

A Linguistic Analysis of Language, Persuasion, and Market Positioning in Cameroon's Telecom Advertising Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic landscape of Cameroon is entrained with pluralities of languages. Official languages (English and French), lingua francas (Cameroon pidgin English and camfranglaise) and more than 300 national languages. This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Cameroon and how telecommunication companies (MTN and Orange) reach their consumers and build consumption preferences. MTN uses English which attracts more of English speakers in consuming their services while Orange uses French to attract French speakers. The research design is descriptive. The simple random sampling was adopted in data collection. A total of 700 advertisements on all languages used were collected between 2000 to 2025 and analyzed. Sources of data are billboards, internet web pages, flyers and Cameroon tribune news papers. The analytical method employed is the approach of Linguistic landscape by Backhaus (2005). Quantitatively, the ads were counted and quantified to see the effects of language choice on consumers preferences. Results reveal that from 2000 to 2022 MTN used more of English language in their advertisements and Orange more of French. The outcome was more Anglophones consuming MTN products and a similar higher consumption of Orange products by Francophones. This study recommends the increase usage of the lingua francas by these companies since the illiterate classes are left out. Also, these lingua francas should be englobed in the language policy by the state. Code switching and mixing are recommended to these companies, they can attract consumers in purchasing. This study contributes in providing knowledge on communication and marketing strategies to companies who need to venture into the Cameroon market.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, language, advertisement, preferences

INTRODUCTION

Underpinning each advertising act is prompting to sell a product, service or idea. According to Jef, Daugherty and Logan (2015), Morales (2017) advertising has as importance the dissemination of information with goal of selling. Radio advertising is used to inform the consumer of product promotion (Kotler, 2002). Online advertising uses the Internet and World Wide Web for the expressed purpose of delivering marketing messages customers. Print includes magazine, newspaper, brochures, leaflets, flyers, and handouts. The actual presentation of messages in a medium refers advertisement (advert or ad for short) (Kotler, 2002)

This study delves on language use on advertisements which determines consumer preferences of telecommunication products and services in Cameroon. On these advertisements, there is the sociolinguistic landscape of Cameroon employed by the advertisers to work on the minds of consumers.

In the telecommunication sector in Cameroon, MTN and Mobilis now Orange were the first mobile phone companies that arrived Cameroon in the early 2000 (Nano & Tankeu, 2007). Cameroonians own mobile phones; be it smartphones or cell phones, they are all connected to a mobile networks. Orange inherited French Telecoms in the year 2000 while Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) traces its origin from South Africa. The telecommunication sector has taken over communication with writing of letters, and becoming the primary mode of communication by Cameroonians.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- i. To investigate the linguistic landscape and consumer language choice in Cameroon.
- ii. To demonstrate how the linguistic landscape has shape consumer choices in consuming telecommunication products and services in Cameroon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cameroon is endowed with pluralities of languages (official languages, lingua francas and mother tongues). Nkamta and Ngwenya (2017) expatiate that Cameroon is a linguistically diverse country with over 275 living languages. This multilingual reality has not been adequately capitalized upon in order to benefit Cameroonians, as advertising messages are predominantly in French and English (Forkam, 2012, p. 137). The use of the Cameroonian lingua francas; Camfranglaise Cameroon Pidgin French (CPF) and Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) in advertisements also functions as a persuading mechanism (Tameh (2017).

Nkamta and Ngwenya (2017, p. 137), notes, ‘official language usage in Cameroon is restricted and confined to French and English, while the vernaculars continue to be limited largely to oral usage and rural family circles.’ The multiplicities of lingua francas in Cameroon can be traced from its historical backgrounds of colonialism (Anchimbe (2005, p. 34).

According to Anchimbe (2005, p. 34) and Echu (2004), Cameroon was founded around 1472 by a Portuguese navigator called fernão do Põ who arrived in the Bight of Biafra, he sailed up the Wouri River in the coastal region. The first explorers and traders were later replaced by the Germans, who in 1884 proclaimed the coastal area a protectorate. French and British troops occupied the region during World War I. Later, Cameroon was divided into French and British zones under the League of Nations. In 1946, United Nations trust territories. The British instituted the English language while the French Instituted French language (Mforteh, 2015).

The Republic of Cameroon is a multilingual and multicultural country, divided into ten administrative regions (Adamawa, Centre, East, Far North, Littoral, North, Northwest, South, Southwest and West). North West and South West are English-speaking and other eight are french-speaking (Nkamta & Ngwenyi, 2017, p. 139).

Cameroon is, however, interesting due to its multitude of African languages called national languages (Echu, 2003a, Giles and Coupland (1991). The official languages came into contact creating the lingua francas CPE and CPF. Both educated English, Cameroonian languages and French. CPE and CPF are no man’s code that is predominantly attached to the uneducated and the less privileged of the society. Although no one wants to identify with it, everyone seems to use it (Mforteh, 2008, Kouega & Aseh, 2017).

The outcome is thus, French speakers are seen highly consuming Orange products/services while English speaking are consuming MTN. Sassatelli (2007, p. 42) and Gabriel and Tim (2006) identify identity of consumer as follows, sovereign, entrepreneur, snob, imitator, slave, collector, flâneur and rebel and nine personas, as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity-seeker, hedonist or artist, victim, rebel, activist and citizen.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories and models are formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions.

Linguistic Landscape and Approaches

Written information (sign) by nature carries much meaning (Ryan, 2011). A common feature of linguistic landscape studies is that they involve a strong quantitative analysis, focusing on quantifying in detail the nature of multilingual signage in a geographical area (Ryan, 2011). Within Linguistic Landscape, interpreting is a formidable task, and several varying approaches have been used to try and explain the patterns that have been observed (Ryan, 2011).

Eberhard, Simons and Fennig (2025) states that there are 275 living languages spoken in Cameroon. Chia (1981), Mbangwana (1981), Tanda (2015), Eberhard et al., (2025) have discussed the pervasiveness of CPE in Cameroon. This is exploited by the telecommunications sector in Cameroon in particular and West Africa in general.

Atechi, (2015), Kouega (2001) and (Quirk, (1990 argue that the CPE and CPF enjoy an unofficial status vested by Cameroonians who recognized it as an important language of social interaction and wider communication in the country. Tarh (2007) and Yuka (2001) reviewed that CPE has virtually taken the centre stage, relegating the local languages to the background'. Fonlon (1963) and Mbangwana (2004) had argued 'CPE was and is still the most widely spoken lingua franca in Cameroon' (p. 402). Chia (1983), Atechi and Fonka, (2007), Kouega, 2007) reinforced this by saying that 'it is not only widely spoken, but also a very popular language in Cameroon.

Approaches to Linguistic Landscape

According to Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (2006), Linguistic Landscape can be used to identify the linguistic boundaries of a certain area. Huebner (2006), Cenoz and Gorter (2006) says it is used to assess the impact and penetration of multilingualism in a community. It is used to test sociolinguistic theories as Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (2006) have implemented. Lou, (2007), Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) argues it is used to analyse semiotics and they can be conducted as qualitative micro-level studies (Coupland and Garrett (2010).

Ben-Rafael and Shohamy's (2006) approach investigated the connections between Linguistic Landscapes and major sociological/sociolinguistic theories. They proposed three sociolinguistic theories that could be tested using Linguistic Landscapes. These theories were that of Bourdieu (1983), Goffman (1981) and Boudon (1990). They used a methodology that was relatively simple. Recorded Signs from around the city were done using digital camera (Ryan, 2011). For them the definition of what constituted a sign was street signs, commercial signs, billboards, signs on national and municipal institutions, trade names, personal study plates or public notices' (Ben-Rafael, 2006, 10, Ryan, 2011).

Spolsky and Cooper (1991), Stroud and Mpendukana (2009), Lou (2007) have made a concrete effort to try and categorise the linguistic landscape semiotically in the Saussurean tradition, which in many ways carries echoes of Scollon and Scollons (2003) work, which in their own words they call a - material ethnography of the linguistic landscape.

METHODOLOGY

The Quantitative Research approach is used in this study. Bryman (2008, p. 715) and (Leedy, 1993) confirms that quantitative research includes quantification in the collection and analysis of data. Generally, statistical procedures are quantitative data approaches. Advertisements are used as data, collected from different media outlets. Sources include offline and online sources. Online sources are internet web pages are consulted, offline sources are newspapers, billboards and brochures.

Tools for data collection was the smartphone, advertisements were pictured in the newspapers and billboards. Internet web pages were screen shorted or downloaded using the smartphone. The analytical framework of linguistic landscape by Backaus (2005) was employed. It quantifies the number of ads that comes in the different languages of Cameroon, classify them and divide them by the total consumers.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analysis data on the linguistic landscape of MTN and Orange from 2000 to 2010 and from 2011 to 2025.

Language Used by MTN from 2000 to 2010

The table below shows the distribution of language used on advertisements from 2000 to 2010.

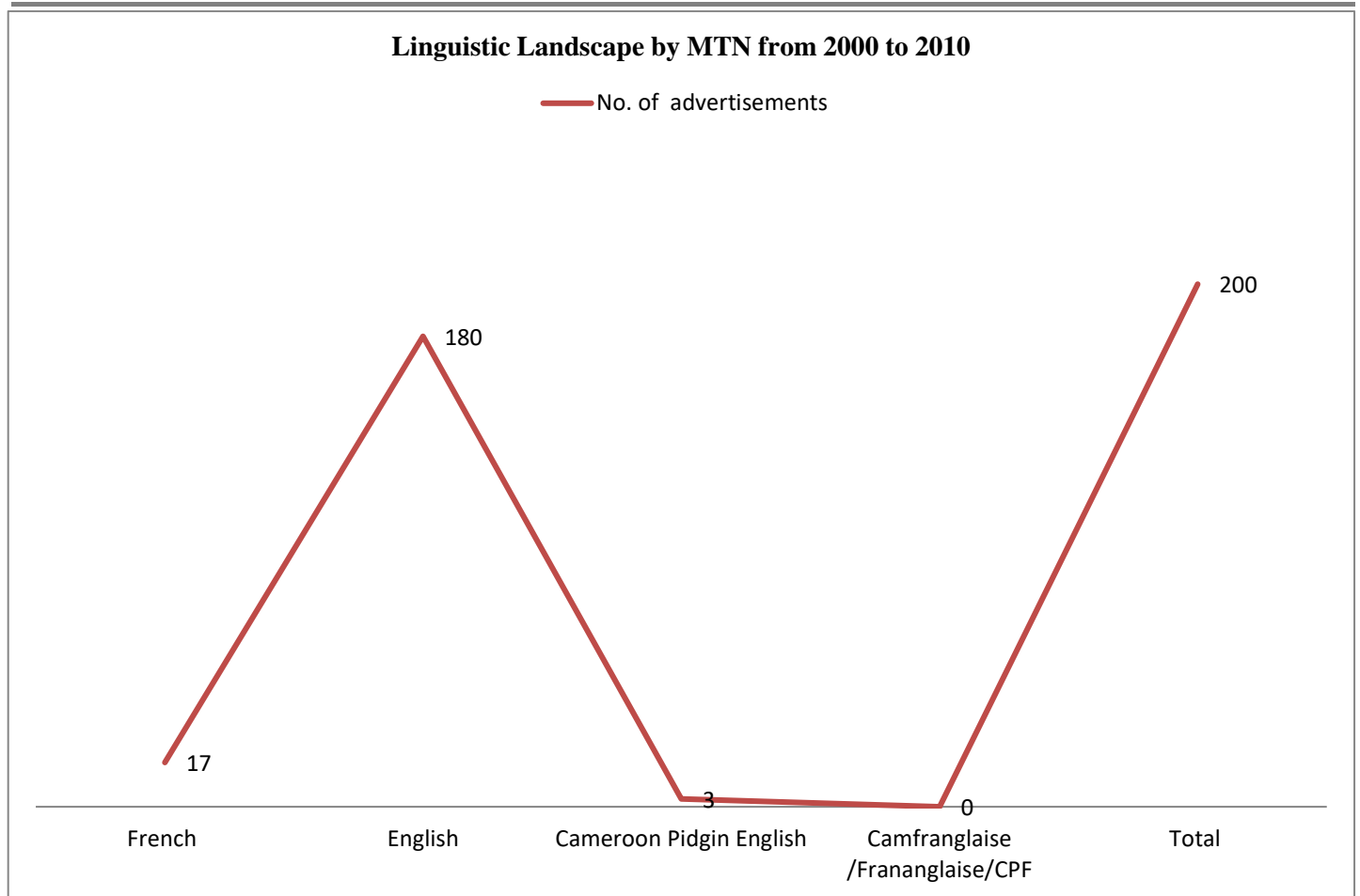


Figure 1: Linguistic Landscape by MTN from 2000 to 2010 (Cameroon Tribune, 2025)

The figure shows that out of the 200 advertisements collected from the media designed by MTN, 180 came in English, 17 in French, 03 in Cameroon Pidgin English while none came in Camfranglaise. The number of users stood at 7million subscribers by 2010 (MTN internal personnel). The company’s market share during the period was determined by the language used in advertisements from the year 2000 to 2010 and comprises of:

Total Number of MTN users = about 7,000,000

Number of Anglophone users = about 6,000,000

Total number of francophone users = about 1,000,000

Total Quantity of ads = 200

Quantity in French = 17

Quantity in English = 180

$17/200 \times 100/1 = 8.5\%$ in French and 91.5% in English

Analysis of the table shows the more use of English language. English was highly used because the dominant language spoken in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. French appeared scarcely used. Other lingua francas like CPE and Camfranglaise were neglected, they are Cameroonians who cannot speak nor understand English.

Among the about 7,000,000 MTN users throughout Cameroon from 2000 to 2010, only about 1,000,000 subscribers were Anglophones showing that, the language used attracted the Anglophones. Minor used by francophones is due to the dominant use of English by MTN.

The Linguistic Landscape by Orange from 2000 to 2010

Languages used by Orange on their advertisements in Cameroon Tribune from 2000 to 2010.

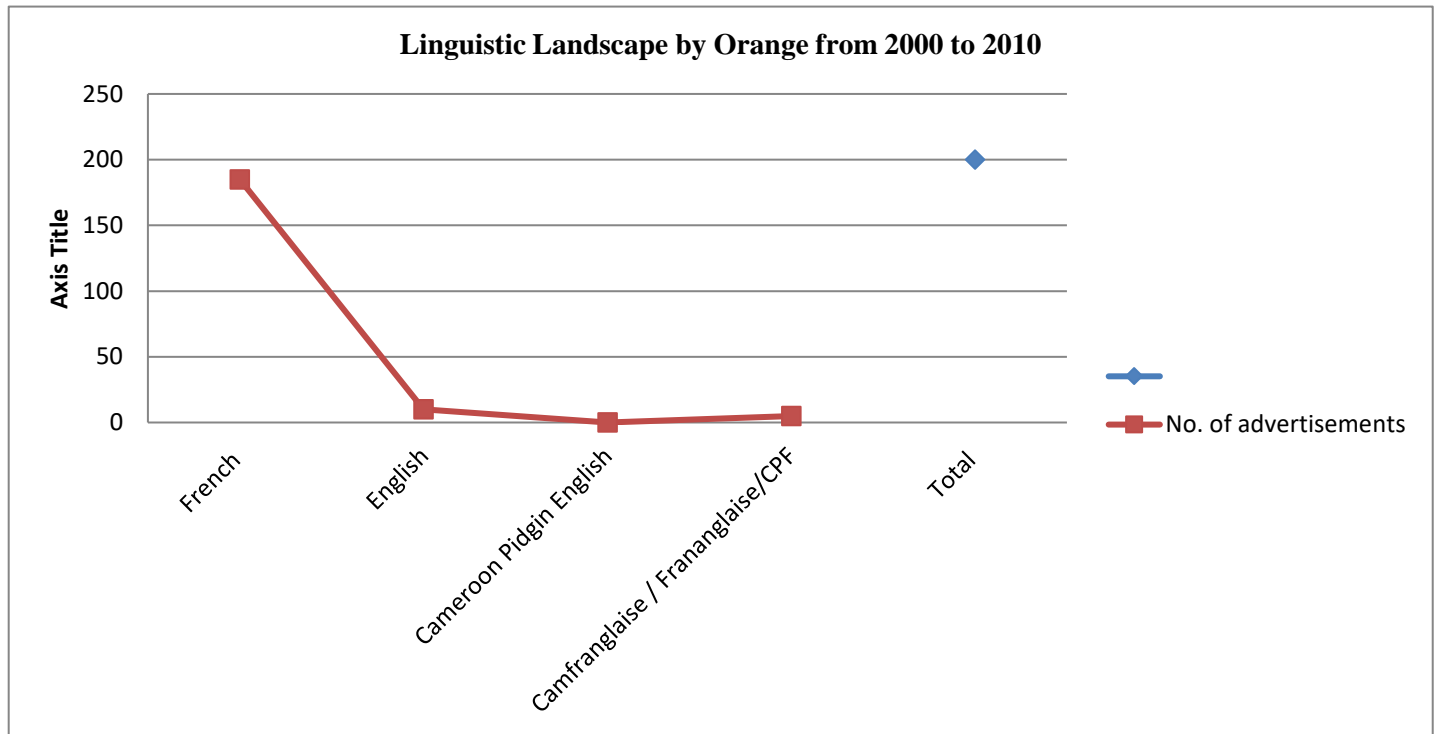


Figure 2: Language used by Orange from 2000 to 2010 (Source: Cameroon Tribune, 2025)

The figure illustrates the number of advertisements and languages used by Orange collected from Newspapers, brochures, internet web pages and billboards in Cameroon. Data shows that; out of the 200 ads, 185 came in French, 10 came in English and 5 in Camfranglaise. French language dominated the media advertisements in Cameroon. Number of Orange subscribers stood at about 6,000,000 (Orange internal personnel).

Total Number of Orange subscribers = about 6,000,000

Number of Anglophone users = about 500,000

Total number of francophone users = about 5500,000

Total quantity of ads = 200

Total quantity in French = 185

Total quantity in English = 10

$185/200 \times 100/1 = 95\%$ in French and 5% in English

The table shows the use of more of French language is associated with the history of the Company. French was highly used because large majority of Cameroonians speak French. English was given little importance by the Company. Other lingua francas like Camfranglaise and CPE were not given priority taking into consideration that, they are Cameroonians who cannot speak nor understand French. Among the about 6,000,000 Orange subscribers throughout Cameroon from 2000 to 2010, only 500,000 subscribers were Anglophones.

Linguistic Landscapes from 2011 to 2025

The linguistic landscape from 2011 2025 is presented in this section.

The Linguistic Landscape by MTN from 2011 To 2025

This is the number languages used by MTN on their advertisements from the years 2011 to 2025.

Table 1: Geographical Distribution of Ads According to the Linguistic Landscape

Language	Cameroon Tribune	Internet Web pages	Yaounde (Billboards)	Bamenda (Billboards)	West (Billboard)	Sub. Total
French	17	09	10	04	12	50
English	24	14	05	40	03	86
CPE	00	01	02	6	00	09
CPF	00	01	03	0	01	05
Total	41	25	20	50	16	150

Source: Authors Field Work study, 2025

Tabulation shows the language used by MTN is English; French followed by CPE and CPF.

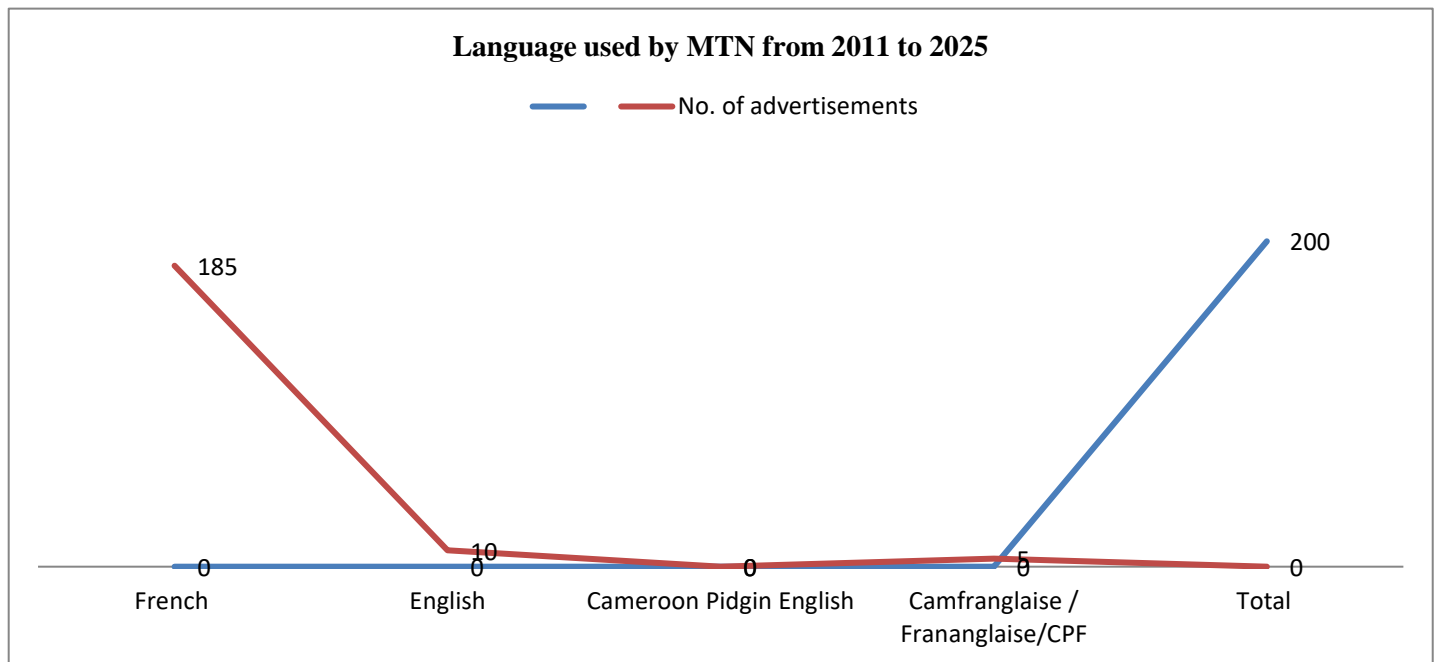


Figure 3: Language used distribution by MTN from 2011 - 2025 (Source: field study, 2025)

The figure show number of languages used in advertisements by MTN collected from the media houses. 150 advertisements were collected from the media, 86 ads came in English, 50 were in French, 09 were in CPE and 05 were in Camfranglaise. This linguistic landscape shows a higher use in the practice of bilingualism by MTN.

The number of users stood at 8millions subscribers in 2025.

Total Number of MTN subscribers as of 2022 = about 8,000,000

Number of Anglophone users = about 5,000,000

Total number of Francophone users = about 3.000,000

Total quantity of ads = 150

Total quantity in French = 60

Total quantity in English = 90

$90/150 \times 100/1 = 60\%$ in English and 40% in French

Statistics show the linguistic landscape greatly evolved in terms of the Cameroon lingua francas used. English, French, CPE and English were more used. Advertisements during this period were design comprising all the

lingua francas of Cameroon. The multiple uses of lingua francas was to create a positive impact in representation of all Cameroonians. In designing ads, the company considered that, they are Cameroonians who cannot speak nor understand these different lingua francas. That is to, they are Cameroonians who cannot speak and understand English and French, but can speak and understand CPE and CPF.

6.5 The Linguistic Landscape by Orange from 2011 To 2025

The table below shows the number of languages used by Orange in their advertisements between 2011 to 2025.

Table 2: Geographical Distribution of Ads according to Language

Language	Cameroon Tribune	Internet Web pages	Yaounde (Billboards)	Bamenda (Billboards)	West (Billboard)	Sub. Total
French	27	17	15	08	09	76
English	13	11	08	05	11	48
CPE	02	02	03	03	01	11
CPF	02	02	06	01	04	15
Total	41	25	20	50	16	150

Source: Authors Field Work, 2025

The table shows the geographical distribution of language from 2011 to 2025. The quantities are collected from the different media houses in Cameroon. The table that shows that, French is the dominant language used, followed by English, CPF and CPE. The lingua francas are minimally use though majority of Cameroonians speak and understand them. The numbers of languages used are used to determined consumers preference below.

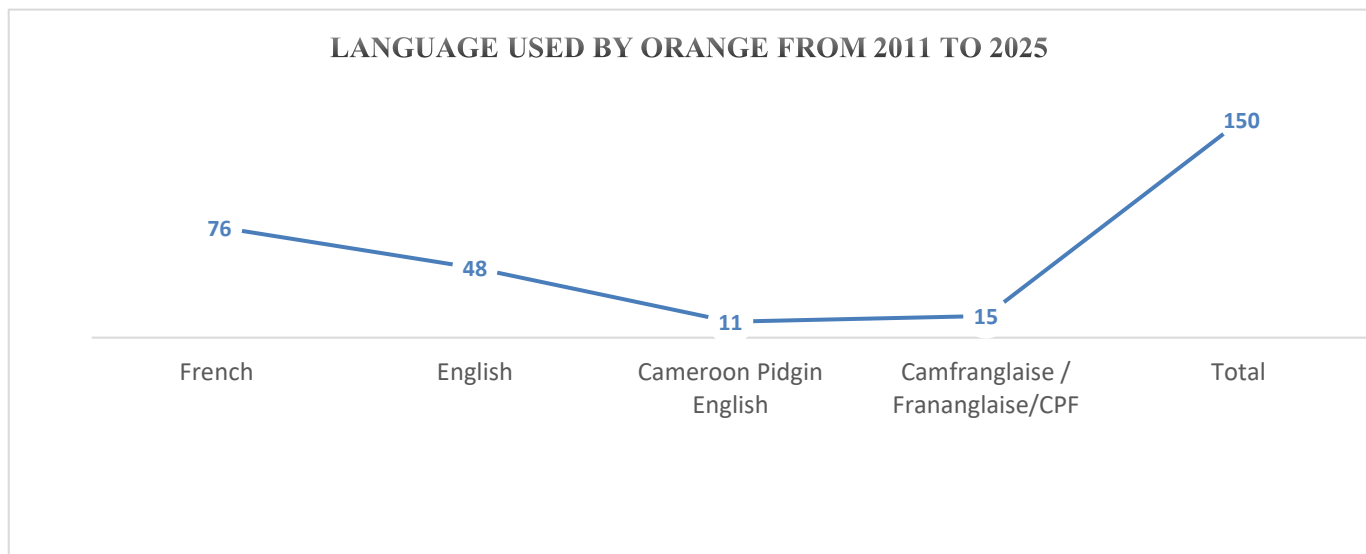


Figure 4: Language used by Orange from 2011 to 2025 (Source: Authors Field Study 2025)

The figure shows the linguistic landscape by Orange after from 2011 to 2022. Quantity of ads 150 collected from the media are: 76 ads came in French, 48 were in English, 11 was in CPE while 15 were in Camfranglaise. Though French remained the dominant language used, the use of English increased. The more use of both languages is argued that, they are the official languages popularly spoken by many Cameroonians. CPE and CPF also flourished because they are lingua francas spoken by many people. The use of English language by Orange increases and can be interpreted to show the need to increase consumption through bilingualism. The number of Orange subscribers by the year 2025 stands at 6 million registered consumers.

Total Number of Orange Subscribers as of 2018 = about 6,000,000

Number of Anglophone users = about 1,300,000

Total number of Francophone users = about 4.700,000

Total Quantity of ads = 150

Quantity in French = 100

Quantity in English = 50

$100/150 \times 100/1 = 66\%$ in French and 34% in English

The table shows the representation of languages by Orange in its communication programs on the media. French and English were the dominant languages used; CPE and Camfranglaise were minimally used. The reason for the use of English and French is because they are the first official languages with Cameroonians mostly versed in them.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the linguistic landscape of MTN and Orange from 2000 to 2010 reveal that, the total number of ads collected from MTN were 200, the number of users were about 7,000,000, number of Anglophone users were about 6,000,000, Total number of francophone users were about 1,000,000, the Quantity of ads collected were 200, the quantity of ads in French were 17, quantity of ads in English were 180.

A mathematical calculation shows 8.5 % of these ads were French while 91.5% came in English. Orange on the other hand had total number subscribers of about 6,000,000, number of Anglophone users were about 500,000, number of francophone users stood at about 5500,000. The quantities of ads collected were 200, the quantities in French were 185, total quantity in English was 10 giving a mathematical calculation of 95 % ads in French and 5% in English. The discussion of findings show that, from 2000 to 2022, English was gaining status in the English-speaking section of Cameroon due to more use of it by MTN on the media while French was gaining status in the French section of the country due to more use of it by Orange on the media. The other lingua francas (CPE and Camfranglaise) were not given importance.

The linguistic landscape from 2011 to 2025 show the different languages used in Cameroon. The number of MTN subscribers stood at 8,000,000 in 2025, the number of Anglophone users was about 5,000,000, the total number of Francophone users was about 3,000,000, the total quantity of ads collected was 150, the quantity in French is 60, the quantity in English was 90. The percentage ad according to language use was 60 % in English and 40% in French. For Orange, the number of Subscribers as of 2022 stood at about 6,000,000, the number of Anglophone users were about 1,300,000, the number of Francophone users were about 4,700,000, the quantity of ads collected was 150, the quantity in French was 100, the quantity in English was 50 giving a percentage ratio of 66% in French and 34% in English. This is argued that, English, French, CPE and Camfranglaise were gaining status in Cameroon by MTN on the media. This accounted for by the fostering of bilingualism in Cameroon. French, English, CPE and Camfranglaise were equally gaining status in use by Orange on the media. The reasons for the shift in behavior during the different phases are accounted for by the below reasons:

Firstly, there were efforts to be bilingual by Cameroonians made the companies to use the official languages (Fonlon, 1969, Anchimbe, 2005). The mastery of these lingua Francas has affected consumers choices, Anglophones are consuming more of MTN because of the high use of English than French while the Francophones more of Orange because of the high use of French than English. The use of the Lingua francas CPE and Camfranglaise by MTN and Orange also attract more consumers. The Linguistic Landscapes from 2000 to 2010 show the demographic distribution of Cameroonians along the lines of the official languages put in place by colonialism gives French more speakers. Since France annex 70% of this former German territory after the First World War and Britain only 30%. French is spoken by over 70% of Cameroonians and English by a meagre 30% of the ten administrative regions, eight are francophone and two Anglophone (Mforteh, 2015). Orange uses more of French which turns Anglophones away from consuming its services and products.

The Linguistic Landscapes from 2011-2025 show the Making of official bilingualism functional started at the level of the state with implementation by the companies. MTN immediately adopted the use of English and

French though French were minimally used. Orange delayed in the implementation process until 2011 upwards. The decision to implement bilingualism was to attract more Anglophones in consuming Orange products and services and to change companies image which Anglophones saw as 'French oriented' and thus, did not understand their messages (Ngu, 2014).

From 2011 upward, data show several linguistic changes that took place in the practice of bilingualism by the telecommunication companies; this included the changing perspectives of the English and French languages by the companies. Francophones saw English as language of opportunities and the renewed attention to CPE as normal rather than a denigrated code (Mforteh, 2015). This made the Orange Company to adopt more of using the code.

Concerning the practice of bilingualism, the organisations took an innovative step. Orange change its communication strategy by using English and French in different editions when advertising on the media. They made sure, if the advertisements in Cameroon Tribune on Monday edition was in French, the next edition on Tuesday was in English. On brochures, if one side is in French, the other side is printed in English. On the internet; it was done weekly or monthly where ads were done in all the languages. MTN on the other hand followed the same strategy. The intention was to attract Anglophones and Francophones in consuming their products and services. However, just like the saying 'old habits die hard'; Orange still uses more of French on the media than English while MTN uses more of English than French.

The linguistic landscape created linguistic effects of language and identity on consumption Jaffe (1996, p. 818). Moreover, culture, if it should be vocal and immediately comprehensive, must "be viewed as derived from, if not constituted in, communication and language practices" (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Language is thus central to identity, it is then clear that many identities can be traced in Cameroon. They include the official language identity, the ethnic identity, the bilingual identity and the individual identity which Cameroonians are using to identify themselves in consumption processes. MTN attaches English and CPE which attracted many consumers who speak English. Orange uses more of French and CPF which attracted French speaking Cameroonians.

The linguistic landscape has created different types of identities (Anchimbe, 2007, p. 46).

The official languages are attached to consumption. The Anglophones are consuming more of MTN because it communicates in English. While the Francophones on their part are consuming more of Orange due to French identity. The current use of bilingualism by these companies (MTN and Orange) is to build official language identity.

Also, there is ethnic identity on these advertisements (Anchimbe, 2005). It is often identified as the roots; it is closed to others who do not belong to it. The lingua franca divide in Cameroon is seen and termed as an ethnic identity. Francophones are using French to be an ethnic divide while the Anglophones are using English on their part. Ethnicity has grown to exclude others from the consuming society. Having Orange in North West and South West is seen as a '**French thing**' and consumers' preferences are hindered and vice versa with MTN.

Bilingual identity on consumption of telecom products should be emphasized. Fonlon's (1969) notion of state bilingualism required that all educated Cameroonians must be fluent in both English and French. There are Anglophones and Francophones who grew up and studied in francophone areas and vice versa, as well as others who majored in bilingual studies at the university. This has been capitalised by the telecommunication companies, MTN and Orange uses bilingualism and attempt to unite Francophones into the 'bilingual identity'. Orange on its part has moved away from too much of 'French usage' to using English and French. The more Cameroonians become bilingual, the more it facilitates communication.

Individual Cameroonians have also form identities from the linguistic landscapes used.

Everyone presumably belongs to an ethnic group (ethnic identity), is either an Anglophone or francophone (official language identity), may or may not be bilingual (bilingual identity) and may want to be regarded as socially superior (individual identity) (Anchimbe, 2005, p. 46). applies to the Cameroonians who claimed to be

bilingual while others reject bilingualism. Consumers of telecommunication products and services are falling within this range. Some consumers are individual identity, reject bilingualism while others accept it. The rejection by others is to show the dislike for one language over another. The socially superior ones who accept bilingualism are seen as the benefactors or beneficiaries of the policy on them. Those who reject it consume only the products and services of the organization which uses their language more.

The linguistic landscapes also form patterns of consumers known as Monolinguals, Bilinguals and Multilinguals. Language remains a focal point especially when rendering services (Helland, 1992). Luna and Perachio (2001) stated that language by itself is a determined factor on brand advertising effectiveness in a bilingual and multilingual market. Tran's (2009, p. 19) study on language familiarity effect on bilingual consumers reveals that many countries with bilingual consumer's environment has become increasingly prevalent and as such has become a crucial tool for marketers to communicate their advertising messages to consumers. Anglophones consume more of MTN because of English and CPE. The Francophones are consuming more of Orange of French and Camfranglaise.

Textual information such as brand names and marketing slogans, labeling and advertisement tend to be perceived by consumers to be more emotional in their first language than being expressed in their second language (Stefano, Bart & Stijn, 2009, p. 1012). This is done through the use of Cameroonian languages, dressing codes and people on the ads who are Cameroonians. For this reason, the understanding of culture in advertising is very vital if not primordial, irrespective of the marketing situation (Mbaye, 2009). Culture is the most influential as far as advertising of MTN and Orange is concerned in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

First-language messages tend to be better remembered than second language messages. Bilingualism might be a matter of degree (Zhang & Schmitt, 2004, pp. 220-28). The linguistic landscape of Cameroon has made a plurality of language choices of MTN and Orange in their ads. MTN turns to use different languages based on the different areas in which the ads are displayed. CPE and CPF are used. When selling in the Anglophone regions MTN uses English and CPE. Meanwhile, national languages are scarcely used by the company.

With regards to the media such as Cameroon Tribune from the year 2000 to 2010, findings show that, Orange uses more of French than English while MTN uses more of English than French. From (2011-2025), both MTN and Orange during certain periods are bilingual with English and French appearing in different editions. Concerning Billboards, MTN uses more of English in English speaking regions while Orange is more bilingual, use both English and French.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Author hereby declares that this study acknowledges the importance of responsible language use in telecom advertising and its potential impact on Cameroonian consumers and society. Our analysis was conducted with consideration for these ethical dimensions thereby, contributing to a more informed discussion on telecom advertising practices in Cameroon.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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