



## Constructing Resistance: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Vernacular Agency in Cameroon's Anglophone Digital Activism

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### Abstract

This study provides a rigorous sociolinguistic examination of the constitutive role of language in the ongoing socio-political conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, positing digital activism as a primary site of discursive struggle. While scholarship has addressed historical-political dimensions, a significant gap persists in the empirical analysis of the micro-linguistic strategies through which vernacular practices enact ideological resistance and counter-hegemonic mobilisation (Blommaert, 2005; Kroskrity, 2000). Employing an integrated mixed-methods framework that synergizes Corpus Linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis (Baker, Gabrielatos, KhosraviNik, Krzyżanowski, McEnery, & Wodak, 2008), this research analyses a specialised digital corpus of approximately 1,200 text-based items from social media, activist communiqués, and transcribed audio (2020–2025)—the Anglophone Digital Activism Corpus (ADAC). Quantitative keyword and collocation analyses identify statistically significant patterns, while subsequent qualitative analysis, guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics' transitivity model (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 2008), performs close readings. The findings reveal a deliberate linguistic architecture characterised by three core mechanisms: the consistent grammatical positioning of collective Anglophone actors as active agents in material processes; the strategic deployment of code-mixing and lexical innovation, using Cameroonian Pidgin English and Camfranglais to create an exclusive, authentic discursive space (Gumperz, 1982); and the use of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) such as EDUCATION IS SOVEREIGNTY to reframe political grievances into mobilising narratives. This paper argues that digital activism in this context is fundamentally a sociolinguistic project, contributing an empirical model for analysing the interface of grammar, digital communication, and political conflict, affirming that the struggle for power is intrinsically a struggle over representation and linguistic resource mobilisation (Bourdieu, 1991).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The protracted socio-political conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, often termed the Anglophone Crisis, represents more than a contest over political autonomy or resource allocation. It constitutes a profound struggle over narrative, representation, and the very means through which reality is linguistically constructed and publicly circulated. Emerging from decades of perceived marginalisation, the crisis has evolved from peaceful protests into a violent separatist conflict. While scholarly work has effectively documented its historical roots

and political trajectories (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2019), a critical analytical lacuna persists. There remains a paucity of rigorous, linguistically-informed examination of how the conflict is waged, sustained, and contested within the digital public sphere.

This study proceeds from the foundational sociolinguistic premise that language is not a neutral medium for describing conflict but is itself a constitutive social practice, deeply embedded within relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1992; Woolard, 1998). In contexts of political unrest, discursive practices become primary battlegrounds where identities are forged, legitimacy is claimed, and resistance is mobilised (Blommaert, 2005). The digital realm—encompassing social media platforms, blogs, and messaging applications—has become an especially crucial arena for this symbolic struggle in Cameroon, offering activists a platform that circumvents state-controlled traditional media and must be analysed through the lens of digital sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2014). Within this space, language choice, syntactic structure, and lexical innovation are not incidental; they are strategic acts of political positioning.

This research addresses a significant gap in both African linguistics and political sociology by interrogating the micro-linguistic architecture of Anglophone digital activism. It moves beyond macro-level discussions of language policy to examine the precise grammatical and discursive mechanisms through which resistance is encoded and enacted (Sebba, 2007). The study is guided by two central research questions: First, what are the predominant linguistic strategies—including transitivity patterns, code-mixing, and metaphorical framing—used to construct agency and resistance in Anglophone digital discourse? Second, how do these vernacular language practices function ideologically to challenge state narratives, foster in-group solidarity, and reconstruct a collective political identity?

To answer these questions, this paper employs an innovative mixed-methods framework, integrating the quantitative, pattern-seeking precision of Corpus Linguistics (CL) with the qualitative, ideological scrutiny of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This synergy, following the model established by Baker et al. (2008), mitigates the potential subjectivity of pure CDA by grounding interpretative claims in statistically significant linguistic evidence derived from a large, systematically assembled digital corpus. By meticulously tracing how agency is grammatically assigned, how social actors are represented, and how vernacular forms are weaponised, this research makes visible the often-invisible linguistic labour of resistance. In doing so, it contributes a novel, empirically-rigorous perspective to the understanding of the Anglophone Crisis, demonstrating that the conflict is as much a war of words as it is a military confrontation.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Language Ideology, Grammatical Agency, and Digital Resistance**

The analytical approach of this study is anchored in the convergence of three interrelated theoretical domains: the sociolinguistics of language ideology, critical linguistics, and digital communication. Central is the concept of language ideology—the culturally and politically rooted beliefs about language that link linguistic forms to social identities and moral or political

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values (Woolard, 1998; Irvine & Gal, 2000). In the Cameroonian context, a longstanding state-led ideology of official bilingualism (French and English) and national unity has systematically suppressed the political valence of sub-national linguistic identities. Digital activism provides a space where this dominant ideology is directly challenged through the deliberate elevation and strategic use of stigmatised vernaculars, especially Cameroonian Pidgin English (CPE) and Camfranglais. This practice constitutes a form of linguistic heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981) deployed for political ends, where the intentional mixing of codes disrupts monologic state discourse and asserts a counter-hegemonic identity (Meeuwis & Blommaert, 1998).

To dissect the mechanics of this discursive resistance, the study employs the analytical toolkit of Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Transitivity analysis, a core component of this framework, is indispensable for this research. It provides a systematic method for examining how agency is distributed in clauses—who is positioned as the Actor (the doer) and who is the Goal (the receiver of action). In conflict discourse, these grammatical choices are profoundly ideological (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979). A state narrative might frame events passively (“schools were closed”), backgrounding the agent of closure, while activist discourse might actively name the agent (“the regime closed our schools”) or, more powerfully, reclaim agency (“we are boycotting state schools”). This grammatical analysis is complemented by social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 2008), which examines how individuals and groups are named, classified, and functionalised in text—for instance, whether activists are aggregated as an anonymous “secessionist or separatist threat” or individualised as “community leaders.”

Furthermore, the study engages with scholarship on digital sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2014) and the sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert, 2010). It recognises that digital platforms have transformed the temporality, scale, and intertextuality of political discourse, enabling new forms of vernacular mobilisation (Varis & Wang, 2011) where linguistic resources become forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). The theoretical integration proposed here allows for a holistic analysis: it connects the microlinguistic (a grammatical choice, a code-switch) to the macro-ideological (the construction of a political community), demonstrating how language forms become acts of sociolinguistic resistance (Bell, 2014) in a digitally-mediated conflict.

### **3. METHODOLOGY: A CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

To ensure empirical rigor, methodological transparency, and analytical depth, this study adopts an integrated corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis approach (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013). This design triangulates quantitative linguistic data derived from a large digital corpus with qualitative interpretation, leveraging the complementary strengths of computational and critical paradigms.

#### **3.1. Corpus Compilation and Design**

The research is built upon the construction of a specialised, diachronic digital corpus titled the Anglophone Digital Activism Corpus (ADAC). The ADAC comprises approximately 1,200

text-based items sourced from publicly accessible digital platforms central to Anglophone mobilisation efforts. Data collection focused on the period from January 2020 to December 2025, capturing the evolution of discourse following the major post-2019 escalations. Sources included public Facebook pages and groups, posts from influential activist accounts on Twitter/X, text from pro-Anglophone news blogs, and transcripts of protest songs and audio messages shared via WhatsApp and YouTube. Collection was conducted using targeted manual archiving and API queries using relevant hashtags (#FreeAmbazonia, #AnglophoneCrisis) and keywords. A stringent cleaning and anonymisation protocol were followed.

### **3.2. Analytical Procedure: Quantitative and Qualitative Phases**

The analysis proceeded in two integrated, iterative phases.

*Phase One: Quantitative Corpus Linguistics Analysis.* Using AntConc software (Anthony, 2022), the ADAC was subjected to computational examination. Keyword analysis (Scott & Tribble, 2006) compared the ADAC to a larger reference corpus of general Cameroonian online news (in English) to identify words statistically over-represented ( $p < 0.01$ ) in the activist discourse, highlighting its unique thematic preoccupations. Concurrently, collocation analysis was conducted to identify words that habitually co-occur with central node words (span: L5-R5, MI score  $> 3$ ) such as “we,” “our,” “government,” and vernacular terms like “pa” (Sinclair, 1991). This revealed the consistent lexical environment and evaluative prosody surrounding key social actors and concepts.

*Phase Two: Qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis.* Salient text samples, identified through the quantitative analysis as containing strong examples of key collocations, marked code-mixing, or representative syntactic patterns, were subjected to detailed close reading. This qualitative analysis applied a specific toolkit: a) Transitivity analysis to parse clauses and map the grammatical distribution of agency; b) Social actor analysis (van Leeuwen, 2008) to examine nomination and functionalisation; c) Conceptual metaphor analysis (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to identify and interpret recurring framing devices; d) Code-mixing analysis, focusing on the pragmatic and ideological functions of switches between Standard English, CPE, and Camfranglais (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Auer, 1998).

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations, Positionality, and Limitations**

This study analyses publicly available digital texts. All data was handled with attention to potential risks; no content from private groups was used, and identifiable details were redacted. As a researcher embedded within the Cameroonian academic context, my positionality provides deep contextual sensitivity but necessitates explicit reflexivity to guard against unconscious bias. The methodological design, particularly the quantitative corpus component, serves as a check against selective interpretation.

The study’s scope is deliberately bounded. It focuses on discursive production within publicly accessible Anglophone digital spaces and does not constitute a reception study. It therefore maps a dominant strand of digitally-mediated resistance but cannot claim to represent the full, multifaceted discursive universe of the conflict. Acknowledging this, it is important to consider potential internal variations within the ADAC, such as differences in linguistic strategy

between more militant versus more diplomatic voices, or across distinct platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Future research could productively explore such complexities to further nuance the analysis. These limitations precisely contour the study's validity and chart an agenda for future research.

#### **4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: THE MICROLINGUISTICS OF MACROPOLITICAL STRUGGLE**

The integrated analysis revealed a sophisticated and multi-layered discursive architecture of resistance, organised around three interlocking strategies: the grammatical encoding of collective agency, the strategic deployment of vernacular authenticity, and the metaphorical reframing of the conflict.

##### **4.1. Grammatical Encoding of Collective Agency**

Transitivity analysis uncovered a fundamental pattern: the consistent grammatical construction of a collective Anglophone “we” as the active Agent in material and verbal processes. This stands in stark contrast to state media portrayals. In the ADAC, clauses like “We have withdrawn our children from these schools” or “We are building our own community defence” were paradigmatic. Here, “we” functions as the deliberate Actor in processes of creation, withdrawal, and protection. This grammatical manoeuvring effects a critical ideological shift, constructing a third subject position—that of a purposeful, collective political actor (Simpson, 1993). Social actor analysis further showed a deliberate representational strategy. The Cameroonian state and its military were regularly functionalised through impersonal nouns (“the regime,” “the occupation force”), while Anglophone actors were personalised and collectivised (“our teachers,” “the community”). This patterning works ideologically to construct a clear dichotomy: an illegitimate, foreign apparatus versus an authentic, agentive community.

##### **4.2. Vernacular Authenticity as Sociolinguistic Reclamation**

A second, highly salient finding was the strategic and symbolic use of code-mixing, particularly the insertion of Cameroonian Pidgin English (CPE) and Camfranglais lexemes. This was not random but followed a clear pragmatic and ideological logic (Auer, 1998). CPE was frequently deployed for direct appeals, solidarity-building, and summative statements. For example, a post might conclude: “We go win this struggle. No shaking! #WetiWeOwn”. The switch to Pidgin functions as a powerful in-group marker (Myers-Scotton, 1993) and an act of linguistic reclamation (Alim, 2009), signalling authenticity and a deliberate rejection of the “standard” English associated with the state's bilingualism policy. Similarly, Camfranglais terms (“ashia,” “mbom”) served to root the political struggle in a shared, contemporary Cameroonian experience. This vernacularisation creates an exclusive discursive space where membership is contingent on sociolinguistic competence (Blommaert & Backus, 2013), thereby strengthening in-group cohesion and erecting a symbolic barrier against outsiders.

##### **4.3. Metaphorical Reframing and Cognitive Reconstruction**

The analysis identified a set of recurring conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) that work to cognitively restructure the understanding of the conflict. The most potent is EDUCATION IS SOVEREIGNTY. This metaphor systematically reframes the targeted closure of schools into an act of political resistance and self-preservation. Discourses spoke of “boycotting a system designed to erase us” and “protecting our children from ideological capture.” Within this framework, the schoolhouse is transformed from an institution of learning into sovereign territory; controlling it becomes synonymous with defending the nation-in-waiting. Another prevalent metaphor was THE STATE IS A DISEASE/INVADER, with collocates like “infection,” “colonial virus,” and “cleanse our land.” This representation legitimises the conflict as a defensive, sanitary operation (Charteris-Black, 2004; Musolff, 2012). These metaphors provide a coherent, morally charged narrative framework that justifies actions and redefines the struggle from criminal insurrection to legitimate self-defence.

#### **4.4.Synthesis: The Architecture of Sociolinguistic Resistance**

The convergence of these three strategies—grammatical agency, vernacular authentication, and metaphorical reframing—creates a synergistic discursive system. It underscores that in digitally-mediated struggle, the capacity to control grammar, weaponize vernaculars, and seed powerful metaphors directly influences recruitment, morale, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). This discourse constructs a parallel public sphere with its own linguistic rules, performing grammatical sovereignty. However, this strength contains a potential limitation: the reliance on exclusive vernacular solidarity may alienate potential allies within Francophone Cameroon, and the absolutist “disease” metaphor may foreclose political negotiation. This highlights a central paradox: the very linguistic tools that empower resistance can also entrench conflict. The corpus-assisted CDA methodology proved essential in uncovering this architecture, providing an empirical anchor for broad patterns while enabling deep ideological unpacking of individual utterances.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study has argued that a comprehensive understanding of the Anglophone Crisis requires a sociolinguistic lens attuned to the digital sphere. Through a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, it has empirically demonstrated how the conflict is lived and advanced through specific, strategic linguistic practices. The construction of grammatical agency, the weaponization of vernacular authenticity, and the reframing power of metaphor constitute the foundational architecture of a digital resistance movement. These are not secondary reflections but primary, constitutive acts of that struggle (Fairclough, 1992).

The contribution of this work is twofold. For the study of the Anglophone Crisis, it adds an indispensable layer of analysis, revealing the war of words that underpins and sustains the military confrontation. For the field of sociolinguistics and discourse studies, it provides a replicable, empirical model for analysing how language functions as a technology of power and resistance (Bourdieu, 1991) in contemporary digital conflicts. It affirms that in an era of networked communication, the grammar of a tweet, the code-choice in a post, and the metaphor in a slogan are sites of significant political contestation (Shifman, 2013; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). The struggle for Ambazonia is thus being waged as vigorously in the transitive clauses

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of Facebook posts and the code-switches of Twitter threads as it is in the forests of the Northwest and Southwest regions. This insight into conflict as a discursive war of words carries practical implications; it suggests that any mediation or dialogue strategy must account for and engage with these deeply embedded narrative and linguistic frameworks to be effective. Future research should build on this foundation through reception studies to understand how these discourses are interpreted, and through comparative analysis with other linguistically-mediated conflicts across Africa, to further theorise the role of digital vernaculars in the construction of political dissent and sovereignty.

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