

Who said 'Abortion'? Semantic Variation and Ideology in Spanish Newspapers' Online Discussions*

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In this paper, we defend the study of semantic variation from a cognitive sociolinguistics perspective. Through a case study on the semantic variation of 'abortion' in Spanish newspapers' comments, we investigate quantitatively the influence of the independent factors ('source', 'date', 'ideology', 'gender', 'quote') on conceptual onomasiological variation. The chi-square tests show that 'ideology' and 'quote' affect significantly the preference for direct (to abort) or indirect expressions (to murder) and for particular conceptual bases (e.g. DEATH/TO KILL, NOT HAVE A BABY, TRIP TO LONDON ...), pointing to two different conceptualizations of 'abortion' for defenders and detractors. By demonstrating the entrenchment of particular construals in their established discourses, we exemplify the indexical power of semantic variation.

Keywords: Cognitive Sociolinguistics; Onomasiological Variation; Ideology; Abortion; Mixed Methodology

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1. Introduction

In 2010, a new Law of Abortion was approved in Spain by the Socialist Party in the government (PSOE). With the approval, the debate on abortion was reopened and accompanied by multiple demonstrations, especially from detractors. A great deal of the fights took place in the linguistic ring of its naming, as some didn't agree with the conceptualizations that hid behind the names for 'abortion' given by the others, and vice versa.

As speakers, we live among concepts that entail cultural, social and ideological value. As the object of linguistic analysis, the meanings we convey are not less informative about who we are and what we do than other linguistic features, to the point that meaning variation, in politics for instance, is often considered manipulative, as shown through the analysis of frame construction and negotiation (Lakoff 1996). Nevertheless, although the indexical power of certain linguistic features is widely acknowledged, it is not in the tradition of sociolinguistics to study the semantic level. But if the variation in the use of words (regardless of conceptual implications) has proved useful in sociolinguistics, as in lexical formal variation (for an overview, see Singleton & Kallen 2004), isn't it time we focus on how we bring about meanings? In other words, aren't meanings also indexical?

This paper is a focus on the analysis of semantic variation in sociolinguistics, specifically at the conceptual onomasiological level, that is, when 'a referent or type of referent may be named by means of various conceptually distinct lexical categories' (Geeraerts *et al.* 1994: 3). Due to the lack of solutions for this level of variation, the first goal of this paper is to make a methodological proposal for the coding of semantic variables. Naturally, the second goal is to test whether this variation is sociolinguistically meaningful, in the sense that it is significantly related to some independent variables, and therefore can be interpreted in terms of its indexicalities, both directly and indirectly. In our view, that would prove that semantic variation is an object of sociolinguistic study in its own right. If variation exists, the final goal is to understand its meaning. Potentially, once concepts are ideologically ascribed, and are at the basis of more or less conscious rationalizations such as 'x-concept is typical of y-group' (Silverstein 1992), they can be performatively displayed as a means of creating in-group solidarity (Hodge & Kress 1993) but also out-of-group identification (with various purposes), as has been proved as well for other linguistic features.

We will try to meet our goals by presenting an empirical case study on the concept of 'abortion', which is rich in conceptual variation, in the sense that, although the concept is relatively clear-cut (it is related to a particular fragment of reality and it has a direct denomination in Spanish, *aborto*), it is often named by indirect expressions, such as *interrupción voluntaria del embarazo* (*voluntary termination of pregnancy*), *asesinato* (*murder*), *operación* (*surgery*), etc. These are indirect ways of presenting specific (subjective) perspectives on the concept. Apart from this richness in variation, the interest of this case is that 'abortion' is a powerful 'cultural conceptualization' (Sharifian 2011), in that the use of a particular concept is not

only a direct index of alignment to a particular ideology but also an indirect positioning in broader cultural models (p. 27) entrenched in Spanish history. Therefore, as the debate through naming was very lively in Spain and involved the two major ideological¹ positions (pro- and anti-abortion), we expect to find a correlation between ideology and the expressions for 'abortion', that would show the emergence of culturally-constructed meanings in different ideological groups.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we will explain briefly our theoretical framework: as sociolinguistics doesn't have a theoretical apparatus on semantic meaning (Lavandera 1978), we adopt a cognitive semantic theory, as is proposed by cognitive sociolinguistics (Geeraerts & Kristiansen ~~forthcoming~~). Then, we will introduce some social context on the approval of the above-mentioned law, so as to understand better the local manifestations of an international debate. The following section focuses on our methodological proposal: we present our specific research questions, the corpus and the data, the operationalization and coding of dependent and independent variables, and how we deal with them analytically. We show the results of both the qualitative and quantitative analyses. Finally, we discuss the sociolinguistic meaning of those results and explain our conclusions on the case study and the method.

2. Conceptual Variation and Social Meaning

In the theory developed by cognitive semantics, language is basically meaning and thus semantic (Geeraerts 2006, 2010b). The symbols or categories that represent the world in the human mind are acquired through experience; thus not only the physical but also the social conditions determine this process of categorization. Despite the high degree of conventionality in use, the meanings of those symbols are not homogeneous from individual to individual, because they are dependent on physical and social experience (Lakoff 1987). Consequently, there is no such thing as an absolute and definable meaning, but a rather (inter)subjective and changing one, reached by ever-renegotiable agreements among individuals. As linguistic meaning is built on those symbols, it is always and inevitably built from the perspective of the speaker. Individuals living in shared conditions, having similar physical experiences of the world, with the same social background or ideological convictions, in other words, belonging to the same cultural group, are likely to share conceptualizations (Sharifian 2011: 26). Differences in these conditions or beliefs, even within the same group, may reflect a fluctuant degree of variability (Kristiansen & Dirven 2008: 4). Especially when there is conflict, the system of classification, normally abstract, may be made apparent (Hodge & Kress 1993: 103ff.).

¹ As we are conscious of the complexity entailed by the concept of 'ideology', we would like to clarify that our use of the term coincides with what Woolard (1992) considers the broad view, 'the values present in any representation of reality', as opposed to the orthodox view that considers 'ideology' only as the 'false consciousness that reflects domination'. In this particular paper, we deal with the ideologies present in the debate about 'abortion', which means, very generally, the positions taken about the subject.

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If meanings are variable and sensitive to contextual features (including the participants and their social background), it comes along naturally in our opinion that sociolinguistics should deal with their analysis, by adopting methods from disciplines with a long-standing tradition in the study of conceptual meaning, like cognitive semantics.

Some scholars have already underlined the need for combining both perspectives, as it could be fruitful in both directions: on the one hand, for the revision of old problems of sociolinguistics, mainly for the analysis of lexical and semantic variation, which has been so scarcely practised; on the other hand, cognitive semantics would also benefit from the expertise of sociolinguistics in analyzing contextualized language (Croft 2009; Geeraerts & Kristiansen ~~forthcoming~~; Geeraerts *et al.* 2010; Janicki 2006; Kristiansen & Dirven 2008). This new discipline has been called cognitive socio-linguistics and its aim would be, in terms of Janicki (2006: 175), ‘applying cognitive non-essentialist reasoning to describe and analyze sociolinguistic phenomena’, that is, mixing methods in order to help studying linguistic phenomena, in particular, lexical and semantic variation (Kristiansen & Dirven 2008). ‘Are the social categories we participate in directly or indirectly related to our use of semantic features?’ is certainly a pertinent question (though still rather unattended) of the type we deal with at other levels of linguistic variation.

From the point of view of lexical semantics, one single concept may be named using different expressions. In some cases, the selection of a name doesn’t entail conceptual differences, which is called formal onomasiological variation, as in the choice between *jeans/blue jeans* (Geeraerts *et al.* 1994: 7). This kind is present in the sociolinguistic tradition because it is compatible with variationist methodology, where variants have to be ‘identical in reference or truth value’ (Labov 1972), with no conceptual differences, in order to be comparable. (It is usually studied as a marker of dialectal preferences, in cases such as *trainers/running shoes* (Chambers 2000)).

In other cases, the variation in naming actually implies more than a formal difference; it implies ‘the choice of a conceptual category for identifying or describing the referent’ (Geeraerts *et al.* 1994: 7): this is the case of conceptual onomasiological variation, which might take the form of taxonomical shifts (*pill* for *contraceptive pill*), metonymies (*Washington* for *the government of the United States*), metaphors (*to feel blue* for *to feel sad*), etc. This type of semantic variation points to a difference in conceptualization, meaning a different understanding of that particular reality. Whether this is a question of nuance or a radical diversion is a matter that needs to be investigated empirically, together with the motivating, internal and external factors (as in Geeraerts *et al.* 1994, 2010; Grondelaers & Geeraerts 1998, 2003; Robinson 2010; Zhang *et al.* 2011, 2012). It is thus a sociolinguistic matter in its own right: if meanings are socially motivated, semantic variation must reflect this.

We know, furthermore, that speakers can do better than just being who they are macro- and meso-sociologically (ascribed to categories like sex, age, socioeconomic group), but they can actually creatively use linguistic variants (Coupland 2007). Specifically, sociolinguistic research of the Third Wave (Eckert 2005, 2009) has shown

that linguistic features can be, and actually are, used by speakers to enact the social meanings that are related to those features for stylistic purposes. This has been proved through a number of studies, the best known of them being at the phonetic level (Eckert 2000, 2010; Kiesling 2009; Zhang 2005). At the lexical level, a few studies investigate the uses of some well-established sociolinguistically meaningful lexical items from a semasiological perspective, in order to elucidate the locally-based, social meanings of particular words (Kiesling 2004; Tagliamonte 2008; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005). This theoretical position redefines the speakers' identity not as a socially determined construct, but more as the sum of the social meanings created and enacted in speech (among other channels of expression), which has a crucial importance in the interpretation of variation.

3. A Bit of Context: The Law of Abortion in Spain

On 24 February 2010, the law known as *Ley del Aborto* ('Law of Abortion') was passed by the Senate in Spain and published some days later as *Ley Orgánica 2/2010, de 3 de marzo, de salud sexual y reproductiva y de la interrupción voluntaria del embarazo* (literally, 'Organic Law [...] of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy').² The law allowed unconditional abortion during the first weeks, as abortion was already decriminalized under some circumstances; in real practice whoever wanted to abort could do it, regardless of age, as the law was vague enough to allow a certain degree of interpretation. The government stated that this new law only put in writing what was already generalized in practice. The opposition feared an indiscriminate increase in abortions, particularly among teenagers.

The approval of the law caused controversial reactions, both within the political and social arenas, including some public protests since the very beginning of the process. As in many other countries, abortion is a problematic issue that divides society roughly in two, the pro-abortion and the anti-abortion defenders, often classified as well under the labels *pro-choice* and *pro-life*.³ As in other countries, in Spain most of the political debate is based on the different answers to the questions 'what is life?' and 'what is a human being?' (Janicki 2006: 98), and thus on the different conceptualizations of 'abortion'. The majority of pro-abortion defenders

² The law legalized abortion on the first 14 weeks of pregnancy under any circumstance, and established a further deadline, up until the 22nd week, for the interruption of pregnancy when there are risks for the life of the mother or the child, or serious anomalies in the foetus. The law stated as well that the right to abort needed to be guaranteed by the Public Health System and, what was particularly controversial, that those aged 16 and 17 years could abort without parental permission when there was an obvious menace of conflict within the family or of rejection of the young woman from the family home. The text of the law can be found on the Boletín Oficial del Estado ('Spanish Official Gazette'), following this link: <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2010/03/04/pdfs/BOE-A-2010-3514.pdf>.

³ Of course, like for any other classification, labels have to be taken carefully as they are mere naming tools, too simplistic to be interpreted as faithful interpretations of reality. For more sociological analysis, see Observatorio de Salud de la Mujer (2005).

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only approve it until life starts, which is in their opinion when the foetus develops a human shape. A minority sub-group approves abortion almost until birth, because the background belief is that life is a social fact of acknowledgement meaningful only after birth. On the other hand, the anti-abortion group also disagrees as to when life starts. The most extreme position situates the beginning of life at the moment of conception (Observatorio de Salud de la Mujer 2005: 545ff.; Ramos 1982).

The symbolic relevance of the abortion debate is proven by the fact that the different opinions are a means of political identification to one party or the other. As is also the case for other matters of political correctness, the institutional names given to 'abortion' are debated openly: it is sometimes interpreted as a means of veiling a reality behind a technical name like *interrupción voluntaria del embarazo* ('voluntary interruption of pregnancy'). An enormous part of this controversy is settled through language. While the expression *aborto* ('abortion') is the most usual, the socialist government insisted on the technical term and the conservative party spoke of *aborto libre* ('free abortion'). But if this was only a matter of labels, would there be such an open debate?

4. Analyzing Semantic Variation in Sociolinguistics: A Proposal

The lack of analysis on semantic variation in sociolinguistics is partly due to the methodological requirements established by variationism: the semantic equivalence of the variants in terms of 'reference or truth value' (Labov 1972: 271), circumscribing the variable context or a 'relevant environment' (as for the phonetic variables) and finding enough variants in corpora (Labov 1972: 72). The difficulties in following these rules for semantic variation have led to thinking that traditional sociolinguistic tools are not adequate for its study. Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to establish methodologies. From a systemic functional perspective, Hasan's (2009) work is a thorough, though sometimes ignored, reasoning of the central position of semantics in sociolinguistic variation. Her methodology is based on a manual analysis of naturally occurring, semantic data (such as types of answers and questions) belonging to a 'semantic system network' (that is, variants of a semantic variable) and its quantitative relation to independent factors and contextual parameters of the communicative situation (field, tenor and mode of discourse). Methodologically the model is designed to study the semantics of discourse phenomena, more than variation at the onomasiological level. A different approach is the 'simple model for lexical choice' (Sankoff *et al.* 1978: 24), where the variable was defined in terms of its minimal distinctive components, as for the linguistic features at other levels of analysis. The problem of this top-down method is that it presupposes that a concept has an actual definition, composed by a number of necessary and sufficient features. This approach implies a too rigid view on the variable, incompatible with a non-essentialist view where meaning is considered to be (among other features) subjective and adaptable to changes in the world (Geeraerts 2006).

In this section, we will present our proposal for the study of conceptual onomasiological variation, illustrated with our case study on 'abortion'.

4.1. Research Questions

Starting from the observed variability and its political relevance, we have engaged in a bottom-up, corpus-based study through which we intend to understand the variation of the concept of 'abortion' in actual use. Considering that '[t]here are, in fact, two aspects to the onomasiological selection of a name for a referent: there is a choice of a conceptual category for identifying or describing the referent, and there is the choice of a lexical item naming that category', as stated by Geeraerts *et al.* (1994: 7), we aim at studying the potential patterns in the choice of categories, rather than lexical items. This will lead to answers to the following groups of questions:

Question 1: As has been observed, there is a tendency to refer indirectly to the concept of 'abortion' through other expressions (more or less institutionalized). In our corpus, what is the dominant tendency (direct or indirect expressions) at this level of onomasiological variation? Is this variation related to any extralinguistic features?

Question 2: Within the indirect construals, what are the categories selected for the expression of 'abortion'? Are there patterns in the underlying conceptual bases? And if so, are those patterns related to any extralinguistic features?

Although a certain degree of idiosyncrasy is possible, we expect to find conceptual commonalities in our data according to independent factors, because people who have similar experiences of the world are likely to 'conceptualise experience in a similar fashion' (Sharifian 2011: 26).

4.2. Corpus and Data

The corpus is composed of 260 readers' comments⁴ ($n=22,380$ words) posted on the online versions of *El País* and *El Mundo*, after the approval of the new *Law of Abortion* in Spain, on 24 February 2010 (109 comments), and the day before its entry into force on 4 July 2010 (151 comments). These are the two most read newspapers in Spain, among those focused on general information (according to Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación 2010). They have different political orientations,⁵ which will presumably give us the opportunity to find different stances with regard to the topic in question.

⁴ The corpus was collected in 2010. Online newspapers keep the news but not the readers' comments on their websites, which makes it impossible to expand the corpus with the date restrictions applied for this study. In total, 380 comments were analyzed: 181 from *El Mundo* and 199 from *El País*. Within these, 258 comments included at least one valid observation and were kept for the final corpus. Original sources: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/Aprobada/forma/definitiva/cambios/ley/aborto/elpepusoc/20100224elpepusoc_5/Tes and <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2010/02/24/espana/1267016517.html>.

⁵ Although other Spanish newspapers are more politically biased, the choice of these two was made according to their popularity and, thus, to the possibility of finding more varied positions within both corpora. It would be certainly interesting to add more data from other sources, but they are not available online anymore either (cf. note 4).

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In onomasiological studies, the dependent variable is the concept or the semantic value that ‘may be variously expressed by means of different words’ (Geeraerts *et al.* 1994: 5). In order to delimit it, a working definition needs to be assumed, without imposing our own conceptualization or a dictionary’s definition. In this case, we focus on the variable ‘abortion’,⁶ understood (in a few words) as ‘induced termination of pregnancy’, especially as a different situation from ‘miscarriage’, though in Spanish they are both referred to as *aborto*.

After the delimitation of the concept under scrutiny, the observations are manually retrieved. Although Geeraerts *et al.* (1994: 18) establish a requirement of referential identifiability (in their case, they work with data where the referents of the terms can be accessed independently, through pictures of clothes), not all case studies have that kind of external input. Data extraction is, in many cases, necessarily manual, inductive, and based on textual and contextual interpretation; in this case, all the expressions refer to ‘abortion’ (see examples in the online Appendix).

In this particular case study, some criteria have been applied for the consideration of an expression as an observation. First of all, although we extracted all the expressions referring to ‘abortion’ present in the comments, we have followed a type-based approach (including only one observation per type per comment in the analysis), because our interest is in the exploration of the range of concepts used by different commenters, rather than on the amount of times they use them. For example, immediate repetitions of an expression or reformulations would increase the number of cases for a given type for reasons that are not related to construal, but rather to emphasis. Apart from that, some expressions are related to other levels of linguistic structure, like syntax, e.g. anaphors or cataphors. Extremely vague expressions are also set aside, when their conceptual basis is not retrievable (like pronominal constructions).

After application of these criteria, out of a total of 534 tokens, 391 valid observations have been extracted into a matrix.

4.3. Variables and Coding

4.3.1. Response variables

Operationalization and coding schemas depend totally on the particular research questions. In this case, we focus on conceptual onomasiological variation at two levels of abstraction. The more abstract is situated at the level of (in)directness in naming. The second level of semantic inquiry focuses on the classification of the indirect categories according to their conceptual bases.

4.3.2. (In)directness

This is the operationalization corresponding to Question 1. Among the linguistic expressions for a particular concept, there is usually one (but sometimes more) that

⁶ The name of the variable could also be ‘abortion/to abort’, but the distinction between verbal and nominal expressions is not relevant here, as they both convey the eventive nature of the concept.

can be considered as the direct (or literal) way of referring to it in a linguistic variety. These direct expressions coexist with other indirect ways of naming the same fragment of reality. The valid observations will be coded as DIRECT or INDIRECT. Out of the 391 observations for 'abortion', 45% corresponded to direct expressions, ABORTION/TO ABORT ($n = 177$), as in example (1); on the other hand, the indirect expressions represent slightly more than half of the data (55%, $n = 214$), as in examples (2)–(11) in the next section.

- (1) Respeto a quien esté en contra del *aborto* [...]
'I respect those who are against abortion [...]'

4.3.3. Conceptual bases

As a following step, we look at the second level of abstraction, which involves a detailed semantic analysis of each observation in order to abstract the underlying conceptualization.⁷ It implies a constant refinement of the coding until a satisfactory level of abstraction is achieved: simple, but not over-reductionist.⁸ For example, observations like *asesinar*, *matar*, *quitar la vida* (to murder, to kill, to take someone's life) have a common conceptual basis that may be labelled as DEATH/KILL. The purpose is the operationalization of these conceptual bases in order to be measured later on, or in other words, to reduce the (apparently chaotic) hundreds of observations into a less complex conceptual picture.

In order to portray what categories compose this group, the observations were semantically analyzed and grouped by common conceptual bases. Through this process of abstraction, we find that these 214 indirect observations rely on 10 different categories. All together with the direct expression (ABORTION/TO ABORT), these indirect expressions constitute a first step towards the conceptual profile of 'abortion' in our data. (We adapt here the notion of 'onomasiological profile' of a concept in a source, which 'is the set of synonymous names for that concept in that particular source, differentiated by relative frequency' (Geeraerts 2010a: 831), in order to include specifically conceptual variability). These categories are: SURGERY, INTERRUPTION OF PREGNANCY, DECISION, TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE, PROBLEM/SOLUTION, RIGHT, DEATH/KILL, NOT TO LIVE, NOT TO HAVE A BABY and TRIP TO LONDON. They appear in examples such as (2)–(11).⁹ (See the Appendix for a complete list.)

⁷ Note that this second step in the analysis could also be carried out on the more comprehensive level of semantic strategies. The data could be coded according to phenomena such as metonymy, metaphor, taxonomic shift, vague expressions, etc. in order to study how they vary. That kind of analysis allows for the study of several concepts at the same time, for example 'abortion', 'pregnancy' and 'miscarriage'. In this particular case study, as we work only with the concept of 'abortion', we have decided to focus on the more specific level of conceptual bases, which seems culturally more informative about the categorization of the concept.

⁸ As non-essentialists, we don't claim that our analysis is the only possible one. We need nevertheless to be able to justify empirically that our groupings are adequate. In this sense, the first observations will all seem idiosyncratic, but soon the common meanings appear. Often, some groups will need to be divided, merged or relabelled.

⁹ Each category is illustrated with a fragment of a comment, where the observation is in italics. The texts are kept exactly as in the original version. Errors in grammar or spelling are not marked nor corrected. Text is only eliminated when it doesn't affect the understanding of the observation. A table with other examples of observations is provided in the Appendix.

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- (2) SURGERY: echamos un polvete sin protección [...] y en el peor de los casos, pastillita u *operación tan sencilla como un dolor de muelas*.
'we have sex without protection [...] and at worst, a pill or an operation simple as a toothache.'
- (3) INTERRUPTION OF PREGNANCY: [...] una ley que garantiza la posibilidad de elegir **no continuar con su embarazo** [...]
'[...] a law which guarantees the possibility of choosing not to continue pregnancy [...]
- (4) DECISION: Nosotras parimos, nosotras **decidimos**, los demás: ¡a callar!
'We give birth, we decide, the rest: shut up!'
- (5) TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE: una mujer que decide abortar [...] **ha pasado por el infierno** y seguramente el infierno nunca la abandonará del todo.
'a woman who decides to abort [...] has gone through hell and hell will probably never leave her.'
- (6) PROBLEM/SOLUTION: Si algo sale mal ... O **se soluciona** y no se habla más del tema, o se tiene.
'If something goes wrong ... Either it's solved and it's not mentioned anymore, or you have it.'
- (7) RIGHT: Negar **este derecho** es imponer a una persona unos problemas a favor de algo que aun no lo es.
'To deny this right is to create problems to a person in favour of something that is not yet anything'.
- (8) DEATH/KILL: Lamento profundamente la decisión que permitirá **la muerte de miles de fetos humanos**.
'I deeply regret the decision that will allow the death of thousands of human foetus.'
- (9) NOT TO LIVE: Un lamentable río de criaturas humanas que **no va a nacer**.
'A sad river of human creatures who will not be born.'
- (10) NOT TO HAVE A BABY: Ayudará a las inmigrantes **a no tener hijos** con 18 años ...
'It will help the immigrant to not have children at 18 ...'
- (11) TRIP TO LONDON: durante la Dictadura miles de niñas de bien, hijas de sres respetables y ricos (ahora madres) **fueron a 'estudiar a Londres'** [...]
'During the Dictatorship thousands of wealthy girls, daughters of respectable and rich men (now mothers) went to "study in London" [...]

Most of these concepts are pretty straightforwardly interpretable, because they focus on facets of the act of abortion that are generally present in the international debate (SURGERY, DECISION, TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE, PROBLEM/SOLUTION, RIGHT, DEATH/KILL, NOT TO LIVE, NOT TO HAVE A BABY). Only two of them require a cultural side note in order to understand what lies behind them: one of them is INTERRUPTION OF PREGNANCY, which is the institutionalized concept for the medical procedure and which is also used in the text of the law. It sometimes takes the acronymic form *IVE* in specialized medical jargon, though not in our data. The other one is a very local concept, TRIP TO LONDON, which refers to the time in Spain during Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975) when women who wanted to abort went abroad, especially to London, because it was forbidden in their country. The TRIP TO LONDON became a well-known euphemism.

After this qualitative analysis, we get a first conceptual profile. The resulting picture shows disparity, in the sense that the categories defining the global image of 'abortion' belong to very different aspects of reality: it is conceptualized in its medical facet (SURGERY, 'interrupt pregnancy'), focusing on related cognitive activities (DECISION, PROBLEM/SOLUTION), in emotional terms (TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE), etc.

4.3.4. Independent variables

Data extracted from online discussions restrict considerably the kind of information we can retrieve from the participants, and so the variables that can be analyzed, because of the generalized anonymity,¹⁰ typical of online discussions (Geeraerts 2010a: 831). Despite the lack of social background, we can assume that there are some shared circumstances for our bloggers that allow us to consider them as a group: very generally, we can deduce that we are dealing with Spanish-speaking people, probably Spanish or living in Spain, readers of these popular newspapers and concerned with the *Law of Abortion* in this country, either as supporters or detractors.

Some independent variables can be straightforwardly retrievable. The variable 'date' has two levels: FEBRUARY, JULY. We include the date because we would like to assess whether the proximity to the entry into force in July or, in other words, the final stage of the law (when it is no longer open to changes), has an influence on semantic variation. The variable 'source', with the levels EL PAÍS and EL MUNDO, needs to be analyzed, in our opinion, because these newspapers are oriented to different audiences, which is likely to be reflected on the semantic choices in the comments.

The rest of our independent variables have been coded manually after analysis. The gender of the commenter (WOMAN, MAN) can be deduced in some cases, when the comment is signed, or when there are marks of grammatical gender, but it might still not be entirely reliable, when it is available at all (in total, 149 observations can be coded with gender information). This restricts our use of this variable to a partial analysis.

The 'ideological positioning' towards the topic of abortion has two levels: ANTI- and PRO-ABORTION. This attribution has been determined through qualitative analysis of the opinions expressed towards the law or towards abortion itself, independently of lexical semantic variation. The purpose of the comments being precisely that of stating point of view, pro-abortion and anti-abortion opinions surface very clearly and thus they can be easily coded.

A nuance needs to be taken into account though: in some cases, the commenter quotes or portrays other peoples' opinions, as in example (12):

- (12) no me vengáis muchos con que es un asesinato, porque son células, y aparte es un FETO, y si no os vais al código civil, y miráis.
'don't tell me that it is murder, because they are cells, and besides it is a foetus, and if you do not agree you can also go and check the civil code.'

In order to avoid an incorrect assignment of ideological positioning to the observations included in those pieces of reported speech (direct and indirect), we have added a specific code for them, under the label QUOTE,¹¹ while the rest is coded

¹⁰ This work follows ethical practices. Whenever the comments are not anonymous, the information is kept in our database and it is only used for research purposes, in order to protect the privacy of the users (Woolard 1992).

¹¹ This is to be understood as reported speech within the commenters' discourse, not as a 'contextual quotation' in computer mediated communication jargon, which is specifically 'the mechanism of including a message or part of one in the reply to a message' (D'Arcy & Young 2012).

with NO QUOTE. In example (12), for instance, it avoids the possibility that the observation *asesinato* ('murder') is counted among the conceptual bases of the pro-abortion group. The quotes are excluded at some stages of the analysis and are studied separately.

4.4. Quantitative Analysis

As a first step for finding patterns in our variables (as formulated in our research questions), we need to observe the overall distribution of our data. As has been demonstrated earlier (Herring 2002), we may access the structure of the conceptual picture by adding a quantitative approach. More central meanings (in the form of conceptual bases) are characterized by being more present, which can be quantitatively measured by calculating the frequencies of appearance of the variants delimited previously. This will give us a further idea of whether there are more entrenched meanings related to 'abortion' in our data, in the sense of being more prominent than others that are more peripheral.

External information might also be added to the global distribution in order to assess the relationship between conceptual variation and other factors in our corpus (as in our research questions). For that purpose, we will analyze: first, whether our external factors are significantly related to the preference for the direct or the indirect construals, which we will explore through a series of chi-square (independence) tests.

In the case of finding a significant result in the relationship between any of the independent variables and the response variable, we would explore the direction of that dependence, through mosaic plots.

In the case of a preference for indirectness (which, as we saw, accounts for 55% of the data), we will analyze the distribution of each indirect construal according to the influential variable, through percentage values and their graphical representation with bar charts.

5. Results

The very different categories for 'abortion' are not equally present in our data. The distribution of the observations according to these categories is very uneven (see Figure 1). Apart from the direct expression (45%), the most prominent semantic bases are DEATH/KILL (27%) and DECISION (11%), followed a long way behind by the other eight, whose individual percent values don't exceed 5% and all together represent 17% of the data. The different frequencies of the conceptualizations of 'abortion' in our data point to differences in their entrenchment.

Without any external information, the distribution of the categories of this profile is not fully interpretable, thus we need to include the available contextual and social information in the exploration of our data.

First, we test the independence of our response variable, '(in)directness', and the contextual variables, 'ideology' (ANTI-, PRO-ABORTION), 'date' (FEBRUARY, JULY), 'source' (EL PAÍS, EL MUNDO), 'quote' (QUOTE, NO QUOTE), through a series of

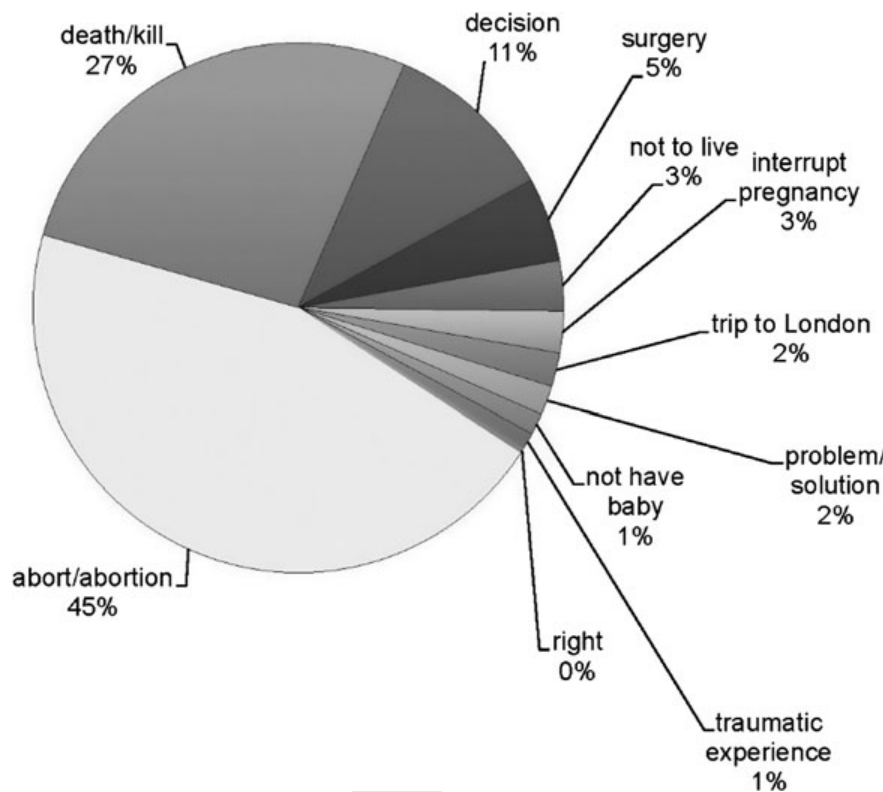


Figure 1 ~~XXXXX~~

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chi-square tests for the whole dataset. These yield the following results: '(in)directness' and 'ideology' and '(in)directness' and 'quote' show a significant statistical difference (p -value=0.01), which means that they are not independent (in addition, 'ideology' and 'quote' are independent from each other), while 'date' and 'source' don't have a significant relation to the preference for '(in)directness'¹² (see Table 1).

This is a relevant result in the sense that, at the most abstract level of onomasiological variation, 'ideology' is significantly related to '(in)directness', which means, in other words, that one of the ideological stances manifests a preference for an indirect construal in naming 'abortion'. If we plot these variables together, we can observe graphically the direction of these dependences: the anti-abortion group uses more indirect expressions (see Figure 2).

On closer inspection, the distribution of the particular conceptual bases for each ideological position also shows different preferences in the expression of the concept (see Table 2). To avoid misleading assumptions, we have eliminated from this table the cases of reported speech, so that the observations accounted for are only those used as the commenter's own (see also the explanation for the coding of the independent variables).

¹² Finally, we have built a subset of the data only with the observations that were coded with gender information ($n = 167$). The chi-square test for independence of 'gender' and (in)directness shows no significant statistical difference.

Table 1 Results of chi-square tests for independence of ‘(in)directness’ and ‘ideology’, ‘date’, ‘source’ and ‘quote’ (*p*-values)

	‘Ideology’	‘Date’	‘Source’	‘Quote’
‘(In)directness’	0.01	0.56	0.66	0.01

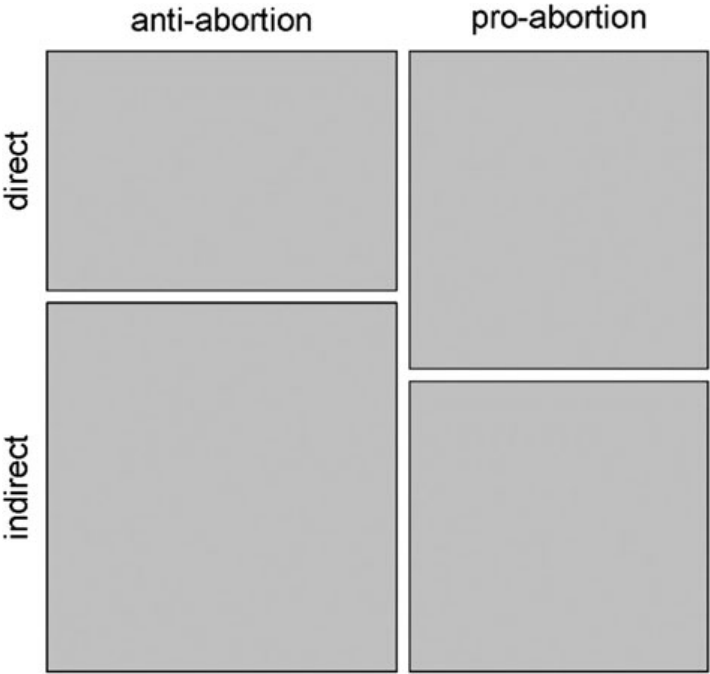


Figure 2 ~~Xxxxx~~

Both groups show unequal use of the direct expression, which represents 56% of the pro-abortion group’s observations and only 40% in the anti-abortion comments. The most apparent differences though are in the distribution of the indirect expressions, almost categorically in various cases. The second most used concept in the overall distribution of the data, DEATH/KILL, is only representative of the anti-abortion group (46% versus 0% for the pro-abortion group). The third, DECISION, represents 19% of the total of the pro-abortion expressions and 3% of the anti-abortion ones. The rest of the concepts, much less present, also show unequal distributions: SURGERY is slightly more used by the pro-abortion stances (6% versus 4.5%). The semantic bases NOT TO HAVE A BABY, RIGHT and TRIP TO LONDON are exclusive of the pro-abortion group, while TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE and INTERRUPT PREGNANCY are almost exclusive of the opposite group. The concept NOT TO LIVE is slightly preferred by the anti-abortion ideology (4% versus 2%), as is PROBLEM/ SOLUTION by the pro-abortion (2% versus 1.5% by the anti-abortion) (see Figure 3).

As shown in Table 1, for the whole dataset, the other independent variable that favours significantly the preference for an indirect expression is the inclusion in a

Table 2 Conceptual bases distributed by 'ideology' of the commenter, in percent and raw numbers

Conceptual bases	Anti-abortion		Pro-abortion	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
ABORTION/TO ABORT	40	80	56	91
DEATH/KILL	46	92	0	0
DECISION	3	6	19	30
INTERRUPT PREGNANCY	0.5	1	5	8
NOT HAVE BABY	0	0	3	5
NOT TO LIVE	4	8	2	4
PROBLEM/SOLUTION	1.5	3	2	4
RIGHT	0	0	1	1
SURGERY	4.5	9	6	9
TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE	0.5	1	2	3
TRIP TO LONDON	0	0	4	7
Total	100	200	100	162

quote. As we can observe in the mosaic plot, when reporting others' opinions, indirect expressions are used more often (see [Figure 4](#)).

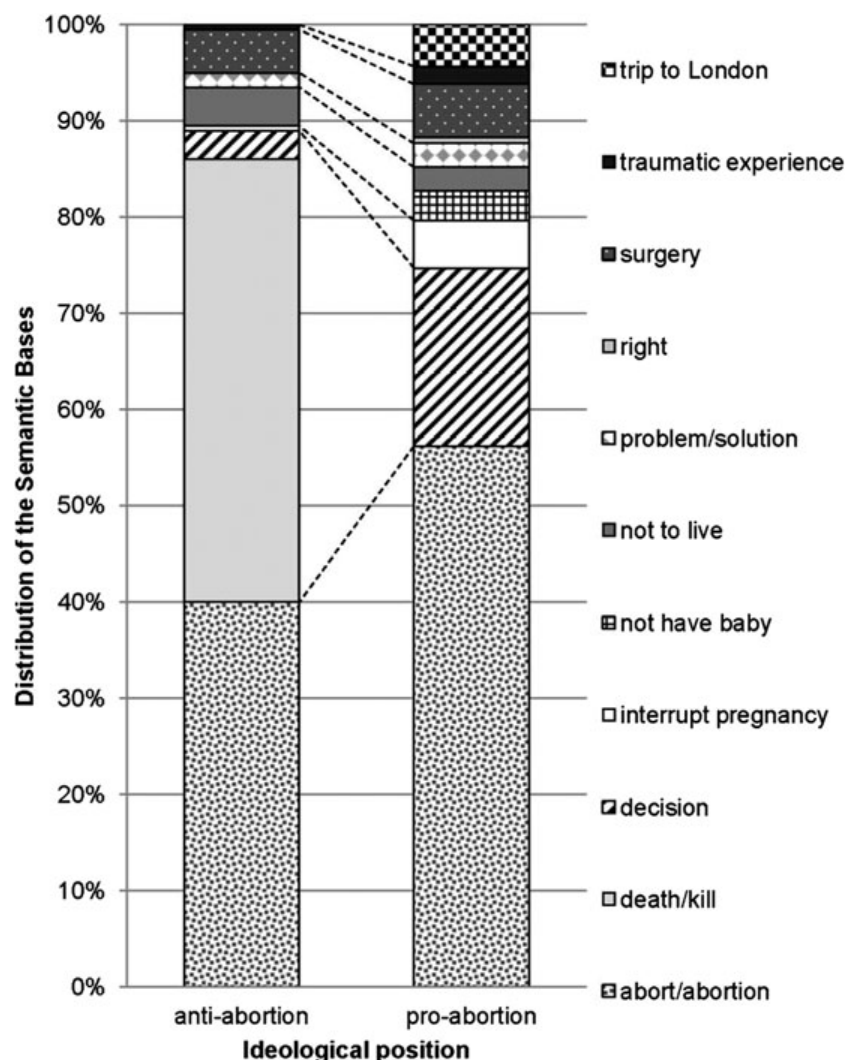
If we focus only on the concepts that are included in those quotes and at their distribution according to the ideology, we find out that only five of the 10 indirect categories are used, and their ideological adscription is clearly divided (see [Figure 5](#)).

The reported speech quoting the anti-abortion group is represented by indirect expressions based on the categories DEATH/KILL and TRIP TO LONDON. For the fragments reporting pro-abortion opinions, the indirect expressions used as theirs are DECISION, INTERRUPT PREGNANCY and SURGERY. Interestingly, the direct expression is used to portray both, which probably means, as we will explain later, that it is not as indexical as the construals. Despite the scarcity of these cases (28 observations), this categorical distribution is very revealing in terms of the indexical power of semantic variation.

6. Discussion

The consecutive steps of our analysis show results that are rich in sociolinguistic information for the onomasiological variation of 'abortion'. The qualitative analysis of the data points to patterned variation, as the 391 valid observations can actually be grouped in a simpler conceptual image composed of 10 different conceptual bases. Various facets of the event of 'abortion' are brought into focus, so, as we mentioned before, our working definition of 'abortion' as 'induced termination of pregnancy' may now be enriched with this information.

The results of the quantitative analysis show that the variation patterns are related to ideology, in the sense that anti-abortion and pro-abortion groups seem to have two different conceptualizations of 'abortion' (see [Table 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)). This is coherent

Figure 3 ~~XXXXX~~

with previous research on semantic variation in cognitive linguistics, which has proved that concepts are perspectival and they can be negotiated, because there is no such thing as a true essence of a word, but rather a net of meanings prototypically constructed that are made apparent depending on the context (Grondelaers & Geeraerts 2003). In other words, from an onomasiological perspective, different contextual aspects define the categories that might be brought into focus for the reference to a particular concept (Fillmore 1982), that is, the meanings (distributed among the cultural group) that might emerge, in Sharifian's terms, in certain circumstances (Grondelaers & Geeraerts 2003). In our case study, the patterns of conceptual onomasiological variation are ideologically motivated, showing two conceptual profiles for 'abortion' related to two ideological groups with different cultural models emerging from their semantic preferences.

In general, the conceptual profile of the anti-abortion group is more uniform: it has less conceptual bases (eight in total) and the observations are mainly distributed only

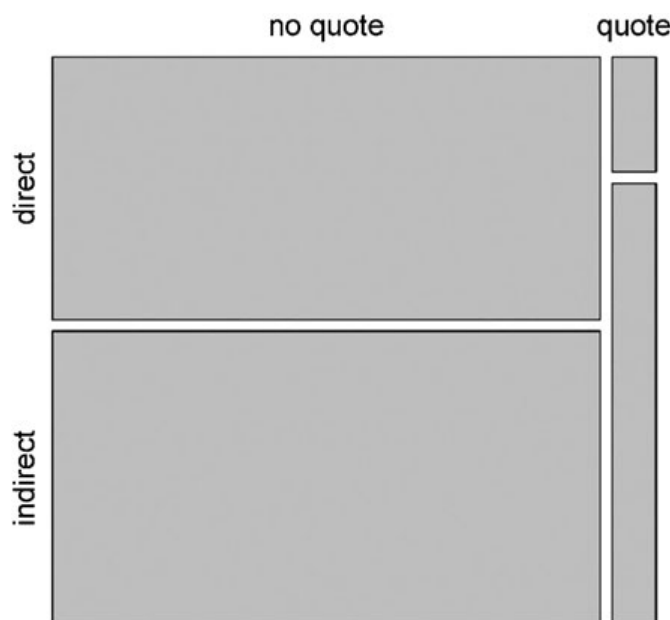


Figure 4 ~~XXXX~~

among two of them (ABORTION/TO ABORT and DEATH/KILL), which represent together 86% of the data (see Figure 6).¹³

DEATH/KILL is extremely salient in their discourse for two reasons: first, because it is quantitatively the most frequent of their variants, and second, because it is exclusive of them. The prominence of this indirect construal in terms of frequency points to an intentional (re)conceptualization of 'abortion' as an action against the life. Through the insistence on this semantic construal, the anti-abortion defenders establish their statements about what life is and when it starts. Their definition of the concept relocates the subject (Sharifian 2011) within a debate on morals (prior to legality) and thus invalidates the mere possibility of discussing about the law (or 'reframes' it, as in Lakoff (1996)).

On the other hand, the conceptual profile of the pro-abortion group reflects conceptual multiplicity: the frequencies of the indirect construals they use are more evenly distributed, and thus, their conceptual profile of 'abortion' doesn't present any blatantly dominant conceptual basis (see Figure 7). Concurrently, the direct expression is preferred (56%), which seems to imply a stronger alignment with it and thus a lesser need for (re)defining the concept with which they agree.

Within the indirect construals, although DECISION is neither quantitatively dominant nor exclusive of them, it is more prominent in their discourse. It resonates with the famous 1970s, feminist, pro-abortion motto *Nosotras parimos, nosotras decidimos* ('we give birth, we decide', see example (4)). Interestingly, we also find resonances of the text of the law, through the concept INTERRUPT PREGNANCY,

¹³ 'These word clouds vary the size of a word with the number of times it appears in the original text.' At wordcloud.com.

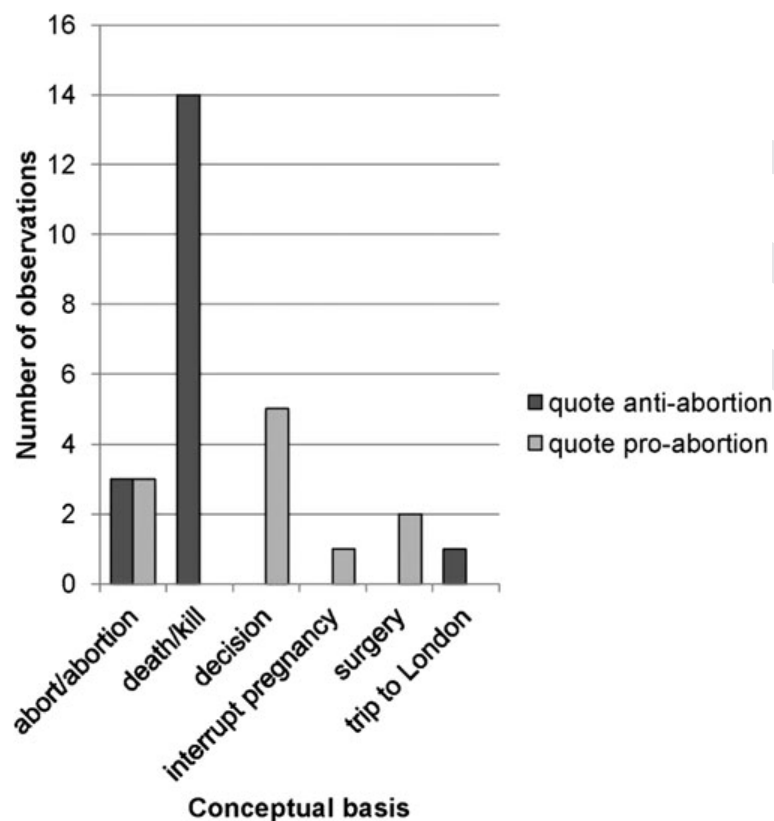


Figure 5 ~~XXXXX~~

implying an assumption of the legality of 'abortion', also present on the conceptual basis RIGHT. Together with the concept NOT HAVE A BABY (exclusive of them) they build a frame that is consistent with family planning ideas.

The debate on life is only introduced in their discourse to defend a relativistic perspective on what is a preferable situation: when the concept NOT TO LIVE is used, it is to support the possibility that an abortion is a preferable outcome (PROBLEM/SOLUTION), acknowledged though as a TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE.

The Spanish concept for 'abortion', TRIP TO LONDON, is exclusive of the pro-abortion discourse and needs special attention, due to its local value. It points to Franco's dictatorship, when abortion was strictly forbidden and women went abroad (typically, to London) to abort under varied pretexts. The TRIP TO LONDON became popular, though it was only available for wealthy women, when wealth was mainly controlled by families that gave support to Franco's regime. This historical resonance is used to connote the hypocrisy of a public anti-abortion discourse that wasn't respected in fact. In our opinion, this concept is not only picturing a past situation here: it is used as an argument against the discourse on morals that the anti-abortion frame nowadays implies some continuity among the holders of that position.

To summarize the findings, the patterned onomasiological variation is at the basis of two different conceptual profiles: the anti-abortion discourse is consistently built around the idea of an action against the life and it is aimed at reconceptualizing

problem/solution
traumatic experience
abort/abortion
surgery decision
not to live interrupt pregnancy
death/kill

Figure 6 ~~XXXXX~~

problem/solution
not have baby
decision
interrupt pregnancy
surgery
not to live
right
abort/abortion
trip to London
traumatic experience

Figure 7 ~~XXXXX~~

‘abortion’. On the other hand, the pro-abortion discourse shows less need to redefine the concept. It presents more conceptual foci, but all insisting on the legality of abortion through different intertextualities.

The dichotomy in the distribution of some of these bases (cf. Table 2, Figures 3, 6 and 7) proves the entrenchment of particular concepts in the two ideological discourses, which makes them indexical of one ideology or the other. The repetitive use in these contexts loads them with their typical social meanings, which allows them to function as ‘shibboleths’ of particular ideological groups (also in Janicki 2006), because a common language creates solidarity among the members of a group (Silverstein 1992, 2003). The proof that the process of entrenchment has been accomplished is that some categories transcend their original discourses and are productively used in reported speech, indexing their typical ideological group. In this sense, the commenters recognize also the concepts to which they don’t subscribe.

Variants like DEATH/KILL or DECISION have finished a process of specific ideological entrenchment and are productively used to index the opponents’ discourses (see Figure 5), and this is done with a remarkable accuracy: the anti-abortion group recognizes the multiplicity of conceptual foci typical of the pro-abortion group, while the pro-abortion commenters also portrait faithfully the uniformity of the anti-abortion group around the concept of DEATH/KILL.

We recognize in this use of reported speech two different functions: primarily, it identifies the others’ discourses, as ‘prototypical quotes allow the teller to epitomize the group by invoking the characteristic words of a prototypical individual speech’ (Hodge & Kress 1993); but secondly, it also has the function of questioning the others’ conceptualizations (Buttny 2004).

Another consequence of the entrenchment of a category in a particular discourse is the possibility of negotiating its meaning when there are disconformities. A good example is the concept of DECISION, which is entrenched in the pro-abortion ideological discourse, but is also used by the opponents, but with a different interpretation. While for the pro-abortion group the DECISION is part of a discourse on individual responsibility on family planning (see example (13)), for the anti-abortion group the DECISION is always that of an irresponsible person (see example (14)).

- (13) Bajo valores de 'ética' la sociedad no puede **decir por** la mujer. Tener o no tener hijos tiene que ser sólo responsabilidad del individuo ... Basta ya de valores e ideas del siglo XIX!
'Under "ethics" values society cannot speak for the woman. To have or not to have children must only be a responsibility of the individual ... Enough with nineteenth century values and ideas!'
- (14) Es un peligro si ponemos la ley en manos de un menor, que no entiende de la vida, ni de lo que está bien o mal, porque siempre **tomará el camino** más sencillo y no sabrá el porqué ocurre eso.
'It is a danger to put the law on the hands of a minor, who doesn't understand life, or what is good or bad, because he will always take the easy way and he won't know why that happens.'

The legalization of abortion is interpreted by the anti-abortion group as an open door for people, irresponsible by nature, to act immorally, while the State should control that irresponsibility. On the other hand, the pro-abortion group reacts against that imposition of control, arguing that people should be masters of their own decisions (Kiesling 2004).

This strategy of negotiation of meaning of some other group's category is also a reframing strategy, like the reconceptualization of abortion as DEATH/KILL. More subtly here, by creating other implications for the category of DECISION, the anti-abortion commenters state their disagreement with that conceptualization. Ultimately, the repetition of the category with new associated meanings could lead to a re-appropriation, by reframing the pro-abortion group's (responsible) DECISION into irresponsibility.

7. Conclusions

Through a case study on the semantic variation of 'abortion' in newspapers' comments in Spain, we have tried to prove the necessity and the possibility of working with conceptual onomasiological variation in context, through an interdisciplinary cognitive sociolinguistic approach (note the connections to 'Strict Father' and 'Nurturant Father' moral politics frames in the USA, as explained in Lakoff (1996)). Sociolinguistics needs to have adequate tools for the quantitative analysis of that kind of material, because the acquisition of words and their conceptual implications is socially motivated.

For that purpose, we have given great importance to the explanation of an analytical methodology, where we have proposed our own 'exploratory manoeuvres' (as defended in Grondelaers and Geeraerts (2003)), consistent with the theoretical principles of cognitive semantics. In order to focus on the procedure, we have worked

on a corpus with a few independent variables, characterized by the prominence of a straightforward ideological division. Nevertheless, we believe that the method is potentially replicable for any semantic variable and can be implemented with as much external information as needed (and as is available).

As for the results of the study, they demonstrate the entrenchment of particular conceptualizations in the discourses of the two different ideological positions towards abortion, to the point that they can be used performatively in reported speech when quoting arguments different from one's own. This is particularly important because it shows that semantic variation is also loaded with indexicalities, at various orders (Labov 1969), as has been proved for other linguistic levels.

It is not surprising then that the debate on the (extralinguistic) reality of abortion is so strongly grounded in linguistic options: at once, our semantic choices reveal much ideological information which is at the very centre of all the indexical processes (Silverstein 2003).

In Spain, pro-abortion and anti-abortion opinions are existing schemas that are well-known for the public, and it is because of that ideological establishment that their conceptualizations can be recognized as their own practices. Through semantic variation, among others, individuals position themselves on the subject and recognize their allies and their detractors within the local scope of the context. But they also set a link with broader ideological discourses (Silverstein 1992), because the construals of the concept are rooted in two radically different cultural models (Janicki 2006; Lakoff 1996).

We should add, as an epilogue, that on November 2011, the conservative party (Partido Popular) won the elections. Two months later, on January 2012, they announced their intention to change the Law of Abortion. The text, as stated by the government, was ready in the first trimester of 2013 and was still under discussion in the beginning of 2014.

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