Persuasive discourse and the political-rhetorical apologia of Mexican left-wing candidates

Antonio Zavala
School of Communication
Universidad Panamericana Mexico.

Abstract

Through critical discourse analysis, this paper explores the congruence between speech, actions and ideological principles of the Mexican left party candidates (Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Andrés Manuel López Obrador). It also determines a possible interpretation of the elections results and their defeat arguments during the Mexican transition (2000-2012). The main problem is a lack of institutional arrangements and an uncertain electoral process during many years, all of them originated by unrepresentative and ineffective governments where citizen’s identity, values and confidence are weak or simply nonexistent. Trust between political and Mexican society has not been achieved and is built on the basis of a democratic discourse, which is not consolidated yet, mainly because of the rhetoric expressed by political parties and their candidates after the presidential election.

This happens since 2000, when the party in power, with an ideology of the center-left (PRI) lost the election and pass the power to the conservative party (PAN), as of this date there have been three presidential elections a period best known as democratic transition. During this period the Mexican left party has repeatedly relied on civil society organizations as a tool of political resistance where Mexican democracy is exhibited as indeterminate and never able to settle legitimacy problems. At the same time, public opinion about democracy is clearly on crisis. The National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) was created in 2006 on the grounds of defenses and reconstruction of electoral political legitimacy in Mexico, after what they called: “The 2006 electoral fraud”. In the beginning, this organization served to loser former presidential candidate of the left, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, to keep a permanent political campaign.

But it was in 2011 when López Obrador presents his electoral project for 2012, which highlights the participation of representatives of the movement in electoral positions. It also indicates that MORENA will officially become NGO from October 2011; at this moment, he also announced his final separation from the PRD (the main left party in Mexico) and started the registration process as a civil society organization. Finally, on September 10, 2012, the former presidential candidate announced his separation from the left political parties and the transformation of civil society movement (MORENA) into a new political force.

1 Paper for ECPR Joint Sessions, panel on ‘Political Organisation in Transformation? The Impact of State Regulation on Parties, Interest Groups and NGOs in Advanced Democracies’, 11-15 April 2014. Disclaimer: This document is a summary of a more extensive investigation of 350 pages, so some points may be omitted or not getting enough explained.

2 Associate Professor & Director of Postgraduate Studies of the School of Communication, Universidad Panamericana, Campus Mexico. anzavala@up.edu.mx
Rhetoric has been practiced throughout history, since the Greeks Aristotle and Plato. Today, four possible uses of rhetoric have been defined within this discipline: to persuade, to inform, to seek truth and to entertain. The objective of rhetoric is to transmit information and the scope and goal of persuasion. This requires an audience that trusts the speaker so as to result in a call to action.

One of the latest developments in this field of research is the Theory of Critical Discourse Analysis which has its roots primarily in the Frankfurt School of Jürgen Habermas, as well as in the school of English criticism, in Basil Bernstein, in the sociolinguistics line and in the works on discourse analysis carried out by Foucault and Pêcheux in France and by Gramsci in Italy.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the characteristics in play of a context in all of the attributes of a social situation subject to study that can influence the production of both written and oral discourse. Under this perspective, the characteristics of the context are relevant in comprehending the discourse. It is fundamental to be aware that CDA analyzes the discursive dimension of the abuse of power as well as the injustice and inequality resulting from it, and not the reverse.

CDA has a hint of counter power that focuses on the study of unacceptable actions indicating the abuse of power and revealing domination; in a way, it reveals a perspective of resistance and solidarity. This is interesting because it allows us to identify what kind of people hold power and the type of abuse which results from this power, on the basis of discourse analysis, the actors which hold power and the dominating groups which have access to manipulation (considering there is not free access to the media), from the president up to the leaders of opinion who control the political discourse.

The analysis goes beyond a descriptive and linguistic analysis; it involves understanding the forms as well as the social and political problems of a society and focuses on the idea of abuse of power determining who has access to structures of communication legitimized by society.

Thus, communication becomes the principal resource of dominating groups and discourse becomes a power to control the actions of others. It is a control of intentions by means of persuasion. In this way, confidence between political interlocutors and Mexican society has not yet been achieved and, at the same time, it has been built upon the foundations of a democratic discourse that has not yet been consolidated precisely due to the rhetoric used by political parties and candidates after presidential elections.

This is the case of the Mexican left which employs a post-electoral democratic discourse (in the case of candidates Cuauhtemoc Cardenas in 1994-2000 and
Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2006-2012) based primarily on rhetorical apologia, a communication practice aimed at gaining the support of internal groups of the Mexican left, as well as of the population in general in the context of the electoral defeat.

As of the year 2000, there have been three presidential elections within the so-called democratic transition. On the three occasions, the dissident party has been the left, particularly in the last two elections in which their approximation towards the defeat occurs from a critical perspective, focusing on the way in which discourse is used to establish and legitimize their positions or practice and resist –without using fixed methods– their main goal of accessing power.

In order to better comprehend how the discourse of the Mexican left-wing party (PRD) works and what kind of rhetorical representations and apologia styles were used by the defeated political parties and candidates in the elections over the past two decades, it is essential to identify the interests in the official discourse of the Mexican left and how the interests of the party converge and diverge with those of their candidates.

The foundation of the discourse of the left and particularly of Cardenas and Lopez Obrador during the period of democratic transition in Mexico is defined and limited to the existence of fraud in such a way that transition and democracy in Mexico shall never be a constant. In any case, they rely on the discussion and continuous debate of an unfinished democratic reform that never concluded.

Another important question to pose is what kind of rhetorical representations and apologia styles were used by defeated political parties and candidates in order to maintain legitimacy regarding party aspirations in the immediate future (the foundation of the next electoral discourse).

The process of constructing meaning and interpretation in the text places great emphasis on the struggle for ideological power and an attempt to transfer it to public opinion by employing two concepts: hope and fraud, both of which have enormous repercussions in the candidates’ rhetorical apologia. In terms of modality, both employ a propositional type (epistemic) of the exhortative type with the intention of influencing (reasoning) the audience to induce an active response in the interlocutor, in this case the electorate. The particularity of these arguments is important because it occurs during post electoral moments, which allows us to deduce that the rhetoric of campaigns persists even after the legal process has concluded.

The rhetoric of both candidates leads us to the recurring consideration of the association between Mexican history, national heroes and their own political
careers that reinforce the use of a propositional-exhortative modality with the intention of inducing an active response in the electorate.

On the other hand, the analysis of lexical-semantic micro strategies shows that discursive propositions are always charged and simultaneously descriptive-disguised; in other words, they allude to emotionally-charged acts of the past in order to induce the acceptance of causes or, at the very least, an aversion for certain elements included in this discourse.

Extra linguistic references of discourse are based primarily on “facts” or the “state” of things in a social, economic and political sense by relying on distinct meanings.

In particular, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas employs designation, addressing taboo subjects within Mexican public opinion whereas Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador does it primarily through presupposition, by denouncing the groups in political and economic power as responsible for the nation’s problems.

It is especially noteworthy the way the concept of fraud is employed. For Cardenas, it is a result of the imposition of presidential power whereas for Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador it is tied to the power wielded by the country’s influential groups, specifically Salinas de Gortari and the economic groups tied to him.

Associations are forms of discourse that can be found in the discourse of both candidates; some of the associations expressed are atemporal, although many of them respond to and reference a specific moment of Mexican reality.

**Cardenas:**

(... ) In the world, political change towards democracy does not occur without sacrifices of the people. Systems that change, governments which are substituted a few days or weeks ago appeared to be strong, unalterable. These are lessons repeated by history. This could already be seen in the era of the *Porfiriato* in 1908 in the interview with Creelman and in the Centennial celebrations of 1910.

Changes in society and in political and economic systems occur when exploitation and misery become excessive, when oppression impedes political expression and denies authentic representation, when wealth is increasingly concentrated in less and less hands. They also occur when the people become aware of the strength that lies in their unity, when this
The rhetoric of both lead us to conclude that by associating Mexican history, national heroes and their own political careers, they reinforce the propositional-exhortative modality with the intention of inducing a more active response in the electorate.

In the analysis of rhetorical-argumentative micro strategies, rhetorical structures frequently vary depending on the forum and the audience. However, similarities between the two can be emphasized with the most marked difference lying in historical self-justification. Cardenas practically never relies on this resource whereas AMLO frequently creates the idea in public opinion that he forms part of a “caudillismo”.

3 Cardenas Solorzano, C. Nace una esperanza, Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, Mexico 1990, pg 19.
5 Lopez Obrador, A.M. ibid., pag. 67.
6 Lopez Obrador, A.M. ibid., pag. 72.
Cardenas

- Condemnation of acts and abuses resulting from the excessive concentration of power in the President
- Accusation of third-party interests (foreigners)
- Proposition of civility and the respect for votes in Mexico
- Elimination of the excessive concentration of power in the President
- A call to action (forming of the PRD or other)

AMLO

- Condemnation of corruption and abuse of groups in power
- Association of AMLO with historic figures (self-justification) or accusation of aggressions towards his person (non-physical)
- Condemnation of mechanisms used to buy social will
- A call to the struggle or civil resistance
- The creation of new institutions (Morena or others)

On the other hand, the designation of social actors (labelling) is always carried out in a negative and derogatory manner towards the common enemy; with Cardenas, it is towards the president and foreign interests; with AMLO, it is towards the ruling PRI political party and the groups in power.

Positioning of the point of view is carried out through declarations based on suppositions aimed at reinforcing the legitimacy of the speaker aligning the subject in question with calls to action which consist of defending the vote, the creation of new electoral figures and the direct struggle against the president or the groups in power in Mexico.

Reasoning is based on the justification of their own personal attributes, in their historical legacy of “caudillismo” and on the imputation of negative actions, facts and values of the common enemy.

In the case of calls to action aimed at mitigating the facts, these are practically non-existent and generally tend to intensify situations that allow for the formation of groups allied to their causes. In other words, heroic “caudillismo” appears upheld in the collective historical memory of Mexicans as a way of involving public opinion.

The circular nature of arguments frequently employed to approach a matter from different angles is revealed in topics addressed in the discourse: those of history, authority, threat, urgency and justice. In contrast, those of charge, number and definition are used much less.
We can affirm that fallacies in linguistics are varied. Furthermore, the discourse of the two left-wing candidates in Mexico contains high-level fallacies, leaving a very narrow and partial vision of the facts and the post-electoral discourse.

The problems of the excessive use of fallacies in the electoral discourse of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador arise when this model becomes a belief/dogma among his followers and, judging from the evidence, as a result, these fallacies multiply in a malign way. They are not manifest in the same manner with Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, whose discourse relies more on matters of party ideology than on cultural stereotypes, as occurs in the former.

A common fallacy implemented is that of argumentum as populum/reasoning for the people, with an exhortation to the majority appealing to that which is popular, to popular prejudice, biases, feelings, enthusiasm and attitudes of the masses with the aim of inducing approval rather than a rational support of the idea. Likewise, the fallacy of consensus/Gentium is employed; that is, their vision is the truth on the basis that the majority of the people believe there really did exist a fraud.

The analysis of other semantic structures, movements and strategies shows that ambiguity is a particularly important semantic form, as it frequently appears in the discourse of both Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The objective of playing with the meaning is employed, particularly when it refers to campaign promises. Contrast, comparison and illustration are systematically the most common forms of the different verbalized configurations in discourse present in semantic structures, movements and strategies. The use of these three semantic forms provides a foundation for argument and counter argument, implications that are generally negative.

Comparisons are drawn primarily between groups of individuals and the plurality. For example, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas frequently tries to demonstrate the degree or amount of power held by foreign interests (of very few) on a first level and compares it with that of Mexicans, on a second level. In other words, foreign interests represent the individuals and the total sum of impoverished Mexicans represents the plurality. As for intertextuality and perspective, we can safely say that these mechanisms are rarely employed.

Finally, the analysis of apologias in political rhetoric show that denial and evasion of responsibility are strategies aimed at diminishing the offensiveness of the electoral defeat. The result of these strategies suggests that candidates always acted in good faith. In spite of this, the end result was not the desired
one (victory), resulting in negative consequences that had already been denounced as a possibility.

These strategies are particularly directed at interest groups with the goal of minimizing the scope of the defeat, clearly differentiating between the rest of the electorate (followers of other political parties).

As for the strategy that consists of reducing or minimizing the magnitude of the offense and the facts, it is oriented towards differentiation-comparison and is combined with the strategy of directly attacking the other actors involved in order to reduce the opponent’s credibility.

The implementation of corrective actions is, undoubtedly, the least frequently employed of Benoit’s strategies given that self-proclamation by the offended party doesn’t allow for the carrying out of a series of commitments, such as admitting campaign errors or simply accepting defeat, since this is looked upon as a threat to the positive “caudillo” image of the candidate. Finally, the mortification strategy based on admitting responsibility and asking for forgiveness is completely non-existent in both Cuauhtemoc Cardenas’ and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s discourse.

This study did not find in the apologia strategies of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas or Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador an attempt to offer an explanation or account of electoral results in a positive tone with the aim of reducing the threat to social order to a minimum. On the contrary, their offer for damage repair to democracy lies in the promise to permanently intensify the struggle.

The final line of questioning in this research is aimed at identifying interests in the official discourse of the Mexican left (PRD) and how they converge and/or diverge with the interests of the party in the discourses of their candidates.

The effects of Cardenas’ and Lopez Obrador’s political rhetoric are greater during years of presidential elections because the candidates have a channel for transmitting their points of view regarding Mexican democracy. It is interesting to note how invasive institutional practices are detected and developed by parties and candidates who rhetorically justify specific interpretations regarding the anticipated result of the electoral process in course (defeat by fraud) and upon which they will base their post electoral actions.

As a result of the instrumentation of this rhetoric, leadership capacities of both candidates were able to develop greater appeal for voters. It is even plausible that their personalities distanced them from the ideological legacies of their origin and from the label of liberal candidates, thus enabling them to claim to be considered “caudillos” as a way of eluding electoral results.
This does not mean that electoral authorities were not respected and complied with (aside from acts of civil resistance expressed at every moment). However, a negative, moral assessment did come into effect that was used to reason and construct the party identity of new political institutions in the country such as PRD and MORENA. However, I think one must be careful not to consider these actions as widespread attitudes within the Mexican left, particularly based on such a small sample of two cases.

Knowledge obtained in this research is limited to identifying practical problems posed in discourse and the use of political rhetorical apologia to move Mexican citizens and institutions in the context of the complexity of contemporary democratic processes towards interests created by the candidates themselves, who are not willing to reduce their own political quota of power.

This necessarily leads us to once again pose a question which is fundamental for a transitional democracy (as in the case of Mexico): Is it possible for a void to arise in democracy in the face of the ambivalence and cynicism of political discourse if we consider that the legitimacy of democratic states resides formally and symbolically in the possibility of choice -through free competition- between parties and managerial elites designed to guarantee the power of citizens over the government?

Undoubtedly, one must not underestimate the role of interests created by different political positions within political campaigns. However, it would seem that the commodification of electoral processes has translated into the loss of power of citizens, when actually the contrary should happen, leading towards an empowering of the electorate over their governing bodies.

This void produces doubts and, consequently, political rhetoric only holds negative conceptions and is considered object of specialized manipulation wherein the discourse alters or interchanges party and ideological values for the sake of benefitting a select few “Caudillos”. This is not a recent perception and has been denounced since the birth of rhetoric described in Chapter 2 of this research.

The attempt to understand the discourses of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is particularly relevant because, in spite of the inherent problems and contradictions condemned in the electoral processes of the Mexican democratic transition, they are both able to appeal to the masses by using a discourse which offers a better, more just and more effective form of government where there is no alternative, where tyranny and oligarchy cannot produce the blend of freedom and equality promised by democracy.
Finally, we must ask if political parties in Mexico are ideologically prepared to face defeat. In response to the above, we can conclude that the distance between the institutional discourse (post electoral) and the political ideologies of the candidates is very narrow. Therefore, they are not capable of positioning themselves ideologically to accept defeat. For them, winning the elections is the only way for there to be a true democracy.

It is evident that partial changes in Mexican democracy are acknowledged within the political discourse of the candidates. However, they condemn new problems and challenges that have arisen from the power and domination represented by the groups in power in Mexico, whether foreign in nature as condemned by Cuauhtemoc Cardenas or internally as claimed by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

To prove the hypothesis that post electoral democratic discourse of Mexican left-wing candidates Cuauhtemoc Cardenas (1994-2000) and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (2006-2012) is based fundamentally on the rhetoric of apologia, the relation between the discourse, actions and ideological principles of the party whose ultimate goal is to maintain power as opposition which encompasses the creation and the emerging development of new political institutions to legitimize and justify decisions and post electoral political actions beyond winning the election as the only political party of the left in Mexico.

This analysis integrated the CDA\textsuperscript{7} and the Image Restoration Theory\textsuperscript{8} that contains a variety of focuses and considerations and therefore, does not consider a sole model for the analysis of political texts of both candidates.

The Image Restoration Theory is flexible as it can embody many variations and combinations of available strategies for self-defence: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification.

The theory is based on objective knowledge centred on communication and is inscribed within the widest context. At certain moments, it can be limited by actual language and mental representations and can even lead to the generation of an erroneous interpretation.

I would like to point out that this theory allows us to identify certain clichés that anticipate a typology of strategies and the actions and conduct of candidates before and after elections. This undoubtedly generates an understanding and a series of important considerations and the reflection and need to participate in image restoration in discourse (text), always taking into account that the key

\textsuperscript{7} Based on the approach of Teun Van Dijk, see bibliography.
\textsuperscript{8} See William Benoit.
point here is the perception of the public in the discussion of a persuasive attack, either in an offensive act or in the search for those responsible of this act, in the case of fraud.

Therefore, the results found lead us once again to the facet of negative, manipulating and ambivalent rhetoric discussed regarding the intentionality of the discourse of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

This exercise identifies and reveals levels of communicative rationality aspired to by the candidates in their discourse and reveals techniques implemented in electoral campaigns that frequently employed rhetorical forms tending to close the debate rather than broaden it. Therefore, the idea of rethinking Mexican democracy, the discourse of the Mexican left was in every sense an exercise incapable of pushing contemporary democracy towards a deliberative democracy where widespread support of the entire political spectrum has been used as a raison d'être argument in favour of guaranteeing the interests created by certain leaderships within the Mexican left and which try to limit the operation of the parties of this ideological wing and the quota political power they already hold within them.

In this way, the permanent institutional channelling of the concept of freedom of democracy grants them the opportunity to influence the public opinion debate and through the disciplined use of reactive rhetoric and apologia in the face of fraud, they design the necessary arsenal to create and administrate the construction of new political institutions (i.e. parties) which guarantee continuity in the national political arena, beyond the possibility of winning the election itself.

Through these arguments we can conclude that the candidates were aware of their personal linguistic choices from an ideological and cultural point of view, of their followers and knowlingness, so the candidates of the left, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, created power relations and ideology at the level of political text of the presidential campaigns which differed from the approach of winning the election.

A detailed exposition of the different motivations and regarding the logic within which the discourse of the two main political actors of the left is produced in the context of the presidential elections of the transition in Mexico will hopefully spark future research regarding the polarization of discourse and the discussion regarding the rhetorical and political borders as a source for the construction of political identities.

Furthermore, they can be the starting point for the in–depth analysis of apologia strategies in the rhetoric of candidates of different schools of thought within the political arena.


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