

# A Grammar of Cameroonian Pidgin



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By

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## PREFACE

I am not a linguist by profession. However, my orientation as a literary student and a creative writer has brought me very close to understanding the mechanics of language and how they operate in literary studies. My humble assumption has always been that literature is a higher form of language since writers exploit linguistic codes in extraordinary ways to create messages and aesthetic effect. As a consequence, a literary critic requires a mastery of the linguistic codes and the components of a language in order to deconstruct the literary content of a text. This insight inspired me to write a book titled *A Stylistics Guide to Literary Appreciation* (1999) republished in 2007, foregrounding the importance of the knowledge of the rules of a language as a primary tool for textual analysis, requiring the breakdown of a literary corpus and the analysis of its constituent linguistic and figurative features to determine their literary relevance. With this background, writing about Cameroonian Pidgin became much facilitated.

Besides, Pidgin is a language I acquired in early childhood and I grew up speaking it in peer forums in several towns of the then West Cameroon. Even thereafter, I have been an adept user of the language, especially in some of my creative works. The experience gave me the first insight into Cameroonian Pidgin as a language in its own right. It provided the original framework for writing this book, especially as I made attempts to come up with a writing system and sentence structures that suited my creative purposes.

In addition, the discussions and debates on Cameroonian Pidgin at the Department of English at the University of Yaounde 1 where I teach were very inspiring. The issues raised focused essentially on what the proper appellation for the Pidgin should be, what writing and sound systems should be adopted, its acceptability as a language for education, whether it is already a Creole or it is still a Pidgin, and whether or not it should become an official national language. The discussions resulted in very interesting perspectives leading to the publication of several relevant research works. Writing this book was, therefore, my modest contribution to the discussions on the subject.

I am grateful to Professor Daniel A. Nkemleke, Dr David Kusi and my doctoral students, Jude Tangwa and Edwin Ntumfon, who read through the

manuscript and made useful suggestions. I am equally appreciative of my colleagues: Dr Miriam Ayafor, Associate Professor Bonaventure Sala, and Associate Professor Aloysius Ngefac with whom I had very fruitful discussions on the subject. Their readiness to provide me with the relevant articles and books added stimulus to the writing of this book.



# INTRODUCTION

The status of Pidgin as a lingua franca in some parts of the world is already well-established and documented. In West and Central Africa, it is possibly the only non-European language that cuts across clans, tribes, ethnic groups and even nations and states. Cameroonian Pidgin in particular, is a flexible and a fast-growing language, undergoing a rapid transformation in a constantly changing world. Although it is spoken mainly in the Anglophone regions, the varieties of the language are developing rapidly in the other parts of the country. Individual speakers, market men and women, media practitioners, social groups, preachers, politicians, creative writers amongst others, increasingly find the language very beneficial in reaching out to the cross-section of the Cameroonian public, especially at the grassroots level. Pidgin is therefore, the lingua franca in everyday life in many regions of Cameroon.

Historically, colonization carved out states without consideration for the existing borders of ethnicity. As a result, large ethnic groups were split and merged with smaller ones for geo-political reasons. Cameroon is a victim of such historical accidents with the merger of over 270 ethnic groups (Anchimbe 2013, 2). While the Cameroonian government is still reluctant to come up with an official national language policy, Pidgin serves as a language of inter-ethnic communication. It has drawn from the multilingual and multicultural ecology to become a lingua franca as well as a formidable unifying factor for Cameroon's multilingual and multi-ethnic society because of its ethnic neutrality.

Despite the popularity of the language, there is still widespread contempt with regard to its use. For many people, it is a sub-standard language, "bad English", "broken English" or "Kumba English" (Ngefacs, 2014) spoken mostly by the less privileged, the uneducated and the uncivilized people. Since some people consider it a low status marker, there are arguments that discourage its propagation, not to talk of giving it an official status in the country. Individuals, professionals, and different linguistic groups use the language disparately and thus do not yet agree on the common structural codes in terms of pronunciation, orthography and grammar.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of Cameroonian Pidgin (also referred to as "Kamtok") as a contact language. Some others, however,

remain diachronic (Todd 1969, Mbassi-Manga 1973, Mbangwana 1991). Linguists like Ayafor (1996, 2000, 2004, 2006) and Ngefacs (2009, 2011, 2014) on their part, have concentrated on the descriptive and the analytic treatment of the syntax, the morphology and the phonology of the language as independent features. Besides, the works are too academic for the ordinary user or learner of the language. Where there have been attempts at discussing the language from a broader perspective, critical reviews of the works have not been very positive. Samarin (2009, 387) for example, has considered such effort as “superficial and antiquated, or naive”.

Many works on Cameroonian Pidgin are analytical and descriptive journal articles which, as it has been stated above, tend to target the specific aspects of the language. Although the works are very rich in their insight and perspectives, they are hardly based on any significant corpus like literary works or quantitative oral recordings from which one can bring out the structural characteristics of the language in a consistent way. For many linguists, as for researchers in the other disciplines, research is carried out mainly to meet the exigencies of academic research. Therefore, such works are quite detached from the non-academic users or the non-speakers who may want to learn the language for communicative purposes or just for the sake of understanding how it functions.

This book, therefore, attempts a comprehensive description of the structure of Cameroonian Pidgin, including the writing and the sound systems, the word formation, the word classes and the sentence structures, in a way that should provide a harmonized version of the individual, the professional and the regional varieties. The book also aims to illustrate that Cameroonian Pidgin communicates new values and modes of life that best constitute the country’s post-postcolonial cultural experience. It argues that Cameroonian Pidgin is a language with a history, rules, and socio-economic values at the national and international levels.

For several reasons, which will be discussed fully in Chapter One, the Kumba variety of Cameroonian Pidgin is the “standard” variety adopted in this book. Given the position of Kumba as one of the towns in the country that have experienced a rapid cultural transformation, I have adopted the view of the Cultural Studies critic, Chris Barker (2012, 7), that “In order to understand culture, we need to explore how meaning is produced symbolically in a language as a ‘signifying system’”. Seen in this light, Pidgin is a vital form of linguistic expression which provides the basis for understanding contemporary Cameroonian culture and society.

Guided by Barker’s views, I began by collecting and transcribing 540 Cameroonian Pidgin proverbs and sayings which served as a corpus for

understanding the cultural, the social, the literary and the philosophical aesthetics and the context of the Cameroonian Pidgin speaker. From the corpus of proverbs, we were able to observe the consistency of the linguistic features, their nature, structures and variations in terms of the morphology and the syntax in their different contexts. It was also possible to suggest the rules and validate the orthography, the sound patterns and the structure of the language. A knowledge of proverbs is essential for the mastery of a language because it measures the grandeur and the vivacity of the culture of the people. Therefore, apart from helping to establish the basic code and the components of the Cameroonian Pidgin structures, the proverbs, which in themselves are the pivot of Cameroonian oral literature, display the great treasure of the Cameroonian folk wisdom in relation to the different facets of the life and the experiences in their multicultural and multilingual contexts.

To further explain and illustrate the mechanics of the language, data was collected from several sources using various methods, including the administration of questionnaires, interviews, recordings of discussions in several social gatherings, transcription of songs in Pidgin, inscriptions on taxi cabs and transport vehicles and publicity messages on posters around town. The sampled population consisted of those who speak Cameroonian Pidgin as a first language (especially those born and bred in the town), residents of the Francophone origin who migrated to the town and have long lost touch with their origins (also known as the “Eleventh Province”), students and workers from all walks of life. The data collected was complemented by my own deep knowledge of the language which I acquired from childhood when I started developing a keen ear and an eloquent tongue for it. The fact that I was exposed to Pidgin at an early age always makes me think of myself as a “native speaker” of the language.

The book is made up of five chapters that deal with the orthography, the sound system, the word formation processes, the major word classes, the minor word classes and the sentence structures of Cameroonian Pidgin. The chapters are followed by a corpus of proverbs in Cameroonian Pidgin. Since the sayings and proverbs have different interpretations in their different contexts, only their literal translations are provided. For example, the proverb “*Wan han no fit tai bondu*” is literally translated into English as “One hand cannot tie a bundle”. It can be interpreted as “Many hands make light work” or “Together we can overcome difficulty”. In the last part of the book, I have included a glossary of over 1,000 popular Cameroonian Pidgin words and expressions which are essentially loaned from the indigenous Cameroonian languages. Other entries are loans from

foreign languages, including English and French, but there is, however, a need to stress that many of these words have lost their pronunciations, spelling rules and meanings in the contexts of their original sources. In other words, they stand out as lexicons in their own right in Cameroonian Pidgin. For example, the word *tanap* /tánáp/ is a loan word from English, translated as “stand up” and it also means “be erect”. Apart from listing the popular Cameroonian Pidgin words, the glossary provides a quick reference to the meanings and a pronunciation guide for the Pidgin words used in the book. The tonal transcriptions of the words in the glossary will also guide the reader in the pronunciation of Pidgin words.

The approach used in this book may not satisfy the taste of a professional linguist. However, given the increasing popularity of Cameroonian Pidgin, we must begin to suggest the grammar rules and the conventions for writing and speaking the language, hoping that a day will come when discourses on Pidgin will be written entirely in the language itself. For now, our approach remains basic, a starting point for the writing of a more comprehensive grammar of Cameroonian Pidgin and a move from a simple glossary to more authenticated dictionaries. The book targets, especially, the ordinary user who may find interest in the way the language functions, as well as the professional linguist who may be interested in historical linguistics, cultural linguistics and the mechanics of language acquisition, growth and structure. In fact, it is for everyone who wants to learn or know about Cameroonian Pidgin, especially tourists and foreigners traveling to West Africa and to some parts of Central Africa, with the intention of interacting with a cross-section of the population.

From the experience in writing this book, it can be concluded that, of all the Cameroonian languages, including the indigenous and the official languages, Pidgin is the fastest growing language among the educated and the uneducated, the Anglophones and the Francophones, and the ethnic and the social groups. We further observed from the rich repertoire of Pidgin proverbs, sayings, words and expressions which were collected, that Cameroonian Pidgin is a more complex Pidgin because it is a product of many sources including English, indigenous languages, French, German, Portuguese, either from a linguistic perspective or from a cultural loan. This is unlike the two major Pidgins in the world: Hawaiian Pidgin that is mainly English-lexified and Nigerian Pidgin that is mainly English-lexified but also a product of indigenous languages.

Cameroonian Pidgin has the characteristics of any natural language. One such characteristic is the consistency in its structures which is the real test for the survival of a language. Moreover, the language is of very significant value to everyday life in Cameroon. Above all, it is an

instrument of social cohesion in a complex multilingual and multicultural context, providing the mechanics for socio-cultural dynamism at the time when cultures are interlocking in an ever-changing world. Its vocabulary is expanding and its sentence structure is becoming more and more complex. Overall, the language has very bright prospects and it is becoming increasingly standardized, especially, as it is frequently being used in literary works and journalistic writings. It is adapting flexibly to the changing world of technology and business, crossing national borders and defining a new cultural character distinct from the indigenous and colonial cultures.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CAMEROONIAN PIDGIN

### **1.1 The linguistic background of Cameroon**

Cameroon is a Central African country situated in the Gulf of Guinea. It is a vast territory spreading across 475000sq km. The country is often referred to as “Africa in miniature” because its diverse cultural and geographical landscapes reflect the various parts of the continent. Its splendid tropical rain forests, its green western highlands and central savannahs, its northern semi-desert landscape, including a variety of archaeological, aesthetic, ethnological, architectural and other heritage wealth, are found elsewhere in Africa. There are over 270 ethnic groups in the country (Anchimbe 2013, 2) with a wide variety of cultural experiences, languages and traditional music, as well as the informational, the spiritual and the philosophical systems which also incorporate four colonial cultural heritages: Portuguese, German, British and French. Of the four language families that define continental Africa, three are found in Cameroon. These include the Congo-Kordofanian, the Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic (Anchimbe 2005, 34).

The country’s rich diversity consequently accounts for its peculiarly complex linguistic context. English is mainly spoken by Anglophones who constitute about 30 percent and French by Francophones who make up 70 percent of the total population of the country. Despite the overwhelming presence of the two languages which are the carriers of the colonial cultures, the communication systems and the cultures of the indigenous people have not been entirely suppressed. While English, spoken by the minority Anglophones, suffered under the pressure of the French language, Pidgin flourished as a lingua franca linking the two ex-colonies. Also, a very limited number of Cameroonians spoke either English or French at the time the country had its independence. Many people were still uneducated and Pidgin has since then become the alternative language for reaching out to a cross-section of the Cameroonian society. Although French is the main official language, it is still limited to the educated class.

Consequently, the language which is most widely used is a Pidgin that has already developed into a creole (Ayafor 2000, 4). Gradually, Pidgin is becoming a tool for both the educated and the uneducated classes, spoken by about 60 percent of Cameroonians.

Cameroon is one of the sub-Saharan countries with a multiplicity of ethnic languages. The local languages spoken in Cameroon can be divided into two main linguistic groups: the north and the south. In the north of the country, the Saharan, the Adamawa and the West Atlantic languages are spoken while in the south, the Bantu languages are spoken by the Tikar groups and in the western grass fields. Despite the multiplicity of the indigenous languages, Cameroon is an exoglosic state with two foreign languages—English and French—as official languages. The colonial strategy was to promote English and French at the expense of the indigenous languages and since independence, the Cameroonian government has been reluctant to promote these indigenous languages. In other words, there are no official national languages as is the case in Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal. Instead, a lot of effort has been made in the promotion of English-French bilingualism. The move toward the official bilingualism in the country has not fully worked partly because of the language “apartheid” whereby the Francophones (although they are beginning to appreciate Anglophone values) believe that French is a “superior” language to English, especially as it is implanted as the language of administration. The linguistic imbroglio of course, favoured the rapid growth of Pidgin in the Anglophone and the Francophone regions of the country, as the only language uniting the two peoples. According to Mbangwana (2004, 23), 97.8 percent of Anglophone Cameroonians speak pidgin while 61.8 of Francophones living in urban areas speak Pidgin, revealing that in terms of its function and spread, the language is competing freely with English and French as well as with the over 270 indigenous languages in the country.

## **1.2 History and names**

The country’s colonial history is a major factor which has influenced the growth of Pidgin as a lingua franca. As previously stated, Cameroon is a product of four colonial experiences, namely the Portuguese, the German, the English and the French. Historical links with Nigeria provided the fertile grounds for the emergence and the growth of the language as well.

A number of sources have explained how the language emerged, developed and established itself in the country as a lingua franca (Mbassi-Manga 1976, Todd and Jumbam 1992, Ayafor 2004 and Kouega 2008).

According to these sources, the first trace of Pidgin in this part of the world which later became Cameroon, was during the arrival of the Portuguese traders who solicited the services of the British buccaneers to carry out their trade. Contact with the indigenes produced a language which was a blend of English, Portuguese and the indigenous languages. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period noted for the greatest colonial expansion, the language was spoken in Southern Cameroons, Fernando Po, Nigeria and several other regions on the west coast of Africa. The German annexation of Cameroon and the setting up of the plantations in which workers from the varying ethnic groups were employed, crystallized the growth of the language and it became a favourite medium of communication among these varying ethnic groups. The language also facilitated the German administration of its colonies, as well as the evangelical missions.

The influence of Nigeria on the British Southern Cameroons (now referred to as Anglophone Cameroon) cannot be neglected. When the German territory of “Kamerun” was divided into two following the creation of the League of Nations, Southern Cameroons became a mandate of Britain governed from, but not joined to Nigeria. With Pidgin fully developed in Nigeria, it meant that the British Southern Cameroons shared similar Pidgin traits and lifestyles with her neighbour. When the British Southern Cameroons joined the French “La République du Cameroun” in 1961, Pidgin was practically transported to the main towns of the Francophone regions.

As a result of Cameroon’s multicultural and multilingual setting, Pidgin is growing very fast, and new varieties or dialects are emerging. There are noticeable differences between the Pidgin spoken by the older generation and the younger generation, between the educated class and the uneducated class and between one regional variety and the other. These differences generally, are influenced mainly by local dialects and the cultural practices in the regions.

The language has been codenamed variously as “Pidgin English”, “Kamtok”, or simply “Cameroonian Pidgin English”. Given the numerous sources from which the language is derived, the codename “Pidgin English” may not be appropriate in the Cameroonian context since the specific codename suggests that the language is either “uneducated English”, “bastardized English”, “the error system of English”, or “pidginized English”. The different trends and influences in the growth of Cameroonian Pidgin have caused many scholars (Todd and Jumbam 1992, Ayafor 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006) to prefer the label “Kamtok” instead of “Cameroon Pidgin English” (Mbassi-Manga 1976). While the argument

for the use of “Kamtok” (“Cameroon Talk”) as a nomenclature replacing “Cameroon Pidgin English” is still to be fully established, English, which is one of the source languages, is gradually losing its grip as the Pidgin continues to pick up more structures and features from the French and the indigenous languages in the Francophone regions of the country. This has resulted in the creation of sub-varieties like “Mboko Tok” and “Camfranglais” used mainly by the youths. Studies on Camfranglais (Kouega 2003) emphasize the mixture of French and English, but one observes, on the contrary, that the users make a *mélange* of not just English and French but the indigenous languages as seen in the following example:

*On go chop ndole /ɔŋ ɡo ʃɔp ndɔlé/*  
 “Let’s go and eat ‘ndole’.”

The four words that make up the sentence are loaned from four sources: “On” (French); “go” (English); “chop” (Pidgin); “ndole” (vernacular language). Thus, Camfranglais should be seen as a slang developed not only from English and French, but from the other languages as well. It is closely related to “Mboko Tok” which, in my opinion, is a variety of Cameroonian Pidgin. As Abongdia (2014, 605) has stated, it is “a hip-hop language variety born from CPE, English and French.” Camfranglais ceases to be exclusively a blend of only English and French but a multilinguistic phenomenon that favours the growth of Pidgin. For these reasons, I prefer the appellation “Cameroonian Pidgin” because it is predominantly an expression of Cameroon’s multicultural and multilinguistic landscape. The grammar, like the vocabulary, is derived from a variety of sources, including the indigenous languages, English and French. There is intelligibility in these varieties, although each variety is suited to or is created by its own specific cultural values as well as its morphological, syntactic and idiosyncratic features. However wide these varieties may be, Cameroonian Pidgin has a code of its own, a pattern of word formation and sentence structure, and a phonetic system which are not similar to English.

### 1.3 The Kumba variety

Early studies (Mbassi-Manga 1973, Mbangwana 1983) have revealed that the first traces of Pidgin could be heard around the coastal settlement in Victoria (now Limbe) by the Sierra Leonean free slaves. It was later widely used in the plantations in Victoria. Although Victoria could be

credited as being the original inlet of the language in the country, it did not provide as much stimulus for its spread as Kumba did. The contribution of Kumba to the growth and the spread of Cameroonian Pidgin, hitherto neglected by researchers, needs to be emphasized.

Before 1990, Kumba was among the five biggest towns in Cameroon. It was also the most vibrant and dynamic multicultural town in the Anglophone regions of the country, until the politics of *kam-no-go* (as the indigenes called the settlers) set the rapidly developing town on the decline. The *kam-no-go* syndrome threatened the prospects of people who came from other parts of the country to settle in Kumba, most of them big investors.

Kumba is the only major town in the country where the indigenes are a visible minority and the indigenous languages are of little significance in influencing the linguistic setup of the town. Put differently, Kumba unlike other towns in the country, is the only town where the recognized “unofficial” language of communication is Pidgin. One can hardly hear people speak English, French or a vernacular in the town. Although clear statistics still need to be established, an overriding percentage of the informants contacted: school children, young adults, people of mixed or intertribal marriages and settlers, admitted that Pidgin is their first language. Studies carried out in the town show that, apart from the formal situations in the classrooms in the primary and the secondary schools and in a few official contexts where English is spoken and written, Pidgin is used in all other aspects of life (including judicial matters). The prominence of the indigenous languages, as is the case with towns like Mamfe, Bamenda and Kumbo, is absent in Kumba since the population of the town is a mixture of peoples from many tribes in the country, as well as the immigrants from neighbouring Nigeria who largely outnumber the indigenes.

Kumba is a trade centre for cocoa, oil palms and timber. Located at a road junction in the heart of the South West Region of the country, it became the main commercial town in Anglophone Cameroon from about 1950 to 1990, thus attracting many foreigners including the Igbos from Nigeria who controlled the greatest percentage of the Kumba main market. As a language of commerce, the relevance of Pidgin in Kumba also favoured the trade between Cameroon and Nigeria. Since there were many Nigerian traders resident in Kumba who determined the pace of the commercial life of the town and the entire South West region of the country, Nigerian Pidgin blended easily with Cameroonian Pidgin without diminishing the peculiarities of the latter. Besides, Kumba was the hub of Anglophone Cameroon. As a major plantation town, it had affiliations

with the Cameroon Development Corporation, whose plantations occupied vast stretches of territory from Kumba down to coastal Limbe, to the River Mungo and to Kupe-Manengumba. Plantation workers, most of whom were recruited from the North West Region, another Anglophone territory of Cameroon, helped to spread the language in that region.

Nearness to Douala, the main seaport and the economic capital of Cameroon, was another factor which favoured the spread of Pidgin from Kumba to the Francophone regions of the country. Business influences from Nigeria and the trade links with Douala transported the language to Douala where individuals (especially the uneducated ones), who came from all the regions of the country and beyond in search of jobs, used the language for everyday communication. This influence later spread to the other parts of the country and developed new varieties from the French, the Bamilike, the Duala, the Beti, and the Fulfulde languages. The language has become widespread within the country, with a wide variation spoken from place to place, making it difficult to derive an acceptable code.

Of all the other varieties of Pidgin in the country, the Kumba variety is the most versatile, the most consistent in its structures, and the most creative, often referred to as “l’Anglais de Kumba” (Kumba English) by the Francophones. It borrows its features from the local idioms, the metaphors and the proverbs from the various cultural and indigenous groups living in the town. Therefore, for a proper understanding of the basic structure and the lexicon of Pidgin in Cameroon, it is important to begin with the Kumba model for the reasons stated above. Consequently, it is most convenient to establish the rules for Cameroonian Pidgin using the Kumba variety.

## **1.4 The Influence of the French language**

It is generally believed that Cameroonian Pidgin is sourced mainly from the English language, the reason it has been labelled “Cameroon Pidgin English” by the early researchers. However, the peculiarity of the language is further explained by its contact with the French language which was established in Cameroon after the defeat of the Germans in the First World War. The German territory of Kamerun was, thereafter, mandated to the British and the French in 1922 by the League of Nations. The French administered four-fifths of the territory up to 1960 when it got its independence as “La République du Cameroun”. The British Southern Cameroons, which was governed as an attachment but not part of Nigeria, also became independent in 1961 through a plebiscite, which favoured her

reunification with French Cameroon. The United Nations established a two-state Federal Republic in the country, but it lasted for just about a decade, when a staged referendum was organized in 1972 to annul the terms of the union. The “United Republic of Cameroon” was created in its place and in 1984 a presidential decree further changed the political orientation from the United Republic of Cameroon to “La République du Cameroun”. Lyombe Eko explains:

In the 40 years since the reunification of English-speaking Southern Cameroons and French-speaking République du Cameroun, the resulting over-centralized government, run mostly by the French-speaking majority, and operating under what is essentially an Africanized version of the Napoleonic code, has attempted to eliminate the British-inspired educational, legal, agricultural, and administrative institutions which the Anglophones brought to the union. This has been accompanied by a concerted attempt to assimilate the English-speakers into the French-dominated system (Qtd. by Dubissi Tande 2006, 3).

The political intrigue which aimed at annihilating the British colonial heritage and transforming the country into a purely French-speaking society has paradoxically witnessed a historical twist in the last decade, with the growing enthusiasm by the Francophones to send their children to the Anglophone schools to study the English language, and to acquire the Anglophone culture. The infiltration of the Francophones into the Anglophone regions of the country where Pidgin is widely spoken would also mean the infiltration of the French language into Pidgin.

There have been arguments which suggest that the French language is undergoing a process of pidginization or has become a Pidgin beside what is commonly referred to as “Cameroon Pidgin English” (Chia 1990). This process is still in its infancy and has not gained the full recognition as a pidgin. At the same time, local dialects of the French language that are usually called “quartier French”, meaning “popular French” which incorporate some elements of the English and the local languages, are a reality in every language. What is evident is that in Cameroon’s multicultural context, the “quartier French” and Camfranglais co-exist freely with the rapidly growing Pidgin.

Apart from functioning primarily as an interethnic lingua franca, Pidgin is today the contact language for many Anglophones and Francophones. It is misleading, then to describe Cameroonian Pidgin as “Cameroonian Pidgin English” in the same way as “Ghanaian Pidgin English” or “Nigerian Pidgin English” which are derived mainly from the English language.

French has, however, remained the dominant language of administration since the 1972 “referendum”. This means that the French language influence has now spread throughout the whole territory. The inflow of words and expressions into Cameroonian Pidgin, relating to the Francophone administration is demonstrated in Table 1 – 1 below.

**Table 1 – 1: Examples of popular Pidgin words and expressions derived from the Francophone administration**

Pidgin	Phonetic transcription	French	English
<i>nome</i>	/nòmé/	nommé	appointed
<i>biro</i>	/biro/	bureau	office
<i>shéf</i>	/ʃɛf/	chef	service head, boss
<i>afekte</i>	/áfěkté/	affecté	transferred, posted
<i>dosie</i>	/dòsie/	dossier	document file
<i>apele</i>	/àpelé/	appelé à d’autre fonction	assigned to other duties
<i>fonsion publik</i>	/fɔŋsiɔŋ pùblik/	fonction publique	public service
<i>bon</i>	/bón/	bon de caisse	cash voucher
<i>direkte</i>	/direkté/	directeur	director
<i>put’am fo furie</i>	/pút’am fɔ furie/	mise en fourrière	impound
<i>kitans</i>	/kitáns/	quittance	receipt, bill
<i>vinyet</i>	/vɪnjét/	vignette automobile	car tax sticker
<i>kale-kale</i>	/kalékálé/	kalé-kalé (raffles militaire)	military raids or hold-ups
<i>petro bon</i>	/pètró bón/	bon d’essence	gas coupon
<i>komise</i>	/kòmise/	commissaire	police commissioner
<i>konvokasion</i>	/kɔnvokasiɔŋ/	convocation	summons

## 1.5 Attitudes toward Cameroonian Pidgin

The importance of Pidgin as a significant lingua franca in Cameroon has already been established. As stated earlier, Pidgin was used as a medium of communication by the colonial administration through which the early and the contemporary missionaries reached out to the masses. In

the contemporary experience, the media, the market men and women and the natives use the language as a vital tool for communication. Politicians and other professional groups also use it as a suitable medium for reaching out to their audiences. It is also a very accessible language for intimate discussions. In the more relaxed out-of-office interactions even the most educated Cameroonians share their intimate experiences in the language. Cameroonian Pidgin, therefore, emerged as a profitable medium of mass communication.

Although the language has a long history and multifunctionality, it still faces much contempt and disdain. Generally, Cameroonians consider Pidgin to be a language spoken by the people from the lower class. Other arguments suggest that it has a negative impact on the acquisition of Standard English. College and university institutions have put up message boards around their campuses to condemn the use of Pidgin, while educated parents have done everything possible to prevent their children from having contact with the language. The so-styled Anglo-Saxon University of Buea is a good example of an institution which is devoted to the fight against Pidgin on the campus, possibly in accordance with its vision to make the students speak and write English using Oxford standards. The university's condemnation of the language is seen on message boards and banners planted in the different parts of the campus as follows:

“English is the password not Pidgin”

“English is the language of the Commonwealth, not Pidgin”

“If you speak pidgin, you'll write pidgin”

“Pidgin is taking a negative toll on your English; shun it”. (Ayafor 2006, 197)

For a dynamic society like Cameroon, such linguistic barriers are not necessary because Pidgin has become the most flexible mechanism for reaching out to a cross-section of the society. Today, it is a major language for bridging the two major linguistic divisions of the country, that is, the Anglophones and the Francophones. In the Department of English at the University of Yaounde 1 where I teach, I often hear the students discuss Shakespeare's works in Pidgin. Considering that large numbers of students use the language on the campus, the question is, why not develop it as a medium of instruction in schools? Because of the increasing popularity of the language, some schools of thought suggest that it should be introduced in the school curriculum to explain notions that cannot easily be grappled with using either the English or the French Language. A study carried out by Atechi (2011, 27) to ascertain if Pidgin can be introduced in the school curriculum reveals that “The introduction of a codified CPE as a medium

of instruction is a first step toward its general recognition and eventual acceptance as a language of national integration”.

Until recently, Pidgin in many institutions was considered a taboo language; a language for the under-scholarised, the rustics and the lowly classed. The paradox of it is that people do not want to be identified as such, yet everyone speaks the language.

## **1.6 Pidgin as a cultural signifier**

Despite the negative attitude of some members of the Cameroonian public and institutions toward Pidgin, the language cannot easily be discarded because it is the product of the socio-cultural and the political diversity of the country. As a hybrid language, it forcefully establishes itself as a relevant tool for communication in gestation. It is not part of the established culture, but a product of the popular and the mutating cultures. Barker (2012, 7-9) explains several key concepts popular in Cultural Studies, three of which we will use to explain the socio-cultural context in which Cameroonian Pidgin operates. The three concepts include culture and the signifying practices, representation and non-reductionism. In order to understand the Cameroonian culture, we need to find out how meaning is produced symbolically in the language as a signifying system. As a language spoken by a significant number of Cameroonians, Pidgin gives more meaning to the cultural and the social practices on a larger national scale than by any of the indigenous languages. In several cases, the official languages (English and French) do not permeate the core of the ordinary Cameroonian society as is the case with Pidgin. Cultural factors that help in the growth of Cameroonian Pidgin include dressing, religious practices, songs and dances, marriage, birth and death ceremonies, folklore and legends.

Cameroonian Pidgin can also be seen as a signifying practice of representation because it represents a particular social class and cultural material that is appositional to the high breed cultures acquired from foreign languages like English and French or established indigenous cultures. Although, as already stated, both the educated and uneducated Cameroonians speak Pidgin, it is the principal medium in Cameroon in which cultural meanings are formed and communicated mainly by the uneducated and the underprivileged Cameroonians who do not master the canon of the official languages like French and English.

From the perspective of non-reductionism, Cameroonian Pidgin is a cultural signifier, as well as a language with its own rules and practices which have specific meanings and whose rules and meanings are not

reducible to, or explainable only in terms of another language or social formation. Cameroonian Pidgin therefore, is not tagged to the rules of the English language as many people who are against the use of the language are made to think. The experience of writing the grammar of Cameroonian Pidgin, its sound systems, word formation processes with the inclusion of an extensive corpus of proverbs, sayings, words and expressions shows that the language has its own peculiarities that cannot be reduced to a substrate of a particular language or culture.

Ross (1993, 667) has stated that cultural forms and genres emerge as the symbolic resolutions to political problems and contradictions. Seen in this light, Cameroonian Pidgin emerged from an immediate need for the interaction between the European colonial agents and the colonized people, but it also developed from the contradiction of the political structures, especially in West and Central Africa to favour multicultural integration, social interaction and political assimilation. The historical development and the social relevance of the language as an intercultural production is therefore, struggling to survive amidst the mainstream or the established Cameroonian and European cultures. By attempting to establish the grammar of Cameroonian Pidgin, we want to underscore the legitimate value of the language as a popular culture and to identify the specific popular practices which the language itself represents such as its numerous proverbs and popular songs.

Apart from acting as a vehicle for social cohesion, Pidgin provides words and expressions which reveal the setting, the traditions and the worldviews peculiar to the Cameroonian people. Cameroonian Pidgin saw the emergence of another culture from the incidence of colonialism. It came with a change in the lifestyle that was manifest in the music, the dressing (*apaga* and *salamanda*), and the social habits which sought to distinguish themselves from the 'local' models of culture. In a cosmopolitan town like Kumba, lifestyles are directly or indirectly influenced by a culture that is determined by one's acquisition of the language. Songs and the local meals like *eru* and *achu* became pidginized, and the social organizations witnessed new lifestyles. Some of the most popular songs in Cameroon that have been sung in Pidgin include the famous "Kompitishon fo Kumba" composed in 1972 by Johnny Tezano. Here are the lyrics of the refrain:

*Kompitishon fo Kumba*  
*Fosika moni palava*  
*Fosika njumba palava ee*

*Kompitishon fo Kumba*  
*Fosika moni palava*  
*Fosika njumba palava ee.*

English rendition:

Competition in Kumba  
 Because of money matters  
 Because of love matters ee

Competition in Kumba  
 Because of money matters  
 Because of love matters ee.  
 (My translation)

More recently, the popular musician, Lapiro de Mbanga (his real name is Lambo Pierre Roger), helped to popularize another variety of Pidgin (known as “Mboko Tok”) in his popular songs which satirize the government and vulgarize the plight of the common man.

Cameroonian Pidgin is, therefore, a product of social relationships and a blend of the ethnic and the foreign cultures. Indigenous cultures enrich Pidgin with its folklore consisting of interesting myths, legends and proverbs drawn from the varied cultural groups. Some of the words do not have English equivalents. For example, the expression *ashia* addressed to someone who has lost a close relation or who is a victim of another form of misfortune may not have the same impact if translated into English as “accept my sympathy” or “take heart”. The word expresses a close and an intimate feeling with the person affected in the context of Cameroonian Pidgin. Another example is drawn from the African polygamous lifestyle. Women who share the same husband call each other *mbanya*. The phenomenon of polygamy is not part of the English culture. Therefore, looking for an English equivalent for *mbanya* sometimes leads to explaining the meaning of the word. Another example is the soft object called *Kata* which one places on his or her head to carry a load. This may not be practised in European cultures. Some of these words and expressions are provided in the glossary section of this book. The reader will discover in the glossary that some Cameroonian Pidgin words have several synonyms. For example, “money” is invariably called *moni*, *do*, *mbam*, *nkap*, *mburu*, and *chang-chang*. Most of the words are those borrowed from the Cameroonian languages, and a few others are loans from English and French.

There is a need to discuss Cameroonian Pidgin as a cultural product emanating from not only a variety of languages but lifestyles as well. The

social structure, of course, determines the type and the standard of the language spoken in every society. The lifestyle within a particular social order carries with it cultural implications—music, dressing, marriage and courtship, dating, and commerce—which are cultural aspects that favour the growth of a language. Cameroonian Pidgin, therefore, can be said to be a synthesis of Cameroonian languages, including the official foreign languages English and French. It is also a synthesis of cultures, explicit in the wisdom of the Cameroonian cultures embedded in the corpus of the proverbs and the sayings provided in the appendix.

### 1.7 The future of Cameroonian Pidgin

The future of Cameroonian Pidgin is guaranteed given that it is “intimately” used in all the aspects of Cameroonian life. The rate of the expansion of the language within the national territory is high. Whereas the language was initially spoken in the Anglophone townships, it is gradually becoming a common form of expression in the rural areas, threatening the very survival of the indigenous languages in the villages. In a similar way, the language is increasingly being used in the Francophone part of the country where more linguistic features are progressively being developed.

It has been observed that the main catalyst for the development of Cameroonian Pidgin is an economic one. From its emergence, Cameroonian Pidgin has been favoured by trade relations and other economic factors. The *bay'am sel'am* (the market men and women) carry on effective trading using the language. Its vitality in informal education cannot be overlooked. For most speakers, especially, those who acquired the language at an earlier age, it is the language with which they explored the world around them, with which they informally acquired the knowledge of their multicultural environment. In many homes, Pidgin is the first language, the language with which children are raised. Informal education as well, is acquired from the rich variety and the stock of the Pidgin folktales which, apart from their high entertainment value, are effective in creating profound moral awareness in the children as they grow up. Memorable examples of such folktales are the *Sens pas king* stories which are noteworthy for their moral teachings.

Creative writers use the language for crafting poetry, drama and prose works while religious authorities have translated sections of the Bible into Pidgin. Moreover, many adverts on the cardboards and the billboards in the public spaces are written in Pidgin. It is the language used by preachers and worshippers while radio programs and television shows in Pidgin

effectively communicate to a wider audience. Drama for development and several films are conveyed in the language while politicians use it during political campaigns to effectively explain their political agenda to the population. Therefore, the popular songs, the movies, and the radio and the television programs in Pidgin have a tremendous impact on the Cameroonian society.

Besides, the educated class and institutions that were against the use of the language are beginning to hold their breath and accept that the language is a dynamic factor in social life and has consequently gained the momentum that calls for standardization in order to ensure its full potential as a language. What guarantees the growth of a language are the socio-cultural and economic factors. If a language is not harmful to the established traditions and instead promotes cultural dynamism, political assimilation and social integration as Cameroonian Pidgin has proven, then it becomes necessary for it to be developed and preserved.

The fact is that Pidgin has firmly established itself in the socio-cultural, economic and the political lives of Cameroonians. With its rapid growth favoured by its multicultural and multilingual contexts and considering that the language has been proven as facilitating social, political and cultural integration, there is strong evidence that the future of the language is guaranteed. For this to happen, individuals, educational establishments, and the government have to consider the language as a valuable tool for national development. It should not be seen as a threat to the English or the French language. The decline in the use of Standard English in the country is to be blamed on a number of factors the most significant being the absence of clearly designed objectives and goals in curriculum planning for the English language in schools. Even where they exist, there is no proper follow up to ensure their effective implementation. Once these factors are rectified, it is certain that the blame of the failure to speak and write Standard English will no longer be laid on the influence of Pidgin.

Finally, Pidgin may be considered a “globalizing” language in Central and West Africa given its extensive use in the informal and the formal contexts. It has become a home language or one of the home languages of the urban groups. It is being used by the younger generations in a wide range of contexts, and it is thriving well in the highly multicultural and multilingual contexts across the regions. It is, therefore, high time that governments in these regions began to think of legitimizing the language since it is the only non-European language to cross the national and the regional borders.

# CHAPTER TWO

## THE WRITING SYSTEM, SOUNDS AND WORD FORMATION

### 2.1 The writing system

Cameroonian pidgin does not yet have an accepted writing system or a recognized pronunciation code. So far, each speaker, writer or researcher uses the language in a way that suits his or her purposes. While spoken Pidgin is very current and alive in Cameroon, used by people from all sectors of life, written Pidgin is still very much in the embryonic stage. The Pidgin translations of the *New Testament* by the Bible Society of Cameroon (2000) and the religious material written by Bishop Pius Awah such as the *Pidgin English Prayer Book* (2005) are possibly the largest textual corpora existing in Pidgin. Besides, written Pidgin can only be found on a few posters, message boards, bumpers of taxis, dialogues in some literary texts, for example in Butake's *Lake God*, in some poems by John Menget and in prose fiction by Nkemngong Nkengasong. Each of these categories of Pidgin writers uses a writing system based on the individual's upbringing, his/her education and the purpose for writing. The variations in the writing system of Cameroonian Pidgin are illustrated in the five excerpts that follow—an excerpt from a literary work by Bole Butake, two excerpts transcribed from the music of the popular Cameroonian musician, Lapiro de Mbanga, and two excerpts from Christian literature.

An excerpt from Bole Butake's play *Lake God*.

Fon: (To Dewa) You bin talk all da foolish talk?  
Dewa: Kai! Me no talkam noting, Mbe. Allah! Me no talkam noting.  
Fon: Na weti happen?  
Dewa: Cow dong go drinki wata fo Ngangba sai we na kontri fo Bororo.