

The Politics of Pidgin English in Cameroon

By Dibussi Tande

Although Pidgin English is the most widely-spoken language in English-speaking Cameroon, and rivals French as the language of choice in some parts of French-speaking Cameroon (particularly in the Littoral and Western Provinces), it is still treated with scorn and disdain by the Elite who consider it a language for the illiterate masses. The origins of disdain go back to the pre-colonial and colonial eras when Pidgin was the *lingua franca* used by Cameroonians to communicate with Europeans. Hence the descriptions of Pidgin as bad, bush, or broken English. “It is interesting that even today Cameroonians popularly associate Standard English, commonly known as "grammar", with the elite; Pidgin English is perceived as the language of the common man,” says [Augustin Simo Bobda](#).

Today, critics of Pidgin English claim that it is polluting Cameroonian English, and preventing English-speaking Cameroonians from speaking Standard English correctly. According to a [survey carried out by Jean-Paul Kouega](#) on the attitude of educated Cameroonians towards Pidgin, “the respondents commented that the use of Pidgin by pupils interferes with their acquisition of English, the language that guarantees upward social mobility.”

Nowhere is the disdain for Pidgin more glaring than at the University of Buea, Cameroon’s lone English language university, where anti-Pidgin English signboards have been placed all over campus:

- "Succeed at university by avoiding Pidgin on campus"
- Pidgin is like AIDS--Shun it"
- English is the Password, not Pidgin"
- Speak English and More English"
- Pidgin is taking a heavy toll on your English--Shun it"
- “Commonwealth Speak English not Pidgin”
- [If you speak Pidgin you will write Pidgin](#)

- ["l'Anglais un passeport pour le monde, le Pidgin, un ticket pour nulle part"](#)

(“English, a Passport to the World, Pidgin, a Ticket to Nowhere” – Yes, this one is in French....)

The perennial critics of Pidgin cannot even fathom that declining English standards in Cameroon may be due to ineffective language teaching methods in Primary and Secondary Schools. Neither does it even cross their minds that the dramatic encroachment of the French language into the English sphere has resulted in a new form of Cameroonian English, which is usually a word-for-word translation of French sentences – and which is regularly on display in the English section of *Cameroon Tribune*. Pidgin, they insist, is the sole culprit for declining English standards in Cameroon.

In a recent [interview with Martin Jumbam](#), Prof. Abioseh Porter of Drexel University attributed attitudes towards Pidgin, particularly at the University of Buea, to intellectual snobbery:

“I find such notices senseless. In fact, the people who seemed to have understood the import of Pidgin as a language of mass communication are the missionaries. They quickly realized that language is a great cultural binder and they knew how to exploit it to reach the greater masses of the people. To me, this opposition to the use of Pidgin is nothing short of intellectual snobbery, period. You and I are now communicating in English, but if we were either in Cameroon or in Sierra Leone, Pidgin or Krio would be the most appropriate means of communication. But where you’re warning people against using the language they master best, that doesn’t make sense to me.”

The fate of Cameroon Pidgin English is similar to that of other “Creoles” around the world which also carry the stigma of illiteracy and “bushness”. For example, “Despite their rich cultural heritage,” says Morga Dalphinis (*Caribbean & African Languages*. Karia Press, 1985), “Creoles have been devalued of prestige, in the same way that their speakers have been, for at least five hundred years.”

Today, the attacks on Cameroonian Pidgin English stand out because of their ferociousness and the quasi-criminalization of Pidgin in certain quarters, as in the University of Buea where it is banned.

So, is Cameroon’s “Pidgin Problem” simply a pedagogic issue (even if it is a misplaced one), or is the “problem” fueled by broader societal conflicts about class, linguistic and communal identity, and political marginalization? In other words, are we dealing here with the *Pedagogy of Pidgin* or with the *Politics of Pidgin* in Cameroon?

Pidgin and the Politics of Identity and Power

In order to understand the position of Pidgin English in Cameroon, and the fury with which its critics go after it, one has to first contextualize the unequal relationship between Cameroon's English-speaking minority (20% of the population) and the French-speaking majority, and also decipher the assimilationist tendencies that underlie that relationship. According to [Lyombe Eko](#),

“In the 40 years since the reunification of English-speaking Southern Cameroons and French-speaking Republique du Cameroun, the resulting over-centralized government, run mostly by the French-speaking majority, and operating under what is essentially an Africanized version of the Napoleonic code, has attempted to eliminate the British-inspired educational, legal, agricultural, and administrative institutions which the Anglophones brought to the union. This has been accompanied by a concerted attempt to assimilate the English-speakers into the French-dominated system.”

A key aspect in this assimilationist policy has been a systematic attempt to devalue anything of Southern Cameroons origin, including its people. As Lyombe points out,

“To this day, when speaking of English-speaking Cameroonians, many French-speaking Cameroonians use the word "Anglo" as an epithet to mean "uncouth," "backward," "uncivilized," "inconsequential," and so on.”

This view of the backward “Anglo” extends to the English that they speak and its byproduct, Pidgin English. It is quite common for barely literate Francophone Cameroonians to insist that the majority of Anglophone Cameroonians are incapable of speaking standard English, and that even the most educated among them speak only “*l'anglais de Bamenda*” – by this they mean a dumbed-down and “Pidginized” English which is supposedly as barbaric as Pidgin itself. Of course, there is no truth to this claim, but it serves the purpose of transforming Cameroon English and Cameroon Pidgin English into symbols of Anglophone inferiority, and of Anglophone inability to fit into the mainstream.

So instead of Pidgin being seen as a symbol of Anglophone creativity and resilience, it has instead become a stigma and an anathema, which supposedly reinforces the perception that English-speaking Cameroonians are unable to excel even in their own English or Anglophone sphere.

The underlying message is a fairly simple one: In order to fit in, English-speaking Cameroonians must shun their inferior culture and language(s) which are obstacles to their integration into the national (read Francophone) mainstream, and gravitate towards French which is the language of access, success and power. Pidgin in particular is therefore portrayed as a language of confinement (in the “Anglophone Ghetto”), of exclusion (from “national mainstream”) and of inferiority (vis-à-vis the French language).

Buying into the Myth of Inferiority

It was Castells (1997) who noted that:

“If nationalism is, most often, a reaction against a threatened autonomous identity, then, in a world submitted to culture homogenization by the ideology of modernization and the power of global media, **language, the direct expression of culture, becomes the trench of cultural resistance, the last bastion of self-control, the refuge of identifiable meaning (52).**” [My emphasis.]

Cameroon’s Anglophone elite have failed to appreciate the role of Pidgin as a tool for identity formation and protection in the former British Southern Cameroons. Instead they see it as a threat which must be eradicated. The result, among other things, says [Ngefac & Sala](#), is a steady “depidginization” of Cameroon Pidgin English:

“It is demonstrated that the feeling that Pidgin is an inferior language has caused Cameroon Pidgin speakers to opt for the “modernization” of the language using English language canons, instead of preserving the state of the language as it was in the yesteryears.”

This again is in line with the traditional relationship of domination and submission which Creole languages have had to deal with all over the world. As Dalphinis has pointed out in the case of Caribbean Creoles,

"Creole languages... have, therefore, traditionally been devalued by their own speakers who may point to these languages and at times their own African features and say that these are the cumulative reasons for their poverty and underdevelopment. They mistakenly equate cause with effect." (6)

The persistent attack on Pidgin English in Cameroon cannot be taken at face value because it points to a more insidious phenomenon, i.e., the steady destruction (deliberate or inadvertent) of Anglophone culture and identity – something which Dr. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi recognized so well in her keynote address at a conference organized by the University of Albany’s [Consortium on Africa](#). According to a [blog entry](#) about the event,

“Pidgin English competes with English proper, French and the more than 200 native languages in polyglot Cameroon, and is being singled out at this Anglophone University as a special threat. Using Gloria Anzaldua, Homi Bhabha and other theorists as a framework, Dr. Abbenyi showed how these signs reveal "a deep anxiety and *malaise*" about linguistic and national identity in Cameroon. Pidgin, she said, drawing on her personal experience as a native speaker of this vernacular, is **"the language of playfulness, informality, vulgarity, transgression, trade, celebration, and family."** To ask students to "shun it" is to ask them to enter the English-speaking public sphere--which is already fraught in majority-Francophone Cameroon--and **not look back.**” [My emphasis.]

In [an earlier article on my blog](#) about the second class status of English in Cameroon, I argued that “Cameroon’s ‘language problem’ is neither pedagogic nor individual, it is political. And, it is at the core of Cameroon's unending crisis of identity.” Today’s national hand-wringing over Pidgin English is also not a pedagogic problem, as its critics would like us to believe, but part and parcel of that unending struggle between competing and conflicting visions about Cameroonian identity.

I will like to emphasize that my conclusion in no way ignores the real issue of falling English standards in Cameroon. However, rather than blaming Pidgin or any other language for these declining standards, we should turn to the educational system itself with its poorly-trained teachers and outdated language teaching methods which have barely changed since the 1960s. Once we factor in the nefarious influence of the dominant Francophone culture and its ubiquitous French language, then it becomes obvious why English standards are going down the drain...