Ó Crioulo! Addressee Terms that Address Race Relations in Brazil

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In a recent article in Newsweek, a Latin American reporter cites a well-known band leader who is called "Neguinho do Samba" or "Little Black of the Samba." He then goes on to comment, "Brazil may be the one country on earth where such a nickname is affectionate rather than derogatory." In this paper, I examine the use of these common racial addressee terms which both identify oneself (as nicknames) and call or reference others. These addressee terms present one prominent way of lexically encoding race and negotiating race relations in Brazil, illustrating how cultural discourses get in language and how language contributes to and reinforces cultural discourses.

Though Brazilians notice "difference" or negatively valued characteristics (such as blackness) disproportionately, they do not always consider this "racist" behavior. Pointing out race in Brazil through nicknames and addressee terms can be considered both friendly and hostile, *carinhoso* (caring) and racist. Linguistic analysis of this speech act thus offers a nuanced understanding of how race gets constructed in a Brazilian context, illustrating how investigation of daily language sheds light on larger societal questions.

To give just a quick overview of this linguistic phenomenon, in a survey given to 300 people, 187 respondents reported having a nickname, 20 (or slightly over 10%) of these nicknames were race-based. 221 people have a friend or acquaintance with a race-based nickname (which is just under 75% of the population surveyed). Of the racial nicknames collected, about 50% dealt with blackness, 30% with whiteness, and 20% with

being mixed or brown. In the interest of time, I will only be able to discuss examples of blackness in this paper.

All examples are taken from interviews and spontaneous conversation collected in Rio de Janeiro, the second largest Brazilian city which has nearly equal percentages of whites and non-whites, with very small representation from Native or Asian populations. The speakers are black, male youth who live in a *favela* (or Brazilian shantytown). I begin with Tição's nickname story:

I. **<u>Racial Nicknames</u>:**
(Tição's story)

Jennifer: Então. Apelido de você... O seu apelido é o quê? Tição?
Jennifer: **So. Your nickname... your nickname is what? Tição?**
Tição: É.
Tição: **Yes.**
Jennifer: Agora pode explicar.
Jennifer: **Okay explain.**
Tição: É porque eu não sou muito preto não, sou mulato. Mas assim quando eu
Tição: **It's because I'm not very black, I'm mulato. But when I**
comecei a estudar, aí a mulher foi e falou que eu era um
began to study, the woman went and said that I was a
pretinho muito chato. Aí, nisso veio a servente e
very annoying little black. Then the lunchlady came and
falou pra mim: "Você é um <u>Tição</u> chato."
said to me, "You are an annoying <u>tição</u> [ember, coal].
Aí que veio Tição. Aí tirou o chato, aí ficou só Tição.
So there came Tição. And they took off the annoying, and it became just Tição [ember, coal].
Jennifer: Mas você gostou desse apelido?
Jennifer: **But you liked that nickname?**
Tição: Porra, no começo eu não gostei não. Mas depois eu
Tição: **Hell, in the beginning I didn't like it at all. But then I**
me acostumei, aí gostei. Pô, aí ninguém sabe
got used to it, and I liked it. Man, so now no one knows
o meu nome verdadeiro. São poucos. Aí me chamam mais de Tição aqui.
my real name. Very few people. They just call me Tição here.
Jennifer: E quando você encontra alguém você fala que o seu nome é o quê?
Jennifer: **And when you meet someone, you say your name is what?**
Tição: Se perguntar meu nome?
Tição: **If they ask my name?**
Jennifer: É.
Jennifer: **Yes.**

Tição: Aí eu falo Alexandre, que é o meu nome.
Tição: Then I say my name is Alexandre, which is my name.
Jennifer: Mas todo mundo te chama de Tição?
Jennifer: But everyone calls you Ticão?
Tição: É.
Tição: Yes.
Jennifer: E você não-
Jennifer: And you don't-
CW: Tição e Tupac.
CW: Tição and Tupac.
Tição: Que isso?
Tição: What's that?!
Jennifer: E quem te chama de Tupac?
Jennifer: And who calls you Tupac?
Tição: Ah, Tupac é o Wagner que, pô, fala que eu pareço com ele.
Tição: Oh, Tupac is Wagner who says that I look like him.
Jennifer: Mas você prefere esse ... esse apelido ali?
Jennifer: But you like this ... this nickname?
Tição: É, eu prefiro Tição.
Tição: Yes, I like Tição.
Jennifer: /Por quê?
Jennifer: /Why?
Tição: /Já me acostumei.
Tição: /I've gotten used to it.
É que há muito tempo que eu tenho Tição.
It's that it's been a long time that I have Tição.
Acho que é cinco anos que me chamam de Tição.
I think it's been 5 years that they call me Tição.
Jennifer: Mas você não fica com raiva?
Jennifer: But you don't get angry?
Tição: Não. É um apeli... Eu acho que é um apelido carinhoso.
Tição: No. It's a nick... I think that it's a caring nickname.
Jennifer: Ah, é?
Jennifer: Really?
Tição: É.
Tição: Yes.
Jennifer: Então você gostou?
Jennifer: So you like it?
Tição: Gostei.
Tição: I like it.
Jennifer: Não bateu em ninguém que falou isso?
Jennifer: And you didn't hit anyone that called you that?
Tição: Não, ih, por causa de apelido? Eu não ligo não.
Tição: No, [surprise] because of my nickname? I don't care.
Cara que... todo mundo aí tem um apelido. Né não, Wagner?
Man... everyone has a nickname. Right Wagner?

Ticão's nickname story illustrates many familiar Brazilian themes: at first he does not like his nickname but then he gets used to it and can think of few people who even know his real name. It is interesting to note that his nickname has a particularly strong and negative origin context: a lunch lady at his school who thinks him annoying begins to call him "annoying black kid" - referencing her attitude towards him and their contentious relationship and highlighting his blackness. Yet his analysis of his nickname is very positive: he prefers it to a second (not as widely used) nickname which compares him to a popular rap star and laughs at the idea of beating someone up for calling him this name (though to call someone "seu tição" to their face is a very strong insult).

The key to understanding these race-based nicknames lies in an examination of the conversational and societal contexts in which they occur. Conceptions of race in Brazil challenge Americans to go beyond fixed, blood or biologically based categories and see race as fluid, often individually defined, and even seasonal. When race is defined as skin color (which is much of the time in Brazil), being tan from the sun can affect the way you identify. Though the Brazilian census asks individuals to identify as black (*negro*), white (*branco*), brown (*pardo*), or yellow (*amarelo*), many Brazilians commonly refer to themselves as *moreno* (or brown). While blackness is both socially and economically stigmatized, extreme whiteness is also considered marked (though not economically disadvantageous). Caught between American Brazilianists who argue for all mixed Brazilians to discover their blackness and other Brazilianists who would rather not see race in Brazil in black and white, Brazilians negotiate fluid racial categories which do not preclude a Brazilian kind of racism.

Brazil is a country of vast income disparity, and darker skinned people disproportionately occupy the lowest social classes. Yet a long history of devaluing blackness is coupled with racial democracy ideology which proclaimed a discussion of racial inequality to be "un-Brazilian" and itself a racist act. Due to this legacy, Brazilians notice race (especially blackness) frequently but are often unaware of how blackness and

whiteness are treated differently (and blackness is often linguistically marked as I will later discuss). As just one example of this, of a survey given to 300 people, 20% said they knew people with a nickname for whiteness and 66% of respondents knew someone with a nickname for blackness. However, when asked if these race-based nicknames were either 1) always about blackness 2) more often about blackness or 3) equally about blackness and whiteness, over 50% responded that blackness and whiteness were treated equally. Thus while blackness gets noticed more often in Brazilian context which devalues it, noticing race (including blackness) is not always understood as a negative or racist act.

On a conversational level, these racial nicknames do not merely index race. As nicknames, they also index intimacy and shared background. Tição, perhaps unwittingly, makes this point. When asked how he introduces himself, he answers Alexandre, since that is his real name. He clearly understands the "people" in my question to mean strangers, however, since he points out that few people in his area actually know his real name and all call him by his nickname. Responding to a survey about nicknames, one girl answered with surprise that of course she thought her nickname was "carinhoso" or "caring" — her mother had given it to her! This is a telling statement for nicknames in general in Brazil: they are most often given to you by your family, your friends, your classmates, or your co-workers. Indeed this is perhaps the most interesting part of Tição's story: while he was given this nickname by an adult supervisor who he did not get along with, the people that use his nickname are his friends, his family, his neighbors — all intimates. It is in this way that noticing blackness as different, as contributing to making a child an annoyance, as putting a person in his place, can be recontextualized and understood as caring. While the first person to use "Tição" was an adult seeking to chastise him for his behavior, Tição has five years of additional contexts in which familiar people in familiar places called out "Tição" — experiences which layer his nickname with new meaning. Because nicknames tend to be used by people you like and

people who like you, they can simultaneously express blackness as both difference and caring.

These two contexts — the conversational and the larger societal — are mutually constituting: Blackness gets noticed within daily linguistic behavior because of a Brazilian history which continues to negatively evaluate blackness on ideological and aesthetic levels as well as everyday political and economic ones, while still proclaiming itself a racial democracy. Day to day language in which speakers address others and refer to themselves uses blackness to establish both hierarchy and intimacy among participants—constructing a larger political atmosphere which notices blackness, disproportionately, in both positive and negative lights. In Brazil, blacks are economically disadvantaged and blackness is frequently noticed and commented upon - but the significance of "noticing" must be understood contextually. To look only at the larger number of black nicknames and the instances where powerful lunch ladies brand black children is to ignore the tender moments where mothers call their babies "little black one" and "black bean" and best friends invoke race to call each other by the only names they know. Race in Brazil, as in all places, is both contextual and multi-faceted.

I now turn to look at the equally common phenomenon of addressing others by their color. Here again, addressee terms more often address blackness. I begin by looking at examples of the term "*negão*" - big black guy. This is likely the most common racial addressee term (or nickname) in Brazil. A semantic equivalent for big white guy, "*brancão,*" does not exist, allowing only "*grandão,*" "*fortão,*" "*saradão,*" - all of which mean big, strong guy but are unmarked for race. In this second example, Pequeno (CW's cousin) and Bujica (CW's best friend) are leaving a message on the tape recorder for CW, who is studying in the United States.

II. NEGãO: Big Black Man Used among Intimates:
(the cousin and best friend of CW, who is studying in the US, are talking to him on the tape from Brazil)

Pequeno: Vem comer um pão com ovo lem casa... parada de (?)
Pequeno: **Come eat bread and eggs at my house... something of (?)**
sei que você só come pizza aê e hamburger.
I know that you only eat pizza there and hamburger.
Bujica: Só pizza, hamburger e filé mignon.
Bujica: **Just pizza, hamburger, and filet mignon.**
Tá com dinheiro heim, negão!
You have some money, don't you, negão!
Pequeno: Âh! Tá vendo? A gente come ... só come só Murilex e
Pequeno: **Oh! See? We eat ... just eat just Murilex**
McValda meu irmão todo dia...
and McValda all day my brother.
[Murilex is the nickname of a hamburger street vendor; McValda = Mc from McDonalds + Valda, the name of another street vendor of hot dogs in their neighborhood]

III. **NEGãO: Big Black Man as a Compliment:**

Jennifer: Que você é... a raça... a sua raça é o que?
Jennifer: **What are you...your race...what is your race?**
Tição: É negra. Pô, meu pai é descendente de angolano.
Ticão: **It's black. Man, my father is a descendent of Angolans.**
CW: É?
CW: **Is he?**
Pequeno: Não sabia não?
Pequeno: **You didn't know that?**
CW: Olha o tamanho da mão dele!
CW: **Look at the size of his hand!**
Pequeno: Pô...
Pequeno: **Wow...**
Tição: Ele é maior negauzão,
Ticão: **He is a huge *negauzão* [big, huge black man],**
grandão,
big man,
com maior barrigão. [risos]
with a huge stomach. [laughter]
Parece que tá grávido.
Looks like he's pregnant.
Tu tá rindo do que, Pequeno? [risos] E o Cobal? E o Cobal? E o Cobal?
What are you laughing at Pequeno? [laughter] And Cobal [Pequeno's father]? And Cobal? And Cobal?
Pequeno: Fico até com vergonha, só porque tou falando nisso.
Pequeno: **I get embarrassed just talking about this.**
Tição: E o Cobal?
Ticão: **And Cobal?**
Pequeno: Que que tem meu pai? Meu pai é saradão.

Pequeno: What about my father? My father is kick-ass [big and strong; This is a joke-his father is short and thin.]

In example number two, negão is used in a context similar to that of nicknames: A best friend jokingly calls out to his friend who is far away. In this context, he is not specifically referencing size or skin color but rather uses the familiar "negão" (which could be taken as offensive, as later examples will show) to demonstrate intimacy and his privileged position: only a true friend can use "negão" without intending insult. Indeed, Bujica exudes confidence in their relationship through this addressee term because his interlocutor is not present and able to respond. If there were any chance CW would take offense, their geographic distance (and the time lapse between utterance and reception) would not allow Bujica to offer a repair (for example, the English "just kidding"). Example number three colorfully illustrates a positive side to the term "*negão*:" which semantically indexes height, weight, and strength. While Tição jokes about his father's stomach, his father's overall size and strength cannot be questioned. Tição uses "*negausão*" (modified twice for largeness), in addition to other modifiers, to one-up his friend Pequeno, whose father does not compare physically. In this way, *negão* can often be understood as a complement, indicating that one is not to be messed with.

Referencing size also has multiple interpretations, however, often including white, middle-class fear of large black men. Here we must understand the ways in which calling out "hey big black man," "*ó negão*," (more often among strangers) uses race to insult, to generalize, and to put black people (more often men) "in their place." In this next example, set within the particular political context of the Brazilian Hip Hop Movement, O Frio Bira, is discussing the difficulty of being "mixed" (or of lighter skin) in fighting for racial equality).

IV. <u>NEGãO: Big Black Man Used as Insult:</u>

(O Frio Bira, active in the Brazilian Hip Hop movement, is discussing the difficulty of being "mixed" (or of lighter skin) in fighting for racial equality)

O Frio Bira: É aquela coisa. Se você se mete, você escuta de
O Frio Bira: It's that thing. If you get involved, you hear from
um lado: "Cala a boca, negão." E você vai escutar
one side: "Shut up, negão." And you are going to hear
do outro: "Por que esse branco tá falando isso?
from the other, "Why is this white guy saying this?
Tá do nosso lado, por quê?" É isso que acontece.
He's on our side, why?" And this is what happens.
Muitas das vezes, eu até evito de me meter
Many times, I actually try to avoid getting involved
na coisa, tanto eu quanto T.R., porque ocorre isso com a gente.
in the thing, me and T.R., because this happens to us.

V. NEGãO: Big Black Man Used to Highlight Blackness:

Jennifer: ...para chamar alguém, mas tavam falando da cor da pessoa.
Jennifer: ...to call someone, but talking about the color of that person.
Bala: Ah, geralmente se você for da côr quando passa
Bala: Ah, generally if you are of color when someone passes
'Qual é negão!' Ainda mais eu que eu sou altão, aí pô, negão.
by, "What's up negão!" Especially for me because I am tall, so hey negão.
Beleléo: Se for pequininhinho ,'Ó neguinho! Chega aí neguinho.'
Beleléo: If it were a small, little person, "hey neguinho [*little black guy*]! Come here neguinho."
Bala: Neguinho, pô, é um lance, pô. Tem horas que você fica até,
Bala: Neguinho, well, it's a problem really. There are times
pô, tenho nome, né?
when you get like, hey, I have a name, don't I?
Neguinho. Negão.
Neguinho. Negão.
Beleléo: Ai fala: 'Chama... fala... chama esse da cor aí, ó, esse da cor.
Beleléo: And then they say "Call...get...call that esse da cor
Chama esse da cor aí que eu quero falar com ele'.
over there [*person of color],* hey, esse da cor. Call that esse da cor there because I want to talk to him."

In both of these examples, the addressee takes offense to being identified on the basis of skin color. As the second example makes clear, black people (especially men) are easily and commonly identified by race in day-to-day life. While both Beleléo and

Bala agreed that judgment of these terms as racist, neutral, or caring depending heavily on the context that followed (was a stranger asking for the time or telling you to get out of his way?), they also agree that the frequency with which they were referred to by their skin color robbed them of a sense of personhood (Bala's comment, "Hey, I have a name you know!).

Finally, in explaining his difficult position as a lighter skinned black fighting for racial equality in Brazil, O Frio Bira points out how the term "*negão*" is often employed to remind blacks of their lower social status. Notice especially that when he is seen as black by whites, a socially and linguistically marked term is invoked, "*negão*" instead of the more neutral "*negro*" or "*preto*" (black) to disqualify and silence him. When he is seen by blacks as white (who also disqualify him as a legitimate voice), he is dismissed with a more mitigated and linguistically neutral, "Why is this white guy saying this?" While he claims both groups can reject him as not belonging, linguistic resources allow for greater insult to blacks. Thus while different contexts allow multiple and simultaneous readings of racial addressee terms, the proliferation of terms that highlight blackness often serve to reinforce blacks' lower position in Brazilian society.

An in-depth investigation of racial addressee terms thus take us to the heart of Brazilian race relations and allows us to explore how larger societal questions of racial identity and racism are linguistically negotiated in everyday interaction.

Appendix:

Examples of Racial Nicknames/Addressee Terms:

For Black:		**For Mixed:**	
azulão	bluebird	**chocolate**	chocolate
crioulo	creole, black	**marrom** **bom bom**	brown bonbon
feijão	black bean	**moreninho**	little brunet
macaco	monkey		

nega	darling, black	**For White:**	
	woman		
		branco azedo	sour white
		leite	milk
		rato branco	white rat