

“Maestro: el Gran Aliado”: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article examined an opinion column titled *Maestro: el Gran Aliado* (teachers: The great ally) from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. The relevance of the analysis of this piece lies on the fact that our current minister of education wrote it shortly before accepting this position. The study sets out to explore the linguistic features used in this opinion column and uncover the opaque intentions behind it. The analysis is conducted through the use of systemic functional linguistics. The findings imply that the discourse used in this opinion column had a different intention than the transparent purpose stated by the name given to it.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, transitivity, modality, textual, opaque meaning, opinion column, systemic functional linguistics.

1. Introduction

Ever since their emergence, newspapers have been important social institutions precisely because they have provided a forum for citizens, although sometimes only a limited group of people get to participate in this forum, to discuss the issues that concerned them (Lewis & Wahl, 2005). Since 2015 and before he was appointed minister of education in Mexico, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán has written opinion columns for *El imparcial*. The themes of the columns vary, for example national and international politics, social issues to name a few; however, education is a consistent topic in most columns.

In 2017, for his opinion column Barragán wrote a short piece called “*Maestro: El gran Aliado*” for the above-mentioned newspaper. The transparent aim of the column was to portrait Barragán’s opinion about teachers in Mexico, specifically teacher from the public sector. This paper presents a critical discourse analysis (CDA) with the aim of analyzing this written discourse in order to uncover the opaque or hidden intention. The analysis is divided into three sections, transitivity, modality and textual. To conclude, I present a summary of the repercussions the op-ed has and the importance of critically processing information on newspapers, specially opinion columns.

2. Theoretical background

For a better understanding of this paper, it is crucial to understand the central phenomenon that is under study in this paper. To provide this context on the central phenomenon, I shall first provide a brief biographical background, in which I explain who Esteban Barragán is and why it is relevant to analyze this opinion column.

- Through the use of systemic functional linguistics, it was found that the discourse used in this opinion column had a different intention than the transparent purpose stated by the title of the piece.
- Behind the opinions that the author has concerning the improvement of public education lies the political endorsement to, at the time, a presidential candidate.
- Evidence of opaque intentions and meanings shed light on the necessity of media literacy training for citizens in any society.

2.1 Esteban Moctezuma Barragán: A brief biographical account

Born in 1954 in Mexico City, Esteban Barragán holds a BA in economy and law from the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) and a MA in political economy from Cambridge University. During Ernesto Zedillo’s presidency (1994-2000), Barragán was appointed *secretario de gobernación* (ministry of the interior) and later he was in charge of the *secretaría de desarrollo social* (ministry of social development). In the year 2000, Esteban Barragán retired from politics and became the CEO of *Fundación Azteca* (a foundation created as part of the social responsibilities of Grupo Salinas). While being part of this foundation he created two programs in charge of promoting music and connecting NGOs and bring them together to improve communities.

Barragán is also the author of three books. Two of them related to public management and government policies and one of them related to public education. Additionally, he published weekly opinion columns at a renowned newspaper in Mexico. On 1 December 2018 Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador appointed Barragán as *secretario de educación* (ministry of education). This marked the end of his job as CEO of *Fundación Azteca* to occupy this position.

It is relevant to analyze this opinion column (and others he has written) because these shed light on his beliefs and perspectives about topics such as education. This opinion was written months before he became minister of education and yet he was already announcing core beliefs and ideas concerning how education was going to evolve. The following section discusses the methodology used for the analysis.

3. Methodology

This analysis sets out to examine an opinion column written by our Minister of Education in 2017. The purpose of such analysis is to uncover the underlying hidden assumptions that this text entails. This is of special interest since this op-ed was written a year before he was appointed minister of education. In order to conduct this study CDA was employed as the research methodology. By the end the 1970s, CDA had established as one of the domains of research in discourse studies. It is known as an approach that is based on the union of language studies and social theory (Fairclough, 1992). It investigates how social power is misused and how text and talk represent, procreate, and resist dominance and inequality in the social context. The focus of CDA is public speech, such as political speeches, advertisement, newspaper, official documents and so on. CDA has its roots in critical science; van Dijk (1986) states that critical science (CS) goes beyond descriptions, superficial applications, and theoretical problems. The importance of CS lies

in that it goes further into questioning responsibility, interest, and ideology, in order to explore social problems.

One of the most important linguistic theories correlated with a critical discourse approach is that of Halliday's systematic functional grammar. It is supported by some linguists (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough, 1995a; Kress, 1985) who used it for analyzing the text because systematic functional grammar has a significant role in critical interpretation of linguistic expression in various discourses. Therefore, systematic functional linguistic (SFG) model has been applied as a tool for analyzing this text, the following subsection provides an overview of this tool. In sum, critical discourse analysis and systematic functional linguistics together will help develop a stronger analysis of the text to better discover the hidden implications of this opinion column.

3.1 Research technique: Systemic functional linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics has been developed for around half a century now, in different contexts around the world. Systematic functional grammar was developed by Michael Halliday and it is based on grammatical description. The framework considers that language is interlocking options or networks of systems for creating meaning (Sharififar & Rahimi, 2015). Halliday (1978) further elaborates that discourse is a multidimensional process which is not only composed of lexico- grammatical choices but also by higher levels of functions like semiotics. In other words, the social, physical, cognitive, cultural, interpersonal and situational context play an important role in discourse choice (Haratyan, 2011). This multidimensional process encompasses three functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Table one summarizes the nature of each of these:

Table 1. SFL's functions

Ideational function	Combine transitivity (grammar) and voice to express reactions, cognitions and perceptions. This function comprises six processes: material (action with a direct object), mental (perceptions and reactions), verbal (exchange information or describe), relational (identify or attribute characteristics), behavioral (express physiological or mental behaviors) and existential (present something that exist or happens)
Interpersonal function	Express comments, attitudes and evaluations related to certain communication roles. These roles are informing , questioning , or giving commands .
Textual function	The manner in which language is organized coherently to help the listener or reading understand the message.

The analysis was conducted by first separating the entire text into clauses to conduct all the three analysis. Appendix A shows the complete transcript of the written discourse, the section of the text in clauses and the color coding for verbs and adjectives.

4. Results

The analysis is divided into three sections, first the transitivity analysis in which the data is classified into the SFL's six processes. The second part of the analysis concerns the interpersonal function providing a modality analysis. The last part of the analysis specifically looks at the textual function in order to understand how content of the opinion column was unified. Table 2 illustrates the general characteristics of the report under examination.

Table 2. General characteristics of discourse

Statistical Item	Opinion Column	
	No.	%
Tokens	498	100
Types	210	42

The results from Table 2 show that the lexical density of the article is at 42% this means that the text is directed at a very small audience.

4.1 Transitivity analysis

The transitivity analysis consists of understanding the processes that are used within the ideation function. To illustrate this analysis Table 3 shows the results of the analysis in relation to the processes. In addition, Table 4 presents some of the examples found in each of the aspects.

Table 3. Transitivity analysis

Statistical Item	Opinion Column	
	No.	%
Material	4	16
Mental	3	12
Relational	2	8
Verbal	6	24
Behavioral	2	8
Existential	8	32

Table 4. Examples of process

Examples	Opinion Column
Material	Invest, educate, led
Mental	Think, rethink
Relational	Maintain, had
Verbal	Ask, answer, have
Behavioral	Improve, revise, wonder
Existential	Forms of to be

The author of the op-ed mostly used the existential process (32% of the time) to describe the state of situations and people related to education. Some examples of clauses are the following: “Porque la mayoría de las maestras y maestros están siempre en el aula / Because the majority of the teachers are always in the classroom”, “El maestro está auténticamente enamorado de su profesión; no es un trabajo sino un compromiso de vida. / Teachers are authentically in love with their professions; it is not a job but a lifetime commitment.”, and “[director] Es el CEO de la escuela y para ello debe prepararse. / [the principal] Is the CEO of the school and must prepare for that”. As we can observe these quotes discuss the status and characteristics of the teachers and

principals that work in the public sector. Therefore, all clauses can be treated by the reader as facts about these stakeholders.

The second most used process is the verbal one, which was used a 24% of the time. The author uses this to communicate the reader his action plan for public education. These clauses express most of the times the class, quality, or quantity what is being shared. Some sentences that illustrate this process are “Contesto que la educación tiene un destino: la calidad. / I respond that education has one destiny: quality”. Barragán here is responding to the rhetorical question concerning education in AMLO’s presidency. Another example is “Es importantísimo tener una amplia oferta de preparación para la gestión directiva. / It is really important to have a wide offer for training principals in schools”. Here, he highlights the importance of this course of action, however, this statement fails to elaborate on how this can be achieved.

The two processes that were used the least are the behavioral and relational ones (both 8%). The relational process was used to compare Spain and México. This comparison was used to explain why México’s educational quality is not high. The behavioral function was used to illustrate how the author and the teachers feel about how teachers are treated.

4.2 Modality analysis

This part of the analysis is concerned with examining “comments, attitudes, and evaluations in relation to the particular communication roles” (Halliday, 1971: 333). The texts’ purpose is to provide the readers with the opinions that the author has surrounding education and they key to improving Mexican public education. Through the analysis of the verbs the results indicate that 85.1% of the text has affirmative verbs. This means that the author states and treats these statements as facts and as something that it is true or presently true. Throughout the written discourse there is only 3.7 % verbs whose mood is imperative. These only appear when the author suggested solutions to improve educational quality and this is followed by a verb commanding the reader to consider such solutions. Table number 5 shows a summary of the mood in the opinion column.

Table 5. Mood

Statistical Item	Opinion Column	
	No.	%
Imperative	1	3.7
Affirmative	23	85.1
Interrogative	3	11.1

Through the identification of the mood in the text it is possible to understand that the purpose of the report is to express a certain ideology that the author of text has concerning the steps to take in order to improve public education in Mexico. Due to the short nature of the opinion column and the asynchronous nature of this type of communication, the audience, do not have access to the inquiries may lead us to question whether or not these had a certain ideological bias. The author of the piece is not explicit on what underlying assumptions or ideologies are informing his opinions.

Additionally, Table 5 summarizes the analysis of the use of tenses within the opinion column. The results indicate that present tense was used the most used tense. The usage of present tense (59.2%) affirms that the aim of the column was to establish this as a relevant social topic. The infinitive tense was second most used tense (27.6%), this was mostly used when discussing what are the steps to follow in order to improve que quality of public education in Mexico. This is

to ensure that the audience understands that the solution lies on actions such as creating, changing, inspiring and educating, to name a few.

Table 5. Use of tenses

Statistical Item	Opinion Column	
	No.	%
Present	46	59.2
Past	6	7.9
Infinitive	21	27.6
Future	4	5.2

The final level of modality is presenting the use of adjectives in order to explain the attitudes and evaluation. As illustrated in the table 6, the author of the column uses mostly positive adjectives. This could mislead us into thinking that the use of these positive adjectives means that the opinion column is a praise to the situation in Mexico. However, all the positive adjectives (93.5%) are almost exclusively used to describe this imaginary scenario where the government changes its mechanisms to improve education. For example; “*capacitación pertinente*/relevant training”, “*acceso total digital*/full digital access”, and “*esfuerzo mayor*/greater effort”. In general, the use of positive adjectives in the text reveal what the future secretary of education believes are the best cases scenario for public education. It also reveals a prescriptive use of adjectives such as normal, quality, main and pertinent. The author does not hedge his claims about what is to be done for education, they are portrayed through the use of adjectives as the only way.

Table 6. Use of adjectives

Statistical Item	Opinion Column	
	No.	%
Positive adjectives	29	93.5
Negative adjectives	2	6.4

The negative adjectives (6.4%) are used to describe the bad criticisms and fame Mexican teacher have in the eyes of society in general “*profundamente triste*/deeply sad”. Repeatedly the use of adjectives gives evidence that the author thinks positively of the changes that in his opinion are necessary to have quality information. It is important to note that the small number of negative adjectives does not mean that the author has mostly positive opinions about the situation in the country.

4.3 Textual analysis

In this part of the analysis I will present the organizational structure of the written discourse I am analyzing. The organization also reveals information on the intention of the opinion column. The first lines of the op-ed are the following:

“Muchas personas preguntan cómo será el programa educativo de ganar Andrés Manuel López Obrador la presidencia. Contesto que la educación tiene un destino: la calidad / A lot of people wonder how will Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s educational program would be if he is elected president. I reply that education has one destination: Quality”.

The opening line of the column references our current president AMLO. When this piece was written, he was still a candidate. It is interesting that although the title highlights teachers as great allies and it seems that the entire piece will revolve around teachers in public

education, it does not. The opinion column is quickly framed into a political statement where Barragán seems to know that education, if AMLO is elected, is destined to become quality education.

“España y México teníamos la misma población en 1960. Hoy, España mantiene su misma población y nosotros crecimos tres veces más! Los españoles llevan 6 décadas invirtiendo en valor agregado para mejorar su servicio educativo, mientras México se nos obligó a crecer su sistema al ritmo de la población / Spain and Mexico, we used to have the same population numbers in 1960. Today, Spain maintains its numbers and we have grown three times more! The Spanish have been investing on added value to improve their education service, while Mexico’s educational system has been forced to grow at the rhythm of our population’s growth”

The introduction continues and tries to set a context. Spain and Mexico are briefly compared in order to offer as justification as to why education in México is lacking quality. In the second section of the column Barragán briefly discusses that quality can be achieved through technology, language learning (priming English), teacher training to name a few. The third section focuses on the teachers. The section discusses topics such as the responsibilities teachers have, the mistreatments they suffer, and the changes education needs to endure in order to have better teachers. All these points are intertwined with Barragan’s opinions concerning the bad perspectives people have about teachers. He voices his admiration for these teachers and eases the heavy load that has been placed on them. Also, there are some comments related to principles in public institutions and what their role should be.

The fourth and final section is a *mélange* of voicing how the teachers feel and what are some mechanisms the government can implement in order to improve the quality of our education. The closing sentences is a rhetorical question posed to the reader in order to appeal to their emotional side. This question is quickly answered by Barragán claiming that this can all be changed if the reevaluate the *función magisterial*.

4. Discussion

In this section I will focus on the significance of findings of the analysis. One significant element of this paper is that it is possible to identify that discourse, whether written or oral, has two meanings (a) the one transparently assigned by the author and the genre of the discourse itself, and (b) the one that is opaque and requires observation and critical thinking skills. According to Wodak and Meyer (2001) language in mass media is meant to be transparent, neutral, disinterested, and an open space for public discourse. Nonetheless, this analysis shows none of these qualities, they do not give evidence of a non-bias nature of the author’s opinion. The affirmative nature of the text is surprising since it is an assumption that what the author is writing is the truth.

Another significant finding was the political endorsement given to a presidential candidate was hiding in plain sight. The reader might forget that the entire text is framed on the assumption that AMLO becomes president. It is almost as if the real problem, which is providing quality education in public schools, can only be solved if people vote for a certain candidate. This is might be misleading for the reader. The significance of the findings shed light onto the deceiving nature papers and media discourse can have and how applied linguistics can help make these opaque meanings more transparent.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this critical discourse analysis, it is apparent that what seems to be one man’s opinion about public education and how teacher are key to change the situation, it is in reality a subtle political endorsement. The transitivity analysis reports that the processes that were majority employed were the existential, verbal and material. The author used a verbal process 32% of the time, this was to paint a picture on the current state and facts of education and its stakeholders, while the verbal process (24%) was used to describe the actions that are necessary for public education to succeed. The op-ed was scripted in an affirmative mood; the reporter used this mood 85.1% of the time. Correspondingly, most of the content was expressed in the present tense. Considering the results, it is vital for Mexican society to consider that texts in newspapers, social media or online websites might have a transparent purpose, manifested by the author or the genre of the text, and a covert one. It is important to raise awareness on this reality where the mass media can select their narratives to a) demand a better quality in our media outlets and b) to provide the citizens with media literacy education (Koltay, 2011). In Mexico 80% of the population is said to live in poverty and each day greater inequities exist among the country’s society (Feixa, 1998). The situation is unfortunate however, it is our decision and education’s responsibility to instruct its citizens with tools that allow aid them navigate life.

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Appendix A. Color coding process for analysis

Verbs (all tenses)	Adjectives	Verbs (infinitive)
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Material process clauses

1. Los españoles **llevan** 6 décadas **invirtiendo** en valor **agregado** para **mejorar** su servicio **educativo**, mientras México **se nos obligó** a **crecer** su sistema al ritmo de la población.
2. De **educar** en artes, **destacando** la música **orquestal**, y de **apasionar** a los estudiantes en ciencia y tecnología a través de la robótica.
3. En el caso de los directores **habrá que darles** el lugar que **merecen** y que **requiere** la calidad.
4. Hace tres años, cuando Emilio Chuayffet **encabezaba** la SEP, **hizo** una consulta **nacional** sobre la educación y al **presentar** los resultados **afirmó**.

Mental process clauses

5. **Pienso** que gran parte de la critica **es injusta**.
6. **Pensemos** en **crear** la Academia de Directores. ¿No **piensas** que **es fundamental** que cuando un niño **llegue** a la clase **vea** en su maestro el ejemplo a **seguir**; la **gran** voz que **le enseña**; el **gran** amigo que lo **puede conducir** al conocimiento y **transmitirle** no sólo la importancia de **tener** sino también de **ser**?
7. Actualmente el mundo **está repensando** cómo **educar** para un futuro en donde los **principales** trabajos hoy **no existen**.

Relational process clauses

8. España y México **teníamos** la **misma** población en 1960.
9. Hoy, España **mantiene** su **misma** población y nosotros **crecimos** itres veces más!

Verbal process clauses

10. Muchas personas **preguntan** cómo **será** el programa **educativo** **de ganar** Andrés Manuel López Obrador la presidencia.
11. **Contesto** que la educación **tiene** un destino: la calidad.
12. Es **importantísimo** **tener** una **amplia** oferta de preparación para la gestión directiva.
13. Eso sólo **se logrará** **revalorando** la función **magisterial**.
14. El éxito en **lograr** la cobertura que **tenemos** nos **impulsa** a un esfuerzo **mayor**.

15. Llegó el momento de la calidad, de lograr acceso total digital, de impulsar el aprendizaje de idiomas, en especial el inglés, de una capacitación pertinente de los maestros y de una educación acorde.

Behavioral classes

16. Los maestros tienen la responsabilidad de ser cada vez mejores, pero también la autoridad educativa tiene el compromiso de darles las herramientas para crecer, de revalorar la función magisterial en serio.
17. Durante años se ha tratado mal al maestro en diversas formas: películas, programas de análisis, declaraciones de “expertos”, por lo que hay que revisar a fondo si esa actitud nos llevará a mejorar la educación. ¿Por qué?

Existential clauses

18. Porque la mayoría de las maestras y maestros están siempre en el aula, dando clases; cumpliendo los programas de la SEP.
19. Están enseñándoles a sus niñas y niños; y esforzándose por aprender cada vez más.
20. El maestro está auténticamente enamorado de su profesión; no es un trabajo sino un compromiso de vida.
21. En México todo está dispuesto para que mejore la educación.
22. El director no puede seguir siendo un tramitólogo administrativo; alguien que se dedique a llenar informes para la SEP, sino un verdadero líder y conductor de la enseñanza en su plantel.
23. Es el CEO de la escuela y para ello debe prepararse.
24. No es lo mismo ser un buen maestro que un buen inspirador de toda una escuela.
- El hallazgo más importante es que el maestro mexicano está profundamente triste, sentido con la sociedad mexicana por cómo se le ha venido tratando.

