

Linguistic Interference in a Multilingual Setting: The Case of Cameroon

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, a central African state is one of the few countries in the world where, in addition to a very rich linguistically diverse landscape (a little below 300 identified indigenous languages) there is English and French (all vestiges of colonial legacy) used as official languages. Coupled with this, there is pidgin English which plays the role of a lingua franca or language of wider communication. As a result of this multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages coexisting in a symbiotic relationship, language contact situations arise where languages tend to influence others in significant ways. This article seeks to examine and analyse the influence exerted by all these coexisting languages on each other and the resulting effects.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

It is a common phenomenon that in Cameroon, one can hardly listen to a sustained conversation in any of the indigenous languages without the frequent use of words or expressions from either French or English depending on the first official language of the interlocutors. Sociolinguists have referred to such discourse situations whereby in the course of a discussion speakers freely change from one language to the other as code switching when it is inter-utterance and code mixing when it is intra-utterance. These are dominant and frequent patterns of usage observed in the speech of Cameroonians at all levels. This linguistic phenomenon that communicative discourse specialists have elaborated upon (Grundstrom et al 1999) can have varied explanations in the Cameroonian context. Firstly speakers involved in this type of speech pattern may be showing a lack of mastery of their mother tongues due to poor exposure to the input of the said languages. Secondly they may