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**Political Discourse and
Pandemic in Latin America**

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Political Discourse and Pandemic in Latin-America

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Abstract
The following study presents an analysis of public discourses of different presidents in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from Argentina, Chile and Mexico. From an experimental approach based on the analysis of co-ocurrences this study seeks to understand how these head of state contribute to "social knowledge" about the pandemic. The study's most relevant findings include the discourses' progressive complexity, the abundance of decontextualizing deictic elements, and the differences between each discourse's key ideas: political-administrative management in Argentina, concern for the population's emotional wellbeing in Chile, and interest in the domestic economy and politics in Mexico.

Keywords: pandemic discourse, discourse analysis, social knowledge, public discourse

Introduction

The analysis presented here fits within the framework of discourse analysis as applied to public discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic. Although discourse analysis can be applied in myriad, diverse ways, this approach is based on the general principles set out by the linguist Teun van Dijk (2016). Van Dijk's theoretical proposal is built upon the conceptual triangle of cognition, society, and discourse, which suggests that any social reality, political strategy, or ideology: a) has a mental component in the form of ideas or beliefs; b) has a social nature that affects group dynamics; and c) is disseminated by semiotic means. Thus, discourses are phenomena of a sociocognitive nature that situate a social mind within a specific political/cultural context.

Politicians' discourses during the pandemic have played, and continue to play, an essential role in the formation of ideas and beliefs within their respective societies, as well as in the formation of group dynamics. To a large extent, as van Dijk explains, much of what we know about the world is acquired or derived from the discourses of individuals or spokespeople upon whom society confers authority and prestige, which are broadcast through various forms of communication (Van Dijk 1993), and much more since the rise of social networks. These discourses help shape a "social knowledge," understood as the body of beliefs

shared by an epistemic community and justified by the criteria of contextually and culturally variable reliability.

This study seeks to understand how the heads of state in several Spanish-speaking countries, as the political leaders of their respective communities, contribute to the formation of "social knowledge" about the pandemic based on their authority and executive roles. This is the first pandemic to occur in a world of globalized communication, in which a wealth of information can be shared across borders instantaneously. In this context, political leaders' discourses take on a degree of relevance that goes beyond their country of origin and form links worthy of analysis.

Objectives

This study's primary objective is to analyze how the presidents of several Spanish-speaking countries construct their public discourse surrounding the pandemic. The research questions, whose answers we hope will achieve this primary objective, are the following: What form do the discourses of various countries' heads of state take? What lexical-semantic units do they prioritize within their discourses and how are these interrelated? How do these presidential discourses differ or evolve as time passes and circumstances shift?

The general objective and research questions will be complemented by more specific objectives, some of which relate to linguistic questions, such as the linguistic innovations brought on by pandemic discourses, while other specific objectives relate to the reality analyzed:

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a) What relationship is established between the discourses and facts?

b) What position is occupied by the leading players in the pandemic: the population, experts and scientists, political leaders, health officials, etc.

This analysis will propose an experimental approach and a possible line for future research. Naturally, given the limited dimension of this analysis, it will not be able to provide an exhaustive response to all of the questions above, though it will reflect on the possibility of future developments.

Methodology

In order to proceed with this analysis, we have worked primarily with the discourses of the presidents of Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. The discourses analyzed are drawn from two timescales: the start of the political crises stemming from the start of the health crisis following the declaration of COVID as a pandemic (March 11, 2020), and the end of the first wave of infections in Europe (May 2020), which, in general, align with the first surge of the pandemic in the Americas. Thus, we have analyzed two moments from the first development of the pandemic in each of the Latin American countries considered. The charts below (Figure 1-5) represent the number of daily infections in each country and the date on which the presidential comments analyzed were made.

Figure 1. Argentina
March 19 & April 18

Figure 2. Chile
March 15 & April 25

Figure 3. Mexico
March 13, 17, 28 & May 23
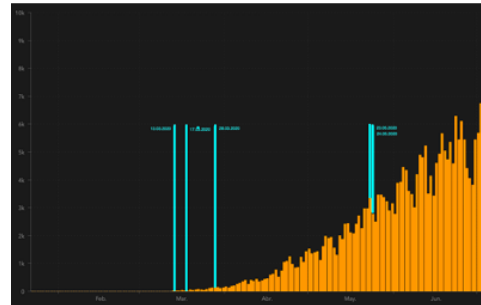
Charts: The moment in which the presidents of Argentina, Chile, and Mexico addressed the state of the pandemic within their countries. Infection data: *John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.*

For additional external references, we have compared the discourse of these Latin American presidents with those of two European heads of state: Spanish President Pedro Sánchez (Figure 4) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Figure 5), both of whom made public comments on similar dates.
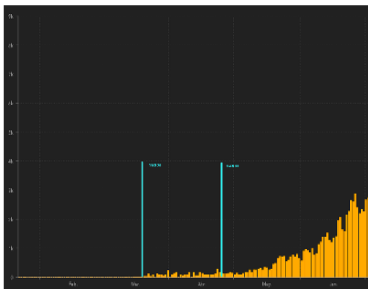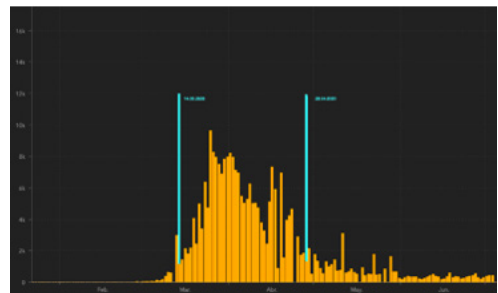
Figure 4. Spain
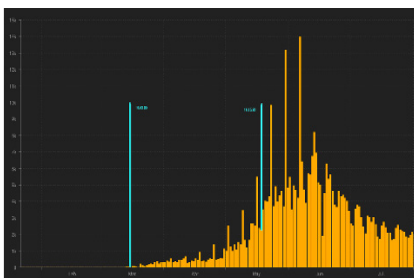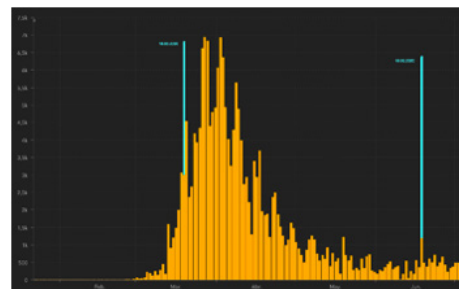March 14 & April 28

Figure 5. Germany
March 14 & April 28

Charts: The moment in which the heads of state of Spain and Germany addressed the state of the pandemic within their countries. Infection data: John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

The discourses analyzed here were drawn from different sources and have been confirmed in all cases: they include messages, statements, and public declarations published and distributed by official means, as well press conferences that were recorded and later transcribed. In all instances, we have limited ourselves to remarks available online. In the case of Mexico, the brevity of the first statements by President López Obrador forced us to include three statements, rather than one, in order to have sufficient text for analysis.

We performed our analysis of presidential pandemic discourses from a text-mining perspective, though we did not have enormous volumes of data comparable to those used in other data-mining and machine-learning processes (Eíto Brun and Senso 2004). Thus, we talk about adopting a text-mining perspective, which means that the analysis could be applied to far greater datasets (Feldman and Sanger 2006). We also talk about this study as experimental; its results may clarify or pave the way for more complex analyses in the future. Although we will take a chiefly quantitative approach, the experimental nature of our study enables us to make qualitative arguments more typically found in a comprehension and category-discovery phase.

For our discourse analysis, we used the application T-Lab (Lancia 2020). This software provides a set of linguistic, statistical, and graphic tools designed for analyzing any kind of text (newspaper articles, transcriptions of interviews and speeches, responses to open questions, Tweets, business documents, legislative texts, books, etc.). The application conducts automatic analyses that enable us to extract patterns based on words and broad themes (Bakero Velásquez 2014).
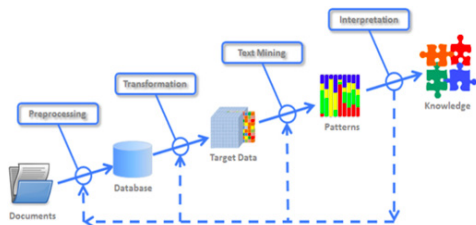
Figure 6: Analytic process of T-Lab.
Source: www.t-lab.it

The texts are subjected to the following processes: formal homogenization, detection of word sequences and empty words, segmentation of elemental context, automatic lemmatization and selection of key (content) words. The following analyses were carried out: 1) co-occurrence analysis, which makes it possible to explore, measure, and map the relationships between key words; 2) thematic analysis, oriented toward the search for key content words within texts and cluster analysis; 3) comparative analysis, which analyzes and maps differences and similarities between different kind of texts.

The analysis offered here is limited to the study of co-occurrences; specifically, we are interested in co-occurrences of key words (content words) to identify the relationships and interrelationships between the themes addressed in these discourses. This analysis enables us to map the strength of the association between key words in these discourses. "Sammon projection" was the form of mapping used; it transfers a high-dimensional space to a space of lower dimensionality. It is essentially a form of multidimensional scaling (MDS). As is well known, scaling constructs a map of elements based on a matrix of proximities (similarities and dissimilarities) between units; in our case, these are units of presidential discourses. In addition to this general technique, we use specific quantitative data to carry out a comparative analysis.

Analysis

The co-occurrence analysis carried out on the discourses of the presidents of Argentina, Chile, and Mexico have provided Sammon projections in the form of multidimensional scaling. The statements by Fernández (Figure 7), Piñera (Figure 8), and López Obrador (Figure 9) following the official declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization can be visualized to make certain differences clear.

Figure 7: Argentina MDS. Sammon projection. March 2020

Figure 8. Chile MDS. Sammon projection. March 2020

Figure 9. Mexico MDS. Sammon projection. March 2020

By comparing these three graphics, it is immediately clear that the president of Mexico's discourse was fairly simplistic relative to the discourses of the Argentine and Chilean presidents. This could be due to López Obrador's chosen mode of discourse and its length, but it is important to remember that, in the case of Mexico, three forms of discourse were analyzed: two were press conferences, but the third was an institutional statement. In any case, the simplicity of the Mexican president's discourse is clear from the weight placed on three ideas: the first relates to information, the second t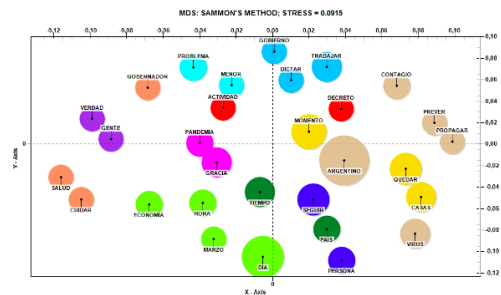o facing the coronavirus, and the third to the convenience of staying at home. All of this took place when the number of infections was negligible or in the low hundreds.

The Argentine and Chilean discourses occurred when the impact of the pandemic in these countries, relative to the current situation, was near-nil. Both discourses, which took the form of statements or official messages, exhibited similar thematic and communicative complexity, with shared elements (spatial-temporal references) but with differences in noteworthy respects. In Argentina, the references to the country and its inhabitants (Argentina, argentinos, argentinas) occupied a central space in the discourse, along with messages such as cuidar la salud (taking care of health), prever la propagación del contagio (preventing the spread of the disease), and el trabajo del gobierno (the government's job). Notably, in this early discourse, the president expressly mentions the economía (economy) and repeatedly alludes to the notion of verdad (truth).

In Chile, the president's comments revolve around the "coronavirus" and he clearly prefers to talk about "chilenos" but not "Chile" as a country, though this does appear in the form of el país (the country). The most common topics are salud, personas, and medidas (health, people, and measures), which are described through actions (adoptar medidas necesarias, proteger salud chilenos, control sanitario, suspensión clases [adopting necessary measures, protecting Chileans' health, public-health monitoring, suspensions of classes]) and through allusion to specific groups within the population (personas alto riesgo, mayores adultos, estudiantes, niños [high-risk individuals, older adults, students, children]). Notably, there is a

certain degree of parallelism between the Chilean and Argentine discourses (references to the country, to the people, to specific actions), although there is a key difference in the Argentine president's explicit allusion to the economy and to the notion of truth.

The presidential comments made over a month later in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico (Figure 12) demonstrate a clear evolution, and occurred within a health context in which Chile and Mexico had begun to see an alarming surge in cases, though Argentina remained less impacted by the pandemic.

Figure 10. Argentina MDS. Sammon projection. April 2020

Figure 11. Chile MDS. Sammon projection. May 2020

Figure 12. Mexico MDS. Sammon projection. May 2020

First, these three graphics demonstrate that these presidential discourses, which occurred over a month after the official declaration of the pandemic, became richer and more complex from a linguistic and discursive point of view. At this moment, there is space to talk about actions (quedarse en casa, guardar distancias, aislamiento and cuarentena [staying at home, social distancing, isolation, and quarantine]), as well as about the government and health systems—their organization and their efficacy—and about the consequences of the pandemic; in practice, this is the case in all three presidents' discourses. However, there are underlying strategical differences among them.

The president of Argentina's discourse (Figure 10), apart from alluding to political organization (autoridad, decisión, gobierno, gobernador, decreto [authority, decision, government, governor, decree]) and action (plan, medidas, prever, resolver, organizar, trabajar [plan, measures, resolve, organize, work]), has two noteworthy characteristics: first, he lends weight to the action of seguir (following); second, he refers to specific spaces (grandes ciudades, Buenos Aires, conglomerados urbanos [big cities, Buenos Aires, urban centers]). The Argentine discourse deploys a strategy built around government action: in fact, Fernández even says hemos calculado absolutamente todo (we have calculated absolutely everything) at times when the pandemic was having minimal impact.

The conceptual epicenter of the president of Chile's discourse (Figure 11) is la vida de los chilenos (Chileans' lives); he utilizes sentimental or affective elements in his discussion, as German Chancellor Merkel did in several of her statements. The most common words include salud, pandemia, familia, papás, mamás, abuelos, niños, compatriotas, responsabilidad, and solidaridad (health, pandemic, family, dads, moms, grandparents, children, fellow citizens, responsibility, and solidarity) as well as allusions to sufrimiento, dolor and angustia (suffering, pain, distress); it also features sequences such as proteger trabajadores vulnerables, personas mayores, fortalecimiento del sistema de salud, and plan de protección (protecting vulnerable workers, older people, strengthening the healthcare system, and protection plan).

Economic concerns occupied a central space in the president of Mexico's discourse (Figure 12) after the number of infections rose drastically: he alludes to millones de dólares and nuevos créditos (millions of dollars and new loans), as well as to concepts such as empleo, mercado, empresa, crisis, dato económico, petróleo, and remesa (employment, the market, business, crisis, economic data, oil, and remittances). He also refers, of course, to the virus and its consequences (cama, enfermero, médico, vida, salud [bed, nurse, doctor, life, health]). In addition to discussing the economy, the president also attacks his political adversaries and the information they are spreading: he even talks about living through a tem-

porada de zopilotes (season of vultures). We note, then, that the main focus of his discourses is strikingly different from that of the other two presidents after the pandemic and its effects were better understood.

Argentina: authorities and political actions (politics)
Chile: Chileans' lives and emotions (citizens)
Mexico: questions of national politics and the economy (economy)

Now, given that the pandemic is, by definition, a global phenomenon and that Europe appears to be at a later stage in terms of its impact and effects, it would be reasonable to expect Latin American presidents' discourses to roughly follow earlier European patterns. To confirm this, we will use the presidential discourses from Spain and Germany.

Figure 13. Spain MDS. Sammon projection. March 2020

Figure 14. Germany MDS. Sammon projection. March 2020

As occurred in the Americas, the president of Spain's discourse (Figure 13) following the official declaration of a pandemic included relatively few specific references to the disease: although he used words such as virus, propagación and sanitarios (virus, propagation, health-related), he did not go into great detail. Sánchez's discourse, which was highly developed from the outset, included meaningful elements: first, he expressed gratitude to the people and services directly involved in treating the virus, those related to actions such as proteger a los mayores (taking care

of the elderly) and garantizar la asistencia (ensuring aid), which also appeared in the Argentine and Chilean discourses. Sánchez utilizes a war metaphor (estado de alarma, victoria, unidad, orden, ganar, emergencia [state of alarm, victory, unity, order, winning, emergency]) that was also used in Latin America, though with less intensity: the president of Argentina talked about the pelea (fight); the president of Chile talked about discipline and about derrotar (defeating) the virus; the president of Mexico appealed to three ostensibly martial qualities: la entrega, el sacrificio and la obediencia (surrender or dedication, sacrifice, and obedience).

However, Pedro Sánchez's discourse did not sidestep references to concepts related to political authority (ministerio de Sanidad, autoridad competente nacional, consejo ministros, protección civil, comunidad autónoma, presidente, administración [Ministry of Health, competent national authority, Council of Ministers, civil protection, autonomous community, president, administration]) and its actions (garantizar, mantener, evitar, actuar, proteger [ensure, maintain, avoid, act, protect]). This rhetoric makes the government and the administration leading players, a choice that was motivated, perhaps, by the fact that his government had been formed two months earlier. In this regard, Sánchez's discourse most closely resembles the discourse of Argentine President Alberto Fernández, who took power in December of 2019.

Germany presents a different case (Figure 14), as Chancellor Angela Merkel focused her March 18 speech on ideas such as "life," "moving forward," "people" and "challenge." The central position of the term Lassen is due to a mere discursive resource that Merkel uses repeatedly. Among the Ibero-American discourses (Latin America and Spain), Chile's most closely resembles the German model, as it includes numerous references to people, their sentiments, and to challenges.

This simple, experimental analysis reveals certain points of interest from a political, communicative, and discursive viewpoint:

a) The progressive complexity of discourses as the amount of information available increased and the political-health situation evolved.

b) A divergence of emphasis among presidential discourses from each country, which focused on politics, the population, and the economy.

c) An abundance of temporal and spatial references, especially regarding time, which made it possible to contextualize these discourses.

d) The precariousness of data on the reality of the pandemic (though not on government actions).

Discussion

This analysis demonstrates that discourses are not simple concatenations of prepositions, but rather scripts and structures whose components establish various forms of conceptual relationship. Furthermore, discourses are used to deploy strategies regarding information, decisions, and actions suitable for a given context, and which lend sociopolitical meaning to non-discursive realities (Beard 1999).

If context is a key factor in the construction of any discourse, then in presidential discourses on the pandemic, it took on a singular importance (Fairclough 2001; Mole 2007). This context was different for each discourse (mainly the context of a press conferences or institutional statements issued through conventional media and social networks) (Patrut and Patrut 2014). In order to understand the importance of these elements, we must believe, as Teun van Dijk's sociocognitive model explains (2016), that the reliability of a discourse as a source of knowledge depends on its context; the expression of beliefs varies according to the moment, the place, and the participants.

Furthermore, these discourses' national contexts also varied by country. This was partially due to the different states of pandemic evolution in each location, in the countries themselves and their surroundings, but also due to the varying political configurations within each nation and government: consider the differences between the constitutional crisis in Chile, the recent inauguration of the president of Argentina (in December 2019), and the social, political, and economic crisis in Mexico; consider, too, struggles with political adversaries, which were notable in all of these cases, but clearest in Argentina and Mexico. These realities can most likely explain:

a) The Argentine president's interest in conveying truthfulness and in highlighting the key role of his recently acquired powers;

b) The Chilean president's interest in appealing to the people's emotions and to the citizens during a volatile political moment;

c) The Mexican president's interest in combating unfavorable information and projecting economic confidence.

Furthermore, the spatial/temporal references, as well as the context of these discourses' content, are of particular importance. In fact, in each of these discourses, no matter how simple, there is an observable, significant presence of deictic elements describing time and place, beginning with references to the international and global situation, which no discourse fails to mention. The most striking case may be the president of Argentina's second statement, in which references to specific places abound. If the context of

messages is important to discourse construction, it is also important for conveying reliability and sincerity.

In terms of different moments throughout the pandemic's evolution in each country, it is interesting to note how elaborate the discourses become and the measures that the president of Argentina took when there was a low number of cases in his country, compared to the sharp increase in Chile and Mexico. This could be explained not just by his desire for political recognition and an interest in demonstrating his ability as the head of a newly-minted administration, but also by the "mirror effect," which can emerge in situations with a global scope: no government wants to fall behind its neighbors or other countries of reference, nor does it wish to be viewed as weak compared to the others. It is important to not lose sight of discursive imitation as a factor (Landman 2000); this may explain why the presidents of Argentina and Mexico focused on *desescalada* (de-escalation) and *semáforos* (traffic signals) as isolation measures when the number of cases in their respective countries was low, and in Argentina's case, midway through a surge.

Notably, these presidential discourses lack precise data about the reality of the pandemic in their respective countries, not just in the first round of statements—which is understandable—but also in the second. The details specified are largely related to particular measures or decisions that the government has made in response to the pandemic and other national factors, measures that, at the time these statements were made, could not be properly called "facts." This reality confirms another insight from Teun van Dijk's model (2016), according to which facts stated in discourses are not interpreted as true or false, but rather as correct or incorrect, which contributes to making a given discourse coherent or incoherent. This is clear in the presidential discourses examined here: they express a will to do what is considered correct, from the position of a coherent discourse.

Of course, coherence and correctness are key qualities within discourses, but that does not mean that data and specific facts are not also important (Lodge and Nordeland 2017). In reality, the lack of data—which ultimately translates to a lack of information—is the ideal breeding ground for disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. This absence of data includes a dearth of real images and faithful audiovisual documentation of the pandemic's reality. In Spain, the few photos of the provisional morgue in Madrid's Palacio de Hielo were leaked or stolen. The importance of data becomes clear when data are falsified or their transcendence is not recognized: for example, the president of Mexico said the country had succeeded in *aplanar la curva* ("flattening the curve") in May, when the number of cases was steadily increasing, and he refused to share specific infection data because *pueden decir que se ocultan casos* ("they might say cases are being hidden").

In terms of the reliability of pandemic discourses, the figure of "experts" and "committees of experts" are similarly relevant (Turner 2001; Peterson 2020). In presidential discourses, experts began appearing largely in the weeks following the declaration of the pandemic: in Argentina, these statements involved infectious disease experts and specialists; in Chile, there was mention of a committee of experts; and in Mexico, experts spoke at press conferences, which excused the president from having to personally provide precise information himself. The president of Spain also alluded to experts who sat on a vague committee whose makeup was never disclosed, and he appeared with Fernando Simón, an epidemiologist and civil servant for the Spanish Ministry of Health, whose statements combined information about the pandemic with social and political considerations.

The presence of experts leads us to another consideration of singular importance in the construction of discourses: the need for characters, protagonists who make the topics addressed feel realistic and close (Lavazza and Farina 2020). As we have seen, the figure of the expert was not well developed in early statements, and that has not changed: in fact, there are many "experts" who appear in non-official media and provide various forms of information, data, and opinions, which are sometimes contradictory. Consider the conversation around the efficacy of facemasks (Peeples 2020)

If it is a matter of character creation, then the characters with the greatest spotlight in these presidential discourses are undoubtedly the very leaders, authorities, and politicians more or less involved in the handling of the pandemic. Of the Ibero-American discourses analyzed here, it was the president of Chile who ceded the most limelight to the people, their feelings, and their personal situations, most likely because of the delicate social crisis gripping the country. That said, the president of Argentina was the only chief executive analyzed here who used gender-inclusive language, always appealing to argentinos and argentinas, to *chicos*, *chicas* and *chiques*, the latter being a supposedly neutral morpheme.

Finally, the presidential discourses in Hispanic America included a number of linguistic features worthy of close analysis that we cannot undertake at this time. Therefore, we will limit ourselves to only one feature: use of the semantic neologism distancia social or distanciamiento social ("social distancing") in the statements by the president of Chile and the president of Spain. Use of this neologism is probably due to emulation of discourses from other places and other languages. Specifically, the concept of distancia social (which, in Spanish, has been associated with a given society's socioeconomic differences for the past sixty years) was probably taken from the English, as the term was used in that language to refer to the reduction of contact during times of pandemic (Huremović 2019).
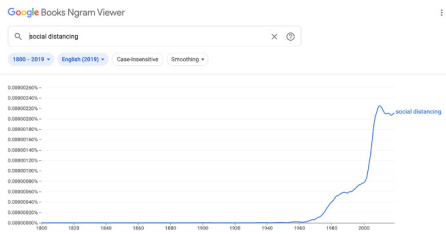
Figure 15. NGram of "Social Distancing". Source: Goo-
gle NGram Viewer. 2019 Corpus.

In the discourses analyzed, there are no instances
of the concept of nueva normalidad, which lately has
been used very frequently: in this case, the clear ante-
cedent is the English "new normal," an economic term
that was previously used to describe moderate growth,
globalism, and the eruption of the Chinese economy,
though other, more generic uses have emerged, par-
ticularly in the last decade. As it can be seen, the re-
search is open to the analysis of new linguistic aspects.

Conclusions

In relation to our overall objective, this analysis
of presidential discourses reveals several signifi-
cant differences regarding prioritization of certain
ideas and themes and their relationships with one
another. Of course, this analysis cannot go be-
yond approximation or experimentality, given the
number of discourses analyzed, but it was none-
theless able to highlight some notable features.

According to the initial objectives, this study's most
relevant findings include these discourses' progres-
sive complexity, the abundance of decontextuali-
zing deictic elements, and the differences between
each discourse's key ideas: political-administrative
management in Argentina, concern for the popu-
lation's emotional wellbeing in Chile, and interest
in the domestic economy and politics in Mexico.

Along with the key topics in each discourse, it was
worth highlighting other characteristics found in each,
as well as the lack of data or specific facts relating to
the pandemic, unlike data relating to governmental
decisions. The role of experts and epidemiologists
in presidential discourses has also been varied: the
president of Mexico ceded full responsibility for sha-
ring information to a specialist; the president of Chile,
in his May speech, alluded expressly to the guidan-
ce of an expert committee, as Spain had done since
March; the president of Argentina made no mention of
specific individuals, but did allude, in generic terms, to
doctors, infectious disease experts, and specialists.

In parallel, these presidential discourses have also
placed differing degrees of importance on data and

facts, in response to one of our specific objectives:
while the president of Mexico offered no data, the
presidents of Chile and Argentina, especially in the
second sets of statements analyzed, provided data
that largely related to the economy (in Chile's case)
and to health coverage (in Argentina's). The presi-
dent of the latter offered health data in response to a
rhetorical question: *¿Qué hicimos en todo ese tiem-
po?* ("What did we do this whole time?"). Perhaps this
relates to the leading role placed on the government
itself and the president's administration, as well as the
insistence on demonstrating faithfulness to the facts.

The analysis of these few Latin-America presidential
discourses is undoubtedly limited, but the text-mining
technique utilized may have a promising future. This
would be clearer if the presidential discourse analysis
were combined with analysis of discourses from ex-
perts, essayists, journalists, and other social agents.
The methodological door remains open to future study.

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