

# Promotion of National Languages in Official Sectors in Cameroon: Myth or Reality?



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## Abstract

This study highlights and insists on the necessity to develop and use national languages mostly in education and official communication, politics, agriculture, health, and other sectors of the country. If this is done, each individual would benefit from a language policy that incorporates the language of every Cameroonian. It is noticed that the country implements and promotes the use of French and English as official languages in all sectors of the country to the exclusion of its over 280 indigenous languages. The theories employed in the study are the Interactionist Sociolinguistics Theory and the Language Planning Theory. A sample population of 120 consultants, out of 150 targeted from the Anglophone regions of the country, were randomly selected for the study. There were 70 men and 50 women between the ages of 20 to 75. The questionnaire and observation were the instruments used to collect the relevant data. Both the quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in the analysis of the data collected from primary and secondary sources. This study reveals that using English and French as official languages of education, communication, politics, agriculture, health, etc., does not allow messages to reach the entire intended audience, particularly the numerous Cameroonians who are not literate in the official languages. It portrays the fact that the promotion of national languages in official sectors in Cameroon is a myth and recommends that the government's mythical phenomenon on the development of national languages be revised significantly and instituted for implementation.

*Keywords: promotion, local/national languages, Anglophone, official sector*

## Introduction

This study hinges on the question "What are the effects of the use of the two official languages and the lingua-franca over the indigenous languages in the official sectors of the country"? To attempt this question, this study holds that language is the mirror, the face, and the soul of the people and their cultures and the mark of their existence. Out of about 280 indigenous languages in Cameroon, none has the status of a national or official language to be used as a language of instruction in schools. Empirical research has shown that national languages are the ideal languages in education with examples from some countries in Africa today like Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania, which have elevated one or more native languages to national status and have tended to fare better than their European language only counterparts as they have given their populations access to opportunity, free of linguistic obstacles. In Cameroon, not only would the elevation of

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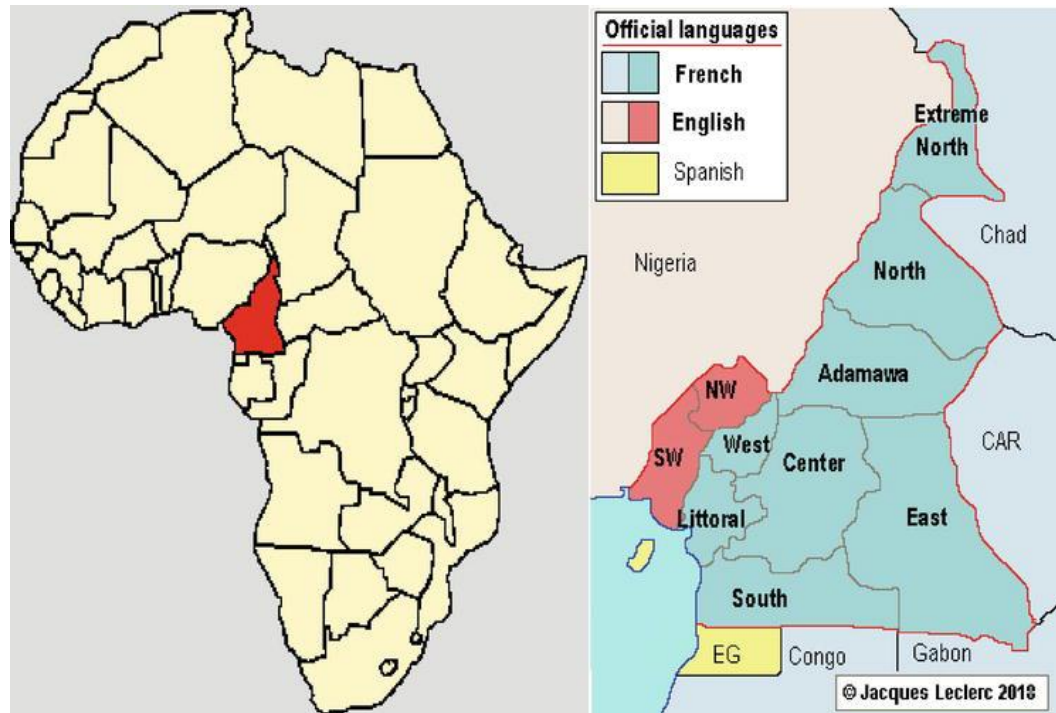
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one or more native languages show faith in the culture and identity of the Cameroonian people, but it would pave the way for opportunity and innovation within the country.

Cameroon is home to over 280 indigenous languages spoken by an estimated 25 million people in the 10 regions of the country with English and French as official languages not leaving out Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), which has in many ways been the lingua franca of Cameroon since the 1880s. (Ethnologue 2020). It is one of the countries the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) classifies as a distinctive cultural density on the linguistic map of the world. Cameroon inherited two foreign languages from its French and English colonial masters as official languages, with 80 per cent of the population speaking French and 20 per cent English. These two languages are commonly used as a vehicle for enhancing communication in this bilingual country. Adopting a suitable national language policy for Cameroon entails taking cognizance of some important general principles of language planning and policy formulation, (Chiatoh & Akumbu 2013). Educationists argue that countries, where the student's first language is the language of instruction, are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All. Empirical research also suggests that engaging marginalized children in school through mother-tongue-based, multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is a successful model (Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Yiakoumetti, 2012a, 2012b).

Many different languages are spoken in Cameroon, and these languages are the mother tongues of the citizens. Some of those are official languages, others are languages of wider communication, minority languages, and others are not associated with any particular ethnic group – other modern European languages. The problem of this paper is anchored on the premise that despite the existence of laws (Law N° 98/004 of 14 April 1998) and the constitution, which advocate for the promotion of national languages they fall short of specifying practical modalities for the promotion of these languages in education and official communication, politics, agriculture, health and other sectors of the country. Despite the government's efforts to improve the use of Cameroonian indigenous languages in education and the media, it is noticed that the implementation and promotion of the use of French and English as official languages in all sectors of the country to the exclusion of its over 280 national languages Ethnologue (2020), is worrisome. Chumbow (1996, 2013) pointed out that at least 60 per cent of the population in most African countries are not literate in official languages such as English and French and are, therefore, marginalized and excluded from knowledge on health and development. At the multilingual and inclusive government primary school in Yaounde, 150 children between the ages of five and 11 years old learn how to count in Ewondo, a Cameroon national language spoken in the country's central and southern regions. The students are also taught the national anthem and patriotic songs in Cameroonian national languages. This is something that could be promoted with the other indigenous languages. African countries are largely made up of autonomous ethnic entities within the nation-state structure. These are territorial entities carved out when Africa was partitioned by European countries in 1884. The partitioning equally split linguistic entities but did not detach them from their linguistic entities. Cameroon has evolved in the same way. The contemporary period has become a central feature of the problem of the nation-building process in Africa. Cameroon has a complex linguistic context. Cameroon inherited two foreign languages from its French and English colonial masters as official languages, with 80 per cent of the population speaking French and 20 per cent

English. These two languages are commonly used as a vehicle for enhancing communication in this bilingual country as shown on the map in Figure 1 below.



Source: <https://www.uottawa.ca/clmc/internationalperspective/cameroon>.

**Figure 1.** Map of Africa showing the location of Cameroon.

### Literature Review

This section of the study presents some works that have been on the promotion of the national languages in education and official communication, politics, agriculture, health, and other sectors of the country to situate the gap for this present study. Since independence, Cameroonian scholars have called for a language policy that recognizes and integrates national languages in official affairs. The initial call for a language policy that incorporates a national language dates back to Ngijol (1964). He proposed that in addition to the official languages, one mother tongue should be used at the national level since it would act as a unifying factor and reduce the threat of tribalism. Considering the difficulties involved in the use of a single national language, Ngijol (1987) suggests the use of several national, provincial, or regional languages.

Paudel (2018) explores the teachers' ideology on the policy (as policy appropriator). Many scholars have revealed that teaching in the mother tongue in the early grades enhances children's ability to learn better than a second or foreign language. Some countries opt for one language of instruction, official or majority language, while others have chosen to use educational strategies that give national or local languages an important place in schooling, (UNESCO, 2003). The ideologies of the language teachers have been drawn from the interpretive perspectives where the reality is judged based on

the experiences of the research and the researched. The results indicate that the teachers unravelled their strong belief in the use of Multicultural London English (MLE) for language promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge.

Njock (1966) proposes a more inclusive policy where all mother tongues are used in the early years of education. Due to the technical difficulties of implementing this policy, e.g., lack of trained linguists, and low level of language development, he recommends the use of zonal languages resulting in the selection of one or more languages per region. Towa (1987), following Ngijol (1964, 1987) suggests the use of one national mother tongue and 12 vehicular languages. The 12 vehicular languages will be used in schools and endowed with the status of national languages. The remaining languages will be used in adult literacy to prevent their extinction.

As noted by Mba (2013), Tadadjeu's (1977) extensive trilingualism envisages that Cameroonians of the future will have the capacity to communicate in at least three languages among which one would certainly be a native Cameroonian language (preferably a mother tongue) and used in all the sectors of the country. The second will be an official language (French for Francophones and English for Anglophones), and the third would be, for some, a Cameroonian vehicular language and, for others, the second official language. The extensive nature of the proposed model captures the fact that the number of languages one can use is unlimited and depends on the individual's linguistic needs and context. The extensive trilingualism model has a two-fold communicational linguistic make-up. The vertical dimension is fulfilled by national languages, ideally, each person's mother tongue, while the horizontal one is materialized through vehicular and official languages. This vision establishes the functional complementary relation among languages as specific domains of activities require specific languages. For example, traditional and cultural activities are best described in native Cameroonian languages than French or English. In the same vein, school activities may both be conducted in official and local languages. Cameroonians with two separate mother tongues would refer to official languages or an adequate local vehicular language to communicate with each other.

Chiatoh and Akumbu (2013) observe that more than 50 years after the reunification of the two Cameroons in 1961, and despite its linguistic diversity, Cameroon still operates an exoglossic language policy that allows only the use of French and English in education and other domains. Moving from the position that such a policy is neither integrative nor representative and so cannot fully respond to the needs of Cameroonians, they strongly advocate for a total overhaul of present educational practices. In the guise of providing guidelines on the procedures and ingredients for the adoption of an appropriate language policy, they propose general and specific principles to be considered in language policy elaboration, outline the quality of an appropriate policy as well as the steps in policy formulation. They conclude their submission with a fervent appeal for the diagnosis and treatment of language issues in Cameroon to be informed by scientific and inclusive approaches.

Akumbu (2021) reported that despite the multilingual nature of the country, there have not been adequate efforts by the government to communicate in languages other than English and French to fight against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. He adds that for many years now, Cameroon has recognized the need to adopt an alternative language policy to fill the gaps created by the dominant English-French language policy. The current policy has demonstrated its limits under its exclusive

and discriminatory nature and should be revised significantly. As the pandemic continues to spread and claim the lives of Cameroonians, the formulation of an appropriate and operational language policy for Cameroon becomes even more compelling. Evidence has been provided and suggestions made to this effect. Since the above proposals have hardly been taken into consideration, English and French have continued to survive as the official languages justifying the need for the present study that draws lessons from insufficient dissemination of languages in official sectors of the country, using the country's national languages, especially the health sector, Chie and Atoh (2022).

### **Methodology**

This was a retrospective study based on corpus data collected from a randomly selected sample population of 120 consultants within the age range of 20 to 60+ age, from the two English-speaking (Northwest and Southwest) regions of the country. The questionnaire and observation are the instruments used to collect the relevant data. Both the quantitative and qualitative research methods are used to analyse the data collected from primary and secondary sources. The qualitative research paradigm is employed here since it offers the latitude for the researcher's immersion in a naturalistic or interactive manner to have first-hand information about this social phenomenon, while the quantitative method is used by adopting questionnaires to come out with statistics that apply to the work. The research designs adopted in the course of this paper are the descriptive research and ethnolinguistics designs. With the descriptive research design, the researcher explains and describes the situation or case in depth in their research materials. The ethnographic research design on its part is employed here because it is a type of research design that is purely on a theoretical basis where the individual collects data, analyses, prepares, and then presents it understandably. Ethnographic research is a qualitative method where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment. The aim of an ethnographic study within a usability project is to get 'under the skin' of a design problem (and all its associated issues).

### **Theoretical and ethical considerations**

The theories employed in the study are the Interactionist Sociolinguistics Theory and the Language Management Theory. The interactionist sociolinguistics theory is interested in what language use informs about social processes, and therefore, its central concern is the social meaning of language use. It is concerned with the interaction of linguistic and social systems; in this view the significance of language is symbolic. On the other hand, the Language Management Theory was developed by Neustupný (1978) and Jernudd (1991). Some authors employ the term language management without the theoretical propositions of Neustupný and Jernudd and may use the term as more or less synonymous with language planning (Spolsky 2009). Language Management Theory (LMT) originated alongside Language Planning Theory (Fishman 1971a, 1971b and Ferguson 1968). However, it has gradually grown so far apart from it that it represents a distinct alternative (Jernudd 1983). What seems to have been decisive was Neustupný's effort to base macro language planning firmly on the theory of language problems (Neustupný 1978). At the theoretical level, particular interactions (discourses) were recognized as the primary source of language problems, which shifted the focus of

theoretical thought concerning language planning towards the micro dimension (Kimura 2005).

Ethical and methodological considerations cannot simply be checked off as deemed completed with the attainment of institutional approval. It is necessary to note that the reflectivity on ethical principles and dilemmas ran throughout the research. Aside from the required institutions' approval, it was important to secure not only the participants' consent but also their understanding and approval of the research process. In this light, preparatory meetings were held with the different informants to make them understand the topic and reason for the research. Most of them showed interest since they agreed with the idea that information about some diseases ravaging the population, which is required by the people is not disseminated in the languages of the people. After the interview sessions, the informants were rewarded with tokens to compensate for their time and resources invested in the study. During the observation, some participants had to share their life stories to express the importance of the study because people in rural areas are lost in some of the information required to prevent pandemics that affect society. As Balsera (2014) stipulates, life-story interviews are prone to elicit discussion of sensitive topics. It is in consideration of potential participant discomfort that the researcher assured participants of the right to either pause or in the worst-case scenario, end the interview as some of them got emotional narrating instances of family members who are dead due to some diseases.

#### **Data presentation and analyses**

This section of the paper describes and analyses the data provided in this study and discusses the results of the data obtained from the field.

**Table 1: Distribution of the actual sample size**

<i>Age * Sex Cross tabulation</i>					
Age range			Sex		Total
			Male	Female	
15-20	Count		5	3	8
	% within Age		62.5%	37.5%	100.0%
	% within Sex		7.1%	6.0%	3.3%
	% of Total		4.1%	2.5%	6.6%
21-30	Count		15	8	23
	% within Age		65.2%	34.7%	100.0%
	% within Sex		21.4%	16.0%	18.7%
	% of Total		12.5%	6.6%	19.1%
31-40	Count		24	23	47
	% within Age		51.1%	48.9%	100.0%
	% within Sex		34.2%	46.0%	40.1%
	% of Total		20.0%	19.2%	39.2%
41-60	Count		20	10	30
	% within Age		66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	% within Sex		28.5%	20.0%	24.3%
	% of Total		16.7%	8.3%	25.0%
60+	Count		7	6	13
	% within Age		53.8%	46.2%	100.0%
	% within Sex		10.0%	12.0%	11.0%
	% of Total		5.8%	5.0%	10.8%
Total	Count		70	50	120
	% within Age		58.3%	41.7%	100.0%
	% within Sex		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total		58.3%	41.7%	100.0%

Source: Conceived by the researcher, November 2021

**Table 2: Formula for calculating the percentages of the distribution of the actual sample size**

1. To calculate the % within Age for males:  $\frac{\text{No. of males}}{\text{Number of males and females for each age range}} \times 100$
2. To calculate the % within Age for females:  $\frac{\text{No. of females}}{\text{Number of males and females for each age range}} \times 100$
3. To calculate the % within Age Sex:  $\frac{\text{No. of males}}{\text{Total number of males in all age ranges}} \times 100$
4. To calculate the % within Sex:  $\frac{\text{No. of females}}{\text{Total number of females in all age ranges}} \times 100$

5. To calculate the % of the total for male:  $\frac{\text{Number of males}}{\text{Total number of the population (consul tan ts)}} \times 100$
6. To calculate the % of the total for female:  $\frac{\text{Number of females}}{\text{Total number of the population (consul tan ts)}} \times 100$
7. To calculate the total within Age: % within Age of males + % within Age of females
8. To calculate the total within Sex: % within Sex of males + % within females divided by 2
9. To calculate the % total of total: % of total males + % of total females

Source: Conceived by the researcher, November 2021

**Table 3: Distribution of the participants according to their profession**

S/N	Profession	Frequency	Per cent
1.	Educationists	15	12.5
2.	Journalists	15	12.5
3.	Policemen	15	12.5
4.	Agriculturalists	15	12.5
5.	Sportsmen	15	12.5
6.	Medics	15	12.5
7.	Pastors	15	12.5
8.	Other sectors	15	12.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>120</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Conceived by researcher, November 2021

**Table 4: Respondents' stance on the promotion of indigenous languages in official sectors**

Respondents	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	115	95.9
No	4	3.3
No response	1	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Conceived by researcher, November 2021

### Discussion of results

If indigenous Cameroonian languages are to be used in transforming and leading Cameroon to modernity, the whole exercise needs to be undergirded by economic rationality and the cultural empowerment of the masses. Literacy in indigenous Cameroonian languages is crucial. Without literacy in the languages of the masses, science, and technology cannot be culturally owned by countries and societies. Cameroonians will remain mere consumers, incapable of creating competitive goods, services, and value-additions in this era of globalization. How can African languages be developed to meet this challenge? For example, the advent of COVID-19 has revealed the

inability of the Cameroonian government to provide information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best since a majority of the languages are neither developed for use nor empowered by the language policy of the country. The pandemic has served as an eye-opener to the reality that using English and French as official languages of communication does not allow messages to reach the entire intended audience, particularly the numerous Cameroonians who are not literate in the official languages.

Data collected through questionnaires and observations from the respondents indicate that the consequences of the Cameroonian juridical and constitutional definition, whereby English and French are designated official languages, relate to many Cameroonians that the other languages, numbering over 280 are less important or inferior. As an illustration of the neglect, the indigenous languages suffer. Previous studies indicate that most of these languages have very few or no school primers, despite the numerous individual and collective efforts to produce them. These languages also feature very little, if at all, in media coverage in the country (Cheo, Chie & Menguie, 2022). The non-promotion of our national languages will result in gradual shifts to lingua francas, especially in areas that lack deliberate community efforts to ensure the survival and development of their languages. Lack of funds and the pressing need to direct scarce resources to areas of national development with a higher priority are often advanced as arguments for neglecting indigenous languages, some of which are already at the point of extinction.

### **Findings**

Despite the relative effort on the part of the government to promote the use of indigenous languages, experimental projects in the area of teaching and research have long been carried out through private initiatives with the implicit approval of government authorities. Such initiatives are observed through the actions of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) - Cameroon, the Operational Research Programme for Language Teaching in Cameroon (PROPELCA), the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL), the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO) and others. (Ilongo, 2016). The study has unearthed the fact that multilingualism, not bilingualism or unilingualism, needs to be cultivated if all voices in Cameroonian national languages are to be heard. If and when this new spirit and policy based on multilingualism becomes operative, a new impetus to a more democratic and majoritarian approach to language use in Cameroon would move into gear. As things currently stand, the overwhelming majority of Cameroonian society is culturally relatively deprived and linguistically silenced. Another way of making this point is to say that they are culturally dominated by the use of official languages.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are being suggested:

1. The importance of active advocacy work and campaigns cannot be overstated. This should involve both state and civil society organizations. A systematic plan for this work needs to be drawn up.
2. Cooperative linkages should be established with bodies involved with similar or related work of the cultural and linguistic kind.
3. A conscientious attempt should be made to our understanding of the relevance of language to social transformation in Cameroon.

4. The use of zonal languages to result in the selection of one or more languages per region.
5. Where possible regional cooperation should be encouraged. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) framework provides the most readily available structure for this.
6. Organize more workshops to discuss advocacy for the empowerment of indigenous languages. These workshops should address issues including, mandate, advocacy, linkages, dissemination of information, publications, and possibly electronic dissemination, in indigenous languages. Such a workshop should include all stakeholders of the country.

The study recommends that the government's mythical phenomenon of the development of national languages be revised significantly and instituted for implementation. This can be done through the following proposals: standardization of unwritten languages, language as a development resource, cultivation, and strengthening of national integration, multilingualism, and multiculturalism as a national resource, national languages in education, the coexistence of languages, regional languages, intellectualization of national languages and national official languages.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the language policy of Cameroon, one can conclude that none of the two official languages (English and French) serves as a unifying language because each of them unifies people across the former colonial boundaries. Pidgin English and some local languages like Bassa, Duala, Ewondo, Haussa, Fulani, and Fulfude serve the purpose of unifying people around the physical and virtual territories bordering the persons who speak these languages. This motivates people speaking these languages to have a sense of belonging to some country beyond, with no properly defined country because of linguistic affiliation.

In Cameroon as indeed the rest of Africa, language policies need to move from being pious articles of faith enshrined in constitutions and policy documents. If Cameroonians are to make progress in social, economic, political, and cultural development, we will need to pursue these policies at the level of active practice. For many years now, Cameroon has recognized the need to adopt an alternative language policy to fill the gaps created by the dominant English-French language policy. It is observed that more than 50 years after the reunification of the two Cameroons in 1961, and despite its linguistic diversity, Cameroon still operates an exoglossic language policy that allows only the use of French and English in education and other domains. Moving from the position that such a policy is neither integrative nor representative and so cannot fully respond to the needs of Cameroonians, they strongly advocate for a total overhaul of present educational practices. In the guise of providing guidelines on the procedures and ingredients for the adoption of an appropriate language policy, they propose general and specific principles to be considered in language policy elaboration, outline the qualities of an appropriate policy as well as the steps in policy formulation. Chiatoh and Akumbu (2013).

It is of great importance to note that virALLanguages, an international volunteer-run project, has investigated and dedicated much energy to producing and distributing videos and audio recordings in minority, endangered, or otherwise marginalized

languages of the world. The sole aim of this project is to reach marginalized communities and share reliable and memorable information so people know what to do to stop the spread of coronavirus. This can be seen in the COVID-19-related messages in Cameroon's national languages (URL <http://virallanguages.org>) Being the first country to enjoy this privilege 16 Cameroonian national languages were translated and disseminated on April 29, 2020. According to WHO, these languages include Aghem, Ajumbu, Babanki, Bafut, Buu, Giziga, Mafa, Massa, Mendankwe, Mokolo, Mundani, Munken, Noni, Obang, Oshie, and Zaah-Biya. This has been possible with collaboration and joint efforts from projects including Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism - Cameroon (KPAAM-CAM) in the University of Buffalo, SUNNY, USA, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), World Language Institute (WLI, UK), and the Community for Global Health Equity (CGHLE) in the University of Buffalo, SUNNY, USA.

The current policy has demonstrated its limits by its exclusive and discriminatory nature and should be revised significantly. If this is done, it will become possible to easily reach out to all Cameroonians with vital information for their well-being whenever the need arises. Other sectors of the country such as education and agriculture would benefit squarely from a language policy that incorporates the language of every Cameroonian. As pandemics continue to spread and claim the lives of Cameroonians, the formulation of an appropriate and operational language policy for Cameroon becomes even more compelling. Evidence has been provided and suggestions made to this effect. The health, agricultural, educational, historical, and political implications for urgent action are obvious and should be given serious consideration. For how long can these conditions of official languages and cultural inferiority continue? One cannot tell. What one can say with certainty, however, is that; it cannot go on forever. Ultimately, the power, strength, and voices of the democratic majority must and will prevail. This paper concludes that the promotion of national languages in Cameroon is a myth and proposes that 'together, let us join projects like virALLanguages, KPAAM-CAM, SOAS, WLI-UK, and CGHLE-USA to fight against myths and forge towards reality as far as the promotion of our national languages is concerned'.

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