Decolonizing Cameroon's language policies: a critical assessment

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Abstract: Due to its colonial history and prevalent multilingualism, Cameroon is a country where language policies have profoundly impacted socioeconomic and political life. Cameroon has 273 local languages and two official languages, English and French. The two official languages have been a crystallization point for discontent and civil unrest, leading to secessionist sentiments and violence. In this paper, we assess Cameroon's language policies, firstly by providing a brief historical and legal overview based in the literature. We then present a new decolonial analytical framework, building on but extending existing theoretical frameworks. Our new analysis shows that a transition to using indigenous languages in formal education and other domains is not necessary at present. However, we argue that such a transition will become unavoidable in future. We show that it will be practically possible to use a limited number of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, building on existing bilingualisms in the country. We believe these languages should be chosen using rational criteria and we introduce an approximate assessment of which languages are easy to learn and teach, and for speakers of which other languages. The transition we foresee requires planning and preparation. A different approach to Cameroon's languages may help in building national unity and healing national wounds in the areas of sociolinguistic power-sharing and interregional cohabitation. We expect that our approach also holds benefits for other African countries.

Keywords: Cameroon; language policy; education; decolonizing; multilingualism; medium of instruction; indigenous languages

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1 Introduction

After independence, many countries in Africa decided to continue with the former colonial language(s) as the official languages. This choice was seen as logical: former colonial languages were considered ethnically neutral and key for helping to unify and build the new nations that had been formed. In Cameroon, this path was chosen as well. Due to its specific colonial history, both English and French were chosen as the official languages, although English dominated in only two regions and French in the eight other regions (Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010, 2020; Tadadjeu 1990).

We believe that more than 60 years after independence, the time has come to re-examine this choice and to evaluate whether or not it would be possible to conceive of different, African-language-based alternatives. Under which circumstances could such alternatives be implemented? What might be the advantages and disadvantages?

To do this, we start with a short historical and sociolinguistic overview of the country and the challenges it faces, especially in the sociolinguistic area. We then outline the current language policy of the country and the proposals that have been made for alternatives in the past, largely by Cameroonian authors and researchers. We then briefly present a new analytical framework, largely taken from Van Pinxteren (2022). Applying this framework to Cameroon leads to proposals for a gradual transition towards a new, decolonial language policy. This policy will have to be multilingual and to base itself on the language ecology of the country. We hope to show why such a transition could be a practical possibility and will eventually become inevitable, driven by the continued expansion of the higher education sector. This is because we hold that it is a fiction that educational systems can expand indefinitely using foreign languages as medium of instruction. We end with some concluding observations.

2 Cameroon

Cameroon is situated in the Gulf of Guinea (also called the Bight of Biafra) in Central Africa. Due to its unique cultural, geographic, and climatic diversity, and its highly multilingual landscape, the country is often considered ‘Africa in miniature’.

2.1 A historical overview[1]

The peoples and ethnolinguistic communities that make up Cameroon have existed for many centuries before the colonial era led by Europeans in Africa, and, like in all

1 The authors are aware of the necessity to challenge any Eurocentric periodization of African history. At the same time, it is necessary to establish the birth of Cameroon as a unified polity; undoubtedly, this national emergence only started with the colonial era in the 20th Century.

other parts of Africa, they had developed their various traditions and technologies to function in their natural habitats.

For this article, our focus is on recent colonial history, mainly because Cameroon as a modern nation is the direct result of the European colonial enterprise in Africa. The land later to be known as Cameroon was first visited by German explorers towards the end of the 19th Century. Later on, a colonization of the territory started after the infamous Berlin Conference of 1885. Germany itself was unified as a country under Bismarck only briefly before, in 1871. With German unification, a new power entered European politics, a power that also sought to establish its mark in the world by seeking its own colonial empire. Germany first tried to establish itself in Cameroon through treaties with some local rulers along the Cameroonian Atlantic coast.[2] Though these local rulers were only a tiny portion of the dozens of local rulers that reigned all across the territory of Cameroon at the time, these were then used as a pretext for establishing colonial rule and a cruel plantation economy that relied to a large extent on land dispossession and forced labour. The gradual German push inland met with considerable resistance, resistance which was quenched in a number of bloody military campaigns under the responsibility of governor Von Puttkammer, whose regime lasted until 1906. When the Germans were forced to relinquish their colonies after losing in World War I, local resistance had not yet been broken completely (Ngoh 1996).

In order to establish their new order and make a quick profit in the most efficient manner, the Germans could ill-afford patience with, and consideration of, the human and linguistic diversity existing in the country. Instead, they imposed their own systems of control over the population, with little regard for what may have existed before. With the arrival of the French (in the largest part of Cameroon), this way of working was left intact, because it agreed well with how France operated in its other colonies. Again, this was met with stiff local resistance. Internal autonomy was obtained in 1956. A smaller part of Cameroon was administered by the British, who used their administrative strategy of 'indirect rule'. One part of the colonial UN trust territory of British Cameroons later became part of Nigeria; the other part united with French Cameroon in 1961. In terms of official languages, this meant that, uniquely, in the former French Trust Territory, French was used as the official language, whereas in the former British Trust Territory, English was used as the

2 It is important to note that many coastal Chiefs refused to sign those German treaties. In addition, one can question the representativity of those coastal Chiefs (Douala and others) who did sign, both in terms of their chiefdoms' demographics and political power. This important historical debate, though crucial in efforts to decolonise African history and the epistemology of some historical claims that in the past may have become established in African studies as an academic discipline, falls outside the remit of this article.

official language. At a national level, the country was officially a bilingual (French and English) country.

After independence, the challenge of leading this diverse country remained as it had been before. A largely artificial national unity was imposed, in part through the one-party system under President Ahmadou Ahidjo's Cameroon National Union. He was succeeded in 1982 by Paul Biya, who has ruled the country to this day (2024) with an iron grip on centralised power.

In practice, French dominated in Cameroon, leading to perceived unfair advantages to francophone Cameroonians. Discontent about this situation in the two anglophone regions of the country where English is used as the official language has led to the Ambazonian secession movement and a repressive reaction that has only served to make matters worse.[3]

2.2 Demographics and administrative division

The population of Cameroon in 2023 is 28,478,697 inhabitants, based on a Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data.[4]

Administratively, the country is divided into ten regions (formerly called provinces): Centre, South, East, Adamawa, North, Far-North, North-West, West, South-West, and Littoral (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

These regions are (both in their naming and in practice) mainly based on geographical areas and do not reflect areas of relative ethnic homogeneity (in contrast to, for example, the counties of Kenya or the regional states of Ethiopia).

The focus of this article is to assess the scope for sustainable development through a better education system, based on the aspirations and languages of the Cameroonian peoples. This is in line with Prah's (2010) call for the use of local languages as medium of instruction at all levels. In order to arrive at such an assessment, we must first examine the multilingual landscape of the country in more detail.

As a starting point, we must briefly describe the relationship between English and French, as the official languages, and Cameroon's indigenous languages. In the Cameroonian academic literature, mother tongues and indigenous languages are also known as 'national languages'. Currently, they tend to be used exclusively in

3 This piece on the *ActuCameroon* webpage gives a critical overview of the 40 years' rule of Paul Biya and the multifaceted discontent that has led to the current regional civil war in the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions: https://actucameroun.com/2022/02/09/can-une-dictature-de-40-ans-et-une-guerre-civile-brutale-tribune/.

4 Source: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/cameroon-population/. Demographic data on countries in the world on this webpage is sourced from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (https://population.un.org/wpp/).

Figure 1: Cameroon (Source: https://www.worldmaps.info/Cameroon/).

family contexts, in social private life, and daily community interactions such as local trade, social intra-ethnic events, and traditional community activities. Official languages are languages used in daily administration and communication in public entities, in official public media such as state television, the national radio, and the printed press. Another important domain of exclusive use of official languages is the education system (both in private and public schools). Persons interacting with any government branch or department are expected to use the official language of the region. Workers in the civil service are required to use official languages in their dealings with the citizens, and families and parents can only use French and English in their written documentation and interaction with State institutions at all levels (Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010, 2020; Tadadjeu 1980; Tadadjeu 1990). Given this situation, then, what is the situation of Cameroon's indigenous languages and what is the scope for increasing their use?

Table 1: Some statistical data about Cameroon.

Population	**28 million** *(2 % of Africa's total)*
Area	**475,445 km^2** *(1.57 % of Africa's total)*
Administrative division	**10 regions**
Local languages	**273** *(Ethnologue)* (***13.06 %*** *of Africa's total)*

2.3 Cameroon, a linguistic paradise?

Due to the linguistic diversity found within its borders, Cameroon is considered by many as a linguistic paradise. In terms of the multilingual landscape of the country, there are 273 languages[5] in Cameroon, according to the *Ethnologue* (Eberhard 2022).

Three of the four main linguistic phyla of Africa are represented in Cameroon: Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Kordofanian (of which Niger-Congo is the largest family) (see Figure 2).

As indicated earlier, the population of the country today is growing towards the 30-million mark. However, in the early 1960s when Cameroon gained its independence and started as a sovereign nation, its population was estimated at only around 5 million. Given its 273 languages, Cameroon is considered to have the highest population-to-languages ratio in Africa, and one of the highest in the world.

These languages fall into three main phyla or mega-families. Here, we will briefly examine each one of them in turn.

The Nilo-Saharan[6] languages spoken in Cameroon form the smallest group with a total of around 200,000 speakers, evenly divided over two languages, one (Kanuri) also spoken in Nigeria and the other (Ngambay) also spoken in Chad; both of those countries have far greater numbers of speakers of those languages.[7]

5 Grouping of speech forms into dialects, languages, and language families has always been controversial; the classifications adopted in this article are merely to help in giving a clearer overview and to help in building our line of reasoning. Likewise, language names can be confusing and controversial. The names given here are mostly taken from the *Ethnologue* database. We hold that the concept of language as a cultural and sociolinguistic reality can be used as an operational tool for quality and sustainable education, and in that role, can be efficiently instrumentalized in education and language policies.

6 It should be noted that existence of a Nilo-Saharan family has been questioned by some linguists (Güldemann 2018).

7 In recent literature, there is an issue with the numbers of speakers of African languages, along the lines of known issues with any statistics and demographic information on African languages and cultures. In the case of Cameroon, the population of the country today is above 28 million; yet no published demographic statistics have been adjusted to account for that number when mentioning specific speaker bases for languages in Cameroon. A disconcerting consequence is that the most

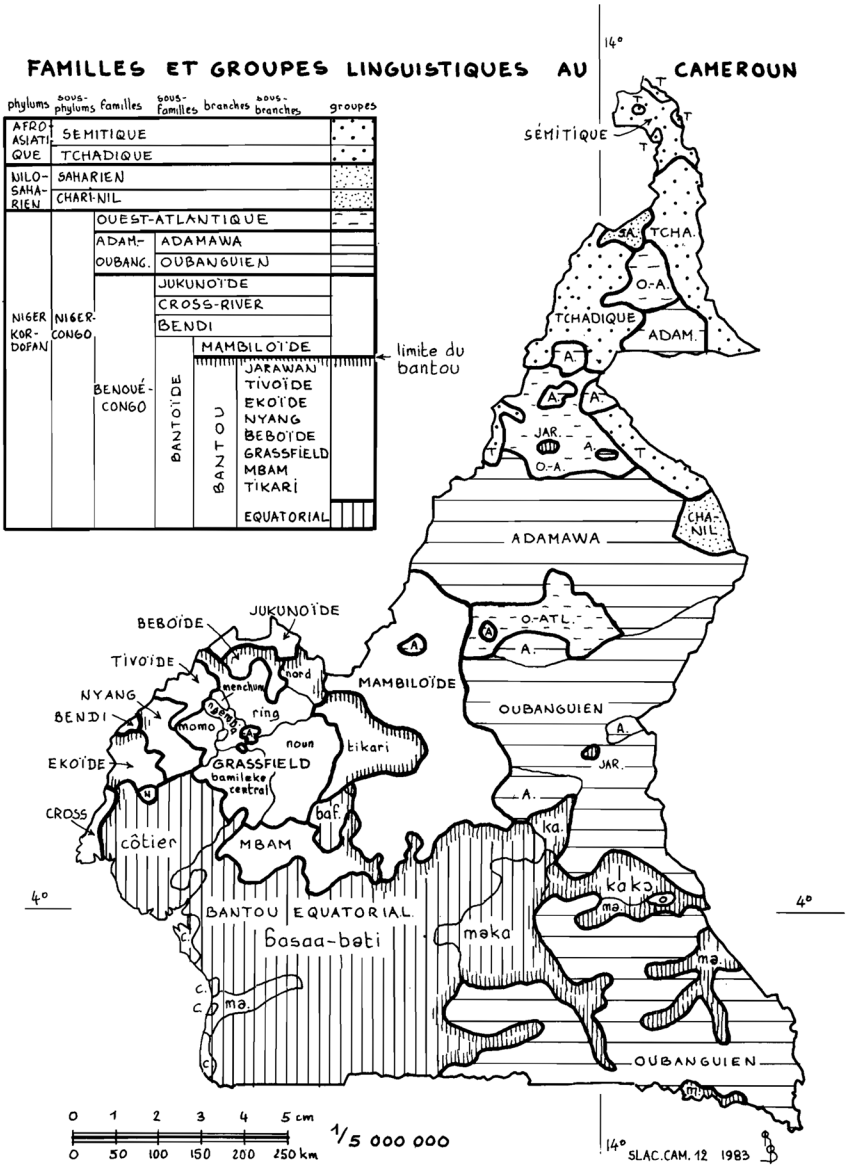

Figure 2: A map of linguistic families in Cameroon (*Source:* Atlas Linguistique de l'Afrique Centrale (ALAC) 1983).

generous estimates of local language speakers tend to total to barely half the current Cameroonian population.

The Afro-Asiatic languages spoken in the country essentially belong to the Biu-Mandara subfamily of the Chadic group. It is made up of speakers of a large number of languages with small speaker numbers. The largest of these is probably Mafa, with a speaker base of around 700,000.

As for the Niger-Kordofanian phylum, the large and diverse Niger-Congo subfamily is well-represented in the country, as can be seen in Figure 2.

There is a very unequal division of speaker numbers over these language groups and subgroups – we will return to this later in the article.

3 Language policies

Language policies are those decisions and actions by institutions and individuals related to how languages are used, managed, and developed in different contexts and domains in a given society. Those decisions and actions affect the status, functions, and rights of languages and their speakers (Baldauf and Kaplan 1997; Batibo 2005; Kamdem 2020).

We will look first at the evolution of the legal framework regulating the use of Cameroonian languages since independence in 1960, with a focus on the last 30 years or so; then at how some local institutions and individuals have worked to promote and support the use of local languages in the two main areas where they have been overtly excluded since colonial times: the mainstream education sector, and the public spaces and domains. For,

> 'the low presence of indigenous African languages from most public spaces is not a natural occurrence that was inevitable, but rather the result of a number of overt language policies articulating the exclusion of indigenous languages from these public spaces.' (Wildsmith-Cromarty et al. 2023: 765)

3.1 The legal environment regarding local languages

3.1.1 The recommendations and resolutions from the National Forum on Education in 1995

In Cameroon, the absence of African languages in the education system and the public spaces is the result of discriminatory policies that were put in place during the colonial era and continued in the post-independence period. In the case of Cameroon, during colonial times, there had been many administrative decrees and other legal instruments clarifying the use of languages in schools and for public communications, all favouring exclusively the official languages, English and French, to be used

as sole mediums of intruction; and other European languages such as German and Spanish to be used as compulsory subjects in the education systems (Akumbu 2020; Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010, 2020; Tadadjeu 1990). In contrast, even after independence, and for more than 30 years into its journey as a post-colonial African nation, there were no official and legally-binding documents with specific reference to local languages; nor were there any formal guidelines on their use in education.

However, a significant change occurred in the 1990s. Some claim that this was part of a larger complex of socio-political changes brought about by the 'Wind from the East' that swept many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, blowing away mono-partyism in national politics, and shaking the national centralised grips on power that had ignored any due consideration to local populations and their languages and cultures (Akumbu 2020; Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2020).

A first public debate both on local languages and their role in education and the necessity for affirmative policies came with the National Forum on Education in 1995, organised in Yaoundé. After long days of deliberations, the delegates adopted several recommendations and resolutions in favour of the teaching of national languages in the education system and their use in official communication. These were then taken up when writing the new constitution in 1996, and in the Law on the orientation of education of 1998, as outlined in the next paragraphs.

3.1.2 The constitutional protection and promotion of national languages

The current Constitution, adopted on 18 January 1996, was the fourth Cameroonian constitution since Independence in 1960, but the first one to mention and acknowledge the importance of local languages, as a direct consequence of the recommendations of the 1995 National Forum on Education. In its Preamble, national pride regarding the country's linguistic diversity is asserted:

> We, the people of Cameroon, Proud of our linguistic and cultural diversity, an enriching feature of our national identity, but profoundly aware of the imperative need to further consolidate our unity, solemnly declare that we constitute one and the same Nation, bound by the same destiny, and assert our firm determination to build the Cameroonian Fatherland on the basis of the ideals of fraternity, justice and progress.

Further down, in Part I: The State and Sovereignty, Article 1 (3) establishes a commitment to protect and promote national languages – equated with local and indigenous languages:

> [The State] shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages.

Thus, the 1996 Constitution contains an official acknowledgment of Cameroonian multilingualism, and linguistic diversity, as an integral part of national identity, and especially the commitment of the State to protect and promote national languages.

Article 1 represents the first official support and endorsement of Mother Tongue – Official Language (MT-OL) bilingual literacy programmes using local languages, which had already been started on an experimental basis (e.g. through the PROPELCA project, see further down).

3.2 Local languages and their promotion/support in official institutions

Following the 1996 Constitution, Law No 98/004 of April 1998 on the Orientation of education in Cameroon advocates (but does not mandate) the teaching of national languages in the educational system. However, more than 25 years later, the implementational instruments also known as texts of application in legal jargon have not been fully promulgated. This creates a confusing situation where there are laws promoting local languages and their use in education, but no additional laws clarifying how to do that properly.[8]

The main public institutions where significant changes in language policies could be implemented to bring about a different destiny for Cameroonian languages are the governmental departments in charge of education from kindergarten to university. In Cameroon, these are the following ministries:

- Basic (Primary) Education,
- Secondary Education,
- Higher Education.

Over the last 30 years, there have been important appointments and the creation of new departments and administrative units in those three ministries to put in place dedicated civil servants tasked with spearheading and overseeing the implementation of policies in favour of the use of Cameroonian languages (République du Cameroun 2013).

For Basic (Primary), and Secondary Education, 'local cultures, including national languages', are now 'part' of the official curriculum. In other words, local languages can be taught as optional subjects. But in practice, they are not compulsory, in contrast to subjects like German and Spanish in the francophone secondary school system.

8 The law in question, like many laws in Cameroon, can be enforced only after implementational texts (additional articles of law to be adopted by the government) have been adopted and promulgated.

The Ministry of Secondary Education has created a National Inspectorate of National Languages. In the Higher Education sector, the ministry has created a department of national languages in the Higher Teachers Training College in charge of the training of Secondary school teachers in Yaoundé. In addition to the three ministries mentioned above, the Ministry of Culture has also created regional and departmental delegations in charge of national languages.

At the bottom line, there is no legally binding provision for any local languages to be used as a medium of instruction at any level of the education system.

3.3 An overview of language policy proposals

Despite more recent positive developments covered below, it is fair to say that overall, the official language policy vis-a-vis the linguistic diversity in Cameroon has not been positive: local or indigenous languages have not been accorded a significant position in the language policies of the country. Instead, the colonial languages, English and French, have been maintained as the official languages, even though only a minority of the population speaks either of these languages with a reasonable level of proficiency – Albaugh (2014: 221) giving an estimate of only 18 percent. This has effectively denied access by large sections of the population to justice, administration, healthcare, politics, and any of the other services that are available to 'citizens' of a country, as opposed to 'subjects' (in the sense described by Mamdani 1996).

The negative consequences regarding access to justice have been described by Dissake (2022) and Ojongnkpot and Badugue (2018). For healthcare, with a specific focus on the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Akumbu (2020) provides an overview of some of those consequences. For the Anglophone intellectual elite, the language policy has added insult to injury, because after having spent a considerable amount of effort in learning English, they come to realize that in the country as a whole, French dominates.

Given all this, the focus of this article is to investigate ways and means of dealing with this diversity instead in a positive way. This is a topic that has challenged Cameroonian social scientists over the years, leading to a fairly voluminous body of literature, that cannot be treated in full here. Yet, it is important to point out a few highlights.

One of the earliest contributions in this direction was by Bot Ba Njock (1966), who suggested that using zonal languages would be sufficient to cover the whole of Cameroon. Another key author who has published on and proposed language policies was Maurice Tadadjeu. In 1980, he published a version of his proposals for a trilingual education system (Tadadjeu 1980). Under this system, English and French

would remain as the two official languages in Cameroon, each in their own regions. The other language would then be taught as a subject from secondary level. Then, each region (called 'province' at the time) would have one or two regional languages that would be taught in schools as well. At the local level, mainly in primary education, a local mother tongue (or national language) would be taught. Thus, for the West province (currently the West Region), he suggested Fe'eFe'e and Ghɔmálá' as the two provincial languages (both are Eastern Grassfields languages). Native speakers of those languages would be taught their first language as the L1 in school, the other provincial language as L2, and French. Native speakers of other languages would be taught their own L1, then either Fe'eFe'e or Ghɔmálá' as the L2, as well as French.

Tadadjeu's proposals are similar to, but predate the proposals by Laitin (1992) for his 3 ± 1 model which includes a local indigenous language (used in primary education); an indigenous lingua franca; and an international language. It is in the same vein that Ojongnkpot and Badugue (2018) proposed the Tier Stratification Model in her study of how Manyu languages in Cameroon can be valorised.

Similar proposals were developed for example by Chumbow (2005) and Chumbow et al. (2007). Theoretically, Chumbow (2005) made an important point, that we will revert to further on. He wrote:

> It has been argued that learning a zonal language for one who speaks a different mother tongue from the zonal language amounts to learning a foreign language (such as English). This is not entirely true if the zonal language chosen is closely related to the child's mother tongue. For example, because of 'deep' intrinsic relations between Bantu languages of the same sub-group such as Bakweri and Duala (Cameroon), it would be much easier for a Bakweri to use Duala as medium in the school system (and vice versa) than English or French. Chumbow (2005: 177)

Chumbow et al. (2007) have developed one element of this proposal further, inspired by the thinking of Prah (1998). They have attempted to reduce the count of the number of languages in Cameroon by establishing levels of mutual intelligibility between two related languages or speech forms and determining in that way which speech forms hitherto seen as separate languages could in fact be seen as belonging to the same language. This was done first by using a lexicostatistical method of establishing the degree of similarity between language pairs and then by administering a test to establish mutual intelligibility. The result of this exercise was that even though some reduction in the number of separate languages could be obtained (e.g. for Fali), this did not significantly reduce the language count for Cameroon.

Establishing levels of mutual intelligibility reliably is problematic, as shown in the overview by Gooskens (2013). In their study, Chumbow et al. (2007) did not delve into another element of Chumbow's thinking: the ease or difficulty of learning (and

teaching) a related (though still different), cognate language, as compared to the ease or difficulty of learning (and teaching) a completely different, non-cognate language. We believe that this second element is of key and increasing importance and will elaborate on that further down.

A significant effort that must be mentioned is the PROPELCA project. PROPELCA is the French acronym for *Projet Operationnel pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun*, i.e. Operational Project for the Teaching of Languages in Cameroon.[9] This was started as far back as 1978 and is still running today, as a unique attempt at combining research with the teaching and promotion of local languages, underpinned by local language committees. Albaugh (2014), Kamdem (2010), and Trudell (2005) give a description of the project, a critical evaluation of its implementation and achievements in the North-West province, and the implications of the results of PROPELCA for changes in the Cameroonian education system. A recent overview of the current developments of PROPELCA is given in Djomeni (2022). He outlines how the teaching of indigenous languages has gradually been introduced both in the legal system and in some institutions of higher education in the country. However, he also documents how the efforts so far have faced various difficulties. In secondary education, several indigenous languages are now being taught in some schools as a subject, together with cultural studies. This is also the case in teacher training colleges and linguistics departments of Universities. A practical case is the existence of the Department of National Languages at the Higher Teachers' Training School, University of Yaoundé 1.

Difficulties include a patchy success of local language committees, a lack of resources, teaching materials, and sometimes local community support (Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2020; NACALCO 2001). In addition, there is a lack of trained teachers. All in all, the success has been limited, both in terms of the number of local Cameroonian languages taught and in terms of the number of schools that are involved (there are more than 22,000 primary schools in the country,[10] but MT/OL bilingual programmes are being implemented in less than 1 % of them). So even though there have been important advances, Djomeni (2022: 153) concludes that *'if the current mindset deriving from the colonial past of Africans could be reversed, this would change the way people look at their languages in education'.* However, this has not happened yet. Is it likely to happen in the future, and if so, what could bring about

9 This was the meaning at the start of the project in the late 70s and early 80s. After the experimental phase, it became, in the 90s, "Programme pour l'Enseignement des Languages au Cameroun" i.e. *Programme for the Teaching of Languages in Cameroon.* PROPELCA is currently in its final stage of implementation, described by its promoters as the generalisation phase (Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010; Tadadjeu 1990).

10 *'At the primary level, from 2014/2015 to 2021/2022, the number of primary schools increased from 19 136 to 22 074.'* (MINEDUB 2022).

such a change in mindset? For that, we need to outline our theoretical framework and build an analysis of the Cameroonian situation using that framework.

3.4 Attitudes and language policy

Attitudes to the use of languages are rooted in the colonial and post-colonial legacy of rejection and exclusion of local languages in the public domains, such as the public administration, the official media, and mainly the mainstream education system (Adejunmobi 2004; Akumbu 2020; Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010, 2020; Nakaziya 2013; Omoniyi 2014; Rassool 2007; Tadadjeu 1990; Wildsmith-Cromarty et al. 2023).

But those attitudes are changing with 'increasing demands for mother tongue-based education' (Chiatoh 2014: 377) and some growing improvement in the visibility and audibility of indigenous languages in the public domains, fuelled by experimental programmes such as PROPELCA that have shown not only the feasibility of Bilingual MT/OL education programmes, but a high level of student success in 'mother tongue-based multilingual education' (Chiatoh 2014: 376) using a balanced combination of local languages and official languages in the classrooms (Akumbu 2020; Chiatoh 2014; Kamdem 2010, 2020; Omoniyi 2014; Tadadjeu 1990; Wildsmith-Cromarty et al. 2023).

From a policy perspective, the 'planned participation of local communities in the process' (Chiatoh 2014: 376) of using local languages in education is key to bringing about significant changes in local attitudes to the use of local languages in the education sector.

What this overview demonstrates is that, in the words of Chiatoh (2014: 377), in Cameroon, *' … governmental language policy is largely deficient. It promotes education that is ill-adapted to national needs and realities by failing to recognise national languages as fundamental resources in the achievement of quality and accessible schooling.'* Chiatoh (2014: 378) concludes: *'the need for an alternative language planning and policy option is not only obvious but clearly imperative.'*

However, how could such an alternative be brought about and what would a sound alternative policy look like?

4 A new analytical framework

According to Smith (2013: 95/6), any language policy needs to deliver three types of political goods:

(1) Access to information: all citizens should have equal access to the information, education, and opportunities of all others.

(2) Autonomy: for multiculturalist theorists, autonomy is a prerequisite for democratic participation. This means that citizens must have the freedom to make their own choices, also in the language area.
(3) Recognition: symbolic affirmation of citizen identity.

The words 'citizen' and 'citizenship' have a specific meaning in a decolonial context: in his landmark 1996 book *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani decisively influenced how the word "citizen" can be used in an African context. Citizens are people who are enabled to participate in democratic decision-making – in contrast to "subjects", who are not.

It is not difficult to see how this is related to language. In the colonial period, the language of administration could be the colonial language, because the colonial authorities never had any intention of giving access to administrative, judicial, or political systems to ordinary people – in Mamdani's terms, the ordinary people were subjects, not citizens. With independence and democracy, this changed, at least notionally. The aim became that all citizens have access to the state institutions meant to serve them. If those institutions function in an official language, then all citizens should have access to that official language; but this has never been the case. The question that deserves to be asked is: will it ever be the case – or is it a fiction to think that all Cameroonians will at some point in the future be able to function as citizens in Mamdani's sense, using one of the country's current official languages?

Van Pinxteren (2022) has compared various educational systems globally. He concludes that as long as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in tertiary education in a country remains under around 40 %, any language of convenience can be used as medium of instruction in higher education (p. 75). Above this threshold, a gradual transition towards using a language closer to the mother tongue of students will become inescapable.[11] In the Global North, all countries have a GER that is well above 40 % – often, it is 80 % or more. Therefore, in the Global North, indigenous languages are generally used as medium of instruction: even the best educational systems in the world cannot give all children who are intellectually able to follow tertiary education a language level in a foreign language that is so high that they can profit from tertiary education in such a foreign language. In sub-Saharan Africa, the tertiary education GER in many countries is still well below the 40 % level – UNESCO statistics give the tertiary education GER for Cameroon for 2018 at under 15 %. However, GER in Cameroon has expanded rapidly, having more than tripled over the past 20 years.

11 There is, of course, the issue of the (lack of) availability of teaching materials in the language(s) to be used as medium of instruction. In some cases, such materials may need to be developed. This is one reason why any transition would have to be a gradual process.

The literature lacks any clear analysis of what level of language knowledge is the minimum that is needed for a person to be able to function as a citizen. Therefore, we do not have a final answer to the question of whether or not in future all Cameroonians will be able to function as citizens in English or French. In the literature, many have argued that this will not be possible but that local languages will be needed instead, at least in addition to the formal colonial languages. An early Cameroonian perspective is by Bot Ba Njock (1966), referenced above. The first who presented a continent-wide argument of this type was Prah (1998); for a human rights perspective, see Skuttnab-Kangas (2012); for an overview, see Ouane and Glanz (2010). However, Van Pinxteren (2022, 2023) was the first to point out that education systems cannot expand indefinitely using non-cognate languages as the mediums of instruction. Following this reasoning, a transition to using Cameroonian languages as mediums of instruction in tertiary education will become necessary at some point in the future, if education continues to expand. We believe that it is this need that will also drive a general change in Cameroon's language policies: if there are changes to the medium of instruction in tertiary education, then it is logical and efficient to also change the language(s) used in other formal domains.

The question then is: which languages would be used in those formal domains? To provide some answers to this question, Van Pinxteren (2022: 41) has proposed to use a distinction between language as *discerned* and language as *designed* (or intellectualized). Language as *discerned* points to the social and political act of calling a certain collection of speech patterns a language, in the way that the *Ethnologue* discerns languages. Language as *designed* points specifically to those languages that have been shaped to serve as vehicles of communication in formal domains, such as in (higher) education, administration, governance, and the judiciary. What Van Pinxteren has shown is that in many countries, such *designed* languages can and do serve the needs for formal communication for speakers of several related *discerned* languages. These languages need not all be mutually intelligible, as long as they are closely related so that they are easy to learn (and to teach). Based on the literature, Van Pinxteren (2022: 213) has proposed five principles on which a rational choice could be made:

(1) Develop a limited number of designed languages for education.
(2) Designed languages should be chosen in such a way that they are easy to learn for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible.
(3) Strive for inclusivity: choose designed languages in such a way that all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.
(4) Make use of existing bilingualism as a resource.
(5) Build incentives for linguistic collaboration, especially for related linguistic communities.

Would it make a difference if education were to be provided in a language that is 'easy', in the sense that it is closer to what Cameroonians already speak? We are convinced this would indeed be the case. Van Pinxteren (2022: 94) cites US experience in teaching 'easy' or 'difficult' languages to young American professionals. There, reaching a reasonable level in a 'very difficult' language (for an English speaker that would be for example Japanese or Korean) takes four times as long as reaching the same level of proficiency for an 'easy' language (such as Dutch might be for an English speaker). Again, there is no research to show whether or not this differential would be similar for Africans, who may have an advantage over Americans in that they are usually raised in a multilingual, rather than a monolingual environment. However, we think there are good reasons to believe that just like in the USA, the distance between languages is of considerable relevance in Cameroon as well, when teaching a new language, in line with Chumbow (2005).

To have a starting point for a discussion on the ease or difficulty of language learning and teaching for specific language pairs, Van Pinxteren (2022) was able to demonstrate that ease or difficulty of language learning/teaching can be measured (in an approximate way) by making use of the database of the Automated Similarity Judgement Programme (ASJP).[12] This database uses a lexicostatistical method for computing the Levenshtein or Normalized Edit Distance between language pairs. Van Pinxteren has proposed a method of dividing language pairs into categories for ease and difficulty of language learning and teaching, ranging from very easy-to-learn language pairs to very difficult ones, based on their linguistic distance as computed through the ASJP (p. 93).

To see what this might mean for Cameroonian languages, consider Table 2, which shows a limited number of Cameroonian languages from various language families, together with English, French, and Kamtok (Cameroonian Pidgin English).

This table shows that English and French are difficult or very difficult to learn for speakers of indigenous Cameroonian languages. However, choosing one or two Cameroonian languages to replace English and French is not an option: even though some of the language pairs in the table above fall into the 'easy' category, many speakers of Cameroonian languages will find that learning some of the other Cameroonian languages is just as difficult as learning English or French would be. This means that in future, a decolonial language policy will also have to be a multilingual language policy, in the sense of allowing for the use of several *designed* languages in all formal domains. We will discuss what that means more in detail in the next section.

12 https://asjp.clld.org/ (Accessed 19 September 2023).

Table 2: ASJP distances, selected Cameroonian languages.

2 SYNONYMS, AT LEAST 28 WORDS, DATE > 1700 LOANWORDS EXCLUDED													
LDND	EWOND	LAMNS	NONI	TIKAR	YEMBA	BAKA_	KAMTOK	MOLOK	FALI	TUPUR	FULFU	ENGLI	FRENC
EWONDO (NC.BANTOID)	0												
LAMNSOQ (NC.BANTOID)	87	0											
NONI (NC.BANTOID)	86	89	0										
TIKAR_AKUEN (NC.BANTOID)	94	89	97	0									
YEMBA (NC.BANTOID)	93	93	99	103	0								
BAKA (NC.UBANGI)	95	92	95	98	99	0							
KAMTOK (Oth.CREOLES_AND_PIDGINS)	105	106	98	101	99	99	0						
MOLOKO (AA.BIU-MANDARA)	98	103	98	98	101	100	97	0					
FALI (NC.ADAMAWA)	96	97	97	95	98	94	95	99	0				
TUPURI (NC.ADAMAWA)	97	94	98	100	98	97	104	101	98	0			
FULFULDE_ADAMAWA (NC.NORTHERN)	97	97	97	99	101	99	103	99	92	94	0		
ENGLISH (IE.GERMANIC)	101	102	101	102	99	101	35	102	93	104	103	0	
FRENCH (IE.ROMANCE)	94	101	99	99	102	98	92	99	99	102	97	91	0
LDND	EWOND	LAMNS	NONI	TIKAR	YEMBA	BAKA_	KAMTOK	MOLOK	FALI	TUPUR	FULFU	ENGLI	FRENC

ASJP distance score	Category
< 60	Very easy
≥ 60, < 90	Easy
≥ 90, ≤ 95	Medium
> 95, < 100	Difficult
≥ 100	Very difficult

Kamtok (Cameroonian pidgin) occupies a special position: it seems from the table that for speakers of Kamtok, learning English is easier and learning French a bit easier than for non-speakers of Kamtok. We will also discuss that more in detail in the next section.

5 Decolonizing Cameroon's language policy: towards a two-tier model

There is a long-standing consensus, going back to at least UNESCO (1953) that education in the mother tongue (or one of the mother tongues) is best, both for learning efficiency and for ensuring that education is appropriate for the cultural environment in which it occurs. It is also clear that early-exit models such as those in use in some African countries, that switch to another language as medium of instruction after the first few years, are inadequate (Skuttnab-Kangas 2012). Teaching additional languages works best if language skills are developed first in (one of the) mother tongue(s) of the learners. The current Cameroonian language policy, with its focus on English and French right from the start of education, is inherently wasteful and inefficient. Those children most gifted in language will still learn – but most children will not be able to realize their full potential, due to the inhibiting factor that is created by current medium of instruction policies. Therefore, we propose that primary education in Cameroon should be provided

in the mother tongue(s) or L1 of children in all the languages discerned in the country.

With Mufwene (2021), we believe that such a transition, beneficial though it may be, will be impossible to achieve without a clear view of which languages will be developed as *designed* or intellectualized languages of Cameroon for use in higher education and other formal domains. As argued above, these languages should be chosen in such a way that they are easily accessible to as many Cameroonians as possible: each *designed* language should serve speakers of several related *discerned* languages.

Based on the ASJP distances as outlined above and on our knowledge of the Cameroonian language ecology, we believe this should include at least one Biu-Mandara language; one Atlantic language (Fulfulde); one Ubangian language; two Adamawa languages; four Southern Bantoid languages (including two Grassfields-Bantu languages); and at least one Narrow-Bantu language, such as Ewondo.[13] This means that in future, Cameroon would have at least ten official languages and would have to translate between them for formal purposes.

Not all of these languages would have to be offered in every secondary school or tertiary education institution in the country: some level of regional differentiation would be possible, which would make the system more practical. In linguistically mixed urban areas, it might be necessary to follow the example of primary schools in some Ethiopian cities, where there are schools with several mediums of instruction (Smith 2013: 153). In the long run, English and French will no longer be the official languages of Cameroon.[14] However, these languages would still be offered as subjects in secondary and perhaps in primary education, possibly alongside other foreign languages, such as Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, or Swahili. In addition, one or two other Cameroonian languages should be offered as subjects; thus, it might be useful for students in schools where for example Fulfulde is used as medium of instruction to also learn Fali, and vice-versa.

Doing it this way offers parents and children a clear perspective: they will know that they can get ahead in life and function as citizens in their country using at least one easily accessible Cameroonian language. In addition, they can continue to use their mother tongue (if different) locally. However, there are three important considerations in this context: how to discern languages, what minimum speaker base would be acceptable, and what the place should be of Kamtok.

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13 This leaves out some languages with smaller speaker bases in Cameroon, such as the Nilo-Saharan languages. For this small minority, the situation would be much improved in primary education; it would not deteriorate compared to the current situation in secondary and higher education.

14 As is the case in many other countries, it could still be that *some* university courses in specific domains would be taught using English or French as medium of instruction. However, for the majority of studies, Cameroonian languages would be used.

On how to discern languages, in the case of Cameroon, the *Ethnologue* or other such sources should not be trusted blindly. Rather, the decisions here should be taken at the community level, based on the work of the PROPELCA project and the language committees that exist for many of Cameroon's languages. Where work should start should be determined by where there is community demand for developing a language for use in primary education and where some work has already been done at the local level. This does not mean that all demands should be met uncritically. In line with the fifth principle listed above, which calls for collaboration among related linguistic communities, it might be good to require a minimum active speaker base, say of at least 10,000 speakers, in order to develop a language discerned by the community for use as medium of instruction in primary education.

Kamtok is an L1 today of an increasing number of Cameroonian children and therefore, we would support its use as medium of instruction, at least in primary education. However, we do not think it should become one of the country's official languages or that it should be used as medium of instruction beyond primary education. This is because we think that for formal purposes, standard English will always have a stronger position and because we believe that the position of the other Cameroonian languages needs to be strengthened. Ultimately, though, this would have to be a political choice.

6 Conclusions

Decolonizing Cameroon's language policies means promoting the use of local languages in more and more (formal) domains, calling into question the continuing role of English and French as the nation's two official languages. In this article, we have shown that if in future Cameroon aspires to reach education levels comparable to those currently available in countries of the Global North, it will have to follow the medium of instruction path that has universally been chosen in the Global North. In other words, it will have to make use of local Camerooian languages as mediums of instruction, at least in large parts of its educational system. We have shown that in order to achieve a transition towards Cameroonian languages, it will not be necessary to use all languages discerned in the country. We have used the concept of discerned versus designed languages to demonstrate that one formalized (or designed) language can in fact serve several related discerned languages for educational and other purposes.

We have recalled five principles that could govern a rational choice of which designed languages to develop for the country. We have used the benchmarked Net Edit Distance scores as provided by the Automated Similarity Judgement

Programme to give approximate indications of easy and difficult-to-learn or teach language pairs. With the help of these scores, we show that the five principles help in choosing a limited set of Cameroonian languages that could be adequate as medium of instruction. We have not discussed how to make a start with planning a transition towards Cameroonian languages, but we would suggest that it might be good, as a first step, to establish a committee of experts that should study the linguistic situation in the country more deeply and come up with a set of recommendations along these lines, to be discussed in wider society, leading to an ultimate decision by Parliament.

Using Cameroonian languages as mediums of instruction might also have wider implications in society. Chumbow, Tadadjeu, and others have suggested that these languages should also be introduced as languages that can be used in courts, for example, or as languages of administration and debate in appropriate regional and national bodies. It is beyond us to predict where this might lead; however, we hope to have demonstrated that it is necessary, possible, and positive to use Cameroon's multilingualism to its future advantage.

For many Cameroonians, the thought of abandoning the need for one (or two) official languages may seem anathema. Yet, that is our plea: to work towards a situation where around ten official languages are used and recognized, and where people communicate using their multilingual skills as well as professional interpretation and translation services. This may seem far-fetched – yet, as education expands, it will become necessary to explore this route. Doing this will also foster the growth of Cameroon as a nation where peoples of different backgrounds can live together in peace, without one group feeling marginalized on the grounds of a problematic sociolinguistic colonial heritage. In a country made up of a combination of many ethnic and linguistic communities, the situation where one sociolinguistic group is pitched against another group will be less likely to occur. Therefore, what we are arguing for will not only be beneficial for the economic and human development of the country, but it will also help to heal the wounds that were essentially created through Cameroon's colonial history.

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