

Chapter 3

The So-Called Royal Register of Bafut within the Bafut Language Ecology

Language Ideologies and Multilingualism in the Cameroonian Grassfields

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1. INTRODUCTION: ARE LOWER FUNGOM AND LOWER CASAMANCE SUI GENERIS CASES?

For decades, research on multilingualism in African countries has been mostly limited to urban settings (e.g., Scotton 1975, 1976; Myers-Scotton 1993; Dakubu 1997; Mc Laughlin 2009; Kamwangamalu 2012; Mba and Sadembouo 2012). More recently, studies stemming from the documentation of endangered languages have widened the scope of this research to include rural areas of the continent as well (Di Carlo 2016; Lüpke 2016; Cobbinah et al. 2016; Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba 2019).¹ This recent development is a welcome advance toward a greater geographic coverage of multilingual phenomena in Africa. Furthermore, approaching communicative practices in rural areas—such as Lower Fungom in northwest Cameroon and Lower Casamance in Senegal—means targeting areas that are characterized, on the one hand, by high degrees of linguistic diversity and, on the other, by the presence of persisting precolonial sociocultural traits. Ways of speaking in these areas, while surely not constituting a unitary phenomenon, are nonetheless distinct from what is known from urban environments.

A key component of these previously undocumented ways of speaking is that, according to the local metapragmatic knowledge, language choice allows the indexing of types of identities that have seldom, if ever, been described in the sociolinguistic literature on multilingualism in Africa. By default, one would expect that any given (socio)linguistic fact, including language choice, would be used to index a certain population and, by association

and through stereotyping, some set of population-distinctive sociocultural and behavioral features (see, e.g., Eckert 2012; Irvine and Gal 2000). This cultural-essentialist indexical process targets what sociologists Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 15) have called “categorical identification,” through which “one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)” Recent research has emphasized that in Lower Fungom and Lower Casamance this is only one of the possible identities selected via language choice.

In Lower Casamance,

members of the patrivorilocal groups that settle in small hamlets or larger villages have identity languages based on patrilineal descent, and villages have nominal languages based on the identity language of the founding clan. I have described this practice as “patrimonial deixis” [now found in Lüpke 2018]. Claiming the patrimonial language in Casamance conveys first comer status and control over land, and in Frontier-style settlements, villages have their own patrimonial language. (Lüpke 2016, 49)

By speaking a certain language, that is, one is able to index one’s membership in the group(s) widely recognized to be the firstcomer(s) and, therefore, founder(s) of a given locale. Patrimonial-deixis identity does not bring along any other behavioral, status-laden, or otherwise essentialist traits.

Another type of identity, equally devoid of essentialist traits, is that described for Lower Fungom (Di Carlo 2016, 2018; Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba 2019). Here, the “‘ideological moves’ (Eckert 2012, 94) that are called up by one’s choice of using any particular local language are limited to the representation of one’s affiliation in a given village community . . . [and] being [a] member in a given group merely means having a certain position in relation to the other members who participate in the interaction” (Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba 2019, section 5). The Lower Fungom case exemplifies “an ideology where the local lects . . . index not ‘identity’ as ‘categorical identification’ but, rather, as ‘relational identification’ and whose interpretation depends on the specific position that an individual occupies within the relational ‘web’ indexed by a lect” (Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba 2019, section 5; for a definition of identity *qua*, relational identification, see Brubaker and Cooper [2000, 15]).

At this point, one must recall that both Lower Fungom and Lower Casamance exemplify quite extreme cases of linguistic diversity and of the pervasiveness and degree of individual multilingualism. Given that, should we look at Lower Fungom and Lower Casamance simply as rare finds? Or, can they be seen as in some way as the expression, albeit admittedly more pronounced,

of language ideologies widespread across Africa? In search of an answer to this question, and taking Lower Fungom as our reference point, we looked for a nonurban language context (a) characterized by a comparatively low degree of linguistic diversity and (b) in which the majority of speakers have multilingual repertoires limited to two or three languages. Bafut, located some fifty-five kilometers to the south of Lower Fungom in the North-West Region of Cameroon, seemed the perfect candidate for this preliminary inquiry because, on top of the features mentioned above, it also displays a much more centralized sociopolitical organization as compared to the small village-chiefdoms of Lower Fungom (see section 2.2).

Although our research is still ongoing, the aim of this chapter is to arrive at a verisimilar delineation of the local language ecology and of some traits of the language ideologies in Bafut (section 5) and compare them with those documented in Lower Fungom (section 6). In order to do so, we will first introduce Bafut in its generalities (section 2), and then will present our preliminary findings concerning some elements of the local language ecology, that is, the so-called royal register (section 3) and other special codes (section 4).

2. BAFUT

2.1 Geography and History

Bafut is the name at once of a town, a traditional chiefdom, an administrative subdivision, a people, and their language.² Our geographical focus here is on the Bafut traditional chiefdom (henceforth *fondom*, from *fon*, “traditional ruler”), which includes the town of Bafut and is included in the subdivision of Bafut, in the division of Mezam, in the North-West Region of Cameroon (see figure 3.1).

The Bafut Fondom extends for about 350 square kilometers and is today home to about 100,000 people.³ Geographically, it is made up of two quite distinct areas: the southern half lies between 1,000 and 1,300 meters above sea level, in a mixed forest-savanna environment typical of the hilly Cameroonian Grassfields; the northern half lies instead at an elevation between about 600 and 850 meters, is more densely forested and less populated than the southern part, and the Menchum River represents an important resource for the local economy (especially for activities like fishing and sand mining). This distinction between the two areas is reflected in Bafut toponymy: *mbu'ntí*, “the lowlands,” identifies the northern half, while the southern half includes two named subareas, *múmàlá'á*, “the heart of the land”—where the palace of the paramount Fon of Bafut is located—and *ntarè*, “the edge area” (see figure 3.1).

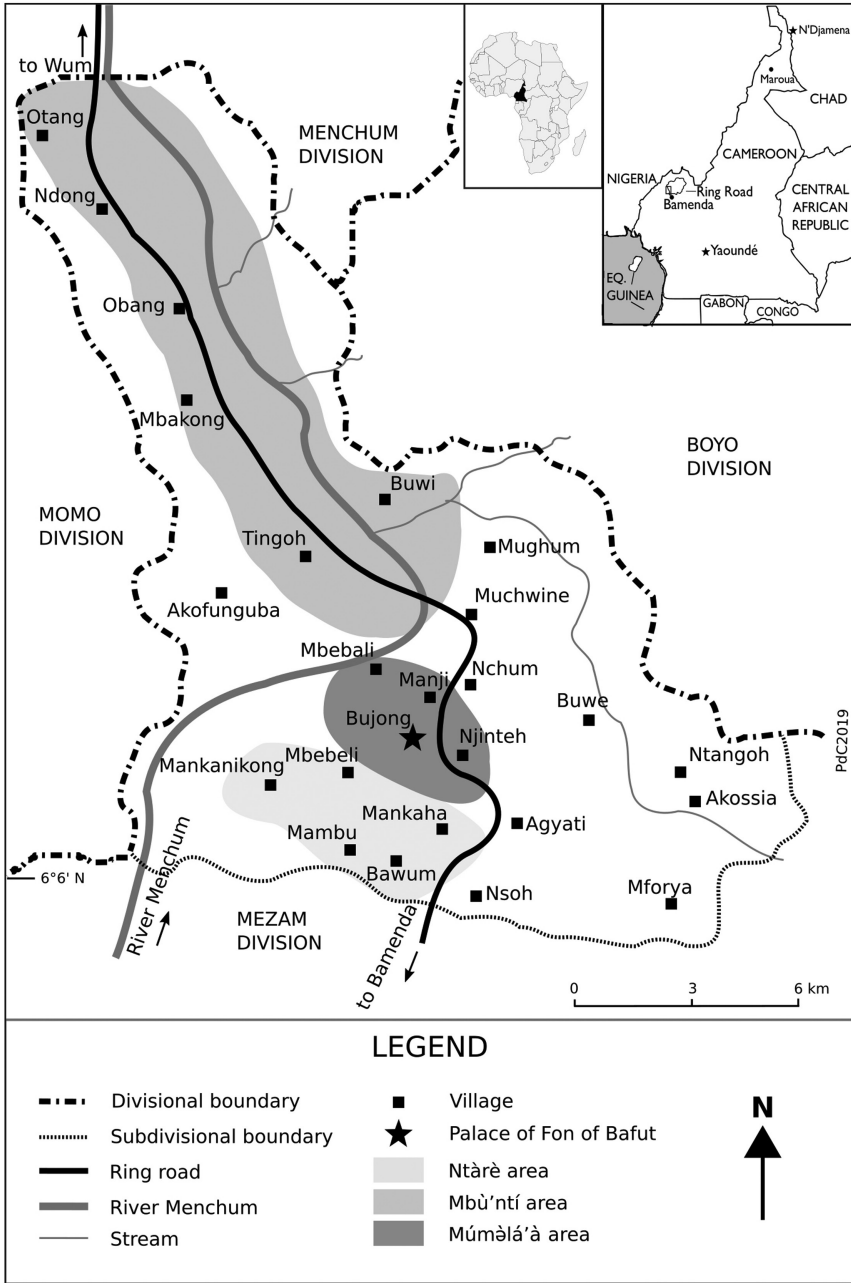


Figure 3.1 Map of Bafut Subdivision, Mezam Division, North-West Region of Cameroon, Giving the Approximate Location of Locally Salient Areas. For a fuller view of Lower Bafut area, see figure 13.1. Source: Map by Pierpaolo Di Carlo, base map from Ngwa 1981, modified.

Local ethnohistories collected by British colonial administrators and historians report that Bafut people arrived in this area around 300 years ago from areas to the east-northeast of their present site (see, e.g., Hawkesworth 1926, 5–12; Chilver and Kaberry 1962, 5–8; 1967, 19–20). It is interesting to note that, contrary to what is stated in some reports (e.g., Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962), those who are now commonly referred to as the “Bafut people” must in fact be considered a composite community, made up of a number of groups that trace their origins to a variety of places (see, e.g., Chilver and Kaberry 1962, 8, 19). To cite a more recent example, during her fieldwork in Bafut, Perpetua Ngengwe (then a PhD student at the Catholic University of Cameroon at Bamenda) interviewed the chiefs of the villages of Bawum and Mambu and both confirmed that their ancestors were already there when the Bafut arrived and also that they used to speak languages different from Bafut (Ngengwe, personal communication, 2018). This is not a surprise to anyone who has a minimal interest in the history of the Bafut people; however, these ethnohistories are seldom remembered in public unless one poses explicit questions, perhaps due to the discourses that might spring from them and that might appear as potentially antagonistic to those supporting the authority of the Fon of Bafut over the whole area.

It is also interesting to note that Bafut is one of the most well-known fondoms of the Grassfields because of the war it fought against the Germans and their allies (mostly the Bali) at the end of the nineteenth century (see, e.g., Chilver and Kaberry 1962, 7–8).

2.2 Society

As with any other community in the Cameroonian Grassfields, in Bafut the state administration and the traditional sociopolitical organization coexist. Following the Cameroon Chieftaincy Law 77/245, the Fon of Bafut is a first-class fon, “appointed directly” by the prime minister of the Republic of Cameroon and, as such, is a civil servant.⁴ Traditionally, the fon was the supreme ruler and the main spiritual guide of the whole Bafut community, a twofold role that has been somewhat reduced by the inclusion of the fondom within the Republic of Cameroon, although the fon and the traditional power structures in general still exert considerable influence on Bafut society.

The traditional subdivision of the Bafut people into the court, on the one hand, and the commoners, on the other, seems still very much present in today’s Bafut. The court (*ntɔʔɔ*) is made up of the fon, his many wives (including those inherited from previous fons), and their offspring, that is, the princes and princesses (*bɔɔntɔʔɔ*). Spatially, most of the court is concentrated in the fon’s quarter, which in Bafut has reached an impressive degree of refinement in the mixture of Western and traditional architecture.

However, there are also members of the court that live outside of the fon's quarter: these are the *atanchos*—royals and nonroyals appointed as chiefs of smaller villages within the fondom, under the fon's authority—plus the *ndinfor* and the *muma*, who are male siblings of the fon elected into the political offices of, respectively, second and third in command to the fon. In the absence of the fon, the next in command is the *ndinfor* and, in his absence the *muma* is in command. Whether living inside or outside the palace, princes still have a lot of influence on the politics of the fondom because they belong to various administrative societies within the palace (see below).

As for the commoners (*bañgɔŋ* or *adzwaŋɛlaʔa*), one should not think that they are necessarily poorer than members of the court or powerless. Quite to the contrary, the whole political structure of Bafut, as with that of the majority of the other chiefdoms of the Cameroonian Grassfields (see, e.g., Chilver and Kaberry 1967), reflects the preoccupation that all the main families of commoners should participate to some extent in the management of the polity and, by so doing, counterbalance the fon's otherwise potentially absolute power.

In Bafut, this tension between court and commoners is realized in the presence of a number of male secret societies—in particular, Kwi'fo, Takumbeng, and Tsong—that are variously connected with the exercise of political, judiciary, and spiritual power.⁵ It is not necessary to explore the details here (more on Bafut secret societies can be found in Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler [1962], Chilver and Kaberry [1962], and Kaberry [1962]); for present purposes, it is sufficient to keep in mind the following points:

- Kwi'fo is the highest politico-spiritual body in the fondom: the fon is also called “the son of Kwi'fo” and can be fined or disciplined in any way as deemed necessary by Kwi'fo. Kwi'fo members are exclusively male commoners plus the fon. All other members of the royal family are strictly forbidden access to it.
- Tsong is a powerful male secret society of the fondom. It is a society of princes and is believed to draw its membership from the princes only, plus the fon.
- Takumbeng is a powerful male secret society mostly associated with the exercise of spiritual power for the protection of the fondom. The greater part of Takumbeng members come from the royal family, including the fon.

2.3 Languages

No sociolinguistic surveys have been carried out on the multilingual competence of the residents of Bafut (except for Lower Bafut, see Chenemo,

forthcoming). However, we do not think it would be wrong to say that everyone in upper Bafut is able to speak Bafut and, most likely, Cameroon Pidgin English. Moreover, anecdotal observations seem to indicate that only a few other local languages (such as Mankon, Meta', and Mungaka) are present in the locals' multilingual repertoires. Although more research is needed in this regard, one might say that (upper) Bafut people are quite clearly less multilingual than, for example, the people of Lower Fungom, for whom speaking four local languages plus Cameroon Pidgin English seems perfectly normal (see, e.g., Di Carlo 2018).

The Bafut language is a Narrow Grassfields Bantu language of the Ngemba subgroup. In fact, Tamanji (2009, 1) informs us that it comprises two diatopic varieties mainly distinguished at the phonological level: the "central dialect" (spoken in the central *múmàlá'á* area as well as throughout the villages in central and eastern Bafut) and the "peripheral dialect" (spoken mainly in the *ntàrè* area). By contrast, in the *mbu'ntí* area of lower elevation in the northern half of the fondom, no local variety of Bafut is reported. This is probably due to the fact that here, in contrast to the rest of the fondom, Bafut is mainly spoken as a second language: this area is home to a number of small, underdescribed languages, and multilingualism is more pronounced than elsewhere in the fondom.⁶

As for diastratic variation, no such thing has been documented in Bafut; instead, there is the presence of what Tamanji (2009, 2) calls "court language," which by and large coincides with what Mitchell and Neba (2019) call "royal register." This has been the main target of Neba's documentation project (Neba 2013) and of a short field trip made by both the current authors in Bafut in 2015.⁷ Our data are summarized in sections 3 and 4.

3. THE ROYAL "REGISTER" OF BAFUT

In Bafut, there is a closed set of lexical items that are used to refer to the fon, to his body parts, his states and actions, and, in general, to things that pertain to him. Every member of Bafut society is expected to use this special lexical set irrespective of the context of use: as we will show, it is simply the case that "things" and actions of the fon must be referred to in a special way. The fon, too, has been reported to use this lexical set when speaking in public (Margaret Chenemo, personal communication, 2018). Data about the Bafut royal register have also been presented in Mitchell and Neba (2019). In this section we try to give a more complete account of the composition of this lexical set. The reasons for using quotes to refer to this "register" will become clearer in section 5.

3.1 Nouns

3.1.1 The Fon's Body Parts

Table 3.1 gives a set of words used in the royal register to refer to body parts of the fon, together with their meaning and the corresponding meanings and words in normal usage. The first word in the table, *àntaámfée'*, means “firefly” in normal usage; its meaning of “fon’s eye” in the royal register is metaphorical, probably meant to emphasize the luminosity of the fon’s eyes.⁸ Also metaphorical is *míríndz'òrì*, “fon’s ears”: in normal usage the word refers to a mushroom typical of the Grassfields whose similarity with a human ear is evident (and is reflected in the scientific name of this species, *Auricularia auricula*) and that is commonly used in Bafut cuisine. As for *n̄tsá'á*, “fon’s foot/hand,”⁹ literally referring to the rattles worn by masked dancers as anklets, the meaning in the royal register is obtained via metonymy and has the effect of connoting the fon as a spiritual agent, as the deployment of spiritual powers are the main *raison d’être* of many masquerade ritual dances.

Dealing with similar semantic phenomena in the honorific registers in some Omotic languages, Storch asserts that “deliberate semantic shifting seems to operate by essentialization, which in an almost iconic way represents, in the form of words, the essence of the powerful and magic substance of lineage elders and priests [of the fon, in the case of Bafut]” (Storch 2011, 26). While referring to the fon’s ears as a kind of edible mushroom does not seem to bear any clear connection with a magical or otherwise powerful substance, seeing his feet as ritual rattles surely does. The cultural significance of the luminosity of the fon’s eyes, referred to as fireflies, is rather difficult to ascertain at present, although it seems safe to assume that fireflies have a special place in Bafut cosmology.

The last four words in the table seem to escape this sort of conceptualization. In normal usage, *gyígì* is highly derogatory, as it is used to ridicule someone by emphasizing the size of their head; its use to refer to the fon’s head is simply surprising. The same can be said for *ájóó'*, “fon’s head,” since *ájóó'* is normally used as a substitute for taboo words. These are cases of a distinct type of semantic shift that, for lack of a better term, we call “semantic reassignment,” that is, a process of lexical expansion by which the relation existing between the form and the denotatum cannot be taken as a “linear,” that is, somewhat “expected,” semantic extension of its normal semantic-referential meaning but, rather, shows a high degree of unpredictability. What we want to emphasize here is that there seems to be a discontinuity between the “normal meaning” as opposed to the “royal meaning” of these words, a discontinuity that appears unrelated to the motivation to represent an “essence of the powerful and magic substance” of the fon.

Table 3.1 Nouns in the Royal Register of Bafut that Refer to the Fon’s Body Parts, and Their Meaning, Together with What the Words Mean in Normal Usage and the Words that Are Found in Normal Usage to Express the Particular Body Parts

Royal Register	Meaning in Royal Register	Meaning in Normal Usage	Equivalent in Normal Usage	Strategy
<i>àntaāmíéé</i>	eye	firefly	<i>nìlìḽì</i>	metaphor
<i>mìrìndḽʷòrì</i>	ears	a kind of mushroom	<i>ìtòḽnì</i>	metaphor
<i>nìsàʔà</i>	foot/hand	rattle (worn on a masquerade’s foot)	<i>mìkòrì</i>	metonymy
<i>gḽìgì</i>	head	big head (insult)	<i>àtḽ</i>	semantic reassignment
<i>àjoo</i>	head	thing (used for taboo words)	<i>àtḽ</i>	deverbalative (change of range of application)
<i>àmì</i>	neck	thing for swallowing	<i>ntɔḽ</i>	deverbalative (change of range of application)
<i>àlumsà</i>	nose	thing that smells or sniffs	<i>nìlḽwì</i>	deverbalative (change of range of application)

Source: Table created by the authors.

The use of deverbatives like *àmi*, “fon’s neck (lit. thing for swallowing),” and *àlumsà*, “fon’s nose (lit. thing for smelling),” with their merely descriptive semantics, seems equally unpredictable in a register that one would expect to index deference to the fon through magnifying his authority and power.

3.1.2 Objects Used or Consumed by the Fon

An equally composite picture can be observed with the nouns for objects used or consumed by the fon summarized in table 3.2. Here we find metaphors, metonyms, semantic shifts, deverbatives, neologisms, and semantic reassignments.

The words defined here as neologisms (*ntòʒò*, “home”; *ɲgyì*, “mouth”; and, perhaps, *nłwi*, “clothes”) are absent from Bafut common use, but in fact our data are unclear on their possible etymology: at present, we cannot rule out the possibility that some of them are loanwords from other languages or archaisms that have been lost in daily discourse. The deverbatives are, like those in table 3.1, formally regular but semantically shallow, so their presence in the fon’s special lexicon remains counterintuitive. As for the cases of metonymy, “*achu*” is a kind of traditional Bafut staple, “grass” recalls the location of places where it was common to urinate and defecate (i.e., far from houses and roads), and “hoe” recalls the local past when forged iron hoes were used as a form of currency (see, e.g., Moffett, Maggs, and van Schalkwyk 2017).

Semantic reassignments are relatively numerous: *àbàri*, “fon’s chair (lit. fool)”; *kàʒà*, “fon’s dish (lit. waste bin)”; *àbèè*, “fon’s residence (lit. uncultivated yard)”; *ɲkòò*, “back (lit. he who scratches)”; *nsáʒà*, “cap (lit. needle)”; and *fíkáʒà*, “calabash (lit. foot-cuffs).” In contrast, there is only one example of semantic shift—*nìi*, “fon’s staff (lit. leg(s) of a masked dancer)” —which explicitly augments the fon’s authority by connecting him with mystical activities, and also only a single example of metaphor—*ɲgyì*, “fon’s bag (lit. jar)” —which also augments the fon’s authority by portraying him as a portentously big man.

3.2 Verbs

The verbs used in the royal register, given in table 3.3, behave both phonologically and syntactically as in normal Bafut usage. For example, all the verbs in the royal register can be put into two tonal groups: the LH group and the H tone group (Tamanji 2009, 109). This is illustrative of the fact that the royal register differs from common usage only semantically. Every other grammatical feature remains the same in the two varieties.

Table 3.2 Nouns in the Royal Register of Bafut that Refer to Objects Used or Consumed by the Fon, and Their Meaning, Together with what the Words Mean in Normal Usage and the Words that Are Found in Normal Usage to Express the Objects

Royal Register	Meaning in Royal Register	Meaning in Normal Usage	Equivalent in Normal Usage	Strategy
̀̀nɔ̀ɔ̀	home	—	̀̀ndá	neologism (?)
̀̀nyí	mouth	—	̀̀nɪ̀sú	neologism (?)
̀̀nɪ̀wí	clothes	be bitter (doubtful that this is the origin)	̀̀atsáʔá	neologism (?)
̀̀áno	cup	thing for drinking	̀̀ndɔ́j	deverbative (change of range of application)
̀̀áɸířá	umbrella	thing for shedding	̀̀ákořá	deverbative (change of range of application)
̀̀ákoɔ̀	food	<i>achu</i> (cocoyam puree)	̀̀mɪdʒí / ̀̀áɸíçyá	metonymy
̀̀jgɛɛ	toilet	grass	̀̀ákoʔá	metonymy
̀̀ásɔ̀	money donated to the fon	hoe	̀̀jɸábá	metonymy (archaism)
̀̀ábərí	chair/throne	fool	̀̀áɸɪp	semantic reassignment
̀̀káʔá	basket/dish	useless basket used as a dust bin	̀̀jɸjɛ	semantic reassignment
̀̀ábɛɛ	residence	uncultivated yard	̀̀ndá	semantic reassignment
̀̀jkoɔ̀	back	he who scratches	̀̀ndzɪm	semantic reassignment
̀̀nsáʔá	cap	needle	̀̀atsáʔá tó	semantic reassignment
̀̀fíkáʔá	calabash	foot-cuffs	̀̀átáá	semantic reassignment
̀̀nɪ̀	staff	leg(s) of a masquerade (singular and plural forms are formally identical)	̀̀átí	semantic reassignment
̀̀jɸyɸí	bag	jar (typically containing palm wine to be distributed)	̀̀ábáá	metaphor

Source: Table created by the authors.

Table 3.3 Verbs Found in the Royal Register of Bafut with a Different Meaning, Together with What the Words Mean in Normal Usage and the Words that Are Found in Normal Usage to Express the Actions (Verbs Are Given in the Imperative Form)

Royal Register	Meaning	Meaning in Normal Usage	Equivalent in Normal Usage	Strategy
<i>bwé</i>	die	be missing	<i>k'wó</i>	euphemism
<i>laà</i>	bury	keep	<i>tw'ijá</i>	euphemism
<i>ɲajna</i>	sit	sit comfortably	<i>tswí</i>	euphemism
<i>kaʔsáwí</i>	wear a cloth	cause (fon's) dress to go up	<i>wéʔé</i>	euphemism
<i>tíu</i>	speak	emit sound (specifically for the secret instrument of the Tsong)	<i>yaa</i>	metonymy
<i>faà</i>	see	—	<i>ja</i>	neologism (?)
<i>b'arà</i>	reproach	—	<i>yaanta</i>	neologism (?)
<i>mòomá</i>	dance	—	<i>bíná</i>	neologism (?)
<i>layá</i>	carry	—	<i>bíʔí</i>	neologism (?)
<i>kwintá</i>	ask (the fon)	fill up	<i>bíʔá</i>	semantic shift
<i>maʔansje</i>	wear	throw down	<i>wéʔé</i>	semantic reassignment
<i>tsàʔá</i>	drink	look for (fruits)	<i>nó</i>	semantic reassignment
<i>bəpá</i>	sleep	turn	<i>b'w'ir</i>	semantic reassignment
<i>too</i>	go out	escape (of a rodent)	<i>féʔé</i>	metaphor

Source: Table created by the authors.

As with the nouns, we observe a variety of semantic strategies used in the creation of the verbal lexicon. It is interesting to note that among the verbs we encounter some euphemisms, such as *bwε*, “die (lit. be missing),” and *ləə*, “bury (lit. keep).” It is believed that the fon does not die, but rather only travels to the land of the ancestors whence he influences the activities of the living in the village; therefore, it is appropriate to give the impression that he is only missing and not dead. By referring to the burying of the fon as “keeping,” the speakers are able to express the idea that a fon never dies—he is not truly buried but “kept” safely in his resting place where he will continue to live and intercede for the living. Also having positive connotations are *tʃú*, “speak,” a verb that is normally used to refer to the sound produced by the secret instrument characteristic of the Tsong secret society (see section 2.2); *ɣáɣnə*, “sit (lit. sit comfortably)”; and, perhaps, *kɔ́ɔ́sə́lwi*, “wear a cloth.” The latter is a compound word formed from *kɔ́ɔ́sə́*, “make climb,” and *lwi*, “fon’s dress”; this could be seen as a way to say that the fon does not wear clothes like ordinary people do, but he somewhat supernaturally makes his clothes go up.

Apart from these verbs and the possible neologisms, on whose semantics and etymology our data remain mute, all the other forms exemplify more or less clear processes of semantic shift and reassignment that make it somewhat difficult to justify their presence in a register that one would expect to encode honor toward the fon. For example, it is difficult to explain why *máʔansjé*, “throw down,” *tsáʔa*, “look for (fruits),” and *bə́ɣə*, “turn,” have come to mean “wear,” “drink,” and “sleep,” respectively, in the royal register. Likewise, the metaphorical *toó*, “go out,” associates the fon’s going out with the escape of a rodent from a predator: we are not aware of any myths, epithets, or customs that justify this association. If deference and politeness are encoded in the use of these lexical items, then it is unclear what mediates these values in the Bafut metapragmatic knowledge (see section 5 below for further discussion).

4. OTHER SPECIAL CODES IN BAFUT

During our 2015 fieldwork, we also collected evidence of other codes that are used by specific groups of people in Bafut and that we will call “special codes,” for lack of a better term. These codes are used by members of the fondom secret societies and by members of the court.

As we indicated in section 2.2, Bafut sociopolitical organization is based on a set of male secret societies above which stands the fon. The most powerful are Tsong, Takumbeng, and Kwi’fo, which is the most powerful of all (cf. Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962; Chilver and Kaberry 1962; Kaberry 1962). Our local consultants, most of whom were members of one or the

other of these associations, reported that each secret society has its own code, known only to initiates. Moreover, all our local consultants concurred that secret societies are normally organized hierarchically in what could be described as concentric subsets of increasing power and authority, and that each of these subsets has some particular ways of communicating among its members. Of course, details about the actual nature of these numerous secret codes were not released, as revealing the exclusive code (or any other secret feature) of the secret societies would entail heavy fines and was traditionally punished by death.

Our interviewees emphasized that, should a Bafut nonmember be present while two members of Kwi'fo communicate using (one of) their exclusive code(s), the nonmember would not realize this is happening as the interaction would be perceived on the surface as entirely "normal." We could get no further details, and it is clear that the nonverbal aspect of these metasemiotic construals plays an important role. However, what the interviewees told us gives us enough room to speculate that at least part of these special codes is similar to the royal register; that is, it contains lexical items that are used in ordinary speech, but that have been assigned a different meaning.

Another interesting fact we were told, which was later confirmed with other Bafut consultants, is that the royal family itself has a code of its own ("court language" in figure 3.2). In this case, however, the code is reportedly rich in non-Bafut words. Here, too, there seem to be multiple layers of secrecy: for one thing, it is to be noted that the words found in the lyrics of the Bafut national anthem are for the most part not Bafut and, according to our consultants, nor are they from the royal family "main" code, possibly indicating that there are a number of codes exclusive to the royal family and that the anthem was composed using one of those ("anthem language" in figure 3.2).¹⁰

Lastly, specific language varieties have also been reported as the necessary tools for the performance of a number of rituals, addressed to a variety of spirits and ancestors (the "spirit languages" in figure 3.2). These varieties are the exclusive knowledge of a handful of high-ranked notables, all of whom are also members in the secret societies mentioned above. The fon is locally conceptualized as the only person in the whole of Bafut who knows all the special codes as he is a member of the royal family and of all the secret societies and has a key role in all the rituals.

All this information can be graphically represented as in figure 3.2, which can be considered as a first approximation of the Bafut community's own linguistic repertoire, representing the distribution of endoglossic varieties and "special codes" within the Bafut speaker community.¹¹

Being able to speak many of these codes is conditional on being a member of a specific subgroup of the Bafut community: this is the case for all

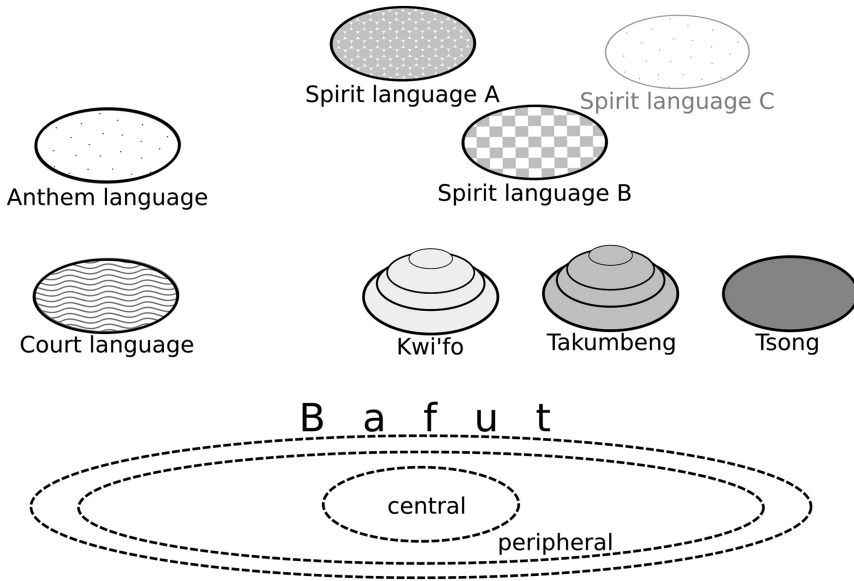


Figure 3.2 Simplified Graphical Representation of the Linguistic Repertoire of the Bafut Community. Bafut daily language (bottom) comprises two diatopic varieties; here boundaries are quite porous, as new Bafut speakers are welcome. By contrast, competence in all the other codes (court language, anthem language, spirit languages, and the codes of secret societies) is policed in much the same way as membership in the groups associated with them. Concentric subgroups within Kwi’fo and Takumbeng represent the internal hierarchies typical of these secret societies (see also section 2.2). *Source:* Figure created by the authors.

the codes of the various secret societies (and their concentric, hierarchical subgroupings) and those of the court. Only the distribution of competence in spirit languages may follow a different, more functionally oriented rationale, but this is probably due to our present lack of data about these languages. Be that as it may, the fon is believed to be the only Bafut person able to understand and communicate in all the codes present in the community’s traditional linguistic repertoire (see figure 3.3).

5. CODES TO INDEX MEMBERSHIP, NOT CALL UP STEREOTYPES

What we have reviewed so far is suggestive of two things: (a) the main motivation for the creation of all the codes populating the Bafut linguistic repertoire is the delimitation and policing of (sub)group boundaries via linguistic behavior; and (b) both the fon’s expected multilingual competence (figure 3.3) and the

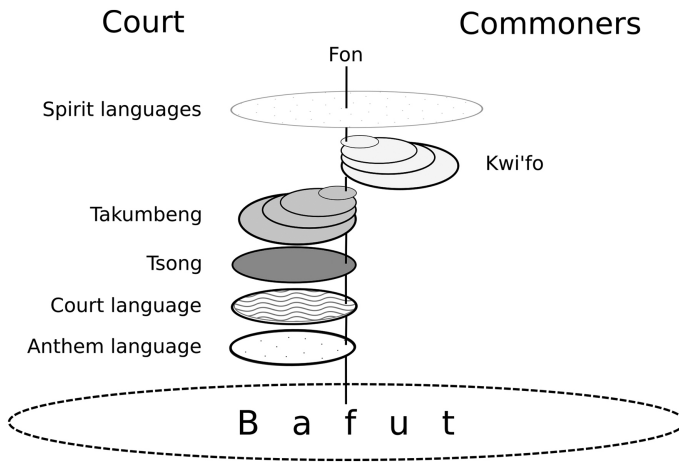


Figure 3.3 The Fon, Represented by the Vertical Line, Is the Only Person Who Knows All the Special Codes Found in the Bafut Linguistic Repertoire, Both Those Associated with the Court (i.e., the Royal Family) and Those Associated with the Commoners. *Source:* Figure created by the authors.

very nature of the so-called royal register stress his uniqueness within Bafut society. It is our view that the Bafut royal register has essentially the function of distinguishing a Bafut person from a non-Bafut, without any moral, behavioral, or otherwise essentialist bearings. Two facts seem to corroborate our view and will be reviewed here.

First, in a number of interviews, both the Fon of Bafut and other nobles made it clear that knowledge of the royal register is the basic requirement for one to be recognized as a Bafut person. In the words of the fon, “[e]very Bafut man¹² should know that the fon *tú* [speaks] and a Bafut man *yáá* . . . If you tell someone that he should begin to *tú*, then it is an insult . . . if you say the fon is *yáá*, then it is an insult to the fon” (Neba 2013, “Interview with Fon”; those parts that were in Bafut have been translated by the second author, who is a native speaker of the language).

Second, there are two basic features that put the so-called royal register in a nonprototypical (at best) category of registers: (a) the fon is reported to use the register himself when speaking in public; and (b) many of the words used in the royal register have a normal-usage meaning that is hardly connected, even from the locals’ point of view, with the semantic mediation of values such as politeness, respect, and deference for the fon.

The former is suggestive of an honorific register that is not focused on deference but, rather, on the difference and uniqueness of the fon as a referent and actor in the Bafut world; the fact of being unique is, per se, the mediation of respect and honor (see also figure 3.3).

The latter is more difficult to deal with in the little space available here. What we can point out is that, if there is one feature that seems to connect the composite array of semantic processes at work in the creation of the fon-related lexical set—especially the dysphemisms and arbitrary semantic reassignments—then it is a sort of upside-down view of the world, of a kind that is similar to what has at times been associated with mythical figures such as the trickster (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1967; Doty and Hynes 1993). This would open up the possibility of seeing a procedural, practical motivation rather than a semantic motivation as underlying the configuration of the fon-related lexical set: it could be seen as a sort of secret code that can be known only if one is initiated and guided by other knowledgeable members.

Another concurring aspect is that once the code becomes devoid of deference (point (a) above) and much of its lexical material does not consistently follow locally salient paths of semantic shift associated with respect or increased authority (point (b) above), then it remains unclear what kind of stereotypical features can leak from the register onto the speakers (cf. Agha 1998). The only feature that would seem to remain available for leakage onto speakers, though not a stereotype-related one, is their affiliation in the group that is known to be the only community using the code, that is, mature Bafut speakers.¹³

6. COMPARING BAFUT AND LOWER FUNGOM

What we have reviewed so far, one would contend, has little to do with multilingualism. For one thing, all the data we have presented are related to only one language, Bafut—with the possible exception of the royal family code and the language of the anthem (see section 4 above)—and this seems at odds with the most common understanding of multilingualism as the ability to communicate in *multiple* languages. Nonetheless, while in the field, we had the impression that the logic underpinning many of the phenomena we were documenting and that we have discussed above was very similar to that characterizing the language ideologies we have found in language ecologies like Lower Fungom that are linguistically much more diverse than Bafut. A succinct recapitulation is in order before we lay down our arguments.

6.1 Prominence of Relational rather than Categorical Identification

Lower Fungom is a small rural area of around 200 square kilometers, about five hours in a truck from Bafut, where we find at least eight Bantoid languages spoken in thirteen village-chiefdoms, most of which have a population

not exceeding a thousand people. Intermarriages across village communities are the norm and this is but one of the factors accounting for the very high degree of multilingual competence found in the area: existing studies screening about 2 percent of the local population report that speaking four local languages plus Cameroon Pidgin English is normal for a resident of Lower Fungom (Esene Agwara 2013; Di Carlo 2018; Di Carlo, Esene Agwara, and Ojong Diba, forthcoming). Lower Fungom's rather extreme form of linguistic density and political fragmentation, and at the same time the pervasiveness of individual multilingualism, is in stark contrast with what is found in Bafut, which is, as we have said, a highly centralized chiefdom inhabited by some 100,000 people, the majority of whom, we have reason to think, are fluent in Bafut, Cameroon Pidgin English, and, perhaps slightly less commonly, Cameroonian English.

The multilingualism documented in Lower Fungom can be defined as nondiglossic or, more simply, egalitarian (François 2012; see also section 1 above): people's multilingual repertoires are not organized hierarchically, that is, there are no prestigious nor otherwise "high" local languages in the language ideologies of the people of Lower Fungom. Roughly speaking, each language is associated with a village; therefore, speaking that language will have the main consequence of, on the one hand, communicating with other speakers of the same language and, on the other, representing oneself as a village community member. It is important to keep in mind that, due to the small size of these communities and to the fact that everyone knows nearly everyone else, one's membership in a village community equates *de facto* to one's position within it. This means that the use of one or the other local language does not call up social stereotypes: in fact, there are none associated with the different village communities. Rather, in such a context, language choice allows speakers to project relational rather than categorical identities. That is, by choosing a given local language, speakers can identify themselves not as members of a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute (such as degree of education, wealth, status, political orientation, or any other essential or behavioral quality) but, rather, as members of concrete social networks in which each one is known to occupy a certain position relative to the other members. The evidence we have summarized in this chapter is suggesting that very similar ideologies are at play even in contexts, such as Bafut, where both the sociopolitical situation is much more centralized and individual multilingualism is much less pronounced.

As we have seen, at a closer look what is commonly referred to as the Bafut "royal register" shows that it cannot be considered straightforwardly as an honorific register, or at least not as a prototypical one (see section 5). While we still need more research to properly analyze this phenomenon, what seems certain is that it allows speakers to signal that they are "full members" of the

Bafut community. The same holds true for use of all the special codes we have mentioned in the previous sections, as they allow their users to achieve the goal of being recognized as members of a concrete social network—like, for instance, the various “concentric circles” within a secret society—not as one of a group of persons sharing a common *abstract* feature. Thus, it is this tendency toward relational rather than categorical types of personal identification that Bafut’s and Lower Fungom’s language ideologies have in common.

6.2 How Can This Affect Our Research on African Multilingualisms?

Why could this understanding be an important advance in our understanding of African multilingualisms? Its importance is twofold.

First, it sheds light on the fact that language ecologies that are apparently very different in the degree of complexity of their inhabitants’ multilingual repertoires may—at least in the Cameroonian Grassfields—share fundamental ideological patterns. Among the traits that are especially visible, we find the following:

- The existence of locally salient social groups is sanctioned by the existence of group-specific linguistic (and paralinguistic) codes.
- Identity is primarily relational (see also section 6.1).
- Given these two points, there is a pervasive tendency to develop multicode competences, be they aimed at increasing one’s symbolic power (see the repertoire of the Fon of Bafut, figure 3.3), or at obtaining multiple affiliations (the norm in Lower Fungom [see Di Carlo 2018]), or both.

Second, looking at it from this perspective, one could legitimately say that the fact that people’s repertoires are populated by different languages, dialects, or non-fully fledged languages (such as the Bafut secret societies’ codes) is but an epiphenomenon of overall limited importance: paraphrasing Hymes (1972, 38), the underlying social functions that find expression in this behavior do not depend on the linguistic status of the codes involved. What we want to stress here is that the data we have presented, along with those reviewed in other works (such as Cobbinah et al. [2016] and Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba [2019]; and much of the literature on codeswitching such as, e.g., Heller [1988] and Auer [1999]), suggest that it is key to base our analyses on whatever linguistic codes are meaningful to speakers and not, as is still the rule for many linguists and sociolinguists, only on codes that have been defined as “properly different languages.” Adopting the latter perspective, it would simply become impossible to try to comprehend the complexities of Africa’s multilingualisms.

7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have presented data collected during field research in Bafut, an important chiefdom of the Cameroonian Grassfields. In particular, we have focused on what, following Hymes, we call the Bafut “linguistic repertoire,” that is, that portion of the Bafut language ecology that consists of endoglossic codes only. Among these, the code we have dealt with here most specifically is the so-called royal register (section 3), while we could only briefly review the scanty evidence available about the court language and the codes used by members of the most important secret societies of Bafut (section 4).

A number of features distinguish the “royal register” from what one would normally expect from an honorific register (following Agha [1998]), and we concluded (see section 5) that (a) it is not focused on deference but, rather, on the difference and uniqueness of the fon; (b) there are no stereotypical features leaking onto speakers who use this register (see Agha 1998, 163–8); and (c) the main outcome of using the register is representing oneself as a “full member” of the Bafut community.

In the final section, we took our argument one step further by comparing the Bafut linguistic repertoire with the language ecology of Lower Fungom. The two are markedly different from each other in that the latter is linguistically very diverse and most residents’ multilingual repertoires include no fewer than four local languages plus Cameroon Pidgin English. Nonetheless, in Bafut one can find a number of language ideological features that are the same as those underpinning the language ideologies of Lower Fungom. This suggests that (a) the two speech communities, although very different on the surface, share a cultural layer that has to do with an emphasis on competence in multiple codes, and (b) the ultimate nature of the codes involved—whether these are “real languages,” dialects, or non-fully fledged codes—has little to no relevance from the point of view of the local ideologies.

These points lead us to conclude that advances in the study of Africa’s multilingualisms must necessarily take these points into consideration in an attempt to overcome established, inertial scholarly assumptions around the ontology of what counts as a language. For a study of multilingual behaviors, what counts as a language depends essentially on the speakers’ ideologies. This is, we contend, a key point that can allow further advances in the study of African multilingualisms.

NOTES

1. How to distinguish between “urban” and “rural” environments in Africa is an issue that historians, anthropologists, and geographers have long debated (see, e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991; Mabogunje 1969; Winters 1977). For present purposes,

we understand rural environments as being characterized by a relative lack of demographic pressure, where most inhabitants are engaged in food production.

2. *Bafut* is a Mungaka word that became the official administrative appellation during the German colonial era (1895–1916). The Bafut people refer to themselves and their language as *bifi*.

3. The 2005 census gives 57,930 residents in the Bafut subdivision (BUCREP 2005), but the population has continued increasing dramatically over the past fifteen years.

4. In fact, the Fon of Bafut is only appointed in an official sense. In reality, he inherits the throne from his father when the latter “disappears” (see section 3.2 for euphemisms referring to the fon’s death). The selection of the new fon from among the princes is complex and complicated. The Fon of Bafut is called either Achirimbi or Abumbi; the present fon is Abumbi II.

5. In Bafut there are also female secret societies, and some of them exert quite some influence on the social life of the fendom. While we did not collect explicit information in this regard, the evidence at hand is suggestive that male rather than female secret societies are the major foci of political, executive, juridical, and spiritual power in the fendom (confirming evidence discussed in Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler [1962], Chilver and Kaberry [1962], and Kaberry [1962]).

6. The languages in this area are Beba, Butang, Buwi, Mbakong, Mantaa, Obang, and Otang. Obang has been described in Asoh’s unpublished PhD thesis (2016). Chenemo’s unpublished MA (2011) and PhD (forthcoming) theses are the only sources for the other languages of the area.

7. The field trip was carried out by the authors and two PhD students (Margaret Chenemo, University of Yaounde I, and Perpetua Ngengwe, Catholic University of Cameroon at Bamenda) in November 2015 and was possible thanks to generous funding from the KPAAM-CAM project (US National Science Foundation Award No. BCS-0853981). Our sincere gratitude goes to Margaret Chenemo, who was very helpful in making arrangements for meetings at the Bafut court and, being a Bafut speaker, also contributed some of the lexical items discussed in this chapter. We also want to thank Maa (Queen) Constance for her kind help and availability to work with us, and His Highness Fon Abumbi II for his warm and welcoming attitude toward us and our students. Finally, our thanks go to Dr. Lilian Lem Atanga (a Bafut native speaker and linguist) for kindly answering a number of questions we had. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this chapter.

8. It is interesting to note in passing that at least one species of firefly present in the area does not light up intermittently, unlike most Lampyridae known in the rest of the world, but rather emits a very long (perhaps continuous) light-green glow while flying.

9. After the chapter was finalized, we realized that this curious polysemy, where one and the same word refers to both “foot” and “hand,” is probably connected with the fact that the fon is also traditionally called *naa* “(four-legged) animal,” a term that is not mentioned in the chapter.

10. Traditionally sung in every Bafut gathering, the Bafut national anthem (Bafut *mban*) is now known and performed by very few people. It contains only a few words of modern Bafut, the rest being hardly understood. It has several preambles

and, according to the Fon of Bafut (Neba 2013, "Interview with Fon"), the fon chants excerpts of this song prior to every traditional rite he performs. It is believed that, when the anthem is sung, ancestral spirits are invoked and participate in the ceremony (Neba 2013, "Mban-Bafut Anthem").

11. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out that Dell Hymes's (1972, 39) notion of "linguistic repertoire" would squarely fit what we had previously called the "Bafut internal language ecology." By contrast, the current Bafut language habitat as a whole—that is, all the codes present in the individual repertoires of speakers living in Bafut—would include a number of other languages, beginning with English and Cameroon Pidgin English and also including the languages spoken in the surrounding areas, such as Mankon and the languages of the *mbu'nti* lowlands in the north.

12. As is clear in the rest of this sentence, "Bafut man" should be understood as "Bafut person" irrespective of gender.

13. We thank one of the reviewers for raising the issue about the sociolectal distribution of this metapragmatic competence. This is a difficult question to answer precisely: currently, use of the fon-related code seems to be decreasing, and only elderly people (both men and women) seem to be still using it. However, we were told that, traditionally, all Bafut people of a certain age (probably, all those who had children) were expected to use it correctly. In our interview with the fon, he pointed out that ignorance of the law is not an excuse.

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