Venezuela in the News: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis

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This paper uses a systemic functional linguistic approach to analyze the differences between U.S. and Venezuelan news reports on the presidential elections in Venezuela. Agency, types of themes, modality, and evaluative vocabulary were all analyzed to identify possible biases within the articles. While there was little to no difference between the articles for some of the features, the use of agency and evaluative vocabulary did point toward a general negative outlook on the elections and Maduro’s government in the American newspapers. The Venezuelan reports, on the other hand, had a more positive approach and attributed less responsibility to Maduro.

Abstract

Methodology

Data was collected from six different news sources: two from the U.S., two from Venezuela, and two from Colombia as a control to ensure linguistic differences based on language were not attributed to possible biases.

A list of agents was developed for each text. The frequency of each agent was calculated by counting the number of times it was used per t-unit. The different types of ideational themes were analyzed in a similar fashion. Each theme was categorized as depicting a process, participant, or circumstance, and the frequency of each of these was calculated based on the number of times they appeared per t-unit. Modality was categorized in terms of high, medium, and low based on classifications defined by Brisk. Evaluative vocabulary was qualified as either positive or negative following the general guidelines provided by Flores.

Discussion

The agency analysis showed clear differences between American and Venezuelan newspapers. While this could be due to certain biases concerning Maduro and the Venezuelan government, it’s also possible that their position as agents has more to do with which participants in the issue the audience of American newspapers would actually be familiar with. There were a few differences between the types of ideational themes used, but they mainly appear to be caused by linguistic differences between Spanish and English and not any attempt to emphasize certain elements of the elections.

The differences in modality use are more distinctive between different news sources, not the different countries. It is interesting to note, however, that the uses of high modality in the Washington Post article were in reference to the views of the Venezuelan government, not the reporter herself. The analysis of evaluative vocabulary did show some clear differences between countries. The Venezuelan articles only used positive vocabulary, indicating support for the upcoming elections, while the American articles used more negative vocabulary. It’s also important to note that, while the New York Times article appears balanced in its use of evaluative vocabulary, most of the positive uses were in reference to people or entities that are being treated poorly by the Venezuelan government.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings somewhat support the idea that the U.S. doesn’t look favorably on the Venezuelan elections, while the Venezuelan news does. Despite the attempt at objectivity, there is still some lingering opinion from the reporters in their articles.