
THE UNMENTIONABLE: VERBAL TABOO AND THE MORAL LIFE OF LANGUAGE

Who Asked You, Condom Head?

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Abstract

One kind of Mexican street vendor is a foulmouthed clown, whose off-color spiel uses racism, sexism, double-entendre, and nationalist chauvinism to assemble and entertain a crowd and, ultimately, to part its members from their money. Vulgar and highly formulaic, the clown's language reaches its creative peaks when the clown engages individuals—whether passers-by, shills, or marks—in direct interaction and subjects them to insult and verbal abuse for manipulative effect. I consider not the interactive insulation of taboo language but, in this highly public context, its subversive exploitation for both entertainment and commercial gain. [Keywords: Mexico, albur, taboo language, street performance, riddle, humor, urban life]

Walking on almost any Mexico City street one is assaulted by a constant symphony of cries: from food sellers and market vendors; from hawkers of chewing gum, CDs, pornographic postcards, or useful educational pamphlets on buses and metros; to purveyors of cheap jewelry, toys, or medicinal products in public plazas. The call of the street vendor is the come-on, the invitation, the summons which is a requisite opening to many commercial interactions.

Such sounds are not confined to recent times. Bernal Díaz de Castillo (1927), on his fourth day in Tenochtitlán in November, 1519, accompanied Cortés to the great market plaza of Tlatelolco.

“The noise and bustle of the market-place below us could be heard a league off, and those who had been at Rome and at Constantinople said, that for convenience, regularity, and population, they had never seen the like.” (Díaz 1927:178)

More than three centuries later, Fanny Calderón de la Barca, a Scottish schoolteacher newly arrived in Mexico City as the wife of the first Spanish ambassador to the newly independent country, describes the “extraordinary number of street-cries in Mexico, which begin at dawn and continue till night, performed in hundreds of discordant voices, impossible to understand at first” (Calderón 1982[1842]:76).

Working public spaces to extract money from passers-by, street performers face first the problem of how even to assemble an audience. Recruiting and retaining spectators, and transforming their reluctance and suspicion into openness, collaboration, generosity, and perhaps even complicity is a trick that, among fast-talking *merolicos* (street vendors) in Mexico, only the most accomplished can bring off reliably.

One flavor of Mexican *merolico* is a kind of foulmouthed clown whose *spiel* involves heavy doses of otherwise taboo language—racism, sexism, *albur* (double entendre male sexual joking), and nationalist chauvinism, not to mention toilet jokes—to bring members of a crowd together and, ultimately, to part them from their money. In this article, I present fragments of the performances of a single virtuoso clown, known as *Tontolín Seso Loco*, “Little-dummy Crazy-brain,” who works the crowds in a central Mexico City plaza jammed on weekends with people in search of cheap entertainment. Research with this and other *merolicos*, which I have pursued as an ongoing ethnographic hobby for the past two decades, is

inspired by ethnographic studies of language in markets, both in Mexico (see Flores 1984, 2003; Bauman 2001, 2004) and elsewhere (for example, Lindenfeld 1978, 1990; Kapchan 1995, 1996).

Jacqueline Lindenfeld distinguishes largely on formal linguistic grounds between what she dubs “calls” and longer and more elaborate “spiels” in French marketplaces. The former are short and simple.

“[T]hey contain formal features which enhance the vividness of the message, thus drawing people’s attention to the sender. For one thing, these advertising calls are usually uttered in a very loud and high-pitched voice, so that they dominate any other kind of talk at the marketplace.” (Lindenfeld 1990:54)

The latter are

“[a]nother form of oral advertising at French urban marketplaces...which also has an extremely distinctive mode of delivery: high volume (often achieved through the use of a microphone), remarkably continuous flow and sustained tempo, very skillful use of prosodic features. Even more so than in the case of vendor calls, the resulting effect is that of a performance, with the speaker creating his own imaginary stage through the manipulation of verbal and non-verbal “props” as he “hawks” his goods.” (Lindenfeld 1990:69)

Bauman (2004) takes up Lindenfeld’s distinction and links it to a simple functional division. Lower priced, common items may be offered for sale with simple, repetitive calls.

“Calls...are formally condensed, made up of a relatively lean inventory of formal components and devices mobilized to identify the commodity for sale, recount its salient attributes, state its cost, and solicit the sensory, cognitive, and social engagement of the customer with the product and its vendor toward consummation of the sale.” (Bauman 2004:80). Higher priced, less frequently purchased goods require the more elaborated spiels.

“Declaimed by true verbal virtuosi, [spiels] are longer, more complex, heteroglossic utterances, which incorporate other primary genres and

speech styles in an insistent cascade of poetic and persuasive words designed to attract and hold an audience of potential buyers for more expensive, less routinely purchased goods...Spiels are adapted to getting customers to buy goods that they had not, perhaps, intended to buy when they came to market, or goods that are costly enough to require more considered decisions.” (Bauman 2004: 80–81)

In her 2000 thesis on merolicos in Mexico City’s main downtown plaza, La Alameda, Dení Sobrevilla characterized the clown variety—the merolicos she calls *Los Bromistas* (the jokers)—as follows:

“This type of merolico attracts the attention of a crowd by telling jokes, and he can gather together more or less the same number of people as an herbalist. In the first part of his act he asks the audience for a voluntary contribution, and then he pretends to do a magic trick. In order to bring this off he needs the help of confederates; then finally he sells a booklet of magic tricks or jokes, or perhaps laxative chewing gum.”¹ (Sobrevilla 2000:12, my translation).

The clown’s routines resemble those of stand-up comics and involve some of the same popular (which is to say, “vulgar”) motifs, if not some of the same one-liners. They resonate in linguistic and interactive form with a range of ancient genres, some of which were also used for crowd manipulation: from riddles (Abrahams and Dundes 1972, Bauman 2004:Ch. 3), set-jokes, and abusive heckling and response, to the double-entendre of Mexican *albur* (Mejía 1985, Beristáin 2001), the insulting “dozens” of American inner cities (Abrahams 1972, Labov 1972a), or even the *flores* (lit., flowers) or *piropos*—elaborate and sometimes even elegant² suggestive remarks—directed at passing women on the streets of Mexico (Conde 1971, Zarebska 2006) and indeed throughout the world (e.g., Gardner 1980).

In this particular public context we encounter not the interactively achieved insulation of ‘taboo’ language from potentially negative effects, but its spectacular if subversive exploitation, both to entertain a crowd and to milk it for financial gain. Not only does Tontolín promiscuously fail to avoid taboo language, but he re-projects his aggressive vulgarity as direct, sincere, honest, and down to earth: his true, unvarnished nature, exemplar of how we (common people) really are.³ He packages it together with a series of highly politically incorrect caricatures—extracted with effortless and

almost magical speed from observable and projectable “identities” ascribed to members of the public at hand—and thereby configures his (virtual) interlocutors, his assembled but in part verbally invented public, as having a specific nature and temperament: people who understand and accept this way of talking, and thus this way of being in the world.

Figure 1. Condom Head.



Though highly formulaic, Tontolín’s language shifts subtly between voices and interactive stances as he moves through his audience, and it reaches peaks of “unmentionability” at the moments when the clown engages individuals—whether passers-by, shills, or marks—in direct interaction for maximal manipulative effect. Here is the sequence from which I have composed my title. Tontolín passes the hat (which is actually a battered chamber pot—as he says, “for the little shit you’re going to give me, isn’t a chamber pot appropriate?”) to extract coins from his audience after warming them up with a series of comic routines.

[1] Condom Head (September 10, 2006).

amigo de cabeza de condón
bienvenido, gracias

*Friend with the condom head,
welcome and thank you.*

te ves bien con esa gorra güey	<i>You look good with that cap, fool.</i>
pareces pito ambulante fíjate bien verdad	<i>You really look like an ambulatory penis, in fact.</i>
((Moves on to another member of the public))...	
amigo de atrás ¿ya me distes?	<i>Friend in the back, did you pay me?</i>
¿no traes?	<i>You have no money?</i>
tonces ¿a qué vienes pendejo?	<i>So what did you come for, asshole?</i>
te enamoras de la muchacha	<i>You fall in love with this girl</i>
la llevas a pasear—	<i>And you take her out—</i>
((Another person steps up unasked and drops a coin in the chamber pot.))	
a ti ¿quién te pidió pendejo?	<i>And who asked you, jerk?</i>
ay ¡cómo hay pinche gente barbera!	<i>Geez, some people are really uncivilized.</i>
pérate que te toque güe:y	<i>Wait your turn, idiot.</i>

Even though these are routines Tontolín has used again and again with different crowds, his assessment of how to play each fleeting encounter is instantaneous. His first target undeniably does look like a walking penis wearing a condom on his head. (See Figure 1.) The next person, overanxious to drop a coin in the chamber pot, is immediately labeled a bad-mannered lout: *pendejo* (jerk), *pinche gente barbera* (fucking barbarian), and *güey* (idiot, fool⁴). In the stream of abusive insults, the clown never misses a beat.

For present purposes, what interests me about the verbal virtuosity of my Mexican *merolico* teacher is how he brazenly gets away with speaking ordinarily unspeakable things over a loudspeaker in a public park on crowded afternoons in the very center of Mexico City. How, moreover, does he use such talk to conjure in his audience both valor and a sense of obligation, which he then shamelessly turns to his own purposes? The *merolico* projects his mode of speech as straightforward and direct: however impolite or vulgar it may seem, this is the way we talk when we are being ourselves: plain people, using plain talk, sophisticated but unpretentious denizens of the Mexico City street. The *merolico* is, moreover, a virtuoso exemplar: never

tongue tied or at a loss for words, quick, fluid, and, in short, enviable in his verbal abilities. The obligation imposed on the crowd follows directly from the fact that the clown is also entertaining: haven't you been laughing and having a good time? Shouldn't I then be paid for my work? Finally, Tontolín plays upon an element of danger for every potential target: if you are facing the constant possibility of being verbally assaulted, isn't the valorous thing to do simply to face and withstand the risk?

From the very beginning of a performance, the clown organizes both the physical and the aural stage so as to set a particular tone. Talking constantly into a handheld microphone so that his voice blares across the central plaza of the Alameda, even as he is still donning costume and makeup (Figure 2), he begins to warm up the public by adopting a recognizable, highly marked verbal stance vis-à-vis the passersby. His language, as much as his striped shirt and clown pants, marks him as who he is.

[2] Clown Pants (September 10, 2006).

((dons shirt))

Bueno	<i>OK</i>
a:nde cabrón.	<i>Damn right!</i>
ya así hasta me siento artista	<i>Now I actually feel like an artist.</i>
ya me fue bien, güey	<i>I had good luck, buddy⁵</i>
ya me rayé.	<i>I got striped (= I succeeded).</i>
ay güey,	<i>Ay, fool,</i>
pensé que no me habían echado tirantes de este	<i>I thought they hadn't put suspenders on these (trousers).</i>
...	
¿cómo me- me visto aquí?	<i>How do I dare to get dressed here?</i>
me vale madres, ¿verda,' güey?	<i>I don't give a shit, do I, fool?</i>
en vez de que ya empiece ya preparado	<i>Instead of just getting ready before I start.</i>

Tontolín displays his unconcerned, devil-may-care attitude—“this is the kind of direct, unashamed person I am”—in the guise of ironically self-critical almost intimate reflection, despite the fact that his amplified remarks are broadcast to the public. Single epithets color the stream of self-deprecation with tiny drops of taboo: impolite but common terms addressed to his assistant—*cabrón* ‘cuckold, bastard,’ *güey* ‘idiot, fool’; the ubiquitous vulgar modifier *pinche*—falling somewhere between “damned” and “fuckin’”; and, of course, the coarse calling out of the multivalent “mother” in *me vale madres* (I don’t give a shit).

The tone is set not only by the vulgar diction, but by the clown’s unabashed substantive and generic impropriety. As he launches into the show, for example, Tontolín takes a miniature parodic stab at a religious benediction.

[3] Nombrando a Dios.

nombrando a Dios y a la
Virgen María

*In the name of God and the
Virgin Mary*

que todo que me valga

*May everything that is
valuable to me*

ni se vaya para fregar la
pulquería

*Not go for fucking up the
pulque bar.*

Thus begins the first serious work of the day: gathering together a crowd which will be the target of the afternoon’s business. The technique is simple, but demanding. The clown addressing humorous, insulting remarks at passers-by, inducing a few of those so addressed to stand and watch the show, but mostly luring others to join the circle and thus unwittingly to become his accomplices in merciless mockery. Much of what he mocks (aside from, say, the police—common targets of public derision) is personal appearance and demeanor.

[4] Pinche flaquito.

señor que viene

The gentleman who is coming up

bienvenido

Welcome

pase a tomar asiento, jefe

Please take a seat, boss

ya vamos a dar comienzo.	<i>We're about to begin</i>
¿no se va a quedar a ver el espectáculo?	<i>Aren't you going to stay and watch the show?</i>
se va a poner bueno.	<i>It's going to get good</i>
ahorita nos e- nos encueramos todos.	<i>Right now we're all going to strip naked</i>
y cuando venga la policía chingando	<i>And when the cops come to fuck us over</i>
nos metemos corriendo a la fuente	<i>We'll run and jump in the fountain</i>
no estén chingando	<i>They shouldn't fuck with us</i>
es un balneario.	<i>It's a swimming pool</i>
pero ¿no va encabronado verdad?	<i>But you're not going away pissed, are you?</i>
más le vale, ¿eh?	<i>Better not, eh?</i>
pinche flaquito	<i>Skinny little asshole.</i>

Note the exquisite, multidirectional and multiply laminated segmentation of vulgarity, which simultaneously partitions the audience (Holmes 1984) in deliberately strategic ways. “Don’t be angry,” says Tontolín (Figure 3), using a verb that incorporates the word *cabrón* and a 2nd person “polite” V form. “Better not,” he goes on, ending with an under-the-breath pseudo-vocative slap: an abusive epithet added to ‘skinny,’ and the whole turned mock-affectionate with an added diminutive, thus *pinche flaquito* (skinny little asshole).⁶ There are, therefore, even in the barefaced use of vulgarity, apparent strategies of containment—the formal pronoun, the mitigating diminutive—though they have a certain ironic flavor, somehow permitting Tontolín more to unleash than to muzzle his foul mouth. (See Figure 4, especially the lefthand side.)

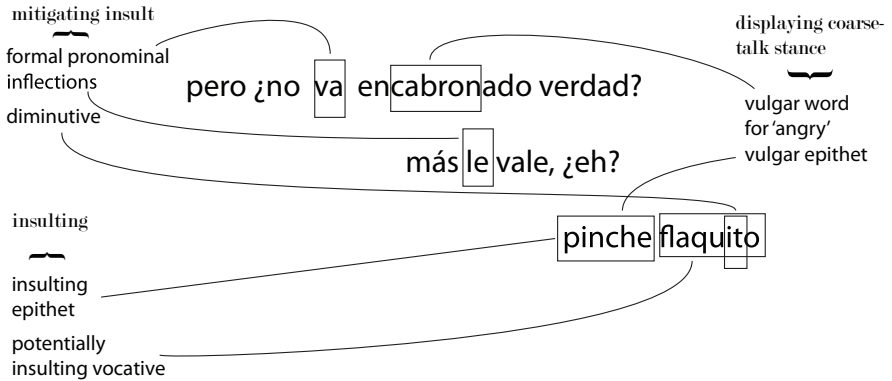
Figure 4 also shows a recurrent strategy in Tontolín’s exploitation of the passing through to assemble a crowd. Tontolín is a master of manipulating voice and target, able sometimes to insult an explicit addressee in a way that only the overhearing audience can fully appreciate—a central feature of

Mexican *albur*. Note that the “mitigating” pronominal inflections indicated in Figure 4 exploit the formal coincidence of the Spanish polite 2nd person V form and the 3rd person singular, so that there is some ambiguity in the final lines of the clown’s spiel about whether he is addressing his hapless victim or merely describing him to his audience. Note that though the start of his spiel in (4) is formally aimed at the passing man—it addresses him directly (“The gentleman who is coming up, take a seat, boss”)—it simultaneously invites the gathering crowd of onlookers to try to identify the clown’s target. Tontolín’s carefully shifting calibration of addressivity via pronominals and other related devices (Silverstein 2003)—including offhand, dropped remarks (Fisher 1976) like his “skinny little asshole” coda⁷—deserves a more detailed treatment than I can give here. Note, however, that the dismissive character of this final dig, as his ostensible addressee leaves the proscenium, makes clear how much the true intended audience here is the complicit public, whose amusement at the transgressive abuse aimed at a receding member of their own number must be mixed with the constant vicarious thrill of knowing that they themselves are imminently in danger of being similarly singled out. Anyone can be next.

Now, in quick succession, as he calls out to passers-by to attract the attention of a crowd, Tontolín constructs a linked series of insultables. He

Figure 2. “Don’t go away pissed.”



Figure 3. Pinche flaquito.

targeted at “addressee” → targeted at public

addresses without fail every passing group of young women (as well as others not-so-young), though they may work hard to ignore him.

[5] Pocahontas.

Ay mira	<i>Oh look</i>
por ahí viene más gente	<i>Over there more people are coming</i>
bienvenida amiga de las trenzas	<i>Welcome, Miss, you with the braids</i>
señorita que traes trenzitas	<i>Miss, the one with the braids!</i>
ahí en frente	<i>There in front.</i>
usted que parece Pocajontas.	<i>You! who looks like Pocahontas!</i>
¡te hablo!	<i>I'm speaking to you!</i>
ay pinches viejas	<i>Ah, damn chicks.</i>
no hacen caso	<i>They pay no attention</i>
se las madreamos	<i>We'll beat them up</i>
vas a ver	<i>You'll see!</i>

He assaults as alleged jerk-offs any children (and, indeed, just about any male) hapless enough to walk by with hands in pockets.

[6] Chaquetitas.

¡niño!	<i>Kid!</i>
sácate las manos de ahí, hijo	<i>Take your hands out of there, son!</i>
no vayas jugando canicas.	<i>Don't go playing marbles!</i>
ire, le vale madres	<i>Look, he doesn't give a shit.</i>
se siente resabroso, mire	<i>It feels really good, look!</i>
¡chaquetitas!	<i>Little jackets!</i>
deja ese-	<i>top that-</i>
no este es chavito	<i>No, he's just a kid.</i>
¡chambritas! ((laughs))	<i>Little coats!</i>
deja ese vicio, hijo	<i>Quit that vice, son</i>
<i>((Here another young kid strolls by, also with hands in pockets.))</i>	
ire de otra vuelta	<i>Look, and then another one</i>
se viene motivando por atrás	<i>behind is getting inspired!</i>
¡no mames! ((laughs))	<i>Don't shit me!</i>
un güey por delante	<i>One idiot in front,</i>
y otro por detrás	<i>and another behind</i>
a ver qué se siente	<i>I wonder what it feels like</i>
la turca	<i>Turkish style!</i>

Here Tontolín instantly deploys a clever play on words: *chaquetitas* (little coats) < *chaqueta* (man's jacket)—a fairly standard vulgar albur euphemism for the masturbating hand⁸—reduced lexically to *chambritas* (little jackets) < *chambra* (woman's jacket) in deference to the kid's young age.

The vexed issues of ethnicity and class, never far from the surface in virtually all social intercourse in Mexico, also appear in the “insultable

categories” that Tontolín’s initial crowd-gathering spiels exploit. In particular, the specter of indigeneity haunts his mocking of the men and women parading around the Alameda on a weekend. It may be a gaggle of dark-skinned girls dressed for the city but obviously from the country.

[7] Las primas de la India María.

mira	<i>Look,</i>
ya están llegando más artistas conocidas	<i>More well-known artists are arriving.</i>
las primas...	<i>“The cousins....”</i>
((long pause for comic effect))	
de la India María. ⁹	<i>“...of Maria the Indian”</i>
ahorita van a empezar	<i>Soon they’ll start saying</i>
“ii, (güerito)	<i>“Hey (Blondie),</i>
ya me chingaron mis huaraches.”	<i>“Now they’ve fucked up my sandals...”</i>

Or it may be a young obviously lower-class Mexican man with bleached hair.

[8] Cool hair.

a ese cabrón sí mira	<i>Look at that bastard</i>
se arregló su pelo chido	<i>He got his hair done very cool</i>
güero güero	<i>Blonde, blonde</i>
parece que le cagó una vaca mira.	<i>It looks like a cow shat on him, see?</i>
((laughter))	
es que él quiere ser gabacho, mira	<i>He wants to be a gringo, look!</i>
su pinche cara zapoteca igual que la mía	<i>His damn face is as Zapotec as mine.</i>

Figure 4. Cool hair.



Or it could simply be someone whose clothes look so formal or expensive—so non unmarked—for the popular atmosphere of the Alameda that he merits a mock bow, and burlesqued formal address, quickly followed by a hyper familiar colloquial claim to the assembled multitude: he's my *cuate* (pal; literally, twin).

[9] Licenciado.

pásele licenciado

After you, Mr. Lawyer

bienvenido licenciado

Welcome, Mr. Lawyer

interventor de gobernación...

*Representative of the Department
of State...*

ay es mi cuate ese

Ay, the guy's my buddy.

And not surprisingly Tontolín reserves special attention for foreigners, often addressing them innocently in English while mocking them mercilessly to their faces in supposedly cryptic Spanish—another clumsier if crowd-pleasing example of multiple addressivity. With those foreigners who speak Spanish, he allows himself more direct kinds of joking.

[10] Gabacho.

mira	<i>Look</i>
él sí le queda estar güero	<i>That guy looks good blonde</i>
porque es gabacho, mira	<i>Because he's a foreigner, see?</i>
¡hola, güero!	<i>Hello, blondie!</i>
((waves))	
¿de dónde vienes?	<i>Where are you from?</i>
((The güero answers that he is from Spain.))	
España, a,	<i>From Spain, oh?</i>
¿vas a invadir?	<i>Are you going to invade?</i>
ahorita nos puteamos	<i>Then we'll beat each other up!</i>
((laughter))	
a, no es cierto, güero	<i>No, that's not true, blondie.</i>
puro cotorreo	<i>Just kidding!</i>

Even here, joking about indigenous Mexican resentment against erstwhile Spanish invaders, Tontolín ratchets up the vulgarity index by moving from the neutral verb *golpear* (beat), through the vulgar colloquial equivalent built on the multivalent word for “mother” *madrear*, to the more deliberately provocative *putear* < *puta* (whore).

Much of Tontolín’s humor depends on ancient (if primitive) techniques for invoking double-meaning and sexual allusion, both verbally and otherwise. For example, he offers to teach women in the audience how to converse in signs, offering to let them slap him if he says a “dirty word,” but using gestures which though innocently glossed involve postures and body parts few of his “volunteers” are willing to employ. Or, after setting a young woman up by innocently asking her for her age, he reacts to the answer with a suggestive leer, whose sexual implications he can then turn back on his interlocutor.

[11] ¿Entonces ya?

t; ¿cómo te llamas?	<i>What's your name?</i>
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p; Perla	<i>Pearl.</i>
t; ((offers her the mike, eyebrow flash))	
p; Perla	<i>Pearl.</i>
t; Perla.	<i>Pearl.</i>
¿cuántos años?	<i>How old?</i>
p; 22	<i>Twenty-two.</i>
t; ((nodding))	
a entonces sí ya	<i>Oh, in that case you already...?</i>
((leer))	
¿verda que ya?	<i>You already ..., don't you?</i>
p; ¿ya qué?	<i>Already what?</i>
t; que si ya trabajas	<i>(I'm asking) if you already have a job!</i>
tú ¿qué chingados estás pensando?	<i>What the fuck were you thinking?</i>
pinche malpensada, ¿e?	<i>Damn dirty mind, eh?</i>

This is, again, a stand-up comic's trick, as is his use of bawdy riddles, some exemplars of which are to be found in the little joke book he hawks,¹⁰ and which he promotes by posing riddles to selected members of his audience. (If you want to contract him for a party or, as his booklet says, for your mother-in-law's wake, you can find his cell phone number in the booklet.) The standard magician's technique of misdirection he thus applies to riddled conceptual garden paths, pulling back from the brink of true lewdness (if he hasn't already fallen over the precipice) only when he reveals the innocuous answer to a young woman in the audience who is usually stumped to come up with anything but an unmentionable answer.

There are, I should mention, several possible native pedigrees for this riddling genre in Mexico. Gossen (1973) collected off-color riddles—he calls them proverbs—in Chamula Tzotzil,¹¹ and José Antonio Flores Farfán has published several collections of Nahuatl, Mixteco, and Yucatec riddles

[12] Tontolín reads a riddle and challenges a woman in the crowd to give the solution.

“Vamos a la cama	<i>“Let’s go to bed</i>
“A hacer lo que Dios nos manda	<i>“To do what God commands</i>
“A juntar pelo con pelo	<i>“To join hair with hair</i>
“Y adentro la carne humana.”	<i>“And inside, human meat.”</i>
((laughter))	
y ella, “¡A:y que a toda madre!”	<i>She goes, “Ah, sounds fucking great!”</i>
sí ¿sabes qué es esa, mi hija?	<i>So do you know what that is, my child?</i>
es el ojo	<i>It’s the eye</i>
dice vamos a la cama cuando nos-	<i>It says, “Let’s go to bed...”</i>
cuando nos acostamos	<i>That’s when we lie down</i>
hacer lo que Dios manda que es	<i>“to do what God commands”</i>
dormir	<i>which is to sleep</i>
a juntar pelo con pelo	<i>“to join hair with hair”</i>
¿no es pestaña con pestaña?	<i>Isn’t that the eyelashes with the eyelashes?</i>
y adentro la carne humana que	<i>“And inside human meat,” which</i>
es el ojo	<i>is the eye.</i>
¿te dio mucha risa?	<i>It really made you laugh, no?</i>
tú pensaste que era tu desayuno,	<i>You thought it was about your</i>
	<i>breakfast</i>
¿verdad mi hija?	<i>Didn’t you, child?</i>

(Flores 2002, 2005; Flores et al. 2006). Fidencio Briseño, in this latter collection, offers a contemporary Yucatec Mayan example, one of my favorites, which can be loosely translated as “what’s big, long, thick,

hairy, and hot, and goes between your legs?” The answer of course cannot be what might immediately come to the gentle reader’s mind, but *tziimin* ‘tapir’ which was the name the Yucatecs gave to the Spanish horse.

The insulting off-color tenor of Tontolín’s performance crescendos to a climax when, toward the end of the act, he moves through the crowd asking for a monetary contribution. It is this connection between invective and collection from which I want to draw my final morals about obligation, valor, and payment. Of course for Tontolín this is work; his livelihood depends on assembling a crowd and taking their money (although the full story—his collaboration with the *gremio* of merolicos of all sorts, some of whom can extract much more cash from a crowd than a clown tries to do, his own genealogy as a street performer—takes us beyond the scope of this short article).

At a certain point, when the crowd is large enough, and its members have been induced to laugh, Tontolín breaks off with his tomfoolery—the riddles, the feigned magic tricks, the hawking of the joke booklet—and launches into a hat-passing spiel. The torrent of words that follows is remarkable for various reasons, not the least of which is its speed: he clips along at more than 8.5 syllables per second.

Notice, first, how Tontolín draws on an explicit theory of reciprocity and obligation. “I have entertained you,” he says, “look how people have been enjoying themselves.” It seems only fair, then, that he should ask the public to “cooperate” with a coin from their pockets.

[13] Collection spiel part I (March 20, 2005).

desde que empecé	<i>From when I began—</i>
señor usted llegó desde que empecé	<i>you, Sir, have been here since I began</i>
¿cómo está la risa?	<i>How has the laughter been?</i>
a está muy vaciado	<i>It’s all been very funny</i>
el señor ya se agarra de su panza	<i>The gentleman is even holding his belly</i>
que le duele de reír	<i>Which hurts him from laughing so hard</i>

However, he continues, there will undoubtedly be many “stingy” people who will try to avoid paying anything, who will consider him a “charlatan” or a mere merolico and feel they can simply walk away. (In keeping with his professed down-to-earth-iness, Tontolín even apologizes for being over-direct and critical here, but “I tell it the way I see it.”)

[14] Collection spiel part II (March 20, 2005).

y mucha gente	<i>But many people</i>
ahorita vas a ver que va a pagar con la espalda	<i>You'll see immediately how they pay me with their backs</i>
perdóname que lo diga de esta manera	<i>Excuse me for putting it this way</i>
pero yo siempre digo las cosas como las siento	<i>But I always tell it the way I see it</i>
quiero que la gente miserable se vaya	<i>I want the stingy people to leave</i>
¿sabes porqué?	<i>Know why?</i>
voy a ver quién me dice payaso.	<i>I will find out who calls me a clown</i>
merolico.	<i>Or a charlatan</i>
...	...
honda es mi bolsillo	<i>My pocket is deep</i>
y por su risa	<i>And in exchange for your laughter</i>
yo les voy a sacar una moneda	<i>I am going to extract a coin from you</i>
pero te pido un favor de amigos	<i>But I ask you a favor, as friends</i>
si no traes una moneda	<i>If you aren't carrying a coin</i>
no hagas eso ((pointing at someone leaving))	<i>Don't do what that person is doing!</i>

no pagues con espalda	<i>Don't pay with your back</i>
para mí vale más tu risa que tu dinero	<i>For me your laughter is more valuable than your money</i>

In keeping with his overall style, however, Tontolín is not able to maintain the serious hyper-sincere tone for long. He offers, as part of his comic act, a parodied caricature of those people so bad mannered and hypocritical as to try to sneak away without paying. Just as his collecting chamber pot by itself puts an ironic, self-depreciating twist on the familiar routine of “passing the hat” he makes fun of the whole procedure.

[15] Collection spiel part III (March 20, 2005).

esa moneda que te pido no es para mí	<i>The coin that I am asking for is not for me</i>
es para unos chamacos que no tienen ropa	<i>It is for some kids who have no clothes</i>
no tienen zapatos	<i>Who have no shoes</i>
son mis hijos me cae de madre, fijate bien	<i>They are my own damn children, in fact</i>
no vayas a aventar monedas al suelo	<i>Don't go throwing coins on the ground</i>
también te pido de favor	<i>either, please</i>

I argue that the clown's commercial success depends crucially on the inversion of value of the “vulgar” language he uses. Rather than offend, it binds him to his audience, creating a social connection that obligates his marks to make at least a token financial contribution. It is thus good marketing. In the last part of his collection spiel, before he actually starts to move through the crowd, chamber pot in hand, the clown invokes a related interpersonal inversion. Though he is effectively in the position of a beggar

asking for a coin, he rhetorically adopts the stance of a boss: “Prepare your coins quickly,” he says, “Because I don’t want to waste my fucking time.”

[16] Collection spiel part IV (March 20, 2005).

una moneda	<i>One coin</i>
hasta el chamaco lo carga ¿así no es cierto?	<i>Even a kid has one, doesn't he?</i>
a ver amigos	<i>Let's see friends</i>
yo voy a dar una vuelta	<i>I am going to make a round</i>
¿quién me da una ayuda con una moneda?	<i>Who will help me out with a coin?</i>
mira, el jefe	<i>Look, the boss</i>
el muchacho	<i>The boy</i>
háganme un favor	<i>Do me a favor</i>
preparen rápido sus monedas	<i>Get your coins ready</i>
que no quiero perder el puto tiempo	<i>Because I don't want to waste my fucking time,</i>
de volada, ¿verda?	<i>Quickly, OK?</i>
otra cosa	<i>Another thing</i>
cooperen por su voluntad	<i>Contribute of your own free will</i>
no quiero amargar a nadie	<i>I don't want to embitter anyone.</i>

It is from the subsequent sequence of individual interactions over money that I drew the initial “condom head” sequence. Tontolín moves around the perimeter of his performance space asking people for contributions one by one. Before finishing the round, the clown is likely to have picked out and made insulting jokes to individuals that invoke almost every politically incorrect theme available, even those he may have neglected up until now. He ridicules people for their poverty and putative laziness.

[17] No trabajas.

ora si no traes	<i>So if you don't have any (money)</i>
dime "no traigo"	<i>Tell me, "I don't have any."</i>
a poco te voy a offender	<i>You don't suppose I am going to insult you?</i>
a lo mejor ni te han pagado (to an audience member)	<i>Probably they haven't paid you.</i>
¿no te han pagado?	<i>Haven't they paid you?</i>
no, pos no trabajas, pendejo	<i>No, because you don't work, asshole.</i>

He even ventures a few words about flatulence, to one woman who is fanning herself in the midday heat.

[18] Un pedo.

¿qué hija?	<i>What child?</i>
¿porqué haces eso?	<i>Why are you doing that?</i>
¿que te echastes un pedo o qué?	<i>Did you fart or what?</i>
no, quédatelo en las narices	<i>No, let it stay by your nose.</i>
se sale sólo,	<i>It will dissipate by itself.</i>
¿sí o no es cierto?	<i>Isn't that so?</i>
está luego ((waving hand))	<i>And then it's like</i>
"¡a:y, phht!" "Ay, phhht."	<i>"Ay, phhht."</i>
"¡niñas!" ((reaching for his butt))	<i>"Girls!"</i>
y él de atrás,	<i>And the guy behind says</i>
"no mames,	<i>"Don't shit me,</i>
respiren parejos"	<i>We all have to breathe."</i>

Like many “dozens players,” Tontolín is also especially eloquent about ugliness, sometimes combining comments on his victim’s appearance with remarks on other criticable traits, such as being ill-mannered. Here he addresses another young man who had tried to make his contribution out of turn.

[19] La nariz.

a tí ¿quién chingados te pidió?	<i>Who the fuck asked you?</i>
¡pérate:!	<i>Wait!</i>
((guy tries to take his coin back))	
¡deja ahí, güey!	<i>Leave it, stupid!</i>
no mames	<i>Are you kidding me?</i>
¿eso fue una nariz o un monumento al moco?	<i>Was that a nose or a monument to snot?</i>
no mames	<i>Don't shit me!</i>
pinche narizota que tiene este güey mira	<i>Damned huge nose that this idiot has, look!</i>
((mimics triangular nose))	
¿tú no te caíste del camión, verda' güey?	<i>You don't fall off the bus, do you, fool?</i>
no te agarras	<i>Instead of holding on</i>
te enganchas	<i>You hook on</i>

I have been trying to understand in general terms the complex dynamic that permits merolicos to succeed in getting people to part with their money. It is not only clowns like Tontolín but also his more sinister companions—who offer good luck, spells, amulets, and spiritual power—who are able to extract sometimes enormous quantities of cash from the same hapless victims, representatives of some of the poorest people in Mexico City. The basic technique relies on an aspect of “encounters” or “face engagements” (Goffman 1964:64) that Goffman identified out long ago.

“Pitchmen and street stemmers...rely on the fact that the accosted person will be willing to agree to a purchase in order not to have to face being the sort of person who walks away from an encounter without being officially released” (Goffman 1963:111).

Of course, as Sacks argued, there is implicit even in the simplest verbal exchange—the adjacency pair (Sacks 1992 Vol. 2, Lect. 1)—a basic mechanism of social coercion: if your interlocutor utters the first pair part, you must either reply with the second or somehow account for your failure to do so. Thus social engagement alone provides some coercive leverage.

Figure 5. Pinche narizota.



Members of the public—many of them maids, chauffeurs, and laborers from the country—are, of course, out for a good time: a stroll in the Alameda, a chance to eye members of the opposite sex, and some cheap entertainment on their only day off after a week’s work. They are thus at least partly complicit in the transaction they enter into with Tontolín and his ilk, since the clown makes no bones about the vulgarity of his show or his intention ultimately to ask for a *cooperación* (monetary contribution). Indeed, his choice of register from the start heightens rather than masks the nature of his act, and it is the entertainment value of the risqué, the inverted value of the unmentionable put on public display, that draws people into the circle in the first place. From the very beginning Tontolín

also makes it clear that anyone—passers-by, whether alone or in groups, tourists, families, couples, Mexican or foreign—is vulnerable to his verbal assaults: to being engaged in public, mocking conversation.

My analysis of the matter goes more to the issues of obligation and valor: the obligation to reciprocate with a coin the entertainment one has manifestly received, and the valor to withstand direct verbal assault from the clown, who tests and diverts you even as he insults you. To walk away without paying is to fail on both counts. Moreover, Tontolín offers direct metacomment about both dimensions. He has, that is, implicitly theorized exactly these aspects of the coercive relationship he establishes with his clients, and he uses the theory explicitly to help guarantee his take.

As we have seen, before launching into his “pass-the-chamber-pot” routine, he has elaborated his view that stingy people will try to escape without paying, despite the fact that have been enjoying the show. However, he goes on to excoriate those who so try to escape, showing that it offers no real protection against shaming and insult.

[20] Me des o no (March 20, 2005) [0:09].

Mira cuánta gente se va, ¡jole	<i>Look how many people are leaving, son of a bitch</i>
porque me des o no	<i>Because, whether you give me money or not</i>
de todos modos te cotorreo porque	<i>I am still going to joke with you, because</i>
vine un güey también y decía a su vieja	<i>One idiot came and said to his old lady</i>
“Dale porque te dice chingaderas,”	<i>“Better give him something or he’ll say nasty shit to you.”</i>
“Aunque me des te digo, me vale madres	<i>“I’ll say it even if you do give me money, I don’t give a damn</i>
soy muy cabrón, fíjate bien.”	<i>“I am a real bastard, you know.”</i>

Finally, in an ironic high point that captures the crux of his art, he makes special fun of those who contribute *despite* (or perhaps because of?) being

verbally mistreated. He approaches a slightly older man who appears to be accompanied by his wife.

[21] No se haga el güey [May 4, 2008].

señor, los que traen vieja
pagan doble

*Sir, those who bring their old
lady pay double*

no se haga el güey, ¿e?

Don't play the numbskull, eh?

((takes money and turns to the public))

Ira

Look

Fijate

Pay attention!

fijate cabrón, le dije "guey"

*Shit, can you imagine?
I called him "numbskull"*

y me dio veinte varos

*And he gave me twenty whole
pesos.*

((turning back to his victim))

señor, ¿si la miento¹²

Mister, if I insult (your mother)

me das cincuenta?

Will you give me fifty?

There is more to say about how Tontolín gets away with massive verbal impropriety in a public plaza (whereas at least one woman merolico I have seen was explicitly chewed out by an irate passer-by for using *groserías* [vulgar words]). Perhaps, as Beristáin somewhat nostalgically claims about albur in general, there has been a gradual devaluation of the formerly unmentionable coin as it emerges more acceptably into public domains.

"*Albur* has recently transcended the circles in which it emerged and has expanded into many public spaces. There have always been off-color jokes, but now they appear even in television and radio commercials. This is a different sort of albur, much less rich, not as complex, more repetitive, which gives rise to a 'lite' discourse; I don't know if this is because it is meant to sell things or because it is somehow influenced by postmodernity with respect to the refunctionalization of its terminological arsenal. This is possible, because such commercials are

made by advertising people in their offices, in order to draw attention to the products on offer. This is no longer the playful verbal art of bricklayers in bars.” (Beristáin 2001:59, my translation)¹³

I rather think that Tontolín’s art depends precisely on revaluing the normal indexical value of using vulgar and abusive talk precisely for this space of public entertainment: retaining the intimacy of insult, the sharedness of shaming, and the sociality of sexual allusion to draw performer and audience into a close, collusive social relationship, and thus to create a commercial/interactive space that the clown artfully and expertly exploits to his own gain.

However, since I have now come to the end of my allotted space, and since the medium impedes me from passing my own hat, I will let one of Tontolín’s own final valedictions stand as mine, as well.

[22] Bendecidos [May 4, 2008].

ah, una aclaración ¿eh?	<i>Ah, one clarification, eh?</i>
toda persona que regaló esta moneda,	<i>Every person who donated a coin</i>
bendecida por Dios sera	<i>Will be blessed by God</i>
y en todo prosperará.	<i>And will prosper in everything</i>
haiga de aquel pinche tacaño gacho culero que trajo y no me quiso dar	<i>But if there is a damned stingy nasty ass-fucker who had a coin and didn’t want to give it to me</i>
maldecido por mí será	<i>He will be damned by me</i>
y quince días de cagar no hará.	<i>And for two weeks he will not be able to shit.</i>

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ENDNOTES

¹“Este tipo de merolico llama la atención del público contando chistes, reúne más o menos la misma cantidad de gente que los hierberos. En una primera fase de su acto, le piden al público una cooperación voluntaria, después simulan hacer un truco de magia. Para realizar este último necesitan paleros, finalmente venden un libro de trucos de magia o chistes, o chicles con purgante.”

²In the long literature on these sexually tinged “complimentary” remarks, opinion stretches between the poles of considering *piropos* to be eloquent literary devices of popular Hispanic culture versus vehicles of sexual harassment. See, for example, Canfield 1946, Schmidt 1988, versus Peek et al 2007.

³Beristáin (2001:59) remarks, in a related if somewhat more rarified analysis, that “[e]l albur quiere recordarnos lo humano que está presente en todas las condiciones sociales. (Albur tries to remind us of the human element present in all social conditions.)”

⁴Although Mary Bucholz’s (2009) teenaged consultants in California translated *güey* as the reasonably innocuous “dude,” the contemporary DF usage of the word—both as a term of reference and a vocative—by males of Tontolín’s age is complex: both intimate and familiar but also potentially disrespectful and derogatory, as in *no te hagas el güey* “don’t be a numbskull.” Since no single English gloss (that I can think of) does justice to this complexity, I have rendered the term variously throughout this paper.

⁵Here the clown addresses his assistant, using *güey* as a term of solidarity.

⁶Thanks to Ana Celia Zentella for helping me puzzle out a rough English equivalent here.

⁷I am indebted to Michael Lempert for his astute observation here.

⁸See Toscano 2002:168.

⁹*a India María* is a caricature of an indigenous woman who appears in a (once) popular series of Mexican film comedies.

¹⁰I refrain from reproducing a page of the booklet here, to give Tontolín himself a chance to sell you a copy on your next visit to the Alameda. As the booklet notes, it costs 25 pesos (about US\$2), which “isn’t cheap—it’s a rip-off, but I have to eat, don’t I?”

¹¹A sample is *javal yajnil, nujul smalal* (The wife is lying face up; the husband is lying face down): the answer is “roof tiles.”

¹²One Mexican expression for “insult someone” is *mentarle la madre* (lit., “mention someone’s mother”), or, more indirectly, *mentársela* in which the clitic *la* makes an oblique reference to the target’s mother.

¹³“El albur ha trascendido recientemente los círculos donde surgió y se ha expandido a muchos lugares públicos. Siempre ha habido chistes albureros, pero ahora hay albures en los anuncios comerciales visuales y en los de la radio. Se trata de un albur diferente,

mucho menos rico, no tan complejo, más repetitivo, que da lugar a un discurso light no sé si porque tiene la intención de vender o porque tiene alguna influencia de la postmodernidad en cuanto al remanejo del arsenal de términos. Es posible, porque tales anuncios los hacen los comunicólogos en sus oficinas, para atraer la atención hacia lo que ofrecen. Ya no es la lúdica hazaña verbal de los albañiles en las pulquerías.”

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