

Idiomatic Formation in Cameroon English Creative Writing

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Abstract

This paper examines the various processes via which novel idiomatic expressions are created in Cameroon English creative writing. The expressions, drawn from fifteen literary works of seven Cameroonian novelists, are classified into three major categories: expressions obtained via the translation of home language and Popular French expressions; locally coined expressions and the expressions obtained via the modification of Standard British English (henceforth SBrE) expressions. The last category includes three subcategories, namely the expressions obtained via the substitution of lexes in SBrE expressions; those obtained via the deletion or addition of lexes in SBrE expressions; and the expressions obtained either both via the substitution and addition or through the substitution, addition and deletion of some lexes in SBrE expressions. It is argued in the paper that a good understanding of these novel expressions is conditioned by the readers' familiarity to some linguistic and extralinguistic factors found in the Cameroonian sociocultural environment.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions, Cameroon English literature, Translation, Home languages, Modification, Standard British English

1. Introduction

Lexico-semantic innovations in New Englishes (Nigerian and Cameroon Englishes, for example) have received a considerable attention in the works of many researchers. For instance, Bamiro (1994) suggests that lexico-semantic innovations in Nigerian English fall under ten linguistic categories, namely loanshift (“*expo*”, clipped form of “exposition”); semantic underdifferentiation (“*small*” for instance is used instead of “little” as in “Laila went on like a small girl”); lexico-semantic duplication and redundancy (“*a stick of cigarette*” is used instead of “cigarette”); ellipsis (“*environmental*” is used for “environmental sanitation day”); conversion, an innovation whereby objects/instruments become processes (e.g., “*paste*” becomes “to paste”); clipping (“*permanent secretary*” becomes perm sec); acronyms (“*c.v.*” is used for “curriculum vitae”), translation equivalents (“*washed his teeth*” is the loan translation of the Igbo expression “osara onuya”); analogical creation (“*gatemen*” is used for “gatekeepers”); and coinages (“*sure bankers*”, a neologism which refers to the questions that will certainly feature in future examinations) (Bamiro, 1994: 49-57). In Simo Bobda (1994), lexical innovations in Cameroon English involve processes such as borrowing (“*bordereau*” used for “mail enclosure slip”); semantic extension (“*balance*” is used for “change”); semantic shift (“*dateline*” is used for “deadline”); collocational extension (“*eat*” collocates with money); derivation (“*indisciplined*” is derived from “*disciplined*” [in+disciplined]); conversion (“*chairman*” [noun] becomes “to chairman” [verb]); back derivation (“to aggress” i.e. “to assault” derives from “aggression”); compounding (“*death celebration*” for “funeral”); clipping of compound (“*bath*” for “bathroom”); and reduplication (e.g. “your team played very very well”) (Simo Bobda, 1994: 245-258).

Another aspect of lexico-semantic innovation which is very prolific in New Englishes contexts and which has not been examined in the above reviewed works is idiomatic formation. Platt (1984) provides some examples of new idioms in New Englishes such as in Papua New Guinean English (e.g., to be two-minded: to be in two minds, to be open-minded; to pass the hard times: to have a hard time, to pass a hard time, etc.), in Sri Lankan English (to put a clout: to give someone a clout; to put a telephone call: to make a telephone call; to put a feed: to have a good meal, etc.) in Singaporean and Malaysian English (to shake legs: to be idle), in Nigerian English (to declare surplus: to host a party), in East African English (to be on the tarmac: to be in the process of finding a new job) (Platt, 1984:107-110) just to name these few examples. The sources of idiomatic variations in non-native contexts are many. In Nigerian English for instance, Adegbiya (2003:48-49) has identified six sources, namely analogical creation (e.g. *public dog*), native source translation equivalents (e.g. *to wet the ground*), personality related (e.g. *sidon look attitude*), media instigated source (e.g. *hidden agenda*), slang origin (e.g. *to flashy*).

Cameroon English is also rich in terms of idiomatic usage as the following examples listed in Kouega (2000: 233-235) indicate: *sons and daughters / all elements of (of a tribe)*: member of a tribe; *come good*: greeting addressed to a guest; *catch you*: leave taking utterance equivalent to “good bye”; *I’m coming*: I am going out now; *excuse me*: utterance made by an affected person in response to the utterance “sorry”; *isn’t it*: a tag phrase for all tags; *not so?*:

another all response tag like “isn’t it?”; *I beg*: a phrase added to a command to convert it into a polite request; *to throw water*: to offer drinks; *to be on seat*: to be present in one’s office; *to chase a file*: to speed up the processing of one’s document”

2. Methodology

The expressions presented and analysed in this paper were drawn from fifteen literary works of seven Cameroonian novelists of English expression identified as follows: Asong’s *The Crown of Thorns (COT)*, *A Legend of the Dead (ALOTD)*, *Doctor Frederick Ngenito (DFN)*, *Stranger in his Homeland (SIH)*, *Salvation Colony (SC)*, *The Akroma File (TAF)*, *Chopchair, No Way to Die (NWTD)*, *The Crabs of Bangui (TCOB)*; Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil (SNS)*; Kongnyuy’s *The Deadly Honey (TDH)*; Tardzenyuy’s *Nyuysham*; Afuh’s *Flowers in the Desert (FID)*, Nyamnjoh’s *A Nose for Money (ANFM)* and Nkemngong Nkengasong’s *The Widow’s Might (TWM)*.

As far as the choice of the writers is concerned, it was deemed necessary to collect the data from the novels of male and female English-speaking Cameroonian novelists of all walks of life who originate from the two English-speaking Regions of the country (Northwest and Southwest regions). So, no novel written in French and translated into English was included. Besides, priority was given to the novels on which researches have already been carried out and the criterion of availability of the novels was also included in their selection. However, it worth acknowledging that there are many novels which fulfil the above criteria but which have not been used. The reason is simple: due to time constraints, it was not possible for us to work on all novels of Cameroonian novelists of English expression. In order to check whether or not the identified expressions are not yet documented, the following dictionaries were used:

- 1) *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005)
- 2) *Chambers Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (1994).
- 3) *Dictionary of English Colloquial Idioms*. (1979)
- 4) *A Dictionary of Cameroon English Usage* (2007).

The degree of idiomaticity of the expressions was checked using the following criteria proposed by Gramley and Pätzold (1992); Makkai (1992) and Moon (1997) as discussed in Ishaq Akbarian (2003): institutionalization, non-compositionality, non-substitution, ambiguity and fixedness.

-Institutionalization: The criterion of institutionalization aims at checking whether the idiom is regularly considered by a language community, i.e., whether the expression recurs.

-Non-compositionality: This criterion has to do with the degree to which an idiom cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialized unitary meaning. In effect, the meaning(s) of idioms are unpredictable given that they have a meaning which is not deducible from that of its component parts.

-Non-substitution: The substitution of a lexical item found in an idiomatic expression is not

allowed. For instance, by substituting the word “green” with “greenish” in the expression “to have green fingers” lead to a complete distortion of the expression.

-Ambiguity: Idioms are potentially ambiguous to decode since there is the possibility of literal interpretation. All idioms usually have two meanings, namely the literal and the idiomatic meanings. The literal meaning is generally different from the idiomatic one. For instance, the literal meaning of the expression “to kick the bucket” is quite different from its idiomatic meaning.

-Fixedness: The criterion of fixedness has to do with the degree to which an idiom “is frozen as a sequence of words”. There are many situations in which the morphosyntactic rules of contemporary English are not respected. However, this does not alter the fact that the expressions are genuine English expressions. For instance, the English definite article “the” has the function of indicating that an item has already been mentioned. However, this use does not apply in the idiomatic expression “to kick *the* bucket”.

It is important to point out that many of the expressions presented in this study do not conform to the first criteria i.e. *institutionalization*. The reason is simple. These writers draw these expressions mostly from their home languages communities. So, they are not yet integrated into Standard Cameroon English (see Kouega’s 2007 *A Dictionary of Cameroon English Usage*).

3. Idiomatic Formation in Cameroon Literary English

As earlier stated, the present work examines idiomatic formation in Cameroon literary English, an example of what Kachru (1986: 160-161) calls “contact literature”¹. An idiom is “a phrase which has a distinct meaning [...] which cannot be explained from the separate meanings of the different words in the phrase” (Platt *et al*, 1984: 107). In effect, what is common to idiomatic expressions is that their meanings “cannot be accounted for as a compositional function of the meanings their parts have when they are not parts of the sequences” (Cruse, 1986: 37). Idiomatic expressions can be “a catch phrase for opaque idioms, well-worn clichés, dead metaphors, proverbial sayings, [...]” (Kouega, 2000: 231). It is also worth pointing out that “idioms tend to be used strategically; that is, they capture and express particular states of mind or particular observations of a speaker, at moments when maximum effect is desired with a minimum of language” (Lupson and Pélissier, 1986: v). The following categories have been obtained in our classification of the expressions: the expressions obtained via the translation of Cameroonian home and Popular French language expressions (section 1); locally coined expressions (section 2); and the expression obtained via modification of SBrE expressions (section 3). The following table depicts their distribution in the corpus.

Table 1. Distribution of the proportion of expressions in the corpus

	Expressions obtained via the translation of home languages and Popular French expressions	Locally coined expressions	Expressions obtained via the modification of SBrE expressions		
			substitution	addition or deletion	substitution, addition (and deletion)
	28	37	11	5	5
Total	28	37	21		

1) Idiomatic expressions obtained via the translation of Cameroonian home languages and Popular French expressions

This category involves expressions which are obtained from the translation of Cameroonian home and Popular French language expressions. The expressions provided in this section are followed by their meanings as well as the language from which their donor language expressions have been translated. It is important to indicate that many of these expressions are attested in many Bantu languages. Therefore, their donor language expressions are not limited to the ones provided in this work. The expressions are provided followed by their meanings as well as the hypothesized home language expression from which they might have originated. Besides, the contexts from which the expressions are used in the text are provided.

(1) To grind pepper on somebody's head: to beat; defeat somebody (*obtained via translation from the Ngie language²*)

ɲwɔ só tó wa

to grind pepper head man

“to beat somebody”

“If Atropen would allow Akan *to grind pepper on his head*, the son of Ekunidi wouldn't do that. (SNS, p.67)

(2) To open one's mouth and talk: to say nonsensical things (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language³*)

lə co' ncù ɲson ei

inf. marker open mouth talk him

“to say nonsensical things”

“*To open one's mouth and talk*, for those who knew the Biongong dialect, meant to speak insensibly” (ALOTD, p. 202)

(3)To drill books into a child's head: to impart knowledge to a child (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

lə yihi akatei atú ŋwa

Inf. marker put book head child

“To impart knowledge to a child”

“Cosmas Weeland was reputed for being a disciplinarian and the only intellectual who could *drill books into a child's head*” (DFN, p.60)

(4)To be sick in one's head: not being reasonable (derogatory) (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

ləghua atú

illness head

“She *is sick in the head*”, Chief Mutare cursed” (DFN, p. 93)

(5)To rub somebody with excrement: to disgrace, disturb somebody (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

ləlb mbit njɔ ŋwɔ

inf. marker + take excrement rub somebody

“to disgrace somebody”

“Then why are you *rubbing us with excrement* up and down like this?” (SIH, p.23)

(6) To wash the genitals of the chief: to have sex with the chief (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

lə soh acena fua

inf. marker wash sex chief

“to have sex with the chief”

“A virgin had been chosen *to wash the genitals of the chief* on the first night of his coronation” (COT, p. 64)

(7)To sleep a girl: to have sex with her (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

lə noŋ mənwi

inf. marker sleep woman

“to have sex with a woman”

“You now want to *sleep my niece* in my house, on my bed” (SIH, p. 279)

(8) To remove the chair from under somebody: to snatch the throne (coined via translation from Nweh)

lə cɔʼ alanŋa acèn ŋwɔ

inf. marker remove chair buttocks somebody

“To snatch the throne”

“The same man who *removed the chair from under him* so that he fell into mud from which he will never climb out?” (COT, p. 98)

(9) To have four eyes: to be a member of an “evil society” (obtained via translation from the Lamnso ⁴ language)

kɛ si kwɛ

to have eyes four

“to be a member of an evil society”

“It was there that people who *had four eyes* gathered at night to form an “evil society” (TDH, p. 138)

(10) To be four-eyed: to be a member of an “evil society (obtained via translation from the Lamnso’ language)

kɛ si kwɛ

to have eyes four

“to be a member of an evil society”

“Those of us who are not “*four-eyed*” are lucky” (TDH, p. 60)

(11) To throw excrement into the face of something /somebody: to insult, disgrace, mock at something or somebody (obtained via translation from the Nweh language)

“lə mɛʼ mbit asə ŋwɔ

Inf. marker throw excrement face somebody

“to disgrace somebody”

“That he had chosen Anuse to rule! That was just *throwing excrement* into the face of the tribe and its traditions” (ALOTD, p. 45)

(12) To have eyes and ears: to be alert, vigilant, reasonable (*obtained via translation from Nweh*)

lə ɲa'tə mí ma betuɲí mɔ

inf. marker open eyes and ears your

“To be alert, vigilant, reasonable”

“[...] we begged you not to go, *talking as a people who have eyes and ears.*” (COT, p. 134)

(13) To have heads: to be reasonable (*obtained via translation from Nweh*)

lə bɔ`ɲ atú

Inf. marker have head

“to be reasonable”

“As a people who *have heads*, what do you think Achiebefuo meant by that [...]” (COT, p. 47)

(14) To put one's hand between the tree and its bark: to intrude in the affairs which do not concern you (*obtained via translation from Popular French spoken in Cameroon*)

mettre sa main entre l'écorce et l'arbre

to put poss. marker hand between det. +bark and det + tree

“To intrude in the affairs which do not concern you”

“[...] “The Goment had *put its hand between the tree and its bark*, forcing them to change the words and choice of the dead chief” (COT, p. 85)

(15) To see one's flower: to menstruate (*obtained via translation from Ghomala⁵*)

nə yɔ fəla wà tsjə

inf. marker+see flower poss. marker

“to menstruate”

“Angelina had come to our chief to tell him that she had just *seen her flower*” (COT, p. 145)

(16) To know a lot of books: to be highly educated (*obtained via translation from Nweh*)

ləbó nzə` akatei

Inf. marker+ very know books

“To be highly educated”

“They agreed that *knowing a lot of books* as Nkoaleck had done, did not constitute a satisfactory qualification for anybody to be their chief” (COT, p. 64)

(17) To have a bad mouth: to say unpleasant things about people (obtained via translation from Nweh)

ləbɔ̀ŋ ncù tèbɔ̀ŋ

inf. marker+ have mouth bad

“To say unpleasant things about people”

“I held every body hostage because I tried to know only unpleasant things about them. They said I *had a bad mouth*” (SC, p. 89) (NB: the verb “*to badmouth*” exists in SBrE and means “to criticize or malign”, *Chambers Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (1994, p.94))

(18) To cry for somebody: to organize a ceremony in memory of a dead person (obtained via translation from Nweh)

lələ ŋwɔ

inf. marker + cry somebody

“To organize a ceremony in memory of a dead person”

“[...] he should have known that I was to be the one to buy food and wine *to cry for his father*.”

(19) To give people one mouth: to make them unanimous, united, for a common cause (obtained via translation from Ngie language)

ina' co fɛ

To give mouth one

“To make people unanimous”

“[...] if we are drinking and chatting in good faith, *let the kola-nut give us one mouth*” (SNS, p. 177)

(20) Someone with two hearts: someone who is not unanimous with other people of the group, a traitor (obtained via translation from Ngie language)

wa ne fiŋi bjɛ'

man with heart two

“someone who is not unanimous with other people of the group”

“So there must be someone here with an evil intention. There is *someone here with two hearts*” (SNS, p. 177)

(21) To buy one's head: to bribe or give money to somebody in order to avoid or prevent a situation (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

ləʒwə tú

inf. marker+buy head

“to bribe or give money in order to avoid or prevent a situation”

“[...] I'll go straight ahead to do so if you do not *buy your head*” (TAF, p. 132)

(22) To expose one's anus in the market: to expose one's private problems, life; not to take precautions (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

ləcu acèna ŋwɔ asǎ

inf. marker+show sex somebody market

“To expose one's private life problems”

“By which you mean that I *expose my anus in the market*?” (Chopchair, p.106)

(23) To eat pepper from somebody's hands: to be beaten severely by somebody (*obtained via translation from the Ngie language*)

ikod úso abugɛ wa

inf. marker + eat pepper hand person

“To be beaten severely by somebody”

“If I can lay hands on him, he will *eat pepper from my hands*” (SNS, p. 19)

(24) To look at water on cocoyam leaves: to have hopes which will not be fulfilled (*obtained via translation from the Ngie language*)

inê bɔŋ nàŋ

inf. marker + look leaves cocoyam

“To have hopes which will not be fulfilled”

“They might be *looking at water on cocoyam leaves*. Echunjei might complete her course and refuse to marry Eziaga.” (SNS, p. 48)

(25) To receive one's pay in a hat: to have a good salary (*obtained via translation from the Ngie language*)

“inumo ŋkap akɛ dan

Inf. marker + take money in hat

“To have a good salary”

“We have heard that your son here teaches in a big college in Mbambe, and *receives his pay in a hat*” (SNS, p.140)

(26) To sit on the stool: to be crowned as the chief (*obtained translation from the Nweh language*)

ləŋaŋ	alaŋa	ləfuɔ
inf. marker + sit	stool	chief

“to be crowned as the chief”

“There was silence Nchindia still held his head down as he did the moment he was asked *to sit on the stool*” (COT, p. 60)

(27) To vomit one’s heart to somebody: to tell somebody all what one knows about an affair (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

lətrɔh	nti	ghi	cəm	abɔ	ŋwɔ
inf. marker +throw	heart	poss. marker	all	onto	somebody

“Directeur let me *vomit my heart* to you (TAF, p. 121)

(28) To spit in somebody’s face: to disgrace him (*obtained via translation from the Nweh language*)

lətrɔh	bətei	asə	ŋwɔ
inf. Marker + throw	spit	face	somebody

“To disgrace somebody”

“Ngobefuo was insulting him directly, he was really *spitting in his face*” (COT, 32)

A close observation of the above expressions indicates that they have social and cultural origins. They can be distributed into various lexical domains such sex, love and related issues (e.g. to wash the genitals of the chief, to sleep somebody (girl), to see one’s flower, etc.), social ills (e.g.: to buy one’s head), education, administration and communication (e.g. to drill books into a child’s head, to know a lot of books, to vomit one’s heart to somebody), customs, traditions and magical practices (e.g. to be four-eyed, to have four eyes, to cry for somebody, to sit on the stool), physical, mental and personality traits (e.g. to be sick in one’s head, to have eyes and ears, to have heads, to have a bad mouth, someone with two hearts), harmony and disharmony among people (e.g.: to grind pepper on somebody’s head, to open one’s mouth and talk, to rub somebody with excrement, to remove the chair from under somebody, to throw excrement into the face of something /somebody, to put one’s hand between the tree

and its bark, to eat pepper from somebody's hands, to spit in somebody's face, to give people one mouth)

Besides, one can observe that the expressions which fall under sex, love and related issues as well as those related to social ills denote taboo realities. This shows the writers' wish to circumvent taboo realities. It is important to point out that many realities which in the western world which are not taboo are considered as taboo issues in the African context. These issues are generally related to sex, love, social ills, just to name these few. Oladipo Salama and Obafemi Awolowo (2006:1) throw more light on this point when they observe that "among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria [...] there are a number of taboo words relating to various aspects of people's lives (sex, food, hygiene, death and so on). The Yoruba people for example, do not often describe the genitals by their technical terms. It is also taboo for example, to mention women's menstrual activity by name". Many Africans do not call a spade a spade when they discuss such realities. This holds true in the Cameroonian society as Tardzenyuy's, a Cameroonian novelist says:

[...] you know that in our tradition, the language of love is often indirectly and euphemistic. We don't call a spade a spade when we discuss love. Our people, especially elderly often go the roundabout way to express certain love ideas[...] a spade may sometimes be called a hoe or a shovel, and fundamental fact will still be something used for digging" (Tardzenyuy, 2002:54)

As pointed out earlier, these expressions result from the translation of Cameroonian background languages expressions. This implies that for readers to understand the meaning of these expressions, they need to be very familiar with the donor language expressions. Besides, readers' knowledge of the cultural aspects found in the writers' environment can be a clue to the good understanding of the meaning(s) of the above expressions: they should be aware of the fact that there are realities which in the purely Cameroonian cultural contexts are considered as taboos (sex related issues, secret societies, social ills, just to name these few) and which are not generally conveyed using technical or commonly known expressions.

In addition to the expressions obtained via the translation of Cameroonian home and Popular French expressions, Cameroonian writers also make use of expressions which are either coined by them or by local people. These expressions are provided and analyzed in the following sections.

2) Locally coined expressions

As opposed to the expressions obtained via the translation of home language expressions, those found in this category are either coined by local people or by novelists themselves. In other words, they are coined neither on the basis of indigenous languages nor on that of any other language of European importation. The expressions are first presented, followed by their meanings. Besides, the context in which the expressions occur in the literary text is provided followed by some information about the context of situation of the utterances in which the expressions are used, when necessary.

(29) To have the mouth and ear of somebody: to be the emissary or representative of somebody

“Tell him that the council *has the mouth and ear of the tribe* now. Go.” (COT, p. 175)

(30) To run before one can walk: not to do things with a lot of anticipations, to be very anxious

“I don’t like children who would want *to run before they can walk*, he reproach Prospère” (ANFM, p.82)

(31) To clean somebody’s eyes: to flatter somebody

“He had refused to come out to meet the chief of mission, or even send something *to clean his eyes* and oil his hands” (ALOTD, p. 304)

(32) To oil somebody’s hands: to bribe somebody

“He had refused to come out to meet the chief of mission, or even send something to clean his eyes and *oil his hands*” (ALOTD, p.304)

(33) To rub somebody’s mouth: to bribe somebody

They were said to have reacted because, they said, the ‘*rubbing of the DO’s mouth*’ was not the monopoly of one village. (SNS, p.143)

(34) To be born at the right moment: to be lucky, fortunate

“You *were born at the right moment*”, Banlanjo said” (TDH, p.143)

(35) To know each other as man and woman: To have got the opportunity to see each other’s nakedness or nudity

“*To know each other as man and woman?* [...]Yes, the opportunity to see each other’s nakedness, or if you like, nudity” (Nyusham, p. 53)

(36) To burn one’s (woman) womb: to become sterile

“What if she *had burnt her womb* in trying to commit abortion” (FID, p. 66)

(37) To dig a deep hole for somebody: to put somebody in a difficult situation

“You have *dug a deep hole for me*, and I do not see how I can get out of it” (TCOB, p.146)

(38) To build a small wall between two people: to put people at loggerhead, apart or in conflict

“I must admit that the Nunqam crisis *built a small wall between the two* of us, Willie and myself.”(NWTd, p. 199)

(39) To post a girl to somebody (man): to send her to live with a man as his wife without his approval

“It was my uncle who *posted you to me* in Europe” (NWTd, p. 214)

(40) To put wings on something: to make it go fast

“If you told a man that he was driving too fast he began to crawl; if you said he was too slow he wanted *to put wings on the car*” (NWTB, p.95)

(41) To speak with so much vinegar on one’s tongue: to speak violently

“Had the soldiers been fed exactly as they ought to, I would be *speaking with so much vinegar on my tongue*” (ALOTD, p.150)

(42) To walk about with cotton in one’s ears: to hear with difficulties

“So, let those who *walk about with cotton in their ears* take it out and hear” (ALOTD, p.233)

(43) To wash the male side of one’s womb: to give birth to male babies

“Wash, *wash quickly the male side of your wombs*. Open your legs and be ready to give birth. This land needs men” (COT, p. 206)

(44) To be the only cock to crow: to be the only person to give orders, the only person whose voice can be heard

“That was long ago when contractors and college proprietors were the hottest cakes in town, *the only cocks to crow*” (TAF, p. 84)

(45) To carry the religion on one’s head: to be a fanatic to one’s religion

“Parents were hurt by their daughters who had virtually *carried the religion on their head*” (SC, p.190)

(46) To scratch the surface of problems: to tackle a problem superficially

“[...] you will see that he did not even *scratch the surface of the problems*” (SC, p.148)

(47) To enjoy somebody’s sweat: to enjoy the fruit of somebody’s labour

“[...]if my husband did not first bring my own relatives to live with me and *enjoy my sweat*, I would make sure that his Mr Dennis did not set foot in my house” (SC, p.106)

(48) To be somebody’s sperm: to be somebody’s offspring

“These two children looking at us like this are *my husband’s sperms*” (TCOB, p.145)

(49) To raise oneself from mud to financial glory: to move from poverty to wealth

“They had refused to suffer and rot and had *raised themselves from mud to financial glory* by their own bootstraps”

(50) To be on somebody’s neck: to request something from somebody persistently

“It was money I borrowed and my creditors *are on my neck*” (TWM, p. 60)

(51) To be somebody’s first piss: to be somebody’s first child

“Now, if you know that you *are my first piss*, leave that rubbish you are doing and hurry to the meeting house” (DFN, p.131)

(52) To sing a different song: to say different things

“We had gone very far and just when we were about to catch up with other tribe of the South West, you are *singing a different song*” (DFN, p. 132)

(53) To walk into a bee hive: to get involved in problems

“Antony had *walked into a bee-hive* by marrying from the Godsabi family, for his problems with Godsabi multiplied with each passing day” (SIH, p. 172)

(54) To see all the walls of a college: to pass through all classes

“I thought that was what anybody who *has seen all the walls of a college* would have said the moment he read it” (SIH, p.211)

(55) To walk on one’s head: to be proud

“If you are already thinking of *walking on your head*, you should first of all know that you did not deliver yourself” (SIH, p.70)

(56) To force a girl down somebody’s throat: to compel somebody to marry a girl

“If she was that good, he thought, why would they want *to force her down his throat?*” (SIH, p.73)

(57) To speak grammar: to speak an educated variety of English

“I am surprised to hear people who have even conversed with me in the vernacular say afterwards that I can only *speak grammar*” (SIH, p.92)

(58) To dig a girl: to have sex with a girl

“With degrees like that, what *girl can you ask to dig* and she refuses? Even a Reverend sister.” (SIH, p.63)

(59) To eat plantains every day: to have sex with the same partner every day

“When he discovered that his wife was pregnant, he had the cheek to tell her not to expect her husband to *“eat plantains every day”* (ANFM, p. 20)

(60) To pour out one’s heart: to reveal one’s secret, one’s private life to somebody

“One doesn’t *pour out one’s heart* to every person one meets for the first time” (ANFM, p. 117)

(61) To pour salt onto somebody’s wounds: to worsen a painful situation

“They would *pour salt onto her wounds*, because it gave them fathomless pleasure to see her in anguish” (ANFM, p. 178)

(62) To have traffic jam in one’s head: to be thoughtful

“In fact there *was traffic jam in his head*” (FID, p. 132)

(63) To drag the crown into the gutters: to alter the prestige of the crown

“Mr Anuse had decided *to drag the crown into the gutters*” (ALOTD, p. 222)

(64) To eat the land: to exploit the resources of the land for one’s egoistic interest

“That is the *land* you said you wanted to *eat*. Eat it now” (COT, p. 209)

(65) To have bad blood in one’s vein: to be the offspring of an incestuous sexual contact

“I am not the right person to be the chief,” Nchindia strained to tell them”

“[...] he would never succeed the chief because he had *bad blood in his veins*?” (COT, p. 60)
(In BrE, “*bad blood*” refers to the “*feeling of hate between two people because of arguments in the past, e.g.: There has been bad blood between the two families for years*”, Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, p. 84)

Like the expressions obtained via the translation of home and Popular French expressions, the meaning of these ones cannot be obtained on a word-for-word basis. For instance the meaning of the expressions *to dig a deep hole for somebody* (to put somebody in a difficult situation), *to use women’s legs* (to have sex with women), *to clean somebody’s eyes* (to flatter somebody), *to speak with so much vinegar on one’s tongue* (to speak harshly, violently), *to walk about with cotton in one’s ears* (to hear with difficulties), *to be on somebody’s neck* (to request something from somebody persistently), *to see all the walls of a college* (to pass through all classes), *to walk on one’s head* (to be proud), *to speak grammar* (to speak an educated variety of English), *to have traffic jam in one’s head* (to be thoughtful), etc. will be skewed if a reader interprets them from literal perspective. However, unlike the expressions obtained from the translation of background languages, these ones do not have donor language equivalent(s). In effect, no donor language expressions from which these expressions are drawn has been identified. These expressions are coined either in analogy with existing British English expressions (e.g.: *to drag something in the gutter* (to alter its prestige) which can be said to be coined in analogy of the British English expression *to drag somebody’s name in the mud/mire* (to damage someone’s reputation by saying extremely insulting things him)) or in their great majority out of the writers’ or local people’s imagination (e.g.: *to eat plantain every day* (to have sexual intercourse with the same partner, *to speak grammar*: to speak an educated variety of English), *to take food with one’s hand and put it into a person’s mouth*: to provide help, support to somebody)). Another source which can be postulated is the authors’ experience with some local practices found in his environment. This can hold true for the expression *to post a girl to a man* (to send her to live with a man as his wife without his approval). Formerly and even nowadays, in many Cameroonian traditional societies, parents were (are) the people who chose (choose) the wife for their sons. The chosen girl, who was (is) generally, in the village was (is) sent to the son who was (is) in town or in a different area. In such a situation, the chosen wife can be assimilated to a letter or parcel *posted* by parents to their son.

4. Idiomatic Expressions Obtained via Modification of SBrE Expressions

As opposed to the expressions found in the preceding categories, those presented here are built on the basis of existing BrE idiomatic expressions. In New Englishes contexts, novel expressions can be obtained via a slight modification of SBrE expressions as the following examples provided by Schmied (1991: 88) indicate: silence means(gives) consent; drag a name in the mud (through the mire); to pull someone's legs (leg). In effect, these lexico-semantic constructions are British English expressions which have undergone modifications. In the present study, the modified expressions have been grouped into three sub-categories: modified expressions obtained via substitution; expression obtained via addition or deletion of lexes or morphemes in SBrE idiomatic expressions; modified expressions obtained either both via the substitution and addition or through the substitution, addition and deletion of lexe(s) or morphemes in SBrE expressions.

4.1 Idiomatic Expressions Obtained via the Substitution of Lexes in SbrE Expressions

In this subsection, the expressions obtained via the substitution of lexes in SBrE are provided. The modified expressions are first provided followed by the SBrE expressions from which the modified expressions have been obtained. Then, the contexts in which the expressions are used in the literary texts are presented followed by some explanations about the expressions.

(66) To bite the *finger* that fed somebody < to bite the *hand* that fed somebody

"Let us show them what it means for a child *to bite the finger that feeds him*" (SNS, p.69)

"And was it for fear of *biting the finger that fed them*, that the urban quacks carefully avoided implicating Prospère as well" (NFM, p. 177) ("*hand*" is replaced with "*finger*")

(67) Without *mixing* words < without *mincing* words

"When you returned from Geneva I told you categorically, and *without mixing words* that the greatest service you can render ... (NWTD, p.186) ("*mincing*" is replaced with "*mixing*")

(68) To put a *full stop* to something < to put an *end* to /a *stop* to something

"I would simply *put a full stop to* all tortures" (NWTD, p.216) ("*end*" or "*stop*" is replaced with "*full stop*")

(69) To put a *final full stop* to something < to put an *end* to /a *stop* to something

"I *will put the final full stop* to it all" (NWTD, p.218) ("*end*" or "*stop*" are replaced with "*final full stop*")

(70) To fall cats and *hens* < to rain cats and *dogs*

"Rain must be *falling cats and hens*" (ALOTD, p.256) ("*dogs*" is replaced with "*hens*")

(71) To cut one's *goat* according to one's size < to cut one's *coat* according to one's size

“The guest of honour was led to the dining table where limen Isidore had put up a humorous notice: “CUT YOUR GOAT ACCORDING TO YOUR SIZE”. (TCOB, 131) (“coat” is replaced with “goat”)

(72) As sure as morning follows night < as sure as hell / as sure as eggs is eggs, i.e. to be certain

“[...] As sure as death, *as sure as morning follows night*, she would, in fact, should, cannot, help but jump and dance” (DFN, p. 43) (“hell” or “eggs is eggs” is replaced with “morning follows night”)

(73) As you make ya bed, so shall you die on it < as you make your bed, so shall you lie on it

“Eru shrugged with a smile: “*As you make ya bed, so shall you die on it*” (SIH, p.215) (Modification of a British English proverb) (“your” and “lie” are replaced with “ya” and “die” respectively)

(74) To sing someone’s song < to sing someone’s praises

“As soon as they were employed and given big posts, they *sang the song of the very government* they castigated” (FID, p. 29) (“praises” is replaced with “song”)

(75) To leave somebody to himself < to leave somebody alone

“After everybody else had gone away that evening Nchinda had told the girl *to leave him to himself*” (COT, p. 64) (“alone” is replaced with the reflexive pronoun “himself”)

(76) To put one’s shoulder to the plough < to put one’s shoulder to the wheel or to put one’s hand to the plough

“Every body should *put his shoulder to the plough* and let us build this nation” (COT, p. 85) (“wheel” is replaced with “plough”)

42 Idiomatic Expressions Obtained either via the Addition or Deletion of Lexes in SBrE Expressions

This sub-section dwells on the expressions obtained by adding or deleting lexes or inflectional morphemes in SBrE expressions. As in the preceding sub-section, the modified expressions are first provided followed by the corresponding SBrE expressions. Then, the contexts in which the expressions are used in the literary text are provided followed by some explanations about the expressions.

(77) To be on night < to be on night call or to be on duty

“I was only coming to know the date and time for your welcome party because I will *be on night* the whole of next week” (SIH, p.85) (the verb “call” is deleted in the expression “to be on night call”).

(78) To make a big name for oneself < to make a name for oneself

“He suggested to me that I could **make a big name for myself**” (NWTD, p.47) (“big” is inserted in the SBrE expression “to make a name for oneself”)

(79) To take the law in one’s own wicket hand < to take the law into one’s own hand i.e. to defy the law

“On the seventh of May you **took the law** of this Republic **into your wicket hand** and killed the duly appointed Distric Officer” (ALOTD, p. 39) (“wicket” is inserted in the SBrE expression “to take the law into one’s own hand”)

(80) To poke one’s noxious nose into something < to poke one’s nose into something, i.e. to pry into or interfere in something

“Rubbish!” roared Nyusham. “If you weren’t mad, why you would **poke your noxious nose into my private life.**” (Nyusham, p. 133) (“noxious” is inserted into the SBrE expression “to poke one’s nose into something”)

(81) Where there is a will, there is always a way < where there is a will, there is a way

“**Where there is a will there is always a way.** Give yourself that will-power.” (COT, p. 182) (the adverb “always” is inserted in the SBrE proverb “there is a will there is a way”)

43 Idiomatic Expressions Obtained Either Both via the Substitution and Addition or through the Substitution, Addition and Deletion of Some Lexes in SBRE Expressions

The expressions found in this sub-category are obtained either by substituting and adding lexes or morphemes in SBrE expressions or by substituting, adding and deleting lexes in the existing native English expressions. In the analysis below, the modified expressions are first provided followed by the BrE expressions from which the modified expressions have been obtained. Then, the contexts in which the expressions are used in the literary texts are presented followed by some explanations about the expressions.

(82) To shout over somebody’s head < to shout at somebody

“I hate to see people **shouting over my head**” (NWTD, p. 46) (modification of BrE idiomatic expression via substitution (“at” is replaced with “over”) and addition (“head” is inserted into the expression)

(83) To put one’s feet into hot waters < to be in hot water or to get into hot water

“Although we want that throne very badly, I want to think about what we are going to do before we start. We should not **put our feet into hot water**” (Chopchair, p.55) (modification via substitution (“to be” or “to get” is (are) replaced with “to put”) and addition (“one’s feet”) is added to the SBrE expression)

(84) To be at somebody’s very nose < to be (right) under somebody’s nose

“[...] **I’m at his very nose** here in Mbambe. We know all that is going on here” (SNS, p.148) (modification via substitution (“under” is replaced with “at”) and addition (“very”) is added to the SBrE expression)

(85) To have a good name < to make a name, i.e. to become famous

“I’ve always been truthful to the profession, which is perhaps why

I *have a good name* not only in the village, but also in the city where I’ve never been, and might never be” (ANFM, p. 82) (*The expression “to have a good name” is modified both via substitution (“make” is replaced with “have”) and addition (“good” is inserted into the SBrE expression)*)

(86) To have one’s feet in water < to be in hot water, to be in trouble, in a difficult situation (modification via substitution)

“But we do not understand how the judgement of His highness, with *his feet still in water*, can be more right than that of those whose knowledge of ways of our people has never been in doubt” (COT, p.121) (*“to be” is replaced with “to have”*); *addition (“one’s feet” is inserted into the SBrE expression) and deletion (“hot” is deleted in the resulting expression)*

Table 2. Processes underlying the modification of SBrE expressions

Nº	Modified expressions	Donour expressions	Lexes/morphemes affected	Processes involved
1	To bite the <i>finger</i> that fed somebody	to bite the <i>hand</i> that fed somebody	finger < hand	substitution
2	Without <i>mixing</i> words	without <i>mincing</i> words	mincing < mixing	substitution
3	To put a <i>full stop</i> to something	to put an <i>end</i> to /a <i>stop</i> to something	full stop < end/stop	substitution
4	To put a <i>final full stop</i> to something	to put an <i>end</i> to /a <i>stop</i> to something	final full stop < end/stop	substitution
5	To fall cats and <i>hens</i>	to rain cats and <i>dogs</i>	hens < dogs	substitution
6	To cut one’s <i>goat</i> according to one’s size	to cut one’s <i>coat</i> according to one’s size	goat < coat	substitution
7	As sure as <i>morning follows night</i>	as sure as <i>hell</i> / as sure as <i>eggs is eggs</i>	morning follows night < hell / egg is eggs	substitution
8	As you make <i>ya</i> bed, so shall you <i>die</i> on it	as you make your bed, so shall you <i>lie</i> on it	ya < your / die < lie	substitution
9	to sing someone’s <i>song</i>	to sing someone’s <i>praises</i>	song < praises	substitution
10	to leave somebody <i>to himself</i>	to leave somebody <i>alone</i>	himself < alone	substitution
11	To put one’s shoulder to the <i>plough</i>	to put one’s shoulder to the <i>wheel</i> or to put one’s hand to the plough	either shoulder < hand or plough < wheel	substitution
12	To be on night	to be on night <i>call</i>	“call” is deleted in the modified expression	deletion

13	To make a <i>big</i> name for oneself	to make a name for oneself	“big” is inserted in the modified expression	addition
14	To take the law in one’s own <i>wicket</i> hand	to take the law into one’s own hand	“wicket” is inserted in the modified expression	addition
15	To poke one’s <i>noxious</i> nose into something	to poke one’s nose into something	“noxious” is inserted in the modified expression	addition
16	Where there is a will, there is <i>always</i> a way	where there is a will, there is a way	“always” is inserted in the modified English proverb	addition
17	To shout <i>over</i> somebody’s <i>head</i>	to shout <i>at</i> somebody	“at” is replaced with “over” and “head” is inserted in the modified expression	substitution, addition
18	<i>To put one’s feet into</i> hot water	to <i>be</i> in hot water or to get into hot water	“to be” or “to get” is (are) replaced with “to put” and “one’s feet” is inserted in the modified expression	substitution, addition
19	To <i>have</i> one’s feet in water	to <i>be</i> in <i>hot</i> water	“to be” is replaced with “to have”; “one’s feet” is inserted into the modified expression and “hot” is deleted in the resulting expression	substitution, addition, deletion
20	To <i>have</i> a good name	to <i>make</i> a name	“make” is replaced with “have” and “good” is inserted in the expression	substitution, addition
21	To be <i>at</i> somebody’s <i>very</i> nose	to be (right) <i>under</i> somebody’s nose	“under” is replaced with “at” and “very” is inserted in the modified expression	substitution, addition

A close observation of some of these expressions indicates that there is a marked tendency for non-native users of English to reshape the native English expressions so that they can really suit the users’ intentions and contexts of situations. For instance, in the modified expressions “to poke one’s *noxious* nose into something < to poke one’s nose into something, to take the law in one’s own *wicket* hand < to take the law into one’s own hand, to be *at* somebody’s *very* nose < to be (right) *under* somebody’s nose, where there is a will, there is *always* a way < where there is a will, there is a way”, one can observe the use of adjectives and adverbials (e.g. “noxious”, “wicket”, “very”, “always”) in order to lay emphasis on some expressions elements so that the expressions really have the user’s desired effect on their interlocutors.

It is also be postulated that the slight modifications of SBrE idiomatic expressions in non-native circles can be attributed to the insufficient exposure of non-natives to “exonormative models” (Kachru, 1986:21). The study carried out by Ishaq Akbarian (2003: 49) on the problems that Iranian learners of English as a foreign language face in the learning of English idioms is instructive in this respect. The researcher has grouped the problems faced

by Iranian learners of English as a foreign language in the use of native English idioms under semantics, structural features (word order, syntactic, grammatical errors) and lexical errors (omission, addition and substitution of lexemes) (Ishaq Akbarian (2003: 55-56). Besides, drawing from the works of Irujo (1986b), Henzl (1973) and Kellerman (1977), Ishaq Akbarian (2003: 52-53) provides the following reasons which account for the difficulties of learners of English as a second and foreign in their use of British idiomatic expressions: the unpredictability of the figurative meaning of idioms, learners' exposure to idioms generally seems to happen in non-interactive situations in which there is no opportunity for negotiation of meaning. Besides, in non-native contexts, native speakers tend to use simple, concrete everyday vocabulary when they talk to second language learners. Also, due to the variance in formality, colloquialisms, situational appropriateness, it is still difficult for the learners to learn to use some English idioms correctly even when they do master them. The researcher also observes that idioms are not well taught in non-native context: many second and foreign language teaching materials ignore idioms entirely. Furthermore, exercises or other aids to learning idioms are not provided and more often, designed materials for the teaching of idioms provide inadequate exercises. Cameroonians, like other learners of English as a second and foreign language, face many difficulties in using Standard British English idioms. That is why these non-native users of English have an approximate knowledge of SBrE idiomatic expressions. On a long run, they internalise and integrate these modified expressions in their verbal repertoires and end up considering them as the norm.

4. Conclusion

From the study of idiomatic formation in Cameroonian literature of English expression, it can be stated that the novel idiomatic expressions used by these writers of "the outer circle" can be grouped into three major categories viz: the expressions obtained via the translation of home and Popular French language expressions; those which are locally coined; and finally, the idioms obtained via the modification of SBrE expressions. Besides, it can be pointed out that the reasons behind this phenomenon can be linked to the relexification of Cameroonian home languages, the "need-filling motive" (Hockett, 1958:405) (many of the above expressions denote realities which are proper to the African cultural context in general and to the Cameroonian one in particular), the insufficient exposure of Cameroonians to "exonormative models" (Kachru, 1986:21). Also, it is worth noting that many of these expressions can be the source of much unintelligibility to many readers who are not familiar with the realities of the Cameroonian socio-cultural context, especially locally coined expressions and those obtained from the translation of home language expressions. In order to foster the description of various aspects of New Englishes, such analyses should be intensified in the works of other non-native writers of English expression in a bid to find out not only whether the processes at work in the formation of these novel expressions are identical but also whether these novel expressions used by Cameroonian writers are also present in the works of other non-native writers of English expression.

Notes

Note 1. The expression "contact literature" is used by Kachru (1986:160) to refer to "the

literatures in English written by the users of English as a second language to delineate contexts which generally do not form part of what may be labeled the traditions of English literatures (African, Malaysian, and Indian and so on”.

Note 2. The Ngie language is a Bantu language spoken in the Northwest region of Cameroon.

Note 3. The Nweh language is a Bantu language spoken in the Southwest region of Cameroon.

Note 4. Lamnso’ is a Bantu language spoken in the Northwest region of Cameroon

Note 5. Ghomala’ is a Bantu language spoken in the West region of Cameroon

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