Podemos and the 15M Language Community

written by Antonio Martínez-Arboleda | February 10, 2016

The Indignados (in English, the "outraged"), protagonists of what is called the Spanish May 15, or 15M, Revolution (2011-2013), concentrated a great deal of their political action on the construction of a shared conceptual and emotional understanding of the political reality around them. Their reliance on social media, assemblies, and dialogue, as well as a lack of previous common activist experiences for a majority of participants, meant that the Indignados became a community of language as much as a political movement. In terms of specific policies and methods to gain power, sadly, the Indignados did not show the ability to build a political program during that period. As sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman observed, "The 15M is emotional, it lacks thinking. … It can only prepare the ground for a construction, in the future, of a different type of organization."[1]

In 2014, a number of new political actors led by members of the Indignados movement sprung up in Spain, claiming to be heirs of the 15M Revolution. Hundreds of thousands of Spaniards, including people who had not been actively involved in the protests and assemblies, immediately recognized the Indignado credential of these projects and joined in enthusiastically, particularly after their ambitious electoral plans seemed to be taking shape. The responsibility of maintaining, refreshing, and reinventing the linguistic universe of the Indignados, previously in the hands of a centerless network of collective intelligence and media, fell primarily on Podemos' shoulders. This was in large part due to its connections with papers and televisions, its populist ideology, and its size and organization.

In this article we will look critically at a selection of key elements of the political discourse of the Spanish radical left with a particular focus on the role of Podemos as the main curator and a key producer of Indignados language from 2014 onwards. Also, the use of language by Podemos, as it strives to become a hegemonic mass movement, and the language's impact on Podemos activists and the orientation of their program, will be discussed.

Given the exploratory nature of this brief article, its focus will be on semantic fields whose analysis may help readers to make sense of the current dilemmas of the radical left in Spain. The lack of a definition of the idea of "language community" is deliberate. Hopefully this article will provide a preliminary indication of its conceptual boundaries and an invitation to others to develop it further in order to gain a more critical understanding of populist experiences.

Adiós to the Linguistic Universe of the Traditional Radical Left

If we look at the names of all the radical left-wing platforms and parties that have appeared in Spain in 2014 and 2015 (Podemos, Ganemos, Ahora en Común, Na Marea, En Comú Podem, and more), all stemming from the 15M movement, and read their literature, we will notice the glaring absence of the words "left," "socialist/socialism," "communist/communism," "class struggle," "people" ("pueblo," in the revolutionary sense), "superstructure," or "working classes." (Interestingly, in the Unidad Popular platform, created in November 2015, some of that language is being recovered.)

This abandonment of left-wing language may seem contradictory, and even upsetting for some, since there is overwhelming agreement that the agendas of these new parties are situated in the radical left of the Spanish and European political spectra, beyond the liberal social-democrat parties like the

Spanish Socialist Workers Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español or PSOE). In fact, the vast majority of the leaders of the new political actors, unlike the organizers of the May 2011 protests, have a revolutionary socialist or anarchist background. This is particularly remarkable in the case of Podemos, whose manifesto, written and published in January 2014, was promoted by Anticapitalist Left, a section of the Fourth International.

The refusal to use the word "left" can be traced back to the very inception of the 15M Indignados movement. The Real Democracy Now group (Democracia Real Ya), who organized the first wave of demonstrations on May 15, 2011, declared emphatically that they were neither left-wing nor right-wing, despite having included in their manifesto a number of clearly progressive socio-economic demands. The reasons behind their attitude can be summed up as follows: First, many of the leading Indignados were very new to politics and had no left-wing loyalty nor acumen. Second, the overhaul of the Spanish political system as a whole and its networks of power ("El Sistema," "The System"), became the objective of the movement, whose leadership was shared through open cumulative networks promoted by small and diverse groups. Rightly or not, the main radical left party, Izquierda Unida (United Left), and certainly the two main trade unions, were regarded as part of "El Sistema," although United Left was seen in a less negative light than the other main parties (the "socialist" PSOE and the conservative Partido Popular, the People's Party). We must bear in mind that the protests started during the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, of the PSOE, who proved incapable of stopping the economic and social deterioration provoked by the crisis that hit Spain and the world from 2007.

The "anti-sistema" element of the Indignados' ideology persisted during its two and a half years as an autonomous movement. Despite the active involvement of thousands of left-wing militants from various organizations (including United Left), no fraction of the Indignados ever accepted the idea that they were or could be represented by any party or union during the period from 2011 to 2013, no matter how closely aligned to the movement the demands and methods of those organizations might be.

The role played by different preexisting groups of ideology-based activists (as opposed to protest groups) in contributing to the Indignados' discourse is something that will need to be studied in more detail in the future. For the purpose of this article, it is worth noting that the 15M movement absorbed, or recreated, meanings from revolutionary socialism and took elements from the language and methods of anarchism. However, the main agent responsible for the choice of terms and for the initial construction of the building blocks of the Indignados discourse was not a political party or a group of academics but the relatively spontaneous and open networks of activists with strong online connections. This network flourished between 2011 and 2013, as different members interacted among themselves, with the public, and with the media.

It is also worth mentioning, as Pérez Vicente[2] points out in her detailed account on the 15M slogans, that the Indignados' rhetoric was from the onset hugely inventive, literary, and colorful, with plenty of humor, metaphors, and popular themes. In my view, this is another reason why the often heavy language of revolutionary Marxism, widely discredited by the establishment, would never have caught on. In the next sections of this article we will look at the most salient expressions used by the 15M and taken up by their political heirs in order to construct this not-so-new political reality of crisis and to articulate effective responses.

The Podemos Language Machine

The creation of Podemos in January 2014 brought about a high degree of institutionalization of the language of the 15M, which had already being internalized by wide sectors of Spanish society. The key figures of Podemos had been politically active, in different capacities, during the 15M revolution,

although not as leading organizers of the protests. Despite the numerous and bitter criticisms received by Podemos for rejecting traditional terms of revolutionary socialism, in my view, in January 2014 when Podemos was created, it was too late to recuperate traditional socialist language for the purpose of mass political pedagogy, particularly with the May 2014 European elections approaching. Podemos was born under the skies of the Indignados' universe of meaning, and that was irreversible.

Right from its inception, Podemos' strategy of communication and public engagement seemed to be aimed at the development of a "Podemos Language" that, stemming from the Indignados lexicon and discourse, would ensure the effective control of the framing of issues in the public sphere, not only on television but also in social media. Podemos experts would have to engage with concepts that the 15M had already developed, either by definition or rejection, such as "democracia" (democracy) or "casta" (caste, the political-economic establishment); they would also have to maintain, creatively, a fresh tone in the language, with the extensive use of metaphors and other literary tropes; and finally, they would have to incorporate non-15M concepts for them to be assigned a function in the Podemos discourse, as was the case with "el Estado de Derecho" (the rule of law), "patria" (motherland), or "mochila" (back pack, in reference to United Left as a burden). The early Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the thinking of the Argentine leftist Ernesto Laclau on "empty signifiers" (words and expressions whose meaning is up for grabs and can be redefined and repurposed for the construction of a new hegemonic political identity such as "the people") inspired the leaders of Podemos. The most thoughtful and comprehensive interpretation of the 15M under the theoretical framework of Laclau has been articulated by Íñigo Errejón, second in command in Podemos.[3]

An interesting connection between the language of the Indignados and the politics of Podemos can be appreciated when we compare the period 2011-2013 to 2014-2015 in the light of Laclau's beliefs that political identities are socially constructed through discourse. Both the Indignados and Podemos used highly language-intensive political action, but there is a fundamental difference between the two: The Indignados populist discourse was spontaneous and highly endogenous, which meant that people connected with the 15M felt, and were, the owners of that language and therefore of their identity. Podemos' leaders, however (notably Errejón,[4] as early as September 2011), realized during the 15M Revolution that the Indignados were (inadvertently) an impromptu textbook example of Laclau's language-constructed "people" and then decided to create Podemos to attract the social base of the 15M and lead them further through Laclau's route to hegemony. Effectively, the choral jazz voice of the 15M started to be mixed with the sing-along karaoke experience of Podemos. This change in the role and status of language creation impacted, as I explain below, the relationships between Podemos, the political contents of its evolving program, and its Indignados social base.

Vistalegre and the Wave of Internal Elections in Podemos

The success of Podemos in the European elections of May 2014, when it obtained five seats in Parliament (one less than the coalition led by United Left), also generated a wave of praise of Podemos' language and methods. The communication strategy of Podemos, which was inherent to their program of building a new mass movement, became a topic of conversation and debate amongst activists and experts alike. The honesty and authenticity of Podemos' approach to communication was questioned by many in the left, particularly in the PCE, the Communist Party of Spain, which formed part of the United Left. But the media noise and the popular enthusiasm generated by Podemos' achievement muffled the critics.

Podemos continued to build its strength and popularity over the summer of 2014. In autumn 2014, between September 15 and November 15, the party held a massive, open, predominantly online

founding assembly that would lead to the discussion and enactment of its statutes and the election of leaders, committees, and councils. During this clinically organized, visually attractive constitutional process, known as Vistalegre, in reference to the place in Madrid were the final sessions were held, the membership grew to more than a quarter of a million, all registered online.

Vistalegre saw a big celebratory explosion of internal democracy, thanks to the fact that more than a hundred circles in Spain and abroad had presented their own proposals of party statutes, often coordinated with other circles. The proposals were allowed to have their own title and slogans, and even their own visual identity. This process had generated many exciting debates over the summer of 2014 and a sense of activist empowerment. However, Vistalegre and the internal electoral processes that came out of it are also of particular interest for a different reason. The shared purpose of the Podemos Language and the linguistic harmony of the 15M were about to be disturbed by the leadership of Podemos.

Negating most activists' predictions, the leaders of the party, led by Pablo Iglesias, proposed a relatively conventional party structure for Podemos in their draft proposal, entitled "Claro que Podemos" ("Of Course We Can"), according to which there would not be a federal committee, contrary to the tradition of the Spanish left, nor a collegial formula of leadership at state level. It would be unfair to deny the virtues of Iglesias' proposal. On paper, Podemos was far better than most parties in terms of transparency, accountability, and member power. However, for many activists the centralist structure proposed by Iglesias was in flagrant contradiction to the philosophy of the 15M.

At this crucial time in the history of the party, a set of new passionate expressions were produced by Iglesias' team to argue the case for this traditional structure: Podemos needed to build an "electoral machine," a "war machine" that could confront the powerful "caste." Various sectors of the party that were unhappy with the project challenged Iglesias and demanded a negotiated agreement on the statutes of the party. Iglesias' response to the demands for "consensus" was that agreements between different "familias" (an ambivalent reference to both mafia "families" and the different factions of a party) belonged to the world of the "caste," not to Podemos. He also responded that he wanted to take the heavens, adding that "heavens are not taken by consensus, but by assault," showing that good old revolutionary language can be used when appropriate for literary reasons. Some of his detractors accused him of being the "alpha male." Iglesias made it clear that if his statutes were not passed, he would not stand as general secretary (the Podemos top officer). The Claro que Podemos statutes were adopted with the backing of 80.71 percent of the vote—but with a 40 percent abstention—as the opposition did not manage to articulate a sufficiently engaging and effective process to allow them to reach a consensus around their various proposals.

Once the statutes had been approved, the process of choosing members of the council and the general secretary started. The candidates for the council, organized in lists, and for general secretary were encouraged to have their own websites, advertising materials, logos using Podemos motifs, and so on. A myriad of proposals, slogans, videos, and political designs produced by groups of activists competing for votes suddenly inundated social media. However, these two electoral processes were also won by the circle of Pablo Iglesias, from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, using as their brand "Claro que Podemos."

The three subsequent internal electoral processes for the regional councils, regional secretaries, as well as the candidates for the regional elections of May 2015 would all be contested in the same way. Activists were encouraged to make up their own lists of candidates, brand them, and compete electorally. Controversially, Claro que Podemos had also decided to take part in these elections by lending their name, logos, and logistical processes to groups of candidates selected by Iglesias' team. Their selection processes were totally secretive. Despite the pain of many, who saw how the

organization they had built was turning against them, the lists supported by Iglesias, most of them under the Claro que Podemos brand, were successful in the majority of regions (11 out of 17), thanks to the patronage of Iglesias and his group.

During all these internal elections, the relationship of many activists with the Podemos Language had become ambivalent, if not destructive. Activists were put in a difficult position. They had to repurpose the discourse that united the 15M-Podemos community, with many of the codes and expressions that they used regularly in their political life, for something that it had not been designed for: internal confrontation.

Iglesias and his team promoted their lists with constant references to "balanced teams of people with a variety of talents," "experts in their respective fields," and "the best people." Iglesias had managed to tap into one of the latent assumptions in Spanish society, shared by the 15M, about their politicians: that they are useless. Iglesias and his team knew what they were doing. A recent sociological study in Spain, in which more than 2,000 people were interviewed, shows how support for stealth democracy, or government by experts, appears to be compatible with being a supporter of "participatory democracy" almost as much as it is compatible with being a supporter of "representative democracy."[5] This "safe pair of hands" line of the new Podemos discourse had already appeared prominently on two occasions: in October 2014, when Pablo Iglesias announced, without consultation with the party, that two prestigious left-wing economists, Professor Vincenç Navarro and Professor Juan Torres, would play an important part in designing the economic strategy of Podemos and later on, in the statutes of Podemos, which establish mandatory consultation with experts for certain decisions.

Meanwhile, the non-Iglesias lists, often made up using pre-primaries, would invariably resort to the whole range of 15M-Podemos positive expressions of the semantic field of participatory democracy to promote their lists, but also to the negative ones associated with the idea of "caste." The nature of the Claro que Podemos selection process and the presence of university lecturers in its lists turned Iglesias into a very easy target. For many of his opponents, the Claro que Podemos apparatus and all his collaborators was part of the "caste."

Another factor that led to the deterioration of the Podemos community was the accelerated pace of these competitive electoral processes, exacerbated by an ambiguous sense of popular empowerment. Social media became saturated with denaturalized Indignados Language, and some Podemos activists suffered a paroxysm of campaigning. Many activists who were contending for positions in councils and lists across the country had their baptism by fire in realpolitik. In a different party and a different situation, the use of language would not have mattered that much, but Podemos' relationship with its activists was heavily based on an identity whose emotional links relied on the shared language, often metaphorical, and was less based on years of militancy, deep personal relationships, or a longstanding political program.

Super Pablo

The irresistible attractiveness of Podemos was evident by May 2014. On June 1, 2014, in an interview by Ana Pastor, Iglesias showed that his ability to frame issues such as the nationalization of strategic industries without resorting to the language of the traditional left had not been affected by his recent election as a member of the European Parliament, where he would be part of the European United Left Parliamentary Group.[6] For a bright communicator such as Iglesias it was rhetorically easy to justify revolutionary socialist policies without abandoning even the conceptual and ideological framework of liberal democracies and the 1978 Constitution. Carefully repurposed expressions such as "democracy," "the rule of law," "patriotism," and "sovereignty" became his rhetorical bulwarks to defend the auditing of the debt, expropriation, confiscation, and even a new

monetary policy, while he also championed the recovery of the private sector by supporting very clearly explained Keynesian principles.

When prompted about his connections with Cuba, Venezuela, or Bolivia, an association used to portray him as a radical socialist and to scare voters (bear in mind all the negative propaganda that circulated about these countries), he would declare that Finland was his exemplary country for education, France for intervention in key industries, and Ecuador for refinancing the debt, whilst praising the improvements in the Human Development Index of socialist-ruled Latin American countries. Iglesias had become the communication role model for the 15M-Podemos community.

In a later interview in November 2014 with the same reporter, Iglesias provided some answers that were criticized by numerous Podemos activists.[7] Perhaps the most interesting of Iglesias' statements that evening came when he was asked if Ana Patricia Botín, Executive Director of the Santander Bank, was part of "the caste":

Iglesias: At the moment in time in which Mrs. Botín phones a politician to tell him what to do, [she] is caste, real caste.

Pastor: And, has she called you?

Iglesias: No, to be honest, no.

Iglesias' appeal is based on his wise representation of antagonism as a rebel and eloquent character. As antagonizing journalism disappears, partly due to the watering down of Podemos' most radical economic proposals, Iglesias' opportunities to excel by interpreting successfully his 15M character become more limited. A rock-bottom point in the decline of Iglesias' popularity came in the interview with Albert Rivera, leader of the center-right Ciudadanos Party, conducted by the journalist Jordi Évole on October 19, 2015.[8] In a purposely laid-back atmosphere in a bar, Rivera, with no tie and a very casual shirt, gave Iglesias a lesson, in front of more than five million viewers, on how to be assertive, yet colloquial and amenable, in a normal life situation. This interview was a defeat for Iglesias and his spin-doctors, but, in my view, the defeat also raises the question of the limitations of the 15M-Podemos linguistic universe. It is not clear whether the 15M-Podemos Language enables members of its community to engage, in a politically purposeful and coherent way, in non-political communicative situations whose rules are determined by longstanding cultural practice, often influenced by class, and requiring therefore the use of codes that are not suitable for carrying 15M-Podemos meanings.

The Platforms and the "Convergence"

When the Municipalist Platforms, the other main strand of the new radical left, appeared in Spain in June 2014, it was difficult to anticipate how they would relate to Podemos, both organically and in terms of production of discourse. The Platforms recognized themselves, just as did Podemos, as heirs of the 15M assemblies. Their founding coincided with the deployment of the Podemos Círculos (Circles), the local open assemblies that were meant to become the backbone of Podemos as a party. At the time the Platforms started to emerge, Podemos' universe of meaning was very close to the Indignados Language and therefore to the language of the Platform activists. The risk of conflict between the two initiatives was low because the Platforms only caught on originally in Barcelona, some Catalan towns, and Madrid, and their electoral aim was merely municipal.

This explosion of local political energies was supported by the already centralized 15M-Podemos Language, which provided an intense sense of shared purpose. Expressions such as "desde abajo" ("bottom-up"), related to the 15M "los de arriba y los de abajo" ("the ones at the top and the ones at

the bottom") as an alternative to the working classes, or "gobernar desde abajo" ("to rule from the bottom") regained momentum and helped to articulate the political meaning of these exciting developments. "Gobernar obedeciendo" ("Governing by obeying," an expression from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation of Mexico) summarized the commitment to participatory democracy by both the Platforms and Podemos. Concerning the structures and governance of the two movements, the expression "espacios de decisión" ("decision-making spaces"), widely used to refer to the 15M assemblies, dominated the discourse of Podemos and the Platforms. The linguistic departure from decision-making "bodies," "committees," or "organs," which were regarded as elements of traditional representative democracy, was stark. While the Platforms were considered a great example of libertarian municipalism, Podemos circles were described from their inception as "sovereign" (and still are in the party statutes, albeit only symbolically).

However, Vistalegre set Podemos apart from the Platforms, who managed to keep alive the anarchist component of the 15M in their discourse and methods. Since then, their relationship has been erratic: At times, Podemos clashed with some of the Platforms, at times Podemos' engagement has been very productive.

Podemos has also created a new set of expressions to refer to the possibility of United Left and Podemos being part of the same platform: Podemos leader Carolina Bescansa used the "mochila" ("back pack") metaphor in reference to the historic baggage of United Left as a burden that its leader, Alberto Garzón, has to carry.[9] Pablo Iglesias unleashed his rage against United Left on several occasions by suggesting that he was not going to rescue their "sinking" boat. The term "sopa de letras" ("alphabet soup") was used insistently by Iglesias and others to deride any type of multi-party coalition. Juan Carlos Monedero, in reference to a common front of the left, said that, "by adding up the little heads of many mice, you will only get a Frankenstein mouse who is not going to be able to generate any emotion."[10] Podemos' attitude toward those organizations whose members do not integrate in Podemos under its terms can be encapsulated with the metaphor of the "caballo" (the knight's horse) jumping over the line of pawns in the opening of a chess game. This metaphor was used by Podemos officer Eduardo Maura to justify the lack of consultation with 15M organizations when Podemos was created,[11] and still applies.

Concluding Thoughts

Following their populist beliefs, Podemos leaders are determined to occupy, using their terminology, the "center of the chessboard." That means, effectively, the moderation of Podemos' socialist proposals, as the reader will have learnt through conventional media and by simply looking at the evolution of the rhetoric that we have outlined in this article. This transformation is not new in politics. We only need to consider the evolution of the Spanish "socialist" PSOE and other European social-democrat parties in the last 40 years.

So what is different this time? Populism. Podemos leaders wanted to capitalize on the enthusiastic Indignados social base and felt extremely pressed by the need to succeed electorally. So, moved by their populist beliefs, they needed the Indignados to become the base of their foundational discourse-built "people." However, the Indignados had become, three years before Podemos appeared, a very specific and strong community of language of its own. Self-made language produced in a networked non-hierarchical manner was not just a way of expressing politics but also an essential component of the Indignados as a community. Therefore, by acting as the main curators of the 15M Language, Podemos became the chief custodian of the Indignados.

Podemos leaders believed that their new political community would have to include voters whose electoral leaning was more "mainstream" than that of their core activists and voters. That meant that after the May 2014 election, Podemos' leaders resorted to language production in an intensive

and targeted way in order to pursue the different strands of their more "centrist" people-building agenda. This move seriously undermined the very political fabric of the Indignados.

As the Indignados language community started to collapse by the autumn of 2014, it became clear to Podemos' leaders that they needed to build a new language community using some of the surviving pieces of the Indignados. In my view, had language not been such a constitutive element of the Indignados, their relationship as a political community with Podemos would have been completely different.

Building a new party community on the base of a diminished group of Indignados loyal to Podemos will take time and cannot be done without enthusiastic and generous mass activism. In this respect, the Podemos leaders have fallen in one of Laclau's contradictions that Cassegard points out: They have excluded the "minority activist," in the way that Marx excludes the lumpenproletariat, for not being part of the populist dynamic, in this case the new populist dynamic set by Podemos.[12]

The left would have been better off if Podemos had supported the organic and autonomous expansion of the 15M community and had made a serious effort to join forces with United Left during 2015. A network of Platforms would have been more successful in maintaining and developing, in a collaborative way with the rest of the Indignados community, their universe of shared understanding, because the production of meaning would have been far less centralized and less subject to being monopolized.

Footnotes

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12. Carl Cassegard, "Laclau and the return of the people," June 22, 2014.