

The Language Battle In Puerto Rico

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The massive incursions of American lifestyle and culture into Puerto Rican society find a natural reflection in the language spoken on the island. In addition to the growing use of English as a vernacular, Puerto Rico has also been characterized by an increasing influence of the English language on the local dialects of Spanish, particularly in the major urban areas. The precise extent of such linguistic influence is impossible to determine with complete objectivity, since language usage in Puerto Rico is closely tied to political questions of independence, statehood, and the intermediate position of *estadolibrismo*. Viewed from the exterior, Puerto Rican Spanish has been considered by many to be rapidly deteriorating under the onslaught of English,¹ and the death knell for the Spanish language in Puerto Rico has already been sounded by the more pessimistic. Native Puerto Rican scholars, on the other hand, have more generally taken the opposing view, that, aside from simple vocabulary borrowings, Puerto Rican Spanish remains relatively free from English influence,² when compared to other dialects of Spanish throughout Latin America, and even in Spain. Proponents of both sides

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[The reader's attention is also directed to a review in this edition of Frances Willard von Maltitz's *Living and Learning in Two Languages: Bilingual-Biocultural Education in the United States*.—Ed.]

¹ In particular, see Germán de Granda Gutiérrez, *Transculturación e interferencia lingüística en el Puerto Rico Contemporáneo (1898-1968)*. Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1972. A somewhat more moderate view is offered by S. Gili Gaya, *Nuestra lengua materna*. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1965.

² See, for example, Washington Lloréns, *El habla popular de Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1971; Salvador Tió, *et al.*, *Recomendaciones para el uso del idioma español en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Departamento de Instrucción Pública, 1968; Rubén del Rosario, *La lengua de Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1971.

adduce numerous anecdotal data to support their respective positions, but rarely if ever are the data presented with sufficient precision or scope to permit an accurate picture of the status of Spanish in Puerto Rico. Not since the unexcelled dialectological inquest of Navarro Tomás,³ undertaken in the 1920's, has Puerto Rican Spanish been subjected to the degree of critical scrutiny necessary for an accurate assessment.

Quite recently, two comprehensive studies of Puerto Rican Spanish have emerged,⁴ both sharing the aim of determining the degree of English influence to be found on the island. Since both are written by foreigners (Pérez Sala is Cuban, Castel, French), albeit sharing close ties with Puerto Rico, one may at last hope for a presentation which is relatively free from the sociopolitical encumbrances which have marred earlier attempts along similar lines.

Pérez Sala's study, originally presented as a dissertation at the University of Puerto Rico, deals, despite its rather misleading title, solely with phenomena of syntactic interference, that is, the creation of Spanish phrases and sentences based on English patterns. Castel's study, on the other hand, includes extensive sections on lexical interference, i.e., vocabulary borrowing and misuse of cognate items. Both authors concur, voicing an opinion shared by earlier investigators, that English has exerted little if any phonological influence on Puerto Rican Spanish, other than in providing loan-words of a non-Spanish sounding nature. The two works thus share a certain common domain, which permits comparison and facilitates a broader picture of the current problems facing Puerto Rican dialectology.

Pérez Sala's inquest, chronologically the earlier, decries the lack of rigor found in other studies dealing with foreign influence in Puerto Rican Spanish, and proposes to offer a 'structural linguistic' model to account for the various forms of syntactic interference. There then follows a long exposition on structural linguistics in general, in which certain salient beliefs characteristic of early American and European linguistic structuralism are discussed. When it comes time to confront the Puerto Rican linguistic data, however, the author contents himself with a general grouping by grammatical function or parts of the sentence, e.g., verb phrases, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, etc. In no instance are examples of real or reputed interference analyzed in terms of their actual linguistic constituents, except for the placement of these broad

³ Tomás Navarro Tomás, *El español en Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras: Editorial Universitaria, 1974, 3rd ed.

⁴ Paulino Pérez Sala, *Interferencia lingüística del inglés en el español hablado en Puerto Rico*. Hato Rey: Inter American University Press, 1971; Arnaud Castel, "L'effritement de la langue et de la culture espagnoles à Porto-Rico," Dissertation, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1974.

categories. Thus, while the examples themselves are at times handled with great precision, the appeal to linguistic theory appears to have been in vain, since the linguistic preliminaries may be bypassed without affecting the substance of the subsequent discussion.

In collecting his data, Pérez utilized a number of sources, in an attempt to garner examples from all walks of Puerto Rican life. Included in his summary are quotes from taped television and radio broadcasts, conversations overheard in university environments, and other examples picked up apparently at random throughout Puerto Rico. The author then attempts to draw general conclusions regarding the relative role of such factors as social class, occupational status, age, etc. in determining the amount of English influence to be encountered.

A noteworthy characteristic of Pérez's examples is that they all deal with the *spoken* language, and in most cases represent spontaneous and unreflecting utterances. On the other hand, the total lack of any statistical data, combined with the random and highly heterogeneous sampling procedure used to obtain the data for discussion preclude the formation of any rigorous sociolinguistic observations, and the reader is forced to rely on the author's assessment of the situation.

The methodology employed by Castel stands in marked contrast to that of his colleague. Castel opens his study with a thorough and penetrating sketch of the historical development of Puerto Rico as a political entity, and of the history of the Spanish and English languages on the island. It is clear from the historical presentations that the American culture has exerted a tremendous influence in Puerto Rico; thus the groundwork is laid for subsequent claims of massive linguistic interference.

The substance of Castel's data consists of an exhaustive analysis of running text from a several months' span of the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo*. Virtually every aspect of the paper is discussed, from its role in the daily life of Puerto Ricans to a detailed description of its format, and minutely tabulated lists are presented from the various categories chosen for discussion. Nearly half of the bulk of Castel's massive work (which runs to nearly 600 pages) represents lists and charts of examples taken from *El Mundo*, followed by critical commentary.

Castel offers us the kind of statistical data lacking in Pérez's study; on the other hand, the limitation to the language found in a newspaper has serious consequences for the representativeness of this study, designed to probe the influence of English throughout all of Puerto Rico. Not only is the rhetorical style found in newspapers highly atypical of spoken Spanish, but there arises the additional problem that a large number of contributors to a major Puerto Rican daily will be trained in American schools and/or be continually exposed to specimens of American journalism. Moreover, as Castel himself notes, a great proportion of the news

items comes from American wire services, and the teletype print-outs are translated on the spot in the editorial offices in Puerto Rico; the hurried translators, under pressures of time and, frequently, lack of expertise, succumb to the ready temptation of translating word by word, rather than attempting to render coherent sentences and paragraphs, often producing highly unnatural Spanish sentences, which have obviously been directly translated from English. To jump from such examples, however, to the claim that all of Puerto Rican Spanish has been equally affected by English, is a bit hasty, in view of the highly limited corpus of data. On the other hand, examples set in type, no matter how hurriedly composed, still reflect more self-consciousness than spontaneously spoken utterances, thus perhaps pointing to a codification of certain grammatical patterns, even after proofreading. In such areas as advertisements and locally written editorials, we may view more naturally produced specimens of Spanish, and in analyzing such fragments, Castel's study more closely approaches the goal of representing the typical Puerto Rican, even though in a highly artificial fashion.

As noted previously, Pérez makes little mention of lexical borrowing from English, conceding, in the light of the evidence, that it may be extensive in Puerto Rico. In one case, however, the use of the word *drogadicto* for "drug addict," one may point to other discussions⁵ which suggest that this word, found throughout Latin America, may not be a simple borrowing from English.

Castel, closely following the sociolinguistic work of Uriel Weinreich,⁶ speaks of three types of lexical interference: adoption in unchanged form of English words, semantic calques or translations, and neologisms, or new formations based on English words but modified to Spanish phonetic patterns. Examples of the first category are most numerous and Castel presents hundreds of examples from all categories, such as *sneakers*, *panti-hose*, *postmaster*, etc. Semantic calques are also quite common, resulting in such misuses as *estar envuelto en* for 'to be involved in.' Finally, true neologisms, which in many cases are difficult to sort out from unassimilated borrowings, are relatively infrequent, and include such words as *chube*, *biftec*, and so forth.

Among the myriad examples discussed by Castel, the majority may unequivocally be placed into the categories he suggests. In a few cases, however, rather controversial descriptions result. For example, we have the verb *gaguear* (297), supposedly from English 'gag'; e.g., 'estaba tan furiosa con ella que ella estaba *gagueando*,' 'she was so furious that she was gagging [sic].' However, Spanish *gaguear* 'to stutter' (a translation

⁵ For example, Richard V. Teschner, "'Adicto a droga(s)," "drogadicto," "morfinómano" or "toxicómano"?, *Hispania*, 57 (1974), 310-12.

⁶ Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact*. The Hague: Mouton, 1968. First edition, 1953.

which fits the context much better than 'to gag') is a well-established word throughout Latin America, and although it might originally have come from English (although more probably it is an onomatopoeic form), it is certainly not a recent acquisition.

Castel also cites (304) *plomero* 'plumber' as a calque from English, instead of *fontanero*, a claim which, in view of the prevalence of *plomero* throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and also of its Latin origins, many will find difficult to accept. The use of *retirado* instead of *jubilado* (308) is also frequent throughout Spanish America, as is the use of *tanque* 'tank', instead of *depósito*. Finally, labeling *zafacón* (399) as a neologism used on 'safety can' requires a little stretching of the imagination, in the absence of any supportive data. On the whole, however, it must be conceded that Castel has unearthed enough examples to convince even the most skeptical of the tremendous influence of English on Puerto Rican journalism. On the other hand, by the author's own admission, his statistical data are often distorted by frequently repeated and stereotyped items, such as repeated advertisements which are run daily.

A highly unique and valuable addition to Castel's study is a section based on headlines. As in other countries, newspaper headlines in Puerto Rico depart radically from traditional grammatical patterns, in an attempt to achieve conciseness and catch the eye. Castel presents large numbers of headlines, in which subjects, verbs, prepositions and other parts of the sentence have been omitted, and in which the verbal present tense predominates over the past tenses. Following each headline is an approximate rendering into English in a similar headline style. Such comparisons are used to yield the claim that Puerto Rican headline style, inasmuch as it is not typical of the spoken Spanish of the island, or even of the newspapers, must be influenced by the format of American headlines. Strikingly absent from the discussion, however, is a comparison with headline styles in newspapers from other Latin American countries less directly influenced by the English language. In fact, an overview of such papers does much to undermine claims of extensive American interference on Puerto Rican headlines, since throughout the world, newspaper headlines, in whatever language, are known for violating virtually all grammatical rules in order to achieve the holographic style which enables the reader to grasp a story line in a glance. While no doubt American newspapers have provided well-known models to be followed, particularly in Latin America, it is far from certain that comparable demands of time and space have not dictated headline styles in other languages independently of direct American influence.

It is in the area of syntactic or grammatical interference, that is, the copying of phrase and sentence patterns from English, that the greatest theoretical interest lies, and it is also here that one encounters the most methodological difficulties. While it is generally quite easy to spot a

borrowed vocabulary item, unless it has become so well integrated into the language as to render it indistinguishable from native words, tracing syntactic interference is much more difficult, since one is dealing only with elements native to the language under consideration, in this case Spanish, albeit rearranged in different patterns. There are no ready signals which unequivocally point to external influence, and one is forced instead to rely on intuitive judgements of 'strangeness' vs. 'naturalness', combined with a study of syntactic patterns in other languages which may potentially have contributed to the interference. In the works under discussion, both authors rely heavily on earlier observations by Gili Gaya (*op. cit.*), Lloréns (*op. cit.*), De Granda (*op. cit.*) and others in compiling lists of putative English syntactic interference in Puerto Rican Spanish. In both cases, the methodology is similar: one finds a Spanish expression of questionable naturalness, followed by a semantically equivalent English phrase with similar syntactic structure, with the resulting claim of syntactic interference. Pérez Sala, who views with scepticism the notion that English has exerted a large degree of syntactic interference on Puerto Rican Spanish, adds a third dimension to the search for Anglicisms: if he can find a parallel expression in other Hispanic countries, or in earlier periods of Spanish, the example is usually rejected as a 'false Anglicism'; if not (and such cases are rare indeed), he concedes syntactic interference from English. The shortcomings of the first part of such a procedure are obvious: Puerto Rico is not the only country in which the American language has made itself felt; Pérez himself cites numerous well-established Anglicisms throughout Latin America and even Spain, thus implicitly undercutting his own arguments with regard to 'false' Anglicisms. On the other hand, on those occasions where one is able to provide a precedent from an earlier period of the Spanish language, the arguments stand on much firmer ground, for Spanish has undergone such a varied syntactic evolution that one who is unaware of its history may well suspect foreign influence each time a structural parallel with another language is found. Castel, in turn, admits (471) that true examples of syntactic interference are difficult to separate from native Spanish expressions, but despite this disclaimer, he proceeds to offer large lists of Spanish-English equivalences, together with claims of direct influence.

An examination of the common examples discussed by Pérez and Castel has already been undertaken,⁷ and a detailed commentary at this time would be inappropriate. Suffice it to say that, in the cases in which direct American influence has been claimed, the investigators have frequently overlooked the possibility of spontaneous evolution from within

⁷ J. Lipski, "English Structures in Puerto Rican Spanish: defining the search," forthcoming.

Spanish, based on analogical extension of patterns already found in the language. Demonstrating the possibility of such spontaneous developments does of course not eliminate the possibility of foreign borrowing, but it does bring into focus an awareness of more endemic possibilities.

In addition to the cases drawn from his predecessors, Castel proffers large lists of putative Anglicized expressions drawn from *El Mundo*. In many cases, one may, based on intuitive feelings, concur with his opinions of foreign influence. A typical example would be the preposing of long strings of adjectives, characteristic of English, for example 'este próspero y en gran medida auto gobernado paraíso americano', or the excessive use of *estar siendo* plus past participle to render English 'is being'.⁸ On the other hand, Castel, in his zeal to demonstrate the extent of Anglicized variants in Puerto Rican Spanish, does include some questionable cases, a few of which deserve mention here. First, the excessive use of subject pronouns, noted by Gili Gaya, Pérez, and others, (e.g., *yo soy*, *tú sabes*, etc.) is not necessarily directly attributable to American influence, particularly in the Caribbean region, where loss of final *s* often obliterates the distinction between *sabe* and *sabes*, or *sabías* and *sabía*, etc. Perhaps this phonetic trait, coupled with other syntactic phenomena, is responsible for the increased use of subject pronouns in all environments in Puerto Rico.⁹

One may also take exception with the phrase 'mi cuñado se graduó de universidad', where the article *la* has been omitted; only in British/Canadian English is the article omitted from *university* (e.g., 'he goes to university'), although the phrase 'going to college' is of course frequent in the United States. Castel also notes omission of the article in a variety of names such as 'la administración de Plaza las Américas,' 'la película *Decamerón*,' 'spaguetti y pizza son platos populares,' etc. In such cases, one may offer the counter suggestion that the status of proper name or obvious foreign borrowing is responsible for the omission of the article (cf. 'estudia en Estados Unidos'), rather than imitation of English.

Pérez Sala concludes his work by affirming that he has found only a handful of true Anglicisms in Puerto Rican syntax; Castel offers us hundreds. Thus, despite the hopes voiced at the beginning of this review, we seem to be faced with another one of the discrepancies characteristic of studies of Puerto Rican Spanish. And yet, in view of the source of the examples utilized by both authors, the true nature of this discrepancy becomes somewhat clearer. While it is probably impossible to totally exempt either author from all claims of political motivation, their respective investigations have been carried out with high regard for

⁸ Cf. M. A. Ramos, 'El fenómeno de "estar siendo."' *Hispania* 55 (1972), 128-31.

⁹ Cf. J. Lipski, 'Preposed Subjects in Questions,' to appear in *Hispania*, and the references given therein.

empirical accuracy. Each study, however, has foundered on a different methodological stumbling block, in failing to consider certain key data. The end result, unfortunately, is a lack of completely satisfactory conclusions. Castel has built an admirable case for the presence of Anglicisms in *El Mundo*; even the staunchest supporter of Puerto Rican linguistic purity will have to admit the validity of his research. The Puerto Rican man in the street has, however, been omitted from such considerations. While Pérez Sala in turn is more interested in the latter individual, he offers us insufficient evidence regarding the linguistic production of the average Puerto Rican. In summary, therefore, it may be affirmed that, although individually failing to provide a total solution to the question of Puerto Rican Spanish, both studies taken together complement each other to a certain extent, and, more importantly, point the way toward the future. Subsequent investigations will have to take into consideration these two key studies, and should utilize them in order to integrate the partial conclusions into a much awaited synthesis representing the true independence (or interdependence) of Spanish in Puerto Rico.