

Means of Expression in Daniel Ortega's Speech Regarding the 2018 Massacre in Nicaragua

Allan Jose Sequeira Lopez

Abstract

The 2018 crisis in Nicaragua has received a great deal of international focus and condemnation, with President Daniel Ortega deemed to have been involved in human rights abuses against its people. This text refers to how President Daniel Ortega has sought to undercut serious consideration of the incident. Therefore, this research paper aims to evaluate Ortega's rhetoric and how this has effectively masked the truth about human rights violations conducted by his regime.

Keywords: Nicaragua, Ortega, Politics, Language, means of expression, dictator, crisis, Human rights.

Introduction

The 2018 massacre in Nicaragua, where government forces violently suppressed anti-government protests, was a highly contentious and politically charged event. In the aftermath, Daniel Ortega, the President of Nicaragua, addressed the nation, using several communications means to downplay the severity of the crackdown and portray the government's actions in a more positive light (Cupples and Glynn 2018). This research paper analyzes the use of Ortega's speech and its implications.

This paper examines the means of communication used in the speech of the Nicaraguan president, Daniel Ortega, at the beginning of the 2018 Nicaraguan crisis. The material chosen for study is Daniel Ortega's televised speech from April 2018, in which he sought to reframe the rapidly aggravating situation in the country. The paper considers the sociocultural context in Nicaragua, where the media cannot broadcast any information. This accentuates the significance of Daniel Ortega's speech because his message is responsible for informing Nicaraguans and shaping their perception of the situation. Moreover, the political leader himself is often interviewed by the media.

The Ortega's political communication was a deliberate attempt to obfuscate the truth and paint a more favorable picture of the government's actions (Gorman 1981). By downplaying the severity of the violence and portraying the protesters as threats to the state, Ortega sought to legitimize the government's response and shift the narrative in its favor.

This strategy is common in authoritarian regimes, where controlling information and manipulating public discourse are essential tools for maintaining power (Spišiaková 2023, Adamcová 2016). In authoritarian regimes, manipulating language is a key strategy for maintaining control and suppressing dissent (Ramírez 2015).

Common means of expression used by politicians include euphemisms and dysphemisms. According to Allan and Burrige (1991), euphemisms are used "as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party." On the contrary, dysphemism is a "term with connotations that are offensive to either the denotate or the audience, or both" (Allan, Burrige 1991). Scholars have argued that the use of euphemisms in political speech is a form of "linguistic engineering", (Spišiaková 2023) where language is deliberately crafted to influence beliefs and attitudes (Cupples and Glynn 2017), the same can be said regarding dysphemisms. This is particularly evident in Ortega's speech, where he employs euphemisms to downplay the government's actions and dysphemisms to demonize the protesters.

In a related study, researchers have examined the role of language in legitimating authoritarian rule, highlighting how the framing of events and the use of specific terminology can justify the government's actions and undermine opposition (Gascón 2023).

The analysis was guided by the principles of critical discourse analysis, which examines the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Bello 2013). The primary data source for this study was the transcript of Ortega's speech, obtained from publicly available sources. In my Text, I closely examine the speech and identify the various euphemisms and other means of expression used by Daniel Ortega.

Background on Daniel Ortega and the Nicaraguan Crisis

Daniel Ortega has been in Nicaragua's political spotlight for most of his life. In 1963, he created the group Juventud Nicaragüense en Acción, which initiated his political career. Several years later, he cofounded the FSLN, which played an important role in overthrowing the Somoza dictator. Under

his rule and the 2018 Nicaraguan crisis, the FSLN has been accused of electoral fraud. The way Ortega runs the country can be described as authoritarian. The 2014 decoration of the National Assembly or the honorary title of El Comandante Presidente that was removed from the 1974 Constitution but currently applies. Ortega also surrounded himself with a clique of close associates, families, and religious leaders, who generally appointed him co-presidents. It is in this context of social discontent and political fights that the 2018 Nicaraguan crisis erupted. In April 2018, predominantly student and elderly protesters protested a social security amendment supported by President Daniel Ortega. The law was quickly repealed, but the police responded with violence, which led to community blockages. The number of government and non-profit organizations killed, wounded, and suborned is different. The government forcibly suppressed opponents after 2018 or repressed the opposition. It sent the police to handle the advocacy organizations. In September, the UN Human Rights Committee called the OAS participation in violent protests unprecedented. Prior to this event, President Daniel Ortega was not actively involved in law enforcement.

Methodology

The speech under analysis was chosen according to its adequacy to the criteria: it represents a key moment in crisis events in contemporary Nicaragua. It contains a wide range of expression means, many of which suit the type of theoretical tool that we want to develop and the richest field of communication means in which to apply it. The capacity of a national leader to cover up the facts of a crisis through a speech is of key relevance: Daniel Ortega reframed massacre images by several expression means that appeared in his speech.

Speech transcripts of a political leader shall be employed to complete the objectives of Linguistic Text Data Integration (LTDI), by which an analytical framework categorizes textually embodied communication means and seeks to complete monolingual interlinear glosses of Nicaraguan Spanish for a Spanish-speaking audience. Qualitative data analysis techniques for Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Studies will be applied. It is less relevant to consider the communication means of a speech within their full context. However, a selective summary of some euphemisms (or dysphemistic expressions) and their translation constitutes a second-level sign of verbal manipulation that paves the way for starting the development of a theoretical description of a hypothetical pragmatic second degree. The

speech has a structured order, following a general development, expansion, and conclusion outline.

Historical context of the protest

The 2018 protests in Nicaragua were a key event in the country's recent history, marking a turning point in Daniel Ortega's government and its relationship with civil society. The demonstrations began in April 2018, initially in response to reforms of the social security system, but quickly expanded to include a wide range of lawsuits against the authoritarian government of Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo.

The initial trigger for the protests was an announcement on April 16, 2018 about reforms to the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS). These reforms included an increase in contributions from workers and employers, as well as a reduction in pensions for retirees. The measures were seen as unfair by many, especially in a context of accumulated discontent over corruption and the deterioration of public services.

The government's response to the first protests was extremely violent. Security forces, along with paramilitary groups and government supporters, brutally repressed the protesters. This sparked outrage and an escalation in protests, which spread across the country.

With the violent repression, the protests went from a limited movement against social security reforms to a widespread uprising against the Ortega government. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of the president and early elections, accusing him of consolidating a dictatorship, corruption and systematic human rights violations.

Ortega's government responded to the protests with fierce repression. Police forces, along with armed parapolic groups loyal to the government, used firearms against protesters, resulting in hundreds of deaths, thousands injured, and more than 1,000 arrests. Reports from human rights organizations, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), noted that the government had committed serious violations, including extrajudicial executions, torture, and enforced disappearances (Organization of American States, 2023).

The toll of the violence was devastating. According to international organizations and NGOs, the protests left more than 300 dead, thousands injured and tens of thousands exiled, many of them taking refuge in neighboring countries such as Costa Rica. The existence of "political prisoners" was also denounced, imprisoned for participating in the demonstrations or expressing opposition to the government.

The protests and repression caused a serious economic crisis. Tourism, a major source of income for Nicaragua, collapsed, and foreign investment declined dramatically. Many businesses closed, and unemployment rose sharply.

The international community reacted by condemning the repression of the Ortega government. The Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union and several Western countries, including the United States, sanctioned key figures in the Ortega regime, demanding a peaceful solution to the crisis and respect for human rights. However, Ortega remained in power, supported by allies such as Venezuela, Russia and some sectors of the international community (Organization of American States, 2023).

Although Ortega managed to stay in power, his legitimacy was severely damaged internally and externally. The 2018 protests left an indelible mark on Nicaraguan society, and since then, the country has lived under a climate of tension and repression, with a government that has intensified control over the media, civil liberties, and political opponents.

The 2018 protests marked a before and after in Nicaraguan politics. Since then, Ortega's government has consolidated its power through increasing repression, while the opposition has continued to seek ways to bring about democratic change in the country. The November 2021 elections, where Ortega was re-elected amid allegations of fraud and the disqualification of opposition candidates, deepened the political crisis.

In short, Nicaragua's protests in 2018 emerged as a reaction to unpopular reforms, but quickly grew into a broader movement against the Ortega regime, which responded with violent repression. This unleashed a human rights crisis and political polarization that still continues to affect the country (Organization of American States, 2023).

Communication during the protests

The effort to minimize and distort reality can function as a rhetorical strategy in autocratic governments to underline the lack of control and existence of these issues all over the world. Ortega tries to create a context whereby the message expresses the opposite of the factual truth. This is where the inconsistency comes from because the correct language would be to express the opposite of what Daniel Ortega says.

This government-friendly euphemism works to keep restraint over his political image and affairs from the world, while diverting the public's attention from the deeper causes of social unrest towards minor disturbances. The tendency to minimize social issues to minor disturbances must be con-

sidered a concern for societal trust. Euphemistic language that intentionally distorts public understanding of reality may jeopardize trust further (Nordirovna 2023).

Below is a selection of Ortega's most used phrases to refer to the protests and their participants. It should be noted that groups of young people and mothers carried out the first protests.

"Golpistas"(Coup Lotters): By labeling the protesters as "coup plotters," Ortega reduces their legitimate demands to simply being part of an attempted coup. This framing presents them as a direct threat to the country's stability, distancing public perception of their grievances and justifying the government's harsh responses. It positions the government as a defender of democracy in the face of a supposed rebellion.

"Bandas mafiosas" (Mafia Gangs) or "elementos criminales" (Criminal Elements): Referring to protesters as "mafia gangs" or "criminal elements" dehumanizes them, painting them as violent criminals rather than citizens exercising their right to protest. This language helps justify the government's use of violence or heavy-handed tactics, as it portrays protesters not as people with political grievances, but as criminals who deserve punishment.

"Restablecimiento de la paz" (Restoring Peace): This euphemism masks the violent nature of government repression as necessary actions to "restore peace" or order. It conceals the brutality involved, making the government's response seem like a calm, reasoned effort to maintain stability rather than a violent crackdown on dissent.

"Limpiando las calles" (Cleaning the streets): Describing the removal of barricades erected by protesters as "street cleansing" trivializes the state's use of force. It makes violent interventions seem benign or even beneficial, comparing them to regular maintenance rather than an aggressive move to suppress protest.

"Fantasmas del pasado" (Ghosts of the past): Ortega uses this phrase to compare opposition groups to former counterrevolutionaries or enemies of the state, implying that they are relics of a dangerous and obsolete ideology. This narrative helps stigmatize them, suggesting that their beliefs are irrelevant in modern times and further positioning the government as the country's protector of backward or harmful forces.

"Turbas" (Mobs): The use of the term "mobs" diminishes the individuality of protesters by presenting them as a faceless, chaotic, and violent mass. This description generates fear and justifies the repressive measures by suggesting that the government is dealing with an unruly and dangerous mob, rather than citizens with legitimate concerns.

"Insignificantes" (Insignificant): Refers to someone or something as unimportant or irrelevant. When used by a president to describe individuals or groups, this term minimizes their significance or contribution to public discourse, effectively undermining their demands or influence.

"Chingastes" (Broken grains or leftovers): This term, which refers to the remnants of milled or broken grains like corn or coffee, can be used metaphorically to describe people as the "scraps" or "leftovers" of society. The president uses it to belittle individuals or groups, implying they are of little value or worth.

"Puchito" (Small portion) means a small amount or fraction of something. A president might use this to diminish the size or impact of a group or protest, suggesting that they are only a "tiny portion" of the population and therefore not worth taking seriously.

"Pobres Diablos" (Poor devils) refers to people in a pitiful, powerless state. The president could use this term to convey condescension, portraying opponents or protesters as pitiable and weak rather than legitimate political actors.

"Estercolero de la Historia" (The dung heap of history): This powerful mean of expression suggests that certain ideas, movements, or people are destined to be discarded and forgotten, like waste in the "dungheap of history." It can be used to dismiss opposition, suggesting that they will ultimately be on the losing side of history, and that their efforts are futile.

"Coreógrafos de la muerte" (Choreographers of death): This phrase implies that certain individuals or groups are responsible for orchestrating death and destruction, like a choreographer directs a dance. A president might use this to label violent opposition or protest leaders as those orchestrating chaos and death, further justifying strong, repressive actions against them.

Expressions used by Daniel Ortega, the president of Nicaragua, serve as rhetorical tools to delegitimize protesters and justify the government's repressive actions during periods of political turmoil. Let's see how these terms work:

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ortega regime strategically uses different categories of expressive means as a powerful tool to manipulate the public, delegitimise the opposition and justify repressive measures. By labelling protesters with terms such as 'conspirators' and 'criminal elements', the government distorts the reality of their grievances and reduces legitimate demands for reform to

criminal threats against the stability of the country. This rhetorical framing not only minimizes the intentions of the protesters, but also positions the state as the force necessary to ensure order, allowing it to justify the suppression of dissent while posing as a defender of peace.

In addition, the regime leverages historical narratives with terms such as "ghosts of the past," invoking outdated ideological threats to align opposition groups with counterrevolutionary forces of the past. This aligns the Ortega government with a protective stance, as if it is protecting Nicaragua against regression to a dangerous past, which stigmatizes opposition groups and reinforces its authority as a stabilizing force. This technique mirrors the tactics used by other autocratic governments to influence public opinion, presenting dissent as obsolete or regressive in order to stifle support for opposition movements.

Ultimately, Ortega's political language illustrates a central tactic of authoritarian regimes: systematically distorting the truth to reshape public perception and maintain political control. These rhetorical strategies not only obscure the severity of the government's actions, but also contribute to eroding public trust, creating a gap between the public's lived experience and the state's portrayal of reality. This strategic manipulation of language underscores how autocratic leaders use language to bolster their power, weaken democratic processes, and suppress legitimate demands for change, highlighting the critical role language plays in sustaining authoritarian governance. Further study in this corpus can reveal mentalities or cultures towards the denomination of social events.

Literatúra

- ALLAN, K., BURRIDGE, K. (1991). *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ANANYEV, M., POYKER, M. (2021). Do dictators signal strength with electoral fraud? *European Journal of Political Economy*, 71, 102075. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2021.102075>
- ADAMCOVÁ, S. (2016). *Political communication and discourse*. In: KVAPIL, R. (ed.). *Cudzí jazyky v premenách času 6: Foreign Languages in Changing Times VI*. Bratislava: Ekonóm, pp. 31–33.
- BELLO, U. (2013). "If I Could Make It, You Too Can Make It!" Personal Pronouns in Political Discourse: A CDA of President Jonathan's Presidential Declaration Speech. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 3(6): 84–84. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v3n6p84>

- CUPPLES, J., GLYNN, K. (2018). Introduction: Democracy and Authoritarianism in Nicaragua. In: CUPPLES, J., GLYNN, K. (eds.). *Shifting Nicaraguan Mediascapes. Authoritarianism and the Struggle for Social Justice*. Cham: Springer, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64319-9_1
- GASCÓN, J. Á. (2023). The Inferential Meaning of Controversial Terms: The Case of “Terrorism”. *Topoi*, 42(2): 547–559. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-022-09879-x>
- GORMAN, S M. (1981). Power and Consolidation in the Nicaraguan Revolution. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 13(1): 133–149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x00006192>
- RAMÍREZ, E A. (2015). Proyecto Calero: una historia de militarización y xenofobia. *Revista Praxis*, Junio-Diciembre, 71: 45–74. <https://doi.org/10.15359/praxis.71.2>
- SPIŠIAKOVÁ, M. (2023). Eufemismos y neologismos en el contexto de la Guerra en Ucrania. *El Español por el Mundo*, 5, <https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/aepe/pdf/revista_05_05_2023/revista_05_05_2023_12.pdf> [12. 10. 2024].
- ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES (2023). *IACHR publishes report on the situation of human rights in Nicaragua*, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/prel_eases/2023/067.asp> [12. 10. 2024].
- NODIROVNA, A. N., BOTIRJONOVNA, F. U. (2023). Euphemisms in Uzbek and English languages, phenomenon of euphemism and its functions in speech. *Open Access Repository*, 9(5): 25–27.

Contact:

Ing. Allan Jose Sequeira Lopez, PhD.

Katedra románských a slovanských jazykov Department of Romance and Slavic Languages
Fakulta aplikovaných jazykov Faculty of Applied Languages
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave University of Economics Bratislava
Email Address: allan.lopez@euba.sk
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2001-320X>