Affective publics and diversity in media discourse on the October 2018 migrant caravans

ANTONIO ROMERO

PhD Researcher
Freie Universität Berlin
Institute for Media and Communication Studies

✉ antonio.romero@fu-berlin.de

INTRODUCTION

The study focuses on the media discourse about the Central American migrant caravan groups traveling during October 2018. This migration movement reunited more than 12,000 people walking through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico in an attempt to cross the border to the United States. The phenomena was a "grammatical shift" (Varela Huerta 2020, 662) on migration dynamics in Central and North America.

Migrant caravans are mixed migration movements, usually integrated by groups of vulnerable people traveling together but for distinct motives (UNHCR, 2016). These intertwined reasons often involve different forms of violence, poverty, and climate-related hardship in northern Central America.

People traveling within mixed migration movements like the caravans may include individuals and groups with diverse needs and vulnerabilities, e.g., families, women, men, unaccompanied children, LGBT+ migrants, or persons with disabilities.

The objective is to analyze how the migration movement was discursively constructed in news stories from the region and to identify which individuals were enounced as visible participants within the caravan groups.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of affective publics allows the analysis of the relational character of how publics are constituted in media discourse, focusing on "the temporal logics in which new publics emerge", often "in moments of crisis and conflict or in search of solidarity or joint action" (Lünenborg 2019, 320). The processual logics of affective publics can be observed in emotional processes based on solidarity and empathy, as well as in dynamics of outrage and fear in public discussion.

Within affect studies, feminist and queer scholars have emphasized how emotional dynamics are deeply intertwined with politics and social interactions, placing emotions as a constitutive element that shows us "how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds" (Ahmed 2013, 20).

METHODOLOGY

The corpus is integrated by a selection of news stories from the most circulated digital news sites in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States during October 2018 when the migration movement started (n=351).
By operationalizing the concept of "discourse bodies" through a Natural Language Processing (NLP) design, the model examines the material or representational entities that emerge in language use through "processes of bodification" and "linguistic collectivization" (Berg et al. 2019, p. 50), as well as the attribution of emotion words to those entities in discourse.
The text files are processed in Python with the NLTK library. Frequencies of "discourse bodies" are computed and normalized to compare the different datasets. Collocation graphs are processed with the software tool #LancsBox X (Brezina and Platt, 2024).
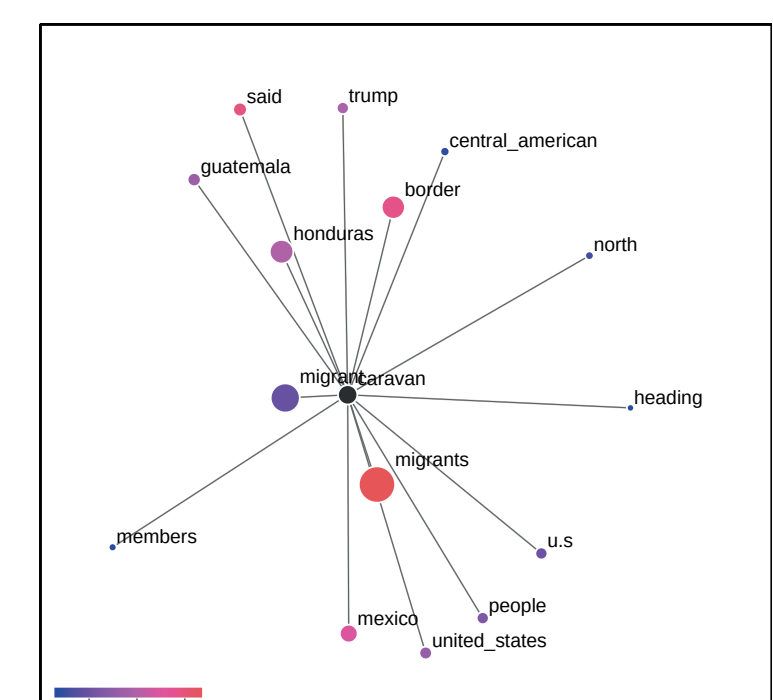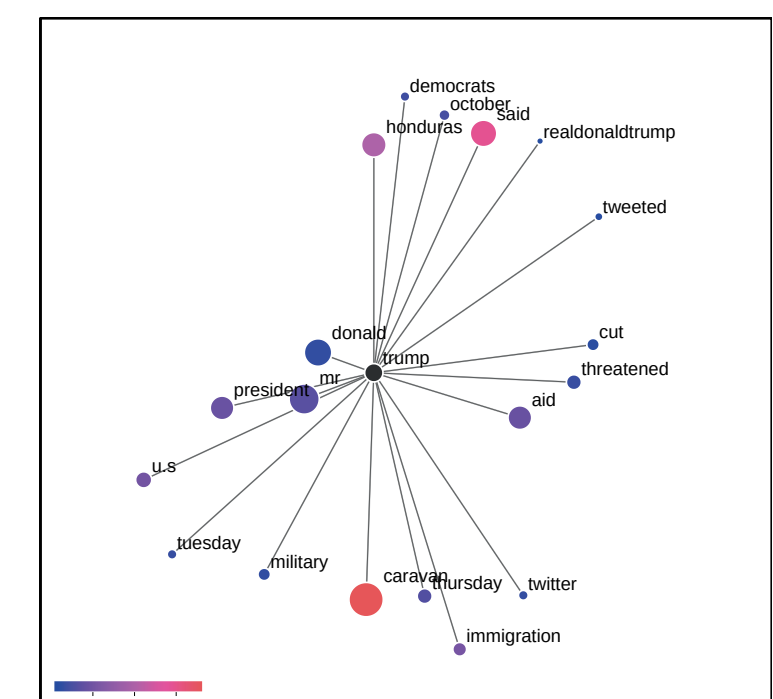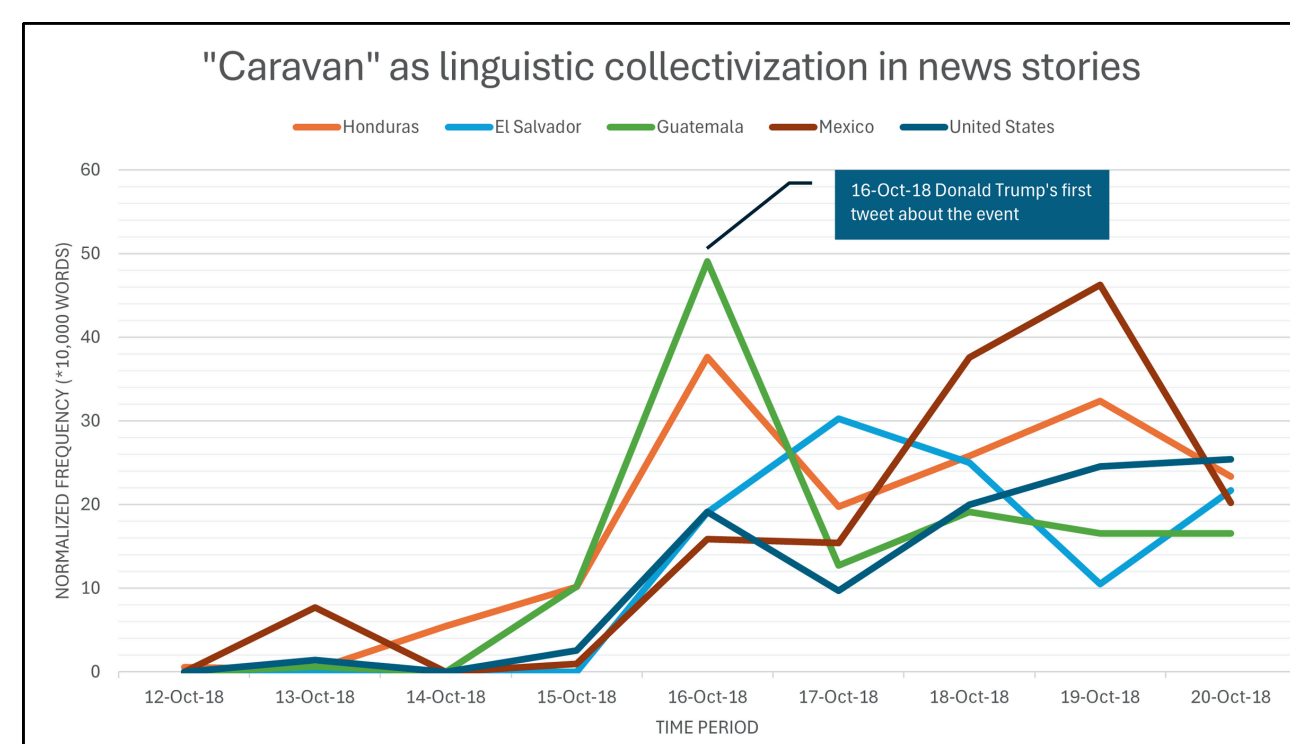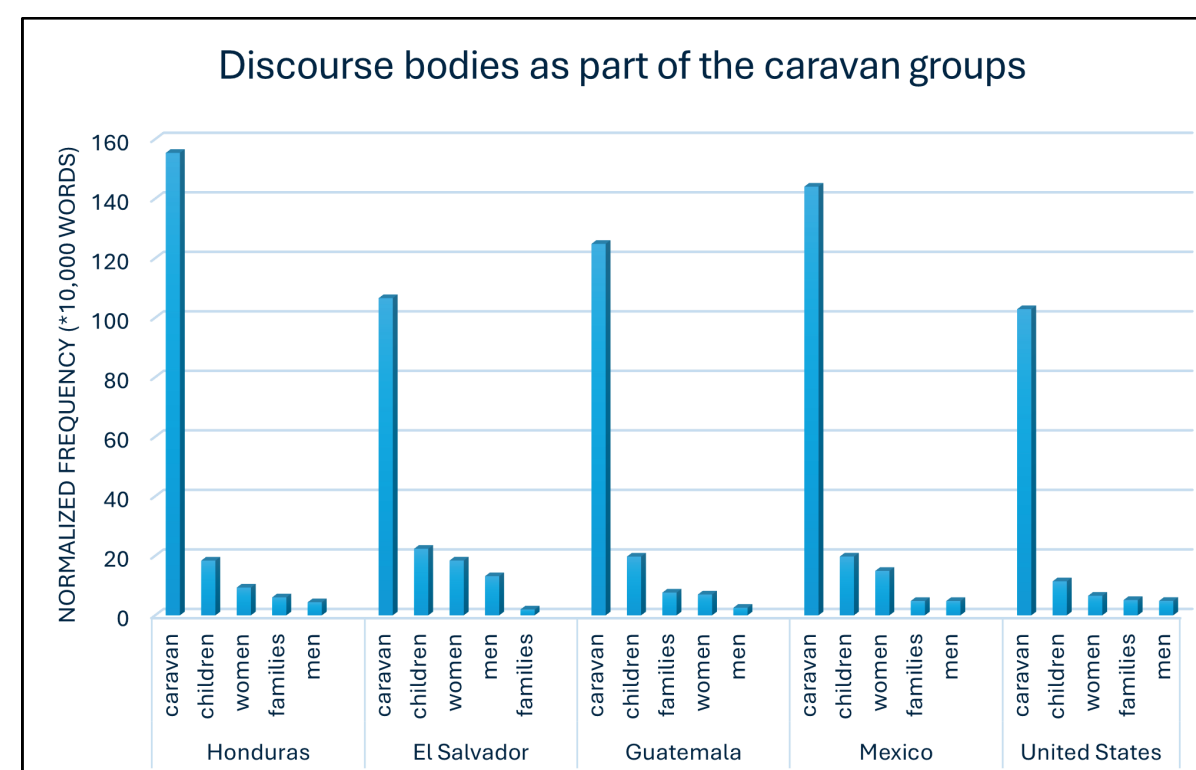
RESULTS

The study shows that news stories provided scarce information about the diversity of persons traveling within the migration movement. The usage of "caravan" as a practice of linguistic collectivization predominated in the discursive spectrum of news stories, growing considerably from October 16th 2018. There was a sparse mention of children, women, families and men traveling within the caravan groups, while there was no allusion at all to LGBT+ migrants or people with disabilities.
The strongest collocations of the word "caravan" were nouns like "migrant", "Trump", or "border" and verbs indicating bodily movement as "heading". On the other hand, among the most frequent collocations of "Trump" were actions with a strong affective component like "threatened" and "cut aid", or nouns like "military" or "democrats". Collocations like "tweeted" or "Twitter" also made evident that Trump's comments on the referenced social media platform were highly quoted in news stories.

ANALYSIS

As the migration movement grew rapidly at the beginning, it was challenging to know the diversity of the participants traveling within the caravan groups. This information was more precise once migrants arrived to migration shelters in Mexico and data was gathered.
Furthermore, then US President Donald Trump was a key actor that strongly influenced the linguistic collectivization of the caravan in news stories through his emotionally charged comments, blaming democrats in the US as responsible parties or menacing the governments in the region if they did not stop the "large caravan of people". Thus, before more information about the diversity of the persons conforming the caravan groups could be potentially enounced in discourse, Trump appeared as a highly influential actor in the relational dynamics of affective publics about the phenomena, contributing to the bodification of the migration movement as a massive and anonymous entity, hiding the bodily experience of the migrants and the material infrastructure of their journey.

Discourse bodies as part of the caravan groups

"Caravan" as linguistic collectivization in news stories
16-Oct-18 Donald Trump's first tweet about the event

Collocation graphs of "Trump" and "caravan" in US news stories
Freq. (collocation) ≥ 5 & Log Dice ≥ 10,65

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates how discursive practices and emotional dynamics heavily influenced by powerful actors in news stories contribute to the discursive construction of migration movements as unified and massive entities, limiting at the same time the potential knowledge about the diverse individuals and collectives that compound those migrant groups. Further steps currently in progress also consider an in-depth critical discourse analysis of some of the selected materials and its relation with discursive interactions in Twitter.

Analyzed corpora. News stories				
Honduras	El Salvador	Guatemala	Mexico	United States
Tiempo	La Prensa Gráfica	Soy 502	El Universal	CNN
El Heraldo	El Diario de Hoy	Prensa Libre	Aristegui Noticias	Fox News
La Prensa	Diario La Página	Emisoras Unidas	Excélsior	New York Times
La Tribuna	Diario 1	El Periódico	Milenio	Washington Post
N = 127	N = 44	N = 56	N = 83	N = 41

RELATED LITERATURE

- Ahmed, Sarah. 2013. The cultural politics of emotion. New York: Routledge.
- Berg, Anna L., Christian von Scheve, N. Yasemin Ural and Robert Walter-Jochum. 2019. "Reading for affect: a methodological proposal for analyzing affective dynamics in discourse". In Analyzing Affective Societies: Methods and Methodologies, edited by Antje Kahl, 45–62. New York: Routledge.
- Brezina, Vaclav and William Platt. 2024. #LancsBox X [software], Lancaster University, http://lancsbox.lancs.ac.uk.
- Lünenborg, Margreth. 2019. "Affective Publics. Understanding the dynamic formation of public articulations beyond the public sphere". In Public Spheres of Resonance: Constellations of Affect and Language, edited by Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve, 30–48. London: Routledge.
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2026. The 10-Point Plan in Action, 2016 – Glossary.
- Varela Huerta, Amarela. 2020. "Notes for an Anti-Racist Feminism in the Wake of the Migrant Caravans." The South Atlantic Quarterly 119 (3): 655–63.

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange Service