

## THE ROLE OF MULTILINGUALISM TO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CAMEROONIAN REFUGEES AND MFAMOSING COMMUNITY

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### **Abstract**

Cross River State is home to over 60,000 Cameroonian refugees who fled their country due to the Anglophone crisis currently ravaging the Republic of Cameroon. Although there is ample research on the refugee situation in Cross River state, there is insufficient data on the role of the multilingualism to communication between the refugee and members of the host communities. The goal of this paper is therefore to identify the role of multilingualism to communication between Cameroonian refugees in Mfamosing. This study adopted a mixed approach design consisting of interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. Using the purposeful sampling technique, seventy-seven (77) participants were selected for the study. The study found that initial communication between the Mfamosing refugees and the host community was arduous and still continues to hinder effective communication between them. It also revealed that these language differences affect access to health services, education, and employment opportunities for refugees. This study highlights the need to intervene in order to bridge the communication gap between the refugees and the host community so as to ensure a harmonious relationship between both parties and ultimately lead to their integration into the Nigerian society. It further recommends the establishment and implementation of language programs aimed at bridging the communication gap between both parties.

**Key-words:** *Communication, host community, integration, multilingualism, refugees.*

### **Résumé**

L'État de Cross River accueille plus de 60 000 réfugiés camerounais qui ont fui leur pays à cause de la crise anglophone qui ravage actuellement la République du Cameroun. Bien qu'il existe de nombreuses recherches sur la situation des réfugiés dans l'État de Cross River, les données sur le rôle du multilinguisme dans la communication entre les réfugiés et les membres des communautés d'accueil sont insuffisantes. L'objectif de cet article est donc d'identifier le rôle du multilinguisme dans la communication entre les

réfugiés camerounais et les indigènes d'Mfamosing. Cette étude a adopté une approche mixte qui comprend des entretiens, des discussions de groupe et des questionnaires. Grâce à la technique d'échantillonnage ciblé, soixante-dix-sept (77) participants ont été sélectionnés pour l'étude. L'étude a révélé que la communication initiale entre les réfugiés de Mfamosing et la communauté d'accueil était ardue et continue d'entraver une communication efficace entre eux. L'étude a également révélé que ces différences linguistiques affectent l'accès aux services de santé, à l'éducation et aux opportunités d'emploi pour les réfugiés. Cette étude met en évidence la nécessité d'intervenir afin de combler la lacune de communication entre les réfugiés et la communauté d'accueil afin d'assurer une relation harmonieuse entre les deux parties et aboutir à leur intégration dans la société nigériane. Elle recommande en outre l'établissement et la mise en œuvre de programmes linguistiques pour combler la lacune de communication entre les deux parties.

**Mots-clés:** *Communication, communauté d'accueil, intégration, multilinguisme, réfugiés.*

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the study**

The Republic of Cameroon has had a long and interesting history since its colonization by Germany in 1884. During the Treaty of Versailles (1919), German Kamerun was taken over to be administered by Britain and France thus leading to different administrative styles for the region. Ndille (2016) affirms that these differences could be evaluated in the difference in languages, social attitudes, administrative systems, education, and judiciary systems. These differences would engender tensions in the years to come.

The Anglophone problem, as it is called, is defined as a struggle by the ethnic Anglophones (former Southern Cameroon Anglophones) to uphold and preserve their cultural identity. This would ultimately culminate in the cessation of the South-Western region on October 1, 2017. Armed conflict between the Cameroonian government and the Ambazonian separatists has led to the death of over 6,000 people and displaced over 700,000 people.

### **Multilingualism in Cameroon**

Cameroon is officially a bilingual country with French and English as official languages. However, Gordon (2005) states that Cameroon has up to 279 indigenous languages of various origins while Anchimbe (2007) posits that in addition to the official languages and indigenous languages, “pidgin” is dominant in the Anglophone part of South West and North West regions.

In a study on Cameroon sociolinguistic history, Makoni and Meinhof (2003: 1) state that:

“precolonial migration, trade down the colonies, the arbitrary territorial changes under colonialism, the industrial exploitation of natural resources, and the unprecedented rapidity of migration and urbanisation brought different language groups into contact and conflict. Thereby changing the sociolinguistic landscape of Cameroon by reshaping the function and status of languages within communities”

Cameroon is thus a melting pot of languages and cultures thrust together as one.

The goal of this paper is to identify the effect of multilingualism on the ability of the Cameroonian refugees to communicate with members of Mfamosing community in Akampa Local Government Area of Cross River state. By bridging the communication gap, this study aims to ease communication difficulties encountered by these refugees thereby easing their integration into the Nigerian society.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Since the declaration of independence of the Republic of Ambazonia in 2017, armed conflict between the Cameroonians and the separatists has resulted in a teeming number of refugees flooding into Nigeria-Cameroon border towns. As many of these refugees are semi-literate and illiterate; they face communication difficulties with members of the host community as the variant of pidgin they speak is different from what is spoken in Nigeria. Existing literature on the refugee

situation in Nigeria is lacking in addressing communication difficulties between these multilingual Cameroonians and Mfamosing, Cross River state. It is on this backdrop that this paper seeks to fill this research gap.

### **1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to proffer solutions to the communication difficulties between Cameroonian refugees and Mfamosing. The following objectives are put forward to actualize the aims of this study:

1. Investigate the languages spoken by the refugees and the host community.
2. Examine the communication difficulties encountered by the refugees as a result of linguistics differences between them and indigenes of Mfamosing community.
3. Identify the impact of multilingualism to their integration to the Mfamosing community.
4. Proffer solutions to the communication difficulties between the refugees and members of the host community.

### **1.4 Research questions**

1. What languages are spoken by the refugees and Mfamosing indigenes?
2. What are the difficulties in communication between the refugees and Mfamosing indigenes?
3. What is the impact of multilingualism to the integration of Cameroonian refugees into Mfamosing?
4. How can the communication difficulties between refugees and Mfamosing indigenes be resolved?

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Communication is vital to human existence and harmony in any milieu. Bridging the language barrier and resolving the linguistic differences between the Cameroonian refugees and indigenes of Mfamosing hold enormous benefits to both parties. It would enable them understand each other better and thus live in peace. It would also promote social integration as communication is key to achieving this. In addition to this, it would

ensure the refugees access basic services such as healthcare, education for refugee children and young adults, legal assistance without hassle. It would further reduce conflict and misunderstandings between both parties as well as foster cultural exchange.

### **1.6 Scope and Delimitation of the Study**

The study is centered on Cameroonian refugees in Mfamosing, Akampa Local Government Area of Cross River State. Here are some of its limitations:

1. The study is limited to one (1) out of over ten (10) refugee camps/resinstallation centers in Cross River State.
2. This study was only able to sample 77 out of over 60,000 Cameroonian refugees currently living in Cross River State.

### **1.7 Theoretical framework**

This study is hinged on two theories:

1. Politeness Principle Pragmatics theory.
2. Speech Accommodation theory.

#### **1.7.1 Leech's Politeness Principle Pragmatics Theory (1983)**

The Politeness Principle is a linguistic theory introduced by English linguist Geoffrey Leech in his 1983 book "*Principles of Pragmatics*". Although sharing similarities with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on Politeness Principle, this study will be hinged on Leech's. His theory offers a framework for understanding how people navigate social interactions and maintain harmony in communication and further highlights the importance of politeness in managing relationships and avoiding conflict.

Politeness Principle can help with the language barrier between Cameroonian refugees and Mfamosing indigenes through the application of simple and clear language (in this case pidgin), avoiding complex vocabulary or idioms thus making it easier for communication to take place.

For example:

Instead of saying, “Sapa dey ooo”, the Mfamosing indigenes can say “nothing dey”.

Non-verbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, and visual aids (like pictures or diagrams) can help bridge the gap. It is important to also be patient and encourage refugees to ask for help if they don’t understand something. This shows respect and understanding.

By applying the Politeness Principle, both the refugees and the local community can create a more respectful and understanding environment, making it easier to overcome the challenges of language barriers and build positive relationships.

### **1.7.2 Giles Speech Accommodation Theory (1973)**

Speech Accommodation Theory was propounded by British-American sociolinguist Howard Giles in his 1973 book *“Toward a Theory of Interpersonal Communication through Speech”*. It focuses on how and why people adjust their speech patterns during interactions with others. It details the process of adjusting one’s speech style to match the speech style of another person during communication. These adjustments may be in accent, speech rate, tone, or vocabulary. When someone adapts their speech to become more similar to the person they are talking to, it shows friendliness, solidarity and the overall wish to make the communication process easier.

This theory can also help with communication between Mfamosing indigenes and the Cameroonian refugees. By making adjustments such as slowing down the rapidity of their speech, and toning down the vocabulary they would usually use; both parties can ensure communication.

For example:

Instead of saying “hunger dey disturb we”, the refugees can say very slowly “H U N G E R D E Y D I S T U R B W E”.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Many researchers have pondered the refugee situation in Nigeria and indeed Cross River state in view to bring awareness to their conditions and proffer solutions to their plight. Studying the Nigerian refugee population in Cameroon in “Language Education and the Social Integration of Nigerian Refugees in Cameroon”, Betek et al (2022) highlight the role of language in the social integration of Nigerians in Cameroon and claim it is the individual responsibility of the refugees, along with assistance from government to acquire the appropriate language necessary for communication. Although, this is practical and realistic, one can easily glean the lack of responsibility on the part of the host community in ensuring communication is smooth between them and the refugees. Nwagbo (2016) studied Liberian refugees in Nigeria and examined the manifestations of identity among the refugees in Oru camp, Ogun state through code-switching. This study revealed that the refugees identified more with English and Pidgin, and less with their indigenous languages, and least with Yoruba, the language of the host community. He further recommended that refugees should identify more with their indigenous languages and the language of the host community (Yoruba) for reasons of language vitality, inclusion, and the benefits of diversity. This once again, expects too much from refugees who have been forced to leave their homes and it is preferable that communication continues in English and pidgin which is understood to a large extent by both parties.

Unfortunately, there is insufficient literature on the refugee situation in Cross river state which hosts over 60,000 refugees. Eweka and Olusegun (2016) comparatively interrogated the management of internal displacement in Africa with focus on Nigeria and Cameroon. They recommended the need to improve on the management of IDPs in both countries. In 2014, Isokon examined displacement status and welfare of Bakassi settlers in Cross River State. It was suggested among others that vigorous education campaigns should be carried out among settlers and host communities around the resettlement area. The campaigns should emphasize attitudinal change, cooperation, peace and unity amongst the settlers and the host communities

with the aim of aiding their social integration. In Etung and Ikom local government areas of the state, Omang (2020) examined the impact of Cameroun refugee influx on food security on the respective host communities and recommended that the Cross-River state government synergizes with the relevant agencies of the Federal Government as well as other international Agencies to stimulate food production.

However, no extant empirical research identifies the role of multilingualism of Cameroonian refugees.

### **2.1 Research Gap**

Extant research covers the refugee situation across Nigeria, cross river state inclusive. However, none examines the language barrier that exists between Cameroonian refugees in Mfamosing and the host community.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In an attempt to address the research questions of this study, this paper employed a mixed method approach in order to ascertain the role of multilingualism to communication between the refugees and indigenes of Mfamosing in Cross River state. Using the qualitative focus group discussions and interviews, the researcher was able to get authentic and reliable data from the research subjects, thus ensuring a better understanding of their linguistic experiences. This study used the purposeful sampling technique. The aim of this is to select those who have encountered or still encounter communication difficulties with members of the host community.

### **3.1 Study population**

Cameroonian refugees living in Mfamosing were targeted for focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Of the ten (10) refugee camps or reinstallation centers as they are called in Cross River state, Mfamosing was chosen due to its proximity to the capital city of Calabar.

### **3.2 Research methods and Design**

The qualitative phase of the study presents twenty-three (23) Focus Group Discussions. Each FGD had four (4) participants

selected on the basis of how they had responded to the questions in the questionnaire distributed earlier. The participants were men and women. Discussions were recorded using a video camera and transcribed for analysis.

Using the quantitative method, a pilot study was carried out by one of the research assistants, Mr Ofem in Mfamosing resettlement center prior to the commencement of the main research. The purpose of this pilot study was to confirm the validity of the study instruments and to adjust the survey questionnaire to fit the social context in the location.

### **3.3 Data collection**

Survey method was used to gather data. The study used the purposeful sampling technique where only those who have knowledge and understanding of the research question at hand are selected for the study – in this case, those who encountered or still encounter communication difficulties due to language barrier between them and indigenes of Mfamosing.

### **3.4 Sample size**

A total number of 77 respondents made up the sample size of this study with 18 men and 59 women age ranged 16 to 70.

### **3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Results**

The researcher employed the Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for the thematic analysis.

### **3.6 Presentation of Findings**

#### **3.6.1 Refugee camp, Mfamosing**

Mfamosing is a border town between Nigeria and Cameroon located in Akampa local government area of Cross River state. Mfamosing hosts a larger number of Cameroonian refugees fleeing the Ambazonian war (from 2017 - present) in their country.



Image 2: The researcher with some Cameroonian refugees currently living in Mfamosing, Cross river state.



Image 3: An ID card of one of the Cameroonian refugees living in Mfamosing.

**Table-1.**  
**Demographic data on the respondents**

| Sex of the respondents       |            |                |              |            |                |        |
|------------------------------|------------|----------------|--------------|------------|----------------|--------|
| Vari<br>able                 | Num<br>ber | Perce<br>ntage | Vari<br>able | Numb<br>er | Percen<br>tage | Total  |
| Men                          | 18         | 23.38          | Wo<br>men    | 59         | 76.62          | (100%) |
| Age of respondents           |            |                |              |            |                |        |
| Age range                    |            |                |              | Number     | Percentage     |        |
| 18 years old – 34 years old  |            |                |              | 15         | 19.48          |        |
| 35 years old -- 49 years old |            |                |              | 39         | 50.65          |        |
| 50 years old – 64 years old  |            |                |              | 12         | 15.58          |        |

|                        |           |            |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 65 years old and older | 11        | 14.29      |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>77</b> | <b>100</b> |

According to Table 1, majority of the Cameroonian refugee population in Mfamosing are middle-aged (35-49 years old).

**Table-2.**

**Do you find it difficult communicating with indigenes of Mfamosing?**

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Yes             | 62            | 80.52             |
| No              | 15            | 19.49             |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>77</b>     | <b>100</b>        |

According to table 2, 80.52% of Cameroonian refugees at Mfamosing have experienced difficulties in communicating with members of Mfamosing community.

**Table-3.**

**What is your preferred language of communication?**

| <b>Reponse</b> | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| English        | 23            | 29.87             |
| Pidgin         | 50            | 64.94             |
| French         | 4             | 5.19              |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>77</b>     | <b>100</b>        |

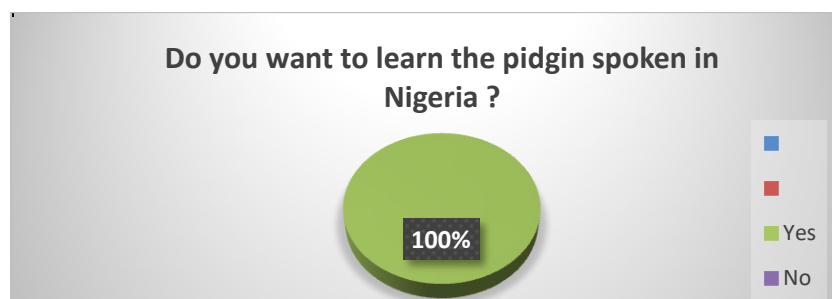
In Mfamosing, 64.94% of the Cameroonian refugees say that their preferred language of communication is pidgin.

**Table-4.**

**Has this language barrier hindered your ability to access essential services such as healthcare?**

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Yes             | 69            | 89.61             |
| No              | 8             | 10.39             |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>77</b>     | <b>100</b>        |

According to table 4, 89.61% of Cameroonian refugees at Mfamosing have been unable to smoothly access essential services due to this language barrier.



They unanimously wish to learn the variant of pidgin spoken in Nigeria in order to enjoy smooth communication between them and the host community.

#### 4.0 Discussion of Findings

This method of research finally yields the following results to the research questions raised. Consequently, these are the findings guided by the research questions aforementioned.

i. *What languages are spoken by the refugees and Mfamosing indigenes?*

Based on the data gathered, the Cameroonian refugees in Mfamosing speak Ewondo (70%), Maka (25%), Bulu (5%) indigenous languages. All the refugees interviewed speak a variant of pidgin language spoken in Cameroon.

The people of Mfamosing speak Efik but like most Nigerians, pidgin is generally spoken by the majority of the population. However, this pidgin is different from the one spoken by the Cameroonians and the researcher had to employ the services of two Cameroonian translators, Miss Ewane and Mr Oben in translating the sentences first into correct English and further translation into Nigerian pidgin by the researcher.

ii. *What are the difficulties in communication between the refugees and Mfamosing indigenes?*

The Cameroonian refugees attest to experiencing difficulties in communicating with members of the host community due to the

language barrier existing between them (please see table 2, page 13). A staggering 80.52% (please see table 4, page 13) of them have encountered difficulties have had consequences on their lives, livelihoods and access to basic services.

“We no be understand English wey the di talk for here. Son time then when the talk sontin, man nedi even understand thin wey the mean. The too nedi understand we.” (Cameroonian pidgin)

“We been no dey understand the English wey them dey speak here. Sometimes, them go talk something, we no go know wetin them talk. Even when we talk, them no dey understand us” (Translation to Nigerian pidgin)

“We don’t understand the English spoken here. Sometimes, when they say something, we don’t understand what they mean. They too do not understand us.”  
(Translation to English)

*iii. What is the impact of multilingualism to the integration of Cameroonian refugees into Mfamosing?*

Cameroon is a multilingual country with over 279 indigenous languages and English and French as its official language. Pidgin is also spoken by the Anglophone southwest region of the country. The refugees currently in Nigeria speak pidgin in addition to their indigenous languages. Although, there are similarities in the pidgin spoken in Nigeria and Cameroon, this research will show there are considerable differences which hamper communication.

I want to go to the health center. How do I get there?

*Ah wan go health center. Abeh you fee direct me?*  
Cameroonian pidgin.

*I won go health center. Abeg how I fit reach there?*  
Nigerian pidgin.

Do you have any job I can do?

*You get any bolo weh I fee bolo?*

Cameroonian pidgin.

*You get any work wey I fit do?*

Nigerian pidgin.

My wife is sick, please help me.

*Abeh helep me, ma nga no well.*

Cameroonian pidgin.

*Abeg help me. My wife no well.*

Nigerian pidgin.

I cannot afford to send my children to school.

*I no fee even for send my njaka them for lewa.*

Cameroonian pidgin.

*I no get money to send my children to school.*

Nigerian pidgin.

We are hungry. Everything is difficult.

*Hungry weh deh. All thing just strong.*

Cameroonian pidgin.

*We dey hungry. Everything hard.*

Nigerian pidgin.

As can be evinced from these sentences, the differences in the Nigerian and Cameroonian pidgin hinder communication between the refugees and indigenes of Mfamosing.

*iv. How can the communication difficulties between refugees and Mfamosing indigenes be resolved?*

The Cameroonian refugees living in Mfamosing wish to be able to communicate with their Mfamosing hosts and they all told the researcher they wish to learn and master Nigerian pidgin (please see pie 1, page 14). This willingness from their part

needs to be followed by actionable policies to bring it to fruition. According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), the responsibility of refugees falls to the government of the country in which they live. Thus, it is the duty of the Nigerian government and the government of Cross River state to ensure that the refugees in Mfamosing receive linguistic aid by creating and distributing bilingual educational materials, such as pamphlets, posters, and videos that explain key phrases, cultural nuances, and common expressions in both variants. Also by organizing language classes for both the refugees and the host community which would include lessons on the variants spoken by each group, fostering mutual understanding. This would further cultural exchange between them. In line with cultural exchange, events where both groups can learn about each other's dialects, cultures, and traditions can be organized. These events can include storytelling, music, and drama. In order to ensure better communication, the use of interpreters and community mediators cannot be overstated. Bilingual individuals who understand both variants of pidgin English should act as interpreters in official settings, community meetings, and social gatherings.

In addition to this, developing radio programs that feature both pidgins, allowing them to listen and become familiar with the other's way of speaking would also help bridge the gap. Finally, the use of social media platforms and messaging apps to create groups where members of both groups can communicate, share content, and learn from each other. By fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding, and providing practical tools and opportunities for language learning, the language barrier between Cameroonian refugees and the indigenes of Cross River State can be effectively bridged.

### **Recommendations**

On the ground of the significance of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Organize language classes for both the refugees and Mfamosing indigenes.
2. Encourage cultural exchange events.

3. Employ multilingual individuals who understand both variants of Pidgin English to act as interpreters.
4. Train community mediators who can help resolve misunderstandings that arise due to language differences.
5. Develop radio programs that feature both Pidgin English variants.
6. Use social media platforms to create groups where both parties can communicate.
7. Create and distribute bilingual educational materials, such as pamphlets, posters etc.
8. Establish community centers where both parties can access language resources and discuss.
9. Allocate resources for language programs and integration initiatives.

#### **Contributions to knowledge**

1. This study establishes the language barrier that exists between Cameroonian refugees and indigenes in Mfamosing.
2. This study provides for the establishment and creation of a linguistic legislation aimed at bridging communication gaps between both parties.
3. This study establishes more work to be done in linguistic integration of refugees in Nigeria.
4. This study is an addition to existing literature in the domain of linguistics.

#### **Conclusion**

The presence of multilingual Cameroonian refugees in Mfamosing, Cross River State poses a number of issues for the host community – one of which is effective communication between both parties. As it is the responsibility of the Nigerian government to assure the safety, security and welfare of all refugees within her borders, the duty to bridge the communication gap between Mfamosing indigenes and Cameroonian refugees falls upon her shoulders. By implementing the recommendations put forward in this study, the language barrier between the two parties will be summarily bridged in a matter of a few years.

This would ensure harmonious relationship between Mfamosing and the refugees and further aid their integration to the Nigerian society.

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