

# Creating New Names for Common Things in Cameroon English

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This paper reviews the creation of descriptive appellations in Cameroon and situates their reticence in ESL/EFL teaching. It focuses on compounds and their relevance to communication in L2 contexts.

## Introduction

The English language in its present state adapts and continues to adopt the speech realities and the environmental exigencies of nations and regions to which it has spread. Having sailed across the world to become a perfect icon of "language expansion" (Platt et al 1984) and triggered by "a mixture of colonial force and deliberate submission, economic convenience on the part of Europeans and faith in progress or pragmatic utility on that of non-Europeans" (Görlach 1995:13), English today "is acquiring various international identities and thus acquiring multiple ownerships" (Kachru 1986:31). The ownership of English highly represented in ESL and EFL teaching manifests itself through the introduction and continuous use of elements of all types; morphological, phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic, that are derived from a given context. The Cameroonian context displays a great and inexhaustive compendium of these typically Cameroonian features.

This paper looks into one category of these new features in English in the Cameroon. It pays attention to naming patterns or the appellations given to certain items in the physical or conceptual environment. Secondly, it deals exclusively with the word formation process of compounding. This is supposedly because with compounds as Katamba (1994:74) upholds, "their meanings are so transparent that they can be worked out using standard rules in the grammar". However in English L2 contexts like Cameroon this may not work out perfectly because besides grammar rules there are context rules that facilitate the extraction of meaning from words. An adequate knowledge of this ecological counterpart is necessary for any successful ESL/EFL teaching. Kouega (1998) studies some of these creations rather from the perspective of native language loans in English in Cameroon. He does not explore the logical hierarchy of naming that is inherent in these compounds. It is this patterning that this paper concentrates on.

## English in Cameroon

The English language in Cameroon is the heritage first of the English Baptist Missionary that covered almost all of West Africa. At this period the Bible and other religious documents written in standard British English were introduced. English later on came to be fully established through the British colonial mandate after World War I. It is one of the two official languages in Cameroon, beside French, and is generally acquired as a second language. Sometimes it is acquired as a third language. This is because Cameroonians generally learn a native language (mother tongue) at home before school age, Pidgin English in the immediate multilingual society also before school and lastly English in school. English therefore is a scholastic medium and may never be learnt if one does not go to school. Massanga (1983:73) delimits the scope of English speakers in Cameroon to education, for he thinks it "logical to consider CSE [Cameroon Standard English] as being that variety of English spoken by the Anglophone Cameroonian who has at least attained and completed the secondary school level of education". The place of education and the stage at which English is learnt in this context prioritises the facile introduction of earlier learnt patterns either from the native languages or from Pidgin English. The latter is frequent and in some cases serves as a bridge for the transliteration of forms into English from the native languages.

Although many people oppose the use of these features in English (Simo Bobda 1994, 2002, Kfua 1996, etc), it cannot be refuted that they are making English to adopt a distinctive character that attaches it to Cameroon. This distinctiveness makes

Cameroonians to "own" English. Moreover, as will be seen below, a certain logic obtains in the manner things are named or renamed, how they are understood under these names and how they replicate the cultural or conceptual landscape. It is also interesting to note that although standard equivalents may exist for these new compound appellations, the new ones seem to be more communicative. Intelligibility, at least within the community, is not in any way hampered. It might be with others. This explains why this paper adopts the point that ESL/ EFL teaching must be founded in the society in which it is being taught. We return to this below but first let us examine the descriptive naming patterns frequent in Cameroon.

## Naming Patterns in English in Cameroon

The technique of compounding is such a rich and elastic weapon in any language because it allows for, as need may be, the creation of as many words as their meanings permit. The general domain consists of compounds with descriptive words that directly point to the referent. This makes it easy to understand what is being referred to. However, a more fascinating realm exists in which the compounding is based on a conceptual analogy built in the sociocultural, traditional or belief system of the community. In this case unless one is familiar with the system, the word will remain strange. In Cameroon all of these get into play and while some can easily be decoded from their descriptive appellations, others need a knowledge of the conceptual system. Things are generally named through their colour, taste, physical or behavioural nature, a contrastive juxtaposition with another element, and analogy with other elements. An attempt has been made in the following examples to provide the English names of these elements in those cases where one exists. Where one does not exist, a description is given.

### Naming Through Colour

Colour is perhaps the most accurate way of identifying things. The world is primarily dissected on basis of colour: whites, blacks, etc. The items named after a given colour take after that colour very strongly in a way that seeing them immediately reverts to the name. The items may have other names but the use of colour is descriptive enough to make them easily known. This logic makes communication feasible in L2 contexts wherein many items exist that have no original names in English. In the following examples, the colour adjective expresses what type of item is under reference. For instance, red oil refers to a type of oil that is red, even if it is palm oil.

Compound	Real Name
red oil	palm oil
white mimbo	palm wine
white stuff	palm wine
yellow pepper	type of yellowish pepper

The nouns above belong to the physical environment of Cameroon which strongly differs from the British. From that point, difference in appellation becomes predictable. In the case of white mimbo, the term mimbo borrowed from Pidgin English means wine and since palm wine is white, the appellation white mimbo leaves no doubt to what is being referred to.

### Naming Through Taste

Taste here suggests that these elements are edible. Food items whose English names are either unknown (bitter leaf) or do not exist (pepper soup) tend to be generally named following their tastes.

Compound	Description
sweet herb	type of herb
sweet drinks	soft drinks
sweet yams	species of yams

bitter leaf	bitter herb used as a meal
pepper soup	soup with hot pepper and meat

The case of pepper soup is different because it is a food item of this society. Nevertheless, the appellation is descriptive of the way this meal tastes and not of its composition. It is a meal of meat, cooked together with spices and pepper. The appellation bitter leaf, a type of herb used as vegetable, creates a new counterpart, sweet herb, which is not sweet as such but is not bitter either. It structurally resembles bitter leaf and since it is not bitter it is described and called sweet herb. Similarly, sweet drinks cover all soft drinks whether sweet or not.

### Naming Through Physical Nature

Although colour and taste are part of the physical nature of things, they are not the ultimate. Other characteristics establish certain other attributes of things. These include the physical composition, the reaction of the item under certain conditions and its uses. The following examples describe one of such physical attributes.

Compound	Description
water leaf	herb used as moisturizer in cooking eru
fever grass	lemon grass believed to treat fever
ground beef	palm rat (lives in holes in the ground)
cutting grass	hedge hog (noted for the way it cuts grass for food and shelter)
elephant grass	large herb in tropical zones

According to Kouega (1998) these compounds "are used to facilitate communication in informal situations". This may not necessarily be the case because most of these compounds do not either have equivalents in English or may have less exact counterparts and so tend to be the only alternative available. It is interesting to note how the eating habits or the living habits of animals are analogized in the naming. The palm rat is named after its habitat as a ground beef while the hedge hog is a cutting grass from the way it feeds on grass. Similarly elephant grass recaptures the gigantic nature of elephants. A certain knowledge of the physical environment is needed to understand these names which though are descriptive, derive from a conceptual field limited to members of the community.

### Naming Through Conceptual Usage

Societies often have a range of knowledge that is affordable to its members. Saussure's (1960) notion of "langue", Mufwene's (2001) "communal language", etc suggest a state where the society follows inherently agreed-upon rules. This is what obtains in conceptual or belief systems. The following examples capture concepts in the sociocultural setup of the society that is accessible to its members. Some of the compounds are transparent, for instance cry die, book work and tight friend whereas others are not.

Compound	Description
born house	birth celebration
cry die	death celebration
open eye	bossy
trouble bank	assistance fund
book work	studies,education
knock door	betrothal ceremony

tight friend
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intimate friend
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One requires familiarity with the cultural concept of knock door to understand it as a betrothal ceremony or with financial meetings to decode trouble bank as savings for emergency assistance. The notion of knock door comes from the traditional realisation of the event. A young man in search of a wife goes to knock at her father's door (house) to ask for her hand in marriage. Again, language becomes intricately linked to society and has to be interpreted from this link.

## Contrastive Juxtaposition Using Bush

The creation of compounds with bush, which Kouega (1998) describes as a pidgin English equivalent for wild, follows a pattern of putting a known element in juxtaposition to an unknown one. The unknown one is referred to as coming from the bush. Here bush refers to the forest. This pattern is generally used for certain animals or plants that have similar counterparts in the immediate vicinity. Below the formation of descriptive appellations is from domestic animals and common fruits in the home.

Compound	Real Name
bush meat	game
bush pig	boar
bush dog	wolf or fox
bush fowl	partridge
bush plum	type of plum found in forests
bush mango	wild type of mango

These items are all found in the forest as opposed to the home-based counterparts from which they are named. However, bush man borrows from this juxtaposition but rather refers to a naïve person.

## Pedagogic Implications

Many pedagogical materials for ESL/EFL teaching are primarily written with a native background that reflects little or nothing of the learners' physical and conceptual environment. This acquaints the learner with foreign concepts and items he will never meet in his own environment. The consequence of this has been the continuous distance between English and the society in which it finds itself. It continues to be foreign because those things that are studied are far away in the womb of the British Isles or the Americas. On the other hand, a greater incidence of borrowing and compounding is witnessed as the speakers try to bridge the gap. As Simo Bobda (1997) insists, the sociocultural context must be represented in the pedagogic material if not it will ceaselessly pose constraints to learners.

The inclusion of this contextual or ecological factor in pedagogic materials may not be enough if teachers insist on teaching only what is right according to native English. Sometimes, this may go as far as creating descriptive names for those elements that do not have counterparts in English whereas native language appellations exist for them. A certain flexibility is required in teaching because, since children come in contact with most of these features even before going to school, the new meanings or words they learn in school tend to be wrong, secondary or deviant to them. No new name can at this point be coined for water leaf, bitter leaf, knock door, etc that would have the same semantic impact as these. Some of them simply have to sip into the variety and be signposts of it if they communicate intelligibly across the community.

## Conclusion

Descriptive names, like the ones exposed above, "are English only in form but essentially Cameroonian in mood and

content" (Mbangwana 1992:96). They are not wrong but simply show other ways, preferred by this community, to designate items. The descriptive mechanism used makes semantic interpretation less laborious and renders them more affordable. As L2, English is bound to be fashioned in this manner if it has to serve the people for whom it is a medium of instruction or transaction. In ESL/EFL teaching therefore, these elements must not be treated as fallouts of incomplete or inadequate learning or as the negative influences of background languages but must be looked upon as logical strategies for accounting for processes, items whose equivalents in English are either inexistent, inaccurate or unknown. So their use should not matter in as long as communication is rendered more effective.

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