

Review of: López Laguerre, María. 1989. *Bilingüismo en Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras, PR: López Laguerre. In *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 16 (1), 1992, 80-84.

Bilingualism in Puerto Rico has been a controversial issue since the U.S. occupation in 1898. The U.S. government openly used English as a tool of cultural and linguistic assimilation and imposed it as the sole medium of education in a country whose vernacular was, and still remains, Spanish. This policy met with resistance from the Puerto Rican people. After a long series of conflicting educational policies, English was finally reduced in 1948 to its present role as mandatory course within the Spanish-medium curriculum from first grade through college. The language is generally presented as the key to prosperity, and there is considerable popular support for its status as co-official with Spanish. However, there is also a very strong nationalistic pride in Spanish as an essential element of Puerto Rican identity, and any policy that appears to threaten that identity is viewed with suspicion.

For those desirous of developing the concept of language planning in Puerto Rico, Professor López Laguerre's book provides a much needed commodity--an empirical analysis of island attitudes with regard to bilingualism. For the first time in the long and fiery history of the language debate, the public has been presented with objective evidence of the language attitudes of one sector, in this case, the high school teachers of the San Juan metropolitan area. Given the highly politicized situation of language on the island, where language attitudes are often associated with adherence to either pro-independence, pro-statehood, or pro-Commonwealth political ideologies, the mere act of presenting clear, dispassionate data without editorializing is a significant achievement.

The book has three primary merits. First, it offers an excellent review of the linguistic literature on bilingualism. This is a vital tool in combatting the myths encountered among the general public with respect to the use of more than one language.

Second, it gathers together the bibliography on the history of language usage in Puerto Rico--the development of the educational system and its numerous and conflicting language policies, the attitudes expressed in the press and academic circles, and the problems faced by those who have attempted to carry out empirical studies. This information is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the current situation.

Third, and most important, the volume provides a model for one type of quantitative analysis that could be used to improve both Spanish and English instruction on the island. If, as a result, similar studies are stimulated, then it will be possible to escape from the subjectivity and speculation that have traditionally accompanied the theme of bilingualism in Puerto Rico to achieve a higher level of analysis and planning.

The basic methodology of the study consisted of the administration of a 42-item questionnaire in which informants were asked to indicate on Lickert scales their degree of agreement/disagreement with certain statements regarding bilingualism. Four hundred and seventy-seven high schools teachers of all subjects responded, of whom 26% considered themselves to be bilingual. Based on the overall profile of responses, the sample was divided into three groups: those positively inclined toward bilingualism, those negatively inclined, and those holding neutral or undecided views. While there are far too many findings to comment on here, five merit our special attention, particularly with regard to their relevance to the teaching of English on the island.

1. The teachers solidly support the presence of English in Puerto Rican schools, even though there is no unanimity regarding its status within the curriculum. The sample is divided among those who prefer English as a required course (38.9%), as an elective course (34.3%), and as part of a bilingual program where it would alternate with Spanish as a medium of instruction (20.2%). Only 19 individuals out of the 477 (3.9%) prefer to exclude English entirely. This indicates that English has an assured place within the schools of Puerto Rico, at least among these teachers.

2. On the other hand, the data reveal that the teachers do **not** consider Puerto Rico to be a bilingual country and do **not** believe that English is displacing Spanish. That is, English is seen not as a **second** language, but rather as an **auxiliary** language. This implies a need to re-think the prevailing technique of teaching English as if it were a second language.

3. The informants agree that reading in English is their best developed skill and that their capacity to speak it is very limited. This finding corresponds perfectly with our experience at the University of Puerto Rico. The order of English skills is always (from strongest to weakest): reading, understanding, writing, and speaking. Knowing this, it would seem that more time needs to be spent in conversation in English classes at all levels. This is our practice in the College of Humanities, but it is not common in the pre-university training the students receive.

4. The teachers with the most contact with English and the U.S. sustain the most positive attitudes towards bilingualism and characterize themselves as more proficient in English. It is not known if the fact of being more proficient in English attracts them more to interaction in English or if the experience in English-speaking environments stimulates

them to acquire more English. Probably there exists a symbiosis in which the two nurture each other. In any case, it is likely that these individuals have a more integrative rather than instrumental orientation toward English which has positively affected their attitudes and proficiency. A basic problem in Puerto Rico is that English is usually pushed as a means of getting jobs, and few students are able to conceive of the language in a humanistic manner.

5. Lastly, a large percentage of teachers in the sample who are categorized as neutrals, that is, they did not respond strongly in either a positive or negative way. This could indicate a lack of consciousness or conviction with respect to bilingualism, or (thinking more optimistically), it could indicate that these individuals are open to new sources of information. Linguists and other students of bilingualism have a responsibility to provide these teachers with the most recent and reliable data regarding the linguistic reality of Puerto Rican society so that they may make decisions and form opinions based on facts rather than myths. Prof. López Laguerre's book is a good beginning.

There are only two short-comings that I can perceive in the book. The first is methodological and the second is the result of the political situation on the island.

Regarding the first, while I have no serious problems with the use of Lickert scales in examining language attitudes, I found that the lack of a definition of "bilingualism" in the questionnaire reduced the explanatory value of the responses. Many of the statements that the subjects had to judge contained the words "bilingual" or "bilingualism", yet they were not asked to indicate what they meant by this nor was a definition provided for them. It is known from other studies on bilingualism that speakers' definitions are often based on very diverse criteria and that a great deal of confusion exists in their perceptions of

individual vs. societal bilingualism. For this reason, when the teachers declare that they agree or disagree with statements that rest upon the concept of "bilingualism," we really don't know what they have in mind. And when we consider that more than 3/4 of the sample did not characterize itself as bilingual, the results are more open to question. In future studies of this nature, the problem should be avoided by adding some items in which alternative definitions are offered to see how the different groups align themselves.

The second shortcoming was beyond the control of the author, but must be signaled here as reflection of the sociopolitical nature of publishing in Puerto Rico. The bibliography stops in 1983 although the book was not published until 1989. This was because the author could not find a publisher due to the "political" nature of the theme. Despite her extraordinary care in reporting in a non-partisan manner the research and its findings, the manuscript languished on various desks, until she decided to publish it herself.

It is indeed tragic that such valuable information was almost suppressed simply because it was deemed politically "sensitive." This book should be required reading for all those interested in Puerto Rico, in language policy and planning, and in Hispanic studies. It is also an excellent candidate for updating and translation into English so that it may receive wider attention.