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BEYOND COMMUNICATION: LEVERAGING FRENCH LANGUAGE FOR GOVERNANCE, SECURITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Abstract:

In an increasingly interconnected world, language has grown beyond a mere tool for communication. Language, now more than ever is becoming a tool for diplomacy, regional integration and access to scarce economic resources. In Africa, French Language occupies a significant place as an official or working language in many countries. In regional bodies as well, French language serves not just a communicative role, but as a significant tool for diplomacy and policy. This work examines how French Language can be leveraged for improved integration and sustained development across the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing from examples in several parts of Africa, this paper aims to establish the multifaceted advantage of French language for institutional integration and cooperation, diplomatic engagement and economic development. The paper further investigates the contribution of French Language to security in terms of intelligence sharing, prevention of conflict and combat against terrorism. The paper also delves into the advantages that French Language offers for individual, regional and national economic development. This paper argues that French language can be a viable tool to build and consolidate regional partnerships as well as offer access to global opportunities. The paper also addresses challenges such as educational disparities, linguistic inequalities and a need for language policies that take into consideration the multilingual characteristic of many African nations. By presenting French Language as not merely a tool for communication but as a strong tool for strong economic gains, improved security and governance in Africa, the paper aims to contribute to discussions on language policy, regional integration and strategic development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Language, French Language, Security, Governance, Policy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The primary function of language is for communication. Verbal or non-verbal, language serves as a means of conveying intentions, culture etc. It sits squarely in the middle of all human endeavours. In recent times however, language has taken other roles as not just a means for communication among members of the same linguistic community. Language has overtime developed into a tool for diplomacy and political power. In many international organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union, ECOWAS etc, multilingualism is an essential requirement for those aspiring to work in these organisations (Knowledge Hub, 2025). The demand for multilingualism underscores the role of language for achieving diplomatic purposes and intentions.



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Although English language remains a major language of communication across the world, French language has also retained its position as a diplomatic language as is seen in its use in many international organisation. What the French Language lacks in the total number of its speakers, it makes up for in the number of countries who claim the language either as an official language or a working language. In Africa, the African Union, Economic Community of West African States, West African Economic and Monetary Union list French alongside other languages as their official language. With twenty- one (21) countries having French as their official or working language, and three (3) countries having a sizable number of French language speakers, the number of countries that speak French language make it impossible to deny its' potential as a catalyst for development in sub-saharan Africa. In many African countries, Nigeria inclusive the teaching of French language is restricted to classrooms, wit many students having no communication competencies after school. This is due largely to the limited understanding of the powers of learning to speak French language in a diverse continent as Africa.

This paper sets out to examine the role of French language in governance in sub-saharan Africa, its impact on economic development and its contribution to regional security. The paper sets out to answer such questions as :

- How French language facilitates governance in multilingual states?
- How does French Language contribute to regional security cooperation?
- How does French Language contribute to economic development?

2.0 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the concept of language as a social capital resting on the linguistic capital theory. Propounded by Bourdieu (1986), linguistic capital theory views language as a form of capital in the society. Bourdieu (2000) states that “language forms a kind of wealth”. This theory considers linguistic competence as much needed capital which puts anyone who lacks it at a disadvantage in every aspect of human life. The linguistic capital theory is linked to the theory of regional integration to establish how regional integration brings about much needed development in sub-saharan Africa.

The theory of regional integration posits that countries that share borders, share problems. The theory proposes that when countries in the same geographical region cooperate in certain technological or economic sectors, their joint problems soon become resolved as a result of their cooperation. Regional integration theory while recognizing the sovereignty and individuality of countries proposes that for the greater good, countries should pool together their sovereign will to address their common challenges.

Data used in this paper is drawn from secondary data available from the World Bank as well as the National Bureau of Statistics. Reference is also made to relevant scholarly articles and publications.

3.0 FRENCH LANGUAGE FOR SECURITY COLLABORATION

Recent happenings in many African countries point to the fact that insecurity is steadily on the rise. Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and others in other parts of Africa continue to face skirmishes, armed banditry, kidnappings etc. Cantens (2019) notes that more than 60% of religious armed groups happen in the borders of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. He points out that the borders of several African countries are largely “porous” and ungoverned. This makes border communities a soft target for armed terrorism and banditry. Cantens notes that governments in Africa often concentrate security efforts to major cities and hubs, while leaving the borders without as much security as is provided in the city centres. As a result of this the insecurity at the borders,



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economic activities which could be a major source of development for the countries is greatly affected. Armed bandits take advantage of the scant security apparatus in border communities to overpower the limited security agents in the borders and hold communities to ransom.

Governments have tried to address this issue of insecurity at the borders by restricting movement and means of transportation, but as has been noted, many times the restriction on means of transportation and movements turn out to harm regular citizens going about their legitimate business. This restriction also causes delay in getting goods to the intended markets across borders, resulting often in loss as a result of perishable goods getting spoilt before reaching the market.

In a study carried out by Ihekuna, Anyanwu & Emela (2024) to assess the influence of French language in Abia State, Nigeria, the researchers found that the perpetrators of crime in the city often communicated in French language in order to engage in discussions without being detected. The inability of residents including security officials to comprehend the language of communication used by the miscreants makes it possible for them to plan and carry out nefarious activities without restraint.

Security experts have advised that countries like Nigeria should invest in training their security forces to speak in French language so as to foster collaboration between anglophone security forces and francophone security forces. All security agents such as the military, custom officers, the police and the forest guards should be encouraged and provided the needed support and resources to learn the French Language. This makes it possible to collaborate with the security apparatus of neighbouring countries in terms of intelligence sharing and unified plans and efforts to improve security concerns.

4.0 FRENCH LANGUAGE FOR CROSS-BORDER COMMUNICATION AND DIPLOMACY

Sawatech (2025) notes that Africa has the highest number of French language speakers with 25 countries having French either as an official language or a working language. Anthonia & Anthonia (2025) note that as a result of colonial influence, French Language remains a lingua franca across Africa despite its controversial position. Due to the multilingual nature of African countries, and a desire to find a common ground for communication, French language has not lost its place as a major language of communication among citizens of African countries. Sawatech (2025) points out that French language became popular in Africa as a result of the desire to find a common language to standardize administrative systems especially in former colonies of France. With time, French language moved from being merely a colonial identity to a tool for integration, “mobility and participation in global affairs”. In the West African region, Anthonia & Anthonia note that French is the most used language for diplomacy within ECOWAS and WAEMU. Among francophone member states of ECOWAS, French serves as a bridge despite linguistic differences. French serves as the language of instruction in classrooms, language of commerce across francophone borders and a binding force for francophone countries. Kohnert (2022) points out that French language serves not just as a tool for regional alignment but also as a “neo-colonial” tool to advance French economic and political agenda.

Dilaram (2025) notes that language plays a central role in diplomacy. It can be useful in building trust, reducing conflict and fostering cooperation among nations. Dilaram points out that language serves as a bridge, used for negotiation, cooperation and understanding between countries with diverse histories, ideologies and cultures. He notes however that the effectiveness of language as a bridge is largely dependent on the ability to use the language respectfully and strategically.



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5.0 LEVERAGING FRENCH LANGUAGE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In an article on Epsilon Publishers site, the author notes that French Language in the Africa has the number and cohesion that permits it to be a major force in economic activities and policies in Africa. With 25 countries actively using French language for economic processes, French language opens the door for collaboration and partnership not only with countries outside Africa, but also with other French speaking countries in Africa. Epsilon notes that French paves a way for partnership with other European countries, which in turn drives local market forces. It is noted that with the presence of such companies as Total Energies, Orange and Bolore, local business et to partner with these companies for economic partnerships that boost their overall performance. French language therefore serves as a facilitator for trade and investments.

The West African Monetary and Economic Union serves as a link providing much needed assistance either technologically or monetary to member states. As has been noted by Anthonia & Anthonia (2025) and Epsilon (2026), the official language of communication for all activities in the WAEMU is French. Ajewole (2025) citing Teibowei (2024) points out that language barrier forms a major barrier to economic partnerships between anglophone nations such as Nigeria. It must be noted that while government in an anglophone country like Nigeria may be able to somehow obtain partnership with francophone countries because of the ability to employ translators, the full benefits of economic partnership with neighbouring francophone countries cannot be enjoyed until regular citizens can also access these opportunities.

According to the World Bank, a nations economic health is directly tied to the economic health of her citizens. The World Bank notes that one major economic indicator is domestic and international trade. Data retrieved from Lloyd notes that 90% of Nigeria`s international trade is reliant on petroleum products, while agricultural products have a very minor percentage of total exports. Lloyd notes that as at 2023, Nigeria`s exports were mainly towards European countries such as Netherlands (12.6% of total exports), Spain (9.4%), India (8.4%), United States (7.5%), Indonesia (6.5%), and France (6.5%). Only Ivory Coast made it to the list of export partners with a paltry 3.8%. By the second quarter of 2025, the National Bureau of Statistics notes a tremendous growth in trade with neighbouring countries such as Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast. By 2025, Togo was recorded as the having the highest exports and imports to and from Nigeria with the figures sitting at 811.97bn for exports and 211.99bn in imports. Of the top partners of Nigeria, Togo and Ivory Coast, which are francophone countries are prominent with Ivory Coast only surpassed by South Africa. Recent data from the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) report shows that Nigeria recorded a 21% increase in regional trade moving from \$7.47 billion in 2024 to \$9.02 billion in 2025. This improvement has been attributed Nigeria`s “intensified focus on regional commerce and efforts to leverage opportunities created by the AfCFTA to lower trade barriers and expand export destinations across the continent.” Ekeghe (2026)

The National Bureau of Statistics notes that Nigeria is largely dependent on other countries in the region for both supply and access. The data, while showing a continuous growth towards established economic relations among countries in the West African region, shows that much ground still needs to be covered. In order to further improve trade relations especially between Nigeria`s closest neighbour, there is a need to consider surmounting the challenge of language barriers that hold back many regular citizens from attempting to expand their businesses beyond the shores of Nigeria. French language grants more market access, breaks the wall of distrust caused by language barrier and generally reduces the cost of doing business. The ability to communicate in French language has been fingered as the key to accessing a wider range of



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suppliers for raw materials, expands supply base and creates room for increased partnership with French based companies.

6.0 CONCLUSION

French language has evolved beyond its traditional communicative function to become a strategic resource for governance, regional integration, security cooperation, and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa. As demonstrated in this study, proficiency in French enhances diplomatic engagement, facilitates cross-border collaboration, strengthens intelligence sharing among security agencies, and expands opportunities for trade and investment within Africa and beyond. The paper also shows that despite its colonial origins, French has become an important instrument of regional cooperation, particularly within West Africa, where many neighbouring countries share it as an official language. However, maximizing these benefits requires deliberate investment in language education, practical bilingual training, and language policies that acknowledge Africa's multilingual character while promoting inclusion and equal opportunity.

Ultimately, leveraging French language should not be viewed as a cultural or educational objective alone, but as a strategic development policy capable of enhancing governance effectiveness, improving regional security, promoting economic competitiveness, and advancing Africa's integration agenda. For countries such as Nigeria, greater investment in functional French language proficiency among citizens, public institutions, and security personnel will not only strengthen relationships with neighbouring Francophone states but also position the country to take fuller advantage of emerging opportunities under regional and continental integration frameworks.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen French Language Education

Governments in Anglophone African countries, particularly Nigeria, should move beyond treating French as merely a school subject. French language education should be made more practical and competency-based, emphasizing speaking, listening, and professional communication skills. Teacher training, language laboratories, exchange programmes, and digital learning platforms should be expanded to improve proficiency.

2. Integrate French into Security Training

Security agencies—including the military, police, customs, immigration, and intelligence services—should incorporate French language training into their professional development programmes. This would improve intelligence sharing, joint border operations, and cooperation with neighbouring Francophone countries in combating terrorism, banditry, human trafficking, and transnational crime.

3. Promote Bilingualism in Public Service

Governments should encourage bilingualism among diplomats, civil servants, and public officials involved in regional cooperation. Competence in French would improve participation in regional organizations such as Economic Community of West African States and facilitate more effective policy implementation and diplomatic engagement.

4. Support Cross-Border Trade through Language Policy

Ministries of Trade, Commerce, and Education should collaborate to provide French language training for entrepreneurs, exporters, transport operators, and border communities. This would reduce communication barriers, increase market access, and improve participation in regional trade under the African Continental Free Trade Area.



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5. Develop Inclusive Multilingual Language Policies

While promoting French, governments should ensure that language policies respect Africa's multilingual reality. French should complement rather than replace indigenous African languages and English, thereby promoting inclusive governance, national unity, and equitable access to opportunities.

6. Expand Regional Academic and Professional Exchanges

Universities, research institutions, and professional bodies should establish more exchange programmes, joint research projects, and bilingual conferences involving Anglophone and Francophone countries. Such initiatives would strengthen regional integration while improving linguistic competence and knowledge transfer.

7. Encourage Private Sector Investment in Language Development

Businesses that engage in regional trade should invest in French language training for their workforce. This would improve negotiations, customer relations, and partnerships with Francophone markets, ultimately increasing competitiveness and economic growth.

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