The power of the apostrophe: linguistic landscape in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte

O poder da apóstrofe: paisagem linguística em Natal, Rio Grande do Norte

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a Linguistic Landscape research (LANDRY; BEN-RAFAEL, 2006; BOURHIS, 1997; SAYER, 2010) carried out by a group of undergraduate students at a Federal university in Rio Grande do Norte, as part of their final project in a mandatory class for their major: Morphosyntactic aspects of the English Language. Provoked by the professor to find instances of code mixing or switching in the linguistic landscape, and noticing the extensive use of the apostrophe in in signs in Natal, RN, that functioned as a genitive case, which is a loan from English usage, students devised this study to map the use of the apostrophe in 4 representative neighborhoods with different quality of life indexes, in Natal, RN, to: identify and classify patterns of usage, determine whether the usage is

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democratic, determine what meanings the use of the apostrophe construes. Results showed that usage fell into three categories: to impart trendiness or sophistication; for aesthetic reasons – to make the sign more beautiful; and to show possession – grammatical loan function from English. We therefore conclude that, in Natal RN, the apostrophe, used to construe the meaning of possession, has entered into common usage in the Brazilian Portuguese at least in Natal, RN, as well as to impart social meanings in the discourse that include trendiness, coolness and sophistication, and aesthetic value— beauty. These patterns were found in all four neighborhoods and therefore we conclude that the use is also democratic. Future studies may include a more systematic investigation with a broader sample in this same geographical context, and nationally.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic Landscape research. English Language Teaching. The Apostrophe.

RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa com base nos estudos de Paisagem Linguística (LANDRY; BOURHIS, 1997; BEN-RAFAEL et al, 2006; SAYER, 2010) feita por um grupo de alunos de uma universidade federal no Rio Grande do Norte, como parte do projeto final de uma disciplina obrigatória do seu curso intitulada Aspectos morfossintáticas da língua inglesa. Impulsionados pelo professor a encontrar marcas de mistura ou alternância de códigos linguísticos na paisagem linguística e, ao notarem o amplo uso da apóstrofe em placas na cidade de Natal, RN, usadas no caso genitivo, o que é um empréstimo da língua inglesa, os alunos desenvolveram este estudo, a fim de mapear o uso de apóstrofes em quatro bairros representativos da cidade que possuem diferentes níveis de qualidade de vida, objetivando: identificar e classificar os padrões de uso, determinar se o uso é democrático e estabelecer que significados são produzidos pelo uso da apóstrofe. Os resultados mostraram três categorias para o seu uso: transmitir tendências e sofisticação, tornar a placa, por razões estéticas, mais bonita e mostrar posse – um empréstimo gramatical do inglês. Por conseguinte, concluímos que, em Natal, RN, o uso de apóstrofe tornou-se de uso comum no português brasileiro, pelo menos, em Natal, RN, tanto para designar posse quanto para conferir significados sociais em discursos que incluem tendências, moda e sofisticação, bem como valor estético – beleza. Esses padrões foram encontrados nos quatro bairros, e, por isso, concluímos que o seu uso também é democrático. Futuros estudos devem incluir uma investigação mais sistemática, com uma amostragem maior de dados no mesmo contexto geográfico e nacionalmente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pesquisa de Paisagem Linguística. Ensino de Língua Inglesa. Apóstrofe.

Introduction

The use of code switching/mixing and linguistic borrowing, on signs, walls and public spaces in cities the world over, has been an indicator of language change and power relationships for centuries. This phenomenon occurs within different speech communities that occupy common geographical urban spaces as well as those within

a broader scope of cultural contact that may not be localized geographically; both draw on the legacy of colonial or neo-colonial campaigns, immigration-emigration patterns, and commercial or trade enterprises in general (BEN-RAFAEL, 2006). In the field of Applied Linguistics, the study of these language patterns is characterized as Linguistic Landscape (LL) research (LANDRY; BEN-RAFAEL, 2006; BOURHIS, 1997; SAYER, 2010). This article reports on a Linguistic Landscape study that investigates the use of the apostrophe on commercial signs throughout four representative neighborhoods in the State capital of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal.

The linguistic landscape of Natal teems with signs that display code switching/mixing between Brazilian Portuguese and a variety of languages, including French and English, with the use of the punctuation and sometimes diacritical mark, the apostrophe, included in these instances. Its frequent and seemingly arbitrary or ungrammatical use on signs of businesses ranging from restaurants (*Restaurante Vitellu's aroma e sabor*), salons (*Cristina's Cabelo, D'ssan Hair*) and newsstands (*Clock's Shop Banca*) to variety stores (*Bolando Art's, DJ Import's, CD's*) among other commercial establishments, piqued our curiosity to find out why business owners stuck apostrophes in their signs in seemingly arbitrary or ungrammatical ways, or in obvious direct borrowings from morphosyntactic patterns of other languages -- as in the genitive case in English -- and if they were aware of these borrowings and their meanings in the original languages, i.e. does the functionality carry over to the second language (L2). We wondered what patterns there were to this usage, which is 'ungrammatical' from the perspective of standard Portuguese, and what meanings were construed, from the perspective of the business owners. Ultimately, we wanted to find out what kind of power the apostrophe wields, since its use is so prominent in the linguistic landscape of Natal.

These observations and curiosities prompted the following research questions:

- How can the distribution of usage in a sample of representative neighborhoods in Natal be characterized?
- What are some of the functions of the use of the apostrophe?
- What are the users' perceptions of the meanings made with respect to the use of the apostrophe in their signs?

In order to answer these questions, the specific objectives of this study include quantifying occurrences of the use of the apostrophe on signs in representative neighborhoods in Natal, determining patterns in usage – patterns of borrowings based on types of stores or other variables –, and the functions of the usage, since we observed both grammatical and ungrammatical usage from a Portuguese language perspective. We also, aimed to categorize and classify the perceptions of the users with regard to the meanings construed in the usage of the apostrophe. Finally, we aimed to determine whether the usage is democratic, by identifying whether similar patterns are found in four neighborhoods representing different quality of life standards constituting different levels of social status.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. Section Two provides demographic information about the neighborhoods targeted for this research. Section Three presents the theoretical and methodological framework, and Section Four reports on the results and discussion. Finally, in Section Five we raise some considerations about future works, followed by references.

1 Natal and its neighborhoods

For the purpose of this research, four neighborhoods were visited in Natal using Google Map Street View (2014) and in locus. What follows is a brief description of the demographics of each neighborhood to provide a portrait of the social context in which the language we are investigating emerges. The classification of the four neighborhoods was based on a study carried out in 2003, entitled 'Mapping the Quality of Life in Natal', developed by, Arima Viana Barroso, which describes the levels of quality of life in Natal based on indicators such as, levels of income, education and health. We use this study, applied to the neighborhoods investigated, to classify them as representative in the three categories - 1,2,3.[1], classification 1 indicating the highest quality of life and 3 the lowest. The following sections provide a brief

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[1] "O Índice de Qualidade de Vida - IQV - The Quality of Life Index was developed in order to measure the quality of life of the resident population in the various districts in Natal, from seven indicators, expressed in three dimensions: income, education and environmental dimension, which established the three specific indexes. Then these ratios were grouped into a single index, resulting in the Quality of Life Index. The mapping of IQV index and sub-indices IQV - income, IQV - environmental and IQV - education, following the classification in groups 1, 2 and 3 enables viewing, geographically, the concentration of the neighborhoods where the population has worse or better standards of life in the context analyzed." BARROSO (2003 p.6 our translation)

description of the neighborhoods investigated in this study, and their Quality of Life Index (*Indice de Qualidade de Vida -* IQV) classification.

1.1 Alecrim

The Alecrim is located on the east side of Natal. After the Second World War, the commercial activity in the neighborhood increased substantially. Today, the Alecrim is considered one of the main commercial centers of Natal. According to the Mayor's office, there were 9.263 households and 3.968 businesses, including commercial stores, services and industry, in 2008. The neighborhood also holds one of the biggest street markets in the city. This research was carried out on two of the main blocks, which have the main concentration of establishments: between Rua Amaro Barreto and Rua dos Pajeús and between Av. Presidente Quaresma and Av. Presidente Bandeira. The IQV index for the Alecrim is 3 (BARROSO, 2003).

1.2 Tirol

According to Ahmed, the history of Tirol is intertwined with the neighborhood of Petrópolis, as "these two neighborhoods were dismembered from a third neighborhood, Cidade Nova (AHMED, 2008, p. 113). In this same article, the author affirms, the Cidade Nova project is, "representative of the wishes of the ruling elites to deem the existing city and expectation of Natal as a city of the future [...] ." Today Tirol has the highest concentration of the richest people of Natal. There are famous luxury boutiques, expensive restaurants, hospitals and clinics, expensive schools, military institutions, Midway Shopping and the only city park open to the public every day, the Parque das Dunas. According to the Mayor's office, as of 2007 there were 14.799 inhabitants living in Tirol. Of this total among 6,421 are men and 8.357 are women. Source: IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Census 2007. The IQV classification is 1 (BARROSO, 2003).

1.3 Ponta Negra

Ponta Negra is a former fishing village. Currently, Ponta Negra is a mix of touristic attractions and families of fishermen and women. There are sophisticated

restaurants, large hotels, concert halls, bars and a trendy nightlife, as well as, time honored gathering places for locals, the beach lined with *jangadas*, and kiosks in the section known as the 'Vila'.

According Barroso (2003, p.16,20,26) Ponta Negra rates 0.64 in Sanitation IQV, which places the neighborhood at position 12th out of a total of 36 neighborhoods and places it in the second group of Life Quality in Sanitation. In the Incoming IQV Ponta Negra had 0,54 point in place 9th and also in the second group of Life Quality. In the Environment IQV Ponte Negra has 0,53 point and got the 26th position. It places Ponte Negra in the second group with medium Environment IQV. Education IQV Ponta Negra had 0,83 point, it got 9th position and place in the high level group 1 in Education. Overall the IQV rating for Ponta Negra is 2 (BARROSO, 2003).

1.4 Cidade Alta

Cidade Alta is the name of the neighborhood that contains Natal's Downtown area. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the City with many bohemian haunts of long time residents of Natal – rodas de samba, traditional bars, used book stores, and cafes. According to the Mayor's office in Natal, there were 2,814 business in the area in 2008: commercial stores, services or Industry. Cidade Alta is on the border of middle and low IQV ratings being a low three or a high two (BARROSO, 2003).

2   Theoretical and methodological framework

This research is characterized as a qualiquantitative, exploratory, Linguistic Landscape (LL) study. LL can be defined as the use of languages, as well as the visibility they may, or may not, receive on signs in either commercial or public urban places (LANDRY; BOURHIS, 1997; SAYER, 2010; BEN-RAFAEL, 2006). Several studies from this perspective have examined power relationships between speech communities, including studies by Trumper-Hecht (2008), which focused on the Upper Nazareth, a cosmopolitan city in Israel, engaged in a cultural struggle between Arabs and Jews, in which public signs are written in more than one language (Hebrew, English, Arabic) due to the city's mixed ethnic context. Even though 50% of the population is Arabic, only 4% of all the signs in the city are written in Arabic. Even

English, as a foreign language in the region, has more representation (30%) (LANDRY; BOURHIS, 1997; SAYER, 2010; BEN-RAFAEL, 2006) .

Along with the premises of LL research, the broad theoretical framework for this study is based on functional grammar in general, and specifically on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)   (HALLIDAY, 2014; EGGINS, 1994;), which takes as its primary premise that language is a **resource for meaning making**, and that we can **model it in a stratified way**. This stratified model emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the context of culture (genre), the context of situation (register) and the lexicogrammar (language) in use.   In this way, we are able to predict language from contexts and deduce contexts from lexicogrammar. The register variables allow us to observe how interpersonal relationships (power) and ideational constructs (representations of the world) as well as textual meaning are construed in the signs through their graphological realizations within the (con)text they emerge.

Establishments with signs that use the apostrophe, were sought out throughout the State Capital of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, in 4 representative neighborhoods, which previously described. The neighborhoods were chosen based on the socio-economic demographics of each, representing a wide range of speech communities from different social backgrounds, but the establishments themselves were found randomly. The research group both looked for establishments using the web tool Google Maps 2014 in workshops, and in the field, walking through the streets and avenues of the city. Photographs of the signs were taken and, later on, a questionnaire was used to ask the owners or managers of the establishments about the purpose for choosing to use the apostrophe. Business owners signed terms of consent to participate in the research.

The following section reports on findings and discusses their implications.

3   Results and discussion

In the Cidade Alta - downtown area, some stores and businesses have used the apostrophe for more than 25 years. However, researchers observed that, in this area, other stores change their names frequently. Some that were photographed by Google Street View in 2014 had changed their names after only one year.

Researchers visited six different establishments (Table 1) in Cidade Alta. Only one of these business owners reported using the apostrophe because of its function

in English — to show possession. Actually, most of the business owners visited reported using the apostrophe just for aesthetic reasons. For example, the owner of "Diva's bijuterias" chose its name because she thought it would be "more beautiful" to use "Diva's" instead of "Divas." According to her, the use of the apostrophe makes the name more sophisticated. She also said the apostrophe in the name of the store comes from the Portuguese language. Her store has been open for four months.

In another example, "Lourde's Bijuterias," which has been open for more than 14 years, uses the apostrophe for the same reason. It was chosen for aesthetic reasons and to distinguish this store from others. The perception of the owner, similar to the first example, is that the apostrophe comes from the Portuguese language. However, the owner doesn't think the apostrophe makes the name more sophisticated.

In two other cases, the perception of the owners is that the apostrophe comes from French. The first is the oldest place the group visited in Cidade Alta. *Dolore's cabelereiros* has been open for more than 25 years. According to the owner, the apostrophe was chosen to add some French characteristics to the name of the store. She also said the use of French is chic and it makes the name of the store more sophisticated. On the other hand, "Óticas Charman't" has been open for six months, but the usage of apostrophe is the same. The owner's perception is that it comes from French and thus, its usage makes the name more sophisticated. However, it is clear that the apostrophe is thrown in with no morphosyntactic purpose, although in the former case, it could suggest possession. However, the perception of the owner's is that its function is aesthetic and designed to emulate what is, for the business owners and their clients (as they perceive them), a further mark of *Frenchness*. It serves no grammatical function since in French 'charmant', which means 'charming' does not carry an apostrophe. Nonetheless, it carries much meaning, and, in this case, wields its own social power.

One of the cases, the owner of *Zaro's lanches*, who is not Greek, uses the apostrophe to make a plural. The owner reported the apostrophe symbolizes the idea that "all workers did it together." While, it is not used for aesthetic reasons, it is still ungrammatical from a Portuguese language perspective, but grammatical from an English language perspective, signifying the genitive case. According to the owner, the apostrophe comes from the Greek language.

The last case is the only one chosen for grammatical reasons. The owners of *Maria's doce* chose its name because of its grammatical function in English — the

genitive case. Therefore, it is a loan from English in this case. The owner said the name of the store is essential to distinguish it from others.

Table 1: Establishments that use the apostrophe in Cidade Alta

Owner's Perceptions of the origin of the Apostrophe	Number of stores
Portuguese language	6 (PN - 5+)
English language	3
French language	2
Other Languages	1 (Greek)
Don't Know	1

In the Alecrim, using Google Maps 2014, researchers found five stores. Only three of these are still in the same location and using the same name. However, commercial galleries included eight more stores, proving that the use of the apostrophe is indeed very common. We limited our search to the two major blocks in the neighborhood. The majority of the establishments found were between Rua Amaro Barreto and Rua dos Pajeús, more precisely inside a popular alley called, *Beco do Café* (Coffee Alley). All of the four stores there were willing to answer the questionnaire. In another location, only one store agreed to participate.

Three of the establishments found in the alley (DJ Import's"; "Bolando Art's" and "D' Freitas Store") claimed that the apostrophe was chosen by the graphic designers of their signs, and it is there only for aesthetic reasons. Their answers were similar: none of them knew the grammatical function of that particular punctuation mark and also thought it was something related to the norms of the Portuguese language. They all agreed that even though the apostrophe sophisticates and characterizes the name of the establishment, it doesn't attract more customers. The last participant *Beco do Café* was one of the owners of the cafeteria *Nilda's Lanches*. The name was chosen by one of Nilda's sons. The apostrophe was used for aesthetic reasons an, also, for its grammatical function — the genitive case. The interviewee said that the name does not attract more clients and does not contribute

to the characterization of the cafeteria since Nilda is already a well-known cook in the Alecrim.

The last establishment that agreed to participate in our survey is located on one of the neighborhood's main avenues: Presidente Bandeira. The owner of *Célia Import's* also claimed that the apostrophe was a suggestion made by the designer of the sign. The interviewee said that she liked the idea very much, for its aesthetic appeal and because she considered it "trendy." According to her, in an area with so many stores in the same segment, a different name really makes the difference. Meaning that she agrees that the name brings her more customers. When asked about the origin of the apostrophe, she first said she did not know and then that it was a norm from the Portuguese language.

In Tirol, which is a more residential neighborhood than commercial, researchers found only four establishments - in the extension of eighteen blocks — wherein the apostrophe is used in names on signs. Only one of these establishments' owners has declared using the apostrophe because of its grammatical usage in English — the genitive case — while another interviewee revealed he was not sure about it. On the other two establishments, researchers were not able to collect enough required data.

These two establishments visited by researchers were not able to participate due the fact that: the owner was not at the establishment and the person responsible did not know how to answer the questions precisely (*D'Santi*); the other was not willing to answer the questionnaire (*Restaurante Vitellu's*).

The first case (*Gil Art's Decora*ções), the apostrophe was chosen following the grammatical Portuguese language rules, according to the owner, however she added she was not absolutely sure. She reported that the use of the apostrophe brings more "visibility" to the establishment making it more "chic and sophisticated". The store has been open for more than ten years in Natal and they have never thought of changing it.

The barber shop's owner (*The Godfather's Barbearia Clube*) reported using the apostrophe because of its function in English — the genitive case. He said the name of the establishment was inspired by the film (The Godfather, 1972), however the movie's name does not have the apostrophe in it. He chose putting the apostrophe to make the genitive with "Barbearia Clube". According to the owner, the

use of the apostrophe in itself does not differentiate the establishment from others but "the creativity of its name does" (personal communication).

In Ponta Negra researchers had trouble gathering data other than the name of the stores as the the people who work in the stores didn't know or didn't want to answer our questions. One exception was the case of *Clock's Shop Banca*, a 'cigarreira', as they are known in the Natal, or 'banca' in other parts of Brazil -- a type of small newsstand/convenience store that sells magazines, newspapers, sodas, beer, fresh coconut water, cigarettes, cookies, crackers, candies and the like, located on the main Avenue, Roberto Freire, in front of the most popular mall on the South side, Praia Shopping. *Clock's Shop Banca* was particularly curious to the research team because of its very prominent visibility and because the name makes no sense from either an English language or Portuguese language perspective, and seemed extremely disconnected from what was actually being sold there. Initially we were unable to reach the owner, and the workers had no idea what the name meant, let alone why there was an apostrophe. Finally, a burly, and impressively tattooed cab driver, seemed to discover the mystery! The cab driver, who knew a little English, in conversation with one of the researchers, surmised it meant *Banca Loja da Hora* (Loja da hora being an expression that means 'Hot Spot' or 'The Place to Be'), because 'clock' means *hora* and 'shop' means *loja*. He also surmised the owner must be from São Paulo, since it is a very popular expression in that city. Triumphant, the researcher reported back to the group and everyone was incredibly impressed by the linguistic prowess of the genius cabbie. Unfortunately, the cab driver was wrong. The same researcher, by chance encountered the owner one night late as he was locking up. The owner reported that the 'cigarreira' was initially meant to be a watch repair shop, since his father was a watchmaker, but it didn't go over well, so they turned it into a convenience store and left the name in honor of their father. Interestingly, this episode illustrates a fundamental desire and ability to attribute meaning to language in the landscape, even when it is this obscure, by everyone from cab drivers to linguists.

Conclusions

As our data shows, in the majority of cases, in neighborhoods across demographic classifications IQV 1,2 and 3, businesses use the apostrophe in three categories:

- for aesthetic/social reasons, making the name "sophisticated", "cool" and "trendy"
- the genitive case (adopted from English grammar)
- for plurals, but only with particular items - CD's, Video's and Import's

Our data also shows that the perceptions of the majority of the business owners participating in the study perceive the apostrophe as originating in the Portuguese language, and is correct Portuguese whether serving a grammatical function, as in the genitive case, or an aesthetic/social function, marking trendiness, sophistication (evoking an exotic other - English, French or Greek). We also found that in many cases, the choice is influenced by the sign designers who helped the owners choose the name.

We therefore conclude that, in Natal RN, the apostrophe, used to construe the meaning of possession, has entered into the norms of usage in Brazilian Portuguese, at least in Natal, RN, as well as imparting social meanings that include trendiness, coolness and sophistication, and aesthetic value- beauty. These patterns were found in all four neighborhoods and therefore we conclude that the use is also democratic.

Limitations of the study include lack of respondents in Ponta Negra and a small sample. Future studies will include a broader sample of establishments and participant responses in Natal, but also a larger study, nationwide, to verify if this pattern is a local one or represents emergent language change on a national scale with regard to the use of the apostrophe in Brazilian Portuguese.

Nonetheless, this study contributes to mapping evidence of language change in Brazil, and the grammatical function of the apostrophe in Brazilian Portuguese as expressing the genitive case as having entered into common usage at least in Natal, RN. On the level of discourse, the data shows that the use of the apostrophe in this context expresses 'trendiness and sophistication' in a majority of cases. Thus, our research shows that the apostrophe has the power to democratically express both social status (sophistication, trendy,cool) and heightened aesthetic (more beautiful),

as well as grammatical function, however, introducing a new pattern borrowed from standard English - to express possession. Further studies may confirm these patterns on both regional and national levels.

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