

## Yoruba Language as an Interface for Trans–Border Communication in the Idiroko Borderline Community

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study investigated the role of Yoruba Language as an interface for trans-border communication in the Idioroko borderline community in the Nigeria-Benin Borders. This study employs a cross-sectional survey paradigm, which integrates a mixed research approach to collect data. A total of 50 respondents were involved in the study to represent the entire population, 20 traders (10 Nigerians, and 10 Beninese). 20 inhabitants of that community, 10 Nigerians, and 10 Beninese as well as 10 key informants (Immigration officers), 5 Nigerians, and 5 Beninese) were selected to provide useful information for the study. In sum, a total of fifty (50) respondents were selected, twenty five (25) Nigerians; and the other twenty five (25) Beninese. Under this investigation, data was collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data was collected using questionnaires containing multiple-choice, open and closed-ended questions, and attitude scales. Qualitative data was collected through observation (non-participant). The results from the quantitative data collected affirmed that truly the role of the Yoruba language in mediating the heels of trans-border miscommunications is indeed a major and independent one and that it's indeed the most effective language employed by traders for successful bargaining process with a 70% favorable index, 60% of respondents also confirmed it as the general language of social interaction while 82% of respondents affirmed that the Yoruba Language is indeed the language used in formal contexts such as advertisement and immigration activities. The study recommends that the accommodation strategy should be embraced by the inhabitants of this community as the governments of both countries must unanimously birth an effective context specific language policy that addresses the divisive multilingual status of this community aiming to institutionalize the Yoruba Language as a unifying linguistic code.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Intercultural Communication, Trans-border Communication, The Yoruba Language, Communication Accommodation, Cross-Border Trade*

### I. INTRODUCTION

“The Yoruba people (Yorùbá in Yoruba orthography) are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language (Yoruba: èdèeYorùbá). The Yoruba constitute between 30 and 50 million individuals throughout West Africa and are found predominantly in Nigeria which makes up around 21% of its population. The Yoruba share borders with the Borgu (variously called "Baruba" and "Borgawa") in the northwest; the Nupe (whom they often call "Tapa") and Ebira in the north; and the Edo, the Èsan, and the Afemai to the southeast. The Igala and other related groups are found in the northeast, and the Egun, Fon, and others in the southwest. The Itsekiri who live in the north-west of Niger delta, are closely related

to the Yoruba but maintain a distinct cultural identity. While the majority of the Yoruba live in western Nigeria, there are also substantial indigenous Yoruba communities in the Republic of Benin and Togo, plus large groups of Yoruba migrants living in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Yoruba population was also involved in slavery and was taken to the Americas, where they form a large diaspora.”(Wikipedia (2012): Yoruba people).

From the above affirmation, it is evident that the Yoruba language is one of the dominant languages spoken across the West African sub region and its border communities even as far as Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra-Leone and Côte d’Ivoire. Closely followed by this is the Hausa language which is widely spoken in many countries in the North, West and Central Africa. This accounts for why in the two bordering nations of Nigeria and Benin Republic, English and French languages are used concurrently with other local languages.

The identity positioning amongst Yoruba-Benin people in the Idiroko border community is indeed a product of the ongoing interaction and intermingling between ‘social space’ and ‘extant interest’, especially within the ‘host society’. Economically, businesses have greatly profited from building the cultural and linguistic skills across the Nigeria-Benin borders since the early 60s. Thus, speaking Yoruba opened new markets to businessmen and women, traders and multinational companies both in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. These market opportunities were previously closed or scarcely exploited. In this regard, this article examines the Yoruba Language as a viable interface to navigate through the linguistic and cultural barriers and build viable social cohesion amongst traders and inhabitants of the Idiroko community.

Primarily, cross-border languages have multifaceted roles in enhancing cross-border activities. Notably: facilitating economic border activities (trade), political mobilization and strategic influence, regional integration between neighboring countries, and finally, facilitating citizenship, granting refugee status and other related benefits (Feyissa&Hoehne, 2010:1). They are also operational to building social capital when used in socioeconomic activities like informal cross-border trade (Ndhlovu, 2013:21).

In relation to this study, the Yoruba language is considered both as a trans-border and inter-ethnic language which is envisaged to mend both linguistic and cultural divisions that exist in this community as well as build viable social networks amongst inhabitants of this community to enhance successful intercultural exchanges and cross-border trade in Idiroko community.

Idiroko is a community between the border of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin and hence, communication between the two countries for the sake of social cohesion and economic development becomes expedient as trans-border communication and trade would not be possible if a common linguistic ground is not found.

This was the same situation during the time of colonial invasion when the white imperialists had to enforce their linguistic code on Africans in order to facilitate their exploitation process. This was so because the imperialists understood that their mission would not be successful if they fail to find a common linguistic ground through which intercultural dialogue could emerge. (Dhikrullah 3:2023)

In the context of the Idiroko Community, Yoruba language has emerged to solve this problem as it becomes the only language that gained wide acceptability in this borderline community. This is because Yoruba Language is a national language in both countries and particularly because the Republic of Benin shares a rich history with the Yoruba race as most of his citizens are of Yoruba descent.

The use of a common language is crucial for fostering mutual understanding among traders and inhabitants. It creates viable sites for the construction of social cohesion. The multiplicity of languages in border communities does more harm than good because a border houses people from heterogeneous linguistic affiliations and they

cannot coexist seamlessly without except they embrace a common linguistic code as their interface of communication.

These challenges informed this study as this study seeks to identify these challenges, proffer solutions and ultimately establish the status of the Yoruba Language in the Idiroko community as it serves as an interface for trans-border communication.

## **II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

The problem statement of this study is therefore that the increased contacts of people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds during trans-border encounters (like in cross-border trade) creates a nascent ground for high levels of linguistic and cultural frictions. This situation demands a linguistic compromise as communication becomes volatile and complex, resulting in miscommunications and misunderstandings thereby affecting cross-border trade and intercultural communication in Idiroko community. This situation requires that the Yoruba Language rises to the occasion and takes its rightful place as the force for linguistic unification in this community. This situation creates a threat for the economic development of this community as no economic activities would be possible if traders can't communicate effectively. Despite the existence of, several researches on intercultural communication problems, little attention has been given to the Yoruba language and border communities.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the status of Yoruba language as an interface of cross-border communication and trade in Idiroko town?
2. Which limitations is Yoruba language facing in its quest of enhancing trans-border communication and trade in Idiroko community?
3. What are the communication strategies developed by inhabitants of this community to overcome these communicative linguistic challenges?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study has both policy and academic significance. This study opens up new horizons of the significance of language unification to solving the problems of linguistic diversity in the context of trans-border communication in border communities in the West African sub region.

Furthermore, results of this study inspire the urgent need for the governments of both countries to forge effective and efficient language policies and programs for borderline communities to facilitate cross-border communication and trade. Finally, the results of this study provide academic pertinence by adding empirical evidence in the field of intercultural communication. More importantly, it serves as a call to interdisciplinary research on the role of trans-border languages, especially from a sociolinguistic point of view in relation to intercultural communication. Thus, it offers a basis for future research.

## **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a wide-ranging framework aimed at predicting and explaining many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction. It explores the different ways in which we accommodate our communication, our motivations for doing so, and the consequences. (Gallois & Giles 2015).

Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM) propounded by Cai and Rodriguez (1997), focuses on the process of communication adjustment between people during initial cross-cultural interactions. It explains how people's perceptions and experiences may facilitate or impede effective adaptation during intercultural interactions. The

IAM model is unique and reflects the communicative scenario between traders and customers in Idiroko town. It is akin to this study as it describes trader-customer trade interactions by suggesting salient steps that may be adopted to galvanize unity, negotiate meaning, and enhance trade during first encounters.

#### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

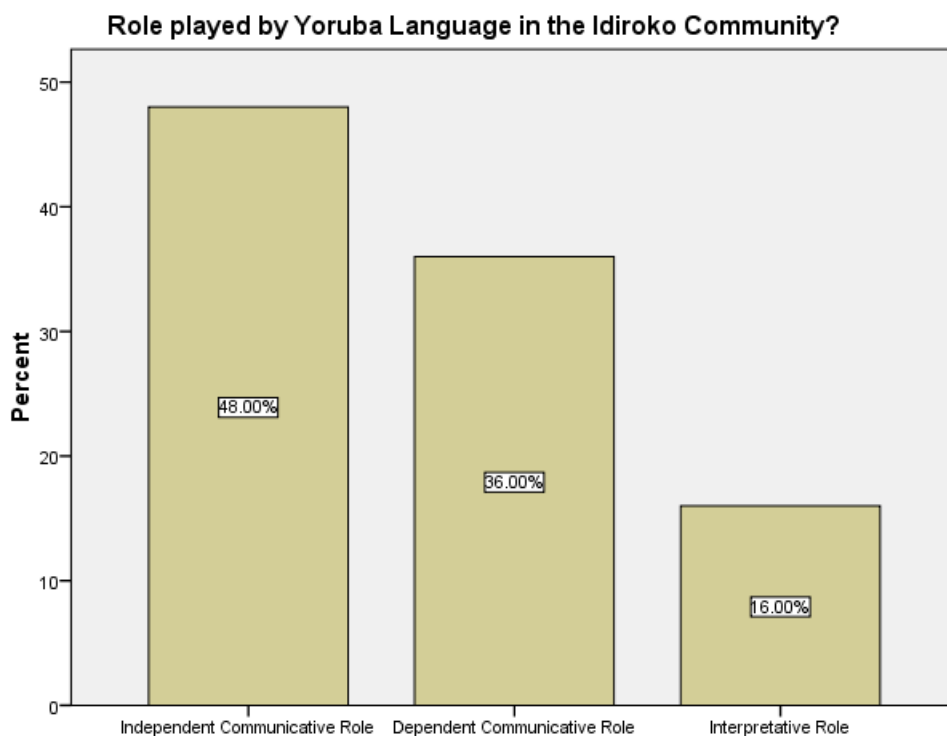
This study employs a cross-sectional survey paradigm, which integrates a mixed research approach to collect data. Qualitative and quantitative data are collected to enhance understanding of the participants' attitudes, perspectives, and experiences on communication and how they create meaning by using a trans-border language (Yoruba) to amplify effective trans-border communication and trade in Idiroko community.

As the study involves investigating the use of a common language (Yoruba) by inhabitants of this community as they interact socially, a sample of 50 respondents was involved in the study to represent the entire population. A total of 50 respondents were involved in the study to represent the entire population. 20 traders (10 Nigerians, and 10 Beninese). 20 inhabitants of that community, as well as 10 key informants (Immigration officers), 5 Nigerians, and 5 Beninese) were selected to provide useful information for the study. For data collection and analysis, a triangulation approach was adopted where the researcher used different approaches, including observations (non-participant), scheduled interviews (individual) were conducted through structured and semi-structured questionnaires. These data collection methods were utilized to reduce bias and increase the validity of the research findings.

Using the above-stated methods, the data collected was presented in tables and charts and analyzed through thematic content analysis (TCA) by the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The deductive approach was thematically used descriptively to present coded narrations (words, sentences and paragraphs) to facilitate the emergence of themes and sub-themes.

#### **QUESTIONNAIRE**

The instrument was self-designed to measure the status of Yoruba Language as an interface for trans-border communication and trade in Idiroko community; it examines the challenges faced by traders and inhabitants of this community as well as analyzes possible solutions to the identified challenges. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A and B. Section A provided demographic information of the respondents such as name, nationality, occupation and sex while section B contained 10 items carefully worded to elicit responses from respondents. The items in the Section C were structured along four-point modified Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability and the coefficient of 0.80 was obtained. The QSALE was piloted on 30 individuals that were not part of the population intended to be used for the main study. Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability and the coefficient of 0.78. The collection of data for the study lasted one month after which the data were analyzed. The data collected was presented in tables and figures and analyzed through thematic content analysis (TCA) by the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The deductive approach was thematically used descriptively to present coded narrations (words, sentences and paragraphs) to facilitate the emergence of themes and sub-themes.



## V. RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** What role does Yoruba Language plays in enhancing intercultural communication in Idiroko Community?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Major	29	58.0	58.0	58.0
	Minor	13	26.0	26.0	84.0
	Insignificant	8	16.0	16.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

**Table 1**

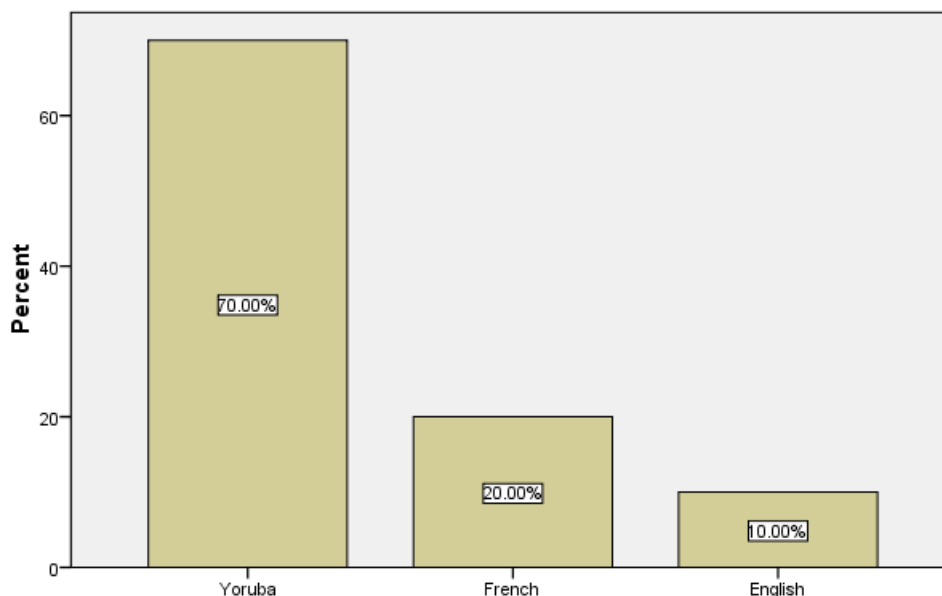
**Source:** Field work

The findings strongly suggested that the Yoruba language is essential to fostering cross-cultural relationships and trade in the Idiroko Community. In trade and other social contacts, it improves communication between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In real-life situations, it is applied to both formal and informal settings. Informal quantitative evidence indicates that the majority of respondents (60%) affirmed that the Yoruba Language is the accepted language of social communication and cohesion. However, only 20% of respondents claimed to speak either English or French, as shown in **figure 1 below**.

During conversations, most respondents with 70% index prefer to use Yoruba Language, 20% prefer French while 10% prefer English.

Yet again, while *bargaining*, 50% of respondents prefer to use Yoruba Language, 30% of whom are mostly Nigerian traders prefer English Language while 20% prefer to use French Language.

Language of social interaction



The findings also indicate that the Yoruba Language is used in formal settings like at the Immigration checkpoints and for advertisement. **Results** shows therefore, that the most commonly used language of advertisement in Idiroko town is Yoruba with 50% index followed by English and French with 10% index each. Furthermore, qualitative data also suggest that the use of the Yoruba Language in Idiroko Community play a crucial role in facilitating trans-border communication and trade.

It is crucial to note that the use of Yoruba language varies across the Nigerian and Benin Republic sides of the border. This is in agreement with Nahayo's (2017) finding that Beninese use Yoruba much less frequently than Nigerians do. Contrarily, this study shows that while Yoruba is used for communication and trade, although most and traders and inhabitants of this community generally use it incorrectly in the light of grammar.

The linguistically incorrect use of Yoruba Language implies that although, the majority of inhabitants of Idiroko Community, especially the Beninese, have Yoruba language as their mother tongues however they import notable interferences from French language which is their official language. These interferences led to the creation of a new variant of Yoruba Language which I call the **Yorufranglais** which is an inter-language that emerged from the intermingling between Yoruba and French language. A good example of this is an extract extracted from the observation carried out where an observed Beninese trader in the Idiroko community said: "Mofe lo manger" Translation: I want to go and eat. The first part of the phrase: "Mofe lo" is in Yoruba language while the other part (Manger) is the French verb to eat.

One interpretation of these results sees the Yoruba Language as a melting pot and a unifying force for the linguistic diversity that exist in Idiroko Community. This pattern of findings is in line with earlier studies of (Igboanusi, 2008), who found that using a common language in a diverse settings significantly affects social interactions positively.

In conclusion, the Yoruba language serves as a tool to promote mutual understanding and social cohesion amongst individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in this community. It promotes regional

integration and social cohesion amongst inhabitants and visitors of Idiroko community. This is also in concord with Ndhlovu's (2013) study, which claimed that cross-border languages (like Yoruba) are essential for regional integration because it is only via them that the views of the marginalized can be heard. These cross-border languages serve as unifying forces and as a fertile field for social cohesion.

**Research Question 2:** What are the challenges faced by the Yoruba Language in enhancing Intercultural Communication in Idiroko Community.

Which among the following obstacles do you think affect mostly the use of Yoruba Language?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Lack of effective context specific language policy	9	18.0	18.0	18.0
	Existence of multiple languages	14	28.0	28.0	46.0
	Colonization and the dominance of foreign language	27	54.0	54.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

**Table 2**

**Source:** Field work

Drawing inspiration from **Table 2** above which shows that the majority of respondents (54%) listed Colonization and the dominance of foreign language as the main barrier to the use of the Yoruba language in Idiroko Community. Another 28% of respondents stated that the major obstacle is multilingualism which the existence of multiple languages in the same environment. 18% of the respondents see the lack of effective context specific language policy as the main challenge.

In view of the afore-stated data, it would be observed that two of these challenges are worthy of note:

**Firstly**, the existence of several minor languages poses threat to the survival of the major languages which Yoruba is one of them. Merchants in Idiroko Community are mostly locals who speak their mother tongue more effectively than they speak other languages. We observed according to our study that although these merchants speak the Yoruba language but some tend to be more comfortable with their mother tongues than they are with the Yoruba language which to some of them is considered a third language. These minority languages spoken by each person cannot engender effective intercultural communication since the vast majority of the people do not speak them. This lack of popularity and the popularity of the Yoruba language and culture in this community justifies why preference should be given to Yoruba Language over other minor languages.

This issue of existence of multiple languages is a major problem in most African societies where cross-cultural communication becomes extremely difficult if not impossible simply because every individual wants to stick to his or her own mother tongue while silently rejecting the national or major languages which are charged to engender mutual cross-cultural communication across ethnic divides. The existence of multiple languages in Africa is in its own a problem simply because for a language to survive, a minor language must accept to die a silent death (lingocide). Minority languages must be ready to embrace the major ones for major African Languages to survive else; they all collectively won't survive the test of this modern time. The fact remains that government can't approve all languages in a country as major languages of communication and therefore, they have to make choices from multiplicity of languages. The implication of this choice is that some languages have to accept to play secondary roles and they have to sacrifice their interests for another else, there would be a complete breakdown in communication because you can't expect that everyone has to learn all the languages of the land to be able to effectively communicate across cultures hence, the need for a compromise.

**Secondly** colonization and the impact of foreign languages on our society: The literature on colonialism tends to focus on Europe’s economic exploitation of many regions and peoples around the world and Europeans’ use of excessive force towards the latter.1 while these issues are undoubtedly of great importance, it is equally important to understand the cultural and specifically the linguistic and discursive practices that came to be associated with European colonial rule. These practices played an instrumental role in assigning low prestige to non-European languages and cultures, including cultural and linguistic forms that emerged due to Europe’s colonial expansion, and in establishing the superiority of the colonizer’s language and culture. Leglise and Migge 2007:01. This mindset in itself is a threat to the growth and development of African Languages. One of the main battlegrounds is the education system. Generally founded during the colonial period, it was conceived on European colonial models and, to date, continues to implement to a greater or a lesser degree many of the colonial linguistic and cultural policies and is thus instrumental in perpetuating colonial discourses. Colonization gave rise to a (new) language hierarchy in which the language of the colonizer was inscribed as the most prestigious language and came to dominate the administrative and mercantile structure of each colony. Since “les dialectesafricains ne sont pas des langues de civilisation” (Davesne 1933: 6), language policy in francophone Africa, for example, prescribed the exclusive use of French. On the contrary, the British, in accordance with their “divide and rule” policy, supported the dominant languages in their colonies (Brenzinger 1992) but this had the same effect of affirming the European language as the most prestigious language.

**Research Question 3: Communication Strategies Used to Overcome Linguistic Barriers**

Strategies to overcome these linguistic challenges?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Learn to code switch effectively across languages	10	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Establish Yoruba Language Learning Centers and introduce it as an elective course in junior school curriculums in government schools across the border community	40	80.0	80.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3**

**Source: Field work**

According to the literature review, approximation (code-switching and code-mixing), is one of the communication methods highlighted in this study, is essential for cross-border communication (Janczak, 2016:2031).

The use of code-switching and code-mixing, (interpreters, and sign language) are among the communication strategies employed by traders and clients, according to both quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered.

The sociolinguistic tactics used by CAT, including interpretability, approximation, interpersonal controls, and discourse management approach, are also looked at. As Rodriguez (1997) proposed, experience was utilized for intercultural adaptation, according to the findings.

According to the findings above, the vast majority of respondents (60%) switch into English Language during communication, followed by (26%) who switch into French Language, (14%) who prefer to switch into Fon Language. In conclusion, the majority of respondents agreed to switch their languages to others, as demonstrated in table 3 above.

In general, according to the data provided, CAT is favored to be more applicable to this study as compared to the IAM.



## **VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This study has three main objectives:

The first is to identify the status of the Yoruba Language as an interface for trans-border communication and trade in Idiroko community. This objective was achieved as evidences from the quantitative data collected affirmed that the role of the Yoruba language is absolutely a major and independent one and that it's indeed the most effective language for bargaining as affirmed by 70% of the 50 respondents, social interaction 60%, and advertisement 82% as established by the research population. One interpretation to this finding is that the Yoruba Language serves as the catholicon to the communication problems that spans from the multiplicity of languages in a particular context particularly in a border community, thereby, making trans-border communication and trade more effective.

The second objective is to establish the challenges faced by the Yoruba Language in its quest to solve the problems of trans-border communication and trade. The quantitative data collected established that Colonization and the impact of foreign languages 54%, Multiplicity of Languages 28%, and lack of effective context specific language policy 18% respectively are cited as obstacles to the use of Yoruba Language in Idiroko Community.

The third objective is to examine communication strategies employed to mediate these communication challenges and problems. Data collected both qualitatively and quantitatively have shown that this objective has been duly attained. The evidences proved that most respondents employ the approximation strategy of code switching to mediate communication problem. They shift from one language to another when they encounter problem in the former. This helps them in no little way to attain urgent communication objectives.

Yet again, from the findings, the use of interpreters as an accommodation strategy is seemingly expensive for the traders. As such, it is imperative to note that to bridge the communication gap that exists between traders from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, learning of the Yoruba Language is pivotal to reduce these communication costs.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

As the present research suggests that the Yoruba Language plays significant role in enhancing trans-border communication and trade in Idiroko community, it would be useful to extend the current findings by examining the level of threats other dominant languages are posing against the growth of the Yoruba Language in this community. This would enable us to determine the height of the linguistic completion as well as inform the direction of future language policies. Furthermore, since the demographic features were not equally distributed, one possible research opportunity would be repeating the present study with a broader demographic scope.

## **VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the research findings of this study, the following recommendations would be critical for informing language policy in the Idiroko community and border communities across the West African sub-region.

Firstly, as the study reveals that accommodation should be the prevailing spirit, it is recommended that governments of both countries should unanimously formulate and enshrine language policies that would recognize Yoruba language as a lingua-franca in that community. The government should also formulate policies to sensitize the inhabitants of this community to embrace the cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes borderline communities. This would be crucial in addressing the negative ethnic attitude leveled against the use of the Yoruba Language. Thus, it would be viewed as a unifying language to foster mutual coexistence and social cohesion.

To ease communication at the border, it is recommended that both governments should set aside funds to finance translation of documents from English and French languages into Yoruba Language to facilitate communication for Yoruba monolinguals.

It is also recommended that both governments should set up policies that encourage the use of Yoruba Language for all formal activities such as advertisement, and immigration activities. This would engender the use of the language, thereby rectifying the lack of uniformity of the status of the Yoruba Language.

Finally, to address this challenge, Yoruba language learning centers should be established so as to facilitate the learning and teaching of the language

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