

## 2 The Naming Process

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Words have a history, as evidenced by their shifting meanings. Writing that history is no easy task, as nothing is more fleeting than ways of saying things, which leave few traces. When it comes to the urban vocabulary, we can nevertheless reconstruct some of the major changes in the ways languages designate places, things, and people. It is possible to investigate these shifts using multiple sources – texts of many kinds, maps, past and present place names. Such research shows that speakers, situated in time and space, are in fact the source of the lexical innovations that result in urban words. Some of those innovations failed to take hold and have been forgotten, while others were successful and have modified the semantic systems that have structured the description of urban worlds, often for very long periods of time. A language can therefore be viewed as a theatre of ongoing struggles over meanings, punctuated by partial agreements that produce – for a while – a common language. This story is made of bureaucratic or popular innovations, new words competing with old usage, the imposition of classification systems and challenges to them, stigmatizing speech acts and their possible subversion.

In this chapter my aim is to describe certain aspects of the process by which urban names are assigned to things and give them consistency, with particular reference to the naming of the urban periphery. I mostly dwell on the findings by other scholars that have been collected in the framework of an international research project that led to a multilingual dictionary of city words (Topalov et al., 2010). The aim of that endeavour was to empirically document the variations of meanings of a series of words that common speakers have used to describe urban aspects through space, time, and society: categories of urban

settlements, districts in cities, types of dwellings, types of urban thoroughfares and open spaces. The stories or “adventures” of about 40 words in each of the eight languages studied were written by some 160 authors. It is their work that made it possible to tentatively underscore some general results.<sup>1</sup>

Our historical point of view on language is markedly different from the search for etymology: instead of positing that the meaning of a word is inscribed in its phonetic features and transmitted along with them through the centuries, we are concerned with the role of the actors of history in transforming systems of signification. This viewpoint also rules out trying to determine the concepts to which words give form: we are by no means postulating the permanence of the signified, of which the signifier would be merely the appearance; on the contrary, we are observing the instability of the signified itself, which changes with the system of signifiers. What we are studying is neither the origin of words nor the history of concepts; it is the variability of usages and, through it, the history of semantic systems.

From this angle, scientific lexicons are of limited importance. Yet sociologists and, above all, geographers, have shown remarkable creativity in inventing new words to describe the unceasing changes in urban worlds more accurately than can the average person. All these specialists would do well to consider that they are not producers of concepts in the enchanted world of science, but in fact speakers like any other. The painter is in the picture, for today the human sciences participate in the concert that results in a common language. It is this shared, everyday language that interests me in this chapter.

Two aspects of the naming process will be constantly interacting in this study: they are both what could be called “lexical events.” The first is the lexical innovation involving moments, places, and protagonists, which we will endeavour to reconstruct as fully as possible. The outcome can only be very approximate because, as E.P. Thompson humorously noted with regard to the neologism “unemployment” in the English language, “cuckoos usually arrive in these islands some weeks before they are announced in the *Times*” (Thompson, 1968: 776n. 2). One can, however, pinpoint (always provisionally) sources in which a new word or usage was encountered for the first time and survey sources showing its dissemination, or the continuing use of older ways, or alternative innovations. One can document speakers’ hesitations. One can also try to reconstruct what those who introduced the new words actually tried to do with them and observe their social characteristics

and specific linguistic register. The second noteworthy aspect of the naming process is the semantic system to which the words we study belong. It is often easier to identify classification systems than to grasp the dynamics of how they change. One can easily recognize oppositions, gradations, or hierarchies among terms, but further observation is necessary to detect how a lexical innovation succeeded in forcing a semantic system to reconfigure itself. In some instances, the case studies outlined in this chapter highlight innovation, and in others the systemic aspect of meanings, but our demonstration will not be complete until both aspects of the naming process have been documented.

One main interpretive thread runs through the present text: the local character of the meanings of city words. We do not primarily live in a "suburb" or a *banlieue*: we live in Highgate, Forest Hills, or Saint-Cloud, in Brixton, the Bronx or the 9-3.<sup>2</sup> For the people who live there, a city is first and foremost made up of places and therefore place names – not common nouns, generic terms, or classificatory categories. Thus, it is important to examine both the meaning of the generic terms that form the common language and the situations that have led to their emergence and possible consolidation.

I propose to show the advantages of this type of questioning in three of many possible ways. First, I will observe how toponyms become generic – that is, how proper names attached to a specific place in a particular city become common nouns, to a degree that speakers forget the local character of the original designation. Next, I will bring out the local character of the lexical systems by which "good" neighbourhoods are contrasted with "bad" ones and a few of the processes of language creation that can be observed in situations of social and spatial stigmatization. Finally, I will show that toponymy preserves the traces of now-forgotten successive classificatory systems and how one can at least partly make sense of the ensuing lexical disorder that appears on maps by reconstructing the history of place names and how the actions of local speakers affected them.

#### When It All Began with a Place Name

One of the notable forms of lexical innovation in the area of city words is the conversion of a place name into a generic term: a name that has no meaning outside a specific locality where it designates a specific place ends up designating all spaces of the same type in the language in question, or even beyond it. At that moment, the local character of the

designation is erased. I will look at three words that exemplify this phenomenon: they all refer to stigmatized places and populations and have circulated widely within one or even several linguistic areas. I will discuss them in the chronological order of their appearance below.

The first case is the Italian word *ghetto*. There has been a good deal of controversy over its origin, which, as often happens in etymological disputes, has become part of the history of the word itself and of its cultural significance. Nevertheless, today there is a very broad consensus regarding the first attestation of the term (Boiteux, 2010). Following a decree issued by the Republic of Venice dated 29 March 1516, the city's Jewish population was forced to settle on a piece of land called *Ghetto nuovo* (new foundry). In the Venetian dialect of the time, the word *geto* signified "melting," and the place name, recorded as early as the thirteenth century, appeared for example in a 1455 notarial deed certifying the purchase by the da Brolo family of the *terreni del Geto* from Larco Ruzzini (Cortelazzo and Zolli, 1980, 2). Soon the word was circulating in other cities of the peninsula with its new meaning: in Genoa in 1536, *getta* designated the wharf where Jews expelled from Spain were held in quarantine (Stow, 1992) and, by the end of the seventeenth century, *ghetto* was used in Rome to designate the *serraglio degli ebrei* (enclosure of the Jews), instituted by the pope in 1555. *Serraglio, vico* (alley), and *clauastro* (cloister) were used in Rome in competition with *ghetto*, which first appeared in the Roman Jewish community, whose men of letters adopted a new etymology: *geth* (divorce) in Hebrew (Wigoder, 1993: 320–22). Some historians preferred the Roman rabbinical interpretation to the Venetian origin. The *geth* etymology is no doubt inaccurate, but that is not what matters: speakers decide the meaning they intend to give words and in so doing may modify their origin. The point is that the word had acquired meaning for those it stigmatized, allowing it to spread easily to other Italian cities that had created a similar institution. In Venice, the new neighbourhood reserved for Jews, set up in 1541 on a former industrial site, was called *Ghetto vecchio* (old foundry), but when the *Ghetto nuovissimo* was created in 1633, the place no longer had a foundry as its origin: the toponym had changed its meaning and become generic.<sup>3</sup>

The word *ghetto* was to undergo other changes in usage later on and we will come back to them in a moment. It began entering other languages with the limited acceptance that it was given in the 1863 Littré *Dictionnaire de la langue française*: "Name, in certain Italian cities, of the quarter in which Jews were obliged to reside," and in the 1890 edition

of *Webster's*: "The Jews' quarter in an Italian town or city." In the 1920s and 1930s, English and French dictionaries extended its meaning beyond the specifically Italian one: "1. The quarter of a town or city to which Jews were restricted for residence, esp. in Italy; a Jewry. Obs. or hist. 2. A quarter of a city where Jews in greatest numbers live" (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 1920).<sup>4</sup> This generalization gave a second life to the word, which had become obsolete with the disappearance of the institution in Italy itself in 1870 – except when it was used as a pejorative term for a poor, squalid neighbourhood: "Old *Zona* [zone] of a city, with tortuous *vie* [streets], filthy *vicoli* [alleys] in a state of abandonment" (Battaglia, 1970, vol. 6). Although there is little documentation on the process whereby the word came to be adopted outside Italy, one might postulate that *ghetto* reappeared at the end of the nineteenth century with the arrival in western Europe and the United States of a large wave of Jewish immigration from Russia and Poland. Use of the word at the time has been documented in English and French in cities, where it took on a new value as a toponym – "the Ghetto," *le Ghetto* – to designate the Lower East Side in New York, Spitalfields in London, or a section of the Marais in Paris.

The second example of a toponym turned a common noun is the word *favela*, which belongs to Brazilian Portuguese but has entered many other languages to designate Brazil's poorer urban districts. Here again, the origin is clearly a place name (Abreu, 1994; Valladares, 2006: 15–26). When the soldiers that quashed the 1897 popular Canudos uprising in the state of Bahia came back to Rio de Janeiro, the capital, they settled in the hills of Morro da Providência to wait for their long-overdue pay. They built makeshift dwellings on the hill, located right in the centre of the city, which soon became the core of an impoverished neighbourhood. The soldiers called the place Morro da Favella, the name of a plant that grows in the Nordeste, which was also given to a hill in Bahia where the federal army had won a decisive victory.<sup>5</sup> The neighbourhood became the leading target of hygienist criticism, and Morro da Favella soon came to be called *la Favella*, a toponym that described it as the prototype of other similar areas resulting from the transformations of the centre of Rio and the expulsion of the labouring population. In the 1920s, the name lost its uppercase *F* and became a generic term commonly used in the Carioca press to designate the growing number of areas filled with makeshift dwellings that were mushrooming on the hillsides. Their inhabitants, initially known as *favelianos* (1931) and later as *favel-lados* (1942), were associated with criminality and social hazard, while

their exotic lifestyle and enthusiasm for the samba were being turned into folklore.<sup>6</sup> The word *favela* entered the administrative lexicon in 1937 with the building code of the city of Rio (*Código de Obras*, 1964: 107) and soon appeared in a dictionary of the Portuguese language (published in 1939), but as a term specific to the city of Rio (Freire, 1939–44). The first census of the *favelas* of Rio was conducted by the city authorities in 1948, and the general census of Brazil in 1950 gave the term a definition that was valid throughout the country (Guimarães, 1953). The word *favela* – already in use in São Paulo and Brasília, where it had shed its particular features as a Carioca place name – had become a generic term that subsumed a wide variety of local words used to designate poor neighbourhoods made up of makeshift dwellings in Brazil, such as *baixada* (Belém), *vila favela* (Belo Horizonte), *mocambo* (Recife), and *invasão* (virtually everywhere). According to a 2001 article in a São Paulo newspaper, "by the end of the twentieth century, Brazil had 3,905 *favelas*, scattered over the entire country" (*Folha de São Paulo*, 7 January 2001).

Our third example of a toponym that became generic is the French word *bidonville*, a case that closely resembles that of *favela*. In the 1920s, when the first neighbourhoods of makeshift dwellings began appearing in Casablanca, one of them, a former encampment called Gadoueville (literally, Dirt-town), was known locally as Bidonville (literally, Tin-Town) (Cohen and Eleb, 1998: 221). Written evidence of this place name can be found in a business magazine published in 1930 and on a postcard printed in 1932: for many people, the neighbourhood had become a symbol. The novelist Pierre Mac Orlan talked about it in 1934: "*Bidonville*, ... capital of 'abject poverty,' made of oil drums and corrugated iron" ([1934] 1989: 65). A few years later, the German journalist Friedrich Sieburg noted: "Today, *Bidonville* stretches out like a monstrous town, where squares and streets are slowly being mapped out" (1938: 205). In the 1930s, the name lost its uppercase *B* and was used to designate all neighbourhoods of this type in Casablanca. It is mentioned in 1934 in an article written by a journalist for *l'Illustration*, with the word still in quotation marks and italics: "a real danger for the European city ... lies in these '*bidonvilles*'" (Vailat, 1934: 91). It was definitely a French word, for local speakers of the Moroccan Arabic dialect used *karyan* (adapted from the French word *carrière*), *derb* (neighbourhood), or *dwar* (village, referring to the rural origin of the inhabitants) (Cattedra, 2010).

In the next phase, *bidonville* came into widespread use as a French word for similar neighbourhoods in other Moroccan cities and all across

French North Africa, with the press serving as a vehicle for its circulation. It was also adopted by the colonial administration and by scholars: in 1958 the Orientalist Jacques Berque described the North African city as divided into three parts: the *métina* (traditional native town), the *villeneuve* (modern European town), and the *bidonville*. In Tunisia, however, *bidonville* was used concurrently with the local word *gourbiville* (*gurbi*, a word in Arabic dialect for a traditional, one-room home with no windows). In the 1950s, the word crossed the Mediterranean to France, where it was used to designate informal settlements of makeshift housing built in cities by North African, Portuguese, and Spanish immigrants as well as French families. In this period, the word *bidonville* replaced the various local terms such as *zone*, *colonies de bicoques*, or *village nègre* employed to designate shantytowns in the Paris area (Crémieux, 1929: 14, quoted by Fourcaut, Bellanger, and Flonneau, 2007: 200). The semantic closeness of *bidonville* to *zone* appears in a 1950 *Série noire* thriller. The hero is being pursued in a locality lost in the Guyanese forest: "It was like hunters moving in for the kill in *Bidonville*." It consisted mostly of "houses made of boards, walls of oil drums flattened with hammers," but there was also "a building a little less *zonier* than the others" and "two or three perfectly normal constructions that seemed out of place in this *espace zonier*" (Dominique, 1956: 57, 55, 20). The terms *bidonvillais* and *bidonvillois* appeared at the same time. In 1966, the French Ministry of the Interior drew up a "map of the *bidonvilles*," with a view to eradicating them, and the social protest movement of May 1968 invented the slogan *Bidonville, ville-bidon* (literally, fake-town). By the end of this period of generalization, *bidonville* was used in the French social sciences and the reformist literature to designate slums of makeshift housing all over the world: for example, in 1980 *La planète des bidonvilles* was published (Cranotier, 1980).

The processes we have just described come under the heading of a figure of speech known as *antonomasia*, in which the name of an individual is used to name the class of objects to which it belongs.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the individual is a place, designated by a proper noun beginning with a capital letter, which is maintained as long as speakers are aware of the link to the original place name. When that link disappears, the *antonomasia* is lexicalized and turned into a common noun or generic term. But what we are describing here is more than a mere matter of words: it is the emergence, among an increasing number of speakers, of a new category of objects. The main condition for transforming a toponym into a generic term is, of course, the need to state that different

places are similar in at least one respect. Places that were once described by various terms – depending on the locality, the speakers, or the linguistic register – find themselves unified under a common term that is used as a general category. The description of the urban world must then be reorganized.

### The Locality of Classifications

Much ink has been spilled by sociologists and geographers in an effort to decide what the true definition of a *quartier*, a *barrio*, or a neighbourhood is – that is, to specify the corresponding concepts and determine how to draw their boundaries and measure their characteristics. After decades of discussion, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on these questions. One can avoid this endless controversy by observing how city dwellers use these words and how the sections into which cities are divided are actually named (Topalov, 2002). Such observation reveals just how local the meanings of words referring to city districts actually are and how futile any attempt is to give them general definitions that would be valid from the outset for an entire linguistic area.

A survey conducted in Guadaluajara, Mexico, in the late 1990s noted the following statement: "Aquí ya no es mas colonia, es barrio" (This place is no longer a *colonia*, it's a *barrio*). The speaker was an elderly woman who missed the former respectability of her neighbourhood, which had been lost due to insecurity and the impoverishment of some of the residents (Rivière d'Arc and Ibarra Ibarra, 2001: 239).

In 1995, the municipality of Rio launched the Favela-Bairro project with aid from the Inter-American Development Bank. The project aimed to endow the *favelas* with an infrastructure and urban services to promote initiatives managed by the inhabitants, thus integrating spaces that were disparaged and dangerous to the rest of the city (Brazil 2003). A version of the project in English described it as a "slum-to-neighborhood project" (Upgrading Urban Communities, 2001).

The classificatory inversion is striking: in the observation made in Guadaluajara, *barrio* is related to *colonia* in the same way *favela* is related to *bairro* in the observation in Rio. The language is not the same, nor are the speakers: in the first case, we have the spontaneous language of a resident; in the second, the official language of an administration. The semantic contrast should nevertheless draw our attention.

The use of *colonia* became widespread in Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century to designate new residential districts built by large-scale

developers for the middle classes, with an overall street plan and some restrictions on the housing that could be constructed within them. This type of development implied modernity, as opposed to the disorderly working-class districts that were expanding on the outskirts of the cities (Rivière d'Arc, 2010a). During the colonial period, the word *barrio* was generally reserved for districts inhabited by indigenous people, which were administered by separate authorities and located outside the grid of the Spanish city (Lira, 2002). Thus, the terms *barrios de indios* (Indian districts), *barrios indígenas* (native districts), and *arrabales* (suburbs) became associated with disorder, poverty, and the common people (Aréchiga Córdoba, 2010). Yet the positive connotations of *colonia* and the pejorative ones of *barrio* were in no way set in stone. In the 1930s and 1940s, the revolutionary regime promoted the rise of *colonias obreras* or *proletarias*, which associated the working class with order and modernity. Some neighbourhoods that grew out of spontaneous urbanization in the 1990s were called *colonias irregulares*, a paradoxical term testifying to the residents' desire to be considered *colonos*, or ordinary citizens. As for the word *barrio*, it can be used as a neutral term to designate a city division or positively to highlight the vitality and singularity of a particular neighbourhood in the literature on reform, tourism, and the social sciences. As a result, while the classificatory opposition invoked by the old woman from Guadalupe was available and perfectly intelligible locally to convey her meaning, it has not been very stable in the Spanish spoken in Mexico.

In contrast, the negative connotations of *favela* and the positive connotations of *bairro* are both quite widespread in Brazilian Portuguese. There are variations, however, that stem from the efforts of certain actors to rehabilitate symbolically and materially the spaces and human groups associated with the word *favela*. With regard to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, during the first decade of this century, there was a definite tendency among activists in non-governmental organizations, electoral candidates, members of the press, and certain inhabitants of these neighbourhoods to describe them as *comunidades* (communities) (see the chapter by Soares Gonçalves and Pilo' in this volume). That term is borrowed from the religious language of the grassroots communities promoted by Catholic liberation theology activists and Protestant evangelicals as well as from the Anglo-American vocabulary used in international organizations. The chosen term was no doubt intended to give the *favelas* and the *favelados* a dignity that hygienist condemnation and police repression had denied them for decades. It is difficult to tell

whether this symbolic rehabilitation has changed the uses of the word *favela*: in the end, does Favela-Bairro mean that the *favelas* are *bairros* and worthy of the name or that they must lose their former name in order to become the latter?

The situations I have just described are reminders not only of the classificatory value of words that designate neighbourhoods, but also of what one might call, by analogy with one of the main theses of Saussurian linguistics, the arbitrariness of the sign.

We have seen, in the case of *favela* and *bidonville*, how pejorative generic terms are formed to designate, from the point of view of outside observers, neighbourhoods of spontaneous urbanization and makeshift housing – social exonyms, as it were, similar within a single linguistic area to the traditional exonyms formed when moving from one language to another.<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon is quite common. In societies in which the economic inequalities between populations are accompanied by spatial divisions, language always supplies pejorative terms to designate spaces of poverty and supposed social risk, in contrast to terms for spaces that represent an acceptable urban order. What is constant, therefore, is the classificatory opposition between a positive word and a negative word. What varies from one locality to the next, including within one and the same linguistic space, is the words that express this contrast. By investigating the history of how this opposition arose locally, we can understand the circumstances surrounding the formation of the word pair in use.

Inhabitants immediately grasp the positive or negative overtones attached to the names of places or areas in the city. At various times since the nineteenth century, such oppositions have structured the representations of urban space: the East End and West End in London, the Lower East Side (or West Side) and Upper East Side in New York, or, on another scale, Belleville and Faubourg Saint-Germain in Paris. Generic words have developed to express more abstractly the same type of opposition: in London, "slum" and "suburb" (Dyos and Reeder, 1973).<sup>9</sup> These polar opposites of places and the names that designate them have a structuring effect, which is not to say the lexicon is stable or even consensual.

In the nineteenth or twentieth century, a dominant (and always pejorative) generic word emerged in most Western languages for the poor districts of a city and sometimes the housing that composed it. In some cases, as we have seen, it resulted from the transformation of a toponym into a generic term. In other instances, it developed from a change

