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# WHAT IS PORTEÑO SPANISH *LUNFARDO*? A COMPREHENSIVE, INSIDER’S SEMANTIC MODEL

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## Abstract

*Lunfardo*, often described as “the slang of Buenos Aires” (capital city of Argentina), is a distinctive, well-researched feature of Porteño Spanish, the Spanish variety spoken in that city. This paper provides a comprehensive semantic model that accounts for the meanings and logics that guide “everyday” Porteños (people of Buenos Aires) in their understanding of this highly complex, culture-specific concept.

The proposed model offers fresh insights into Porteños’ construal of their own linguistic world, including people, places, words, discourses, and values that give shape to this world. The model is constructed using the natural semantic metalanguage’s (NSM) approach of maximally simple, clear, cross-translatable terms, and based on close analysis of cultural insiders’ collaborative conceptual exploration in live TV conversation.

**Key words:** lunfardo, Porteño Spanish, tango, language contact, slang, Argentine language and culture, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM)

## 1. Introduction

*Lunfardo* is a distinctive feature of Porteño Spanish, the Spanish variety spoken in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. Often described as “the slang of Buenos Aires”, *lunfardo* comprises a vocabulary of approximately 6,000 terms that Porteños (people from Buenos Aires) use in addition to, and often in contrast to, standard Spanish (Gobello & Oliveri 2010, 2013; Conde 2013). The literature on *lunfardo* is vast and diverse. Early studies emanated from criminology, and viewed *lunfardo* as the language of criminals (e.g. Villamayor 1915; Dellepiane 1967 [1894]). More recently, cultural and linguistic studies examined the shared universes of *lunfardo*, Porteño literature, and *tango* music (e.g. Soler Cañas 1965; Teruggi 1978; Furlan 1995; Gobello 1999, 2009 [1953]; Conde & Oliveri

2002; Conde 2011a, 2014). There is also a large body of lexicographic work, which includes a number of *lunfardo*-standard Spanish dictionaries (for a review of these dictionaries, see Iribarren Castilla 2009, and Conde 2011a).

However, to date, no study has specifically aimed to account for the exact meanings and discursive logics that guide “everyday” Porteños in their understanding of *lunfardo*. As a result, we lack a description of *lunfardo* that captures a truly “emic” (cultural insiders’) perspective. This paper represents the first attempt to fill this gap. Drawing on the methodological tools of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive emic model of the *lunfardo* concept, framed in simple, maximally translatable terminology. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the way Porteño insiders construe words, people, and places that give shape to their linguistic world.

The paper is structured as follows. In §1, I introduce the NSM approach that will be used to compose the semantic model of *lunfardo*. In §2, I describe the sources on which the model is based and justify the potential for an episode of the Argentine TV show *Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand* (‘Lunching with Mirtha Legrand’) to be used as a case study (El Trece 2018). In §§3, 4, 5, and 6, I embark on the analysis proper: based on the discussion of various excerpts from *Almorzando*, each of these four sections provides a partial model of *lunfardo*. In §7, the four partial models are put together into a single comprehensive semantic model. In §8, I offer some concluding remarks.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The model presented in this paper was constructed using the tools of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach. For the unacquainted, a brief introduction to this approach is provided here (for a comprehensive practical introduction, see the introduction to this special issue; see also Goddard 2018a). Central to the NSM approach is the use of the NSM mini-language to compose meaning representations, known as “semantic explications”. The mini-language comprises 65 simple (i.e. non-decomposable) meanings, coined “semantic primes”, which are hypothesized to be realizable as words or word-like expressions in all natural languages. Semantic primes can be combined into sentences according to well-specified rules that are likewise hypothesized to be available in all languages. The main

advantage of the approach is that complex, culture-specific meanings (in our case, *lunfardo*) can be modelled into a semantic explication composed of simple words which accurately reflect the perspectives of cultural insiders, and which can be translated into other languages with minimum risk of terminological biases.

While the semantic explication of *lunfardo* offered in this paper is chiefly framed in simple semantic primes, it also makes use of other, relatively complex concepts known in NSM theory as “semantic molecules” (marked “[m]”). These function alongside semantic primes as intermediate “meaning blocks” for the composition of more complex concepts. It also makes use of “portmanteaus”, that is, expressions in which a single word stands for a combination of several semantic primes, and “exemplars” (marked “\*”)—the need for the latter is explained in the relevant section.

### 3. Sources

I am a Porteño myself, and therefore much of this analysis of *lunfardo* is informed by my own insider’s knowledge, and my native speaker semantic-discursive intuitions. It is also grounded on the exploration of a range of scholarly literature and practical *lunfardo* guides, including Spanish and *lunfardo* dictionaries (see introductory lines). The linguistic evidence, which is at the centre of the paper, however, is an extended conversation on *lunfardo* that took place during an episode of *Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand* (‘Lunching with Mirtha Legrand’) (El Trece 2018). For the non-Argentine reader, I will note that *Almorzando* is Argentina’s most popular TV show, and the longest running show on Argentine TV (on air for over 50 years). As its name reveals, *Almorzando* has a unique format: Mirtha Legrand (the show’s legendary hostess, unquestionably *the* Argentine diva, aged 95 at the time of writing) and her guests (Argentine public figures of all kinds) freely converse over the course of a 2–3 hour lunch. In this particular episode, the invited guests (the “participants” of this case study) were seven Porteños, among these, Oscar Conde (hereafter, “Conde”), a prominent *lunfardo* scholar. To familiarize the reader with these participants, I offer (1), which captures the moment when Mirtha introduces them (bracketed information added by me).

- (1) *Mirtha* [TV presenter, actress, 91]: Muy bien. Hoy van a estar con nosotros ... mire cuál mesaza, eh, remesaza: la señora Fátima Flores [actress, 39], la señora Teté Coustarot [model, TV/radio hostess, 68], el señor Ronnie Arias [comedian, journalist, 56], el señor Rolando Barbano [author, journalist,

45], el señor Oscar Conde [writer, *lunfardo* scholar, 57]—que va a hablar sobre lunfardo, si tienen palabras en lunfardo, mándenmelas a la mesa—y el Doctor Diego Montes de Oca [medical doctor, 50], que nos va a hablar sobre el estreptococo, que todos estamos bastante preocupados.  
'*Mirtha* [TV presenter, actress, 91]: Alright. Joining us today ... look at this table, hey, such an impressive table: Ms. Fátima Flores [actress, 39], Ms. Teté Coustarot [model, TV/radio hostess 68], Mr. Ronnie Arias [comedian, journalist, 56], Mr. Rolando Barbano [author, journalist, 45], Mr. Oscar Conde [writer, lunfardo scholar, 57]—who will talk about lunfardo, if you at home have words in lunfardo, send them to the table—and Dr. Diego Montes de Oca [medical doctor, 50], who will talk with us about the streptococcus, which we are all very concerned about.'<sup>1</sup>

*Almorzando*'s episode has a great potential to provide insightful data. Its homely setting and relaxed format encourage participants to engage in spontaneous conversation and collaborative thinking-aloud. The varied backgrounds and age groups of the participants (and of the audience, who send messages to the table) allows for diverse voices to take part in these processes. Importantly, Conde's role is not, for the most, that of an expert who explains *lunfardo*'s "true facts" to others. Rather, he encourages and assists others as they invoke *lunfardo* knowledges, narratives, and discourses. In effect, the episode is akin to a session of semantic consultation where, via "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998), cultural insiders bring to light shared knowledges encapsulated in words and meanings (Levisen 2017, 2019).

#### 4. The semantic core of *lunfardo*

In this section, I propose a basic model of the conceptual make-up of *lunfardo*, or what can be termed *lunfardo*'s "semantic core" (or "concept minimum", see Wierzbicka 1985; Goddard 2018b). A main idea in this core is that *lunfardo* consists of 'many words', and that all these words belong to the same 'kind', namely, *lunfardo*. Excerpt (1) (above) illustrates this, as *Mirtha* is there encouraging her audience to send her "words in *lunfardo*". Note that if *Mirtha* did not think there

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of space and readability, I have removed false starts, filler words, and repetitions from transcripts, provided this removal did not alter the analysis in substantial ways.

were many such words, this request would make little sense. The same basic idea is also evident in (2), Mirtha and Conde's first exchange. Here, Conde fears that he will be asked about words that, despite being an expert in *lunfardo*, he has not heard of (bold added for emphasis hereafter):

- (2) *Mirtha*: Bueno, vamos a ver qué comemos. Después voy a hablar con usted, Dr. Conde.  
*Conde*: Cómo no.  
*Mirtha*: Que **me anoté unas palabritas en lunfardo, de mi cosecha.** (*laughs*)  
*Conde*: Bien. **Me da un poquito de miedo,** pero ...  
*Mirtha*: ¿Qué le da miedo? ¡No!  
*Conde*: No, no...que usted me hable de **palabras que yo no conozca,** o no saber responder.  
*Mirtha*: **Son las usuales, las comunes.**

'*Mirtha*: Alright, let's see what we are eating. Then I will talk with you, Dr. Conde.

*Conde*: Sure.

*Mirtha*: Because **I just noted down a few words in lunfardo, that I harvested myself.** (*laughs*).

*Conde*: Alright. **I am a bit scared,** but ...

*Mirtha*: What are you scared of? Don't be scared!

*Conde*: Well ... that you might talk to me about **words that I don't know,** or that I might not know how to answer.

*Mirtha*: **They are the usual ones, the common ones.'**

Note that Mirtha reassures Conde that she will only ask about "usual", "common" words. The passage therefore suggests that there are *lunfardo* words that people do not know. This idea is also deeply embedded in the concept of *lunfardo*, and will be taken up in §5, when I study the link between *lunfardo* and historical *tango*.

Note also that in both (1) and (2) Mirtha uses the construction *en lunfardo* ('in lunfardo'), commonly used among Porteños. In relation to this common construction, Conde has stated elsewhere (2011b:145; my translation from Spanish):

*It is clear that lunfardo is not a language [idioma]. It is not a language because one cannot speak entirely in lunfardo, as one can speak in Quechua, in Guaraní or in*

*Portuguese. And this is because neither pronouns nor prepositions nor conjunctions exist within lunfardo, and because it practically lacks also adverbs, and because—this is what is fundamental—lunfardo utilizes the morphological mechanisms of Spanish for the conjugation of verbs, the inflection of nouns and adjectives, and it makes use of the same Castilian syntax that we have studied at school. Even though the expression «to speak in lunfardo» has spread, it's clear that what one could do, at most, in any case, is «to speak with lunfardo».*

Conde's academic objection does not change the fact that many Porteños, including celebrated writers (e.g. Flores 1975:76; Arlt 1998 [1928]:369), do think of *lunfardo* as (*un*) *idioma* (roughly, '(a) language'), or would not hesitate to describe it as something that is on a par with languages, and that therefore the construction *en lunfardo* makes intuitive sense to them. After all, speakers conceptualize *lunfardo* as a vast collection of words, and, as the majority of examples in this paper will illustrate, this vast collection of words is considered to afford great expressive power.

To capture the semantic core of *lunfardo*, I propose the following partial explication [A]:

**[A] semantic core [partial explication of *lunfardo*]**

- a. many words of one kind,  
    one of these words is *laburo*<sup>\*</sup>, another of these words is *mina*<sup>\*</sup>,  
    another is *guita*<sup>\*</sup>, there are many other words of this kind
- b. people in Buenos Aires [m] know [m] many of these words,  
    they often say many of these words
- c. people in other places in Argentina [m] know [m] many of these words,  
    they often say many of these words
- d. people can say something about many things with words of this kind,  
    like people can say something about many things with other words

The second and third lines of component (a) intend to mimic speakers' natural strategy of explaining *lunfardo* via what they consider to be typical, everyday *lunfardo* word examples. In NSM, such natural salient examples are known as "exemplars", and marked with the standard notation "\*" (Goddard 2017). The choice of *laburo*, *mina*, and *guita* (roughly, 'work', 'woman', and 'money') as exemplars is

grounded on ample evidence (and personal experience) that speakers themselves typically choose these three words when explaining what *lunfardo* is.<sup>2</sup> Importantly also, two of these words (*laburo* and *mina*) are Italianisms, the relevance of which will become clear in the next section.

Component (b) captures the knowledge that people in Buenos Aires know and say many *lunfardo* words. What is true for Buenos Aires in (b) is true also for “other places”—cities, regions, provinces, etc.—in Argentina, as stated in (c). Together, these two components suggest that people think of *lunfardo* as Porteño primarily, and as Argentine more broadly. Components (b) and (c) also imply an awareness that there may be *lunfardo* words that people do not know, or know but do not say, as implied in Mirtha and Conde’s first exchanges.

Finally, component (d) captures speakers’ construal of *lunfardo* as a vast vocabulary with a wide expressive potential, on a par with “other words” (typically, the words of standard Spanish).

### **5. *Lunfardo* as a product of language contact**

Compressed in the concept of *lunfardo* is a narrative discourse concerning how the vocabulary originated. According to this narrative discourse, *lunfardo* is a product of the language contact situation that occurred during the massive wave of European immigration that flooded Argentina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand*, the question about *lunfardo*’s origin is raised early on:

- (3) *Mirtha*: ¿El lunfardo qué es ...? ¿Es porteño el lunfardo?  
*Conde*: Bueno, originariamente es rioplatense, ¿no?  
*Mirtha*: Es rioplatense ...  
*Conde*: Es un argot<sup>3</sup> surgido en las ciudades del Río de la Plata—  
tanto en Buenos Aires como en Montevideo, La Plata, Rosario—

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<sup>2</sup> On YouTube there are various “amateur” *lunfardo* tutorials showing this (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkUu6tSwMbA>). See also exemplification by scholars in spontaneous conversation at (e.g.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83qEuUIy3Es>

<sup>3</sup> As in much of his written work (e.g. Conde 2011a, 2011b, 2014), Conde here chooses to define *lunfardo* via the technical term *argot*, which can mean ‘popular, alternative vocabulary’, as intended by him, but also ‘criminal jargon’. His choice of

entre 1870 y 1880, más o menos, con la llegada de la gran inmigración.

*Mirtha*: Claro, claro.

*Conde*: Y así empezó.

‘*Mirtha*: What is lunfardo ...? Is lunfardo Porteño?

*Conde*: Well, it is originally from the River Plate region, isn't it?

*Mirtha*: It's from the River Plate region ...

*Conde*: It is an argot that emerged in the cities of the River Plate—in Buenos Aires as in Montevideo, La Plata, Rosario—between, more or less, 1870 and 1880, with the arrival of the great immigration.

*Mirtha*: Right, right.

*Conde*: And so it began.’

At this point, the exchange enacts the typical discursive progression of a conversation on *lunfardo*: speakers begin to explore, and indulge in, the origins—specifically, the *Italian* origins—of various *lunfardo* words. As they do, they also begin to flesh out the stories of the Italian immigrants who had brought these words to the country:

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this ambiguous term comes as a surprise, given that Conde himself—following the lead of Gobello (2009 [1953])—is determined to undermine the criminalizing discourses of early *lunfardo* research (more on this in §6).



- (4) *Mirtha*: ¿[Inmigración] italiana más bien?  
*Conde*: Sí, especialmente la italiana es la que aportó más palabras en los orígenes, ¿no?  
*Mirtha*: ¿[Inmigración] napolitana o genovesa?  
*Conde*: De todo. Hay palabras del [idioma] napolitano; hay quizá más [palabras] genovesas porque en Buenos Aires se quedaron muchos más genoveses.  
*Mirtha*: ¿“Pizza”, por ejemplo? Es genovés, me parece, ¿no?  
*Conde*: ¿Qué palabra?  
*Mirtha*: “Pizza”.  
*Conde*: Sí, claro.  
*Mirtha*: Pero todos pensamos en “*napolitana*”, la “*pizza napolitana*”, generalmente, erróneamente, ¿no es cierto?  
*Conde*: Sí, no, pero ... eh ... Hay más palabras del genovés quizás. Y el genovés aportó muchas palabras al mundo de la gastronomía también, ¿no? “*Fainá*”, por ejemplo, “*tuco*” (...)  
*Teté*: Aparte Génova era el puerto donde salían los inmigrantes, ¿no?  
*Conde*: Claro, exactamente.

‘*Mirtha*: Italian [immigration] mostly?  
*Conde*: Yes, especially the Italian is the one that contributed most words in the beginnings, right?  
*Mirtha*: Neapolitan or Genoese [immigration]?  
*Conde*: Everything. There are words from Neapolitan [language]; maybe there are more Genoese [words] because many more Genoese remained in Buenos Aires.  
*Mirtha*: “*Pizza*”, for example? It’s Genoese, I think so, isn’t it?  
*Conde*: What word?  
*Mirtha*: “*Pizza*”.  
*Conde*: Yes, of course.  
*Mirtha*: But we all think of “*napolitana*”, the “*pizza napolitana*”<sup>4</sup>, generally, erroneously, is that true?  
*Conde*: Yes, well, but ... um ... Maybe there are more words from Genoese. And Genoese contributed many words to the world of gastronomy, right? “*Fainá*”, for example, “*tuco*” (...)  
*Teté*: Besides, Genoa was the port where the immigrants departed from, wasn’t it?  
*Conde*: Right, exactly.’

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<sup>4</sup> The *pizza napolitana* is the Porteño variant of the Italian *pizza napoletana*.

In the blink of an eye, the word *lunfardo* has propelled Mirtha's guests into a Buenos Aires at the turn of the nineteenth century, when no less than a third of the city's population had just come from Italy (Latzina et al. 1889, p. 9), and when the smell of Genoese *fainá*, *tocco*, and *pizza* (lunf. *fainá*, *tuco*, and *pizza*) had begun to fill the city's streets.<sup>5</sup>

Next, one of Mirtha's guests conjures up a family memory:

- (5) *Ronnie [to Conde]*: Me acuerdo que mi abuela era hija de italianos, criada por italianos, y decía “*dotor*” [en vez de “*doctor*”], “*sétimo piso*” [en vez de “*séptimo piso*”]. Y uno pensaba, “*qué grasa, qué mersa*” (...). Y con los años empecé a pensar (...) que los padres, al hablar en italiano, era el “*dottore*”, se transformaba en el “*dotor*”; el “*setimo*” era el ...

‘*Ronnie [to Conde]*: I remember that my grandmother had Italian parents, she was brought up by Italians, and she used to say “*dotor*” [instead of Spanish “*doctor*”], and “*sétimo piso*” [instead of Spanish “*séptimo piso*”]. And I would think “*how vulgar, how coarse*” (...). But, as the years went by, I began to think (...) well, it's because her parents spoke Italian, and they said “*dottore*”, and that transformed into “*dotor*”; and “*sétimo*” was ...’

Ronnie is conjuring up a key protagonist in the narrative about the emergence of *lunfardo*, one that has been infinitely represented in Argentine film, TV, and in the popular theatre of the River Plate region (Di Tullio 2010:73–168; Conde 2011a; Ennis 2015). This protagonist is the Italian immigrant who, in their everyday interactions with Porteños, spoke Italianized Spanish, Hispanized Italian, or anything on the continuum between these two. This short-lived language mix came to be known as “*cocoliche*”.<sup>6</sup> Porteños—most

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<sup>5</sup> By 1887, the city's population was distributed as follows: 32.1% were Italian, 9% were Spanish, 4.6% French, and 6.9% came from other countries. Only 47.2% were Argentine-born Porteños (Latzina et al. 1889:9).

<sup>6</sup> The word *cocoliche* comes from Antonio Coccolliccio (or Cucco(l)liccio), a Calabrian clown working at a famous circus that toured around Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coccolliccio became popular for his sketches parodying the speech of Italian immigrants. Today, the word *cocoliche* is used to describe something as *híbrido* (‘hybrid’) or *ininteligible* (‘unintelligible’) (Conde 2011a; Ennis 2015; Academia Argentina de Letras 2019:197). My description

typically, the young, male, lower-class Porteños, aka *compadritos*—would borrow words from these Italian immigrants (among other immigrants), introducing semantic and phonetic playful adaptations, and so the early *lunfardo* was born (Gobello 1989; Conde 2014).

Now, Italians were not the only group whose words contributed to the early *lunfardo*. Conde (2011a) estimates that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, *lunfardo* comprised 1,500 words, half of which were borrowed from Italian, and, to a lesser extent, from other newly migrated European languages, especially French, English, and Portuguese. The other half comprised Hispanicisms, words from indigenous languages, and ruralisms brought from various Argentine provinces (pp. 147–48).

Importantly, once the immigration wave ceased, *lunfardo* continued to incorporate words. In fact, *lunfardo* quadrupled in size throughout the twentieth century (Conde 2011a:147–48, 2013:81). The majority of these later *lunfardo* words did not emerge from the languages brought by the immigrant wave, but from Spanish words that underwent different processes of resignification (typically, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche) and morphological change (Conde 2011a 2012).

Already by 1965, only 12.66% of *lunfardo* words were Italianisms, and the overwhelming majority, namely, 78.5%, comprised the abovementioned Spanish-based words (Conde 2011a:217). Nevertheless, most Porteños seem to share the perception that prototypical *lunfardo* words are Italianisms. The majority of words that Mirtha and her guests (and the Argentine TV audience, via Mirtha) choose to offer as examples of *lunfardo* words reflect this. Four examples are in order:

- (6) *Teté*: “*Voy de tía*” [‘I’m going to my aunt’s house’]?  
*Conde*: También, **es un italianismo**.  
*Mirtha*: “*Voy del doctor*” [‘I’m going to the doctor’]?  
*Teté*: **Es un italianismo dijo**.  
*Conde*: Claro **es un italianismo**.

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of *cocoliche* as a “linguistic continuum” with two extremes is akin to Fontanella de Weinberg’s (1987:138–42). For a review of scholarly definitions on, and literary work written in, *cocoliche*, see Conde (2011a:164–88).

‘Teté: “Voy de tía” [‘I’m going to my aunt’s house’]?’

Conde: Also, **that is an Italianism.**

Mirtha: “Voy del doctor” [‘I’m going to the doctor’]?’

Teté: He said **it is an Italianism.**

Conde: Yes, **it is an Italianism.**’

- (7) Mirtha: ¿“Mishiadura” [‘poverty’]?’

Conde: Y “mishiadura” tiene que ver con “mishio”, que **también es un italianismo**; “mishio” quiere decir “pobre”.

‘Mirtha: ¿“Mishiadura” [‘poverty’]?’

Conde: “Mishiadura” has to do with “mishio”, which **is also an Italianism**; “mishio” means “poor”.’

- (8) Mirtha: Y dicen “laburo” [‘work’] (...) Viene de “lavoro” [‘work’], ¿no? **Del italiano.**

Conde: Sí, sí, “laburo” viene **del toscano**. De “lavoro”.

‘Mirtha: And they say “laburo” [‘work’] (...) It comes from “lavoro” [‘work’], right? **From Italian.**

Conde: Yes, yes, “laburo” comes **from Tuscan**. From “lavoro”.’

- (9) Mirtha: Ay, yo tengo una: “chichipío”. **Eso es italiano.**

Conde: Sí, quiere decir “tonto”, ¿no?

‘Mirtha: Oh, I got one: “chichipío”. **That is Italian.**

Conde: Yes, it means “silly”, right?’

Excerpt (10) below illustrates two important points. First, that Porteños can also construe *lunfardo* words as originating from other languages brought by the European immigrants. Second, that the immigration narrative is so central to the *lunfardo* concept that, for many Porteños, it may be hard to conceive that non-European words can be part of *lunfardo* too. The word in question in this example is *cache*. Mirtha and some guests are convinced that *cache* (pronounced

/ˈkatʃe/) must derive from a French word, which, they imagine, must be pronounced /kaʃ/. To their incredulity, Conde proposes that *cache* has an indigenous Guarani origin:

- (10) *Mirtha*: ¿Y “cache” [ˈkatʃe/]? Vio cuando se dice “ay, es cache, es cache”. Como que fuera ordinario, fuera de moda, vulgar. ¿Qué origen tendrá?

*Conde*: “Cache”. Bueno, esa palabra ... eso ya es una palabra que tiene que ver con el guaraní.<sup>7</sup>

*Ronnie*: ¡No!

*Fátima*: ¡Ay!

*Mirtha*: ¿Con el guaraní? Ah sí ... ¡Qué notable!

*Teté*: ¡Qué genial! Porque todos los que la utilizan pensarán que es una palabra francesa. Guaraní, me encantó.

*Ronnie*: ¡Francesa! [*imitating refined French accent*:] “¡Qué cache [kaʃ/]!”

*Teté*: [*imitating refined French accent*:] “¡Qué cache [kaʃ/]!”

*Conde*: No, para nada.

‘*Mirtha*: ¿And “cache” [ˈkatʃe/]? You know, when people say “aw, it’s cache, it’s cache”. Like when something is tacky, out of fashion, vulgar. What might the origin of this word be?’

*Conde*: “Cache”. Well, that word ... this is instead a word that has to do with Guarani.

*Ronnie*: No way!

*Fátima*: Oh!

*Mirtha*: With Guarani? Aha ... How curious!

*Teté*: How marvellous! Because everybody that employs it must think that it is a French word. But it is Guarani. I loved it.

*Ronnie*: French! [*imitating refined French accent*:] “What a cache [kaʃ/]!”

*Teté*: [*imitating refined French accent*:] “What a cache [kaʃ/]!”

*Conde*: Not at all.’

To capture speakers’ construal of *lunfardo* as a product of language contact, I propose section [B]. The section comprises—and compresses—a narrative consisting of three main parts: Act 1, Act 2, and Thesis. Chronologically speaking, the Thesis is what occurs at the end of the narrative. However, it appears first in the explication, so as

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<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Conde (2011a:236–37) offers a Quechuan origin for *cache*.

to highlight precisely its status as “thesis” of the narrative: that is, as the speaker’s main “point” with the narrative.

**[B] language contact [partial explication of *lunfardo*]**

**(Thesis)**

- a. many words of this kind are like words people say in Italy [m],  
others are like words people say in some other countries [m] in Europe  
[m]
- b. it is like this because of this:

**(Act 1)**

- c. – a long time ago, many people in these countries [m] wanted to live in  
Argentina [m]  
many lived in Italy [m], many lived in Spain [m],  
many lived in other countries [m] in Europe [m]

**(Act 2)**

- d. – after this, these people lived in Argentina [m] for a long time,  
many of them lived in Buenos Aires [m]
- e. – often, when these people wanted to say something,  
they said it with words people say in Italy [m],  
they said it with words people say in these other countries in  
Europe [m]
- f. – because of this, people in Buenos Aires [m] often heard these words,  
after some time, many often said something with these words

Component (a) is an analogy that states that many words from *lunfardo* are like words people say in countries in Europe, particularly in Italy. The precise *tertium comparationis* in this analogy—the quality (or qualities) motivating it—is left unspecified. This is because this quality varies from word to word. For example, speakers often know that the *lunfardo* words *birra* and *laburo* are like their Italian counterparts *birra* and *lavoro* in terms of both form and meaning. Many do not know what the (purported) European counterpart of *cache* may be like, but some may readily hypothesize that it is a French word of similar form.

Component (b) marks (a) as the Thesis that follows from the narrative, and it also introduces the two Acts of this narrative. Act 1 begins in (c) by introducing certain protagonists (“many people”), and by setting these protagonists in time (“a long time ago”) and in space (“countries in Europe”, most prominently “Italy”, and also “Spain”, the second major sending country). Also, it entrusts these protagonists

with a certain goal, a commitment to migrating (“they wanted to live in Argentina”).

Act 2 offers a language contact hypothesis that accounts for the emergence of *lunfardo*. In (d), the protagonists of the narrative have fulfilled their goal. The locus of the narrative changes from European countries to Argentina, and, within Argentina, Buenos Aires is profiled, in line with speakers’ knowledge that this city is where most immigrants settled.

In component (e), the immigrants engage in everyday interactions, and these interactions involve words from Italian and from other European languages. The component accounts for communicative situations involving one shared code (e.g. members of an immigrant family conversing with each other, or with other fellow countrymen), but also for mixed-language situations (e.g. Italians speaking *cocoliche*, immigrants of various origins conversing in the shared patio of the Porteño *conventillo* (“tenement house”).

In component (f), the narrative zooms in to Buenos Aires to state that “people”—that is, local Porteños, but also immigrant families of various origins—were frequently exposed to these words from Italian (and other European) languages, and that, subsequently, many of them began to use these words in their everyday interactions. We witness with this the birth of the early *lunfardo* repertoire, whose predominantly European make-up justifies the Thesis expressed in (a). *Lunfardo* would continue to incorporate new Spanish-based words, but this evolution does not enter into the widely shared narrative embedded in the *lunfardo* concept.

## **6. *Lunfardo* and *tango***

This section proposes that the concept of *lunfardo* encodes a link between *lunfardo* words and early *tango*. For the reader unacquainted with Argentina or *tango*, some background is in order. Like *lunfardo*, *tango* originated in late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires as a result of the contact between the newly arrived European immigrants and local (White and Afro) Porteños. At first, it was a dance and instrumental music only, performed by the lower classes in *conventillos* (‘tenement houses’), *casas de tolerancia* (‘houses of ill repute/brothels’), and *academias* (‘ballrooms’) (Conde 2011a, 2014). Before long, however, *tango* music began to incorporate lyrics, and lyricists began to employ *lunfardo* words as a way of achieving more expressivity in the compositions. *Lunfardo* words eventually became a central ingredient

in the poetics of *tango* lyrics, and, as *tango* surged in popularity, these lyrics began to play an important role in disseminating *lunfardo* words across a broader spectrum of the Porteño speech community (Teruggi 1978; Conde 2011a, 2014).

Like the majority of today's Porteños, Mirtha's guests (unlike Mirtha, who was born in 1927) did not live during *tango*'s heyday in the 1920s–40s. Perhaps most of them do not regularly dance or listen to *tango* either. Nevertheless, in their minds, *tango* and *lunfardo* are two inextricably connected phenomena. Mirtha and Conde's first exchange (partially presented in (2) but extended here) reflects this connection. Note how, as soon as *lunfardo* takes the floor in the conversation, *tango* inevitably joins:

- (11) *Mirtha*: Bueno, vamos a ver qué comemos. Después voy a hablar con usted, Dr. Conde.

*Conde*: Cómo no.

*Mirtha*: Que **me anoté unas palabritas en lunfardo** (...).

*Conde*: Bien. Me da un poquito de miedo, pero ...

*Mirtha*: ¿Qué le da miedo? ¡No!

*Conde*: No, no ... que usted me hable de palabras que yo no conozca, o no saber responder.

*Mirtha*: Son las usuales, las comunes. **Yo me acuerdo, hace años, no sé en qué gobierno, me parece que de Onganía, había un tango que se llamaba “Guardia vieja”, y había que decirle “¡Cuidado, mamá!”**.

'*Mirtha*: Alright, let's see what we are eating. Then I will talk with you, Dr. Conde.

*Conde*: Sure.

*Mirtha*: Because **I just noted down a few words in lunfardo** (...).

*Conde*: Alright. I am a bit scared, but ...

*Mirtha*: What are you scared of? Don't be scared!

*Conde*: Well ... that you might talk to me about words that I don't know, or that I might not know how to answer.

*Mirtha*: They are the usual ones, the common ones. **I remember, many years ago, I don't know which government it was, I think it was Onganía's, there was a tango called “Guardia vieja”, but people had to call it “¡Cuidado, mamá!”**.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mirtha is alluding to the censorship on *lunfardo* words and *tango* lyrics, during a period (1930s–40s) when the Argentine state considered these to be deviant and



*Tango* lyrics have an abiding presence in the collective memory of Porteños, and in Buenos Aires one does not need be a *tango* aficionado to know the lines of famous *tango* songs. Indeed, several times throughout the lunch, Mirtha and her guests draw on their knowledge of famous *tango* lyrics to offer examples of *lunfardo* words. Importantly, many of these *lunfardo* words that Porteños can draw from historical *tango* songs are words that have fallen into disuse, and whose meanings they often do not know. This is illustrated in (12), (13), and (14). Via *tango* lyrics, the participants access the words “*percanta*” (‘young woman’), “*fané*” (‘withered’), “*descangallada*” (‘deteriorated’), and “*esplín*” (‘melancholy’), whose meanings they ignore or are not entirely clear to them. Note however speakers’ knowledge of the lyrics in which these words occur, as well as the titles and authors of the source *tango* songs:<sup>9</sup>

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obscene language (Di Tullio 2010; Conde 2011a; Ennis 2015). Mirtha’s anecdote is that the song title “*Guardia vieja*” (‘Old guard’), which is in standard Spanish, was censored simply for being a near homophone of *lunfardo* “*¡Guarda, vieja!*” (‘Look out, mum!’). To circumvent the prohibition, the story goes, Porteños came up with a title in standard Spanish, namely, “*¡Cuidado, mamá!*” (‘Look out, mum!’). The veracity of this anecdote has been refuted (Gobello 1999:128), but the excerpt is indicative of Porteños’ shared awareness of the historical censorship; this will be taken up in §6.

<sup>9</sup> Their knowledge is not always accurate, though. The correct names and authors of the *tango* songs cited in (12), (13), and (14) are, respectively: *Mi noche triste* (‘My sad night’) (by Castriota & Contursi, first released 1916), *Esta noche me emborracho* (‘This night I’ll get drunk’) (by Discépolo, 1928), and *Balada para mi muerte* (‘Ballad for my death’) (by Piazzolla & Ferrer, 1968) (details for these songs are available on <https://tango.info> and <http://www.todotango.com>).

- (12) *Mirtha*: Mire, anoté algunas [palabras]: “*percanta*”.  
*Conde*: “*Percanta*”. Bueno, “*percanta*” es una palabra muy linda porque se relaciona con la tela del percal, que es la tela que usaban las chicas humildes ...  
*Mirtha*: [reciting tango song] “*Percanta que me amuraste ...*”  
*Conde*: ... para hacerse los vestidos. No se hacían vestidos de seda, sino de percal, y entonces ...  
*Mirtha*: Hay un tango [llamado] “*Perca!*”, de Mores me parece ... [sic]  
*Conde*: Sí, claro.  
*Teté*: Claro.  
*Ronnie*: [Es un tango] hermoso.  
*Mirtha*: [reciting tango song] “*Percanta que me amuraste, en lo mejor de mi vida ...*”  
*Conde*: ... y por eso [decimos] “*percanta*”, ¿no? Una “*percanta*” es una chica vestida de *percal*.  
*Teté*: ¡Qué lindo!
- ‘*Mirtha*: Look, I noted down some [words]: “*percanta*”.  
*Conde*: “*Percanta*”. Okay, “*percanta*” is a beautiful word because it is related to the percale fabric, which is the fabric that humble young women used to use ...  
*Mirtha*: [reciting tango song] “*Percanta, you abandoned me ...*”  
*Conde*: ... to make their dresses. They wouldn’t make dresses with silk, but with percale, and so ...  
*Mirtha*: There is a tango called “*Perca!*”, I think it’s by Mores ... [sic]  
*Conde*: Yes, sure.  
*Teté*: Sure.  
*Ronnie*: [It’s a] beautiful [tango].  
*Mirtha*: [reciting tango song] “*Percanta, you abandoned me in the prime of my life ...*”  
*Conde*: ... so that’s why [we say] “*percanta*”, ¿right? A “*percanta*” is a young woman dressed in percale.  
*Teté*: How beautiful!’

- (13) *Teté*: ¿“*Fané y descangallada*” también?  
*Conde*: Eso es [de un tango] de Discépolo, ¿no?  
*Mirtha*: ¿Cuál [palabra], *Teté*?  
*Teté*: [reciting tango song] “*Fané y descangallada la vi en la madrugada ...*”  
*Conde*: Bueno, “*fané*” es una palabra francesa, quiere decir “*marchito*”, o “*marchita*”, es un participio. Y “*descangallada*” [‘deteriorated’] es una palabra que procede del gallego, ¿no? El verbo [gallego] “*escangallar*” sería ... [interruption]
- ‘*Teté*: “*Fané and descangallada*” also?  
*Conde*: That is [from a tango] by Discépolo, right?  
*Mirtha*: Which [word], *Teté*?  
*Teté*: [reciting tango song] “*Fané and descangallada I saw her in the small hours ...*”  
*Conde*: Well, “*fané*” is a French word, it means “*withered*”, it is a participle. And “*descangallada*” [‘deteriorated’] is a word that comes from Galician, right? The [Galician] verb “*escangallar*” would mean ... [interruption]’
- (14) *Ronnie*: Tengo otra [palabra]. Horacio Ferrer cuando dice “*mi puñado de esplín*”, en [el tango] “*Morir en Buenos Aires*” [sic], ¿qué es?  
*Conde*: Sí, “*esplín*”.  
*Mirtha*: Esa es inglesa, “*esplín*”, ¿no? ¿O no?  
*Conde*: Si, la palabra “*esplín*” es una palabra inglesa.  
*Mirtha*: ¿Qué es? ¿“*Recuerdo*”? ¿“*Recuerdo*”? ¿“*Añoranza*”? ¿“*Recuerdo*”?  
*Conde*: No, “*melancolía*” sería.  
*Mirtha*: “*Melancolía*”.  
*Conde*: Sí, es una palabra que, sin embargo, siendo inglesa, la hizo famosa un gran poeta francés.<sup>10</sup> Hay un libro [de este poeta] que se llama “*El spleen de París*”, y de ahí todos los tangueros empezaron a usar la palabra “*esplín*”.

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<sup>10</sup> The French poet in question is Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867).

‘Ronnie: I have another [word]. When Horacio Ferrer says “my fistful of *esplín*” in [the tango] “*To die in Buenos Aires*” [sic], what does it mean?

Conde: Okay, “*esplín*”.

Mirtha: That one is English, “*esplín*”, right? Or is it not?

Conde: Yes, the word *esplín* is an English word.

Mirtha: What is it? A “*memory*”? “*Memory*”? “*Yearning*”? “*Memory*”?

Conde: No, it would be “*melancholy*”.

Mirtha: “*Melancholy*”.

Conde: Yes, and although it is an English word, it was made famous by a great French poet. There is a book [by this poet] that is called “*Paris Spleen*”, and from there all tango people began to use the word “*esplín*”.

In short, due to their association to historical *tango* and the period of the immigration wave, Porteños largely think of *lunfardo* words as lexical relics of a bygone era, preserved for them in *tango* lyrics. A consequence of this is that Porteños are often conflicted as to whether newly emerged words can be legitimately considered to be *lunfardo*. This is illustrated in (15) and (16):

- (15) *Teté*: ¿Y [creadas] ahora hay también palabras? Porque ahora hay toda una generación con muchas palabras, ¿no?

‘*Teté*: Are there words [created] these days? Because there is a whole generation with many words, right?’

- (16) *Mirtha*: Porque antes se empleaban más los ... estos ... estas palabras, ¿no?  
*Conde*: Bueno, muchos lunfardismos han caído en desuso. Pero, como decía Teté recién, muchos han surgido a partir de los años 40, 50, 60 ...  
*Mirtha*: El tango influyó mucho, ¿no? Muchísimo.  
*Oscar*: Sí, claro.  
*Rolando*: ¿Y se siguen incorporando— digamos—se siguen incorporando palabras?  
*Oscar*: Sí, absolutamente.  
*Rolando*: Por ejemplo, hay toda una generación de delincuentes actuales que usa sus propias palabras. Porque tienen lenguaje *tumbero*. ¿Eso lo siguen tomando como lunfardo?

‘*Mirtha*: All these words were used more in the past, right?’

*Conde*: Well, many lunfardo words have fallen into disuse. But, like Teté was just saying now, many have appeared after the 40s, 50s, 60s ...

*Mirtha*: Tango was quite influential, right? Really influential.

*Oscar*: Yes, of course.

*Rolando*: And words continue to be incorporated?

*Oscar*: Yes, absolutely.

*Rolando*: For example, there is a whole generation of criminals these days that use their own words. They have *tumbero* language [roughly, ‘prison slang’]. Is that still considered to be lunfardo?’

Conde estimates that there is presently a total of approximately 6,000 *lunfardo* words, of which 1,200 have fallen into disuse, and 300 are not recognizable by the newer generations (Conde 2013:81). This means that, indeed, an important portion of *lunfardo* words lie outside Porteños’ competence. Nevertheless, it also means that the great majority of *lunfardo* words remain in usage, contrary to what many Porteños may assume.

For the explication of *lunfardo*, I propose section [C], capturing a widely shared knowledge that relates *lunfardo* and *tango*:

**[C] *lunfardo* and *tango* [partial explication of *lunfardo*]**

- a. people can hear many words of this kind when they hear one kind of music [m],  
people can say what this kind of music [m] is with the word *tango*,

- b. people don't say many of these words anymore,  
they don't know [m] many of these words anymore

Component (a) captures the shared knowledge that people can hear many *lunfardo* words in one kind of music, and that they can jointly identify this kind of music with the word *tango*.<sup>11</sup> Component (b) captures the perception that many of these words have fallen into disuse (“people don't say many of these words anymore”), and that people are no longer familiar with them (“they don't know [m] many of these words anymore”).

### 7. Metapragmatic components in *lunfardo*

The final section of the semantic explication concerns the metapragmatics encapsulated in the *lunfardo* concept, that is to say, speakers' knowledge of shared attitudes towards the use of *lunfardo* words.

On the one hand, there is what can be termed *lunfardo*'s “positive” metapragmatics: the shared notion that using *lunfardo* words (or, indeed, speaking *in lunfardo*) is generally considered to be “good”. In different ways, the examples presented thus far have reflected this shared understanding: Porteños see *lunfardo* as a vocabulary that is distinctively expressive and playful,<sup>12</sup> indexical of *tango* aesthetics, of “true” Euro-Argentine middle-class identity, a marker of trust and affection, etc. (Teruggi 1978; Mafud 1966; Conde 2011a).

It is important to note that this positive metapragmatics has developed relatively recently in the history of *lunfardo*. It took force

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<sup>11</sup> *Tango* is not recruited as a semantic molecule here, but as a “word sign”, like *laburo*, *mina*, and *guita* in section [A] of the explication. Unlike these, however, *tango* does not function here as an exemplar (salient example), and therefore it is not marked with the standard notation for exemplars “\*”.

<sup>12</sup> The playful dimension of *lunfardo* words is often realized via a kind of wordplay called *vesre*. *Vesre* is a form of syllabic inversion in which (typically) the order of the syllables of a (*lunfardo* or standard Spanish) word is reversed, e.g. *zabeca* is *vesre* for *cabeza* (‘head’), *dorima*, for *marido* (‘husband’), *bolonqui*, for *quilombo* (‘a mess’), *dolobu* for *boludo* (‘moron’), *lleca*, for *calle* (‘street’), and *feca*, for *café* (‘coffee’); the term *vesre* itself is an inversion of *revés* (‘backward’) (Conde 2014). Note that many widely used *vesres* are specialized cases: for example, *vesre* for *boludo* (‘moron’) is not *dolubo*, but *dolobu*. Also, many *vesres* take on a different propositional meaning altogether, such as *jermu*, which is the *vesre* for *mujer* (‘woman’), means ‘wife’ (Conde 2014).

after the 1950s, when scholars and literary writers began to trace the various European roots of *lunfardo* words, and to value the role of *lunfardo* in popular theatre, literature, and *tango*, which until then had been generally considered “low” forms of literary expression (e.g. the work of Soler Cañas 1965, 1976; Peña 1972; Gobello 2009 [1953]; and, more recently, Gobello 1996, 2004; Conde 2004a, 2004b, 2011a; Gobello & Oliveri 2010, 2013).

On the other hand, there is *lunfardo*’s “negative” metapragmatics. This concerns speakers’ shared knowledge that in certain occasions using *lunfardo* words may be deemed ‘bad’. This negative metapragmatics has a longer history; a brief summary is in order. It began in the late nineteenth century, when criminologists and crime journalists first brought public attention to *lunfardo*, seeding the hypothesis that the vocabulary in question was part of a secret code employed by criminals. As has been observed, these early researchers were unable to see that *lunfardo* was also being spoken outside the criminal circles they were studying (Teruggi 1978; Conde 2011a). Later, prominent linguists, following this early research, continued to describe *lunfardo* as being originally an underworld jargon, thus contributing to its disparagement and criminalization (e.g. Lavandera 1976; Fontanella de Weinberg 1983; Martorell de Laconi 2002a, 2002b). Likewise, dictionary definitions of *lunfardo* have historically perpetuated the same discourse about *lunfardo*’s criminal origins (e.g. Real Academia Española 1992; Academia Argentina de Letras 2008).

The Argentine state has also played a key role in construing *lunfardo* as a deviant, vulgar form of language, typical of the low-classes and the uneducated immigrant masses. In an effort to “fix” the chaotic linguistic landscape left by decades of migratory influx, it implemented schooling policies that aimed to transform Argentine children into monocultural, monolingual citizens, freed from the aberrances of *lunfardo*, *cocoliche*, and other non-standard Spanish elements. It also regulated radio broadcasting for much of the 1930s–1940s, prohibiting the use of many *lunfardo* words and the *tango* songs that contained them (Di Tullio 2010; Conde 2011a; Ennis 2015).

To illustrate *lunfardo*’s present-day negative metapragmatics, I will use two excerpts from Mirtha’s show. In the first one, Mirtha finds it quite astounding that “*gente bien*” (roughly, ‘well-off/decent

people’),<sup>13</sup> people who are “*leída*” (‘well-read’), and “*informada*” (‘well-informed’), use the *lunfardo* word “*laburo*” (‘work’). For her, standard Spanish “*trabajo*” (‘work’) is more appropriate for these “well-informed”, “decent” classes:

- (17) *Mirtha*: Teté, la gente no dice más [stand.] “*trabajo*”.  
*Teté*: No, [dice] [lunf.] “*laburo*”.  
*Mirtha*: “*Laburo*” dice, “*laburo*”. Pero **gente bien**.  
*Fátima*: Sí.  
*Conde*: **De todos los niveles sociales**.  
*Fátima*: Sí, es verdad.  
*Mirtha*: **Gente bien en el sentido de que es gente informada.**  
**Gente “leída”,** como se decía antes.  
*Conde*: Sí, tal cual.  
*Mirtha*: Y dicen “*laburo*”. ¡Qué notable! No existe más la palabra “*trabajo*”. Viene de “*lavoro*”, ¿no? Del italiano.  
*Conde*: Sí, sí, “*laburo*” viene del toscano. De “*lavoro*”.

‘*Mirtha*: Teté, people don’t say *trabajo* [stand. ‘work’] anymore.  
*Teté*: No, [they say] “*laburo*” [lunf. ‘work’].  
*Mirtha*: They say “*laburo*”. And it’s **well-off, decent people**.  
*Fátima*: Yes.  
*Conde*: **[People] from all social classes**.  
*Fátima*: Yes, it’s true.  
*Mirtha*: **I mean, it’s decent people in the sense that they are well-informed people. “Well-read” people,** as they said in the old days.  
*Conde*: Yes, sure.  
*Mirtha*: And they say “*laburo*”. How remarkable! The word “*trabajo*” does not exist anymore. “*Laburo*” comes from “*lavoro*”, from Italian, right?  
*Conde*: Yes, yes, “*laburo*” comes from Tuscan. From “*lavoro*”.’

In (18), the *lunfardo* word *tujes* (roughly, ‘ass’) is met with the approval and laughter of *Mirtha*’s guests, but it takes *Mirtha* to observe that “*speaking with lunfardo words is not elegant*”:

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<sup>13</sup> The Spanish term *gente bien* (roughly, ‘well-off/decent people’), composed of the terms *gente* (‘people’) and *bien* (‘good’), implies that well-off people are good, and that lower-class people are bad (Conde 2011:127).



- (18) *Conde*: “*Tujes*” también es palabra del yiddish.  
*Fátima*: Ay, “*tujes*” es muy divertido. “*Me va como el tujes*” cuando [alguien] dice. [*Laughter*].  
*Mirtha*: **Yo sabía que íbamos a caer en esto. ¡Estaba segura! En algún momento, vamos a ir a esto.** Que [*Conde*] lo dice aquí en el libro.  
*Ronnie*: [Ya íbamos] a llegar a las palabras ...  
*Mirtha*: **¡Y a algunas peores!**  
*Conde*: Bueno, sí, sí, pero ...  
*Mirtha*: Bueno, son las [palabras] que se usan. Pero **no es elegante hablar en ... con palabras lunfardas, ¿no?**
- ‘*Conde*: Also “*tujes*” is a word from Yiddish.  
*Fátima*: Yes! “*Tujes*”, it’s so funny. Like when [someone] says “*My life is going bad, like the tujes*”.  
[*Laughter*].  
*Mirtha*: **I knew we would end up here, I was convinced! At any time, we would end up here.** [*Conde*] talks about this in his book!  
*Ronnie*: [We would finally] arrive at these words ...  
*Mirtha*: **And even at some worse words.**  
*Conde*: Well, yes, yes, but ...  
*Mirtha*: Well, these are the words that are used. But **it is not elegant to speak in ... with lunfardo words, is it?**’

I propose the following section [D] to capture the metapragmatic knowledge condensed in the word *lunfardo*:

**[D] metapragmatic awareness [partial explication of *lunfardo*]**

- a. many people think like this:
- b. “often it is good when people say things with words of this kind  
at times like this, they can feel something good if they say these words,  
they can feel something good if they hear these words
- c. sometimes it can be bad if someone says things with words of this kind  
at times like these, some people can feel something bad if they hear these words  
these people can think like this:  
“this someone can say the same with other words”

The section captures the speaker’s knowledge of certain widely shared attitudes towards *lunfardo*, as signalled in component (a). Component

(b) renders the metapragmatic knowledge that using *lunfardo* words is generally deemed “good” by speakers, and that it promotes good feelings among speakers. As noted earlier, there are multiple reasons why this is generally so—*lunfardo* words convey a sense of trust, fun, intimacy, “Euro” identity, they “voice” a *tango*-like aesthetic, etc.

In addition, speakers know that there are certain situations where the use of *lunfardo* may trigger a negative outcome. In these contexts, some people may deem the use of *lunfardo* words to be “bad”, and they may do so for various possible reasons noted earlier—*lunfardo* words are considered to be vulgar, coarse, inelegant, too intimate, etc. Whatever the reason(s) may be, it is known that “other words” (standard, elegant, formal, official, words) would be preferred.

### 8. Full semantic explication of *lunfardo*

The entire explication with its four sections—[A], [B], [C] and [D]—reads as follows:

#### *lunfardo*

##### [A] semantic core

- a. many words of one kind,  
    one of these words is *laburo*\*, another of these words is *mina*\*,  
    another is *guita*\*, there are many other words of this kind
- b. people in Buenos Aires [m] know [m] many of these words,  
    they often say many of these words
- c. people in other places in Argentina [m] know [m] many of these words,  
    they often say many of these words
- d. people can say something about many things with words of this kind,  
    like people can say something about many things with other words

##### [B] language contact

###### (Thesis)

- a. many words of this kind are like words people say in Italy [m],  
    others are like words people say in some other countries [m] in Europe  
    [m]
- b. it is like this because of this:

###### (Act 1)

- c. – a long time ago, many people in these countries [m] wanted to live in  
    Argentina [m]  
    many lived in Italy [m], many lived in Spain [m],  
    many lived in other countries [m] in Europe [m]

**(Act 2)**

- d. – after this, these people lived in Argentina [m] for a long time,  
many of them lived in Buenos Aires [m]
- e. – often, when these people wanted to say something,  
they said it with words people say in Italy [m],  
they said it with words people say in these other countries in  
Europe [m]
- f. – because of this, people in Buenos Aires [m] often heard these words,  
after some time, many often said something with these words

**[C] *lunfardo* and *tango***

- a. people can hear many words of this kind when they hear one kind of music  
[m],  
people can say what this kind of music [m] is with the word *tango*,
- b. people don't say many of these words anymore,  
they don't know [m] many of these words anymore

**[D] metapragmatic awareness**

- a. many people think like this:
- b. “often it is good when people say things with words of this kind  
at times like this, they can feel something good if they say these words,  
they can feel something good if they hear these words
- c. sometimes it can be bad if someone says things with words of this kind  
at times like these, some people can feel something bad if they hear  
these words  
these people can think like this:  
“this someone can say the same with other words”

**9. Concluding remarks**

This paper represents the first attempt to capture the everyday Porteño insider's understanding of *lunfardo*, using the NSM approach to complex meaning description via simple, universally shared terms. I have proposed a comprehensive, maximally translatable model which views *lunfardo* as a word in which whole cultural discourses, knowledges, and attitudes are compressed—a model in line with current theorizations of “cultural keywords” (i.e. culture-specific, culture-rich words) and their discursive affordances (Levisen & Waters 2017). The TV show *Almorzando* proved an excellent case study to this end, providing illustrative examples where these

compressed discourses, knowledges, and attitudes are readily activated as speakers engage in spontaneous conversation on *lunfardo*.

Some important features of the presented model can be summarized as follows. *Lunfardo* is construed as a vast, rich collection of words known and used in Buenos Aires primarily, and in Argentina more broadly. Embedded in *lunfardo* is also a historical narrative about its origins in language contact, including a shared “thesis” that many original *lunfardo* words are like words from Italian and other European languages brought during the great immigration. The semantic explication also captured locals’ construal of *lunfardo* words as being characteristic of, and preserved in, *tango* music. Together, all these elements contribute to the perception that most *lunfardo* words are lexical relics of a bygone era, and that much of the language of Buenos Aires, like Porteños themselves, purportedly “descends from the (immigrants’) ships”, to use a local expression (see Hein 2020). The explication also accounted for speakers’ knowledge of shared attitudes towards the use of *lunfardo* words. This metapragmatic knowledge, I proposed, is rooted in two historical currents of discourse around *lunfardo*: an early one, which disparaged and criminalized it, and a later one, which valued it as an offspring of the European immigration wave, and as a distinctively expressive, culture-rich repertoire of words.

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