

Paul Biya The Force Of Experience

An Explanation Beyond Translations

■ Culled from "CAMEROON REALCLEAR POLITICS" - By Geof Tanyi*

Since the unveiling of candidate Paul Biya's slogan, "The Force of Experience", a number of linguists and professional translators have raised the argument that there was a "translation mistake" from the French to the English version. They hold that the appropriate translation should have been "the power of experience", "the strength of experience", or even "experience is the best teacher".

Such criticisms, whose objectives are to distract, digress and discredit the Biya Campaign, or simply to seek for notice, have only begged for a number of questions. Is the expression "The Force of Experience" good English or Frenchified English? Is it effective sloganeering in political communication? What meaning does it convey to the ordinary English-speaking voters in the context of the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon?

1. The Force of Experience is Very Good English!

It is preposterous for any person who passes for a language expert to state that the phrase "Force of Experience" is a "mistake" in the English language! For any professional whose stock-in-trade is the appropriate use of language (translator, journalist, lawyer, diplomat, linguist), the first thing to do in case of doubt is to resort to dictionaries. Therefore, whether we consult the Webster, Oxford, Cambridge, Collins English language dictionaries, the definitions of "force" include both "mental or moral strength" and the "capacity to persuade or convince". It is therefore common in good English for people to talk about "the force of public opinion", "the force of character", "the force of one's personality", and of course, "the force of experience". It is not in any way "Frenchified English" as claimed by self-proclaimed language whistle-blowers in the social media. Because of its "moral strength" and "capacity to convince", the use of the word "force" within the context of an election campaign only seems more appropriate than any of its other synonyms such as "strength", "power", "energy", "current" in formulating a slogan.

It is clear, at least from the meaning attributed by various dictionaries, that the phrase "Force of Experience" is very good English and should be used with no apologies to "citizen translators" seeking for cheap publicity in the social media. That notwithstanding, the false alarm by such Google-driven social media translators have even raised a deeper concern about how the public perceives the policy process in Cameroon. What makes our language experts think that the original version of the slogan was not in English, especially since it is good English, and it is the French version which is a translation? Had the slogan been originally formulated in English, could the translation into the French as "La Force de l'Expérience" been a problem?

The false alarm by our social media language experts is a sterile argument as the phrase "the Force of Experience" is understood by any English-speaker anywhere in the world in the meaning attributed to it by the various English language dictionaries. It is in no way, a bastardised English, and I can only invite our social media language experts to consult their English dictionaries.

2. The Force of Experience is Effective Sloganeering and Political Communication.

Without undermining the expertise of our linguists and professional translators, it is important to understand that sloganeering is essentially political communication and not an exercise in translation. American political communication expert, William Safire, for instance, holds that: "Good slogans have rhyme, rhythm, or alliteration to make them memorable". Such is the case with the slogan, "The Force of Experience".

Linguists and broadcast journalists will agree with me that the rhyme, rhythm, and alliterations in "ce" in the key words of force and experience make the slogan smooth, memorable and more adaptable to radio and TV political spots. Such effects and Sound bites could have been lost if synonyms such as "strength", "power", and "energy" advocated by the language experts were used. The translator of a political slogan should bear in mind that the main objective is effective political communication and not a scientific exercise in semantics. In all fairness, and in spite of their expertise, translators cannot be judgemental to the point of insinuating "mistakes" on issues that might be outside their competence, and which have received the sanctions of other experts. Contrary to public opinion, political communication has emerged as a distinct scientific discipline with its own corps of professionals who plan their products meticulously.

I will be surprised if an expert in political communication holds the view that even as a matter of form, the phrases: "Strength of Experience" and "Power of Experience" sound better for effective sloganeering than "Force of Experience". I will equally be surprised if a translator, specialised in political communication will hold the view that "The Force of Experience" is a mistake in the English language.

For the records, one of the most effective slogans in the English language in Cameroon's political history has been "The Force of Argument". It was formulated and adopted by the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) in April 1993 in Buea by some of the best and brightest of the Anglophone elite, including renowned linguists and professional translators.

The slogan was not a translation from the French as it was thought out, formulated and adopted in English. The collective knowledge of these Anglophone elite never thought the slogan sounded French because they did not use phrases such as "the Power of Argument" or "the Strength of Argument". On the contrary, the "Force of Argument", has remained one of the most effective English language slogans in Cameroon because it encapsulates the "capacity to convince and persuade" alluded to by the various English language dictionaries.

3. Explaining Paul Biya: the Force of Experience

From the explanations above, it is clear that the slogan "The Force of Experience" is both good English and effective political commu-

nication. But it goes beyond that because it carries a very powerful message. It shows that the Biya Campaign Team respects the other candidates and their programmes they present to the Cameroonian electorate. That notwithstanding, the Biya Campaign Team expects that experience in the management of public affairs will remain the dividing line among the candidates.

It is candidate Paul Biya's experience, especially in a moment of crisis that will be the final, determining, and decisive factor in the choice for the next president. Such experience encompasses wisdom, tolerance, and historical understanding of issues, which other candidates in the race do not have. Experience, therefore, as a "force", has the capacity to persuade and convince in an overriding manner, why the voters would choose candidate Biya among the other candidates.

Beyond the effectiveness of the word "force" for radio and TV political spots, there is a significant difference in its favour over other synonyms like "strength" and "power" advocated by our language experts. While these words best describe latent energy, "force" describes more dynamic and activated energy that could overcome or override any obstacles. The example of the Lion, which has been used in other campaigns to describe candidate Biya's fighting spirit is illustrative. While asleep, the lion's strength and power are latent but, when it wakes up, it uses its force to overcome and conquer its opponents.

Political communication experts have identified

five main types of slogans: promissory slogans, warning slogans, change slogans, emotional slogans, and rational slogans. Interesting, all of these are in the mixed grill of the current 2018 presidential campaign.

The strength of the Biya Campaign, however, is based on an honest appeal to voters to make rational choices after examining his records and achievements. Such rational sloganeering based on a candidate's records reminds one of the 1960 Nixon-Lodge presidential campaign in the US, or the 2011 Cuomo Gubernatorial in New York, built around the slogan "Experience Counts".

Finally, the meaning in English of "The Force of Experience" to the ordinary voter, therefore, seems to be that: after due considerations of the strengths and weaknesses of all the candidates, Paul Biya is convincingly and irresistibly the best choice.

Candidate Biya's experience, as a force, overcomes, overrides and is decisive in any rational choice of the next president. This slogan, and the message it carries, is, therefore, understood by Anglophone voters in plain, simple, good and original English, "independently" of whatever translation experts might have seen in the French version. Such is the essence of effective sloganeering in political communication.

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