Language, Signs, and the Performance of Power

The Discursive Struggle over Decolonization in the Bolivia of Evo Morales

by

Rosaleen Howard

The spread of the term “decolonization” in Bolivian political discourse since the coming to power of Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism—MAS) in January 2006 is an example of the ways in which shifts in the use of language can be seen to constitute the very processes of change of which they are part. Opposing ideologies are being expressed through various channels (language, dress, symbolism, and ritual) in the struggle for dominance in the public sphere. The mass media play a dual role, both providing illustrations of the discursive processes at work and discursively countering decolonization. Despite media opposition, Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo are developing the structural conditions necessary for previously marginalized voices to be heard.

Keywords: Language, Political discourse, Symbolism, Ideology, Decolonization

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heightened period of change such as we are witnessing in Bolivia, we can make use of Voloshinov’s (1986 [1929]: 23) notion of the “multiaccentuality” of the ideological sign. I shall also propose that such meaning making can be treated as evidence of the discursive “performance” of power, both enacting and counteracting the decolonizing process.

## THE IDEA OF DECOLONIZATION IN BOLIVIA TODAY

The struggle of Morales and the MAS to overturn the existing hegemony in Bolivia is encapsulated, for the purposes of this article, in the range of understandings (or multiaccentuality) brought to the idea of decolonization, some of which are mutually compatible while others are in tension with each other. In an everyday sense, “decolonization” connotes reversal of the colonial order, undoing the wrongs of history, and releasing colonized subjects from domination, injustice, and oppression. With independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, decolonization for the creole elites in the Andean states was something quite different from what it would have been for the indigenous populations, for whom independence never amounted to liberation. In the contemporary period, by contrast, and from the standpoint of the Bolivian indigenous and peasant movements, decolonization involves overthrowing the exploitative, unjust, and discriminatory order that persisted beyond independence from Spain and into the twentieth century; it evokes a range of related meanings from liberation to emancipation, democracy, and autonomy.

On the one hand, indigenous decolonization can entail ideological radicalism, whereby a return to a former order, or *pachakuti* (Quechua for “world turning”), is sought, as with the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti (Pachakuti Indigenous Movement—MIP) led by Morales’s erstwhile rival Felipe Quispe. On the other hand, for Bolivian intellectuals such as Silvia Rivera (2006) and Esteban Ticona (2006), decolonization is about shifting the epistemological center, allowing new forms of knowledge to evolve and be recognized—a kind of “decolonization of the mind.” Yet again, for the president with a “post-neoliberal” socialist agenda, decolonization will be achieved through economic strategies such as nationalizing the hydrocarbons industry and channeling its profits into social-benefit programs and legislation based on the terms of the new constitution. In addition, decolonization forms the backbone of the proposed new education bill drafted in 2006 by the education minister Félix Patzi (Howard, 2009b), and Article 78.I of the new constitution explicitly states: “Education is . . . democratic, participatory, communitarian, *decolonizing*, and of quality” (República de Bolivia, 2009, my emphasis). In line with the politics of Evo Morales and the MAS, the concept applies to all the social sectors that have been marginalized through elite political, economic, and cultural hegemony.

In response to the “left-indigenous” inflections of the concept thus far identified, we find countersignifications coming from the opposition, for example, a reading of decolonization as a lowering of standards and verbal attempts to discredit or silence the decolonizing discourse of the Morales regime.
DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE OVER DECOLONIZATION: EXPRESSIVE CHANNELS

I shall take textual examples of the discursive struggle over decolonization from press and television news coverage, scholarly papers, and Internet sites, focusing on the following periods: (1) early January 2006, around the time of the presidential inauguration; (2) August 2006, when the Constituent Assembly was inaugurated in Sucre; and (3) February–March 2008, after the Constituent Assembly’s December 2007 approval of the draft constitution. As far as language is concerned, decolonization is expressed at a number of levels: in the thematic content of discourse, in the form of language, from vocabulary to phonetics, and in the choices speakers make concerning which language to speak, when, and to whom. Other semiotic channels—dress code, ritual, and symbol—can also be read as discursively producing decolonization and at times intersect with each other and with language itself in mutually reinforcing ways. The media play a dual role. On the one hand, the press and television provide us with illustrations of the discursive processes at work. On the other hand, as a terrain of struggle they can be found to perform decolonization discursively or to counter it with oppositional discourses.

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, VOICE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF POWER

The word “language” here refers to a communicative tool in which functional competence is acquired (“linguistic code”) and is distinguished from “discourse,” the ideologically grounded and value-laden modes of signification constitutive of the social order. However, whereas Foucault (1971) envisages discourse as a primarily verbal phenomenon, I shall use it more broadly to include nonlinguistic symbolic forms that may replace or support the verbal message. In the Andes, the meaning-bearing functions of clothing styles and ritual acts are correlated with linguistic messages in a myriad of culturally specific ways, constituting what Hall (1982; 1997) describes as “signifying practices.” Following Butler’s (2007) usage of “performance” in her work on gender identity and that of Howard (2009a) as a tool for deconstructing Andean cultural identities, I propose the expression “performance of power” as a means to conceptualize power as exercised through signifying practices, that is, as discursively constituted in such practices rather than external to them.

The related concepts of “dominant discourse” and “voice” have the greatest explanatory power for exploring the issues of hegemony, counterhegemony, subversion, and resistance that lie at the heart of the discursive struggle over decolonization as conceived here. The dominant discourse—a set of stylistically and ideologically privileged parameters for the discursive production and reproduction of the dominant social order—is hegemonically constituted, associated with a given socio-historical moment, and access to it may depend on variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, educational level, and economic status. The idea of voice allows us to talk about the ways in which colonized groups were historically prevented from, variously, evolving a discourse that would be heard under the colonial order, developing their own languages
for an increasing range of functions over time, and acquiring new linguistic
codes sufficiently well for effective interaction with the wider society.

Lack of voice, social injustice, economic inequality, and political disempower-
ment have been intimately linked throughout Andean colonial and postco-
lonial history. Pratt (1996: 10) evokes the symbolic violence of this experience
by commenting on the detail that the rebel Tupac Amaru’s tongue should
have been cut out upon his execution in Cuzco in 1781: “The cutting out of the
tongue . . . is one of the few things that both sides in the conflict did to each
other’s bodies. Apart from whatever symbolic castration is involved, surely
this practice has meaning with respect to the problem and power of language
in colonial struggles.” And the symbolic power of language (see also Bourdieu,
1991) is at the heart of Spivak’s (1993) discussion in her foundational paper
“Can the Subaltern Speak?” as Beverley (1999: 29) proposes: “When Gayatri
Spivak makes the claim that the subaltern cannot speak, she means that the
subaltern cannot speak in a way that would carry any sort of authority or
meaning for us without altering the relations of power/knowledge that
constitute it as subaltern in the first place.” Beverley (1999: 28) takes up the
idea that discourse is constituted as a nexus between power and knowledge
(Foucault, 1980) and further formulates his point in terms of a “conceptual
binary of verbal fluency-power versus mutism-subalternity.” His observations
invite us to propose the hypothesis that a shift in power/knowledge relations
might enable historically subordinated groups and individuals to be listened
to in languages and/or registers that had hitherto rendered them mute and
that, furthermore, a dialectical relationship between discursive and political
empowerment might potentially evolve. I shall explore this hypothesis by
presenting textual evidence of the discursive struggle over decolonization in
Bolivia through verbal, aesthetic, and ritual channels.

LINGUISTIC DECOLONIZATION UNDER MORALES?

Because of the persistent dominant ideology of Spanish monolingualism
and concomitant limited functions for Amerindian tongues in the wider soci-
ety, linguistic diversity, mediated by racially constituted social hierarchies,
still produces inequality today. Some indigenous language-speakers feel stig-
matized by their linguistic and cultural identities (Howard, 2007); even when
they use Spanish, they suffer from lack of access to the dominant discourse. In
educational, political, and professional spheres this means a perceived lack of
competence in the appropriate register (stylistic features, pronunciation, and
range of vocabulary that differentiate formal language from “popular” speech).
With the coming to government in Bolivia of a party whose main power base
lies in the indigenous sectors (62 percent of the population according to the
2001 census) and one that proposes a decolonizing agenda, we can ask in what
ways decolonization reveals a linguistic face. To put it in terms of Spivak’s
(1993) question, is the subaltern becoming able to speak?

The 2001 census reveals a 50:50 split in the Bolivian population between
Spanish monolinguals and those who speak an indigenous language with
or without Spanish in addition. Since the 1992 census, there had been a
10 percent dip in the level of bilingualism, with a corresponding rise in
Spanish monolingualism, although the percentage of monolingual indigenous
language-speakers had remained stable at around 11.5 percent (Molina and Albó, 2006). The latter stability may be related to the fact that intercultural bilingual education for indigenous children was implemented in primary schools during the same period, under the terms of the 1994 education reform (Law 1565) (Howard, 2009b). This law has been discredited under Morales because of its association with the 1990s neoliberal reforms, and the new education reform bill still awaits passage through the congress (Howard, 2009b). This legislative hiatus has created the perception of a paradox whereby the country’s first indigenous government is perceived as doing little to support the use of indigenous languages.

In fact, the new constitution makes plentiful provision for such support, although the necessary legislation has yet to be passed. Furthermore, legislation alone cannot bring about linguistic democracy; negative social attitudes and the habits of bilinguals (who tend to use Spanish in formal contexts) are hard to shift. Nonetheless, the constitution declares 36 indigenous languages as official alongside Spanish and requires government representatives to use “at least two official languages,” one of them Spanish (Article 5.II, República de Bolivia, 2009).\(^5\) MAS government members conduct their affairs mainly in Spanish, constitutional reform notwithstanding. From electoral success it does not necessarily follow that the linguistically mediated barriers that previously kept them out of government have suddenly vanished; there is a legitimacy attached to the speaking of Spanish in formal settings that will be slow to be modified. This said, even speaking Spanish, unless it is encoded according to the norms of speech of the socially dominant classes, is not a panacea for linguistic discrimination (Freeland, 2008).

When Morales came to power, public attention was drawn to his signifying practices and those of members of the MAS government. In certain respects these practices did not conform to the norms of communicative behavior expected of a ruling group. The very fact that they attracted comment suggests that the aforementioned hypothesis regarding the relationship between linguistic, discursive, and political empowerment was beginning to be borne out. I shall argue that negative public reactions to such signifying practices can be read as an expression of resistance to the changing political order. For clarity of argument, as far as examples relating to the verbal channel are concerned, I shall discuss first issues of language form (linguistic code and register) and then issues of voice and its representation in the media. Insofar as both sets of issues have to do with legitimacy and delegitimation of language use, it will be seen that they are interrelated.

1. How should a president speak? Evo Morales was born into an Aymara community in the Bolivian altiplano but spent much of his youth in Spanish- and Quechua-speaking parts of the country to which his parents migrated for economic reasons. The territorial uprooting that comes by definition with migration is one of the most common triggers of shift to Spanish among speakers of indigenous languages, in the Andes as elsewhere in Latin America (von Gleich, 2004; Howard, 2007: 110–115). The social-geographical setting for Morales’s subsequent political career—among the highland immigrants of the coca-growing Chapare lowlands (Canessa, 2006: 250)—would have further reinforced his use of Spanish as a language of intercultural communication. To judge by his public speeches, he does not use the
The present research has depended on secondhand information as to whether Morales “really” speaks any of the Amerindian languages of highland Bolivia, and I have so far found no categorical knowledge of this matter in the public domain. In my view, the lack of certainty on this question is due in part to the problematic relationship between language use and social-class identity in the Andean states. To press for a categorical answer, I believe, would be to overlook the intrinsically contingent nature of Andean cultural identities and their linguistic dimensions, as much in everyday life as in today’s identity politics. As Canessa (2006: 250) observes, “While [Morales] refers to his indigenous roots . . . he is careful to avoid presenting himself and his party as simply an indigenous party, even as he lays out his programme with regular reference to indigeneity.” The relationship between indigenous identity and use of the indigenous language can, furthermore, be considered in light of the 2001 Bolivian census, according to which 62 percent of the population over age 15 identify themselves as indigenous while only 49.3 percent claim to speak an indigenous language (Molina and Albó, 2006). It is therefore not incongruous for Morales to claim Aymara identity while making little active use of the language. Canessa sums up the problem facing analysts: “[Morales] is frequently reported in the press as speaking both languages, although there is some debate as to whether he speaks either at all” (see also Albro, 2005, as cited by Canessa), and the journalist Waldo Peña Cazas, writing in the Sucre daily Correo del Sur (July 20, 2008), ironically refers to Morales’s mother tongue as one “which even he, apparently, cannot identify.”

The above discussion notwithstanding, according to the biographer Martín Sivak (2008: 56), Morales made a conscious decision with regard to language use: “As the years went by, Evo opted to speak Spanish because, in his own words, it allowed him to centralize (centralizar) communication. Some campesino and originario rivals were to criticize his inability to make speeches in Aymara or Quechua.” The term centralizar expresses the fact that speaking Spanish enables Morales to have broad appeal rather than being more narrowly aligned with the indigenous groupings in the country. His speech is pitched in an informal register with which he reaches out to his popular base, speakers of indigenous languages and Spanish alike. Any one paragraph from the text of his speech at the opening of the Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, can serve to illustrate the passion he brings to his public speaking, without paying too much attention to the rigors of normative syntax. For example, “Now we are here, all together to change that mistreated Bolivia, those humiliated peoples, those discriminated peoples, despised, to tell our brother constituents, our sister constituents, that clearly they have an enormous responsibility to change our Bolivia” (Morales, 2006). In contrast to former vice president Cárdenas and MIP leader Quispe, furthermore, Morales rarely uses traditional Andean metaphors (references to the ayllu and pachakuti) in his speeches, which is indicative of a more class-based than indigenist orientation. His use of the various Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní words for “beautiful day” to describe the dawning of the new political era in his inaugural address to the Constituent Assembly (Morales, 2006) is an exception to this general rule.
When I was in Bolivia in August 2006, friends and colleagues in academic circles frequently expressed their views on the way Morales and other members of his cabinet spoke Spanish. A professional linguist and leading figure in the intercultural bilingual education field, implicitly touching on the issue of the relationship between language and power that preoccupies theorists such as Voloshinov (1986 [1929]), Gramsci (as in Ives, 2004), and Bourdieu (1991), reflected on whether those newly in power might be consciously using informal registers of Spanish in formal settings as “a challenge to lay down a new set of norms” (L. E. López, personal communication, August 2006). It is not my intention here to enter into phonetic analysis. Suffice it to say that occasional slippage reveals Aymara influence on the way Morales pronounces his vowels—the notoriously stigmatized feature of Andean Spanish known as mote (Cerrón-Palomino, 2003). “Prodocción” for “producción” is one example from my 2006 fieldnotes.

Whether there is substance to the metalinguistic comments of observers (myself included) is less important to my argument than the fact that they express a popular perception. When negatively expressed, this perception confirms the point that speaking Spanish is not a panacea for linguistic discrimination. The following sardonic, though not unsympathetic, comment from the journalist Waldo Peña Cazas (Correo del Sur, May 27, 2007) is illustrative:

There is something for which people will not forgive Evo Morales: his mixed-up Spanish (español atravesado) with strange interferences. People say “he can’t speak,” the assumption being that speaking well means subjecting oneself to grammatical rules and linguistic usages that, strictly speaking, are no more than the norms of speech of the ruling classes. The problem of Goni Sánchez [ex-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada] was worse, but his Spanish was mixed up with English and that was socially acceptable.

Peña Cazas’s words confirm the point made by the sociolinguist Deborah Cameron (1995: 11), writing of language ideologies in the English-speaking world, that a focus on language may be a smokescreen for social discrimination actually rooted in nonlinguistic anxieties; concerns about language, in her words, “get recruited to non-linguistic concerns.” The above extract provides insight into the way in which metalinguistic discourse may channel and mask the fears of the “ruling classes” as political power shifts its center of gravity in Bolivia under Morales.

A year later, as the same writer pursues the argument (Correo del Sur, July 20, 2008), we note his ironic allusion to what is commonly construed as the president’s indeterminate linguistic identity:

Evo Morales . . . expresses himself in a style of language that is unusual in public life, not only because of his social background but above all because his Spanish is influenced by a mother tongue which even he, apparently, cannot identify. What I notice in Evo’s language is greater simplicity and some relation between what he says and what he thinks, although he doesn’t always think well. He doesn’t use the impressive but anodyne fillers (muletillas) typical of traditional political language, meaningless expressions whose only function is to get the speaker off the hook.
It also seems ironic that the head of state does not seem to adhere to Article 5.II of the new constitution. The quotations from both Sivak and Peña Cazas suggest that Morales is open to criticism from several sides because of the way he chooses to speak: from his indigenous base for not speaking their languages and from the middle classes for using an “inappropriate” register of Spanish. At the level of linguistic code it seems he is in a bind (cf. Graham, 2002). In terms of language ideologies, the issue is who is recognized as having the power to determine the norm. There is a tension here between Morales’s apparent aim to reach out to all groups alike and the facts of the relationship between language and symbolic power.

2. “Let her speak when she learns Spanish!” During the Constituent Assembly proceedings, the MAS delegate Isabel Domínguez objected to the declaration of an adjournment at a moment when a heated party political divide over the decree nationalizing the gas industry had opened up in the chamber. As she spoke, she switched from Spanish, the general language of the proceedings, to her mother tongue, Quechua. Despite the fact that 55.8 percent of the delegates identified themselves as “originary or indigenous” and the fact that of this percentage 64.7 percent were speakers of an Amerindian language (Albó, 2008: 55), there was no rule allowing these languages to be officially used in the assembly. Domínguez’s “code switching” provoked the following reaction (La Prensa, August 24, 2006):

The Chair didn’t know whom to give the floor to. Then whistles were heard and everyone was speaking at once. People became more exasperated when the MAS delegate Isabel Domínguez spoke out, “We came here to work . . . ,” she said. The words spoken in Quechua generated protest from the [right-wing party] PODEMOS benches. “Let her speak when she learns Spanish!” shouted the PODEMOS representative Beatriz Capobianco, while her colleagues drummed their fists on the desks.

Domínguez was attacked for inappropriate use of Quechua in a space where, at least tacitly, only the language of coloniality, Spanish, was deemed in order. In terms of the theoretical premises set out earlier, hers was an emergent subaltern voice upon which a member of the existing hegemonic order sought to reimpose mutism. The conflict was not over Domínguez’s words as such but over the appropriateness of the sign system she employed. In Voloshinov’s (1986 [1929]) terms, the episode provides a clear example of the playing out of social struggle in the use of language. From this example and the previous one it is apparent that issues of linguistic decolonization pertain as much to use of popular Spanish as to the use of indigenous languages in the public sphere.

PERFORMING DECOLONIZATION THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF DRESS

In the Andean countries, clothing styles constitute a terrain of symbolic struggle in almost equal measure to language itself. A number of researchers (e.g., Femenías, 2005) have examined how dress (among other items, the poncho in men and the dirndl skirt [pollera] in women) serves to index hierarchies and boundaries variously conceived in terms of region, class, ethnicity, and gender. Crucially, the potential for style switching in dress is exploited in ways similar to code switching in language, according to social setting and
for effects of power and identity construction. In contemporary Bolivian politics, dress is a key dimension of the performance of power in the terms previously defined.

During the early Morales period, public attention focused on the semiotics of the president’s dress style, which variously evoked his working-class roots and the pre-Columbian past, according to the setting and the audience he was seeking to reach. Soon after winning the elections he embarked on a series of visits to world leaders in Latin America and Europe and the United Nations in New York City. His clothing style, which departed from dress code conventions for such occasions, incited media commentary: “Since Morales began his tour of America and Europe, . . . his outfit, characterized by a pair of slacks, a shirt (usually short-sleeved), a sweater, and a windbreaker (chamarra), has attracted attention” (La Razón, January 6, 2006). The matter became the subject of media polemic turning on whether his clothing could be read as a sign of disrespect for his hosts or, conversely, as a “declaration of principles” (La Razón, January 6, 2006, citing the Spanish columnist Rosa Belmonte). Either way, the powerful performative function of dress choice was recognized, in the words of Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubi, writing in the Cochabamba newspaper Opinión (January 8, 2006), as follows: “There is nothing more potent in political communication than to see businessmen, ministers, presidents, and even kings, honoring, when not adulating, a simple man in a sweater . . . but one who is president of his country. Morales knows what he is doing, and he is conscious of the international media dimension of his image.”

The symbolism of both dress and ritual was invoked still more powerfully during the president’s ritual inauguration at the ancestral site of Tiwanaku on January 22, 2006. As Postero (2007: 1) describes it, “He walked barefoot over paths covered with coca leaves to the top of the Akapana pyramid, [where] “traditional spiritual leaders dressed him in a red tunic, covered his head with a four-cornered cap representing the four cardinal points, and bestowed on him the staff of office marking him as the Apumallku.” While the sweater and chamarra worn on the international circuit had conveyed an uncompromising message about “staying with his class roots,” the red tunic and headdress at Tiwanaku evoked the pre-Columbian past, yet with the ceremony being transmitted globally via satellite technology.

The inauguration process also involved formal investiture in the Palacio de Gobierno (Government Palace), where Morales was decorated with the insignia of the nation: the presidential sash in the colors of the Bolivian flag and the Simón Bolívar medallion. The power of the symbolism involved here had led former President Carlos Mesa to speculate about the self-image the president might choose to project on this occasion: “It will be the first time in history that a president receives the sash and the medallion of office without a suit and tie. But how will he dress? Will he wear a chamarra in the blue of his party and an open-necked shirt? Will he wear a poncho, which he has never normally worn in his life?” (Landes, 2006). In the event, Morales hit on a compromise that says much about his skill in negotiating divergent semiotic fields. He had a jacket tailored from alpaca cloth in natural colors and trimmed with a woven Andean design. This is the dress code he has now adopted for all state occasions. The semiotic skill at work here lies in the fact that the jackets are contemporary in form while being vernacular Andean in
substance—a combination reminiscent of the “cultural reconversion” that García Canclini (1992) describes in his work on cultural hybridity. Morales is not alone in signaling a new sociopolitical order through his style of dress. A number of his women ministers retained their Andean clothing style on assuming office, two examples being Silvia Lazarte and Casimira Rodríguez, whose social origins are indexed by their use of the pollera and wide-brimmed straw hat of the warm valley region.

PANPIPES, FLAGS, AND GARLANDS: POPULAR PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE OF POWER

In addition to dress, other semiotic channels, such as music, flags, and garlands, mediate the performance of power among the MAS and its supporters in the social organizations. On February 28, 2008, the congress passed a set of laws designed to facilitate a call to referendum on the new draft constitution. Media coverage of the occasion provides evidence of popular participatory aspects of political performance in which the symbolic dimensions of language, dress, and music combine. During the week, indigenous and peasant organizations had mobilized from all over the country and converged outside the congress (in the Plaza Murillo in La Paz) to pressure the government to pass the laws. Dressed in full indigenous regalia, they set up camp with consorts of panpipe players (widely associated with ritual practice in Andean cultures), banners displaying the names of their organizations, and the rainbow flag (wiphala)—a checkered ensign in the colors of the rainbow that symbolizes the pluricultural nation. Article 6.II of the constitution declares the wiphala an official symbol of the Bolivian state alongside the red, yellow, and green tricolor, the national anthem, the coat of arms, and certain floral emblems. When Morales emerged to announce the legislation, he was greeted with cheers, shouts, and bursts of triumphal music from the crowd.

The tone of Morales’s speech to his supporters (“I feel that once more the Bolivian people are making history,” TV Boliviana news footage, February 28, 2008) and the theatricality of the Plaza Murillo occupation contributed to the performative repositioning of the locus of power from the traditional parties to the MAS, and features of attire matched the rallying language. Morales and his ministers had their necks draped with garlands, and there was a festive air. In rural community festivals in Bolivia, garlands festoon the statues of saints and flowers adorn people’s hats. In the contemporary political context the garland can be seen as a means to honor the wearer and evoke celebration. In other settings, such as when speaking to the armed forces, Morales’s style is more sober; while he wears one of his trademark woven jackets, the garlands are absent.

MEDIA ROLES IN THE DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE OVER DECOLONIZATION

The sources used in this study have in common that they mediate between the live events and the viewer, listener, or reader on the receiving end. Each text (whether written or oral in origin) has been encoded (selected, edited,
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(re-)presented) to give it the shape it has. In the case of the mass media, this process may amount not merely to “mediation” but to “mediatization,” in terms of Cottle’s (2006) distinction. Cottle (2006: 9) emphasizes the “performative involvement and constitutive role” of the media in their relation to conflict, as opposed to a role of “reflection” or even “representation” of the events reported upon. This perspective ties in with Erick Torrico Villanueva’s (2008: 37) observation regarding the increasingly “techno-political” role of the media in Bolivia, whereby “political space” becomes “predominantly framed and defined by the media.”

The media appear not only to mediate the struggle over decolonization in Bolivia under Morales but also to engage that struggle as active players. The examples I offer invite us to ask whether the intervention of the media can be seen to put a brake on the government’s ability to evolve its own agency—whether “techno-politics” allows members of the new political class to “speak for themselves” or stifles their newfound voice. At the time this research was conducted, the Bolivian daily press was without exception controlled by private enterprise and/or oligarchic groups that had little sympathy with the MAS. Its editorials tended to be relentlessly antigovernment. With regard to television the same could be said with the exception of Channel 7, TV Boliviana, which represents the interests of the government of the day.

ANTIDECOLONIZATION DISCOURSE IN THE MEDIA

The discursive struggle over decolonization is attested to in examples of counterdiscourse that cropped up in the print media with some regularity in 2006. Critics and political opponents wasted no time in attempting to redefine decolonization in ways that delegitimated it and Morales. A vitriolic attack by a supporter of the Nación Camba (Camba Nation, a right-wing social movement based around Santa Cruz) was given a manifesto-like full-page spread in the Cochabamba broadsheet Los Tiempos (Carvalho, 2006). This text merges multiple discursive lines of attack: it creates a caricature of decolonization that transforms respect for indigenous languages and practices into disrespect for nonindigenous culture and then implies that Morales is a hypocrite for failing to adhere to the caricature. In addition, it identifies the MAS program with foreign radicalism as personified by Hugo Chávez. According to this distorted version, decolonization requires rejection of “the damned Spanish language” (el maldito castellano) and nonindigenous clothing (“The chamarra and sweater have nothing to do with the clothing of the Collasuyo”) and would condemn as “imperialist” modern technology such as cell phones (la tecnología celular imperialista). Thus, in right-wing discourse, cultural decolonization morphs into the rejection of everything nonindigenous rather than the end of centuries-long oppression of indigenous peoples and cultures that it signifies to MAS supporters. By this fictitious standard, Morales fails to live up to his call for decolonization. Furthermore, the reference to Morales’s use of the cell phone “to communicate with his friend Chávez” activates Bolivian right-wing anxiety over the president’s friendship with Venezuela’s left-wing regime. In right-wing Bolivian discourse “Chávez” is an ideologically charged sign that stands for erosion of democracy and attacks on private economic initiative, whereas in MAS discourse it is identified with the struggle for social
justice and resistance to transnational interests. In Carvalho’s (2006) text, language, dress, modern technology, and Chávez stand as ideological signs that condense the discursive struggle over decolonization; in the (de-)colonial setting, they are inherently multiaccentual signifiers in Voloshinov’s terms.

In a further example, Cuba acts as a similarly multiaccentual sign. El Diario (a La Paz broadsheet) carried a piece whose author expresses the hope that decolonization in Bolivia will not be along the lines of “the Cuban model of generalized poverty” (Zeballos H., 2006) and goes on to criticize the former education minister Patzi’s call for a decolonized education system purportedly to be founded on the knowledge and science of Bolivia’s “other civilizations.” This extract is striking for its inherently circular logic, by which it seems to defeat its own professedly antidecolonizing argument: “[Patzi’s proposal] is fantastic musing (elucubración fantasiosa), for if such civilizations and forms of knowledge had existed, the indigenous people would not be living with technological backwardness and poverty despite the attempts that have been made for years to incorporate them into modern development, lamentably with poor results.” Once again, the contested meanings of decolonization reveal the discursive struggle over this key sign. Whereas the MAS equates decolonization with liberation through the transformation of institutions that reproduce indigenous subordination, right-wing discourse counters with decolonization as the reproduction of “backwardness,” which is counterposed to what the right considers a superior Western “modernity.”

MEDIA COMMENT ON THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

The Constituent Assembly installed in Sucre on August 6, 2006, became a process whereby for the first time representatives of the traditional political parties and the indigenous and peasant social organizations shared a space for deliberation on a national project, defined as the “refounding of Bolivia” (Valcarce, 2008). As the work of the assembly’s commissions got under way, the media criticized the indigenous delegates’ mode of participation. One example of such criticism appeared in the Cochabamba daily Opinión (August 22, 2006):

Disorder and nervousness. The first meetings of the Constituent Assembly have not been the best from an organic and institutional point of view. This is understandable, because the majority of the delegates are people who have never had experience of taking part in meetings with a sense of order and basic internal principles. Many of them come from unions and other organizations where the norm is improvised debate and shouting to make themselves heard and get motions passed. . . . The disorientation of the delegates reached such an extreme that some of them thought they could perform ritual libations with alcohol during the work sessions, although of course those who broke the rules in this way justified the act by saying it was “indigenous custom.”

This delegitimation of ritual libation can be read as an attempt to suppress indigenous practice when it appears to intrude into a site of state political power—indeed, when it appears to take on a role in performing such power. Insofar as ritual is a communicative medium, this is equally an attempt to reimpose mutism, to deny the indigenous performance of power, and to define social and political boundaries according to the norms of the status quo.
However, the practice of ritual libation (ch’alla) to which the journalist refers, which involves drinking and sprinkling alcohol and uttering a few words of blessing, is widespread across all social classes in Bolivia in both rural and urban settings. The ch’alla, an act of communication with the gods of the Andean cosmos, is performed as a means to bless crops and animals in indigenous communities, just as the urban middle-classes perform it to bless a new vehicle or inaugurate a house or public building. Ch’alla Tuesday, after Carnival, is a public holiday on which people focus on the rituals owed to their houses, businesses, and fields, as the case may be. The ritual authority to perform the ch’alla is usually conferred on a shaman in all these settings. Thus, it can be seen as a primordial feature of indigenous culture that has been integrated into that of the society at large. The journalist’s tone suggests that he sees the introduction of the ritual into the conduct of the Constituent Assembly as evidence of a worrying articulation of indigenous ritual practice with the ceremonial norms of “modernity” of the criollo-mestizo class. However, given the wider context, to perform the ch’alla as a means of securing a successful outcome for the collective drafting of the new constitution is a wholly appropriate act.

It is not, however, just indigenous ritual that this journalist attempts to delegitimate. He also creates an image of procedural incompetence on the part of the indigenous delegates by forging a discursive link between their union and social-movement backgrounds and the supposed disorder, rowdiness, and ineffectiveness of the social organizations they represent.

COMMENT ON MINISTERIAL APPOINTMENTS AS DECOLONIZING STRATEGY

In making his nominations for new ministerial appointments in 2006, Morales broke with conventional criteria of eligibility for such posts and in so doing put into practice social and political values that can be seen as decolonizing. A journalist in Opinión (August 23, 2006) comments ironically on this move:

The new Bolivian ambassador to the United States is a long-haired career journalist with no previous diplomatic experience and scant knowledge of English. Gustavo Guzmán was perplexed when President Evo Morales called him at six in the morning to make an appointment with him at the presidential palace, where he asked him to represent the revolutionary government of Bolivia in Washington. “I said, ‘compañero Evo, please’”—these were Guzmán’s first words to the president, as he reported them to the Associated Press. He asked Morales if he thought he was capable of taking on such a task. “And he answered me, ‘And you, have you ever imagined what capacity I have to be president of the Republic?’ With that reply it was impossible for me to say no.” Guzmán is the latest surprising nomination made by Morales since he took over as the first indigenous president of Bolivia in December. A former domestic servant is minister of justice. A peasant woman coca grower with little formal education heads the assembly that is rewriting the constitution, and a singer of the Quechua language is ambassador to France.

Voloshinov (1986 [1929]: 23) problematizes meaning not merely as the product of a referential relationship between language (or some other signifying medium) and the world but as the outcome or ongoing trace of social struggle. Such a struggle is inherent in two important ways in this extract, both of
which reveal aspects of the mediatization of the political process. Struggle inheres, first, in the selection of particular ideologically loaded signs and, second, in the omission of factual content in the interest of encouraging one “preferred reading” (Hall, 1982) over another. In light of Hall’s (1982: 62–65) thesis regarding the role of the media in consensus formation and Cottle’s (2006: 9) emphasis on performance, we can read the item as a performative attempt on the part of the press to hold back the structural forces of change that the coming to power of the MAS has set in train. However, alternative readings emerge if we look at it in light of Voloshinov’s argument regarding the “social multiaccentuality of the ideological sign” (1986 [1929]: 23); depending on who the readers are, different meanings will be activated.

The article opens with reference to the appointment of Gustavo Guzmán as ambassador to the United States and goes on to refer to other “surprising” nominations. The writer’s use of rhetoric betrays ironic intention, which we can read at least as criticizing and at most as mocking the governmental choices. This is achieved through an accumulation of ideologically embedded semiotic pairings whereby, if measured against the dominant consensus in Hall’s (1982) terms, social structural categories “normally” kept separate are incongruously juxtaposed: the “career journalist” with “no previous diplomatic experience,” “long hair,” and “little English” as ambassador to the United States, the “former domestic servant” as minister, the “peasant woman coca grower with little formal education” as president of the Assembly, the “singer of Quechua” as ambassador to France.

The irony is better appreciated if we set the text against the actual selection criteria that Morales presumably exercised, which the writer omits to mention. For his U.S. ambassador he turned to a well-established left-wing journalist whose experience included having been general editor of the weekly magazine Pulso and a member of the Bolivian Communist Party in his youth (http://www.bolpress.com, July 5, 2006, accessed October 10, 2009). In this context, the sign “long-haired” (backed up by a photo of Guzmán that shows this feature in close-up) can be taken to reference “socialism” broadly speaking; in the context of Morales’s Bolivia, it is also a potential signifier for “Che” (the iconic long-haired leader of revolution in Cuba and Bolivia alike) and likely to be taken as a questionable attribute by the readers of this middle-of-the-road newspaper.

Similar negative intention is suggested by the failure to specify the background of Casimira Rodríguez, general secretary of the Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de las Trabajadoras del Hogar (Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers) between 2001 and May 2006 (http://www.bbcmundo.com, July 7, 2006, accessed October 10, 2009), referring to her instead as a “former domestic servant,” and the election of a distinguished woman leader of the Chapare coca growers’ federation (Silvia Lazarte) to the presidency of the Constituent Assembly is countered by dubbing her a “peasant woman coca grower.” The “singer of Quechua” is the internationally renowned Luzmila Carpio, long resident in France, whose qualifications are best described in Morales’s own words: “She was already our French ambassador. She was a legitimate compañero Luzmila Carpio’s status
as ambassador in France” (http://boliviscopio.blogspot.com, April 23, 2006, accessed October 10, 2009).

A further feature of rhetoric with ironic effect lies in the dialogue alleged to have taken place between Guzmán and the president. The term of address “compañero Evo” references the Latin American left, Fidel in particular. In the words attributed to the president, mediatized as reported direct speech, the head of state is said to delegitimate even his own qualifications for high office, again, as measured against an unspoken consensus. In this textual context, the sign “first indigenous president of Bolivia” is also pejorative, linking “indigenous” to “poor judgment.” The positive qualifications of Morales’s appointees link them to a track record in left-wing politics and the social movements; these details are omitted from the text in favor of value-laden signs that demean them and the president who chose them in the eyes of a readership unsympathetic to the MAS.

In this text, “long-haired” and “compañero” are multiaccentual signs in Voloshinov’s terms: insofar as they reference “revolution,” for those on the left they stand for social justice and resistance to imperialism while for those on the right they evoke a political-economic model that would threaten the status quo. It is this openness of meaning that makes them powerful constituents of ideological struggle in discourse. This press item illustrates the role played by the Bolivian media in constructing narratives that counter the bid for power of the newly ruling party; the mediatization is in itself a performance, conjuring up a vision of incongruity in the actions of the government that will play to the prejudices of a certain readership.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper illustrates how the contest for hegemony in Bolivia is being conducted (among other means) as a discursive struggle over decolonization in which oppositional signifiers come into play: linguistic codes, discursive styles and registers, communicative practices, modes of dress, ritual symbolism, and mediatized performances of all of these. Following Voloshinov (1986 [1929]) and encouraged by Hall (1982), I have shown how encoded signification has become a terrain of struggle. On the one hand, such encodings provide a medium for decolonizing practice: new ways of speaking, dressing, and interacting socially may be seen to constitute new ways of performing power. However, the role of the media in both portraying the political process and, to some extent, performing it (Cottle, 2006) through its interpretation of politicians’ words and deeds is evident. The mediatization of the political agenda is thus an important dimension of the discursive struggle over decolonization. As far as the conservative mainstream media are concerned, this involves countervailing performances: an attempt to “drive inward,” in Voloshinov’s (1986 [1929]: 23) phrase, the struggle for change in the social order.

The bid for hegemony of Morales and the MAS-affiliated bloc threatens to disrupt the language/knowledge/power paradigm that has hitherto helped define relations of power. The media, in contesting the communicative practices of the new administration, attack the inner workings of the nascent
counterhegemony and have the capacity thus to undermine the government’s ability not merely to speak but to have its speech recognized, listened to, and legitimated in the public sphere. However, despite the oppositional efforts of the mass media, as president Evo Morales can be seen as an effective performer of popular power, mobilizing the diverse correlating sign systems that signify decolonization for a varied range of publics. With regard to Spivak’s (1993) foundational question whether the subaltern can speak, in my view we are witnessing in Bolivia the gradual evolution of the structural conditions necessary for previously marginalized voices to be heard. Through their discursive performances of decolonization, Morales and the MAS are giving Spivak an affirmative reply.

NOTES

1. For other examples see Howard (2008; 2009b) and Mayorga Ugarte’s (2007) study of the synergy between discourse and the political process applied to the neoliberal era of “Gonismo” (1985–1989).

2. In his inaugural speech to the Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, Morales (2006) juxtaposed the terms “decolonization,” “nationalization,” and “de-neoliberalization.”

3. The violent confrontations between government supporters and the opposition that have flared up since 2006 are not considered “discursive” expressions of struggle for present purposes and are therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Evo Morales convincingly won a second term of office on December 6, 2009, and the number of representatives of the social movements elected to the Chamber of Deputies significantly increased (http://www.boliviainfoforum.org.uk, accessed December 7, 2009). The consolidation of the national political position of Morales and the MAS will lead to an evolution of the issues discussed here.

5. The wording of Article 5.II is vague: “The plurinational government and the departmental governments must use at least two official languages. One of these must be Spanish” (República de Bolivia, 2009). (All citations from Bolivian sources are my translations from the Spanish.)

6. Suppression of the vernacular (whether voluntary or involuntary, and leading to an apparent “inability” to speak it) is due to a complex of social, cultural, and economic factors, not least the stigma attached to the indigenous languages in Bolivia during the decades of Morales’s childhood and youth. Given this context, his shift from Aymara to Spanish may have been less a matter of choice than Spivak’s use of the word “opt” suggests. Ben Kohl has informed me that Morales apparently understands both Aymara and Quechua and speaks a little of both; that his Aymara is not fluent is understandable in that he ceased to live in an Aymara-speaking area when he was 17 (Kohl, personal communication, December 2009, also citing Andrew Canessa, personal communication).

7. Whether the Spanish-speaking “popular” sectors explicitly approve of Morales’s way of speaking and see it as a legitimation of the nonelite register they share with him remains to be confirmed by future research.

8. In sociolinguistic terminology, “code switching” refers to the switch from one language to another in the course of a conversation in which the participants speak more than one language.

9. Simultaneous translation was subsequently introduced in the Constituent Assembly but only for the plenary sessions (F. Garcés and P. Regalsky, personal communications, 2009). For analysis of the Isabel Domínguez episode, see Garcés (2008) and Valcarce (2008: 45).

10. Morales’s sweater captured the popular imagination to such an extent that the style was copied and commercialized by Bolivian knitwear company Punto Blanco (http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas, January 20, 2006; accessed December 12, 2009).

11. It is notable that a similar level of “linguistic reconversion” is not present in Morales’s speech habits, where elements of the Amerindian languages are rarely present. See the photo gallery at http://evonobel2007.org/ for the complex semiotics of Morales’s public dress styles, whereby he attempts to be many things to many people.
12. The wiphala has a long history in Andean identity politics (van den Berghe and Flores Ochoa, 2000: 14–15; Pajuelo Teves, 2007: 147–156). In a global context, the rainbow flag is a quintessential multiaccentual sign, also being the symbol of racial democracy in postapartheid South Africa and the flag of the Gay Pride movement.

13. The MAS-aligned daily El Cambio was launched since the research was carried out and therefore has not been drawn on for the present study.

14. I gratefully acknowledge Rosalind Bresnahan’s contribution to the analysis of the examples in this section.

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