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INTER-TEXTUAL

THE RISE OF ANTI-FRENCH SENTIMENT IN THE SAHEL: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLARIZATION IN THE SPEECHES OF THE JUNTA LEADERS IN MALI AND BURKINA FASO

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Abstract

Anti-French feelings have been growing in some Sahelian countries in recent years. Between 2021 and 2022 the Sahel region, especially countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have been the epicentre of unprecedented anti-French protests. As Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso seized control in these nations by ousting democratic governments, there have been exceptional shifts in the leaders' statements regarding France's involvement in the Sahel. This change is characterized by polarized or divisive political narratives which amplify anti-French sentiments in Mali and Burkina Faso. This qualitative study delves into the dynamics of polarization in the discourses of Malian interim President Assimi Goïta and President Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso. In other words, this analysis explores polarization strategies used by both leaders to demonize France's policy in Africa. Drawing on Van Dijk's (2006) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this study reveals the occurrence of four main tactics of ideological-based polarization in Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré's discourses which are: lexicalization, actor description, self-national glorification and victimization. The findings show that lexicalisation and actor description strategies are frequently employed by Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré to present 'Themselves' as good and 'Others' as bad.

Keywords: Discourse, France, Junta, Polarization, Anti-French sentiment

Résumé

Ces dernières années, les sentiments anti-français se sont amplifiés dans certains pays du Sahel. Entre 2021 et 2022, la région du Sahel, en particulier des pays comme le Mali et le Burkina Faso, ont été le théâtre de manifestations anti-françaises sans précédent. Depuis qu'Assimi Goïta et Ibrahim Traoré, du Burkina Faso, ont pris le contrôle de ces pays en renversant les régimes démocratiques, les déclarations des dirigeants concernant l'implication de la France au Sahel ont connu des changements exceptionnels. Cela se caractérise par des discours politiques polarisés ou clivants qui amplifient les sentiments anti-français au Mali et au Burkina Faso. Cette étude qualitative se penche sur la dynamique de polarisation dans les

discours des présidents Malien et Burkinabé. En d'autres termes, cette analyse explore les stratégies de polarisation utilisées par les deux dirigeants pour diaboliser la politique de la France en Afrique. S'appuyant sur la théorie d'Analyse Critique du Discours de Van Dijk (2006), cette étude révèle l'existence de quatre principales tactiques de polarisation idéologique dans les discours d'Assimi Goïta et d'Ibrahim Traoré, à savoir : la lexicalisation, la description des acteurs, l'autoglorification nationale et la victimisation. Les résultats montrent que les stratégies de lexicalisation et de description des acteurs sont fréquemment utilisées par Assimi Goïta et Ibrahim Traoré pour se présenter comme les « bons » et les « autres » comme les « méchants ».

Mots-clés : Discours, France, Junte, Polarisation, sentiments anti-français

Introduction

The rise of military leaders to power in Burkina Faso and Mali has been a profound turning point in the political landscape of some Sahelian countries like Mali and Burkina Faso. The ascension of the military junta in power in Mali and Burkina Faso has significantly deteriorated the special ties between France and its former colonies in the Sahel. The hostility toward France and the surge of anti-French sentiments in sub-Saharan countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have attracted many scholars' attention. Pigeaud and Samba Sylla (2024) point out that the criticisms directed to France in most French-speaking countries stem from France's support to despotic regimes, its military interventions and its maintenance of monetary supervision through the CFA. The struggle against imperialism, neo-colonialism and the quest of sovereignty have propelled Captain Ibrahim Traoré and General Assimi Goïta in the fore front of the political scene in their countries. Both leaders position themselves as nationalists who are opposed to France's interference in its former colonies' internal affairs.

Adopting a more radical stance against French presence in the Sahelian Countries, the new leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso constantly use France as the scapegoat for the socio-political and economic problems in their countries. Morten and Viljar (2025) point out that the failures of France offered the junta a rich repertoire to draw on for its own legitimacy. Indeed, to consolidate their power and win people's support, the new leaders frequently harness anti-French sentiments observable throughout frequent criticisms, accusations and polarized discourses directed toward France. This study follows a qualitative approach in analyzing the speeches of Presidents Goïta and Traoré. Van Dijk's (2006) framework of Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) is used in order to unveil the polarization strategies embedded in Goïta and Traoré's speeches. Thus, the topic of this study is: "The Rise of Anti-French Sentiment in the Sahel: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Polarization in The Speeches of the Junta Leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso". This subject triggers the following questions: What linguistic patterns are used to signal polarization in representing France and events in the Sahel? What are the polarization markers used by Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré's? This study intends to investigate polarization in Presidents Traoré and Goïta's speeches. It also aims to show how Traoré and Goïta's polarized discourses lead to a rise of anti-French sentiments in the Sahel.

In a bipartite division, this work sheds light on Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré's polarization strategies and the rising of anti-French sentiments in the Sahelian regions. The first part deals with the literature review on polarization and CDA. The second part highlights polarization strategies in Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré's speeches.

1- Anti-French-Sentiments: Historical and Contemporary Context

The anti-French sentiments and the hostilities toward France in the Sahelian regions, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso have been the subject of analysis of many scholars. According to Korkmaz (2019, p. 1), "after the colonial times came to an end and most of the colonies gained their independence, the vestiges of colonialism remains and France maintains special relations with its former colonies". As a matter of fact, since the decolonization period, France has kept a special relationship with its former colonies. This special relationship known as 'Françafrique'¹ is considered as one of the main causes of African disenchantment with France's policies. For Akrimi (2023, p. 2), what is considered an "anti-French sentiment" in the "global North seems to echo another concept many consider outdated: the Françafrique is France's neocolonial ties with its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa on economic, monetary, diplomatic, and military levels".

The surge of anti-French sentiments is related to France's colonial legacy in the Sahel. Some Africans see the presence of France in Africa as an extension of colonial dominance. Akrimi (2023) points out that anti-French feelings are not mere rhetoric; they reflect a growing frustration with both symbolic and tangible aspects of French influence, from colonial legacies to present-day policies, trade relations, and military presence. As far as the new factors of anti-

¹ According to Korkmaz (2019), President Félix Houphouët-Boigny is the first African leader who has coined the term 'La Françafrique' in 1955 to define the wish of some members of the African elite to maintain special relations with France after their independence.

French sentiments in Mali and Burkina Faso are concerned, one can cite: political instability, socio-political issues and insecurity in the Sahel. Besides, political instability, the rise of nationalism and the ascension of militaries in power in Burkina Faso and Mali are key factors that lead Sahelian people to take a dim view of French presence in the Sahel. Indeed, the ascension of Presidents Ibrahim Traoré and Assimi Goïta in power represents a profound turning point in French presence in the Sahel. In fact, Captain Ibrahim Traoré and Colonel Assimi Goïta are two young military officers who rose rapidly through the ranks to become respectively Burkina Faso and Mali's interim presidents overthrowing democratic governments in Burkina Faso and Mali.

1.1- Theoretical Background of Polarization and Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Ybiskay (2022), the concept of polarization can be traced back to Sartori (1976). Sartori points out that “polarisation occurs when we have ideological distance (in contra-distinction to ideological proximity)” (Sartori, 1976, p. 135) because political groups see themselves as mutually exclusive or incapable to join forces. Polarized discourses tend to categorise people. Hamed (2020) maintains that as an ideology, polarization means that individuals who adopt a polarized ideology never tolerate “the Others.” He adds that the “Others” in this sense can be seen as any person belonging to a different group. Van Dijk's (2006) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a holistic insight into the way ideological polarization is expressed in political discourse.

When politicians explain, motivate or legitimate their group-based actions, they typically do so in terms of ideological discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). CDA is an approach to discourse analysis focusing on the way power abuse, ideology and inequality are enacted in communications. This approach goes beyond the mere description of linguistic patterns by shedding light on the implications and effects of discourse on people. It aims to critically investigate how ideology and power are harnessed in discourse. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to discourse studies. In this sense, it combines discourse and social theories to reveal how language shapes social beliefs, ideologies and practices.

There are many studies on CDA. Linguists like Van Dijk (2004, 2006), Fowler (1991) and Fairclough (1995) suggest that this analytical framework helps to uncover ideological polarization in discourse. To analyse ideological polarization in presidents Traoré and Goïta's speeches, Van Dijk's approach to CDA is of interest in this study. For Van Dijk, discourse is an essential means through which social realities are constructed and contested. CDA analytical framework allows to delve into the way societal norms and values are reproduced by people through discourse. Van Dijk's (2006) model gives insight into the interplay between text, context of interaction and cognition. Van Dijk puts an emphasis on context in discourse studies, arguing for a thorough study of social, historical context and cultural factors that shape the production of text and talk. Indeed, Van Dijk sees discourse as social practice. This implies "a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the way language use reinforces, challenges and resists existing power relations. For V. Dijk (2006, p. 728), "politics is one of the social domains whose practices are virtually exclusively discursive; political cognition is by definition ideologically based; and political ideologies² are largely reproduced by discourse." According to Hamed (2020), Van Dijk's model of CDA focuses on ideologically-based discourse that follows the general instructions of emphasizing "positive things about Us" while stating "negative things about Them". This refers to the polarized structure of ideologies which are underpinning political discourses. Van Dijk (2006) has suggested two main semantic macro-strategies for detecting ideological polarization in discourse which are: positive self-presentation³ and negative other presentation.

Van Dijk (2006) states that ideologies are usually polarized in their structure, especially in representing or categorizing a competing or conflicting group membership between ingroups and outgroups. This polarization manifests itself in political discourses. As a result, political discourses are influenced by the political leaders polarized ideological stances. In this sense, Saadeen and Albzour (2022, p. 35) suggest that if ideologies are polarized, "discourse is likely to exhibit different forms of polarization as well". Van Dijk's approach is a systematic method which offers some analytical tools for detecting polarization in discourse. Van Dijk (2006) puts forward the Ideological Square which emphasises polarization between 'Us' versus 'Them'. In

² V. Dijk (2006, p. 729) maintains that ideologies are "the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group"

³ This 'self' refers to the language user's group/community of membership.

fact, the Ideological Square comprises four key concepts as follows: **Emphasize Our Good Things, Emphasize Their Bad Things, De-Emphasize Our Bad things, De-emphasize Their good things** (Van Dijk, 2006, p.734). Van Dijk's (2006) ideological polarization devices such as actor description, comparison, national self-glorification, generalization, evidentiality and victimization are applied in this study to identify polarized language in Presidents Goïta and Traoré's speeches.

1.2- Data and Methodology

The corpus of this investigation consists of the transcripts of three speeches delivered by Ibrahima Traoré, the president of Burkina Faso and Assimi Goïta, the President of Mali. The following table displays key information about the sample data.

Title of the speech	Date of delivery	Website
President Traoré's Africa-Russia Summit Speech	July 28, 2023	https://www.memri.org/reports/interim-president-burkina-faso-traore-speaking-russia-africa-summit-russia-part-family
Captain Traoré's speech during the first summit of Sahelian States Alliance	July 6, 2024	https://www.presidencedufaso.bf/discours-de-s-e-le-capitaine-ibrahim-traore-au-1er-sommet-de-laes/
Assimi Goïta's Africa- Russia Summit Speech	July 28, 2023	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71842

Table 2: **The Corpus of the Study**

This qualitative study adopts Van Dijk's (2006) model of Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate ideological polarization in Ibrahim Traoré and Assimi Goïta's speeches. The qualitative method is appropriate for this type research work, since it explores polarization in political discourse. In fact, the data are the utterances excerpted from the speeches of the two political leaders.

1.3 - Analysis and Discussion

Political Discourse is shaped by underlying ideologies. This implies that ideologies have control on whatever is uttered by political leaders. Indeed, ideologies influence politicians' attitudes toward different issues. Thus, the polarization we see in society derives from people's opposed ideologies. The contention of this research paper is that polarization is manifested in the speeches of the new leaders in the Sahel.

2.- Polarization Strategies in Presidents Goïta and Traoré's Speeches

The analysis of Traoré and Goïta's speeches reveals that they employ victimization to show the negative side of France's presence in the Sahel. Victimization is the process by which politicians portray people who are not members of their group negatively, while portraying self or members of their group as victims of bias or unfair treatments. The analysis shows that the interim President of Mali, Assimi Goïta and Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the President of Burkina Faso commonly employ victimization as way to depict the dire legacy of colonisation and Françafrique. As a matter of fact, they present the Sahel as a victim of neocolonialism and imperialist practices. In the excerpts below, Van Dijk's (2006) victimization strategy is found in the speeches of the two presidents:

- (1) As for Burkina Faso, for the past eight years we have been fighting “the most barbaric” and “cruel form of colonialism and imperialism”, which are forcing a modern form of slavery on us (I. Traoré, 2023).
- (2) Our forefathers were deported to save Europe, and “this happened against their will”. But when they came back and tried to assert their basic rights, “they faced cruel repression” (I. Traoré, 2023).
- (3) Numerous African countries, especially Mali, are suffering from the unprecedented pressure from several countries that are all but ready to “introduce sanctions against us” for our partnership with Russia, for our sovereign choice. (A. Goïta, 2023).

In the data (1), (2) and (3) Africa is presented as a victim of “the most barbaric and cruel form of colonialism and imperialism”. Traoré and Goïta commonly employ victimisation to elicit people's emotions and make palatable their narratives of socio-political events. The examples (1), (2) and (3) tell a lot about these leaders' ideology. They show virulent opposition to neo-colonialism and imperialism in Africa. Through this strategy, they show the evil nature of western countries, especially France. Furthermore, victimization strategy is employed by

these leaders to echo their people's grievances. In data (2), Traoré points out how France has been unjust to African soldiers who fought alongside France during the World War II.

According to N. F. Hassan Akbar and N. Fadhil Abbas (2019), actor description is a polarization strategy which is concerned with the way people are depicted in discourse. This strategy deals with how people talk about others' roles, status, gender and actions. Actor description strategy represents the core of the ideological polarization of US vs THEM in racist, discriminatory and political discourses according to Van Dijk (2011). The analysis shows the occurrence of this strategy in Ibrahim Traoré's discourses and in that of A. Goïta. The following extracts illustrate the occurrences of actor description tactic in their speeches:

(4) Numerous "African countries", especially Mali, are suffering from the unprecedented pressure from "several countries" that are all but ready to introduce sanctions against us for our partnership with "Russia", for our sovereign choice (Assimi Goïta, 2023)

(5) "They" are always ready to betray their brothers to satisfy "the master". "They" have betrayed us since independence, and others continue to this day to betray us for the benefit of "their master" (Ibrahim Traoré, 2024).

Following their ideology of anti-imperialism, Presidents Traoré and President Assimi Goïta criticise European countries, particularly France for its actions in the Sahel. The examples (4) and (5) show the description of foreign countries in Africa. For instance, Russia is positively presented as a good partner and a friend. While, France and its allies are negatively described as "master". Indeed, actor description in these two leaders' speeches exemplify how polarization is manifested in political communication. Actor description is frequently employed by Ibrahim Traoré to attack France and its allies in Africa. The data (6), (7) and (8) are excerpted from president Traoré's speeches. They reveal the negative presentation of France. In addition, the examples (6), (7) and (8) seem to be criticisms directed to the partisans of the 'Françafrique'.

(6) "These imperialists" have only one cliché in mind. Africa is the continent of slaves; that's how they see Africa (Ibrahim Traoré, 2024).

(7) If we are as poor as "they" say, why don't "they" want to leave when the time comes for us to take responsibility and ask "this master" to leave places? (Ibrahim Traoré, 2024).

(8) In the case of Niger, for over 40 years, "certain countries" have been mining uranium to produce energy at home. From "Ottawa" to "Paris", the streets are lit up; but in Niger, we are served darkness (Ibrahim Traoré, 2024).

The aforementioned examples indicate that Traoré and Goïta resort to polarized discourses characterised by positive ingroup presentation versus negative other presentation. Polarization is manifested in Traoré and Goïta's speeches as follows: **We** versus **They**, True leaders versus Traitors or puppets of France. As matter of fact, Traoré and Goïta's polarized discourses contribute to the rising of anti-French sentiments in the Sahel. Thus, the self-advantage narration of socio-political events and France's role in Africa by both leaders can increase hostilities toward France in the Sahel. Besides, the analysis also shows the use of national self-glorification in the statements of the two presidents. National Self-Glorification is an ideological device which implies "various forms of positive references to or praise for one's own country, its principles, history, and traditions" (V. Dijk, 2006, p. 738). Indeed, going through Assimi Goïta's and Ibrahim Traoré's speeches, one was expecting to see positive evaluations of their countries. They glorify Africa in their messages. The data (9) and (10) illustrate how the two presidents employ national self-glorification in their speeches:

(9) I cannot understand why Africa, with its "huge mineral resources", "water and sun", is the poorest continent where hunger abounds, and why we have to ask for help (Traoré, 2023).

(10) In this struggle, "our courageous people" decided to take up arms against terrorism. We were surprised to learn that imperialists refer to them as armed groups or militarized groups (Traoré, 2023).

National self-glorification is a discursive tactic used to enhance the positive self-image and at the same time to emphasize the negative other-presentation. Malian and Burkinabè interim Presidents use national self-glorification to shed positive light on their country and actions.

Another polarization strategy found in interim Presidents Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré is categorization. Fowler (1991, p. 58) defines categorization as a "linguistic objectification of allocation of a definite place" This study regards categorisation as a powerful ideological tool which is employed by the two leaders to direct their people's interpretation to a certain direction which, in turn, leads to polarization or hatred toward France. In (11), President Traoré implicitly refers to France as the "master" who treats his homeland as a poor country.

(11) If we are as poor as they say we are, why won't they leave when the time comes for us to assume our responsibilities and ask "this master" to leave? (Traoré, 2024).

Polarization can be seen through the way these leaders depict foreign countries in their discourses. For instance, France is described as “imperialist” and “neo-colonialist”. By contrast, Russia is described by the interim Presidents as “friend”. In examples (12) and (13), President Assimi Goïta and Ibrahim Traoré use categorization to create polarization.

(12) These individuals still continue, against all odds, to help “the master” plunder Africa (Traoré, 2024).

(13) The Malian people sincerely appreciate the support of “the Russian Federation” because we are finally seeing in these serious, difficult times who “our true friends” are (A. Goïta, 2023).

Eissa (2015, p. 51) maintains that “categorization is a kind of grouping of entities into larger categories”. This categorization or grouping is never neutral as it always carries ideological meaning. Categorisation is widely use in both leaders’ speeches with the aim of establishing certain ideological-based stereotypes of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. In the examples (14) and (15), one can see that a European country like Russia is treated as Mali and Burkina Faso’s friend. While, other European countries are very often described as imperialists by Traoré and Goïta.

(14) I would like to convey fraternal greetings to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, a great friend of Mali”, and to sincerely thank you on behalf of the people (A. Goïta, 2023)

(15) Russia is part of the family for Africa, because we have the same history. Russia has suffered many losses to liberate Europe and the rest of the world from Nazism during the Second World War (Traoré, 2023).

Categorisation is a form of ideological polarization which is employed by the military leaders to ingrain in people’s mind two categories of European in Africa: the friends of Africa (in-group) versus the neo-colonialists (out-group). Following their ideology, Russia is presented as the friend of Africa. In this sense, these African leaders emphasise the positive actions of Russia in their homelands. According to Van Dijk (2006), categorization creates ingroup and out-group. In the context of politics, out-group members are described as enemies and their actions are negatively valued.

Conclusion

The analysis shows the portrayal of categories in terms of Us and Them. All the descriptions given about France and European countries emphasise their negative representation and consequently reinforce the ideological polarization of 'US' versus 'THEM'. The findings obtained from analyzing the selected data lead to the conclusion that Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the interim President of the republic of Burkina Faso and Assimi Goïta, the President of Mali have the tendency to negatively present western countries, particularly France as a neo-colonialist country. President Traoré resorts to diverse ideological discursive means such as categorization, national self-glorification, actor description and victimization to influence people's perception about France and to harness anti-French sentiments in the Sahel. This study suggests that Assimi Goïta emphasises positive ingroup (Us) presentation through the use of national self-glorification and categorization. While, Ibrahim Traoré emphasises negative presentation of out-group (others). He constantly depicts western countries, particularly France as neo-colonialist country. Burkina Faso's President employs diverse ideological discursive means such as categorization, national self-glorification, actor description and victimization to influence people's perception about France and increase anti-French sentiments in the Sahel.

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