

## Chapter 8

# Travelling Terms

## *Analysis of Semantic Fluctuations in the Atlantic World*

Wilson Trajano Filho

In this chapter I examine how systematic intersocietal encounters set cultural elements in motion across time and space, generating semantic instabilities that affect the meanings of things and ideas in a nonrandom way. My attention will be directed to the connections (and the turbulences they bring about) between the ecumenes that arose from processes of cultural creolization along the Upper Guinea Coast before the arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century; the Luso-African ecumene that developed in this portion of the African coast and the adjacent islands of Cape Verde; and the Caribbean ecumene, also the product of a long process of creolization involving Europeans of different nationalities and Africans of various cultural and social provenance. I take each of these ecumenes as a vast field of communication that provides actors with means to develop a sense of difference as well as a loosely disseminated feeling of sharing symbolic forms and social institutions.

The word *tabanka*<sup>1</sup> is used today by speakers of five different languages. It has been widely used in the varieties of Portuguese spoken in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, in the Portuguese-based Creoles spoken in these countries, in some Caribbean variations of English (Allsopp 2003) and in Trinidad's English Creole (Winer 2009). One word, five languages and at least three different surface meanings form a synchronic picture that I want to scrutinize in its most simple form. The complete picture is far more complicated, involving other cognate words belonging to several languages spoken along the Upper Guinea Coast and diachronic processes of semantic fluctuation triggered by a long history of intersocietal encounters. As the term is largely unknown to most Brazilian Portuguese speakers, I begin with our two major dictionaries. The word is absent in the Aurélio dictionary, but in Houaiss's we find the following glosses: (1) African village or locality, usually fortified; (2) (Cape Verde) a kind of traditional fanfare on the Isle of Santiago (Houaiss 2001). The author adds that

the first entry in the Portuguese dictionaries appears in the 1881 Caldas Aulete dictionary.

In what follows, I will analyse the semantic fluctuations of the word *tabanka* over its five-century journey of thousands of kilometres from the west coast of Africa to Trinidad, with a strategic stop at the Cape Verde Islands. Etymological inquiry is traditionally a linguistics issue, somewhat distant from the usual concerns of today's anthropologists. Were we living at the time of the diffusionist debates in anthropology, with their main focus on the origins and dispersal of cultural artefacts, the present topic would hardly seem anachronistic and senseless. It is just as well that the diffusionist fad has to my relief been revisited of late under the guise of flows and counterflows of the globalized world system. This chapter presents my thus disguised ideas about the turbulences that have provoked semantic shifts in the word *tabanka* during its journey across the Atlantic Ocean.

The challenge I face in this essay is to show how words have travelled in time and space from one society to another, and how their meanings have been changed during this journey to adjust to new conditions of use. This issue is to some extent similar to the one in Merry's (2006) analysis of ideas of human rights: how they are appropriated by the vernaculars of various communities around the globe, have their core meanings changed and, thus transformed, are used to criticize everyday practices of violence. However, in comparison to the travelling terms treated by Merry, the appropriations and remakings I want to focus on differ radically from those of the journey of human rights ideas in the contemporary world in terms of their temporal depth. Unlike the spread of human rights ideas, the semantic shifts I deal with do not emanate from a single hegemonic source but rather from myriad flows that can hardly be accurately retraced. They are semantic changes that have been going on for centuries. Thus they bear a closer resemblance to certain changes in the moral ideas of the Semites as treated by Mauss (1985: 170). In his classic study on the gift, Mauss argues that the original meaning of the Arabic and Hebraic terms *sadaka* and *zedaga* was related to the idea of justice. However, through centuries, the meanings of these words were gradually changed, eventually consolidating around the ideas of charity and alms. This chapter will examine something similar.

Like any etymological research, mine is riddled with guesses that can be very creative are but hardly ever open to the falsification test. The path the term *tabanka* took in both time and in space cannot be fully retraced with the data now available. All I can do is revisit short stretches of its route and reach some conclusions as to the landscape it has covered, namely, the creolized social system that comprised the Atlantic World from the onset of European expansion in the mid-fifteenth century, which I will depict as the intersection of several cultural ecumenes.

## Journey Inland: From Protection Against Violence to the Comforts of Home

In this section I focus on the semantic changes of terms that originate from the supposedly West Atlantic root *\*abank(?)*. These terms originally conveyed the meaning of fortification, which provided protection against violence brought about by conflicts between social groupings. For 300 years they went through semantic shifts, taking on new meanings referring to the inhabited space of the house, the kin group and the village.

Although tracing the routes of this word's diffusion through these five languages is not my main focus, the first question to be asked concerns its origins. Of uncertain etymology, it seems to have sprung from the dozens of languages of the so-called West Atlantic family that are spoken on the African coast from Senegal to Sierra Leone – including Wolof, Fula/Peul, Diola, Balanta, Banyun, Pepel, Manjaco, Mancanha, Baga and Temne – and have great syntactic and morphological similarities. In many of them, we find a supposed root, *\*abank(?)*, that encompasses the semantic field around ideas of locality, dwelling, protection, safety, defence, and (territorial) membership unit.

Among the contemporary Baga-Sitem of the Republic of Guinea, the word *abanka* (pl. *cibanka*) refers to a village section or common yard of a residence cluster of three or four exogamous groups patrilineally descended (*kor*, 'belly') from a founding ancestor who came from elsewhere (a stranger). The Baga *abanka* refers to a corporate group and underlines a social identity that is often more important than *kor* or kinship. Each *abanka* has a protector spirit (*amanko*) that brings prosperity, protection and well-being to its members (Sarró 2009: 35–38).<sup>2</sup> It seems, however, that the word *abanka* exists only in the Baga-Sitem language. Other Baga groups have other words to express other territorial logic. Ramon Sarró informed me (personal communication) that in the Bulongic language the term *ebene* covers more or less the same meaning as *abanka*, but they do not seem to stem from the same root.

According to Walter Hawthorne (2003: 12), the Balanta people of Guinea-Bissau call the compact village they live in *tabanka*. It is the most important unit of Balanta social organization. People living in the same village share common interests, and the most important rituals and collective work associated with agricultural activities are performed and organized at this local level. Key institutions of Balanta social organization, such as age grades, the council of elders, and marriages, function at the *tabanka* level, working to strengthen community bonds. However, the Balanta recognize that *tabanka* means more than a unit of cohesive nature. It is also the unit within which the major cleavages of society take place, along lines of kin, generation, and gender (2003: 120). As a membership unit, the Balanta *tabanka* is the stage where processes of integration and

conflict occur – a stage that has a complex history. Hawthorne (2003: 121–23) explains that in precolonial times the Balanta lived in dispersed settlements in Guinea’s hinterland. Political upheaval caused by the Mande expansion since the thirteenth century and then by European expansion that intensified the slave trade pushed them off to the mangrove seeking refuge. In this new environment they learned how to grow wet rice and founded compact villages, the *tabankas*, better suited for protection from slave traders.<sup>3</sup>

I have consulted other specialists in Balanta culture and society, and they all agreed that the word *tabanka* is strange to Balanta language. Although they concur with Hawthorne’s interpretation, they point out that his Balanta informants were using a Creole word to talk about some aspects of the group social organization. In other words, they mean that if the term *tabanka* has been used by Balanta speakers, it is a recent borrowing from the Creole language of Guinea-Bissau.

The contemporary Mancanha in Guinea-Bissau use the same term to mean village, but it seems to be a loan word from the Creole language that emerged on Luso-African settlements, or from neighbouring peoples. According to linguist Jean-Louis Rougé (2004: 352; see also Buis 1990: 258), among the Manjaco the term *N-tab* (also *untab*) designates village. The resemblance to the Creole *tabanka* is crystalline, but it may be misleading to take them as cognate words. They are more aptly a case of linguistic convergence (see below). In any case, one of the greatest ethnographers of this group informed me that the Manjaco word for village is *’utchak*; *bolai* is the term for hut, and *kato* is the word for house or dwelling (Eric Gable, personal communication).

Further north of the Manjaco territory, the Diola of Guinea-Bissau and Casamance seem also to have words that stem from the root *\*abank(?)*. The southern Diola (Diola-Kassa) use the term *hankabu* to designate a lineage-based living area that comprises several houses. It is not a family house, which would be *ellupai*, but rather a lineage-based compound. Among the northern Diola (Diola-Fogny) the word would be *funk*, with the same meaning.<sup>4</sup> The similarity of these Diola words indicates that both are derived from the West Atlantic root *\*abank(?)*. Moving north to Senegalese territory, we will find that the Wolof *tabakh* now means ‘construction’, ‘wall’ or ‘building’ (usually with hard, durable materials like cement and bricks, as opposed to *sampe*, which is building with soft materials like wood or mud).

I now move from the contemporary crystallizations around the root *\*abank(?)* in the West Atlantic language stock to examine how it was described by the first Portuguese and Luso-African travellers to the Guinea coast. The first written reference is by André Álvares de Almada (1964: 367), a Cape Verdean trader who, in describing the African coast in 1594, used the verbal form *atabancar* to refer to Sierra Leonean Manes warriors’ custom of building fortifications within which they felt protected. He also used the noun form *atabanca* to designate the trenches the Manes dug (ibid.: 372). As a verb, the term seems to have been

incorporated into the Portuguese variant then spoken in Cape Verde and on the Guinea coast, and likely into the budding Portuguese-based Creole in the region. Thirty years later another Cape Verdean, André Donelha (1977 [1625]: 102), used the term *tabanka* to refer to the fences and walls with very high watchtowers that surrounded the villages of Sierra Leonean coastal peoples.<sup>5</sup> Another Cape Verdean trader, Francisco de Lemos Coelho, refers to the word *tabanca* in his seventeenth-century description of Cacheu, a Luso-African village in Guinea-Bissau. According to him, Cacheu was ‘surrounded by a stockade formed of pointed stakes with sharp tips, fastened together with crossbars, and it has two gates which are closed at night. The fence is called the *tabanca* of Casa Forte’ (Coelho 1990 [1684]: 149; see also Coelho 1990 [1669]: 34; 1990 [1684]: 151).

In his comment on Donelha’s account, historian Paul Hair (1977: 250) reports that in the archaic forms of the Temne language, also in Sierra Leone, *ka-banɕa* meant fortification or palisaded villages (see also Hair 1967: 46, 56). Coelho’s account of the use of the term *tabanka* in Cacheu leaves no doubt that this word entered the Creole language then spoken by the Luso-Africans as a loanword from Temne and other Mel languages spoken in Sierra Leone. The term was probably carried by coastal Sapi speakers (Temne, Bullom) who sought refuge and protection at Cacheu after the Mani invaded their territories in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Early evidence of a slight fluctuation affecting the meaning of *tabanka* (or one of its West African cognates) came from a Scottish missionary named Henry Brunton in 1802. After a sojourn in the area that is presently Sierra Leone and Guinea, he published in Edinburgh a book containing a grammar and a vocabulary of Susu language. His vocabulary list there contains the word *bankhi*, which he glossed as dwelling house (1802: 63) without any allusion to fortification or palisade. This evidence presents a problem for the case I am trying to make. Susu is a Mande language, so it belongs to a language family of the Niger Congo stock, quite different from the West Atlantic languages supposed to be the origin of the root *\*abank(?)* (see note 5). How to explain this? Bruce Mouser (personal communication) allows that *bankhi* is truly a Susu word, although he asserts that Brunton collected it in Baga territory. Thus it might be a case of borrowing from Baga language. According to Ramon Sarró (personal communication), words typically end with /i/ in Susu, especially when they are borrowings from other languages.

Irrespective of its origin, my point in this connection is that the Susu *bankhi* represents a first step towards a semantic shift from protection against violence and warlike activities (clearly associated with the slave trade) to the feeling of warmth characteristic of the domestic domain, and the practice of sociability associated with activities taking place in family and neighbourhood circles. The paucity of available data impedes a fully satisfactory explanation of why this se-

mantic shift occurred, somehow unexpectedly, among the Susu living in Baga territory at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a period of visceral violence linked to the slave trade and the growing instabilities and rearrangements of political boundaries in the area. Although left largely unexplained, the fact is that some decades later, this semantic fluctuation came to full completion along the same lines I have just examined in the Creole Luso-African settlements of Guinea-Bissau.

Written sources suggest that in the Luso-African Creole spoken on the Guinea *praças*, up until the late nineteenth century, the term *tabanka* was used to mean a fortified locality.<sup>7</sup> A close look at the glossary (Portuguese-Creole) published by Barros (1902) suggests that the term *tabanka* was still undergoing a semantic shift at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Creole society of Guinea-Bissau. He translated Portuguese *paliçada* (palisade) as *tabanca* (1902: 188); Portuguese *aldeia* (village) was *aldya* (ibid.: 85); and Portuguese *murado* (to be walled) was glossed as *q'o ten tabanca* (ibid.: 186) These examples suggest that the meaning of *tabanka* in the Creole language was in conformity with the old usage. However, Barros also translated Portuguese *povoação* (settlement) as *tabanca* (ibid.: 270), a gloss that suggests the semantic field of the Creole word was undergoing a process of lexical expansion similar to that of the word *bankhi* in the Susu language. From then on, it lost the semantic component of fortification, defence and protection to mean simply village or settlement. It was certainly a gradual process. I first came across this word meaning settlement or village in official Portuguese documents from 1850 and on. It referred to the quarters of the auxiliaries of Luso-African traders – newcomers to Creole settlements – located just outside Bissau. It was called *tabanka dos grumetes* (sailors' village or quarter). Curiously, they were set apart from the Luso-African town, locally known as *praça*, by a wall built by the colonial governor that stood until 1913. The wall was not designed to protect the African village, but rather to assure that the Bissau Creole population had some security and control over the frequent abuses by auxiliaries of dubious loyalty. Only then – from 1850 on – did the term meaning settlement or village set in the Guinea Creole.

This semantic change is an example of lexical expansion that is quite common in Creole languages, as may be gauged by the central place the relexification hypothesis has in creole studies. Hancock (1980) identifies twelve categories of lexical progression in general. The case of *tabanka* is dubious: it might be explained as semantic extension – 'a new interpretation for an item, in addition to, or in replacement of, its original use' (Hancock 1980: 74); semantic shift – 'the same as semantic extension, except that the original meaning has not survived' (ibid.: 78); convergence – 'two forms originally distinct acquire the same phonological surface form' (ibid.: 79); or adoption – 'the acquisition of items from other languages' (ibid.: 81).<sup>8</sup> I cannot advance much on this regard, but refer to Jean-Louis Rougé's (2004: 352) argument for convergence, according to which

the current meaning of *tabanka* in Guinean Creole as ‘village’ comes from convergence with Manjaco *N-tab* or *untab*.

I should mention, however, that the word’s use has an evident sociological connotation. In Guinea Creole, *tabanka* is not used to designate just any village, but only the villages of local indigenous peoples. Urban clusters inhabited by Portuguese and creolized Luso-Africans are called *praças*, regardless of size and location. This dichotomy is a clear manifestation of an opposition that is constitutive of the Creole world, namely, the cultural cleavage between the space of ‘Creoleness’ – the *praças* – and that of ‘Africanness’ – the *tabancas*, from where Creole society has historically recruited most of its members.

### **Journey to the Islands: From Territory to Conviviality**

In this section I focus on the second stop of the long journey of the semantic fluctuations of *tabanka*. This stop altered the route already taken, which had led to the idea of village, reflecting a move towards the idea of conviviality.

In the word’s journey to the Creole of Santiago, I notice a semantic change that appears to be radical but in fact is deeply connected to the underlying meanings it has on the Guinea coast.<sup>9</sup> According to the Cape Verdean writer Félix Monteiro (1948: 14), in the remote past the word was also used in Santiago to mean settlement or village, but its original reference to a territorial unit was lost, and nowadays most Creole speakers in Cape Verde do not recognize it.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, what Monteiro calls an old usage (*tabanka* as village) is in fact quite recent. Presently, Santiago people, especially the adults, take *tabanka* to mean a mutual aid association that is very important to the peasants in the interior and to the residents of poor neighbourhoods in the town of Praia. For the young people and those who come from the windward islands, however, this reference to mutual aid has been blurred: now the word is mostly used to designate a kind of popular feast unique to the islands of Santiago and Maio and, more recently, a mass-culture musical style derived from the music played during *tabanka* festivities. Thus, to speak of *tabanka* in Cape Verde is to speak of feasting and joy, of striking sounds and colours. Nevertheless, something of the original sense of village or settlement still remains, for if *tabanka* is festivity, it is always the festivity of a village, a neighbourhood or even a cluster of scattered houses. This is why one speaks of Tabanka of Várzea, of Achada Santo António, of Achada Grande (Praia neighbourhoods), of Chã de Tanque, Lém Cabral, and other places on the island. Hence, whether as an institution or as a feast, the word in Santiago Creole retains a metonymic relationship vis-à-vis the Guinean meaning of settlement, in the sense that the part suggests the whole.

Large-scale festivities cannot occur without social actors to organize complex activities and take on responsibility for the efficacy of the performance. In other words, if *tabanka* means festivity, it also means a type of institution that leads or

organizes the feast. Although less visible to the Cape Verdeans of the windward islands and the country's larger urban centres, this institutional component continues to be the *tabanka's* *raison d'être*. Put in this way, the Cape Verde *tabanka* is an institution with a complex structure that recruits members from a territorial base and works as a brotherhood, or a mutual aid association.

As an institutional association, the structure of the *tabanka* copies that of society to create a miniature social system. Just like a society, *tabankas* have chiefs, law and order agents, crooks, prestigious personages, and values and symbols of their own. They also have kings and queens, ministers, physicians, policemen and thieves, soldiers with guns and uniforms, distinguished people as counsellors and ambassadors, and regular, subordinate people who are called *catibos* (captives) and *negas* (black women). In a critical and ironic mode, their subordinate group mimics the slave society of the past and the inequalities of the present. In the vast majority of *tabanka* pageants, this group is classified by the same categories that once referred to slaves. It is mostly made up of women.

*Tabanka* insignias are rated as values. Among them, the banner representing the patron saint has the highest value. It is starkly simple, a metaphoric rendition of the believers' poverty and purity. Besides the patron saint's banner, there are others of a different nature. Extremely colourful, they display very different designs, revealing the workings of a syncretic mindset that voraciously assimilates everything that comes its way. They lend life and colour to the brotherhood members' long excursions towards the houses of the feast promoters, called *reis* (*rainhas*) *de agasalho* (shelter kings or queens), who always live in the neighbouring villages. These insignias of life and colour reflect the Cape Verdeans' particular way of reproducing their own society, which is based on emigration strategies. Only in a society of emigrants can we find, as commonplace objects, banners of Turkish soccer teams, stylized national flags from various countries, and the typical admixture of mass culture in a globalized world, juxtaposing American and Jamaican colours and symbols, a black hero like Bob Marley and an icon of mass culture like Michael Jackson. Alongside flags and banners, musical instruments are also powerful symbols of the *tabankas*: two or three crude drums, a collection of three to six seashells (conches), and a military trumpet in some brotherhoods. The production and distribution of these goods do not satisfy local demand, and their consequent rarity lends prestige to the owner associations.

Also worth considering are the values that are transmitted by these feasts. I limit myself to those values that, with critical irony, attempt to reproduce an idea of order typical of the colonial society that serves as the *tabanka's* model. Three elements are vigorously present at the brotherhood rituals, especially during long pageants for collecting gifts from the shelter kings. First, the value of order and discipline is materialized in the act of queuing up and in the general concern for a highly organized and orderly march. The pageant is more than a mere outing: it is framed as a Creolized rendition of military marches and pilgrimages (Trajano



Filho 2011). The *catibos* and *negas* must remain strictly in single file; there is even a character responsible for whipping them whenever they step out of it. A second feature representing order and social control, satirically lived out at the *tabanka* feast, is the organization of time. Treated in utter caricature, respect for schedule is often acted out in ritual games during the feast. A *tabanka* member who arrives late to any of his activities is punished severely. Taken to a corner that functions as a jail, he is tied up, a crown of thorns on his head, to endure the jeers of passers-by. Thus, with fines and arrests, outlandish rigour in the control of time, and a military-like obsession with queues, the *tabankas* ritually live through the order, discipline and hierarchy of the dominant society in both the present and in the past while also bringing vigour, rhythm and colour to the ritual.

Each *tabanka* has its own patron saint chosen from popular Catholicism with celebrations in June (Saint Anthony, Saint John and Saint Peter). Their image and that of the holy family are kept and venerated in chapels and courts erected in their honour. These are also places for prayer and pleas for abundance, plenty of rain at the right time, good harvests in the coming months and harmony for the district and its residents. Under the protection of the patron saints, these chapels house, for their delight, the offerings of the *tabanka*'s members and its shelter kings and queens. The gifts are auctioned at the end of the common meals that begin on the saint's day, which today last for four or five days.

Despite surface differences in the meaning of the word *tabanka* in Cape Verde and in Guinea, I wish to emphasize some connections between them. In the first place, whether an institution or a festivity, in Santiago Creole the word maintains a metonymic relationship with the idea of a living place, as a part that suggests the whole. Moreover, like *cibanka* among the Baga-Sitem and many other peoples of the Guinea coast, a Cape Verde *tabanka* has a patron saint as its protector spirit, a source of well-being, prosperity, fertility and abundance. The allegories, uniforms and musical instruments of the Cape Verde associations are called *armamento*, which I gloss as 'weaponry'. Military and religious meaning pervades both role ascription in the processions towards the home of the shelter king and the form these pageants take. Commanders, soldiers, policemen and captives parade in a parody of order and discipline. After all, to leave one's place of residence and march through valleys and riverbanks to other places is, cosmologically speaking, to brave the dangers of a no-man's land. Underlying all this are ingrained ideas of protection and defence against both mystical and human enemies in the deepest sense of the African palisaded *tabankas*. Lastly, the existence of these associations in Santiago and the perception the local Creole elites have of them also hint at a constitutive opposition in the Creole world analogous to that in Guinea-Bissau. Here, instead of a cultural cleavage between the spaces of Creoleness and Africanness, the social division is between, on the one hand, the peasants in the interior and the poor in the Praia urban periphery, and on the other, the educated elite of the plateau.

## Across the Ocean: Towards Affection

My analysis of the semantic changes of the word *tabanka* could end here, and the reader could go directly to my concluding remarks. However, I choose to take a more audacious stance and face the semantic turbulences that might have affected the core meaning of this word in its likely journey to the New World. The modal used to express probability or condition and the journey's depiction as but a possibility indicate that we are navigating an ocean of speculations that are hardly falsifiable. There is both *ônus* and *bônus* in such an endeavour. The price we risk paying is widely known: we might be facing a case of false cognate. I firmly believe, however, that we cannot be charged much for it, because one 'can never tell where a word comes from' when dealing with language contact in a diffuse setting (Le Page 1998: 66).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, two bonuses might await us at the finishing line. The first would be the refutation of the allegation of false cognate, which would mean gaining an extra layer of knowledge about the historical flows from the African coast to the Caribbean Islands. The second is somewhat independent of the *ônus* and has to do with the general hypothesis of this work, namely, that intersocietal encounters (in our case, between creolized ecumenes) stir up semantic turbulences in classificatory categories, values and symbols. In the case of encounters between creolized ecumenes, semantic changes affecting a particular cultural category tend to preserve part of the previous meaning it had in its original setting.

The word *tabanka's* journey from the Guinea coast to the Cape Verde islands and the surface semantic shifts that occurred during its travels are related to the unremitting intercommunication between ecumenes (i.e. that of the Upper Guinea Coast, and the Luso-African ones) in the context of the creolization process that gave birth to a Creole society in Cape Verde. These long-term intersocietal encounters would likely have caused some kind of social and cultural turbulence powerful enough to shake the cultural kit of conceptual tools for thinking and conceiving sociability, conviviality, security and protection while still maintaining some degree of continuity with the deep semantic core of the root *\*abank(?)*.

I now turn, very briefly, to a supposedly third moment of the *tabanka* trip, stopping strategically on the island of Trinidad off the coast of Venezuela. Here the word means neither a village (fortified or not) nor a mutual aid institution that manages reciprocity within and across villages. Revealing yet another semantic transformation, the Trinidadian *tabanka* refers to a specific kind of suffering and oppression, somewhat similar to a state biomedicine classifies as a psychopathology. According to anthropologist Roland Littlewood (1998: 121), it refers to 'the inappropriate psychological response to desertion'. This is a working-class cultural category, unlike the idea of adultery, which is restricted to middle-class settings. It happens when a man's wife abandons him, particularly for another

man, and the abandoned husband succumbs to loss and misery rather than resume life as usual. Disheartened, he begins to show signs of lethargy and anorexia and to lose interest in work. He wanders aimlessly through the streets or retires to the solitude of his house to nurture his hatred for the unfaithful woman. He drinks and smokes excessively, eats little or nothing, does not sleep and, in extreme cases, dies of neglect or accident, or commits suicide (Littlewood 1993: 47–52; 1998: 85–86, 117–19).

This kind of disorder, verging on madness, is not caused by the fact of being abandoned, but by the victim's response to abandonment. Moreover, it should not be taken for lovesickness. It only occurs when the man and woman have had a sexual and economic relationship, especially when they were wedded in the Church. In Trinidad, the *tabanka* is basically a form of emotional expression that afflicts men much more frequently than it does women, and appears among the Creole and rural populations as well as the *tibourgs* (petty bourgeoisie) and *béke negres* (black whites) who aspire to the white middle-class lifestyle (Littlewood 1998: 117).<sup>12</sup> Contrary to what one might expect, those unaffected by it take it as an opportunity to heap scorn and irony upon the disgruntled husband. They scoff at his economic and psychological investment in another person in a world riddled with precariousness and individualism. As Littlewood (1998: 121–22) clearly perceived in regard to the humour of *tabanka*, this is not a criticism of the faithfulness and respectability inherent in Christian marriage, but rather of the somewhat snobbish aspirations of persons from the lower strata of society who emulate a lifestyle based on white or local middle-class values. The *tabanka* victim loses his reputation, an important value in the lower ranks of Creole society. He also loses the little respectability he so unsteadily won when he mimicked the bourgeois ethos by getting married, respectability being a central value for the middle strata of society.<sup>13</sup>

With such different renderings in Trinidad, Cape Verde and Guinea, it would be unsurprising if the relationship between these words in Creole languages so far apart were mere homonymy with no common underlying meaning. My research is still very inconclusive, if not negative. I consulted several specialists on Caribbean Creole languages but got no definite answer. Lise Winer told me that the term seems to have been introduced recently; the earliest written record she found dated from 1957. She also referred to vague and highly speculative interpretations that the Trinidadian *tabanka* might come from *tabaka* in Kikongo, a language spoken in the Congo and Angola. *Tabaka* can be glossed as 'sell out or buy up completely' (Winer 2009: 871). In Trinidad (also in Guyana and Grenada, according to Allsopp 2003) it would have acquired the meaning of loss of love. Other authors believe that in the Caribbean, the word comes from a term in Kituba, a 'contact-based' (Creole?) language variety spoken in Central Africa. It is worth noting that a variety of this Creole language, called *Kikongo ya leta* or *Kikongo-matadi*, emerged in late nineteenth century as a lingua franca and later

became the vernacular language of people living at administrative outposts in west, south and east Kinshasa. The expression *Kikongo-matadi* refers to a railroad that connects Matadi (a port town) to Kinshasa. It was built by workers brought in from Senegal and Sierra Leone (Mufwene 2009: 213) who spoke various languages of the West Atlantic stock, source of the root \**abank*(?).

Littlewood (1993: 266) also attempted to pinpoint the etymology of the Trinidadian *tabanka* but concluded that it is obscure and likely to be multiple. He suggests that it comes from a cognate of the French-based Creole *ta banque*, meaning bankruptcy or breach of contract, of the Creole *ti blanc* (little white) or even of the Jamaican *bacha* (little banana, in this case, lack of erection). Another possible origin would be *tabanco*, a Spanish Central American word referring to 'a place for castrated cocks'. Allsopp (2003) suggests it might have come from the cognate (or borrowed word) *tabangke* in Makushi (a Carib language), which means 'wonder.'

In any case, many Africans who arrived in Trinidad as slaves came from the Upper Guinean coast, a region where a number of local languages share the root \**abank*(?), giving credence to the hunch that the term is of Guinean origin. Even if future linguistic research reveals that this is not the case, it seems that the similarity between the Guinean, Cape Verdean and Trinidadian forms is not merely an accidental homonymy, because this part of the Caribbean has been an area of intersection between various cultural ecumenes that arose during creolization processes triggered by European expansion since the late fifteenth century. To Trinidad converged people, language forms and items as well as a repertoire of values and ideas from continental America, other Caribbean Islands, the East Indies, Europe and Africa (including the Upper Guinea Coast). This convergence may have produced a kind of semantic turbulence that altered the original meaning of the word that the Trinidadian *tabanka* derives so as to impregnate it with some connotations (or transformations of them) of the Cape Verdean and Guinean *tabanka*.

Furthermore, the gap in meaning is not too wide; a semantic continuity in the use of the word is visible in the three Creole languages. First, there is a connotation of an intense but ambiguous feeling of security, protection and sociability. The Trinidadian case involves a clear structural inversion, where the positive signal associated with this feeling becomes negative. A second resemblance lies in the mode of parody, caricature and criticism in the *tabanka* of Cape Verde and Trinidad. Finally, in all three countries, the term indicates a basic opposition between social groups or cultural forms: in Guinea, between spaces of Creoleness and Africanness; in Cape Verde, between peasant social forms and the lowest strata of society on one hand, and the educated elite on the other; and in Trinidad, between the structural principles of reputation and respectability, quite similar to the Cape Verdean case. Figure 8.1 synthesizes the various steps taken by this word in its journey from the coast of African to the Caribbean.

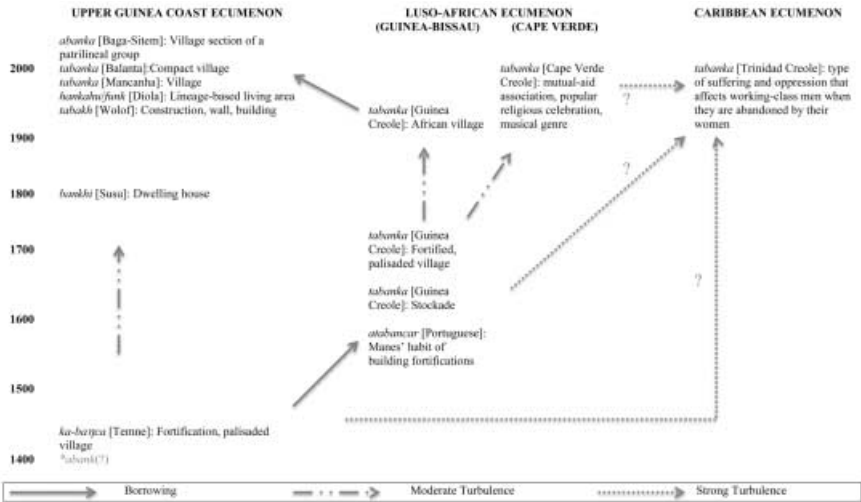


Figure 8.1. Synoptic Chart of Semantic Shifts

### Concluding Remarks

Though I still have a long way to go, I will conclude by saying that a close look at the semantic fluctuations of the term *tabanka* suggests a scenario of historical connections between various cultural ecumenes that, in turn, derive from cultural and linguistic creolization, and all overlap on the Caribbean Islands. I take up the idea of the ecumene from a long anthropological tradition that includes the work of Kroeber (1946), Kopytoff (1987), Hannerz (1991) and Mintz (1996). Inspired by these authors, I take ecumene to mean a field of intense communication through both time and space, where social agents share, alongside a number of isolated traits – idiom, institutions, culinary habits, naming practices and symbolic forms – a deep sense of common history, maintained and reproduced regardless of spatial contiguity (see Mintz 1996: 297).

Kroeber’s ecumene is a ‘great historic unit ... a frame within which a particular combination of processes happened to achieve certain unique results’ (1946: 9). As I see it, though, what makes it unique is not the particular combination of processes or shared cultural traits, but the way its internal differences are acted out. It is bound together by a kind of relationship between alterities that is not based on the logic of distinctive oppositions between sociocentric categories of group identity (Pina Cabral 2010: 7–8), but upon the exercise of a ‘working acceptance’, in Goffman’s expression. This working acceptance, says Goffman (1967: 11), is the fundamental feature of any interaction, as it enables participants in social encounters to deploy self-regulation. Working acceptance is a ritual act. It is in the minutest of interaction rites that we learn how to be perceptive; to have feelings related to the self, a self connected to a positive self-image

(the face); to be proud and dignified when dealing with other people; to display consideration, sensitiveness, tact and demeanour. In short, these tiny rituals require a certain indulgence, a sort of 'temporary truce' that lets the interaction go on even amongst constant offenses.

In contexts of intersubjectivity, the ecumene becomes visible in everyday life when it assures social agents (not necessarily in terms of a reflexive awareness) that they have a shared history, especially regarding how difference is perceived and how persons are made. Thus objectified by social agents, the ecumene whets our appetite for thinking far beyond the diffusion of cultural traits, acculturation or syncretism. As Pina Cabral (2010: 16) states, it makes us identify echoes that allow denizens of the same ecumene to recognize each other. These echoes render their world more intelligible.

Thinking of *tabanka's* long journey from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean islands as part of a process that linked various ecumenes frees us of the empiricist temptation to try to understand that world in terms of the diffusion of individual cultural traits. It also saves us from falling into lazy generic notions such as 'the world in flux', 'Black Atlantic' and others. It forces us to ask two questions I deem quite important. First, what happens when cultural ecumenes come to an intersection? This makes us ponder what sort of turbulence is behind the semantic fluctuations I have just examined, and how strongly they disturb the conceptual kit of cultural categories that frame the experience of the social actors (ideas of protection, security, sociability and reciprocity, as well as the lack of them). The second question addresses the concrete object of my analysis. Although I have focused on the semantic fluctuations of a single lexical item, I hope I have shown that they are associated with continuities and discontinuities in ways of conceiving sociability and difference. True, I could have done this by following the journey of any other cultural object towards the intercommunication between ecumenes. But would I have been able to do so with any object? How do we choose the items we carry in our luggage on these trips that, after all, are no more or less than the expansion and contraction of ecumenes?

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**Wilson Trajano Filho** is an associate professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Brasilia, Brazil, where he researches and teaches anthropology

of Africa, African popular culture, Creolization and creole societies along the Upper Guinea Coast and anthropological theory. He was visiting professor at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais (ICS), University of Lisbon and at the University of Cape Verde. He is an associate of the Upper Guinea Coast research group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. He edited *Lugares, Pessoas e Grupos* (ABA Publicações, 2010) and *Travessias Antropológicas* (ABA Publicações, 2012). With Gustavo Ribeiro he coedited *O campo da Antropologia* (ContraCapa, 2004), and with Jacqueline Knörr, *The Powerful Presence of the Past* (Brill, 2010).

## Notes

1. The spelling of this word varies a lot. In the Portuguese dictionaries, it is spelt *tabanca*, but Creole dictionaries spell it *tabanka*. In this essay I will adopt the latter form because it suggests a non-Portuguese origin.
2. According to Hair (1967: 46), the Baga word is *ke-ban̄ka*, meaning ‘village’.
3. See Horton (1976) for a dynamic model that relates state and stateless societies in West Africa. The pattern of settlement (dispersed and compact villages) plays a key role in this model.
4. I should thank respectively Joanna Davidson and Peter Mark for this information.
5. He also uses this word to refer to the stockade made of posts and pieces of trees that encircled the Mandingo village of Cação, on the River Gambia (1977: 150). Commenting on this passage, Teixeira da Mota (1977: 300–302) notes that other descriptions testify to the existence of palisades in Mandingo villages. However, this does not mean that the word has a Mande origin.
6. It is interesting to note that the Temne word did not enter the English-based Creole spoken by the Krio in the Freetown peninsula, much closer to Temne traditional territory than to Cacheu.
7. See Oliveira (1888–1889: 307): ‘The most important settlements are protected by strong *tabancas* ... around the houses and huts of these villages is constructed a type of wall, with tall and thick trunks of trees’.
8. See also Baptista (2007) for an analysis of congruence between substratal languages and Portuguese in creole formation.
9. I leave unexplored a possible derivation of the Santiagoan Creole *funco* (poor housing, hut) from the West Atlantic root *\*abank(?)*. This word appears in several historical sources meaning house (Álvares 1990), granary (Álvares 1990 [1615]; Kup 1961: 102) chapel or shrine (Álvares 1990) and porch or balcony (Almada 1964: 348). These authors use it in their descriptions of events taking place in the Isle of Bissau and in various parts of Sierra Leone. According to Hair (1977: 266), similar words exist in modern Temne: *αη-fun̄k* (granary) and *αη-pun̄kaη* (balcony, porch). The similarity to the Diola *funk* is remarkable (see above).
10. See also Carreira (1964) and Rougé (2004) for the meanings of this word in the Luso-African cultural universe.
11. The opposition between focused and diffuse linguistic ideologies and practices has been discussed by Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985) and Le Page (1998).
12. Nowadays, the meaning of *tabanka* has been extended to designate bereavement and other losses (Littlewood 1998: 117). It has been employed, e.g., to refer to the feeling of loss related to political competition or disputes, especially after elections, which is called

'political *tabanka*' (cf. Winer 2009: 871). Heike Drotbohm (personal communication) informed me that in Trinidadian urban contexts, the word has been used in colloquial register to express a feeling of longing or missing something precious. In addition, it seems that the word is going through a semantic extension in certain social circles, whereby it begins to play a new role in everyday discourses. The exact direction of this change is not yet clear, but the Trinidadian *tabanka* seems to be a good candidate to stand for the ethos of the country's culture.

13. Littlewood borrows from Wilson (1995) the opposition between reputation and respectability as the two primary principles of Caribbean social structures.

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