South Atlantic Quarterly, vol. 121, núm. 2, 2022, pp. 432-442.

An approach to the argumentation in the “front line’s” discourse in Colombia.

Abud, Farid.

Farid Abud

An Approach to the Argumentation in the "Front Line's" Discourse in Colombia

At the beginning of 2021, the Colombian government of Iván Duque Márquez proposed reforms to tax public services and basic goods, increase private participation in the health care system, and loosen labor regulations triggered an unprecedented series of protests throughout the national territory, which have continued from April 28 to the time of this writing. When the reforms were proposed, Colombia was in the midst of a crisis that plunged 42.5 percent of the population under the poverty line (Departamento Nacional de Estadística 2021). Prior to the pandemic it was already the second most unequal country in Latin America (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean et al. 2019: 224) and had one of the most unequal rates of land distribution in the world (OXFAM 2017). In addition, since the 1990s, Colombia has gone through a humanitarian crisis in which, among other characteristics, more than 8.3 million people have been victims of forced displacement (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2021: 24).

The so-called front line (*primera linea*) has taken on a leading role in the protest movement. These groups of young people aim to protect protesters from state and parastate violence. They cover their faces and carry handmade shields, leading the protests and protecting strategic points in cities—the so-called resistance points, sites where cultural activities, community kitchens, and popular education processes are carried out.

In this article, I reflect on some features that I consider characteristic of the front line's discourse. However, far from offering a global and definitive description, my purpose is to make an initial exploratory approach to

The South Atlantic Quarterly 121:2, April 2022
DOI 10.1215/00382876-9663744

this discourse, providing resources that will feed the debate and contribute to the future development of more comprehensive research.

Brief Theoretical-Methodological Framework

This work is inscribed within discourse analysis, understood as an interdisciplinary field of study that applies tools from the language sciences to knowledges from different disciplines, such as political theory, history, and philosophy. It aims to understand the social use of language, accounting for its role in structuring different societies and, with that, revealing semiolinguistic phenomena that escape the will of subjects (Arnoux 2006).

In this framework, the reflections developed here specifically fall into the field of the rhetoric of argumentation, understood, following Angenot (2014), as an integrated discipline studying sociohistorical variation in persuasive discourses. This field examines how the use of evidence can characterize a group, a social class, or even a society in a certain historical moment, always in connection with the economic and political structures that traverse it.

Building off this framework, I carried out an inquiry based on indexical inferences. Following Arnoux (2006: 20), it is a fundamentally qualitative investigation whose object of study is a limited number of documents produced in moments of real discourse, calling attention to the involuntary frameworks and peripheral details that we can interpret as traces of significant regularities in the use of language. More specifically, I examine three documents from 2021, selected to offer direct demonstrations of the discourse of the youth participating in the front line: a May 24 interview by María Jimena Duzán of members of the Blue Shields in Bogota (Duzán 2021), a May 27 interview by the alternative media group Ciudad Extrema of members of the front line at the "La Luna" resistance point in Cali (Ciudad Extrema 2021), and Cali's Channel 2 direct broadcast from the resistance point located in the city's Calipso neighborhood (Canal 2 Cali 2021).

A Common Set of Demands

The front line's discourse is, above all, a discourse of political protest against the status quo, which revolves around the value of resistance, marked by a critical and contestational attitude. Its expressions are profoundly heterogeneous, as it is not identified with political party affiliation, and its members have diverse backgrounds regarding social class, ideological orientation, and

education level. Additionally, the front line is a relatively spontaneous organizational experience and therefore has high member turnover; furthermore, there are significant differences between different cities and even between different resistance points within the same city.

However, despite claims that the demands put forth by the grass roots in this uprising are local, dissimilar, and hard to reconcile, an initial look at the front line's discourse shows the opposite, with arguments articulated around a stable core of demands. A first articulating element of this discourse involves proving the imperative need to guarantee the right to life in Colombia, which goes along with the denunciation of police abuse, human rights violations, and other acts of state terrorism:

> Specifically, what has this national strike demonstrated? That life is not being respected here, that here the life of anyone who decides to think differently is under attack. . . . We need life to be respected, because when life is respected then we can demand all other rights, such as the right to health care, housing, education. (Simona, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021])

> We are always afraid, I am afraid, we are all afraid. Why? Because we see a *motorizada* [police patrol] and you know what we think? That they are going to kill us, they are going to grab us, they are going to kidnap us. (Member of the Front Line of Puerto Maderas, Barrio Calipso, Cali [Canal 2 Cali 2021])

This discourse's second articulating demand centers on the need to guarantee the fulfillment of constitutional rights to freedom of expression and protest, understood as necessary for society as a whole to be able to process its demands:

> Right now we do question this democracy when the basic right of social protest is being violated in the streets, when the right to life is not being fulfilled, when all the rights of freedom of expression are completely restricted, we cannot say that we are in a democracy, we cannot say that we are being backed by a government that is fighting for our rights. (Simona, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021])

> It is really shameful and painful to know that here by the right to protest they are saying you are already committing a crime or being persecuted by some entity or authority. We truly cover up [our faces] primarily for our safety and that of our families, as well as also [to protect the safety of our] friends. (Spokesperson of the Front Line of the Resistance Point of "La Luna" Sector, Cali [Ciudad Extrema 2021])

Finally, a third component of this common nucleus of demands focuses on the need to find a solution to a structural situation of discrimination and inequality, particularly regarding treatment by authorities: "They [indicating a police officer] treat all of us, those of who make up the people, who have few resources, or people from the district [referring to the most impoverished zones of the city] or something like that, excuse my language, like shit, as if we were not worth anything" (Member of the Front Line of Puerto Maderas, Barrio Calipso, Cali [Canal 2 Cali 2021]).

The Structural Character of Demands: A Long-Term Memory

Departing from those interpretations, according to which we would be facing an exceptional situation caused by the conjuncture of the pandemic, the demands laid out and defended in the front line's discourse refer to structural problems. For that reason, they tend to be based on a long-term memory. This is clear even when critiques focus on the current government or the political current in power, in other words, even when they refer to so-called Uribism (referring to the political ideology of former president Álvaro Uribe):

> People went out [to protest] at first due to the tax reform. . . . But I should say that this was only the straw that broke the camel's back, because this had been brewing since the strike in 2019, the national strike. It even goes back further, to the whole student movement that took place in 2013 with the MANE [Broad National Student Commission], or even earlier with the agrarian strike here in Colombia. (Simona, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021])

> Uribism is a scapegoat. What is going on is that this country has been a country of absolute *caudillismo* for a long time, and well, the thing is that [the social discontent] goes beyond Uribism, people just call it Uribism, but [the protest] is against paramilitary thinking, it is against violent thinking, against fascism, against neoliberalism in which I simply defend my own interests, I defend my privileges at the expense of the lack of privileges for other people. . . . The real struggle is against that way of thinking. What happens is that Uribism is that, it is the scapegoat. (Marco, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021])

Example and Illustration: An Experiential Pedagogy

As stated above, in terms of a political protest discourse, the front line is characterized by a critical and contestational attitude. However, on examining the types of arguments used in this discourse,[1] the recurrence of three proce-

dures stands out: argumentation by example, argumentation by illustration, and the use of questioning (which is the focus of the following section).

Argumentation by example and argumentation by illustration are characterized as typically pedagogical procedures: in both the argument is based on the presentation of specific cases (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1989: 536–54). These not only allow for the audience to identify with the point of view put forth (whether it is a new point of view, in the case of argumentation by example, or one for which there is already agreement but the speaker seeks to reinforce, in the case of argumentation by illustration) but also help the audience understand that point of view better. Let's look at an example: "Well, we mask up because there is a [high] level of violence against anyone who thinks differently: social leaders doing community work are assassinated, students who make their voices heard are assassinated, Indigenous people are assassinated" (Simona, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021]). This fragment initially puts forth a causal argument, in which the young member of the front line justifies the fact that they are forced to cover their their faces, or "mask up," because "there is a [high] level of violence against anyone who thinks differently." However, to support that fact, as a subordinate argument, an illustration is laid out, in which a series of cases are enumerated that not only facilitate the acceptance of that fact but also allow the receiver to visualize its realization: "Social leaders doing community work are assassinated, students."

Frequently, when this discourse uses argumentation through example or illustration, the cases used to sustain the argument come from the speaker's own experience, especially from the experience of having been a victim of discrimination or abuse of power. Thus, the argumentation in the front line's discourse can be described as an "experiential pedagogy" that constantly illustrates and exemplifies, producing the very figure of the young speaker, who is thus turned into a character with whom the interlocutor can identify:

> It is really very hard to come and say "respect my rights!" and then leave that protest point and go running scared to your house not knowing if they are going to kill you, kidnap you, disappear you, or arrest you. That is why we cover up our identity. (Spokesperson from the Front Line of the Resistance Point of "La Luna" Sector, Cali [Ciudad Extrema 2021]).

An Invitation to Question: The Construction of a Critical Citizenry

Among the different procedures in the argumentative discourse of members of the front line, the most frequently used, by far, is questioning. How-

ever, while it is a rhetorical-argumentative use of questioning, in this case it is not necessarily presented through the form of a stratagem or fallacy—that is, not as the typical manifestation of the so-called rhetorical question, a question that imposes its response (Beristáin 1995: 262–63); rather, it forms part of an argumentative exercise in which frontline orators constantly put themselves in the position of a third party, that is, in the place of the audience.

In effect, as Plantin (2012: 65–67) explains, when we make use of argumentation we can take on different actancial roles: that of the proponent, whose discourse is oriented toward justifying and identifying a point of view; that of the opponent, guided by refutation; or that of the third party, whose discourse focuses on instilling doubt and questioning, functioning as a judge or audience. Then, through putting an almost constant maieutic into practice, speakers from the front line put themselves in the place of the Colombian people, staging their possible doubts and questionings. In fact, in the front line's discourse, interrogation becomes a vehicle through which other types of arguments materialize.

Let's look at a few examples: "It is really something that you cannot take in. How could they come to kill someone for wanting to participate in a peaceful protest?" (Spokesperson of the Front Line of the Resistance Point of "La Luna" Sector, Cali [Ciudad Extrema 2021]). In this fragment, we see argumentation by example, which as explained above is based on a particular case. Additionally, here it is combined with the use of questioning. Let's look at another expression, in which questioning functions as a vehicle to formulate an argument of reciprocity:[2] "Why does the strike continue so intensely? Well, because it is the response to a very intense social crisis" (Cuervo, member of the Blue Shields, Bogota [Duzán 2021]). As in the previous fragment, in many cases this exercise of posing questions involves immediately offering responses. However, rather than as an imposition on an opponent, here this dynamic is developed in a pedagogical register.

In other cases, on the other hand, the question remains open, in such a way that, by delegating its resolution to the audience, it operates as an invitation to question: "They say that the police are not all the same, but, the truth is that if there are good police, why don't they oppose the bad ones?" (Member of the Front Line of Barrio Calipso, Cali [Canal 2 Cali 2021]). This constant maieutic based on one's own experience can even be seen in situations in which young people from the front line directly debated with police officers. They approached them through interrogation, verbalizing their possible contradictions, and in doing so, inviting them to question themselves:

> [Speaking to a police officer] Didn't you all swear to defend the people? This is the people, look! . . . Can you imagine how much they are going to damage health care? What are they going to privatize if you can barely go to the hospital and they take three hours to attend you. Or not even three hours, it takes like two years! I have a request in at some clinics for a surgery that I needed and to this day I have not received it. I have responsibilities, including for my child. But here justice does not exist. (Member of the Front Line of Puerto Maderas, Barrio Calipso, Cali [Canal 2 Cali 2021])

By Way of Conclusion

This approach to the argumentation deployed in the front line's discourse during the 2021 uprising in Colombia allows for formulating a series of interpretative hypotheses of an exploratory nature. These provide us with keys for debating the country's present moment and, with it, to understand and contribute to resolving the problems that traverse it.

Thus, investigating the points of view laid out in the front line's discourse and their connection with the conditions of production in which they are inserted suggests that this discourse is articulated around a common core of demands: the right to life, freedom of expression and right to protest, and equality and equity. Additionally, these are not of a conjunctural nature but are structural, which explains why the front line is justified through the evocation of a long-term memory.

Furthermore, analyzing the types of arguments demonstrates that the front line's discourse is developed, among other elements, through a pedagogical praxis whose primary input is the participants' own experience. Combined with the previous feature, a reflection on the *actancial* roles taken up in the front line's discourse, based on recognizing interrogation as a recurrent procedure in this discourse, also allows us to see that it uses a constant posing of questions, through which the interlocutor is invited to raise questions, which ultimately contributes to the construction of the audience as a critical citizenry.

Notes

1 Drawing on Angenot 2014 and Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca 1989, the types of arguments can be understood as culturally inherited persuasive schemas, by virtue of which inferences are made and positions are justified and refuted in the context of the interaction.

2 As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989: 339) explain, arguments of reciprocity are those that operate through the quasi-logical imitation of the principle of symmetry, according to which "A is to B as B is to A."

References

Angenot, Marc. 2014. "La retórica como ciencia histórica y social" ("Rhetoric as Historical and Social Science"). In *Libro de Actas del II Coloquio Nacional de Retórica y el I Congreso Internacional de Retórica e Interdisciplina* (*Book of the Proceedings of the II National Rhetoric Colloquium and the I International Interdisciplinary Rhetoric Congress*), edited by A. Colman, N. Ailin, and M. A. Vitale, 18–32. Asociación Argentina de Retórica. www.aaretorica.org/docs/ActasMendoza_2014.pdf.

Arnoux, Elvira Narvaja de. 2006. *Análisis del discurso: Modos de abordar materiales de archivo* (*Discourse Analysis: Modes of Approaching Archival Materials*). Santiago, Chile: Santiago Arcos Editor.

Beristáin, Helena. 1995. *Diccionario de retórica y poética* (*Dictionary of Rhetoric and Poetics*). 7th ed. Mexico City: Porrúa Editorial.

Canal 2 Cali. 2021. "¿Qué pasó realmente en el Éxito de la Simón Bolívar de Calipso?" May 20. www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH36wo6Cgss.

Ciudad Extrema. 2021. "Entrevista con la primera línea: Paro nacional en Colombia después de un mes." May 27. www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLF8tNs4utI.

Departamento Nacional de Estadística. 2021. *Pobreza monetaria y pobreza monetaria extrema* (*Monetary Poverty and Extreme Monetary Poverty*). www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/pobreza-y-condiciones-de-vida/pobreza-monetaria.

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Development Bank of Latin America, European Union, and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2019. *Perspectivas económicas de América Latina 2019: Desarrollo en transición* (*Economic Perspectives on Latin America 2019: Development in Transition*). OECD.

Duzán, María Jimena. 2021. "Exclusivo: Hablan los jóvenes de la Primera línea de las protestas en Colombia." May 24. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZjLJr34k6w

OXFAM (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief). 2017. *Radiografía de la desigualdad: Lo que nos dice el último censo agropecuario sobre la distribución de la tierra en Colombia* (*X-ray of Inequality: What the Latest Agricultural Census Tells Us about Land Distribution in Colombia*). OXFAM América. www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/radiografia_de_la_desigualdad.pdf.

Perelman, Chaim, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. 1989. *Tratado de la argumentación: La nueva retórica*, edited by D. Alonso, translated by J. Zevilla Muñoz. Madrid: Gredos.

Plantin, C. 2012. *La argumentación: Historia, teorías, perspectivas* (*Argumentation: History, Theories, Perspectives*). Buenos Aires: Biblos Editorial.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2021. "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020." UNHCR Global Data Service. www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/.