

Perceived Similarity as the Source of the Feeling of Intergroup Threat: Testing the Brown's (1984) Hypothesis in the Cameroonian Linguistic Context

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ABSTRACT

In Cameroon, a country which has undergone a double French/British administration (1916-1961), the cohabitation between Francophones and Anglophones since 1961 is far from having erased the intergroup differences linked to their respective colonial pasts. On the contrary, over time, it has generated what has been called the Anglophone problem. In this context, is the strong tendency towards the schooling of students from francophone families in schools of the anglophone sub-system of education likely to attenuate intergroups cleavages? From the theoretical perspective of social identity, this research suggests that the perceived similarity between Anglophones and anglophonized francophones generates a threat to the specific Anglophones' linguistic identity. To test this hypothesis, the optimal distinctiveness ($\alpha = .749$) and intergroup threat ($\alpha = .835$) scales were administered to 462 Anglophones participants of both sexes. The correlation and linear regression analyzes provide empirical support for the hypothesis of the study ($r = .704$; $p < .001$; $r^2 = .495$; $f(1, 162) = 135.914$; $p < .001$). An adjusted R2 index (adjusted $r^2 = .493$) validates the existence of a causal relationship between perceived similarity and intergroup threat.

1. Introduction

Social cleavages are the avatars of the cohabitation of groups of different origins in a specific space. This cohabitation can even, in some cases, lead to intergroup conflicts based on ethnic markers. These are, among others, age, race, gender, religion, and language, to which this research is devoted. Language is considered as an identity marker because it is a criterion for the inclusion and exclusion of individuals in social groups. In this vein, it constitutes a criterion of social categorization which participates in the definition of individuals' group identity (Dragojevic et al., 2017). As such, it can have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of a group, as revealed in the literature, which reports that cohabitation between several linguistic groups is likely to lead to social instability and the establishment of a hierarchy, because it involves intergroup rivalry in the distribution of material and symbolic resources (Messanga, 2018b).

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Intergroup conflicts based on linguistic identity are specific to multilingual countries such as Belgium, the United States of America, Canada or Cameroon. In Cameroon, the crisis underway since October 2016 in the anglophone regions is the result of the linguistic system's degeneration, long considered by the anglophone minority as oppressive and assimilationist (International Crisis Group, 2017). This system is the consequence of the dual French and English administration experienced by Cameroon before gaining international sovereignty at the early 1960s. The administrators bequeathed their language to the local populations which, after independence, became a marker from which they define themselves, that is to say a component of their identity (Konings, 1996). Anglophone minority accuse Francophones of threat, exploitation and domination; hence the fact that they consider themselves a captive people, colonized by their French-speaking compatriots, accused among others of not taking into account their cultural and linguistic specificities. According to them, Francophones have implemented a subtle and systematic policy of Francophonization of Anglophones, which proceeds by obliterating all reference to anglophony and erasing all the institutional foundations of the anglophone identity (Fonchingong, 2013). Added to this is the unequal distribution of social capital in the areas of residence of the two linguistic communities, hence the construction of a minority, subjugated, marginal and assimilated anglophony (Nguelieutou Tch, 2004; Nkoum-Me-Ntseny, 1996, 1999; Tchinda Kenfo, 2017). Clearly, in Cameroon, Anglophones see themselves not only as a "marginalized", "exploited" and "assimilated" group in a state dominated by Francophones, but also as an oppressed minority whose territory has been annexed (Konings, 1996). This is why they feel a threat to their group identity, like many linguistic minorities who generally suffer linguistic assimilation, discrimination based on language and non-recognition of the language specificity of the group (Messanga, 2018b; Wright & Bougie, 2007).

In the perspective of Wagner's work (2010), we can suggest that in Cameroon, the francophone majority has a depersonalized vision of the anglophone outgroup, hence the fact that it wants to assimilate it, according to the principle of intercultural domination resulting from intergroup asymmetry in which the dominant group imposes his culture on the dominated group (Hewstone et al., 2002). Indeed,

[over assimilation process] is evidenced by the imposition of French language on Anglophones by the use of the monopolistic public broadcast media where seven-eight of broadcast time is reserved for French language programs ; using official texts and documents including inscriptions on the national currency only in French ; ensuring that where both languages are used on the same document the words in French are bold and those in English too fine to be legible ; compelling all cinema theatres in the Anglophone region to screen only French language films (AACI, 1993) ; and imposing Francophone administrative system and appointed governor to the anglophone Northwest province was a Francophone who spoke no English and the current governors of the two Anglophone regions are Francophones. (Fonchingong, 2013: 226)

Over time, the Anglophones' feeling of marginalization due to the non-consideration of their specificities by the governing authorities has generated what the literature calls the Anglophone problem (Messanga, 2018a).

1.1. The Education of Students from Francophone Families in the Anglophone Sub-System of Education: A Solution to the Anglophone Problem?

When two communities live together, the greater their demographic difference, the higher the percentage of bilingual individuals in the minority community (Mackey, 1979 cited by Nguelieutou Tch, 2004). But in Cameroon, it is more the members of the francophone majority who are schooling in the anglophone minority's sub-system of education. Indeed, the Cameroonian system of education is the reflection of the influences that this country has

known. It has two sub-systems, the existence of which is explained by the “national option of biculturalism” (Article 15 of the Law No. 98/004 of April 14, 1998 on the orientation of education). They coexist while each retaining its specificity in the areas of assessment and certification. In principle, pupils attend schools in the sub-system corresponding to the language spoken in the family. But in reality, we observe an increasingly notable attendance of schools of the anglophone sub-system of education by pupils from French-speaking families (Echu, 2005). Indeed, as Sala (2014: 13-14) notes:

one peculiar vigorously reported changing trait in Cameroon's bilingualism today is the tendency for francophones to flood English-medium schools and universities. Consideration of the enrollment in anglophone schools in Cameroon shows an increasing number of francophone students pursuing the English medium educational system in Cameroon. This phenomenon has been reported in Simo Bobda (2001), Anchimbe (2005), Echu (2005), Mforteh (2008), Ngefac (2010) and Fonyuy (2010). English departments in Cameroonian state universities noticeably enough have an increasing number of names from francophone regions. Echu (2005: 654) notes that the number of francophone children who attend anglophone primary schools far outweighs the number of anglophone children who attend francophone primary schools.

From a certain point of view, the schooling of students from francophone families in the anglophone sub-system of education can be considered as a possible solution to the integration of the two linguistic communities (Messanga, 2018b). Indeed, bilingual schools present themselves as places of meeting, pooling, sharing of values and intermingling between their members. Hypothetically, since they increase the possibilities for inter-community meetings and mingling, they could maximize sympathetic or cordial relations between groups (Hallinan & Smith, 1985). But, is it actually the case?

Ideally, we can consider that students from francophone families, but who are educated in schools of the anglophone sub-system of education, are the bridge between the two linguistic communities. These anglophonized Francophones should be seen as people who have achieved the highest level of contact with the outgroup: assimilation of its values through school (Messanga, 2018b). They should therefore be treated positively by members of the anglophone outgroup. But it is not the case. Indeed, Fonchingong (2013: 232) denies them the quality of member of the anglophone community because of their geographical and therefore cultural origins. For him, schooling in the anglophone sub-system of education or in regions located in the british zone of influence is not enough to categorize a Cameroonian citizen as an anglophone. He specifically states that:

Many Francophone parents are currently sending their children to be educated in Anglophone schools. Although this may be induced by the desire to benefit from the pre-eminence of the English language in the world, it also tends to weaken the English language or even Anglophone education as a marker of Anglophone identity because as mentioned above, one does not become an Anglophone simply by acquiring Anglophone education.

These remarks reveal the idea that the Anglophone group specificity is threatened by the enrollment of Francophones in schools of the anglophone sub-system of education, since it extends the boundaries of anglophony into the Francophone regions of the country. Indeed, as reported by the study conducted by Messanga (2018b), Anglophones feel threatened, on the realistic and symbolic dimensions, by the anglophonized Francophones. Linguistically, this observation is paradoxical. Indeed, for the traditional anglophone linguistic community, originating in the regions located in the former British Cameroon, the increase in the number of english speakers should be good news, because it would mean, for example, that they will find more civil servants who understand and speak the english language in the years to come.

However, the data collected by this author indicates that this is not the case. On the contrary, this societal development poses a problem for them. In fact, 73% of them do not consider these students as Anglophones; 58% believe they are spies infiltrated by Francophones into the anglophone community to destroy it from within; and 63% believe that it would be good to prevent them from pursuing their school and academic career in the anglophone sub-system of education. This is why 64% of them approve of discriminatory attitudes and behavior towards these students. These research results seem to contradict the postulates of the theory of intergroup contact, which defends the idea that sometimes it is enough to assemble individuals, without taking into account their race, religion or nationality, to destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes (Allport, 1954; Olaizola et al., 2014). They can however be brought together with Brown's (1984) propositions relating to the threat represented by intergroup similarity.

1.2. Brown's (1984) Hypothesis: Perceived Similarity as a Source of the Feeling of Intergroup Threat

Intergroup contact is seen as a strategy for improving intergroup relations through the reduction of stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination (Medeiros, 2014; Messanga, 2018b; Messanga & Dzuetsou Mouafo, 2014). It acts on the cognitive (learning about the outgroup), affective (creating emotional and friendship bonds, arousing empathy and reducing anxiety and threat) and behavioral dimensions (opening up to potential positive experiences of contact) (Tausch & Hewstone, 2010). Thus, it reduces intergroup differences by increasing similarities.

Contrary to the intergroup contact hypothesis, Brown (1984) suggests that the perceived similarity between ingroup and outgroup can be threatening. According to him, similarity increases the dimensions of comparability and makes it more difficult to differentiate between groups and to protect or enhance particular social identity. He argues that in intergroup contact, the need for distinction implies differentiation from the outgroup, but not necessarily negativity towards its members. In his refinement of social identity theory, he postulates that perceived similarity is likely to generate hostility against the outgroup in certain situations. Indeed, in situations of competition, it threatens ingroup's singularity, implies the great probability that this one loses its superiority in intergroup comparison and generates hostility. In contrast, in the absence of any competition between groups, similarity induces positive attitudes and behaviors towards members of the outgroup (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). This means that intergroup competition could play a moderating role in the link between perceived intergroup similarity and the feeling of intergroup threat. These propositions can be linked to the postulates of the theory of optimal distinctiveness.

The concept of distinctiveness refers to the possibility of seeing oneself as different from others. In this vein, the theory of optimal distinctiveness postulates that individuals seek to satisfy two a priori opposing needs. The first is the need for assimilation, belonging or inclusion. It manifests itself in the individual's desire to be a member of a group. The second is the need for differentiation or distinctiveness. It opposes the need for assimilation and is characterized by the individual's desire to be different from another individual or group. According to Brewer's (1991) model, when somebody joins a group, the need for assimilation is satisfied, but the need for differentiation remains activated. On the other hand, when he is not a member of a group, the need for differentiation decreases and the need for assimilation is activated. In any given social context, the balance between these two needs is the motive that determines the selection and strength of a distinct social identity. This means that a positive social identity is achieved when the needs for intracategorical assimilation and, simultaneously, the needs for inter-category differentiation are met.

According to the model of optimal distinctiveness, two factors structure social relations. On the one hand, individuals organize the understanding of the social environment on the basis of categorial distinctions that transform continuous variables into discrete classes. Thus, categorization has the effect of minimizing intracategory differences and accentuating intercategory differences (Tajfel, 1969). On the other hand, since individuals are members of a particular social category, social categorization imposes implicit distinctions between ingroup and outgroup (us/them). Because of the self-interest of social categories, the ingroup/outgroup classification allows for a distinction of overlapping categories with affective and emotional meaning. These two premises provide a framework for the conceptualization of any social situation in which the ingroup/outgroup categorization is made salient. Indeed, the theory of optimal distinctiveness postulates a basic scheme for intergroup relations with the following characteristics: a) intracategorical assimilation and intercategory contrast are performed so that all members of a group perceive themselves to be more close to each other and different from the members of the outgroup (principle of accentuating intergroup biases); b) positive affects (trust, love) are generally shared selectively among ingroup members rather than with outgroup members (principle of pro-ingroup favoritism); c) intergroup comparisons are associated with a negative perception of the interdependence between ingroup and outgroup (principle of social competition).

When members of a group are in prolonged competition with an outgroup, they are more likely to develop a desire to feel distinct from the members of that group and to avoid threats that would undermine their identity, by not perceiving the similarities between them and the others. Struch and Schwartz (1989) then put forward the idea that this ability to avoid all similarity, and therefore all assimilation, would allow members of a group to maintain their sense of difference. Brought back to the Cameroonian linguistic context, these theoretical proposals suggest that the perceived similarity between people from anglophone regions and anglophonized Francophone constitutes a threat to the specific Anglophones' linguistic identity, which they persist in defining on the basis of territorial markers resulting from colonization and not according to linguistic criteria. The testing of this idea is the scientific project of this research.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

462 anglophones students of both sexes, from regions located in the former British Cameroon, participated in this study. They are enrolled in various faculties of the University of Dschang (Cameroon). They are between 20 and 32 years old ($M = 23.81$; $SD = 6.63$). They all agreed to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

2.2. Material and Procedure

Due to the fact that there is no standardized scale to assess optimal distinctiveness and intergroup threat, this study adapts the scales of Pickett et al. (2002) and Stephan and Stephan (1999) (see Table 1 for reliability indices). The first, made up of 10 items, measures two constructs. The first 5 items assess the need for differentiation. For example, item 5 states: "Francophones don't understand the way Anglophones view the world." The other 5 assess the perceived similarity. For example, item 4 states: "Francophones should not try to impose their values on Anglophones." The second is made up of 24 items. The first 12 measure the realistic threat. For example, item 1 states that: "Francophones hold too many positions of power and responsibility in this country." The last 12 items assess the symbolic threat. For example, item 24 proposes that: "Anglophones do not get as much respect from Francophones as they deserve." The task of the participants is to give their opinion on each of

the statements on a five (5) points Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The number of points participants obtain determines their needs for assimilation and differentiation, as well as their perceived threat level. The higher their scores in a dimension, the stronger the need or the type of threat assessed by that dimension.

3. Results

The results of the present study include the reliability indices of the administered global scales and their dimensions, as well as the correlations and linear regression applied. These respectively assess the degree of the link between the variables and the causal relationship between them.

Table 1.

Descriptive, inferential statistics and reliability index of the optimal distinctiveness and intergroup threat scales relating to linguistic intergroup relations in Cameroon

	M. [SD]	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Realistic threat	41,260[7,406]	(.769)					
2. Symbolic threat	44,940[7,103]	.612**	(.723)				
3. Intergroup threat	131,04[19,32]	.821**	.954**	(.835)			
4. Need for differentiation	18,880[3,687]	.793**	.514**	.686**	(.699)		
5. Perceived similarity	18,284[3,240]	.600**	.673**	.704**	.538**	(.701)	
6. Optimal distinctiveness	34,940[5,163]	.698**	.630**	.724**	.738**	.744**	(.749)

** .001 (two-tailed): Significant correlation. Data in parentheses are Cronbach's Alphas. Data in italics are correlation coefficients.

Table 1 reveals that the global scales have good internal consistency indices (optimal distinctiveness scale: $\alpha = .749$; intergroup threat scale: $\alpha = .835$). These indices are greater than the indices of their respective dimensions. These are the dimensions relating to the assimilation ($\alpha = .701$) and differentiation ($\alpha = .699$) needs for the optimal distinctiveness scale; and realistic ($\alpha = .769$) and symbolic ($\alpha = .723$) threats for the intergroup threat scale. Five of these internal consistency indices are above the threshold of .70, and therefore attest to the reliability of the psychometric methods administered in this study (Nunnally, 1978). Descriptive statistics reveal that participants have almost similar tendencies for the purposes of differentiation (M = 18.880; SD = 3.687) and perceived similarity (M = 18.284; SD = 3.240). They also tend to feel symbolic (M = 44.940; SD = 7.103) and realistic (M = 41.260; SD = 7.406) threats. In general, there is a prevalence of optimal distinctiveness (M = 34.940; SD = 5.163), considered in this study as a source of the feeling of intergroup threat (M = 131.04; SD = 5.163). T. = 19.32).

The correlation test reveals positive associations between the variables of the study, with average, strong and significant correlation indices. Thus, intergroup threat is positively correlated with perceived similarity ($r = .704$; $p < .001$). It means that in 70.4% of cases, the linguistic intergroup threat felt by Anglophones is linked to the Anglophones-Francophones intergroup similarity. The empirical explanation for this link is related to a strong desire for differentiation among the participants. This results in a double link established between the need for differentiation and perceived similarity ($r = .538$; $p < .001$), and between the need for differentiation and the feeling of intergroup threat ($r = .686$; $p < .001$). It means that in 53.8% of cases, the desire for differentiation is linked to the perceived linguistic intergroup similarity and that in 68.6% of cases, it explains the feeling of intergroup threat.

Table 2.

Regression matrix testing the effects of perceived similarity on the feeling of intergroup threat

Model	Sum of squares	ddl	Mean square	f	Sig.	r ²	r	r square	Adjusted r square
Regression	25751,765	1	25751,765	135,914	,000	.495	,704	,496	,493
1 Residual	26147,056	138	189,471						
Total	51898,821	139							

The linear regression matrix presented in Table 2 not only verifies the strength of the link between perceived similarity and intergroup threat, but also evaluates the effects of the first on the second. It validates the correlation index ($r = .704$; $p < .001$) observed between these variables (see Table 1). An adjusted R² index (adjusted $r^2 = .493$) validates the existence of a causal relationship between perceived similarity and intergroup threat. After analysis, we observe a significant interaction between perceived similarity and intergroup threat ($r^2 = .495$; $f(1, 162) = 135.914$; $p < .001$). We conclude that the feeling of intergroup threat observed among the participants stems from the similarity between them and certain members of the Francophone outgroup. These results provide empirical support for the hypothesis of the study.

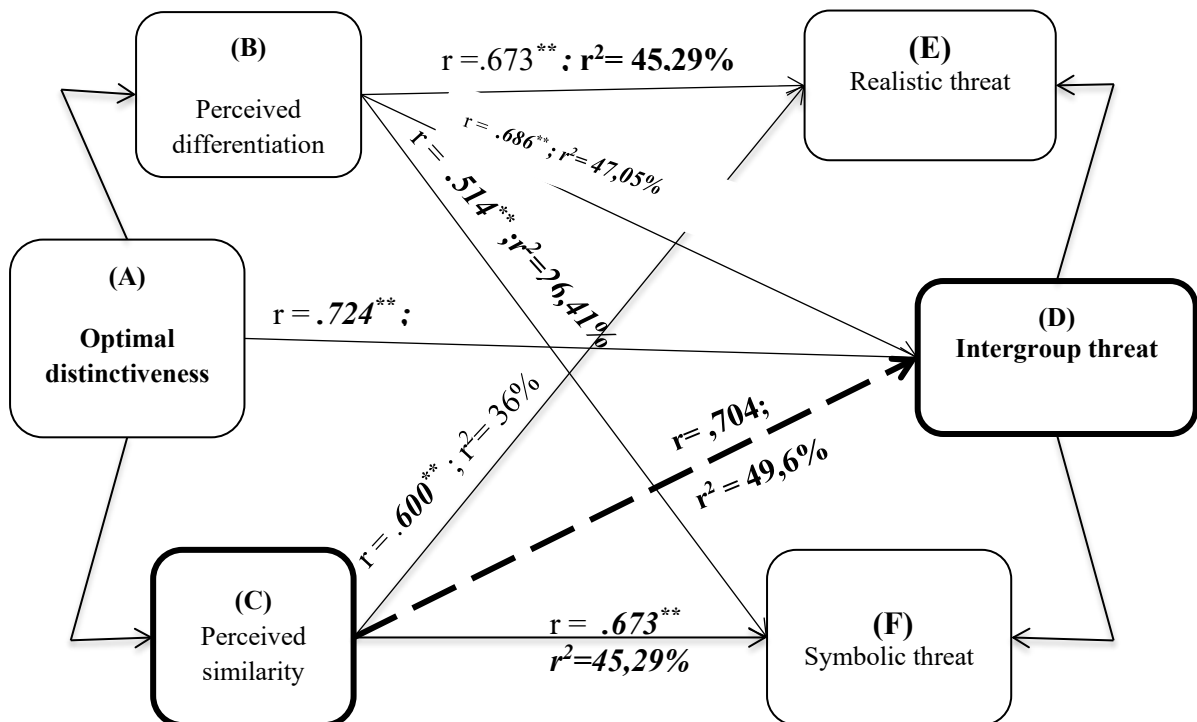


Figure 1. The integrative model of the study

Figure 1 present the integrative model of the study. It accounts, in a symmetrical causal relationship, for the predictive power of optimal distinctiveness and the feeling of intergroup threat. Specifically, it puts into perspective the symmetrical relationship between perceived similarity and feeling of intergroup threat as postulated by Brown (1984). In addition to this author's prediction, this model formulates and validates several hypotheses. Indeed, it supports the theses according to which: 1) the perceived similarity between ingroup and outgroup is a predictor of identity threat at 45.29% and of realistic threat at 36%, because it calls into question the group distinctiveness, therefore its uniqueness; 2) the desire for intergroup differentiation explains 47.05% of the existence of the feeling of intergroup threat among participants; 3) the desire for intergroup differentiation specifically explains feelings

of identity threat at 26.41% and realistic threat at 45.29%; and 4) symmetrically, the desire for optimal distinctiveness predicts the feeling of intergroup threat at 47.05%.

4. Discussion

This study tested the hypothesis that: the perceived similarity between Anglophones originating from the former British Cameroon and anglophonized Francophones constitutes a threat to the specific linguistic identity of Anglophones, which they persist in defining according to territorial markers resulting from colonization and not according to linguistic criteria. The observations made provide empirical support for this prediction. They indicate that the anglophonization of Francophones tends to deprive Anglophones of their group specificity, hence the feeling of threat to group's identity that they feel. They therefore provide empirical support to Brown's (1984) hypothesis which proposes that perceived similarity is likely to generate hostility against outgroup in competitive situations, because it threatens ingroup's singularity and implies a high probability that this one loses its superiority in intergroup comparison.

The results of this study contrast Allport's (1954) and Brown's (1984) theses. In fact, the first proposes that intergroup contact promotes the discovery of similarities and leads to an affectionate relationship, hence the similarity-affection hypothesis. The second, on the other hand, supports the thesis that perceived similarity is a source of intergroup tensions, because it calls into question group specificity, which constitutes one of the bases of group identity. These results agree with those which indicate that linguistic intergroup contact between Anglophones and Francophones is not a factor in mitigating hostile intergroup cognitions and behaviors (stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination), but a source of intergroup tension (Messanga, 2018b). An explanation for this observation can be found in the optimal distinctiveness theory.

Optimal distinctiveness theory defends the thesis of individuals seeking an optimal balance between desires for distinctiveness and assimilation (Brewer, 1991; 2003). It postulates that the desire for greater intragroup assimilation and, simultaneously, greater intergroup differentiation, leads to changes in the perception of group homogeneity (Pickett & Brewer, 2001). Improving ingroup and outgroup homogeneity increases intergroup contrast; this is particularly important when the distinctiveness of a social identity is threatened. As a result, increasing the ingroup and outgroup's homogeneity helps to satisfy the need for assimilation. The perception that "we are all alike" can help to restore a secure inclusion within the group for an individual whose need for assimilation has been aroused. Likewise, perceiving the outgroup as homogeneous increases intergroup contrast, which in turn reinforces intragroup assimilation and intergroup differentiation.

The data collected in this research indicates that the feeling of intergroup threat felt by the Anglophones stems from the failure to achieve a balance between the needs for distinctiveness and assimilation. The reason is that their need for distinctiveness or intergroup differentiation is challenged by the linguistic heterogeneity of the members of the francophone's outgroup, some of whom are anglophonized francophones. Therefore, to preserve their specific group distinctiveness, they resort to hostile intergroup cognitions and behaviors. In fact, by relying on territorial and non-linguistic categorization criteria to determine the linguistic group to which anglophonized francophones belong, they exclude them from the anglophone community; thus, making both the said community and its francophone counterpart more homogeneous. However, as noted above, increasing ingroup and outgroup homogeneity increases intergroup contrast. This is particularly the case in situations where a social identity's distinctiveness is threatened, such as among Anglophones, as anglophonized Francophones blur linguistic intergroup boundaries. In this vein, Messanga (2018b) supports the idea that, by stretching anglophony's borders into the historically

francophone regions of Cameroon, students from francophone families, who are educated in the anglophone sub-system of education, are removing the linguistic and cultural specificities on which Anglophones from regions located in the former British Cameroon rely in their interactions with public authorities. This situation is so threatening for them as in Cameroon, there is sometimes debate on the criteria for the inclusion in the anglophone community. Indeed, these concerns are raised by Sala (2014), who asserts that one cannot have viable statistics on the number of Anglophones based on the demographic situation of the two regions of the former British Cameroon. This author believes that only a census could collect these data, if however, we determine who is an anglophone in this country. And this is where the controversy lies.

5. Conclusion

The crisis that the regions of the former British Cameroon have been experiencing since october 2016 is a proof of the fact that after sixty years of independence, the linguistic and cultural cleavages inherited from the dual French/British administrations are far from having been overcome. Indeed, the anglophone community, which represents one-fifth of the country's total population, considers itself marginalized, discredited and assimilated by a governing system piloted by members of the francophone community since 1961, the year of unification. In this context, some might consider the increasingly observable schooling of students from francophone families in the anglophone sub-system of education as a solution to the integration of the two linguistic communities. But, in fact, is it really the case? This research suggests and validates the hypothesis that, paradoxically, this notable societal phenomenon constitutes a threat for Anglophones. This hypothesis and the subsequent observations are based on Brown's (1984) proposition, which defends the thesis that in competitive situations, perceived intergroup similarity threatens ingroup's singularity, implies the great probability that this group loses its position of superiority in intergroup comparison, and generates hostility. In this context, it is logical that the anglophonization of Francophones should be seen as a threat by Anglophones, due to the fact that it calls into question their group specificity: expression in the english language, in a country where the four-fifth of the population are considered as Francophones.

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