

Cameroon Pidgin English as a Language of the Media

Mba Atche

University of Buea

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ABSTRACT

The stigmatisation of Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) has contributed immensely to its slow recognition and acceptance in the media. Contrary to the situation in the 50s and 60s which limited the use of CPE to occasional slots in local newspaper columns (Schneider 1966: 111), it has been gaining grounds in its function as the language of the media from the 80s till date. CPE is now confidently used in newspapers, television, and radio broadcasts, advertisements etc. As such, CPE has been given the name ‘a crowd pulling’ language especially when used in the media. This paper substantiates Kelly’s (1978: 293) statement that “popular language is used to popularise a supposedly popular medium.” It describes the extent to which CPE is used as a tool for spreading publicity information over the radio and Television in Cameroon. This paper shows that five media structures were used for the study, namely: CRTV Buea, FM Mount Cameroon, CBS Radio and Equinox TV in Douala. The results revealed that CPE is used in a wide range of media programmes: news broadcasts, advertisements, Public announcements and talk shows. So, Neba, Chibaka, and Atindogbe have a point when they say that “This language, then, may not be the curse that it has been made to appear in the past, but rather a blessing in disguise”, 2006: 58.

INTRODUCTION

CPE dates as far back as the days of the slave trade (the 1440s), i.e. before the German annexation of Cameroon. This means that it preceded English in Cameroon. The first Baptist missionaries who arrived Cameroon in 1845 and introduced formal education in English, had to learn this language. A few decades later, during the German annexation period (1884-1914), pidgin resisted the German ban. It took flight when it became a makeshift language used in German plantations and undertakings by forced labourers who were drawn from the hinterlands and who spoke different indigenous languages (Etchu, 2003). Over time, it spread to the market place and was adopted by Baptist missionaries for evangelical purposes. For many years it has been used on school playgrounds, in politics, on campuses etc. Today it is forcing its way into formal areas like police stations, courts, hospitals and the media.

The situation of CPE in the 50s and 60s indicates that CPE was limited only to occasional slots in local newspaper columns. This is perhaps due to the stigma that was attached to it. Alobwede (1998) and Ayafor (2004) regard CPE as a negative influence on the learning of English. CPE is associated with the common man while the English Language is perceived as the language of the educated (Bobda, 2001).

However, other writers argue that we need to really re-examine whether the declining standards of English in Cameroon is due to CPE or other factors like ineffective language teaching methods in Primary and Secondary schools in Cameroon (Fontem, 2005:64-85). Furthermore, it should be examined whether the dramatic encroachment of French and other languages into English have any effects. Again, another school of thought puts the blame on the political situation of Cameroon (Dibussi, 2001: 51).

Despite the above reasons which are meant to castigate and stigmatize CPE, it has been growing and gaining wider grounds. It has stood the test of time and because of its resistance, today it seems unstoppable. It can be named among the fastest growing languages in Cameroon today. It is being spoken by people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Among the educated, uneducated and barely educated, CPE is

used profusely in many spheres of life especially in informal situations. It has permeated the various social groups of the Cameroonian society so much that it is presently being considered by Cameroonian linguists as equal in status to a standard and official language. It is one of the most convenient forms of communication in reaching heterogeneous target audiences. Plausible evidence points to fact that CPE is being used as a language of the media (radio, television programmes) as well as entertainment and advertisements of all sorts. This goes in line with Neba et al (2006) who indicate that it would be impossible to stamp it out.

Indeed, the more measures are taken to ban Cameroon Pidgin English the more it spreads. Accordingly, if we ameliorate the negative connotation given to CPE, then it can officially be recognised and developed, (Neba et al 2006).

The use of CPE in reading news, announcements and advertising is aimed at functional and pragmatic goals. CPE is very instrumental at reaching and catching the attention of a vast number of people. The language thus has the potential of facilitating and disseminating the messages to both literate and illiterate consumers. This gives CPE the status of a language of socialization (Alobwede, 1998, Ayafor, 2006), and of unity (Ayafor, 2000, Koenig et al, 1983:78, Neba et al 2006).

This paper is organised such that in the next section, I present the objectives which constitute the driving force of the research paper followed by the theoretical frame work used for analysis. In the third section, I present the methods and how they are used to describe the extent to which the Cameroon Media (audio and visual) uses CPE and in the fourth section, I analyse the data collected and the results follow. The sixth section concludes the study.

OBJECTIVES

This paper intends to:

- Describe the extent to which the Cameroonian media uses CPE
- Explain why broadcasters prefer CPE over the official languages
- Determine the fact that CPE is both a language of entertainment, information and publicity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper hinges on the Closing the knowledge Gap hypothesis with web 2.0 by Elizabeth Corley and Dietram Scheufel (2010) which is a revised edition of the knowledge gap theory by Tichenor, George and Clarice of the 1970s. The knowledge gap theory posits that the increase of information in society is not evenly acquired by every member of society, that is, people with higher socio-economic status tend to have better ability to acquire information (Wen S. C., 2000). This will obviously bring a split because the lower socio-economic class will acquire less or no knowledge about public affairs. Consequently they are disconnected from news events and important discoveries. These critics (Elizabeth Corley et al) in their “Closing the knowledge gap Hypothesis with Web 2.0” attempt to breach this gap with the mass media and in the case of Cameroon, the use of Pidgin English would be appropriate. CPE would be “...a tool for creating a more informed citizenry by serving as a ‘leveller’ of knowledge gaps” (Corley and Scheufele, 2010:2).

METHODOLOGY

The population of study includes radio and TV stations in Cameroon which use CPE in their broadcasts.

These are: CRTV Buea, CBS Buea, CRTV Bamenda, Radio Banakanda, Abakwa FM Bamenda and FM Mount Cameroon. Television Channels in the French-speaking Littoral Region also use CPE: Equinox TV and LTM.

To select a representative sample, a random sampling was done on CRTV Buea, FM Mount Cameroon, CBS Radio and Equinox TV in Douala. Five media structures were therefore used for this study. The data for analysis was collected through recording of live broadcasts of the CPE programs of these stations. Consent of the Pidgin program broadcasters on radio was sought and the researcher was given a few past recordings of some of their CPE programs. These stations use CPE as the language of certain newscasts, adverts, announcements, and talk shows to reach their widest audience at every level. The data collection spread out for a period of one month. Only samples of the data are actually extracted for the purpose of the analysis of CPE as the language of the media (radio and Television) which is our goal. Finally, interviews were conducted by the researcher to help authenticate the findings. Only journalists who were directly concerned with the presentation of the CPE programs were interviewed. The table below presents the various media houses, the number of CPE programmes recorded, the presenters and the time.

Presentation of Data

MEDIA HOUSE	NUMBER OF RECORDINGS	PROGRAMME	PRESENTER	DAY AND TIME	TYPE
CRTV Buea	9	Voices of Women	Anne Munjong	Tuesdays 8:15 – 9am	Talk show
FM Mount Cameroon	7	Pidgin News	Kolle George	Week days 4 – 5pm	News Cast
————	4	Adverts	————	During news cast	
————	16	Announcements	————		
————	5		————		
Cameroon Broadcasting Service (CBS) Buea	2	Laugh with CBS	Nganji Roger		Talk show
————	2	Beyond Borders	Desmond Nnamndi	Mondays 6 - 7pm	Talk show
————	2	Voice of the Voiceless	Alfred Essinge	Thursdays 2 - 3pm	Talk show
Equinox Television Douala	12	Pidgin News	Massa TokTok	Weekdays 1- 1:20pm	News cast
————	7	Announcements	————	————	Announcements
Total	66	9	6		10

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The data collection revealed that CPE is used in a wide range of media programmes: news broadcasts, advertisements, Public announcements and talk shows as indicated in the table above. This gives a total of 66 CPE programmes recorded from 4 media houses namely: CRTV Buea, FM Mount Cameroon, Cameroon Broadcasting Service (CBS), and Equinox Television, Douala. The essence of communication is achieved

when the message goes across from the sender and is well digested or understood by the receiver. Most of the presenters of the above programmes (Anne Munjong, Kollo George and Alfred Essinge) testified that the participants of the various CPE programmes confirmed that they enjoy listening and participating in Pidgin English programmes unlike when some of them are being presented in the English or French languages. Before, they understood that news “was meant only for the educated.” Nowadays, the non-literates equally have a chance of getting information about what is happening around them.

Furthermore, there is the use of CPE in Media adverts. Here we sight private individual adverts and government or public adverts. We noticed that the target population here is everyone in the society. The Cameroon government uses CPE to do health adverts because they have realised that maximum sensitization can only be achieved when the message goes across. A good example is the distribution of treated mosquito bed nets and the new polio vaccine to be administered to children- August 2015. Doing the advert in Pidgin, the government is guaranteed that the message has gone across to everyone especially the uneducated.

Proprietors of private schools publicize their schools in English, French and Pidgin English. The researcher learned from some journalists that all the slots sent to them are written in English, so they have the challenging duty of translating these texts into CPE before they read. The choice of words must be captivating and suitable in a way that will lure the consumer into buying the product. This way they are sure that they have achieved their social responsibility.

Individual organizations like Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), medical practitioners, traditional herbalists, Evangelical Campaigns etc. all rush their adverts and announcements to be done on the media in Pidgin English. Thus CPE is instrumental in reaching and catching the attention of a vast range of people. It turns to capture people or the audience better than others especially in the English speaking regions of Cameroon.

Talking about talk shows in CPE, they have become more popular with a greater participation than talk shows in any other national language in Cameroon. In an interview with Mr Alfred Essinge, the presenter of the talk show “Voice of the Voiceless” on the CBS radio, Buea, he stressed that Pidgin English is preferred because “it is a language of familiarity where people of all classes best express themselves”. According to him the same programme was been done in English and Pidgin but they realized that the pidgin participants outnumbered the English ones. Finally they settled on the programme to be done in Pidgin because they realised that even some really educated people best expressed themselves in CPE. Paraphrasing Mr Essinge’s words, pidgin cuts across the society and so can reach people more than any other language.

It is worth mentioning that the researcher listened to talk shows in CPE and some in English Language. Surprisingly, in a period of 20 minutes, there were 15 participants in a CPE talk show while a full one hour period of an English Language talk show recorded only four participants.

The researcher also contacted Kollo George, and Anne Munjong, renowned journalists at CRTV Buea and FM Mount Cameroon respectively with an unstructured questionnaire which carried the following questions:

- Why did you choose to use CPE in presenting these programs?
- What is your target population?
- Would people understand if you chose another language and do you think the feedback would be the same?
- Do you think you have succeeded in your choice of CPE to pass your messages across?

Generally, their responses were positive. They all attested to the fact that CPE successfully attracts and catches everyone’s attention to the point of motivating them to want a product (in the case of an advert) or participate in the program (in the case of talk show). Audio-Visual media messages in Pidgin English trigger

the public’s curiosity and interest to know more about news events within and without. For example, during the Pidgin news hour on Equinox and LTM TV channels, vendors leave their market places to go cluster around nearby TVs to watch news.

According to Kollo George who happens to be the genesis of media broadcasting in CPE in Cameroon, media broadcasting is ‘proximity broadcasting’. This is to ensure that everyone in the society exercises their rights to be entertained and educated. CPE ensures these rights because everyone understands it. Therefore to choose to use a language which will be understood only by some section of the society would be unfair, and consequently no communication. He further stresses that “you must be able to choose a language which cuts across” to enable perfect understanding.

Anne Munjong of CRTV Buea (presenter of Voices of Women) shares the same view about their choice of Pidgin English as the language to sensitise and inform their target population: “It’s a common language which can be understood and spoken by everyone in the society.” She further remarked that they tried doing this programme in English but the feedback was poor, consequently they had to go back to Pidgin English. CPE has the ability of “bringing everyone on board”. Since her programme, Voices of women, deals with issues that plague the society in general, everyone must be aware of what is happening around them. This can only be achieved through a common language; Pidgin English. It should be mentioned here that though the variety of Pidgin English used in the South West Region is different from that used in Douala, Bamenda etc., and most speakers will understand the other varieties as they are almost the same but for a few lexical items that may differ. It could therefore be agreed that CPE is a language of socialization and wider communication, (Neba et al 2006).

Concerning the question of their target population, both presenters shared the same resolution. At the conception of these programs, the idea was to target people who were semi-literate and non-literate. However, everyone has come to love to take part in these programs- the literate, semi-literate and non-literate. Thus pidgin has gone viral and the population would approve if many more programs are done in Pidgin English. It is worth mentioning here that the researcher actually did a questionnaire to find out the public’s attitude towards Pidgin programmes in the media, but for the purpose of this paper, the data would not be analysed. Neba et al (2006) seem to have realised this and thus the call for CPE to be standardised and used as a medium of instructions in urban areas.

USES OF CPE IN THE CAMEROONIAN MEDIA

6.1. CPE on radio

6.1.1. Official

6.1.2. Private

6.2. CPE on TV

6.2.1. Official

6.2.2. Private

Summary or table of the use of CPE in the media

	Audio-visual			
	Radio		Television	
Programs	Official	Private	Official	Private
Advertisement	👍	👍	×	👍

News	👍	👍	×	👍
Talk shows	👍	👍	×	👍
Announcements	👍	👍	×	👍

From table 3.3 above, it could be seen that CPE is used both by the state media (formal) and private media. However, the private media uses it more than the state media. The reason for this is that the private media aims at reaching their community more, thus the adoption of a common and down to earth language- Pidgin English. The state media on the other hand, in as much as they want to maintain only the use of the national languages (English and French), begin to realise the need to use a language which can be understood by everyone irrespective of their class, level and tribe. They implement the use of CPE in some of their audio (radio) programmes.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

This paper has attempted to show how CPE is a suitable language of the media and will continue to thrive because of its ability to catch the attention of the population. Its dominance can be explained by the fact that it has potentials to trigger the curiosity and interest of the people to learn and be well informed about things happening around them. It gives everyone their right to information and education while creating fun and entertainment. To attempt to ban CPE would be senseless. Instead, an appeal could be tabled for the authorities concerned to give more slots and time for Pidgin English programmes on the media. This would get the population more involved, committed and would give them a better sense of identity.

It should be mentioned that another study can be carried out on the population and how they perceive the use of CPE in the media. Questionnaires could be designed for the public and interviews conducted to get the respondents' ideas as far as using CPE in various Media programmes is concerned.

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