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Migration in the Bamenda Grassfield Region of Cameroon: Vector of Linguistic Interference in the Language of Civil Engineer

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ABSTRACT

Brettell and Hollifield (2019) posit that over the years, migration has attracted the interest of scholars from different areas of study. Among these scholars are linguists who examine how the interface between regional affiliation and ethnicity generates novel patterns in language variation and restructuring. This paper looks at migration in the Bamenda Grassfield Region of Cameroon as an antecedent to linguistic interference in civil engineering where a considerable stock of terms in common use is in French. The framework of the study hinges



on Lenz's Substratum Theory which is a paradigm that explains issues related to Languages in Contact and their attendant consequences. Answers from research questions revealed that when job-seeking youths from the Bamenda Grassfield migrate to towns like Yaoundé and Douala, they get in contact with French and pick up some of its lexical items as a way of developing a functional vocabulary. As returning migrants, these youths use acquired civil engineering terms in French as a result of habit, nostalgia and the necessity to fill linguistic gaps. The study revealed that the dexterity shown in the use of French terms did not match the ability in providing equivalent English renderings. By extension, the observed phenomenon was equally blamed on the inadequate impetus and orientation that had been given to technical education in the Bamenda Grassfield Area and in the Anglophone Sub-System of education as a whole. It is hoped that this paper will draw attention to the need for equity in the status of English and French in all domains of life in Cameroon.

Keywords: *Migration, Civil Engineering, Grassfield, Degree of intelligibility, Interference, Language Variation and Restructuring.*

1.0 Introduction/Background

1.1 An Overview of Migration and Linguistic Interference

The movement of humans as a species from place to place is an ancient process which has been predicated on several reasons. It may be to go in search of jobs, for leisure, to get shielded from war, natural disasters, to reunite with loved ones etc. Whatever the reason behind such movements, we are to ask ourselves some important questions which might provide informed facts about the different types of migration and the migrant experiences that people likely to have. For instance, it is important to ascertain the types of journeys undertaken by migrants: Are they long, short, desperate, risky? Do migrants move voluntarily or are they compelled by circumstances beyond their control? What experiences do they have upon arrival at the places of destination? What attitude does the receiving community have towards them? Do migrants face cultural and linguistic challenges? What happens after migrants must have integrated themselves in their new communities? Are there



any manifest residual hybridity traits when migrants return to their homeland?

Castles and Miller (2009) state that we are living in an age of migration and that globalisation has given a radical twist to that phenomenon as more people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds move from place to place in search of a better life. Migration and migrants' experiences are rife and it is for this reason that Brettel and Hollified (2015) argue that migration as a subject should be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. Thus, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, geographers, political scientists, historians, linguists amongst others have used their different disciplines to give both theoretical and empirical orientations to the study of migration. For example, anthropologists focus on networks and transnational communities, sociologists and economists are concerned with the human and social capital and the difficulties of immigrant settlement and immersion. Geographers are interested in the spatial dimensions of migration and settlement. Political scientists explore migration trends to make public policy. Legalists bring out the consequences of migration on state sovereignty and state institutions. Historians trace a diachronic experience of migration in order to bring to the fore the aspirations of people who move from place to place.

Viewed from a linguistic perspective, migration in all its facets is known to bring about cross linguistic influences that are captured in terms of interference, borrowing and transfer. This is why the interest of linguists in the field of migration focuses on examining ways in which the interaction of ethnicity and regional affiliation gives rise to systemic patterns of language variation and restructuring that come as a result of language contact (Anderson 2008).

Language contact, according to Thomason (2001) is understood as a social and linguistic phenomenon by which speakers of different languages or different dialects of the same language interact with one



another. The linguistic component of language contact hinges on such features as interference, borrowing, code switching/mixing, diglossia, bilingualism and multilingualism.

For the purpose of this paper, Rudolf Lenz's Substratum Theory is useful in examining the linguistic influence of migration and globalisation. According to the tenets of this theory, a language which is less used is capable of influencing a more dominant language within a given speech community. This theory is therefore relevant in studying a linguistic phenomenon whereby a language like French in the Bamenda Grassfield seeks to impose itself as a result of political, economic or socio-cultural superiority.

1.2 Types of Linguistic Interferences

Interference, which is tributary to the theme of this paper is understood as the arrangement of patterns that results from the introduction of foreign features into the more highly structured domains of language such as the bulk the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax and some areas of vocabulary. Owing to this, Thomason and Kauman (1988) have proposed three types of interferences which include phonic interference, grammatical interference and lexical interference.

Phonic interference refers to the reproduction of a sound of one language system according to the phonetic rules of another language. Sociolinguistic researchers such as Wolfram (1969) and Labov (1994) have introduced patterns of use which provide useful clues that account for linguistic choices that are motivated by the necessity of group solidarity and ethnic identity. For instance, evidence from the works cited above point to the fact that African-American English (AAE) is quite distinct with Midwestern White varieties (Anderson, 2008). Acoustic studies carried out by Phillips (2000) have similarly been carried out in Cameroon by Simo Bobda (2002). This indigenous



language researcher illustrates how interference from home languages has influenced English pronunciation. For example:

- Plait [plaet] is pronounced (plet)
- Parliament / pa:liəment is pronounced [paliaɛn].
- Circuit [sɜ:kit] is pronounced [sekwit]
- Fatal [fɛtəl] is pronounced [fatal].

Grammatical interference, on the other hand, is expressed by the transfer of morphemes from one language into another. This phenomenon is orchestrated by changes in word order as a replication of the relation of another language. In other words, grammatical interference is automatic transfer due to the habit of the surface structure of the source language unto the surface structure of the target language (Dulay et al, 1982). Thus, grammatical interference entails the intrusion of foreign parts of speech, grammatical categories and function forms into the recipient language. These are some illustrations.

* "Help to do something" drawn from French "aider à **faire** quelque chose" instead of "help do something" (Mbangwana, 1999).

* "I will tell to Mr. Fuh" drawn from French "Je vais **dire** à M. Fuh" instead of "Tell Mr. Fuh". (Atemba, 2018).

Lexical interference as an independent category refers to the transfer of words and phrases as well as their meaning from the source language to the target language. Such interference leads to the phenomenon of "relexification" Muysken (1997:365) which is considered as a process of lexical borrowing involving a large part of vocabulary and the replacement of native items rather than a mere addition of vocabulary.

Within the perspective of lexical interference, Kouega (200) investigates the influence of French on English in Cameroon where he demonstrates that one of the outcomes of the contact of these two languages is the incorporation of French words into English. He goes further to argue that such an incorporation is triggered by the need to fill a cultural gap or simply by ignorance that causes speakers to be deceived by



similarities in structure and etymology to choose false friends for standard words.

Similarly, Simo Bobda (2007) holds that Cameroon English has acquired new lexical entries by borrowing words from other languages particularly French.

On his part, Mforteh (2009) demonstrates cases of lexical intrusion of CPE into Standard English. Below are some examples.

- A) "Are you going to trek to your house?" (from Cameroon Pidgin English henceforth CPE) meaning to walk a short distance).
- B) No, I will climb a machine to the junction. I cannot trek (from CPE, meaning a motor cycle).

1.3) Contextualising Migration and Linguistic Interference within Cameroon

The urge to go for greener pastures in Europe and America has formatted the minds of young Cameroonians and made them to believe that metropolitan strongholds are indicated places for the achievement of prosperity. But most often, the hopes for a better life in the Metropolis are quickly deconstructed as soon as the flood of migrant youths from rural and semi urban areas of the Bamenda Grassfield encounter challenges of integrating themselves in their 'new-found land.' In the midst of misery and frustration, they are forced to return to the homeland with the only achievement being their ability to articulate a few words and sentences in French; some of which have been garnered as the data for this study.

After an overview of the notion of language contact and its attendant features, it is important to recast our discussion on one of the themes of this conference which is migration and linguistic interferences. For the purpose of this paper, migration is examined from a less global perspective since it focuses mainly on internal or intra-national



migration with the Bamenda Grassfield region of Cameroon being the focal point of the study.

Meva'a Abomo et al (2013) define internal migration as the movement of people from one region of the country to another place of residence for security, political, economic and social reasons. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2011), place of residence refers to the area where the migrant has continuously lived for at least six months and one day, not counting temporary absences due to holidays or work assignments. (UN, 2008:111). The term 'region of the country' includes several meanings: Political, administrative, historical and geographical. According to statistics published by the Central Bureau of Census and Population Studies (CBCPS) 2010, internal migrants represent 25.6% of the population of the Littoral Region, 20.5 % of the West Region, 18.9% of the Centre Region, 13.9 % of the Far North Region, and 3.9% of the Adamawa.

Generally, internal migration observed during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Cameroon is linked to three main factors:

Firstly, there was the flight from colonial persecution and repression due to forced manual labour in the construction of roads and railways and opening of agro-industrial plantations. Secondly, the crack-down on radical people during the fight for Cameroon's independence led to several internal migration movements.

Thirdly, social, environmental and economic factors caused further displacement as people went in quest for fertile lands, employment opportunities and better living conditions (Van Santen, 2012).

Before the onset of multipartism in the 1990s and the Anglophone crises in 2016, Cameroon was one of the few countries in Africa to have maintained political stability and avoided large-scale conflict since independence in 1960. (Mberu and Pongou, 2012). Most recent data on migration in Cameroon suggests that current migration flows in Cameroon continue to be mostly internal, from the country side and



small cities to bigger ones like Yaoundé and Douala. Those involved in such movements are mainly energetic skilled and unskilled youths ranging between the ages of 18 to 35 years. (Meka'a 2007). When such categories of migrants arrive their destination, they are engaged in learning or practising skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs like motor mechanics, welding, building and construction, driving, sinking of wells and sanitary pits, block moulding etc. Advancements in the craftsmanship of these migrants call for a rapid acquisition of functional language skills that will permit them to be easily integrated at their place of work.

Following the objective of this paper, the global definition of linguistic interference is narrowed down to operate at the level of the lexicon. Here, the notion of interference is not constrained since it is a feature of language contact that stretches to touch on other notions like borrowing and code mixing. Borrowing in this context is, of course, not standardised because its scope of operation is highly restricted. This is why the reasons for borrowing, as far as this paper is concerned, may be slightly different from those that account for borrowing at a more extended level. Therefore, the interference to which reference is made here can also be loosely viewed in terms of borrowing and code mixing. On the one hand, it is interference when the users unintentionally or unconsciously transfer lexical items from French into English. Fuster and Neuser (2018) consider this as lexical transfer that occurs automatically as opposed to that which occurs strategically. On the other hand, it becomes borrowing and/or code-mixing when the speakers tend to selectively draw on the lexical repertoire of French as a way of filling a linguistic gap, constructing a specific identity or achieving a particular discursive aim. Poullisse and Bongaerts (1994) consider this as intentional transfer since it aims at fulfilling a pragmatic purpose and actualising self-repair.



2. Research Problem/Research questions.

This survey is made within the backdrop of an observation that the language of civil engineering in the Bamenda grass field area has witnessed lexical innovation whereby a good number of technical terms in the domain of civil engineering are in French. This claim gains justification from interviews and participant observation at some 12 (twelve) selected building sites around Bambili, Bambui and Bamenda. The phenomenon brings to the fore the seemingly overarching superiority that French imposes on English especially in the two English regions of Cameroon. After establishing the facts of the observation, it was important to propose some eliciting questions that could be useful for the investigation. The questions are as follows:

- i) Why do youths from the Bamenda Grassfield Region need to migrate to other Regions for jobs that fall within the domain of building and construction?
- ii) What is the attitude of these youths towards the use of French terms as they return from migration?
- iii) Why and to what extent do they encounter difficulties in getting English equivalents for their lexical options?
- iv) To what extent are members of the target population conscious of the origin of the French lexical items that are inserted into English, CPE, or local languages?

4. Methodology

The study was carried out in 12 construction sites that were purposively selected as follows from 03 areas of the Bamenda grassfield: 06 sites in Bambili, 02 sites in Bambui and 04 sites in Bamenda. In these areas, the researcher used jotters and memory to take down data from 41 participants that were distributed as displayed on table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Population



Area of Study	Number	Percentage
Bambili	21	51.22%
Bambui	06	14.63%
Bamenda	14	34.15%
Total	41	100%

Table 1 indicates the a larger number of participants was drawn from construction sites in Bambili followed by Bamenda and Bambui.

The methodology for data collection consisted in passively listening to language use by the target population (builders) and in carrying out interviews with 22 randomly selected members of the universe of the study. These two methods of data collection gave useful insights to preferred language options or, more specifically, lexical choices. In spite of some lapses in pronunciation, the lexical choices recorded a high degree of intelligibility as all the participants involved in the various discursive events, be they engineers, builders or general labourers, perfectly understood each other.

5. Data Presentation and Domains of Use

In Cameroon, the domains in which lexical items in French are inserted into English, CPE and other local languages are diverse. The practice is observed in politics, the civil service, the military, the audio-visual media, in church, in business and in other social and cultural transactions. For the purpose of this paper, focus is on the domain of civil engineering (building and construction).

It has already been established that the pervasive use of words of French origin in the vocabulary of civil engineering in English, CPE and other local languages is triggered by named factors. Statistics from this study hold that more than 80% of builders in the area of study (Bambili,



Bambui and Bamenda) are school drop-outs who have had little or no opportunity to receive training in French as one of Cameroon's official languages. Yet, they are capable of mastering some functional driven vocabulary which helps them in building a working language. These vocabulary items that were frequently used and widely intelligible in all the 12 construction sites that constitute the area of this study include the following:

Aprêt – Primer. (a substance used to prime wood or metal surfaces in preparation for painting or spraying).

Béton armé – reinforced concrete. (concrete work which is reinforced by iron rods).

Béton de propreté – Hardcore (sometimes wrongly pronounced by users of English and CPE as /hɪkɔ:/ (aggregate used in laying the base of a foundation).

Chantier – a building site. (It could be the construction of roads, bridges, houses, stadia, airports, seaports ports, etc).

Chantier naval – shipyard (a place where ships are built and repaired).

Chasuble ['tsæzsubəl] – Chasuble /tʃəzublə/ (a brightly coloured reflecting sleeveless gilet worn by workers at construction sites for safety and identification).

Ciment colle –mastic flexible waterproof cement used as an adhesive or a sealant especially in placing tiles.

Collage. (Nominal form of collar) – a decking (placing concrete which may be reinforced to obtain a flat surface that can be walked on. e.g storey buildings, bridges, culverts etc.

Dalle (nominal form of 'daller') – A concrete slap.

Daller – to cast a concrete slap

Diluant (nominal form of diluer) – a thinner or diluent. Sometimes wrongly pronounced by English and CPE users as /dʒu:liən/. (a is substance used in diluting vanishes and other coating substances).

Enduit – Coating: (a thin outer layer usually placed on walls to render it smooth for painting).

Fer de 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 etc. - 6mm, 8mm, 10mm, 12mm, 14mm iron rods.(diametral measurement of the thickness of iron rods).



Fil à plomb – Plumb bulb (used in determining the straightness of vertical structures like pillars)

Fil d'attache – binding wire (a thin thread metal used in tying iron rods).

Fond de quinze - 15cm seating used as a fly-over facility to support window and door lintels.

Fond dur - filler (a thick cream whitish substance often diluted in a thinner and used in preparing wooden surfaces for vanishing (the English name 'filler' is derived from the operation it performs i.e. filling wood pores

Gabarit – a guage. (A template made out of wood or iron whose shape serves as a guide to make other objects).

Lambris – panels (a moulded wooden, plastic or metal compartment found on door shorters and ceilings.

Nervure – rib beam. Wrongly pronounced by English and CPE users as /nevi/ (A network of arched iron work used on surfaces being prepared for decking).

Niveau à caochuc – Water level (used in determining the evenness of flat surfaces like floors)

Niveau (à bulle)- spirit level (usually simply referred to as “niveau”). - a tool used mainly in building and construction to ascertain if a surface is level or if a horizontal or vertical line is straight.

Quincaillerie– hardware shop (a shop which deals in building materials).

Raccord – touch up or repair works (mostly on architectural structures like walls, floors, tiles, shorters etc).

Tenaille – Pliers. (A gripping tool used for bending metallic material like iron rods).

Titre foncier – land certificate (land title).

Tôle bac- large-gapped undulated iron sheet

Tôle lisse – smooth surface iron sheet.

Trait de niveau – blue line, used in obtaining even floor surfaces.

The above French terms as well as others operating in different domains of use are very expressive as they are more productive in generating meaning among users of CamE,(Cameroon English) CPE and local



languages. Some outstanding examples are found in words mostly used in association with colour terms like:

Carte grise – car registration certificate (called ‘carte grise’ because of its grey colour).

Carte rose – car insurance certificate (called ‘carte rose’ because of its pink colour).

Carte bleue – transporter’s licence (called ‘carte bleue’ because of its blue colour).

Boîte noire – flight data recorder (the metaphorical choice of the ‘noire’ is very expressive as it designates a box which cannot be damaged or accessed manually).

Caisse noire – sinking fund (A fund that is reserved to be used in unforeseen circumstances)

Or noir – crude oil (‘or’, ‘gold’ in English adds value to crude oil which is dark in colour)

Nuit blanche – sleepless night

Jeune d’oeuf – egg yolk (French appellation from the yellow colour of an egg yolk)

Anti-vol – window protector (Placed on windows to prevent thieves from entering)

Dos d’âne – speed break (It has the shape of a donkey’s back)

Cahier de texte – log book (A book into which material taught is recorded)

Garde malade – care giver (One who takes care of a patient in the hospital).

6. Discussions

The terms analysed in this paper are a reflection of the bilingual nature of Cameroon. Such terms have therefore come as a result of interference; a phenomenon that subsumes direct borrowings and lexical transfers from French which is the background language or the lexifier language as far as this study is concerned.



The intrusion of French civil engineering vocabulary into English, CPE and indigenous languages is not common only within the ranks of returning migrants. In fact, the phenomenon which is fast gaining grounds is also enabled by some linguistic practices within other stakeholders in the domain of civil engineering. For example, evidence has shown that names of building material items figuring on computer generated invoices from renowned hardware shops around Bamenda like FOKOU, SOREPCO, COGENI, QUIFEUROU NDZUDIE and MAISON du PLOMBIER (without publicity) are all in French.

Results from the interviews administered to 22 respondents showed that although the population of this study understood the meaning of technical terms in French, they were unable to give the English equivalence of more than 50% of such terms. 15 of them representing 68.2% of the total population were not even aware that the terms they were using were neither English nor CPE. This drawback was not in any way negatively perceived because lexical influences from French do not hamper meaning and communication in English, Pidgin or other local languages.

The participants drew the researchers' attention to the fact that their contact with French was principally as a result of their migration to the cities of Yaoundé and Douala, two main towns where the dominant language is French. This migration was blamed on the sparseness of huge construction projects in the North West Region of the country.

The participants went further to argue that companies operating in the domain of civil engineering like EDGE, WAGA, BUNS, KINDELEY and DEAMLAND who execute most construction jobs in the Bamenda Grassfield Area have French as their operational language. It was deduced from this argument that the highly skilled employees in such companies are from the Francophone sub system of education. In such a case, locally recruited semi-skilled and unskilled workers are obliged to function in French.



From another perspective, it was observed that the inadequate human and infrastructural resources in technical education and vocational training in the area of study observed for over five decades also accounts for the prolific use of French terms in civil engineering. Before the creation of the Higher Technical Teachers Training College (HTTTC) in the Universities of Bamenda and Buea, there had been a shortage of teachers of English expression to handle trade subjects in the area of civil engineering. As such, teachers from the Francophone sub system who showed low proficiency in English were recruited to teach Anglophone students and most often, teaching was done in French.

Moreover, high-ranking engineers were up till 2018 trained in higher institutes which were mainly located in big Francophone towns like Yaoundé and Douala. Such schools include: The Higher National Polytechnic Institute in Yaoundé, Institut Siantou in Yaoundé, Institut de Technologie Fotso Victor in Bandjoun, The Advanced School of Public Works in Yaoundé with its Annex in Buea etc. The few Anglophones who enrolled into such schools received instructions in French and so graduated as hybrids though with a penchant towards the use of French as their professional language. Yet, knowledge in science and technology and specifically in civil engineering can be more adequately understood and disseminated among people of the Bamenda Grassfield if such knowledge is transmitted through a more familiar language like English, CPE and other local languages.

CONCLUSION

The terms and expressions considered for this study are fore chosen ways of expression by a negligible percentage of the Bamenda Grassfield population. This suggests the evidence of a yawning gap between those who use such terms and their immediate linguistic environment. With time however, the frequent use of French terms in civil engineering in the area of study may become exoglossic as it is



likely to estrange speakers of English, CPE and indigenous languages who neither understand nor speak French.

Considering that the domain of civil engineering is open and dynamic, its language is expected to be that which is understood by a greater majority of the masses.

The vulgarisation of the linguistic phenomenon that was found worthy for investigation is likely to metamorphose into a diglossic situation where French terms in civil engineering may develop an overbearing edge over their English counterparts. Establishing linguistic equilibrium in the area of science and technology and civil engineering in particular therefore remains an important endeavour in a bilingual country like Cameroon where English does not seem to enjoy equal status with French in most domains of use. Since this linguistic rift can negatively affect national cohesion, as has been the case for the past five years with the Anglophone Crises, efforts are to be made in mitigating ill feelings that may further tear the country apart. The creation of a National Commission for Bilingualism, the transformation of some Government Technical Colleges into Government Bilingual Technical Colleges and the recruitment of bilingual teachers to teach science subjects, among others, are all amends to show that the government is sensitive to the imminent sources of discord raised above.

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