

The arms of democracy

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Abstract

The analysis undertaken in the present work intends to show how different social actors interpret and react to part of a speech that the Peronist candidate Carlos Menem delivered in the course of his presidential campaign in Buenos Aires in November 2002. In his eloquent speech addressed to a group of professionals and technicians, after referring to the appalling high rates of crime and delinquency in Argentina, Menem called for increased police powers to repress criminals, and he even “suggested” resorting to the Army and other state security forces to combat crime. Three groups from different social, political and economic positions reply to Menem’s speech. All of them were interviewed immediately after Menem’s controversial words were broadcast by the Argentine news media. Three newspaper reports representing each of these groups are analysed following van Dijk’s socio-psychological framework and taking into account his theory of context and social representations.

Keywords: social actors, discourse, context, social representations.

Las armas de la democracia

Resumen

El análisis que se realiza en este trabajo intentará mostrar de qué manera diferentes actores sociales interpretan y reaccionan ante parte de un discurso pronunciado en Buenos Aires en noviembre de 2002 por el candidato peronista Dr. Carlos Menem, durante su campaña para acceder a la Presidencia de la Nación. En un elocuente discurso dirigido a un grupo de profesionales y técnicos, luego de referirse a los sorprendentemente altos índices de criminalidad y delincuencia en Argentina, Menem hizo un llamado a las fuerzas policiales para reprimir a los criminales, y hasta “sugirió” recurrir a la Armada y a otras fuerzas de seguridad estatales para lidiar con el problema. Tres grupos con diferentes posturas sociales, políticas y económicas respondieron al discurso de Menem. Todos fueron entrevistados de inmediato luego de conocerse las polémicas palabras de Menem a través de los medios de prensa argentinos. Los tres informes periodísticos se analizan siguiendo el esquema socio psicológico de van Dijk, y considerando su teoría de contexto y representaciones sociales.

Palabras clave: actores sociales, discurso, contexto, representaciones sociales.

As armas da democracia

Resumo

A análise que é realizada no presente trabalho tenta mostrar de que maneira diferentes atores sociais interpretam e reagem ante parte de um discurso pronunciado em Buenos Aires em novembro de 2002 pelo candidato peronista Dr. Carlos Menem, durante sua campanha para ascender à Presidência da Nação. Em um eloqüente discurso dirigido a um grupo de profissionais e técnicos, após referir-se aos surpreendentemente altos índices de criminalidade e delinqüência na Argentina, Menem fez um chamado às forças policiais para reprimir os criminosos, e até 'sugeriu' recorrer à Marinha e a outras forças de segurança estatais para lidar com o problema. Três grupos com diferentes posturas sociais, políticas e econômicas responderam ao discurso de Menem. Todos foram entrevistados imediatamente pós serem conhecidas as polêmicas palavras de Menem através dos meios de comunicação argentinos. Os três artigos jornalísticos são analisados seguindo o esquema sócio-psicológico de van Dijk, e considerando sua teoria de contexto e representações sociais.

Palavras chave: atores sociais, discurso, contexto, representações sociais.

The analysis undertaken in the present work intends to show how different social actors –a group of activists, a Justicialist (1) governor, and president Eduardo Duhalde’s (2) Chief of Staff– interpret and react to part of a speech that the Peronist candidate Carlos Menem delivered in the course of his presidential campaign in Buenos Aires in November 2002. This calls to be considered without disregarding either Menem’s worldwide reputation (3) and his skills in the political arena after a ten-year presidential tenure from 1989 to 1999, or the reverberations which his words might have had in view of the long history of military interventions in the country and, especially, the most recent and bloodiest coup d’état in 1976 (4).

In his eloquent speech (Appendix 1) addressed to a group of professionals and technicians, after referring to the appalling high rates of crime and delinquency in Argentina, Menem called for increased police powers to repress criminals, and he even “suggested” resorting to the Army and other state security forces to combat crime. This is an extract of Menem’s speech, the portion that brought about different reactions and interpretations:

Este año las muertes civiles en delitos violentos superan los 5.000 casos.

Los asesinatos de policías federales se han incrementado en un 1.000 por ciento en relación a los casos que se producían en la década del 90.

*Secuestros, robos y crímenes cunden tanto en las ciudades como en zonas rurales.[...].
Una vez más se demuestra que cuando no se gobierna, cuando se extiende la ingobernabilidad, se avanza hacia la descomposición y el caos.
Nosotros vamos a dar un giro estratégico en materia de seguridad, que se apoyará en la capacidad de gobernar y en el ejercicio de un liderazgo decidido.
Vamos a poner en práctica una política integral y activa para combatir el crimen utilizando todo el peso de la Ley y todos los instrumentos del Estado. Vamos a incluir, donde sea conveniente y necesario, la participación de las Fuerzas Armadas.
[...] Vamos a afrontar con inteligencia y vigor el desafío del crimen organizado y de sus manifestaciones más peligrosas y nefastas, [...]*

Three groups from different social, political and economic positions reply to Menem’s speech: activists (“*piqueteros*”) representing unemployed men and women (henceforth Report 1), José Manuel De la Sota, who stands for another faction of the Peronist political party (henceforth Report 2), and Chief of Staff José Pampuro, who embodies the current president and the official political party’s views (henceforth Report 3) (5). All of them were interviewed immediately after Menem’s controversial words were broadcast by the Argentine news media. I selected the three reports from the written press, just as they were released by two of the most prestigious news agencies in Argentina, DyN and Telam. *Diarios y Noticias S.A.*, founded in 1982 by a bureau of newspapers from the Fed-

eral Capital, reports information to most of the newspapers, radio stations, TV channels, and web sites in Argentina (6), whereas Telam, a state news agency, provides information to government institutions as well as to the national and international media.

I followed van Dijk's socio-psychological framework to analyse the three newspaper reports and took into account his theory of context and social representations. As van Dijk (2004) pointed out, "it is the way people *understand* or *interpret* their social environment that constitutes the context of their discourse and social practices". According to van Dijk (in Wodak, R., 2001: 21), social actors involved in a communicative event rely upon their personal experiences, strategies and mental models to interpret a social event. These mental models or social representations form an interface between the individual socio-cognitive system and the social system, and they control the pragmatic aspect of discourse. This in turn means that the mental constructs allow language users to subjectively interpret a social situation and to control discourse production. Likewise, Fairclough and Wodak (in Widdowson 2004: 138) believed that "discourse cannot be understood without taking context into consideration", and "utterances are only meaningful [...] if we know what the discourse relates to in the past." I followed some of the steps suggested by van Dijk (in Wodak 2001) to analyse the three pieces of discourse, namely: analysis of context, analysis of local meanings, analysis of "subtle" formal structures and analysis of specific linguistic realizations.

Report 1 displays features of the broader context which are worth analysing. If we consider context in a social interaction, human participants –their roles, position and power– are crucial elements, together with setting, genre and domain. All these features of context may influence the interpretation of what is said. In this report, the participants are Juan Carlos Alderete, Nicolas Lista, and Nestor Pitrola, all of them activists from different unemployed workers' movements. They belong to a low social class, and they are speaking as representatives of the unemployed and hungry people in Argentina, as disadvantaged citizens, and as opponents of violence defending those who died in *Puente Pueyrredón* (7). They were interviewed to know their opinions and reactions to Menem's speech on November 22nd, in Buenos Aires. The domain is politics, and their role is to defend Argentine citizens' rights, to reinforce the democratic system, and to criticize Menem's previous presidential term.

On analysing local meanings, van Dijk finds it very interesting to take into account the analysis of "implicit and indirect meanings, such as implications and presuppositions" (26), together with irony, metaphors and polarizations. Although most of the activists' opinions were expressed using direct and explicit language, it is worth mentioning in this analysis the presence of irony in "*primero que arregle La Rioja*" (8), meaning that, if Menem is not able to manage his own province, he will not be able to govern the country, either. The metaphoric expression "*sacar a la Gendarmería y la policía a la calle*"

(8) accounts for the unrest that Menem's "suggestion" produced on this social group. As regards presuppositions and implicatures, in "*algunos piqueteros [...] encapuchados para que la policía no los identifique*" (9), the presupposition is that police forces try to identify these people during demonstrations to arrest them, and the implicature is that there is a struggle activists vs. police forces. This also reveals pre-existing tensions between activists and policemen, and between activists and Menem.

After analysing local meanings, van Dijk suggests analysing "subtle" formal structures, as lexical style, topic choice, and rhetorical figures, among others. As regards lexical style, Report 1 is crowded with words of negative connotation, such as *hambre, desnutrición, desesperación, violencia* (10), which convey the idea of social and economic unrest.

In this piece of discourse there are two dominant lexical chains, one related to crime and punishment: *mafioso, paredón, fusilarlo, robado, represivo, vendepatria, massacre* (11) and the other connected with social inequality: *deudores, hambre, capitalista, autoritaria* (12). They all contribute to build up Menem's negative image. The use of numbers and statistics accounts for the number of children that die in the province of La Rioja because of malnutrition, "*22 / 23% de muerte infantil*" (13), and are used to provide a believable support to the speaker's claim that children also die in La Rioja, Menem's birthplace.

Linguistic realizations, such as generalizations, are also used in this text. One of the activists, Pitrola, denounces the current state of affairs in many provinces by saying "*mientras cunde el hambre en 'todas' las provincias,*" probably meaning that hunger and poverty have long been commonplace in some provinces, without specifying which ones. Another activist, Alderete, refers to Menem as an offender who has acted dishonestly, betraying all political and ethical principles: "*Ha traicionado 'todos' los principios*" (14). Being a Justicialist politician, he should not forget about social justice and equality.

Being quite short, Report 2 displays fewer instances which are worthy of analysis. Out of those, I chose as its most salient features its context and some "subtle" formal structures. As for context, the participant is De la Sota, at that time, governor of the province of Córdoba. He is another Peronist presidential candidate and Menem's rival. Different from the participants in Report 1, this politician comes from a high social class. He speaks as the governor of a very important province, as a citizen, but mainly as a politician. He was also interviewed on November 22nd, in Córdoba, and he plainly attacks Menem. De la Sota uses the adjectives *salvaje* (15) and *nefasto* (16) to qualify Menem's future presidential term, and compares him with very important conservative political leaders such as Pinochet, Fujimori and Le Pen, all of them fascist dictators. He disapproves of what Menem has proposed by using a very informal expression, not characteristic of his social and cultural class: "*metiéndole bala a todo el mundo*" (17). De la Sota makes it clear that, in order to stop crime, the government cannot kill all the criminals. He moves from a formal register to an informal one, very much like the one

characteristic of a lower social class, and closer to the activists' language. He may be showing sympathy towards these groups as part of his political campaign.

Finally, in Report 3 the only participant is José Pampuro. As De la Sota, he also belongs to a high social class. He speaks as a member of the current government and as a citizen. His role is to reassure the democratic system and to defend the government. The analysis of local meanings shows the many devices this man uses to show detachment and to avoid saying too much. Pampuro uses passive voice in "*es visto como una cosa negativa*" (18), to avoid saying who considers Menem's suggestion inappropriate. There are two linguistic devices that are worth mentioning: repetition and nominalization. In the case of repetition, the word "*marco constitucional*" (19) is repeated to reinforce the idea that the Army acts with the government. As regards nominalization, there are two examples: "*un marco constitucional de actuación,*" and "*sacarlo de ese marco*" (20). The speaker, Pampuro, uses this device to distance himself from the situation. Besides, he justifies Menem's words and tries to mitigate their effect by saying that the candidate is campaigning: "*los candidatos pueden estar buscando su discurso de campaña*" (20). Definitely, Pampuro aims at guaranteeing the constitutional rights in a state of peace and quietness.

The present analysis has shown how, in interpreting Menem's words, different social actors revealed pre-existing socio-political tensions with the current Peronist government, and strongly denounced Menem as a fascist, a criminal and a demagogue, who was just campaigning. Contrary to what Menem proposed, these three groups were convinced that empowering the Army and other state security forces would endanger Argentina's democratic system. Undoubtedly the phrase *Fuerzas Armadas* (21), closely connected with the 1976 military coup d'état, produced adverse reactions on the three groups and were interpreted in various ways. In the activists' view the Army was seen as a force engaged in illegal activities, for which Menem was the Head: "*Menem es el jefe de los mafiosos*"(22). De la Sota believed that Menem's call on the Army to act in political and social affairs would rate him as a fascist: "*Menem se ha vuelto fascista*"(16). However, it is worth saying that De la Sota was also campaigning, and his words were part of his strategic plan to deride Menem. For Pampuro, one of the current government's representatives, the Army acts *with* the President and not *for* the President. All of the social actors, however, were highly critical of Menem's proposal of empowering the state security forces. The activists or "*piqueteros*" used informal and aggressive language to refer to Menem, as did De la Sota, whereas Chief of Staff Pampuro used moderate language in his response.

All things considered, Menem wanted to picture himself as a powerful democratic candidate, capable of bringing back security with the help of the Army, but the social actors interpreting his words seem to aim at destroying that image and creating a new one, that of a sly politician involved in almost illegal affairs verging on fascism, and

whose only goal was trying to persuade citizens to vote him. Once again, thus, strong evidence supports the use of Discourse Analysis as a tool to dismantle, re-signify and, consequently, better understand the arms of democracy.

Notes

- (1) Justicialism or Peronism is an Argentine political movement based on the ideas and programs associated with former president Juan Perón (1946-1952 and 1973-1974). Perón's party, the *Partido Justicialista*, derived its name from the Spanish words for justice (*justicia*) and socialist (*socialista*). Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periodism>
- (2) He was in office from January 2, 2002 to May 25, 2003. He belonged to the Peronist party.
- (3) During his presidency (1989-1999), an amnesty was granted to most of the leaders of the 1976 dictatorship. Menem sold many of Argentina's state industries to private owners at bargain prices. He was implicated in the illegal sale of arms to Croatia and Ecuador when both those nations were engaged in military conflicts.
- (4) The 1976 Argentine coup d'état overthrew Isabel Perón on March 24, 1976, in Argentina. In her place, a military junta was installed, which took the official name of "National Reorganization Process," and remained in power until 1983. It resulted in the "disappearances" of about 30,000 persons. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_Argentine_coup
- (5) For Reports 1, 2 and 3 see Appendix 2.
- (6) <http://www.dyn.com.ar>
- (7) On July 26 a number of unemployed workers' (*piqueteros*) movements called for demonstrations against the economic and social policies of Duhalde's government. Riot police at Puente Pueyrredon tried to stop workers. Two activists were shot dead, more than 160 were injured and hundreds were arrested. The murdered activists were Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán.
- (8) First, he should organize La Rioja.
- (9) Some activists cover their faces so that the police would not identify them.
- (10) Hunger, malnutrition, despair, violence.
- (11) Mafia man, wall, execute, robbed, repressive, massacre.
- (12) Debtors, hunger, capitalist, authoritative.
- (13) 22 / 23 % of children's deaths.
- (14) While there is widespread famine in "every" province; he has betrayed "all" principles.
- (15) Savage.
- (16) Inauspicious.
- (17) Shooting all the criminals.
- (18) It is considered as a negative / inappropriate decision.
- (19) Constitucional framework.
- (20) Constitucional framework for action, taking it out of the framework.
- (21) The Army.
- (22) He is the Head of the Mafia.