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Original Research Article

Mainstream Mesolectal and Basilectal Cameroon English Speech: Implications for Phonological Norm Selection and Classroom Practice

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Abstract: The growing advocacy for Cameroon English (CamE) as a medium of instruction and pedagogical norm in the Anglophone subsystem of education continues to raise a question that has received insufficient systematic attention: which phonological features of this variety should serve as the standard for teaching? Because CamE has not been formally codified, there is a real risk that features characteristic of basilectal speech, forms shaped by limited formal education and strong substrate influence, may be misconstrued as features of mainstream CamE and, on that basis, accorded legitimacy they do not warrant. This paper addresses that risk by systematically distinguishing between the segmental features of mainstream CamE speech and those of basilectal origin and character. Drawing on field data collected from semi-educated and uneducated Anglophone Cameroonian speakers from the North West and South West Regions, the study identifies and analyses a set of vocalic and consonantal processes (including vowel replacement, vowel insertion, monophthongisation, diphthongisation, consonant substitution, final obstruent deletion and yod deletion) that deviate significantly from mainstream CamE phonological norms. The paper argues that the frequency with which these forms occur in everyday speech cannot, by itself, confer pedagogical legitimacy upon them. Codification requires norm selection, and norm selection requires carefully drawing the boundaries of the mainstream variety and defending them analytically. The findings carry direct implications for English language teaching in Cameroon, for ongoing discussions about the standardisation of CamE and for broader debates within the World Englishes literature concerning the pedagogical status of nativised varieties.

Keywords: Cameroon English, Basilectal Speech, Phonological Codification, Norm Selection, Standardisation, Intelligibility, English Language Teaching, Pronunciation Pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language has, over several decades, moved well beyond traditional geographic and cultural frontiers. In the course of this movement, it has been adopted and adapted in contexts as diverse as West Africa, South and South-East Asia and the Caribbean, acquiring in each setting distinctive phonological, lexical and grammatical features that mark it as a local variety rather than a direct replica of its ancestral forms. The term 'New Englishes' captures this phenomenon, drawing attention to the varieties that have emerged from the encounter

between the English language and the indigenous linguistic ecologies of its new environments (Kachru, 1985, 1986; Platt, Weber, & Ho, 1984; Schneider, 2007). Cameroon English (CamE) is one of such varieties. Developing out of the British colonial presence and the subsequent entrenchment of English as a co-official language with French, CamE has established itself as a recognisable variety with documented phonological, lexical and grammatical features that distinguish it from both Received Pronunciation (RP) and other varieties of English used globally (Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; Simo Bobda, 1994; Kouega, 1999, 2013; Anchimbe, 2006; Ngefac, 2010).

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the scholarly and educational discourse surrounding CamE. Researchers and practitioners alike have begun to question the continued use of RP or Standard British English as the sole reference model for English language teaching in the Cameroonian classroom, arguing instead that CamE should be recognised and possibly elevated as a legitimate pedagogical norm (Ngwa & Mforteh, 2021; Ngefac, 2011; Anchimbe, 2006). This position is not without merit. If the variety of English that learners encounter daily, from their teachers, in the media and in professional life, is consistently CamE rather than RP, then there is a strong practical argument for calibrating instructional norms to that reality rather than to a remote native-speaker standard that few Cameroonian learners will ever approach or need to approximate. The intelligibility-based arguments advanced by Jenkins (2000, 2007) and others within the English as a Lingua Franca research tradition lend further weight to this position.

The problem, however, is that CamE has not yet been formally codified. There is no authoritative description of CamE phonology, grammar and lexis that could serve as the basis for curriculum design, syllabus construction, or the training of English language teachers. In this context, the risk of premature or indiscriminate elevation of CamE to pedagogical norm status is not merely theoretical. It is practical and immediate. If CamE is declared a legitimate teaching norm without prior codification, then every feature of every variety spoken under that label becomes, potentially, a legitimate instructional target. This would include not only the mesolectal features that are widely attested among educated Anglophone Cameroonians and that have been extensively described in the literature (Simo Bobda, 1994; Kouega, 2013), but also basilectal features, namely forms shaped by substrate interference, limited formal education and strong ethnic phonological influence, that diverge significantly from the mainstream variety and that most informed observers would readily recognise as outside the acceptable range.

The present paper contributes to this debate by directly addressing one dimension of the codification problem: the identification and description of basilectal features of CamE speech. The study proceeds from the position, argued at length in Ngwa (2015) that CamE differs from RP in systematic and principled ways. It goes further, however, by demonstrating that within the CamE speech community itself, there is a range of variation that demands careful internal differentiation. Not all features that deviate from RP qualify as features of mainstream CamE, and not all features that circulate in everyday Anglophone Cameroonian speech warrant pedagogical endorsement. Identifying what belongs outside the mainstream is, in this sense, a necessary step towards defining what belongs within it. Norm selection, understood in the language planning tradition as the choice among competing varieties of a developing standard (Haugen, 1983; Cooper, 1989), cannot proceed without that foundational descriptive work.

2. CAMEROON ENGLISH IN EDUCATION: CONTEXT AND DEBATE

Formal education in English was introduced into what is now Anglophone Cameroon by Baptist missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century (Kouega, 2013). Since the country's independence and its federal union in 1961, English and French have served as co-official languages, with each community maintaining its own educational sub-system. Within the Anglophone sub-system, English functions as both a school subject and the medium of instruction from primary through tertiary level. It is, however, English as taught and modelled by Cameroonian teachers, that is CamE in its mesolectal range, rather than RP that most learners encounter in practice. Akongoh (2021) has documented in detail how the Anglophone educational system affords relatively limited attention to spoken English, with pronunciation and speaking skills receiving considerably less instructional time than reading, writing and listening. This structural neglect of phonological instruction has created the conditions in which local forms of English, including both mainstream mesolectal features and basilectal variants, become entrenched through intergenerational transmission.

The idea that CamE should replace RP as the teaching norm in Cameroonian schools is not new, but it has gained momentum in the literature since the early 2000s. Anchimbe (2006) makes a sustained argument for recognising CamE as a legitimate variety in its own right, with its own ecology and evolutionary logic, rather than measuring it against

native-speaker standards that are neither locally produced nor locally functional. Ngefac (2010) identifies attitudes among both teachers and learners that are broadly favourable to the use of CamE as a reference model, while acknowledging the practical challenges posed by codification. Ngwa (2020) extends this discussion by providing a systematic phonological comparison of CamE and RP, demonstrating the principled and consistent nature of CamE's departures from the RP model. The implicit argument in all these contributions is that CamE is stable enough, distinctive enough and sufficiently widely used to justify its elevation to a pedagogical standard.

What these arguments have not sufficiently addressed is the internal heterogeneity of CamE. The variety is not monolithic. Scholars have long recognised that CamE speech exists along a continuum ranging from basilectal forms (heavily substrate-influenced, associated with uneducated or semi-educated speakers), through mesolectal forms (the educated, relatively stable variety documented in most phonological studies), to acrolectal forms that approximate RP more closely (Simo Bobda & Mbangwana, 1993; Kouega, 1999; Atechi, 2006; Ngefac, 2010). When researchers argue for CamE as a teaching norm, they generally have the mesolectal variety in mind. The basilectal range of the continuum is seldom foregrounded in these normative discussions, and the risk that basilectal forms may be absorbed into the pedagogical norm by default has received little direct analytical attention. This paper addresses that gap.

3. LECTS, NORMS AND INTELLIGIBILITY

The concept of the lect continuum, introduced into the New Englishes literature through the sociolinguistics of creole and contact varieties, provides the central analytical tool for this study. A basilect is conventionally defined as the variety in a language continuum that diverges most from the prestige or standard variety (McArthur, 1992; Flores, 2004). In the CamE context, basilects are forms of English produced by speakers with limited formal education and that reflect heavy substrate interference from their first languages. They are not random deviations; they are patterned, predictable within their own phonological logic, and often ethnically marked, in that they allow listeners to identify the speaker's ethnic origin on phonological grounds alone (Fonyuy, 2011; Sala, 1999; Ngwa, 2015). They are, nevertheless, distinct from mainstream CamE. In the terms proposed by Ngefac (2010), they are tribal, uneducated features rather than educated ones.

The significance of this distinction for language planning is direct. Codification, in Haugen's (1983) classic formulation, involves the selection of a norm, the elaboration of that norm (developing its grammar, dictionary and conventions of use), and its acceptance by the relevant speech community. Norm selection requires a prior act of description and boundary-drawing: one must identify what belongs to the targeted variety and what does not. This is not a judgment about the intrinsic value or legitimacy of any speaker's language; it is a functional decision about what can serve as a stable, broadly intelligible reference point for educational purposes. The present study contributes to that descriptive and boundary-drawing work.

The intelligibility argument is relevant here in a specific sense. Researchers in the English as a Lingua Franca tradition, notably Jenkins (2000, 2007), have argued that, for international communication, it is mutual intelligibility rather than conformity to a native-speaker norm that should drive pronunciation pedagogy. This argument has considerable force and has influenced debates about CamE's pedagogical status. However, intelligibility is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Basilectal features of CamE, specifically the diphthongisation of monophthongs, the insertion of vowels to break consonant clusters and the deletion of word-final obstruents, create intelligibility problems not only for listeners accustomed to RP or other varieties of English, but also for educated Cameroonian listeners who are not familiar with particular basilectal forms. Frequency of use, which might seem like a democratic criterion for norm selection, is therefore an unreliable guide: a feature may be widely produced without being widely understood. The pedagogical norm should be anchored in the variety that maximises intelligibility within the Cameroonian setting and beyond, namely mainstream mesolectal CamE rather than its basilectal extensions.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data on which this study is based were collected through a combination of a structured word- and sentence-reading task and guided oral interviews with 75 Anglophone Cameroonian speakers from the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. Informants were selected on the criterion of limited formal education: all had either completed only primary school (holding the First School Leaving Certificate) or had attended secondary school for no more than two years without completing the cycle. This educational profile is consistent with the identification of basilectal speakers in the CamE literature (Masanga, 1983; Kouega, 1999; Ngefac, 2010; Ngwa, 2015). Informants were drawn from a range of ethnic groups in both regions, including Banso, Kom, Bafut, Pinyin, Mankon, Bakweri, Bakossi, Bayangi and Oroko

communities, in recognition of the fact that basilectal features in CamE are partly ethnically conditioned.

The reading task comprised 30 words and 10 sentences containing targeted phonological environments drawn from the prior literature on CamE phonology. When informants were unable or unwilling to read, topics from everyday life were introduced, and they were asked to speak freely. Their speech was either transcribed in the field or recorded for subsequent analysis. The data were then classified into vocalic and consonantal categories, and each category was examined for deviations from mainstream CamE phonological norms as documented in Simo Bobda (1994), Atechi (2006), and Kouega (2013). The analysis is qualitative, focusing on the identification and description of phonological processes rather than on the statistical frequency of individual forms. Following the conventions established in the CamE phonological literature, data are presented in tables showing the mainstream CamE pronunciation and the basilectal form alongside the orthographic word.

5. VOCALIC FEATURES OF BASILECTAL CAME SPEECH

The vocalic system of mainstream CamE has been well documented. Unlike RP, which uses 12 monophthongs, CamE uses 8 monophthongs, a reduced set of diphthongs structured largely by spelling conventions and no triphthongs (Simo Bobda, 1994; Kouega, 2013; Ngwa, 2020). Basilectal CamE speech deviates from this mainstream system in four principal ways: replacement of vowels, insertion of vowels, monophthongisation of sound sequences and diphthongisation of monophthongs. Each of these processes is examined in turn.

5.1 Replacement of Vowels

The most pervasive vocalic process in basilectal CamE speech is the replacement of mainstream CamE vowels with other vowels. This replacement is not random. It respects the front-back dimension of the vowel space: front vowels tend to be replaced by other front vowels, and back vowels by other back vowels. The primary mechanism is raising or lowering of the tongue, producing a vowel one step higher or lower in the vowel inventory than the mainstream CamE target.

Among front vowels, the CamE mid-low front vowel [ɛ] receives several realisations in basilectal speech. When followed by the alveolar lateral [l], it is raised and centralised to [ɜ]:

Table 1: Centralisation of CamE [ɛ] before [l]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
help	[hɛlp]	[hɜp]
belch	[bɛlʃ]	[bɜʃ]
melt	[mɛlt]	[mɜt]
element	[ɛlɛmɛnt]	[ɜlɛmɛn]

When [ɛ] falls between two nasals or in the final syllable of a disyllabic word, it is raised to [i], creating false homophones that do not exist in mainstream CamE. The pair 'men' and 'mean', for instance, both become [min], a merger that may create genuine comprehension difficulties for listeners not accustomed to this pattern:

Table 2: Raising of CamE [ɛ] to [i] in nasal environments

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
men	[mɛn]	[min]
wicked	[wikɛt]	[wikid]
market	[makɛt]	[makit]
blessed (adj.)	[blɛsɛt]	[blɛsid]

In pre-nasal environments, [ɛ] is also lowered to [e], a process illustrated in the following examples:

Table 3: Lowering of CamE [ɛ] to [e] before nasals

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
ten	[tɛn]	[ten]
pen	[pɛn]	[pen]
get	[gɛt]	[get]

A similar pattern is observed with CamE [e]. In environments of nasals, [e] is raised to [i], creating a new set of false homophones. The words 'make', 'may' and 'main', for instance, coincide in basilectal

speech with 'meek', 'me' and 'mean' respectively, all being rendered [mik], [mi] and [min]:

Table 4: Raising of CamE [e] to [i] in nasal environments

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
make	[mek]	[mik]
may	[me]	[mi]
main	[men]	[min]
name	[nem]	[nim]
many	[meni]	[mini]

CamE [e] is equally lowered to [ɛ] in certain environments, as illustrated below:

Table 5: Lowering of CamE [e] to [ɛ]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
game	[gem]	[gɛm]
same	[sem]	[sɛm]
train	[tren]	[trɛn]
faint	[fent]	[fɛnt]

In the back vowel system, the CamE high back vowel [u] is lowered to [ɔ] or [o] in the speech of basilectal informants. These replacements have been reported in the literature specifically for Banso English, where the rendering of [o] as [u] has been termed the defining feature of that ethnic variety (Sala, 1999; Dzelambong, 1996). Sahmo (2014) has, however, demonstrated that such replacements extend well beyond Banso speakers, appearing across a range of North West Englishes. The present data confirm this broader distribution:

Table 6: Lowering of CamE [u] to [ɔ] and [o]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
remove	[rimuf]	[rimɔf]
soon	[sun]	[sɔn]
moon	[mun]	[mɔn]
tools	[tuls]	[tols]
room	[rum]	[rom]

The reverse process is equally attested: CamE [o] is raised to [u] in a pattern that appears across multiple ethnic varieties. Where mainstream CamE has [got] for 'goat', basilectal speakers consistently produce [gut]:

Table 7: Raising of CamE [o] to [u]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
goat	[got]	[gut]
cocoyam	[kokojam]	[kukujam]
potatoes	[potetos]	[putetus]
go	[go]	[gu]

Worthy of note is the fact that all the replacements documented above observe the front-back constraint: front vowels are replaced by front vowels, and back vowels by back vowels. The sole exception is the centralisation of [ɛ] to [ɜ] before [l], documented in Table 1. This underlying pattern suggests that the replacement process in basilectal CamE speech is governed by phonological principles related to tongue height rather than being simply random or idiosyncratic.

5.2 Insertion of Vowels

A second vocalic process characteristic of basilectal CamE speech is the insertion of vowels to break consonant clusters that are difficult to produce for speakers whose first languages do not permit such clusters. Two vowels are inserted: the high front vowel [i] and the high back vowel [u]. Insertion of [i] occurs consistently when [s] precedes the lateral [l] or the nasals [m] and [n] in the onset of a syllable, producing what are in effect additional syllables:

Table 8: Insertion of [i] to break initial consonant clusters

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
slim	[slim]	[silim]
sleep	[slip]	[silip]
small	[smɔl]	[simɔl]
smell	[smɛl]	[simɛl]
snake	[snek]	[sinik]
snail	[snel]	[sinɛl]

The insertion of [u] operates in a different environment. It occurs in word-final syllables when an obstruent is followed by the alveolar lateral [l], as in the following examples. The resulting forms, while widely produced, add a syllable to the word and diverge recognisably from the mainstream CamE norm:

Table 9: Insertion of [u] before word-final [l]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
table	[tebl]	[tebul]
apple	[apl]	[apul]
little	[litl]	[litul]
couple	[kɔpl]	[kɔpul]
Possible	[pɔsibl]	[pɔsibul]

In this light, the insertion of [u] in word-final syllables is not a peripheral or occasional phenomenon; it is a systematic feature of basilectal CamE speech that has been overlooked in most phonological descriptions of the variety precisely because those descriptions have focused on educated speakers. The alveolar lateral [l] is the common factor in both types of insertion, suggesting that this consonant creates articulatory difficulties for basilectal speakers that are resolved through epenthesis.

5.3 Monophthongisation of Sound Sequences

Basilectal CamE speakers also reduce mainstream CamE diphthongs to monophthongs and simplify longer vowel sequences to single vowels. The diphthongs most frequently affected are [ai] and [au]:

Table 10: Monophthongisation of mainstream CamE diphthongs

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
Primary	[praimari]	[pramari]
Direct	[dairɛkt]	[darekt]
Country	[kauntri]	[kɔntri]
Down	[daun]	[da:n]

Beyond diphthong simplification, basilectal speakers also reduce the trisyllabic sequence [awa], which in mainstream CamE corresponds to words like 'flower', 'power' and 'sour', to the monophthong [a:]. The resulting forms are monosyllabic, where mainstream CamE has two syllables, and some informants specifically justified this production because the mainstream CamE form sounded incorrect to them, a form of hypercorrection operating in the wrong direction:

Table 11: Reduction of [awa] to [a:]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
Flower	[flawa]	[fla:]
Power	[pawa]	[pa:]
Flour	[flawa]	[fla:]
Sour	[sawa]	[sa:]

5.4 Diphthongisation of Monophthongs

The converse process is also attested: certain mainstream CamE monophthongs are diphthongised in basilectal speech. The vowel [a] is raised and combined with [i] to produce [ai] in specific environments, as seen in the following example:

Table 12: Diphthongisation of CamE [a] to [ai]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
thank you	[taŋk ju]	[taiŋk ju]

Though represented by a single lexical item in the corpus, the diphthongisation of [a] to [ai] was observed with sufficient regularity across informants to warrant identification as a basilectal feature. It is consistent with the broader pattern of vowel instability in basilectal CamE speech, where phonological targets are approximated through processes of raising, lowering, lengthening and gliding that reflect the phonological structure of the informants' first languages.

6. CONSONANTAL FEATURES OF BASILECTAL CAME SPEECH

The consonant system of basilectal CamE speech is, broadly speaking, similar to that of mainstream CamE. The same inventory of consonant phonemes is in use, and most are articulated in ways that are consistent with mainstream norms. The divergences that do occur, however, are systematic and recurrent. Three major processes are identified: the substitution of consonants in specific phonological environments, the deletion of word-final obstruents and the deletion of the yod.

6.1 Substitution of Consonants

Word-final affricates constitute one of the more salient sites of consonant substitution in basilectal CamE speech. Both [tʃ] and [dʒ] are reduced to the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ] when they occur in word-final position. The production of affricates requires a gliding movement from a plosive release to a fricative, and this articulatory complexity appears to be resolved in basilectal speech by simplification to the fricative alone:

Table 13: Reduction of word-final affricates to [ʃ]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
charge	[tʃadʒ]	[tʃaʃ]
change	[tʃendʒ]	[tʃenʃ]
pinch	[pintʃ]	[pinʃ]
teach	[titʃ]	[tiʃ]

A further substitution observed in basilectal CamE speech involves the bilabial plosives [p] and [b], which are occasionally interchanged in initial and final positions. This feature is particularly associated with Bafut speakers of English (Simo Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008), but was encountered across several ethnic groups in the data:

Table 14: Substitution of [p] for [b] and [b] for [p]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
Peter	[pita]	[bita]
cup	[kɔp]	[kɔb]
soup	[sup]	[sub]

An additional substitution involves [s] before the bilabial semi-vowel [w]. In basilectal CamE speech, [s] is realised as [ʃ] in this environment, so that [sw] becomes [ʃw]. The probable mechanism is place assimilation, as [s] takes on the palatal quality of the semi-vowel that follows it:

Table 15: Palatalisation of [s] before [w]

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
sweep	[swip]	[ʃwip]
swim	[swim]	[ʃwim]

6.2 Deletion of Word-Final Obstruents

The deletion of consonants in word-final position is well documented in varieties of English worldwide, including mainstream CamE (Simo Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008). In basilectal CamE speech, however, deletion is more pervasive and extends to phonemes that are retained in mainstream CamE. The voiceless plosives [p] and [t] are the most frequently deleted:

Table 16: Deletion of word-final plosives

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
camp	[kamp]	[kam]
jump	[dʒɔmp]	[dʒɔm]
first	[fɛst]	[fɛs]
test	[tɛst]	[tɛs]

The alveolar lateral [l] is also deleted in word-final position when preceded by the vowels [u], [i] or [ɔ]. Deletion of [l] in this environment is accompanied by lengthening of the preceding vowel, producing a compensatory phonological adjustment that maintains roughly the same syllable weight:

Table 17: Deletion of word-final [l] with preceding vowel lengthening

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
Football	[futbɔl]	[futbɔ:]
School	[skul]	[sku:]
Fool	[ful]	[fu:]
Kill	[kil]	[ki:]
Recall	[rikɔl]	[rikɔ:]

6.3 Yod Deletion

A final consonantal feature characteristic of basilectal CamE speech is the deletion of the palatal glide [j] when it follows a consonant. In mainstream CamE, the yod is retained in words like 'news', 'music' and 'stew'. In basilectal speech, it is consistently dropped, producing forms that coincide more closely with the American English pattern of yod deletion, though the motivation in basilectal CamE is substrate-based rather than dialectal:

Table 18: Yod deletion in basilectal CamE speech

Word	Mainstream CamE	Basilectal Form
News	[njus]	[nus]
Stew	[stju]	[stu]
Music	[mjuzik]	[muzik]

The deletion of the yod reduces the phonological distance between words that are distinct in mainstream CamE, with potential consequences for the intelligibility of listeners accustomed to the mainstream variety.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings reported in Sections 5 and 6 describe a coherent phonological system. Vowel replacement, vowel insertion, monophthongisation, diphthongisation, consonant substitution, final obstruent deletion and yod deletion are not scattered errors but a patterned set of processes that together define the basilectal range of CamE speech, distinct from the mesolectal mainstream documented in Simo Bobda (1994), Atechi (2006) and Kouega (2013). The patterning itself is theoretically significant. McArthur's (1998) account of the lect continuum predicts exactly this kind of internal stratification within a developing variety. Flores's (2004) study of basilectal Philippine English shows a strikingly similar profile: vowel insertion to resolve consonant clusters that the speaker's first language does not permit, consonant simplification in word-final position and a set of mergers that did not exist before. That two unrelated postcolonial Englishes, shaped by entirely different linguistic substrata, arrive at comparable basilectal solutions suggests that what is being observed here is not a peculiarity of Cameroonian speech but a general property of how new Englishes stratify once they reach a sufficiently large speaker population. The basilect, in other words, is not noise around the mainstream signal. It is a signal of its own.

The study reported in Ngwa (2015) argues that mainstream CamE deviates from RP in systematic and principled ways and that this principled deviation is precisely what should qualify CamE for pedagogical recognition. The present findings accept that argument and extend it into more difficult territory. Mainstream CamE deviates from RP in systematic, principled ways. Basilectal CamE deviates from mainstream CamE in ways that are systematic and principled, too. The two deviations, however, are not principled in the same sense. The first arises from nativisation, from the gradual settling of English into a new linguistic ecology over generations of educated use. The second arises from substrate interference operating on speakers with little or no sustained exposure to formal English instruction. Systematicity is not, by itself, a certificate of legitimacy. A pattern can be entirely regular and still be the wrong pattern to teach.

The intelligibility dimension sharpens this distinction further. Jenkins (2007) argues, within the English as a Lingua Franca tradition, that mutual intelligibility rather than conformity to a native-speaker target should govern pronunciation pedagogy and Atechi (2006) has examined precisely this question for native and non-native listeners of English. The basilectal data reported here speak directly to that concern. 'Men' and 'mean' both surface as [min]. 'Make' and 'meek' both surface as [mik]. These are not subtle phonetic variations that a sympathetic listener can resolve through context. They are mergers that erase distinctions the mainstream variety preserves and generate exactly the kind of comprehension failure that Jenkins's own intelligibility criterion was designed to guard against. Loyalty to RP is not the issue here. Functional efficiency within the Cameroonian speech community is and, on that measure, the basilect performs worse than the mainstream from which it departs. The criterion proposed here is therefore not social prestige or educational elitism, but pedagogical intelligibility and broad inter-speaker comprehensibility within and beyond the Cameroonian speech community.

This is where the paper's central difficulty becomes apparent. Haugen's (1983) classic model of codification, comprising selection, elaboration and acceptance of a norm and Cooper's (1989) account of language planning as a social process, both assume that selection is possible once description has done its work. What description reveals here, however, is a boundary that cuts in two directions at once. Drawing the line around mainstream mesolectal CamE makes the variety describable, teachable and codifiable. The same line, drawn at the same place, puts the basilectal speaker's own spoken English permanently outside the selected pedagogic norm. The boundary that legitimises CamE as a pedagogical norm is the boundary that delegitimises the only English some of these speakers have ever produced.

For English language teachers in Anglophone Cameroon, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels, as well as in some speech communities, where basilectal forms are most likely to surface among learners, this has direct practical weight. Akongoh (2021) has already shown that pronunciation receives comparatively little instructional time in the Anglophone system, which is precisely the condition under which basilectal features go unrecognised rather than addressed. A teacher who cannot distinguish the insertion of [i] in 'slim' or 'small' or the raising of [ɛ] to [i] before nasals or the deletion of word-final [l], from ordinary CamE pronunciation is left with two equally unhelpful options: treat the basilectal form as acceptable CamE, or fail to notice it at all. Awareness of the specific processes catalogued in this paper allows a third option: targeted phonological correction grounded in an accurate description of what is actually mainstream and what is not.

8. CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the question of norm selection for CamE operates at three levels simultaneously. Phonologically, the basilect is a coherent and rule-governed system in its own right, not a degraded version of the mainstream. Sociolinguistically, its mergers entail real intelligibility costs that the mainstream variety does not. Politically, the descriptive boundary required to recognise mainstream CamE as a teachable norm is the same boundary that excludes basilectal speech and, by extension, some of its speakers' communicative competence from the variety the classroom is built to serve. The line that makes CamE codifiable is also raises questions about whose English counts.

This paper has therefore sought to do more than catalogue seven phonological processes, vowel replacement, vowel insertion, monophthongisation, diphthongisation, consonant substitution, final obstruent deletion and yod deletion, across a sample of seventy-five semi-educated and uneducated Anglophone Cameroonian speakers. It has sought to perform the descriptive labour that any responsible codification of CamE must rest upon, since norm selection without prior boundary-drawing risks exactly the outcome Ngefac (2010) warns against when he distinguishes the educated variety from what he calls, in his own terms, 'tribal-uneducated' features. Frequency of production in everyday speech is not, by itself, a basis for pedagogical legitimacy, however widespread a given basilectal form may be.

Several lines of further enquiry follow naturally from this study. The suprasegmental dimension, stress, rhythm and intonation in basilectal CamE speech have not been examined here and would extend the description considerably. Attitudinal work among Anglophone teachers and learners, asking how aware they are of these features and how they respond to them in the classroom, would test whether the boundary proposed here aligns with the boundary practitioners already intuitively sense. A longitudinal or cross-sectional study of how basilectal features are acquired and shed across educational levels would clarify how much of this variation schooling itself resolves over time and comparative work across other Anglophone regions of Cameroon would establish which of these features are general to the basilect and which are narrowly local. None of this descriptive work settles the social and political questions that codification ultimately requires. What it can do and what this

paper has tried to do, is make sure those questions are eventually settled based on an accurate map of where the mainstream actually ends.

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