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## “Speaking like a White Person”: Ideologies about Accent among Cameroonian Immigrants in Paris

### Resümee

Dieser Artikel beschreibt die persönlichen Erfahrungen von Migrant\*innen aus Kamerun in Paris mit unterschiedlichen Akzenten anhand einer Analyse ihrer Sprachideologien zur Praxis des „whitiser“. Der Neologismus wird von ihnen als ein Akt des „Sprechens wie eine weiße Person“ oder, mit anderen Worten, als „Französisch sprechen ohne Akzent“ definiert. Viele Sprecher\*innen beschreiben diese Praxis als eine Form von Akkommodation, die darin besteht, die eigene Sprechweise an jene von französischen oder kameruner Gesprächspartner\*innen anzupassen, indem sie deren Akzent imitieren. Dagegen definieren es einige Sprecher\*innen als eine Imitation von französischem Akzent beim Sprechen von Kameruner\*innen mit Kameruner\*innen im Kamerun und assoziieren sehr negative Bewertungen mit dieser Praxis. Meistens wird sie als eine Form der Assimilation, der Verleugnung der eigenen Herkunft und des Ausdrucks eines durch die Kolonisierung geerbten Minderwertigkeitskomplexes gesehen. Aufgrund dessen haben die Sprecher\*innen ambivalente Einstellungen, die aus der Spannung zwischen ihren Sehnsüchten resultiert, sich mit der „weißen“ oder „französischen“ Bevölkerung zu identifizieren und sich von postkolonialen Machtstrukturen zu emanzipieren, die zwischen Personen in Frankreich und in Kamerun bestehen. Daher besetzen die Sprecher\*innen die Kategorie „weiß“ je nach Interaktionskontext mit unterschiedlichen sozialen Bedeutungen.

### Abstract

This article describes the personal experiences of Cameroonian immigrants in Paris about accent differences through an analysis of their ideologies on the act of *whitiser*. This neologism is defined by them as the act of “speaking like a white person” or, in other words, “speaking French without an accent”. Many speakers define this practice as a form of accommodation, which consists in adapting one’s way of speaking to French or non Cameroonian interlocutors by imitating their accents, while a few speakers define it as the imitation of the French accent by a Cameroonian talking with another Cameroonian in Cameroon, and associate highly negative values to the practice. Most of the times it is perceived as a form of assimilation, a denial of one’s origins and as the expression of an inferiority complex inherited from colonization. Therefore, the speakers have ambivalent opinions about this practice, thus revealing a tension between their ambivalent desire to identify with the group of “White” or “French” people and their desire to emancipate from postcolonial power relations between the French and the Cameroonian people. They invest the category “White” with variable social meanings, depending on the interactional contexts.

## Introduction

Migration from one country to another is a pivotal experience of “dislocation” in the life of an individual: it always implies “a change both in the living conditions and linguistic environments, including the practices, discourses, and rules one is familiar with”; it gives new opportunities to “reinvent oneself as a (speaking) subject” or, more negatively, to experience emotional stress and a feeling of strangeness, because of “the underlying experience that one’s own linguistic repertoire no longer ‘fits in’” (cf. Busch 2015, 1). I studied thirteen French-speaking Cameroonian immigrants, who were all twenty-five years old or so, and had lived in France for about ten years or more. These immigrants, who all came from the area of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, are part of a generation of highly skilled young immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa who had recently arrived in France (Barou 2002, 6). They moved to France to be educated in prestigious engineering, business, communication or management schools, so as to be able to reach high positions in France or abroad. Some of them have French citizenship. For every person, the choice of migrating to France is part of a family plan, and on arrival, all the subjects integrated family networks already constituted in France. With two exceptions, out of twelve respondents, the majority of the interviewees only speak French, English as they learned it at school, and for two of them, other languages such as Spanish and Italian; but most of them are not fluent in their parents’ vernacular languages or in other local Cameroonian languages, and they only have a very partial knowledge of these languages (limited to a few words and phrases). French is the language of first socialization for all respondents. This observation can be explained by the evolution of the sociolinguistic situation of French in Cameroon. Indeed, in ninety years of intensive teaching in schools, “French has gradually invested in urban communication as a language of integration in the French-speaking cities of the South (Douala, Yaoundé, Edéa, Bafoussam) to the detriment of old local languages”; it “ensures 70 % of family communication between parents and their offspring in the city of Yaoundé”, and “[i]t has become the mother tongue of about 40 % of young urban Cameroonians who have it as their sole language of communication.” (Zachée Denis 2007, 59). Nevertheless, although all my interviewees learned French from a very young age at home in their families, the confrontation with other ways of speaking French in France, where the Parisian accent is the standard and legitimate accent, made them aware of their linguistic and sociocultural differences with the ‘Whites’ or the ‘French’ people: they dis-

covered that they had an “accent” and became new speaking subjects as they adopted new linguistic habits in order to fit in their new sociocultural environment. If we can define, from a linguistic point of view, accent as “the set of pronunciation characteristics which are linked to the linguistic, territorial or social origins of the speaker, the perception of which makes it possible to identify the origin of the addressee” (Harmegnies 1997, 9–10; translated from French), saying that someone has an accent means first of all referring him or her to a “linguistic otherness”. As Larrivée says, as quoted by Meyer (2011):

“It is the other’s language practice that is designated as having an accent, which is the difference from one’s own practice. This difference is the one we identify in a speaker who has our language as a second language, or who speaks another variety of it. And not all varieties are equal. When they are received as understandable, dominated varieties are referred to as accent carriers” (Meyer 2011, 36; translated from French).

Any accent, therefore, only exists in contrast to the “non-accent” or the “standard accent”. This linguistic norm, which corresponds to the commonly used pronunciation in the media, the educated classes, and more generally in dominant social groups, is a “myth” or an ideological construction resulting from a process of linguistic subordination of dominated or stigmatized social groups (Lippi-Green 2012, 44). The analysis of the discourses of these immigrants of Cameroonian origins about their practice of *whitisation* and their relationship to their own accent and that of the “whites” or the “French” people will thus take into account the perceptions by the speaking subjects themselves of the postcolonial power relations in which this language practice is embedded. Therefore, I will describe Cameroonian speakers’ positionings with regards to their accent differences through the analysis of their ideologies<sup>1</sup> about the practice of *whitisation* (or *whitisation*). In Cameroon, the word *whitisation* or *whitisation*, which is derived from the verb *whitiser*, commonly refers in a restricted sense to the fact of “speaking like a White person”, that is, according to my interviewees, “speaking French without an accent” or more precisely imitating the French people’s accent – or, more broadly, the Westerners’ accent (cf. Telep 2016 and 2018). Thus, as J. Peuvergne (2016, 145) explained in her study of linguistic categorization processes in interviews she conducted in Duala:

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1 As “sets of beliefs about languages and linguistic practices” (Silverstein 1979, 193), language ideologies constitute “a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk”, enabling us to reflect upon the ways actors organize their social life and interact with others through language (Woolard and Schiefflin 1994, 55).

“The term *whitiser* (i.e. to speak like the whites) is indeed widely used, and it is known by everybody [in Cameroon] (it is also found as a substantive form in *whitisation* [...]). Speaking like the French means in counterpoint that there is a Cameroonian way of speaking (it is noticeable that someone is no longer speaking like a Cameroonian). Above all, this very popular expression reveals that speakers recognize the existence of an endogenous Cameroonian norm (or even several ones)” (translated from French).

In a postcolonial African society such as Cameroon, where social success depends in particular on the “ability to copy the behavior of the Whites” (Zambo Belinga 2003, 31), whitening can confer some social prestige on the subject, especially in “youth and even intellectual circles” (*ibid.*, 29). Mimicking the accent of the “Whites” would thus be a sign of the speaker’s great competence in French, and the meanings of this practice partly result from postcolonial power relations between Cameroon and France. Besides, the social meanings of the act of *whitiser* must be understood within the sociolinguistic context of Cameroon, a multilingual country with two official languages, English and French, which coexist with nearly 250 local languages including Pidgin-English (Kouega 2007) and hybrid language styles such as Francanglais/Camfranglais (Féral 2006, Telep 2014).

My data comes from biographical interviews<sup>2</sup> based on an ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2014 and 2015 in a pan-African association in Paris, according to a participant observation approach. I conducted interviews with twelve people, including nine individual interviews and three interviews in groups of two people. For the analysis of these interviews, I adopted an interpretative approach to discourse based on a theory of the “speaking actor-subject” (*acteur-sujet parlant*, cf. Telep 2019), that is conceived both as a pragmatic and reflexive actor who co-constructs with other speakers cognitive models of action in the here-and-now of interaction, and as a “subject of desire” and of the unconscious (Butler 1997, 1999). In a Butlerian perspective, it is this ambivalent actor-subject that is the locus of subjectivation and possible emancipation. At the theoretical level, in order to analyse these two dimensions of language activity, I combined the metapragmatic theory of the Chicago School (Agha 2007, Silverstein 2003) with the discursive approaches developed in France in the theories of linguistic imaginary (Houdebine 1983) and of epilinguistic discourse (Canut 2000, 2008). The latter approaches, in fact, define subjectivity as a cleavage or an internal tension within the “speak-

2 All the following extracts have been translated from French.

ing-desiring-subject” (*sujet parlant-désirant*), a subject of the unconscious (Houdebine 1983, Canut 2008). Thus, this theoretical framework enables to analyse recurrent schemes of interpretation and action in the discourses of speakers about their practice of *whitisation*, while describing the tensions and ambivalences that characterize speakers’ subjectivities as produced by postcolonial power relations. Indeed, I argue that, through their discourses about accent differences, the speakers adopt variable, and sometimes ambivalent, interactional positionings both with regards to the French people and the Cameroonian people. These “subjective fluctuations” (Canut 2000) reveal a tension between their desire for identification with the white people, and their desire for emancipation from postcolonial power relationships which underlie their practice of *whitisation*. Moreover, these intersubjective positionings enable them to establish “relations of similarity and difference” and of “genuinness and artifice” (Bucholtz and Hall 2007, 382) *vis-à-vis* some reference groups, the French people or the Cameroonian people, and *vis-à-vis* individuals perceived as belonging (or not) to one of these groups in the postcolonial symbolic economy (Bourdieu 1991). First, I will present the two distinct definitions of the practice of *whitisation*, whether defined as a form of accommodation or as a form of stylization, and I will describe some of the main social functions which the subjects attribute to this practice. Secondly, I will show that, through discourses about accent authenticity and purity, the speakers can assign highly negative values to the act of *whitiser* described as a form of assimilation and as the expression of an inferiority complex toward the white people, inherited from colonization<sup>3</sup>.

### 1. ‘Whitiser, c’est parler comme un Blanc<sup>4</sup>’: definitions of the practice of *whitisation* and description of its social functions

The practice of *whitisation* is defined by a few speakers as a form of accommodation which consists in adapting one’s way of speaking to a non Cameroonian interlocutor by imitating his or her accent and thus erasing one’s own foreign accent (cf. Giles *et alii* 1991). Therefore, it can be perceived not only as a necessary language practice in order to be integrated in the host society, but also as a way of hiding the potential negative stigma of a foreign accent,

3 This article is a more expanded version of a Working Paper previously published in *Trinity College Dublin Working Papers in Linguistics* (Telep 2016).

4 ‘Whitiser means speaking like a White person’.

which can be socially unfavourable to the speakers if they are associated with a socially stigmatized group. Indeed, it is a strategy of convergence ‘whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-nonverbal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze, and so on’ (Giles *et alii* 1991, 7). Therefore, communicative acts of convergence aim to reduce interpersonal differences between the interlocutors while reducing their language differences, thus enabling speakers to project social images of selves which they perceive as similar to those projected by their interlocutors. In interethnic and interracial relations, acts of convergence show the speakers’ desire for social integration or identification with the members of the other ethnic or racial group (cf. Giles *et alii* 1991).

Yohan, one of the speakers I interviewed, described his own practice of *whitising* thus:

“Yohan<sup>5</sup>: *whitiser* necessarily means speaking like a white person + people speak with their own accents + they speak with their own accents I speak with my accent + but when you speak with French people and you want to be on the same wavelength + that is to say when they speak with their high pitched voices and their ways you also want to talk like them

Suzie: [laugh]

Yohan: [laugh] that’s inevitable + that’s systematic + if you want to talk with them

Suzie: to put yourself on the same level

Yohan: to put yourself on the same level + as you will never be able to talk like a Chinese + or you will never be able to talk like an English man + but when you want to talk with them + you need to align to their ways that is to say euh + if they pause you want to do the same pauses as they do so that they can understand you you see

Suzie: then for you *whitiser* means: + it means changing your accent

Yohan: yes + it means changing your accent + then you can’t anymore + that’s inevitable you can’t have your accent + when you want to try to

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5 Transcription conventions: the + sign indicates a short pause, the ++ sign indicates a longer pause. The utterance segments in square brackets [...] correspond to overlapping speech. The sign: indicates a vowel lengthening. The [XXXX] sign indicates an inaudible passage. Capital letters indicate an increase in volume or a stronger accentuation of the word. All first names used are pseudonyms.

speak like the others + that's it + it's like a salesman + can you imagine  
 a Cameroonian coming here he's leaving Cameroon he's coming here  
 he's a salesman he's going to speak French + so he has to adapt his voice  
 Suzie: mmh

Yohan: otherwise you will find that + guys won't understand you + be-  
 cause if you hear a genuine Cameroonian + go to Cameroon + you hear  
 a Cameroonian speaking + well I'm not sure that + I'm telling you + I  
 mean record people + and come back and play it to any French person  
 + and ask if they understand<sup>6</sup>

Here the subject describes the practice of *whitisation* as a necessary behaviour, a social constraint for the speaker: the use of the adverb *necessarily* and of the adjective *inevitable* stresses that this behaviour is deemed absolutely necessary by the speaker. It expresses also the high degree of certainty by the subject. The use of the adjective *systematic* indexes a generalized behaviour among the community, which is part of the group's interactional norms. First, the speaker gives a definition, which is equivalent to a behavioural maxim for the community ('*whitiser* necessarily means speaking like a White person'), and proposes a justification for this behaviour: indeed, he describes this practice

6 Original extract:

« Yohan : whitiser c'est forcément parler comme un Blanc on parle tous avec notre accent ++ on parle tous avec notre accent moi je parle avec mon accent +, mais quand tu parles avec les Français et que tu veux être dans la même longueur d'onde + c'est-à-dire quand il parle avec ses aigus et ses trucs tu veux aussi parler comme lui

Suzie : [rires]

Yohan : [rires] obligé + c'est systématique + si tu veux avoir une conversation avec lui

Suzie : se mettre au même niveau

Yohan : se mettre au même niveau + comme tu ne pourras jamais parler comme un Chinois + ou comme tu pourras jamais parler comme un Anglais +, mais quand tu vas vouloir discuter avec lui + tu vas vouloir t'aligner à sa façon c'est-à-dire euh + s'il marque des pauses tu vas vouloir faire les mêmes pauses que lui pour que il te comprenne tu vois [...]

Suzie : mais du coup pour toi whitiser ça : + ça veut dire modifier l'accent enfin :

Yohan : oui + c'est modifier l'accent + là tu peux plus + tu peux pas avoir forcément ton accent + quand tu veux essayer de parler comme l'autre + voilà + c'est comme un commercial + tu t'imagines un Camerounais il arrive il quitte la France il arrive ici il est commercial il va se mettre à parler le français + eh ben il est obligé d'adapter sa voix

Suzie : mmh

Yohan : sinon tu vas voir que comment + les gars vont pas te comprendre + puisque si tu entends un Camer + va au pays + tu entends un Camer parler + ben je suis pas sûr que + je te dis + c'est-à-dire enregistre + et tu viens tu fais parler ça à un Français + et tu lui demandes si il comprend »

as a form of imitation of the white interlocutor's language ('speaking like a White person') and as a way of identifying with the others. The repetition of the verb *to want* in this extract shows that this identification is also presented as a wish and therefore, as a personal choice. Then, the subject describes the practice of *whitisation* as a form of alignment with his interlocutors' ways of speaking, whatever their nationalities – French, Chinese or English. This alignment is not a perfect imitation of the others' ways of speaking. It has a social function: it enables the speakers to 'be on the same level' as their interlocutors. The reference to the Chinese speaker indexes that the subject, who is responsible for the computer production in a famous French bank, understands the practice of *whitisation* as a necessary strategy of communication in a globalized space in which business relationships with China are crucial. This social and strategic dimension of the practice of *whitisation* is, after that, more explicitly conjured up with the salesman who arrives in Cameroon. With this example, the subject establishes an implicit connection between the social position of the speaker who, as a salesman, practices a profession characterized by a strong relational dimension, and the need to adapt his language. After this example, the subject explains the fact that this person has to *whitise* by giving another argument: language accommodation is the key for a successful communication between French and Cameroonian speakers because French people may find it difficult to understand the Cameroonian accent.

In this extract, we can find the two main motives described by Giles *et alii* (1991) to explain the strategy of accommodation:

- Speakers seeking 'communication efficiency': like Yohan, all the speakers said repeatedly that when they arrived in France, their interlocutors found it difficult to understand their accent, so that they had to modify it in order to be understood and to communicate efficiently. Yohan explained that he had to 'adapt' his Cameroonian accent to imitate his interlocutors' intonation ('high pitched voices') and pauses in order to be understood by them.
- Speakers seeking 'social attractiveness': the practice of *whitisation* enables the speakers to align themselves with the others and to put themselves on the same level, to be their equals. Thus, by speaking 'French without an accent', the speakers can erase the stigma of their foreign accent, which can be socially unfavourable to them in some contexts.

Nevertheless, although many speakers, like Yohan, categorized the practice of accommodation to the accent of French people in France as a form of

*whitisation*, some of them refused to categorize as such their own practice of accent convergence. They rather adopted ambivalent positionings toward the practice of *whitisation* and most of the times, they associated highly negative values to it. This is the case for Emilie, for instance, who distinguishes her own practice of accommodation from the act of *whitiser*:

“Suzie: do you consider that you speak white?”

Emilie: heu: + I wouldn’t say I speak white + I would say I speak French like the French

Suzie: mmh

Emilie: so if this is speaking white + maybe so + I speak French like the French [...] so the Cameroonians may call that *whitiser*

Suzie: mmh + but you would not say that you speak white?

Emilie: no + I wouldn’t + I adapt to the language of the country where I live + yeah

Suzie: but is this not the definition of the act of *whitiser* + is it not that *whitiser*?

Emilie: well for me in Cameroon *whitiser* has a derogatory meaning + so euh as I speak several languages<sup>7</sup> I would refuse to give a negative meaning to the fact that I adapt to my interlocutors or my surroundings + for me it is rather a question of adapting to my interlocutors and to my surroundings + but in other contexts *whitiser* could also mean to try and speak to a Cameroonian with a French tone and accent + precisely precisely I would consider that it is generally in those cases that people say but + why do you speak white? + why do you speak to me as if I were someone else? + in that sense yes I think it is not appropriate because + my attitude in communication well: it is that I will speak to the people around me with a tone that they will understand and according to the cultural environment in which we are<sup>8</sup>”

This speaker, who is very famous among the African Diaspora in France, is the manager of a successful fashion company dedicated to the promotion and the diffusion of African fashion in the Western world. She usually presents

7 These languages are French, English and Spanish. Emilie has also some basics in Pidgin-English and Italian, but she does not speak these languages fluently.

8 Original extract :

« Suzie : est-ce que tu considères que tu whitises ou pas ?

herself in her TV or newspaper interviews as a very “multicultural” person who has travelled in many different countries. In her clothing style, she often strategically blends African style items (clothes and/or jewels) with Western style clothes. In this interview, she projected a similar social image, the one of a cosmopolitan and highly versatile speaker, who masters different languages and who is able to shift purposely her speech style in any sociocultural context (‘I adapt to the language of the country I live in’). Later in this interview, she defines herself as a ‘chameleon’, thus emphasizing again, through this metaphor, her excellent ability to change her speech style. Nevertheless, while recognizing that she can adapt to her interlocutor and to the sociocultural environment in which she lives, Emilie refuses to categorize this practice of accommodation as a form of *whitisation*, due to the derogatory connotations of this practice in Cameroon. The repetition of the sentence ‘I speak French like the French’ expresses her strong identification to the French people and her desire to imitate their speech. She distinguishes this act of speech convergence from the act of *whitiser*, which she defines more specifically as ‘trying to speak to a Cameroonian with a French tone and accent’. She considers this definition as being widely recognized among the Cameroonian community, as evidenced by the use of the collective and impersonal verbal phrase *people say*, which refers to the social community, and the use of the adverb *usually*. She criticizes this behaviour by deeming it inappropriate and by invoking the interactional norm to which she refers implicitly at the beginning of this

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Émilie : heu : + je dirais pas que je whitise + je dirais que je parle le français comme les Français

Suzie : mmh

Émilie : après heu + si ça s’appelle whitiser : + peut-être + je parle le français comme les Français [...] après les Camerounais peut-être qu’ils appellent ça whitiser

Suzie : mmh +, mais tu dirais pas que tu whitises quoi

Émilie : non + pour moi non + pour moi je m’adapte à la langue du pays où je vis + ouais

Suzie : c’est pas la définition du : fait de whitiser + c’est pas ça whitiser ?

Émilie : ben pour moi + whitiser au Cameroun a un sens péjoratif + + donc heu vu que je parle plusieurs langues je refuserai de donner un sens péjoratif au fait que je m’adapte à mon interlocuteur ou à mon environnement + pour moi c’est plutôt m’adapter à mon interlocuteur et à mon environnement + après dans un autre contexte whitiser serait essayer de parler à un Camerounais avec un ton et un accent français + moi je trouverais justement justement c’est généralement dans ces cas-là qu’on dit, mais + pourquoi tu whitises + pourquoi tu me parles à moi comme si j’étais quelqu’un d’autre + dans ce sens là oui je trouve que c’est pas approprié parce que + moi mon attitude dans la communication ben : c’est que je vais parler à la personne qui est en face de moi avec un ton qu’il va comprendre et par rapport à l’environnement culturel dans lequel on est »

extract, according to which people should adapt to their interlocutors and to the sociocultural environment in which they live. Besides, she perceives the act of *whitiser* with another Cameroonian as a way of excluding an interlocutor from the Cameroonian community by speaking to him or her ‘as if [he/she] were someone else’. Thus, by criticizing this practice, she distinguishes herself from other Cameroonian people who speak ‘white’ in Cameroon.

Most of the speakers I interviewed, like Emilie, defined also the act of *whitiser* as the imitation of the French people’s accent by a Cameroonian person talking with another Cameroonian person. In this case, *whitiser* can be defined as a form of ‘stylization’ (Bakhtin 1981: 603–604), a social ‘representation of another’s linguistic style’ or a social ‘image of another’s language’, here the language of the ‘White’ or the ‘French’ people, which is widely recognized among the Cameroonian community (cf. Peuvergne 2015, 145; Zambo Belinga 2003, 29). As it is a ‘double-voiced’ discourse, the act of stylization always implies that the hearer must be a member of the same linguistic community as the speaker, and therefore can perceive meaningful differences between the ‘regular’ speech style of the speaker and his speech style when he tries to speak ‘white’. This style has to be recognized by the interlocutor as the *intentional* imitation of the speech style which is conventionally associated with a social ‘other’ in a given community (Bakhtin 1981, 603–604), so that the hearer can assign it specific meanings depending on the interactional context. This is the precise definition that Frédéric, another interviewee, gives of the act of *whitiser*. According to him, ‘*whitiser* is done intentionally + however when it’s not done deliberately it’s not *whitisage*’. Frédéric then explains that he would consider that he was speaking ‘white’ with his Cameroonian girlfriend Solange if he spoke intentionally with her the way he was speaking with me during the interview, because usually he uses a more Cameroonian intonation with her (‘for me it would have been *whitiser* if I spoke intentionally with Solange the way I am speaking to you just now’), whereas when he speaks with me, he ‘automatically’ accommodates to my speech style. Therefore, the categorization of a speech style as a form of *whitisage* depends on the interactional context: the same language practice can be perceived by this subject as a form of stylization or as a form of accommodation, depending on his interlocutor and on the relationship between the speakers. Later in the interview, he figures out his own response if his Cameroonian girlfriend started speaking white with him:

“Frédéric: if Solange started to speak white to me<sup>9</sup> without any reason and not jokingly I would say come on + you’re being disrespectful I am a Cameroonian like you actually you can’t speak to me like that +  
[XXXXXX]

Suzie : ah yeah + [in other words you’d feel offended]

Frédéric: yes I would feel offended although + although if it were other people I would not say that to them + but it is because I know that she can speak to me like a Cameroonian so for me when she speaks to me like that she does not accept the fact that I am a Cameroonian in fact she would speak to me as if I were white although she knows that + on the other hand I can answer her like that + if she didn’t know I would not question her + but if she doesn’t answer me I would say to her no no + no no no stop that stop that + speak to me normally + for me what’s “normal” is definitely to speak Cameroonian when I am with her<sup>10</sup>”

Frédéric considers an inappropriate behaviour when people who are comfortable both in speaking Cameroonian and speaking ‘white’ do not switch according to the context, and a way to mark a distance with the interlocutor, by refusing to recognize that he belongs to the black Cameroonian community (‘she speaks to me as if I were white’). The speaker clearly identifies with the Cameroonian community and claims the colour of his black skin, by refusing the place of the foreigner where his girlfriend would put him if she spoke white to him. Indeed, the use of the direct transitive construction of the verb *whitiser* in French (‘me whitiser’) at the beginning of this narration, which

9 The speaker says in French « me whitiser », thus using the verb *whitiser* with a direct object (*me*), without any preposition like *avec* (*with*), contrary to what would be expected.

10 Original extract :

« Frédéric : si Solange se mettait à me whitiser sans aucune raison et si c’est pas sur un ton moqueur je lui dirais, mais + tu me respectes pas je suis Camerounais comme toi tu n’as pas à me parler comme ça en fait +

[XXXXXX]

Suzie : ah ouais + [tu le prendrais mal en fait]

Frédéric : ouais je le prendrais mal alors que : + alors que ce serait quelqu’un d’autre je lui dirais pas ça + mais c’est parce que je sais en fait qu’elle est capable de me parler comme un Camerounais donc pour moi en me parlant comme ça elle n’accepte pas le fait que je sois Camerounais en fait elle me parle comme si j’étais blanc alors qu’elle sait que + dans l’autre sens je suis capable de lui répondre comme ça + si elle ne savait pas je ne considérerais pas la question +, mais si elle me répond pas je lui dirais non non + non non non arrête ça arrête ça + parle-moi normalement + pour moi le normal est bien de parler camerounais quand je suis avec elle ».

makes the subject the direct and passive object of the act, instead of the use of the expected indirect transitive construction (‘whitiser *avec moi*’ [speaking white with me]), may suggest that the speaker perceives this behaviour as a mean trick played by his girlfriend on him<sup>11</sup> and that this joke could directly have a negative impact on him by turning him ‘white’. The speaker opposes here two ways of speaking French, which he presents as radically distinct and contrasted: the verbal group ‘speaking Cameroonian’, constructed on the model ‘speaking + language’, refers to the normal, habitual way of speaking among Cameroonians, and it is opposed to the practice of *whitisation*. Thus, he introduces a hierarchy between two ways of speaking in this precise context, in which the act of *whitiser* is perceived as an expression of lack of respect, whereas the act of speaking Cameroonian is presented as the common and unmarked way of speaking, as shown by the choice of the adverb *normally*, which refers to this implicit interactional norm. In the fictitious discourse to his girlfriend, he forbids her to speak ‘white’, and when he reproaches her to speak in this way and blames her for adopting a disrespectful behaviour toward him (‘you’re being disrespectful I am a Cameroonian like you actually you can’t speak to me like that’), the speaker expresses his point of view about the rules which govern the interactions among the Cameroonian people. These interactional rules are based on the identity (which is perceived as a similitude) between the speaker and his interlocutor, due to their shared origin, as indexed by the comparison ‘like you’ (‘I am Cameroonian like you’). The fact that the speaker identifies with his interlocutor justifies, according to Frédéric, the act of ‘speaking Cameroonian’ and explains the incongruity of the choice of *whitiser*. Indeed, the repetition of the negation, when the subject expresses his disapproval of his girlfriend’s attitude, reveals his irritation and his refusal of the other’s behaviour (‘if she didn’t answer me I would say to her no no + no no no stop that stop that + speak normally to me’). Therefore, the knowledge of the interlocutors and of their language skills is crucial for judging positively or negatively the practice of *whitisation*. *Whitiser* with a Cameroonian would be meaningful, according to Frédéric, only if this act had a playful or humorous function. Otherwise, the practice shows a form of condescension toward the interlocutor and the speaker’s will to show his superiority over his or her interlocutor by establishing an asymmetrical relationship between both of them.

11 This direct transitive construction reminds that of phrasal verbs like ‘me faire une farce’ or ‘me faire un tour’ (‘to play a mean trick on me’) in French.

Thus, we can note that ambivalent values are associated with the practice of *whitisation* among Cameroonian interlocutors: it can sometimes be perceived as a form of parodical stylization, invested with comic or playful functions. But more often, it is associated with highly negative values, and it is perceived as a way of expressing one's superiority over an interlocutor or as a way of excluding an interlocutor from the group of Cameroonian people. Besides, speakers also deal with issues of authenticity when they assert 'claims of realness' in the act of imitating the French people's accent, through the discursive processes of 'authentication' and 'denaturalization', which respectively concern 'the construction of a credible or genuine' social image of self and the production of an image of self 'that is literally incredible or non-genuine' (Bucholtz & Hall 2007, 385). Indeed, if the convergence toward the French people's speech style can be valued as a form of adaptation and a sign of open-mindedness to the others in a new sociocultural environment, its excessive imitation, whether in France or in Cameroon, can be perceived, in some contexts, as a form of assimilation and rejection of one's origins, and as the performance of an inauthentic self which reveals an inferiority complex toward the white people, inherited from colonization.

## 2. *Whitiser*: adaptation or assimilation to the Whites?

The association of accent with the (real or claimed) origins of the speakers or with their 'profound identity' (cf. Fries & Deprez 2003, 99) is a very recurrent ideology in discourses of individuals who are perceived or who perceive themselves as speaking with a non-standard accent, even when these individuals admit that their accent can be a stigma in some contexts and try to accommodate, to some extent, to the non-standard pronunciation of their interlocutors. For instance in France, as in England, 'changing one's vocabulary and one's syntax ('improve' them from a normative point of view) can be an integral part of being educated, but changing one's accent is often badly perceived', as if it betrayed an attempt to hide one's origins (cf. Fries & Deprez 2003, 99; my translation from French). Thus, while defining the act of *whitiser*, many speakers among my interviewees adopted ambivalent identity positionings toward their accent and their own practice of accommodation: they oscillated between a desire for identification and adaptation to the other, and a desire for emancipation from postcolonial power relationships dominated by White people. This is the case, for instance, for Christian:

“Christian: at school it’s different because when I’m with my mates + I am used to keeping my voice and so on + but when I am alone with my teachers + because everything is + it is to my advantage that they understand me in fact + if they don’t understand me we can’t have a discussion you see + so I don’t change my voice I mean I don’t start speaking white [*whitiser*] + but either I slow down my speech rate + or I totally change the way I speak you see

Suzie: so you speak white + do you consider that you speak white [*whitises*] when you do that?

Christian: no + no *whitiser* is really deep well it means speaking like THEM + I don’t speak like them I lower my voice + with you I could have spoken white + I could have decided to talk like French people do I could have thought ok well I am I try to speak like the French people + but no you see + that is speaking white + you see + I will lower my speech rate I will keep my accent<sup>12</sup>”

Christian describes how he can adapt to his interlocutors and change his way of speaking, and especially his accent, depending on his interlocutors: the baker, his teachers, his friends, or me. Nevertheless, while other respondents categorized this stylistic versatility as a form of *whitisation*, Christian refused to categorize his own practice like this: three times, he denied the fact that he ‘speaks white’, while recognizing that he is used to significantly changing the way he speaks according to his interlocutor, especially by modulating his speech rate, making it faster when he speaks with his friends than when he speaks with me for example. Then, he adopted a contradictory positioning: while denying that he ‘speaks white’ (*whitise*), when he defines the practice of *whitisation* as the act of ‘changing [his] voice’, yet he admitted that he could

12 Original extract:

« Christian: [...] à l’école c’est différent parce que quand je suis avec mes potes + bon moi mon habitude c’est que je garde ma voix et tout + mais quand je suis seulement avec mon prof + parce que tout est c’est à mon avantage qu’il me comprenne en fait + s’il me comprend pas on peut pas échanger tu vois + donc je ne change pas ma voix enfin je me mets pas à whitiser + mais soit je baisse mon débit de parole + soit carrément je change ma façon de parler tu vois

Suzie: donc tu whitises + est-ce que tu considères que tu whitises quand tu fais ça ou pas ?  
 Christian : non + non whitiser c’est vraiment profond hein c’est parler comme EUX + moi je parle pas comme eux je baisse ma voix ++ avec toi j’aurais pu whitiser + me dire que bon voilà je suis j’essaie de parler comme les Français mais tu vois non + ça c’est whitiser + tu vois + je vais baisser mon débit de parole je vais garder mon accent »

radically change the way he talks; the adverb *completely* indicates the radical nature of this change. However, this apparent contradiction is solved later in the interview with his more precise definition of *whitisation*. This definition enables him to explain his refusal to classify these practices as forms of *whitisation* (“no + no *whitiser* is really deep well + it means speaking like THEM + I don’t speak like them I lower my voice”). The extreme change in his way of speaking would be to “lower [his] voice”, which means for him, to speak in a deeper and softer voice (he performed this act of lowering his voice while uttering this part of the sentence). By refusing to ‘speak white’ (*whitiser*), he takes up an identity positioning: he expressed his refusal to be identified with the White or with the French people. Thus, he indirectly identified himself as a foreigner or at least as an ‘Other’, and opposed an implied ‘We’, that of his ethnic group, to ‘Them’, that is to say the Whites or the French, two social groups from which he wants to distinguish himself. Therefore, the speaker asserts here his authentic speech style, which he wants to keep real, original, as the use of the possessive pronoun *my* (‘I will keep my accent’) shows. Christian feels that if he recognized that he spoke white (*whitise*) when he accommodates to the speech style of his white interlocutors, he would deny his original, authentic self. Thus, he expresses his ideal of a ‘pure’ language, which has not been altered by the contact with the whites, and which he associates with an ideal of authenticity.

In this extract, Christian drew lines between the practice of accommodation, which implies a certain degree of convergence toward the French people’s accent, and the intention to exactly imitate their accent. Whereas the first behavior is perceived as normal and as compatible with the preservation by the subject of his authentic speech style, the latter behavior is perceived as an inauthentic and exaggerated imitation of the other: it ‘sounds odd’, and the people who speak like that are perceived to behave ‘like black skins under white masks’, as Solange, one of my interviewees, said, thus explicitly referring to the famous Frantz Fanon’s book. Indeed, Fanon (1952) described a similar attitude among people from Martinique. According to him, ‘speaking like a White person’ for someone coming from Martinique to France consisted in excessively imitating the pronunciation of the French [r]. Fanon explained that this inauthentic imitation of the Whites resulted from an ‘inferiority complex’ among the Black colonized people, urging them to take the French language and culture as a model. Imitating the language of the ‘White’ allowed the colonized to climb up the social ladder and get a privileged position among the community. According to Fanon, whose analysis deals with the situation

in the French West Indies, this behavior can be seen in every population who has been colonized (Fanon 1952, 38–39).

Similarly, my interviewees generally perceive this inauthentic imitation of White people as the expression of an inferiority complex inherited from colonization. For instance, Daniel highly criticized the same attitude by a recently arrived Cameroonian person in France and opposed this inauthentic attitude to his own, thus asserting the authenticity of his own speech behavior:

“Daniel: first I am not even sure I have a French accent + I don’t think so even after eight years I don’t think so [laughter] + I HAVE kept my accent + [...] but then [...] there you have some guys as soon as they arrive in France + but well it’s not that I am for or against it but I think it’s SHOCKING + they have arrived in France for some three months only + and directly + straight out they have changed their accent

Corinne<sup>13</sup>: yeah

Suzie: that bothers you

Daniel: I am here I say to myself but matey you have lived for eighteen years in Cameroon + three months later you’ve forgotten it? + I think people who do that are complexed + they are complexed + they are people who have I don’t know + a complex of I don’t know what + I don’t give a damn I speak the way I speak + then of course you improve your language in contact with other people + but for all that I won’t deny after barely three months the fact that I have lived in Africa + [...] three months down the road and you change your language

[...]

Corinne: there are other people even when they speak you feel that + it’s not convincingly done

Daniel: it’s forced + you feel that it’s forced<sup>14</sup>”

Daniel adopts here a ‘denaturalizing’ discourse which denounces the artificiality of the behaviour. He emphasizes the contrast between the speaker’s short stay (‘only three months’) in France and his or her long life in Cameroon

13 Corinne is a friend of Daniel. She is also Cameroonian, and at the time of this interview she was still a member of the Pan-african association in which I carried out my fieldwork.

14 Original extract :

« Daniel : déjà moi l’accent je ne suis pas sûr d’avoir un accent français + je ne crois pas depuis huit ans je ne pense pas [rires] + j’ai BIEN gardé mon accent + après [...] tu en as qui une fois arrivés en France + mais voilà après ça c’est pas que je suis pour ou contre mais

(‘eighteen or twenty years’) on the one hand, and the dramatically quick change noticeable in his speech style on the other hand: the use of the adverbs *directly* and *straight out*, and of the adjective *shocking*, which qualifies the other’s attitude, indexes the subject’s high disapproval of this behavior. His friend Corinne and he both highlight the artificiality of this imitation and the lack of authenticity of this behaviour with other adjectives or phrases (‘it’s forced’, ‘it’s not well done’). Nevertheless, Daniel almost contradicts himself here: indeed, he first asserts that there is nothing wrong with this behaviour (‘it’s not that I am for it or against it’) before explicitly criticizing it in the following concessive phrase (‘but I find it’s SHOCKING’), as if he wanted to soften, to some extent, the strength of his criticism. Later, he takes on another ambivalent subjective positioning toward the White people’s accent, which reveals his fluctuating desire to identify with or to distinguish himself from the White people. First, he opposes two distinct speech styles, the “French accent” and his own accent that he says to have kept (‘I HAVE kept my accent’), thus revealing his ideal of a ‘pure’ and ‘real’ accent, and his fear of mixing up his speech style with the one of the whites. His own practice of accommodation is presented as not incompatible with the preservation of his authentic speech style, which he claims to be ‘real’ through a tautological assertion that he reinforces by a strong affective positioning (‘I don’t give a damn I speak the way I speak’). Then, he acknowledges the general need to ‘improve’ one’s language by one’s contact with the others through the practice of accommodation, as evidenced by the use of the adverbial phrase *of course*, of the gnomic present and of the pronoun *you* (*tu* in French), which has an impersonal value here. Nevertheless, right after this assertion, he expresses again in the concessive phrase introduced by *but* a desire to distinguish himself

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je trouve ça CHOQUANT + tu es arrivé en France ça fait à peine peut-être trois mois + et directement + t’as carrément changé d’accent

Corinne : ouais

Suzie : ça ça te gêne ça

Daniel : je suis là je me dis mais mon ami tu as quand même vécu dix-huit ans vingt ans au Cameroun + trois mois après t’as oublié ? + moi je pense ça c’est des personnes complexées à mon sens qui font ça + c’est des personnes complexées qui font ça + c’est des personnes qui ont je sais pas + un complexe de je sais pas quoi + moi j’en ai rien à foutre je parle comme je parle + après bien sûr tu améliores ta langue au contact + au contact des gens + mais pour autant je ne vais pas pour autant aller renier après trois mois à peine le fait que j’ai vécu en Afrique [...] + trois mois après tu changes ton langage  
[...]

Corinne : y en a d’autres même quand ils essaient de parler tu sens + c’est pas bien fait

Daniel : c’est forcé tu sens que c’est forcé »

from the Whites by claiming his African roots and his refusal to deny them by radically changing his accent, thus actualizing the metaphor of the origins which is associated with the ideology of authenticity.

Besides the excessive imitation of the White people’s speech by Cameroonians who have just arrived in France, the practice of *whitisation* among Cameroonians in Cameroon is also described by many speakers as the expression of an inferiority complex towards the French people. For instance later in the same interview, Daniel strongly and angrily criticized the behaviour of the Cameroonians who ‘spoke White with him when he went back to Cameroon during the holidays, and interpreted this behaviour as the expression of a ‘historical complex’:

Daniel: and then what also bothers me sometimes + [to Corinne] maybe you have also seen that + I mean it’s when you go back to Cameroon + there are some people because they know that you’re coming from Europe  
Corinne: yes + they change the way they speak

Daniel: they + they try to have a French accent + and you say but you + you:

Corinne: take it easy

Daniel: you are: + actually what’s your problem in fact + [...] you are at home what and who do you adapt to + huh what do you adapt to + mate I used to live here ok do you want to adapt to me? + what’s your problem are you crazy or what?

[...]

Corinne: it’s a historical complex now we won’t:

Daniel: yes it’ a historical complex unfortunately + and that’s also the problem + that’s what I don’t understand

Suzie: history

Daniel: yes it’s history<sup>15</sup>”

The insistent repetition of the question ‘What do you adapt to?’, of its variants (‘What and who do you want to adapt to?’; ‘Do you want to adapt to me?’) and the use of the other rhetorical questions introduce a dialogic speech fea-

15 Original extract:

« Daniel : et après aussi moi ce qui me dérange des fois + peut-être que toi tu as aussi vu ça + c’est quand tu rentres au Cameroun + y en a parce que ils savent que tu viennes d’Europe  
Corinne : ouais ils changent leur façon de parler

turing the confrontational discussion with the other. These questions betray Daniel's negative opinion on these practices: indeed, while pointing out their absurdity and their lack of authenticity, he interpreted them as a symptom of a psychological problem among his interlocutor ('What is your problem? Are you mad or what?'). Once again, the category 'White' and the act of *whitiser* which is associated with it do not index the interlocutor's skin colour, but rather, in this context, it indexes his knowledge of Europe, which stems from his long stay in France and confers a high symbolic capital on him<sup>16</sup>. Because he went to Europe, Daniel was identified by his interlocutor as belonging to the category of the 'Others', with a privileged social position among the Cameroonian community. This position made him equal to the 'Whites', excluded him from his peer group, and created an asymmetrical relationship between the two speakers which made him feel uncomfortable and made him very angry. Daniel and Corinne perceive this practice as the expression of a 'historical complex', which could be inherited from colonization when the French language was first the language of the colonial elites, and started to be widely spoken in Cameroon and in currently French-speaking countries in Africa (cf. Manessy 1994).

*Whitiser* can thus be an interactional strategy of social distinction through which speakers assign themselves or their interlocutors' particular social attributes, thus marking their difference from their Cameroonian peers. Through this practice, the speakers index an absent figure, a fantasized 'Other' or a social prototype, the 'White', with whom they temporarily want to identify while projecting socially desirable images of selves. Indeed, according to the Cameroonian anthropologist Zambo Belinga, *whitiser* can be perceived by

Daniel : ils + ils essayent de prendre l'accent français + tu dis mais mais + toi tu: tu as quel problème en fait [...] + tu es chez toi tu t'adaptes à quoi à qui + tu t'adaptes à quoi + hein tu t'adaptes à quoi + moi gars j'ai vécu ici hein tu veux t'adapter à moi ? + tu as des problèmes toi tu es fou ou quoi ?  
[...]

Corinne : c'est un complexe historique hein on va pas:

Daniel : oui c'est un complexe historique malheureusement + et c'est aussi ça le problème + c'est ce que je comprends pas

Suzie : l'histoire

Daniel : oui c'est l'histoire »

16 According to the anthropologist Zambo Belinga (2003), who describes an 'obsession with Europe' among his interviewees, going to Europe, and particularly to Paris, is highly valuable for many Cameroonians and is perceived as an index of social success: in Cameroonian people's representations, 'travelling to Paris is analyzed as an achievement' (Zambo Belinga 2003, 23; my translation from French).

some Cameroonians as an index of the speakers' high competence in French and of their social success, particularly among the youth and the intellectuals in big cities, so that those who do not speak white can be perceived as 'villagers' or uneducated people (Zambo Belinga 2003, 29). This linguistic ideology is reminiscent of colonial discourses (Calvet 1979). In that case, the relationship between the category 'White' and the practice of *whitisage* is not a direct one but an indirect one. Indeed, linguistic forms do not often directly index the speakers or the interlocutors' belonging to a specific macro-social category in their interactions: rather, they first index attitudes, stances, activities and attributes that are, in turn, socio-historically associated with particular social categories in a specific social context (cf. Eckert 2008, Ochs 1991). Thus, in Cameroon, 'in a society where "being White" confers a social reputation' in some contexts, the category 'White' can be associated with different social attributes and stances, such as modernity, civilization, social success, wealth or education, which are partly inherited from the power relationship between the colonized Black and the White colonizer (cf. Zambo Belinga 2003, 22–31, my translation from French; cf. also Nyamnjoh & Page 2002). Therefore, the speakers do not 'speak white' only with people who have a white skin: if the act of *whitiser* can allow the speakers to express their identification with their white-skinned interlocutors, it also enables them, during interactions with non white-skinned people, to index various social attributes or interactional positionings which are associated with the category 'White'. Power relationships between the Cameroonians and the French people, which are inherited from colonization, partly frame present interactions and can explain the ambivalent values associated with the word *whitiser* in Cameroon. These latter reflect the ambivalent "representations of whiteness constructed by young black Cameroonians" in the postcolonial Cameroonian society (Nyamnjoh & Page 2002, 607).

## Conclusion

Drawing on this analysis of the discourses of Cameroonian immigrants about the act of *whitiser*, we can understand that although most of the speakers recognize that they felt more or less the need to adapt to the French people's accent when they arrived in France, the definition of the act of *whitiser* and the choice of categorizing one's own practice of accommodation as a form of *whitisage* vary from one subject to another, depending on the different interactional positionings they take on, and on the different groups or in-

dividuals they wish to identify with or distance themselves from. Indeed, speakers take on ambivalent positionings, which reveals their fluctuating desire to identify with the ‘Whites’. Nevertheless, despite this variability of stances, most of them assign derogatory values to this practice, which they generally perceive as the expression of an inferiority complex toward the White people, inherited from colonization. Their discourses, while stigmatizing this language behaviour, conjure up, more or less explicitly, remnants of the burden of the colonial past. Thus, by disapproving this practice, the speakers can also distance themselves, to some extent, from the postcolonial representation of the Whites which partly imbues the social imaginary and the present everyday interactions between the Cameroonians in Cameroon and abroad. Finally, analyzing discourses about the act of *whitiser* enables us to shed light on the complex social indexicality of the category ‘White’ in Cameroon. Far from referring only to a specific phenotype, this category can be invested with variable social meanings. Therefore, the act of imitating the ‘Whites’ allows social actors to take on various intersubjective positionings, depending on the interactional context and on the individuals’ interactional goals. These multiple social meanings are partly ideologically associated with the social figure of the ‘Whites’ as it has been historically constructed in the Cameroonian society.

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