

Home Language Use in Multilingual Workplace: Exploring Practices, Attitudes, and Relevance in Ngaoundere Public Administration

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Abstract: *This paper is a sociolinguistic study that examines the use of the mother tongue in the public administration of Ngaoundere, Adamawa Cameroon, focusing on the practices, the attitudes of public workers and the relevance of the phenomenon. A sample population of 115 civil servants was surveyed and data were collected using a mixed method approach combining both participant observation and questionnaire. Fishman's Domain Theory (1972) and Giles' Accommodation Theory (2007) served as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The results show that the majority of public employees (45.22%) frequently communicate in their mother tongue, especially in Fulfulde, with public users, colleagues or friends to clarify messages or discuss casual topics. Employees (69.57%) accommodate their language to the public users' code choice, when necessary, without resistance. They do not raise an eyebrow when they hear colleagues speaking to each other in their native language (74.78%) or colleagues speaking to public users in their native language (74.78%). Interestingly, a significant proportion of staff (60%) recognise the relevance of mother tongues in administration, highlighting their role in improving service delivery, work cohesion and increasing trust and citizen engagement. The study concludes that the use of the mother tongue in the workplace is a key factor in effective public administration and advocates policies that support multilingualism to improve governance and service delivery in local administrations in the era of decentralisation.*

Keywords: attitudes, home language, practices, public administration, relevance.

INTRODUCTION

The workplace is not only an area of employment where people work but it is also a network of socialization, cultural practices and compromises. The workplace possesses cultural norms

for engaging in work or non-work-related activities (Angouri & Marra, 2011; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). The Adamawa public administration is a multilingual workplace which intersects assorted linguistic groups distributed as the Fulani, the Gbaya, the Mboum, the Hausa, the Dii, and other settled groups resulting from migration, representative of the sociolinguistic landscape of the region. Again, Adamawa is a multilingual region outnumbered by French-speaking Cameroonians with Fulfulde as the main lingua franca. Ngaoundere public administration is a multilingual environment where the use of the mother tongue is a reality though French and English are the official languages of administration. The implementation of home languages in Cameroon administration, though taught in school, remains a thorny question. In recent years, home language in administration has attracted increasing attention from scholars, for it consolidates rapport between workers and public users and preserves cultural identities (Echu, 2004; Tamandji, 2009; Ndamba & Foncha, 2015; Mbah, 2020). “Home language” is primarily seen as the language spoken and used within the domestic and familial sphere, reflecting individuals’ cultural heritage and family ties (Higgins, 2009). Thus, home language is the language used at home or in the family. Home language is synonymously used with “mother tongue”, “vernacular language” and “native language” as in the context of this research. The context of this sociolinguistic research is an interesting research endeavour because the 1996 constitution buttresses that the State shall protect and promote local languages, a disposition already met in the domain of education since 2009 and yet to be official in administration.

This paper purports to investigate the current practices of home languages in Ngaoundere public administration. Further, it surveys workers’ attitudes towards the use of mother tongues in the public service and shows their relevance in administrative matters as far as service delivery and rapport between workers and public users or colleagues are concerned. In short, the paper enlightens on the multilingual practices and intercultural communication in Ngaoundere administrative workplace settings.

Statement of the problem

Cameroon is a population of about 20 million people with about 300 native languages besides English and French, the two official languages. This impressive multilingual situation complexifies the government’s attempt to promote native languages for the sake of national unity and cohesion. These recent years, the promotion of native languages has been fostered in education, emphasized by organs (PROPELCA, SIL, CABTAL, NACALCO, ELAN *Afrique*, ALCAM) and scholars’ support of mother tongue-based education (see Bidja’a, 2001; Chiato & Akumbu, 2014; Chumbow, 2005; Tadadjeu et al., 1997) to the detriment of administration. The absence of a decree that gives an official status to national languages operational in administration endangers minority languages and limits access to public services as emphasized by Hornberger (2008) who posits that linguistic exclusion can create barriers to access to public services for these citizens whose mother tongue is not considered as an official language or even where the foreign language is used.

Research questions

The following research questions to be addressed were elaborated to guide this sociolinguistic study on home language practices in government offices:

1. How often do workers use mother tongues in their workplace?

2. Whom do they use the mother tongue with? What for?
3. What are workers' attitudes towards the use of the mother tongue in administrative settings?
4. What is the relevance of the mother tongue in administration?

Significance of the study

The relevance of the study lies in its potential to address critical issues related to language policies in local councils and contribute to the improvement of communication, efficiency, and service delivery within public administration. Linguistic diversity in the Adamawa, Ngaoundere, in particular, is characterized by a rich diversity of home languages spoken by its inhabitants. Understanding the role and impact of home language use in public administration is crucial for promoting inclusive communication and accommodating the linguistic diversity present in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews insights on the importance of home language in the workplace and previous studies conducted on home language in Cameroon public administration.

Importance of home languages in the workplace

Home languages in the workplace are crucial for fostering a diverse and inclusive environment. Therefore, recognising and valuing employees' home languages can enhance communication and collaboration within the workplace. Promoting the use of home languages in the workplace can lead to increased employee engagement and satisfaction. Embracing employees' home languages in the workplace can improve customer service and satisfaction. The utilisation of home languages in the workplace can enhance cultural understanding and promote global business opportunities. These ideas are vehicled by the works reviewed below.

Neeley (2017) offers a nuanced exploration of the impact of language in multinational companies. Her research and arguments are based on an in-depth case study of a Japanese company that adopted English as its official lingua franca. In her insightful examination, she presents several key points regarding the importance of home languages in the workplace such as:

1. **Fostering Inclusivity:** Home languages help create an inclusive environment where employees feel valued and respected for their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
2. **Enhancing Communication:** Embracing home languages can improve communication among employees, leading to better teamwork, collaboration, and understanding.
3. **Promoting Diversity:** Recognising and incorporating home languages into the workplace promotes diversity and demonstrates an organisation's commitment to embracing different cultures and perspectives.
4. **Empowering Employees:** Embracing home languages empowers employees to express themselves more comfortably and effectively, leading to increased engagement and productivity.
5. **Building Trust:** Acknowledging and respecting employees' home languages can build trust and rapport within the team, ultimately contributing to a positive work environment.

Chukwu (2008) shows the importance of home languages in the workplace by highlighting their contribution to various facets of the corporate environment. The following are an illustrative formulation of his insights:

1. **Innovation Boost:** Chukwu suggests that linguistic diversity can serve as a catalyst for creativity. Teams that incorporate a variety of home languages often have access to a broader range of ideas and perspectives. This diversity can spark innovation as team members may approach problem-solving in unique ways, informed by their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
2. **Enhanced Communication:** While it might seem counterintuitive, Chukwu argues that home language utilization can actually enhance communication within multinational companies. By facilitating communication in languages in which employees are more comfortable, companies can improve understanding and reduce the chances of miscommunication.
3. **Talent Attraction and Retention:** Recognising and encouraging the use of home languages signifies an inclusive and supportive company culture. Chukwu points out that this can be a major draw for top talent from diverse backgrounds as well as a key factor in retention, with employees feeling more valued and included.
4. **Market Competitiveness:** Chukwu notes the direct impact on a company's ability to compete in global markets. Employees who can communicate in their home languages can often connect better with international clients, navigate cultural nuances more effectively, and help build stronger partnerships, thus driving competitive advantage.
5. **Employee Morale and Job Satisfaction:** On a personal level, the acceptance and encouragement of home languages can lead to greater employee satisfaction. Chukwu posits that when employees are permitted to express themselves in their home languages, they are likely to feel a greater sense of belonging and engagement, which contributes to higher morale.
6. **Learning and Development Opportunities:** Chukwu states that linguistic diversity creates a natural environment for language learning and cultural exchange, encouraging lifelong learning and personal development.
7. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** According to Chukwu, when companies encourage the use of home languages, they foster a more inclusive decision-making process. Different languages carry various cognitive styles and thought processes, and incorporating these can lead to more holistic and well-rounded business decisions. In essence, Chukwu views home languages not just as a tool for communication but as an integral element that contributes significantly to organizational strength, resiliency, and adaptability. His article emphasizes the notion that linguistic diversity, when harnessed effectively, can be a superpower for any corporation looking to thrive in the international business landscape.

Finally, the ability for employees to communicate in their home language in the workplace has several potential benefits. The use of home languages in the workplace improves comfort, the employees often feel more comfortable and confident expressing themselves in their home language, which can lead to clearer communication. When individuals can use their native language, they may perform better because they can process information more efficiently without a language barrier. Employees are likely to build more authentic relationships with colleagues if they can communicate in their home language, leading to better teamwork and collaboration.

Home language and implementation policy in Cameroon public administration

Cameroonian scholars evaluated the role of home language use in public administration and implementation policies in different regions of the nation.

To begin with, Nkwenti (2003) assessed the role of home languages in enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of public administration in the South region of Cameroon. The research involved 60 informants, including public administration officials, local government employees, and residents of various communities within the South region who regularly interact with public services. The methods of data collection used included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys among public administration employees and general citizens to gather numerical data on language use, preferences, and perceived impact on service delivery. The research is grounded on Fishman's sociolinguistic domain theory and Gile's Communication Accommodation Theory. The researcher came out with the findings that the use of home languages facilitated better communication, leading to more efficient service delivery and fewer misunderstandings. Citizens expressed increased trust in public administration when services were provided in their home languages, feeling that it demonstrated respect for their cultural identities. Further, engaging with citizens in their home languages led to higher levels of participation and responsiveness in public affairs. Notable challenges included the need for training public officials in multiple local languages and the logistical complexities of implementing multilingual administrative systems.

Also, Echu (2004) studied the language planning and policy implementation of home language use in the Cameroon public administration. The study involved 80 informants including language policy makers, public administration officials, and local community members. The sample was representative of various departments within public administration and community groups across regions of Cameroon such as the North West, South West, Centre, Littoral and West focusing on urban and rural settings. Echu used mixed methods comprised of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and surveys. The theoretical approaches applied to the study were language planning and policy theory and Fishman's domain theory. Language planning and policy framework were employed to analyze how language policies are formulated, and implemented, and their impact on public administration practices. Fishman's domain theory was used to explore the functional allocation of languages within the public administration domain. The study found that the implementation of home language policies in public administration varied significantly between urban and rural areas, with better implementation in regions where home languages were more widely spoken. Home languages facilitated clearer and more effective communication between public officials and community members, leading to improved service delivery. The use of home languages in public administration was associated with higher levels of trust and satisfaction among community members, who felt their cultural identities were respected. The research identified challenges such as insufficient training for public servants in home languages and the complexity of managing a multilingual public administration system.

In the same light, Tamanji (2009) studied the role of the Beti language in regional public administrations, exploring how its use affects administrative efficiency, identity preservation, and community relations in the South region of Cameroon. The study involved 50 informants, including regional public administration officials, local government employees, and members

of the Beti-speaking community who interact regularly with public administration. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and surveys were employed as methods of data collection. The ethnolinguistic identity theory was employed to understand how the use of native languages in public administration influences the cultural identity of the Beti-speaking community. Fishman's sociolinguistic domain theory was also used to examine the functional allocation of the Beti language in various administrative domains and its effect on routine administrative tasks. The findings showed that the use of the Beti language facilitated better understanding and communication between public servants and the Beti-speaking community, leading to more effective service delivery. The study found that using the Beti language in public administration helped preserve the cultural identity of the Beti-speaking population, enhancing their sense of belonging and pride. Community members reported higher levels of trust in public administration when officials communicated in the Beti language, feeling that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds were respected. Despite the advantages, the study identified challenges which included limited language proficiency among some public servants and the need for ongoing language training programmes.

Ngome (2013) evaluated the effectiveness and practicality of language policies within Cameroonian public administration, with a specific focus on the use of home languages in enhancing service delivery and administrative efficiency. This study engaged 100 informants comprising policy makers, public administrators, and citizens across different the following regions of Cameroon like the North West, South West, Centre, Littoral, and West with emphasis on urban and rural differences. The method of data collection was both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative method resorted to in-depth interviews with policymakers and public administrators which explored the intricacies and challenges of implementing language policies. Also, focus groups with citizens provided detailed narratives on their experiences and perceptions. Regarding the quantitative method, a survey was conducted among public servants and community members to collect statistical data on language use patterns, preferences, and the perceived impact on public administration. The theoretical framework used in this study was language policy and planning theory, which guided the analysis of the legislative and practical aspects of implementing home language policies in public administration. Social identity theory was also utilised to understand how language use in public administration affected individuals' cultural identity and community engagement. The study concluded that the use of home languages made public services more accessible to citizens who were not fluent in official languages, thereby enhancing overall service delivery. Citizens exhibited higher levels of trust.

Further, Ndamba & Foncha (2015) explored multilingual practices in public administration within the South-West region of Cameroon, specifically examining the use and impact of home languages on administrative efficiency and public engagement. The study involved 70 informants, including government officials, public service employees, and local community members. The sample was representative of various departments within the regional public administration. Semi-structured interviews, as a qualitative method, were conducted with public administration officials to gain insights into their perspectives on home language use. Also, focus group discussions with community members provided a broader understanding of public perceptions and experiences. Surveys were administered to a larger group of public servants and citizens, to collect statistical data on language preferences, usage patterns, and the perceived

effectiveness of multilingual administrative practices. To carry out this research, they used Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to explore how cultural and linguistic background influenced communication and interaction within public administration. Language policy and planning theory is another approach which provided insights into how language policies are formulated and implemented in the context of public administration. The findings revealed that the use of home languages facilitated more effective communication between public servants and community members, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings. Local residents reported a greater sense of trust and satisfaction with public services when their home languages were used in official interactions. Home language use made public services more accessible to non-French and non-English speaking residents, increasing their participation in public programmes and services. The study identified challenges such as the need for comprehensive language training for public servants and the logistical difficulties of implementing a multilingual administrative system.

Finally, Mbah (2020) investigated the role and impact of using home languages in public administration within the South region of Cameroon, focusing on how it affects service delivery, employee engagement, and public satisfaction. The study involved 50 informants including public servants, local government officials, and citizens who frequently interact with public administration services in the South Region of Cameroon. The data were collected using a mixed method including the qualitative method and the quantitative method. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with public servants and local residents provided in-depth insights into personal experiences and perceptions. Quantitative Data through surveys gathered numerical data on language use and its perceived effectiveness. The study drew from Fishman's sociolinguistic domain theory and Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory. Fishman's domain theory was used to analyze the functional allocation of languages in various administrative tasks and contexts. Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory was applied to understand how public servants adjusted their language to accommodate the linguistic needs of the citizens they serve. The study found that the use of home languages significantly improved communication between public servants and citizens, reducing misunderstandings and increasing the clarity of information. Citizens reported higher levels of trust and engagement with public administration when their home languages were used, feeling more respected and valued. Public servants noted an improvement in service delivery efficiency, as communicating in home languages streamlined processes and reduced delays. Some challenges included limited proficiency in multiple home languages among public servants and the need for additional training to manage linguistic diversity effectively.

The preceding reviewed works deal with the implementation of home language in public administration and their role in administrative interactions and service delivery in various locations such as the Centre, Littoral, North-West and South-West regions. The present research conducted in the Adamawa region anchors on public workers' use of home languages in government offices, their attitudes towards the use of mother tongue in work premises and the importance of using vernaculars in administrative settings with the perspective of adopting Fulfulde as a national language and language of administration in the Adamawa region beside French and English the official languages of administration, for the protection of the cultural values and identities of the people.

Theoretical Framework

The exploration of the complexities and implications associated with the use of home languages within the public administrations of Ngaoundere anchors in Fishman's Domain Theory (1972) and Giles' Accommodation Theory (2007). Fishman's Domain Theory suggests that several factors can influence the use of languages in different domains including the social status and prestige of a language, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of speakers. Specific languages are chosen for particular domains based on their perceived appropriateness and functionality. In the context of Ngaoundere public administrations, home languages may be used in informal interactions, community outreach programmes, or services targeting specific ethnic groups to ensure effective communication.

Giles's Accommodation Theory argues that people do not always use the same language variety in all situations. Rather, they may adjust their language to accommodate the other person's style, reduce communication barriers and build relationships. There is convergence when people adjust their communication style to become more similar to the other person's style and divergence when people adjust their communication style to become more different from the other person's style. Accommodation Theory has important implications for communication in a variety of contexts like intercultural communication as it can help explain how people from different cultures adjust their communication style to accommodate each other and to explain how people can use accommodation strategies to resolve conflicts and build relationships. Giles' accommodation theory might be applied in analyzing practices, attitudes, and the relevance of home language use in public administrations in different ways. In the context of public administrations, employees and public users might engage in convergence when they adapt their language to match the language of the person they are communicating with. Conversely, an individual might use divergence by speaking in a different language or dialect to maintain social distance, assert cultural identity, or resist assimilation. For instance, a public employee insisting on using an administrative or colonial language despite being conversant in the home language could be seen as asserting the authority or prestige of the public administration's official language.

Taken together, Fishman's Domain Theory and Giles's Accommodation Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between language and social structure. These theories can be used to explain how people use language in different social domains and how they adjust their language use to accommodate the other person's style.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sampling Technique A total of 115 informants from different services within Ngaoundere public administrations were selected to participate in the data collection process, using the random sampling technique. This method involved dividing the population into distinct strata based on regional delegations within Ngaoundere. Each stratum represented a different regional delegation within the public administration sector. The sampled delegations included hospital centres, the Regional delegation of tourism, the Regional Delegation of Agriculture, the Regional Delegation of Arts and Culture, the Regional Delegation of Transports, the Regional Delegation of Public Works and the Regional Delegation of Livestock.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methods of data collection included participant observation and questionnaire. Participant observation, involved watching discretely public workers and public users interacting in offices caring for their linguistic choices. The questionnaire, consisted of four questions, surveyed public users' practices and attitudes towards home language use with colleagues, bosses and public users. The first section aimed to gather demographic information from participants, including their age, ethnicity, occupation, and years of experience in public administration. The section provides essential contextual information about the participants that could be used to analyse responses across different demographic variables. Section two focused on participants' language practices within the public administration sector. Questions were structured to gather insights into the languages spoken and used for official communication, as well as the frequency and contexts in which different languages were employed. The third section dealt with participants' attitudes towards language use in the workplace. Questions were designed to elicit responses regarding preferences for using specific languages in administrative settings, and attitudes towards multilingual communication. Section four dealt with the perceived relevance of home languages within the context of public administration. Questions were structured to capture insights into the perceived impact of home language use on communication effectiveness, workplace dynamics, and overall job performance. The collected data will be analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Home Language Practices in Offices

Table 1: Statistical representation of the use of mother tongue in the workplace

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
I use the mother tongue in the office	Yes	63	54.78 %
	No	52	45.22 %
Total		115	100%

According to the findings obtained in Table 4 above, more than half of the surveyed informants (54.78%) actively speak their native language in public administration settings. Conversely, less than half (45.22%) of the respondents claimed that they did not use their home language in public administrative contexts. The high percentage of home language users indicates a strong inclination towards maintaining cultural heritage and ensuring accessibility, engagement, and effective communication within their workplace. Several factors may justify the attitude of those public workers who use their mother tongue in the office, among which proficiency in public users' and colleagues home language, alignment to the colleague's linguistic choice during interaction, solidarity, and friendship. Those who do not speak the mother tongue in the office may be influenced by stigma associated with minority languages or an overwhelming preference for dominant languages such as French or English, the languages of administration.

Table 2: Statistical representation of the frequency use of mother tongues in the office

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
I use the mother tongue in the office	Always	4	3.48%
	Usually	52	45.22 %
	Sometimes	31	26.96%
	Never	28	24.34%
Total		115	100%

A greater proportion of informants (45.22%) claimed that they usually used the mother tongue in the office. Another significant group (26.96%) sometimes interacted in their native tongue. In the same vein, an important group (24.34%) never spoke their tongue in the office and the minor group (3.48%) stated that they always used their native language in their office. Overall, the findings showed that public users in Ngaoundere public administration regularly used their mother tongue at work when the context required.

Table 3: Statistical representation of interlocutors with whom workers use home languages in Ngaoundere public offices

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Interlocutors in public services	Public users	57	49.57%
	Colleagues	36	31.30 %
	Friends	20	17.39%
	Others	2	1.74%
Total		115	100%

In compliance with Table 3, nearly half of the public workers (49.57%) reported using vernacular language primarily when interacting with public users in administrative contexts. From a different perspective, 31.30% of public workers used their home language when interacting with colleagues. A lower group (17.39%) used their home language when interacting with friends. An insignificant group (1.74%) used their mother tongue when engaging with others outside defined categories such as public users, colleagues, or friends. These findings inform that public workers highly interact in mother tongue with public users to ease communication and service delivery. This means that public users mostly express their needs and concerns in their native language, especially when clarity is essential. This can lead to more accurate exchanges of information and a greater likelihood of resolving issues effectively.

Table 4: Statistical representation of the most spoken home language in offices

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
The most spoken language in offices	Fulfulde	75	65.21%
	Dii	09	07.82%
	Mboum	11	09.57%
	Hausa	05	04.35%
	Gbaya	10	08.70%
	Bulu	03	2.61%
	Beti	02	1.74%
Total		115	100%

In the vibrant linguistic landscape of Ngaoundere, Fulfulde stands out as the most spoken native language in government offices (65.21%), followed by the Mboum (09.57%) and Gbaya (8.70%) while other languages as the Dii (07.86%), Mboum (02.60%), Hausa (04.35%), Bulu (2.61%) and Beti (1.74%) languages are underused. These statistics not only highlight the prevalence of Fulfulde within the community but also underscore its significance in Ngaoundere public administrations. The dominant use of this language in offices accounts for the fact that it is the lingua franca of the region. The prominence of Fulfulde in public administration serves practical purposes. For instance, when officials communicate in a language that resonates with the majority of the population, it enhances understanding and clarity in governance. This is particularly crucial in a setting where effective communication is a key to service delivery. Therefore, the integration of Fulfulde into administrative practices not only bridges linguistic gaps but also promotes transparency and accountability within public institutions. In this way, the language acts as a conduit for fostering trust between the government and its citizens.

Table 5: Reasons accounting for public workers' use of home languages in offices

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Public workers' views justifying the use of home language in the office	To clarify messages	63	54.78%
	To chat with my colleagues	21	18.26%
	To hide a secret	3	2.61%
	When the public user does not master any official languages	1	0.87%
	Others	27	23.48%
Total		115	100%

The predominant reason for using home languages in Ngaoundere public administration is to clarify messages (54.78%). This finding underscores the fundamental role that home languages play in ensuring effective communication within public services. When officials and citizens engage in dialogue, the use of a common home language allows for nuances and cultural contexts to be conveyed more clearly. Consequently, this practice enhances understanding and reduces the likelihood of miscommunication, which can often lead to administrative errors or public dissatisfaction. The ability to clarify messages through home languages not only facilitates better communication but also fosters a sense of inclusion among community members.

The category “others”, which garnered responses from 27 informants (23.48%), reflects a nuanced understanding of how home language use manifests within Ngaoundere public administration practices. This designation suggests that respondents perceive varying degrees of importance attached to using their native tongues depending on specific contexts or situations encountered during their professional duties. Such variability indicates an adaptive approach towards language use that aligns with practical needs rather than rigid adherence to any single communication style.

Another notable aspect of home language use in Ngaoundere public administration is its role in informal communication among colleagues. More than a quarter of public workers (18.26%) indicate that they use home languages to chat with their peers, this practice highlights the social dimensions of language in the workplace. Informal conversations are essential for building camaraderie and fostering teamwork among public workers. When colleagues converse in their native tongues, it creates a comfortable atmosphere that encourages collaboration and mutual support. Chatting in home languages allows for a more relaxed exchange of ideas and opinions. In high-pressure environments like public administration, where decisions can have significant implications for community welfare, informal discussions can serve as an essential outlet for expressing concerns or brainstorming solutions. Such interactions often lead to innovative approaches to problem-solving, as colleagues feel free to share insights without the constraints imposed by formal language barriers.

A minimal group (2.61%) indicated that they used home languages to hide secrets within the context of public administration. This relatively low percentage raises intriguing questions about the motivations behind such practices and their implications for transparency and accountability in governance. While secrecy may be necessary in certain situations such as protecting sensitive information, its prevalence should be carefully scrutinised in public service contexts.

An insignificant group (0.87%) uses home languages when public users do not master English or French to shed light on an important issue. This finding highlights the challenges faced by individuals who may not be proficient in official languages yet require access to government services and information.

Public Workers' Attitudes Towards Home Language Use in the Administrative Setting

The attitudes of government officials towards home language use significantly influence the linguistic dynamics within public administrations in Ngaoundere.

Table 6: Statistical representation of public workers' opinions on the use of mother tongue in the workplace

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Public worker's opinion on whether to use the mother tongue in the workplace	Yes	82	71.3%
	No	33	28.7%
Total		115	100%

Survey results indicate that the majority of government officials (71.3%) hold positive views regarding the use of mother tongues in the work environment. This favorable attitude suggests recognition of the cultural significance of local languages and their potential to enhance communication with constituents. They appreciate the potential benefits associated with using home languages in their day-to-day operations. In contrast to the positive attitudes observed among the majority of public workers, a small group (28.7%) expresses a negative opinion on home language use highlighting significant concerns about communication efficiency. Those expressing reservations believe that using home languages could complicate bureaucratic processes or lead to misunderstandings during interactions with citizens. This minority

perspective raises important questions about the barriers that continue to exist in fostering an inclusive environment for linguistic diversity.

Table 7: Public workers' attitudes when they hear a colleague speaking the mother tongue in the office with a public user

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Colleague speaking the mother tongue in the office with a public user	I have no problem	86	74.78%
	I am angry	28	24.35%
	I am jealous	1	0.87%
	I am indifferent	-	0%
Total		115	100%

Findings from Table 7 demonstrate that a substantial number of public workers in Ngaoundere (74.78%) do not see any problem when their colleagues exchange in the mother tongue with public users. The high percentage suggests that these workers feel comfortable and confident in communicating with users in their home languages. Another non-significant group (24.35%) feels angry when using home languages with public users. When public workers exhibit anger or frustration towards users speaking their native languages, it creates an unwelcoming environment that can deter individuals from seeking assistance or engaging with services altogether. Further, a minor group feels jealous (0.87%) when users employ home languages. While these workers do not express outright hostility towards home languages, their lack of engagement may indicate a missed opportunity for building stronger connections with users. Lastly, nobody among the surveyed workers felt indifferent when they heard a colleague exchanging in mother tongue with a public user.

Table 8: Public workers' attitudes when they hear a colleague speaking the mother tongue in the office with a colleague

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Colleague speaking the mother tongue in the office with another colleague	I have no problem	86	74.78%
	I am angry	28	24.35%
	I am jealous	1	0.87%
	I am indifferent	-	0%
Total		115	100%

The majority of public workers (74.78%) had no problem when their colleague exchanged with another colleague in the mother tongue. This finding underscores a positive and inclusive attitude towards linguistic diversity among public workers. The high percentage indicates that these workers appreciate and accept the use of home languages as a natural part of their workplace interactions. Another group (24.35%) said that they felt angry when they listened to a colleague exchanging in tongues with another one while a negligent group (0.87%) felt jealous. Such extreme reactions can have detrimental effects on workplace morale and interpersonal relationships among colleagues.

Table 9: Statistical representation of the language government workers use the most with public users

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
The language workers use the most to render service	French	102	88.69%
	English	05	0.34%
	Mother tongue	08	06.95%
Total		115	100%

The French language is the dominant language (88.69%) used in public offices in Ngaoundere. However, the mother tongue (06.95%) is overused than English (0.34%). The dominance of French during service transactions with public users is accountable to the fact that it is the language of administration in conjunction with English, which, on the contrary, is underused (0.34%). Another point is that the majority of public workers in Ngaoundere public offices are French-speaking. The choice of mother tongue in some situations may be done to accommodate the public user's code.

Table 10: Public workers' reactions towards the use of mother tongue by a public user

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
When a public user speaks to me in the mother tongue	I answer in his/her language if I understand	80	69.57%
	I tell him that I do not understand	26	22.60%
	I send him to a colleague who speaks the language	9	7.83%
Total		115	100%

Public workers' reactions when a public user starts conversation in the mother tongue showed that the majority of them (69.57%) answered in the language of the user if they understood. This demonstrates a significant level of acceptance and willingness among public workers to engage with users in their native languages. This response highlights a pragmatic approach where communication clarity and user comfort take precedence over adherence to strict language policies. The second significant response, "I tell him that I do not understand," stated by 26 informants (22.60%) highlights the reality of a multilingual environment where not every public worker is fluent in all the local languages. This response reflects a direct and honest approach to communication, acknowledging the limitations of the individual worker while emphasising a desire for transparency. The least frequent response, "I send him to a colleague who speaks the language," highlighted by 9 informants (7.83%), demonstrates a collaborative approach to addressing linguistic challenges. This response emphasises the importance of teamwork within the public administration system, where individuals leverage their collective linguistic expertise to provide comprehensive and accessible services.

Relevance of Home Language in Administration

The study also samples workers' opinion on the importance of interacting in home languages in public services as the following results indicate.

Table 11: Statistical representation of workers' opinion on the relevance of home language use in public offices

Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Public workers' opinion on the relevance of home language in the public office	Yes	69	60%
	No	46	40%
Total		115	100%

A significant number of public workers (60%) believe that using the mother tongue in the office is important though the lowest number (40%) denied it. Results of the relevance of mother tongues within public services revealed significant benefits for both service delivery and workplace dynamics. Some public workers reported that employing home languages led to improved public user satisfaction. This is evident in hospital centres, where workers noted that users express greater understanding and comfort when treated in their native languages. In addition, the respondents claimed that using mother tongues fostered stronger relationships between public servants and community members, cohering with Echu (2004)'s and Ngome's findings in the Centre, Littoral, North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. They indicated that they experienced increased trust from service users when communicating in local languages. This trust is essential for effective governance and community engagement, as it encourages citizens to participate actively in public initiatives. Further, concerning enhancing public users' relationships, the findings indicated that using home languages contributed positively to employee morale and job satisfaction. Other public workers felt more valued and understood when allowed to communicate in their native languages. This sense of belonging translates into higher productivity levels when they indicate that they feel more motivated to perform well when their linguistic preferences are acknowledged.

However, challenges remain regarding the mother tongue used across different services. Public workers highlighted difficulties stemming from varying levels of proficiency among staff members in local languages, which can lead to confusion during public user's interactions. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for maximising the benefits associated with mother tongue use. Another non-negligent challenge is tribalism, which may be vector of favoritism and exclusion.

Implications to research and practice

The results of this study enrich studies on language policy and language planning in Cameroon, especially in the era of decentralization. The findings emphasize the need for the Cameroon government to craft decisions that accord a vital role to national languages in public administration given that such languages are taught in schools. Public users must feel that their native language is valorised and they must feel comfortable when they engage in conversations in public offices. Their language rights should be preserved and avoiding stereotypes that may cause conflicts.

CONCLUSION

This study conducted in Ngaoundere public administration explored public workers' home language practices in their workplace, their attitudes towards colleagues or public users who exchange in the mother tongue in work premises, and the importance of using it in work transactions. Data were elicited from 155 workers, and Fishman's Domain Theory and Giles' Accommodation Theory served as theoretical frameworks. The findings obtained demonstrated that the surveyed workers in great number stated that they usually used their mother tongues with public users or colleagues, showing that the public service is a multilingual space where native language rights are accepted. Fulfulde appears as the mother tongue widely used in offices. These same workers held a positive attitude when public users or colleagues spoke their mother tongue in the workplace. Their perspectives about the presence of mother tongue in the workplace revealed that it fostered trust between public servants and citizens, enhanced service delivery, and contributed to a more motivated and satisfied workforce. Hence there is the need for the officialisation of a home language of consensus, Fulfulde, for instance, in the Adamawa region, to preserve local people's identity and cultural heritage. By embracing linguistic diversity, public administrations can better serve their populations, fostering a sense of belonging, inclusiveness, and cultural pride, essential for effective governance in Cameroon. However, challenges persist concerning varying proficiency levels in local languages among staff members and tribalism, which can affect communication quality.

Future research

This study has waded into the use of home languages in Ngaoundere Public Administration, where French and English are the official languages of work. Further studies may explore the evaluation of the syllabus for the teaching of the national language in primary and secondary education in Cameroon.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION I : IDENTIFICATION

Ethnic group : _____

Groupe ethnique

Mother tongue: _____

Langue maternelle

First official language: English ☐ French ☐
Langue officielle Anglais Français

Age range : 20-30 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 40-50 ☐ 50-60 ☐ 60-65 ☐

Occupation : _____

Profession

Workplace : _____

Lieu de travail/service

Professional experience : _____

Expérience professionnelle

SECTION II : PRACTICES

1. Do you use the mother tongue in your workplace?

*Utilisez-vous la langue maternelle dans votre lieu de travail ?*Yes ☐No ☐*Oui**Non*

2. How often do you use it?

*À quelle fréquence l'utilisez-vous ?*Always ☐Usually ☐Sometimes ☐Never ☐*Toujours**d'habitude**parfois**jamais*

3. Who do you use the mother tongue with?

*Avec qui utilisez-vous cette langue maternelle sur votre lieu de travail ?*Colleagues ☐public users ☐c. Friends ☐d. other (s) ☐

les collègues

les usagers

Amis

Autre(s)

What for ? (Pour faire quoi, selon le cas ?):

4. Which mother tongue do you use the most in your workplace?

Quelle langue maternelle utilisez-vous le plus sur votre lieu de travail ?

5. Why do you use mother tongues in your workplace?

*Pourquoi utilisez-vous la langue maternelle sur votre lieu de travail ?*To clarify messages ☐To chat with colleagues ☐*Pour clarifier les messages**Pour discuter avec un collègue*To hide a secret ☐When the public user does not master any of the official languages ☐*Pour cacher un secret**Lorsque l'utilisateur ne maîtrise aucune des langues officielles***SECTION III: ATTITUDES**

6. Do you think it is normal to speak the mother tongue in the workplace?

*Pensez-vous qu'il est normal d'utiliser sa langue maternelle sur le lieu de travail ?*Yes ☐No ☐

Why? (Pourquoi?) _____

7. What is your attitude when you hear a colleague speaking mother tongue in the workplace?

Quelle est votre attitude lorsqu'un collègue parle la langue maternelle sur le lieu de travail ?

a. With public users (avec les usagers) :

I have no problem ☐I am angry ☐I am jealous ☐I am indifferent ☐*Je n'ai aucun souci avec cela**je suis en colère**J'ai honte**Je suis indifférent*

b. With colleagues (Avec des collègues)

I have no problem ☐I am angry ☐I am jealous ☐I am indifferent ☐*Je n'ai aucun souci avec cela**je suis en colère**J'ai honte**Je suis indifférent*

8. When a public user speaks to me in the mother tongue instead of using English or French, I answer in....

*Lorsqu'un usager public me parle dans sa langue maternelle en dehors de l'anglais et du français, je réponds en....*His/her language if I understand ☐I tell him that I do not understand ☐*Sa langue si je comprends**Je lui dis que je ne comprends pas*I send him to a colleague who speaks the language ☐I send him away ☐*Je l'envoie chez un collègue qui parle la langue**Je le renvoie*

SECTION IV: RELEVANCE

9. Do you think that the use of the mother tongue in the office is important?

Pensez-vous qu'il est important d'utiliser la langue maternelle au bureau ?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Why? _____