

ENGLISH-SPEAKING ENCLAVES IN PUERTO RICO¹

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ABSTRACT

While Puerto Rico without a doubt is a Spanish-speaking territory, there are enclaves of English speakers scattered around the island. This paper seeks to identify those enclaves, describe the people who make them up, and speculate as to the reasons for their existence. Utilizing Census data, educational reports, findings from ethnographic studies, and other resources, the paper attempts to deal with a topic that is rarely discussed—the role of English speakers in the linguistic ecosystem of Puerto Rico.

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1.0 Introduction

Puerto Rico is often referred to as a “bilingual society.” Nevertheless, despite the existence of highly bilingual individuals, particularly in the upper classes, overall Puerto Rican society is predominately Spanish-speaking (Barreto, 2001). In the 2000 Census, 82.4% of individuals over 18 claimed to speak English “less than very well,” indicating that only 17.6% considered that they spoke English “very well.”

Very little attention has been paid to the role of English-proficient speakers in the linguistic ecosystem of Puerto Rico. In a paper presented at the 2008 Puerto Rican Studies Association conference (Pousada, 2008), I utilized 2000 census data to locate the municipalities with the most English-proficient speakers. Table 1 presents the 11 (out of 78) municipalities with 20% or more adults who believe they speak English “very well.” It should be noted that none exceeds 40.2%, and all are located near the San Juan metro area. This was pretty much what I expected to find, given the location of tourist areas, naval bases, English-medium schools, and other cultural institutions that would attract the English-proficient.

Table 1: Municipalities with highest percentage of adults who speak English “very well” (Extrapolated from 2000 Census)	
Culebra	40.2
Guaynabo	29.9
Ceiba	29.0
Fajardo	26.5
San Juan	26.2
Catano	21.7
Carolina	21.4
Vieques	21.4
Dorado	21.1
Luquillo	20.9
Bayamón	20.6

I also looked at municipalities with somewhat fewer English speakers and those with almost none. Map 1 presents the overall distribution of speakers who claim to speak English “very well” among the 78 municipalities of Puerto Rico. This permits a more fine-grained view of where English speakers congregate.

However, I soon discovered that there were enclaves of competent English speakers all over the island. I was able to identify 20 communities with high levels of English speakers (ranging from 81% to 40.2%) and 38 additional communities with moderately high levels of proficient English speakers (ranging from 38.5% to 30.2%). (See Tables 2 and 3 in your handouts for details.)

The problem with Census data is that it depends on self-report, and one is never sure whether the responses are completely truthful, aggrandized, or underestimated. Speakers are notoriously unreliable in assessing their own speech. Nevertheless, the exercise provided a framework within which to begin locating English-speaking enclaves on the island which will be further refined once the 2010 census data are made available.

2.0 Exploring the enclaves

Essentially, there are four basic types of English enclaves in Puerto Rico:

- Americans and their children who came because of military duties or business opportunities
- Communities of return migrants who lived in the U.S. and returned to Puerto Rico to raise children or retire
- Foreigners who utilize English as a lingua franca in PR;
- Puerto Ricans who learned English on the island and grew to prefer it at home for personal reasons (marriage, raising children, work, worship, etc.)

In this paper, I will focus upon the Americans and return migrants, since these are “native speakers” who have used English in English monolingual environments. In a future paper, I will address the other groups of “non-native speakers” who have primarily used English among other non-native speakers.

2.1 Americans who live in PR

According to the 2006 Puerto Rico Community Survey, 14, 727 individuals 5 years and over in Puerto Rico were born in the U.S. and speak only English (about 4% of the total population). Many are Americans, although the figure also includes third or fourth generation Puerto Rican return migrants or descendants of other U.S. minorities.

“Continental” or “gringos,” as they are often known, tend to congregate in the greater San Juan metro area: in Old San Juan, the Condado, Ocean Park, parts of Miramar, Isla Verde, Guaynabo, Río Piedras, or Caparra Heights. A primary consideration for Americans in the metro area is the location of English-medium schools for their children, so they gravitate toward areas with well-known, high quality private schools that utilize English for teaching.² They also tend to look for areas with social amenities they were accustomed to in the States, like good shopping, community centers, public libraries, clubs, charitable organizations, and places of worship.

² The schools most renowned for English instruction tend to be in areas where English is commonly utilized. They include private schools like Baldwin School and Wesleyan Academy (in Guaynabo), Robinson School and St. John’s School (in the Condado), Colegio San Antonio de Padua in Río Piedras, Cupeyville School in Cupey, and TASIS and the Dorado Academy (in Dorado).

Those who venture further in search of the ultimate Caribbean experience, especially retirees or those with grown children, may end up in oceanfront areas like Rincón, Vieques, and Luquillo, enjoying their leisure or running local tourist businesses. Some are snowbirds who summer in the States and winter on the island.

Often the neighborhoods chosen are very "Americanized" with almost no need to speak Spanish. While this makes "continentals" feel comfortable, it also isolates them from general Puerto Rican society and prolongs the period of language learning and cultural adaptation. Some never acquire fluency in Spanish despite decades living on the island, and others (especially those who marry Puerto Ricans) achieve considerable proficiency and can be considered to be functionally bilingual. Some "go native" and redefine themselves as Puerto Ricans, speaking Spanish daily although usually with an accent. Regardless of fluency in Spanish, over time they incorporate Puerto Rican Spanish lexical items into their English. Nash (1982) used the term "Pringlish" to describe such loanwords.

A good many Americans residing on the island serve as English teachers or tutors at some point in their lives, write for English-language or bilingual publications, or give academic content instruction in English at the university

level.³ Others occupy leadership positions in the island business community. They thus serve to reinforce and refine language models set by cable TV stations and Hollywood movies.

As far as I know, no research has focused on the island-raised children of Americans. From personal experience, I know that many become extremely proficient in Spanish, despite going to English-only schools, but many also end up returning to the States for higher education and then settling there. The extent of their linguistic influence upon the island is still an open question and one that should be added to our research agendas.

2.2 Return migrants who live in PR

Because of the circular migration between Puerto Rico and the U.S., many English-proficient islanders are return migrants (often referred to as “Nuyoricans” or “Neoricans”) and were raised or spent considerable time in the States. Return migrants constitute a significant portion of the island population. Of all Puerto Ricans living on the island in 2000, 6.1% were born in the U.S. Almost 20% of the sample Jorge Duany interviewed in 2001 had lived outside Puerto Rico and returned, while another 3% had left and returned at least twice (Duany 2001).

There is considerable variability in their migratory and linguistic experiences. Some were born in Puerto Rico, left at an early age, and returned before adulthood but continue to utilize English in their homes. Often their Spanish is less than standard, and they prefer English. Others left Puerto Rico in

³ Although university instruction is generally given in Spanish, many textbooks are in English, particularly in the natural sciences. Many foreign-born professors (from the U.S., Russia, China, India, etc.) give their lectures in English.

adolescence or adulthood, spent an extended period off island, and then returned. Their Spanish skills tend to be better than those of the first group, but their English may be less native-like. Still others experienced repeated migrations and may have strong skills or may feel insecure in both languages, depending on the quality of their educational backgrounds and their parents' ability to maintain language skills within the family. A final subgroup was born in the U.S. of migrant parents and moved to Puerto Rico at some point in their childhood. Their English and Spanish abilities are much like those of the true return migrants who were born in Puerto Rico but left at an early age, although individual families may make more or less effort to maintain Spanish.

Of course, social class and the educational opportunities it affords may enhance or diminish the language proficiencies of all these return migrants, regardless of age of arrival or number of years off island. College graduates who pursue advanced degrees in the U.S. have qualitatively different linguistic and economic experiences when they return to seek employment on the island as compared with less-privileged workers.

According to the 2000 census, nine percent of all children in Puerto Rico were born off-island, the majority in the U.S. Figures for 2010 are not yet available but will surely be higher given mounting economic problems. With little assistance from the school system, these youngsters are expected to develop the standard Spanish skills necessary to complete their formal education, while at the same time learning the myriad of cultural details required for comfortable adaptation to local school and peer norms. Many suffer reading problems in both

English and Spanish (Prewitt-Díaz & Seilhammer, 1987) and utilize non-standard language varieties frowned upon in both U.S. and Puerto Rican schools.

Los bilingües are immediately branded as problematic (Lorenzo-Hernández, 1999), “rebellious, hostile, unable to communicate in Spanish, aggressive, daring in their dress and speech, Americanized...or unintelligent” (Beléndez Soltero, 1994, p. 306). They are labeled as *los de afuera* which leaves no doubt as to their marginalization and marking as the Other. They are rarely viewed or utilized as a resource in the schools. Nevertheless, they have a considerable effect upon the island’s language ecology since they bring new words and styles of speaking, and they use English openly in public places. Some end up in the universities in fields which call for English and eventually find jobs that capitalize on their English skills, for example, in tourism, the media, public relations, banking, education, and the sciences, thus extending the sphere of their influence on the island. A small minority end up in the entertainment industry where their English skills come to the forefront in rap or reggaeton music, locally-filmed movies or television shows, and radio programs, once again influencing their audiences with their language output.

3.0 One effect of English-speaking enclaves on Puerto Rican society

In the last couple of years, there have been sporadic moves to “protect” the rights of individuals living in Puerto Rico who claim to speak only English. Perhaps the most publicized of these attempts to consider the rights of English monolinguals in Puerto Rico was the effort to make bilingual ballots available

(*Diffenderfer, et. al. v. Ramón E. Gómez, et. al.*, 2008) which was decided in favor of the plaintiffs. Plaintiffs argued that, according to the 2000 Census, 14.4% of the residents of Puerto Rico over the age of 5 were English monolinguals, comparable to the percentage of non-English-speaking populations in the U.S. which have the right to bilingual ballots.⁴ Judge Fusté accepted this reasoning and ordered the printing of ballots in both Spanish and English in time for the 2008 elections (El Pueblo Latino, 2008).⁵ Since each form bore both languages, there is no way to know how many people actually read the ballot in English.

Many observers felt that the whole campaign was a political ploy to strengthen the pro-Statehood party by bringing English into yet another social domain in Puerto Rico.

Another highly visible (and laughable) move to honor the rights of English speakers in Puerto Rico was the changing of traffic signs, building signs, and police car markings from Spanish to English in Guaynabo City (as it has been referred to since Hector O'Neill became mayor in 1993). The mayor of Guayama Glorimari Jaime⁶ has also followed suit by renaming her city center "Downtown"

⁴ The 2000 Census asked "Do you speak a language other than English at home?" The 14% that said "no" were then taken to be English monolinguals, even though they could be proficient in Spanish but simply decided to use English at home. The 2006 Puerto Rico Community Survey (part of the American Community Survey which has different questions from the regular Census) indicates in Table B06007-PR: Place of birth by language spoken at home and ability to speak English in population 5 years and over) that: 3,500,128 people over the age of 5 (95.2%) speak Spanish, and 171,595 people over the age of 5 (4.7%) speak only English. This seems like a more reasonable figure.

⁵ Interestingly enough, there was a problem in the translation of the ballots, since the phrase *voto integral* was translated as *single vote* rather than *straight ballot or straight vote*, clearly confusing the issue (cf. Cruz Maldonado, Gerardo, 2008).

⁶ Both officials are prominent in the Partido Nuevo Progresista (pro-statehood party).

and its major thoroughfare "Main Street," much to the amusement of most Puerto Ricans. The rationale given that this would help tourists as well as aid children's bilingual development did not seem to hold water, since bilingual signage would have made more sense.

6.0 Conclusion

There have been communities of English speakers in Puerto Rico ever since the 19th century, when wealthy American merchants purchased *haciendas* and formed small English-speaking enclaves in the countryside (Pousada 1999). Nevertheless, there has been a curious silence about the linguistic effects of their presence, even though the topic of bilingualism is argued incessantly with every passing administration. It is time to fill this lacuna with research dedicated to understanding the lives of these communities and the role they play in the linguistic ecology of Puerto Rico. I hope my words today stimulate a few of you to take up the challenge.

APPENDIX

The barrios seen in the two tables of this appendix tend to be located in tourist zones, military bases, or areas populated by return migrants.

Table 2: Barrios in PR with highest levels of adults who speak English “very well” (extrapolated from 2000 Census)	
El Mangó (Juncos)	81.0
Roosevelt Roads 1 (Ceiba)	78.5
Ponce zona urbana	69.3
Añasco zona urbana	68.7
Guayacán barrio (Ceiba)	66.8
Roosevelt Roads 2 (Ceiba)	66.8
Demajagua barrio (Fajardo)	54.5
Sabana Grande zona urbana	51.6
Juan Alonso barrio (Mayagüez)	47.3
Maleza Baja barrio (Aguadilla)	45.1
Isla de Mona barrio (Mayagüez)	44.1
Flamenco barrio (Culebra)	43.1
Cangrejo Arriba barrio (Carolina)	43.0
Carolina zona urbana	43.0
Trujillo Alto zona urbana	42.0
Culebra zona urbana	41.8
Benavente barrio (Hormigueros)	41.6
Monacillo barrio (San Juan)	41.0
San Juan zona urbana	41.0
Culebra barrios juntos	40.2

Table 3: Barrios of PR with moderate percentages of adults who speak English “very well” (extrapolated from 2000 Census)	
Fraile barrio (Culebra)	38.5
Santiago y Lima barrio (Naguabo)	37.3
Guaynabo zona urbana 3	37.3
Hato Rey Sur (San Juan)	36.9
Pueblo Viejo barrio (Guaynabo)	36.5
Frailes barrio (Guaynabo)	36.0
Cupey barrio (San Juan)	35.6
San Juan zona urbana 1	35.5
Las Marías barrio	35.5
Quebradillas zona urbana	35.4
Yauco zona urbana	35.2
Peña Pobre comunidad (Naguabo)	35.0
Aguacate barrio (Aguadilla)	34.4
Quinto barrio (Ponce)	34.2
Rincón zona urbana	34.0
Luquillo zona urbana 1	34.0
Rafael Hernández com.(Aguadilla)	33.8
Las Marías zona urbana 2	33.3
Playa Sardinias 1 barrio (Culebra)	33.3
Limón barrio (Utuado)	33.1
Ceiba barrio	33.0
Hato Rey North (San Juan)	32.9
Monacillo barrio (San Juan)	32.8
El Cinco barrio (San Juan)	32.4
Sardinera barrio (Fajardo)	31.7
Caimito barrio (San Juan)	31.6
Candelero Abajo (Humacao)	31.6
Las Marías zona urbana 1	31.4
Mayagüez zona urbana	31.0
Rincón zona urbana 2	31.0

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