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Cultural Keywords in Buenos Aires: the semantics of lunfardo in Porteño Spanish.

Abstract:

The word lunfardo refers to the speech ways and vocabulary of Porteños, the residents of the capital city of Buenos Aires. To the Porteño mind, the word inevitably invokes rich local narratives and knowledges of lunfardo’s early days. For example, it is often said that, originally, lunfardo was the secret vocabulary of thieves in 19th century Buenos Aires, and that the Porteño masses later incorporated it into their everyday language. The lyrics of tango, a musical genre created by both immigrants and local Porteños, also feature many lunfardo words, and therefore many people would describe lunfardo as, simply, the language of tango. Crucially, it is often asserted that the majority of lunfardo words emerged due to contact with the languages—in particular, Italian dialects—brought by the European immigrants that flooded the Argentine capital in the late 19th and early 20th century. Lunfardo, then, is a historically rich word, designating something which is distinctively local and yet strongly connected to the North.

In this paper I use the NSM metalanguage approach of simple, cross-translatable terms (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014; Goddard 2018; Levisen & Waters 2017; Ye 2017) to capture the exact meanings which guide Porteños when they use the word lunfardo. I will champion that, with powerful semantic compression, the word articulates a sense of belonging to the North in the South, as also do the meanings of expressions such as “We Argentines descend from ships”, “Buenos Aires is the Paris of South America”, “We Argentines are Italians that speak Spanish”. I will furthermore argue that, valid as they might be, scholarly definitions of lunfardo do not reflect the exact meanings articulated by speakers in their everyday use of the word. NSM semantic explications and cultural scripts are supported with discursive evidence coming inter alia from local TV programs, newspaper articles, and commentary in social media.

References:


Levisen, C., & Waters, S. (Eds.). (2017). Cultural Keywords in Discourse. Amsterdam: John Benjamins