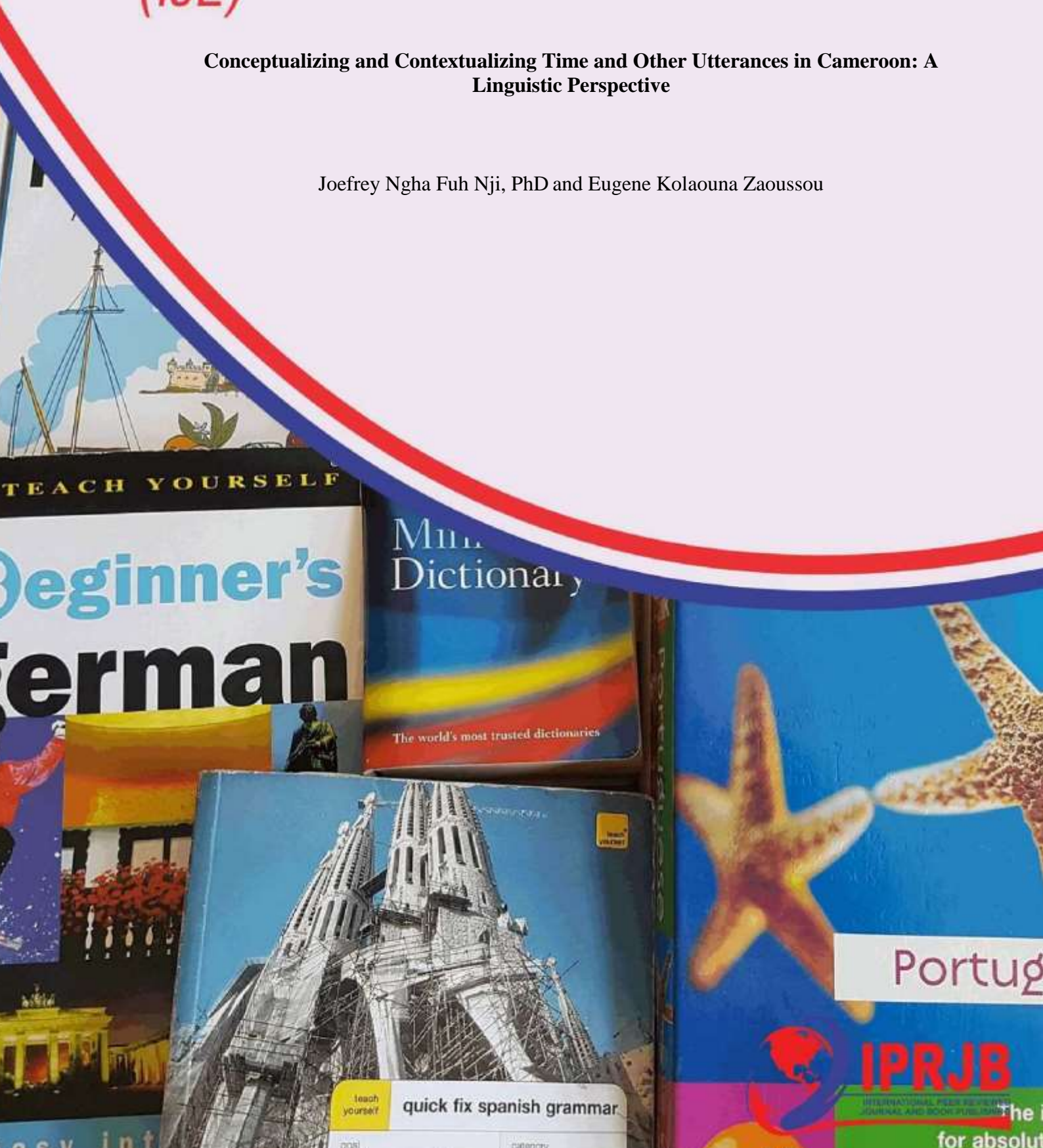



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**Conceptualizing and Contextualizing Time and Other Utterances in Cameroon: A
Linguistic Perspective**

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Conceptualizing and Contextualizing Time and Other Utterances in Cameroon: A Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the conceptualization and contextualization of time in Cameroon from a linguistic perspective, emphasizing how localized meanings of words and expressions shape cognitive and social dynamics.

Methodology: Anchored in the pragmatic framework which examines the relationship between linguistic signs, their users, and speaker intent, this research focuses on the role of context, place, and time in the production and interpretation of time-related utterances. Data was drawn from casual conversations, lecture materials, and media discourse.

Findings: The study reveals that Cameroonian linguistic practices reflect a strong emphasis on hierarchical status, relatively low prioritization of time-consciousness, and the adaptation of certain expressions in ways that diverge from their conventional meanings in other cultural settings.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: These findings suggest that time perception in Cameroon is deeply embedded in socio-cultural realities, with significant implications for communication, governance, and national development. Encouraging greater time-consciousness, particularly among the ruling class, could contribute to enhanced efficiency and progress across various sectors.

Keywords: *Conceptualizing, Contextualizing, Cameroon, Linguistic, Perspective*

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INTRODUCTION

In language studies, socio-pragmatics examines how a language, and more specifically, the words of a language can have diverse meanings and uses depending on the social context or region, reflecting the social and cultural influences on the language. In this vein, it can be stated that socio-pragmatics illuminates how words have been localized according to countries and regions (Mbangwana, 2010), thereby stressing the fact that language use and meaning can shift based on social contexts, cultural norms, and even geographical differences. In this domain therefore, interest is laid not only on the meaning of words but also on how they are interpreted and used in specific social situations, implying a process of localization as words are adapted, taking new forms, meanings or connotations based on the local culture, history or social practices (Kachru, 1992; Crystal, 2003; Levinson, 2004; Blommaert, 2005; House, 2013).

In this perspective, local conceptions and representations of time is an important area of study. Temporal semantics is the branch of semantics that deals with how time is represented and interpreted in a language. It focusses on how linguistic expressions (verb, tenses, adverbs, temporal phrases, etc.) convey temporal information about events actions or states, and how these temporal relations are understood in context. In other words, this field explores how speakers conceptualize and represent the passage of time and the relationship between events and their temporal contexts. Research in the domain has provided considerable pieces of work over the decades.

Therefore, temporal semantics remains a rich and evolving area of study, combining elements from formal logic, linguistic theory, cognitive science, and philosophy. Key areas of research include the role of tense and aspect in temporal reference, the interaction between modality and time, and cross-linguistic variations in temporal expression. In relation to the above, this study stems poses the problem that in Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa, words or utterances have been localized and given a different meaning to shape and reshape the thinking ability of the people, in vary context, place and time. This results in the production of diverse utterances whose understanding is essentially versed into and determined by the realities of Cameroonian populations and the local cultures. From household environment to the political setting these expressions and representations of time have implications that may impact the nation at large.

In this vein, the main objective of this study is to explicitly and implicitly raise awareness most especially to the fact that Cameroonians should wake up from slumber and give another meaning to the use of titles and the management of time for the betterment of the nation. In other words, it ultimately aims at raising awareness in the younger generation so that they should not rely on the ancients when it comes to doing things in time, through an analysis of common expressions whose impact on the attitudes of the people in the country is notable. In this vein, the following research questions are formulated:

- How is time conceptualized in the current administrative setup in Cameroon?
- What are some of the expressions of time peculiar to the Cameroonian context that have a strong socio-pragmatic implication?
- What are the possible effects of the use of these expressions on the perception of public and authoritative discourse on issues of concern for the individuals and the nations at large?
- How can a reframed conceptualization of time help in the betterment of the Cameroonian nation?

These research questions constitute an adequate roadmap for the understanding and analysis of time-related words and expressions in the Cameroonian context.

Theoretical Framework

Theory

This study is set within the domain of socio-pragmatics which examines how the words of a language can have diverse meanings and uses depending on the social context, and specifically within the branch of temporal semantics that deals with how time is represented and interpreted in a language.

The traditional view on tense and temporal reference was introduced by Reichenbach (1947), which indicates that tense is one of the most direct linguistic markers of time. His view is that is that tense encodes a relationship between three temporal points: the time of utterance (UT), the time of the event (ET), and the reference time (RT), concluding that tense can be used to locate an event within a temporal framework (past, present, or future) and establish its relationship to other events or states. In like manner, a variety of theories of tense have been proposed, including Davidsonian approaches that link tense with event semantics (Davidson, 1967). According to this view, tense is seen not merely as a temporal index but as a linguistic tool that connects events with temporal coordinates. It introduces a relationship between Speech time (S), event time (E), and reference time (R) in the interpretation of tense.

Aspect is another key element in temporal semantics, dealing with how events unfold over time. It contrasts with tense by focusing on the internal structure of an event. The distinction between perfective and imperfective aspects, as well as other more complex aspectual categories (e.g., progressive, habitual), has been extensively explored in temporal semantics. Smith (1991) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding aspect and its relation to event structure. According to Smith, the aspectual features of a verb phrase (such as whether an event is seen as complete or ongoing) crucially influence the interpretation of the event's temporal characteristics.

Temporal reference in discourse and cognitive and cross-linguistic perspectives are key notions to our study. In discourse, temporal reference extends beyond simple tense markers to include temporal adverbs and temporal conjunctions, which help construct a coherent timeline of events. The interaction between sentence-level tense and discourse-level temporal reference has been a subject of extensive research in discourse semantics. In this light, Talmy (1985) and Haspelmath (1997) explore the way temporal expressions in discourse construct complex temporal relationships, such as anaphoric reference to prior or future events. These relationships are essential in understanding how language users maintain a coherent and consistent temporal framework across sentences.

Also, on the issue of cognitive and cross-linguistic perspectives, recent research in temporal semantics has highlighted the role of cognition in shaping temporal representations. Studies in cognitive linguistics emphasize that temporal reference is not only a linguistic construct but also a reflection of human conceptualization of time. Research by Langacker (2008) on conceptualization and the embodiment of time in language supports this view. Cross-linguistic studies, such as those by Bybee (1985), show that different languages may employ varied strategies for temporal marking, leading to diverse temporal conceptualizations across cultures. From this perspective, the multicultural and multilingual nature of Cameroon lead to the hypothesis that local cultures and languages may have an influence on the expression and

representation of time in English language use by Cameroonian speakers. This justifies the statement by that when it comes to analyzing time in a language, traditional linguists “look at a structure, not at a process, and even if they study concrete utterances that are deployed in time, they are interested in their grammatical and lexical properties, not in the way in which they are produced or understood in real time”, thereby stressing the importance of language processing, which studies the actual time course of how utterances are produced and understood (which is one of the areas devoted to the study of “language in time” alongside historical linguistics and language acquisition) (Klein, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive linguistics, philosophy, and cross-linguistic studies all contribute to the understanding of how time is represented in language. Time is a fundamental aspect of human experience and cognition, and its representation in language has long intrigued linguists and philosophers. In particular, how people understand and express time depends on both cultural factors and cognitive structures, and these aspects are closely tied to the language they speak. While time is often thought of as a universal, objective dimension, language plays a significant role in shaping how it is conceptualized and expressed.

Time is often treated as a metaphorical concept that is grounded in human perception and experience. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduced the idea that abstract concepts, including time, are understood in terms of metaphorical mappings. They argue that time is conceptualized through metaphors such as “time is money” or “time flows like a river.” These metaphors not only reflect cultural and cognitive processes but also shape how time is perceived and discussed in language.

Time is typically conceptualized in linear terms in many languages, where events are represented along a timeline, with past, present, and future as distinct, sequential points. However, some languages and cultures have different ways of understanding and expressing time. For instance, in Aymara, a language spoken in the Andes, speakers conceptualize the future as behind them and the past as ahead of them, which contrasts with the typical Western metaphor of future ahead and past behind (Núñez & Sweetser, 2006).

A significant body of work in cognitive linguistics has focused on the conceptualization of time as a spatial domain. A common metaphor is the “container metaphor,” where time is seen as a container that holds events or actions. This conceptualization is reflected in expressions such as “in time,” “on time,” or “out of time.” The spatial metaphors used to represent time (e.g., time is a container or a path) reveal how temporal events are structured within conceptual space. For example, English speakers often describe time as a path or a container, as seen in phrases like “We are running out of time” or “We have reached the end of the year.” Similarly, people speak about time in terms of landmarks (e.g., “We are approaching Christmas,” “We are past the deadline”), reflecting a spatial understanding of time.

The role of aspect in temporal conceptualization is also important to note. Aspect is a crucial linguistic feature for understanding how time is represented, especially in relation to the internal structure of events. While tense typically locates events on the time axis (past, present, future), aspect provides information about the internal temporal flow of events (whether an event is completed, habitual, or ongoing). This distinction is particularly important in languages with grammaticalized aspectual distinctions, such as Russian, where aspect is an essential part of verbal morphology. Comrie (1976) provides an influential discussion of aspect, differentiating between perfective and imperfective aspect. The former treats an event as a

whole, completed action, while the latter often implies an ongoing or habitual process. This conceptualization influences how speakers of different languages perceive the duration or completion of events.

Temporal Metaphors and Cultural Differences The study of temporal metaphors has shown that different cultures can conceptualize time in vastly different ways. In Western cultures, time is often imagined as linear and progressive, moving from the past to the future. However, non-Western cultures may conceive of time differently. For instance, in some Native American languages, time is seen as cyclical, and this cyclical view often reflects how events are discussed in terms of recurring patterns or seasons (Whorf, 1956). In contrast, other cultures, such as Chinese, may employ cyclical metaphors, seeing the past and future as interconnected in a non-linear fashion. The conceptualization of time as cyclical rather than linear reflects different cultural attitudes toward progress and change.

Temporal Frames of Reference: Ego-moving vs. Time-moving A key distinction in temporal conceptualization is the difference between ego-moving and time-moving perspectives. In ego-moving metaphors, the speaker is imagined as moving through time, while events remain fixed. For example, a person might say, “We’re moving into the future.” In contrast, time-moving metaphors conceptualize time as moving past a stationary person, as in the phrase “Time is flying.” This distinction has been found to have cross-linguistic variation, with languages like English favoring ego-moving metaphors, while other languages, such as Chinese, may use more time-moving metaphors. This difference can influence how speakers of different languages relate to and discuss time (Danziger, 2010).

Grammatical Markers and Time Conceptualization Languages also use grammatical markers (e.g., tense, aspect, modality) to encode time and temporal relations. These markers help speakers express nuanced temporal distinctions, including the ordering of events, the completion of actions, and the duration or repetition of events. For example, English marks tense through auxiliary verbs (e.g., “will” for future, “have” for perfect), while languages like Spanish and Italian rely more heavily on verb morphology to mark aspect and time. The role of grammatical markers in temporal conceptualization has been extensively studied in formal semantics. Klein (1994) discusses the semantic contribution of tense and aspect in temporal representation and examines how different languages use tense and aspect to convey temporal relationships.

The conceptualization of time in language is shaped by cognitive structures, metaphors, and cultural norms. Time is often understood in spatial terms, as a linear or cyclical flow, and this conceptualization varies widely across languages and cultures. Temporal expressions in language, whether through tense, aspect, or metaphors, not only reflect but also influence how speakers understand and navigate the passage of time. Understanding these conceptualizations is critical for studying linguistic relativity, the interaction between thought and language, and the cross-linguistic variations in temporal expression.

Grushina (2020) work on the concept of time in language and text provides important theoretical considerations on the contextual markers of time that appear in the excerpts selected and analyzed in this study. Her work defines time as “an abstract category connected to human life” and further stresses the point that social and cultural factors determine, thereby underlining the importance of placing time markers in context, (p:148). Comparing linguistic and contextual markers of time, this study connects language as a structure and cognition. This perspective assimilates “time” to other concepts where it obtains new connotations and

additional meanings. This leads to the consideration of time as a picture, time as a book, and time as a space. Considering discourse evolutions in terms of speech, semantics and syntax, she concludes that the concept of time in discourse will not involve only a succession of events, but also elements that help build up historical time. Therefore, the following are considered as contextual time markers: proper names (historical characters, politics, artists, actors, names of books, newspapers, magazines, films, etc.), toponyms (geographical points), expressions of social status (titles), realia (objects and material from everyday life), precedent texts or phenomena (texts that are cognitively or emotionally significant, widely known by a linguistic community; quotations or allusions to well-known texts) (Grushina, 2020, p. 145-146).

The related works and theoretical considerations discussed above, underline the fact that expressing time in a language is a highly contextual aspect of discourse which is not realized only through traditional markers of time (adverbs, tenses, etc.). Besides, the meaning carried by these contextual time markers impacts the way language builds social relationships and impacts the daily life of a community as the examples taken from language use in Cameroon presented in the section that follows illustrate.

METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the data collection and data analysis procedure.

Data Collection and Sources

The data for this study were collected through a series of recorded conversations conducted in English, with a focus on naturally-occurring speech. This was supplemented by participant observation in different settings where time-related expressions were supposed to arise. These include public gatherings, lecture notes, declarations during interviews and expressions used on different contexts of interaction. As temporal word semantic analysis requires that we have access to a reasonable number of texts that spans a long period of time, primary data were obtained from interactions within the public domain, capturing natural conversations and expressions used in various contexts. This made it possible to understand the different ways in which Cameroonian speakers of English nurture the language and give it a local flair to express various meanings, intentions and emotions. Additionally, lecture notes were analyzed to understand how time is discussed in academic settings, providing insight into more formal uses of English in relation to time. Furthermore, declarations during interviews and political speeches constituted a crucial element to determine the way participants shared their personal reflections and verbal expressions in relation to time and its possible influences on how authoritative discourse might be perceived.

The combination of these data sources allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how time is framed and understood in English by Cameroonian speakers across different social and situational contexts.

Data Analysis

The data collected were transcribed and the expressions related to time were highlighted for analysis. For illustrations, they are emboldened in the excerpts presented in section (4). This identification of time-related expressions is followed by an examination and interpretation in context to uncover their actual meanings. Finally, comparing the meaning of these expressions to those in standard English was deemed necessary to standard English to sort out whether they

were unique features specific to the Cameroonian context such as influences from local languages and cultural perceptions of time.

The section that follows takes up analysis of selected excerpts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on analysis and discussion on the data. It successively tackles vary perspectives on the conceptualization and contextualization of time in Cameroon.

The Administrative Set-Up

In Cameroon the administrative set up is very title sensitive to the extent that if a person fails to address an administrative head without using the latter's known title, it is regarded as being disloyal and disrespectful to the hierarchy; for example:

Chiefs and Fons in Cameroon are referred to as HRM, H.R.H (His Royal Majesty, His Royal Highness) the use of the third person singular pronoun in English is now being used as a possessive title by a Chief or Fon.

In other parts of the world, like in Britain and America, a queen or president remains the queen or president, a minister is a minister but it has become a common practice in Cameroon to address the president of the republic as 'His Excellency...the President of the Republic', we have titles like the 'Vice Prime Minister', 'Minister of State in charge of Justice and keeper of the Seal'. We have 'Minister Delegate in charge of Special duties at the Presidency' etc. This showcases the fact that Cameroonians feel very comfortable with these titles or utterances whereas it may not apply the same elsewhere. This may just explain why we have a plethora of ministers and ministries and things seem to be too bureaucratic.

More interestingly when one takes a look at the military, one sees that if a junior colleague should address their senior without the use of the latter's title or rank like "mon general", "mon colonel", "mon officier", "mon capitaine", "mon commissaire", "mon délégué" and so on, it will entail disrespect and disloyalty to the hierarchy or superiors. The inferior military personnel showing such disrespect might never even be promoted or change grade, and even if they have to, it will be an uphill task. So we see that titles play an important role in distinguishing younger and senior colleagues to enhance respect and honor in Cameroon military and other domains of life.

On the other hand, the Church is not left out, in the church we have 'Priest, Pastor, Rev. father, Rev Pastor, Right Reverend Moderator, Bishop, Archbishop, His Holiness, Rev Dr. Rev Professor', just to name a few. Should anyone fail to address any of those who carry these titles correctly, they will have serious problems with the said Rev Dr. or Rev. Professor. They might even refuse to attend to you because you have not used the correct title that defines them. So their definition is more in titles than in the ONE they are serving through the people who solicit their services in church.

Considering the above, it can be stated that, normally, respect and honor are natural tenets in life albeit titles. In Cameroon, however, it appears that these titles represent essential aspects to establishing and maintaining relationships among individuals.

On the Management of Time

Meantime in the western world, time is very precious and needs not to be gambled with. This may explain why a British would say "Time is money" to show how important time is to them. But in Cameroon, the notion of keeping to time is still very farfetched. This may explain why

during public ceremonies like 11th February and 20th May and many other public ceremonies, you can receive an invitation card which has as 9am on it for the start of the occasion, to someone who is not familiar with the notion of time in Cameroon, they would be taken aback to see that the ceremony finally, begins at 12 noon. This is not only true in public ceremonies; even private social gatherings are no exception. It is very sad to hear these expressions, “Blackman time, African time”, “Cameroonian time”, from here we see that ‘time’ which is ‘money’ elsewhere that is preciously and jealously utilized is anxiously, consciously and unconsciously wasted in Cameroon.

Delay in Carrying out Outlined Projects

The poor management of time in Cameroon has serious representations in language use from both public officials and ordinary citizen. At the administrative level, it has become part and parcel of public and political discourse, in expressions that tend to institutionalize slowness and non-respect of schedules in the realization of serious projects. In this light, projects have been earmarked by the government and these projects fail or are being delayed to be realized, the actors, in a bid to lure the people and keep them docile, would use the following utterances: “...government machinery grinds slowly but surely”, “...these projects will be carried out progressively”, “...in the days ahead...”, “...in a short while...”, “...Cameroon will emerge by horizon twenty thirty five...”, “...it is due to inertia and administrative bottlenecks...”, and at times it is “...a slip in date”. The aforementioned utterances are a clear indication that deadlines are not a problem in Cameroon when it comes to realizing projects for the welfare of the people and for the development of the country, these words are carefully thought of to lure the people and keep them in oblivion so that they can only reason in the way the ruling class has shaped and reshaped their thinking ability which suits only the ruling class. Normally in other countries sanctions are meted on those who failed or are delaying the realization of such projects but in Cameroon they are instead promoted or maintained in their respective functions while looking forward to “horizon twenty thirty-five”. However, it should be noted that time consciousness and respect for deadlines is sine qua non to the development of Cameroon.

The Expression “Thank You”

Still, the expression “Thank You” in English is universally accepted as a way of appreciation for a benevolent act that is performed or done by someone to your favour. But in Cameroon, depending on the context, the expression “Thank You” could be used to blame or insult someone who fails to carry out a certain important task or project that could be of help to you. For instance, if you invited a close friend to attend your wedding and this friend failed to come, meanwhile they had an important role to play during the ceremony, you could use this expression to express your disappointment and to equally politely shame them, by saying “Thank You”.

The Concept of Aunty, Uncle, Daddy and Mummy

In Cameroon, it has become a common practice for the younger ones to call the or any elderly person as aunty or uncle, this is to show respect meanwhile in English an **aunt** or **uncle** is one with whom you have a blood relationship-mother’s sister or father’s-brother. At times it could be used to obtain some favors from these elderly ones. So, to sound polite, and supplicative they will employ the utterances “aunty and uncle” to get what they need. Moreover, it is universally known that children refer to their parents as “daddy” and “mummy” but in Africa and in some parts of Cameroon in particular, children feel comfortable calling their parents as “Baba”, “moumou”, or “mama”, (Baba-father and moumou or mama-mother). In recent times

in Cameroon, it is also observed that some wives refer to their husbands as “Daddy” meanwhile some husbands equally refer to their wives as “Mummy”, this is in a bid to express intimacy and love for each other.

The Concept of Envelope and Kola Nut

In like manner, the word “envelope”, in the Cameroonian context would mean “giving bribe”, just the noun kola nut would equally mean “bribe”. This means that a new meaning has been given to the word “envelope” which in its pure sense has to do with posting mails. Kola nut on the other hand has also been given a new meaning in Cameroon to mean “bribe” instead of the literal kola nut that people eat.

Also, an utterance changes meaning in the context, for instance the English expression “I am coming”, in Britain, it means “I am on my way coming to meet you”. But in Cameroon it would mean “I am going to come later”, or “I will be back soon”. Still, the utterance “terrible” has been reinterpreted to mean skillful when used to describe an outstanding and talented person as in the utterance “Roger Milla is a **terrible** player”. The word “sorry” which is usually used to sympathize with somebody has a double meaning in Cameroon. For example: you are moving with a friend on a path, suddenly they slip and fall; and you say “sorry” you are showing empathy and at the same time apologizing for something you have not caused.

The Concept of Pig and Dog

The concept of pig to a Moslem is something that is bad, dirty and very unclean; that should not even be seen anywhere around them. But the same pig is being venerated by a Dschang person and other people in Cameroon. To a Dschang person, a pig is a symbol of their livelihood, without that pig a Dschang person is as a palm wine calabash without wine. This shows that different things, words or utterances have different meanings to different people in the same region in different context, time and place like the case of Moslems and non-Moslems in Cameroon with regards to pork. Furthermore, the way a person in the village will treat a dog, will be quite different from the way someone in town will do. At the village level, a dog to a hunter will mean a collaborator, a companion who helps in hunting and providing good meat or beef for the family. But to someone in the city a dog is used as a security officer who guards and protects their premises. So, talking about a **dog** to these two persons will give two different concepts of what a dog means to them.

The Concept of Horses and Cowries

When we look at the concept of horses, we realize that in Britain, horses are eaten and they treat horses there with a lot of care and honor; which is quite different from the concept Cameroonians have about horses, because in Cameroon horses are used for display during special events, and also as a means of transportation. Their behavior towards horses will not be quite keen like that of the British. Finally, the concept of cowrie, which symbolizes royalty in the Adamawa and Grasslands of Cameroon, is not given the same respect in some areas of Cameroon-people from these areas can wear them as normal jewelry. But someone from Adamawa and Grasslands of Cameroon who wears them consciously or unconsciously meanwhile they have no royal lineage will be treated harshly and even fined for defying a precious royal ornament.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed at explicitly and implicitly raise awareness most especially to the fact that Cameroonians should wake up from slumber and give another meaning to the use of titles and

the management of time for the betterment of the nation. Drawing from socio pragmatics and temporal linguistics, this study has shown that the use of English language in Cameroon is characterized by words or utterances that have been localized and given a different meaning to shape and reshape the thinking ability of the people, in vary context, place and time.

To achieve the ultimate objective, this study proceeded to an analysis of different expressions used in the Cameroonian context to establish and determine the way time references is contextually dependent end conceptualized. Different utterances drawn from various settings helped to reveal that Cameroonian linguistic practices reflect a strong emphasis on hierarchical status, relatively low prioritization of time-consciousness, and the adaptation of certain expressions in ways that diverge from their conventional meanings in other cultural settings. Consequently, different utterances are produced and the understanding of these is essentially versed into and determined by the realities of Cameroonian populations and the local cultures. From household environment to the political setting these expressions and representations of time have implications that may impact the nation at large as the excerpts presented and analyzed illustrate.

Therefore, this study contributes to stressing the point that the conceptualization of time in language is shaped by cognitive structures, metaphors, and cultural norms. Time is often understood in spatial terms, as a linear or cyclical flow, and this conceptualization varies widely across languages and cultures. Temporal expressions in language, whether through tense, aspect, or metaphors, not only reflect but also influence how speakers understand and navigate the passage of time. Understanding these conceptualizations is critical for studying linguistic relativity, the interaction between thought and language, and the cross-linguistic variations in temporal expression.

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