

African and European Languages in contact and the emergence of new urban practices and identities: Pidgin and Francanglais in Cameroon

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Different types of linguistic processes can result from language contact situations. Among them is the emergence of new languages, such as pidgins and creoles, or new linguistic practices which are stigmatised (e.g. “youth languages”).

In Cameroon, a country in which approximately 250 to 280 African languages¹ co-exist with the two official languages, English and French, one can observe two types of urban linguistic practices: Pidgin English, an “expanded” English-based pidgin spoken in the anglophone provinces as well as in some towns in the francophone area, and Francanglais, a “youth language” spoken by the young francophone Cameroonians. Both assume a vehicular as well as a vernacular function: their usage in urban areas enables the speakers to transcend ethnic and socio-cultural diversity and to symbolize new identities (e.g. a regional or national identity with Pidgin and being “Cameroonian”, as well as “young” and “francophone” with Francanglais), which neither the “ethnic” languages, called “langues nationales”, nor English, nor French in its exogeneous standard variety, can do

From a strict linguistic point of view Pidgin and Francanglais are very different. Most of Pidgin vocabulary comes from English but its morphology and syntax are quite different (with, for example, pre-verbal markers for tenses and aspects, as in other pidgins and creoles, but an original human/non human gender distinction for 3rd person pronouns, probably due to the influence, at the “semantactic” level, of the bantu substrate). On the contrary, Francanglais only differs from common French by the use of lexical items which are mostly borrowed from English/Pidgin or African languages. Whereas Pidgin can be considered as an autonomous system (even if the boundaries between English and Pidgin fluctuate on the anglophone side), this is not the case of Francanglais. Defining Francanglais as a linguistic object is therefore problematic: studies need to focus not only on the purely linguistic data but also on the speakers’categorisations as well as their discourse strategies.

¹ Depending on the sources.