

TOWARD A LANGUAGE POLICY THAT ADDRESSES PUERTO RICAN REALITY*

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Most people probably see bilingualism per se as a positive concept in the abstract. A society of bilingual people would probably have all kinds of advantages over a society populated by speakers of only one language. In the Puerto Rican context the idea of bilingualism in reality refers to the great majority of people sharing the same vernacular and the same foreign language. This is different from societies where two or more languages coexist as vernaculars of large sectors of their populations (e.g. Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Canada). It is also different from multilingual societies where a particular foreign language performs a unifying function (the case of many African and Asian nations like Kenya, Tanzania, India, and the Philippines).

In Puerto Rico bilingualism means, first and foremost, speaking Spanish as a vernacular and learning English as a required foreign language through the school system. Increasingly, however, many Puerto Ricans have learned English in a second language context by having lived in the United States prior to establishing permanent residency on the island. Most people would agree that despite the undeniable hegemony of Spanish in Puerto Rico, English does have a very noticeable presence that cannot be claimed by any other foreign language. According to self-reports collected in the 1990 census, it is estimated that 20% of our population is proficient in English, and another 20% can handle the language relatively well. This means that approximately 1,500,000 Puerto Rican residents can communicate in English successfully. It is quite evident as well that throughout most of the island English is

frequently encountered in one way or another. Does this mean that Puerto Rico is a bilingual society?

It makes sense to make a distinction here between *individual* bilingualism and collective or *societal* bilingualism. Puerto Ricans for the most part enthusiastically support the concept of individual bilingualism. We tend to admire people who speak more than one language, and we want our children to master English as well as Spanish.¹ It is assumed that English has great importance and that anyone wishing to get ahead must attain proficiency in its use. But the concept of societal bilingualism is certainly much more controversial. This implies allowing for the use of English in those public and high profile scenarios where traditionally only Spanish has been used. Acceptance of an unrestrained language policy that wishes to promote complete societal bilingualism would have to legitimize the use of English in the Puerto Rican legislature and court system; the use of English as a medium of instruction in the public school system; and the expectation of non-Spanish speakers that they could demand the use of English in any or all public contexts as a linguistic right. No doubt the great majority of Puerto Ricans are either extremely uneasy about such an arrangement or reject it unconditionally since it challenges the primary status of Spanish and it would be seen as opening the door for language shift into English.

So bilingualism, while good for the individual, can be, and often is, very problematic when projected to the society as a whole. In Quebec the current pro-French language policy came about as a rejection of societal bilingualism that was seen as giving advantages only to English. The English-only movement in the United States originated in part as a reaction to politically correct cultural diversity ideologies which were seen as attempting to legitimize government-sponsored teaching and use of languages other than English. Such diversity, in turn, would presumably lead to the 'balkanization' of the country (Wiley and Lukes 1996). Algeria's 1990 Arabization law, whose purpose is to divest French of any official and public functions it currently performs, has contributed mightily to that country's current political instability (Djté 1992). Meanwhile, Puerto Rico's recent misadventures with official language legislation demonstrate our own confusion on these matters (Vélez and Schweers 1993). In short, there is simply no way to trivialize the conflictive potential of societal bilingualism.

In the end, Puerto Rico can most accurately be characterized today as a monolingual Spanish-speaking society which contains a large number of Spanish/English bilingual *individuals*; a society where Spanish is by far the dominant language, but where English does perform specific communicative functions (business, government, scientific research); and does receive special attention (education). Additionally, English is either the primary or preferred language of a minority sector of the population comprised of English-dominant returned migrants, Americans, and immigrants from the Caribbean. In my opinion, any language policy for Puerto Rico must reflect this sociolinguistic reality.²

Such a language policy must also address the island's political reality, and there can be no getting around the fact that English is indeed a political issue in Puerto Rico. The history of the imposition of English between 1898 and 1948 leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the ones who first made English a political issue were, in fact, the American colonial administrators, and not the Puerto Ricans who were reacting to these initiatives and against the favoritism enjoyed by English at the expense of Spanish. One hundred years have come and gone, and many of the original circumstances of the early part of this century have certainly disappeared, but English continues to be a political football. Why? Because language is tied into our status issue. As long as we continue to argue about status, and as long as statehood is supported by a significant percentage of the Puerto Rican population, English will be associated with statehood and Americanism, and Spanish will be associated with commonwealth and independence and Puerto Rican nationalism. When you factor into the equation concerns dealing with language shift, ideologies related to identity and Hispanicity, and claims that our youth are losing their Spanish language skills, it should not surprise us that English has become such a political and ideological whipping boy.

At the heart of all these controversies is the perception held by many that the two languages are competing with each other as opposed to complementing each other. And while such perceptions are highly distorted and greatly exaggerated, they are nevertheless quite real to those who choose to believe them. Until the Puerto Rican people are convinced that Spanish and English are not adversaries, but allies, this adversarial relationship will remain to

be fueled for political reasons by those unwilling to give up the fight.

This brings us to consider the nature of Puerto Rico's political status condition. The fact remains that Puerto Rico is politically subordinate to the United States; that Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, where English is, pragmatically speaking, the language of government and of the dominant culture; and, most importantly, that Puerto Ricans *seem to favor the retention of some kind of political union with the United States*, be it through statehood, association, or even independence with dual citizenship. The current relation of subordination has clear linguistic implications that cannot be casually dismissed, and islanders give every indication of acknowledging the need for English to have a legitimate presence on the island as a price for maintaining political ties to the United States. It is true, nevertheless, that there is a limit to the linguistic 'sacrifice' that Puerto Ricans are willing to pay. Spanish is, after all, the most salient marker of our cultural and national identity viz-a-viz the United States.

Many people fear language shift from Spanish into English if we promote the unrestricted use of English in Puerto Rico (Resnick 1993). There is probably good reason for such suspicions. When two languages come into contact, frequently a competitive dynamic ensues in which, in most cases, the more powerful, economically dominant, and prestigious of the two wins out (Fishman 1991; Fasold 1984; Paulston 1994). Throughout history, the losers have included Celtic in Ireland, Gaelic in Scotland, Breton in France, Nahuatl in Mexico, Chamorro in Guam, Cajun in Louisiana, Spanish in New Mexico, and Hawaiian (Veltman 1988; Watson 1989; Kuter 1989; Solé 1990; Coronado-Suzán 1992; Brown 1993; Clampit 1995). Interestingly, however, this has not happened in Puerto Rico despite a good number of advantages in English's favor. Demographics, resistance, and political autonomy have coincided to perpetuate the dominance of Spanish (see Vélez in press). What is clear is that to the extent that Spanish continues to fulfill a diversity of communicative functions in Puerto Rican society, ranging from the most casual and intimate to the most formal and structured, to that same extent we may feel confident of its survival among us, regardless of what specialized functions English may acquire. That confidence would be greater still if Puerto Rico were

to retain the prerogative to protect Spanish from the uncontrolled encroachment of English.

History has shown that a top-down official bilingual policy, indeed a policy of Americanization and anglification, would in all probability fail in Puerto Rico. However, most observers agree that there has been and continues to be a relentless bottom-up process of anglification by which Puerto Ricans who have lived in the United States acquire English in a more natural manner, and then move to the island. These may develop a high degree of identification with the United States and/or a powerful attachment to English that often impedes their attempts to become fully Puerto Ricanized, or impedes their willingness to commit themselves to developing their Spanish language skills. Any increase in their number or in their influence might pose a threat to Spanish at some future point. On the other hand, we commonly find that many if not most of these returned migrants do indeed manage to assimilate to the island culture either because they wish to be accepted by the majority or because they were victims of prejudice in the U.S. and have no desire to identify with that country. They will probably keep their English as part of their personal identity, but they readily accept the primary status of Spanish for all Puerto Ricans. Whatever the case, it is important to remember that the phenomenon of the returned migrant is a natural outgrowth of the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. An enlightened language policy for the island cannot ignore the linguistic interests of these Puerto Ricans.

Recently, a group of scholars in Puerto Rico have suggested that a Puerto Rican variety of English exists on the island, spoken by islanders who are fluent in English (Blau and Dayton 1994). Such a development would have extremely serious implications for the Spanish/English debate since it would challenge many of the assumptions that underlie an ideological notion of a Puerto Rican Hispanic identity. If Puerto Rican English exists, then this must mean that at least some Puerto Ricans on the island are speaking English to other Puerto Ricans. Indeed, they may use English not only in the workplace, but also when they socialize with friends, and perhaps even when speaking to their children. If this were the case, then claims that Puerto Ricanness can be associated only with

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Spanish cannot be sustained, exactly the point frequently stated by Puerto Ricans living on the mainland and many returned migrants (Zentella 1990).

At present, Puerto Rico needs a language policy that promotes individual bilingualism by providing greater and better access to English through the school system while improving Spanish-language literacy and academic skills. It must acknowledge and justify the primary status of Spanish as the ancestral vernacular and the unmarked language of normal interaction in almost all domains. The official status of English should be recognized in concordance with Puerto Rico's voluntary support of political ties to the United States and the natural consequences generated by them. But the policy must state that English is a secondary or auxiliary language that performs specific and limited functions in Puerto Rican society. This is best done by identifying the government functions to be performed by Spanish exclusively and those that would allow the use of English when warranted.³ In this manner we could go a long way toward creating a sense of security and stability regarding Spanish/English coexistence on the island. This is the only way to depoliticize islander language concerns given their connection to the unresolved status issue.

If the people feel that Spanish is not threatened by English, then innovative English-language teaching strategies might be adopted in the pursuit of individual bilingualism for the population at large. These might include limited use of English as a medium of instruction, the greater incorporation of English-language electronic media in the school, greater access to English-language electronic media in the home, and the establishment of English-only summer immersion programs for public school students. Similarly, an explicit commitment to English would allow for postponing English reading and writing until the middle grades or developing a parallel track for English independent of the grade-level system. These initiatives regarding English must be accompanied by similar pro-Spanish actions. Puerto Rican students desperately need to develop their Spanish-language reading, composition, and debating skills—all of which have been ignored by a public education curriculum that prefers to emphasize grammar, writing conventions, and literature. The point is that if Spanish/English educational policies are clearly defined, then no accusations

of hidden agendas can be made when new approaches and techniques are applied.

In conclusion, a language policy for Puerto Rico must be sensitive to the island's sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical reality. It must be a policy that recognizes the roles played by the two languages; the inherent duality and impermanence of Puerto Rico's political status; the linguistic needs and aspirations of the people; and the hegemony of Spanish. The current bilingual policy in no way addresses these concerns. Since the 1993 law does not draw clear distinctions between the functions of Spanish and English, the door has been left wide open for a continued perception of linguistic competition as opposed to linguistic stability. The primacy of Spanish is not recognized nor is there a commitment to ensure that primacy. Any lack of decisiveness in supporting the dominant status of Spanish will undermine any attempts to encourage and increase the knowledge and use of English by our public school students. A new language policy which would minimize this adversarial relationship cannot be seen as a panacea, but it would be a crucial first step toward improving our students' English language skills by allowing educators to take bold steps in reforming the English curriculum without these posing a threat to Spanish.

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NOTES

1. Attitudinal studies on language issues carried out in Puerto Rico consistently show the subjects' positive feelings toward Spanish-English individual bilingualism. See for example López-Laguerre (1990) and Pousada (in press).
2. Research is needed to accurately describe the true nature of the Spanish/English contact situation on the island. How much has English penetrated the Puerto Rican scenario? Who speaks it to whom, and in what contexts? What are the reading-writing contexts for English? How have the two languages affected each other? See Vélez (1995) and Pousada (1996).
3. The functions performed by official languages vary according to the needs of particular political entities. Cooper (1989) enumerates the roles played by official languages in different countries. See also Pousada (1996). The 1991 Official Spanish law did indeed try to explicitly claim unique functions for Spanish and restrict functions to be performed by English. But it was doomed because of the insistence in eliminating the official status of English, a politically untenable position.

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