

MUNICIPAL ELECTION 2020 IN THE CONTEXT OF REFORMS IN BENIN : SEMIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL ADVERTISEMENTS

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Résumé

Le contexte de réforme impose désormais à l'espace public béninois le renforcement des entités collectives politiques au détriment d'entités politiques égotistes en pleine mutation numérique. Alors entre effacement imposé et le soi renforcé, le cadre légal électoral construit un espace discursif avec instances locutrices en situation complexe. L'information est-elle réellement manifeste (Sperber et Wilson 1986) ? Ceci pour poser que, l'espace électoral est le produit des réglementations voulues par un pays. Cette étude questionne les affiches de campagne pour les enjeux de la construction discursive. Les affiches électorales publiées sur les réseaux sociaux par les entités politiques que par les candidats à la conquête du pouvoir à la base sont analysées pour l'ancrage du cadre légal au niveau des instances locutrices énonciatrices quel que soit le statut.

Mots clés : *Bénin, réformes politiques, affiches électorales numériques, information manifeste, construit discursif légal.*

Abstract

The reform context now imposes the strengthening of collective political entities over egotistical political entities undergoing digital transformation in the Beninese public space. Between imposed erasure and reinforced self, the electoral legal framework constructs a discursive space with complex locutionary instances. Is the manifestness of the information truly mutual (Sperber and Wilson 1986) ? This raises to hypothesize that the electoral space is the product of regulations desired by a country. This study examines campaign posters in terms of discursive construction issues. The electoral posters published on social networks by the political entities and by the candidates for power at the grassroots are analyzed for their alignment with the legal framework at the level of the locutionary instances, regardless of their status.

Keywords : *Benin, political reforms, digital electoral posters, manifest information, legal discursive construction.*

Introduction

In the face of the political will of the elected president since 2016 to reform all systems that lead to stagnation rather than the expected progress of a developing country like Benin, all texts at all levels are being updated. Elections have been the most exposed to these political assaults,

raising questions about the relationship between regulations and social construction (Lokonon 2019) given the observed upheavals. It needs to remind here that, laws are made and undone ; their production is fruitful. Already, a few months before the municipal election, a modifying law concerning the charter of political parties is passed. This takes place on November 7, 2019. On November 15, 2019, Law No. 2018-31 regarding the electoral code is revised, and it is this law that leads the country to the elections in May 2020. And on June 2, 2020, this same law undergoes another amendment. This is not too condemnable if we know that, as A. Barratin (1913) observes, "there is surely something missing in the law that hinders the honest man." However, this raises questions : if the parties that won the municipal elections were not part of the presidential movement, would they have easily been able to modify the rules of the game during the course of play ?

The society is a reflection of the aspirations of both citizens and leaders and the governing texts are the products of these aspirations. So, does every discursive construction not reveal the agreement on the fact (the legal framework) and the level of reception of locutionary instances ? Indeed, the animation of the electoral discursive space by locutionary instances gives substance to the "intended meaning" upon which praxis depends.

The purpose of this study is to analyze in a legal framework context, the electoral posters, disseminated on social networks that express informational relevance. This leads to, on one side, the identification of the mutual manifestness of information within the interactive framework ; and on other side, to the rhetoric of the participants in accordance with the legal framework. Therefore, we postulate that digital discursive productions are ostensive ; thus, they reveal the intentions of information and communication, unveiling the participants within the interactive framework for an interpretation within the legal framework. It is worth noting that, this work compares the electoral posters (coming from the five parties selected by the National Autonomous Electoral Commission-CENA: Union Progressiste-UP, Bloc Républicain-BR, Parti du Renouveau Démocratique-PRD, Moele - Movement of Engaged Elites for the Emancipation of Benin, and Union pour la Démocratie et la Nouvelle Bénin-UDBN) with the texts governing elections in Benin, with the main focus being the confrontation of discursive productions between collective, individual, and institutional entities.

As evidenced, this study falls within semiotics in terms of composition and the framework, drawing on Joly (1994) and St Martin (1994) through the golden rule and the rule of thirds expressing the intentions of the enunciators. This justifies the invocation of the notion constructing the deductive device and mutual knowledge (Sperber and Wilson 1986), to reveal the realization of the subject's space and the position of the subject, specific to an interactional study (Flahault 1978 ; Lokonon 2019, 2022). It is a study on the rhetoric of interaction in political landscape of elections.

To better address our questions, we provide a brief reminder of the contextual situation (i) and then analyze the posters in order to understand the intentions of the speaking entities (ii), with the aim of constructing the participants' rhetoric (iii).

1. A few facts to recall

In 2019, legislative elections were held in Benin, which led to various upheavals and citizen involvement in municipal management (Lokonon 2019) within a specific context : the exclusion of certain parties from the elections, for the first time in the electoral political history of this country, by the electoral organizing body, the National Autonomous Electoral Commission (CENA). This situation repeated itself with the elections concerning municipalities and communes in 2020 and justifies the surge of citizens on social media networks (SMN). They served various purposes and involved everyone.

Furthermore, similar to the legislative election of April 2019, in which there was a general outcry over the exclusion of certain political parties from the electoral process, and especially intense activity on social networks, even if citizens appear not to agree with this political debate of exclusion, they have nevertheless focused their efforts on one goal : the postponement of elections due to a legal framework that is perceived as biased. We present here some posters to illustrate this point.

Figure 1 : Some citizen-generated digital artwork advocating for the postponement of municipal and communal elections.



As the statements show, there is a categorical rejection of the organization of elections, as seen in statements such as ‘(..) invites workers to stay at home’ (CSTB), ‘USL denounces... issues its rallying cry’ and ‘boycott of the election’ (National Resistance). Whether in media publications or on digital platforms of civil organizations, there is a rejection of what is being prepared on the electoral front. It is in this context that the construction of the electoral space is taking place.

It is worth noting that in an interactive framework such as an interactive website, two categories are in confrontation : the issuing locutionary instance and the receiving locutionary instance, each with its own particularities. In the context of this study, there are two levels of the receiving instance : the first representing political parties, candidates, and the people to whom the texts governing decentralization and elections are addressed ; and the second encompassing all those to whom the first level is addressed, namely the election regulatory body with its multiple actors, the population as a whole, the population of the respective locality, the voting population, and ideological groups. This raises an interrogative question : who is the issuer or who can it be ? There is also a multichannel aspect, ranging from the producer (the National Assembly or the government) to the electoral commission (Cena) in the case of this study, and extending to the other, which undoubtedly demonstrates the perception of the informative intention being shown

to it and caring about the other in order to manifest it. For this latter category in search of the power of representation, there is only one goal : to see its intention realized. It is important to note how it transitions from reception to emission, depending on the purpose of the discourse. Therefore, should its identity be ethical and local, ideological-ethical and local, ideological-local or devoid of the self ? Hence the importance of the question of ‘ostension’ developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995).

Indeed, some questions remain regarding the formation of the new identity through the legal framework in Benin. Indeed, even if in practice, local governance extends beyond space and does not singularize it as space, does it not promote this space as both organizer and organized ? What, then, is the stake of this effacement of the egotic entity when we know that local governance is based on “a transformation of the properties of space, with each space becoming unique as it carries its own identity” (Dufourt, 1996) ? These are thought-provoking questions concerning regulation and societal construction.

Therefore, it can be noted that among the eight (8) parties that made the effort to comply with the political party charter by obtaining a certificate of conformity through a decision of the constitutional court (Lokonon 2019) and submitting their candidacy files for the municipal elections, five (5) managed to pass the selection by Cena (the electoral organization institution). Here we are echoing the point made by newspapers.

Figure 2 : Information from newspapers about the parties approved by Cena.



When three (3) were excluded, namely MOELE BENIN, PER, and FCDB ; that means from the electoral argumentative space through electoral posters.

2. Digital electoral posters for informational relevance

This electoral campaign is taking place in a deleterious climate : frustration, discontent, disdain, and a sense of self-satisfaction. “One of the most common causes of breaks in any system is the cross-fertilization with another system (...)” (M. McLuhan 1994 : 49) ; this means that the infertile cannot be fertilized. Hybridization, especially the desire to evolve regardless of the system, is inevitably perilous for societies. Thus, in this context of electoral propaganda, collective ideological entities at the national level, regional-national collective ideological entities, and regional/local egotistic entities coexist in terms of messages. They all expect one and only one action from the citizen-voter : their vote to shape its regional or local dimension.

We start with the actor recognized *de facto* by the legal framework : the collective ideological and national entity - the political party, recognized as such "(...) each list of candidates for legislative or communal elections submits a candidacy declaration to Cena" ; "party alliances are not allowed to present lists of candidates" (Articles 38 and 39 of the Electoral Code). This naturally eliminates the individual in favor of the collectivity. Here, the primary information offered by these national-level political entities is sought.

Figure 3 : The 'ideological' political entity in the electoral space.



Source : WhatsApp

As shown in the statements, the language used is explicit, and the linguistic tense reveals the emotional effect embedded in the image. Regarding the iconic discourse, there is a photo of the party president and the party logo in poster 1, and two comic featuring human figures urging not to forget the past and to make the useful gesture in poster 2. Additionally, the addressing markers include the use of "vous" (formal "you") for UDBN and "tu" (informal "you") for PRD. Furthermore, there are crossed arms joined at the waist for the UDBN president, and a sense of motion within the symbolism of the election (the specimen of the ballot) on which one of the comic strips places his right foot-standing in an upright position, holding the instrument that allowed them to perform the useful act : the voting stamp.

The textual axiology allows us to conclude that there is a strong sense of frustration combined with a willingness to take action from all. However, for the UDBN, it expresses a position of elevation, as the right arm is crossed over the left arm while exposing the hands that do not support either elbow. It signifies an offensive profile accompanied by a desire for existence among others. This expresses a sense of frustration (Messinger 2009 : 20-21). On the other hand, for the PRD, the act is aggressive toward the topic under discussion and those who represent it, while adopting an elevated position to express a desire to claim ownership of the message's objet or subject. It represents an act of both utterance and interaction, driven by emotions, inviting empathy and action in favor of oneself and struggling for oneself against all odds. The performativity of these signs positions them as acts of face-threatening Acts through the trampling of the ballot specimen (PRD) and the crossed arms at the waist of the UDBN president, implicitly reproaching the assertion of self-defiance against authority, as if to say, "I know what's going on, you just vote for us, it means the party". The linguistic tense, imperative form ("faites" (do) and "votiez" (vote) for UDBN, "souviens-toi" (remember) and "vote" for PRD), plays a role in emphasizing the acts of language in the performative sense (Austin, 1962) and reestablishing an asymmetrical relationship favoring oneself. Is it not important to remember here that these two parties claim to be part of the presidential movement !

However, the inclusion of the UDBN president's photo raises questions about the legal framework and the construction of the electoral space. Nevertheless, certain circumstances mitigate the concern. This woman is the legal representative of this national political entity ; she is legally recognized as such, and it is her responsibility to present the party's

candidacy. Therefore, her photograph on the poster is justified. At this level, only the legal entity is accepted. This is where the “cross-fertilization of systems” in McLuhan’s logic continues to create a hybrid system within the electoral space. “Each list of candidates for legislative or communal elections submits a candidacy declaration to the Cena” (Article 38 of the Electoral Code). The validity of the declaration combines the party and individual entities : “The declaration includes the names, first names, professions, date and place of birth, as well as the complete address of the candidates.” Then, the individual is intertwined with other documents such as “certificate of nationality, tax clearance”, all *in tutti pesonae* (Article 41 of the Electoral Code). This proves that the election is primarily a matter of the “individual-of the human person” before being a matter of a political group.

Otherwise, questions persist regarding the communicative intention : what informative intention is evident to the recipient ? Which one is evident for the party, the activists, and the citizens? How can they be differentiated ? (Sperber and Wilson 1986 : 96-98) ? It seems that in this framework, there is not “mutual knowledge” and “comon knowledge” ; so it is difficult to talk about communication ; or to share that the party’s informative intention is understood the militant candidats. The posters will certainly reveal whether there is “information evident to the sender self and to the recipient other”. This brings us back to what ideology represents for politics, because if doubts persist, isolated element cannot develop a behavior beyond that.

“the social functions’ ideologies perform are numerous.

They will include the creation of a sense of group solidarity and cohesion for members of that group through shared ideological values ; an explanation of the past, an analysis of the present, and, usually, a vision of the future with some description of how a better future will come about” (Harrison & Boyd, s.d.:137).

So, the causes of solidarity and vision should enable us to interpret the informational convergence for the affirmation of an egoistic self inseparable from the national egoistic ensemble, if only through the distilled effect in the statements. Shouldn't the entities come together for informational relevance ?

Figure 4 : The egotistical entity asserting itself while challenging the legal framework.



Sources : WhatsApp and Facebook

It must be emphasized that these posters raise the issue of mutual knowledge and genuine mutual understanding between the party (sender) accepted by the legal framework and the individual candidates in terms of fulfilling the intentions, whether they are informative or communicative, with the aim of documenting actions. Each photograph expresses confidence, joy in being part of the space, and the belief that nothing occurs beyond what is authorized by the legal framework. This reveals the state of the Beninese political sphere, where ideology is more focused on personal gain than a philosophy of thought and being. However, as demonstrated by these posters, the signified here is the announcement of oneself as a candidate and not of a list, even if the representative symbol is embedded for a form of compliance with the legal framework. It concerns a list of candidates and not individual candidacy. If we wish to interpret the text rigorously, we can dare to say that no political party authorized by the election institution exists unless it possesses the required lists in all the districts of the 77 municipalities. Consequently, the logo is neither solely the rightful holder nor the candidate. So, if we accept the game, we must play it to the end. Should we recall how other political groups were rejected because they couldn't provide all the required lists as mandated by the electoral code ! Based on this data, it can be asserted that the following hypothesis : "digital discursive productions reveal informative and communicative

intentions” is not confirmed as it invents a context beyond the legal framework.

However, these posters raise questions about the construction of the electoral political space and, above all, about the effective exercise of the right to be an active participant in any election. Indeed, to be included on a list means accepting the principle of self-erasure for the collective. Simultaneously, within the same country, the legal framework violates a provision : “no one can be a candidate in the elections mentioned in the preceding article unless they are an elector” (Article 39 of the electoral code, cited above) while inventing another provision : “you can be an elector without being eligible”. The electoral code in this case, which requires that the enjoyment of the right to be elected be granted by a third party (a political party), challenges : is the power of representation a matter of will, self-determination, or rather, a matter of charity ? Because an individual may want to exercise this right, raise their hand within the political body, and not be selected or proposed to be on the list, while someone else, without any ambition for public affairs, may be promoted and positioned on a list, and elected to sit in an institution that has never been their concern. What kind of elected representative does this create, and what can the people expect from such a person propelled to the forefront of the public stage ? The development of the nation requires a pause to question the profile of representatives that the legal frameworks are truly constructing for Benin and on other side the boulevard of corruption opened for this purpose by this carefully orchestrated system of depriving a citizen of the right to be elected.

3. The signs for the rhetoric of the conflictual participation framework

This Goffmanian terminology highlights the participants of the interactive framework and is already multimodal, according to the author. However, this multimodality varies depending on the site and the mode of dissemination (Lokonon 2019). Who is legally defined as a participant in this interactive framework ? “The rhetoric of the content inevitably particularizes that of the participants, who must make 'the topoi' manifest to everyone” (Lokonon 2023 : 70).

Figure 5 : Sample of the ballot paper of the Electoral Commission for municipal and communal elections.



Source : <https://Lévénementprécis.com>

As observed in the specimen, the five (5) parties selected for the elections are positioned. It is important to note that the positioning on this specimen is the result of a random draw conducted among party representatives during a dedicated session. Applying the rule of thirds (St Martin 1994) to the lay-out, which means dividing the image into three equal parts horizontally and vertically, we can see that only the upper third is dedicated to the primary information : the issuer and the first assumption : the purpose of the image composition. In the case of this image, it indicates the Electoral Commission (Cena), followed by the type of election and the date. This is communicative and reflects the ongoing construction of the legal electoral space. So, does this created specimen fulfill the requirements of “rhapsody” in terms of both form and substance, that is, an iconographic discourse rooted in the history and political culture of the time (Lokonon 2023 : 66) ?

It is undeniable that from this specimen, the institution reminds the true recipients : the political parties, and not the candidates through whom an ideological list has been established. Additionally, the unique logos on the specimen serve as *stimuli* to make the intention of the message recognizable. However, one cultural fragment missing in the collective memory of the legal framework seems to be the absence of enunciative and interactional existence from the acting sender. Where can we find, in this sender actor, the other information that reinforces what is

highlighted on this specimen : the lists, and again the lists in the 77 communes ? This specimen suffers from “social transparency” (Fontanille 2015 : 106-107) as it does not provide the “topoi at the heart of forms of life” that each constitute sign of the ballot specimen represents. This inevitably raises questions about the organizational system in terms of institutional electoral discursive productions and the relationship between the electoral organizational system and the legal framework.

This is also a significant point in this study, referring to the context of reforms. If the legal framework (the electoral code) requires political parties to present lists in all municipalities throughout the territory and not only in the areas desired by the parties themselves, and failure to comply with this requirement constitutes a rejection criterion, this simple provision in turn imposes a “praxis” in terms of constructing the interactive space. The signs in the image do not effectively convey the informative intention, which in turn hampers the communicative intention. Does the electoral doxa not influence the sender here ? Does the economy of elections not dictate the laws of constructing the argumentative space ? As it’s said, “... , an act is fraudulent if it breaks the law” (Lehoucq 2003). The law ! It says everything.

Furthermore, the sender who convenes a space of exchange, especially an argumentative exchange where each component of the sphere is crucial not only for the construction, animation, and preservation of the space, as revealed by speech (verbal, non-verbal, or paraverbal), inevitably transforms the axis that modifies the typology of actors. Actors in an informational and memory framework share profiles as subject creators of the semio-enunciative space, accounting for both the creator and the one in whose service the professional puts their competence, with or without questioning (Lokonon and Gbaguidi 2022 forthcoming). Indeed, the professional who questions themselves, invites the legal framework, serves the *citizen's right to vote*, and serves the other right : *the citizen's right to information*. But the other who does not question themselves serves their ego, deriving satisfaction from the work put on the market, whether ostensive or not. This is what these electoral posters for the municipal and local elections offer to show. From there, this opens up the field of responsibility for various actors in electoral matters based on the principle of information transparency.

Therefore, it is imperative to emphasize here that the Cena must provide the people with access to all lists ; it cannot summon citizens and, on the

day of voting, withhold information on such important data for the citizen's decision on their ballot. Does the citizen vote for a political party or for a list of candidates belonging to a political party ? If the voting citizen does not need to have access to each list on that day before placing their stamp among others, then why require parties to create lists in all territorial divisions, sometimes corresponding to the number of elected officials envisioned ? We can therefore conclude that based on what has happened so far, voters have voted for parties and not lists, which was never foreseen in the legal framework.

As a result, the cost for the National Autonomous Electoral Commission (CENA) to comply with this reform is high, both in terms of energy, logistics, and financing. But what is the value of the legal framework if it does not contribute to societal construction ? Every construction of meaning and sense depends on "the ensemble of systems" (Argentin 1989), topical units (J-C. Abric, 2019), and the relevance of information (D. Sperber and D. Wilson, 1995) for understanding the locutor-actors of the argumentative space. Voting symbol not means vote a list (photographies) ; the form of life and the human form do not convey the same information. "Non-verbal language is closely linked to the cultural system in which it develops" (J-C. Abric 2019 : 59) and this reinforces the visual text's axiology, in its function as a rhapsody (Leone 2012). So, what kind of poster can ensure compliance with the legal framework on the communicative axis for all locutor-actors ?

Figure n° 6 : Posters promoting the legal provision of lists



These posters differ from the others studied. As observed, they contain three symbols : the self (photograph of the candidate-individual), the

ideological entity (the party logo presenting the "self" as a candidate), and naturally the assumptions justifying the assembly of various signs : the mention of the election, the object of political publicity space.

By observing these posters, two of them meet the conditions for existence in order to be entitled to exist in a public space for the animation of the electoral argumentative space. The other three cannot claim a right to existence even if they have the right to be created. Because as soon as the sender (the CENA) fulfills all the felicity conditions to manifest itself in space (understanding the object of the space to be constructed, implementing the legal framework, communication), it will ask : what is this poster for ? What electoral argumentative space does it represent ?

It is therefore difficult, in the face of this non-compliance with the legal framework, to consider these actors in the interactive electoral space as "subject-directors, archi-actors of the semio-interactive space" (C. Lokonon and J. K. Ggaguidi, forthcoming 2022). Consequently, this hypothesis : "posters unveil the participation framework of the interactive electoral site" poses a real problem in terms of being verified in relation to the legal framework.

This raises a genuine problem, and it needs to be addressed directly : it is an act of constructing an anti-legal electoral interactive space. The electoral framework sets forth the principle for the interactive electoral space, specifying the number of parties selected and the number of posters (lists) to be displayed on the ballot, per municipality. Therefore, the CENA cannot present only one sample ballot to the argumentative space, but rather as many sample ballots as there are municipalities. If this becomes a headache, then the system needs to be reconsidered.

Conclusion

If the hypotheses "digital discursive productions reveal informative and communicative intentions" and "reveal the participatory framework of the interactive electoral site" are not true, then the hypothesis "digital discursive productions are ostensive" is not confirmed. This demonstrates that the electoral argumentative space is dependent on the legal framework.

From the analysis of electoral posters, a distancing is observed between what the interactive site should be in terms of manifestness of information for both the receiver and the sender. The axis of

communication thus produces emitting locutor instances that compel the opening and animation of the site, as well as the content of the information, which creates diverse actor worlds already within the political sphere, then between the political sphere and the emitting archi-acting subject, and finally between the individual candidate and the citizen. This shifts the focus of this study towards the realm of societal construction.

As demonstrated, in the context of reforms, praxis has shown its limitations in highlighting the power of doxa in any action of summoning and animating an electoral argumentative space. This creates a conflict between the authority's right to speak and the right to be informed. Therefore, this study takes a transversal position to emphasize the indispensability of the legal framework and the argumentative space. However, the greatest challenge remains the submission of power to power, regardless of the power at hand. Regardless of the power conferred, it should not authorize withholding information. For withholding is just one step away from disinformation and manipulation.

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