**Multimodal metaphors, political activism and Anglophone nationalism in Cameroon**

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This paper is part of a broader study of how separatist leaders from the English-speaking part of Cameroon resort to discourse in order to push for their main political goal, which is the formation of a separate state. These last few years, Cameroon politics has been characterized by an increase in secessionist sentiment amongst English-speaking citizens, thus yielding the so-called Anglophone crisis which has now turned into a full-blown conflict between armed separatists and the country's military. The study presented here deals specifically with the use of multimodal metaphors to depict the plight of Anglophone Cameroonians and also engage them in the struggle for self-determination. Therefore, cartoons published on separatist social media pages were analyzed following approaches pertaining to cognitive linguistics and social semiotics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Van Leeuwen, 2005). This research has revealed that the cartoonist(s) resort(s) to various types of metaphor, including the journey metaphor, animal metaphors and personification.

**Keywords:** Multimodal Metaphor, Discourse, Anglophone nationalism, Cameroon

**1. Introduction**

This paper analyzes the manifestations of Anglophone nationalism in Cameroon through the study of multimodal metaphor in political cartoons. It is based on the belief that illustrations in the form of cartoons, memes and other visuals are indeed powerful tools that can be used to push certain narratives and cause change in society. The use of non-verbal metaphor in persuasive discourse has been documented in a large number of scholarly publications which demonstrate that pictorial communication can contribute effectively to shaping minds, creating beliefs, ideologies and enjoining or pushing people to adopt certain behaviors (Ervas et al. 2021; McQuarrie & Phillips 2005; Se‐Hoon Jeong, 2008). Illustrations are therefore seen not only as mere depictions of reality, but also as ways to persuade audiences. In political discourse, these usually take the form of cartoons that may represent a specific ideology and stance by describing social actors, phenomena and events. Just like other pieces of discourse, cartoons can therefore be used not only to legitimize hegemonic discourses but also to resist them and create alternative narratives (Marín-Arrese, 2019). To achieve their persuasive goals, political cartoonists often resort to metaphor, which may be verbal (in speech bubbles or narratorial comments), pictorial or multimodal. This paper is therefore based on the awareness of the importance of cartoons in political discourse, and its aim is to study the use of visual and multimodal metaphor to depict the plight of Cameroon’s English-speaking minority and advocate their right to self-determination.

**2. Context**

Since Cameroon’s independence in the early 60s, national unity has been challenged by tensions between the country’s French-speaking and English-speaking communities. Cameroon was originally established as a German protectorate (*Kamerun[[1]](#footnote-1)*), which was eventually partitioned into two territories after Germany’s defeat in World War I. While most of *Kamerun* was handed over to France and administered as a constituent entity of French Equatorial Africa, the westernmost part of the former German protectorate was incorporated into the British colony of Nigeria and subdivided into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. France and Britain then went on to administer the territories until the early 60s. Unlike French Cameroun which became independent in 1960, British Cameroons was not considered viable enough to achieve full independence. Therefore, the territory was offered independence by joining either the Nigerian Federation or the Republic of Cameroon, and a plebiscite was held to that effect in 1961. British Southern Cameroons eventually opted to join the former French Cameroun while British Northern Cameroons decided to fully integrate into newly independent Nigeria.

Soon after the 1961 reunification of the former French Cameroun and British Southern Cameroons, English-speaking Cameroonians started complaining about the political, economic and sociocultural domination of their Francophone compatriots. Anglophone Cameroonians were only a tiny minority in the newly formed state, thus making them less influential in decision-making. Over the years, the difficulties faced by citizens from the former British Southern Cameroons when trying to navigate through the Francophone-dominated administration, and their alleged marginalization have contributed to the spread of nationalist sentiment amongst English-speaking Cameroonians, who consider relics of British imperialism such as the English Common Law and the so-called ‘Anglo-Saxon’ education system the bedrocks of their distinct identity (Echitchi, 2023). In 2016, Anglophone lawyers and teachers spearheaded strike actions aimed at protesting against Francophone influence in Anglophone legal jurisdictions and education system. The protests, which were initially peaceful, eventually turned into riots that affected most cities and towns in the English-speaking part of Cameroon. As a reaction to government crackdown (which many described as disproportionate) some Anglophone nationalists started advocating armed resistance, and the crisis then developed into the present-day conflict between armed separatists and the Cameroon military.

Regardless of whether it is expressed at supra- or sub-state levels, nationalism is now widely considered a social construct. This is exactly why nations can be created, redefined, or even challenged by the creation of other nations. As Anderson (2006) states, for a nation come to life, social actors must spread narratives about it, and this can be done by means of text, talk, and even images. The creation of nations is always underpinned by social antagonism whose actual realization can be armed conflicts, as witnessed in Cameroon. Indeed, separatist leaders in the country have been using discourse as a form of political action (Van Dijk, 1998) to create and foster antagonism between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians and thus present their struggle as both legitimate and legal. While previous studies have analyzed text and talk within the context of Anglophone nationalism (Anyefru, 2011; Echitchi, 2021, 2023; Ngouo 2020), it seems no study has targeted other ways of political expression such as political cartoons. The present study therefore seeks to provide readers with insights into how images can be used in the legitimization of sub-state nationalism through the analysis of multimodal metaphors. More specifically, this paper will focus on how visual and multimodal metaphors are used to legitimize the former British Southern Cameroons’ right to self-determination.

**3. Theoretical framework**

**3.1** Nation-building and cognition

Scholars have resorted to a wide range of criteria in their attempts to define the concept of “nation”. Those definitions have been described as essentialist (objective), non-essentialist (subjective) and a combination of both – also known as less-essentialist definitions (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019). Essentialist definitions of the nation, which emphasize tangible criteria such as linguistic, cultural and territorial unity, were found to have very little empirical backing since modern nation-states are not always based on internal homogeneity (Renan 1990). Purely essentialist definitions of the nation are now “highly unusual” in the literature (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019, p. 3) as most contemporary scholars understand nation-building to be a combination of objective and subjective considerations (Renan, 1990; Smith, 2007, 2010) or the result of purely subjective (non-essentialist) factors (Anderson, 2006). According to Anderson, nations are fully imagined communities, i.e., the product of people’s desire to overlook what separates them while emphasizing what brings them together with the ultimate goal of creating a nation.

From a non-essentialist perspective, the construction of nationalist sentiment cannot be fully achieved without media, which enable all stakeholders to spread myths, beliefs and ideologies aimed at creating a nation while challenging the existence of another one. Nations and discourse(s) therefore go together since the birth and consolidation of the nation are often grounded in sets of linguistic and non-linguistic social practices (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2015). Furthermore, discourses contribute to the creation of knowledge structures, which, as Foucault (1980) suggests, are very much connected to power. It is therefore not surprising that metaphors, which are knowledge structures themselves –or at least constitutive of such structures (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019), play a very important role in critical discourse analysis, whose aim is to analyze the extent to which power and ideologies are embedded in discourse. As Stanojević and Šarić (2019, p. 9) posit, “the vague concept of the nation reflected in dictionary conceptions may be conceptualized as a person, a body (politic), a family, and so on”.

The link between metaphor and national identity discourse has long been established in academic research. As a matter of fact, metaphors are used in the conceptualization, formation, consolidation and negotiation of national identity, values and borders. As opposed to non-constructivist theories that consider metaphor to be mainly a matter of language (Davidson, 1979; Searle, 1993), the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) sees metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This constructivist understanding of metaphor is similar to non-essentialist definitions of the nation, which relate nation-building – a concept which, as Kolstø (2000) observes, is a metaphor itself– to thought. If nations are imagined communities, therefore their construction is very much related to cognition (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019). Nationalist sentiment is certainly a feeling, and metaphor is a conceptual mechanism which is closely related to feelings (as they both originate in the brain). Therefore, the use of metaphor is pervasive in political discourse, whose main aim is to arouse emotions in people and make them act in certain ways (Vertessen & De Landtsheer, 2008).

**3.2** Conceptualizations of the nation

Given how abstract the term “nation” is, societies have often sought to make it more concrete and less theoretical by portraying nations as animals, people and other tangible objects.

From time immemorial, animal metaphors have been used to portray societies, politicians and their systems of governance. The constant association of certain animals with nations has led to conceptualizations of those nations in terms of the animals they are closely related to. For instance, Russia is often conceptualized as a bear (Platoff, 2012; Riabov & de Lazari, 2009) while kangaroos and kiwis allude metaphorically to Australia and New Zealand respectively (Platoff 2012). Some animal metaphors have even gained official acceptance, thus becoming national symbols, such as the Gallic Rooster in France and the Bald Eagle in the USA.

Along with animal metaphors, family and body metaphors, which fall within personification (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019: 20), have also been used to conceptualize the nation in various cultures around the world (Herzfeld, 1997; Watson, 2010). The interconnectedness between family metaphor and gender has led to research on the nation is a woman metaphor, which provides insights into human traits that people attribute to the nation and how those traits are related to our perception of gender roles (Ahrens, 2009; Einhorn, 2006; Mostov, 2000; Peterson, 2013). In addition to being conceptualized as a family (or parts of it), the nation may often be represented by means of metaphors representing the human body. Just like the nation is a family metaphor, this is a complex metaphor through which different characteristics of the body are attached to the nation. The use of body metaphors in national identity discourse may therefore be a very effective legitimization strategy aimed at making “conclusions about the target domain of the nation seem ‘natural’” (Stanojević & Šarić, 2019, p. 13). For instance, describing outsiders as microorganisms that are a threat to the system (nation) makes metaphor vivid and thus arouses strong feelings in the audience. This is observed by Musolff (2010) in his study of Nazi propaganda in which Jews were often described as parasites, a metaphor that is widespread in discourse targeting immigrants (Lawton, 2013). Finally, it is worth mentioning that even though conceptualizations of the nation by means of body metaphors are common around the world, there are differences (or at least nuances) in such conceptualizations when moving from one linguistic and/or cultural group to another (Musolff, 2021).

Furthermore, nations are often conceptualized by means of the journey metaphor, which often involves different types of vehicles such as cars, boats, or hot air balloons, with political leaders being portrayed as pilots, sailors, or drivers (Aremu, 2017; Zhang & Forceville, 2020). The state of the road or path in such conceptualizations of the nation can allude to how easy or difficult it is to reach the destination, which, in national identity discourse, could be political autonomy or economic prosperity (Forceville & Jeulink, 2011; Lipset & Handler, 2014; Zhang & Forceville, 2020).

The use of animal, family, body, and journey metaphors is therefore very common in discourse about nations, although interpretations are not always straightforward. Given that the link between visual conceptualizations of the nations may be fuzzy, cartoonists often resort to the flag-for-country metonymy to ease the interpretation of the aforementioned metaphorical representations (Zhang & Forceville, 2020). This strategy is certainly true of the cartoons that are studied in this paper, which, as a reminder, delves into visual conceptualizations of Cameroon with a view to finding out how these conceptualizations are used to legitimize Anglophone separatists’ struggle for self-determination.

**3.3** Multimodal metaphor analysis

As we mentioned earlier in this paper, most researchers agree that metaphor should be understood as a conceptual rather than a verbal phenomenon. This is surely what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) meant when stating that “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language” (p.153). This study will therefore be based on the understanding of metaphor as a cognitive mapping across two conceptual domains (Steen et al, 2010; Šorm & Steen, 2018).

Even though most studies in the field have targeted verbal metaphor, a sizeable number of researchers have tried to sort out ways to analyze visual and multimodal metaphors. To begin with, Kaplan (2005) came up with a procedure for the identification and analysis of pictorial metaphor in advertisement which includes noting the presence of the metaphor, naming its two terms and identifying properties that are transferred to the product. The last two steps are very similar to those in Forceville’s (1996; 2016) approach, which is based on the belief that metaphor identification and analysis should be guided by three main questions aimed at finding out what the terms or domains of the metaphor are, its primary and secondary subjects (also known as target and source domains, respectively), and the features of the secondary subject that are projected onto the primary subject. Forceville therefore divided his approach into three main steps, aimed at identifying 1) the two terms of the metaphor, 2) the primary subject (or target domain) and secondary subject (source domain) of the metaphor 3) the features of the secondary subject that must be projected upon the primary subject for the metaphor. As Šorm and Steen (2018) note, Forceville’s approach differs from Kaplan’s in that it does not really include a step aimed at formally identifying visual metaphors.

Overall, there has been much more scholarly interest in the study of visual and multimodal metaphors in advertising than in political discourse (Forceville, 1996). In addition, as Randour et al. (2020) noted, Western countries have been overrepresented in research on political discourse. This article therefore aims at filling this gap in research by providing insights into how cartoons are used in Cameroon’s political discourse.

**4. Data and method**

This paper is part of a larger study aimed at deciphering Anglophone separatist discourse in Cameroon. It focusses on ways in which visual and multimodal metaphors are used to conceptualize the Anglophone (Southern Cameroonian or Ambazonian) imagined community and legitimize the struggle for self-determination.

**4.1** Data collection

This was probably the most challenging step in our research as finding cartoons depicting Anglophone separatism is far from an easy task. Separatism is still illegal in Cameroon, so mainstream newspaper editors tend to shy away from publishing cartoons with a clear separatist stance. Therefore, we had to turn to social media, which separatist activists use to reach their target audience. After navigating through the social media platforms of different separatist factions that are active in the country, we finally stumbled across three Facebook pages bearing similar names, namely Dinga Dinga and Don Dinga (<https://www.facebook.com/dinga.dinga.90038>; <https://www.facebook.com/don.dinga.3> <https://www.facebook.com/dingha.dingha.33> – last accessed on 18 March 2024). The pages mostly included cartoons, memes and other illustrations aimed at pushing for the independence of the former British Southern Cameroons.

Given how sensitive this study is, it proved impossible to fully abide by ethical guidelines regarding authorship and copyright. Despite our multiple requests, we could not obtain signed consent from the page administrator(s) and/ or cartoonist(s) because online separatist activists often prefer to remain anonymous in order to avoid prosecution. As the literature on research ethics confirms, the requirement to get consent from participants/stakeholders cannot always be applied to online research involving extremist groups (Fuchs, 2023; Sugiura et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we still made sure to tell the page administrator(s) about our study, its objectives and the fact that the cartoons published on their pages would be reproduced in our paper. We then downloaded all relevant cartoons, which totaled 185 images –all published between 2018 and 2023 and went ahead to analyze them according to the methodology described below.

**4.2** Method

As concerns methodology, this research project mainly falls within critical discourse studies and is based on a combination of cognitive linguistics and social semiotics, (Forceville 1996, 2016; Šorm & Steen, 2018). Before analyzing the cartoons collected, it was necessary to first ascertain they contained visual metaphors. The visual metaphor thus identified were then described and classified.

**4.3** Identification

After collecting our data, we applied Šorm and Steen’s (2018) Metaphor Identification Procedure to confirm that the cartoons we collected indeed contained visual metaphors (and discard those that did not). Therefore, each cartoon was carefully considered so as to 1) establish a general understanding of the image, 2) structure the conceptual roles of the units in it, 3) find incongruous visual units, 4) find out whether the incongruous units are integrated in the topic by comparing to something else, 5) test whether there are two distinct domains involved and 6) test if comparison is indirect. It is only after 4, 5 and 6 yielded positive results that we confirmed that there was indeed a visual metaphor in the image. This process was done manually for every single cartoon we collected.

For instance, Figure 0 was initially included in our sample, but after applying Šorm and Steen’s procedure, we realized that it did not contain a visual metaphor and therefore had to be left out. The steps which led to that conclusion are outlined below.

1. Two prominent members of Cameroon’s ruling party dressed in the party uniform and wearing sashes[[2]](#footnote-2). Each of them has a ball and chain attached to their foot.
2. The main visual units here are the two politicians (and their attire) and the shackles (ball and chain). The politicians’ attire illustrates their political affiliation and position while the shackles describe imprisonment.
3. The shackles in the cartoon seem incongruous as balls and chains are no longer used to prevent prisoners from escaping. In addition, the phrase “ball and chain” is often used metaphorically to refer to the impossibility to achieve freedom or make progress.
4. However, at the time the cartoon was created, both politicians were literally held hostage by guerrilla fighters (or in, separatist parlance, serving jail time for treason). Therefore, the balls and chains do refer to physical restraint and/or imprisonment and do not lead to any other comparison.

Considering the above, the shackles in the cartoon are not used metaphorically since both leaders were indeed in detention (5), so the comparison between both politicians and other prisoners is rather literal (6).

FIGURE 0 ABOUT HERE

**4.4** Description and classification

The metaphors identified following Šorm and Steen’s procedure were classified according to their source domains. Rather than describing all the metaphors we identified, this paper will analyze the journey metaphor, animal metaphor and personification in a limited number of cartoons in order to understand how Cameroon and Southern Cameroons (and the relationship between both states) are conceptualized in separatist discourse.

As opposed to studies on which combined statistical analysis and multimodal discourse analysis (Pan, 2013, for instance), our project was meant to be most mostly interpretative and inducive. The rationale behind our decision to focus on qualitative analysis is that, as Tay (2017) indicates, qualitative approaches make it possible to focus on a few examples and analyze them comprehensively. Therefore, given how novel this study is, we thought it sensible to first of all decipher a small number of cartoons in order to pave the way for other studies that might then combine qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**5. Results**

Following the procedure described in the previous section, a total of 45 images containing metaphors were identified. Some of the metaphors studied in this paper may be described more accurately as multimodal rather than visual because their source and target domains are rendered in a combination of pictorial and verbal modes (Forceville, 2006). Furthermore, we realized that overall, the cartoonist(s) tend(s) to make use of hybrid metaphors or simile in which the target and source domains are integrated or juxtaposed (Forceville, 2016). All in all, various strategies are used to ease cognitive mapping from source to target domains. These strategies include the use of flags (decorating, draping or painting source domain characters or objects in the colors of Cameroon and Ambazonia flags), realistic cartoons or photographs of prominent politicians and verbal resources (captions, speech bubbles, etc.).

Given the large number of source domains that were found in the 45 cartoons, this paper will focus on visual or multimodal metaphors involving traffic accidents, breakdowns or sinking vehicles (journey metaphor), assault, pregnancy and childbirth and death (personification), predators and prey (animal metaphor).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

**5.1** Journey metaphor

The journey metaphor is the most important type of metaphor used in presenting and legitimizing Southern Cameroons’ struggle for self-determination and independence. It is used mainly to describe Cameroon as a failed state and involves metaphor scenarios representing Cameroon (and the breakaway state of Ambazonia) as a vehicle, the incumbent president as the driver, citizens as passengers, economic prosperity (or emergence) as the destination and the state of the road/path as difficulties in (or the impossibility of) achieving economic prosperity. The source domains we identified include car crashes, a fuel gauge, and sinking vehicles.

**5.1.1** *Cameroon is a broken car*

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In Figure 1, one can see a minibus painted in the colors of the Cameroon flag that has just crashed into a tree. Thanks to the combination of cartoon and photography it is possible for anyone familiar with Cameroon politics to recognize the passengers as prominent members of the Cameroon ruling elite and the driver as President Paul Biya. In addition, the captions “Cameroon Express” on the bus is further indication that the vehicle is meant to represent Cameroon.

This cartoon therefore emphasizes the fact that Cameroon is a failed state which is debt-laden (hence the load on the bus), with members of the ruling elite trying to justify the catastrophic situation, as seen in the speech bubbles.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The idea of Cameroon as a failed state is also replicated in Figure 2 where the country is depicted as a car that has lost its wheels after hitting a pothole. In the driver seat, we recognize President Paul Biya, next to whom is sitting Paul Tasong, a prominent Anglophone politician. Based on the flag-for-country metonymy and the captions found in both cartoons, it can be inferred that the car represents Cameroon on the road to economic prosperity. From the state of the car and the road, one could deduce that Cameroon is unlikely to achieve economic prosperity, an argument on which Anglophone nationalism is built.

More recently, separatist leaders have put in place different strategies aimed at further weakening the country’s economy. These include stay-at-home strike actions (known as ghost towns or lockdowns) and sabotage operations whose purpose is to make Cameroon’s English-speaking regions ungovernable and convince Anglophone citizens to join the struggle for self-determination. Given the relative success of those actions, separatist leaders often boast of having crippled Cameroon’s economy, and this may explain why in Figure 1, President Biya admits the crash was caused by Ambazonia, which is the name separatist leaders would like their country to be called.

The fuel gauge in Figure 3 is further evidence of the conceptualization of Cameroon as a broken car. This is confirmed by the presence of the country’s map and flag on the center wheel of the gauge. In addition, the caption in the illustration is superimposed on an Ambazonian flag and reads “economic strangulation”, which reflects an attempt on the part of the cartoonist(s) and separatist activist(s) to indicate that their strategies aimed at destroying Cameroon’s economy are yielding fruits.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

**5.1.2** *Cameroon is a sinking ship/cart*

Just like the broken car metaphor described earlier in this paper, the sinking ship/cart metaphor aims at highlighting the catastrophic state of Cameroon’s political and socioeconomic fabric with a view to presenting separation as a better alternative.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

In Figure 4, one can see a sinking ship from which President Biya is being airlifted. The three other most important personalities in Cameroon’s political hierarchy, namely the Speakers of the two Houses of Parliament and the Prime Minister, seem to be close to a terrible end as they are swimming next to what appears to be a shark, given the dorsal fin clearly visible in the picture. Next to the sinking ship is a small sailboat, which, despite its size, is still afloat. The dichotomy between the sinking ship and the sailboat is used to express the idea that even though the former British Southern Cameroons is smaller and less powerful, its independence is the only way Anglophone Cameroonians can escape the disaster that awaits their French-speaking countrymen.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Figure 5 on the other hand features a cart on which is sitting President Paul Biya. Even though the cart seems to be gradually sinking, a man we recognize as Paul Atanga Nji, an Anglophone politician and one of President Biya’s diehard supporters, reassures the president that the water body is not that deep. To make sure the cartoon is interpreted accurately, the cartoonist(s) once again resort(s) to the flag-for-country metonymy, which is used consistently in all the cartoons under study. The cart is flanked by the country’s Prime Minister– who also hails from the English-speaking region. The signs in the picture indicate the number of years Paul Biya had been in power when the cartoon was published. This again communicates the idea that Cameroon is not only undemocratic, but also a failed state, and that Anglophones had better embrace the self-determination struggle as otherwise they will perish like their most prominent representatives in the Cameroon government.

Given the content of the cartoons described above, it is clear that whenever the journey metaphor is used, Cameroon is the vehicle, economic prosperity is the destination, which, according to separatists cannot be achieved given the state of the vehicle and/or the path. In other words, vehicle Cameroon cannot reach its destination due to its foreign debt (represented by the heavy load in Figure 1), corruption, embezzlement and other social ills (illustrated by potholes and flooding in figures 2 & 4), lack of fuel, i.e., financial resources (Figure 3), and the incompetence of the driver and his assistants (President Paul Biya and his ministers).

**5.2** Personification

Personification is, along with the journey metaphor, one of the two most important types of metaphor used in conceptualizations of the republic of Cameroon, the former British Southern Cameroons and the relationship between both political entities. Personification enables the cartoonist(s) to represent the former Southern Cameroons as a victim of sexual assault, a pregnant woman, a baby, while describing Cameroon as a predator state or a dead entity.

**5.2.1** *Southern Cameroons is a victim of sexual assault*

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

The former British Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon are conceptualized by means of visual metaphors evocative of sexual assault in figures 6 and 7, which feature a man who bears a striking resemblance to Paul Biya, the president of the republic of Cameroon. The man is topless and wearing a Cameroon-flag bottom, while the colours of the clothes worn by the women in each cartoon are reminiscent of the flag of Ambazonia, the breakaway state separatist leaders aim to establish in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. The women who are visibly in distress are trying to run away from the man.

Based on the flag-for-country and leader-for-country metonymies, it can be concluded that the man in figures 6 and 7 represents Cameroon and the women the former British Southern Cameroons. Although both cartoons deal with a similar source domain (sexual assault), they depict the plight of Anglophone Cameroonians from slightly different perspectives.

The woman in Figure 6 looks mature and is running away from a setting that looks domestic. This, as well as the sentence “I’m done with you” in the speech bubble, suggests the woman is trying to break free from an abusive partner. The cartoon is in line with the tendency in Anglophone political discourse to liken the reunification of the former British Southern Cameroons and the former French Cameroon to an abusive and unlawful marriage.

While Figure 6 focusses on the need to break away from an abusive relationship, Figure 7 highlights how helpless Anglophone Cameroonians are by portraying a young girl being assaulted by an older man. In this cartoon, a third individual, who is probably UN secretary general Antonio Guterres (based on resemblance and the UN pins on his jacket and tie) claps and seems to be entertained by a situation which is rather disturbing. The cartoonist(s) could therefore be criticizing the international community’s attitude.

By making use of the source domain of assault, the cartoonist(s) want(s) to bring to the limelight the plight of English-speaking Cameroonians, who, they believe, are being oppressed by the Francophone-dominated government of Cameroon headed by Paul Biya.

**5.2.2** *Southern Cameroons is a baby*

FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE

When the former British Southern Cameroons is not conceptualized as a victim of sexual assault, personification might involve conceptualizing the nation as a baby as seen in figures 8 and 9. Once again the cartoonist(s) resort(s) to the flag-for-country metonymy to make it clear that they are indeed talking about the former British Southern Cameroons. Therefore, the foetus in Figure 8 holds the Ambazonian flag while the baby in Figure 9 is draped in it.

The conceptualization of the independent state of Ambazonia as an unborn baby in Figure 8 is further consolidated by the caption, which likens the fight for to pregnancy. Independence activists are therefore encouraged to see an independent Ambazonia as a baby for whom they are yearning and consider the difficulties they are facing as part of the process. By depicting a faceless woman, the cartoonist(s) might be trying to make every Anglophone Cameroonian identify with her. The faceless woman may also be a metaphorical representation of Africa, as in Figure 9, where the map of Africa and the woman’s face are merged in an attempt to consolidate the conceptualization of Africa as a mother. The sentence in the speech bubble, which reads “this is her 55th child”, confirms the metaphorical representation of Africa as a mother, given that there are currently 54 countries on the continent.

**5.2.3** *Cameroon is a corpse*

To ease the identification of the source and target domains of the Cameroon is a corpse metaphor, the cartoonist(s) makes use of combination of visual and verbal resources, including map metonymies. In Figure 10, the source domain is that of a tomb next to which stands an undertaker who is holding a shovel. The Epitaph indicates that Cameroon (represented by the country’s flag) is dead and buried. It is interesting to note here that the date of birth on the tombstone is 1972, which is the year the Federal Republic (which recognized the autonomy of the former British Southern Cameroons) was dismantled. The cartoonist(s) might thus be suggesting that the recent armed resistance has contributed to restoring a sense of autonomy in Anglophone Cameroon.

FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE

**5.3** Animal metaphors

When Cameroon and the unrecognized state of Ambazonia are not conceptualized in terms of the journey metaphor and personification, animal attributes can also be given to both entities. Here again, the main ideas are economic hardship and social abuse.

**5.3.1** *Cameroon is a Predator (and Southern Cameroons is prey)*

FIGURE 11 ABOUT HERE

Anglophone separatists believe Cameroon has always taken advantage of its relative strength and international support to inflict pain on the former British Southern Cameroons and its people. Animal metaphors are therefore used to conceptualize the relationship between a powerful entity (the Republic of Cameroon) and a community which is just trying to fight for its right to existence. In Figure 11, the former British Southern Cameroons is conceptualized as a frog which is trying to strangle a pelican to avoid being swallowed by the latter. The caption “Ambazonia shall never give up” emphasizes a message of resilience.

FIGURE 12 ABOUT HERE

Animal metaphors can also include cases of anthropomorphism, where animals are given human attributes not only to portray resilience, but also to highlight the need to unite in order to resist Cameroon. This is exactly the case in Figure 12 which features a hawk hunting for chicks that are well sheltered under a hen and protected by armed roosters. The hawk seems to represent Cameroon and the hen the unrecognized state of Ambazonia. The chicks stand for Anglophone Cameroonians while armed roosters most likely represent independence activists and different armed factions. The message behind this cartoon is therefore that the only way for Anglophone Cameroonians not to be annihilated by Cameroon is to return to their motherland, and back separatist activists and guerrilla fighters. It is important to note that Ambazonia fighters do not constitute a united entity but are organized into several factions that often operate independently, hence the caption “why should collaboration be a problem if we have the same goal?”

**5.3.2** *Cameroon is a greedy rooster (and Southern Cameroons a chick)*

As discussed throughout this paper, economy plays an important part in Anglophone separatist discourse. Separatist leaders all believe that Cameroon’s economy is doomed and that it is only thanks to the resources taken from the English-speaking regions that the country has been able to keep bankruptcy at bay. Nevertheless, according to separatist advocates, the English-speaking regions remain underdeveloped and under the yoke of poverty and economic hardship despite their significant contribution to the country’s economy. Breaking away from Cameroon will therefore enable them to manage, invest and redistribute their resources effectively. This is what transpires from Figure 13 in which a chick is agonizing next to a rooster which is feeding from a bag of grain. Based on the flag-for-country metonymy, we can state with a high degree of certainty that the rooster stands for Cameroon while the dying chick certainly represents Anglophone Cameroonians. The bag of grain, whose shape alludes to the map of the former British Southern Cameroons, symbolizes the former British Southern Cameroons and its economic resources. This logically leads to the caption “unacceptable”, which further legitimizes the struggle for independence.

FIGURE 13 ABOUT HERE

**6. Discussion**

The study of visual and multimodal metaphors in cartoons downloaded from Facebook pages administered by Anglophone separatists has enabled us to understand that the legitimization of Anglophone separatism is based on the belief amongst separatists that Cameroon is a failed state that has been preying on the former British Southern Cameroons to survive. The cartoonist(s) is/are certainly aware that, without proper contextualization, their cartoons might be misunderstood, so in addition to the multimodal resources presented earlier in this paper, they mostly make use of conventional metaphors. However, in cases where it is impossible to use conventional metaphors, metaphors related to current happenings are used.

**6.1** Legitimization through conventional metaphors

It is very important to note that mapping from source to target domains is on various occasions achieved by means of conventional metaphors. For instance, the picture of President Biya next to the steering wheel in figures 1 and 2 is the visual representation of the leading (a country) is driving a vehicle metaphor which is evidenced in the phrase “being in the driver seat”, i.e., being in control. The understanding of the vehicle as Cameroon in figures 1 and 2 is eased by the flag-for-country metonymy, which also facilitates the interpretation of the load on the minibus and the state of the road respectively. The load illustrates another conventional metaphor, namely debt is weight, as seen Standard English phrases such as “heavy debt”, “debt burden”. What is more, any endeavour/ project is seen as a journey (hence the project is a journey metaphor in expressions such as “embark on a project”, “on the road/path to success” etc.), so the poor state of both the path and means of transport in figures 1, 2, 4 and 5 emphasizes the belief that Cameroon’s desire to become an emerging economy by 2035 is bound to fail. Finally, Figure 3 illustrates another conventional metaphor, namely economy is an engine (thus phrases such as “sputtering economy”, “the economy is expected to heat up” – Chung & Ahrens, 2004). Seen as such, it is easy to see how a fuel gauge would lead to conclusions regarding Cameroon’s economy.

With regard to personification and animal metaphors, the conventional metaphor that was identified in the cartoons under study is an idea is a baby (Steinhart, 2001). The fact that this metaphor is indeed conventionalized in English is reflected in the metaphorical use of words or phrases such as “to nurture” and “to give birth” along with words such as “ideas”, “concept”. Therefore, the independent nation of Ambazonia, which is first and foremost an idea, is therefore conceptualized as an (unborn) baby. This conceptualization of the independent nation as a baby makes it possible to create in the target audience (Anglophone Cameroonians) the desire to protect, feed and nurture the concept and patiently wait for its actualization. As concerns animal metaphors, the main source domain is the relationship between predators and prey, which translates into two conventional metaphors, namely cameroon is a predator and southern cameroons/ ambazonia is prey. This makes it easy for anyone familiar with the animal world to understand and even support Southern Cameroon’s right to self-defense.

**6.2**Novel metaphor: political domination is sexual abuse

The cartoons studied in this paper were all produced between 2018 and 2023, a period characterized by an increase in awareness of violence against women and the spread of the MeToo movement. In two of the cartoons analyzed, the former British Southern Cameroons is depicted as a woman trying to leave an abusive relationship (Figure 6) and a young girl running away from an older abuser (Figure 7). Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the cartoons are built on the two forms of sexual abuse the MeToo movement has brought to public attention, namely violence perpetrated by partners (or relatives), and instances where the abuser and the victim are not close. Even though the use of the sexual abuse metaphor to describe the relationship between states and minorities is not that common, context makes it easy to understand the point the cartoonist(s) want(s) to make. What is more, portraying Cameroon as male and the former British Southern Cameroon as female facilitates inferences related to the broader idea of gender, which is very much related to the cognitive conceptualization of nations (Ahrens, 2009; Einhorn, 2006; Mostov, 2000; Peterson, 2013). Therefore, the former British Southern Cameroons may be indirectly described as a weaker and vulnerable entity at the mercy of a more powerful opponent. Considering things from this perspective, the sexual abuse metaphor is closely connected to the predator/prey metaphor (which we discussed earlier) hence the use of expressions such as “sexual predators” when talking about rapists or other abusers.

We strongly suspect the cartoons that depict this metaphor are aimed at the international community (hence the presence of the UN secretary general in Figure 7), and the subliminal message conveyed is that what is witnessed in the former British Southern Cameroons is just the same as gender-based violence, so the international community should rise, confront and condemn Cameroon. The use of this metaphor is also in line with the overall tendency to present the country’s English-speaking community as weak, vulnerable and in need of support.

Even though we consider this metaphor to be novel, it is important to note that imperialism has on various occasions been conceptualized as sexual abuse. There has indeed been a high tendency amongst anti anti-imperialists to make use of the rape metaphor. Colonization always involved the exploitation of a territory and its resources without the indigenes’ consent, which makes it similar to rape (Ribeiro 2006, p.132). Nehru for instance described the British invasion of India in the following terms:

they seized her body and possessed her, but it was a possession of violence. They did not know her or try to know her. They never looked into her eyes, for theirs were averted and hers cast down through shame and humiliation. (qted. in Suleri, 1992, pp. 16-17).

The use of the sexual abuse metaphor in separatist cartoons therefore falls within an argumentative strategy whose purpose is presenting the former British Southern Cameroons as a territory under colonial rule, with the colonial master being the Francophone-dominated Republic of Cameroon.

**7. Conclusion**

This paper aimed at studying a set of political cartoons from Cameroon to decipher the use of visual and multimodal metaphors in Anglophone separatist discourse. The study, which focused on three main types of metaphor, namely personification, journey and animal metaphors, is further confirmation that metaphor is not a verbal, but rather a cognitive phenomenon which can be achieved by means of verbal, aural, visual and multimodal resources. It has also provided enough examples in support of the assumption that even though most studies have analyzed conventional metaphor from a verbal perspective, metaphors can be visualized as well. Visualizing conventional metaphors can contribute to spreading a message effectively since, in addition to background knowledge and familiarity with the domains involved in the conventional metaphors, their presentation by means of images will make it possible for everybody, including the illiterate, to understand the message being carried across. Finally, this study has contributed to shedding light on the fact that novel metaphors are not always “novel” as they are often underpinned by specific discourses and narratives. As mentioned throughout this paper, the study of visual and multimodal metaphor in political discourse is still in its initial stages and the aim of this study is to motivate similar endeavors, especially in African contexts.

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1. In this article I make use of the appellations “Kamerun”, “British (Southern/Northern) Cameroons” and “French Cameroons” when talking about the German, British and French colonial entities that preceded present-day Cameroon. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elected or appointed representatives in Cameroon wear flag sashes. The woman is a senator while the man is the President of the North West Regional Assembly (created in 2019 after the Anglophone regions were granted the so-called “Special Status”) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)