

## **INTERJECTIONS IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES: ISSUES IN AWING AND YEMBA**

**Kouesso Jean Romain (PhD), Nforbi Emmanuel (PhD) and Moko Theodore Ngowah**

Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, University of Dschang, P.O. Box 49 Dschang  
Cameroon

---

**ABSTRACT:** *This article reports a study on interjections carried out in Awing and Yemba, two Bantu Grassfield Languages in Cameroon. The study shows that language learning and language use especially as concerns interjections stem out from the learners first language. Given the reality on the ground whereby mother tongue teaching has been neglected for quite a while, until recently that linguists have introduced mother tongue study both in the secondary school and the university. Interjections of Awing and Yemba languages were collected from natives of these mother tongues. The data were compared and transcribed. Its presentation was done on a table form, some contrasts and comparisms were done and results gotten were analyzed between these two mother tongues. Mother tongue interjections share a lot in common with one another in Cameroon. Their phonology, morphemes and features are similar to one another which are equally similar to the official languages in use. This shows that the study of these mother tongue interjections will enhance not only understanding of interjections but will equally promote and sustain some cultural and linguistic aspects of our national languages which are dying out.*

**KEYWORDS:** Interjections, Awing, Yemba, Mother Tongue, Language Learning.

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The normal approach to literacy is to start from the known to the unknown. In the case of Cameroon, the known here which is the mother tongue, is usually an African language. Literacy in African languages has been very timid and inefficient in the yesteryears. The prevailing tendency has been to start literacy from the foreign languages, standing as official languages. Generally, these languages are not spoken by the learners the time they are introduced into reading and writing. The study of the mother tongue interjections which appears to be one primordial aspect in communication is an issue to reckon with. Awing, a language spoken by the people of Awing in the North West Region of Cameroon, predominantly, has English as the official language. On the other hand, Yemba, a mother tongue spoken by the people of Menoua Division in the West Region of Cameroon has French as the predominantly spoken official language. Data collected from both mother tongues will enable us to establish the link which exists between interjections of both mother tongues and official languages in Cameroon and how they influence each other. Education in Africa and Cameroon in particular cannot be functional without literacy in the language of the individual. Through these languages, Africans have interpreted and interacted with the world. Africans who through education acquired foreign languages cannot avoid facing the realities of their own societies, which are best expressed through their mother tongues.

### **Languages in Cameroon**

According to Lewis et al. (2016), Cameroon is home to about 279 living languages for a population estimated at about 23 500 000 inhabitants in 2015. It is the 8<sup>th</sup> multilingual country

of the world, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> most diverse country with a diversity index of 0.974 (97%). Among the 279 living languages, 275 are national (or indigenous) and 4 are non-national (non-indigenous). Cameroonian national languages belong to three of the four main African language families; namely the Afro-Asiatic, the Nilo-Saharan and the Niger-Kordofanian. Awing and Yemba originate from the latter which is the most represented family language with more than 75% of languages.

Non-national languages in Cameroon are French, English, Pidgin and Camfranglais. Being colonized by France and United Kingdom (1916-1960), Cameroon inherited from its colonial masters two foreign languages, i.e. French and English. Out of the 10 regions of Cameroon, 8 are known to be Francophone whereas 2 are Anglophone. Pidgin and Camfranglais are lingua franca. The former is widely spoken in North West, South West, Littoral and West Regions for trade purpose while the latter is mostly used among youth in urban cities.

French and English are Cameroonian official languages, promoted and mainly used in administration, schools, media and business as means of communication. Since colonial period, national languages have been banned from any official or prestigious purpose (Stumpf 1979, Kouesso 2008). It is only with the provisions of the 1996 Constitution bearing the protection and the promotion of national languages that a number of laws and regulations are being taken towards the teaching of these languages in schools.

## **Awing and Yemba Languages**

### **Localization**

Awing and Yemba are all East-Grassfield languages, one of the two Groups of Grassfield Sub Branch/Bantu Branch/Bantoid Sub Family/Congo-Benue Family/Niger-Congo Sub Phylum. The East-Grassfield Group is made up of four Sub Groups, namely North, Noun, Bamileke Central and Ngemba. Awing belongs to Ngemba Sub Group, with 6 other languages, and Yemba to Bamileke Central Sub Group, alongside with 9 other languages (Dieu et Renaud 1983).

From administrative point of view, Awing is located in the North West Region. Also known as Bambuluwing or Ndong Awing, it is situated in Santa Sub-Division/Mezam Division, having over 19 000 native speakers. Concerning Yemba, it is spoken mainly in Menoua Division in the West Region and certain localities of Lebialem Division in the South West Region. Since 1992, Yemba covered about 300 000 native speakers. It has been taught and written since more than 90 years (Kouesso 2016).

### **Aspects of orthography and grammar**

Like other Bantu Grassfield languages, Awing and Yemba are known to be tone languages. In tone languages, words are made of three types of units, namely consonants, vowels and tones, each of which can serve to distinguish meanings of words or to indicate a grammatical function (Kutsch Lojenga 2014, Kouesso 2016). Thus, the writing of these languages should be based on consonant, vowel and tone graphemes, not only on consonant and vowel graphemes as it is the case for some languages like English.

Awing orthography is based on an alphabet system of 33 graphemes, i.e. 3 tones, 9 vowels and 21 consonants (Akem Shedmankah 2009):

- Tones: ´ (high tone), ˇ (rising tone), ^ (falling tone);
- Vowels: a, e, ə, ε, i, í, o, ɔ, u;
- Consonants: b, ch, d, f, g, gh, h, j, k, ʻ, l, m, n, ny, ŋ, p, s, t, w, y, z.

Yemba orthography uses an alphabet system of 35 graphemes, i.e. 2 tone graphemes, 9 vowel graphemes and 24 consonant graphemes (Kouesso 2009):

- Tones: ´ (high tone) ˉ (mid tone);
- Vowels: a, e, ə, ε, i, o, ɔ, u, ɯ;
- Consonants: b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, ʻ, l, m, n, ŋ, p, pf, r, s, sh, t, ts, v, w, y, z.

Many studies have been carried out on the grammar of Awing and Yemba languages. (Watters 2003, Akem Shedmankah 2009, Kouesso 2009). They usually point out nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and prepositions as word classes. Interjections have not yet been a matter of concern.

Generally, interjections are words whose function is to express feelings and emotions. They do not enter into syntactic constructions with traditional grammar categories, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and prepositions (Crystal 1997, Nforbi, Kouesso and Moko 2016). According to Padilla Cruz (2010:40), their general features are as follows:

- Morphologically, they are usually simple, i.e. monomorphemic and invariable, as they do not receive inflectional or derivational affixes [...].
- Phonologically, they do not tend to be homophonous or homonymous with other lexical items whose meaning they may be related to [...], and in many cases their phonological features lie outside the regular system of the language.
- Semantically, they do not have denotative, indexical meaning.
- Syntactically, they normally occur alone, in isolation, as full utterances, or tone units, and not as part of larger grammatical constituents. They do not usually enter into construction with other signs or are loosely attached to the rest of the constituents of a sentence. Also, quite rarely, they may occur medially in a syntactic structure.

### **Problem**

Our main preoccupation in this article is to raise awareness on interjections in African languages. If interjections have been seriously handled in some Indo-Europeans languages such as English and French, it is not the case with many African languages like Awing and Yemba.

### **Approaches**

This study is guided by language socialization, communicative and pragmatic approaches.

### **Language Socialization**

This approach argues that language acquisition is highly influenced by the society in which the child grows. Through their participation in social interaction, children tend to internalize and gain competences in this socio-cultural defined context (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986).

### The Communicative and Pragmatic Approaches

These approaches see language more as a tool of communication than a matter of respecting grammatical rules. Thus interjections are more context-dependent and embodied with a lot of meaning (Canale and Swain 1980, Leech 1983).

## METHODOLOGY

Interjections in oral form were collected from native speakers of Awing and Yemba languages and were transcribed with the assistance of some mother tongue teachers and other resource persons. Another source of data was from already documented material. The final data was presented in three columns. Column one represents interjections in mother tongues while column two represents its translation into the English language. In column three, various meanings and interpretations are represented. The analyses of the data was done in using a comparative method. Both languages were compared and contrasted in terms of their differences and similarities in various features. Results are presented in tables.

### The Awing Interjections

Below is the list of interjections collected in Awing.

#### List of Awing Interjections

No	Interjections	Translation	Meanings
1	Ŋgebè!	Please!	Agreement, excuse me, listen, calling an attention
2	Ŋgèh ke nta'ŋ!	Miracle, wonders shall never end!	Surprise
3	Lo!	Surprise, displeasure	Pleading
4	Wo ngèh mə!	Oh my trouble!	Surprise, pain, anger discontentment
5	O səŋ! ŋge!	Really! , You mean it!	insistence, asking a question
6	O oh!	I am finished!	Despair, pain, grief, dissatisfaction, attention, a call
7	O səŋ lè!	Really!	Concerting, concord
8	Lénuè!	It's true!	Assurance, peace, certainty
9	Alò!	Hello!	calling attention, displeasure
10	Á fele'!	He messed up everything!	Realization, pity of oneself, disagreement
11	Làŋ dɔ!	Leave! Go away!	Despair, failure, discontentment

12	Á pè le!	Hello!, hullo!, allo!, hi!, How are you? Greetings to you!	Forms of salutation
13	Laŋ felè!	Go out!	Command, anger, surprise, A gap filler
14	O lè!	You slept well!	Greetings especially in the early morning
15	Wóho!, aie!, kai!	A hash cry!	Embarrassment, pain, regret,
16	Yéhe!	A hash cry	Disappointment, surprise, anger
17	O lo pə!	Are you up!	Greetings, good morning
18	Em bi ŋke səŋ!	I said it!	Anger, disagreement, unsatisfaction
19	Ŋzò tè!	Listen!	Exaggeration, command to stop,
20	Òzène kè!	You haven't seen anything yet!	Exaggeration, insult,
21	Yé ye ē!	What will I do!	Distress, confusion, pain
22	Anuye yèlèmə!	Go away!	Anger, regret, pain, distress
23	Ti eh!	Wait!	Anger
24	Wó mə me!	Oh my mother!	Regret, disappointment
25	Wə mə me!	oh my mother!	Regret, disappointment
26	Wə' tà me!	Wait!	Anger
27	Yaá! Yaá ne wu!	Stop, shame on you!	Insulting, abusing,
28	Ŋe'!	Yes!, I agree!	Agree, to accept
29	Ŋe eh ehh!	Take it like this!	
30	Ŋe e e!	Yes!	Insisting, acceptance,
31	Osəŋ! Osəŋ pə!	Really!	Demanding, questioning, assuring
32	Ŋge'è!	Trouble!	Pain, regret, fear, anger

The above list of some Awing interjections shows in the first column their written forms as in the mother-tongue, followed by their translation (2<sup>nd</sup> column) and their meaning (3<sup>rd</sup> column). Most of the Awing interjections show meanings of greetings, regret, disappointment, anger, distress, confusion, demanding, questioning, and assuring. These interjections are mostly produced in such contexts.

### The Yemba Interjections

The documentation of the Yemba language has facilitated us to identify some interesting interjections that have frequent appearances in the daily communication. Some of these interjections are listed below.

**List of Yemba Interjections and their Meanings**

No	Interjections	Translation	Meanings
1	A á pūp!	That is it!	Agreement
2	Lemaŋ mboo!	Miracle!	Surprise
3	Akuá !	Surprise!	Pleading
4	Oo!	Surprise!	pain, anger discontentment
5	Eeŋ eeŋ!	Yes!	insistence, asking a question
6	Meŋ á mi!	I am finished!	Despair, pain, grief, dissatisfaction
7	Te mé se!	And so what!	Anger, complex
8	Náŋ á ésí!	Calm down! Remain calm!	Assurance, peace
9	Ashuh!	To be proud!	Pity, calling attention, displeasure
10	Á fū' te lem!	He messed up everything!	Realisation, pity of onself
11	Anu á pū ŋhū!	It's worse!	Despair, failure, discontentment
12	A á lá a!	Hello!, hullo!, allo!, hi! How are you?, greetings to you!	Forms of salutation
13	Wúyi!		Joy, anger, surprise
14	Á ā!	Yes!	Accept, agreement
15	Wó ho!		embarrassment
16	Yéhe!		embarrassment
17	Oo lo!		Paranoia
18	Éε!		Anger, disagreement, unsatisfaction
19	Wúúkuyi!		exaggeration
20	Wúú'úu!	Too much!	Exaggeration. bizarre
21	Yé meŋ ē!	What will I do!	Distress, confusion, pain
22	Guo mé ége!	Go away!	Anger, disappointment
23	Kápté!	Close!, silence!	Anger, unconversational
24	Awó!	Who is it?	Question, interrogation
25	Ɔo tá'!	Yes but!	Acceptance, agreement
26	Zwí'té!	Wait!	Anger, command to stop and listen
27	Yaá !, yaá me wu!	Stop!, shame on you!	Despise, to ignore exposition
28	Láŋté!	Shut up!	High silence
29	Ko pá'a!	I don't care!	Neglect, forbade
30	Lephū!	Sky!	admiration
31	ndoo!	Courage!	Encouragement, flattery
32	O á zie?	Morning!	Greetings, salutations
33	ŋgáŋ!	No!	Refusal, disagree, denial
34	Yé mé gé!	My mother!	Despair, pain, confusion, regret
35	Yé mo'ó geé!	My father!	Despair, pain, confusion, regret

Above are some interjections gotten from the Yemba language. The first column shows the interjections as they appear in the mother tongue. In column two, we have their corresponding English interpretation. Column three is an outline of the various emotions displayed. A particularity with these interjections is that one interjection like Yé mo'ó geé! (My father!) will represent various emotions like despair, pain, confusion, and regret in different contexts. We

should note that some of the mother-tongue interjections do not have corresponding translations in English in such contexts.

### Comparism of the Awing and Yemba Tables of Interjections

The Awing people are from the North West Region where apart from English which is commonly used as the official language, Pidgin-English has a stronghold on the linguistic diversity of the people. For this reason, most of the primary interjections of English like hm!, er!, em!, emm!, um!, ah!, mmmhe!, eh!, uh! Huh!, hi!, hey!, ish!, ugh!, Ooh!, ouch!, aah!, eh!, hmp!, ah ha, oops!, aih! The interjections on the table therefore are classified under secondary interjections. For example, Lénouè! Linguistically, the people say this to mean 'It's true!' which means in its pragmatic contexts assurance, peace, certainty.

On the other hand, the Yemba people stem up from a Francophone zone which doubles at the same time as a university milieu. This geographical advantage encourages research in the language. Just like the English interjections, those of the French language also have most of the primary interjections from the French interjections, such as oh!, ah!, eh!, ah!, bigre!, aie!, hi!, heu !, hie!, o hie!. The linguistic sounds of the language are presented above in the table. The analyses of the data are as follows.

### Lexical Word Structure of the Interjections

Interjections orthography follows sound symbols of the *General alphabet of Cameroon languages* (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo 1984). Some of them are just utterances while others are words and even whole phrases. They share most of the primary interjections with English and French languages like oh!, eh!, ah!, ah ha!, wow!, etc. When we compare the lexical organization of the words in Awing relative to English, we notice that they show differences in structures as seen below in the table E.g.

**Table showing some Awing lexical word structure**

<b>Awing</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
O lè!	You sleep	Hello, how are you, good morning
O lo pə! ne lè pə	You are up	Good morning, how is the family, variants of greetings
osəŋ! osəŋ lè!	Is it, do you mean what you say	Asking question, attention, seriousness
osəŋ pə!	Is that it	Acceptance, concert

**Awing and Yemba Interjections.** They share relatively the same characteristics as in the table below.

**Table showing some common similarities between Awing and Yemba interjections**

<b>Awing</b>	<b>Yemba</b>
Ɖzò tè! (Listen)	Zwí'té! (listen)
wɔ ma'me! (oh my mother)	Yé mé gé !(My mother)
Wɔ' tà me! (Oh my father)	Yé mɔ'ó geé! (My father)

**Semantic Interpretation of the Interjections**

Let us consider that we find a native speaker of Awing who gives us the meaning of the following interjections and a distinguished professor of linguistics who is not a native speaker of the Awing language tells us the meaning relative to semantic rules, which one will be more appropriate?

O sɛŋ! ..... means 'You mean'?

O sɛŋ ŋge! ..... means 'You mean that'?

O sɛŋ lè! ..... means 'is that it?' or 'is it the way it should be?'

O sɛŋ pə! ..... means 'I agree'

From the above, it can be said that the mother-tongue of a people used by the native speakers, is the primary source of meaning to a word. This is why interjections of the mother-tongue should be studied as well as the French and English dialects spoken in Cameroon.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to highlight the importance of mother tongue interjections as part of speech. They play a vital role in communication and can be found in either the mother tongue as the official languages. Their negligence in African languages can bilaterally lead to the loss of style and beauty in communication. Nonetheless, we have been able to present some interjections and their implications through a pragmatic approach. This important aspect of language is used in all communities for semantic and pragmatic purposes. Here, new perspectives are opened for subsequent deeper studies.

**REFERENCES**

- AKEM SHEDMANKAH H. (2009) *Awing structural grammar*. MA Thesis, University of Dschang.
- AUSTIN, J. L. (1962) *How to do things with words*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- CANALE, M. and SWAIN, M. (1980) *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*. *Applied Linguistics* 1 (1), 1-47.
- CRYSTAL, D. (1997) *Dictionary of Linguistics and phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell.



- DIEU, M. and RENAUD, P. (eds) (1983) *Atlas linguistique du Cameroun : Inventaire préliminaire*, Paris/Yaoundé, ACCT/CERDOTOLA.
- KOUESSO, J. R. (2008) « Ecrire en langues nationales au Cameroun ou le refus d'une mort linguistique », in *Nka' Lumière. Etudes sur l'Afrique : Bilans et perspectives*, Hors-série N° 001, pp. 262-278.
- KOUESSO, J. R. (2009) Variation dialectale et standardisation de l'orthographe du yémba, Thèse de Doctorat/Ph.D, Faculté des Arts, Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Yaoundé I.
- KOUESSO, J. R. (2016) "The Yemba language (Cameroon): 90 years of tone orthography", in *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, Vol.4, No.3, pp. 1-15, August 2016.
- KUTSCH LOJENGA, C. (2014) "Orthography and tone: a tone-system with implications for orthography development", in Cahill, M. and Rice, K. (eds), *Developing orthographies for unwritten languages*, Dallas, Texas: SIL, pp. 49-72.
- LEECH, G. N. (1983) *Principles of pragmatics*, London/New York: Longman.
- LEWIS, M. P; SIMONS G. F. and FENNIG C. D. (eds) (2016). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, nineteenth Edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- NFORBI, E; KOUESSO J. R. and MOKO, T. N. (2016) "Teaching the English interjections in Cameroon secondary schools", in *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, Vol.4, No.5, pp.1-14.
- PADILLA, C. (2010) "What do interjections contribute to Communication and how are they interpreted? A cognitive pragmatic account", in IWONA, WITCZAK-PLISIECKA (ed) *Pragmatic perspectives on language and linguistics. Vol. 1, Speech actions in theory and applied studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- SCHIEFFELIN B. B. and OCHS E. (eds) (1986), *Language socialization across cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STUMPF, R. (1979). *La politique linguistique au Cameroun de 1884 à 1960 : Comparaison entre les administrations coloniales allemande, française et britannique et du rôle joué par les sociétés missionnaires*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- TADADJEU, M. and SADEMOUO E. (1984) *General alphabet of Cameroon languages*, PROPELCA Series, No 1, Bilingual edition Yaounde: University of Yaounde.
- WATTERS, J. R. (2003) "Grassfields Bantu", in NURSE, D. and PHILIPPSON, G. (eds.), *The Bantu languages*, London/New York: Routledge, pp. 225-256.