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*Puerto Rico: On the Horns of a Language Planning Dilemma**

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This article considers a number of factors that have contributed to the long-standing conflict between Spanish and English in Puerto Rico. Among them are the historical imposition of English as part of a heavy-handed Americanization plan, the critical role of party politics in the consideration of linguistic and cultural questions, the socioeconomic schisms in Puerto Rican society and their linguistic and educational ramifications, and a host of pedagogical problems that stem from an overly centralized and politicized school system in economic crisis. The article then notes ways in which a language planning perspective could help defuse the conflict and arrive at functionally adequate policies in keeping with the Puerto Rican people's desire for self-determination. Finally, the article specifies concrete roles for English language professionals in the planning effort.

Language and bilingualism have been objects of heated controversy in Puerto Rico ever since the U.S. occupied the island in 1898. Although Spanish is unquestionably the local vernacular and is fervently defended and maintained, English is a mandatory subject in schools and colleges and increasingly a requirement for work in commerce, technology, and the professions. Frequent and conflicting changes in official language policy over the years and the intertwining of the language question with the still-unresolved issue of legal status for the island have resulted in a partisan polemic that rages on at all levels of Puerto Rican society. To add fuel to the fire, some intellectuals assert that teaching English has produced "transculturation" and "linguistic impoverishment" in Spanish (Meyn, 1983; Rua, 1987; Seda Bonilla, 1987).

The debate is well documented in the popular media (see Schweers & Vélez, 1992). Politicians, educators, and columnists have repeatedly taken up the pen to duel over language matters. These writers regularly

* An earlier, briefer version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the International Linguistics Association in New York City, April 1989.

stir up public frenzy but do little to shed light on the role of language in the current reality and future needs of the Puerto Rican people.

As a result, teaching English in Puerto Rico is highly problematic. ESL teachers are seen, on the one hand, as purveyors of U.S. colonialism and agents of cultural destruction and, on the other, as liberators and providers of marketable skills. Moreover, they are constantly bombarded with complaints about the poor showing of Puerto Rican students in English, and the streets abound with commercial enterprises purporting to teach quickly (but never cheaply) what the schools have “failed” to teach.

By far the greatest impediment faced by the ESL teacher has been the public’s resistance to learning English, what Resnick (1993) terms a *motivated failure*. Despite official policy and public consensus on the instrumental utility of English as an international language, according to the 1990 census only about 20% of the island’s people consider that they can use it effectively. Because English is not indispensable in their domestic lives and because they already speak a language of worldwide prominence, Puerto Ricans are ambivalent about their L2, and most underestimate their proficiency. Some fear betraying their Puerto Ricanness if they become too competent and may even assume a “patriotic accent” when speaking English. In essence, although they agree that English is important, many covertly resist learning it out of nationalistic loyalty to Spanish.

Thus, before ESL teachers in Puerto Rico can even contemplate teaching structures and norms of appropriateness, they must find creative ways to overcome students’ negativity. Without appropriate motivation, little learning can take place, regardless of methods or materials, and the students’ worst fears about the intransigence of English are confirmed.

Puerto Ricans’ resistance to bilingualism is due to several factors. What follows is a discussion of some of the historical, political, socioeconomic, and pedagogical factors that have contributed to this resistance.

HISTORICAL FACTORS

English was forcibly imposed in Puerto Rico as part of a plan openly dedicated to the creation of a territory loyal to U.S. interests (see Meyn, 1983; Negrón de Montilla, 1970; Osuna, 1949). Victor Clark, who directed island education during the military regime, asserted that Puerto Ricans had little devotion to their native tongue and spoke not Spanish but a “patois” with little value as an intellectual medium. He speculated, “There is a bare possibility that it will be as easy to educate

this people out of their patois into English as it will be to educate them into the elegant tongue of Castile" (Cebollero, 1945, p. 6).

Clark obviously knew nothing about dialect variation and even less about Puerto Rican literature, for this was the period of such distinguished writers and thinkers as Eugenio María de Hostos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, José Gautier Benítez, José G. Padilla, and Luis Muñoz Rivera. Still worse, he spoke in total ignorance of the fiercely nationalistic nature of the Puerto Rican people, who viewed (and still view) Spanish as a nonnegotiable symbol of cultural identity.

Not surprisingly, Clark's English-only language policy was heartily disliked by teachers and students, who circumvented the official decrees. Resistance to the imposition of English resurfaced repeatedly throughout the history of the U.S.-appointed commissioners of education and their inventive language policies. Suffice it to say that virtually every combination of Spanish and English was tried in Puerto Rico. (For an overview of the changes, see Language Policy Task Force, 1978.) The more Washington pushed English, the more defensive and nationalistic the populace became. The pattern continued until 1949, when Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico's first elected governor, appointed Mariano Villaronga as secretary of public instruction. Villaronga immediately instituted Spanish as the medium of instruction at all levels with English taught as an L2. This policy still holds today, yet even such a minimal role for English continues to spark controversy.

POLITICAL FACTORS

Language policy changes have always been tightly connected to political struggles on and off the island, in particular the nagging headache of political status. Statehooders are anxious for a closer union with the U.S., yet they want Puerto Rico to be admitted as a *jíbaro* state with Spanish as its official language.¹ This hardly seems likely given the English-only thrust of recent U.S. legislation. Commonwealth backers are caught in a bind because their option does not resolve the status question but prolongs the uncertainty. Some have put forward the idea of an associated republic, which would be more autonomous than a commonwealth and presumably able to govern language policy. Despite their official support of bilingualism, relatively few would call themselves bilingual. The *independentistas* are similarly divided. Some view all U.S.

¹ The *jíbaro* is the rural peasant from the interior of the island, the symbol of the quintessential, unspoiled Puerto Rican.

influence, especially English, as negative and would like to dethrone it from its official position; others see English as a vital tool in accomplishing the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. It should be noted that the leaders of all three persuasions have studied in the U.S. and are proficient in English.

The link between partisan politics and language policy became irrefutable in 1991, when the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party), supporting commonwealth status, revoked the Official Language Act of 1902, which had granted English and Spanish equal official status. Many observers saw the move as a political ploy to gain votes in the following elections (Vélez & Schweers, 1993). The new law established Spanish as the sole official language, although it recognized the importance of English and did not alter school language policy. Nevertheless, in 1993, when the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party), supporting statehood, came into power, Governor Pedro Rosselló, fulfilling a campaign promise, promptly repealed the Spanish-only law. Puerto Rico is now back to two official languages, although this may change again in future elections.

As Algren de Gutiérrez (1987) has aptly put it, a true resolution of the language conflict requires the confrontation of equal political forces. For that, Puerto Rico needs a defined political status.

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

On the other hand, Canino (1981) has argued that the language policy changes were motivated not solely by colonial imperatives of political control but also by changes in the system of production. The conflicts and contradictions arising from the shifts from the early consolidation of agrarian capitalism, to the decline and collapse of the plantation system, to the development of industrial capitalism were echoed in the struggle over language. Different sectors of the population vigorously supported or opposed English depending on their class interests.

The class base of language choice on the island is evident today in the fairly clear social demarcation between those who have mastered English and those who have not. Highly competent bilinguals in Puerto Rican society tend to be middle- and upper-class members of the intelligentsia, the international commercial circle, and the military. Their social mobility is closely tied to economic benefits accruing from the mastery of English, and they have collectively deserted the public school system to go into private schools where English is more actively and effectively developed.

PEDAGOGICAL FACTORS

This brings us to the schools themselves. Although the overall official language policy has remained constant for the past 40 years, debates over implementation have continued. Periodically, the question of when to begin ESL instruction has arisen. Attempts in 1986 to delay English teaching until the third grade to allow children to become more proficient in their mother tongue met with public outcry. Although most people agree that English is poorly taught, they fear that experimentation will worsen the situation.

Part of the uncertainty stems from conflicting psycholinguistic research findings. Prior to the 1960s, the stress was on the negative cognitive effects of bilingualism (Hakuta, 1986), and this perspective left its imprint in the public consciousness. During the 1970s and 1980s, although much research concluded that bilingualism was beneficial or neutral in child development, a significant subset (particularly that involving U.S. minority populations) indicated that children did best when taught in their native language. In Puerto Rico, this finding was taken to mean that teaching English would damage children. What was forgotten is that in Puerto Rico the issue is not usually teaching in English but rather teaching English as a subject. Given the role of Spanish as majority language, it is difficult to see how 50 minutes of English daily would pose much of a threat regardless of when it was initiated. Nevertheless, this menace was held over the parents and served to further cloud the issues.

Just as critical as when English instruction is begun is how it is imparted. Because of the anomalous situation of Puerto Rico, schools have vacillated between ESL and EFL orientations.

In an ESL approach, only English is used in class. Materials are geared toward preparing students for life in an English-speaking environment. This orientation is appropriate for students who eventually migrate to the U.S., but it does not work as a national policy. ESL requires a speech community in which to practice natural communication, such as that found in the U.S. or the Virgin Islands, where Puerto Ricans represent a sizable minority (Simounet-Geigel, 1993). In Puerto Rico, such a speech community does not exist outside the enclaves of North Americans and the return migrant (or *Nuyoricano*) populations. Nevertheless, the pervasive influence of English in commercial signs, cable TV, English language broadcasting, English-only federal courts, and the like argues for an ESL approach.

An EFL approach is used when students do not have the opportunity to use English on a daily basis. Although some EFL classes are carried out solely in English and focus on speaking, most emphasize reading and

writing as the most accessible and pragmatic forms of language proficiency. This emphasis also makes sense for Puerto Rico but is weakened by the reality of continual migration and the fact that most residents have English-speaking relatives living in the U.S. with whom they communicate and exchange visits. Given these conditions, English cannot be compared to foreign languages like French or Portuguese.

An alternative to the binary split is English as an auxiliary language (EAL) (Olshtain, 1985), a label applied to situations in which English is the official or co-official language but not the mother tongue, as in many former British colonies. A key distinction is that these former colonies are now free nations and can determine their own language policies whereas Puerto Rico remains in a legal limbo that limits policymaking. Clarification of Puerto Rico's status would lead to clarification of language goals and roles, which would, it is hoped, lead to better language teaching. Whether Puerto Rico becomes a state or sovereign nation, effective teaching in both Spanish and English will be necessary.

Of course, merely placing Puerto Rico within a typology does not resolve the matter. Much work needs to be done to devise curricular materials that correspond to the specific needs of the island in its use of EAL. Currently available materials in an ESL or EFL vein are less than adequate and lack local relevance.

To add to the problems, Puerto Rico finds itself in an educational crisis of monumental proportions. Those who can, put their children in private schools, further weakening an already tottering, overly centralized, physically deteriorating system by taking away precisely those parents most empowered to demand the changes needed. The public schools have become the domain of the working poor, the welfare recipients, and the public housing residents, the most disenfranchised sectors of the society. In such a system, excellence in language teaching cannot be guaranteed.

The predicament is perpetuated by the fact that teachers are paid very poorly and that top university students are drawn into more lucrative and respected fields. As a result, colleges of education have a smaller pool of exemplary students to draw from and are forced to accept applicants of lesser standing. As a corollary, students in more academically demanding fields like the sciences tend to have greater English proficiency than those who go into education as a profession. In a study of the lowest level 2nd-year English students at the University of Puerto Rico, one third were found to be majoring in education as opposed to less than one tenth in natural sciences (Pousada, 1987b). It is not clear whether the science students' English proficiency is due to greater academic capacity, superior study habits, or the more pressing need for English skills in their field, which then motivates learning of the language. Probably all three reasons are operative.

Certainly, however, a vicious cycle exists in which ill-prepared English teachers who are unsure of their English rely on mechanical methods of teaching that disguise gaps in their background and give them control over reluctant students. The students, in turn, become proficient at superficial language tasks like filling in blanks and responding to predictable and unnatural language patterns. They are allowed to pass English. When they come to the university, their true lack of proficiency is revealed, so they avoid the sciences, which require extensive English reading. The university is faced with the task of remediating a dozen years of mislearning and unlearning, which in most cases it is not able to do. So students are once again passed on with faulty skills. Some become English teachers, and thus the cycle resumes.

LANGUAGE PLANNING AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

An effective way of dealing with the conflicting language issues in Puerto Rico is through language planning (Pousada, 1989). By *language planning* I mean the conscious and deliberate manipulation of the linguistic resources of a society to achieve certain educational, political, and economic ends. Language planning is a widespread phenomenon in today's world, particularly in the organization and development of multilingual states and recently decolonized territories. Because of the increasing complexity of modern, urbanized societies and the mounting political and social demands of minority groups the world round for equitable treatment, careful, systematic, and sensitive language planning has become highly desirable and indeed necessary in many nations (Eastman, 1983). Language planners are involved in the selection of official or national languages; development of writing systems; preparation of dictionaries, grammars, and textbooks; promotion of literacy; and standardization, modernization, and terminological enrichment of both majority and minority languages. Their work is closely tied to that of educational planners, as it is within the sphere of formal education that language treatment is most often perceived and carried out. However, language planning also entails the assessment and alteration of the practices and products of government, private business, and the media.

Solid language planning typically consists of four stages: research, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The research stage is perhaps the most critical, for only through careful investigation into the linguistic resources, attitudes, and goals of the people can a responsible and sensitive policy be derived. Unfortunately, because of the exigencies of time, economics, and political pressure, research is often truncated or tailored to the beliefs of the dominant group, and the resulting policy is ineffectual or rejected outright by the populace.

Policy formulation and the determination of goals and strategies for its implementation are essentially political tasks because they must balance the demands of different interest groups against the long-term needs of the nation as a whole. To quote Mackey (1979), "Language policy is a branch of the politics of accommodation" (p. 49). Sometimes policymakers make seemingly unlikely choices precisely because of the difficulties inherent in favoring one indigenous cultural or linguistic group over others. The actual formulation is affected by the nature of the planning agency, the economic and political state of the polity, the linguistic systems concerned and the attitudes held toward them, the extent of literacy, and the people's sense of cultural identity.

Implementation is another thorny area, especially if the policy has not been well researched or is being imposed on a doubting public. It requires the development of materials, programs, and institutions to support decisions as well as the organized mobilization of economic, educational, and communicative resources. Unsuccessful or partial implementation can cause further disorganization, mistrust, and conflict.

The success or failure of the implementation is evident in the evaluation process. Ideally, evaluation is ongoing and initiated at the outset of the plan. Two basic criteria for assessing a policy's outcomes are functional adequacy and popular acceptance. A third criterion that should be added is the enhancement of the democracy, equality, autonomy, and overall well-being of the people. If a policy does not do this, then planning language becomes "planning inequality" (Tollefson, 1991) or "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992).

In Puerto Rico, language policy has rarely been planned and even less often been evaluated. It has usually been imposed in response to political imperatives. One attempt to go beyond came in 1986 when a special commission of former secretaries of education of Puerto Rico presented the governor with a report on language instruction that paid particular attention to the teaching of English (Special Commission of Ex-Secretaries of Education, 1986). It was not a full-blown language policy, but it did present recent research findings along with recommendations, falling thus into the stages of research and policy formulation. Because it had neither the force of law nor the control of funds necessary for implementation, the document functioned only as a guidepost and point of departure for an eventual language education policy to be determined, presumably by the Department of Education.

Nevertheless, the report represents one of the few dispassionate and comprehensive pronouncements on the subject and is based on research and classroom experience. It takes as its major premise the desirability and necessity for generalized bilingualism in Puerto Rico while underscoring the undeniable reality of Spanish as the national vernacular and principal means of socialization and cultural identity. It points out the

instrumental utility of ESL and recommends additional attention to innovative instruction, research, materials development, and staffing in order to provide Puerto Rican youngsters with more significant levels of communicative competence. Rejected is the view of English and Spanish as rivals. Instead the two are projected as complementary avenues to the full cultural development of the individual.

Among the report's recommendations are school decentralization to provide local flexibility; the provision of meaningful contexts for English; initiation of L2 instruction at the earliest possible time consistent with the students' state of readiness; the use of varied teaching methods and techniques to meet the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous student population; improved and linguistically oriented training of greater numbers of qualified and motivated English teachers, especially at the elementary levels; better pay for teachers; and the revamping of language proficiency instruments, teaching materials, curriculum design, and teacher evaluation. The report also insisted on the need for systematic university- and school-coordinated research into language acquisition, bilingualism, teaching techniques, and language attitudes.

In a University of Puerto Rico forum on the teaching of languages in Puerto Rico, I outlined a follow-up agenda to concretize the Special Commission's recommendations (Pousada, 1987a). A first step would be to establish an official, nonpartisan language commission (LC), much like those in Canada, Norway, India, Sweden, and Malaysia. The LC would consist of representatives from public and private schools, government agencies, private enterprises, and the media, as well as linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists, and would function independently of the government and electoral process.

The LC's primary mission would be to popularize the concepts of linguistic alternatives and language planning via, for example, surveys of attitudes, public hearings, radio and television programs, newspaper columns, public debates, and school activities. Another important task would be to collect all materials pertaining to language on the island. In addition to Department of Education documents, these materials would include federal and local legislation regarding language and education, civil rights, and minority rights; regulations mentioning language in commercial enterprises, factories, workshops, unions, and community associations; and language policies established by radio and television stations, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, public relations firms, and other agencies that manipulate language and public consciousness.

After a predetermined period of investigation, the LC would prepare a report on the current situation and suggest the changes that would most benefit the people in terms of national unification and development. These recommendations would be discussed and amended. Special

referenda or other democratic mechanisms would determine the general direction of the new policy. The details of implementing the plan would be the responsibility of the LC and the appropriate experts.

To achieve a national language policy in a culturally congruent manner, popular campaigns complete with slogans would be necessary to awaken the interest of the Puerto Rican citizenry and maintain the struggle high on the national agenda. While planning for policy implementation, the LC could also define the criteria for a continuous evaluation—that is to say, the significant indications of the probable success or failure of the policy at each stage.

THE ROLE OF ESL TEACHERS AND LANGUAGE SPECIALISTS

The development of a functionally adequate and popularly acceptable language policy for Puerto Rico will not be easy or rapid, but each step should bring the island closer to unity and clarity and farther away from the current divisiveness and confusion. Although a cohesive language policy would not be a panacea for all the ills that afflict Puerto Rican society, it could provide a base on which to organize other far-reaching changes.

It is my firm belief that linguists and language teachers can be of help in this matter; however, there is no question but that efforts on the island's political status will determine to a great extent the nature of the eventual policies. My only hope is that language planning will be part of the resolution of the status question and not left as an appendage to be grafted on later.

One way in which this can take place is if all interested parties begin immediately to collect the preliminary information necessary to begin the planning process. Some good starting points would be the survey of language attitudes carried out by López Laguerre (1990); the work of the Linguistic Competencies project at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras; and the 1994 Language Planning conference at the Inter-American University in San Germán. Another important source is the recently established Puerto Rican Association of Applied Linguistics, which has language policy as one of its primary concerns.

However, these forums are limited primarily to a university audience. Of more direct impact would be teacher-generated studies in the classroom. ESL teachers are uniquely situated to take the linguistic pulse of the island's children by gathering information and eliciting students' views on ways to improve English teaching. Teachers can influence perceptions and serve as models for bilingualism. They can inform

principals and supervisors and make improvements at the school level. They can become catalysts for change and make a significant difference in the way scores of Puerto Rican children are prepared to handle challenges in today's modern, multilingual world. They can in essence serve as the vanguard of the language planning forces to come.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored in brief the historical, political, socioeconomic, and educational reasons behind the Puerto Rican resistance to the English language. It has outlined a language planning perspective that could involve ESL teachers and other language specialists in creating viable language policies.

Although it is unlikely that the entrenched nature of the problem will prevent any substantive change in the near future, it is hoped that the information presented here will draw attention to the Puerto Rican language policy dilemma and perhaps provide useful parallels to situations in other nations.

THE AUTHOR

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