Immigrants’ languages, lunfardo and lexical diffusion in popular porteño Spanish

Línguas de imigrantes, lunfardo e difusão lexical no espanhol portenho popular

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Abstract: In this paper, contemporary newspaper reports as well as criminological and sociological studies concerned with the life of the underworld in Buenos Aires, Argentina from the 1870s to the early 1900s will be analyzed to assess the supposedly exclusive association of lunfardo with the speech of the criminal. The linguistic analysis will focus on lunfardo’s lexicon — its composition, its formation and its inclusion of elements from immigrants’ languages. Specifically, the Italian dialectal varieties present in the city and the transitional cocoliche or imperfect Spanish spoken by Italian immigrants will provide the backdrop to the scenarios advanced here for lexical diffusion and the emergence of immigrants’ languages as Buenos Aires society was being transformed in the late nineteenth century. By comparing the first attestations of lunfardo with the porteño Spanish vernacular, one may view lexical diffusion as a linguistic ‘decriminalization’ of lunfardo as it was being progressively accepted by Argentine society. This investigation will argue that lunfardo, the Spanish sociolects spoken by the lower classes and the contact vernaculars spoken by immigrants

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converged in the urban margins of Buenos Aires allowing for cross-linguistic influences. Here, the crowded tenements or *conventillos* became an emblematic micro-space where law-abiding Argentine nationals or Creoles (*criollos*), European immigrants and lunfardos came together because of economic necessity. In turn, this social setting allowed a dynamic interplay among the several groups favoring the diffusion of words, some eventually contributing to the formation of popular *porteño* Spanish.

**Keywords:** Dialectology, lunfardo, Argentine Spanish.

**Resumo:** Este artigo procura analisar relatos de jornais bem como estudos criminológicos e sociológicos contemporâneos sobre a vida do submundo de Buenos Aires, desde 1870 a 1900, com o objetivo de examinar a alegada associação entre o lunfardo e o jargão dos criminosos. A análise linguística irá incidir sobre o léxico lunfardo — sua composição, formação e inclusão de elementos de línguas emigrantes. Mas especificamente, as variedades dialetais italianas e o *cocoliche* transitório (ou Espanhol imperfeito) falado pelos emigrantes italianos servem de contexto para a difusão lexical e emergência de línguas emigrantes durante a transformação da sociedade de Buenos Aires em finais do século XIX. Através da comparação entre as primeiras ocorrências de lunfardo e o Espanhol Vernacular Porteño, é possível ver na difusão lexical uma ‘descriminalização’ linguística do lunfardo à medida que ia sendo progressivamente aceite pela sociedade argentina. Esta investigação defenderá que o lunfardo, os socioletos falados pelas classes baixas bem como as línguas vernaculares de contacto faladas pelos emigrantes concentraram-se nas margens urbanas de Buenos Aires, favorecendo a existência de influências linguísticas mútuas. Aqui, as habitações sobrelotadas ou *conventillos* constituíam micro-espacos emblemáticos nos quais se concentravam argentinos ou crioulos (*criollos*), emigrantes europeus e lunfardos, por motivos económicos. Neste contexto social, a interação dinâmica entre os vários grupos favoreceu a difusão de palavras, podendo ter inclusivamente contribuído para a formação do *Porteño* popular.

**Palavras-chave:** Dialetologia; lunfardo; espanhol argentino.
1 Introduction

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the underworld life of Buenos Aires inspired the publication of police chronicles in newspapers and criminological studies. These are the earliest references to lunfardo, the thief of all sorts hiding in the urban slum or arrabal (also called bajo fondo) of Buenos Aires whose population was undergoing rapid growth as European immigrants were disembarking in the port in increasing numbers. The different types of thieves — the pickpockets or punguistas, the lock-picking house thieves or escruchantes and the violent criminals who attacked their victims or biabistas — communicated among themselves by means of a cryptic speech called lunfardo. Lunfardo has been described as a specialized language (or jargon) employed by its speakers to mask communication from the police, their victims and witnesses in order to carry out their unlawful practices. It has also been described as the language used by prisoners in the penitentiaries of Buenos Aires. Lunfardo’s origin among the criminal types who shared the conventillos with immigrants and native Argentines has been the accepted scenario for its emergence ever since the first references to this ‘thieves’ language’ appeared in the mid-1870s.

The fact that the gran aldea (the big village), as Buenos Aires was known at the time, was significantly transformed by a large influx of immigrants during the period when lunfardo begins to be mentioned by observers naturally leads us to question such simple scenarios for its formation. Because lunfardo’s underworld connections took place within a social context in which immigrants — especially from Italy and Spain — spoke different languages and dialects side by side, other non-criminal linguistic inputs into the makeup of lunfardo merit a closer look. In addition, given the lexical affinities between lunfardo and present-day porteño Spanish (< puerto ‘port’, the port of Buenos Aires), it would be prudent to look into the social and linguistic factors underlying the emergence of porteño Spanish as a new dialect in mainland Latin America before coming to any conclusions about the emergence of lunfardo.

In this paper, contemporary newspaper reports as well as criminological and sociological studies concerned with the life of the underworld in Buenos Aires from the 1870s to the early 1900s will be analyzed to assess the supposedly exclusive association of lunfardo with the speech of the criminal. The linguistic analysis will focus on lunfardo’s lexicon — its composition, its formation and its inclusion of elements from immigrants’ languages. Specifically, the Italian dialectal varieties present in the city and the transitional cocoliche or imperfect Spanish spoken by Italian immigrants will provide the backdrop to the scenarios advanced here for lexical diffusion and the emergence of immigrants’ languages.
as Buenos Aires society was being transformed in the late nineteenth century. By comparing the first attestations of lunfardo with the porteño Spanish vernacular, one may view lexical diffusion as a linguistic ‘decriminalization’ of lunfardo as it was being progressively accepted by Argentine society. This investigation will argue that lunfardo, the Spanish sociolects spoken by the lower classes and the contact vernaculars spoken by immigrants converged in the urban margins of Buenos Aires allowing for cross-linguistic influences. Here, the crowded tenements or conventillos became an emblematic micro-space where law-abiding Argentine nationals or Creoles (criollos), European immigrants and lunfardos came together because of economic necessity. In turn, this social setting allowed a dynamic interplay among the several groups favoring the diffusion of words, some eventually contributing to the formation of popular porteño Spanish.

Section 2 describes the lunfardo corpus that was used for this study, which consists of a total of five texts published between 1879 and 1908. The following section (3) presents an overview of the formative processes and language sources that form the matrix from which the lunfardo lexicon emerged, highlighting the input of immigrants’ languages and cocoliche. In section 4, lexical diffusion in the context of life in the conventillo and language contact between immigrants and native Argentines is put forward as a mechanism for explaining the cross-linguistic influences on the development of popular porteño Spanish.

2 The lunfardo corpus (1879-1908)

This section will introduce the corpus on which this study is based followed by a discussion of the lexical sources and compositional/derivative processes that contributed to the development of lunfardo. Notwithstanding the distinctive lexico-semantic features discussed below, lunfardo is in all other regards (grammar, general lexicon) a variety of Spanish. The corpus used in the following analysis spans a thirty-year period (1879 to 1908) and includes:

- Two articles written by Benigno Lugones and published in the newspaper La Nación in 1879 with the intriguing title Los beduinos policiales (‘The bandit policemen’) and the euphemistic Los caballeros de la industria (‘The captains of industry’), respectively.

- Luis María Drago’s Los hombres de presa (‘The men of prey’, 1888) which was a pioneering study of the criminal life in Buenos Aires.
• Contribución al estudio de la psicología criminal. El idioma del delito (‘Contribution to the study of the criminal psychology. The language of crime’, 1894) which was written by the criminologist Ángel Dellepiane. Like Drago, Dellepiane explores the social and psychological roots of criminality, but it also offers the first study of lunfardo as an argot.

• A collection of essays by José Álvarez (aka Fray Mocho) titled Memorias de un vigilante (Memories of a vigilante, 1897).

• La mala vida en Buenos Aires (‘The unlawful life in Buenos Aires’, 1908), by the criminologist Eusebio Gómez.

All five authors (Lugones, Drago, Dellepiane, Álvarez and Gómez) had direct knowledge of the underworld, its actors, its modes of operation and its component organizations. Even though their studies sought to understand the social and psychological traits of the lunfardos as ‘thieves’, they also address their communication practices and criminal jargon. Álvarez and Lugones had been policemen in the city before becoming crime reporters for La Nación. Álvarez moved up the ranks, becoming chief detective (comisario de pesquisas) before his retirement from police service (Álvarez 1897). Dellepiane, Drago and Gómez had spent time in Europe learning the fundamentals of the science of criminology modeled on the positivist school of Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri and Rafael Garofalo and focused on the physical and moral traits of the criminal. They wrote extensively on the subject, interviewing policemen and lunfardos themselves in the prisons of Buenos Aires:

(1) a. El procedimiento de esta categoría de lunfardo ha sido referido con toda exactitud por el Comisario Rossi. (Gómez 1908: 91)
   [The procedure for this category of lunfardo has been described [to me] precisely by Police Chief Rossi.]

b. El ejemplo anterior no es supuesto; es recogido por el que esto escribe en la Penitenciaría de la Capital. (Dellepiane 1894: 51)
   [The example above is not conjecture; it was collected by the present writer in the Buenos Aires Penitentiary.]

c. El sargento Gómez y Regir — mi maestro inolvidable más tarde, en los días en que ya la fortuna comenzó a sonreírme y que me sirvió de guía para penetrar en el bajo mundo social de Buenos Aires, cuyos misterios haré desfilar ante la vista de mis lectores en curso de estas Memorias. (Álvarez 1897: 81)
   [Sargent Gómez y Regnier — my teacher later on when good fortune was already beginning to smile upon me and who served as my guide in penetrating the social underworld of Buenos Aires, whose mysteries I will reveal to my readers over the course of these Memoires.]
d. Estos datos los debemos a la amabilidad del señor comisario D. Ignacio Socas, que nos facilitó la ocasión de hablar con algunos de los principales y más conocidos lunfardos. (Drago 1888: 110)

[We owe this information to the chief of police Ignacio Socas, who let us speak with some of the main and most well-known lunfardos.]

The meticulous italicizing of lunfardo vocabulary and footnotes in the corpus demonstrates the authors’ attempt not only to explain jargon words that otherwise might not have been understood by certain segments of society, but also to highlight their clandestine usage. They describe in detail, and in the case of journalists Álvarez and Lugones occasionally with a humorous touch, the *modus operandi* of thieves, their organizational structures and how they executed their criminal activities, euphemistically called *trabajos* (literally ‘jobs’):

(2) a. La palabra *hurtar* es sinónima de *trabajar* en la comunidad de lunfardos o ladrones.

[The word ‘hurtar’ is synonymous of ‘trabajar’ [to work] in the community of lunfardos or thieves’ (Drago 1888: 67).]

b. ...los ladrones y malhechores de Buenos Aires, lunfardos, como ellos se llaman, están sometidos a una organización estricta y es tal vez por eso que rara vez se descubre un crimen, inspirado en el robo, que no tenga extensas conexiones. (*ibid*: 100)

[...the thieves and wicked people of Buenos Aires, the lunfardos, as they call themselves, are part of a strict criminal hierarchy and perhaps it is for this reason that it is rare to detect any crime having to do with robbery that is without extended connections to a network of other criminal acts and players.]

Each criminal gang organized itself according to the function of its members:

(3) Entre reos lunfardos hay cinco grandes familias: los *punguistas*, o limpiabolsillos; los *escruchantes*, o abridores de puertas; los que dan la *caramayoli* o la *biaba* o sea los asaltantes; los que cuentan el cuento, o hacen el *scruscho*, vulgarmente llamados *estafadores*, y, finalmente, los que reúnen en su honorable persona las habilidades de cada especie: estos estuches son conocidos por de las cuatro armas. (Álvarez 1897: 58)

[Among the lunfardos there are five big families: the *punguistas* or pickpockets; the *escruchantes* or lock pickers; those who administer the *caramayoli* or *biaba*, that is, the assailants; those who swindle or do the *scrucho*, commonly known as *estafadores* and, finally, those who are the honorable masters of all four of these talents, who are know of as the four arms.]
An indispensable component in robberies carried out by lunfardos was the *campana* ‘the look-out’:

(4) El *campana*... el que busca la casa o el hombre fácil de robar, el que estudia el medio de efectuarlo, el que está en relaciones con los que cambian lo robado por dinero: la providencia en forma de hombre. (*ibid*: 59)

[The *campana* or look-out... the person who identifies a house or person who can be easily targeted for a robbery, who devises a way of carrying out the robbery, who has links with those who exchange the stolen merchandise for money: a robber’s guardian angel incarnate]

A lunfardo variety with no words to refer to victims would be incomplete. The word *otario* describes the distracted victim of the *punguista* who applied his skills in crowded tramways and streets. According to Lugones, *otarios* were ‘personas ingenuas, cándidas y sencillas, muy especialmente nuestros paisanos’ [ingenuous, candid and simple-minded people, especially our country folk] (April 6, 1879).

The word lunfardo is believed to derive from Italian *Lombardo* ‘natural of Lombardy’ via the Romanesco dialect (Roma) in which *lombardo* means ‘thief’, perhaps with Genoese interference (Gobello 1982: 124-25). Its earliest reference denoting the thieves themselves, rather than their language, is found in an anonymous note titled ‘El dialecto de los ladrones’ published by the newspaper *La Prensa* in 1878 (Conde 2011: 87), who was probably assisted by a police chief (*comisario*) acquainted with lunfardo, as the following quote suggests:

(5) Pero un comisario que se ocupa de hacerle la guerra a los ladrones tiene un vocabulario [del lunfardo] y de este vocabulario hemos tomado la copia de algunas de las frases más usuales. (Conde 2011: 87)

[But a police chief whose work it is to make war on the thieves has a glossary (of lunfardo) and from it we have noted down some of the most common phrases.]

*La Prensa* was one of the two major newspapers in Buenos Aires at the time. The other one was *La Nación*, where Lugones’ articles would appear a year later (1879a-b). It is in one of these articles that we find the first attestations of lunfardo in reference to the language of the underworld in two footnotes. In the first, he identifies lunfardo with *caló*, the name used in Spain to refer to the varieties used among thieves, and in the second, he gives readers pronunciation tips for certain lunfardo sounds:
a. Las palabras subrayadas que en adelante se encuentren pertenecen, como lunfardo, al caló de los ladrones.

[The underlined words found henceforth belong, as lunfardo words, to the caló of the thieves.]

b. Pronúnciese en ésta y demás palabras del lunfardo la ch como en la lengua francesa.

[In this and other lunfardo words one should pronounce <ch> as in French.]

As a noun, the word appears in the phrase *lunfardos extranjeros* ‘foreign or immigrant lunfardos’ (March 18, 1879); as a modifier, in *poesía lunfarda* ‘lunfardo poetry’ (idem) and *mundo lunfardo* ‘lunfardo world’. In Drago the dual use of lunfardo to refer to both thieves and their language is already established in the literature:

(7) En el lunfardo (palabra que designa al mismo tiempo la jerga y los que se valen de ella), de los ladrones bonaerenses, se nota muchas locuciones cuyo empleo a todas luces revela la necesidad de recurrir en ciertos casos a una jerigonza especial. (1888: 102)

[In the lunfardo (a word that designates at same time the jargon and those who make use of it) of the thieves of Buenos Aires, one notes many locutions whose use reveals clearly the necessity to recur in certain cases to a special lingo.]

Dellepiane’s study had a broader scope setting lunfardo on the same footing as the argots of France, Italy and Spain.

(8) Los ladrones de profesión...se sirven en las relaciones privadas que mantienen entre sí, de un lenguaje especial, enteramente propio, en el sentido de que no trasciende, por lo común, fuera de la atmósfera del delito. Distinto para cada país...recibiendo en Francia el nombre de argot, el de *gergo* en Italia, en España el de *bribia*, *germanía*, *hampa* o *caló* y el de lunfardo en la República Argentina. (Dellepiane 1894: 8)

[Professional thieves make use in their private communication of a special language, entirely their own, which does not extend beyond their criminal environment. Different in each country and even in different cities within each country, being called argot in France, gergo in Italy, in Spain it is called bribia, germanía, hampa or caló and lunfardo in the Argentine Republic.]
Indeed, critics of Argentina’s immigration practices in the late nineteenth century, particularly the upper classes, claimed that the growing criminality in the country was largely due to the unchecked arrival of immigrants with a criminal past, especially from southern Europe (Castro 2006: 95). A chief police explains this anti-immigration sentiment as follows:

(9) Buenos Aires, lo mismo que toda la República, abierta de par en par a quien quiere venir a ella, recibe por fuerza, dentro de la corriente inmigratoria normal, buena parte de la escoria antisocial de los demás países. (quoted in Gómez 1908: 30)

[Buenos Aires, like the rest of the Republic, having opened its doors fully to whomsoever wants to come, inevitably receives as part of the normal flow of immigrants, a generous portion of the antisocial scum of other countries.]

For Gómez the foreign elements borrowed from immigrants’ languages into lunfardo did not go unnoticed:

(10) Es de advertir que, la mayoría de las voces que constituyen la jerga de nuestros delincuentes, derivan de las de otros países, hecho perfectamente explicable en virtud del contingente que el elemento inmigratorio aporta a la criminalidad bonaerense. (1908: 110)

[It is important to note that the majority of words that make up the jargon of our criminals derive from those of other countries, a fact easily accounted for by virtue of the contribution of immigrants to criminality in Buenos Aires.]

3 Lunfardo

Lunfardo shares with other argots the social underpinnings that give rise to this type of language. The early descriptions refer directly or indirectly to the argot, jargon or slang as categories applicable to lunfardo. An argot may be defined as follows:

(11) [...] a secret language, roughly corresponding to cant, used by beggars and thieves in medieval France. More broadly, argot may refer to any specialized vocabulary or set of expressions (jargon) used by a particular group or class and not widely understood by mainstream society, e.g. the argot of gamblers or the argot of the underworld (Task 2007: 85; italics are mine)
This characterization of argot resembles Dellepiane’s reference to lunfardo as a tecnicismo profesional, i.e. a special language, whose features reflect the linguistic background and group identity shared by a community of people with common interests (lawyers, scientists, teenagers, sport fans, gamblers, etc.):

(12) Así, al ladrón, y solamente al ladrón, puede ocurrirsele dar un nombre especial a cada uno de los bolsillos del traje masculino; en lo cual nuestro argot aventaja a la misma lengua ordinaria que no ha pensado jamás en establecer semejantes distinciones (‘cabalete’, bolsillo en general; ‘grillo’, bolsillo lateral del pantalón; ‘grillo de espiante’, bolsillo trasero del pantalón; ‘grillo de camisulín’, bolsillo del chaleco; ‘shuca’, bolsillo lateral del saco; ‘sotala’ o ‘sotana’, bolsillo interior del saco, jaquet o levita; ‘media luna’, bolsillo exterior del saco donde suele llevarse el pañuelo.) (Dellepiane 1888: 16-17)

[Thus, the thief, and only the thief, would ever think of giving special names to each of the pockets in a man’s suit of clothes; in this respect our argot [lunfardo] has an advantage over the common language which has never bothered to make such distinctions (cabalete, ‘pocket in general’; grillo, ‘trousers side pocket’; grillo de espiante, ‘trousers back pocket’; grillo de camisulín, ‘vest pocket’; shuca, ‘jacket side pocket; sotala or sotana, ‘jacket inside pocket’; media luna, ‘outside pocket where one usually carries a handkerchief’.]

In Los hombres de presa Drago moves us beyond Lugones’ rather impressionistic views of lunfardo, which are limited mainly to its function as a secret or crypto-language. Drago’s use of the phrase modo peculiar de expression — based on Lombroso’s (1876) sociological model of the criminal world — stresses both the secret and group identity function of lunfardo as a variety used by people who share the same profession, trade or social class:

(13) En cuanto al empleo del argot, ese lenguaje a la vez pintoresco y cínico, destinado como lo dicen los mismos criminales, a ocultar sus comunicaciones a los extraños, puede muy bien ser, según apunta Lombroso, la reproducción del fenómeno en cuya virtud todos los gremios y oficios, como las diversas capas sociales, y aún los diferentes géneros de literatura, tiene sus modos peculiares de expresión. (Drago 1888: 101-2)

[In respect to the use of argot (lunfardo), this simultaneously evocative and cynical language which, as the criminals themselves claim, was created to hide their communication from strangers, may very well be nothing less than a manifestation of the phenomenon which Lombroso ascribes to each trade and profession, to each social stratum, and even to each literary genre, which develops its own particular mode of expression.]
In what follows, some of the semantic, phonological, morphological and lexical features of lunfardo will be outlined, with the goal of demonstrating that the linguistic mechanisms for the development of lunfardo are not unlike those which normally contribute to the formation of other argots, a view already articulated more than a century ago by Dellepiane:

(14) Los modos principales de la formación de los términos de la jerga criminal son los tropos, las imágenes, las homofonías y asonancias, el onomatopeyismo, la reduplicación, los barbarismos y neologismos, los arcaísmos y la alteración fonética de voces del idioma ordinario. (1894: 55)

[The main modes of formation of the thieves’ jargon (lunfardo) are the very same tropes, images, homophonies and assonances, onomatopoeia, reduplication, barbarisms and neologisms, archaisms and phonetic alternations found in our common language.]

3.1 Linguistic characterization of lunfardo

3.1.1 Semantics

Metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche are part of the rich imaginary used by the creators of lunfardo:

(15) a. madrastra ‘jail’ < Spanish madrastra ‘stepmother’
    b. quinta ‘jail’ < Spanish quinta ‘country house’
    c. dátil ‘thief’ < Spanish dátil ‘finger’
    d. campana ‘watchman’ < Spanish campana ‘bell’
    e. caminante ‘shoe’ < Spanish caminante ‘walker, person who walks’

3.1.2 Phonology

Homophony, phonetic modification and sound symbolism played a role in the emergence of lunfardo (Conde 2011: 341).

(16) a. cumplir ‘accomplice’ < Spanish cómplice idem + Spanish cumplir ‘to fulfill’
    b. ladrillo ‘thief’ < Spanish ladrillo ‘brick’ + Spanish ladrón ‘thief’
    c. león ‘slacks’ < Spanish pantalón ‘slacks’ + Spanish león ‘lion’
Words of Italian origin having initial consonant clusters unlicensed in Spanish underwent epenthesis in lunfardo:

(17) a. espiantar ‘to run away’ < Italian spiantare ‘to uproot, to dig’
    b. escabiar ‘to drink in excess’ < Genoese scabbio ‘wine’
    c. esquilafo ‘slap’ < Italian schiaffo ‘idem’
    d. escorchar ‘to pester’ < Italian scocciare ‘to annoy’

Italian geminates were reduced in lunfardo although they were still likely to be pronounced among the Italian-speaking lunfardos. While spelling is rarely a reliable guide to pronunciation, it is even less reliable where it concerns the representation of consonantal length, especially given the lack of orthographic consistency among the various authors.

(18) a. nono, nona ‘idem’ < Italian nonno, nonna ‘grandfather, grandmother’
    b. chitrulo ‘idem’ < Italian citrullo ‘stupid’
    c. cazote ‘idem’ < Italian cazzotto ‘punch’
    d. fato ‘business, affair’ < Italian fatto ‘fact’

3.1.3 Morphology

Examples (5-9) cover a range of morphological transformations that shaped lunfardo, many of which can be attributed to cross-linguistic influences:

Clipping or abbreviation of longer words may be followed by lexicalization:

(19) a. tano ‘Italian’ < Spanish napolitano ‘Neapolitan’
    b. corte ‘idem’ < Spanish cortafierro ‘tool to cut metal’
    c. sario ‘idem’ < Spanish comisario ‘chief of police’
    d. saría ‘idem’ < Spanish comisaría ‘precinct’

Affixation involves the use of derivational affixes with one lunfardo word to form another lunfardo word related in meaning:
Immigrants’ languages, lunfardo and...
Línguas de imigrantes, lunfardo e...

(20)  

a. *marroquería* ‘bakery’ < lunfardo *marroque* ‘bread’ < caló (Spain) *marró* ‘idem.’

b. *campanear* ‘to watch for police during a robbery’ < lunfardo *campana* ‘watchman’

c. *encanar* ‘to catch a thief’ < lunfardo *cana* ‘prison’

d. *barbisa* ‘beard’ < Spanish *barba* ‘idem’

e. *cambiaso* ‘exchange of robbed merchandise between thieves’ < Spanish *cambio* ‘change’

f. *guitero* ‘collector of stolen money’ < lunfardo *guita* ‘money’

Reduplication is involved in lunfardo word formation:

(21)  

a. *bobo* ‘chain watch’

b. *bibí* ‘woman’

c. *tun tun* ‘revólver’

Metathesis — the permutation of sounds or full syllables within word boundaries — is not found in the lunfardo corpus analyzed here, despite its extension in later stages to popular porteño Spanish with a semantic shift. In popular porteño Spanish, ‘vesre’ is the name given to reversing the syllable order in bi- or polysyllabic words, i.e. re-vés > vesre.

(22)  

a. *garpar* ‘to pick up the tab or check against one’s will’ < Spanish *pagar* ‘to pay’ (Gobello 1982: 96)

b. *yolipar* ‘to sleep until late in the day’ < lunfardo *apoliyar* ‘idem’ < Italian dialect *poleggiare* + Spanish *polilla* ‘moth’ (idem: 90)

c. *corroma* ‘bread’ < lunfardo *marroco* ‘idem’ (Conde 2011: 332)

3.2 A lexical comparison of the lunfardo corpus (1879-1908)

The nature of the lunfardo lexicon in the corpus chosen for this study is conditioned by the intent and extent of each source, which include the following:

(a) Dellepiane’s 128-page monograph (1894) on the underworld of Buenos Aires contains a lunfardo-Spanish dictionary listing 428 lexical entries and 182 phrases, many more than the other four sources. Sixty of those words had been included in Lugones (1879a-b), therefore, Dellepiane added 368 new words (Conde 2011: 89-90).
(b) Because of their journalistic nature, the two articles by Lugones (1879a-b) are necessarily limited in scope. Still, the 78 lunfardo words included in them, together with the twelve words published anonymously a year earlier in La Prensa, are historically significant because they are among the earliest recorded lexical items in the language. Furthermore, eighteen words in Lugones plus the twelve words in La Prensa are not in Dellepiane’s lunfardo-Spanish dictionary. In section 4.0 it will be shown that lexical diffusion could be the cause of this disparity as in 1879 lunfardo was beginning to have an input into popular porteño Spanish a decade later.

(c) The essays of Álvarez do not describe the lexical composition of lunfardo with as much detail as does the work of Dellepiane. The fact that he wrote his memoirs in 1897, many years after leaving the police force, may explain Álvarez’s shorter list of only thirty-three words. The lexical scarcity in ‘Memories of a policeman’ is compensated by an in-depth ethnographic study of the Buenos Aires underground.

(d) Drago (1888) registered thirty-four lunfardo words, not many in view of the fact that his Los hombres de presa is 285 pages long. Of these, eight words had not been previously mentioned in Lugones or in the anonymous article in La Prensa (Conde 2011: 89).

(e) Finally, Gómez (1908), the latest lunfardo source included in this analysis, contains a total of sixty-four words; most of which had already appeared in some or all of the earlier references.

Table 1 lists the shared vocabulary between Dellepiane and Lugones, Drago, Álvarez and Gómez, respectively. Dellepiane is used as the comparative reference as it has contains the most comprehensive lunfardo lexicon compiled during the period under discussion.

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<th></th>
<th>Lugones (1879)</th>
<th>Drago (1888)</th>
<th>Dellepiane (1894)</th>
<th>Álvarez (1897)</th>
<th>Gómez (1908)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total lunfardo words</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunfardo words shared with Dellepiane (%)</td>
<td>(85%)</td>
<td>(97%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
<td>(63%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any trends based on these figures must be interpreted with caution. Drago shares almost all of his vocabulary with Dellepiane (97%), while the other four sources range from 45% to 85%. A comparison of the earliest (Lugones)
and latest source (Gómez) yields twenty-three words in common (ca. 36%). The twenty-seven words attested in Lugones but not in Gómez, may include items no longer considered to be uniquely lunfardo, due lexical diffusion from lunfardo into popular porteño Spanish, e.g. atorrar ‘to sleep’, escrachar ‘to throw with force’ and guita ‘money’ (Gobello 1982). By the same token, there are lunfardo words in Lugones unattested in Gómez that seem not to have spread to popular porteño Spanish, e.g. cala ‘carriage’ and brema ‘playing cards’. The above figures are provided mainly to underscore the phenomenon of diffusion across sociolects amidst the social fluidity characterizing turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires. In drawing conclusions regarding language change (see § 4.0), however, it is important keep in mind the highly anecdotal nature of the lexicographic data summarized in Table 1.

### 3.3 Immigrant languages’ contribution to lunfardo

Immigrants from Europe — especially Italy and Spain — began arriving in Buenos Aires in such large numbers in 1860, that by the 1910 centennial of Argentina’s independence half the population dwelling in the city was foreign-born (Scobie 1974). Among them there were immigrants who strayed from the path of hard work and sacrifice for the sendero de la mala vida. Immigrant lunfardos were described as being more numerous and more dangerous than the native-born lunfardos, thus requiring closer surveillance by the police:

(23) Buenos Aires encierra dos clases de pícaros: los naturales y los extranjeros. Los primeros son pocos, relativamente, y menos peligrosos que los segundos... El pillo extranjero es el más abundante. (Álvarez 1897: 52)

[Buenos Aires brings together two types of rogues, the natives and the foreigners. The former are relatively few and less dangerous than the latter...The foreign-born scoundrels abound.]

Italy contributed significantly to the underground, which is not surprising given the country’s important contribution to the total number of immigrants:

(24) Los escruchantes más terribles son los italianos, que están constituidos en pequeñas asociaciones de mutua protección, especie de alianzas ofensivo-defensivas entre quince o veinte lunfardos. (Lugones, March 18, 1879)

[The most dangerous thieves are Italian, who are organized in small mutual protection associations, which constitute a type of offensive-defensive alliance of between fifteen to twenty thieves.]
Among the regions of origin of the immigrants who organized these asociaciones de mutua protección, Genoa, Calabria, Piedmont, Lombardy, Sicily, Venice and Naples in Italy, and Galicia and Asturias in Spain, contributed the highest numbers. Terms for describing the immigrant thieves’ nationality (Italian, Spaniard and Uruguayan) are included in the corpus. The presence of Italians in the criminal gangs is linguistically relevant for they must have contributed to the emerging lunfardo with their own dialectal argots like furbesco or gèrго della mala vita (Conde 2011).

It is difficult at times to distinguish general Italianisms from Italian regionalisms in lunfardo, in light of Italy’s linguistic diversity around reunification (1870) when immigration from the peninsula to Argentina began to gain momentum. Besides Italianisms one must consider contributions from French argot, Spanish germanía and caló, and Brazilian gíria in the formation of the lunfardo lexicon (Conde 2011: 147 ff).

About half of the five-hundred lunfardo words found in Lugones, Drago, Dellepiane, Álvarez and Gómez are of Italian origin. They derive not only from standard Italian, which is based mainly on the Tuscan dialect, but are also found in the Roman (Romanesco) and other regional varieties as well as in the gèrго or thieves’ jargon. Genoese played a especially significant role among the dialects that contributed to lunfardo’s lexicon. For example, thirty five out of the seventy eight or forty percent of the words in Lugones (1879a-b) are of Genoese origin (Conde 2011: 159). Indeed, the influence of Genoese immigrants in the transformation of Buenos Aires society between 1880 and 1920 was extensive, e.g. the old neighborhood of La Boca was known as ‘Little Genoa’ at the time.

A sample of lunfardo words found in the corpus which are still present in popular porteño Spanish and whose origins can be traced to regional Italian varieties and are listed below:

(25) a. bacán ‘man, boss’ < Genoese baccan ‘boss’ (Gobello 1982: 22)
   b. balurdo ‘fool, bundle with paper inside and money outside for deception’ < Italian balordo ‘fool’ (with Genoese vowel rising -o- > -u-) + Italian gèrго balord ‘idem’ (ibid: 23)
   c. encanar ‘to arrest, to imprison’ and cana ‘prison’ < Venetian dial. incaenar ‘to chain’ (ibid: 77)
   d. chanta ‘not trustworthy’ < Genoese ciantapuffi ‘person who does not pay back his debts’ (Conde 2011: 160)
   e. estrolar ‘to give a beating, to break’ < Milanese strollâ ‘to spill blood’ (ibid: 161)
   f. esquifuso ‘dirty, disgusting’ < Sicilian schifiuso ‘idem’ (ibid: 162)
3.4 Cocoliche

In view of the large influx of Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires between 1875 and 1910 and Argentina's lax immigration laws at the time, the appearance of Italianisms in lunfardo should not come as a surprise (see Gómez quote above). Likewise, popular porteño Spanish shows a significant number of words of Italian origin in comparison to other Latin American dialects (Meo-Zilio 1970).

In order to understand lexical diffusion to and from both lunfardo and popular porteño Spanish, it is worth considering also the characteristics of the Spanish spoken by Italian immigrants, popularly known as cocoliche. This temporary form of imperfect natural language acquisition may have had input into the circulation of words among the lower classes living in the urban margins where common housing or conventillos might have offered loci for lexical diffusion.

As an Argentine literary genre, the sainete often represented on stage the lives of immigrants and it was a vehicle for characterizing the imperfect Spanish spoken by Italians, Galicians, Jews, etc. However, cocoliche became the most easily recognized linguistic code in the sainetes written at the turn of the century for Italians whose Spanish showed transfer from their native varieties. So, the rhetorical question: ¿E dónde se produce la mezcolanza? Al conventillo (‘where does this jumble of people take place? In the tenements’), by Don Gaetano in the sainete ‘Mustafá’ (when he found out that his daughter would marry an immigrant from the Middle East) expresses the popular perception of the conventillo as fostering contact among immigrants regardless of nationality, religion or linguistic background, during the first stages of their acculturation to their new country.

Reinecke’s (1937) first survey of contact languages (‘marginal languages’) described the Argentine ‘Italian-Spanish’ immigrant variety (he does not call it cocoliche) as ‘foreigners’ mixed speech’, which lacks the systematic grammar and stable lexicon of a creole language. Whinnom (1971) viewed cocoliche as the result of secondary hybridization (or imperfect second language acquisition) encompassing a spectrum of lects from native Italian dialects to non-native immigrant Spanish. While highly variable, in some respects it remains rather stable and predictable as a linguistic system. More importantly, Whinnom distinguishes between the stereotypical or mock cocoliche of the sainete and real cocoliche, as evinced by the erroneous use of the Italian particles vi and ne in the popular sainetes (see also Cara-Walker 1987, Golluscio de Montoya 1981). Other studies of cocoliche (Meo-Zilio 1970, Fontanella de Weinberg 1987) discussed the sociolinguistic constraints on its use (men used more Hispanized cocoliche varieties than women), its comprehensibility (native-born Argentines understood the less Italianized cocoliche better than the more Ita-
lianized varieties) and its lexicon (different arenas of employment for immigrants contributed different words). Finally, it is important to consider the linguistic variability of cocoliche in relation to the typological distance between Spanish and Italian as well as between northern (Tuscan, Piedmontese) and southern (Calabrese, Sicilian) dialects of Italian.

4 Discussion

As shown above, the early literature on lunfardo popularized its exclusive association with the thieves’ communication. Undeniably, lunfardo did play a role in the underworld, as laid out by the criminologists Drago, Dellepiane and Gómez. However, it will be argued below that a less narrow interpretation of lunfardo makes possible an appreciation of its sociolinguistic history vis-à-vis immigrants’ languages (especially Italian) and lower Spanish sociolects. Specifically, language contact in the conventillos helps us to understand lexical borrowing and diffusion across the lunfardo- porteño Spanish boundary.

The arrival of Italian, Spanish and other immigrants had its urban counterpart in the creation of the port of Buenos Aires, the subway system and, crucially, the proliferation of popular housing to accommodate the many immigrants. This happened when the wealthy Creoles vacated their palace as they began moving to residential areas north of Buenos Aires, turning their dwellings into conventillos.

The national censuses of 1869, 1895 and 1914 yield the following data on the porteño conventillo (Scobie (1974: 264, Baer 1994: 99):

- A conventillo had on average sixty tenants.
- In 1904 more than one fourth of the population (26.8%) of the city of Buenos Aires lived in conventillos.
- In 1895 the native-born Argentines who lived in conventillos amounted to almost half of the tenant population.
- Foreigners represented the majority of the tenant population of the conventillos.
- Among these foreigners in tenement housing, Spaniards and Italians predominated.
Foreign tenants in *conventillos* at times came from the same region of their country of origin, as a result of their social networking with family members and acquaintances (Baily and Ramella 1988, Italiano 2013). In a few cases, a single nationality predominated in a particular *conventillo*, as was the case for the *conventillo* of Calle San Martin 256/258 where 93 percent of the tenants were of Italian origin. Though *conventillos* usually represented the main type of dwelling on a given block, by no means were they the only type, as there could be a few houses of wealthy families adjacent to them. Besides national origin, class became another cohesive element among immigrants, which at times materialized in collective actions such as general tenant strikes that pitted *conventillo* dwellers against landlords for unfair rental practices, lack of acceptable sanitary conditions, etc. (Páez 1970).

Immigrants maintained ties with people of the same nationality, town or dialect, especially right after arrival in Buenos Aires, in order to find jobs and housing. During these initial years after arrival, immigrants found more opportunities to use their native language. The following quotes are from a young Italian immigrant who comments on the extended use of Italian varieties in Buenos Aires alongside some mixed varieties, as well as on the relatively ease with which young immigrants learned Spanish:

(26) a. El idioma aquí es castellano... pero no oigo a nadie hablarlo. Dondequiera que uno vaya, en el hotel o en el trabajo, todos hablan piemontese o italiano, aun los que son de otros países y, hasta los argentinos hablan italiano (Baily and Ramella 1988: 164-5).

[The language is Castilian here... but I do not hear anyone speak it. Everywhere you go, at the hotel or at work, they all speak Piedmontese or Italian, even those who are from other countries and even the Argentines speak Italian.]

b. Hablo español bastante bien. A veces no se dan cuenta que soy italiano; y también lo escribo muy bien (idem).

[I speak Spanish pretty well. Sometimes they do not realize I'm Italian, and I also write it very well.]

Socialization and language practices were shaped by the many cultural and linguistic similarities between Argentina and Italy which facilitated quick assimilation among immigrants’ children. The conventillo experience was most intense during the peak years of immigration between 1880 and 1930. Thereafter, factors such as social mobility, international marriages, education and home ownership fostered the ascent of immigrants up the Argentine social ladder. Being the official language of Argentina, Spanish exerted a unifying
force for the immigrants through three processes: (1) a free and mandatory education system, (2) literacy campaigns, and (3) growing nationalist sentiment. It may be reasoned that such factors external to the *conventillo* disfavored the establishment of a stable Italian-Spanish bilingualism, with language shift usually virtually complete within a generation or two.

Language contact with native Argentines in the *conventillos* might have led to borrowing on their part from the immigrants’ languages (i.e. Italian varieties) into their Spanish sociolects. On the other hand, the social conditions (factors 1-3 above) surrounding the rapid language shift from immigrant parents’ Italian to Spanish among their offspring, might have militated against the kinds of structural changes (phonetic, phonological, morphosyntactic) found in other contact situations in which interference during shift leads to the incorporation of foreign features (i.e., Italian) into the community’s native language (i.e. Spanish) (Thomason and Kaufman 1988).

The use of cocoliche might have eased intelligibility between Italian immigrants and native-born Argentines. The similarities between Spanish and Italian facilitated the incorporation of elements from the two languages in both directions in both cocoliche varieties: (1) the ‘real’ cocoliche resulting from Italian transfer into immigrant Spanish and, (2) the ‘folkloric’ cocoliche produced when Argentines attempted to imitate immigrant Spanish, such as the one used by Italian immigrant characters in the *sainetes*. Regardless of the relative weight of these two pathways for lexical diffusion, the end result was the introduction of Italianisms and pseudo-Italianisms in porteño Spanish, judging from the vocabulary today’s varieties of that language.

Lunfardo was not immune to the two-way diffusion between the immigrants’ languages and porteño Spanish since the various criminal types described in §2.0 (*punguista*, *biabista*, *escrushante*) lived side by side in the *conventillos* with both Creoles and immigrants of a number of different backgrounds. Evidence for such diffusion is the fact that while the lunfardo used in the *sainetes* written before 1890 was usually translated, this was no longer the case in later *sainetes* as elements of lunfardo had already diffused into porteño Spanish (Castro 2006: 106). This diffusion might have been selective in admitting certain lunfardo words but not others, as can be inferred from an article in *La Nación* on February 11, 1887 called ‘Caló Porteño’, which includes what the author calls ‘un diccionario de argentinismos’, a clear reference to words of wide circulation among the lower classes of Buenos Aires society. Since many of the words found in the five lunfardo texts analyzed in § 3.0 above are present in this 1887 article, it is possible that Lugones, Drago and the other authors attributed to lunfardo some words that were not of exclusive use among thieves. They may have thought that the lexicon elicited from
criminals in prison was exclusively lunfardo, without realizing that some of these words were also part of the lexical repertoire of popular porteño Spanish. On the other hand, they may have assumed that their readers were already aware of this overlap. It is also possible that in the eight years lapsed between Lugones' publication (1879a-b) and the ‘Caló Porteño’ of 1887 many of these lunfardo words actually diffused to popular porteño Spanish. In this respect, it may be useful to differentiate between ‘technical’ words associated with the lunfardo life (bobo ‘watch’, shua ‘key’) itself and words eventually shared with Spanish sociolects (atorrante ‘bum’, morfar ‘eat’) (Conde 2011: 97).

Whether or not all or part of the lunfardo lexicon originated in the underworld, lexical diffusion continued to advance upward in society. By the 1930s popular cultural expressions like tango and the sainete helped to propagate the use of words that were originally restricted to the lower sociolects of Argentine Spanish, lunfardo and cocoliche to varieties spoken by members of higher social strata. In this regard, a quick comparison shows that of the nearly 500 lunfardo words that constitute the corpus upon which the present work is based, 90 are still in use in present-day popular porteño Spanish. Indeed, a lunfardo or porteño Spanish word in a doublet with related meanings may express not only semantic nuances, but also index the speaker’s identity, age or social circumstances, e.g. comer ‘to eat’ vs. morfar ‘to eat in excess’ and dormir ‘to sleep’ vs. apoliyar ‘to sleep late’.

5 Conclusion

Over the past century, lunfardo words have undergone the types of modifications that typify language change in general. In the case of lunfardo, however, words attached to the underworld life seem to have relinquished their criminal ties. This ‘decriminalized’ variety of lunfardo has become, together with an additional cohort of Italian words mediated through cocoliche, an essential component of everyday porteño Spanish. With no respect for cultural and social boundaries, the lunfardo of Lugones, Drago, Dellepiane, Álvarez and Gómez has become a quintessential part of Argentine speech giving voice to people from all social circumstances and ultimately making its way into the highly cultivated writing of authors who have acquired a pre-eminent place in the official Argentine literary canon, like Roberto Arlt and Jorge Luis Borges. The full measure of lunfardo’s impact in the popular language of Buenos Aires is graphically illustrated by the annual celebration of the Día del Lunfardo (Lunfardo National Day) on September 5 and the existence of the Academia Porteña del Lunfardo.
References


