



French Lexicon in English Diplomatic Discourse: Prestige, Precision, and Functional Hierarchy

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Abstract

This article examines the role and ongoing relevance of French lexical borrowings in contemporary English diplomatic discourse. Although English is the dominant global language of international relations, its formal, institutional, and professional registers remain strongly influenced by vocabulary of French origin. These lexical units function as markers of prestige and authority while also enhancing semantic precision, especially in legal, procedural, and political contexts where ambiguity must be minimized. The study argues that French borrowings should not be viewed merely as historical remnants of linguistic contact, but as essential tools that ensure clarity, neutrality, and stylistic refinement in communication of diplomats. Through a systematic analysis of key lexical units of French derivation, the paper shows how they contribute to hierarchical register formation and enable nuanced expression in complex communicative environments. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the coexistence of Germanic and Romance elements in English creates a highly flexible linguistic system. This dual structure allows speakers to shift between emotional expressiveness and institutional formality, thereby addressing the diverse communicative requirements of modern diplomatic discourse.

Keywords: *diplomatic discourse, French borrowings in English, lexical prestige, semantic precision, linguistic hierarchy*

1. Introduction

English holds a leading role in the sphere of international diplomacy, serving as the principal language for negotiations, treaty drafting, and global communication. Nevertheless, its functionality in this field extends beyond its Germanic linguistic foundation. A significant contribution comes from a layer of vocabulary of French origin, which introduces formality, accuracy, and a sense of institutional legitimacy. This combination results in a stratified lexical

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system where French-derived elements are typically associated with more formal and prestigious registers, where lexical choices signal social and professional hierarchy (Fairclough, 2015).

This study aims to analyze the contribution of French lexical components to the prestige and semantic precision of diplomatic English. It suggests that the persistence of such vocabulary is due to historical factors and practical communicative demands. As noted by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, linguistic choices in formal interaction are crucial in institutional communication for the sake of politeness and face management (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Diplomatic terminology of French origin frequently conveys complex legal and political concepts that lack direct equivalents in the Germanic lexicon. This aligns with the observation in lexical studies that borrowed vocabulary often becomes "specialized in meaning and function within institutional domains" (Crystal, 2003). Consequently, their use is essential for maintaining clarity and reducing ambiguity in sensitive and high-level international interactions. In diplomatic communication in particular, language is used not only to transmit information but to convey power relations and reduce interpretative conflict (Chilton, 2004). Diplomatic discourse therefore functions as what Teun A. van Dijk defines as a form of socially situated discourse where ideology and institutional power shape linguistic structure (van Dijk, 2008), while, in our opinion, the opposite is also true.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach to investigate the role of French lexical borrowings in English diplomatic discourse (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The research focuses on identifying, classifying, and interpreting lexical items (Bhatia, 2004) of French origin and examining their functional contribution to semantic precision, formality, and professional register.

The data for the analysis were collected from a range of authentic sources representing contemporary diplomatic communication (Chilton, 2004; Sharp, 2009). These include official statements, international agreements, policy documents, and transcripts of diplomatic speeches published by governmental and international institutions. Additional examples were drawn from authoritative lexicographic resources, including the Oxford English Dictionary and the Online Etymology Dictionary, to verify the origin and semantic development of selected lexical items.

The methodological framework consists of several stages. First, a corpus of frequently used French-derived lexical units in diplomatic English was compiled. These items were selected based on their frequency, relevance to diplomatic contexts, and clear etymological origin (Coulthard, 2014). The corpus includes nouns (e.g., *communiqué*, *envoy*, *protocol*), verbs (*assist*, *enquire*, *select*), and adjectives (*amicable*, *profound*).



Second, the selected lexical items were analyzed using semantic and functional analysis (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). This stage focused on identifying the specific meanings carried by French borrowings and comparing them with their Germanic equivalents. Attention was paid also to differences in connotation (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), level of formality, and degree of abstraction.

Third, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine how lexical choice influences register and communicative effect (van Dijk, 2008). Pairs of Germanic and French-derived synonyms were evaluated in context to determine how they function within diplomatic discourse and how they contribute to clarity, neutrality, and institutional tone.

Finally, elements of discourse analysis (Wodak, 2009; Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 2008) were applied to assess how these lexical choices operate within broader communicative structures. This allowed for the identification of patterns in the use of French borrowings as markers of prestige and professionalism in diplomatic and academic settings.

Overall, this methodology enables a systematic examination of the linguistic, semantic, and functional significance of French borrowings, highlighting their role as essential components of modern English diplomatic communication.

3. Results

The analysis of French lexical borrowings in English diplomatic discourse reveals a consistent pattern of functional specialization, where French-derived vocabulary systematically operates as a marker of formality (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2008), precision, and institutional authority (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The examined data demonstrate that such lexical units are not randomly distributed but are strongly concentrated in contexts requiring legal exactness, procedural clarity, and diplomatic neutrality.

3.1. Borrowings as International Diplomatic Terminology

The results confirm that French borrowings occupy a higher stylistic register compared to their Germanic counterparts. In diplomatic documents and official statements, terms such as *communiqué*, *protocol*, *envoy*, *attaché*, *détente*, and *rapprochement* (Sargsyan, 2020; Oxford English Dictionary) are consistently used to encode institutional meanings that require precision and standardization. These units function as established international terms, reducing ambiguity and ensuring mutual understanding between multilingual actors in diplomatic communication.

3.2. Semantic Precision

The semantic analysis shows that French-derived vocabulary frequently carries meanings that are more specialized (Kecskes, 2014) and context-dependent than their Germanic equivalents. For example, *communiqué* is not interchangeable with "report," as it implies an officially sanctioned and carefully formulated public statement. Similarly, *impasse* denotes not merely a



"dead end," but a structured diplomatic deadlock that implies negotiation potential. These distinctions support the claim that French borrowings contribute significantly to semantic precision in high-level international contexts.

3.3. Stylistic Register

The comparative analysis of synonymic pairs (Germanic vs. French-derived) confirms a systematic shift in register and tone. Germanic verbs such as help, ask, buy, and choose are regularly replaced in formal discourse by assist, enquire, purchase, and select. This substitution produces a more objective and impersonal tone, which is essential in diplomatic communication where emotional neutrality and professionalism are required. Similarly, adjectives such as amicable and profound replace simpler forms like "friendly" and "deep," reinforcing an elevated and institutional style.

3.4. Borrowings as Determinators of Diplomatic Roles

The results indicate that French lexical items serve as markers of institutional hierarchy (Sharp, 2009) and diplomatic roles. Terms such as attaché and envoy encode specific functional positions within diplomatic missions, while protocol regulates official behavior and procedure. Their use reinforces structural clarity and institutional legitimacy within international relations, as they are widely recognized across diplomatic systems.

3.5. Universal Diplomatic Discourse Formants

Discourse-level analysis demonstrates that French borrowings contribute to the construction of a standardized diplomatic register that transcends national linguistic variation. This is particularly evident in terms related to political processes and international relations, such as détente, rapprochement, and impasse, which provide concise conceptual labels for complex geopolitical situations. Their usage enables diplomats to communicate abstract political realities efficiently and with reduced interpretative variability.

Overall, the results confirm that French lexical borrowings play a dual role (Fairclough, 2015) in English diplomatic discourse: they function both as tools of semantic precision and as indicators of prestige and institutional formality. Their persistent use reflects not only historical linguistic influence but also their continued practical necessity in ensuring clarity, neutrality, and efficiency in international communication, as supported by etymological and lexicographic evidence from standard references.

4. Discussion

The results of this study highlight the central role of French lexical borrowings in shaping the stylistic and functional structure of English diplomatic discourse. Their persistent use confirms



that English, while structurally Germanic, operates in diplomacy through a layered lexical system in which French-derived elements occupy a privileged position of formality and precision.

The findings support earlier observations in linguistic scholarship that French has historically functioned as the language of diplomacy, law, and elite communication in Europe, a process reinforced after the Norman Conquest and subsequent centuries of cultural exchange (Roth, 2011). This historical background explains why many French-origin terms remain embedded in institutional English today, not as archaic remnants, but as active components of specialized registers.

A key implication of the results is that French borrowings fulfill a functional gap in English vocabulary. As demonstrated in the analysis, Germanic lexical items often express direct, everyday meanings, while French-derived terms encode more abstract, institutional, or legally precise concepts. This supports the view that lexical duality in English is not redundant but complementary. The coexistence of pairs such as help/assist, ask/enquire, and buy/purchase allows speakers to select between informal immediacy and formal detachment depending on communicative context.

Furthermore, the study confirms that French borrowings operate as markers of prestige and institutional authority. Terms such as communiqué, protocol, and envoy are not merely stylistic alternatives but standardized international terms that carry recognized diplomatic weight. Their usage enhances the perceived legitimacy of communication and aligns with established norms of international discourse. This observation is consistent with lexicographic evidence from authoritative sources such as the Oxford English Dictionary and etymological studies documenting the sustained prestige of French-origin vocabulary in English.

The analysis also demonstrates that semantic precision is a key factor explaining the persistence of French lexical units. In diplomatic contexts, where misinterpretation can have significant political consequences, lexical clarity is essential. French-derived terms such as impasse and détente encapsulate complex geopolitical situations in concise and internationally recognized forms. As noted in Sargsyan (2020), such borrowings contribute to the stabilization of meaning across multilingual environments, reducing the risk of semantic ambiguity.

At the same time, the study reveals that the use of French vocabulary is not purely functional but also symbolic. It reflects the continued association of French with education, refinement, and institutional authority. This symbolic dimension contributes to the perception of diplomatic English as a neutral and professional medium, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions within discourse.

Overall, the discussion confirms that French lexical borrowings are integral to the structure of diplomatic English. They simultaneously perform communicative, semantic, and symbolic



roles, enabling English to function effectively as a global diplomatic language. Their continued relevance demonstrates that linguistic prestige and communicative efficiency are closely interconnected in international discourse, where clarity, neutrality, and institutional legitimacy remain essential.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of French lexical borrowings in English diplomatic discourse, focusing on their contribution to lexical prestige, semantic precision, and institutional formality. The findings demonstrate that French-derived vocabulary is a structurally significant component of diplomatic English rather than a peripheral historical influence.

The analysis confirms that French borrowings consistently function as markers of elevated register, distinguishing formal and institutional communication from everyday usage. Through examples such as *communiqué*, *protocol*, *envoy*, *détente*, and *rapprochement*, it has been shown that these terms encode complex diplomatic meanings in a concise and internationally recognizable form. This supports their continued use in contexts where clarity, neutrality, and precision are essential.

The study also highlights the importance of lexical duality in English, where Germanic and Romance elements coexist and fulfill complementary communicative roles. While Germanic vocabulary tends to express directness and emotional immediacy, French-derived terms provide abstraction, formality, and conceptual specificity. This balance enables English to adapt effectively to different communicative settings, particularly in international relations.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the persistence of French lexical items is driven not only by historical tradition but also by functional necessity. In diplomatic communication, where misunderstandings may have significant political consequences, French borrowings help minimize ambiguity and standardize meaning across multilingual contexts.

Overall, the research confirms that French lexical influence remains essential to the structure and effectiveness of modern diplomatic English. It ensures both semantic accuracy and institutional legitimacy, while also reinforcing the prestige associated with formal international communication. The coexistence of Germanic and French layers ultimately provides English with the flexibility required for its role as the dominant global language of diplomacy.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval: The study does not involve human participants. No personally identifiable information was collected.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the References section.

Author Contributions: The authors confirm their joint responsibility for the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, and preparation of the manuscript.

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