

# Popular Brazilian Portuguese through capoeira: from local to global

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The present study examines the process of globalization of popular Brazilian Portuguese (PBP) through the spreading of capoeira outside Brazil. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in New York City and eight years of capoeira practice, my objective is to demonstrate that PBP is the variety of Portuguese that is exported abroad by Brazilian capoeira practitioners, and that non-Brazilian ones are learning this non-standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese as essential to their identity as a community of practice. Consequently, PBP is being detached from language ideologies related to lower social classes originating in Brazil during colonial times, but is still attached to Brazilian national identity and the resistance of blacks to slavery. In demonstrating how the use of PBP extends beyond Brazilian non-elites to also include an international community, I argue that PBP is currently being linked to other forms of symbolic capital by virtue of its increasing use in globalizing contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** capoeira, globalization, popular Brazilian Portuguese, identity, ideologies.

**O português popular do Brasil através da capoeira: do local ao global**  
O presente estudo examina o processo de globalização do português popular do Brasil (PPB) através da disseminação da capoeira fora do Brasil. Com base num trabalho de campo etnográfico na cidade de Nova Iorque e em oito anos de prática de capoeira, o meu objetivo é demonstrar que o PPB é a variedade de português que é exportada para o estrangeiro pelos capoeiristas brasileiros e que os capoeiristas não brasileiros aprendem esta variedade de português não padrão como sendo essencial à sua identidade como comunidade de prática. Assim, o PPB está a desapegar-se das ideologias linguísticas relacionadas com as classes sociais mais baixas criadas no Brasil durante a época colonial, mas ainda está ligado à identidade nacional brasileira e à resistência dos negros à escravidão. Ao demonstrar como o uso do PPB se estende além das não elites brasileiras, para passar a incluir também a comunidade internacional, argumento que o PPB está sendo, atualmente, vinculado a outras formas de capital simbólico em virtude do seu uso crescente em contextos globalizados.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** capoeira, globalização, português popular do Brasil, identidade, ideologias.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article presents empirical research on the global spread of non-standard Brazilian Portuguese through capoeira. It aims to demonstrate that popular Brazilian Portuguese (henceforth PBP) is the variety of Brazilian Portuguese that is exported abroad by Brazilian *capoeiristas* (*i.e.* capoeira practitioners), and that non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are learning this non-standard variety as essential to their identity as a community of practice. As a consequence, the use of PBP is being gradually decontextualized from language ideologies related to social class and race that were originally constructed in Brazil during colonial times and that categorized it as an inferior variety, but remains strongly attached to ideologies about Brazilian identity and the anticolonial movement. Through capoeira, PBP is acquiring new nuances of indexical meaning. One of the most prominent aspects of the latter is that such language variety, when used in the *roda*, *i.e.* the space of capoeira performance, produces values of authenticity and empowerment attached to various forms of resistance of the vast population of African descent in Brazil. The article also describes two fundamental grammatical parameters of PBP, *i.e.* nominal and verbal agreement, and demonstrates that non-native speakers of Portuguese have access to this variety of Portuguese through the capoeira world.

In this article, I ask the following questions: What evidence points to PBP being used in capoeira? How is PBP being transmitted through capoeira, from a national to a global scale? What language ideologies are associated with PBP, in Brazil and in the global capoeira community, that argue for the importance of learning PBP for capoeira?

To answer these questions, I first discuss the spread of capoeira around the world and look closer at the emergent relationship between capoeira and PBP. I then present the current study, and examine two linguistic features of PBP that are present in the capoeira world. I also underline the importance of speaking Portuguese (likely PBP) to fully participate in capoeira and to show belonging to the community of practice, and I discuss the importance of music and songs to the development of capoeira games. Next, I delve deeper into the experience of two *capoeiristas* and their learning of Portuguese as a second language through capoeira. In conclusion, I argue that PBP is currently being linked to other forms of symbolic capital by virtue of its increasing use in globalizing contexts while it is extending beyond Brazilian non-elites to also include an international community.

The current research complements the work of historians who took interest in the origins of capoeira (Assunção 2005; Desch-Obi 2008; Talmon-Chvaicer 2008), anthropologists and ethnographers who studied and analyzed capoeira from different points of view, such as genre and embodiment (*e.g.* Lewis 1995), neuroanthropology (Downey 2010), gender performances within capoeira

(Stephens and Delamont 2014; Mukherjee and Sen 2017; Owen and Ugolotti 2018; Joseph and Falcous 2019), diaspora and multiculturalism (Joseph 2012; Hedegard 2013; Almeida *et al.* 2013; Wulfhorst, Rocha and Morgan 2014), or authenticity (Rosario, Stephens and Delamont 2010; Almeida *et al.* 2013), and finally linguists who investigated features of PBP (*cf.* Guy 1981; Holm 1992; Bouchard 2013).

Note that most of the information given in this article is related to capoeira Angola, one of the two main styles of capoeira (the other one being Regional capoeira). I am also focusing on the perspectives and communicative practices of what *Mestre* João Grande refers to as *os discípulos* [the disciples], because, as he said, “*aluno é uma coisa, discípulo é outra coisa*” [a student is one thing, a disciple is another thing]. According to him, the disciples are the students who place capoeira in the center of their life, and who are entirely committed to their capoeira group and *mestre* [master]. In this article, I will interchangeably refer to them as students or *capoeiristas*, as is customary among practitioners.

#### THE GLOBALIZATION OF CAPOEIRA AND PBP

Capoeira is a game, a fight, a dance, a philosophy, a way of life; it is a space of linguistic, corporal, and social mediation. Capoeira is a “theater of liberation” (Lewis 1992: 13); it was created in Brazil under the regime of slavery between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> According to Lewis (1992: 5), “capoeira is a delicate balance between domination and liberation, between fight and dance [and] those creative tensions generate an endless fascinating interplay.” It combines physical interaction, instrumental music, singing and oral poetry. Although dance and fight are generally considered to be antithetical, capoeira is often referred to as *dança-luta* [dance-fight] (Lewis 1992). It is a dialogue between two bodies moving to the rhythm of the instruments. Therefore, rhythm, lyrics and songs are important to capoeira, as they lead the game and provide its beauty. The songs are written and sung in PBP, the main language used in capoeira.

Capoeira is also a manifestation of the Brazilian culture, and many Brazilians consider it an important Afro-Brazilian contribution to the country’s cultural heritage. It was classified by UNESCO in 2014 as Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the 1970s, capoeira started to expand and to be practiced outside Brazil. Since then, it has been performed everywhere in the world, by

1 That capoeira was created in Brazil is the most probable hypothesis according to the historical documents. However, there are two other hypotheses: (1) capoeira was born in Central Africa and was brought intact to Brazil by African slaves, and (2) capoeira was created by indigenous peoples of Brazil, which would explain why it is called *capoeira*, from *caã puêra*, a word of Tupi origin that means *mato ralo* [low vegetation] (IPHAN 2007).

people of different ages and social backgrounds. Capoeira is also considered to be one of the main agents for the spreading of Brazilian Portuguese around the world (together with music and *telenovelas*, soap operas, for instance).<sup>2</sup> The variety of Brazilian Portuguese that is conveyed through capoeira is the variety that Guy (1981) and Holm (1992) labeled as PBP. I define PBP the same way as Holm: “the language spoken by lower-class Brazilians with little education. It differs considerably from Standard Brazilian Portuguese, the literary language usually spoken by educated middle- and upper-class Brazilians, particularly in formal circumstances” (Holm 1992: 37). This definition does not imply that there is only one uniform or standardized PBP throughout the country but rather that the set of regional vernacular varieties, distinct from standard Brazilian Portuguese (SBP), can be grouped under one category. Consequently, PBP refers to a range of varieties; it includes all non-standard varieties of Portuguese spoken in Brazil. There exists a vast literature on standard ideologies (Silverstein 1996; Milroy and Milroy 1999; Hill 2008). The standard is a creation, the belief that there is a most prestigious form of a language, or a most highly ranked form. The ideology of standard is the belief that among local varieties of any given languages one of them is “correct,” so the other ones are not correct, or not as correct. It is usually the highly-educated people who speak a variety of language that is the closest to the standard. It is believed that “prestigious people speak the prestigious form, which deserves its prestige because it is correct” (Hill 2008: 35). Such belief definitely contrasts with the view of linguistic anthropologists and linguists, who consider all varieties and languages to be systematic and rule-governed (Hill 2008).

Note that the speakers’ race or skin color is not mentioned in the linguistic distinction made by Holm between the standard and the popular varieties. Although both are spoken by people of all ethnicities, the facts cannot be denied: in Brazil, most of the lower social classes are black, and blacks are underrepresented in the higher social classes. In the 2010 census, the poorest Brazilians included 76% African-Brazilians and 24% whites (Phillips 2011).

Through the globalization of capoeira, non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are learning a non-standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese. Speaking this variety is essential for *capoeiristas* to grow in their practice. It allows them to have access to the *mestres*’ knowledge and to understand the meaning of the songs. Songs, their lyrics and the music are central to capoeira. In order to take those elements into consideration, I constructed my theoretical framework based on the relationship between language, community of practice (*cf.* Wenger 1998, 2000), and globalization (*cf.* Appadurai 2001; Blommaert 2010).

2 In a personal e-mail exchange, *Mestre* Bocão wrote that “the Ministry of Culture considers capoeira to be the main responsible for the spreading of the Portuguese language around the world” (author’s translation).

Most people belong to several communities of practice (*e.g.*, sport teams, friendship groups, family, work place), and their belonging to communities may change over time. These communities of practice foster the development of a shared identity among members. According to Wenger (1998), three interrelated terms define a community of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. The fact that a shared repertoire is central to defining a community of practice is of particular interest to this paper, as I argue that PBP is the language used to show belonging to the capoeira world. Community of practice is a conceptual framework that allows us to think and investigate learning as a process of social participation (Wenger 1998). According to Eckert (2006: 683), a community of practice “provides an accountable link [...] between the individual, the group, and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice emerges as a function of this link.” Instead of characterizing a social group as geographically defined (which is possible with the speech community perspective, for example – *cf.* Gumperz 1968; Labov 1972), or as sharing abstract characteristics (*e.g.* socioeconomic class, gender), the concept of community of practice does so in virtue of shared practices (Eckert 2006).

Capoeira is practiced on five continents, and in more than 150 countries (IPHAN 2007: 8). Previous studies related to the globalization of capoeira include Delamont and Stephens (Delamont and Stephens 2008; Stephens and Delamont 2014), and Joseph (2012) on the diasporic capoeira (in UK and Canada), Brito and Lewgoy (2012), and Wulfhorst, Rocha and Morgan (2014) on the transnationalization of capoeira, as well as Robitaille (2013) on the shifting meanings and values attached to capoeira in the context of neoliberalism (in USA and Canada), and Almeida *et al.* (2013) or Hedegard (2013) on the marketing of capoeira, among others.

Globalization as a process is characterized by an intensive flow of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the world; it is driven by technological innovation and is producing new patterns of global and communicative activity, mainly characterized by mobility (Blommaert 2010). It is a system that generates opportunities, possibilities, and progress, as well as constraints, problems, and regression. Globalization facilitates the mobility of people, which entails the mobility of linguistic and sociolinguistic resources. Today, people, languages and places can no longer be perceived as spatially fixed; we are dealing with mobile resources, speakers and markets. However, all these flows in the actual world-in-motion are in a relation of disjuncture, which creates imbalance and “fundamental problems of livelihood, equity, suffering, justice, and governance” (Appadurai 2001: 6). Through these flows, capoeira and PBP are exported to outside Brazil. PBP is a variety that used to be restricted to certain communities in Brazil, but due to the globalization of capoeira, has become increasingly spoken around the world.

The globalization of capoeira differs from the globalization of other martial arts such as judo and karate (Japan), kung fu (China) and taekwondo (Korea). According to Bowman (2010), the spread of these martial arts was first related to the military, margins and migration; they developed in sites of conflict, and their “dissemination was linked to the cultural and social diasporas that spread out from these historical sites” (Bowman 2010: 436). However, since the 1970s, their dissemination correlates mainly to global media. Today, the presence of a *mestre* is not necessary to guarantee the style’s authenticity, and there is no need to learn Japanese, Mandarin, or Korean to be affiliated to the group. In capoeira, authenticity and direct lineage are still important (cf. Almeida *et al.* 2013; Hedegard 2013). When a *capoeirista* comes to visit *Mestre João Grande* at his academy, the master’s first question is generally “*Quem é seu Mestre?*” [Who’s your Master?]. Such a popular culture phenomenon spreads the use of non-standard languages while the elite language has no similar medium of dissemination.

In the 1970s, capoeira grew throughout Brazil, but also started to expand beyond the country’s borders in the context of globalization. The first *mestre* to move to the United States was *Mestre Jelon*, in 1974. In 1990, he brought in *Mestre João Grande*. *Mestre João Grande* is a black Brazilian from Bahia, a state in Northeastern Brazil considered to be the cradle of capoeira (cf. Hedegard 2013). He was a student of *Mestre Pastinha* (1889-1981), the father of capoeira Angola. Today, *Mestre João Grande* is a legend of capoeira; in 2001, he was awarded the National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts, which is one of the most prestigious awards for artists who support and contribute to the nation’s traditional arts heritage. His role in the globalization of capoeira was significant; before moving to New York City, he travelled all around the world doing folkloric shows, participated in movies and TV shows, and promoted capoeira as a sport accessible to non-Brazilians.<sup>3</sup> As the anthropologist Greg Downey said in an interview (in 2004), “*Mestre João Grande não virou americano, mas fez os americanos mais brasileiros*” [*Mestre João Grande didn’t become American, but he made Americans become more Brazilian*]. Still today, at the age of 86 (he was born in 1933), *Mestre João Grande* travels regularly; in the year and a half that I spent training at his academy, he went to Brazil, Japan, Spain, Italy, Serbia, Chile, and other cities in the United States. *Mestre João Grande* believes that God put him on Earth to teach capoeira (“*Deus me deixou no mundo pra ensinar a capoeira*”). He also remembers his *mestre*, *Mestre Pastinha*, telling him and *Mestre Pequeno*: “*Vocês dois, estou ensinando pro mundo conhecer a capoeira*” [You two, I’m teaching you so the whole world can know about capoeira].

3 For example, *Mestre João Grande* appeared in *Sesame Street*, a long-running American children’s television series, broadcasted around the world. A video of his participation is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxG0uh3SPw0>> (last access in May 2020).

Capoeira is now popular internationally thanks to the work of *capoeiristas* who have decided to divulge their art abroad; they are informal ambassadors of the Brazilian culture. Most *capoeiristas* who teach abroad are successful in terms of status, number of students, and media support, but not necessarily economics.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned by Joseph (2012: 1083), “few teachers can make a living from capoeira exclusively.” Still, capoeira is an opportunity for talented *capoeiristas* (mainly young men, often from lower social classes) to emigrate. As Downey said,

“[w]ith the culture of capoeira abroad, you have an encounter that is not so normal in other places. There are people from almost everywhere in the world who are running away from the poverty of their country, but in Brazil, you have poor people who have the capacity to travel thanks to capoeira. That’s different” [interview in 2004, author’s translation].

Capoeira is a local product that has become (and is still becoming) global, but it remains linked to its Brazilian identity and African roots, maybe as a tool for marketing and promoting capoeira around the world (*cf.* Almeida *et al.* 2013).<sup>5</sup> As demonstrated in this article, it is also linked to PBP, the variety of Portuguese that the *capoeiristas* have access to through capoeira and which the majority of them learn. Of course, some decide to take Portuguese classes on the side, which gives them access to SBP. However, in this article, I am mainly interested in *capoeiristas* who learned Portuguese through their capoeira community.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

### *Research purpose*

The objective of this research is twofold. First, I discuss the process of globalization of PBP through the spread of capoeira outside Brazil, and how this variety is essential to the identity of a *capoeirista*. Second, I examine two linguistic

4 According to Nestor Capoeira (1995), *capoeiristas* abroad are also successful in terms of money. However, I do not agree. In Canada, the United States, and Europe, I have seen and I know of many capoeira teachers who struggle economically. Most of them have other jobs on the side to earn a living (Joseph 2012). That being said, things might have been different for capoeira teachers in the early 90s when Nestor Capoeira wrote his book, or perhaps his definition of economic success differs from mine.

5 Robitaille (2007, 2013) has interesting discussions about the changing discourse of capoeira in order to include non-Brazilians. According to her, changes can be observed at the level of identity: “While maintaining strategic links with consensual Brazilian culture, globally capoeira is detaching from that culture and appropriating its own distinct space, renegotiating its links with national identity” (2007: 213). Also, one might refer to Wulforth, Rocha and Morgan (2014) for a discussion on capoeira from a globalised perspective.

features that are characteristic of PBP, *i. e.* the absence of nominal and of verbal agreement, and show their use in the capoeira world. The use of these features (among others) in capoeira songs and the speech of *mestres* points to PBP as being the vernacular among *capoeiristas*.

### ***Fieldwork and data***

This study is based on eight years of capoeira practice in Canada, the United States of America, and Brazil, but focuses more specifically on an eighteen-month fieldwork in New York City, at the Capoeira Angola Center of *Mestre* João Grande. Observation and ethnographic field notes are at the base of this reflexivity regarding the relation between the spread of PBP and the globalization of capoeira. I also conducted a small number of interviews in order to find answers to more specific questions and delve deeper in the experience of a few *capoeiristas*. In this paper, I will present the portrait of two students of *Mestre* João Grande, Alisha and Felipe (pseudonyms), *capoeiristas* who have learned Portuguese as a second language through capoeira. I also present excerpts of my interviews with *Mestre* João Grande himself.

### ***Position of the researcher***

My background in the capoeira world means that I know the participants in my study. I have trained capoeira for eight years and I consider myself a *capoeirista*. Among these years, one and a half was spent in New York City, training with *Mestre* João Grande and his students (at his Capoeira Angola Center). During my fieldwork, this reality made me feel as an insider and an outsider at the same time, since I was shifting from one position to another. I would alternate between being a student of *Mestre* João Grande and a researcher on the history of capoeira, and between being a friend and member of the group and being an ethnographer observing and analyzing the group.

This double or multiple positioning can be advantageous; it can lead to understand that fieldwork is not “a collection of data by a dehumanized machine” (Okely 1992: 3). The fact that I already possessed knowledge about the field certainly facilitated my work within it, and the research itself. As Vellet wrote, “[i]t is this kind of knowledge, coming from the inside, from deeply felt experience, that allows us to build a pertinent, sensitive, and experimental fieldwork question” (2011: 224). Robitaille (2013) also underlined the importance of involving the researcher’s own body in the research process; this methodology has been called “embodiment” or “embodied research” (*e.g.* Lewis 1995; Downey 2010). This type of research goes beyond the visual and the rational; it recognizes the knowledge grounded in bodily experience and its importance. The body is perceived as a tool to collect knowledge, which “can also help reduce the gap between scholarly work and the studied, embodied practice” (Robitaille 2013: 29).



The fact that I have trained capoeira for so many years gave me access to important embodied meaning and knowledge performed in the *roda*. *Roda* means “circle” or “ring”; it is the space to play capoeira, but also an event, a game, or a performance (Lewis 1992). It is the musical and spatial set in which the game occurs. The *roda* is formed by the *capoeiristas*, waiting for their turn to play, by the musicians playing the instruments that mark the rhythm for the *capoeiristas* playing, and sometimes by spectators of the game that is being performed. My own experience also allowed me to communicate easily with the capoeira *mestre* and the students that I interviewed.

However, being an insider in the field also has drawbacks. During my fieldwork, putting aside my subjectivity, background knowledge, and engagement with the group was a constant challenge. But by acknowledging my double positioning, I could go back to the interviews, the literature, and the theoretical framework to find explanations to my observations.

#### LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF PBP AND CAPOEIRA SONG LYRICS

The history of Brazil is marked by the contact between the Portuguese colonizers and “thousands of alloglots, speakers of more than a thousand indigenous languages and almost two hundred languages that came from the mouths of almost four million Africans brought to the country as slaves” (translated from Lucchesi, Baxter and Ribeiro 2009: 41). The colonization of Brazil from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of a system of slavery forced the encounter between different cultures and languages in the territory of this Portuguese colony. This kind of contact, be it forced or desired, creates considerable linguistic changes. In the case of PBP, two of these changes are the absence of verbal and of nominal agreement, differing from SBP and European Portuguese (EP). These features are found in traditional capoeira songs performed around the world by *capoeiristas* of different linguistic backgrounds. The ones presented in this paper are traditional capoeira songs. The lyrics were verified with *Mestre* João Grande, and compared with two main books for capoeira songs: one from the Capoeira Angola Center of *Mestre* João Grande (which is a little handmade book that *capoeiristas* can buy at the academy), and another one from the Academy of João Pequeno de Pastinha, in Salvador (bought in 2007). In this section, I will present the two linguistic features and give examples of songs in which they can be found. The examples of PBP come from interviews I conducted with *Mestre* João Grande. In the translation of the examples, I use the following abbreviations commonly used in linguistics: PL for plural form, SG for singular form, and NEG for negation. I also use underlining to draw the readers’ attention to specific elements of the examples.

First, among the features that distinguish PBP from SBP is the variation in the use of plural markers in the noun phrase. In fact, PBP often exhibits

absence of agreement flexion between the noun and its modifiers in a noun phrase. This can be seen in the following two examples:

(1)

PBP *Os mestres têm que ensiná os aluno a falá português.*

Eng The.PL masters have to teach the.PL student.SG to speak Portuguese  
[Masters have to teach students how to speak Portuguese.]

(2)

PBP *Deus e os orixá me deram esse dom.*

Eng God and the.PL orixá.SG me gave.PL this gift  
[God and the orixás gave me this gift.]

In these two interview excerpts, there is absence of agreement between the definite article in its plural form (*os*) and the nouns in their singular form (*aluno* and *orixá*). In SBP, the plural form of these nouns is marked with a final -s (*alunos* and *orixás*). *Orixás* are Afro-Brazilian deities. *Mestre* João Grande often talks about the *orixás* and *candomblé*, which is one of the main Afro-Brazilian religions. *Mestre* João Grande has an altar in his academy, and he considers it to be sacred; no students can touch it or get close to it.

This absence of plural marking is also found in capoeira songs. Here are two examples of songs in which we can see the absence of plural marking (3) and the absence of number agreement (4):

(3) *Chuê chuá*

PBP

*Eu pisei na folha seca*

*Ouvi fazer chuê chuá*

*Chuê chuê chuê chuá*

*Ouvi fazer chuê chuá*

SBP

*Eu pisei nas folhas secas*

*Ouvi fazer chuê chuá*

*Chuê chuê chuê chuá*

*Ouvi fazer chuê chuá*

English

I stepped on dry leaves

I heard *chuê chuá*

*Chuê chuê chuê chuá*

I heard *chuê chuá*

[traditional capoeira song; *chuê chuá* refers to the sound of dead and dried leaves when one steps on them]

(4) *Adeus Santo Amaro*

PBP

*Adeus Santo Amaro*

*Vou ver, vou pra lá*

*Ê Santo Amaro*

*Vou ver os Angoleiro de lá*

SBP

*Adeus Santo Amaro*

*Vou ver, vou para lá*

*Ê Santo Amaro*

*Vou ver os Angoleiros de lá*

English

Goodbye Saint Amaro

I'll see, I'm going there

Ê Saint Amaro

I'll see the Angoleiros from there

[*Mestre* João Grande]

In the first song (3), the whole noun phrase is in the singular form (*na folha seca*) although the meaning is of stepping on many dried leaves (*nas folhas secas*, in SBP). In the second song (4), there is no nominal agreement between the definite article in its plural form (*os*) and the noun in its singular form (*Angoleiro* instead of *Angoleiros*). Note that the absence of number agreement is the most common verbally; in capoeira song books, “correction” is often made to write the songs in a more standard variety.

Additionally, in PBP, noun phrase and verb don’t always agree in number, and not always correspond to the same grammatical person. Here are two excerpts from the interview with *Mestre* João Grande that demonstrate the absence of verbal agreement in his speech. Note that in the two following sentences (5, 6) the subject noun phrases are in plural form while verbs are used in the singular:

(5)

PBP: *Os que não viaja, pode ser porque não tem (têm?)*

Eng: The.PL ones that NEG travel.SG, might be because NEG has (have?)  
[The ones who don’t travel, it might be because they don’t have]

PBP: *oportunidade, ou porque não gosta.*

Eng: opportunity, or because NEG like.SG  
[the opportunity or because they don’t like it.]

(6)

PBP: *Todos os movimentos da natureza sai da capoeira.*

Eng: All the.PL movement.PL of nature come.SG from the capoeira  
[All movements of nature come from capoeira Angola.]

In SBP, the verbs would be in their plural form – *viajam* and *gostam* in (5), and *saem* in (6). The verb *ter* [to have] has a similar pronunciation in the singular and plural third persons (as in 5): *tem* [he has] and *têm* [they have]. Therefore, in this case it is difficult to know if the speaker used the singular or the plural form.

Absence of verbal agreement is typical of PBP, and it can be observed in capoeira songs:

(7) *Foi agora que eu cheguei*

PBP	SBP	English
<i>Foi agora que cheguei</i>	<i>Foi agora que cheguei</i>	I’ve arrived now
<i>Me mandaram me chamar</i>	<i>Mandaram-me chamar</i>	They called me
<i>Para ver os angoleiros</i>	<i>Para ver os angoleiros</i>	To see the <i>Angoleiros</i>
<i>Pra <u>puder nós</u> vadiar</i>	<i>Para <u>poder/podermos</u> vadiar</i>	So we can <i>vadiar</i>
		[ <i>Mestre</i> João Grande]

(8) *Cala boca menino*

PBP	SBP	English
<i>Cala boca menino que tu apanha</i>	<i>Cala boca menino que tu apanhas</i>	Shut up kid, you'll take a beating
<i>Que tu apanha, que tu apanha</i>	<i>Que tu apanhas, que tu apanhas</i>	You'll take a beating, you'll take a beating
		[traditional capoeira song]

The agreement of the second singular personal pronoun *tu* [you], with a verb in third person singular is common in some regions of Brazil, but it is not in Bahia, where capoeira originates from. Note that Lewis (1992: 47) translates *vadiar* (as in 7) as “to be idle, to loaf, to bum around.” I would add to his definition “to play”; for example, *vamos vadiar* can mean “let’s play (capoeira).”

The *mestres* and the songs are usually the first and main contacts that non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* have with Portuguese. As shown in the next section, the variety of Portuguese that *capoeiristas* have access to within their community of practice is actually PBP.

## MUSIC, LYRICS, AND NON-STANDARD FEATURES

Capoeira was outlawed in Brazil between 1890 and 1940. With *Mestre Bimba* and *Mestre Pastinha*, capoeira was transformed from a fight into a game, from an unorganized street violence into a structured martial art. In this section, I will focus on the musical side of capoeira, discussing the songs, the lyrics and the language. Note that the information related to capoeira is surrounded by secrets, doubts, and hidden meanings. As Robitaille (2007) mentioned, capoeira was created to resist the dominant system. Therefore, its language and its structure were for a long time exclusively accessible to the *capoeiristas*, and nowadays it can still be incomprehensible to the outsiders.

Music is primordial in a *roda*. The songs take the form of call and response, which is characteristic of African and African-American music (Lewis 1992). In a *roda*, the *capoeiristas* are also the musicians. They alternate between playing capoeira in the *roda*, playing the musical instruments, and simply watching the games. All the songs are in Portuguese, or as I propose, in PBP. Capoeira songs pass on important messages and values. They can praise God, pay tribute to aspects of the game or to old *mestres*, transmit important values (such as equality, trust, friendship, hardwork, etc.), or describe historical and cultural situations and events. Here is an example of a *ladainha* [litaney] in which advices based on life experience are passed on from older practitioners to younger ones (e.g. money is not essential, letting go is important):

<i>No céu entra quem merece</i>	You enter heaven on your merits,
<i>Na terra vale é quem tem.</i>	On Earth what you own is all that counts
<i>Passá bem ou passá mal,</i>	Fare you well or fare you poorly,
<i>Tudo na vida é passá, camará.</i>	All on this Earth is farewell, comrade.
	[traditional capoeira song]

Here is a short example of a song, a *corrido*, “running song”:

<i>Dá, dá, dá no nego</i>	Hit, hit, hit the Black
<i>No nego você não dá</i>	The Black you don't hit
<i>Mas se der vai apanhá</i>	But if you do you will take a beating
	[traditional capoeira song]

This song makes reference to slavery and the persecution by the police; it is also an analysis of the capoeira game, of the actions and reactions of the *capoeiristas* in a game (Barbosa 2005). *Nego* is the popular form of the word *negro*, “black,” and is commonly used to refer to black people. This is an example of the words used in PBP. It is often used in capoeira songs, especially in the traditional ones. Most capoeira *mestres* accept the use of this word, and do not see it as a pejorative term. However, *Mestre* João Grande disagrees: “*Eu observo muito, e sei que o preto se sente envergonhado quando ouve a palavra nego. Mesmo quando não fala nada, o negro fica triste quando ouve isso*” [I observe a lot, and I know that the black is ashamed when he hears the word *black*. Even if he doesn't say anything, he becomes sad when he hears that]. As a solution, *Mestre* João Grande adapted the songs: he uses *moleque* or *menino* [little boy], instead of *nego*, and *sinhá* [lady], the form used to call the *senhora*, *i.e.* the wife of the slave owner, instead of *nega*. It is interesting to think about how capoeira is also a critique of racism. For example, the following song was written by a white capoeira *mestre* and highlights the brotherhood between black and white *capoeiristas*:

“Sometimes they call me a negro, thinking that they will humiliate me. But what they don't know, is that it only reminds me, that I come from that race, which fought for its freedom. [...] Capoeira powerful weapon, a struggle of liberation, whites and blacks in the *roda*, hug each other like brothers. I ask: Comrade, what is mine? It is my brother” (translated by Assunção 2005: 209).

Traditional songs are important in capoeira, and most of them were written by old capoeira Angola *mestres*. But new songs are constantly written, and improvisation during the game is also possible. In fact, the lead singer can improvise and say things about the game, the players, or people in the *roda* in

order to tell the players what to do, or just to make people laugh. According to Lewis, “[t]his was an essential aspect of singing in the past, still understood by Angola-style *mestres* today, that represents part of the challenge of attaining complete mastery of the sport” (1992: 163). For example, I remember hearing a *capoeirista*, who was just about to play, sing “*Jogue comigo com muito cuidado, com muito cuidado que meu joelho tá quebrado*” [Play with me very carefully, very carefully because my knee hurts]. The original lyrics of the song do not refer to knee pain, but the player was recovering from a knee problem and was letting his opponent know about his condition and his desire to play more carefully.

The variety of Portuguese used in the traditional and innovative songs is PBP, which is the variety of Portuguese used by most of the *capoeiristas*, and in the capoeira world in general. Another evidence of this is the difficulty for Brazilian non-*capoeiristas* to understand the capoeira songs. In a discussion with a Brazilian friend (from a higher social class of Rio de Janeiro) whom I asked for help for the translation of the songs for this article, I noted how difficult it was for her to help me: “*Eu não sempre entendo as letras das músicas de capoeira! Os capoeiristas têm um vocabulário próprio, palavras dos africanos, do Nordeste, sei lá. Tem coisas que não fazem sentido pra mim!*” [I don’t always understand the lyrics of the capoeira songs! *Capoeiristas* have their own vocabulary, words coming from Africans, from North-Eastern Brazil, I don’t know. They say things that don’t make sense to me!]. Typical features of PBP, which are considered low prestige in SBP and EP, are not perceived as negatively globally (in the capoeira world) as they are locally (in Brazil in general). One of the possible explanations is that non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are not aware that the variety of Portuguese spoken in the capoeira world differs from SBP. When I asked one of my interviewees if she thought there was a special way of Portuguese in capoeira, she said she wasn’t sure: “You know, Portuguese is a second language for me. So I don’t really recognize the accents, the different ways of speaking or anything. To me, Portuguese is Portuguese.” Not surprisingly, people outside of Brazil, non-native speakers, do not necessarily recognize the social stigma attached to different varieties. And when they do, they accept it as a marker of capoeira identity.

A recent example that illustrates this observation does not refer to a capoeira song, but rather to the advertising of a capoeira event (see figure 1). In April 2013, a capoeira meeting was organized in New York City, in the academy of *Mestre* João Grande. The name was “*Os grandes mestres que me ensinou,*” which could be translated as “The great masters who taught me.” However, in this sentence, the subject *os grandes mestres* [the great masters] is in plural form, but the verb *ensinou* [taught] is used in the singular form. In SBP, this sentence would be “*Os grandes mestres que me ensinaram,*” with the verb in its plural form. While some students did not appreciate the fact that there was a “mistake” in the flyers, the organizer of the event decided to keep this non-standard feature, which she considered to be a feature of the speech of *Mestre* João

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Figure 1 – Capoeira event in New York City, April 2013, *Os grandes mestres que me ensinou*.  
Source: Personal archive.

Grande: “This is how *Mestre* talks!” This suggests that PBP is perceived as being the variety spoken by the practitioners who have exported capoeira throughout the world, and probably as being a more authentic variety of Portuguese spoken within the community of practice.

#### WHY CAPOEIRISTAS LEARN PORTUGUESE

Learning Portuguese, and likely PBP, is essential to grasp (as best as possible) the entire meaning of capoeira and to participate in this community of practice. The importance of speaking Portuguese to fully participate in capoeira was underlined by all the *capoeiristas* I have discussed with. According to *Mestre* João Grande, “*tem que falar português para ensinar capoeira. Os mestre têm que ensiná os aluno a falá português. Todos os alunos*

*do Japão cantam em português*” [one must speak Portuguese to teach capoeira. The masters must teach Portuguese to their students. All the students in Japan sing in Portuguese]. Alisha, one of the *capoeiristas* I interviewed, said that “if you don’t speak Portuguese, you don’t get the full experience. You just get the physical part of it. But capoeira is more than that. How do you understand songs, stories, teachings, and all that if you don’t speak Portuguese?” Learning Portuguese is an exciting part of learning capoeira, as it brings you closer to its essence. According to Downey,

“foreigners find in Brazilians part of a personality they want to develop in themselves. They find a part that is more spontaneous, more artistic, softer, more social, happier, especially in the personality of the capoeira masters” [interview in 2004, author’s translation].

Speaking Portuguese, especially the non-standard variety of Portuguese spoken by the capoeira *mestres*, is certainly one of the tools to become (or feel) more Brazilian, and to display their belonging to the community of practice of *capoeiristas*.

Alisha underlined the importance of speaking Portuguese when learning and practicing capoeira, but also the pride of Brazilians in their language:

“You could train in another language, but you would lose a lot, because the *fonte* [source] is Brazil and Portuguese. You know, Brazilians are so nationalistic; they are proud and attached to their language. For me, coming from an African diaspora background, I thought Portuguese was the colonizers’ language, so it was hard for me to understand why they are so attached to Portuguese.”

To understand better the importance of learning Portuguese, and more specifically PBP, for non-Brazilian *capoeiristas*, the next section presents two portraits of students of *Mestre João Grande* who have been practicing capoeira for many years in New York City.

#### SPEAKERS PORTRAITS

*Mestre João Grande* does not speak English. To him, this is not a problem, since capoeira should be taught in Portuguese: “*No consulado, perguntaram pra mim como que ia dar aula pra falante de inglês. Expliquei que mostrava movimento assim [com o corpo], que mostrava palavra por palavra*” [At the consulate, they asked me how I could teach classes to English speakers. I explained to them that I show the moves like this [with his body], and that I teach word for word]. To communicate with *Mestre João Grande* and to have access to his knowledge, his students must learn his variety of Portuguese.<sup>6</sup> To learn more about the relationship between capoeiristas and PBP, and about the language spoken by capoeiristas in general, I interviewed Felipe and Alisha, two capoeiristas who have been students of *Mestre João Grande* since 1999 and 1994, respectively. Both interviewees speak a non-standard variety of Portuguese that they have learned through their capoeira practice. They speak it with a foreign accent, but can express themselves very well. The interviews were carried out in English, which is a language that Felipe and Alisha feel more comfortable with.

Felipe is from the Dominican Republic. He moved to New York City with his family when he was 14 years old. He has been living in the United States for 22 years. He speaks Spanish as first language, and English and Portuguese

6 As noted by one of the anonymous reviewers, it is a little unusual for a *mestre* to make no attempt to speak the local language of the country in which they live and teach. This might be related to the fact that *Mestre João Grande* is such a legendary figure, and because he was already 57 years old when he moved to New York City. Many capoeira teachers and *mestres* learn the local language, especially when they immigrate at a young age. Classes can then be taught mixing the local language and PBP.



as second languages. Felipe started to learn Portuguese when he started to train capoeira 20 years ago. He saw people training and was attracted right away to what seemed to be a mix of acrobatics, dance, music, and fight. When I asked him why he decided to learn Portuguese, Felipe gave me four main reasons: to communicate with his *mestre*, to get a direct access to the knowledge of his *mestre* (*i. e.* with no translation taking place between them), to understand the capoeira songs, and to communicate with other *capoeiristas* of the world (as Portuguese is usually the language they have in common, regardless of their origin).

Felipe learned Portuguese through capoeira: “I haven’t studied Portuguese at school or anything. I just picked it up like that, with time, in conversations with *Mestre*, when learning the capoeira songs, and also when talking to other *capoeiristas* in Brazil when I went there to train.” Felipe has travelled with his *mestre* to Brazil, Italy, and Spain. He said that when he speaks with other *capoeiristas*, whether it is in Portuguese or in English, he uses a vocabulary that is specific to capoeira. Some of the examples that came up in my conversation with Felipe were *axé* [vital energy], *malícia* [“a mixture of shrewdness, street-smarts, and wariness” (Capoeira 1995: 33)], *mandinga* [knowing the basic forces of nature and knowing how to use them, sometimes by means of ritual (Capoeira 1995: 33)], and *malandragem* [“can signify almost any kind of shady activity” (Lewis 1992: 47)]. Felipe says that he uses these words in his everyday life. He defines *axé* and *malícia* as follows:

“*Axé* is energy, you know. Energy in everything: in nature, in us, everything. I say ‘*Axé!*’ when I want to send good energy, positive vibes to someone. And *malícia*, well... *malícia* is not translated to ‘malice’. *Malícia* is knowledge. It’s just a different kind of knowledge, more related to street knowledge. It’s being more cunning, you outsmart the other person. For example, when talking about someone, you can say, ‘*Ele é malicioso*’ [he is clever].”

Capoeira is part of Felipe’s everyday life. For him, capoeira is everything and everywhere: “Capoeira is how you walk, how you eat, how you take care of yourself, how you talk.” He always listens to capoeira music outside the academy. Some of the songs have an important meaning to him: “A lot of the songs I like, it’s because of the story and the meaning. The songs tell you a story, they paint it.” This quotation underlines the importance of understanding PBP to have access to the songs, which are an important part of capoeira.

Alisha is a black African American woman from New York City. She is in her forties, and has been training capoeira since 1994. She discovered capoeira through an African Diaspora class; she needed to write a paper, and because she had just found out that there were a lot of black people in Brazil, she wanted to write a paper related to this country. Her professor sent her to

another professor, who in turn suggested that she visited *Mestre* João Grande: “After one class with *Mestre*, I was hooked. I started to train right away!” That same week, Alisha also started to study Portuguese:

“I started to learn Portuguese immediately because *Mestre* didn’t speak English. I wanted to communicate with him, and understand the songs. Because, you know, when you understand the songs, you can infuse them with your personality. You pick and sing the songs that touch you, that mean something for you. [...] But I never took Portuguese classes; I taught myself. I learned it through capoeira and capoeira songs. I spent hours transcribing songs to make a song book, the one that we use at the academy.”

Alisha acknowledged not knowing much about the different varieties of Brazilian Portuguese. However, she believes that the language used in capoeira is distinctive from the Portuguese used by non-*capoeiristas*:

“... because of all the words we use on a regular basis. For example, you say *devagar* [slow down] to a capoeira person, and he will know what you’re talking about. Another Portuguese speaker would not understand it the same way. The *capoeirista* will think about the song *Devagar, devagar* [Slowly, slowly], about the game, the body that slows down, etc.”

Alisha travelled a lot with *Mestre* João Grande. She went to Brazil, Japan, Serbia and Germany, among other places. With other *capoeiristas* abroad, she mainly speaks Portuguese. She also said that the “songs are very important. They bring the beauty to another level. Music takes you to a different space. It makes it a more spiritual practice.” Her favorite song is *Maior é Deus* [Greater is God], because of the lyrics. “I’m big and small, powerful and weak. That’s so true about myself, about life. And it’s God who gave that gift to me.”

Interestingly, I know very little about the socioeconomic background of Felipe, Alisha, and the other *capoeiristas* of the group. When *capoeiristas* enter the academy, they leave their non-capoeira person outside. In the academy, everybody is presumed equal, everybody is wearing similar white clothing, social status is useless, as what counts is what you can do in the *roda*. Capoeira promotes the ideal of equality. At the academy of *Mestre* João Grande, there are children training with adults, women training with men, college students training with doctors, teachers, and unemployed.

These interviews with Felipe and Alisha suggest that *capoeiristas* are learning a non-standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese (likely PBP) that is essential to their practice. It suggests that capoeira is contributing to the global spread of PBP via its communities of practice abroad, and that the valuation of PBP as a low prestige variety is not transferred at the same time. Based on these

interviews and other discussions I had with *capoeiristas*, it seems that non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are conscious that their variety of Portuguese varies from the standard at the lexical level, but not necessarily at the morphological and syntactic levels (which include linguistic features such as verbal and nominal agreement and marking, but also gender agreement, negation marking, word order, sentence structure, etc.).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this article suggests that PBP is associated with the practice of capoeira, and that through the globalization of the dance-fight, non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are learning PBP. Understanding and speaking PBP is central to their identity as *capoeiristas*; it is essential for them to fully participate in the capoeira community of practice. Capoeira is a performance in which both the embodied knowledge and the songs are fundamental. The interaction between the two is essential for the game to be legitimate and fluid. Through the lyrics of the songs, important knowledge is transmitted (from older *mestres* who wrote the songs to current *capoeiristas*) and directives to the players in the game are given. The *capoeiristas* I interviewed underlined the importance of speaking Portuguese (and likely PBP) in order to communicate with their *mestre*, for direct access to his knowledge, to understand the meanings of the songs, and to communicate with *capoeiristas* from around the world.

Linguistic features that are characteristic of PBP are common in capoeira songs. Amongst these features are the absence of nominal and plural marking. They appear in traditional capoeira songs that all *capoeiristas* should know. In Brazil, language ideologies about PBP relate this variety of non-standard Brazilian Portuguese to the lower social class, the less educated and people of African descent. However, these ideologies were not completely transmitted abroad with the globalization of capoeira and PBP. Non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* who learn Portuguese through capoeira in an informal way do not necessarily know that the variety that is used in the capoeira world differs from the norm.

PBP is being transferred from a Brazilian non-elite to an international community, regardless of social class and race. This suggests that PBP might currently be attached to another form of symbolic capital by virtue of it being used in elite global spaces. Capoeira is still a powerful marker of Brazilian national identity. According to Assunção, “[c]apoeira in a global context still provides identity. Despite its use as an African and Afro-Brazilian symbol, its globalized practice is, in most cases, no longer linked to a specific class or ethnic group but rather to the feeling of encompassing resistance against oppression, or ‘the system’ ” (2005: 195). The same could be said regarding PBP in

the international capoeira community, which is not specifically associated to the poor, but rather more generally to the dance-fight, the anticolonial movement, and Brazilian national identity.

The objective of this article was to demonstrate that non-Brazilian *capoeiristas* are learning PBP, which is the variety of Portuguese attached to capoeira, and to provide a better understanding of how this language is being transmitted in the context of globalization. The study suggests that PBP has moved (and is probably still moving) from being spoken in Brazil among non-elites to being spoken around the world in the context of capoeira. In fact, PBP is necessary for a *capoeirista* to grow and progress in her/his capoeira. Abroad, this non-standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese is not attached to the same ideologies as in Brazil. Following Assunção (2005), who suggested that through the process of globalization capoeira is no longer associated to race and class, I suggest that PBP has been (and still is) going through a similar process that has detached it from the ideologies related to social class, but has left it indexical to Brazilian identity and the countercultural cachet related to black slaves and outlaws. My findings complements previous research that investigated the sociolinguistics of globalization and processes of de-standardization from national to global scales (*e.g.* Blommaert 2010; Kristiansen and Coupland 2011). Globalization is certainly creating a tension in capoeira between the maintenance of traditions and the adaptation to other societies and cultures. Further studies investigating these two forces and how they affect PBP (and any other languages involved) in the capoeira world would be of particular interest.

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