Group Formation: Language as a Sociopolitical Tool

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Abstract

The Cameroonian Grassfields, a region located along the southern Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, is characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity and by widespread individual multilingualism in local languages, with the additional presence regional lingua francas and official languages. Its complex linguistic ecology presents a number of opportunities for exploring the role of language in the formation of sociopolitical groups. Local ideologies traditionally view linguistic distinctiveness as a prerequisite for a group to claim political autonomy. This may lead to rapid formation of new linguistic varieties as new political units form, as well as patterns of language shift as formerly independent political units become integrated into expanding polities. This situation of small-scale political and linguistic distinctiveness is navigated by individuals through their competence in a number of local

languages, a phenomenon that also mirrors ideologies of identity construction that value the maintenance multiple sociopolitical affiliations.

Introduction: Multilingual Repertoires as Tools for Navigating Political Environments

This chapter considers the role of language in group formation in societies of the Cameroonian Grassfields, a region located in the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland which, as a whole, is characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity and widespread individual-level multilingualism in local languages in addition to regional lingua francas and official languages. Local ideologies traditionally view linguistic distinctiveness as a prerequisite for a group to claim political autonomy. At the same time, the groups that are formed around the use of a single language cannot be seen as distinct ethnolinguistic units since, to the extent that a notion like ethnicity is active in traditional social relations, linguistic differences do not play a central role in defining ethnic identity. This leads to interactions between languages and political structures which do not yet appear to be widely known in either the linguistic or political science literature.

We describe this situation in more detail below focusing, in particular, on the Western Grassfields region due to the fact that the links between language and sociopolitical structures have been studied extensively there.[1] Our intent is to both add to the understanding of the diversity of ways in which language and politics can interact and also to consider how linguistic diversity intersects with the management of conflict in settings where the presence of individual-level multilingualism is seen as the normal state of affairs. In §2, we introduce the ways in which the kinds of multilingualism that are the focus of the discussion differ from more well-studied

[1] We are not aware of many similar studies to those presented here looking closely at the interaction between linguistic identity, multilingualism, and sociopolitical structures in non-urban African settings. However, for an additional example, see MacEachern (2003).

kinds of multilingualism. In §3, we present a general overview of the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical situation of the Grassfields area and also consider the extent to which some notion of "ethnicity" is operative in the local social space. In §4, we examine the interaction between language and political structures in the Grassfields in detail through three contrastive case studies. The chapter concludes with discussion of the relationship between multilingualism and conflict management in §5. Figure 2.1 provides a map of the North West Region of Cameroon, where the Western Grassfields are located, highlighting the locations of the areas from which our three case studies are drawn.

Before moving on, it is important to note that the discussion below in §4 below reflects the situation before 2017. Since that time, Cameroon has been impacted by a conflict generally referred to as the Anglophone Crisis (Pommerolle & De Marie Heungoup 2017). This has severely affected all of the communities we discuss below, and it is not clear to what extent the generalizations that we make are still valid today. While this conflict is typically presented as one between linguistically defined populations, i.e., "Anglophones" and "Francophones", this is misleading since it ultimately derives from the broader colonial legacies associated with the division of the German colony of Kamerun between France and the United Kingdom after World War I. We come back to this issue in §5. Needless to say, given the linguistic diversity of Cameroon, where somewhere on the order of 250–300 languages are in use, any division of the country into an Anglophone region and a Francophone region is a gross oversimplification.[2]

[2] Even the use of the "anglophone" label is complicated by the fact that the lingua franca of the so-called anglophone regions is not English but, rather Cameroon Pidgin English, a distinct language in its own right. See Anchimbe (2018) for further discussion of the categories of "anglophone" and "francophone" in a Cameroonian context, as well as §5.

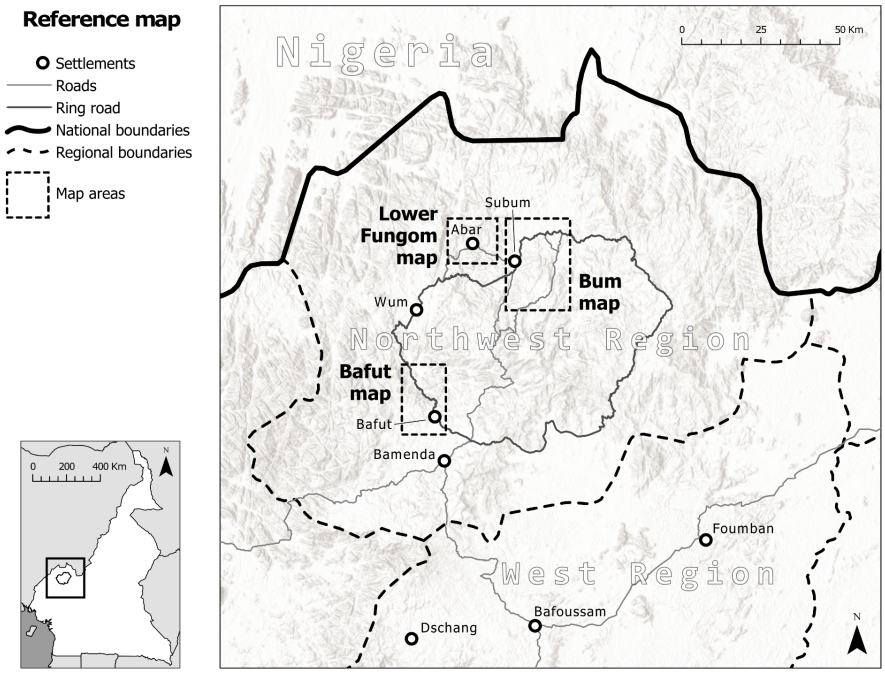

Figure 2.1. Map of the Western Grassfields (North West Region, Cameroon) with locations of the three areas of focus indicated: Lower Fungom (§4.2), Bum (§4.3), and Bafut (§4.4) (map created by Clayton Hamre)

2: Multilingualism in Small-scale Societies: Overview and Terminological Preliminaries

Our use of the term multilingualism here subsumes both bilingualism and knowledge of more than two languages. The vast majority of research on multilingualism focuses on large-scale, state-based societies. This includes work on the social and political contexts of multilingualism, ranging from Fishman's (1967) classic and influential treatment of bilingualism to more recent work that maintains a focus on such societies even if it adopts a very different theoretical point of view, as seen, for example, in work on linguistic "superdiversity" examining the interaction of different languages in settings impacted by globalization (Blommaert & Rampton 2011). This is also true of work on the acquisition of multiple languages by individuals, whether in untutored or educational settings (Bigelow & Collins 2019; Hellwig 2022; Kidd & Garcia 2022). More recently, an emerging area of research, emanating from work on endangered

languages, has been the study of so-called small-scale multilingualism, i.e., the multilingualism of small-scale societies (Pakendorf et al. 2021). These are understood as societies where individuals mostly interact with other individuals that they already know, in opposition to large-scale societies where individuals routinely interact with strangers (Reyes-Garcia et al. 2017).

In studying multilingualism in small-scale settings, it is crucial to distinguish between *societal multilingualism*, referring to the ways in which different languages are present and socially regimented within a given community, and *individual-level multilingualism*, which refers to the multilingual knowledge of an individual who is a member of a multilingual society. As will be clear from the discussion in §4, each concept is important for understanding the relationship between language and political structures in the Grassfields.[3] When discussing individual-level multilingualism, we will also use the term *linguistic repertoire* at times, which is widely used to encompass, "the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed in the course of socially significant interaction" (Gumperz 1964: 137). For multilingual individuals, this will include the regular use of linguistic forms across multiple languages.

An important descriptive generalization that has emerged from work on small-scale multilingualism is that there is considerable diversity in the social meanings attached to different languages across communities. For example, as will be discussed in §3, we find evidence for the importance of making a distinction between contexts where language choice is linked to the expression of *relational* identities versus *categorical* identities, in the sense of Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 15). Relational identities can be understood in terms of membership in socially-defined networks of individuals (e.g., kinship groups, patron-client ties, etc.). Categorical

[3] The term *plurilingualism* has also been coined to have a meaning more or less equivalent to our understanding of individual-level multilingualism, in particular in the context of the development of language policy within the European Union (García & Otheguy 2020:21–22). We do not use it here since, in our experience, it has yet to gain wide currency in the English-language literature on multilingualism.

identities are understood in terms of an individual's perceived membership in a group defined in terms of an abstract social category (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, etc.). These latter identities can be linked to notions of cultural *essentialism*, where the use of a specific language is seen as one of the intrinsic qualities distinguishing members of one social group from those of other groups. Categorical identities provide the logical point of departure for the complex semiotic processes involved in the construction of sameness and difference. For example, through the process of iconization, the way a group speaks becomes construed as directly reflecting its inherent cultural or social characteristics (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37). This can lead to the belief that true membership in a sociopolitical entity, such as the nation-state, requires not only fluency in an official language but also exclusive use of that language, resulting in an essentialist view where a cultural identity is defined (at least in part) by internal linguistic uniformity and sharp linguistic distinctions from external groups (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 374).

The relationship between linguistic knowledge, language choice, and identities can be understood in terms of *language ideologies*, which will play a prominent role in the discussion below. These determine the way that individuals conceptualize the relationship between the linguistic varieties that are present in their communities and other aspects of their social life, such as the different dimensions of their identities and the structure of the communities of which they are part (see Kroskrity 2004). Even on the basis of the relatively limited number of well-described cases, small-scale multilingual societies across the world show significant variation in their language ideologies. For example, in some communities an individual's patrilect (i.e., the variety associated with their father) is given primary status as a language of identity, while in others there may be a strong ideological connection between a language and a particular piece of land (Pakendorf et al. 2021: 3–5).

A crucial feature of language ideologies for understanding their connection to political structures is the nature of the relationship assumed to hold among the different languages that are known and used within a community, and whether they are viewed as being in a (more or less) egalitarian relationship or in a hierarchical relationship. Hierarchical relationships are more characteristic of highly socially stratified contexts, such as urban environments, where some languages are associated with more prestige than others, often as a result of being the languages used in official settings and in schools. In an African context, for example, languages historically linked to colonialism (e.g., English or French) may be assigned the highest level of prestige, with other languages of wider communication being at an intermediate level and the primary languages of small-scale societies having the lowest prestige from the point of view of the social organization of the state (e.g., Wolff 2016: 210). At the same time, this last set of languages may have a relatively egalitarian relationship with each other and play a crucial role in structuring local social relations even if, from the "outside", they are seen as relatively lacking in prestige. This dynamic can result in the presence of different ideological "layers" being simultaneously present within a single society (Di Carlo et al. 2019: §3.3).

A final important aspect of language ideologies in small-scale societies—whose languages are generally not written or subject to the kind of standardization associated with languages used in official contexts—is the question of which linguistic varieties are categorized as distinct "languages" in the local sociolinguistic context. This will not necessarily overlap with scholarly linguistic classifications (see §4.3 for a concrete example), but can have quite significant impacts with respect to the structure of local political units. Incongruencies between scholarly linguistic classifications and community-based classifications are not restricted to small-scale societies, as evidenced, for example, in the complications surrounding the

"language" typically referred to by linguists as Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg 2004). However, in the case of small-scale societies, the precise ways in which linguistic variation is linked to the category of "language" is generally of local concern and otherwise unknown in the absence of targeted research. The resulting gaps in our knowledge limit our ability to explore the connection between language and political structures in such societies and also mean that the enumerations of languages found in large-scale linguistic databases, such as Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2023), must be treated with caution when used to explore the relationship between linguistic diversity and political conflict (see, e.g., Eberle et al. 2020 for an example of work where this is a potential concern).

Because of the sociopolitical complexities associated with the term *language*, at times below we will use other terms when a greater degree of precision is required. These include *lexico-grammatical code*, which is used to refer to the structural aspects of a language as a communicative system without additional social entailments (Good 2018), and *linguistic variety*, a label intended to refer to a clearly identifiable lexico-grammatical code regardless of whether it would be classified by scholars or users as a distinct "language".

3: The sociopolitical and sociolinguistic structures of Grassfields societies

The Grassfields region of Cameroon roughly encompasses the country's North West Region and West Region. The focus of this chapter is on communities found in the North West Region, in an area that has been variously referred to as the Bamenda Grassfields or Western Grassfields (Chilver and Kaberry 1968; Nkwi and Warnier 1982), and we will use the latter name here. The West Region contains the Eastern Grassfields area and is dominated by Bamileke communities, who speak very closely related languages that are also related to the

languages of the Western Grassfields. Bamileke cultures overlap in significant ways with polities in the Western Grassfields to be discussed in §4 (Tardits 1960; Feldman-Savelsberg 1995). However, they are distinctive enough to merit dedicated treatment in their own right, which we are not able to provide here.

Our understanding of the traditional political system of the Western Grassfields is strongly informed by Kopytoff's (1987) notion of the internal African frontier. This model of community formation can be summarized as follows: As a sociopolitical unit grows demographically, internal conflicts may arise that lead to its fission, where one part of its population leaves the group and either founds a new sociopolitical unit elsewhere or is incorporated into an existing group. If it forms a new unit, in the idealized case, it does so in a region that is seen as outside the political control of other groups. A sociopolitical unit in these societies can grow by "attracting to itself the ethnic and cultural detritus produced by the routine workings of other societies" (Kopytoff 1987: 7). While intended to be generalizable across much of sub-Saharan Africa, this model seems especially fruitful in the Grassfields whose communities frequently appear to have histories in line with those predicted by the internal African frontier model (see, e.g., Kopytoff 1981 on a community found in the same area of the Grassfields as those considered in §4).

Di Carlo and Good (2023: 90–93) discuss these processes from the perspective of the structural formation of new linguistic varieties. Here, we focus more on their political implications, which, nevertheless, have a significant linguistic dimension. This can be seen most strikingly in the high level of linguistic diversity found in the Grassfields. While the linguistic literature has characterized this diversity in terms of "fragmentation" (Dalby 1970: 163; Stallcup 1980), suggesting the breaking up of a former political unity of some kind, the perspective

provided by the internal African frontier model is more congruent with an analytical approach that assumes the presence of a strong regional ideology towards the "linguistic singularity" (Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996: 1) of sociopolitical units. That is, one of the overt means of signaling the political independence of a community in the local context is that it should have its own "language". For example, describing the Bamileke area, Voorhoeve (1971: 1) writes: "Each chiefdom considers its own language as the only possible linguistic norm. Dialect differences are often exaggerated by the speakers…It does not seem conceivable for the inhabitants of a certain village to regard their mother-tongue as a dialect of the language of some other village." This sociopolitical feature of Grassfields societies will be developed more concretely in a Western Grassfields setting in §4.2.

This tendency towards linguistic singularity is in tension with another tendency in the Grassfields for there to be broadly shared cultural traits across its communities that result in "the seemingly idiosyncratic parcelling up in individual polities of elements from a common core of cultural forms and practices" (Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996: 1). This encompasses kinship structures, patterns of economic specialization, and, in particular, regulatory societies, among other sociocultural domains (Nkwi & Warnier 1982; Röschenthaler 2011).

Regulatory societies, in these contexts, are secret societies (i.e., a society whose members are bound, in part, by knowledge of various secrets) (Kaberry 1968: 287), and they play a central role in the traditional political organization of the Western Grassfields. In the region of the Grassfields in focus in §4, a particularly significant regulatory society is the *Kwi'fo*, the presence of which is an additional requirement to establish a community's political independence in some cases (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 58).[4] Of special interest in the present context is the extent to

[4] The name given to this society varies across communities, and we make use here of the general term and spelling adopted by Nkwi and Warnier (1982:56).

which regulatory societies like Kwi'fo can be acquired by one political unit from another via purchase (see, e.g., Geary 1979: 60–65 for a detailed discussion of this process in one community). Through such processes, political institutions can spread across communities, creating links among them that can, among other things, help manage relationships between them and, in particular, maintain peace and manage conflicts (Kah 2011: 56–58) (see also §4.3).

As a final point here, it is important to emphasize that, in line with general observations regarding multilingualism in sub-Saharan Africa that it serves as "the African lingua franca (Fardon & Furniss 1994: 4)", the tendency towards linguistic singularity at the level of socio-political units should not be taken to mean that individuals are themselves linguistically "isolated" within their main polity of affiliation. In fact, they are embedded in an environment of neighboring micro-polities whose members frequently intermarry and interact in daily life and, as a result, linguistic singularity within a polity is offset by multilingualism at the level of the individual. This appears to be a phenomenon of significant historical time depth, certainly long predating the colonial period (Warnier 1979; 1980), and it allows an individual to use their linguistic knowledge to index different political affiliations depending on the context (Di Carlo 2016: 84; Di Carlo et al. 2019: §5). This potential multiplicity of an individual's political affiliations is a key reason why a metaphor of linguistic fragmentation is not ideal for the Grassfields setting since linguistic diversity does not restrict individuals to membership in a single, small polity but, rather, allows them to situate themselves within a web of interconnections among them.

4: Language in the formation of political structures: Three case studies

4.1. Singularity, Consolidation, and Stratification

In this section, we discuss three case studies illustrating the relationship between language and political identity in the Western Grassfields (see Figure 2.1). We begin by discussing the situation of the Lower Fungom region in §4.2, which provides an exceptionally clear example of the ways that pressures towards linguistic singularity (see §3) can lead to a high degree of linguistic differentiation within a compact geographic area so that a local alignment between sociopolitical and linguistic units can be maintained. In §4.3, we discuss the opposite situation in a region adjacent to Lower Fungom, where an expanding polity uses local political structures to pressure previously sociopolitically independent communities to shift their overt language as a means of signaling their political allegiances. In §4.4, we discuss a way in which a set of varieties that are categorized as registers of a single language are linked to the maintenance of political structures within the Bafut community, providing an illuminating contrast to the Lower Fungom and Bum cases.

4.2. Extreme Political Singularity: The Case of Lower Fungom

A map of the Lower Fungom region of Cameroon is provided in Figure 2.1. The discussion in this section is based on extensive previous research on the linguistic situation of the region, and detailed background discussion of the points of interest here can be found in Di Carlo (2011) and Di Carlo and Good (2014; 2023). Lower Fungom is found at the northern edge of the Western Grassfields. It is characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity, and each village of the region is also traditionally sociopolitically independent from the other villages. In particular, each of them has its own chief. Accordingly, we refer to these units as village-chiefdoms at various points below. Villages assigned the same symbol in the map in Figure 2.2

speak closely related varieties to the point where they would largely be considered to comprise "one language" in scholarly terms, though this does not match the local perception where each village is viewed as having its own "country talk". However, despite some mismatches in the details of local and scholarly classifications, each village is associated with a noticeably distinct linguistic variety.

Lower Fungom provides an unusually clear example of the relationship between linguistic varieties and sociopolitical identities in the Western Grassfields due to the precise one-to-one correspondence between village-chiefdoms and "languages", as understood in local terms. As will be clear from the discussion in §4.3 and §4.4, political structures containing multiple village-level units are also found in the Western Grassfields (and include the greater part of the population of the region), and "dialect" variation may be present within them, but, within Lower Fungom, such higher-level political units are not found. Moreover, local language ideologies quite explicitly refer to the connection between linguistic distinctiveness and the independence of village-chiefdoms. Consider, for example, this remark collected and translated from Cameroon Pidgin English—an English-based creole language that currently serves as a lingua franca in the Western Grassfields—to English by the first author regarding the village of Munken in Lower Fungom, which is divided into two spatially distinct settlements, referred to locally in English as Munken Up and Munken Down.

> [The sub-chief of Munken Down] wanted to split off from Munken, make Munken Down independent, and become its chief. But, you know, it was just a crazy plan. He didn't even have a separate language! [laughs]
>
> –Kum Nixon, 2010

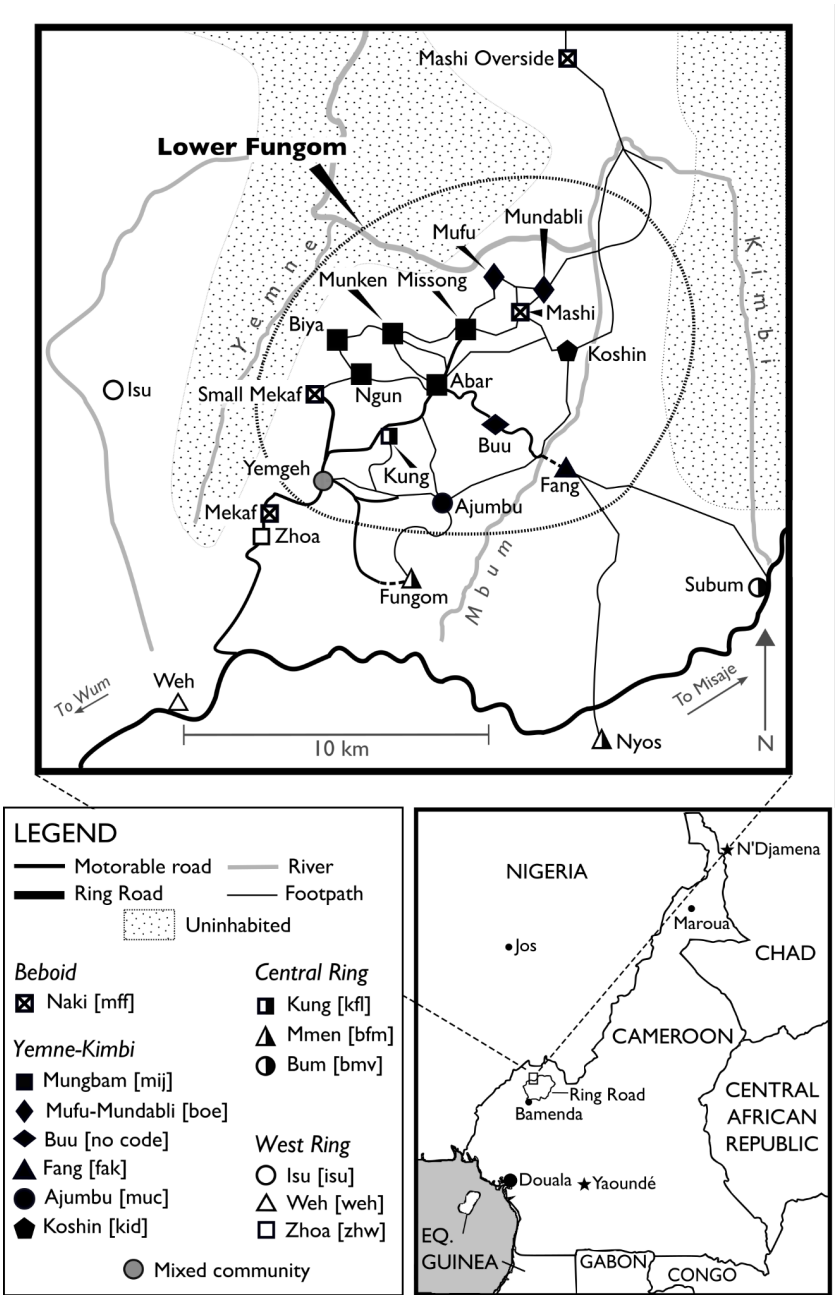

Figure 2.2. Lower Fungom and surrounding region (map created by Pierpaolo Di Carlo).

As discussed in more detail in Di Carlo and Good (2014) and Good (2020), which assemble data from various sources, the village-chiefdom of Missong is particularly interesting with respect to understanding the relationship between languages and political units in Lower

Fungom. Linguistically, Missong is the most divergent variety of the Mungbam language (Lovegren 2013). The label *Mungbam* is only used in scholarly sources since, as just discussed above, in local terms, each of the five villages associated with Mungbam are treated as speaking their own language (which are referred to using the same names as the villages here). The Missong village shows many signs of being a relatively recent formation, which means that the divergence of its linguistic variety from the others cannot be primarily understood in terms of the historical "drift" resulting from the social or geographic separation of two parts of a formerly unified community. Instead, converging evidence from oral traditions, ethnographic characteristics of the village, and archival records, among other sources, suggests that the emergence of a distinctive Missong lexico-grammatical code coincides with the creation of an independent Missong village. The variety appears to have been formed using an existing Mungbam variety as its base (perhaps corresponding to the primary language of the kin group associated with the individual who would become chief of the village) which underwent a degree of deliberate change so that it would be clearly distinctive in the local linguistic space. This change likely involved mixing elements from other languages used by Missong's initial community members with a Mungbam variety.

Deliberate change is not well recognized in the linguistic literature as a process affecting the linguistic varieties of small-scale societies like those found in Lower Fungom (see Garde 2008 for another case). However, there is evidence that it has impacted other Lower Fungom varieties, in particular Fang and Munken (Mve et al. 2019; Di Carlo & Good 2023: 106–110). Such kinds of change, however, are well documented in centralized, state-based societies where they are typically described using different terms, such as *language reform* (e.g., Lewis 2022). What is interesting about this case in the present context is the fact that the creation of a new

linguistic variety and a new polity appear to have been more or less simultaneous due to the presence of a language ideology that links political independence to linguistic distinctiveness. In state-based societies, the general tendency appears instead to be for deliberate change to be done post hoc. That is, it takes place after the formation of new states (see, e.g., Greenberg 2004 on the successor states to the former Yugoslavia). At the same time, we should stress that the formation of a new village-chiefdom does not create a new categorical identity, e.g., along the lines of *Missongness*, but, rather, simply a new relational identity signaling that a set of kin groups have joined together to form a new unit of a village, under the authority of one chief and a set of chiefdom-specific regulatory societies (see §3). This is clearly described in this quotation collected and translated from Cameroon Pidgin English to English by the first author from a resident of Missong in 2010:

> As my father told me, we were from Fang side, even in Bum side there were many of us. When you people are cooperating you speak one language. If you speak one language, you cooperate. As a group of relatives moves, the brothers may decide to split, each choosing a different place to stay. This is what happened to us. We left the early place in Fang side as a whole and arrived in Abar. From here we scattered. Now, we Bambiam from Missong have relatives in Abar, in Buu, in Ngun. Each family attached itself to a village and therefore had to speak the general language used there. For example, we Bambiam attached ourselves to Bikwom and hence had to adopt their language; Bikwom people are attached to Bidjumbi and Biandzəm to form the village of Missong, and this is why they all had to use the same language, that is, Missong. This is why all the descendants of the family that moved from Fang side now speak different languages. –Makpa Buo Amos, 2010

Importantly, this tendency towards linguistic singularity in Lower Fungom is offset by a different tendency, discussed in §3, which applied quite strongly at least until recently, namely the presence of high degrees of individual-level multilingualism in local language varieties

(Esene Agwara 2020). Because of this, it is important not to view the political identities that residents of Lower Fungom express through the use of a language as being exclusive in nature.

This is quite clearly seen in linguistic behavior in Lower Fungom, where local languages are supposed to follow a usage pattern that Ojong Diba (2020) refers to as code *regimentation*, where an interaction between a pair of individuals should normally only involve the use of one local language unless there is a clear change in the social context that might prompt a shift (e.g., the presence of a new individual in the interaction). The choice of language is normally determined with respect to seniority, where the junior interlocutor should respect the language choice of the senior interlocutor to the extent that their linguistic repertoire allows for this. However, the junior interlocutor can specifically flout this convention when expressing irritation with the senior interlocutor. By using a local language that is different from the one selected by the senior interlocutor, the junior one can foreground one of their alternate relational identities, i.e., one of the other networks in which they are member, thereby distancing them from the network that the senior interlocutor has chosen to emphasize (Ojong Diba 2020: 25–26). Such cases of the social meanings associated with language "switching" are a particularly striking illustration of the more general relationship between knowledge of multiple languages and membership in multiple political groups in Lower Fungom.

In the next section, we provide an instance of inverse process, where an expanding polity results in formerly independent political units shifting from their own language to that of a larger polity.

4.3. Language as a Tool of Political Consolidation: The Case of Bum

Bum is the name of a centralized chiefdom whose territory coincides with today's Bum subdivision of the Boyo Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. It is also the name of a language associated with the Bum polity. Updated figures for the number of speakers of Bum are not available, but they number at least in the tens of thousands. A map of the Bum area is provided in Figure 2.3.

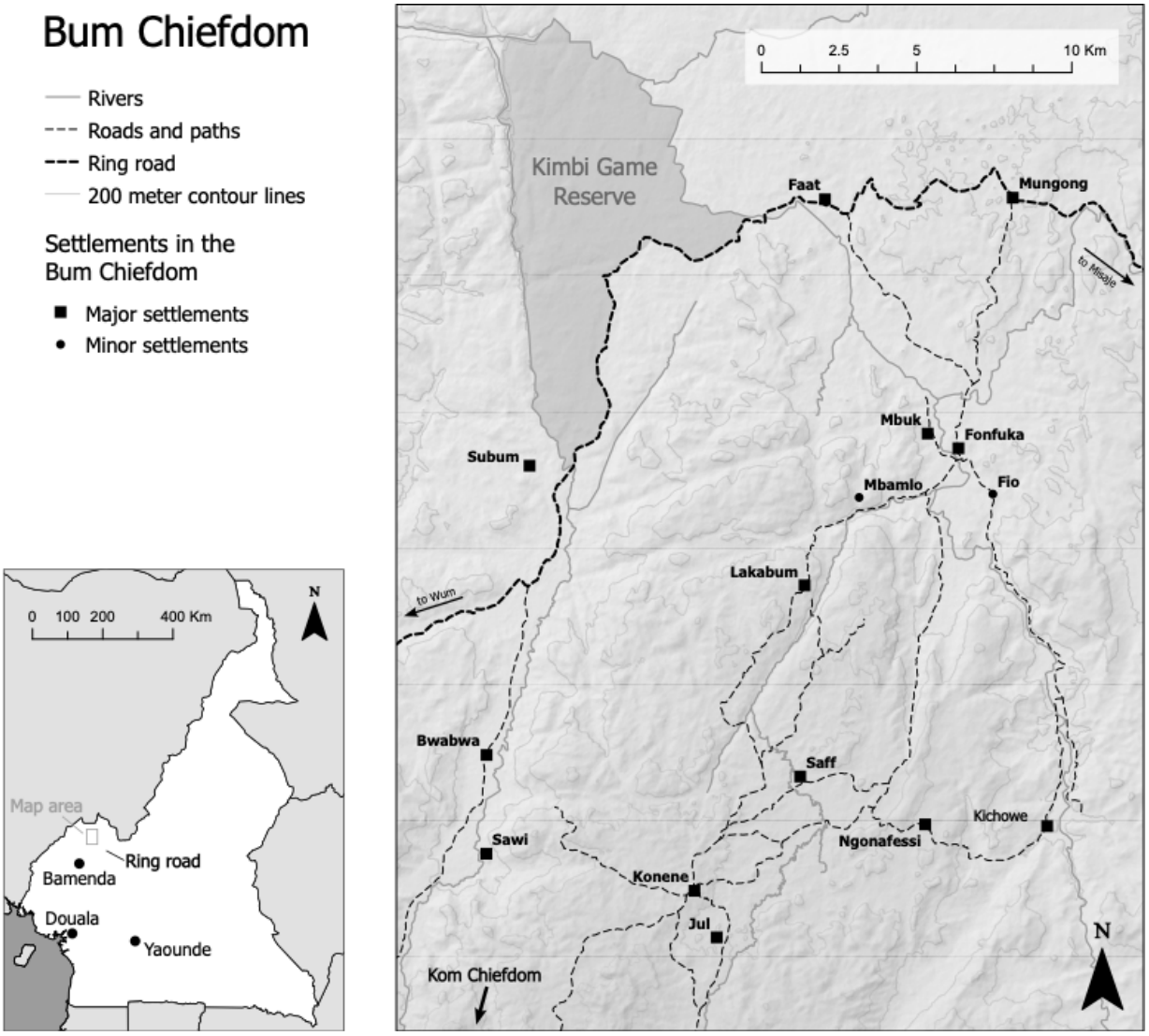

Figure 2.3: The Bum area (map created by Clayton Hamre)

The history of the Bum chiefdom provides a good case study of the relationships between language, power, and the management of conflict in the political tradition of the Grassfields. Local traditions in Bum, as well as supporting evidence from the traditions of surrounding chiefdoms, indicate that the foundation of the Bum chiefdom dates to around the end of the eighteenth century (Pollock 1927; Bridges 1933; Chilver & Kaberry 1968: 32). The founders of Bum were the last to settle in an area that was already inhabited by a diverse population (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1997: 76; Takor 2005: 28–34). The village of Sawi had been founded by a group coming from around Oku, located about a one-day journey by foot south of Sawi. The village of Saaf had been founded by kin groups related to families settled in Nkor, about a one-day journey by foot to the east of Saaf. Traditions about Faat connect its foundation to the arrival of kin groups from the area of Dumbo, about a one-day journey by foot to the north of Faat. The settlements of Fio, Mbuk, and Mbamlo are reported to have been founded since time immemorial, or, as an interviewee of Takor's put it (2005: 31), "they emerged from a cave". The other settlements found in Figure 2.3 (e.g. Bwabwa, Kimbi River, Ngonafessi, and Kichowe) are best considered relatively recent demographic outgrowths from neighboring villages.

The linguistic situation of Bum is one where, in addition to Cameroon Pidgin English, everyone is reported to be fluent in the Bum language (Lamberty 2002). However, for some communities, Bum is best considered to be a second language. These are the village-chiefdoms of Mbuk (Tschonghongei 2020), Mungong (Boutwell 2014), and Faat (Lamberty 2002: 3), as

well as the two hamlets of Fio (Budji 2015) and Mbamlo (Lamberty 2002: 4, Tschonghongei 2013).[5] All the other villages speak relatively uniform varieties of Bum (Lamberty 2002: 8).

One indirect piece of evidence corroborating the idea that the area was linguistically diverse before the arrival of the Bum is that the Lower Fungom village of Koshin (§4.2) was founded by groups escaping from the area close to Sawi (see Di Carlo 2011: 81 and references cited therein) and who now speak a language that has no close affinities with its neighbors, thus likely representing an additional remnant of the languages spoken in the Bum area before the arrival of the Bum. Moreover, based on the existence of language ideologies stressing one-to-one correspondences between chiefdoms and "languages" in the Grassfields (see §3), we would have no reason to doubt that the diversity of the populations reported in local ethnohistorical traditions would be extended to the linguistic domain. However, this would mean that the only "original" Bum-speaking communities in the Bum area are Lakabum—i.e., the settlement where the Bum royal palace is located—and Lakabum's extension at Fonfuka, which is the main economic center of the area and which once served as an important entrepot for the kola trade between the Grassfields and the Jukun area in today's Taraba State of Nigeria (see Chilver & Kaberry 1967: 127). If that is the case, then the key question is not why Mbuk, Mungong, Faat, Fio, and Mbamlo are associated with a language different from Bum but, rather, why villages like Sawi and Saff no longer speak their own, pre-Bum language. From this perspective, it is also counterintuitive that the villages that are not presently primarily Bum speaking are demographically quite small with populations in the hundreds and, in the case of Fio, Mbamlo,

[5] Lamberty (2002:3–4) characterizes these villages in terms of having "mixed populations", thus potentially suggesting that their language differences are due to relatively recent demographic movements. As made clear in the discussion below, the available evidence suggests that this is not the case.

and Mbuk, very close to the main centers of the spread of Bum influence (i.e., Lakabum and Fonfuka) whereas larger and more distant centers like Sawi and Saff speak Bum.

Historiographical and ethnographic evidence indicates that Sawi was the most powerful chiefdom when the Bum founding dynasty arrived in the area and that it was from Sawi that the Bum obtained the land where they initially settled (Takor 2005: 48; Takor 2011; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998). This strongly suggests that Sawi had a language of its own before that time. The strongest indication that the memory of this pre-Bum language has been subject to a process of ideological erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38) comes from the distribution of the traditional political structures in the Bum area. Relevant information is found in Table 2.1, adapted from Takor (2005: 69), with an indication of the "degree" of the chief of the village (if one is present), whether the Kwi'fo regulatory society is present in the settlement (see §3), and the name of its primary language (with a dagger marking languages that are moribund). The assignment of different degrees to chiefs reflects a categorization made in the colonial period that has carried on into the present-day Cameroonian state. This categorization partly reflected less formalized pre-colonial hierarchies (see Nkwi 1979: 99–100, 114). In principle, the most politically powerful chiefs are of the first degree, followed by the second-degree chiefs and, then, third-degree chiefs.

VILLAGE	CHIEF DEGREE	KWI'FO	LANGUAGE
Lakabum	2	✓	Bum
Sawi	3	✓	Bum
Saff	3	✓	Bum
Jul	3	✓	Bum
Mbamlo	3	–	Mbamlo†
Mbuk	3	–	Mbuk
Mungong	3	–	Mungong

Faat	3	–	Chung
Fio	–	–	Fio†

Table 2.1. Political organization of villages of the Bum area

The information in Table 2.1 shows that those villages that are associated with a language different from Bum are also those that do *not* have a Kwi'fo. To understand the significance of this fact, it is helpful to bear in mind that the presence of a Kwi'fo in a village can be seen simultaneously as a sign that a given community is tightly integrated into the Bum polity and that it has also been granted a role within the leadership structure of Bum. So, communities that are still associated with languages of their own are those that are *less* integrated into the Bum political structure. The case of Fio is additionally noteworthy due to the fact that the settlement lacks a chief that is recognized by the state, which is a clear indication of its political subordination within the Bum polity.

Oral traditions report that, once settled in the area, the policy of the Bum aimed to unite local communities under their hegemony (Nyamnjoh 1997; Takor 2005). What we see in contemporary Bum appears to represent different degrees of integration within the emerging composite, but united, Bum chiefdom. In a Grassfields chiefdom like Bum, regulatory societies—as well as retainers, title holders, and palace officials—were able to serve as a partial control on the chief's powers (Nkwi 1979: 100). Therefore, only communities that were "full" members of the Bum polity could be integrated into this system and exert political control over the chief. As one interviewee from the Bum area described, "those who speak other languages are like spies" (Nelson C. Tschonghongei p.c.), clearly demonstrating the link between the Bum language integration into the political system.

A desire to join the newly emerging polity, and therefore have such control, is the most likely explanation for the early language shift to Bum in communities like Sawi and Saff. These

two communities may have felt specific pressure to join the Bum polity due to the fact that they were threatened by the expansion of the Kom community immediately to their south (Takor 2005: 43–44). Those communities in the Bum area that maintained their own language were not given political authority in the form of Kwi'fo, and, therefore, would have been completely subjugated by the chief of Bum. The extent to which this was due to the fact that the Bum polity did not allow them to establish their own Kwi'fo or due to those communities choosing not to integrate is not completely clear based on the information that is available to us, even if the connection between language and political integration is clear. However, at least in the case of Fio, information found in Budji (2015: 116) suggests that the maintenance of their language is due to a desire to remain independent from Bum, as evidenced by the following remarks from one of the remaining Fio speakers that she recorded:

> We Fio people are proud because we still have our language, unlike Mbamlo who forgot it and now speak only Bum. If we lose our language then people will laugh at us like they laugh at Mbamlo now for having lost their language.

These remarks not only demonstrate the value that Fio speakers place on using the language but also make clear that they are also keeping track of the general linguistic situation of the Bum area and how it affects the perception of other settlements—in this case Mbamlo, whose distinctive language was in fact still used by a few speakers at least as late as 2013 (Tschonghongei 2013), during the same period of time when Budji (2015) was doing her research.[6]

[6] It is interesting to note that Budji's (2015) interviewee, too, appears to have initiated a process of erasure at the expense of an accurate report on Mbamlo, probably in order to further stress Fio's pride to an outside researcher.

The Bum case illustrates two useful points in our view. First, it serves as an additional, corroborating example of the link between political independence and distinctive lexicogrammatical codes in the Grassfields, as discussed with respect to Lower Fungom in §4.2. Second, it shows that the link between political and territorial expansion and language can be complex and ideologically mediated rather than being viewed simply in terms of power relations. The expansion of the Bum polity clearly expanded knowledge of the Bum language throughout the area. However, only villages that became politically integrated into the Bum power structure became "Bum-speaking" villages (i.e., villages where use, or recent memory of use, of a non-Bum language is not reported). Moreover, the observed pattern is contrary to what would be expected based on patterns of language shift seen within modern states. In such states, political autonomy, either at the national or regional level, is normally seen as a factor that will support the maintenance of a distinct language (Grenoble & Whaley 1998: 39). In Bum, we see the reverse. Language shift to Bum within a village—and the accompanying establishment of a Kwi'fo there—played a key role in the process through which it would gain a degree of political autonomy within the Bum polity, while the continued maintenance of a different language is associated with political subjugation.

The language maintenance and shift patterns that we see in the Bum area are hard to make sense of if we assume that lexicogrammatical codes are typically linked to categorical identities (see §2), where the loss of a language would be associated with the loss of an essential feature of a community's identity. However, they make more sense under the view that, in the Grassfields, local languages are linked to relational identities that simply define a group of people cooperating within a political unit and where the use of a distinct language is a signal of a

lack of political integration with other nearby communities rather than an attempted expression of an essentialist notion such as “ethnic autonomy”.

5: Linguistic Registers and Social Stratification: The Case of Bafut

Figure 2.4 provides a map of the Bafut area, and the discussion here builds on Di Carlo and Neba (2020). (Mitchell & Neba 2019 focus more on specific linguistic aspects of the same phenomenon.) Like the Bum case just discussed in §4.3, the Bafut area includes villages that are politically subordinate to the Fondom of Bafut but where other languages predominate.[7] The Bafut language predominates in the more densely populated Upper Bafut area, which comprises the two southern regions on the map, namely Mbù’ntí and Múmə̀lá’à, and perhaps has as many as 100,000 speakers. Other languages predominate in the Lower Bafut area (Ntàrè).

[7] The term Fon is frequently used for traditional political leaders in the Western Grassfields, especially among the larger groups. See Nkwi and Warnier (1982:59–64). The term *chief* is sometimes used in place of fon, as we have chosen to do in §4.2, for example. We use *fon* in this section due to our emphasis on this specific Grassfields sociopolitical role in the Bafut community.

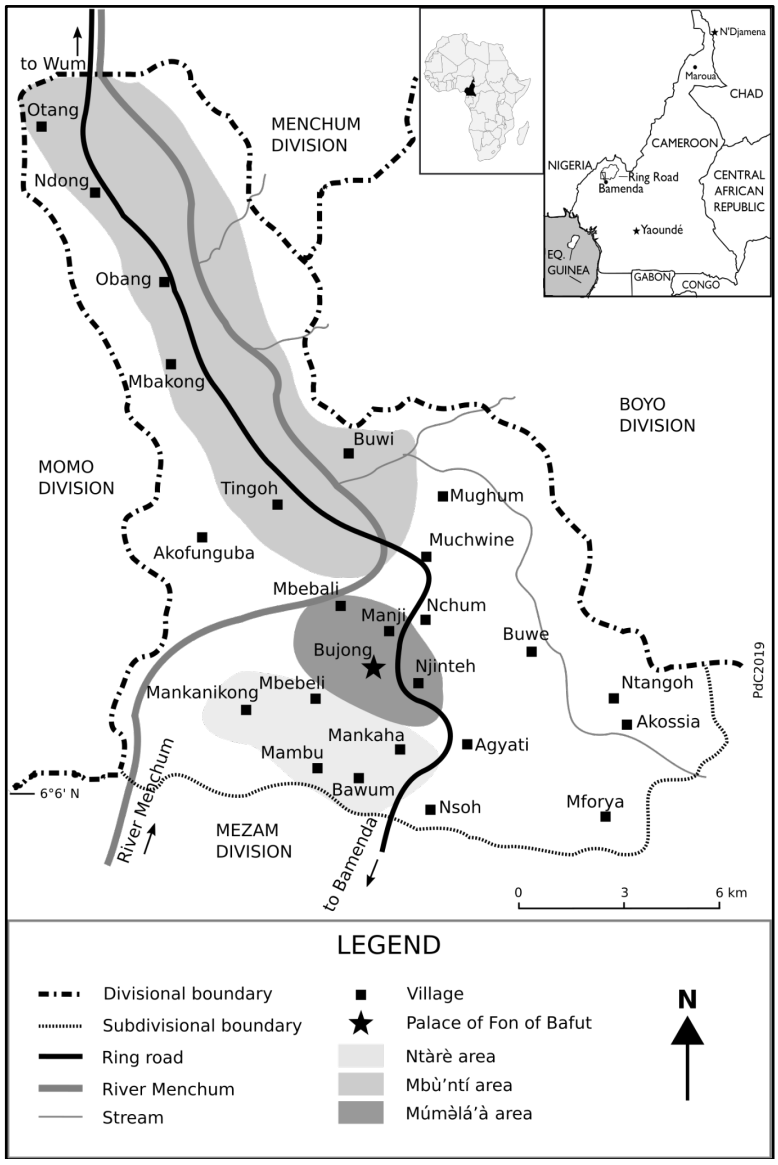

Figure 2.4. The Bafut area (map created by Pierpaolo Di Carlo)

We are interested here in the nature of language variation within the Bafut-speaking community rather than how the Bafut language relates to the other languages of the Bafut area. This provides an interesting example of the role of linguistic variation in the maintenance of the political structures within a community, and, therefore, shows how such variation can have an "internal" function within a relatively stratified Grassfields society. This is comparable to its

"external" function of marking political divisions within less stratified contexts such as what was seen in Lower Fungom in §4.2.

As the leader of a relatively large polity, the Fon of Bafut has a very distinctive social status from other members of Bafut society including the community's "notables"—i.e., members of the royal court—being, like other fons, "first, and far above the others" (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 59). The special status of fons in Western Grassfields societies is seen in many aspects of social interaction, for example in prohibitions against being seen eating in public, reflecting their traditional role as a sacred authority (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 61).[8]

Linguistically, this manifests in restrictions on the way a fon can be described, such as only talking indirectly about matters relating to his physical state (e.g., illness, death, etc.). Within the Grassfields, Bafut has an especially elaborated royal register for talking about the fon. This involves the use of an extensive parallel vocabulary where words from the regular language are either used in special ways when talking about the fon or words otherwise entirely absent from the regular register of Bafut are used. As the traditional way of encoding deference to the Fon of Bafut in language use, "knowledge of the royal register is the basic requirement for one to be recognized as a Bafut person" (Di Carlo & Neba 2020: 43).

Examples of some of the verbs associated with the Bafut royal register are provided in Table 2.2 (Di Carlo & Neba 2020: 39). The term as used in the royal register is provided, along with its meaning in the normal register, if it is found, along with a general indication of the semantic relationship between the term as used in the royal register versus the normal register.

[8] The extent to which traditional leaders, such as fons or chiefs, were associated with such prohibitions would differ from group to group, with the greatest level of prohibitions being associated with the leaders of larger, more centralized political entities. The chiefs of smaller political entities, such as the village-chiefdoms of Lower Fungom (see §4.2) also participate in this system of prohibitions, but less extensively.

ROYAL TERM	ROYAL MEANING	NORMAL MEANING	NORMAL TERM	STRATEGY
bwɛ̂	‘die’	‘be missing’	*kʷô*	euphemism
ləə̌	‘bury’	‘keep’	*tʷíŋə̂*	euphemism
tóô	‘go out’	‘escape (of a rodent)’	*fɛ̂ʔɛ̂*	metaphor
tʃú	‘speak’	‘emit sound (from a secret instrument)’	*ɣàá*	metonymy
fəə̂	‘see’	—	*jə̂*	neologism (?)
ləɣə̂	‘carry’	—	*bìʔî*	neologism (?)
kwíintə̂	‘ask (the fon)’	‘fill up’	*bítə̂*	semantic shift
tsàʔâ	‘drink’	‘look for (fruit)’	*nô*	semantic reassignment
bə́ŋə̂	‘sleep’	‘turn’	*bʷíî*	semantic reassignment

Table 2.2. Example verbs in the Bafut royal register

While the royal register is the most well-known and well-studied special register of the Bafut language, this is, in fact, only one of many special registers of the language. The various regulatory societies of Bafut, such as Kwi’fo (see §3), for example, are also associated with their own registers. Moreover, even within these societies, there is a hierarchical organization of members, and higher levels of the hierarchy may be associated with their own distinctive communicative patterns. Unlike the royal register, which is (in principle) known by all members of the Bafut community, these other registers are only known by members of these groups. From this perspective, the Bafut “language”, rather than being seen as a single lexico-grammatical code is, perhaps, better understood as a concentric layering of different “subcodes”, with the common Bafut register at its base and a series of other codes associated with specialized

functions occupying successively higher positions (see Di Carlo & Neba 2020: 43 for a graphical representation).

Only one member of the Bafut community is believed to know all of these registers, namely the Fon. He is, therefore, associated with two distinct traits connected to language. One of these is tied to the external behavior of members of the community, namely that there is a special register used to talk about him. The other is connected to the community's understanding of the internal state of his knowledge, namely that he can use and understand all of the registers associated with the Bafut "language."

The Bafut case demonstrates several ways in which language interacts with political group formation. On the one hand, it is used to distinguish the Fon of Bafut from all other members of the community, through the use of the royal register. This signals his special, sacred status as the traditional leader of the community. On the other hand, knowledge of the royal register is viewed ideologically as one of the indicators that an individual is a member of the Bafut community, as opposed to being an individual who merely knows how to speak some Bafut. If knowledge of the common Bafut register and the royal register is required for "basic" membership in the Bafut community, knowledge of additional registers is a requirement to be recognized as a member of various Bafut subcommunities, and, in particular, of the regulatory societies which play a central role in political organization. Here, too, the Fon of Bafut has a special status as the only individual who has knowledge of all of these codes. Taken together, these registers, therefore, simultaneously establish the Fon's authority and structure the Bafut political hierarchy.

As discussed by Di Carlo and Neba (2020: 44-46), there is an interesting parallel to the multilingual structure of an area like Lower Fungom dominated by village-chiefdoms, as

discussed in §4.2, and the use of specialized registers in the much larger Bafut polity. In both cases, lexico-grammatical codes are used as a means of constructing political subdivisions. Moreover, knowledge of multiple codes allows an individual to claim membership in multiple political units, whether these are the village-chiefdoms of Lower Fungom or different levels of the regulatory societies of Bafut. The major difference is the extent of the difference of the codes involved. The distinctive lexico-grammatical codes of Lower Fungom differ substantially in both lexicon and grammar from each other, whereas the Bafut registers primarily involve only differences in vocabulary. Nevertheless, these commonalities point to an underlying ideology in both cases that links language to sociopolitical group formation.

Conclusion: Multilingualism, Conflict, and Peace in the Grassfields

The presence of multiple languages within a single community or a geographic area is often seen as a potential source of conflict (e.g., Davies & Dubinsky 2018: Part III). This is not surprising, in particular, when languages are used as key indicators of an individual's categorical identity (§2). However, the Grassfields presents us with a strikingly different situation where, rather than the cause of conflict, languages can actually be one *outcome* of conflict. Because lexicogrammatical codes are linked to concrete groups of people—and, relatedly, to a conceptualization of identity as relational (§2)—conflict resulting in the formation of new political groupings can lead to the creation of new languages, as was likely the case for the development of the Missong variety of the Mungbam language discussed in §4.2. What we can observe more broadly is that languages in the region are a tool that can be used for conflict management, whether as a means of formally establishing the political independence of a newly forming group, as in the case of Missong, integrating a previously independent entity into an

expanding political group, as in the case of Bum, discussed in §4.3, or managing community-internal social hierarchies and political structures, as in the case of the Bafut registers discussed in §4.4.

The role of language for managing society-level conflict should also be considered alongside the presence of widespread multilingualism (see §3) which provides a means for individuals to associate themselves with multiple political units, and, thereby, potentially make a claim to the resources of more than one community to manage their personal risk. Languages, therefore, conceptually create "boundaries" around communities but, at the same time, are a tool individuals use to access multiple communities in a relational web. This is interestingly paralleled by descriptions of political boundaries in traditional African societies as being conceptualized primarily as places of contact and meeting rather than places of division (Fanso 1984: 24), suggesting that there may be a larger cultural complex involved with the linguistic patterns described here.

These ideas are in stark contrast to the conceptualization of the most significant political conflict in Cameroon at present—which, indeed, should likely be considered its most significant political conflict in the post-independence period. This is the so-called Anglophone Crisis (see §1), which is widely characterized as if the primary division of the conflict is linguistic in nature— between "anglophones" and "francophones"—even though the proximate causes of the conflict are not linguistic but, rather, linked to the distinct educational and legal systems found in Cameroon corresponding to whether a given region was formerly under British or French control (Anchimbe 2018: 169). What we see here are two different language ideologies operating within the same communities at the same time. On the one hand, there is the traditional ideology linking lexicogrammatical codes to relational identities, and where language can be used to manage

conflict, and, on other hand, there is the colonial ideology, where lexicogrammatical codes are an intrinsic part of the nation-state "package", which has led to a conflict that is not purely about language being characterized in linguistic terms.

This leads us to a final observation in this context regarding the analysis of language and political conflict, which is that it cannot proceed as if the relationship between languages and political units are globally uniform in nature. As should be clear from the analyses above, targeted ethnographic analysis is needed to understand the nature of this relationship across different cultural areas. Moreover, particular caution must be taken when using the results of global-scale language surveys to make political inferences since these will inevitably abstract away from the local language ideologies that underpin the connection between those lexicogrammatical codes that we call "languages" and the sociopolitical units that they are associated with.

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