

Leveraging the French Language in West African International Relations: Soft Power, Diplomatic Influence, and Regional Cooperation across Francophone and Non-Francophone States**Ayeni, Queen Olubukola**

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Abstract

The French language continues to play a strategic role in shaping international relations in West Africa, a region characterized by a linguistic divide between Francophone and non-Francophone states. Rooted in colonial history, the prevalence of French in diplomacy, education, and administration has granted it enduring influence in regional affairs. However, this linguistic legacy also presents challenges for inclusive communication, cooperation, and integration among diverse West African nations. This study examines how the French language is being leveraged as a tool of soft power and diplomatic influence, not only by Francophone states but also by non-Francophone actors seeking strategic entry into regional and international platforms dominated by French-speaking institutions. The research aims to explore the extent to which the French language facilitates or hinders regional cooperation, with particular attention to its use in multilateral organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union. A population comprising diplomatic actors, institutional officials, academics, and regional cooperation professionals involved in international relations in West Africa, across both Francophone and non-Francophone states were purposively selected. This sample size ensures balanced representation of the region's diverse linguistic and institutional contexts. A qualitative methodology is employed, including document analysis of treaties, policy papers, and official communications, as well as interviews with members of the diplomatic corps and language policy experts. The study reveals how linguistic dynamics influence diplomatic engagement, and how French functions as both a bridge and a barrier in West African integration efforts.

Keywords: French language, soft power, West Africa, international relations, multilingual diplomac**Introduction**

Language is never neutral in international relations; it embodies histories, ideologies, and power relations that extend beyond mere communication. In West Africa, the French language remains deeply embedded

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in diplomacy, cooperation, and cultural exchange—a legacy of France’s colonial history and its sustained geopolitical presence in the region. Even after decolonization, French continues to function both as a medium of negotiation and as a symbol of influence. Nye (2004) argues that language operates as an instrument of soft power, shaping perceptions and building alliances without overt coercion. Scholars such as Chafer (2016) and Bach (2013) further note that in West African diplomacy, French mediates a complex interplay between Francophone and Anglophone states, structuring access to regional decision-making spaces such as ECOWAS and the African Union. However, existing scholarship has largely examined French in Africa through macro lenses—emphasizing France’s cultural diplomacy, educational policies, or media strategies—without sufficiently interrogating how language functions as a lived geopolitical tool within inter-African relations. Studies have focused either on the persistence of Francophonie as a neocolonial project or on the pragmatic use of French in regional institutions, but few have addressed how Anglophone states like Nigeria and Ghana strategically engage with French as both an asset and a barrier in multilateral negotiations. This gap reveals an under-explored intersection between linguistic geopolitics, postcolonial diplomacy, and regional integration. Building on Nye’s soft power framework (2004: 10) and postcolonial analyses (Chafer, 2016; Bach, 2013), this study interrogates French as a dynamic instrument of influence in West African diplomacy. It explores how linguistic hierarchies shape negotiation, alliance-building, and regional cohesion, thereby contributing a fresh perspective to debates in linguistic geopolitics and postcolonial international relations. The paper thus repositions language as central—not peripheral—to understanding regional cooperation and power relations in contemporary West Africa.

Historical Context of the French Language in West Africa

France’s penetration into West Africa in the late nineteenth century was not merely a political or economic project but a deeply linguistic and cultural one. Under the policy of assimilation, France sought to remake African subjects in its own image through the adoption of its language, culture, and values (Afigbo 1986). French thus became the cornerstone of administration, education, and commerce, institutionalizing a hierarchy of knowledge and legitimacy that privileged the colonizer’s voice. This policy reflected France’s conviction in the universality of its civilization and its “mission civilisatrice”, positioning language as an instrument of domination and a vehicle for what Chafer (2002) describes as “cultural governance.” The francisation process, which Nancy Kwang (2003) aptly calls “the French technology of nationalism,” transformed linguistic conformity into political belonging, turning mastery of French into both a symbol of enlightenment and a condition of citizenship (Ayeni & Malumi, 2018).

Yet, the shift from assimilation to association did not dismantle these hierarchies—it rebranded them. While association ostensibly respected cultural difference, it continued to privilege French as the language of modernity and diplomacy (Suret-Canale 1971). Colonial education served as the crucible for this linguistic order, grooming African elites to function within French administrative structures and perpetuate its linguistic hegemony. These elites became intermediaries, translating not only words but ideologies—a role that persisted long after independence. Despite nationalist rhetoric, most Francophone states retained French as their official language, rationalizing it as ethnically neutral and diplomatically strategic (Bach 2013). Senghor’s defence of French as a vehicle of *négritude* and global engagement (Senghor 1962, p. 89) epitomizes this ambivalence: a language of emancipation that remained tied to empire. Critically, this study reinterprets the endurance of French not simply as colonial residue but as an evolving instrument of soft power. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), established in 1970, embodies France’s postcolonial recalibration of influence through cultural diplomacy (Chafer 2016; Ayeni & Lori, 2025). By funding education, cultural projects, and governance training, the OIF extends France’s geopolitical reach under the veneer of cooperation. Consequently, French functions as both legacy and leverage—an emblem of postcolonial continuity that sustains asymmetrical relations. In this dynamic, Anglophone states such as Nigeria navigate French as both a regional necessity and a geopolitical constraint, revealing how linguistic power continues to structure access, authority, and alliance in contemporary West African diplomacy.

Diplomatic Influence in International Relations

Diplomatic influence has long been central to the projection of state power and the configuration of international order. Unlike coercive mechanisms rooted in military or economic might, diplomacy operates through negotiation, persuasion, and the careful management of symbols and norms. As Berridge (2015) asserts, it thrives on credibility, trust, and relationship-building—qualities that render it indispensable to global governance. Bull (1977) further contends that diplomacy provides the institutional scaffolding for the coexistence and cooperation of states, a view that underscores its normative as well as strategic significance. Yet contemporary analyses have expanded this understanding, locating diplomatic influence within the broader logic of soft power, where language, culture, and shared values become instruments of persuasion and legitimacy (Nye 2004). In this evolving discourse, language emerges as both a communicative medium and a vector of identity and authority. French diplomacy, historically anchored in the prestige of the French language, exemplifies how linguistic capital becomes a conduit for political and cultural dominance. Chafer (2016) demonstrates that French has long symbolized access to networks of cooperation and recognition—a linguistic passport into global and regional diplomacy. Within West Africa, this legacy manifests in the enduring dominance of French across institutions like ECOWAS and the African Union. As Ayeni and Ellah (2025) note, these bodies grapple with managing Africa’s multilingual reality while maintaining institutional cohesion; French, English, and Portuguese serve as official languages, yet French retains disproportionate symbolic power. Bach (2013) extends this argument, revealing how linguistic dominance structures norms of engagement and defines who participates meaningfully in diplomacy.

However, this study interrogates the prevailing literature by shifting focus from France’s linguistic dominance to its negotiated implications for non-Francophone actors. For instance, Nigeria’s engagement with French underscores the duality of diplomatic influence: while linguistic adaptation enhances integration, it also exposes asymmetries of access and representation. Ayeni and Brown (2025) highlight that Franco-Nigerian cooperation holds strategic importance but remains conditioned by linguistic and cultural negotiation. Similarly, institutions such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) serve as platforms where France extends its influence through cultural diplomacy (Kunz 2011; Ayeni & Lori, 2025). Yet this framework, while fostering cooperation, simultaneously entrenches neo-hierarchies within postcolonial diplomacy. As Zartman (2010) observes, language can both bridge and divide—inviting inclusion even as it reinforces structural inequalities. This tension broadens the theoretical frontier, recasting diplomatic influence as a dynamic interplay between attraction, adaptation, and asymmetry in West African geopolitics.

Regional Cooperation in West Africa

Regional cooperation has constituted a defining feature of West African international relations since the dawn of decolonization. Emerging from fragmented political systems, limited domestic markets, and shared security vulnerabilities, postcolonial states have consistently pursued institutional mechanisms to promote integration, self-reliance, and stability. Scholars such as Ayeni, Effiong, and Ogbang (2025; Ayeni & Oben, 2025) argue that linguistic solidarity remains an often-overlooked but critical dimension of these efforts, shaping political, cultural, and economic integration. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, stands as the most tangible embodiment of these aspirations, designed to foster regional trade, political cooperation, and collective security (Bach 2013). Yet, the linguistic legacies of colonialism continue to define the contours of cooperation: French, English, and Portuguese remain the dominant working languages of ECOWAS, reflecting both historical alignments and contemporary asymmetries (Ayeni 2017).

Existing scholarship, while recognizing the institutional significance of language, has tended to understate its geopolitical implications. Chafer (2016) underscores the privileged position of French within ECOWAS and the African Union, where it operates not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbol of legitimacy and political leverage. This linguistic privilege allows Francophone states—forming the majority within ECOWAS—to project influence and consolidate policy agendas, whereas Anglophone

states like Nigeria and Ghana must navigate linguistic adaptation to maintain parity. The literature, however, often stops short of examining how this dynamic translates into unequal participation, or how language politics reproduces regional hierarchies under the guise of cooperation. Beyond economics, regional cooperation extends into peacekeeping and conflict resolution, where French again assumes a mediating role. Chafer (2002) and Ayeni & Ellah (2025) highlight France's sustained military engagement through operations such as Barkhane and MINUSMA in Mali, which reveal how French operates as both a diplomatic and operational resource in regional interventions. Yet, as Adebani (2017) observes, linguistic dualism within ECOWAS often engenders friction, slowing consensus and reinforcing latent divides between Anglophone and Francophone blocs. This study advances the debate by repositioning French not merely as a colonial residue but as a structural pillar of West African regionalism—both enabling integration and perpetuating asymmetry. By interrogating the linguistic foundations of cooperation, it expands the literature's frontiers, demonstrating that language remains a decisive, if understated, determinant of political agency, regional alignment, and power negotiation in West African diplomacy.

The Role of the French Language in Soft Power

The French language functions as a powerful instrument of soft power in West Africa—an enduring symbol of prestige, legitimacy, and attraction that transcends mere communication. As Chafer (2016) notes, cultural diplomacy has long been central to France's international engagement, with French serving as its key vehicle. Through institutions such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the Institut Français, and the network of Alliances Françaises, France sustains a web of influence rooted in language and culture. Yet, unlike earlier perspectives that viewed these institutions simply as colonial extensions (Suret-Canale 1971), this study reveals their evolution into mediating spaces where identity, hybridity, and cultural negotiation unfold. French in West Africa has moved beyond being a colonial residue; in literature, theatre, and film, it now functions as a language of creativity and self-expression, embodying the hybridity of postcolonial experience. This extends Chafer's (2002) idea of linguistic continuity by recognizing the agency of African artists and intellectuals who re-appropriate French as a transnational cultural resource. In education, French remains a cornerstone of influence, sustained through scholarships and elite networks (Bach 2013). However, it now carries a dual identity: both a unifying administrative tool and a contested symbol of belonging. This complexity reflects what Umukoro, Ayeni, and Okey (2025: 79) describe as the coexistence of linguistic dependence and decolonial aspiration—where mastery of French enables global participation while reinforcing existing hierarchies.

The media sphere further illustrates this paradox. Outlets such as RFI and France 24 (Fraser 2008, p. 146) continue to shape Francophone discourse, but they now face growing dialogue from African media that use French to articulate indigenous narratives. This transformation signals a shift from one-way influence to a more dialogic exchange. Viewed through Nye's (2004; 2011) framework, French soft power in West Africa embodies both attraction and inequality. As Zahran and Ramos (2010) argue, soft power often conceals neo-colonial continuities beneath the language of partnership. Ultimately, the French language operates as performative diplomacy—reproducing and reimagining postcolonial relations, where domination and agency coexist within the same linguistic terrain.

Diplomatic Influence of Francophone States

Francophone states in West Africa exert diplomatic influence through an intricate blend of linguistic capital, institutional density, and historically embedded relations with France and the wider Francophone community. Yet, beyond the descriptive dimension of this phenomenon, the present analysis interrogates its conceptual underpinnings within theories of soft power, linguistic geopolitics, and regional diplomacy. It argues that while language has often been treated as a neutral medium of communication, in the Francophone West African context it operates as a strategic resource—a form of symbolic capital that shapes legitimacy, access, and coalition-building in international relations. This reorientation departs from earlier structuralist interpretations that linked Francophone diplomacy almost exclusively to neocolonial

dependence (Suret-Canale 1971; Adebajo 2002), by highlighting instead the agency of West African actors in reconfiguring linguistic heritage into a functional asset of regional influence.

Empirical evidence from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali supports this theoretical repositioning. Senegal, long regarded as a diplomatic hub, exemplifies how elite bilingualism and cultural diplomacy can transform colonial linguistic legacies into tools of soft power. Dakar's peacekeeping and mediation roles—anchored in professional foreign service traditions shaped in French—demonstrate how linguistic proficiency can generate trust and institutional predictability in international arenas (Chafer 2016). This finding both extends and complicates Chafer's (2002) earlier assertion that Francophone ties serve primarily French interests, suggesting instead a reciprocal exchange where Senegal leverages its linguistic capital to consolidate its regional stature.

Côte d'Ivoire's diplomacy reveals another dimension: the instrumental use of French in shaping international narratives during political crises. The Ivorian state's capacity to frame discourse through French-language platforms within ECOWAS and the AU underscores how linguistic affinity facilitates norm diffusion and multilateral coordination (Adebajo 2010). This corroborates Bach's (2013) argument that linguistic proximity enhances predictability and partnership, yet the present analysis nuances this by demonstrating that such proximity also accelerates diplomatic recovery and reintegration following instability. Mali, despite its recurrent political volatility, has similarly used French as the idiom of crisis diplomacy, ensuring continuity of engagement through Francophone circuits and multilateral frameworks (Chafer 2016). Here, linguistic interoperability becomes both a survival strategy and a means of sustaining international legitimacy—an observation that refines traditional dependency paradigms.

At the bilateral and multilateral levels, French-language networks, including defence agreements, educational exchanges, and the Institut Français, serve as infrastructures of influence that are activated within and beyond Africa (Kunz 201; Chafer 2002). These networks support horizontal cooperation among Francophone states—Senegal with Côte d'Ivoire or Mali with Niger—where French enables coordination, shared drafting, and collective bargaining (Bach 2013). The study's findings affirm Zartman's (2010) claim that language fosters “repeat-player advantages,” but extend his thesis by showing that this linguistic continuity now sustains an autonomous Francophone bloc within regional institutions such as ECOWAS.

Within ECOWAS, French functions not merely as an official working language but as an agenda-setting mechanism. Francophone numerical plurality and procedural familiarity often shape communiqués and policy framing (Bach 2013; Chafer 2016). Yet, the study also reveals structural limits: Anglophone states, especially Nigeria, counterbalance this through demographic and economic weight. The resulting equilibrium illustrates what this paper theorizes as linguistic counter-hegemony—a dynamic interplay between Francophone coordination and Anglophone capacity. In contrast to earlier dichotomous views that portrayed ECOWAS as linguistically divided, this analysis posits a more nuanced hybridity, where soft-power infrastructures sustained by language coexist with pragmatic power politics. By navigating between two languages and two cultures, bilingual individuals often develop a unique bicultural identity, which can enable them to play the role of cultural mediators (Ayeni, 2024). Thus, the findings contribute conceptually to rethinking Francophone influence in West Africa not as linguistic dependency but as negotiated soft power embedded in the evolving grammar of regional diplomacy.

Research Methodology

This study draws on a qualitative approach to explore how the French language functions as an instrument of soft power and diplomacy in West Africa. The analysis brings together official documents, treaties, and policy papers with insights from interviews conducted with diplomats, cultural officers, and language policy experts in Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana. The purpose is to capture both the institutional framing of French and the lived experiences of those working within the diplomatic and cultural fields. The documentary evidence clearly shows the centrality of French in shaping regional and continental cooperation. The 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty, for example, identifies French and English as the official working languages of the Community. While this may appear a pragmatic choice, it is also a symbolic act that reinforces ties with

former colonial powers and preserves linguistic hierarchies (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Art. 62). Similarly, the African Union's Language Policy Framework highlights French and English as strategically important for building continental cohesion and facilitating diplomacy (AU Language Policy, 2004). Policy statements from the Organization Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) further illustrate this agenda. A 2018 communiqué explicitly states: "The promotion of French across West Africa ensures not merely cultural preservation but also greater diplomatic coherence within and beyond the region" (OIF Communiqué, 2018). Such references demonstrate how institutions directly link language to integration, legitimacy, and prestige.

The interview data reinforce the study's findings while adding a more human and experiential dimension to the analysis. Between April and July 2024, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative component of the study *Leveraging the French Language in West African International Relations: Soft Power, Diplomatic Influence, and Regional Cooperation across Francophone and Non-Francophone States*. The study population comprised diplomats, cultural actors, and language policy experts actively engaged in West African international relations. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants whose professional roles provided direct insight into the diplomatic and soft power functions of the French language.

The sample included Nigerian diplomats posted to francophone countries, francophone envoys based in Abuja, officials of French cultural institutions, and scholars specializing in language policy and international relations. This targeted approach ensured that participants possessed relevant experience with cross-linguistic diplomatic engagement. As one Nigerian diplomat stationed in Abidjan remarked, "French is not just a working language here; it is the key to opening doors. Without it, you remain an outsider in regional conversations, even if you speak English fluently" (Interview, Nigerian Diplomat, June 2024).

From another angle, a Senegalese envoy in Abuja noted: "Nigeria's diplomatic weight is undeniable, but its limited use of French sometimes weakens its influence within ECOWAS discussions" (Interview, May 2024). This points to an asymmetry of linguistic capital: while Nigeria wields economic and political power, it is sometimes disadvantaged in francophone-dominated spaces. A Ghanaian professor of language policy captured this dynamic neatly, describing French as "a regional currency of diplomacy—it is the language that bridges Francophone and Anglophone states, especially when cooperation requires cultural diplomacy and not just economics" (Interview, Ghanaian Professor, July 2024). These reflections vividly illustrate how language proficiency shapes everyday diplomatic interactions, access, and legitimacy, by demonstrating that the strategic value of French in West African diplomacy is not merely institutional but deeply embedded in lived professional practice.

Interactions between Francophone and non-Francophone states

Interactions between Francophone and non-Francophone states in West Africa reveal a complex dialectic between linguistic cohesion and communicative asymmetry—an interplay that embodies both the connective and divisive potential of language in diplomacy. Theoretically, this dynamic underscores the dual character of language as both soft power (Nye 2004) and structural capital (Bach 2013), shaping who defines regional agendas, whose narratives gain legitimacy, and how cooperation is institutionalized. The findings of this study move beyond descriptive accounts of linguistic plurality to interrogate language as an infrastructure of influence—one that mediates political agency, trade networks, and identity formation in West African regionalism. Empirical evidence demonstrates that language operates simultaneously as a bridge and a barrier. Within multilateral fora, the predominance of French in drafting and technical meetings often privileges Francophone delegates, who benefit from procedural fluency and immediate access to negotiation texts (Bach 2013). Anglophone actors, reliant on interpreters and translation delays, incur what may be termed "transactional asymmetry." However, this finding diverges from earlier scholarship that viewed linguistic dominance as a fixed legacy of colonialism. Instead, it reveals a fluid negotiation process: Anglophone states, notably Nigeria, are actively reappropriating French through education and diplomacy to bridge communicative gaps and reinforce regional influence (Okey, Ayeni & Ousmanou 2025). This

hybrid adaptation supports Chafer's (2016) claim that shared language fosters cooperation, while extending it by showing how linguistic learning itself becomes an instrument of strategic realignment.

In economic terms, the study finds that language informs not only institutional regulation but also market accessibility. The "seed text" phenomenon—where initial drafts in French shape final regulatory frameworks—illustrates how linguistic templates embed epistemic authority in trade negotiations (Bach 2013). Yet, this does not result in Francophone economic dominance. Rather, Anglophone market power, particularly Nigeria's demographic and financial leverage, introduces a compensatory equilibrium that forces pragmatic multilingualism (Adebajo 2010). Thus, language functions less as a determinant and more as a variable shaping the efficiency and inclusivity of trade integration.

Politically, Francophone solidarity—visible in ECOWAS and the OIF—has often been interpreted as linguistic bloc politics (Chafer 2016). This research complicates that view by demonstrating that linguistic solidarity also constitutes a performative resource: through common vocabularies, training regimes, and legal cultures, Francophone states sustain policy cohesion and rapid consensus-building in security and governance matters (Adebajo 2002). However, as Ayeni and Ellah (2025) observe, the global reach of French also situates West African Francophonie within wider circuits of exchange, transforming regional bilingualism into a node of global interconnection.

The findings therefore suggest a reconceptualization of language from a mere communicative medium to a strategic ecosystem that mediates participation, trust, and legitimacy. Anglophone states' adaptive strategies—multilingual capacity-building, institutional inclusivity, and policy translation—illustrate emerging linguistic pluralism as a form of counter-soft power (Bach 2013). Conceptually, this reframes regional diplomacy as a field of linguistic negotiation, where communication becomes both a site of contest and collaboration. Ultimately, transforming linguistic diversity from a barrier into an engine of cooperative capacity demands institutional reforms—robust interpretation systems, bilingual education, and equitable knowledge exchange—that align language politics with the broader goals of regional integration and inclusive governance.

Challenges and Opportunities

The dynamics of leveraging the French language in West African international relations reflect a delicate balance of challenges and opportunities rooted in the region's linguistic diversity, political complexities, and aspirations for deeper cooperation. Understanding this balance reveals how language operates not just as a means of communication but as a strategic tool for inclusion, identity negotiation, and regional integration.

Linguistic Diversity and Its Impact: West Africa's multilingual landscape is both an obstacle and an opportunity. The region's coexistence of French, English, Portuguese, and numerous indigenous languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Wolof creates a dense communicative mosaic that complicates policymaking and diplomatic coordination (Bamgbose 2000). Yet, as Ayeni and Ebong (2016) argue, linguistic diversity—if effectively managed—can serve as a foundation for solidarity rather than division. French, in particular, often functions as a bridge language, facilitating cooperation between Francophone and non-Francophone states (Adebija 2004). When language policies prioritize mutual intelligibility and cultural respect, multilingualism can evolve into a resource that strengthens regional cohesion and inclusivity rather than fragmentation.

Political Dynamics in West Africa: The political landscape adds another layer of complexity. Coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have disrupted democratic governance and tested ECOWAS's capacity to manage crises (Adebajo 2002). In these tense moments, French has remained the principal medium for negotiation and mediation, reaffirming its centrality in West African diplomacy. However, this reliance sometimes reinforces perceptions of imbalance, particularly among Anglophone powers like Nigeria and Ghana, which are wary of Francophone dominance (Chafer 2016). Nigeria's former Head of State, General Sani Abacha, acknowledged this linguistic divide, noting in 1996 that colonial borders and language

differences hinder regional unity. His advocacy for bilingualism reflected a recognition that overcoming linguistic barriers is crucial for sustainable integration (Ayeni & Ebong 2016).

Future Prospects for Cooperation: Looking ahead, French could serve as a catalyst for educational, media, and professional collaboration across linguistic lines. Expanding bilingual education and translation services within ECOWAS, as Loimeier (2013) suggests, would promote inclusivity and shared understanding. By treating linguistic diversity as a strategic resource, West Africa can transform potential divides into opportunities for innovation and partnership. If harnessed thoughtfully, the French language—alongside English and Portuguese—could anchor a more cohesive, multilingual regional identity, positioning West Africa as a model for linguistic pluralism and cooperative diplomacy in global affairs.

Analysis and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the French language continues to serve as a powerful medium of soft power and diplomatic influence in West African international relations, bridging and at times reinforcing the divide between francophone and non-francophone states. By situating French within both institutional frameworks and everyday diplomatic practice, it becomes clear that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a resource that conveys legitimacy, access, and influence.

From a structural perspective, official treaties and policy papers codify the privileged status of French. The ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993) formalizes French and English as working languages, yet the symbolic effect of enshrining French alongside English is profound. It reflects a regional reality where francophone states constitute the majority and where French remains a dominant vehicle of regional integration. Similarly, the African Union’s Language Policy Framework underscores the “strategic importance” of French and English, situating both languages as essential to continental diplomacy (AU Language Policy: 15). While France long exercised a dominant influence over Africa, notably due to its historical ties with its former colonies, current dynamics suggest a gradual transformation of this relationship (Ayeni, 2025b). The organization Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) goes even further by framing the promotion of French not only as cultural preservation but also as a guarantee of diplomatic coherence (OIF Communiqué, 2018). These official narratives demonstrate the intentional embedding of French within the institutional machinery of regional cooperation. Yet the lived experiences of diplomats and experts reveal deeper layers of meaning. For Nigerian diplomats posted in francophone states, French is not just an official tool but an everyday requirement for recognition and legitimacy. As one diplomat in Abidjan explained, “French is not just a working language here; it is the key to opening doors. Without it, you remain an outsider in regional conversations” (Interview, Nigerian Diplomat, June 2024). This illustrates how the absence of French proficiency can relegate even powerful actors like Nigeria to the margins of informal decision-making. Conversely, francophone envoys stationed in Abuja perceive Nigeria’s lack of French engagement as a limitation of its otherwise formidable regional influence. A Senegalese envoy observed that “Nigeria’s diplomatic weight is undeniable, but its limited use of French sometimes weakens its influence within ECOWAS discussions” (Interview, May 2024). These perspectives reveal how linguistic capital is unevenly distributed and how its absence can dilute political capital. Experts in language policy further highlight the symbolic function of French as a “regional currency of diplomacy.” By framing French as a bridge between Anglophone and francophone states, a Ghanaian professor captured its unique role in cultural diplomacy, particularly in contexts where trust, legitimacy, and shared identity matter as much as economics or security (Interview, Accra, July 2024). This observation situates French at the heart of regional soft power dynamics: it is the language through which relationships are built, alliances are forged, and legitimacy is claimed. The convergence of these insights underscores a paradox. On the one hand, French facilitates cooperation by offering a shared medium across diverse states. On the other hand, it reinforces linguistic hierarchies that privilege francophone actors and disadvantage Anglophone ones, particularly Nigeria, whose regional ambitions are sometimes constrained by linguistic gaps. In this sense, French is both a tool of integration and a gatekeeper of influence.

Overall, the analysis shows that French functions not only as a formal instrument enshrined in treaties and policies but also as a symbolic asset that shapes perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and belonging in West African diplomacy. The French language thus operates as a strategic resource—an embodiment of soft power—that underpins regional cooperation while also sustaining asymmetries between francophone and non-francophone states.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm the theoretical argument that language functions as a strategic instrument of soft power and regional diplomacy, yet they also extend existing scholarship by revealing how French operates within a more complex and dynamic multilingual environment than previously acknowledged. While earlier studies—such as those by Calvet (1999) and Djité (2008)—emphasized the dominance of French as a unifying postcolonial medium in Francophone Africa, this research shows that its influence now coexists with increasing linguistic negotiation between Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone blocs. Conceptually, the study challenges the traditional binary of linguistic hegemony versus resistance by framing French as both a legacy of colonial dependence and a resource for regional agency. Theoretically, it situates language as a geopolitical tool that can either reinforce asymmetries or enable multilateral collaboration, depending on how inclusively it is deployed. Unlike previous works that treated linguistic diversity as an obstacle to integration, this research underscores its potential as a catalyst for plural diplomacy and equitable cooperation. Hence, the implication is that sustainable regional integration in West Africa must move beyond linguistic uniformity toward a model of cooperative multilingualism—where French serves as one of several interconnecting instruments of shared regional identity and strategic communication.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Aligned with the core objective of this study which is to examine how the French language can function as a strategic tool for soft power, diplomacy, and regional cooperation in West Africa, these recommendations translate the findings into actionable policy directions. By advocating stronger institutional multilingualism within ECOWAS and the African Union, the study reinforces its argument that French gains greater diplomatic effectiveness when embedded within inclusive linguistic frameworks that recognize regional diversity. Such an approach enhances participation, legitimacy, and mutual trust among member states. The emphasis on bilingual and multilingual training for diplomats and civil servants directly supports the study's objective of strengthening intercultural competence and reducing linguistic asymmetries between Francophone and non-Francophone countries. Rather than positioning French as a competing language, the study highlights its complementary role alongside English and indigenous languages in facilitating dialogue and cooperation.

Reimagining cultural diplomacy around shared regional identities aligns with the study's aim of decoupling French from colonial connotations and repositioning it as a medium for partnership, cultural exchange, and collective regional belonging. Similarly, recognizing language as integral to economic and trade policy advances the study's broader objective of linking linguistic mediation to practical outcomes in cross-border commerce and development.

Finally, the call for digital and technological innovation reflects the study's forward-looking objective of ensuring that French remains relevant in contemporary governance, economic integration, and regional connectivity. Together, these recommendations operationalise the study's vision of language as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable regional cooperation.

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