

The Debate on the Pandemic in Spain: Discursive Strategies in Political Argumentation¹

Francisco Javier Vellón Lahoz
University Jaume I (Spain)

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a remarkable impact on several aspects of democratic societies, beyond health, that have affected our ways of living together, the economic reality, consumer habits, and the way we manage public and private activities.

Faced with this challenge, governments had to adopt urgent measures whose implementation has provoked political responses in parliamentary debates, for, as Shepherd, MacKendrick & Mora pointed out (2020, 2), “the pandemic emerged among anxieties about the trustworthiness of government institutions”.

The management of this crisis, including the adoption of important curtailments of civil liberties, happened in a moment of extreme political complexity in the evolution of the democratic model in advanced societies in which these new proposals have even questioned the design of the institutional state, as Maesschalck points out (2020, 128):

The closing of the public space and the restriction of individual liberties, substituted by non-transparent, expedite administrative procedures, have restricted the political order to its most questioned form from an intellectual and social point of view, that is, the obsolete structure of a representative and surveillance democracy (versus other forms that started to manifest themselves in previous decades)

In this context, the relation between the executive and legislative powers seems particularly complex, both because of the impact of the adopted solutions on the democratic quality and transparency and the implications of the different political actors, as indicated by Dodds & *alii* (2020, 293):

These are truly extraordinary times, which will require parliamentary democracies in particular to think about how and when they recalibrate the relationship between the executive and legislature. As authoritarian governments have shown repeatedly, there is a danger that the state of emergency becomes the new norm.

Because the crisis, as Walby points out (2020, 15), “offers an opportunity for the executive to legitimate a claim for more power on the grounds that in such exceptional circumstances, these powers are needed to counter an existential threat”, democracies are faced with a challenge related to the response of the political parties according to their strategic goals. As Kavanagh & Singh affirm (2020, 1002): “Democracies also have the added challenge of managing competing political factions and institutions, some of whom may have political incentives to undermine response”.

In the case of Spain, the fragmentation and dispersal of the political discourse, after decades of bipartisanship, the questioning of the institutions born out of the *Transición*, and the problems of the autonomous state design have created a situation with specific characteristics whose result is described by Crespo & Garrido (2020, 17) in the following

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manner: “En España, en la actual fase de explosión de la crisis, se ha producido, más bien, un cierto *blame game* o juego de la culpa acerca de las responsabilidades políticas por la crisis, en las que cada fuerza política ha intentado realizar un enmarcado y una estrategia de comunicación propia” (In Spain, in the current phase of bursting of the crisis, there has been a somewhat blame game or assignment of blame about the political responsibilities for the crisis in which each political party has created their own communication frame and strategy).

The pandemic arrived in Spain in a moment of great political and institutional complexity. To understand how the political debate is articulated, the frames within which legitimizing discourses are constructed, the argumentative strategies and the emotional keys to the semantic references, it is necessary to know the main elements of the parliamentary and legislative context:

- A unstable government with a fragile parliamentary majority born out of a coalition of two left-wing parties, one belonging to the traditional political establishment, *Socialist Party* (PSOE), and another, *Unidas Podemos*, that reached power after the disturbances created in the previous economic crisis;
- A right-wing opposition that is fragmented, with a new extreme-right party, *Vox*, that threatens the hegemony of the main right-wing *Popular Party* (PP), and another party, *Ciudadanos*, receding although its parliamentary members make it still relevant considering the difficult parliamentary math after the general elections of 2019.

Regarding the challenges the Spanish State must face immediately, which will be present in parliamentary debates as an explicit or indirect reference, we can mention the following:

- The governmental need to create a majority able to approve a budget that guarantees governmental stability. The pandemic arrived precisely in the middle of the tension created by the profile of the majority chosen by the government, what motivated a struggle among the different ideological groups of the Executive.
- The territorial issue, brought to the fore of the political conflict after the illegal Catalan referendum of 2017, which is constantly present in all relations among parties in the Congress because the nationalist parliamentary members are necessary to win the majority vote. In this case, negotiations with *Republican Left of Catalonia* (ERC) and *Bildu* (Basque Country nationalist) will be constant references in the debates.

This context, composed of different interests and party strategies difficult to be reconciled with a sense of political responsibility, is what has characterized the political debate on COVID-19 in Spain, to the point that Rapeli & Saikkonen (2020, 27) question the effect this radical polarization will have in democratic institutions: “The Spanish case leads to the more pressing question of whether COVID-19 could have more fundamental consequences for attitudes toward democracy and its institutions. Could the pandemic undermine the legitimacy of representative democracy—or strengthen it?”.

The aim of this article is to analyze the discursive model used in the political confrontation through the parliamentary debates between the president of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the leader of the opposition, Pablo Casado (PP). The pandemic has obliged them to redefine their strategies to articulate a discourse capable of projecting different objectives with which to transmit an image that goes from the commanding format aimed at facing the effects of the Coronavirus to identifying a political program opposed to that of the opponent. This double discursive direction is particularly pressing in the case of Pablo Casado, for, as pointed out by Rapeli & Saikkonen (2020, 29), while the health urgency has been a challenge for the parties in power, the opposition has seen how the opportunities to intervene publicly have been reduced as well as the opportunities for communication: “The pandemic situation also means that the incumbents’ media

presence is greatly increased and the opposition will have even more difficulties in communicating its message to voters”.

In the following chapter, we will detail the corpus of texts we have studied, their discursive characteristics, and the methodology utilized in the analysis. In the following three sections, our research will focus on the different aspects of the debate on the pandemic, paying attention to the legitimizing discursive model of the Spanish Executive, as well as the debate strategies developed according to the political objectives of the two majority groups in the Congress, from an argumentative standpoint as well as from the point of view of the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms utilized.

Corpus and Methodology

Our research was carried out through the analysis of the eight debates in Congress between Pablo Casado and the president Pedro Sánchez, as they are described in Table 1. To this end, we have used the transcription of the *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso*.

Tabla 1. Description of the debates analyzed in our research

SESSION	INTERVENTION	DISCURSIVE ORIENTATION
APRIL 15, 2020	Question - Pablo Casado: How do you value the way the Government has managed the crisis created by the Coronavirus?	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse
APRIL 22, 2020	The President of the Government informs about the European Council and the request to extend the state of emergency	Institutional Exposition – Political parties establish their official position – Reply by the President of the Government
MAY 20, 2020	The President of the Government requests an extension of the state of emergency	Institutional Exposition – Political parties establish their official position – Reply by the President of the Government
JUNE 10, 2020	Question - Pablo Casado: Does the Government think that Spain is coming out stronger after this health crisis?	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse
JUNE 24, 2020	Question Pablo Casado: What is the Government’s forecast regarding the social and economic situation of our country	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse
JULY 22, 2020	Question Pablo Casado: How do you value the situation Spaniards are going through	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse
SEPTEMBER 9, 2020	Question Pablo Casado: Has the Government defeated the virus?	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse

OCTOBER 28, 2020	Question Pablo Casado: What is the Government doing in this new wave of the pandemic?	Question/Answer/Reply/ Counterresponse
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This is a discursive model that is included among the “ritualized forms “ (Igalada, 2003, 993) that condition the type of communication as well as the relation between the speaker and the different reception levels, with shifts that determine the anchoring in the context and therefore its performative sense. We should remember, as Van Dijk states (2005), that:

although content and even style of what is said in parliament may be shared by other types of communicative events, the function of such structures should be established in relation to the specific political situation: The speakers-MPs are ‘doing’ politics, legislate, represent the voters, govern the country, and so on

The structural disposition of the interventions follows a complex discursive practice whose aim is to control not only the dissemination of information, but also its interpretation and the influence of the questions subjected to the social debate, as it befits political elites in advanced societies. As Ilie indicates (2001, 21), “Parliamentary debating tactics and strategies consist of cooperative interaction and adversarial encounters, both of which instantiate a struggle for political influence and authority that is conveyed partly rationally, and partly emotionally”.

The selection of texts has been made according to the aims of this article, that is, choosing those that allow us to delve into the keys of the debate of the pandemic in Spain, regarding the attempt to encourage international agreements as the tendency to place themselves within the public opinion through the image of the projection made of their own and the opponent’s image.

Thus, the corpus is composed of some texts with a high degree of preparation, as it is normal for governments that appear institutionally in Parliament, and others characterized by their dialogical dimension, particularly in the interventions furthest removed in time from the initial question, in which the reference to the original organization of the debate is more blurry due to the need to respond to the opponent.

Our article will focus on two main types of discursive constructions:

- The exposition-argumentation type developed around the strategic model of legitimation, through the selection of all sorts of resources (discursive, lexico-semantic and grammatical) in order to reinforce the validity of a political ideology with the discourse itself (see Leeuwen 1996; Martín Rojo & van Dijk 1998; van Dijk 2008). The general format that defines the speaker’s ethos in this discursive modality has been defined as “oral pedagogical discourse” (Verón 1987 y 2001; Molina 2003; Vitale 2020) insofar as the orator adopts a given attitude towards the facts and the discourse contributes to place him in a position in which his legitimacy is justified beyond argumentative dialectics.
- The conversational debate model, whose aim is argumentative dialectics addressed to responding to the opponent’s ideas as well as to the statements which are potentially menacing acts (Fernández 2000, 115 y ss.) regarding the speaker’s face in what Brown & Levinson (1987, 55) define as FTAs (*face threatening acts*). In this type of institutionalized communicative events, the public image of the speaker adopts great relevance, and therefore the interest of the discourse is measured by its capacity to act as a mechanism of social intervention.

Regarding the methodology used in this article, the critical discourse analysis offers a model not only to overcome the interpretive limitations of traditional hermeneutics but also because “it is based on a semiotic perspective understood as an irreducible part of the material social processes” (Fairclough 2003, 180). In the concrete context of political discourse, the importance of this methodology, as stated by Concepción Montiel (2010, 16), lies in the fact that “through studies like these, we can access the political activity itself, and thus they become a useful tool to understand the articulation and essence of the political act in contemporary societies”.

Analysis of the Debates

1. Institutional Discourse: the Executive and Social Pedagogy

The priorities of governmental discourse, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, were, first, to clarify the informative transparency of their policies, something that according to Castillo, Fernández Souto & Puentes (2020), “allows to establish the framework of the discussion”, and second, to foment the effect called “rally round the flag”, a sort of patriotism around the measures adopted that, as Garrido, Martínez Rodríguez & Mora indicate (2020, 533), “when this model, typical of a bipartisan system, is adopted by a multi-partisan country, this “closing ranks” effect must be construed conceptually with a minimum consensus about the approval of the president”.

This implies discursive operations involving the receiver and the speaker in the interventions by the president of the Executive in Congress. In the first case, we can remember, as van Dijk states (2001), that “in parliamentary debates it is necessary to take into consideration the voters and other extra-parliamentary groups as receivers”. Thus, although the immediate receivers are named explicitly (“Members of Parliament”), the most relevant part of the message is addressed to construe a discourse capable to integrating the citizenship and its representatives, even beyond the parliamentary space.

This can be observed in the construction of a model organized around an iconic syntax that goes from the impersonality (“this is a Government”) to personalizing the speaker thus projecting a humanizing image that communicates itself to the actions performed with all sorts of political and social institutions. Resources related to iteration such as parallelism, anaphora, repetitions in echo, etc. contribute to creating this effect, as well as a structure framed within a reference to “this Government”:

this is a Government [...] that believes in the autonomous state, that believes in the composition we currently have of our autonomous state. The ten presidential meetings [...] I have had with the autonomous presidents have been State Meetings, meetings of collaborative work to take care of Spanish citizens, as well as those I held with the *Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias* and those I have had with social agents. [...], and this Government has repeated during all this state of emergency that we would not have special powers one day more than it would be necessary, not one more. (05/20)

The use of the demonstrative “this”, with a deictic value of cognitive proximity – both spatially and conceptually – points to the other relevant factor in the creation of a governmental discursive model: the figure of the speaker.

In order to guarantee the performative efficiency of the message, it is necessary for the discourse to adopt an exposition based on objective values whose legitimacy lies in the “axis of knowledge” (Vitale 2020, 117), that is argumentative referents organized around ideas of an ethical nature and the categorical imperative.

To this end, the discourse takes the form of an oral pedagogical model (vid. supra §2), which means the predominance of the receiver in the argumentative process because

of his dominant position in the ins and outs of political action, and the obligation on his part to support a persuasive communication capable of mitigating the distorting effects of partisan politics, which results in the use of all those strategies that foment an image of predominance in a discourse that claims to be inclusive, symbolically efficient as an institutional action and representative of the knowledge shared by the community.

In this sense, the first mechanism is geared towards transmitting the privileged position of the Executive as the source of the operation on which its legitimacy is based and the illocutionary strength of the discourse, its performative character materialized in making explicit the political referent, which means the textual actualization of the actors involved and their institutional weight in the context of their social interventions. This is achieved through the linking of the subject of the sentence and the global actor of the enunciation, indicated through deictic transitions of the impersonal form (“the Government”), the corporative plural (“we”) or even the “I”, and also through the fixation of the discursive position of the subject in the communicative ritual “in order to make function the performative logic of the symbolic domination” (Bourdieu 1985, 59). To this end, the institutional action is placed at the center of the discursive process, what highlights its authority and also its symbolic efficiency by establishing “the relationship among the properties of the discourse, the properties of the speaker and the properties of the institution” (Bourdieu 1985 71). We can observe this in the transitions around the enunciating agent and the constructions with parallelism, whose verbal content is based on a sole argumentative referent, the Government:

The Spanish Government has maintained a firm position which we have underlined and repeated from this podium [...]. We have always understood that European solidarity is one of the best tools to fight the virus, but also one of the best tools to fight for an idea of Europe in which we believe, in which I am convinced that the majority of you can agree. Now is the moment to act together, also in the European front, against this adversity. Thus, from the beginning of this crisis we were at the forefront of the negotiations, exercising leadership, [...] (20/05)

The second mechanism has a meta-discursive character: alluding to the argumentative process itself as a source of a shared understanding. Hence the constant references to intellectual verbs that require the acquiescence of the audience about the communicated messages:

I believe we all agree that it is not yet the moment to do it and there exists already a de-escalation plan with several phases in which this will be done gradually, progressively. [...]. Is it being demanded the right to open businesses, offices, companies without any restrictions? I believe nobody sees this possibility as something reasonable from a health point of view. We can agree on the rapidity [...] I believe we all agree it would be an extraordinary lack of responsibility, leaving aside what you intend to vote today. (05/20)

Another characteristic formula of the pedagogical discourse issued from a situation of institutional and discursive domination of the President of the Government is related to the exposition mode, with resources that place the speaker in a context of a privileged informant who possesses more knowledge than the addressee.

Among them, we could highlight the power of the speaker to indicate the key aspects of his intervention:

And I believe crucial to underscore the verbs I am using in my speech, and obviously also in the text you have to vote on: it allows the Ministry of Health to modify, enlarge, and

restrict the measures, places, businesses and commercial, cultural, and recreational activities that are allowed. (04/22/2020)

Also, the use of reformulation, exemplifying and explanatory connectors:

That is to say, members of Parliament, we are going to move forward and backward depending on how the pandemic develops in each region. (04/22/2020)

Rhetorical questions are intended to make explicit the contradictions of those who oppose the institutional discourse and to propose, through an answer, the objective alternative defended by the governmental discourse:

What benefits could we obtain from lifting the state of emergency? What benefits we would obtain today from lifting the state of emergency? I will tell you in a different manner, what rights would be restored or returned in doing so? Can the right to mobility be restored without any restriction? [...] (05/20/2020)

The following mechanism refers to formulas used to stress the preponderant role of the speaker in the argumentative process. The control over the message and over its formal and verification resources can be observed in structures in which the speaker reaffirms his communicative intentions as an interpretive frame of what he intends to say: *“I want to be, members of Parliament, very clear about this. We haven’t arrived here by the current, [...]”* (20/05/2020)

There are also sentences that determine the interpretation of the highlighted facts and the reasoning that has to be followed to access the criterion of objective truth in which the institutional discourse is placed:

In fourth place, a strong welfare state — *I believe it is very important to reach this conclusion after what we have seen* —, that offers social justice and protects everyone, particularly the weakest (04/22/2020)

Another resource of oral pedagogy is recapitulating, an operation geared towards recuperating relevant information in order to oblige the receiver to assume the arguments with which the argumentation has been produced:

Let us remember some numbers, members of Parliament. Two months ago the virus was spreading at a rate of 35% daily, [...]. Today, the reproduction index is below, really below, 1, around 0.20 (05/20/2020)

Conversely, the speaker anticipates future developments through an interpretation of the receiver’s intentions:

Much has been discussed, and not only here —*and I am convinced the members of Parliament will do it also, particularly those whose vote is a ‘No’ to the continuation of the state of emergency* — about the need for the state of emergency [...] (20/05/2020)

Recontextualizing the content is the next mechanism that contributes to the didactic image of the speech. The institutional representative is invested with a power that allows him on one hand to act as mediator between the specialized discourse and the audience (the audience present and also the entire society) and, on the other, to reassert his proposals through the criteria of authority, which in this particular case is twofold, scientific and international: *“Members of Parliament, Spain will follow the criteria of the*

HWO and the experts, as we have been doing from the beginning of this crisis”(04/22/2020)

Finally, the speaker resorts to data as the best proof of truth in order to show himself as the discursive entity supported by quantitative references:

...that the second success would happen when the number of medical releases was higher than the number of new infections, and I will simply offer you the following data: in this last week, that is from Monday 11th to Sunday 17th, there have been 15,785 cured patients vs. 3,947 newly infected; last week there were 8,316 newly infected [...] (05/20/2020)

2. Legitimizing Semantics

The legitimizing semantic strategy is based on the argumentative references upon which the official representation is built and is the framework for the Executive's action. It is then about integrating the program of adopted measures within a normative order adjusted to the requirements of the pandemic context, and about showing that it responds to objective needs as much as to the fulfillment of ethical, scientific, political, and legal requirements.

Legality is the first aspect to be highlighted in the aforementioned legitimizing process. Although it is present in any governmental intervention, this time it offers some peculiarities.

First, in two of the abovementioned texts that belong to key moments in the parliamentary debate on the pandemics, an extension of the state of emergency is requested. This implies that in his speech the President appeals to the general framework of the Constitution. Besides, his insistence and the weight of this argument in how he builds his discourse are due to the fact that from the opposition they tried to attack the constitutionality of the measure, either appealing to its dubious constitutional nature or to more political aspects such as the unconstitutional spirit displayed by some members of the Executive (particularly the members of *Unidas Podemos* are always mentioned).

In the next fragment of Pedro Sánchez's speech, we can see not only the dominant presence of the legal frame of the Constitution, but also the discursive reinforcement with pragmatic markers (“nothing less”, “thankfully”), the lexical selection around the conceptual nucleus of the Law (“juridical, legislative, legal, constitutional, constituents”), and the syntactic construction that places the “Government of Spain” in the perceived center, linked to other European governments:

First, the state of emergency is fully legal, nothing less than the main nucleus of our legislative system, which is the Spanish Constitution. It is not something, then, invented by the Government, just as the other European governments that have utilized a juridical and constitutional tool similar to ours have not invented theirs either. (05/20/2020)

After establishing the legal principles, it is time for legitimizing the authority in charge of enforcing them. Faced with the magnitude of the problem, the discourse of the President opts to transmit the image that State, European and worldwide organizations are involved in this situation. In fact, the credibility of the institutional message and the legality of the execution of those measures is sustained by an iron-clad system of representation that, as proven by the next text, goes, politically, from the supranational to the state institutions and the social agents, and regarding human emotions, to the collectivity, thus moving from the juridical space to the ethic and moral area:

I, members of Parliament, am confident; confident in our autonomous and municipal institutions; confident in our social agents; confident in the European institutions, in their

will to preserve the Union despite differences and difficulties; and confident, especially, in our compatriots [...] (22/04/2020)

The third semantic reference in the legitimizing process is based on the insistence on the fact that the adopted measures respond to an exceptional situation. As Kavanagh & Singh point out (2020, 998), “With COVID-19, governments have been praised for enacting rigid lockdowns that would not have been seen as ethical in other contexts”. Within this context, the strategy of the governmental discourse is to remark the challenging nature of the situation, with numerous lexical mechanisms that point towards this (from an epic context whose more relevant index is the repetition of terms such as “extraordinary” and “exceptions”), and the appeal to the affective component (alluding to the social effects of the virus) and its global dimension, what places governmental action within the normalcy of the conventional procedures enacted by all politicians in change worldwide:

We are living in a period of extraordinary sacrifices personally, and also of social sacrifices and economic sacrifices, which have barely began because the health world crisis that started with COVID-19 will not be completely finished until science discovers a vaccine (04/22/2020)

Under this approach, there are three related semantic strategies in the governmental discourse in Parliament. First, appealing to consensus. As Castelo & Szulman point out (2020, 29):

Faced with the coronavirus pandemic, probably the most complex and deep crisis in the last decades, many governments are defining frames and utilizing metaphors that construe an otherness, a dangerous enemy that can only be defeated if we stand united.

Invoking consensus is the main axis in the argumentation, for obtaining it is a reaffirmation of the hegemony of the presidential discourse, giving support to the objective evaluation of the procedures and involving all political parties in something that goes beyond the political and acquires a moral category:

We are in the midst of an economic and social crisis of Dantesque proportions as a consequence of COVID, but we will not let fear overpower us. *We can overcome it, and I am convinced we will overcome it by acting together* (05/20/2020)

Unity becomes the main objective of the discursive strategy, a unity in which social groups are involved and in which, as can be seen in the following text, the Government acts as the catalyst (as the nucleus of the grammatical links with all the organizations listed), without forgetting the personalized affective expression with which the paragraph ends:

What we really want is total victory over COVID-19, and we want to do it united: uniting politics and science, uniting the Government and the autonomous communities and municipalities, uniting the Government of Spain and the social agents [...], and in addition, I would like to do it united with all the parties in this Parliament, especially starting—and I say this wholeheartedly— a social and economic reconstruction plan. (04/15/2020)

Appealing to consensus brings us to the second strategy: creating an in-group. The governmental discourse projects the image of the existence of a group composed by society and its political representatives that constitutes a reference versus the external

enemy. As we will see in the next section, this will be one of the harshest points of contention in the debate with the opposition, hence the President's insistence on endowing the group of those who support his measures with a characterization that is very humanized and scarcely political, a group that fights against the virus beyond their individual disagreements. Thus, he anticipates a possible negative vote of some political parties and places them as self-excluded from the ample center around which the social order is resting.

The next text reveals the main argumentative resources utilized in Pedro Sánchez's speech: the use of inclusive deixis allows us to create a link between the interests of the Government and the expectations of society; the group activity as a key in the strategy against the pandemic, converted into a subject of the sentences of the speech; the projection on the temporal axis in a dynamic of past ("we have responded")/present ("we are overcoming")/future ("we will find") that determines success according to the goals achieved as a group; the morphological resource indicated by the prefix *re-* that directs the attention toward the semantic value associated with the return to normalcy ("recognition, reconstruction, reactivation"):

Members of Parliament, we have been subjected to an unthinkable test, we have responded with sacrifice, with unity, with winning ethics, and we are overcoming the test. Let us recognize all good things we have accomplished together and how brave we have been [...]. We must value the agreements we have been able to reach and their fruitful consequences for the whole of the Spanish citizens, [...]. In that recognition we will find the necessary strength to reconstruct and reactivate our country, to make it move forward [...]. (05/20/2020)

The third strategy in the argumentation for the unitary action is based on comparison. The purpose is to strengthen the governmental position through its relation with a general tendency in other European countries, something that consolidates the existence of the in-group and isolates its critics:

Members of Parliament, the pacts in Spain will be the pacts in Europe: unity and solidarity, a capability for common work, the real possibility of upholding freedom and democracy, in sum, of not leaving anybody behind. This is the new politics ahead of us [...] (04/22/20)

3. The Political Debate: Party Strategy vs. Institutional Strategy

The treatment of the pandemic and the adopted solutions arrived at a moment when the advanced democracies were been shaken by a series of internal problems perfectly described by Powell, Molina & Martínez (2020, 16): polarization and a crisis of confidence of citizens "towards institutions and the political actors".

Within this context, the political debate tended to become more difficult with the opposition parties' temptation of adopting a populist discourse capable of offering an argumentative option to the institutional legitimizing argument that also could rally behind it the emotional expectations of the society, as Elstub, Sarah Liu & Lühiste point out (2020, 433):

Alternatively, populists in opposition may utilise public scepticism in the increased powers the state has adopted and the inevitable economic recession to continue to offer simplistic solutions to complex problems

The confrontation among parties becomes now the objective of political strategies vs. the need for a constructive discourse around a consensus about the problem. Thus, if in the legitimizing discourse the institutional speaker adopts an attitude of playing down the differences and proposing shared spaces (supported by his dominant position in the discourse and as an expression of the objective references), the debate then moves towards a discourse whose objective is to shatter the image of institutional strength. The result is an argumentative process addressed to the discourse's legitimation foundation transmitted from the source of power itself and therefore the parliamentary dynamics moves towards the defense of the singularity of each political party and their confrontation with their opponents.

The most relevant discursive operations developed by the opposition tend to highlight the thematic protagonism of its leader, his agency in the events that are being disputed, and his correspondence in the grammatical order of the statements. The argumentative strategies and the semantic propositions associated to this control of the discursive resources, as an alternative to what the President has done as part of his legitimation strategy, aims at creating rhematic predicates as a response to those issued from the power.

Thus, first of all, regarding the legislative support of the argumentation, we can perceive in the next excerpts how the statements depend on the thematic source associated to the Partido Popular and its leader, and they project from there two pieces of information that act syncretically: the constitutional limits to the Executive's proposal (the state of emergency) and the alternative presented by the conservative party. A new legal frame is then stated that is supported by a speaker that acts as the specular counter-reflection of the person in power:

Against your lack of action against the new outbreaks, we have been telling you for weeks to apply the current legislation in order to achieve an efficient response without resorting again to the state of emergency. And against your passivity to this recession, we have been telling you for months to enact a national plan of reforms [...] like other countries do. (Casado 07/22/2020)

The response to this line of argumentation is to reassert the constitutional frame as the objective legal base that legitimizes the Executive's acts, thus placing the opponent outside the legal framework through a discursive operation by which his actions are termed contradictory by insisting on the thematic role of the Popular Party:

What your party is doing is making mistake after mistake. You have denigrated a legitimate and efficient constitutional tool in the fight against the virus, the state of emergency. You even qualified the state of emergency as a constitutional dictatorship. It is either dictatorship or constitutional, Mr. Casado, [...] (Sánchez 10/28/2020)

Regarding authority, it is about diminishing the institutional rank of the speaker, that is the principles that supported the presidential discourse: his credibility and legitimacy. To this end, it is about dispossessing the figure with the maximum state representation of his discursive attributes, thus projecting onto the message the categorial objectivation of its content.

The pragmatic strategies of discourtesy are thus activated, addressed to act on the public and private image of the adversary in order to undermine the foundation that supports the discursive figures created during the process of the debate.

The first resource is constructed *ad hominem*, that is presenting the figure responsible for the legitimizing discourse beyond his institutional attributes. In the

following text, we can see two of these argumentative mechanisms: deception, the use of personal-private actions to throw an accusation of illegality, what amounts to mixing the personal and public spheres:

On July 5th, Mr Sánchez —the virus having been defeated, according to his own words— engaged in a propaganda campaign and left on holidays. This very same week they said the situation was stable —their spokesperson, that of the imaginary committee of experts, and his minister, the one who hides the security alerts—, but yesterday you approved a state of emergency for six months, without any parliamentary or judicial control, something that goes beyond our legal state (Casado 28/10/2020)

The second resource is one of the clichés of the political debate on the pandemic: misinformation. As Salaverría & *alii* remind us (2020): “Political parties exchanged mutual accusations about spreading unfounded rumors and fake news, and as the study shows, with the Government quoting mass media verification sources of fake news as well as the opposition”. It is a generalized tendency, as Scott Brennen & *alii* state (2020, 6): “Across the sample, the most common claims within pieces of misinformation concern the actions or policies that public authorities are taking to address COVID-19”

The accusation of lying is one of the mechanisms that maximizes the image attack. The seriousness the accusations have for the image of the receiver obliges this strategy to have attenuation mechanisms. However, the virulence of the analyzed debates is reflected in the following excerpts, where we can perceive the absence of pragmatic-linguistic resources with an attenuation purpose:

I ignore where you get those numbers from, although I imagine from the same place as your reports about Oxford, Johns Hopkins and the OCDE; that is, from your factory of *fake news* (Casado 05/20/2020)

Thus, President Sánchez, fulfill your obligation with the Spaniards since Europe has fulfilled its obligation with Spain; do it this time, for a change. (Casado 07/22/2020)

In the process of the discursive discrediting of the receiver, another strategy utilized is associating the opponent with negative intentions, events of dubious legality. As we see in the following examples, these accusations are accompanied by pointing personally at the adversary (singling out the attack), about whom serious accusations are expressed. In the case of Pedro Sánchez, he places Pablo Casado as the representative of anti-system attitudes through the use of shocking terms (*dead persons, conspiracy*) and by pointing out the scarce consistency of his arguments which are contradicted in the first statement. In the case of the leader of the opposition, he links lying to lacking empathy towards the suffering of others:

The truth is that I am moved by your words, Mr Casado, but what happens is that after your words come your actions, like the arguments you elaborate to instigate your leaders [...] to use the dead by COVID against the Government of Spain or, for example, what you say about Barajas becoming the new March 8th, what represents a new conspiracy of the Partido Popular [...] (Sánchez 06/24/2020)

You have abandoned families in the chaotic return to school, and autonomous communities and their health workers during the new outbreaks, [...]. Then, could you tell us why you said two months ago that you had defeated the virus and whether you will accept any responsibility for lying so massively to the population? (Casado 9/9/2020)

When disqualifying the opponent, other argumentative strategy in the debate on the pandemic is adopting a contemptuous attitude towards the adversary and showing comparisons in which the receiver has a disadvantage. It is one of the discursive operations of discourtesy described by Culpeper (1996, 358) as a devaluing tactic whose main objective is lessening the discursive position of the opponent as the axis that gives sense to the ideas transmitted in the speech act.

The following examples reveal the keys in this argumentative development. In the first instance, Pablo Casado is presented as ineffective in contrast with the generalized effort, with the rhetorical detail of a question that precedes to conclusive climax of the accusation. In the second one, the questions point towards the lack of loyalty, the lack of confidence that the President inspires, with a figurative referent (*The Doberman*) that activates the knowledge shared with the audience about old publicity campaigns of the PSOE:

In sum, members of Parliament, the work has been exhausting, the negotiations have been exhausting, and, Mr Casado, your contribution to that great collective European achievement, do you know what has it been? Non-existent (Sánchez 07/22/2020)

This is the spirit of the heart-felt pact you are offering us? This is the loyalty and unity you offer us with one hand, while with the other you release the classic Doberman of the Socialist Party? (Casado, 04/15/2020)

The result of these argumentative strategies focused on the attack of the discursive image of the adversary reaches its highest point with a reformulation of the in-group image and its consequences in mastering consensus and the hegemony of the points of view that articulate political messages.

In this sense, the discursive operation is organized around three argumentative parameters: who has the legitimacy to lead the ordering of the majorities that constitute the criterion of objective truth; from this dominant condition, who is excluded from the in-group; how is it organized and what are its components?

The interventions of the opposition leader are framed within this strategy through the contrast of the two discursive subjects and their adscription to a “we” of which the citizens are part versus an out-group whose visible head is the Government. All of this is part of a new concept of discourse that tries to convert the citizen into the protagonist as an expression of the new political tendencies marked by the arrival of new parties supported by the prominence of public opinion (Fuentes Rodríguez 2016, 111):

Tomorrow is in our hands, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and the PP will always be at the service of the citizens to come out of this crisis; we are able to and we will prevail. The Government has overcome the crisis, but the Spaniards, we will overcome it despite the Government (Casado 05/20/2020)

Regarding the President of the Government, following a more political guideline, his discourse is geared towards the identification of an out-group led by the extreme-right, what means a strategic attack on the external image that the PP wished to create, versus the unity as a term that encapsulates the argumentative axis of his message: “Let’s see, Mr Casado, between unity and the extreme right, you have chosen the extreme right” (Sánchez 20/05/2020).

4. The Emotional Component in the Political Debate on the Pandemic

The new forms of facing the public debate, linked to their echo in the mass media and therefore with parameters of discursive efficiency linked to the impact of reductionist messages, have turned the emotional component into the key element of political argumentation, as Gutiérrez Rubí asserts (2007, 64).

Emotional argumentation, as stated by Montolío (2019, 75), has substituted the classical persuasive model based on causality and connecting ideas, “and has created noise under the guise of an argument”. Thus, appealing to the sphere of affects, of personalization, of disjunctive statements or false dilemmas, are the formulas that need a verifying component.

While the discourses of both leaders reflect a notable presence of emotional mechanisms, in the case of Pablo Casado the resources associated to this component acquire a clear purpose within the context of his discursive strategy of offering an alternative to the institutional message and undermining its foundations from a discursive point of view. Thus, regarding this stylistic component, resorting to the colloquial, idiomatic, figurative language is the resource with which he wants to break the solidity of a communication formalized through the use of the standard language as a variety associated to the dominant message of power.

A mechanism with a great emotional efficiency is appealing to personal experience as a referent from which to access the collective drama. Against the institutional point of view’s objectivizing distance, this resource allows to access a more human component:

Yesterday, my father’s brother was buried quietly. I talked to my cousin who told me: I could have never imagine that you would not be able to be with us, that we would do it like this. But it is much worse for those whose family has not even been able to say goodbye in the worst moments of the pandemic. (Casado, 04/22/2020)

The operations of lexicalization and re-lexicalization, as indicated by Piquer Vidal (2020, 174 and ss.), make the selections of terms one of the elements with the most communicative efficiency when transmitting values capable of activating affective reactions of great impact. Thus, while Pedro uses expressions like “compatriots” versus a more neutral “citizens” as well as expressions of personal identity (“I feel them as my own”), Casado, in the following excerpt, after an introduction that resembles Unamuno (and thus placing himself in the tradition of Spanish reformism from Generation of 98’), utilizes a vocabulary with connotations associated to a hyperbolic vision with emotional resonance:

Members of Parliament, Spain hurts me, as I am convinced you are also hurting. We have undergone a month and a half of this national drama, and this is not a war, as the Government is fond of saying, this is a catastrophe in human lives, this is an economic calamity (Casado 04/22/2020)

The comparison allows the leader of the opposition to establish parallels between historical periods deeply-rooted in the collective conscience, and the humanizing dimension of the discourse insists on it, moving from the information with numbers to the personal interpretation of the events:

[...] there have been days with more victims than 5 times those of 11-M; to be able to grasp the global dimension, in Spain more people have died because of the Coronavirus than allied soldiers in the D-Day. It is not curves and peaks, it is not numbers, it is not cold statistics, it is broken families, [...] (Casado, 04/22/2020)

Another similar resource is placing those affected the most as the protagonists of the message. While in the discourse of power those present are the big corporations, supranational entities, state institutions, macroeconomic messages, the alternative discourse resorts to the most immediate, the social groups hit by the crisis, to “Aluche and the endless lines to request a food bag” (Casado, 05/20/2020). One of the most relevant is the elderly, who in Casado’s speech are related to the *Transición*, one of the points of friction between the Government associates, what proves a reading in terms of inner politics that underlies the debate on COVID-19:

I want to remember the generation of the elderly, [...], a generation that carried out the *Transición*, a generation that saved us from economic crises and now deserves all our respect and protection (Casado, 22/04/2020)

Finally, the objective of creating an efficient text versus the image of the arbitrariness of the standard language and an objective neutrality, which are the characteristics of the institutional discourse, is developed through two resources related to figurative language.

On one hand, metaphors offer a stylistic and personalized component vs. the impersonality typical of the governmental legitimation or the tendency to encourage, as Semino points out (2021, 53), military metaphors in order to create a “sense of collective responsibility and sacrifice”. Thus, recurrent metaphors are used to organize the semantic frame of the speech:

Do not try to sell us your puppet show, for you even ignore its plot and characters; you only know that when the curtain falls down, all of us will be responsible for your own mistakes (Casado, 04/15/2020)

On the other hand, phraseological formulas contribute to intensify the idiomaticity of the text and therefore its connection to the control of the language closest to the communicative experiences of the community. Thus, against the aseptic character of the discourse of power, the opposition chooses the more emotional component of the social perspective, with frequent expressions as the following:

The ball is still on your turf, stop trying to find *scapegoats* and start governing for all Spaniards at once. (Casado 6/24/2020)

What you demand is our *unconditional surrender* and not to govern better but to keep doing it badly [...]. Do not ask us to *pull in our weight* in order to save you (Casado, 9/9/2020)

Conclusion

Studies on the political debate in Europe during the pandemic have shown that the uniqueness of the Spanish case (Íñigo 2007, 425 and ss.) is its connection to party politics associated to the strategy of confrontation and the objective of discrediting the opponent, while, for instance, the British parliamentary discourse tends towards a nationalist referent, that is determining the country’s responsibility and its relationship with its surroundings.

While the initial impact of the pandemic diminished the political confrontation and there were instances of consensus, the polarization of Spanish political life soon took the way of virulence –“toxicity” is the term coined by Guerrero-Solé & Philippe (2020) in Twitter-, and the debate was undertaken between the need to consolidate a legitimizing

discourse on the part of the Government (capable of rallying a majority behind a leadership as necessary as its parliamentary support was weak) and the strategy of the main opposition party of transmitting its political identity in the middle of a vague situation for their voters.

The different discourses in Parliament respond to heterogeneous criteria based on particular political strategies and not on the requirements of COVID-19. First, the discourse associated to power had the objective of encouraging affinities capable of consolidating a program of institutional character, for which a process of recognition is needed that legitimizes the adopted measures. Secondly, the discourse of which each political party tried to place itself in a complex information space, to exert a protagonic role with the public opinion and consequently to displace the other party to the margins.

The pandemic has then become the detonator in a political conflict that reflects in turn the current limitations of advanced democracies, the seed of their potential renovations and the crisis in the way citizens identify themselves with their parliamentary representatives.

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