

TANGLED TONGUES: LANGUAGE CONFLICTS IN PUERTO RICO¹

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Language is generally believed to be the essential instrument of ethnic expression, a viaduct for the beliefs, customs, rituals, and behaviors which constitute cultural identity. It is seen as the embodiment of human thought and the shaper of human action. For most, language is inextricably linked to the very essence of being human and of belonging to a specific cultural group.

Few would deny the critical role which language plays in our self-definition. However, all too often, popular analysis confuses **language** (an abstract human cognitive and social construct) with **a language** (a specific language variety used within a particular speech community).

One of the results of this confusion is the notion that a second language cannot be learned perfectly, that bilingualism is unnatural and potentially harmful, and that bilinguals are divided souls without allegiance to any culture. In other words, since our first language is so intimately linked to our social and cognitive formation as people, therefore a second language should not be allowed to threaten or infringe upon the arena of the first in any way. Such thinking is most prevalent in relatively homogeneous speech communities where bilingualism is not the norm, for example the small town in New York State where I was raised and bore the brunt of

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the anti-bilingual sentiments of our "ultra-American" neighbors. In those parts of the world where multilingualism is commonplace (and indeed vital for survival), such concerns are much less relevant.

Puerto Rico, though often billed as a "bilingual" nation, actually is not. In the last census, only about 50% of the population indicated an ability to use English, and English skills are clearly correlated with high social class, private schooling, and/or residential experience in the United States. The majority of the San Juan high school teachers surveyed in López Laguerre's 1989 *Bilingüismo en Puerto Rico* did not view Puerto Rico as a bilingual country nor did they judge themselves to be bilingual. Nevertheless, there are many bilingual individuals on the island.

A U.S possession with a 500 year old tradition of speaking Spanish, Puerto Rico has been forced by historical circumstances of conquest and economic dependence to engage in a century-long debate over the role of English and Spanish. Ever since English was imposed upon the territory in 1898 as part of an aggressive Americanization campaign, Puerto Ricans have argued back and forth about the "dangers" and benefits of bilingualism. The key danger perceived is the potential loss of Spanish as vernacular and carrier of "puertorriqueñidad". However, at the same time, there is a strong popular consensus that learning English is vital for instrumental purposes.

The debate is well-documented in the popular media. Politicians, writers, educators, and columnists (who ironically belong to the very social classes with greatest access to the English language and its benefits) have time and time again taken up the pen to duel over language issues. Many claim to speak for the masses, yet the positions taken reflect more the political ideologies of their authors than any mass consensus. These writers regularly whip up public frenzy regarding bilingualism but do relatively little to shed light on the role of language in the current reality and future needs of the Puerto Rican people.

My own position is grounded in my training as a sociolinguist and educational linguist. While I fully understand the historical resistance to the imposition of English in Puerto Rico which culminated in the 1991 Official Language Act, I am also convinced from my studies in international language policy that the Spanish language in Puerto Rico has little to fear from English and that bilingualism offers Puerto Ricans tools with which to struggle for self-determination. Bilingualism (defined on either the individual or societal level) does not **have to** be legislated in order to occur; however, public attitudes toward both languages must be positive and unambiguous in order for any true benefits to be obtained. Any legal apparatus that appears to disenfranchise a language or limit its use (whether it be 'Spanish-only' or 'English-only') clouds public perceptions and makes adequate language planning nearly impossible.

As an English professor, I try to develop in my students an appreciation for the utility and beauty of English as a language of wider communication which complements their native Spanish, another great language of wider communication.

As a socially committed bilingual, I urge them to use their expanded speech repertoire to improve the society in which they live. As a Hispanic and resident of this island, I hope that they will be wise enough to defend what is theirs and yet be open to new ideas and influences. But my words are often blown away by the fear and suspicion that animate much of the anti-bilingualism rhetoric.

Unfortunately, the debate regarding language in Puerto Rico is generally carried out in a vacuum. Aside from some facile references to Quebec and other supposed bilingual "fiascos," few Puerto Ricans are aware of global parallels to the island's linguistic dilemma. We need to move beyond the "tangled tongues" of Puerto Rico to examine how similar language conflicts have manifested themselves in other areas, particularly in island territories presently or formerly under U.S. control, e.g. Guam, Hawaii, the Philippines, American Samoa, etc. Only through such comparative analysis can the Puerto Rican people begin to understand what is unique to their homeland and what is part of global patterns of linguistic accommodation.

I found myself in a very curious (and uncomfortable) position last year when all of the hullabaloo regarding the official language was going on. As fellow panelist Jorge Vélez pointed out in the TESOL-Gram, it was a tough time to be an English teacher in Puerto Rico, and I felt particularly conflicted.

On the one hand, as a sympathizer of nationalist developments in Puerto Rican history, I applauded the intent of replacing the highly artificial Language Act of 1902, which granted English and Spanish equal official status on the island. Given U.S. domination over economic and legal processes, I could appreciate the

symbolic gesture of stating what has long been obvious--that regardless of U.S. efforts to the contrary, Spanish is (and will continue to be) the sole vernacular of the Puerto Rican people.

On the other hand, as an English professor, I had a vested interest in the propagation of English as a second language on the island. My goal has always been to help more students master the language so they can empower themselves for survival within the peculiar political and economic entity which is Puerto Rico.

Regardless of my initial ambivalence, I ended up with grave reservations about this recent language policymaking effort. This was not because I opposed the idea of Spanish being the sole official language of the island. On the contrary, I firmly believe in the right of any people to decide what their official language will be, and Spanish makes a lot more sense than English here. But the law was proposed and passed for many wrong reasons, manipulated for political gain, and supported or opposed on the basis of insufficient information regarding long-term implications. All this represents the antithesis of what good language planning should be.

My specific concerns were as follows:

First of all, most people behaved as though the Act were a "Spanish-only" law. This is a false perception which even a cursory reading of the text will prove wrong. Unfortunately, the media broadly publicized it in this manner and confused people even more. Support for or opposition to the law was on the basis of political party enrollment, for the most part, rather than on an analysis of the legislation. No newspaper at the time published the full text for people to contemplate and discuss.

This goes against the language planning notion of popular evaluation, for no one can assess a plan which is not explained in full.

Second, the promotion of the legislation was clearly a grandstanding effort by the party in power during a pre-election period. Now that the opposing party will be in power in January, we are witnessing the staging of another grandstanding move to repeal the 1991 law. Once again, a very important social issue becomes a political football to be tossed back and forth with votes being the primary concern, rather than social progress.

Third, as a piece of language policy, the law is so open that in reality very little has changed as a result of its passing. You may remember Nick Silva's humorous article titled: "The day a language law hit Puerto Rico" which depicted a Puerto Rico totally purified of English influence (and U.S. economic aid) as a result of the so-called "Spanish-only" law. This did not come to pass.

Most of the businesses or agencies that might have been affected obtained waivers (e.g. the banking industry, the health system, architectural firms, accounting firms, etc.). Federal and municipal transactions function as before, in English and Spanish, respectively. The public school system continues with the policy established in 1948 of utilizing Spanish as the medium of instruction and requiring English as a Second Language. Even the professional translators who expected a boom once businesses moved to using Spanish technical materials in lieu of the English ones that predominated prior to the new law, were disappointed. Businesses either obtained waivers or prepared in-house translations of technical terms.

Fourth, the new language legislation brought out the worst in many people. A narrow nationalism that rested mainly on provincial insularism began to be voiced. A graduate student of mine who taught at U.H.S. reported that students there were celebrating the supposed "end" of English classes on the island. And I'll never forget an old woman who scolded me for allowing my son to speak English in public and reminded me: "Estamos en Puerto Rico. Aquí se habla español." This smacked of the same kind of know-nothing irrational fear of bilingualism that I grew up with in the U.S., home of the "illustrious" "English-only" movement.

In closing, I would like to state that my fondest hope is to see more rational, carefully conceived language planning that takes into account all of the special features of Puerto Rican society--the neocolonial relationship with the U.S., the economic and social needs of the Puerto Rican people, the aspirations of parents for their children, and the presence of English-dominant return migrants and others on the island. But for this to occur, the matter will have to be taken out of the hands of politicians, put on the agenda of applied linguists, educators, and social planners, and finally submitted for popular approval in a non-partisan referendum.

As my time has ended, I leave further comments on this matter to my distinguished fellow panelists. Thank you for allowing me to share my views.

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