

## THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN PUERTO RICO<sup>1</sup>

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I have been asked to discuss the sociolinguistic implications of the teaching of English in Puerto Rico. As you all know, English has become the international *lingua franca* of the Information Age and is promoted globally as the language of science, technology, business, and diplomacy. According to renowned linguist David Crystal, author of *English as a global language* (1997) and *The language revolution* (2004), about 1.4 million people around the planet speak some form of English. (That's approximately a quarter of the population of the Earth.) Moreover, as Crystal is fond of reminding us, there are now more non-native users of English than there are native speakers.

The importation of English into any new locale has numerous sociolinguistic implications for the speech community in question, regardless of whether it's in Singapore, Greenland, or Vanuatu. There may be concerns about English displacing the local language(s) as young people begin to associate English with modernity and progress and reject their vernacular as old-fashioned and inadequate for expressing their current lifestyles. This may lead to what is called *language shift* in which a community shifts its preference or dominance from one language to another, or in the worst case scenario it may even lead to

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*language loss or death*, when a language is totally abandoned by its speakers. Examples of *language shift* abound in the United States where sociologist of language Joshua Fishman (1989) has documented that the process typically takes three generations for most immigrant communities.<sup>2</sup> *Language loss or death* is common among the “small” languages of the world, and it is estimated that 90% of the language varieties currently being spoken will disappear by the end of this century (Wurm 2001).

It should be noted here that it is unlikely that language shift or language loss will occur in Puerto Rico in the near future, given the world-class status of the Spanish language and the fact that the overwhelming majority of island residents speak Spanish as their dominant language.

Another common result when English (or any other world language) rides into town is that it will heavily influence the local vernacular. This is readily visible in speech communities all around the world, particularly in the domains of higher education, technology, the sciences, and government. Local communities will borrow English words that refer to inventions that were developed in English-speaking areas or that express more succinctly certain processes or products. Such *loanwords* may eventually become completely integrated into the native language to such an extent that local speakers can no longer identify them as foreign (e.g., *closet*, *dona*, *matre*, and *suéter* in Puerto Rico). A related process known as *code switching*, in which larger elements of two languages alternate in the same stretch of discourse, can also occur, especially among those members

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<sup>2</sup> Puerto Ricans in the United States have been an exception to this rule, often retaining Spanish well past the third generation. This is most likely due to the circular migration between the island and the continent that permits constant replenishing of the Spanish repertoire.

of a society that are socially mobile and in contact with English users either directly or through the media. Often the elite members of such societies begin to depend more and more on English to carry out their functions, and along the way they make subtle adjustments to the English language, utilizing structures from their own languages. Sometimes the lower classes are the source of the innovations. Vendors, guides, taxi drivers, service personnel are active agents in language change, as are athletes and musicians who become prominent. The media play a huge role in disseminating changes made at both the top and the bottom of society. The processes of word borrowing and code switching, and *the formation of new English forms* are definitely taking place in Puerto Rico.

I will limit myself to discussing two offshoots of the teaching of English in Puerto Rico: the influence of English upon the Spanish of Puerto Rico and the development of a recognizably Puerto Rican English. Both of these processes result from the reality that English has a decided presence in Puerto Rico due to more than a century of U.S. economic and cultural domination. There are numerous groups of return migrants, North Americans, and other foreigners who use English. English is present on street and commercial signs, in product names, in instructions for taking medications and using electrical appliances, on cable TV, in newspapers, magazines, and Hollywood movies, within the Federal Courts, and in all activities and domains related to tourism. English is a required school subject from kindergarten until the university. Moreover, there are countless commercial institutes dedicated to the teaching of English. Nor should we forget the constant migratory flow between the U.S. and the island which

results in thousands of Puerto Ricans relocating to the States for periods of time, learning English, and then returning to occupy positions on the island which require the use of English on a regular basis.

### **1.0 The influence of English upon the Spanish of Puerto Rico**

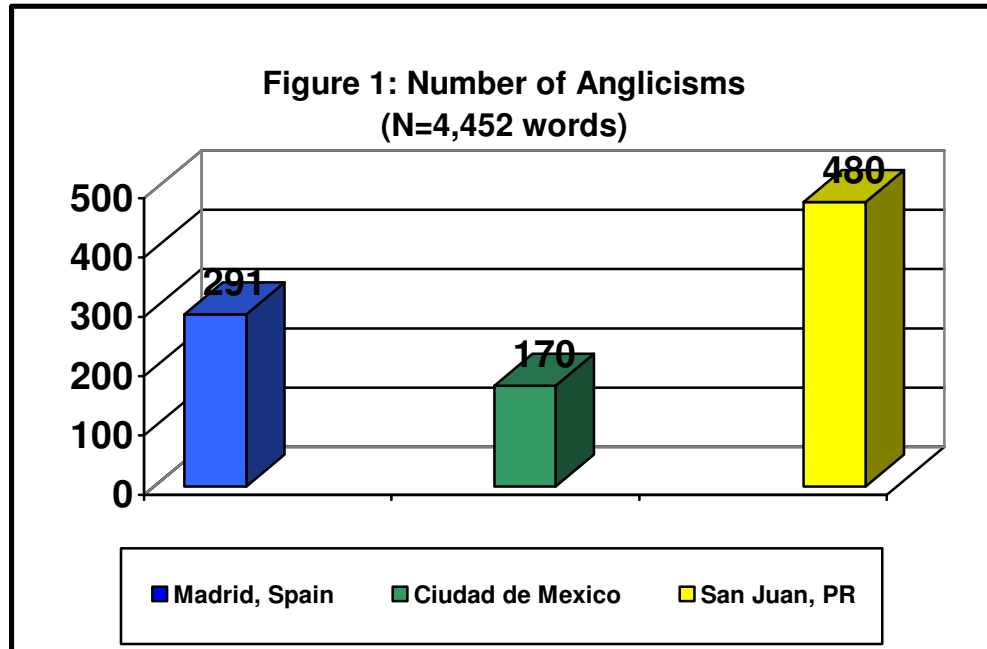
There have been many studies dedicated to the examination of the effects that English has upon the Spanish of Puerto Rico. Mellado de Hunter (1961) found that among Puerto Rican professionals, the use of Anglicisms was most common among doctors, lawyers, and engineers and least common among teachers. In contrast, Huyke (1973) discovered that the field of communications was much more vulnerable to English influence than were the professions. All studies have pointed to certain areas of enterprise as being more prone to using English loanwords, among them: auto mechanics, sports, fashion, and computer technology.

The great majority of the studies have dealt with the lexical or word level, since this is one that yields most readily to foreign influence, as even a casual look at the classified ads in Puerto Rico will reveal. Eminent sociolinguist María Vaquero reported in 1990 on the following types of *anglicismos* found in the newspapers of San Juan.

- Using Spanish words with English meanings (e.g., *bloques* [building blocks] for “street blocks” instead of *cuadras*)

- Creating a Spanish-looking word based on an English word form instead of its Spanish equivalent (e.g., *coincidentalmente* instead of *de forma coincidente*)
- Translating literally from English into Spanish which known as a *loan translation* (e.g., *hacer sentido* to mean “make sense”)
- Use of an English word for a specific aspect of the meaning of a particular referent, while Spanish is employed for another (e.g., *magacín* [from English *magazine*] denotes popular magazines like *Imagen* or *Vea*, while Spanish *revista* is more often used for news magazines and journals).

Another sociolinguist who has examined English loanwords in Puerto Rican Spanish is Humberto López Morales. In Figure 1, López Morales compares the number of English loanwords in the Spanish of Madrid, Mexico City, and San Juan. While it is clear that all three locales utilize English loanwords, Puerto Rico appears to be the most enamored of this process, probably because the amount of exposure to English is more constant and unrelenting.



Adapted from López Morales (1992)

Lipski (1996: 358) describes syntactic influences of English upon the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico. Some examples he provides are:

- ¿Cómo te gustó la playa? [How did you like the beach?]
- El problema está siendo considerado. [The problem is being considered.]
- Te llamo para atrás. [I'll call you back.]
- Él sabe cómo hablar inglés. [He knows how to speak English.]

One that I hear almost daily in Puerto Rico is: *La guagua está supuesto llegar a las 11:15.* [The bus is supposed to arrive at 11:15.] instead of the standard Spanish: *Se supone que la guagua llegue a las 11:15.*

Local sociolinguist Amparo Morales has looked at all of these and also focused on morphosyntactic structures like the employment of the present continuous verb tense: *¿Qué estás haciendo?* [What are you doing?] instead of

the more usual simple present: *¿Qué haces?* Many commentators have suggested that the increased use of the present continuous is due to the influence of English. Morales (1986, 2001) concludes that such syntactic influences are low in frequency, often are found in other Hispanic speech communities, sometimes occur in places where little or no English influence can be documented, and occasionally represent very old forms of Spanish itself. She cautions against jumping to conclusions that every variation in syntax is automatically due to the pernicious effects of English and will lead to Spanish language attrition or loss.

The general attitude of sociolinguists with regard to loanwords from foreign languages is that they are a natural result of the contact between speech communities and serve to enrich the vocabulary of the receiving language, particularly when they are integrated phonologically and morphologically and utilized as synonyms to express nuances not present in the equivalent native word. In and of themselves, they do not represent a danger to the native language. In fact, perhaps the greatest strength of the English language has been its willingness to take in elements from virtually every language in the world, converting its lexicon into an enormously rich repository of more than a million words (two million, according to David Crystal's *Encyclopedia of the English Language*, if we count scientific terminology).<sup>3</sup>

Of course, appreciating the value of foreign loanwords does not mean that native language teachers should stop teaching children the native words for

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<sup>3</sup> This doesn't include the formal names for organisms and compounds.

expressing themselves. The idea should always be to enhance and enlarge, not replace.

## 2.0 The development of a Puerto Rican English

Perhaps the earliest serious work on the development of a Puerto Rican variety of English was carried out by linguist Rose Nash in 1971. She coined the term *Englañol* to describe the English spoken by Puerto Ricans on the island.<sup>4</sup> Nash describes Englañol as having relatively little direct lexical borrowing and a great deal of syntactic transfer. It is typically loaded with false cognates used in a Spanish manner, loan translations, and spelling pronunciations. In Nash's opinion: "...Englañol is the true standard in Puerto Rico. With very few exceptions, it is Englañol rather than Standard English that is taught in the public schools, from the first grade through the university level" (1971, p. 121).

Sociolinguist Joan Fayer and her graduate students at the UPR in Río Piedras have, for quite some time, been carrying out research into the features of the English spoken in Puerto Rico which they prefer to call *Puerto Rican English* (or PRE). One of Fayer's former students, Catherine Walsh (1994), characterizes PRE as exhibiting the following phonological features:

- de-spirantization of [ð] and [θ] to [d] and [t], pronouncing *that* as *dat* [dæt] and *thing* as *ting* [tɪŋ]
- de-affrication of "j," pronouncing *job* as *zhob* or *yob*
- devoicing of [z] to [s], pronouncing *his* as *hiss*

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<sup>4</sup>She also coined the term *Pringlish* to refer to the Spanish-influenced English of Americans who live on the island for a long time.



- confusion of “ch” and “sh,” pronouncing *watches* as *washes*
- shifting stress to the last element of compound nouns, pronouncing *dishwasher* as *dishwasher*

Fayer et al. (1998) add to this description the following morphosyntactic features:

- inverted word order (e.g., *They tell me how important is the bill for them.*)
- new lexical creations based on English forms (e.g., *There are many urbanizations<sup>5</sup> in Puerto Rico.*)
- borrowings from Spanish (e.g., *I was stuck in the tapón<sup>6</sup>.*)
- hybrid compounds utilizing English and Spanish words (e.g., *Many people were arrested at the drug punto.<sup>7</sup>*)

While description is an important part of documenting a new variety, it is also vital to determine the degree to which the variety is accepted by speakers. This allows us to distinguish between learner errors and accepted new forms. In 1999, sociolinguists Elizabeth Dayton and Eileen Blau of the UPR in Mayaguez presented the results of an acceptability study they carried out with 223 subjects, including UPR students in Basic, Intermediate, and Honors English classes, Puerto Rican English teachers who were non-native speakers of English, and native speakers of English residing in the United States. Participants in the study were given two tasks. The first entailed reading real sentences containing lexical items that Dayton & Blau had previously determined to be likely candidates for

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<sup>5</sup> In PRE, *urbanization* means “housing development” while in standard American English it can only mean “process of urbanizing.”

<sup>6</sup> *Tapón* in Spanish means “traffic jam.”

<sup>7</sup> In PRE, drug *punto* refers to the place where drugs are sold.

inclusion in the new variety they call Puerto Rican English. These included such terms as: *interpreted* (for “sang”), *domination* (for “command”), *approved* (for “passed”), *celebrated* (for “held”). The stimulus sentences can be seen in Figure 2 below.<sup>8</sup> The task was to correct the sentences if they felt it was necessary.

The second task was to respond to multiple choice questions in which the target words were replaced by a blank and three options given to fill the blank. In addition, Dayton and Blau interviewed an island-born and raised English teacher, a return migrant English teacher, and an English native speaker who knew no Spanish, in order to probe more deeply into the reasons for the differences between the native and non-native speakers’ judgments.

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the highlighting in Figure 2 and in the forthcoming Table 1 was not in the original study. It is provided here as an aid to comprehension and analysis.

### Sentences with Puerto Rican English Lexical Items

1. The best number in Gloria Estefan's concert was "Coming out of the dark," which she *interpreted* at the end of the one and a half hour show. 'sang'  
(written source)
2. The teacher was hired because of her *domination* of English. 'command'  
(spoken source)
3. The employee is responsible for *maintaining* production standards updated. 'keeping'  
(written source)
4. Eugenio is in an English as a Second Language program where he has *approved* 24 credits. 'completed'  
(written source)
5. My cousin *suffered* an accident with the skates. 'had'  
(spoken source)
6. One professor asked another professor to take care of his computer while he was out of town. The second professor agreed and said, "I'll give it back to you when you return; I won't *stay* with it. 'keep'  
(spoken source)
7. Hotel officials enjoyed a delightful lunch *elaborated* by the executive chef at the Mayaguez Hilton. 'prepared'  
(written source)
8. In 1983 the government *celebrated* the first public hearings about Cerro Maravilla. 'held'  
(written source)
9. The test *resulted* too long. 'was'  
(spoken source)
10. The textbook was expensive and they didn't use it very much, so the students felt they had *lost* their money. 'wasted'  
(spoken source)

Figure 2: Stimulus sentences utilized in Dayton & Blau (1999)

Dayton and Blau's results can be seen in Table 1 below. In short, they discovered two rather unsurprising patterns:

1. Native English speakers accepted or chose the lowest number of PRE lexical items. (The small number of PRE words that were left unedited were probably due to the subjects' not knowing what to do with them, as indicated by written comments they made on the questionnaires.)
2. As student proficiency increased, students accepted or chose fewer PRE lexical items, even equaling the teachers' scores for the multiple choice task at the Honors English level.

	Sentence Editing	Multiple Choice
Basic English students	94%	56%
Intermediate Eng. students	95%	29%
Honors Eng. Students	83%	29%
Puerto Rican Eng. Teachers	61%	30%
Eng. native speakers in US	28%	3%

What was more surprising was the considerable difference between the judgments of the Puerto Rican teachers and the native speakers. Given that English teachers are normative by nature and training, they would have been expected to approach the levels of native speakers. Dayton & Blau conclude that the fact that they did not indicates that they are aiming at a different target: that of Puerto Rican English, rather than U.S. standard English.

This upholds data from other speech communities which indicate that native and non-native professionals have different language intuitions and

interpretations. In Dayton & Blau's opinion, this should not cause alarm, since it is not likely to lead to communication breakdowns. In their words (p. 190): "it is a 'double standard' to tolerate differences among native varieties but not among NNVs [non-native varieties]. Since PRE is an acceptable NNV, we see no reason why it, or any other acceptable NNV, should not be on an equal footing with native varieties of English."

### **3.0 Implications of these findings**

As educators, you all need to comprehend the sociolinguistic process of language contact that you and every one of your students are affected by. It is misleading and wrongheaded to ignore the process and act as if languages are impregnable to outside influences. This leads to puristic postures that are ill-suited to cultivating healthy, bilingual children. The purist fights in vain to maintain English and Spanish as totally distinct and unsullied. It is much more realistic to accept that there are hybrid varieties in use, and that over time, these may become ratified as the local standards. Even the Real Academia Española has reinterpreted its ancient slogan: *Limpia, fija y da esplendor* to pay less attention to purifying and freezing for all time an abstract notion of Spanish and is now granting more recognition to the locally accepted usages around the Hispanic world.

Children need to be taught that standard language varieties exist (at least as concepts) because these are the instruments used by gatekeepers the world around to grant or block job and educational opportunities. They need to be able

to negotiate those tricky waters with linguistic tools that no one can question. However, they also need to be taught that the natural state of language is to change constantly and to be influenced by other languages and cultures. Mixed varieties are commonplace and do not imply inferiority. Both standard English and standard Spanish descended from highly hybridized (even creolized) varieties and owe much of their respective structure and vocabulary to the influences of Norman French and Arabic, respectively, not to mention the dozens of other languages that have left their traces in both languages. We owe it to our children to let them in on this sociolinguistic truth.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

To conclude, teaching English in Puerto Rico in an informed and tolerant manner has significant sociolinguistic implications for both the English and the Spanish spoken on the island. An understanding and an appreciation of the nature of language contact and the ways in which it creates changes in languages are necessary for our collective self-esteem. We cannot allow our children to believe that the only path to bilingualism is through narrow insistence on linguistic purity or that both their Spanish and their English are flawed vehicles of communication. We must instill in them a sense of pride of the creative force of their people who take elements of another language and bend it to their will to enhance their self-expression.

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