

DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND POPULIST RHETORIC IN TRADITIONAL BRAZILIAN JOURNALISM

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to identify the markers of populist discourse that emerge through the analysis of conceptual metaphors employed by traditional journalism in its portrayal of homeless individuals in the city of São Paulo. This research examines 9,757 words drawn from articles published in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, utilizing the Orange Data Mining software to process textual data through text mining techniques, which are used to develop linguistic patterns and identify lexical fields. The results indicate the prevalence of dichotomous thinking, where populism arises as a reaction to systemic values in postmodernity, reflecting the discontent of groups excluded from recent political and social processes. The study also found that, in an effort to avoid overt ideological commitment, traditional journalism employs empty signifiers and neutral representations, allowing them to be appropriated by readers from various ideological standpoints. The significance of this study lies not only in how journalism shapes such thought processes in relation to marginalized social groups, but also in the broader context of the responsibilities borne by both journalism and civil society regarding public policies aimed at the homeless population, as well as the underlying structure and logic of necropolises.

Keywords. Populism, conceptual metaphors, journalism.

1. Introduction

By 2050, it is projected that 70% of the global population will reside in urban areas. Currently, however, approximately 1.1 billion people live in precarious housing conditions or situations partially covered by basic housing systems, with estimates suggesting that an additional 2 billion individuals will face similar conditions over the next 30 years (United Nations-Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). Furthermore, data indicate that around 150 million people are homeless worldwide (United Nations-General Assembly, 2019). In the Brazilian context, as of July 2023, it is estimated that 200,000 individuals are living on the streets, with 91,000 in the state of São Paulo and 54,000 in the city of São Paulo (Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship, 2023). This article aims to analyze the discourse surrounding homelessness, particularly focusing on the metaphors employed by traditional Brazilian journalism when addressing the homeless population. Additionally, the study examines the use of language that enables media outlets to maintain a

neutral stance, allowing them to align with the perceived opinions and ideologies of their readership. Through this analysis, we seek to identify the discursive strategies currently employed by journalism to address politically polarized issues within society.

2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify the populist markers that emerge in journalistic discourses through the analysis of conceptual metaphors used by traditional media in their portrayal of homeless individuals in São Paulo. The secondary objectives of the study are to: a) Analyze journalism's response to the crisis of credibility and its strategies for retaining readers; b) Investigate the use of semantic selection, particularly metaphors, as a tool for conceptual consolidation and shaping public opinion; c) Classify and cluster the primary conceptual metaphors, grouping them according to similarities and differences; d) Conduct an exploratory analysis of the clustering data to identify

patterns, recurrences, anomalies, and other populist semantic strategies employed by traditional journalism.

This study is structured in alignment with the objectives of the "Media and Cities Laboratory" research group (UNINOVE/CNPq), within which the author's undergraduate research project (2023) was developed.

3. Methods and procedures

This research commenced with an analysis of Brazilian legislation that established the National Policy for the Homeless Population (Brazil, 2024), which outlines seven key areas of action and monitoring for the support of homeless individuals. From these seven areas, we selected Axis 02 — Health. This choice is justified by the recurring focus on health in traditional journalism when addressing issues related to homelessness and drug use. Once the axis was defined, we established the corresponding semantic field and measured the presence and absence of relevant terms in journalistic articles covering these topics.

The excerpts analyzed from the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper support the discussions presented here and are divided into two sections (both produced by the newspaper itself): "Cracolândia" (a Brazilian general term for homeless addictions groups within a city) and "Tragédia dos Sem-Teto" ("Tragedy of the Homeless"). It is noteworthy that the "Tragedy of the Homeless" section accumulated 16 articles over the span of a year, from January 23, 2022, to September 5, 2023, while the "Cracolândia" section produced 17 articles in less than a month, between October 27 and November 14, 2023. The total corpus consisted of 237 paragraphs, 1,021 lines, and 9,757 words.

In order to test our hypothesis, the Orange Data Mining tool (Demsar et al., 2013) was employed to perform text mining, which allowed for the processing of textual data to develop linguistic patterns and identify lexical fields. This analysis enabled us to identify the domains of central conceptual metaphors associated with the selected terms and to assess whether these concepts converge or diverge. The subsequent analysis of the textual corpus categorized the identified classes based on recurrence and similarity within a lexical field, interpreted within sociocultural contexts where the metaphors are discursively situated.

The analysis of conceptual metaphors, as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (2008), becomes effective only when examined within these contexts, allowing for the identification of the target domains that were activated and those that were omitted. Finally, through clustering, it was identified discursive phenomena such as dichotomization, hegemonic ideas, semantic overlaps, and explored the hypothesis of the use of empty signifiers, as posited by Laclau (1994).

4. Development

4.1. Analysis of Representation and Conceptual Metaphors

The use of language is inherently linked to the culture of a society, and thus social ideas play a significant role in shaping the process of representation. In this context, the selection of news stories for publication, along with word choice and syntactic constructions, act as filters of reality. These choices, whether intentional or not, shape a representation that may not fully capture the truth of events (Marin, 2020). The relevance of the concept of "representation" emerges from linguistics, which studies, among other things, how metaphors contribute to the formation of human conceptual thought. The way individuals think, perceive the world, and interact with others is deeply embedded in communication, and metaphor plays a key role in this phenomenon. Therefore, representation is the form through which metaphor shapes reality. For instance, the metaphor "arguing is war" creates a more hostile framework for electoral debates (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

4.2. Journalistic Neutrality and Public Agenda

The significance of topics covered in newspapers is tied to the public agenda of problems that need to be addressed by both public authorities and civic actors in Brazil (Soares, 2009). According to Hill and McCombs' Agenda-Setting Theory, there is a correlation between the main issues highlighted by the media and the mental images formed by audiences. In this sense, the media, public, and political agendas are interconnected (Rossetto & Silva, 2012). However, when the media does not offer an accurate portrayal of reality—driven by commercial interests rather than genuine representation—both the state and the population are less likely to become aware of the country's true demands. As a result, long-standing concerns that hinder national development and social well-being are perpetuated (Soares, 2009).

4.3. Populism and Traditional Journalism

In a global context, populist leaders often divert attention from urgent public issues, effectively allowing governments to avoid taking meaningful action. Examples of this dynamic include figures such as Donald Trump and Nicolás Maduro (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Within an anti-systemic framework, where certain institutions are challenged, journalism has become a target, especially as social media creates direct connections between populist figures and the public, bypassing traditional media mediation (Rothberg et al., 2023). Consequently, populist discourse—whether from the opposition or the government—intensifies societal polarization.

As the media seeks to capture the attention of a dispersed and fragmented public, ideologically

polarized content that appeals to emotions tends to generate higher engagement (de Almeida, 2022). To compete with the internet for viewership, journalism often publishes controversial populist statements on divisive issues that provoke interest and attention, particularly in contexts of heightened social polarization. Populist politicians exploit this dynamic, attracting journalistic audiences, while the press maintains its relevance in shaping public opinion and generating profits by fueling debates among polarized groups (Rothberg, Silva & Oliveira, 2023).

Populist discourse tends to polarize societies ideologically (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). A polarized society is characterized by internally homogeneous but externally divergent groups (Przeworski, 2019). Political theorists are particularly concerned with the rising intolerance toward “difference,” which, in some cases, can escalate from mere rhetoric to acts of aggression. Therefore, it is critical to examine the media’s role in disseminating ideologically polarized issues to better understand potential consequences, such as the crisis of social-democratic politics and the increase in violence motivated by prejudice against marginalized groups.

In the Brazilian context, while citizens regained their political rights in the 1980s, civil rights continue to be violated in certain situations. Do Rio Caldeira (2000) pointed to an urban process involving the privatization of public spaces, such as the construction of shopping malls and the erection of protective walls around buildings and homes. While these developments may initially appear to address concerns about public and private security, they are manifestations of more complex socioeconomic processes, ranging from real estate speculation to necropolitics (do Rio Caldeira, 2000).

4.4. Populism and Representations in Brazil

The erosion of representation in democratic politics delegitimizes and discredits hegemonic parties and groups, paving the way for populist discourses. In this sense, the structure of communication in postmodernity may contribute to reinforcing phenomena such as polarization and populism.

In the Brazilian context, the increase in public safety concerns in São Paulo has led to what Rio Caldeira (2000) refers to as “crime talk,” in which stereotypical categories of good and evil, often propagated by mainstream media, are presented to the public. The region of “Cracolândia,” located in the central area of São Paulo, which is home to a high concentration of drug users, is frequently depicted through discourses of criminality that further stigmatize those involved (de Souza & Melo, 2022). This discourse reflects “crime talk” by representing criminals through lenses that reveal more about societal prejudices than the reality of crime (do Rio Caldeira, 2000).

The conceptualization of individuals as having certain rights restricted by the State is far more complex than the simplistic portrayal of criminals as inherently evil. This reductionist view conflicts with deep-seated prejudices in Brazilian society. The “crime talk” narrative, which argues that certain “others” do not deserve human rights, has gained traction within a democracy that enshrines human rights as a fundamental principle in its National Constitution (do Rio Caldeira, 2000).

Rio Caldeira (2000) notes that the rise of “crime talk” concerning the poor and northeastern immigrants in São Paulo’s Mooca neighborhood reflects broader socioeconomic changes in the area. Political theorist Przeworski (2019) further argues that during periods of socioeconomic insecurity, people tend to scapegoat various groups for these effects. For instance, the rise in xenophobia across Europe since the Syrian war began in 2011 can be linked more to pre-existing prejudices than to the real impact of refugees on the labor market following the 2008 financial crisis (Przeworski, 2019). In this sense, homeless populations serve as a focal point for polarized worldviews in a complex context, wherein individuals struggle to simplify the causes and effects of postmodern realities.

4.5. Neutral Representations and Empty Signifiers

While individuals may lack the ability to process the vast amount of data necessary to fully comprehend social issues, this does not preclude them from forming beliefs that appear to align with the truth (Castells, 1999). These beliefs, and their discursive agents, often create “neutral” meanings and representations that are presented as objective realities rather than biased political constructions, facilitating their appropriation by the public (Costa et al., 2022). However, such simplifications and the illusion of neutrality are divorced from the historical and social context of political concepts, preventing the generation of more pertinent critiques (Costa et al., 2022).

For example, the term “Cracolândia” obfuscates the findings of the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) and the Ministry of Social Development and Hunger Alleviation, which revealed a heterogeneous group rather than a monolithic one. Around 70% of individuals surveyed in the region were employed, while only 15% cited begging as their primary source of income—challenging prevailing stigmas. The complexity of the homeless population’s life narratives, shaped by factors ranging from mental health issues and familial breakdown to natural disasters such as floods and landslides, cannot be reduced to simplistic categories like drug addiction (Sarmiento, 2020). The use of the term “Cracolândia” thus serves as a contemporary manifestation of older social stigmas, such as the “vagrant” figure prevalent during Brazil’s First Republic (Costa et al., 2022).

In postmodern society, marked by insecurity and fear of the "other," issues of Public Safety often take precedence. The focus on policing regions like "Cracolândia" rather than implementing medium- and long-term public policies reflects a naturalization and internalization of "horror" (de Souza & Melo, 2022). Superficial discussions and detailed portrayals of "horrific situations" perpetuate this cycle, as they fail to challenge the systemic factors that contribute to these conditions (Leite, 2020). The "horror" experienced by those deprived of basic rights, as guaranteed by the National Constitution, becomes normalized through processes of legitimization and justification, which internalize a logic of causality within the broader population. Limited exposure to the "other" and the dichotomization of social relations contribute to the perception of certain acts of violence as natural or logical acts that, in other contexts and under different societal values, would be recognized as oppressive (Leite, 2020).

Furthermore, this logic not only governs the choice of language but also influences the selection of news stories. For instance, while the murder of indigenous Pataxó Galdino Jesus dos Santos in Brasília in 1997 sparked national and international discussions on human rights, the daily murders of homeless individuals go largely unreported in mainstream media, instead being covered by alternative outlets (Sarmento, 2020).

4.6. Polarization and Extremist Discourses

Discourses are representational logics of reality, and as such, they indirectly influence the mind. A specific vision of reality, shaped by discourse, inevitably leads to corresponding social practices that symbolize these logics. Hence, controlling discourse and adapting it to particular contexts and interests is critical in the exercise of power (van Dijk, 2008).

In a process of simplification and aggregation of interests, polarization of ideas becomes an effective means of generating behavioral trends. In democracies where political groups rely on societal support, for instance during election processes, populist rhetoric from politicians and parties emerges as a strategic bid for power.

In this context, analyzing how journalism disseminates such ideological frameworks and the consequences of extremist actions for marginalized social groups is crucial for two primary reasons. First, it aids in understanding the collusion between the media and civil society regarding public policies affecting homeless populations. Second, it sheds light on the postmodern structure and logic of necropolitics—"the politics of making people suffer."

5. Results

In the initial phase, it was identified two primary clusters that semantically grouped distinct terms (Figure 1): (a) Cracolândia and (b) Sem Teto (Homeless). From these terms, it was examined the

recurrence of words and the metaphors used in both contexts. Across both scenarios, traditional journalism was perceived as a representative that does not merely reflect the desires of the represented, but also legitimizes or alters the meanings within public administration and political discourse (Silva & Baron, 2021). The inquiry "Are you homeless or a crack user?" critiques the dichotomous thinking model (Fuks & Marques, 2022), where populism emerges as a reaction to the liberal-cosmopolitan values of globalization. This populism manifests through anti-systemic discourse, expressing the discontent of groups excluded from recent political and social processes.

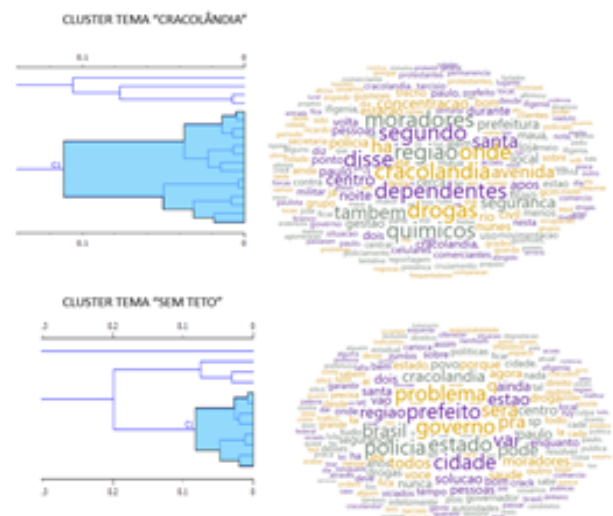


Figure 1: Thematic Clusters

5.1. Analysis of "Folha de São Paulo"

The use of the pejorative term Cracolândia to describe a complex social problem reduces the issue to a subset of street dwellers. The term's formation, through suffix derivation, combines crack (a cheap and harmful cocaine derivative) with the suffix -lândia (indicating the place of origin for a group) (Chishman, 2020). Therefore, the term signifies a group identified by illicit substance use and occupying an urban space.

This framing emphasizes the illicit nature of the group and its perceived danger, overshadowing the economic, social, and health dimensions of crack use. The term also reinforces discomfort with the mere existence of the "other" in public spaces, particularly those not generating any perceived value to society. In essence, a multifaceted problem that requires a nuanced understanding of facts and data is reduced to one of urban violence and crime, as reflected in the section's title and focus.

Example:

"Residents report they must pass through these checkpoints if they wish to leave and are often stopped by guards, who ask where they are going and what they plan to do. 'Women are told to throw away trash, and they won't let us. They're violating

our right to come and go. This isn't a policy for serving homeless people. They're pitting people against people and displacing users from one street to another,' criticizes the representative. "This is the life we live every day. We are victims, but so are they." (Residents of an occupation block entry to Cracolândia on a street in São Paulo).

This statement by Ivaneti Araújo, a representative of the Housing and Justice Movement, illustrates the complexity that should inform journalistic discourse. Both the homeless, some of whom are addicted to illicit substances, and residents of downtown São Paulo are victims of an economic and social reality shaped by political decisions over centuries.

This discourse prompts pertinent questions beyond conventional frameworks: Are they not all victims of a control logic, given that the police themselves often confuse the two groups? If both groups are subject to control, would it not be more productive for them to unite?

The earlier discussion of "crime talk" highlights how narratives shift attention from structural issues, such as economic decay or industrial flight, to social problems like the arrival of northeastern immigrants (do Rio Caldeira, 2000).

Instead of conflict, new and traditional residents could have cooperated in addressing Brazil's broader population impoverishment, demanding greater responsibility and socially sustainable practices from the state and corporations. Had such collaboration occurred, not only might conflicts have been minimized, but there could also have been long-term solutions to improve the well-being of both groups (do Rio Caldeira, 2000)

6. Conclusions

Understanding how journalism shapes public thought and the impact of extremist actions on marginalized groups is essential to revealing the media's role in colluding with civil society on public policies regarding homelessness (Frangella, 2022).

The simplification and polarization of ideas contribute to the formation of behavioral trends. Discourses, expressed through conceptual metaphors, serve as representational logics of reality. These logics, indirectly, generate specific visions of reality, leading to corresponding social practices. Traditional journalism, embedded within democratic discourse, seeks to maintain control over these narratives, adapting to varying contexts and interests (Przeworski, 2019). In its effort to remain ideologically uncommitted, journalism often employs empty signifiers and neutral representations, allowing readers from different perspectives to interpret its messages as they see fit.

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