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From discursive event to discourse *événement*: A case study of political–religious discourse in Argentina

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Abstract

This article analyses the interplay between religious and political discourse in Argentina, departing from a case study located in the transition towards democracy in April 1987, and conveying military, political and religious discourse within the conflicts that surrounded the government of President Raúl R. Alfonsín (1983–9). It involved a well-established discourse genre, the homily, within an historical social practice, the Catholic mass; but it also included the violation of one of its main features, namely the monopoly of talk by priests. By challenging the bishop's monologue, questioned by the homily, President Alfonsín settled a different ground, neither religious nor political, an *événement* that required urgent recontextualization. The mass media, as privileged agents representing contemporary social practices, recontextualized it through the multimodal attribution of *genericity* (Adam and Heidmann, 2004) in two main different ways, ascribing the event to either a religious or political field. In both cases, as we will see later, the actions and actors involved were consistently opposite, responding to different ideological motivations and with different strategic goals. The underlying theoretical point is that genres are not fixed in events, but rather represent ways of dealing with the exceptionality of *événements* that bring out ideological or political tensions.

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Political–religious discourse

Linguistic analysis of religious discourse is an emerging field in discourse analysis and qualitative sociolinguistics. Many of these studies have been conducted from an ethnographic point of view, with observant participation in more or less structured discourse events. Howard-Malverde (1998), Dzameshie (1993, 1995) and Du Bois (1986) focus on the linguistic codification of ritual practices, either in low regulated interactions or highly Catholic institutionalized genres: among them, homilies and sermons preached by legitimate religious agents (i.e. bishops and priests). From a cognitive-processes point of view, and also through participant observation, Balaban (1996, 1999) has analysed agency and legitimation among believers at a 'Marian apparition site' in the USA. Also in this country, collective processes of meaning production in protestant conversational preaching have been analysed through conversation analysis and text linguistics.

As preaching genres are more visible and methodologically accessible, they happen to be the most studied within religious discourse in Argentina, either from the point of view of their argumentative processes (Acebal, 2002, 2006) or from their conversational properties (Blanco, 2003; Vitale, 2003). Within this growing field of research,[1] we can highlight those papers which, beyond the textual features that characterize preaching genres, focus on the relationships established between religious discourse and other discourse types. Arnoux (2004), Arnoux and Blanco (2003, 2004), Arnoux and Bonnin (2011) and Bonnin (2006, 2009, 2011) analyse different *corpora* of texts that display a constitutive tension between political and religious features, produced by priests, bishops and political actors in Argentina and Latin America.[2]

These relationships cannot be understood from an enumeration of formal linguistic features. On the contrary, they emerge at the confluence of discourse practices and social actors that claim to be exclusively religious *or* political. This distinction, made by speakers themselves, is crucial, because admitting the mixed nature of their utterances entails a de-legitimation of their position in their respective fields. A priest that admits a political intention or a politician that defends an explicitly religious motivation is most rare and marginal in contemporary Argentina.[3]

Therefore, one of the main characteristics of Catholic discourse in Argentina is that, although it produces *political effects* in terms of reception, it presents itself as non-political or even anti-political (Bonnin, 2009, 2011). As a result, political–religious *discourse* is not political as a *text*, and can, therefore, assume religious contents that would not be legitimate in the political arena. The same observation is made by Fairclough (1995), who analyses a critical pastoral letter from the USA National Conference of Catholic Bishops about nuclear weapons under the administration of Ronald Reagan. Fairclough states that, employing a religious genre, 'they can draw upon an authoritative and unmitigated moral discourse which might be difficult for them to use if they were overtly addressing themselves to the outside (including the government)' (Fairclough, 1995: 204).

In this article, we will explore some of the complexities of political–religious discourse in Argentina through a case study, intentionally selected by its exceptionality, but recontextualized in a well-known series of regular practices. Thus, we can observe without pre-conceptions where the difference lies, what procedures are employed to naturalize it and the boundaries within which it can be represented as different – even opposed – social practices.

The case selected is a discourse event drawn from our research on the relationships between political and religious discourse in Argentina and Latin America. It conveys political and religious discourse within the conflicts that surrounded the government of President Raúl R. Alfonsín (1983–1989), involving a well-established discourse genre, the homily, within an historical social practice, the Catholic mass; but it also included the violation of one of its main features: the monopoly of talk by priests. By challenging the bishop's monologue, questioned by the homily, President Alfonsín settled a different ground, neither religious nor political, that required an urgent recontextualization. Mass media, as privileged agents representing contemporary social practices, recontextualized it in two main different ways through multimodal texts, ascribing the event either to the religious or political field. In both cases, as we will see, the actions and actors involved were consistently opposite, responding to different ideological motivations and having different strategic goals.

Methodological approach: Context, recontextualization and 'genericity effect'

In methodological terms, we will analyse two separate but closely related events in our case study. In the first place, in order to observe the event itself and to detect where the shift between religious and political discourse is produced, we will analyse the strategies implemented to represent the participants in the situation both by President Alfonsín and Bishop Medina. In the second place, in order to analyse how mass media presented competing interpretations of the event, we will employ Van Leeuwen's concept of *recontextualization*, both in terms of the visual representation of social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 136–48) and of the 'genericity effect' or *effet de généricité*, conceptualized by Adam and Heidmann (2004).[4]

The concept of *recontextualization* may be understood in two similar but different ways. On the one hand, Linell defines it as 'the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context to another' (Linell, 1998: 144–5), as a specification of Bakhtin's dialogical principle that states that 'no linguistic message, no thought or intention, exists first without a context' (p. 145). This concept has been employed to understand the ways in which social actors actualize previously known genres in new contexts, as in the case of applicants that bring into the context of a job interview discourses from other parts of their lives, from prior work experiences to private life (Scheuer, 2001).

On the other hand, Van Leeuwen (2008) offers a more radical definition: discourse is the recontextualization of social practice as a mode of social cognition and specific social ways of 'knowing social practices [that] can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text' (p. 6). And this representation always involves an evaluation of represented social practices, being a social practice itself.

In methodological terms, there exist linguistic resources to represent social action including its components, regarding social actors, the action itself, time and space both in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic (i.e. visual) terms. This kind of representation is always produced in terms of a known form, based on shared knowledge which is capable of making it understandable through a sequence of communicative activities, that is, a *genre*.

Now, genres of discourse are not a simple classification of texts in terms of common linguistic and textual features. Following Bauman (2001) and Rampton (2006: 30–1), we can define them as a set of conventionalized expectations that participants use to construct and 'make sense' (Blommaert, 2008) of the communicative activity in which they are engaged. As such, generic expectations may – or may not – match the activity, and this turns out to be a focus of political and ideological struggle (Rampton, 2006: 31). Genre distinctions are meaningful to the speakers, and genre *labelling* is, therefore, a meaningful discursive procedure. Adam and Heidmann (2004) have defined this labelling as relating texts with *open categories* – the genres themselves – in a way that makes a sequence of utterances inseparable from a sequence of texts. In other words, since there is a text – that is, the acknowledging of the fact that a series of utterances conforms to a unit of communication – there is a *genericity effect* (*effét de généricité*) – that is, the inclusion of that series of utterances into a class of discourse: 'genericity is a socio-cognitive need that bonds every text to the interdiscourse of a social formation' (Adam and Heidmann, 2004: 62, my translation).

This 'genericity effect', the inscription of the individual text into a recognizable series, can be achieved either by the use of a textual form that is associated to a genre, or by employing genre labels that bring a genericity effect to the text. As a result, either the textual form and/or the generic label recontextualizes the text into a given meaningful series, into a discursive practice. As such, it entails an ideological motivation that relates different genres and generic features (Fairclough, 1992: 200–24).

Both procedures of recontextualization took place in our case study. In terms of production, the discursive event had a strong generic ambiguity that made it impossible to univocally ascribe it to a given genre. This generic uncertainty was solved by the media in their reports of the event, producing different genericity effects by labelling Alfonsín's speech either as a legitimate political reply or as an illegitimate religious sermon.

Case study

On 2 April 1987, as it was the fifth anniversary of Argentina's landing on the Malvinas Islands, the military vicar at the time, Catholic bishop José Miguel Medina, conducted a mass at the military chapel Stella Maris, with the attendance of President Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín. The relationship between his government and the episcopacy had been especially conflictive since the beginning (Bonnin, 2011). The legal modernization projects conducted by Alfonsín and his party, the *Unión Cívica Radical* ('Radical Civic Union'), concerned a number of issues about which the Argentinian Catholic Church was particularly sensitive: sexual education, educational reform, regulation of the mass media, elimination of state censorship, legalization of divorce, reform of the military code and of the National Constitution, among others. As a result, the first four years of Alfonsín's government were highly confronted and publicly contested by the Catholic hierarchy. Nevertheless, the erosion of the episcopacy's public image, due to the revelation of the involvement of many priests and bishops in State terrorism during the military dictatorship (1976–83) and its extremely politicized discourse, lowered Catholic belligerence. Consequently, the Radical Government also conceded some privileges and gestures of goodwill. One of them – also interpreted as a sign of political weakness – was the delay

of the approval of the divorce law until one week after the visit of the Catholic Pope, John Paul II, scheduled for 6 April.

Although the conflict with the church had calmed down, the conflict with the military forces still persisted due to the trials against the personnel involved in illegal repression during the dictatorship. This conflict emerged once again on 20 April, when a group of military rebels overtook military quarters by force in the provinces of Córdoba, Misiones and Buenos Aires as a form of protest against the trials. A week later, together with the divorce law, law 23.521 – known as the 'law of due obedience' (*ley de obediencia debida*) – was sanctioned. It was a legal instrument which extinguished penal actions, in due course or in the future, against military personnel involved in State terrorism, presuming that their actions were constricted by 'due obedience' to their hierarchical superiors.

Within this critical situation, the mass at Stella Maris chapel was filled with great expectations because it represented in one person, the military bishop Medina, two of Alfonsín's main political antagonists: the Catholic Church and the military forces.

Bishop Medina's homily: Shifting from religious to political discourse

Homily, as a preaching genre, constantly oscillates between a context-dependent reference system, deictically anchored in the communicative situation, and a wider representation of participants and situations that guarantees the – potentially – universalistic preaching of the Roman Catholic Church (Arnoux and Blanco, 2004; Bonnin, 2011: 37–9). One of the main differences with typical political discourse, therefore, resides in the absence of explicit polarization in the definition of an enemy. In order to offer universal 'salvation', Catholic discourse is ultimately addressed to members of the whole population who, following their own evaluation, can always 'come back' to the church (Arnoux and Bonnin, 2011).

Consequently, the shift between a religious and a political configuration of register implies a significant change in the status of the text and what the speaker is allowed to say through it. Medina's discourse does not represent the immediate communicative situation, neither regarding place – the Stella Maris Chapel – nor participants – military forces and civil government personnel. On the contrary, deictic references are employed to designate the whole country of Argentina as the place where the interaction is taking place and where the speaker, Bishop Medina, addresses the whole population:

(1) El achicamiento malvinense ha sido geográfico y ad extra (…) *hoy* deseo exponer otro achicamiento, el *ad intra*, el que *nosotros* mismos *nos* causamos. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 5, col. 1)

(1) The Malvinas' shrinkage has been geographic and ad extra (…) *today* I want to talk about another 'shrinkage', the *ad intra* one, the one that *we* cause *ourselves*.

(2) *Nosotros*, los de *hoy*, nos encontramos en el medio entre la patria recibida y la a entregar: *somos* responsables ante el pasado y ante el futuro. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 5, col. 2)

(2) *We*, the people of *today*, find ourselves between the received Homeland and the one to give away: *we* are responsible for facing the past and the future.

Here, the addresser is included in the same group, sharing the same collective identity as the speaker, who is grammatically represented by the *inclusive we* (Levinson, 1983), referring to the whole Argentinian population. Arnoux and Blanco (2004) have already pointed out that the genre *homily* often displaces the referential content of the 'inclusive we', changing from an immediate deictic meaning (*we*-present-at-the-situation) to an imaginary wider and collective referent (i.e. we-Argentinian). In an earlier work (Bonnin, 2006), we have shown that this kind of referential move is not specific to every homily, but only to those that represent the speaker as, simultaneously, religious and political authority. However, the distinctive feature of homily as a genre is the constant ambiguity that privileges the immediate-context situation over the symbolic wider one, so as to avoid the open politicization of religious discourse.[5] The most skilled Episcopal speakers can maintain this oscillation without losing the legitimacy of religious discourse (cf. Arnoux and Blanco, 2004; Bonnin, 2006). Medina, on the other hand, makes this identification even more problematic, because he introduces an *opponent* to this *we*. As a result, the audience is urged to take sides in political terms, in a with-us-or-against-us formula that is not legitimate within the potentially universalistic message of Catholic discourse.

The following passage, which was highly quoted by the media and specifically referred to in Alfonsín's discourse, was, in our interpretation, the one that triggered the exceptional reply by the president and, hence, the *événement* as it occurred:

> (3) *Digamos* no y *vivamos* este no: no al predominio de lo sectorial o al egoísta no te metás; no a la delincuencia, a la patotería, a la *coima*, al *negociado*, a la injusticia; no a la disgregación, a la antisocial emigración, a la decadencia, a la drogadicción, y a la destrucción de la identidad nacional. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 5, col. 2)

> (3) Let's say no and let's live out this no: no to the prevailing sectoral [interests] or to the selfish 'don't get involved'; no to *delinquency*, to *gangsterness*, to *bribery*, to *dirty business*, to *injustice*; no to [social] disintegration, to anti-social emigration, to decadence, to drug addiction and to the destruction of the national identity.

The compromise of the *inclusive we* (we-Argentinian) into a collective identity opposes its system of ideas and values to an *anti-addresser* that receives the place of the enemy, the political opponent. In this case, the enemy is 'packed' (Halliday and Martin, 1993: 131) into a series of nominalizations and refers quite directly, despite the mitigation of agents, to President Alfonsín and the civil government.

Van Leeuwen (2008) re-considers the well-known problem of the agent deletion as a particular case of *exclusion* of a social actor (2008: 28–32). Although some forms of exclusion leave no traces in texts, and are thus only visible through intertextual comparison (cf. Trew, 1979), others do leave marks. In the case of what he calls 'backgrounding', although the social actors are excluded in a particular sequence, they are mentioned elsewhere in the text and are easily inferable: 'they are not so much excluded as deemphasized, pushed into the background' (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 29).

We observe in Medina's discourse a clear example of backgrounding. The opponent is lexico-grammatically 'packed' in nominalizations which, by reducing clauses to a nominal phrase, elide the arguments of the verbs and delete the agent of those processes (Halliday, 1994; Halliday and Martin, 1993). Nevertheless, the agent is easily traceable within the immediate situational context because it is not concealed but presupposed.

Although nominalized verbs are semantically and syntactically heterogeneous, the packed agents are paratactically associated (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 38) in a way that links criminal and government agents: 'delinquency' and 'gangsterness' evoke the actors 'delinquent' and 'gangster', within the semantic field of crime. But 'bribery', 'dirty business' and 'injustice' involve government agents. Therefore, following a metonymical equivalency chain (in terms of Laclau, 2005), the criminal is the government, who is responsible for '[social] disintegration', 'anti-social emigration', etc. Now, in the context of the actual mass at Stella Maris chapel, Alfonsín was the highest State authority, so the agent accused was, precisely, the president.

Within the opposition drawn in the text, criminals and government agents alike are opposed to 'us', the legitimate we-Argentinians who 'say no'. Thus, the 'specifically political distinction' between *friend* and *enemy* (Schmitt, 1927 [1996]: 26) is produced and the subtle boundaries between religious and political discourse are trespassed.

President Alfonsín's speech: Re-locating the communicative situation

Contrary to Medina's speech, Alfonsín's is characterized by a recontextualization of the communicative situation into the immediate empirical parameters and the dissolution of the friend–enemy opposition, which allow him to move aside from both religious and political discourse.

Regarding the first of these procedures, we observe the opening of his speech:

> (4) *Venimos hoy* a honrar y recordar a quienes murieron por la Patria (…) Hombres del aire, del mar y de tierra, que entregaron su sangre en defensa de la Patria. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 5, col. 2).

> (4) *We* come *here today* to honour and remember those who died for their homeland (…) Men of the air, the sea and the ground who shed their blood in defence of their homeland.

> (5) Si hay algo que *todos nosotros*, los que *tenemos responsabilidades de gobierno, debemos* cuidar en nuestra patria es la honradez en *nuestros* procederes. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1, col. 1)

> (5) If there is something that *all of us, who have government responsibilities, should* be concerned about in *our* homeland, that is honesty in *our* behaviour.

Alfonsín's words are highly anchored in the communicative situation: spatially, with the deictic verb 'come', which refers to the Stella Maris chapel; temporally, through the use of the time adverb 'today', designating the anniversary of the Malvinas war. Finally, in terms of the participants, the inclusive-we, spatiotemporally limited to the situation, includes only those present, in a restricted reference, i.e. military and government personnel, who are in charge of the government

Facing a homily topically centred in 'temporal' reality and highly politicized, Alfonsín's speech begins by recontextualizing the situational context, locating it within the parameters of a religious ceremony. Consequently, the priest – who is not designated as 'bishop' – appears to lack for religiosity:

(6) *Yo* comprendo que frente a estas circunstancias, el *sacerdote*, en el momento de su *plegaria*, haya sentido abrumado su espíritu, que haya quizás actuado con injusticia para con el *Señor*. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1, col. 1)

(6) *I* understand that, in these circumstances, the *priest*, during his *prayer*, could have felt that his spirit was overwhelmed, he could have been unfair to the *Lord*.

(7) *Tenemos* que *agradecer* la paz, en la que tanto tuvo que ver *Su Santidad; tenemos* que agradecer la democracia (…) *Agradecemos* entonces también este período de la Patria que se engrandece. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1, col. 1)

(7) *We* have to be *grateful* for peace, in which *His Holiness* played an important role; *we* have to be grateful to democracy (…) *We* should also be grateful, then, to this period during which the homeland grows.

Alfonsín keeps the place of the opposition implicit, but, at the same time, reverses it: when the bishop *complains* against the '*shrinkage*', the president *thanks* the '*enlarging*'; when the bishop *complains* before the *citizenship*, the president *thanks God* and the *Pope*.

Nevertheless, in order to avoid an open confrontation with Medina, Alfonsín constantly evades the friend–enemy distinction through the mitigation of agency:

(8) Aquí *se* ha hablado de *coima* y *negociados* (…) Si *se* ha dicho esto delante del Presidente es porque *se* conoce algo que el Presidente desconoce, de modo que *yo* solicito también públicamente que si *alguien de los presentes* conoce de alguna *coima* o de algún *negociado*, haciendo honor a nuestras mejores tradiciones (…) lo diga y lo manifieste concretamente. (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1, col. 2)

(8) *It* has been said here that there exist *bribery* and *dirty business* (…) If this *has been said* before the president it is because something *is known*, which the president ignores, so *I* request, also publicly, that if *any of the people here* know anything about any *bribery* or *dirty business*, then honouring our best traditions (…) he or she should explicitly say it and express it with precision.

By mitigating the agency of the accusation through the use of the impersonal 'se' and passive voice constructions, Alfonsín avoids Medina's representation as antagonist. At the same time, it makes evident the politicization of the bishop's homily by demanding the disambiguation of the mitigated agents. Lexical reiteration of 'coima' and 'negociados' allows him to evoke the critical passages in the bishop's homily; but the paratactic association with the semantic field of delinquency is now broken.

Reception: Two snapshots

The episode had wide repercussions because of its exceptionality, produced by the confrontation between civil government and the mixture of religious and military power.

As can be expected, the newspapers of the opposition constructed a negative representation of Alfonsín's speech and the official publications a positive one. Yet it is curious to see the relative homogeneity within each of these groups in terms of: (a) the generic labelling of his speech or, in Adam and Heidman's (2004) terms, its genericity effect; (b) the images used to recontextualize visually the *événement* as a recognizable discursive event.

On the opposition front, newspapers such as *Ámbito Financiero* and *The Buenos Aires Herald* designated the president's speech as a 'sermon', representing him as an illegitimate competitor for the religious position:

(9) *Sermón* presidencial: el presidente parece haber adoptado una nueva afición: *predicar*, no desde el balcón de la Casa de Gobierno, sino en una iglesia católica. No hay indicios de que el presidente proyecte tomar los hábitos (…) pero sí parece pensar que tiene derecho a franquear los límites entre Iglesia y Estado. (*The Buenos Aires Herald*, 4 April 1987, p. 10; our emphasis)

(9) A presidential *sermon*: the president appears to have taken up a new hobby: *preaching*, not from the balcony of Government House, but in a Roman Catholic Church. There is no indication that the president has plans to become a man of the cloth (…) But he does appear to feel he has some sort of right to cross the boundaries between Church and State.

(10) Atípico lugar eligió ayer el Presidente para dar, él también, un *sermón*. (*Ámbito Financiero*, 3 April 1987; our emphasis)

(10) An atypical place was chosen yesterday by the president to also preach a *sermon* himself.

In a less moderate way, the catholic–nationalist magazine *Cabildo* headlined with:

(11) Usurpador de púlpitos hoy, ¿incendiario de templos, mañana? (*Cabildo*, 19 April 1987)

(11) Pulpit usurper today: temple-arsonist tomorrow?

The visual representations employed by these publications were surprisingly similar.

Atípico lugar eligió ayer el Presidente para dar, él también, un sermón. Fue en la Iglesia Stella Maris.

Figure 1. Photo from *Ámbito Financiero*

Usurpador de púlpitos hoy, ¿incendiario de templos, mañana?

Figure 2. Photo from *Cabildo*

Analysing them from a multimodal point of view (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Van Leeuwen, 2008), we observe a close shot of President Alfonsín, who appears as a vehement speaker talking from the pulpit; the religious position – represented by the Bible in its stand and the *vitreaux* in the background – is reinforced by the linguistic genre label: 'sermon'. Alfonsín is pointing towards an absent audience that includes the viewer. Therefore, the oblique and slightly low angle of the camera represents the point of view of the attendants to the mass, giving the readers the same perspective: a collective anonymous audience facing a single speaker. This displacement of Alfonsín's genre-expected place was emphasized in the cartoon that illustrated the newspaper (Figure 3).

In this cartoon, we can observe a perfect inversion of the typical communicative roles of the homily, leaving the priests in the place of attendants and representing the government in the place of religious agency: Alfonsín lecturing an energetic sermon at the pulpit and the minister of economy collecting the alms as an acolyte.

The newspapers which, on the contrary, were not in opposition (though not all of which were pro-government) did not condemn Alfonsín's speech or categorize it as a 'sermon' but as a 'reply'. Quite opposite to the other group, the president was represented not as gesticulating but, conversely, as with a 'temperate tone' ('tono mesurado', *La Razón*, 3 April 1987, p. 1), 'slow and paused tone' ('tono bajo y pausado', *La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1), 'controlled tone' ('tono sereno', *Crónica*, 3 April 1987, p. 10):

(12) [T]ras decirle al acólito y al propio obispo que diría unas palabras, *con el tono de quien solicita permiso*, se dirigió al púlpito y desde allí, *en tono bajo y pausado, entre otros conceptos* dijo … (*La Nación*, 3 April 1987, p. 1; our emphasis)

(12) After informing the acolyte and the bishop that he would say a few words, *with the tone of someone who is asking for permission*, he headed to the pulpit and, from there, *in a slow and temperate tone*, among other things, he said …

Figure 3. Satirical cartoon from *Ámbito Financiero*

El presidente Raúl Alfonsín en el púlpito de la Iglesia Stella Maris responde a la homilía del vicario castrense.

Figure 4. Photo from *La Razón*

It is the same with the images, which are equally similar to each other, and which showed Alfonsín quiet, not talking, in a religious non-politicized context.

En inusual actitud, desde el púlpito de la iglesia Stella Maris, Alfonsín respondió a conceptos vertidos por el vicario castrense. (Inf. Pag. 10)

Figure 5. Photo from *Crónica*

The visual representation is congruent with the texts, showing a contrite person within a religious context but without any prominent role in it. Although the picture was taken during Alfonsín's speech, he is not portrayed talking but silent. As in the previously analysed images, the viewer is a *voyeur* who is not directly addressed by the represented person. However, there is a greater distance and an eye-level vertical angle that inhibits the identification between the point of view of the camera and the attendants to the mass. Actually, the appearance of a photographer within the frame tends to break the exclusively 'religious' recontextualization. The picture taken by *Crónica* is exemplary of the tension between the priest, on the right, and the photographer, on the left; the religious and the political.

This tension at the iconic level is solved by texts through genre labelling, which provoked a genericity effect that recontextualized Alfonsín's speech as a reply, rather than a sermon:

(13) El presidente Raúl Alfonsín en el púlpito de la iglesia Stella Maris *responde* a la homilía del vicario castrense. (*La Razón*, 3 April 1987, p. 1; our emphasis)

(13) President Raúl Alfonsín, at the pulpit of the Stella Maris church, *replies* to the military vicar's homily.

(14) En inusual actitud, desde el púlpito de la iglesia Stella Maris, Alfonsín *respondió* a conceptos vertidos por el vicario castrense. (*Crónica*, 3 April 1987, p. 1; our emphasis)

(14) With an unusual attitude, from the pulpit of the Stella Maris church, Alfonsín *replied* to the opinions expressed by the military vicar.

Facing both discourses, the reader is led to represent two different, even opposite events. In the first one, the president interrupted a mass violently and illegitimately usurped the pulpit in order to lecture an inappropriate sermon. In the second one, Alfonsín made a legitimate political reply, respectful of the religious context that surrounded him. The recontextualization of his action was made within the frame of a genericity effect that naturalized the discursive event: as an illegitimate sermon or as a legitimate political reply, the event was now recognizable, entering a well-known shared ground of discourse practices.

Conclusion: From *discourse event* to *événement*

From an empirical point of view, we have seen how political tensions emerged in an exceptional situation in which both a priest and a prominent mass attendant violated genre conventions. Bishop Medina proposed a strong political representation of the event and actors involved in it. In doing so, he lost the legitimacy derived by the religious context that assured him the monopoly of talk. President Alfonsín, by assuming a non-expected role as speaker, abandoned the passive position of the mass attendant and claimed an active role, although he used some typical features of religious discourse. As a result, a religious actor speaks in political terms, and a political actor replies to him in a religious register.

The mass media, on the other hand, recontextualized this unusual discursive event through multimodal texts that followed two opposite strategies. Those who criticized Alfonsín represented him as an aggressive unlawful religious orator who preached a *sermon*; whereas those who supported him presented him as a correct and contrite political speaker who made a polite *reply*. None of them evaluated Medina's conduct, whose position remained untouched behind the authority of legitimate religious speakers. If we assume that recontextualization introduces singular events, actors and actions within a recognizable, semiotized social context, the case analysed here shows an additional interest, precisely because both groups of media represented it in two consistently opposite ways.

In this case, situational indetermination can be attributed to the singular features of the interchange between Alfonsín and Medina, which appears as a social action that can not, a priori, be ascribed to a regular social practice. We need, therefore, a theoretical displacement from the *discursive event* (Fairclough, 1995: 33) – understood as an operational concept to schematize every communicative situation – to the discourse *événement* (Pêcheux, 1988) in order to restitute the individual features that can be overlooked from a structural approach. While discussing Foucault's notion of 'discursive formation', Pêcheux argued that it entails a structural conception of discursivity that leads to 'an obliteration of the event [*événement*] through its absorption in anticipatory overinterpretation' (Pêcheux, 1988: 648). As a result, despite

structural determinations within which discourse emerges, its very existence stands for the possibility of a destructuring–restructuring of its social conditions.

Consequently, mass media recontextualized the *événement* into two different discursive events, either as a religious or a political one. Neither of them represented it as a complex political–religious phenomenon which, as we have seen, shows deep imbrications between both dimensions. By naturalizing the *événement* as a recognizable, regular discursive event, the media avoided its singular features, and thus shaded the exception, the individuality, the counter-discourse which, defying expectations, is the counterpart of every utterance.

This case study illustrates the limits of religious discourse, although it cannot define it; and it shows how deep it was entwined with other orders of discourse. In this sense, Alfonsín's speech is a rare example of resistance to religious–political discourse, employing its very same rules and resources. Although this fight was rapidly lost, and its unique features absorbed by mainstream discourses through political or religious recontextualization, it shows how the mainstream could be challenged in its limits and contradictions. By focusing on exceptional and contingent ways of producing meaning, we can achieve a better understanding of the conditions and effects of political and ideological struggle.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For a more complete state-of-the-art view of religious discourse studies, see Bonnin (2011: 7–19).
2. For space reasons, we cannot here expand on the references to similar research on political polarization. See Bolívar (2008, 2009) on the use of insults and different communicative transgressions by the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez. For a different interpretation, see Arnoux (2008).
3. Irrazábal (2010) shows how political actors that use juridical or medical language to support anti-abortion legislation have strong Catholic identities. At the same time, Catholic priests that have strong political connections hide them under theological discourse.
4. The analysis of the event itself integrated in its media effects is similar to Bolívar (2009), who focuses on the political scope of the utterance '¿Por qué no te callas?' ('Why don't you shut up?'), addressed by the king of Spain to the president of Venezuela in November 2007.
5. There exists, of course, a large number of religious genres designed to address wider audiences, even universal ones, but this is not the case in this kind of homily.

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