
Is Cameroon Pidgin flourishing or dying?

SAMUEL ATECHI

An attempt to reconcile conflicting reports on the functions and status of Cameroon pidgin English

Introduction

Cameroon Pidgin English (abbreviated to *CamP*) is one of the languages of wider communication in Cameroon, a country second only to Papua New Guinea in terms of its multiplicity of languages for a relatively small population. CamP is used alongside other languages like English and French (official languages), Fulfulde, Arab Choa, Ewondo and Duala (lingua francas), and over 250 indigenous languages. What is, however, peculiar about CamP is that it is not restricted to a particular class of people or to people from a particular region. A language which arose as a result of the desperate need for a link language between people who spoke mutually unintelligible languages has now established itself as a major force to reckon with in the linguistic landscape of the country. One of the main preoccupations among researchers on CamP has been its relationship with Cameroon English (CamE), which has higher status. While CamE is an official language in the country's constitution, CamP enjoys covert prestige bestowed on it by Cameroonians as a language of wider communication, social interaction, intimacy, etc. However, Cameroonians have been given to understand that the coexistence of CamP and CamE is responsible for the falling standard of English in the country, as a result of which CamP should be eradicated at all costs. This attitude has led to the stigmatisation and intimidation of CamP speakers as educational authorities all over the country attempt to ban the language, and refer to it in such pejorative terms as *bad English*, *poor English*, *bush English*, *join join English* etc. Such hostility has tended to drive the language underground so that speakers rarely express their liking for the language overtly. They are suspicious of

language authorities and thus have developed an ambivalent attitude towards anything that has to do with CamP. Thus if those speakers who use CamP daily as the main medium of communication were to be asked what they think about its status, functions and prospects, the results would be largely negative (Schröder, 2003), not because they do not like the language but simply because they have been intimidated and stigmatised. This ambivalence has caused serious methodological difficulties for researchers, which have marred most results of studies on the functions, status and prospects of CamP. The inability to adopt an appropriate methodology to research the topic has given rise to conflicting findings and statements on the relationship between CamP and CamE, some of which are sometimes truly baffling (see Ngefacs & Sala, 2006; Ayafor, 2005; Kouega,



SAMUEL ATECHI has BA and MA degrees in English from the University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon, and a PhD in English from the Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany. He is a senior lecturer in the Department of English, University of Yaoundé I and a

*visiting lecturer at the Madonna University, Nigeria. His research interests include the phonology of World Englishes, and Pidgins and Creoles. He has published widely in local and international journals. His book *The Intelligibility of Native and Non-native English Speech* argues that second language varieties of English are not deficient in any way. Email: atechi69@yahoo.com*

2001; Chia, 2009). Researchers insensitive to the situation carry out research on CamP and obtain results that paint a completely distorted picture of the situation on the ground. In this light, certain basic questions about this relationship remain to be settled: What is actually the relationship between CamP and CamE? Is CamP really facing death? Is CamP losing ground to CamE? Is CamP soon going to lose its identity and idiosyncrasies to CamE or is CamP going to supplant CamE? This paper will consider how various researchers have grappled with these questions. By analysing their statements, it will attempt to explain the controversies that have characterised research on the relationship between CamP and CamE thus far.

Cameroon English vs. Cameroon Pidgin

CamP started in Cameroon as early as the year 1400 and started establishing itself as the only means through which people who spoke mutually unintelligible languages could communicate. Thus CamP was extensively used during the Portuguese trade and later during the slave trade period. The abolition of the slave trade saw the colonial period set in with the Germans in 1884. The Germans opened large plantations and the labourers used CamP for easy communication. CamE was in restricted usage because not many people were educated. With the departure of the Germans, the English took over the plantations and tried to implement English as the main vehicle of communication. This was of course not without sociolinguistic consequences: whereas society was linguistically unmarked when CamP was the dominant language, now people on the plantations were stratified on linguistic lines, with the few whites and blacks who could speak and write English being regarded as the higher class, and the majority of blacks who only spoke CamP considered the lower class. The blacks were further classified according to their competence in CamE: stratification was reflected in manifold ways, ranging from the type of jobs they did, to where they lived and the facilities put at their disposal as workers. This meant that those who spoke only CamP were stigmatised as they found themselves quarantined not only because they spoke CamP but also because it exposed them to a lifestyle and morals associated with slovenliness, vulgarity, and debasement (Alobwede, 1998: 57). The CamP speaker was then caught up in a dilemma of being loyal to his

language on the one hand, and struggling to identify with the higher class on the other. As time went on, the language actually increased in importance as people used it not just because they were desperate for a link language but also because its functional load had increased. This even attracted the attention of the educated elite both in the plantations and in the coastal towns who joined unconsciously in speaking and promoting the language. Opponents who saw speakers of CamP as the underdogs and who expected that increasing exposure to CamE would lead to the death of CamP were dismayed to find that CamP was instead gaining ground. Governmental authorities and other overzealous individuals saw this as a threat to the acquisition of CamE and started waging a fierce battle against it. One of the strategies they used was to give it derogatory names of the sort cited above. This controversial relationship between CamP and CamE has attracted the attention of both local and international scholars.

An appraisal of previous research on Cameroon Pidgin

Kouega (2001) carried out an investigation on attitudes towards CamP in the educational sphere. He found that out of 189 informants, 151 respondents (79.8%) were against its adoption as a language of instruction in the first three years of education and only 38 respondents (20.1%) were in favour of its institution in this phase. Six years later, Tarh (2007) conducted a similar survey in three towns in Cameroon and the results showed that 53 out of the 142 informants (or 37.4%) were willing to have CamP as a pedagogic language in Cameroon. Atechi (2008) carried out a similar study and the results showed that 38% were in favour of its institution as a language of education. Thus if we follow the trend from (Kouega, 2001) 20.1% through (Tarh, 2007) 37.4%, to (Atechi, 2008) 38%, we see a steady increase in positive attitudes towards the language.

From his results, Kouega unequivocally declares that CamP is facing death, although we should be cautious in equating lack of prestige in a formal domain like education with language death. In the same vein, Schröder carried out a survey and came out with similar results and this equally led her to conclude that attitudes towards CamP were largely negative and that the language was losing ground to CamE. The comments of these two scholars after such surveys reflect the difficulty that surrounds research on attitudes towards CamP. CamP

speakers have been made to develop such sensitivity that even when asked questions indirectly, they still understand the hidden implications and of course give only the information they want to give. One researcher who seems to understand this myth is Chia (2009) who carried out a survey on the use of CamP on the Buea University campus. His observations on methodology are pertinent.

We were aware that if we asked students simply to indicate whether or not they spoke CPE the answer would be overwhelmingly negative even in answering anonymous questionnaires, because of the ban. Since CPE is illicit here, instances of its usage can only be collected when not elicited directly or when not being observed. To overcome this problem good data would be collected by simple rapid random sampling, but which must not be seen to be observed. (Chia, 2009: 44–5)

He then conceived a data observation sheet which allowed observers stationed at one strategic point on campus, preferably the entrance into a lecture hall, to observe and note down any pair of students who came conversing. The observers were students rather than lecturers, because a student would blend easily into student groups without raising any fear or suspicion. Twenty of them were recruited for the task. Each observation sheet was designed to take 25 observations. The students ticked the observation sheets as instructed and the following results were obtained: Out of a total population of 10,000 students enrolled at the University of Buea, the investigation sampled 1,442 students who were actually involved in a conversation using one or other of the languages in their repertoire on campus; out of this number 904 students (or 63%) used CamP. English recorded 369 students representing a relatively low 25% and French 11%.

One of Chia's aims was to ascertain what use students made of CamP. In listening to the conversations observers had to determine whether the students focused on academic or non-academic topics. Some students were actually discussing mathematical and chemical formulas and literary issues in CamP. Although this investigation does not deal directly with language attitudes, these results can be interpreted as having a bearing on this. The students profess that CamP is the language of intimacy, the language they feel at home with, a means of building friendships, etc. Chia then asks the question if the ban (discussed in the next section) on the use of CamP has worked, concluding that the answer is negative because the speakers

show such stiff resistance. Chia (2009: 48) expresses the fear that 'since CamP is making in-roads into the very fief of Standard English in this nascent role as a language of academic discourse, it may eventually supplant standard English' (48).

These results vividly reflect the growing demographic power wielded by CamP on the campus. We need to take into consideration the fact that the high usage (63%) of CamP took place in a very sensitive environment with signboards everywhere asking students to shun CamP. The percentage is expected to be higher in outside settings where hostilities and stigmatisation are less severe.

Like Chia, Ayafor (2005) contradicts Kouega and Schröder when she thinks that CamP is gaining ground rather than facing death. Examining the two camps represented by those who see CamP dwindling and those who see it gaining ground, Sala & Ngefac (2006: 220) dismiss the reasons put forward by the two opposing sides as extra-linguistic and think rather that there is an 'internal threat which is wreaking havoc on the structure of CamP, namely the influence from the world's lingua franca, the English language'. The authors raise the following points in support of their argument. Firstly, CamP phonology is undergoing some restructuring towards English phonology, especially of some of the most divergent features from mainstream English (e.g. *neba, noba* (1960) *neva* (2005) the words for 'never'). This observation also applies to grammatical structure and vocabulary (e.g. *kwa* (1960) *bag* (2005), becoming *bag* (2005). *Dis na ma basiku* ('this it is my bicycle') (1960) *Dis wan na mai bicycle* ('this one it is my bicycle') (2005)). A degree of convergence between CamE and CamP was earlier predicted by (Sala, 2005: 402–8). The restructuring of CamP in the direction of CamE is the more evident aspect of this convergence, and is a result of increasing exposure to formal English and the overt denigration of CamP in government and educational policies.

From the foregoing, Sala and Ngefac (2006) made the following predictions: (a) that this restructuring will reach a point where the two languages would merge in favour of CamE, and (b) that CamP is becoming more and more intelligible to the speaker of British English, thereby losing its distinctive identity.

Such restructuring can be attributed to the increase in the level of education of Cameroonians, and the effects of globalisation and the new electronic media, which have exposed Cameroonians to more English.

This article differs from such conclusions based mainly on structural criteria. I do not see language change as a *problem* and a *threat* to the survival of CamP. Change is, after all, an inevitable linguistic phenomenon. It may turn out that what is seen at the surface as a threat to CamP may, as it were, turn out to be a strength. I prefer to shift the argument back to the numbers of speakers, their status and the variety of functions to which they put language. In the past, CamP was used more as a link language between people who spoke mutually unintelligible languages, mostly by the uneducated who worked on the plantations. In short, CamP was used out of desperate communicative necessity. Today the level of education of Cameroonians has significantly increased and most of the uneducated speakers are giving way to the younger generation who now speak the form of CamP that reflects their linguistic circumstances, including their level of exposure to English. The educated speakers cannot go back to the way the uneducated speakers spoke – there is no reason to do so. What Sala & Ngefac (2006) call ‘unique peculiarity’, meaning the way the older generation pronounced the borrowed words from English, was simply the inability of these speakers to pronounce the loanwords from English well, due to their lack of exposure to the language. Uneducated pronunciation is not what makes CamP unique. It needs to be acknowledged that CamP has along the line acquired other very significant functions that have even relegated the ‘desperation factor’ to the background. CamP is used almost in all domains today. Simo Bobda & Chumbow (1996) point out that CamP is used in court, civil service, advertising, doctor-patient interactions, buying and selling, political campaigns, etc. Atechi & Fonka (2007) demonstrate that CamP is now a lingua franca not only for the Anglophone sector of Cameroon but also for the Francophone sector. And more recently Chia (2009) and Simo Bobda (2009) add that it has become one of the languages of academic discourse even in our universities. Simo Bobda (2009: 19) succinctly captures this promotion in the following lines:

We are today gradually moving to another extreme where PE, even in university circles, has squatted into the domains which were hitherto the preserve of English. Indeed, while English is fast becoming a foreign language (in the ELT sense of the term and with all the consequences), Pidgin English is commonly used by postgraduate students to discuss Shakespeare and Chomsky, or nuclear physics.

A complex co-existence

In this section I present some data reflecting the uneasy coexistence of the two types of English on a university campus. Threatening and sometimes desperate slogans on the following billboards mounted all over the campus in the pure Anglo-Saxon university of Buea testify to the fear that authorities feel about the growing influence of CamP.

- *Pidgin is taking a heavy toll on your English; shun it.*
- *No Pidgin on campus please!*
- *The medium of studies at UB is English, not Pidgin*
- *If you speak Pidgin, you will write Pidgin.*
- *English is the password, not Pidgin*
- *Speak less pidgin and more English*
- *Commonwealth (people) speak English, not Pidgin.*
- *Be my friend, speak English.*
- *Succeed at UB by avoiding Pidgin on Campus*
- *The better you speak Pidgin, the worse you will write English*

From these slogans we see that the threat posed by CamP is so serious that the authorities use varied tactics to try to deal with the problem. They start with a considerable degree of authority and firmness, for example, *No Pidgin on Campus please! English is the password, not Pidgin, Pidgin is taking a heavy toll on your English; shun it!* But it seems that at one point, they discovered that threats alone may prove insufficient and they changed their approach and now sound more desperate as they plead with the students to shun CamP as in *Be my friend, speak English*. This contradicts the claim of researchers like Kouega (2001), Schröder (2003), Ngefac & Sala (2006) that CamP’s hegemony is being threatened by the growing popularity of CamE. Instead, the authorities are literally on their knees, begging students to speak CamE and shun CamP.

A similar scenario is painted by Bonny Kfua¹ who issues the following decree in ‘Time is up for PE’.

Anyone reading through an essay or letter written by a class seven pupil will admit that the cry of fallen standards in our schools is a reality. Whatever might have pushed the British and the Catholic Church to use pidgin as a vehicle of communication, it is high time *someone courageously* put an end to the widespread use of PE in Cameroon. (my emphasis)

The words ‘courageously put an end to the widespread use of PE in Cameroon’ call for the death of CamP in more direct language than the more diplomatic language of the campus notices. The two sets of examples vividly show how CamP is threatening the hegemony of CamE and not the other way round. The obvious shock waves being sent by CamP from primary school to university level makes it unwise to start prophesying the end of such a language. I would be more cautious.

Conclusion

From all the above indications it is clear that research on CamP has been a lively though often contradictory activity. I suggest that CamP has, and will continue to have, a significant place in the complex linguistic landscape of Cameroon. The language is not facing death; on the contrary, it is gaining ground and asserting itself as a force to reckon with in the linguistic make-up of Cameroon. On the other hand, CamE maintains its official status as the language of education and international communication. I strongly believe that each of these languages has a vital role to play in Cameroon. There is no need to start imagining them at each other’s throat, as it were. On considering the issue of falling standards of English Alobwede (1998: 57) observes that standards can only fall if they were once high, and asks the question ‘Where was CamP when the standards were high?’ Indeed, CamP preceded English in Cameroon and not the other way round. It is true they have a lot in common and sometimes their functions overlap; both are needed for a linguistically healthy Cameroon. The present restructuring of CamP towards CamE or ‘modernisation’ is but a natural phenomenon. It is a movement towards stabilisation and not towards the grave.

Note

1 This quotation (n.d.) is taken from Alobwede d’Epie (1998) *English Today* 14(1).

References

- Alobwede, D. 1998. ‘Banning Pidgin English in Cameroon.’ *English Today*, 14(1), 54–60.
- Atechi, S. 2008. ‘Cameroon Pidgin: to teach or not to teach.’ Paper presented at the International Symposium in honour of Professor Paul Mbangwana. Yaoundé.
- . & Fonka, H. 2007. ‘Pidgin English as a lingua franca in Cameroon.’ *Papers in English & Linguistics*, 7&8, 40–55.
- Ayafor, M. 2005. ‘Is Pidgin facing death or gaining ground in Cameroon?’ Paper presented at the International Conference on Language, Literature and Identity, Yaoundé.
- Chia, E. 2009. ‘Further developments in Cameroon Pidgin English.’ *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences. Special Edition in Honour of Professor Paul N. Mbangwana*, 39–50.
- Chumbow, B. & Simo Bobda, A. 1996. ‘The life cycle of post-imperial English in Cameroon.’ In J. Fishman, A. Conrad & A. Rubal-Lopez (eds), *Post-Imperial English: Status Change in Former British and American Colonies, 1940–1990*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 401–28.
- Kouega, J. P. 2001. ‘Pidgin facing death in Cameroon.’ Terralingua Discussion Paper No 17. Online at <www.terralingua.org/Discussionpapers.html> (Accessed July 20, 2008).
- Ngefacc, A. & Sala, B. 2006. ‘Cameroon Pidgin and Cameroon English at a confluence: a real time investigation.’ *English World Wide* 27(2), 217–27.
- Sala, B. 2005. ‘Aspects of the Cameroon English sentence.’ PhD thesis. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé I.
- . & Ngefacc, A. 2006. ‘The depidginisation process in Cameroon Pidgin English.’ *PhiN* 36, 31–43.
- Schröder, A. 2003. *Status, Functions, and Prospects of Pidgin English: An empirical approach to language dynamics in Cameroon*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Simo Bobda, A. 2009. ‘The heritage of Professor Paul Nkad Mbangwana.’ *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences. Special Edition in Honour of Professor Paul N. Mbangwana*, 17–25.
- Tarh, I. 2007. ‘Pidgin English as a self-assertive language in Cameroon.’ Maitrise Dissertation. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé I.