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More than words: Argumentative structures as a tool of disinformation in Sputnik Mundo

Więcej niż słowa. Struktury argumentacyjne jako narzędzie dezinformacji w Sputnik Mundo

Abstract

While disinformation is often equated with fabricated content, its impact extends beyond falsified information to the way narratives are linguistically constructed. This article explores the role of argumentative structures in disinformation strategies, focusing on how linguistic devices shape the reader's interpretation of events. By analyzing argumentative operators and connectives in articles published on the Spanish-language pro-Kremlin news portal Sputnik Mundo, the study demonstrates that manipulation is not only a matter of content but also of discourse structure. The research is based on Anscombre and Ducrot's theory of argumentation within language (1994) and framed within an interdisciplinary perspective, combining linguistic analysis with insights from disinformation studies and military theory, particularly the notion of disinformation as a weapon in hybrid conflict. Through an examination of selected articles covering NATO's Steadfast Defender exercises in Europe, the study reveals how argumentative mechanisms are used to challenge official Western narratives, delegitimize NATO's actions, and promote a Kremlin-aligned interpretation of geopolitical events.

Dezinformacja jest niezwykle złożonym zjawiskiem, które może być analizowane z wielu punktów widzenia. W niniejszym artykule zakładamy, że manipulacja w tekstach dezinformacyjnych nie opiera się wyłącznie na sfabrykowanych treściach, ale również na sposobie, w jaki są prezentowane. Wyniki analizy językowej interpretujemy w szerokim, interdyscyplinarnym kontekście, obejmującym m.in. militarną koncepcję konfliktu hybrydowego. Przedmiotem analizy są artykuły na temat manewrów NATO Steadfast Defender, które odbyły się na początku 2024 roku, opublikowane na prorosyjskim portalu informacyjnym Sputnik Mundo. Interesuje nas nie tyle, jakie informacje na temat manewrów Europie przekazują rosyjskie media odbiorcom w Ameryce Południowej, ile w jaki sposób narzucają ich interpretację i ocenę. W tym celu, bazując na założeniach teorii argumentacji w języku Anscombre'a i Ducrota (1994), analizujemy użycie konektorów i operatorów argumentacyjnych w wybranych tekstach, które narzucają odbiorcom interpretację wydarzeń podważającą kluczowe założenia zachodniej narracji w zakresie bezpieczeństwa i współpracy między USA i krajami europejskimi w ramach NATO i promują prokremlowskie interesy geopolityczne.

Key words

disinformation, hybrid warfare, discourse markers, theory of argumentation within language
dezinformacja, wojna hybrydowa, znaczniki dyskursu, teoria argumentacji w języku

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1. Introduction

The claim that argumentation and, more broadly, discourse are effective instruments of manipulation, especially in a political context, is nothing new (van Dijk 2006). Today, however, when disinformation plays a role equivalent to military operations in hybrid conflicts (Konstantevych et al. 2022), it has taken on the status of a full-fledged weapon. Evidence of this is visible daily in the online coverage of the war in Ukraine, where, alongside physical confrontations, a relentless psychological and informational conflict unfolds, strategically designed to shape public perception in line with the objectives of each side. The extent of this influence is approximated by a 2023 report by Demagog and the Polish Media Monitoring Institute, which shows that anti-Ukrainian posts on Polish-language websites reached over 54 million potential viewers, with an Advertising Value Equivalent (AVE) of 189 million PLN. (Demagog and Instytut Monitorowania Mediów 2023).

This article aims to analyze the ways in which argumentation is deployed within disinformation texts on the Spanish-language portal Sputnik Mundo (latamnews.lat), part of the Russian government-controlled Sputnik News Agency (formerly Voice of Russia and RIA Novosti). Although the European Union banned Sputnik in March 2022 for spreading disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it remains active online in Latin America, where it is highly popular. According to some experts at the Reuters Institute, this popularity is driven by a "deficit of non-Western media in Latin America, the region's anti-American sentiment, and a lack of understanding about modern Russia."[1] Incidentally, the portal latamnews.lat is one of the several conduits through which pro-Kremlin narratives reach Spanish-speaking audiences in Europe.

1. Cf. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/es/news/bloqueada-en-occidente-la-propaganda-rusa-prospera-en-espanol-en-tv-y-redes-sociales

Our analysis centers on articles covering the ongoing NATO's Steadfast Defender exercises in Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe, as published in Sputnik Mundo's Defence and Spain sections between January and May 2024. Based on the query phrase "maniobras OTAN en Polonia" (NATO exercises in Poland), the portal's search engine identified 23 articles (as of July 11, 2024), six of which were included in the dataset (cf. appendix). However, it is worth noting that the topic had appeared on Sputnik Mundo earlier as well. Preliminary readings of the articles revealed that they employed similar manipulative strategies and presented a coherent narrative, according to which the Steadfast Defender maneuvers were deemed an aggressive provocation against Russia, reduced security in the region, and served as evidence of the U.S. neo-colonial policy toward other NATO members. We attempt to illustrate the linguistic mechanisms of argumentation used on the basis of the six selected articles. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate that manipulation operates not only at the level of content but also through the form of discourse. In our analysis, we use the pragmatic theory of argumentation developed by Anscombre and Ducrot in 1994 (cf. Miczka 2002). This niche theory has been highly influential in the French-speaking world (Eemeren et al. 2014, 490) and has also gained traction in the Spanish-language scholarship. We also show how certain linguistic mechanisms function within the analyzed texts by interpreting them in the broader interdisciplinary context of modern hybrid warfare, where "one of the most important goals is to win the battle in the mind of the enemy" (Skoneczny 2015, 49).

2. Hybrid warfare as a model of future conflict

To understand the significance of disinformation in modern conflicts, it is crucial to grasp the concept of hybrid warfare. The term first appeared in 2002 in William J. Nemeth's book *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare*, in relation to the activities of Chechen militants within a society characterized, on the one hand, by traditional morality and, on the other, by access to modern technologies. Later studies of contemporary military conflicts and analyses of theoretical models, such as fourth-generation wars and unrestricted warfare, have led to the formulation of a new scientific paradigm for future wars (Hoffman 2007). These conflicts will have a hybrid nature, which means that the distinction between wartime and peacetime, as well as between soldiers and civilians, will increasingly blur (Hoffman 2007; Gerasimov 2013). Warfare will not be conducted solely by state actors but also by other more or less formal groups. Such conflicts will be omnidirectional, with all aspects of reality forming a part of a unified battlefield (Hoffman 2007, 29). Warfare will incorporate both conventional and

unconventional methods (terrorist acts, mass violence, crime) while political, economic, and humanitarian instruments, combined with the manipulation of public sentiments in conflict zones, will become more and more influential (Gerasimov's Doctrine, cf. Fridman 2019). In this context, disinformation activities will gain growing importance, especially through the use of new technologies.

3. Disinformation: An interdisciplinary perspective

The term *disinformation* emerged in the interwar period in the context of the activities of the USSR's intelligence services. Russians elevated disinformation to the status of a political weapon, developing its methods and a broad theoretical foundation based on the concept of "active measures" (Bryjka 2018). These measures include techniques for manipulating the media and public opinion in foreign countries through fabricated information, combined with "information warfare," which either supports military operations, is used independently for political purposes or both. Interestingly, the term *disinformation* did not appear in Western dictionaries until half a century later; before that, "the semantic field [of it] was covered by terms like 'communist lies' or 'propaganda' more broadly" (Kupiecki 2021, 20). These concepts, however, did not account for the crucial aspect of disinformation: the masking of intentions and the actual source of (dis)information.

These days, security services define disinformation in military terms as an advanced form of communication based on falsehoods, "the purpose of which is to induce in the recipient a view, decision, action, or inaction, in line with the intention of the agent who designed the misleading process" (Basaj 2024). It is one of the basic operational methods of intelligence services, used both in wartime and peacetime, and can be divided into tactical and strategic (long-term). The former is typically used in wartime, involving misleading information on specific issues (such as troop movements or military operations). Strategic disinformation, often deployed in peacetime and aimed at long-term goals, involves spreading false information to create a distorted view of reality and, as a result, an erroneous assessment of the situation (Chlebowicz 2012). Its aim is to undermine the culturally embedded common-sense attitudes in societies; it often succeeds in destroying trust in authorities, science (as was the case with vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic), and public institutions, as well as in influencing democratic processes (e.g., the 2016 U.S. elections) (Kuczma 2016).

Although the concept of disinformation first emerged during the interwar period and gained broader recognition in the West several decades later, its study gained significant momentum following the socio-political events of 2016.

The U.S. presidential campaign and the rise to power of Donald Trump, along with the Brexit referendum in the UK, exposed the scale and effectiveness of disinformation campaigns in the media (e.g., Vamanu 2019; Cervi 2019; García Martín and Salvat Martinrey 2021). These events prompted researchers across disciplines to examine not only the psychological and linguistic mechanisms behind the creation of false or manipulated content but also the ways in which such information spreads and influences public perception.

At a societal level, the growing prevalence of disinformation is linked to increasing global instability (Stasiuk-Krajewska 2023, 25), declining trust in political and economic institutions, and a rise of digital media (García Martín and Salvat Martinrey 2021, 200), leading to information oversaturation (García Martín and Salvat Martinrey 2021; Valverde-Berrocoso et al. 2022; Stasiuk-Krajewska 2023) and contributing to the broader post-truth climate, in which subjective beliefs and emotions influence public opinion more than facts (Bermúdez 2018; Cervi 2019, 127). While post-truth revolves around facts, disinformation concerns information understood both as a representation of reality (Fallis 2015, 404) and as a form of media communication (McQuail 2007). This information reaches audiences through specific supply chains, shaping their knowledge and perception of the world (Lecheler and Egelhofer 2022, 69).

A defining characteristic of the concept of disinformation is the deliberate intent to mislead (Fallis 2015, 406), distinguishing disinformation from other forms of information disorder, particularly misinformation (the content that is false but is disseminated without any intention to harm and without awareness that is untrue), and malinformation, which is true but used to cause harm (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 20). The intent to mislead applies both to the creation and distribution of false content: "in the context of disinformation, intention means knowing that information is untrue at the point of creation or dissemination" (Lecheler and Egelhofer 2022, 72). Disinformation is frequently subsumed under "fake news" (Stasiuk-Krajewska 2023); however, researchers argue that this term is overly simplistic and imprecise (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, Rodríguez Pérez 2019, Lecheler and Egelhofer 2022). Moreover, it "has been appropriated by politicians worldwide to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable. Thus, it has become a tool for the powerful to undermine and circumvent the free press" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 15). At the same time, the term "fake news" used to describe a specific genre of media content – fabricated stories that mimic traditional news formats to appear credible (Guo and Vargo, 2020). Such content is particularly deceptive because it adopts the structural elements of legitimate journalism, including headlines, body text, and images, leading audiences to perceive it as real news (Lecheler and Egelhofer 2022, 71), which is particularly relevant for this study.

4. Research objectives and methods

While the above characteristics do not fully exhaust the complexity of the issue, they indicate that disinformation is a "complex, multifaceted, and multidimensional" phenomenon (García Martín and Salvat Martinrey 2021, 200) that can be examined from multiple perspectives and at various levels. This study focuses on its argumentative dimension, specifically, the linguistic means of argumentation employed in disinformative media texts to impose a particular interpretation of events on the audience. Similar to propaganda, disinformation takes the form of a more or less elaborate argument (cf. Walton 2007, 109-110). Consequently, even when a text does not contain outright false information, it can still impose a misleading interpretation of events. As van Dijk (1989) states, "the media construct an interpretative framework. Given a rather general definition of the situation, they do not simply convey or prescribe 'what' people should think, but rather 'how' they should think" (van Dijk 1989, 121).

This analysis will focus particularly on the use of discourse markers – linguistic units that serve to guide "the inferences made in communication" (Portolés 2010, 282). The methodological approach is grounded in the principles of the theory of argumentation within language, as developed by Anscombre and Ducrot (1994). According to these scholars, every utterance is inherently argumentative because its formulation is oriented toward a specific conclusion: "A speaker makes an argument when they present an utterance (or set of utterances) E1 [arguments] in order to have another utterance (or set of utterances) E2 [conclusion] accepted" (Anscombre and Ducrot 1994, 8). This implies that "in most utterances, there are certain features that determine their pragmatic value independently of their informational content" (Anscombre and Ducrot, 1994, 31). In other words, "one does not argue 'with' utterances that represent facts, but 'within' the very linguistic form of these utterances" (Portolés 1988, 75).

A key component of the theory is the distinction between elements that provide information and those that guide the interpretation of communicated content. This distinction aligns with relevance theory's differentiation between conceptual and procedural meaning, as proposed by Diane Blakemore (1987). Blakemore argues that linguistic meaning contributes to inferential pragmatic processes in two ways: it can either encode constituents of conceptual (propositional) representations, which undergo inferential processing, or encode procedural information about how these processes should be conducted (Blakemore 2000, 464). In other words, units with procedural meaning "determine the way in which human cognition should process the information provided by units with conceptual meaning" (Portolés 2010, 282).

Connectives and argumentative operators (Ducrot 1984, Portolés 1988) play a fundamental role in argumentation within language. Their procedural meaning not only provides instructions regarding the argumentative orientation of an utterance but also determines the strength of arguments along a scale. As a result, "through the use of such operators, argumentative values enter into the semantic structure of the sentence. These operators provide sentences with an orientation toward a certain type of conclusion that cannot be deduced merely from the informative content of the sentence concerned" (Eemeren et al. 2014, 491).

Another crucial aspect of Anscombre and Ducrot's theory is the concept of topos, derived from Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. They define topoi as "guarantees or rules of inference that connect utterances within an argumentative chain" (Anscombre and Ducrot 1994, 217). Topoi encompass general rules, shared knowledge within a given community, and common-sense principles embedded in the repository of implicit knowledge (Gutiérrez Ordóñez 2002, 275). For example, the statement "this restaurant is expensive" can lead to two entirely different implicit conclusions depending on the prevailing topoi in a given speech community (+expensive, +recommendable vs. +expensive, -recommendable). However, if a speaker wishes to ensure that the recipient arrives at the intended conclusion, they can provide guidance using elements with procedural meaning, such as connectives (e.g., "this restaurant is expensive, but you should go there") or argumentative operators (e.g., "this restaurant is a little expensive, but you really should go there").

The analysis of connectives and argumentative operators in disinformation texts does not, of course, exhaust the topic of the structure of disinformation discourse. However, it offers insights into how an agent's intentions are realized within the linguistic structure of an utterance. This study focuses on Russian propaganda targeting Latin American audiences, which presents information about NATO military exercises in Europe while attempting to impose an interpretation aligned with the Kremlin's ideological stance. As previously mentioned, we examine six out of 23 articles published on Sputnik Mundo during 2024 Steadfast Defender[2] military maneuvers.

First, we present the findings from a broader analysis of the entire corpus, covering the overall structure of the articles and identifying recurring manipulative strategies (van Dijk 2006). This helps establish the key assumptions underlying Russian propaganda in this context. We then conduct a detailed examination of selected passages in which connectives and/or argumentative operators are used to guide readers toward a specific interpretation of events in alignment with the propaganda objectives. We analyze their procedural meaning, demonstrating how

2. Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises took place from January 8 to May 31, 2024, and were the largest NATO military exercises in Europe since the Cold War. They involved 32 allied countries (including Sweden) and included operations on land, at sea, and in the air (Gurgurewicz 2024).

they shape the argumentative orientation of the text and, where relevant, which topoi they invoke. Finally, we interpret our findings within a broader interdisciplinary framework, considering not only linguistic aspects but also objectives of strategic disinformation and hybrid warfare. Such analysis may also provide a valuable cross-cultural perspective on the mechanisms of disinformation, offering insight into how argumentative structures function across different cultural and communicative contexts.

5. Analysis and findings

We begin the analysis by presenting general observations regarding the analyzed texts, all of which follow a similar structure that is typical of articles in news portals. They consist of a headline followed by a photo, a lead, and the main body of content, which includes additional photos, hyperlinks to related texts, and expert comments interwoven throughout. Indeed, disinformative content often mimics news media in form. The headline plays a key role in shaping news reports, becoming an "identification tag of each news report" (van Dijk 1989). Headlines highlight the most important information in the text while also activating models and scripts. Since the information contained in the headline sits at the top of the macrostructure hierarchy, it is also the most easily remembered by readers, which may be particularly significant from the perspective of strategic disinformation (van Dijk 1988, 228).

Following this reasoning, the headlines of articles on Steadfast Defender in Sputnik Mundo impose a clear interpretation of NATO's maneuvers as an aggressive provocation against Russia. In most cases, NATO is explicitly mentioned (15 out of 23 articles) in the context of expressions such as *conflicto* (conflict), *asalto* (assault), *desestabilización* (destabilization), *guerra* (war), *provocación* (provocation), and *confrontación* (confrontation). This represents a consistent disinformation strategy embedded in the broader framework of Russian propaganda efforts (Kahl 2024). Even before the exercises began, in September 2023, readers could already find headlines such as *La OTAN practicará su "capacidad de atacar" a Rusia en el mar Báltico* (NATO will practice its "capacity to attack" Russia in the Baltic Sea, Sept. 3) or *La OTAN prepara su mayor ejercicio militar tras la Guerra Fría y con Rusia en la mira* (NATO is preparing its largest military exercise since the Cold War, with Russia in its sights, Sept. 11).

In the headlines of the six articles, Steadfast Defender exercises are explicitly presented as a NATO provocation that threatens regional security, as in *Ejercicios como Steadfast Defender "elevan el riesgo de incidentes militares*"[3] and *La OTAN*

3. Exercises like Steadfast Defender "increase the risk of military incidents.

realiza sus ejercicios militares para entrar al conflicto en Ucrania "sin máscaras"[4]. Some titles suggest this implicitly by posing questions: *Maniobras de la OTAN en el Mediterráneo: ¿por qué España también le muestra los dientes a Rusia?*[5] and *Ejercicio Steadfast Defender 2024: ¿qué busca la OTAN con sus mayores maniobras en décadas?*[6] Two of the titles do not refer to the exercises directly but address topics closely related to Spanish domestic policy: *Militares de España mueren en Polonia mientras su gasto militar ya supera el 2% de su PIB*[7]; *España construirá un nuevo y enorme buque de guerra: ¿por qué, para quién y a qué costes?*[8]

At the content level, the articles typically begin by presenting facts, official statements from authorities, or the "objective" state of affairs, and then gradually move toward interpretation and evaluation. A key role is played by out-of-context comments from independent experts, often placed in highlighted text box, which allow direct sharing on social media platforms (X/Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp), where the quoted content can be commented on and shared by readers. From a disinformation process perspective, expert comments serve two main functions: (1) Argument from authority: the experts offer critical commentary on the state of affairs presented, frequently challenging the views of politicians or official sources. These comments often contain connectives and argumentative operators; (2) Facilitation of horizontal propaganda (Ellul 1973): allowing readers to share the content on their social networks, the commentaries facilitate the dissemination of disinformation. This operational pattern is typical of Russian propaganda as information spread by state centers and Kremlin-affiliated media is then further distributed by "proxy sources," including both conscious and unconscious propagators of disinformation, often in foreign languages (U.S. Department of State 2020).

The content of the articles revolves around the argument that NATO's actions are driven by the neocolonial policies of the United States and that the Steadfast Defender exercises serve as a provocation against Russia. This thesis is expressed explicitly, for instance, in direct statements from Russian government representatives:

> "Los intereses de la seguridad europea poco preocupan hoy a quienes llevan la voz cantante en la OTAN. Para ellos, lo fundamental es mantener a flote este instrumento de influencia estadounidense en la lucha, ya perdida, por preservar la hegemonía occidental en el mundo"[9] (Alexandr Grushko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia).

4. NATO conducts its military exercises to enter the conflict in Ukraine "without masks.
5. NATO maneuvers in the Mediterranean: Why is Spain also baring its teeth at Russia?
6. Steadfast Defender 2024 Exercise: What is NATO aiming for with its largest maneuvers in decades?
7. Spanish soldiers die in Poland while the country's military spending already exceeds 2% of its GDP.
8. Spain will build a new and massive warship: Why, for whom, and at what cost?
9. "The interests of European security matter little today to those who lead NATO. For them, the main priority is to keep this instrument of U.S. influence afloat in the already lost struggle to preserve Western hegemony in the world."

> "Estados Unidos está ejerciendo acciones de coalición contra Rusia. Tenemos que admitir que los Estados de la OTAN se están preparando seriamente para un posible conflicto con nosotros, del que, por cierto, hablan abiertamente altos representantes de la OTAN"[10] (Maria Zakharova, Spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

More often, however, this idea is conveyed indirectly, as in the following excerpt, where the author implies that the increase in defense spending among European countries reflects an effort to reduce their dependence on the United States:

> Las cifras europeas, también las del Reino Unido, concuerdan con la decisión de la OTAN y la UE de aumentar las partidas militares de los presupuestos al objeto de limar su dependencia de Washington y ganar en autonomía.[11]

Our observations align with the conclusions of the report *The Kremlin's Efforts to Covertly Spread Disinformation in Latin America*, which states: "The [disinformation] operations primarily focus on attempting to persuade Latin American audiences that Russia's war against Ukraine is just and that they can unite with Russia to defeat neocolonialism. These themes align with Russia's broader false narrative that it is a champion against neocolonialization" (U.S. Department of State 2023).

In all the analyzed articles, the authors challenge the official stance of Western politicians, both in the context of external (NATO-related) and domestic policies. Typically, the official line is presented first, followed by critical analysis, often based on commentaries from independent experts or institutions. For example, one text begins by discussing how global defense spending has increased. Citing data from a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the author notes that the highest defense expenditures come from the U.S., China, and Russia, and that the U.K. and other European countries have also increased their military budgets. The focus then shifts to Spain, and the author, presenting a series of figures and percentages, claims that despite politicians' assurances, the country spends far more than the 2% required by NATO. Even though the argument is based on quantitative data, the sheer volume of information and the way it is presented create informational noise. Additionally, the data are presented selectively, tailored to support a preconceived thesis, which is a common disinformation technique (Kuczma 2016). The conclusions from the numerical data analysis are summarized by an expert, which takes the form of direct counter-arguments[12] to the official position of NATO countries.

10. "The United States is carrying out coalition actions against Russia. We have to admit that NATO states are seriously preparing for a possible conflict with us, which, by the way, high-ranking NATO representatives openly talk about."
11. The European figures, including those of the United Kingdom, align with NATO and the EU's decision to increase military budget allocations in order to reduce their dependence on Washington and gain greater autonomy.
12. "Let *p Consec q* be a discursive sequence where *p* is the antecedent, *q* the consequent, and *Consec* the connector that links them. This sequence presents indirect counter-argumentation if there exists a conclusion *r*, different from *q*, for which *q* is an argument, while *p* is an argument for ~*r*. The counter-argumentation is direct if *p* is an argument for ~*q*" (Ancombre 1998, 89).

> Los Estados están dando prioridad a la fuerza militar, *pero* corren el riesgo de entrar en una espiral de acción-reacción en un panorama geopolítico y de seguridad cada vez más volátil", afirma Nan Tian, investigador senior del Programa de Gasto Militar y Producción de Armas del SIPRI.[13]

The counter-argument is structured by the connective *pero* (but). As noted by Anscombre (1995), connectives contain a set of semantic instructions that, from within the sentence, point to the inferences that the reader is expected to make from the utterances in which they appear. In Spanish, *pero* not only changes the argumentative direction but also strengthens the counter-argument: "it introduces information that is presented as more powerful from an argumentative perspective and thus shifts the conclusion in the same argumentative direction" (Montolío 2001, 51).

In that example, two arguments are used. The first one, "the States are prioritizing military strength," leads to the implicit conclusion, "they are increasing their security," based on the topos +military force, +security. However, the introduction of the counter-argumentative connective shifts the argumentative orientation by presenting a stronger argument: "They risk entering an action-reaction spiral in an increasingly volatile geopolitical context." As a result, the reader draws the conclusion that "the States are decreasing their security," which undermines a key assumption of NATO policy.

Another assumption challenged by the analyzed articles is that the NATO maneuvers serve to dissuade Russia. In another article we find the following argumentative sequence:

> El objetivo declarado de todas estas maniobras, travesías, ejercicios y las naves implicadas es la „disuasión" a lo largo de todo el flanco marítimo de la alianza „desde Estambul hasta Helsinki", en palabras del contralmirante Gonzalo Villar, que declaró a los medios españoles invitados a bordo que el sentido de los ejercicios es „evitar una confrontación con Rusia". *Pero* cabe preguntarse si lo que se añade *en realidad* es *precisamente* más tensión. „Esto no es para la seguridad, es *más bien* una forma de amenazar veladamente a Rusia", explica a Sputnik el historiador y analista internacional José Miguel Villarroya.[14]

In this passage, the author openly questions the military representative's stance, encouraging the audience to engage in its critical analysis. The use of the counter-argumentative connective *pero* is strengthened by argumentative operators. Their function is, by definition, "to act within a statement and mark orientation, force,

13. "The States are prioritizing military strength, *but* they risk entering an action-reaction spiral in an increasingly volatile geopolitical and security landscape," says Nan Tian, senior researcher at SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Program.

14. The stated goal of all these maneuvers, crossings, exercises, and the involved vessels is "deterrence" along the entire maritime flank of the alliance "from Istanbul to Helsinki," according to Rear Admiral Gonzalo Villar. He told the Spanish media invited on board that the purpose of the exercises is "to prevent a confrontation with Russia. "*However*, one might wonder if, *in reality*, they are only adding *exactly* more tension. This is not about security; it is *rather* a veiled way of threatening Russia," explains historian and international analyst José Miguel Villarroya to Sputnik."

and/or argumentative sufficiency. They are the clearest procedures to indicate, above all, the position on the scale and act as realizing or derealizing" (Fuentes Rodríguez and Alcaide Lara 2007, 64). The inferences of the operators depend on the conceptual meaning of the expression they accompany (Portolés 2004, 237).

In the analyzed example, the operators serve a realizing function; that is to say, they enhance the strength of the argument. Thus, *(añade) en realidad* ((add) in fact) has a modal function, emphasizing the author's skepticism toward the position he proceeds to attack. *Precisamente (más tension)* (exactly (more tension)) focuses on the counter-argument itself, since, according to the *Diccionario de Partículas Discursivas* (Briz et al. 2008), it contains the following procedural meaning: "The speaker considers that the appearance of one element, out of all possible elements, coinciding with a previous one is significant, either due to the surprising nature of such a coincidence or because it was intentionally sought." The operator *(es) más bien* ((is) rather) in the expert's statement reinforces the counter-argument formulated by the author, as it indicates procedurally that although "the part of the discourse that follows does not accurately describe a specific reality or idea; it is the closest to reality" (Briz et al. 2008).

The theme of U.S. neocolonialism is also brought up in the context of national affairs to discredit domestic politicians. The central thesis is that Spanish leaders, particularly Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, are making decisions that do not align with the interests of the people but rather serve to meet U.S. demands. The arguments are constructed with the aim to erode public trust in the government. In the articles analyzed here, this goal is achieved in various ways. One approach is to show the audience that they are being deceived. For instance, Pedro Sánchez's claim that Spain's defense budget for 2024 is only 1.24% of GDP (i.e., too low) is contrasted with "objective" data:

> En 2024 la inversión en defensa solo alcanzará el 1,24%. *Pero* esta última cifra bien pudiera ser una falacia. Según un análisis conjunto del Centro Delàs de Estudios por la Paz de Barcelona y el International Peace Bureau (IPB), el gasto militar de España en 2023 alcanzó los 28.591,81 millones de euros, luego de añadir al presupuesto consolidado del Ministerio de Defensa (el inicial de 16.877,4 millones más los incrementos extraordinarios) el resto de gastos militares repartidos y camuflados en otros ministerios.[15]

Here the author explicitly questions the truthfulness of the Prime Minister's words while implicitly constructing an argument that leads to the conclusion that the government is lying. We can illustrate it in the following way:

15. In 2024, defense investment will only reach 1.24%. *However*, this figure may well be misleading. According to a joint analysis by the Delàs Center for Peace Studies in Barcelona and the International Peace Bureau (IPB), Spain's military spending in 2023 reached 28,591.81 million euros. This figure includes the consolidated budget of the Ministry of Defense (the initial 16,877.4 million plus extraordinary increases) along with additional military expenses distributed and concealed within other ministries.

(argument 1:) The government says that military spending is too low, below 2% of GDP
+ but (connective which introduces stronger counter-argument)
+ (argument 2:) Experts say that military spending far exceeds 2% of GDP
+ topos: scientists/specialists are more credible than politicians
(conclusion:) Military spending should not be so high (= The government is lying).

To explain: the implicit conclusion is derived from the synchronized deployment of three argumentative tools on different levels: (1) the use of the counter-argumentative connective *pero* (but), which introduces a stronger counter-argument; (2) the application of the topos that scientists or specialists are more credible than politicians; (3) a targeted analysis of numerical data, sourced from independent authorities.

At the pragmatic level, the argumentative structure is both repeated and reinforced in the following expert commentary, where the use of connectives clearly indicates the argumentative orientation:

> "El Gobierno español, a pesar de tener congelado el presupuesto para este año 2024, continúa aumentando el gasto en defensa con la excusa de querer cumplir el compromiso de alcanzar el 2% del PIB que exige la OTAN. *Pero* esto supone, básicamente, hacerse trampas al solitario, porque si se tienen en cuenta el resto de las partidas militares repartidas en otros ministerios, España ya ha superado el 2% del PIB en gasto militar", explica Pere Ortega, Centro Delàs.[16]

We observe a similar disinformation strategy aimed at undermining trust in democratic institutions. The author discusses defense spending, particularly the construction of a warship, within the context of the Galician elections[17] with the aim of giving a derogatory portrayal of the actions of Pedro Sánchez. Through the voice of Antonio Aguilar, the director of the Spanish Institute of Geopolitics, the author criticizes this investment:

> *No obstante*, Aguilar se pregunta si buques de estas características son realmente necesarios según la doctrina militar española o "son una muestra más de la militarización obligada por la OTAN para dar cobertura a las marinas de los países aliados" e integrarlo en ellas.[18]

The counter-argumentative connective at the beginning of the statement indicates that the expert quoted here disagrees with the politicians' decision. *No obstante*

16. "The Spanish government, despite having a frozen budget for 2024, continues to increase defense spending under the pretext of meeting NATO's requirement to reach 2% of GDP. *However*, this is essentially a case of playing a rigged game, because if all military allocations spread across other ministries are taken into account, Spain has already surpassed the 2% of GDP in military spending," explains Pere Ortega, the Delàs Center.
17. According to Spanish fact-checking service maldita.es, the elections to the Galician Parliament on February 18, 2024, were a frequent target of disinformation activities (https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240218/bulos-desinformaciones-elecciones-autonomicas-gallegas/).
18. *However*, Aguilar questions whether ships of this nature are truly necessary according to Spanish military doctrine or if they are "just another example of the militarization imposed by NATO to support the navies of allied countries" and integrate them into its forces.

(nevertheless, however) is a strong connective that introduces a counter-argument due to its procedural meaning: "previous information must be reconsidered, since what follows presents unexpected information that diverges from the previous line of reasoning, leading to a different conclusion than one might expect" (Montolío 2001, 62). As in the previous example, the argument is reinforced by a verbatim quote from a specialist:

> "No es algo que necesitemos para nuestros litorales y archipiélagos. [porque] Nuestras necesidades quedarían perfectamente cubiertas con un par de buques más pequeños. *Luego* estamos ante un buque cuyo destino es formar parte de fuerzas de proyección de la OTAN. Pero esto no es nuevo", recuerda Aguilar.[19]

In the first part of the statement, the cause-effect relation is implied, but later on, the procedural meaning of connective *luego* (then) indicates that we are dealing with a logical conclusion drawn from the previous statement: "The conclusion is based on an assumption shared by an entire community of speakers" (Briz et al. 2008). As a result, we learn that the investment does not serve Spain's interests, which is framed as unsurprising *pero esto no es nuevo* (but it is nothing new) and includes a presupposition that similar decisions have been made in the past.

In the following passages related to domestic politics, it is also evident that one of the main targets of Russian disinformation is Pedro Sánchez. In these and other articles, he is portrayed as a weak politician, subservient to U.S. interests or those of his own party. We can observe it in the following example:

> "EL PSOE no tiene *ni* una línea propia para Galicia *ni* tampoco un candidato fuerte, al que la mayoría de la población gallega no conoce. *Por tanto*, Pedro Sánchez aparece aquí como un paracaidista, con un anuncio para intentar revitalizar la campaña electoral de su partido", explains Daniel Seixo, a Galician sociologist, to Sputnik.[20]

In this case, the author uses explicit means of argumentation: the additive connective *ni...ni* (neither... nor), which links two mutually supportive arguments, and the consecutive connector *por tanto* (therefore), which guides the reader toward an unambiguously detrimental conclusion about the Prime Minister's intentions. The use of argumentative connectives ensures that the reader's interpretation aligns with the author's intended message.

The final example we want to present is particularly compelling from the perspective of the pragmatic theory of argumentation. We can observe how tragic

19. "This is not something we need for our coastlines and archipelagos, [because] our needs would be perfectly met with a couple of smaller ships. *Then*, we are looking at a vessel intended to be part of NATO's power projection forces. But this is nothing new," recalls Aguilar.

20. "PSOE *doesn't have* a single line of its own for Galicia, *nor* a strong candidate, one that the majority of the Galician population doesn't know. *Therefore*, Pedro Sánchez appears here as a parachutist, with an announcement trying to revitalize his party's electoral campaign," explains Daniel Seixo, a Galician sociologist, to Sputnik.

incidents can be used propagandistically and, at the same time, illustrate the way the formulation of a statement determines its argumentative orientation. Also, the thesis presented in the headline is repeated twice in the text, both in form and meaning, which suggests a deliberate intention:

> (A2) Militares de España mueren en Polonia *mientras* (A1) su gasto militar ya supera el 2% de su PIB (headline);
> (A1) España añade 1.129 millones de euros para 2024 *mientras* (A2) sus tropas ya sufren bajas mortales en las maniobras de la OTAN (lead);
> (A1) Los presupuestos de defensa no paran de aumentar *y, a la par, también* (A2) lo hacen los riesgos para los militares españoles (body of the article).[21]

Each of the three utterances consists of two clauses in the present tense, connected by the conjunction which denotes simultaneity (*mientras*, *a la par*). However, there is no direct relationship between the two pieces of information. The first clause (labeled as argument A1) refers to the increase in Spain's defense spending. The phrases used, namely *no parar de aumentar* (to keep increasing) and *añadir* (to add), presuppose that spending was already increasing and imply that it will continue to do so. The combination of explicative and implicative meanings suggests that we are dealing with an ongoing process, effectively indicating that defense spending will keep rising, despite having already reached the required 2%. At the same time, the use of the conjunction *mientras* (meanwhile) implies that, alongside the rise in defense spending, the number of casualties among Spanish soldiers is also increasing.

The plural forms (*militares de España*, *militares españoles*) and the collective noun *tropas* (troops) are meant to cause the reader to infer that a significant number of deaths are involved. In reality, the text refers to the tragic accidental death of a sole Spanish soldier during NATO exercises at the Bemowo Piskie training ground. This discrepancy indicates intentional manipulation. Moreover, as shown by the anaphora *lo (hacen)* in the last example, the authors emphasize that the rise in Spanish military casualties is directly proportional to the increase in defense spending. In sum, the interpretation of these examples relies on a generalization: Spanish military losses are seen as rising in parallel with increased defense spending. What conclusion can be drawn? If we apply the topos "+defense spending, +safety for soldiers" the conclusion will resemble that in the examples we analyzed earlier. What is perhaps more interesting, in a statement thus formulated the temporal conjunction *mientras* functions, at the pragmatic level, as a counter-argumentative connective:

21. Spanish soldiers die in Poland *while* their military spending already exceeds 2% of GDP (headline); Spain adds 1.129 billion euros for 2024 *while* its troops are already suffering fatalities in NATO maneuvers (lead);
Defense budgets keep increasing and, *at the same time*, so do the risks for Spanish soldiers (body of the article).

(A1:) Spanish defense spending is increasing > (C1 implicit:) The safety of Spanish soldiers is increasing.
+ topos (+defense spending, +safety for soldiers)
+ meanwhile (equivalent to counter-argumentative connective)
(A2:) Spanish military casualties are increasing > (C2 implicit:) The safety of Spanish soldiers is decreasing.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to examine the argumentation strategies used by the pro-Kremlin news portal *Sputnik Mundo*. Our goal was not only to illustrate how pro-Russian media shape perceptions of the situation in Europe among Latin American audiences but also to demonstrate how these strategies manifest at the level of discourse structure. Although we certainly do not exhaust the topic, it allows us to draw several compelling conclusions. Firstly, we observe that the analyzed arguments align with the goals of strategic disinformation, as defined within the framework of hybrid conflict: to confuse and intimidate the audience, to undermine trust in allies and democratic institutions, and to manipulate data (cf. Kuczma 2016). The key role is played by expert comments, which, on the one hand, challenge the official position while, on the other, lend credibility to the thesis put forward by Sputnik. They usually serve as an authority fallacy (cf. van Dijk 2006, 375) arguing against the official NATO position by using counter-argumentative connectives. The argumentative operators do not appear frequently in the body of the texts; however, they are used in the comments. At the pragmatic level, we can observe that the arguments presented are formulated to challenge the topos that underpins the Western narratives of NATO alliance protecting the interests and citizens' security, with justification for increasing defense spending.

It can also be concluded that the argumentative strategies employed in the analyzed texts operate on multiple levels. Regardless of the details of the information conveyed, the formulation of utterances can influence the way they are interpreted. This study aims to contribute to the point that fostering resilience to disinformation in society requires, among other measures, developing "the ability to understand the nature of language through which information is conveyed." (Cooke 2017, 217).

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Appendix

Ejercicio Steadfast Defender 2024: *¿qué busca la OTAN con sus mayores maniobras en décadas?* Accessed July 12, 2024. https://latamnews.lat/20240125/ejercicio-steadfast-defender-2024-que-busca-la-otan-con-sus-mayores-maniobras-en-decadas-1147663310.html

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