LINGUISTS IN THE RESOLUTION OF CARIBBEAN LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Alicia Poussada
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

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.

Keywords: language planning, Caribbean, Puerto Rico, language policies

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 decisions made determine opportunities for employment, education, and legal equality (Eastman, 1983; Gibson, 2006).

LP cannot be understood apart from its social context and the history that produced that context (Cooper, 1989; Wright, 2004). 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 area of expertise 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 Caribbean creoles, 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. They 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 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 (Gibson, 2006).

LP may affect all levels of language structure but typically focuses on the most visible levels: writing, vocabulary, and grammar. 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 (Farcllas, Barrows & Cortes-Pinto, 2010). The lexicon of a language may be enriched to keep up with technological development via the creation of native-based norms of nomenclature, the coinage of new words, or the legitimization of foreign loan words, making possible the preparation of glossaries and eventually dictionaries. Finally, the morphological and syntactic systems (the grammar) 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 (cf. Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Papiamento in Aruba). The description and normalization of the grammatical structure is generally effected via the preparation of linguistic (descriptive) and pedagogical (prescriptive) grammars.

In the Caribbean, the major focus on language has always been in the schools (LePage, 1968; Craig, 1971; Edwards, 1978). 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 for 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. Use of standard English with creole-speaking children has led to a long history of incomplete learning and attitudinal problems (Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture, 2001).

Nevertheless, according to Roberts (1994), it has been difficult to give any official recognition to creoles, because schools exist to reflect and create
middle-class behavior and values, while creoles are associated with poor people and subordination. Parents often resist any attempt to utilize the local creole in school settings because they interpret that this approach would hold their children back. They are especially leery when outsiders come in and propose such solutions to their children's learning difficulties. This underscores the need to build language policy using local resources instead of foreign expertise, teachers, or advisors. However, scarcity of resources has prevented locally implemented LP in many Caribbean countries. Many language-related projects are funded by international agencies like UNESCO or the World Bank.

Attitudes toward the use of creoles in both oral and written forms have historically tended to be negative because of persistent associations with slavery and degradation. As a result, creoles are often seen as inappropriate for utilization in schools. Since the end of the twentieth 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 West Indian creoles (cf. DeGraff, 2001; Aceto & Williams, 2003; Bailey, 2009 [1966]; Kowenber & LaCharité, 2011). The development of orthographies appropriate for the preparation of reference and teaching materials in various creole languages has also helped improve attitudes and enhance the "legitimacy" of the creoles (cf. Cassidy, 1993; Schieffelin & Dauvoit, 1994; Winer, 1996; Allsopp, 1996). However, there is still a long way to go in terms of achieving general acceptance of creoles in school settings.

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).

We will return to the charter several times in this article because it has much to teach us here in Puerto Rico.

**Language Issues in Puerto Rico**

Puerto Ricans enjoy a rather 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.

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 (via ESL, English immersion, and bilingual education), the management of the language contact situation (i.e., control vs. incorporation of anglicisms), and certain decisions regarding standard and non-standard dialects or registers of both Spanish and English (lengua culta vs. lengua coloquial and the concept of a distinctly Puerto Rican English). There is also a significant problem of functional illiteracy among poor and working-class sectors of 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 (Schweers & Vélez, 1999; Pousada, 1996, 1999). They would do well to examine with care the multilingual and polyglot societiesthat are so common in the rest of the Caribbean. Other Caribbean people have learned from birth to switch language varieties according to

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1 An excellent example of a locally-motivated and implemented program is the pilot bilingual education project for primary school students sponsored by the Jamaican Language Unit at the University of the West Indies at Mona. This project seeks to assist native speakers of Jamaican (Creole) who enter the first grade without the readiness skills required by the Grade One National Curriculum. The Project also serves students who do not attain full literacy in standard English by the fourth grade.
stated that the language of the insular courts was Spanish, although provision would be made for anyone who did not speak Spanish. The US 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 2008b). There is simultaneous interpretation into Spanish for witnesses and accused who do not speak English and consecutive interpretation into English of any Spanish testimony for the bilingual jury members. This byzantine system 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 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 US federal court in Puerto Rico violates that essential premise.

**Schools**

Despite considerable effort and a variety of often conflicting language education policies (Torres González, 2002), the US government did not succeed in displacing the Spanish vernacular nor was it very successful in teaching English to the Puerto Rican masses (Clachar, 1997b). 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 early in the twentieth century 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 drawn away from the island. Often those teachers who remain follow the path of least resistance and fall into the habit of teaching the English class in Spanish, so 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.2

Furthermore, English and Spanish are continually posed as rivals in the public school system instead of as complementary resources. When Spanish test scores go down, the blame is always placed on the English requirements (Agencia F, 1997). The problem with this reasoning becomes clear when we take a look at the actual scores and their distribution among public and private school students. If we examine the College Board scores of graduating high school seniors for each year from 1985 to 2008 (see Table 1 below), two very clear patterns emerge. 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 and always slightly lower than the Spanish scores. It is hard to blame the decline in Spanish scores on the English classes since the public school students only receive an hour of English a day. Among the private school students, English scores have exceeded Spanish scores since 1995 (to be expected given that the private schools stress English strongly); however, their Spanish scores never go as low as the public school students’ scores (probably a reflection of the better resources available in all subject areas in the privately funded schools).

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 (most notably that of Secretary of Public Education Víctor Fajardo in 1997); however, none have really succeeded due to lack of continuity and follow-through.

Puerto Rican schools receive increasing numbers of students from outside the island, either from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, or other Caribbean islands, as well as return migrant Puerto Rican students. There is a small program called Programa de Servicios Educativos de Emergencia a Estudiantes Inmigrantes

(1) There is a small but growing group of young Puerto Rican instructors who are actively seeking to remedy this situation by writing their own storybooks and textbooks with which to teach English. Among them are: Aníbal Muñoz Claudio, Ilsa López, and Carmen Milagros Torres.

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N = Población total examinada

Agro/2009

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

Table 1: College Board Scores in Spanish & English Among Graduating Seniors at Public and Private Schools in Puerto Rico 1985-2008

(Emergency Educational Services for Immigrant Students Program) active in four schools in the metro area for dealing with these students but no cohesive plan for the entire island. Those from the Dominican Republic and Haiti may have little or no English training, and those from the US 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 (Pousada, 1994; Clachar, 1997a).

Again, this directly contradicts the provisions of the Charter on language policy and language rights in the creole-speaking Caribbean which state:
This Charter considers that 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 are faced with negative attitudes and difficult living situations. Some have very limited literacy skills in Spanish or English.

Literacy is another problem in Puerto Rico, particularly in rural and urban working class neighborhoods. In the year 2000, more than 25% of the people aged 25 and over had less than a ninth grade education (see Table 2 below):

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source: US Census Bureau, 2000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Less than 9th grade</td>
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<td>581,225</td>
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<td>25.4%</td>
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Table 2: Academic level attained by population 25 years and over in Puerto Rico

In 2010, according to World Bank figures, the literacy rate among young people ages 15 to 25 in Puerto Rico was only 85%, which means that 15% were not able to read and write (with understanding) a short, simple statement on their everyday life (see table below). Since 1990, there has been a clear decrease in literacy skills among this age group (due in great part to the economic difficulties experienced by their families), and the public is largely unaware of the full extent of the problem. There is an island-wide literacy program called Alfabetización: La Magia de Leer, but it has limited resources. 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 literacy opportunities that often do not reach the population most in need. Such youths are not prepared to 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.

**BUSINESS**

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 US-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 only route to economic success. The media promote this myth by showing English speakers as being

3 Official unemployment is currently 14.2% in Puerto Rico, and this does not include the permanently defeated who have stopped looking for work or the thousands who are under-employed.

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“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. This media presentation, coupled with the current economic crisis, also impels young Puerto Ricans to seek their fortunes in the US rather than struggle to improve local conditions.

It should be noted that at present there is no official body that deals directly with language status issues in Puerto Rico. On August 9, 2002, during the administration of Governor 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 these languages are 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.

The Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española (the Puerto Rican Spanish Language Academy), under the direction of Dr. José Luis Vega, is at present the only body that deals directly with language corpus issues on the island. It is dedicated to promulgating the correct use, conservation, and 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 Academia 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, the Academia 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 Zámez, Suzette Bacó, and Remi...

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4 Periodically, community groups are formed to defend the Spanish language from the supposed menace of English. In 2009, a group called Unidos por Nuestra Idioma (UNI) was created to combat the move in various locales like Guaynabo to utilize English instead of Spanish on public signage and police cars (see Rivera Quiñones, 2009).

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5 The College Board of Puerto Rico deals with the testing of language and math skills among all students in Puerto Rico and is therefore involved in the evaluation of language corpus planning. In its bulletin Academia, it regularly publishes test results. It also organizes conferences for teachers in which language issues are discussed. An example is the October 2009 conference titled Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Español whose theme was the creation of a culture of reading and writing on the island (College Board, 2009b). It is also responsible for testing teachers for certification via the Pruebas de Certificación de Maestros (PCMAS).
the Clown. The Academy selected seventy-five Puerto Rican words to promote during the campaign.

The Academia has a mildly 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.

WHERE LINGUISTS CAN MAKE A CONTRIBUTION

Linguists are trained to analyze the structure of 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 aphasics, 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 dispasionate guidance in matters regarding language. Nevertheless, their expertise is often ignored or put aside in favor of political expediency or power-brokering.

To rectify this situation, what is needed is 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. Part of the process would be 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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