
Globalising a local language and localising a global language: the case of Kamtok and English in Cameroon

ALOYSIUS NGEFAC

The contest between English and Kamtok in Cameroon

Introduction

This paper assesses efforts being made to promote and expose a Cameroonian local language, Kamtok, to the global, intellectual community and to integrate and promote a global language in the Cameroonian context. Kamtok carries the ecology, culture and identity of Cameroon, besides being one of the most widely spoken languages in the country. The global language which is the focus of this discourse is English, considering that its use is no longer restricted to any particular country. The language, like other colonial linguistic legacies, was transported through colonialism and transplanted in different parts of the world, including Cameroon, and is now serving communication needs beyond the frontiers of its original seat. It is therefore claimed in this paper that Kamtok, like many Cameroonian indigenous languages, is relegated to the background and hidden from the global community, paradoxically because it carries the ecology and identity of Cameroon, and English, like other global languages, is being localized and promoted in the Cameroonian context with every iota of passion and vigour. This type of tendency is predictably rooted in the colonial history or in what Bokamba (2007: 41) calls a 'ukolonia' tendency whereby the colonised people were indoctrinated to believe that everything of theirs, including their indigenous languages and culture, was inferior and barbaric. Interestingly, English in Cameroon, unlike Kamtok, has an official recognition and is one of the official languages used for state transactions; it is taught in most, if not all, Cameroonian schools and the variety spoken in Britain is most often the classroom target,

though this is done with little or no success; it has been the focus of many research works carried out by local researchers; and its vigorous promotion has even led to the banning of an important Cameroonian language, as shall be discussed later. Kamtok, on the other hand, has witnessed, and is still witnessing, many turbulent moments, such as the open and official banning of its use in some public circles, the complete absence of educational and political efforts to promote it, lack of standardisation, misrepresentation of its developmental status by both scholars and laypeople, and lack of scholarly interest from local researchers.



ALOYSIUS NGEFAC is Associate Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Yaoundé I. He holds a PhD in English linguistics and many other professional and academic certificates from the same university. He has won many international awards (e.g.

*AvH Fellowship, Fulbright Scholarship and DAAD) and has given guest lectures at the Universities of Regensburg, Leipzig, Giessen, Pennsylvania, City University of New York, Indiana State University, Indiana University and Drexel University. His research and teaching interests include Sociolinguistics, World Englishes, ELT and Pidgins and Creoles. Professor Ngefacs is author of *Social Differentiation in Cameroon English* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) and many scholarly articles. Email: angefac@yahoo.co.uk*

This situation presents a serious disconnect and a paradox! If Cameroonians are, indeed, proud of their own identity and culture, a language like Kamtok that embodies these fundamental aspects of human existence should logically be projected or globalised as much as possible through political, educational and research efforts, as an attempt to expose the Cameroonian culture to the global community. It was a result of pride in one's local identity that made Tommy T. B. Koh, the Singaporean permanent secretary to the United Nations, declare that

When one is abroad, in a bus or train or aeroplane and when one overhears someone speaking, one can immediately say this is someone from Malaysia or Singapore: and I should hope when I'm speaking abroad, my countrymen will have no problem recognizing that I am a Singaporean. (Foley 1988: 7–8)

Paradoxically, it is mostly through the efforts of foreign scholars that most sociolinguistic and scholarly facts about Kamtok are known in the global community and many local researchers are still to reconcile with themselves whether a local language, like Kamtok, is even worth studying. If it is not worth exposing or presenting Kamtok to the global community through political and research efforts because it carries the 'inferior' local flag, is the passionate promotion and localisation of English, especially the variety spoken in Britain, not a paradox? This paper will argue that almost everything is done, and sometimes with exaggerated goals, to localise and promote English in Cameroon and almost nothing is done, sometimes with exaggerated cynicism, to expose to the global or intellectual community the rich dynamics of Kamtok, a language that carries the ecology, culture and identity of Cameroon, besides the fact that it can be a serious source of anthropological and creolistic enquiry. The tendency to relegate a local language to the background and promote a global language with too much passion is hypothesised to be an aftermath effect of colonial indoctrination, which upset the minds and worldview of the indigenous population.

The colonial doctrine and postcolonial mentality

Through colonialism the political, economic and social lives of the colonised nations were invaded, transformed, controlled and shaped by the colonisers; their worldviews, cultures and languages

were eroded and subjected to an inferior position; their minds and cosmic vision were upset and they were finally made to understand that everything of theirs was inferior. The colonial mentality has preoccupied the minds of many postcolonial people, as they tend to see everything that reflects their contextual or ecological setting as inferior. Bokamba (2007: 41) refers to this type of inferiority complex as a 'ukolonia' tendency, which has made many postcolonial subjects to place their local output and potentials in an inferior position in favour of what is rooted in Western constructs. Many people in postcolonial contexts now perceive their own culture and indigenous languages with an inferiority complex and tend to think that colonial languages are the only media through which effective communication can take place. Some people are even ready to negotiate their own identity to embrace one that strongly links them to the Western world. These types of tendencies are certainly some of the aftermaths of colonial indoctrination, which greatly reshaped and reconditioned the thinking of the colonised population. Bokamba (2007: 27f) and Anchimbe (2007: 9) point out that in most postcolonial settings, people are still identified with colonial languages as 'Anglophone', 'Francophone' and 'Lusophone' and not as 'Bantuphone', 'Swahiliphone' and 'Mandingphone', because they believe that their dreams must necessarily be built on Western constructs in order to be meaningful. It is not surprising that in postcolonial Cameroon, for instance, indigenous languages and Kamtok, languages that symbolise the ecology and culture of Cameroon, are treated with contempt and indignation, but English and other colonial linguistic legacies, such as French, are promoted with passion, as shall be seen in the following section.

Localising English and globalising Kamtok

Unlike Kamtok, English, a global language and one of the colonial linguistic legacies, is well rooted in Cameroon and is gaining ground almost on a daily basis. Besides the fact that its status as one of the official languages of Cameroon is well defined in the country's Constitution, it is taught in every French and English-speaking school in the country at all the educational levels. Interestingly, the goal is not to teach indigenised Cameroon English, but rather the variety spoken in Britain and the United States, the original seats

of the language. It is for this reason that Bobda (2002: v) maintains that

While acknowledging the legitimate emergence of an autonomous variety of English in Cameroon, I believe that we are still, in many ways, dependent upon British and American norms. Our educational and professional successes are still dependent on these norms. (Bobda, 2002: v)

The above statements clearly indicate that the target in Cameroon is not just English per se; but, interestingly, Inner Circle English is the ultimate goal, even though this goal is hardly ever achieved, as reported in previous investigations (see, for instance, Bobda, 1991, 1994; Kouega, 2006; Ngefacs, 2008, forthcoming; and Mbangwana and Sala, 2009).

The passion to promote and localise English is also seen in the fact that most research works on this language are carried out by local researchers (see Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Bobda, 1991, 1993, 1994, 2002; Kouega; Anchimbe, 2006, Ngefacs, 2008; Mbangwana and Sala, 2009, etc.).

Unlike English, which has witnessed significant interest from local scholars, most of the scholarly facts about Kamtok have surfaced through the efforts of foreign researchers and very few local scholars find it logical to study a language that is significantly rooted in local realities. As far as this investigation could reveal, there are only a handful of Cameroonian researchers who are really interested in the description of Kamtok as a language in its own right and this interest is only a recent development. It is no exaggeration to claim that before 1990 there were fewer than five research works on this language from local researchers and this research could only identify Menang (1979), Ngome (1986), and Mbangwana (1983) as research works from local scholars available before 1990, excluding evangelical documents written to facilitate priestly missions. Although the interest from local scholars on this language increased after 1990 (see, for instance, Tsende, 1993; Ayafor, 1996, 2004, 2006; Leoue, 1996; Alobwede, 1998; Ngefacs and Sala, 2006; Neba et al., 2006; Ngefacs, 2009 and Sala, 2009), the interest is still below expectation as compared to the numerous works on the language produced by foreign scholars (see, for instance, Schneider, 1960, 1966, 1967; Dwyer, 1966; Todd, 1969, 1971, 1986, 1979, 1991; Féral, 1978, 1980, 1989; Bellama et al., 1983; and Schröder, 2003a & b). This shows that this Cameroonian language is, paradoxically, more of interest to foreign scholars than to local researchers. Is it what Bokamba (2007) refers to as a 'ukolonia' tendency?

Unlike English, Kamtok has witnessed no educational efforts to promote it. In spite of the fact that the language carries the ecology and identity of Cameroon and tends to be the only Cameroonian language that transcends ethnic, professional, educational and other social boundaries, it is not taught in any of the Cameroonian schools. On the contrary, there are serious threats to ban it. Surprisingly, the only English-speaking university in the country, known as the University of Buea, displays all types of provocative signboards that openly ban the use of this language on the campus, simply because the promotion and localisation of English is a priority.

The following are some of the signboards that are displayed on the campus of this university:



- English is the password, not pidgin
- Pidgin is taking a heavy toll on your English; shun it
- No Pidgin on Campus, please!
- If you speak pidgin, you will write pidgin
- Be my friend. Speak English
- Commonwealth speak English not pidgin

It is difficult to understand why there is so much passion about the promotion of English to the point that an official ban is placed on one of the most spoken languages in the country, which is also a language that significantly defines the Cameroonian identity.

One of the ways through which Kamtok has been relegated to the background is the lack of political effort to standardise it. Is it not a paradox that a language that has served communicative needs in the country for more than 500 years (see Kouega, 2008) has neither been standardised nor given an

official recognition? The importance of any language lies in its communicative potential. And Kamtok has been identified in various research works as one of the most widely spoken languages in the country and a language that transcends most ethnic, educational, religious, and social boundaries. It is used in varying degrees in the civil service, in court, on radio and TV, in records, in advertising, in conversations among friends, colleagues and relatives, in teacher-student interaction outside the classroom, in patient-doctor interaction, in large scale business transaction, in petty trades, literature and performing arts, in religion, in political campaigns and in traffic police-coach driver interaction (Chumbow and Bobda, 1996: 420 and Schröder, 2003: 181). The use of the language in English-speaking towns in Cameroon needs no special emphasis, given that there are already as high as 36.2 % and 42.3 % of native speakers in some of the Cameroonian towns (see Schröder, 2003: 85). But the use of the language in French-speaking towns tends to be in high competition with French, as revealed in Table 1.

What explains the fact that a language that has existed in the country for more than 500 years, is already serving as the mother tongue of many Cameroonians, is being used in many domains of life and is even competing with French in French-speaking towns cannot be standardised? The fact that the issue of orthography for the language is a hot debate only now (see Sala, 2009b and Ngefac, manuscript) shows that its standardisation agenda is still a dream.

The misrepresentation of the developmental status of Kamtok by both scholars and laypeople is one of the ways through which the real dynamics of this language have been concealed from the global and intellectual community. The language has been given all types of appellations and most of these appellations do not capture the real developmental stage of the language. Anchimbe (2006: 33) maintains that the language is 'taken for a debased, low-class medium of communication'. Similarly, some see it as the substandard variety of Cameroon English (see Ubanako, 2008); others simply call it Pidgin English (see Alobwede, 1998; Ngefac and

Sala, 2006; Sala and Ngefac, 2006; Kouega, 2008 and Sala, 2009); some call it Kamtok (see Ngome, 1986; Todd, 1990; Mbangwana, 1991; and Ayafor, 1996, 2006). Some laypeople with no linguistic and creolistic interests perceive the language rather as bush English or the code of communication for uneducated people. Whatever appellation has been given so far to this language, the truth is that the language is neither a substandard variety of Cameroon English nor bush English nor a jargon nor a pidgin as previously thought. As early as 1960, that is 50 years ago, Gilbert Schneider wrote the first dictionary of the language and called it 'Cameroons creole Dictionary' (Schneider, 1960). If the language was perceived in 1960 as a creole, there is no logic why, 50 years after, the same language should still be regarded as a jargon or a pidgin. In a recent study (see Ngefac, manuscript), it is demonstrated that this language displays most, if not all, characteristics of a creole and more interesting is the fact that the variety spoken in the Southwest and Northwest English-speaking regions is already experiencing a postcreole continuum, because of its constant contact with English, the superstrate language. As concerns its creolistic traits, sociolinguistically, it is spoken as an L1 by a significant proportion of its speakers (see Koenig et al., 1983; Schröder, 2003 and Neba et al., 2006) and it serves as the main language of communication for the Anglophone speech community. Structurally, it displays an SVO word order as is the case with many creoles described in the literature. For instance, the following Kamtok sentences taken from different works on the language display an SVO word order (also see Ngefac, manuscript):

- a) Peta de chop rais 'Peter is eating rice' (Kouega, 2008: 46)
- b) i bin sén i másinja. 'He sent his messenger' (Schneider, 1966: 96)
- c) aláta bin kári dát ring. 'The rat carried the ring' (Schneider, 1966: 125)
- d) a don bai som fain plánti 'I've just bought some nice plantains' (Todd, 1973: 5)

In addition to the SVO word order it displays, there are systematic and well established preverbal

Table 1: Percentage of Kamtok speakers in French-speaking towns in Cameroon

	Nkongsamba	Bafang	Douala	Bafoussam	Dschang
Pidgin	95 %	91 %	90 %	72 %	78 %
French	84 %	81 %	90 %	93 %	91.5 %

(Koenig et al., 1983)

particles that express different grammatical categories such as tense and aspect observable in other creoles around the world. Such descriptive works as Schneider, 1966; Todd, 1969, 1991; Mbassi-Manga, 1973; Féral, 1989; Ayafor, 2000 and Schröder, 2003a have identified the preverbal particles “go” as the future marker, “bin” as the past tense marker, “di” as the progressive or imperfective aspect marker, and “don” as the perfective aspect marker that indicates a completed action. The preverbal particle “neba” has also been identified as a perfective aspect that marks negation. Considering therefore the sociolinguistic and structural aspects of this language, calling it a pidgin or a jargon or bush English or the substandard variety of Cameroon English is concealing the status of this language as a creole from the intellectual and global community.

Conclusion

It is shown in this paper that every effort is made in Cameroon to localise and promote a global language or one of the so-called European languages of wider communication (Bokamba, 2007: 33), such as English, but no effort is made to develop, promote and expose to the intellectual community a local language, such as Kamtok, which significantly carries the identity and ecology of Cameroon. The tendency to associate local resources and potentials with an inferiority complex in favour of what is rooted in Western constructs, as is the case in Cameroon, is claimed in this paper to be one of the consequences of colonial indoctrination. Meaningful development can only take place in postcolonial Cameroon if local potentials and resources are successfully combined with those of the West. This implies that both local and ex-colonial languages are necessary to make Cameroon a veritable multilingual context worth being proud of. A complete rejection of a local language such as Kamtok can project Cameroon as a country that has an identity problem. This is because Kamtok significantly carries the identity and ecology of Cameroon and a rejection of such a language will be synonymous with refusing one's own identity and embracing one that is fallaciously judged to be superior. The United Nations' effort to promote mutual international understanding and cooperation is not anchored, as far as culture is concerned, on a vertical partnership among nations, but rather on a horizontal relationship where no country's culture is necessarily superior or inferior. If Cameroon, for example, engages in a mutual relationship with another country and is unable to

display what is uniquely Cameroonian, such as its local languages and other cultural artifacts, that relationship is bound to be a failure. ■

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