

# Lunfardo, Popular Culture, and the Process of Creation of a National Cultural Identity in Argentina

Marco Gottardo

## Abstract

As Argentina is born as a modern nation-state in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the question of what its cultural identity is becomes prominent in Argentine society. At the elite and the popular levels of society, different discourses and cultural practices negotiate the formation of that new cultural identity. Lunfardo is a linguistic repertoire central both for these new forms of popular culture, and as a foil for a different model of national culture by the elites, and thus opposed by them in their initial analyses of it. This paper aims to elucidate some of the dynamics around the discourse on Lunfardo at both the elite and popular level in those decades, early within the process of creation of a national cultural identity in Argentina.

**keywords:** Argentina, Buenos Aires, crime, cultural history, immigration, Lunfardo, margins, modernity, nation, national cultural identity, sainete, tango

## 1. Introduction<sup>(1)</sup>

In the words of one of Lunfardo's most prolific and respected contemporary scholars, Oscar Conde, Lunfardo may be concisely defined as "a lexical repertoire, limited in its origin to the region of the Rio de la Plata, made up of popular terms and expressions of diverse origins, used as alternative or open opposition to those of standard Spanish, and spread transversally through all social strata of Argentina."<sup>(2)</sup> It is a linguistic repertoire, a vocabulary currently estimated to contain about 6,000 words, which is employed by many and diverse users in everyday oral communication (and in certain written forms) within the otherwise standard Argentine Spanish, especially in the large cities on the Rio de la Plata, the largest of which being Buenos Aires (hereafter BA).<sup>(3)</sup>

A characteristic of Lunfardo is that most of the words it consists of have their origins in a variety of languages and dialects, mostly from European countries, and it thus reflects the process of its formation taking place within the immigrant populations that entered and settled in that BA area since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The use of Lunfardo in Argentina (and particularly in BA) is widely spread, and it may be said to have become a sign of the national identity of Argentina: tango lyrics, movies, poetry, everyday spoken Argentine Spanish, Argentine theatrical pieces, Argentine rock lyrics, etc. often contain Lunfardo words, to the extent that indeed the presence of such words is an index of an Argentine cultural product.

This paper studies the relationship between Lunfardo and its place within the Argentine national cultural identity. Although Lunfardo probably started forming in the 1870s, with the first large waves of European immigrants, the specifics of the process of its formation, as well as the way Lunfardo was described and thought about are not straightforward. This paper aims to elucidate some of the discourses that centered around, or related to Lunfardo from the 1880s until the 1930s, as they promise to show some of the dynamics that take place (and factors that may be involved) during the process of imagining, establishing, and stabilizing the cultural identity of a modern nation.

## 2. Early Lunfardo in the dominant elite discourse

From the earliest instances of the use of the term "*lunfardo*" describing a linguistic and social phenomenon in 1879 and for

---

所属：リベラルアーツ学部リベラルアーツ学科

the next four decades, this term comes to signify something very specific, for the Argentine elites, and to be associated with a very particular social and national ideology.<sup>(4)</sup> In newspaper articles and book-length treatises published between 1879 and 1915 by various journalists, intellectuals, and scholars, the term “*lunfardo*” was used to describe two elements of the world of criminality of BA: the jargon that the criminals use, and the criminals themselves.<sup>(5)</sup> “Lunfardo” thus was seen to mean “thief” within the world of criminality in BA, as well as the whole set of words belonging to the world of those criminals called “*lunfardos*.” All of these early studies on “*lunfardo*” took as their point of departure the attempt to study (and thus control) the phenomenon of criminality in BA, which by those years came to be seen as a major social problem in the rapidly growing city. As part of such an attempt, the jargon of criminals was an important subject of analysis, thus the interest on Lunfardo over those decades. As those studies focused on the jargon the criminals of BA employed in their activities, the conclusion that Lunfardo was the jargon of the criminals of BA was the obvious foreseen conclusion.

As the population of BA had come to be composed of large numbers of immigrants, especially from Italy and other southern European countries, through large migratory waves since the mid-1870s, naturally many criminals in BA too originated from that immigration, and naturally they brought to their criminal activities the languages and dialects of their native lands.<sup>(6)</sup> As a consequence, the jargon of criminals in BA had a large repertoire of words coming from immigration, and this resulted in those early studies to group any word related to immigration included in the jargon of the criminals of BA under the term Lunfardo, and to define Lunfardo as the jargon of criminals in BA.

At the same time, in those same years toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new ideas from Europe had also been accepted by the Argentine elites: positivism, evolutionary discourse, and Social Darwinism. These new ideas were then applied to an apparent social “problem” perceived by the Argentine elites in those years: despite earlier views, popular amongst the Argentine elites, that European immigration was to be promoted and sought after, but only from “civilized” Northern Europe (mostly Britain, but also France to an extent), the reality was that the vast majority of immigrants were not from those chosen areas, but from southern Europe (especially Italy), and those immigrants were not bringing the coveted “Anglo-Saxon civilization” to the Argentine shores.<sup>(7)</sup> Thus the racist ideology of positivist criminal anthropology was applied to the problem of criminality of BA: the BA criminals use a jargon (Lunfardo) that corrupts standard Spanish and is the result of an underdeveloped group of people (the criminals) who happen to come largely from immigration (especially from Italy). So the elites in Argentina came to define Lunfardo as the jargon of criminals and identify it with a supposedly less-developed immigrant population that formed the basis of criminality in Argentina.<sup>(8)</sup><sup>(9)</sup>

The view of Lunfardo as the jargon of underdeveloped criminals (immigrants often just automatically superimposed with that group), and thus as a corrupted and corrupting linguistic presence in Argentina established by those early studies influenced the way in which Lunfardo was perceived “officially” by Argentina (by “officially” here it is meant by the dominant elite discourse on this cultural phenomenon). Such an official view can be seen informing the views of other intellectuals of the period, a representative example of this being Jorge Luis Borges’ own depiction of Lunfardo in his 1925 *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (The extent of my hope) as “an artificial jargon of thieves... a guild vocabulary like so many others... the technology of the *furca* and the *ganzúa*.”<sup>(10)</sup>

Around these same years (from 1890 to the 1930s), the elites in Argentina are also involved in another debate, which relates to Lunfardo: that of the relationship between a “national language” and the existence of an Argentine “nation,” i.e. the national identity of Argentina. By 1880, Argentina had reached the political and economical configuration of a modern nation-state. After the end of the existence of this territory as a colony of Spain with its independence finalized in 1816, a period of internecine wars fought amongst the Provinces led to the establishment of a hegemonic political group (the oligarchy centered in the city of BA) based on the economy of the port and the customs office of BA (as the Argentine economy was at that time based on the export of products from agriculture and cattle raising). The capitalist economy established on British loans (e.g. the very early Baring Brothers loan in 1826)<sup>(11)</sup> and investments (e.g. British-developed and -owned railways connecting BA to

the rest of the country<sup>(12)</sup>) completes the formation of Argentina as a modern nation-state plugged in the international capitalist system and led politically by a class that has been able to establish the hegemonical control characteristic of modern nations. In 1880, this process of modern nation-state formation is completed, with the finalization of the political structure of Argentina as a federal state with BA as its capital city and seat of its government. The question of national identity, therefore, is central in the political and cultural life of Argentina since 1880, and one of the themes around which this question is debated is that of a national language.

In 1896, a proposal for a law on the teaching in the national language (*Proyecto de ley relativo a la enseñanza en idioma nacional*)<sup>(13)</sup> is debated in the National Congress between September 4 and 9, 1896. During this debate, two opposing views were expressed on nationalism and language. One, the conservative view, argued that the national language is a tool for the creation and consolidation of a sense of nation and national identity in the population. In this view, the “nation” is based on a single ethnic origin, to which a single culture and a single language must be connected. Thus, only teaching through a single national language can ensure the proper education of a people with a national identity. All education in other languages must be suppressed by the State. The other, the liberal view, is that the “nation” is based on a common understanding of rights and values, amongst which the freedom of organizing diverse forms of education is essential. Thus, schools teaching in other languages beside Spanish as national language must be accepted and supported by the State.<sup>(14)</sup> Not surprisingly, the former view often incorporates elements of racism that we have encountered in the discussion on Lunfardo above, e.g. immigration is a negative influence on the nation, as it contaminates it.<sup>(15)</sup> The latter view, on the contrary, defends the right of immigrants to teach in their languages, so as to maintain their relationships with their original countries strong, and through these continued contacts with other countries to strengthen Argentina itself. Immigration is not seen as a malady for the national body, but a strength.<sup>(16)</sup> Though the proposal is eventually not passed into law, the conservative view of the need to repress schools that do not use Spanish will become more dominant in the following years.

Over the next three decades, this question of Argentine Spanish as the national language that needs to be kept uncorrupted by other systems of education in foreign languages is debated further by politicians and intellectuals. In 1900, French linguist Luciano Abeille published his book *Idioma nacional de los argentinos* (The national language of Argentines).<sup>(17)</sup> In it, Abeille argues that indeed a nation needs a national language to be a complete nation. However, he also argues that the national language must reflect the specific conditions of a people, and thus in Argentina it is not correct to teach pure Spanish (as it is taught in Spain), but rather the natural changes in pronunciation, etc. that belong to the evolution of Spanish in Argentina (as distinguished from that of Spain) must be accepted and incorporated in the new, Argentine Spanish.<sup>(18)</sup> In a sense, this influential treatise, then, effectively seems to open the door to the possibility that the sort of hybridization taking place with Lunfardo in BA would have to be accepted not only as a variant of Spanish, but as the actual proper national language of Argentina.

Conservative intellectuals like Ernesto Quesada and Miguel Cané, amongst others, will strongly criticize Abeille’s ideas in their subsequent writings. Quesada, in his *El problema del idioma nacional* (The problem of the national language) agrees in principle with Abeille, but argues that only in the case in which a “race” is unified and stable can the changes brought by its people be allowed to reflect in its language.<sup>(19)</sup> But, argues Quesada, Argentina is subjected to massive immigration, which brings with it all sorts of languages, and thus the purity of its language is threatened. He proposes that the national language is in fact the very thing that may be able to bring together these disparate multitudes into a single nation.<sup>(20)</sup> Quesada eventually directly argues against considering Lunfardo in the question of the national language: since Lunfardo is the jargon of criminals (citing Dellepiane’s work), and even though it may have entered the common parlance in BA, it can never be considered for incorporation into the official (“literary”) language of Argentina, Quesada concludes.<sup>(21)</sup>

Miguel Cané too will address this issue, in his 1919 collection of essays *Prosa ligera* (Light prose). In the essay *La cuestión del idioma* (The problem of language) he directly argues against Abeille’s original ideas citing again, like Quesada, the issue of immigration: because Argentina is a country of immigration, Abeille’s ideas are dangerous and must be categorically condemned. He argues that “Only nations with good language have good literature, and good literature means culture, progress, civilization. To pretend that the future language of this land, if we accept Mr. Abeille’s theories and leave the

grammatical routes of Castilian Spanish, a language that will be formed on a base of Spanish, with a lot of Italian, a little French, a crumb of Quechua, a bit of Guaraní, as well as a syntax from Toba, has a great future, is the same as wishing the success of Greek or Latin to the jargon spoken by the Chinese on the coast or the gibberish of the Levantines, a true Volapuk, without rules, created by the needs of commerce.” In other words: the national language of Argentina must not be allowed to be corrupted by any other language, neither the ones that have arrived to Argentina via immigration, nor the few remnants of the indigenous languages of this land.

### 3. Lunfardo in popular culture

Despite the above views held by the Argentine elites, which saw Lunfardo primarily as the language of criminals (and often of immigrants *qua* criminals), we now know that the actual nature of Lunfardo was quite different. Since the 1950s, research led by José Gobello has shown that the origins of Lunfardo are not merely the world of criminality, but the world of immigration in general. Subsequently, other seminal works have confirmed and deepened this understanding of Lunfardo as rooted in the linguistic repertoire of immigrants. Those works and more recent ones have shown that up to 50% of the Lunfardo words used by criminals originally studied in the documents analyzed earlier in this paper were unrelated to the world of criminality. Instead, they were words for common, everyday objects, places, actions that the law-abiding immigrants were sharing within their multicultural communities, and thus that criminals (who were also immigrants and also lived in the same places as law-abiding ones) were using in their everyday life too. Although neglected by the earlier sources described above in this paper, Lunfardo was present in the popular culture of BA outside of the world of criminality already by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the three areas of music, literature, and theater, and in the remainder of this paper those cultural phenomena and their relationship with Lunfardo will be analyzed.

#### A. Tango

The main social milieu in which immigrants shared their linguistic repertoires which hybridized with Argentine Spanish to give rise to Lunfardo was the cheap housing tenements (*conventillos*), especially in the marginal areas of the city of BA. In these same marginal areas of BA, a new musical form was gestating since the 1880s: tango. With influences from gaucho culture (e.g. the guitar and singing style of *payadores*, as well the *milonga* rhythmical structure), Afro-American culture (e.g. the *habanera* and *candombe* rhythms), and European culture (e.g. the use of European musical instruments like flute and violin) coming together, tango is born in the same marginal areas of BA where those three cultures physically work and live together.

This music quickly spreads and develops amongst the commoners and the places they frequent, especially in the *conventillos*, on the streets, and in cafes, as well as in places of prostitution (both legal and unofficial ones), where the music is danced by couples in a new dance form also called tango. In cafes, various instrumental ensembles form to play and compose tango music; at the earlier stages, no standard number nor type of instrument is specified. Guitars, violins, flutes, clarinets, accordions, pianos, double basses are all employed. In the streets and in the central corridor of *conventillos*, tango music is being spread by the *organitos*, street organs played by organ grinders who thus help spread and popularize the music. In official brothels and illegal establishments for prostitution, as well as in private homes, the cylinders and records to be played in gramophones become more and more popular by the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and further contribute to the spread of this genre of popular music and dance. Starting from the 1920s, another technological innovation will further contribute to the spread of tango music in BA (and Argentina in general): the radio. The first commercial radio transmission took place in BA on August 27<sup>th</sup> 1920, when a performance of Wagner’s opera Parsifal at the Coliseo Theater of BA was broadcast by the team of four entrepreneurs Enrique Susini, Luis Romero, César Guerrico, and Miguel Mujica. Soon after, the radio becomes a central medium for the spread of tango music, both in live performances and in the broadcasting of recorded pieces.

The popular nature of tango, created by the unplanned interactions of different social and cultural groups working and living at close quarters does not allow us to have documents irrefutably proving the actual early steps in the creation and

popularization of this music. However, it is thought that from the very beginning of tango (however that may be defined, given the problem just stated), the music was likely accompanied by some form of singing.<sup>(35)</sup> During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, certain tango pieces are composed with lyrics, making such musical pieces actual songs. Among these early sung tangos we can list: “La bicicleta” (1897), “El Esquinazo” (1900), “El choclo” (1903), “El Porteño” (1903), “La Morocha” (1905), “Cuidado con los 50” (1907), etc.<sup>(36)</sup> The lyrics of many of these early tango songs are in standard Argentine Spanish (with occasional exceptions), and often portray the prowess (usually related to the world of love or passion), strength, or street-wise savvy of a man or woman of BA. The tone of the lyrics is usually light, and often double entendres in the titles or in the lyrics are suggestive of sexual acts.

During these first twenty to thirty years, the milieu in which tango developed was that of commoners, in which immigrants (especially Italians) formed a large component. The elites too were exposed to tango (both music and dance), mostly via the route of prostitution: tango was often the music heard and danced in the waiting rooms of brothels and other such establishments. However, the BA elite did not fully embrace this new artistic production, and its involvement with it remained unsanctioned. We should recall here that in those years around the turn of the century, the BA elite still recognized immigration from southern Europe as inferior compared to the preferred and expected immigration from London and Paris (recognized as the only centers of civilization, by that elite). The promulgation of the so-called “Law of foreigners’ residence” (*Ley de Residencia de extranjeros*) in 1902 is a concrete sign of the way immigration was perceived as a problem by the elites.<sup>(37)</sup>

However, from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tango players and dancers from BA travel to Europe, where tango is almost immediately recognized as an exciting new cultural phenomenon. Especially in Paris, between about 1907 and 1914 we can witness a true craze about Argentine tango, and the first example of this form of popular culture from Argentina being recognized by the world as “Argentine.”<sup>(38)</sup> As tango has been accepted by Parisian society, the Argentine elites in BA, who had held Paris as a symbol of civilization, are almost compelled to accept tango as a respectable cultural phenomenon, which will further accelerate the development of tango in BA, spread it across different social classes in Argentina, and establish it as a legitimate element of Argentine national cultural identity.<sup>(39)</sup>

At the same time, tango in Argentina undergoes another significant change: a new style of lyrics comes to be associated with tango songs. This new style is generally called “*tango canción*” (“tango song”), and its characteristic is a shift to a more introspective, quiet analysis of one’s life, including one’s economical struggles, one’s failures in love (especially betrayed love), social injustices, longing for one’s distant family (especially one’s mother), longing for one’s childhood, longing for one’s neighborhood or town, etc. The first such *tango canción* has traditionally been recognized as the tango “Mi noche triste” (1916), composed by Samuel Castriota with lyrics by Pascual Contursi. This tango is especially famous because it was the first tango recorded on disc by Carlos Gardel (1890–1935) in 1917.<sup>(40)</sup> By that year, Gardel had already had success as singer of Argentine songs which he recorded since 1913. However, with this *tango canción*, his repertoire changes rapidly, and from 1920 to the end of his life tango becomes the main repertoire of his performed music. Gardel as singer of tango will himself come to be almost worshipped in Argentina as a cultural icon even during his life, and after his tragic death in 1935 he will rise to near-legendary status in Argentina, and in the world to one of the most important and famous cultural icons of Argentina. “Mi noche triste,” as the first *tango canción* interpreted by him, therefore, is especially important within the framework of Argentine national cultural identity. It is therefore of high relevance to the topic of this paper that the very first words of that song are not in standard Spanish, but in Lunfardo. The song starts with: “*Percanta que me amuraste / en lo mejor de mi vida, /...*” (girl, you left me / in the prime of my life /...). *Percanta* is Lunfardo for a man’s female partner, one’s love, and *amurar* in Lunfardo means to abandon: the singer is remembering the happy times of his life with his partner, laments his current life after she has left him, and states that nothing can bring light to the darkness of his night’s sadness (the translation of the song’s title is in fact “My sad night”).

These first Lunfardo words of the first *tango canción* sung by Carlos Gardel are important because they effectively bring



Lunfardo, which had been previously always categorized as the jargon of delinquents, into the very center of tango, an art form that had been recently validated, in the eyes of the BA elites, by the Parisian acceptance of tango dance. The context of the song is not sexual, nor “immoral,” and thus this use of Lunfardo confirms to the whole Argentine society that this is a linguistic repertoire that transcends the world of crime, and that originates in the immigrant waves from Europe that came to populate BA (and Argentina). Lunfardo is thus cleared to take center stage in this form of cultural production that represents Argentina in the world.

From this point on, although the earlier pieces of tango music and songs remain actively performed, *tango canción* will come to take a more and more prominent place within the tango repertoire. Many of these new *tango canción* come with lyrics in which Lunfardo is present (like in “Mi noche triste”) or is prominent. Some lyricists of those years (late 1910s to 1930s) employ Lunfardo often and heavily in their songs, like poet Celedonio Flores (1896–1947) and Enrique Cadícamo (1900–1999), others more sporadically but still prominently in some songs, like Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901–1951) and Pascual Contursi (1888–1932), and others rarely, like Alfredo Le Pera (1900–1935). With these poets/lyricists and their tango songs, Lunfardo is established firmly as a legitimate linguistic medium for the expression of popular culture, which is thus brought from the periphery to the center of the Argentine national cultural identity.

In the 1930s another technological innovation further helps to cement this new identity of Lunfardo as acceptable linguistic repertoire, and as a sort of mark of Argentine identity: commercial sound cinema. In Argentina, the first movie with this novel technology was recorded in 1929, and in 1930 Carlos Gardel recorded a series of ten short videos of songs and short conversations between Gardel and the song writers, under the direction of Eduardo Morera, which then was projected in movie theaters the next year. The ten songs include one *canción criolla* (a style of song distinct from tango: “El carretero”), two *valses* (a type of tango music with 3/4 rhythmical structure: “Añoranzas” and “Rosas de otoño”) and seven tangos (“Cancho”, “Enfundá la mandolina”, “Mano a mano”, “Padrino pelao”, “Tengo miedo”, “Viejo smoking”, “Yira... yira”). All the seven tangos include Lunfardo in the lyrics, so this short featured the first images with sound of Carlos Gardel actually saying those Lunfardo words on film. Gardel would then go on to act and sing in a number of full-length movies until his death, each movie featuring at least one tango song. This film repertoire greatly contributed to the growth of his legendary status in Argentina, as well as to spread Argentine culture worldwide. In this respect, tango songs being featured in all of his movies ensured the further establishment of the equation tango = Argentine culture. Some of the tango songs in those movies include Lunfardo words, though not prominently, and therefore this successful film repertoire centered on Carlos Gardel too reinforced the view of Lunfardo as a “normal” part of common Argentine Spanish, uncoupled from the earlier associations with the world of crime.

## B. Poetry and the press

The definition of tango lyricist versus poet is a tenuous one. Most of the various lyricists mentioned in the previous section of this paper also composed poems independent of music, tango or otherwise. For this reason most tango lyricists are often referred to as poets. Amongst them, the ones using Lunfardo also used this linguistic repertoire in poetry, both as individual poems and in poem collections.

However, there are also renowned poets using Lunfardo extensively or even exclusively, who contributed to this process of acceptance of Lunfardo by Argentine society, by moving Lunfardo from an oral to a literary cultural form. The most representative of such poets is arguably Carlos de la Púa (pseudonym of Carlos Raúl Muñoz y Pérez, 1898–1950), also known as el Malevo Muñoz. Under the pen name Carlos de la Púa, he published a poetry collection titled *La crencha engrasada* (The greased hairdo) in 1928, which includes 44 poems, all of which include Lunfardo. Some (e.g. “Los bueyes”) only include a few words of Lunfardo, while most others (e.g. “La canción de la mugre”) are filled with Lunfardo words, so much so that without notes on the meaning of those Lunfardo terms, even a native speaker of Spanish (not from BA) would find it hard if not impossible to understand their meaning. This collection of poems depicts the everyday life of common people in BA: their personality, their struggles, the neighborhoods in which they live; often tango is part of their lives, and often so is a certain

degree of violence too. Thanks to this work, the lives and culture of the inhabitants of the margins (*orillas*) of BA are brought to the center of cultural attention by the written literary form of poetry, but through the linguistic repertoire closest to their everyday spoken language: Lunfardo.<sup>(53)</sup>

Other poets of Lunfardo who deserve special mention for the role of their poetry in the history of Lunfardo are Yacaré (pseudonym of Felipe H. Fernández, 1889–1929) with his *Versos rantifusos* (Vagrant rhymes) (1916) and Dante A Linyera (pseudonym of Francisco Bautista Rímoli, 1903–1938) with his *¡Semos hermanos!* (We brothers!) (1928). Together with Carlos de la Púa's, their poetry, heavy in Lunfardo, focused on the condition and problems of common people living at the margins of BA society, and thus gave a voice to those masses that otherwise would go unseen, if not actively suppressed, by the elites. All the Lunfardo poets provided an additional route that eventually led to the recognition of Lunfardo as a valuable and important cultural phenomenon central in the cultural identity of Argentina.

Many of the above poets and lyricists were also often contributors to newspapers and magazines, as journalists and writers, usually in an effort to represent the life of common people living at the margins of power in BA. Other journalists and writers, though not writing with Lunfardo, were involved in editorial and publishing activities that effectively contributed to the spread and understanding of the nature of Lunfardo as a commoners' linguistic repertoire in BA.<sup>(54)</sup> One such example is Fray Mocho (pseudonym of José Sixto Álvarez Escalada, 1858–1903).<sup>(55)</sup> With journalist and writer Eustaquio Pellicer (1859–1937) in 1898 he founded and was the editor of the weekly magazine *Caras y Caretas*, involved in introducing national and international events to its readership, as well as depicting some of the social realities of BA and of Argentina with short written pieces and caricatures/illustrations.<sup>(56)</sup> In a number of short prose vignettes about the everyday life on the streets of BA we encounter words both from the Lunfardo repertoire when the speech of criollo "*compadritos*" (common person of the street) characters is being described, and from Cocoliche when the conversation of Italian immigrants is being represented.<sup>(57)</sup> In other words, the linguistic milieu of a BA in which standard Spanish coexists with hybridized Lunfardo and with the Cocoliche of recently arrived Italian immigrants is presented as the norm, unrelated to the discourse on crime. In this context, Lunfardo comes through as the most comfortable and "natural" of the three repertoires, as the Cocoliche is a spoken language destined to extinction (as immigrants gradually lose contact with their European origins), and standard Spanish seems somehow artificial and detached from the realities of the common person of the street.<sup>(58)</sup>

We should at this point include one more writer and journalist in our current discussion on Lunfardo in literature: Roberto Arlt (1900–1942). Belonging to the left-leaning avant-garde intellectual Grupo de Boedo (opposed to the elite-focused Grupo de Florida, to which Jorge Luis Borges was associated), and sympathizing with the popular sectors of society and the workers' movement, in a number of his journalistic writings he addressed the question of the Argentine popular language. In an article of July 26, 1928 in the newspaper *El Mundo*, Arlt addresses the origin and history of a word commonly heard spoken in BA: *berretín*. This is a common Lunfardo term, and Arlt compares it to another expression *engrupido*, similar but distinct. This too is a Lunfardo word, and though Arlt does not mention this point for either of the words, he treats them both as viable and accepted common words in the vocabulary of BA.<sup>(59)</sup>

In another article in *El Mundo* (September 3, 1929), Arlt addresses the question posed by a reader of whether it is justifiable to "lower" one's language to the "language of the streets" (*el lenguaje de la calle*). Arlt explains that as a common man, as a man of the streets himself, using the street's language implies no lowering of standards. To the contrary: it is the "high" academic Spanish the elites are attached to that is unnatural and uninteresting to him.<sup>(60)</sup> He further depicts the popular language of the streets (for which he gives two words as examples: *merza* and *patota*, both Lunfardo terms) as "a sonorous, flexible, brand new language, understandable to everyone, alive, restless, colored by strange nuances and which will replace a rigid language that does not correspond to our psychology."<sup>(61)</sup> Finally, in the same article, he seems to give a quick stab at the negative definition of the popular language of Argentina that Borges had given in 1925 (described earlier in this paper). Arlt concludes saying that "It is impossible for a sincere writer to dishonor or debase himself by dealing with popular themes and using the vocabulary of the people. What is popular jargon today will become official language tomorrow."<sup>(62)</sup>

### C. *Sainete criollo*

The final expression of popular culture in which we find Lunfardo, and which helped consolidate the view of Lunfardo as a significant linguistic repertoire in BA was the theater form *sainete criollo*. Originated from the Spanish *sainete*, it developed as a form of popular Argentine theater in BA from the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though keeping the original short format (it typically consists of a single act) and content (it is often humorous, and stages brief episodes of common people's everyday life), the specific setup of many *sainetes criollos* was the typical *conventillo* tenement of BA, with its cacophony of immigrants coexisting at close quarters.<sup>(63)</sup> It should not come as a surprise, then, to note that many of the interactions represented in *sainetes criollos* were between stereotyped figures who would typically inhabit such marginal space, like the Argentine whose family has lived in BA for many generations, the first- and second-generation immigrants (usually older, in the former case, and younger in the latter), the honest worker, the good-for-nothing troublemaker in search for trouble, etc. The themes too reflect this space, like the social and economic expectations of immigrant parents for their children (often unfulfilled), and the cultural tension between the "old" European culture and the "new" Argentine culture within those families, or the forms of entertainment affordable to those marginal inhabitants of BA, like music (especially tango), dance gatherings (including tango dance), drinking, etc. The success of *sainete criollo* lies precisely in its choice of themes and characters, which are representing on stage in short vignettes the very dramas and problematics felt by its audience.

In a number of *sainetes criollos*, realism is reached also through the choice of language in which the characters express themselves. In many pieces, in which first-generation immigrants (most of the times Italians) are depicted, their language is often Cocoliche. An early example of such a character is Genaro in "Los óleos del chico", *sainete* of 1892 by Nemesio Trejo.<sup>(64)</sup> Described as a "*napolitano*" (person from Napoli), his Spanish is quite close to standard, BA Spanish spoken on the streets, but with certain aberrations that betray an influence of Italian (or Neapolitan dialect). Trying to fit in his social milieu, Genaro often uses Lunfardo words and typical Argentine Spanish expressions, as he interacts with other characters. The latter (e.g. Nicolás) are clearly different from Genaro: as their BA street Spanish is more fluent, and as they employ more Lunfardo terms (as well as words that define Genaro as non-native, like "*Napoleón*" for Neapolitan) they represent those BA inhabitants who have been integrating in Argentine society for more generations. Thus, already by the early 1890s we find Lunfardo used in such theatrical pieces as the index of Argentine (or, better, BA) identity, we see represented the shift that possibly happened between Cocoliche and Lunfardo amongst the Italian immigrant population as it acculturated in BA, and we see the social forces at play behind these linguistic dynamics, i.e. the construction of social relations across groups of marginal inhabitants of BA. No relation between Lunfardo and criminality is even hinted in this piece.

In the 1915 *sainete* "La caravana" by Alberto Novión, a more complex linguistic and cultural content is described.<sup>(65)</sup> Here, the center of the action is a family of Italian immigrants: Bachicha (don Bartolo) and Jenara are the elderly couple apparently first-generation immigrants, and their daughters Manuela (married to Juan) and Marina (in a relationship with Pedro). Bachicha and Jenara (typical Italian names in BA at that time) speak Spanish with a strong Italian intonation, and Bachicha especially uses his version of Cocoliche, in which Italian words are used without any attempt at translating them into correct Spanish. Manuela and Marina, on the other hand, speak perfectly neutral BA Spanish, a sign of their being second-generation immigrants. Manuela lives with her parents, and her husband Juan (unrelated to Italian immigration) speaks BA Spanish when interacting with Manuela and other characters, but employs a few Italian words when jovially communicating with his father-in-law. Marina, instead, has left the house and is living her own life, and her boyfriend (Pedro) only speaks standard BA Spanish with her, but often interjects a few Lunfardo terms, which immediately reveal that he is from BA. Other characters too (e.g. Toribio and Rafael), like Pedro, represent established inhabitants of BA, and they too drop the occasional Lunfardo word within their neutral Spanish, while a Polish friend of theirs (Iván) struggles in his pronunciation of Spanish terms, and a young woman named "Lulú" speaks standard Spanish broken here and there by French words and expressions (she is likely an Argentine woman affecting the exotic airs of a French woman). Though the events in this *sainete* do not take place in a *conventillo*, the characters, their relationships, and their linguistic repertoires are typical of the common life of common BA inhabitants. It is especially important, in the context of this paper, to notice the nuanced linguistic choices that Novión makes



to give his characters immediately recognizable cultural and ethnic identities. In this case too, Lunfardo is central in the representation of BA culture/society, and here too it is not associated to criminality.

As mentioned before, music and dance feature often in *sainetes criollos*. Tango especially, both as a musical genre and as a style of dance proper of the culture of BA, appears in many *sainetes*. Although not tango, many musical and dance genres are included in the above-mentioned “Los óleos del chico”: *milonga*, *polka*, *habanera*, *valse*, *videlita*, are sung, played on guitar and accordion, and danced at various occasions throughout the short piece, providing the image of a BA at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose musical culture is vibrant and likely to lead to hybridizing results between European and American styles. The *organitos* mentioned earlier in this paper were likely one major form of production and diffusion of such diverse musical repertoire throughout the margins of the city. In the 1897 *sainete* “Justicia criolla” by Ezequiel Soria, Argentine tango is played by an ensemble at a dance party (requested instead of other musical options like *valse* and *cuadrilla*) and danced, and even a brief description of how to dance tango (i.e. with a close embrace) is given.<sup>(66)</sup> This is one of the first *sainetes* to directly represent danced tango on stage. In terms of language, this *sainete* also sees a number of Lunfardo terms incorporated in the spoken Spanish of BA common people, thus indicating once again how, even before 1900, Lunfardo was an integral element of the Spanish spoken in BA by common people, and that there was no causative connection between the use of Lunfardo and criminality: in fact, no direct connection even with immigration, as these words and expressions originally imported through immigration, by those years were just identified with the normal linguistic repertoire of BA, and thus indicative of Argentine culture.

Finally, we should include here the case of the 1918 *sainete* “Los dientes del perro” by Alberto T. Weisbach and José González Castillo. In it, a tango is sung accompanied by the tango orchestra (usually referred to in tango as “*orquesta típica*”) of Juan Maglio (Pacheco): the tango was originally titled “¿Qué has hecho de mi cariño?” with lyrics by the *sainete* writers, and sung by the actress Manolita Poli. Later, this tango was substituted by the tango “Mi noche triste” (described earlier in this paper) with lyrics by Pascual Contursi, due to the popularity of this *tango canción* linked to the celebrity of its famous singer, Carlos Gardel.<sup>(67)</sup> This tango starting with Lunfardo words, thus links the poetical form of tango lyrics in Lunfardo to the popular music and dance created in BA, as well as to the popular theater genre of BA, thus coalescing these three aspects of popular Argentine culture (language in poetry, music and dance, and theater) into the center of the Argentine cultural identity at the popular level.

#### 4. Conclusions

Building on previous research, this paper has traced the process through which Lunfardo came to be recognized as a significant element of the national cultural identity of Argentina. It coalesced in the spaces at the margins of BA, its *conventillos* (tenements), the *barrios* (neighborhoods) at the outskirts of the city, the cafes, the brothels, the streets at the *orillas* (edges) of BA starting from the 1870s. Its origins are mostly in the European dialects and languages of the immigrants who went to BA mostly to look for a new life for themselves, leaving their (mostly newborn) nations of origin behind. Poverty, marginalization, and low education levels were characteristics of most of those immigrants, and as they settled in the place that promised to be their best chance for the future (the large and growing city of BA), they initiated a process of hybridization as well as acculturation in their new country. Hybridization (both cultural and linguistic) was favored by the conditions of living for most of them: the tight and packed *conventillos*. There, soon various generations of immigrants shared the social milieu that led to the creation of new forms of interaction, new artistic ways of expression, a new culture. Lunfardo was a central component of this new and hybrid culture, composed of not only European immigrant, but also older generations of Argentines of Spanish origin who in many cases had already hybridized with indigenous peoples and Africans who had been brought to South America along the slave routes. Those were the *gauchos* who, as the city grew and the nation took shape, moved from the vast pampas to the outskirts of BA. Their culture, their language and music interacted and further hybridized with those of the new immigrants.

As a result, Lunfardo (and Cocoliche before it) started taking shape and being spoken by the people living at the margins of

BA. Those same people created a new form of music, tango, based on African rhythms, as well as gaucho musical genres, using European instruments, one of which, the bandoneon, upon its arrival from German church music transformed the nature of tango music. Lyrics started being associated with this new music, and at some point that relationship between word and music too changed, with the creation of the *tango canción*. This new form of tango needed more poetry, and the very linguistic repertoire of the people at the edges of BA, Lunfardo, became a pillar in the production of that new music and poetry. Lunfardo started also its life as a literary form through other forms of poetry, in printed stories about the commoners' life in BA in periodicals, and at the same time that tango was being created and spread through the city, a new, Argentine version of an old, Spanish theater also developed and became popular, the *sainete*. It too, like tango and poetry, represented the common human condition of the common inhabitant of BA to an audience of common inhabitants of BA, and it too used Lunfardo to represent that reality. All along these cultural movements, the influence of new technologies too was central: the *organito*, the record, radio, cinema all contributed to the consolidation of the new Argentine culture that formed in BA, and all of them carried Lunfardo throughout the city, then the country, and eventually the world.

All the while, the elite of BA (and Argentina), in control of economical and political power, would not recognize this new culture and its language as valuable. Instead, it relegated it to some kind of controlling discourse: first the older "civilization vs barbarism" scheme, and later the positivist discourse of biology, anthropology, and sociology. That kept Lunfardo and the cultural productions related to its forming milieu within the realm of unwanted criminal aberration and corrupting presence to be controlled and suppressed, in the elite discourse. At one point, though, this ignored cultural element found its way to Paris, one of the idealized beacons of civilization in the eyes of the Argentine elites, and the success of tango, its dancers and singers, and of the language of its lyrics resonated all the way from Paris back to those Argentine elites in BA. Tango was eventually accepted and embraced, Lunfardo came out through the voice of Carlos Gardel in records and movies filmed in Paris and New York: that new culture had moved from the margins to the center of the city and of the national *imaginaire*. Lunfardo could not easily be removed from that center, though later military governments attempted to censor its use. Much later, from the 1950s on, new scholars revisited the history of this linguistic repertoire and of the culture linked to it, and could rewrite the story of its origins and of its place in Argentine cultural history.

This paper has attempted to show some of the historical, intellectual, and technological elements that contributed to both the creation of a new (popular) culture and its linguistic repertoire, as well as some of the constructive and destructive dynamics at play during that process of creation and consolidation, particularly between the dominant and the marginal sectors of society. The process of establishment of modern nation-states plays out not only in the political and economical arenas, but in the cultural one as well. The case of the coming into existence of Lunfardo, and of its place within the newly born nation-state of Argentina from the 1880s on is complex but well-defined, and studying it can give us a better understanding of both Argentine culture as well as of similar processes of formation of national cultural identity in other modern nation-states.

## Notes

- ( 1 ) All translations from Spanish to English or Lunfardo to English in this paper are mine, unless otherwise noted. Throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted, I use the capitalized word Lunfardo to refer to the vocabulary, and *lunfardo* in italics as adjective or as the Lunfardo term for thief.
- ( 2 ) "*un repertorio léxico, limitado a la región rioplatense en su origen, constituido por términos y expresiones populares de diversa procedencia utilizados en alternancia o abierta oposición a los del español estándar y difundido transversalmente en todas las capas sociales de la Argentina.*" Conde (2011), p.133.
- ( 3 ) This paper focuses solely on the specific aspects of early Lunfardo history in the city of BA, though it has been and is used in other cities in Argentina, as well as Uruguay.
- ( 4 ) The following brief discussion is a condensed summary of two of my earlier papers on this subject. For the full and more specific analysis of these texts and their overall role in the discourse on Lunfardo in Argentina, see Gottardo (2023) and Gottardo (2024).

- ( 5 ) These texts are: two articles in 1879 by Benigno Lugones for the newspaper *La Nación* titled *Los beduinos urbanos* (The urban Bedouins) and *Los caballeros de industria* (The gentlemen of industry); a study on criminality in 1888 by lawyer and political figure Luis María Drago titled *Los hombres de presa* (Men of prey); the 1894 treatise (containing a Lunfardo-Spanish dictionary) by lawyer and scholar Antonio Dellepiane titled *El idioma del delito* (The language of crime); the 1908 treatise on criminality in BA by criminal lawyer Eusebio Gómez titled *La mala vida en Buenos Aires* (The dissolute life in Buenos Aires); the 1910 book by Francisco de Veyga, professor at the University of BA, titled *Los “Lunfardos” – psicología de los delincuentes profesionales* (The “Lunfardos” – a Psychology of professional criminals); the 1915 Lunfardo dictionary by journalist and officer in the National Corps of Prison Wardens Luis Villamayor titled *El lenguaje del bajo fondo* (The language of the underworld).
- ( 6 ) In 1887, for instance, the population of BA was made up of about 30% immigrants from Italy and a little less than 50% of Argentines, the remaining 20% being immigrants from other countries. See Martínez (1889), pp.340–341. Certain *barrios* (neighborhoods) of BA came to be almost entirely populated by Italian immigrants of first- and second-generations, like LaBoca in the south of the city. See Iarossi (2017), pp.4–5.
- ( 7 ) This despite the major cultural impact of Italian immigrants on Argentine culture. We could mention the large number of classical musicians from Italy who were some of the first players and directors of classical music orchestras in BA, as well as opera singers and teachers (see for example Cetrangolo (2015), pp.76–80); the large presence of Italian newspapers and periodicals created in Argentina by Italian immigrant journalists and editors (see for example Bertagna (2009), pp.14–15), or the number and importance of the social and cultural associations created in Argentina by Italian immigrants, like Italian mutual aid societies, Italian hospitals, social clubs, etc. (see for example Devoto (2007), pp.161–205).
- ( 8 ) For a detailed analysis of this point, see Gottardo (2024).
- ( 9 ) A population closer to the “barbarism” than to the “civilization” element of the dichotomy famously established in the discourse on Argentine national identity by Domingo Sarmiento (1811–1888) in his 1845 *Facundo. Civilización y barbarie* (Facundo. Civilization and barbarism).
- (10) The full citation in Spanish is “*El lunfardo es una jerga artificiosa de los ladrones; el arrabalero es la simulación de esa jerga, es la coquetería del compadrón que quiere hacerse el forajido y el malo, y cuyas malhechoras hazañas caben en un bochinche de almacén, favorecido por el alcohol y el compañerismo. El lunfardo es un vocabulario gremial como tantos otros, es la tecnología de la furca y de la ganzúa: el arrabalero es cosa más grave.*” (Lunfardo is an artificial jargon of thieves; the *arrabalero* is the simulation of that jargon, it is the coquetry of the *compadrón* who wants to play the outlaw and bad guy, and whose evil deeds just end in a warehouse brawl, favored by alcohol and his peers’ support. Lunfardo is a guild vocabulary like so many others, it is the technology of the *furca* and the *ganzúa*: the *arrabalero* is something even worse.) Borges (2016), p.105.
- (11) For an extensive analysis of this relationship between British capital and Argentine politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Ortega Peña and Duhalde (2013).
- (12) For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between British economical interests and the development of the railway system in Argentina, see Wright (1974) and López (2016).
- (13) The present explanation of this episode is based on the analysis of this debate and its implications provided by Vázquez Villanueva (2006).
- (14) Vázquez Villanueva (2006), p.110.
- (15) Vázquez Villanueva (2006), p.113.
- (16) Vázquez Villanueva (2006), pp.116–117.
- (17) Cited in DeLaney (2020), p.119.
- (18) Abeille (1900), pp.423–424.
- (19) Quesada (1900), p.14.
- (20) Quesada (1900), p.17.
- (21) Quesada (1900), pp.122–123. Quesada will return to this idea of Lunfardo as the language of criminals in another treatise in 1902 titled *El criollismo en la literatura argentina* (Criollismo in Argentine literature), in which he states that “The slang of this criollo-compadrito-orillero genre uses a language in which are visible the infiltrations of “lunfardo” vocabulary, that is, that of people of the underworld.” (“*La jerga de ese género criollo-compadrito-orillero usa un lenguaje en el cual son visibles las filtraciones del vocabulario “lunfardo”, o sea el de la gente de mal vivir.*”). Cited in Lamas and Binda (1998), p.78.
- (22) “*Sólo los países de buena habla tienen buena literatura y buena literatura significa cultura, progreso, civilización. Pretender que el idioma futuro de esta tierra, si admitimos las teorías del señor Abeille y salimos de las rutas gramaticales del castellano, idioma que se formará, sobre una base de español, con mucho italiano, un poco de francés, una migaja de quichua, una narigada de guaraní, amén de una sintaxis toba, tiene un gran provenir, es lo mismo que augurar los destinos del griego o del latín a la jerga que hablan los chinos*

- de la costa o la jerigonza de los levantinos, verdadero volapuk, sin reglas, creado por las necesidades del comercio.*" Cané (1919), p.70.
- (23) This debate on the problem of the national language of Argentina continued, with the focus on purity of the "race" being reflected in the purity of the language. In her study on nationalism and national identity in modern Argentina, DeLaney shows that the definition of "race" shifts, from an earlier meaning close to "ethnicity" and "culture" to one much more based on a biological view of race, in the 1930s, and thus more essentialist. DeLaney (2020), p.128.
- (24) Gobello (1953).
- (25) See for example Teruggi (1974) and Conde (2011).
- (26) See for example Gottardo (2023).
- (27) For a discussion of this process, see Gottardo (2023), p.43.
- (28) See for example Rivera (1976) and Selles (2011).
- (29) For example the area of La Boca, mostly inhabited by Italian immigrants from Genoa working at the docks along the Riachuelo river, in the south of the city, and the neighboring ones of Barracas al Norte and Parque de los Patricios (aka *barrio de las ranas* or *de las latas*), just west of La Boca, where the meat industry of BA is concentrated, with its corrals (*corrales*), slaughterhouses (*mataderos*), and facilities for salting meats (*saladeros*), as well as important railway nodes for the movement of those products to the interior and to the port of BA (e.g. the stations of Sola, Barracas al Norte, Tres Esquinas, Barraca Peña), and the large garbage disposal (burning) facilities (La Quemada) of BA. See for example Casadevall (1968), p.21.
- (30) See for example Benarós (2011).
- (31) For a list of notable early tango composers and players, see Selles (2011), pp.163–185. By the year 1900, the European immigrants introduce the bandoneon to BA from Germany, where it was used as a substitute for the organ in church music in communities without full-size organs. Once in BA, it quickly becomes an integral and practically quintessential instrument in tango ensembles.
- (32) *Organitos* were present in BA from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as attested by documents on the licenses required for their use. See Lamas and Binda (1998), p.33.
- (33) See Pesce (2011), pp.315–337. Lamas and Binda estimate that the price of a record around 1910 was equivalent to one or two days' wage. Lamas and Binda (1998), p.298.
- (34) Ulanovsky (1995), pp.18–19.
- (35) See for example Gobello (1976), p.102.
- (36) Tallon (1959), p.60. These listed tango songs are all by renowned composer and lyricist Angel Villoldo, who was one of the most important figures in the development of tango in those years. The first sung tango recorded on a record was "La bicicleta" (sung by Eloísa Ceballos), in 1902 (Lamas and Binda (1998), p.76).
- (37) See Gottardo (2023), p.44 and Gottardo (2024), p.14 for a discussion of this matter and its relationship to the discourse on crime.
- (38) For a discussion of the views in Argentina, on the success of tango in Paris in those years, see Gasió (1999), pp.19–26.
- (39) For a comprehensive depiction of the arrival of tango in Paris, and the consequent effects on the view of the Argentine elites on tango, see Humbert (2000).
- (40) Salazar (1991), p.151.
- (41) E.g. "Mano a mano" (1923), "El bulín de la calle Ayacucho" (1925), "Viejo smoking" (1930), "Corrientes y Esmeralda" (1933).
- (42) E.g. "Pompas de jabón" (1925), "¡Che papusa, oí!" (1927), "Muñeca brava" (1929), "Apología tanguera" (1933), "Al mundo le falta un tornillo" (1933).
- (43) E.g. "¿Qué vachaché?" (1926), ¡Chorra!" (1928), "Yira... yira" (1930), "Cambalache" (1934).
- (44) E.g. "Mi noche triste" (1916), "De vuelta al bulín" (1917), "Flor de fango" (1917), "El motivo" (1920), "Bandoneón arrabalero" (1928).
- (45) E.g. "Melodía de arrabal" (1932), "Golondrinas" (1934), "Mi Buenos Aires querido" (1934).
- (46) Lyricists/poets of a decade later like Cátulo Catstillo (1906–1975), Homero Expósito (1918–1951), Homero Manzi (1907–1951) will continue this pattern, by composing tango lyrics in the 1940s in which Lunfardo continues to take a central (or at least important) role. We should however note that during the years 1943 and 1949 (i.e. over a period spanning from the military dictatorship of presidents Pedro Pablo Ramírez and Edelmiro Julián Farrell to the first presidency of Juan Domingo Perón), Lunfardo was subjected to a heavy censorship on radio broadcasting by the Argentine government. Seeing the titles of tangos in Lunfardo, their themes, and the Lunfardo words employed as corrupted and immoral (e.g. the theme of alcohol use and abuse often touched upon in tango songs), radio stations in Argentina were discouraged from broadcasting tango songs containing Lunfardo terms. The censorship was not limited to Lunfardo, but a large proportion of the songs affected by it were related to Lunfardo. In order to be broadcasted, the composers and lyricists had the choice of rewriting their original lyrics to "amend" their tango songs. Works by the above mentioned Le Pera, Flores, etc. were often rewritten and "expurgated" of their Lunfardo contents and thematics. For a study on this phenomenon of radio censorship of Lunfardo, see Vardaro (2007).

- (47) Salazar (1991), p.45.
- (48) Representative amongst these movies are: “Las luces de Buenos Aires” (1931, filmed in France for Paramount), with the tango “Tomo y obligo” (no Lunfardo); “Melodía de arrabal” (1932, filmed in France for Paramount), with the tango “Melodía de arrabal” (contains some Lunfardo); “Cuesta abajo” (1934, filmed in New York for Paramount), with the tango “Mi Buenos Aires querido” (contains some Lunfardo); “El tango en Broadway” (1934, filmed in New York for Paramount), with the tango “Golondrinas” (contains some Lunfardo) and “Soledad” (no Lunfardo); “El día que me quieras” (1935, filmed in New York for Paramount), with the tango “Sus ojos se cerraron” (no Lunfardo) and “Volver” (no Lunfardo); “Tango bar” (1935, filmed in New York for Paramount), with the tango “Por una cabeza” (no Lunfardo) and “Arrabal Amargo” (no Lunfardo). For all the tangos listed here, the music was composed by Carlos Gardel and the lyrics written by Alfredo Le Pera (apart from those for “Tomo y obligo”, by Manuel Romero).
- (49) It should be noted here that there are documents attesting to the fact that Gardel used Lunfardo terms commonly in everyday conversations, thus strengthening the view that his characters on the big screen and in songs were not mere caricatures, but reflections of the reality of common people living in BA in those years. See Gobello (1991), pp.51, 53, 56–57.
- (50) A prominent example of such lyricists/poets is Celedonio Flores.
- (51) As an example, we can cite Julián Centeya (1910–1974) (real name: Amleto Enrico Vergiati).
- (52) There is a number of anthologies of Lunfardo poetry published. One good such collection of poems written between the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century by a wide sample of poets is Gobello (2010).
- (53) Another foundational poet of the marginal *orillas* of BA, Evaristo Carriego (1883–1912) had the opposite approach: despite his attention being also on the lives of, and spaces inhabited by, common people at the margins of BA (i.e. not the elites), all but one of his poems are in standard Spanish, e.g. his 1908 collection *Misas herejes* (Heretical Masses). The one exception is “Día de bronca” (1912), published in a police magazine as a missive in Lunfardo verses from a common man to his friend, describing his anger at having been left by his girlfriend. The poem, possibly the last by Carriego, is heavy with Lunfardo expressions, and given the rest of the poet’s production as well as the type of publication for the poem (and the fact that Carriego signed it with the pseudonym El Barretero), this poem seems more an exercise by Carriego in the use and style of Lunfardo poetry. See Ciruzzi (1999), pp.193–195.
- (54) One of the earliest examples of this type of presence of Lunfardo in the press is an anonymous piece that appeared in the newspaper La Nación on February 11, 1887 (later attributed to Juan A. Piaggio). It is a short fictional dialogue between two men (unrelated to the world of criminality and immigration) living in the marginal spaces of BA, in which they talk about simple events in their everyday life using standard colloquial BA Spanish in which a number of Lunfardo words are organically inserted. For an analysis of this text, see Gottardo (2023), p.42.
- (55) In 1887, Fray Mocho published a book of photos of 200 renowned thieves in BA accompanied by short descriptions of their background, affiliations, and *modi operandi* (titled *Galería de ladrones de la capital* (Gallery of thieves of the capital)). Also, in 1897 he published a collection of stories based on his experiences as deputy investigator for the police of BA (titled *Memorias de un vigilante* (Memories of a guard)), in which Lunfardo terms appear often in the context of criminals’ conversations or activities.
- (56) In 1904, Pellicer left *Caras y Caretas* and founded a new weekly magazine of political satire called *PBT*, similar somehow to the earlier *Caras y Caretas*.
- (57) Cocoliche is a hybrid sociolect with a strong Italian base (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar). See Anecchiarico (2012), pp.81–90, Conde (2011), pp.173–179, Cara-Walker (1987), pp.50–54.
- (58) Examples of Cocoliche in early issues of *Caras y Caretas* are in the articles “El lechero” appearing on October 10, 1898, “Pascalino” of October 22, 1898, “Tirando al aire” of June 22, 1901, all signed by Fray Mocho. The interaction through Lunfardo words between two *compadritos* can be found in “Titeo corrido” of December 3, 1898, signed by Julio Castellanos.
- (59) Arlt (2017), pp.35–38.
- (60) “Si yo no soy ningún académico. Yo soy un hombre de la calle, de barrio, como usted y como tantos que andan por ahí...Yo no me podría hacer entender por ello empleando un lenguaje que a mí no me interesa para nada y que tiene el horrible defecto de no ser natural.” (“I am not an academic. I am a man of the street, of the neighborhood, like you and like so many others who walk around there... I could not make myself understood by using a language that does not interest me at all, and that has the terrible defect of not being natural.”) Arlt (2017), p.141.
- (61) “...un idioma sonoro, flexible, flamante, comprensible para todos, vivo, nervioso, coloreado por matices extraños y que sustituirá a un rígido idioma que no corresponde a nuestra psicología.” Arlt (2017), p.142.
- (62) “Ningún escritor sincero puede deshonorarse ni se rebaja por tratar temas populares y con el léxico del pueblo. Lo que es hoy caló, mañana se convierte en idioma oficializado.” Arlt (2017), p.142.
- (63) Various types of *sainete criollo* may be distinguished like *sainete cómico*, *sanete tragicómico*, *sainete grotesco*, etc., depending mostly on the tenor of the narrated story (from closer to comedic all the way to tragic, through the grotesque juxtaposition of comical and



- dramatic elements). For a concise introduction to this Argentine theatrical genre see Dubatti (2007), pp.7–20.
- (64) Dubatti (2007), pp.27–51.
- (65) Pellettieri (2002), pp.104–144.
- (66) Dubatti (2007), p.81 and p.79, respectively.
- (67) Casadevall (1968), pp.153–154. From that point on, it became customary to have a whole *tango canción* sung with the accompaniment of an *orquesta típica* during the performance of these short theatrical pieces.

## Bibliography

- Abeille, Luciano (1900). *Idioma nacional de los argentinos*. Paris: Librairie Émile Bouillon, Éditeur
- Annechiarico, Sabatino Alfonso (2012). *Cocoliche e Lunfardo: l'Italiano degli argentini*. Milano: Mimesis
- Arlt, Roberto (2017). *Aguafuertes y notas periodísticas*. Buenos Aires: EUDEBA
- Benarós, León (2011). “El tango y los lugares y casas de baile.” In Selles, Roberto, León Benarós (eds.), *La historia del tango - primera época*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Bertagna, Federica (2009). *La stampa italiana in Argentina*. Roma: Donzelli Editore
- Borges, Jorge Luis (2016). *El tamaño de mi esperanza / El idioma de los argentinos*. Buenos Aires: Debolsillo
- Cané, Miguel (1919). *Prosa Ligera*. Buenos Aires: Administración General
- Cara-Walker, Ana (1987). “Cocoliche: the art of assimilation and dissimulation among Italians and Argentines.” *Latin American Research Review*, vol.22, no.3, pp.37–67
- Casadevall, Domingo (1968). *Buenos Aires: arrabal, sainete, tango*. Buenos Aires: Compañía General Fabril Editora
- Cetrangolo, Aníbal (2015). *Ópera, barcos y banderas*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva
- Ciruzzi, Marcela (1999). *Evaristo Carriego - obra completa*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Conde, Oscar (2011). *Lunfardo*. Buenos Aires: Taurus
- DeLaney, Jeane (2020). *Identity and nationalism in modern Argentina*. University of Notre Dame Press
- Dellepiane, Antonio (1894). *El idioma del delito*. Buenos Aires: Arnoldo Moen Editor
- Devoto, Fernando J. (2007). *Storia degli italiani in argentina*. Roma: Donzelli
- De Veyga, Francisco (1910). *Los “lunfardos”*. Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional
- Drago, Luis M. (1921). *Los hombres de presa*. Buenos Aires: “La Cultura Argentina”
- Dubatti, Jorge (2007). *Los óleos del chico, Justicia Criolla, Fumadas, El diablo en el conventillo, Don Juan Malevo*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada
- Gasió, Guillermo (1999). *Jean Richepin y el tango argentino en París en 1913*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Gobello, José (1953) (reprinted in 2009). *Lunfardía*. Buenos Aires: Marcelo H. Oliveri Editor
- Gobello, José (1976). “Orígenes de la letra de tango.” In Rivera, Jorge B., Blas Matamoros, José Gobello (eds.), *La historia del tango - sus orígenes*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Gobello José (1991). *Tres estudios gardellianos*. Buenos Aires: Academia Porteña del Lunfardo
- Gobello, José (2010). *Poesía lunfarda - del burdel al parnaso*. Antología. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Gómez, Eusebio (1908). *La mala vida en Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Juan Roldan
- Gottardo, Marco (2023). “Constructing a national identity through language: an analysis of the earliest descriptions of Lunfardo in Argentina”. *The Journal of the College of Arts and Sciences, Tamagawa University* (16), pp.33–48
- Gottardo, Marco (2024). “A study placing the earliest depictions of Lunfardo within the discourse on crime and immigration in Argentina around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. *The Journal of the College of Arts and Sciences, Tamagawa University* (17), pp.11–27
- Humbert, Béatrice (2000). “El tango en París de 1907 a 1920.” In Pelinski, Ramón (ed.), *El tango nómada*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Iarossi, Maria Pompeiana (2017). *Laboratorio La Boca. Tracce d'Italia a Buenos Aires*. Firenze: Altralinea
- Lamas, Hugo, and Binda, Enrique (1998). *El tango en la sociedad porteña (1880–1920)*. Ediciones Hector L. Lucci
- López, Mario Justo (2016). “La suma del capital privado y público en la construcción de las primeras líneas ferroviarias (1857–1886).” In López, Mario Justo, Jorge E. Waddell, Juan Pablo Martínez. *Historia del Ferrocarril en Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Lenguaje Claro Editora
- Lugones, Benigno B. (1879 a). “Los beduinos urbanos”. *La Nación* March 18. Buenos Aires
- Lugones, Benigno B. (1879 b). “Los caballeros de industria”. *La Nación* April 6. Buenos Aires
- Martinez, Alberto (1889). *Estudio topográfico e historia demográfica de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Compañía sud-

americana de billetes de banco

- Ortega Peña, Rodolfo and Duhalde, Eduardo Luis (2013). *Baring Brothers y la historia política argentina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue
- Pellettieri, Osvaldo (2002). *Alberto Novión: La transición al grotesco criollo*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba
- Pesce, Rubén (2011). "La Guardia Vieja." In Pesca, Rubén, Oscar del Priore, Silvestre Byron (eds.). *La historia del tango - La guardia vieja*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Quesada, Ernesto (1900). *El problema del idioma nacional*. Buenos Aires: Revista Nacional Casa Editora
- Rivera, Jorge B. (1976). "Historias paralelas." In Rivera, Jorge B., Blas Matamoro, José Gobello (eds.). *La historia del tango - sus orígenes*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Salazar, Jaime Rico (1991). *Carlos Gardel - su vida y sus canciones*. Bogotá: Centro Editorial de Estudios Musicales
- Selles, Roberto (2011). "El tango y sus dos primeras décadas (1880–1900)." In Selles, Roberto, León Benarós (eds.). *La historia del tango - primera época*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor
- Tallon, José Sebastián (1959). *El tango en su etapa de música prohibida*. Buenos Aires: Instituto Amigos del Libro Argentino
- Teruggi, Mario E. (1974). *Panorama del Lunfardo*. Ediciones Cabargón
- Ulanovsky, Carlos (1995). *Días de Radio*. Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe
- Vásquez Villanueva, Graciana (2006). "Una política lingüística en el callejón: Hacer la nación, unificar la lengua en Argentina (1890–1900)." *Lenguaje* (34), November 2006, pp.97–123
- Vardaro, Arcángel Pascual (2007) (2014 edition). *La censura radial del lunfardo*. Windmills editions
- Villamayor, Luis C. (1915). *El lenguaje del bajo fondo*. Buenos Aires: Rio Cuarto
- Wright, Winthrop R. (1974). *British-owned railways in Argentina*. The University of Texas Press