Lexical Indexicality and Reappropriation: The case of *favelado* in Brazilian Portuguese

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Traditional work on variation focuses on phonological and morphosyntactic variables in order to understand linguistic and social constraints that account for the alternation among linguistic forms. More recent work on indexicality has explored layers of interrelated social meanings (Silverstein 2003, Eckert 2008). Using Eckert’s concept of the indexical field, we explore indexical meanings of a lexical item as a form of variation. Specifically, we consider the application of the indexical field for the Brazilian Portuguese (BP) term *favelado* ‘slum-dweller’. *Favelado*, synonymous with *morador de favela* ‘slum-dweller’, has acquired negatively charged indexical values in many contexts, likely due to negative associations with slums in Brazilian society. Data acquired through internet research indicate three main orders of indexical meaning for *favelado*:

1) the *nth* order meaning (‘slum-dweller’);
2) several related pejorative *n+1* order meanings (‘poor’, ‘uncultured’, ‘slutty’);
3) (re)appropriated *n+1* order meanings (‘badass’, ‘street-smart’).

The (re)appropriated meanings display positive reevaluation of slum identity and are used as an in-group identity marker among certain populations (namely, fans of a certain soccer team). By considering the variability of meanings associated with this term, we propose an expansion of the indexical field framework to account for lexical items.

Research on lexical items typically traces a word’s history and meanings, but these studies understand lexical development as a linear progression, mapping a single meaning to a point in time (Hock 1991, Hock & Joseph 2009, McConnell-Ginet 2001). Building on discussions of the (re)appropriation of pejorized terms, such as the Cantonese word *tongzhi* (Wong 2005, 2008), *gay* (McConnell-Ginet 2001), *queer* (McConnell-Ginet 2001), *nigger* (Croom 2011), *inter alia*, our work on *favelado* provides a framework with which to conceptualize the simultaneous availability of both pejorative and powerful meanings. In adapting Eckert’s (2008) model of the indexical field, we find the distinction between ‘social types’ and ‘permanent qualities’ useful for lexical items but discard ‘stances’ because of the inherent associations made with the referent of the *nth* order meaning. The “sidestepping” which Eckert (2008) proposes is represented in small steps between individual yet interrelated pejorative *n+1* order meanings in the field. The (re)appropriated forms are partitioned off from the pejorative meanings. These positively-valenced meanings are highly contextually dependent and require simultaneous access to pejorative meanings.

Through variation of indexical meanings, social and linguistic change occurs much like change related to phonological and morphosyntactic variables. Furthermore, cross-linguistically we find semantic and pragmatic extension which lead to grammaticalization processes that allow for a noun to become an adjective and then an adverb (*favelado* n. ‘slum-dweller’ > *favelado*, adj. ‘poor’ > (falar) *favelado* adv. ‘(to speak) in an uneducated way’), showing a similar progression to that of other pejorized terms such as *gay* and *queer*. This paper brings to the forefront the necessity of a discussion in the wider linguistic community about the inherent variation in lexical meanings and the importance of accounting for indexical values in the study of variation.