Public sphere, linguistic sphericules and discourse communities in Africa

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1. Introduction

In his much commented book, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas describes the public sphere (PS) as an open domain of free conversation directed toward pragmatic agreement, and characterises it on the basis of two variables: the state, and the private community of citizens engaged in public deliberation, conceived in terms of a basically discursive activity, with the aim of influencing the action of the state. Discourse is considered as essential for the participation of the citizenry in the public debate which, crucially, is supposed to take place in a society that happens to be homogeneous from the point of view of language. Agreement obtains exclusively through argumentation and may be reached not only on (what may be) matters of common or public concern but also on the way to deal with them. The main aim of this paper is to discuss the relevance of language and discourse in a genuinely multilingual context as is sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth Africa) based on the impact that language diversity may have on the dynamics typical of the public space and its relation with the African state.

We intend to show that whereas linguistic practices evidence abundant and multifarious cases of code-switching and code-mixing, the discursive practices and, more generally, the complex dynamics that characterize the public debate in this context are determined by sociolinguistic factors such as ‘elite closure’ and language and register choice. Language diversity thus breaks up the public space into multiple smaller groups, the two most important of which are distributed along the divide between the European and the African languages spoken in each country. The first of such particularist groups, or sphericules in the sense of Gitling (1998), is constructed around the variety of the European language spoken in the country. The second, associated with African languages, has to do primarily with discursive and rhetorical strategies which are typical of the traditional realm. Each of these sphericules excludes those individuals who supposedly lack competence in the language or the register required and, moreover constitutes a discourse community, i.e. a set of individuals whose discursive practices reveal interests, goals, beliefs, and, above all, rhetorical strategies that are common and exclusive to its members.

Two groups of speakers are kept invisible in the resulting public space: those individuals whose linguistic code is a mix of existing languages, and the members of the subordinate sphericule (whose repertoires are limited to African languages). We argue in this respect that the visibility of such groups, necessary in any inclusive PS, requires the openness of the public space to diverse types of messages, independently of the way they materialize. One interesting consequence of the discussion is the disempowering of the (European)
languages in the African public space, which to some extent may favour ‘linguistic convergence’ in the context of public discussion.

Language diversity has thus the effect of adding a great deal of complexity and tension to the interaction of the PS and the state, besides accounting for linguistic and/or rhetorical strategies, commonly observed in public discussion within our context, which tend to blur all that may be considered proper to argumentation, as much as they lend authority and even power to the individuals who use them. From this point of view, language plays a complex and crucial role in relation to the African public space. On the one hand, it is a matter of concern for all citizens as well as for the state. On the other hand, and more generally, it is one of the vectors of the socio-political dynamics subsumed in the PS, since it is difficult to imagine the argumentative interaction without language. Furthermore, a linguistic PS may be seen as a metaphor for such dynamics: a site which reflects the tensions and contradictions which characterize the socio-political landscape typical of the African states and the African PS in general.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2 we intend to contextualise the public sphere, by discussing some important differences between the PS as it has evolved in Europe and the public space typical of the African context. Section 3 focuses on the linguistic (dimension of the) public sphere and the internal organization and dynamics that characterize it in the African context. The fourth section deals with the discourse communities and their communicative practices, as well as the impact they have on the socio-political processes characteristically observed in Africa. Lastly, in section 5, we conclude by underlining the relevance of the communicative strategies adopted by the masses for their own empowerment as well as for the emergence of a PS in the African context in general before we briefly discuss the role of the state with respect to the effects of such strategies both on public discourse and argumentation, besides communication in general.

2. Contextualising the public sphere

As described by Habermas, the PS originally associated with the emergence of a new social class whose existence would suppose radical changes in the structure of the society and its relations with the state in the European context. In general, the most salient features of this social group have essentially to do with its internal composition, its aims and activities and the way it carries them out as well as its relationship with the state and society in general. Accordingly, the topography of the PS results from the complex (and often inconsistent)
overlapping of the spaces partially associated with these features. In this section we will
discuss some of such features with reference to the European and the African context.

2.1. The relevance of affluence and literacy in the constitution of the PS

The PS was originally constituted as a discussion group in which dialogue and
argumentation prevailed. Habermas (1989: 36) describes it as a space within which status was
disregarded altogether, areas that until then had not been questioned were problematized, and
“the issues discussed became “general” not merely in their significance, but also in their
accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate”. The relevance of argument, dialogue and
agreement for the functioning of the PS suggests that it was an open space in whose activities
any human endowed with reason could participate. In practice, however, only individuals
pertaining to two apparently different social strata composed the original PS. In effect, many
types of requisite, including affluence and literacy, constrained such a space, as they
determined who could be a member of this group. According to Habermas (1989: 85)

“[…] education was the one criterion for admission –property ownership the
other. De facto both criteria demarcated largely the same circle of persons; for formal
education at that time was more a consequence than a precondition of social status. Which
in turn was primarily determined by one’s title to property. The educated strata
were also the property owning ones”.

Thus, although the PS was accessible in principle to every citizen, given the centrality
of reason and the irrelevance of (social) status, in practice it was a very exclusive community.
Moreover, as underlined by Habermas, the sets of individuals that were part of that
community were largely coincident, at least at the time of the emergence of the PS, when “the
educated strata were also the property owning ones”. Social status had not lost all of its
relevance, but affluence and education appeared to be more intimately related to the new
social class. In this sense, the original European PS was largely constituted by literates,
bourgeois traders -literate or not- and only marginally by nobles.

The complexities of the socio-political dynamics that are typical of the African
countries make the PS much more difficult to characterise in this context. The emergence of
the modern African states supposed the superposition of a traditional and a modern realms
associated, respectively, with ethnical groups and the state. Africa, as described by Ekeh
(1975, quoted in Joseph (1999)), presents two publics: “one derived from the colonial superstructure and the other from a “deeper” African communal structure”. With respect to the latter, Joseph (1999: 241) underlines that “the participatory and communal elements that were central features of Athenian democracy are also constitutive elements of many African societies”. The markedly deliberative tendency of the PS in the traditional African realm is reflected still more clearly in Nyerere’s notion that African democracy rests on individuals “talking until they agree”.

What does not seem so clear is the medium through which agreement was reached in the context of a PS accessible to all, whether argument or authority or power, once mechanical majority and representation were deemed irrelevant. As for the colonial superstructure and the state that has resulted from it, it is intimately related to the emergence of new social strata which, also, have to do with education and affluence, and whose existence has supposed radical changes in society. The topological differences discussed below explain some of the disparities observed between these two public spaces.

The first of such differences has to do with the bourgeoisie as a social class. Whereas the changes related to the African modern state owe nothing to an African bourgeoisie, inexistent at the time of its emergence, the existence of the PS is difficult and even impossible to imagine in absence of the bourgeoisie in Europe. This fact accounts for the relevance of literacy in modern Africa where, clearly, it has been a precondition to social status and affluence. We thus observe a radical transformation of the society, as individuals are differentiated on the basis of an exogenous language and of written competence in that language: one is literate before he can pretend any change in her social status. The second difference is relative to language. In effect, the linguistic diversity which characterizes African states eludes the idealized communicative community on which Habermas’ reflections are based, and adds a great lot of complexity to the interaction of the PS and the state. In each country many endogenous languages compete with different varieties of exogenous languages and with codes that result from the mixture of the former. In this sense, language may hinder the access to the PS, in addition to barriers such as literacy, sex and affluence that also prevailed in Europe. Because of its very specific relevance in the African context, language appears to be, along with literacy as we will see, a crucial variable for the

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1 The characterization offered by Nyerere is consistent with the idea of a political system characterized by “a commitment to the resolution of problems of public choice through public reasoning”, which is discussed in section 4 below; cf. Cohen, (1989) and Schmitter and Karl (1991), quoted in Joseph (1999) and, more recently Newman (2005a, b), Ejobowah (2001), and Roberts & Crossley (2004).

2 According to (Bayart, 2008 [1981]), “Parler de “bourgeoisie nationale” paraît […] prématuré, voire déplacé ”.
emergence of the PS. Other such variables, centred on the relation of the PS with the state and with society in general, are the focus of the next sub-section.

2.2. The PS and socio-political power

Literate individuals in Africa, as bourgeois and educated people in Europe, considered they had a particular status that positioned them above all other citizens. In the European context, they formed a very specific imagined community in the sense of Anderson (1991). In Habermas’ (1989: 37) terms, such a group “did not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps as its educator”. This position allowed them to claim a privileged social status from which they could think and speak in the name of the masses and, by way of consequence, identify their own interests and concerns with those of the citizenry, or ignore the latter altogether, as many discussions of Habermas’ work have shown (cf. Habermas (1989: 87-88), Fraser (1992) and, for recent discussion, Goode (2005)). It is in this sense that one may characterize both groups as “educated and powerful citizens [who] were supposed to form an elite public […] whose critical debate determined public opinion” (Habermas (1989: 137)). This exhausts the commonalities that exist between these two groups, in contrast to the multiple differences observed in their relations with the state and with society in general.

As observed before, the main aim of the political activity of the original PS in Europe was to influence the interaction of the state and civil society. To this end, it had recourse to reason and to argument, that is, to rational-critical public debate, an art which “the bourgeois avant-garde of educated middle class learned […] through its contact with the “elegant world”’” generally associated with nobles’ court (cf. Habermas (1989: 29)). Such an art consisted not only in discursive strategies related to argumentation, even though the outcome of the debate depended exclusively on argument, and agreement was reached through persuasion. It also implied certain specific attitudes on the part of the discussants whose status as members of the PS made them equals. In this way another important feature of the European PS, namely the idea that human beings share a common quality qua humans, made its way first in the private debates on literary and then on political matters. The combined effects of the discursive interaction of the members of the PS and the way the citizens were conceived account to a large extent for the transformations undergone by the PS. One such transformation has to do with representation, and the other with agreement. With reference to

3 […]: social equality was possible at first only as an equality outside the state” (Habermas (1989: 35)).
the latter, Goode (2005) stresses that “unforced consensus [...] associated with the rational-critical debate” have the virtue of transforming the PS into a “site for the organisation of resistance and renewal as much as it is an arena for the mobilisation of domination and legitimation”.

On the other hand, for any interchange to take place a code commonality is necessary. From his point of view, the so-called native language was an object of major preoccupation for all those who were part of the European PS, not only for its centrality in the debate but also because, to a large extent, it mediated the universality of the human condition. This was the case, for instance, with German societies (orders, chambers and academies, among others) which interpreted the native tongue as “the medium of communication and understanding between people in their common quality as human beings and nothing more than human beings” (Habermas (1989: 34)).

Summing up, then, in their attempt to achieve consensus on the basis of persuasion, the members of the original European PS trusted reason, argument and the universality of the human condition or the equality of the citizens, not authority nor coercion. This undoubtedly had the effect of bringing them nearer to a more universal focus in their demands to the state.

The African context consisted in two very dissimilar realms: traditional and modern. Due to these disparities, the access of an individual to formal education implied that on the one hand she acquired spoken (and eventually written) competence in a European language whereas, on the other hand, she distanced herself progressively from the endogenous codes known or available to her. Seen in this light, literacy not only brings power and privilege, it also supposes estrangement from one’s cultural and linguistic community, an inconvenient unknown in the European context. An interesting consequence is that, although educated Africans claimed to be the voice of “those who are not listened to”, they could not represent (at least not as fully as the members of the European PS could do) the masses whose cultural and communicative codes they knew only partially or even superficially. In these circumstances, it would be very difficult for them to identify their concerns and interests with those of the public in general, in case they proceeded in the same way as the European PS.

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4 In this sense Goode stresses that “due to the interests of the social actors implied and their asymmetrical power relations, it is difficult to seek to conceive the public sphere as homogenous, uniform, unidimensional and equitable or to treat it as the arena of unqualified “virtue” vis-à-vis authoritarian states or unrepresentative public authorities”.

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Moreover, in contraposition to what occurred in Europe (where representation was a derived notion), in Africa representation was consubstantial to the status of educated people, in accordance with their claims. Such a notion of representation, based on authority, power and social status stands in contraposition to the ideal of equality of all citizens and to the discursive practices associated with discussion. In a context in which the art of rational-critical debate is neither learned nor cultivated, and representation has nothing to do with peer scrutiny nor with the common interests of the citizenry, the question arises as to whether consensus may be achieved and, in the affirmative case, how agreement obtains.

Turning now more briefly to the relation of these groups with the state, the fact that they are imagined communities does not strip them of the power they may have in correlation with their independence and, therefore, their power. The crucial difference between both groups is that whereas African elites emerged within the apparatus of the modern African state and were primarily state employees, the bourgeois PS “arose historically in conjunction with a society separated from the state” (Habermas (1989: 127)). Moreover, the separation presupposed by the bourgeoisie was such that “the PS, made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered part of the private realm” (pags. 175-176).

The power associated with this position of the European elites accounts for the fact that they “claimed the PS regulated from above against the public authorities themselves” (pag. 27). As Goode (2005: 5) observes,

“[…] struggles over economic production and trade saw an increasingly confident ‘private sphere’ starting to erode the omnipotence of the state. A nascent bourgeoisie was carving out its independence and building a ‘civil society’ based on private commerce”.

Thus, far from depending on the state, European elites defied it, even though the confrontation did occur only when they explicitly and openly assumed political functions, that is, once the PS was consolidated. According to Habermas’ (1989: 35) narrative, such a
“coming together of private people into a public was [...] anticipated in secret, as a public sphere still existing largely behind the closed doors”.5

In contrast, any member of the African elite depended on the state, in the sense that they were necessarily part of its structure, either as a politician, an employee of the administration or both (cf. Bayart 2008 [1981] among others). This, together with the considerable power of the state apparatus in Africa accounts for its tendency to strongly permeate civil society.

2.3. The changing topography of the African public sphere(s)

The European/African-language divide opposes two realms which show important differences in their internal topography and dynamics: the fragmented traditional groups which coexisted in a given place, and the modern state formed by many of such groups. Generally, traditional societies corresponded to small groups of people whose members knew each other and carried their intense interaction through spoken language. In terms of political culture, they tended to adopt specific strategies in the assessment and solution of conflicts, which consisted basically in the so-called palabre. According to Beti & Tobner (1989: 91),

“L’usage de la palabre suppose non seulement l’existence des conflits, assumés en tant que tels, mais l’aménagement millénaire de procédures visant à retarder la décision aussi longtemps que possible afin que le plus grand nombre possible de membres du groupe soient informés des données du débat et puissent y prendre part”.

Supposing that the debate was open to the extent of what Beti & Tobner call “libre parole collective”, one may consider participation and deliberation as the most relevant aspects in the internal dynamics of these groups. However, this does not answer the question about the way in which consensus was reached, since it cannot be inferred on the basis of the dynamics typical of the palabre alone. In so far as the agreement was the outcome of deliberation more than open discussion, decision-making could only result from accommodation. The latter is considered by Appiah (1992: 129 ff.) as an essential feature of traditional societies. It is a “general process [...] necessary for those who are bound to each

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5 “The process in which the state-governed PS was appropriated by the public of private sphere making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority was one of functionally converting the PS in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion” ; (cf. Habermas (1989: 51)).
other as neighbours for life”, and its main effect in conversation is the avoidance of a style that is generally considered aggressive in this context. Convivial strategies tend to prevail in traditional societies, which are typically nonliterate, and accommodate well to orality and figurative language, a language which is heavily indexical, metaphorical and, above all, context-dependent. Crucially, the style avoided in this context involves precisely the strategies that define the internal dynamics of the European PS: to disagree and to argue.

The modern realm opposes the state to civil society and has much more of the imagined communities described by Anderson (1991). The members of civil society divide into two main groups: educated and nonliterate individuals. The former show characteristically variable spoken and written competence in the official language of their country, generally a European language and, also, a variable degree of estrangement with respect to the African languages. The reverse occurs with nonliterate citizens, although an increasing number of them, generally young urban dwellers, tend to use codes that mix European and African languages, or a popular variety of the official European language. This fact does not seem, however, to make any difference between these two groups as far as the deliberative aspects of the PS are concerned. For, educated as well as nonliterate individuals coincide in avoiding the adversarial style which is so characteristic of the European PS, as they consider aggressive to disagree and even to argue. This does not mean that critical debate is absent from the African context. What we wish to underline is that it proceeds in a different fashion and with different effects, as discussions adopt different profiles depending on the context, the matter debated, and/or the other discussant(s). In contrast, the rational dimension has scarce prominence in all types of space but the intellectual milieu, in which recourse is had in principle to reason when dealing with so-called scientific matters. In any case, the binding effect of the debate is not as strong as in Europe, either on the discussants or at the public level in general. It may thus be said that the debate culture delimitates one single space, in contradistinction to the space associated with social status, and to the language divide discussed above.

Leaving aside factors such as sex, class or ethnic group, we thus have different spaces which overlap partially and not always in a consistent fashion. The asymmetry between the discursive sphere and the other kinds of space raises once more the interesting question as to

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6 See Appiah (1992: 130) for an interesting illustration and discussion.
7 Thus, one of the spaces in which debates are most frequent are bars (so-called ‘bistrots’). However, discussions tend to be chaotic from all points of view and passionate, even violent.
how agreement obtains in the African society. This question comes in two parts, the first of which has been answered briefly above. Agreement is reached in part through accommodation, that is, the fact that one of the interlocutors does neither argue nor disagree. However, and this is the second part of the answer, this effect can be obtained only by means of very specific discursive strategies which characteristically are not based on arguments nor, more generally, on reason. Thus, whereas in the European PS public debate may be seen metaphorically as a fight in which reason and arguments are the only weapons allowed, in the African context what prevails are strategies which make possible the ‘defeat of the opponent(s)’ without the necessity of a better or stronger argument. An art that enables to “vaincre sans avoir raison”, as one of the characters of the novel of Hamidou Kane, *L’Aventure ambiguë*, puts it so emphatically with respect to (the ‘school of) the White Man’. In so far as for agreement to be reached people do not have to concede to reason, they have to bow to something else. We intend to show in the next section that the strategies that are more recurrent in this respect have much to do with language diversity whose relevance results disproportionately enhanced in the African context.

3. The linguistic public sphere

3.1. Language and socio-political dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa

The diversity that is characteristic of Africa from the linguistic point of view owes much to the history of the continent, considered by many as the multilingual space *par excellence*. The socio-political dynamics typical of the pre-colonial period explain the large amount of indigenous languages which exist in any African country, whereas the process of colonization has meant, besides the imposition of an exogenous language, the intense interaction of multifarious language communities whose members have had to elaborate multiple and complex strategies in order to intercommunicate with, as a result, the enormous capacity of sub-Saharan Africans to flexibly adapt to very different sociolinguistic environments (Fardon and Furniss, 1994). The most pervasive manifestations of this capacity are code mixing and code switching. However, the fundamental divide from the sociolinguistic point of view opposes the citizens of a country on the basis of their linguistic repertoire and, most specifically, of their competence in the European language. Besides being the official language in the country in which it is spoken, the European language is generally associated to rational modernity, as well as to symbolic and economic power, in contrast to African languages which not only are marginal from the political, symbolic and
economic point of view, but are associated to tradition, conceived in opposition to development (Ambadiang, 2005).

The codes resulting from mixing processes in which these two types of languages are involved tend to be overlooked in scientific reports on the sociolinguistic situation of the African countries and are largely ignored in the political agendas of the African governments. This occurs contrary to facts, since all the citizens of the African countries incur to a greater or lesser extent in code mixing, and given the increasingly generalized use of some the codes that have resulted from mixing processes, specifically those based on European languages. Both tendencies are so widespread that sociolinguists such as Makoni characterize African multilingualism as typically associated with mixing, in contrast to the idea of language segregation subsumed in the European conception of multilingualism; (cf. Makoni & Meinhof (2003) for instance).

The invisibility of the mixed codes is of great interest for different reasons. Their absence from the scientific agenda is due to the fact that linguists tend to prefer so-called institutionalized languages as their objects of study. Their occultation in the political agendas is strategically related to what Myers-Scotton has dubbed ‘social closure’. In effect, in stating the (political and /or cultural) elite of a determined country that the popular variety of the European language used in that country bears no identity relationship to that language, they strategically close off the access to their social class or strata, by hindering the social promotion generally associated with the European languages in this context, in order to maintain their privileges. We are thus told that a very low percentage of the citizenry of African countries, generally only the elite, show spoken and written competence in the corresponding European language. Lastly, from the social point of view, mixed codes tend to be associated to urban environments and more specifically to urban youth (cf. Ewota, 1986; Herbert, 1992, among many others). Their speakers characteristically lack both the power that characterizes the speakers of the European language, and the authenticity seal which results from the association of the African language with tradition. In light of the above, the relevance of these codes can be stated only in case their increasing expansion and the number of their speakers are taken as the crucial factors, which gives cause for the inclusion of these codes into the scientific, political and social agendas. If, as Makoni et al. (2003) emphasize, African languages should be privileged in the political and social realms because of the correlation that exists between their institutional use and democracy, it seems necessary to extend these privileges to the codes that result from mixture processes. Moreover, the
inclusion of these varieties in the socio-political agenda has very interesting implications for both the topography and the internal dynamics of the African PS.

3.3. Communicative practices and agency

If communicative practices have to do in general with two basic types of patterns: linguistic and cultural, this is more so in a context in which, as is the case with sub-Saharan Africa, belonging to a determined group is reflected in variable degrees of linguistic and/or cultural integration (Makoni & Meinhof, 2003). There is a strong correlation in this context between the asymmetries which show among members of a given group (ethnic or otherwise) from the linguistic and cultural point of view, and their tendency to linguistic and cultural accommodation. Speakers’ linguistic repertoires vary largely as to the number and types of languages included in them, whereas language use oscillates between codes that exist separately from others in linguistic atlases, i.e. institutionalized codes, and mixed codes. The results of the possible combinations of the codes available are enormously varied. However, in so far as such variation is not without purpose, one may associate it with choice and, more generally, with agency. In this sense, it may be said that language learning and language use do not only suppose a cognitive burden on the part of the speaker, but also the capacity of agency, as evidenced in the attitudes of speakers such as, for instance, those observed by Moreau (1994) and Canut (1996) in Senegal and Mali in relation to Wolof and Bambara respectively:

(a) "Je parle leur langue pour faire des affaires avec eux, pas parce que ça m'intéresse" (Moreau, 1994: 86)
(b) "Je garde mon accent, comme ça on sait que je suis peul" (cf. Canut, 1996: 73)
(c) "Je ne connais que le nom des condiments pour faire mon marché" (id.)
(d) "Je n'ai jamais appris cette langue, je n'en ai pas besoin" (id.)

We suggest that attitudes such as those just mentioned, ranging from the ambivalence of (a-c) to the distance subsumed in (d), do not concern languages of wider communication only; rather, they may be observed with any language, depending on the way a given speaker conceives his relationship with that language.

As for accommodation, we owe a very interesting illustration to Finlayson & Slabbert (1997) who depict communicative interactions typical of the African context by means of the
metaphor of a bridge that the interlocutors must cross in such a fashion as to “meet halfway”. This means that in this context communicative processes are heavily influenced by the speakers’ disposition to cooperate, through negotiation and adaptation, from the linguistic and communicative point of view. Once interlocutors negotiate the codes that are useful for intercommunication (on the basis of the languages they share), boundaries between codes tend to collapse giving rise to multiple forms of integrated codes or systems (Ewota, 1986; cf. Herbert, 1992).

There thus appears to be a strong correlation between agency and accommodation: people tend to feel free in the way they use any language other than their own because native speakers are disposed and willing to make up for their flaws. Because the speakers’ disposition to cooperate makes intercommunication possible, language diversity may not impede the constitution of a public sphere. The contrast observed between the communicative adaptability that uniformly characterizes the linguistic PS and the internal fragmentation of civil society suggests that to share the linguistic medium of the debate is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the constitution of a socio-political PS, for reasons to be discussed in section 4 (cf. Antonsich, 2008; Ipperciel, 2008).

3.4. Discourse communities and rhetorical strategies

Discourse communities may be described in terms of individuals whose discourse practices reveal common interests, goals and beliefs with respect to a specific concern or object of study (Watts, 1999)) though, as observed above, different communities may share any of these features but discourse. In our context, the problems related to language diversity concern both the elite and the masses which, from the point of view of their discursive practices and their messages about this concern, constitute different types of discourse communities. Furthermore, the messages subsumed or implicit in the communicative interactions of the latter may be linguistic or not (Carrithers, 2005). Whereas the masses consider both the mixed codes and the individual (European and African) languages involved in their structure relevant for communicative and, more generally, social purposes, the discussion of the elite (scientific and political) is crucially based on the opposition of European and African languages. The two types of discourse which tend to prevail among them are those elaborated by so-called nationalists and pragmatists. The former consider the promotion of the African languages as a sine qua non of a genuine independence of African countries, supposing that they, moreover, favour the decolonisation of the mind and the
integral development of the African masses. In contrast, pragmatists tend to see the European languages as more efficient instruments for the development of the African countries.8

These discourse communities are consistent with the (partial) linguistic spheres, or sphericules, described above as spaces of exclusion, particularly for the members of the subaltern sphere, associated to all languages but European. However, as already suggested, the exclusion may also be based on other factors which, at the same time, convert themselves in crucial rhetorical assets which may allow one to win without the necessity of adducing arguments. The power of exclusion of language explains the tendency to associate such rhetorical strategies with language use as well as their relevance for the outcome of debates and discussions. The rhetorical strategies of interest for our discussion will thus have to do with language and ‘lect’ (dialect or sociolect) choice. Language choice is relevant mostly in cases in which different languages are involved because discussants have more or less divergent linguistic repertoires, whereas ‘lect’ choice occurs when the discussants share the language in which the debate unfolds. Many scenarios may be envisaged here, depending on the language to be chosen, the status of the discussant who chooses it and that of her interlocutor(s). We can only broadly sketch some of them here, focusing on the dynamics of public debate and the strategic uses of the languages available to each discussant. In the table below only such uses are indicated explicitly.

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Strategic uses of languages in public debate

Any debate opposes two discussants, one of which intends to cause a change in the other in terms of opinion, belief or behaviour (Carrithers, 2005). The equal status of interlocutors in discussions based on reason and argument makes their roles interchangeable: any one of them may play the role of either the persuading agent or the persuaded (patient). In a context in which debate is not exclusively, nor even mainly, based on reason and argument,

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8 See Mazrui (1996) and, for recent discussion, Makoni et al (2003).
language choice results crucial, for different reasons. Two types of context serve to illustrate the relevance of language choice for the dynamics of the debate.

In the first context, corresponding to A boxes in the table, an individual has recourse to a language other than the one used by her interlocutors. In general, such a choice is exclusive to those who feel they are in a position of power: the irruption of such a code is as much advantageous to the individual who imposes it in a discussion as it is disempowering for her interlocutors, who are generally less competent in that code. Language choice appears to be doubly strategic: it is a manifestation of the power of the discussant which it also serves to confirm and reinforce. The outcome of the debate is thus decided on the basis of the status of the language used and, more specifically, on its association with the position of power of the speaker. This is what occurs when a member of the elite makes use of an European language with non literate or semi-literate interlocutors, or when an (illiterate) elder has recourse to an African language among young men or elite who are less competent in that language. The fact that everybody acknowledges the association of such practices with authority and power, particularly in the case of the dominant languages, explains the register uniformity or homogeneity that tends to characterize public debates, as even individuals who typically use the popular versions of the European languages adopt the register of the elite (often with undesired effects illustrated in many African novels and parodies of political speeches).

In the second context, corresponding to B boxes in the table, an individual who is not supposed to have much competence in a given code has recourse to it however. The effect has to do in this case with empathy, since what is intended in such uses is greater proximity with the interlocutors, who contextually happen to be in a position of power.

In both cases, one of the discussants has strategic recourse to a language whose use is not expected in a given context, with the aim of gaining authority or affection, though with different effects, given the fact that the European language sphere is dominant. From this point of view, one of the most interesting features of the table has to do with the irrelevance of so-called mixed codes. The fact that they cannot be put to strategic uses is consistent with their invisibility from the scientific and political point of view. The European languages are necessarily visible, whereas the African languages may be visible or not, depending on the speaker. As observed above, a significant consequence is the social irrelevance or invisibility of the speakers of mixed codes, in spite of the fact that an increasing number of individuals use mixed varieties such as Pidgin English or ‘français populaire’ in urban settings in replacement of indigenous languages or as a first language (Mugane 2006). Such exclusion
has much more to do with power than with the sociolinguistic dynamics observed in the African context, since as underlined in the preceding sections, the use of code-mixing is generalized in the continent, though some speakers have recourse to this strategy more liberally than others. In so far as all languages present in this context share many of the features that are considered typical of mixed-codes, particularly in informal communicative contexts, the linguistic landscape may be seen as a continuum with many different languages at its multiple poles and multifariously mixed varieties between them. On the other hand, the ensuing difficulty to separate the codes makes it difficult to establish stable and consistent associations between any code and a given (social or discursive) function. Seen in this light, any strategic use of an European or African language subsumes necessarily an intent to impose formality in an informal communicative context, or much more formality in an already formal context. The above observations, together with the limitations of oral communication and the effects of accommodation, may help us get an idea of the complexity inherent to communicative processes of any kind, particularly those involving some kind of discussion.

4. The linguistic public sphere(s) and the state

From the observations adduced in the preceding sections one might infer that two types of factor are mostly relevant for the constitution of a PS. The first type is linguistic in nature, whereas the other has to do with the procedure of the debate. As shown above, dynamics that are typical of the linguistic sphere tend to interfere in socio-political interactions, making it very difficult to learn and cultivate the art of public debate. The aim of the present section is thus to discuss the effect(s) of social fragmentation in relation to the state and democratic representation.

4.1. Communicative practices, consensus and democratic representation

Considered in relation to public debate, communicative practices have a procedural and a linguistic dimension. We have seen that from a linguistic point of view the predominant characteristic of the African context is linguistic accommodation, evidenced in code mixing as well as in so-called “convergence languages”, i.e. languages whose expansion has implied more or less profound changes in their structure and their demography due to their non-native speakers (Mugane, 2006). The democratic practices associated with these fragments of the linguistic sphere are thus in sharp contrast with the contexts in which what we have dubbed strategic language uses prevail. In contrast to language users who do not disrupt the tendency
to inclusive and thus democratic participation in the linguistic PS, the individuals who make strategic uses of language may be considered as “linguistic brokers”, the effect of whose practices is to exclude other speakers from the discussion, and even to cancel it. This obtains mainly through processes of what may be called rhetorical de-contextualization and contextualization. In the first case there is an asymmetry between the informality of the communicative context and the formality of the language used, whereas in the second a speaker adapts the language he uses to the context.

Accommodation also occurs when the communicative practices are considered from a procedural vantage, given the tendency of interlocutors to avoid the adversarial style typical of the Western PS. Consensus is reached on the basis of conviviality, not argument, with interesting consequences which have to do with what Mbembe (2001: 11) calls simulacre, a relationship based on falseness and illusion. The inconsistency and fragility of such a relationship is emphasized by Sennett (1998, quoted in Johnson (2006: 3)) when he underlines that agreements forged through argument and debate are inevitably stronger and more enduring than ties shaped by mere convention or convenience. Besides the social effects just mentioned, agreement reached through argument has the property of empowering all the individuals involved in the discussion. Likewise, it induces each of them to reflect on the shared value commitments that can make her points of view and claims intelligible to the others (Johnson (2006: 5)). The consequences of concession based on convenience are much more difficult to assess, apart from its illusory effects. In this respect, Mbembe’s (2001: 111) insightful observation concerning political authority fits the description of any kind of power relation in our context. The dynamics associated with power converge on an effect of simulacre which, according to Mbembe,

“[…], does not increase either the depth of subordination or the level of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment for both ruled and rulers. [...] although it may demystify the commandement, even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the commandement’s material base. At best it creates potholes of indiscipline on which the commandement may stub its toe”.

As this observation suggests, disempowerment is not the only negative effect of concession-based agreement. In social terms this kind of agreement cannot cast aside distrust
and, by way of consequence, is more apparent than real and, above all, strategic. One of the purposes of simulacre is precisely the illusion of a total absence of conflict. This is what occurs with unstructured and seemingly deliberative formats which, though “intended to foster enfranchisement can in fact generate ‘false unity’ or exaggerated impressions of harmony (cf. Phillips (1991, quoted in Wayne (2000: 180)).

The illusory condition of this relationship is particularly evident in the fact that it is subject to constant though tacit contestation from below, and to a negotiation process that, besides being continuous, cannot escape mistrust on both parts. This is why once applauding subjects may “become a cursing, abusive mob” (Mbembe (2001: 111)). The ultimate consequence of convenience-based agreement, however, is the de-humanisation of both poles of the relationship. Powerful members identify the interests and concerns of the group with their own, with the apparent effect of depriving the disempowered members of their liberty and subjectivity, whereas the latter comply only apparently with the dictates of the former. The group is thus fragmented along the line of power relations, and representation along such a divide can only be undemocratic, unless provision is made for making subjects’ own voices heard.

Therefore, as was the case with language before, participation is not a sufficient condition for debate-based agreement. As underlined by Wayne (2000: 187), “it is too simplistic to assume that more participation would lead to greater democracy”. The focus of the next sub-section will be on the implications of the above observations for the participation of individual citizens in the political sphere.

4.2. Linguistic sphere(ical)es and the political sphere

African countries grossly coincide in their linguistic and political patterns. The territory that corresponds to each of them is enormously fragmented from the linguistic point of view but a markedly homogeneous arena in communicative terms. From this point of view, the languages and their corresponding linguistic sphericules included in the linguistic space of each country do not exhaust its linguistic public sphere. However, many of the problems observed with respect to the participation of civil society in the political sphere in this context correlate with what we may call the ‘language or linguistic bias’. In effect, the political sphere

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9 This may have to do with the fact that ‘power in Africa has long depended more on wealth in people than wealth in things, that is, more on the cultivation of social relations, and to attract and sustain subordinates through patronage and feeding of the social body’ (cf. West, 2005; quoted in Stroud (2007: 41)).
is structured according to linguistic, not communicative, factors, as the marginality of the
codes most heavily involved in communication, viz. mixed codes, makes it clear. From the
political point of view, it has been argued that participation is not a sufficient condition for
democracy as, by itself, it does not imply critical discussion nor rational debate. Both factors:
linguistic segregation and conviviality may thus be considered as some of the most important
barriers to the constitution and evolution of the PS in Africa and, as suggested above, their
effects can in no way be helpful for the participation of the masses in the political sphere.
Because political participation favours the effective empowerment of the masses, it requires
radical changes in the way both the communicative and procedural dimensions of public
discussion are negotiated. The following brief discussion of these changes will take the
evolution of the Western PS as its starting point.

In his narrative on the European PS Habermas considers its emergence as crucially
dependent on affluence, literacy and power (related to the capacity of determining the actions
of the state). Although he does not discuss the relative importance of each of these variables,
one might consider literacy and freedom as the factors which affect most profoundly the
dynamics of the PS, and affluence as either a mere characteristic, though a most favourable
one, of the context in which the PS happened to emerge, i.e. as a trigger of the PS. This,
besides its direct association with power. In comparison, the African PS cannot be related to
affluence mostly because, due to their socio-political status, affluent people (who are in
general also literate) seldom engage in public debates whose purpose is to control the state
and whose effects have to do with the empowerment of the masses. The interesting
implication here is that the unique locus of the public space in which the PS may emerge is
among the masses. In this respect, sight should not be lost of the fact that the masses are the
social strata typically associated with the codes of wider communication, the mixed
languages, which happen to be marginal. Note also that the features that are characteristic of
the Western PS in relation to its internal dynamics, its purposes, its discursive basis, etc., may
be observed in this locus, though in a rather inconsistent way. The question thus arises as to
the conditions in which this small fragment of socio-political space may evolve into the
democratic arena that would correspond to the PS in African countries. The observation of the
sociolinguistic and political dynamics that characterize some of these countries is highly
illustrative in this regard.

As suggested above, part of these conditions relate to the medium of communication.
The main change in this respect consists in the adoption of the ‘communicative bias’
according to which the solutions adopted by the masses should be given primacy in public
communication. Not only are such codes widely used, as is the case with Swanglish and Sheng in Kenya (Mugane, 2006), Wolof in Senegal (Ngom, 2004), Portuguese in Mozambique (Stroud, 2007), or popular varieties of French and English in different countries, they may be politically relevant. For instance, Stroud (2007: 43) stresses in his study of the sociolinguistic dynamics typical of Mozambique, that

“The use of African languages also contributes more widely to the vernacularization and popularization, that is, democratization of Mozambican politics”.

The democratization of politics ultimately implies the empowerment of the citizenry. A multilevel linguistic sphere, inspired in the notion of ‘segmented levels of public discourse’ (cf. Beierwaltes, 1998, quoted in Breidbach (2003: 86)) notion, would be fit here, though we will consider only two such fragments: the level of public discussion and the level of scientific debate. The former would cover the space corresponding to the PS, in which matters of common concern may be openly discussed, the latter being circumscribed to circles of specialists and professionals. Likewise, the codes of wider communication, and more generally linguistic accommodation, would help to solve the problem that arises around the commonality of the debate language, which is not necessary, at least in principle, among specialists.

Other conditions deal with the debate procedure itself. These have to do with the attitudes and the cognitive and psychological capacities of the discussants. Johnson (2006: 5), for instance, alludes to the hermeneutical effort required of all members of the PS, whereas Wayne (2000: 187) associates the political culture based on public debate with the necessity for the citizens to “consciously adopt the discursive attitudes of responsibility, self-discipline, respect, cooperation [...] necessary to produce consensual agreement” (cf. also Newman 2005 a, b; Roberts & Crossley, 2004). Such attitudes and aptitudes are mostly the result of a learning process, as stressed by Habermas in his account of the emergence of European PS. Interaction with other members of the community is crucial in the learning process, though the most relevant factor is literacy, as evidenced in the following statement (Stroud (2007: 44))

“In the sphere of civil society, vernacular literacy programmes have been used actively by rural women to create a private and gendered pace for themselves as they no longer
have to rely on male literacy brokers for help with their written communication [...] and are free to broach topics that were previously taboo”.

These circumstances, which may be applied to other subaltern groups such as semi-literate urban youth, remind us of the tendency of the emergent European PS to reflect upon topics previously exclusive to the church or the state. Reading (and thus literacy) has the double effect of informing and making one part of an imagined community, which is very helpful for the adoption of the adversarial style that characterizes rational debate. In this sense Appiah (1992: 131, 133) stresses that “literacy moves you toward universality in your language”, whereas printing breeds “the independence of minds”.

5. Conclusion

Public sphere is a virtual space composed by smaller spatial fragments differentiated on the basis of variables such as the medium of communication, the social status or gender of its members, or its purpose(s), but whose internal dynamics are strictly coincident. The discussion above has shown that language is very important for the constitution and internal dynamics of any PS, particularly so in a context of considerable language diversity as is Africa. The linguistic PS is, by way of consequence, a crucial component of the (political) PS and, correlatively, a space in which the battle for the empowerment of the citizenry is fought.

The fight is fundamentally between the groups of privileged and disempowered citizens. The former may be characterized as linguistic brokers who have developed social skills which allow them to make a strategic use of their linguistic competence. Though they also recur to code mixing, as everybody does in this context, their claims are related exclusively to languages as traditionally defined, that is, to institutionalized languages, typically associated to a specific community of speakers and showing a limited degree of loan structures, in contraposition to mixed codes. The status of these brokers is based on the competence they claim to have in different languages whose social, economic and even political capital imbue them with power. In consistence with their linguistic ideology, they conceive language use as a migration process across different languages separated by neat and clear frontiers. Moreover, their power position allows them to impose to their interlocutors any of the languages included in their repertoire. In contrast, the interactions in which the masses are

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10 Thus, Bayart (2008 [1981]), for instance, considers that « la catégorie des jeunes marginalisés par l’appareil de production capitaliste et vivant d’expéditions » is «la plus décidée à affronter le système de domination en place, parce qu’elle n’a rien à perdre, ni d’un point de vue « traditionnel » ni d’un point de vue «moderne »». 
involved are much more diverse in terms of the codes required and, furthermore, are associated with marginalized codes. In this sense the masses tend to be identified with translinguistic spaces, in which migration can only be partial, as though any speaker had a foot in each of the languages available in a given interaction.

Though language diversity is a matter of concern for all, there is no debate between the two most important fragments of the public space, the powerful elite and the masses, which may be identified with a code-based vs. a communication-based culture, the former of which is imposed on all the citizenry. However, as we have seen, any interaction between individuals different from the point of view of their linguistic cultures has much of a masquerade in the sense that the form of their messages does not adjust to their linguistic culture or to their claims in this respect. In this way, it reinforces the code-based culture which, in turn, explains the attention, frequently bordering obsession, with which the form of the messages is treated in our context. As a result, form rather than contents or arguments tends to be the focus of the interaction, since it is the factor which determines the outcome of any discussion. This has the effect of disempowering the masses in two senses: it deprives them of the linguistic code(s) they normally use and it hinders and even impedes any form of debate, although they are frequently involved in processes of this kind. Therefore, a first step towards the diffusion of the art of debate in the public space supposes that, on the one hand, we give primacy to the communication-based culture and, on the other, we disempower the linguistic brokers by stripping the rhetoric of (strategic) language use of the power associated to it. Once there is no space left for strategic language uses, attention may progressively be focused on the contents and arguments. Seen in this light, language, or more precisely communication, constitutes itself in an essential factor for the constitution of the PS.

However, communication is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of a PS: as discussed above, neither a common language, nor a communicative chain may make a PS emerge. For this to happen, specific attitudes and aptitudes are deemed crucial and moreover, as suggested before, many of them have to be learned. The most relevant of the former is the adversarial style, whereas literacy, undoubtedly the best start in learning such a style, is the crucial factor among the latter.

Finally, the discussion above shows that in spite of the diversity of historical and social conditions in which public spheres emerge in different contexts, they share a set of characteristics which have to do with communication (the capacity of their members to reach other members in communicative terms) and with debate. In so far as these characteristics are also essential features of any democratic space, we suggest that attention be paid to the
masses and the solutions they elaborate in their way to the construction of an African PS. The master words here are empowerment and equality, though the reality to which they refer is heavily dependent on the state.

References


