

“Cameroon English” or “English in Cameroon”: Assessing the Status and Nature of English in Cameroon

(Guest lecture to be delivered at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt on October 24, 2016 at 09:30 am)

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Resumé

This lecture will assess the status of English in Cameroon and will address the following fundamental question: can we conveniently talk of “Cameroon English” or we should rather talk of “English in Cameroon”? In order to answer this question, a knowledge of the complex sociolinguistic landscape of the country and its colonial history are necessary prerequisites. Considering that the country was colonially governed by France and Britain, 80 % of the country is today French-speaking and 20 % is English-speaking, coupled with the fact that French and English are used as the official languages of the country, co-existing with more than 280 indigenous languages. Given this type of a complex sociolinguistic landscape and the fact that French tends to be more dominant than English in official transactions and the fact that it is spoken by up to 80 % of the population, the exact status and nature of English in this postcolonial multilingual nation is often masked and difficult to discern.

In this lecture, it will be demonstrated that Cameroon displays an ambivalent situation, whereby we can talk of “Cameroon English” and “English in Cameroon” at the same time. In other words, Cameroon simultaneously belongs to the Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru 1985), making it possible for one to talk of “Cameroon English” and “English in Cameroon”. As concerns the former (i.e. Cameroon English), Anglophone Cameroonians are speakers of a new English, which has undergone the processes of indigenisation, acculturation, and nativisation that characterise other Englishes spoken in the Outer Circle. With regard to the latter (i.e. English in Cameroon), Francophone Cameroonians are speakers or users of what Kachru (1985, 1986) refers to as a “performance variety”. The functions of the language among Francophone users are more limited than what obtains in the variety spoken by Anglophone Cameroonians. In addition, features of this performance variety spoken by Francophones are not yet systematic and predictable enough to be qualified as a new English, hence the term English in Cameroon.

The lecture will focus more on “Cameroon English” and will exemplify the extent to which the language has been indigenized in Cameroon, with empirical evidence from different linguistic levels (phonology, syntax, lexis, etc.). It will also illustrate the diverse functions of the language, which explain the nativisation process that characterises this new English, known as Cameroon English.