The Role of Language in Negotiating Power in Sudan

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Background

• This paper examines the role of language in power negotiation between Sudanese Arabs and Africanists from a critical discourse analysis perspective (henceforth CDA) in the hope to draw the attention of the Sudanese people to the fact that extreme political discourse can jeopardize national unity. The paper begins with summarizing the basic tenets of the CDA theory and proceeds to examine Sudanese power-related discourse accordingly. Particularly, the paper assumes both top-down and bottom-up approaches to examine the discourses corresponding to these two ethnicities.
The top-down approach examines the discourse of the ruling Arab elites who have exclusive access to institutional discourse and communication. By contrast, although the Africanist discourse was formerly considered illegal and could not, therefore, be conveyed through public discourse and communication institutions, it has recently been released through the internet and TV channels. A number of socio-political groups, generally referred to as marginalized affiliations, are now initiating resistance discourse that goes hand in hand with their armed struggle against the ruling elites.
• Sudan is a multi-affiliated country. On the one hand, it is an African country by virtue of geography, population skin colour and many indigenous Sudanese languages. On the other hand, a variety of linguistic, religious, and political facts classify it as an Arabian country; viz. immigration of Arabs to Sudan approximately between 10\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries (cf. Miller and Abu Manga 1992: 9) had two consequences that were and still shaping the Sudanese identity.
• First, Arabic has become the official language of the country though a great deal of Sudanese people do not speak it natively. In fact, some members of many Sudanese ethnic groups monolingually speak Sudanese languages as many others use Arabic as a lingua franca. Second, due to the historical association between the Arabs and the Islamic religion, Islam has been politically prescribed as the official religion of the country; thus adding a religious dimension to the Sudanese identity despite a number of dissenting voices.
The Islamic junta, which took over in 1989, adopted extreme procedures in imposing an Islamic ruling system and imposing Arabic as the only language of instruction in the higher education institutions. Other things being equal, these procedures have reinforced the Arabist discourse that have been holding sway since the independence of Sudan from the Anglo-Egyptian rule.
Part of the Sudanese political unrest since independence in 1956 seems to have been given rise by the dispute over its identity. For ever since Sudan became an independent country, the ruling elites, who were and still descendants of Arab immigrants, have chosen to identify it with the Arab world. They took the Sudanese Arab identity for granted, paying no attention to the fact that for the majority of the Sudanese ethnic groups Africanism is more relevant to their identity than Arabism- except if the politically motivated Arabization and Arabicization were conceived to settle the Sudanese identity problem.
• The best known diagnosis of the Sudanese identity crisis is widely reported in connection with an African scholar who was reported saying: "Sudan could have become the best African country, but it chose to be the worst Arab country". All in all, the Sudanese identity dispute can be argued to have presented the country to the outside world either as a pure Arab country or as a pure African country due to the huge literature that has been released by the competing groups.
• This paper will attempt an examination of how language was and still employed in negotiating power by these competing groups. Reference will particularly be made to two domains: politics and education for the central role they have been playing in the power mechanism ever since Sudanism was in the making in the 19th century
This paper is subsumed under the CDA theory. The relevant literature seems to show that different scholars investigate this same subject-matter using different terms. It is suffice to quote three authorities to show that this is so. Van Dijk consistently uses the term “CDA” in his published works. Fairclough (1989: 1), on the other hand, uses the term “critical language study” (abbreviated as CLS) – though he also used the term “CDA” in a later publication, i.e. Fairclough (1995). Waddak (1989), as quoted in Dellinger (1995), uses the term “critical linguistics”. 
Basic Concepts

• **Discourse Analysis**: A form of language use beyond the sentence level. Put simply: it is text and talk.

• **Critical Discourse Analysis**: accounts for the relationship between discourse and social power. More specifically, such an analysis should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimimized by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions.
• **Power**: “social power is based on privileged access to socially valued resources such as wealth, income, position, status, force, group membership, education or knowledge”

• **Dominance**: “exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups that result in social inequality”
• Other things being equal, what these scholars have in common is adopting an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of language whereby linguistics, psychology, sociology and politics are on an equal footing. However, some language researchers might wish to argue that language that was once made an independent area of enquiry by the structural linguists at the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. Crystal 1973) lost that hard won “independent status” toward the end of the same century due to the advent of the CDA theory.
The three scholars reported above give similar definitions of the subject-matter that they term differently. Van Dijk’s CDA rests, *interalia*, on such concepts as ‘power’, ‘dominance’ and ‘access’. Fairclough’s CLS centres upon ‘connection between language and unequal relations of power’, while Wadak’s “critical linguistics” subsumes three concepts: “language”, “power” and “ideology”. Apparently, then, the differences between these approaches to the study area remain to be terminological in nature.
• However, due to the popularity of the term CDA in the literature, it will be the one adopted by this paper. Now since the concepts “language” and “power” seem to lie at the heart of the relevant literature, it would be appropriate to examine how CDA scholars account for the relationship between them.
To begin with, Fairclough (1989:3) argues that ‘... nobody who is interested in relationship between politics and power in modern society can afford to ignore language’. The fact that this is so, the arguments goes, stems from the contribution of language ‘... to the domination of some people by others’. Further explanation of how this domination works can be given with reference to Van Dijk (1993). Talking about “power”, “dominance” and “access”, Van Dijk maintains that “social power is based on privileged access to socially valued resources such as wealth, income, position, status, force, group membership, education or knowledge” (p. 250).
As such power is conceived of as “control”, which Van Dijk subcategorizes into “action”, i.e. ‘limitation of a group power by another group’ and “cognition”, i.e. ‘influence on a group’s minds’ (p. 254). Exercise of “social power” is what Van Dijk refers to as “dominance”. He associates “dominance” with ‘elites, institutions or groups’ (p.249-250). So when elites or institutions exercise power, ‘social inequality results’ (ibid).
• Both “power” and dominance are measured by “access” (p. 257). Thus where dominating groups are concerned, Van Dijk argues that they have ‘access to discourse and communication’. By contrast, dominated groups are characterized by ‘lack of active access to discourse. At best, the latter group ‘have access to bureaucrats in public agencies ... as in the case of letters to the editor ... shouting slogans in demonstrations...’, (p. 254) – these can, of course, be overlooked by dominating groups.
Following Van Dijk’s taxonomy of power relations (p.250), CDA studies can be conducted along either top-down or bottom-up schemata. As such, top-down studies centre upon “dominance” relations. By contrast, bottom-up studies deal with “resistance” relations. However, it can be argued that since resistance relations are associated with passive access to discourse and communication, they hardly provide significant (written) data for CDA research compared to “dominance” relations. In fact, in many parts of the world “resistance” relations tend to result in armed struggle, e.g. the Irish Republic Army (IRA) in Great Britain, the People’s Republic Liberation Army (SPLA) in Sudan, etc. Although these military organizations have political wings that produce “text” and “talk” to go hand in hand with military action, governments consider them illegitimate and, therefore, deny them access to public institutions of discourse and communication.
Arabist Discourse in Sudan

• Despite the political division of Sudan into twenty-six states, Sudanese people implicitly conceive of the country as consisting of five regions: the Central Region, the Northern Region, the Eastern Region, the Southern Region and the Western Region. As to Sudan’s ethnic structure, the first two regions are dominated by Arab groups, except for the far North where Nubians constitute the absolute majority of the population
• The Eastern and Western Regions are populated by African and Arab groups with no statistical figures to show domination of a given group over the other. However, two claims can be made about the ethnic structure of these two regions. First, the Eastern region has historically been associated with Beja tribes whose African origin is undisputable. Second, The far western part of the country is named after the well-known Fur tribe, which is an indigenous African tribe. As to the Southern region, it exclusively dominated by a number of African tribes.
• Where power structure is concerned, people inhabiting the Cenorthern regions (who were historically associated with the Anglo-Egyptian rule 1898-1956) greatly benefited from the educational and economic opportunities at that time, which finally qualified them to rule the country after independence. Thus, in an attempt to restrict this inherited power to the elites descending from these regions, huge prejudiced discourse has been produced in the manner stated above.
This paper draws on the assumption that because power has been accessible to the Sudanese Arabs since the independence from the Anglo-Egyptian rule, the dominant power-related discourse has been formulated in such a way as to confirm the superiority of the ruling elites and the relevant affiliations whose interests they have been safe-guarding. In addition, this prejudiced discourse has been intended to stereotype all non-Arabs and the Sudanese Arabs other than those coming from Central and Northern (henceforth Cenorthern) Sudan as inferior and primitive and are, therefore, denied access to power even in regions they dominate.
• By contrast, such discourse has been resisted by the latter groups both linguistically and through armed struggle. The paper also assumes that prejudiced, power-related discourse stems from racial, regional and religious preconception about the other, which is institutionalized and exploited by the ruling elites to achieve political interests; viz. eternal access to power. The paper will investigate these assumptions in connection with two power-related domains: politics and education.
Politics

• Ever since Sudan became an independent country, the ruling institutions, whether military or civil, have been led by people who were and still from the Cenorthern regions. These institutions have been labeled as “national” such as “National Unionist Party”, “Umma National Party”, “National Islamic Front”, “National Congress”, etc. Of course, these political institutions included members from other parts of Sudan. However, the folkloric effect that the latters have been intended to add has persuaded some of them to form new institutions to defend the interests of their constituencies. Because the new institutions are assumed to detract from the power of the old ones, they are readily reduced to “racial” or at best “regional” affiliations.
• The same classification also applies to coups. Viz. all coups led by officers from Cenorthern Sudan were called ‘national revolutions’ or ‘people’s revolutions’. For instance, General Numeiri’s coup in May 1969 was repeatedly referred to as ‘people’s revolution’. Likewise, General Omer Al-Bashir’s coup in June 1989 was named ‘National Salvation Revolution’. Both juntas suffered a series of coup attempts some of which were led by officers from Southern and Western Sudan.
To mention but some: Hassan Hussein (Western Sudan) coup attempt in 1976 and Dr. Lama Akol (southern Sudan) coup attempt in 1985. The same racial classification was never applied to the coups led by officers from Cenorthern Sudan in 1971 against General Numeiri and in 1989 against General Al-Bashir. Moreover, in 1976 the opposition to General Numeiri’s government based in Libya invaded Khartoum. Because the bulk of the invading troops were (black) people from Western Sudan, it was easy for General Numeiri to use a racist discourse to mobilize Cenortherners against the invaders. That event is still documented as the ‘mercenaries’ invasion’.
• Apparently, such official political discourse emanates from public prejudice against people from regions other than the Cenorthern ones. Reference can particularly be made to the prejudice against people from Western Sudan (who are mainly African or black Arabs). The Mahdist revolution in the nineteenth century imposed a reality whereby people from Western were and still conceived as terrorists. This reality is still shaping the Sudanese political and social life.
Hureiz (1975) contributed an article to a publication produced by the University of Khartoum that, under normal circumstances, could have incriminated him. In other words, his article could have been considered an act of arousing hatred and jeopardizing public safety if it had been written by a person with an African background. Part of the folk poetry he analyzed was the following stanza which he translated as:

• They are notorious people who came to us from the West.
• They brought destruction and drove us from out homes.
• We were of noble decent, but they treated us like dogs.
• O father Negus, O English men hurry up to our rescue.
Hureiz justifies this public insult to people from Western Sudan by claiming that “the Mahdi’s successor (who belonged to a tribe from Western Sudan) became a sort of military despot”. But it is a fact that Cenorthern writers hardly explain why the Mahdi’s successor “became a sort of military despot”! These writers have absolute access to the official media to spread their prejudiced discourse against all non-Cenorthern Sudanese people in general and Western Sudan people in particular. As such they have always been accusing people of Western Sudan of brutality while being absolutely silent on their share in the conflict.
Education

• It was natural that Cenorthern Sudan population most benefited from the educational opportunities offered by the Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule due to the establishment of colonial headquarters on lands they dominated. Following the downfall of the Mahdist State in 1898, Gordon Memorial College was established in 1902 to commemorate the death of General Gordon (a British governor of Sudan employed by the Turco-Egyptian colonial rule to eliminate the Mahdist national revolution but was killed by the Mahdist army) and to provide the new colonial government with local underpaid employees. Therefore, Cenorthern elites could not be blamed for the foundation of educational institutions by the colonial rule in the parts of Sudan they inhabited. It was also natural that these same elites had advantage over Sudanese population in other regions with respect to their legacy of the independent national government in 1956.
However, domination of the Sudanese political life by the afore-mentioned elites was eternalized through, *inter alia*, education. Viz. school curriculum has been accumulated with educational materials that tend to glorify these same elites historically, regionally, socially, racially and intellectually. The only criterion that seems to have been applied to select educational materials was and still race. Viz. course materials emphasise one central theme: the Arab origin of Sudan. Therefore, any such material, no matter how insignificant, has found its way into the school curriculum. This is particularly true where the geography and history of Sudan are concerned.
As for geography, curriculum developers seem to have been consistently overlooking the fact that Sudan is located in Africa. Thus, apart from pointing out that Sudan shares “noisy” borders with six African countries, Africa has been intentionally absented from the Sudanese geography curriculum. By contrast, Arab geography has been richly presented in the same curriculum. Every detail of the Arab world has been accumulated in the Sudanese school textbooks. Thus, all graduates of Sudanese schools are knowledgeable about all types of geographical information regarding the Arab world: regions, cities, rivers, hills, deserts, seas, number of population, political systems, economies, etc.
• On the other hand, Sudanese history curriculum glorifies events associated with Sudanese Arabs even when these were minor ones. For example, there is no Sudanese school graduate who was not taught about an Arab woman called “Muheira” who accompanied tribal fighters in resistance of the Turco-Egyptian army invading their lands in 1820. Her tribesmen finally surrendered and supported the invading army in its onward marsh to subjugate the country to the new colonial rule but they are still conceived as “national heroes” despite their cooperation with the invaders. Now Sudanese women are referred to as “Muheira’s daughters” to show their noble origin.
• A neighbouring Arab tribe took the leader of the invading army aback, killed him, and fled the country for good. Now a main road in the capital of the country is named after the head of this tribe while the remaining members of the tribe are stereotyped as the “bravest” Sudanese men. Sudanese history and, therefore, school history curriculum barely mentions more epoch-making historical events that were associated with such parts of the country as the Southern and Western Regions. School curriculum was silent on the Southern resistance to the Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule. Similar events took place in Western Sudan (e.g. Suheini revolution against Anglo-Egyptian rule in Nyala, Southern Darfur)
But since Sudanese history authorities were and still Cenorthern elites, they chose to overshadow the contribution of these regions to the history of Sudan. Admittedly, this act casts doubt on the reliability of the criteria that were applied in choosing what to appear in the Sudanese historical records.
Dr. Abdullah Al-Tayeb, a well-known and late Professor Emeritus at the University of Khartoum, delivered a lecture in 1998 on “Sudanism”. The objective of the lecture was to give a linguistic exploration of the term alongside the political events that were associated with it. His exploration ranged between early Nubian Kingdoms to the present day Sudan. Despite the fact that the Mahdist State was the first attempt to shape modern Sudan, the lecturer chose to overlook it.
• Presumably, it was because the vast majority of the Mahdist State supporters were from Western Sudan. The victorious support that they gave to the Mahdist revolution against the Turco-Egyptian rule of Sudan persuaded the revolution leader Muhammad Ahmad Al-Mahdi to choose one of them to be his successor; viz. Abdullah Al-Ta’aishi. This choice aggravated the conflict between Cenorthern and Western Sudan people – a fact which has continued to characterize modern Sudanese political (and social) life.
Africanist discourse

• As mentioned above, Africanist discourse takes the form of resistance discourse that mostly goes hand in hand with armed struggle against the ruling elites in Khartoum. Only recently has the discourse of marginalization found its way to media. Thanks to the information revolution that made it possible for marginalized Sudanese affiliations to bring this issue under focus and discussion. Generally speaking, it is a protesting discourse presented by some enlightened elites from the remote corners of Sudan against what they believe to be monopolization of power and wealth by the center.
It is generally believed that the marginal parts of Sudan are deprived of access to wealth and power. A decade ago, it was taboo to talk about concerns of villages and dwellers of remote areas over developing their homelands and seeking equitable share in how the country should be ruled. Nowadays, the Sudanese living abroad whether from Southern Sudan, Darfur, the far north or the far east can easily push their concerns for discussion in Sudanese online, in electronic newspapers and TV channels. Surely these media are watched by various viewers and spectators who may be sympathetic, antagonistic, or neutral to the such a discourse; yet it will inevitably increase the solidarity of the Sudanese over the significance of negotiating these debatable issues.
The revolutions or uprisings, as named by those carrying arms as a means to achieve their goals in power and wealth sharing or (rebels, outlaws, or bandits) as named by the central government, also contributed to bringing marginalization discourse into the surface of concern both at the national and the international levels. The methods used by these movements in attacking the central government in the towns and cities of Sudan created a new discourse of a protesting tone backed by military operations or mostly gorilla attacks.
• The Spokespersons of these movements appear on TV channels after every battle to claim victory or to refute government's allegations. The viewers find themselves apt to view both versions to reach a balanced overview of the news. In conclusion, this type of discourse is still in the making. Thus, more sociolinguistic research is needed to identify its linguistic features.
Conclusion

• This paper has been an attempt to shed light on the use of language in negotiating power between Sudanese ethnic institutions. It has particularly examined the discourse of the powerful Arab elites who descended from Sudanese Cenorthern regions. The paper has argued that these elites’ access to power and communication resulted from their association with the Anglo-Egyptian colonial institutions, viz. the establishment of colonial headquarters and educational institutions in Cenorthern Sudan gave the descendents from these regions incomparable advantage over the descendents of the other Sudanese regions.
• Thus, in attempt to eternalize their dominance over the whole country, Cenorthern elites released huge literature that pictured other Sudanese people as unsophisticated, uneducated and unqualified for access to power. Only recently that this domination discourse has been resisted by people of African origin both linguistically and through armed struggle. Since the latter discourse is still in the making, further research is needed to identify its linguistic features.
Thank you