

PUERTO RICAN ENGLISH: AN ACCEPTABLE NON-NATIVE VARIETY?*

Elizabeth Dayton and Eileen Blau

Introduction

The varieties of English studied within the world Englishes framework are collectively referred to as non-native varieties (NNVs). Historical, as well as societal, context plays a role in the definition of these varieties. The NNVs of India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Nigeria, all former colonies of Great Britain, have emerged as second languages in large, multilingual societies, which can be referred to as English as a Second Language (ESL) English-using societies.

Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island with a population of roughly 3.5 million. It is a commonwealth of the United States in which Spanish is the predominant language, but in which Spanish and English have co-existed as official languages, except for a brief interruption, since the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Although the historical and societal fit between Puerto Rico and other ESL-English using societies is not perfect, we have argued, on the basis of our examination of Puerto Rico with respect to Moag's (1982) Taxonomy of English-using Societies, that Puerto Rico is an ESL-English using society (Blau & Dayton 1997). Thus, Puerto Rico provides the societal context for the emergence of an NNV on the island, Puerto Rican English (PRE).

This study focuses on judgments of acceptability that are influenced by a speaker's competence and addresses the question of whether or not PRE is an acceptable NNV both within Puerto Rico and outside, i.e. on the U.S. mainland. In research on native

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

varieties of English, the term *acceptability* indicates the subjective response of native speakers (Labov 1971, 1975). Within the world Englishes framework, Sahgal and Agnihotri (1985) have extended the term *acceptability* to research on NNVs in their use of acceptability judgments to get at the normative behavior of users of Indian English. A definition of acceptability that we have found useful comes from Lyons (1968), for whom an acceptable utterance is one that has been, or might be, produced by a native speaker in some appropriate context and is, or would be, accepted by other native speakers of the language in question.

In our effort to determine if PRE is an acceptable NNV, we focus on PRE lexical items embedded in sentential contexts. We build on a previous unpublished study in which we asked non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) of English to edit texts with lexical, grammatical, and inflectional differences from American English (AE). Regardless of proficiency level, the NNSs were most successful at changing inflectional differences and least successful at changing lexical differences, which led us to propose that PRE is realized largely through the lexicon, although this is not to say that it could not be realized in other areas of the grammar as well.

Our focus on the lexicon is in accordance with the views of others who have studied both native and non-native varieties and with those who have studied Spanish-English contact in Puerto Rico. With respect to native varieties, Wald (1984) points out that vernaculars, or first learned varieties, differ from each other and from the standard primarily in the lexicon and in phonology and to a lesser degree in syntax. According to Kachru (1986), the lexicon and phonology have been two extensively studied components in the nativization of NNVs. Nash (1970, 1971, 1979, 1983) has repeatedly stressed the centrality of the lexicon in the emergence of the hybrid varieties in Puerto Rico.

In acceptability studies, subjects are generally asked to judge sentences using a scale of acceptability. Because a pilot test using a scale of acceptability was unsuccessful, we did not use a scale in this study. Instead, we devised three related instruments, all based on the sentences in Figure 1, which shows the ten PRE lexical items in which we were interested embedded in their sentential contexts. The lexical items are glossed with English items that NSs of AE

would be likely to use, but these glosses are not the only possible items that would fit in the sentences. All the sentences are taken from natural speech. The sentences labeled 'written source' come from Puerto Rico's only English language newspaper and a bulletin published by Puerto Rico TESOL; the sentences labeled 'spoken source' come from English teachers, some of whom were born and raised on the island and some of whom are Puerto Rican returnees from the mainland. None of the sentences comes from student sources.

Figure 1

Sentences with Puerto Rican English Lexical Items

1. The best number in Gloria Estefan's concert was "Coming out of the dark," which she *interpreted* at the end of the one and a half hour show. 'sang'
(written source)
2. The teacher was hired because of her *domination* of English. 'command'
(spoken source)
3. The employee is responsible for *maintaining* production standards updated. 'keeping'
(written source)
4. Eugenio is in an English as a Second Language program where he has *approved* 24 credits. 'completed'
(written source)
5. My cousin *suffered* an accident with the skates. 'had'
(spoken source)
6. One professor asked another professor to take care of his computer while he was out of town. The second professor agreed and said, "I'll give it back to you when you return; I won't *stay with* it. 'keep'
(spoken source)

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

7. Hotel officials enjoyed a delightful lunch *elaborated* by the executive chef at the Mayaguez Hilton. 'prepared'
(written source)
8. In 1983 the government *celebrated* the first public hearings about Cerro Maravilla. 'held'
(written source)
9. The test *resulted* too long.
'was'
(spoken source)
10. The textbook was expensive and they didn't use it very much, so the students felt they had *lost* their money.
'wasted'
(spoken source)

The lexical items used in the instruments show cross-linguistic influence (Sharwood-Smith & Kellerman 1986) between Spanish and English in three ways. First, the lexical items may be polysemous in both languages, but the ranges of meaning are not exactly congruent across the two languages. In Figure 2, part (a), words such as *interpret* and *approve* have two meanings in English which are shared by Spanish *interpretar* and *aprobar*, but the Spanish words each have a third meaning which the English cognates do not have. Second, the lexical items may have different semantic ranges across the two languages. In Figure 2, part (b), a Spanish speaker using English might not make the distinction a NS would make between *stay with* and *keep*. Third, the lexical items may have different collocational ranges. In Figure 2, part (c), both *perder* in Spanish and *lose* in English share the meanings of *be unable to find*, *mislaid* and *not win*. Spanish *perder*, however, has a much wider collocational range; in Spanish *perder* collocates with *tiempo*, *dinero* (in the sense of *malgastar*) and *vuelo*, *tren*, etc. In English a variety of verbs must be used; NSs *waste time* and *money* and *miss flights* and *trains*.

Figure 2

Cross-linguistic Influence
Spanish-English Lexical Items

(Words are in boldface; their meanings are below.)

(a) **Spanish**

interpretar

comprehend
translate
sing

aprobar

consent
regard favorably
pass a test or course,
complete credits

(b)

quedarse con

stay with (do not leave)
keep (do not give back)

(c)

perder

be unable to find
mislay
not win
waste (time, money)
miss (flights, trains)

English

interpret

comprehend
translate

approve

consent
regard favorably

lose

be unable to find
mislay
not win
waste (time, money)
miss (flights, trains)

Instruments

The first instrument based on the sentences in Figure 1 was a sentence editing task in which subjects were asked to judge, improve, and correct, i.e. edit, the sentences in Figure 1 by adding, deleting, changing, and moving elements.

The rationale used in designing the editing task was similar to that of a number of judgment studies (Chaudron 1983; Coppieters

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

1987; Gass 1983; Masny & d'Anglejan 1985; Schachter & Yip 1990) designed to provide insight about an individual's underlying competence, which according to Sajavara & Lehtonen (1989:39) is "getting at language users' minds by their reactions to linguistic stimuli." We reasoned that if a subject did not change the PRE lexical item in a sentence, the sentence with its lexical item was acceptable in that it did not violate the subject's underlying competence.

The second instrument based on the sentences in Figure 1 was a multiple choice test, as shown in Figure 3. For this test the lexical items underlined in Figure 1 were removed and subjects were asked for each sentence to fill in the blank by choosing the one vocabulary item out of three possibilities that they thought best fit in the sentence.

Figure 3

Multiple Choice Test

1. The best number in Gloria Estefan's concert was "Coming out of the _____ dark," which she _____ at the end of the 1 1/2 hour show.
a. interpreted b. presented c. performed
2. The teacher was hired because of her _____ English.
a. ability in b. domination of c. command of
3. The employee is responsible for _____ production standards updated.
a. having b. maintaining c. keeping
4. Eugenio is in an ESL graduate program where he has _____ 24 credits.
a. finished b. approved c. completed
5. My cousin _____ an accident with the skates.
a. had b. suffered c. got into
6. You can take this copy, and I'll _____ this one.
a. stay with b. keep c. hold

7. Hotel officials enjoyed a delightful lunch _____ by the executive chef at the Mayaguez Hilton.
a. prepared b. developed c. elaborated
8. In 1983 the government _____ the first public hearings about Cerro Maravilla.
a. celebrated b. held c. convened
9. The test _____ too long.
a. came out b. turned out c. resulted
10. The textbook was expensive and they didn't use it very much, so the students felt they had _____ their money.
a. used up b. wasted c. lost

We complemented the sentence editing task with the multiple choice test for two reasons. First, we did not want to draw our conclusions about acceptability on the basis of a single task since the conclusions could be task dependent. Second, in a pilot study with a sentence editing task, we were surprised that the NNSs did not change the PRE lexical items a higher percent of the time and believed that they had more lexical knowledge than their performance on the task revealed; as Sharwood-Smith (1986) points out, NNSs may have competence without performance. Accordingly, we piloted several different formats for a recognition task and chose a multiple choice test.

Subjects

The sentence editing task and the multiple choice test were administered to 223 subjects, as shown in Table 1. The first four groups were Puerto Rican subjects who represented a cross-section of proficiency levels. The first three groups were student learners of English; the fourth group was NNS English teachers in Puerto Rico whose status as learners or acquirers varied depending on their residential history. The fifth group was NSs of English residing on the mainland who did not speak Spanish.

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

Table 1:

Five groups of subjects who did the multiple choice test and the sentence editing task

	Multiple choice	Sentence Editing	Total N
1. Basic	23	24	47
2. Intermediate	10	8	18
3. Honors	36	38	74
4. Teachers	16	18	34
5. Native speakers	23	27	50
Totals	108	115	223

Interviews

In addition to the two principal instruments, we tape-recorded interviews with three subjects: a Puerto Rican English teacher born and raised on the island, a Puerto Rican English teacher returnee, and a NS of English who lived on the mainland and did not speak Spanish.

These three subjects were first asked to do the sentence editing task silently. They were then asked during their interview to discuss the changes that they made in each sentence, to focus on the PRE lexical items, to substitute other English words for the items, if possible, and to reflect on samenesses and differences in meaning. The two Puerto Rican subjects were asked to translate the sentences into Spanish and to take the multiple choice test and discuss their choices.

The purpose of the interviews was to shed light on the performance of the teachers and the NSs who did the sentence editing task and the multiple choice test (Groups 4 and 5 on Table 1). The inspiration for the interviews derived from Coppieters (1987), who interviewed native and near-native speakers of French to compare their intuitions and interpretations and showed that they did not share the same internal grammar.

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the multiple choice test and the sentence editing task for all subjects. (For numbers of subjects responding to each ten-item instrument, see Table 1.)

Table 2
Percent PRE Lexical Items Chosen/Accepted

	Sentence Editing	Multiple Choice
1. Basic	94%	56%
2. Intermediate	95%	29%
3. Honors	83%	29%
4. Teachers	61%	30%
5. Native Speakers	28%	3%

As we see in the table, as proficiency increases, student performance moves in the direction of the teachers; that is, as proficiency increases from Basic English through Honors, students chose and accepted a lower percent of items that diverged from AE.

In addition, all NNS subjects, including the teachers, chose a lower percent of the PRE lexical items on the multiple choice test than on the editing task, confirming our view that subjects' performance on the editing task did not reveal the full extent of their lexical knowledge. To explain the difference in performance on the two tasks we observe, first, that recognition tasks such as multiple choice tests with options to prime the subject are easier for the subject than production tasks which do not provide any priming choices, and, second, that in real language use, students do not always apply what they know. In other words, they might be able to perform well on a multiple choice test, but make errors in actual language use, and the editing task better reflects actual language use than the multiple choice test.

Table 2 also shows that on the multiple choice test the NSs chose the PRE lexical items 3% of the time while the teachers chose the lexical items 30% of the time. One might question why the two groups of subjects performed differently on the same task.

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

One explanation for the difference in performance is that the teachers haven't reached the target while the NSs have. Thus, the teachers' choice of PRE lexical items 30% of the time may be an acquisitional effect reflecting their stage of interlanguage (IL). In other words, since the teachers, native speakers of Spanish, have probably completed their language acquisition, their stage of IL has stabilized and their choice of PRE lexical items on the multiple choice task represents fossilized IL. This explanation makes sense if we accept that the teachers and the NSs have the same target, AE.

An alternative explanation for the difference in performance is that the teachers have reached their target, a target which is different from that of the NSs. This explanation makes sense if we accept that the teachers and the NSs have two different targets. The teachers' target is a NNV, PRE, while the NSs' target is a native variety, AE.

The first piece of evidence in support of this explanation has to do with the social role of the teachers themselves. According to Labov (1972), teachers uphold middle class norms, are sensitive to prestige forms and norms, and may accelerate hypercorrection. In addition, women are more sensitive to overt social correction and use more standard prestige forms than men. If teachers, in general, and English teachers, in particular, are more sensitive to language than the general population, and if the teachers in this study, the majority of whom are women, and the NSs share the same target variety, we might expect that if any group of users of PRE were able to match the NSs on the multiple choice test, it would be the teachers. The fact that they did not match the NSs supports our view that the teachers have a target different from that of the NSs, and it is the target towards which the students from Basic through Honors move.

The second piece of evidence in support of this explanation relates to the difference between fossilized IL and NNVs. Although both fossilized IL and NNVs are characterized by stability, fossilized IL is more likely to be the property of the individual while NNVs, which are characterized by institutionalization and the creation of shared norms, are more likely to be the property of the speech community. To the extent that we can define the teachers as a speech community of English users with shared norms, we can view their

choice of PRE lexical items 30% of the time on the multiple choice test as a reflection of the norm that they share. To conclude, the teachers and the NSs performed differently on the multiple choice test because they have two different targets, PRE and AE. The next section turns to the relationship of this conclusion both to the performance of each group on the two tasks and to acceptability.

Turning first to the teachers, we see that they chose the PRE lexical items 30% of the time on the multiple choice test but left the lexical items unchanged 61% of the time on the editing task. If the 61% on the editing task indicates acceptability, we might ask why they performed differently on the two tasks and why they didn't choose the PRE lexical items a higher percent of the time on the multiple choice test.

In our view, the teachers left the PRE lexical items unchanged 61% of the time on the editing task, and thus, found the lexical items embedded in their sentential contexts to be acceptable because they share the same normative behavior as the users of PRE who produced these real world sentences in natural speech. This normative behavior includes the possibility that the teachers have more lexical options than the NSs do due to the polysemy of the PRE lexical items. In other words, the teachers chose to accept the sentences in which the PRE lexical items were embedded even though they were aware that other lexical options were possible.

The best evidence that the teachers' performance on the editing task involves lexical options and choice comes from the two teachers whom we interviewed. Both teachers, who left most of the PRE lexical items unchanged in the editing task, were able to provide native speaker alternatives when asked to do so during the interview. They both knew that *keep* could substitute for both *maintain* and *stay with* and that *fluency*, *proficiency*, and *ability* could substitute for *domination*. They were also sensitive to stylistic or register differences between the PRE lexical items and native speaker alternatives, particularly in the written sources. Special occasions with important political consequences such as the Cerro Maravilla hearings should be *celebrated*, not *held*; fancy luncheons at the Hilton Hotel are *elaborated*, not *prepared*. One teacher even viewed the PRE lexical items with their Latinate roots as more 'sophisticated' than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. As mentioned, the multiple choice test offered the advantage of priming options

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

that the editing task did not offer. We believe that had it not been for the priming options, the teachers' performance on the multiple choice test would have more closely approximated their performance and indication of acceptability on the editing task.

Turning to the NSs, we see that they chose the PRE lexical items 3% of the time on the multiple choice test but left the lexical items unchanged 28% of the time on the editing task. If the 3% on the multiple choice test reflects their target variety, AE, as we have suggested, we might ask why they performed differently on the two tasks and why they left the PRE lexical items unchanged 28% of the time on the editing task. In other words, does the 28% reflect acceptability or not? According to Smith & Nelson (1985), and Berns (1990), understanding takes place on three levels, two of which are comprehensibility and interpretability. We will use the more general term, understanding, for these two levels. Although the extent to which understanding affects acceptability has received little attention in the literature, it seems likely that understanding is a necessary prerequisite for acceptability.

To decide if the 28% reflects acceptability or not, we consider, first, the fact that the NSs changed the items on the editing task 72% of the time. This 72% reflects non-acceptance of the items, but when we examine the 72% more carefully, we see, as shown in Figure 4, that this non-acceptance is partly affected by understanding.

Figure 4

Acceptability and Understanding by Native Speakers (as shown in the sentence editing task)

	21% problems with understanding
72% changed => non-acceptance	51% no apparent problem with understanding
	no change => acceptance
28% not changed	no change => puzzlement
	no change => different understanding

The 72% can be divided into two parts. In the first part the NSs changed the PRE lexical items 21% of the time but provided an indication that they did not understand the items in the same way as the teachers. In some cases when the NSs changed the PRE lexical items, they substituted English words that the teachers never used. For example, the NSs substituted *given*, *sponsored*, *put on*, and *hosted for elaborated* while the teachers substituted *prepared a meal*; the NSs substituted *improvised*, *explained*, or *gave an interpretation* for interpreted while the teachers substituted sang. In other cases, they provided either meta-comments or meta-questions reflecting their problems with understanding. The native speaker interviewee confessed that she was “stumped” by the sentences *The test resulted too long and Eugenio has approved 24 credits*. The other NSs wrote on their test papers questions such as “What was the intent of the statement?” and “Production standards updated?”. In the second part of the 72% the NSs changed the PRE lexical item 51% of the time in the same way the teachers did, indicating that understanding was not a problem in these cases.

When we return to the 28% on the editing task, we find that we could conclude that this 28% reflects native speaker acceptance of the PRE lexical items in the same way that 61% reflects teacher acceptance of the same items. However, given the problems with understanding that the NSs indicated they had when they did change the PRE lexical items, we find that there could be at least two other explanations for why they left the items unchanged 28% of the time on the editing task. First, the 28% could reflect the fact that the NSs didn't understand the sentences (“puzzlement” in Figure 4); thus, they didn't know what to do with them, so they left them unchanged. Evidence for this is provided by the subject who wrote the comment “All are crap sentences” on his paper and changed only a few items. Second, the 28% could reflect the fact that the NSs had different readings for the sentences (“different understanding Δ in Figure 4), judged the sentences to be paraphrases for their readings, and, thus, left the sentences unchanged.

There is no way for us to decide the extent to which the 28% represents acceptability for the NSs in the same way that the 61% does for the teachers or the extent to which the 28% represents problems with understanding. Given that the NSs clearly do indicate problems with understanding at least 21% of the time, we can

Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

conclude that understanding affects acceptability, and that if understanding is a prerequisite for acceptability, native speaker acceptability of the PRE lexical items must be lower than 28% and more in line with the 3% on the multiple choice test. Even though multiple choice tests are not typically thought of as measurements of acceptability, it seems reasonable to conclude that the 97% native speaker avoidance of the PRE lexical items on the multiple choice test also reflects non-acceptance of these items.

Discussion

We concluded above that the teachers and NSs have two different targets. We then examined the performance of each group on both instruments. Because of priming choices which reminded them of other options, the teachers chose PRE lexical items on the multiple choice test only 30% of the time while they left the lexical items unchanged on the editing task 61% of the time. Overall, their performance demonstrated a high degree of acceptance. In line with Lyons' view that an acceptable utterance is one that has been, or might be, produced by a native speaker and is, or would be, accepted by other native speakers of the language in question, we are not surprised that the teachers accepted the PRE lexical items in their sentential contexts. In fact, all the sentences incorporated in the instruments were produced either by teachers or by other users of PRE.

The NSs, on the other hand, showed a high degree of non-acceptance on the multiple choice test. Their performance on the editing task was more difficult to interpret but indicated less than 28% acceptance, which is clearly much lower than the teachers' level of acceptance on that task. This finding is also in line with Lyons' definition of acceptability. We would no more expect our native speaker subjects to produce the lexical items in the sentences on which our instruments were based than we would expect them to judge them as acceptable in the same way the teachers did. In our view, the lexical knowledge necessary to either produce or accept the lexical items in the sentences is not part of our NSs' competence. Thus, on the basis of the instruments used in this study, we believe that PRE is an acceptable NNV within Puerto Rico but is not an acceptable NNV outside Puerto Rico among native speakers of English who do not speak Spanish.

As we have seen, the possibility that NSs will not be able to understand the PRE lexical items exists and accounts for their lower acceptance of the items. According to Coppiters (1987), NSs and near-NSs do have different intuitions and interpretations, similar to the findings reported here, but these do not usually disrupt communication. In fact, the same noise in the system undoubtedly exists for native speaker interlocutors as well. Regardless of the native speakers' problems with understanding created by the lexical items, given the cooperative principle and context, we believe that communication is no more likely to break down between a speaker of PRE, an NNV, and a speaker of AE, a native variety, than it is to break down between two speakers of two different native varieties of English, for example, American English and Australian English. To conclude, we agree with Moag and Moag (1979) that it is a "double standard" to tolerate differences among native varieties but not among NNVs. Since PRE is an acceptable NNV, we see no reason why it, or any other acceptable NNV, should not be on an equal footing with native varieties of English.

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Puerto Rican English: An acceptable non-native variety?

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