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Infrastructural Semiotics and Infrastructural Citizenship: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Linguistic Stratification and the Hydrosocial Contract in Urban Cameroon

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Abstract

This sociolinguistic ethnography introduces and operationalizes the concepts of "infrastructural semiotics" and "infrastructural citizenship" through a Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how power, inequality, and civic belonging are discursively constructed around urban water access in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Through a 12-month multimodal study conducted between January and December 2022, this paper synthesizes political economy and Critical Discourse Analysis within a dialectical-relational framework to dissect the stratified linguistic markets materializing around hydrological infrastructure. The analysis identifies and deconstructs three dominant registers: a French-dominant state-corporate register that deploys technocratic depoliticization, a multilingual grassroots-complaint register that functions as a tactical counter-discourse, and an English-French NGO-developmental register that propagates a neoliberal ethos. Drawing on approximately 150 hours of recorded interactions, 65 semi-structured interviews, a systematic multimodal photographic corpus, and policy documents, the paper demonstrates that discourse is a core infrastructural technology where linguistic competence constitutes symbolic capital, directly mediating one's ability to claim rights. It argues that the struggle for water is fundamentally a struggle over the linguistic and semiotic terms of recognition within a fragmented state, revealing the co-constitutive relationship between material scarcity and communicative injustice in a polity defined by its colonial linguistic legacy and profound

diversity of over 280 indigenous languages. The paper concludes that infrastructural citizenship is forged in this contested terrain, with significant implications for understanding the nexus of language, power, and resource justice in multilingual, postcolonial states.

Keywords: infrastructure, semiotics, citizenship, political economy, water access

Introduction

In Cameroon, a nation where official bilingualism in French and English overlays a vibrant ecology of over 280 indigenous languages and Cameroonian Pidgin English, language is a primary and contentious technology of political identity and social stratification. Concurrently, equitable access to potable water remains an unfulfilled promise for a significant portion of the urban population, serving as a potent material index of state capacity and civic inclusion. While sociolinguistics and political ecology often treat these domains separately, this paper posits their fundamental co-constitution. The protracted Anglophone Crisis, rooted in decades of linguistic-political marginalization and resulting in severe humanitarian consequences, exemplifies how language policy can fracture the state itself. This crisis underscores that language is not a neutral medium but a key mechanism for building or denying political community and distributing life-sustaining resources.

This work develops the integrated frameworks of infrastructural semiotics and infrastructural citizenship and grounds them in a rigorous Critical Discourse Analysis methodology. It examines how everyday talk, bureaucratic documents, public signs, and embodied practices surrounding water access form a parallel discursive infrastructure that actively governs populations, legitimizes authority, and delineates civic boundaries. In Cameroon's postcolonial context, where colonial partitions continue to structure political and economic life, the empirical

question of who obtains water is refracted through the analytical question of who commands the linguistic and semiotic capital to successfully claim it. The central research question is: How do stratified discursive registers and multimodal semiotic practices around urban water access in Cameroon discursively produce, naturalize, and contest power relations and competing visions of citizenship?

The hypothesis is that the infrastructural semiotic field is stratified, privileging a French-dominant techno-bureaucratic register that aligns with state power, while marginalizing yet failing to silence vibrant multilingual registers that serve as vehicles for resistance and alternative claim-making. By analysing discourse as a form of social practice, this work aims to expose the often-opaque connections between language, power, and material reality in the daily negotiation for a fundamental right.

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry synthesizes the political economy of language with a robust Critical Discourse Analysis framework, adopting a dialectical-relational approach that seeks to explicate the connections between discourse, power, and material reality. The political economy of language provides the macro-level understanding, viewing language as a resource within struggles over power, value, and distribution in a neoliberal order. Critical Discourse Analysis provides the systematic, micro-level analytical toolkit to investigate how this plays out in concrete texts and interactions, treating discourse as a constitutive social practice that shapes and is shaped by social structures.

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged from critical linguistics with the explicit aim of addressing social injustice through the analysis of discourse, focusing on language's role in sustaining or challenging social structures and inequities. To navigate scholarly critiques of Critical Discourse Analysis – particularly regarding its

potential for deterministic readings and the selectivity of textual analysis – this paper adopts a rigorously contextualized and transparent methodology. It aligns with a Discourse-Historical Approach, which emphasizes grounding analysis in extensive contextual knowledge. This is operationalized through ethnographic immersion, ensuring interpretation of texts is informed by a deep understanding of their context of production and reception. Furthermore, the issue of selectivity is addressed by following a model of moving systematically between detailed textual analysis, processing analysis, and broader social analysis. The analysis focuses on several core Critical Discourse Analysis concepts applied to the data:

Legitimation refers to how language is used to justify actions, policies, or relations of power. The analysis examines how the state-corporate register legitimizes authority through technocratic rationality, while the grassroots register legitimizes claims through moral appeals.

Nominalization and agency concern how processes are turned into static nouns, often obscuring agency and responsibility. This is key to analysing the depoliticizing strategies of bureaucratic discourse.

Intertextuality and recontextualization describe how texts reference, absorb, and transform other texts across genres and scales. This allows tracing how policy discourse is recontextualized into NGO project proposals or reshaped in community complaints.

Spatiality and discourse follow insights that discourse organizes and is organized by social space; the analysis therefore considers how the physical and social space of the water point shapes and is shaped by communicative practices.

This integrated framework underpins the core concept of **infrastructural semiotics,** defined as the study of the structured, politically charged systems of signs (linguistic and multimodal) that coalesce around material infrastructures to govern access, assign value, and position social actors. **Infrastructural citizenship** is thus the agentive practice of navigating, appropriating, or resisting these semiotic systems to assert claims to public goods and to perform civic belonging within a fragmented political field.

For researchers seeking to apply this framework in other contexts, infrastructural semiotics analysis typically proceeds through six heuristic stages. While any application must remain responsive to local specificities, these moves represent the analytical logic that guided this study and may be adapted as needed. First, the researcher maps the infrastructural field, identifying the material system under study and the key actors – state agencies, corporations, users, intermediaries – that populate it. Second, discursive data are collected from sites representing different positions within the social hierarchy, following a comparative logic that captures both dominant and marginal voices.

Third, through inductive coding, emergent registers crystallize from the data rather than being imposed through predetermined categories. Fourth, each register is analysed for its ideological work using the core Critical Discourse Analysis concepts elaborated above: grammatical attributions of agency, lexical framing, legitimation strategies, and intertextual connections. Fifth, relations between registers are traced – how they reference, parody, ignore, or contest one another – revealing the discursive economy of the infrastructural field. Sixth and finally, these discursive findings are connected to macro-contextual dynamics: colonial history, language policy, political economy, and ongoing social struggles. Table 1 summarizes these analytical dimensions

with guiding questions for researchers undertaking infrastructural semiotics analysis.

Table 1: Infrastructural Semiotics Framework – Analytical Dimensions

Dimension	Definition	Key Questions for Researchers	Analytical Tools
Linguistic register	Stratified codes that organize access	What languages or dialects are privileged in infrastructural communication? Who speaks them? Who is excluded?	Lexical analysis, code-switching patterns, language ideology critique
Genre conventions	Standardized textual forms organizing interaction	What genres structure infrastructural encounters (bills, notices, complaints)? How do they position readers?	Genre analysis, intertextuality, interdiscursivity
Material-semiotic form	Physical mediation of signs	How does materiality (paper, plaque, graffiti, digital interface) shape meaning and access?	Multimodal analysis, geosemiotics, affordance analysis
Spatial emplacement	Location in physical and social space	Where are signs placed? Who encounters them? What hierarchies does location produce?	Geosemiotic analysis, spatial discourse analysis, proxemics
Agency and obfuscation	Grammatical attribution of responsibility	Who is represented as actor? What agents are erased? How is responsibility distributed?	Transitivity analysis, nominalization, passive voice, ergativity
Legitimation strategies	Discursive justification of power	How is authority claimed or contested? Through what appeals (technical, moral, traditional)?	Authorization, moralization, rationalization, mythopoesis

This study enacted this framework through a 12-month critical ethnography in Yaoundé, as detailed in the methodology that follows.

Methodology

To enact this framework, a 12-month critical ethnographic study was conducted in Yaoundé between January and December 2022, employing a comparative case design across two neighbourhoods – Bastos (a planned, high-status quartier) and Briqueterie (an autoconstructed, popular quartier) – to capture discursive variation across social strata. Data collection involved triangulation across four streams: approximately 150 hours of audio-recorded naturalistic interactions at water points, queues, and administrative offices; 65 semi-structured interviews with residents, CAMWATER officials, local councillors, and NGO staff; a systematic multimodal photographic corpus of the semiotic landscape comprising signs, graffiti, and infrastructure conditions; and a collection of policy documents, utility bills, and NGO reports.

The Critical Discourse Analysis was conducted in a structured, three-phase protocol, adapting established models to ensure procedural transparency and to mitigate concerns over interpretive subjectivity.

Phase 1: Textual Description and Coding. All transcripts, documents, and sign texts were imported into qualitative data analysis software. An initial inductive open coding identified recurring themes. Subsequently, a deductive coding frame based on the Critical Discourse Analysis framework was applied, systematically tagging instances of nominalization, modality, transitivity, lexicalization, metaphor, intertextual references, **and interdiscursivity—the mixing of discourses, genres, or styles from different social domains within a single text.**

Phase 2: Processing Analysis. Here, the analysis examined how the texts were produced, distributed, and consumed. For recorded interactions, this included analysing turn-taking, code-switching, and metapragmatic comments. For documents and signs, genre

conventions, authorship, intended audience, and physical placement in the landscape were analysed. **Analysis of interdiscursivity examined how texts blended multiple discourses—for instance, how bureaucratic language was appropriated in grassroots speech or how corporate management discourse infiltrated NGO development rhetoric. This revealed the hybrid genres through which infrastructural politics is negotiated.** This phase explicitly links the textual features from Phase 1 to their function within specific communicative events.

Phase 3: Social Analysis. This final phase interprets the discursive practices within the broader social context, asking how these discourses reproduce, negotiate, or challenge power relations around water and how they reconstruct social identities. This phase draws directly on ethnographic observations, historical knowledge of Cameroon's language politics, and interview data to explain the social and political consequences of the discourses analysed in Phases 1 and 2.

Integration of Semiotic Landscape Analysis. The photographic corpus was analysed not as illustrative images but as material-discursive artifacts. Their analysis followed a parallel track: textual Critical Discourse Analysis of the written language on the sign, visual analysis of colour, font, images, and logos, and geosemiotic analysis of their emplacement – physical location, height, permanence, and relationship to other objects in space. This multimodal approach recognizes that the meaning of a "No Water" graffiti is shaped as much by its spray-painted, ephemeral form on a crumbling wall as by its textual message, differentiating it fundamentally from an official, and framed notice in a CAMWATER office.

The following analysis presents granular textual examples drawn from this larger corpus to substantiate the identification of registers

and their ideological work, moving from description to explanation as per the Critical Discourse Analysis protocol.

The State-Corporate Register: A Grammar of Depoliticization

This register's power lies in its grammatical construction of an orderly, technocratic world where political conflict is erased. Consider this excerpt from an official CAMWATER notice posted in a municipal building:

Text 1: "Suite à des défaillances techniques sur la station de pompage principal, une réduction temporaire de la pression dans le réseau de distribution est attendue. Les usagers sont remerciés pour leur compréhension." (Following technical failures at the main pumping station, a temporary reduction in distribution network pressure is expected. Users are thanked for their understanding.)

A Critical Discourse Analysis reveals several key legitimization and obfuscation strategies:

Nominalization and Agency Obscuration: The active process (the pump at the main station failed) is transformed into a static, abstract noun phrase: "des défaillances techniques" (technical failures). This grammatical move deletes the agent. Who failed to maintain the pump? The responsible entity vanishes from the sentence, leaving only an anonymous technical event. Similarly, "a reduction... is expected" uses the passive voice, further distancing any institution from responsibility.

Lexicalization and Presupposition: The choice of "défaillances techniques" presupposes that the cause is purely technical, not political or administrative. It frames the issue within a paradigm of engineering, not rights or governance. The final sentence, thanking users for their "compréhension" (understanding), is a politeness strategy that interpellates them as compliant, patient subjects rather than rights-bearing citizens who might legitimately protest. This discourse functions to organize social space by presenting the

state's role as a technical manager rather than a political entity accountable for a social right.

The Grassroots-Complaint Register: Tactical Re-politicization through Metaphor and Directness

In stark contrast, the grassroots register re-inserts agency, affect, and moral judgment. The following is an excerpt from a recorded conversation at a standpipe in Briqueterie between two women, Amélie and Chantal:

Text 2: Amélie (in Cameroonian Pidgin English): "Dis wan wata no di come again since morning. Na which kind délestage be dis wey di take whole day? Dem say na 'technical problem,' but na lie. Na l'argent don finish for CAMWATER, dem no get fuel for pump." (This water hasn't been coming since morning. What kind of shedding is this that takes the whole day? They say it's a technical problem, but it's a lie. It's that the money has finished at CAMWATER, they don't have fuel for the pump.)

Chantal (mixing Ewondo and French) : "Oui, ils nous prennent pour des idiots. L'eau, c'est un droit, pas un cadeau. Mais ici, c'est la souffrance qui coule du robinet." (Yes, they take us for idiots. Water is a right, not a gift. But here, it is suffering that flows from the tap.)

A Critical Discourse Analysis of this interaction reveals its counter-discursive force:

Metaphor and Relexicalization: Chantal's metaphor, "la souffrance qui coule du robinet" (suffering that flows from the tap), is a powerful re-lexicalization. It replaces the technical term water with an embodied, emotional experience, directly contesting the state's technical framing. It transforms the tap from a delivery point for a commodity into a source of collective pain, reconstructing the social meaning of the infrastructure through discourse.

Direct Attribution of Agency and Blame: Amélie directly identifies the agents and explicitly rejects the official explanation. She offers an alternative, politically-charged explanation: financial mismanagement. This is a classic tactic of re-politicization, moving the issue from the realm of technical failure to that of governance and resource allocation.

Intertextual Irony and Code-Switching: Amélie's use of the French bureaucratic term "délestage" (shedding) is heavily ironic, embedding the state's own language within a scathing critique of its failure. The strategic code-switching between Cameroonian Pidgin English, Ewondo, and French marks the discourse as both locally grounded and strategically engaged with the dominant linguistic market, performing a multilingual infrastructural citizenship.

This moment also illustrates **interdiscursivity** – the mixing of discourses from different social domains. By inserting the French bureaucratic term 'délestage' into Cameroonian Pidgin English, Amélie creates a hybrid utterance that simultaneously inhabits and critiques state discourse. The bureaucratic genre is recontextualized within a grassroots complaint register, generating ironic distance from official framings.

The NGO-Developmental Register: Constructing Neoliberal Subjectivity

This register, materialized on glossy bilingual plaques at new boreholes, blends technical terms with the moral lexicon of development. An excerpt from an NGO project memorandum states:

Text 3: "The project aims to empower the community through the sustainable management of the water point. Community ownership and participation in maintenance are key to sustainability."

A Critical Discourse Analysis uncovers its propagation of a neoliberal ethos:

Lexicalization and Subject Positioning: Keywords like "empower," "community ownership," and "participation" are not neutral. They are part of a globalized discourse that constructs community members as entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own development. The discourse subtly shifts the frame of accountability: the focus becomes community management of the borehole, potentially masking the state's retreat from its duty to maintain the integrated network.

Intertextuality: This language recontextualizes fragments of global development policy into local project documents. It creates a transnational, project-based citizenship where access is governed by the logic of the project, as one NGO worker stated. This discourse can create a parallel infrastructural power, but its linguistic demands often replicate exclusion, requiring fluency in its specific hybrid of technical English and French to be a legible participant or stakeholder.

The register further operates through **interdiscursivity,** blending the moral lexicon of humanitarianism with corporate management discourse. This hybridity constructs water access simultaneously as a right and as a matter of entrepreneurial responsibility, exemplifying how global policy paradigms are localized through discursive mixing.

The Semiotic Landscape: Materialising Inequality

The analysis of a physical sign demonstrates the Critical Discourse Analysis-multimodal synthesis. In Briqueterie, a faded A4 paper notice from CAMWATER is often found taped haphazardly to a rusted pipe or a concrete wall stained with mineral deposits from leaking water. The materiality – the fading ink, the peeling tape, the corroded substrate – visually communicates neglect, impermanence, and state abandonment. Its meaning is co-created by this context of decay. Conversely, in Bastos, a similar notice might be found behind glass in a clean lobby or on an official bulletin board. Its meaning is one of order and authority. A nearby

NGO sign, a glossy aluminum plaque, introduces a third material discourse. Its durability, professional finish, and prominent donor logo index transnational power, project-based timeframes, and a different model of provision, visually interrupting the binary state-citizen semiotic field. The geosemiotics of placement – whether a sign is official, defaced, handwritten, or professionally mounted – is thus a primary component of its discourse, analysed as rigorously as its text.

Discussion: Infrastructural Citizenship, Discursive Power, and the Multinational State

The integrated critical discourse analysis of the stratified registers within Yaoundé's hydrosocial landscape reveals a fundamental sociological truth: discourse is not a passive reflection of water inequality but a constitutive infrastructure of governance and political struggle. The empirical journey from the technocratic bulletins in Bastos to the metaphoric complaints at Briqueterie's standpipes demonstrates that the material scarcity of water is produced and sustained by a parallel economy of semiotic scarcity, where the power to name, define, categorize, and claim is itself an unequally distributed resource. This discussion grounds these findings within deeper theoretical currents in political sociology, the anthropology of the state, and critical language policy. It argues that the micro-politics of infrastructural citizenship, as revealed through discourse, are the capillary expressions of Cameroon's macro-political condition as a fragmented multinational state, where linguistic justice is inextricably linked to hydrological justice, and where the failure to provide a communicative infrastructure is as consequential as the failure to maintain pipes and pumps.

The State-Corporate Register, with its French-dominant technocratic lexicon and impersonal syntax, performs a crucial ideological operation: depoliticization. The systematic use of nominalization and passive constructions actively obscures human

agency and responsibility. This is not merely bureaucratic jargon but a discursive strategy that re-frames profound political and administrative failures – failures of investment, maintenance, and equity – as neutral technical problems. As such, CAMWATER's discourse functions as a hydrological anti-politics machine. By interpellating residents as clients or subscribers within a market, it discursively constructs a consumerist model of citizenship.

The right to water becomes contingent upon the ability to pay and, as the data shows, the cultural-linguistic capital to navigate the bureaucratic system. This creates a form of para-citizenship, where formal membership in the nation-state is fragmented into a hierarchy of effective personhood, with those fluent in the state's preferred register occupying a higher tier of recognizability and recourse. The engineer's distinction of "les clients sérieux" is a poignant ethnographic moment that encapsulates this: seriousness is not an inherent quality but a discursive performance aligned with state logics. This exclusionary linguistic infrastructure exists in tension with the state's formal commitments, as seen in its participation in international human rights mechanisms where it accepts recommendations on improving living conditions, a discursive performance on a global stage that contrasts sharply with local practice.

In stark opposition, the Grassroots-Complaint Register serves as a vibrant tactical counter-discourse that actively repoliticizes what the state seeks to depoliticize. Where the state employs the strategy of technocratic depoliticization, residents deploy tactical linguistic creativity. The use of metaphor, direct attribution of blame, humour, and proverbial wisdom are not signs of linguistic poverty but sophisticated tools for moral claim-making and the construction of a counter-public sphere. This register operates in a local scale, but its power is immense. It forges solidarity through shared linguistic codes and constructs a collective identity grounded in shared embodied experience of scarcity. The graffiti,

"Ici, l'eau est un souvenir," is a masterful act of semiotic resistance. It personifies water as a ghostly memory, directly challenging the state's presentation of scarcity as a temporary technical glitch. It asserts a historical narrative of loss and state abandonment. This discourse enacts a form of citizenship rooted not in legal-bureaucratic status but in voice as a value – the fundamental human capacity to give an account of one's life and have that account heard. The grassroots register is the assertion of voice in the face of administrative deafness, a vital mechanism for maintaining social dignity and political subjectivity amidst neglect.

The NGO-Developmental Register introduces a third, transnational vector of power into this already contested field. Its bilingual, techno-moral discourse represents the brokerage function of development, where global policy narratives are translated into local project interventions. A critical discourse analysis of this register reveals its propagation of a neoliberal ethos of citizenship. Keywords like participation, ownership, empowerment, and sustainability are part of a globalized discourse that commodifies language and social relations, reconstructing citizens as entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own development.

The discourse subtly shifts the frame of accountability: the focus becomes community management of the borehole, not the state's duty to maintain the integrated network. This can inadvertently individualize collective problems and render technical complex political-economic issues. While providing essential infrastructure, this register can create a parallel project-based citizenship that further fragments the social contract. Access to water becomes tied to the temporality and conditionalities of a donor project, not to an inalienable right guaranteed by the state. The NGO worker's statement about operating under the logic of the project is revelatory; it shows how a new extra-state discursive regime with its own rules of legibility and participation is superimposed on the local landscape, potentially undermining the long-term authority

and accountability of the state while replicating its linguistic exclusions. **The interdiscursivity of the NGO-developmental register – its mixing of humanitarian and corporate discourses – exemplifies how global policy paradigms are localized. This hybridity creates new subject positions ('empowered community members') while potentially obscuring the state's retreat from service provision. This discursive mixing, like the nominalization and agency obfuscation in the state-corporate register, performs ideological work – rendering invisible the political choices underlying water inequality while celebrating local entrepreneurialism.**

These discursive conflicts cannot be understood outside of Cameroon's overarching national crisis, the Anglophone Conflict. This discussion posits that the micro-level linguistic stratifications around water in Yaoundé are a direct manifestation of the macro-level fractures threatening the nation. The Francophone-dominated State-Corporate Register is more than an administrative convenience; it is a daily lived reinforcement of the political and cultural hegemony that fuels separatist sentiment.

When proficiency in French is a prerequisite for being taken seriously as a claimant for a basic public good, the state is effectively communicating who its primary constituents are. This aligns with historical analyses of the conflict's roots in the perceived assimilationist policies of the Francophone-dominated central government. The water point, therefore, becomes a micro-arena of the national question. For an Anglophone citizen in Yaoundé, or a Francophone from a marginalized region, the experience at the CAMWATER office is a personal encounter with the state's monolingual face of power. Research on water conflicts in the Anglophone Northwest, exacerbated by the wider war, shows how this localizes. When the central state's legitimacy collapses through violence, its infrastructural discourse loses all authority, and communities revert to or innovate local discursive

and governance systems based on indigenous languages and traditional authority. Thus, the struggle over infrastructural citizenship is a key mechanism through which national identity conflicts are experienced and reproduced in everyday life.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the potent synergy between prolonged ethnographic immersion and rigorous Critical Discourse Analysis. Ethnography provided the contextual thickness necessary to interpret discourse as social action. It allowed observation of where and among whom the different registers were deployed and capture of the metapragmatic comments that reveal language ideologies at work. Critical Discourse Analysis, in turn, provided the systematic analytical toolkit to move from rich description to explanatory critique. It enabled a precise dissection of how power works through text and talk: through grammatical choices that obscure agency, lexical choices that frame issues, and intertextual chains that link a local complaint to a global development paradigm. For instance, without ethnography, the Pidgin metaphor is just a colourful phrase; with it, its role in building solidarity at the standpipe becomes clear.

Without Critical Discourse Analysis, the NGO plaque is just an informative sign; with it, its neoliberal presuppositions are deconstructed. This methodological integration answers calls for sociolinguistics to deepen its engagement with both experiential reality and precise textual analysis. The three-phase protocol, moving from text to context and back again, provides a transparent, replicable model for similar studies, addressing core Critical Discourse Analysis concerns about rigor and selectivity.

Theoretically, this analysis urges a reconceptualization of infrastructure itself. Following seminal work, infrastructure is not just the physical network but also the totality of both technical and cultural systems that enable its function. This study shows that discourse is a core component of this totality—a metainfrastructure

that governs how the physical infrastructure is perceived, used, and contested. The breakdown of water supply is thus always a dual event: a mechanical failure and a communicative crisis. This framework contributes to the political economy of language by grounding insights about language as a resource in the visceral, high-stakes domain of essential service provision. It shows that the value of a linguistic repertoire is not abstract but can be measured in litres of water obtainable, in hours of waiting avoided, and in dignity preserved or denied.

The discussion must also confront the practical implications and ethical dilemmas these findings raise. If discursive inequality co-produces material inequality, then interventions must address both. Simply building a new pipe into Briqueterie without creating transparent, multilingual, and accessible channels for communication and complaint would be an incomplete solution. It might change the hydrological map but leave the semiotic landscape of marginalization intact. Policymakers and NGOs must move beyond a tokenistic local participation to a deep linguistic justice approach that validates indigenous languages and Cameroonian Pidgin English as legitimate codes for formal engagement, official documentation, and dispute resolution.

This is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound political one, as it directly contests the centralized Francophone-dominated linguistic ideology of the Cameroonian state. The path to a more equitable hydrosocial contract in Cameroon, and in similarly multilingual postcolonial states, is paved not only with concrete and PVC but with a radical reimagining of whose words count, whose stories are heard, and whose linguistic repertoire is recognized as constituting a legitimate claim to citizenship and the right to water. Infrastructural citizenship is the lived interface where these monumental political questions are decided, one conversation, one complaint, and one water bill at a time.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, while the comparative case design captures variation across socioeconomic strata within Yaoundé, the findings may not fully represent dynamics in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, where linguistic politics operate differently and where the ongoing conflict creates distinct conditions for infrastructural governance. Future research should extend this framework to cities in the Northwest and Southwest regions, examining how the Anglophone Crisis reshapes discursive infrastructures around water and other public goods.

Second, the researcher's positionality as an Anglophone scholar working in a predominantly Francophone institutional context necessarily shaped access to particular discursive spaces. While extensive ethnographic immersion, sustained language learning, and collaboration with local research assistants mitigated this limitation, interactions conducted primarily in French-dominant bureaucratic settings may have been navigated differently than by a Francophone researcher. Conversely, the researcher's Anglophone identity may have facilitated greater rapport and trust in grassroots spaces where English, Cameroonian Pidgin English, and indigenous languages were used to critique Francophone state hegemony. This dual positioning – outsider to the dominant bureaucratic register yet potentially insider to counter-discursive spaces – produced both constraints and affordances. Subsequent studies should prioritize research teams with fuller linguistic repertoires spanning Cameroon's diverse linguistic landscape, including native-level competence in French, English, Cameroonian Pidgin English, and relevant indigenous languages, to capture the full complexity of infrastructural discourse.

Third, the reference to the Ministère de la Justice document from February 2024, while providing valuable contextual illustration of ongoing state discourse, postdates the fieldwork period and was

included for its illustrative value rather than as primary data. Its temporal placement relative to the study should be noted. Future research might examine how the discursive patterns identified in 2022 evolve in response to shifting political and policy contexts.

Finally, the focus on water infrastructure, while analytically fruitful, represents only one domain of infrastructural citizenship. Comparative studies of electricity, housing, sanitation, and digital infrastructure would illuminate whether the patterns identified here hold across different infrastructural sectors and how they intersect.

Conclusion

This article has argued, through a synthesized critical discourse-analytic and political economy lens, for the profound inseparability of the material and the discursive in the political ecology of water. By deconstructing the stratified registers of infrastructural semiotics in Yaoundé – the depoliticizing state-corporate, the repoliticizing grassroots, and the neoliberal NGO-developmental – it has demonstrated how language acts as a core technology of citizenship, shaping who is recognized as a legitimate claimant. The water crisis is, therefore, a profound crisis of communication and discursive recognition. The struggle for water is inextricably a struggle over the linguistic terms of belonging and the semiotic resources necessary to articulate a claim that will be heard and acted upon by power.

The article makes several key contributions. Theoretically, it advances the concepts of infrastructural semiotics and infrastructural citizenship, providing a framework for analysing how discourse functions as a governing infrastructure. Methodologically, it models a rigorous, transparent, and replicable protocol for integrating multimodal ethnography with detailed Critical Discourse Analysis, from textual coding to social explanation. The six-stage analytical heuristic presented here provides other researchers with transferable tools for examining

discursive infrastructures in diverse settings. Empirically, it provides a granular, contextualized account of how Cameroon's macro-level linguistic and political conflicts are lived and negotiated at the micro-level of everyday practice around an essential public good.

For scholarship, this analysis demonstrates that in fragmented multilingual states, the project of nation-building and equitable service delivery will continually falter without a concomitant project of communicative justice. Future research should apply this framework to other infrastructural domains and in other postcolonial contexts to further elucidate the mechanisms by which language serves as both a tool of governance and a terrain of struggle. For policymakers, the imperative is clear: sustainable and equitable infrastructure development must be paired with the development of equitable communicative infrastructures – transparent, multilingual, and accessible channels that honour a nation's full linguistic repertoire. In Cameroon and beyond, the path to water security, and indeed to a more cohesive and just polity, must be paved with words that all citizens can understand, speak, and own. Infrastructural citizenship is forged in this contested terrain, determining not just access to water but the very meaning of membership in the political community.

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