

TRENDY BLENDS IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF NATAL/RN

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Resumo:

Este trabalho pretende discutir as implicações práticas das misturas linguísticas usadas nas fachadas de lojas em Natal/RN. Nossos objetivos foram mapear as áreas onde ocorrem os blends, identificar as características e significados construídos, bem como analisar suas funções morfossintáticas e identificar as motivações para o uso de blends. Esta pesquisa exploratória se baseia no arcabouço teórico-metodológico de pesquisas em Linguistic Landscape. A coleta de dados foi realizada através de questionários e análise de fotos, das quais foram criadas categorias. De acordo com essas categorias, o uso do inglês nas fachadas tem fins comerciais e estéticos. Além disso, nossas descobertas revelam que algumas palavras em inglês vêm sendo integradas ao idioma local.

Palavras-chave: *Blends; Linguistic Landscape; Motivações.*

Abstract:

This work intends to discuss the practical implications of linguistic blends used on storefront signs in Natal/RN. Our objectives were to map the areas where blends occur, to identify the characteristics and meanings construed, analyzing their morphosyntactic functions and to identify the motivations for this use. This exploratory research is based on a theoretical-methodological framework of Linguistic Landscape research. The data was collected through questionnaires and the analysis of photos, from which were created categories. According to these categories, the use of English in the storefronts is used as a marketing strategy and for aesthetic purposes. Also, our findings reveal that some English words have been integrated into the local language.

Keywords: *Blends; Linguistic Landscape; Motivations.*

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Introduction

Despite English having become the global *lingua franca*, in Natal-RN, a great part of the population does not have access to English language courses whereby they may become proficient in the language. Nevertheless, even without this formal English language instruction, Natalenses are notorious for using it in a variety of contexts. In Natal, English is used in commercial enterprises, on the frontages of stores, restaurants, gyms, and more. Some prefer the names of their businesses completely in English, while others make “adaptations”, mixing English and Portuguese at the same time. This type of linguistic realization is known as a ‘blend’ (ROIG-MARIN, 2016; KELLY, 1998). Pasari (2015) defines a blend as “a word in which different ideas are brought together into a new, integrated concept by simply fusing the corresponding words into a single lexical item” (p. 23).

Given the frequency of blends used in the Linguistic Landscape (LL) of Natal, we posed the following research questions: Where and how are these blends formed?; What meanings are construed?; Why do business owners use blends? To answer these questions, this study proposes the following objectives: (1) to map the areas where blends occur in Natal; (2) to identify the morphosyntactic elements and functions of the blends; and (3) to identify the perceptions of the users about their motivations to use blends.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections: Section 2 describes the theoretical-methodological framework of this research; section 3 describes the methods used; section 4 reports the results with a discussion of the data; and in section 5 we offer our final considerations, including suggestions for future works, followed by references.

1. Mapping the merging of cultures

This study is based on a theoretical framework that regards morphological blends of the English and Brazilian Portuguese language on signs in selected neighborhoods in Natal, RN. The following sections describe this framework, based on studies of Blends and Linguistic Landscape Research.

According to Roig-Marín (2016), words of any language “attest to new realities and societal changes”. These social changes can result also in a revolution in the way we express ourselves and interact with the world. Kelly (1998) affirms that globalization and the use of technologies is clearly reflected in “coined words”, which

are the combination of two or three source words that can also be from different languages. Thus, a new blended lexical item is created, making evident the merging of words on the level of their morphology (through free and bound morphemes⁴), but may also rely on the phonemic expression to create meaning, transmitting information in a succinct and creative way. Also, when two different words from different languages are combined, the word carries cultural aspects/nuances, as well. Ultimately, it is also a form of language/culture play, as Kelly affirms (1998).

Roig-Marín (2016, p. 5), supports this view, adding that: “their coinage involves playing with sounds, sense relations and, all in all, reversing our expectations as to what we consider to be existing and permissible words”. A lexical blend becomes a unique way to play with words and meanings, soliciting from the readers all their potential and creative skills.

However, there are motivations for these uses that go beyond “mere playfulness”, as Leher, (2007) posits, affirming that having a new clever word on a storefront is eye-catching, piquing curiosities, which prepares the public to receive the information being presented. The author also suggests that people create blends because they think it is fashionable to do so, showing they are trendy and cool.

1.1 Linguistic Landscape

One way to analyze languages in context is to focus on the written information that is available in signs in a specific area or the “linguistic landscape” according to Landry and Bourhis (1997). “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (LANDRY; BOURHIS, 1997, p. 25).

Lanza and Woldemariam (2014) discuss that, currently, LL studies have focused on signage in world cities and its significance for the construction of cultural and social meaning in urban spaces. As English is considered an international language, its broad and worldwide presence in LL investigations is one of the main indicators of the globalization process. The driving force for this spreading movement is certainly economic: as companies aim to increase their markets and sales, these occurrences have been increasingly present in LL studies as a result of the globalized new economy.

⁴ Free morphemes are those that have more lexical content, while bound morphemes have grammatical function, containing minor parts of speech (CELCE-MURCIA; LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999).

Signs that rely on code-mixing and blends with English, can be found in a variety of urban spaces, as Sayer (2010) observed in Oaxaca, Mexico. Although the population was not proficient in English, it was common to find English on signs that did not function to inform English language speakers, serving then a symbolic function. The author comments that one possible interpretation of this phenomenon is the result of linguistic and cultural imperialism, as the linguistic landscape reflects the relative power and status of different languages in a specific sociolinguistic context.

2. Research Methods

Aiming to consider language in context, thus, we carried out an exploratory research, as characterized by Nunan (1992) – a study that establishes criteria and techniques for its elaboration and aims to offer information about the object of the research. It can also be considered a qualiquantitative, Linguistic Landscape study of linguistic blends, observing the following methods.

First, we mapped the occurrences of blends in the linguistic landscape of the best-known neighborhoods in Natal, using the tool, Google Maps. After making a map of these areas, we quantified and categorized the examples according to the highest frequency morphemes. Secondly, we analyzed the meanings they construed within the blend, and any recognizable pattern. For example, many blends rely on the use of a part of an owner's name joined to an English morpheme related to the service the business provides – *Márciocar*, *Renart*, *Nilcar*.

Finally, we visited the businesses applying a questionnaire of the following questions: (1) What was your motivation to choose this name for your store? (2) What meaning did you want to create by choosing this name? (3) Is there any particular reason for using English in the name of your store? And (4) What response from the public did you anticipate?

3. Results and Discussion

With this mapping, we observed that, among the neighborhoods targeted, all of which have different socioeconomic profiles, those with the most blends were located in the Alecrim (14) with a percentage of 31.1% of the total, followed by Lagoa Nova (28.9%), Candelária (11.1%) and Igapó (6.7%).

One interpretation of these findings is that the use of blends is related to zoning – commercial or residential. More blends were found in the Alecrim, which is the oldest and lowest scoring neighborhood on the quality of life⁵ index (BARROSO, 2003), in Natal, for example, as it is zoned commercially. Reflections on the socioeconomic aspects and statistical treatment of a more in-depth survey are anticipated in future studies. These findings, however, act as preliminary results, to direct these future studies.

The following presents the geographic context of the state of Rio Grande do Norte and the city of Natal in Brazil, as well as the neighborhoods in which the highest frequency of blends in Natal were found, outlined in red, which are pictured from top to bottom: Igapó, Alecrim, Lagoa Nova, and Candelária.



Picture 1: Location of Rio Grande do Norte and Natal in Brazil. (Source: Prefeitura Municipal do Natal)

⁵ “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” (BARROSO, 2003, p. 6, our translation).



Picture 2: Location of the neighborhoods from top to bottom - Igapó, Alecrim, Lagoa Nova, and Candelária. (Source: Prefeitura Municipal do Natal)

3.1 Blends and their meanings

Our second and third objectives focus on a brief analysis of the morphological construction and semantic realizations of the blends based on the analysis of all the pictures taken, from which we derived the following categories: 1) Name (Portuguese) + Service (English); 2) Service (Portuguese) + Characteristic (English); 3) Mix of service/characteristic (English) + Service/characteristic (Portuguese).

Firstly, our results show that in 71.1% of the occurrences of blends analyzed, the first morpheme represented is in Portuguese. Also, the morphemes in English tend to contain fewer syllables. According to the users, many reported that it made the word sound better: *“these words are smaller and produce a nice sound, so it is better to say ‘tech’ than the whole word”* - P10⁶.

⁶ The questionnaire and all excerpts used in this work were translated from Portuguese to English by the authors of this study. Participants are indicated in this study as ‘P’, and given an arbitrary number. Further demographic information about the participants were not included in this present study, yet, future works will include this information. The original excerpts were removed due to character limitations. Nevertheless, we are available to provide the original answers of participants in Portuguese.

3.1.1 Blends: Name + Service

In Natal, it is very common to find businesses with the name of their owners. This practice is carried over with the blends, being one of the most common occurrences of blends covered by this study. Through the analysis of the pictures, we identified a common pattern associated with these blends: the first morpheme represents the name of the business owner, the second, which is written in English (or cognate) is related to the product or the service offered, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1

Márciocar
Renart
Nilcar
Téocell
Niltech
Glaysoncell

The participants affirmed that the preference for their own names combined with a second word in English would make it “*more original*”, as mentioned by P3. In some cases, such as “Márciocar” and “Nilcar”, there is an erasure of the possessive, which is marked by an apostrophe in the English language, but not in Standard Brazilian Portuguese. According to P3, the intention of this omission is “to bring the word closer to Portuguese and to make it easier to write it”. Firmino (2008) explains that this kind of erasure of foreign traits guarantees the acceptance of Portuguese as a symbol of national unity and official language.



Picture 3: Renart (Source: Google Maps, 2017)



Picture 4: Niltech (Source: Google Maps, 2017)

3.1.2 Portuguese-English Blends: Service + Characteristic

Another common characteristic of blends found in this study is the combination of a word in Portuguese representing the product or service offered to a “popular” English word, such as “art”, “car”, “center” and “cell” referring generally to the product. The initial Portuguese morpheme (bound or free) is added to a free morpheme in English to form a neologism (complex/compound). The owner of the car store, “Formulacar”, told us that he intended to invoke Formula 1, creating a “double meaning”. Table 2 shows some examples (Portuguese morphemes in bold).

Table 2: Portuguese-English Blends

COMPLEX	COMPOUND
Plast center, Plast cell	Fórmula Car
Eletro point	Pneu drive
Lav clean	Digital line.com
Chic pizza	Audio car

Notably, some participants reported some English words have become so common in storefronts that people often use them to “fit in with the market” and “keep up with the competition” - P20. This was the case of participants who did not intend to use English or did not know the real meaning of the word used, but still adopted the morpheme to name their stores because “many of the other stores are doing the same” - P11.



Picture 5: Eletropoint (Source: Google Maps, 2017)



Picture 6: Formulacar (Source: Google Maps, 2017)

3.1.3 English-Portuguese Blends

In this case, the initial English morpheme (bound or free) is added to a Portuguese base form (free morpheme) to form a neologism. In some cases, the English morpheme has an adjectival function, as in the stores “Bigeletro”, “Biglar” and “Bigboi”. Participant 13 explained he wanted *“to give the impression that the store is big in size, that there is a huge variety of products, and exceptional quality”*. Additionally, the stores “Artlab” and “Artmundy”, by using the word “art” aimed to signify the creation of art: *“We wanted to say that our store is in the world of arts, because we create art for our clients”*, according to P14. In “Petmania” and “Petmimo”, the words in Portuguese are used to give the impression of love for animals: *“The word ‘mimo’ symbolizes our love for animals, I mean, a caring feeling”*, P16 reported. The following, Table 3, presents some examples (the English morpheme in bold):

Table 3: English-Portuguese Blends: an initial English morpheme (bound or free) added to a Portuguese morpheme (bound or free).

Big Eletro
Fachik
Art lab
Big Lar
Gold sol
Copy Graf
Big boi
Colo rtel
Pet mania
Art mundy
Pet mimo

In the formation of the blends from this section, 72% of the English morphemes identified have only one syllable. These occurrences may indicate an emergent language change, considering that some of these English words are already considered part of the Portuguese language by the users. For example, P16 told us that “pet” is considered a common word in their Portuguese vocabulary: *“Actually, the word ‘pet’ has nothing to do with English. The word ‘pet’ it is like ‘animal’... it is common for us [the employees]. Everyone uses it for stores that sell products for animals”*.



Picture 7: Petmimo (Source: Google Maps)



Picture 8: Bigboi (Source: Google Maps, 2017)

3.2 Motivations

In this section, we investigate the motivations that led business owners to opt for the use of blends with the English language. However, similar to the unwitting use of English morphemes by participants in this study, cited in the previous section, we also include some who could not explain the meaning they were actually creating or who did not intend to use English, as P1 reported. *“In fact, the intention was not to use English at all ... the intention was to give a better effect to the word “art”, which could differentiate itself from other stores, drawing more attention from people who pass by”*. The motivations are categorized in three types as follows.

3.2.1 Marketing strategies: “English is cool and beautiful”

Our first category presents the most common motivation that led business owners to use blends, beginning with those who intentionally used English morphemes. These shared a common motive: using English is popular and makes the business more attractive as P2 states, *“Today, Brazilians have this common custom of making relations between English and their products or services” ... the name becomes prettier, more striking and presentable*. Our findings showed that the majority of business owners in Natal, participating in this study, perceive blends as being popular and aesthetically pleasing, as English *“causes a good impression,*

makes the name of the store, much prettier and exclusive” - P3. This idea is corroborated in Lehrer (2007), who affirms that people use blends because it is a trendy practice.

3.2.2 Visual effect: “English catches people’s attention”

The second most common theme cited by participants was the visual effect of English, as catching people’s attention effectively and rapidly, stating that the name *“becomes different and unusual”*. Also, P5 pointed out that when the name is creative, *“people will be able to remember it and share the information about the store”*, recommending it to others. In addition, P12 reported: *“English is well seen, it gives more visibility to the store. You can cause more impact”*. This perception is also confirmed in Lehrer (2007), in which he found that a new creative word is able to make people curious and ready to receive the information presented.

3.2.3 Abbreviations of words in Portuguese: “Is that English?”

Among the participants who did not intend to use English, a very common motivation was simply to abbreviate words in Portuguese. Notably, some words in Portuguese are cognates in the English language, such as the words "car", "cell" and "art". These morphemes were the most frequently used. They justified the use of the term "art", "car", for example, *“to make the word smaller”* and, consequently, *“to make it sound much better”* P6. According to P8 *“there was no specific intention of using English, but the word 'cell' is very popular among stores that sell accessories for cellphones, so I decided to use it”*.

From these answers we find that, even without knowing that the word is in English, people will use it if it brings some positive response from buyers. When the use becomes common, people add it to their vocabulary, oftentimes in a slightly different context and creating a new meaning for the word, or it is a cognate or is absorbed into the dominate language, as in ‘pet’. This is an important indication of emergent language change, which merits further study.

Final Considerations

With regard to where, how, and why blends are used in Natal, we found that the neighborhoods Alecrim and Lagoa Nova had the highest frequency of blends. In the majority of cases, in the neighborhoods analyzed, the use of blends in the names

of businesses in Natal/RN is directly related to commercial purposes and motivated by three main factors: as a marketing strategy because of its social status as ‘cool’ and ‘trendy’, for the visual effect of Portuguese-English blends, catching people’s attention quickly and effectively, and because they are phonetically simple enough to remember easily.

Lanza and Woldemariam (2014, p. 9) argue that LL intersects with other discourses, especially the discourse of development. Our findings, which confirm the predominance of English in the LL of Natal, corroborate with their conception that English is an indicator of “the important role the language plays in society and hence the high placement on the vertical scale of prestige”. Its use in advertising by shop owners in Natal serves the symbolic function of associating the business and its products with popularity, modernity and trendy practices. This symbolic function also construes an identity as modern for both the shop owner and customer.

Furthermore, thinking of the sector of the population that was not aware that they were actually using English on their storefronts, we may interpret this to be an indication that these morphemes have become so thoroughly naturalized that their creative use in the linguistic landscape is evidence that they have entered into the lexicon of Brazilian Portuguese, evidence of emergent language change that merits further study. It could also mean that business owners have no intention of construing meaning, but rather use the English language pictorially – visually aesthetic – following patterns set by others who have language awareness. Broader samples of blends are needed on regional and nationwide scales to confirm or not these hypotheses. Nonetheless, this exploratory study provides us with a clear indication of the important social and commercial role English plays in the linguistic landscape of Natal/RN, as well as the creativity of business owners in their morphological play with Portuguese—English blends.

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Artigo recebido em: 03/04/2018

Aprovação final: 19/11/2018