**A War Over New Words: An Analysis of Drug Trafficking Vocabulary in Mexico**

**Miranda Dahlin**

**ABSTRACT**

In Mexican media, there exists an entire vocabulary that is related to the realm of narcotraficantes (drug traffickers), the cartels, and their actions. This paper examines how both the use of this vocabulary as well as its repression is often charged with attempted assertions of power and legitimacy by different actors. Particular strategies have been employed by some state officials in an attempt to manage or control the assertions of power that are present in these new terms. The main strategies I examine in this paper are the repression of narcocorridos, and 'Habla Bien de México' - a campaign initiated by the Ministry of Tourism of Mexico to ban or discourage some of the vocabulary related to drug-trafficking. I argue that these attempts to control 'narco-vocabulary' are efforts to maintain the semblance of a boundary between the state and criminal organizations: a boundary which, in many cases, is rather porous. This is a boundary between the actors involved in what is often understood as 'morally acceptable' forms of mobility (like the circulation of information or legal goods and services, and the passage of [documented] bodies through tourism and legal immigration), and those working and living in the 'underbelly' of transnational mobility and globalization (which includes the passage of undocumented bodies through national borders, and the flow of illegal goods and services such as drugs and arms). This attempt at boundary creation is thus also an attempt to obscure the involvement of some state officials in the violence that is often attributed to the second realm.

**Introduction**

It is 2010, in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. “It’s a narco-bar,” my friend tells me. “Mira, puras camionetas.” I look over as we drive past and my eyes are temporarily blinded by the glare of the streetlights reflecting off the shiny rims on the large wheels of the numerous pick-up trucks parked in the small cement parking lot. “Let’s go in,” I joke. He laughs and shakes his head as we drive past.
It is a Friday night a couple of weeks later and I enter a bar in \textit{el centro}, the downtown of Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, with the same friend. We are meeting up with a few other friends for a couple weekend beers. The music is blaring, and I can feel the beat thumping in my chest as we climb the stairs to find the table of our friends. We spot them, near the back of the room, and sidle up around the table. We order cold beers and get to talking. A round or two later, my friend leans in and starts to speak under the music and only to me, rather than fighting to elevate his voice above it, as our friends are attempting to do in their conversations across the table. He remembers my interest in the drug-trafficking violence that has been taking place in his state, (both because I tend to plague him with questions about it and because he finds my interest a little strange), and he wants to tell me something. “Don’t look right now,” he says quietly. “But the table behind us – that’s what I was talking about. They’re narcos.” “How can you tell?” I ask him, glad, for the first time that night, that the music is loud so that it easily drowning out our conversation from any other ears. “Just how I said before. By the clothes. Look at the fancy shirts, the boots, the hats, the expensive jewelry, and those expensive bottles they are drinking. They don’t all dress like this anymore, though. Many of them just wear American clothes and then go home to their \textit{narcomansiones}.” “Should we leave?” I ask, as a story from the bar in Uruapan four years earlier plays across my thoughts. He half laughs. “No, But I just might make extra sure that I don’t step on their toes or bump into them with my drink.”

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It is 2006 in Uruapan, Michoacán; a two hour drive from Morelia. Five severed heads are rolled onto the dance floor of a bar by heavily armed men. A note was left with the heads. “La Familia doesn't kill for money, doesn't kill women, doesn't kill innocents. Only those who deserve to die will die” (BBC News, 2006). This was the grisly entrance of another new cartel on the scene in Mexico. The note left with the human heads was called a \textit{narcomensaje} (drug-trafficker or ‘narco’ message) by the media. This term was not new and although similar in intent, it is not to be confused with a \textit{narcomanta} – a message accompanying corpses (sometimes dismembered), and written on a big banner and hung from a bridge or a building. The consistent appearance of the prefix “narco” placed in front of a variety of words has continued to pique my interest since these events, and is worth further attention.

A close examination of the transformations that are taking place on the terrain of language offers insight into larger battles over power and legitimacy that are being waged in the social world. In particular, discursive tensions and struggles between notions of the national and transnational and what each should entail - and between accepted and ‘unaccepted’ forms of mobility between these –
can be visible in an examination of certain new vocabularies within a language, and in the responses to these new linguistic emergences. To illustrate this idea, I find it productive to look at the realm of transnational drug trafficking, composed of cartels that are based in Mexico.

Along with an increase in spectacular drug-trafficking violence, a very specific vocabulary surrounding this violence has proliferated in Mexico. An examination of these transformations that have been taking place in daily conversations and in the Mexican media - as well as an examination of the responses to these transformations - point to larger social conflicts over power and legitimacy. Thus, the first part of this paper will focus on the emergence of ‘narco-vocabulary’, as well as a form of music called the narcocorrido that utilizes this vocabulary. I do not wish to suggest that the struggle taking place on the landscape of the Spanish language in Mexico is always a clearly defined dichotomy with boundaries between two sides – in fact, I argue, as Shaylih Muehlmann (2013) does in her ethnography of the impact of drug smuggling on daily life along the US-Mexico border, that the boundaries between “in” and “out” of the drug trade are often blurry at best. However, the first section of this paper will point toward the investment that particular social actors have in the acceptance and use of this emerging vocabulary. The second part of the paper will focus on a negative and oppositional response to this vocabulary and related content initiated by the Confederation of the National Chambers of Commerce, Services and Tourism of Mexico (CONCANACO). To conclude, I will look at the social actors that are behind this governmental response and their investment in the movement. I argue that analyzing emerging vocabulary – especially surrounding informal mobility networks such as transnational drug trafficking organizations, and the responses to the language transformations taking place – point to larger social battles over power and legitimacy within these contexts. Specifically, the battle over narco-vocabulary can be partially understood as a battle over the parameters of what gets to be recognized as a legal transnational mobility, who gets to define these parameters, and thus, who reaps the benefits from the power and legitimacy associated with facilitating and controlling these mobilities.

Drug-trafficking is a space of ambiguities. As organizations that specialize in the trade of illegal narcotics as well as weapons, these networks support an informal and illicit form of transnational mobility. Drug trafficking networks compose part of the underbelly of more ‘accepted’ forms of mobility – namely the circulation of information and legal goods and services, and the (generally) accepted circulation of (documented) people through immigration and tourism - that have increased with the expansion of neoliberal policies. As the underbelly of a snake cannot be separated from its long and equally-as-slick back, the illicit underbelly of neoliberal, capitalist circulation cannot be separated from its legally
accepted counterparts. However, this underbelly has often either been pushed into the shadows by national and transnational actors invested in hiding the ‘negative’ effects of the processes they support and promote, or, the image that is projected of this mobility is monitored and projected in a particular way by these same figures – usually painted in shades of immorality. Drug-trafficking, and its inseparability from more accepted mobilities within the neoliberal milieu, pushes the boundaries of the dominant moral order. It is in this space of tension and ambiguity that narco-vocabulary has grown, and this space has been expanding and becoming more visible in daily life.

**Narcopalabras: The Emergence of a New Vocabulary**

With the increase of spectacular drug trafficking violence in Mexico, a new vocabulary has also been taking shape. First, the prefix ‘narco’ is often tacked onto many nouns in order to signify an association with drug trafficking. *Narcomansiones* (mansions of drug traffickers decorated in nouveau-riche style) and *narcotienditas* (small stores that either sell drugs or launder money for drug cartels) pepper the streets of cities and towns (Moore, 1999; Ellingwood, 2009); *narcoabogados* (lawyers that work for drug traffickers) may be employed, and *narcomantas* (messages left by drug cartels, often to intimidate their rivals, and left with dead bodies in public places) are scrawled across a canvas hung on the side of a bridge or building.

Second, there has arisen a new vocabulary surrounding not only the objects and places associated with drug trafficking, but also the violent tactics that many drug cartels engage in. Thus, while reading about murder victims in the newspaper, one may read about “*encajuelados* (dead bodies stuffed in car trunks), *encobijados* (bodies wrapped in blankets), *entambados* (bodies stuffed in metal barrels, often along with acid or wet cement), [or] *enteipados* (bodies wrapped in industrial tape)” (Campbell, 2009: 29). Just as Victor Klemperer (2002) noted in his experience of the Holocaust, “one could draw up a dictionary of the new language” (Klemperer, 2002: 30). When such a large amount of new vocabulary begins to emerge, it seems that it often points to larger, and often violent, social transformations. Thus, when a critical lens is placed on the emergence of a new vocabulary, questions revolving around the ‘purpose’ of such inventions begin to surface. Who employs these terms and why is *encajuelado* chosen over “a dead body in a car trunk”? Is it for reasons of simplicity: the increase of violence makes it easier to create a single term for something previously described with an entire phrase? Or are there other, more complex reasons these terms are used?

Various US newspaper articles on the topic of narco-vocabulary have put forth ideas that relate to the grisly nature of these murders. The LA Times notes
A War Over New Words: An Analysis of Drug Trafficking Vocabulary in Mexico

that, “average words are not sufficient for the over the top violence of Mexico’s drug war, so new ones have been invented” (Ellingwood, 2009). The Brownsville Herald argues that the employment of these terms desensitizes the public to this violence, making it seem routine and helping people to more calmly deal with the horrors (Stevenson, 2011). In these explanations for the increased circulation of new vocabulary, there appears to be a particular understanding of language that is reminiscent of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – that language shapes, structures, and limits experience. In fact, the Brownsville Herald cites Ricardo Ainslie, a professor at the University of Texas who studies the psychological effects of violence in Ciudad Juarez, explicitly arguing that, “people need the language because it structures experience” (Stevenson, 2011). Therefore, at least in these explanations, new words are invented in order to adapt to changing situations through structuring experiences. However, this explanation appears to be incomplete. In it, the social actors who employ these terms, and the arenas in which they are employed, are only mere outlines – they do not figure predominantly in the explanation. Thus, by more attentively examining the contexts in which these terms are used, as well as some of the responses to this vocabulary, the picture becomes historically richer and much more complex.

When the prefix narco is tacked onto the beginning of a noun, it appears as an attempt to signal that the noun attached now belongs to a different realm – that of the drug trafficker. Thus, a message – as a mensaje, a small communication between two ‘average citizens’ (engaged in the formal and accepted flows of mobility and embedded in the dominant moral order) – becomes a narcomensaje with the prefix narco, signaling its detachment from the realm of the accepted and moral and its new attachment to the underbelly of informal and illegal mobility and immorality. In this way, political actors with nationalist and particular moral interests are able to create and promote the idea that a boundary exists between a moral, legal and acceptable daily life and what is consequently bracketed off as the immoral, illegal and unacceptable ‘underworld’ of drug trafficking. Political officials interested in keeping a semblance of some sort of distinction between these two ‘worlds’ visible – because often many ‘official’ authorities such as police officers and politicians may be implicated in hidden drug trafficking activities – are thus able to employ these terms in order to remind the public of these boundaries.

However, it is not only political actors and state-sponsored media outlets that utilize the prefix ‘narco’, and the media is not the only arena where new ‘narco-vocabulary’ circulates. Drug traffickers have also created a cache of their own vocabulary that “refer[s] to all aspects of drug trafficking, including various drugs; the tools, objects, technologies, and vehicles used to produce, process and transport them; and the various social types and roles associated with the drug trafficking culture” (Campbell, 2009: 18). One of the most common terms with
the prefix of ‘narco’ is the *narcocorrido* – a musical genre that adapts the traditional corrido, or narrative ballad, to memorialize the exploits of particular drug traffickers or to discuss the drug trafficker lifestyle in general, and it is within this musical genre that much of this second cache of narco-vocabulary circulates. For example, in many *narcocorridos*, an assault rifle is commonly called a *cuerno de chivo* (literally, a ‘goat’s horn’, reportedly named in such a way because of the shape of the gun).

The employment of this vocabulary by drug traffickers themselves is interesting and offers insight to some of the possibilities for reasons of investment in these words. Monica Heller, in her (1999) discussion of French language use in Canada states that, “…language has become the principal characteristic differentiating groups which clearly think of themselves as distinct” (Heller, 1999: 144). Although Heller is referring to ‘language’ and not vocabulary here, and despite the fact that contemporary Mexico clearly provides a largely different context – historically and otherwise – than that of Quebec, a shade of this same idea can be fruitfully employed when analyzing drug trafficking vocabulary. Following this logic, the employment of these terms may be a way to assert an identity and to use and promote terms that the speaker feels better represents his or her lived experience.

Diego Gambetta, in his (2009) work on criminal communication – mainly among the Italian mafia and the Japanese Yakuza - provides conversational examples of the feelings of legitimacy and recognition that many “mobsters” (and those who lived somewhat similar lives) felt after they watched the film *The Godfather*. In conversations, mafia members intimated that they felt they had finally found a cohesive image of many of their life experiences, and would even repeat particular lines from the movie in their daily interactions in order to signify particular intended tones, such as ominousness (Gambetta, 2009: 268-270). Gambetta also argues that ‘mobsters’ often benefit from ‘pop culture’ images created in their likeness, and thus, tend to (re)imitate the clothing style given to tough guys on the big screen in order to signal to the wider public that they too are tough, like many of the cinematic representations of Italian mafiosi (Gambetta, 2009: 268). Similarly, Muehlemann argues that the *narcotraficante* is a ‘rags-to-riches’ figure that some individuals from marginalized populations in Mexico may draw on as an alternative route to social and economic capital in the face of stark economic inequality (Muehlemann, 2013: 62). The particular ‘rich ranchero’ style that my friend had pointed out in the bar that night in Morelia, although no longer the preferred fashion choice for many *narcos*, is nevertheless an option from which one can draw on to signal a self-proclaimed label of ‘narco’, and to try to cash in on what Muehlemann calls the ‘social and economic capital’ that comes along with the lifestyle.
However, it is not only through dressing in a particular style that claims to social and economic capital may be made. Taking a cue from Gambetta’s mafiosi repeating potent lines from gangster movies in order to channel their signifying power, a closer look at the use (or conversely, as we will see later, the repression) of a particular vocabulary may also illuminate broader social struggles over power and legitimacy. Campbell, in his ethnography on the “drug war zone” along the US-Mexico border where he discusses the emergence of new drug-trafficking vocabulary, offers the suggestion that perhaps this “inventive language...[is] part of an emergent culture and discourse created by outsiders and marginal members of Mexican society who, however cruelly, are remaking their cultural world” (Campbell, 2009: 29). Although it must be remembered that the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the drug trade is a difficult one to draw – specifically because of stark economic inequality, political corruption, and the wide reach of the drug trade through extortion, money laundering, and small scale smuggling - the use of this vocabulary by some marginalized portions of the population can be understood as an assertion of identity and voice. Thus, like Gambetta’s argument on style imitation and Muehlemann’s discussion of the ‘figure’ of the narcotraficante as a “positive symbolic resource” (Muehlemann, 2013: 86), the employment of particular vocabulary can also be understood as making a claim to power in the face of economic and social inequality and political corruption, and, I argue, in the context of (il)licit transnational mobilities. The use of the prefix “narco” by drug-traffickers themselves can thus be understood as being tacked onto a noun as a badge of pride: the narco is often mythologized as a self-made man (and sometimes, but less frequently, a self-made woman) who has gained economic and social capital via an alternative, ‘outlawed,’ often violent route. The difference that is demonstrated through the use of the prefix ‘narco,’ then, is ambivalent: it simultaneously has both negative and positive connotations, depending on who is employing it.

Looking more closely at the composition of some of the other words in the cache of narco-vocabulary may help to illuminate how this claim to social and economic capital is being made. Campbell addresses the grammar of some of these terms and the possible symbolic meanings of such grammatical transformations. For example, when analyzing the terms revolving around dead bodies – *encajuelado, encobijados, entambados*


  iii

, and so on – the attachment of “the preposition en to a participal verb converts the verb into an adjective or noun; each shift is grammatically marked by a morpheme; and the active verb implies an act of violence at the level of grammar, since *en* implies the placing or rendering of a human body inside something it would not normally be inside” (Campbell, 2009: 29). This violent grammatical act may also be extended to the act that a particular drug cartel – Los Zetas – uses in their narcomensajes. Los Zetas are known for replacing the letter s in their messages with the letter z
(Stevenson, 2011; Campbell, 2009: 28). While Campbell sees this as a way to demonstrate power and influence, I argue that along with this assertion, it may also be understood as an act of grammatical violence that can be interpreted as an ominous reminder: the imposition of the ‘z’ – so close to the ‘s’ in terms of sound and shape, is a reminder that the realm of the narco is tightly entangled with and inseparable from what is presented, by some political actors, as the moral face of the political-economic realm. The ‘Z’ signifies that the message has been ripped out of ‘normative’ communication and that it, along with its authors, also belong to the realm of the ‘narco,’ and that this realm is never too far from the reader.

This is an underbelly of the more ‘accepted’ transnational processes, an underbelly with its own moral order. This underbelly is not separate from accepted transnational processes – in fact the two are inseparable - but is often demarcated as a separate realm by many political actors. Thus, by ripping words out of their normative context and associating them with the narco through the exchange of an s with a z, Los Zetas’ grammatical actions are a reminder of the inseparability of the ‘two sides’ of transnational flows: the licit and illicit. This ripping out and re-contextualization of words can consequently be seen as an act that asserts the narco ‘voice’ in the realm of language, demonstrating the presence of the narco - and the transnational mobilities associated with the narco - over the din of ‘official’ political narratives that attempt to demonstrate a separation between this underbelly from the ‘accepted’ or legal transnational mobilities (and which promote the latter). Thus, the emergence of new vocabulary surrounding drug trafficking becomes more complex when the social actors who employ these terms – the political actors that are involved with the media and the drug traffickers themselves - are brought to the forefront and their investments in this vocabulary are dissected. Now I will turn to another dimension of the social actors involved in the circulation of these words: those who consume them, while maintaining their visibility through another venue – that of the narcocorrido.

Narcocorridos: Putting the Words to Music

The corrido is a type of song derived from Spanish romancero ballads, which were brought to Mexico during the Conquest (Herrera-Sobek, 1993: xxii). In the adaptation to this new context, corridos not only retained some of the old features from the romancero ballads but also incorporated aspects of indigenous musical and narrative genres (McDowell, 2000: 26). In the past, corridos often fulfilled the function of recounting and memorializing the exploits of particular men in battle. Increasing in popularity in the territorial skirmishes against Anglophone settlers along the US-Mexico border, and later, experiencing a popularity explosion during the Mexican Revolution, the corrido was understood as telling
an ‘alternative story’ from dominant official histories. Over the past several decades, correlating with an increase of drug trafficking and drug trafficking related violence, the corrido has once again experienced an increase in popularity, but this time in what is considered to be a new format: the narcocorrido. This type of corrido still fulfills the function of recounting exploits of particular people and telling alternative stories from the media (Quinones, 2001). However, the exploits and lives memorialized in the narcocorrido are now drug traffickers and people involved in the drug trade (and may even be commissioned by the drug traffickers themselves), and the genre now employs a lot of the vocabulary that has been associated with drug trafficking, such as cuerno de chivo. This twist on what is often viewed as a ‘traditional’ music genre in Mexico becomes even more interesting when looked at in terms of its production and consumption, as well as the genre’s adversaries. Analyzing the narcocorrido in this way, points to the larger battles that are taking place on the terrain of language.

In terms of consumption, the narcocorrido is most popular along the border, among some marginalized populations in the rural areas of Mexico, and in areas of the United States that have large populations of first or second generation Mexicans, especially along the US-Mexico border (Morrison, 2008: 381-382 and 393-394). This particular consumption demographic suggests various possibilities for the role of the narcocorrido. Living along the US-Mexico border, with its deep history of tension between the two countries, some Mexican Americans may listen to this genre of music because it allows for an assertion of a particular identity in the face of “assimilationist paradigms” and anti-immigration attitudes, and may demonstrate a “desire for distinction within a multicultural city” (Morrison, 2008: 381-382).

Furthermore, narcocorridos have also been likened to rap music, and as such, not only may be understood as responding to the harsh realities of the “streets” (Morrison, 2008: 383-384; Ramirez-Pimienta and Villalobos, 2004: 144-145), but the analogy also suggests that it is an opportunity to consume what are viewed as capitalist prestige items (the same ones that are often form part of the content of many rap songs) in a Mexican musical genre. The lyrical content of narcocorridos as well as the music videos that now accompany many of the songs may attest to this prestige consumption: men wearing expensive jewelry sing about their power, their large trucks, their fat bank accounts and their numerous guns. The possibility for the consumption of neoliberal prestige items in a Mexican musical context via the consumption of narcocorridos may also be a factor for the consumers south of the US-Mexico border. Often viewed by the middle and upper classes as “poor people’s music” (Muehlmann, 2013:100) due to their popularity among lower economic classes, narcocorridos and the prestige items that form part of their lyrical and visual content (in music videos), can be
seen as the promotion and even the celebration of an alternative (yet violent) path to economic prestige and a degree of social capital.

With the similarity to the rap video genre and the focus on prestige items, Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002 [1944]) arguments on standardization in the ‘culture industry’ – that all pop culture creations have been commodified and standardized and usher uncritical masses into passive consumerism – may appear to be quite applicable here. However, fancy guns and trucks are not the only things that are sung about in narcocorridos. Many of the songs are also critical of political actors and economic oppression and because of these lyrics, there exist more possibilities for reasons of consumption that should not be overlooked.

‘Por el zorro lo supimos / Que llego a romper los platos / Y la cuerda de la perra / La mordió por un buen rato / Y yo creo que se soltó / Para armar un gran relajo / Los puerquitos le ayudaron / Se alimentan de la granja / Diario quieren más maíz / Y se pierden las ganancias / Y el granjero que trabaja / Ya no les tiene confianza’iv.

The lyrics above are from a song called “La Granja” by a famous norteño band called Los Tigres del Norte. The song is an allegory about a farm (una granja), which can be read as “Mexico,” and the listener is also invited to read the characters of the song as different social actors within Mexico. Thus, “the Fox” can be understood as former Mexican president Vicente Fox, the dog as the drug cartels, the pigs as the corrupt Mexican politicians, and the farmer as the poor, rural Mexican laborer (Wilkinson, 2009). The story in the song is that the fox, with the help of the pigs, has unleashed the dog and the dog has caused nothing but death and destruction, which causes the farmer to lose the trust of the fox and the pigs. The farmer, despite being plagued by the violence of the dog (the cartels) is held in place by a fence (read: the US border), and is thus stuck with a vicious dog and an untrustworthy fox (Wilkinson, 2009).

The lyrics of this song illustrate that narcocorridos, while often relaying (and sometimes glamorizing) the violent exploits of narcotraficantes, can also, at times, offer a strong critique of the political and economic system. In the lyrical content of narcocorridos, corrupt politicians and their apparatuses can be lambasted and there is often a protagonist that is portrayed as rising from ‘rags to
riches’ in the face of political marginalization and economic oppressionvi. Thus, the popularity of narcocorridos among economically marginalized Mexicans from the equally politically marginalized rural areas of the country, points to another possible function of the narcocorrido genre – it may fulfill the role of being a voice for the voiceless (Ramirez-Pimienta and Villalobos, 2004: 129). This is a voice that appropriates particular aspects of dominant and hegemonic national ‘culture’ – such as the musical structure and sound of the corrido, and the narrative function that memorializes exploits of particular actors – and manipulates them by substituting drug traffickers for the more ‘traditional’ protagonists of the Revolution (who are now revered as national heroes), or by critiquing the political corruption of government officials – all the while using particular vocabulary that is associated with the world of the ‘narco.’

Thus, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002 [1944]) argument that the ‘culture industry’ acts as a distraction for the masses from the corruption and inequalities of the ruling order, and as an industry that produces uncritical spectators, narcocorridos can, at times, be understood to do exactly the opposite: to draw public attention to political corruption and inequality. However, we should be careful not to go so far as to label the critique of political corruption and inequality that is sometimes present in narcocorridos as ‘counter-hegemonic’ in any Gramscian sense. Although narcocorrido predecessors (corridos during the Mexican Revolution) were often sung about social bandits who were fighting for political change (think Emiliano Zapata), contemporary narcocorridos, and the narcotraficantes they are often written about, do not proclaim to be interested in overthrowing or radically changing the political order. Instead, the lyrics of narcocorridos are mainly used to demonstrate bravery, cunning, and fearlessness, and to document the exploits of particular narcotraficantes – violently ‘getting ahead’ in the system rather than overthrowing it. By appropriating the musical structure and style of corridos previously sung about socially revolutionary bandits, the commissioning of a corrodista (writer of a corrido) by a narcotraficante to write a narcocorrido can be understood as an attempt at placing one’s own socially marginalized identity in a framework that has legitimizing and publicizing potential. The narcotraficante wants to be seen by the public, and by his partners and adversaries, as fearless and strong, and hopes to gain respect or recognition through fear. Take, for example, the lyrics in “Sanguinarios del M1” (Bloodthirsty Men of M1) by Movimiento Alterado:

Con cuerno de chivo y bazooka en la nuca / Volando cabezas a quien se atraviesa / Somos sanguinarios, locos bien ondeandos / Nos gusta matar.”vii
This corrido is about a high level trafficker with the Sinaloa cartel (El M1) and his men. Clearly, a goal of “Sanguinarios del M1” is to convey the fearlessness, recklessness, and brute force of the drug traffickers the song is about. However, whether or not this image creation is successful - or perhaps precisely out of fear of its potential - the same appropriation and manipulation of these national tropes often leads to a condemnation of the genre by many government officials. Turning to an analysis of the adversaries of the narcocorrido will more clearly illustrate the investments that both the proponents have in this genre, as well as what its adversaries understand the stakes to be in its repression.

Narcocorridos Prohibidos

Narcocorridos have been officially banned from radio play in many Mexican states (Ramirez Pimienta and Villalobos, 2004: 133; Wald, 2001: 87). Los Tigres del Norte, writers and performers of “La Granja,” have been banned from playing concerts in the northern border state of Chihuahua, because, the Chihuahuan government states, they play songs that glamorize the lives of drug-traffickers (Itzkoff, 2012). Local political actors at the state level who ban narcocorridos do not act alone - they often do so with full support of the federal government and from Catholic Church officials (Morrison, 2008: 394). When the songs are not banned, they are usually heavily censored. Furthermore, the narcocorrido genre is not only officially marginalized but is also informally marginalized, as it is stigmatized as “hick music” among financially prosperous and “elite” Mexicans, and often looked at as a diseased version of a ‘traditional’ folk genre (Morrison, 2008: 393). Muehlemann, too, notes that this genre is usually associated (by middle and upper class Mexicans) with the lower economic class, and that this perception makes the genre all the more dangerous for the elite because the music is popular with the sectors of the population that, due to a lack of other options, are the most likely to be drawn to drug-trafficking as an alternative (and often violent) means to gain economic capital (Muehlemann, 2013:100). A closer examination of the negative reaction of many state officials in Mexico to narcocorridos may further illuminate the stakes in maintaining a staunch stance against the circulation and promotion of this genre of music.

Not only may songs about “drugs, guns and womanizing...raise the ire of bourgeois moral authorities in any society” (Morrison, 2008: 1), but political actors who are scrutinized in these songs and implicated in corrupt activities or exposed as being in collusion with particular trafficking groups may attempt to prevent the circulation of these songs in order to save their reputation and to maintain a level of power. Thus, I argue that political actors that are involved with the ‘good’ or socially acceptable type of transnational mobility want to maintain a solid distinction between this circulation and that of the ‘immoral’ and ‘bad’ type
of circulation: drugs, weapons, and so on – especially because some of these political officials are indeed involved with this underbelly of transnational mobility. At first glance, it may come as a surprise that political actors ban the narcocorrido while they themselves may use or allow such terms as *narcomensaje* and *encajuelados* to appear in the media. However, this incongruency may be understood when the concept of boundary-maintenance and power is inserted into the equation; when these terms are employed in the media, or by political actors themselves, power is retained over them – they may be employed to delineate a distinction or to paint the narco ‘world’ in a violent, immoral and unacceptable light. Narcocorridos, on the other hand, are banned because once these terms are spoken by the marginalized, the control over these terms changes hands. When these terms are placed in the context of the narcocorrido, they may be put to work to critique the oppression of the political and economic system or the corruption of particular politicians. The work that this narco-vocabulary can do in a narcocorrido becomes a threat to a political official’s attempt to maintain the precarious distinction between the violent realm of the ‘narco’ and the political actors who are supposed to represent the ‘good’ and ‘just’ side of transnational mobility and other neoliberal processes.

In addition to the attempt at boundary and power maintenance, the perspective of the narcocorrido as a ‘perversion’ of a traditional musical genre may be promoted as a way to hold onto the power of ‘the state,’ when faced with the underbelly of globalizing and transnational neoliberal flows. Due to the fact that many consumers of this genre are first or second generation Mexican Americans who have either immigrated themselves or are familiar immigration stories from friends and family that have, as well as populations along the US-Mexico border, and economically and politically marginalized Mexicans from rural areas, the entire consumption demographic of the narcocorrido genre, then, forms a population whose lived experiences are more likely to involve experiences with the ‘illicit’ side of transnational mobility. This side is composed of such things as the danger that faces an undocumented body attempting to cross national borders, the obstacles and insecurity that this undocumented body may face once it arrives on the other side, and the effects of the production and flow of the illegal drug and weapon trade. Thus, the voice of the marginalized via the narcocorrido, peppered as it is with new vocabulary and replete with critiques of the political actors and negative perspectives of the political and economic system, represents the ‘immoral’ and unaccepted underbelly of transnational and globalizing neoliberal mobility and meets an attempted silencing by those in power - those who do not want oppositional voices heard, who do not want their reputations sullied and their power challenged, and who do not want the other face of neoliberal transnationalism and globalization to rear its head. However, given that the narcocorrido has a strong fan base north of the border, and given
that the consumption of music is not limited to live performances or radio play, the bans that some Mexican political officials have put in place have limited efficacy on narcocorrido consumption. Yet, it is the attempt at repression that is revealing. The battle being fought on the terrain of language through the assertion and the attempted repression of new vocabulary through the medium of narcocorridos – and more specifically, through the assertion and attempted silencing of the lived experiences and perspectives that this vocabulary expresses - can be understood as a microcosm of larger forces battling for power and legitimacy in the political-economic conditions of the surrounding context.

Fighting Back with ‘Habla Bien de Mexico’ : Another Response to Narco-Vocabulary

With the increasing influence and visibility of the drug trafficking organizations, however, retaining control over the use of new words is becoming an increasingly difficult task for state officials and the media to maintain. Thus, as is visible in other parts of the world, “what states and nationalist elites are doing is redrawing their strategies” (Pujolar, 2007: 90). Such redrawing of strategies in Mexico can be exemplified by a campaign called “Habla Bien de Mexico” or ‘Speak Well of Mexico’. This campaign was started in 2011 by the Confederation of the National Chambers of Commerce, Services and Tourism of Mexico (CONCANACO), and has gained public support from Mexico’s “most powerful broadcasters” and many newspapers and politicians (Stevenson, 2011). Even the City Council of Public Security and Law Enforcement of the Federal District has publicly supported the campaign, adding that, “speaking is a powerful way through which we strengthen ties” (Habla Bien de Mexico, 2011).

The mission of Habla Bien de Mexico, is to use the power of positive words during these “difficult times” to “transform the perception that Mexicans have of [their] country, toward a positive, constructive and realistic attitude” (Habla Bien de Mexico). With the increasing visibility of drug trafficking violence and the emergence of a new vocabulary to match, some state officials in charge of the tourism industry – as well as those in other areas of governance, such as public security councils – have noticed that the previous technique of utilizing the terms in the media while repressing the utilization of the same terms by others (as in the case of banned narcocorridos), is failing as an attempt at boundary-maintenance. The porous and permeable boundary is now changing the perceptions that both locals and foreigners have of Mexico, and consequently, some political actors have changed their strategies and are now supporting an all-out repression of much of the vocabulary. As part of the voluntary agreement
supported by many political actors and signed by many broadcasters and newspapers in support of this campaign, it is expected that “news stories should avoid using the terminology used by criminals” (Stevenson, 2011). Instead, by focusing on the aspects of life in Mexico that are perceived as ‘positive’, rather than ‘negative’ features such as drug trafficking - and refusing to employ the terms associated with it – state officials are hoping to change the perceptions and understandings of Mexico, both at home and abroad. “We are convinced,” states CONCANACO, “that words are seeds, which nurture our intentions, transform us and allow us to believe in new realities” (Habla Bien de Mexico, 2011).

Clearly, the strategies that are being redrawn by state officials are based on specific philosophies of language. What is interesting is that this strategy appears to use the same philosophy as the proponents of the terms. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that revolves around the idea that language structures experience, seems to be present here yet again. Previously employed, as we have seen above, by scholars such as Roberto Ainslie who argue for the necessity of terms such as *encajuelados* to deal with the violence, this Whorfian notion is employed here toward different ends. Again, these state officials argue that language structures experience, which makes it necessary to speak in positive terms about Mexico and reject the use of violent and negative terms in order to change the daily life experiences of Mexico. A section in the mission statement of *Habla Bien de Mexico* demonstrates this similarity to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but adds a cognitive behavioral therapy type of twist: “neurolinguistic programming is a pragmatic school of thought which supports [the idea] that ultimately all human behavior is built on a learned structure of thought, which can be detected, and can be modeled or copied by others…. [this school of thought] argues that it is possible to change or reprogram this…structure of thought, if there is anything that limits - or may enhance - any action, behavior or belief, in order to improve the quality of life” (Habla Bien de Mexico, 2011). Here, words are portrayed as seeds that shape understandings and transform imaginaries, and consequently, realities. The ‘wrong’ words are portrayed as having the capability to negatively affect the capacities of Mexico’s citizens, but the ‘right’ words are portrayed as allowing them to harvest their potential. Thus, by utilizing more of the ‘right’ words, language is understood to have the ability to change the experience of daily life.

However, the linguistic theory that language structures experience is not the only undercurrent lying beneath *Habla Bien de Mexico*. Once again, I argue that this micro-battle over language can point to a larger social struggle over power and legitimacy in the context of il(licit) transnational flows. *Habla Bien de Mexico*, then, is also about border and boundary-maintenance in the face of the underbelly of transnational mobility. The realm of the ‘narco’ here, instead of its borders being delineated through the employment of narco-related terms in order
to maintain a distinction, is now being delineated through the extinguishing of the terminology altogether. In this new strategy, the words of the narco have no place in all that is ‘good’ about Mexico, and there exists an attempt to completely cut the ‘realm’ of the narco out from speech about Mexico. Thus, as Heller finds in Canada, the same may be found on the terrain of ‘narco-vocabulary’ in Mexico: “language…is about borders…about defining borders, building borders, even ignoring borders, insofar as to deliberately ignore a border you have to accept that there is a border to ignore” (Heller, 1999: 166). The battle of boundaries being played out on the terrain of language is even noticeable in the resistance of particular newspapers to sign onto this agreement. La Jornada, for example, a major leftist newspaper in Mexico, has refused to participate in this “self-censorship” by joining other periodicals in the campaign (Stevenson, 2011). The public statement of resistance to the agreement thus demonstrates an acknowledgement of the attempt at the creation of a border - even in its refusal to not ‘cross’ it. Perhaps La Jornada recognizes this border as so permeable and porous, recognizes the marriage between the ‘accepted’ flows of transnational and globalizing neoliberal processes and those of its underbelly, and thus, refuses to support such an attempt at absolute boundary-creation. Whatever the implicit reason for La Jornada’s rejection of Habla Bien de Mexico, the strategy exists and is supported by some state officials and broadcasters and therefore, remains a piece of the puzzle that offers a glimpse into the larger battles that are being played out on the terrain of language.

Conclusion

It is a common view that “overall, narcotraficantes and narco-culture have become the most significant current challenge to the Mexican state” (Campbell, 2009: 271). However, the notion of ‘challenge’ is interesting here. After all, following Heyman and Smart’s (1999) argument, “states and illicit or illegal activities are not separate, distinct fields of social action, but are tightly intertwined in a dialectic relationship” (cited in Campbell, 2009: 9). The challenge, then, lies in promoting a semblance of a distinct boundary between the realm of everyday life and politics in Mexico and the realm of the ‘narco’ - between the ‘legal, just, and beneficial’ transnational capitalist mobilities, and their ‘illegal, informal and immoral’ underbelly. The semblance of this boundary is hard to maintain. Drug traffickers form agreements with high-ranking political actors and state officials, and the armed branches of the state (police and military) are often publicly understood as working in tandem with drug trafficking organizations. Formal and informal transnational flows and activities blur together, and the ‘borders’ that are constructed in an attempt at distinguishing
between these two ‘sides’ break down. ‘Narco’ terminology starts to seep through the gaps in this constructed border, one word at a time, and when the strategy aimed at controlling and directing the flow of these terms – through their controlled employment in the media and the repression of narcocorridos - begins to appear too precarious and inefficient to maintain, the border starts to break down too blatantly in the public eye, and strategies are consequently redrawn. Habla Bien de Mexico is an attempt to patch the holes in the border in order to maintain its appearance.

Finally, the analysis of the vocabulary surrounding drug trafficking – as well as an analysis of the responses to it – points to larger battles over power and legitimacy that are taking place in the surrounding political-economic and social context of il(licit) transnational mobilities. In particular, it “[makes] visible the ways in which language is used by social actors to construct categorizations and legitimize ideologies” (Pujolar, 2007: 91). Whether or not the construction of these categories and these legitimizations are successful is another story, but the battle has been illuminated and it may now open the door for further ethnographic research.

Notes

i For example, those mobilities accepted by states, such as tourism and official trade agreements, as opposed to the ‘unaccepted’ forms of transnational mobility, such as the drug trade and the transnational movements of undocumented migrants.

ii Although these organizations are now more tightly intertwined than ever before with legal transnational mobilities, as they are now branching into other industries, such as mining and logging, where, some argue, the profits are even greater than that of drug-trafficking (Associated Press, 2014).

iii Where ‘en’ means ‘in,’ the middle portion of the word refers to a noun (i.e. cajuela, which means car trunk), and ‘ado’ is a suffix that is often used as ‘ed’ is in English. Thus, approximate translations are; “In-trunk-ed,” referring to a corpse in a car trunk, “in-blanket-ed,” referring to a corpse wrapped in a blanket, and “in-barreled,” referring to a corpse in a barrel, often submerged in acid, burned, or encased in cement.

iv We found out from the Fox / Who arrived to break plates / And the dog’s leash / The Fox bit for a good while / And I believe it has been freed / To create a big mess / The little piggies helped out / They feed themselves from the farm / Daily they want more corn / And they lose the profits / And the farmer that works / Does not trust them anymore. (Translation: Just a song blog. http://justasong2.blogspot.ca/2010/05/los-tigres-del-norte-la-granja.html)

v Norteño is a genre of Mexican music that incorporates aspects of both traditional corridos and polka music. The accordion is a very common sound in this genre, as is the bajo sexto, or the “sixth bass” – a Mexican instrument with twelve strings (Wald, 2001: 1-2 and 14).

vi See, for example, “La Clave Privada” by Banda El Recodo: Ya mucho tiempo fue pobre (For a long time I was poor) / Mucha gente me humillaba (Many people humiliated me) / Y empecé a ganar dinero (And I started to earn money) / Las cosas están volteadas (Things are turning
around) / Ahora me llaman patron (Now they call me boss) / Tengo mi clave privada (I have my private key)

With a ‘goat’s horn’ (AK-47) and bazooka in the neck / Making the heads fly of whoever crosses us / We are crazy, deep in the [narco] scene / We like to kill. (Translation: Complex Music: The 10 Best Narcocorrido Songs. http://ca.complex.com/music/2012/05/the-10-best-narcocorrido-songs/movimiento-alterado-sanguinarios-del-m1-bloodthirsty-men-of-the-m1-2010. Last time accessed: 11/02/2016)

Banned Narcocorridos, also a play on the title of a popular Los Tigres del Norte album, “Corridos Prohibidos” (1989).

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Author contact information:
Miranda Dahlin
PhD Candidate
Department of Anthropology McGill University
7th Floor, Leacock Building,
855 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T7
miranda.dahlin@mail.mcgill.ca

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