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Loans from some Indigenous Languages in Cameroon English

Cameroon is a Central African country which shares a border with five countries: Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon and Nigeria. In the past, it has had trading links with several European countries, but has actually been colonised by Germany, France and England. As Germany was defeated in the First World War, its possessions were shared between France and England (Neba: 1987). The French Cameroon became independent in 1960, and in 1961, it reunited with part of the English Cameroon. The first government of the united Cameroon adopted both French and English as official languages. Today the country has a population of around 12 million people (1991 National Census), of which the English-speaking community is estimated impressionistically at twenty per cent.

Several languages beside these two official ones are used in the country. At the present stage of investigation, there exist some 236 which are spoken natively (Dieu et al.: 1983) among which four are lingua francas: Ffulde, Ewondo, Duala, and Arab Choa (Chia: 1983). But the most widely used lingua franca is Pidgin English, a composite language made up of features that come from English and the indigenous languages. Though widely used in Cameroon, Pidgin English has unofficial status and low prestige in certain circles (Mbangwana: 1983), unlike French and English, which are rated very high. Actually English and Pidgin English constitute the two extremes of the scale of English in Cameroon, which ranges from a somewhat acrolectal form, spoken by educated people (Kouega: 1991), through a general form spoken by semi-educated people and which can be labelled here mesolect, to a

basic form dominated by Pidgin English and the home languages and spoken by school dropouts and illiterate people (Todd, 1982).

This study focuses on the loan terms which occur in both this basic form and its acrolectal counterpart. Previous studies of the lexis of Cameroon English have focused on loans from French, the dominant official language (Yango: 1975). Those which have broached borrowings from the home languages have done so only to show that French is not, after all, the only donor (Cho: 1980), though it is the major one (Simo: 1994). Other donor languages which have thus far received little scholarly attention include Cameroon Pidgin English and the various indigenous languages.

An analysis of the sample of data described above has shown that the loans contributed to English by Cameroon languages refer broadly to five semantic domains and that they are obtained from linguistic processes such as loan translation or semantic extension. We shall consider in turn the nature of these loan terms (1), and the linguistic processes underlying their formation (2).

1. THE NATURE OF THE BORROWED TERMS

Most loans from Cameroon languages are drawn from the fields of traditional ruling systems (1.1), economic systems (1.2), honorific titles (1.3), dances and items of clothing (1.4), and foodstuff (1.5).

1. 1 - Traditional Ruling Systems

Cameroon is a multicultural country whose constituent ethnic groups have a structure comparable with that of most modern societies. Most cultural groups are ruled by *traditional chiefs*, whose position or rank is known as *traditional chieftaincy*. Depending on the geographical area these chiefs belong to, they are called *Lamido* (North), *Sultan* (Bamun area), *Mbobok* (Bassa area), *Fon* (Grassfield area) to mention only these few.

Chiefs are enthroned by a special group of notables known as *King makers*; they are assisted by private secretaries called *chindas*, by security agents called *kwifons*, and sometimes by women political groups like *takumbengs*, who provided tight security measures to the Chairman of the radical opposition for Union for Change in the North-west province.

Some chiefs, namely *paramount chiefs* or *Fons*, rule very big communities, like that of the Bafaw in the South-west province. Other chiefs, namely *local chiefs*, run small tribes within the Fons' territories. In the South-west province, they are called chiefs. Elsewhere they are assigned titles like *Fai* in Nso kingdom or *Nkem*, among some of the grassfield kingdoms.

It should be noted in passing that in Cameroon English, the adjective *local* as in *local chief* above may mean "something of a lower grade or rank" or "something which is not modern or sophisticated":

The battle for the control of Mutengene took place with peace boys pitched against the anti-peace boys, who . . . decided to come out with cutlasses, clubs, spears, bows and arrows and other *local war arsenals* against the peace force. (*Le Messenger*, Vol.II, N° 14, 12)

1.2 - Traditional Economic System.

It has been observed that Cameroonians who have a common background tend to organise themselves into small groups to solve their everyday problems. Such small groups are commonly known as *associations*, and the individual members refer to themselves as *sons and daughters of* (a given community), as in:

The town of Mundemba...came alive as from Friday evening as *sons and daughters of* the South-west Province came from all corners of the Republic to attend the 5th General Assembly of the South-west Elites Association (SWELA). (*Le Messenger*, Vol. II, N° 15, 16)

In such associations, two major financial activities take place; namely a *trouble bank*, and a *njangi*. A trouble bank is a special assistance fund to which money is contributed at regular intervals by every member and from which a fixed amount is deducted and given to any member who happens to be a victim of a misfortune such as an accident or death. A *njangi*, on the other hand, is a financial activity similar to the modern banking system but different from it in that it is based on mutual trust. This is the reason why, for instance, a jobless but hard working member who has neither personal property nor real estate may be given a substantial loan, a risk that very few modern bankers would take.

This financial activity is so widespread in certain communities that the word *njangi* is sometimes used synonymously with *association*. Structurally, the term collocates with the verbs *play*, *throw*, *pick*, *chop*, *sell*, *buy*, and *win*: all members of a *njangi* must *throw* it or *play* it, that is, they must hand in their contributions. But only one member *picks* it, *chops* it or *wins* it each time. In some associations the *njangi* is *sold* to any member in need who can afford to *buy* it, as in an auction sale, where the highest bidder is the winner.

1.3 - Honorific titles

In addition to institutionalised honorific titles like Professor, Doctor, Sir, the traditional titles *Pa-* and *Ma-* are used to address elderly men and women, as instanced by *Pa Foncha* in:

The Director General of the British Council Sir Richard Francis would have had working sessions with *Pa Foncha* before proceeding... (*Le Messenger*, Vol. II, N° 14, 10)

It should also be noted that in Cameroon cultures, it is somewhat irreverent to call an elderly person's name without affixing a honorific title to it. This title can be attached to either the family name or the forename; hence the full name *Pa John Mukake* can be referred to as *Pa John* or *Pa Mukake*.

Some speakers of English in Cameroon tend to extend this cultural rule to English titles, as in:

The Director General of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, *Dr Lawrence Stephen*, arrived in Cameroon today for an assessment of IITA projects in the country...*Dr Lawrence Stephen* emphasized on high level training... *Dr Lawrence* is expected to visit... (CRTV Radio News, 1988)

where *Dr Lawrence Stephen* is also referred to as *Dr Lawrence* instead of *Dr Stephen*. Although this cultural interference is very rare in the news discourse it is however very frequent in everyday conversations among Cameroonians, both English-speaking and French-speaking.

1.4 - Dances and Items of Clothing

Most traditional dances in Cameroon are practised within the confines of specific geographical areas. The most popular ones include *juju* (performed by dancers wearing masks), *samba* (an end-of-year dance), *lela* (popular in the Bali area), *bottle-dance* (played at funerals and social gatherings).

Items of clothing, on the other hand, include *lapa* or *rapa* (worn by women), *kaba* (worn especially by pregnant women), *okrika* (second-hand clothing of all types, imported from developed countries).

1.5 – Foodstuff

The domain of foodstuff is very productive in Cameroon English vocabulary. Idowu (1985) classifies foodstuffs into five categories, labelled meat, fruits and vegetables, grains, seeds and nuts, beverages and drinks, and finally, dishes.

Meat is generally obtained from domestic animals (pig, goat); it may also be obtained from wild animals like *ngombe* (alligator), *chukchuk*

beef (porcupine), *cane rat* or *cutting grass* (hedge hog), *giant rat*, *palm rat* or *ground beef* (a mouse-like animal), *bush pig* (boar), *bush cow* (buffalo), *bush dog* (wolf). It should be noted here that where a wild animal has a domestic equivalent, the term *bush* is used to refer to the wild one, for example *bush fowl* (partridge), *bush mouse* (mole). Meat can also come from birds, fishes, and shellfishes such as *koba koba* (turkey), *makadjo* (cod), *bouga* or *malulu* (herring), *njanga* (cray fish, shrimps).

Fruits include mango, pineapple, and also *lemon*, *mandarin*, *pear* and *plum*. The term *lemon* is used to refer to both “lemon” and “lime.” *Mandarin* is preferred to “tangerine,” and *pear*, pronounced *lpial*, is preferred to “avocado pear.” Similarly, *plum*, also called *bush butter*, is used to refer to a tropical fruit, as will be shown in 2.2 below.

Vegetables, on the other hand, are sub-divided into three types. First, leafy green vegetables comprise cabbage, *spinach* or *bush green*, *bitter leaf* or *ndole*, *eru* (sliced bush green), *huckleberry leaf* or *country jamajama*, to name but a few. Secondly, root vegetables consist mainly of cassava, *potato* and *yam*. Potatoes are either *white* or *sweet*, and yams may be *white*, *yellow* or *sweet*. A sub-type of yam, called *cocoyam*, includes *mamie cocoyam* or *mamie coco* for short, where *mamie* is the Pidgin English word for “mother.” Thirdly, fruit and stem vegetables include *okro* (okra), *jakato* (garden egg), *aubergine* (egg plant), *elephant grass* (pennisetum purpurem), and *pumpkin* (a melon-like fruit which becomes a calabash or gourd when dry).

Common grains include rice, maize, and millet. Starch from these grains can be cooked to produce a semi-liquid food called *corn pap* or *rice pap*, which is served at breakfast. Seeds, on the other hand, are of various types. *Melon seeds* contain *egusi*, while *pumpkin seeds* contain *country egusi*; both are used in place of groundnuts in certain soups. *Bush mango seeds* are edible in certain tribes, but *njansang*, a wood-oil-nut, is a common ingredient for soups, stews and sauces.

Beverages and drinks include coffee and tea as well as *fever grass* (lemon grass tea), so called because it is believed to treat fever or

malaria. Drinks are generally referred to by the generic terms *mimbo* and *corn beer*. *Mimbo* comprises *palm wine*, obtained from palm trees, and *raffia palm-wine*, obtained from a palm tree-like plant. *Corn beer*, on the other hand, includes *nkang* (corn gruel) and *quacha* (corn beer with a high alcoholic content).

Dishes which are served for breakfast are mainly *corn pap* (semi-liquid food made out of corn), *puff puff* or *akara balls* (fried balls made out of wheat flour), *egusi koki*, *cassava koki*, and others, where *koki* means meal wrapped in banana leaves and tied in bundles.

Common meals served for lunch or dinner are *equan* also spelt *ekwan* (grated *cocoyam* wrapped in *cocoyam* leaves and cooked with salt, oil and other ingredients); *achu* (pounded *cocoyam* eaten with a yellowish soup, also called *banga soup*, where *banga* is the Pidgin for palm-tree nuts; this soup sometimes contains *kanda*, singed skin of cow); *equacoco* (grated *cocoyam* wrapped in plantain leaves and eaten with any soup); *garri* (cassava flour boiled and eaten with any soup); and *fufu* (any pounded vegetables or grains), to name only a few.

Corn fufu and *cassava fufu* also called *kumkum*, are very popular among the Grassfield people. The utensils used to prepare *fufu* include a solid-based pot, a spatula and a stick, which may be obtained from raffia palm trees, hence *bamboo stick*, or from any hard-wood tree, hence *wooden stick*.

2- PROCESSES OF FORMATION OF THE BORROWED TERMS

Several processes underlie the formation of these terms, namely borrowing and loan translation (2.1), semantic extension and analogy (2.2), and compounding (2.3).

2-1- Borrowing and Loan Translation

As was noted above, the traditional terms in Cameroon English are borrowed from Pidgin English, which has in turn borrowed them from the various indigenous languages in the country. Instances of such direct loans include *chinda* (private secretary of a king), *njangi* (association), *samba* (a popular dance), *kaba* (gown), *makadjo* (cod), *egusi* (melon seeds), or *jakato* (garden egg).

In most languages, there exists a term meaning the “children or natives of” a given tribe; its equivalent in Cameroon English is *sons and daughters of*. Another instance of loan translation is the term *trouble bank* (assistance fund), a sum of money put aside by an association and used only when one of its members happens to have a misfortune.

2-2- Semantic Extension and Analogy

Some terms are clear cases of semantic extension of existing English words. Take for instance *plum*, *pear*, and *huckleberry*. These words seem to have been borrowed first from English by Pidgin English, where their meanings were widened to designate tropical fruits, and then from Pidgin English by Cameroon English and the various indigenous languages.

Plum refers to a soft round, smooth-skinned fruit with a stone-like seed. To most Cameroonians, it is a hard oval smooth-skinned fruit with a stone-like seed ; it is violet in colour and rich in fat and becomes soft when exposed to a source of heat. In other words, the Cameroonian *plum* seems to have received its name because of likeness in appearance and seeds, but it differs from the European ‘plum’ in its texture (hard) and its shape (oval).

Similarly, *pear* has a fatty flesh that tastes like butter whereas its European counterpart is a sweet juicy fruit. *Huckleberry*, commonly known as *country jamajama*, refers to the small, dark-blue, edible berry of

a low shrub that grows in America, whereas in Cameroon, it refers to a plant whose leaves are edible, but not its dark-bluish berries.

Other loan terms are cases of semantic analogy, that is, an imitation of a feature associated with the things concerned. For instance the name of the animal *cutting grass* (hedge hog) comes from the analogy between what it feeds on (a cane-like type of grass) and the way it eats (by cutting the grass as if with a cutlass). Similarly, the weed *elephant grass* is a plant whose leaves are literally as huge as an elephant, and the animal *giant rat* is a big mouse-like animal, also called a *ground beef*, as it lives in burrows dug in the ground.

This process of semantic analogy has enriched Cameroon English: *born house* (birth celebration) is a house where a baby is born and people gather to celebrate the event, and *burning corn* is grilled corn that is still not *roast corn*. In the same light, *kanda* (a type of meat) is named after the Pidgin term for “belt”: it is the singed skin of cow used as meat in certain soups, especially *achu*. The likeness between “belt” and *kanda* derives from three facts: they both come from the same material (skin of cow or other animals); they are tapering in shape, and are both too strong to cut or chew. Other such words include *mamiécoco* (*cocoyam* tuber), literally the mother of *cocoyam*, and *fever grass* (lemon grass) a hot drink that is believed to treat fever.

2-3- Compounding

Compounding seems to be the most productive process of lexical innovations. The four words which are brought in constant service are *local*, *beef*, *country*, and *bush*. *Local*, which means “of a lower rank” and “not sophisticated,” collocates with “chief” and “arsenal” to yield *local chief* (second class chief) and *local arsenal* (rudimentary war tool) as seen above.

Beef, on the other hand, co-occurs with “ground” and “chukchuk,” giving rise to the compounds *ground beef* (palm rat) and *chukchuk beef* (porcupine). Similarly *country*, which is a Pidgin adjective meaning “indigenous, home grown,” is used pejoratively to indicate that the word it modifies is native to the land; hence, *country egusi* (seeds from calabashes and gourds); *country jamajama* or huckleberry (a type of vegetable grown by peasants); *country Sunday* (the day in the African eight-day week system on which the land is not supposed to be tilled; it may fall on any modern week day, not necessarily a Sunday).

Lastly, the word *bush* meaning in Pidgin English “wild” can collocate with words, referring to any domestic objects or animals that have a wild equivalent. Hence *bush pig* (boar), *bush cow* (buffalo), *bush dog* (wolf), *bush fowl* (partridge), *bush butter* (also called plum, a wild fruit that tastes like butter), *bush mango* (a type of mango that grows in the forest).

By extension, *bush man* is an abuse meaning “a brute, a man who behaves like a beast, in an uncivil way.” This term is also found in Australian English (Eagleson, 1984), together with *bush fire*, *bush mechanic*. The term “bush telegraph,” which is of the same origin as the above, has made its way into the standard English lexicon (Hornby, 1974).

Other cases of compounding are reduplicatives, like *jamajama* (a leafy green vegetable), *juju* (a kind of dance), *chukchuk beef* (porcupine, deriving from the Pidgin verb *chuk* meaning “to sting,” “to prickle;” *koba koba* (turkey), *puff-puff* (fried balls made out of flour), *kumkum* (cassava flour), and to a lesser extent, *quacha* (fermented corn beer).

These three types of word-formation processes are by far the most productive in the field considered here. Other processes are scarce. Cases of clipping are instanced by *cutting* whose full form is *cutting grass* (hedge hog), and *mamiecoco*, short for *mamiecocoyam*, meaning literally “mother of *cocoyam*.” Processes such as affixation (deforestation), conversion (release), blends (Eurovision), acronyms (radar), seem non-existent.

CONCLUSION

This article has looked into some of the loan terms from indigenous languages in Cameroon English and has classified them into five groups according to the concepts which they denote. These loans come from various Cameroon languages, but they have actually entered Cameroon English through Pidgin English, which is a widely used lingua franca, especially in the English-speaking provinces of the country. These loan words are obtained from the linguistic processes of borrowing (*kaba*: gown), loan translation (trouble bank: assistance fund), semantic extension (plum: a wild tropical fruit), semantic analogy (cutting grass: hedge hog), compounding (bush pig: boar), and clipping (mamiecoco, short for mamie *cocoyam*: mother stem from which young *cocoyam* tubers develop). They are borrowed generally to satisfy a linguistic need, namely to designate new objects (for instance, Cameroon foodstuff), and new concepts (like the traditional social organisations in Cameroon). Where there exist English equivalents of these loan terms, the latter are used to facilitate communication in informal situations, like *chukchuk beef* and its English equivalent "porcupine" or *makadjo* and "cod." Although some of these loan words have made their way into international English (*Lamido*, *Sultan*, *cocoyam*), the vast majority is still unknown to the outside world.

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