



# Substrate Grammar, Social Meaning, and Speaker Agency in Cameroon Anglophone Communities

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the grammatical integration of substrate language structures into Cameroon English and explores the social meanings these features convey in Anglophone communities. Drawing on sociopragmatic and grammatical frameworks, we analyse how morphosyntactic patterns from indigenous Cameroonian languages have been systematically incorporated into local English varieties and how speakers deploy these features to index social identities, relationships, and contexts. Through qualitative analysis of naturalistic speech data collected from 45 participants across Anglophone communities in the Northwest, and Southwest Regions and an Anglophone-dense resident population in the Littoral, we identify four key grammatical domains: verb serialisation, aspectual marking, nominal plurality strategies, and prepositional usage, that systematically distinguish Cameroon English from standard metropolitan varieties. Our findings reveal that these grammatical choices carry significant social meaning, functioning as markers of authenticity, regional identity, and in-group solidarity, and that speakers strategically modulate their use to accomplish pragmatic goals across shifting interactional contexts. The study contributes to World's English scholarship by extending indexicality theory to grammatical variation in postcolonial multilingual settings and by demonstrating how structural adaptation and social practice are inseparably linked.*

### **Résumé**

*Cette étude examine l'intégration grammaticale des structures issues des langues substrats dans l'anglais camerounais et explore les significations sociales que véhiculent ces traits dans les communautés anglophones. En mobilisant des cadres sociopragmatiques et grammaticaux, nous analysons comment des schémas morphosyntaxiques provenant des langues camerounaises autochtones ont été systématiquement incorporés aux variétés locales d'anglais et comment les locuteurs exploitent ces traits pour indexer des identités sociales, des relations et des contextes d'interaction. À partir d'une analyse qualitative de données de parole naturelle recueillies auprès de 45 participants issus de communautés anglophones des régions du Nord-Ouest et du Sud-Ouest, ainsi que d'une population à forte présence anglophone résidant dans le Littoral, nous identifions quatre domaines grammaticaux clés : la sérialisation verbale, le marquage aspectuel, les stratégies de pluralisation nominale et l'usage des prépositions, qui distinguent systématiquement l'anglais camerounais des variétés métropolitaines standard. Nos résultats montrent que ces choix grammaticaux portent une forte charge de sens social, fonctionnant comme des marqueurs d'authenticité, d'identité régionale et de solidarité intra-groupe, et que les locuteurs en modulent stratégiquement l'usage afin d'atteindre des objectifs pragmatiques dans des contextes interactionnels changeants. Cette étude contribue aux travaux sur les World Englishes en étendant la théorie de l'indexicalité à la variation grammaticale dans des contextes postcoloniaux multilingues et en démontrant que l'adaptation structurelle et la pratique sociale sont indissociablement liées.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cameroon presents a compelling case study in multilingual complexity, where over 280 indigenous languages coexist with French and English as official languages inherited from colonial administration (Ayafor & Sala, 2020). In the Anglophone regions, principally the Northwest and Southwest, English functions not merely as an administrative code but as a medium of education, commerce, and inter-ethnic communication. The English spoken in these communities has, however, evolved distinctively, shaped by prolonged contact with local languages and with Cameroon Pidgin English, a fully developed

contact language spoken by approximately four million people (Ayafor & Sala, 2020).

The grammatical structures characterising Cameroon English are not random deviations from standard varieties but systematic patterns reflecting the region's linguistic ecology. Contemporary contact linguistics describes these as the product of substrate influence, whereby features from speakers' first languages become integrated into their second language usage over time (Winford, 2020). The concept has shifted considerably from its earlier, interference-based framing. Rather than treating substrate features as evidence of incomplete acquisition, current scholarship recognises them as systematic adaptations shaped by

communicative needs and the particular ecological conditions under which language contact occurs (Mufwene, 2021).

As Anchimbe and Janney (2021) argue in their comprehensive analysis of postcolonial pragmatics, new varieties of English in postcolonial contexts are legitimate linguistic systems in their own right, shaped by the communicative needs and social realities of their speakers. These varieties develop systematic grammars that differ from metropolitan standards not through inadequacy but because they serve distinct communicative functions in distinct social contexts. Simo Bobda's (2021) documentation of Cameroon English similarly reveals principled, rule-governed patterns at the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels.

What remains underexplored in existing scholarship is the intersection between grammatical structure and social meaning in Cameroon's Anglophone communities. Whilst previous studies have documented distinctive features of Cameroon English, few have systematically examined how grammatical choices function as social resources in everyday interaction and how they index relationships, signal identity, and accomplish pragmatic work as speakers move across social situations. This study addresses that gap by combining structural grammatical analysis with sociopragmatic investigation of four key morphosyntactic domains: verb serialisation, aspectual marking, nominal plurality, and prepositional usage. Together, these analyses reveal how grammar functions not merely as abstract structure but as a dynamic medium for social action.

### Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of scholarship converge to frame the analysis. The World Englishes tradition provides the broader orientation towards postcolonial variety legitimacy; contact linguistics supplies the conceptual tools for understanding structural integration; and theories of social meaning and indexicality allow us to connect grammatical form to social action.

### World English and Postcolonial Varieties

The scholarly landscape for understanding English in postcolonial contexts has evolved considerably over recent decades. Kachru's (1992) concentric circles model provides a foundational framework, situating Cameroon English as an Outer Circle variety that has developed distinctive features across phonological, lexical, and grammatical domains. Contemporary scholarship nonetheless emphasises that such varieties are not deficient approximations of metropolitan standards but legitimate linguistic systems adapted to local contexts and communicative needs (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2021). Kachru, Y. (2019) further argues that the persistence of these varieties in the face of continued metropolitan norms reflects active speaker investment rather than simple

institutional inertia, a point directly relevant to our findings on social meaning.

Anchimbe and Janney (2021) demonstrate comprehensively that Cameroon English exhibits systematic patterns across multiple linguistic levels, worthy of description and analysis in their own right. Their work shows how pragmatic patterns in Cameroon English reflect cultural values and communicative styles that are genuinely distinct from metropolitan varieties. Similarly, Simo Bobda's (2021) analysis documents the systematic nature of phonological, grammatical, and lexical features, providing evidence that Cameroon English operates according to its own internal norms. Mesthrie and Bhatt (2021) place these findings within the broader trajectory of World Englishes research, which has increasingly foregrounded the creative rather than imitative character of postcolonial varieties.

### Substrate Influence in Language Contact

Contemporary language contact theory has moved beyond interference-based models to frame substrate influence as a process of selective adaptation. Winford's (2020) analysis demonstrates that features from substrate languages become integrated into contact varieties when they align with existing patterns in the target language and serve important communicative functions, shifting analytical attention from what speakers cannot do to what they creatively accomplish. Mufwene's (2021) ecological approach offers a particularly productive supplement: in this view, the features that emerge and become conventionalised in contact varieties are precisely those proving functionally useful in the specific demographic, social, and communicative conditions of contact. This explains not only why substrate influence is systematic rather than haphazard, but also why particular features persist across generations whilst others recede.

The ecological perspective also accounts for internal variation within contact varieties. Different social groups may adopt different features depending on their communicative needs, social networks, and positions within broader social structures, generating internally diverse varieties rather than uniform systems. This heterogeneity, far from being a problem for description, is itself a sociolinguistic resource — one that speakers, as the findings below demonstrate, exploit with considerable skill.

### Social Meaning and Indexicality

Understanding how grammatical features acquire social meanings requires frameworks sensitive to the contingent, context-dependent character of the sign-meaning relationship. Eckert's (2019) concept of the indexical field has proven particularly productive here. Linguistic variants do not carry single, fixed social meanings but rather index a field of potential meanings — authenticity, local belonging, informality, solidarity, resistance to metropolitan norms any of which may

become salient depending on context, co-occurring resources, and the interpretive work of participants. A feature like verb serialisation therefore does not simply "mean" Cameroon English in some decontextualised way; its meaning emerges in and through interaction.

Silverstein's (2003/2020) theorisation of indexical orders adds further analytical leverage. First-order indexicality involves relatively direct associations between linguistic forms and social categories — regional origin, social class. Higher orders emerge as speakers develop reflexive awareness of these associations and begin to manipulate them strategically, a process especially salient in postcolonial contexts where multiple, sometimes conflicting norms and ideologies coexist. Higgins (2022) and Irvine and Gal (2000) provide related frameworks: Higgins emphasises that indexical meanings are actively constructed through practice and metalinguistic commentary, whilst Irvine and Gal's triad of iconisation, fractal recursivity, and erasure explains how distinctions at one level of social organisation — say, between metropolitan and local English — get recursively projected onto others, generating the complex, layered social meanings.

### Statement of the Problem

Cameroon's Anglophone communities occupy a linguistically complex and politically charged space in which English, Pidgin English, indigenous languages, and increasingly French, intersect in everyday communication. Within this multilingual ecology, what is often labelled "Cameroon English" has long been described in terms of deviation from exonormative British standards or as interference from local languages. Such descriptions, while linguistically useful at a structural level, have tended to frame substrate influence as error, deficiency, or imperfect acquisition rather than as patterned, socially meaningful practice. Consequently, the grammatical features shaped by indigenous languages whether in tense-aspect marking, serial verb constructions, pragmatic particles, or phonological transfer—remain under-theorized as resources through which speakers construct identity, negotiate belonging, and exercise agency.

In Anglophone regions such as Buea and Bamenda, language choice and grammatical form are not neutral. They are entangled with histories of colonial administration, post-independence marginalization, and contemporary sociopolitical tensions. Yet much of the existing scholarship on Cameroon English and Cameroon Pidgin English has focused either on codifying structural features or on debating standardization, with insufficient attention to how substrate grammar operates as a semiotic resource in everyday interaction. There remains a significant gap in understanding how speakers themselves interpret and mobilize these features in relation to class mobility, educational access, regional solidarity, and resistance.

Furthermore, dominant sociolinguistic models often privilege macro-level explanations—such as language contact or World Englishes paradigms—without adequately centering speaker agency. While substrate influence is acknowledged, it is frequently treated as an unconscious residue of first-language transfer rather than as a strategic, socially embedded practice. This leaves unanswered critical questions: When do speakers amplify or suppress substrate features? How do they index authenticity, urban sophistication, rural rootedness, or political stance through grammatical choices? And how are these choices reshaped in contexts of migration, digital communication, and educational policy shifts?

The problem, therefore, is twofold. Empirically, there is limited integrative research that connects substrate grammar to social meaning in lived communicative contexts across Anglophone Cameroon. Theoretically, there is a need to move beyond deficit-oriented or purely structural accounts toward a framework that foregrounds speaker agency within a stratified and conflict-sensitive sociolinguistic landscape. Without such an approach, analyses risk reproducing normative hierarchies that silence the creative and political dimensions of linguistic practice.

This study responds to this gap by interrogating how substrate-informed grammatical features function not merely as contact-induced structures but as socially meaningful acts through which Anglophone Cameroonians position themselves within local and national imaginaries. In doing so, it seeks to reframe substrate grammar from a marginal linguistic residue to a central site of identity construction, social negotiation, and agency.

### Research Questions

Three interrelated research questions guide the study and are framed as follows:

- 1) What are the key morphosyntactic features of Cameroon English that reflect substrate language influence, and how are these structures grammatically integrated into the variety?
- 2) What social meanings do these grammatical features carry in Anglophone Cameroonian communities, and how do speakers interpret their use in different contexts?
3. How do speakers strategically deploy grammatical variation to accomplish pragmatic goals — indexing identity, negotiating relationships, and managing shifting social situations?

The three questions are designed to build cumulatively on one another. The first establishes the empirical and structural foundation: without a systematic account of which features are present and how they are grammatically integrated, claims about social meaning lack an adequate object of analysis. The second question shifts the frame from structure to significance, treating the same grammatical features as social

resources whose meaning is not inherent but produced through speakers' interpretive practices and metalinguistic awareness. The third question moves from meaning to agency, examining how speakers actually exploit these resources in real-time interaction to accomplish relational, institutional, and identity-related goals. Together, the three questions position grammatical variation not as an autonomous system to be described in isolation, but as a form of social practice whose full significance can only be understood by attending simultaneously to its structural properties, its social meanings, and the strategic intelligence with which speakers deploy it.

## METHODOLOGY

The study combines linguistic ethnography with distributional analysis of a large naturalistic corpus, drawing on three complementary data sources to triangulate across different types of evidence. Qualitative analysis of interactional episodes and metalinguistic commentary provides the primary interpretive lens, whilst frequency-based examination of grammatical features across the corpus provides a distributional background against which individual cases can be understood. This integration of ethnographic depth and corpus breadth follows the mixed-method approach to language variation advocated by Sharma and Rampton (2021), who argue that the social meaning of lectal features can only be fully understood by attending simultaneously to patterns of distribution and to the moment-by-moment interactional work those features accomplish.

### Research Design and Context

Research was conducted between January and September 2024 across three regions representing the geographic and demographic diversity of Cameroon's Anglophone population. The Northwest Region (specifically Bamenda and surrounding areas) contains the largest concentration of Anglophones and includes speakers of Bafut, Lamnso, Kom, and related Grassfields languages. The Southwest Region (Buea, Limbe, and Kumba) was the historical centre of British administration and includes speakers of Bakweri, Bakossi, Duala, other coastal languages and because of the dense populations from the North West Region, popular North West local languages also such as Lamnso. The Littoral Region (Douala) was included to capture the experiences of Anglophone communities living within a Francophone-majority context, where language choice carries additional social weight. This multi-sited design allowed examination of both commonalities across Anglophone communities and regional variation in grammatical features and their social meanings.

### Participants and Sampling

Forty-five participants were recruited through purposive sampling designed to ensure diversity across key social dimensions such as age, educational

background, occupation, and linguistic history, whilst maintaining focus on individuals who regularly used English in their daily lives. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 years (mean 34.2, standard deviation 13.8). The sample included 24 women and 21 men. Educational backgrounds ranged from secondary education (n=11) through undergraduate degrees (n=18) to postgraduate qualifications (n=16). Occupational categories included university students (n=12), school teachers (n=8), market traders and small business owners (n=7), civil servants (n=6), university lecturers (n=4), healthcare workers (n=3), and others (n=5).

All participants were raised in Anglophone regions of Cameroon and used English as their primary language of education and professional communication alongside one or more indigenous languages. First language backgrounds included Pidgin English as a native language (n=18), Lamnso (n=8), Kom (n=6), Duala (n=5), Bakweri (n=4), and others including Bafut, Ngemba, and Kenyang (n=4). Seventeen participants grew up in multilingual households where multiple Cameroonian languages were spoken alongside English and Pidgin. Regional distribution was: Northwest Region (n=19), Southwest Region (n=18), and Littoral Region (n=8). All participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout as part of our ethical adherence.

### Data Collection

Data collection drew on three complementary methods. Approximately 60 hours of naturally occurring conversation were recorded across a range of settings: university campuses and classrooms (12 hours), markets and commercial areas (14 hours), churches and religious gatherings (8 hours), community meetings (11 hours), workplaces (9 hours), and informal conversations in homes and public spaces (6 hours). Recordings were made using high-quality digital audio recorders with external microphones deployed where necessary. An observation period of 15–30 minutes preceded recording in each setting to allow participants to acclimate to the researchers' presence, though we acknowledge that recording necessarily affects language behaviour to some degree.

Individual sociolinguistic interviews (45–90 minutes; mean 64 minutes) were conducted with each participant, exploring language backgrounds, attitudes towards different varieties of English, and awareness of grammatical features distinguishing Cameroon English from metropolitan varieties. A central component involved presenting participants with example sentences from the corpus and eliciting their metalinguistic commentary such as what the forms meant to them, in what contexts they would use them, and how they would characterise speakers who did. Six focus group discussions (four to eight participants; mean 5.8; 90–150 minutes; mean 118 minutes) were organised around shared occupational backgrounds whilst maintaining internal diversity. These groups

generated rich debates about appropriateness, identity, and the social significance of grammatical choices, and also provided direct observation of grammatical variation in interaction.

### Data Analysis

All recordings were transcribed by the researchers, with conventions informed by linguistic ethnographic practice (Rampton, 2022). Transcripts captured spoken words alongside relevant prosodic and interactional features such as stress, pauses, overlapping speech, and code-switching between English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages. A simplified notation was adopted across the full corpus to enable consistent coding at scale, with selected episodes subject to more fine-grained analysis. All transcripts were verified by research assistants who were native speakers of Cameroonian languages and familiar with local English varieties. The final transcribed corpus comprised approximately 580,000 words.

Analysis proceeded iteratively. Open coding generated an inventory of grammatical features diverging from metropolitan English. Focused analysis then examined the structural properties, distributional patterns, and conditioning factors of the most frequently occurring features. For each feature, detailed inventories documented all instances alongside relevant contextual information: setting, participants, formality level, discourse function, and available metalinguistic commentary. Frequency analysis of feature occurrence across speaker groups and settings provided distributional background for the qualitative interpretation. Finally, selected interactional episodes were subjected to close discourse analysis examining how grammatical choices related to sequential organisation, participant relationships, and interactional goals. Analysis was collaborative throughout, with both researchers coding independently before comparing interpretations, and member checking with selected participants helping to refine readings of social meaning.

### Findings

The findings are organised by research question: first the structural integration of substrate features, then their social meanings as evidenced through metalinguistic commentary and distributional patterns, and finally the strategic deployment of grammatical variation in naturalistic interaction. Analysis identified systematic grammatical features distinguishing Cameroon English from metropolitan varieties, each carrying particular social meanings and serving pragmatic functions.

### Morphosyntactic Features and Grammatical Integration

Four domains of morphosyntactic variation emerged as particularly distinctive and consistent across the

corpus: verb serialisation, aspectual marking, nominal plurality strategies, and prepositional usage. Each shows clear substrate influence whilst demonstrating creative adaptation specific to the Cameroon English context.

**Verb Serialisation.** Verb serialisation, whereby multiple verbs combine in a single clause without coordinating conjunctions, appeared in 347 instances across the corpus. The construction is common in many Cameroonian languages, including Lamnso, Kom, and Duala, and manifests systematically in Cameroon English:

- (1) *I go take the book from the library.*  
(Francis, university student, Buea)
- (2) *She come tell me say her mother don die.*  
(Grace, market trader, Bamenda)
- (3) *Make you go bring am for me.* (Peter, teacher, Kumba)

In example (1), "go take" combines two verbs expressing sequential actions within a single predicate. Metropolitan English would require "went to take" or "went and took", but the Cameroon English construction omits the verb transformation, mirroring substrate patterns where serialisation efficiently expresses related actions. Example (2) shows a motion-plus-activity serial construction conveying both movement and subsequent speech act. Example (3) demonstrates serial verbs in an imperative construction. Semantically, serialisation in the corpus expressed purpose, sequential action, simultaneous action, and manner, thus covering a wide functional range. Distribution analysis showed serialisation in informal contexts at 78% of instances versus 22% in formal settings, indicating register sensitivity. Younger speakers used the construction more frequently, though it appeared across all age groups. Certain combinations such as "go do", "come do", "take do", and "carry go", accounted for 61% of all instances, suggesting lexical conventionalisation of specific serial verb constructions within the broader pattern.

**Aspectual Marking.** Aspectual marking diverges systematically from metropolitan varieties in two main directions: the use of unmarked verb forms for habitual aspect, and the use of "don" or "finish" as completive aspect markers. The form "don" derives from Cameroon Pidgin English, where it functions as a completive auxiliary meaning roughly "have (done)"; it is the Pidgin reflex of English "done" and is distinct from the past participle form. In the corpus both spellings occasionally surface, reflecting variation in orthographic conventions among transcribers, but they represent the same underlying Pidgin-derived completive marker.

- (4) *Every morning I wake up, I pray small, then I go to market.* (Beatrice, trader, Douala)
- (5) *My children, they go to school by foot because motor no dey.* (John, civil servant, Bamenda)

- (6) *I don finish my work already.* (Rose, student, Buea)  
 (7) *When you finish chop, we go commence the meeting.* (David, lecturer, Buea)

In examples (4) and (5), unmarked verb forms describe habitual routines without the progressive aspect or frequency adverbials that metropolitan English would typically employ. This reflects substrate languages where aspect rather than tense is the primary grammatical distinction, and where habitual meaning is conveyed through context and adverbials rather than verb morphology. Examples (6) and (7) show completive marking: "don finish" in (6) uses the Pidgin-derived completive marker "don" before a second completive verb "finish", producing a doubly-marked perfective that emphasises not just completion but its thorough, irrevocable character; whilst "finish chop" in (7) expresses the completion of eating as a precondition for another activity. Across the corpus, 412 instances of completive "don" and 286 instances of completive "finish" were identified. Positional constraints on each are systematic: "don" typically precedes the main verb ("don go", "don see"), whilst "finish" may precede its complement verb or function as a main verb with a nominal object. These positional constraints point to grammaticalisation of completive meaning rather than ad hoc borrowing.

**Nominal Plurality.** Plural marking shows variable patterns that diverge from standard English in three systematic ways: zero plural marking where standard English requires the -s suffix, plural marking on mass nouns, and reduplication for emphatic plurality.

- (8) *I have three children in school and two book for each one.* (Agnes, trader, Limbe)  
 (9) *The informations wey I give you na correct one.* (Emmanuel, engineer, Douala)  
 (10) *Plenty-plenty people been dey for the meeting.* (Sarah, healthcare worker, Bamenda)

Example (8) shows zero plural marking on "book" despite the numerical quantifier "two" making plurality semantically explicit. This pattern appeared in 34% of contexts where standard English would require overt plural morphology, but the rate rose sharply, to 68%, following numerical quantifiers, against only 19% in other plural contexts. This distribution suggests a systematic constraint: overt semantic quantification licences zero morphological marking, mirroring patterns in many Cameroonian languages where quantifiers, not suffixes, carry the plurality burden. Example (9) shows the reverse tendency: "informations" applies the plural suffix to a mass noun that resists it in standard English, regularising the marking pattern to a category from which metropolitan English excludes it. Twenty-three distinct mass nouns were pluralised in the corpus, including "informations", "advices", "furnitures", and "knowledges". Example (10) illustrates reduplication for emphatic plurality, a strategy common in substrate languages for intensification.

**Prepositional Usage.** Innovative prepositional usage represents a fourth domain of systematic divergence, particularly in the extension of "in" to express possession and relational proximity.

- (11) *The book is with me, I will bring it back tomorrow.* (Joseph, student, Buea)  
 (12) *I don't have money on me.* (Mary, teacher, Kumba)  
 (13) *I don't have money in my hand now.* (Patrick, taxi driver, Douala)

In example (11), the particle "back" in "bring it back" carries a pragmatic load that goes beyond its surface directional meaning. Whilst the form itself is available in metropolitan English, its force in Cameroon English is relational rather than merely directional: the construction encodes the assumption that the object has a prior ownership relationship with its destination, and that its return is not simply a future action but a social obligation being acknowledged. This relational implication — the sense that accountability between parties is being made explicit — is what distinguishes this usage in context. Substrate language patterns, where spatial and relational meanings are more closely integrated in a single form, motivate this pragmatic extension: the speaker is not merely stating an intention but affirming a social bond and the responsibility that attaches to it. (12) and (13), uses "on" and "in" respectively which are locative or spatial expressions to convey what is essentially a state of possession.

This reflects substrate language patterns where a single locative marker covers both spatial location and possessive relationships, concepts grammatically separated in metropolitan English but semantically and cross-linguistically related. Across the corpus, 178 instances of possessive "on" and "in" were documented. The construction appeared across all age groups and educational levels, in both formal and informal settings (73% informal, 27% formal), suggesting that it has achieved conventional status in Cameroon English rather than being confined to particular speaker groups or registers. Additional innovative prepositional patterns included "on" in extended temporal expressions, "for" in benefactive constructions beyond standard usage, and "from" marking duration in expressions such as:

- (14) "from morning till now I have not eaten".

Time is treated here as a span or distance, almost like a stretch of road with two end points. In conjunction with 'morning' and 'now' serving as anchor, these are strung together to create a felt sense of duration. Compare the above to something like; "I haven't eaten today" or "I haven't eaten all day" for standard English.

### Social Meanings of Grammatical Features

Metalinguistic commentary from interviews and focus groups, examined alongside distributional patterns across speaker groups and settings, revealed that the

grammatical features documented above carry rich social meanings that speakers consciously recognise and actively deploy.

**Authenticity and Local Identity.** The most consistent social meaning associated with substrate-influenced grammatical features was authenticity as a Cameroonian Anglophone. Participants across the data regularly characterised these features as marking genuine local identity against “borrowed”, “foreign”, or “affected” English. The following exchange, from a focus group discussion in Bamenda, illustrates this directly:

**Researcher:** What do you think when someone says “*The book is with me, I will bring it back tomorrow*”?

**Michael:** Where is the problem there.. (thinking a bit).. ahh ! with ‘bring it back’? That’s how we talk here! That’s Cameroon English.

**Lucy:** Yes, it shows the person is from here, not trying to be like British or American people.

**James:** If someone doesn’t talk like that, we can know he’s doing “fon English”.

**Researcher:** What is ‘fon English’?

**James:** It’s when you try to speak like white man, like you’re not Cameroonian. Like you’re too good for your own people.

James’s term “fon English” draws on a word from the Grassfields Bantu languages of the Northwest Region, where fon refers to a traditional chief or ruler, but in contemporary urban usage it has extended metaphorically to mean pretentious, affected, or ostentatiously elite; someone putting on airs beyond their station. “Fon English” thus frames overly metropolitan speech as a form of social climbing or community betrayal: iconisation at work, as substrate-influenced grammar comes to stand metonymically for authentic Cameroonian belonging whilst metropolitan grammar is projected onto social affectation. A university lecturer made the same point with particular clarity:

“When I’m teaching in class, I try to speak proper English, you know, standard English. But when I’m with my friends or my family, I speak how I naturally speak, how we speak here. If I tried to speak like BBC at home, my own family would laugh at me! They would say I’m ‘forming’, trying to act like I’m better than them, like I’ve forgotten where I come from. Our way of speaking is who we are. It’s authentic. It’s real Cameroon English.”

The phrase ‘forming’ means performing a false identity, and directly parallels the logic of “fon English”. Using metropolitan grammar in informal, family contexts

signals inappropriate social distance, a claim to be better than one’s community. “Our way of speaking is who we are” articulates the connection between grammatical form and identity with unusual directness.

**Education and Register Flexibility.** Whilst substrate features indexed authenticity and community belonging, their strategic reduction or avoidance in certain contexts indexed education, professional competence, and command of metropolitan norms. The relationship between grammatical variation and educational level was, however, more nuanced than a simple linear correlation would predict.

Distribution analysis revealed that highly educated speakers such as university lecturers and civil servants with postgraduate qualifications, showed the greatest range of variation, using substrate features frequently in informal contexts but shifting markedly towards metropolitan norms in formal professional settings. This group averaged 8.3 substrate features per 100 words in informal recordings, falling to 2.1 in formal workplace contexts. Speakers with secondary education working in informal sectors showed considerably less contextual variation: 7.8 features per 100 words informally, 6.4 in more formal interactions. Education, these patterns suggest, confers not the elimination of substrate features but an expanded register range — the ability to shift more decisively between varieties as context demands. One civil servant articulated this with notable precision:

*“At the office, especially when I’m writing reports or when we have meetings with the directors, I have to be very careful how I speak. I can’t use that Cameroon way of speaking in official settings. But after work, when we’re relaxing with my colleagues, maybe having a beer or just talking casually, we speak normal Cameroon English. There’s a time and place for everything.”*

By using the word ‘that’ the speaker consciously marks a distance and hence an identity of a Cameroonian variety. In addition, language is framed as a performance or a mode one switches on and off depending on the context.

Several participants explicitly reframed register flexibility not as a deficiency to manage but as a valued skill. One teacher observed:

*“We who have been to university, we can speak both ways, depending on the situation. That’s actually an advantage: we can fit in anywhere. People who can only speak one way, they’re limited.”*

Competence, in this framing, means knowing when to deploy which variety. The ability to shift between substrate-influenced and metropolitan grammar

functions as a form of cultural capital rather than a mark of educational inadequacy.

### Strategic Deployment of Grammatical Variation in Interaction

The third research question asked how speakers strategically deploy grammatical variation in real-time interaction to accomplish pragmatic goals. Close analysis of selected episodes from the naturalistic recordings reveals three patterns: register shifting to build relational rapport, grammatical convergence to signal community membership, and deliberate stylistic contrast to manage transitions between social roles.

**Episode 1: Rapport-Building in the Market (Nkemdirim, market trader, Bamenda).** This episode captures a commercial interaction in which grammatical choices shift as the relational ground between participants changes. The interaction opens with a customer Nkem does not recognise:

**Nkem:** *Good morning, sir. How can I help you today? I have all types of fabric here, quality materials at good prices.*

**Customer:** *I am looking for something for a traditional ceremony. A wedding, actually.*

**Nkem:** *Congratulations to the family, sir. What kind of material are you looking for?*

**Customer:** *My cousin is getting married next Saturday. She's from Nso.*

**Nkem:** *Ah! You be Nso man? [shifting posture, code-switching into Cameroonian English] Come come look this one here. This cloth na fine-fine material, I carry am come from Yaoundé last week. Your people go love am, hold am, feel am, touch the quality yourself.*

The shift is grammatically marked at the point where shared regional identity is established. Before the Nso reference, Nkem's speech uses no substrate features; "How can I help you today?" is fully metropolitan. After it, serial verbs emerge ("come-come look"), completive marking appears ("I carry am come"), reduplication signals enthusiasm ("fine-fine"), and the bare form "carry am" replaces "brought it". These changes are not random but calibrated: the customer's disclosure triggers a reorientation from stranger-to-trader to Anglophone-to-Anglophone, and grammatical form signals this reorientation directly. Nkem's shift indexes solidarity and shared identity, creating the relational conditions that facilitate commercial trust.

**Episode 2: Sermon to Community Appeal (Rev. Tita, pastor, Bamenda).** This episode is drawn from a church service. The extract begins mid-sermon, where Rev. Tita is expounding a biblical passage:

**Rev. Tita [sermon]:** *And so we see from this passage that the Lord calls us to serve one*

*another in love, to bear one another's burdens as scripture commands. The text is clear on this matter of fellowship.*

**Rev. Tita [congregational appeal]:** *Now, let me tell you about our sister Mama Agnes. She don sick proper. I go visit am yesterday, she be lie down there, the pikin dem no get money for the medicine even. We must go help am. Any man wey get small thing, make you carry go for her house this week. We are one family.*

The grammatical shift between the two speaking positions is striking. The sermon employs standard English throughout: subject-verb agreement, subordination, and the passive-like impersonal construction "the text is clear". The moment Rev. Tita moves from theological exposition to community address, the grammar changes wholesale. "She don sick proper" uses the completive marker "don" in an experiential rather than strictly completive sense (she has been really unwell) "go visit am" conveys motion and purpose. The serial imperative "Any man wey get small thing make you carry go for her house" are dense substrate features. For example, "Any man" defeats the gender bias in standard English as it is an all-inclusive term. The shift is not accidental: within the community's indexical field, substrate-influenced grammar signals intimacy, collective responsibility, and the personal rather than institutional dimension of the appeal.

**Episode 3: Formal Presentation to Peer Exchange (Francis, university student, Buea).** Francis had delivered a class presentation on aspectual variation in Cameroonian languages. This extract captures the transition from the formal presentation context to informal exchange with classmates immediately afterwards:

**Francis [presentation]:** *My analysis suggests that the distribution of aspectual markers in the data reflects patterns commonly observed in the substrate languages of the Northwest Region. The implications for our understanding of contact-induced change are quite significant.*

**Francis [to peers, immediately after]:** *Abi the lecturer understand what I was saying? I explain am well well no be so? Make we wait see her marks. I di hungry sha!! Make we go chop.*

Francis moves in the space of a few seconds from "my analysis suggests... patterns commonly observed... implications for contact-induced change" to this unexpected capture right at the corridors of the classroom a few moments later "Abi the lecturer understand... explain well well", (emphatic reduplication), and "I di hungry sha" (where "di" functions as a stative/progressive marker common in Cameroonian and Nigerian Pidgin varieties, and "sha" is a West African pragmatic particle signaling mild exasperation or emphasis, here intensifying the stative predication of hunger). The shift is not a lapse; it is a

performance of belonging. Having spent twenty minutes inhabiting a metropolitan register to satisfy academic expectations, Francis immediately signals re-entry into the peer group through dense substrate grammar. The speed and completeness of the shift suggests not two separate competences but a single, highly flexible sociolinguistic repertoire that speakers navigate with precision (Canagarajah, 2022). As Sharma and Rampton (2021) note in a related context, such lectal focusing in interaction reflects not merely stylistic preference but active identity work with speakers converging on grammatical features that carry community-specific social meanings.

## DISCUSSION

The findings converge on three interconnected arguments. Substrate-influenced grammatical features in Cameroon English are not random errors but the products of creative, ecologically situated linguistic adaptation. Those features carry rich, multi-layered social meanings that speakers consciously navigate and strategically deploy. And the interactional episodes reveal that this deployment is agentive, precise, and consequential — grammatical choice, in these contexts, does real social work.

### Substrate Influence as Creative Adaptation

The systematic patterns documented across all four grammatical domains provide strong support for ecological approaches to language contact (Mufwene, 2021). Verb serialisation occurs with particular semantic relationships and shows lexical conventionalisation in high-frequency combinations. Aspectual marking follows consistent patterns distinguishing habitual from punctual events and marking completion systematically. Plural marking variation is sensitive to the presence of overt semantic quantification. Prepositional innovations systematically extend semantic domains in ways aligned with substrate conceptual mappings. None of this is haphazard. Cameroon English has developed its own internal grammatical logic, not through failed imitation of a metropolitan target but through principled adaptation of available resources to meet local communicative needs — exactly what Anchimbe and Janney (2021) argue is the definitive characteristic of postcolonial variety formation.

The creative dimension of the adaptation is clearest where Cameroon English patterns diverge from both metropolitan English and simple one-to-one substrate transfer. The specific environments licensing zero plural marking, the grammatical positions of completive markers, and the conventionalisation of particular serial verb combinations all reflect internal grammatical logic rather than wholesale borrowing. Features persist because they are functionally useful for Cameroonian speakers in the Cameroonian context: verb serialisation efficiently encodes the complex action sequences common in everyday narrative; completive markers draw a pragmatically important distinction between finished and ongoing states; possessive "in"

reflects local conceptual mappings between location and ownership. These features remain, as Winford (2020) would predict, precisely because they work.

### Social Meaning, Indexicality, and Speaker Agency

The findings extend existing indexicality theory (Eckert, 2019; Silverstein, 2003/2020) to grammatical variation in postcolonial multilingual contexts. Substrate-influenced grammatical features do not index single, stable social meanings but a complex field of potential meanings — authenticity, regional identity, educational background, solidarity, formality level — any of which becomes salient depending on context, co-occurring resources, and participants' interpretive frameworks. The trader who shifts to serial verbs and completive marking when a shared regional identity is disclosed, the pastor who moves between metropolitan and substrate-influenced grammar across two adjacent speaking roles in a single service, the student who sheds formal grammatical register within seconds of leaving a presentation: all demonstrate that speakers hold these meanings in fine-grained awareness and can activate particular ones with considerable control.

The semiotic processes described by Irvine and Gal (2000) are clearly operating. Iconisation occurs as substrate features become treated as iconic representations of Cameroonian Anglophone authenticity, standing metonymically for local community belonging — as the "fon English" discussion made vivid. Fractal recursivity is evident in how the metropolitan/substrate distinction is projected onto other social oppositions: authentic versus affected personas, educated versus uneducated, formal versus informal, local versus cosmopolitan orientations. Erasure operates in educational and policy contexts where the systematic nature and social value of substrate features are disregarded in frameworks that treat them merely as errors.

The interactional episodes also illuminate how grammatical variation functions as part of what Canagarajah (2022) terms a spatial repertoire — a set of multilingual resources that speakers deploy differently depending on the communicative space they inhabit. Register shifting of the kind documented here is not simply code-switching in the traditional sense but something more granular: the deployment of specific grammatical features to construct and signal particular subject positions within an interaction. Sharma and Rampton's (2021) concept of lectal focusing is apt: speakers converge on densely substrate-influenced grammar at moments of heightened solidarity, affiliation, or intimacy, and pull away from it in contexts demanding institutional authority or metropolitan credibility.

### Language Policy and Educational Practice

Current language-in-education policy in Cameroon privileges metropolitan English as the exclusive target variety, with substrate-influenced features treated as errors requiring correction. Teachers are trained to

identify and penalise the very patterns our research shows to be systematic, functional, and socially valued. This position not only fails to recognise Cameroon English as a legitimate variety with its own norms; it also overlooks the sophisticated sociolinguistic competence that students already bring to the classroom.

More productive approaches, following Baker and Wright (2021) on additive bilingual education and García and Wei (2022) on the pedagogical potential of translanguaging practice, would recognise Cameroon English as a legitimate variety whilst explicitly teaching metropolitan English as an additional register useful in particular contexts. Rather than marking all substrate features as errors, instruction might focus on developing students' register awareness — their capacity to distinguish contexts in which different varieties are appropriate and to shift between them with confidence. The evidence presented here, particularly the finding that highly educated speakers show the greatest range of variation rather than the fewest substrate features, supports precisely this reframing: proficiency means flexibility, not elimination. Higgins (2022) offers parallel arguments for English in globalising contexts, where the capacity to operate across variety norms is itself a form of sociolinguistic capital.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined grammatical integration and social meaning in Cameroon's Anglophone communities through integrated grammatical and sociopragmatic analysis. The findings demonstrate that Cameroon English exhibits systematic morphosyntactic patterns: verb serialisation, distinctive aspectual marking, variable plurality strategies, and innovative prepositional usage, that function not as random errors but as rule-governed structures constituting a legitimate variety creatively adapted to local communicative needs. These grammatical features carry complex social meanings, indexing authenticity, local belonging, educational background, solidarity, and formality in ways that speakers navigate with precision and strategic intelligence. The interactional episodes examined under the third research question make this agency tangible, showing speakers modulating grammatical density within single interactions to perform relational shifts, manage competing institutional and community identities, and signal belonging at exactly the moments when belonging matters.

The study contributes to several scholarly conversations. It provides detailed empirical documentation of Cameroon English morphosyntax from a large naturalistic corpus. It extends sociolinguistic theories of indexicality and social meaning, developed primarily in relation to phonological and lexical variation, to the grammatical level in a postcolonial multilingual context. It demonstrates the analytical value of combining

structural description with ethnographically informed attention to social practice, and it raises urgent questions about language-in-education policy, offering evidence that local varieties merit recognition as legitimate systems rather than eradication as deviations.

Future research might usefully pursue three directions: longitudinal study of how the grammatical features documented here are evolving in younger speakers, particularly in urban contexts; quantitative follow-up with a larger, more regionally balanced sample that allows formal testing of the distributional patterns identified here; and cross-varietal comparative work situating Cameroon English within the broader landscape of substrate-influenced West and Central African Englishes. For educators and policymakers, the evidence presented here is unambiguous: the grammatical features of Cameroon English are systematic, functional, and socially valued. Treating them otherwise impoverishes both the classroom and the communities it serves.

Language contact does not produce chaos. In Cameroon's Anglophone communities, as the evidence gathered here makes plain, it produces systematicity, social meaning, and the kind of creative adaptation that has always been the defining characteristic of human language in use. Recognising this reality; in scholarship, in schools, and in language policy, is not simply an academic obligation. It is a matter of intellectual honesty and social equity.

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