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Local Languages Dynamics during COVID-19 Times in Cameroon

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to show that the surge of a world pandemic known as COVID-19 has allowed the local languages of Cameroon to supplant the official languages, English and French in their daily use to fight against the pandemic or to prevent the population from the threat. To reach the people at the grassroots, local languages have been used as the main channel. The pandemic is therefore looked at as a contributor to the dynamics of small languages, mainly in Cameroon, favouring their greater use for better communication and sensitisation. Relying on the community-based approach, triggered by personal observation and community involvement, the paper demonstrates that COVID-19 has allowed the enrichment of the local languages or national languages of Cameroon with new words, and has vivified their use in an environment where they are dominated by some world killer languages like English and French. The paper concludes that the dynamics of the local languages would also benefit a lot from an interconnectedness among language committees and health care specialists who will develop entangled discourses in the local languages to reach a larger majority of peoples at the grassroots, and by doing so, creating more new words that will perpetuate the lexical dynamics of the involved languages.*
Keywords: *languages, dynamics, COVID-19, pandemic, community, new words*
Résumé *: Cet article vise à démontrer que la propagation de la pandémie mondiale à corona virus encore connue sous l'appellation COVID-19 a donné la possibilité aux langues locales ou nationales Camerounaises de supplanter les langues officielles, à savoir le français et l'anglais, dans leur usage quotidien dans la lutte contre la pandémie ou dans la sensibilisation de la population contre la maladie. Les langues locales ont été ainsi utilisées depuis l'avènement de la pandémie comme le moyen principal d'atteindre la grande masse de la population à la base. Dans cette perspective, nous pouvons considérer la pandémie à COVID-19 comme un adjuvant au dynamisme des langues minorées puisqu'elle contribue à favoriser une utilisation plus large des langues nationales en permettant de véhiculer la bonne information et de sensibiliser efficacement les populations sur la pandémie. En nous appuyant sur la l'approche communautaire sur laquelle se greffe l'observation personnelle et l'implication communautaire, l'étude démontre que l'avènement de la COVID-19 a favorisé l'enrichissement des langues locales camerounaises avec de nouveaux concepts. En outre, leur utilisation s'est vue vivifier dans un environnement où ces dernières sont largement dominées par les langues officielles que sont l'anglais et le français. L'article*

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s'achève aussi sur la conclusion selon laquelle la dynamique des langues locales pourrait aussi bénéficier de l'interconnexion entre les comités de langue et les spécialistes de santé qui pourront développer des discours croisés dans le but d'atteindre davantage un plus grand nombre de la population à la base et ce faisant, créant de nouveaux mots qui perpétueront le dynamisme lexical des langues impliquées.
***Mots-clés** : langues, dynamique, COVID-19, pandémie, communauté, nouveaux concepts*

1. Introduction

The birth and growth of the Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 as a world pandemic has imposed on our society new paradigms of thoughts and attitudes and new unbelievable undertakings in almost all domains where human beings intervene. The observation is that it has reversed the world order, breaking the chains of linguistic neo-imperialism, expressed through the large dominance of colonial languages in the linguistic arena of the former colonies. The failure or rather the limits of the languages of larger communication like English and French in most parts of Africa to bring COVID-19 key information to the majority of the people who do not master or rather have a very limited mastery of those former colonial languages to the people at the grassroots has triggered the use of local languages. Because of the shortcoming to meet the grassroots people at a large scale, in addition to government commitment to using the local languages to convey COVID-19 related information for better awareness, protection and prevention, local communities have strongly committed themselves to developing the required terminology in their respective mother tongues to those ends. This is why around the world, COVID-19 has been looked at as the world biggest translation challenge (see Djomeni, to appear) of this time.

In this paper inspired by the community-based approach (Djomeni, 2016 & 2018) and building from participant observation and personal observation, we unveil how four Grassfields linguistic communities, notably the Fe'efe'e, Ngiembɔɔn, Mədûmbɑ and Ghɔmálá', through their language committees, have successfully undertaken the development of COVID-19 terms in their respective languages to meet with an adequate sensitisation of the population and to fill the gap left behind by the foreign official languages. By doing so, they contribute at the same time to a better conveyance of preventive information about the pandemic within their communities and lives saving alongside the internal dynamics of their language.

To get to the heart of the discussion, we have organised the paper into five (5) sections that unfold as follows: The first one exposes how COVID-19 has broken the world linguistic supremacy of killer languages or languages of wider communication, among which English and French in most parts of Africa, with special focus on Cameroon. The second addresses the relationship among languages in Cameroon. The third exposes some newly-created terms and community involvement in their creation in five Grassfields languages. The fourth section shows how pandemic times have contributed to the greater use of local languages in traditional and new media. The last section, section five, points out the necessary interconnectedness among language committees and health practitioners to build reliable sensitisation discourses to raise more awareness in the local languages to save lives. The discussion begins with a brief methodological background on the topic.

2. Brief Methodological Background

The present analysis is built on the community-based approach (Djomeni, 2016 & 2018) and based on participant observation and personal observation. The community-based approach relies on the premises that any community that is the first beneficiary of any action undertaken to their benefit should be directly involved in its different activities for sustainability. This justifies the direct implication of communities' representatives, known in the framework of this study as a language committee in the lexical innovation process of new terms used to fight COVID-19. This implication has involved the creation of new words and the development of strategies useful to raise awareness within their respective communities about the pandemic with the assistance of the researcher. This is why the community-based approach requires the presence of the researcher who must work in collaboration with the local people in the field. This approach then gives the researcher the priority to be part of the activities and to personally observe field-based activities to easily propose some remedies where shortcomings are observed. We have worked together with the Fe'efe'e community while for the others, the data provided were produced by their different authors through the same approach.

Before heading to the bottom of the issue, we shall first briefly discuss the relation among languages in Cameroon.

3. Relationship among Languages in Cameroon

The discussion in this section of the paper will focus on the relationship among languages in Cameroon. This relationship will be discussed in term of diglossia and heteroglossia.

The diglossic situation languages in Cameroon could be addressed at two main levels: the micro-level and macro-level.

At the micro-level, some Cameroonian languages are stronger and mostly used in key domains than others. The use of some is still very limited to their linguistic area while others do not yet have the minima tools to be introduced into the school system.

At the macro-level, English, mostly I the English speaking Regions and French, mostly in French-speaking Regions dominate Cameroon native languages in all domains, except at the level of the oral use of the languages. The international dominance of the English language is gradually pushing some basically French-speaking Cameroonians to send their kids to English-speaking schools or to the Anglophone sub-system of education. The existence of a micro-level and macro-level of diglossia that coexist in the Cameroon linguistic arena give ground to a polyglossic linguistic environment, dominated by English and French, former colonial languages acknowledged by the constitution of Cameroon as official languages, to the detriment of its many national languages and the facto by local languages at the oral level notably in rural areas. This creates a real linguistic battle field here languages are fighting to survive; here the national languages of Cameroon are fighting to keep a bit of their space in face of the threatening force of English and French. In spite of this over empowerment of English and French, the national languages of Cameroon have been showing stronger presence and use to curve the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cameroon to the detriment of the powerful official languages. This is actually a contribution toward the shaking of the linguistic world order at the local level.

It is rather surprising that a pandemic has suddenly become a threat to bigger languages in most African contexts. This is what we shall demonstrate in the following section.

4. COVID-19 and the breaking of linguistic world order

The sudden occurrence of the COVID-19 has shaken the world in all domains: healthcare, educational, linguistic, political and economic. Because communication and language impacts work hand in hand in crises situations as language is the key code used for communication, they have a greater role in crises situations.

It sounds relevant to recall the world linguistic cartography or language distribution, especially that of Cameroon before the appearance of the pandemic. Before Coronavirus broke out, in less privileged countries, notably in the South of the Sahara, the linguistic landscape and arena has long been/ and were still dominated by the languages of former colonial masters which are used in all domains and even the most critical ones like education. Across the African continent, English, French, Portuguese, among other languages of former colonisers, have been dominating the linguistic battlefield, perpetuating linguistic neo-imperialism. This is why major information has been conveyed in those 'big' languages over the continent to the detriment of most people's mother tongue until the Coronavirus breakthrough. Suddenly, the COVID-19 came up and has reversed the world order. Linguistics has been no exception. As Djomeni (to appear) points out, as soon as the pandemic started spreading savagely, most African governments got conscious of the fact that they could not reach the largest majority of their people if they do not have recourse to their mother tongues. This is the very moment when in countries like Cameroon, English and French, the official languages of the country, started losing some ground in favour of Cameroon local languages on the linguistic battlefield.

What we mean is that the local languages of Cameroon imposed themselves over French and English as official languages because of the urgent need to save lives through sensitisation, consciousness-raising campaigns and to make the people been aware of the pandemic and its threats. This is how little-known and small-scale languages have succeeded in overturning and overtaking the position of what Skutnabb-Kangas (2003), Gutiérez Estrada, et.al (2018) calls 'killer languages'.

In Cameroon, local communities through their language committees and community radio channels have successfully engaged in the used of the local languages to raise more awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, everybody has realised the worth of their mother tongues. Some local communities through their language committees (the case of Nufi, the Fe'efe'e language committee, APROLAGH, Ghomálá' language committee and CEPOM, Mədûmbɑ language committee, CLN (Ngiembɔɔn language and culture committee) undertook to use loudspeakers to rock their native communities in their attempt to sensitise against the COVID-19 in the local language, the mother tongue of the largest majority of the local people, to the detriment of English and French, imposed via extroverted language-in-education policy and language policy in Cameroon.

The supplanting of the official languages by the local languages in consciousness-raising campaigns in countries like Cameroon might also be alike in other countries, notably where the mother tongues of the people have been imperially replaced by the

languages of their former colonial masters. This contextual substitution, therefore, constitutes a reversal of the linguistic hegemony of the official languages. The use of these local languages has triggered the development of COVID-19 terminology to meet the demand of the new concepts initially developed in the English language. We shall now examine how four local communities have contributed to the development of new terms related to COVID-19 in their respective languages. The internal dynamism of the local languages of Cameroon, especially during this COVID-19 time is sustained by the creation of new terms related to the pandemic in those languages to ease the conveyance of COVID-19 related information.

5. Local Communities and their Involvement in the Creation Process of new COVID-19 terms in Cameroon Languages: Insight from four Grassfields languages

As earlier mentioned, local communities have seriously looked at COVID-19 as an opportunity to revive the lexicon of their mother tongues. This argument is backed by the real commitment of those communities to develop key COVID-19 related terminology into their mother tongues to tackle the disease.

In such contexts, terminology development and translation interwove. Looking at from a community-based perspective, i.e., an approach where the community is part, parcel and the first beneficiary of the newly-developed terms and when carried out by a linguist or a language activist, it should involve at least three categories of participants:

- the linguist, applied language specialist and technician;
- the language committee;
- the media for popularisation.

The role of the linguist is to make sure that the technical aspect i.e., the scientific strategies adopted to develop the new terms are respected and that the newly-developed concepts meet with the language-internal morphological patterns of the language. As for the language committee, they ensure during the creation process of new words whether related concepts existed already in the language. They make use of their cultural background to call for semantic extension or shift where relevant. In this vein, we must emphasise that terminology development for minoritised languages or little-known languages requires a wealth of traditional-cultural knowledge. It necessitates people who are deeply-rooted into their culture among terminology development team members. The role of the media is essential to easily popularise the new terms within the linguistic community before they could even appear in textbooks and community newspapers in the local languages where they exist.

We present in the following table a sample of the COVID-19 related terms created within the respective communities and with community members, through their language committee to talk and raise awareness about the pandemic, with the ultimate goal to ease information and communication wiring in the local languages within communities for better prevention and protection (see Nemgne Sopgui & Kouesso &Djoumene (to appear) for further details). It might be worth noting that we will not discuss lexical innovation techniques in this paper because we do not deem them necessary for the understand of the point raised. Therefore, we will only expose samples of newly-coined COVID-19 words.

Languages				
Fe'efe'e	**Ngiembɔɔn**	**Ghɔmálá'**	**Mədûmbα**	
Newly-coined words or expression	***Newly-coined words or expression***	**Newly-coined words or expression**	**Newly-coined words or expression**	***Meaning in English***
tά'sínā	lefʉŋte pù̱a	Dzə́ fó' khúnyə̀ ghó		social distancing
lʉ̱nándʉ̄ᾱ	lesele nde'e nnɛ́			self-isolation
Ntie' ghoō nshwī mfʉ'ná wen lά	fʉ'ʉ legu' guɔ			incubation period
Sini	lele'e nnɛ́	cɛ ghò		quarantine
kwénngwē'	lekue	kam		lockdown
tómngwē'		təm kam		end of lockdown
wuᾱghoōndomncᾱ'			kəya'	pandemic
wuᾱghoōntámngwe'				epidemic
sí'ghoo				endemic
		tàmtəshyə jwə̂mcucwə	ntsə̌nka	hand sanitizer
nhᾱghoo		bhə̂ ghó		pathogenic agent
ndhīnzī		dzə msə́	fimntsəlɑg	face mask
			fimbu	glove

The table shows some lexical items created by the different language committees mentioned to respond to the fight against the coronavirus. These new terms created from the English language as the source language are contributing to the generalisation of awareness-raising discourses in the local languages. These new terms contribute to the development of a terminology peculiar to COVID-19 discourses in national languages of Cameroon. Some of the concepts fall within the field of medical terminology development like in the case of Spanish and French (Poder Le 2020: 132-145) as the pandemic intertwins between many fields. These newly coined words are also contributing to the development of COVID-19 technolecte in Cameroon national languages as it is the case in other world languages (Messaoudi 2013; Belhaj 2020).

6. The Contribution of COVID-19 to a Greater use of Local Languages across Cameroon

Djomeni (to appear) has already pointed out that coronavirus time is being a very fruitful moment for local languages or small-scale languages. It came to the observation that all over the world, people and their governments have endeavoured to use their mother tongues in favour of sensitisation campaigns against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 has therefore contributed to the greater use of little-known or minoritised languages, imposing on governments an implicit authorisation to allow the

people to exercise their linguistic rights at their will. This contribution has been observed in the following ways:

- posting of recorded audio-video messages explaining how to prevent from coronavirus in the local languages of Cameroon;
- use of local languages in official/public and private media to convey information about the COVID-19: the use of local languages alongside the official languages in media, notably in radiophonic sensitisation campaings against COVID-19 has led to a vivid contact among the languages in presence (see Boutammina & Dellalou for further details);
- more important presence of audio-video, audio and written recordings and texts in the local languages in social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, etc);
- change in the linguistic landscape with greater use of the local languages.

This shows how important the media are in the process.

7. The Impact of Traditional and new Media in the Dynamics of Cameroonian Languages during COVID-19 times so far

We have already noted above that the uprising of the Coronavirus as a world threat has given a lot of avenues to local languages or little known languages and their speakers. Traditional and new media have been contributing to the spread of sensitisation messages about the pandemic. Cameroon mother tongues have suddenly invaded the traditional and the new media, in their attempt to reach the greatest majority of Cameroonians with messages in the languages of their heart, their mother tongues, the languages they understand the most. For the message to reach those people, newly-created items have to be conveyed through accessible channels.

The traditional media here include radio, television and local newspapers in the local language. These media have contributed to channel audio-video and written sensitisation messages in the local languages through to the people at the grassroots, enabling them to keep safe from the pandemic. The state owned media, Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) and mostly private media (audio-video) have included spots, scrolls messages, TV and radio programmes in national languages to raise more awareness about the pandemic and to prescribe vigilance and taking of homemade medicine in case of any suspected sign before heading to the hospital.

New media, with the generalisation of the use of smartphones (mainly phones with Android system in Cameroon) among which social media through its mostly used apps in Cameroon, notably WhatsApp and Facebook, and most recently Telegram, are contributing to the protection of the people against the Coronavirus. Audio and video recordings are aiming to enable speakers who are illiterate in their mother tongues to also easily access the sensitisation messages while written texts go beyond that not only to convey the information but also to promote the writing system of the languages in presence, allowing social media users who had not been exposed to the writing system of their mother tongue before to get acquainted with. Traditional and new media, associated to ICT hence become a reality and not a representation (Ammi & Immoune 2018) in the fight against the pandemic.

Beyond the use of the media to convey COVID-19 related messages in the mother tongues of the people in Cameroon, we propose an interconnectedness among some factors to attain satisfactory results.

8. Building an Interconnection among Community Members, Local Language use and Health Practitioners for more Awareness

As Djomeni (2016 & 2018), Sadembouo and Djomeni (2019) have already demonstrated, where community members are involved in activities of any sorts, success is along the line. This justifies why the lexical innovation process shall involve the people at the grassroots. Fortunately, in Cameroon, the possibility to include these people is very high and structured at the same time in that if the community has a language committee or language academy, it will be possible to easily work with them and in such a domain. We posit that if health specialists are included and involved in the community sensitisation process in the local languages, more accurate lexical items not yet expressed in the mother tongues will be created to ease consciousness-raising within the community in the local language. Not only this will enable building a collaborative network among the health specialists and the language committee members but will favour the spreading of messages about the protection of the population and they will indirectly contribute to the revitalisation of the languages.

The interconnectedness between the community through its language committee and health practitioners will facilitate information sharing and consciousness-raising among community members about coronavirus. Furthermore, underlyingly, it will contribute to the local language-internal and external dynamics, with the coining of new words and their concrete use to foster mind set change for a better prevention against COVID-19.

9. Conclusion

COVID-19 times has allowed the local languages of Cameroon to regain some vitality to the detriment of the official languages (English and French). It has given the local languages the possibilities to revivify their vocabulary and their use to entangle the social-health crisis. In this vein, local communities have gathered around their language committees to coin some new lexical items useful to build sensitisation discourses in the respective local languages, to better contribute to lives saving in the language the local people understand the most. The newly-created items are simply a path to a more generalised used of the national languages to talk about the pandemic within and outside the communities. The traditional and new media have also been a channel through which main messages about the Coronavirus are spread to reach a greater number of people. At the same time, a collaborative network between language committees and health practitioners will not only favour the sharing of information and preventive measures about the COVID-19, but will immensely contribute to greater local languages use during the pandemic time for life-saving. This discussion has therefore led us to believe that the pandemic happens to be an opportunity to minoritised world languages in general, and to the national languages of Cameroon in particular. The urgency to use the national languages for live saving imposed by the context is a vivid illustration that at times, from an evil forest, we could extract very curative plants and tree barks.

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