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Youth language attitudes and  
secrecy in West Cameroon

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## Youth language attitudes and secrecy in West Cameroon

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### 1. Introduction: A dialogue

**Persons:** Calvin and Joan, his aunt.

**Scene:** at a neighborhood in mile three Nkwen, Bamenda Cameroon, 22 December 2017.

**Joan:** Calvin, could you please get my shoes cleaned when you finish with your laundry?

**Calvin:** Yes, auntie, I will.

**Joan:** I wonder if this rumor about school reopening on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January is actually true.

**Calvin:** Hmm, auntie, I am not sure; this has been going on for long now but no actual resumption has ever taken place. Heeee – and auntie we don't have a house (Heee and auntie we have stayed in the house for so long now).

**Joan:** Hmm teeh? One will not stop hearing new words.

**Calvin:** Hahahaha.

**Joan:** We hope things do not get worst. By the way, where is Lum? She was supposed to boil some rice so we can eat for lunch.

**Calvin:** Lum don vanish, nowhere around here.

**Joan:** What is vanish, what language are you speaking?

**Calvin:** Hahahaha, auntie, what I meant is, Lum has gone, she is nowhere around the house now.

**Joan:** Where do you people learn these new ways of speaking with very strange words?

**Calvin:** it comes up automatically as we discuss with friends, nobody teaches us and as we speak, many of our friends after hearing for a long time start speaking like us.

**Joan:** Hmmm, okay ooo...

Despite the fact that languages are being taught, are standardized or developed, every language starts with just a single person, two persons or a few people. Humans are always moved with the desire to communicate in a language that is best understood by them and a few people in their cycles, and they sometimes use this language(s) so often that it becomes a common knowledge to many and in many cases, gradually becomes a standard way of speaking ranging from a small group of people to larger groups. Hence, as people evolve and communities change, languages equally evolve and new languages pop up depending on those involved. These languages may include youth language, secret language, religious language, language according to the different professions and gender-specific language, among many others.

Youth language has been existing for a long time; it has gained a lot of attention from scholars in European contexts, as compared to the African context where most scholars just

recently developed an interest in it. This interest evolved due to many reasons. It is worth noting that youth language has faced a lot of challenges including the fact that many people find it difficult to accept the fact that youth language or languages are not only made up of bad words, slangs or for resistance purposes. Contrary to that, there are a number of reasons why youths do create new languages and in many cases it has little or nothing to do with bad words or being resistant – studies such as the ones mentioned below have shown that there are varieties of youth languages that will depend on the group or groups to which one belongs. In the case of Nigeria for example, we have groups such as the ‘whatzup boys’ (westernized and often economically well-heeled fellows) and ‘yahoo-yahoo boys’ (entrepreneurial youngsters sometimes associated with illegal local and international dealings). There is also the motor park language widely spoken by uneducated drivers and ‘area boys’ (school-dropouts, social miscreants) (see Hurst-Harosh & Erastus 2018: 184). Associating these different groups with violence goes a long way to support the ideology that youth language frequently originates in the so-called criminal milieu (Halliday 1978, cited in Hurst-Harosh & Erastus 2018: 184).

This paper investigates youth culture as a whole package (dressing, language, dancing styles, hair styles, articulation and many more). It focuses on youth culture in West Cameroon looking into their language which is highly characterized by multilingualism with traces of many colonial and African languages and like many other youth languages, it is highly influenced by cultures such as hip hop music, dressing and walking styles among others. The intention of this paper is to add to other voices that youth have got a mind of their own to create

new cultures for their own satisfaction and not necessarily resisting others who are out of their cycles.

## **2. Paper aim**

Despite the popular idea that youth languages are mostly slangs, bad words or mostly a matter of resistance (law, home rules, societal norms etc.), there has been a growing interest in youth language lately. Youth language in Cameroon is not an exception to this interest as we have a number of scholars writing on these languages. But in my opinion, there is still so much to be talked about as youths develop new languages and culture more often than one can imagine. This paper aims at looking at existing knowledge on youth language, questioning its generalization where necessary while adding new ideas to show that youth language and culture in West Cameroon must not be seen from a negative point of view but that different ideologies are the rationale behind their different life styles.

## **3. General overview**

According to McCarty & Wyman (2009), many indigenous youths in rapidly shifting communities are not simply abandoning their heritage (such as language) but rather expressing powerful yearnings to become confident heritage language speakers. They further explain that youth may value and actively attempt to maintain their heritage languages with one another even as their own changing peer practices of language shift and are endangered. The authors claim that in order to understand how youth, families and communities move along trajectories of language endangerment

in such settings, we must have a deeper look on how language learning and beliefs about languages change over time within complex linguistic ecologies (see McCarty & Wyman 2009: 279-290).

According to Nassenstein & Hollington (2015: 1), “despite the fact that each youth language in Africa and beyond has its own flavors and features and has to be regarded in its own particular cultural, (multi)lingual, social and local contexts, youth languages in Africa share certain properties, especially with regard to their function as markers of identity and in terms of the strategies of linguistic manipulation employed”. They cite Kießling & Mous (2004), saying domains such as music, clothing, political attitudes, movies, hair style, street knowledge, way of life, dancing styles, ways of working among many others come together with language in terms of creating and expressing the shared group identity of the members of the community of practice. This should be taken into consideration in order to draw a more coherent and holistic picture of the linguistic practice in its social and cultural context.

When words are manipulated, language is deliberately changed, giving different levels of meaning, expressing distance and group boundaries, as Storch (2011: 11) argues. Storch also went further to say that “in being equated to the sacred and magnified reality, manipulated language is surely also an essentialization of shared ideas and concepts of truth among a certain community of speakers.”

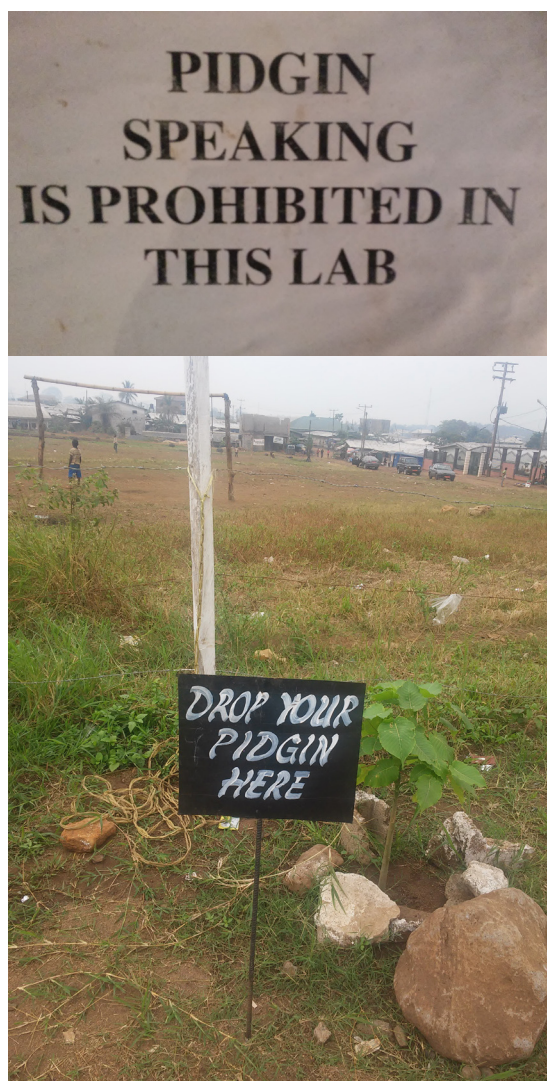
There are claims that youth languages in nature are short-lived and change rapidly based on the assumption that others cannot or should not understand them. These languages generally originate with lexical borrowing

from other languages or slang varieties not leaving out the terminologies of crime and delinquency and they have a feature of high variation. It is important to know that after these languages have been established as youth languages and their speakers grow older, they might be adopted by the general society as vernaculars themselves countering the claims that they are short-lived (an example of these is Sheng in Nairobi; see McLaughlin 2009: 9). There is therefore a need to sometimes disassociate the history of origin of a language from its present usage. In this regard, a language that originated from a 'deviant group' and has developed to a widely spoken language should be judged from its present state. Nouchi is a language spoken in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and the term originally applied to a social group of street gangs 'juvenile delinquents' (Ploog 2008: 253). This language was developed in the 1980s as a secret language which youths could use to prevent the police from understanding them. According to Ploog (2008: 253) and Kube-Barth (2009: 105), it is based on *Français Populaire* – a variety of French – and borrowing from English, German, Spanish, Baoule, Dioula and Bete.

Cameroon Pidgin is one of those languages that despite the fact that it is widely spoken, it has not been fully accepted as a language worth using and still faces a lot of resistance as people are sometimes seen as being inferior when they use it. It is often considered the language of the illiterate masses and described as bad, bush English or broken English (Dibussi Tande 2006). The disdain for Pidgin is even glaring on school and university campuses where one can get anti-Pidgin signboards as follows:

*"Drop your Pidgin here"*  
*"Succeed at the university by avoiding Pidgin"*  
*"Pidgin is like AIDS shun it"*  
*"Pidgin is your linguistic enemy"*  
*"English is the password not Pidgin"*  
*"Commonwealth speak English not Pidgin"*

Fig. 1 & Fig. 2. Prohibitions



The fate of youth language is like other languages such as pidgins and creoles which have been devalued of prestige in the same way their speakers have been devalued (see Morga Dalphinis 1985, cited in Dibussi Tande 2006 :2). The urge to create an identity is a characteristic of youth language where through speaking a particular language, they feel a sense of possession and belonging. Storch (2011: 14) explains how languages of rituals, secret languages and those restricted to a particular group including youth languages not only express but are used to create social identities where group boundaries are constructed and maintained. The issue of creating an identity to me trashes the assumption that youth languages are mostly slangs or for resistance purposes. It is common practice for individuals to want to belong or be identified with what they find interesting. Hence, language is just one of those strategies used by youth or any special group to make these differentiations and should not be assumed of being delinquent.

Camfranglais for example is a language spoken by youths in the francophone part of the country. It originated as a language of criminals so many years back and even goes by several different names like *Pidgin French*, *Franglais*, *Langage de Bandits de Douala*, or *Camspeak*, but is now widely spoken amongst youths (Schröder 2007: 282). An example is:

- (1) *Man, lep je go where avec une djim-djim so?*  
 ‘Man, where will I go with a fat lady like this?’

According to Schröder, Camfranglais is used as a “secret in-group language” and therefore concludes that what these codes represent is the urge of young people in this societies to impregnate the dominant standard and the colonial languages with a local flavor and add local color to a global language (Schröder 2007: 293–297).

#### 4. Other aspects of youth languages

Looking at some of the examples of these youth language such as Camfranglais, Mboko, “Nigger Talk” (see below), among others, one can see that in many of the contexts, the discussion is usually more about the speakers themselves than against others. Let us take a look at a popular interpretation of the situation:

Fig. 3. Cartoon – Boy, I was wondering, where do you live? – Man, never mind, it is in a place where I can’t tell you<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> See [<http://www.cameroonpostline.com/in-praise-of-camfranglais-and-other-africanisms/>].



With the above example among many other examples, it is worth saying that their communication might not have been understood by people around them, but it doesn't make it a secret as many will assume. It can therefore be safe to say they simply want to flow in a language they deem suitable for a certain situation or at a particular time.

Music by the popular musician in Cameroon, Lapiro de Mbanga (of late) who was known for his unique style of singing is another good example. Lapiro was also known as the father and author of Mboko Talk, as it could be heard in most of his music. The particular clip illustrated below was very popular in the early 2000s and was highly loved, sung and danced to by youths who enjoyed the language used and the manner in which he portrayed the daily activities and language of a typical Cameroonian youth. The language in his music is so intense that till today, many youths might not be able to translate every part of his music if asked to – just made of English, French, Pidgin and some indigenous languages.

It is worth noting that despite the long time Mboko has been spoken in Cameroon, especially in the Anglophone part of the country, many people still distance themselves from it because of the negative connotations given to it such as: a language to resist criminal and other laws of a community, household rules and other societal regulations, a language for thieves, school drop-outs and irresponsible youths. On the other hand, many young and uprising musicians in Cameroon now use and identify themselves with this language and other similar languages, which gives them a



Fig. 4. Screenshots from Lapiro's music clips<sup>2</sup>

sense of pride so that people are now accused of claiming ownership of the language.

Looking at the above examples, one could add that apart from being resistant or secretive with language, youths have a sense of pride when using a particular language that is not widely spoken. In addition to that, what they say might not necessarily be a secret as many people around them may understand what is being said. All they want is to make a difference and at times, show off their ability to switch codes, mix different languages and make a known language sound completely different. Below is a typical situation of my home when growing up as a teenager and you can be assured the aim was never to say anything

<sup>2</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzBbHqhLQi0>].

secret; it's a style that was adopted by many youths and even still in use today despite a strong denial from some parents.

Day one

**Me:** *Abeg bring me that kong make I tsuhte this finion dey, then no forget dat kehke too let me remove this fufu because e don over stay for fire.*

'Please bring that stick so I can pound this garden egg and don't forget to also bring a saucer so I can remove this fufu, it has been on fire for too long.'

**Mother:** *What? What language are you speaking? This should be the last time I am getting that nonsense in this house, its either you speak English, pidgin or the dialect. Stop mixing up languages like a confused cockroach.*

Day 2

**Jane:** *So wona be di over mbene for dat party because wona want show all man say you can dance very well? Then waiti I be see for ya kehvu like shark so or don't tell me you don start shark da kind?*

'Where you guys dancing a lot at that party because you wanted to show to everyone that you can dance? And by the way what did I see in your hands like a beer, don't tell me you have started drinking beer?'

**Me:** *Abeg leave me, waiti be ya own for deh, make man no mbene say I di soir who? Nobe the party was organized for people for mbene?*

'Let me be please, what is your business in it who am I afraid of that I shouldn't dance and was the party not organized for people to dance?'

**Megi:** *But you nova still answer about that shark weh you be haah.*

'But you haven't said anything about the beer you were holding.'

**Me:** *Which shark nor? What exactly you be see?*

'Which beer, what exactly did you see?'

**Jane:** *I say you be hold shark di nehe ya body you ask me say waiti I be see?*

'I said you had a bottle of beer and was shaking your body (dancing) and you are asking me what exactly I saw?'

**Megi:** *Hahahaha and na so deh bottle be large.*

'Hahahaha and the bottle was really big.'

**Me:** *What? Wona no serious at all, next time wona boteh wona eye look fine. I nobe get any shark because I nodi first shark, na juice I be hold wona come di claim overdone for here. Wona must first di shout sodat make mami or papa hear di feel say wie don di shark weh a no get any idea?*

'What? You guys are not serious at all, next time please open your eyes and look well. I had no beer because I don't drink beer in the first place, it was a bottle of juice I had and you guys are claiming to be so informed. By the way must you people shout for mama or papa to hear and think I have started drinking beer when I have no idea?'

**Mother:** *Waiti wona di talk for here? I don warn wona for always di stick to one language noh (attempting to slap the closest person to her). Make I hear that*



*confused talk for this house again. Na so wona go go di mix am for wona exam paper dem.*

‘What are you people saying here? Haven’t I warned you guys to always stick to one language? Let me hear that confused language here again, that is exactly how you will go and mix up languages during an exam.’

Following the dialogues, one can deduce that the initial aim of the choice of language wasn’t meant to resist the parents or say something secretive, it just gives them a sense of pride to use language in an artistic way and still be able to flow in their chat. Even the mother could understand what was being said but will not want to use the same language because she identifies it with the youth and does not find it appropriate. Apart from this, there are so many different reasons why youths use languages that are meant to be spoken only by those in their cycle. While some people said they have a feeling of belonging and pride while speaking these languages, others said their professions make them form languages that are limited to their cycles, or they just want to be out of the ordinary in their choice of language. Awa Prosper, a midwife in Cameroon, said they will use a medical language in the hospital to convey information that will be understood only by medical practitioners. It could be an information that could put a patient or his/her family member in a shock. Hence, they will prefer to pass it on just among themselves. For example, if the patient is HIV positive they

use the word *IT* or if a patient is dead, they say *the patient is alga 0*.<sup>3</sup>

Vuchase Godwill, a youth in Bamenda uses special language(s) in his day-to-day conversation with friends and even adds some special codes to his speech, for instance when he says *clean* for ‘yes’ and *night* for ‘no’. In her opinion, Sandra (another youth) says that these languages are used among themselves to enjoy the discussion and also to say something they think is sacred to their group, e.g. when they say *bra* for ‘menses’. It’s not necessarily something secretive but simply used because they won’t want an immature person or the guys to understand they are talking about their menstrual period.<sup>4</sup>

To another person, some of the words added to the youth language may come about as a result of a mistake, or a particular event. One person makes a mistake and it becomes the norm to refer to that word or person. For example, Peter falls in the presence of his friends, then the next time Samuel almost falls and the friends use words like *please don’t peter here*. It could also be associated with an object (food, music, plants, dressing among others). In this case, someone might be so connected to a particular object or person in a way that the friends use the object to refer to that person or the people around him.<sup>5</sup>

According to Elma, some of these new languages or codes come up because of the urge to shorten the words and reduce stress in communication. Some examples of these words are *shi* ‘100 frs’ and *nkolo* ‘1000 frs’. It is worth mentioning that this has also extended to writing

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s archive.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s archive.

<sup>5</sup> Author’s archive.

where youths in particular use very limited letters to spell words in their text messages. It is common seeing expressions like *hawwa you* 'how are you', *8* 'great', *nyt* 'night', *btw* 'by the way' and *lol* 'laugh out loud' among many others.<sup>6</sup>

Youths are not only considered being resistant from their language. Their hairstyle, walking style, dancing, music choices and even dressing styles are in some cases considered as being resistant or being deviant. According to Rumeana Jahangir at BBC News (31 May 2015), in early African civilization, hairstyles could indicate a person's family background, tribe and social status. Hair was considered to tell a lot about someone's identity which is one of the reasons why a woman in mourning will either not do her hair or will choose a subdued hairstyle for that period. This ideology, as I can say, has not completely been forgotten, as it is very common to get people laying emphasis on what hairstyle is suitable for a responsible person.

Dialogue between Marie and the father in a neighborhood in Ntambessi, Bamenda Cameroon on 5 January 2018:

**Marie:** Good evening Papa!

**Father:** Yes, good evening. Where are you coming from?

**Marie:** From the salon.

**Father:** Hmm, are you by any means trying to say this is what you went and paid money to do?

**Marie:** But papa, what is wrong with the hair? This is what many people do these days.

**Father:** Good enough, you are not many people. First thing tomorrow morning, I want you to take off that nonsense from your head.

**Marie:** Hmm.

**Father:** Don't even argue with me, I wonder who told you could do anything on your head and bring to this house. Is this how you were brought up? Just take off that thing because it does not represent this family at all.

**Marie:** Papa, I spent so much money to do this hair.

**Father:** I will give you money to make a new one.

Looking at the above dialogue, one can see that Marie's father has associated the hairstyle already with being deviant. He is so concerned about his family name and how the society will think he did not bring up his daughter well by allowing her to do that particular hairstyle. There is a popular belief that youths have deviated from the standard or 'morally right' way of doing things, including hairstyles, to an 'immoral and uncultured' way. It is therefore common to get parents making statements like "What is this nonsense you people wear these days? Just take a look at my pictures in the past and see how decently dressed we were!". Dreadlocks is one hairstyle that is associated with 'irresponsible' youths, especially boys, in Cameroon. According to Carin Kometa in

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<sup>6</sup> Author's archive.

the Postnewsline.com<sup>7</sup>, it is something that was common with Reggae musicians like Bob Marley and Lucky Dube who used their music as a weapon for change. As most of them were revolutionists, they were seen as radicals and a violent group of people. As a result, people seen with dreadlocks are considered to be radical. This has not stopped the Cameroonian youths from adopting it, as it is fast becoming a hairstyle for many Cameroonian youths today.



Fig. 5. Dreadlocks becoming an ideal hairstyle for many youths

Fig. 6, 7 & 8. Ideal hairstyle around the 1980s



The pictures (6–8) are typical examples of what was done especially in the 80s and what some parents will consider ideal for a decent lady. At the same time, the present generation will consider any young person with that hairstyle as being ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’. The photo on the left is a recent photo of a youth who had this ‘old’ hairstyle commonly known in Cameroon as *follow me*. Before leaving the house, she had a cap on and did not expose this hairstyle, as would have been done in the past. Talking to her, she mentioned she might not have been so comfortable moving around with the hair because people might consider it to be old-fashioned or not tidy. I also remember having this hairstyle some eleven years ago but never exposed it when I was out of the house. I would always wear a cap when getting out of the house because I felt it was archaic and I had it on for different reasons other than for beauty. Worthy of note is the fact that recently, I have observed some youths are gradually getting into this hairstyle and even showing it off on social media. This gives me the impression that like many other styles practiced by our parents many years ago, such as dressing style, among others, and adopted by youths these days, this hairstyle might in some few years to come find its way back to life.

Music is not being left out of the culture, as it is also believed that youths in Cameroon have changed the pattern of music, and it is common practice these days to hear complains such as, “young people’s music is full of meaningless words and slangs”. Mr. Albert, a lecturer in one of the private universities in Bamenda, in an interview on 28 December 2017, said:

<sup>7</sup> See [<http://allafrica.com/stories/200810171138.html>].



Fig. 9. Screenshots of music in the 1980s and early 1990s<sup>9</sup>

Music these days actually make no sense, I can't waste my time going to a club because I wonder what I will be dancing or listening to. We no longer have good music, I think the youth have turned the music industry to something completely out of place, even listening to the lyrics, I weep for the youth because it seems they can't control what they say. Even the scenes are very indecent.

Below are two YouTube links. The first one is a mix of what the older generation will consider 'ideal', with the 'desired' scenes while the second is the modern mix mostly loved by the youth and considered to be 'meaningless' and 'immoral' by the older generation. This music also goes with a complete different style of dancing compared to what the older generation will even want to be associated with. An example of some of these changes can be seen with *Wamarde*, the pastoral *Mbororo* Fulani of Cameroon youth dance. There is a strong opposition from different quarters that it has gone through a lot of modernization and consequently changing the *Wamarde* tradition.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the audience does not want to look at the changes brought about by the youth from a positive point of view but are more interested in what has always been a tradition. Hence, anything that moves from the 'original form' is negative and threatening.

In an interview I conducted with him, Shetih Elkanah, a young musician with the artist name Obeytheking, on 8 January 2018, stated:

I flow with what is in fashion, what the masses will want to hear. Yes, I use the word *nigger* and I know many people, especially the older generation will not want to hear the word because to them, it is an insulting word to the blacks but many hip hop musicians use it now because we are proud of our identity and do not give a damn to the names people call us. We rather use the word *nigger* to our own advantage, so we can call ourselves *nigger* and why not add it to our music.

<sup>8</sup> See [<http://www.ascleiden.nl/news/they-will-destroy-our-wamarde-mbororo-youth-dance-transition-cameroon>].

<sup>9</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0ixYILpRbUJ>].



Fig. 10. Screenshots of typical  
'youth'<sup>10</sup> music

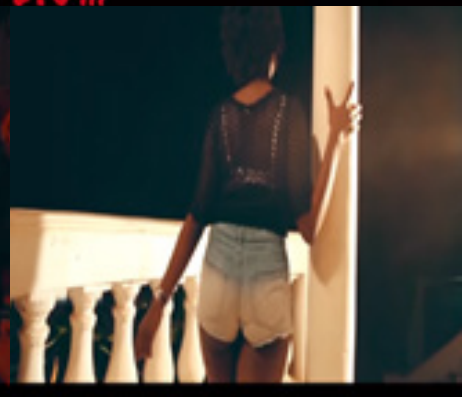
## 5. Conclusion

Taking into consideration the above analysis, I will start by saying that times have changed drastically and keep changing. People move with the trend, and some people, especially the youths, are usually very open to change: they go with the change in taste and fashion. Language in general changes with a rapid speed due to reasons like migration, fashion and language contact which can lead to borrowing words from another language, just to name a few. It is sometimes unavoidable as most of us will testify to have been influenced by or have influence on others with a new language. Therefore, apart from these natural changes, the Cameroonian youths due to some reasons given above, such as prestige, secrecy, among others, intentionally create new languages or codes from the existing ones. It is true that some of these languages came about as a result of the urge by youths to get away with some unwanted practices such as the case of Mboko spoken in Cameroon, but most if not all of these languages are later on developed and spoken by many. As a result, it might be of great help to see the language from its present use rather than judge the speakers according to the origin of the language. Every group of people wants to differentiate themselves through their culture, activities, lifestyle and even language, hence the appellation "group". The youth are not an exception to this demand or desire; their culture must not be what every other person wants it to be. They are full of so much energy that changes brought by them will hardly go unnoticed. Ndinga Joel, a student from the University of Bamenda on 8 January 2018 told me:

<sup>10</sup> See [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA4i9\\_vyQas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA4i9_vyQas)].

<sup>11</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIRni7d6qso>].

Fig. 11. Screenshots of typical 'youth music'



We all know in most societies, change is introduced by youth and considering the fact that most people are usually not comfortable with change until when it is being forced down their throats, the youth are always considered rebellious when they come up with strategies to effect this change. It does not only end with our culture, it extends even to political and economic change, whenever we complain and try to ask for a change, we are being termed terrorists. As a result of this, anything new introduced by us the youth whether it is for the benefit of all, we are being bullied and sometimes treated with so much scorn and even inflicted with pain. At times, when we end up succeeding, you see others benefiting, this also includes our language, lifestyle, walking style, hairstyle etc. Whenever we change these things, we get resistance from the community but trust me – in a long run you get people speaking that language, doing same hairstyle they had termed irresponsible. I have seen mothers being called *remey ngah* meaning ‘young mother’ because they try to copy all what is being done by the youth especially in their language and dressing.

In my opinion, all these are assumptions and not the reality. Maybe trying to know why a group of young people uses a particular ‘unpopular’ language might be better than assuming they are planning something bad or resisting something. I keep asking myself if not through research, how would I have known that young nurses in Anglophone Cameroon have created new codes to pass out information in the presence of a patient without necessarily demoralizing the patient or putting their family members in shock? I will rather love to use the phrase “patient is IT” next time instead of “patient is HIV positive” in order to avoid putting anybody in a demoralizing mode.

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- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA4i9\\_vyQas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA4i9_vyQas)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIR-ni7d6qso>

#### **Weblinks** (all accessed May 2018)

- <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-merseyside-31438273>
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