

Climate Change in Cameroon Political Discourse: A Case Study of Paul Biya's COP21 Speech

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1. Introduction

The aim of the present contribution is to provide insight into the political discourse on climate, with a special focus on Cameroon. The management of, and the concern regarding, climate change have been occupying a growing space in public debates in recent years. The various challenges which are linked to climate change can be said to have become a global concern, as there have been mobilisations from institutions and persons that work in various fields—science, politics and even arts. Frameworks have been developed over the years to enable people from all of these diverse fields to meet and discuss this issue which has a direct impact on the daily life of societies all over the world. The most important of such frames is the Conference of the Parties (COP) organised by the United Nations, where people from various fields meet to discuss what is at stake and the measures that can or should be taken in order to develop a coordinated, global response to the challenges the world faces due to climate change.

The discourse on climate can as mentioned be initiated by people in diverse fields. Research in climate discourse has sought to determine the distinct features of each of these. Thus, some studies have focussed on the scientific reports about climate (Fløttum & Dahl 2014), on political discourse on climate (Fløttum & Gjerstad 2013) or even on blogs (Fløttum et al. 2014), with particular attention to linguistic features and/or language use. In the present article, I focus on political discourse which, as some previous studies have pointed out, also has a link to the scientific

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discourse, since political leaders often draw on research carried out in the domain they are considering. They sometimes use research results as authority arguments in a bid to persuade their partners on the points they raise. Scientific arguments and discourse are therefore used in the political field with rhetorical objectives. Fløttum (2010, 13) points out, therefore, that the transfer of knowledge from science to politics is realised through language. Furthermore, she highlights the need for people to know and understand what is going on in the climate debate at various levels: “If there are going to be any agreements at all, be they multi- or bilateral, global, regional or national, and if there are going to be sound and relevant actions, we at least need to know what is actually said and discussed and by whom, in the climate change debate.” (Fløttum 2010, 1).

There has been a growing interest in the issue of climate and environment protection in the political field in Cameroon over the past few years. The advent of multi-partyism¹ in the 1990s triggered the creation of dozens of political parties, which have been taking part in various elections. One of these parties, is the *Mouvement des écologistes camerounais* (Mec),² which is affiliated to “The global Green” movement whose main mission is to foster a global value shift toward a sustainable and secure future. Central to the party’s preoccupations are the issues of environment protection and the fight against climate change. Since its creation, this party has participated in various elections, the major ones being the presidential elections. It has succeeded, therefore, in having its green agenda included among the issues that were discussed during all the elections in which it has had a candidate.

In addition, it is interesting to note that not only the opposition has shown concern about the fight against climate change and environment protection. In fact, the officials of the country have also demonstrated some concern about the issue. In 2004, presidential decree no 2004/320 of December 8, 2004 creates and organises a ministry of environment and nature protection, which eight years later became the ministry of the environment, nature protection and sustainable development, following another presidential decree no 2012/431 of October 1, 2012. This ministry is responsible for coordinating the government’s activity related to envi-

1 There have been four presidential elections since the advent of multi-partyism in Cameroon (1992, 1997, 2004, 2011).

2 Movement of Cameroon Ecologists

ronment protection and climate change. It also takes measures to deal with all matters concerning these two issues in the national territory, as well as participating in and organizing national and international forums on environment protection and climate change. In order to achieve these aims, it has two technical organs which are responsible for the implementation of its policies in this field. The Environmental Monitoring and Evaluation cell is charged with all national activities and measures related to climate-change mitigation. The role of the National Observatory on Climate Change is to initiate all awareness-raising and preventative activities relevant to climate change, to serve as an operational instrument in the context of reducing emissions, to propose government measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to promote cooperation with other regional and international climate-change entities. All of these activities are carried out under the patronage of the President of the republic, Paul Biya, who is more active in the diplomatic field. He has been active in various international summits on climate (change), the largest of which was the Conference of Parties (COP) where he has been very active, making frequent speeches and taking part in discussions involving international partners in the field. The speech which will serve as the basis of the subsequent analyses was made in this context.

The above provides a brief overview of what is being done in the field of environment protection and climate in Cameroon, and most importantly, the involvement of the government in this area. Turning to President Biya's COP21 speech as an example of the official communication on climate-related issues, this article now addresses the following questions: (1) Where does Cameroon stand in the major trends on climate (change)? (2) What is the relationship between Cameroon's voice and those of the other partners involved in the discussions? (3) Which strategies does Biya resort to in order to make his point?

The article is divided into four sections. After this introduction (section 1), section 2 briefly considers the theoretical framework that underlies this undertaking. It is concerned, more precisely, with the recent concept of discursive polyphony, which is here viewed as being a blend of two polyphonic theories: the ScaPoLine approach and the *praxématique* approach. It will further present the corpus data. Section 3 analyses a few typical examples drawn from the corpus data. Section 4 sums up the analyses and tries to identify the points that really matter to Cameroon.

2. *Theory and methodology*

The postulate of a discursive polyphony was raised by Gjerstad (2011). His undertaking was a syncretic one, which put together three major theories that fall within the framework of polyphonic analyses: the ScaPoLine approach (Nølke, Fløttum & Norén 2004), the *praxématique* approach (Nowakowska & Sarale 2011) and the Geneva Model (Roulet, Fillettaz & Grobet 2001). To these, he adds some interaction features, which are linked to the intentions of the participants in the discourse. The notion of communicative intention is crucial in the author's argument, as he views discourse from a pragmatic perspective, which holds that there is a communicative or pragmatic intention in every discourse. This should entail that the interpreter is able to use some contextual elements to help him gain a better understanding of the linguistic phenomena at stake in the discourse as a text (Micheli 2006). This operation would not be allowed by the ScaPoLine approach.

Gjerstad's study (2011) can be said to represent a significant step towards making the study of multi-voicedness an important part of the broad field of discourse analysis. In fact, the premises of this major turning point are found in the ScaPoLine itself, which has the clear aim: "to reveal not only explicit voices, such as reported speech, but also implicit voices, in a more or less hidden interaction through devices such as pronouns, sentence connectives, modal expressions, adverbs, negation, pre-supposition, information structure and many more" (Fløttum & Dahl 2014, 16). Moreover, it provides the interpreter with a clear and well-structured analysis scheme, which can lead to a more objective identification and analysis of the polyphonic phenomena. The polyphonic configuration also enables researchers to highlight the relationships between the voices that exist in the text; that is, the way they interact with one another. This last point is quite relevant as it coincides with the second aim of this paper. While ScaPoLine limits itself mainly to the linguistic level, discourse can also be viewed, as Chilton (1994, 583) suggests, as "l'usage du potentiel sémantique et pragmatique d'une langue en situation pratique."³ We can therefore understand the limit of the ScaPoLine, especially when it comes to exploiting the semantic and pragmatic potential of a language, in relation to the practical situation which should be

3 The use of the semantic and pragmatic potential of a language in a practical situation.

viewed here as the context. Gjerstad (2011, 73) points out this limit while comparing the approach to the *praxématique*. He states:

La ScaPoLine est une théorie sémantique, qui cherche à décrire la manière dont les voix font partie intégrante de la signification linguistique. Le dialogisme est d'ordre discursif, ce qui veut dire que la pluralité de voix est un phénomène susceptible de se produire dans l'interprétation, sans forcément relever du seul contenu sémantique de l'énoncé.⁴

This assumption gives rise to the need to complement an essentially language-oriented approach with one that takes into account context-based devices in an effort to develop a more discursive approach. This has been the main motivation of Gjerstad's study (2011), a motivation that also underlies the present paper. My approach differs from Gjerstad's perspective in that it seeks to narrow the scope of a discursive polyphony to include only two approaches: the ScaPoLine and the *praxématique*. It does not apply the Geneva Model which divides the complex nature of discourse into three modules: the interactional module which is related to the situation; the hierarchical module which is concerned with the text structure; and the syntactic and lexical module which has to do with the linguistic component of the text. However, it can be argued that the ScaPoLine and the *praxématique* consider these modules, although in a different way. The *praxématique* approach allows the interpreter to explore the context. This is achieved thanks to its interdiscursive dialogism, which views a speech as a response to a previous speech, and its interlocutive dialogism according to which a speech can anticipate the potential responding speeches. The polyphonic phenomena are likely, therefore, to occur out of the semantic potential of the words. In this new undertaking, I postulate here, both the linguistic and contextual elements will be relevant in the identification, analysis and interpretation of the polyphonic phenomena. This approach is expected to lead to a deeper and well-structured exploitation of polyphony in discourse, in a bid to more clearly identify who is

4 "The ScaPoLine is a semantic theory that seeks to describe how voices are an integral part of linguistic meaning. Dialogism is of discursive order, which means that the plurality of voices is likely to occur in the interpretation, without necessarily belonging to the semantic content of the utterance alone."

saying what and who is responsible for which position in a speech that deals with a global concern such as that of climate change.

The choice of political discourse as the object of study is socially relevant in the sense that the political authorities are the ones who have the power to implement measures, and they represent the people they rule. Their attitudes and their opinions really matter, as they can result in more direct action than those of scientists, for example, who do not have any political mandate—even though they have some societal responsibility. In other words, political discourse is more action-oriented than scientific discourse—to remain with this example. The speech analysed in this article is by Paul Biya, the current president of Cameroon, and was made in Paris on November 30, 2015. The communicative setting is that of the opening session of the COP21 summit on climate change, where he was addressing representatives of the international community with prominent figures such as other Heads of States, Prime Ministers, and the Secretary General of the UN. The context here is therefore a diplomatic gathering, since the COP is a summit organised by the UN, where participants are mostly representatives of countries and NGOs. On such occasions, participants are expected to present a report on their views on climate change, the measures they have taken to combat it and what they intend to do in the future. It is therefore an arena where participants interact with one another to a significant degree through their individual speeches. Thus, language and language use are central when it comes to understanding what is going on in such meetings.

3. *A polyphonic analysis*

The analyses carried out employ the approach described in the preceding section; that is, a model based on the ScaPoLine and the *praxématique* methods only. The analyses constitute an attempt to implement a discursive polyphony based on the two aforementioned approaches. The text excerpts are taken as they arise from the speech and were selected based on the devices that create the multi-voicedness effect. The polyphonic effects are considered within the limits of the ScaPoLine and those of the *praxématique*. In fact, the polyphonic markers are likely to arise both from the language—words, syntactic structures, etc.—and from the situation, in relation to such elements as the participants in the speech event

and the topic of discourse. Meanwhile, the scheme used in the analyses is the configuration which is proposed in the ScaPoLine.

Polemic negation is one of the commonly encountered forms of polyphony. The polyphonic marker is the negation element which in French generally—but not only—has the form of *ne/n'... pas* and may correspond to the English *not*.

(1) NOUS N'AVONS PAS LE DROIT D'ÉCHOUER.⁵

The semantic instructions of this marker make it clear that there are two points of view (pov) in this utterance. From the purely linguistic (ScaPoLine) perspective, the following organisation can be identified:

pov₁: Nous avons le droit d'échouer.

pov₂: pov 1 is not valid.

The first pov is that of an unknown speaker—“non-identified voice” (Fløttum & Gjerstad 2013, 423)—while the known speaker is responsible for the second pov which rejects or invalidates the preceding one. A contextualisation using the ScaPoLine, which limits itself to the text, allows one to gain a clearer idea of the speaker being Biya, while no clear indication is given as to the identity of the person who can or could be responsible for pov 1—although the accurate identification of the source might not be cardinal for one in order to understand the challenge in the statement. This fact of non-identification of the discursive being is typical in negation and can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy that allows the speaker to highlight a controversy without necessarily identifying who is behind it (Gjerstad 2011, 103).

Nonetheless, when one considers the context using the *praxématique*, one can view this statement as an example of a discursive dialogism. It consists of Biya (pov 2) responding to some still unidentified speaker(s) who is responsible for pov 1, and represents the view that is often held by those who are sceptical about human contribution to climate change. From a rhetorical perspective, therefore, this seems to be done by Biya simply to emphasise the need for the participants to reach an agreement.

5 “We do *not* have the right to fail.” Biya’s speech is quoted from (Biya 2015). Translations are my own.

Less explicit, yet relevant to the identification of polyphony in a statement, is the phenomenon of presupposition:

(2) Le Cameroun, faible émetteur de gaz à effet de serre, entend *poursuivre* sa contribution à leur réduction.⁶

The presupposition lies in the verb *poursuivre* in the above statement. Its semantic instructions inform us of a process which has already begun, which is going on and which is to continue. The polyphony here seems to be based on three pov as follows:

pov₁: Cameroon has contributed to the reduction of the greenhouse gases.

pov₂: Cameroon is currently contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gases.

pov₃: Cameroon will contribute to the reduction of the greenhouse gases.

This strategy often leads to a positive portrayal of the role the speaker and his country, in this case, have been playing in relation to the issue discussed (Fløttum & Gjerstad 2013, 425). By employing this strategy, Biya seems to present his actions and those of his country as an example of a country that respects its commitments. One can add, based on textual elements, that he prefigures already that his country will respect any binding measures if that is the world's decision, as he himself makes the proposal of in this same speech.

Example (2) can be said to be complex due to the multiplicity of polyphonic markers in it. In fact, the incised apposition “faible émetteur de gaz à effet de serre”⁷ seems to be in contrast with the rest of the sentence. In other words, there seems to be an underlying *but—mais* in French. Though the polyphonic effect seems to arise from interpretation in this case, the following organisation can be proposed, based on the scheme that the ScaPoLine proposes for the analysis of *mais* (Nølke, Fløttum, and Norén 2004, 92):

6 “Cameroon, a low emitter of greenhouse gases, intends to *continue* its contribution to their reduction.”

7 “low emitter of greenhouse gases”

pov₁: A low emitter of greenhouse gases should/can stop its contribution in their reduction.

pov₂: Cameroon is a low emitter.

The awaited conclusion could then have been:

pov₃: Therefore, it can stop its contribution to their reduction.

However, Biya chooses the opposite to this logically-expected conclusion and states, implicitly:

pov₄: [Cameroon] will continue its contribution to their reduction.

By choosing this strategy, which is grounded on polyphony, Biya seems to indicate to Cameroon's partners in the negotiations that it could have logically stopped its efforts to reduce greenhouse gases as its production of them is currently low compared to that of some of the partners. But the country chooses to continue its efforts as a sign of good will and determination in the fight against climate change.

In addition, in some statements, one needs to associate the semantic instruction of the words with the context in order to decipher their polyphonic nature. This is the case with the following statement:

(3) *Deux sujets interpellent la COP21.*⁸

In this statement, Biya reduces the number of concerns that should be the topics for the debates in the COP21. While one can learn from the context that the topics of discussions were more diverse in nature and numerous, Biya's speech wishes them to be: (1) the destruction of the forests in Central Africa and (2) the fact that Lake Chad is drying up. Thus, the following voices can be highlighted:

pov₁: The COP21 is concerned with many topics.

pov₂: pov 1 is not valid.

pov₃: There are only two concerns in the COP21.

8 "The COP21 has two concerns."

Biya seems to invalidate the pov_1 , which could be understood as originating with the organisers of the COP21 summit. Having done this, he can now raise the concerns that matter the most to him. This should not be viewed as a dismissal of the other concerns, but rather as an attempt to put the interests of Africa, and particularly those of his country, first; the fact that Lake Chad is drying up and the destruction of the forests in the Congo Basin directly affect the inhabitants of the North and the South of his country respectively.

Modal expressions in utterances often evoke some voice(s) underlying that of the speaker. The following statements can offer insight into how polyphony is organised based on the modal verb form “*devons*” in French.

(4) NOUS *DEVONS* SAUVER LES FORETS DU BASSIN DU CONGO.⁹

(5) NOUS *DEVONS* SAUVER LE SECOND POUMON DE LA PLANETE.¹⁰

These two utterances express the same idea. The French modal *devoir* may correspond to the English *must*. In both of the utterances, it seems to express the view that this is a duty, hence its deontic significance. The polyphony here rests on the fact that, before something is considered to be a *must*, it needs to have been previously validated as possible; that is, it is likely to occur (Kronning 2001; Barbet 2012).

Furthermore, Kronning (1996, 19) highlights the polysemous nature of this modal and goes on to stress that this polysemy lies in its ability to express a deontic, an epistemic and an alethic meaning, all at the same time (Kronning 1996, 256). Based on this assumption, the following polyphonic configuration emerges for (4):

pov_1 : It is possible to save the forests in the Congo Basin.

pov_2 : It is necessary to save the forests in the Congo Basin.

pov_3 : It is a *must* to save the forests in the Congo Basin.

9 “We *must* save the forests of the Congo Basin”

10 “We *must* save the world’s second lung.”

By calling upon his audience to take action in order to save the forests in the Congo Basin, Biya needs to have first assessed this action and concluded that it is possible to carry it out. He then proceeds by suggesting it as a necessity. He ends by presenting it as a must, an obligation.

However, taking into account the communicative setting of the diplomatic meeting that was described earlier, one does not expect the president of Cameroon to present such a reality as obligatory for his partners. This narrows the polysemy of this modal, therefore, to the expression of a possibility and of an absolute necessity (Kronning 1996, 256). The aim here seems to be the mobilisation of his partners to join his efforts in a bid to protect these two vital places.

The expressions of consequence can also conceal some polyphony, depending on the way they are structured. Some of the common devices that usually introduce other voices include *as such* and *so*, as can be seen in the statement below:

(6) Nous sommes là pour répondre aux attentes et aux espoirs de nos peuples. *Alors*, faisons preuve de détermination et de courage politique.¹¹

The French *alors* (6) may correspond to the English *then*. It is used at the beginning of a sentence which is supposed to be a conclusion/consequence to an argument that started in the preceding sentence(s) as (6) can illustrate. This results in the following polyphonic organisation:

pov₁: Whenever one is called upon to respond to the needs and hopes of their people, one should demonstrate some sense of commitment and political courage.

pov₂: We are here to respond to the needs and hopes of our peoples.

pov₃: *As such*, we should demonstrate some sense of commitment and political courage.

Pov₁ belongs to common sense, that is what both interlocutors—Biya and the audience/his partners—hold to be true. Biya states this as a general fact, and then proceeds by introducing the present situation, the COP21,

11 “We are here to respond to the needs and hopes of our peoples. *As such*, we should demonstrate some sense of commitment and political courage.”

as a typical example of such cases (pov_2). The conclusion should therefore be logical (pov_3). This strategy is commonly used in scientific papers, and the aim is not only to demonstrate but also to persuade the reader or the audience that something is true. Biya employs it for the second purpose. He seeks to persuade his partners in the ongoing negotiations that they have the responsibility to be politically courageous in an effort to meet their respective peoples' needs and hopes, which seem to correspond to the protection of the environment. He seems to use the argument related to the populations as a strong argument to persuade his interlocutors, most of whom represent their respective populations, of the necessity to respect their needs. By these needs, he seems to mean the reaching of an agreement on the measures that ought to be taken in order to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

By the same token, some syntactic structures aimed at expressing conditions are said to have a polyphonic nature, as they also contain, in addition to the speaker's voice, that or those of some other entities. The commonly used word to express a condition is *if*, whose French equivalent is *si*.

(7) *Si nous y parvenons, la conférence de Paris sera ce moment décisif que le monde, dans sa quête pour la survie de l'humanité, appelle de tous ses vœux.*¹²

Kronning makes a distinction between three categories of conditionals based on the likelihood that their content will occur or not.¹³ Such conditional sentences as (7) are those Kronning (2009, 98) refers to as “content conditionals”; that is, those whose content is genuine, likely to occur. One of their key characteristics is the tenses of their verbs: simple present (q) and future (p). There is a hypothetical relationship, R , between the semantic content of p and q , the two sections of the conditional sentence. As such, the structures with the form “*if P, Q*” require both segments to be true first. Kronning concludes that such conditionals have two points of view: the first simply states the utterance, while the second expresses some epistemic attitude about the relationship between p and

12 “If we make it, the Paris Conference will have been that crucial occasion that the world has been expecting in its quest for the survival of humanity.”

13 For more details on the other categories, see Kronning (2009)

q. Let us consider that *p*= la conférence de Paris sera ce moment décisif que le monde, [...], appelle de tous ses vœux; and *q*= Si nous y parvenons. The relation between these two is known as *R* (= probable). The speaker is responsible for this epistemic attitude, which is positive in this case. The following polyphonic configuration results:

pov₁¹⁴ : TRUE (R (*p*, *q*))
 pov₂ : TRUE (POSSIBLE (*p*)) & TRUE (POSSIBLE (*q*))

Moreover, when the communicative intention of the speaker, which is to persuade his interlocutor(s), is taken into account, this same structure seems to follow the organisation previously encountered in (6) with three pov. When the linguistic and the context-based instruction are combined, the following final configuration can be suggested:

pov₁ : POSSIBLE (we make it (_{*p*})) & POSSIBLE (the Paris Conference will have been that crucial occasion that the world has been expecting in its quest for the survival of humanity (_{*q*}))
 pov₂ : TRUE (R (*p*, *q*))
 pov₃ : (TOP (if *p*, *q*))

One can conclude that the epistemic attitude (positive) precedes the relationship *R* between *p* and *q*, because we can infer that this relation is positive and likely to occur because the speaker has previously judged the two sections individually to be valid. Once this is done, he goes further to assert that there is a relationship, *R*, between the two. It is this final assertion that opens up the possibility for the interlocutor(s) to join him and conclude that the Paris Conference will really have been that crucial event that the world has been awaiting in its quest for the survival of humanity.

Biya is again calling upon the individual responsibility of his interlocutors, mostly his colleagues, to make the Paris Conference a successful encounter. It seems to him that this success will guarantee that more sustainable measures are taken to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, which constitute one of the main causes of climate change.

14 Kronning uses the terms Voice (a) for pov₁ and Voice (b) for pov₂.

4. *Closing remarks*

This paper offered two major challenges: a theoretical one and an empirical one. I have tried to develop a discursive approach that relies only on the ScaPoLine and the *praxématique* theories, based on the features that the two approaches can share. The analysis undertaken shows that it is possible to combine a purely linguistic approach with one that includes contextual devices, in order to identify the polyphonic phenomena in a speech and propose an interpretation close to the reality of the events. Throughout the analyses, I have shown how polemic negation, presupposition, modal expression, consequence and condition, which are linguistic devices that function as polyphonic markers, could support a particular interpretation. The addition of contextual elements provides a better view of their polyphonic potential. For instance, it is evident that the context may limit the polysemy which is inherent to the modal *must*. Moreover, the context was useful in identifying the rhetorical function of the polyphonic excerpts analysed. In fact, multi-voicedness can be used for rhetorical and pragmatic purposes; for example, to persuade one's audience (modal expression), to raise their awareness by calling upon their individual conscience and responsibility (consequence), and to present oneself as a good example (presupposition).

In addition, the use of interdiscursive dialogism, which relies essentially on the context, can be helpful in understanding the overall aim of a speech from a rhetorical perspective. In this case, for example, Biya employs interdiscursive dialogism in an effort to ensure that the interests of his country are among the topics to be discussed during the negotiations.

Context is relevant, therefore, in the polyphonic analyses, in the sense that it takes one from a purely theoretical linguistic level, to one which is more empirical. The researcher no longer deals solely with virtual images of the speaker, but moves gradually to the real-life entities that are responsible for the various opinions and proposals. It enables researchers to deal with life itself; the use of the climate debate is there to reinforce this idea. Climate (change) is not virtual, it is a reality people struggle with in different parts of the world.

Finally, the polyphonic analysis of this speech reveals that Biya is willing to fight against climate change through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. His audience learns that greenhouse gas emissions are low in his country, although they do occur. In spite of that, Cameroon has

been involved in this mitigation project, and it is currently active and will continue its efforts in this sense. Moreover, Biya uses interdiscursive dialogism to focus the attention of his interlocutors on what matters to him: the destruction of the Congo Basin forests and the fact that Lake Chad is drying up. Furthermore, the overall attitude of Biya in this speech reveals a quest for consensus that would lead to more binding measures to limit the greenhouse gas emissions. All of the polyphonic strategies that he uses seem to be directed towards the conclusion that the fight against climate change is not something that can be done successfully while alone; it is a global fight.

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