

A case study into the making and evolution of populist discourse

Examining Hugo Chávez’s discourse and its radicalisation through time

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Research Questions

Did the discourse of Hugo Chávez follow the traditional patterns of populist discourse?
How did Chávez’s discourse evolve throughout his presidency?

Background

The rise to power and popularity of late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, can be understood by the exploitation of charismatic legitimacy. Chávez emerged as a political outsider and radical military man with no political connections. His charismatic leadership goes a long way towards explaining leader’s political radicalism. Chávez vowed to eradicate Venezuela’s old order and initiate the Bolivarian Revolution, consequently leading the country to twenty-first century socialism. An adept orator, Chávez rallied popular support through his ability to inspire crowds with his blunt albeit passionate speeches. Chavez’s persona was perhaps best exemplified through his television programme, Aló Presidente (“Hello Presidente”). Entirely unscripted and sometimes played out like a presidential reality show, Chávez utilised it as a populist platform to engage with the broader masses “in person”. Given his extensive political trajectory, Chavez’s discourse deserves attention.

As Hawkins (2010) argued, Chávez’s language is not just that of Chávez or a repeat of what we would essentially find in any chief executive’s speeches. It has distinctive elements that the theoretical literature identifies with populist discourse. Thus, Hawkins’ article is particularly relevant in that he foreshadows the need for rhetorical inquiry into Chávez’s discourse by emphasizing how charismatic political power is derived from the orator’s effective speech. Consequently, this study aimed to evaluate the composition and evolution of his discourse throughout his presidency establishing a methodological framework in order to classify the discursive elements he utilised and their purpose. The study highlights that although many scholars are now familiar with Chávez’s radical leftism, many may be less aware of the early ideological content of his discourse and its radicalisation over time. Thus, in an attempt to overcome this deficit in the literature, it aims to prove the radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse throughout his presidency.

Method

Populism?

“You are not going to re-elect Chávez really, you are going to re-elect yourselves, the people will re-elect the people. Chávez is nothing but an instrument of the people” (Hugo Chávez, 2006)

Conceptualisation of populism as a discourse

Traditional patterns of populist discourse:

Taking into account Ernesto Laclau’s discursive theory of populism (1977), I developed two elements, personalism and polarisation, that serve as the two premises for traditional patterns of populist discourse.

Personalism (a focal reference to el pueblo) ✓

Polarisation (a consistently antagonistic discourse) ✓

Revolution (the systematic need for change) ✗

Hawkins’ (2010) theoretical insights allowed me to recognise

one corollary element in Chávez’s discourse: revolution.

Deviating from the traditional patterns of populist discourse,

this pillar served to illustrate the radicalisation

in Chávez’s discourse.

In this way I constructed “three pillars of populist discourse” which provided the methodological framework for the detailed analysis of Chávez’s discourse representing and describing Chávez’s discursive strategy.

Analytical Model

Three pillars of populist discourse

Personalism pillar

Appealing to and identifying with el pueblo is a baseline and necessary condition. In Chávez’s discourse el pueblo represent the common people, those who have been marginalized, ignored, and exploited.

	Spanish terms	English terms
1	Yo	Me
2	Nosotros	We
3	Pueblo	The people
4	Compatriota(s)	Compatriot(s)
5	Compadre(s)	Comrade(s)
6	Hermano(s)	Brother(s)
7	Ustedes	You (plural)
8	Gobierno	Government
9	Pais	Country
10	Venezolano/a (s)	Venezuelan(s)

Polarisation pillar

Conceptualises the vital “us vs. them” axis, which seeks to remind the popular masses that the opposition is the enemy.

	Spanish terms	English terms
1	Pasado	Past
2	Enemigo(s)	Enemy (ies)
3	Guerra	War
4	Oligarquía	Oligarchy
5	Estados unidos	The United States
6	Amenaza	Threat
7	Miseria	Misery
8	Miedo	Fear
9	Imperio	Empire
10	Capitalismo	Capitalism
11	La verdad	The truth
12	Neoliberal	Neoliberal
13	Diablo	Devil

Revolution pillar

Aims to demonstrate that references to revolution not only permeate the language of Chávez but also intensify over time, with new stages always on the horizon.

	Spanish terms	English terms
1	Militar	Soldier
2	Mision(es)	Mission (Social programmes)
3	Revolucion	Revolution
4	Cuba	Cuba
5	Socialismo	Socialism
6	Socialista(s)	Socialist(s)
7	Clase	Class
8	Bolivariana/o(s)	Bolivarian(s)
9	Batalla(s)	Battle(s)
10	Patria	Fatherland
11	Simón Bolívar	Simón Bolívar

Bolivarian revolution

The first subdivision aims to show the initial construction of Chávez’s national revolution whereby he unabatedly utilised the symbol of a national hero, Simón Bolívar, to legitimise his political trajectory.

Twenty-first century socialism

The second subdivision aims to highlight the change in Chávez’s strategy as his agenda became more radical with the introduction of twenty-first century socialism, crystallising a revolutionary break with the past.

“The new era will begin today as an idea, central force, basic, fundamental strategic line, deepening, extension and expansion of the Bolivarian Revolution, of the democratic revolution in Venezuelan life towards socialism” (Chávez, 2006)

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1:** The three main pillars of populist discourse will appear in Chávez’s discourse.
- Hypothesis 2:** The personalism pillar will remain stable over time.
- Hypothesis 3:** The polarisation pillar will increase over time.
- Hypothesis 4:** The revolution pillar will increase over time.

Methodology

The analysis was anchored through a combination of both a dictionary quantitative approach and a qualitative interpretation of Chávez’s discourse in his television programme, Aló Presidente. The analysis covers a twelve-year period of Chávez’s presidency divided into **four phases**,

Phase I: The moderate stage, 1999-2000

Phase II: Opposition revolt and Chávez’s retaliation, 2001-2004

Phase III: The change in revolutionary agenda to twenty-first century socialism, 2006-2008

Phase IV: Chávez’s illness and further consolidation, 2010-2012

depicting a transition characterised by steady escalation of conflict, polarisation and radicalisation.

Content Analysis: Quantitative dictionary approach

This study utilised a quantitative analysis of textual data, in the form of transcripts, consisting of three categories derived from frequency-sorted word-lists(frequency meaning the number of occurrences of a word in a given text), controlled for the distribution of words and their respective categories over the texts. Thus, after devising the frequency lists I established three categories to depict the main pillars of populist discourse that I deemed highly relevant to the study of Hugo Chávez’s discourse: personalism, polarisation, and revolution. The three frequency lists are an amalgam of thirty-two keywords.

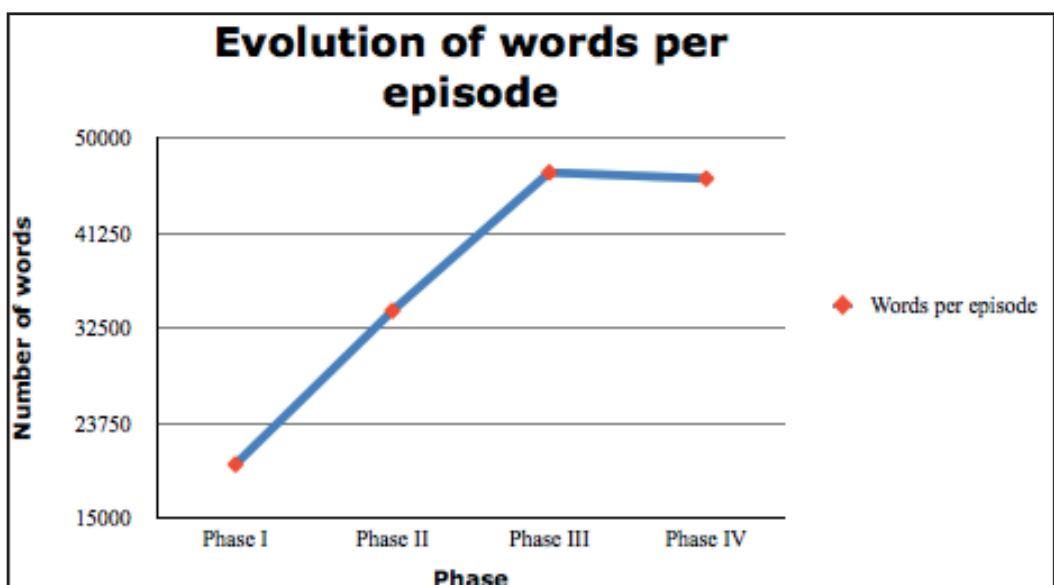
Qualitative Interpretation

This was complemented by the qualitative approach, which explores the intentionality and implication of categories by highlighting numerous extracts from the transcripts.

Findings

1. The four hypotheses were validated.

2. The length of episodes on Aló Presidente increased greatly.



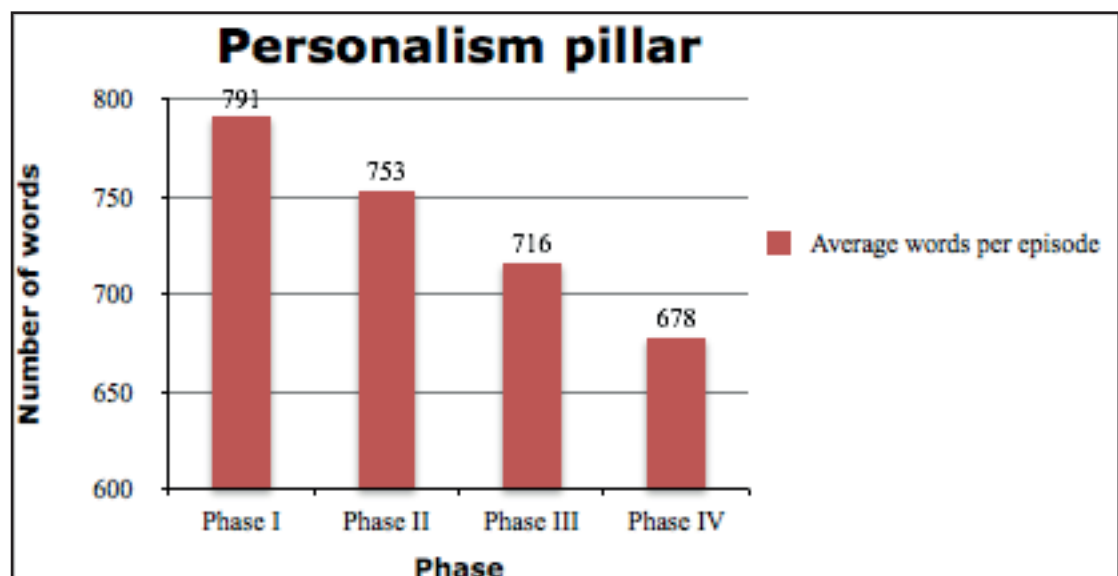
Reinforcing Chávez’s personalism discourse, over time the episodes began to get longer as he spoke more, highlighting his demagogic and populist persona.

3. The first research question, Did the discourse of Hugo Chávez follow the traditional patterns of populist discourse?, was negated.

The presence of a third corollary element, revolution, signalled the deviation of Chávez’s discourse from the standards of traditional populist discourse, as it does not adhere to Laclau’s two criteria.

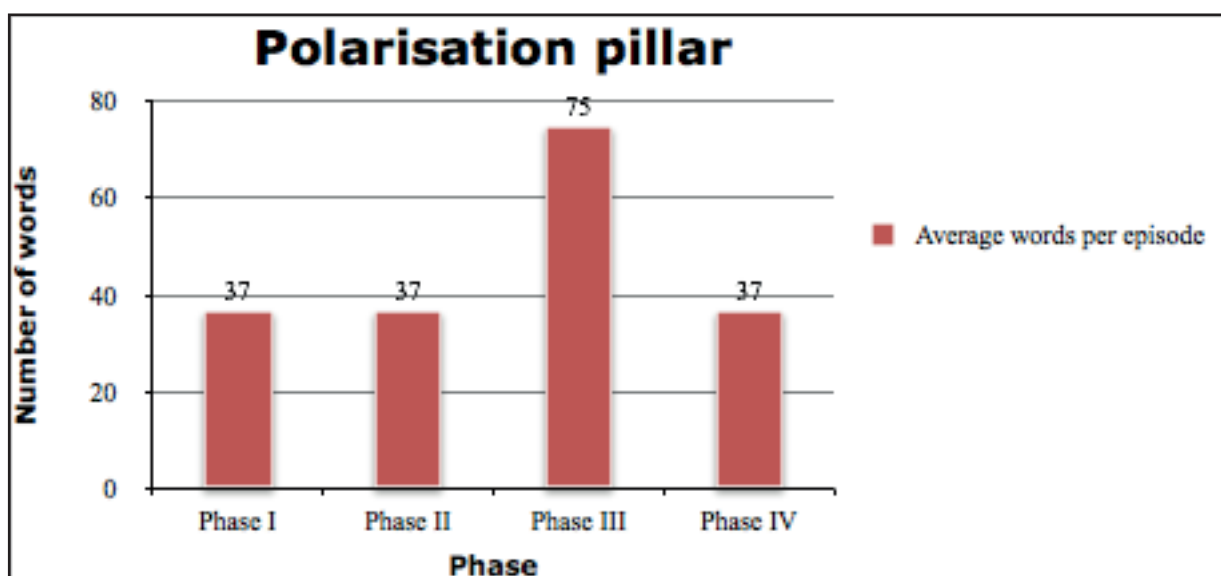
4. The second research question, How did Chávez’s discourse evolve throughout his presidency?, was answered through the validation of hypotheses 2-4 proving that Chávez’s personalism pillar remained stable, while the polarisation and revolution pillar increased over time.

➔ **Personalism pillar: identification with el pueblo**
This pillar remains stable over time with no meaningful change in frequency.

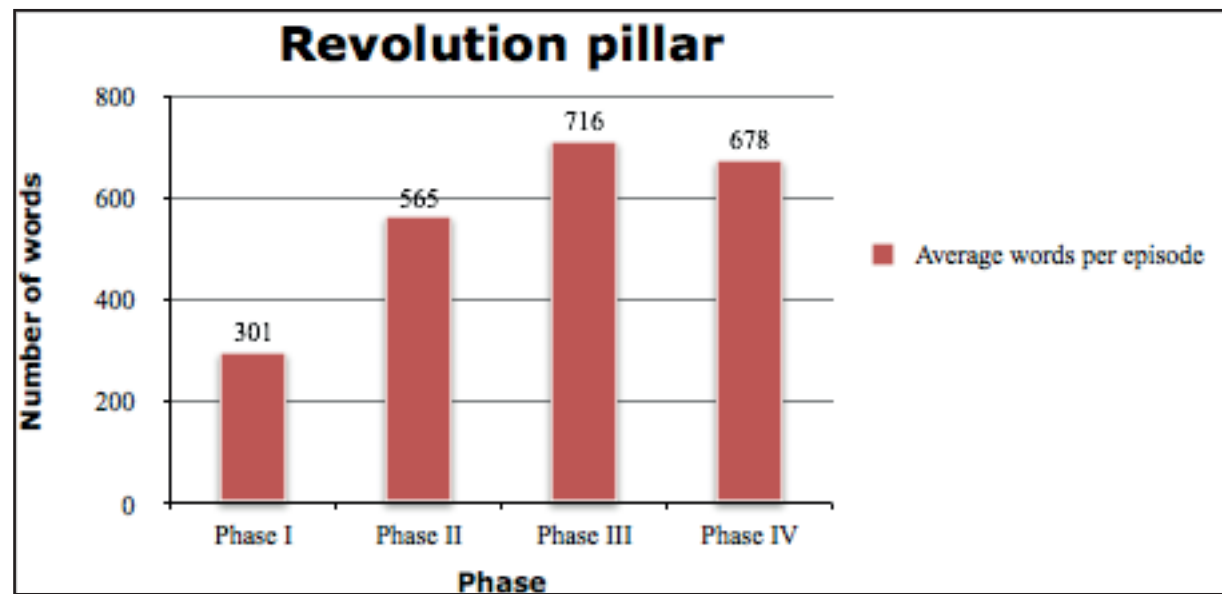


➔ **Polarisation pillar: antagonism and polarisation of the nation**
There is a systematic increase in the frequency of each phase.

Average frequency:
Phase I: 0.14%
Phase II: 0.18%
Phase III: 0.23%
Phase IV: 0.17%



➔ **Revolution pillar: deepening his revolutionary agenda**
From Phase I to Phase III the frequency more than doubled, with the average words per episode rising by 138%, validating that the revolution pillar would increase over time.



The substantial increase of the revolution pillar over time signals the radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse. This coincides with the fact that with the passing of each phase, after each confrontation, Chávez emerged stronger and more consolidated, and his hold over power more secure.

Bolivarian revolution

The first subdivision was present throughout the four phases with no substantial increase. This illustrates how Chávez continually exploited the figure of Simón Bolívar, the national hero, to glorify and give resonance to his revolutionary agenda depicting himself as the successor of Bolívar’s unfinished work.

Twenty-first century socialism

On the contrary, the second subdivision emerged in the third phase, with the stark increase in references to words like socialist and socialism, which highlights the drastic radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse that coincided with the deepening of his revolutionary vision.