

# BEING BILINGUAL/BICULTURAL IN PUERTO RICO: PERSONAL HISTORIES<sup>1</sup>

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## 1.0 Introduction

I am an educational linguist who specializes in multilingualism and language planning and policy, and some of you may be surprised to see me here at a literature conference. However, today I want to share with you a project in progress which is firmly rooted in the literary genre of autobiography, specifically what Paul John Eakin (1985) has termed the “linguistic autobiography.” This is a personal narrative in which language is the primary hub around which the author’s life story turns and upon which his or her identities and personal ideologies are constructed.

Well-known cases of linguistic autobiographies include Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Ariel Dorfman’s *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* (1998), and Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (1987). Others perhaps less well-known are Nancy Huston’s *Losing north: Musings on land, tongue and self* (2002) and Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. (1989). A very worthwhile collection edited by Isabelle de Courtivron in 2003 and titled *Lives in translation: Bilingual writers on identity and creativity* includes linguistic autobiographical essays by Dorfman, Huston, and Hoffman as well as other notable bilingual writers like Ilan Stavans, Sylvia Molloy, Yoko Tawada, and Anita Desai. Other

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autobiographical works of great merit whose writers relive their language acquisition and cultural transformation are Maxine Hong Kingston's *The woman warrior: Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts* (1976) and Saul Friedlander's *When memory comes* (1979), which explore, respectively, Chinese-American and Jewish immigrant experiences of "otherness (Ramsdell, 2004).

My project features not literary luminaries but rather a group of UPR graduate students majoring in language-related fields (literature, linguistics, translation, and TESOL) who have constructed bilingual/bicultural identities. My data are drawn from more than 40 linguistic autobiographies prepared for my Master's level seminar on bilingualism over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> A group of about 30 will be included verbatim in a book to be titled *Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Voices from UPR Students* which will showcase the linguistic, sociocultural, and educational variation found in the students' life histories and propose a more nuanced approach to language policy on the island that acknowledges and incorporates this diversity.

## **2.0 Defining terms**

Let me begin by clarifying some terminology. In this presentation, I am going to follow François Grosjean (2010) and use "bilingualism" in the broadest possible fashion, including within it the use of two or more languages or dialects along the continuum from receptive bilingual, at one extreme, to perfect bilingual at the other. "Bilingualism," as I employ it, includes "bidialectalism," as well as "multilingualism" and "multidialectalism." I will similarly apply the term "biculturalism" broadly to the ample range of assimilative behaviors and levels of incorporation of social practices or

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<sup>2</sup> The technique of assigning linguistic autobiographies goes back to dialectologist Raven McDavid's linguistic classes in the 1940s.

worldviews from two or more cultures. By “language planning or policymaking,” I mean any organized and deliberate effort (whether governmental or non-governmental) to regulate or shape the structural development, societal use, maintenance, revival, or standardization of a given language variety (cf. Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997).

### **3.0 The language situation in Puerto Rico**

The island of Puerto Rico is characterized by the almost universal use of Puerto Rican Spanish as the language of daily interaction in personal, academic, and professional domains. This Spanish monolingual linguistic base (with its Taíno and African influences) was complicated by the historical imposition of the English language and accompanying American cultural values beginning in 1898 with the forcible assertion of U.S. dominion over the island (Torres González, 2002; Pousada, 1999). During the first 50 years of the regime, an assortment of misguided language policies were implemented, which had limited success yet left an indelible mark on language attitudes and cultural identity.

The linguistic dynamic was further affected by the arrival of a relatively small number of Americans and foreigners who set up residence on the island and by cyclical waves of economically motivated migration between the island and the U.S. resulting in the current situation in which the number of Puerto Ricans on the island (3.5 million) is less than the number of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (4.9 million) (Cohen, Patten, & Hugo López, 2014).

Ongoing media debate and publically articulated demands for cultural maintenance and autonomy have produced passionate speculations about the implications of cultural and linguistic contact for the future of Puerto Ricans as a people

(Schweers & Vélez, 1992; Unidos por Nuestro Idioma, 2009). Periodic changes in governmental and educational policies since the formation of the Puerto Rican Commonwealth in 1952 have created even more confusion as programs are implemented by adherents of the victorious political party of the moment and then discarded by the next (Schmidt, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Much of the focus on language and culture in the media in Puerto Rico is on the supposed lack of bilingual skills among island residents despite years of governmental efforts made to foment societal bilingualism. However, this ignores the existence of significant sectors which do have productive proficiency in both Spanish and English (and other language varieties) and identify culturally with more than one speech community. Some are return migrants, Puerto Ricans raised in the diaspora, or the children of English-dominant parents. Others are products of bilingual or English-only schools. Still others have become bilingual/bicultural via more complex routes.

#### **4.0 Data from linguistic autobiographies of PR graduate students**

Analyses of census and survey data give a general impression of the overall demographic changes that have occurred, including the gradual increase each decade in the number of Puerto Ricans who claim English proficiency signaled by Barretto (2001) and the clustering of English-proficient speakers in the San Juan area and other urban coastal areas identified by Pousada (2010). However, they do not reveal much about the concrete ways in which island residents struggle to forge their lives and creatively interpret and enact their individual and collective identities. For this reason, I have turned to examining personal histories written by adults who have successfully

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<sup>3</sup> By the way, for those of you who don't know, Jorge Schmidt will be presenting his book *The politics of English in Puerto Rico's public schools* this afternoon at 1:30 pm in the College of General Studies.

navigated the waters of bilingualism and biculturalism to become productive members of Puerto Rican society and who are also equipped to survive off the island if their personal circumstances should lead them in that direction.

My graduate students (both Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican) were encouraged to be brutally honest in their depictions of their linguistic and cultural development, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses and confessing personal doubts and identity resets along the way. Their essays reveal certain common tendencies but also illustrate how human beings can creatively construct distinct destinies using the same basic cultural tools.

### **5.0 Diversity of bilingualism and biculturalism in PR revealed in essays**

While my analysis is still underway, I can state that the collection of linguistic autobiographies demonstrates the importance of certain factors, namely:

1. Caring adults who play supportive roles in exposing children to various linguistic and cultural systems;
2. Ample opportunities for language and culture acquisition in the form of diverse living arrangements, schools, travel experiences, interactions with people from different backgrounds, print and audiovisual media, etc.;
3. General awareness of the instrumental benefits of being bilingual/bicultural but also openness to the integrative advantages (i.e., the emotional connection with the languages and their speakers);
4. Non-judgmental attitudes toward “otherness” of all kinds due to interactional experiences with diverse discourse modes (oral, written, gestural, cybernetic, etc.) from many places of origin;

5. Concomitant development of personal relationships which give meaning and purpose to the acquisition of other languages and the adoption of cultural practices that depart from the norm;
6. Openness to change and flexibility in the face of the vicissitudes of life; and
7. Willingness to take social risks and stand out from the crowd despite considerable pressure to the contrary.<sup>4</sup>

These characteristics make the “accidental” group created by enrollment in a particular graduate course much more cohesive than originally anticipated.

At the same time, the linguistic autobiographies abundantly illustrate many differences in the trajectories of the students’ lives and how they have reacted to specific changes in their cultural and linguistic environments.

1. The students varied considerably in the **types of schools** they attended (public, Catholic, lay private, etc.), the number of years they spent in each type, and the curricula provided in those schools (monolingual Spanish or English, bilingual, ESL, etc.). Clearly, the educational system, while vital, is not the sole determinant in the development of bilingual/bicultural individuals in Puerto Rico.
2. The students also varied in the **types of family structure** they grew up in. Many were the products of families divided by divorce, a fact which ironically increased the types and amounts of linguistic influences in their lives, but others lived in intact families and still developed bilingual/bicultural identities.
3. A notable number of students had a **parent in the U.S. military** which tended to increase the number of residential locations and perhaps the allegiance to

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<sup>4</sup> Many commented that their bilingual skills were looked upon as aberrant or suspect by their peers and/or teachers. This was not only the case with those raised in the diaspora, but also occurred with those who were fluent in English without ever having left the island.

American culture, but again, it cannot be said that to be bilingual/bicultural, this feature is required.

4. Students varied in the **types of communities** they were reared in. Some grew up in rural zones, and others, in urban or suburban neighborhoods. Some started life in the U.S. or another country and moved to PR, while others were born in PR and left to spend formative years in the U.S. or elsewhere. Still others moved back and forth multiple times.

### **6.0 Implications for nuanced language education policy**

The characteristics that unite the group of graduate students can be seen as goals for a language education policy that would prepare all residents of Puerto Rico to take their place in the global economy and cultural marketplace. More specifically, this general language education policy would have to:

1. help individuals understand the benefits of bilingualism and biculturalism and transmit this knowledge to their children;
2. provide students of all ages with opportunities to acquire multiple language varieties and cultural beliefs and support them in their attempts to go beyond their own community experiences; and
3. find ways to foster individuals who are open to outsiders and willing to create personal relationships that make language acquisition worth doing.

Accomplishing these goals would necessitate the intimate involvement of parents and community in the planning process as well as education beyond the classroom walls.

The traits that distinguish some students from others point to subgroups in Puerto Rican society whose needs must be attended to if any language education policy

is to function adequately. More specifically, students raised in the Puerto Rican diaspora should be provided with special English and Spanish classes that reflect their particular backgrounds as native speakers of English dialects and heritage speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish. The all-purpose courses currently available serve to bore or frustrate them. Furthermore, students with bilingual/bicultural attributes (however they were developed) should serve as resources to help other students, instead of being marginalized or mocked.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In closing, my work so far indicates that linguistic autobiographies can yield a surprising amount of information about how bilingualism/biculturalism is actually lived in Puerto Rico. Such information can be exceedingly useful in creating language education policies that can move Puerto Rico beyond never-ending debate and toward resolution of long-standing problems.



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