

# The Sociology of Knowledge in Change Processes: Connecting Mother Tongue Education with Knowledge Development in Cameroon Primary Schools

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.70554>

Received: 09 April 2023; Revised: 27 April 2023; Accepted: 02 May 2023; Published: 06 June 2023

## ABSTRACT

What, exactly, constitutes an appropriate understanding of life issues is the degree to which these issues interrelate with the operational values and systems of a given community. Yet, this understanding is intrinsically linked to the cultural realities of the people covertly or overtly expressed in the language of their contextual reality which is the mother tongue. This study focuses on the interconnectivity of knowledge in this evaluative era of multiculturalism in Cameroon and seeks to establish the challenges of the mother tongue education in some selected primary schools in Donga Mantung Division with the Limbum language as a case study. The paper discusses, from a psychosocial perspective, issues raised by Skinner and Tamanji in their theories of behaviourism and cognitivism respectively in an attempt to contribute to the on-going discourse on the vital need to revitalize Cameroon local languages at the initial levels of education, which is the primary school. In examining the critical role for research and the importance of transformative or quantitative mother tongue education, the paper underpins the challenges inherent in the process and the limitations in carrying out the project with naturalness and authenticity.

**Keywords:** Interconnectivity, knowledge, multiculturalism, education, Psychological.

## INTRODUCTION

The new Webster's Dictionary, among others defines mother tongue as the first language that one learns when still a baby, rather than language learned at school or as an adult. The commonality in the definitions is that, the mother tongue is the language which a person has grown up speaking from early childhood. Related to that, we understand that education is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits as expressed by Nforbi (2018).

The International Mother Language Day (IMLD) is a worldwide annual observance held on the 21st of February each year, to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as multilingualism. It was first announced by UNESCO on 17 November 1999, and formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in a resolution establishing 2008 as the International Year of Languages resulting in the institutionalization of Mother Language Day.

However, it was in 2007, that the Cameroon Ministry of Basic Education introduced the teaching of national languages and culture in formal educational system in Cameroon. This was within the framework of the education system put in place in which the 1996 constitution stipulates that the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country should be promoted. While this came as good news to some sociolinguists, there were, sooner, concerns as to the nature and expected visibility of the project as a quick look into the internal setup of the Cameroon linguistic landscape revealed impending challenges with regards to the multicultural nature of the country. This study sets out to explore the challenges faced in the teaching and learning of the Limbum language in some nursery and primary schools in Nkambe Central Sub-Division in Donga–Mantung Division of Cameroon.

The literature on the importance of mother tongues to knowledge development is numerous. Despite the existence of documents encouraging the promotion of mother tongues, and the integration of mother tongues in the educational system (also referred to as national languages in the educational system in Cameroon), it is shallowly implemented in the nursery and primary sector, as compared to the secondary sector in Cameroon in general and in the Nkambe in particular. This article thereby aims at providing answers to the questions of: To what extent is mother tongue at the center of knowledge construction in this area? and How effective is the teaching and learning process of the Limbum language in the Basic Education sector in Donga Mantung?

In the quest to answer these questions, social knowledge construction is presented in section 2, the sociolinguistic challenges for mother tongue education in the Basic Education sector are presented in section 3, and the conclusion in section 4.

## **SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE AS A CHANGE PROCESS**

The conceptual framework for social knowledge as used in this paper is guided by the theory of behaviourism propounded by Skinner and the Social Cognitive Learning theory of Tamanji.

Skinner's theory focuses on objectively observable behaviors' and discounts any independent activities of the mind. It defines "learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviors based on environmental conditions". This theory presents conditioning as a universal learning process and states that there are two different types of conditioning (classical conditioning and operant conditioning), each yielding a different behavioral pattern. He opines that classical conditioning occurs when there is a natural reflex response to a stimulus like in the educational environment where pupils exhibit fears and anxieties such as fear of failure, fear of public speaking and general school phobia. This theory clearly questions the stimulus of knowledge development and the effectiveness of such a stimulus. In this light, the stimulus of social knowledge development in the context of Limbum mother tongue education in the nursery and primary schools in Nkambe Central Sub-Division is below.

The weakness of Skinner's theory is that, it does not take into consideration the activities of the mind; and there is no education that can take place effectively without considering the mind. This assertion ties with the argument by Chomsky that, language could not be acquired purely through conditioning, and must be at least partly explained by the existence of some inner cultural abilities. As an illustration, he says that children will "intuitively assemble words into sentences they have not been taught" (Bhana, 2015). This weakness encourages researchers like Bandura (1986), Tamanji (2009) and others.

In this light, Tamanji (2009), in his cognitive social theory, provides a framework for understanding how people actively shape and are shaped by their environment. In particular, the theory details the process of observational learning/modelling and the influence of self-efficacy on the production of behavior. Thus, social phenomenon affects the psychology of children who tend to learn and imitate the actions of their

peers which they look up to as models. In the context of mother tongue education in the basic education sector, if a learner coincidentally meets with another learner who does not like to learn the mother tongue, that learner will obviously not want to learn the mother tongue just like his or her peer. This poses difficulties in mother tongue education especially on the part of the teacher who has to stress up in order to lure the students to learn. Tamanji (2009) agrees with Skinner's behaviorist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning. However, he adds two important ideas: 1- mediating processes occur between stimuli and responses; and 2- behaviors is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. Linking this to Mohammed Rhalmi's cognitivism theory it becomes evident that mother tongue education in Cameroon faces challenge as learners of mother tongue are shying away from using their home languages which they consider inferior to colonial languages like English and French.

Life is understood from the cultural realities of a given community, and these cultural realities are expressed through the mother tongue of that linguistic community. This therefore means that the knowledge acquired and learned by infants and pupils of the nursery and primary education sector is influenced by the linguistic practices and their day-to-day activities. These two act as a stimulus to knowledge development, be it social or linguistics. In the case of the Limbum mother tongue education, empirical facts show that the infants and pupils are less interested in Limbum despite its function as a language of instruction or a subject like any other. This is grounded by the fact that the colonial language English, and the lingual franca Pidgin English are rapidly gaining grounds in this area, thus stimulating the learners to be more interested in these languages than in the Limbum language. Despite the efforts put in by the teachers to stimulate the learners, the learners remain adamant to their language choice due to peer pressure and the need to prove their learnedness to their parents and grandparents.

From day-to-day communication, they are stimulated at home to use the Limbum language, and simulated by societal pride and the effects of globalization to used more of English and Pidgin English and less of Limbum, thus causing the children to have mixed cultures and a drawback in social and cultural knowledge construction. This is reinforced by the multiculturalism of the setup that influences mother tongue education. When social knowledge construction is slowed by the learner's linguistic mindset, it delays the development of knowledge in general.

Recalling the commonality in the definitions of mother tongue which is the language which a person has grown up speaking from early childhood, and Nforbi's (2008) definition of education which is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits as expressed, the learners find it difficult acquire education since the language they learn at home from birth is Limbum, but while growing up, they slowly shift to pidgin English and then English, cause them to develop at this stage a kind of intermediary language which is a mixture of pidgin English and Limbum through code mixing.

## **SOCIOLINGUISTIC CHALLENGES**

The social and linguistics challenges to Limbum mother tongue education in the nursery and primary education sector in Nkambe Central sud –division are enormous.

The negative attitude of Limbum parents in respect of the fact that their children should not be taught Limbum as a subject at school is one major factor. Parents in this community take pride in children who can efficiently express themselves in English. This shows how schooled their child is over the other children in the community. This enhances the linguistic hegemony of the English language on the Limbum language.

As aforementioned, the pupils themselves are influenced by their role models and peers act as negative stimulus to them. The result of the interview with some of these pupils shows that these learners prefer English over Limbum because of the fear of being termed "villager" by their peers.

Some teachers also feel reluctant to teach Limbum as a subject, or to use Limbum as a language of instruction at school because they are not convinced about the contribution of this language to knowledge construction in children. They turn to used teaching methods like story telling exercises and flipped classroom exercises mostly during the celebration of the international mother tongue day. The grammatical content is left untouched. These approaches are far too rudimentary to constitute a valid argument for the necessity to embark on a national scale program on local language revitalization.

Again, there are no trained teachers from the Teacher Training Colleges who have been sent to teach the Limbum language. Equally, teachers do not know the Limbum alphabet, thus, they do more of oral exercises than written. They cannot spell words using the Limbum orthography. This ties with the view of Nforbi (2018: 85) in his book, “Mother Tongue Literacy and Sustainable Development in Cameroon”, who postulates that, the custodians of African indigenous knowledge are generally in the villages and rural areas. Most of them are not scholars while some are semi-literates or illiterates. They have not been trained to teach as there are no Teacher Training Colleges to train people with pedagogic skills. He outlines the problems faced by the teachers and learners in different schools as follows: there is a problem at the level of didactic materials for effective teaching. There are no adaptable materials that are made or produced in order of age, class and levels of teaching and learning. The audio-visual techniques are not yet fully exploited and the lack of motivation in the literacy program is the order of the day in the teaching of the mother tongues in Cameroon. This is compounded by the lack of adequate appropriate language technology which rather complicates the whole process.

It was equally observed that sociolinguistic issues hinder the choice and use of languages for education in multilingual societies like Cameroon. One of such variables identified by Nforbi (2018: 9), is the status of languages available as he asserts that, “... Africa is perhaps the only continent in the world where non-native languages have been taught and learned with the greatest anxiety and interest at the expense of its own languages”. Parents, for example, may be more willing to have their children study and learn in languages with a high status and do feel reluctant to invest for their children to learn what they consider unimportant languages. As such, the attitudes of some parents who are economically motivated, prefer their children to learn foreign languages as they consider these languages to have a better education and better opportunities in life. This ties with the situation of Limbum mother tongue education. In this light, the people of the Wimbun community need to be sensitized and encouraged on the advantages of reading and writing the Limbum language since many people still have the notion that there is no need studying their own language.

In the same light with Nforbi (2008), Tamanji (2009) in “Attitudes and Commitment towards Mother Tongue Education in Cameroon holds that, the issue of choice of the mother tongue to be taught in the schools where they are many indigenous languages is a thorny one. This assessment ties with the opinion of Nforbi (2012) who holds that, “the behavior of an individual in a given situation is due to the forces of other individuals and groups acting between the person and his environment rather than to the other property of the individual as such”. By implication, parents should encourage their children not to only speak the local language, but also to learn how to read and write the mother tongue (Ngala, 2020: 73).

All these challenges put together show that the Limbum language is in danger of being abandoned in favor of Pidgin English and English. Intergenerational transition has been slackened by the need for economic integration and wider social integration. The formal education aspect is obstructed by untrained teachers, the negative linguistic attitudes of teachers and the unavailability of didactic materials. From these angles, it is evident that the language is dying slowly but surely. Revitalization strategies must be enhanced by communities, stakeholders and the government in other to revitalized not only the Limbum language, but other local languages in Cameroon and beyond that are facing the same changes.

## CONCLUSION

The possible remedy for the mother tongue education dilemma in Cameroon must begin with the deconstruction of our basic system of multiculturalism and language policy itself. The whole purpose of laying down a program such as this is achieved only when we can complete its sociocultural deconstruction by practical actions such as: encouraging our children to learn Limbum mother tongue as a subject, provide learners with didactic materials, sensitize the Wimbun community on the importance of mother tongue education to children, create Limbum literacy centers, and employ trained instructors to teach Limbum in those centers and schools. This would enable the Wimbun community and its neighboring linguistic communities to master their languages thereby avoiding linguistic and cultural uprooting of the indigenes especially the youths.

Teaching of Limbum language using the Limbum orthography will facilitate the general dissemination of scientific knowledge not only in Limbum, but in other national languages. The learning capacities will be facilitated alongside learning of official and others foreign languages of Cameroon.

The problem plaguing opinions on mother tongue education in Cameroon will overlap, diverge but will hardly ever converge. The divergent/convergent discourse on the issue must not only be deconstructed in critical discourses, but be broken down in our institutional practices as well. Cameroonian language policy makers can begin by rethinking the mental structures of smaller binary oppositions that support the great one. From this kind of thinking, a new collective and inclusive practice with a purposeful objective can emerge, not only in respect to the Limbum language in particular, but to the general language policy debacle in Cameroon.

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