A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis on News Posts About Andres Manuel López Obrador Across Facebook

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Abstract

News sites on Facebook present posts with headlines that are aimed at triggering a reaction in their audience. This is significant specially when observing one of the currently most polarizing figures in Mexico, Andres Manuel López Obrador. This article analyses how these sites present AMLO for their audience and the intended image they portrait in the combination of written discourse and the image of the president attached to it. This image could be negative, positive or neutral.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis, intermodality/intertextuality, communicative acts.

1. Introduction/background

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) is the current president of Mexico. When compared with other leaders in Mexico López Obrador stands as the most popular leader with an approval rating above 60% (Sheridan, 2019). He started to gain popularity across the country while being mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to 2005. However, he has been involved in politics since 1976 when he supported Carlos Pellicer's campaign to senator in the State of Tabasco (Lic. Andrés Manuel López Obrador – AMLO, 2022). During his rule in Mexico City, his public programs gained the attention of Mexicans by promoting economical supports for single mothers, pensions for the elderly and greatly investing in urban development, transportation and education (Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador | Age, political party, & facts, 2022). Nonetheless, his rule in Mexico City was also notorious for cases of corruption among his subordinates and difficulties to reduce crime in the city (Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador | Age, political party, & facts, 2022).

Andres Manuel López Obrador ran for presidency in three different occasions after his rule of Mexico City. He was elected president in 2018 with over 60% of voters on his side. Ever since, his popularity has remained strong among the Mexican people. The popularity of the president is also shown in the thousands of viewers he has during his daily morning reports, *las mañaneras*. This morning reports are the common source of most news about the president and the images use to represent him.

In spite of his popularity, Mexico shows signs of polarization (Centro de opinion Publica, 2019). This is noticeable when exploring social media.

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There are 84.1 million internet users in Mexico which represents 72% of the population in Mexico, and 96% of these users access the internet through a smartphone (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2021). Thus, social media is an important source of information, and therefore it has a strong influence in the population. Social media has become an open platform for people to engage in all kinds of subjects like entertainment, health, education, and politics. While in public spaces or face to face interaction some topics are avoided because they are controversial or considered taboo, many internet users have found a space in social media to openly discuss these. In fact, sites dedicated to reporting news have gained significant numbers of followers who actively engage in interaction about their content.

News media using social networks post headlines and pictures with the aim of attracting people to their pages and generating replies, comments and reactions, or some kind of interaction depending on the social media platform. A common strategy is to present a headline with clickbait or partial information that will trigger polarized reactions and heated discussions in their reply or comment sections as observed in the study conducted by Sari (2019). Posts referring to López Obrador usually call the attention of social media users and typically get thousands of reactions and comments, which trigger heated online discussions. Some posts also seem to present information with the aim of promoting a specific image about the president. Depending on the media broadcaster, this image could be either positive, negative or neutral.

The aim of this paper is to present the analysis of several news post on Facebook about Andres Manuel López Obrador and the picture showing him that is attached to it. Therefore, the following research questions guide the study:

- How do news pages on Facebook represent Andres Manuel López Obrador and his government in their headlines and cover pictures?

- What is the intended image of Andres Manuel López Obrador that news pages on Facebook project to their audience?

2. Literature review

Research on discourse and images used in social media has been undertaken from different perspectives in DA and through various methods. This section offers an overview of research on the discourse and images used on social media and news.

Hamrita (2016) presents a critical discourse analysis on the representation of the Islamic community on Facebook after the revolution in Tunisia. The study analyzes how the secularist group depicts Islamism, through their views posted on Facebook. Hamrita (2016) analyzed 10 texts from secularist intellectuals using a framework that results from a combination of Fairclaugh's research methodology in CDA and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to discourse. The results show an aggressive and demeaning discourse against Islamism which contradicts the message of peace and openness manifested by the secularist intellectuals in their text from different subjects.

Another related study is from Sari (2019) who analyzed news headlines based on Fairclough's model of discourse analysis and using the pragmatic identity method from Sudaryanto (1992). Their finding shows how news pages on the social media try to manipulate their readers to increase their views and generated heated discussion between opposing readers to obtain comments. The tendentious headlines or fragments of information presented do not precisely reflect the actual information in the main article.

The critical discourse analysis approach used in the studies by Hamrita (2016) and Sari (2019) are only focus on the written text. They do not provide much information on the images

(if any) that may accompany the texts found on social media or headlines in news sites, which can also shape the message perceived by their readers.

Visuals in social media have a great impact in communication and the message transmitted through it. Adami and Jewitt (2016) contrast different articles presented in a journal on social media and visuals. In their analysis they identify four themes related to visual communication:

- The creation of new genres and practices in communication thanks to new technologies that facilitate the creation of multimodal texts.

- Visuals in social media enables the expression and construction of identity, however it also allows for the spreading of stereotypes.

- The diffusion of public and private everyday practices redefines the way we interpret events and situations. What seems common or inconsequential may have a greater impact in a different moment.

- Visual products are shared, copied, re-purposed or used again. This causes difficulty to determine who is the author or owner of visual materials shared in social media.

The themes found bring interest in the relevance of multimodality in social media. Communication is changing through technology and focusing critical discourse analysis only on written or spoken text is no longer enough to provide a complete and critical picture of any discourse related issue in social media that is under study.

Van Leeuwen (2006) exposes the relevance of visuals to discourse. He suggests speech acts should be called *communicative acts* and broad the analysis of discourse beyond written and spoken language. In this paper, Van Leeuwen (2006) uses the *Kitchener Recruitment Poster* to present how the intermodality between images, language and typography represent what he calls a *single communicative act*.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, this multimodal critical discourse analysis study focuses on the intermodality between written discourse about Andres Manuel López Obrador and the images of him that are attached to publications from different news' pages on Facebook. The posts were collected between February and April 2022. A total of 31 posts comprises the data collected of this study.

According to Hurtado Razo (2020) Facebook is the most accessed social media platform in Mexico. He also remarks that Facebook has a great influence in politics, culture and the public opinion, which generates polarization as it provides a space for the expression and discussion of topics that more traditional media does not often cover. The study concludes that Facebook is the social platform with the highest control over the flow of information, emotions and communication in Mexico. "*Nunca pensamos que tuviera tanto poder en la actualidad*" (Hurtado Razo, 2020).

The news pages were chosen based on the number of followers they have, at least one hundred thousand followers. In 2014 the average organic reach (not as a result of an ad) of a brand Facebook page is 6% of their followers (Manson, 2014). When pages with 100 thousand followers post something, 6 thousand followers are organically reached in average.

The data is first collected by taking screenshots from the posts while scrolling Facebook through its app in a smartphone using android. The screenshots are saved in a special folder in Google drive. The screenshots are divided in folders by topic. In the end one of the most

popular or controversial topics is selected specifically for lexical and image analysis. The topic selected is the opening of the new airport Felipe Angeles. Each folder must have at least 10 screenshots from different news' pages. The criteria use to select the screenshot is that they must content three elements, a written text as post, a picture showing Andres Manuel López Obrador and a headline, typically under the picture that is linked to the full article in the news page site.

Figure 1. Shows a news post screenshot from Facebook. It shows its three elements, post written text, image and the article headline generally under the image

Based on Hamrita's (2016) methodology, this paper draws on Fairclough's (1984) research methodology. Hamrita proposes three aspects: description, interpretation and, explanation and evaluation.

The description focuses on describing the highlights of the individual elements that form the communicative act, the language in the written text, the typography and the image. The interpretation focuses on the analysis of the details observed on the intermodality between these three elements to form a single communicative act in some selected posts from the data. Finally, the explanation and evaluation highlight the findings and determines the implications of the influence these news posts have in their viewers.

AntConc software (Version 4.0.11; Anthony, 2022) was used to create a short corpus with the 31 post and headlines' written text. The main reason for using this software is to observe how Andres Manuel López Obrador name is mentioned in the posts. This corpus consists of 1431 tokens and 540 types. Then lexical choices, and over lexicalization, are observe to help determine the position of the post based purely on the written text, as observed in Machin and Mayr (2018); other elements are also observed based on the strategies described by Van Dijk (2004) in his ideological discourse analysis, i.e., positive/negative lexicalization, vagueness, generalization, irony/sarcasm, etc. Typographic choices are observed in the use of uppercase text, some orthographic symbols and emojis.

The analysis of the image of López Obrador attached to the text in the post is centered around two criteria. The first element is the distance created between the reader and Andres Manuel López Obrador, this is determined by whether it is a close-up, a medium shot, a long shot or if López Obrador is facing the camera or looking at a third object (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

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The second characteristic considers the facial expressions, hand gestures and body language (if visible) that Lopez Obrador shows in the image and how it may affect the connotation of the text in the post and headline.

4. Description

4.1 *Naming the president*

Andres Manuel López Obrador is usually mentioned in a variety of names. The corpus created through AntConc software (Version 4.0.11; Anthony, 2022) revealed that Andres Manuel López Obrador is named AMLO 38 times through the 31 post analyzed and *presidente* 19 times. These names could be considered neutral terms, however "AMLO" is sometimes use as a way to avoid referring to him as an authority. He is also referred with his full name, Andres Manuel López Obrador, only seven times, and six out of those seven times with the title *presidente*. These last forms for naming him could be considered as a formal or very formal way to referred to the president. Due to the research limitations this corpus size does not provide enough data to analyze the use of other common names like, Andres Manuel, López Obrador, Obrador, or some of the nicknames he is sometimes referred to either with appreciation or contempt.

4.2 *Positive, negative and neutral positions*

It is observed that the different news pages may present elements that define the ideology or position about the news presented. The expressions and word choices for the different themes set the tone of the post. Positive, negative and neutral representations are observed some clearly just by observing the written language, and others that are influence positively or negatively by the image that is attached to the post.

4.3 *Visuals*

In the typographical dimension we can observe the use of orthographical symbols and full upper-case letters. These words are sometimes use to highlight elements in the discourse or to denote certain irony or sarcasm. Some less formal pages use emojis to visually set the tone of their post.

The images of the president are usually composed of the president, the podium with microphones and a white or red background that is usually visible during his *mañaneras*. Sometimes the Mexican flag is also visible on the background and occasionally other people or a screen.

Figure 2. The elements usually observed in AMLO's pictures,
his face/body, the podium and the background

Some news pages often show pictures of AMLO depicting neutral body language, gestures and facial expressions. However, some others use pictures that may enhanced their post written text or headline either in a positive or negative way. While some pictures show AMLO in a clear image, with a body language that makes him look straight and a kind face, other pictures show AMLO in positions where he seems stooped, with messy hair, and the colors of the picture lighting seems darker. Pictures sometimes show him frowning, smiling, grinning, smirking, with an upset face, or with a serious expression. The smirking or smiling face may have a different tone for interpretation depending on the written text that is tag along with it.

5. Analysis

Due to the limitations in the extend of this paper, the analysis presented is only focused on two contrasting posts.

5.1 *Felipe Angeles Airport*

The opening of the Felipe Angeles Airport (AIFA) was surrounded in polemic. One of the most highlighted topics was the stands of food selling different typical Mexican foods including *tlayudas*. This generate a lot of headlines in the news as *tlayudas* are food that is usually found in small stands on the streets, and not so typical in big malls or international airports.

Debate los Mochis, a news page from the state of Sinaloa, has over 380 thousand followers. After analyzing various Facebook posts, it is clear that *Debate los Mochis* has a tendency towards representing the president negatively:

Figure 3. *Debate los Mochis*, Tlayudas, AIFA, reporter

The post text reduces Andres Manuel López Obrador to his acronym "AMLO", perhaps just for shorting as later on it acknowledges him as president. However, the post's text refers to a reporter who confronted the figure of authority that represents the president. It victimizes the journalist in face of the power represented by the president who calls her "classist" and "racist", the way the text is presented makes it feel like an attack, though we cannot see the full context. The headline that links to the full article also stablishes this power dynamic in which the president exhibits Azucena Uresti (the journalist) for showing a video of a woman selling *tlayudas*. Again,

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no further context is presented, and the word "exhibit" is use with a negative lexicalization that presents the journalist as a victim of the president in this power dynamic.

The image shows the president in his podium from the presidential morning report facing a crowd from a slightly downward position. The picture was selected in a moment where the president face gives the impression of being gesticulating or about to say something and a slight smirk. He is slightly leaning forward which could be interpreted as a menacing position. This is enhanced as it happens from the presidential podium which is a sign of power.

The combination of all these elements denotes a negative impression about Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador that depicts him as an oppressive power.

In contrast *La Jornada* is another news site that tends to depict a positive image of the president. La Jornada is a nationally recognized newspaper with over three million followers.

Figure 4. *La Jornada*, una mujer, Tlayudas and AIFA

The text in the post refers to people questioning the opening of the new airport as *opositores* (adversaries) which is a generalization. Then it refers to the criticism made by *una mujer*, "a woman," about the food stands selling *tlayudas*. In contrast, *Debate los Mochis* created the figure of a victim in a journalist while *La Jornada* presents her as just a nameless woman. It is not clear is both news' posts are referring to the same or a different person, just based on the post information. AMLO is referred as "the president Andres Manuel López Obrador" which reinforces his position as authority and power. Then, *tlayudas* are presented as a contribution of the native cultures in order to provide them of some greater value beyond just a typical Mexican dish. This attribution as contribution of the native cultures reinforces the headline in which AMLO suggests the opening of typical food locations in new airport. Here he is referred as AMLO perhaps just for keeping the headline short. In both the post text and the headline, it is express the confrontation to the adversaries and the criticism as something that the figure of the president has to fight.

The picture depicts AMLO facing the camera, above his podium. his sight seems to be focus on the crowd he is speaking too. His lips are forming a smile with a short opening, as if he

was saying something. His body is slightly lean to one side while extending his hand to the crowd, in a gesture similar to that of a teacher giving a lecture. Behind there is a red diffuse background, and on the left the Mexican flag is distinguishable. This picture depicts a positive image that enhances the message presented in both the post's text and the headline which can be interpreted as a teacher educating the crowd.

6. Explanation/evaluation

It is clear that some news sites take stances about Andres Manuel López Obrador and organize their post to depict a specific image about him. This does not mean the positive or negative portrayal of the presidents is false as it much depends on the topic and the actual context, however viewers generally take the first impression they have from the three elements analyze in the post. Ethically it is necessary that news pages make their best to present their news post from a neutral stance, and allow the viewers to access and read their articles to get the full context, so they construct their opinion more informatively. However, this does not exempt followers of critically analyze these posts and construct their opinions from information obtained from different sources.

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