants were chosen with these two variables in mind. To be more specific, each potential informant was to meet the following two requirements: a) be an English-speaking Cameroonian holding at least a GCE O'Level diploma (obtained in Grade 12), or a French-English bilingual Cameroonian having studied at postgraduate level in an English-speaking University, and b) have a job in – or be familiar with – a sector related to a specific lexical domain such as finance, health and the like.

The sentence construction exercise revealed two interesting facts. First, some words used in newspapers and literary works are rejected by the informants, who propose standard English equivalents like “disponibility” (availability), “dateline” (deadline), “correct a script” (mark a script), “sensibilise people” (sensitize people). The words cited as illustrations in this work are recognized and accepted by at least 80% of the informants: they actually constructed meaningful sentences with them, and these sentences conveyed the same meanings as the original sentences from which they were extracted. The remaining 20% include cases where some informants proposed alternative words or simply skipped some of them. Secondly, English in Cameroon is influenced by two major languages. Pidgin English, a widespread lingua franca (Mbangwana 1983) donates three categories of items, namely words which are specific to Cameroon Pidgin such as “kanda” (cow hide), “quacha” (an alcoholic drink), “buga” (dried herring), words from West African Pidgin (Jowitt 1991) such as “egusi” (melon seed), “akara” (beans cake), “chinchin” (fried cakes) and “dodo” (fried plantain chips); and words from Cameroon indigenous languages such as “nchinda” (private secretary of a chief), “kaba” (women’s gown) and “njanga” (cray fish). Incidentally, it was found that all borrowings from indigenous Cameroonian languages enter Cameroon English via Cameroon Pidgin. The present study focuses on borrowings from French.

3. Analysis and discussion of the findings

In most countries where English functions as a second language, its lexicon is enriched by a variety of integrated lexical innovations. These innovations are the outcome of a number of word-formation processes such as compounding, affixation, functional shift, clipping, borrowing and others listed in the literature (see among others Potter 1976, Wallace 1981, Bauer 1983, Quirk et al 1985, Cruse 1986, Crystal 1987). Examples drawn from three New Englishes of Africa and Asia, namely Ghanaian English (Dako 2001), Pakistani English (Baumgardner 1998) and Cameroon English are cited below to illustrate each of these processes:

compounding

a) *childlifter*: thief, kidnapper (Pakistan)

b) *blowman*: hero in a film (Ghana)

c) *bride price*: money and property given by the bridegroom’s family to the in-laws in exchange for their daughter (Cameroon)

affixation

a) *denter*: car body technician

b) *chewer*: single man/woman with no companion of the opposite sex

c) *downer* (floor): lower floor in a storey building

functional shift

a) *influential* (noun): a person of influence

b) *against* (noun): opposition

c) *pregnant* (verb): make pregnant

clipping

- a) *supple*: supplementary examinations
- b) *demo*: demonstration
- c) *off* (a radio): to switch off a radio (as in: Can you *off* that radio, please!)

borrowing

- a) *shoora*: advice (borrowed from Urdu)
- b) *bronya*: Christmas (borrowed from the Akan language)
- c) *nchinda*: private secretary of a traditional ruler (borrowed from the Grassfield tribal languages of Cameroon)

As these examples above show, similar word formation processes operate in most non-native English countries.

One of these processes, namely borrowing, deserves special attention. Generally, borrowed words come from the widespread local languages of a community, like Akan in Ghana (West Africa) and Urdu in Pakistan (South Asia). In Cameroon, however, borrowing comes not only from the widespread local languages, but also and most importantly, from French, the dominant official language. Actually, the system of government in this country is French-based; generally, official documents are conceived in French and then translated into English, with the French version alone being legally binding. This situation is reflected in the lexis of this country's English, which includes a sizeable proportion of French loans and French-sounding words. These features are captured below under the labels direct loan (3.1) and loan translation (3.2).

3.1. Direct loan

French loans abound in various domains of the official life of the country. In the domain of administration for example, the French word “*demande d'explication*” is generally used in place of its English equivalent “query”. Similar loans are attested in the domain of politics, finance, law, army, health and the like, as can be inferred from the illustrations below:

Administration and politics

- *demande d'explication*: query

The director gave me a *demande d'explication* this morning because yesterday I left the office before closing time

- *opposant*: a member of a political party other than the ruling one

Finance:

- *decharger* a file: certify that one has collected one's file from a given office

Where is the director's secretariat? I want to *decharger* my file.

- *bordereau*: mail enclosure slip

Law and police

- *procureur*: magistrate appointed by presidential decree to act as a public prosecutor in a court

My classmate was nominated *procureur* at the Buea first instance court (note the use of “nominated” in place of “appointed”, which is accounted for below)

- *commissaire divisionnaire*: highest grade in the police force

- *greffier*: court clerk

Army

- *adjudant-chef*: non-commissioned Army officer

- *commandant*: head of a gendarmes' office

Public service and health

- *concours*: competitive examination

Some university graduates write more than five *concours* in a year and of course they keep on failing

- *accoucheur*: male or female maternity ward nurse

The Yaounde school of nursing trains *accoucheurs*, nurses and pharmacists.

Post-office

- BP (French abbreviation for Boîte Postale): PO Box (post-office box)

- *mandat*: post-office money order

One of the documents for the *concours* is a 5,000 Francs *mandat* to be made payable to the Registrar.

Education

- *capacité*: certificate issued by a law faculty and equated with the British GCE A Level
- *licence*: bachelor's degree, obtained in Cameroon after three years of university education

She got the *licence* after four years because she repeated Year Two.

Transport and housing

- *dependence*: small apartment built behind a residence to house one's dependants and occasionally one's tenants
- *vignette*: road tax disc

The price of *vignette* has been put up. Small cars are now to pay what trailers used to pay.

A close look at these direct loans shows that they are used in Cameroon English to solve at least four major linguistic problems. First, they are used to designate objects and concepts for which the English language does not have a name, like *capacite* (certificate issued by a law faculty and equated with the British GCE A level). Secondly, they are used when the English term for an object or concept does not describe it effectively or is less expressive, like *accoucheur*, which refers to both a female and a male midwife. Thirdly, they are used when an English term is too wordy or is lengthier than its loan counterpart, as can be illustrated by *concours* (competitive examination). Fourthly, they are used to facilitate effective and quick communication between the francophone and anglophone members of the community. Actually, the insertion of French terms in English structures tends to facilitate their comprehensibility. To take just one example, sentence a) below is less effective in the Cameroon English context than sentence b):

a) Where do you keep the mail enclosure slip in this office?

b) Where do you keep the *bordereau* in this office?

Here, the French loan *bordereau* is likely to be understood by francophone and anglophone users, whereas "mail enclosure slip" may not make sense even to some anglophone users.

3.2. Loan translation

Loan translation is a word formative process which consists in forming a new word by translating word for word the individual parts of a lexeme. An example is the German term "Fernsprecher" cited by Crystal (1987: 330), which includes "fern" (distant) and "sprecher" (speaker). In Cameroon English, this process does not only yield words which are literal translations from French, like "minister of State" (<French: ministre d'état), "assistant nurse" (<French: infirmier adjoint). It also causes most French and English cognates to be used as equivalents, irrespective of their meanings. Hence, the Standard English words "direction", "controller", "align" and "lieutenant" are instantly used as equivalents for the French words "direction", "controleur", "aligner" and "lieutenant", which is what Nash et al (1996) refer to as deceptive cognates in their Puerto Rican English corpus. Needless to say that such translations sometimes interfere with existing words, like "secretary of state", which renders the French word "secrétaire d'état" and therefore differs from the standard word "secretary of state". Below are cited two words identified in each of the institutionalised semantic domains listed. The sentences illustrating these words are constructed by the informants, unless otherwise specified.

Administration

- *decision* (<Fr. decision): work contract for low level state employees like drivers, cleaners, porters and the like

Immediately his *decision* was signed, he took up duties and since then, he has been receiving his salary every month

- *nominate* (<Fr. nommer): appoint

Mr Awanti is *nominated* chief of service in the direction of General Affairs (Mr Awanti is appointed service head of Personnel Office)

Finance

- align a child (<Fr. aligner un enfant): to register the birth of a child so as to be granted family allowances

Civil servants rush to *align their children* so that their taxes are reduced

- financial controller (<Fr. controleur financier): state auditor

The former treasurer was appointed *financial controller* of the Ministry of Agriculture

- receiver (<Fr. receveur): State revenue paymaster for a second level territory unit

If you can't cash your pay voucher, why don't you go to the treasury and talk to the *receiver*

Territory management

- sub-prefect (<Fr. sous-prefet): officer in charge of a third level territory unit

Inhabitants of Furu Awa in Menchum Division were recently shocked and scandalised to discover a gendarme, Atangana, making love to the wife of a catechist in the church.

He (the catechist) alerted the Brigade Commander and the *Sub-prefect* who had been drinking with Atangana in the nearby bar. (The Herald newspaper, No 277, 1996, p. 5)

- first class chief (<Fr. chef de premier degre): official grade of traditional rulers administering a large community of people or tribes

Politics

- delegation/delegate (<Fr. delegation/delegue): branch of government employment which handles, at the level of a province, the affairs of a given State department/government official in charge of the affairs of a department in a given province

The former head of the Examinations service was recently appointed *delegate* at the Littoral provincial *delegation* for education

- political bureau (<Fr. bureau politique): highest executive body of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement party, whose president has been ruling the country since 1982

Law

- co-wife (<Fr. co-epouse): wife in a polygamous set-up

The secretary phoned this morning to tell you that her *co-wife* got a baby last night and that she was attending to her, so she may not come to work today

- supreme court (<Fr. court supreme): highest level court situated in the country's capital

Police

- life certificate (<Fr. certificat de vie): certificate issued by a superintendent of police to attest that an individual is alive (affidavit?)

As for your family allowance file, you should include the birth certificate of each child and a *life certificate*, which can be obtained from the nearest police station

- senior peace officer (<Fr. officier de la paix principal): senior prison warder

Army

- brigade (<Fr. brigade): a gendarme station in a town

The assailants attacked ... a gendarmerie territorial *brigade* where its *commandant*, Samaki, was shot dead and arms carted away (The Witness Newspaper, No 087, 8 April 1997, p. 7)

- company of gendarmerie (<Fr. compagnie de gendarmerie): gendarme station in a small locality

Public service

- decision worker (<Fr. agent decisionnaire): low-ranking State employee such as drivers, cleaners, night-watchmen

He is a *decision worker*, not a civil servant

- reclassification (<Fr. reclassement): promotion of a State employee to a higher grade within his/her corps

Since I graduated, I have not compiled my *reclassification* file.

Health

- sanitary technician (<Fr. technicien sanitaire): one of the three classes of medical personnel in the country, the two others being those of doctors and of nurses

- developed health centre (<Fr. centre de sante developpe): public medical establishment run by a State registered nurse, assisted by a non-resident general practitioner

Post-office

- rural mobile post-office (<Fr. poste automobile rurale): vehicle offering post-office services at regular intervals in rural areas
- taxed letter (<Fr. lettre taxee): posted letter, the postage of which will be paid for by the sendee when collecting the letter (it operates the same as reverse charge telephone calls)

Education

- third cycle doctorate (<Fr. doctorat de troisieme cycle): university certificate below the Ph.D. and above the Master's degree
- special semester (<Fr. semestre special): re-sit examinations session, which generally takes place around the month of September in State universities

Decorations

- grand chancellery (<Fr. grande chancellerie)::presidency office in charge of decorations
- order of valour (<Fr. ordre du merite): decorations awarded citizens who have distinguished themselves in the domains of sports, defence etc

Sports

- prolongation (<Fr. prolongation): extra time
The match ended in a draw, and so the teams had to play *prolongation* for thirty more minutes
- interpool (<Fr. interpoule): football tournament on completion of which the three top teams of the ten involved are promoted to the Cameroon Football Premiership
- median line (<Fr. ligne mediane): halfway line in a football pitch

Transport and housing

- enclaved (area) (<Fr. region enclavee): landlocked (area)
The minister promised to build new roads in all *enclaved* areas.
- villa (<Fr. villa): modern detached house which is enclosed in a fence and is generally located in a top-drawer residential area of big towns.
- caution (<Fr. caution): money given to a landlord by a tenant and which will be refunded when the tenant quits the house; guarantee, security
- duplex (<Fr. duplex): refers to either a house with rooms on two floors with an inner staircase or a sequence of two houses sharing one of the walls

As can be inferred from the illustrations above, the process of loan translation is used in Cameroon English to satisfy at least three major linguistic needs.

Firstly, it is used to fill a cultural gap, as can be illustrated by the word *co-wife*, which designates wives in a polygamous household. Native English cultures are inherently monogamous, so no provision is made in the language to refer to this practice. As the French language has a word for it, this French word is translated literally into English (co-wife: <Fr. co-epouse).

Secondly, loan translation is used when an English cognate word, because of its similarity with a French word, is chosen as the equivalent of this French word, irrespective of context of use. Such choices have extended the list of French and English false friends in Cameroon. To take just one example, the English word “prolongation” is adopted as the equivalent of the French football term “prolongation”, that is “extra time”. In the table below are entered a few other illustrations:

<i>Cameroon English words</i>	<i>French source words</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
prolongation	prolongation	extra time
brigade	brigade	a gendarme station/office
caution	caution	security, guaranty
dispensary	dispensaire	pharmacy
enclaved	enclave(e)	landlocked
prefect/prefet	prefet	head of a second level territory unit

Thirdly, loan translation is used to facilitate communication between the anglophone and francophone communities of the country. In fact, an English structure interspersed with loan translation words is potentially easier for francophones to comprehend – and to produce – than one with standard words and expressions. Actually, the use of native and colloquial terms can blur communication with

francophones and can eventually lead to antagonistic behaviour. Below are a few French-sounding words which seem to have supplanted their standard equivalents:

<i>Cameroon English words</i>	<i>French source word</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
align a child	aligner un enfant	to register the birth of a child
life certificate	certificat de vie	affidavit (?)
median line	ligne mediane	halfway line

Conclusion

This paper has examined an aspect of the influence of French on English in Cameroon. These two languages, which share official status in the country, have been evolving peacefully for close to half a century today. Thanks to this peaceful co-habitation, the two languages have been affecting each other in various ways, one of which is the incorporation into Cameroon English of French words by way of direct loan and loan translation. Direct loans abound in public domains like administration, finance, health and the like, and are used to solve a number of linguistic problems such as the naming of new objects and concepts, the re-naming of known things in a more expressive way, the preference of shorter names for concepts designated by longer terms, and the desire to achieve effective communication. Similarly, loan translation terms, which are literal translations into English of French words, tend to be used in three major contexts: when a cultural gap is observed and needs filling, when similarity in structure and etymology misleads users, who end up taking a false friend for a standard word, and when users decide to communicate in a way that is comprehensible to both anglophone and francophone interlocutors. It is this co-habitation which has shaped Cameroon English and given it the characteristic stamp which distinguishes it from other New Englishes.

Appendices

Appendix 1. French loans cited

<i>French loans</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
- accoucheur:	male or female maternity ward nurse
- adjudant-chef:	non-commissioned army officer
- bordereau:	mail enclosure slip
- BP (abbreviation for Boîte Postale):	PO Box (post-office box)
- capacité (en droit):	certificate issued by a law faculty and equated with the British GCE A level
- commandant:	head of a gendarmes' office
- commissaire divisionnaire:	highest grade in the police force
- concours:	competitive examination
- decharger a file:	certify that one has collected one's file from a given office
- demande d'explication:	query
- dependance:	small apartment built behind a residence to house one's dependants and occasionally one's tenants
- greffier:	court clerk
- licence:	bachelor's degree, obtained in Cameroon after three years of university education
- mandat:	post-office money order
- opposant:	a member of a political party other than the ruling one
- procureur:	magistrate appointed by presidential decree to act as a public prosecutor in a court
- vignette:	road tax disc

Appendix 2. Loan translation terms cited

<i>Cameroon English words</i>	<i>French source words</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
align a child	aligner un enfant	register the birth of a child so as to be granted family allowances
assistant nurse	infirmier adjoint	a state registered nurse of a lower category
brigade	brigade	a gendarme station in a town
caution	caution	guaranty, security
company of gendarmerie	compagnie de gendarmerie	a gendarme station in a small locality
controller (financial)	controleur	state auditor (?)
co-wife	co-epouse	term used by a woman to refer to another woman with whom she legally shares the same husband and, usually, the same house
decision	decision	work contract for low level state employees
decision worker	agent decisionnaire	a low level state employee like a driver, cleaner, etc
delegate	delegue	Government official in charge of a “delegation”
delegation	delegation	branch of government employment which handles, at the level of a province, the affairs of a given state department
developed health centre	centre de sante developpe	public medical establishment run by a state registered nurse, assisted by a non-resident general practitioner
direction	direction	office at the third level of the organization chart of government departments, below “secretariat-general” and above “sub-direction”
dispensary	dispensaire	medical establishment run by a state registered nurse
duplex	duplex	a house with rooms on two floors with an inner staircase or a sequence of two houses sharing one wall
enclaved (- area)	enclavee (region)	Landlocked
first class chief	chef de premier degre	official grade of traditional ruler administering a large community of people
grand chancellery	grande chancellerie	presidency office in charge of decorations
interpool	interpoule	football tournament on completion of

		which the three top teams of the ten involved are promoted to the Cameroon Football Premiership
life certificate	certificat de vie	(affidavit?)
median line	ligne mediane	halfway line
minister of State	ministre d'Etat	a chief minister in a government
nominate	nommer	to appoint
order of valour	ordre du merite	decorations awarded citizens who have distinguished themselves in the domains of sports, defence etc
political bureau	bureau politique	highest executive body of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement party
prefect/prefet	prefet	officer in charge of a second level territory unit
prolongation	prolongation	extra time in football
receiver	receveur	state revenue paymaster for a second level territory unit
reclassification	reclassement	promotion of a state employee to a higher grade within his/her corps
rural mobile post-office	poste automobile rurale	vehicle offering post-office services at regular intervals in rural areas
sanitary technician	technicien sanitaire	class of health specialists including physiotherapists and laboratory technicians
secretaire d'etat	secretary of state	executive officer below a government minister and above a secretary-general
senior peace officer	officier de la paix principal	prison warder below a "major peace officer" and above a "peace officer"
special semester	semestre special	re-sit examinations session in state universities
sub-prefect	sous-prefet	officer in charge of a third level territory unit (see "prefet")
supreme court	court supreme	highest level court in the country
taxed letter	lettre taxee	a posted letter, the postage of which is to be paid for by the sendee
third cycle doctorate	doctorat de troisieme cycle	a university certificate below the Ph.D. and above the Master's degree

villa

villa

modern detached house which is enclosed in a fence and is generally located in a top-drawer residential area of big towns

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