Mapping the itineraries of semiotic artefacts in the linguistic landscape of protest: The case of shields in Venezuela

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the emergence and developments through time of a semiotic artefact, the shield, used by demonstrators in violent anti-government protests in contemporary Venezuela. Drawing on the concept of discourse itineraries (Scollon 2008), the material and semiotic transformations this artefact underwent are mapped through various protest cycles, whilst considering the semiotic enrichment of century-long traditions of shields that inform the various functions they play within current day itineraries. The study concludes by discussing the advantages of using the concept of discourse itineraries for understanding moments in the life cycle of semiotic artefacts in the linguistic landscape and outlines future opportunities to expand the analysis of shields beyond the Venezuelan case. (Linguistic landscape of protest, discourse itineraries, semiotic artefact, shields, Venezuela)*

INTRODUCTION

In 2014 and 2017 Venezuela lived through two of the most contentious periods in its recent history, with sustained mass protests against the government of Nicolás Maduro.[1] Within such periods of unrest, a key semiotic artefact emerged in the linguistic landscape of protests in the country: the shield. As confrontations between demonstrators and the government security forces increased in frequency, the images that circulated of these events depicted protesters and other actors in the protests equipped with various types of combat gear, including gas masks, construction helmets, gardening gloves—but most saliently shields painted with a variety of symbols and other semiotic resources (see Figure 1). Although there is a long tradition of protests in Venezuela, including violent ones (see López Maya 2002, 2019 for relevant surveys), the use of shields in demonstrations is a recent phenomenon, considering that aside from 2014 and 2017 there is no recorded evidence of their presence.

In this article, the novel use of shields in Venezuelan protests is taken as a case to explore the emergence, developments, and functions of semiotic artefacts in linguistic landscapes of protests. I build on Scollon's (2008:234) concept of 'discourse itineraries', defined as the 'historical paths of resemiotized

749

FIGURE 1. Photo taken by @raynerpenar on May 31, 2017.

displacement' that discourses follow, paths that can stretch far into the past (Jones 2014) in interwoven connections of not only texts, but people, objects, and practices. This and related concepts (i.e. trajectories and pathways) have proven useful for studying the spatial mobilities of signs and artefacts (e.g. to and from the physical and virtual) in different linguistic landscapes (see Chun 2014; Lou & Jaworski 2016; Abas 2019). I have chosen discourse itineraries over other available concepts, as this one entails both spatial distributions and temporal extensions (Scollon 2008; see also Joyce & Gillespie 2015) and is thus useful to examine different 'moments' of the social circulation (Stroud & Mpendukana 2009) of an artefact, from its inception in a given landscape to its developments throughout time. Before I continue delving into the theoretical and methodological advantages of the concept of discourse itineraries for an analysis of this nature, let me first explain in more detail the context of the protests in which shields emerged in Venezuela.

THE 2014 AND 2017 VENEZUELAN PROTEST CYCLES

The 2014 and 2017 protest cycles[2] were unprecedented in their duration, lasting six and five months respectively and occurring on an almost daily frequency. They were also characteristically violent—each left a high death toll, and thousands of injured individuals due to the disproportionate use of force to disperse demonstrations[3] and clashes between government security forces, demonstrators, and armed

750 *Language in Society* **51**:5 (2022)

groups. The willingness to repress protests represented for many scholars an indication of an increasingly authoritarian turn of Maduro's government (see García-Guadilla 2020; Jiménez 2021). To understand the emergence of shields within this climate of unrest, we need to consider these protest cycles in more detail.

The first of these cycles began in early February 2014 in the Venezuela's western state of Táchira where university students took to the streets to condemn the rampant insecurity on their university campus (see López Maya 2014). The government responded by repressing the protests and detaining several students which, in turn, caused public outrage and sparked other university demonstrations across the country in solidarity with those detained. The protest cycle reached a peak and gained greater visibility on February 12, when the student movement and prominent opposition leaders—each with their own agenda—organised mobilisations in Caracas, the capital city, and fifteen other states to demand the release of the detainees. The protests in Caracas were met with even more aggressive repression. In addition, clashes broke between opposition and pro-government groups who were also summoned by Maduro to organise in the same day to express solidarity to the government. The day ended with the imprisonment of various activists and politicians but more tragically with the death of two university students and one government supporter.

In the days and months that ensued, the conflict continued and escalated. Demonstrators remained on the streets until July, when the spirit of protesters waned due to the disparity of objectives of the different actors involved and the escalation of violence that had taken place (see Masullo 2017). By the end of the cycle there were forty-two deaths and 3,351 arbitrary detentions (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social 2014). While demonstrations continued to take place in the following years, it was not until 2017 that the country would find itself in a similar situation of civil unrest.

The second cycle of protests began on March 30, 2017, with a call made by the opposition coalition to protest in Caracas to demand the annulment of two judicial rulings that sought to strip the National Assembly of its functions. The National Assembly at the time was the only governmental body through which parties opposing to the government could have a voice and a role in decision making. Even though the Supreme Court quickly reversed its decisions (April 1st), people remained on the streets for months, fuelled by the aggravating economic and socio-political crises and the deadly turn that the protests took (for a detailed list of the motives that fuelled the protest and a timeline of the events, see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017; Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social 2018). Similar to the previous cycle that was ignited by punctual events, the 2017 protests grew bigger following the violent government response to the demonstrations and accumulated popular discontent. The 2017 protests dispersed in July due to the high death toll and imprisonments (157 and 5,051 respectively, based on the data by Observatorio venezolano de conflictividad social 2018), the lack of organization of the opposition leaders, and the

installation of a National Constituent Assembly which threatened to impose severe punishments against demonstrators (see Uzcátegui 2018).

It was during these two cycles of protests that shields of various types emerged and were extensively used. To understand why they emerge, the main developments they underwent and the various functions they served through time, I turn to discussing the theoretical and methodological tool that I use in this article.

MAPPING THE ITINERARIES OF SEMIOTIC ARTEFACTS: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concept 'discourse itineraries' was proposed by Ron Scollon (2008) as a replacement of the term 'discourse cycles'[4] previously developed by him and his colleague Suzie Wong Scollon in 2004 in their nexus analysis theory. Central to the concept is the idea that discourses run along extended itineraries of transformation, meaning that 'much discourse which is of relevance to a moment of action is, in fact, displaced from that action, often at quite a distance and across a wide variety of times, places, people, media, and objects' (Scollon 2008:233). As exemplified by Jones (2015:343), who has applied the concept to a variety of discourses, its analytical utility lies in that it calls attention to 'how discourses might enter into a particular site of engagement in many different forms—in the form of a 'text' such as a story or a rumour, or as a habitual practice such as the practice of only buying vegetables form a certain place, or as an object such as a particular kind of kitchen appliance'. It is then the task of the researcher to map these long historical paths, and their spread through multiple, complex, and interlinked processes of transformation throughout space and time.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the concept of discourse itineraries has been used by various scholars in linguistic landscape research to explore the complex pathways followed by signage and artefacts through space. Chun (2014), for instance, uses it to describe the 'mobile itineraries' of three protest signs documented in the Occupy movement in Los Angeles in 2011, as they were relocated from the physical to virtual space, being featured in blogs, YouTube videos, and the like. Building on Chun's (2014) work, Lou & Jaworski (2016) observed that in the semiotic landscape of the 2014 Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, the pathways followed by signs and artefacts were not unidirectional (from physical to virtual spaces), but far more complex describing what they call 'circular itineraries' where signs get re-emplaced from physical to virtual spaces and back to physical spaces (see Abas 2019 for a similar analysis). While in these articles there is a recognition of the role that these spatial distributions have in extending itineraries across time for further uptakes, they do not actively engage with the temporal extensions of the itinerary. A focus on the temporal aspects of the itinerary not only allows us to explore specific moments in the life cycle of an artefact, but to follow its evolution. The latter point is particularly

important since, as Chun (2014) acknowledges in the conclusion of his article, the moves and meanings of signs may evince increasing complexity as they are re/de/politicised in the various contexts in which they get relocated over time.

With regards to the methodology, two of the most challenging aspects of mapping an itinerary are to be able to delimit the scope of the analysis and establish how to uncover relevant information, as 'many of the histories that lead up to a particular text being the way it is or a particular practice being performed … are buried deep in the past and invisible to those using these texts or engaging in these practices' (Jones 2015:344). In the field guide provided for nexus analysis, Scollon & Scollon (2004:164) explain that mapping entails expanding the circumference of analysis beyond the particular focal point of study, moving backward and/or forward around the circumference, so that one can note particular points in which a transformation occurs. Taking the example of the use of the word 'organic' in food discourse as provided by Scollon (2008), in practice, the mapping process involved steps as varied as the revision of the common dictionary definition of the word, the product advertising blurb of the company that produced the rice inscribed in the back of the package as it describes their organic practices, and the definition provided by the board that certifies the product as organic. Other researchers using the concept have also considered mapping to involve analysing photographic evidence (Lou & Jaworski 2016), interviewing different actors (see Jones 2014, 2015), interpreting classroom data—from textbooks to students' assignments and fieldnotes (Chun 2010)—and conducting internet searches (see Chun 2014), depending on the nature of their research.

There are two important aspects to note that determine the data and analysis followed for shields in this study. The first one is that shields are rich cultural artefacts imbued with a long history in hunting, combats, art, policing/riot control, and, more recently, global protest movements. These previous itineraries no doubt have influenced the use of this semiotic artefact in the Venezuelan protests, and thus it needs to be explored to understand its emergence. The other important aspect to consider is that shields are a semiotic artefact with both practical and communicative functions derived from the affordances of its semiotic resources, including the materials they are made of and the resources (written texts, images, logos, etc.) they display on their surfaces (see Björkvall 2009 for other examples of semiotic artefacts with practical and communicative functions). Thus, in considering the itineraries of shields in Venezuela, I placed particular attention, on the one hand, to the shield as a cultural artefact throughout history, and on the other, to the materials of which the shields in the 2014 and 2017 linguistic landscape of protests are made and the content of the semiotic resources inscribed within them.

For that reason, the mapping consisted of two main stages. First, I conducted a search of definitions of shields to provide a brief survey of their context of use and functions (practical and communicative) throughout time. Research is taken from records that concern a variety of disciplines: archaeology, military history, heraldry,

and modern policing. Such a survey is not exhaustive. My purpose was to highlight the continuous presence of this artefact through time, from antiquity to the twenty-first century, to provide a backdrop for their analysis and interpretation in the Venezuelan protests and create links that explain how 'one set of social actors along an itinerary function to either enable or constrain the actions of social actors occurring at other points along the same or intersecting itineraries' (Jones 2015:483).

Second, to explore the particular case of shields in the Venezuelan protests of 2014 and 2017, I draw on a range of evidence. As a primary data source, I used photographs of shields as they constitute one of the few remaining records of the signage and semiotic artefacts that make up a linguistic landscape of protests. Since I was not in the country at the time of the events, I could only (as other linguistic landscape scholars before me) follow 'traces from past linguistic landscapes' (Pavlenko 2010:133). This required the access to a digital archive through which to study the phenomenon from afar and in retrospect. The photographs depicted here were taken from the Instagram accounts of Venezuelan professional photographers and photojournalists. Among the factors for choosing Instagram photos include the popularity of this platform in Venezuela for sharing footage and information about the protests, in light of the communicational hegemony imposed by the state over the past two decades (Freedom House 2017), and the fact that photographs in this platform are arranged and displayed by date, which in turn facilitates the chronological register of the protests that allows me to estimate when shields first emerged and how they were used over time. The photographs are taken from photographers and photojournalists accounts since they were meticulous in their recording of the images throughout the months of the protests. They stated in their captions and/or hashtags the date, place, and events that surrounded the photographs they took and acknowledged any reposted photos made by colleagues or themselves, which not only ensured the use of corroborated data but allowed for the systematic cataloguing and analysis of change.

The photos depicted in the article were chosen to illustrate general trends and/or important developments in the itinerary of shields, observed in a corpus of approximately 200 photographs that depict this artefact in the 2014 and 2017 protests.[5] In order to pinpoint their emergence and relevant developments, the photographs were screenshotted and catalogued into a spreadsheet, noting the dates when they were taken and any additional contextual information available sourced from the hashtags, caption, and/or the interviews conducted with participants (see paragraph below for more information about the interviews). The shields within these photographs were analysed following a social semiotic approach (see Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), with attention to the categories previously described (materials and content of semiotic resources). In addition, the position of the semiotic resources (inner and outer surface of the shields) was also considered for the analysis of the functions as they imply difference addressees and hence different purposes.

The complementary data included searches of newspaper articles, investigative journalistic reports, and academic papers that described the use of shields in the said protests, as well as photo-elicited interviews conducted in 2018 with some of the professional photographers and photojournalists who documented the protests.[6] Together, they provided context and a frame to interpret the contextual characteristics that led to the emergence of shields and helped corroborate the major changes that shields underwent during each cycle of protests. Photo-elicited interviews, in particular, added an eyewitness perspective to the phenomenon through the retelling of the events by the interviewees. Since they were actively immersed in the demonstrations and have been documenting protest events for several years in the country, they provided invaluable insights to the internal dynamics of the protests (e.g. discussions between protesters, attitudes between police and civilians, and descriptions of the use of shields). Ideally, these testimonies would have been complemented by those of actors with a more direct role in the production of shields in the Venezuelan protests, such as the demonstrators themselves and other individuals involved in crafting and using these artefacts. Although this would have deepened our understanding of the emergence of shields, their developments throughout the protests, and the rationale behind certain semiotic resources inscribed on them, contacting these actors was not feasible. This was partly because of the practicalities involved in tracing demonstrators once protests have finished, but also due to the ethical implications of interviewing individuals whose actions were criminalised in a country like today's Venezuela.

ANALYSIS

Defining shields

Shields constitute an important protective device that has been used for millennia. For instance, in nomadic and early sedentary groups, shields were used for hunting purposes. Later, many empires would come to use shields in warfare to defend themselves from enemy attack (Tucker 2015). This defensive armament continued to be popular as a mode of protection until the end of the Middle Ages, when the creation of firearms brought about their temporary obsolescence (Tucker 2015), a point to which I return later in this section.

From early versions made with wood, leather, and basketry followed sturdier shields created through the welding of metals such as bronze, iron, and steel. The surfaces of shields have been embellished, as if they were canvases, with semiotic symbols, geometric shapes, and images, depictions of hunting and battle scenes, patterns of noble lineages, among other motifs that included written and visual resources. Their apparently decorative motifs have in fact served specific communicative functions. Feest (1980), for instance, notes in his study of shields in the tribal world three main functions. First, he highlights a protective function of the motifs, a point that is reinforced by Tavarelli (1995:12), when he details how

'the carved and painted images on shields are visual attempts to muster spiritual forces to protect the warriors'. Second, Feest (1980) mentions a secondary combative force in the motifs, drawing on symbols used to provoke and/or defy the enemy. The third purpose was an index of the identity of the shield bearer, where shields were decorated with motifs that identified the owner of the shield and/or the group to which he or she affiliated. The motifs included semiotic symbols associated with the owner such as patterns, specific animals, or the coat of arms (see also Nickel, Pyhrr, & Tarassuk 1984). Another feature noted in the literature is that the communicative functions of shields vary depending on the location of the motifs. In some instances, as noted by Feest (1980) and Nickel & colleagues (1984), shields were decorated both on the inside and outside surfaces. In this respect, the symbols were intended to address not only the enemy but also the bearer on the shield.

Although shields were largely replaced by alternative forms of protection in contemporary societies, they continued to appear in certain contexts. For instance, at present shields are used by law enforcement officers and military units for riot control purposes, or during military operations for protection. These shields are quite standard in their design. They tend to be made of polycarbonate and are typically clear in colour, to allow the user to see through the shield during deployment (see Hunsicker 2011). In regards to their semiotic characteristics, there is also little variation. Riot shields do not typically contain other symbols than those that index the group to which they belong (i.e. the name and/or insignia of the police force), usually placed on their outer surface.

While their widespread use amongst police for riot control purposes already locates the shield in the context of a protest, less is known about their use by protestors. Notwithstanding the lack of scholarly work on the latter, a Google search of news points to examples of shields used by protesters in places as disparate as Ukraine in 2013–2014 (Ruptly 2014), Chile during 2019–2020 (DW News 2019), Colombia in 2019–2020 (Agencia EFE 2019), and most recently in Myanmar 2021 (The Straits Times 2021) (see also the symbolic case of the umbrella used in Hong Kong in late 2014 for similar purposes). In this article, I use the Venezuelan protests of 2014 and 2017 as a case through which I discuss how protesters' shields emerged and were used in this context.

The emergence of shields in the 2014 and 2017 Venezuelan protest cycles

The use of shields as semiotic artifacts by protesters in Venezuela's linguistic landscape of protests was first observed in the cycle of protests of 2014, and subsequently in 2017. In 2014 shields were used by isolated and anonymous groups of protesters (Figure 2), whereas in the 2017 cycle of protests they were used by *los escuderos* or 'the squires' (Figure 3), part of a group that identified themselves as *la Resistencia* 'the resistance' (see Puyosa 2019). They were also used by 'the green helmets', a volunteer first-aid team comprised by doctors and medical

FIGURE 2. Photo taken by @juanchoh on March 6, 2014.

students who treated injured protesters on site (Rueda 2017; see Figure 4). The different ways in which shields were used by each of these groups is a point to which I return in the next section of the analysis.

FIGURE 3. Photo taken by @raynerpenar on May 10, 2017.

FIGURE 4. Photo taken by @gabrielmendezphoto on June 07, 2017.

The earliest photographic evidence that I have registered of shields used by protesters in Venezuela dates from March 6, 2014—a month into the first cycle of anti-government protests. At that point in time, human rights institutions were reporting the first deaths directly connected to the protests and expressing their concerns regarding the systematic repression of demonstrations by the government (see Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social 2014). A similar pattern is observed in regards the cycle of protests of 2017, where shields appear a few days after the first casualties took place. The timing, thus, suggests that the rise in violence played a central role in the emergence of this artefact. This assertion was confirmed by participants interviewed as part of this research, who also pointed to factors such as the duration of the protests and the defiant attitude assumed by protesters as the events unfolded. One photographer eloquently explained the moment of the emergence of shields as follows.

> Fue a partir de 2014 porque es la primera vez que se dan enfrentamientos permanentes con las autoridades. En todos los intentos de manifestación ciudadana que habíamos tenido antes, no había habido represión, no había existido, o si hay represión, hay una huida, pero no existía el ánimo de resistir.

> 'It was in 2014, since it was the first time that recurrent clashes with the security forces took place. In every other protest attempt that we had before, we had never faced repression, it didn't exist, or if there was repression, there was not a will to resist, only to run from it.'

The fact that shields were incorporated into the linguistic landscape of protests a month into the demonstrations suggests they emerge as a reactionary response to

violence and as an instrument of the protesters' defiance (see Llorens 2017). They reflect the needs of demonstrators to protect their bodies, while sending a clear statement of their intentions to continue protesting. Through their use, the protesters acknowledged and anticipated further violence.

Beyond these contextual factors, the interviewed participants point to the influence of other global social movements. They mention the 2013–2014 Ukrainian protests, commonly referred to as Euromaidan, and the role of these riots in the emergence of shields in the Venezuelan protests through the circulation of images and news in social media. As one interviewee explained:

> En un mundo globalizado obviamente las imágenes del Maidan llegaron a todas partes del mundo y el ejemplo de la resistencia ucraniana circuló viralmente por redes. Incluso hay un mensaje que publicaron muchísimo y que lo vi durante 2017, no recuerdo si durante 2014, pero era un— incluso uno de los directores, de los gestores de la lucha en el Maidan de cómo—era un mensaje hacia los venezolanos, de cómo debíamos resistir, y eso. Sí hubo una comunicación no solo con ese [conflicto] sino con las primaveras árabes y con todos esos movimientos que generó por redes sociales, de alguna manera sí alimentó [las protestas venezolanas].

> 'Obviously, in a globalised world, the images of the Euromaidan reached all parts of the world, and the success of the Ukrainian uprising became viral on social media. If you search, there's even a message that got reposted a lot and that I saw during 2017, I don't remember if during 2014 actually, but it was one of the leaders behind the Euromaidan, it was a message directed to Venezuelans explaining how we should resist. There was communication not only with this [uprising] but also with the Arab Spring and those kind of protest movements that had a strong presence in social media. In a way they all influenced [the Venezuelan protests].'

Euromaidan constitutes an important link in the itinerary of the shields in the Venezuelan protests not only because this semiotic artefact was also used there, but because this uprising coincided with the Venezuelan cycle of protests of 2014 and was similar in levels of repression, creating temporal and contextual links that explain the shield's pathway into the country. Indeed, as the photographer cited indicates, there exist extensive materials on the internet regarding such protests, including YouTube videos by Ukrainian protesters expressing messages of solidarity directed at Venezuelans (see Petro Didula 2014). Moreover, during 2014 the two conflicts were frequently reported jointly in the international media (see, for example, Taylor 2014). In the specific case of 2017, the example was brought back to the present through Q&A sessions in public universities in Venezuela in which the documentary 'Winter on fire: Ukraine's fight for freedom' (Afineevsky 2015) was shown and discussed as a reflective piece to talk about the issues of Venezuela, but also to 'educate' or show an inspiring case of resistance strategies (Castillo 2017).[7]

However anecdotal these events may seem, they illustrate how the intersection of itineraries can influence the subsequent trajectories these take (Jones 2015). They also point to the interactions between groups and the technologies of circulation that might facilitate the itineraries of semiotic artefacts, to the extent that many of the items that we see and think are so particular to our local linguistic landscapes 'often have their origins… elsewhere, in a translocal online world which has

prepared them, tested them, debated them and circulated them long before they became locally (offline) emplaced' where we first encountered them (Blommaert 2016:113).

Thus, the inspiration brought about by a foreign social movement coupled with the local characteristics of Venezuelan protest (i.e. their violence, duration, and change in the attitudes of the protests) comprehend the overarching circumstances that made the appearance of the shield possible in the first place.

Developments and usage of shields throughout the 2014 and 2017 protests

Most of the shields found in 2014, and especially those that emerged during the initial months of the demonstrations, had a makeshift appearance (see, for example, Figures 5 and 6). The shields in this first protest cycle were typically made from 'repurposed' objects (see Banda & Jimaima 2015), including fences, barrels, TV antennas, phone booths, whiteboards, doors, and so on (see Figures 5–9). One characteristic that all of the repurposed objects had in common is that they could be found in the built environment, and as such it is very likely that protesters have sourced them be it through appropriation of discarded objects (e.g. Figure 5), looting or destruction of public property (e.g. Figure 6), as well as through illegal appropriation of shields that belong to the security forces (e.g. Figure 7). In each case, there is a sense of the improvisation or a practical

FIGURE 5. Photo taken by @gabrielmendezphoto on April 6, 2014.

FIGURE 6. Photo taken by @juanchoh on April 20, 2014.

urgency that comes from the protesters' need to protect their bodies from attack with whatever resources are at hand.[8] The repurposed quality of these shields stands in stark contrast to the heavily armed police equipped with sophisticated anti-riot gear. It also symbolically underscores the disproportionate fight in which protesters find themselves.

The repurposing of materials is also indicative of older itineraries. Take for example Figures 6 and 7, where the shields contain visible traces of their previous uses. Figure 6 portrays a hooded demonstrator shielded behind a 'loading and unloading zone' sign, originally utilised for parking control purposes. In its repurposing as a shield, the public sign has lost its original function, and the written text remains but a trace of the previous use of this object. In other words, what gets repurposed to create a new itinerary is the material, but the earlier semiotic message becomes redundant in this context.

In the case of Figure 7, the 'layering' (Scollon & Scollon 2003) of semiotic resources on the shield recalls two different moments in time and evinces old and new itineraries. The first itinerary is semiotically demarcated through the official logo of the Bolivarian National Police and a written text that states the name of the police body, which ironically indicates that before being appropriated by a protester, the object was an anti-riot shield belonging to the police. Thus, similar to Figure 6, the logo and label here indicate the previous uses and/or owner of the shield. The second and newer itinerary is demarcated through a stencil with a cartoonish outline of Maduro's face, crossed out and accompanied by the word *capuski*.

FIGURE 7. Photo taken by @juanchoh on March 12, 2014.

This word has also followed its own long historical path, as it has been 'resemiotized' (Iedema 2003) from a televised speech made in February 2014, where the president stumbled over his words and uttered the nonsensical expression *capuski-capubul*, which was later converted into a meme that went viral on the internet (see Desde la Plaza 2014). In its newer emplacement (Scollon & Scollon 2003), within the surface of the shield in the context of a protest, the word is used to mock the president. At the same time, it resemiotises the older message by signalling that this shield has been appropriated by the protester.

A similar form of layering can be observed in the different materials of the various elements that make up the shields. Using a significant development as an example, Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how the repurposed objects (i.e. a satellite plate antenna and a whiteboard) show signs of modification through the addition of straps for gripping (made of cloth and leather), which make the shields easier to carry and handle. Similar to the layered semiotic messages described in Figure 7, the differences in materials are dissonant; they do not give the impression of comprising a coherent whole, indicating that they were not part of the original design, but represent a later improvement.

The examples cited thus far contrast with the kind of shields that emerged during the last couple of months of the 2014 protests (May–July). The makeshift appearance of earlier shields changed to become more 'professional',[9] as evident in Figure 10. In this example, shields are no longer sourced from repurposed

FIGURE 8. Photo taken by @juanchoh on April 7, 2014.

objects. Instead, they are purpose-built, intended to serve as shields, making use of high-quality materials such as checker plate (i.e. sturdier and more durable), which ensure greater protection.

Fast-forwarding to the 2017 protest cycle, the shields that appear show both continuity and significant developments in their evolving itinerary. That is, despite the absence in use of this artefact between one cycle of protests and the next, trends from 2014 are also observed in 2017. Repurposed shields coexisted along purpose-built shields in the linguistic landscape of these protests (see Figure 11). Yet, the 2017 shields show higher degrees of sophistication in their materials and exceed the practical function of protection that was imperative in the 2014 protests. In setting the scene of their use in the 2017 protests, it is also important to note that the presence of shields increases significantly in this second cycle, catching the attention of the mass media and enabling further uptakes and resemiotisations of this artefact in the mediascape.[10]

Developments related to the materiality of shields include the addition of more than one handle to enable different manoeuvres (Figure 12), and the incorporation of peepholes in their design. As illustrated in Figure 13, peepholes have been added to some shields in the form of a rectangular window (or two circular holes as seen in other pictures) at eye level that enabled protesters to have a full range of vision of their surroundings while remaining protected by the shield. Through this development the shields used by protestors begin to acquire standard characteristics of combat and anti-riot shields as discussed in previous sections.

FIGURE 9. Photo taken by @rodolfochurion on July 6, 2014.

In regards to the communicative functions, while in the data from 2014 I found very few examples of shields featuring semiotic resources, many of which were unrelated to the protests, in 2017 a large number of shields displayed a wide range of semiotic resources (Figures 11–15). Although a comprehensive analysis

764   *Language in Society* **51**:5 (2022)

FIGURE 10. Photo taken by @rodolfochurion on June 4, 2014.

of the main themes of these messages is beyond the scope of this research, there are some important points to make about the various communicative functions they fulfilled within these protests.

The content and communicative function varies depending on the location of the semiotic resources on the shield (inner or outer surface). On the inner surface usually a word or phrase is used as a motto (see Figure 12, *x tu familia* '4 your family') to remind the protesters of their personal reasons for protesting.[11] On the inside, I also found examples of religious themes which symbolise divine protection. Such is the case of Figure 14, which portrays the stencil of a virgin accompanied by the phrase *yo te protejo* 'I will protect you'. This example echoes the protective functions of medieval shields noted by Feest (1980) and Tavarelli (1995).

By contrast, most semiotic resources on the outer surface of the shield range from overtly political and/or social, to symbols of national identity, to provocative messages targeting the police force. For instance, the messages on shields recurrently draw on national symbols (e.g. the Venezuelan flag, the cover of the Constitution text) and figures (e.g. independence heroes) to display national identity. Additionally, those same symbols are often used to criticise the actions of different social

FIGURE 11. Photo taken by @raynerpenar on May 27, 2017.

FIGURE 12. Photo taken by @andrearnadez on June 1, 2017.

actors (the security forces, the government, etc.). Such is the case of the phrase *maldito el soldado que apunta su arma contra su pueblo* 'damned is the soldier that points his gun to his own people', attributed to the founding father of the

766   *Language in Society* **51**:5 (2022)

FIGURE 13. Photo taken by @raynerpenar on April 24, 2017.

FIGURE 14. Photo taken by @gabrielmendezphoto on May 29, 2017.

country, Simón Bolívar, in the early nineteenth century (repeated throughout several of the shields depicted in Figure 3), where the quote has been brought to the present to criticise the actions of the security forces in repressing the protests.

FIGURE 15. Photo taken by @andrernandez on May 3, 2017.

Other symbols placed in the outer surface of shields conveyed belonging to specific groups. Take for example the green cross over a white background displayed exclusively on the shields carried by the volunteer group of doctors and medical students known as 'the green helmets' (see Figure 4, presented earlier). Another curious symbol of group identity relates to the red cross painted over a white background (see Figure 15), in the shields of members of *la resistencia*. This cross echoes the emblematic symbol displayed on the shields, banners, and armour of the Knights Templar, a military body of the Catholic Church which was central during the Crusades in medieval times (twelfth to fourteenth century).While one can hypothesise about the many possible meanings that protesters were attempting to communicate, what is certain is that the repetition of the symbol and the uniformity of the design also inadvertently convey a collective identity (see Kim & Jang 2022). This example is also interesting as it shows how the shields in these protests are not only connected with other shields used at different times by the practical functions derived from its materials but through symbols and other semiotic resources.

In concluding the analysis, it is important to note that the texts, symbols, and images in the latter examples perform many of the same functions typically allocated to 'protest signs', as discussed in other linguistic landscape literature (see Hanauer 2012). This is not surprising, considering the context in which they are located (i.e. a protest) and the other semiotic artifacts that surround them, namely placards, banners, and handheld signs. Yet, they mark a significant shift as this

artefact is positioned here halfway between a protective device in the context of violent protests and a canvas to voice protesters' claims.

CONCLUSION

In this article I applied the concept of discourse itineraries (Scollon 2008) to understand moments in the life cycle of a semiotic artefact, the shield, in the linguistic landscape of protests in Venezuela. The analysis shows the complex contextual circumstances that enabled the emergence of this semiotic artefact (i.e. the nature and duration of the protests as well as a change to protesters' attitude) in the cycles of protests, but it also points to the intersecting and influential itineraries of other global conflicts in the emergence and use of this artefact in Venezuela.

In addition to enabling an exploration of the emergence of an artefact, the concept of itinerary applied to shields was used to follow its developments during the span of the months of the protests and from one cycle to the next, and to explore the varied functions this artefact served. The analysis described how throughout the duration of the protests, and despite the intermittent use of this artefact, shields gradually evolved from improvised and repurposed objects to sophisticated semiotic artefacts used as tools for self-defence and communication.

It is worth highlighting that the itinerary of shields I mapped only covered moments within in a larger itinerary of shields as used in modern day protest. As Joyce & Gillespie (2015:3) reflect, 'Itineraries have no real beginning other than where we enter them and no end since things and their extensions continue to move'. This became evident while conducting this research as other movements such as the Euromaidan in Ukraine influenced the itinerary of shields in the Venezuelan protests. Moreover, the itinerary is far from over. Shields have also been used in other protests across the world since 2017, including several countries geographically close to Venezuela (e.g. Chile and Colombia). Due to space constraints, these connections were not explored in this study, but they call attention to the currency of this analysis and the relevance of studying the use of this semiotic artefact for contemporary protest movements, especially those that arise out of repressive and/or authoritarian regimes. Further research should continue to expand in scope and engage in comparative studies of different linguistic landscapes of protests in which shields have been used. Such research projects could result in an exploration of the spatial distribution and a larger temporal extension of the itinerary of shields, which could in turn be used to deepen our understanding into the defining characteristics of this artefact, the appropriations it suffers when it moves to different contexts as well as the structures that mediate the production, circulation, and uptake of apparently disconnected semiotic artefacts in different spaces across time.

NOTES

[1]After the death of former president Hugo Chávez on March 5, 2013, elections were held to choose a new government. Nicolás Maduro was elected president in April 2013 with a tight margin in a very contested election. During his presidency, many existing issues in the country (high inflation, shortages of basic goods, rampant insecurity) have aggravated (see Human Rights Council 2019), leading to intense periods of social unrests such as the ones described in this article.

[2]Following the renowned political scientist Sidney Tarrow (2012:134), 'protest cycles' are defined as 'an increasing and then decreasing wave of interrelated collective actions and reactions to them whose aggregate frequency, intensity, and forms increase and then decline in rough chronological proximity'. This is the concept that most scholars studying the 2014 and 2017 protests have used to characterised them (see Masullo 2017; García-Guadilla 2020). For the purposes of this article, the reference to the concept is apt to highlight the intensity, frequency, and duration of the protests studied, but also that, throughout protest cycles, innovations in repertoires of collective action (themes, symbols) tend to occur, an aspect that could explain from a political perspective why shields were used within these particular protests. In Tarrow's (2012:134) terms, cycles 'are crucibles within which new weapons of social protest are fashioned'.

[3]The repressive tactics included the use of tear gas grenades and other types of canisters, shot directly at demonstrators and at short-range aiming at vulnerable parts of the body, water cannons knocking demonstrators over and causing them serious injuries, and the use of firearms with more harmful ammunition, such as buckshot, marbles, and metal rod pieces (Foro Penal 2017; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017).

[4]Scollon (2008) does not provide an explanation for the replacement of the term *cycle* for itineraries, even though they have quite different connotations. In his 2005 publication, there is a rare mention to what motivated the cycle analogy in the first place: 'We have thought of these successive changes of meaning on analogy with the water cycle in which water may solidify into ice or evaporate into water vapor, but throughout the cycle retain some core molecular identity as H2O' (2005:273). From this explanation, it follows that the central concern captured by the concept of cycle is that discourses transform, and that when they do so they may retain some of their core characteristics (which could potentially make them recognisable as part of a cycle or itinerary). The term *itinerary* in contrast to *cycles*, I would argue, retains these qualities yet emphasises the temporal character of these sequences of transformation.

[5]While protests occurred simultaneously in different parts of the country, the data for this article is limited to the demonstrations that took place in Caracas, the capital city, where demonstrations received the most coverage. Despite numerous attempts to locate sources that had documented protests in other cities and states of Venezuela, the data found was not extensive enough to establish trends and/or developments in shields and as such was not included in the corpus.

[6]I conducted the interviews with the informed consent of the participants and reproduced their photos with their authorisation.

[7]While the influence of Ukraine's 2013–2014 uprising in the Venezuelan protests of 2017 has been noted on numerous occasions in news reports (see Lugo 2017; García Rawlins 2017), the connections that I described in relation to the 2014 protest cycles have often been obscured or neglected, presenting shields as a new phenomenon in the country exclusively used in 2017.

[8]This use contrasts with other semiotic associations that scholars make between repurposed materials and the socio-economic dynamics of the setting in which they appear (see Banda & Jimaima 2015 for an analysis of repurposed objects within rural Zambia and Stroud & Mpendukana 2009 for 'sites of necessity').

[9]Following Hanauer (2012), I use the adjective *professional* to refer to this type of shield to highlight the fact that they make use of high-quality materials (e.g. checker plate, medium density fibreboards) that may require skilled use of tools for their handling and production (e.g. craftmanship, smithing).

[10]While in the 2014 cycle of protests the presence and use of shields in the linguistic landscape of protests passed rather unnoticed in academic literature and the press (for a rare mention, see Ellsword 2014), in 2017 the shield became 'iconized' (Jones 2015) by being shown by both the national (see Lugo 2017) and international press (see García Rawlins 2017) as a symbol to communicate the volatile political situation in the country. They were also used to exalt heroic traits in protesters (Matos Smith 2017). Because of space constrains I focus on the functions that this artefact had within the physical emplacement of the protest.

[11]The content, position, as well as the pronouns or verbs used in the second person singular, suggest that the protester herself/himself is the intended audience of the messages in the inner surface of shields.

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