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Semantic Representation of Bilateral Tensions between the United States and Venezuela in the International Press

Representación semántica de tensiones bilaterales entre Estados Unidos y Venezuela en la prensa internacional

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Bryan Granado
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4656-2782
granado.academico@gmail.com
Universidad del Zulia. Maracaibo, Venezuela

Mauricio Ocando
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0234-400X
ocando.academico@gmail.com
Universidad del Zulia. Maracaibo, Venezuela

Abstract

This article analyzes the semantic representation of bilateral tensions between the United States and Venezuela through a qualitative study of four news reports published in El Nacional, El Tiempo, BBC, and Infobae. The main objective is to examine the linguistic and discursive resources used in media constructions of the conflict, focusing on lexical choices, semantic load, and emergent interpretative frames. The study draws on Lyons' (1997) linguistic semantics and Van Dijk's (2000) discourse analysis, complemented by perspectives from Karam (2005) and Santander (2011). A qualitative, documentary and analytical approach was applied to interpret explicit and implicit meanings in the texts. Results reveal differentiated discursive patterns, including metaphors of threat, references to possible actions, defensive strategies, and oscillation between tension and diplomacy. It is concluded that the language employed by the media structures the conflict through semantic oppositions and verbal constructions that shape public understanding of an evolving geopolitical scenario.

Keywords: press, United States, Venezuela.

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza la representación semántica de las tensiones bilaterales entre Estados Unidos y Venezuela a partir del estudio cualitativo de cuatro noticias publicadas en medios internacionales: El Nacional, El Tiempo, BBC e Infobae. El objetivo general consiste en examinar los recursos lingüísticos y discursivos empleados en la construcción mediática del conflicto, atendiendo a las cargas semánticas de los enunciados, la selección léxica y los marcos interpretativos que emergen en cada texto. La investigación se sustenta en la semántica lingüística de Lyons (1997), así como en los aportes del análisis del discurso expuestos por Van Dijk (2000), Karam (2005) y Santander (2011). Se aplica un enfoque metodológico cualitativo, documental y analítico, orientado a la interpretación de significados explícitos e implícitos. Los resultados evidencian patrones discursivos diferenciados, en los que predominan metáforas de amenaza, acciones potenciales, estrategias defensivas y alternancia entre tensionamiento y diplomacia. Se concluye que el lenguaje empleado por los medios organiza el conflicto mediante oposiciones semánticas y construcciones verbales que modulan la percepción pública del escenario internacional, reforzando marcos de presión, confrontación y negociación en un contexto geopolítico complejo.

Palabras clave: prensa, Estados Unidos, Venezuela.

Introduction

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela have received extensive coverage in the international press, where linguistic and discursive resources are mobilized to construct particular representations

of the conflict. From the standpoint of linguistic semantics, utterances do more than convey information: they organize meanings that shape the social interpretation of events (Lyons, 1997). Discourse analysis, in turn, allows texts to be understood as practices of social action linked to historical and institutional conditions (Van Dijk, 2000; Karam, 2005; Santander, 2011).

This study sets out to examine how four news items, published by El Nacional, El Tiempo, BBC, and Infobae, construct a semantic representation of the tensions between the two countries. It considers the processes of lexical selection, metaphor, action verbs, expressive modality, and the discursive strategies that frame the events. Throughout, the analysis strives to maintain critical distance and to avoid taking any political stance, consistent with the linguistic perspective that guides the study.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, documentary, and analytical approach. Four news items representative of the recent period of bilateral tension were selected, all published by El Nacional, El Tiempo, BBC, and Infobae. The corpus was examined through close reading and semantic categorization, drawing on the account of Lyons (1997) about meaning and utterance modulation as well as on the principles of discourse analysis put forward by Van Dijk (2000).

These outlets were chosen for their international reach, their influence on the regional and global news agenda, and the diversity of their editorial lines, which makes it possible to observe different discursive and semantic strategies in the representation of the same conflict.

The procedure entailed identifying units of meaning, describing action verbs (active and passive voice, following Franco, 1997), detecting metaphors, modalities, and semantic oppositions, and providing a contextual discursive interpretation. No tables or statistical procedures were used, consistent with the interpretive nature of the study.

Results and discussion

1. El Nacional (December 9, 2025)

Headline: **“Trump warns Maduro: ‘His days are numbered’”**

From the outset, this headline carries a heavy semantic charge. The phrase ‘his days are numbered’ functions as a categorical statement that evokes imminence, a temporal limit, and a shift toward the future. Following Lyons (1997), the meaning conveyed here combines denotative elements, a warning, with strong connotations that heighten the reader's interpretation.

The active-voice verb ‘warns’ assigns direct agency to the first actor, Trump, in line with the account of Franco (1997) about active voice as a device that foregrounds the subject as agent. This construction casts Trump as the source of the statement and reinforces his active standing within the framework of the conflict.

Further into the article, the statement ‘I don't want to confirm it or rule it out’ conveys an epistemic modality that expresses deliberate uncertainty. This kind of semantic vagueness opens up a discursive space in which action remains possible but not guaranteed, producing an effect of contained tension.

The reference to ‘Operation Southern Spear’ introduces an explicit military metaphor. The word ‘spear’ evokes an image of attack or penetration, which colors the overall tone and contributes to building a war-like frame.

The actions described ‘has destroyed some twenty boats,’ ‘the extrajudicial killing of more than 80 people’ rely on past-tense verbs that establish a backdrop of accomplished fact.

The mention of a ‘cordial’ conversation between Trump and Maduro, meanwhile, creates a striking semantic contrast. The text shifts in tone, moving between a discourse of pressure and the possibility of dialogue. This shift bears out the claim of Van Dijk (2000) that discourses are not homogeneous but respond to a range of contextual circumstances.

2. El Tiempo (December 5, 2025)

Headline: **“Nicolás Maduro asks Venezuela's police and military to consider ‘all forms of armed struggle’”**

The headline pivots on the verb ‘asks,’ which conveys an act of command or exhortation. Semantically, this verb frames the action as a directive issued by political power toward the armed institutions. The inclusion of the quotation ‘all forms of armed struggle’ reinforces a semantic frame of preparedness and defense.

The modality implicit in the phrase ‘all forms’ widens the range of possibilities it evokes. Lyons (1997) notes that expressions of semantic breadth or indeterminacy generate meanings that go beyond the literal, amplifying the force of the statement.

The article goes on to reference the U.S. military deployment, describing these actions through passive verbal constructions: ‘more than 20 vessels have been attacked’ and ‘flights were suspended.’

According to Franco (1997), this verb form shifts the focus from the agent to the outcome, producing a representation in which consequence, rather than action, predominates.

The article also draws on institutional sources, such as FAA and IACHR reports. These external voices operate as discursive strategies that broaden the semantic field and shape the reader's interpretation. In this respect, the discourse is built from multiple sources, which aligns with the view of Van Dijk (2000) about discourse as a contextualized social practice.

Semantic oppositions such as ‘security guarantee’ versus ‘threat’ also appear, helping to define discursive positions without the outlet explicitly taking a stance.

3. BBC (November 29, 2025)

Headline: **“Trump declares the total closure of Venezuelan airspace, and the Caracas government calls the announcement a ‘colonialist threat’”**

This headline forms a two-part semantic structure that brings together two opposing statements. The first segment, ‘Trump declares the total closure of the airspace,’ uses the verb ‘declares,’ which implies a performative act.

The adjective ‘total’ intensifies the meaning of the closure, producing an absolute modality.

The second segment introduces a discursive response: ‘the Caracas government calls the announcement a colonialist threat.’

The verb ‘calls’ points to a semantic process of interpretation, whereby an actor assigns a specific meaning to an event. The phrase ‘colonialist threat’ is an expression laden with cultural and historical values, one that activates metaphors of subordination and domination.

Within the body of the article, the BBC incorporates contextual framing that functions as a semantic modulator.

For instance, the statement that the U.S. president ‘has no authority over Venezuelan airspace’ works as a factual clarification while also constructing an interpretive frame around the limits of the declared action.

The text also relies on indirect citation (‘as the New York Times points out’), which widens the discursive polyphony. Karam (2005) observes that resources of this kind reflect the ideological and cultural conditions that shape the production of discourse.

The inclusion of the U.S. argument regarding the fight against drug trafficking, together with the mention of observers who read the act as political pressure, underscores the polysemantic nature of the conflict.

The discourse thus emerges as a stage on which different voices attribute divergent meanings to the same event.

4. Infobae (December 3, 2025)

Headline: **“Nicolás Maduro confirmed he spoke with Trump amid Washington's military pressure: ‘It was cordial’”**

This headline combines two distinct semantic planes:

- military pressure, tied to the international context;
- cordiality, tied to diplomatic contact.

The contrast between the two terms creates a frame of discursive complexity in which the semantics of war coexist with the semantics of relationship. According to Lyons (1997), this juxtaposition of meanings generates interpretive nuances that cannot be grasped at the literal level alone.

The article foregrounds verbs such as confirmed, spoke, maintained, and stated, all of which belong to the semantic field of communication and diplomacy. These verbs soften the interpretive frame that dominates the other reports, offering a less confrontational representation.

The text nonetheless also includes references to military pressure, rewards offered by the United States, and interpretations concerning possible strategic targets.

This combination builds a dual semantic register: on one hand, a willingness to engage in dialogue is presented; on the other, elements tied to international tension are retained.

The alternation between verbs of forceful action (for example, ‘declared a terrorist organization,’ ‘has offered a reward’) and verbs of rapprochement (‘I spoke,’ ‘proposed,’ ‘welcomed dialogue’) reinforces the heterogeneous character of the discourse. Santander (2011) points out that discursive configurations of this kind reflect the social function of language as a mechanism for managing symbolic conflict.

Analysis of the corpus identifies three predominant semantic axes, whose relative weight is established interpretively, on the basis of discursive recurrence and the semantic loading of the statements, rather than through strict quantitative counting; what is reported instead is the qualitative predominance observed in the analysis.

1. Confrontation axis (≈ 45%)

This axis carries the heaviest discursive weight, as three of the four reports repeatedly draw on verbs of force (warns, declares, asks), war metaphors, references to military operations, and expressions that heighten the perception of tension. It stands as the dominant frame because it structures most of the media narrative and steers the reader's interpretation toward scenarios of instability.

2. Threat/defense axis (≈ 35%)

Its weight is likewise considerable, manifested in nouns carrying negative valuation (threat, aggression, narco-terrorists), the use of passive voice to foreground consequences, and explicit semantic attributions (labeling something a colonialist threat). This axis complements the first and reinforces the interpretive logic of the conflict, adding a justificatory and evaluative dimension to the actions described.

3. Dialogue/diplomacy axis (≈ 20%)

Although less frequent, its presence is significant, particularly in the Infobae report. Verbs such as spoke, stated, and proposed, together with qualifiers such as cordial or respectful dialogue, introduce an alternative semantic register that softens the conflictive frame. Its smaller share does not make it irrelevant; on the contrary, it operates as a counterpoint that adds complexity to the representation of the conflict and keeps the discourse from becoming homogeneous.

These proportions do not derive from a strict count but from a qualitative assessment of semantic predominance within the corpus, consistent with the interpretive approach adopted throughout the analysis. Their purpose is to describe the relative configuration of meanings and to ease the transition toward the study's conclusions.

The semantic distribution observed shows that the media representation of the conflict is not built uniformly but rather through the interaction of these three discursive axes, which overlap and modulate one another. This overall picture helps explain how the news reports configure a symbolic space in which tensions, evaluations, and diplomatic openings coexist, shaping public perception.

Conclusions

This study of the semantic representation of bilateral tensions between the United States and Venezuela across four news reports made it possible to identify how journalistic discourse organizes and modulates the meaning of an international conflict through lexical choice, verbal structures, and the articulation of interpretive frames. The findings show that language occupies a central place in the media construction of events, in keeping with the account of Lyons (1997) about meaning modulation and with the socio-communicative conception of discourse developed by Van Dijk (2000).

First, the individual analysis of the reports showed confrontation to be the predominant semantic axis (≈ 45%), manifested in verbs of force, metaphors drawn from the military domain, and expressions suggesting urgency or imminence. This predominance contributes to a representation of the international scenario as a space of strategic tension.

Second, the threat/defense axis (≈ 35%) is articulated through evaluative nouns, passive-voice structures, and discursive constructions that emphasize consequences over agents. It complements the first axis by supplying an interpretive frame in which the actors' actions are understood in terms of their political and symbolic significance.

Finally, the dialogue/diplomacy axis (≈ 20%) introduces nuances that soften the representation of the conflict. The presence of communication verbs, qualifiers denoting cordiality, and references to spaces of negotiation demonstrates that media discourse is not confined to reproducing tension; it also draws on semantic resources that open up alternative interpretive possibilities.

Overall, the interaction of these three axes reveals that media representations of the bilateral conflict are built through overlapping meanings, in which tension and diplomacy coexist as complementary dimensions. This

configuration confirms that journalistic discourse operates as a mechanism of symbolic elaboration that not only informs but also shapes public perception within dynamic geopolitical contexts.

Recommendations

News outlets are encouraged to draw on a wider diversity of sources and voices in their international coverage, including institutional, academic, and neutral-observer perspectives, so as to offer a more complete and balanced interpretive frame that allows readers to understand the conflict from multiple angles.

It would likewise be useful for coverage to balance information about confrontation with the inclusion of diplomatic efforts and spaces for dialogue. Highlighting these elements helps convey the complexity of the geopolitical scenario and keeps public perception from being reduced solely to military tension.

Careful attention to verbal voice and the modality of statements is also recommended, clearly signaling when confirmed facts are being presented and when the content instead consists of declarations, hypotheses, or interpretations. This helps reduce ambiguity and allows audiences to distinguish between actual events and the perceptions or evaluations offered by the actors involved.

Finally, media outlets can contextualize semantically loaded terms and war metaphors by briefly explaining their historical or political significance, pairing them with linguistic resources that signal negotiation, communication, or cooperation. This practice preserves informative intensity without distorting the interpretation of events or exacerbating the perception of conflict.

Implementing these recommendations helps journalistic language fulfill not only its informative function but also its role as symbolic mediator, fostering a more nuanced understanding of events and strengthening the public's capacity to critically interpret international conflicts.

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