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## **Language and diplomacy: Harnessing English and French for inter-border communication in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*Human language is heterogeneous as languages are culturally transmitted and human beings are scattered apart in different speech communities and life endeavours. A speech community in which one grows up from childhood determines the language one speaks and the occupation one finds oneself determines the diatypic variety of the language one frequently uses. Language varies from area to area, person to person and situation to situation as speakers are not in a single geographical location, social class and career. There is no monolingual nation as half of the population of the world is bilingual. Bilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon. There are 1500 to 2000 estimated languages in Africa and this wealth of languages is a tribute to the rich cultural diversity of this continent. Africa was colonized by different colonial masters: France, Britain, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, Italy etc. This leads to the many foreign languages in Africa, each country using the language of the former colonial masters as its L2 or official language while other countries use the language of the colonial masters of others as their foreign language. English is a legacy of the British colonialism in Nigeria, while French is a vestige of French colonialism in Cameroun, Niger Republic, Gabon, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin Republic etc. The British and French colonial administrations in Africa implanted English and French in the continent. Nigeria is bordered by Francophone countries and the*

*two foreign languages' contact results in word borrowing, interference etc. Language is the store-house of possibilities. The English/French contact between Nigeria and her neighbours lead to inter-border communication, diplomatic relation, peace and development. Language is the essence of diplomacy. Diplomats engage in negotiations, presentation and persuasion using language. A mutually intelligible language is a sine qua non for effective conduct of diplomatic work as a common language binds its speakers together. Many speakers of English in Africa are lukewarm about learning French and vice versa. This constitutes a problem to inter-border communication and diplomacy. Harnessing English and French for inter-border communication and diplomacy in Africa is the main thrust of this paper.*

**Key words:** Language, Communication, Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Diplomacy, Second Language and Foreign Language.

## **Introduction**

Language is the store-house of possibilities. Without the instrumentality of language, there can hardly be success in any human endeavour. Human beings are gregarious animals living in the company of others, interacting and doing things together. Language is the instrument of thought and expression and human beings use it to communicate together. The world is now a global village with the advent of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as well as the invention of airplane, automobile and ship. People can easily move from place to place because of the modern means of transport. People interact one on one and they can also interact even when they are distanced with

the help of ICT facilities like the computer, cell phone, telephone, television, radio etc.

Language performs myriads of functions or roles in the human society. According to Ndimele (2001:3), language performs informational, expressive, phatic, directive, ideational, performative and ludic roles, respectively. These functions of human language can be employed for diplomacy and inter-ethnic, international or inter-border relation. There are many languages in the world, precisely 7106 living languages in the world as recorded in the seventeenth edition of the *Ethnologue Catalogue*. Human language is culturally transmitted and these languages are spoken in different regions. According to Senn and Skinner (1992:121), “the wealth of world languages is a tribute to the rich diversity of this planet”. The 7106 languages of the world are importantly equal linguistically. There is no superior or inferior language as every language performs the same function of communication and once the communicative function is achieved, it is regarded and no other language is superior or inferior to it. Akmajan et al (2001:8) affirm this fact thus:

There is no such thing as a primitive human language. All languages provide a means for asking questions, making requests, making assertions and so on. And there is nothing that can be expressed in one language that cannot be expressed in any other...Anything we can imagine or think we can express in any human language.”

Odeh (2019:3) also lends credence to this assertion thus: “There are many different languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning”. The scramble for and partition of Africa leads to the influx of many European countries into Africa for colonialism (Abiola 1984:148-151). European colonialism gives birth to linguistic imposition as the languages of the colonialists

become the official languages, second languages and lingua-francas in different countries of Africa. English and French are also products of Western colonialism in Africa.

Both English and French are Germanic languages as they both evolved from German. They are both intra-national, international and official languages of the world. English is the official language, lingua franca, language of unity as well as language of education, science and technology, commerce, entertainment, international communication, law, religion etc in Nigeria. While French is a minor exoglossic language in Nigeria. In fact, it is a foreign and semi-official language in Nigeria. French is now one of the ten most used languages of the world. It is an international language and a language of diplomacy which has enabled bilingual Africans to showcase their talents and excel in their talented areas outside their shores (Ewoviereno, 2016:118, 119, 121, 123 and 125). French is the second official language in Nigeria and Umeh (2004:149) states the rationale for adopting it as the second official language in this country thus:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools.

According to Ewoviereno (2016:118), “one of the greatest advantages of globalization in almost every part of the world today is the need to learn other languages in order to facilitate good communication among nations of the world”. The world is now a global village and understanding another language, most especially a foreign or international language is an added advantage for job procurement, better opportunities, international business etc. Language knits its speakers together and according to Ewoviereno

(2016:126), “Nigeria as a country will have a lot to lose in the near future if French is not given more attention to than it is now”.

No one is an island. People depend on others for mutual benefits and survival. Kikanme (2015:188) lends credence to this assertion when she states: “We live in an independent world, respect for diversity is not enough. We must be able to establish consensus on the basis of international co-existence”. A common language brings about such co-existence. Bilingual speakers of English and French in Africa and other parts of the world can have diplomatic relations for mutual benefits and development.

There can never be inter-border and diplomatic relation without a mutually intelligible language. Nigerians, Cameroonians, Beninese, Nigeriens, Gabonese, Ghanaians, Gambians etc can have bilateral and inter-border relations if they can all speak English and French. A common language is the knot that ties a people together. Harnessing English and French for inter-border communication and relation for peace and development among the Anglophone and Francophone countries of Africa, precisely Nigeria and her French neighbours is the crux of this paper.

### **Language**

Language is the basic means of communication among human beings. A language is something spoken and the spoken language is the basis for the development of a written form (Otagburuagu and Anyanwu, 2002:254, Ndimele, 1996:2). Language is the unified system of symbols and sounds that permits a sharing of meaning. Ronald Wardhaugh (1972) cited in Syal and Jindal (2008:4) defines it as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication”. It is a species-specific to man, making him human and distinguishes him from other animals. Man is the only speaking or talking animal, hence he is described as

“homoloquens” (Syal and Jindal,6). Language is man’s birthright - a special gift of God to him alone, making him unique. According to Algeo (2010:1), “to be human is to use language, and to talk is to be a person”. Language is the quintessence of human existence and in a world without a language, man would only continue to be a denizen of the forest and the caves. Language "has changed the entire gamut of human relations and made it possible for human beings to grow into a community on this planet” (Syal and Jinda,5). Human language is culturally or socially transmitted, creative or productive, learnable, conventional, arbitrary, symbolic, systematic, vocalic etc.

### **Communication**

Communication is the sharing and impartation of information from one person to another. Oberg (2005:5) defines it as "the process of sending and receiving messages to achieve understanding”. While the Wikipedia (2018) defines communication as “a process of transferring information from one entity to another”. The entity that transfers information is the sender or encoder, while the entity that receives the information is the receiver or decoder. Chappel and Road (1984) quoted in Sybil et al (1990:2) equally define communication as “any means by which a thought is transferred from one person to another”. Finally, Udall and Udall in Sybil et al (1990:3) see it as “the process by which one person (or group) shares and imparts information to another person (or group) so that both people (or groups) clearly understand one another”.

The last definition of communication given above implies that it is between two persons, a person and a group or between a group of people to another group of people. In other words, it is personal and impersonal. It is personal if the communication is between a particular person or persons and impersonal if it is not

addressed or referred to any particular person but the general public. The impersonal communication is society-wide and it is synonymous with mass communication. The personal communication can be intra-personal, interpersonal or group. (Ndimele,1999:151-153).

Communication skills enable people to develop more satisfying personal relationships. It is an indispensable fact that “people who communicate well make more friends, have more dates, are more popular, and sustain friendships and marriages better than those who do not understand or practice the principles of effective communication” (Oberg, 2005:2). In fact, interpersonal communication is important because it has been proved by science that those who are connected to others are healthier and that social isolation is linked to stress, disease and early death. Again, heart disease is more common among people who do not have interpersonal relationships (Oberg,2005: 2).

Communication is a social affair and it is therapeutic. According to Stewart and D’Angelo (1988:38) quoted in Ndimele (1999:124), it is “an interaction, a process of mutual or reciprocal influence between people”. It brings about cooperation, mutual understanding, peace, unity, oneness etc. Communicators or interlocutors are of one mind. To communicate is to share, make common, or make known. It is an exchange of thoughts, ideas or the like. So, communication takes place if the information or message received is the same as that sent by the sender. In other words, communication is said to be effective if the transmitted message is received and understood by someone in the way it is intended and acted upon accordingly. There is a communication breach if there is no mutual understanding between the interlocutors. Communication breach can be caused by using mutually unintelligible language, bad pronunciation, bad grammar,

wrong choices of word etc. Quoting Confucius, an Eastern Sage, Eyisi (2002:vii) states: “If the language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone”. Communication is very essential for success and growth of any organization.

No organisation can survive without effective or successful communication. This is because it is the lubricant or grease that keeps the machinery of an organisation. In fact, communication is the life-blood of any organization. Through communication, the rules, regulations, policies, available products of an organization etc are made known to people within and outside the organization. Information is power and if you are not informed, then you are psychologically deformed. Effective communication is a key to success in every trade, occupation, profession etc. Communication touches every aspect of human activity. It informs all of man’s actions because it is occasioned by his need to interact with his fellow man. In fact, communication helps us to understand ourselves, keep in touch with other people, understand them and be able to predict their response(s) to situations.

Language is a tool for communication. Communication of whatever form and medium is language and it is verbal or non-verbal. Communication is verbal if it is spoken or written and non-verbal if it is not spoken or written but uses body language such as gestures, facial expressions etc to convey information or message. This paper dwells on the verbal communication and English and French are the chosen languages for this communication. Every human endeavour or career needs communication and diplomacy or ambassadorship is not an exception. Nigeria shares boundaries with Francophone countries and it is expedient for such inter-border Anglophone and Francophone countries to learn one another’s language for mutual relationship.



## **Bilingualism**

Bilingualism is the ability to speak two languages fluently. A bilingual or diglot is a two-tongued person as he has a native-like control of two languages. Bilingualism can be individual when an individual speaker or person is capable of speaking two separate languages or social if there are two separate languages spoken side by side in a speech community for different communicative purposes as it is in Canada where English and French are spoken (Odeh 2016:100).

Africa is a multilingual continent with an estimate of 1500 – 2000 languages in it. All the African countries have their native languages as well as the languages of their colonial masters used as the lingua franca and official language. There can never be any bilateral or diplomatic relationship if the citizens of the two countries involved in the bilateral contract cannot speak each other's language. There is no monolingual nation and half of the population of the world is bilingual (Uguru, 2008:25 and Malmkjar, 1991:57). So, countries and communities that share common boundaries should learn each other's language for trans-border and transcultural communication and relation.

A common mutually intelligible language knits its speakers together, bringing about unity, peace, development and progress evident in the Tower of Babel in the Bible (Gen.11:1-9). God said: "Behold the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do (Gen.11:6). There can never be effective inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-border and transcultural relation without a common language. Speakers of Anglophone (English), (Francophone), Lusophone (Portuguese), Hispanophone (Spanish) etc languages should learn one another's languages for inter-border communication, diplomacy and inter-dependence. A

bilingual is a bicultural person as language is an integral part of culture and it is acquired through acculturation.

### **Multilingualism**

Multilingualism is the ability to speak more than two languages well. It breeds ethnicity, mistrust and war. Elugbe (1990:11) lends credence to this assertion when he states: "Ethnic divisions are often along linguistic lines... the existence of many languages means the existence of many basically antagonistic ethnic nationalities trying to form a nation". But the ability to speak other's languages can create a good rapport or good relationship that can ward off mistrust, prejudice and conflict among people of different ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural backgrounds. Kikanme (2015:188) affirms this assertion thus:

Multilingual education can be a valuable instrument for the culture of peace. Crossing the border of the first language can mean empathizing with another culture, with other communities, with another view of the world and with other values... to establish bridges of friendship between different cultures, to present human diversity as something positive, to arouse a taste for the complementarity of the various traditions ... to make a call for openness of spirit, to promote tolerance, to learn to dialogue, to respect differences and to get on together...Multilingual education must be a way of fighting the prejudices, stereotypes and sectarianism that underpin the culture of war.

The world is now a global village and understanding another language, most especially a foreign and international language is an added advantage for job procurement in other countries, ambassadorial appointment, international trade, studying in other countries etc. So, English and French speakers will have a lot to

lose if they do not learn each other's language. They should learn each other's language for inter-border communication, peace building and development.

### **Second Language**

A second language (L2) is the language someone acquires, especially a bilingual and which is not from childhood and neither native to a community but learned at school because it has an established role in the community (Matthews, 1999:332). It is a language used side by side with the native or first language (L1). While the L1 is subconsciously acquired at childhood, the L2 is learnt at adulthood.

In other words, a second language is a conscious learning activity by a person who has already acquired a first language or mother tongue. A second language may or may not be the chronological second language of a bilingual or multilingual. It can even be the fourth language acquired or learnt by a polyglot. But it is termed "second" because it is the language which many people in the speech community have a native-like control or the kind of linguistic competence that is rated or ranked "second" to the L1 (Onuigbo and Eyisi, 2009:33). According to these scholars, the term "second" in language learning is just a technical representation of the functional position of the language and not the position in chronological or sequential order of the acquisition of the language.

A second language is functionally more than any language one learns in addition to that learnt as a child (Onuigbo and Eyisi,34). It is an important medium of communication in a multilingual situation. L2 users of any language are not competent in it and cannot be free from the endemic bilingual problem of mother-tongue interference, cannot be free from consulting books

for correct usage in the L2 and may not be able to make reliable value-judgment on it. Africa is a creation of her colonial masters. There are many second and official languages in the African continent as she had many colonial masters. For instance, English is the L2 in all the former British colonies like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone, Gambia etc; French is the L2 in all the former French colonies such as Benin Republic, Niger Republic, Cameroon, Gabon etc. A second language often functions as the language of the office, education, mass media, law, commerce etc. and its users share a socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic affinity with its native speakers through colonialism.

### **Foreign Language**

According to Ajiboye (2002) in Ewoviereno (2016:124), a foreign language (FL) is a “Language which is geographically and politically exogenous to the mother tongue(s) identifiable in the geopolitical speech community under reference and which is introduced into the community by choice, as a result of a felt need for supra-national cooperation or integration”. A foreign language is originally from another country and it is different from the L2 in that the FL speakers have no socio-cultural and socio-political affinity with the native speakers of the language through colonialism (Ewoviereno, 123).

An FL is not widely spoken in an alien speech community. It is only learnt and used by a few people for their individual purposes. French is a foreign language in all the former British, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, American etc colonies of Africa. But English is a foreign language in all the former French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and German colonies. A different language is a different culture and a different vision of life. A foreign language

learning is a foreign culture acquisition, integration, and peace. According to Kikanme (2015:186),

Learning a foreign language gives one the opportunity not only to be conversant with foreign cultures, but also to develop one's consciousness to peace and also enable one to acquire inner peace which transcends into other relationships.

Language pluralism leads to a change of mentality (I understand people who are not like me) and a change of orientation or attitude (I can be a friend and partner of people from other human communities) etc (Kikanme, 188). A bilingual or multilingual, especially one who can speak an L2 or FL can "bridge the gap between cultures, contribute to international diplomacy, promote national security and world peace, successfully engaged in international trade" (Kikanme, 189-190). Language is a storehouse of possibilities and an inter-border or international language is a sine qua non for diplomacy or international relations among nations.

### **Diplomacy**

Diplomacy is the art and practice of conducting international relations through bilateral agreements, negotiations and dialogues for peaceful co-existence and mutual development. According to the *Encyclopedia Americana* (2000:141), "diplomacy" "comprises the procedures and processes of negotiating agreements, usually between foreign states". While the *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1994: 242) sees it as "the theory and practice of conducting negotiations between governments". The word "diplomacy" is derived from the Greek word "diploma" meaning "something written on paper or parchment and folded; its application to international agreements executed in duplicate between two sovereigns" (*Collier's*

*Encyclopedia*, 242). *The Chambers Dictionary* gives the etymology of diplomacy or diploma as a letter folded double (456). This connotes a bilateral agreement. The bilateralism in the context of international relations and diplomacy is inter-border or international. It is all about negotiations between nations or between members of international organizations. Human beings are gregarious and interdependent. They live in tribes, kingdoms, nations, or city-states and have some kind of relationship with others who are their neighbours. This mutual relationship is made possible by a mutually intelligible language.

Language is not only the means of communication but also the essence of diplomacy. Diplomatic government agents and ambassadors engage in negotiations, persuasions, dialogues etc with language. Africa has a conglomeration of foreign and international languages and there is a need for nations speaking mutually unintelligible languages sharing a common boundary to learn one another's language for inter-border communication, peace and development. Specifically, Nigeria is bordered by Cameroon, Niger Republic, Benin Republic etc - all of which are French speaking countries. The common boundary and the difference in languages make a few Nigerians to study French, making it the semi- official language in Nigeria.

### **Harnessing English and French for Diplomacy**

According to Sir Winston Churchill, "jaw-jaw" is better than "war-war." This means that talking is better than fighting. This is an elementary truth in diplomacy. In fact, language is the very essence of the diplomatic vocation. According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "language is the armoury of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of the past and the weapons of its future" (in Ogbulogo, 2011:1). Language is a dagger and an

artillery, an instrument of propaganda, peace-building etc. It is the store house of possibilities. According to Derek Prince (1999:6), “there is no area in our personality more directly related to our total well-being than the mouth and tongue”.

There is no diplomatic lingua franca. But there must be a common mutually intelligible language before a diplomatic relationship can take place. A common language promotes bilateral relationships and a second or foreign language facilitates inter-border communication and relationship (Ekahfuede, 2009:114). There can be no inter-border and diplomatic relationship without a common mutually intelligible language. Effective communication builds relationship, peace, unity and development. English and French (and all other official languages) can be harnessed in diplomacy as they are international languages that play vital roles in globalization.

English and French occupy a place of honour in this world and will undoubtedly facilitate global understanding, peace and development. Quoting Iwuchukwu (2008), Ekahfuede (2009:115) states: “It is believed that literacy in French will enhance mutual understanding, harmonious co-existence and cooperation between the English and French speaking African countries”. English and French promote peace in Africa and in the World at large. (Quoting Iwuchukwu (2004), Ekahfuede (2009:115) states further:

French language is somewhat a unifying factor in the Nigerian linguistic and cultural diversity system... Through the use of dialogue in conflict resolution, French language will help to eliminate or alleviate inter-ethnic or inter-religious conflicts... especially in the West African sub-region.

Because of their internationality, English and French should be harnessed for inter-border relationship and co-existence. These two languages are relevant in almost every facet of life. Ekahfuede (2009:115) states:

For proper understanding, cordial relationships, reciprocal and rewarding socio-economic rapport, enduring political extents, exemplary multilateral relationship and transnational mobility... devoid of jealousy, suspicion and conflicts and noted in the vision of achieving complete regional integration between all the countries of West African sub-region, French [and English] cannot but play a very vital role.

Language is used for different communicative purposes or functions. English and French can be employed for dialogue, negotiations, translations etc. among inter-border countries speaking different languages. But the percentage of Nigerians speaking French and the percentage of Francophone Africa speaking English is infinitesimal and this hampers diplomatic dialogues, negotiations, translations, and so on. Citizens of Anglophone countries and citizens of Francophone countries are lukewarm about learning each other's language and this is a big problem in diplomatic relations between Anglophone and Francophone Africa. English and French are official international languages. So they are automatically languages of diplomacy. Diplomacy is all about international relations and it is cross-border or inter-border. So, a diplomatic language is also a language of inter-border communication.



## **Conclusion**

Language is the instrument of thought and expression and the store-house of possibilities. It dissects society. Human beings are gregarious and interdependent and a common language knits its speakers together. A mutually intelligible language is needed for inter-ethnic, inter-racial and inter-border communication and co-existence.

No individual or nation is an island. Everyone depends on another in a way for survival. The human society is plurilingual and a common language is required for inter-racial or inter-border peace building, trade, study, job opportunity etc in a foreign nation. A common language, most especially a foreign and international language is a sine qua non for such inter-border relations. An international language is an essential tool for diplomacy and international relations. There are many foreign languages in Africa as she had many white colonizers as well as through socio-cultural contact with the white world: English, French, Spanish, Arabic etc. Nations that share common boundaries should learn one another's language for inter-border communication and interdependence.

Specifically, French and English speakers should learn each other's language and have good diplomatic relations with each other. They should use dialogue to settle differences and not to go for war. They should assist each other in whichever way possible. English and French are different languages with different linguistic forms which must be studied assiduously for proficiency and international intelligibility and acceptability. Speakers of English and French should avoid over-generalization of linguistic rules and negative transfer of the linguistic forms of one language to the other. Understanding a foreign language creates job opportunities, international trade etc. All citizens of Anglophone and Francophone countries should learn each other's language. Finally,

the government of Francophone and Anglophone countries of Africa should build more immersion centres, provide conducive teaching/learning environments, employ enough French and English teachers and provide adequate modern teaching and learning facilities for effective teaching/learning of English and French in an L2 or FL situation.

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