

The Postcolonial Dialogue Within Talpense Men's Talk

Brett Falcon

Northern Arizona University

I observe how the historical tensions that have existed between Church authorities and their subjects emerge in the speech practices of working class men in Talpa de Allende, Jalisco, Mexico. Batalla identifies the tensions that commonly exist in neocolonial situations, namely, those tensions between the practices of dominant classes and subjugated classes of people that make up Mexican society today (1996, p. xvi). In the case of religion in Mexico, it is crucial to give attention to the asymmetrical access people had in the post-conquest years to positions of authority —and how these inequalities were based on the colonists' dominant understandings of culture and race. The facts that all clergy were Spanish, or at least, of Spanish descent for the two hundred years following the conquest in Mesoamerica, and that all of their subjects were of indigenous descent during this time frame, are significant to an understanding of social inequalities that exist in Mexico today. At the same time, it is necessary to observe the subtle ways in which subjugated people practice resistance to and problematize dominant and historically grounded institutional processes of power. The anticlerical discourse of working class Talpense men's speech practices points to historical tensions existing in Mexican society by an invocation of the conquest and events related to it in the Mesoamerican context.

In this paper, I investigate how a postcolonial dialogue is revealed in Talpense men's speech. Talpenses' linguistic practices shed light on the social forces and characteristics that motivate speakers to engage in criticisms of the Catholic Church. Tensions exist in male residents' discussions about the role of the Church in Talpa as they dialogue with the authoritative voice of the Catholic Church and comment on other processes of power linked to government and economic practices in their speech. Analyses of Talpenses' conversations reveal information about how people understand their own agencies in relation to the practices of Church and state in Mexico. It is important to attend to the ways in which people see their potential for social, economic, and spiritual success as being either limited or animated by their relationships to the Mexican Church and state. Linguistic anthropological analysis of these discussions illuminates how residents voice their own agency vis-à-vis the institutional powers that be in Mexico. Finally, residents' speech reveals and re-constitutes the "structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977) that act on them and mediate their relationships and identities in light of the Church and government in Mexico.

Gender has serious implications for the discursive practices in which a person is expected or normatively permitted to engage in the patriarchal society of Talpa. In many ways, linguistic practices are connected to the religious practices of this pilgrimage center. In a town where mass attendance is high (many people attend mass more than once a week), priest's roles in the public, ritual contexts of the Catholic Church have gendered implications for the other, secular speech activities in which Talpenses are

normatively expected to partake. Talpense working class men are the most likely to engage in discursive practices that critique dominant practices of the Catholic Church and Mexican government. The social dynamics that are implicated in Talpense men's criticisms of local and national processes of power in Mexico point to local hierarchies based on gender and class. Talpense women do engage in a critical discursive activity similar to gossip (in which they critique the behavior of individuals absent from the speech context), however they do not normally engage in outright discussions of the Catholic Church's institutional shortcomings.

1. Ethnographic Context and Methods

In their discussions of local economic activities, Talpense men express themselves as people who are situated in a postcolonial historical trajectory. Talpense men perceive the church administration and personnel as constraints on their access to social services and economic opportunities. The men with whom I talked, listened to, and recorded generally sold fruit and vegetables, medicinal herbs and drinks, religious arts and crafts, and flavored ice in the plaza. In their discussions of their relationships to the Church, Talpense men criticized the Church personnel's appropriation of funds generated by pilgrimages to the town. I did fieldwork in Talpa de Allende, Jalisco, Mexico over the summer months of 2007 with the goal of analyzing residents' speech practices in the contexts of exchange, leisure, and ritual. My husband, Eduardo Aranda Venegas—a Jalisciense—worked with me as a research assistant.

The first two transcripts presented feature two Talpense men, Vincent and Rene, who speak with Eduardo in the plaza; the third and fourth transcripts feature another Talpense man, Manuel, who speaks to Eduardo and me at his home. Vincent and Manuel exhibit competence as verbal artists in the ways that they parody a pious voice of Catholicism and thus point to the neocolonial context of Talpa (cf. Bauman, [1975] 2001). Vincent's and Manuel's conversations are representative of the stances that many Talpense men express toward the practices and politics of the local priests in Talpa. Their discursive practices thus provide critical postcolonial commentaries.

There follows two segments from a conversation between Eduardo, Rene, and Vincent. Vincent is a Jalisciense man in his seventies, who has previously lived in Talpa, but now resides in Guadalajara. Vincent frequently travels back and forth between the two places. We are in the plaza of the Catholic Church—the ever-present spatial structure in Mexican cities and towns. This recording of this transcript occurs right after we meet Vincent for the first time through our friend, Estela (who vends chilate roses in the plaza.) Vincent had been talking with Rene, Estela's nephew, who vends medicinal drinks in the plaza. Both Vincent and Rene agreed to let us record the interaction.

3 **Vincent:** la gente, la gente tiene miedo, la gente no lo hace
the people, the people have fear, the people don't do it (business)

4 V: porque **no están acostumbrados** a ser y arriesgar a hacer negocios (PAUSA)
because they aren't accustomed to be or to risk to do business (PAUSE)

5 V: **Están acostumbrados** ah ah ah estar **bajo huevos de cabrones**,
They are accustomed to be below the balls of stubborn men

6 V: **bajo huevos de patrones...**
below the balls of patrons

7 V: a que **nos den** atole con el dedo y medio tragar no mas
of they who string us along with corn beverage, and half a beverage no more

8 V: y **nos van a llevar** a la esclavitud como habia antes

and they go to take us to slavery like before

Vincent's speech denotes and indexes the social-structural processes that constrain working class people in Talpa. Wilce observes how the "mutual involvement" (Wilce, 2008, p. 97) of denotational and interactional texts recreates— or even creates— linkages between linguistic structures and the social realities invoked by the identity categories associated with such structures (Silverstein, 2004, p. 627). Immediately in line 6, Vincent's speech denotes and indexes two social categories —patron and client—in Talpa. The word *patrones* "patrons" in this line denotes not only a powerful social identity (i.e., a businessman, politician, or priest,)— its location within the rhythmic and repetitive parallelistic phrases (*bajo huevos de cabrones—bajo huevos de patrones* of lines 5 and 6) of Vincent's speech shapes an interactional text that indexes hierarchical relationships in Talpa (and more broadly the relationships that constitute Mexican and Catholic social structures.)

Wolf and Foster explain how patrons have the power to assist clients or "peasants"¹ with credit or work, as they mediate between urban and rural spheres (Foster, 1967, p. 9). Vincent's speech in line 4: *no están acostumbrados* "they aren't accustomed to" referentially constructs the limited agency clients possess in comparison to the agency of patrons in Mexican society. In line 8, Vincent's use of the phrase *nos van a llevar a la esclavitud* also denotes clients' lack of socioeconomic agency in their relationships with the patrons, the more powerful actors working within and outside the neocolonial context of Talpa.

The semantic roles of patient and agent in speech emerge from analysis of syntactic forms (cf. Ahearn, 2001, p. 120). To analyze agency in Vincent's discourse it is necessary to focus on the denotative forms or "information structure" (Wilce, 2008, p. 97) of his speech, and how this structurally indexes constraints on clients' agency. The structures of reflexive verbs in lines 7 and 8 *nos den* and *nos van a llevar* are indexical of the social constraints that practices of patronage impose on the agency or socioeconomic mobility of clients. Reflexive verbs in Spanish co-occur morphologically with the direct objects of the verbs. Vincent's use of the reflexive verbs in the present tense, *nos den* "they give us" and *nos van a llevar* "they are going to bring us" contemporarily locate "clients" (with whom Vincent identifies) in the role of semantic patient, and the "patrons" in the role of semantic agent.

Vincent's speech possesses agency. The metaphoric phrases, *bajo huevos de cabrones*, *bajo huevos de patrones* "below the balls of cabrones, below the balls of patrons" in lines 5 and 6 of his talk invoke a spatially stratified description of the social relationships endured by less fortunate people in Talpa. Vincent's use of these metaphoric phrases not only indexes clients' lesser access to socioeconomic agency—due to a location in a degrading position within the socially stratified universe of his experience; Ironically, Vincent's use of the term "balls" also indexes his own agency as he poetically critiques the practice of patronage by framing it (cf. Bauman, [1975] 2001) as a corrupt socioeconomic system. Vincent linguistically frames his stance toward political economic practices, by invoking and creatively critiquing the practices of patronage in Talpense (and Jalisciense) society. Vincent's speech conveys a form of agency in the critique he offers. His commentary sheds light on sociocultural knowledge associated with the "structuring structures" of the Church and economic practices (Bourdieu 1977, p. 78) in Talpa, and it indexes his postcolonial subjectivity.

The transcript below is of the conversation and it immediately follows where the last transcript ended.

¹ I use quotes around the term peasant because I do not wish to convey the derogative tone that sometimes accompanies this word.

9 Vincent: tu tienes escuela verdad entonces te voy hacer una pregunta por quien tenemos libertad horita, por quien?

You have schooling, right? Then I'm going to give you a question... Because of whom do we have liberty right now? Because of whom?

10 Eduardo: Ah por el cura Hidalgo

Ah because of the priest Hidalgo

[

V: exactamente

exactly

11 V: Ahí esta la... (lista??) yo no estoy platicando mentiras

There it is... (ready?) I am not talking lies

12 V: yo yo soy , un **analfabestia**

I I am an illiterate fool

13 Rene: analfabeta

An illiterate

14 V: no no la palabra correcta **analfabestia**

no no the better, the correct word (is) an illiterate fool

[

15 E: ja ja ja la palabra natural {laughing}

Ha ha ha the natural word

16 V: entonces de ser un **analfabestia** horita ya me siento diferente,

Then from being an illiterate fool, right now I feel different

17 V: de ser **analfabestia** {PAUSE}

from being an illiterate fool

18 V: Siéntate aquí para que no nos oigan... ha ha hablar

Sit yourself here so that they don't hear us talk

19 V: porque las cosas son secretas porque...

because the things are secret because

20 E: si me oyen dicen "ese pinche viejillo hay que mandarlo matar al hijo de su puta madre"

*if they hear me they say "that (f*****) old man, it is necessary to kill him, that child of (his) whore mother"*

Eduardo responds to Vincent's rhetorical question in line 9 by answering *Hidalgo* in line 10. *Hidalgo* denotes and points to an historical national hero who initiated the call to independence from Spain. In this context the name *Hidalgo* indexes a nationalistic, historical account that circulates in Talpa—and in Mexican society in general—of the Mexican War for Independence from Spain. The name *Hidalgo* is also indexical of the up rise by subordinate and middle class *Creole* classes toward ruling Spanish classes following the conquest up until the early nineteenth century.

In line 20, the phrase that Vincent is voicing: *al hijo de su puta madre* “one of the children of (his) whore mother” is a gendered trope of the violation that indexes the Mesoamerican experience of the conquest (cf. Lester, 2005, p. 294). His use of *su* in the phrase indexes colonial (conquistadors) and present day authorities or anyone who subscribes to authoritative accounts of historical and present day economic conditions. Lester argues that a variant of this discursive phrase—*hijo de la chingada*, “child of the raped mother”—is sometimes invoked today to index Mexican subjects’ gendered resistance to Americanized processes of economic and spiritual expansion (Lester, 2005, 294-296). She specifically examines how Mexicans currently use the phrase to index their resistance toward external forces (i.e., processes of media and neoliberal economic policies). In the context of Vincent’s speech the phrase indexes and voices his subjectivity as a contemporary, marginalized man in Mexico who locates his position and livelihood in a postcolonial trajectory. In using the phrase *hijo de su puta madre* —Vincent’s speech serves two obvious functions: it indexes a gendered humiliation experienced by marginalized men, and it frames colonial and neocolonial practices as corrupt.

In addition to analyzing the verbal performance and framing devices in this transcript, it is also important to also analyze the function of the double-voiced discourse in Vincent’s speech. Vincent’s speech in the surrounding context clearly shows that he is talking about violence and violation; the reported speech, *si me oyen dicen “ese pinche viejillo hay que mandarlo matar”* voices and frames the moral and subjugated position prescribed to working class Mexicans and the neocolonial political economic conditions in which his and other working class people’s livelihoods are at stake. According to Bakhtin, “double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324), meaning that as speakers we internalize the plurality of voices that configure a society, and that these voices emerge in our discursive practices. Bakhtin describes multivocality as the competition of multiple voices within a written text, language repertoire, or even within an individual’s consciousness (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 360).

Vincent’s use of *analfabestia* in lines 12-17 demonstrates his creative resistance by use of word play. This play on words is an example of what Bauman calls a “parodic counterstatement” (Bauman, 1996, p. 314). Vincent’s use of *analfabestia* indexes aversion and moral resistance to conditions of mass illiteracy affecting many impoverished people in Mexico. Vincent’s use of this phrase, and his insistence on using it even after Rene “corrected” him, hints that the conventional phrase Rene uses, *analfabeta*, euphemistically covers up processes of socioeconomic displacement.

The next two transcripts are from a conversation in the residential context of an elderly Talpense couple. Both husband and wife are present, but the transcript features the speech of the husband, Manuel. Manuel is in his late sixties, and he vends tamales and atole in the Church plaza with his wife Rita. Eduardo and I were also present during this recording. Manuel had previously been discussing his frustration with the constraints the priests in Talpa exercise on his economic activities when pilgrims visit the town.

95 Manuel: ¡Oye! es cierto que ellos llevan la tajada mas grande
Listen, it’s certain that they bring the most business

96 M: todo lo que traen los peregrinos
all that the pilgrims bring

97 M: {PAUSE} que vienen de por allá
that come from (from far away)

98 M: ya traen el billetito en la bolsa
and they bring the bills in their pockets
[demonstrates with hand in pocket]

99 M: dedicado para ella, para la Virgen

dedicated for the her, for the Virgin,
[points to the Basílica]

100 M: y este... si es el gobierno, pues, sacan dinero
and (well)... yes is the government, well, (who) takes the money

101 M: de a madral de que rentan las calles diario en las fiestas
a mountain of money when they rent the streets daily (during) the fiestas

102 M: entonces
then

103 M: nosotros vamos de de la puntita de la colita
we go (at the tail end)

104 M: lo que nos queda
that's where they leave us

The phrase *nosotros vamos* “we go” in line 103, references the identity of working class Talpense vendors during the pilgrimage and Catholic fiesta activities from September until May in Talpa. The object and verb *nos queda* “they leave us” in line 104 both reference two conventionally opposed identities that emerge in the critical discursive practices of working class men —the Church and state authorities and working-class people.

Note, that in contrast to Manuel, Rita remains silent. Rita’s silence is partially an index of the limited access women have in the spoken contexts in the public arenas of Talpense society. Rita’s embodied actions express some form of hesitation to what Manuel is saying as she raises her hands to her face in line 91. However, since she refrains from outright agreement or disagreement to what Manuel says of the Church, her position remains ambiguous.

Manuel’s use of this phrase *puntita de la colita* “tail end” is similar to Vincent’s use of the phrase *bajo huevos de patrones* “below the balls of patrons” in that it depicts and indexes vendors’ underprivileged locations in relationship to authorities in Talpense society during the season of religious fiestas. Although referentially Manuel’s speech in lines 103 and 104 denotes Talpense vendors’ limited agency, his creative description and critique of social space in Talpa indexes his own agency. As does the metaphor in Vincent’s speech, Manuel’s use of metaphor effectively frames a critique of corrupt socioeconomic relationships and practices that are sanctioned by the Talpense Church and state.

The transcript from Manuel’s discussion below briefly follows where the last transcript ended.

121 Manuel: aunque sea padre y “hereje ” padre no le hace sea que hay que decir la realidad
even though one is a priest, and a “heretic” priest it’s not important (for them) to tell the reality

122 M: porque no somos “brutos” porque después de tanto estudio que vienen a quedar
because we are not “brutes” because after so many studies they have they come to remain

123 M: en “unas personas salvajes” porque “no son humanos” deben de ser humanos con la gente
“wild people” because “they aren’t human” they should be human beings with the people

What is ironic about Manuel’s speech is his parody of the voice historically deployed by colonial and religious authorities to assess the practices of heterodox Christians or non-Christian pagans. Manuel’s speech invokes the pious Catholic voice of local authorities —and past conquistadores. In his parodic

deployment of the nouns “*hereje*,” “*brutos*,” and the phrases, “*unas personas salvajes*” and “*no son humanos*” Manuel simultaneously plays with the voice of religious authorities and critiques their practices in Talpa.

2. Findings

Giddens argues (1979, p. 58), “The accounts actors are able to provide of their reasons are bounded, or subject to various degrees of possible articulation, in respect of tacitly employed mutual knowledge.” In order to give a fuller picture of the ways Talpenses draw linguistically from the town’s religious repertoire it is necessary to focus on their multivocal expressions. In addition, we must ask how people (like Vincent and Manuel) use language creatively to challenge social “structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). We should also note where access to certain linguistic forms is limited for certain persons (i.e., that Talpense women do not generally voice criticisms at the Church because criticisms of institutions in Talpa are gendered).

What linguistic features mark the critical discourse practice regarding dominant institutional practices in Mexico? Conventionally, working class male speakers in the presence of other male speech participants, reflexive verb constructions which juxtapose working class and elite identities, double-voiced discourse, and tropes of irony and of the body (i.e. word play) compose a critical message containing critical assessments of current political economic conditions grounded a history of postcolonial experience. Phrases containing body metaphors are characteristic of Talpense men’s critical discourse genre (Manuel’s *vamos de la puntita de la colita* “we go at the tail end” and Vincent’s *bajo huevos de cabrones*, *bajo juevos de patrones* “below the balls of stubborn men, below the balls of patrons”). In using these phrases, Vincent and Manuel frame the dominant practices of Mexican authorities (specifically Church and State institutions) as the corrupt sources of structural violence that have supplanted the socioeconomic well-being of many working class Mexicans today.

Men’s engagement in this postcolonial and historical evaluation of the Church inextricably links them to another discursive forum (usually in the course of one speech event) where they give voice to their marginalized experiences in light of contemporary Mexican economic and government contexts. Talpense working class men’s understanding of their historical relationship to the Catholic Church provides them with a critical frame of reference by which to express discontent regarding their relationships with other powerful institutions in Mexico—for example, the government.

Bauman proposes that speech, or verbal art, as performance should be taken seriously (2001 [1975]). The word play in Vincent’s and Manuel’s speech should be taken seriously because they direct various voices in their discourse to convey significant information about their conscious relationships to the dominant practices of the Catholic Church in Talpa. Vincent’s word play reveals his critical stance toward the dominant contemporary and historically grounded practices of religion, government, and education that constitute the social reality of Talpa. His and Manuel’s tropic speech forms simultaneously function to get a subordinate position across and to undermine the authoritative accounts of powerful institutions in Mexico.

I look at Talpense men’s discourse for evidence of postcolonial identities. The content, style, composition, and contexts of the men’s talk point to a postcolonial dialogue with the church and state of Talpa. Men dialogue with modern ideals of liberty and equality as they invoke the conquest to illustrate critiques of current, neocolonial hierarchies in Mexican society. By engaging in this discourse, men critically assesses practices entailed by patron-client and priest-layperson relationships—relationships that frame and recreate hierarchies in Mexican society—hierarchies that have served a number of purposes, but have also historically structured and limited peoples’ access to education and government and business negotiations in Mexico.

References

- Ahearn, Laura M. (2001). Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 109–137.
- Badone, Ellen (1990). Introduction. In Badone, (Ed.) *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (pp. 3-23). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bauman, Richard (2001 [1975]) Verbal Art as Performance. In Duranti, (Ed.) *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader* (pp.165-188). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Bauman, Richard (1996). Transformations of the Word in the Production of Mexican Festival Drama. In Silverstein and Urban, (Eds.) *Natural Histories of Discourse* (pp. 301-328). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Besnier, Niko (Manuscript). Humor and Humiliation: Narratives of Modernity on Nukulaelae Atoll. Amsterdam: Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1977 [1972]) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2001) Structures, Habitus, and Practices. In Erickson and Murphy, (Eds.) *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory* (pp. 533-42). New York: Broadview Press, Ltd.
- Cahn, Peter S. (2005). A Standoffish Priest and Sticky Catholics: Questioning the Religious Marketplace in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*. 10:1, 1-26.
- De Vries, Pieter (2002). Vanishing Mediators: Enjoyment as a Political Factor in Western Mexico. *American Ethnologist*. 29: 4, 901-927
- Dubisch, Jill (1990) Pilgrimage and Popular Religion. In Badone, (Ed.) *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (pp.113-139). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Duranti, Alessandro (1997). *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foster, George (1967). The Dyadic Contract: a Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village. *American Anthropologist* Vol. 63: 173- 1192.
- Foster, George (1967). Introduction: What is a Peasant? In Jack M. Potter, May N. Diaz, and George M. Foster, (Eds.) *Peasant Society: A Reader* (pp. 1-13). Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Giddens, Anthony (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hill, Jane (1995). The Voices of Don Gabriel: Responsibility and Self in a Modern Mexicano Narrative. In Tedlock and Mannheim, (Eds.) *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (pp.97-147). Champagne-Urbana: The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.
- Lester, Rebecca J. (2005). *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

- Silverstein, Michael (2001 [1981]). The Limits of Awareness. In Duranti, (Ed.) *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader* (pp.382-401). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wilce, James M. (1998). *Eloquence in Trouble: The Poetics and Politics of Complaint in Rural Bangladesh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilce, James M. (2008). Scientizing Bangladeshi Psychiatry: Parallelism, Enregisterment, and the Cure for a Magic Complex. *Language in Society* 37:1, 91-114.
- Wolf, Eric R. (1955). Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 57: 3, 452-471.
- Wolf, Eric
1982 *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.