

Affectivization of borders in the digital sphere: Migration-Related Online Narratives in Argentina

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Laura Gherlone's research addresses the interdisciplinary thought of Juri Lotman — with a focus on his late theoretical production — in relation to the spatial turn, the theory of cultural affects and the Latin American reflection on decoloniality, considering the migratory issue as a field of exploration. She is the author of numerous international publications.

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The topic of borders is an active research area in Lotmanian studies. Starting from this scholarship, the article aims to open up fresh possibilities for interpretation of Lotman's spatial-driven theory, making it dialogue with the cultural affect studies and the current communication-focused research on the digital sphere. This theoretical framework underpins the case study covered in the essay, that is, the linguistic analysis of online narratives on migration during the COVID-19 pandemic – a prolonged situation of high-intensity relational affect in which emotions played a pivotal (agentive) role in the perception of a widespread and multidimensional crisis. Argentina is the cultural milieu of socio-semiotic scrutiny, in which distant reading and close reading cross-pollinate each other.

Keywords: Ju. Lotman; polarization; emotional repertoires; COVID-19; corpora analyses; Twitter

Introduction

The topic of borders¹ is an active research area in Lotmanian studies (Randviir 2007, 2022; Veidemann 2009; Nöth 2014; Vólkova Américo 2017; Gherlone 2019a; Monticelli 2019; De Luca Picione, forthcoming), by proving to be particularly productive for political theory and socio-spatial critique (see Gaufman 2017; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017; Nugin et al. 2020, all mainly focused on Estonia and the Baltic region).

¹ In this paper “border” and “boundary” are used interchangeably to express the Russian concept of *granitsa* (граница). For an insightful exploration of these two terms see Hagen (2021).

One of Juri Lotman's major theoretical achievements was to show that border, while being often associated with the physical (mostly geographical) dimension, is a wide-ranging concept which feeds our everyday language, practices, and experiences.

In this special issue devoted to Russian-Estonian scholar, I would like to unpack the timeliness of his spatial theory; despite not having witnessed the Internet-centred world, Lotman advanced ideas which are relevant nowadays to understanding the border formation in a seemingly fluid, decentralized and distributed space like that of the digital sphere. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, his considerations might shed light on the relationship between border formation and our societies' affective intensity, which is all-pervading and agentive in the public scenario(s) (see, in particular, Slaby and von Scheve 2019; Fleig and von Scheve 2020).

Regardless of the extensive body of scholarship emerging from semiotics in the field of digital research, there has been little cross-over of the (affect-focused) reflection on virtual borders with Lotmanian studies (to some extent, this field of research finds expression in some recent investigations on media studies considering Lotman's key notion of "semiosphere", such as Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2021; Ibrus and Ojamaa 2022; Madisson and Ventsel 2022).

I will address such a reflection by offering a brief theoretical introduction and then tackle a case study centred on the topic of migration. Argentina will represent the cultural milieu of my semiotic exploration.

Borders, emotions, and the digital sphere: a Lotmanian perspective

Borders are a constitutive aspect of our being in the world, as is a common language: distinction and mirroring, difference and similarity, division and contiguity, incomprehension and mutual understanding are, from a cultural perspective, opposite

sides of the same coin. This idea was central to Lotman, enough to make him dictate, close to his death, four pages of notes entitled *Chuzhoi mir, chuzhoe povedenie* (Чужой мир, чужое поведение), translatable as *Foreign world, alien behavior*. In this unpublished short paper, he emphasized how, despite the willingness to find shared codes, humans need to create or, from another angle, to define themselves as an *alien otherness* (Lotman 1992–93a, n.d.)²: a sort of outward projection that allows them to build their own *space*. The alien otherness can be an individual person, a social group, or an entire population, but in any case, it is a subject who moves away or is banished from the *cultural world-picture* (картина мира // *kartina mira*). The latter is a sort of common language, understood as a set of highly codified and resilient narratives that function, so to speak, as a spatial-driven self-description of society, by identifying common beliefs, behaviors, norms, and value judgments. In turn, the self-description is embedded in the culture's temporal horizon, that is, in its collection of stories about the past (genealogies) and the future (probable developments).

The cultural portrait – Lotman underlines in the monograph *Universe of the Mind* (1990, 130) – is consistent only at a meta level: “[w]hile the picture of the upper

² In this work, unlike in others, Lotman focuses on the subject who *intentionally* decides to become an alien otherness. He/she can be culturally configured as a subject in search of a foreign and virgin land that needs to be crowded, or as a subject who sees the leaving of the known world – perceived as if it was cursed – “as a rupture, a desertion, or an escape from it. (...) the person who abandons it goes away, without looking back, like *Lot and his daughters*. In this case, the person acts as a refugee, a fugitive, and his/her relationship with the world that has been abandoned is presented beforehand as negative” (Lotman 1992–93a, n.d.).

level is painted in a smooth uniform colour, the lower level is bright with colours and many intersecting boundaries”. Put another way, while people need a hierarchy of meanings to keep alive the social whole and its *imago mundi*, the *space of culture* teems with subjectivities (личность / lichnost’)³ who feel alien to it and create their own space – which, in Lotmanian terms, is synonymous with *identity* –, building a different set of shared narratives. At the same time, the cultural world-picture stands against an external environment (a no-culture), always perceived and described as unorganized and blurred (a chaos), to reinforce its physiognomy and ultimately to preserve the frontiers.

The issue of borders is so inseparable from the geo-territorial, political-ideological, and socio-semiotic dimension.

From this brief overview of Lotman’s spatial vision – where conflict is the “ancestral” energy⁴ that drives the mirror-like relationship between the inside and outside –, it is possible to glimpse at least three hypotheses applicable to current research on the digital sphere.

First, if our knowledge of the world comes, to a large extent, through collective

³ I use the word “subjectivity”, but it is worth remembering that Lotman (1990, 138) talks about “personality” (личность / lichnost’). For more details on the meaning of this term, I refer to Caryl Emerson (2008, 30), who points out that *lichnost’* comes from *litso*, “the generic Russian word for face”, and is “the abstract noun palely rendered in English as ‘personality’”: an imperfect translation, since in Russian spiritual philosophy [lichnost’] always implies moral and interpersonal responsibility”.

⁴ Throughout his work, Lotman talks of “conflict” (конфликт / konflikt), “contradiction” (противоречие / protivorechie), “collision” (столкновение / stolknovenie), “fight” (борьба / bor’ba).

narratives, cyberspace could be considered as a real-immaterial “place” capable of affording at once different viewpoints which are continuously co-constructed, co-interpreted, reinterpreted, deconstructed, and even (at first sight) destroyed. In this perspective, Lotman’s assumption of a “volumetric” or “semiospheric” knowledge (Lotman 1992–93b, n.d.), propelled by intertextuality and approximate translation, not only finds an echo in the present days but can nourish that emerging scholarship in language studies committed to adopt “a more flexible approach to narrative” (Page 2018, 8) and to consider social media messages properly as shared stories, however small or simplified.

Second, if the cultural world-picture is sustained by a central (ossified, resilient and so dominant) narrative of the time, it is also true that the collision of different subjectivities can awake stories from the past that were thought to be dead or destroyed or not even existed (Lotman 1990, 126–127) – stories that, in a sense, were buried but whose semiotic life has never been exhausted (for discussion of these claims, see Tamm 2019; Lorusso 2019; Gherlone and Restaneo, forthcoming). Accordingly, Lotman’s theory can bring fresh impetus to the study of the digital sphere which, while being a collective space that challenges the paradigm of chronological time, can be also regarded as the ideal terrain for surfacing of different temporalities in the form of ideology-imbued stories, that is, with their own system of values, norms, spatial-temporal models, and symbols.

Third, if the mirror-like relationship between different world-pictures’ inside and outside space implies an intensive force field, where conflict – it bears repeating – assumes a key role according to Lotman, the question of narrativized borders has inescapably an affective nature and reach (especially in certain periods of crisis when shared meanings seem to fade away). Although the Russian-Estonian scholar touched

this topic only in the last years of his intellectual production when reflecting upon cultural memory, his considerations can be incorporated into current studies on “emotion repertoires” (see, especially, von Poser et al. 2019). Following this theory, it is conceivable that people, through the encounter-clash of narratives, together with the “active” and “dormant” memories also “unearth” the affective charge embedded in them and in their systems of axiological orientations. In the light of the two previous points, the digital sphere would act as a public scenery for the affectivization of borders and the *massive, diffuse, and immersive* emergence of feelings. Furthermore, the circulation of high-frequent clusters of words, images, iconic codes (such as emojis), etc. would be the evidence that multiple worldviews (or ideologies) condense and sediment until they become stereotyped, fluidly spreading into the digital sphere as “semiotic clouds” dense with meaning. In this perspective, visual language – as Lotman emphasized countless times – would play a pivotal role. Although, for reasons of space, it is not possible to address fully this topic here, it must be emphasized that the function of digital images is vital for the affect-driven intensity of the World Wide Web’s shared stories, due a set of qualities such as their tendency to circulate (being more universally decodable and re-interpretable), to appear in a networked fashion, to be embedded in multiple publics. This set of qualities makes them affective, mnemonic, and imaginative vehicles, while being agents of cultural memory, social bonding, and emotion propagation.

Nevertheless, for this research I chose to work mainly, but not exclusively, on verbal language, while focusing on migration narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic – i.e., a prolonged situation of high-intensity relational affect in which emotions played a key role in the perception of a widespread and multidimensional crisis.

Migration studies under the magnifying glass of emotions

The case study: an introduction

Migration studies have traditionally benefited from border theory. In this article I circumscribed this field of investigation by framing it within the Lotmanian theoretical picture and, at the same time, by considering it as an “affective matter”. Specifically, I started from the assumption that migration, in its relationship with spatiality (whether physical or virtual), can be fruitfully observed under the magnifying glass of emotions.

As already pointed out elsewhere (Gherlone 2022), a global and cross-cultural look at communication flows concerning migration cannot in fact ignore the bond that unites the whole of stories about migrants and the amalgam of feelings linked to the “foreigner”: a polarizing discourse that puts into play issues such as identity, mobility, the own space, the borders, and cultural memory (Makarychev 2018) as well as processes of classification and simplification of the “alien otherness” (see, for example, Becker 2020).

This has meant that, in recent years, numerous studies have attempted to fill the research gap on the connection between emotions and migration (see, in particular, Svašek 2010; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Alinejad and Olivieri 2020; Alinejad and Ponzanesi 2020; Glăveanu and Womersley 2021). At present a particularly promising scholarship is investigating such a binomial in relation to cyberspace-mediated communication. My research lies in this intersection and takes Argentina into consideration as a context of analysis.

Context

Argentina is traditionally considered an immigration country. In recent years it has faced the exodus from Venezuela, becoming the 4th country of residence of Venezuelans with regular status, after Colombia, Chile, and Peru (UNHCR, n.d., data updated to 31 July 2021 regarding the situation in Argentina). This flow has been incorporated into an already consolidated immigration, mainly composed of Paraguayan, Bolivian and Peruvian people, with a strong presence of women. Such a situation is inevitably changing the socio-cultural fabric of this country in terms of identity, power relations, gender (in)equality, imaginary, spatial appropriations/uses/rights, also in the light of the concept-myth of “a white and racially homogeneous nation” (Gordillo 2016, 242).

This picture, already complex, is part of a larger (emotion-imbued) scenario marked by the ongoing deep economic crisis since 2018, the legacy of the waves of protests which occurred in late 2019 in several Latin American countries, and above all the outbreak of COVID-19 (for a general overview of this topic, see Freier and Castillo Jara 2021; Freier and Doña- Reveco 2022). In March 2020, to address the epidemiological emergence, the government of President Alberto Fernández opted, among other measures (Gobierno Argentino, n.d.), for social policies mainly targeted at the most vulnerable⁵ (Gobierno Argentino, March 17 and 26, 2020; see also Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos, 2020), a long period of collective lockdown,⁶ and

⁵ “Vulnerable condition” here refers to a family economic situation that is close to or below the poverty line and, in most cases, linked to labour informality.

⁶ The lockdown decree (No. 297/2020) took effect on 20 March and was extended several times until 16 August 2020 under the name of *Social, preventive, and mandatory isolation* (known by its Spanish acronym ASPO). After that date, the government began to speak of *Mandatory, preventive and social distancing, and Social, preventive and mandatory*

repeated closures of internal and external borders (initially introduced to limit the viral transmission in the pandemic's early days). These restrictions were at first well received by the population and then harshly criticized.

In particular, certain decisions taken to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in terms of economic impact⁷ as well as to curb the community spread of the virus, such as the suspension of in-person learning spaces, ended up polarizing Argentinean society. While being challenged by the data from reality – the delay in first dose COVID-19 mass vaccination, the selective distribution of vaccines (the so-called “Vacunatorio VIP”), the massive closure of small businesses, the increase in poverty and social malaise, the “elitist” breaking of the country's stay-at-home rule,⁸ etc. –, the *protection-focused* and *inclusive-driven* public discourse began to be interpreted differently. Over time, it was seen as the means to justify the deprivation of freedom and a sort of disguised dis-protection, the “double standard” in following the rules (ordinary people vs. political elites), and ultimately the lack of attention for “the other half” of the

isolation (Decree No. 677/2020), softening the discourse and leveraging the word “distancing” rather than “isolation”. This decision was also made to differentiate geographic areas of the country that were showing different epidemiological growth rates.

Broadly speaking, strict measures of social distancing and isolation, especially in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) and in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA), continued until spring 2021.

⁷ Among the economic measures that most evoked controversy is the Emergency Family Income (known by its Spanish acronym IFE) for most vulnerable, the prohibition of dismissal of employees and the double indemnity in the case of dismissal, the temporary rent freeze, and the suspension of evictions.

⁸ In specific, on August 12, 2021, photos of First Lady Fabiola Yáñez's birthday party in 2020 surfaced, unmasking the breaking of the quarantine at the presidential residence during the strictest phase of the Coronavirus lockdown.

population (the Argentina that works vs. the Argentina that lives on state assistance).

In this context my research interest turned to verify if and how migrants could have been entangled in the meshes of polarization, given that these are vulnerable individuals (OHCHR 2018; IOM 2019) whose need for assistance and human rights protection has increased with the Coronavirus health crisis (for an overview of this topic see Penchaszadeh, Nicolao, and Debandi' 2021 report; furthermore, some exploratory studies, focused primarily on Latin America, can be encountered in Nejamkis, Conti, and Aksakal 2021).⁹

Research question

The migratory issue in Argentina in times of COVID-19 could be addressed from different angles. A first exploratory viewpoint is without doubt the difference in perception of the pandemic by migrants and the host society, considering that these two collective subjects can be dichotomously separated and studied only for heuristic purposes. Having in mind in particular the research on collective emotions and their narrativization in the digital sphere, in the present investigation I considered the perspective of the host society. The goal was to explore Argentines' online stories about migration in a situation of unprecedented exposure to uncertainty – a situation that could have led, as outlined above, to the emergence of processes of otherness shaping together with long-standing and resilient affective imaginaries.

In a nutshell, the research question could be formulated as follows: did migrants

⁹ While focusing on the migration issue, this article can also enrich the investigations on a possible typologization of “semiopolitical responses” to the explosion of COVID-19, of which an introductory exploration can be found in Sedda (2021).

become the subject of an emotion-driven “bordering” narration during the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina?

To narrow the scope of the investigation, I focused on the discursive universe that arose in response to a decree published during the social distancing phase in Argentina and having migration as its object: the Decree no. 138/2021 of March 5, 2021.

Legal framework

By means of the NUD (Necessity and Urgency Decree) no. 138/2021, President Alberto Fernández rendered ineffective a previous presidential decree ([no. 70/2017](#)) of identical legal nature. The latter, which was signed by the predecessor in office, Mauricio Macri (belonging to a different political affiliation), established a series of measures aimed at counteracting illegal immigration. Such measures were justified, according to the reasons stated in the decree itself, in the need to “*improve*” the migratory regulatory order “*in the face of current phenomena such as globalization, the internationalization of tourism and the growth of international organized crime*”. Other reasons given in the decree were the increase in the percentage of foreigners in prisons and the slowness of procedures in migration matters.

Specifically, the Decree no. 70/2017 increased the grounds for preventing the entry and stay of foreigners in Argentina, as well as the grounds for cancelling granted residences and expelling foreigners. While the commission of various typologies of crimes was already a reason to prevent the entry of a foreigner, the Decree no. 70/2017 expanded the range of crimes, specifically in relation to drug trafficking, corruption, etc. In addition, the criteria for determining whether certain offenses were an impediment to residence and authorized the expulsion of foreigners were broadened. Finally, the

decree modified the administrative procedure by shortening the time periods for its resolution and establishing more restrictive criteria for challenging measures issued by the immigration authorities; this should have resulted, in particular, in a facilitation of expulsions.

The Decree issued by former President Macri in 2017 was the subject of judicial challenges mainly for two reasons: first, the exceptional procedure used for its issuance and, second, the suspicion of violating rights and guarantees recognized by the National Constitution and the numerous international human rights treaties to which Argentina has adhered.

For these same reasons, President Fernandez annulled the previous legislation in March 2021 and justified his decision by considering “irreconcilable” such a norm with the National Constitution and the international system of Human Rights. The Decree no. 70/2017 was considered a violation of the principle of due process and the right to have assistance and legal defence, while disclosing certain weaknesses such as the restriction to a broad and sufficient control of the judiciary over the acts of the administrative authority, the extensiveness with which the pretrial detention of the migrant is provided without defining the causes that enable it, and the restriction to the rights of family reunification and exemption for humanitarian reasons.

The research

Data collection

In light of the above and bearing in mind that an online comment, however small, can be seen as an ideology-imbued story, I considered that reactions to the Decree 138/2021 web announcements might have been a relevant field of inquiry to study the migratory

issue in Argentina in times of COVID-19 from the host society's point of view.

Among the variety of social media platforms, I decided to work on Twitter, also considering the key concept of *platform-specific vernaculars*, with their affordances, publics, and potentials (Gibbs et al. 2015; Rogers 2021). To create the body of data, I made use of Twitter Advanced Search and I entered “70/2017” as a keyword in the time frame of one day (“March 5, 2021”). Through previous exploratory research, I noted in fact that in the sphere of public communication (journalists, politicians, NGO representatives, etc.) the Decree no. 138/2021 was publicized by leveraging the repealing action and the temporal dimension (before *vs.* after); this meant that in most cases the web announcements referred to and focused on the well-known Decree no. 70/2017.

Among the search results, I prioritized public institutions' most popular Spanish-language Tweets (based on replies and retweets), while avoiding those traceable to personal profile's accounts. I selected a sample of three messages in favor of the legislative measure and posted by users linked to human rights:

- a Tweet by a government body's account: @SDHArgentina of the Secretariat of Human Rights of the Argentinean Nation (*Secretaría de Derechos Humanos de la Nación*).

Con la decisión del presidente Alberto Fernández de derogar el DNU migratorio 70/2017, se vuelve a colocar a la Argentina en la senda de la inclusión y el respeto de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes, valorando su aporte a la cultura y a la identidad de nuestro país.

With the decision of President Alberto Fernández to repeal the migratory NUD 70/2017, Argentina has again been placed on the path of inclusion and respect for migrants' human rights, valuing their contribution to the culture and identity of our country.

- a Tweet by a national non-governmental organization's account:

@CELS_Argentina of the Center for Legal and Social Studies (*Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*).

✓ Celebramos la decisión del Poder Ejecutivo de derogar el DNU 70/2017, cuya implementación significó un claro retroceso en los derechos de las personas migrantes en el país en los últimos cuatro años.

<https://www.boletinoficial.gob.ar/detalleAviso/primera/241471/20210305>



✓ We welcome the decision of the Executive Branch to repeal NUD 70/2017, whose application meant a clear step backwards in migrants' rights in the country during the last four years.

<https://www.boletinoficial.gob.ar/detalleAviso/primera/241471/20210305>



- a Tweet by an international non-governmental organization's account:

@amnistiaar of Amnesty International in Argentina.

¡#BuenasNoticias! 🎉

🗳 El Gobierno puso hoy fin a un fuerte retroceso para la política migratoria argentina.

👏 Celebramos la derogación del DNU N° 70/2017 que violaba los #DerechosHumanos de las personas migrantes.

📄 Comunicado: <https://amnistia.org.ar/amnistia-internacional-celebra-la-derogacion-del-dnu-que-violaba-los-derechos-humanos-de-los-migrantes/>





It should be noted that in all three cases (but more markedly in the case of @CELS_Argentina and @amnistiaar) the global message springs from a tweetstorm of which only the first Tweet is shown above.

| Account | @SDHArgentina | @CELS | @amnistiaar |
|--|---------------|-------|-------------|
| Twitter thread | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| No. of the thread messages | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| No. of replies | 196 | 300 | 92 |
| No. of retweets | 144 | 324 | 169 |
| No. of likes | 369 | 544 | 349 |
| Image(s) within the 1 st Tweet | No | No | Yes |
| Symbol(s) within the 1 st Tweet | No | Yes | Yes |
| Link(s) to an external source within the 1 st Tweet | No | Yes | Yes |

Table 1. The features of the three selected Tweets at the time of this writing.

Once the selection was made, I extracted the replies to @SDHArgentina's, @CELS_Argentina's and @amnistiaar's March 5 Tweets (the textual corpus was saved as plain-text files with the file appendix .txt.); since these are multimodal resources – and provided that I opted for a mixed and multi-method research –, when extracting the

verbal items, I have simultaneously created a separate archive for the images and the other audiovisual resources originally embedded in the messages.

Methods of analysis

As mentioned, I adopted a flexible approach to narrative and therefore to social media messages (Page 2018), considering *replies within Twitter conversations as small, shared narratives*, capable of “capturing” the ecosystem of thoughts and emotional attitudes on a given topic.

Methodologically speaking, I used AntConc (Anthony 2022) to analyze the data collected according to a corpus approach. This software has the advantage that, in addition to being freeware, streamlines textual analysis; specifically, and thinking about the purposes of this research, it makes it possible to identify, among other things, high-frequency words, their collocation in the phrases and the related-to words in terms of adjacency. Such a computerized exploration, combined with a “magnifying glass” analysis,¹⁰ can shed light on *clouds of meaning* that thicken around certain topics and that create, as Lotman would say, axiological orientations, while generating affect-driven positions.

The potential of AntConc is particularly appreciable when dealing with large-scale verbal datasets. While trying to maintain the dimension of “big data” and distant reading, it must be emphasized that this digital inquiry involves a relatively limited selection of textual items. Nonetheless, I believe that the size considered may represent a sufficient sample for an introductory sociosemiotic scrutiny.

¹⁰ On the methodological feasibility of making a qualitative perspective (small stories) and a quantitative perspective (big data) coexist in the corpus approach see Page (2018, 32–33).

In addition to the corpus approach, the iconic dimension of the messages has been taken into consideration through a close reading, given that images and other audiovisual resources are not considered here as mere “adornments” but rather as key resources in the message signification.

In this article I focused on @SDHArgentina’s narrative and affective universe, of which I will now discuss the research results. Nevertheless, the interpretative framework is implicitly nurtured and corroborated by @CELS_Argentina’s and @amnistiaar’s mesh of shared stories.

Discussion

The Argentinian Human Rights Secretariat’s tweet tells the story of a subject (“Argentina”) that, after losing its way, gets back on the right track (“the path of inclusion and respect”). The action is in the hands of an external protagonist (“President Alberto Fernández”) who causes this subject – marked by the passive voice of the verb – to be placed back into its original vocation and aspiration.

In other words, the tweet is the micro-narration of a *rectification* from a wrong condition to a desirable one.

The message does not mention the decree entered into force (no. 138/2021) but places the accent on the repealed one (no. 70/2017), so emphasizing the need to “erase” the past and indirectly the political world view (*cosmovisión*) linked to the 2017 decree. Furthermore, while not contain an explicit denigrating judgment to the situation prior to the legislative repeal, precisely because it refers only to Mauricio Macri’s decree, the message states *a before* and *an after*: the path of inclusion and respect is implicitly

preceded by and contrasted with the path of exclusion and violation. These two poles are inevitably charged in an axiological sense.

| Decree no. | 70/2017 | 138/2021 |
|---|---|--|
| Mentioned decree | Yes | No |
| Temporal construction of the story | A before: a past to be “repealed” | An after: a future towards which to head again |
| Spatial-symbolic construction of the story | A path of exclusion and violation of human rights | A path of inclusion and respect for human rights |
| Moral implications of the story | Deviation from or loss of the way | Return to the right direction |
| Axiological position | Wrong | Right |

Table 2. @SDHArgentina’s tweet is understood as a story.

Following the narrative, the tweet then highlights the positive action of the Government, committed not only to protect but also to enhance the beneficiaries of the human rights legislation (i.e., “migrants”), recognizing their contribution to the host society’s culture and identity.

Finally, it should be noted that the message is followed by a @SDHArgentina’s second post which links to the Argentinian Human Rights Secretariat’s press release (“Leé el comunicado de la Secretaría de Derechos Humanos →”).

To query meaningfully the verbal data extracted from the 144 replies to @SDHArgentina’s tweet, I have first visualized a ranking of words through the Word List tool of Antconc. This function allows to check with a glance which words are the most frequent in a corpus and, at the same time – by helping the researcher unearth words that are less frequent or even mentioned only once –, it can provide her/him with

the domain-specific vocabulary.

Returning to @SDHArgentina's tweet, I started to work on the term "foreigner(s)" as a meaningful word which could serve as a linguistic indicator within the corpus, since it was mentioned much more frequently than the term "migrant(s)".

Once I entered "extranjer*" ¹¹ into the search term box of the KWIC (KeyWord In Context) tool, I looked for the concordances, which highlights patterns in language.

The word "foreigner(s)" appeared mainly followed by the preposition "with":

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| extranjer* con antecedentes penales | foreign* with criminal records |
| extranjer* con causas penales | foreign* with criminal causes |
| extranjer* con antecedentes delictivos | foreign* with criminal backgrounds |

Other relevant cases are those in which this content-driven term occurs as an adjective:

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| delincuentes extranjeros | foreign delinquents |
| lacra extranjera | foreign scum |

This search becomes even more significant when exploring the linguistic root of "migra*" and "inmigra*" in context.

¹¹ I entered the word "extranjer*" with the * operator in order to look for the root of the noun/adjective avoiding specification of gender and number (feminine/masculine and singular/plural). By doing so, all four grammatical possibilities could have been appeared (extranjera/extranjero and extranjeras/extranjeros), as well as the variants related to the so-called inclusive language (such as "extranjerxs", "extranjer@s").

| | |
|--|---|
| ¡Esos son delincuentes huyendo, no personas migrantes! | Those are delinquents on the run, not migrants! |
| el inmigrante con antecedentes delictuales tiene mas derecho que los Argentinos de bien? | the immigrant with criminal records has more rights than the decent Argentines? |
| Los delincuentes no son inmigrantes son criminales y vienen a lastimar a los Argentinos | Delinquents are not immigrants [;] they are criminals and they come to hurt Argentines. |

Twitter users who replied to @SDHArgentina’s announcement and who used these key terms distinguished between a foreigner/migrant “in a broad sense” and a foreigner/immigrant *with* a criminal past. In other words, they wanted to stress that not all migrants are unwelcome, but only those who can potentially bring criminality into Argentine society.

But why does a tweet focused on the (enhanced) rights of migrants open a scenario where delinquents take center stage?

This preliminary result prompted me to carry out two other queries, (1) by placing the magnifying glass on the term “delinquent”; (2) by paying attention to the verbs adjacent or close to the aforementioned key terms.

“Delinquent” – a keyword

Antconc ranked the Spanish word *delicuyente(s)* as *the most frequent term* of the verbal dataset (after the so-called function words). Once sorted and analyzed through the KWIC tool, an even more significant contextual information surfaced: within the corpus, “delinquent” goes with other words related to the world of crime, and specifically (in order of frequency):

| | |
|---|---|
| asesinos | murderers |
| ladrones, chorros, cacos | thieves |
| narcotraficantes, narcos, transas | drug lords |
| violadores, violentos | rapists, violent people |
| palabras menos frecuentes (terroristas, pedófilos, contrabandistas, trata[ntes] de blancas) | less frequent words (terrorists, pedophiles smugglers, white slave trade[rs]) |

Interestingly, the two words that statistically appear the most often adjacent are “murderers” and “rapists”. Four illustrative examples follow:

| | |
|--|--|
| soltaron a los <i>asesinos</i> y <i>violadores</i> por “covid” y ahora abren las fronteras para traer mas lacra extranjera!!!! | they released <i>murderers and rapists</i> for “covid” and now they are opening the borders to bring in more foreign scum!!!! |
| Liberan <i>asesinos</i> y <i>violadores</i> y ahora abren las fronteras para la delincuencia. | They free <i>murderers and rapists</i> and now open the borders for crime. |
| Sigan incluyendo ladrones, violentos, <i>asesinos</i> y <i>violadores</i> . Gobierno de ineptos, gobierno de la vergüenza. | Please, continue to include thieves, violent people, <i>murderers and rapists</i> . Government of stooges, government of shame. |
| Dejan pasar <i>violadores</i> y <i>asesinos</i> genios... y por otro lado.... cuando condenan la represión en FORMOSA por parte del dictador INSFRAN? | They let <i>rapists and murderers</i> pass.... geniuses... and on the other hand.... when do they plan to condemn the repression in FORMOSA by the dictator INSFRAN? |

The concordance analysis, besides providing “a way of downscaling the data to those parts which can be given the close reading” (Page 2018, 34), allows the researcher to grasp the cultural and socio-interactional context within which a lexical pattern, such as “murderers and rapists”, occurs. In this case, the concordance analysis allows to answer the question posed above: why does a tweet focused on an allegedly better lawmaking in favor of migrants open an affect-driven scenario where delinquents take center stage?

Through online comments, we can glimpse two *stories* that fuel most people’s reactions to the migratory issue in Argentina in times of COVID-19, as taken place in the circumscribed context of @SDHArgentina’s announcement.

A past story of injustice

The majority of Twitter users engaged in the debate, instead of interpreting the Government’s post as a message of protection towards migrants, understood it as an act

of *des-protection towards* and *vulnerabilization of* Argentinean society. This happened, as already pointed out, because of the Government's emphasis on the repealed decree instead of the legislation entered into force – the first, aimed at counteracting illegal immigration, recalled the *value of security and safety*, while the second evoked the *value of protection of rights for most vulnerable*. But this is not the only reason.

Inferentially, most Twitter users linked the repeal of the 70/2017 decree to “another story” that put the same values at stake: a 2020 judicial-political decision, made during the strict isolation phase and again having as its object the defense of human rights. In this case, the measures concerned convicts at higher risk from COVID-19 and those in prison for the commission of low-level offenses, who were granted home detention and temporary freedom to prevent the viral transmission in overcrowded penitentiaries of Argentina (for recent discussion see Marmolejo et al. 2020). At that juncture, the release of highly dangerous individuals with criminal records, particularly rape and murder, caused a sensation.

The idea (and collective perception) that *delinquents had been liberated and were able to circulate freely* while people were submitted to the stay-at-home rule represented a controversial and powerfully emotional event, whose negative affective charge (fear, anger, indignation, disgust) exploded through massive protests from building balconies throughout the country (the so-called *cacerolazo*) and whose remembrance endured in the daily discourses. As we can see from the above-mentioned illustrative examples (but many others could be mentioned), Twitter users created a direct connection between *los presos* (the prisoners) – linguistically condensed in the pattern “murderers and rapists” – and the foreign delinquents, completely removing the figure of the migrants and their potential contribution to the host society's culture and identity. Consider the following comment:

| | |
|---|--|
| Con esa derogación va a haber mas mujeres muertas y violadas, mas jóvenes atrapados por la droga, pero no importa el gobierno tendrá una fuerza de choque similar a Venezuela | With this repeal there will be more women killed and raped, more young people trapped by drugs, but no matter what [,] the government will have a strike force similar to Venezuela. |
|---|--|

We see how the digital interactional context not only allows connections between past and present, making them effortlessly circulate, but also affords projections of possible scenarios into the future. In this case, it makes room for pictures of increasing violence (“there *will* be *more* women killed and raped, *more* young people trapped by drugs”)¹² – which are presumed to have a direct relation with the repeal of the 70/2017 decree – while boosting a deep antagonism toward the Government (“the government *will* have a strike force similar to Venezuela”). The reference to Venezuela is only marginally related to the migration issue: here, as in general in the corpora I am analyzing, it represents not so much the country from which Argentina is receiving migrants, but rather a political model¹³ from which Twitter users in conversation with @SDHArgentina are vigorously dissociated and towards which – they consider – Argentina is heading. Stated differently, it symbolizes the future scenario of a section of the population’s existing concerns. The focal point of the linguistic interactions thus shifted not only to the *delinquents* but also to *the other side* of the political arena.

¹² Interestingly, the question of the *violence against women*, the *rape* and the *feminicide* are diffusely mentioned in the analysed corpora, intertwining with the presence of the foreigner. Although its scrutiny goes beyond the direct scope of this paper, it is undoubtedly a topic that should be explored and that brings the semiotic approach and the historical-anthropological one into dialogue.

¹³ “Dictatorship” is an expression commonly used by Twitter users. Although the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has not been formally defined as a dictatorship, several international organisms have talked about a “rupture of the constitutional and democratic order”.

That leads to *another affect-driven story* traceable in the web of narratives concerning migration and linked to @SDHArgentina's 5 March 2021 tweet.

A present story of injustice

The word “delinquents” put the spotlight on the terms *violadores* (rapists) and *violentos* (violent people). By exploring the linguistic root “viol*”, Antconc detected the recurrence of *violadores/violación/violencia* (rapists or violators/violation/violence) – nouns that, in addition to enclosing a strong affective charge, are interestingly associated with the following terms:

- *Formosa*, which is also the most frequent word of the verbal dataset after *delicuyente(s)*, and
- *derechos humanos* (human rights) or *DDHH* (the Spanish acronym of “HR – human rights”).

A further computerized exploration revealed that “human rights // HR in Formosa”, “repression // [to] repress in Formosa”, “violators of human rights” are the most present word clusters, as the following examples show:

| | |
|---|--|
| REPRIMEN EN FORMOSA. INAUGURAN MEGAESTADIO EN LA 2da PROVINCIA MÁS POBRE. MUEREN MÉDICOS SIN VACUNAS (se las dieron a los pibes de la cámpora) FEMICIDIOS RECORD. VUELVE A PERMITIRSE LA ENTRADA A DELINCUENTES AL PAÍS. SINDICALISTA FAJAN A LOS JUBILADOS PQ LLEGARON ANTES. ASCO Cuál sería la FUNDAMENT P DEJAR ENTRAR A EXTRANJEROS CON ANTECEDENTES?? Joder a los pobres q no tenemos seguridad?? Jodéeme flaco! ah!! Y acordate de MIS PARIENTES EN FORMOSA Q ESTÁN BAJO UN DICTADOR!!! o..DEFENDÉS A VIOLADORES DE DDHH? La REPRESIÓN EN FORMOSA PONDRÍA ORGULLOSO A VIDELA. INFRÁN ES UN NAZI! | THEY <i>REPRESS IN FORMOSA</i> . THEY INAUGURATE A MEGA-ESTADIUM IN THE 2nd POOREST PROVINCE. DOCTORS DIE WITHOUT VACCINATIONS (they gave them to the guys of La Cámpora) [.] RECORD OF FEMICIDES. CRIMINALS ARE ALLOWED TO ENTER THE COUNTRY AGAIN. TRADE UNIONISTS SCREW RETIREES BECAUSE THEY ARRIVED EARLIER. YUCK What would be the FUNDAMENT FOR LETTING FOREIGNERS WITH BACKGROUNDS TO ENTER? [To] screw the poor people who do not have security? Fuck me [,] dude! ah!!! and remember MY RELATIVES IN <i>FORMOSA</i> WHO ARE UNDER A DICTATOR!!! or...ARE YOU DEFENDING <i>VIOLATORS OF HUMAN RIGHTS?</i> <i>REPRESSION IN FORMOSA</i> WOULD MAKE VIDELA PROUD. INFRÁN IS A NAZI! |
|---|--|

On 4 March 2021 Gildo Insfrán, the Governor of Formosa (a province in northeastern Argentina) decreed the return to two-weeks strict isolation because of a few new cases of Coronavirus. This measure, in addition to being perceived by people as outsized, was also suspiciously interpreted as a *collective “captivity”*. At the same time as the Decree no. 138/2021 was issued, the social protests triggered in response to Insfrán’s decision were harshly repressed by security forces. This combination/overlapping of events, made publicly available at once thanks to the large-scale immediacy of the digital space-time, had two effects in terms of shared stories.

First, the repeal of the 70/2017 decree was seen as a confirmation of the suspicion that a state plan was underway to incarcerate citizens and release criminals. Sentences such as *NarcoEstado violador de DDHH* (NarcoState violator of human rights) or *#ElEstadoNoTeCuida* (The State Does Not Take Care of You) speak of a widespread, “atmospheric” mistrust, which pushes people to shift the discursive axis concerning human rights from vulnerable persons (migrants) to a violated collective subject (Argentine society) – that is, a sort of *affective community* (for a reflection on

this topic in Lotmanian terms see Gherlone 2019b; an insightful discussion in general terms can be found in Leone 2020, chap. 3; Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel 2020).

Second, through a backward look into the cultural memory and an immersion into its affective charge, people connected the repression in Formosa to the historical trauma of the Argentinean military dictatorship. Not surprisingly, in the example shown above, as in others, reference is made to the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla and, by a simplistic analogical inference, to Nazism.

The embedding of visual objects primarily invokes the semantic and emotional universe of *violence*, with the exhibition of wounds and the “ocular” denunciation of collective protests and acts of military repression, namely highly agent and affect-eliciting images.



Images 1. An example of pictures embedded in the @SDHArgentina's mesh of replies.

Following Lotman's hypothesis, in the face of a conflict situation, the affective energy accumulated during the pandemic might have activated certain worldviews with their repository of semiotic constructs (imageries, clouds of words, etc.), thus rousing

simultaneously emotion repertoires and sets of beliefs, appraisals, attitudes, past experiences, and future perceptions.

The visceral feature of this collective reaction to @SDHArgentina's tweet is also visible from the speech register, which, not only is highly informal (making widespread use of slang, vulgar language, and "sectarian" expressions), but at the typographic level tends to the overflowing use of capitals, exclamation marks and question marks, while sub-using commas and dots.

The "bordering" action of the verbs

Because I started to work on the term "foreigner(s)" as a linguistic indicator within the corpus, I considered that a focus on the verbs linked to it could have signified a meaningful exploration.

In most cases "extranjer*" ("foreign*"), with the various lexical specifications related to the world of crime, goes together the verbs (in order of frequency):

| | |
|----------|----------------|
| entrar | enter |
| ingresar | get into/enter |
| abrir | open |
| traer | bring in |
| venir | come |

The KWIC tool highlights that, in the case of *abrir* (open), the verb appears always with the plural noun *fronteras* (borders), where the phrase takes on a strongly critical connotation, such as the following example:

| | |
|---|---|
| La inclusion es cuidar a los tuyos y luego a los demás. Abrir las fronteras a narcos, asesinos, terroristas, cacos, no es incluir, es crear brigadas contra el que piensa distinto. | The inclusion is to take care of <i>your own people</i> and then <i>the others</i> . <i>Opening the borders</i> to drug lords, murderers, terrorists, thieves, does not mean to <i>include</i> , it means to create brigades against those who think differently. |
|---|---|

When talking about "delinquent(s)", Antconc detects:

- For bulleted lists the verbs or nouns referring to the access to the country from outside by criminal migrants: *ingresar/ingreso* (to get into/entry), *entrar/entrada* (to enter/entry).
- the verbs related to a quantitative projection or estimation of migrant criminals in the Argentinean society after the Decree 138/2021: *sobrar* (to be in surplus), *aumentar* (to increase), *llenar (de)* (to fill with), *hacer prosperar* (to make thrive).
- the verbs related to the Government's precise political choice with respect to criminal migrants: *incluir* (to include), *importar* (to import), *valorar* (to value).

The case of the verb *incluir* is particularly interesting because its use in the replies creates a lexical connection with @SDHArgentina's tweet ("Argentina has again been placed on the path of *inclusion* and respect for migrants' human rights"), while introducing a counternarrative. Inclusion is not about the migrants but about the criminals who, *like* and *together with* the Government's members, push the country towards a chasm of downturn and exclusion of "the other half" of the population who thinks differently. In addition to the above example, see the following one:

| | |
|---|---|
| Es incluir delincuentes en las filas partidarias oficiales al peronismo, kirchnerismo y así seguir con la mafia y corrupción, cada día retrocedemos en este país con un gobierno corrupto y de delincuentes | This is about <i>including</i> criminals in the official party ranks of Peronism, Kirchnerism and thus continue with the mafia and corruption, every day we go backwards in this country with a corrupt government of criminals |
|---|---|

The migration topic-related "blurring" is again brought into play here: in a prolonged situation of high-intensity relational affect such as the COVID-19 pandemic, most people links @SDHArgentina's tweet to the collective isolation, intended not as a *reassuring measure*, but as an *uncanny excuse to freeze the society*, while *mobilizing the borders* to foreign criminals.

Verbs are used to mark the inside *vs.* outside, closed *vs.* open, motionless *vs.* dynamic dichotomy and, simultaneously, to introduce a rhetorical connotation to the interactional context, which exacerbates the affective borders between the two poles of conversation: “we” and “they”. The third person plural encapsulates migrants, criminals, and Government’s members/adherents into a single collective subject.

| The collective subject “we” | The collective subject “they” |
|---|--|
| National borders are closed for the decent Argentines | Argentinian borders are open for the comings and goings of delinquents |
| Decent Argentines are stuck at home, following the rules and being harmed | Delinquents circulate freely, breaking the rules and harming people |
| Decent Argentines are “in hibernation” | Delinquents are in surplus and thriving |
| Decent Argentines are despised and have no rights | Delinquents are valued and are granted additional rights |

Table 3: The use of verbs by Twitter repliers to @SDHArgentina’s announcement: the complaint of a paradoxical situation.

Final remarks

Starting from a message aimed to communicate a change in migration law, @SDHArgentina’s tweet ended up making room for a narrative which had a universe of values at its core. This universe locked on not only to a precise worldview but also to an affective reservoir nurtured by “prepackaged” emotion repertoires, socio-historical and cultural in nature. As a result, @SDHArgentina’s message – fashioned as a micro-story about a journey of rectification – fostered an emotional reaction/response, which allowed the majority voice to perform as a value-oriented subject. Replies shaped in fact

a collective counternarrative which completely “blurred” the main question (migrant’ rights and their potential contribution to the host society’s culture and identity), shifting the axis of the public communication to stories of injustice linked to the Government’s antagonistic action during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stated differently, the topic-related communication gave way to the axiological engagement in direct opposition to the protection-focused and inclusive-driven official discourse.

In both cases words were a means of moral (and moralizing) complaint: while @SDHArgentina’s story considered the previous government guilty of having trampled on the rights of migrants, thus accusing it of *negligence and violence*, the vast majority of Twitter users’ replies blamed the current government for *treason and violence* against the country, by having allowed the national borders to be opened for the free movement of foreign delinquents. Furthermore, in both cases *the other’s* action was deemed wrong, while *one’s own* was considered right (i.e., honest, coherent, original, etc.).

The major difference between the two positions lies in the outlook on the future, expressed in spatial terms: while @SDHArgentina’s story tells of a return to the “straight and narrow”, the Twitter users’ replies see in this same path a backwards way.

In the space of the digital sphere, affective charge was key to awaken violence-related imaginaries and beliefs linked to certain worldviews, to fuel sociosemiotic narrativization, and ultimately – as Lotman would point out – to shape the borders between “we” and “they”, “cosmos” and “chaos”, “civilization” and “barbarism”, “our nation” and “foreign space”.

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