

# **The language-in-education problem and the decolonisation of higher education in Cameroon: Analysis and prospects.**

Gabriel D Djomeni, (2024)  
Department of African Studies and  
Globalisation (DASG),  
University of Dschang, Cameroon

## **Abstract**

This piece of research accounts for how Cameroon's higher education could be decolonised from within, based on the reformation of its language-in-education policy still dominated by imperial and colonial practices triggered by Western thoughts. Taking stock of the practices in higher education in this country since the post-independence era and reunification of both Cameroons, the study investigates the current image of higher education in Cameroon from the perspective of language policies in education. The analysis is based on the critical decoloniality theoretical framework (CDTF) backed by autoethnography, observation and personal observation as a field practitioner and documentary search focused on quality thematic reviews. The study leads to the conclusion that the ongoing education practices in higher education in Cameroon are still to emancipate themselves from Western-centred and epistemologically oriented systems of knowledge to endorse an endogenous process of knowledge construction, acquisition, transmission and transfer through quality education. The research further stresses that decolonial language-in-education policies are the only way to train a new generation of Cameroonians, hence Africans, who are rooted in their environments and ready for curriculum, research and scholarship changes in higher education. The paper concludes that epistemic injustices triggered by a colonial system of education can only be adequately challenged through quality education that implies the training of a new generation of learners who receive an endocentric education first, before opening up to the world to be able to transform from local to global thanks to a change of mindset.

**Keywords:** decolonisation, higher education, curriculum, research, scholarship, education

## **About the author**

Gabriel Delmon Djomeni is PhD holder and Senior lecturer in linguistics and African languages in the Department of African Studies and Globalisation at the University of Dschang, Cameroon. In 2014, he was a postdoctoral research fellow in linguistics at the University of Cape Town. He has authored books, booklets and scientific papers in national and international peer review Journals. His current fields of interest include descriptive grammars of undescribed or lesser described languages, language documentation, revitalization and standardisation, didactics and pedagogic materials design for African languages, language in education policy, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. He has developed interest in decolonial linguistics and decoloniality perspective in scholarly debate and social application. His scholarly interests cut across all fields of linguistics (general and applied). He is also member of some scholarly societies.

## **Introduction**

The language-in-education policy in African education systems has been pointed out as one of the key barriers, a thorn in the mind, if not the most important fence needed to be broken to access knowledge and to instigate social change through transformation. The present study attempts to expose how Cameroon's higher education could be decolonised through a new language-in-education policy and the mind's decolonisation of higher education stakeholders. The study considers the ongoing practices in higher education in Cameroon to question how Cameroonian/African universities or higher education can emancipate themselves from colonial education practices through a decolonised language-in-education policy and higher education (HE) stakeholders' mind change. An attempt to answer the above questions led to borrowing from the critical decoloniality theoretical framework as applied to the area of education and the decolonial theory to analyse the situation involved through a bibliographical search that will explore the historiography of higher education in Cameroon. In addition, the study uses observation and participant observation, to account for live experiences in the field of teaching/learning practices in higher education in Cameroon because the author is an actor in the Cameroon higher education sector. The use of participant observation for the study has led to also convoke autoethnography, both as a theory and method to account for facts in Cameroon higher education (CHE). The content of the present paper unfolds thus: the first section exposes the theoretical and methodological frameworks that underpin the study, followed by the provision of some background information on Cameroon's higher education history in section 2. In section 3, it looks into the language-in-education problem in higher education in Cameroon. Finally, in the last section, section 4, the analysis uncovers how Cameroon's higher education could be decolonised. Therefore, the paper is organised around four main sections.

### **1. Theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study**

The discussion in this section unveils the theoretical frameworks and the methodology used in the present paper.

#### **1.1. Theoretical framework**

As purported by Ebot Ashu (2020, p.5), the critical decoloniality theoretical framework as applied to the area of education focuses on the limits of the contents and policies of education in many postcolonial countries and communities. In fact, such contents were not thought and implemented neither by the people to whom it was addressed, neither for their own good nor for their well-being as former colonised individuals or people of former colonised descent. As Ashu (op cit, p.5) states, this approach derives from Geuss (1981) who believes that within the frame of critical theory, ideology is the main barrier to the liberation of formerly colonised countries and African ones in particular, because Africa has been suffering the upmost setback

of colonialism from the Western-centred epistemological frames that are still perpetuated today by most of the people in the present generation of African leaders trained within a system which ideologically shaped their thoughts and minds, rendering them black-colonisers, status in which they seem very comfortable.

In the present study, this theoretical framework builds on the decolonial theory attempts to analyse and criticise then propose solutions to reverse the Western-dominated and controlled system of thought, knowledge, knowledge production, scholarship and publication, etc., in higher education in Cameroon. This theoretical framework will help to question existing practices in CHE today in order to probe, dig out and identify its problems and possibly propose ways to address them in such a way as to nurture a new environment capable of contributing to mind decolonisation of the next generation of African or Cameroonian leaders. Because the data collection also involved participant observation, autoethnography has also been convoked in a search to provide an adequate answer to the question posed by the study. Autoethnography (Ufuk, 2022) builds on the day-to-day contact of the research with the researched object to propose a way to account for facts based on her/his lived experiences and feelings.

## **1.2. Methodology**

The present study is based on bibliographical search, personal observation and participant observation, encapsulated in autoethnography as an actor of higher education in Cameroon. The bibliographical search allowed us to investigate the historiography of higher education in Cameroon yesterday and today. As for observation and participant observation, they helped to account for live experiences in the field of teaching/learning practices in higher education in Cameroon. The data is therefore essentially qualitative.

## **2. Some background knowledge of Cameroon's higher education**

The complex education environment of Cameroon is consequent to its complex colonial past. Cameroon was first almost a German colony. At the end of World War I, Germany lost the war and Cameroon became a trustee of the League of Nations. It was then put under the trusteeship of British and French governments with the French government occupying almost 80% of the territory while the British were granted only 20% of the territory (Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD, 2024, p.4). The situation later led to a dual education system in Cameroon with an Anglophone sub-system on the one hand and a Francophone sub-system on the other. Since then, Cameroon has not emancipated from this colonial past though it is known that the country has never been colonised or has never been a colony strictu sensu.

The true history of Cameroon higher education (CHE) begins in the aftermath of the independence of French-speaking Cameroon. French Cameroon obtained its independence in 1960. In 1962, two years after French Cameroon's independence, the Federal University of Cameroon was created in Yaoundé. This university dominated

the official State's higher education environment from 1962 to 1992 (ADEA/ WGHE, 1999).

In 1993, five (5) new State universities were created by the government because of the outgrowth of the student population at the Federal State University of Cameroon in Yaoundé and the fear of massive protests from angry students. The experience witnessed by the government in 1992 with students who protested for democratic access to knowledge coupled with a highly tensed political situation led them to violently repress the demonstrators. With the intention to decongest the promiscuous population of students in Yaoundé to counteract future student uprisings, the government of Cameroon broke down the single existing university into six. Hence, the creation of The University of Yaoundé I, University of Yaoundé II, University of Dschang, University of Ngaoundéré and University of Buea took place. The University of Buea in the South West of Cameroon was the only English medium of instruction among the four (4) between 1993 and 2007. It could be pointed out that the Universities of Dschang, Douala, Buea and Ngaoundéré were created based on what was called before then University centres. They were created between 1962 and 1992 to decongest the single Federal University of Yaoundé overcrowded with a burgeoning number of students coming from all corners of the country and the Central African sub-region (ADEA/ WGHE, 1999, p.5).

In the meantime, between 1993 and 2022, several private University institutes have sprouted like mushrooms in the higher education environment of Cameroon (Campbell, T and Ismar-Jabot. 2021). In this same span of time, the University of Bamenda was created in Bambili, North West Region of Cameroon and Maroua in the Upper North of the country.

In January 2022, 3 new State universities were created and the government's higher education arena extended by this fact. They included: the University of Bertoua in Bertoua, University of Ebolowa in Ebolowa and University of Garoua in Garoua.

For the time being, each Region of Cameroon has its State University, with the Centre Region championing the numbering with 2 state universities namely, The University of Yaoundé I and University of Yaoundé II.

In sum, Cameroon possesses 11 state universities (Universities of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé II, Maroua, Garoua, Ngaoundéré, Ebolowa, Bertoua, Dschang, Bamenda, Douala and Buea), 3 State University Institute of Technology (UIT of Douala, UIT Fotso Victor of Bandjoun, UIT of Ngaoundéré), 2 State Institutes of Fine Arts (1 in Fouban for University of Dschang and 1 in Nkongsamba for University of Douala), around 46 training schools under State universities, Ministry of Higher Education (MINHED/MINESUP) or Technical Ministries and more than 430 Private University Institutes (IPES) (https://www.minesup.gov.cm/index.php/instituts-priveseignement-superieur/), under the Ministry of Higher Education and State Universities trusteeship (see Campbell, T and Ismar-Jabot. 2021 for further details). The Université Inter-Etats Cameroun-Congo (UIECC) in Sangmélima could be added to this list. This University results from a cooperation between Cameroon and Congo.

Based on the foregoing, Degreune (2004: 31) states that Cameroon's higher education development could be summarised into 4 main stages. In his opinion, the first stage corresponds to the initial development stage which is traced back to independence, notably from 1957 to 1961. He then adds that subsequent expansion periods took place from 1962 to 1992, with the period from 1992 to 2007 corresponding to that of the reform of higher education in Cameroon. To him, from 2008 till now, Cameroon higher education has been going through what he called 'advancement in the contemporary era'.

This background information and history on CHE leads to address one of the main problems of this piece of research, that is, the language-in-education policy of higher education in Cameroon.

### **3. The language-in-education problem in higher education in Cameroon**

To understand the language-in-education policy problem in Cameroon Higher education, it seems worthwhile recalling whether Cameroon has a language-in-education policy or not.

The constitution of Cameroon states that the official languages of Cameroon are English and French, with both languages deserving equal status. Thereafter, it stipulates that Cameroon languages are national languages that deserve to be protected and promoted. This is clearly stated in its amended constitutional Law No 2008/001 of 14 April 2008, Part 1, Article 1 and Paragraph 3 that

*The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages.*

In general, what could be considered the language-in-education policy of Cameroon is based on its 'official bilingualism' stated above. In primary and secondary schools, two sub-systems are applied across the country: The Francophone sub-system with French as the medium of instruction and the Anglophone sub-system of education with English as the medium of instruction. In each of these two sub-systems, bilingual sections could be found, with English and French supposed to be used as media of instruction and then taught as subjects respectively. English and French are the legacy of colonisation and the very complex colonial past of Cameroon. They continue to be the languages of education in terms of mediums of instruction, administration, and official communication, i.e., languages of key domains. Hence, Cameroon national languages are seen and used just as identity languages though since 2009, they have been gradually officially included first in the curricula of secondary schools and then in those of basic education as subject, under the denomination 'National languages and cultures' then 'National Languages, Cultures and Arts'.

In higher education per se, among the eleven (11) State Universities, four (4) were initially known to be bilingual (universities of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé II, Dschang and Bamenda), one is monolingual with English as medium of instruction (Buea) while the rest were considered monolingual with French as the medium of instruction although they do accept English speaking Cameroonians and recruit English speaking Cameroonian teachers. This last consideration makes it more complex in an already very complex linguistic makeup of the country. However, the Anglophone outcry has led the government to gradually make 10 of its universities, except Buea, de facto official Bilingual universities, where English and French are both used as media of instruction though the status of 'bilingual' is not officially granted to some of them. This means that for instance, the University of Ngaoundéré which was created to be a Francophone University has almost become bilingual.

In bilingual universities, to allow students to cope with academic discourse in

both languages and to help them meet their 'official bilingualism' challenges, French and English for special/academic purposes courses are offered as subjects: English to French-speaking and French to English-speaking learners. In the English-only medium of instruction university, it is assumed that English is the common and sole language to all learners and this explains why they only offer French for special/academic purposes courses to their students to prepare them for 'nationwide integration'. This de facto language-in-education policy has often triggered an outcry from English-speaking Cameroonians who often stand against the recruitment of lecturers originating from the French-speaking part of Cameroon to teach in 'their universities' even when they have an English-based education background but do consider it normal to work in any other university of the country.

Yet, what should be noted is that Cameroon does not have an overt and inclusive language policy clearly consigned in a document. Nonetheless, the de facto use of English and French within the 'official bilingualism' label is assumed to be the language policy of the country as stipulated by the Constitution.

From what precedes, the language-in-education policy in Cameroon higher education is not different from the 'Official Bilingualism' stated in the constitution. The sole languages or media of instruction in all domains, in public and private university institutions remain English and French. Foreign languages like German, Spanish, Latin, Chinese, etc., are taught as subjects.

Despite the introduction of national languages and cultures into formal curricula in basic and secondary education and the teaching of Cameroon and/or African languages, cultures and linguistics in higher education, research works (at the Master's and PhD levels ) cannot be written in any national or African language. For instance, it is not authorised to write a Master's dissertation or a Ph.D thesis in a Cameroonian/African language though linguistics studies are carried out on them. This situation is identical to what happens in Higher Teachers Training Colleges where national languages, cultures and arts students-teachers are trained. They are not allowed to write and present their end-of-training dissertations in the language (s) they will be entitled to teach in the secondary school they will be posted after their training. Instead, they could write and present in either English or French while the national language they will be specialised in will be used in their texts simply for illustration.

Regrettably, this practice does not allow the youth to view their Cameroonian languages or mother tongues with the same prestige like in either English or French or both. Nonetheless, the formal teaching of Cameroon languages and cultures as a subject has helped in the nurturing of a gradual positive attitude among the youth and their parents with regard to the use of national languages in Cameroon and in Africa as a tool for development and sustainable development, a way forward to the decolonisation of the language-in-education policy in Higher education in Cameroon and the mind change of education stakeholders in this level of training to impact trainees worldview these recent years.

#### **4. Decolonisation of higher education in Cameroon: Analysis and prospects**

The decolonisation of Higher education in Cameroon includes in the first stage the decolonisation of scholars' minds, the decolonisation of curricula and the

decolonisation of scholarship, research directions and publications. As afore-discussed, the decolonisation of Cameroon's higher education implies the deconstruction of the epistemic violence promoting the dominance of an ideology and epistemological silencing of the West that has long plagued African nations in their majority in almost all life sectors (Masaka, 2022). Based on the discussion provided on the language-in-education policy in Cameroon higher education (CHE) above, the teaching of endogenous knowledge needs to be reinforced in academic teachings and evaluation. For this to be possible, the teaching of local languages and cultures should become a compulsory constituent of the training of students even for learners in professional schools such as polytechnic, medical, mathematical, physics, schools, etc., to nurture mind change and prepare the younger generation for social transformation from within. This undertaking will involve the decolonisation of CHE.

#### **4.1. Decolonising scholars' minds and thoughts in CHE**

Higher education practices, narratives and debates are still highly influenced in Cameroon by Western ideological and epistemological silencing strategies upgraded by a postcolonial generation of Black colonisers, Cameroonians/Africans in that respect, trained in a way to silence non-Western voices. However, new voices are gradually paving their way in academic debates and scholarships in Cameroon with a growing generation of young scholars carrying along decoloniality ideals in Cameroon public Universities.

More than six decades after the “independence”, endogenous knowledge worth for social transformation has not really found its way through in the Cameroon higher education milieu and state universities in particular. For any such change to happen there should first be a change in the paradigms of thinking, thoughts and minds of higher education stakeholders and notably scholars whose role is to shake established orders, nurture new knowledge and propose endogenous solutions to local and global problems through well-furbished crossfertilisation of home-conceived and globally-oriented knowledge. Mind decolonisation implies changing the old thinking paradigms and accepting that knowledge production and dissemination should start at home and should be based on home realities first. Mind change therefore involves an estrangement from the epistemic violence perpetuated in Cameroon up till now by the CHE administration. This rupture includes a shift in education curricula.

#### **4.2. Decolonising the curricula and scholarship in CHE**

Higher education is supposed to be an arena for knowledge production for social transformation. Otherwise, its mission is a failed one. For the transformation to take place, ongoing curricula in CHE, notably public Higher education institutions should be revised to depart from colonial practices that are still mirrored in most curricula.

First and foremost, disciplines created and taught since independence should be revised and those deemed not very useful or outdated as per new national

development strategies smoothly be supplanted by new ones designed to address local and endogenous problems first. To this effect, change must be brought in in diverse ways including in the following ways:

- a) New curricula should focus more on new research areas and disciplines geared towards national/continental problems in the first place, in an attempt to adequately prepare a new generation of leaders and citizens and 'Afrotizens' capable of providing local answers to their problems;
- b) The new endogenous-centred disciplines should aim at tackling national problems with global impact. They may include: national languages and cultures (whose teaching might impact all areas of knowledge and minds, local arts, traditional pharmacopeia and pharmacology, traditional medicine (to allow large access to low-cost healthcare), technology-enhanced teaching and learning in higher education, land tenure law (one of the major problems of access to land in Cameroon today seems to originate from the teaching and implementation of land tenure law borrowed from colonial education, which states that lands belong to the State while in reality, they belong to individuals and communities). Redesigning and teaching land tenure laws based on endogenous realities is urgent in Cameroon and probably most parts of Africa, etc.;
- c) The new disciplines along their curricula (Suellen, 2016) must trigger the recruitment of lecturers in those disciplines as a priority;
- d) The power relationship between junior and senior scholars in Cameroon public universities in their greatest majority, inherited from an epistemic colonial-centred higher education, should be tackled to allow the setting of collaborative networks between the two groups. This is because, in Cameroon, it is observed that in public universities, there is a power tussle between junior and senior scholars not because junior ones are not respectful to their elders, but because they are downgraded by their seniors. The latter see junior ones as their servants and this is illustrated by the saying stated by a senior colleague that "Assistant lecturers are meant for corvee". Some senior colleagues, full professors, at times, use their academic grades to influence defence verdicts when a supervisee of theirs is defending and being examined by a junior colleague. Though this is still related to mind change, the issue of curriculum change appears here in that without collaboration, striking course contents cannot be designed, based on the premises that newly-recruited lecturers are often more dynamic than their senior peers because of a rapidly changing world and academia influenced by technologically-enhanced teaching to which elder Cameroonian scholars do often cope with great difficulties;
- e) The implication of the above is that foreign languages should cease to be prioritised by the Cameroon government to the detriment of national languages cultures and arts, vehicles of people's identity and philosophy;
- f) Search for grades (academic promotion) has been taking advantage of scholarship and pedagogy in Cameroon Universities. Therefore, to



contribute to the decolonisation of CHE, administrative posts occupied by scholars should be accessed through elections or calls for applications. Currently, in Cameroon, the managerial team that occupies administrative posts such as those of VC, Deans, and HODs are appointed either by the president of the Republic (VC, Dean) or the Minister of Higher Education (HOD). They are therefore highly politicised. The appointment does not give the appointees room to be accountable for their management to their peers and colleagues, but to s/he who appointed them. Consequently, any colleague who raises the VC or Dean's attention on any mismanaging issue or any autocratic behaviour portrayed by unpopular decisions towards students and colleagues is regarded as an enemy. The appointment practice could be considered today as one of the loopholes plaguing State universities in Cameroon because most often, appointments are mostly based on high-level connections and not on merits, leading to corruption and bribery in the process;

- g) As for the promotion of university lecturers in Cameroon higher education in general (public or private, the promotion has been managed by public universities and finally by the Ministry of Higher Education for those who do not pass through CAMES (Conseil Africain et Malgache pour L'Enseignement Supérieur)), publication provided from Western outlets always have preponderance over those published in local or African Journals and publishing houses. The epistemic lies supporting that quality knowledge production can only be controlled by Western countries while anything produced in Africa or anywhere in the Global South is of low quality has been silencing Southern scholars who publish on the African continent (see Fabidun & Olatunji, (2021). This assessment of publications based on Western standards shall be revised to give room to decolonial evaluation practices because well-known publication outlets exist on the continent and in Cameroon;
- h) Rampant corruption plaguing the recruitment of teaching staff members in Cameroon characterised by favouritism, nepotism and bribery highly infests the recruitment process and should be addressed. This is so critical that most often, those who are qualified for an advertised post are side-lined to the advantage of those who, though with poor application files, are supported and eventually recruited by the ruling system within the university administration. It is obvious that such fraudulently recruited lecturers would definitely disseminate the corruption and cheating system when in office/service (mark selling to students, sexual harassment, etc) as they are protected by the powerful peers who introduced them in the system and who most often are bound by the same practice;
- i) Research labs with some dating back to the creation of each State university must be updated with locally produced materials (if not, why has the country been training engineers?) and modernised to meet the standards equivalent to the development needs;

- j) Cameroon Universities are also retarded because of their incapacity to adapt to technological advancements: IT labs, broadband high-speed internet on campus, and digital hubs, all are absent; along with the building, they make Cameroon universities look like stone age institutions;
- k) Finally, university mottos written in Latin, a dead language, should be decolonised and be written in the language of the locality where the university institution is found.

## Conclusion

In addressing the problems raised above, the epistemic injustices in the CHE system dominated by Western standards, thoughts and doing so far could be combatted for more locally-rooted institutions. This will help value locally-produced knowledge first without embracing the Westerncentric epistemic views. By doing so, Cameroon Universities and notably public universities would move from knowledge consumption to knowledge production and transformation institutions. Hence, as earlier mentioned, the epistemic injustices triggered by a colonial system of education can only be adequately challenged through quality education that implies training of a new generation of learners who receive an endocentric education first, before opening up to the world in order to be able to transform from local to global because in their education process, their mind has been successfully shifted from colonial based knowledge to the possibilities offered by endogenous knowledge for sustainable development and liberation of the country/continent.

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