

UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE THREAT: THE CASE OF PUERTO RICO

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ABSTRACT

As a colony of the United States since 1898, Puerto Rico has continuously been pressured to incorporate English as a co-official language along with Spanish, the vernacular of the majority of islanders. This paper presents the historical context of language education policy in Puerto Rico as a case study in order to understand Spanish language maintenance despite more than 115 years of U.S. colonization. After providing a brief review of literature regarding perceptions of language threat and how they have traditionally been viewed, the paper uses the island's context to explore the impact that strong perceptions of threat can have on language maintenance and societal bilingualism. The paper explores the perceptions of threat associated with English in Puerto Rico and ultimately argues that the colonization practices and the on-going political environment have positioned English as a problem, which has consequently led to a primarily monolingual island.

Keywords: Puerto Rico, Spanish, language threat, language maintenance

RESUMEN

Como colonia de los Estados Unidos desde 1898, Puerto Rico ha sido presionado continuamente para incorporar el inglés como idioma co-oficial en conjunto con el español, idioma vernacular de la mayoría de los isleños. Este artículo presenta el contexto histórico de la política educativa del lenguaje en Puerto Rico como un caso de estudio para entender el que se haya mantenido el español como idioma durante más de 115 años después de la colonización de los Estados Unidos. Luego de proveer una breve revisión de literatura sobre las percepciones de amenazas del lenguaje y cómo éstas han sido vistas tradicionalmente, el artículo usa el contexto de la Isla para explorar el impacto que las fuertes percepciones de amenaza pueden tener en el mantenimiento del lenguaje y el bilingüismo social. El artículo explora las percepciones de amenazas asociadas con el inglés en Puerto Rico y arguye que las prácticas de colonización y el ambiente político han posicionado el inglés como un problema, lo que como consecuencia ha llevado a una isla principalmente monolingüista.

Palabras clave: Puerto Rico, español, amenaza del idioma, mantenimiento de la lengua

RÉSUMÉ

En tant que colonie des Etats-Unis depuis 1898, Porto Rico a été continuellement forcé à intégrer l'anglais comme langue co-officielle avec l'espagnol, langue vernaculaire parlée par la majorité des habitants de l'île. Cet article présente le contexte historique de la politique d'enseignement des langues à Porto Rico comme une étude de cas, afin d'expliquer le maintien de la langue espagnole, malgré plus de 115 ans de colonisation américaine. Après avoir fourni un bref état des lieux de la littérature portant sur les diverses perceptions de la menace linguistique et de la façon dont elles ont traditionnellement été considérées, nous prendrons pour exemple le contexte de Porto Rico pour dévoiler l'impact que de fortes perceptions de menace peuvent avoir sur le maintien de la langue et du bilinguisme sociétal. Enfin, les perceptions de menace associées à l'anglais à Porto Rico permettront d'aboutir à la conclusion que les pratiques de colonisation et l'actuel environnement politique ont fait émerger l'anglais comme un problème, ce qui a par ailleurs conduit l'île à être essentiellement monolingue.

Mots-clés : Porto Rico, espagnol, langue menacée, langue maintenue

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Introduction

Research focusing on threatened languages where language shift is underway has been the focus of much of the research within the field of language policy and planning (LPP). Of great concern has been the loss of countless languages taken over by more dominant languages and their speakers (Hale *et al.* 1992; King 1999). Ecological frameworks have been used in the field to argue that languages, in some ways, are similar to natural species, and thus need to be protected (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1996). However, the argument for protection assumes that the language(s) is/are indeed endangered (May 2000; Pennycook 2000). The terms 'threat' and 'endangerment' within the field of language policy are often used interchangeably with the assumption that language threat will inevitably develop into endangerment (Ruiz 2006).

This paper uses the case of Puerto Rico to document a context where successful language maintenance of Spanish has come at the expense of societal bilingualism. The current result has been strong Spanish language maintenance as a result of educational language policies that privilege the elite whose children learn English in private schools, while

the public school curriculum relegates English to one hour per day. Such language maintenance is steeped in the perception that American ideals and culture will infiltrate the island with the increased adoption of English; however, with increased use of English in almost all societal domains, the language policies of the Puerto Rican Department of Education have not changed since 1949. Such policies have impacted the eighty percent of Puerto Ricans who attend public schools and has further facilitated the gap between the rich and the poor.

The field of LPP has historically placed great emphasis on understanding the impact of national language policies and their effect on smaller indigenous populations whose languages have moved toward endangerment or in many cases have died. Such has been the case for countless indigenous languages on all continents (Hale 1992; Grimes, Grimes, and Summer Institute of Linguistics 2000; May 2000). Thus, much of the energy within the field of LPP, and rightfully so, has concentrated on the documentation and revitalization of languages that have unjustly been marginalized and often lost. Language shift toward a politically more dominant language can come so quickly that the disenfranchised group is left scrambling to maintain language and other traditional aspects of their old way of life that were once viewed as commonplace (Nettle and Romaine 2000; Romaine 2006; Wyman 2009).

One interesting aspect about LPP is that the general public tends to have very strong ideas concerning the dominant language and the language's position in regard to other languages and the people who speak them (Cameron 2012; Creese and Blackledge 2011). The idea of folk LPP, playing off Preston's (1993) notion of folk linguistics, refers to the collective opinion of everyday people in regards to their society's dominant language and policies surrounding it. Unlike theories in atmospheric science or quantum physics, which the average person has never studied, everyone in society uses language on a daily basis. Thus, there is a sense of entitlement among language users toward the language(s) they use on daily basis (Cameron 2012). This aspect of entitlement allows ordinary people to unabatedly share and act on their opinions, thoughts and fears regarding their language. Therefore as such, the same person who has formed no opinion on the latest theories and hypotheses in quantum physics generally has a strongly formed opinion on the use of a minority language in schools or the officialization of their language in a state or nation's constitution.

As citizens of a nation and speakers of at least one language, ordinary people naturally feel they have something at stake in discussions concerning language—theirs or someone else's (Cameron 2012). The opinions of the general population are thus influenced by their own experiences and because they do not have an academic background in

LPP, their own experiences work in developing a fear of other languages and the people who speak them. Such life experience entails living in environments where a monolingual discourse is the norm and where neo-liberal views on language promulgate the idea of societal bilingualism or multilingualism as undesirable or weak (Phillipson, forthcoming). Thus, in line with Cameron (2007), there are language contexts in which non-endangered languages can be considered threatened or can be the cause of panic.

Perceived threats to language and culture have worked to create and strengthen nation-states throughout history, but often to the detriment and extinction of local indigenous languages (Lomawaima and McCarty 2006). As a common national language became one of the principal ingredients in creating a cohesive and powerful nation-state, minority languages were pressured to give up many of their cultural and linguistic practices for the betterment of the nation. France, which is commonly referred to as the first nation-state, promoted the use of French instead of the various minority languages used throughout the different regions of the country (Ostler 2005). As the continued use of regional languages was seen as a threat to the newly developed nation, there was a conscious effort by the French government to bring together the linguistically and culturally diverse groups of people in order to unify as a stronger political entity. This obviously had a positive impact on the unification of France, but had a detrimental impact on the languages formerly used within the current day borders of the country.

As the concept of the nation-state moved beyond the originally designed borders to include colonial “discoveries” language change was inevitable. Historically, the practice of imposing the colonizer’s language has been challenged as minority groups voice their opposition due to understandable resentment. Despite having lost many of their native speakers, indigenous groups around the world have taken advantage of more accepting language policies to promote and revitalize the language(s) that were so negatively impacted by colonization practices. More recently those working in LPP as well as local speakers of threatened languages have led a new struggle to maintain and protect the language rights of speakers of all languages, including the often-stigmatized regional and minoritized languages (Fishman 1991; Fishman 2001). Past paradigms of one country: one language have been disputed and linguistic human rights of minority language users have come to the forefront of language planning and policy (Nettle and Romaine 2000). Leaders in the fight for language rights have published research on the importance of protecting regional languages such as Welsh, Catalan, Maori, Inuktitut, and French (in Quebec), among many others (May 2003). The right to receive a primary education in one’s mother tongue also has been at the very core of

improving literacy rates and working to provide basic linguistic human rights to speakers of minority languages (UNESCO 2010).

While the use of students' mother tongue in primary education is a generally agreed upon goal, the presence of a second language, whether in an official context such as a school, or even the large presence of speakers of a second language can also raise perceptions of threat. For many people, fear of the unknown translates into a perceived threat. Therefore, the presence of a second language course in a school's curriculum or even more intimidating, a large group of speakers of another language or cultural group, can raise the anxiety level of community members to start to believe that such presence of a second language will ultimately displace the current linguistic norm. This is exemplified by English speakers in the Southwest U.S. who believe that the latest influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants will lead to a permanent shift in the linguistic landscape of their state. As a result, voters in states like Arizona and California have passed anti-immigrant and anti-Spanish legislation (Combs and Nicholas, 2012; Escamilla *et al.* 2003). These ideas of perceived threat to language are in stark contrast to language contexts where language shift has occurred, and thus, there is a legitimate threat posed to a language. Historically, research has tended to focus on the innumerable languages in imminent danger of language shift. This study argues that we must incorporate the *perceptions* behind language threat into the more general discussion and documentation of threatened languages. Thus, the rationale for this paper is to document the historical influences in the development of the perceptions of language threat and how such threat has influenced language maintenance in Puerto Rico.

Methods

Data collection for this case study consisted of six interviews of approximately one hour each with high profile politicians and government appointees (from the pro-statehood, pro-independence, and pro-commonwealth parties) as well as language policy experts on the island of Puerto Rico. The participants represented the three major political parties on the island and came from different geographic regions within Puerto Rico. The interview questions centered around the importance of Spanish for Puerto Ricans and the extent to which English played a role in the future development of Puerto Rico (See Appendix A). In addition to the interviews, the countless policy documents published by Puerto Rico's Department of Education were analyzed along with other historical documents related to the opposition to the teaching of English on the island. Furthermore, the author brings over thirteen years worth of experience having studied, lived and taught on the island.

The historical context of Spanish in Puerto Rico

The Spanish colonization of the island of Puerto Rico had a major influence on various aspects of what is currently considered one of the oldest and largest continuous colonies in the world (Barreto 2001). As Spanish *conquistadores* mixed with both the indigenous and African slaves, the race and culture of modern day Puerto Rico started to develop. With such intermarriage, Spanish became the language of the masses and a symbol of power and prestige. Toward the end of the 1800s when the Spanish were losing their colonies to independence movements, Puerto Rico and the political elite who ran the island, sought local autonomy. Such autonomy was briefly granted by the Spanish at the end of the 19th century but within the same year was soon taken away when the United States annexed the island as part of concessions from the Spanish American War (Morales Carrión 1983).

American colonization at the start of the 20th century alienated and offended many Puerto Rican poets, professors, and influential politicians. Such alienation worked to facilitate the creation of a movement that associated English with colonial oppression (Algren de Gutiérrez 1987). Among other things, this movement strengthened Puerto Rican nationalism and the demand for local autonomy, which was partially realized when the United States granted the island the right to elect their own governor in 1947. Shortly thereafter, policies requiring the use of English in public schools were diluted to Spanish medium courses with English being taught as a preferred subject equating to approximately one class hour per day. Spanish has been the main language of education on the island, and efforts to increase English in schools generally have been defeated as anti-Puerto Rican (Schmidt-Nieto 2014).

Although Spanish on the island has never been threatened in the sense that there was a large influx of English-speaking immigrants, the political association with the United States and the United States' past language policies constituted a threat in that they attempted to eradicate Spanish from the island (Algren de Gutiérrez 1987; Clampitt-Dunlap 2000). Current language use on the island points to an increased ability among Puerto Ricans to use English, but the island is still nowhere close to being bilingual in Spanish and English (Carroll 2008; Mazak 2012).

The island of Puerto Rico was unlike many of the other territories the U.S. had acquired over the years. Census data from 1900 reported that the island had close to one million inhabitants, as the '[t]otal population was 953,243 with a population density seven times that of Cuba, twice that of Pennsylvania, and almost equal to the industrial state of New Jersey' (Morales Carrión 1989:137). Puerto Rico's population density was so high that it severely inhibited the kind of influx of migrants

seen in California and other states in the west. Nevertheless, Puerto Rico was an important political pawn that allowed the United States to flex its muscles as a powerful influence in the region.

Even though the island served as a symbol of U.S. power by 1900, the people of Puerto Rico remained Spanish at heart. Spanish continued to be the language spoken on the island, and Spanish colonization for nearly four hundred years had ingrained a sense of loyalty and respect for Spain, which can still be felt today. Accordingly, since 1898, the Spanish and English languages have had joint official status except in 1991 when Governor Hernández Colón briefly made Spanish the sole official language. This designation was short-lived and largely symbolic as it was immediately repealed in 1993 when Dr. Pedro Rosselló became governor (Pousada 2008).

Since 1898, the political elite in Puerto Rico have struggled with the U.S. government to regain the local autonomy they had been granted by the Spanish. It was the opinion of many in the United States, however, that Puerto Ricans were uncivilized heathens who were in dire need of colonization (Algren de Gutiérrez 1987). The mixed blood of the majority of the population only served to fuel that thought and conjured up racist ideas when discussions regarding autonomy were raised. Those ideals are exemplified in a statement by Peter J. Hamilton, a judge in the U.S. District Court appointed by President Wilson, who wrote, '[t]he Puerto Ricans have the Latin-American excitability, and I think America should go slow in granting them anything like autonomy. Their civilization is not at all like ours yet' (as quoted in Morales Carrión 1989:188). In subsequent months Judge Hamilton added, 'the mixture of black and white in Porto Rico threatens to create a race of mongrels of no use to anyone, a race of Spanish American talkers' (as quoted in Morales Carrión 1989:188). Pleas for local autonomy fell on deaf ears, but the Jones Bill, signed on March 2, 1917 by President Woodrow Wilson, gave Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship. Conveniently, this occurred just weeks before war was declared against Germany, and with their new U.S. citizenship, Puerto Ricans were eligible to enlist in the United States armed forces where, even today, many Puerto Ricans have served and lost their lives.

In 1948, Luis Muñoz Marín was elected the first governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The granting of local autonomy to the people of Puerto Rico gave them the power to govern local matters, but still provided them with the protection of the U.S. armed forces. Puerto Ricans do not pay U.S. federal income taxes, and they are not eligible to vote in federal elections. However, in a unique twist to their influence on Washington politics, Puerto Ricans do vote in presidential primaries and in the 2008 Democratic primaries between Senator Barack Obama and

Senator Hillary Clinton, Puerto Rico was a focal point of the campaign which eventually saw Hillary Clinton winning the most delegates on the island but later, losing to Obama in the Democratic primary. Puerto Ricans also elect a representative in the U.S. Congress. This person represents the island and serves on congressional committees but has no right to vote. Although Puerto Rico's commonwealth status allows for local autonomy, Puerto Rico is not permitted to enter into foreign trade agreements, and any federal trials are taken up in the U.S. Federal Court system where the language of record is English (Pousada 2008).

English in the school system

The United States' attempt at colonization came primarily through the public education system. The public school system has always been a symbol and a tool by which the United States and Puerto Rican governments have worked to instill a sense of 'culture' among Puerto Ricans. Algren de Gutiérrez (1987) provides a detailed account of the various attempts on the part of U.S. appointed governors to implement English-only education in the public school system. Algren de Gutiérrez explains that these policies to 'Americanize' Puerto Ricans were met with strong opposition on the part of both teachers and the political elite. After a half century of failed policies to try to Americanize Puerto Ricans, the U.S. granted Puerto Rico local autonomy and the right to elect their own governor in 1949. Thus, it took about fifty years to gain roughly the same status they had achieved with Spain right before Spain ceded the island to the United States.

During Puerto Rico's association with the United States over the last 115 years, English has been perceived as a threat to Puerto Rican identity and a symbol of U.S. colonization. While language policy in the colonization era (1898-1952) ranged from a full attempt to shift Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans to monolingual English speakers to the recognition of the importance of Spanish in primary education, the intent to change Puerto Ricans' sense of identity consistently marked the period.

When the United States invaded Puerto Rico in 1898, it brought a public school system that was new to the island. At that time, the majority of the island's population was illiterate, and the U.S. goal was not only to make Puerto Ricans literate, but to do so in English (Algren de Gutiérrez 1987). The U.S. was explicit in their agenda to turn Puerto Ricans into 'Americans.' As such, with this new public school system came an English program that strove to 'destroy the Puerto Rican nationality through education' (Bliss 1994:1). In the early years of colonization the United States attempted to make English the primary language of the island, but this approach was unsuccessful.

According to Vélez (2000), throughout ‘the first 50 years of American rule, colonial administrators implemented an educational language policy whose goal was to Americanize the population and make English the dominant language’ (p. 6). Thus, from 1898 to 1949, English was the language of instruction in the public school system, but the use of English in the public school system changed dramatically throughout those years (see Algren de Gutiérrez (1987) for a detailed account of different policies regarding the teaching of English). For example, in 1901, Commissioner Martin G. Brumbaugh first imposed English instruction on all grades but when this plan failed, restricted it to grades nine through twelve, and left the elementary curriculum (grades one through eight) to be mediated in Spanish (de Montilla 1975). From that point on, although many different policies were used to implement English in all grades, few were successful (Fajardo, Albino, Báez *et al.* 1997).

As time passed in the early Puerto Rican colonial period, however, even more emphasis was given to Spanish in the primary grades. English, however, was always used as the medium of instruction at the secondary level. In fact, until 1949, all high school studies throughout the island were conducted in English. However, the few students who made it to high school tended to be from the elite families on the island. As Schweers and Hudders (2000) stated: ‘The small elite that continued in high school, however, became fully bilingual, thus exacerbating the difference between the classes’ (p. 66). When Puerto Rico was granted local autonomy in 1948, the new Secretary of Education, Mariano Villaronga, made Spanish the language of instruction of all subjects on the island. English was moved to a preferred subject position and relegated to one class period per day (Torres-González 2002). Thus, from the late 1940s to the present, Spanish has been the medium of instruction in all grades of public schooling on the island and English has played a reduced role when compared to the early years of U.S. colonization.

Throughout the early years of U.S. colonization, English language competence became the expected standard for the island’s elite. The elite often finished their secondary education in the public school system, and these students were able to attend universities on the mainland, as well as compete for English-speaking jobs upon returning to Puerto Rico. On the other hand, the average Puerto Rican remained monolingual and was typically not able to go beyond an elementary school education. If the poor and middle class had been economically stable enough to attend school through the twelfth grade, they too probably would have been bilingual and enjoyed the same opportunities of the elite. Even today, the ability to travel to the United States for university studies is something that is practiced primarily by the bilingual children of the elite.

When the public school system moved toward using Spanish as the

medium of instruction in 1949, English lost its elite status in the Department of Education and parents were forced to send their children to private schools to receive a medium of instruction in either English or a mixture of English and Spanish. In doing so, the elite families circumvented the system (Schweers and Hudders 2000), and many children from the Puerto Rican upper class continued their higher education on the mainland before returning to Puerto Rico after graduation to work in the best-paying jobs. The exodus of the elite from the public school system starting in the early 1950s continues to this day. It is very uncommon in Puerto Rico for children of the middle and upper class, to be sent to public schools (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz 2006). As these children attend private schools where there is often a greater emphasis on the English curriculum, the children are well prepared to maintain their social class distinction when they move into the job market. Thus, social class has played a major factor, not only in the learning of English, but also in the schools and experiences that are available to students.

After Spanish was implemented as the medium of instruction, Puerto Rico became one of the world leaders in improving access to public education (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz 2006). This improved access to a meaningful curriculum increased the size of public schools. Thus, while politicians were successful in painting the idea that English was a threat to Puerto Rican identity, they were not able to deny the importance of English for economic prosperity on the island. As a result, the use of Spanish as the language of instruction prompted many wealthy families to pull their children out of the public schools and place them in private schools, offering English education. Inequity in social class is often exacerbated by the vast difference in outcomes between private and public schools, especially, but not limited to, the learning of English. According to Schweers and Hudders (2000),

...the average Puerto Rican needs and benefits from a knowledge of English. Until now bilingual ability in English has marked class divisions. In a true democratic Puerto Rico, children from all classes should have an equal opportunity to master this necessary language. (p. 70)

The island has an abundance of private schools that place a greater emphasis on English education than public schools do. 'It is almost a truism at the University of Puerto Rico that public school students do poorly in English, and private or Catholic school students do better' (Pousada 2000:112). The findings of Pousada (2000) reaffirm the fact that the wealthy who send their children to private schools, do so in order to ensure their children will learn English. Because the highest paying jobs in Puerto Rico require knowledge of English, the children of the elite are the few who can fill these positions, thereby allowing them

to stay on top of the economic pyramid of Puerto Rican society (Ortiz 2001). Schmidt-Nieto (2014) reaffirms Pousada's argument in that he systematically documented the divergence of the island's educational language policies regarding English as they relate to opportunities that students have to learn language outside of school. Using a metric that he created called the Educational Language Gap (ELAG), Schmidt-Nieto argues that public school policies regarding English do not adequately reflect students' opportunities to learn the language outside of school, thus highlighting how language policies have not kept up with the social context of language use on the island.

The importance of Spanish in Puerto Rico

The political history involving both Spain and the United States has undoubtedly shaped the current linguistic landscape of the island of Puerto Rico and its conceptualization of nationalism (Personal interview with Jorge Schmidt-Nieto, June 9, 2008). Spanish language policies were *de facto* in the sense that shortly after the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores*, the medium of communication for daily life on the island was and still is Spanish. Fernando Martín, former president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, confirmed the profoundly significant role Spanish has had on the island and in the region in an interview for this study:

For me, the explanation (of why Puerto Rico has maintained Spanish) is relatively straightforward. If you look at the development of nationalism in the region, the three most nationalist countries of this whole region are Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico, and perhaps to the point of caricature. And the reason for that is that we have been the three countries that have been literally the frontier. We have been the frontier. It is in these, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, that the population has felt that Anglo American culture, the English language, the culture of Freud's overwhelming beast, that is what is about to overtake you, or overcome you. (Personal interview with Fernando Martín, June 14, 2008)

Martín's explanation of the important role of Spanish in the region goes beyond the geographic boundaries of Puerto Rico. It also antecedes U.S. occupation of the island, in that it goes back to historic battles between the status of Spanish and English in the whole region. His idea that the United States and the English language have been seen historically as a threat to the vitality of Spanish and culture in the three nations mentioned provides fuel for such 'caricatured' or vibrant realizations of nationalism, which were created to protect against American imperialism and, by extension, the English language.

Throughout the 20th century, nationalist groups who published their

ideas through various media outlets fed locals a rhetoric that preyed on the perception that their local language and identity was threatened due to the current, and possibly future, relationship with their respective colonizer. Throughout the struggle for local autonomy for the island, Puerto Rican political leaders waged battle against the ever-encroaching political, social and capitalistic ideals from the United States. The movements attempted to identify and define Puerto Rican identity as something very foreign to the 'American' ideals that were being pushed on islanders throughout the 20th century.

The political elite in Puerto Rico inundated locals with an anti-English and anti-American rhetoric that served to combat the often racist and derogatory feelings that the United States had toward its Spanish-speaking territory. Such rhetoric is exemplified in this quote from the famous José de Diego who said,

Y a todos vosotros jóvenes estudiantes puertorriqueños, que guardáis en vuestros pechos la rebeldía contra los ilegítimos poseedores del territorio patrio; a vosotros, que por fuerza recibís la enseñanza en lenguaje extranjero y por voluntad preserváis el nativo lenguaje para la oración que os comunica con vuestro pueblo y para el ideal que os comunica con su futura victoria. (Castro Pereda 1993:13)

And for all of you young Puerto Rican students, may you keep in your chest (heart) your rebellious ways against the illegitimate possessors of your native territory; to you, who have been obligated to learn in a foreign language but have voluntarily preserved your native language to speak and communicate with your community with the ideal that it (Spanish) will be used to communicate in your future victory. (Translation by author)

Unlike many other Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico never experienced a sizable migration of speakers of a foreign language. Nevertheless, growing access to television, increased American industrialization, and more recently, the advent of the Internet, have continued to fuel the perception that the core of what it means to be Puerto Rican is threatened. Such sentiment was summed up by José Luis Vega, former head of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, when he said: "La gente de Puerto Rico vive preocupada por el idioma y esta posición que yo te digo no es generalizada, pero mucha gente cree que si no lo quedamos [hablando español], nos vamos a perderlo / The people of Puerto Rico live preoccupied by the language and while this position that I tell you is not generalizable, but there are many people who think that if we do not keep [using Spanish] we will lose it" (Personal interview on June 13, 2008).

Return migrants: The Nuyorican comes home

The arrival of a sizable population of immigrants in a foreign land is often met with resistance. Many of the cases documenting language threat present a situation in which there is an influx of speakers of a language not traditionally found in the host country. Contemporary cases such as the United States, Sweden and France, where language policies have been passed to protect the local language despite its relative strength, exemplify the defensive manner of citizens and their governments as they react to new immigrant populations (Spolsky 2004).

The case of the United States, where an influential number of non-English speakers have arrived and consistently been met with growing anti-immigrant sentiment, offers an interesting comparison to other immigrant situations. In the U.S., such anti-immigrant sentiment has led to the passing of a number of voter-initiated propositions that limit social and educational benefits for non-English speakers (Wright 2005). In addition to a slew of anti-immigrant laws which have been enacted, the different cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds of these immigrants also has prompted legislation that seeks to curb the use of any language other than English (Brown 2009). In other cases, such as with many Native American groups in the U.S. and other indigenous communities throughout the world, an influx of immigrants led to the eventual death of countless speakers and, consequently, their languages (Dalby 2003). Thus, an influx of non-native speakers of the local language has, in fact, posed a language threat in particular circumstances throughout history.

Despite the fact that Puerto Rico has never experienced a massive influx of non-Spanish-speaking immigrants (Clampitt-Dunlap 2000), there have been sizable numbers of returnees from the United States (Personal interview with Clampitt-Dunlap on June 10, 2008). The influence of return migrants on the island is an aspect of Puerto Rican society that is often overlooked (Kerkhof 2001). While many Puerto Ricans have spent time in different cities throughout the United States, return migrants and their children are often ridiculed because of their inability to speak Spanish with the same accent and lexicon as natives (Kerkhof 2001). According to Carlos Chardón, the two-time Secretary of Education of Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans have never really known what to do with return migrants or how they fit into traditional conceptualizations of Puerto Rican identity (Personal interview on June 5, 2008). Zentella (1999) and Duany (2000; 2002) echo such resistance on the part of Puerto Ricans living on the island to accept literary works from 'Puerto Ricans' living in the United States into the local canon. Traditional views of what it means to be Puerto Rican, requiring the use of Spanish, precludes

writers whose prose is written in English from being adopted into the Puerto Rican canon.

Similar to the immigrants in other parts of the world, return migrants to Puerto Rico tend to be viewed as a burden within the school system as teachers often do not understand return migrants' linguistic and economic resources nor do they have knowledge of students' needs (Soto-Santiago 2014). Consequently, these return migrants are often seen as a problem that the system is required to deal with. As a result, these students try to assimilate as quickly as possible so as not to attract too much negative attention. The need to assimilate on the part of the return migrants symbolically reaffirms both the subtle and dominant characteristics of Puerto Rican nationalism, which requires the use of Spanish. The use of English, or an accented version of Puerto Rican Spanish, can elicit discrimination against those who are deemed to be too 'American.' My experiences living in Puerto Rico along with the relevant research (Morris 1995; Pousada 2008) confirms that the majority of island Puerto Ricans speak Spanish among themselves, and those who choose to speak another language among their Puerto Rican brethren are often viewed as outsiders. While English has always been a marker of status, return migrants who choose to use English to bolster their status can be met with resentment on the part of islanders who view their language use as a display of arrogance.

Return migrants in Puerto Rico have traditionally been the only sizeable group of English users to move to the island. As a result, these return migrants have been the 'whipping boys,' so to speak, and they are deemed not to be 'real' Puerto Ricans if they do not speak the same variety as islanders. Not only does such distinction cause division among return migrants and island Puerto Ricans, it also fuels the decades-old rhetoric that by knowing or using English, speakers are giving up a portion of their Puerto Rican identity. It should be noted that the division between Puerto Rican return migrants and native Puerto Ricans is not nearly as pronounced as the division between traditional immigrant groups and native populations throughout the world. This is because return Puerto Rican migrants often have maintained much of the historical and cultural traditions of Puerto Rico, whereas this simply is not the case in many contexts witnessing large influxes of immigrants.

Perceptions of threat and its impact on language maintenance

Puerto Rico's geographic location as an island set 1,000 miles southeast of Miami, Florida coupled with high population density in the early 1900s made it difficult for a mass migration of English speakers to the island, as was the case in Hawaii and Arizona. Furthermore, in the

early stages of the colonization process, Puerto Rico benefited from an established base of nationalist leaders who did not take kindly to their loss of authority to the colonial superpower. Puerto Rican leaders had secured the island's own autonomous state shortly before it was ceded to the U.S. in 1898, and it also had its own politicians and influential elite. When the U.S. started to impose its respective colonization efforts, the local politicians responded with nationalistic discourses that highlighted the differences between the locals and the colonizers. In essence, island leaders were working to define core cultural ideals to rally around, which became a necessity in opposing the various colonial policies that sought to assimilate Puerto Ricans as English-speaking Americans. Thus, English and U.S. efforts to 'Americanize' were seen as anti-Puerto Rican and as a legitimate threat to island life, and most notably, to the use of Spanish.

While the movement to protect Spanish and Puerto Ricanness was effective in creating a perception of threat, the actual threat that English posed was quite minimal. In concurrence with Clampitt-Dunlap's (1995) findings, the continued language maintenance of Spanish has been aided by the absence of any sizeable population of monolingual English speakers on the island. For this reason, there really never was a legitimate threat in the first place, nor has there ever been one. Failed English-only policies from the start of the 20th century gave way to a public school system that now uses Spanish as the language of instruction. As English-only policies become a faint memory, the average Puerto Rican wants their children to learn English. While the use of English in schools is an extremely political subject, for the most part Puerto Ricans respect the English language. Nevertheless, even today, plans to increase the importance and access to English education are often met with resistance on the part of teacher's unions, as well as politicians who see any move toward an increased importance of English as a move toward statehood. The political connections between English and the United States are obvious and understood and they will not vanish in the foreseeable future. As English continues to become a symbol of upward social mobility, however, more and more parents will demand that the public school system offer results similar to those in private schools, where many students learn English effectively and efficiently (Hermina 2014).

As researchers throughout the world work to document the levels to which languages are threatened and have started to shift, I argue with this paper that researchers need to take into consideration the perceptions of threat that language users have when comparing their language to other languages in contact with their own. The heightened sense of threat that English poses to Puerto Rican Spanish has yielded positive results from a language maintenance perspective, but has paid

poor dividends in developing a bilingual population. When examining perceptions of language threat and their consequences on policy and people, it is important to also understand who stands to benefit and who is maintaining their role and status in society. Hermina (2014) systematically documents the presence of two speech communities in Puerto Rico based on income level where those who have the resources to send their children to private schools do so whereas those families who do not have the same resources are forced to stay in the public education system. It is the public education system that has been the battleground for the opposition of English and Americanization, where over a century of Americanization and Puerto Rican pushback has created a school culture where English is often demonized. All the while, the children of those policy makers are enrolled in private schools where they blissfully ignore these language-as-a-problem orientations to bilingualism and learn both Spanish and English, thus giving them a competitive advantage and securing their social strata.

Throughout the world, perceptions of language threat have influenced language maintenance as well as language shift. As researchers examining language maintenance and language shift, we need to begin to look for systematic ways to document perceptions of threat and their impact on language use. Healthy doses of perceived threat can work to maintain languages, but when said perceptions are too strong, they can result in language-as-a-problem orientations that justify discrimination. Furthermore, when these perceptions of threat spin out of control, they can influence public education policies, which in the case of Puerto Rico have stunted the ability of countless students to receive an education where they can truly compete with their private school peers.

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Appendix A
Guide questions for open-ended interview with
participants in Puerto Rico.

1. What factors existed or exist that may promote language shift away from Spanish?
2. What are the functions of English and Spanish throughout society?
3. Has the native language(s) been maintained or has there been a shift toward different languages on the island?
4. What has been the result of past language policies / education policies in terms of the language used for instruction in schools?
5. What language do you think is most closely related to the formation and maintenance of a national identity?
6. Have language policies worked to exclude other languages, if so why?
7. Has there ever been nationalist groups, or the like, that have worked to maintain Spanish or even English?
8. What have been some reasons for successful language maintenance?
9. What are islanders' attitudes toward learning additional languages?
10. Do you think the current state of education on the island provides ALL students an equitable opportunity to succeed?
11. What language(s) are used in public education and until what grade?
12. Linguistically speaking, what is the expectation of those in school now and their ability to use different languages?
13. Is multilingualism viewed as additive? Or do you think the goal of the island is to become monolingual?
14. What rationale was used to defend the maintenance of the native language(s) or oppose the spread of the colonizers' language in schools, in other societal institutions and in language policies?
15. What does the future hold in terms of language use on the island? Are attitudes starting to be more inclusive of speakers of other languages or more exclusive?