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# *Homophones and Heterophones in Cameroon English*

## *1. Introduction*

One of the strong points often advanced to defend the integrity and acceptability of the New Englishes in general and Cameroon English (CamE) in particular is the fact that these non-native Englishes display systematic and predictable linguistic peculiarities which are significantly different from those of native Englishes. Previous studies on CamE (*e.g.* Masanga 1982, Mbangwana 1987, Kouna 1991, Simo Bobda 1994 and Ngefac 2003) have, in fact, reported that it is characterised by such phonological processes as the replacement of Received Pronunciation (RP) sounds with those of CamE, the reduction of long sounds to short ones, the monophthongisation of RP diphthongs, the devoicing of final consonants, the alveolarisation of apico-dental sounds and a stress placement that contrasts with that of RP or any native English variety. The main thrust of this paper is not to show, through these phonological processes, how CamE is different from older varieties of English (RP, British English, American English, etc.). The objectives of the paper are manifold. First, to prove that, through the above phonological processes, homophones of special types are identifiable in CamE. Second, to show that RP homophones are realised in CamE as words that are phonologically distinct. Third, to demonstrate that some RP heterophones or words that are spelt the same, but have different pronunciations and different meanings are articulated in CamE with the same pronunciations.

## 2. Homophonic pairs in CamE

One of the phonological processes that characterises CamE is the replacement of native English or RP sounds with those of CamE. Through this process, the following pairs of words tend to be homophones in CamE.

- a) learnt and lend
- b) murder and mother
- c) worm and warm
- d) burn and born

In (a), the sound /ɜ/ in *learnt* is replaced with /ɛ/, yielding the pronunciation /lent/ for RP /lɜnt/. As a result, *learnt* tends to be perfectly homophonic with “lend” in CamE, a situation which is not observable at all in either RP or any of the native varieties of English. It should be noted that the final voiced alveolar plosive of *lend* is rendered voiceless, making the word to be pronounced also as /lent/. The sets of words in (b) equally tend to be homophones in CamE as a result of the replacement of RP segments. The sound /ɜ/ in *murder* is replaced in CamE with /ɔ/ and, as a result, the word is pronounced as /mɔda/. It can also be noticed from the pronunciation of the word that the final schwa in CamE is replaced with /a/. As concerns the pronunciation of *mother*, /ʌ/ is also replaced with /ɔ/ and the apico-dental fricative is alveolarised to yield /d/. Given that the final schwa is always replaced with /a/, the two words, *murder* and *mother*, are realised in CamE as /mɔda/, hence their homophonic character. The replacement of /ɜ/ with /ɔ/ in the words *worm* and *burn* in (c) and (d) above also makes the words to be homophonic with *warm* and *born* respectively. In effect, RP /wɜm/ (*worm*) and /bɜn/ (*burn*) are realised in CamE as /wɔm/ and /bɔn/ respectively. As a consequence, *worm* and *warm* and *burn* and *born* tend to be perfect homophones.

The replacement of /ʌ/ with /ɔ/ in CamE also makes the following pairs of words to be homophones:

- (a) cut, cord and cot
- (b) money and morning
- (c) bus and boss
- (d) fun and Fon ( a local chief in Cameroonian pragmatics)
- (e) dull and doll

The word *cut* in (a) is articulated in RP as /kʌt/, but in CamE the vowel of the word, /ʌ/, is replaced with /ɔ/ and, as a result, the word is pronounced as /kɔt/, the pronunciation that is observable for the three words in the set. It should be noted that the /l/ of *cord* and the /ɒ/ of *cot* are also replaced with /ɔ/ and the final consonant of *cord* is also devoiced. The three words in (a) are therefore realised in CamE as /kɔt/, instead of RP /kʌt/, /kɔd/, and /kɒt/ respectively. In (b), instead of RP /mʌni/, the word “money” is produced in CamE as /mɔni/ and RP; /mɔniŋ/ in most cases is also realised as /mɔni/, except in the speech of those who make conscious efforts to approximate RP or any standard native speech. In (c), both words are produced as /bɔs/, instead of RP /bʌs/ and /bɒs/. The word *fun* in (d) is realised in CamE as /fɔn/, the same pronunciation that is obtained for the word *Fon*, the title given to the local head of a village in Cameroonian pragmatics. As a result, RP /fʌn/ (fun) and the word *Fon* tend to be perfect homophones. In (e), the replacement of /ʌ/ in *dull* and /ɔ/ in *doll* with /ɔ/ respectively makes the two words to be realised in CamE as homophones.

Homophonic pairs are produced in CamE also as a result of the replacement of RP diphthongs. The diphthong /iə/ in the word *mere* is replaced in CamE with /ɛ/, rendering the word as /mɛ/. CamE equally replaces the RP diphthong of the word “may” with /ɛ/. As a result, the words *mere* and *may* tend to be homophones. The two words are, in fact, produced in CamE as /mɛ/. A similar situation is observed in the realisation of the diphthongs of *pay* and *pear*. In RP, *pay* is produced as /pei/ and “pear” as /pɛə/, but in CamE, the diphthongs of the two words are monothongised or replaced by the

monophthong /ɛ/, rendering the two words as /pɛ/. The two words are therefore realised as homophones. The pronunciation of the words *James*, *germs*, *phase* and *first* offer other interesting illustrations of homophonic pairs in CamE. Interestingly, the diphthong of the words *James* and *phase*, /ei/, is replaced or monophthongised as /ɛ/.

As a result, the words tend to be homophones with the words *germs* and *first* respectively. It should be noted that the nurse vowel /ɜ/ of *germs* and *first* is also replaced by /ɛ/, rendering the words as /gɛmz/ and /fɛst/ respectively.

This therefore makes it possible for *James* and *germs* and *phase* and *first* to be homophonic pairs in CamE. The monophthongisation of RP diphthongs also makes the following pairs of words to be homophones:

- (a) plate and plait
- (b) create and crate
- (c) late and let
- (d) said and set
- (e) main and men
- (f) made and met

In (a), *plate* is realised in CamE as /plet/, instead of RP /pleit/. This is an evidence of the monophthongisation of the diphthong. The word *plait*, which is realised in RP as /plæt/, tends to be pronounced in CamE as /plet/. Consequently, *plate* and *plait*, which are not homophones in RP, have the tendency to be realised as perfect homophones in CamE. Similarly, the set of words in (b) tend to be homophones as a result of the monophthongisation of the diphthong of the two words. The word *crate*, pronounced in RP as /kreit/, is realised in CamE as /kret/. CamE speakers equally pronounced *create* as /kret/ and sometimes as /kriet/, instead of RP /krieit/. The CamE variant /kret/ shows that, besides the monophthongisation of /ei/, the high front vowel /i/, which precedes the diphthong, is in most cases muted. The obvious consequence is that *create* and *crate*

tend to be homophonic, a situation which is not observable in RP or in any native English accent. The same tendency is observed in the pronunciation of *late* and *let* in (c). The monophthongisation of the sound /ei/ in *late* makes the word to be pronounced as /let/, the same pronunciation that is obtained for the word *let*. In (d), the /ei/ of *said* is also realised as /e/ and the final alveolar voiced plosive is produced as the voiceless counterpart.

As result, *said* and *set* tend to be perfect homophones, as the two words are pronounced as /set/. The diphthong /ei/ of the words *main*, *tame*, *made* in (e), (f) and (g) are equally monophthongised to yield /e/. and, as a result, *main*, *made* and *tame* are pronounced as /men/, /met/, /tem/. In the pronunciation of *made*, the final voiced alveolar sound is devoiced. It should equally be noted that generally /ɜ/ is realised as /e/ or /ɛ/. This makes it possible for *main* and *men*, *made* and *met*, and *tame* and *term* to be homophonic pairs.

The reduction of long vowels to short ones makes the following pairs of words to be homophones in CamE:

- (a) sit and seat
- (b) fill and feel
- (c) full and fool
- (d) pull and pool
- (e) cat and cart
- (f) pot and port

In (a) and (b), the sound /ɪ/ in *sit* and *fill* and the sound /i/ in *seat* and *feel* are pronounced as /ɪ/, a sound which is neither the short /ɪ/ nor the long /i/. Similarly, in (c) and (d), the sound /ʊ/ in *full* and *pull* and the long counterpart /u/ in *fool* and *pool* are both articulated as /ʊ/. In (e), the low front vowel /æ/ in *cat* and the back low long vowel /ɑ/ in *cart* are pronounced as /ɑ/, and /ɑ/ is neither /æ/ nor /ɑ/. The /ɒ/ of *pot* and the /ɔ/ of *port* are equally realised in CamE as /ɔ/.

Another process through which homophones are obtained in CamE is the alveolarisation of apico-dental sounds. The following pairs of words provide vivid illustrations:

- (a) that and dad
- (b) further and fodder
- (c) order and other
- (d) bath and bad

The words *that* and *dad* tend to be homophones in CamE. This is due to the fact the /ð/ of *that* is alveolarised to yield /d/ and the final consonant of *dad* tends to be devoiced to yield /t/. Given that /æ/ is generally replaced with /a/, the two words are pronounced in CamE as /dat/, hence their homophonic character.

In (b), the alveolarisation of the apico-dental /ð/ in *further* makes the word to have an identical pronunciation with *fodder* and the two words are actually pronounced as /fɔdə/, though the pronunciation /foda/ for *fodder* is also observable in CamE. The words *order* and *other* in (c), interestingly, are also realised as homophones in CamE. Instead of RP /ɔdə/ and /ʌ/ for *order* and *other* respectively, CamE speakers produce /ɔdə/ as the pronunciation for the two words, thereby rendering *order* and *other* as homophones. It should be noted here that, besides the alveolarisation of /ð/ in *other*, the vowel /ʌ/ is rendered as a back round high sound and the schwa /ə/ of the two words is replaced by the typical CamE sound /a/. In (d), the alveolarisation of the voiceless apico-dental fricative /θ/ in *bath*, the devoicedness of the alveolar voiced plosive of *bad* and the replacement of /æ/ in *bad* and /a/ in *bath* by /a/ also make the two words to be perfect homophones in CamE.

The table below summarises homophonic pairs in CamE discussed so far in this paper.

Table I: Homophones in CamE

Words	CamE	RP
learnt, lend	lent	lɛnt, lɛnt
murder, mother	mɔdə	mɜdə, mʌðə
burn, born	bɔn	bɜn, bɔn -
cot, cut, cord	kɔt	kɒt, kʌt, kɔd
morning, money	mɔni	mɔniŋ, mʌni
bus, boss	bɔs	bʌs, bɔs
fun, Fon	fɔn	fʌn, fɔn
dull, doll	dɔl	dʌl, dɒl
mere, may	me, mɛ	mɪə, mɛɪ
pear, pay	pɛ, pɛ	pɛə, pɛɪ
James, germs	dʒɛmz	dʒeɪmz, dʒɜmz
plate, plait	plet	pleɪt, plæt
late, let	let	leɪt, lɛt
said, set	set	seɪd, sɛt
tame, term	tem	teɪm, tɜm
main, men	men	meɪn, mɛn
made, met	met	meɪd, mɛt
sit, seat	sɪt	sɪt, si:t
full, fool	ful	fʊl, fu:l
fill, feel	fil	fɪl, fi:l
pull, pool	pul	pʊl, pu:l
cat, cart	kat	kæt, kɑt
pot, port	pɔt	pɒt, pɔt
that, dad	dat	ðæt, dæd
further, fodder	fɔdə	fɜðə, fɒdə
order, other	ɔdə	ɔdə, ʌðə
bad, bath	bat	bæd, bɑθ

In the discussion so far in this paper, the target has been to prove that homophones of special types are identifiable in CamE. These homophones are obtained through the influence of certain phonological processes that characterise this variety of English. Be-



fore shifting the discussion to heterophones, it is worthwhile to discuss how CamE speakers realise RP homophones.

### 3. CamE speakers' realisation of RP homophones

Most words that are pronounced in RP as homophones are articulated in CamE as if they are not phonologically identical. The following table presents homophonic pairs in RP which have different pronunciations in Cameroon.

Table II: The pronunciation of RP homophones in CamE

Words	Received Pronunciation	CamE Pronunciation
corps, core	kɔ	kɔps, kɔ
aren't, aunt	ɑnt	arent, ant
laud, lord	lɔd	laud, lɔd
mare, mayor	mɛə	mɛ, mejɔ
colonel, kernel	kɛnl	kɔlɔnel, kɔlonel, kolo- nel, kɛnel
draft, draught	draʃt	draft, draut
taw, tore	tɔ	tau, tɔ
key, quay	ki:	ki, kwei
their, there	ðɛə	dia, dea
air, heir	ɛə	ea, hea

The first column of the table shows linguistic items that are realised as homophones in RP. The second column provides the pronunciation of the items in RP and the third column displays the different pronunciations that are obtained for the words in CamE. As seen from the table, CamE speakers do not observe the silent letters in the word *corps* and tend to articulate the word as /kɔps/, a pronunciation that contrasts with RP /kɔ/. As a result, *corps* and *core* are not realised in CamE as homophones, as is the case in RP.

The pronunciation of *aren't* in CamE is orthographically induced and, as a result, it is realised as /arent/, instead of RP /ɑnt/

which is homophonous with the word *aunt*. The obvious consequence is that *aren't* and *aunt* are not pronounced in CamE as homophones, despite the fact that they are perfect homophones in RP and in other native varieties of English. *Laud* and *lord* which are homophones in RP are phonologically distinct in CamE. CamE speakers are influenced by the spelling of *laud* and tend to pronounce the word with the diphthong /au/, instead of RP /ɔ/, yielding the pronunciation /laud/ which contrasts with RP /lɔd/. In the pronunciation of *mare* and *mayor* in CamE, the diphthong /ɛə/ in *mare* is monophthongised or reduced to /ɛ/ while the diphthong in *mayor* is replaced with /ejɔ/, to yield /mɛ/ and /mejɔ/ respectively. The pronunciations of the two words are rather contrastive in CamE, instead of being homophonic as in RP.

The table above also shows that *colonel* and *kernel* are not pronounced in CamE as homophones, as is the case in RP. *Colonel* is either pronounced in CamE as /kɔlənel/, /kɔlonel/, /kɛnel/ or /kolonel/, but /kɔlənel/ constitutes mainstream CamE pronunciation for the word. The RP pronunciation /kɜnl/ is seldom heard in the speech of CamE speakers. This implies that the main CamE is not a homophone of *kernel*, as is the case in RP. CamE speakers do not equally find it logical to articulate *draft* and *draught* as homophones. *Draft* is pronounced in CamE as /draɪt/. In such a pronunciation, RP /au/ is replaced with /a/. *Draught*, on the other hand, is pronounced with the diphthong /au/, instead of RP /ɑ/, to yield the pronunciation /draut/. In this case, *draft* and *draught* tend not to be homophones in CamE, despite the fact that the two words are perfect homophones in RP. As the table also shows, *taw* and *tore*, *key* and *quay*, *their* and *there*, *air* and *heir* are not realised in CamE as homophones, unlike in RP where the pairs of words are perfect homophones.

#### ***4. The realisation of heterophones in CamE***

Heterophones refer to words that have the same spelling, but different pronunciations and different meanings. Bobda and Mbangwana (1993) identify a good number of such words in RP. But in

CamE speakers tend to produce the same pronunciation for the words, instead of making them phonologically distinct as in RP. The word *tear*, for instance, has two different pronunciations in RP, depending on the meanings. When it refers to water from the eyes, it is pronounced /tɪə/, but when it is used as a verb to mean “to pull apart or into pieces”, it is realised as /teə/. But CamE speakers, interestingly, articulate the two words as /tɪə/ and sometimes as /tia/. In this case, it is the context of discussion that can reduce intelligibility problems if a CamE speaker is involved in a conversation with an interlocutor who is not familiar with that variety of English.

The word *committee* equally has two pronunciations for two different meanings. When it refers to a group of people responsible for a particular duty, it is pronounced with the stress on the middle syllable to yield *com'mittee*, but when it refers to a person who is committed, it is articulated with the stress on the last syllable as *commi'ttee*. The tendency in CamE is that there is an indiscriminate use of the two pronunciations. The following table presents other linguistic items that are pronounced differently in RP depending on the meanings of the words (see Bobda and Mbangwana 1993), but which are realised with identical pronunciations in CamE.

*Table 3: Heterophones that are articulated with identical pronunciations in CamE*

Words	RP	CamE
Preside (to direct)	Pre[z]ide	Pre[s]ide
Preside (preceding side)	Pre[s]ide	
Reside (to live in a place)	Re[z]ide	Re[s]ide
Reside (side anew)	Re[s]ide	
Resound (reverberate)	Re[z]ound	Re[s]ound
Resound (sound anew)	Re[s]ound	
Resort (a relaxation place)	Re[z]ort	Re[s]ort
Resort (sort anew)	Re[s]ort	

In the first column of the table, each word presented has two meanings. The different pronunciations that are obtained for the two

meanings are provided in the second column. The third column shows that in CamE only one pronunciation is obtained for the different meanings, an indication that CamE speakers do not use the words as heterophones or as words that have the same spelling for different pronunciations and different meanings. The table below equally provides linguistic items that are spelt the same and pronounced differently in RP, depending on the part of speech of the word, but tend to have the same pronunciation in CamE.

Table 4: Other examples of heterophones in RP that have identical pronunciation in CamE

Words	RP	CamE
House (verb)	/haʊz/	/haus/
House (noun)	/haus/	
Use (verb)	/juz/	/jus/
Use (noun)	/jus/	
Close (verb )	/kləʊz/	/kləʊs/
Close (adjective, adverb)	/kləʊs/	
Abuse (verb)	/əbjuz/	/əbjus/
Abuse (noun)	/əbjus/	
Excuse(verb)	/ik skjuz/	/ik skjus/
Excuse(noun)	/ik skjus/	

As the table shows, the words presented in the first column have the same spelling, but belong to different parts of speech. The second column provides the different ways of pronouncing the words in RP and the third column shows that in CamE, there is only one pronunciation for each of the pairs of words.

### ***5. Implications***

In this paper, so far, a number of issues have been underscored. First, it has been shown that the phonological processes that characterise CamE make it possible for homophones that are not

observable in RP to be produced in this variety of English. Second, it is proven that RP homophones are realised in CamE as words that are phonologically distinct. Third, some RP heterophones or words that are spelt the same, but have different pronunciations and different meanings are articulated in CamE with the same pronunciations. What are therefore the implications of these phonological peculiarities of CamE exemplified in this paper?

The implications are manifold. First, it is a further indication that CamE is very different from RP and should be codified and standardised. It should be noted that purists (*e.g.* Chevillet 1999) think that the peculiarities of the New Englishes are errors and not necessarily indications that such varieties of English have reached the matured stage of standardisation. Second, since the notions of homophone and heterophone exist in CamE in a different way, a classroom teacher in Cameroon whose target is RP may not easily draw vivid examples from local speech to illustrate the teaching of such concepts. Third, the systematic and predictable nature of CamE and the absence of many RP features in CamE is a suggestion that CamE should be the main variety of English to be emphasised in the Cameroonian classroom, given that learners can easily draw inspirations and motivations from their immediate environment.

### *5. Explicating features of CamE*

In spite of the fact that many previous attempts (*e.g.* Masanga 1982, Mbangwana 1987, Bobda 2000a, 2000b, Ngefac 2003) have been made to account for the features of CamE, a paper of this nature cannot be complete without a focus on the historical, sociolinguistic, pedagogical and psychological realities of Cameroon, which make CamE to be very different from native varieties of English.

The historical realities of Cameroon have shaped CamE in a particular way. After the discovery of the country in 1472 by the Portuguese (Mbassi-Manga 1973 and Todd 1991), other Europeans like the Dutch, the Swedes, the Poles, the Danes, the Spaniards, the Germans, the French and the English lived in Cameroon at different points in time either for commercial, political, educational, religious

or colonial reasons. The presence of these countries significantly affected the use of the English language in Cameroon. It should be noted that some researchers (e.g. Bobda 2000b) have even attributed the use of deviant features in Cameroon to the substandard English of some of the earlier settlers who were not even native speakers of English. In effect therefore, the peculiarity of CamE can be partly attributed to the influence from the different Europeans who have lived in Cameroon at different historical points.

The sociolinguistic landscape of Cameroon also accounts for the English language situation in the country. The heavy multilingual situation of Cameroon tends to influence the use of English. Besides French and English as the two official languages of the country, and Pidgin English as the lingua franca, there are approximately 248 indigenous languages in Cameroon. These languages affect the use of English at all linguistic levels, especially at the phonological level. CamE also experiences significant influence from other varieties of English spoken in Cameroon. In fact, there are traces of RP, British English accent, American English accent, Nigerian English accent and Ghanaian English accent in Cameroon. In such a situation, CamE pronunciation is bound to be influenced significantly by these varieties of English spoken in Cameroon and by the different languages that are used in Cameroon. In effect therefore, CamE accent is a conglomeration of accents.

Pedagogically, the phonological peculiarities of CamE can be accounted for by a number of reasons. First, English Language teachers in Cameroon do not often teach RP, which is presumably the target in the Cameroonian classroom. This is in most cases because they themselves have little knowledge of RP. As a result, they are bound to expose learners only to the local accent that characterises their own speech. Second, the lack of didactic materials to teach RP discourages most teachers from making an effort to teach it, an accent which is considered by purists to be the model accent in Cameroon. Third, the absence of an official statement from the government on which variety of English to be taught tends to influence non-purists to promote only the local accent.

Psychologically, Cameroonians have a strong attachment for their variety of English. They feel that CamE is a symbol of their identity and any attempt to approximate a foreign accent is jeopardising their cultural heritage. In this light, a conscious attempt is made by a number of patriotic Cameroonians to distance themselves from any foreign accent, though some see a foreign accent as a prestige. It has even been reported by Mbangwana (1987) that Cameroonians who make efforts to speak RP are often looked upon with contempt rather than admiration. In this type of situation, CamE is bound to be the unavoidable companion of most Cameroonian speakers of English.

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