

Revisiting Some Linguistic Concepts and Beliefs in the Light of the Sociolinguistic Situation of Cameroon

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider, in the context of the uniquely complex language situation of Cameroon, some concepts, beliefs and assumptions inspired by other societies which do not have the same linguistic landscape. The paper thus revisits, for example, the concept of *mother tongue* and related issues, factors in the acquisition of a second language, patterns of language interference, mixing and switching, and language use for inner expression by a multilingual individual.

1. The exceptional complexity of the sociolinguistic situation of Cameroon

The linguistic landscape of Cameroon has a unique complexity, hardly paralleled by that of any other country in the world. Obviously not by that of Canada, where English and French are used in eight basically monolingual English-speaking provinces, one French-speaking province, respectively, and one bilingual province; not by that of Switzerland, where four languages, German, French, Italian and Romansch are spoken in four territorially monolingual regions (Hoffman 1991:14); not by that of many Asian and African countries, where one colonial language is used over a spectrum or some scores or hundreds of local languages. Indeed, the language situation of Cameroon is not paralleled even by that of neighbouring Nigeria, a country of 130 million inhabitants, which has, in addition to English and Pidgin, over 400 languages. Cameroon differs from Nigeria in several ways. First, Cameroon has about 260 languages, which means a language to 57, 000 inhabitants, compared with one to 325, 000 in Nigeria; it can safely be argued that the smaller the ratio between the number of languages and the population, the more complex the landscape. Cameroon further differs from Nigeria because of the extra burden of two exoglossic languages (English and French) that it has to manage.

In this kind of landscape, Cameroonians live *with* far more languages than elsewhere, which means that there is more interaction between these languages than between languages in a different landscape. A typical Anglophone Cameronian in Yaounde the capital, for example, speaks *naturally* and *normally* the following languages *daily*: one or more home languages (HLs), Pidgin English (PE), English and French. It is this language use and distribution that Tanyi (1978:10) captures as follows in the response of an Anglophone child to an interview:

“I talk country talk with my mother.

I talk Pidgin and country talk with my sister and brothers.

I talk French when I play with my friends.

I talk English and Pidgin at school”.

[talk = speak]

The words *naturally*, *normally* and *daily* are highlighted above to show that this pattern of language use is typical and representative, and differs from the untypical and unrepresentative cases of polyglots or persons living in other rare multilingual settings in the world which may not be a reflection of the whole country in which they live.

The language situation of Cameroon is further compounded by the total absence of a language policy which would regulate the use of the languages. This absence compels each language to fend for itself, and this creates more confusion.

2. Discussion of some concepts and beliefs

2.1. The notions of “mother tongue / first language / native language” in the Cameroonian context

The notions of “mother tongue / first language / native language” and related concepts are among the most commonly used in language teaching and learning, and other fields of applied linguistics. Although these expressions suggest different things and in fact are different from their very composition, Richards *et al* (1992) note that they are often used interchangeably in the literature. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981:18) proposes the following definitions for the concept of “mother tongue”, according to criteria associated with particular disciplines (Table 1):

Table 1: Definitions of “mother tongue” according to Skutnabb-Kangas (1981:13)

Criterion	Definition of “mother tongue”	Discipline
Origin	the language one learnt first (the language in which one established one’s first lasting communication relationship)	sociology
Competence	the language one knows best	linguistics
Function	the language one uses most	sociolinguistics
Attitudes	the language one identifies with (internal identification)	social psychology psychology of the individual
	the language one is identified as a native speaker of by other people (external identification)	social psychology sociology
(automacy) (world view)	(the language one counts in, thinks in, dreams in writes a diary in, writes poetry in, etc.)	Popular conceptions

Following these definitions, all the types of languages used in Cameroon can be a mother tongue on the basis of each criterion. For example, French, like a given HL, or PE, or English, would be a mother tongue from the criterion of origin, competence, function, attitudes, and automacy / world view. Another reading of the chart is that, since each definition tends to be exclusive, an individual can generally have only one “mother tongue” according to each criterion, but can have several mother tongues for several criteria. Thus, someone’s mother tongue could be a HL because their first communication was in it, French or English because it is the language they know best, and so on. In fact, this loose definition could even accommodate non-official foreign languages used by Cameroonians like German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, etc., which are the languages some of them know best. Note that the principle of exclusiveness does not apply to the criterion of automacy and world view, since many informants report that they express themselves in the private domains indicated here in several tongues, as will be seen below.

Baker (1996:16) also recognizes that the expression “mother tongue” is used “ambiguously” in the literature. He states the following as its various meanings: (a) the language learnt from the mother; (b) the first language learnt, irrespective of ‘from whom’; the stronger language at any time in life; (c) the ‘mother tongue’ of the area or country (e.g. Irish in Ireland); (d) the language most used by a person; the language to which a person has the more positive attitude and affection [Baker refers the reader to Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1989].

Following Baker’s definitions too, a typical Cameroonian will generally have several “mother tongues” depending on the parameters chosen. The first “mother tongues” that come to mind are the local languages (or HLs). PE is also a mother tongue in many parts of Cameroon, considering some or all of Baker’s five parameters. In fact, PE in several areas enjoys the full status of a Creole, and the

distinction made in the traditional literature between PE in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon on the one hand (supposedly a pidgin, not a Creole) and Krio in Sierra Leone (a Creole), for example, is unfounded; the status and functions of Krio in Sierra Leone are, in most respects, comparable with what obtains with PE in the PE-speaking parts of Nigeria and Cameroon. Finally, the exoglossic languages, also referred to in the literature as received languages (RLs), are the “mother tongues” to a large number of Cameroonians, especially in the urban centers, considering again some, or all of Baker’s criteria.

The examination of the status of French and English in Cameroon (in fact in all other African or Asian countries where English or French is the official language) takes us to the distinction often made in English or French language teaching between a native speaker and a non-native speaker. The traditional distinction excludes the African and Asian from the rights and privileges of a native speaker of English and French, no matter how much knowledge of, or how much exposure to, the colonial language he or she shows. For example, Simo Bobda (2002) shows, African and Asian users of English are discriminated against in ELT staff recruitment, and are subjected to English proficiency tests sometimes conducted by far less proficient European and American examiners. The notion of “native speaker” in ELT has a genetic, rather than a linguistic connotation.

Our findings in the field reveal that there are still many unexplored emotional, psychological, sociological and other correlates of the concept of “mother tongue” in Africa in general, and Cameroon in particular. For example, there should be something particular about the “mother tongue”, when this mother tongue happens to be the first language learnt, and the language of the mother. Otherwise, how would we explain the fact that, although Bulu is by no means now the language that Informant of Case No 3 knows best, or the language that he uses mostly frequently, it is the only language that survived when he was struck by partial aphasia?

2.2 *Factors in the acquisition of a second language*

Several differing factors, often supported by studies with conflicting findings, are advanced in the literature as influential in the acquisition of another language. The ones we are going to consider here are age, one of the most important, and the situation of learning. How significantly do these factors influence / determine the ultimate level of achievement?

The debate with regard to age is whether there is a *critical period* for the acquisition of another language and, if so, when it ends (Ellis 1994:34). The most notable statements supporting the critical period hypothesis include Long (1990) and Scovel (1988), quoted by Ellis (1994). Long’s study shows that the acquisition of a native-like accent is not possible by learners who begin learning after the age of 6. He further advances that it is difficult to acquire native-like grammatical competence after puberty. Scovel’s (1988) study, somewhat different, argues that the critical age for native-like pronunciation is around 12 years of age. Those who refute the critical period hypothesis include Neufeld (1977,1978, 1979), Birdsong (1992) and Thompson (1991), also cited by Ellis. Neufeld’s studies show that, under the right conditions, adults can achieve native ability, even in pronunciation, the most difficult aspect of for adults. Birdsong’s work, which used the grammaticality judgement test, did not find any significant difference between the judgements of adult non-native and native speakers. Thompson’s study of foreign accents of Russian immigrants in the United States found that those who arrived in the US before the age of 10 attained the native accent English more easily than those who arrived later; he, however, further found that two children who had arrived in the US at the age of 4 still had a “slight accent”, due presumably to the fact that these children had maintained a high level of proficiency in their native Russian. In the face of this finding, Ellis (1994: 488) suggests the need to consider, alongside age, other factors like L1 maintenance and the fact that some speakers may not like to sound like native speakers.

Our findings in the present paper add to the evidence that the critical period hypothesis does not often hold. Indeed, many informants pick up languages at several ages, and attain native or near-native competence in them (see examples in Section II above).

The factor of the situation of learning, closely related to the age factor above, has to do with whether the new language is learned in a “naturalistic” or in an “instructed” situation (Ellis 1994:484).

A common view, represented by Malmberg (1977), is that an instructed situation does not normally produce the same result as a naturalistic situation. Malmberg (p.135) thus asserts that “a knowledge of a second language laboriously acquired does not result in bilingualism”, and establishes a clear distinction between “bilingualism” and “a knowledge of foreign languages” (ibid.). It is difficult to apply Malmberg’s theory to the language learning experience of the Cameroonians. Concerning the HLs and PE, they are generally learnt only in naturalistic situations, since they are not widely written, and they are not normally taught as school subjects. The situation in which English and French are learnt in Cameroon is ambiguous.

In fact, the situation varies across the Anglophone-Francophone divide, and from one individual to another. Cameroonian families differ tremendously with regard to their policy on the use of the first official language. Due to several factors including their level of education, their social class, whether the parents are from different ethnic groups, children are either made to learn English or French in their first years of life through a naturalistic method, or made to learn it at school through the instructed method. But the first official language is almost always learnt through a mixture of the two methods. As for the second European language, its learning also varies from an exclusively instructed method (with the language regarded as a “foreign language”) to a naturalistic way whereby the Anglophone Cameroonian, for example, may be exposed to French from early childhood in the home and in the neighbourhood. In any case, modern methods of teaching languages in the world in general and other factors do produce astonishingly good results, which contradict Malmberg’s pronouncement on the result of learning languages in an instructed situation.

One factor of achievement in second language acquisition which has not received much attention in the literature, especially one favouring the attainment of native competence, seems to be the genetic affinity between the second language and the source language(s). Just as it must be generally easier for a Spanish speaker to attain native proficiency in Italian than it would for a German, so also it should be easier for a speaker of a Grassfield language to attain native competence in another Grassfield language than in a Bantu language to the south.

2.3 *Language(s) of inner expression*

The inner uses of language are often said to reflect which of the languages spoken by a bilingual is the dominant one. These internal uses, according to Mackey (1968:565), include counting, reckoning, praying, cursing, dreaming, diary writing, and note-taking. While recognizing that some bilinguals use one and the same language, the dominant language, for all sorts of inner expression, Mackey (ibid.) notes that other bilinguals use different languages for all sorts of inner expression. This is the case for the majority of the informants interviewed for this paper. The interview focused on praying, counting, dreaming, and cursing / exclaiming.

With praying, a distinction must be made between a prayer in one’s own words to a Christian God or other gods, and the conventional Christian prayer to be recited. In the former case, it was interesting that the prayer was not always said in the language in which the bilingual was most proficient. There was the particular case of Anglophone PE speakers who reported that, although this language is the one in which they feel most comfortable, they pray in only English. There are a number of situations in the latter case. First of all, some prayers were learnt in another language (European or local) in the colonial days of evangelisation. In addition to Latin, English, Pidgin English and French, prayers were thus learnt in Duala in the Littoral region, Mungaka and Lamnso in the present North West Province, and Mongo Ewondo in the southern part of the country, which were the languages of evangelisation in the respective areas. With the subsequent wind of indigenisation, prayers were translated into the HLs of the Christians. But the texts of some prayers in the non-local languages (Pidgin English and the European languages) are so entrenched in the minds and hearts of some Christians that they continue to say them in these languages, even when these languages are not their dominants languages.

There is also a strong tendency for Cameroonians to count in their first European languages, even if their proficiency in these languages is but minimal. The figures were memorized during their school days. High figures (eg millions) prove particularly difficult for many speakers to render in local languages.

Many informants declared that they dream in several languages, depending on the context of the dreaming. In fact, all the languages in the speaker's code repertoire were found to be involved in the dream at one time or another.

For cursing, one must distinguish between two main types, determining the language used. There is first of all the jocular type of curse or exclamation, which a Cameroonian speaker may borrow from other languages, even when he does not normally speak those languages. The Cameroonian thus jocularly borrows exclamations or words expressing indignation like *kay* [kai] from Fulfulde, *bebele* (*zamba*) from Beti, curses like *elang nwazu* from PE. As long as these are jokes, they do not constitute inner uses of language as such. Uses of the language that are really private and internal to the speaker are in the speaker's main languages, except when the curse or exclamation word is a borrowed term which has become part of the speaker's code. One example of this borrowing is the exclamation of surprise [ekje] from the Beti language, used by speakers of different language backgrounds.

2.4 Patterns of interaction / interference / switching between the codes of a bilingual / multilingual Cameroonian

The patterns of interaction, interference and code-switching mostly described in the literature involve European and North-American settings, with generally one new language added to the old landscape, or one new language learnt by an initially monolingual individual. But the situation in Cameroon is quite different.

For example, which of the many previous languages interferes most with the learning of a new language? If we take an Anglophone Cameroonian learning French, that is, against a language substratum comprising one or more home languages, Pidgin English and English, which of the languages most interferes with his French, and why? All these languages interfere with his French production. But Chumbow's (1984) seminal study shows that English, learnt after the HL(s) and Pidgin English, exerts the greatest amount of influence. Chumbow explains that it is because there has been a transfer of the status and the functions of "mother tongue" (in the original sense of the 'language of the mother' – the HL) to English. This transfer occurs in the process of institutionalization, localization and ownership of the colonial languages by the Asian or African, as discussed above. The force of the invading European languages is that they have pushed the original languages to the sides, to the point that, in the discussion of the French and English problems Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians, English and French are sometimes exclusively regarded as the source languages of the Anglophones and Francophones, respectively.

But the reason why the first learnt European language exerts the greatest influence on the other language may not be just the transfer of the status of the mother tongue onto it, or its replacement of this mother tongue. Genetic similarity between the languages involved, as well as the similarity of functions and the modes of acquisition may also be considered. Indeed, French and English being both European languages with a number of shared features would be influenced by each other more than by a non-Indo-European language. The fact that these languages are used for the same functions (administration, education, normally all formal functions) increases the affinity between them and renders them more prone to mutual influence. Finally and quite importantly, the fact that, unlike the HLs, English and French are learnt the same way through the formal assimilation of their various aspects is likely to favour the transfer of some elements from one language to the other.

The influence of the languages first acquired by the Cameroonian, the HLs for the Francophone, the HLs and /or Pidgin English for the Anglophone, is mostly felt in the learning of the first official language. Countless examples of the HLs and PE are thus found in the French of Francophones and the English of Anglophones, respectively. Such examples are evidence of the localization of English and French in Cameroon, even by eminent academics and renowned writers.

Indeed, the phenomenon of localization of English and French is quite visible in literary works, where the local languages are constantly hidden behind the European languages used to produce the texts. In translated texts, this complicates the search for the real source of the material being translated. Some English or French texts translated from the other colonial language should be understood, not only from the language directly translated from, but also in terms of the language and culture which

provided the initial input. The HL behind the colonial language translated is what Tiayon-Lekobou (1990) calls the “hidden language”. Thus, Mongo Bet’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* or Ferdinand Oyono’s *The Old Man and the Medal*, beyond the original texts *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* or *Le Vieux Negre et la Medaille*, can sometimes be fully understood only if placed within the context of the original Beti language and culture of the original setting. It is the same situation with Chinua Achebe’s *Le Monde s’effondre* translated from English *Things Fall Apart*, with the Igbo language and culture hiding behind.

Code-mixing provides another illustration of the specificity of Cameroon with regard to the interaction between languages. Most cases of code-mixing in the literature involve two languages, like English and French in Canada, English and Spanish in America. Cameroon does have cases of mixture of English and French, resulting in what is generally referred to as *Franglais* with examples from Ze Amvela (1983), which Simo Bobda (2003) analyses as two separate phenomena, *Frenglish* proper (use of French words while speaking English) exemplified by

(a)

The bon de caisse are not yet out. (The pay vouchers are not yet out.)

You can consider yourself un real grille. (You can consider yourself a person that nothing bothers any more [having had so many problems before].)

The work was confie to a number of contractors. (The work was entrusted....)

and *Franglais* (use of English words while speaking French) exemplified by

(b)

Je vais tuer ce pay clerk-la aujourd’hui. (I am going to kill this pay clerk today)

J’ai ete voir His Royal Highness, Fon of Bali. (I went to see ...)

In addition to these phenomena, an idiom called *Camfranglais* has developed in Cameroon resulting from a mixture, not only of English and French, but also of Pidgin English and various HLs. *Camfranglais*, which Tiayon-Lekobou (1985) calls *Camspeak*, has recently received the scholarly attention of many authors including Ze Amvela (1983), Tiayon-Lekobou (1985), Chia (1990), Essono (1996), Fosso (1996), Biloa (1999), Efoua-Zengue (1999), Kouega (2003).

Examples of *Camfranglais* are:

Le blow etait dang. (The fight was really fierce.)

On a kick mon agogo. (They have stolen my watch.)

Tu ne *know* pas que je *go* dans le meme *quat* que toi ? (Don’t you know that i am going to the same neighbourhood as you?)

Le test de linguistique etant sharp, j’ai prefere piak. (The Linguistics test was too difficult, and he preferred to run away [=to miss it].)

Cameroon also has something new to tell with regard to code-mixing, which consists in switching to another language altogether in the course of a speech event. Like code interference and code-mixing discussed above, code-switching in the literature generally involves only two languages, and switching occurs in two ways. But in Cameroon, the typical speaker daily switches between three and more codes, as seen in Section I above. But of particular interest are the patterns of switching, as indeed there are constraints in these patterns. For example, a typical Francophone Cameroonian switches from one HL to another, from one HL to French, and from French to English, and vice-versa. He or she does not normally switch from an HL (even when the Anglophone interlocutor can speak the same HL) to English, the second official language. A typical Anglophone Cameroonian normally switches from one

HL to another, from an HL to PE, from PE to English, from English to French, and vice-versa. He or she does not normally switch from his or her HL to French, even if the interlocutor understands his HL. There is still need for research into the factors which determine the switching constraints in a multilingual community: why does a Francophone not normally switch from his or her HL to English, for example? Tentatively, the reasons may have to do with several factors including the order of acquisition (one language follows each other), the related factor of the use of one language to learn the other, and the natural co-existence within a community. Thus, switching between the following codes in the Francophone language repertoire may be accounted for as follows:

HL – HL: order of acquisition; natural co-existence;

HL-French: order of acquisition; the former used to learn the latter; natural co-existence;

French-English: order of acquisition; the former used to learn the latter; natural co-existence

None of the three factors mentioned here favours the switch between the Francophone's HL, and English. From this discussion, one can arguably defend the concept of **"mate languages"** in a multilingual community, whereby languages like the above which are involved in switches from one to another are mates, and those which are not involved are **not** mates.

3. Summary and conclusions

Thus, Cameroon offers a landscape where many uncommon sociolinguistic phenomena are found. There is more flexibility in terms of many beliefs like the age of acquisition of a new language, the notion and number of "mother tongues" an individual can have, how many languages can be mixed in an individual's speech event, the number and type of languages used for inner expression. Interesting constraints exist, however, in matters like direction of interference and patterns of code-mixing. More probing into the sociolinguistics of Cameroon surely has a lot more in store for the investigator.

Appendix: Some typical cases

Informants like the following, interviewed in the course of the field work, could be said to constitute typical cases:

Case No 1:

Age: 65

Sex: Female

Level of education: Primary school leaver

Occupation: Petty trader

First official language: French

Languages learnt, age of learning, and context of learning:

1. Bandjoun (a dialect of Ghomala): from birth; as an *au pair*;

2. French: age of 10; school;

3. Baham (a dialect of Ghomala): age of 12; as an *au pair*;

4. Dschang: 15 years; as an *au pair* and from peers at school;

5. Fulfulde: 18 years; from neighbours;

6. Baloum: 18 years; language of native village and mother;

7. Fe'fe': 23 years; from neighbours;

8. Bamendjou: 23 years; from neighbours;

10. Ewondo: 40 years; market place and church;

11. Manguissa: 40 years; market place;

12. Medumba: 47 years; from neighbours

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency:

Ghomala, Baloum, Dschang, Fe'fe', Ewondo, French, Medumba, Manguissa, Fulfulde

Languages of inner expression:

Dream: Ghomala

Prayer: Ghomala and Ewondo (there is a prayer book in this language)

Counting: Baloum

Exclamation/curse: Baloum

Case No 2:

Age: 55

Sex: Female

Level of education: Master's in English Language

Occupation: Lecturer in English

First official language: English

Languages used, age of learning, and context of learning:

1. Medumba: from birth;

2. Pidgin English: 6 years; lingua franca in the area;

3. English: 7 years; school

4. French: 14 years; school, and later in the Francophone area where she lived

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency:

Pidgin English, English, Medumba, French

Languages of inner expression:

Dream: Depends on context

Prayer: English

Counting: English

Exclamation/curse: English

Patterns of code-switching

Medumba – English; Medumba – PE; PE – English; English - French

Not Medumba – French

Case No 3:

Age: 55

Sex: Male

Level of education: PhD in Linguistics

Occupation: Professor of English Language and Linguistics

First official language: French

Languages used, age of learning, context of learning:

1. Bulu: from birth; language of home;

2. French: 6 years; school;

3. English: 13 years; school;

4. PE: lingua franca in towns where informant has lived

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency:

Informant insists that he cannot provide a general ranking, as it all depends on the contexts (eg He obviously feels more comfortable discussing linguistics in English.)

Languages of inner expression:

Dream: Bulu, French, English depending on the context

Prayer: Bulu and French

Counting Bulu, French, English

Exclamation/curse: Bulu, English, French

Patterns of switching:

Bulu – French; French – English

Not Bulu – English

Important remark on this particular informant:

In 1998, at the age of 50, he suffered from partial and temporary aphasia as a result of a road accident, and the only language he could speak out of the above spectrum was Bulu.

Case No 4:

Age: 49

Sex: Female

Level of education: GCE "O"

Occupation: Business lady

First official language: French

Languages learnt, age of learning, and context of learning

1. Medumba: from birth (father's language);
2. Badenkop: from birth (mother's language);
3. Fe'efe: childhood (through her mother's co-spouse)
4. French: 6 years; school;
5. Ewondo: 8 years; from neighbours
6. Ghomala: 12 years; in her cousin's house when she was living there.

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency

Medumba, Badenkop, French, Ghomala, Ewondo, Fe'efe

Languages of inner expression

Dream: mostly French

Prayer: French

Counting: formerly Medumba and Badenkop but French

Exclamation: Medumba

Case No 5:

Age: 27

Sex: Male

Level of education: First Degree

Occupation: Student

First official language: English

Languages learnt, age of learning, and context of learning

1. Lamnso': from birth
2. English: 9 years, school
3. Pidgin English: 10 years; in playgrounds with friends
4. French: 15 years; school

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency

English, Lamnso', Pidgin English, French

Languages of inner expression

Dream: Lamnso' / English

Prayer: English / Lamnso'

Counting: English

Exclamation: English / Lamnso'

Case No 6:

Age: 29

Sex: male

Level of education: Masters in English Language and Italian

Occupation: Language teacher (French and Italian)

First official language: French

Languages learnt, age of learning, and context of learning

1. Yemba: from birth;
2. Ngemba: in childhood; from neighbours;
3. French: 6 years;
4. English: 13 years; school;
5. Italian: 21 years; school.

Languages in decreasing order of proficiency

Yemba, Ngemba, French, English, Italian

Languages of inner expression

Dream: Yemba / English / French

Prayer: English / French / Italian

Counting: French / English

Exclamation: Yemba / English / French / Italian

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