

THE PRACTICE OF RETORT: EXCHANGES LEADING TO THE CARACAS PEACE DIALOGUES¹

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1. Introduction

On December 9th, 1990, when Colombian citizens were electing the members of a Constituent Assembly, the national army attacked the Casa Verde headquarters of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)—the oldest and largest guerrilla organization— intensifying the conflict between the State and insurgents. Following a three month long military offensive by the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB)², three of its commanders, Daniel Aldana, Miguel Suárez Piragua and Lucía González, in civil dress and unarmed, entered the Venezuelan Embassy in Bogotá on April 30th, 1991, accompanied by Alvaro Leyva Durán, member of the Constituent Assembly, Jesús Carvajal and Rafael Serrano Prada, members of the Peace Commission of the House of Representatives, and Hernán Motta Motta then presiding the Patriotic Union. With the acquiescence of the Venezuelan ambassador the commanders requested the Colombian government initiation of direct peace talks at the diplomatic seat. Although the government peremptorily refused, that daring action unchained the events that eventually brought President Gaviria to the negotiating table, opening the way for the Caracas Peace Dialogues. As background for the entry operation stood 185 years of political independent life, 38 of the last 46 under emergency rule (Gunson 1996). A history of chronic violence, engendered primarily by long standing political exclusions, throughout which have ebbed

¹ We thank Charles L. Briggs for the invitation to participate in the session on “Violence and social struggle in discourse”, at the Fifth International Pragmatics Conference. Author Villalón gladly acknowledges the financial assistance provided by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas (CONICIT), the Asociación de Profesores de la Universidad Central de Venezuela (AP-UCV), and the Vicerrectorado Académico of that same university. Both writers are indebted to panel coordinator Charles L. Briggs and its two lively discussants, Allen D. Grimshaw and Michael Silverstein, for their insightful commentaries on the original draft of this paper. Sandra Angeleri gratefully acknowledges Charles Briggs’ intellectual support and encouragement, as well as the financial assistance of the Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico (CDCH) of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) in carrying out her original work (Angeleri 1996).

² An umbrella organization comprised by the FARC, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional [National Liberation Army]) and the unpacified wing of the EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación [Popular Army of Liberation]). It was founded in 1987, and at the Commanders’ First Summit in 1990 participating groups agreed on a common ideology, strategy and command while each retained its military autonomy (Angeleri 1996: 115).

and flowed Colombian “violencias” and pacifications. Amidst these, sixteen constitutions³ and a tradition of bipartisan politics managed to create a state capitalist framework, but failed to build a nation (Angeleri 1996: 61-62)⁴. Thus, when the CGSB and the government finally convened in Caracas, at stake were opposing conceptions of what Colombia ought to be, along with the end of protracted “armed social conflict”.

Whereas the embassy entry was conceived, in an insurgent’s own words, “as a pressure tactic to force [peace] negotiations” (Ruíz 1991), such a characterization has a limited explanatory power and can not be taken entirely at face value. Behind this simple attribution of motive or intention lies the fundamental issue of how and why a particular action enacts the expectations and entailments anticipated by it. Seeking to understand the manner in which the embassy entry acquired the efficacious power to “force” a certain type of discourse practice, we would like to argue that the entry comprised a context-building strategy that recentered contenders’ discourses, redefined intertextual links and configured public identities. Drawing on Silverstein (1992: 315) we might say it created another “potential order of effective indexicality”. Seen in this light, the Caracas Peace Dialogues indeed began then and there, that 30th of April in Bogotá. As we illustrate some outstanding facets of the context building process, we hope to clarify the pivotal and overriding pragmatic significance the embassy entry had in the ensuing dialogues. But first, a word of explanation about our data, theoretical, and methodological assumptions.

In accomplishing the analytic tasks set forth we draw on several types of evidence: 1) transcripts of taped interviews of Andrés París, alias “Pablo Catatumbo”, who was negotiating in Caracas on behalf of the FARC⁵, and of alias “Diego Ruíz”, a negotiator of the ELP who, in his own words, “wished to offer an alternative ‘non governmental’ view of the talks”. The interviews were carried out by Sandra Angeleri during October and November 1991 as the first round of talks in Caracas unfolded. Each interviewee edited the transcript of his tape. 2) Off stage and off the record views, commentaries and opinions recorded while Sandra Angeleri observed and monitored the event from the (out)side lines. 3) Notes taken during her interview with international mediator Emilio Figueredo Planchart (who declined to be taped) on November 1993. And 4) official declarations and statements emanating from the Caracas Peace Dialogues, press releases and other published sources⁶. Taken together they appear a reasonably adequate base for study, though they fall short of the ideal data type for discourse analysis described by Grimshaw (1992: 88), in the sense that they do not amount to an “optimally complete, unedited, electronically recorded sound-image record” of the actual talks. While the availability of such a record would certainly have improved our understanding of the case and illuminated the ways in

³ In 1991 the one in force dated from 1886.

⁴ Ex-President Belisario Betancur (1982-86) recognized this when he rebuked traditional Colombian politicians who, “like crusaders” prefer “the struggle for ideas rather than the fora to discuss them” (1982: 19).

⁵ During 1990-1991 Andrés París, then member of the M-19, participated as negotiator in the peace process that culminated in the pacification of that guerrilla organization.

⁶ Although for convenience’s sake we mostly cite secondary sources for the texts we analyze, their wording was checked for accuracy against the original “official” documents.

which “our species employs talk and writing to accomplish its manifold goals” (Grimshaw 1992: 88), as it usually happens in international negotiations, the Caracas Peace Dialogues were not recorded electronically, probably for the same reasons that Grimshaw (1992) discusses at length⁷. However, the records we can and do examine here were part of the same overall discourse process, and shaped it just as much as the unrecorded utterances, gestures and stances exchanged behind doors. Also, had “an optimally complete” record existed our task as analysts and interpreters would not have been substantially modified, due to the fact that processing it would have required the unavoidable chores of transcription and editing, and hence of re-presentation and re-contextualization with a specific purpose in mind. Feldman (1991: 284) timely reminded us that “no particular strategy of reading can exhaust a discourse in whole or part,” so we do not mean to disavow our own entextualizations: we have chosen, edited, juxtaposed and reconstructed texts, discourses and exchanges, all the while seeking a manner to render explicit “tacit intertextual references between antagonistic discourses in political practice”.

In the empirical, material sense the discourses we examine were collectively drafted. From the semiotic point of view each objectified (and continue to objectify) multiple voices—i.e., multiple “speakers”, “narrators”, “authors” and “hearers” (both “addressees” and “audiences”) which, as can be expected, established different relationships among themselves and among other discourse dimensions. For example, both mountain commanders’ texts were jointly produced by the top echelons of the Coordinadora’s member organizations, and each declaration indexed distinctly its discourse parameters, simultaneously forging, and being forged by, evolving contexts, intertextual links and personae. Similarly, President Gaviria’s official statements were drafted by his peace commissioners and advisers, and again the texts were tailored according to emerging circumstances and shifting aims, as the context building process developed. The joint declaration announcing a tentative agenda for the peace talks was negotiated at multitudinous (but closed) assemblies in which the mountain commanders (via nightly radio consultations), guerrilla representatives, several branches of government, and a number of popular Colombian organization participated. In the course of our analysis we will come back to some of these interlocking dimensions of textual production.

What we have said so far regarding the representation of our data already discloses some theoretical and methodological assumptions which we will now attempt to render more explicit. We believe it possible to focus productively on the pragmatic uses and effects of the various discourses that converge, overlap and intersect in conflict negotiation, if we take a broad enough view of discourse itself. Thus, drawing on Foucault (1972: 49) and Briggs (1993: 389-90), we conceive discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”, connoting besides a sense of situatedness and agency, “specific strategies, institutional formations, and social relations that create effects of power.” All these come notably to the fore in exchanges that carry profound historical significance, during which participants usually deploy a deliberate language. Under such circumstances, expectations of interpretation largely condition discourse production, which

⁷ He cites five main reasons for the “nearly consensual reluctance” to keep records of talk in negotiating sessions: The “no benefits” argument, endangerment of trust, the possibility of monitoring talk against future use of the record, fear of litigation and judicial review, and fear of leaks (Grimshaw 1992: 101-05).

becomes self-monitored to an unusual degree. And while it is true that even the most banal discourse presupposes some intent and some interpreters in mind, when the stakes are high language is manipulated for strategic purposes in subtle and complex ways, condensing, as it were, societal formations, relations and histories strained between stasis and transformation.

These considerations bring next to the fore the question of establishing relevancy, evidentiality, and consequentiality in discourse analysis (see also Briggs (this volume)), which directly concerns underlying epistemological assumptions. If, as we believe, communication is not successful decoding alone, but rather interpretation and understanding (themselves constructive, interactive, and historical activities), then it follows that text and meaning have no objective reality apart from a situated subject. The discovery of meaning (understanding and explanation) becomes an open, infinite process, as Gadamer has argued (Mackert 1993: 47). This means that the meaning of a text does not necessarily coincide with, or is reducible to, its authors(s)' original intended meaning(s) nor to the meaning(s) assigned by its different original audiences (intended or not). A related but distinct issue is the impossibility of ever fully recovering a particular author's intentions or motives (i.e., "to get into people's heads"). These notions suggest that searching for the "hidden reality" masked or reflected in texts, or framing explanations in terms of how well sender's intentions and pragmatic effects match in utterances, might not be the most illuminating analytic strategy to pursue. Hence, in these pages we direct our gaze towards a chain of linked discourses and concentrate on understanding their interaction and the mechanisms at play, focusing on how existing power relations are reproduced or altered in the process. The overall aim is to provide plausible, adequate descriptions and explanations that avoid arbitrariness and offer insights as to how conflicting subjects, contexts and situations reciprocally construct each other in and through discourse.

2. The exchanges

2.1. *Appropriating a platform, constructing personae . . .*

Two concurrent realities played a key role in devising the context-building strategy, the embassy entry itself, and in reckoning its political impact and pragmatic effects: 1) a Constituent Assembly working out a new national consensus, and 2) the pacification of other guerrilla groups⁸, thereafter incorporated to the Assembly's work. Amidst these happenings the CGSB, though militarily strong with 96 active fronts⁹ throughout Colombia and over 8.000 combatants (Angeleri 1996: 175; Colombia Hoy Informa 1991: 17), found itself at a fringe, risking to remain excluded from the new political order being shaped.

⁸ Alianza Democrática M-19 [Democratic Alliance M-19], Quentin Lame and a wing of the EPL.

⁹ The exact number is uncertain and the issue was painstakingly debated during negotiations. The Gaviria Administration proposed the delimitation of 60 "mitigation areas" (*áreas de distensión*) while the CGSB insisted on 96 (see Angeleri 1996: 173-176). The present estimates range between 120 and 160 active guerrilla fronts.

Thus, negotiating a peace agreement and ensuring political viability through participation in the National Constituent Assembly became one and the same goal for the Coordinadora. However, throughout 1990 President Gaviria had ignored all overtures advanced by the CGSB, which sought new bargaining terms unhappy with the outcomes of previous pacification programs and with the negotiating style of a State which had traditionally prescribed the conditions for talk. Facing a risky and unproductive stalemate, the guerrilla entry operation became an effective way of actualizing discourses, a move which on account of its powerful symbolic efficacy provided a fresh backdrop for dialogue. Seen in this context, the embassy entry can be understood as a metadiscursive performance meant to challenge and recreate power relations (cf. Briggs 1993: 391) linking contenders' texts in unprecedented fashion. The unparalleled action, or more precisely, the set of social meanings it articulated, simultaneously illegitimatized the government's hard stance and freed guerrilla's discourse from the inferential residues, attachments and consequences of previous unsuccessful attempts to dialogue. This last was akin to a process of desemanticization, whereby prior discourse references are neutralized and realigned with new meanings and references (cf. Feldman 1991: 12). Those effects, in turn, strengthened the insurgents' leverage in the moves to break the impasse and "force" peace talks.

Contributing to the success of the guerrilla's metadiscursive exercise was the potent self-representation it articulated, tapping an image "beloved by Latin societies: The macho rebel . . . the weaver of exotic fantasies" (Carrigan 1993: 34). Certainly, reaching and walking around heavily guarded downtown Bogotá and entering an embassy were actions daring enough to reinforce the popular image of the guerrillero as a cunning fighter against a corrupt system, a hero willing to die for noble ideals. Indeed the opening words of the proclamation the militants drafted before leaving the embassy bound for Caracas, addressed and elaborated these representations, positively framing and enhancing their performance¹⁰. We reproduce below the full text of that proclamation (Arango 1992: 17-19)¹¹:

1. That in representation of the shared forces of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, we traveled to the city of Bogotá, after facing huge risks, to aid the initiation of the conversations, having entered normally the premises of the Venezuelan embassy in this capital, where we were received as citizens interested in talking about peace.
2. That at no moment was it a guerrilla seizure, but rather an approach to the premises of a friendly nation, sister of Colombia, where we entered wholly unarmed . . .
3. That given the Colombian government's refusal to talk directly to us within this embassy or any other place in the country, we solicited the good offices of the Episcopal Conference represented by Bishop Vega and Father Nel Beltrán Santamaría, who pleaded for direct talks before the Interior Minister, offering several alternatives none of which was accepted.
4. Facing these difficulties, [we] the official delegates of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar have solicited diplomatic asylum in the Venezuelan republic from where we will insist over a direct dialogue with the Colombian government.

¹⁰ The appropriation of the romantic image was a dependable discourse move other guerrilla organizations had previously and successfully tried (cf. Carrigan 1993).

¹¹ Co-author Villalón has translated all the Spanish texts as close to the original as possible, even at the risk of making the English version sound rather odd. Although reasonably sure of not having unduly distorted the sense, she airs the caveat that the language of the official releases was at times so equivocal and convoluted that translation became specially difficult.

5. We consider that having once more failed our efforts to reinstate conversations, the Colombian government has wasted a great opportunity to attain peace in our country, and understand that the administration of President César Gaviria Trujillo will be solely responsible for the consequences. We are fully convinced that Colombia's final destiny can't be war.
6. We are grateful to the Venezuelan homeland¹² for the generous hospitality offered by its Ambassador Dr. Fernando Gerbasi, who explicitly declared that the diplomatic premises were never seized.

We wish to dedicate this new peace initiative to all Colombians on the eve of the celebration of Workers' International Day [May 1st].

For unity, for life, for Colombia and its people, Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, FARC, UC-ELN, EPL; Daniel Aldana M., Miguel Suárez Piragua, Lucía González A.

Note how in the first two paragraphs of this first declaration the guerrilleros define themselves as lofty risk takers searching for peace and the collective good. Despite being soldiers in arms, they entered the foreign embassy “completely unarmed and after facing huge risks”, effectively backgrounding possible negative associations linked to their condition as agents of war and violence. At the same time, the uneventful ingress exposed the deficiencies of the State's intelligence apparatus, which in turn bolstered its bad public image as a corrupt and inefficient body. In this way the guerrilla entry operation, made known, defined and contextualized in and through discourse, ridiculed oppressive power structures and glorified the rebel figure. These mutually reinforcing pragmatic effects of the entry itself and its contextualization helped legitimate guerrilla's practices and clinched a strategic success for the CGSB. As we will shortly see, the latter was able, without bullets or bombs, to reshape intertextual links, actualizing and reframing its own discourse along with the government's. These particular strategies and effects, part of the overall process of context building and reformulation, also show how metadiscursive practices can be “oriented toward exerting effects of power on other situated discourses” (Briggs 1993: 390). Newly empowered and resonating from the embassy, the rebels' voice eventually (if temporarily), succeeded in modifying social relations and State policies.

2.2. A question of action genre or the battle over context

The peace overture the insurgents advanced from the Venezuelan embassy, possibly with its tacit consent¹³ and that of the Constituent Assembly's and National Legislature's, piqued a surprised Executive Office, which promptly dismissed the offer unwilling “to act under

¹² We skip over the discursive and pragmatic uses and effects participants elaborated when characterizing Venezuela throughout their exchanges. Properly explaining and contextualizing those elaborations would take us too far afield. We may only mention that despite centuries of shared history, a common rich, turbulent, uncontrolled and disputed border make relationships between Colombia and Venezuela quite complex and stormy enough.

¹³ A source close to Ambassador Gerbasi in the Ministry of Foreign Relations stated in private that the embassy entry was pre-arranged with the Venezuelan authorities.

pressure”. President Gaviria’s reluctance, like his predecessors’, also stemmed from the overall implications compliance had for a State wont to rule through imposition and political exclusion. Yet his refusal cornered him in a defensive position which hampered his capacity to dictate the conditions under which conversations were to take place, should they get eventually under way. Moreover, accepting the overture was tantamount to recognizing the rebel organization as a legitimate interlocutor—or worse, as a “belligerent force”, with the international repercussions such a status might entail. Acceptance would also acknowledge publicly the military stalemate and would further expose the political fragility of the Colombian State. Hence it made sense for the Gaviria administration to recontextualize the embassy entry as a hostile act, thereby simultaneously entextualizing the official discourse and stance as morally credible and politically legitimate (i.e., originating in a lawful instance and resisting illicit pressure). It did so in detached and dispassionate words that profited from the performative force interaction between speech style and content can muster in constructing public selves and empowering agents. The full text of the Administration’s release follows (El Tiempo, May 1st, 1991, p. 8A):

Regarding the entry today of three members of guerrilla organizations in the offices of the Republic of Venezuela’ embassy in Bogotá, the National Government allows itself to inform:

1. A group of political leaders comprised by Drs. Alvaro Leyva, Rafael Serrano Prada, Jesús Carvajal and Hernán Motta Motta, asked to be received by the ambassador of Venezuela, Dr. Fernando Gerbassi [*sic*].
2. This morning the group presented itself at the embassy’s offices unexpectedly accompanied by three members of guerrilla organizations who once inside, requested that conversations with members of the National Government be initiated within the diplomatic premises.
3. The Colombian government, in close contact with the Venezuelan embassy, rejected the request, being it an accomplished act that did not comply with the conditions required to initiate a constructive dialogue.
4. The Colombian and Venezuela governments resolved, therefore, to expedite the departure of the occupants to the neighboring country.
5. In earlier opportunities the government of the Republic of Venezuela has offered to host in its territory prospective conversations between representatives of guerrilla organizations and Colombian Government’s personnel, as long as these result from previously shared and coordinated efforts, and not from forced deeds.
6. The Government reaffirms once more, as it has been doing for several months, its willingness to initiate abroad direct conversations with the guerrillas that have not yet embraced the peace process, seeking the definitive end of the armed struggle, and looks favorably upon the possibility that those dialogues take place in Venezuela.

As suggested previously, this carefully structured text repositioned at least two major situational parameters. Firstly, it portrayed the government as an agent respectful of citizens’ rights and established procedures, patiently enduring the insurgents’ mischief. Note, for example, that the Executive doesn’t just “inform” Colombians at large, but “allows itself to”, in a revealing understatement that ratifies a claim to legitimate power asserting a duty to establish the truth. Besides, the Administration doesn’t reject unilaterally the rebels’ request, but does so jointly (“in close contact”) with the Venezuelan embassy, thus spreading over an ambiguous third entity the adverse connotations of its refusal. In addition, this last decision is further masked, even refuted, in the final paragraph, reminding the public that “for several months” the government has “reaffirmed” its willingness to talk

abroad, being still so inclined (in spite of the rebels' uncivil behavior). Secondly, the official release gradually built up, from start to finish, an increasingly negative characterization of the embassy event: an "entry" in the introductory remarks became an uncomplaisant *fait accompli* in paragraph three, an "occupation" in the fourth, and a "forced deed" in the fifth. Noteworthy here is the crucial role manipulation of syntactic form may play in deflecting agency, shifting the most hostile recontextualization over to a foreign agent by simply embedding the prepositional phrase "from forced deeds" in a clause subordinate to the main sentence having "Venezuelan government" as subject. Overall discourse structure may also be contributing to the task when, in the brief span of a few short paragraphs the text constructs the Executive as an omniscient narrator of events (1,2), as witness (5, on account of the deictic phrase "in earlier opportunities" alongside a third person subject), as protagonist (3,4), and as speaker (opening sentence, 6), addressing first Colombians and the world at large, and then the guerrillas and Venezuelan authorities in the final two paragraphs. To say the least, these alternating commutations of textual subject and narrative point of view, successively personalizing and depersonalizing discourse, effacing or materializing the subject, tend to bewilder the audience and to hinder the recognition of agency. Thus, with the above riposte, condemning the embassy entry yet simultaneously "looking favorably upon the possibility that dialogues take place in Venezuela", the Gaviria Administration became a *de facto* interlocutor, engaging in a textual exchange which became one public discourse axis of a momentous attempt to redistribute political power. It was one more step ahead in the process of building a formal negotiating frame suitable to participants.

In turn, the Coordinadora challenged Gaviria's discourse strategy with one of its own—contradictory and effective. What the government wished to define as a forced occupation or "seizure" (Colombia Hoy Informa 1991: 27), became widely and variously characterized as an "irruption" by an "insurgent commando" (Arango 1992: 15-17), a "peaceful entry", an "approach", a "simply making available for dialogue", or a "transfer" [of spokespersons]. The first two labels, encoding one mode of recontextualization, appeared in the introductory remarks to the embassy manifesto presented earlier, reproduced from a guerrilla publication (Arango 1992: 17). The following two appeared in the manifesto itself, and the last two in a follow-up communiqué issued by the mountain commanders the day after the entry, once the guerrilleros had safely flown to Caracas. The full text of that second guerrilla declaration follows (from Arango 1992: 19-20):

1. The government's refusal to talk with the CGSB's commissioners present at the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá reveals once more that its permanent reiteration of an open door policy is mere rhetoric. Peace needs fewer speeches and more decisiveness.
2. It can not be seriously believed that an act performed without any use of force was a pressure tactic, when simply a commission was made available for dialogue overcoming the difficulties pointed out by the administration itself in a previous occasion.
3. Our spokespersons that were transferred to Bogotá had this city as goal in order to celebrate a first meeting. Once removed from the capital they cease in their functions as negotiators, and the Coordinadora's chief staff takes over the pending tasks.
4. [The fact] that the government has rejected this new proposal does not affect our decision to liberate more than 60 policemen, soldiers and marines that we hold as prisoners of war, in a sovereign act ratifying our will to conciliate.
5. We wish to thank the sister republic of Venezuela and its ambassador, Fernando Gerbasi, for its great effort and kind hospitality, the Constituent Assembly member Alvaro Leyva Durán and the members of the Peace Commission of the House of Representatives, Dr.

Rafael Serrano and Dr. Jesús Carvajal, the Unión Patriótica and its president, Hernán Motta Motta, the delegates of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, Bishop Guillermo Vega, Father Nel Beltrán, and all those individuals and organizations that helped out, wishing to open up a new opportunity for peace. To all of them and to the country we say that we will continue our efforts to attain a constructive dialogue facing the country, with full guarantees for all involved, that will take us toward negotiation and peace.

Signed: CGSB, Colombian Mountains,
May 1st, 1991.

Dwelling a bit on the competing contextualizations we note, firstly, that although the words “irruption” and “insurgent commando” imply violence, they fall short of connoting a military seizure, as government sources sought to characterize the entry. Those labels not only dismissed the official definition but aimed, rather, at underscoring guerrilla’s power and defiance, building up its self-image and staking a rightful claim to be heard. This particular contextualization might seem to clash with that elaborated by the entrants themselves, but the conflict is merely superficial. While it is true that both guerrilla manifestos ratified the absence of force and avoided the harsher terms (stressing instead the peacefulness and quietness of a conciliatory “approach” or “transfer”), they nonetheless emphasized the dramatic aura of the embassy feat, again appealing to, and enhancing, the positive symbolic attributes associated with rebel figures in Latin American societies. Having commented on how the first declaration accomplished this, we need only add that the “difficulties” alluded to in the second paragraph of the mountain commanders’ text include, among others, security problems, and thus hinted at the personal sacrifice and risks involved in guerrilla life and actions. And, Isn’t that what the spatial reference closing the declaration was meant to foreground, leaving the reader in the “Colombian mountains” right by the war front? Taken together, these overt and covert discursive modes of identity construction support Grimshaw’s claim (1990: 284) “that *all* conflict talk involves *some* negotiation of identities and of the appropriate nature of interpersonal (i.e., structural, organizational) arrangements” (his emphasis). Related to this stands the fact that although both manifestos disavowed a military occupation and characterized blandly the guerrilleros and their performance¹⁴ (“official *delegates* or *commissioners* of the CGSB”; “[Church supported] *citizens* interested in talking about peace”; who “*normally entered* the Venezuelan embassy . . .” in an “*approach* to the branch office of a friendly nation . . .”; a “*commission simply made available for dialogue*”; “our *spokespersons* . . . transferred to Bogotá”), the CGSB never disclaimed the alternative, vaunting contextualizations favorable sources publicized, thereby tacitly appropriating them. In this way the CGSB forged two parallel and seemingly contrasting contextualizations of its feat, introducing a convenient dose of contextual ambiguity and discourse flexibility. As seen, this

¹⁴ Compare the strikingly similar M-19’s 1985 text, released a week after militants seized (and the army destroyed) Bogotá’s Palace of Justice, killing over one hundred people, including eleven Supreme Court Justices and all guerrilleros involved: “We sought the opportunity before this honorable Court to explain our reasons and to hold a public trial of the violation of the truce accords and the social reforms; to put this regime on trial for the violation of the National Constitution, for the surrender of economic and legal sovereignty, and for betraying the hope of the nation... We presented ourselves to the Supreme Court invoking our rights as citizens, because as an army of the people we embrace the defense of the Constitution and fight for its existence... We seized the Palace of Justice for truth and democracy... not to attack the Supreme Court or its representatives... (Carrigan 1993: 36).

construction of ambiguity involved amplifying shared meanings and multiplying possible ones (cf. Briggs 1993: 390) with a strategic goal in mind. That is, in juxtaposing two discourse strategies the guerrillas multiplied lexical referentialities and interpretative frames, catering to different audiences and sets of sympathizers, aligning hearers and speakers, in order to increase public support and widen their space for maneuvering in the negotiating event they were crafting up.

Yet, we should bear in mind that despite the apparent contrast among the Administration's and rebels' metadiscursive practices objectified in the competing recontextualizations of the embassy ingress, these reveal a coincidence in some strategic goals, for each interlocutor attempted to minimize and camouflage individual craftings of effects of power, demoting morally and politically the other in order to enhance his own public image and negotiating leverage. While the Gaviria administration portrayed the insurgents as perpetrators of wanton force against a civil foreign target, the rebels' discourse dwelled on the government's unwarranted refusal to acknowledge their peace efforts. Taken together, these practices and multiple recontextualizations illustrate how discourse indexes political strategy, the nuances and complexities of one order of praxis mirroring the nuances and complexities of the other. They also illustrate the exercise of power in and through the ability to constrain textual content, i.e., the favoring and/or exclusion of certain interpretations and wordings of events as tactics meant to disguise the power being exercised—"the power to disguise power", in Fairclough (1989: 52) apt phrase. We elaborate on these points in the following paragraphs.

2.3. Staging authority and credibility

Other formal features of the CGSB's texts helped structure related discourse strategies participating in the context building process initiated with the embassy ingress. One such strategy had to do with the modes of encoding and recoding violence, power and authority; another with deployment of cultural conceptions of language. We will take one at a time. Recall that after President Gaviria refused to negotiate a peace initiative with the CGSB's embassy "delegates", these declared "that having once more failed our efforts to reinstate talks, the Colombian government has forsaken a great peace opportunity for our country, and understand that the administration of President César Gaviria Trujillo will be solely responsible for the consequences. We are fully convinced that Colombia's final destiny can't be war". In these words we see again how syntactic patterning encoded specific pragmatic effects. Employing a pseudo imperative future ("will be solely responsible") followed by a negative verb ([Colombia's final destiny] "can't be war"), the guerrilleros first threatened unforeseen consequences and immediately spelled these out announcing outright war, in words ostensibly designed to avoid it. Words that simultaneously craft and mask the power game, objectifying a virtual "war scenario" while preaching peaceful aims. But they did more. Through a similar discourse maneuver the statement also attempted to recast the violent juncture, topicalizing the Gaviria administration as the major obstacle to the construction of a peaceful society, thereby deflecting focus from the rebels' use of violence to achieve that very same goal. According to Buttny (1993: 1, quoted in Auburn et al 1995: 374), procedures such as these—attributing single agency and posing the perpetrator as victim—comprise discourse moves that fulfill a transformative function

“designed to recast the pejorative significance of action, or one’s responsibility for it, and thereby transform others’ negative evaluations”—in our case, those of potential allies, such as the legislative branch, the Church, opposing political parties, and other powerful and influential sectors of Colombian society that might bring support.

Turning next to the third paragraph of the mountain commanders’ communiqué, we find there significant recodings of authority in and through discourse. For example, the halfway unexplained removal of the embassy threesome (already in Caracas) as negotiators, and the announcement that CGSB’s top echelon was thereafter assuming control of the ensuing events, conveyed the presence of a strong military hierarchization and internal discipline within the Coordinadora—one worthy of any national army. These were words meant to empower the emitters and promote impressions of equal might between the contenders; as such, they signaled a veiled threat to a procrastinating Gaviria administration. The thematization of hierarchy, discipline and military strength, as well as the pragmatic goals it was designed to achieve, appeared again shortly after, as the exiled rebels publicly sought to repair what turned out to be a miscalculated discourse move by the mountain commanders (El Tiempo, May 3rd, 1991, p. 8A):

Meanwhile, the CGSB’s commissioners offered yesterday a press conference at the Investigation and Prevention Division of the Caracas Police (DISIP)¹⁵ where, according to them, they are ‘lodged’.

There they not only confirmed that had been deprived of authority by their chiefs, but indicated that as persons in exile they can not carry out any negotiations. ‘A political refugee can not be a negotiator on behalf of a movement up in arms,’ they said. By the same token, they gave journalists copy of a four point proposal drafted by the CGSB which includes: society’s demilitarization, a new socioeconomic order, national democratization and sovereignty.

At the same time they demanded full guarantees that will allow the initiation of conversations.

This repair job was needed, we may surmise, because the mountain commanders had insufficiently contextualized (whether unintendedly or not we can’t say) the replacement of the negotiation team, the announcement coming across unduly strong and perplexing. The framing cue “once removed from the capital (they cease in their functions as negotiators . . .)” proved inadequate to encompass the set of circumstances explained above¹⁶. The Gaviria administration, apparently surprised by the removal of the negotiators, seized the opportunity to articulate its own strength and recontextualized the statement to its own advantage as a dilatory and obstructionist tactic. It responded in the following terms (El Tiempo, May 3rd, 1991, p. 8A):

¹⁵ More correctly, “Intelligence and Police Services Division” (*División de Inteligencia y Servicio Policial*), the political arm of the police corps, with a rather poor institutional record and worse public image in Venezuela. As foreign political refugees the guerrilleros should not have been “lodged” at the DISIP headquarters. The fact they they were was a diplomatic face-saving concession of Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez to his Colombian peer—in the context of the situation, and eloquent pragmatic move on Pérez’ part.

¹⁶ The change might have been contemplated to make way for higher placed commanders once dialogues began.

In a communication released this past 30th of April, the National Government expressed its disposition to initiate dialogues in Caracas with the representatives of the guerrilla organizations once the required consultations had been made with the neighboring country. The government was reckoning that initiating conversations there would not find any obstacles given that the guerrillas' commissioners were already in Caracas.

Notwithstanding, the commanders of the guerrilla organizations, in a communication released this morning (yesterday), deprived its own commissioners of authority to dialogue with representatives of the National Government. This attitude defers once more the opportunity to initiate direct conversations, and appears to insist on carrying out dialogues within Colombian territory.

In that respect, the Government wishes to remind [*sic*] that through the Episcopal Conference, it indicated in time several places in the area of La Uribe¹⁷, among them, Diviso, la Julia, Muriba, Guayabo Negro, Puerto Chiguiro, Mesa de Fernández, and offered as well to guarantee the security and the presence of guerrilla delegates in the said places. All these sites were in time turned down by the guerrilla organizations.

Despite the communication released today (yesterday) by the guerrilla organizations, the Government reiterates its decision and willingness to dialogue in places such as those mentioned in the preceding paragraph, or abroad, because it understands it is time the guerrilla organizations provide the country clear proof that their willingness to initiate effective peace dialogues is sincere. Bogotá, May 2nd, 1991.

Consonant with the self-portrayal the Executive was discursively elaborating through the exchange, the text adopted a cool, self-righteous, patronizing tone that distanced the Gaviria administration from the militant style of the rebel proclamation. To achieve these effects the official wording employed veiled agency and referential ambiguity, as the terms “national government” (or simply) “government” exemplify. In particular, the phrase “in that respect, the Government wishes to remind that . . .” [*a este respecto, el Gobierno desea recordar que . . .*] is so contrived that it betrayed a deliberate effort to mask authority avoiding direct, clear reference. As it stands the expression can mean either that the government itself wishes to remember, or that it wishes to remind others, thereby leaving undetermined the utterance's meaning as well as the identity of those others. Omitting a dative marker not only verged on obfuscation, but so underscored a desire to avoid a patronizing language that it evoked the very authority it wished to mask.¹⁸ Contributing to this last effect was the use of agentless passives, which can leave the locus of authority undefined (cf. Thiesmeyer 1995: 328), as in the phrases “in a communication released . . .”, “once . . . consultations had been made . . .” Note, also, how the government, searching for legitimacy, appealed to a second, morally credible agent—the Episcopal Conference—at a crucial point in its discourse, where it recognized having negotiated with the guerrilla possible dialogue sites. Publicly sharing responsibility with the Catholic Church brought legitimacy to Gaviria's policies vis-à-vis the army and other conservative sectors of Colombian society, which condemned his political aperture.

¹⁷ The mountaneous area where the FARC had its headquarters destroyed by the Colombian army the very same day the members of the National Constituent Assembly were being elected.

¹⁸ A more natural, unmarked usage would have been “the government wishes to remind (all, the people, the public, etc.)” [*el gobierno desea recordarle (a todos, all país, al público, etc.)*], or even *el gobierno desea recordarles* (“them” or “you readers”). This plural ending, however, would probably have been eschewed anyway because it connotes excessive condescendence.

Finally, amidst so much referential ambiguity, the explicit attribution of guilt found in the second paragraph of the presidential release, rebuking the commanders for their behavior, stood out markedly, and recalled the similar but opposite imputation the guerrilleros made as they left the Venezuelan embassy.

At this point enough has been said to underscore the interdependency between participants' discourses and remark the modes whereby textual form, function and meaning contribute to shaping that interdependency. To the extent that all discourse production is situated it is also unavoidably intertextual, so that we may say that intertextuality is an immanent property of discourse as we understand it here. However, in formal, focused exchanges like those we have been describing, intertextuality may assume a heightened performativity as discourse production and reception nucleates around specific texts and performances. In our case at least, creating, manipulating or suppressing intertextual relationships became salient practices in negotiating context and identities in a conflict situation.

The contrast between the authoritarian tone of the mountain commanders' statement and the style of the first one issued from the Venezuelan embassy provide another instance. The disparity is rather significant and revealed additional tailorings of rhetorical strategies. If the situatedness of discourse and its inherent indexicality are taken into account, it becomes clear that the formal features of each guerrilla manifesto construed different intended meanings and pragmatic effects within a rapidly evolving situational context. The first one aimed down, towards the disenfranchised, and deployed a marked emotional component designed to encourage mutual identification— "all Colombians, the people, the workers . . .for unity, for life, for Colombia and its people . . ." The second manifesto aimed up, towards the established powerholders, and like the government's, lacked a phatic component. Despite their differences, however, both statements complemented each other, expanding intertextual links and pursuing the built-up of strategic ambiguity. Once the crafting of hidden effects of power are understood, discourse aimed horizontally and vertically exercised authority become complementary strategies in masking, bidding for, and exercising power between balanced opponents.

Paragraph four of the mountain commanders' communiqué developed further these discourse practices, elaborating a second strategy of empowerment in a text that avowed the exercise of state sovereignty through the decision to release some POWs. That is, appropriating major powers such as holding and releasing prisoners of war, censuring government, and threatening to continue the armed conflict, constituted discursive modes of impersonating the State and challenging its hegemony. In so doing, the commander's manifesto recasted the Colombian state as a heteronomous entity, aggravating the threats other violent agents such as drug cartels, paramilitary bands and criminal gangs posed to its integrity. With these implications and entailments now very much part of the contextual parameters, the insurgents strengthened their negotiating position and built-up their symbolic capital. At this juncture they had already achieved the goal of initiating negotiations, overtly by way of exchanging communiqués and press releases, and covertly by way of all the diplomatic, security and governmental activity the embassy performance engendered. Peace negotiations had indeed begun.

2.4. When talk is not talk . . .

Guerrilla expressions that opposed “speech” and “action”, or “effective” talk vs. “mere rhetoric”, as in the mountain commander’s opening paragraph, or the Administration’s pronouncement above, revealed conceptions of language that further elaborated and actualized the recontextualization processes. Those dichotomies are variants of the common folk dualism between talk and action (van Dijk 1995: 307). In one sense talk is construed as a replacement for action, and connotes negatively. In the other, it exemplifies a positive way of easing conflict. While these notions can be treated either as manifestations of particular linguistic ideologies (see Woolard and Schieffelin 1994), attempts to define negotiating “positions” and “interests”, or the desired nature of (possible) agreements (“contracts” or “guidelines”) (see Grimshaw 1992), they are also, at bottom, additional components of contenders’ metadiscursive strategies deployed as tactical resources in constructing, appropriating and naturalizing symbolic power (Briggs 1992: 389). Woven into the fabric of discourse, portrayals of competing discourses and assumptions as to when and how talk is performative or non-performative, challenge established power hierarchies and identity claims in conflict negotiation. For example, the insurgents depicted themselves as generators of positive social action, engaged in daring practices in order to make dialogue possible. The Government proceeded similarly: it “reiterates its decision and willingness to dialogue”, “guarantees the security and presence of guerrilla delegates” at the negotiation site, and accused the insurgents of insincerity. In their turn, the latter responded in like terms, demanding security guarantees, *de facto* dismissing the Administration’s offer as if it had never been uttered. Thus, posing as altruistic carvers of democratic spaces to build a peaceful society, each side also advanced its respective agenda, demoting the opponent’s moral character and legitimacy claims. Note the underlying ambiguity in the handling of language notions: whereas each party claimed to behave so as to make dialogue possible (stressing the fact the other is not “really” talking, i.e., disregarding rival’s efforts or legitimate claims), it simultaneously subverted opponent’s discourse practice defining it as ineffectual or deceitful, “just” talk.¹⁹ In this fashion beliefs opposing talk and action (i.e., the notion that discourse is inherently deceptive, concealing a hidden agenda), index distinctive linguistic behavior and choices, despite the fact, as shown, that like other cultural conceptions they are interest-laden, contradictory and multi-layered (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 58; Briggs 1992: 398).

The CGSB’s discursive performance met with ultimate success partially because it skillfully identified the strategic referents at play and managed them adroitly enough. As the pragmatic effects of its context building strategy accumulated, guerrilla discourse mobilized other social actors whose short term goals coincided with theirs albeit for different reasons. In addition to the pressure stemming from the Venezuelan embassy, transnational corporations (specially oil companies which bemoaned the Colombian army’s ineffectiveness in safeguarding life and property) (Venezuela 1991), the business community, a sessioning National Constituent Assembly, political parties and a coterie of politicians, all prevailed upon President Gaviria to recognize the Coordinadora’s initiative. With mounting pressure, risking losing control of the situation or of missing the possibility

¹⁹ Indeed, these linguistic acrobatics were so salient in the context of the situation that a major newspaper headlined: “Dialogue will take place but not negotiation” (*El Tiempo*, May 14th, 1991, p. 6A).

of centralizing dialogue efforts in the face of emerging regional peace talks, the Government changed its policy and consented to talk with the insurgents without obliging a cease-fire—the sensitive issue that had for a decade thwarted agreement on a talking platform. The *de facto* negotiations begun at the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá now entered a new phase in which defining spaces for talk and warring, as well as dialogue content, became the focus of metadiscursive practices.

2.5. “Grounding” Dialogue

For the first time in history the Colombian state, embodied in the administration of President Gaviria, settled for unconditioned talks with insurgent groups (Angeleri 1996: 118). Representatives of the Coordinadora and of the Executive office agreed to meet in order to discuss the negotiation framework. Selecting the site of this “preparatory” meeting, however, gave rise to intense negotiations after the guerrilla, objectifying its power and accumulated leverage, proposed two sites that were virtually impossible for Gaviria to accept: The FARC headquarters in La Uribe, then in the hands of the Colombian army, and the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá. Political costs aside, these were condensed sites of social fracture, spatial icons of social transgression and violence that the Presidency could not afford to legitimize convening there with the rebels. The contextual antecedents and the heavily charged atmosphere magnified the symbolic significance of spatializing preliminary conversations, considering that symbolization is a process that transcends the expressive realm to become an affective and determining material performance reflexively transforming person and social relations (Feldman 1991: 165). The significance of choosing the site was also directly linked to the propagandistic value and potential to magnify power effects different sites had for the contending parties, so that (literally) “grounding” discourse became an additional attempt to wield power. Reckoning these, as well as security and logistic considerations (including facilities for the journalists), the government and the CGSB eventually agreed to meet in the small Colombian frontier town of Cravo Norte.²⁰ On May 6th, 1991, the mountain commanders formally announced their acceptance in the following terms (Arango 1992: 26-28):

1. The Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar agrees to meet immediately with government delegates in the municipality of Cravo Norte, Arauca District.
2. It is conveying pertinent counsel to its three (3) commissioners in the city of Caracas, so that charged with negotiating functions, establish contact with ambasadress Nohemí Sanín de Rubio, and with the Venezuelan government in order to carry out the necessary tasks and represent the Coordinadora Guerrillera at this important meeting.
3. We acknowledge the government’s willingness to ‘immediately transport to any of these sites [?] the guerrilla delegates with the required security measures, to guarantee security at the chosen meeting place, and transport the guerrilla delegates, once the meeting ends, to an agreed site with the required security measures’, taking note that, with the previous consent of the Venezuelan government, our three (3) commissioners ought to be taken back

²⁰ One is tempted to interpret the chosen meeting grounds, a municipality bordering with Venezuela (and thus in a sense neither entirely Colombian nor Venezuelan), as a spatial metaphor of the encounter itself. A region that being at the geopolitical limits of countries with reciprocal chronic border, military and immigration problems, is itself an icon of the opposite forces about to intersect on its grounds.

- to the city of Caracas.
4. It has been the purpose of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar to carry out dialogues facing the country; it would be pertinent that a National Constituent Assembly commission presented itself, as well as representatives of the different mass media.
 5. It is important that a high frequency radio transmitter be made available at the meeting, so as to allow consultations and thus ensure the best results.
 6. We initiate this new phase of conversations with great optimism, convinced of being able among all, to find the best and shortest solution paths to the great crisis affecting the country.

Several discourse devices forged specific pragmatic effects in the preceding text. Lexical choices, verb inflection and framing infused it with an imperious, unemotional tone that conveyed, anew, a sense of tight authority and hierarchy, as for example, in the verbal phrases: “agrees to meet immediately”, “it is conveying pertinent counsel”, “ought to be taken back”, “it would be pertinent that . . . presented itself . . .”. Similarly, the framing given to the request for a radio transmitter, i.e., “to allow consultations”, signaled that the Coordinadora’s representatives had limited autonomy and decision-making power. Akin to other examples we have already seen, however, the ambiguity created by the absence of the expected prepositional phrase following “consultations” (with whom after all?) softened the rhetorical impact by masking agency. Once more, speech “horizontalized” the exercise of vertical rule within an organization catering to the disenfranchised masses. Moving on to other sections of the declaration, note how the lexical choices in last sentence (“optimism”, “togetherness”) introduced a dash of empathy, just the minimum needed to widen audience appeal but preserve the overall low affective gradient of the text. Salient in the construction of that appeal (and in promoting self-effacement) was, again, the use of referential ambiguity, for beyond the rebels themselves, Who are those “all” called upon to save the country? If these texts we have been analyzing are at all indicative, the strategic construction and management of ambiguity emerges as another prime discourse device in critical conflict talk, being specially suited to accomplishing at least two pragmatic goals: 1) concealing agency, and 2) simultaneously evoking and effacing effects of power. Not unrelated to the latter result the discourse structure and function of paragraph four. There we can perceive how a penchant for probity (i.e., willingness to talk “facing the country”) tempered a commanding voice and disguised the request for media exposure and participation at the National Constituent Assembly—a cherished goal of the Coordinadora. Lastly, recognizing that at Cravo Norte began “a new phase of conversations” we believe guerrilla’s and analysts’ interpretations approach each other, pointing to the embassy episode as the onset of the Caracas Peace Dialogues. As we have endeavored to show, that peaceful entrée inaugurated a metadiscursive performance that recreated intertextual links between opponents’ discourses, just as it succeed in redefining group identities and modifying State policies.

2.6. *Cravo Norte: Face-to-face at last*

Finally, on May 15th, 1991, two weeks after the embassy entry, the parties faced each other at Cravo Norte. A meeting expected to last a few hours turned into a grueling three day event that nonetheless reached consensus over the institutionalization of peace conversations. As befitted the occasion, the participants issued their first joint declaration

officializing their political and performative agreement. The terms of that deal follow (Arango 1992: 28-30):

The representatives of the national government, and of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, gathered at Cravo Norte, Arauca, in the school José Antonio Galán, after three days of negotiations, in the presence of the commissions appointed by the National Constituent Assembly and the House of Representatives and other observers,

Agree:

First.- To hold direct conversations, initially in Caracas, with representatives at the highest decision-making levels, heading towards finding a negotiated solution to the armed political struggle, beginning June 1st of this year. It is understood that after the Caracas talks, and once the circumstances and conditions allow the transfer of the negotiations, these will continue in a Colombian city that will be chosen by the parties as part of the agenda the high commissioners establish or concur upon.

Second.- The Colombian government will pursue the pertinent tasks before the government of the sister republic of Venezuela, in order to ask it be authorized that the city of Caracas be the stage of the dialogue.

Third.- Should the authorization to carry on conversations in Caracas be obtained from the Venezuelan government, the Colombian government binds itself to guaranteeing all matters concerning the security and transfer of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar's commissioners to the site chosen to carry on conversations.

Fourth.- The Colombian government ratifies its commitment to return to the country in the same conditions as their departure, the members of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, the results of the conversations having no effect over the said commitment.

Fifth.- The parties agree that beginning the forthcoming Monday 20th of May, and in order to expedite the required arrangements to carry out the meeting abroad, they will open a direct channel of communication between themselves.

Sixth.- The representatives of the national government and of Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, express their gratitude for the valuable collaboration tendered by the government of the sister republic of Venezuela at this stage of the process. Similarly we thank the Araucanian people, the district authorities and the municipal authorities of Cravo Norte, for the many demonstrations of support that enabled conversations to be carried on under the best conditions.

On behalf of the national government:

Andrés González Díaz,
Interior Viceminister;
Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo
Peace Council;

On behalf of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar:

Lucía González,
Daniel Aldana Mutis,
Miguel Suárez Piragua.

As far as formal discourse features, pragmatic goals, and rhetorical devices went, this text reiterated those already seen. For instance, it relied heavily on passive forms and indirect impersonal reference: "it is understood. . .", "it be authorized. . .", "should the authorization . . . be obtained . . .". Likewise, it echoed a real guerrilla concern over security measures, which although understandable, also evoked danger and heroism, thereby contributing to the image building and self-situating processes woven throughout the exchanges considered. As we will immediately see, the forging and management of public identities continued with care and forethought on the institutionalized talking stage Caracas provided.

2.7. The Caracas Peace Dialogues: Limits and possibilities of ritualized discourse

Following closely the agreements reached at Cravo Norte, the Caracas Peace Dialogues formally began June 3rd, 1991, at the campus of the Universidad “Simón Bolívar”.²¹ Representing the Colombian government at the opening ceremony were Humberto La Calle, Interior Minister, Andrés González, Interior Viceminister, and Jesús Antonio Bejarano, peace adviser. On behalf of the CGSB attended top ranking chiefs, including FARC’s members Alfonso Cano, Iván Márquez, Pablo Catatumbo, Andrés París, Guillermo Zuluaga, Miguel Suárez and Daniel Aldana; EPL’s members Diego Ruiz and Asdrúbal Jiménez; and UC-ELN’s members Francisco Galán and Lucía González. To the press’ relish and everyone’s surprise, some of them arrived in Caracas accompanied by their wives and attended the opening ceremony dressed in coat and tie—recasting themselves as ordinary “citizens interested in talking about peace”, knowing quite well their presence was far from “ordinary”. Whereas the Colombian ministers were in Caracas fulfilling their everyday duties representing government, the top underground commanders, exposing themselves to the public limelight (and not precisely as subversives), were indeed conducting a historical performance. Shedding their military identities and impersonating statesmanship, they dramatized before a world audience their communion with ideals of social tolerance, democracy and “civil(ized)” life. In sum, as if they had read Poirier’s (1971: 86) words—“it’s performance that matters—pacing, economies, juxtapositions, aggregations of tone, the whole conduct of the shaping presence”, the Coordinadora’s commanders authenticated on the Caracas stage one facet of the polyvalent identity they were forging in and through discourse since the embassy entrée.

After three days of negotiating the issues to be discussed in Caracas, the parties jointly announced a tentative agenda. The wording of that release alone—so ill-contrived—betrayed the difficulties experienced in drafting it, partially stemming from the reduced decision making power conferred upon the guerrilla representatives, obliged to carry on nightly radio consultations with the mountain commanders. The whole set up, text included, did not augur a bright future, as it unfortunately turned out to be the case. We reproduce below the second half of the text, enough to expose how lexical choices and grammatical design combined to create referential and propositional ambiguity, conceal agency, and disguise commitment—each and all of them discourse strategies indexing the substantive divide separating the interlocutors. Salient in that respect were the profusion of passive, impersonal verb forms (ten alone in paragraph IV below) and the iteration of chained nominals (“conception of the peace process”, “continuation of deliberations”, “approaches to their handling”, “precisions about their content and scope . . .”). Calling attention to the role linguistic details play in shaping discourse strategy, however, underscores just one aspect of overall metadiscursive practice, for the tighter intertextual links become the higher the saliency of contextual dimensions in discourse production and reception. As our examples increasingly show, “the roots of intertextual practices run just as deeply into social, cultural, ideological, and political-economic facets of social life as they do into the minutiae of linguistic structure and use” (Briggs and Bauman 1992:160).

²¹ Unfortunately, space limitations do not allow us to dwell on this coincidence (?) in spatial, institutional and participant denomination. Beyond that, a study of the multifarious appropriations of the name of the foremost South American independence hero could easily fill several volumes.

The negotiating agenda announced in Caracas on June 6th, 1991 (Gobierno Nacional de Colombia y Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar 1991) read partially as follows:

...
IV. After presenting, the government as well as the guerrilla, its conception of the peace process and the fundamental elements that comprise it, it has been agreed to announce a set of themes that configure a preliminary agenda allowing the continuation of deliberations in Caracas, as well as placing the peace process within a general perspective to be developed in the future. It is understood that in regard to the themes announced below approaches to their handling and precisions about their content and scope ought to be defined in the conversations to be undertaken in the coming days.

V. The themes agreed to be discussed, some of which imply bilateral commitments, listed for examination according to priority, are the following:

1. Study the possibility of reaching between the government and the Coordinadora a formula for a cease-fire and ending hostilities.
2. Relationships among this process, the National Constituent Assembly, the public corporations, the political organizations and the social sectors.
3. Measures against “paramilitary” and private justice groups. Effective steps against [their?] impunity. Notions regarding the so-called national security doctrine.
4. Human rights. Ethnic minorities rights.
5. The State, democracy and political propitiousness.²²
6. Elements that will contribute to develop national sovereignty, such as management of natural resources and international treaties’ features related to this process, and to foreign economic policy.
7. Elements towards democratization of social and economic policy.
8. Outline of a process that will allow evolving toward a phase in which agreements and practical steps be materialized in order to concretize the definite vanquish of Colombia’s armed conflict and guarantee the exercise of political activity without the use of weapons, within the framework of the country’s civil and democratic life, once the necessary prerequisites for this purpose are satisfied.
9. Inspectorship of the peace process.
10. Methodology, procedures and regulation of negotiations and agreements.

VI. The government and the Coordinadora call upon the mass media and public opinion advisers so that with their usual pondering judge the contents of this declaration, as well as the themes that have been included, with the sole purpose of discussing afterwards their scope, approach and possibilities.

On behalf of the National Government

Jesús Antonio Bejarano A.
Presidential Adviser

Andrés González D.
Interior Viceminister

Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo C.
Advisership’s Counselor

On behalf of the Coordinadora Guerrillera

Simón Bolívar
Alfonso Cano (Farc)

Iván Márquez (Farc)

Pablo Catatumbo (Farc)

²² That is, exploring favorable conditions for participation in the National Constituent Assembly and political life following demobilization.

Humberto Vergara P. Advisership's Counselor	Humberto Zuluoga (Farc) ²³
Tomás Concha S. Advisership's Counselor	Daniel Aldana (Farc)
Reynaldo Gary P. Commission's Adviser	Miguel Suárez (Farc)
	Andrés París (Farc)
	Francisco Galán (Eln)
	Lucía González (Eln)
	Diego Ruiz (Epl)
	Asdrúbal Jiménez (Epl).

Around this preliminary agenda conversations unfolded with difficulty over a span of five months. During this period the parties concluded two rounds of negotiations 69 days apart, with two phases each, before recessing November 10th, 1991. However, to the extent that reaching consensus over substantive issues appeared unrealizable, considerations over incorporating an impartial observer along with the rules and procedures for discourse—the last two and seemingly least important points in the agenda—became the focus of the dialogues themselves. This joint strategic step avoided a premature break by transforming the nature of the talks, making them increasingly performative and ritualized. In the absence of any other type of agreement, negotiating how to negotiate became a consensual and effective metadiscursive strategy—a move which preserved the performative effects of the dialogues and potentialized the prospects of negotiating substantive issues in the future. Indeed, the Coordinadora and the Gaviria administration eventually agreed on two cease-fire formulas, neither of which was implemented due to the escalation of war back home. These results exposed the fact that the Caracas Peace Dialogues did not, and could not, encompass the complex range of discourses Colombian citizen were articulating in the process of enacting contemporary society. Doubts as to the representativeness of each interlocutor eventually outweighed the gains increased discourse performativity brought. Guerrilla delegates at the negotiating table were labeled “softies” by the “tough” militants fighting back home, while the military and other conservative sectors of society increasingly pressured President Gaviria to demand demobilization. Drawing on Feldman (1991: 5) we might say that the ultimate failure of the talks point to “the growing autonomy of violence as a self-legitimizing sphere of social discourse and transaction” as well as “to the inability of any sphere of social practice to totalize society. Violence itself both reflects and accelerates the experience of society as an incomplete project, as something to be made.” True enough.

3. Postscript

Conversations could not reopen as scheduled on February 10th, 1992, due to a failed coup d'état in Venezuela the fourth of that month. Ultimately they reconvened March 10th in Tlaxcala, Mexico, following months of intensified hostilities in Colombia. Shortly

²³ Arango (1992: 53) listed him as Guillermo Zuluaga. This same source also included the following list of “Observers present”: Miguel Motoa C., Rafael Serrano P., María Cristina Ocampo, Henry Millán, William Ramírez, Oscar Reyes, Jesús Carvajal, Alvaro Vásquez, Hernán Motta, Nelson Berrio.

thereafter, on the 20th of March, conversations came to an abrupt end as governmental representatives retired upon learning the death of ex-Minister Argelino Durán Quintero, then a captive of an EPL front. Without reaching any working arrangement, the CGSB and President Gaviria's administration parted for good in Mexico on May 4th, 1992. As we write these lines, the FARC insistently asks reinitiating peace talks and the mediation of the Venezuelan government, amidst a growing armed conflict involving an estimated 160 active guerrilla fronts which have spread combats to a bare 100 kilometers from Bogotá, and engulfed the Venezuelan border in the violent strife.

As we suggested at the beginning of this essay, The Caracas Peace Dialogues had as much to do with ending armed struggle as with defining a nation yet to be born. But despite the fact they failed on both accounts, the failure was only partial if we consider the Dialogues as a step in the right direction, a process that broke a State tradition and allowed Colombians to sample for the first time in history the positive effects of engaging as equals in talk.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on major metadiscursive and pragmatic aspects of discourse instances selected from the exchanges leading to the Caracas Peace Dialogues, themselves but an episode in the history of Colombian guerrilla warfare and pacification attempts. As a starting point we argued that the Dialogues effectively began when three members of the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, two men and a woman, entered the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá and tended a peace overture to President César Gaviria Trujillo. Seeing discourse as situated practice, we defined that entry operation as a metadiscursive exercise meant to reshape intertextual links and contextual parameters, in an effort to anchor anew peace negotiations between the guerrilla and the Colombian State. As such, the *entrée* triggered off a context building strategy which not only structured and permeated the entire dialogue process, but which itself indexed political strategy. Naturally, as context building got under way and intertextual links among discourses shifted, power relations were also modified. Monitoring the development of these three interwoven processes in the exchanges ensuing the embassy entry, we identified major underlying discourse components and devices along with associated pragmatic effects. For example, in the type of conflict talk analyzed, the strategic production of referential, contextual and propositional ambiguity appeared a preferred discourse device to conceal agency and to simultaneously evoke and efface effects of power. In turn, the manipulation of linguistic resources such as agentless passives, impersonal reference or verb inflection, along with semantic framing, lexical choice and grammatical design, all contributed to the forging of ambiguity. Other pragmatic goals salient in the exchanges described were the strategic construction, juxtaposition and deployment of public identities and language ideologies, as well as contrasting thematizations of hierarchy and authority. Finally, the history of the Caracas Dialogues suggests that in situations characterized by armed conflict between militarily evened but deeply antagonistic ideological opponents, speech performativity may play a crucial role in tailoring a common discourse strategy. Under such circumstances, performing talk may have a comparable symbolic impact and provide similar social dividends as performing *in* talk. To sum up, the pragmatic presuppositions, indexical

connections, interactions between formal linguistic structures and referential content, as well as the wider links among institutional structures and sociohistorical processes which shaped the Caracas Peace Dialogues, together witness the fact that at least in this type of historically significant discourse event, context was not primarily an interpretative frame adopted by interlocutors (cf. Heritage 1984: 242; in Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 29), but way beyond that, a strategy for maneuvering the course of discourse.

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