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TANGO: AN INTRODUCTION TO TANGO-RELATED TOPICS

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present tango not as a choreographic arrangement (although this will inevitably be discussed), but as a social phenomenon with a very interesting history, created in specific historical and cultural circumstances, constituting an extremely popular cinematic and literary motif and, no less importantly, an area of linguistic research. Hence the more general or descriptive nature of the article, in which, in addition to the necessary information, numerous questions, doubts and research paths appear. At the same time, we would like to emphasize the international and intercultural nature of tango, visible primarily in music and dance, but also in all the other threads presented in this article, which makes this dance a subject of broadly understood cultural studies.

Keywords: tango, cultural studies, literature, linguistics

INTRODUCTION

Although tango is commonly associated with dance, it is much more than a choreography performed to the rhythm of music. It has a rich history where different cultures and influences are intertwined and, therefore, it can be the subject of diverse research. The aim of this article is to present tango as an intercultural phenomenon rooted in literature, cinematographic arts or language. We have chosen these areas because, on the one hand, they are the fields of research in which tango enjoys a very palpable presence (hence the presence of cinema) and, on the other, they are related to

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our specialty, i.e. philological studies (literature and linguistics). Likewise, at the end of the article we present more topics that belong to other areas of study, suggesting in this way: tango as a possible object of interdisciplinary research.

Given the review nature of this work, the methodology here applied is merely descriptive. The most notable works in relation to the presented topics are cited, but we also cover them in our publications with the intention that they serve as inspiration for new studies.

The article consists of five main parts. The first is a brief presentation of the history of tango, which, in our view, is essential to understand its intercultural character. Then we describe the presence of tango in cinema, literature (Rio de la Plata and worldwide) and the linguistic issues related to the etymology of the word *tango* and the language used in its texts. We conclude by mentioning several anthropological studies and the possible lines of investigation that remain to be carried out.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DANCE²

All the documents discovered so far that mention the beginnings of tango come from the second half of the 19th century: scholars present the dates 1862 (police note), 1874 (another police note), 1877 (press note), 1897 (a report from the play *Justicia criolla* performed in Buenos Aires, in which one of the characters announces that he will dance the tango), 1865 (the probable date of one of the oldest tangos, *El chicoba*). This press note from 1877 was published in the daily *Crítica* in 1913, and it is where the author hidden under the pseudonym *Viejo Tanguero* tells how in 1877, in a poor district of Buenos Aires inhabited by the African population, a new dance called tango was presented, similar in style and movements to *candombe*. The dancers performed it in pairs, but separated from each other. Then, the residents of the area, parodying the dance among themselves, transferred it in this way to the district where the cattle slaughterhouses were located (one of the main occupations of the immigrant population), introduced these new movements to the already known dance, which was the milonga, and soon the

² Most of the factual information comes from the monograph by A. Carretero (1999), and more information on the history of tango, already in Polish, can be found in Stala (2017a), among others.

new dance quickly spread to other districts. At first, the tango was socially rejected and condemned for its lowly origins and lewd nature (as evidenced by the completely unambiguous, even obscene titles of the first pieces), over time, from the poor districts it made its way to all kinds of establishments: so-called dance academies and brothels among others. According to some sources, in the second half of the 19th century, in order to gain acceptance from white residents, some African groups replaced *candombe* with European rhythms, such as *mazurka* or *polka*. And vice versa: some whites began to imitate black dances to such an extent that in 1869 a carnival group called “Black Company” was founded by whites. Such groups were usually formed by wealthy young men who could afford costumes called *blacks of soot* or *blacks of burnt cork*, an obvious reference to the painted faces of the masqueraders. The choreography also slowly changed: while African dances are performed separately by the couple, at a certain distance from each other, and the woman has the same status as the man, in the *habanera*, a dance originated in Cuba, the dancers dance embraced, although at a distance, and in the *milonga*, the woman follows the man in his arms, becoming, in a way, an ornament in the dance initiated by the man. In the 1860s, dance academies enjoyed great success. This is when a genre called *guajira flamenca* appeared, composed in a 6/8 rhythm but performed in a 2/4 rhythm. In the same rhythm, easy for non-professional musicians to reproduce, African pieces were also performed, mainly with the accompaniment of drums, and this meter would become characteristic of tango.

To this black and white mix, at the end of the century an extremely large immigration from the Old Continent was added: suffice it to say that while in 1854 the percentage of foreigners was 9%, in 1869 it was already 37%. The census of 1869 records 22,488 men, mainly aged 20–40, most of them without any professional qualifications; the census of 1887 records over 50,000 people, half of whom were of foreign origin, mostly from Italy.³ The opening, even if only partially, of places frequented by the African population to whites and the massive influx of immigrants caused changes in the profile of the city’s inhabitants. They all needed shelter, food and entertainment. They found shelter mainly in multi-family barracks (so-called *conventillos*, from Sp. *convento* ‘monastery’), food was provided by the cheapest inns, and they found entertainment in pubs and brothels.

³ On the linguistic consequences of this presence, among others, in Meo Zilio & Rossi (1970).

When speaking about the beginnings of tango, it is impossible not to mention the beginnings of so-called folk music in Argentina. The Spanish square dance gave origin to Andalusian tango, Cuban habanera and flamenco tango. When these genres arrived in Buenos Aires in the mid-19th century, they quickly mixed with dances already known on the American continent. This is how the milonga was born. It was especially popular with the so-called *payadores*, traveling singers who, accompanied by a guitar, improvised their rhymed ballads (Sp. *payadas*), often fighting verbal and musical duels. In the interior of the country, especially in the north-west, the local population mixed with the incoming European civilization, and some European instruments (e.g. the guitar) with typical instruments of the natives (e.g. the *kena*). This is how Argentine folklore is created. At first, it was called African tango, Andalusian tango, flamenco tango and it was most often played by duets or trios traveling from one venue to another, hence the most common set of instruments were guitar, flute and violin. Later the accordion appeared, which became very popular among musicians, and in 1870, an instrument called *bandoneón* arrived on the American continent, which would eventually become a key instrument of tango. In the middle of the first decade of the 20th century a traditional formation was created, the so-called *orquesta típica*: a sextet consisting of two *bandoneóns*, two violins, a piano and a flute, which would eventually be replaced by a double bass.

As we already know, the first tangos did not have official authors, and the words were an addition to the music. They were passed on without any record, which facilitated possible changes and corrections. The texts often contained obscene words or clear allusions to the capital's underworld – it was not the music of salons, but at most “forbidden fruit” that young men from wealthy families reached for in secret. In 1899, when the World Exposition was organized in Paris (the Eiffel Tower was built for the occasion), some of the workers employed in the construction of the Argentine pavilion sold the scores they brought with them, and in this way new music appeared in Europe. Others give the year 1905 as the date of the initiation of tango in Paris, when sailors brought with them the scores of the tangos *El choclo* and *La Morocha* (hits of the era). The date remains controversial, but it is indisputable that at the beginning of the 20th century, tango arrived in the capital of France and began to arouse interest in exotic music, sophisticated choreography and the specific sensuality of the dancing couple to such an extent that

a real *tangomania* broke out. Tango was danced by the entire city: the so-called *beau monde*, but also the demi-monde; it was danced on the Champs Elysées, in clubs, cabarets and brothels. Tango teas and tango conferences were organized, people sprayed themselves with tango perfume, the color tango (intense orange), tango corsets and tango blouses (made of satin or silk, from a single piece of material) and tango clothes (a type of wide culottes). From Paris, tango travels to Berlin, Vienna, New York and Tokyo and, most importantly, it finally loses its inglorious connotations: having gained recognition in the eyes of Europe, it returns triumphantly to Buenos Aires.

At the same time (1920s) the phonographic industry was developing in Argentina, and this almost perfectly coincided with the appearance on the scene (or more precisely with the change of his repertoire from folk to tango) of the singer commonly known as Carlos Gardel (born Charles Romuald Gardes 1890?–1935). He was not only the uncrowned king of tango, but also a performer thanks to whom the so-called *tango canción* (lit. tango-song) became popular, in which the poetic text became as important as the music. And it was this third factor, after choreography and music, namely poetry, that would play a key role in the so-called The Golden Age of Tango; the 40s and 50s, when extremely musically and literary tangos were created: *María, Malena, Grisel, Sur...* The 50s were a time of political turmoil in Argentina and a slow decline of tango, which began to revive in the next decade thanks to Astor Piazzolla and a new variety of tango, the so-called *tango nuevo* (lit. new tango). Currently, in addition to performers of classical tangos, there are groups specializing in the interpretation of the oldest ones, for flute, violin and guitar, groups that cultivate the musical and poetic achievements of the Piazzolla-Ferrer duo (which have already entered the tango canon), but also performers looking for new varieties of the old dance, hence, for example, neotango or electrotango, also known as techno tango, and tango itself became a fantastic export product, especially in times of crisis.

This brief introduction to the history of dance shows how music and dance evolve through cultural interactions, leading to new hybrid forms that reflect diverse influences. Tango, as a dance, is the sum of African, native (Creole) and, finally, immigrant (European) elements. It is also an urban product and, like any urban product, it is very eclectic, but also open to new musical genres, which inevitably contributes to its vitality and attractiveness. In its ethnic, cultural and musical diversity, it is a reflection of the

region itself (the Rio de la Plata basin⁴), often called a racial melting pot, but over time it has also constituted itself as an autonomous cultural phenomenon and, what is more, has become a national symbol of Argentina and recognized as intangible cultural heritage. In 1990, a national decree established the National Academia of Tango (Sp. Academia Nacional del Tango de la República Argentina), whose aim is to collect, organize, study and protect tango. That is why in its founding book we read: “el tango como arte musical, coreográfico, poético e interpretativo, lleva un siglo de inalterable vigencia como expresión auténtica y profunda del pueblo argentino. Que esta vigencia creadora del tango está expresada en no menos de Quince Mil (15.000) obras compuestas, editadas y estrenadas, y que existen desde fines del siglo XIX más de Cincuenta Mil (50.000) versiones grabadas de dichas obras en diversos soportes fonográficos, cinematográficos y de otro tipo en la República Argentina y en todo el mundo...”⁵ (Academia Nacional del Tango 1993: 35).

At the same time, being a hybrid product in its origins, and over time a national symbol and an element of the identity of the inhabitants of this region, it managed to capture the mass imagination of Europeans (and not only), leaving its cultural mark in many areas of culture and art, as discussed in the following chapters. This review begins with visual art, cinema, which, although it goes beyond the scope of philological research, contributed to the popularization of the phenomenon, and then we move on to the two main areas of traditional philological research, i.e. literature and linguistics. In conclusion, we would like to indicate potential research paths and show, in this way, that tango fits into the stream of cultural studies, but can also be the object of interdisciplinary research.

⁴ We are aware that tango, although commonly associated with Argentina, is present on both sides of this river. On the Uruguayan presence in tango, among others in Stala (2017a).

⁵ ENG: “Tango as a musical, choreographic, poetic and interpretive art has been in force for a century as an authentic and profound expression of the Argentine people. This creative force of tango is expressed in no less than fifteen thousand (15,000) composed, edited and premiered works, and since the end of the 19th century there have been more than fifty thousand (50,000) recorded versions of said works on various phonographic, cinematographic and other media in the Argentine Republic and throughout the world...”.

TANGO AT THE CINEMA⁶

The first films shot in Argentina containing tango were probably created by a certain Eugenio Py, for a record company that started its operations in Buenos Aires, in 1897. In the same year, 1897, the first production was created, entitled *Tango argentino*, and probably in 1901 the first short film was created, which showed a couple dancing tango, but still at a distance from each other, in accordance with the canons of the era. Between 1907 and 1911, thirty-two films were recorded, all short (the longest of them was just over 4 minutes), they contained scenes of various dances, including tango. In the meantime, in 1921, based on the novel by the Spanish writer Vicente Blasco Ibáñez the film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is made in the United States, and it is in it that the famous scene appears, in which Rudolf Valentino dances the tango with Beatrice Domínguez. In 1931, the first film with a soundtrack was recorded, *Muñequitas porteñas*, directed by José Agustín Perreyra: the main character (played by María Turgenowa, of Spanish origin, a star of Argentine silent cinema), abused by her father, decides to abandon her home and fiancé, and runs away with a lover who promises her... a career as a tango singer. A year later, in 1932, the first film-musical is made, titled... *Tango*. In the 1930s, a new sound system was also created and short films were made, all starring the aforementioned Carlos Gardel, who thus gained worldwide fame. Tango also made its way into American and European cinematography very early on. In addition to the aforementioned film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, tango (not always successfully) appeared in such productions as *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers or *Go into Your Dance* (1935) with Al Jolson and Ruby Keeler. A little later, tango appeared, among others, in: *Down Argentine Way* (1940) by Irving Cummings; *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or *Some Like It Hot* (1959) both directed by Billy Wilder; *The Conformist* (1970) by Bernardo Bertolucci; *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), with Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider; *Madame Claude* (1977) with Klaus Kinsky; *Clementine Tango* (1982) directed by Caroline Roboh; *L'Oiseau rare* (1973, dir. Jean-Claude Brial); *Tango Bar* by Marcos Zurinaga (1988); *Cotton Club* by Francesco Coppola (1984); *Alice* (1991) by Woody Allen; *Indochine* (1992) with Catherine Deneuve; and finally *Scent of a Woman* (1992) by Martin

⁶ In the editing of these fragments I refer largely to the already mentioned monograph (Stala 2017a).

Brest with Al Pacino in the leading role; *Tango* directed by Patrice Leconte (1993); *The Postman* from 1994 (dir. M. Radford and M. Troisi), in which the character Neruda dances the tango performed by Gardel's *Madreselva en flor* on a flowery terrace; *True Lies* (1994), in which Arnold Schwarzenegger dances the tango *Por una cabeza* with Tia Carrer; Sally Potter's *Tango Lesson* from 1997 with an acting performance by the director herself and Pablo Verón; and *Take the Lead* (2006) with Antonio Banderas as the dance teacher. Incidentally, the tango *Por una cabeza* enjoys considerable popularity in cinematography: it appears in *Schindler's List* (1993), in the film *Delicatessen* (1991), the aforementioned *Scent of a Woman* (1992) and *All the King's Men* (2006). In 1998, Spanish director Carlos Saura presents his next poetic dance film, this time dedicated to tango, entitled *Tango, no me dejes nunca*, and in 2006 Pedro Almodóvar presents the tango-inspired film *Volver* of the same title. Finally, in 2008, a "musical documentary" directed by Miguel Kohan, *Café de los maestros*, hits the screens, and in 2015 a more personal documentary is made: the story of the life and dance of one of the most famous tango couples: María Nieves and Juan Carlos Copes, entitled *Un tango más*, directed by German Kral.

Once again, this shortened review of tango filmography is evidence of tango's international career, but also of the complex intercultural relations and the multitude of threads associated with tango and used in film creations. Sometimes it is a poetic image of dance (cf. Carlos Saura's *Tango, no me dejes nunca*), sometimes an artistic document (cf. Miguel Kohan's *Café de los maestros*) or a personal recollection (cf. German Kral's *Un tango más* or Sally Potter's *A Tango Lesson*), but sometimes (cf. *Scent of a Woman* or *Schindler's List*) tango appears incidentally, as a symbol of sensuality, grace or sophistication. The tango thread in cinematography should definitely become the subject of film and cultural studies.

TANGO IN LITERATURE

In fact, I am only mentioning prose works here – the tango motif in poetry or theatre is a completely separate topic. At the beginning of the 20th century a collection of short stories entitled *Tangos* appeared, in which the author Enrique González Tuñón describes the poor districts of Buenos Aires. Afterwards, practically every Argentine writer at some point in his work refers to tango: Roberto Arlt and his *El juguete rabioso* (1926), *Los siete*

locos (1929) or *Los lanzallamas* (1931), Raún Scalabrini Ortiz in: *El hombre que está sólo y espera* from the same year or Ezequiel Martínez Estrada in his novel *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933), where he calls tango a monotonous dance. Interestingly, Borges was not a fan of tango: it was too sentimental for him, but in his short stories such as *La Intrusa* (which he considered one of his best), *Sur* or *El hombre de la esquina rosada*, he described brave and daring boys from the suburbs... and when, years later, he was in Texas, at the home of a friend who was a literature professor, and the host started playing tangos, “while I was evaluating them intellectually, I felt tears – I cried with emotion. That is, I condemned them intellectually, but at the same time they moved me to tears” (quoted in Ostuni 2000). Tango appears in Bernardo Kordona (*Alias Gardelito, Reina del Plata*), Bernardo Verbitsky (*Calles de tango*), J. L. Cortázar (the stories *Gardel, Premios, Clone* or *Tango de vuelta* and, of course, *Rayuela*), Adolf Bioy Casares (*El sueño de los héroes*), Manuel Puig (*Boquitas pintadas*), Ernest Sábato (*Tango, discusión y clave* or *Sobre héroes y tumbas*), Pedra Orgambide (*Un tango para Gardel*), Vicente Battista (*Sucesos argentinos*), Jorge Manzurra (*Tinta rioja*), José Pablo Feinmann (*Ni el tiro al final*), Antonia Di Benedetto (*Sombras, nada más*), Osvaldo Soriano (*No habrá más pena ni olvido, Una sombra ya pronto serás*), Marcos Ricardo Barnatán (*Con la frente marchita*), Tomás Eloy Martínez (*El cantor de tango*), but also by completely contemporary authors: Juan Terranova (*El bailarín de tango*, 2003) or Federico Andahazi (*Errante en la sombra*, 2004). Many of these items are either titles or fragments of the most famous tangos. Some of them speak of it directly (such as *Tango, discusión y clave* by Ernesto Sábato), but in many tango is only a subtle reference: childhood memories, nostalgia for the abandoned country (cf. *Rayuela* by Julio Cortázar), political issues (cf. *No habrá más pena ni olvido* by Osvaldo Soriano), the atmosphere of Buenos Aires (cf. *El cantor de tango* by Tomás Eloy Martínez), and even spy themes (cf. *Una sombra ya pronto serás* by Osvaldo Soriano), detective themes (cf. *Ni el tiro al final* by José Pablo Feinmann) or the motif of return (cf. *Con la frente marchita* by Marcos Ricardo Barnatán), the title of which refers to the cult tango *Volver*.

Of course, the list of literary works devoted to tango or inspired by it is dominated by native authors, but since tango is by definition intercultural, it is impossible not to mention the most important works from outside Argentina. In South American literature, it appears as a motif in the novels of Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes (*Cambio de piel*, 1967), in the works of Spanish writers: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (*El Quinteto de Buenos Aires*,

1997) or Artur Pérez Reverte (*El tango de la Guardia Vieja*, 2012): a love story that could inspire another tango. But sometimes, as in Almudena Grandes's 1994 novel *Malena es un nombre de tango*, the name of the titular rebel refers to the heroine of the tango Malena. But the literary reach of tango goes beyond Spanish-language literature: suffice it to mention the novel *Suuri illusioini* [ENG: *The Grand Illusion*] by Mika Waltari from 1928, because it is probably the earliest presence of tango in European literature, but it is also present in the works of the Swedish master of crime fiction Henning Mankell (*Danslärarens återkomst*, ENG: *The Return of the Dancing Master*, 2000) and in the novel by Szczepan Twardoch *Król* [ENG: *The King of Warsaw*] from 2016. This is understandable, since the action takes place in interwar Warsaw, when tango reigned supreme on the capital's stages.⁷

This is further evidence of how tango enters into cultural interactions, contributing its threads to the literary production of writers from both continents.

TANGO FOR THE LINGUIST

Perhaps the first linguistic issue that is still waiting to be addressed is... the etymology of the word *tango*. Just the combination of potential meanings and the multitude of theories regarding the origin of this word makes us realize how culturally complex the phenomenon tango is. In the unpublished history of tango, Carretero (n.d.) presents a whole list of semantic and etymological possibilities:

1. a yard where cows are milked;
2. a place where milk is sold;
3. a place where Africans danced;
4. in Jesuit missions: a place used to receive and accommodate visitors;
5. a word from the Indian Quechua language meaning an oboe;
6. from the African Kimbundu language: a closed place, a circle;
7. a place where captured slaves were gathered before being sent by ship to individual ports;
8. a name that the Portuguese used for African middlemen in the slave trade;

⁷ More about this phenomenon in Gulbinowicz (2000).

9. a place where slaves were publicly traded;
10. a term for the slave community until 1813 (the time of the abolition of slavery), and then for freed groups, mulattoes or mixed races;
11. a percussion instrument (drum) and, by translation, a dance performed to its rhythm;
12. a deformation of the word *Shangó*, meaning the god of thunder and storms in Yoruba mythology;
13. a gypsy dance;
14. an African dance;
15. a dance gathering of blacks;
16. a place where African dances are performed;
17. a word derived from the verb *tanguer*, referring to playing an instrument;
18. a dance from the Canary Island of Hierro;
19. generally: a place for dancing;
20. an Andalusian dance of African origin;
21. a dance of Afro-Cuban origin;
22. a dance performed by rural people;
23. a dance of low social rank;
24. a dance in itself;
25. a meeting of slaves, during which dancing is done to the rhythm of a drum and other instruments;
26. a type of folk dance from France and Normandy.

The etymological dictionary *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico* (Corominas & Pascual 1983, 405, sv. *tango*) gives the following meanings: 'Argentine dance,' and previously 'a gathering of blacks who dance to the rhythm of a drum' and 'the name of a drum,' and gives the date of first attestation as 1836. The authors of the dictionary also cite the *Enciclopedia de Salvá* (1847), which defines this term as 'a folk dance from Mexico,' and the edition of an academic dictionary of the Spanish language from 1869, where *tango* means 'a meeting and dance of gypsies,' but ten years later in the same dictionary *tango* means 'a fun and dance of blacks or a folk dance in South America, music for this dance.' The aforementioned etymological dictionary cites African roots, but the authors support the onomatopoeia of *tang* 'a low sound of a drum or other instrument,' somewhat similar to the word *candombe* 'an African drum, the sound of which determines the rhythm of the dance.' There are also other

suggestions: French *tanguer* ‘to wobble against a ship,’ Latin *tango*, *-ere* ‘to touch,’ Catalan or Provençal *tràngo(l)* ‘storm, tempest’ or Portuguese *tangomao* ‘Africanized Portuguese.’ But there is also the word *tángano*, recorded in a Spanish dictionary from 1803, which means ‘a bone or stone used in a game of that name.’ Most sources, however, support not onomatopoeia, but African origins.⁸ The word *tango* in reference to African dance appears in old encyclopedias and in descriptions of travels around the Iberian Peninsula and the Canary Islands (or rather the island of Tenerife, although others mention the island of Hierro). In the Portuguese-Brazilian encyclopedia (*Grande Enciclopedia Portuguesa e Brasileira* 1960, 667), *tango* is the name of a dance of African origin, brought to the American continent first to Mexico, Cuba and Haiti by African slaves, who called it *tangano*. In Uruguay and Argentina, this dance was known as *cambone* (the similarity with candombe does not seem accidental), and in combination with other dances it transformed into *tango* and took on this name. Still other sources slightly modify the African word, as coming from the Ibibio language (spoken in Congo and Nigeria) *tamgú* ‘drum, dance to the rhythm of a drum.’ Given the large presence of African people (in 1777 they constituted 30% of the population of Buenos Aires), the African origin of the word becomes very probable, and the meaning of the word *tango* itself evolved over time: defining more or less precisely the elements brought to the white man’s culture by African slaves: the place and type of meeting, music, instruments, dance.

The language of tango is, apart from literary Spanish and a few folk elements, *lunfardo*, a specific slang of thieves from the poor districts, which over time became a linguistic determinant of *porteños*, or residents of the capital.⁹ The presence of Italian in the vocabulary of *lunfardo* is not accidental: when huge numbers of Italian immigrants arrived in Argentina, many of them came from Lombardy. And since some of the newcomers sought easy solutions in the profession of thieves, *lombardo* began to mean ‘thief.’ And

⁸ Detailed information in Stala (2004).

⁹ It should be mentioned, however, that many contemporary researchers of *lunfardo*, including Oscar Conde, the author of the etymological dictionary of *lunfardo* (1st edition in 1998), distance themselves from this inglorious, prison-thief origin, treating *lunfardo* as urban jargon, but undeniably, *lunfardo* has many synonyms for a policeman, prison or various thieving arts, which, however, suggests connections with the thieving technoelect (Stala 2017b).

from *lombardo*, over time, the word *lunfardo* arose. And *lunfa* is used to describe a thief. This is at least the official version of the origin of this word. *Lunfardo* began to be created at the end of the 19th century, initially it was a spoken language, records of individual words come from police chronicles. In 1878, an anonymous note appeared in a journal about the links between *lunfardo* and the criminal world, and two years later, Benigno B. Lugones, a former policeman, published two articles on the subject in the daily *La Nación*. Over time, like many thieves' jargons, it began to permeate the poorer classes of the population, and since one of the carriers was tango, it began to spread to other social groups along with it. To this day, however, although it is widely used, it has negative connotations (Flisek 1999). It is difficult to estimate the vocabulary of *lunfardo*: according to some, there are 10,000 of them, according to others, even 20,000. It is also difficult to define this variety of language unequivocally: some researchers therefore speak of a phenomenon called *historical lunfardo*, that is, the first, from the turn of the century, as opposed to the contemporary one, used not by pickpockets but in ordinary conversations, when the interlocutors feel that they can afford a bit of humour, and thus show that they belong to the same group of language users. Hence the fluid boundary between *lunfardo* and colloquial Buenos Aires Spanish. On the syntactic and phonetic level (with a few exceptions in the form of phonologization under the influence of Italian), it does not differ from standard Spanish from the Río de la Plata region; *lunfardo* is primarily lexis: with a large admixture of Italian, both literary and dialectal, from the south and north of Italy, but it also has borrowings from Galician, English, French or the language of the Andalusian Roma, the so-called *caló*, and even words from the languages of indigenous Indian tribes.¹⁰ At the semantic level, various changes can be observed: *confitería* 'bar, cafe' from Spanish *confitura* 'id.', *gallego* 'resident of Spanish Galicia' is generally a Spaniard (which has its historical justification, because in the era of immigration, most Spaniards came from this region, Galicia), *asfalto* 'asphalt' also means 'city,' but also new meanings resulting from metonymic associations: *mochila* 'backpack' means a hunchback, and *sifón* 'siphon' means an owner of a big nose. But the most characteristic feature of *lunfardo* is a phenomenon from the field of morphophonology, the so-called *vesre*, deliberate rearrangement of syllables

¹⁰ More details about this slang: Teruggi (1978) or Iribarren Castilla (2011), and about borrowings from indigenous languages: Stala (2014).

(from the rearrangement of syllables in Spanish *revés* ‘reverse,’ *al revés* ‘the other way round’). Thus, *trompa* is *vesre* from *patrón* ‘owner,’ *tordo* is doctor ‘doctor,’ and *feca* is café ‘coffee,’ *feca con chele* is café con leche ‘coffee with milk.’ Importantly, in everyday conversation the whole genius lies in using such a puzzle *ad hoc*, surprising the other person. Sometimes whole semantic-derivational series arise: Spanish *loco* ‘crazy’ > *colo* ‘id.’ > Spanish *colifato* (with the suffix *-ato*) > *colibrí* (false deglutination? contamination?) i.e. ‘hummingbird,’ but with the original meaning of ‘crazy.’¹¹

Lunfardo is such an important social marker that on December 12, 1962, the *Academia Porteña del Lunfardo* was founded in Buenos Aires, with the aim of studying the language, culture, and art of the city. The presidents of this organization have been successively: the journalist José Barcia (1962–1981), the linguist Marcos Augusto Moríngo (1981–1985), the musician Sebastián Piana (1985–1994), since 1995, the journalist and *lunfardo* expert José Gobello (who died in 2013) and, currently, Otilia da Veiga. The Academy has its corresponding members in many countries, including France, Uruguay, Germany, Poland, but also in the rest of Argentina. The library has about 3,600 volumes (including old Italian dialectal dictionaries and various *lunfardo* dictionaries) and about 8,000 tango scores. The Academy offers not only free access to its collections, but also organizes lectures, concerts and art exhibitions. It also publishes its own magazine: *Boletín de la Academia Porteña del Lunfardo*. The presented etymological theories and the brief description of the linguistic layer of tango reflect the multitude of languages, cultures and nations, so characteristic of tango, but also of the entire Río de las Plata area, as if in a mirror, and tango itself is gaining the status of a dream subject for research in the field of cultural linguistics.¹²

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: TANGO AS AN OPEN WORK

All the above examples and themes show tango as the sum and effect of racial, cultural and linguistic contacts. A philologist will find many research topics in tango, its texts and its history. Leaving aside the controversial and

¹¹ On the subject of the *vesre* phenomenon I recommend, among others, the publications by P. Sorbet (2014, 2016, 2017, 2021).

¹² On this linguistic concept, among others, in Anusiewicz (1995) or Palmer (1996).

open etymological issue of the word *tango*, many of the so-called *lunfardismos*, or words from *lunfardo*, still await an explanation of their origin. On a more literary level, it is worth mentioning tango emblems such as the mother figure, the woman figure, the theme of love, friendship, pain (cf. Rössner 2000; Bułat-Silva 2011) or the image of the city (not only Buenos Aires, but also Montevideo) through themes, still based on texts, but touching on sociology (cf. Ulla 1967; Conde 2005; Pfänder & Nazareno Saxe 2011; Ulla 2013), purely linguistic topics, such as those about *vesre*, but also those concerning linguistic politeness (cf. Kaul de Marlangeon 2011), borrowings (cf. Balint-Zanchetta 2011), or monographs devoted to the work of the greatest tango poets (cf. Zurita Soto 2018). But the issue of tango is not limited to choreographic, musicological or, as we have tried to present, philological considerations. Tango is an anthropological phenomenon for many, as Horacio Ferrer (of Uruguayan origin), the founder of the National Tango Academy, once stated: “Tango is a way of being. You have to live in the atmosphere of tango to be able to express it” (Azzi 1991, 35). Tango is also closely linked to national identity (cf. Salas 2000) and a point of reference for various diasporas (cf. Pelinski 2000). Tango serves as an object of sociological research (cf. Mafud 1966; Carretero 1999), but also, in recent years, it has become the object of gender research related to social roles (cf. Saikin 2004). This is an example of how music and dance contribute to the formation and expression of cultural, ethnic, and national or gender identities in intercultural contexts and in our society. Thus, tango can serve as an object of broadly understood cultural studies, understood as a post disciplinary academic field that explores the dynamics of especially contemporary culture and its social and historical foundations (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler 1992). As we can see, tango, not only on the dance floor, is still an open work.

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