
A Semiotic Investigation of Argentine Tango: Culture, Controversy, and Connection

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Introduction

This paper is designed to afford me opportunities to think about elements of Argentine tango from a semiotic [[47]] perspective. Each section, other than the introduction and conclusion, will look at some aspect of tango by means of a small number, often just one, of semiotic ideas.

The second section of this paper, titled “The Essence of Salon Tango”, will endeavor to give a feel for the phenomenological nature of Argentine salon as construed through contemporary theories of embodied cognition ((12, 13, 14, 18)), with particular emphasis on nonverbal communication ((6)), most notably haptics [[15]], kinesics [[25]], and proxemics [[42]], and the infrastructure of image schema [[21]], ((2, 9, 14)) on which the immersive, intimate, improvisational ((21)) dance of the tango is based. These ideas resonate well with aspects of Peircian semiotics, and firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] will figure into the discussion.

The third section of this paper, titled “Tango: Creation of a Cultural Icon”, channels Jo Baim who, in a [book](#) that inspired this chapter [[1]], discusses the first 50 years of tango, with particular emphasis on the milieu in which it took route, and on its cultural surround as it developed. Much of this same material is recounted in [[4]], a [book](#) well-known for its compelling pictures and illustrations. Clearly, tango was a “marked” dance, a dance singled out for its perceived deviance, with respect to most other dances of the time.

The fourth section of this paper, titled “Tango Variations”, classifies the tango dance in two distinct ways, one according to tango style, guardia viejo, tango milongero, and salon tango, and one according to the tango type, tango proper, milonga, and tango vals. Articulation of the denotation ((9)) and the connotation ((6)) of each of these variants of tango serves as the underlying semiotic theme for this section of the paper.

The fifth section of this paper, titled “The Milonga Code”, talks about the code [[2]] that governs the social dance which is so significant to those who are devoted to salon tango ((11,16)).

The sixth section of this paper, titled “Tango as Language”, investigates the conceptual metaphor [[4]] ((12, 15)) “tango = language”, with language being the source domain, and tango being the destination domain. Analogs to Saussure’s *langue* [[26]] and *parole* [[36]] are discussed ((3,6)), along with a number of other semiotic ideas.

The seventh section of this paper, titled “Jacobson’s Functions of Communication in Tango”, relates the emotive [[13]], conative [[3]], referential [[43]], poetic [[38]], phatic [[37]], and metalingual [[27]] functions of communication ((6)) to the connection between partners in the tango embrace.

The eighth section of this paper, titled “Discursive Description of a Presentational Sign”, is based on the premise that inventing notational systems for activities is a worthwhile pursuit because such systems serve as a tool for thinking about the activity ((22)). For example, written language can be viewed as a tool for thinking about speech (not merely a tool for recording speech). Likewise, musical notation can be viewed as a tool for thinking about music (not merely a tool for recording music). This paper is all about the potential value of developing a symbol system with which to think about tango. From a lofty point of view, this section investigates ideas surrounding the invention of discursive [[12]] approximations to presentational [[41]] signs ((16)).

The ninth section of this paper, titled “Lunfardo and Tango Lyrics”, channels a Oscar Conde’s piece “Lunfardo in Tango: A Way of Speaking that Defines a Way of Being” in a book ((20)) that features a range of topics relating to tango culture. Lunfardo is a hybrid language, born of the encounter between immigrants and criollos (native-born Latin Americans) in the conventillos (tenements) and suburbs of the cities in the Rio Plate region ((17, 20)). Lunfardo will be discussed as both a language, but also as a sign [[51]], and the many significant connotations of Lunfardo as a sign will be presented.

The tenth section of this paper, titled “Should a Feminist Dance Tango?”, addresses this rather controversial issue. Not being properly positioned to personally weigh in on this, yet being very interested in understanding the issues underlying the question, I plan to be guided by the experiences and thoughts of Kathy Davis, which she recounts in her book “Dancing Tango” ((7)). More generally, this section will address issues of femininity and masculinity surrounding tango, mostly by recounting insights shared by a number of other female authors ((19,20,26))

The eleventh section of this paper, titled “Life as Tango”, will investigate what might be learned from dancing tango about living a meaningful life by considering the conceptual metaphor ((12, 15)) saylife = tango.

The conclusion of this paper summarizes the semiotic ideas which are featured in the consideration of tango throughout the paper.

The Essence of Salon Tango

I want to write about the nature of salon tango as an immersive, intimate, improvisational experience. **I plan to focus on** of nonverbal communication that feature in the dance, and on the infrastructure of image schema on which the dance depends. **I would like my reader to** appreciate the essential nature of salon tango, as distinct from, for example, stage tango or ballroom tango.

- ¶ I will write about the role that kinesics plays in tango.
- ¶ I will write about the role that haptics plays in tango.
- ¶ I will write about the role that proxemics plays in tango.
- ¶ I will write about the notions of embodiment that related to salon tango, with special emphasis on image schema.

Tango: Creation of a Cultural Icon

I want to write about the first 50 years of the dance from a cultural point of view, from its origins in the poorer neighborhoods of Buenos Aires to the scene it made in Paris to its wild worldwide acceptance. **I plan to focus on** the cultural aspects of its transformation, on the facts that cities banned it, that army officers were threatened with demotion if caught dancing it, and that clergy and politicians wrote diatribes against it, that newspaper headlines warned that people died from dancing the tango, and that it would be the downfall of civilization, even as it became all the rage in many of the world’s great cities. **I would like my reader to** gain some perspective on the birth and development of the dance, and on the social and cultural impact of the dance.

- ¶ I will write about the origins of tango, with influences from Europe (especially Italy), Africa, Cuba, and Buenos Aires / Uruguay.
- ¶ I will very briefly tell the story of how Europe and the United States discovered tango.
- ¶ I will recount how Argentina reclaimed its native dance.

- ¶ I will talk some about the status that tango attained around the world at its peak of popularity.
- ¶ I will talk about the evolution of music associated with the tango.

Tango Variations

I want to write about styles of tango from the early years to the golden age, and types of tango that are danced at traditional milongas. **I plan to focus on** the denotation and the connotation of each style and each type. **I would like my reader to** appreciate these two classification schemes that help tango dancers to get on the same page prior to hitting the floor.

- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation (steps; embrace; exemplars) of guardia viejo (steps; embrace; classic tunes).
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation of (steps; embrace; exemplars) tango milonguero.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation of (steps; embrace; exemplars) tango salon.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation of (steps; embrace; exemplars) tango proper.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation of (steps; embrace; exemplars) milonga.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and the connotation of (steps; embrace; exemplars) vals.

The Milonga Code

I want to write about the code of the Milonga, the social dance that so many tango dancers religiously attend. **I plan to focus on** the milonga code by aspects of the milonga both (1) procedurally, and (2) with the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic dimensions in mind. **I would like my reader to** have a feel for what is expected of someone when they attend a milonga.

- ¶ The Cabaceo, how a pair of dancers find one another
- ¶ La Cumparsita, marking the end of the milonga.
- ¶ The idea that the couple moves in the “line of dance” (counterclockwise), and that the “woman” dances around the “man”, and that couples must be considerate of other couples with respect to considerations of space.
- ¶ The concept of “tanda”, which is the unit of dance (either 3 milonga or 3 vals or 4 tango) for a set of partners before a short break, which is marked by a bit of decidedly non-tango music, and is called a cortina (curtain).
- ¶ What does it mean to say “thank you” when dancing a tanda? Hint: you would rather not be thanked!

Tango as Language

I want to write about the conceptual metaphor “tango = language” with the goal of exploring aspects of tango figures through the source domain of language. **I plan to focus on** Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*, his conceptualization of difference, and explorations of connotation as these ideas can be seen to manifest in tango. **I would like my reader to** gain insights into the practice of dancing tango that are analogous to those that

Conclusion

In this paper, I did my best to relate some ideas of significance from the realm of semiotics to a relatively small number of phenomena that are associated with Tango Argentino. The particular semiotic concepts appropriated for the purpose of thinking some tango thoughts from a fresh perspective can be seen in the following list, which summarizes the discussions featured in the various sections:

- **Nonverbal communication**, especially **haptics**, **kinesics**, and **proxemics** was discussed as it pertains to dancing Tango. The foundational infrastructure of **image schema**, which enable movement of the body through space, was introduced. And Peirce's well-known ways of knowing, **firstness**, **secondness**, and **thirdness**, were used to describe elements of the experience of dancing tango.
- **Culture**, as it pertains to the establishment and development of early tango, was discussed, as was the ways in which tango was **marked**, was thought by many to be deviant in some sense, throughout its early history.
- The notions of **denotation** and **connotation** were thematically employed to distinguish between three styles of tango and three types of tango.
- The semiotic idea of semiotic **code**, with its **paradigmatic** and **syntagmatic** dimensions took center stage in the description of how people interact at a milonga (social dance).
- Saussure's conceptions of **langua** and **parole**, along with his notion of **difference** were the featured "items of transfer" when the **conceptual metaphor** "tango = language" was considered.
- Roman Jakobson's six functions of communication, the **emotive**, **conative**, **referential**, **poetic**, **phatic**, and **metalingual** functions were defined, exemplified, and applied to gaining insight into the connection between partners in the tango embrace.
- Ideas surrounding Suzanne Langer's distinction between **discursive signs** and **presentational signs** formed the basis for a discussion about the potential benefit of inventing symbol systems for writing about art (including tango).
- The relation between **language** and **culture** was considered in a discussion of Lunfardo, as was the idea of focusing on Lunfardo as a **sign**, so that its many **connotations** might be investigated.
- **Sex**, **gender**, **myth**, **markedness**, and a host of other topics that fall within the realm of semiotic analysis were discussed while considering the question "Should a feminist dance tango?" and related matters.
- Yet another **conceptual metaphor**, "life = tango", was investigated with the goal of identifying what might be learned from tango about living a meaningful life.

At the very least, this paper serves as an example of how one might apply semiotic ideas to the study of a domain of interest, in order to think some fresh thoughts about the domain, which could result in enhanced understanding of the domain, and might even change your relationship to the domain in a positive way.