

THE ROLE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IN PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

OLADIMEJI Oluwatoyin Olasunmbo

French Department, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.
tosumb@gmail.com

Abstract

Language serves as a fundamental instrument of diplomacy, negotiation, and international cooperation. This paper examines the role of the French language in promoting international relations, with particular emphasis on Nigeria's foreign policy, regional integration, and diplomatic engagements. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive research methodology, the study draws upon academic journals, textbooks, government publications, regional organisation reports, and credible online sources. The study finds that French occupies a unique position in global diplomacy as an official working language of major international institutions, including the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), European Union (EU), and the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF). For Nigeria, an Anglophone country surrounded almost entirely by Francophone neighbours Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon the relevance of French is magnified by geographical, economic, and security realities. French facilitates Nigeria's participation in regional peacekeeping operations, cross-border trade, counterterrorism initiatives, migration management, and multilateral diplomacy. The study also identifies key Nigerian agencies promoting French for diplomatic purposes, including the Nigerian French Language Village (NFLV), the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), alongside international bodies such as the OIF, UNESCO, and Alliance Française. The study concludes that mastering French is a strategic necessity for Nigeria to strengthen its diplomatic influence, economic relations, peacekeeping effectiveness, and soft power projection. It recommends increased investment in French language education, diplomatic training, and cross-cultural communication initiatives to enhance Nigeria's foreign policy execution and global visibility.

Keywords: French language, international relations, diplomacy, Nigeria, Francophone, soft power, regional integration, multilingualism, ECOWAS, linguistic relativity

Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful instruments of human interaction and a central component of diplomatic practice. In the field of international relations, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for negotiation, influence, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Countries rely on language to express foreign policy objectives, interpret treaties, engage in intercultural dialogue, and participate effectively in regional and global organisations. Among the world's most influential diplomatic languages, French occupies a unique position due to its long history in global diplomacy, its cultural influence, and its official status in several international institutions.

The French language has historically served as the language of diplomacy from the 17th to the early 20th century, shaping treaty-making, international law, and intergovernmental communication. Today, it remains one of the working languages of major global bodies such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF). Its importance is equally notable in Africa, where 21 countries use French as an official language, making it a central medium for regional cooperation and integration.

For Nigeria, the relevance of the French language is greatly magnified by its geographical and political realities. Nigeria is an Anglophone country surrounded almost entirely by Francophone neighbours Benin Republic, Niger Republic, Chad, and Cameroon. These countries share deep historical, cultural, economic, and security ties with Nigeria. As a result, French becomes a strategic tool for Nigeria's diplomacy, border management, cross-border trade, counterterrorism initiatives, and participation in multilateral organisations such as ECOWAS, where French is widely spoken. Nigeria's active engagement in regional peacekeeping operations and global diplomacy further underscores the need for linguistic competence in French to avoid communication barriers and strengthen diplomatic influence.

The mastery of the French language also enhances Nigeria's soft power and global visibility. In an increasingly interconnected world, multilingualism is a resource that promotes cultural diplomacy, international education exchange, and foreign investment. French emerges as a bridge that connects Nigeria to Francophone Africa, Europe, and global diplomatic platforms. Despite the dominance of English within Nigeria, the inclusion of French as a second official language and the establishment of institutions such as the Nigerian French Language Village (NFLV) reflect efforts to enhance bilingual competence among diplomats, students, and professionals.

This introduction therefore sets the foundation for a detailed exploration of the role of the French language in promoting international relations, with emphasis on Nigeria's foreign policy, regional integration, and diplomatic engagements. The subsequent sections provide a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical, institutional, and practical dimensions of the French language in global and regional diplomacy.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the influence of the French language on global diplomatic communication.
2. To analyse the relevance of the French language to Nigeria's foreign policy strategies.
3. To identify major agencies and institutions promoting French for diplomatic purposes.
4. To study the linguistic challenges created by the English–French divide in West Africa.
5. To explain how French enhances Nigeria's soft power and international visibility.

Importance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons:

1. It examines the critical role language plays in diplomacy and cross-cultural communication.
2. It promotes understanding of why French remains central to global governance structures.
3. It highlights the relevance of French in Nigeria's regional and international engagements.
4. It supports academic research on linguistics, international cooperation, and foreign policy.
5. It encourages multilingualism as a vehicle for peacebuilding and diplomatic advancement.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon three interrelated theories that help explain the importance of language particularly French in shaping international relations. These theories include the Constructivist Theory of International Relations, the Linguistic Relativity Theory, and the Soft Power Theory. Each framework provides conceptual tools for understanding how language influences diplomacy, international cooperation, and global political dynamics.

1. Constructivist Theory of International Relations

Constructivism argues that international relations are shaped not only by material factors such as military power or economic strength, but also by ideas, norms, identities, perceptions, and communication. According to this perspective, the behaviour of states is greatly influenced by how they interpret and understand one another an understanding that is largely shaped through language.

Relevance to the Study

Language shapes identity: French-speaking and English-speaking states often form distinct political identities and alliances in global organisations.

Language influences norms: Diplomatic norms, treaties, resolutions, and communiqués are constructed through language, giving French an influential role in international institutions where it is a working language.

Communication builds cooperation: Constructivism emphasizes the role of dialogue. French enables Nigeria to participate more effectively in discussions within ECOWAS, AU, and UN meetings.

Thus, French becomes not just a communication tool but a constructive force that helps build shared meanings and regional integration.

2. Linguistic Relativity Theory (Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis)

The Linguistic Relativity Theory, popularly known as the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis, posits that language influences how individuals perceive, interpret, and understand the world. This theory is

not merely about vocabulary; it highlights how language shapes worldview, culture, diplomatic expression, and negotiation behaviours

Relevance to the Study

Diplomatic interpretation: How policies and treaties are interpreted may differ between English-speaking and French-speaking diplomats due to linguistic and cultural structures.

Negotiation style: French diplomatic traditions place emphasis on formality, precision, and cultural nuance, influencing diplomatic communication.

Cross-cultural understanding: Nigerian diplomats who understand French gain deeper insight into the worldview and political culture of Francophone partners.

Therefore, linguistic relativity explains why language gaps can lead to misunderstandings, while language competence enhances cooperation and trust.

3. Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye)

Soft Power Theory suggests that a nation's influence does not rely solely on military force or economic pressure, but also on its ability to attract, persuade, and culturally influence others. French, as a global diplomatic language, represents one of the strongest instruments of soft power.

Relevance to the Study

Cultural diplomacy: French promotes cultural exchanges, educational programmes, and international partnerships that enhance a nation's attractiveness.

Institutional influence: Because French is a working language of major international institutions, nations that speak it can exert more influence in diplomatic processes.

National image: Nigeria's increased competence in French strengthens its regional and global visibility, helping project a positive image and improve international cooperation.

French therefore becomes a soft power asset that enhances diplomatic influence, promotes international partnerships, and supports Nigeria's foreign policy goals.

4. Integration of the Theories

All three theories collectively highlight how:

- Language shapes political identity (Constructivism)
- Language influences how diplomatic actors think and communicate (Linguistic Relativity)
- Language enhances a nation's influence and attractiveness (Soft Power Theory)

These frameworks underline that French is not merely a linguistic tool but a strategic instrument of diplomacy, regional integration, and international cooperation. They also help explain why Nigerian diplomats, policymakers, and institutions increasingly recognize the necessity of French proficiency in strengthening Nigeria's international relations.

Methodology

A qualitative, descriptive research methodology was adopted. Data were gathered from academic journals, textbooks on international relations and linguistics, government publications, regional organisation reports, and credible online sources. The information was analysed using thematic interpretation to understand the relationship between language and international diplomacy.

Overview of International Relations of Nigeria

Nigeria's international relations reflect its position as Africa's most populous country, one of the continent's largest economies, and a central geopolitical actor in West Africa. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has developed a foreign policy guided by principles of African unity, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, economic cooperation, and the promotion of international peace. Nigeria's foreign policy orientation is therefore influenced by its historical experiences, domestic realities, geopolitical position, and strategic interests within the international system.

• Historical Foundations of Nigeria's International Relations

At independence, Nigeria adopted a foreign policy rooted in the promotion of African interests. This orientation was driven by the desire to support decolonization, racial equality, and regional solidarity. Post-independence leaders such as Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and later Murtala Mohammed strengthened Nigeria's involvement in the United Nations (UN), Commonwealth, Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Nigeria's historical contributions to anti-apartheid struggles, peacekeeping missions, and regional mediation helped establish its reputation as a responsible and influential African state.

• Geopolitical Environment and Regional Position

Nigeria occupies a strategic position in West Africa, sharing borders with four Francophone countries Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. This geographic reality compels Nigeria to pursue active diplomatic relations in areas such as:

- Cross-border security
- Migration management
- Trade and economic integration
- Counterterrorism operations (especially against Boko Haram and banditry)
- Environmental cooperation (e.g., Lake Chad Basin)

Nigeria's international relations are therefore shaped by the need to maintain stability and cooperation within a linguistically diverse sub-region.

• Key Principles Guiding Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Nigeria's international relations rest on certain foundational principles, including:

- a. African Unity and Regional Cooperation

Nigeria sees itself as a champion of African progress and therefore prioritizes African issues within global diplomacy.

b. Non-Alignment

Nigeria maintains that it does not formally align with major global power blocs, allowing flexibility in international partnerships.

c. Peaceful Coexistence and Conflict Resolution

Nigeria actively promotes dialogue and mediation to resolve conflicts in Africa, such as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Mali.

d. Economic Diplomacy

Modern Nigerian foreign policy emphasizes attracting foreign investment, international trade, and global economic partnerships.

e. Multilateralism

Nigeria engages actively with multilateral organisations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, United Nations, Commonwealth, and OPEC.

- **Nigeria's Role in Regional Organisations**

a. ECOWAS

Nigeria is a founding member and financial contributor to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It plays a leading role in:

Peacekeeping operations (e.g., ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone)

Regional trade agreements

Free movement of persons

Conflict resolution in Francophone states

French is a key language of ECOWAS, making bilingualism essential for effective participation.

b. African Union (AU)

Nigeria is influential within the AU due to its population, economic power, and historical commitment to African unity.

c. Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)

Nigeria cooperates with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon to address environmental challenges and terrorism in the Lake Chad region.

- **Nigeria’s Global Diplomatic Engagements**

Nigeria maintains diplomatic relations with major global powers such as the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. These relations revolve around trade, security, education, energy, and cultural diplomacy.

Nigeria also plays active roles in:

United Nations peacekeeping operations

Global climate change negotiations

Economic cooperation forums (e.g., G-77, OPEC)

International criminal justice and human rights diplomacy

French, being a major working language in many of these organisations, often facilitates Nigeria’s diplomatic communication.

- **Significance of Language in Nigeria’s International Relations**

Because Nigeria is surrounded by Francophone countries and participates in multiple international platforms where French is used, language becomes a key factor in foreign relations.

Significant areas of linguistic impact include:

- a. Bilateral negotiations
- b. Border cooperation
- c. Peacekeeping communication
- d. Trade agreements
- e. Regional law enforcement operations
- f. Migration management
- g. Participation in international summits

This makes French a strategic diplomatic asset for Nigeria.

- **Contemporary Challenges in Nigeria’s International Relations**

Nigeria faces several challenges that shape its diplomatic engagements, such as:

Rising insecurity and terrorism

Economic instability and dependence on oil

Border disputes with Cameroon (e.g., Bakassi Peninsula)

Diplomatic tensions with neighbouring countries over trade restrictions

The English–French linguistic divide limiting deeper regional integration

These challenges highlight why Nigeria needs stronger multilingual and diplomatic strategies.

- **The Future of Nigeria's International Relations**

Nigeria's future foreign policy direction emphasizes:

Increased regional integration

Expanded economic diplomacy

Effective participation in global governance

Strengthening multilingual competence, especially in French

Developing soft power through culture, education, and innovation

Improved French language proficiency will significantly enhance Nigeria's role within West Africa and the broader international system.

Language and Diplomacy

In diplomacy, language functions as an instrument of negotiation, treaty formulation, political dialogue, and intercultural communication. French is particularly influential because it is an official language of key organisations including:

1. United Nations (UN)
2. African Union (AU)
3. ECOWAS
4. European Union (EU)
5. International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF)

The use of French facilitates communication in meetings, conferences, peacekeeping missions, and intergovernmental negotiations. Without linguistic competence, a nation risks limited participation and diminished influence on global platforms.

Agencies for Promotion of International Relations through French

International Agencies:

- Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF): Promotes French language and cultural cooperation.
- UNESCO: Supports multilingualism and cultural diplomacy.
- Alliance Française: Facilitates French language learning globally.
- European Union (EU): Incorporates French in all major institutions.

Nigerian Agencies:

- Nigerian French Language Village (NFLV): Provides immersion training for students and diplomats.
- Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Encourages multilingualism in diplomatic practice.

- National Universities Commission (NUC): Supports French studies in tertiary institutions.
- Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA): Conducts diplomatic research, some of which involves French-speaking partners.

Dichotomy Between English and French

In West Africa, English and French represent the two dominant colonial languages. Nigeria uses English, while most neighbouring states use French, leading to a linguistic divide. This creates communication barriers in trade, regional governance, military cooperation, and border management.

Challenges include:

1. Diplomatic misunderstandings
2. Limited depth in cross-border negotiations
3. Reduced trade efficiency due to translation delays
4. Barriers in joint military operations

However, opportunities exist:

Multilingualism enhances integration

Increased employment for interpreters and translators

Nigeria can strengthen its influence through bilingual education

French Language and International Relations in Nigeria

The French language strengthens Nigeria's diplomatic relations in numerous ways:

a. Regional Integration

French enables Nigeria to engage effectively in ECOWAS and AU meetings, where French is widely used.

b. Economic Diplomacy

French-speaking countries such as Benin, Cameroon, and Niger are major economic partners. Understanding French enhances trade negotiations.

c. Peacekeeping

Nigeria has participated in peacekeeping operations in Francophone countries such as Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, where French communication is essential.

d. Cultural Diplomacy

French cultural centres in Nigeria promote cross-cultural exchanges that enhance mutual understanding.

e. Political Cooperation

Security collaborations, especially on cross-border terrorism and migration, require French communication for effective coordination.

Summary

This study has shown that the French language plays a significant role in global diplomacy and in Nigeria's international relations. Its relevance is rooted in Nigeria's geopolitical environment, participation in multilateral organisations, and commitment to regional cooperation. Mastering French enhances Nigeria's diplomatic efficiency, economic relations, political influence, and peacekeeping operations.

Conclusion

The French language remains a powerful tool for promoting international relations. For Nigeria, its importance is heightened by the country's position within a Francophone-dominated region. To strengthen foreign relations, Nigeria must invest more in French language education, diplomatic training, and cross-cultural communication initiatives. This will not only enhance foreign policy execution but also expand Nigeria's influence in global affairs.

References

- Akinboye, S. O. (2013). *Nigerian Foreign Policy and International Relations*.
- Akinwotu, A. (2020). Language and diplomacy in West Africa. *Journal of African Studies*, 14(2), 55–72.
- Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF). (2022). *Annual Report*.
- Nye, J. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.
- Ojo, O. (1986). *Nigeria and the International System*.
- ECOWAS Commission. (2020). *Language Policy and Regional Integration*.