# Social Media Networks and Language Digitalization of Multilinguals in Cameroon: The Case of Lower Fungom Migrants in the Diaspora

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**Abstract**
This paper explores the consequences of the absence of digitalized African languages on the multilingual repertoire of Lower Fungom migrants in Souza, in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. Considering the languages that make up the linguistic repertoire of the multilingual speakers in Souza, English is a lingua franca in education, administration, economics, and politics. In Cameroon, the official languages, (English and French) are digitalized on several network platforms. Little or no effort is made to digitalize most of our Cameroonian/indigenous languages. This research uses a survey design and a mixed method of data collection and analysis, which employs the questionnaire, self-recorded interview, and observation to collect data from twenty (20) diasporans from Lower Fungom (in Menchum Division in the North West Region of Cameroon). The study uses the Social Network Theory and the Domain Theory to show the extent to which networks can facilitate language learning and help maintain the multilingual repertoire of an individual. Findings reveal a possibility of language endangerment, loss, or death if no measures are taken to digitalize Cameroonian languages. The study concludes with a rise in the digitalization of English and other lingua francas whose implication for African languages cannot be underestimated. The study, therefore, recommends a properly managed language policy that encourages the digitalization of Cameroonian languages and proposes the use of digital games for use in educational settings.
***Keywords: multilingualism, diaspora, digitalization, networks, indigenous languages***

**Introduction**
Multilingualism continues to be the default context for human beings. This assertion holds to the fact that it is very common to find human beings (both adults and children alike) who are capable of speaking two or more languages. The concept which is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalisation and cultural

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openings can be traced back to the bible days. Angiachi (2013) also explains this by taking us back to the bible in Acts 2:4 and Acts 7:12 where we read that the Apostles communicated with people who came from different locations like Pontus, Asia, Judea, Pamphylia, Libya, Crete, and Egypt where different languages were spoken. The impact of multilingualism cannot be digested without taking into account the role played by social networks and language digitalisation in the language learning process. Social networks in this situation would include; Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn, (Grahl, 2013). Given that these networking sites can accommodate several languages at the same time, they can serve as a fertile ground for the promotion and maintenance of an individual's multilingual repertoire. Educators regularly incorporate a variety of tools to enable and allow their students to interact in new and different ways, both in class and beyond the walls of the classroom (Thorne, 2010). In particular, popular social networking sites can go a long way to offer educators even more ways to help students increase motivation and strengthen the classroom climate (Mazer *et al.*, 2007). Social networking tools such as the ones listed above, also provide opportunities for language learners to enhance digital and multi-literacy skills, interact in and through the target language, work collaboratively, and enhance their linguistic and pragmatic proficiency (Blattner and Fiori, 2011; Blattner and Lomicka, 2012b; Lomicka and Lord, 2012; Mills 2011).

Lower Fungom, which is situated in the Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon, has been noted by linguists to be one of the most linguistically saturated areas of the Grassfields Region of Cameroon. The study by Good *et al.*, (2011) revealed that seven languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in thirteen recognized villages of Lower Fungom, four of which have been restricted to a single village. Di Carlo *et al.*, (2020), further expatiate this and reveal that individual multilingualism in three local languages plus Cameroon Pidgin English dominates the area of Lower Fungom, however, with a small number who also speak Cameroon English. Further research by Di Carlo and Good (2014), shows that Lower Fungom is an example of an extreme case of linguistic diversity. While some of the languages spoken in this area are classified as independent languages, others have been grouped as varieties of other languages. Ajumbu, Buu, Fang, Koshin, and Kung are grouped as one-village languages, while the languages spoken in the other five villages; Abar, Biya, Missong, Munken, and Ngun are seen as "closely related varieties" of Mungbam, whereas, Mufu and Mundabli are regarded as varieties of the same language. Apart from Fang and Koshin, all other villages are inhabited by a number lower than one thousand, (Good *et al*, 2011).

It is indicated that an individual language user in Lower Fungom is capable of speaking at least six dialects or what a linguist will consider four languages, Di Carlo *et al.*, (2020). This gives the impression that there could be no monolingual speaker in the area of Lower Fungom. Research carried out by Menguie *et al.* (2022), however, reveals a bilingual Lower Fungom migrant who only became multilingual after migrating to Souza. With this notion, digitalising Cameroonian languages on social networking sites could foster language learning and maintenance, especially in migrant communities, where the indigenes may not have the opportunity to come in contact with speakers of some of the languages in their language repertoire. Given that globalisation has exposed many more people to social networking sites like Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, putting our indigenous languages on these platforms can be a

means of encouraging many more multilingual migrants to use their languages often. Research has shown that social networking sites provide a virtual environment for learners outside of scheduled class time, Mills (2011), and as a result, a "*positive, flexible, and non-threatening space for learners to communicate and collaborate*" (Ota, 2011). Moreover, research has it that, learners are encouraged to express their opinions more freely in online social spaces in comparison to their interactions in face-to-face settings (Harting, 2017). Several studies also indicate that social network sites create a virtual extension of the face-to-face classroom setting which could be advantageous to multilingual speakers. Mills (2011), for example, observed that such a virtual environment opens up opportunities for learners to engage through the exchange of cultural multimedia, interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes within the social context of their communities. By emphasising the mobility of these spaces, this type of classroom extension, therefore, becomes a gathering place where learners navigate and interact in an authentic environment.

As propounded by Milroy and Milroy (1992), social networks relate to the community and interpersonal level of social organisation. The community in this situation could be on-site (physical environment like church, market, school, or place of work) or off-site (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, etc.). The focus of this study is based on an off-site language community and how such a language community can be used to encourage language learning and language maintenance (employing digitalisation) and as such, promote multilingualism.

**Review of Related Literature**

Network is an increasingly popular word in sociolinguistic research. The word is often used synonymously for partnership, collaboration, alliance, or group. However, it is used with a more specific intention to describe the relationships that exist between groups of individuals or agencies and the resources to which members of such groups facilitate access. Evans (2004) observes that there are two basic forms of looking at social networks. From the first point of view, that allows seeing them as a "*system of personal relations with effects on the individual*" and from a second one, that allows "*understanding them as relations used by the individuals to reach their goals.*" These networks represent the degrees of contact between individuals who associate with each other regularly, through properties like multiplexity which is consistent with the network content and density which relates to the network structure. The concept of a social network makes the basic assumption that we do not exist in isolation from each other or as free members of individual groups, but rather that we share social networks in which every element as Bergs (2006) has stated, that it is by some means elementarily linked to other elements in a node. An early examination of social networks by Traves and Milgram (1969), looked at the lengths of the paths between individuals and the question of the probability of any two randomly selected individuals knowing each other, or how many acquaintances connect them in a chain of people.

The use of digital technologies in language revitalization has evolved and has become a tool of support to increase the use of indigenous languages that are working to strengthen their vitality (Galla, 2018 & Soria, 2016). It should be noted that their ability to encourage communities in their transmission of knowledge through digitalized language projects cannot be underestimated. In line with this, Bird (2020) has noted that the presence of indigenous languages in the digital world can be used as a point of focus for

learners, especially the younger generations who have more access to digital accessories. In an attempt to access these digitalized languages, new networks can be created. As Li et al., (2021) have noted, their easy accessibility to technology is not only because of its attractiveness but also based on the fact that it is affordable.

In addition, most technologies nowadays (computing Power, Smarter devices, Datafication, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Machine Learning, etc.) include online features. As such the use of indigenous languages in online settings might generate prestige in the community of speakers since it can go as far as proving that these languages are functional and are being used in modern domains. Coronel-Molina, 2019 and Galla, (2018) further add that the use of indigenous languages in online settings can equally go a long way to enhance feelings of pride in the community. Internet charts in indigenous languages and indigenous web pages for learning indigenous languages and cultural information published by indigenous groups and global audiences are some examples of how traditional knowledge and modern technology can be blended. Without any doubt, indigenous people are very much aware of the media and language digitalization as a means to revitalize not only their languages (Coronel-Molina, 2019) but also to create new networks.

ICTs are networks or nodes of technological innovations composed of computing, microelectronics, and electronic communication (including broadcasting and the internet). ICTs have shifted the processes of information and knowledge production, dissemination, and reproduction, leading to time compression and facilities in terms of interactivity (Norris, 2001). ICTs can be used for purposes like political and social mobilization (Norris, 2001) and strengthening citizenship during presidential elections (Dia, 2001). While the internet has reinforced the prominence of English as an international language, it can offer possibilities to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Coronel-Molina (2019) further explains that community projects that involve a wide range of community members the project seeks to empower are usually, the most successful. It is important to note that, more and more networks can be created during these community project sessions. This assertion is based on the fact, the indigenes of the community the project is intended to serve the most, are usually the ones who take active roles in the projects. In the process of this, they often come in contact with speakers of other languages and even speakers of their languages who can influence their linguistic repertoire.

The popularity of online social networks has increased drastically over the years. This has resulted from technological expansion and also resulted in the need for fast communication among individuals. Online social network users tend to cultivate their virtual social relationships and virtual life on some common social networking sites like Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. In Bishop-Russell *et al.*, (2006), it is evident that the academic benefits of online social networking sites have been streamed down to the opportunities it provides to learners in online learning. Adding to this, Junco (2011) and Junco *et al.*, (2010) believe that the use of online social networking sites for educational purposes has a positive effect on learners' grades. Contrary to this view, Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) hold that using online social network sites affects the learners' grades negatively. These contradictory findings are only an inspiration for further research on the possibilities of using online social networks to encourage

language learning, and language maintenance and to effectively promote multilingualism.

This study inculcates the social network theory of Milroy (1992) which asserts that, in some communities, complex patterns of social network relations often develop among subgroups to demarcate them from other subgroups, and these intercultural variations will often be reflected in linguistic variations within the general language norms of the community, (Edwards, 1992). According to Milroy (1992), the foundations of this theory are based on the social contact of individuals with other individuals. These foundations, vividly fit the stands of migrants who would want to create new contacts with members of their host community than live in isolation. The present study on Lower Fungom multilingual migrants in Souza is an example to reckon with. Based on Milroy's views, these social contacts consist of "interpersonal ties" of different types of strength, and these structural relationships between links can vary.

Milroy (1992), believes that in a maximally dense and multiplex network, everyone would know everyone else (density) while the actors would know one another in a range of capacities (multiplexity). She further adds that this construction is an "idealization" that predicts that in a community bound by maximally dense and multiplex network ties, the linguistic change would not take place at all. In her point of view, "*close socialization patterns have the effect of maintaining traditional norms, and resisting change from outside*." In the opinion of Li (1994), social network factors may sway the language choice of an individual. He goes further to show that there is a dialectic relationship between a speaker's linguistic behaviour and their interpersonal ties, Li (1994:23). In multilingual communities, therefore, language choice is affected by and affects the speaker's social interaction. Based on the above, the theory can be understood as being a useful tool for describing a specific language community.

Furthermore, Vertovec (2007) notes that in the super-diversity that characterizes the globalized society, the interpretation of domains is liable to vary. Other aspects that concern contemporary society, are the multitudes of networks an individual participates in, and the fact that networks can stretch over domains. For example, an individual could be connected with one person via different networks. This theory, therefore, based on the fact that it employs aspects of domains in which social networks are created and how actors in the networks accommodate their communication to suit every participant is of great importance to the current study. However, it can single-handedly expand our understanding of how social networks have affected the multilingual repertoire of Lower Fungom migrants in Souza. For this reason, Milroy's (1992) Social Network theory has equally been used.

**Methodology**

Online activities as well as online social networking no longer belong to a world apart but are part of a continuum of a single and heterogeneous social reality. This condition has allowed the boundaries of incompatible social realities to fall due to recent technological developments which increase the scope and range of online communities and the forms and time of participation. This study considered employing a mixed method to collect data given that little has been documented in the area of language digitalization. To provide an in-depth, underlying understanding of what, where, when, and how Lower Fungom speakers are networking with the tool used in digitalizing indigenous languages in their homes, an observation had to be carried out using an

observational protocol. These sessions provided an understanding of how digitalized languages are creating an impact on the social networks of multilingual speakers.

This study was conducted in Souza which is found in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. The study considered participants from Lower Fungom who have a multilingual linguistic repertoire. In the course of the study, 20 multilingual speakers of Lower Fungom Languages were selected to provide data for the study. Out of the 20 participants, 6 were males and 14 were females from Abar, Ajumbu, and Mundabli, all villages of Lower Fungom. The consultants for this research were selected using a purposive sampling technique. For this to be accomplished, the participants had to be indigenes from Lower Fungom who for one reason or another have migrated to Souza. In addition, they had to be from Lower Fungom, have a multilingual language repertoire, and have affiliations with different social networks.

The method chosen for analyzing the data collected for this study was based on the coding of the questionnaire and the self-recorded interviews. The questionnaire provided an overview of the types of technological equipment used by Lower Fungom speakers to learn new languages and how this acquisition process affects or impacts social networks. The self-recorded interviews on their part, went further to confirm the fact that, digitalized languages have an impact on the social networks of Lower Fungom speakers in Souza.

**Table 1: Respondents' demographic data**

| S/N | Coded Names | Sex | Age | Languages spoken | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Valis N. B. | Male | 36 | Abar, Munken, English and Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) | Businessman |
| 2. | Sammy K. N. | Male | 26 | Ajumbu, Fungom, English, and Cameroon Pidgin English | Teacher/Farmer |
| 3. | Chris N. N. | Male | 29 | Ajumbu, Buu, English, CPE, and French | Farmer/Business |
| 4. | Lidi S. B. | Female | 67 | Ajumbu, Fang, Fungo and CPE | Farmer |
| 5. | Nadi K. N. | Female | 22 | Abar and CPE | Tailor/Farmer |
| 6. | Chanti N. S. | Female | 29 | Ajumbu, Fungom, French, English, and CPE | Teacher |
| 7. | Gil C. A. | Male | 42 | Ajumbu, Kung, Fungom, Kuk, French and CPE | Rubber tapper/Bike rider |
| 8. | StanK. C. | Male | 47 | Kung and Bafmen | Farmer/Bike rider |
| 9. | Suzie D. E. | Female | 38 | Mundabli and CPE | Business/Farmer |
| 10. | Noel C. N. | Male | 38 | Mundabli, Munfu French, and CPE | Business/Farmer |
| 11. | Charlie E.L. | Female | 29 | Abar and CPE | Farmer/Business |
| 12. | Jace S. N. | Female | 40 | Kung, Ajumbu, Bafmen and CPE | Business |
| 13. | Emmy S.C. | Female | 38 | Kung and CPE | Business |
| 14. | Heddy N.C. | Female | 22 | Kung, English, and CPE | Student |
| 15. | Christy B.B. | Female | 30 | Ajumbu, Buu, CPE, French, and English | Tailor |
| 16. | Gracey F. M | Female | 40 | Kung, Bafmen, and CPE | Farmer/Business |
| 17. | Myra N. K. | Female | 40 | Mundabli and CPE | Business/Farmer |
| 18. | Benny B. C. | Female | 38 | Mundabli and CPE | Business |
| 19. | Enny D. S. | Female | 38 | Mundabli and CPE | Business/Farmer |
| 20. | Licia S. B. | Female | 35 | Mundabli and CPE | Farmer/Business |

***Source: Conceived by researchers. May 2023***

**Presentation of data and analysis**

This section provides the data collected from the field and the results obtained from the analysis

**Table 2: Respondents Social Media Use Patterns**

| S/N | Social Media | Frequency Yes | Frequency No | Total Frequency | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Facebook | 10 (50%) | 10 (50%) | 20 | 100% |
| 2. | Instagram | 11 (55%) | 9 (45%) | 20 | 100% |
| 3. | LinkedIn | 5 (25%) | 15(75%) | 20 | 100% |
| 4. | Twitter | 11(55%) | 9 (45%) | 20 | 100% |
| 5. | WhatsApp | 20 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 20 | 100% |
| 6. | Telegram | 3(15%) | 17 (85%) | 20 | 100% |

***Source: Conceived by researchers, May 2023***

As can be seen from Table 2 above, all the respondents make use of social media networks. However, WhatsApp appears to be the most widely used as all twenty respondents accepted that they use it. This is followed by Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook while LinkedIn and Telegram are the least used.

**Table 3: Number of Social media contacts during their stay in Souza**

| S/N | Number of people | Contacts created | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 3 | 1-20 | 15% |
| 2. | 3 | 20-40 | 15% |
| 3. | 4 | 40-60 | 20% |
| 4. | 4 | 60-80 | 20% |
| 5. | 6 | 80-100 | 30% |
| **6.** | **Total 20** | **100** | **100%** |

***Source: Conceived by researchers, May 2023***

As far as the creation of new contacts is concerned, it is indicated in Table 3 that 3 (15%) respondents (15%) of the population created 1-20 contacts for the length of time they have been in Souza; 3 respondents (15%) created 20-40 contacts; 4 respondents (20%) 40-60 contacts; 4 respondents (20%) 60-80 and 6 respondents (30%) created 80-100 contacts.

**Table 4: Social Media Influence on Language Repertoire of the Respondents**

| S/N | Outcome | Frequency Yes | Frequency No | Total Frequency | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Learned other languages | 19 (95%) | 1 (5%) | 20 | 100% |
| 2. | Facilitated Business Communication and Transaction | 4 (20%) | 16 (80%) | 20 | 100% |
| 3. | Enabled me to switch from one language to another | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 4. | Negatively affected my mother tongue proficiency | 4 (20%) | 16 (80%) | 20 | 100% |
| 5. | Improved my Mother Tongue Proficiency | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |

***Source: Conceived by researchers, May 2023***

As shown in Table 4 above, 19 (95%) respondents indicated that some of the influences of social media networks on their language repertoire include the fact that they learned other languages, 4 (20%) indicated that social media networks facilitated their business communication and transactions, 2 (10%) said that the networks helped them to switch from one language to another, 4 (10%) indicated that social media networks affected their mother tongue proficiencies negatively and as a result, caused them to forget their mother tongue, and the 2 (10%) indicated that social media networks enabled them to improve on their mother tongue.

**Table 5: Languages used with contacts created.**

| SN | Language(s) Used with Networks | Frequency Yes | Frequency No | Total Frequency | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Pidgin English | 19 (98%) | 1 (5%) | 20 | 100% |
| 2. | French | 15 (75%) | 5 (25%) | 20 | 100% |
| 3. | English | 9 (25%) | 11 (75%) | 20 | 100% |
| 4. | Mundabli | 8 (40%) | 12 (60%) | 20 | 100% |
| 5. | Kung | 4 (200%) | 16 (800%) | 20 | 100% |
| 6. | Ajumbu | 5 (25%) | 15 (75%) | 20 | 100% |
| 7. | Abo'o | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 8. | Bafmen | 3 (15%) | 17 ((85%) | 20 | 100% |
| 9. | Pongo | 3 (15%) | 17 (85%) | 20 | 100% |
| 10. | Mumfu | 1 (5%) | 19 (95%) | 20 | 100% |
| 11. | Douala | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 12. | Abar | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 13. | Munkem | 1 (5%) | 19 (95%) | 20 | 100% |
| 14. | Fungom | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 15. | Fang | 2 (10%) | 18 (90%) | 20 | 100% |
| 16. | Ngiebong | 1 (5%) | 19 (95%) | 20 | 100% |
| 17. | Itanikom | 1 (5%) | 19 (95%) | 20 | 100% |

***Source: Conceived by researchers, May 2023***

Among the languages identified in the network of respondents, Mumfu, Munken, Ngiebong, and Itanikom were identified as the least used in Souza with a respondent rate of 1 (5%) for each of them. Cameroon Pidgin English made a hallmark in the scene of languages used by Lower Fungom indigenes with their networks in Souza. Meanwhile, French, English, and Mundabli follow with higher percentages.

**Discussion of Results**

The study reveals the types of technologies used by Lower Fungom indigenes to preserve their indigenous languages and maintain their social networks. A general concern for Lower Fungom speakers is how digitalized languages can contribute to language learning and the impact this can create on their social networks. This area of concern brings about a stimulating discussion which results in a dynamic that can at times divide a community and its people given that, language learning is easier when the older generation verbally transmits it during conversations with the younger generation. However, at one end of the spectrum, it is common to see the younger generation using technologies of all sorts and communicating in ways that were unavailable to the world

some decades ago, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, it is also common to see little or no use of technologies by the older generation.

In addition, the study reveals that language digitalization can be a means of preserving social networks, especially for first-time learners of a language. This as they indicated, is based on the fact that by constantly reviewing chats done with their networks on Facebook and WhatsApp, they get to learn how to read and write in some of the indigenous languages and those of their host community. This is in line with the views of Galla (2018) and Soria (2016) who noted that digitalized languages have become a tool of support in increasing the use of indigenous languages. This equally falls in place with the opinion of Bird (2020) who pointed out that, the presence of indigenous languages in the digital world can be used as a point of focus for learners, especially the younger generations who have more access to digital accessories. This is a practice that instils in them the feeling of always wanting to stay connected to their social network.

**Recommendations**

Based on the above results, this study recommends the following;

1. Language centres like CABTAL and SIL should come together and agree on a digitalized form of indigenous languages to enable speakers of these languages to learn new languages and maintain the ones they already have in their linguistic repertoire.
2. Lower Fungom migrants in Souza should equally encourage online meetings, especially on WhatsApp during which the use of Lower Fungom languages will be encouraged. This will not only help some of the speakers who are weak in the language to improve their speaking and reading abilities but will equally maintain and create new networks.
3. In addition, the government should put in place language policies that favour and encourage language digitalization.

**Conclusion**

The study concludes that making the Lower Fungom languages available in traditional as well as social media networks is a necessity. This will not only help to make the world a global village but will equally make the Lower Fungom indigenes residing in Souza consider preserving the languages in their host community as much as their Lower Fungom Languages. Unlike the physical presence of the social networks of Lower Fungom multilingual individuals in Souza, the assistance of a technological tool or app in learning a language can be empowering in that the tool does not judge the learners' abilities in the learning process.

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