

Berlin between the Western showcase and the Soviet bloc:
phraseology as a critique of the Cold War in Gabriel García
Márquez's *Berlín es un disparate* /

*Berlín entre el escaparate occidental y el bloque soviético: la
fraseología como crítica de la Guerra Fría en Berlín es un
disparate, de Gabriel García Márquez*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phraseology of the absurd in Gabriel García Márquez's chronicle *Berlín es un disparate* and shows how lexical items and phraseological units underpin a critical stance toward the propagandistic staging of the Cold War. The study adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. In the first stage, *Voyant Tools* is used to describe lexical frequencies and segmental distribution and to identify three semantic clusters: urban space; geopolitics and ideology; and economics and propaganda. In the second stage, a twelve-item inventory of phraseological units (PUs) is manually compiled and classified; their contextual paraphrases are formulated, their experiential domains are delineated, and their evaluative orientations are established. The findings reveal an asymmetrical distribution of attention, with a clear emphasis on the Western bloc, and group the PUs into four lexico-phraseological fields: chaos and disorder; spectacle and propagandistic façade; border and silent violence; and overcrowding and everyday malaise. The article concludes that phraseology transforms the material contradictions of the divided city into a form of critique accessible to a Spanish American readership and brings linguistic analysis into dialogue with literary interpretations of the Cold War.

KEYWORDS: Phraseology; Phraseological units; Gabriel García Márquez; Cold War; Travel chronicle.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la fraseología del despropósito en la crónica *Berlín es un disparate* de Gabriel García Márquez y muestra cómo las unidades léxicas y fraseológicas sostienen una posición crítica ante la escenificación propagandística de la Guerra Fría. Se adopta un enfoque cuantitativo-cualitativo. En una primera fase, *Voyant Tools* permite describir las frecuencias y la distribución segmental e identificar tres núcleos semánticos: espacial-urbano,

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geopolítico-ideológico y económico-propagandístico. En una segunda fase, se extrae y clasifica manualmente un inventario de doce unidades fraseológicas (UF), se formula su paráfrasis contextual, se delimitan sus dominios experienciales y se determina su orientación evaluativa. Los resultados evidencian una focalización asimétrica, con predominio del eje occidental, y agrupan las UF en cuatro campos léxico-fraseológicos: caos y desorden, espectáculo y fachada propagandística, frontera y violencia silenciosa y hacinamiento y malestar cotidiano. Se concluye que la fraseología convierte las contradicciones materiales de la ciudad dividida en una crítica legible para el público hispanoamericano y permite articular el análisis lingüístico con la interpretación literaria de la Guerra Fría.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fraseología; Unidades fraseológicas; Gabriel García Márquez; Guerra Fría; Crónica de viaje.

1 Introduction

Was the Marshall Plan in Berlin an instrument of reconstruction or a strategy of economic and cultural control by the United States? This question structures Gabriel García Márquez's gaze upon his arrival in a city fractured by the Cold War. The chronicler encapsulates US direction of the reconstruction through the expression "The United States is calling the tune"¹ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644). The Marshall Plan was the economic recovery program promoted by the United States in Western Europe between 1948 and 1952, but it also formed part of a strategy designed to consolidate Western consensus and informal US hegemony in the political and cultural spheres (Spagnolo, 2003, p. 275, 290). The Cold War is understood here as the geopolitical, ideological, and cultural confrontation between the Western and Soviet blocs, a struggle that made Berlin one of its principal material and symbolic arenas (Buffet, 2019, p. 70).

Berlín es un disparate recounts García Márquez's journey through the two Germanies in 1957, four years before the construction of the Berlin Wall. The writer was then at a decisive stage in his journalistic development and had yet to achieve international recognition as a novelist. In the European chronicles of this period, observation of everyday life, political interpretation, and narrative techniques converge within the same mode of writing (Bonano, 2017, p. 70). As Gilard documents (2015, p. 53–54), the journey to socialist Germany took shape in Frankfurt, where García Márquez, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, and Soledad Mendoza came into contact with Colombian students linked to the Communist Party after visiting the poet Eduardo Cote Lamus, then the Colombian consul. This circumstance helps to clarify the position from which he writes: that of a Spanish American journalist who moves between the two blocs and tests their discourses against the scenes he observes.

¹ Original Spanish: Los Estados Unidos llevan la batuta

This position is particularly significant in light of the young writer's ideological proximity to the left. In the mid-1950s, García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo shared favorable expectations of socialism and wished to encounter Eastern Europe directly (Martin, 2009, p. 211). The journey did not result in uncritical adherence. The chronicler questions the propagandistic staging of West Berlin while also recording the material shortages, bureaucracy, and everyday malaise of the Eastern bloc. His critique arises from the distance between official rhetoric and concrete experience.

Previous studies have addressed primarily the generic and ideological dimensions of these chronicles (Bonano, 2017, p. 70), the representation of the city in García Márquez's journalism (Chehin, 2022, p. 63), and, in another text from the European cycle, the relationship between lexical combinations and metadiscourse (Torrellas Alonso, 2025, p. 290). The specific role played by phraseological units in shaping his critical stance has not received systematic study. This article seeks to fill that gap by relating the phraseological repertoire to the semantic organization of the divided city.

This stance becomes apparent in the description of West Berlin, which presents the sector as “a huge capitalist propaganda agency²” designed to produce an “appearance of fabulous prosperity³” (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644). The city appears as a showcase intended to display the superiority of the Western model and unsettle the population under Soviet influence. The scenes set in East Berlin and Leipzig open another line of critique: material shortages, overcrowded spaces, and everyday malaise preclude any idealization of the socialist bloc.

This representation gives rise to two questions: (1) what phraseological repertoire organizes the chronicle's representation of the city? and (2) how do these units help shape the images of West Berlin, East Berlin, and Leipzig within the context of the Cold War? We argue that the chronicle constructs the divided city as a chaotic, spectacularized, and morally exhausted space, although its critique of each bloc rests on different grounds. To describe how the PUs operate together, we propose the expression “phraseology of the absurd,” understood as an interpretive category encompassing contextual values of incoherence, artificiality, excess, and dysfunction, rather than as a new formal class within phraseology.

² Original Spanish: una enorme agencia de propaganda capitalista.

³ Original Spanish: apariencia de prosperidad fabulosa.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Phraseology, lexical-semantic fields, and evaluation

This study adopts the broad conception of the phraseological unit (hereafter PU) proposed by Corpas Pastor (1996, p. 20), who defines such units as “lexical units whose lower limit consists of more than two written words and whose upper limit lies at the level of the compound sentence⁴”. These combinations display varying degrees of institutionalization, fixedness, variation, and idiomaticity. These properties distinguish idioms and other phraseological combinations from free associations created occasionally in discourse.

The notion of the lexical-semantic field is adopted here from a relational perspective. Coseriu (1977, p. 210) defines the lexical field as a paradigm composed of lexemes that share a continuous area of meaning and stand in immediate opposition to one another. In broader terms, Lehrer (1974, p. 1) conceives it as a set of closely related words whose analysis must account both for their internal relations and for their connection to a general domain; she further argues that vocabulary is organized into sets associated with conceptual fields (Lehrer, 1974, p. 15–17).

Cruse (1986, p. 84–86), for his part, distinguishes paradigmatic from syntagmatic relations and regards as analytically relevant those semantic relations that recur systematically in pairs or sets of lexical units. Because the corpus examined here contains multiword units and is limited to a single chronicle, this study does not seek to reconstruct a lexical field within the linguistic system in the strict Coserian sense. The term lexico-phraseological fields refers here to analytical groupings built from shared experiential domains, semantic affinities, and contextual contrasts. These groupings make it possible to organize recurrences and compare the representations of West Berlin, East Berlin, and Leipzig without displacing close reading of the complete passages.

Evaluation is understood as the set of resources through which a speaker or writer expresses an attitude, position, or judgment toward the entities and propositions in a discourse (Hunston; Thompson, 2000, p. 5). In addition to conveying an opinion, evaluation reflects systems of values, helps construct the relationship between author and reader, and participates in the organization of discourse (Hunston; Thompson, 2000, p. 6).

⁴ Original Spanish: unidades léxicas formadas por más de dos palabras gráficas en su límite inferior, cuyo límite superior se sitúa en el nivel de la oración compuesta.

Stubbs (2001, p. 65–66) uses the term discourse prosody to refer to an evaluative orientation that extends beyond an isolated unit, expresses the speaker's attitude, and contributes to the function and cohesion of discourse. Because the corpus consists of a single chronicle, the present analysis focuses more narrowly on the contextual evaluative orientation that each PU acquires through interaction with its immediate co-text. This distinction separates the expression's conventional meaning from the political, moral, spatial, or affective evaluation produced in each passage.

2.2 Corpus and tools

The corpus consists of *Berlín es un disparate*, as published in *Obra periodística 3: De Europa y América (1955-1960)* (García Márquez, 2015, p. 641–649). This case study permits a detailed reconstruction of the phraseological repertoire and of its relationship to the spaces along the itinerary. Only minimal orthographic and punctuation normalization was applied in preparing the corpus to facilitate searches; the statements under analysis were not altered. Because the PUs and quoted passages are themselves the object of linguistic analysis, they are retained in Spanish throughout. Frequencies and concordances were obtained using the web version 2.6.21 of *Voyant Tools*, developed by Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell (Sinclair; Rockwell, 2016). The quantitative component serves a descriptive and exploratory purpose; interpretation of the PUs is always grounded in the complete passages from the chronicle.

2.3 Analytical procedure

The procedure comprised four stages. In the first, *Voyant Tools* generated a frequency overview and made it possible to delineate three lexical clusters: urban-spatial, geopolitical-ideological, and economic-propagandistic. This initial screening guided the contextual reading but did not by itself determine the classification.

In the second stage, the PUs were extracted manually. The analysis worked with types rather than occurrences alone. Three criteria governed the inclusion of a sequence: multiword composition; some degree of formal fixedness; and a partially or wholly conventionalized overall meaning. Each candidate was checked against both its sentence and the passage in which it occurs.

The overview confirms the chronicle's spatial and political character. Three clusters emerge among the content lexemes. The urban-spatial cluster comprises *Berlín* (21), *ciudad* (15), *avenida* (10), *mundo* (8), *lado* (8), *Leipzig* (6), *centro* (5), and *calle* (5). The geopolitical-ideological cluster comprises *occidental* (15), *oriental* (7), *Stalin* (7), *Alemania* (6), *sistemas* (5), and *pueblo* (5). The higher frequency of "occidental" indicates that the description initially concentrates on the sector reconstructed under US influence; *pueblo* subsequently shifts attention toward those who live between the two systems.

The economic-propagandistic cluster combines *operación* (5) with words related to monetary circulation and consumption, including *comprar* (6), *marcos* (5), and *mejor* (5). These counts are descriptive and do not suffice to establish the text's critical orientation. Their purpose is to locate lexical concentrations that can then be tested against the complete passages. This screening identified twelve PUs, grouped into the four fields analyzed below.

3.2 Lexico-phraseological fields

For each PU, a minimal contextual paraphrase was formulated and two dimensions were described. The experiential domain identifies the sphere of reality activated in the passage—urban organization, reconstruction, propaganda, border, or everyday life—in keeping with the relational conception of meaning associated with lexical-semantic fields (Coseriu, 1977, p. 210; Lehrer, 1974, p. 1; Cruse, 1986, p. 84–86). Evaluative orientation identifies the polarity and type of judgment arising from the interaction between the unit's conventional meaning and its co-text, in accordance with research on evaluation and discourse prosody (Hunston; Thompson, 2000, p. 5–6; Stubbs, 2001, p. 65–66). On this twofold basis, the PUs are distributed across four fields.

3.2.1 Chaos and disorder

Table 1: Lexico-phraseological field I: chaos and disorder

Phraseological unit	Segment	Experiential domain	Evaluative orientation
<i>Sin pies ni cabeza</i>	West Berlin / Leipzig	Organization of urban space and intelligibility of experience	Negative, spatial, and cognitive: urban disorganization and interpretive disorientation

Source: prepared by the author based on García Márquez (2015, p. 643–649)

As Table 1 shows, the field of chaos and disorder centers on a single PU, “sin pies ni cabeza,” but its recurrence at two widely separated points in the chronicle gives it a structuring function. Its first appearance occurs during the journey through West Berlin. Before using the expression, the narrator links a bodily sensation—emptiness—to a futile action—searching for the city—and circular movement—going round and round within it:

The first contact with that gigantic operation of capitalism within the domains of socialism gave me a feeling of emptiness. We spent the entire morning looking for the city, going around inside it without finding it. It is asymmetrical, without rhyme or reason, but above all it still lacks a center where one can experience the feeling of having arrived⁵ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 643).

The PU recapitulates a descriptive sequence in which West Berlin becomes difficult to recognize as a city: it can be traversed physically, but it offers no center capable of organizing the traveler’s experience. The expression retains its conventional meaning—the absence of coherence or intelligible structure—and projects it onto the urban organization. Asymmetry, still-empty areas, unfinished construction, and the juxtaposition of barracks, skyscrapers, and commercial establishments compose a fragmented space. This is why the narrator claims to have been *buscando la ciudad* while already inside it. The paradox shows that his disorientation affects West Berlin’s very status as a city.

The expression recurs at the end of the Leipzig episode. On this second occasion, it no longer directly characterizes an urban configuration. Instead, it encapsulates the travelers’ difficulty in comprehending the distance between the revolutionary promise of a “mundo nuevo” and an everyday experience dominated by sadness, inefficiency, and material decay:

⁵ Original Spanish: El primer contacto con esa gigantesca operación del capitalismo dentro de los dominios del socialismo me produjo una sensación de vacío. Toda la mañana estuvimos buscando la ciudad, dando vueltas dentro de ella sin encontrarla. Es asimétrica, sin pies ni cabeza, pero sobre todo carece todavía de un centro donde se experimente la emoción de haber llegado.

We could not understand. It was as if we had gone to the cinema to kill time and found ourselves watching a crazy film, without rhyme or reason, with a plot designed exclusively to bewilder. For it is bewildering, to say the least, that in the new world, at the very center of the revolution, everything should seem antiquated, stale, decrepit⁶ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 649).

The repetition preserves the core idea of incoherence while altering its experiential domain. In West Berlin, *sin pies ni cabeza* describes a city without a center or spatial continuity; in Leipzig, it characterizes a political experience that the traveler cannot integrate into a rational explanation. The context strengthens this second orientation through *película de locos*, *desconcertar*, *anticuadas*, *revenidas*, and *decrépitas*. The PU thus moves from the illegibility of space to the difficulty of interpreting socialist reality.

García Márquez does not equate these two realities, since the grounds for his critique differ. What remains constant is a mode of seeing. When confronted with each system, the expression marks the distance between the order it proclaims and the concrete experience it affords the traveler. Chaos therefore functions as a spatial category in the West and as a cognitive category in Leipzig.

3.2.2 Spectacle and propagandistic façade

Table 2: Lexico-phraseological field II: spectacle and propagandistic façade

Phraseological unit	Segment	Experiential domain	Evaluative orientation
<i>Borrón y cuenta nueva</i>	West Berlin	Urban reconstruction and treatment of wartime ruins	Critical, urban, and economic-ideological: rupture with the previous material fabric and primacy of commercial criteria
<i>Llevar la batuta</i>	West Berlin	Direction of reconstruction and investment	Critical, political-economic: US direction of the process
<i>Con la boca abierta</i>	East Germany confronted with West Berlin	Socio-affective effect of the capitalist display	Critical, propagandistic, and socio-affective: induced amazement and reduction of the East to the position of spectator

Source: prepared by the author based on García Márquez (2015, p. 643–649)

⁶ Original Spanish: No podíamos entender. Aquello era como haber ido al cine por matar el tiempo y haberse encontrado con una película de locos, sin pies ni cabeza, con un argumento hecho exclusivamente para desconcertar. Porque es por lo menos desconcertante que en el mundo nuevo, en pleno centro de la revolución, todas las cosas parezcan anticuadas, revenidas, decrépitas

As Table 2 shows, the PUs *borrón y cuenta nueva*, *llevar la batuta*, and *con la boca abierta* (García Márquez, 2015, p. 643–649) organize the reconstruction of West Berlin as a propagandistic circuit. The first characterizes the procedure applied to the city; the second identifies the agent directing the operation; and the third represents the intended effect on the Eastern audience. The relationship among the three units does not depend solely on their proximity within the chronicle. Each occupies a distinct position in a sequence comprising urban intervention, political direction, and reception of the spectacle.

The chronicle begins by contrasting two ways of reconstructing a destroyed city. One possibility would have been to preserve and reinforce the remains of the buildings; the criterion applied by the Americans is presented through an expression drawn from accounting:

The only trace of Europe in West Berlin is the scorched cathedral, with a tower shorn by the bombs. Americans, like children, are terrified of bats. Instead of shoring up the few walls left standing after the war and using them to make a patched-up city, they applied a more hygienic and much more commercial criterion: wipe the slate clean⁷ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 643).

In its conventional meaning, *borrón y cuenta nueva* denotes the cancellation of what came before and the beginning of a different stage. The co-text turns this abstract operation into a material action performed on the city: the remnants of war are removed, and reconstruction begins from a cleared surface. The PU's critical orientation is prepared by the contrast between *ciudad de remiendos* and a *criterio más higiénico y mucho más comercial*. The latter at first appears favorable, but the adjective “comercial” shifts the evaluation toward the interests governing reconstruction. The resulting city will later be described as *resplandeciente* and *aséptica*, although it has *el inconveniente de parecer demasiado nueva*.

The passage does not support the claim that García Márquez explicitly denounces a planned erasure of historical memory, since the chronicle formulates no such thesis. It can, however, be argued that the PU represents a visible rupture with Berlin's previous material fabric and links this rupture to a commercial logic. The critique targets a form of reconstruction that turns the city into novelty, surface, and commodity. The past remains visible chiefly in the scorched cathedral; the rest of the space is presented as the antithesis of war-ravaged Europe.

⁷ Original Spanish: El único rastro de Europa en Berlín Occidental es la chamuscada catedral con una torre despuntada por las bombas. Los norteamericanos, como los niños, tienen horror de los murciélagos. En lugar de apuntalar los pocos paredones que quedaron en pie después de la guerra y hacer con ellos una ciudad de remiendos, aplicaron un criterio más higiénico y mucho más comercial: borrón y cuenta nueva

The second PU identifies the principal agent in the process. García Márquez moves from describing the city to assigning responsibility:

It has been said that this is the most interesting architectural experiment in Europe. Clearly it is. From a technical point of view, West Berlin is not a city but a laboratory. The United States is calling the tune. I have no data on the amount of dollars invested in reconstruction or on how the investments were made. But the results are there for all to see⁸ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644).

“Llevar la batuta” invokes the metaphorical domain of orchestral direction: an authority that coordinates the actions of others and determines the rhythm of the whole. Its use assigns the United States primary agency in the reconstruction, but the passage also contains a qualification. The chronicler acknowledges that he has no exact data on the investments and bases his judgment on the visible “resultados.” The critical stance is therefore constructed as an inference drawn from urban observation: late-model automobiles, inexplicably inexpensive hotels, US products, advertisements in English, and radio stations that do not broadcast in German.

The third PU introduces the intended recipient of this representation. After enumerating the economic anomalies of West Berlin, the narrator states his interpretation openly:

I humbly believe that it is a fake city. [...] In every detail one can see the deliberate intention to Project an appearance of fabulous prosperity, to bewilder East Germany, which watches the spectacle open-mouthed through the keyhole⁹ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644).

The construction *con la boca abierta* expresses amazement and a momentary suspension of response. In this context, García Márquez personifies East Germany and positions it as the collective spectator of the Western display. The expression also forms part of a double image: the *espectáculo* is viewed through *el ojo de la cerradura*. The critique falls primarily on the manufacture of this unequal relationship between exhibitor and observer. East Germany is reduced to the role of audience, while West Berlin is configured as a stage.

⁸ Original Spanish: Se ha dicho que ésa es la experiencia arquitectónica más interesante de Europa. Es evidente. Desde un punto de vista técnico, Berlín Occidental no es una ciudad, sino un laboratorio. Los Estados Unidos llevan la batuta. No tengo datos de la cantidad de dólares invertidos en la reconstrucción ni de la forma en que se han hecho las inversiones. Pero los resultados están a la vista

⁹ Original Spanish: Yo creo humildemente que es una ciudad falsa. [...] En cada detalle se advierte el deliberado propósito de ofrecer una apariencia de prosperidad fabulosa, de desconcertar a la Alemania Oriental, que contempla el espectáculo con la boca abierta por el ojo de la cerradura

The three PUs thus establish a progression: *borrón y cuenta nueva* names the procedure that transforms the city; *llevar la batuta* identifies US direction; and *con la boca abierta* represents the intended effect on the other bloc. Phraseology enables the critique to move from material intervention to political purpose. West Berlin appears as a surface reconstructed so that prosperity might function as a visual argument within the Cold War.

3.2.3 Border and silent violence

Table 3: Lexico-phraseological field III: border and silent violence

Phraseological unit	Segment	Experiential domain	Evaluative orientation
<i>Cortina de hierro</i>	West Berlin	Geopolitical border and isolation of the Western enclave	Negative, geopolitical: separation and structural tension between the blocs
<i>Sacar partido de</i>	Both sectors	Everyday exploitation of economic differences	Neutral or mildly positive, pragmatic: popular capacity to obtain advantages
<i>Arreglárselas</i>	Both sectors	Adaptation and survival between two economies	Neutral or mildly positive, pragmatic-existential: the search for everyday solutions
<i>Hacerse de la vista gorda</i>	Both sectors / authorities	Tacit and selective enforcement of rules	Critical, institutional: tolerance of violations in order to preserve appearances
<i>No saber a qué atenerse</i>	Both sectors	Subjective experience of normative ambiguity	Negative, affective, and political: uncertainty, anxiety, and the absence of predictable rules

Source: prepared by the author based on García Márquez (2015, p. 643–649)

As Table 3 shows, the field of border and silent violence comprises *cortina de hierro*, *sacar partido de*, *arreglárselas*, *hacerse de la vista gorda*, and *no saber a qué atenerse*. These units facilitate a movement from the geopolitical representation of Berlin to the practices through which inhabitants and authorities manage division in everyday life. The border first appears as a structure separating the two systems; the journey through the city then reveals that this separation is permeable, negotiated, and economically productive.

Cortina de hierro introduces the geopolitical scale. West Berlin appears as an enclave within socialist territory:

West Berlin is an island embedded in the Iron Courtain. It has no comercial relations within a radius of 500 kilometers, is not a major industrial center, and its exchanges with the Western world take place by means of planes that land and take off at the airfield located in the center of the city¹⁰ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644).

The image of the *islote enclavado* gives spatial form to the political metaphor. The curtain does not merely divide Europe into two large zones; it encircles a Western space installed within the territory of the GDR. This enclave condition reinforces the economic anomaly identified by the chronicler: a city without a commensurate industrial or commercial base nonetheless displays extraordinary prosperity. The PU thus relates to the preceding field, because West Berlin's isolation increases its value as a propagandistic showcase.

The chronicle nevertheless introduces a decisive contradiction. Although *cortina de hierro* suggests separation and impermeability, the division between the two sectors had not yet acquired material form in the Berlin Wall, which would be built in 1961. In the scene at the Brandenburg Gate, the border bears visible political and administrative signs, but the crossing proves surprisingly simple:

Fifty meters away there is an alarming sign: "Attention, you are about to enter the Soviet sector." [...] A Russian policeman signaled us to stop, inspected the car with a wholly administrative glance, and then ordered us to continue. Crossing is as simple as waiting for a green light. But the change is noticeable. And it is brutal¹¹ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644-645).

The simplicity of the procedure contrasts with the brutality of the urban change. The border is defined by an immediate transformation in the landscape, living conditions, and ideological signs. This opposition helps explain the remaining PUs in the field: the division is official and materially perceptible, yet inhabitants continue to cross it and take advantage of the differences between the two systems.

¹⁰ Original Spanish: Berlín Occidental es un islote enclavado en la cortina de hierro, que no tiene relaciones comerciales a 500 kilómetros a la redonda, que no es un centro industrial considerable y que el intercambio con el mundo occidental se hace en aviones que aterrizan y decolan en el aeródromo situado en el centro de la ciudad.

¹¹ Original Spanish: A 50 metros hay un letrero alarmante: «Atención, usted va a entrar en el sector soviético». [...] Un policía ruso nos hizo señas de detenernos, inspeccionó el automóvil con una mirada enteramente administrativa y luego nos dio la orden de seguir adelante. El paso es tan sencillo como esperar un verde en el semáforo. Pero el cambio se nota. Y es brutal

The subway offers the reverse side of the visible border. The narrator himself announces that understanding Berlin's "vida íntima" requires one to "mirarla por el revés y descubrir las costuras." In this underground space, "sacar partido de" and "arreglárselas" appear:

That is why it is sordid and damp, but it is the means used by the people of Berlin—the poor on both sides—to take advantage of the silent struggle waged by the two systems on the surface. Some people work on one side and live on the other, managing as best they can to take advantage of the best of each system. In certain sectors all one has to do is cross the Street. One sidewalk is socialista. The other is capitalist¹² (García Márquez, 2015, p. 646).

The two expressions share a pragmatic orientation, but they do not designate exactly the same operation. *Arreglárselas* focuses on adaptation: inhabitants find solutions within a complex and changing situation. *Sacar partido de* emphasizes the result obtained: the population turns differences in wages, currencies, and trade into concrete opportunities. A person may live in one sector, work in the other, and purchase goods wherever they are more affordable.

The subjects of these actions are not members of a political or economic elite. García Márquez specifies that they are *la gente pobre de ambos lados*. Phraseology thus shifts attention from the two systems to those who must live between them. Capitalism and socialism wage a *sorda contienda* above ground; underground, the population combines available resources and in practice moves beyond the absolute opposition proclaimed by both blocs. The PUs therefore carry a neutral or mildly positive orientation: they foreground popular ingenuity and adaptability, although these strategies arise from conditions of precarity.

The expression *silent violence*, which gives the field its name, must be understood in relation to the martial co-text surrounding these practices. The chronicle speaks of a *sorda contienda*, an *encarnizada batalla*, a *barril de pólvora*, a *cañonazo*, and the possibility that a bursting tire might trigger panic. Violence in this section does not take the form of direct physical aggression. It appears as environmental pressure produced by tension between the systems, unstable rules, and the permanent possibility that an everyday act might acquire political consequences.

¹² Original Spanish: Por eso es sórdido y húmedo, pero es el medio que utiliza el pueblo de Berlín —la gente pobre de ambos lados— para sacar partido de la sorda contienda que los dos sistemas libran en la superficie. Hay gente que trabaja en un lado y vive en el otro, arreglándose de la mejor manera posible para aprovechar lo mejor de cada sistema. En ciertos sectores basta con atravesar la calle. Una acera es socialista. La otra es capitalista

Normative ambiguity is concentrated in *hacerse de la vista gorda*. After explaining the prohibitions intended to prevent speculation, capital flight, and the spending of money earned in the other sector, the narrator contrasts written rules with institutional practice:

But in Berlin all regulations are theoretical. There are very precise agreements to prevent speculation, capital flight, and the demoralization of the systems. [...] But in practice the authorities turn a blind eye. The only thing that matters is appearances¹³ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 646-647).

The expression attributes both knowledge and volition to the authorities: violations do not go unnoticed but are tacitly tolerated. The opposition between *teoría* and *práctica* organizes the passage. In theory, each system protects its economy and punishes irregular exchanges; in practice, both permit certain transgressions so long as the appearance of separation is maintained. *Hacerse de la vista gorda* thus introduces a critical evaluation of institutions whose enforcement of rules depends less on their content than on the public preservation of ideological division.

This tolerance benefits some popular strategies, but it also produces uncertainty. Those who know Berlin's *claves* can move between the sectors and exploit their differences; those who do not are exposed to rules whose application is unpredictable. This experience is formulated through *no saber a qué atenerse*:

Those who do not know the keys to this city, where nothing is entirely certain, where no one quite knows what to expect and the simple acts of everyday life have something of sleight of hand about them, live in a state of permanente anxiety. They feel as though they are sitting on a powder keg. It seems that no one has a clear conscience¹⁴ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 647).

The PU transfers the contradiction between regulation and tolerance to the affective plane. *No saber a qué atenerse* expresses the impossibility of anticipating which rule will be applied, when, and with what consequences. The co-text intensifies this insecurity through *nada es completamente cierto*, *ansiedad permanente*, *barril de pólvora*, and *nadie tuviera la conciencia tranquila*. The border's silent violence lies precisely in this combination of permissiveness and

¹³ Original Spanish: Pero en Berlín todas las disposiciones son teóricas. Hay acuerdos muy precisos para impedir la especulación, la fuga de capitales, la desmoralización de los sistemas. [...] Pero en la práctica las autoridades se hacen de la vista gorda. Lo único que interesa son las apariencias

¹⁴ Original Spanish: Quienes no tienen las claves de esa ciudad donde nada es completamente cierto, donde nadie sabe muy bien a qué atenerse y los actos más simples de la vida cotidiana tienen algo de juego de manos, viven en un estado de ansiedad permanente. Se sienten sentados en un barril de pólvora. Parece que nadie tuviera la conciencia tranquila

uncertainty: violations are tolerated, but the population can never convert that tolerance into a reliable rule.

Taken together, the five PUs trace a movement from geopolitics to individual experience. *Cortina de hierro* names the division between the blocs; *sacar partido de* and *arreglárselas* show how the population uses its fissures; *hacerse de la vista gorda* reveals the authorities' tacit participation; and *no saber a qué atenerse* records the affective effect of this unstable order. Phraseology turns the border into an everyday regime of circulation, advantage-seeking, tolerance, and uncertainty permeated by Cold War tension.

3.2.4 Overcrowding and everyday malaise

Table 4: Lexico-phraseological field IV: overcrowding and everyday malaise

Phraseological unit	Segment	Experiential domain	Evaluative orientation
<i>No cabe un alfiler</i>	GDR: Leipzig	Saturation of leisure spaces	Negative, material, and affective: crowding, immobility, and exhaustion
<i>Matar el tiempo</i>	GDR: Leipzig	Comparison used to represent the difficulty of understanding the city	Negative, cognitive, and affective: bewilderment and frustration
<i>Entrar por un oído y salir por el otro</i>	GDR: Leipzig	Reception of music in an overcrowded public space	Negative, affective: inattention, fatigue, and indifference

Source: prepared by the author based on García Márquez (2015, p. 643–649)

As Table 4 shows, the fourth field is situated in Leipzig and extends the representation of the German Democratic Republic beyond East Berlin. The PUs *no cabe un alfiler*, *matar el tiempo*, and *entrar por un oído y salir por el otro* contribute to the construction of an urban experience marked by crowding, bewilderment, and fatigue. Their evaluative function organizes a progression that begins with the physical saturation of space, continues with the difficulty of understanding what is observed, and culminates in irritation and exhaustion.

The first unit appears in the description of Leipzig's amusement gardens:

On Sundays the crowds pour into the amusement gardens, where dance music is played, soft drinks are consumed, and, all in all, an exhausting afternoon can be spent for very little money. There is not even room for a pin on the dance floor, yet the packed, almost motionless couples wear the same expresión of

displeasure as the crowd crammed into the trams¹⁵ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 648-649).

In this passage, *no cabe un alfiler* functions as an intensifying formula that represents the dance floor at maximum capacity. Its negative orientation does not arise solely from the number of people present. The co-text relates it to the participles and adjectives *apelmazadas*, *inmóviles*, and *enlatada*, as well as to the *aire de disgusto* attributed both to the couples and to the tram passengers. A lexical chain associated with bodily compression and restricted movement is thereby formed.

The expression also stands in tension with the recreational function of the setting. The crowd goes to the gardens to listen to music, dance, and consume inexpensive drinks, yet the narrator characterizes the afternoon as *agotadora*. Leisure does not appear as a form of rest, since it reproduces the crowding found in other urban spaces. This interpretation is immediately reinforced by references to lines for bread, train tickets, and cinema tickets, and to the two hours the travelers need to obtain a lemonade. The PU thus condenses a critique of the distance between the collective organization of leisure and the material experience of those who participate in it.

The second unit forms part of a comparison through which the narrator attempts to express his bewilderment:

We could not understand. It was as if we had gone to the cinema to kill time and found ourselves watching a crazy film, without rhyme or reason, with a plot designed exclusively to bewilder. For it is bewildering, to say the least, that in the new world, at the very center of the revolution, everything should seem antiquated, stale, decrepit¹⁶ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 649).

In this instance, *matar el tiempo* does not describe a leisure practice actually observed in Leipzig. The unit is embedded in a hypothetical comparison: visiting the city resembles entering a cinema with modest expectations only to encounter an incomprehensible film. It is therefore insufficiently grounded to interpret the expression as representing a society without a temporal

¹⁵ Original Spanish: Los domingos la multitud se vuelca en los jardines de diversión donde se toca música de baile, se toman bebidas gaseosas y se pasa, en fin, una tarde agotadora por un precio muy reducido. En la pista de baile no cabe un alfiler, pero las parejas apelmazadas, casi inmóviles, tienen el mismo aire de disgusto de la multitud enlatada en los tranvías

¹⁶ Original Spanish: No podíamos entender. Aquello era como haber ido al cine por matar el tiempo y haberse encontrado con una película de locos, sin pies ni cabeza, con un argumento hecho exclusivamente para desconcertar. Porque es por lo menos desconcertante que en el mundo nuevo, en pleno centro de la revolución, todas las cosas parezcan anticuadas, revenidas, decrepitas

horizon. Its function is to make intelligible the travelers' perplexity before a reality that contradicts their expectations.

The comparison is intensified by the recurrence of *sin pies ni cabeza*, previously analyzed in relation to the difficulty of organizing and comprehending urban space. In Leipzig, this unit no longer qualifies the structure of the city but rather the chronicler's interpretive experience. The expressions *no podíamos entender*, *película de locos*, and *argumento hecho exclusivamente para desconcertar* form a semantic field of incomprehension. The critique focuses particularly on the contrast between the representation of socialist society as a *mundo nuevo* and the perception of conditions described as *antiguadas*, *revenidas*, *decrépitas*. Phraseology formulates this contradiction through the traveler's subjective experience without in itself converting that experience into a historical or political explanation.

The third unit appears at the end of the day, in the station restaurant:

At night, in the station restaurant, after an hour's wait, suffocated by the smoke, the smell, and the orchestra's music, which went in one ear and out the other for the clientele, Jacqueline became exasperated: —This is an awful country, she said¹⁷ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 649).

The construction *entrar por un oído y salir por el otro* represents a perception that produces neither attention nor an appreciable response. In the passage, the music reaches the patrons but does not alter the atmosphere in the restaurant. The expression is incorporated into an enumeration of unpleasant stimuli: the prolonged wait, the smoke, the smell, and the sound of the orchestra. Its evaluative meaning depends on this sensory accumulation, which explains Jacqueline's subsequent exasperation.

This passage does not warrant the claim that music or culture lacks value in the German Democratic Republic. The unit describes the reaction of a particular group of patrons in an overcrowded space after an hour's wait. Moreover, the sentence "This is an awful country"¹⁸ belongs to Jacqueline's direct speech. Although Franco says that he agrees, the chronicle distinguishes this immediate reaction from the later search for explanations. The following day, the travelers meet students from the Marx-Lenin University, and the narrator acknowledges that their

¹⁷ Original Spanish: Por la noche, en el restaurante de la estación, después de una hora de espera, sofocados por el humo, por el olor, por la música de la orquesta que le entraba a la clientela por un oído y le salía por el otro, Jacqueline se exasperó:

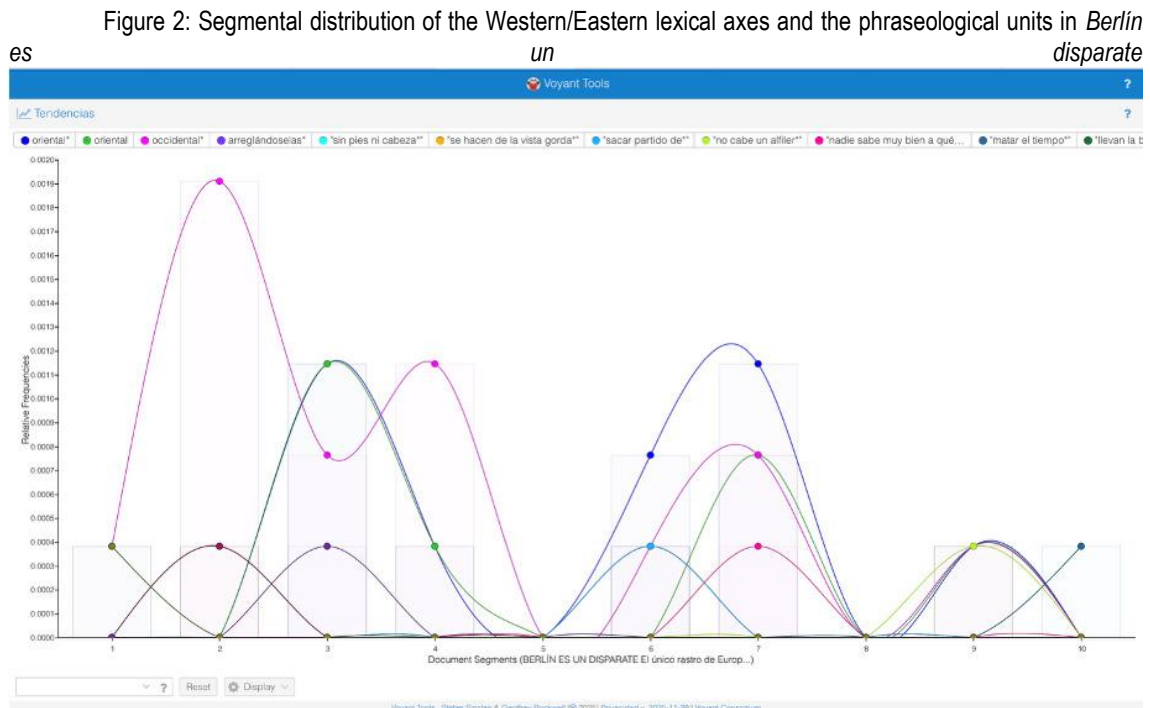
—Éste es un país atroz —dijo

¹⁸ Original Spanish: Éste es un país atroz

observations “might have been subjective¹⁹” (García Márquez, 2015, p. 649). This qualification introduces caution into the narrative itself and prevents the initial impressions from being presented as an objective and definitive description of the country.

Taken together, the three phraseological units construct a sequence that moves from bodily saturation to cognitive disorientation and, finally, affective exhaustion. *No cabe un alfiler* makes the crowding on the dance floor palpable; *matar el tiempo* forms part of the comparison with an incomprehensible film; and *entrar por un oído y salir por el otro* represents the indifference produced in an environment dominated by waiting and discomfort. García Márquez’s critique is articulated through the contrast between the expectations associated with the revolution’s *mundo nuevo* and the material conditions observed by the traveler in Leipzig. Phraseology turns this contrast into a bodily and everyday experience, while the chronicle itself preserves the situated and initially subjective character of these impressions.

3.3 Segmental distribution



¹⁹ Original Spanish: hubieran podido ser subjetivas

As a visual aid, Figure 2 brings together the Western/Eastern lexical series and the twelve PUs across ten segments. Its value is descriptive: with the exception of *sin pies ni cabeza*, which is recorded twice, each unit appears only once; the curves therefore do not demonstrate statistical trends. The opening segments cluster the PUs associated with West Berlin, the middle segments those associated with the border, and the final segments those located in Leipzig. The figure complements the contextual analysis but does not constitute independent evidence.

3.3.1 Western/Eastern

At the lexical level, the corpus contains 16 occurrences associated with the Western axis—15 instances of *occidental* and one of *Occidente*—compared with 10 associated with the Eastern axis—*oriental* and *orientales*. Approximately 61.5% of the references thus belong to the Western axis and 38.5% to the Eastern axis.

The trend graph shows that mentions of *occidental* cluster in the first third of the chronicle, where García Márquez describes the city's capitalist reconstruction: “West Berlin is not a city but a laboratory²⁰”; “in the territory of West Germany there are five radio stations...”²¹ (García Márquez, 2015, p. 644). This initial clustering reinforces the idea that the chronicler's gaze first settles on the space sponsored by the Marshall Plan and makes the Western sector the starting point of the evaluation.

The forms *oriental* and *orientales* are more dispersed across the middle portion of the text and are associated with East Germany, East German marks, and scenes of consumption. The result is a dual focus: *occidental* establishes the geopolitical frame of the capitalist experiment, whereas *oriental* is anchored in everyday economic life and the journey to Leipzig.

3.3.2 The twelve phraseological units across the text

The graph locates the PUs within three sections of the itinerary. Segments 1–4 contain *borrón y cuenta nueva*, *sin pies ni cabeza*, *llevar la batuta*, *cortina de hierro*, and *con la boca abierta*; this group links Western reconstruction to urban chaos and propaganda.

²⁰ Original Spanish: Berlín Occidental no es una ciudad, sino un laboratorio.

²¹ Original Spanish: en el territorio de Alemania Occidental hay cinco emisoras...

Segments 5–7 comprise *sacar partido de*, *arreglárselas*, *hacerse de la vista gorda*, and *no saber a qué atenerse*, associated with the border, monetary exchange, and the ambiguous enforcement of rules. Segments 8–10 contain *no cabe un alfiler*, *matar el tiempo*, and *entrar por un oído y salir por el otro*, which relocate the logic of the absurd in Leipzig and in the GDR's everyday malaise. The sequence does not demonstrate statistical differences, but it makes visible the narrative movement from the Western laboratory to everyday experience in the socialist bloc (García Márquez, 2015, p. 643–649).

3.4 The phraseology of the absurd

The four fields clarify the scope of the *phraseology of the absurd*. The term describes how PUs operate together in this chronicle to expose contradictions between planning and disorder, prosperity and propaganda, regulation and everyday practice. Their unity derives from the evaluative function they acquire in the co-text, not from a common grammatical structure.

In West Berlin, the PUs organize a sequence comprising the reconstruction procedure, US direction, and the intended propagandistic effect. At the border, attention shifts to the population's strategies and the ambiguous enforcement of rules. In Leipzig, the units translate crowding, bewilderment, and fatigue into bodily and affective experiences. This progression questions both blocs on different evidentiary grounds and avoids treating them as equivalent realities.

Muñoz Solano (2021, p. 4) characterizes García Márquez's hyperbole as “a mechanism of semantic intensions ('with an s' in Spanish) and intentions ('with a c' in Spanish)²²”—a play on semantic intension and authorial intention—capable of expanding or compressing semantic content. This formulation helps explain the evaluative intensity of certain passages, but it does not turn every PU into hyperbole. In the corpus, critique arises from the interaction among conventionalized expressions, enumerations, contrasts, and observed scenes. The absurd thus functions as an interpretive lens that makes the divided city's material and symbolic contradictions intelligible to the readership.

²² Original Spanish: resorte de intensiones ('con s') e intenciones (con 'c').

Concluding remarks

The analysis shows that phraseology participates systematically in the representation of the Cold War in *Berlín es un disparate*. The lexical overview reveals the predominance of the Western axis and identifies urban reconstruction, ideological confrontation, and economic circulation as the text's principal clusters. The twelve PUs give concrete form to these networks across four fields: chaos and disorder; spectacle and propagandistic façade; border and silent violence; and overcrowding and everyday malaise.

The study's contribution lies in relating the conventional meaning of the PUs to their evaluative orientation in complete passages from the chronicle. *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, *llevar la batuta*, and *con la boca abierta* articulate the critique of the Western showcase; units associated with the border reveal popular tactics and institutional ambiguity; and expressions situated in Leipzig transfer evaluation to the body and the emotions. The critique does not fully endorse either system: it identifies the West's propagandistic artifice alongside the material deprivation and affective malaise observed in the East.

The findings are limited to this chronicle and cannot be generalized to García Márquez's journalistic work as a whole. Analysis of other texts on Europe will make it possible to determine whether the phraseology of the absurd persists or changes across other itineraries.

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