Language & Identity Among Syrio-Lebanese Diaspora in Brazil

Brandon Rodgers

University of Pittsburgh

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# INTRODUCTION

Out of the seven continents, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants have spread across the globe to six of them. Outside of their respective countries, many might be surprised to learn that the highest Syrio-Lebanese population resides in Brazil (Visita do Ministro das Relações Exteriores, 2015). Many Syrian and Lebanese immigrants fleeing famine and war sought safety and economic opportunities in the lusophone country, bringing cultural and linguistic influences with them. Like most waves of immigrants, they were not accepted without difficulties or prejudices and the transition to a country with an unfamiliar language and culture was not easy. Today, however, the Syrio-Lebanese community of Brazil’s impact remains strong, with a number of high-ranking Brazilians claiming Levantine ancestry. This analysis will seek to understand the language attitudes and identities among the diaspora within Brazil. Some comparison may be made between Lebanese and Syrians abroad in other non-Arab nations, as well. Religious differences will be taken into consideration as the initial waves of immigrants to Brazil were overwhelmingly Christian in comparison to modern immigrants and refugees headed towards the country. The refugee crisis will be touched upon but not explored in depth as it is still a developing phenomenon.

# THE FIRST ARAB-BRAZILIANS: *TURCOS*

To begin, the initial bursts of Syrio-Lebanese immigration to Brazil must be understood. More than 140,000 thousand Middle Easterners arrived in Brazil between 1880 and 1960 (Dávilia, 2005). Many of these individuals were from the Levant and were fleeing religious persecution, wars, and a famine in Lebanon, which lasted from 1915-1918 (Harris, 2012). More than 80% of those arriving to Brazil were Christian, primarily Maronites and Syrian Catholics or Eastern Orthodox Christians, with approximately 15% being Muslim or Druze (Karam, 2008). Though the majority of Brazilians were Roman Catholic during this time period, their shared religious identity did not spare the Christian Middle Easterners from open criticisms and prejudices. These first-generation Syrian and Lebanese-Brazilians, who often worked as merchants, were called *turcos*, or Turks, as they had arrived from the Ottoman Empire. The largest Syrio-Lebanese community in Brazil is centered in the nation’s commercial hub, São Paulo. A lot of concern was initially raised over the community’s low rates of miscegenation. To many during this time period, and even today, to be Brazilian meant to mix with other groups, to be a part of the melting pot. Many felt pride that the country existed as a blended society and, thus, the high endogamy rates among the Levantine communities were perceived as a failure to assimilate into Brazilian culture and society. This was especially directed towards the Maronite and Syrian Catholics, as there were no understandable religious barriers to prevent intermarriage (Karam, 2008).

The Arab-Brazilian communities placed a high level of importance on maintaining their culture and language and, even until recently, it was a common practice for Syrio-Lebanese men in Brazil to return to *il-balad,* or the home country, to find a bride. Having a wife from *il-balad*, especially one who spoke Arabic, was extremely important as women were seen as critical in instilling cultural and linguistic development in children. This practice began to decline in the 1940s, though descendants continued to marry native born Arab-Brazilians. Around this time, many began to consider the Syrio-Lebanese communities of Brazil as being mixed as they were marrying native Brazilians; however, this is considered inaccurate as these spouses are native Brazilians, but often second- or third-generation Arab-Brazilians.

Many of the first-generation immigrants arrived as poor factory workers or travelling merchants (Lesser, 1998). Despite this, they viewed higher education as indispensable and ensured their children received degrees, hence the large number of Syrio-Lebanese descendants in positions of power in Brazil. For example, the former president of Brazil, Michel Temer, was born to Lebanese immigrants from Btaaboura in 1940 (País, 2015). This quick economic rise from paupers to wealthy political figure drew criticism, too. Many considered Syrio-Lebanese immigrants as acquiring vast wealth without providing anything economically. During this time, the word *turco*, which previously was a generalized term for any Middle Easterner, came to be a pejorative (Karam, 2008). Based on interviews in a 2008 study by J. T. Karam, Syrio-Lebanese immigrants and descendants said that *turco* was equivalent to that of ‘cheap-skate’ or ‘unrefined.’ Some individuals recalled that they were referred to solely as *turquinho* or *filho do turco,* ‘little Turk’ and ‘son of the Turk,’ respectively. According to some interviews, *turquinho* was taken as a fighting word, even. Today, *turco* has reached status as an affectionate or in-group joking term and mostly shed the negative connotations once associated with it.

# SYRIO-LEBANESE BRAZILIAN CULTURE & IDENTITY

Aside from accruing economic power, the Syrio-Lebanese diaspora of Brazil began to shape their identity with that of Brazilian identity (Dávilia, 2005). Popular Levantine dishes spread through the city of São Paulo and further through restaurants such as Habib’s Arabic Food. Foods such as *esfirra, taboule, quibe,* and *halwa* all became well-known and available throughout the country, mixing with local gastronomic practices. The community even erected a statue called the Monument of Syrio-Lebanese Friendship, which depicts an indigenous Brazilian warrior receiving a gift from an Arabic peasant-woman. Another woman, intended to be “Mother Brazil,” stands over them with outstretched arms. Below, celebrated Arab and Phoenician contributions to history are etched into the statue’s base. Famous hospitals also bear names such as the Syrio-Lebanese Hospital of São Paulo (Dávilia, 2005). There was a common joke amongst the community that they arrived as peasant *turcos*, began earning money and became *sírios*, and after they were millionaires became *libaneses* (Dávilia, 2005). Today, most Arab-Brazilians identify as *descendentes Syrio-libaneses*, or Syrio-Lebanese descendants due to the intermarrying between Syrians and Lebanese in the country (Karam, 2008).

# LINGUISTIC CONTACT BETWEEN ARABIC & PORTUGUESE

Linguistically, the community also further contributed loan-words from Arabic to Brazilian Portuguese as Portuguese already had existing loan-words from prior historical contact with Arabic. The Syrio-Lebanese community is also known for their unique accent, which surfaces due to differences between Arabic and Portuguese. For example, Portuguese contains the sounds /p/ and /v/, whereas Arabic does not. As such, many in the community would substitute these with the sounds /b/ and /f/, which do exist in Arabic. For instance, words such as [praɪə] ‘beach’ and [valeɪu] ‘thanks’ become [braɪə] and [faleɪu]. Consonant clusters not found in Arabic, like /bl/, would be broken up with an epenthetic vowel such that the word [bləʊku] will become [baləʊku]. Overtime, during the lingual shift to Portuguese, many Syrio-Lebanese descendants, now native speakers of Portuguese, began to affect local Arabic. Arabic loans words like *dinar*, ‘currency,’ are impacted by Portuguese’s dental stop palatalization rules, going from [dinar] to [ʤinaɾ]. Consonant clusters in Arabic such as /ft/ would be broken up with epenthetic vowels, such as [ʃuft] ‘he saw’ becoming [ʃufɪt] (Guedri, 2008).

# LANGUAGE PRACTICES OF SYRIO-LEBANESE BRAZILIANS

The use of Arabic among the Christian population has declined since the early 1900s, even as a liturgical language (Culturnicity, 2011). This may be in part to the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, which began in 1937. During this time, it became illegal to publish in languages other than Portuguese. Prior to this, however, Arabic schools flourished in Brazil along with a number of Arabic magazines sold throughout Brazil which did not contain Portuguese (Guedri, 2008). Today, many Syrio-Lebanese Christians are not fluent in Arabic like their Muslim counterparts, who have maintained Arabic as a liturgical language. In a similar event to that which occurred in the past, this is drawing criticisms from the greater Brazilian community as a failure to assimilate linguistically (Culturnicity, 2011).

In a survey, Christine Guedri found an evident general decline in the use of Arabic generationally. Participants were asked to measure how frequently they use Arabic in a number of domains, including at home, with friends, work, religiously, school, through email, or on the phone. None of the third-generation respondents answered that they always used Arabic in any category; instead, they never used Arabic in more than 75% of all occasions, with only 22% using Arabic at home or religiously. With the exception of email, all of the first-generation respondents answered that they used Arabic in the mentioned domains, with 100% using Arabic at home and 92% religiously. As can be assumed, second-generation respondents measure between those of the first- and third-generations. Based on these results, it could be likely that Arabic will further decline in the future. Another factor in the generational decline of Arabic is the language abilities of descendants. Michel Temer, previously mentioned son of Lebanese immigrants, has stated in interviews that while he can understand Arabic completely, he is unable to speak fluently (Daniel, 2013). Guedri’s study has also shown that Arabic fluency, comprehension, and literacy has declined over 70% over the span of three generations, with more descendants being able to understand Arabic than speak it. Given this, it is unlikely further descendants will learn any Arabic at all. The survey showed that more third-generation Brazilians were able to speak English than in Arabic. It would seem that the lingual shift from a bilingual Arabic and Portuguese existence in the Syrio-Lebanese Brazilian community could diminish completely in the near following generations.

# SYRIAN REFUGEES IN BRAZIL

Today, another influx of Syrians is arriving in Brazil in the form refugees fleeing Syrian Civil War. Brazil plans to accept around 10,000 refugees overall from Syria. Differing from the initial waves from Syria and Lebanon, the majority of refugees arriving in the country are Muslim. Given the importance of Arabic to the Islamic faith, some predict that a bilingual existence will be possible for an extended period of time in the Brazilian Muslim community (Culturnicity, 2011). Though grateful, many of the refugees experience a shock upon arrival in Brazil. Brazil does not provide the same resources upon arrival as other countries such as Canada and the United States. Once having arrived, refugees must navigate their way through Brazil alone, often struggling to find fellow Arabic speakers, though Portuguese as a non-native language classes are becoming more readily available (Tomkiw, 2016). In addition to the lack of resources, the vastly different culture and environment of Brazil in comparison to Syria creates another difficulty for the refugees. Cultural taboos in the Arab world, such as physical contact between unrelated members of the opposite sex, are the norm in Brazil, where it is common even for those meeting for the first time share a kiss on the cheek. Crime rates in Brazil are also a shock to many; one refugee stating that she was surprised when a friend asked her not to use her phone in public for the risk of being robbed (Tomkiw, 2016). The lack of knowledge about Islam in Brazil also presents some areas of misunderstanding within the country (Culturnicity, 2011). Many are accustomed to the Arab immigrants of the past and are not aware of the strong cultural and religious differences of the refugees. For example, some refugees have reported being asked if they were members of the Islamic State out of innocence; many Brazilians have never met or even seen practicing Muslims, let alone spoken to one. (Tomkiw, 2011).

# CONCLUSION

The Syrio-Lebanese community has had a long-lasting impact on Brazilian life and culture. Along with their families, they brought their language, food, and culture with them. Some families, after over 100 years of living in Brazil, have managed to hold on to the Arabic language for generations while being surrounded by Portuguese. For others, Arabic impacted the Portuguese in the community and, as time passed, Portuguese began to have an effect on the Arabic of native born Brazilian generations. With another wave on newcomers on the horizon, the future of Arabic in Brazil has been renewed. From *turcos* to *sírio-libaneses* to *refugiados*, Arab Brazilians have woven themselves into the fabric of Brazil and will continue to leave their cultural and linguistic impact on the lusophone country.

Word count: 1,928

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