

# LINGUISTS IN THE RESOLUTION OF CARIBBEAN LANGUAGE PROBLEMS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Language policy decisions are made daily in the Caribbean. They may include selection of official or national languages, development and implementation of writing systems, organization of national literacy campaigns, recognition and regularization of creoles or dialects, establishment of teacher training standards, creation of scientific or technological nomenclature, dissemination of publishing norms, and preparation of dictionaries. Regrettably, many determinations involving language are made with little genuine input from those trained to analyze language and its social functions.

In Puerto Rico, partisan politics and commercial concerns, rather than sociolinguistic insights, have traditionally prevailed in language-related matters. This paper probes the different types of language policies carried out routinely in Puerto Rico. It then outlines the specific contributions that linguists can make to the resolution of language issues, based upon the documented experiences of other Caribbean nations. Its objective is to serve as a suggested plan of action for applied linguists on the island and throughout the Caribbean.

## 1.0 Background on language planning

Robinson (1988, p. 1) defines language planning (hereafter referred to as LP) as “a coherent effort by individuals, groups, or organizations to influence language use or development.” It generally occurs in response to sociopolitical needs, especially when different speech communities compete for access to social benefits or official recognition. Often, language planners attempt to meet these needs by designating a particular variety as the official or standard variety in order to promote linguistic unity in a multilingual country, or by granting official recognition to more than one variety in order to appease competing groups. The

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decisions made determine opportunities for employment, education, and legal equality (Eastman, 1983).

LP cannot be understood apart from its social context and the history that produced that context (Cooper, 1989). It is primarily motivated by efforts to assure or maintain material and/or non-material interests. It can be initiated at any level of the social hierarchy, but it is not necessarily initiated by people whose primary focus is language. LP may originate among legislators, administrators, the military, and missionaries, rather than among writers, poets, linguists, language teachers, lexicographers, and translators.

Mazama (1994) considers that LP was brought to the Third World as part of imperial conquest under the guise of “civilization” and later “development” and was based upon the deep-rooted belief that European experience could and should provide the model and standard for the rest of humanity. She feels that the concept of LP is problematic, since “language development” implies that some language varieties are better than others.

While we would agree that LP was definitely utilized in this manner during colonial times, it does not mean that the activity itself is of no utility in the post-colonial Caribbean; rather, we should take heed of the warning sounded by Mazama and take steps to ensure that LP is locally controlled and designed to protect the linguistic rights of the masses. This converts LP into an intrinsically progressive measure and avoids what Tollefson (1991) calls “planning inequality”. As St. Hilaire (1999) puts it:

By promoting ...the linguistic and cultural property of the popular classes, the governments of the region encourage greater participation in national life by all segments of society. (p. 213)

Language policies may entail the selection of official or national languages, development and implementation of writing systems, organization of national literacy campaigns, and

standardization of linguistic structures through the preparation of dictionaries, grammars, and textbooks. It may also involve the establishment of standards for teacher training and hiring, creation of scientific or technological nomenclature as part of the modernization of the society, dissemination of publishing norms, and censoring of taboo language in the media, among others (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997).

LP is most often carried out in the schools; however, it also applies to the assessment and alteration of the practices and products of government, private business, and the media. Schools may contribute greatly to the legitimization of a language plan by imbuing it with the prestige that a formal education conveys to its products. In this sense, the schools help to change language attitudes among the populace and create a space in which language change can be seen as desirable.

LP may affect all levels of language structure but typically focuses on the most visible levels: writing, vocabulary, and morpho-syntax. The written form of a language variety may be developed, modified, or standardized through the creation of an orthography. This often entails dealing with issues of power, domination, hegemony, and resistance (Faraclas, Barrows & Cortes Piñeiro, 2005). The lexicon of a language may be enriched to keep up with technological development via the creation of native-based norms of nomenclature, the coining of new words, or the legitimization of foreign loan words, leading to the preparation of glossaries and eventually dictionaries. Finally, the morphological and syntactic systems may be expanded or made more complex as the language variety takes on official functions, a common occurrence when pidgins or creoles become national or regional *lingua francas*. The description and normalization of morpho-syntax is generally effected via the preparation of linguistic and pedagogical grammars.

In the Caribbean, the major locus of LP has always been the schools. Devonish (1986) points out that on the anglophone islands standard English has traditionally been seen as the sole medium for teaching literacy as well as general instruction. Underlying this practice is the assumption that the students are native English speakers and that creoles are forms of broken English that have to be “repaired” by the schools.

It has been difficult to give any official recognition to the creoles, according to Roberts (1994), because the schools exist to create middle-class behavior and values, and creoles are associated with poor people and subordination. In addition, since decisions imposed by outsiders often fail, any project for implementing the use of creoles in schools must be locally based and directed and cannot rely solely on foreign expertise, teachers, or advisors. Scarcity of resources has prevented this in many Caribbean countries.

Attitudes toward the use of oral and written creoles have historically tended to be negative because of persistent associations with slavery and degradation. As a result, the creoles are often seen as inappropriate for utilization in schools. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a softening of this attitude due to political independence, changes in the routes to social acceptability, the erosion of the power of the landowning classes, the emergence of recognized literary and artistic figures who use creole, and the accumulation of a rapidly growing body of linguistic scholarship on creoles.

On January 14, 2011, in Kingston, Jamaica, a significant language planning event occurred, namely, the ratification by a group of linguists and government officials of the *Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean*. This charter proposes the creation of a Regional Council of Languages within the creole-speaking Caribbean as well as a Territorial Council of Languages for each of the creole-speaking territories to which the Charter applies. Taking its ideological and juridical foundations from the basic precepts of

the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, the American Convention on Human Rights of 1969, and the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights of 1996, the charter considers language rights to be inalienable personal rights as well as collective rights of speech communities. It views discrimination against speech communities as unacceptable, regardless of whether it is based on degree of political sovereignty, socio-economic condition, or extent of codification or modernization (*Charter*, Article 5; 2).

This charter caused quite an uproar among the general public in Jamaica, as well as among certain government officials, because it promotes the notion of a bilingual education approach to the teaching of creole (or patwa) alongside standard English in the public schools.<sup>2</sup> However, I will refer to this charter several times during my talk today because I find it has much to offer to us here in Puerto Rico.

## **2.0 Language issues in Puerto Rico**

Puerto Ricans enjoy a very privileged situation in the Caribbean because of their political and economic relationship with the United States. As a result, they have been conditioned to look always to the north for models for problem resolution. Rarely do they consult their Caribbean neighbors for guidance. However, understanding the situation of LP in the Greater Caribbean can shed light on some of the language-related problems that we face here in Puerto Rico.

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<sup>2</sup> The online edition of the *Jamaica Gleaner* of April 13, 2011 had a brief report on the Charter as proposed by Prof. Hubert Devonish of the University of the West Indies and the reaction of former prime minister and chancellor of the University of Technology Edward Seaga who considers that including patois in the schools would be a waste of educational resources. It also mentions education advocate Dr. Ralph Thompson who favors having early childhood educators with knowledge of patois to be able to connect with the children. On the other hand, Prime Minister Bruce Golding regards teaching patois to be an admission of failure in the teaching of standard English. Twenty-eight pages of commentaries from the general public run the full gamut of reactions, with a significant number questioning the sanity and/or sincerity of Prof. Devonish.

In Puerto Rico, the concern is not with the legitimization of a creole variety but rather with the development of popular access to two world standard languages, the management of a language contact situation, and certain decisions regarding standard and non-standard dialects or registers of both Spanish and English. There is also a significant problem of functional illiteracy among poor and working-class youths in Puerto Rican society. Finally, there is the issue of immigration and its concomitant language dilemmas (e.g., how to effectively educate Dominicans, Haitians, and return migrant Puerto Ricans who utilize distinct language varieties).

Puerto Ricans struggle daily with conflicting attitudes toward bilingualism in English and Spanish. They would do well to examine with care the multilingual and polyglossic societies of the Caribbean in which speakers learn from birth to shift language varieties according to specific social domains or functions. Such societies (for example, the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao where Papiamentu is used along with Dutch, English, and Spanish) are aware that small polities require multilingualism in order to survive in a complex world and participate in international trade. They have also known for a long time that language contact can result in expansion of language varieties through borrowings and other integrative language behaviors. They have furthermore clung fervently to their native vernaculars while at the same time working to acquire languages of wider communication for instrumental purposes. Often speakers of “world class” languages like Spanish feel that their varieties are somehow superior to and more “developed” than “small” languages like creoles. This causes them to overlook and underestimate the richness and value of linguistic diversity.

In what follows, I will explore different language issues that currently face Puerto Rican society. The first set may be termed *language status* issues (i.e., matters that involve the selection of a particular code for a particular function or the valorization given to a particular code vs. another code). Under language status, I will examine language in the government and

courts, the schools, the business world, and the media. The second set of language issues may be termed *language corpus* issues (i.e., matters that involve the internal structure of the language being used), and within this category, I will comment on the dichotomy between standard and non-standard usage, actions taken with regard to specific elements of Puerto Rican Spanish (e.g., accentuation, spelling, anglicisms, and archaisms), the creation of specialized dictionaries, and the imparting of literacy skills in Spanish.

### **3.0 Language status issues in different domains of Puerto Rican society**

From 1902, when the U.S. established a civilian government on the island, up to the present time (with a brief respite in 1991-1992), Puerto Rico has had (at least nominally) two official languages: Spanish and English. The Official Language Act of 1902 was not the result of any coherent language planning process; rather it was imposed for the convenience of the English-speaking colonial governors as well as for the implementation of a no-holds barred Americanization project. This law ostensibly treated both languages indistinctly, but the reality was that English was the language of power, even in the local courts. It was not until 1965 that the Puerto Rico Supreme Court ruled ( in *Pueblo de P.R. v. Tribunal Superior*, 92 D. P.R. 696-7, 1965) that the language of the insular courts was officially designated as Spanish, although provision for interpreters would be made for anyone who did not speak Spanish. The U.S. federal court in Puerto Rico, on the other hand, has maintained its English-only nature despite many attempts to change this policy and even to remove the federal court from the island (Pousada 2008). A byzantine system of simultaneous interpretation into Spanish for plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses who do not speak English and consecutive interpretation into English of any Spanish testimony for the “benefit” of the bilingual jury members bolsters the highly artificial reliance on English as the sole language of record among participants who are practically all native Spanish speakers.

It is interesting to contrast this situation with the provisions of the *Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean* that I mentioned earlier which states:

Everyone has the right to be polyglot and to know and use the language most conducive to his/her personal development or social mobility, without prejudice to the guarantees established in this Charter for the public use of territorial languages. (Article 11; 2 )

Clearly, the U.S. federal court in Puerto Rico violates this essential premise. I would personally like to see a reexamination of the federal court with the input of linguists utilizing the Charter as a starting point for discussion.

Despite considerable effort and a variety of often conflicting language education policies (Pousada 1999, 2008b), the U.S. government did not succeed in displacing the Spanish vernacular nor was it very successful in teaching English to the Puerto Rican masses. In recognition of these two facts, since 1948, the language of education in the public schools of Puerto Rico has been Spanish, with English as a mandatory subject required for graduation at all levels up to the university. Every administration has experimented with “fixing” the English program in Puerto Rico. Differential pay scales for English teachers were established to attract bilingual instructors to the public school system, and at different points American teachers were recruited to work on the island. Unfortunately, English-proficient teachers can earn so much more working in the States that they are often drawn away from the island. Some of those who remain behind fall into the habit of teaching the English class in Spanish, and even less English is learned. In addition, the textbooks they are given to teach from tend to be designed for use in the States and are not relevant to the Puerto Rican students’ interests or needs. There are very

few locally written books for young people in English.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, English and Spanish are continually posed as rivals in the public school system instead of as complementary resources. When Spanish scores go down, the blame is always placed on the English requirements. If we examine the College Board scores of graduating high school seniors for each year from 1985 to 2008, we can see two very clear patterns. First, every year, the public school students score lower in both Spanish and English than do the private school students, not too surprising given the differences in socioeconomic background and parental expectations of the two groups. Second, the Spanish scores among the public school students have been decreasing since 1985, while the English scores have remained fairly constant although always slightly lower than the Spanish scores. It is hard to blame the English classes for this drop in Spanish scores since the public school students receive less than an hour of English a day. Among the private school students, English scores have exceeded Spanish scores since 1995 although the Spanish scores never go as low as the public school students' scores. This is to be expected given that the private schools stress English strongly.

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<sup>3</sup>There is a small but growing group of young professors who are actively seeking to remedy this situation by writing their own storybooks and textbooks with which to teach English. Among these are: Ilsa López and Anibal Munoz.

**COLLEGE BOARD SCORES IN SPANISH & ENGLISH  
AMONG GRADUATING SENIORS AT PUBLIC & PRIVATE SCHOOLS  
IN PUERTO RICO 1985-2008**

Año de la Clase	Español			Inglés		
	Pública	Privada	P.R. Total	Pública	Privada	P.R. Total
1985	460	553	474	417	532	433
1986	467	552	480	423	532	440
1987	464	545	477	422	536	440
1988	469	543	482	424	536	443
1989	470	555	484	424	537	442
1990	462	540	476	422	531	443
1991	467	536	481	426	524	446
1992	468	533	483	424	529	449
1993	466	534	484	425	525	451
1994	460	528	476	425	525	449
1995	453	522	469	431	530	454
1996	456	511	467	419	512	438
1997	446	514	462	420	515	442
1998	441	499	453	416	516	437
1999	442	496	453	414	520	436
2000	440	503	453	416	524	440
2001	434	499	449	412	537	439
2002	435	497	447	415	536	440
2003	432	496	445	417	534	441
2004	430	484	442	416	538	443
2005	430	490	442	419	536	443
2006	428	489	442	420	546	448
2007	428	488	442	423	537	449
2008	431	493	445	429	542	456

**N = Población total examinada**

Ag/2009

**Source: College Board Puerto Rico y América Latina.  
Programa de Evaluación y Admisión Universitaria (2009)**

While there are some bilingual public schools and quite a few private schools that offer instruction in English-only or in both languages, there is no cohesive policy regarding bilingualism. The island has experimented with various plans to create bilingual citizens; however, none have succeeded due to lack of continuity and follow-through. Influential linguists are cited in the proposals for such programs; however, there is no concerted effort to involve them in the actual implementation or evaluation of the plans.

Puerto Rican schools receive increasing numbers of students from outside the island, primarily from the Dominican Republic and Haiti, as well as return migrant Puerto Rican students. There is no cohesive plan for dealing with these students. Those from the Dominican Republic and Haiti may have little or no English training, and those from the U.S. may have little or no Spanish training. In addition, the return migrants who are native speakers of English may speak non-standard varieties that are not accepted in the schools in Puerto Rico.

Again, this directly contradicts the provisions of the *Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean* which state:

... persons who move to and settle in the territory of another language community have the right and duty to maintain an attitude of *integration* towards this community. This term is understood to mean an additional socialization of such persons, in such a way that they may preserve their original linguistic and cultural characteristics, while sharing with the society in which they have settled sufficient references, values and forms of behaviour in linguistic and other areas; to enable them to function socially without greater difficulties than those experienced by members of the host community. (Article 4:1)

Most new arrivals in Puerto Rico are faced with negative attitudes and difficult living situations. Some have very limited literacy skills in either Spanish or English.

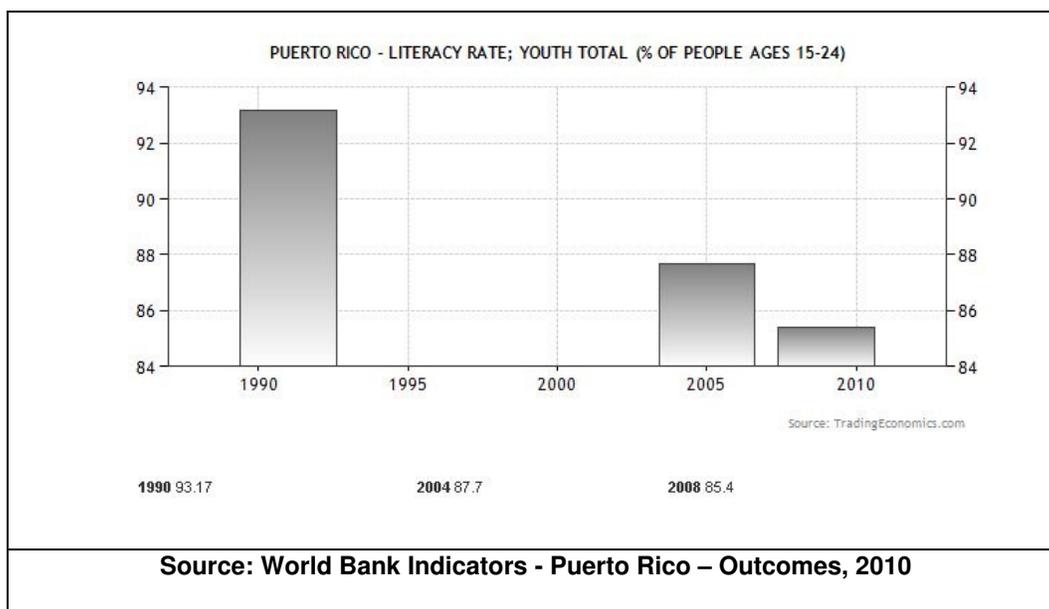
Literacy is another language education problem in Puerto Rico, although you might not suspect it from the official figures usually reported which cite an adult literacy rate of over 94% (cf. CIA World Factbook 2010). In order to see the real effects of functional illiteracy in a society, you need to look at the teenage and young adult population. In the year 2000, more than 18% of the young people in Puerto Rico between the ages of 25 and 35 had a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education or less (see table below):

**Grado académico alcanzado, personas de 25 a 35 años**  
**Total de personas y proporción sobre el total**  
*Academic level attained, persons 25-35 years old*  
*Total of persons and proportion over total*

**Fuente de los datos (Data source):** U.S. Census Bureau

2000										
TOTAL DE PERSONAS de 25 a 35 años (Total of persons from 25-35 years old)										
No school	Nursery to 6th grade	7th grade to 12th grade (without diploma)	High school diploma	Some college (without degree)	Associates degree	Bachelors	Masters	Professional studies	Doctorate	
No escuela	Nursery a 6to grado	7mo grado a 12mo grado (sin diploma)	Diploma de escuela superior	Estudios universitarios (sin grado)	Grado asociado	Bachillerato	Maestría	Estudios profesionales	Doctorado	
<b>Total Isla (Total Island)</b>	111,615	309,454	495,335	509,858	280,089	163,724	310,443	62,840	32,117	12,853
	4.9%	13.5%	21.6%	22.3%	12.2%	7.2%	13.8%	2.7%	1.4%	0.6%

In 2010, according to World Bank figures, the literacy rate among young people ages 15 to 24 in Puerto Rico was only 85%, which means that 15% were not able to read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life with understanding (see table below).



There has been a clear decrease in literacy skills among this age group, and the public is largely unaware of the extent of the problem. As far as I know, no linguists have been called in to

analyze or address the issue. Once again, it is instructive to examine the provisions for literacy in the *Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean*:

All members of the language community have the right to a quality education and literacy in their first language outside the formal school system. This includes youth and adults who have not had the opportunity to attend school or who have dropped out. They also have the right to study (in) a second (and other) language(s). (Article 30)

In Puerto Rico, there are limited adult education opportunities that often do not reach the youth that are most in need. Such youths cannot function competently within a modern, technological society and end up occupying the ranks of the permanently unemployed and underemployed, often falling into criminal activity. Efforts to train such youths to enter the job market are also quite limited.

The world of business is another arena in which language-related issues abound. Most businesses in Puerto Rico create their own in house rules and standards for language use. Those that deal primarily with tourists and U.S.-based companies tend to hire employees with strong English skills, while those that are more island-based make only *pro forma* searches for “bilingual” candidates. There are many jobs that require only minimal English skills, but there is a powerful sense among Puerto Ricans that English is the route to economic success. The media promote this myth by showing English speakers as being “cool,” “modern,” and with access to disposable income. Many advertisements feature attractive young people consuming luxury or recreational products while switching between Spanish and English or using English loanwords.

It should be noted that at present there is no body that deals directly with language status issues in Puerto Rico. On August 9, 2002, during the administration of Sila Calderón, Law 138

was passed to create a Language Planning Institute in the Puerto Rican government. Its stated purpose was to:

1. Develop a language policy that would respond to the social, political, economic, and cultural needs of the island.
2. Create applied linguistic projects that would contribute to establish new teaching methods and also maintain a database regarding the teaching of English and Spanish.
3. Protect and sustain the use of the Spanish language
4. Facilitate and accelerate the learning of English
5. Make possible the learning of other languages, particularly French and Portuguese as languages spoken in the surrounding Caribbean region.
6. Structure the necessary means by which Spanish would serve as the vehicle for all governmental communication on the island.

Unfortunately, due to partisan politics and budgetary cuts, the Language Planning Institute was never formally constituted nor funded, and on July 29, 2010, Law 111 was passed to revoke the original law that sought to establish it. Another golden opportunity to make use of the expertise of linguists in the resolution of language issues was lost, and the island went back to engaging in the same old tired debates about English and Spanish, as if that were all there was to consider regarding language in Puerto Rico.

#### **4.0 Language corpus issues in Puerto Rican society**

The Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española (under the direction of linguist Humberto López Morales) is at present the only body that deals directly with language corpus issues on the island. It is dedicated to promulgating the correct use, the conservation, and the study of Spanish in the context of the cultural history of the island, from its origins to the present

day. It carries out linguistic research to amend the existing grammars of Puerto Rican Spanish, document the historical developments in the language, revise the spelling and accentuation of Spanish words, and contribute to the large international project known as CORPES (Corpus del Siglo XXI). The Academy publishes grammars, dictionaries (both general and specialized), special editions of classic works of renowned authors, and tributes to key figures in the world of letters. It is greatly concerned with the development of *lengua culta* (cultured language) and maintains various campaigns intended to raise linguistic awareness among the Puerto Rican people, including a public appeal to send in Puerto Rican words that are not present in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española. With regard to Anglicisms, its stated goal is the timely detection of foreignisms, especially those related to technology, in order to provide alternatives that facilitate uniformity in communication. It publishes an attractive on-line journal called *Dilo* (Say it) which informs the public on different aspects of Puerto Rican language structure and usage. It also responds to questions from the public regarding spelling, proper words, and grammar. In December of 2010, it launched an interesting campaign to popularize the use of typically Puerto Rican words called “Español puertorriqueño: ¡Atrévete y dilo!” (Puerto Rican Spanish: Dare to say it!). It consisted of fifty 30-second radio capsules recorded by well-known artists and public figures of the island, among them: Cordelia González, Ricardo Alegría, Antonio Martorell, David Ortiz Angleró, Jacobo Morales, Jorge Castro, Juan Manuel Lebrón, Mayra Santos Febres, Sandra Záiter, Suzette Bacó , and Remi the Clown. The Academy selected 75 Puerto Rican words to promote during the campaign.

The Academy has a mild normative effect upon the teaching of Spanish on the island since it serves as a voice of authority and emits important reference books that are used in preparing textbooks and other pedagogical materials. However, its work is not widely known

among the populace, nor have its linguists become directly involved in language planning efforts on the island.<sup>4</sup>

### **5.0 Where linguists can make a contribution**

Linguists are trained to analyze the structure of the sounds, words, sentences, and extended discourses. They tap into the unconscious knowledge we all possess about language by observing and analyzing how we speak. They examine how information is stored in words and then shared by interlocutors. Their special expertise can be applied to endeavors as disparate as the development of child language skills, the recovery of speech functions among aphasiacs, and the revival of endangered languages. They can facilitate the work of speech pathologists, foreign language teachers, lawyers, computer programmers, and many others in society.

Generally speaking, while linguists are not in a political position to make substantive changes in society, they can provide important information and dispassionate guidance in matters regarding language. Nevertheless, their expertise is often ignored or put aside in favor of political expedience or power-brokering.

To rectify this situation, I would like to call for a careful consideration of the *Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean* on the part of all linguists in Puerto Rico and the ratification of a similar document with special pertinence to local concerns. As part of the process, I would also like to call for public discussion of linguistic matters that go beyond the usual debate about teaching English and Spanish and reach into the core of what language, in all its marvelous manifestations, means to the Puerto Rican people.

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<sup>4</sup> The Academy did issue a report that reacted in part to the 1997 plan to create the bilingual citizen, but it had little impact on the events that unfolded during that year (Academia, 1998).

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