

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# LANGUAGE, MASKS, AND SOLITUDE: OCTAVIO PAZ AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEXICAN IDENTITY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Octavio Paz's work *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, focusing on his critical exploration of how Mexican identity is formed by historical trauma and perpetuated by national myths. Tracing key historical events in Mexico, it contextualizes Paz's argument that Mexican identity has been shaped by deep psychological wounds. The paper analyses three themes identified by Paz, the use of masks as both individual and collective defense mechanisms, the experience of existential solitude of a Mexican, and the prevalence of rituals as both moments of release and instruments of superficial unity. It further explores language as a site where historical trauma, power structures, and cultural memory are encoded, highlighting the role of the symbolic lexicon, indirectness, and silence in sustaining these patterns. Through this analysis, the paper highlights Paz's critique of nationalism for reinforcing conformity and masking genuine diversity, ultimately arguing for the necessity of authentic self-exploration in the pursuit of a more inclusive and honest national identity.

"What is called the "genius of a people" is only a set of reactions to a given stimulus." (Paz, 1961, p.9)



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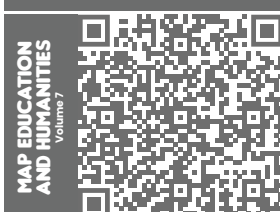
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### Introduction

Octavio Paz, a renowned Mexican poet, essayist, and thinker, is considered the one whose intellectual legacy is closely tied to his exploration of Mexican cultural identity. With his seminal work *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), he offers an insight into the Mexican nation and identity, as well as a sharp critique of what it means to be Mexican in the aftermath of centuries marked by conquest, colonization, and revolution. In this collection of essays, Paz examines the psychological and historical forces that have shaped the Mexican character, arguing that themes of masks, solitude, and rituals are integral components of Mexican national experience. He also emphasizes the central role of language, thereby showing how culturally loaded expressions, silence, and indirectness function as tools for encoding historical trauma and regulating social behavior.

*The Labyrinth of Solitude* analyzes how the trauma of the Spanish conquest, the hierarchical structures of colonial rule, and the ideological transformations brought by independence and revolution created a society in continuous negation of its past. Paz suggests that these repetitive ruptures led to the formation of an identity defined by denial of origins. Central to his critique is the idea that Mexicans, in response to these wounds, have adopted strategies of self-concealment, embodied through the concept of masks, then developed an existential solitude, and constructed elaborate rituals and fiestas as both a form of escape and affirmation. Language, in this context, operates as a symbolic archive, preserving and transmitting these collective experiences across generations.

After overviewing the historical context of Mexico, which is crucial for understanding the internal, psychological tensions of a Mexican explored by Paz, this paper will proceed to analyze the three central themes he identifies: masks as symbols of self-defense, solitude as an existential response to fractured origins, and rituals, particularly *fiestas*, as moments of both catharsis and concealment. The analysis will also focus on the ways in which these phenomena contribute to the construction of a false sense of Mexican nationalism, a process Paz critiques for covering up deep social wounds and authentic diversity in favor of a superficial, performative unity. Additionally, this paper examines how linguistic strategies within the symbolic lexicon both reflect and reinforce these patterns of masking, solitude, and ritualized

behavior. While Paz presents a unified image of 'the Mexican,' this paper treats such representations as discursive constructions rather than reflections of a homogeneous social reality. Ultimately, the paper affirms Paz not only as a literary figure but also as a critical political thinker whose reflections on solitude, dignity, and cultural difference continue to challenge dominant narratives of national cohesion and identity.

### Theoretical background

Paz's analysis of Mexican identity extends beyond observable social practices into the realm of language, where silence, metaphor, and coded expressions function as mechanisms of both concealment and revelation. Rather than operating as a secondary cultural layer, language constitutes a central analytical dimension through which identity is simultaneously performed and obscured, acting as a symbolic mechanism through which Mexican identity is enacted, regulated, and historically reproduced. In this sense, linguistic practices mirror and reinforce the broader structures identified by Paz: masks emerge not only as social behaviors but also as discursive strategies of indirectness and formalism; solitude manifests as communicative withdrawal, silence, and the refusal of transparency; and rituals extend into the repetition of symbolic expressions that stabilize meaning while concealing historical tensions. The prevalence of indirect speech, strategic ambiguity, and culturally loaded expressions illustrates how discourse encodes relations of power, domination, and historical trauma, functioning not merely as a reflection of social reality but as a force that actively structures it, legitimizes hierarchies, and shapes perception. At the semantic level, the symbolic lexicon, comprising culturally loaded expressions, euphemisms, and metaphorical language, serves as a repository for historical memory, preserving both individual and collective experiences of trauma. Drawing on Bourdieu's conception of language as symbolic power, Goffman's notion of performativity, and a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a regime of power/knowledge, these recurring patterns can be understood as regulating what can be expressed, remembered, or silenced across multiple levels: pragmatically, in the ways speakers hedge or boost their statements; discursively, in patterns of silence and indirectness; and semantically, through metaphors and idiomatic expressions that encode historical and social hierarchies.

Crucially, these linguistic practices cannot be understood outside of their historical formation. The violent imposition of colonial discourse during the Conquest, the symbolic figure of La Malinche, and enduring expressions such as “hijos de la chingada” represent the crystallization of historical trauma within language itself. Other idiomatic expressions, insults, and gendered metaphors similarly encode centuries of domination, social stratification, and collective memory. Thus, discourse becomes a site where past violence is not only remembered but continually reproduced, embedding structures of domination and alienation into everyday communication. In this way, language does not simply describe Mexican identity; it actively participates in its construction, functioning as both a mask and a trace of unresolved historical rupture, while linking the individual’s experience to the broader cultural memory of the nation.

### Historical Background

To sufficiently explore the themes addressed in Octavio Paz’s *Labyrinth of Solitude*, it is necessary to briefly pay attention to the major historical traumas and transitions that, as the author argues, defined and shaped Mexican psychology. Mexican history consists of several important events and periods, including the Spanish conquest, the colonial era, the struggle for independence, the Reform era, and the Mexican Revolution. Central to Paz’s analysis is the enduring impact of the Conquest, by which he refers to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, led by Hernán Cortés from 1519 to 1521. This event marked the abrupt destruction of pre-Cortesian civilizations, including primarily the Aztecs, but also the Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, and other indigenous peoples (Restall, 2003). The military defeat and the subsequent imposition of Spanish rule resulted in an unprecedented population decline through war and introduced epidemics, while systematically dismantling indigenous social, religious, and political structures (Meyer & Sherman, 2017). In the aftermath of the colonial period, which spanned between 1521 and 1821, New Spain witnessed the formation of a hierarchical society governed by a rigid caste system (*casta*), privileging Spaniards while relegating mestizos, indigenous peoples, and Africans to subaltern positions (Seed, 2001). The Catholic Church became a dominant institution, overseeing most aspects of religious and civil life, shaping daily routine, moral codes, and land tenure through its role as a vast landholder (Burkholder & Johnson, 2018).

The late colonial era saw increasing dissatisfaction and desire for autonomy, which culminated in the Mexican War of Independence (1810–1821), which, after a protracted conflict, led to separation from Spain and the establishment of an unstable Mexican Empire, soon replaced by a fragile republic (Van Young, 2001). Despite breaking colonial ties, the early post-independence period was marred by political chaos, economic stagnation, and enduring social stratification, evidencing the inherited problems and unfulfilled promises of national rebirth (Meyer & Sherman, 2017). The Reform era in the mid-nineteenth century, spearheaded by figures such as Benito Juárez, aimed to diminish the power of the Catholic Church, promote civil liberties, and consolidate the authority of a liberal state, encapsulated in landmark legislation like the Ley Juárez and Ley Lerdo (Hamnett, 1999). However, liberal reforms often alienated indigenous communities and exacerbated social tensions, leading to conflict with conservative factions and culminating in the French Intervention and the ephemeral reign of Emperor Maximilian (1864–1867) (Hamnett, 1999).

The social order remained highly unequal until the eruption of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), a multi-faceted upheaval triggered by the autocratic regime of Porfirio Díaz, elite domination, and peasant disenfranchisement (Knight, 1986). The Revolution’s decade-long violence produced multiple competing factions, each with distinct regional and socioeconomic grievances. Its immediate aftermath led to land redistribution, the secularization of education, and new labor rights, enshrined in the 1917 Constitution (Vaughan & Lewis, 2006). However, the revolutionary state quickly consolidated power, creating new myths of origin and national unity, while facing ongoing struggles to implement its radical promises. Throughout the twentieth century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) gradually stabilized and monopolized political life, often through corporatist control and ritualized displays of national identity (Krauze, 1997). These cycles of conquest, resistance, colonization, and revolution created a society characterized by deep social hierarchies, hybrid cultural practices, and recurring patterns of collective rupture and reinvention, setting the stage for Mexico’s continually evolving search for identity.

### Masks

Octavio Paz centers the notion of masks as both a metaphor and mechanism for

understanding Mexican identity by acknowledging that “The Mexican builds a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and himself” (Paz, 1961, p. 29). The mask is therefore not only a surface-level concealment, but it is a deep and habitual form of self-protection shaped by historical wounds and enduring solitude. As Paz himself notes: “The Mexican, whether young or old, criollo or mestizo, general or laborer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile” (Paz, 1961, p. 29). This tendency to conceal, as Paz argues, is one of the most defining traits of the Mexican persona and forms the psychological core of the country’s performative nationalism.

Masks function as defenses against the outside world, which a Mexican perceives as hostile and intrusive. Paz writes that the tendencies “never to crack” or “back down” and “never to allow the outside world to penetrate one’s privacy” become the ultimate aspirations of an ordinary Mexican (Paz, 1961, p. 30). This defense manifests itself in the embodiment of stoicism, sarcasm and obsession with form, disguises adopted because of trauma of conquest and centuries of cultural hybridization. They serve as protective mechanisms, allowing the Mexican to turn inward and suppress his identity, in his conviction that vulnerability is a weakness and a betrayal of himself.

Paz’s analysis turns to how these masks are gendered in Mexican culture. The macho is, in Paz’s words, “a hermetic being, closed up in himself, capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided to him” (Paz, 1961, p. 31). Stoicism and invulnerability are glorified as masculine virtues, and even suffering is a matter of dignity and restraint rather than complaint. This social construct not only regulates male behavior but also becomes a psychological shield against perceived threats from the outside world (Beezley, 2018).

According to Paz, masking is not a male reserved phenomenon, but also manifests in the behavior of Mexican women, although in different ways. The mask of a woman is characterized with modesty, prudence, and resignation, and the ideal Mexican woman is “decent in the face of erotic excitement and long-suffering in the face of adversity” (Paz, 1961, p. 36). While she, too, hides emotion, her mask is reflected in opposite virtues, embodying compliance and servitude. As with men, the outward mask of the “long-suffering woman” is a response to historical and social

pressures. Thus, both genders, even though through somewhat different manifestations, use masks to hide vulnerability and maintain an appearance of invincibility, while subordinating their true selves to social expectations.

However, Paz’s gendered interpretation has been widely criticized for reinforcing binary and hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity. His portrayal of women as passive and long-suffering risks reproducing the very structures of domination he seeks to critique, rather than interrogating their social and historical contingency.

Paz argues that the concept of dissimulation shows itself as both a symptom and a reinforcement of masked existence. In the attempt not to reveal one’s true self, a Mexican continuously needs to dissimulate, that is, to conceal his character, suppressing his genuine feelings and thoughts. For such purposes, Mexicans adopted lying, yet another component of their mask. Paz observes that “lying plays a decisive role in our daily lives, our politics, our love-affairs and our friendships,” affirming that Mexicans deploy deception not simply to mislead others, but to hide from themselves and thus “the lie becomes the very foundation of his personality” (Paz, 1961, p. 40). These perpetual attempts to hide restrict the development of an authentic Mexican identity.

The significance of these psychological masks transcends the individual and influences the collective personality, contributing to the construction of Mexican national identity. This was particularly true in the post-Revolution period, when the Mexican state sought to forge a sense of unity by promoting an official model of what it means to be Mexican, namely a stoic, proud, and homogeneous persona. Paz criticizes this nationalism as it prohibits authentic national self-understanding and prescribes a “rigid formula”, reiterating the logic of individual masks on a national scale (Paz, 1961). The nationalism itself is a mask; it is a performative, rehearsed identity that only superficially resolves the underlying solitude and fragmentation of Mexican society (Treviño, 2014). By cultivating this national attitude of a people united by stoicism and form, Mexicans overlook their unresolved historical tensions and fail to explore their identity. As Paz observes, “if we are all Nobody, then none of us exists” (Paz, 1961, p. 46) the collective adoption of the mask eradicates genuine individuality and silences the possibility of critique or transformation.

This logic of masking extends into language itself, where indirectness, formalism, and controlled expression function as linguistic strategies of concealment, reinforcing the social imperative to remain closed and impenetrable.

### Solitude

Central to Octavio Paz's analysis is the assertion that solitude is a defining feature of the Mexican experience. This solitude, as he argues, is not merely a term of social isolation, but of broader existential separation. Paz's statement that "Mexico is all alone, like each one of her sons" (Paz, 195) captures this notion of both individual and collective estrangement. This solitude, for Paz, arises from the uncertainty and denial of origins: "The question of origins, then, is the central secret of our anxiety and anguish" (Paz, 1961). Paz argues that the legacy of conquest and the subsequent colonial order left Mexicans in a suspended, unresolved state, belonging neither to the world of the conquered Indigenous peoples nor to the conquering Spaniard. The Mexican identity is therefore described as an abstraction, refusing to accept either inheritance, or embracing that "he is a man... the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self" (Paz, 1961). In other words, a Mexican conceives of himself as a unique creation, not a derivative of its past influences.

Paz terms this concept as orphanhood, reasoning that it is not just a cultural metaphor but an existential wound that spills into both public and private spheres. The sense of being "a man without roots—a son of nothingness" manifests in widespread distrust, fear, and social barriers. He observes that "All their relationships are poisoned by fear and suspicion: fear of the master and suspicion of their equals. Each keeps watch over the other because every companion could also be a traitor... He must live alone, without witnesses. He dares to be himself only in solitude" (Paz, 1961). This underlines the psychological consequences of historical violence and subjugation, as solitude became a defense and a means of self-preservation in a context where collective bonds have been undermined by betrayal and domination.

Paz traces this solitude to both individual psychology and national history. He argues that Mexicans respond to their ambiguous origins not by synthesizing them, but by negating them: "The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended

from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction" (Paz, 1961). This existential denial translates into an ongoing alienation from the self and from others. As Paz notes intimacy "never flowers in a natural way, only when incited by fiestas, alcohol or death" (Paz, 1961), alluding to the nonexistence of a genuine connection with the other.

Instead of healing this solitude, the rise of Mexican nationalism after the Revolution has deepened it further. With its rituals, slogans and symbols, Mexican nationalism supposedly offers a sense of unity but ultimately presents itself as a form of conformity. It provides for artificially constructed collective identity, failing to address deeper wounds in Mexican society and contemplate what it means to be a Mexican (Treviño, 2014). Nationalism thus replaces authentic bonds, intensifying the very solitude it claims to overcome.

Paz concludes that Mexicans do not transcend their solitude but lock themselves within it, oscillating "between intimacy and withdrawal, between a shout and a silence, between a fiesta and a wake, without ever truly surrendering [themselves]" (Paz, 1961). This cyclical movement between outburst and retreat leaves Mexicans isolated not only from each other but from their own histories and identities. In this way, solitude is not overcome by nationalism, but instead, nationalism becomes another mask. It offers only the false sense of belonging, while the true wound of orphanhood, division and uncertainty remains unhealed at the core of the Mexican experience.

Solitude is not only social but communicative, manifesting in silence, evasion, and the inability to articulate intimacy, thereby reproducing isolation at the level of discourse.

### Rituals

Octavio Paz devotes substantial attention to the role of rituals, especially fiestas, and how they have contributed to the synthesis of Mexican identity. Fiestas, as Paz describes them, are not just moments of joy and collective amusement, but they occupy a central place in the emotional and social life of the country, functioning as outlets that allow for the temporary forgetting of everyday burdens. By analyzing how these rituals operate both on the personal and collective level, Paz points to their connection to the construction of Mexican nationalism.

Mexicans are observed as lovers of fiestas and public gatherings, since Paz notes that “any occasion for getting together will serve, any pretext to stop the flow of time and commemorate men and events with festivals and ceremonies” (Paz, 1961). This prominence of fiestas is not simply a manifestation of joy, but rather a response to a persistent, underlying sense of solitude and constraint of Mexican true self, poverty, as Paz describes it, both in a material and spiritual sense.

Fiestas break the monotony of daily life and completely, yet temporarily dissolve the social barriers that keep Mexicans isolated from one another. On these nights, the usual boundaries and superficial social kindness are set aside, as typically distant people become expressive; they share emotions, resolve old grievances, and forge meaningful connections. Paz describes this as the overthrow of normal social order. Fiestas break the everyday silence with noise, song and communal energy. In these moments, the distinctions of class, gender, and authority are overturned, as men disguise themselves as women, the poor as the rich, the law and the church are mocked and boundaries collapse. However, as Paz argues, the sense of chaos and openness that emerges during these celebrations does not transform the deeper realities of isolation and restraint in the long term. Instead, the fiesta serves as a temporary and evident contrast to everyday solitude, offering short relief rather than genuine change. For Paz, even if temporarily, it is a return to “the formless, to pure being”, which evidently contrasts the controlled, repetitive nature of Mexican life (p. 52). It offers a catharsis but does not resolve the deeper solitude or address the historical and social fractures that define a Mexican. Paz points out that without them we (Mexicans) would explode. They free us, if only momentarily, from the thwarted impulses, the inflammable desires that we carry within us” (p. 52–53). The fiesta is thus a necessary outlet, but not a sustainable solution to Mexican solitude and estrangement from self.

The logic of the fiesta spills into the sphere of state and nationalist ritual. After the Revolution, the Mexican state institutionalized public spectacles, including commemorations, parades and official holidays, to build a sense of communal belonging. Yet, as Paz argues, these rituals did not foster true unity. Rather, they serve as performances. What he terms as “mechanical unity” is imposed, as underlying problems, stemming primarily from the Mexican difficult past, are neglected rather than

faced. For that reason, the crowd in such events does not become “a people, in the sense of a people”, instead, it remains an “agglomeration of solitary individuals” (Paz, 1961). In other words, these events do not construct any genuine sense of community but only serve performative purposes which mask the solitude of a Mexican. In this way, both the spontaneous fiesta and state-organized nationalist rituals function as collective masks. They allow the nation to theatrically express a sense of harmony and togetherness, but when the celebration fades, individuals return to the “solitude that confines him during the rest of the year” (Paz, 1961).

Paz is critical of how nationalism, when reduced to a ritual, loses its power to create genuine community or instigate change. It becomes disconnected from everyday reality, a mask that conceals persistent wounds and contradictions (Treviño, 2014). Rituals of nationalism are repeated year after year, through reciting of the same myths, deployment of the same symbols, which serve as mere performances that reinforce a false narrative of unity. In Paz’s vision, this kind of nationalism “serves to distract from or suppress unresolved tensions and contradictions,” ultimately deepening solitude rather than overcoming it (Paz, 1961).

Rituals also operate discursively, through the repetition of symbolic language, slogans, and performative expressions that construct an illusion of unity while masking underlying fragmentation.

### Language, Silence, and Symbolic Power in the Construction of Identity

The previous discussion of masks, solitude, and rituals shows that Mexican identity, as described by Octavio Paz, is built through practices that manage how people express themselves, hide their vulnerability, and create a sense of collective belonging. However, these dynamics are not limited to social behavior or cultural performance. They are also deeply rooted in language itself. Language becomes a crucial space where these patterns are maintained, challenged, and ingrained into daily life. The same mechanisms that influence social interactions (such as indirectness, concealment, and ritual) are reflected linguistically through speech, silence, and symbolic expressions. Therefore, understanding Mexican identity requires examining how language functions beyond mere communication; it acts as a system of control and representation that carries historical trauma, shapes social relationships, and sustains the

conditions of masking and solitude. The following sections will explore this linguistic aspect across three interconnected levels: pragmatic indirectness, discursive silence, and symbolic vocabulary at the semantic level.

### Indirectness (Pragmatic Level)

At the pragmatic level, indirectness emerges as a systematic communicative strategy characterized by hedging, ambiguity, and evasion. Rather than functioning as mere stylistic variation, these features operate as structured mechanisms through which speakers regulate the degree of personal exposure in interaction. Hedging devices (e.g., using modal or copular verbs) introduce epistemic distance, allowing speakers to soften assertions and avoid full commitment to propositional content. Ambiguity, similarly, enables multiple interpretive possibilities, diffusing responsibility for meaning and reducing the risk of confrontation or misalignment. Evasion, whether through topic shifting, circumlocution, or partial responses, further reinforces this tendency to withhold direct expression.

Taken together, these strategies reflect a broader communicative orientation in which speakers deliberately avoid full self-disclosure. This avoidance is not simply individual but culturally patterned, shaped by historical conditions of mistrust, hierarchy, and vulnerability. In such a context, directness may be perceived as risky, exposing the speaker to potential judgment, conflict, or symbolic domination. Indirectness serves as a protective barrier, facilitating engagement in social interactions while preserving a regulated distance from personal statements and emotions.

This pragmatic pattern can be seen as the linguistic version of the "mask" that Paz talks about. Indirectness lets speakers talk without fully showing themselves, just like a mask hides inner states while showing an acceptable outside. Meaning is mediated, filtered, and strategically concealed, resulting in a discursive space where presence and absence coexist. The speaker is both present and absent, showing and hiding at the same time. In this way, indirectness doesn't make communication weaker; it changes it by making hiding a part of how people interact and copying the logic of masking in how people use language.

### Silence (Discursive Level)

At the discursive level, silence should not be interpreted as a simple absence of speech but as a form of controlled non-expression. It is an active and meaningful component of communication, governed by social norms and strategic considerations. Silence operates within discourse as a deliberate withholding of verbalization, where what is left unsaid carries as much significance as what is articulated. Rather than signaling communicative failure, it constitutes a structured practice through which speakers negotiate relationships, identities, and boundaries.

One of its primary functions is boundary-setting. By refusing to verbalize certain thoughts, emotions, or experiences, speakers establish limits around their personal domain, protecting it from external intrusion. Silence defines the boundaries of communicative accessibility and privacy, thereby preserving the distinction between the self and others. Closely related to this is its role in emotional protection. In contexts marked by historical trauma or social vulnerability, silence serves as a defense mechanism, preventing the exposure of affective states that may be perceived as weakness or may invite exploitation. It allows individuals to maintain composure and control, aligning with broader cultural expectations of restraint and self-containment.

Also, silence helps keep social distance. It keeps a certain level of distance between people by limiting direct communication, which strengthens hierarchical or cautious relationships. This is especially clear in situations where trust is weak or where social interactions are shaped by differences in power. In this context, silence is not neutral but relational; it influences the negotiation of proximity and distance within discourse.

Importantly, these functions collectively link silence to the reproduction of solitude through communication. Even in interaction, where connection might be expected, silence preserves separation. It interrupts the potential for intimacy, preventing the full articulation of self and thereby sustaining the condition of isolation described by Paz. Communication does not eliminate solitude but becomes one of the means through which it is maintained. Silence ensures that interaction remains partial, controlled, and ultimately

incomplete, reinforcing the broader cultural pattern in which individuals remain enclosed within themselves despite being in constant contact with others.

### Words of Memory and Symbolic Lexicon at the Semantic Level

At the semantic level, Octavio Paz identifies one of the most enduring aspects of Mexican identity in what can be called a symbolic lexicon: a collection of culturally rich expressions that embody historical experiences within everyday language. These expressions go beyond simple colloquialisms or insults by serving as semantic vessels that preserve and transmit collective memory, especially memories of violence, domination, and rupture. In this way, language functions as an archive of historical trauma. Building on Paz's idea that language encodes such trauma, the symbolic lexicon of Mexican Spanish demonstrates how meaning acts as a carrier of colonial history and power dynamics. These culturally charged expressions are not just linguistic units but condensed narratives of conquest, gendered violence, and social hierarchy. To clarify how these linguistic patterns operate in practice, the table below organizes key expressions according to both their grammatical categories (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives) and broader discursive strategies (e.g., metaphor, euphemism, hedging). This distinction is important because it shows that the encoding of historical trauma does not occur only at the level of individual words, but also through figurative language and indirect expression. In particular, metaphors and euphemisms play a crucial role by simultaneously revealing and concealing violence: metaphors structure how experiences (in this case, abstract or traumatic) are conceptualized (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), while euphemisms enable the indirect articulation of taboo subjects such as domination and sexual violence (Allan & Burridge, 1991). From a discourse-analytic perspective, such strategies are central to the reproduction of power, as they shape what can be said and how it can be expressed (Foucault, 1972). Analyzing these strategies therefore makes it possible to trace how colonial power relations persist not only in what is said, but in how it is expressed, embedding domination in culturally familiar and often unquestioned forms of speech (Bourdieu, 1991). The table itself presents representative examples of these expressions. It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive but rather illustrative of broader patterns in Mexican Spanish that Paz identifies as central to the symbolic

lexicon. It summarizes some of the most impactful expressions used by Paz. Each entry demonstrates how word choice, structure, and rhetorical strategy function to embed historical trauma and social hierarchy within everyday speech.

As the table illustrates, these expressions are not isolated but systematically distributed across linguistic categories, which demonstrates how colonial meanings permeate multiple levels of language structure. This analysis shows that the symbolic lexicon functions as a semantic infrastructure of memory, where expressions like "hijos de la chingada" are not just isolated phrases but nodes within a larger system that perpetuates colonial violence, gender hierarchy, and social domination through language. Through this symbolic lexicon, historical trauma becomes naturalized within everyday communication. Speakers may not consciously invoke colonial history, yet the meanings embedded in these expressions continue to reproduce its logic. In this way, language functions as a mechanism of continuity that carries forward asymmetrical power relations established during the colonial period. The persistence of these terms shows how domination is not only maintained through institutions but also through meaning itself, through the words that structure perception and social interaction. Moreover, these expressions contribute to the internalization of hierarchical and gendered power structures. The figure of the violated woman and the stigmatization of her "offspring" reinforce narratives of shame, illegitimacy, and inferiority, which echo colonial distinctions between conqueror and conquered. As such, the symbolic lexicon does not merely reflect power; it actively participates in its reproduction by embedding these hierarchies into the semantic fabric of everyday life. By examining language at this level, it becomes evident that discourse is inseparable from history. The symbolic lexicon bridges past and present. In Paz's framework, words are not neutral descriptors but charged signifiers that encode collective trauma, sustain structures of domination, and reinforce the conditions of solitude and masking that define the Mexican experience. The recurring use of metaphor, ambiguity, and indirectness serves to both preserve trauma through repetition and obscure it via symbolic displacement. While Paz identifies these metaphors as expressions of historical trauma, he does not fully question how such representations perpetuate gendered violence symbolically, embedding misogynistic assumptions within national identity itself. Consequently, discourse

**Table 1:**  
*Linguistic Strategies and Examples*

Category/ Subcategory	Example	Discursive Function	Colonial/Historical Link
<b>Word Class</b>  Nouns	<b>hijos</b> de la chingada (sons of a bitch) → offspring of violation, abduction or deceit	Labels identity with inherited shame	Encodes trauma from sexualized colonial violence and social stigma
	<b>La Malinche</b> (historical figure)	Represents betrayal and conflicted cultural identity	Embodies colonial conquest and gendered power relations
	<i>caciques</i> , feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry ... all <b>machos</b> , <b>chingones</b>	Signifying hierarchy and social control	Identity tied to domination and rupture
	<b>mestizo</b> (mixed-race person)	Denotes ambiguous cultural identity	Symbolizes racial mixing and identity conflict from colonial times
	<b>criollo</b> (a person of pure Spanish blood living in the Americas)	Denotes ambiguous cultural identity	Symbolizes racial mixing and identity conflict from colonial times
	Verbs	<b>chingar</b> (screw/do violence)	Expresses aggression and domination
the Mother <b>forcibly opened, violated or deceived</b> ; we <b>disguise</b> not only our anger but also our tenderness; the Mexican... <b>shuts</b> himself away to protect himself; the Spanish state <b>assimilated</b> and <b>organized</b> the conquests		Representing domination, violation, concealment, and control as ongoing processes	Reproducing colonial logic through action embedded in language
to <b>mask</b> , to <b>close</b> oneself, to <b>open</b> , to <b>violate</b> , to <b>wound</b>		Encoding agency in terms of domination (violate) vs. defense (close oneself)	Lexical field reflects colonial rupture (Conquest as “wound”); defensive vocabulary (mask, closed) signals postcolonial identity shaped by subjugation and mistrust
Adjectives	The Mexican is always <b>remote</b> , from the world and from other people. And also from himself.	Marks emotional restraint and self-protection	Psychological defense shaped by historical trauma
	defenseless <b>old</b> man (Hidalgo); <b>long-suffering</b> Mexican mother; <b>closed</b> nature of our reactions; <b>authoritarian, inquisitorial</b> tone; implacably <b>closed</b> to all personal expression	Attaching evaluative and emotional meanings to subjects and identities	Reinforcing internalized hierarchies and colonial subjectivity; helplessness against force
	hermetic, closed, solitary, indifferent, explosive	Constructing a psychological-national character	Defensive vocabulary
<b>Metaphor</b>	The Chingada is the Mother forcibly opened → metaphor of violation; his face is a mask and so is his smile → concealment of identity; The revolutionary explosion is a prodigious <i>fiesta</i> → violence as ritual release; we are the son of Nothingness	Symbolizing trauma, identity, and historical rupture through imagery	Translating colonial violence into enduring symbolic forms

	The Mexican wears masks; history is a wound; we are children of the chingada; the pachuco... wants to be both invisible and defiant; fiesta as explosion	Translating historical and sociological processes into embodied, affective imagery; creates coherence between personal psychology and collective history	Colonial violence is internalized as identity (wound, violated mother); hybridity and marginality (pachuco) reflect postcolonial dislocation between cultures
<b>Euphemism</b>	La Chingada (displacing explicit rape); the violated mother; to open oneself / to be opened; shameful origins generalized references to "the Conquest" without detailing brutality	Indirectly encoding taboo subjects (rape, domination, humiliation); maintaining philosophical tone while gesturing toward trauma; allowing culturally legible but softened articulation	Reflecting silencing of colonial sexual violence; Malinche as symbolic figure of conquest; mirroring historical repression and patriarchal framing of colonial past
	Pretend it never happened, <i>señor</i> → erasure of offense; we dissimulate so eagerly that we almost cease to exist → softening of self-erasure; politeness masking domination	Concealing conflict, violence, and social tension through indirect phrasing	Reflecting adaptive strategies under oppressive or hierarchical systems
<b>Double Entendre</b>	chingar (to fuck / to violate / to defeat); La Chingada (violated woman / symbolic mother of the nation); opening (emotional vulnerability / sexual penetration); closed/open (psychological vs. bodily states)	Producing semantic layering simultaneously vulgar, historical, and symbolic; invites reader interpretation; embeds ideology in everyday language	Language itself carries colonial history; sexualized meanings reflect gendered violence of conquest; national identity encoded in ambivalent, unstable signifiers
	¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada! → both affirmation and insult; chingar... to molest, to ridicule, to wound or kill → semantic field of aggression; a change of tone is enough to change its meaning	Producing layered meanings that encode aggression and identity simultaneously	Preserving colonial violence in everyday linguistic ambiguity
<b>Hedging</b>	It seems to me that North Americans consider the world...; perhaps they have never experienced true joy; it would be worth while to examine that verb → avoids absolute authority	Introducing epistemic distance and indirectness	Reflecting caution shaped by historical hierarchy and mistrust
	perhaps the Mexican..., it seems to me that..., one could say..., we might interpret...	Softening generalizations about national identity; constructing reflective, essayistic authority rather than rigid determinism; signaling interpretive openness	Acknowledging complexity of postcolonial identity; avoiding totalizing claims while still engaging in broad cultural diagnosis
<b>Boosting</b>	Everything that makes up the present-day Mexican... can be reduced to this; We are alone; Man (...) is not in history: he is history; The Revolution (...) was an explosion of reality	Asserting strong, universal, or definitive claims about identity and history	Reinforcing collective identity formed in opposition to colonial domination
	the Mexican is..., we are alone, this is the key to..., undoubtedly; strong declaratives about solitude, identity, and history	Reinforcing central theses; creating rhetorical authority and philosophical weight; framing interpretations as essential truths	Risks essentializing Mexican identity as product of colonial trauma; constructing a unified narrative rooted in Conquest and its aftermath

does not merely mirror historical power relations but actively sustains them with the aim of embedding asymmetrical relations into everyday speech and making them seem natural rather than contingent. This shows that the symbolic lexicon plays a key role in shaping Mexican identity, at once exposing and hiding its historical roots, and it strengthens Paz's point that language, power, and cultural memory are closely intertwined.

### Conclusion

Octavio Paz, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, examines how the experiences of conquest, colonization, and revolution have shaped Mexican identity through mechanisms of masking, persistent solitude, and the organization of rituals. Paz points out that a mask acts as both a protection and a barrier and is reflected in both gender expectations

and everyday social interactions, preventing people from honestly confronting their own histories and vulnerabilities. This habit of concealment is further embedded in language, where culturally loaded expressions, indirect speech, and symbolic metaphors encode historical trauma and reinforce social hierarchies, making silence and ambiguity part of the fabric of identity. This habit of concealment extends to the national level, where a homogenized image of a community is promoted, while real social and cultural differences are being suppressed.

Paz identifies solitude as a fundamental feature of Mexican experience. He argues that it is rooted in denial of origins and reinforced through distrust in social relationships. Rather than resolving this through authentic connection, Mexicans turn inward, and even public celebrations fail to bridge the underlying sense of alienation. Rituals and fiestas, in both personal and national contexts, temporarily relieve this isolation. However, they do not resolve deeper divisions or heal historical wounds. Instead, they create an illusion of community and reinforce a national identity built on performance rather than genuine understanding of oneself. Even linguistic practices within these rituals, including repetition of slogans, euphemisms, and performative speech acts, contribute to the maintenance of these masks and the symbolic projection of unity.

Through his analysis, Paz exposes how Mexican nationalism relies on form and ritual to construct unity but ultimately perpetuates the very divisions and solitude it claims to overcome. His ultimate message is that, to move forward and allow himself to truly explore his identity and conceive of his nationality, a Mexican first needs to address and come to terms with his past. By situating language as both a repository and a conduit of historical trauma, Paz demonstrates that Mexican identity is not only shaped by historical events but continuously reproduced through discourse, symbolic expression, and culturally loaded vocabulary. Ultimately, Paz's analysis reveals that Mexican identity is not only historically produced but discursively sustained, as language itself becomes a site where trauma, power, and concealment are continuously enacted.

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