

## A live Language

# " PIDGIN ENGLISH "

by J. A. KISOB

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### THE PROBLEM

One year has now rolled by since the unique Cameroon experiment took place — the former French administered Cameroon, after about forty years of separation, re-united with the English speaking Cameroon. Hitherto the two sectors had been a German Colony from 1884-1914. The Federal Republic of Cameroon came into being on the 1st of October, 1961 when the former Southern Cameroon now West Cameroon, became independent by joining the independent Republic now referred to as East Cameroon.

By this union, it goes without saying that the two systems of administration have to merge into one at the centre. Although subparagraph 3 of Article 1 of the Federal Constitution provides that "the official languages of the Federal Republic of Cameroon shall be French and English", in practice, this has meant a slowing down of the machinery of Government because of the tediousness involved in the use of the two languages. This is particularly the problem at the initial stages since most of the high officials understand only one of the languages. Nevertheless with the establishment of a translation Bureau at the Presidency and the engagement of Bilingual Secretaries, the difficulty has been minimized living the long term problem to be solved. It is encouraging to observe that goodwill, notwithstanding handicaps, has contributed a great deal to this success.

It would be particularly interesting to find out how the officials from the Federated State of West Cameroon, where only English is spoken, have fared since their secondment to the Federal Ministries in the Federal Capital, Yaounde. Some have worked with the help of interpreters where such able persons can be found, thanks to the East Cameroon Government who include the teaching of English in their secondary school syllabus. On the whole, the majority have

had to carry on Government business through the medium of pidgin-English or vernacular or by means of a mixture of English and a few French phrases said very badly. The same problem applies to the French speaking Cameroonians who work in West Cameroon.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is very unbelievable how smoothly work proceeds. Some attempts are being made by U. N. E. S. C. O. to teach French to the officials from West Cameroon and English to French speaking officials. Since these courses are pursued part time, progress is slow but sure. There is no doubt that a more dynamic programme will produce national results of general benefit to the Federation.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A brief mention has been made earlier to the fact that officials at the Federal Capital have had to resort to the use of "pidgin-English" and the vernacular in order to understand themselves. My readers may wonder just what I am talking about but a brief historical background will clarify the position.

The Germans used the Doualas and the Balis as agents to achieve their colonial ambitions. These in turn oppressed other tribes and when educated became aware of their rights and even threatened the German rule.

Professor Rudin in the Chapter on Education in his book "Germans in the Cameroons 1884-1914", gives a clear exposition of Germany's colonial education policy.

"The value of having natives able to read and write in native dialects is clear; the difficulty was to choose which dialect should be so used where there were so many of them. The objections of the Government to the wider use of the Douala language in places that had closely related dialects has already been pointed out. In the grasslands of north-western Cameroons there were so many dialects that the various tribes spoke and still do speak pidgin-English to make themselves understood by others on their periodic market days."<sup>1</sup>

The German Governor Puttkamer "objected to the teaching of the Douala dialect in the school at Victoria because he felt the influence of the Douala tribe was already too great". Governor Seitz, following the results of the important Conference held in Douala on 18th December, 1907, decreed that instruction was to be only

in German and not in any other European language. The area over which Douala was taught was limited and the arguments which were used against the teaching of Douala were applicable to the spread and teaching of Bali in the grassland areas.

It is true that before the end of the 1st world war, the number of Cameroonians literate in German was relatively too small for the language to have a grip on the people after the departure of the Germans.

In 1913 just before the war the school population was as follows<sup>2</sup>:

PROPRIETOR	NO. OF SCHOOLS	SCHOOL POPULATION	
Government	4	Douala	362
		Victoria	257
		Yaoundé	160
		Garoua	54
Missions (631)			
Baptist Mission	57		3 151
American Presbyterians	97		6 545
German Catholic	151		12 532
Basel Mission	319		17 833
TOTAL	635	TOTAL	40 896

The result was that the missions<sup>3</sup> struggled, after the departure of the Missionaries as a result of war action, to keep Douala and Bali alive. Fortunately the Bible had been translated into these languages and a minimum of school literature existed. In this state of chaos, pidgin gained popularity and firmly established itself, and has continued to maintain its place irrespective of the eventuous teaching of French and English in the two sectors of the Federation.

Government policy was to train clerks to assist the administration and the trading firms and also to give instruction on principles involved in tilling the soil, while mission schools, endeavouring to do the same, laid more emphasis in teaching the Bible and making teachers and catechists for the spread of religion. The above figure shows quite clearly the extent of German education in a country

<sup>2</sup> Statistics compiled from information obtained from Rudin's "Germans in the Cameroons".

<sup>3</sup> Only the Protestant mission used the dialects. The Catholics used pidgin.

with a population of about 5 million. There is no doubt therefore why there is so little trace of spoken German left. It is from this background that we can understand why pidgin-English has had such a grip, besides, it is to be remembered that the early traders used this language in their activities along the coast of West Africa.

With the departure of the Germans and the occupation of partitioned Cameroon by the English and French, it would appear that the Catholic Mission which had not extensively used the Douala and Bali dialects in instruction took the opportunity to intensify the use of pidgin. It was Mgr. Joseph Plissonneau, then in charge of the Nkongsamba Diocese from 1920-1930 who first wrote a pidgin-English series of Gospel books with commentaries, a catechism and a Bible History Book 4.

This pidgin-English christian literature has been revised from time to time and has been accepted and used widely in the West Cameroon in all Roman Catholic Churches. All Foreign Priests are expected to study pidgin-English in order to be effective in their various assignments, the reason being that all through the length of West Cameroon the young and the old understand pidgin-English.

Including this development, four easily distinguishable dialects of pidgin can be identified in Cameroon: The first dialect is the written pidgin described above which I choose to call "Ecclesiastical pidgin" for lack of a more suitable name, there is also the "Creole" pidgin spoken at the coast mainly by Cameroonians with Sierra Leonean influence, who are descendants of the early christian followers of Alfred Saker from Fernando Po. Their numbers are very small and they control the Native Baptist Congregation in Victoria. There is also the pidgin spoken by the illiterate people in Cameroon which differs in detail depending on where it is spoken; this type is influenced by local dialects. The sophisticated illiterate plantation Overseer who occasionally comes out with an outburst of first class English and then lapses into pidgin comes within this group. The last dialect which is almost extinct, is pidgin-English spoken by the Cameroonians who saw German administration whose pidgin is tinted with some Spanish, German and sometimes French phrases and words.

Available information shows that about 15% (?) of the Cameroon population is literate 5. This leaves us with 85% illiterates to whom this language problem is of primary importance. The present trend is to endeavour to make the 15% already literate

4. G.V. Hagen wrote a short handbook of Negro-English used in West Africa - especially in Kamerun as far back as 1913.

5. Time Magazine of August 3rd, 1962.

population bilingual, but what is going to happen to the rest? Admittedly children of school age will continue to attend school 6 but the bulk of the population will have to live together in the new Federation.

#### SPREAD AND USE OF PIDGIN-ENGLISH ON THE WEST COAST

Nor is this problem peculiar to the Cameroon Federation alone, because along the West Coast of Africa, one notices the fact that what was formerly Freetown Colony has no other language but pidgin-English (Creole) and all Coastal towns in West Africa use pidgin as the Commercial language.

In the West Cameroon alone there are many tribes speaking nearly about one hundred vernaculars. The 1958 Cameroon Report to the United Nation describes the problem in the following words:

"The many tribes... speak a bewildering variety of different languages, Bantu, Bantoid and non-Bantu, and there are about a hundred vernaculars. There is no indigenous language remotely approaching a lingua franca for the Territory. English is spoken widely in the Southern Cameroons, and in its "Pidgin" form is almost universally understood there. Fulani (in Adamawa) and Kanuri (in Bornu) are understood over sizeable areas and Jukum (in northern parts of Wum and Nkamba), Bali (in part of Bamenda) and Duala (in parts of Victoria and Kumba) over very limited areas. Hausa is also generally understood in the larger centres of population."

Pidgin-English has recently become the popular language for "high-life" gramophone recordings along the West Coast. To mention some of the high-lights in this respect, one enjoys listening to the popular record from Sierra Leone entitled, "Freetown Boy", and the recent craze from Lagos, "Lagos Life na so so enjoyment", and lastly "Wuna give me bottom bele" sung by a Cameroonian artist.

The newspaper world has found pidgin very useful in order to reach certain sections of the population. There is the well read column "King fo toly" in a Douala sports weekly "Le Courier Sportif". This paper carries also very effective advertisement in pidgin-English. For example the advertisement for C. D. B., a brand of red wine, reads thus, "Manjonga na manjonga but C. D. B. na number one". Who on reading this will not prefer C. D. B.

6. Time Magazine places school attendance in Cameroon at 78%.

7. 1958 Cameroon U. N. O. Report.

to the best "Vin Rouge"? The newly edited "Catholic Information Bulletin" published in Kumba, West Cameroon, by the Roman Catholic Mission, devotes quite a section to articles in pidgin, for Teachers and Catechists. The Radio too has benefited from it. Listen to "Allawo and Shaky Shaky" on Radio Nigeria, a pidgin-English dialogue produced twice weekly. Besides, pidgin-English is the workers' language in West Africa's industrial towns where labour is drawn from various tribal groups. It is therefore an industrial language of great economic importance; an indispensable raw material in any scheme of industrialization. Soap box politics are impossible without pidgin-English; at least this is true of the whole of West Cameroon and the Coastal areas of East Cameroon. Pidgin-English has featured very well in drama. In 1944, as a contribution to the war effort, Charles Low, an Education Officer in Cameroon, wrote a play entitled "White flows the latex Ho I" which was successfully dramatised by the students of his College. The play, which depicted every-day life on the rubber plantations, was aimed at boosting the production of rubber during the war. Since the actors in the play were supposed to be workers, the dialogue was, in the main, in pidgin-English.

Since language is indispensable for happy living and brotherliness, I have taken this timely opportunity to suggest that something should be done to introduce a lingua franca for the common man in Cameroon. What are the prospects of intensifying the use of Ball, Fulani, Douala or Bulu? Will the old prejudices allow this to be done? If so what are the prospects of using pidgin-English? Unconfirmed sources state that a British University Professor sometime this year advocated that pidgin-English ought to be studied as a language. For practical purposes, I wish to advocate the intensive use of pidgin-English by the Press and Radio so that the all important middle class pidgin-English speaking population may be reached. These observations are not only true for Cameroon but also for the whole of cosmopolitan West Africa where one type of pidgin-English or the other is spoken.

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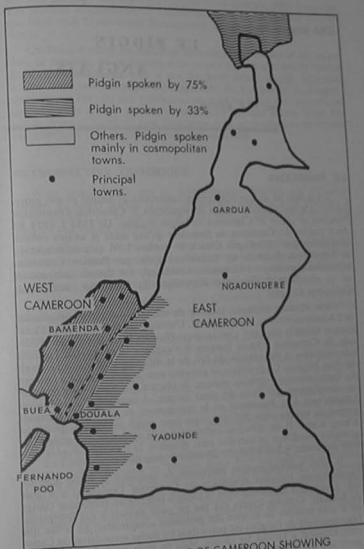
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MAP OF FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON SHOWING THE SPREAD OF PIDGIN-ENGLISH

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