

English Language And The Puerto Rican Elites Education Essay

While the influence of English is present, to some degree, in all parts of Spanish-speaking America, Puerto Rico is unique as the island has two official languages: English and Spanish (Nash p. 223). Despite the equal legal status of these languages, the English language is often seen as a symbol of power and dominance, among the Puerto Rican elites (Clachar p. 72). Consequently, their level of English proficiency has played a role in the development of social inequality through which the Puerto Rican upper and upper-middle-classes have actively shaped and re-shaped their elite status (Clachar p. 72). As a result, the question arises whether speakers from higher social classes in Puerto Rico use more English than speakers from lower social classes. In accordance to the above mentioned endorsement of English as a power symbol and tool to reshape social hierarchy, this essay hypothesizes that higher social classes indeed use more English than lower social classes.

In answering the research question, a framework will be used in which identity negotiation takes up the central point. By using identity negotiation as a base, this essay will further elaborate on the different roles language policies, education and migration play in the use of English among the Puerto Rican elites.

Research for this essay is based on information from four articles found in the Omega database (see bibliography), whereby Erna Kerkhof's research on 'The Myth of the Dumb Puerto Rican: Circular Migration and Language Struggle in Puerto Rico' served as foundation. The other sources were summarized and the different consensuses compared to one another. Sufficient primary source material was found in the secondary sources, consequently, no separate primary sources were used for this essay.

As for the essay's built-up, the first subheading 'Language Struggles and the Elites' analyzes the role of the elites in Puerto Rico's language planning process across time, specifically the elite's influence in education philosophies. It starts off with a short history of America's influence on Puerto Rican identity and education, then it takes a look at how a language struggle is closely related to the viewpoints of political movements and nationalism. The second subheading 'Impact of Language Policy on Public and Private Education' is concerned with the role of education and what authority the language planning process has on public and private education. The influence of the language planning process will be shown with the help of a comparison between the language policies in private schools and public ones, resulting in a preliminary conclusion on the different language preferences among social classes.

The third subheading 'Language Development, Economy and Migration' elaborates on migration dynamics and the economy in Puerto Rico and how these notions put pressure on the social class system and language use. Important factors put forward here are the presence of return immigrants on the island and ties with America. Finally, based on the arguments discussed in the previous

subheadings, the conclusion answers to the question with which the essay began and makes a final evaluation on the higher social classes' English language use compared to the language use of lower social classes and how this language use is related to identity negotiation.

Language Struggles and the Elites

Puerto Rico became an American territory in 1898, after four centuries serving as a strategic outpost of the Spanish Empire (Kerkhof p. 259). After the American invasion, the Spanish language became a pillar of Puerto Rican identity, because Puerto Ricans saw, and to some extent still see, themselves as separate from Americans (Kerkhof p. 259). Despite the islanders preference for Spanish, a public school system was set up by the Americans where English served as the language of instruction (Kerkhof p. 259). This school system and policy was heavily criticized by Puerto Rican educators, teachers and politicians (Kerkhof p. 259). During the decades subsequent to the American invasion, language policies in Puerto Rican schools were altered numerous times, often in favor of Spanish which was pressed upon by the elites (Kerkhof p. 259). Spanish officially became the language of instruction at every level of Puerto Rican public education in 1949 (Kerkhof p. 259). Nevertheless, stories from elderly people advocate that English as an instruction language had been discarded long before that (Kerkhof p. 259).

This change to Spanish was not the only language struggle Puerto Rico would encounter. The post-1949 period saw three more developments: the 'bilingualization of the public education, the explosion of private schools, and the 'politicization of the language as writers and intellectuals (Kerkhof p. 261)'. The first two issues will be addressed in more detail later in the essay. The final development springs from the rivalry between political parties: PPD (Partido Popular Democrático) who aims for Puerto Rican autonomy, PNP (Partido Nuevo Progresista) who spires U.S. statehood and PIP (Partido Independista Puertorriqueño) who advocates sovereignty. These parties are constantly fighting about Puerto Rico's language policy. The PNP focuses on Puerto Rico as being bilingual, while the PPD and PIP want to present Puerto Rico as monolingual, emphasizing on Spanish (Kerkhof p. 261).

By the 1990s, the power struggle between these parties resulted in two language laws. The first, supported by the PPD and PIP, stated Spanish as the official language of Puerto Rico, which made the use of Spanish obligatory in all government and commercial institutions on the island (Kerkhof p. 261). However, in 1992, this law was abolished, after a victory of the PNP, instead both Spanish and English are recognized as official languages up until this day (Kerkhof p. 261).

But what makes this political tug-of-war game so relevant to the elite's use of the English language?. Metaphorically speaking, languages can rally people for political purposes. In Puerto Rico, the PPD and PIP are preferred parties among the higher social classes (Kerkhof p. 274). Both these parties stand for a defense of Spanish and strong nationalism. This strong nationalism is connected with an image of determined and victorious people, because by defending Spanish, the Puerto Ricans have triumphed over the most powerful country in the world: The United States (Kerkhof p. 274). Thus, the pro-Spanish viewpoint is seen as highly attractive by the elites. Moreover, among the elites, the imposition of English on the island's population is considered as an unashamed case of linguistic imperialism (Clachar p. 71). Therefore, the Spanish language is also being used as a political marker in their standpoint to ties with the American mainland, a notion which will return in the subheading on migration (Kerkhof p. 274).

Against this political background, the elites have embraced Spanish as the most important source from which to negotiate identity stories from (Kerkhof p. 275). In a way, Spanish transcends political differences. A great example of this view is the “Committee of the People in Defense of Spanish”. This movement’s leadership contains PIP and PPD politicians and intellectuals leading cultural institutions, thus both groups are part of the higher social class (Kerkhof p. 275). The efforts of this movement to promote Spanish in everyday Puerto Rican life are rooted in strong cultural nationalism, which builds on the tradition of the victorious language struggle in public education which will be discussed in the later on (Kerkhof p. 275).

Overall, by taking these political implications into account, it is not as straightforward to say that higher social classes on Puerto Rico speak a lot of English, solely because of prestige and social hierarchy matters. Among the elites, the English language is considered part of linguistic imperialism, something which has a strong negative connotation. Moreover, as the elites support pro-Spanish political movements they are forced to negotiate an identity which condemns the English language, thus speaking English would then harm one’s Puerto Rican identity shaping. In the end, this notion is not without problems, which will be made clear in the next subheading on education.

Impact of Language Policy on Public and Private Education

In 1949, Spanish had become the official language of instruction in schools; a victory attributed to the PDD (Kerkhof p. 268). Still, English language classes had to be taught as an obligatory subject in all schools from the first grade up until university level (Nash p. 223). At the start, there were no guidelines for teaching in Spanish, consequently teachers taught Spanish as they saw fit (Kerkhof p. 268). This often resulted in a view where English and Spanish were seen as opposites. For example, a teacher might highlight the importance of Spanish in the daily English class, thus subverting the English language (Kerkhof p. 268).

Consequently, the elite movement for reinstating Spanish as the language of instruction in public education, turned into a movement against the teaching of English in Puerto Rico’s schools, according to Edith Algren de Gutiérrez who analyzed the language policy in public schools during the 1898-1949 period (Kerkhof p. 268). During that time, teaching in English became associated with ‘linguistically crippled individuals (Kerkhof p. 268)’. Fascinatingly, Gutiérrez included in her observations the different social class interests in the restriction of English (Kerkhof p. 269).

Gutiérrez’ observations put forward one of the paradoxes of Spanish-based Puerto Rican identity negotiation among the higher social classes. In the post-1949 period, most parents who can afford it have enrolled their children into private schools where English was, and in some cases still is, the language of instruction (Kerkhof p. 269). However, the higher social class that enrolls its children into private schools also produces the leading characters in the Puerto Rican Spanish only political movement (Kerkhof p. 269). Before addressing this argument in more detail, it is helpful to have a closer look at the development of public and private education on the island, as it is related to the elite’s choice of English education for their children.

The increase in private education was mainly a response to the worsening of public education. From the 1950s onwards, the large increase in school enrollment, connected to a scarcity of schools, resources, qualified instructors, and the shortage of a clear educational philosophy led to an

'education crisis' (Kerkhof p. 269). Consequently, as public education deteriorated, people from all different classes started sending their children to private schools, because of the better quality of education those schools offered (Kerkhof p. 269).

One can also not exclude the role of the economy in the growth of private education. The post World War II economic upturn attracted many non-Puerto Ricans, often on temporary basis, to Puerto Rico (Kerkhof p. 269). Foreign couples as well as Puerto Ricans who had married a foreigner frequently favored schools where English was the language of instruction (Kerkhof p. 269). On the whole, the higher social classes' choice to put their children in private schools was not related to the issue of prestige, it was only focused on the higher quality of education offered at private schools (Kerkhof p. 269).

The fast growth of private education ran parallel to the vanishing of English as the language of instruction in public schools (Kerkhof p. 269). It can be said that the choice to use Spanish as instruction language was itself seen as worsening the public schools' quality, especially lower and middle class parents attributed much value to the English language (Kerkhof p. 269). Writer Ana Lydia Vega supports this argument. She was sent to an English Catholic elementary school run by Irish-American nuns in 1952 (Kerkhof p. 270). The decision to send her to this school was not inspired by religious feelings, her father was anti-clerical, but by the certainty that she had to learn the English language (Kerkhof p. 270). Delgado Cintrón, an upper class law specialist, who was one of the instigators of the 1991 law that declared Spanish the only official language, also stresses on the importance of learning English for any individual (Kerkhof p. 275). According to Cintrón, the actual struggle of the elite is not against English, but against the notion called bilingualism (Kerkhof p. 275). Teaching both languages would deprive Puerto Rican children from any language. They would become 'zero lingual' which harms the by elites much beloved Puerto Rican identity negotiation (Kerkhof p. 275).

Still, the quality difference between public and private education in addition to the hostility towards bilingualism seem to be superficial reasons as to why upper class parents send their children to schools where English is the instruction language, despite their support for the pro-Spanish political parties. Upper class parents' arguments put forward for this paradox usually contain links to religious preferability and globalization (Kerkhof p. 273). For example, the English only school in question was the only one in the region with a non-religious educational philosophy, and in a globalizing world it is important to learn English well (Kerkhof p. 273).

Nonetheless, one still cannot draw the conclusion that higher social classes speak more English than lower social classes, because of the now apparent ambivalent relation the higher social classes have with English. E.g. they learn English in school, but they are limited in their use of it because of political reasons. Over time, lower social classes have become aware of the elites' difficult language situation. During demonstrations regarding language policies and education, working class people critically commented on pro-Spanish political parties, such as the PIP and how social class distinctions linguistically divide the island (Kerkhof p. 273). E.g. people would yell "Their children go to private schools, and then they go to the United States to study. They all speak English (Kerkhof p. 273)".

In general, upper class people with a private school upbringing might in theory be more knowledgeable about the English language, but in practice they will probably refrain from using it too often as it is associated with the 'harmful' notion of bilingualism next to the previously mentioned idea of English linguistic imperialism. In comparison, lower class people do not consider the notion of

bilingualism as harmful, thus they are sooner encouraged to use English in everyday life. In most cases, their economic prosperity relies on the use of English, something which is relevant to the next subheading on migration.

Language Development, Economy and Migration

Noticeably, not one of the numerous language policies mentions migration, although it is a key issue in Puerto Rican identity negotiation. From the 1960s onwards, migrants, who bring the language and culture of the American mainland with them, started to return to the island in numbers that virtually exceeded those of migration to the mainland (Nash p. 223). An important part of this group were the Newyorricans (New York Puerto Ricans) who brought with them the language and culture of Spanish Harlem (Nash p. 223). Consequently, in the urban areas of Puerto Rico, where return immigrants play an important role in economic life, English is often used or the English-Spanish hybrid version called Spanglish (Nash p. 223).

However, Spanglish was not accepted by island-raised Puerto Ricans. In the 1970s, the use of English on the streets made Newyorricans suspects in the eyes of the police, because the return immigrant group was associated with drugs (Kerkhof p. 264). Moreover, the difference in communication styles between the island-raised Puerto Ricans and return immigrants stirred up an array of feelings about language and identity among all social classes. For example, island-raised teachers felt uncomfortable about their English when they encountered their mainland-raised colleagues, thus they started to limited their English use (Kerkhof p. 265). Moreover, the island-based elites refrained from the Newyorricans communication style, because it was too open (Kerkhof p. 265). Saying things straight out was a distinctive sign of being ill-bred in the eyes of the upper-class (Kerkhof p. 265)

Despite these hostilities towards immigrant English use, the migrant flow did influence the presence of English on the street, in commercials, product names, on cable television, in newspapers, magazines, and all activities and domains related to tourism (Pousada p. 3). Tourism is important to take into account here, because lower classes are usually the source and direct link of communication with tourists (Pousada p. 3). Thus, even when upper class people hold a grudge against English, lower class workers such as vendors, taxi drivers, and service personnel have to be active agents in the use of the English language on the island in order to keep the economy running (Pousada p. 3)

This more economic point of view is of course linked to the socioeconomic and political awareness of the importance of ties with Americans. On the island, American companies own and control a uneven share of the manufacturing economy in a predominantly Spanish mother tongue labor force (Kerkhof p. 262) E.g. a survey of technical professionals discovered that English is not often used on a one-to-one basis with co-workers and office staff, but it is regularly used with bosses, management staff, and clients (Clachar p. 88). This context related use of English put prestige and status on the language according to most Puerto Ricans, something which was put forward in the introduction (Clachar p. 72). After all, English is the language of successful migration, business, industry, science and technology, thus excluding the language' political aspect (Clachar p. 72). This exclusion of the political factor can also be found in professional middle class return immigrants their point of view regarding the instruction language in schools. Their children go to private schools and the majority of parents vote for a Spanish-only party, but it is simply beyond question that one should learn English (Kerkhof p.

283). It is seen as an important part of one's general education, because the expectation is often that their children will go to an American university (Kerkhof p. 283). In general, many upper class migrants consider the access to the non-Hispanic world, which English gave them as enriching (Kerkhof p. 283).

Accordingly, it is not possible to see the Puerto Rican elite as one big homogenous block. There are several different factions divided under labels such as upper class migrant, upper class island-based lawyer or upper class migrant politician. Therefore, the use of English among the elites is almost impossible to describe in much detail, because all factions have different ways of reasoning about the English language use. This will be further elaborated on in the conclusion below.

Conclusion

Answering the question whether or not higher social classes speak more English than lower social classes is more difficult to answer than one thinks. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that English is more often used among the elites, because of its high prestige and dominance factors is refuted. In most cases, elites' use of English is based on necessity. E.g Puerto Rico's better education system is given in English. Where it all comes down to is the elite's negotiation of identities. In other words, the elites' language choice puts emphasis on the fact that their identities are relational, dynamic and multidimensional, which is evidently the same in all social classes

The official shift to Spanish in 1949 marked the start of the identification of the Spanish language with Puerto Rican identity. Cultural nationalism was heavily promoted, among the local elites and speaking Spanish became a symbol of the struggle against the "Americanization" process. Thus, some members of the elites made the choice to identify themselves with Pro-Spanish ideology, thus limiting their English language use. However, this resulted in an education paradox in which higher social class children attend private schools where English is the language of instruction, while clashing with political ideologies

In addition, members of the upper class migrant group, and upper and middle class people who heavily depend on ties with America chose to distinguish themselves by stating the importance of English in one's upbringing, thus they often use English as part of their identity negotiation.

In the end, answering the research question with a firm yes or no is impossible, because the answer is too closely connected to personal viewpoints. The English language use of the Puerto Rican elites involves personal choices. Choices concerning political preferences, economic background, access to social networks etcetera. Either way, the Puerto Rican elites, just as in all other social classes, always acknowledge their local, situated interactions with others, while creating their language influenced identities. Thus, some upper class members will indeed use more English than members from the lower classes, but it can also be turned around, once again, depending on the context related language choices higher social class members make.

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