

**To Be a Developed Nation is to Speak as a Developed Nation:  
Constructing Tropes of Transparency and Development Through  
Syntax, Register, and Context in the Political Oratory of Imerina,  
Madagascar<sup>1</sup>**

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**1. “I want to run for president and I want to know what it will take to win”**

In May 2001, yogurt mogul and mayor of the capital city of Madagascar, Marc Ravalomanana phoned a long-time friend and the mayor of a large east coast city in the U.S. He announced his intent to run for President of the country of Madagascar and asked his friend’s help to run what would surely take him to victory—an “American-style” campaign.<sup>2</sup> These two mayors had become political allies and friends when Ravalomanana visited the United States for a World Bank conference some years before. He had requested to meet with other city mayors, at which time he met this and many other mayors of large U.S. cities. With this news that Antananarivo’s mayor was running for president possibly to unseat a president who had been in power for over twenty-five years, the U.S. mayor enlisted the aid of his former campaign manager to pull together a campaign for Ravalomanana—from platform to strategy and vision; even to the speeches and gimmicks of hats, buttons, bumper stickers, and posters. The campaign materials were designed in the glitz and glamour of the American style and printed in Germany. They were secretly shipped to Madagascar’s capital province, Imerina, in containers marked for the mayor’s yogurt business, Tiko, to elude any political opposition, of which they expected much. Leading up to the election, the group of U.S. political strategists and campaign advisors, their Malagasy counterparts, and the candidate huddled in hotel rooms in the capital for nights on end, writing speeches and talking about the work of the speech:

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<sup>2</sup> Because I am deferring to the preference of my informant, I have chosen not to disclose the name of the U.S. mayor. Also, although his primary identity during the initial meeting with Ravalomanana may have been as mayor, his service to the actual campaign was ultimately outside that public role.

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They strategized how through the speech and embodied presidential style, this candidate would communicate not only his campaign platform but the personality to get elected.<sup>3</sup>

This political strategy involved crafting oratory that worked in stark contrast—sometimes intentionally and other times not so much—to the prior genre of State address, known as *kabary politika*. This genre had been common in Madagascar since the first Merina Kingdom of the eighteenth century and is the expected means of state political oratorical address today.<sup>4</sup> *Kabary politika* is a highly stylized context of oratory full of indirect voicing, and a register full of indexical expressions and tropes such as proverbs, poetry, and riddles. Contextually, at the onset of its token opening utterance, this type of oratorical genre is productive of a “public,” a composite of the rhetor on stage and an audience of the ritual collective or multitude.

In contrast to this established encoded formality of the *kabary* style and context, the American campaign strategists argued Ravalomanana speak to the rural public in modest casual attire over a suit and tie, offer a smile over a stern look, shake hands and make eye contact with the public over keeping a recognizably respectable distance between leaders and led. They encouraged him to go by the more personable “MARC Ravalomanana” over “RAVALOMANANA Marc.” They urged him to speak with a single, direct message and to project one image rather than a detailed concrete platform for Madagascar’s future. In short, the Americans advocated that in all a candidate says and in the style he embodies, the key to success is this: “people do not care about the platform or whether or not they agree with you. They will elect you if they like you.” This team worked to make a likable person by creating and delivering a single “message” wrapped and repeatedly delivered in a nice “image.” During the campaign season, and at least in part with this approach, the team of Americans and Malagasy worked along this premise to spin a campaign of slogans, metaphor, and speeches that would usher in a new concept of governance and a new type of person to lead Madagascar’s future.<sup>5</sup>

The branding-through-image-and-message strategy carried them through a successful campaign with over fifty-five whistle stops across the country—a record in Madagascar’s election history campaign. This branding continued even throughout the post-election crisis that nearly thrust Madagascar into civil war as both the incumbent and Ravalomanana vied for victory and threatened run-offs. As the crisis continued for seven months, the two Americans on the campaign team shifted from trusted campaign advisors to international legal council for the presidential candidate, ultimately branding Ravalomanana as the victorious force of modernization, the international icon of good governance. They were instrumental in negotiating with the international community and diplomatically motivating its intervention, which ultimately led to victory for Ravalomanana and exile for the incumbent.

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<sup>3</sup> This information was obtained during fieldwork through conversations with campaign advisors from both the U.S. and Madagascar teams, 2003-2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Kabary politika* is a metapragmatic neologism often used in substitution of the former term of *kabarim-panjakana*, though both are used to refer to or describe the public mode of address of government leaders and representatives.

<sup>5</sup> The American campaign advisor to Marc Ravalomanana also had served as a state director for the Clinton campaign. As he explained, everything he learned and accomplished in that campaign shaped how he approached this campaign in Madagascar, to include speechwriting.

In terms of how this President speaks to and about his country as an icon of development and governance, the election campaign story corroborates well with a recent recollection in the BBC Press by anthropologist, Luke Freeman, a British scholar commissioned by the President to serve as speechwriter:

At the African Union summit in Addis Ababa, as the president and I sat together behind the Malagasy flag he asked me to become his director of communications. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan had just finished speaking.

“Teach me to speak like that,” he said.

...He had seen in me somebody who could solve his communication difficulties and help him address the English-speaking world, with whom he is keen to forge political and economic alliances.<sup>6</sup>

Luke Freeman later wrote speeches for the President, in both Malagasy and English. Ravalomanana not only wanted to speak English but also to speak like the English. Such long-lasting phenomena of transnational collaboration in matters of governance are not unusual. What is remarkable with regard to this election campaign is the localized and dialogically constituted U.S. institutional consultation and intervention into the functional linguistic repertoire of local political communicative performance of *kabary politika* oratory. This intervention is namely into the linguistically embodied ways in which national political figures speak to and about their country during a presidential campaign and continually in the everyday national politics of Madagascar. In Imerina, the urban province of Madagascar’s capital, Ravalomanana’s variation of *kabary* based on this type of intervention represents the leading edge of the stylistic and contextual shifts in prior genres of political discourse. These are shifts both pragmatically and metapragmatically affected for particular political outcomes.

The extent to which these stylistic and contextual shifts in *kabary* are intentional varies according to the degrees of ideological and aesthetic awareness of categories in language; and, this awareness is largely an otherwise unconsciously driven phenomenon of communicative social practice. What is certain amongst the Americans and Malagasy huddled together in hotel rooms crafting speeches, however, is that very different apperceptions of language use and language users are at play. Though both modes of oratory may be ideologically explained as productive of “images,” both go about crafting images in very different ways according to very different aesthetics. Such folk understandings and attitudes of language use and experience undergird the ideas, perceptions and gut feelings speakers have about language and how tropes—figurative idioms whose context-dependent meanings are iconic, contiguous, or symbolic of larger contexts—could and should be used to convey social identities and mediate social relations. What is more, the local semiotic chemistry of tropes in political discourse motivates imaginings of potential social conditions. In this case, imaginings of alternate but competing discourses conflate one type of speaking with transparency, development, and modernity, against another which keys “tradition” to corruption and continued poverty.

## 2. Keying Tropes of “Development” Through Variations in *Kabary Politika* Structure and Style

<sup>6</sup> Freeman, L. (2004) “Writing for Madagascar’s President” *BBC NEWS*. Retrieved on 09/13/2004 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/3645594.stm>

The old variation of *kabary politika* contrasts with the style of Ravalomanana in that its predicative phrases and imperatives are indirectly voiced and softened with markers of verbal politesse. Its register of primarily image, analogical, and contiguity tropes (Friedrich, 1991), manifests in back-to-back proverbs and indirect turns of phrase and motivates the political *kabary*'s formal structure of scripted greetings, virtues, and request for excuse from blame for speaking. An *mpikabary*, or *kabary* orator, offers a message circuitously and covertly communicated through literary features, all meant less to convey to auditors a point and more to convey an "image," commonly referred to as *sarinteny*, in the minds of auditors. Rather than completing his thought by stipulating a point, an *mpikabary* instead keeps the *kabary* alive beyond the event by reducing or simplifying his message to this lasting image and conveying it through various tropes. For example, should an *mpikabary* wish to address the importance of speaking indirectly, he will explain *indirectly*, "there are many trees, but it's the sugar cane that is the sweetest of them all." With this metaphor, auditors are left with a pleasing sense of what it means to hear words conveyed in a certain way over another. Or, for example, when a politician declares the necessity to take drastic measures, such as during the presidential election crisis of 2002, he may use the proverb "it is time to blow the top from the rice pot," prompting audiences to conjure a long past of political crises in which the masses assembled in solidarity to overcome problems by any means necessary. It is the dialogic work of these tropes that situates *kabary* as political action, as David Graeber (1996, p. 73) explains, that kind of "...action meant to be recounted, narrated, or in some way represented to other people afterwards," a semiotic process in which such images in *kabary* are articulated through new and jointly authored signs within the semiosocial realm constituting the political public sphere. In fact, it is this communicative process of talk *about* the *kabary* talk (*resaka*) based on the social meaning of these figurative idioms of *sarinteny* that gives *kabary* its pragmatic salience as politically meaningful action and warrants a more substantial analysis beyond the scope of this article.

Operationally, through both grammatical and contextual features, the productive role in Malagasy political relations of Ravalomanana's style of *kabary politika* is achieved through the indexically presupposed and entailing aspects of a set of pragmatically contrastive pre-packaged "images," what I refer to here as tropes. Their functionality may be best explained by Friedrich's observation of tropes as figurative idioms or "...prepatterns that variously channel, influence, and determine how the speaker interrelates elements of language to each other and interrelates language itself and the rest of the world" (Friedrich, 1991, p. 55). According to an operational analogy undergirding the language ideology and aesthetic of what is purported as "modern," tropes in *kabary politika* of the Ravalomanana sort indexically entail images of persons, groups, and imaginings of a Malagasy developed nation; whereas, rationalizations of prior genres of *kabary politika* are emblematic of a past rife with corruption. In short, referential transparency is viewed as iconic of motivational transparency. Prior presidential styles of *kabary* presuppose some predisposition and intent toward corruption. They signify the old ways, a way to "hide" what you "really mean" in the winding style, passive voice, markers of verbal politesse, and other formalized aspects structured in the code of what has been objectified as traditional *kabary*. Rather, to speak "directly" in an agent-centered active voice is indexical of an active leader and presupposes some ability and intent toward development and progress. Too many proverbs and a strict formal distance between speaker and audience index a speaker as trying to avoid responsibility and hide behind another's words rather than to show leader-like qualities of linguistic sophistication, a finesse inherent in power (*mahasina*) and of strength (*mahery*). Yet, idioms fashioned in

the corporatized register of business and international development “straight talk” mediate imaginaries of modernity, indicate development and progress, and imply a transparent government in their terseness. This evaluative shift is assimilated into the local stylistic context of Ravalomanana’s *kabary politika* and read by auditors today as somewhat startling to their aesthetic sense. Eventually, however, it “...gets semiotically turned into a positive attribute of [local] identity” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 404). In short, what was once thought by audiences in the capital city to be a speaking style embodying the essence of strength and power endowed as an “authorized language” has shifted over time. These qualities of a speaker are indexed in a different and contrasting *kabary* speech style, one this president and his campaign managers recognize as the “American style” but that is ultimately syncretically hybrid and transnational (Bourdieu, 1991; Errington, 1998; Hill and Hill, 1986).

Despite expressed rationalizations about new *kabary* variations, this talk about the pragmatics of language use and users is caught up in the ideological tension that many in urban Imerina share. In effect, stylistic shifts in *kabary politika* index ideological stances that co-articulate with “...deeply felt yet contested discourses” between western and Malagasy ideologies and aesthetics of oratory and the semiotics of how “image” is conveyed and experienced (Gal, 1993). Some of the political representatives in my research share the view of many SAE<sup>7</sup> speakers that indirect means for conveying a message through proverbs and other figurative idioms is a way to corrupt a message and to hide behind one’s words (Harman, 2002). Most Malagasy non-elites in urban Imerina, however, will argue that to be able to deliver a political *kabary* with such indirect and covert winding skill (*sakalaka*) through indirect speech (*teny mioloka*) is in fact, productive of transparency. It is to show the citizenry the orator’s path of thought in decision-making and, therefore, how he is able to think through and make decisions behind closed doors. In what Durham and Fernandez (1991) call an “argument of images,” these competing icons of corruption versus transparency between prior styles of *kabary politika* and emerging variations today serve as mediating products of competing and shifting registers and the linguistic markets associated with them. In this case of *kabary politika*, locally recognized variants become emblems (iconically essentialized indexes), and thus, tropes of their users’ agentive positions in shifting fields of identities (Silverstein, 1998, p.411). Through competing language variants—what has been deemed traditional in contrast to emerging forms today since Ravalomanana’s presidency—and discourses about such variants, political speakers within the plurilingual community of presidential speechwriters in Madagascar reclaim these continually emerging ideological notions of social agency denotationally encoded and achieved in speech.

It is within this purview of *kabary politika* that Ravalomanana shifts his speech style in three distinct ways: syntactically, with respect to register, and by metapragmatically altering an otherwise formalized oratorical context from one indexical of an unenlightened and unproductive corrupt past associated with prior “traditional” *kabary* styles to Ravalomanana’s variation that semantically (or through its denotational code) presages a future of modern development and progress. Stylistically enabled and sustained by the presupposed authority in the form of *kabary* itself and its power to invest in its speakers a creative force, these changes in Ravalomanana’s *kabary politika* speech style are not fully in place or widely recognized consciously.<sup>8</sup> They are, however, beginning to be felt and

<sup>7</sup> Western language variations, in general, or as Whorf (1956) coined, Standard Average European (SAE) languages.

<sup>8</sup> See Irvine, J. (1979). Formality and Informality in Communicative Events. *American Anthropologist* 81(4), 773-90 for more concerning authority and formality.

judged according to an aesthetic awareness that is both enabling of and in tension with everyday ideologies of language. Ravalomanana's utterances during the campaign and now are read, evaluated, and "rendered understandably relevant to what the [auditor] can come to perceive is going on" according to this discursive contextual style and the authority and power it both presupposes and entails (Goffman, 1983, pp. 50-51).

### **3. Syntactic Tropes of Identity in *Kabary Politika*: "I am a man of action, not one to stand here and make a speech"**

Linguistic variations of *kabary politika* evinced in the linguistic structural and stylistic aspects of the current president's speech style are especially productive of tropes that metapragmatically pit development and progress against corruption. Though it is only fair to state clearly that Marc Ravalomanana did not take all of the advice and implicit counsel from his campaign managers—a reason why he is so respected by these advisors—the stylistic and contextual variations that are evident in his speeches as president go hand in hand with the ideologies of "image" or figurative idioms of social agency denotatively encoded in speech. Specifically, these syntactic variations from prior genres of *kabary politika* contexts are of three types: In the American style Ravalomanana has been apprenticing, his speech reflects high incidences of active voice constructions, agent-oriented predicative phrases, and active imperatives. This syntactic style is evinced in his frequent use of the first person nominative, "*Izaho*," the nominative used to construct subject-verb-object (SVO) or agent-centered active voice predicative phrases. Though the passive voice is unmarked in Malagasy formal and informal discourse, in Ravalomanana's speeches, there is almost no passive voice unless the verb can only be voiced in this way, and almost no markers of verbal politesse, both ubiquitous with *kabary politika*. This is compounded by the imperative "*Aza matahotra...*" or "Have no fear..." reported speech of the Word of God as reported in the *Gospel of Mark*, but frequently re-animated as an active imperative refrain by Marc the President.

As a reflexive stance vis-à-vis marked voicing, Ravalomanana's speech style is productive of grammatic tropes denotatively encoding notions of social agency. This includes shifting syntax from the passive voice of predicative and imperative forms to the agent-centered active voice of SVO and active imperative constructions. Across styles of oratory, the functional qualities of ideological communicative practices and the ideologies and aesthetics on which auditors base their evaluations naturalize grammatical patterns as indexical of a speaker's internal state. In this case, focus operations in propositional and imperative statements of the Ravalomanana variety are perceived by auditors as semantic testimony to one's agentive capacity to lead a nation toward development. They also point to a directness that is ideologically oriented to transparency and action in this new variation of state communication, as it is marked in contrast to traditional *kabary*'s common reputation for indirectness associated with its stylistic features. Such perceptions of agentive capacity are mapped denotatively with active and agent-centered semantic operators, which are recontextualized as grammatic tropes of social agency and transparency. As words are up front, so too, is the person. This folk perception of the social indexicality of syntactic voicing resonates well with Ravalomanana's recent and frequent reflexive explanation about his own understandings of speech as a matter

opposite to action: “*I am a man of action. I want to see results instead of reports. I am not one to stand here and make big speeches.*”<sup>9</sup>

Local long-held ideologies of language in urban Imerina, however, contrast to those underlying western oratorical speech styles of active voice propositional statements. In general, because the passive voice is used in more formal situations by political elites, its construction is not marked in formalized speaking situations, yet the active voice is. In a speech community where passive constructions are unmarked in their ubiquity, agent-centered active voice syntactic constructions of SVO are grammatically correct in Malagasy but their interactional meaning is more closely associated with speech outside the context of the highly formalized genre of *kabary politika*. In fact, excessive use of agent-centered active voice in propositional and imperative statements does not go unnoticed. Today, political cartoons in urban Imerina often emphasize this fact of Ravalomanana’s speaking patterns, iconically essentializing the man himself through caricatures embodying this voicing as a stereotype of him and any who are irascibly egotistical, headstrong, or unabashed self-promoters. As “directness is associated with the ways of children...,” the ways of western speakers, “...and with things contrary to tradition,” Ravalomanana’s speech style—as candidate and as leader—is conflated in auditors’ evaluations with an unconscious awareness of one part of his syntactic patterns and the ideological associations between those patterns’ aesthetic and link to language users (Ochs, 1998, p. 104). In this, what might well be reproduced below the speaker’s threshold of ideological awareness is challenged from above the threshold of awareness, consciously in the evaluative purview of his audience (Hill and Mannheim, 1992, p. 389).

#### 4. On the Political Fruits of Register, or the Apples and Oranges of Word Choice

With respect to register, analogy tropes shift from the figurative idioms of proverbs, metaphor, and poetry, which are indexically presupposing of the *kabary* form, to the politicized religious scripture and simplification of political message through lexical items. These may be termed “sound-bites”—ubiquitous in American generic forms of political oratory and international development: “We will stand up to meet the challenge” toward “good governance,” “political stability,” “democracy,” “transparency,” “sustainability,” “good public service delivery,” all pitched for its “added-value” toward “economic development,” “vision,” and an “ownership society”; organized according to a “clear roadmap” to “lead the way to make this vision a reality.”<sup>10</sup> Whether speaking to an audience of rural Malagasy or to an American audience in Washington, DC, Ravalomanana’s register persists as a translocal syncretically hybridized version of what Michael Silverstein (2004, p. 116) describes as “corporatized register,” “...fashioned along the lines of modern advertising copy...very precisely composed by phrases and words as units...a compositional ‘language’...of imagery”; in short, with what Habermas and Benhabib (1981, p. 8) have termed “...a form of modernization guided by standards of economic administrative [communicative] rationality.”

Ravalomanana’s variation in word choice is demystified to an audience accustomed to prior registers of *kabary* genres, one usually full of proverbs and metaphorical virtues when registers of prior genres are put alongside his new variations. The former serves as

<sup>9</sup> *Olon'ny asa aho. Vokatra no ilaiko fa tsy tatitra. Tsy karazan'ireo olona moajorojoro sy be kabary ny tenako.* Recorded, Antananarivo, April 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpts from the President’s various speeches concerning the Millennium Challenge Corporation grant recently awarded to the Madagascar government. Recorded 19 April 2005, Washington, DC.

both entertaining and didactic translation for the latter, as in this example of the President of the National Assembly's *kabary*: "It has been a long time since the country's management has not been taken as if it were like oranges at the market grabbed by a thief who avoids thrown stones of a shopkeeper, to no avail." President Ravalomanana follows this traditional metaphor with his own brand of *kabary*: "This mentality was among the reasons for our non-development. We will bring home what is good from abroad... These are among my aims with the 3-P or Public-Private-Partnership."<sup>11</sup> The semiotic process of trope-making in current political oratory involves recontextualizing new signs of "elsewhere" into being with the "here-and-now," as each new sign is made understandable in the contexts of old and, in this case, coupled with talk about a type of pragmatic mentality. Any alternative mentality associated with prior styles of communicative practices—linguistic or otherwise—are "othered," thus metonymically aligning new ways of speaking with a new mentality, and old ways as indexical of an old mentality. Eventually this semiotic process of associating ways of governing with mentality and conveyed in a new register "...gets semiotically turned into a positive attribute of [local] identity," eventually assimilated into the local stylistic context of a nationally imagined *kabary politika* (Silverstein, 1998, p. 404). Through this compression of metaphor as metonym, speakers ably direct public opinion—really the measure of cultural values, norms, ways, and a group's disposition toward perceiving and acting in the world beyond the event. The interactional dimensions of *kabary politika* registers serve as an instructive example for this. Proverbs of a country's management like oranges at the market grabbed by a thief who avoids the thrown stones of a shopkeeper, juxtaposed to the 3-P tropes of a developed nation link together a complex of images maximally productive of particular identities and imaginaries of potential social conditions and social relations.

## 5. Frame Breaks as Tropes Productive of Transparency

The impeccably dressed leader, who finally agreed to smile for his campaign poster and deliver *kabary* in the variation of an American politician, built a campaign around an American "style." This style was discursively deployed to create an image in a consequential way that embodied "the very essence, the principle, the 'right stuff' to hold together that one message," the message of the modern man (Silverstein, 2004, p. 24). Malagasy-delivered and susceptible to evaluation according to local attitudes about language and about language's role in power, this American "style" of hand shaking, eye contact, and casual dress, however, breaks down and symbolically reframes the experience of the normalized formal context of *kabary*. During his oratorical performances Ravalomanana deftly recalibrated the physical and symbolic contextual distance between speaker and auditor through *metanarratives* or talk about the context of the form within the form itself. This shift from talking in *kabary* to talking about some aspect of *kabary* constitutes frame breaks, or ways speakers and audiences experience the intersubjective and dialogical qualities distinctive of *kabary politika* (Goffman, 1974).

Principles of power and authority shaping *kabary politika*'s formalized context are iconically reflected in the embodiment of a candidate's speech and how his audience reacts to that contextualizing act. The traditional *mpikabary* generally maintains a physical and symbolic distance from the audience. The audience legitimates this distance by remaining silent and not penetrating that intersubjective distance without taking

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpts of speeches by Lahiniriko, President of the National Assembly, and Ravalomanana, 9 January 2004 New Year *Kabary* at Iavaloha, Antananarivo, Madagascar.



contextualized cues from the speaker to do so. On the contrary, though by the nature of his political role, Ravalomanana's mere utterance presupposes a State *kabary politika* with this kind of presupposed distance between speaker and audience. Quite often Ravalomanana provides a frame break by talking about the context of this form of State address in the *kabary* itself. This is evinced in his 2004 commemoration address of the Malagasy insurrection against colonialism on 29 March 1947. Ravalomanana broke the frame otherwise presupposed in this physical orientation between speaker and audience in his *kabary* when stating to veterans of the insurrection, "You down there, come up here because you are to be honored and I will go down there as I am to be thankful of your work." With entailing discourse *about* the contextual organization of *kabary* governing this discourse, he metapragmatically recalibrates the otherwise presupposed context of speech metonymic of the relationship between the State and the people. During the campaign, he further upset the contextual conventions of the code of presidential *kabary* by offering his cell phone number to members of the crowd, shaking hands with people across the audience, and unabashedly keeping the mud on his shoes—all the while explaining in his speech that these were the things that really spoke the truth about him as a transparent and action-oriented presidential candidate, not one who just gives *kabary* full of empty promises. Ravalomanana's reflexive actions are keyed to already in place native ideologies of language's functionality as contextualized social action, namely that events of *kabary politika* incite evaluations of their political speakers as liars (*mpandainga*), their words as metonymic of an institutionalized corruption. Often the instantiation of the form itself is impetus enough for this and, in fact, during the presidential campaign, simply to deliver a *kabary* without also narrating one's awareness of this anticipated evaluation was to destine oneself for failure at the polls.

*Kabary* context, as an object of metanarrative scrutiny for their animators and auditors, serves as a figurative idiom of Malagasy talking and agentive intent itself. In this sense of shifting the speaker's positional identity from distant to proximal, this kind of break in the formalized intersubjective experience between speaker and audience has the productive force to index Ravalomanana's intentions away from broken promises and corruption and toward "transparency" and "real action." Ravalomanana projects the formalized dimension of traditional *kabary politika* onto the dimension of corrupt versus transparent governance, indexically realigning ways of speaking with ways of doing government. Inhabiting the speaking role of the very context he disrupts, he is continually recast as an irrefutable symbol of progress and development, now and whenever he speaks again.

## 6. Conclusion. Semiotics of "American-style" Trope-making in *Kabary Politika*

As both iconic and indexical of language use and language users, Ravalomanana's oratorical variations discussed in this paper are based from an essentialized analogy of association and equivalence between speaking styles and internal states based from certain semantically-motivated ideologies and aesthetics of what language is and does. In this case, this analogy is based from translocalized contrasting ideologies—American and Malagasy—of how speech referentially relates to one's potential to embody and advance the "image" of good and modern governance through development and transparency. A good *mpikabary* builds a message from images (*sarinteny*) as does the American orator, but the two differ greatly in just what those tropes are, what they index, and how they frame the experience of the dialogical communicative interaction *cum* intersubjective engagement between speaker and auditors. In other words, as far as political rhetoric is

concerned, both styles—American oratory and Malagasy *kabary politika*—are fruitful in their respective contexts. Only they are of apples and oranges.

This particular semiotic and processual logic of practice in building an inhabitable “image” from words becomes pragmatically salient as a mediator of political process between leaders and led through what Vygotskij has termed “thinking in complexes” (Silverstein, 2004, pp. 22, 38). This is a mode of classification that results in grouping things together based on some principle of equivalence, a principle we may be hard-pressed later to extract as what holds this complex together. In the case of the Ravalomanana campaign, through oratory, “issues” of good and modern governance are “lumped and turned into ‘message’-operators available for stylistic fashioning of image” attached to and embodied by the successful political figure who animates them (Silverstein, 2004, p. 24). Marc Ravalomanana’s frequent deployment of the term “development plan” as a trôpic edifice for supporting his platform, is emblematic of the kind of message operators used to classify and fashion all that this leader says as part of an “image” of progress and transparency. And it is against this complex that suppresses alternative tropes of the skilled and winding *mpikabary*, while recontextualizing their prior genres with corruption.

Michael Silverstein’s analysis of American oratory in *Talking Politics* (2004) is relevant to this situation in Madagascar because of his analysis of the pragmatic features of U.S. political oratory, which are products of an evaluative orientation representative of the American campaign advisors to Ravalomanana. The American campaign advisors to Ravalomanana crafted speeches based on prior genres of speech in the United States, but this time for a Malagasy audience, inadvertently pitting one ideology and aesthetic of oratory against another. In the case of Ravalomanana’s campaign and his speech style as president, American speechwriters mapped American or western speech styles onto the campaign regardless of their generic form or the space and time in which they were uttered. Their anticipated pragmatic outcomes were assumed based from how such styles are evaluated by local attitudes in the places where they are most often deployed. The authority presumed in the *kabary* form itself bestows a power of creative force on the president so that any shifts he makes are read by local urban audience through the ideological lens of an audience that presupposes that authority in a leader. Aesthetically, however, as many in urban Imerina will attest, such variations do not go unnoted and it is often at this level of experience that language variation is read, evaluated and contested in the ways discussed in this paper. It is this local ideological orientation that explains away Ravalomanana’s variations as products of his creative force, but it is the aesthetic of local attitudes that determine how these shifts may be socially productive.

In effect, patterns of speech enacted in political oratory through tropes and mass-mediated evaluations in urban Imerina are starting to be read as contiguous with patterns of other actions aligned with the “image” representing the State’s “development plan” through action and those who inhabit that message. As Silverstein (2004, p. 24) explains, “To give birth to ‘message’ issues”, in this case, of modern development as contrasted to corruption of the past, “must be brought together—given plot and characters, rhyme if not reason—in occasions devoted to the making of image,” what I have termed the making of tropes in this discussion; and “the best occasions of this sort combine the use of verbal discourse situated in the context of a reinforcing sound-and-light show”—in Ravalomanana’s case, of helicopters dropping in on remote villages carrying a messenger of hope and progress through good governance and development, iconically displayed in

the “strong” words and able body of a Malagasy boy *cum* millionaire through hard work and faith.

This pre-packaged mode of making “image” in concert with language and embodiment reflects a social dynamic of political engagement in an increasingly plurilingual social field mediated by both local and global constituents and contrasting apperceptions of political oratory and orators. In its continually emerging local version, this approach to language and embodiment is indicative of a changing political public sphere and continues to mediate notions and practices of authority in political process, as well as modes of political participation today. Together, these differing perceptions pit progress as an effect of denotational transparency against the corruption of “winding speech,” iconically and indexically contrasting them through syntax, register, and context by analogizing certain speech styles with certain styles of governance. As Silverstein (1998, p.411) argues, “...seen locally in essentializing ideological terms...these polar(ized) opposites become a processual armature of revalorization of the very language form with which positioned identities are heard to speak in various public fora.” In short, the older variations of *kabary* known for their *sakalaka* and *teny mioloka* will continue to shift in valence as urban Malagasy auditors come to know from their president’s oratorical style and the message he inhabits that to be a developed nation is to speak as a developed nation.

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