



# The Multilingual Dynamics of Cameroon: Exploring the Influence of Mother Tongue

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**Abstract**— Cameroon, a central African country, is known for its linguistic diversity, with over 284 languages spoken within its borders. The mother tongue plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting identity, as it serves as a carrier of traditions, customs, and values. Speaking one's mother tongue allows for deeper connection to emotions and thoughts, leading to stronger self-expression. However, the country's official languages, English and French, can sometimes overshadow local languages, posing challenges. Despite these challenges, preserving the mother tongue is essential for national unity and promoting effective communication. Governments and educational institutions can support local languages by allocating resources, creating policies for inclusion, and encouraging language maintenance and revitalization efforts. This approach fosters unity and celebrates the unique linguistic fabric of Cameroon, allowing the country to continue to prosper and maintain cultural vibrancy.



**Keywords**— Mother tongue, Multilingualism, Linguistic diversity, Cultural richness, National Identity, Language policy, Cultural identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

With about 284 different languages spoken within its borders Nforbi Emmanuel (2021), Cameroon is considered a multilingual country. This linguistic diversity reflects the cultural richness of the country and plays an essential role in shaping each individual's national identity. In this context, the concept of mother tongue becomes especially important because it represents the language that individuals learn from their parents or local community during their early years. Richard Nordquist (2019). The term "mother tongue" refers to a person's native language — that is, a language learned from birth, also called a first language, dominant language, home language, and native tongue. It is the first language a person learns as a child, usually from their parents or immediate environment. It is the language that individuals are most proficient in and feel most comfortable expressing themselves. In the case of Cameroon, mother tongues vary according to the different ethnic groups present in the country. These indigenous languages such as

Aghem, Bafut, Weh, Mankon, and Mukaka all in the grass field are an essential part of each community's cultural heritage and traditions, shaping their identity and sense of belonging. The main linguistic groups are Beti-Fang, Bulu and Ewondo in the Central region, the Grass fields language group in the Western region and the Bantu-speaking group in the Southern region. Each group has its distinct language, making Cameroon a linguistically diverse country. This linguistic diversity can pose challenges, especially in terms of communication and national cohesion. To address these challenges, Cameroon has adopted a language policy that promotes French and English as official languages, while recognizing the importance of indigenous languages. The policy is an attempt to balance the need for national unity and effective communication with the preservation of linguistic heritage and cultural diversity. The official languages, French and English, are widely taught in schools and used in government institutions, while some indigenous languages are taught as optional subjects. However, debates and discussions are ongoing regarding the appropriate balance

and allocation of resources to promote linguistic diversity while ensuring effective communication and development opportunities for all companies. In short, the importance of indigenous languages cannot be overstated. It plays an essential role in an individual's identity by allowing for authentic self-expression. Ultimately, mastering your native language improves communication skills and promotes cognitive development. Recognizing and appreciating the importance of local languages is vital for personal development, cultural appreciation and effective communication in a globalized world.

### **1. Overview of Cameroon's multilingualism**

Linguistic diversity plays an important role in shaping a country's culture, identity and communication. Each language has its aspects and nuances that contribute to the richness and diversity of a country. In this article, we will explore the importance of linguistic diversity and how it impacts a country.

Firstly, linguistic diversity is important for preserving a country's culture. Each language is deeply linked to its respective culture, carrying with it the history, beliefs and traditions of its speakers. When it embraces linguistic diversity, it instills a sense of pride and belonging among its citizens. It allows different communities to express their cultural heritage, thereby promoting integration and understanding between different groups.

Additionally, linguistic diversity is a reminder of the country's historical roots and the different influences that have shaped its identity over time. Additionally, linguistic diversity strengthens the overall identity and uniqueness of a country. A multilingual country has an invaluable asset that sets it apart from other countries. For example, Switzerland's multilingualism, with four official languages, contributes to its international reputation as a diverse and inclusive nation. These languages not only reflect the country's cultural diversity but are also symbols of national unity, proving that different linguistic communities can coexist harmoniously under one flag. Linguistic diversity also plays an important role in effective communication. When a country recognizes and accepts diverse languages, it allows its citizens to communicate and express themselves more effectively. Multilingualism allows individuals to come into contact with each other, thereby promoting understanding and cooperation in society. It also provides more opportunities for cultural exchange, allowing people to learn from different perspectives and broaden their horizons. By encouraging linguistic diversity, a country enables its citizens to participate in global dialogue and engage with the international community. In addition to cultural and communication impacts, linguistic diversity can also bring

economic benefits. Multilingual citizens possess valuable skills in an increasingly globalized world. They can work as interpreters, translators or cultural mediators, facilitating international business transactions and promoting cross-cultural collaboration.

Over 284 different languages are spoken in Cameroon, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries. Cameroon's linguistic diversity can be attributed to its history and the presence of several ethnic groups. The official languages of Cameroon are French and English, inherited from French and British colonial times. French is mainly spoken in the Southern and Central regions, while English is mainly spoken in the Western and Northwestern regions. These two languages are used in the fields of government, education, media and business. In addition to French and English, Cameroon also recognizes nine national languages. These are languages of significant cultural and historical importance to their respective ethnic groups. Some of the national languages spoken in Cameroon include Fulfulde, Ewondo, Bassa and Duala. These languages are widely spoken in their respective regions and have a strong presence in the local communities. Besides the official and national languages, Cameroon is also home to many indigenous languages spoken by various ethnic groups. These languages make up the majority of the country's linguistic landscape. Some of these indigenous languages include Bamileke, Bamiléké, Bamoun and Bakweri. Pk Awah (2021). These languages are mainly spoken in rural areas and are passed down from generation to generation. Linguistic diversity in Cameroon is not without its challenges. With so many languages spoken, communication between different ethnic groups can sometimes be a barrier. This can make national unity and cohesion difficult. In addition, the predominance of French and English has led to a decline in the use of some indigenous languages because they are often not taught in schools or used in formal contexts. Efforts are being made to preserve and promote Cameroon's indigenous languages. Local organizations and initiatives are working to document these languages, create language programs, and integrate them into the education system. Equally, there is growing recognition of the importance of multilingualism and its value in preserving the country's cultural heritage.

### **II. IMPORTANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE**

Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the time the data was collected, Statistic Canada (2022). This is of great importance in various aspects of our lives. First, it enhances effective communication within the family and

community. Second, it plays an essential role in cognitive development. In addition, it also helps preserve heritage and cultural identity. Ultimately, it enriches the learning of other subjects and improves language skills. In short, the mother tongue is of crucial importance and must be valued, sustain and maintained. Blasius A. Chiatoh (2011). One of the main reasons why the mother tongue is important is because it allows for effective communication within the family and community. The community sustain mother tongue when individuals can fully understand and express themselves in their native language, they form stronger bonds and bonds with those close to them. This helps maintain traditions, values and cultural norms that may be unique to a particular community or family. Therefore, the mother tongue acts as a bridge between generations and strengthens the sense of belonging and identity.

Furthermore, the mother tongue plays an important role in a child's life. Research has shown that when children learn in their native language during their early years, they develop better cognitive skills, including problem-solving and critical thinking skills. This foundation gives them a solid foundation for future academic success. On the other hand, depriving children of their mother tongue can make it difficult for them to grasp and understand complex concepts, thereby hindering their intellectual development. Preserving cultural heritage and identity is another essential aspect of the mother tongue. Language is closely tied to culture because it conveys unique ways of expressing ideas, beliefs, and traditions. By retaining and using their mother tongue, individuals help ensure the longevity and richness of their cultural heritage. This preservation is especially important in a globalized world, where cultural diversity risks being overshadowed by dominant languages.

In addition, the mother tongue also reinforces learning in other subjects and improves language skills. Studies have shown that children who learn to read and write in their first language before moving on to a second language have better literacy skills overall. This platform is in The concept of mother tongue refers to the language a person learns and speaks from birth, usually learned from their mother. It plays an important role in shaping personal and communal identities. The mother tongue is important because it is the main means of communication within the family and community, helping to preserve cultural heritage and traditions

### III. LANGUAGE POLICY IN CAMEROON

Language policy in Cameroon has played a key role in shaping the country's linguistic landscape. Therefore,

language policies have been implemented to promote linguistic diversity, facilitate communication and maintain social cohesion. This article will discuss language policies in Cameroon, including official languages, languages of instruction, and language planning initiatives. Firstly, Cameroon has two official languages: English and French. This is a unique feature of the country, as it is the only officially bilingual country in Africa. The importance of maintaining both languages is reflected in many different aspects of society, including government administration, education, and media. English is mainly spoken in areas formerly under British rule, while French is spoken in areas formerly under French rule. Second, the language of instruction in Cameroon's education system is determined by the region where the school is located. English-speaking regions typically use English as the language of instruction, while French-speaking regions use French. This can sometimes lead to unequal access to educational opportunities as educational resources and materials may be limited in one language or another. Many efforts have been made to bridge this gap through initiatives such as translating textbooks and promoting bilingualism in schools.

Additionally, language planning initiatives have been used to accommodate linguistic diversity in Cameroon. The country implements a policy of national integration through promoting multiculturalism and multilingualism. These initiatives aim to preserve indigenous languages, prevent domination of one language over another, and promote cultural exchange. National governments as well as local organizations encourage the use of local languages in schools, media and cultural activities to ensure their visibility and vitality. However, the implementation of language policy in Cameroon is facing many challenges. One of the main challenges is the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities between the English and French-speaking regions. This has led to tensions and calls for more inclusivity and equality. More to that, there is often a lack of resources and infrastructure to support the implementation of language policies, especially in rural areas. This constitutes an obstacle to effective language planning and equitable access to education. In summary, language policies in Cameroon aim to promote linguistic diversity, maintain social cohesion and ensure equal opportunities for all citizens. The country's initiatives on official bilingualism, languages of instruction, and language planning all play an important role in shaping the country's linguistic landscape. However, challenges such as regional disparities and limited resources must be addressed to realize the full potential of these policies. Overall, language policies have a significant impact on Cameroon's identity as a multilingual country.

### **3.1. Efforts to promote and preserve indigenous languages in education and official sectors in Cameroon**

In Cameroon, the promotion and preservation of Indigenous languages in education and the official sectors is a subject of increasing interest and effort. Recognizing the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage, the government and several organizations have engaged in various initiatives to ensure the vitality of indigenous languages. An important effort is to incorporate indigenous languages into the education system. The government has introduced bilingual and multilingual education policies, aiming to integrate indigenous languages into classroom teaching in addition to the official languages of French and English. This approach recognizes the value of indigenous languages as effective communication tools and important cultural identifiers. Through the promotion and use of Indigenous languages, students are encouraged to appreciate their cultural heritage and become active participants in their communities.

Additionally, government agencies and organizations have collaborated to produce educational materials, textbooks, and dictionaries in indigenous languages. These resources facilitate the learning and preservation of Indigenous languages, making them more accessible in educational settings. The development of standardized writing systems for previously unwritten languages has allowed for expanded literacy and written communication in native languages. These measures contribute to the long-term preservation and transmission of indigenous languages to future generations. Efforts to integrate indigenous languages extend beyond education. The government also tolerates the use of indigenous languages in official sectors. For example, certain administrative documents, including birth certificates and identity cards, can now be issued in local languages, in addition to French and English. Recognition and inclusion of indigenous languages in these official documents allow individuals to fully exercise their linguistic rights and maintain their cultural identity. To further support the promotion and preservation of indigenous languages, cultural events and festivals are held across the country. These events provide a platform for indigenous communities to celebrate. Although significant progress has been made in promoting and preserving indigenous languages in education and official sectors, challenges remain. The limited number of teachers with native language proficiency poses a significant barrier. Efforts should be made to train and recruit more teachers capable of teaching effectively in the local language. In addition, raising awareness among the general population about the importance of indigenous

languages is important to preserve and continue to promote them. In conclusion, the efforts to promote and preserve indigenous languages in education and official sectors in Cameroon are commendable. The inclusion of indigenous languages in the education system, the production of educational materials and the recognition of indigenous languages in official documents contribute to the vitality and cultural heritage of Cameroon's linguistic diversity. Even as challenges persist, a commitment to linguistic and cultural diversity will ensure a better future for Cameroon's indigenous languages.

## **IV. CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF MULTILINGUALISM**

Maintaining multilingualism is a significant challenge for the country. PK Awah(2021) The coexistence of several languages poses various obstacles in terms of education, governance and social cohesion.

Firstly, one of the main challenges Cameroon faces in maintaining multilingualism is education. The country follows a bilingual system, with English and French as the official languages. However, many students come from different language backgrounds and may have limited English or French proficiency. This language barrier hinders their learning experience and can lead to lower academic performance. Furthermore, the scarcity of resources, such as textbooks and qualified teachers, in local languages further exacerbates the challenge of providing equal educational opportunities for all..

Second, multilingualism also causes obstacles in the management and administration of Cameroon. The country speaks both English and French, which makes effective communication important. However, the presence of many local languages makes it difficult to disseminate information and ensure transparency. Government officials have difficulty conveying important messages and policies to citizens, especially those who are not fluent in French or English. This language barrier can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, further complicating effective management.

Another challenge is achieving social cohesion in Cameroon's diverse linguistic landscape. Language is an essential factor contributing to cultural identity and social integration. With different ethnic groups speaking different languages, building bridges of understanding and tolerance between communities becomes urgent. However, language barriers can create division and misunderstanding, leading to division in society. Linguistic diversity can be a double-edged sword, enriching cultures while also highlighting social disparities. Furthermore, preserving and promoting local languages faces a significant challenge in Cameroon.



Although efforts have been made to preserve indigenous languages, the predominance of English and French as official languages may overshadow their importance. The lack of language policies supporting the preservation and use of local languages in various fields such as media and literature contributes to their decline. This endangers Cameroon's cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. In conclusion, Cameroon faces several challenges in maintaining multilingualism due to its linguistic diversity. The education system strives to provide equal opportunities to students of different linguistic backgrounds. However, it also faces several problems related to language dominance, language change and language disappearance

Multilingualism in Cameroon offers numerous benefits, including cultural preservation, improved communication, economic opportunities, enhanced educational prospects, increased job prospects, cultural exchange and integration, and improved access to information. With over 280 languages spoken, multilingualism promotes the cultural heritage of various ethnic groups, bridges language barriers, and fosters understanding and cooperation among different groups. It also opens up a wide range of economic opportunities, with proficiency in English and French being highly sought after in various industries. Multilingualism also facilitates cultural exchange and integration, encouraging individuals to embrace diversity and multiculturalism.

## V. PROMOTING MULTILINGUALISM

It is important to undertake initiatives that promote and preserve Cameroon's multilingual character. The article discusses the various programs, initiatives, and organizations actively participating in this important effort. First, the Cameroonian government has launched several initiatives to support the country's multilingual character. One of such initiative is the National Language Promotion Commission (NLPC). The NLPC aims to standardize and promote the Cameroonian language in education, administration and media. Through its efforts, the commission helps preserve and revitalize these languages, ensuring that they remain an integral part of cultural heritage. In addition, many educational programs have been implemented to promote multilingualism in schools in Cameroon. For example, bilingual education programs are widely implemented to encourage students to learn French and English, the country's official languages. This program not only helps students gain language skills but also promotes understanding and appreciation of many cultures. Also, initiatives such as incorporating local languages into school curricula and helping language

learning resources maintain the country's multilingual fabric. In addition to the government-led initiatives, various Cameroonian organizations are actively working to promote and preserve the country's multilingual character. The International Language Society (ILS) is one such organization. SIL focuses on promoting linguistic research, documentation and language development in Cameroon. In partnership with local communities, SIL conducts language surveys and publishes dictionaries, grammar and other language learning materials, ensuring the preservation of endangered languages. Associations such as the Cameroon Linguistic Society (CLS) play an important role in raising awareness and protecting linguistic diversity. CLS organizes seminars, conferences and workshops to discuss linguistic issues, share research results and develop a strategy to preserve Cameroon's language. The organization also supports language documentation projects and collaborates with universities and research institutes to improve language research in the country. In short, preserving Cameroon's multilingual nature requires continuous efforts from various programs, initiatives and organizations. The government's National Language Promotion Commission and bilingual education programs are keys to promoting multilingualism in schools. In addition, organizations such as SIL and CLS contribute significantly to the documentation, research and development of the Cameroonian language. By working together, these initiatives and organizations ensure that Cameroon's linguistic diversity helps its cultural heritage thrive for future generations. In recent years, Cameroon has made significant progress in promoting linguistic diversity and reviving endangered languages. Many successful language revitalization projects have been implemented to preserve and promote the country's rich linguistic heritage. These efforts not only strengthen cultural identity and heritage but also play an important role in promoting social cohesion and inclusion.

This article explores some notable examples of successful language revitalization projects and efforts to promote linguistic diversity in Cameroon. One notable initiative is the revitalization of the Mbororo language. The Mbororo people, a nomadic pastoral community, are at risk of losing their traditional language due to increasing globalization and encroachment on their cultural practices. Recognizing the importance of preserving this unique linguistic heritage, the Mbororo community has launched language revitalization efforts. These initiatives include establishing language schools, organizing cultural festivals focusing on linguistic traditions, and encouraging intergenerational dialogue. As a result, the Mbororo language began to be recognized and passed on to the younger generation, thus ensuring its survival. Another

notable project is the promotion of the Bafut language in the Northwest region of Cameroon. The Bafut community, like many others, has had difficulty preserving its language and cultural practices in the face of globalization.

To address this problem, community leaders have collaborated with linguists and educators to develop language learning materials, establish Bafut language classes, and establish cultural centres.. These efforts not only revived the Bafut language but also brought a new sense of pride and cultural identity to community members. Furthermore, the Cameroonian government has been actively involved in promoting linguistic diversity through policies and initiatives. One such strategy is the inclusion of regional languages in the national education curriculum. This policy aims to create conditions for students to learn and speak their mother tongue in addition to the official languages English and French. By recognizing and valuing each language, this effort promotes linguistic diversity and supports the preservation of endangered languages. Additionally, community initiatives have played an important role in revitalizing and promoting linguistic diversity in Cameroon. NGOs, such as Cameroon's Association for the Promotion and Protection of Indigenous Languages (CAPEDIL), have played an important role in supporting language revitalization projects in different regions of the country. CAPEDIL has produced language materials, published educational materials and organized language festivals to raise awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity. In conclusion, Cameroon's efforts to revive endangered languages and promote linguistic diversity have been successful and commendable. Through community initiatives, government policies and collaboration with language experts, several projects have been undertaken to preserve and promote the country's rich linguistic heritage. Successful language revitalization projects in Cameroon serve as a model for other countries facing similar challenges and demonstrate the importance of preserving linguistic diversity for cohesion.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Linguistic diversity plays an important role in shaping a country's cultural identity. In Cameroon, promoting and preserving linguistic diversity is of utmost importance. With over 284 different languages spoken in the country, it is clear that linguistic diversity is an important aspect of Cameroon's cultural heritage. First, valuing and preserving linguistic diversity in Cameroon enhances social cohesion among its diverse people. Language serves as a means for individuals to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and values. When

people are encouraged to express themselves freely in their native language, it fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging. This in turn promotes a more harmonious and united society. Language acts as a bridge connecting people, allowing for greater understanding and empathy between different linguistic communities. Second, linguistic diversity is critical to providing quality education to all Cameroonian citizens. Language is an essential tool for teaching and learning. By recognizing and preserving different languages, the education system can be tailored to meet the needs of individual learners. Research shows that children learn best when taught in their native language. When students can learn and understand concepts in a language they are familiar with, their overall educational experience improves. By promoting linguistic diversity in education, Cameroon can improve the quality of learning and ensure equal access to education for all its citizens. Furthermore, valuing linguistic diversity is essential to preserving the unique cultural identity of Cameroon's different ethnic groups. Language is deeply connected to culture because it conveys the traditions, history and values of a community. Losing language means losing invaluable cultural knowledge and practices, passed down from generation to generation. By protecting linguistic diversity, Cameroon can protect its rich cultural heritage and prevent the loss of indigenous knowledge and traditions. In addition, linguistic diversity also brings economic benefits to the country. The diverse linguistic landscape allows for the exploration of tourism opportunities. By embracing linguistic diversity, Cameroon can attract tourists interested in experiencing the country's unique language and culture. This, in turn, can contribute to the local economy by creating employment opportunities and increasing revenue from the tourism industry. Promoting and preserving linguistic diversity in Cameroon is essential to maintain social cohesion, improve education, preserve cultural identity and energize. By recognizing the importance of linguistic diversity and promoting multilingual policies, Cameroon can ensure that no language is marginalized or lost. It takes effort Above all, the existence of many mother tongues in Cameroon is a testament to the cultural richness and heritage that the country possesses. Each language embodies the traditions, customs, and history of a particular community. Preserving these unique identities and ensuring their continued importance and development is an essential endeavor that should be embraced and celebrated by all Cameroonians. In short, the multilingual nature of Cameroon truly encourages reflection and highlights the cultural richness of the country. While accepting this diversity is necessary, addressing the challenges it poses is equally important. By

promoting bilingual education and preserving endangered languages, Cameroon can create an inclusive society that protects linguistic diversity while promoting national unity. It is through such efforts that the potential of Cameroon's indigenous languages and multilingual character can be fully exploited.

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