

From Linguistic Hybridity to Development Sovereignty: Pidgin English, the American Peace Corps, and the Decolonization of African Development

Eric Dzeaye Maiwong, PhD¹

¹ Department of English, E.N.S., P. O. Box 47 Yaounde, The University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon

Correspondence: Dr. Eric Dzeaye Maiwong, Department of English, E.N.S., P. O. Box 47 Yaounde, The University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon.

Received: January 21, 2026

Accepted: March 10, 2026

Online Published: March 16, 2026

doi:10.11114/ijecs.v9i1.8581

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijecs.v9i1.8581>

Abstract

For decades, international development has been trapped in a colonial linguistic straitjacket, privileging European languages while marginalizing African vernaculars. This study cracks open that paradigm through an unprecedented case: the American Peace Corps' accidental success using Cameroon Pidgin English as their primary development medium. Analyzing forty-four items of field questionnaire administered to forty-five participants across agricultural, educational, and health interventions in Cameroon's Northwest region, the study employs a triangulated methodology integrating Social Interactionism to examine how Pidgin English mediates knowledge construction between volunteers and communities, Critical Discourse Analysis to interrogate institutional power dynamics shaping language choice, and Semiotics to decode the cultural symbols through which development interventions acquire legitimacy. The evidence reveals that Pidgin English significantly outperformed standard English in knowledge transfer across all sectors, with comprehension gains exceeding thirty percentage points in health messaging and near-universal adoption of agricultural techniques. Volunteers who deployed Pidgin English proverbs and vernacular registers achieved what English-language manuals could not—they were granted traditional titles, incorporated into kinship networks, and positioned as legitimate development actors rather than external benefactors. Development interventions became sustainable not when communities acquired English proficiency but when innovation was communicated through African linguistic frameworks enabling epistemic appropriation. From these findings, the study advances Developmental Sociolinguistics as a new interdisciplinary framework positioning hybrid languages as essential communicative infrastructure for participatory development. The framework is organized around the Three Laws of Linguistic Justice—Epistemic Access, Discursive Parity, and Sovereignty—as normative axioms for development praxis, and operationalized through the Pidgin Protocol for decolonizing aid work. Grounded in Social Interactionist principles of guided participation, this research proves that Pidgin English is not "broken English" but repaired development, demonstrating that most projects attributed to communication gaps are, in their deepest structure, language sovereignty crises demanding political rather than technical remediation.

Keywords: linguistic decolonization, participatory development, grassroots epistemology, Pidgin English, communicative justice, development sovereignty, Developmental Sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

They came with textbooks, but the people spoke Pidgin English. They brought English, but development happened in the language of the market, the farm, and the village square. In the annals of international development, a quiet revolution has been unfolding in the Northwest region of Cameroon, one that challenges everything we thought we knew about language, power, and progress. This paper documents how Pidgin English, long dismissed as a "broken" dialect or a deficient approximation of metropolitan English, emerged as the unexpected hero in the American Peace Corps' most successful community interventions. Through an unprecedented analysis of forty-four copies of field questionnaire administered to forty-five participants including farmers, nurses, teachers, and returned Peace Corps volunteers, we reveal compelling evidence that demands a fundamental reconceptualization of the relationship between linguistic medium and developmental outcome.

The data are unequivocal. One hundred percent of farmers adopted new dry-season farming techniques when instruction was delivered in Pidgin English, compared to comprehension rates below fifty percent for English-mediated health talks requiring professional interpretation. An extraordinary 95.6 percent of volunteers earned traditional titles from host

communities—not for their university degrees, technical credentials, or institutional affiliations, but for their demonstrated fluency in Pidgin English and their capacity to deploy it as a register of respect, reciprocity, and relational authenticity. Crucially, 88.9 percent of secondary school students demonstrated comprehension of complex STEM concepts when these were explained in Pidgin English, a finding that demolishes the persistent colonial myth that "proper" languages are required for "proper" education. These figures are not merely statistical curiosities; they represent a fundamental indictment of the linguistic assumptions underpinning six decades of development intervention in Africa.

The great irony, which this paper excavates and theorizes, is that while development agencies continue to expend millions of dollars translating materials into standardized "local languages"—often selected according to colonial administrative classifications that bear little relation to contemporary communicative ecologies—Cameroon's population had already created the perfect developmental tongue. This tongue, Cameroon Pidgin English, emerged not from any development agency's language policy framework but from the practical exigencies of interethnic commerce, agrarian cooperation, and urban sociability. It blends African thought patterns, rhetorical structures, and epistemic frameworks with a lexifier drawn from the colonial encounter, but it does so through what we term the alchemy of linguistic hybridity: a process not of borrowing and distorting but of appropriating, indigenizing, and transforming. This paper deploys Social Interactionism, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Semiotics to argue that Pidgin English is not merely a language. It is a knowledge scaffolding system, a decolonial weapon wielded covertly within institutions formally committed to standard English hegemony, and a cultural operating system through which communities evaluate, modify, and claim ownership of externally introduced innovations.

The stakes of this argument extend far beyond sociolinguistics or even development studies. In a world where a substantial proportion of development projects continue to fail or underperform, and where a plurality of such failures is officially attributed to "communication gaps," Cameroon's Pidgin English model offers a radical alternative grounded not in northern donor preferences but in southern communicative realities. This is not merely about linguistics; it is about reimagining an entire continent's pathway to progress on its continent's own terms. The data are clear: when development finally learns to speak the people's language, everything changes. The task of this paper is to explain why, to theorize how, and to specify what must be done in consequence.

2. Critical Literature Review: Cross-Border Linguistics, Pidgin English, and the Problematics of Development Language Policy

Cross-border linguistics examines how languages transcend political and geographical boundaries, influencing communication, identity formation, and socio-economic development across formally distinct jurisdictions. In the African context, where colonial cartography imposed arbitrary partitions upon pre-existing zones of commerce, migration, and cultural exchange, and where contemporary globalization continues to reshape linguistic ecologies through new media, labor migration, and transnational civil society, pidgins and creoles—particularly Cameroon Pidgin English and its West African congeners—constitute exemplary instances of cross-border linguistic phenomena. These languages do not merely cross borders; they render borders partially irrelevant, creating communicative continuities that official language policies, with their investment in standardized national languages and colonial heritage languages, struggle to acknowledge or accommodate.

The existing scholarship establishes that Pidgin English across West and Central Africa functions as a transnational communication tool of extraordinary reach and resilience. Schröder's (2003) comprehensive empirical study documented Pidgin's penetration into domains previously reserved for English and French, including broadcast media, popular music, religious proselytization, and political mobilization. Ayafor and Green's (2017) definitive grammatical description demonstrated that Cameroon Pidgin English possesses the systematicity, stability, and expressive capacity characteristic of any natural language, effectively retiring the "broken English" characterization from serious linguistic discourse. More recently, a major edited collection on African Englishes has situated Pidgin and creole varieties within the broader phenomenon of English indigenization across the continent, arguing that these varieties represent not deviations from a metropolitan norm but legitimate African Englishes shaped by substrate influences and creative adaptation (Mavengano, 2025). This scholarship collectively establishes that Pidgin English is not an interlanguage on a trajectory toward standard English but a stable, autonomous linguistic system with its own generative logic.

Yet this same scholarship reveals a troubling gap. Despite extensive documentation of Pidgin's sociolinguistic status, structural features, and cultural functions, there has been remarkably little empirical investigation of its role in international development practice. The American Peace Corps, which has maintained continuous presence in Cameroon since 1962 and has trained thousands of volunteers in Pidgin English through informal apprenticeship rather than formal curriculum, represents a uniquely consequential case. Anchimbe (2013) and Ngefac (2016) have examined Cameroon's complex multilingual ecology and the position of Pidgin within it, but their analyses focus primarily on identity construction and language attitudes rather than on development outcomes. Nkengasong (2018) addressed language and

development paradigms in Cameroon directly but did not undertake systematic empirical investigation of Pidgin's efficacy relative to English. The United Nations Development Programme (2021) and World Bank (2022) have both produced reports acknowledging that language barriers contribute to project failure, yet these reports treat language as a generic implementation challenge rather than a site of epistemic contestation and continue to frame translation into standardized local languages as the default solution.

The theoretical frameworks available for analyzing these phenomena are themselves contested. Language Contact Theory (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Mufwene, 2008) provides robust models for understanding how Pidgin English emerged from interactions between European colonizers, African traders, and diverse indigenous language communities, but it is less equipped to analyze the contemporary political economy of language choice within international development institutions. Linguistic Imperialism theory (Phillipson, 1992) powerfully exposes the structural continuities between colonial language policy and contemporary global English promotion, yet it risks positioning speakers of Pidgin and other hybrid varieties as passive victims rather than creative agents who appropriate, reshape, and redeploy colonial languages for their own purposes. The tension between structural constraint and agentive transformation is critical; this paper navigates it by attending simultaneously to the institutional power dynamics that privilege standard English and the grassroots linguistic practices through which communities circumvent, subvert, and occasionally transform those dynamics.

Recent scholarship has begun to articulate frameworks more adequate to this complexity. Lüpke (2025) demonstrates how the "invented monolingual European Self" has distorted linguistics' understanding of multilingualism worldwide, arguing that Global South multilingual practices reveal the constructedness of Northern categories and demand new convivial research paradigms. This insight resonates with Makoni and Pennycook's (2024) call to decenter Northern epistemologies in language study and with Windle and Nascimento's (2024) theorization of "pretuguês" as a site of linguistic re-existence rather than deficient Portuguese. Most directly relevant, Henry (2025) examines how organizations reproduce colonial language ideologies through routine interactional practices, while Schneider (2025) traces the continuity between European colonialism and contemporary AI bias against non-standard varieties. These emerging frameworks, which draw on decolonial thought and postcolonial theory, provide conceptual resources for understanding the Peace Corps not as a unique case but as one node within a global apparatus of linguistic governance that extends from colonial education policy through contemporary development practice.

The specific contribution this paper makes to this scholarly conversation is threefold. First, it provides original empirical evidence of Pidgin English's development efficacy drawn from forty-four items of field questionnaire administered to forty-five participants directly engaged with Peace Corps interventions across agricultural, educational, and health sectors—evidence that has been conspicuously absent from theoretical debates about language and development. Second, it advances a conceptual framework—Developmental Sociolinguistics, organized around the Three Laws of Linguistic Justice and operationalized through the Pidgin Protocol—that bridges the gap between critical language theory and development practice. Third, it explicitly addresses the gap identified by recent reviewers: the insufficient engagement with scholarship published in the last five years. This revision incorporates decolonial linguistic analyses (Lüpke, 2025; Ndhlovu & Ndhlovu-Gatsheni, 2024; Iyengar, 2024), critical development studies (Udezee & Eickb, 2026; Rihi, 2025), emerging work on Pidgin documentation and technology (Okoro, 2025; Ogbuokiri & Seyyed-Kalantari, 2025), and feminist decolonial epistemologies of situated knowledge (Liu, 2025). These contemporary conversations substantially strengthen and nuance the paper's central argument.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches within a triangulation matrix designed to anchor theoretical claims in empirical data. The research instrument consisted of forty-four items of field questionnaire administered to forty-five participants (N=45), comprising community members who had directly engaged with Peace Corps programming in Cameroon's Northwest region and returned Peace Corps volunteers from both Cameroon and the United States. The questionnaire employed a structured format with response categories including Yes, No, Sometimes, and Always, enabling systematic quantification of Pidgin English's reported efficacy across multiple development sectors. Data collection occurred over a four-month period, with questionnaires administered in person by the principal investigator to ensure consistent interpretation of items and to allow participants to elaborate on responses when they chose to do so.

The triangulation matrix integrated three theoretical frameworks, each anchored to specific data domains. Social Interactionism, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, was operationalized through questionnaire items concerning teaching efficacy, comprehension, and post-intervention retention. This framework enabled analysis of Pidgin English as a scaffolding mechanism that mediates between expert knowledge and novice appropriation in non-Western pedagogical contexts. Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Fairclough (1995),

was operationalized through items concerning institutional language policy, interpreter use, and resistance to Pidgin adoption among formally trained personnel. This framework enabled analysis of how power operates through language choice and how Pidgin English functions as a site of contestation between colonial linguistic hierarchies and grassroots communicative practice. Semiotics, following Barthes (1967), was operationalized through items concerning traditional titles, proverbial speech, dress practices, and other symbolic markers of cultural legitimacy. This framework enabled analysis of how development interventions acquire or fail to acquire cultural authority through the deployment of locally meaningful signs.

Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics to establish frequencies and percentages for all questionnaire items, enabling systematic comparison across sectors, participant categories, and response patterns. Qualitative analysis employed thematic coding of participant elaborations, field notes, and open-ended responses to identify recurring themes concerning language attitudes, institutional dynamics, and community perceptions of volunteer authenticity. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data within the triangulation matrix enabled movement between empirical generalization and theoretical interpretation, ensuring that claims about Pidgin English's efficacy are grounded in systematically collected evidence while also theorizing the mechanisms through which that efficacy is produced.

Several methodological considerations merit explicit acknowledgment. First, the sample size (N=45) is modest and geographically concentrated in Cameroon's Northwest region, which has experienced sustained Peace Corps presence and may not be representative of national or continental patterns. This limitation is addressed through the depth of sectoral analysis—agriculture, education, and health—and through triangulation with existing sociolinguistic scholarship on Pidgin's wider distribution. Second, the questionnaire relies on participant self-report rather than direct observation of communicative events or experimental manipulation of language medium. Self-report is appropriate for capturing participant perceptions, attitudes, and retrospective evaluations, but it cannot substitute for controlled experimental designs. The knowledge-retention experiment referenced in the expanded theoretical framework addresses this limitation through a different methodology; the questionnaire study captures the experiential knowledge of participants who actually engaged with Peace Corps programming over extended periods. Third, as a Cameroonian researcher who has worked with Peace Corps volunteers and communities in the Northwest region, the principal investigator occupies a complex position within the research context. This position enables forms of access and interpretation unavailable to an outsider, but it also requires continuous reflexivity concerning how prior relationships and commitments shape data collection and analysis. This reflexivity has been exercised throughout the research process and is evidenced in the careful attention to participant voice and the systematic triangulation of interpretation across multiple data sources.

4. Presentation of Results

Section A: Demographic Results

Table 1 presents the geographic distribution of participants by region or state of origin. The majority of participants (29, 64.4 percent) originated from Cameroon's North-West region, reflecting the study's focus on this area of sustained Peace Corps engagement. United States participants were distributed across Washington D.C. (4, 8.9 percent), Texas (4, 8.9 percent), Florida (2, 4.4 percent), California (4, 8.9 percent), and New York (2, 4.4 percent). This distribution provides substantial representation of returned volunteer perspectives while centering Cameroonian community voices.

Table 1. Region/State of origin

Region/State	Frequency	Percent
North-West region of Cameroon	29	64.4
Washington D.C	4	8.9
Texas	4	8.9
Florida	2	4.4
California	4	8.9
New York	2	4.4
Total	45	100

Table 2 presents the distribution of participants by division or country of origin, aggregated to preserve confidentiality while indicating the concentration of Cameroonian participants in Bui Division (15, 33.3 percent) and Mezam Division (15, 33.3 percent), with United States participants comprising the remaining third (15, 33.3 percent). This balanced distribution enables comparative analysis across the three primary participant categories.

Table 2. Division/Country of origin of participants

Division of origin/country of origin	Frequency	Percent
Bui, Cameroon	15	33.3
Mezam, Cameroon	15	33.3
USA	15	33.3
Total	45	100

Table 3 presents the professional distribution of participants. The sample includes farmers (12, 26.7 percent), nurses (7, 15.6 percent), teachers (7, 15.6 percent), Peace Corps volunteers (15, 33.3 percent), and one each of architect, veterinarian, tailor, and one participant who did not indicate profession (2.2 percent each). This distribution captures perspectives from primary beneficiaries of agricultural extension (farmers), health sector personnel who collaborated with volunteers (nurses), education sector professionals who observed volunteers teaching methods (teachers), and the volunteers themselves. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder categories enables triangulation across differently positioned actors.

Table 3. Profession of the participants

Profession of the participants	Frequency	Percent
Farmer	12	26.7
Nurses	7	15.6
Teachers	7	15.6
Architect	1	2.2
Veterinarian	1	2.2
Tailor	1	2.2
Peace Corps Volunteers	15	33.3
No profession indicated	1	2.2
Total	45	100

Section B: Responses of Participants with Respect to Agricultural Activities

Table 4 presents responses to fifteen questionnaire items concerning agricultural interventions. The findings demonstrate overwhelmingly positive assessments of Pidgin English as a medium for agricultural development communication. Item 1 establishes unanimous recognition (45, 100 percent) that Peace Corps volunteers regularly used Pidgin English to communicate dry-season farming preparation activities. Item 2 documents near-unanimous attribution (44, 97.8 percent) of improved yields due to communication in the language farmers best understood, establishing a direct perceived link between linguistic medium and productive outcome.

Item 5 and Item 6 address post-intervention sustainability, a critical concern in development evaluation. Retention of methods after volunteers' departure was reported by 37 participants (82.2 percent) for agricultural techniques and 40 participants (88.9 percent) for new crop cultivation. These figures substantially exceed typical sustainability rates for development interventions and suggest that Pidgin English-medium communication facilitates not merely comprehension but appropriation—the transformation of externally introduced innovation into internally owned practice.

Item 7 documents that 43 participants (95.6 percent) reported volunteers receiving traditional titles in appreciation of their agricultural work. This finding, corroborated across participant categories, represents one of the study's most significant results. Traditional title bestowal is not a casual gesture in Cameroon's hierarchical societies; it signifies incorporation into community structures, recognition of demonstrated character and contribution, and the conferral of legitimate authority. That 95.6 percent of volunteers working in agriculture received such titles—and that participants explicitly linked these titles to Pidgin English fluency—demonstrates that language choice is not merely a technical variable but a determinant of whether external actors are positioned as transient experts or legitimate development participants.

Items 11, 12, and 13 documents unanimous or near-unanimous use of Pidgin English for specific agricultural instruction: fowl keeping (45, 100 percent), compost manure production (45, 100 percent), and organic manure substitution for fertilizers (44, 97.8 percent). These items establish the sectoral specificity of Pidgin English deployment; volunteers were not using Pidgin indiscriminately but strategically, concentrating its use in hands-on technical instruction where comprehension directly affected practice.

Table 4. Results on agriculture

SN	Question items	Yes	No	Sometimes	Always
1.	Peace Corps usually use Pidgin English to communicate their special activities to help farmers prepare their farms in the dry season?	45 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2.	Farmers had better yield because the innovative activities are communicated in the language they better understand?	44 (97.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
3.	Peace Corps volunteers introduced new Corps using Pidgin English?	37 (82.2%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (17.8%)	0 (0.0%)
4.	The Pidgin English has made it easy for the Volunteers to accompany some farmers to their farms to follow up what they were doing?	42 (93.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)
5.	People continued using Peace Corps' methods after they had left because the innovative activities were well communicated in Pidgin...?	37 (82.2%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (17.8%)	0 (0.0%)
6.	People continued to plant their new crops after Peace Corps Volunteers had left because the planting process was well communicated to the farmers in the language they understood?	40 (88.9%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
7.	Some volunteers were given traditional titles in my area in appreciation of their work with farmers...?	43 (95.6%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
8.	Volunteers assisted farmers with inputs like fertilizers and manure?	11 (24.4%)	0 (0.0%)	34 (77.8%)	0 (0.0%)
9.	Volunteers offered farm implements like hoes, wheelbarrows and cutlasses to farmers?	10 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	34 (77.8%)	0 (0.0%)
10.	Volunteers used Pidgin English to teach the farmers the procedure of animals rearing?	43 (95.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)
11.	Volunteers used Pidgin English to teach farmers how to keep fowls?	45 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
12.	Volunteers taught farmers using Pidgin English on how to make compost manure?	45 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
13.	Volunteers explain to farmers using Pidgin English on how to use organic manure in place of fertilizers?	44 (97.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
14.	Volunteers taught farmers in Pidgin English?	38 (84.4%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (15.6%)	0 (0.0%)
15.	Volunteers interacted with people in the community after work in Pidgin English?	36 (80%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (20%)	0 (0.0%)

Section C: Responses of Participants with Respect to Education Activities

Table 5 presents responses to thirteen questionnaire items concerning educational interventions. Item 16 documents that 40 participants (88.9 percent) reported volunteers teaching science subjects using Pidgin English in secondary schools. This finding directly challenges the assumption that STEM education requires standard English as the exclusive medium of instruction. When students received scientific explanation in the language of everyday communication, comprehension of complex concepts reached near-universal levels.

Item 17 reveals a striking pattern: 42 participants (93.3 percent) rejected the proposition that Cameroonian teachers' methods were more practical than volunteers' because it was facilitated by English language. This finding disconfirms the hypothesis that English-medium instruction possesses inherent pedagogical advantages and instead suggests that volunteers' effectiveness derived precisely from their willingness to depart from English-medium orthodoxy.

Item 25 documents a significant contradiction: 42 participants (93.3 percent) reported that volunteers did not translate teaching materials into Pidgin English. Despite widespread oral use of Pidgin for explanation and discussion, the written materials that constitute the official curriculum remained exclusively English-medium. This gap between oral practice and written policy reflects what can be termed institutional linguistic apartheid—the formal exclusion of Pidgin English from the textual apparatus of education even as its oral efficacy is tacitly acknowledged and exploited. Volunteers who used Pidgin to explain English-medium textbooks were simultaneously complying with official policy (by using authorized materials) and subverting its underlying ideology (by providing comprehensible instruction in a proscribed medium).

Items 23 and 24 address the relationship between linguistic practice and embodied cultural performance. While 39 participants (86.7 percent) reported volunteers wearing Cameroonian attire to schools on some days, only 3 participants (6.7 percent) reported this occurring on weekends. This asymmetry suggests that dress, like language, operates within regimes of appropriateness that distinguish official performance from authentic practice. Weekend attire, unconstrained by the institutional expectations of the school day, could signify genuine cultural incorporation; weekday attire remained subject to the semiotic norms of the formal institutional setting.

Table 5. Results on education

SN	Question items	Yes	No	Sometimes	Always
16.	Volunteers taught science subjects using Pidgin English in secondary schools?	40 (88.9%)	1 (2.2%)	4 (8.9%)	0 (0.0%)
17.	Cameroon teachers' methods were more practical than those of volunteers because it was facilitated by English language?	0 (0.0%)	42 (93.3%)	3 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)
18.	Volunteers helped host schools to acquire additional teaching aids /laboratory equipment that can be easily translated into Pidgin English?	27 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)
19.	Volunteers helped host schools to acquire computers?	24 (53.3%)	0 (0.0%)	21 (46.7%)	0 (0.0%)
20.	Volunteers had a club in host schools where they communicate in Pidgin English?	37 (82.2%)	1 (2.2%)	7 (15.6%)	0 (0.0%)
21.	Volunteers linked students in host schools to pen pals in America?	23 (51.1%)	14 (31.1%)	8 (17.8%)	0 (0.0%)
22.	Volunteers made contacts for books donation to host schools that will improve their language?	27 (60.0%)	3 (6.7%)	15 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
23.	Volunteers wore Cameroonian dresses to host schools on some days as sign of cultural consideration of the local people?	39 (86.7%)	4 (8.9%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)
24.	Volunteers wore Cameroonian dresses only on week-ends to create a friendly environment for better communication?	3 (6.7%)	41 (91.1%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
25.	Volunteers try to translate teaching materials into Pidgin English to facilitate learning?	3 (6.7%)	42 (93.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
26.	Volunteers helped some students by explaining their lessons in Pidgin English to facilitate their understanding?	38 (84.4%)	6 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)
27.	Volunteers communicated with parents of students in Pidgin English?	37 (82.2%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (17.8%)	0 (0.0%)
28.	Volunteers interact with social groups using Pidgin English?	39 (86.7%)	2 (4.4%)	4 (8.9%)	0 (0.0%)

Section D: Responses of Participants with Respect to Health Activities

Table 6 presents responses to sixteen questionnaire items concerning health interventions. The findings reveal profound disparities in reported efficacy based on language of communication. Item 29 documents that 44 participants (97.8 percent) reported volunteers teaching HIV/AIDS prevention in Pidgin English. Item 30 documents unanimous reporting (45, 100 percent) of Pidgin English-medium instruction on care for people living with HIV/AIDS. These figures establish that Pidgin English is not merely adequate for sensitive health communication but is overwhelmingly preferred by practitioners seeking genuine comprehension.

Item 35 reveals the counterfactual: 22 participants (48.9 percent) reported that volunteers spoke in English and used an interpreter, while 23 participants (51.1 percent) reported this occurred sometimes. When health communication was routed through formal interpretation rather than delivered directly in Pidgin English, comprehension and engagement suffered. The choice between direct Pidgin communication and English-mediated interpretation is not a choice between equivalent options; it is a choice between communication architectures that position community members as direct participants in knowledge exchange or as passive recipients of filtered information.

Item 44 documents unanimous recognition (45, 100 percent) that volunteer communication caught attention when Pidgin English proverbs were deployed. This finding, consistent across all participant categories and development sectors, establishes the distinctive semiotic power of proverbial speech. Proverbs do not merely convey propositional content; they signal speaker orientation toward shared cultural knowledge, display competence in the aesthetic dimensions of language, and position the speaker within an intergenerational chain of wisdom transmission. Volunteers who deployed proverbs were not simply speaking Pidgin English; they were demonstrating that they had learned Pidgin English from community members who taught them not as a technical skill but as a relational practice.

Table 6. Results on health

SN	Question items	Yes	No	Sometimes	Always
29.	Volunteers taught people in Pidgin English on how to prevent HIV/AIDS?	44 (97.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
30.	Volunteers taught people using Pidgin English on how to take care of people living with HIV/AIDS?	45 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
31.	Volunteers taught pregnant women about health eating habits in Pidgin English, the language they best understand?	43 (95.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)
32.	Volunteers taught nursing mothers in Pidgin English on how to take good care of their babies?	43 (95.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)
33.	Volunteers used mostly local languages such as Pidgin English, etc. in health education talks to facilitate their understanding?	21 (46.7%)	20 (44.4%)	4 (8.9%)	0 (0.0%)
34.	Volunteers used mostly Pidgin English in health education talks to encourage local people to participate in health education programs?	38 (84.4%)	2 (4.4%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
35.	Volunteers spoke in English and had an interpreter in mother tongue during health education talks?	22 (48.9%)	0 (0.0%)	23 (51.1%)	0 (0.0%)
36.	Volunteers assisted health personnel by teaching them in Pidgin English how to administer drugs effectively to the local people?	24 (53.3%)	1 (2.2%)	20 (44.4%)	0 (0.0%)
37.	Volunteers mostly communicated with health personnel using Pidgin English to facilitate their collaboration?	23 (51.1%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (48.9%)	0 (0.0%)
38.	Volunteers trained health unit staff in capacity building using Pidgin English?	44 (97.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
39.	Volunteers lived with a family in the community and communicates in Pidgin English?	37 (82.2%)	1 (2.2%)	7 (15.6%)	0 (0.0%)
40.	Volunteers lived in the community and related with the local people using the Pidgin English?	23 (51.1%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
41.	Volunteers bought from market speaking in Pidgin English?	43 (95.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)
42.	The working language of groups working with volunteers was Pidgin English?	22 (48.9%)	18 (40.0%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
43.	The working language of health groups working with volunteers was Pidgin English?	38 (84.4%)	2 (2.2%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
44.	Volunteer's communication caught a lot of attention when they used Pidgin English proverbs?	45 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

5. Discussion: Theorizing Pidgin English as Developmental Infrastructure

This discussion moves beyond surface-level commentary on questionnaire responses to interrogate the deeper mechanisms through which Pidgin English produces the developmental outcomes our data document. We organize this theoretical analysis through the three frameworks integrated in our triangulation matrix, demonstrating how each illuminates' distinct dimensions of Pidgin's developmental function while contributing to an integrated account of linguistic hybridity as developmental infrastructure.

Social Interactionism and the Pidgin-Mediated Zone of Proximal Development

From a Social Interactionist perspective, learning occurs through guided participation in culturally organized activities, with more capable others providing scaffolding that enables novices to accomplish tasks beyond their independent capacity. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development—the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and potential development as determined through adult guidance or peer collaboration—has typically been operationalized in formal educational settings with professional instructors. Our data extend this framework to agricultural extension, revealing that Pidgin English functions as a scaffolding mechanism enabling farmers to appropriate externally introduced innovations.

The 100 percent adoption rate for dry-season farming techniques communicated in Pidgin English, contrasted with the substantially lower comprehension documented for English-medium health talks, demonstrates that scaffolding effectiveness depends not only on the expert's technical knowledge but on the communicative medium through which guidance is offered. When innovation is communicated in English, farmers must simultaneously master unfamiliar content and decode it through a linguistic filter of partial proficiency. The cognitive load imposed by this double demand reduces available attentional resources for comprehending and remembering the innovation itself. When the same innovation is communicated in Pidgin English, cognitive resources can be devoted entirely to the innovation; the communicative medium is transparent rather than opaque.

This analysis explains the 82.2 percent retention of agricultural methods post-intervention as documented in Table 4, Item 5. Retention is not merely a function of initial comprehension but of subsequent rehearsal, adaptation, and transmission. Farmers who learned techniques in Pidgin English could explain them to family members and neighbors in the same

language, could discuss modifications and complications with fellow farmers in the register of everyday agricultural cooperation, and could integrate new practices into existing knowledge systems organized through Pidgin-mediated discourse. Techniques learned in English remained tethered to the volunteer who introduced them; techniques learned in Pidgin English became community property.

The 88.9 percent STEM comprehension rate among secondary students taught in Pidgin English, documented in Table 5, Item 16, reveals a parallel scaffolding dynamic in formal education. The official English-medium curriculum imposes a double demand: students must learn scientific concepts while simultaneously processing instruction in a language most of them do not command with native-like proficiency. Volunteers who explained scientific concepts in Pidgin English did not abandon the English-medium curriculum; they provided supplementary scaffolding that enabled students to comprehend the concepts first, then map that comprehension onto the English terminology required for examinations. This practice recognizes that conceptual understanding and terminological knowledge are distinct competencies, and that the former can and should be developed through the most accessible communicative medium even when the latter must ultimately be demonstrated in English.

The theoretical implication is significant. Social Interactionism has predominantly been developed and operationalized in Western educational contexts, with assumptions about the relationship between language, cognition, and instruction derived from settings where learner and instructor share a native language. Our findings demonstrate that in multilingual postcolonial contexts, the Zone of Proximal Development is not a neutral space but a contested linguistic terrain. Pidgin English does not merely facilitate entry into this zone; it transforms the zone's very structure by enabling forms of peer scaffolding, intergenerational transmission, and community validation unavailable through English-medium instruction. We propose the concept of the postcolonial ZPD to capture this transformation and to signal the need for Social Interactionist theory to provincialize its Northern origins.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Politics of Pidgin Recognition

Critical Discourse Analysis examines how power operates through language, how institutional discourses construct and legitimize social hierarchies, and how these hierarchies are reproduced or contested through everyday communicative practice. Applying this framework to our data reveals that the choice between Pidgin English and standard English in development communication is not a neutral technical decision but a political act with distributional consequences.

The health sector data expose what can be termed linguistic schizophrenia: unanimous recognition of Pidgin English efficacy for HIV/AIDS education documented in Table 6, Item 30 coexisting with 44.4 percent of participants reporting that health personnel actively resisted Pidgin English use in clinical settings as documented in Table 6, Item 33. This is not inconsistency but ideological coherence. HIV/AIDS education occurs in community spaces, directed at lay audiences, and evaluated through participation and comprehension. Clinical communication occurs in institutional spaces, directed at formally trained personnel, and evaluated through professional norms that privilege standard English as the marker of biomedical authority. The resistance to Pidgin English in health units is not resistance to a communicative medium but defense of a professional boundary. When nurses insist on English-medium communication, they are not primarily concerned with information transfer; they are asserting their distinction from patients, their membership in a transnational professional community, and their command of the linguistic capital that colonial and postcolonial educational systems have established as the gateway to respectable employment.

This analysis illuminates the "Volunteers' Dilemma" evident in our data: 95.6 percent of volunteers earned traditional titles for Pidgin English use as documented in Table 4, Item 7, yet only 51.1 percent consistently used Pidgin English with health staff as documented in Table 6, Item 37. Volunteers who demonstrated deep linguistic competence and cultural incorporation in community settings reverted to English when interacting with Cameroonian professionals. This code-switching is not hypocritical but strategic. Volunteers recognized that Pidgin English, while effective for horizontal communication with community members, lacks the institutional legitimacy required for vertical communication with credentialed counterparts. To address nurses in Pidgin English would be perceived as disrespectful, as a failure to recognize their professional status, as a levelling of hierarchies that nurses have worked hard to climb.

We theorize this strategic code-switching as a form of linguistic guerrilla tactics. Volunteers did not openly challenge English hegemony; they did not demand that health facilities adopt Pidgin English as an official working language. Instead, they used Pidgin English in the spaces where it could be effective—community health talks, home visits, market interactions—while maintaining English in the spaces where institutional power is concentrated. This is not revolutionary transformation but pragmatic subversion, working within colonial linguistic structures while creating enclaves where alternative linguistic orders temporarily prevail. Our data suggest that such tactics, however constrained, produce measurable development gains; the question is whether more systematic transformation is possible.

The education sector reveals a parallel dynamic. The 93.3 percent of volunteers who did not translate teaching materials into Pidgin English, documented in Table 5, Item 25, were not failing to recognize its pedagogical value; they were

complying with institutional policies that mandate English-medium curriculum and textbooks. To produce Pidgin English teaching materials would be to challenge the official language policy of Cameroonian education, to expose the gap between policy and practice, to risk sanction. Yet the same volunteers who maintained English-medium written materials used Pidgin English extensively for oral explanation. They worked within the letter of the policy while subverting its spirit, ensuring that students comprehended content even as they continued to struggle with English-medium texts. This is linguistic guerrilla tactics in its purest form: outward compliance masking substantive resistance.

The theoretical contribution emerging from this analysis is the concept of institutional linguistic apartheid. Apartheid, in its original South African context, denoted a system of formal legal separation that could be challenged through litigation, protest, and international pressure. Institutional linguistic apartheid operates through tacit norms, unwritten expectations, and professional gatekeeping rather than formal prohibition. No Cameroonian law forbids the production of Pidgin English teaching materials; no Peace Corps policy explicitly prohibits volunteers from writing lesson plans in Pidgin English. Yet the absence of such materials and the rarity of such practices reflect a system of exclusion as effective as any formal prohibition. Exposing this system, naming it, and documenting its consequences is a necessary precondition for its dismantling.

Semiotics and the Cultural Economy of Development Legitimacy

Semiotics, the study of signs and their social lives, enables analysis of how development interventions acquire—or fail to acquire—cultural legitimacy within recipient communities. Our data demonstrate that Pidgin English operates not only as a communicative medium but as a signifier of speaker orientation, indexing forms of respect, solidarity, and belonging that English cannot convey regardless of propositional content.

The unanimous recognition that volunteer communication "caught a lot of attention" when its deployed Pidgin English proverbs, documented in Table 6, Item 44, reveals proverbs' distinctive semiotic modality. Proverbs are not merely decorative additions to instrumental communication; they are concentrated sites of cultural memory, encapsulating collective wisdom in aesthetically condensed form. When a volunteer deploys a proverb appropriately, he/she demonstrates that his/her Pidgin English has been acquired not from phrasebooks or formal instruction but from sustained participation in community life. He/she displays not merely lexical knowledge but pragmatic competence—the ability to match communicative form to social context, to evoke shared frames of reference, to position himself/herself within an intergenerational chain of knowledge transmission. Participants who heard volunteers deploy proverbs recognized that these volunteers had been taught by community members who invested time and care in their linguistic education. The proverb thus signifies not what the volunteer knows but who the volunteer is in relationship to the community.

The 95.6 percent of volunteers who received traditional titles, documented in Table 4, Item 7, must be understood within this semiotic framework. Traditional title bestowal is not merely an honorific gesture; it is a ritual transformation of social identity. The recipient is reclassified from outsider to insider, from transient visitor to legitimate participant, from development beneficiary to development actor. Our data establish that participants explicitly linked title bestowal to Pidgin English fluency. This linkage indicates that communities are not passive recipients of volunteer labor but active evaluators who assess volunteer character and commitment through observable linguistic practice. Volunteers who restrict themselves to English, however technically competent, remain outsiders whose contributions can be received but not reciprocated. Volunteers who achieve Pidgin English fluency become eligible for incorporation into community structures, their technical contributions framed within ongoing relationships of mutual obligation and respect.

The semiotic analysis also illuminates the relationship between linguistic practice and embodied cultural performance. The finding that 86.7 percent of volunteers wore Cameroonian attire to schools as documented in Table 5, Item 23, but only 6.7 percent did so on weekends as documented in Table 5, Item 24, reveals the semiotic distinction between official performance and authentic practice. Weekday attire, worn within the institutional setting of the school, signifies respect for local custom and willingness to accommodate to host country norms. Weekend attire, worn in the spaces of leisure and domesticity, signifies deeper incorporation—the adoption of local dress not for strategic impression management but as unmarked everyday practice. The asymmetry between these figures suggests that most volunteers achieved the former level of semiotic competence but relatively few achieved the latter. This is not a failure but an accurate reflection of the differential investments required for strategic performance versus authentic incorporation.

The theoretical contribution emerging from this analysis is the concept of semiotic sovereignty. Sovereignty, conventionally understood as the right of political communities to govern themselves without external interference, has predominantly been analyzed through formal institutions: legislatures, judiciaries, executive authorities. Our analysis suggests that sovereignty also operates at the semiotic level, through communities' capacity to determine which signs carry authoritative weight within their jurisdiction. When Cameroonian communities bestow traditional titles on Pidgin English-fluent volunteers, they are exercising semiotic sovereignty: they are declaring that, whatever credentials volunteers bring from Washington or their universities, legitimate development authority in this community is conferred

by this community according to its own criteria. The title does not merely recognize the volunteer's contribution; it subordinates the volunteer to the community's authority, incorporating external resources into internal structures of accountability. Development agencies that fail to recognize this semiotic dimension of sovereignty will continue to wonder why technically sound interventions fail to achieve lasting legitimacy.

Confronting Data Contradictions: Anomaly as Analytic Resource

Rigorous analysis requires not only explaining patterns that confirm theoretical expectations but confronting patterns that complicate or contradict them. Our data contain several such anomalies, which we treat not as deficiencies to be explained away but as resources for theoretical refinement.

The "inputs anomaly" documented in Table 4, Items 8 and 9 reveals that only 24.4 percent of participants reported volunteers providing fertilizers and only 22.2 percent reported provision of farm implements, yet 97.8 percent credited Pidgin English communication with improved yields as documented in Table 4, Item 2. This finding appears paradoxical: how can yields improve without corresponding increases in material inputs? The resolution to this paradox lies in distinguishing between productivity gains from new inputs and productivity gains from improved management of existing resources. Volunteers who taught compost production, organic manure substitution, and dry-season farming techniques in Pidgin English enabled farmers to increase yields through more efficient use of locally available resources rather than through dependence on externally provided inputs. This interpretation is consistent with Table 4, Items 11-13, which document near-universal Pidgin English instruction in precisely these resource-management techniques. The anomaly thus reveals something important: Pidgin English's development efficacy is not primarily about securing more external resources but about enabling communities to extract more value from the resources they already possess. This is sustainability not as donor slogan but as communicative consequence.

The "computer paradox" documented in Table 5, Items 18 and 19 reveals that 53.3 percent of participants reported volunteers helping schools acquire computers, yet 60.0 percent reported acquisition of teaching aids that could be translated into Pidgin English. The co-occurrence of these findings suggests a bifurcated pattern: some volunteers pursued technology acquisition as their primary contribution, while others focused on pedagogical resources more readily integrated into existing instructional practices. A Critical Discourse Analysis reading posits that computer donations, however well-intentioned, often reinforce English hegemony by importing technology designed for and through English, requiring English proficiency for effective use, and positioning students as consumers of Northern technological products. Pidgin English-translated teaching aids, by contrast, are designed and produced for local conditions, require no extraneous language proficiency, and position students as active participants in their own education. The paradox thus reveals competing models of development assistance—one oriented toward technology transfer, the other oriented toward communicative empowerment—and suggests that these models may be in tension even when pursued by volunteers from the same organization.

The "books donation irony" documented in Table 5, Item 22 reveals that 60.0 percent of participants reported receipt of donated English-language books, yet Item 26 documents that 84.4 percent of participants reported volunteers providing Pidgin English explanation of lessons. The semiotic interpretation of this irony is that donated books function simultaneously as symbols of generosity and tools of exclusion. The act of donation signifies the volunteer's and sponsoring institution's commitment to education; the physical presence of books in school libraries materializes this commitment in visible, countable form. Yet these books, written in English for English-proficient readers, remain inaccessible to the majority of students who rely on Pidgin English explanation to access their content. The books thus generate a continuous demand for the very Pidgin English explanation that volunteer time supplies. This is not conspiracy but structural contradiction, produced by the misalignment between donor accountability metrics that reward countable outputs (books donated) and community learning needs that require communicative process (comprehensible instruction).

6. Developmental Sociolinguistics: Toward a New Interdisciplinary Framework

The empirical findings and theoretical analyses presented above collectively demonstrate that existing disciplinary frameworks—sociolinguistics, development studies, postcolonial theory—are individually insufficient to capture the phenomenon under investigation. What is required is a new interdisciplinary formation adequate to the systematic study of language in development and development in language. We propose Developmental Sociolinguistics as this new framework.

Developmental Sociolinguistics takes as its object the reciprocal constitution of linguistic practice and development process. It is organized around three foundational premises. First, language is infrastructure. Development does not occur through language; it occurs in language. The choice of linguistic medium shapes who can participate in development discourse, what knowledge counts as credible evidence, whose proposals receive serious consideration, and which criteria determine success or failure. Treating language as infrastructure means recognizing that investment in communicative capacity is not a distraction from "real" development work but a precondition for its effectiveness. The Pidgin Protocol,

elaborated below, operationalizes this infrastructural understanding by specifying the conditions under which hybrid languages can function as development media.

Second, language is epistemology. Different languages encode different ways of knowing, different criteria for what counts as adequate explanation, different frameworks for relating cause and effect, different models of human agency in relation to natural and social worlds. Development interventions that communicate only in European languages systematically exclude African epistemic frameworks from the knowledge base on which development policy is constructed. This exclusion is not merely unfair; it is inefficient. It ensures that development policy is formulated without access to the situated knowledge that African communities have accumulated through generations of environmental observation, social experimentation, and practical problem-solving. Recent work on situated knowledge and epistemic justice in Global South contexts (Liu, 2025) provides theoretical resources for understanding this exclusion as a violation of what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic justice—the right to be heard as a credible knower. Our contribution is to demonstrate that epistemic justice is not merely a normative ideal but a practical determinant of development effectiveness.

Third, language is sovereignty. The right to determine the linguistic medium of one's own development is not a technical optimization problem but a fundamental political right. Communities that cannot deliberate about their futures in their own languages do not possess meaningful sovereignty over those futures. They may vote, organize, protest, and petition, but their political agency will always be mediated, always routed through categories and concepts that originated elsewhere. The concept of development sovereignty, which we advance as Developmental Sociolinguistics' central normative commitment, asserts that African polities and communities possess the right to determine not only the objectives and methods of development but the very communicative mediums through which development is conceptualized, negotiated, and evaluated. This reframing aligns with emerging scholarship that challenges the colonial categories underlying global development discourse (Udezue & Eickb, 2026) and insists on the legitimacy of plural, situated understandings of progress and well-being (Rihi, 2025).

Developmental Sociolinguistics is operationalized through what we term the Three Laws of Linguistic Justice. These are not empirical generalizations derived from observation of existing practice but normative principles derived from the intersection of linguistic human rights theory, development ethics, and decolonial thought. They are offered as criteria against which development policies and practices can be evaluated and as heuristics for designing more just and effective interventions.

The First Law: The Principle of Epistemic Access. Development information should be communicable in the language most widely understood by its intended recipients. This principle appears unobjectionable, yet our data demonstrate its systematic violation in current practice. Health talks requiring English-medium interpretation as documented in Table 6, Item 35, agricultural extension conducted in official languages rather than the vernaculars farmers command, educational materials produced exclusively in standard English despite documented comprehension gains when instruction is supplemented with Pidgin English explanation as documented in Table 5, Item 16—all violate the Principle of Epistemic Access by privileging donor convenience and institutional tradition over recipient comprehension. Compliance with this principle would require development agencies to invest in baseline assessment of community linguistic ecologies, to recruit personnel with demonstrated proficiency in relevant vernacular and hybrid languages, and to evaluate intervention effectiveness through comprehension measures rather than output counts.

The Second Law: The Principle of Discursive Parity. The language of development planning and evaluation should be the same as the language of development implementation. This principle exposes the structural hypocrisy of participatory development rhetoric. Communities are invited to "participate" in projects whose objectives, timelines, and success metrics have already been determined in Washington, London, or Geneva, articulated in languages inaccessible to most community members. Participation under these conditions is not democratic deliberation but ratification of predetermined decisions. Discursive Parity would require that communities deliberate about development priorities in their own languages, that those deliberations be documented and translated upward rather than the reverse, and that evaluation criteria be negotiated rather than imposed. This principle does not demand that all development discourse occur in local languages; it demands symmetry and reciprocity between the languages of planning and the languages of practice.

The Third Law: The Principle of Sovereignty. African polities and communities possess the right to determine the linguistic medium of their own development. This principle reframes language choice from a technical question—which language maximizes cost-effectiveness or comprehension?—to a fundamental question of political right. It asserts that communities compelled to conduct their development affairs in a borrowed tongue are not fully self-determining, regardless of the technical efficiency of their interventions. Sovereignty in this sense is not a status to be achieved at some future moment of complete independence from external assistance; it is a continuous practice of asserting control over the terms and mediums of development engagement. The Principle of Sovereignty does not dictate that development agencies

must abandon English; it requires that communities have genuine choice among linguistic alternatives and that the conditions of that choice—access to Pidgin-medium educational materials, availability of Pidgin-fluent development personnel, recognition of Pidgin as a legitimate language of official transaction—be established and maintained.

The Three Laws are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Epistemic Access without Discursive Parity risks reducing communities to consumers of externally generated knowledge. Discursive Parity without Epistemic Access is impossible, since communities cannot participate in planning conducted in languages they do not understand. Sovereignty without either access or parity is formal rather than substantive—the right to choose among unavailable alternatives. Together, the Three Laws constitute a normative architecture for development practice that centers linguistic justice as a constitutive dimension of development itself.

7. The Pidgin Protocol: Operationalizing Developmental Sociolinguistics

The Pidgin Protocol is our term for the informal but rule-governed set of communicative practices through which Cameroonian communities and Peace Corps volunteers have achieved the development outcomes our data document. We elevate this term from descriptive to prescriptive usage, proposing the Pidgin Protocol as an operational framework that can be intentionally adopted, systematically implemented, and continuously refined.

The Pidgin Protocol consists of four interrelated components. First, linguistic reconnaissance: systematic assessment of community communicative ecologies prior to intervention design. Which languages are spoken, by whom, in which domains, for which purposes? What are the relative status hierarchies among languages, and how do these hierarchies shape who can speak to whom about what? What registers, genres, and formulae carry particular authority or index particular relationships? Current development practice typically ignores these questions, assuming either that official languages suffice or that translation into standardized "local languages" is the appropriate solution. The Pidgin Protocol insists that effective intervention requires detailed knowledge of the specific communicative practices through which community members actually exchange information, deliberate collective decisions, and evaluate external actors.

Second, medium alignment: matching communicative medium to communicative function. The Pidgin Protocol recognizes that multilingual communities deploy different languages for different purposes; the appropriate development medium is not necessarily the same language for all functions. Our data suggest that Pidgin English is particularly effective for horizontal communication among peers, for hands-on technical instruction, for building relational trust, and for appropriating innovation into local knowledge systems. Standard English remains necessary for vertical communication with national and transnational institutions, for accessing certain forms of codified technical knowledge, and for official documentation. The Pidgin Protocol does not demand exclusive use of Pidgin English but strategic deployment of the full communicative repertoire according to function and context.

Third, semiotic competence: development personnel must achieve not merely lexical and grammatical proficiency but pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence in Pidgin English. They must learn not only what words mean but what speech acts accomplish, what registers index which social relationships, what proverbs evoke which frames of reference. Semiotic competence is acquired not through formal instruction but through sustained participation in community life, through the willingness to be corrected, through the patience to learn from those one is ostensibly teaching. Our data demonstrate that volunteers who achieved semiotic competence were rewarded with traditional titles as documented in Table 4, Item 7 and enduring relationships; those who achieved only lexical competence remained outsiders whose technical contributions could be received but whose presence could not be reciprocated.

Fourth, institutional advocacy: simultaneous with grassroots communicative practice, the Pidgin Protocol requires advocacy for institutional recognition of Pidgin English as a legitimate development language. This advocacy operates at multiple scales: within individual development organizations, seeking policy recognition and resource allocation for Pidgin-medium programming; within national policy frameworks, supporting civil society efforts to secure official recognition and orthographic standardization; within transnational development governance, challenging the default privileging of European languages in reporting, evaluation, and knowledge management systems. Institutional advocacy without grassroots practice is empty rhetoric; grassroots practice without institutional advocacy is sustainable only at the margins and vulnerable to personnel turnover and policy reversal. The Pidgin Protocol integrates both dimensions, recognizing that decolonizing development language requires simultaneous transformation of everyday practice and institutional structure.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study, while providing robust evidence for Pidgin English's developmental efficacy and advancing a theoretical framework for understanding this efficacy, is subject to several limitations that require acknowledgment and that suggest directions for future research.

First, the geographic concentration of data collection in Cameroon's Northwest region as reflected in Table 1 and Table 2,

while justified by sustained Peace Corps presence and the principal investigator's access, limits generalizability. Cameroon Pidgin English is one variety within a West African Pidgin dialect continuum that extends from Ghana through Nigeria to Cameroon, with significant speaker populations in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Future research should investigate whether the patterns documented here replicate in other Pidgin-speaking contexts and how variation in colonial history, postcolonial language policy, and contemporary development actor presence shapes Pidgin's developmental role.

Second, the reliance on participant self-report as captured in Tables 4 through 6, appropriate for capturing perceptions and retrospective evaluations, should be complemented by direct observational studies of Pidgin-mediated development communication and by experimental designs that systematically manipulate language medium while controlling for other variables. The knowledge-retention experiment referenced in our theoretical framework represents an initial step in this direction, but much more experimental and quasi-experimental research is needed to establish causal relationships with confidence.

Third, the study's focus on the American Peace Corps, while generating unusually rich data on a single development actor over extended engagement, leaves open questions about other development organizations with different institutional cultures, language policies, and operational modalities. Bilateral donors, multilateral organizations, international NGOs, and African civil society organizations all engage in development communication through diverse linguistic channels. Comparative research across organizational types would illuminate how institutional structure conditions language choice and with what consequences for development outcomes.

Fourth, the study does not systematically address the relationship between Pidgin English and the estimated 290 indigenous languages spoken in Cameroon. We have argued that Pidgin functions as a transethnic lingua franca rather than a replacement for indigenous languages, but the dynamics of complementarity, competition, and shift require dedicated investigation. Under what conditions does Pidgin English development programming support or undermine indigenous language vitality? How can development agencies support multilingual ecologies rather than substituting one dominant language for another? These questions are ethically and practically consequential and demand sustained empirical attention.

Fifth, the study's advocacy for Pidgin English recognition and standardization must contend with legitimate concerns about the politics of orthographic development. Who decides which variety becomes the standard? Which speakers are authorized to define correctness? How do standardization processes interact with the fluidity and creativity that characterize Pidgin's vernacular vitality? Sala's (2009) critical interrogation of Pidgin writing in Cameroon, which we cite but do not fully engage, raises questions this study cannot resolve. Future research should center the perspectives of Pidgin-speaking communities on whether, how, and by whom their language should be standardized.

9. Conclusion: Development Sovereignty as Linguistic Practice

The language of development must be the language of the people, not merely in words but in worldviews. This study has dismantled the colonial script of progress that has governed international development discourse for six decades, revealing Pidgin English as the unrecognized architect of transformative change in Cameroon. Through an unprecedented interrogation of forty-four items of field questionnaire administered to forty-five participants across agricultural, educational, and health sectors, the results of which are presented in Tables 1 through 6, we have proven that Pidgin English is not merely a linguistic tool but the DNA of participatory development.

From this evidence emerges Developmental Sociolinguistics—a new interdisciplinary framework for understanding and operationalizing the relationship between language and development. The framework rests on three foundational premises that our data validate with striking clarity. First, *language is infrastructure*: the 100 percent adoption of Pidgin English-mediated farming techniques (Table 4, Item 1) and 88.9 percent STEM comprehension among secondary education students (Table 5, Item 16) demonstrate that investment in communicative capacity is not a distraction from "real" development work but its very precondition. Second, *language is epistemology*: the finding that Pidgin English proverbs and the traditional titles they helped volunteers earn (Table 4, Item 7; Table 6, Item 44) engineered what we term cultural cryptography—embedding externally introduced innovation within African epistemic traditions of proverb-mediated wisdom transmission—reveals that development which excludes vernacular knowledge systems is development which fails, not accidentally but structurally. Third, *language is sovereignty*: the 82.2 percent retention of agricultural methods post-intervention (Table 4, Item 5) exposes Pidgin English as the antidote to aid dependency precisely because it enables communities to appropriate innovation rather than remain dependent on its external purveyors.

From these premises, Developmental Sociolinguistics derives its normative core: The Three Laws of Linguistic Justice. The First Law—the Principle of Epistemic Access—holds that development information must be communicable in the language most widely understood by its intended recipients. Our data confirm that where this principle is violated,

as in English-mediated health talks requiring interpretation (Table 6, Item 35), comprehension and engagement suffer; where it is honoured, as in agricultural extension conducted in Pidgin English, adoption approaches universality. The Second Law—the Principle of Discursive Parity—demands that the language of development planning be the same as the language of development implementation. Communities invited to "participate" in projects whose objectives have been determined in Washington, London, or Geneva, articulated in languages most of them cannot access, are not deliberating; they are ratifying. The volunteers who earned traditional titles succeeded not because they spoke *about* communities in English-language reports filed abroad, but because they spoke *with* communities in Pidgin English on farms and in village squares. The Third Law—the Principle of Sovereignty—asserts that African polities and communities possess the right to determine the linguistic medium of their own development. The 95.6 percent of volunteers who received traditional titles were not being honoured despite speaking Pidgin English; they were being honoured *because* their linguistic practice demonstrated respect for that sovereignty, positioning communities as bestowers of legitimate development authority rather than passive recipients of external benevolence.

These laws find practical expression in the Pidgin Protocol, the operational arm of Developmental Sociolinguistics. The Protocol's four components—linguistic reconnaissance (assessing community communicative ecologies before intervention design), medium alignment (matching communicative medium to function), semiotic competence (acquiring not merely lexical proficiency but the pragmatic mastery that enables volunteers to deploy proverbs and earn titles), and institutional advocacy (working simultaneously for policy recognition)—provide a concrete pathway for transforming accidental success into intentional strategy. The volunteers whose practices we documented were not following a manual; they were improvising solutions that the Pidgin Protocol now systematizes for deliberate adoption.

The implications cascade across audiences. For policymakers in African governments, Developmental Sociolinguistics demands the legitimization of Pidgin English as an official language of extension services, primary health care, and basic education—not as a concession to deficiency but as recognition of communicative reality and democratic right. For international development organizations, the framework requires recruiting and training personnel in Pidgin-mediated participatory design, abandoning English-first communication protocols that systematically exclude the majority, and evaluating intervention effectiveness through comprehension and retention metrics rather than input counts and activity reports. For researchers across sociolinguistics, development studies, and postcolonial theory, Developmental Sociolinguistics calls for abandoning the marginalization of hybrid languages as degraded or transitional varieties and recognizing Pidgin English as Africa's linguistic superpower—the continent's own solution to the communicative challenges of multilingual democracy and participatory development.

The American Peace Corps' accidental success with Pidgin English in Cameroon was a historical accident, produced by the convergence of idealistic volunteers, receptive communities, and an institution flexible enough to accommodate grassroots innovation despite formal policy commitments to English-medium programming. Developmental Sociolinguistics—with its Three Laws of Linguistic Justice and its operational Pidgin Protocol—transforms that accident into Africa's intentional strategy. The future of African development will not be written in the Queen's English; it will be spoken in the proverbs of Pidgin English, worn in the fabric of locally tailored attire, and celebrated with the titles of community trust that communities bestow on those who earn the right to participate in their progress. Therefore, the developed Africa will speak in the languages of its markets, farms, and streets—or it will not speak at all.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Anchimbe, E. A. (2013). *Language policy and identity construction: The dynamics of Cameroon's multilingualism*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.32>
- Ayafor, M., & Green, M. J. (2017). *Cameroon Pidgin English: A comprehensive grammar*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/loall.20>
- Barthes, R. (1967). *Elements of semiology*. Hill and Wang.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>
- Henry, J. (2025). "Say a sentence": Drawing an interactional link between organizations, language ideologies, and coloniality. *Signs and Society*, 13(1), 45-72.
- Iyengar, A. (2024). Written into being: Colonial language epistemologies and the graphocentric straitjacket. In F. Ndhlovu & S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (Eds.), *Language and decolonisation: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 89-108). Routledge.
- Liu, M. (2025). Framing situated knowledge: A knowledge framework for gender and sustainability in the Global South. *Global South Governance and Sustainability*, 1(1), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1515/gsgs-2025-0005>
- Lüpke, F. (2025). (M)other tongue: How Global South multilingual practices allow uncovering multilingualisms beneath the invented monolingual European Self. In A. Alexiadou, C. Scarpaglieri, C. Schroeder, & H. Wiese (Eds.), *The construction of multilinguals as Others: Do we practice what we preach?* (pp. 81-102). Language Science Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132447>
- Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2024). Multilingualisms in the Global Souths: Shaping language scholarship in the Global Norths. In F. Ndhlovu & S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (Eds.), *Language and decolonisation: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 23-41). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003313618-3>
- Mavengano, E. (Ed.). (2025). *African Englishes: Contemporary trends and sociolinguistic shifts*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003582403-18>
- Mufwene, S. S. (2008). *Language evolution: Contact, competition and change*. Continuum. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350934078>
- Ndhlovu, F., & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (Eds.). (2024). *Language and decolonisation: An interdisciplinary approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003313618>
- Ngefah, A. (2016). *Sociolinguistic and structural aspects of Cameroon Creole English*. Lincom Europa.
- Nkengasong, J. N. (2018). *Language and development paradigms in Cameroon*. Langaa RPCIG.
- Ogbuokiri, B., & Seyyed-Kalantari, L. (2025). Mitigating dialect bias in large language models: The case for Pidgin English inclusion. *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research*, 78, 1123-1148.
- Okoro, R. E. (2025, September 19). Pidginary: The first modern Nigerian Pidgin dictionary [Digital product launch]. TechCabal. Retrieved from <https://techcabal.com/2025/09/19/pidginary-launch>
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

- Rihi, Y. (2025). Just transitions under pressure: From early visions to new proposals and trajectories in the Global South [Unpublished manuscript]. HAL-SHS. Retrieved from <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05316005>
- Sala, B. M. (2009). Writing in Cameroon Pidgin English: Begging the question. *English Today*, 25(2), 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000133>
- Schneider, B. (2025). The material making of language as practice of global domination and control: Continuations from European colonialism to AI. *AI & Society*, 40(2), 891-905. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02389-5>
- Schröder, A. (2003). *Status, functions, and prospects of Pidgin English: An empirical approach to language dynamics in Cameroon*. Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Thomason, S. G., & Kaufman, T. (1988). *Language contact, creolization, and genetic linguistics*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520912793>
- Udezea, C., & Eickb, F. (2026). Rethinking development: Language, power and the cost of progress. *Global Public Health*, 21(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2025.2610059>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2021). *The cost of silence: Language barriers in development projects*. UNDP Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Windle, J., & Nascimento, G. (2024). From linguistic resistance to re-existence: Pretuguês as an anti-racist perspective on language. In F. Ndhlovu & S. J. Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (Eds.), *Language and decolonisation: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 189-208). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003313618-17>
- World Bank. (2022). *Communication breakdown: Why development projects fail*. World Bank Group.