

Seminar : Université de Lorraine, IDEA

Misunderstanding or Geopolitical Divergence in West Africa? Hegemonic and Counter-Hegemonic Narratives across Semiotic Modes

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Short biography.

Issa Kanté is an Associate Professor in English linguistics at the University of La Réunion and a member of the DIRE research unit. His research areas include English-French contrastive linguistics, cognitive linguistics and Critical Discourse Studies, with a focus on political and geopolitical discourse. He is particularly interested in the syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface, lexical modality, and figurative language (especially metonymy and metaphor). He also studies ideology in discourse, as well as discursive strategies of foregrounding and backgrounding. His current work focuses on counter-hegemonic and sovereigntist discourse in Africa.

Abstract.

Although most sub-Saharan African countries gained independence in the 1960s, the continent has remained a field of geopolitical rivalry, which some now describe as a “new Cold War” (Maru, 2019; Dietz, 2022; Lindén, 2023; Nogueira Pinto, 2023). The end of formal colonization in Africa did not necessarily mark the end of European political, cultural and economic dominance (Ziegler, 1978; Ayittey, 2005; Hansen and Jonsson, 2017; Okoli, 2024). This seminar explores how hegemonic (in the Gramscian sense) and counter-hegemonic ideologies and narratives are constructed, reproduced, and contested in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on West Africa and additional examples from Central Africa. Adopting a perspective that combines Critical Discourse Studies (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2008; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016) with Cognitive Linguistics (Chilton and Lakoff, 1995; Chilton, 2004; Lakoff, 2004; Littlemore, 2015; Gibbs, 2017), I examine a corpus of political and geopolitical discourses expressed through various semiotic modes: spoken political speeches, media discourse, and visual-verbal protest slogans. Throughout, I focus on how ideology and worldview – often expressed through figurative scenarios (Musolff, 2004, 2018) – shape (geo)political rhetoric and discursive manipulation. I also use Thompson’s (1988, 1990) theoretical framework to analyze how ideologies of domination are legitimized, dissimulated, and reified, from early postcolonial paternalism to the current rhetoric of “partners and friends.” I ask whether the new forms of sovereigntist and Pan-Africanist discourses emerging in the Sahel (particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) and beyond can be reduced to “anti-French” or “anti-Western sentiment”, or to “pro-Russian propaganda”. I argue that these labels, often used in French political and media discourse (e.g., Lorgerie, 2020; Le Cam, 2023; Le Cam and Vincent, 2023), overlook the cognitive, ideological, and historical foundations of the current sovereigntist narratives. Finally, I ask whether the tensions and breakdown in diplomatic relations reflect a broader misunderstanding between Sahelian states and the so-called “West”, or a geopolitical divergence between France and its former colonies.

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