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# Cameroon English accent: Issues of standardization, attitudes and pedagogic concerns

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The twists and turns that the English language has undergone in Cameroon, as a result of the ecological, sociolinguistic and cultural realities of this postcolonial multilingual setting, make this New English, like other New Englishes, significantly different from older or traditional native Englishes, such as British and American Englishes. In spite of efforts made so far to describe Cameroon English at all linguistic levels as one of the World Englishes (Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Bobda, 1994; Sala, 2005; Kouega, 1991; Anchimbe, 2006; Ngefac, 2008), no concrete effort has been made to place its phonological features at different levels of the continuum to indicate which of the features should be included in the linguistic spectrum of what can be called standard and substandard Cameroon English. No effort has equally been made to elect the Cameroon English pronunciation model for educational practices. This study describes Cameroon English phonological features in terms of a continuum, proposes what should constitute standard Cameroon pronunciation, the model for educational practices, and investigates attitudes towards the different varieties that make up the continuum of Cameroon English pronunciation.

**Key words:** English, continuum, Cameroon.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars of “Afrikanistik” (African Studies), an emerging domain of research, have asserted in different ways that African languages are instrumental media through which the African identity, cosmic vision and culture can be expressed and a reliable means through which meaningful development and transformation of the African continent can take place. This is, of course, a very legitimate position, given that many African leaders who have been under the addiction of what Bokamba (2007) calls “ukolonia” have fallaciously assumed that African development must be engineered from the West, or at least rooted in Western constructs, for it to be meaningful. As a result of this neocolonial mentality, many things with African orientation, including African languages, have often been relegated to the background in favour of what is Western. It is for this reason that many African countries, including Cameroon, still rely on Western languages for official transactions and some of these countries sometimes insist on the standard varieties of the languages spoken in the respective Western countries. For instance, Standard British English is the variety officially recommended in the English language teaching industry in Cameroon. If the so-called European

languages of wider communication (Bokamba, 2007), such as English, French and Portuguese, have to perform official functions in former colonial settings, with or without African languages, the fundamental question that desperately begs an answer is as follows: Can such European languages of wider communication actually convey an African experience and express an African cosmology? In other words, can these colonial linguistic legacies express the ecological and sociocultural realities of the different postcolonial contexts where the languages are used? (see Kachru, 1985, 1986; Mufwene, 1997; Schneider, 2007).

Given that these colonial legacies, such as English, have actually undergone significant contextualisation by embracing elements of the local colour, as attested in previous studies, is it logical for the varieties considered as standard in the respective Western contexts to be the classroom target in African contexts? If the local variety of a colonial language should be promoted through pedagogic efforts in postcolonial African settings, what should determine this variety and what is the attitude of local users towards it?

The English language is one of the colonial legacies

that have survived the passage of time in former colonies and which carries the local flags of the respective postcolonial countries where the language has been adopted. Colonialism actually transported and transplanted this language in contexts referred to now as new nations or postcolonial communities and the language has under-gone many twists and turns according to the realities of such places. Today, the language that was at one point the preserve of a few Western countries has crossed many international and continental boundaries and has “grown local roots” (Schneider, 2007: 2) with new native speakers in different parts of the world. If there are new native speakers of English, it implies that the notions of “native speaker” and “Standard English” must be redefined in order to accommodate the fact that the language has been “adopted and appropriated” (Schneider, 2007: 1) according to the contextual realities of the various new nations where it is spoken. Today, one can conveniently say the English language that has been adopted and adapted in different postcolonial settings, including Cameroon, carries the ecology, the sociolinguistics and the culture of those places and can therefore unquestionably express the cultural identity of the various places where it is spoken. In the literature, one can already identify such catchphrases as “Ghanaian Standard English”, “Nigerian Standard English”, “Indian Standard English” and so on. In spite of the fact that a few research works (Mbangwana, 1987) have already mentioned the expression “Cameroon Standard English”, it is not yet known what should be included in, and excluded from, what can be called Cameroon Standard English. At the level of phonology, the concern of this investigation, the target in the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in Cameroon continues to be Standard British English (SBE), but the standardisation and promotion of Cameroon English pronunciation is of very little interest to policy makers and language planners. The belief that what is good for Africa should necessarily have a Western orientation is certainly the underlying motivation behind the election and promotion of SBE accent in Cameroon.

But the varieties of English accent on the tongue of Cameroonian speakers of English carry aspects of the local realities and features of British English are seldom heard, as reported in previous studies on Cameroon English pronunciation (see Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Bobda, 1994; Kouega, 1991; Ngefacs, 2008a, b). The implication of this situation is that, instead of targeting SBE which is psychologically, physically and practically far remote from many Cameroonian speakers of English, one of the varieties of English pronunciation that characterise the tongue of Cameroonian speakers of English needs to be selected, standardised, promoted and used to project the Cameroonian experience and identity. The purpose of this study is therefore to rely on the attitudes of Cameroonians towards the different varieties of English pronunciation attested in Cameroon

and on the recurrence of the features to elect the variety that can be standardised and promoted through pedagogic efforts for national identification.

## THE NEW ENGLISHES AND THEIR STATUS IN POSTCOLONIAL SETTINGS

Colonialism constituted the main route through which the English language was transported and transplanted in postcolonial settings. The fact that the language has transcended many international and continental frontiers to emerge as the native language of many countries around the world has been the concern of many scholars. The different models (Kachru's (1985) three concentric model, McArthur's (1998) circle with the spokes and Edgar Schneider's (2007) dynamic model) postulated by scholars around the world to describe and capture this unprecedented expansion of the language to the different corners of the planet earth are indicative of the extent to which this phenomenon is a serious object of current linguistic inquiry. Today, unlike what existed in the yesteryears, “English” has become a plural noun and we can find in the literature expressions such as “World Englishes”, “New Englishes”, “Global English”, “English as an International Language”, “Postcolonial Englishes” (Kachru, 1986; Schmied, 1991; Bobda, 1994; Graddol, 1997; Todd, 1999; Modiano, 1999; Mufwene, 1997; Crystal, 1997; Schneider 2007).

In the various postcolonial settings where the language is transplanted, it has developed through an itinerary that is determined by the ecological and sociocultural realities of the places and has acquired an identity unique to such places (Kachru, 1986; Mufwene, 1997; Schneider 2007). The process of adapting to the contextual realities of the various places where the language has been adopted is referred to in the literature as nativisation, acculturation, indigenisation and contextualisation (Kachru, 1986; Mufwene, 1994, 1997; Todd, 1999; Schneider, 2007; Ngefacs, 2008).

In the case of what obtains on the African continent, it can also be referred to as Africanisation, and Cameroonisation in the case of Cameroon. Through nativisation, the language has acquired, naturally, one should emphasise, phonological, syntactic, and lexico-morphological peculiarities that are significantly different from those of English in traditional native English countries. The following excerpt from Schneider (2007) captures the extent to which the language has penetrated the different corners of the planet earth and acquired diverse forms, statuses and functions according to the contextual realities of the different postcolonial contexts in which it has been transplanted:

“Its pull and attractiveness are immense. From Barbados to Australia, from Kenya to Hong Kong a traveler will today get along with English, but he or she will also realize that the Englishes encountered are quite

different from each other – pronounced with varying accents, employing local words opaque to an outsider, and even, on closer inspection, constructing sentences with certain words in slightly different ways. What is perhaps even more interesting is that our virtual traveler will encounter native speakers of English not only in Canada and New Zealand where this would be expected, but also in Nigeria and Singapore, and in many other parts of the world in which English is not an ancestral language” (Schneider, 2007: 2).

In the above excerpt, the author acknowledges the fact that English now has native speakers outside traditional native English countries. The fact that English now has new native speakers implies that the issue of norm in the language should be context-specific and should not be the responsibility of a few English-speaking countries to determine acceptable features for world-wide consumption of the language. In this light, what is acceptable in, say, Ghana or Cameroon should not necessarily be what obtains in Britain or the United States. Kachru (1986, 1992) has actually championed an academic campaign for the use of context-specific approaches in the study of the English language which has acquired the status of a world language.

He advocates “a shift from frameworks and theories which are essentially appropriate only to monolingual countries” (Kachru, 1992: 11) and adds that “it is indeed essential to recognise that World Englishes represent certain linguistic, cultural and pragmatic realities and pluralism, and that pluralism is now an integral part of World Englishes and literatures written in Englishes” (Kachru, 1992). In his opinion, “the pluralism of English must be reflected in the approaches, both theoretical and applied, we adopt for understanding this unprecedented linguistic phenomenon” (Kachru, 1992:2).

## THE NEED FOR CAMEROON STANDARD ENGLISH

In spite of the fact that the English language has undergone significant indigenisation in different parts of the world, including Cameroon, the phonological focus in the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in Cameroon continues to be Standard British English (SBE), even though this goal is hardly ever attained. In a heavily multilingual context such as Cameroon that has even been described as the Tower of Babel (Mforteh, 2006) or a melting pot of languages, where there are numerous languages with different statuses and functions, can the promotion of Standard British English ever yield the expected fruits?

It should be noted that, besides French and English serving as the official languages of the country, ‘Kamtok’ (or Cameroon Pidgin English) playing the role of a major lingua franca that transcends all regional, educational, linguistic and social boundaries, ‘Camfranglais’ that is serving the communicative needs of urban youths in

Francophone towns, ‘Mbokotok’ that has asserted itself as the language of rustics, there exist approximately 285 indigenous languages within the territory of Cameroon. In such a complex linguistic landscape where numerous languages and their different varieties are spoken in the same context, the speakers’ ability to speak a traditional native English variety, such as British English, is likely to be significantly influenced by their multilingualism. In such a situation, any insistence on SBE phonological norms may not yield the expected fruits and a locally determined pronunciation pattern is certainly what the speakers need.

Previous studies on Cameroon English pronunciation (CEP) (Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Kouega, 1991; Bobda, 1994; Ngefac, 2008) have demonstrated that the English spoken in Cameroon, irrespective of level of education, is characterised at the phonological level, by a heavy simplification of consonant clusters, devoicing of final voiced consonants, reduction of long sounds to short ones, the monophthongisation of diphthongs and different stress and intonation patterns. These studies have equally unequivocally established that features of the so-called SBE which teachers labour to promote, even when they do not master it, are systematically lacking in the speech of the most educated speakers of English in Cameroon. The speech of these speakers is, predictably and logically, patterned according to the sociocultural and pragmatic realities of Cameroon. This implies that SBE targeted in the Cameroonian classroom will hardly ever penetrate the speakers’ sociocultural and ecological backgrounds to emerge as an easily accessible accent of English for the speakers. Cameroonians therefore need a variety that carries the Cameroonian flag, and this variety should necessarily be rooted in their contextual realities.

The passionate advocacy of a contextually-determined variety of English pronunciation for Cameroon does not mean that anything that deviates from traditional native English varieties should be projected as Cameroon Standard English. The varieties of English pronunciation attested in Cameroon, besides traces of traditional native English features, constitute a spectrum of accents determined by such sociolinguistic factors as education, tribe, gender, age and so on. These accents are made up of features that range from basilectal through mesolectal to hypercorrect forms. One of these varieties needs to be elected to provide a classroom teacher what to project as Cameroon Standard English pronunciation, the variety that should be capable of expressing the Cameroonian identity and sociocultural landscape. It should be reiterated here that language is the carrier of culture and identity, and the English language in Cameroon needs to project these fundamental aspects.

Many criteria are necessary for a language or a variety of a language to be considered for standardisation (Kachru, 1986; Bobda, 1994). Some of these criteria include ample documentation of the language or the

variety of the language in question, the attitude of the speakers of the language or the variety and the existence of language academies to regulate usage in the language. In this study, I will rely on the attitudes towards the different varieties of English pronunciation in Cameroon and the recurrence of the features in the speech of Cameroonian speakers of English to suggest which variety of CEP can be standardised for national identification and for pedagogic purposes. It should be noted that I consider the degree of recurrence of the features in the speech of Cameroonians and the attitudes of Cameroonians towards their indigenised English very crucial, because features that need to be standardised should be those that are uttered by a majority of Cameroonian speakers, not those that are heard in the speech of those who have been privileged with a trip abroad. And speakers need to have an attitude of acceptance towards a language or a variety of a language before it can be standardised, given that the consumption of the standardised language or variety is the responsibility of these speakers.

#### METHODOLOGY

Many methodological strategies were used to carry out this investigation. First, 100 English-speaking Cameroonian informants were asked to read out a number of words containing different English phonological variables and a tape recorder was used to record their pronunciation. The variables usually result in varying degrees in tribal uneducated features, mainstream forms, hypercorrect forms and traditional native English (SBE and American English) features. This was an attempt to evaluate the recurrence of the different lects in the speech of the informants. The speakers' approximation of traditional English features was wittingly excluded from the scope of the analysis, given that such features do not constitute potential candidates to be included in the spectrum of what can be called Cameroon Standard English.

Second, I then read out the same words to the informants with different pronunciation patterns and asked them through a questionnaire to express their attitudes towards each of the categories of features. They were expected to indicate whether the pronunciations they heard should be encouraged or discouraged in Cameroon. Third, the words were transcribed and the frequency of each of the three categories of pronunciation earmarked was calculated. In some cases, the stress patterns of the words were established and the frequency of each of them was also determined. It should be noted here that World List Style (WLS) used in many sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Labov, 1966) was preferred because it has often revealed significant phonological data. Fourth, the frequency of each of the attitudes expressed was established. In the overall analysis, the degree to which the features were recurrent in the speech of the informants and the different attitudes towards each of the categories of features were used to determine which variety of CEP should be standardised and promoted for national identification.

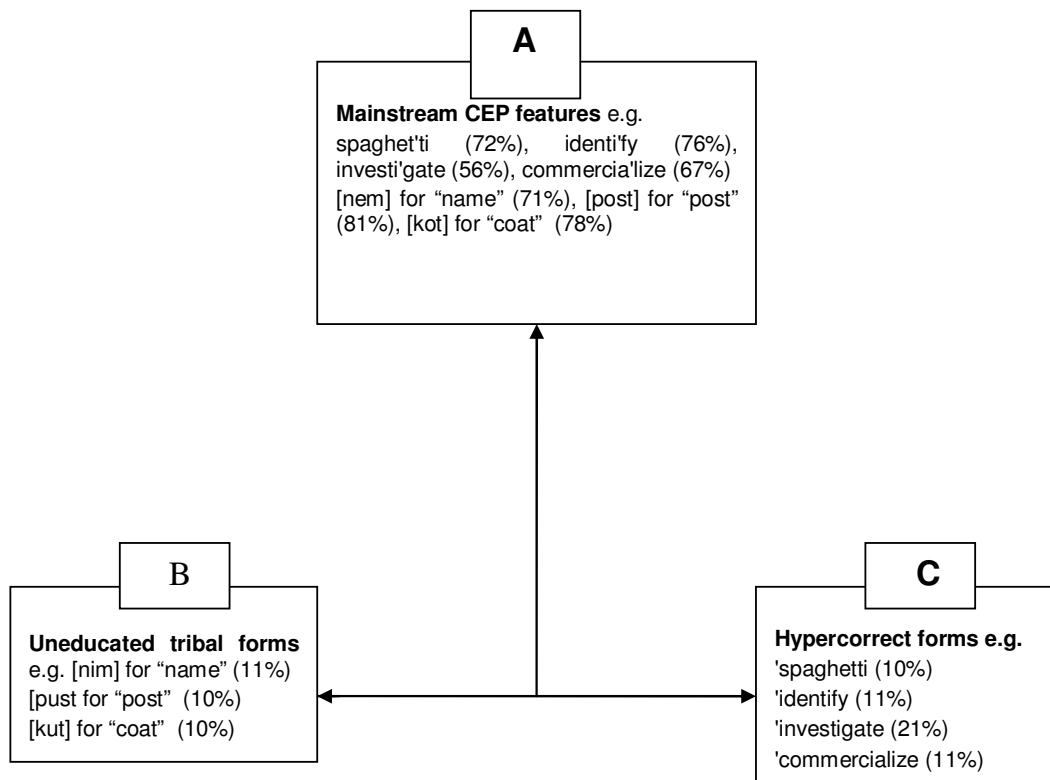
#### FEATURES OF CAMEROON ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION WITHIN A CONTINUUM AND THEIR FREQUENCIES

Typical features of CEP can be placed within a continuum,

ranging from uneducated tribal forms through mainstream features to hypercorrect forms. As earlier hinted, British English features are not considered in this investigation because its traces are heard only in the speech of very few speakers and also because they do not constitute features of indigenised Cameroon English. The following schema presents features that make up the continuum of CEP and their frequencies in the speech of the 100 informants who constituted the sample for this investigation.

As presented in (B) in Figure 1, only a handful of the informants uttered uneducated tribal features. Such features are mostly heard in the speech of speakers of English with minimal formal education from 'Nso', a tribe in the North West region of Cameroon. These features lack a national dimension and cannot therefore represent what can be called Standard Cameroon English pronunciation. In addition to tribal uneducated pronunciation features, Figure 1 also presents, at the bottom, hypercorrect forms that characterised the speech of some of the informants. These features are produced mostly by speakers with a high level of education who struggle in vain to utter SBE forms. In their attempt to pronounce as in SBE, they end up producing features that are neither those of British English nor those of Cameroon English. To a non-specialist of English phonology, such speakers are approximating SBE, given that the features are different from those of mainstream Cameroon English and tend to have a backward stress pattern, as what generally obtains in SBE. But the features are significantly different from those of SBE because the "backwardness" of the stress pattern is one syllable exaggerated. Mainstream CEP features or what can also be referred to as mesolectal features presented in (A) in Figure 1 constitute the third category. These features dominated the speech of the informants, as illustrated in Figure 1. Generally, Cameroonian speakers of English produce mesolectal phonological features, and in most cases, irrespective of their level of education, social status, age and gender. In other words, these features are dominant in the speech of a majority of Cameroon English speakers.

If the frequency of the different lects that make up CEP is considered to determine which of them need to be standardized, the verdict logically favours mainstream or mesolectal features for the following reasons: First, these features are produced by a majority of English speakers in Cameroon, as A in Figure 1 illustrates. Second, speakers require formal education to be able to produce the features. Without significant formal education speakers will produce only basilectal tribal features, displayed in (B) in Figure 1. Third, speakers need to be under the influence of the sociocultural and multilingual realities of Cameroon to be able to produce the features. Speakers who are under the addiction of what Bokamba (2007: 41) refers to as "ukolonia" will rather produce the type of features exemplified in (C) in Figure 1, because of



**Figure 1.** Features of Cameroon English pronunciation.

the zeal to utter traditional native English pronunciation features, which unfortunately remain an unattainable dream to most, if not all, speakers of English in Cameroon.

Features presented in (B) cannot be included in the pool of Cameroon English phonological features that need to be standardised. The first reason is that such features are produced by a minority of Cameroon English speakers. The second reason is the fact that they do not have a national dimension, given that only speakers from certain tribes utter them.

The fact that speakers who utter such features are usually not very literate in formal education constitutes the third reason. Speakers require significant formal education to be able to produce features that should be standardised.

Features presented in (C) in Figure 1 are not equally good candidates for those that can be included in the linguistic spectrum of Cameroon Standard English, given that they are not conditioned by the contextual realities of Cameroon. Such features are heard mostly in the speech of those who want to live out of their contextual realities and imitate an accent that is rooted in the contextual realities of a given Western setting. Such hypercorrect features neither reflect the Cameroonian landscape nor that of any Western context. Considering that hypercorrect features are produced only by a minority of

Cameroon English speakers and given the fact that they are produced out of context, they cannot therefore, serve as good candidates for Cameroon Standard English.

### **ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DIFFERENT CAMEROON ENGLISH PHONOLOGICAL LECTS**

In addition to relying on the frequency of the different lects that make up CEP to determine which features can be standardized, the attitude of the informants towards the different lects was also considered. The lects that need to be standardised should necessarily be those most preferred by Cameroon English speakers. The informants were asked to state their opinion on whether each of the categories of phonological lects (basilectal features, mainstream features and hypercorrect features) attested in indigenised Cameroon English should be encouraged or discouraged.

### **BASILECTAL TRIBAL FEATURES**

As concerns such pronunciation as [nim] for "name", [pust] for "post" and [kut] for "coat", the following results show the way these pronunciation features are perceived by Cameroonian speakers of English:

- (a) These pronunciation features should be seriously encouraged ..... 0%
- (b) These pronunciation features should be seriously discouraged ..... 67%
- (c) These pronunciation features should be encouraged ..... 0%
- (d) These pronunciation features should be discouraged ..... 15%
- (e) These pronunciation features should neither be encouraged nor discouraged ..... 18%

The above data show that most speakers of English in Cameroon (67%) are of the opinion that basilectal tribal English pronunciation features should be seriously discouraged and 15% think that they should simply be discouraged. The fact that no informant was of the opinion that such features should be encouraged implies that they would not want learners to be exposed to them and will logically discourage their inclusion in the spectrum of what can eventually be called Standard Cameroon English.

### Mesolectal features

The informants were equally asked to express their attitudes towards the following selected English pronunciation features attested in Cameroon:

1. [nem] for "name", [post] for "post" and [kot] for "coat" (focus on segments)
2. "spaghet'ti", "identi'fy", "investi'gate" and "commercia'lize" (focus on word stress)

The informants indicated the following opinions about the features:

- a) These pronunciation features should be seriously encouraged ..... 55%
- b) These pronunciation features should be seriously discouraged ..... 0%
- c) These pronunciation features should be encouraged ..... 33%
- d) These pronunciation features should be discouraged ..... 0%
- e) These pronunciation features should neither be encouraged nor discouraged ..... 12%

Unlike the case of basilectal features presented earlier, where most of the informants indicated that such features should be seriously discouraged, a majority of the informants were of the opinion that mesolectal features, which dominate the speech of most Cameroon English speakers, should be seriously encouraged (55%) or simply encouraged (33%).

No informant equally said the features should be discouraged. This is an indication that they perceive the features as part and parcel of their speech repertoire,

which can only be encouraged.

### Hypercorrect features

The informants indicated different opinions about the following features involving word stress: "spaghetti", "identify", "investigate" and "commercialize", "event". These opinions are as follows:

- (a) These pronunciation features should be seriously encouraged ..... 32%
- (b) These pronunciation features should be seriously discouraged ..... 10%
- (c) These pronunciation features should be encouraged ..... 9%
- (d) These pronunciation features should be discouraged ..... 17%
- (e) These pronunciation features should neither be encouraged nor discouraged ..... 32%

The attitudes of the informants towards hypercorrect features are different from the ones they expressed towards basilectal and mainstream Cameroon forms. Interestingly, up to 32% of them are of the opinion that such features should be seriously encouraged. The informants who think that such features should be seriously encouraged are certainly those who perceive the features as those of SBE. Such informants would, predictably, express the same attitudes towards features of traditional native English, such as British or American English. The informants who said such features should be seriously discouraged (10%) or simply discouraged (17%) probably recognized the features as hypercorrect features. If we rely on the number of Cameroon English speakers who approve this category of features, then it is obvious that such hypercorrect features are not competitive candidates for lects that can be selected for standardization, given that only 32% of the informants think that they should be seriously encouraged.

### CONCLUSION: THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals that Cameroon English speakers display many phonological features that are rooted in the sociocultural realities of Cameroon. These pronunciation features range from basilectal tribal forms through mainstream features to hypercorrect lects. Each of these categories of features occurs at varying degree in the speech of the speakers and are perceived differently by them. The frequency of the features in the speech of the informants and the speakers' attitudes towards the different categories of features were used to determine which features should be standardized and promoted through pedagogic efforts. Mesolectal features were found to be most dominant in the speech of the informants

and they were equally the features most recommended by them.

The sociolinguistic and pedagogic implications are multidimensional. First, the dominance of mesolectal features in the speech of the informants, irrespective of their social background, implies that such features are the unavoidable companion of Cameroon English speakers. If Cameroonians are inseparable from such features, the most logical thing to do is to give the features an official recognition by standardizing and promoting them through pedagogic efforts for national identification. The continuous insistence on SBE or on any traditional native English when the speakers' tongues are dominated by locally determined features implies that ELT goals in Cameroon are set out of the context of Cameroon and would hardly ever be attained, as revealed in previous studies that have evaluated the speakers' knowledge of SBE (Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Bobda, 1994; Ngefacs, 2008). Phonological features that can easily be promoted in the ELT industry in Cameroon through pedagogic efforts are those rooted in the sociocultural and pragmatic realities of the speakers, such as mainstream features captured in (A) in Figure 1.

Second, the existence of hypercorrect features in the speech of some of the informants suggests that, they believe it is more prestigious to utter pronunciation features that are different from mainstream Cameroon English forms. But the attempt to produce "different features" could only lead them to utter forms that are neither those of Cameroon English nor those of any traditional native English. Speakers who produce such forms are certainly under the addiction of what Bokamba (2007: 41) calls "ukolonia", given that their attempt to produce such forms is influenced by the belief that local features are inferior and those that sound foreign are superior. These types of phonological features cannot be included in the spectrum of features to be standardized and cannot equally be promoted in the Cameroonian classroom, given that they do not carry the Cameroonian flag.

Third, although basilectal tribal forms are rooted in the sociocultural realities of Cameroon, they cannot be included in the pool of features for Cameroon Standard English pronunciation, because of three main reasons. First, such features lack prestige in the context of Cameroon because speakers do not require formal education to be able to utter them. Cameroon English pronunciation features that need to be standardized should be those that speakers need to work hard through formal schooling to be able to utter. Second, the features are not heard in the speech of a majority of Cameroon English speakers. Features to be included in the pool of standard Cameroon English pronunciation should necessarily be frequent in the speech of a majority of speakers with significant formal education. Third, a majority of speakers do not have a positive attitude towards these features; most of them are of the opinion that such features should be discouraged as much as possible.

Cameroon English speakers should necessarily have a positive attitude towards the variety of English that needs to be standardized for national identification, given that they are the immediate consumers of the variety to be standardized.

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