

Implementation of national Languages through official curriculum in Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

Cameroon is a mosaic of cultures and therefore languages. This situation, while giving the opportunity to enjoy a rich cultural heritage, also presents a number of challenges; one of them being the process of incorporating national languages in the official curriculum.

In this paper we will:

- 1) Briefly outline some of the historical circumstances which lead to the present situation;
- 2) Describe the language families present in Cameroon and attempt to evaluate how they relate to distinct or overlapping social contexts and interactions;
- 3) Highlight the challenges this situation brings;
- 4) And finally give a brief account of the official policies and practices put in place to respond to these challenges.

1) Historical circumstances:

Cameroon has a complex history. The geographical boundaries were mainly decided at the Berlin Conference held from 15th November 1884 to 26th February 1885. Although the frontiers and the colonizing nations were certainly going to change in the future, this conference, held between European

colonizers, drew the main geographical borders of modern Cameroon (MVENG & BELING-NKOUMA, 1985: 146). Those borders did not take into account the historical, cultural, social realities of the land and its peoples. Indeed the conference's goal was to secure international trading, and as a duty and responsibility, to expand European civilisation. The colonizing countries had an obligation to protect the territories they were occupying, and to build infrastructures such as roads and railways. The forgone information is indicative of what the situation would be for local cultures and languages.

2) Language families: difficult classifications:

The administrative and geographic borders of the Republic of Cameroon and its cultural areas do not match exactly. A number of languages and customs which are Cameroonian are also found in parts of the countries bordering it.

Also, after independence in 1960, the administrative partition of the country into its various administrative units was made without any consideration of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the populations. As a matter of fact, populations who are linguistically and culturally different can be found in the same administrative region, division or subdivision.

The three language families found on the Cameroonian territory are as follows:

- Nilo-Saharan
- Afro-Asiatic
- Niger-Kordofan

Ndongo Semengue and Sadembouo (1999) admitted that Cameroon counts 248 national languages. In 2007, during a Conference held in Yaounde, Cameroon was quoted as having 262 languages among which 239 are living languages while 23 are dead languages or which may die very soon (*CERDOTOLA-ACALAN-UNION AFRICAINE*, 2007.)

We also have now to add Indo-European languages such as English and French which are official languages, Pidgin English (NGEFAC (2009) and Camfranglais which are lingua franca. German, Spanish, Arabic are taught as foreign languages while Latin and Greek are taken as classical languages mostly in the francophone sub-system. Other foreign languages are in the process of being introduced in the school system. Among them are Italian, Chinese, Portuguese and Japanese.

The classification of languages is itself problematic for the following reasons:

- a. **Linguistic:** unstable, non established grammar and writing, various usages and needs. There may be a different framework to define them.
- b. **Sociological:** a division based on their function/usage cannot be absolutely relied upon as they are mostly multifunctional.

Nevertheless the following are categories in relation to their usage:

A) The two official languages: English and French.

We must note that the “official” languages are of foreign origin and the “national” languages are, generally, local. Yet the “local” languages may also be part of the memory of an imperialist expansion within Africa. We are not going to explore these issues here. We simply wish to point out that the “local” languages are themselves the result of various population movements, be they wars or migrations, and that their territory does not always neatly match that of the modern Republic of Cameroon. There are therefore difficulties in the justification for the teaching of local languages based on historical factors.

B) The national languages:

In that category we have the vehicular and vernacular languages such as Beti fang, Hausa, Fulfulde which are spoken in and outside the Cameroon territory.

The **vernacular** languages are always used on more restricted geographical areas and cultural contexts and are not always vehicular. They are however important symbols of a cultural identity which have practical purposes in maintaining social links-from younger persons to their elders- ; cultural practices and beliefs; When spoken outside Cameroon they may allow a certain fraternity or even privileges. For example a politician from a particular ethnic group with a vernacular language may attract political allegiance of his cultural group. It can also be spoken in the Diaspora. It therefore also affects the whole of society.

Religions will also have a bearing on which languages will be favoured by a particular ethnic group:

Religions in Cameroon include Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and a number of traditional religious groups. We note that there are important new religious congregations coming mostly from neighbouring Nigeria. They are claiming to be “born again” Christians.

There is no doubt that language acts as a signifier for other social factors that are not dependant on what is being said but attached to the discourses about a given language. Arabic and Haousa for instance are linked to the Moslem religion while English may be linked to business. Most business at the local level may be conducted in Pidgin English.

There exists opposition between a type of speech which signifies urbanity and certain modernity such as Camfranglais for youngsters. Urbanity is also linked to the written speech. This, of course, favours the languages which are already written: *“Aucun de nos interlocuteurs ne conçoit une campagne publicitaire en langue camerounaise, qui identifierait un produit à un groupe ethnique et se fermerait ainsi au reste de la population”*. (HATER, 2005)

Criteria for the selection of national languages to be included in the curriculum:

The administration will face numerous problems when selecting which languages should have an institutional recognition: how to select a language without excluding another and with it a whole host of social practices and beliefs? The issue of literacy is, paradoxically, crucial to the teaching and maintaining of a traditionally spoken language. Those already written have a stronger presence but also a better prospect of existence.

Some of the vernacular languages are perceived as not being worthwhile as object of funding for teaching as they only meet local needs. For example, even if a student learns to read and write in a/his/her vernacular language who else will want to read his/her works? In other words those languages are not deemed commercially viable. Since resources are limited, it seems that parents/caretakers for the students will want to spend their sometimes meagre resources as an investment for an education which gives better prospects for future employment... So will the government's administration.

Nonetheless, there are linguistic developments taking place outside the « official » classification. These come to bear on the decision-makers in relation to organising and justifying the curriculum.

The definition of a given language may present numerous difficulties: pidgin is not English but relies heavily on it. For the local languages, there is necessarily an overlapping of some languages. The constant linguistic development makes it difficult to teach and assess a linguistic space which is in constant evolution. While English or French are undoubtedly linked to colonisation, the successful literary production in those languages has asserted the possibilities of developing another –specifically Cameroonian- historical context for them.

Overall the possibility of introducing national languages in the curriculum will depend on how well defined a given language can be, to what purposes it is

already used and may be used subsequently, and how many people are concerned.

In the project¹ put in place in Cameroon to implement the teaching of national languages and cultures at the secondary education level, the following criteria have been established:

- the languages must have already been taught at the primary and secondary level;*
- the necessary material to start and to experiment is available;*
- the human resources allowing for the subsequent development of both the teaching material and the training of teachers exist;*
- the support of the community through a recognized awareness and participation exists (For example, an already functioning language committee or language academy “Comité ou Académie de langue” with a high percentage of local activities and involvement) ;*
- the languages to be taught are selected in all the administrative regions of the country to allow for a certain national representativeness and equity.*

3) Highlighting the challenges this situation brings:

What is at stake in that complexity?

Cultural/social:

- To maintain one's heritage as part of the world heritage;
- To establish, to adapt linguistic specificity to social modern changes.
This involves, amongst other things, using a written alphabet;
- To maintain as well as transform a cultural heritage as a culture cannot be closed onto itself;
- To balance National identities and National identity (i.e. a multi-faceted national identity)

¹ Project for the Introduction of the teaching of National languages and cultures in Secondary Education

Educational:

- To define exactly each national language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, etc... so as to have a workable sphere in terms of assessing the competencies in a given language. A definition of a language allows for its recognition.
- To balance world awareness and specific diversity, employment requirements and cultural identities, including religious faiths.
- Promotion and implementation of national languages.
- To manage the diversity without abusive exclusion/inclusion of one or another language.
- To generate and maintain motivation.
- To encourage intergenerational/intercultural interactions.

Political/administrative

- Avoid using the language issues for political gain (a politician could favour a particular language...)
- To establish and strengthen the status and opportunity of access to learning national languages through the development of a Constitutional status of National languages (HALAOUI, 2001).
- To create and structure a government body responsible for coordinating activities of different ministerial departments having something to do with the development of national languages.

4) Official policies and practices to respond to these challenges

A preoccupation with languages has been a constant feature of cultural encounters. Translations of the Bible in local languages:

Missionaries such as Alfred Saker translated the Bible between 1862 and 1872. However this was not done to conserve or to strengthen local cultures but inevitably, as there was good will from some missionaries, to transform them.

There have been various associations, institutions or projects in Cameroon working at the preservation of national languages such as:

- NACALCO (National Association of Cameroon Language Committees)
- SIL-Cameroon (Sumer Institute of Linguistics – Cameroon)
- CABTAL (Cameroon Association for the Bible Translation and Literacy)
- Various private educative institutions such as the Collège Libermann Douala (Pioneer in terms of teaching national languages since the sixties).
- PROPELCA (Operational Research Project for Language Education in Cameroon)
- BASAL (Basic Standardization of All African Languages)
- CLED (Cameroon Mother Tongue Literacy, Education and Development Project)
- Etc.

However to see a real, measurable and widely recognized progress in linguistic matters, there needs be:

- 1) A specific status given to the national languages
- 2) A strategy of implementation
- 3) Assessment instruments in educational institutions which would put the selected languages in the sphere of recognized knowledge.

The international opinion is, to a sizeable extend, favourable to the conservation and transmission of “minority” languages. As a demonstration of this tendency we can cite:

- La Déclaration universelle des droits linguistiques (World Conference, 6-9 June 1996, Barcelona, Spain) (NSEME (2007))

- La Convention sur la protection et la promotion de la diversité des expressions culturelles, (Paris 20 octobre 2005) (NSEME (2007))

Specific measures taken by the Cameroonian government:

The Cameroonian Government has taken some measures in favour of national languages. The secondary educational institution has now the responsibility of teaching and developing an appreciation of the national languages among the students. This is now at the first stage of implementation: the stage of experimentation. There are seven pilot schools :

- Adamoua Region : Lycée Classique et Moderne de Ngaoundéré
- Centre Region: Lycée Général Leclerc de Yaounde
- Littoral Region : Lycée d'Akwa de Douala
- Northen Region: Lycée Classique et Moderne de Garoua
- North-West Region : Government High School Njinikom
- South Region: Lycée Classique d'Ebolowa
- Western Region: Lycée Classique de Bafang

In private religious institutions the teaching of the National languages follows the methodology from PROPELCA.

PROPELCA is the French acronym for Operational Research Project for Language Education in Cameroon implemented since 1981. Four models were proposed as the solutions to language education problems in the three levels of Cameroon system of Education: nursery, primary and secondary:

1. Model 1: Official bilingualism (English - French);
2. Model 2: The teaching of national languages and official languages in primary schools in a bilingual perspective;
3. Model 3: The teaching of national languages in secondary education;
4. Model 4: The teaching of mother tongues in nursery schools.

The theoretical framework that underlies PROPELCA models is “trilingualism”, a language planning hypothesis for Africa defended by TADADJEU (1977). “Extended trilingualism” (TADADJEU, 1985) and “functional trilingualism” (TADADJEU, 1996) were added to the hypothesis of “trilingualism”, as applied in Cameroon. According to TADADJEU, each Cameroonian should speak at least three languages: His mother tongue, his first official language, the second official language and by extension another Cameroonian language, mostly a vehicular language.

The project for the introduction of the teaching of national languages in secondary education was designed with the collaboration of experts from NACALCO, researchers of the PROPELCA project.

In the 3rd PROPELCA model, any student who enters Form I²², chooses a national language different from his mother tongue and learns how to speak and to write it. This is done through foreign language teaching techniques such as dialogues, drills and role play. The other dimension of the program deals with the learning of applied phonetics and the symbols of the “General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages”, an common alphabet to all national languages that was elaborated by researchers such as Professor TADADJEU Maurice in 1979.

After Form I and Form II, National languages’ classes focus on the teaching of selected mother tongue texts that carry pertinent cultural and traditional messages. The aim of the program is to ensure that by the end of From V, the students are deep-rooted in their cultures.

While PROPELCA was mainly implemented in private religious institutions, the project for the introduction of the teaching of Cameroonian languages in secondary education is being carried out in the public pilot schools named above.

²² First class of the secondary education level

There is a proposition for restructuring secondary education in Cameroon. The secondary level would be sub-divided into three levels:

- first: sub-cycle of “observation” (From I and From II)
- second: sub-cycle of “orientation” (From III, From IV and From V)
- third: “second cycle” (Lower sixth and upper sixth)

During the sub-cycle of “observation” there is no selection of languages. Subsequent to the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, that recommends the protection and the promotion of all national languages, the concept of “the linguistic repertory of the classroom” has been proposed. It includes all the national languages spoken by the students of a given class. According to the curriculum, we must teach applied phonetics and grammar. Examples of sounds, tones and grammatical structures are given by students, taken from their respective national languages. That makes the teaching of national languages and cultures classes interactive classes.

The selection of national languages to be taught takes place in the sub-cycle of orientation. Three linguistic paradigms are then considered: national languages, official languages and foreign languages. Each paradigm works autonomously. Within the paradigm of national languages, the selection of a target language will be made in relation to the criteria stated above.

A distinction is made between national and foreign languages: Arabic, for example, is taught as a foreign language like German and Spanish. Arabic is also taught in Franco-Arabic primary schools.

The Cameroonian alphabet is used for all the national languages. At the moment there are about 20 schools overall where the Cameroonian national languages are being taught (i.e. the 7 pilot schools and other private schools). In the schools outside the official experimental program, teachers are proposed by the pertinent language academy or committee. In the experimental schools, the teachers are qualified in General and Applied Linguistics. They usually have

been trained at the Yaounde Higher Teacher Training College (École Normale Supérieure de Yaoundé)³ to teach subjects other than national languages. They have some knowledge of theoretical and applied linguistics acquired in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics. The Higher Teacher Training College of Yaounde now boasts a “Department of Cameroonian Languages and Cultures”.

The syllabuses used in experimental classes were elaborated in line with the competency approach, based on real life situations. For the subject “national languages”, we have 8 modules:

1. Cameroon linguistic diversity
2. sounds (segments),
3. tones (supra-segments),
4. words,
5. noun phrases,
6. verb phrases,
7. sentences,
8. and texts.

For the subject “national cultures”, we have 3 modules:

1. Cameroon cultural diversity,
2. Ways of life among Cameroon ethnic groups: customs and traditions; literature (poetry, story, theatre, riddle, proverbs...); art (culinary art, musical art, plastic art, architecture, plaiting...);
3. Specific cultural activities and ceremonies surrounding major events in human life: birth, marriage, death.

The problems encountered in this program are mainly the lack of qualified teachers and appropriate textbooks. There are also some parents who view this

³ Teacher’s College for the training of secondary school teachers and primary and nursery school teacher trainers.

as a futile exercise since there are presently no diploma or official examinations at the end of endogenous linguistic acquisitions in Secondary education. They do not seem to contribute towards improving employment prospects. But the students themselves are showing great enthusiasm in their participation during classes.

Nevertheless, the teaching of national languages at the secondary school level of the Cameroon education system might have a bright future. Some officials of the Ministry of Secondary Education are proposing that, in the near future, a paper related to national languages and cultures be introduced in the BEPC or GCE O’L examinations. In the 2010 and 2011 state’s budgets, a total amount of 21 million CFA has been provided to implement the teaching of national languages and cultures in Secondary education. Among other things, the money is used to organise workshops that bring together regional pedagogic inspectors and teachers of national languages and cultures. The trainers are selected among renowned national languages and cultures’ lecturers from the University of Yaoundé I and the NACALCO Centre for applied Linguistics.

In the Department of Cameroonian languages and cultures, courses are divided in two sections: a section for Cameroonian languages and another one for Cameroonian cultures. For a student teacher to qualify as a fully trained teacher of Cameroonian languages and cultures, there is a provision of two cycles: first cycle – a three-year of training for the holder of a Baccalaureate or GCE Advanced Level; second cycle – a two-year training for the holder of a Bachelor degree in any of the scientific domains: General or Applied Linguistics, Arts, African Languages and Linguistics, Anthropology, African Literature, ...

In the training of student teachers, there are basic courses and complementary courses. As far as basic courses are concerned, the first year students of the first cycle take:

- Core subjects such as articulatory phonetics and transcription, phonology, Cameroon languages' writing system, general linguistics, didactics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, sociology and history of education, pedagogy, Cameroon linguistic and cultural regions, African oral literature (story, epic, legend, proverbs, riddles, etc.), sociocultural institutions (blood relations, family, marriage) ;
- National Languages and Cultures in specific group courses (alphabet, orthographic principles, and cultural practices).
- Complementary courses: bilingual training: (English/French) and computer science/IT applied to African languages.

For the academic year 2010/2011, 32 national languages are figuring in the student teachers' training program of which 7 are taught directly (i.e. as full languages) and others through a self-literacy program.

There are no predefined criteria to select a national language to be taught. All Cameroonian national languages are equal in the State Constitution and can therefore be taught. Each academic year, after the entrance examination, the Head of the Department of Cameroonian languages and cultures assigns the successful candidates to different cultural and language groups. The self-literacy group takes any student who is the only speaker of a national language. When a language has two or more speakers, a group is formed. Then a language teacher and a culture teacher are selected from the pertinent language committee. A student of the self-literacy group acquires basic knowledge in general and applied linguistics that enables him to standardise his mother tongue if it is not yet standardised. He can help to improve the level of standardisation of the

language if it has already been standardised. Therefore, he comes up with a document treating a particular aspect of that language, and by so doing; he improves his written and spoken skills.

Training takes place mainly on the Higher Teacher Training College premises but also in lycees and colleges where student teachers do practicals. For the 2010/2011 academic year, from the 4th February to the 11th of April, 38 second cycle students of the national languages and cultures Department carried out teaching practices for eight weeks in the seven pilot schools named above. Before their graduation, each of them will present a dissertation on a theme related to national languages or national cultures under the supervision of a lecturer.

So far, with no clear policy for the selection of students, few didactic materials, very few national languages lecturers, low standardisation of many languages, limited financial resources, negative attitudes of some stakeholders, there is still much to be done for Cameroonian national languages and cultures to stand as a recognized subject amongst those regularly taught in Higher Teacher Training Program in Cameroon.

Before concluding, something is worth mentioning. Even the Ministry of Basic Education which has always been reluctant to participate in the teaching of Cameroonian languages has recently participated in the organisation of the International Mother Tongue Day. Furthermore, under the sponsorship of La Francophonie, a project entitled “Initiative ELAN Afrique” is being carried out in that ministry with the aim of contributing to the teaching of National Languages in primary and nursery schools.

CONCLUSION

A wind of change is blowing in Cameroon's system of education. This country qualified by some scholars as "Africa in miniature" because of its complex, rich and diversified (inter alia) linguistic and cultural heritage, has taken an important step in the promotion and development of national languages and cultures. In this paper we have presented the challenges faced and efforts made to implement the teaching of Cameroonian languages in the official curriculum. However, much still has to be done for this program of Cameroon language "redemption" to achieve good and concrete results. We have said that there is no official linguistic policy set by the Government to generalize the teaching of national languages at all levels of the formal system of education (basic, secondary and higher education) and non formal education, insufficient allocation of resources, and low standardization of languages. But there's great hope that things might change in the near future.

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APPENDIX

*Table 1: Classification of Cameroonian languages
Boum Ndongo Semengue et Sadembouo (1999: 67)*

Phylums	Familles	Sous-familles	Groupes	Branches	Sous-branches	Nombre d'unités -langues
Nilo-saharien	Saharienne					1
	Chari-Nil					1
Afro-asiatique	Sémitique					1
	Tchadique			Ouest		57
				Centre-Ouest		
				Centre-Est		
				Sud		
				Est		
Niger-kordofan	Ouest-atlantique					1
	Adamaoua Oubanguienne	Oubanguienne				40
		Adamaoua	Samba			
			Daka			
			Kobo Dii			
			Mumuye			
			Mbum			
			Fali			
			Nimbari			
			Langues peu connues			
	Bénoué-Congo	Jukonoïde				146
		Cross-River				
		Bendi				
		Bantoïde		Mambiloïde		
				Bantoue	Jarawan	
					Tivoïde	
					Ekoïde	
					Nyang	
					Béboïde	
					Grassfield	
					Mbam	
					Equatoriale	
Hors-phylum		Pidgin				
Total						248

FAMILLES ET GROUPES LINGUISTIQUES AU CAMEROUN

AFRO-ASIA-TIQUE	SEMITIQUE	
NILO-SAHARIEN	TCHADIQUE	
	SAHARIEN	
	CHARI-NIL	
	OUEST-ATLANTIQUE	
	ADAMAWA	
	OUBANGUIEN	
	JUKUNOÏDE	
	CROSS-RIVER	
	BENDI	
	MAMBILOÏDE	
	JARAWAN	
	TIVOÏDE	
	EKOÏDE	
	NYANG	
	BEBOÏDE	
	GRASSFIELD	
	MBAM	
	TIKARI	
	EQUATORIAL	
PHYLUM	SOUS-PHYLUM	PHYLUM
	FAMILLES	FAMILLES
	SOUS-BRANCHES	SOUS-BRANCHES
	GROUPES	GROUPES

