



DIGLOSSIA IN CAMEROON. THE FIRST LANGUAGE DILEMMA OF CAMEROONIAN SPEAKERS: LANGUAGE OF TRIBAL AFFILIATION VS LANGUAGE OF NATIONAL AFFILIATION

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Abstract : What constitutes the first language of Cameroonian speakers? Is it the language they speak most fluently, or the one—though perhaps imperfectly mastered—that embodies their primary cultural identity? This is the central question we seek to explore in this paper. To do so, we begin by examining the linguistic repertoires of Cameroon at both the national and individual levels, recognizing that individual linguistic realities often diverge from the broader national picture. We then undertake a heuristic inquiry into the notion of "first language" as it applies to Cameroonian speakers, with the aim of clarifying the conceptual ambiguities surrounding this term. Our methodological approach is ethnographic. That is, we draw on the observation and analysis of language behaviors and attitudes to better understand the complex sociolinguistic landscape of Cameroon—a former colony shaped by multiple layers of linguistic influence. This approach will ultimately allow us to propose a descriptive model that may contribute to the conceptualization and classification of languages in contact within diglossic contexts.

Index Terms: Community; Linguistic Repertoire; Diglossia; First Language.

INTRODUCTION

The complex and often nebulous descriptions of Cameroon's linguistic landscape continue to pose a significant epistemological challenge to a clear understanding of its multilingualism. This article represents a preliminary step in a broader, ongoing inquiry whose ultimate aim is to address the conceptual vagueness surrounding what may be termed the sociolinguistic architecture of Cameroon. To this end, we propose to examine the linguistic repertoires of both the Republic of Cameroon and its speakers. These repertoires are often mischaracterized as a straightforward coexistence of multiple languages along a single axis—typically framed in terms of opposition between dominant and dominated languages. However, Cameroon's sociolinguistic structure is far more intricate than a binary distinction between minority and majority languages. It encompasses dimensions that remain underexplored or obscured, yet which give rise to fascinating sociolinguistic phenomena observable at both the social and individual levels.

To support this argument, we offer a dual-scale analysis—individual and collective—of Cameroon's sociolinguistic repertoires. We put forward a new interpretive framework for understanding Cameroonian multilingualism, which, as we will demonstrate, is not merely a juxtaposition of strong, weak, or endangered languages. Rather, it is a dynamic intersection of sociolinguistic and psychosocial forces. Bringing these dynamics to light, we argue, is both necessary and fruitful for advancing scholarly engagement with the complexities of language contact in Cameroon.

This study adopts a macro-sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on the hierarchical organization that has emerged among the languages spoken in Cameroon. This hierarchy reflects the varying degrees of prominence certain languages have attained, as well as the subordinate status to which others have been relegated—both in the perception of their speakers and within the broader framework of the Cameroonian nation.

In this context, we aim to describe two distinct yet interconnected levels of linguistic repertoire: first, that of the Cameroonian linguistic community as a whole, and second, that of individual Cameroonians. This dual approach is not redundant, as one might initially assume, since individual linguistic repertoires do not necessarily mirror the collective linguistic landscape of the community in which individuals operate.

1. SOCIO-HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The formal linguistic history of Cameroon can broadly be traced back to the era of European imperialism in Africa. Primarily driven by economic interests, this period of territorial expansion inevitably brought with it cultural and linguistic imperialism. Cameroon came under the effective and sustained control of three colonial powers: Germany, France, and Britain. However, only the latter two would leave a lasting linguistic legacy, as Germany lost its colonial holdings at the end of the First World War.

Today, French and English are the official languages of Cameroon, colonial languages that were ultimately **juxtaposed** or **superimposed** (depending on one's analytical lens) onto a preexisting and highly diverse linguistic environment. It is important to underscore that long before the imposition of European languages, this region of Central Africa was already characterized by a high density of indigenous languages, most of which were (and still are), closely tied to distinct ethnic groups or tribes. It was under the political and administrative influence of these colonial powers that these diverse tribal entities were merged into a single nation-state. Over time, a progressive homogenization of customs and social practices gave rise to a collective national identity marked by shared cultural and societal traits. In reference to the sociologist Karl Mannheim, such a configuration may be described as a "community of connective experience of an exclusive type" (Allodi et al., 2000:175).

The societal and cultural traits that emerged with the formation of the Cameroonian state did not, however, erase the deep-rooted ethnic and tribal heterogeneity of the past. This diversity continues to assert itself today (persistently and, at times, subtly) despite sustained efforts to suppress or subdue it. These efforts, historically aimed at promoting national unification, now seek to foster social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, they are met with a form of resistance (largely passive, yet remarkably resilient), against the ongoing push for cultural homogenization and linguistic standardization.

From the enduring tension between these opposing socio-political forces, a dual linguistic dynamic has emerged: an antagonism between two equally influential linguistic factors. This reflects what might be described as the dual ethnocultural (and therefore linguistic) identity of Cameroonian speakers (hereafter referred to as CS). On one hand, there is a symbolic dimension, tied to a speaker's **primary identity**, anchored in their tribal or ethnic community. On the other, there exists a pragmatic dimension, related to the **communicative utility** of the language associated with the national community¹. This opposition between symbolic and pragmatic linguistic allegiances gives rise to a hierarchical relationship of status and prestige between the language of tribal affiliation and that of national affiliation. It also leads to a functional distribution of language use across social contexts.

Importantly, the language associated with national identity draws its legitimacy from two key conceptual foundations: first, the legal concept of the Nation; and second, the notion introduced earlier (drawing from Karl Mannheim) of a "community of connective experience of an exclusive type" (Allodi et al., 2000:175)

2. LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES AND THEIR REPERTOIRES

Before embarking on a description of Cameroon's linguistic repertoires, it is essential to establish a working definition of the concept of **linguistic repertoire**, especially since this notion neither corresponds to a universally agreed-upon reality nor represents a clearly bounded abstraction. At first glance, a linguistic repertoire might be defined simply as the set of languages spoken by a linguistic community. While this definition is not incorrect, it is at best relative and arguably incomplete. To clarify, we must first agree on what constitutes a **linguistic community**. Key questions arise: What is the spatial extent of such a community? Does it necessarily correspond to a specific geographic territory? In other words, is it defined by clearly demarcated boundaries (provincial, regional, or national) or is it simply a group of people connected by a shared language, irrespective of their physical location?

This introduces an important distinction: a linguistic community may be defined either by *space* or by *speakers*. In the latter case, it cannot be strictly confined to a particular territory. For example, the country of Cameroon, as an autonomous political entity, constitutes a linguistic community defined by geographical and political boundaries. Conversely, the Fulani people (dispersed across multiple African countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria) identify as a single linguistic community due to their shared genetic heritage and linguistic affinity, despite lacking a unified territorial base. Thus, one might speak of a linguistic community by *territory* and a linguistic community by *lineage* (or *by blood*); each one of them being conceptually valid but distinct in scope and application.

A linguistic community by land refers to an autonomous territorial entity characterized as a *community of connective experience of an exclusive type*, which encompasses a set of languages and language varieties (describable as **proximal dialects**) as well as potentially including immigrant languages. In contrast, a linguistic community by blood designates all speakers of a single language along with its geographically dispersed variants (what can be termed **distal dialects**) reflecting the natural linguistic variation that arises as a language spreads from its original point of origin (Kachru, 1985). In both cases, the fundamental defining principle of a linguistic community lies in its members' possession of some degree of competence in the language, or at least in their recognition of that language as a core element of their intrinsic identity.

In this article, we define the linguistic community as a territorial entity with the potential for diplomatic unity on a global or international scale (Haugen, 1966), aligning with the first definition of linguistic community based on territorial boundaries. The linguistic repertoire of such a community can be understood as the set of languages spoken within its territory. More precisely, it is important to distinguish between the *community* linguistic repertoire and *individual* linguistic repertoires, a distinction we will explore further below. The community linguistic repertoire is defined as the sum of all language varieties spoken within the community (Berruto & Cerruti, 2015:12), including hybrid varieties that emerge through contact between these languages. However, individual linguistic repertoires may differ from the community repertoire. An individual's repertoire can include languages not widely used for daily communication by the broader community, whereas a language is considered part of the community repertoire only if it is spoken regularly by a significant number of its members. Conversely, an individual's repertoire may not encompass all languages present in the community, especially in highly multilingual contexts like Cameroon, where approximately 283 languages coexist (Lewis et al., 2019:6). These numerous languages represent the linguistic resources available to individuals born within Cameroon's borders. Over time, individuals may adopt one or more of these languages as their first language, while other languages assume secondary roles, even though all contribute to their linguistic identity. Despite this vast linguistic diversity, as we will see later, typically only two languages occupy a prominent place in a speaker's linguistic and social behavior, fulfilling the two fundamental functions of language: the **symbolic** and the **communicative** function (Billiez, 1985).

¹ The latter may be understood as a continuation of tribal affiliation.

3. THE LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE OF CAMEROON'S TERRITORY

The linguistic repertoire of the Republic of Cameroon can be understood as the set of languages spoken within the country's borders, a repertoire defined, in this sense, "by land." Our focus here is neither on a taxonomic classification of these languages nor on the detailed analysis of their structural interactions in daily contact. Rather, we aim to describe the broad, macroscopic arrangement that emerges from their varying statuses and social functions. The linguistic resources available to Cameroonian citizens can be grouped into three categories based on their symbolic and functional significance: endogenous, exogenous and hybrid languages.

3.1. THE "ENDOGENOUS" LANGUAGES

The first group comprises **endogenous languages**, so called because of their longstanding presence within the territorial boundaries of Cameroon. These languages are also often referred to as local or indigenous languages². They predate the arrival of European colonial powers and can be described, in various respects, as the mother tongues of Cameroonian speakers, embodying the concept of ancestral languages (Fewou Ngouloure, 2012). According to the most recent research, approximately 279 such languages exist in Cameroon (Lewis et al., 2019), though their exact number remains a subject of considerable debate. While it is currently impossible to establish an absolute count of the languages spoken in the country, the reasons behind this uncertainty are well documented³.

Given the primarily tribal organization of the peoples living in Cameroon, endogenous languages generally correspond to specific tribal groups. However, the equation "one language, one tribe" does not always apply, as many of these languages are spoken by multiple tribes within a larger ethnic group, reflecting their shared genetic origins. In fact, the different tribes within a large ethnic group are often distinguished mainly by the names history has assigned to them. Here, ethnicity is understood as a broader category than tribe. As a result, distinct tribes may speak very similar languages because they descend from the same original *protolanguage*. This situation can be seen as a geographical distribution in **linguistic clusters** where each cluster represents a large ethnic group, and each subgroup within it (or "grape") corresponds to a tribe speaking a variety derived from the shared protolanguage.

It is important to note, however, that structural similarities between different endogenous languages do not necessarily indicate genetic relatedness. Linguistic contact alone can lead to significant structural convergence. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a linguistic map that distinguishes not only true linguistic clusters (or linguistic zones), but also **linguistic areas** that are groups of languages that have undergone marked structural convergence due to territorial proximity.

It is worth noting that the term "**endogenous**" is also applied to two other languages (Efai and Shoa Arabic) that actually originated elsewhere. Their long-standing presence within Cameroonian territory has led them to be perceived as local languages. In other words, although these languages were introduced from outside and permanently integrated into the local linguistic community over time, they are now considered part of the indigenous linguistic landscape, even if this is not strictly accurate. Paradoxically, the two Western languages (French and English) are also immigrant languages, but of much more recent arrival. Yet, they are generally not perceived or labeled as such, likely because they have gained significant social prestige by becoming the country's two official languages. While French and English are not viewed as local languages either, they remain the most widely used in Cameroon. This situation creates a unique sociolinguistic dilemma regarding the identity of the *first language* of Cameroonian speakers, a topic we will explore further in section 4.1.

For the sake of clarity and precision, we will group endogenous languages under a conceptual category we call **languages of tribal affiliation**. A language of tribal affiliation (hereafter referred to as LTA) is simply the language of the tribe to which a speaker belongs. As we will see, this language plays a central role in shaping the linguistic identity of Cameroonian speakers.

3.2. THE "EXOGENOUS" LANGUAGES

Exogenous languages, as the term suggests, are languages of distant or external origin. They have not always been present within Cameroonian territory but arrived through various waves of population migration. These languages may or may not hold the status of national languages in their places of origin. As we have seen in the previous section, contrary to common belief, French and English (today's official languages of Cameroon) are not the only exogenous languages in the country. Alongside them are Efai and Shoa Arabic, which, despite their external origins, have been present in the region for a much longer time; therefore, because of their long-standing presence, Efai and Shoa Arabic are often now considered indigenous languages.

Currently, the category of exogenous languages primarily includes the colonial languages (German, French, English, and Spanish) as well as more recently introduced languages such as Chinese and Italian, which have only recently been integrated into Cameroon's linguistic landscape.

Among all these exogenous languages, only French and English have historically and socially attained a sufficiently high status to become fundamental components of the linguistic identity of Cameroonian speakers. For the sake of clarity and precision, we will therefore introduce a second category of languages that play a crucial role in shaping this linguistic identity: the **languages of national affiliation** (hereafter referred to as LNA), which correspond to the official languages of the country⁴.

It is important to highlight that the prominence of LANs has been shaped by four key socio-historical factors:

- (a) The political ideal that emerged in 18th-century Europe, which linked each nation (or political entity aspiring to nationhood) to a shared language recognized by its members (Thiesse, 1999);
- (b) The colonial administrators' strategy to assert authority not merely over the bodies but over the minds and souls of the colonized populations (Calvet, 1974);
- (c) The practical absence of an indigenous linguistic code with the same level of institutional elaboration (even though had such a code existed, it likely would not have been widely adopted for the reasons mentioned above;

² Sometimes these languages are also called 'national languages,' but we prefer to avoid this term here to prevent any confusion with the concept of 'Language of National Affiliation introduced in this study.

³ Foremost among the challenges is the conceptual and phenomenological difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between languages and the varieties that are merely their dialects.

⁴ These can be considered, so to speak, as the state languages—the languages through which the Cameroonian State and Nation maintain social cohesion, given their central role as key instruments of communication.

(d) The creation of two major linguistic zones in Cameroon (a French-speaking zone and an English-speaking zone) following the reunification of the former French and British Cameroons after World War II.

It is important to remember that for many speakers (especially in rural areas) LNAs often function as second or even foreign languages. This is not because these populations consciously prefer other languages, but rather due to endemic illiteracy linked to socio-economic conditions. In fact, these communities frequently experience what Bernstein (1964) described as "verbal deprivation," stemming from limited and inconsistent exposure to the official languages. The inevitable result is a "linguistic deficit" (Bernstein, 1964) in the very languages whose proficiency is crucial to avoiding social marginalization. This situation is all the more true as for those who do manage to access formal education, French or English then becomes the linguistic code in which they develop the highest level of competence, given its systematic use in both public and private spheres.

3.3. THE HYBRID LANGUAGES

The interaction between endogenous and exogenous languages has given rise to hybrid dialects, now well documented by both national and international scholars. Among the most prominent are **Camfranglais** and **Pidgin English**. The third group of languages within Cameroon's linguistic repertoire therefore consists of those that have emerged through hybridization between languages of tribal affiliation (LTA) and languages of national affiliation (LNA). CSs typically acquire a degree of proficiency in at least one of these hybrid varieties, depending on their region of origin and/or residence. Broadly speaking, this might be **Camfranglais** in major urban centers such as Douala, Yaoundé, Nkongsamba, and Bafoussam; **Pidgin English** or **Kamtok** in the Anglophone regions of the Southwest and Northwest; or **Franfulfuldé** in the northern cities of Ngaoundéré, Garoua, and Maroua. It is from these three categories (endogenous, exogenous, and hybrid) that the individual linguistic repertoires of CSs are formed. These repertoires typically include at least one language from each group. However, because hybrid languages tend to play a secondary role, they will not be the focus of our analysis. Instead, we will concentrate on the two categories that form the core of CSs' linguistic identity: the LTA and the LNA that as a matter of fact represent their primary linguistic identity.

4. THE LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE OF CAMEROONIAN CITIZENS

We will now turn to a description of the linguistic repertoire of the average CS. As previously emphasized, this individual repertoire does not (and indeed cannot) fully mirror the broader linguistic repertoire of the national community. Before proceeding, however, it is important to address the question of the mother tongue of CSs.

4.1. THE FIRST LANGUAGE DILEMMA OF CAMEROONIAN SPEAKERS

A longstanding and heated debate continues regarding the status of Cameroon's two official languages, French and English: should they be considered **foreign languages**, as some scholars have argued (Wamba & Noumssi, 2003), or **mother tongues**, given that many Cameroonians are exposed to them from early childhood? This dilemma arises from two conflicting observations. On one hand, since many Cameroonians acquire French or English at a young age and develop native-like competence, it seems inconsistent to classify these languages as *foreign*, even though speakers themselves often perceive them as having a strong degree of "otherness" or *xenity* (Biloua & Fonkoua, 2010). On the other hand, since these languages are not the ancestral tongues of most Cameroonians, it is equally problematic to define them as *mother tongues* in the traditional sense, despite their dominant presence across nearly all domains of public and private life⁵.

This leads to a persistent ambiguity over which language should rightfully be considered the **first language** of Cameroonian speakers: a language of tribal affiliation (LTA) or a language of national affiliation (LNA). This is a common dilemma in diglossic contexts, where speakers often find themselves torn between two languages that both hold deep personal and social significance.

The question is far from easy to resolve. Those who claim to do so with certainty are often positioned at one end of the ideological spectrum: either **nationalists**, who assert that only local languages can legitimately be considered mother tongues, or **zealous Francophiles** (or Anglophiles), who emphasize the unparalleled dominance of French or English and view this dominance as justification for their status as first languages. Defenders of LTAs counter that Cameroonians had mother tongues long before colonial languages were introduced. Furthermore, they argue that because French and English were imposed through colonial rule, they cannot be authentically considered *first* or *primary* languages in either an emotional or historical sense.

All things considered, if we focus strictly on observable facts, one conclusion becomes evident: two principal languages form the core of the linguistic identity of Cameroonian citizens. The first is the language of their tribal group, which we have termed **LTA** (Language of Tribal Affiliation). The second is the language associated with one of the country's two main linguistic zones (Francophone or Anglophone) designated as **LNA** (Language of National Affiliation). Due to its official status and high degree of elaboration as a language of education, administration, and culture, the LNA also serves as the primary vehicle for cognitive and formal communication.

Although most CSs are proficient in at least three languages, only two (LTA and LNA) play a dominant role in shaping their primary (socio)linguistic identity. This dichotomous framework is particularly useful, as it allows us to approach a potential resolution to the Cornelian dilemma outlined in the previous section: the complex question of which language should be considered the **first language** of Cameroonians.

Before addressing this issue directly, however, it is essential to examine the reasons why these two languages (LTA and LNA) have come to constitute the core of the (socio)linguistic identity of Cameroonian speakers.

4.2. THE LTA/LNA BINOMIAL AS THE CENTRAL CORE OF THE PRIMARY LINGUISTIC IDENTITY OF CSs

The **LTA** represents the foundation of cultural identity. It is the ancestral tongue, a linguistic code transmitted through lineage; through one's belonging to a specific cultural and ethnic group. LTAs could, in many respects, be legitimately regarded as **mother tongues**, as they embody the primordial cultural identity of CSs. However, in practice, most speakers possess only limited or passive proficiency in these languages. This gap in competence raises a critical question: at this point should the status of *mother tongue* be more appropriately attributed to **LNAs**, which are often the languages that Cameroonians most effectively *master*, particularly in urban areas where LNAs frequently serve as languages of **first socialization**?

⁵ Education, media, leisure, religion, and other key social domains.

Rather than redefining LNAs as mother tongues (which may be problematic from a historical and cultural standpoint), one might instead refer to them as “**master languages**” (Pichon, 1936: 102). This term emphasizes the idea of linguistic *mastery*, capturing the fact that LNAs often function as the primary tools through which CSs engage in **verbal semiosis** and complex cognitive activity⁶. In this sense, the LNA is the dominant or **strong language**, the code most frequently used for formal reasoning, education, abstract thought, and interaction with institutional structures.

This does not imply that LTAs are inherently less capable of fulfilling these functions. On the contrary, local languages possess rich expressive and cognitive potential. However, it is important to acknowledge (objectively and without ideological bias) that colonial language policy deliberately worked to **minoritize** LTAs (Calvet, 1974; Sol, 1997). This systematic marginalization undermined efforts toward **linguistic normalization**, preventing the development, standardization, and functional expansion of any local language to a status that would allow it to serve as a primary semiotic and cognitive tool for the broader population.

In urban contexts especially, where French or English often serve as both the language of first contact and the medium of early education and socialization, it may be more accurate to speak of a “**xeno-mother tongue**” (Telep, 2017), a term that captures the paradox of having one's primary linguistic and cognitive identity shaped by a language that is, historically and culturally, not indigenous.

The primacy of these two languages (LTA and LNA) is rooted in two fundamentally distinct dynamics: the first is primarily **ontological**, while the second is largely **pragmatic**. The LTA holds symbolic and identity-based importance by virtue of its status as the *language of the ancestors*. As the linguistic expression of a specific cultural and tribal group, it serves as a marker of **ethnic identity** and **community cohesion**. By contrast, the significance of the LNA lies in its **instrumental value**, its utility as a language of wider communication, access, and opportunity. Mastery of a LNA serves as a powerful vehicle for **social integration, educational advancement, and socioeconomic mobility**. It opens the door to a broader linguistic and cultural universe than that offered by the LTA. Thus, the relationship between these two varieties reflects a fundamental **dialectic** between the **symbolic function** of language (embodied by the LTA) and its **communicative function** (embodied by the LNA).

In monolingual societies, these two functions typically **converge** in a single language, one that serves both as the **mother tongue** and the **master language**. This language acquires symbolic value early in life through intimate, affective bonds (notably maternal), and, over time, it evolves into a robust cognitive tool as vocabulary expands and syntactic structures become more complex (Haugen, 1966). It thus fulfills both the **identity-building** and **functional-communicative** roles of language. In contrast, for CSs, or more broadly, for speakers in **diglossic** settings, these two core functions have become **structurally dissociated**, and are carried by **two separate linguistic codes** (the LTA and the LNA) that often have **no genetic relationship**. This division reflects both the historical trajectory of language contact in Cameroon and the sociolinguistic pressures that continue to shape the linguistic identities of its citizens. Thus, while the LNA's preeminence stems from being the language individuals actively master and use, the LTA derives its significance from its role as a carrier of a cultural heritage that predates the speakers themselves and to which they claim belonging. The LTA functions as a marker of **ethnic**, and more specifically, **tribal affiliation**. It embodies what Fishman (1967) described as the three “Ps”: **Paternity, Heritage, and Phenomenology**.

However, it is important to reiterate that although the LTA is a central component of the linguistic identity of CSs, this does not necessarily mean they speak it fluently, or at all. In fact, many Cameroonians either have limited proficiency in their LTA or do not speak it at all (Telep, 2017). Moreover, a significant number of those who do speak their LTA often abandon it, or are willing to do so, when presented with opportunities for social advancement. CSs tend to be significantly more proficient in the LNA than in the LTA, largely because the former is the language of their formal education. For many, it has accompanied their mental development from the earliest stages of socialization through to cognitive maturity. Additionally, LNAs are the languages used in what Ferguson (1959) described as the “higher” institutions of society; they are the languages of scientific progress, modernity, and thus hold far greater value on the linguistic market compared to LTAs. Consequently, it is accurate to say that, for the average CS, LNA serves as the primary language for most cognitive and communicative activities, having established itself as the main medium of communication across all social and institutional spheres. Those without even a basic command of a LNA often face significant social and economic disadvantages.

It is important to note that the dominance of LNA within these higher institutions, and even within primary socialization agents (such as the nuclear family and extended relatives) and secondary socialization settings (such as schools and peer groups) cannot be attributed solely to the long-term legacy of colonial policies, whose effects remain visible today. Two additional factors play a role: first, the limited vitality of LTAs (many of which struggle to achieve sufficient standardization), and second, the relatively low level of ideological mobilization by political and academic actors to promote LTAs (Nkwain, 2010). The first factor can be seen as a consequence of the second.

Because of this functional duality or the “division” of language's two fundamental roles (symbolic vs. communicative, identity vs. utility, ontological vs. pragmatic), we argue that it may be more accurate to view LTA and LNA as two sides of the same coin. Together, they represent the dual facets of what constitutes the first language: one side being the “mother tongue” in the strict sense, and the other the “master language” (Pichon, 1936:102). LTAs fulfill an ontological need for identity and derive their importance primarily from their symbolic function, while LNAs take on the communicative role and gain significance through their pragmatic utility as the main linguistic tools for daily interaction and social advancement⁷.

4.3. SECOND LANGUAGES

Public and semi-public educational centers are the primary venues for second language acquisition. This category mainly encompasses the more recently introduced foreign languages, such as Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian. These languages are typically learned by Cameroonian citizens aiming to pursue higher education in the respective corresponding countries. Notably, Italian and Chinese have made significant progress over the past decade. Whereas until the 1990s these languages were only available through specialized language centers, they have now been incorporated into the academic curricula of schools, allowing young Cameroonians to receive prolonged exposure. This sustained learning enables many students, after a substantial period of

⁶ The same holds true for English among Anglophone Cameroonians.

⁷ This does not exclude the possibility that they may also serve a symbolic and identity function for certain LCs.”

study, to reach a proficiency level high enough to travel to these countries without needing to demonstrate official language certification (such as a B2 level) for study visa purposes.

It is also important to highlight that in certain parts of the country, French/English is effectively treated as a second language. This situation is especially prevalent in rural areas, where economic factors limit exposure to French (or English) outside of the school environment. Due to persistent logistical challenges, language acquisition in these contexts follows the pattern of second language learning rather than first language acquisition, which contrasts sharply with urban areas. In cities, exposure to official languages is widespread through media outlets such as radio, television, and print, facilitating more natural and immersive language development (Ekomo Engolo, 2001).

4.4. HYBRID LANGUAGES

As mentioned above, the mixed languages spoken in Cameroon include Camfranglais, Pidgin English, and Franfulfuldé. Of these three, only Camfranglais has garnered significant attention from the scientific community, which has produced numerous insightful studies on the subject (De Feral, 2006; Telep, 2017). It is important to note, however, that although the term "hybrid language" suggests a balanced fusion of two languages (implying an equal contribution of lexical items and morpho-syntactic structures from each), Cameroonian hybrid dialects are more accurately described as diatopic variations of the country's two official languages, French and English. This is especially evident in the case of Camfranglais, where the majority of the lexicon and syntax derive primarily from French. Therefore, Camfranglais is not a proportional blend of Cameroonian languages, French, and English, as might be assumed; rather, it is largely French that has undergone significant morphological, syntactic, lexical, and especially prosodic modifications. In contrast, Pidgin English appears to be more distinct from standard English than Camfranglais is from French. However, this observation remains preliminary and would require comprehensive linguistic study to confirm its accuracy.

5. DUAL LINGUISTIC LOYALTY AS A COROLLARY OF A DIVIDED LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

We would like to revisit the theme of the CS's mother tongue to highlight an important phenomenon that should not be overlooked. As previously discussed, language is the primary vehicle of identity. Tribal belonging is notably marked by the knowledge, recognition, or use of the emblematic language of one's tribe, which we refer to as the "language of tribal affiliation". Similarly, national belonging is marked by the knowledge, recognition, and use of a "language of national affiliation". Together, these two languages form the central core of the linguistic repertoire of nearly all citizens of the Republic of Cameroon. In this light, it can be asserted that the linguistic-ethnic identity of each Cameroonian is founded on a dual sociolinguistic affiliation reflecting two distinct dimensions of "exclusive connective experience". The first dimension corresponds to the community of tribal affiliation (the tribe of origin), while the second pertains to the community of national affiliation, that is, the Cameroonian nation.

The formation, preservation, and cohesion of each of these two intertwined communities depend heavily on their respective languages. Thus, the first level of cohesion (within the tribe) is maintained through the LTA, while the second level (within the Nation) is sustained by the LNA, which are the official languages. This arrangement constitutes a "dia-system" in which the structural divergence between these languages has, over time, fostered a diglossic system, made even more pronounced by its placement within a context of "dinomy" (Saville-Troike, 2003:45).

Interestingly, the dual affiliation of Cameroonian citizens (both tribal and national) has given rise to a dual loyalty, or rather, a shared loyalty. On one hand, the tribal language is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of its speakers, appealing to their sense of ancient origins and profound identity. On the other hand, the LNA fosters loyalty through its role as the primary emblem of the Nation, promoting the internal cohesion of the political unit. As Einar Haugen insightfully noted, in order to strengthen national unity, a nation encourages its citizens to expand their loyalty beyond family or tribal ties and to identify their personal identity with that of the Nation (Haugen, 1966:68).

However, in the case of the CS, this identification with the nation (mediated primarily through the LNA) does not entail a renunciation of their primary cultural niche, the tribe. Were the nation ontologically an extension of the tribe, the CS would more easily align their individual identity with the nation, which would simply be a broader reflection of the tribe's identity. In such a scenario, we would observe what Dell'Aquila and Iannacaro (2004) describe as "**homogenetic diglossia**," where the genetic kinship between the two languages facilitates both the acceptance and mastery of the 'high' language as an extension of the 'low' language⁸. However, CS's situation is one of "**heterogenetic diglossia**" (Ibid.), marked by a fundamental divide between tribe and Nation. This sharp separation makes it significantly more challenging for speakers to fully integrate their individual identity with that of the nation.

Be that as it may, this dual sense of belonging also manifests as a dual linguistic loyalty rooted in the split linguistic identity of Cameroonian citizens. On one hand, they feel an emotional loyalty to the linguistic ego of their tribe; on the other, a pragmatic loyalty to the linguistic ego of their Nation. While many may question the legitimacy of loyalty to a colonial language, it is important to recognize that such loyalty is rarely emotional; it is primarily utilitarian, grounded in the practical value of the LNA, which remains essential in most everyday interactions across the vast majority of the country. Determining which of these two loyalties predominates is difficult, but what is undeniable is the common and tangible impossibility for speakers to free themselves entirely from either language. The symbolic and pragmatic functions these languages fulfill are intrinsic to human experience, and as such, the linguistic codes carrying these functions cannot simply be replaced or discarded overnight. At best, they might be reformed through a long and complex process of language planning.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding this paper, let us briefly recap the key points addressed. The first section presented important socio-historical premises concerning the linguistic situation in Cameroon. In the second section, we defined the sociolinguistic concepts of linguistic community and repertoire to establish the conceptual framework guiding our analysis. The third and fourth sections offered a detailed description of linguistic repertoires; first at the level of the Cameroonian territory, then focusing on individual language speakers, from a broad, macro-sociolinguistic perspective. In the fifth and final section, we highlighted the divided linguistic identity

⁸ For example, consider a young speaker who begins with a variety specific to the intimate family circle and gradually expands their idiolect to incorporate the higher variety, which is essentially a continuation of the original.

of CSs, who, by virtue of this duality, embody a dual linguistic loyalty. The first loyalty, toward their LTA, is linked to the ontological function of deep identity that this language assumes. The second, toward their LNA, is less a result of deliberate language choice and more the product of social conditioning, making it an indispensable asset due to its practical utility.

This structural bipartition of the notion of first language into two distinct conceptual entities naturally brings us back to the concept of diglossia as defined by Ferguson, which involves a high language and a low language. In the Cameroonian context, these correspond respectively to the LNA and the LTA, both forming the core of CSs' primary linguistic identity. This duality continues to fuel confusion about which language should be considered the true mother tongue of CSs: the language they best command (French or English), or the language with which they most strongly identify ethnolinguistically. Alongside the conceptual framework proposed here as a tentative resolution to this dilemma, it seems appropriate to suggest that the final decision ultimately rests with each individual speaker.

However, several questions remain open regarding the potential implications of our bipartite conception of the first language. If both LTA and LNA play such significant roles for the average speaker, yet coexist within a diglossic dynamic characterized by functional distribution, status asymmetry, and conflict, how do CSs actually experience these languages? What is their relationship to languages that are integral to their identity but may not fully satisfy their deepest communicative needs? Conversely, how do they relate to languages they seem unable to live without, even though their emotional identification with them may be limited or absent? Can we anticipate specific language behaviors emerging from such a sociolinguistic configuration and complex relationship with the first language? These questions open important avenues for reflection, yet they lie beyond the scope of this article. We therefore defer them to future studies, where we intend to explore, among other topics, the psychosocial effects of diglossia on speakers' perceptions of their languages, as well as the broader diglossic architecture of Cameroonian multilingualism.

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