

**A Semiotic Analysis of Nonverbal Linguistic Signals Used on Social Media  
During the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the use of nonverbal signals in online posts during the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. It has been observed that nonverbal signals such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body expressions play a greater role in the way human beings communicate, especially during periods of crises. Although nonverbal, this means of communication acts more than verbal. This work, therefore, focuses on nonverbal linguistic features used mostly by women during the Anglophone crisis to call for an end to the ongoing crisis. It should be said that this work is of great relevance in language use in the sense that it shows how people can express their wrath without using any harmful means. This research uses a qualitative research design. The reason is that the researcher collected some pictures that were posted on social media during the period of the crisis (2017-2022). Insight was drawn from Barthes’s (1964) theory of semiotics. The findings indicated that people used “nkeng” (peace plant), branches of trees, boards, colors, black dresses, and facial expressions. In addition, it has also been found that some women were kneeling with their faces facing the ground, bend of the head with two hands on the legs, sitting on the ground in bare feet and the legs stretched out to show that they are overwhelmed by the situation. The researcher suggests that educators or public facilitators should teach the public how to love each other and how to preserve national unity.

**Keywords:** Boards, peace plant, pictures, Phoenix, Semiotics analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, communication on social media has become indispensable for the world. The beauty of this new communication method is the offer of virtual connectivity irrespective of geographical distance or educational level (Madakam & Tripathi, 2021, p. 1). Social media has fostered communication, creativity, social cohesion, and advanced freedom of expression. This freedom of expression is seen in the kind of information people post online via various social media platforms. It can also be looked at as fuel or fire that burns everything where it passes. Due to social media, a conflict situation can become an armed crisis. This is what happened in Cameroon where a conflict started with the protest on social media and later on led to armed conflict. It should be noted that the genesis of the problem that led to this ongoing crisis goes back to the world political climate in 1916 when Germany was defeated in World War I by Britain and France's joint armies. They divided Cameroon into two parts known as French and British colonies, thus leaving two different political heritages. The sharing was confirmed in 1922 by the League of Nations Agreement. France governed its own portion of Cameroon as an autonomous part of its colony, while the British Administered Northern and Southern regions as part of its Nigerian colony (Eyongetah & Brain, 1974; Osuntokun, 1975, 1978; Ngoh, 1987). The history of these two regions took twists and turns. With time the international scenes and the management of the home affairs by the ruling cast made the brothers to be like 'co-wives'. This is the result of the degradation of the relationships between the two areas, which led to the degradation of the language; in its turn, the degradation of language brought to the bloody actions. This problem only became a crisis in October 2016 with the unprovoked harassment of Anglophone lawyers engaged in peaceful protest marches in September 2016 to vent their grievances over the perceived marginalization of the Anglophone Common Law practice in the country. Unfortunately, things turned sour as the government decided to handle the situation by brutalising the lawyers. This act by the government changed everything and today we have as some people consider it as a war while others see it as a crisis. This work stems from the fact that the use of nonverbal signals such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body expressions, in online posts plays an important role in the dissemination of information. They extend and give further explanations where words are limited so becoming more effective than verbal ones. This study aims at investigating the use of and the meanings of nonverbal signals on social media posts during the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon from 2017 to 2022. This work would be useful to scholars and the educational milieu as a whole since it could enlarge and widen their knowledge of the relevant use of nonverbal signals during a conflictual period. Following the main aim of the work, the following objectives were addressed:

To examine the use of peace plants;

To explore facial expressions and dressings;

To look at the meaning and significance of colours.

This research is guided by the following research questions:

What are the types of nonverbal signals used on social media posts during the Anglophone crisis?

How effective and significant are the used signals on social media?

## **2. Literature Review**

The advent and rapid growth of social media have eased the share of information, opinions, thoughts, and written, oral, and video messages. The numerous and instantaneous increase in e-messages (Tabe, 2011, 2012,2013,2018, Tabe & Nouhou, 2021) and posts on various social media platforms have drawn the attention of many scholars to carry out research from countless perspectives, notably from a linguistic perspective (Crystal 2001, 2006, Herring, 2002). They mainly studied its newness, e-morphology, and increasing changes, just to mention these. In the meantime, some researchers looked at it from a non-verbal perspective; that is from a semiotic angle which is the target of the current research. In that vein, some erudite conducted semiotic studies on social media (Mikhaeil&Baskerville, 2019; Almucharomah, Sahayu &Triono (2023), platforms such as Facebook (Eijansantos, 2018) and Instagram (Turnip, Wulan,& Malau, 2016; Mirsarrat, Shairi,&Ahmadpanah, 2017).

The research done on semiotic analysis of the Facebook postings of grade 11 Students of Bunguiao national school via syntax and semantics by Eijansantos (2018), attempted to analyze the January Facebook postings. The investigation focused on the textual contents of the postings via the interplay of syntax and semantics; the subject of the post, and a grammatical function vis-à-vis the semantic role. The findings revealed that only three semantic roles for the subjects figured in the postings of the learners: agent, the doer of the action which is done in volition; experiencer, the subject experiences the event in the sentence; and theme, the affected caused by the verb in the sentence.

In another study on Instagram, some researchers were interested in the semiotic analysis of photographs and aspects of the Instagram social network (Turnip, Wulan,& Malau 2016; Mirsarrat, Shairi & Ahmadpanah, 2017). They researched Babystagram Phenomenon among Indonesia Celebrities Instagram Accounts and Instagram social network. The purpose of Turnip, Wulan, and Malau's (2016) investigation was to analyze the increasing costs of children's photos on Instagram that use a lot of babystagram hashtag #babystagram. It differs from Mirsarrat, Shairi, and Ahmad panah (2017) objective that sought to discuss differences between the typical semiotic communication model and instagram social network communication model. The findings of these studies revealed that denotative meanings from photos on babystagram account is for many purposes like pleasure, entertainment, compassion, and the form of pride. Whereas the meaning of the connotation is for showing off, popularity, satisfying self-obsession, for economic interests such as getting many endorsements, advertising offers, movies, brand ambassador, model, and result with the main goal being for economic interests or money. The

myth from the research showed a luxurious lifestyle that culminated in the formation of the ideology; narcissism, hedonism, and consumerism caused the emergence of commodification content in photos on babystagram account. The entire meaning is an indication of child exploitation can be truly occur in the posts of the celebrity children's photos on Instagram. Besides, it has been demonstrated that Instagram can also be used as a successful platform for pictorial and multimodal sign production and distribution.

Furthermore, the presence of social media makes the process of social interaction experience very significant changes. Communication through social media is a very important social interaction in human life. Mikhaeil and Baskerville (2019); Almucharomah, Sahayu, and Triono (2023) investigated semiotic analysis to analyze the Covid-19 meme. To them, the increasing use of social media has spawned new phenomena among social media users and one of these is the creativity in making memes. The researchers tried to describe the facts behind the creation of the Covid-19 meme circulating on social media. The signifiers found in the Covid-19 meme include snippets of famous movie and game scenes.

The function and symbols of some linguistic signs were studied by some scholars (Goodnow, 2006; Anyogo, 2018) from their visual content. They found that symbols have four primary functions: explanation, awareness, identification, and sanction. In addition, the findings indicated that non-verbal communication serves as a very significant avenue for information dissemination and meaning sharing among people. Similarly, A'la (2011) conducted a descriptive qualitative study with the aim to illustrate the connotative meanings of verbal and non-verbal language and demonstrated that the denotative and connotative meaning of signs determines their function.

Al-Bahrani, Al-Saadi, and Yousif (2016) examined contradictory statements in that the language of image is “universal” or a “source of ambiguity and creativity” while Naif (2020) examined the linguistic strategies and non-linguistic devices used in English tourism brochures in Iraq and Malaysia. He found that the statements were full of denotative meaning and/ or highlight other denotative meaning potentials from a decontextualized image caricature. Moreover, it has been revealed that non-linguistic devices are far more persuasive than linguistic ones.

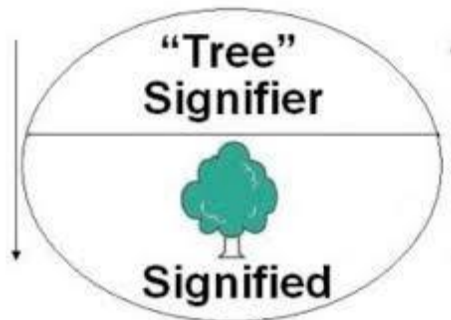
It is worth mentioning that many studies have been carried out on the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. It has been studied from the educational perspective (Akame, Crockett, & Awutarh, 2021), geopolitical and rhetorical (Ascone & Renaut, 2019; Ekah, 2019), conflictual perspective (Annan, Beseng, Crawford & Kewir, 2021; Barrach-Yousefi, 2020; Bang & Balgah, 2022; Kweitsu & Besong, 2019; Ngange & Mokondo, 2019; Nganji & Cockburn, 2019; Nganji, 2022; Nounkeu, 2020; Ketzmerick, 2023; Sawalda, 2020), and linguistic perspectives (Tabe & Fieze, 2018; Tchouape, 2019; Ngouo, 2020; Nouhou, 2022). These scholars used different approaches and obtained both convergent findings (Tabe & Fieze, 2018; Tchouape, 2019) and divergent ones (Ekah, 2019; Ascone & Renaut, 2019). These studies revealed that violence and disruption may have sought educational alternatives through informal learning methods, as well as relocating to neighbouring towns in Southern Cameroons or other relatively sub-urban areas

of the Anglophone regions. Nevertheless, Nouhou's (2022) investigation brought a new way of looking at the crisis for, the researcher succeeded to come out with findings that promote peace, social cohesion, and living together from some messages on WhatsApp and Facebook in the ongoing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon

From the above literature review works it has been observed that no study has been conducted on semiotics analysis of signs and symbols on social media in relation to the various crises that went and/or are ongoing in Cameroon.

Barthes's (1964) theory of semiotics is the basis of this study. Semiotics as a discipline is simply the analysis of signs or the study of the function of sign systems (Cobley & Janz, 1999). It is a branch of linguistics to study signs and learn everything related to the sign and its meaning. Therefore, it attracted Ferdinand de Saussure to aver that semiotics has two inseparable sides as the two sides of dichotomies opposition as the *signifier*, *significant*, and *signified*, *signifie*, speaking (parole) and the common language (langue), the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, and also the diachronic and the synchronic (Ratna, 2008, pp. 98-99). Saussure describes the two inseparable sides as a sheet of paper that is cut by scissors. To him, there is no sound without thought and also there is no thought without sound. The inseparability of the signified (mental concept) and the signifier (material aspect) leads Saussure to offer the following figure one.

Figure 1. Saussure's concept of sign



Source: Adapted from de Saussure (1983, p. 66) as cited in (Yakin & Totu, 2014)

The relation between the signified and the signifier (signification) is completing and supporting each other. It is like the two sides of a coin where the signified on the one side and the signifier on the other side.

Barthes developed significant-signifie theory from Saussure to be a theory of grammar and its connotation meaning. The significant term was changed to be expression(E) and the signifie changed to be content (C). According to Barthes theory, every ideological sign is either a denotative or a connotative sign system. To Barthes, connotation is the “tone” of a text, the manner which has been decorated.” In the final analysis, the signified of a “connotative sign” is for Barthes the “fragment of an ideology,” the signified, in turn, a “rhetoric,” both going back to a “real system” via metalanguage obviously even here no differences made between communication and indication. Thus, for him anything which furnishes meaning becomes a sign, and any group of sign becomes a system, although neither the existence of an intention to communicate, not of a complete sign inventory, nor of combination of rules or opposing features, is proven. A denotative sign which is a strictly descriptive system is the result of the signifier image and the signified concept combining. In other words, the apple is the signifier, and healthy is the signified. Besides, a connotative sign has lost its historical meaning. This could be due to a number of things: changes in culture or terminology, an event, or even just evolution. Barthes’ framework helped us to identify those non-verbal linguistic signals used on social media during the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon and what they mean in the context of this crisis. Glance from the above theory shows that the study of semiotic lays on signifier, signified, sign and symbol. They are understood through connotative or denotative meaning. This theory helped the researchers to analyse the no-verbal posts during the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

### **3. Data Collection**

The data (from 2017 to 2022) was collected from online pictures on The British Broadcasting Corporation, Human Rights Watch, *Journal du Cameroun*, Phoenix, Pan African Visions, and The Guardian Newspaper. A total of 11 nonverbal posts were collected and each of these portrays the gathering of women who are engaged in the fight for peace to return back in the Southern Cameroons. The researchers used a purposive sampling technique to select posts that bear nonverbal signals which suit the study and analysed the data using qualitative methods.

#### 4. Data Analysis

This section focuses on the analysis of the data using Barthes theory of semiotic.



*Figure 1.* Women protest in Bamaneda, Cameroon in response to attack on local Presbyterian school of science and technology

*Source:* Africa Center for Strategic Studies. October, 26<sup>th</sup> 2018. p.1

It is clear from picture one that women are sitting on the ground carrying the “Nkeng” (peace plant). This peace plant is used in the North West Region of Cameroon to settle disputes. In the context of this study, it signifies peace and justice. In other words, these women are saying that let there be peace. Peace should reign in the war zones. This is justified by the message on the banner they are holding which reads “***ALL FORCES CEASE FIRE.***”

Another noticeable feature of this banner is the yellow colour which stands for optimism. Yellow to Paint Company Glidden is truly joyous and virtuous in its purest form. Yellow exudes warmth, inspiration, and vitality and it is the happiest of all colours. Yellow signifies communication, enlightenment, sunlight, and spirituality. If your favourite colour is yellow, this indicates that you look forward to the future and that you are intellectual, highly imaginative, and idealistic. You tend to have a cheerful spirit and have an expectation of greater happiness.

If we link the above analysis to the picture above, we can say that these women are foresighted as they see beyond the present moment. As intellectuals, they are highly imaginative, idealistic, and optimistic. They have cheerful spirits and an expectation of greater happiness. This explains why they are calling on all forces to cease fire so that there can be happiness and peace as it was before October 2016.



Figure 2. Women engage in seeking peaceful solutions to Anglophone crisis.

*Source:* Journal du Cameroun, March, 19<sup>th</sup>2019.

Just like figure one, this picture equally shows women sitting on the ground holding boards that are messages calling for peace. There are also peace plants on the ground which in their tradition and culture symbolise peace. This plant is used to settle disputes between people who are not at peace. The expression on the faces of these women tells it all. They need peace. It is justified by the inscriptions on the boards they are carrying. For example, the first message on the first board reads:

*SNWOT*  
*“AGAINST RAPE”*

*Daughters aren't*  
*objects for rape!*  
*STOP THE RAPES*



It is worth noting that some of the expressions used on this board are capitalised. This is to show how urgent it is for peace to return to the two English speaking regions so that rapes can stop. More to this, we also notice that some of the writing is bold. This is to draw the attention of Cameroonians and the world at large to the plight of the population of these regions. That is, how girls are raped in these regions. Similarly, the second board also carries messages. One of them (“PEACE”) is capitalised. This is to draw the attention of the warring parties and the international community to the need for peace to reign. This board also reads “War is costly but PEACE is priceless.” Once more, peace is capitalised. From this message, we see that war is costly but when it comes to peace, it cannot be bought. The message is an indication that peace is what these women are craving.



*Figure 3: Anglophone Cameroonians looking for a way to get to talk.*

**Source:** Sam Giltlitz; March, 21<sup>st</sup> 2022.

Just like the pictures above, one notices a woman, accompanied by many people, carrying a peace plant (Nkeng) which stands for peace and justice. Also, this woman is holding a board with the inscription, “*NO TO ANGLOPHONE MARGINALISATION.*” It is worth noting that the writer of this message has not only capitalized “*NO TO ANGLOPHONE*” but has equally bold it. This is a call to the powers that be to see that the marginalization Anglophones are going through should be solved peacefully, justified by the peace plant this woman is holding.



*Figure 4.* Women sit during a protest demanding an end to violence between government forces and armed separatists, in Bamenda, Cameroon

**Source:** Moki Edwin Kindzeka, 2022

Figure four shows women sitting on the ground with their feet stretched out. One of them is bending the head with her two hands on her legs. This is to show that these women are tired of what they are going through. There is also another woman who is equally sitting on the ground with her hands crossed. She too is tired of the situation in her community. The women are carrying boards with written messages such as “*ALL FORCES CEASE FIRE*” and “*WOMEN NEED PEACE.*” These messages are written in capital letters to show the seriousness of the situation at hand. Furthermore, the facial expressions of these women show that they need peace at all cost. The scene as portrayed in the picture and in the analysis is a call for concern aimed at telling the world what people in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon are going through.



Figure 5. Anglophone Cameroonians protest after gunmen opened fire at school, killing at least six children in Kumba, Cameroon.

Source: Josiane Kouaheu, 25<sup>th</sup> 2020.

The picture above portrays women and men carrying banners with messages written on them which read:

1. *We need pens not guns.*(figure 5)

It should be noted that this message is capitalised so as to draw the attention of the public to the plight of the suffering population of these regions. In addition to this, we also have the use of the inclusive pronoun “we”. This is to say the people need peace. Pens can only be used if the guns are not being fired all the times. In other words, *pens* symbolises educated people who can contribute to bringing back peace without any use of guns.

2. *We say no to violence.*(figure 5)

Just like the first sentence, this sentence is also capitalised. This is also done to attract the attention of the public to what is written on this board. Violence can only stop if there is peace.

3. *Enough is enough.*(figure 5)

From the above message, the impression one has is that these people are tired of what is happening in their communities. They can no longer bear it. The situation can only be normalized if there is peace.

4. *I'm Kumba. Children's lives matter!!!(figure 5)*

This message is a wake-up call to the warring parties that the lives of children are as important as the lives of other human beings. Children deserve the right to live. They are not to be killed as if they are animals.



Figure 6. African alliance of YMCA message on the ongoing Cameroon Anglophone crisis

*Source:* International Crisis Group, May, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019.

The picture above shows women dressed in black. According to Jouve (2000, pp. 49-54) quoted by Eka' Aban (2009, p. 60), colours are highly suggestive and representative. For this reason, meaning should be bestowed on them. This implies that they are not chosen at random, they stand for something else. The black colour symbolises “death, darkness, mourning, fear, misfortune, and loneliness.” The picture above is a depiction of death, darkness, mourning, fear, misfortune, and loneliness. This is justified by the dead man we see in this picture lying in a pool of blood on the ground, by the expression on the faces of the women as they are mourning, the destroyed buildings, and the man whose leg has been amputated and children left homeless. Due to fear of the unknown, the women are calling for dialogue as seen on one of the boards they are holding which reads, “*DIALOGUE. Yes to DIALOGUE*”(figure 6). This writing shows the need for dialogue to take place so that this peace can live in peace.



*Figure 7.* Women from North West region of Cameroon gather to call for an end  
*Source:* Boris Esono Nwenfor. Sept.7<sup>th</sup> 2018

Just like other pictures above, one can see women sitting on the ground and holding peace plants. Some are singing songs-mournful and peaceful songs. Mournful songs show the difficult moments they are currently going through. They are living without their family members. This explains why they want their children and husbands back home who have been arrested may be for crimes they have not committed by the Cameroon military. Also, they are singing peaceful songs because they are tired of living in fear, and loneliness and without their families. The expression and message this picture is sending to the public is that there should be peace.



*Figure 8:* Women protesting against violence in Southern Cameroons.  
*Source:* Journal du Cameroun, 2017

The picture is a gloomy one as expressed on the faces of the women, their crossed legs, and hands, a woman supporting the waist with one hand and the other hand holding the leg, and a woman supporting her chin with the hand. This is to say these women are mourning. The sadness expressed on the faces of these women is justified by the message we find on the board on the women which is written in capital letters. It should be noted that some of these women are dressed in black. Also, they have head ties and wrappers around their waists to show that they are mourning their children and husbands who are not with them.



**Figure 9.** Women in Bamenda crying for the return of peace

**Source:** Theophile, 2022

The first thing that catches one's attention from this picture is the cries of the women as illustrated with the woman holding the board painted white and others. She is not only crying but also pointing in an unknown direction. This is a call for help. Furthermore, the woman near her is on her knees, perhaps praying to God to help them. The atmosphere in this picture is a sad one as seen on the faces of these women. For this reason, they need peace. This is because "As women, we are partners for PEACE and DEVELOPMENT." Moreover, "We refuse to be quiet in the face of chaos." (**Figure9**)

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the types of non-verbal signals used on social media posts during the Anglophone crisis. The analysis revealed that peace plants, boards, dresses (black), banners, body and facial signs, and the use of black, yellow, and white colours were found on the posts. These signs and symbols were used to call upon the belligerents to ceasefire so that peace should come back in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. The findings of this study are similar to that of Nouhou (2022) who found that the messages on WhatsApp and Facebook promoted peace, social cohesion, and living together. Seen from this perspective, one can strongly aver that the quest for peace in this part of Cameroon is indispensable for peace, social cohesion, and living in oneness as was the case before 2016. However, his study differs from this one in that it did not look into non-verbal signals and what they signify which is the focus of this work. However, Naif's (2020) results diverge from the ones of the present study and the one of Nouhou (2022) in the sense that Naif's findings (2020) showed that the use of some statements was full of denotative meaning and/ or highlight other denotative meaning potentials from a decontextualized image caricature.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined nonverbal linguistic signals used on social media during the Anglophone crisis from 2017 to 2022. The findings indicated that nonverbal linguistic signals were used to express peace and the end of the crisis through dialogue. Moreover, these signals showed that Anglophone Cameroonians are tired of their precarious condition, and as such they brand boards that carry messages of peace to sensitize the world about what is happening in the North West and South West Regions. Some of the posts portray the killings, rapes, arrests, and burnings going on in their communities. The most popular slang is that war is costly but peace is priceless. It should be therefore maintained that nonverbal linguistic signals can play an important role during conflicts as is the case with the armed conflict in the North West and South West Regions. They are used to pass across multiple messages to the public thanks to social media which has become entirely part of the present world. The researchers noticed that women are more engaged in looking for peace than men. From the twelve sampled pictures, only one showed a young boy crying for peace in Douala's street. The researchers therefore concluded that everyone should take measures for peace to return back not only in the Southern Cameroons but in Cameroon as a whole. Thus it is a call for all men to look for peace at all costs for, without peace, our lives have no existence.

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