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EXAMINING WEST AFRICAN REGIONAL INTEGRATION ON THE SCALE OF ANGLOPHONE-FRANCOPHONE LINGUISTIC STRAIN

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ABSTRACT

The hope of the eventual transformation of the Economic Community of West African States into a cohesive regional union, accentuated with the dynamism and transformation of the institution from 1975 to the present, reflects evolving exigencies. However, five decades down the line, the dream of a fully integrated West African community remains a pipe dream. The nascent nationalism manifesting as a military uprising in the sub-region further obfuscates attempts at characterising the milieu within globalization and regionalism contexts. There is palpable relapse in the auspicious ECOWAS of Peoples initiative, with deep-seated colonial legacies, specifically the persistent Anglophone/Francophone linguistic blocs. The animosity it produces has not received adequate attention. This study examines how the persistent linguistic strain continues to inhibit regional integration. The study adopts a Descriptive Method in analyzing data from dual sources. This study argues that the linguistic divide is deeply entrenched and will endlessly weigh down integration, because while multilingualism serves a centripetal purpose in the European Union for example, it is the reverse in the ECOWAS. Linguistic Relativity also known as the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,' was used to explain the linguistic phenomenon. It recommends a more robust socio-cultural and multilingual approach which emphasises globalism epitomized in democracy despite the essential economic and political asymmetries.

Key Words: Regional Integration, Anglophone, Francophone, Linguistic Strain

INTRODUCTION

Collective self-sufficiency is a commonly acknowledged regional integration objective considered as the most viable approach towards fostering economic development, political stability, and social cohesion among neighboring states. Apparently, the European Economic Community (EEC) now European Union (EU) inspired formation of regional integration in West Africa in different forms. Firstly, states of West Africa were direct colonies of the states of Europe, they would have no other than the metropolitan orientation redolent of exploitation and reaction. Secondly, the phenomenon of European regional integration would obviously impair the realization of the Pan African objectives of African freedom and unity; therefore, the surrender of national sovereignty to a supra national authority was a suitable sacrifice. Most striking is the threat which the European Economic Community - where France is a member - posed to Nigeria's sovereignty and regional hegemony. The Nigerian Civil War experiences in immediate terms, fired up Nigeria's desire to form a regional block, to counter the French entrenched interests. Markedly, the Nigerian-Togo Ministerial meeting held at Lome set up series of meetings to work out the draft treaty to be signed and adopted by a summit of Heads of State and Government in May, 1975 (Aluko, 1981). Therefore, on the 28th of May, 1975 the states of West Africa signed the pact (Treaty of Lagos) which brought the regional organization called the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to existence, envisioned as a platform for achieving collective self-sufficiency, deeper political collaboration, and enhanced regional identity among its fifteen member countries (Aluko, 1981).

Necessity imposed a repeated expansion in the original objectives and mandate of ECOWAS beyond economic objectives, extending to the issues of security, governance, military incursions, democracy, human rights and cultural fusion in 1993. However, the colonial legacies continued to trail ECOWAS like a patient dog, pulling the colonial economies strings toward the metropole and thereby weakening horizontal social ties between regional states, first through the formation in 1994 of a parallel French based union called the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) (Aleman, undated).

Though out-spaced by the UEMOA due to commonality in currency among the French speaking countries (West African CFA franc has a long history, with operational Customs Union and Common External Tariff, since 2000) (Piccolino & Minou, 2014).Institutional reforms and robust integration regimes initiated by the ECOWAS were already giving the integration project a direction when recently the resurgence of coup d'etat brought about a group within the group which have as a mark of protest withdrawn from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel State (AES). Whether it was a protest against Western influence, it has torn the draperies of regionalism in ECOWAS. The immediate concern is why did Nigeria not replicate the feats it achieved in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d' Ivoire, The Gambia, Sao Tome and Principe? Also burning, is what Nigeria has to lose over the rejection of its greatest rival (France) by its former colonies.

Of the frequently asked questions, one is whether Nigeria had a long-term vision of a union of West African states or it fortuitously responded to the immediate threat by French interest in the sub region. Being the dominant power in the sub region and the leading power in the formation of ECOWAS, one would be tempted to ask whether Nigeria could not have taken the union steps ahead if it so desired five decades after its creation. Several issues point to the lethargic commitment of Nigeria to the full integration of West Africa despite the leading role it has played in the formation, maintenance and reformation of ECOWAS. Nigeria was a foremost advocate of sovereign equality and non-interference in the affairs of other states, apparently to allay the fears of lesser states, however, does that constitute Nigeria's readiness to sacrifice its own sovereignty on the altar of Integration? Added to this internal problem which trail ECOWAS integration is the linguistic gulf created by colonialism and maintained by the French post-independence policies that continued to tie the economies of colonial territories to the metropole.

Among the most significant barriers to regional integration in West Africa, linguistic diversity is the least frequently addressed. The ECOWAS bloc is home to a complex tapestry of languages, reflecting both indigenous multiplicity and the legacies of colonialism, which led to the emergence of new languages. Member states operate primarily in three colonial languages—English, French, and Portuguese along with hundreds of indigenous tongues such as Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof, and Mandinka. This multilingual environment, while culturally rich, presents profound challenges to communication, policy harmonization, diplomacy, and grassroots connectivity across the region (Akindele, 2023; Aluko, 1981).

Language plays a central role in shaping identities, trust, and access to information. Language is more than a medium of communication; it is a key element of cultural identity and group solidarity. In the context of regional integration and national unity, linguistic affinity simplifies interaction, reduces transaction costs, and cultivates shared norms. In a regional organization like ECOWAS, where consensus-building, joint programs, and citizen participation are essential, linguistic barriers can fuel misunderstanding, perpetuate divisions, and slow down integration initiatives (Asiwaju, 2012). The colonial language divide—particularly between Anglophone and Francophone countries had affected the commitment of the Francophone countries to the formation of ECOWAS at the initial stage and it continues to influence political alliances, economic patterns, and even military cooperation, as seen in recent regional security arrangements. Moreover, procedural matters within ECOWAS institutions themselves often encounter inefficiencies due to translation issues, misinterpretations, and unequal linguistic access.

Despite the recognition of these challenges, scholarly attention to the specific role of language as a structural barrier to ECOWAS integration remains relatively sparse. Most

studies on regional integration tend to focus on macroeconomic disparities, political instability, and security issues, often overlooking the subtle but persistent impact of linguistic strains. Yet, as global examples of successful integration (such as the European Union) demonstrate, effective multilingualism policies and cultural bridging are indispensable for deepening regional bonds. West Africa is divided into Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone zones as a result of colonialism; these zones correspond to the colonial languages of English, French, and Portuguese respectively (Akindele, 2023). Efforts to promote regional unity are complicated by the profound integration of these language identities into national institutions, legal frameworks, and diplomatic practices.

In view of the military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea, ripple coup d'états and security realignments such as the formation of Sahel Alliance, the three nations left ECOWAS. The perceived Anglophone dominance and Western alignment of ECOWAS are cited by these countries (mostly Francophone) as arguments for leaving (International Crisis Group, 2024). There is palpable communication breakdown among the states in the sub region because despite the formal use of various languages in ECOWAS meetings in, the problem of concurrent interpretation made coordination more difficult among the military and renders crisis response slow (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). According to surveys conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, there is a legacy of citizen disconnect as language barriers contribute to the general public's poor comprehension of ECOWAS activities (Afrobarometer, 2023). Disparate legal terminology and enforcement strategies rooted in colonial legal traditions provide challenges to the implementation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) (UNCTAD, 2023).

In the light of above, this study critically examined the extent to which linguistic differences among ECOWAS member states strain the processes and ambitions of regional integration. It aims to investigate how language affects diplomatic interaction, policy execution, and the participation of citizens in regional programs. Additionally, it explores the efforts (if any) made by ECOWAS to bridge linguistic gaps, and how these measures have impacted the pace and quality of integration. By situating language at the center of the discourse on regional cooperation, this research provides fresh insights into the sociocultural underpinnings of integration efforts in West Africa. Understanding the depth and mechanics of linguistic strains is vital not only for enhancing the operational effectiveness of ECOWAS but also for building a more inclusive and genuinely united West African community (Bach, 2007).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Regional integration remains an objective of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), envisioned to promote economic growth, political stability, and socio-cultural cohesion among its member states. Despite several decades of collective effort, the actualisation of full integration has been sluggish and irregular. While many scholars and policymakers have extensively put forward economic disparities, political instability, and security challenges as impediments to the realization of regional unity, less attention has been paid to the sociolinguistic dimensions of integration, particularly the role of language either as a catalyst or as a barrier to regional integration. The linguistic landscape of ECOWAS is notably complex. The relics of colonial historical structure indicates that there exists bloc or linguistic identities such as Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone group of countries, each maintaining strong attachments to their respective colonial languages, including English, French, and Portuguese in addition to the widespread use of indigenous African languages. This linguistic diversity, although reflective of the region’s rich cultural heritage, has posed

significant challenges to communication, policy coordination, diplomacy, legal harmonisation, and citizen engagement across member states.

The fear of dominance of certain languages over others within ECOWAS institutions implies disregarding some countries, creating sensitivities of inequality, fostering mistrust, and impeding the sense of shared identity which is required for deeper integration. Translation and interpretation services, where they are formally provided, often fall short in bridging these divides, leading to operational inefficiencies, misunderstandings, and low public participation in regional initiatives. Consequently, linguistic strains may delicately but persistently undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of ECOWAS, widening gaps between policy ambitions and practical outcomes, including democratic regimes like the ECOWAS Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy (2000).

Given the strategic importance of communication and mutual understanding in any integration project, it becomes critical to interrogate the extent to which linguistic differences constitute a structural barrier to ECOWAS's goals. Without addressing this fundamental issue, efforts at economic convergence, political collaboration, and socio-cultural unity are likely to remain superficial or fragile. Thus, this study seeks to fill an important gap by examining how linguistic diversity influences ECOWAS regional integration, evaluating the institutional mechanisms in place to address language barriers, and proposing strategies to strengthen linguistic inclusivity in West Africa's integration agenda. Notably, ECOWAS of Peoples implies a cultural renaissance for integration in West Africa, however, culture flourishes with the linguistic components and the political disposition. The world is on a changing trajectory; therefore, we have evolved into a globalized state. A focus merely on local cultures rather than the global culture may yield inadequate results in such a world where democracy has become the main stay and standard practice. More critical of the questions begging for answers border onthe nature of existing linguistic structures in West Africa; the extent to which linguistic diversity among ECOWAS member states affected regional integration efforts; and what mechanisms and policies ECOWAS has put in place to manage diversity including the linguistic and inclusive and effective have they are.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to critically examine the influence of linguistic diversity on the process of regional integration within the ECOWAS sub region. In order to achieve this objective, the study:

1. examines the existing linguistic structures in West Africa.
2. The study assesses the extent to which linguistic differences among ECOWAS member states have affected regional cooperation and integration efforts.
3. It determines ECOWAS mechanisms and policies put in place towards integration including linguistic diversity.
4. The study further analyses holistic strategies capable of mitigating linguistic strains and instilling the sense of community in communication within the ECOWAS sub region.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Global structure is characteristic of inequalities and asymmetries whither the ECOWAS subregion finds itself at the lowest rungs, owing to decades of external pressure from colonial powers which left entrenched vertical structures. The effects of this phenomenon of western domination pervades virtually all planes, extending to the intellectual realm where concepts are given western or the reactionary southern perspectives. The push and pull of globalization and Regionalism tend to generate debates as to the viability of

regional grouping in a global world. However, the European Union (EU) and the Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN) point to the necessity of regional operation as a form of coactivity in a global world.

Studies on regional integration in West Africa largely adopted regional and global, inter and intra institutional relations among the people of West Africa. However, much of the studies did not broaden the discourse beyond the usual political, economic, and security dynamics by introducing a (people to people) critical cultural-linguistic perspective. Apart from the contextual expansion, this study offers- though not novel -a theoretical approach which differs from the typical International Relations theories such as Realism, Liberalism and the Dependency theory of the south. This does not mean that it rendered the usual theories irrelevant, rather, while acknowledging the import of these theories, it further explained the phenomenon from the cultural and sociolinguistic angles which offers proper understanding.

This study adopts the historical methodology which unveils significantly the behavioural patterns in ECOWAS and the global system denominated by change and continuities, diverging from the traditional explanation of relationship between variables. To policymakers and other stakeholders within ECOWAS, the study provides empirical basis and insight into how the linguistic structure subtly but critically influence the success or failure of integration initiatives. Understanding these dynamics will aid in formulating more effective language policies, improving multilingual communication strategies, and fostering inclusive governance system within the ECOWAS. The findings from this study serve as a valuable reference for future scholarly inquiries into the relationship between language, governance, and regionalism.

By identifying the obstacles posed by linguistic divisions and suggesting ways to overcome them, the study supports efforts to build stronger institutional coherence and solidarity among member states. This is essential for advancing economic cooperation, political stability, and socio-cultural unity in West Africa. Regional integration cannot succeed without the active participation of the populations it seeks to unite. This study highlights various ways in which linguistic characterisation affects citizen involvement, trust, and identification with ECOWAS. Enhancing linguistic inclusivity could bridge gaps between institutions and the people they serve, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the regional project. The study also offers comparative insights by relating the ECOWAS experience to other regional bodies, such as the European Union, where language management plays a crucial role. Lessons drawn would guide ECOWAS toward more robust and sustainable integration frameworks. In sum, the study aspires to deepen understanding, inform policy reforms, and inspire practical innovations toward building a more communicatively cohesive and politically integrated West African region.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study focuses on the impact of linguistic diversity on the processes of regional integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The research concentrates specifically in geographical terms on West Africa. The study therefore covers all fifteen ECOWAS member states, acknowledging their categorization into Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone groups, with emphasis on representative case studies from each linguistic bloc. However, for the purpose of comparison, reference shall be made to the European Union being the model of regional grouping. This study explored how language influences diplomatic relations, institutional efficiency, legal harmonization, citizen

engagement, and the overall pace of regional integration. It also assessed the effectiveness of ECOWAS's existing multilingual policies and communication mechanisms.

The research considered developments from before the 20Th Century, specifically the Berlin West Conference of 1884/85 to the present - a period marked by intensified integration efforts and increased regional challenges. The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including content analysis, interviews on regional officials and experts, and surveys among citizens of member states, to gather comprehensive data on perceptions and realities of linguistic strain. This study undertook a demanding path in research finding and analysis; meaning, several limitations like gathering detailed, up-to-date internal documents from ECOWAS institutions regarding linguistic policies and operations. These challenges included the fear of confidentiality, restrictions, and bureaucratic stays. Ideally, conducting these surveys and interviews which cut across multiple linguistic zones (English, French, Portuguese, and indigenous languages) present challenges in translation accuracy, interpretation, and data consistency. Although the study was comprehensive, practical constraints such as time, resources, and accessibility due to existing tension in West Africa informed our focus more deeply on Nigeria as representative country rather than an equally detailed examination of all fifteen ECOWAS members. Therefore, the study relied largely on official briefs and bulletins, participant accounts in books, journals, magazines and newspapers, which were considered reliable without elements of influence.

The political and institutional landscape in West Africa is highly dynamic, with recent events such as coups and regional realignments (e.g., Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's strained relations with ECOWAS) potentially affected integration processes and research atmosphere during the study period. Citizen and official perspectives on linguistic issues are inherently subjective and may vary widely based on personal experiences, political affiliations, or cultural background, potentially introducing bias into survey and interview results. Despite these limitations, every effort was made to ensure that the study remains rigorous, balanced, and reflective of the complexities involved in ECOWAS regional integration and linguistic dynamics.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Regional Integration

The process by which sovereign states come together to harmonize policies, enhance trade, promote political cooperation, and foster socio-economic development is what is referred to as regional integration (Mattli, 2022). ECOWAS was aimed at promoting such integration among West African states, nevertheless tenacious obstacles have slowed down the realization of its goals. Economic and security factors are often emphasized, yet, regional integration also depends largely on effective communication, shared identity, and institutional cohesion all of which are affected by language.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism is a defining characteristic of the West African region, encompassing both official colonial languages and hundreds of indigenous languages (Eldin, 2023). While multilingualism reflects cultural richness, it also necessitates deliberate and costly communication strategies for inclusion. Within ECOWAS institutions, multilingualism demands translation, interpretation, and linguistic accommodation, without which certain member states or citizens feel marginalized.

Communication in Regional Organizations

Effective communication is the lifeblood of regional organizations. Clear, accessible, and inclusive communication facilitates decision-making, trust-building, and citizen engagement (Kakonge, 2020). However, when linguistic barriers exist, communication breakdowns can lead to misinterpretations, delayed negotiations, and public alienation. In ECOWAS, despite formal translation policies, informal communication gaps often persist, thereby weakening the coherence of the regional agenda.

Sociocultural Identity

Regional integration efforts are most successful when they are underpinned by a shared regional identity (Adetula, 2024). Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a marker of belonging. In West Africa, fragmented linguistic identities contribute to a fragmented sociocultural space, making it difficult for ECOWAS citizens to perceive themselves as part of a unified regional community. Strengthening a collective West African identity requires bridging linguistic divides.

Linguistic Strain

Linguistic strain refers to the tensions and inefficiencies that arise when language differences hinder understanding, collaboration, and policy execution. Within ECOWAS, colonial legacies have left a division primarily between Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone countries, resulting in fragmented communication channels and competing national interests (Diallo, 2021). Linguistic strain thus acts as a structural barrier to unity and slows the effective implementation of regional programs. In ECOWAS, regional integration has been consistently undermined by linguistic strain, which complicates both official and informal communication among member states and citizens. Multilingualism, while culturally enriching, presents practical challenges when not carefully managed through institutional frameworks. Furthermore, linguistic divisions exacerbate the fragmentation of sociocultural identity, weakening citizens' emotional investment in the idea of a unified West Africa. Thus, the interplay of these five concepts explains why language, often overlooked, is a central but subtle impediment to achieving the deeper integration goals envisioned by ECOWAS. Understanding the differences between local and global culture will address the dynamics crucial for building a more coherent and effective regional community.

Language and Diplomacy

The requisite tact and intelligence for diplomatic communication is largely contingent upon the use of language and language skills. The first major role of language in diplomacy is clarity and precision. Ambiguities are detestable practices in diplomacy; thus, Treaties and Conventions are written in very clear and precise terms whether bilingual or multilingual. A critical example is the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which provides for a multilingual and centripetal arrangement. In institutional terms, while the UN uses six official languages, the EU of twenty-four members has twenty-four official languages. Diplomatic History is marked by rise and fall in use of lingua franca as a uniting force, dating back to the Akkadian times (a nearly extinct language) 2500 BC in the Middle East. Notably, the Treaty between Egypt and the Hittites in 1300 BC was written in Akkadian (Kurbalija, 2021). The role of unification was later epitomised by the rise of the French primacy from the 17th to the 20th Century, assisted by French political and cultural dominance. The 1539 Villers-Cotterets Ordinance mandated that all administrative documents be in French. The French language assumed such a phenomenal status that at a time, 88 member states belonged to the Organisation La Francophonie, which facilitated the use of French language and unity among the French speaking countries (Kurbalija, 2021). The 20th Century witnessed a decline in French influence and the nascence of English as the dominant global language. The 1919

Treaty of Versailles was drafted in both French and English. The new surge was driven by the growing influence of the United States of America, an English-speaking nation following the World Wars (Afgan Mehtiyev, undated). The order of succession in dominance was like this: Akkadian c.2500-1000 BC; Latin c.500-1500 AD; French c. 1700-1919 AD and English 1919-Present.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DIVIDE

Beginning with the Berlin Conference in Germany in 1884-85, where among others, the African boundaries were drawn arbitrarily (Adebajo, 2008); internal distortions were caused; foreign languages especially those of the colonizing countries were imposed as official languages; bonds which transcend filial proximity were established, leading to bloc allegiance; and political and economic orientations were formed (Adebajo, 2021). This is evident in the direct and the indirect rule systems of the French and the British authorities respectively. The Francophone states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and others) historically leaned towards France for economic and political support, maintaining close diplomatic and financial ties through assimilation and financial mechanisms like the CEAO and later UEMOA CFA Franc Zone. In contrast, Anglophone countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Liberia) promoted a model of broader Pan-African independence from former colonial powers (Ezeani, 2022). Therefore, different legal systems, administrative, philosophical and political logics which were established with West Africa more than 50 years after independence.

This linguistic-cum-political division led to distrust and competing interests within ECOWAS from its early years, with each bloc wary of domination by the other. For example: Francophone states often perceived Nigeria's leadership (as the largest Anglophone nation) as hegemonic. The fragile Nigeria-French relationship dating far back as the 1961 severance of diplomatic ties with France by Nigeria largely account for this animosity (Aluko, 1981). Anglophone states criticized the perceived economic conservatism and external dependency of the Francophone bloc as naïve and servile, given their financial dependence and political patronage. In essence, the cultural and linguistic fusion of the French colonies proved a huge obstacle to integration efforts.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded on 28May1975 through the Treaty of Lagos**,** with an ambitious aim: to promote economic integration across all sectors, including industry, transport, energy, agriculture, and commerce, with the ultimate goal of establishing an economic union among West African states (Adebanwi, 2021). The early blueprint reflected optimism that closer economic ties would foster political solidarity and socio-cultural unity among the fifteen member states. Initially driven by Nigeria **(**Anglophone**)** and Togo **(**Francophone**),** ECOWAS was intended to overcome colonial-era divisions and facilitate regional self-reliance (Asante, 2020). From inception, linguistic and colonial legacies posed structural hurdles to this vision to the extent that trade relations among the regional states remain as low as ten per cent (10%), while trade with the vertical realms stand as high as sixty-one per cent (61%).Within ECOWAS institutions—including the Commission**,** the Parliament**,** and the Court of Justice—multilingualism (English, French, Portuguese) was formally recognized. However, in practice, language has remained a major obstacle to effective collaboration. Research shows that: Official communications**,** reports, and meetings are often delayed because of translation bottlenecks (Iheduru, 2023). Policy negotiations suffer from misinterpretations and slow coordination due to linguistic mismatches. Citizens' engagement with ECOWAS programs is lower in countries where official documents are not quickly translated into accessible languages. ECOWAS budgets significant sums annually for translation and interpretation, yet

disparities in real-time communication still fuel bureaucratic inefficiency and frustration among delegates (Aleman, undated).

Leadership became a matter of contestation in ECOWAS, though not strange among intergovernmental institutions, however, it assumed a linguistic and geopolitical dimension. For example, in 2010, there was an incidence of heightened tension over the appointment of the President of ECOWAS Commission (Bach, 2007). Whereas the Francophone states lobbied heavily for the appointment of Kadre Désiré Ouédraogo from Burkina Faso, others routed for the appointment of a Nigerian candidate, leading to brief diplomatic rifts (ECOWAS, 2014). This incident underscores the delicate balancing act ECOWAS must maintain to ensure linguistic and regional representation, often at the cost of merit-based selection. As noted earlier, contests are practices that are conventional in institutions, but the ill feelings generated in the post-election years may linger.

The legal documents of ECOWAS were written in English, French, and Portuguese languages, however, the translation delays and technical inconsistencies obstructed the timeliness of decision-making. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons of 1979 is a typical example of the discrepancies in the translation of legal documents into various versions, including its subsequent revisions (Adepoju, 2002). This made the document itself subject to different legal interpretations among member states, which affected harmonization and enforcement in terms of customs and immigration.

In another incidence in 2019, the Francophone West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), championed by Côte d'Ivoire, announced the adoption of the "ECO" as the common currency without a general ECOWAS agreement. Expectedly, this action generated a response from Nigeria and other Anglophone states, who observed the move as counterproductive to regional consensus (Olayiwola, 2020; BBC, 2020). This probably adds to the delay in the realisation of the ECOWAS single currency (ECO) which reflects the linguistic and geopolitical divide between the Francophone UEMOA bloc and Anglophone countries. Other forms of hindrance arising from the breakdown in communication resulting from the Anglophone/Francophone divide include non-tariff barriers at border posts, delayed movement of goods, services, and persons; multiplicity of road blocks and duplication of levies (often illegal), extortion and other corrupt practices. Conflicting regulations among states counter the spirit of ECOWAS integration and impede trade.

Most apparently, the primary production orientation of West Africa continued to tie West African economies to the linguistic cum colonial blocs. Nigeria, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea for example, trade in crude oil; Ivory Coast, Ghana and Burkina Faso trade in cocoa, gold and uranium, Sierra Leone trade in diamonds and titanium; Mali produces cotton. Primary products obviously are more in demand by the foreign countries than countries of West Africa, however, that does not justify the failure of West African states to add value to the distribution chain by turning the primary products into finished forms for export. In terms of education, this divide continues to widen the gap as citizens are confined to their linguistic areas, therefore inhibiting ventilation of ideas and educational uniformity necessary for regional development. Foreign non material culture and ideas continue to permeate and weaken local ideas owing to the dependent structure, to the extent intellectualism too becomes dependent.

Linguistic divides have been particularly visible during ECOWAS' responses to regional crises. For example, during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars (1990s), Anglophone states led military interventions through ECOMOG, while Francophone states were often reluctant participants (Adebajo, 2021). Recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and

Niger (2021–2023) have seen differing reactions between the linguistic blocs, with some Francophone countries advocating for negotiation, while Anglophone powers like Nigeria pushed for stricter sanctions. This fragmentation weakens ECOWAS's collective bargaining power and delays critical interventions, undermining its credibility as a regional actor. Among the most visible linguistic strains in ECOWAS occurred in peacekeeping operations, especially in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire (Adebajo, 2002)**.** While the Liberian Civil War lasted (1989–1997), ECOWAS peacekeeping operations codenamed ECOMOG was majorly championed by Nigeria, an Anglophone country, while the Francophone states like Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso were accused of undermining the intervention by supporting Charles Taylor's faction (Francis, 2001).

Today, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers a new impetus for regional integration, and ECOWAS must align its internal processes to benefit from continental opportunities. Yet, linguistic strains and the primary producing nature of West Africa continue to complicate efforts. Common legal frameworks, financial markets, and cross-border transport systems are slow to harmonize across language lines. Citizens in Francophone states report lower awareness of ECOWAS initiatives compared to their Anglophone counterparts (World Bank, 2023). Thus, without decisive strategies to neutralize linguistic barriers, ECOWAS risks becoming marginalized within the broader continental integration process.

LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES

It is often said – though in error - of African states that they are lacking in sociocultural and political ideological leanings to the extent that democratic access and cultural respect is the strength of the European Union. A characterisation of identities in terms of linguistic bloc in ECOWAS is a complex and persuasive phenomenon driven by history, politics and social psychology. In principles, while the ECOWAS is a heritage of colonisation, the European Union was founded on the principles of democratic and economic integration. Whereas the linguistic diversity of the European Union is a design in principle, the strain in ECOWAS and extending to the COMESA is a legacy of inherited burden (Ferrando, 2016). Historical perspectives point to the enduring legacy of colonialism as responsible for the ossified linguistic identities in ECOWAS. Of the three blocs: Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone; the Francophone bloc (former French colonies) were governed using the French policy of assimilation, compelling the use of French in administration, education and law, basically all official domains, thereby, creating a strong, top-down linguistic identity tied to France. The ultimate goal of France was to make Frenchmen out of the colonised. The Anglophone bloc (former British colonies) were governed by the Indirect Rule system adopted by the British; allowing local languages and structures to persist for everyday life, while using English for top level administration, thereby creating a significantly different relationship with the language of colonialism, which is a different experience from that of the Francophone bloc. The Lusophone bloc (former Portuguese colonies) were ruled by Assimilation, but it was a loose cannon of a sort and not as strict as those of the Francophone, thereby creating a different historical context.

These colonial policies did not just introduce languages; they created distinct administrative cultures, educational systems, legal and economic systems that exist till date. Franz Fanon in his discourse on Africans and the language of the colonisers argues that,

> for it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other…to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization (Fanon, 2008).

Hence, the use of the colonial language in administrative and educational systems, as well as in cultural practices like dressing, mannerism among others are invariably ways in which the African exists for his colonisers. The linguistic differences as a result of the colonial administration sets the stage for modern processes that ossify these identities, especially when dealing with nations or entities from a different bloc. Leigh Oakes and Jane Warren argue that individuals can simultaneously enjoy different social identities,

> "the 'multiple identities' of interest here are those which exists at the same level of identification, when individuals belong to multiple groups of the same nature, for example, when they are perceived to have two or more ethnic identities…there is one positively-viewed in-group, while all outgroups are considered unfavourably" (Oakes and Warren, 2007).

While ECOWAS aims for integration, its operation often reinforces the bloc identities as meetings are conducted in French, English and Portuguese, which naturally inspire delegates to group themselves along these linguistic lines, thereby determining negotiating positions. Often, meetings are held and positions are taken within blocs (e.g Francophone West African States meeting before a full ECOWAS summit) creating a 'them versus us' dynamic before discussions even begin. More so, political counter-balancing happens through blocs to check the power of a dominant member e.g. the Francophone states often combine to checkmate Nigerian influence, fearing that their agenda will be dominated. This is a clear example of non-bloc entity (Nigeria, the Anglophone giant) triggering a hardened collective identity response from the Francophone bloc.

Language is a major barrier to ECOWAS integration despite official multilingualism, the elites are often more fluent in their colonial language (English and French) than in regional lingua franca like Hausa, Yoruba, Fulfulde and Mande. This makes genuine grass root integration and formation of a shared "West African" identity difficult. The non-bloc person is first and foremost, a linguistic outsider. True integration requires moving beyond these ossified Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone blocs to foster a genuinely shared West African identity: a task that remains the central challenge for the region.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ECOWAS UP TO 2024

Apparently, multilingualism as much as multiculturalism informed Nigerian leaders' skepticism which is the fountain of all their foreign policies predilections reflected for example, in Tafawa Balewa's view of the Nigerian state and by extension, of West Africa in 1948 where he declared that:

> since 1914 the British government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite… Nigerian unity is only a British invention (Meredith, 2005 in Pham, 2007).

Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Action Group in a similar vein, declared in 1947 that:

> 'Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no Nigerians in the same sense that there are 'English', 'Welsh', or 'French'. The word Nigerian is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the borders of Nigeria and those who do not`` (Awolowo, 1947, in Pham, 2007).

Despite the pessimism of Nigerian leaders about the unity of Nigeria and by extension West Africa, ECOWAS has been through laudable integration initiatives which has assumed a steady progression. Protocols and Conventions have been signed towards the advancement

of the ECOWAS integration objectives, amongst them: Protocol on Non-Aggression 1978; Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance of Defense 1981; Declaration of Political Principles 1991; Treaty of Cotonou in 1993; To justify intervention in Liberia 1990-97; Sierra Leone 1997-2000; Return of Ahmed Teejan Kabbah to power; Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security 1999; Peacekeeping in Guinea Bissau and Cote D Ivoire 1999 and 2003 (ECOWAS Commission, 2023).

Beginning with the 2020 Malian experience, West Africa has witnessed a trend of military overthrows in Mali again in 2021, Guinea in 2021**,** Burkina Faso in 2022**,** and Niger in 2023**.** This phenomenon followed a protracted security threat in the Sahel and the failure of the governments and their western allies to quell the persistent terrorist attacks which had claimed enormous lives and property (International Crisis Group, 2024). The emerging regimes have presented themselves as nationalist and Pan-Africanist crusade**,** claiming to represent a fight against neo-colonial control, foreign exploitation, and ineffectual regional bodies like ECOWAS. However**,** actions such as withdrawal from ECOWAS, imposing tariffs against neighboring countries, and forming separate alliances suggest motivations that are more parochial and anti-integrationist than genuinely Pan-African.

In Mali, during the successive years 2020, 2021, Colonel Assimi Goïta**,** led the military to take over power citing corruption, persistent insecurity, and French neo-colonialism. French troops were expelled under the guise of restoration of national sovereignty. In a similar manner, the Burkina Faso military coup in 2022 was led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré**,** who echoed Pan-Africanist discourses of liberating Burkina Faso from foreign puppetry (Al Jazeera. 2022). He placed emphasis on building ties with other military regimes in the sub region rather than a broader West African unity. Same goes to Niger in 2023, where a coup was staged against President Mohamed Bazoum, and the junta condemned ECOWAS as being a puppet of the Western powers. They **w**ithdrew from the G5 Sahel security alliance in 2022 and made a strong critique of ECOWAS sanctions thereafter. However, rather than promoting continental unity, Niger joined with Mali and Burkina Faso to form a confederation known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)**,** effectively splintering the ECOWAS framework.

In January 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger officially announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS (Reuters, 2024). They accused ECOWAS of imposing foreign-dictated sanctions; failing to assist in counter-terrorism efforts; and protecting puppet regimes. In view of these criticisms, some scholars argued that these withdrawals will tend to weaken regional solidarity and contradict sincere Pan-African ideals. Isolationist policies risk creating new sovereigntist states" more focused on internal militarization than genuine development (Cummings, 2024). AES members have started Imposing new tariffs and restricting trade with ECOWAS countries that are seen as aligned with Western powers (World Bank, 2024). Closing borders or tightening controls with countries like Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. This economic fragmentation contradicts ECOWAS protocols on free movement and trade**,** such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (1979)**.**

In a swift of fate, following the July 2023 coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, the Nigerien junta adopted Hausa one of the country's most widely spoken indigenous languages as a key official language for government communication, downgrading the use of French (Reuters, 2024). This decision followed broader anti-French sentiment, fueled by perceptions of France's neocolonial interference in Niger and the broader Sahel region. The move challenges the colonial linguistic legacy and could inspire a shift towards African linguistic sovereignty**.** If successful, it could reshape integration around

indigenous languages like Hausa, Yoruba, Fulfulde, and Mande, rather than French and English. Hausa is spoken by over 80 million people across West Africa (mainly in Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Chad). Its regional spread could serve as an alternative unifying medium across linguistic lines, especially between Niger and northern Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Elevating Hausa aligns Niger more closely with northern Nigeria**,** where Hausa is predominant. This could **s**trengthen Niger-Nigeria trade relations**,** foster cross-border cultural projects**,** and create sub-regional economic corridors (e.g., Kano–Maradi trade zone). Such regional corridors**,** if expanded, could revive economic ties independently of colonial language barriers. The declaration of Hausa represents both a bold attempt to decolonize national identity and a risk to existing regional structures built around colonial languages. If handled inclusively (by promoting multilingualism and accommodating minority languages), the move could redefine regional integration on African terms (International Crisis Group, 2024). If implemented exclusively and antagonistically, it risks deepening fragmentation and isolating Niger diplomatically and economically**.** Thus, the success of this language shift for integration depends largely on whether it evolves toward inclusive African multilingualism or narrow nationalist exclusivism**.** Hausa's elevation in Niger challenges the Francophone-Anglophone dichotomy that has historically constrained West African integration. However, for this linguistic revolution to foster rather than fracture regional solidarity, it must be embedded within a broader, inclusive framework that values linguistic plurality**,** cross-border solidarity**,** and collaborative governance transcending the colonial language fault lines that continue to haunt ECOWAS (International Crisis Group, 2024).

While the oratory of sovereignty and freedom from neo-colonialism is trendy, many a scholar would argue that proper Pan-Africanism seeks broader African unity, economic integration, and collective development**,** rather than isolation (Zeleza, 2023). The current wave of military nationalism focuses on consolidating authoritarian rule**,** restricting political pluralism**,** and breaking regional solidarity with the Western powers**.** Thus, the breakaway from ECOWAS is less about liberating Africa and more about entrenching militarized states**,** seeking to avoid democratic pressure from regional organizations. The current political scenario in West Africa reflects a paradox: military leaders beseech Pan-Africanist ideals of sovereignty and anti-colonialism, nevertheless their actions, including withdrawal from ECOWAS**,** tariff impositions**,** regional fragmentation**,** and alliances of military states undermine regional unity and integration**.** Instead of strengthening West Africa's collective position globally, the Sahel breakaway movements risk deepening isolation, economic decline, and political instability in the region.

Diplomatic efforts, including sanctions, high powered delegations, and inter-ministerial meetings to woo the defecting countries have not proved effective. To all intent and purpose, it appears that the external or global politicking between the world powers, especially France and Russia have reared its head in the whole dynamics, with Russia providing the material and moral support for the 'juntas', reminiscent of the days of decolonization. Despite this problem, it remains unclear whether the deep-seated Anglophone/Francophone linguistic strain can be relaxed with the absence of France. Other issues of concern include whether the land locked AES states can continue to do without relying on the ECOWAS states and access to the seas.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

While Neofunctionalism explains how the economic interdependence of entities foster unity and progress, Constructivism on the reverse side demonstrates how language and other colonial legacies create distinct national identities and interests, leading to suspicion and

policy misalignment. However, Neofunctionalism is limited because it does not explain the economic and non-economic distortions like political and socio cultural inconsistencies. Therefore, this study considers Linguistic Relativity theory which was coined as Sapir-Whorf theory in 1954 (Carroll, Levinson, & Lee, 2012) as most relevant in interpreting the behavior of West African linguistic blocs.

This study dwells largely on Linguistic Relativity otherwise referred to as the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis' as a platform to explain the relativity of language in West Africa and to further describe how it bears negatively on West African regional integration. The main tenets of this theory propounded by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf in the 1920s and 30s are that language shapes thought; that the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview, cognition, and perception of reality. Relativity theory also indicates cultural embeddedness, meaning that language is not just a tool for communication but a carrier of culture and identity. It has the features of non-universality of experience, meaning that people who speak different languages experience or perceive the world differently, influencing how they relate to others and make decisions.

The use of Linguistic Relativity is justifiable within the context of West African integration due to the linguistic relativity of West Africa and how the multiplicity of language impacts not just communication but also political thinking and group identity. It explains the deep-rooted identity and perception gaps between the Anglophone and Francophone communities of West Africa. Anglophone and Francophone blocs approached regional policies, governance, and cooperation diversely due to language-rooted worldviews and colonial legacies. It further explains the difficulty in creating unified regional narratives or ideologies across linguistic lines and supports the idea that language policy and translation efforts in West Africa are not deep enough, and that deeper mutual understanding must be fostered to build trust and integration. This theory helps explain the cognitive and perceptual dimensions of linguistic strain, going beyond practical barriers like translation to the mental and cultural divide language reinforces.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of Anglophone-Francophone linguistic tensions continues to undermine ECOWAS's capacity to achieve its vision of robust regional integration, political stability, and collective economic growth. Although ECOWAS was founded on the principles of unity, shared prosperity, and continental solidarity, colonial linguistic legacies have fostered enduring mistrust, miscommunication, and fragmentation among member states. In the current era of political upheavals (marked by the rise of nationalist military regimes and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS) the linguistic divide has become even more pronounced. These divisions are no longer merely linguistic but have evolved into geopolitical fractures**,** reflecting competing visions for West Africa's future.

The Francophone-Anglophone cleavage**,** exacerbated by differing colonial histories, administrative systems, and foreign alignments, impedes the ability of ECOWAS to: Formulate unified security responses; harmonize economic policies; foster citizen engagement across linguistic boundaries and effectively mediate in political crises. The linguistic strain thus intersects with broader political tensions, weakening the fabric of regional cooperation precisely when unity is most needed to face transnational threats like terrorism, economic instability, and external exploitation. Without urgent action to depoliticize language differences**,** institutionalize multilingualism**,** and forge a new integrative identity beyond colonial lines**,** ECOWAS risks becoming irrelevant in the face of new regional alliances and nationalist fragmentation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ECOWAS must invest heavily in real-time, high-quality translation and interpretation infrastructure, leveraging on technological advancement in artificial intelligence powered real-time translation apps at all organizational levels, ensuring that language ceases to be a barrier to decision-making**.** Recruitment policies should favor multilingual professionals capable of bridging linguistic divides. Create a fully operational ECOWAS Language Services Agency independent of political organs to ensure efficiency and neutrality. Launching a West African Regional Civic Education Campaign for a regional civic identity must be nurtured through media, educational curricula, and cultural exchanges that promote ECOWAS ideals across all languages, rather than reinforcing colonial linguistic identities. Initiate a One West Africa media campaign simultaneously broadcast in English, French, Portuguese, and indigenous languages thereby fostering a mental shift, where rather than perceive language diversity as an obstacle, it would be seen as a valuable asset with the potential of enriching dialogue, bring about broader participation among member nations.

Facilitate regular language-bridging forums to foster trust and mutual understanding between Anglophone and Francophone political, military, and civil society leaders. Institutionalise an Annual ECOWAS Francophone-Anglophone Dialogue Summit focused on security, trade, and governance cooperation. Given the failures to anticipate or resolve recent political crises, ECOWAS should reform its conflict mediation frameworks to ensure inclusive, multilingual negotiations and neutral language facilitation during peace talks. All ECOWAS peace missions should be linguistically balanced and include official linguistic mediators.

Most critical of these recommendations is the establishment of an institutional mechanism for the furtherance of democratic cultures among member states, thus deemphasising inter-state transactions and focusing on intra people's initiatives like it happened during the popular days of ECOWAS, when they installed a democratically elected President that had been denied his seat, they restored an ousted president in Sao Tome and Principe. Efforts should be geared towards making prompt and proper translation of all crucial documents, resolutions, negotiations or proposals into the official languages of English, French and Portuguese should be done accurately and in a timely manner, leading to quick and better-informed decision making among member states.

Promote Cross-Linguistic Economic Initiatives, Joint infrastructure projects (railways, energy corridors, digital connectivity) should deliberately cut across Anglophone-Francophone frontiers**,** demonstrating the tangible economic benefits of integration. Prioritize cross-border Special Economic Zones (SEZs) linking countries from different linguistic blocs (e.g., Nigeria-Benin, Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire). Reaffirm ECOWAS's Role in a New Sahel Strategy following the departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. ECOWAS must urgently craft a new inclusive Sahel engagement strategy**,** recognizing linguistic nuances, while maintaining political neutrality to bring these nations back into the integration framework. Establish a West Africa Reconciliation Task Force composed of respected Francophone and Anglophone statespersons to reopen dialogue with the Sahel breakaway states. True West African integration demands more than trade agreements and security pacts; it demands cultural and linguistic reconciliation**.** ECOWAS stands at an intersection; it must either embrace its diversity as a strength or risk splintering under the weight of its unresolved colonial legacies. A future of peace, prosperity, and dignity for West Africans can only be built on a foundation where language unites rather than divides**.**

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