

## *Español, English, y Spanglish: The Battle of Language in Puerto Rico*

There was something unsettling about the way people looked at me when I talked to them. The rosy expressions of curiosity and enthusiasm that dressed the faces of people approaching me would soon become ones of bewilderment and disappointment after I opened my mouth. In the beginning, my Spanish was a disjointed *revolú*<sup>1</sup> of dissonant sounds and utterances that followed the structure and pronunciation of an alien language. Words that were not within my vocabulary were omitted altogether and replaced with gestures and charade performances that often only further obscured the original meaning of the sentence. If you asked me then what I thought of the Spanish language, I would have told you that I hated it, so much so, that if given the option between Spanish and being mute, I would have chosen the latter. What I quickly learned was that my relationship with the language was a matter of exposure. The more I *janguéaba*<sup>2</sup> with the other kids, the more I began to understand them. Their jokes started making sense, I began being included in the *bochinche*<sup>3</sup> of the day, and the teacher's previously lethargic and seemingly unintelligible speeches at the beginning of class now presented tangible ideas and information. As an English-speaking kid in San Juan, Puerto Rico, there was no other option than to simply get with the program.

Now this story is of course a common one in the United States to kids who grew up speaking a language at home other than English, and for many, it is a sensitive subject. Mexican American journalist and Author, Richard Rodriguez discusses this bilingual struggle in his essay titled *Aria*. He talks about his anxiety and unwillingness to speak as a child of Mexican immigrant parents growing up in California, his loss of confidence in his parents from an early

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish word native to Puerto Rico meaning a disordered “mess,” or “mishmash.”

<sup>2</sup> Spanish anglicism from Puerto Rico meaning “To hang out.”

<sup>3</sup> Spanish word native to Puerto Rico meaning “gossip.”

age due to their inability to pronounce English words, as well as the rejection he faced from his Spanish-speaking Mexican relatives. Upon witnessing his parents speak English in public, Rodriguez says that as a kid, “I’d grow nervous, and my clutching trust in their protection and power would be weakened” (Rodriguez 27). Reading works like *Aria*, it becomes obvious as to why this debate is often accompanied by those same old feelings of shame, humiliation, alienation, and of course, resentment – many of which, stem from these traumatic recollections from childhood. But what happens when the foreign child is not meant to change and instead the entire society is expected to change? This is the dilemma in Puerto Rico, whose unique set of historical developments and circumstances have set forth a new, yet controversial linguistic horizon.

Now it must be said, it is often taught that Puerto Rico is a territory that speaks English and Spanish, but this is false. It is, first and foremost, a place that speaks Spanish, and reluctantly tolerates English when it is convenient. Furthermore, the ongoing clash between these two languages in Puerto Rico has produced a linguistic landscape like no other in the United States. But with that said, this landscape as unique as it is, presents a major issue: Should Puerto Ricans encourage the use of English on the same level as Spanish, or should Puerto Ricans continue to predominantly speak Spanish? There is no clear answer to this question, but there is some necessary historical background, that may aid us in navigating it.

The official language of Puerto Rico was Spanish for several hundred years as a result of the Spanish colonial presence on the island that began in the 15th century (“Puerto Rico History”). This went unchallenged until the Spanish American War in 1898, when the United States took control of the island and instituted English as the second official language in 1902 (Morris 29). Despite being a territory of the United States now for over 100 years, Puerto Rico

continues to predominantly speak Spanish with 76.6% of people not being able to speak English ‘very well,’ and 94.5% of people speaking only Spanish at home (US Census).

With the Foraker Act in 1902, English not only became one of the two official languages in Puerto Rico but also became “the language of instruction,” and was to be used exclusively in all public schools (Simon). Vito Marcantonio the Representative who was largely responsible for the legislation that restored Spanish as the language used in public schools in 1948, described the institution of English as “cultural chauvinism” and “torture” to the Puerto Rican public school students forced to learn this unfamiliar language (Simon). Of course, this was not the only way in which the United States reminded Puerto Ricans who was in charge. In 1955, the United States used low-income Puerto Rican women as guinea pigs in the development of birth control, which resulted in nearly a 1/3 of the population becoming completely sterile, most times involuntarily (Blakemore). The Jones Act, a piece of legislation dating back to the 1920s, also makes it so that Puerto Rico can only accept imports from American ships resulting in much more expensive shipping costs for food, and just about anything not made in Puerto Rico (Isidore). In recent times, wealthy American land developers have invested in Puerto Rico’s coasts, and in doing so, have displaced low-income families, and are damaging vital mangroves, wetlands, and reefs (Garcia-Quijano & Lloréns).

Puerto Ricans today have refused to let these by-products of American colonialism be forgotten. Their outrage over this exploitation is still very much visceral and raw, while the fight against American colonialism is still ongoing (Espada). One of these fights has begun through the grassroots activist collective *#AbolishAct60*, whose name refers to the tax break laws for wealthy American entrepreneurs. The group has repeatedly called for the “gringos to go home,” and for Governor Pedro Perluisi to end these financial incentives (Espada). And for many, these

bitter feelings have gone beyond wealthy America land developers and has become associated with everything American, especially, the English language. I recall that if I ever did myself the disservice of speaking English in school, I was returned with a snappy reminder that “Aqui, hablamos espanol.” Often times teachers would get visibly flustered by students speaking English, almost as if doing so was some sort of transgression against them on a personal level. It is only now that I realize why it was and continues to be so personal.

Spanish, naturally, is very much tied to Puerto Rican culture. It is the language of our poets, abolitionists, and most prized cultural icons and exports, and the language of *salsa*, *merengue*, *bachata*, and *reggaeton*. Puerto Ricans have also largely made Spanish their own, so much so, that the Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish might even be virtually unintelligible to some Spanish speakers. In the same way that *Hamilton* playwright Lin Manuel Miranda is a revered cultural product of Puerto Rico, so is Puerto Rican Spanish. To many, it is seen as a tool of cultural preservation and resistance to American colonization. These feelings even impacted legislation: In 1991, the administration of Governor Rafael Hernandez Colon made Spanish the only language in government in what was called the “Spanish-Only Act” (Senate). In the same way that conservative Americans will say “In America we speak English,” Puerto Ricans will say “En Puerto Rico, hablamos Espanol,” with just as much fervor and conviction.

Now with this said, to argue that English poses a genuine threat to the preservation of Puerto Rican heritage (at least at this junction) is outlandish. The United States has possessed Puerto Rico as a territory for over a hundred years, and Spanish is still very much alive on the island, especially now that the bulk of public and even private schools only teach classes in Spanish. What may not be as far-fetched is the argument that using English in certain settings can often create unnecessary hurdles and challenges. For example, the federal district courts of

Puerto Rico operate in English, which oftentimes requires the hiring of translators who are expected to translate everything that is said in the courtroom, which in turn, causes trials to take significantly more time, creates barriers for local attorneys looking to practice in the federal system, and makes jury selection longer, as the government typically opts to have English-speaking jurors (Pousada 9). Other times, documents and government services provided in English are often translated poorly. From personal experience, the written driving exam in Puerto Rico comes in both English and Spanish, but, the English translations are incoherent, so much so that an English speaker with a weak grasp of the Spanish language would be better off taking the Spanish version.

Despite the prevalence of Spanish and the hindrance of English in bureaucratic matters, others feel that for Puerto Rico to develop a competitive workforce and promote a more progressive education, English should be taught and spoken more widely (Marquez); a shift that they argue would allow Puerto Ricans to have their voices heard especially by English-speaking American audiences. This in many ways resembles the argument made by Richard Rodriguez in *Aria*, which sees English as a way of connecting with a greater society (Rodriguez 34). Of course, Rodriguez believes that one can only accept English by abandoning their original language, which is a position that Rodriguez reiterates several times with this dogmatic, ‘matter-of-fact’ confidence in rebutting advocates of bilingual classroom pedagogies: “They likewise insist that bilingual instruction will give [immigrant or first-gen] students a sense of their identity apart from the English-speaking public. Behind this scheme gleams a bright promise for the alien child: one can become a public person while still remaining a private person. Who would not want to believe such an appealing idea? ... It is not enough to say that such schemes are foolish and certainly doomed,” (Rodriguez 39). Again, I am left with the same question: What makes

Rodriguez so certain these two identities are mutually exclusive? Rodriguez emphasizes that the loss of his Spanish as a necessary trade-off done to achieve this public identity: “If I rehearse these changes in my private life after my Americanization, it is finally to emphasize a public gain. The loss implies the gain. Once I learned the public language, it would never again be easy for me to hear intimate family voices” (Rodriguez 35). Here we must understand the context in which Rodriguez found himself. With no systems in place that would have encouraged or incentivized him to maintain his Spanish, and facing the trauma of discrimination against his parents for their heavily accented non-fluent English, one could argue that for Rodriguez and the American society he is referring to, this trade-off is inevitable. With that said, English education and proficiency in Puerto Rico should not be at the expense of Spanish, and to disagree more explicitly with Rodriguez, it doesn’t have to be. In Puerto Rico, bilingual people such as myself are constantly using English and Spanish to define both a local and a more Americanized identity.

Of course, there is an undeniable utility in being able to speak English in the modern era, especially now that English is becoming a ‘common tongue’ of sorts and English-speaking media is becoming digital and transmitted through media forms like Youtube, Instagram, and TikTok. But this does not mean that Puerto Ricans need to hand over their Spanish to become a part of this new community as Rodriguez suggests is the case with second generation immigrant children and this “mainstream” American community. Many Puerto Ricans have developed their proficiency in English as a result of exposure and attraction to American media and culture. For many bilingual Puerto Ricans who were raised in Spanish-speaking households, this process is facilitated by increased exposure to English both online and in academic and social spheres (Colón). Despite its limited resources, one way in which Puerto Rico has responded to this push

and pull between Spanish and English is through the use of a language that has been gaining much traction: *Spanglish*, an undefined hybrid language of English and Spanish, that relies on a decent level of proficiency in both languages.

From the perspective of someone born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, English has played a critical role in creating new language forms on the island. Many of the words that I use when speaking Spanish are a result of anglicisms that were created in Puerto Rico, many of which, have interestingly become new acquisitions to the global Spanish vernacular. Some include: *chequiar* (meaning “to check”), *internet* (meaning “internet”), *parking* (meaning “parking,” though *estacionamiento* is the traditional word that is also sometimes used), *conflei* (meaning “cornflakes”), *sanguich* (meaning “Sandwich”), and my favourite, *breakesito* (meaning “a little break”) often used in sentences like *dame un breakesito* meaning give me a break. Anglicisms, however, only scratch the surface; many components of ‘Spanglish,’ are completely discretionary – they take on the linguistic form of their speaker and in many ways are an extension of one’s own identity. For example, nearly all Puerto Ricans would know what *breakesito* or *sanguich* means but might not necessarily know English. Other Puerto Ricans, especially those who have been educated in private schools, tend to mesh perfectly grammatical English and Spanish together, which is a language that I commonly speak with my friends. For example, I might say: “Tengo que ir al grocery store, pero do me a favor, y deja la puerta unlocked, please and thank you.” This sentence translates to “I have to go to the grocery store, but do me a favor, and leave the door unlocked, please and thank you.”

Spanglish is interesting in that it very much feels like an authentically Puerto Rican language; in San Juan, even Sanjuaneros with very limited English will still often use English words, phrases, and anglicisms as if they are just as much a part of the Spanish language as any

other Spanish word. This gives Puerto Ricans the opportunity to incorporate English and its unique linguistic devices on their own terms, leading to more creative forms of speaking, and expression independent of American linguistic hegemony. Spanglish has also followed a similar trend as many other translingual languages, in that it is now becoming considered a more hip, cultured way of speaking and this is true in other emergent English hybrids globally. For example, the use of a hybrid Shona-English language in Zimbabwe has garnered such a reputation (Veit-Wild 516). Flora Veit-Wild, a professor in African Literature at Humboldt University, in her article, *Zimboldicious*, says that this Shona-English is seen by Zimbabwe's youth as a more globalized, modern way of talking that is linked to more affluent, urban spheres in Zimbabwe where bilingualism is more common. One of the phrases that Veit-Wild uses to describe this urban youth is "cosmopolitan in consciousness," meaning that this younger subset of the population is keen on connecting with broader cultural spheres (Veit-Wild 516).

This brings to light a fundamental component of translingual language: negotiation. As Suresh Canagarajah touches on in his essay *Translingual Practice*, translingual languages gain legitimacy and intelligibility as a result of negotiation and acceptance from the larger population (Canagarajah 151). To expect Puerto Ricans to abandon Spanish in order to connect with the greater English-speaking world would be an unfair negotiation, but to systematically expose Puerto Ricans to more English words and phrases through a linguistic liaison could be promising and encouraging of a more bilingual society. This is precisely the goal of a translingual education outlined by author and professor of English at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Jacqueline Jones Royster and English and politics professor John Trimbur from Emerson College: "to develop and broaden the repertoire of students' linguistic resources and to honor the resources of all language users. Thus, it is aligned with those forms of bilingual education that aim not to



replace knowledge of one language with another, but to build on students' existing language abilities, including the teaching of English as a second language" (Royster & Trimbur 308).

But this is of course, not without its limitations. To bring such a form of education to Puerto Rico would be ambitious, to say the least. In Puerto Rico, there is a shortage of English-speaking instructors, educational resources, and funding aimed at devising such an education. Most successful bilingual education programs have been implemented through expensive private school systems that are not accessible to the majority of Puerto Ricans (Colón). It also relies on the notion that Puerto Ricans will willingly negotiate such terms. In San Juan, teaching Puerto Rican and Nuyorican varieties of Spanglish in schools might garner more support than it would in rural towns and pueblos, where Puerto Ricans solely speak Spanish and would have to invest much more time and resources into promoting and providing such an education.

As was previously mentioned there is no clear answer to how English and Spanish should exist in Puerto Rico and the *dilemma* is one that of course goes far beyond Puerto Rico. Regardless, I believe that it is the Puerto Rican people's prerogative to decide their own linguistic fate. To assert English onto a population that is itself navigating the situation in real time would be an arrogant dismissal of the complexity of the issue -- one that seeks to understand how English and Spanish fit into Puerto Rican society in light of a contentious history of American colonialism. Coming from an Irish American family but being born and raised deep in the barrio of Santurce in San Juan, Spanglish has allowed me to come to terms with my own identity that at many points in my life felt mismatched and hard to define. And yet in some kind of miraculous fashion, the language I once resented has now become an integral part of me, one that unapologetically refuses to fade.

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