

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

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### **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

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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 We build on a previous unpublished study in which we asked non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) of English to edit texts with lexical, grammatical, and inflectional differences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)

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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

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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

