

Rationalizing the Attitude-Acquisition Conundrum in Cameroon Pidgin English

VINCENT A. TANDA

Why elitist attitudes towards these dialects cannot - and should not - hinder the growth and spread of Pidgin Englishes

Introduction

This paper seeks to rationalize the attitude-acquisition conundrum which is witnessed with Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), an English-based pidgin spoken in Cameroon. According to Baker (1992: 10), 'attitude' refers to a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior. In second-language acquisition literature, the use of the term 'attitude' has very often conjured up associated notions such as behavior, motivation, prestige and importance, which are seen to be important determinants of levels of success in L2 learning/acquisition. A positive attitude is said to fortify the motivation to learn a language; to be a successful learner, a positive attitude towards the target language is necessary. However, as McKenzie (2008: 4) notes, the relationship between attitude and L2 learning/acquisition is a rather complex one, which varies according to social context. Among other things, a positive attitude towards an L2 is also driven by factors such as (1) the socio-economic value of the L2, (2) the L2's status-raising potential and (3) its perceived instrumental value.

There is a widely held and rather influential (but in my view nonetheless misconceived) belief in elite circles in Cameroon that CPE is 'bad English' and incapable of contributing to 'civilized discourse'. What feeds this belief is the assumption that CPE is English badly learned, and that CPE, as a derivative of English, impedes the learning of Standard English. As Tande (2006) observes, although CPE is widespread in the two anglophone regions of Cameroon, it is still treated with scorn

and disdain, and among elite circles is considered a language for the lowly class. The attitude of some of the Cameroonian elite and those in official policymaking circles is so acerbic because they consider CPE the major cause of a presumed falling proficiency in Standard English in Cameroon, and would like to see it banned altogether (see e.g. Bobda, 2002; Kouega, 2007; Fontem, 2004). One should also observe here that this is not peculiar to Cameroon, as the same has been reported of student pidgin in Ghana (see Rupp, 2013).

A counter voice, but one which is rather feeble, recognizes the important geographical spread of the language, and considering its observed functional utility suggests that instead of trying to wish CPE away, it could be harnessed for a variety



VINCENT TANDA is an associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Buea, Cameroon, where he teaches syntactic theory and applied linguistics. He holds a PhD from the University of Manchester, United Kingdom (UK) and has been teaching at the University of Buea since 1994.

Vincent Tanda has several publications in peer-reviewed journals on aspects of syntax of Cameroonian languages, changing global dynamics and shifting paradigms in language learning/acquisition in Cameroon, and ecolinguistics. Email: vtanda@yahoo.com

of developmental goals. Unfortunately, this stance does not have the ear of those who wield political power and take the final policy decisions in the country. As Povey (1983: 16) puts it, '[t]hose who should best appreciate the value of CPE are determined out of ignorance or prejudice to minimize its possibilities.'

This paper sets out to examine the attitude-acquisition paradox observed in the use of CPE. Following this introduction, Section two presents the language policy of Cameroon, showing that there is an intricate link between language policy in education and economic, political and socio-cultural complexities. Section three looks at the attitude-acquisition conundrum in CPE in detail and presents the reasons that underpin why many Cameroonians seek to know and use CPE in spite of the negative attitudes that elite groups hold towards it. Section four concludes the paper.

Language policy and Politics in Cameroon

Research in the field of language policy has established language as a means of solving problems. In Cameroon the problem to be addressed is that of maintaining national unity and integration.

At independence and upon reunification in 1961, the first independent government of Cameroon did not opt for one, two or more of the 286 indigenous Cameroonian languages as official and national in the country because this was considered a potential recipe for contention and strife (Grimes 2000). Instead, it opted for an official English-French bilingual policy. These two languages, which are the languages of its ex-colonial masters, were to be the languages used for official communication by Cameroonians. Future generations of Cameroonians were expected to be bilingual in English and French (Tchoungui 1983); for this reason, both languages were made compulsory in the school system. Institutions such as the Linguistic Centers were established to foster this bilingual policy.

Nevertheless, the Cameroon National Forum on Education of May 1995 recognized the need to develop and use indigenous Cameroon languages in education in the school system. This eventually was translated in 2004 and 2012 to laws empowering local regions to support the promotion of indigenous languages through education and literacy and to create an inspectorate in charge of literacy of non-formal basic education and of the

promotion of mother tongue education at the Ministry of Basic Education, respectively (see Mba 2013).

The attitude-acquisition conundrum

As we observed above, significant endeavors have been undertaken by policy makers to promote English and French as the official languages of Cameroon. The steps taken include the enactment of the compulsory teaching of these two languages at all levels of the school system, and students being expected to pass in either of them as a prerequisite to pursue higher education in the country or to be employed in the civil service. English therefore would be seen as a means of guaranteeing or at least promoting upward social mobility.

As a corollary to these measures and especially to protect the English language, CPE was and is still banned on campuses of prestigious anglophone schools such as St Paul's Comprehensive school in Bamenda and at the universities of Buea and Bamenda, the two English-speaking Universities in the Country. Those of this strand of thinking refer to CPE as 'Broken English', 'Bad English' or 'Bush English'.

The thought that feeds this belief tends to lean on the closeness that CPE bears to Standard British English in terms of syntax and lexicon British English. Given this, learners of Standard English are perceived as having the tendency to bring in certain pidgin structures and lexical items when speaking standard English, without being conscious of their perceived inappropriateness in Standard English usage. CPE, to this school of thought, thus carries the stigma of illiteracy. Those who use it are considered not to have mastered Standard English.

Yet in spite of all the resolve to plan for and promote the use of standard English (and French), because of the drive for national cohesion and the instrumentalism of these languages in the globalizing world, the paradox remains that it is neither French nor Standard English but rather Cameroon pidgin English that is gaining more and more of a national character. As Povey (1983: 15) puts it:

If one examines the overall figures provided... it is not French, it is not Fulfulde, and it is certainly not standard English that has established itself as the most widespread... the single most useful means of communication in Cameroon... is Pidgin English.

One of the early sociolinguistic surveys on the usage of CPE, carried out by Mbangwana (1983),

identified the nation-wide status the language entertains and how it has even gained a mother tongue status with some anglophones (see also Shroder 2003). Given its spread and function in Cameroon specifically, and West Africa in general, he recommended its acceptability and formalization in the Cameroonian educational system. This argument has found adherents in Echu (2003), Mbufong and Tanda (2003) and Ayu'nwi (2006), among others.

A more recent survey by Lewis et al (2013) confirms that while CPE continues to conjure a rather negative attitude in Cameroon, it remains at the same time by far the most widespread lingua franca in the country, being used by about half the population. The question that arises, then, is what motivates more and more Cameroonians and visitors to Cameroon to learn this language despite its lowly prestige and the negative attitudes it engenders in elite Cameroonian circles? The following section addresses this question.

CPE as the lingua franca of Cameroon

Of late, Cameroon Pidgin English has established itself as a recognized medium of interaction in multifarious spheres, and it has become the language of widest communication. As the years go by, it is creating new niches for itself in several domains. It is the language of interethnic interaction, used for greetings, socializing and in many other domains, as has been discussed in Shroder (2003). It is also the language of popular politics and television and radio news. The acquisition of CPE is not limited to Cameroonian nationals. In fact, American Peace Corps volunteers to Cameroon are expected to learn it to enable them interact with people in the villages where they often work. Even the educated elite have been seen to use it albeit in informal circles. Given this increasingly widespread usage, CPE is now finally starting to lose its stigma as the language of illiterates. Consider this table by Shröder (2003: 181) on the functions of CPE in Cameroon.

The economic value of CPE

Arcand (1996: 119) states that languages are the lubricant of trade. A cost-benefit analysis of CPE would bring to light a wide range of financial benefits gained by individual Cameroonians or foreigners who use it. For instance one will note that in the domains of trade, commerce and tourism, CPE plays an important role. As key to individuals' economic activity in the country, CPE is the

primary language of national trade and commerce. One can in fact state here that CPE gives demonstrable economic returns to its speakers. Povey (1983: 16) observed that in the francophone city of Douala, which is also the major economic center of Cameroon, 83% of the population used CPE when buying in the market, a figure that indicates the near monopoly of CPE for day-to-day services, in this city especially. More recent studies by Ojongnkpot (2014: 139) and others seem to corroborate this trend for Mamfe and other Cameroonian towns.

CPE as a cultural binder

There is no gainsaying that members of cultural communities have strong emotional attachments to their identities. This is because identity is what makes these members of the community recognizably the same. This is precisely the emotion that binds all anglophone Cameroonians whose origins are in the former British trust territory of the Southern Cameroons.

Cameroon Pidgin English is an integral part of anglophone Cameroonian identity first and foremost, before one even considers the other parts of the country. CPE is seen to bind all anglophones, and their willingness to speak this language has an integrative dimension. Indeed, while the purely instrumental and functional values of English and French have been emphasized in Cameroon as a crucial goal of building a modern country and a means of plugging unto the global economy, the integrative goal of CPE among anglophones should not be underestimated. Inevitably, anglophones will express how they view and interpret the world around them more naturally in CPE than in Standard English. For instance, if we consider some very familiar CPE proverbs such as (1) and (2), we want to note that they have direct correlates with indigenous Cameroonian proverbs as in (3) and (4). This is a pointer to the fact that they are translations from the indigenous proverbs, which mimic the Cameroonian worldview.

- (1) Goat di chop for place where they tie hi. (CPE)
goat Asp feed for place where they tie it
'A goat feeds where it is tethered.'
- (2) When your broda dey ontop plum tree you go chop black plum. (CPE)
If your brother is on plum tree you will eat black plum
'If you have a brother on a plum tree you should expect to eat the best plums.'

Table 1: The functions of CPE in Cameroon

| | In general | anglophones | Francophones |
|--------------------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| education | • | •• | • |
| mass media | •• | •• | • |
| political campaigns | ••• | ••• | • |
| administration | • | •• | • |
| work | ••• | •••• | •• |
| religion | ••• | ••••• | •• |
| trade | ••• | ••••• | •• |
| literature and performing arts | • | •• | • |
| science and technology | • | ••• | |
| literary topics | • | ••• | |
| politics | • | •• | |
| humor | •••• | ••••• | •••• |
| intimacy | ••• | •••• | •• |
| secret | ••• | ••• | •• |
| national and cultural identity | • | • | • |

•••••very high ••••high ••••medium ••low, •very low frequency use.

- (3) Bisi' zi ma senke yu ngwu kadze. (Babungo)
Goat feeds Asp where it is tied
'A goat feeds where it is tethered.'
- (4) Ni muma gho a nda nifor o tee abee meke?
(Bafut)
With brother yours in house royal you stand
outside how
'How can you have one of yours in government
and suffer want.'

Cameroonians will be familiar with these proverbs in the sense that they represent the typical Cameroonian worldview: It is commonly to be expected that one should benefit from the perks of one's office, or that when you have kindred occupying an influential position in government you should naturally expect to be favoured. Some other cultures will refer to such a way of appreciating such issues as misappropriation or nepotism respectively.

Acquisition of CPE

CPE is acquired informally in Cameroon. There are no schools wherein it is taught and learned. Within their multilingual background, anglophones acquire Pidgin English naturally as they grow up. It is only recently that textbooks have been written to teach CPE, especially to tourists and American

Peace Corps volunteers. Because anglophone Cameroonians acquire the language on an informal and ad hoc basis, they feel less constrained by rules of grammar and conceptions of 'proper' use. It is *their* language; they make the rules within the boundaries of communicative competence, and it does not matter to them which variety of CPE they are using.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the attitude-acquisition conundrum in Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE). It submits that despite the widely held negative attitude in influential circles about CPE being bad English which is incapable of 'civilized discourse', this negativism has not blighted the inroads being made by this language to become the language of wider communication in this country. Statistics show that when it comes to CPE, emotions and attitudes cloud the real picture. That is, despite the prevalence of negative public attitudes towards CPE, particularly among social and political elites, it is CPE rather than standard English that lubricates trade and tourism in Cameroon. Beyond these, Cameroon Pidgin English also expresses the anglophone identity in a country wherein anglophones are in the minority, and it indeed it constitutes a repository of the history of its anglophone speakers.

References

- Arcand, J. L. 1996. 'Development economics and language: the earnest search for a mirage?' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 121, 119–57.
- Ayu'nwi, N., Fogwe, E. & Atindogbe, G. 2006. 'Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) as a tool for empowerment and national development.' *African Study Monographs*, 27(2), 39–61.
- Baker, C. 1992. *Attitudes and Language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Bobda, S. 2002. *Watch your English! A collection of remedial lessons on English usage*. Yaounde: B & K Language Institute.
- Echu, G. 2003. 'Influence of Cameroon Pidgin English on the linguistic and cultural development of the French language.' Online at <www.indiana.edu/~pdfs/03-echuo3.pdf> (Accessed September 9, 2013).
- Fontem, A. N. 2004. 'Pidgin influence on anglophone English language proficiency in Bamenda.' PhD thesis. Nigeria: University of Ibadan.
- Grimes, B. F. (ed.) 2002. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Kouega, J-P. 2007. 'The language situation in Cameroon: current issues in Cameroon language planning.' *CILP* 8(1), 3–94.
- Lewis, M., Simons, G. & Fenning, C. (eds.) 2013. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Mba, G. 2013. 'An overview of language policy and planning in Cameroon'. In P. Akumbu & B. Chiatoh (eds.), *Language Policy in Africa: Perspectives for Cameroon*. Kansas City: Miraclaire Academic Publications, pp. 12–31.
- Mbangwana, P. 1983. 'The scope and role of pidgin English in Cameroon'. In E. Koenig, E. Chia & J. Povey (eds.), *A Sociolinguistic Profile of Urban Centers in Cameroon*. Los Angeles, CA: Cross Road Press, pp. 79–91.
- Mbufong, P. & Tanda, V. 2003. 'The problem with the English Language in Cameroon.' *Language Forum*, 29(1), 37–44.
- McKenzie, R. 2008. 'Social factors and non-native attitudes toward varieties of spoken English: Japanese case study.' *International journal of Applied linguistics*, 18(1), 63–86.
- Ojongnkpot, C. 2014. 'Assessing the nature and degree of endangerment: the case of Manyu indigenous languages.' PhD thesis. Cameroon: University of Buea.
- Povey, J. 2013. 'The language profile of Cameroon: an introduction.' In E. Koenig, E. Chia & J. Povey (eds.), *A Sociolinguistic Profile of Urban Centers in Cameroon*. Los Angeles, CA: Cross Road Press, pp. 7–18.
- Rupp, C. 2013. 'The function of student pidgin in Ghana.' *English Today*, 29(4), 13–22.
- Shroder, A. 2003. *Status, Function and Prospects of Pidgin English: An Empirical Approach to Language Dynamics in Cameroon*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Tande, D. 2006. 'The politics of pidgin English in Cameroon.' Online at <http://www.dibussi.com/2006/08/the_politics_of.html> (Accessed September 6, 2013).
- Tchoungui, G. 1983. 'Focus on official bilingualism in Cameroon: its relationship to education.' In E. Koenig, E. Chia & J. Povey (eds.), *A Sociolinguistic Profile of Urban Centers in Cameroon*. Los Angeles, CA: Cross Road Press, pp. 93–115.