ETHNOCOHERENCE AND THE ANALYSIS OF
SWAHILI POLITICAL STYLE:
STEPS TOWARDS A METHOD.

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1. Introduction[1]

As early as 1964, Dell Hymes warned an audience consisting of the first generation of sociolinguists about what he called a 'second type of linguistic relativity' The first type being the classical Whorfian relativity of linguistic structure and world view, this second type had to to with *language use*. Hymes contended that, even though language samples (what we would now call discourse) may be structurally similar, they may refer to a strongly different underlying view on their function as a culturally embedded 'way of speaking' (Hymes 1966) The solution he then suggested for the theoretical problems raised by this issue was what later became known as the 'Ethnography of Speaking': a theory of the use of language in context, as an essential component of the general study of language.

This paper will offer some arguments to demonstrate that the second type of linguistic relativity becomes a crucial element in all types of intercultural (comparative or merely descriptive) discourse analysis, because of the existence of what I have called elsewhere *internationalized* genres such as written literature, journalism, scientific discourse, and political discourse (see Blommaert 1990, 1991) This point will be illustrated by referring to Tanzanian Swahili political rhetoric

2. A problem of reading

As a general introductory point, I want to clarify the theoretical and practical problems caused by internationalized genres. To summarize an otherwise tedious line of argument: during colonization, foreign forms of communicative behavior were imported in nonwestern societies When the colonies gained national independence, hegemonic power over these genres shifted from the colonizers to the (former) colonized. They now had the legitimate right to write newspaper articles and novels, to become professors at their national universities, or to speak as a politician. So, although these genres were of western origin, they were adopted and used by nonwesterners. Given the intercultural dimension of this process, the Hymesian question arises: does structural similarity (caused by the adoption of originally western forms of

communication, such as e.g newspaper journalism) hide an underlying intercultural difference or not? In other words, are newspaper articles, novels, political speeches etc. produced in Tanzania unproblematic genres from our (western) point of view? If we notice that the second type of relativity applies here, how are we going to approach it, and how are we going to try to understand it?

The question, as formulated here, is a question of *intercultural reading*, and the ring it has is quite familiar. Poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches have long been trying to find answers to the questions of the materiality of texts, and their internal/external poly-interpretability (although arguably from a monocultural perspective). Heterogeneity of discursive systems, as well as the hegemonic dimension of contest and dominance, will be treated as a given in this paper, and they will not surface until the end of my exposé. The compelling theoretical argument for approaching the intercultural reading problem from this angle is, however, the Bakhtinian notion of 'dialogue', which when applied to intercultural communication practice leads to a considerable *problemization of the research procedure itself*. If it is the case that reading means re-creating the text in terms of one's own premises, value systems and cultural background, how then does one reach a level of interpretational preciseness that reflects adequately the meanings contained in the object text, while preserving its interpretability in terms of one's own cultural boundedness? The dialogic nature of intercultural research seriously amends the epistemological simplicity of (post-)Hymesian Ethnography, as clearly recognized by Fabian (1990). Ethnography is dialogue, and thus a joint endeavor of two (or more) participants who, incidentally, belong to another cultural tradition.

The critical and metatheoretical dimensions of this problem of intercultural reading cannot be fully treated in this paper. Rather, I hope to show how a methodology based upon ethnography, but complemented by a more historical and dialogical emphasis, can reconstruct and make understandable intercultural differences below the surface of texts. Thus, rather than a solution, I will propose a *modus vivendi* that does away with at least some of the flaws contained in more traditional forms of intercultural research.

3. Ethnocoherence

We all know from classical discourse analysis that a text makes sense by virtue of its internal and external consistency -- its cohesion and coherence. A text should be an organized whole, allowing for sufficient internal grammatical differentiation and marking for things such as topic, theme etc. Furthermore, a text should be contextually meaningful, i.e. it should make sense because of the fact that it has been adapted to a number of circumstantial, contextual factors. It is to the highest level of adaptations that I will direct my attention: the level of sociocultural context.

To follow a suggestion made by Jan-Ola Östman (1986: 184-5), coherence should not be seen as just another side of the coin, on a par with cohesion (narrowly defined as textual, mainly grammatical, cohesion; see e.g de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981, or Halliday & Hasan 1976). Rather, it should be seen as "a more general notion, of which cohesion ( ) is just a particular manifestation". More specifically,

> The pragmatic parameter of Coherence can be seen as accounting for the implicit, common-sensical
> rules in accordance with which human beings (intuitively) adjust themselves to this world - in short,
> according to which they live (...). In the final instance, this means that *Coherence stands for what we*
> *generally refer to as culture* (Östman 1986: 185, emphasis mine)

In other words, texts only make sense if they are in line with the complex of meanings shared by other members of the sociocultural group generally defined as the speech community. This complex of meanings -- we might call it the repertoire of possibly communicable meanings -- is primarily sociocultural in nature, that is, generally speaking it is not something with regard to which the individual has an unrestricted freedom. It is a macro-influence which is active on a more or less subconscious level of communicative behavior.

At this point, two important consequences of this particular view on coherence must be identified.

First, given the fact that the coherence of a text is a matter of its sociocultural embeddedness, intercultural differences in style (a concept to which I cannot devote too much attention here) can be attributed to differences at the level of local forms of coherence: *ethnocoherence*. This is because we may reasonably assume that texts produced in another culture, such as in my case, African political texts, are in line with general expectations and criteria of interpretability valid in the local speech community.

Second, interpreting this kind of texts will require a procedure for analyzing ethnocoherence as manifested in individual texts. Given the macro-dimension of the concept of ethnocoherence, this procedure will take the shape of a *historiography of texts*, i.e. a search for the sources and the conditions governing the production of texts.

The historicist bias of this approach is clear (e.g. Ricoeur 1963),[2] and defendable. Making sense of an individual text, embedded in a sociocultural basis other than my own (a situation in which an anthropological linguist finds him/herself almost by definition) requires the disentangling of the historical -- and therefore necessarily social and cultural -- genesis and development of the *differences* experienced when reading the text.

This need not be a case of theoretical overkill. As noted in the introduction, internationalized genres such as political rhetoric are **deceptively similar** at the level of surface structure, yet they are different. Differences at the surface level, e.g. features such as local honorifics ('Citoyen', 'Ndugu'.), are largely trivial in themselves. What is more important for our purpose of understanding these texts is the fact that they originated from a process of *generic development and differentiation* in the field of politics which is totally different from what we know in our own society. To put it simply: the texts may be similar, but the politics about which the texts are written is different, historically different. It is these historical differences that shape differences at the level of *implicit* text structuring - - a level notorious for its hermeticism to outsiders.

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[2] I'm also ready to acknowledge the influence of some social constructivists, such as John Shotter (1990). Johannes Fabian's work (esp. 1990) is the main example and source of inspiration for the type of analysis advocated here.

I cannot dwell too long on the shape the historiography of texts takes in practice. In brief, I opt for methods and analytical concepts that safeguard both (a) the historical (here to be read as diachronical) and processual nature of the object of inquiry, and (b) the relevance of surface elements of a text in terms of macro-level elements. This, as has become clear to everybody, will steer me in a direction previously explored by scholars such as Foucault and Bakhtin. In my attempt, however, to check tendencies to move from one level to another on the basis of just an assumption,[3] I include the almost microscopic attention for 'clues' (developed by Ginzburg (e.g. 1986), and elegantly elaborated by Fabian (1990)) as the basis of empirical investigation. 'Clues' in the text, i.e. surface characteristics that appear as *differences* in an intercultural reading, are the 'entries' I use for detecting underlying differences in generic expectation, and ultimately in the sociocultural genesis of the text. A further motive for including this empirical dimension is the fact that, for hegemonic discourse (e.g. political ideology) to be effective, its surface realization must carry all the features that are (locally) deemed to be characteristics of effective discourse. The surface structure must, in other words, be clearly and recognizably *coherent*

A final point worth mentioning is that, obviously, this type of research aims at detecting and understanding *emergent traditions* in a sociocultural environment that is subject to rapid, sometimes even revolutionary change. It aims at the phenomenon of sociocultural transformation and innovation in Africa -- a theoretical problem worth more than one paper in its own, because it does away with simple (but extremely pervasive) dichotomies between such things as 'traditional Africa' and 'modern Africa'. But maybe this point will become clear by looking at some facts now

4. Borrowed or created? Ujamaa as a local artefact

The key question to be asked in an intercultural research context such as this one, is the question of generic recognizability. Is an individual speech by a Tanzanian politician, say the former president Nyerere, *recognizable as an instance of political communication*, and if so, why? This question has, particularly with regard to African literature, been answered by a multitude of scholars, mostly ethnographers or literary critics, and mostly from two rather extreme and diagonally opposite perspectives.

The first perspective is the *universalist* perspective. There it is assumed that generic recognizability lies in the reproduction of stylistic canons which (necessarily) are to be situated at the surface level of a text (see e.g. Ngara 1982). Here the oppressive character of commonly available canons becomes strikingly clear: intercultural differences are treated as aberrations from assumedly universal (but, of course, basically western) canons, and therefore as stylistic shortcomings. Whatever criteria one applies, the intercultural dimension of texts will be minimized in favor of the internationalized dimension

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[3] Viz. the assumption that individual texts (and their individual surface features) derive their meaningfulness solely from their generic affiliation, and that therefore macro-conclusions can be drawn automatically, without linguistic/stylistic justification. This assumption leads to the kind of radical relativism typical for postmodernist approaches to meaning

The second perspective one can take is the *particularistic* one, in which the text is approached solely in terms of local criteria This position is taken by e.g. Okot p'Bitek (1986), and even more forcefully by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) [4] Here, the internationalized dimension is minimized in favor of the intercultural one, and the advocates of this perspective are trapped in what Finkielkraut (1987) has described as the oppression by cultural uniqueness: dialogue and intercultural meaning exchange are precluded by the presumed exclusive (culture-specific) character of the text

The paradoxes are quite simple: in the universalistic perspective, *differences* are overlooked, and in the particularistic perspective *similarities* are overlooked. Neither of the two extremes appears to be productive enough to answer the question of generic recognizability for internationalized genres such as political discourse

Let us see what the historiography of texts can do to further the study of internationalized genres More concretely, let us see how the question of generic recognizability can be answered with regard to Swahili political rhetoric I will suggest three steps, that together form a coherent research design

1st step.

The historiographic focus of the method allows us to realize what internationalization really means, in terms of generic development In the case of Swahili, as in any other form of contemporary African political rhetoric, the source of the genre must be sought in *colonization*. Despite claims to the contrary mostly made by African politicians themselves, the roots of what has become known as Ujamaa (and seen as a highly original form of state organization) lie in European politics [5] And the vestiges are still quite important:

a) The whole complex of situations, associated in the Bakhtinian sense of *'communicative spheres'* with 'politics', is borrowed from western sources This includes the basic pragmatic question: who speaks what to whom and when and where and how?

b) all the units commonly used in political discourse are derived from western sources The state, the people, the nation, the politicians, the party, the national and international institutions etc.

c) *terminology and concepts* have been borrowed. English is, together with Arabic, the prime source for borrowing political terminology and translating it into Swahili terms. Thus, to paraphrase one of Mazrui's well-known statements, English is one of the most important political factors in Tanzanian politics, because it shapes the way in which politics is talked about in Swahili It is the basic linguistic point of reference for Swahili political rhetoric

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[4] The debate is also particularly lively in Tanzanian literary circles, where the universalist stance is taken by Kezilahabi, and more particularistic positions by people such as T. Sengo

[5] Both Ali A. Mazrui and Immanuel Wallerstein repeatedly emphasized throughout their oeuvre the dramatic ambiguity created by the western political legacy in African states

2nd step.

The historiographic focus also allows us to detect the quite revolutionary break in the development of the genre, caused by *decolonization*. In other words, it allows us to identify Swahili political rhetoric as a *discontinuous genre*. Decolonization not only had the very concrete and practical implication of designing a new flag and composing a national anthem. It implied a much more important psychological and conceptual shift.[6]

a) *'politics'* fell within the realm of the formerly oppressed. Hegemonic power over the genre shifted almost overnight. This has a quite dramatic dimension: the politics of independence were such that only political movements who adopted commonly established political doctrines (preferably western-style parliamentary democracy, but some socialism was also tolerated) were eligible for post- independence power. This meant that the Africans had to erase part of their memory. The system they now espoused as the way to progress had been the recipe for oppression during the colonial era. They basically had to view as positive that which they had been fighting against as something quite negative.

b) *social identities* changed quite radically. Yesterday's lower-class now became the petty bourgeoisie; yesterday's petty bourgeoisie now became the ruling class; yesterday's dissidents now became the party leaders, cabinet ministers and presidents. Reversely, yesterday's benefactors were now the enemy, the losers. The Africans now had the right to make their own alliances internationally, including, as happened in a number of cases, breaking diplomatic relationships with the former colonial rulers.

The stage is now set. After these two steps, Swahili political discourse can be identified as a discontinuous genre, characterized by conceptual *fields of tension, contradictions, and paradoxes*. It is an unstable system, in which changes appear more in the shape of radical reformulations than as smooth transitions. But what are the particular stylistic correlates of these fields of tension, contradictions etc.?

3rd step.

The surface clues that are relevant for identifying the unstable and contradictory nature of Swahili political discourse are, in my opinion:

a) the *Language*, Swahili. This looks so trivial, but it is so essential for a fair understanding of the full pragmatics of political communication. Language is a choice, for which a (mostly limited) range of possibilities are available. In extremely multiethnic environments, such as all African states, the choice of a language may even be a crucial one in terms of nation-building, administrative efficiency, and education. Going somewhat deeper into the fabric of society, it may be a critical choice for class formation (esp. urban elite formation), as I have demonstrated with regard to English-Swahili codeswitching in Dar es Salaam (Blommaert 1992; Blommaert & Gysels 1990). Comparing with other African countries, Tanzania's choice for Swahili as the national language, to be used for government and (part of) education purposes, was as good as

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[6] The psychological and conceptual nature of the two processes described below should be stressed. The changes in (a) and (b) are *theoretical*, they pertain to the level of the offical political self-image of the new states, and thus serve as the basis for the development of postcolonial political ideologies and analyses.

unique. The choice was largely ideological: it expressed the desire to eradicate the remnants of colonialism, and to make the nation truly 'African' Therefore, and because of the ideological-symbolic opposition thus created with English (the language of imperialism and oppression), the use of Swahili as a medium of political discourse is a pragmatic element of meaning in its own right. Whatever the tone or the content of a speech, when it is in Swahili, it's patriotic The frame of interpretation induced by Swahili political rhetoric is therefore necessarily nationalist.

b) Equally relevant is the abundance of *definitions* either implicit or explicit, in political discourse (see Blommaert 1991). Certainly until the early 'eighties, most speeches were explanatory rather than argumentative, with a heavy emphasis on 'newness'.[7] New concepts, new plans, new institutions were presented to the people by means of political speech This indicates the conceptual shift mentioned above The new, independent society and all it entailed in terms of new identities and roles in society, was something that people had to learn, they had to be explained the basis of their state structure

c) At the level of *what is said* by politicians, three things stand out: (1) unity, i.e. nationhood and equality; (2) Africanity, i.e the fact that the new nation is truly African in nature; (3) socialism as the organizational and ideological paradigm for the country The first two themes are certainly indicative of 'newness', and as could be expected they are ambiguous in their mutual relationship. Although the idea of a 'nation' is, certainly in the multiethnic shape foreseen by independence, a foreign product, it is motivated by means of 'African tradition'. This combines in the third point, 'socialism' Though clearly not of African origin, efforts are made to present it as a truly traditional African value system. This goes even to the point of using a neologism for this African socialism: Ujamaa, emphasizing newness and intercultural difference rather than continuity and similarity. Ujamaa combines African values such as solidarity, mutual respect, and family loyalty, with the very western application of socialism as a state doctrine

d) At the level of *how things are said*, the particularly dialogical and colloquial style of (especially Nyerere's) Swahili rhetoric is a relevant clue Explicit authority and politeness features, typical of the politician's awareness of his audience, are mixed with jokes, proverbs, and elaborate metaphors and allegories This points at two important sociocultural contextual elements: (1) the dynamics of class formation and class alliances in the newly independent country; and (2) the literacy situation in the country, which compels politicians to create their political ideology as an oral system of meaning transmission Despite the existence of tons of written documents on Ujamaa, the doctrine has pervaded society primarily through the image of the public speaker, Nyerere Even today, the amount of public (and broadcasted) political speech in the country is amazing.

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[7] This is partly achieved by grammatical marking of references to the past, the present and the future The present is nearly absent from political rhetoric; the basic temporal axis is the opposition between past (colonial) and future (socialist) The future, in Ujamaa rhetoric, often takes the shape of a 'plan' or a 'desired state', encoded in subjunctive verb forms rather than by means of the future tense.

So, *what do we know now*? We know certainly that the whole thing is ambiguous to the extreme. Heteroglossia, at a very deep level of message structuring, is a major characteristic of Swahili political rhetoric. Although the basis of the genre is clearly of western origin, the simplistic dichotomy between 'western' elements and 'African' ones is an uninteresting analytical instrument in trying to understand contemporary Swahili political rhetoric. It is a self-evident point of departure. Something special has emerged: a local sociocultural artefact, expressing (as noted by Fabian (1990) with regard to Shaba) a very unstable sociocultural environment, characterized by internal contradictions such as that between urban areas and the countryside, elite and underclass, rich and poor, not to mention that between past and present and the symbolic connotations both periods have. The genre is *coherent* with this environment.

Small clues in the texts also shed some light on contest and dominance in Swahili political rhetoric (see esp. Blommaert 1990). The precise shape and structure of these features are, as yet, unclear. Do the internal inconsistency of texts, and the need to define and redefine certain crucial concepts, indicate responses to challenges from below? Or do they, on the contrary, reflect the absolute control Nyerere and his supporters had over the conceptual and pragmatic field of politics? In other words, are they signals of contest or of dominance? I have to leave the question open.

5. Conclusion

Hymes 'second relativity' is certainly a valid notion for Swahili political rhetoric. The inherent ambiguity of the genre creates a deceptive similarity, because basically the same general frame of reference is used for talking about society as elsewhere in the world of 'modern politics', similar words and phrases are used by people who carry the same sociopolitical-hierarchical labels as elsewhere. This similarity, however, is so superficial and epiphenomenal that the illusion of "deep similarity versus surface differences" should be buried as soon as possible, together with heuristic and analytical notions associated with it, such as the dichotomy between 'African' and 'Western', 'traditional' and 'modern', or the notion of 'acculturation'. They all make little sense, on the one hand, and they are based on epistemological claims which sound too optimistic too me, on the other hand.

What makes sense, in my view, is to try to seek the coherence, however incoherent it appears, between speech and the environment in which it is produced. Intercultural differences are then interpreted against the background of more global patterns of sociocultural change and development. The assumption of similarity is at least checked by an awareness of the potential for local, different forms of ("deep") functionality. The questioning of similarity is, of course, the methodological correlate of the questioning of my own position as a researcher involved in intercultural interpretive research. This holistic and dynamic perspective on communication, I believe, could open interesting lines of research into nonwestern cultural products expressed in internationalized genres such as (besides politics) journalism or literature. The relevance of this for intercultural understanding at a macro-level should be clear to everyone.

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