

# **THE SINGULARLY STRANGE STORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PUERTO RICO<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

The history of the English language in Puerto Rico is a decidedly peculiar one, characterized by incessant conflict and chaotic change. English has long been viewed on the island as both a tool of liberation and an instrument of oppression. Children are told from the earliest grades that English will be vital for their educational and professional advancement, while they are also cautioned that learning it too well may endanger their Puerto Rican identity. Fostering English is linked in the minds of many Puerto Ricans with assimilationism, while defending Spanish is the hallmark of nationalism. Consequently, overt popular support of English acquisition coexists with covert popular resistance, complicating even further the teaching task.

As is often the case in situations of language contact, attitudes towards the language have blurred together with attitudes towards the people who speak it and the government behind them. Despite the role of English as a language of wider communication on a global scale, in Puerto Rico it is most often associated with the United States and its policies. As a result, to study the history of English on the island is to study the history of Puerto Rico's uneasy relationship with the U. S. and its political, economic, and cultural implications.

In this paper, I will review the historical development of English on the island, from the earliest contact up to the present time. I will utilize historical and policy documents as well as

different studies which have been carried out regarding the use of English, its influence upon Puerto Rican Spanish, and popular attitudes towards its role in Puerto Rican society.

### **English in Puerto Rico prior to 1898**

When the Spanish colonized Boriken, as the Taino Indians called Puerto Rico, they brought with them the Spanish language which soon displaced the Arawakan dialect spoken by the indigenous population. Initially, before the rabidly genocidal policies of the conquistadores took their toll upon the Tainos, the Spanish and Taino languages coexisted. We know, for example, that in 1493 the Spanish soldier Juan González Ponce de León helped Capt. Juan Ponce de León converse with the Tainos, and he was not alone in this ability. However, by 1530, most of the Tainos had succumbed to the rigors of forced labor or had become fluent in Spanish. With the exception of well-documented loanwords referring to geographical place names, features of nature, and foods, the Taino language vanished along with most of its speakers (Álvarez Nazario 1991).

The early Spaniards, primarily from the southern part of Spain and the Canary Islands, brought their own particular dialect of Spanish to the island. Over the centuries, in the hands of the criollo population and with the added influence of the African slaves and their different languages, this southern-flavored Spanish evolved into the well-known Puerto Rican Spanish of today. While this is not the place to go into the particulars of the linguistic features of Puerto Rican Spanish, it is safe to say that it was sufficiently distinct from the Castilian dialect to provoke certain negative and disparaging comments both from the Spanish colonial powers (who should have known better) as well as the more ignorant American powers who came later.

During the Spanish colonial regime, Spanish was the uncontested language of the island, although there were speakers of other languages like French, Corsican, Russian, and even Chinese present in the population. English was originally spoken by only a tiny portion of the elite who engaged in international travel and diplomacy.

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Many people think that relations between the U.S. and Puerto Rico began in 1898; however, there was a long history of cross-influence. The earliest contacts go back to the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries and the struggle to colonize North America, in which English-speaking colonists were concentrated in the northern areas, while Spanish-speaking colonists took over the southern lands. During the 17th century, in particular, North American contrabanders prowled the waters of the Caribbean and had unofficial dealings with the island of Puerto Rico.

During the French Revolution of 1789, soon after the establishment of the United States as an independent nation, the Spanish government found its Antillean ports to be under attack by French corsairs. In order to obtain necessary goods, it was forced to open Cuban harbors to neutral ships. Many of these were from the U.S. While Puerto Rico was not officially included in the arrangement, Spanish diplomats in the U.S. took advantage of the opening and began to grant permits to U.S. merchants to export food and munitions to Puerto Rico (Santana 1972).

In 1796, Spain was involved in a war with England which severely interrupted trade in the Caribbean and eventually led to several attacks on Puerto Rico in 1797. (Interestingly enough, during these attacks primarily native-born Puerto Ricans, not Spanish soldiers, were involved in the defense of the island, evidence of a growing sense of nationality even at this early date.) The resulting lack of basic provisions led the Spanish crown to decree an opening of trade with neutral nations in the Atlantic. Of all the neutral nations, of course, the one which was most able to take advantage of the situation was the United States. As a consequence, active trading between the U.S. and Puerto Rico ensued, and from that moment on, the U.S. became an increasingly important element in the Puerto Rican economy.

Beginning in 1797, U.S. ships arrived in San Juan bearing gunpowder, grains, and other provisions in exchange for sugar, molasses, rum, coffee, tobacco, leather, and other tropical products (Fernández Méndez 1969). Many of these ships served as intermediaries among the European nations, bringing goods as well as communications. Spain was less than thrilled by these developments, and in 1799 revoked the earlier decree; however,

numerous special permits made it possible for some U.S. ships to continue trading with Puerto Rico.

In 1815 the Real Cédula de Gracias permitted Puerto Rico to sustain economic relations with countries other than Spain, and attention turned naturally to the United States. The Cédula provided for a 15% tax on imports from foreign nations, and U.S. boats had to pay an additional 8 reales per ton for entry into Puerto Rican harbors (Cruz Monclova 1969: 81). Throughout the 19th century, commercial contacts between Puerto Rico and the U.S. grew. By 1898, the U.S. had become the primary trading partner for the island.

These economic ties also brought cultural links. American consuls and their families could be found in every port on the island. Wealthy American merchants purchased haciendas and formed small English-speaking enclaves in the countryside. The embryonic but not insignificant ruling class of the island began to send its sons to the U.S. for higher education, rather than to the traditional sites in Spain, France, and Germany.

From another perspective, many Puerto Ricans exiled from the island by the Spanish throne for subversive activity ended up in New York City, from which they (along with their Cuban counterparts) organized political activity aimed at the liberation of the Spanish colonies in the Antilles. Small groups of Puerto Rican agricultural workers and cigar makers emigrated to Florida and the southern states to work during this period. Presumably, all encountered English and were influenced by the language.

Thus, we see that the initial contact between English and Spanish did not occur with the invasion of U.S. troops in 1898, but rather had its roots nearly a hundred years earlier.

### **English in Puerto Rico after 1898**

Once the U.S. took over Puerto Rico in 1898 under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, then the contact between the two languages abruptly intensified. At the time of the Spanish American War, Puerto Rico was just beginning to establish a school system, and illiteracy was high. The island had a population of about one million. Of these, 44,861 individuals (about 4%) were enrolled in 529 public schools and 26 private schools. Secondary education was unusual but could be obtained in Provincial Institutes or private

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high schools. Spanish was the medium of instruction at all levels of the school system (Cebollero 1945).

The military government installed under the command of General John Brooke was charged by the Carroll Commission of the U.S. Congress with the task of establishing universal, obligatory, and free education on the island. The recommendation was that the teachers be North Americans and that they teach in English (García Martínez 1976: 59). In 1899, General John Eaton, who had been Commissioner of Education in the U.S., arrived in Puerto Rico to take over educational affairs. His mission, quite overtly stated, was to promote Americanization via the English language. Among his proposals were the mandatory learning of English by all teachers, the preferential hiring of English-speaking teachers, and the examination of high school and normal school candidates in English.

Eaton resigned after only one year, but his replacement, Victor Clark, was of a like mind. He dismissed Puerto Rican Spanish as a "patois" and pushed for a total Americanization of the schools in order to inspire an "American spirit" among the "passive and malleable" teachers and students. His fear was that if a deliberate plan of Americanization were not followed, then the French and Spanish models of education current on the island prior to U.S. occupation would prevail, and pro-U.S. sympathies would diminish. Not surprisingly, during these first two years, there was considerable opposition to the American schools. Various insular commissions were sent to Washington to bring about an end to the military regime and its proposed school system.

In 1900, the Foraker Act was passed which established a civil government on the island and created the Department of Public Instruction as regent of education at all levels (Mellado Parsons 1979:26). A long string of contradictory language policies ensued as a result. We will look at each in turn.

The first Commissioner of Education was Martin Brumbaugh, who recognized that it would not be a simple matter to impose English when the national vernacular was Spanish. His policy was to continue the teaching of Spanish while extending the English language until it became the commercial and domestic language of the island. In his Annual Report (1901: 65), he predicted (erroneously, as we now know) that the process in Puerto Rico would take much less time than it had in earlier acquisitions of Spanish-

