

*Chico Bento:*  
**Linguistic Marking and National Identity  
in Brazilian Comics**

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The main character of the popular Brazilian comic book *Chico Bento* is a country boy whose speech is depicted in an eye dialect of *caipira*, a rural dialect centered in the interior of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, states in Southeastern Brazil. The author highlights Chico's speech in order to describe social difference and relations resulting from widespread rural-urban migration. This linguistic marking is essential to the location of *caipira* culture in Brazilian national identity. The *caipira* is portrayed as a source of nostalgia, representing a common, rural past, and as such serves as a resource for nation building; however, *caipiras* are also depicted as an obstacle to modernity in contemporary Brazilian society.

INTRODUCTION

*Chico Bento*, one in a series of the most popular comic books in Brazil (see Plate 1), is distinctive in its focus on the daily life of a country boy. Chico Bento's speech is written in an eye dialect of *caipira*, a rural dialect centered in the interior of northern São Paulo and southern Minas Gerais, states in the more industrialized Southeast. Speech differences in Brazil primarily index class and reflect language contact and change resulting from increased urbanization. Phonological variation generally occurs along a fluid continuum from the most stigmatized, rural dialects (such as *caipira*) to the most formal, urban standard. Despite this gradient, the phonetic transcription of Chico's speech, which includes elements common to various dialects, is contrasted sharply with the use of Standard Brazilian Portuguese (SBP) in representing other characters in the comics. In this work I review the history of the *caipira* dialect, distinguish the phonetic elements that index *caipira*, and explore the current sociolinguistic setting in Brazil in order to understand the social meaning of this contrastive use of eye dialect.

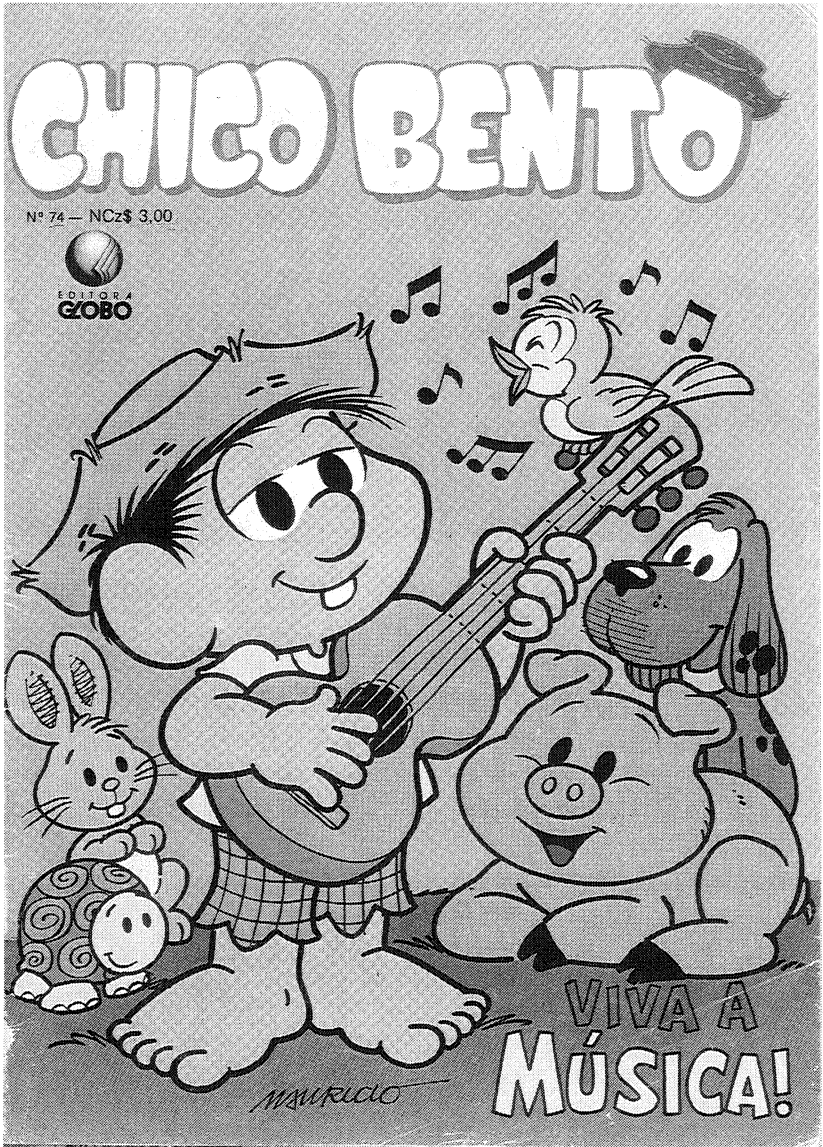


Plate 1: Cover of *Chico Bento* comic book (1989, No. 74)

*Chico Bento* reprinted with permission from Estúdio Mauricio de Sousa.

### HISTORY OF THE CAIPIRA DIALECT

From 1500 to the end of the seventeenth century, the cross-national Tupi, a *lingua geral* (general or common language), was adopted by the European colonizers, particularly the Jesuits. Although the European elite and clergy spoke Portuguese, a pidginized form of Portuguese was developed by bilingual indigenous people and descendants of the colonizers. The process of pidginization was further advanced with the importation over three centuries of roughly 3.5 million African slaves (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:15); as the pidgin-speaking population grew, Tupi was gradually displaced.

However, a number of factors in the eighteenth century brought the pidginization process to a halt. Economic trends such as the "gold cycle" and "cattle cycle" led huge numbers of Portuguese to immigrate to the interior, and furthered the extermination and enslavement of indigenous peoples. It is likely that this influx of Portuguese in the hinterland resulted in the evolution of pidgin into the nonstandard Portuguese *caipira* dialect (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:17). "*Caipira*," from the Tupi word "*curipira*," has as its locus the rural, traditional culture and dialect of northern São Paulo and southern Minas Gerais. The term originally referred to the miners, cattlemen, and indigenous people in the region, whose nomadic lifestyle eventually spread elements of the dialect to other regions. Due to this early mobility, *caipira* "shows a surprisingly high level of uniformity" (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:2) and now signifies a rural, isolated, and "backward" lifestyle in much of Brazil.

During the eighteenth century, a somewhat separate process was occurring first in Rio de Janeiro and then São Paulo. Increased Portuguese immigration and the first wave of urbanization contributed to sharper social stratification, with Portuguese as the prestige language. The government passed laws in support of Portuguese as a national language, reflecting the desire of the elites (the wealthiest Portuguese and their descendants) to appear as European as possible. Only European Portuguese was allowed in written form until the early 1900s, a century after independence, when it was finally replaced by Standard Brazilian Portuguese (SBP). However, these urban developments had little effect on the rural *caipira*, which not only evolved in a different direction but, over time, preserved some archaic features of Portuguese.

Ever-increasing urbanization of Brazil in the twentieth century, however, has had profound effects on the rural population. Not only have changes in land ownership systems and the consolidation of property displaced rural populations to the city, but industrialization has penetrated the countryside so that the city also comes to them. According to the Brazilian Institute of Statistics, the population of Brazil in 1872 was 9.9 million, less than four percent of which was urban; in the 1940s, urban dwellers surged to over 31 percent and continued to grow until almost 68 percent of the 119 million Brazilians in 1980 lived in cities (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:20). The *caipiras*, who had developed a sustainable agricultural system that afforded them considerable leisure time, were reluctant to give up this lifestyle and accept low positions in the expanding latifundiary monoculture; this resistance has been transmuted into the stereotype of a "backward" and "lazy" population (Candido 1975).

#### CURRENT SOCIOLINGUISTIC TRENDS

Urbanization has led to intense and widespread contact between rural and urban dialects; the resulting process of integration is at the heart of current sociolinguistic trends in Brazil. As Labov has observed, mass relocation from rural areas to cities often leads to increased vertical stratification of the language and the decline of local dialects (1972:300). Thus in countries such as Brazil, language difference is related primarily to socioeconomic class rather than region. Dialects cut across racial and ethnic categories as well; however, it is important to note that social mobility, and thus linguistic elements, are constrained by racial and ethnic factors.

Although there is a large gap between *caipira* and the formal, urban standard, "[m]ost of the nonstandard features of the language are characteristic of a gradient rather than a sharp stratification" (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:10). Rural dialects represent the sharpest break in this gradient; nevertheless, there is a clear merging of *caipira* with the nonstandard urban dialects. In Brazil, there is very little regional language loyalty, and rural variations are highly stigmatized; thus recent arrivals to the city are quick to adopt the more prestigious urban nonstandard varieties of the lower classes, their new primary social networks. At the same time, a high percentage of the urban poor are themselves relatively recent immigrants from the countryside who have had little access to the

standard code and retain several *caipira* elements. Furthermore, social stratification is tempered by the fact that certain lower-class features may carry informal prestige, a type of casual, urban savvy, which may travel upward through the social hierarchy (Eckert 1988:183).

Due to the gradient described above, the lack of regional loyalty, and the general dynamism of language in Brazil, “a generally standard pronunciation does not seem to exist” (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:14). There are, however, a few “marked” features that serve to index speakers along this spectrum. In the following section I investigate these features with particular attention to the *caipira* dialect as represented in *Chico Bento*. The primary focus is on phonetic variation, which represents the most salient and distinctive features of *caipira*.

#### THE USE OF EYE DIALECT IN *CHICO BENTO*

*Chico Bento* is written in eye dialect; that is, there is an attempt to make the orthography match actual pronunciation more closely than does standard written Brazilian Portuguese. Maurício de Sousa, the famous author of *Chico Bento*, has developed a comprehensive eye dialect that describes all phonetic aspects of *caipira* that can be expressed to the reader through the Roman alphabet; his transcription also includes those elements shared by the Brazilian population in general that deviate from standard orthographic representations. The top line in the following excerpt provides examples of the *caipira* eye dialect (CED) used in *Chico Bento*. In order to highlight the main features, I have included the standard written Brazilian Portuguese (BP) on the second line. Here the mischievous Chico gets caught stealing the neighbor’s guavas; he runs, falls, and has an out-of-body experience (Sousa 1990a:28-29):

CED: VORTA AQUI CAS      MINHA GOIABA, MOLEQUE!  
 BP:    VOLTA AQUI COM AS MINHAS GOIABAS, MOLEQUE!  
 Eng:    *Come back here with my guavas, brat!*

CED: IH, IH, VOU DEIXÁ O NHO    LAU LÁ PRA TRAIS!  
 BP:    IH, IH, VOU DEIXAR O SENHOR LAU LÁ PARA ATRÁS!  
 Eng:    *Ha, ha, I’m going to leave Mr. Lau in the dust!*  
 CED:    QUI SORTE! FOI SÓ UM TRUPIÇÃO...

BP: QUI SORTE! FOI SÓ UMA TROPEÇÃO...  
 Eng: *What luck! I just stumbled...*

CED: CHICO! VIRGE SANTA! O QUE QUI ACONTECEU?  
 BP: CHICO! VIRGEM SANTA! O QUE É QUE ACONTECEU?  
 Eng: *Chico! Holy Mary! What happened?*

CED: AAI... A CURPA É MINHA!  
 BP: AAI... A CULPA É MINHA!  
 Eng: *Oh... this is all my fault!*

CED: CUMÉ QUI EU TÔ LÁ, SI EU TÔ AQUI?  
 BP: COMO É QUE EU ESTOU LÁ, SE EU ESTOU AQUI?  
 Eng: *How can I be there if I'm here?*

CED: CRUIZ-CREDO! MIÓ LEVÁ ELE PRA CASA!  
 BP: CRUIZ-CREDO! MELHOR LEVÁ-LO PARA CASA!  
 Eng: *Gosh! Better to take him home!*

As mentioned, much of this transcription expresses pronunciation not specific to the *caipira* dialect but rather common to general, nonstandard but relatively unmarked pronunciation as well. Despite this overlap, popular metalinguistic explanations attribute the majority of nonstandard elements to *caipira* alone, a tendency reinforced in *Chico Bento*. The “unmarked” norm established in the comics is white, middle-class, and based in São Paulo/ Minas Gerais, the most industrialized region of the country. A comparison of Standard Brazilian Pronunciation, nonstandard elements of varying markedness, and the *caipira* dialect reveals that *caipira* has very few distinctive features (Figures 1.1-1.3).

### Figure 1.1 Gradient of Features.

	<u>loss of final r</u>	<u>loss of final s</u>
Standard		
Orthography	cantar comer	as outras casas
SBP	cantá comê	as outras casas
less marked	cantá comê	as outras casa
marked	cantá comê	as outra casa
<i>caipira</i>	cantá comê	as outra casa
<i>English</i>	<i>to sing to eat</i>	<i>the other houses</i>

As seen in Figure 1.1, a major shift in SBP as well as most dialects is the loss of the final *r* in verbs; in fact, “the rate of deletion is so high that . . . whenever present, (it) is constrained by style, the *-r* being inserted in formal, careful contexts” (Tarallo 1991:12). Similarly, there is a loss of final *s*, particularly of plural nouns but also of their modifying adjectives, unless there is a significant difference between the singular and plural forms, such as *patrão*/*patrões*. Where distinction is minimal, as in *casa/casas*, there is a gradient from the standard to the most marked pronunciations (Tarallo 1991:11).

**Figure 1.2**

	<u>e → i</u>		<u>o → u</u>	
Standard				
Orthography	pele	escola	medo	bonito
SBP	pe <i>l</i> i	escola	medu	bonitu
less marked	pe <i>l</i> i	escola	medu	bonitu
marked	pe <i>l</i> i	iscola	medu	bunitu
<i>caipira</i>	pe <i>l</i> i	iscola	medu	bunitu
<i>English</i>	<i>skin</i>	<i>school</i>	<i>fear</i>	<i>pretty</i>

The substitution of final *e* with *i* and final *o* with *u* are features that have penetrated SBP. However, such substitutions in other locations are variable and considered most salient in nonstandard and *caipira* dialects.

**Figure 1.3**

	<u>ei → e</u>	<u>ou → o</u>	<u>addition of i</u>	
Standard				
Orthography	peixe	acabou	mas	cruz
SBP	peixi	acabou	mas	cruz
less marked	pexi	acabou	mais	cruz
marked	pexi	acabô	mais	cruiz
<i>caipira</i>	pexi	acabô	mais	cruiz
<i>English</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>finished</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>cross</i>

As seen above, the monophthongization (reduction to a single vowel sound) of various diphthongs also follows “a gradient stratification, i.e., some diphthongs in some linguistic environments are almost categorically reduced even in formal styles of the

standard language. In other environments, however, the reduction is stigmatized and functions as an indicator of both lower class speech and rural vernaculars" (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:47). Other final syllables that are stressed may be diphthongized through adding an *i* (Bortoni-Ricardo 1985:55).

As demonstrated in these examples, most of the phonetic features highlighted in Chico Bento's speech are not specific to *caipira* alone. However, there are four elements of *caipira* not found in other nonstandard dialects:

1) the substitution of a Spanish-style tapped *r*, formed by tapping the tip of the tongue against the roof of the mouth (the alveolar ridge), with a more American-English style *r*, known as a retroflex *r*, produced by curling the tip of the tongue back behind the alveolar ridge:

marca (mark): marca → marca

2) the substitution of *l* with *r*, whether standard pronunciation of the *l* in a particular word is /*l*/ or /*u*/:

plano (flat, plan): plano → prano

voltar (return): voutá → vortá

3) the substitution of *lh* (/li/) with *i*

mulher (woman): mulher → muié

melhor (better): melhor → mió

4) the persistence of the nonfricative *te*, *ti*, *de*, and *di*, an archaic feature of European Portuguese:

*te* (you): *ci* (pronounced "chee") → *ti* (pronounced "tee")

*tia* (aunt): *cia* → *tia*

*de* (of): *ji* → *di*

*dia* (day): *jia* → *dia*

Although most nonstandard features of the eye dialect in *Chico Bento* are also part of the general gradient of colloquial BP, these four variations in pronunciation represent a sharp divergence from the continuum and are considered highly salient and indexical of the *caipira* dialect.

#### EYE DIALECT AND THE DISCOURSE OF *CHICO BENTO*

It is important to note that not all characters in *Chico Bento* speak *caipira* or are represented through eye dialect. Chico appears to live near a city, perhaps in the state of São Paulo, and has frequent contact with non*caipiras* in both the country and the city. The



language of Chico, his girlfriend, parents, and *caipira* friends is contrasted with the language of his teacher, other friends, and visitors in the countryside. Many of these characters are perhaps from small towns rather than farms or ranches; they tend to be better groomed, wear shoes, and speak in standard written BP with only occasional, unmarked grammatical divergences and slang. Thus there is a false differentiation between *caipira* and non*caipira* speech; a comparable example in English would be to attribute the pronunciation of "says" as "sez" to some characters and not others. Through the selective use of eye dialect, the standard pronunciations that the speakers have in common are suppressed and the *caipira* dialect is emphasized.

Indeed, the greatest difference lies not between spoken standard Brazilian Portuguese and *caipira*, but rather between spoken and written Brazilian Portuguese in general. Comparing an eye dialect of fairly standard, unmarked Brazilian pronunciation (SP), as rendered by the author, with the *caipira* eye dialect of the comics reveals few differences (Sousa 1990b:4): The following text, selected to illustrate the similarity between the spoken forms, reveals no differences:

SP: SABI O QUE VAI ACONTECÊ SE VOCÊ FICÁ NESSI...

CED: SABI O QUE VAI ACONTECÊ SE VOCÊ FICÁ NESSI...

*Do you know what will happen if you go on like this...*

On the other hand, standard orthography provides a much greater contrast:

SABE O QUE VAI ACONTECER SE VOCÊ FICAR NESSE...

Thus the use of eye dialect only for *caipiras* creates exaggerated linguistic difference between *caipiras* and non*caipiras*. However, this differentiation is constructed to mark social differences in order that social relations may be described. The discourse of the comics involves the contact of different cultures due to urbanization; because cultures are difficult to represent visually, difference is communicated through language. Through linguistic marking, contrasting patterns of social relations in the countryside and the city emerge.

In *Chico Bento*, the countryside is depicted as essentially egalitarian: There are no social divisions between *caipira* and *noncaipira* characters. Thus linguistic differentiation and slightly contrasted appearance are accompanied by an atmosphere of harmony, signifying unity despite difference. Indeed, the comics provide a nostalgic, moralistic vision of Brazil's rural past. Chico's family lives a "simple life," rustic and traditional; they are hardworking, gentle, and happy on the family farm. Although Chico is mischievous and fun loving, he has a good heart and learns many moral lessons from his parents, girlfriend, teacher, and guardian angel. These entertaining yet moralistic adventures represent a discourse of nostalgia, a longing for the countryside that so many Brazilians have recently left. The comic reminds people of their childhood or relatives and friends who lived or still live on their own land; the memory of "long ago" is "inextricably linked to a desirable social order of the past" (Hill 1992:267). The rural-urban transition is such a common experience that its evocation serves as a base for the construction of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of the Brazilian nation.

In contrast to the harmonious, egalitarian relations of the countryside, *caipira*-*noncaipira* relations in the city describe conflict and hierarchy. When Chico visits the city, his linguistic marking as a *caipira* is accompanied by repeated references to the standard, negative media stereotype of *caipiras* as backward, ignorant, and unable to adapt. For example, when he visits his cousin in the city (Sousa 1989), he has difficulty with language, customs, and urban concepts such as electricity, the movies, and eating out. When his cousin takes him to a restaurant, Chico does not know what a hamburger is and wants to eat sitting on the floor. The ridicule of others and his cousin's continual attempts to educate him and correct his behavior characterize the experience of moving to the city, where *caipira* culture and language are clearly considered inferior. The message is that immigrants from the country must abandon their ways and adapt to the city.

Thus the *caipira* has apparently conflicting social meaning in *Chico Bento*. In the countryside, Chico represents nostalgia, harmony, morality, and cultural roots that may be used for the construction of national identity; in the city, a hierarchy emerges in which he represents an impediment to progress. In other words, there has been a selective appropriation of *caipira* characteristics for

different purposes of nation building (see Manthei 1994). Ruben George Oliven has studied the ways in which attributes of certain groups are appropriated, resemanticized, and ultimately transformed into national symbols. This process involves the rejection of "offensive," "disorderly," and "dangerous" elements and the recuperation of decorative, exotic, and ideologically appropriate material (Oliven 1984:143-144). In *Chico Bento*, the "violence" and "laziness" of *caipiras* are clearly rejected—indeed, they are replaced with gentleness and a strong work ethic; on the other hand, the relationship to the land and the "simple" subsistence lifestyle are recuperated for their nostalgic and moralizing resources, their potential as symbols of social cohesion in the construction of national identity. As Oliven cites Fry, "the conversion of ethnic symbols into national symbols not only hides a situation of . . . domination but makes the task of denouncing it much more difficult" (Fry in Oliven 1984:150).

Thus *Chico Bento* represents an attempt to define the place and nature of *caipiras*, and their clash with modernizing forces, within a discourse of national identity. As the mass media construct the communicative space of the nation-state, all of a nation's languages, dialects, and language varieties, and the speech communities associated with them, are automatically drawn into relations with one another (Spitulnik 1992:335). In this representation of Brazilian history, the *caipiras'* value is limited to providing a source of national nostalgia; they are inappropriate to modern, urban settings. This portrayal depends on the depiction of social groups and their relations; in these comics, the eye dialect is used as a "metadiscursive strategy" (Briggs 1992:401) for delineating ethnic categories and their places in Brazilian society.

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