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# The Language of Official Communiques in Cameroon: Interpretations and Attitudes

**Julius Angwah**

Department of English, Higher Teacher Training College, University of Yaounde I, Yaounde, Cameroon

**Email address:**

[angwahjulius@yahoo.com](mailto:angwahjulius@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract:** Information is designed to stimulate responses. It should, therefore, be well crafted in terms of codes of communication and contents. In Cameroon, however, though English and French are the two official languages, as stated in Article one Paragraph three of the Constitution of Cameroon, official communiques are sometimes published only in French and this seems to create a feeling of frustration among Cameroonians who do not understand the French language and consequently cannot efficiently react to communiques that may concern them. This study was, therefore, designed to find out the extent to which official communiques in Cameroon are published in English and French, as stated in the constitution of the country. The study also intended to find out the levels of comprehension of French-only communiques and attitudes towards inability to decode and react to them. In order to effectively carry out this study, 50 randomly selected communiques from five Government Ministries (10 from each Ministry), published between 2020 and 2023 were considered for analysis. One communique was later randomly selected and used to find out the extent to which the Anglophone informants could interpret French-only communiques. 360 informants (180 Anglophones and 180 Francophones) from the city of Yaounde were sampled as informants for the study. The results revealed that communiques from Cameroon Government Ministries are either published in French or in French and English and this poses a serious problem of comprehension and feeling of frustration among Anglophones who do not understand French.

**Keywords:** Official Communiques, English, French, Interpretations, Attitudes

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## 1. Introduction

Information is quite central to national growth and development, and cultural diversity places increasing demands on effective communication. De Vito rightly remarks that communication is only relevant when it is effectively understood by the target audience [10]. This cannot be over emphasized considering that poorly understood information cannot only be quite devastating and frustrating, but it can also lead to misleading responses. Notably, researchers and scholars [5] agree that culture precedes communication since effective communication, in this regard, anchors not only on language preference and linguistic correctness but, and perhaps even more significantly, on the sociolinguistic or cultural codes of the target listeners or readers.

Effective informational dispersal anchors largely on

language preference and frame. The choice and framing of language play an important role in effective comprehension principally for two reasons. First, the language preference should necessarily be the official language(s) of those who depend on such information in order to comfortably survive in their respective communities. While there may be multiple languages, as in the case of most contemporary communities, the official language(s) is certainly the most effective language preference for official communication. Second, information should not be ambiguous. That is, it should be interpreted in exactly the way it was designed to be interpreted. This is to ensure that it stimulates the right reactions from the target audience.

When information is not communicated in the language of the target audience, the emotive implications of the contents are hardly transmitted even when the language of communication maybe superficially intelligible. Aitchison explains that though the major function of language is to

convey information, language is multifunctional whether true or not, or is designed to be used to command, persuade or express feelings [1]. It is particularly useful for the promotion and maintenance of social contacts and order. This is in line with Fasold's conclusion that language is used to make a statement about one's own identity, about one's self in relation to the listener, and to define the situations of use [11]. However, this could pose a serious problem in multilingual contexts, like Cameroon, where some people do not totally identify with the official language preference.

In post-colonial Cameroon, the two official languages, English and French, are observably not equitably exploited in official documentation and communication. Though English is used in official settings, French tends to be given more prominence in administration, defense, the judiciary, education and other major areas in government [8]. This projects two major concerns. First, it creates a feeling of frustration and marginalisation among those who lack basic communicative competencies in the preferred official language. Second, it denies those who do not understand the preferred language access to vital information that may be relevant to them, and this violates one of their fundamental human rights. Article 19 and 21 (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights state that everyone has the rights to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers and also the right of equal access to public service in their country [20]. Limiting official communiques to French in a country that has two official languages (English and French), therefore, may not only be very frustrating but could also provoke anger and denunciations of state institutions. This study set out to examine the extent to which some government ministries in Cameroon, based on Law No 2019/019 of 24<sup>th</sup> December 2019 [16], promote the country's official languages through communiques.

## 2. Official Bilingualism in Cameroon

Bilingualism presents a linguistic situation where two languages are simultaneously in use. Bloomfield defines it as "native-like control of two languages" [7], but Weinreich adds that the notion of "native-like control" is not apparent since they might be varied competencies in mastery [19]. Over the years, scholars [14, 13, 6, 4] have considered this conception ambiguous. They argue that the notion of "native-like" competence does not enjoy a straight forward definition. Loveday, for example, argues that an absolute equal level of competence in two languages is not feasible [14]. He observes that a cross section of bilinguals tend to feel more confident in certain situations and periods with one language than with another. Matsumoto and Juang conclude that "many bilinguals are more proficient or fluent in one language or the other. ... differences between languages may actually reflect differences in degree of proficiency rather than linguistic relativity" [15]. However, the notion of bilingualism cannot be fairly limited to any specific conception or definition. Hoffman argues that "the most

salient feature of bilingualism is that it is a multi-faceted phenomenon [13]. Whether one is considering it at a societal or an individual level, one has to accept that there can be no clear cut-off points. He further argues that "as bilingualism defies delimitation, it is open to a variety of descriptions, interpretations and definitions" [13]. This in a way makes it quite difficult to challenge societal and individual understandings of bilingualism which seems to be one of the polemics of official bilingualism in Cameroon.

The controversial implications of bilingualism as an ideology and as a practice tend to be further complicated in Cameroon which makes it even harder to contextualize the issue within a comprehensible construct. Ayafor contends that "the glaring evidence for the complexity is the absence of an official government position on the subject in spite of ongoing action and declared efforts to encourage the use of French and English at the individual, institutional and government levels" [2]. Consequently, institutions and individuals conceptualise the idea within narrow margins and this undoubtedly has a significant impact on not only the practicality of bilingualism in the country but and perhaps more crucially on government commitment to effective bilingualism. While the official opinion is that English and French be used in all official settings in the country, Chumbow argues that from a linguistic perspective, it is short of efficient policy since it lacks the linguistic description of what should characterise the process [8]. In addition, Tadjadjeu maintains that it lacks a comprehensible framework for effective implementation [18]. These limitations and more have arguably influenced top-bottom and bottom-up actions which seem to be affecting national unity and integration.

Over the years, the government of Cameroon has been of the opinion that the creation of bilingual schools would adequately meet the need for a commendably bilingual country, but this breeds even more critical questions. Ayafor questions the extent to which bilingualism, within such narrow thinking, may be arbitrary and remain acceptable as a language policy and the point at which the current conceptions of bilingualism would become successful language policies [2]. Additionally, the creation of a National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (NCPBM) most recently seems to be a relatively minimal effort on this continuum and does not convincingly pledge a clearer future for Cameroon's language policies. Considering the current socio-political realities of the country which partly seem to divide people on linguistic and ethnic lines, the importance of a detailed and effective language policy that takes into consideration the identity and culture of the people becomes even more glaring. This explains why this study was designed to describe the language of official communiques from some Cameroon Government Ministries, the extent to which Anglophones can interpret French-only communiques as well as their attitudes towards them in order to show the limitation of official bilingualism in the country and to inspire a more practical and inclusive official bilingual policy.

### 3. Theoretical Landscape

This study leans on two critical approaches. Firstly, it anchors on the Top-Down reading model which lays emphasis on what the reader brings to the text. It is based on the idea that reading is concept-driven and proceeds from whole to part. According to Goodman, efficient reading involves the skill to identify and select the fewest and most productive cues in a piece of writing and readers do not strictly depend on the text but also on prior knowledge and experiences about language [12]. Consequently, reading requires certain basic skills which are developed in the early stages of language learning and since the majority of those who read official communiques are adult who have already grown above the Critical Period [22], difficulties in comprehension is not unexpected. Secondly, this study incorporates elements of Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analytic perspective [21]. Van Dijk posits that from text, state of mind and attitudes are easily discernable. Summarily, while Cameroonians may have difficulties to read due to the lack of basic knowledge of an official language, their feelings about the interpretations of texts may permit us to understand their frustrations.

### 4. Methodology

The data were constituted of 50 randomly selected communiques from five Government Ministries<sup>1</sup> published between 2020 and 2023. The five ministries were randomly selected from the thirty-seven ministries in the country. Cameroonians expect a lot, from these ministries, in terms of job opportunities, government regulations and information in general. 360 randomly selected Cameroonians (180 Anglophones and 180 Francophones) in the city of Yaounde were identified as informants for the study. However, only those who have had the GCE Advanced Levels or the Baccalaureate certificate<sup>2</sup> qualified for the study. This was to ensure that all the informants had a comprehensible basic reading ability in their first official languages (English for Anglophones and French for Francophones). The opinions of both groups were sampled on the language of official communiques in the country. Later, the 50 communiques were analysed in terms of whether they were published in both English and French. The 180 Anglophone informants<sup>3</sup> were presented a randomly selected French-only communique to interpret and their level of comprehension was noted. Their attitudes towards French-only communiques were also recorded. The results are quantitatively and qualitatively presented.

### 5. Informants' Opinions on the Language of Official Communiques

We were first of all concerned with public opinions on the language of official communiques in the country. The informants were, therefore, asked to state the language of official communiques in the country. Since Cameroon has a

policy of official bilingualism<sup>4</sup>, official communiques, especially from the government, are expected to be published in both English and French. However, the informants tended to have a different opinion as can be seen on the following table.

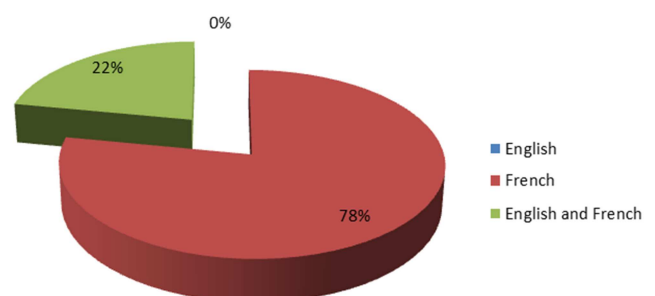
*Table 1. Opinions on the language of Official Communiques in Cameroon.*

Informants	Lang of official communiques	Freq.	%
Anglophones	English	0	0
	French	158	87.77
	French and English	22	12.23
Total		180	100
Francophones	English	0	0
	French	109	60.55
	French and English	71	39.45
Total		180	100%

The above table shows significant differences on the opinion scale of the language of official communiques in the country. The focus was principally on French and/or French and English. The results from both groups show that the majority of informants (74.16%) believe that official communiques in Cameroon are published only in French. While the majority (87.77%) Anglophone informants were of this opinion, 109 (60.55%) of Francophone informants also expressed a similar stance. Only 25.84% of the informants, majority of whom were Francophones – (76.34%), felt that official communiques were published in both English and French. None of the informants felt that official communiques are published strictly in English.

### 6. The Language of Official Communiques from Five Government Ministries

The above results inspired the need to explore 50 communiques in terms of the extent to which they were published in both official languages. The following figure presents the language of the communiques considered for this study.



*Figure 1. The Language of 50 official communiques from five Government Ministries.*

The above figure confirms the opinion scale to a certain extent. While none of the communiques was published strictly in English, the majority (39 (78%)) were published in French and only 11 (22%) published in English and French.

This statistics affirms French as the principal official language in the country even when Section 5 (2) of the 2019 Law on the promotion of official bilingualism in Cameroon [17] clearly demands for an equal distribution of both English and French in every official situation. The majority of communiques published in both English and French came from the Prime Ministry as can be seen on Table 2 that follows.

*Table 2. Distribution of Official Communiques in Five Ministries.*

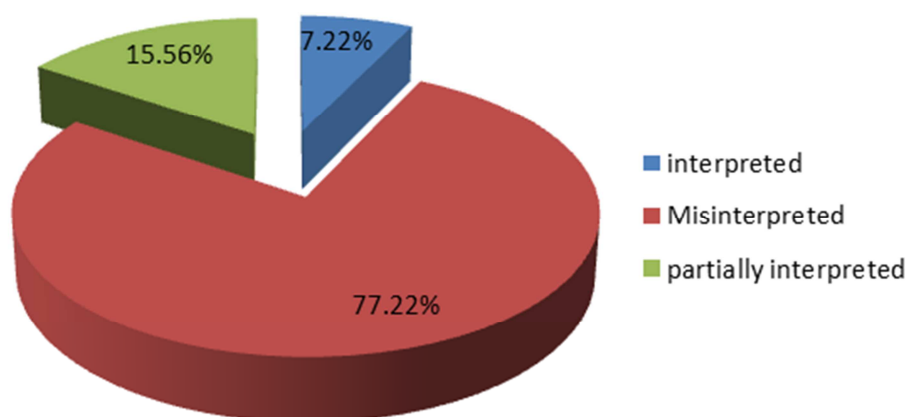
Ministries	English -only	French-only	English & French	Rel. T <sup>5</sup>
Prime Ministry	-	3 (30%)	7 (70%)	
Ministry of Public service	-	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	
Ministry of Transport	-	10 (100%)	- (0%)	10 (100%)
Ministry of Youth and Sport	-	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	
Ministry of Employment	-	8 (80%)	2 (20%)	
Grand Total	0	39 (78%)	11 (22%)	

The above table shows the probability of official communiques published in English and French. Essentially, these Ministries are quite important in the lives of

Cameroonians. Many depend on them for information that directly or indirectly affects their lives. It is, therefore, imperative for Cameroonians, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds, competencies and performances to be able to read and interpret communiques that could positively or negatively affect their lives.

## 7. Anglophones Interpretations of French-Only Communiques

Since the communiques were either in French or French and English, it was necessary to find out the extent to which the 180 Anglophone informants could interpret one of the French-only communiques. A French-only communique<sup>6</sup> from the Ministry of Transport on the major causes of accidents in the Far North Region of Cameroon was used in this situation. In the communique, the Minister cautioned drivers to be aware of wild winds and dusts that could blur their vision while driving. Such information is extremely important to drivers irrespective of their linguistic background. The informants were, therefore, asked to read the communique and say what it was all about. The following figure shows the extent to which they could interpret the communique.



*Figure 2. Anglophone Informants' interpretations of a sampled French-only Communique.*

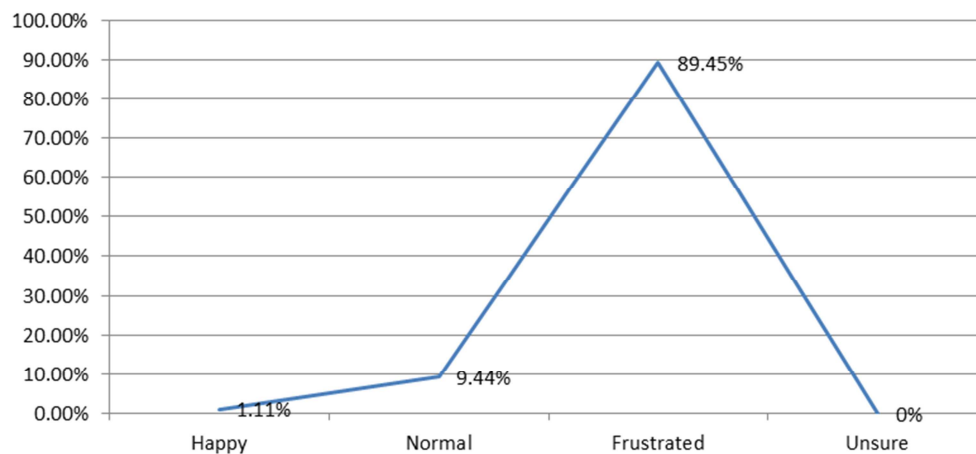
Of the 180 informants, only 13 (7.22%) could interpret the communique. 28 (15.56%) others partially interpreted it, ignoring certain details. 139 (77.22%) of the informants could not interpret the communique at all. While the informants' inability to interpret French-only communiques may suggest a conscious or an unconscious concealment of information from Cameroonians who lack basic competences in French, the statistics nonetheless indicates a possibility of misinterpretation or partial interpretation of vital information. Essentially, a partial or total misinterpretation of a communique would affect citizens' reactions and behaviours in the society.

## 8. Attitudes Towards French-Only Communiques

Having established the preference of French over

English in the publication of official communiques in the country and Anglophones' inability to interpret or react to vital information in French-only official communiques, it was necessary to find out their attitudes towards their inability to interpret French-only communiques. Attitude is an important sociolinguistic variable in communication because it reveals a lot about language use, preferences and identity. The informants were simply asked to say how they feel about their inability to interpret French-only communiques. The 13 informants who interpreted the communique correctly were also asked to state their opinions on some Anglophones' inability to interpret French-only communiques. The informants' responses were classified in three categories – happy, normal, and frustrated. The following Figure shows the distribution of the informants' attitudes towards French-only

communiques.



**Figure 3.** Anglophones' Attitudes towards French-only communiques.

The majority of Anglophone informants (161 (89.45%)) did not feel comfortable with French. They felt frustrated about their inabilities to interpret the French-only communiques. Some began by asking if there was an English version of the communiques because they thought the contents

could be relevant and they may want to react to it. The percentage of those who felt happy and normal was insignificant but it was quite interesting to understand the reasons for their choices. The following table presents the informants' justifications for their attitudes.

**Table 3.** Attitudes towards inabilities to interpret French-only Communiques.

Attitudes towards inabilities to interpret French-only Communiques	Freq.	%
Happy		
It helps me want to learn the language	1	0.55
It ameliorates my French	1	0.55
Normal		
Government is French and we are used to that	4	2.22
I have been in many situations that oblige me to interpret French-only docs	3	1.66
It is normal for every Cameroonian to speak both French and English	11	6.11
Frustrated		
All official communiques should be in French and English	46	25.55
Francophones are never forced to read and understand things in English. But Anglophones are expected to read and understand French	6	3.33
I might miss opportunities because they are advertised only in French and I don't understand French.	57	31.66
I hate reading anything in French	51	28.37
Total	180	100

The above table presents informants' justifications for their attitudes. The two informants who said they were happy that they were unable to interpret French-only communiques said that their inabilities would push them to learn the language. Those who felt normal argued that French is the preferred language in the daily activities of the government since the government is largely French-speaking. They have learned over time to cope with French and sometimes they do not interpret it but get others to assist them. The majority of them, however, felt that it is normal for every Cameroonian to speak both English and French. Those who felt frustrated that they were unable to read and interpret French-only communiques had many reasons for their positions. First, they argued that official communiques, in a bilingual country like Cameroon that has adopted English and French as its official languages, should be in both languages and not just in French. While they were unsure about bilingual communiques in strictly French-speaking communities, they agreed that every communiques from the Ministry should necessarily be in both languages in order to give equal

opportunities to English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians. A good number of those who felt frustrated (57 (31.66%)) said they have missed government opportunities simply because they could neither interpret nor understand French.

## 9. Discussion

An appraisal of the current sociolinguistic picture of Cameroon quickly reveals the nature of official bilingualism in the country. Though the constitution is quite specific on the question of official languages, implementation reveals a different reality. Article one paragraph three of the Constitution of Cameroon states that English and French are the two official languages in the country [16]. Section 2 (2) and Section 5 (1) Law No. 2019/019 of 24 December 2019 on the promotion of official languages in Cameroon advocate the use and equal value of both languages [17]. The expectation is that Cameroonians use both official languages every day and that in contexts where

one of the official languages is not understood a professional translation be done for purposes of peace and tranquility (Section 7 (f)) [17]. Even at that, from our findings, it is still quite difficult for those who do not understand French to have complete access to vital information. This could perhaps be partly based on the blithe conceptualisation of official bilingualism in the country which does not critically and adequately define the weight of official language policy and use.

The conceptualisation of bilingualism in Cameroon does not promise effective implementation in the field and could result in a feeling of frustration and even marginalisation. Official use of both languages seems guided by choice and not by obligation. This explains why a good number of communiques continue to be published only in French and sometimes in French and English. In fact, based on experiences, the informants agreed that French is the preferred language of administration and that Cameroonians must understand this language in order to function normally. For a country that celebrates English and French official bilingualism, both languages must have their places in the day to day communication of the society. While private institutions and individuals may be hesitant in the implementation of these laws, all institutions, especially government institutions, must be carefully guided by law to ensure that both languages are effectively in use.

Our analyses of 50 communiques from five government ministries revealed that most communiques are published in French, though at the Prime Ministry, 70% of communiques are published in English and French. This could be attributed to the fact that Prime Ministers have almost always been Anglophones who would most likely want to see communiques published in both official languages. That it is not the case with other Ministries could be suggestive of the lighthearted nature that characterises the reception and conceptualisation of the subject among some officials in government.

The study also revealed that the majority of Anglophone informants gallingly reacted to French-only communiques. This exasperation stems from the fact that such key Ministries, as the Ministries of Public Service, Health and Transport which are quite close to the population, may tend to deny Anglophones access to total and complete information. This clearly violates their fundamental right to information. What Francophones easily read and understand, Anglophones struggle to read and understand, and sometimes ridiculously understand them in exactly the way they should not be understood.

A cross section (77.22%) of Anglophone informants could not interpret French-only communiques. This should be quite disturbing considering that these are citizens who also have the right to information. Essentially, communiques may inform the public about an eminent catastrophe, as in the case of the French-only communique which we analysed. However, since not everyone has the ability to read or interpret French-only communiques, this might lead to misinformation or noncompliance. Perhaps the majority of Anglophones' inability to read French-only communiques could be one of the foundational causes of their frustration

and feeling of detachment from the current Cameroon system as a whole.

One could understand the frustration of 89.45% of the Anglophone informants who could not interpret the French-only communique. In fact, they were completely lost and wondered whether it contained information that could make or mar their lives. This leaves them in the dark and clearly denies their right to information. We cannot fairly think that they could depend on those who understand French to decode the messages inherent in French-only communiques because such services are not only paid for, but getting someone who can effectively translate such information could be quite difficult. It also suggests that Anglophones should always get someone to translate French-only communiques when Francophones do not have to. This does not encourage the transformative development of the country which depends largely on effective language policies for nation building, peace and social cohesion.

## 10. Conclusion

Language is an important part of social life. This is because it bears marks of identity and gives a sense of belonging to those who speak it. Since English and French were constitutionally declared official languages in Cameroon because of the sociolinguistic backgrounds of Anglophones and Francophones, for there to be any meaningful transformational development of the country, it is imperative for these languages to have their rightful places. In fact, French-only or English-only communiques should constitutionally be considered illegal. The feeling of identifying or promoting colonial languages instead of local languages cannot fairly apply in this situation because these languages have been adopted and adapted to suit the realities of Anglophone and Francophone population in Cameroon. Besides, Cameroon Pidgin English and Fulfulde are arguably the only languages that are used and understood by a significant number of Cameroonians. Practically encouraging the use of English and French in all domains of life in Cameroon could technically and partly augment Anglophones' confidence in the institutions of the country and perhaps set a meaningful foundation for its transformational development.

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1 Prime Ministry, Ministry of Public service, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Youth and Sport, and the Ministry of Employment

2 The GCE Advanced Levels and Baccalaureate certificates are final high school qualifications that usher students into the universities.

3 The interpretation of the communique was limited to the Anglophone informants for two reasons. First, the communiques were either published in French or in French and English which means comprehension could not pose any major problem to Francophone informants. Second, it permitted me to better analyse the difficulties Anglophone informants had in the interpretation of French-only communiques.

4 Cameroon is fundamentally a multilingual country, but has adopted an official language policy that entails the use of English and French for Government business. This decision is often referred to as the policy of official bilingualism in the country.

5 Relative Total

6 Communique No 006YC/M/N/SG/DMN/CMN/SPM