

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN CROSS-BORDER BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: A COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY-BASED STUDY OF BUSINESS OPERATIONS BETWEEN BENIN AND NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language barriers constitute a significant yet under-examined constraint on cross-border business communication in West Africa, particularly between the Republic of Benin and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Rooted in the Anglophone–Francophone divide and compounded by a dense landscape of indigenous languages, these barriers shape how traders, customs officials, corporate staff, and customers interact across the border. This study uses Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) — which explains how speakers adjust their communication style toward (convergence), away from (divergence), or independently of (maintenance) their interlocutors — as an analytical lens for understanding how individuals and organisations manage linguistic diversity in Benin–Nigeria business relations.

Adopting a qualitative, documentary research design, the study draws on secondary trade and policy data, institutional reports, and the corporate communication practices of Caterpillar Inc. (CAT) as an illustrative case of a multinational operating across the two countries. Findings show that Benin–Nigeria business communication is shaped by all three CAT strategies: convergence, where traders and officials adapt to a counterpart's language; divergence, where organisations maintain their own language while providing structured accommodation such as translation and interpretation; and maintenance, where communities rely on shared local languages, particularly Yoruba, as an informal lingua franca.

The analysis demonstrates that accommodation strategies which acknowledge and actively manage linguistic diversity — rather than suppress it or leave it to chance — reduce miscommunication, lower transaction costs, and build the interpersonal trust on which cross-border commerce depends. The study concludes that embedding deliberate communication accommodation practices within corporate training, customer engagement, and institutional communication is essential to strengthening cross-border business operations and deepening economic ties between Benin and Nigeria.

Keywords: Communication Accommodation Theory, language barriers, cross-border business communication, Benin–Nigeria trade, multilingualism, convergence, divergence, cross-cultural business

1. Introduction

Benin and Nigeria are bound by geographic proximity, deep cultural ties, and one of West Africa's most active informal and formal trade corridors. Yet business communication across this border is shaped by a linguistic divide rooted in colonial history: Nigeria is predominantly Anglophone, with English as its official language, while Benin is Francophone, with French as its primary language of administration and commerce. This asymmetry runs through every layer of cross-border business activity — from everyday negotiations between traders, to customer relations for multinational firms, to communication between customs and regulatory officials — and constitutes a persistent, if often underexamined, barrier to effective business communication (Brookings Institution, 2019; AllAfrica, 2025).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, offers a well-established framework for understanding how people adjust their communicative behaviour when interacting with others from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Giles, 1973; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). The theory identifies three broad strategies: convergence, in which a speaker adapts their language or style to more closely resemble that of their interlocutor in order to build rapport and understanding; divergence, in which a speaker maintains or accentuates their own language or style, often to assert identity, while still providing accommodation through other means such as translation; and maintenance, in which each party continues to use their own language or a shared third language without adjusting toward the other. Applied to a business setting, CAT helps explain why some cross-border interactions in Benin and Nigeria succeed despite linguistic difference, while others break down into miscommunication, delay, and mistrust.

Within this landscape, multinational corporations operating across the Benin–Nigeria corridor face the same accommodation challenge at organisational scale. Caterpillar Inc. (CAT), a global manufacturer of construction and mining equipment with extensive operations across both countries, must manage technical training, maintenance support, and customer relations across French- and English-speaking environments. Its communication strategy — combining bilingual documentation, dual-language training, and visual and digital tools — offers a concrete case of how a business organisation applies accommodation principles in practice. This article uses CAT (the theory) to examine how businesses, traders, and institutions in the Benin–Nigeria corridor navigate language barriers, with Caterpillar Inc. (the company) serving as an illustrative corporate case within the broader analysis.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite strong commercial ties between Benin and Nigeria, language barriers continue to disrupt cross-border business communication. Misunderstandings between traders and customers, inconsistent translation of contracts and technical materials, and limited multilingual capacity among customs and business personnel generate delays, increased transaction costs, and weakened trust between counterparties. Much existing commentary treats these barriers narrowly, as a technical problem of translation or as a subset of tariff and customs administration, without examining the underlying communicative behaviour that determines whether cross-border interactions succeed or fail. There is a need for a study that applies an established communication framework to explain how convergence, divergence, and maintenance strategies operate across different levels of Benin–Nigeria business communication — from individual trader interactions to corporate and institutional practice — and what this implies for improving business operations.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine, through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory, how language barriers affect cross-border business communication between Benin and Nigeria, and how accommodation strategies can improve business operations. The specific objectives are to:

- Assess the nature and sources of language barriers in Benin–Nigeria cross-border business communication.
- Analyse how convergence, divergence, and maintenance strategies, as conceptualised by Communication Accommodation Theory, manifest in trader interactions, institutional communication, and corporate practice.
- Examine Caterpillar Inc.'s communication strategy as a corporate case of accommodation practice in a bilingual business environment.
- Propose actionable, accommodation-based recommendations to enhance cross-border business communication between Benin and Nigeria.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, documentary research design guided by Communication Accommodation Theory. Rather than testing the theory through primary linguistic data collection, the study uses CAT's three core constructs — convergence, divergence, and maintenance — as an analytical framework for classifying and interpreting communication practices reported in secondary sources on Benin–Nigeria business relations.

Three categories of sources were consulted. Policy and institutional documentation includes ECOWAS reports and trade facilitation materials, national trade policy documents, and the ECOWAS Trade Information System (ECOTIS), which provide evidence of institutional-level communication practice at the border. News and press sources comprise media coverage of government initiatives to bridge the Benin–Nigeria language gap and of regional

multilingual capacity-building efforts. Corporate and academic sources include Caterpillar Inc.'s sustainability and technical documentation, alongside scholarly literature on language management in multinational corporations and on Communication Accommodation Theory itself.

Each source was analysed thematically to identify instances of convergence (adaptation toward a counterpart's language), divergence (maintenance of one's own language paired with structured accommodation such as translation or interpretation), and maintenance (reliance on a shared local or lingua franca code without adaptation toward an official language). These instances were then organised across three levels of business communication: interpersonal (trader-to-trader and trader-to-customer interactions), institutional (customs and regulatory communication), and corporate (multinational firm practice, illustrated through Caterpillar Inc.). The study covers the period from 2015 onward, with emphasis on developments up to 2025, and focuses on the Benin–Nigeria corridor, including key crossing points such as Sèmè-Krake.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1 The Linguistic Landscape of Benin–Nigeria Business Relations

Business communication between Benin and Nigeria takes place against a complex linguistic backdrop. Nigeria's administrative and commercial life operates predominantly in English, while Benin's operates predominantly in French — an asymmetry rooted in differing colonial legacies. Beneath these official languages lies substantial linguistic diversity: Benin's population speaks numerous indigenous languages, including Fon, Yoruba, and Bariba, alongside French, while Nigeria hosts over 500 languages, with Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo serving as major lingua francas alongside English. Yoruba, spoken widely on both sides of the border in areas such as Ogun State (Nigeria) and neighbouring

parts of Benin, occupies a distinctive position as a cross-border lingua franca (AllAfrica, 2025).

This layered linguistic environment means that any two parties to a Benin–Nigeria business transaction — a trader and a customer, a company representative and a client, a customs officer and a haulier — may share no common official language, a shared local language, or only a language mediated through translation. It is precisely this variability that makes Communication Accommodation Theory a useful analytical tool: different pairings of interlocutors resolve the same underlying language barrier through different accommodation strategies, examined in turn below.

3.2 Convergence: Adapting Toward the Counterpart's Language

Convergence occurs when one party adjusts its language use to more closely match that of its counterpart, typically to ease understanding and build rapport. In the Benin–Nigeria business context, convergence is visible in both government policy and everyday commercial practice. Nigeria has publicly committed to bridging the language gap with Benin, including plans to deploy English-language teachers in Benin and to promote French learning among Nigerian officials and traders — a direct, government-led convergence strategy aimed at enabling Nigerian actors to communicate more effectively in French with their Beninese counterparts (Afripost, 2025; Independent Nigeria, 2025).

At the level of individual commerce, traders on both sides of the border routinely learn basic phrases or functional vocabulary in their counterpart's language to facilitate transactions, particularly in busy corridor markets. This form of convergence lowers the immediate communication burden in a transaction but depends heavily on individual effort and is unevenly distributed — it is most common among traders with frequent, repeated cross-border

dealings, and least available to occasional or first-time participants in formal trade.

3.3 Divergence: Maintaining One's Own Language Through Structured Accommodation

Divergence, in CAT terms, involves maintaining or asserting one's own language while still accommodating the counterpart through other structured means — most commonly translation, interpretation, or parallel-language documentation — rather than requiring either party to switch languages outright. This strategy dominates formal institutional and corporate communication in the Benin–Nigeria corridor, where legal precision and consistency make full linguistic convergence impractical.

At the institutional level, ECOWAS has called for border personnel to be proficient in English, French, and Portuguese, and has proposed establishing multilingual "ECOWAS Desks" at key border points to support communication without requiring either country to abandon its official language (MyJoyOnline, 2025). Regional trade facilitation workshops organised with UNCTAD and the Trade Facilitation West Africa (TFWA) Programme similarly deliver parallel sessions in English, French, and Portuguese rather than a single working language (UNCTAD, 2025). Digital tools follow the same pattern: systems such as the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit (SIGMAT), which links customs processes between Benin and Nigeria, function as divergence-based accommodation when their interfaces and documentation are made available in both languages rather than one (ECOWAS, 2025).

At the corporate level, Caterpillar Inc.'s communication strategy — examined in detail in section 3.5 — is the clearest illustration of divergence in this study: rather than requiring technicians or customers to operate in a single corporate language, the company maintains parallel English and French documentation, training, and support, each delivered by staff proficient in the relevant language or supported by specialist technical interpreters.

3.4 Maintenance: Reliance on Shared Local Languages

Maintenance strategies occur where neither party adapts toward the other's official language, and communication instead proceeds through a shared code that belongs to neither country's formal administrative system. Along the Benin–Nigeria frontier, this role is filled largely by indigenous lingua francas, most notably Yoruba, which is spoken across border communities on both sides and enables everyday commercial communication among small traders and market participants without reference to English or French at all (AllAfrica, 2025).

This maintenance strategy is highly effective at the community level, where it sustains a large volume of informal cross-border trade. However, it does not extend into formal documentation, contracts, or regulatory compliance, where English and French remain dominant. This creates a structural gap: traders who communicate fluently and confidently in a shared local language at the point of sale may still face documentation errors, compliance difficulties, or exclusion from formal trade channels when their transactions require engagement with official-language systems for which no equivalent maintenance strategy exists (Okwara, 2025).

3.5 Institutional Communication and the Limits of Current Accommodation Practice

Formal institutions along the corridor — customs administrations, regulatory agencies, and trade facilitation bodies — rely heavily on divergence-based accommodation (parallel documentation, multilingual staffing, translated materials), but this study's evidence suggests the practice is applied unevenly. Where customs officers or business support staff lack proficiency in a counterpart's language, communication can be delayed, unclear, or inconsistently executed, and translated materials are not always synchronised or updated at the same pace across languages, producing gaps that undermine the accommodation strategy's intended effect (MyJoyOnline, 2025). Where digital platforms and information sources are not published simultaneously in both languages, traders

on one side of the border face an information disadvantage relative to those on the other, reinforcing dependence on informal intermediaries and, indirectly, on maintenance-based coping through shared local languages rather than genuine institutional accommodation.

3.6 Corporate Case: Caterpillar Inc.'s Communication Accommodation Strategy

Caterpillar Inc.'s operations across Benin and Nigeria provide a concentrated example of how a business organisation applies accommodation strategies deliberately rather than incidentally. The company has established regional training centres delivering instruction in both English and French, using a dual-language curriculum in which instructors are either bilingual or work alongside interpreters who specialise in technical terminology — a structured divergence strategy that preserves precision in each language rather than forcing technicians to operate in a single shared one.

The company supplements this linguistic accommodation with communication channels that reduce dependence on language altogether: video demonstrations, augmented reality applications, and interactive simulations allow technicians to learn maintenance procedures through observation and practice, reinforcing safety protocols while lowering reliance on written or spoken language. This can be understood as a third accommodation route within CAT's framework — reducing the communicative burden itself rather than resolving it purely through convergence or divergence. Beyond language, Caterpillar's approach reflects a broader cultural accommodation: personnel are trained in cross-cultural communication, scheduling of maintenance services is adapted to regional holidays, and communication formality is adjusted to match business norms that differ between Benin and Nigeria. The company monitors the effectiveness of these strategies through indicators such as service completion times, customer satisfaction scores across language groups, safety incident rates, and equipment

uptime, supplemented by regular surveys of customers and technicians in both countries — feeding into quarterly reviews that adjust training materials, documentation, and support processes. This case illustrates a pattern consistent with the interpersonal and institutional findings above: sustainable cross-border business communication depends not on a single accommodation strategy but on the deliberate combination of convergence (language training), divergence (parallel documentation and interpretation), and communication routes that reduce linguistic dependence altogether — matched to the specific relationship and stakes involved in each interaction.

4. Discussion

Viewed through Communication Accommodation Theory, the Benin–Nigeria business corridor emerges not as a single linguistic problem but as a layered set of communicative relationships, each resolved through a different accommodation strategy. Interpersonal trade at the community level leans on maintenance, through shared local languages such as Yoruba; formal institutional and corporate communication leans on divergence, through parallel-language documentation, interpretation, and multilingual staffing; and individual and policy-level convergence efforts — traders learning a counterpart's language, or Nigeria's initiative to promote French proficiency — supplement both. No single strategy dominates because no single type of relationship dominates cross-border commerce.

This layered picture helps explain why some accounts of Benin–Nigeria trade describe language as a minor, easily bridged obstacle while others describe it as a serious constraint: the answer depends on which level of communication is under discussion. Maintenance-based coping via Yoruba is genuinely effective at the community level but has no equivalent at the level of formal documentation and regulatory compliance, where the absence of

an alternative to institutional divergence produces exactly the delays, errors, and information asymmetries this study documents. Caterpillar Inc.'s corporate practice is instructive precisely because it does not rely on a single accommodation strategy. Its combination of dual-language training (divergence), staff and customer language learning encouraged over time (convergence), and visual, hands-on communication that reduces linguistic dependence altogether suggests that effective cross-border business communication is best understood as a deliberately managed portfolio of accommodation strategies rather than a choice between them. The consistency between this corporate practice and the institutional-level recommendations emerging from ECOWAS and allied bodies suggests that the same principle — matching the accommodation strategy to the relationship and stakes involved — can scale from a single multinational's customer relations to regional trade governance.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that language barriers in Benin–Nigeria business communication are best understood, and best addressed, through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory. Interpersonal, institutional, and corporate actors along the corridor already deploy convergence, divergence, and maintenance strategies — sometimes deliberately, sometimes informally — but the evidence suggests these strategies are applied unevenly and are rarely combined as deliberately as they could be. Where accommodation is left informal, as in reliance on shared local languages for interpersonal trade, it functions well within its scope but leaves formal documentation and compliance exposed. Where accommodation is institutionalised, as in ECOWAS's multilingual policy commitments or Caterpillar Inc.'s dual-language corporate strategy, it more reliably reduces miscommunication and builds trust.

The central implication is that businesses and institutions operating across the Benin–Nigeria border should treat communication accommodation as a deliberate strategic choice rather than an incidental byproduct of translation or training budgets. Caterpillar Inc.'s experience shows that combining structured divergence (parallel-language documentation and staffing), targeted convergence (language learning for frequent counterparties), and communication channels that reduce linguistic dependence altogether offers a replicable model — for other multinational corporations and for regional trade institutions alike — for turning a persistent language barrier into a manageable, and ultimately strengthening, feature of cross-border business relationships.

5.1 Recommendations

Grounded in Communication Accommodation Theory, the study recommends the following measures to strengthen cross-border business communication between Benin and Nigeria.

- Strengthen divergence-based accommodation: ensure that contracts, marketing materials, customer communications, and regulatory documentation are consistently produced in both English and French, kept synchronised, and reviewed for technical accuracy rather than treated as a one-off translation exercise.
- Support convergence through targeted language learning: extend structured English–French language training beyond customs and border officials to sales staff, customer service teams, and frequent traders, building on Nigeria's existing commitment to promoting French proficiency.
- Invest in communication channels that reduce linguistic dependence: expand the use of visual, video, and hands-on communication tools — following Caterpillar Inc.'s model — in technical training, product demonstration, and customer support, particularly where literacy or language proficiency varies widely among the audience.

- Recognise and support local-language maintenance strategies: acknowledge the role of Yoruba and other cross-border lingua francas in sustaining interpersonal trade, and extend basic business communication training in these languages alongside English and French, particularly for small traders, women, and youth.
- Institutionalise multilingual points of contact: establish bilingual support desks and trade facilitation centres at key crossing points such as Sèmè-Krake and Idiroko, staffed by personnel able to accommodate traders in their preferred language.
- Deploy multilingual digital tools: ensure customs, trade information, and corporate digital platforms offer functioning interfaces in both English and French, with translation aids for technical and regulatory terminology.
- Monitor accommodation outcomes: adopt measurable indicators — such as service completion times, customer satisfaction by language group, and documentation error rates — to track whether accommodation strategies are working, following the model of Caterpillar Inc.'s quarterly review process.

Applied together, these measures embed communication accommodation as an explicit operating principle — rather than an ad hoc response — within corporate practice and institutional policy along the Benin–Nigeria corridor, supporting more effective business communication and deeper regional economic integration.

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