

MARSHALL MORRIS, *Saying and meaning in Puerto Rico: Some problems in the ethnography of discourse*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981. Pp. xiv + 152.

Studies in the ethnography of speaking have examined such speech events as contrapuntal conversations (Reisman 1974), greetings (Irvine 1974, Salmond 1974), narratives (Darnell 1974, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1974), male and female speech (Keenan 1974), and even silence (Basso 1972). The research thus far has made it clear that speech communities vary considerably in the ways in which they use language and the ways in which speech forms are perceived. What may be tolerated and even expected in one community may prove completely dysfunctional in another.

Marshall Morris's book about Puerto Rico examines what he refers to as "problems in the ethnography of discourse," presumably yet another designation for the ethnography of communication (cf. Hymes 1962, 1964, 1967, 1972). While the work evidences considerable anthropological and linguistic sensitivity in its treatment of the dynamics of language contact in this island colony, the author has taken a somewhat undisciplined approach to the analysis of the relationship of saying and meaning in everyday communicational behavior. The resulting conclusions are often tenuous and at times potentially harmful.

Morris's thesis is that Puerto Ricans convey information in ways that differ

radically from those familiar to North Americans. To be precise (in good "North American" style), Morris contends that Puerto Rican language use is typified by indirectness, willful lack of definition, and an aversion to coming to the point and thereby confronting interlocutors with the truth. Puerto Ricans, according to Morris, tend to perceive problems in their entirety, full of complexities and interrelated with other issues. This reluctance, or perhaps inability, to separate problems into manageable parts, combined with a cultural disposition to accept whatever happens as being beyond human control, results in the frustrating and seemingly inexplicable events described in this volume.

The data upon which these conclusions are drawn consist of a series of cases or "episodes" in which certain communicative failures or disjunctions between form and meaning are displayed. These were collected sporadically over a period of three years primarily from the North American author's own observations in university and other middle-class settings in metropolitan San Juan, along with the observations of a number of other residents, for the most part professors and students in language-related fields. A number of foreign professionals contributed as well.

Some examples may help illustrate his approach. Under the section entitled "Inattention," Morris cites the following:

At a car repair shop, I am parking my vehicle when a man asks that I move it so that he can use the car-washing area. I do, but narrowly miss running over him. After asking me to move – the only possible way to do so is to back up – he walks directly behind the moving vehicle (28).

Under "Imprecision," we find this:

Asking where I might get the title of a car transferred, I am told that I can do so where they sell licenses. Where is that, I ask. At a large shopping center, which is named. I ask for more specific directions and am told again something like, *allí mismo* (right there). In fact, it is across a busy road from the shopping centre in what is to me an altogether different place from the practical point of view of how to get there. Yet it is "in the area" (42).

Still later, under "Toleration of errors":

I go into the room where representatives of the Registrar are waiting for professors to submit their grade sheets personally, and to give them a receipt for them. I follow the instructions to the letter, marking the sheets as indicated on the instructions printed on them. When I have finished – every time – I am told to change something in a way that directly contradicts the printed instructions (54).

And as an example of "Distinctions not made":

There are six people in the room, in two conversations, four in one, two in the other. The conversations are about different things. At one point, I answer

in the other conversation hears "no" and asks, "Why not?" — but in terms of her own conversation. She had crossed over the line between the conversations, apparently without noticing it, and applied what I said to her own line of thought (81).

Putting aside obvious and serious questions about the manner in which the episodes were collected, the kind of informants who participated, and the nature of the population represented, there are a number of critical problems immediately discernible in the approach taken in this work.

To begin, there is no consideration of the identity of the anthropologist and its effect upon both the data collected and the interpretation of that data. Morris does not seem to recognize that as a North American professor in a nation economically, politically, and (one might argue) culturally dominated by the United States, he (by his very presence) elicits responses that are not typical of everyday behavior. The fact that he is often the object of jokes, rudeness, and misunderstandings does not appear to make him question how he is perceived and how such attitudes affect his work and his ultimate interpretations.

Morris does point out that North Americans, Cubans, and Argentines are treated with hostility by Puerto Ricans and that they are also described as overly direct and aggressive. He appears to reverse the causality of the phenomena, arguing that because foreigners violate native conventions of indirectness, they are viewed with enmity, rather than comprehending that the belligerence is a response to the tremendous economic power wielded by these outsiders as well as their often arrogant attitudes toward the very people who work in their enterprises and utilize their services. As frequently happens, language labels serve merely as convenient ways to signal conflicts waged on other battlefields.

This failure to engage in careful self-examination is also apparent in Morris's implicit acceptance of North American cultural norms as a basis for judging Puerto Rican behavior. Despite the ostensibly nonjudgmental anthropological stance taken in the introduction, the work is characterized by a kind of peevishness that makes unavoidable the impression that Puerto Ricans don't appear to say what they mean or mean what they say primarily because their behavior doesn't correspond to Morris's expectations of what right-thinking people do.

All of his categories are negative and imply constant comparison to U.S. standards. A listing of some of the features described will illustrate this orientation: inattention, imprecision, inadequate specification, over-specification, toleration of errors, discontinuities, diffuseness, manipulation of categories, inconsistencies, unsystematic application of rules, avoidance of responsibility, and so forth. It is only at the close of the book that he admits that these "disjunctions" are not actually dysfunctional for participants and that strategies exist for coping with any ambiguities or redundancies that arise.

Another major problem is Morris's labeling of the behavior depicted in his

conclusion that similar episodes may occur on occasion in other contexts, the maintenance that such patterns are present in unrepeated proportions in Puerto Rico. However, much of what is attributed to Puerto Ricans strikes the reader as common in North American settings, for example, ignoring or literal interpretation of written signs; inarticulate behavior on the part of young people; giving of false or misleading directions; use of imprecise terms like "whatchamacallit," "thingy," etc.; confusion of doctor's instructions; refusal to get involved or take responsibility; and elaborate and often contradictory excuses for failures; to mention only a few.

In addition, there is no recognition that much of what is described is characteristic of any bureaucratic society, including our own. The great majority of Morris's episodes emanate from encounters with bureaucracy, for example, university course registration, tax filing, landlord-tenant conflicts, receptionist-client exchanges, etc. After reading Morris's book, I began collecting episodes of my own from similar settings in New York City. For the purposes of comparison, some are included here:

I called the Board of Elections to request some information about obtaining the text of the Voting Rights Act in Spanish. The woman who took the call answered with surprise, "But the voting rights are the same for everyone whether they speak Spanish or English."

On another occasion:

A call came into my office requesting information that was clearly more within the province of another department in the college. As it was too late to transfer the call (the switchboard being closed) and I had no directory at hand, I asked the caller if he had Security's number, for the guards could direct him to the appropriate office. The caller responded by giving me his Social Security number.

On still another occasion:

I needed to notarize some papers on a Saturday afternoon. The banks having closed, I entered an office building where many law firms are located, hoping to find someone there who could do the job. After explaining the problem to the receptionist on duty, I was informed that the Notary Republic (sic) had left for the day, and no one else was qualified to notarize affidavits. When I asked if there were any lawyers present in the building, I was firmly told once again that no one there was qualified to notarize signatures.

And one final example recognizable to any New Yorker:

A woman stepped into the D train stopped at Columbus Circle and asked what train it was. When informed (after a long silence) that it was a D, she inquired

when the train stopped at 14th Street. Another long pause as passengers looked away or ignored her, and finally she answered nervously that it did indeed stop there. The woman thanked the individual and then stepped out of the train.

I list these here to illustrate how easy it would be to collect a number of the same type of episodes collected by Morris in Puerto Rico and come up with an elaborate theory of how imprecise, confused, and uncooperative New Yorkers are (and no doubt, there are readers who would eagerly embrace this hypothesis). If Morris does not see as many disjunctions in U.S. society as he does in Puerto Rico, it may be that he has not seriously considered the possibility that they exist.

The real danger in the approach taken in this work lies in postulating theories with relatively little substantiation that serve to further long-standing stereotypes, rather than probe deeply into cultural ideology and meaning. Puerto Ricans have historically been viewed (even by Puerto Rican commentators) as fatalistic, insular, docile, ignorant, confused, lethargic and weak-willed (see Pedreira [1934]1957). That these are misconceptions need not be argued here (see Flores 1980). What we must ask ourselves as we read Morris's book is whether or not the same worn-out cliché's are appearing in a new "scientific" guise.

This is not to dismiss the entire effort as lacking in utility or validity. The work makes some contributions to the ethnography of speaking in Puerto Rico. Morris accurately and vividly delineates conventions of overlapping conversations, verbal stroking, variable eye contact, and preoccupation with gesture and intonation. He spends considerable time on the notions of *respeto* and *relajo*, which have been documented as key cultural themes on the island (Lauria 1964), and the attendant themes of saving face and keeping one's composure.

In addition, Morris appears to have a good understanding of the complex language polemic in Puerto Rico, a U.S. colonial possession that has been forced to fluctuate between Spanish and English as media of education in accordance with shifts in U.S. policy. He points out the increasingly bilingual nature of the island and does not cringe in the face of English loanwords in Spanish, acknowledging with calmness the inevitability of linguistic change in language contact situations. He also rejects puristic notions of how language should be spoken and yet recognizes the necessity for standard as well as vernacular forms.

There are a few minor linguistic slips, the most outstanding of which is his assertion that Puerto Rican speech is highly uniform - "The speech [of an upper class man] sounds like that of the labourer standing next to him" (13). This flies in the face of quantitative and qualitative dialectological and sociolinguistic studies that point to linguistic variability (Navarro-Tomás 1966, Llorens 1971, Milán 1974, Terrell 1978). Despite the relatively recent class changes in Puerto Rican society resulting from the rapid post World War II industrialization of the island (Hansen 1955, Bonilla 1978), it cannot be said that linguistic differences have been levelled.

In conclusion, Morris's book treats a subject that has not been considered elsewhere (to my knowledge) in any systematic manner; and for this reason alone, it should be read (critically) by anyone interested in Puerto Rican or Latin American language issues, as well as by those concerned with advancing the field of the ethnography of speaking. While there is much to criticize in his approach and interpretations, Morris provides much that is thought-provoking and potentially useful as a stepping stone to further research.

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