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LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE: A BRIDGE TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of the linguistic landscape on crisis management within the framework of decentralisation in Cameroon. It examines the local languages used in public spaces and their communicative implications. The study explores the linguistic devices used in the communication landscape of Cameroon with particular reference to the towns of Buea and Bamenda (cosmopolitan cities in the two English-speaking regions). It highlights the importance and influence of local indigenous languages as resource languages. The background of the socio-political and linguistic situations expressed in the Anglophone crisis in these two regions (North West and South West) lays the bedrock for this research. Data from advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shops, etc., were obtained and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively through observation. The study reveals the extent of linguistic diversity in the two cities by comparing both communities (the Anglophone regions of Cameroon). It evinces a shift from English/French (official languages) to indigenous languages (Mokpe, Ejagham, CPE, etc.) and the lingua franca Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) as significant languages of communication in the linguistic landscape in these cities. From a linguistic perspective, the paper documents the influence of Indigenous languages in enhancing the decentralisation process as a catalyst for the socio-political situation. Also, it demonstrates how public space preserves some of Cameroon's indigenous languages, not just in terms of vocabulary but also in terms of pronunciation, orthography, and syntax. However, it exposes the communicative and informative functions of the Indigenous regional languages in these regions. It demonstrates the role of the theory of inclusion of the local communities in decentralisation as a medium for crisis management in Cameroon.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Crisis management, Inclusion, Indigenous languages.

Introduction

The linguistic diversity of a country can be a reflection of its complex (socio-cultural and political) social and political dynamics. In many cases, the linguistic landscape has been closely linked to crises, serving as both a source of conflict and a potential bridge to reconciliation. This paper explores the intricate relationship between linguistic landscape and crisis management, focusing on understanding the potential for leveraging linguistic diversity for peace and conflict resolution. Research unequivocally demonstrates that 16 out of the top 20 and 7 out of the top 10 countries with the highest linguistic diversity index, as developed by SIL International, are located in Africa, including Cameroon (Eberhard et al., 2022). Cameroon, located in Central Africa, has a complex linguistic landscape, with over 250 indigenous languages spoken. The official languages are English and French, inherited from the colonial past when the

country was under British and French rule. The linguistic diversity in Cameroon has been a source of both richness and conflict, particularly in recent years, as tensions between the English-speaking regions (Northwest and Southwest) and the French-speaking regions have led to a crisis.

Furthermore, startling statistics indicate that at least 74.8% of African languages are moderately or severely endangered, with 94% either extinct or on the verge of extinction (Ethnologue 25th edition, 2022). This is a grave concern as the demise of a language signifies the loss of linguistic identity and cultural diversity (Batibo, 2005). Furthermore, the erosion of language and cultural diversity could result in losing human identity, a sense of belonging, and knowledge. In Cameroon, most national or indigenous languages face the threat of endangerment due to their limited use in specific communication domains.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section gives a brief background on the sociolinguistic situation of Cameroon and appropriately situates the concepts of official bilingualism, multilingualism, and minority and national languages. Section two highlights methodological issues, including the description of the study area. The third section presents the data and discusses the findings, emphasising the role of linguistic landscaping in crisis management. The last section discusses the significance of the study and recommends areas for further research on the information on the linguistic landscape to enhance inclusion in resolving the crisis.

1. Background to the study

Cameroon is faced with linguistic complexity as it hosts about 248 languages, most of which are minority languages with less than 10,000 speakers each (Chiatoh & Akumbu, 2013). The linguistic complexity and the challenge of choosing a national language policy have necessitated the adoption of English and French as the only official languages since 1961. This choice must be re-evaluated to ensure effective communication in society, particularly in education and written and spoken communication, since it is considered a significant catalyst of the Anglophone crisis. Despite government efforts to address this issue through constitutional reforms (such as the Bilingualism Committee), educational reforms, and legal frameworks, the solution still needs to be completed. Indigenous languages have yet to be appropriately developed despite their official or regional status.

Our indigenous languages should be perceived as assets rather than problems. In Cameroon, it is worth mentioning that our languages, like all other resources, are crucial in national development efforts and should be exploited and incorporated into the planning processes. This can only be achieved if we acknowledge that big or small language embodies great societal values (economic, political, educational, cultural and ideological). The research (heightens) heighten indigenous languages' political, cultural and ideological

values in developing a nation. Language's role in a community or nation is determined by its diglossic function. It shapes individual and social attitudes and developmental orientations as reflected in the values it portrays in the nation /community. Politically, language is a determining factor in defining power relationships and the distribution of opportunities. Using some languages (English/French) at the expense of others (indigenous languages) automatically deprives their speakers of the right to be heard in the nation. However, if the language policy considers the equitable management of linguistic resources, it will enhance the freedom of voice in the country. Culturally, language has been proven to be the bed vessel of the identity of a people and a nation, given that our identity is embedded in the languages we speak. If our Indigenous languages are carefully developed and incorporated into the country's language policy, it will eventually construct and enhance national unity and identity. This study advocates and encourages using our indigenous languages in the linguistic landscape to foster unity, given that most signage is in English and French, which bear foreign identities and ideologies. Cuéllar et al. (1995) highlight these values when they state that the spoken or written language of the people is the most important cultural attribute, and the language policy, like other policies, should serve as an instrument of domination, fragmentation and integration into the ruling political structure.

Cameroon's historical premise reflects that it is a bi-cultural nation as reflected by its two official foreign languages (Eng/Fre) inherited from its colonisers after the reunification of 1961. This research acknowledges the use of this historical heritage. Equally, it advocates the valorisation of the national languages by including and integrating the linguistic resources exploited in the LL, especially in the two cities of the English-speaking Regions (Buea and Bamenda). The crisis that took off in these two English-speaking regions in Cameroon has experienced varying measures from the country's government to seek peace. One of these measures is the creation of a National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (NCPBM), by decree N° 2017/013 Of 23rd January, which has as its function the responsibility to promote bilingualism and multiculturalism to maintain peace, consolidate the country's national unity and strengthen its people's willingness and day-to-day experience concerning living together. Given the ideologies behind this crisis, it was eventually labelled the Anglophone Crisis, portraying language's critical role in enhancing peace and unity in the nation. This paper illustrates the role of language used in public spaces in improving stability and harmony in the crisis in Cameroon.

Although Cameroon is officially bilingual, it is a heterogeneous state with its citizens independently speaking different or related languages. The research aims to identify the indigenous languages and other semiotic resources of written symbols used in public spaces and their communicative implications in some

cities in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. Its objective is to identify the linguistic measures employed by the government, non-governmental organisations, or local communities to enhance effective communication and abate the problem.

The study exploits this research area by answering the following questions: What languages/signs are displayed in the physical environment in the indigenous languages? How do posters, billboards, advertisements, and street names reflect the sociolinguistic realities of the communities? How does the country's sociolinguistic situation pose as one of the feeding grounds for solving the crisis in the two English-speaking Regions, labelled the Anglophone crisis?

2. Review of some relevant Literature

Existing literature highlights the significance of the linguistic landscape in reflecting socio-political tensions, power differentials, and the potential for conflicts. Studies on crisis management emphasise the importance of understanding linguistic divisions in conflict-prone regions and the potential for leveraging linguistic diversity as a bridge to peace and reconciliation.

The linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration is the language used in the physical environment like road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, graffiti, and public signs on government buildings (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). They identified the different languages found in signs used in multilingual communities, focusing on the visibility of French and English on public and commercial signs in Quebec City (the capital of Canada's Quebec province with French as the official language). They demonstrated that the presence of different languages on signs reveals the extent of the ethnolinguistic vitality of particular languages, affecting the language people speak when found in specific places. This study reflects the multilingual and bilingual contexts of the environment under research where language contact and conflict occur. This study focuses on the local languages and other semiotic resources of written symbols used in public spaces and their communicative implications in some cities in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.

Laying the foundation on Linguistic Landscape (LL) research by Landry and Bourhis (1997) provided further discussions on the top-down and bottom-up signs (Backhaus, 2007). In his study on LL of Tokyo, he identified and documented the languages used in public space, focusing on their geographical and territorial distribution on the map. His study revealed that apart from Japanese, fourteen other languages were visible on the LL of Tokyo, and most interestingly, English was the most widely used language as opposed to Japanese. The frequent use of English on LL of Tokyo reflects the bottom-up approach (mainly used for commercial purposes such as demonstrating the image of the

companies using it), while the use of Japanese reflects a top-down approach (official purposes to express and reinforce feelings of authority and solidarity)

As observed in rural and urban cities, signage is often available in post-colonial languages such as English / French rather than in the local languages of the community. Thus, the use and non-usage of particular wording in the linguistic landscape can indicate the perception and status towards the languages in contact (Gorter, 2006; Cenoz & Gorter, 2009). Written or oral language has proven to be a significant resource for people to express their opinions and share information in a crisis (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2016); reflects the behaviour or beliefs of speakers and ideas (With appropriate exploitation of this resource, the situation might be manageable, as in the case of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon's North West and South West regions. This research provides additional evidence to that of Gorter (2006) and Shothamy & Waksman (2009) as it enhances inclusion in exploiting semiotic resources in constructing the linguistic landscape in a community, especially in crisis management.

All sorts of signs can compose the linguistic landscape of a particular society, which can be categorised as top-down and bottom-up. According to Ben-Ragael et al. (2006), signs classified as top-down are official messages produced by public institutions, like the government and councils, such as street names, signs, and road and direction signs. Bottom-up are signs fabricated by commercial and private organisations, including notices in offices, shops, factories and companies. This research will primarily exploit bottom-up signs used with the research site for analysis.

3. Methodology

- Data collection

The methodology of this study involves a multi-faceted approach to comprehensively understanding the impact of language diversity on crises. For data collection, a field observation was conducted to document the use of different languages in public spaces, such as street signs, billboards, and commercial establishments. Linguistic data was gathered from various urban and rural areas within the Northwest and Southwest regions, focusing on towns like Buea and Bamenda to provide a comparative analysis. Also, the researcher engaged with local communities and language speakers to understand their perspectives and experiences regarding linguistic diversity in crisis management.

The research is conducted in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon: North West and South West (NW & SW). These areas are purposively selected because both regions are affected by the ongoing Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Due to the crisis and the rich, diverse language repertoire in these areas, it was essential to focus on the local languages of both regions as a primary means of communication for crisis management. After carefully considering the methodology, 13 local languages have been identified as data, in addition to

English, French, and CPE in both regions. The languages identified represent the linguistic diversity and cultural heritage of the regions, as this sociolinguistic situation significantly demonstrates the linguistic vitality of the areas.

This research utilises Linguistic mapping, a visual representation of linguistic landscape, to identify the distribution of languages in public spaces, signage, and official communications. It helps understand the visibility and representation of different languages within a region and how linguistic diversity manifests in the public domain. As a multidisciplinary study, it focuses on the visible display of written languages or signs in public spaces and people's interaction with these languages and symbols.

- *Data Analysis*

The research is grounded within the sociolinguistic framework and adopts multimodal and qualitative ethnographic data collection methods. Also, it makes use of privileged digital images as quantifiable data. Danesi (2004:87) states that photographs capture a fleeting and irretrievable moment in time, extracting it from the flux of change that characterises human life. These pictures reflect the ideology and culture of the communities where it is used. As data collection instruments, the research elaborately relies on using digital cameras. The ethnographic approach is exploited through interviews and the sociocultural history of the place.

The collected data was analysed qualitatively to identify patterns and trends in using different languages in public spaces during crises. I examined the communicative implications of local languages and their role(s) in conveying crisis-related information and messages. Using a quantitative method, I measured the prevalence and distribution of different languages in public spaces, providing statistical insights into the linguistic landscape and its connection to crisis management.

By employing qualitative and quantitative methods, this research aims to comprehensively understand how linguistic diversity and language usage in public spaces intersect with crisis management in Cameroon, particularly within the context of the Anglophone crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions. When analysing data, the theoretical framework drew from several vital perspectives. From the sociolinguistic perspective, I examined the role of language in identity formation and conflict resolution. This involves exploring how the use of different languages in public spaces reflects and impacts the socio-political dynamics of the crisis and how linguistic inclusivity can contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Also, there is a relationship between language policies, linguistic diversity, and decentralisation (Tollefson & Tsui, 2006). This framework would explore how language policies, particularly in decentralisation, influence crisis management and how including Indigenous languages in public

discourse can foster a sense of belonging and participation among different linguistic communities.

Furthermore, I incorporated the concept of language vitality and endangerment from a sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology perspective. This perspective involved assessing the status of Indigenous languages in public spaces, the challenges they face in terms of endangerment, and the potential impact of preserving and promoting these languages on crisis management and community cohesion.

- *Research procedure*

This research is conducted in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon: North West and South West (NW & SW). These areas were purposively selected because both regions are affected by the ongoing Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Due to the crisis and the rich, diverse language repertoire in these areas, it was essential to focus on the local languages of both regions as a primary means of communication for crisis management. After carefully considering the methodology, 13 local languages were identified as data, in addition to English, French, and CPE in both regions. The languages identified represented the linguistic diversity and cultural heritage of the regions, as this sociolinguistic situation significantly demonstrates the linguistic vitality of the regions.

Ethical practices were ensured when engaging with the local communities and obtaining consent for data collection, particularly involving human participants. I visited the two cities in the English-speaking Regions (Buea and Bamenda) for observation. The research collected photos of words, phrases, and languages displayed on billboards, shop signboards, etc. 150 pictures of billboards, posters, and buildings, and 75 words were identified. In analysing the data, I collected the words and identified the languages used in the billboards and signboards in both cities. A semi-structured interview was administered to determine first why these particular languages were chosen among the others in the regions. The interview was administered to one private business establishment (Orange, Cameroon) and ten (10) individuals (business owners) in both study areas. Their responses provided ample data, which was analysed qualitatively to determine the choice of the languages.

To respond to the research question of the number of local languages used, I identified one by one from the billboard images that could show how the billboards represent ethnic groups in the region.

This study has demonstrated that written or oral language is a significant resource for people to express their opinions and share information in a crisis. It sheds light on identity inclusion and exclusion, vital issues to consider in crisis management. From a linguistic perspective, the paper documents the influence of Indigenous languages in enhancing the decentralisation process as a catalyst for

the socio-political situation. It also demonstrated how public space serves as a platform to preserve some of Cameroon's indigenous languages regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, orthography, and syntax. Consequently, the appearance of the minority languages in the LL of the Regions indicates the languages' vitality and speakers' vitality.

4. Linguistic Landscape and Crisis Management in Cameroon

This section delves into the specific manifestations of the linguistic landscape in Cameroon and its relevance to crisis management. It examines the use of language in political discourse, education, media, and public spaces and how these linguistic expressions reflect and shape the crisis in the Anglophone regions.

In addition to English and French, thirteen (13) other indigenous languages are visible on the LL. Four (4) Indigenous languages are used on billboards in the SW Region, and Nine (9) were used in the NW Regions (two English-speaking regions) of Cameroon, including Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), which is used in both areas.

Table 1: Languages on public signs in The NW and SW

S/N	languages	North West	South West
1.	English	yes	yes
2.	French	yes	yes
3.	CPE	yes	yes
4.	Mokpe		yes
5.	Ejagham		yes
6.	Kenyang		yes
6.	bafaw		yes
8.	mughaka	Yes	
9.	lamso	Yes	
10.	Limbum	yes	
11.	kom	Yes	
12.	metta	Yes	

13.	aghem	Yes	
14	menemo	Yes	
15.	biffi	yes	
16	Hausa	yes	
Total		12	7

Table 1 above shows that sixteen (16) languages are used in public spaces in both Regions of Cameroon: four (4) Indigenous languages for the South West and nine (9) Indigenous languages for the North West, together with the two official languages and the lingua franca CPE.

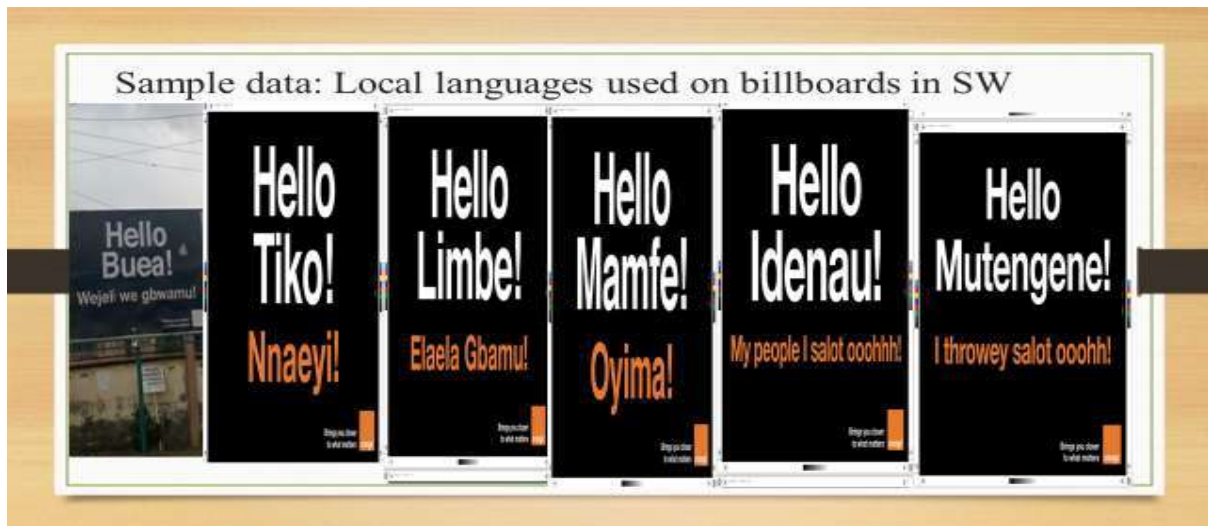


Figure 1: Local languages used on billboards in the South West region



Figure 2: Local languages used on billboards in the North West region

Another point of interest about the billboard is that the English translation appears above the local language bits. This might seem insignificant, but it is a subtle awakening that in this city (Buea), English is the dominant language used even though *Mokpe* is the dominant local language. The post on a shopfront in Bamenda expresses an intimate relationship with the trader. It expresses solidarity with customers while communicating what the shop offers.

The billboards with the message *Hello Buea! wejeli we gbwamu* “You are welcome to Buea” or *Abakwa! We salot wena*, “greetings from Bamenda,” within the context of the crisis, index the feelings of hospitality, nationalism, and resilience. This is interesting because it highlights how language and other signs are integrated into the physical environment and impact people's behaviour and reactions in obvious and subtle ways. Furthermore, these messages also portray how the linguistic aspects of the community are affected and often change in response to social, economic, political, physical and sociolinguistic activities. This study on language use in the environment sheds light on identity inclusion and exclusion, which are vital issues to consider in crisis management.



Figure 3: Languages used on private buildings in the South West Region.

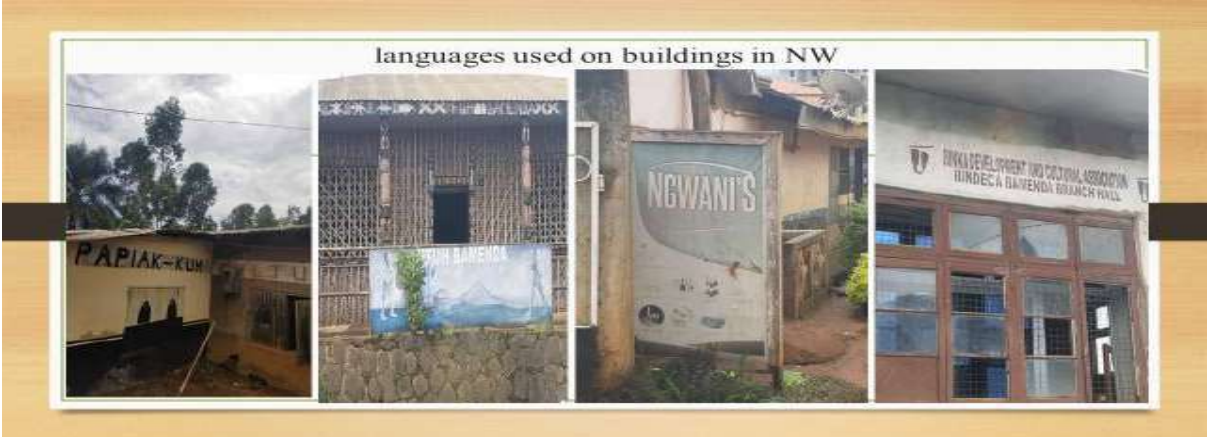


Figure 4: Languages used on private buildings in the South West Region.

Private owners and institutions provide the languages used on the buildings presented in Figures 3 and 4 above. These languages communicate information to the communities and symbolise cultural affiliation and identity. They are mainly used on private buildings, reflecting a bottom-up approach.

5. Discussion

Investigating the visibility of local languages in a multilingual context, as in the case of the two communities under research, provides an understanding of the area's sociolinguistic composition, which is vital for seeking possible solutions to the ongoing crisis in both regions. From the languages in the public space, we learn about those who make up the communities, what language they speak, and the relationship between the language in the physical environment and the language speakers. The visibility and non-visibility of local and national languages in the public space provide great insights into which language is most accepted within the community and excluded (top-down). The code choice on public signage is a symbolic practice that is not only communicative but also ideological. Through a bottom-up approach, apart from other languages such as English, French or Pidgin English, the choice of *mokpe* on billboards in the town of Buea is vital because the language seems to represent the dominant ethnic group that lives in the city to the dominant use of English and French on the public space. The language choices in these cities can be seen as inclusive, given that it considers the speakers of the various languages within the communities.

According to the 2010 census, the NW Region has over a hundred languages spoken by 1.8 million people, resulting in many inhabitants being multilingual in their mother tongue, CPE, English, French and any other language, but not up to 1/10 of these local languages are exploited in the public space. In addition to English and French, fifteen (15) other languages are visible on the LL of the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon. Four (04) local and national languages were used on billboards in the SW Region, and nine (09) local and national languages were used in the NW Regions and the national lingua franca, Cameroon Pidgin English. They showcase the cultural richness and testify to the vibrant cultural heritages of the regions. This LL situation pushes the researcher to ponder why the local indigenous languages were excluded. An attempt to answer this question may lead to the following: who creates signs, why, who uses them, and how the signs reveal the history, culture, and politics of the given communities.

The language used in Cameroon's physical environment to communicate performed social identities and showed allegiances to particular groups and ideologies. Interestingly, how the crisis has influenced (positively) the communicative environments in which people operate is intriguing. Only some of the information on the billboards in these two regions is in English and French; not all are produced by government bodies or companies. Figures 1 and 2 above demonstrate a sample of local languages used in the public space in the NW and

SW regions of Cameroon, respectively, which portrays their identity and origin. For instance, a noticeboard put up by the cultural community of Limbum (local language) speakers in Bamenda portrays their identity and origin.

Furthermore, the Linguistic landscape of these two English-speaking regions in Cameroon reflects an overt bottom-up approach and a covert top-down approach. The covert Top-down approach demonstrates the inclusion of different cultural and personal ideologies in exploiting semiotic resources to construct the LL in both communities and manage the crisis. It showcases the cultural richness and testifies to the region's vibrant heritage.

Conclusion

The linguistic landscape presents challenges to crisis management in Cameroon, including linguistic discrimination, political marginalisation, and difficulties in communication across linguistic divides. Also, it has demonstrated a shift from English/French (official languages) to indigenous languages (Mokpe, Ejagham, CPE, etc.) and the lingua franca Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) as significant languages of communication in the linguistic landscape in these cities. LL plays a pivotal role in crisis management, offering insights into societal tensions and providing opportunities for fostering peace and reconciliation. By recognising the significance of linguistic diversity in shaping crises, stakeholders can work towards inclusive and effective crisis management strategies that account for the diverse linguistic fabric of society. However, it also offers opportunities for dialogue, cultural exchange, and developing inclusive crisis management strategies that account for the country's linguistic diversity. Consequently, this research provides recommendations for leveraging the linguistic landscape as a bridge to crisis management in Cameroon. This includes promoting linguistic inclusivity in policies and programs, fostering dialogue between linguistic communities, and integrating linguistic considerations into crisis management frameworks.

Conclusively, the linguistic landscape serves as a crucial bridge to crisis management in Cameroon, offering insights into the underlying tensions and the potential for fostering peace and reconciliation. By recognising the role of language in shaping crises, stakeholders can work towards inclusive and effective crisis management strategies that account for the country's diverse linguistic fabric.

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