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Bilingualism: A Catalyst for Social Cohesion in the Context of Decentralization: Stakes and Challenges

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Abstract: ***Bilingualism represents one of the assets of the Republic of Cameroon as enshrined on the preamble of the constitution. Article 1(2) of the Cameroon constitution affirms that the Republic of Cameroon shall be a decentralized unitary state, one and indivisible, secular, democratic and dedicated to social service [1]. The people have been empowered through Local and Regional councils to take part in their development with competencies being transferred to local entities. Cameroonians therefore will be able to work, teach, study, live or do business in any region of the country as long as they can express themselves or understand the second official language. With over 250 indigenous languages and ethnic groups in Cameroon [2], knowledge of French and English, a colonial heritage, serve as a social cement to bring citizens together. With the current advancement in technology and globalization, global education as well as job opportunities require the possession of transversal skills among which is communication skill. With the creation of the National Commission on Bilingualism and Multiculturalism aimed at fostering peace, justice and social cohesion, it is clear that the Government understands the role of bilingualism in the strife for a peaceful and harmonious nation. The Circular letter no. 23/22/MINESEC/IGP/IP-BIL of 28th January 2022 by the Minister of Secondary Education on instructions for preparation of National Week of Bilingualism presented the theme of 2022 bilingualism week as "Bilingualism: A Catalyst for Social Cohesion in the Context of Decentralization." This paper therefore drawing inspiration from this theme, examines the role of bilingualism in promoting social cohesion in the context of decentralization. It also presents some challenges plaguing the promotion of bilingualism in Cameroon and ends by proposing a way forward.***

Keywords: Bilingualism/Cameroon/ Decentralization/Social Cohesion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The First World War that started in Europe in 1914 soon spread to German *Kamerun* when in August 1914 Britain dispatched forces from Gambia, Sierria Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria while French troops arrived from French Equatorial Africa into German *Kamerun* [3]. The joint effort of the British and French troops defeated the Germans who had occupied the territory since 1884. As compensation for their war effort, Britain took one-fifth while France took four-fifth of the territory [4]. The French administered their portion as part of the French colonial empire using the policy of assimilation which aimed at transforming the indigenes to French men and women except in colour. The British used the policy of indirect rule which saw the indigenes being administered through their local chiefs. Both colonial masters did all to spread their languages and culture in their respective spheres. On 1st October 1961, British Southern Cameroons gained its independence and reunited with the Republic of Cameroon which had gained its independence on 1st January 1960 to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Prio to the independence of British Southern Cameroons, preparatory meetings in view of reunification culminated to the Foumban Conference of 17th to 21st July 1961 which gave birth to the Federal constitution. This constitution took effect from the 1st of October 1961, with English and French adopted as the official languages in both West and East Cameroon [4]. Thus, the two official languages is the direct result of the union between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon [5].
Also, Law No. 2008/001 of 14th April 2008 to amend and supplement some provisions of Law No. 96/6 of 18th January 1996 to amend the constitution of 2nd June 1972, states in article 1(3) that "the official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The state shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages." [1]. Also, drawing inspiration from the above law, article 3 of the 1998 Orientation Law on Education in Cameroon[6] and article 5 of the 2001 Law to Guide Higher Education in Cameroon [7] states that "the state shall institute Bilingualism at all levels of education as a factor of national unity and integration." It is in fulfilment of this that the state has made tremendous efforts to instil bilingualism. To better understand the context of this paper, it is important to clarify certain key concepts.

Bilingualism:
The aptitude of expressing oneself fluently in any two languages [5]. In our Cameroonian context, bilingualism is the aptitude of expressing oneself fluently in English and French which are our official languages.

Catalyst:
A person or thing that precipitates an event. I Cameroon, English and French Languages are expected to precipitate social cohesion.

Social Cohesion:
The extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society [8].

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Decentralization:
The transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy [9]. In Cameroon, it is the legal, institutional and financial means through which regional and local authorities operate to foster local development with the active involvement of the population [10].

Some Effort in Promoting Bilingualism in Cameroon
Ndongko & Tambo [11] posit that in the first few years after independence and unification, there were arguments along educational circles as to whether French should be taught in Anglophone primary schools and English in Francophone primary schools. However, proponents of bilingualism at the time like Bernard Fonlon argued that both English and French should be taught together from the very beginning of primary school and this view prevailed [10]. The University of Yaounde was created in 1961 as a bilingual university. When the University of Yaounde II and the University of Dschang were created in 1993, the University of Yaounde I and Dschang were given a bilingual status [12]. In 1965, the Bilingual Grammar School Yaounde was created and its counterpart opened in Man O' War Bay and later moved to Molyko Buea in 1970 as nurseries for the training of bilingual Cameroonians [5]. These schools represented real bilingualism with some subjects taught in both English and French in specific classes, not like most of the bilingual schools created today just by name which are merely a co-habitation of two sub-systems in one campus (Anglophone and Francophone sections). Government effort to institute bilingualism as a curriculum policy in Cameroon is thought to be the best way to promote the constitutional option of state bilingualism adopted at independence and unification [11].
In 1972, a program, *French by Radio* was aired over radio Cameroon Buea Station to enable English speaking civil servants learn and master the French language [5]. Similar programs followed suit in the French speaking section. The Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) was opened in 1985 in Buea to train translators and interpreters. Linguistic centres have been opened in the regional head-quarters where interested persons can take lessons in the second language. Inspectorates for the promotion of bilingualism were created under the Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education to monitor and promote the spread of bilingualism in schools. Also, English and French languages are taught as subjects from nursery to university level as a means to foster bilingualism. The state has also instituted the National Week of Bilingualism every year, during which teachers and learners engage in bilingual activities such as songs, rhymes, drama with teachers encouraged during such weeks to make summaries of their lessons in the second language.
Also in 2017, the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism was created in Cameroon as a consultative organ responsible for promoting bilingualism and multiculturalism. This organ monitors and ensures that all official publications are done in both languages in the public and private sectors in Cameroon.

The Role of Bilingualism in Social Cohesion
Awa [5] contends that to be bilingual simply means that the person in question is able to understand the second official language, even if he/she cannot speak it. This view is erroneous as it only goes to discourage effective efforts to learn the second language. True bilingualism should involve the ability to understand, speak and for the literate, to read and

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write the second language. Effective bilingualism will promote social cohesion in the following ways.

English is the language of science and technology, commerce, medicine and the language of communication in many countries of the world, while French is the language of diplomacy, arts and international relations [5]. Knowledge of both languages will enable its speakers and writers to interact at any level with relative ease and occupy comfortable positions anywhere within the national triangle and abroad.

Also, knowledge of English and French will promote inter marriages between persons from English speaking and French speaking backgrounds. Such unions go a long way to cement the social ties between the two sub groups thereby reducing avenues for conflict and tension.

Being bilingual in Cameroon facilitates social integration as Anglophones and Francophones are capable of living in the same neigbourhoods. Such living together enhances peace and prevents conflicts that may arise when settlement is socially stratified based on linguistic lines. This will limit the phenomenon of "*quartier Anglophone*" or "*quartier Francophone*" that is always accompanied by stigma.

Bilingualism fosters academic tourism within Cameroon and even abroad. Being able to express oneself in the second official language will permit students and teachers exploit opportunities in schools and universities in any part of the national triangle. With such academic blend, social relationships are strengthened between students and teachers from the two sub-systems.

Some Challenges Plaguing Bilingualism in Cameroon

The population disparity of an eighty per-cent French-speaking majority and a twenty per-cent English-speaking minority from its colonial past makes bilingualism seem like "assimilation". This population disparity contributes in dampening efforts to promote bilingualism as the dominant population is also bound to dominate in the use of their language in official matters.

Furthermore, negative attitudes and bad faith, lack of interest or apathy of some citizens towards learning and speaking the second language kills the spirit of bilingualism. One will hear expressions like "*je m'enfou de la langue anglaise", "je ne comprends pas votre patois la"* or English speakers will say "I don't hear that your French", where am I going with French?". Such derogatory expressions do not only kill the zeal to learn the second language but also strain the relationship between the two sides.

The lack of political will to enforce laws on bilingualism is also another deterring factor. Irrespective of the fact that the constitution gives equal status to both languages, and the putting in place of the National Commission on Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, much still need to be done through legislation to enforce the respect of official bilingualism principles. It is still common to find some sign posts, official decisions still existing only in one language or wrongly translated. For instance "*I'école publique- public school, or school of the public."* The absence of sanctions to such violations only go a long way to promote social tension.

Insufficiency of trained bilingual teachers in schools is another challenge to the promotion of bilingualism. Government efforts to recruit 1000 bilingual teachers recently was plagued by irregularities. Some of the teachers were not "bilingual" per se, some deployed to already

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saturated schools in major towns, while others deployed to suburbs have looked for their re-deployment to economically more lucrative arrears.

Recommendations

- More bilingual teachers should be trained and deployed to schools in need.
- Bilingual schools in the real sense of the word should be created to train learners in different subject areas in both languages.
- The state should ensure enforcement of laws on bilingualism and mete out effective sanctions to defaulters and promoters of hate speech emanating from linguistic lines.
- Cameroonians need to change their negative attitude towards the learning and use of the second language. Awa [5] contends that stake holders in the promotion of bilingualism in Cameroon must make up their minds to submerge their individual differences so as to promote bilingualism without inciting dissention in one party or the other.
- Also, well-grounded experiences of bilingualism in multicultural/linguistic socio-political contexts around the world such as the Canadian model can be studied and adapted to the Cameroonian context.

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