

A DAVID / GOLIATH ACRIMONY: REFLECTIONS ON ENGLISH IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The Cameroonian aphorism that the country is Africa in miniature is manifested equally in its linguistic landscape. The country is not only inundated by many native languages but equally by a number of Englishes. This has resulted in a fervent jostling for position amongst users of the English language within the macrocosm of the varied contexts of use. The hegemony exerted on the 'marginalised' variety in various spheres turns to conceal the inherent beauty and magnificence of the latter; projecting it as an inferior variety. The coexistence is at times ferocious especially in a mesolectal context where a lot of arguments on the ideal are predominant. This paper is a reflection on English in Cameroon today, with a focus on users' opinions vis à vis the Englishes. The article is a premonition of the outcome of such linguistic transgression alluding it to the outcome of the biblical David versus Goliath contest. It examines the various Englishes that find expression within the linguistic landscape of Cameroon with a projection of the 'marginalised' Cameroonian variety of English. The conclusion is that Cameroon English like other 'minor' varieties is imbedded with beauty and magnificence in the expression of national realities as well as the sociocultural heritage of a nation and should be valorised and used with unbridled pride.

Key Words: *Englishes, Varieties, prescriptivism, attitudes, codification*

1. The spread of English across the globe; Cameroon, cultural and linguistic implications

The spread of English across the globe was engendered by both socio-economic and political imperatives. The imperial and trade ambitions of Britain, the economic might of the USA and the technological blossoming of the 21st century with English taking central stage as the language of modern technology have all contributed to the spread, implantation and indigenisation of the English language in both native and settler areas. It is thus no doubt again that the language has surpassed the realm of ownership by one nation and attained a global status (Mbibeh 2013).

The spread of English to other nations did not go without its inherent intricacies. Referring to history, we can understand that Britain and its policy of indirect rule did not consider African colonised territories as part of Britain unlike other colonial powers like France. As such, they found it unnecessary teaching natives the English language given that they did not want Africans to

assume the 'civilised' level- a preserve of the high race. Little did the colonialist politicians know that this wanton inequity was going to have a boomerang effect. In fact, to a greater extent, the linguistic tolerance led to the development of an African, West African and Cameroonian variety of English with impeccable lexico syntactic, phonological and discursive peculiarities. (see Melchers and Shaw 2003)

As far as Cameroon English is concerned, Kouega (2006) from a lexical perspective, presents twelve semantic domains in which lexical items are created as well as a number of word formation processes including borrowing, compounding, affixation, coinage etc. (*fon*, *cutting grass*, *co-wife*, *fondom* are some examples). In terms of syntactic features, Sala (2003) gives a succinct description of the Cameroon English sentence with peculiarities on simplification of transformations, overt and covert variance. From a phonological dimension Simo Bobda and Mbangwana (2004) present variations in both the segmental and suprasegmental features of Cameroon English. With regard to discourse strategies such as leave taking, greetings, sympathizing etc that portray a people's identity, there is a marked difference in Cameroon English as expatiated by Quafeu (2006), Nkemleke (2007) and Mforteh (2009). Such descriptive analyses portray Cameroon English as a distinct variety on its own with inherent and very conspicuous specificities.

The anthropological implication of English in the outer circle is the inability to imbibe the cultural component of the non-native speaker. That is why the need for a way of expressing belief systems, traditional practices, food etc cannot be directly transcribed by British English. As such Kachru (1986) talks of the nativization of English in the outer circle referring to linguistic and cultural adaptations to reflect the sociolinguistic background of the second language speakers. If we do agree that language is the expression of the culture and identity of a people, then we have no choice than to adopt New Englishes and use them in any context. Of what significance is it to compel a Cameroonian to say *seitan*, when in the next minute they will come back to *satan*? Even if you do so, will *fon* be referred to as the *monarch*? Even if that happens, what will they call *achu* or *mbongo chobi* etc. From a paralinguistic perspective, a Cameroonian of the Northwest Region will not greet the *fon* by shaking hands with him as a kind of greeting nor nod the head as an Indian will do. The constant effort by ardent purists to reinforce inner circle norms in the outer circle especially in the pedagogic world is definitely a David versus Goliath fight that may not be resolved given that issues of a people's identity are both innate and very sensitive.

Purists' attempts to get rid of the African Englishes can no longer yield any fruit given that it has been transmitted from generation to generation and has become an expression of the culture and identity of a people. This explains why the rise of prescriptivism as a means of "polishing and refining" the language to use Jonathan Swift's (1907) words only end up in unremitting pedagogic conflicts that are difficult to resolve within such spheres.

2. Prescriptivism and English in Cameroon.

The rise of prescriptivism as described by Mbangwana and Sala (2009:44) was necessitated by the yearning for correctness. The quest for correctness spurred grammarians of the prescriptive tradition to develop grammars that described language the way it ought to be and not the way it

really is. Cardinal Richelieu's French Academy (1639), the Renaissance of the 16th century, Swift's letter to Lord Treasurer; the Earl of Oxford (1712) and Academia Della Crusca (1582) had as major objective to purge the languages (French, English and Italian respectively) from foreign intrusions and maintain what the Alexandrians of the 3rd century BC called 'pure' forms for the sake of purity and homogeneity.

The absence of such an academy like the 'Académie Française' in English to propagate the goals of prescriptivism, liberalised the quest for norms and motivated the wide expansion of English, adopting new identities in what has become today the New Englishes. The norms and preference of this variety are dependent on attitudinal constraints, the conversational or linguistic contexts and interlocutors. Kachru (1986:89) for example reports that "an educated Indian English speaker may attempt to approximate a native English model while speaking to an Englishman or an American but switch to the localized variety when talking to a fellow Indian colleague". Within the New Englishes, the question of norm¹ is engendering hot debates across linguists with rhetorical questions such as; who sets the norms?, for whom? and where are such norms supposed to be respected? are animating the debate.

The prescriptive approach to language learning has been criticised over the years especially with regard to English. Penalosa (1981:145) regrets that prescriptivism, unfortunately based on Latin grammar for instance, and transferred to English language teaching rather than on a strictly independent analysis of the language itself, is bound to fail. Kachru (ibid: 142) believes prescriptivism is a dilemma for English while Mbangwana and Sala (2009: 46) recognise the complexity of this dimension to English today because "...English has many native speakers and also non-native speakers who use it as an L1, SL or a FL. The result is that while English is evolving in time and space among various native speakers, it is also taking many twists and turns in communities that have adopted it as SL or a FL". Still in this line of thought, Ngefac (2011) compares the practicability of imposing standards of a particular grammar (of British English to Cameroonians) to a blind man leading another blind. He thus maintains that given the sociolinguistic realities of Cameroon, imposing standard British pronunciation (which of course is done using the prescriptive approach) is tantamount to a great fallacy.

Hall (1960) has been one of the most vigorous critics of the prescriptive approach (Penalosa 1981:115). One of his arguments that have raised eyebrows is that: "There is no such thing as good or bad (grammar), correct or incorrect, grammatical or ungrammatical, right or wrong language. 'Correct' can only mean 'socially acceptable' and the way a person speaks is more an authority for his own speech than any dictionary of grammar."

Hall (ibid) maintains that words do not have any 'real' meaning as opposed to other false meanings and the meaning that people give to a word is its real meaning in that particular situation. As such, no language or dialect will have more merit than the other and language change does not represent language 'decay'. According to Hall therefore, 'good' language is language which gets the desired effect with the least friction and difficulty for its users. If speakers in a particular region consistently use language in a given way,

¹ For a discussion on the issue of norm in New Englishes confer Mbangwana and Sala (2009) and Kachru (1986)

should we therefore dismiss this as ungrammatical? Will it not be beneficial to know how and may be why people use language in a particular way? I believe that reasoning in this direction will give interesting insights into what speakers are doing with a language rather than what they ought to do.

The diversity of language contexts and situations as exemplified by English (ESL, EFL etc) was a motivating factor leading to a branch of linguistics that considers influences from the context to language called sociolinguistics. This branch of linguistics was to take care of language evolution within space and time using empirical ethnographic research with enormous data. As a consequence, there was a drift from what people ought to say to what they are actually doing with the language. (Yule 2004)

The descriptive approach seems relevant to the description of English in Cameroon given that people in diverse areas are using language differently for various purposes. This situation is evidence of the diverse socio-cultural and historical realities of the various language users. As the English language extends its tentacles to the various societies, so does it metamorphosize and is indigenized. It is imperative to consider what speakers in this context are doing with the language to achieve various goals rather than a prescription of what the speakers ought to do with the language. If speakers in a given area are consistently using language in a given way, this must not be neglected. On the contrary, it should be documented and made evident.

Kachru (1986:117) argues that in practical terms, a model “means acquisition of language at various linguistic levels (phonetic, phonological, grammatical, lexical)”. If this is the case, the acquisition of a “native like competence” as Bloomfield (1933:56) calls it would mean that the learner should also acquire the intricacies of cultural nuances. It would therefore be as Kachru (ibid) puts it that “a non RP (received pronunciation) speaker will appear incongruent if he puts on this linguistic mask but does not combine it with the mannerisms and cultural traits of the RP speaker” As Kachru (1986:117) explains, “The concept of model is directly related to language intelligibility.” Hence, teachers need the “linguistic ideal” to keep in mind when imparting, instructing or learning a language. In whatever case, intelligibility should be assured.

Imbibing the cultural components of a community is rather a natural than an artificially learnt property, and the child spontaneously discovers the culture they grow in which becomes something like an identity for the child. The complexity of the cultural proponent on English and the English-speaking context gives the language some peculiarity that needs to be managed. Since the issue of a norm is significant in pedagogy, there is need for some standards which can only be possible if the descriptive approach to language is used to describe English so as to come up with models for these societies. In which case, relativism would be the watchword in such a venture. It is partly within this line of thought that this paper proposes the descriptive parameter to language analysis within the New Englishes context. The trends thereof could be used further to establish general norms of Cameroon English. Norms, which of course could be flexible within time and space, and a reflection of the innate grammar of the native speakers of the language as Chomsky (2002) would prefer.

3. The Englishes in Cameroon; stakes and opinions

When Cameroonian lawmakers adopted English and French as official languages in article 1 section 1 of the 1962 constitution at independence as well as in its various ramifications and modifications in the later years, little did they pause to ponder about the intricacies in the English language. That is, which of the varieties was to be recommended for use? Though the general impression is that British English (later BrE) is the reference variety due especially to umbilical origins, there is no legal and/or official backing to this dimension. The prestige enjoyed by American English (later AmE) the world over has not left Cameroonians indifferent. It is no news again that Cameroonians speak Cameroon English (later CamE) as research in all levels of language analysis over the years has proven (phonology, grammar, lexicology, discourse etc) (Simo Bobda and Mbangwana (2002), Sala and Mbangwana(2007), Kouega (2006), Sala (2003), Quefeu (2006) Mforteh(2009), Mbibeh (2013). Unfortunately, a majority of educated Cameroonians (secondary leavers and university graduates) keep claiming that they speak BrE. This is definitely because of the inferiority complex imposed by speakers on Cameroon English vis-à-vis British and American English. It would be quite unconvincing to claim that Cameroonians speak BrE especially given the enormity of deviations from standard BrE as observed by Simo Bobda (2006). Though he calls it deviations from a rather pejorative perspective, I prefer to call them differences. This equally explains why Ngefack (2011) is quick to observe that it is a fallacy introducing BrE norms to the Cameroonian classroom. Could it thus be that Cameroonians speak AmE given the influx and enormity of Americanisms in their speech and writing as expatiated by Atechi (2010)? In fact, Atechi (2008:39) earlier described the relationship between British and American English in Cameroon as that of coexistence and further comments that the confusion brought about by this coexistence is so serious that it poses a lot of challenges to both the teacher and learner in non-native speaking environments placing them in a somewhat dilemma as to which variety to use.

According to Mbibeh (2013), there is no particular variety of English privileged in Cameroon today. The imposition of BrE in Cameroon is considered a fallacy (see Ngefack 2011) and its teaching equated to a blind leading the blind given the absence of native linguistic context. Mbibeh (2013) further describes a classroom scenario where we have students and teachers who are non-native speakers of English but the course text referencing BrE. In which case, teachers simply express linguistic and pedagogic hypocrisy as they advocate for standard English norms which they themselves do not use a minute after leaving the classroom. American English is jostling for position and its use only limited to items considered prestigious (see Atechi 2008). Codification, extra-linguistic challenges and lack of didactic material have debilitated the introduction and practical use of CamE in the classroom as would have been expected (see Simo Bobda 2011, Ngefack 2011). From the observations above, it is evident that English in Cameroon is a hodgepodge of many Englishes with an observable wrangle for position.

4. Some opinions from teachers of English language

Teachers of English constitute the category of speakers that adhere fervently to the dictates of prescriptivism and accept with 100% surety that they speak British English. They are not to blame for such stands given the training they received from the schools of education. Some findings on a research

carried out by Mbibeh (2013) on Englishes in the Cameroonian classroom have some intriguing revelations as regards preference of vocabulary items as well as sentential expressions in the various Englishes. Data collected for this study and results thereof discussed here are obtained from a sample of 60 secondary level teachers of English in the English-speaking regions. They were asked questions related to their identification and preferences of the different varieties of English in Cameroon.

Table 1. Language preference

Variety of Eng	No of teachers	Percentage
BrE	17	28.8
AmE	10	16.6
CamE	33	55

The findings reveal for example that teachers preferred using CamE vocabulary items while conversing with friends. In which case, they would prefer to use for example the items *state council* instead of *district attorney* in AmE or *public prosecutor* in BrE. A similar situation goes for the use of *lawyer* in CamE instead of *barrister* and *attorney* in BrE and AmE respectively. The reason given for the use of these items is that it is a matter of preference and not that of ungrammaticality. Therefore, these respondents are quite aware of the existence of these varieties but would prefer a particular one. Worthy of note is the AmE item *liquor* as against the CamE *hot drink* or BrE *spirits* as well as AmE *city hall* as against CamE *municipal hall/city council hall* and BrE *town hall* that were preferred by teachers in general conversation. Unlike the CamE items where choice was a matter of preference, the reason for choosing AmE items is because they sound nice. The question to be raised here is this: if teachers could switch ‘codes’ and use items just because they sound nice what more of learners?

Moreover, 43.3% of the general sample preferred using CamE expressions. This was closely followed by BrE where 41.6% of the respondents who preferred BrE expressions unlike the minimal 15% that considered using AmE expressions. Though falling below the mean, it is still evident that a majority of the respondents preferred using the CamE expressions below instead of their BrE and AmE counterparts.

1) Do you have a cold?

- Yes I’ve got it. AmE

- Yes I have it. BrE

- Yes I have. CamE

2) Can I find the book here?

- We’ll have to check it. BrE

- We’ll have to check it out. AmE

- We’ll have to check. CamE

The proximity between the number of respondents that preferred CamE and BrE is quite close. That is, 26 and 25 for CamE and BrE respectively. This is however justifiable not only on historical (colonial) grounds but equally on

account of the fact that BrE is the source variety for CamE. This is why no matter the nice sounding AmE as observed in the first case, a majority of Cameroonians consciously or not will find some natural attachment to BrE than to AmE. Responding to the question “why did you choose the expression above”, a majority of respondents still believe it is a matter of preference while a minority indicate that some of the expressions sound odd. Odd here can be related to their unfamiliarity with the expression.

Apart from familiarity with structures, BrE expressions according to the study were for example preferred because of their presence in the textbook. This underscores the role of pedagogic grammar in language acquisition in an ESL context. Learners are prone to textbooks and believe it is the beholder of the linguistic etiquette. The question on the use of CamE as a standard variety within Cameroon is raised here. It is not all about advocacy for its use, but more about codification and use especially within the educational milieu. When respondents confess familiarity with BrE and AmE and choose to use it equally as a matter of preference, it is not all about advocacy but about codification. In fact, the literature and academic material they have been familiar with is British and American oriented. As mentioned previously, it becomes but normal for them to be prone to the variety. If CamE must reach this stage as the wish of a majority of descriptive linguists in the variety is, there is ample need for the insertion of CamE literature into the academic milieu. As such, when speakers and learners become familiar with the variety, they will not feel inferior and will have more confidence using the variety in formal contexts. That is why it would be possible for them to think of the variety as simple and easy to understand.

In fact, those who relegated AmE or expressions considered as such through various phonological renditions (mostly hypercorrections) referred to it as youthful language with derogatory undertones. The same consideration is possible for Cameroon English that is considered inferior. Hence stereotyping can have serious repercussions in language acquisition and use, which could either be positive or negative.

While there was evidence from a majority of teachers that they use BrE in and out of class, practical observation proved the contrary. When asked why users preferred CamE expressions, they equally mentioned they were more familiar with them and also considered that it would be understood by many. This reminds us of the Jacobian dictate on the goal of language which is communication. Using a variety that fails to communicate as interlocutors do not give comprehensible feedback, can only be considered a waste of precious time that speakers are not ready to engage in. One other reason that the respondents failed to understand is the fact that CamE is a language I can dare say they have been naturally endowed with. The language they have come to speak has as origin a linguistic context provided by teachers who themselves are speakers of CamE. There is no doubt therefore that they will grow to speak the variety. This is leading us to a rational conclusion that the jostle for position with any other variety that is not naturally engraved in the Cameroonian speaker of English will result in a David versus Goliath fight in which the ‘small’ David (Cameroon English) will prevail. It is thus high time to valorise this variety and use it with unflinching pride as an expression of the Cameroonian identity.

5. Conclusion

This paper recognises the intricacies in the linguistic landscape of Cameroon with reference to the different Englishes that find expression in this context. The coexistence and consequent jostling for position is alluded to the mythical battle between the giant Goliath (here referring to the imposing varieties British and American English) and the little David (Cameroon English). While such ferocious negative attitudinal outbursts that condemn the use of Cameroon English; and yet are using the language in so doing need to be managed, the paper proposes an introduction of Cameroon English in the various spheres and domains of knowledge. Even if previous linguists (see Talom 1990, Atechi 2006) think that dust is yet to settle as far as the model of English suitable for the non-native setting is concerned (see Atechi 2008:196) owing especially to questions on documentation and codification (see Simo Bobda 2000, Kachru 1991, Bamgbose 1998), this paper argues that there is no timeframe or succinct yardstick to measure codification or documentation from an objective standpoint. When we say the non-native varieties have not been codified, there is need to specify the aspect of the language we are referring to or the level to which it has not been codified. This is because documentation and codification are an ongoing process. If the native varieties enjoy the credibility today, it is because the process started some time ago and of course has not yet come to a standstill. Cameroonian writers of literature in English are doing a great deal to valorise this variety in their write ups. It is high time other spheres of knowledge join the train. It is high time we challenge dominant claims that Cameroon English is backward and engage in a paradigm shift to uphold this variety. It is only from this perspective that the contribution and impact of this variety can be felt in the global village. Waiting for trumpets to sound for non-native Englishes to be valorised is tantamount to engaging in a mythical journey to oblivion. It is high time Cameroonians stop marginalising the English they use and uphold it as a matter of national identity and inalienable pride.

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