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Exonyms in Cameroon English: Reinforcing Socio-Political Inclusiveness

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Abstract

This study investigated the formation and socio-political significance of place-name exonyms in Cameroon English. It focused primarily on how such naming practices reflect identity negotiation and linguistic inclusiveness in a post-colonial bilingual Cameroon. The study adopted a mixed method design, a research combined documentary analysis and an attitudinal inquiry. The linguistic data were collected from official public service documents, including official communiques, application letters and complaints. And supplemented with informal discussions involving Anglophone Cameroonians in Yaoundé. From these sources, 20 exonym-endonym pairs were identified and classified according to their phonological and orthographic processes. In addition, attitudinal data were obtained through purposive sampling of 273 Francophone respondents from communities whose place names had undergone exonymisation. 154 educated Anglophone respondents were also interviewed on their motivations for English-based naming variants. Quantitative analysis was conducted using percentage distributions, while qualitative interpretations were guided by Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory. The findings revealed three dominant exonymic processes in Cameroon English: allophonic variation, diacritic omission, and orthographic simplification. Attitudinal evidence showed broad acceptance of English-based variants when referring to major national locations (over 80% among Francophone respondents and 94% among Anglophones), but resistance emerged when modifications concern local

communal names. The study concluded that exonym formation in Cameroon English functions not only as linguistic adaptation but also as a symbolic strategy through which minority speakers negotiate visibility and inclusion within unevenly implemented bilingual policies. The study recommended the dire need for clearer national guidelines on place-name standardisation to balance communicative accessibility with cultural authenticity.
Keywords: Exonyms, Endonyms, Cameroon English, Socio-political inclusiveness, language identity

Introduction

Language is an important marker of identity which does not only communicate thoughts and feelings but technically reveals a lot about beliefs and backgrounds. Pinka (1994, pp.1) observes that language is "so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine human life without it". This makes it an important medium of understanding societies and beliefs. Through this medium, identities are either constructed or destroyed, and communicators, at every instance, endeavour to project an opinion. This aligns with Fasold's (1984) idea that language is implicitly connected to people's personal experiences or those they share with others. Consequently, besides the communicative function of language use in every speech act, there is an implicit expression of identity which informs the people about how others relate or want to relate with them. The identity question in Cameroon English (CamE, hereafter) reveals quite interesting peculiarities, perhaps compared to what obtains in other English second (ESL) and foreign (EFL) contexts.

Though used as both second and foreign language in Cameroon, the English language in Cameroon bears macro and micro marks of ethnic groupings. At the macro level, Cameroonians from the former British Trust Territory of the United Nations, who united with the Republic of Cameroun in 1961 to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon, are identified with English and referred to

as Anglophones while those in the former French part identify with French and are considered Francophones. This identification of people in terms of English and French makes the languages not only a linguistic code of communication, but perhaps more pertinently an identity marker. Essentially, an Anglophone in Cameroon is not just someone who speaks English but fundamentally someone who comes from the former British Trust Territory of the United Nations whether they speak English or not.

The unification of the two Cameroons came with minority questions which did not only become popular as the Anglophone politico-ethnic questions, but practically sparked a politico-ethnic violence in 2016. The violence ultimately transformed into war in 2017 and is still ongoing with over six thousand deaths and nearly 800,000 displaced people as of August 2024 (Global Center for Responsibility to Protect, December 2024). While there is a broad-based belief that the violence is rooted in socio-political frustrations and complete neglect of unification accords (International Crisis Group, 2017; Amnesty International, 2023), the frustration has also stemmed from the partial use of the English language in official government communication (Angwah, 2023). Cameroon is officially recognized as a bilingual country in English and French. While previous scholars (Kouega, 2018; Fon, 2019; Takam and Fassè, 2020) have taken turns to explore the level of bilingualism in the country, investigating it as a concept and as a practice, at the individual, communal and national levels, the uncertainties seemingly anchor on sheer intransigence.

Though the December 24, 2019 law on official language in the country spells out the use of the language in different sectors of the country and that the government shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country, it does not spell out follow-up efforts which guarantee effective implementation. Consequently, there are observable bottom-up, and sometimes top-bottom, efforts to impose the English Language even in contexts that evoke more

questions than answers. One of such efforts is with the renaming or modification of place names.

Renaming, either through translations or neologisms, falls within the logic of exonyms. Nordquist (2018, pp. 2) defines exonym as "a place name that isn't used by the people who live in that place but that is used by others." The non-use by the people whose communal name gains a new designation is arguably relative since recent studies (Jordan, 2021; Kudla, 2022) have revealed that there are observable instances where natives think foreign naming is a version of their communal name and tend to accept it. The recurrence of random exonyms, especially in vulnerable communities has often provoked suspicion and anger. Such suspicion is eloquent in Woodman's (2007, pp. 3) argument that exonym is "bestowed from the outside, and in a language from the outside". The logical and perhaps moral question of why name a place that already has a name entreats an objective response. The United Nations Groups of Experts on Geographical names (UNGEGN), concerned with unprecedented renaming especially in culturally weak communities, recommends a reduction in the use of exonyms especially in international cartography. Such a move could have been inspired by the effect the process has on local identity and originality of places and artefacts.

In Cameroon English, exonyms rather seem to be motivated by certain political desires that are constitutional but not in practice. Until 2019, the status of official language use in all sectors of the country was not seamlessly evident in the constitution, although English and French were adopted as official languages of the country in the 1961 constitution. Law No. 2019/019 of December 24, 2019 now clearly states where, when, and how both languages should be used in accordance with the government's goal to promote official bilingualism in the country. Even at that, the law does not concretely spell out a follow-up measure to ensure that both languages are impeccably implemented in every sector of the

country. In practice, therefore, the realisation of bilingualism across many national sectors appears to hinge less on the authority of constitutional provisions and more on the discretion of individuals operating within those institutions. This has provoked a feeling of frustration among those with limited competencies in the largely favoured French language (Angwah, 2023). Based on this frustration, the desire to see an English equivalence for certain political headquarters is common in the country and has led to minority efforts to provide English alternatives for some names of places in the French part of Cameroon.

While previous studies (Simo-Bobda, 1994; Takam & Fassè, 2020 and Angwah, 2023) have documented linguistic variation and bilingual policy tensions, little attention has been paid to exonym formation as a bottom-up socio-political practice that shapes identity, ensure the visibility of official bilingual cultures and language implementation. The arguments have anchored predominantly on the idea that exonyms emerge primarily through phonological and orthographical adaptation of French-mediated indigenous place names reflecting broader processes of linguistic nativisation which is a typical characteristic of postcolonial English varieties (Simo Bobda, 1994; Schneider, 2007). Scholars have also shown that language choice in Cameroon is closely tied to politico-ethnic identity, with English functioning as a marker of Anglophone belonging and solidarity (Kouega, 2018; Fon, 2019). Within this sociolinguistic context, the use of English-based place-name variants seem to be a symbolic strategy for negotiating linguistic visibility and inclusion in administrative domains. However, international onomastic literature highlights that exonym use is often socially ambivalent and weakly standardised, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial settings where place names are tied to cultural authenticity and political sensitivity (Hough, 2015; Jordan, 2011; Woodman, 2007). Building on these insights, the present study shifts from earlier arguments that mainly framed exonyms as either linguistic simplifications or

externally imposed naming practices by demonstrating that, in Cameroon, exonym formation can also operate as a bottom-up sociopolitical practice through which minority speakers linguistically re-map national space in order to negotiate identity and contest perceived asymmetries in language policy and implementation. This study answers three key questions. First, what are the different examples of exonyms in Cameroon English and what analysis can be made vis-à-vis their endonyms? Second, what are the local, administrative and outside opinions about exonyms in terms of their acceptability and usage in official communication in the country? Finally, what are the motivations and implications for renaming in post-colonial multilingual Cameroon? After the introduction, we review existing literature on language, identity and the politics of exonyms which includes exonym standardization, and linguistic landscape studies. Thereafter, the theoretical framework is presented followed by analyses, discussions and conclusion.

Language, Identity and the Politics of Exonyms

Language is indispensable in every social interaction. Agha (2006) defines it as a structured system, with a grammar and vocabulary that facilitates social interaction. The systematicity of language is not only in its grammar but also in its culture and historicity. Chomksy (1998, pp. 2), more concretely, argues that it is not just words, but "a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is." Remarkably, human languages are characterized by numerous ways of communicating similar ideas and feelings and each pattern of communication, at every moment, embeds a logic that allows for more profound understanding. Spivak (1992, pp. 312) opines that "language maybe one of the many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves." This means that language transcends the superficial transmission of information or expression of emotions. It delves into the wealth of culture and identity which are indispensable in every "accurate" or "acceptable" instance of

language use. To Spivak, the linguistic pattern of every language is an effort to make sense of the self. This means that communal linguistic forms or preferences, whether logical or illogical, do not depend on others, it is exclusively the business of her speakers. It becomes even more interesting when a proliferated language, like English which has spread across the world and has been adopted and adapted in relation to diverse cultural riches, is considered.

In the new English-speaking communities, traditional standards are replaced by contextual ones. The spread of the English Language, from its traditional settings to new settings, allows for multiple conventions and connection to the language across the world. Schneider (2007, pp. 1) remarks that

> English has diversified, developing into homegrown forms and uses in many locations. It has also become an indigenized language, even a mother tongue, in several countries around the globe. The new contexts adopted and adapted the language to suit their respective cultural realities.

Logically, since language is an expression of the self and the English Language has been significantly acculturated to the extent that it now reflects the worldview of its new speakers, it follows that the language projects the self of her new speakers. Achebe (1965) encourages African writers to adopt the English language and use it in a way that accurately tells their stories.

This makes sense when we reflect on the status of English in Cameroon as a marker of identity. Anglophone Cameroonians consider it their language and see every instance of its underutilization, especially in administration, as a clear example of discrimination against them. The language has become the property of minority Anglophone population. Its distinctive features have been described at all levels of language analysis (Simo Bobda, 1992, Simo and Mbangwana, 1994; Sala, 2005), which has revealed, above all, that the variety is not only different

from such traditional varieties as Standard British and American Englishes but also other non-native varieties such as Nigerian and Ghanaian Englishes. This partly makes it a marker of Anglophone identity in the country.

Identity is an expression of uniqueness typical of an individual, group or entity. It embodies the characteristics that are recognized as constituting an individual or communal personality of life. Tajfel (1978, pp. 63) argues that it is self-concept of shared knowledge of membership in a particular group. Non-members do not identify with the distinctiveness even where they have the linguistic competence. Simon (2004) argues that social or collective identity finds expressions in shared self-beliefs, symbols, psychological and physical traits. So, identity is significantly expressed through language. This explains why Momaday (1969, pp. 4) concludes that "my language is the sum total of myself".

The correlation between language and identity cannot be over emphasized. Language is intricately connected to identity. Edward (2009, pp. 1) remarks that "the language we use forms an important part of our sense of who we are". This is arguably because, through regular communication and shared local experiences, every society unconsciously defines principles that make them different from others. Members of the same speech communities tend to be psychologically guided by similar accent, lexical choices and thought systems. This does not only make them unique but different from others. Within the logic of the new Englishes which have undergone significant acculturation typical of the realities of each context, the acculturation is quite eloquent in the proper adjectives that precede each variety. Dieckhoff (2004) remarks that a language or variety of a language communicates the unique character of a community and encourages solidarity. In this regard, language is perceived as liaison of social identities since people who speak the same

language or variety of a language tend to identify with one another especially in such multilingual contexts as Cameroon. Besides the multiple indigenous languages in Cameroon, two official languages (English and French) unite a greater part of Cameroonians at the macro level. Besides such lingua franca as Fulfulde which is only popular in the northern regions of Cameroon (Adamawa, North and Far North Regions) and Cameroon Pidgin English which is mostly popular in the North West and South West regions of the country, no other languages adequately unite Francophones like French or Anglophones like English, making English Language use in Cameroon an unavoidable medium of understanding and appreciating the cultures of English-speaking Cameroonians. This explains why the English Language in Cameroon tends to adopt certain indigenous names of politically sensitive locations and offers English equivalences which falls within the broad conception of exonyms in this study.

Woodman (2007, pp. 3) conceives exonym as "a toponym bestowed from the outside, and in a language from the outside", more or less a name generally not used by a people but mostly by outsiders. This suggests a linguistic totalitarianism, where foreigners, mostly for political purposes, impose or modify an existing name. While the phenomenon is often top-bottom due to the undisclosed agenda of the stronger party, in Cameroon English, it tends to assume a bottom-up approach with adoption and adaptation of local names in French Cameroon. Top-bottom acceptance "Cameroon" as the English equivalence of "Cameroun" and "Yaounde" as the English equivalence of "Yaoundé" are used in some official documents in the country, though the extent to which both patterns are used in high-level official communication is unknown. This is so because the idea was conceived to accommodate English-speaking Cameroonians who only joined the country in 1961 when the "endonyms" existed already and had no English exonymic equivalences. The popularity of these forms

in official writing is arguably projected by the English-speaking population who clearly desire a stake in key institutions of the country. An English equivalence allows for stronger evidence of belonging. Nordquist (2018) argues that in current usage, many exonyms are considered insensitive and indigenous people expect foreigners to understand and stick to the endonyms. While there may be linguistic factors, such as non-existence of certain linguistic forms in foreigners' languages, making it difficult for a proper rendition of endonyms, there are instances like the case in Cameroon where the difference is significantly in the use of tone markers. The proposition that English does not have tone markers, like French and indigenous languages, for example, and so English speakers can write French and indigenous words without the markers rather projects another twist.

This is so because while exonyms may exist in relatively casual communication, since indigenous people do not really have much control over foreigners' approximation of their names, in official communication especially at the international level, exonyms may be considered ridiculous, derogatory or even demeaning. Interestingly, scholars (Woodman, 2006 and Hough, 2015) have argued that minor deviations such as diacritics do not constitute true examples of exonyms and that for a term to be considered an exonym, it should exhibit more substantial differences from the original endonym. In fact, Hough (2015, pp. 7) argues that

> For a toponym to be defined as an exonym, there must exist a minimum degree of difference between it and the corresponding endonym... The omission of diacritical marks usually does not turn an endonym into an exonym: Sao Paulo (for São Paulo); Malaga (for Málaga) or Amman (for ʿAmmān) are not considered exonyms.

It is imperative to remark that diacritic and spelling deviations also account for pronunciation differences which these scholars paradoxically project as a possible exonymic variation. Additionally, a broader conceptualisation of exonyms includes any

form of deviation (spelling or excluded diacritics) which has been significantly explored in more recent studies (Jordan, 2021 and Watanabe, 2023). These scholars conceive exonyms within the narrow complexities of cultural exigencies and argue that even a minor deviation in spelling has an emotive impact on the conceptualisation of the reference or concept. This broader perspective becomes even more salient in official written communication especially in such a linguistically complex setting like Cameroon where the government, though with remarkable inconsistency, uses the exonyms in official communication. What could even be more interesting is the extent to which the indigenous people accept non-diacritical alternatives of their names as Standard English equivalences.

The standardisation of exonyms has raised certain controversies and has provoked critical debates in onomastic literature. The debate intersects closely with broader questions on language, identity and politics especially in such multilingual postcolonial societies as Cameroon. On the one hand, functionalists such as Kadmon (2000) argue that exonyms arise as a pragmatic linguistic adaptation that facilitates communication and a cognitive mapping of unfamiliar places. on the other hand, critical onomastic scholarship emphasizes that naming practices are embedded in historical power relations and ideological struggles over cultural legitimacy. Woodman (2007) and Jordan (2011), for instance, are unanimous on the idea that increasing international preference for endonyms reflects global movements toward linguistic rights and symbolic decolonization which also reveals tensions between communicative efficiency and identity preservation. Similarly, Hough (2015) highlights the conceptual difficulties involved in defining and standardising exonyms, especially where minor orthographic deviations carry significant sociocultural meanings. These debates connect quite well to Spolsky's (2004) insights on linguistic landscape studies. Spolsky demonstrates that language choice in public signposts and administrative texts index patterns

of inclusion, exclusion or territorial ownership. Within this analytical framework, the emergence of English-based place name variants in Cameroon can be understood not merely as linguistic simplification but as part of a broader politics of naming through which minority Anglophone speakers negotiate visibility and participation in national institutions. In the current study, exonym is interpreted from a bottom-up socio-political perspective that reflects both uneven implementation of official bilingualism and the linguistic reconfiguration of national spaces.

Theoretical Landscape

This study builds on the Social Identity Theory as developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory provides a useful socio-psychological framework for understanding how language practices function as markers of group belonging, social differentiation and symbolic power in multilingual societies. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and tend to adopt behavioural and symbolic strategies that enhance the positive distinctiveness of their in-group in relation to out-groups. At the core of the theory are three interrelated processes: social categorisation, social identification and social comparison. Social categorisation refers to the tendency of individuals to classify themselves and others into social groups based on shared attributes such as language, ethnicity or historical background. Social identification occurs when individuals internalise the norms, values and symbolic practices associated with their group membership. Social comparison involves the evaluation of one's group in relation to others, often with the aim of achieving positive social identity and greater visibility or recognition.

In multilingual postcolonial contexts such as Cameroon, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbolic resource for negotiating identity, inclusion and power relations. The historical coexistence of English and French as

official languages has produced distinct linguistic communities whose identities are shaped by colonial legacies, administrative structures and socio-political experiences. Within this setting, linguistic practices such as the adaptation of place names can be interpreted as strategies through which speakers assert belonging, resist perceived marginalisation and seek symbolic representation in national space. Applying Social Identity Theory to the study of exonyms allows for a deeper understanding of how naming practices operate beyond purely linguistic motivations. The formation and use of English-based place-name variants in Cameroon English may reflect attempts by Anglophone speakers to reduce symbolic distance from administrative institutions and to reinforce the presence of their linguistic identity within predominantly Francophone environments. Such practices can therefore be seen as discursive acts of spatial re-mapping, through which minority groups negotiate participation and visibility in official domains.

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory helps to explain attitudinal differences towards exonym use. Acceptance or rejection of modified place names may depend on whether such forms are perceived as facilitating intergroup communication or as threatening cultural authenticity and communal ownership of linguistic heritage. In this regard, exonymisation can simultaneously function as a tool of inclusion, identity affirmation and socio-political contestation. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the study interprets the linguistic processes identified in Cameroon English exonyms, such as allophonic variation, diacritic omission and orthographic simplification, not merely as structural adaptations but as manifestations of broader identity dynamics in a bilingual postcolonial state. Social Identity Theory therefore provides the conceptual basis for analysing how language practices intersect with questions of belonging and national integration.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design which combined documentary analysis, sociolinguistic description and attitudinal survey techniques in order to examine the formation, usage and sociopolitical implications of place-name exonyms in Cameroon English. The methodological approach was structured to generate both linguistic evidence on exonymic patterns and empirical data on speaker attitudes and motivations. Linguistic data were collected through a systematic review of written official documents produced within the Cameroon Public Service. These documents included ministerial official communiqués, application letters and complaints from the Ministries of Secondary and Higher Education. The documents were closely read to identify occurrences of place names used in English-language communication. Each identified form was subsequently verified with indigenes from the respective communities in order to establish the standard endonymic spelling and pronunciation. Forms that diverged from indigenous norms were classified as exonyms. Through this procedure, a corpus of 20 exonym and their endonym pairs was established. To complement the documentary data, oral sociolinguistic insights were obtained through informal discussions with Anglophone Cameroonians resident in Yaoundé.

These interactions provided contextual explanations regarding everyday usage patterns and motivations for adopting English-based naming variants. In addition to linguistic description, the study incorporated an attitudinal survey component which was designed to examine perceptions of exonyms use among relevant speech communities. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 273 Francophone respondents from communities whose place names had undergone exonymisation. They were asked to indicate their preferred spelling forms, level of comfort with English-based variants and general views on the modification of communal names. Furthermore, 154 educated Anglophone respondents were interviewed to explore motivations for exonymic

adaptation and perceptions of linguistic inclusiveness in national administrative communication. The data analysis incorporated both quantitative and qualitative procedures. While the quantitative analysis involved the use of frequency counts and percentage distributions to measure the occurrence of exonyms in official documents and the distribution of attitudes among respondents, the qualitative analysis focused on identifying recurring linguistic processes, which were later categorised as allophonic variation, diacritic omission and orthographic simplification. The interpretations of motivations and attitudes were guided by the Social Identity Theory, which provided an analytical framework for understanding how naming practices function as strategies of identity negotiation and symbolic inclusion in Cameroon.

Analysis and Discussion

The first preoccupation of the study was to present and analyse the different exonyms which were identified in official writing in the country. The following table presents the exonyms along with their endonyms.

Endonyms	**Exonyms**
Cameroun	Cameroon
Yaoundé	Yaounde
Adamaoua	Adamawa
Ngaoundéré	Ngaoundere
Édea	Edea
Bangaté	Bangate
Nanga Éboko	Nanga Eboko
Ngaoua	Ngawa
Mbamoua	Mbamawa
Yamoua	Yamawa
Fang-aoua	Fang-awa
Makénéné	Makenene
Manatélé	Monatele
Nabaoua	Nabawa

Mangaoua	Mangawa
Bamboutaoua	Bamboutawa
Ngaoundéaoua	Ngaoundewa
Wazaoua	Wazawa
Lekié	Lekie
Ebolowa (w-/v/)	Ebolowa (w-/w/)

Table One: Sample Exonyms in Cameroon English

The above list shows different shades of exonymic processes which are worth analysing. They could be logically stratified into three categories: allophonic patterns, diacritic omission and orthographic simplification, and. For systematic purposes, these exonyms will be discussed under these broad categories.

Allophonic Variation

Allophonic variation reveals a linguistic situation in which two separate sounds do not create any meaningful difference in the understanding of a word. Such usages revealed a type of exonymic pattern in Cameroon English. Some words are written with "w" but pronounced /v/ and vice versa, but they are rendered in /w/ in Cameroon English to refer to the same places. Consider the following examples;

Endonyms	**Exonyms**
Ebolowa /ébólóvà/	Ebolowa /ébólówà/
Bavock /bávòk/	bawock /bá**w**òk/
Wouri /vóri/	Wouri /wóri/
Mwomekaˈa /mwòmèkà/	Mwomekaˈa /m**v**òmèkà/
Awae /a**v**ăe/	Awae /a**w**ăe/

Table Four: Examples of Allophonic patterns in CamE

Basically, while the spellings of these names are consistent in the endonyms and exonyms, there is the replacement of /w/ with /v/. This is because /w/ and /v/ are sometimes used interchangeably in many Bantu languages (Hyman, 1969), although time and consistency seem to have made the exonyms the norm for many certain usages which like "mwomekaʼa" and "awae" are

observably rendered as /awăe/. These renditions are also partly because, at a more general level, French orthography favours "v" over "w" (Ramat and Ramat, 2005), but English keeps "w". Besides, some speakers naturally favour certain sounds over others arguably for purposes of simplification. For example, it could really be quite difficult to get non-natives to pronounce the "w" in the word "Ebolowa" as /v/.

The tendency is that most speakers of English, in Cameroon and elsewhere, will not be sensitive to the allophonic variation in the rendition of "Ebolowa" for example, which is not unexpected, mindful of the fact that people come different linguistic backgrounds and sometimes carry certain linguistic features of their languages into the target language. Besides these largely linguistic motivation for such usage, the sociolinguistic complexities of the Cameroonian contexts breathe in non-linguistic motivations which provide a fairly deeper understanding of such usages in Cameroon English. Allophonic variation in the pronunciation of place names illustrates how linguistic identity is performed in everyday communication. Social Identity Theory suggests that group members often adopt shared speech patterns to reinforce solidarity and mark boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. In this case, the reinterpretation of sounds such as /v/ and /w/ demonstrates the localisation of English phonological norms within multilingual interaction.

These changes reveal complex linguistic hierarchies, where indigenous phonological systems are filtered through both French and English linguistic frameworks. The resulting hybrid pronunciations reflect layered histories of contact, migration, power relation and institutional language dominance. Such phonological adaptation can also be linked to colonial legacies, since the initial codification of many place names occurred under European administrative regimes. Contemporary reinterpretations therefore represent a re-appropriation of inherited linguistic forms,

allowing speakers to re-embed these names within their own identity narratives.

Diacritic Omission

Diacritic omission is typical example of exonym in Cameroon English. The following are some examples in which the tone markers are dropped in the rendition of the exonyms in CamE.

Endonyms	**Exonyms**
Yaoundé	Yaounde
Ngoundéré	Ngoundere
Ngaoundéré	Ngaoundere
Édéa	Edea
Bangaté	Bangate
Nanga Éboko	Nanga Eboko
Makénéné	Makenene
Manatélé	Monatele
Lekié	Lekie

Table Three: Examples of Diacritic Omissions in CamE

These words have their roots from Cameroonian indigenous languages which are fundamentally tone languages. The omission of the tone diacritic makes them good examples of exonyms in Cameroon English. This is basically because tone markers are important linguistic marker in indigenous languages and capable of distinguishing word meanings. The transliteration of these words from indigenous languages into Cameroon French, the tone markers are allowed for purposes of maintaining their tonal originality. The high tone therefore cannot be fairly ignored since it might be revealing of something other than its original conceptualization of the name. In Cameroon English, the tone marker is dropped unapologetically and used as such even in official communication. This perhaps stems from the fact that, unlike French and Cameroon indigenous languages, the English language does not use tone markers. The adaptation of the words in CamE therefore follows this convention which leads to the production of English alternatives that may communicate

something other than the original conceptions. While maintaining the diacritics could adequately communicate the originality of the words, the dropping is a typical characteristic of the English phonological pattern.

The omission of diacritics in place names, however, can be better interpreted as a sociolinguistic strategy of identity assertion rather than merely a structural feature of English orthography. Within the logic of Social Identity Theory, this practice reflects efforts by Anglophone speakers to reduce symbolic distance between themselves and national institutions through the naturalization of administrative geography into their linguistic repertoire. At the same time, this phenomenon highlights hierarchies between written language traditions, where French orthographic norms historically shaped official naming practices. The removal of tone markers may therefore signal a contestation of linguistic authority and a re-negotiation of what constitutes legitimate representation in official communication. From a colonial perspective, the persistence of French-mediated spellings in national administration reflects the institutional continuity of colonial governance structures. Diacritic omission becomes a means through which speakers symbolically decolonise spatial representation, even while relying on a global colonial language (English).

Orthographic Simplification

Place names are sometimes written differently as a result of linguistic conventions (spelling norms or basically orthographical rules of the language) or historical influences. In this light, the following examples could be classified under this significant deviation:

Endonyms	**Exonyms**
Camer**ou**n	Camer**oo**n
Adam**aoua**	Adam**awa**
Nab**aoua**	Nab**awa**

Mang**aoua**	Mang**awa**
Bambout**aoua**	Bambout**awa**
Ngaoundé**aoua**	Ngaound**ewa**
Waz**aoua**	Waz**awa**
Ng**aoua**	Ng**awa**
Mbam**oua**	Mbam**awa**
Yam**oua**	Yam**awa**
Fang-**aoua**	Fang-**awa**

Table Two: Examples of Orthographic Simplification in CamE

These examples show a significant deviation in spelling which are typically characterized by replacement of letters or simplification of orthography. In the endonym, "Cameroun" for example, the "u" is replaced with an "o" clearly for purposes of simplification. This simplification is even more glaring in the other examples where "-aoua" is replaced with "-awa". Arguably, "-aoua" is typical of many indigenous languages in the French part of Cameroon. However, most words that have these form witness a replacement with "awa" in Cameroon English. Linguistically, the combination is dropped because of the inconsistency between pronunciation and spelling in English even though there are other non-linguistic motivations for this pattern which will be discussed in the later section of this study.

From a Social Identity Theory perspective, orthographic simplification in Cameroon English exonyms can be interpreted as a process of symbolic in-group alignment and linguistic accommodation. Anglophone speakers adapt complex French-mediated indigenous spellings to forms that conform to English orthographic conventions in order to make these places cognitively and socially accessible within their linguistic community. This linguistic restructuring reflects Tajfel and Turner's (1979) proposition that social groups seek positive distinctiveness by reinforcing markers that strengthen internal cohesion. These changes also reveal underlying linguistic hierarchies, where

English functions simultaneously as a minority identity symbol at the national level and as a language of global prestige. By reshaping place names into English-compatible forms, speakers symbolically reposition themselves within national space, challenging the dominance of French as the administrative norm. Historically, such practices are inseparable from colonial legacies of territorial partition and dual administrative traditions, which produced competing linguistic identities. Orthographic simplification therefore operates not only as a phonological adjustment but as a subtle strategy for negotiating postcolonial belonging and visibility.

National Acceptance of Exonyms

Article 1, paragraph 3 of the January 18, 1996 constitution of Cameroon designates English and French as official languages with equal status. This law is later reinforced in the December 24, 2019 law on bilingualism which mandates the promotion of both languages in all sectors throughout the country. By implication, official communication at all levels is not only expected to be in both languages, but should adhere to the standards of both languages. With the recurrent use of these exonyms, it was necessary to find out the extent to which government borrows place name exonyms, from Cameroon English, and use them in official communication. In this regards, 26 Central government official communiques in English were studied to find out the extent to which they incorporate CamE exonyms. From the results on Figure One, 12 (46.15%) of the communiques, though contents were in English, stuck to such endonyms as “Cameroun”, “Yaoundé” and “Adamoua” and while only three communiques were consistent in the use of familiar exonyms, 11 used endonyms and exonyms interchangeably.

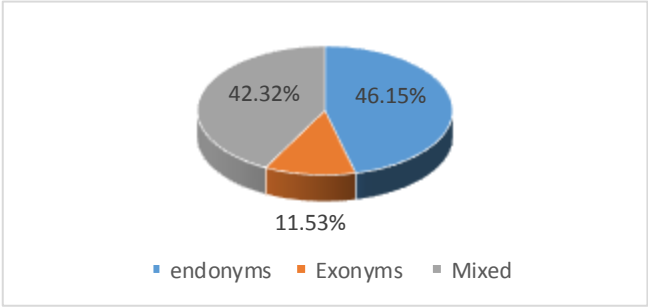

Figure One: Frequency of Exonyms in Official Communication in Cameroon

From the above figure, it is realized that though the constitution encourages the promotion of bilingualism in English and French, the government maintains specific official spellings in both English and French communication. The capital city, for instance, is officially spelled "Yaoundé" even in English communiques, retaining the accent on the final "e". While the use of alternative spellings such as "Yaounde" and "Cameroon" are common especially in official documents written by Anglophones and some Francophone, they hardly change in very official communication. Although such exonyms as "Cameroon", "Yaounde" and "Adamawa" are recognized by the Cameroon government, considering that they do not consider them errors in official documents written in English, the extent to which they use these forms in very official or international communication leaves much to be desired. This tendency could be based on the argument that people often feel uncomfortable when their names are altered even though in some cases, with no stigma, they are accepted and used.

Attitudes towards Exonyms in Official Communication in Cameroon

Attitudes towards exonyms are diverse. While the UNGEGN (2021) remarks that exonyms as a natural linguistic adaptation that facilitate communication, and that some communities accept and adopt as a linguistic heritage, Jordan (2021) has argued that certain

exonyms could be offensive or outdated, especially if they are tied to historical oppression. By implication, not all exonyms are accepted and this raised even more questions than answers. Sampling opinions on the use of exonyms was bi-directional. The opinions of both Francophone and Anglophone informants were considered quite important in understanding general attitudes towards exonyms in Cameroon English since the exonyms considered for this study are indigenous names in Francophone communities. This is so because the study was limited to exonyms from key place names in the French part of Cameroon. The informants were first asked if they felt comfortable with the translation and usage of "Cameroun", "Yaounde", and "Adamaoua" in English and why. The following table presents their responses.

Opinions	**Informants**		**Freq.**	**%**
Do you accept the translation of local names to English such as Yaounde from "Yaoundé", "Cameroon" from "Cameroun" and "Adamawa" from "Adamaoua"?	Francophone	Yes	220	80.59
		No	53	19.41
	Total		**273**	**100**
	Anglophones	Yes	145	94.16
		No	9	5.84
	Total		**154**	**100**

Table Five: **Attitudes towards Local Name Modification**

A significant number of informants did not see any problem with the translation and use of names in English. In fact, when such examples as "Yaoundé" and "Yaounde" and "Cameroun" and "Cameroon" were presented to them, they felt these were officially the English and French versions of these important places. Others felt that it exposes their cultures to other cultures, but these stances were dropped when they were asked how they will feel if the names of their villages were modified by non-natives and used in official communication to refer to them. Their responses changed as can be seen on the following figure. Since there were no significant differences in the responses between the Anglophone and Francophone informants, the responses were harmonized as can be seen on Figure Two.

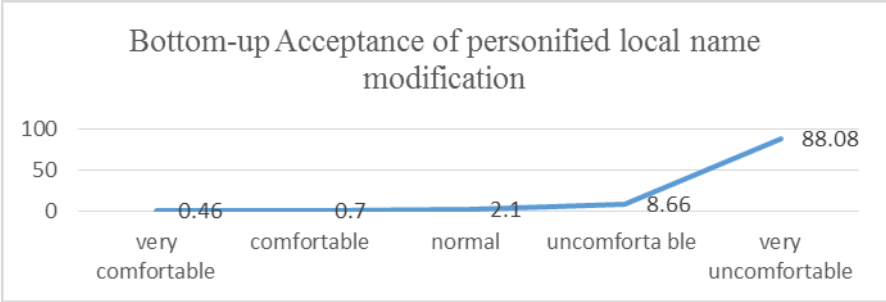

Figure Two: Attitudes towards Personified Local name modification

While there is a general impression that names could be modified based on different linguistic realities and used officially, when the question was personified, the opinions shifted. Both category of informants would not want their local communal names modified. In fact, they made several efforts to get others to pronounce them correctly and when such efforts failed, they either found it funny or irritating. Arguably, regions may promote endonyms as a form of cultural revival or political assertion which is exactly the case with Anglophone Cameroonians. They argue that though their local names are not subject to any form of modification, some names of places in the country could be modified to obtain the English equivalences for historical, linguistic and socio-political inclusiveness.

Historically, colonial heritage includes marks of linguistic identity which is significantly present in the country. Informants argued that Cameroon was colonized by both Britain and France which led to a bilingual, bi-cultural and bi-jurisdictional system. Anglophones who were historically under the British rule, often seek to express their linguistic identity by adapting place names to English conventions. Omitting diacritics in French words to have English equivalences or replacing certain French letters with Standard English orthographical norms become a typical characteristic for effective unification.

Besides the impacts of colonial heritage, the informants also highlighted the idea of perceived Francophone domination. They argued that many of them feel marginalized in a country where French is dominant especially in administration, education and legislation. They conceptualized the English translation of key place names as a subtle form of resistance and affirmation of linguistic identity. In fact, this opinion was shared by 94% of the Anglophone informants who believed that it is the right thing to do mindful of Cameroon's unique socio-political background. This provokes more critical questions since most of the place names in question are rooted in indigenous languages and consequently an accurate translation to English could derive phrases or sentences with ridiculous meanings which may sound odd or strenuous to regularly reference in real-life discussions. Even at that, some informants (6%), though insignificant, felt that endonyms should be used by all because names should not be subject to any form of translation.

Additionally, some of the informants raised concerns on the traditional conventions of the English Language which is linguistically different from French. They argue that English does not commonly use such diacritics as accent or tone markers. So, the tendency is that in an effort to realize place names with such markers, English Language speakers tend to remove or replace non-English markers with close English ones or linguistic markers that conform to English spelling or speaking rules. Jordan (2021) argues that this is how many international place names are adapted in different languages. Within the complexities of Cameroon's linguistic exigencies, such a move may provoke more political debates.

Politically, they argued that the name "Cameroun", like the other endonyms, which they considered French, cannot have just one spelling because not all Cameroonians are French-speaking. "Cameroon" as well as other "English" alternatives, to them, give

the impression that the triangle is made up of both English and French speakers. This argument reflects the socio-political intricacies on which contemporary Cameroon is built. Centralized systems of government, as it is the case of Cameroon at the moment, tends to favour development in some areas to the detriment of others. In Cameroon, observably, mostly French communities are economically empowered which does not only result to a comparatively more significant movement of Anglophones to Francophone zones for economic purposes, but also the restructuring of the English language to linguistically adapt to the new environments.

Conclusion

The politics of exonyms anchor on certain exigencies that cannot be undermined. This is fundamentally because foreigners, influenced by their respective cultures, rename places, cultures and even people. In this kind of situation, significant questions on identity, power and autonomy are inevitable. This study analyzed certain exonyms in Cameroon English which revealed a paradoxical situation in which a minority group, for political reasons and desire for more inclusive consideration in the affairs of the country, rename key political places. The name of the country, La Republique du Cameroun, was translated to "the Republic of Cameroon", with a slight distortion in the spelling of "Cameroon". Though this exonym was designed to accommodate the English community that joined the country in 1961 and to project the bilingual status of the country, the official name of the country has not really changed and is often used in high-level national and international communication in both English and French. This is the same with such key cities as Yaoundé and Adamaoua that, though with bottom-up acceptable English equivalences, remain the official spellings of the respective cities.

Though Exonyms have farfetched implications on identity, power and autonomy since they influence national, cultural and social

realities of a people. They often stem from a profound desire for power or the projection of the self. According to Said (1978), renaming is a form of distorted perception of a people and culture. This study has, however, revealed that exonyms are also integral to a community's heritage, reflecting its language and historical interactions. They serve as identity markers, reflecting the community's perception and relation to other communities. Anglophone Cameroonians' feeling of subjugation pushes them to not only respond politically, but also linguistically. Since they consider English as a marker of their identity in Cameroon, every neglect of the language vis-à-vis the French alternative seems to be a subtle attack on their identity. As a result of power imbalances between the two peoples, exonym serves as a marker of resistance designed to reclaim lost identities and assert their autonomy. While a previous study (Spolsky, 2004) has reported that many communities often actively work to restore endonyms, such effort in the French-speaking Cameroon is quite minimal, even though the government may prefer endonyms in high-level communication.

This study demonstrates that exonym formation in Cameroon English is not simply a matter of linguistic simplification but constitutes a social identity practice through which minority speakers symbolically negotiate inclusion and positive distinctiveness within a multilingual state. By applying Social Identity Theory, the findings show that naming practices can function as discursive strategies for re-mapping national space and contesting perceived linguistic marginalisation. The study therefore contributes to sociolinguistic theory by illustrating how identity processes operate not only in interpersonal interaction but also in toponymic restructuring and spatial language use. This could have farfetched implications for national conceptualization of language use. The dire need for clearer national guidelines on place-name usage in bilingual communication, particularly concerning the representation of indigenous names in English texts

cannot be over emphasized. Balanced standardisation policies could promote communicative accessibility and safeguard cultural authenticity. Strengthening institutional bilingualism may also reduce the symbolic pressures that motivate bottom-up naming innovations. This study has focused exclusively on place names based on current usage. However subsequent studies can extend the data stock to include personal names, institutional and commercial names, communal artefacts, natural or spiritual sites in Cameroonian communities. Later studies can also explore longitudinal attitudinal changes towards exonyms.

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