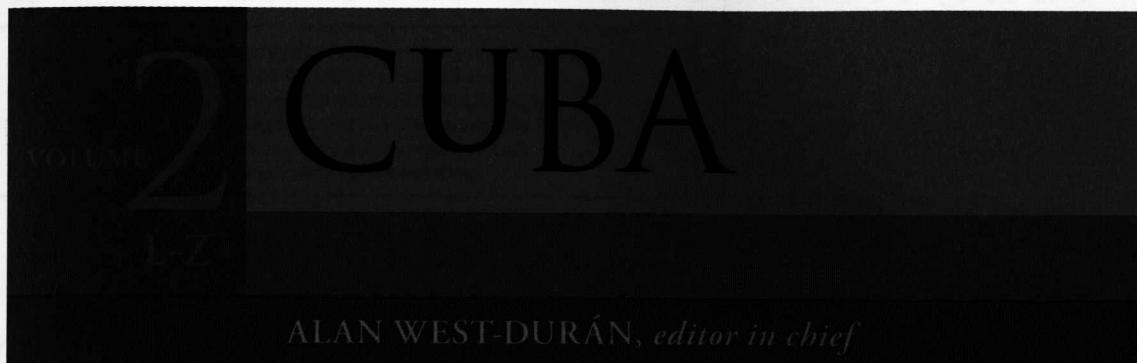


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SP/1/2008

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Alan West-Durán, editor in chief.
v. cm. -- (Scribner world scholar series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-684-31681-9 (set : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-684-31681-1 (set: alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-684-31682-6 (v. 1: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-684-31682-X (v. 1: alk. paper)
[etc.]
1. Cuba. I. West, Alan, 1953-
F1758.C9485 2012
972.91--dc22

2011012007

Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

ISBN-13: 978-0-6843-1681-9 (set) ISBN-10: 0-6843-1681-1 (set)
ISBN-13: 978-0-6843-1682-6 (vol. 1) ISBN-10: 0-6843-1682-X (vol. 1)
ISBN-13: 978-0-6843-1683-3 (vol. 2) ISBN-10: 0-6843-1683-8 (vol. 2)

This title will also be available as an e-book.
ISBN-13: 978-0-6843-1684-0 ISBN-10: 0-6843-1684-6
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CUSTOM GRAPHICS

XNR Productions, Inc.

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PAGE DESIGN

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LANGUAGE: SPANISH

John M. Lipski

Overview of the Spanish language in Cuba, including the formation of the Cuban dialects of Spanish.

With a population of roughly 12 million, Cuba ranks around tenth place among the world's most populous Spanish-speaking nations (eleventh if the United States is taken into consideration). Even taking into account the several million more Cubans and their Spanish-speaking descendants living outside of Cuba, speakers of Cuban Spanish represent less than 5 percent of the world's more than 400 million native Spanish speakers. Within the Spanish-speaking world, however, Cuban Spanish has played a much larger role than these numbers suggest, due to the prominence of Cuban writers, teachers, artists, athletes, activists, and politicians, who for over a century and a half have placed Cuban varieties of Spanish before a global audience. Issuing from the largest of the Antilles, the Spanish of Cuba has several unique characteristics, and at the same time it represents a dialect cluster embracing the Caribbean basin and also encompassing—due to historical settlement patterns—the Canary Islands and southwestern Spain. Outside of Cuba there are substantial numbers of Cuban Spanish speakers in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Panama, Mexico, and Spain, but expatriate Cuban Spanish has received the greatest attention in the United States, where the majority of an estimated 1.5 million Cuban Americans continue in the early 2010s to use the language in their public and private lives.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPANISH IN CUBA

The Spanish language has been spoken in Cuba since the early sixteenth century, and since then it has undergone many changes, cycling in and out of the linguistic mainstream as Cuba's fortunes waxed and waned. Although the first permanent Spanish settlements were in eastern Cuba, it was Havana that became the most important city, due largely to

colonial trade routes that dictated that ships leaving Spanish America for Spain exit via the northern Caribbean, with Havana being the final port of call before crossing the Atlantic. Deprived of officially sanctioned commercial ties with Spain, eastern Cuba often turned to contraband for its economic support, and linguistic and commercial ties with other Caribbean islands were more significant than contacts with Havana. The results are noticeable in contemporary Cuban Spanish, where the speech of the *Palestinos* (Palestinians, the modern term for Cubans from the easternmost provinces, because “Palestinians come from the East”) is more similar to Dominican and Puerto Rican Spanish than to Havana's, in both vocabulary and intonation.

After Spain expanded its trade routes, Havana declined in importance and Cuban Spanish was relegated to a linguistic backwater through the end of the eighteenth century. With the Haitian revolution of the 1790s and the collapse of the French sugar-producing colony of Saint-Domingue, the Cuban sugar industry enjoyed a meteoric upsurge; later, the economy was further supplemented by commercial tobacco production. Following the Spanish-American War of 1898 and continuing through the Revolution of 1959, the United States was the largest external economic force in Cuba. Ownership of many Cuban companies by North Americans, large communities of expatriate Americans in Cuba, and frequent visits to Cuba by American tourists in the first half of the twentieth century brought many Cubans into close contact with English, particularly English terminology of sports and consumer goods. After the Revolution, Cuba's economic domination by the United States was replaced by the patronage of the Soviet Union. Thousands of Cubans studied in Eastern bloc nations, including Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union, but even the obligatory teaching of Russian in Cuban schools resulted in almost no lexical borrowings or other imprints on Cuban Spanish. As of the early 2010s, the Cuban economy is subsidized by the government of Venezuela, where a type of Caribbean Spanish not unlike that of Cuba is spoken. Because this economic support does not involve large-scale displacements of either Cubans or Venezuelans, it is unlikely that Venezuelan Spanish will have any significant impact in Cuba.

Cuban Spanish was already well developed by the end of the nineteenth century, despite continued immigration from Spain, but it was during the Republican period (1902–1959) that the dialectal varieties of the newly independent nation were consolidated. The increased exposure to other varieties of Spanish occasioned by improved travel, educational systems, and mass media created a greater awareness among Cubans of the peculiarities of their forms of Spanish. During this period numerous Cuban scholars published articles and monographs on Cuban Spanish, and linguistics and philology were taught at Cuban universities, all of which underscored the fact that Cuban Spanish

■ See also

Education: Colonial Period

Education: Republican Period

Governance and Contestation: Colonial Period

was not simply a collection of immigrants' leftovers but rather a cohesive dialect cluster in its own right. By the time of the 1959 revolution, Cuban Spanish had taken its place among the icons of Cuban identity that were radically transformed in the ensuing years.

A large proportion of the early colonists in the Spanish Caribbean were from southern Spain, particularly Andalusia, but the two regions of Spain that supplied the largest number of immigrants to Cuba in the final century and a half of colonization were Galicia, in northwestern Spain, and the Canary Islands. Cubans began to refer to all Spaniards from the peninsula as *gallegos* (Galicians) and to the Canary Islanders as *isleños* (islanders). At the time of the Spanish-American War of 1898, almost half the white Cuban population had been born somewhere in Spain. Impressionistically, Cuban Spanish bears little resemblance to the Spanish dialect of Galicia, whereas the similarities with Canary Spanish are so striking that some observers confuse Cubans and Canary Islanders based on their speech. The congruence was enhanced by the massive emigration of Canary Islanders to Cuba in the early twentieth century; their linguistic presence is still noticeable a century later. In addition to overall patterns of pronunciation and grammar, one word that links Cuba to the Canary Islands is *guagua* (bus). Many Canary Islanders believe that this word was borrowed from Cuba, but given the presence of the term in other areas where Canary Islanders were once prominent (e.g., southeastern Louisiana, Equatorial Guinea), the opposite transfer is more likely.

When Spaniards first landed in Cuba, the island had a considerable indigenous population, mostly Arawak, with some Siboney and Taíno, but these groups left little imprint on Cuban Spanish except for numerous place-names and words that made their way from the Caribbean islands into general Latin American and even world Spanish: *batey* (plantation, yard), *conuco* (small farm), *bohío* (rustic hut), *aji* (pepper), and *huracán* (hurricane). The primary non-Hispanic linguistic influences on Cuban Spanish came from Africa and from Afro-Caribbean languages, then from China, and finally from the United States.

AFRICAN INFLUENCES IN CUBAN SPANISH

Although small numbers of sub-Saharan Africans were present in Cuba from the earliest colonial period, the strong African linguistic and cultural presence that characterizes modern Cuba only began toward the end of the eighteenth century. During most of the eighteenth century Cuba remained a neglected although not impoverished colony. The expansion of trade routes throughout the Caribbean, together with the reduced importance of the colonial treasure fleets, deprived Havana of much of its former strategic importance. Although small amounts of sugar were grown in Cuba, no Spanish-American colony could compete with the massive sugar production of the French colony Saint-Domingue (which

eventually became Haiti). As a consequence of the Haitian revolution beginning in 1791, the world's largest source of sugar disappeared almost overnight. Many French planters escaped to Cuba, and the rapid increase in world sugar prices resulted in a frenzied conversion of all available land in Cuba to sugar cultivation. To meet the skyrocketing labor demands, Cubans began to import African slaves and nominally free workers on a scale never before seen in the Spanish Caribbean. Of the estimated 750,000 to 1.2 million enslaved Africans taken to colonial Cuba, nearly 86 percent arrived during the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, African slaves represented as much as 40 percent of the total Cuban population. If to this figure is added the large free black population, Africans and Afro-Hispanics made up well over half the Cuban population for much of the nineteenth century. The demographic distribution was not even; in the larger cities, the population was predominantly of Spanish origin, whereas in rural sugar-growing areas, the Afro-Hispanic population was in the majority.

Natives of Africa who spoke little or no Spanish were known by the term *bozal*, a Spanish word originally referring to the muzzle placed over the mouth of untamed dogs and horses and eventually to the savage beasts themselves. For much of the nineteenth century, African-born *bozales* significantly outnumbered native speakers of Spanish in many parts of Cuba, especially in rural sugar-growing areas, and they frequently communicated with one another and with overseers and other plantation workers in partially acquired Spanish. *Bozal* Spanish was familiar to most Cubans well into the twentieth century, either from firsthand experience or from the numerous imitations of *bozal* speech found in popular skits, stories, novels, and songs. With the advent of phonograph recordings, Afro-Cuban artists such as Ignacio Villa (Bola de Nieve, 1911–1971), Miguelito Valdés (1912–1978), and Celia Cruz (1924–2003) recorded popular songs using *bozal* language, and these imitations survived into the era of radio broadcasting, by which time true African-born *bozales* were exceedingly scarce. There is an ongoing debate as to whether Afro-Cuban *bozal* Spanish ever coalesced into a natively spoken and transgenerationally transmitted creole language with consistent grammatical features rather than the haphazard jumble of individual learners' approximations to Spanish. Although the demographics of rural Cuba were propitious for creolization in the early nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery in the second half of the century and the rapid incorporation of Afro-Cubans into Spanish-speaking society make it unlikely that a creolized *bozal* language lasted more than a generation, if indeed any such creolization ever took place. Some of the more common traits of nineteenth-century Cuban *bozal* Spanish include:

invariant copular verb *son* (be): “*¿nuté son flancé, nuté son flancé? Si nuté son flancé, nuté son man picalo, mandito, traindó?*” (“are you a Frenchman? If you are a Frenchman, you are a damned scoundrel, a traitor” [“Proclama que en un cabildo de negros congos” c. 1808]);

invariant third-person singular (and sometimes) plural pronoun *elle/nelle* instead of Spanish *él* (he) and *ella* (she): “*Mufieco con píritu de muerto muchacho, que nelle metía dientro*” (“a doll with spirits of the dead inside, that she put inside” [Cabrera p. 492]);

invariant verbs based on the third-person singular: “*Tú son bueno y callao, yo va a contá a ti una cosa*” (“you are good and discreet, I'm going to tell you something” [Barnet p. 158]);

in some instances, verbs based on *ta* + verb stem: “*Changó ta vení con el machete en la mano*” (“Changó is coming with his machete in his hand” [Cruz 1974, p. x]); occasional double negation, that is, placing *no* both before and after the verb: “*No é mío, no*” (“it's not mine”).

These traits were not shared by all Afro-Cuban *bozales*, but they were not simply figments of (white authors') literary imagination either, because some of these elements can still be found in the speech of elderly Afro-Cubans in remote rural areas (Ortiz López), in the ritual chants of the *palo mayombe* cults (Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler), and in the trance-speech of *Santería* initiates who appear to be channeling the spirits of their *bozal* ancestors (Castellanos).

In addition to the residual presence of *bozal* Spanish in Afro-Cuban rituals, several Afro-Cuban lexical items have entered the general vocabulary; these include *chévere* (wonderful), *asere* (friend, buddy), *babalao* (Afro-Cuban priest), and *orishá* (African deity). The rites and practices of Afro-Cuban religions and secret societies, including *Santería* (Yoruba language), *Palo Mayombe* (Kikongo language), and *Abakuá* (Efik language), have contributed to the passive vocabulary of many Cubans, including nonparticipants in these rituals.

OTHER CARIBBEAN LANGUAGES IN CUBA

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, when African slavery was abolished in Cuba, immigrants from other Caribbean islands arrived in eastern and central Cuba in large numbers, mostly to work on sugar plantations and other agricultural enterprises. Nearly all of these workers spoke creole languages derived from contacts between European and African languages, languages with similar grammatical structures but with words derived from former colonial speech. In the nineteenth century, many

laborers were imported from the Dutch-held Caribbean island of Curaçao, where the Afro-Hispanic creole language Papiamentu is spoken. This language bears enough similarity to Afro-Cuban *bozal* speech that some Cubans thought that Papiamentu was simply *español arañaño* (tattered Spanish)—a viewpoint first offered by the Czech missionary Michael Joannes Alexius Schabel in 1704—and speakers of what was obviously a mixture of Papiamentu and Spanish appear in nineteenth-century Cuban literature simply as *bozales*. Some Papiamentu words made their way into the Afro-Cuban lexicon and still persist among some elderly Afro-Cubans; these include *agué* (today), *yio* (son, daughter), and *aguora* (now).

The Haitian presence in eastern Cuba was once considerable, and elderly speakers of Haitian Creole can still be found in this region. Songs sung in *kreyòl* form part of the *tumba francesa* tradition among various Cuban groups of Haitian descent (Alén Rodríguez). Jamaican workers speaking creole English arrived in large numbers to work on sugar plantations; they figure prominently in the first novel of Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), *Écue-yamba-ó* (1933). Workers from Barbados settled in coastal regions such as Baraguá, where Afro-Antillean carnival continues to be celebrated, and creole English interacts with Cuban Spanish.

CHINESE INFLUENCE ON CUBAN SPANISH

Between the middle of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, Cuba received more than 100,000 Chinese immigrants. The first arrivals were a response to the abolition of African slavery and the consequent demands for a replacement labor force, and Chinese workers often worked alongside former African slaves, some of whom continued to speak *bozal* Spanish. In time, an identifiable Cuban Chinese community arose, maintaining the Chinese language and culture while also speaking Spanish and participating in the Cuban lifestyle. The main cultural traces of the Chinese are found in a Cuban variant of the numbers game known as the *charada china*. Awareness of many Chinese lexical items also reached the general Cuban population, although few non-Chinese Cubans actively employed these words.

ENGLISH INFLUENCE ON CUBAN SPANISH

Despite the geographical proximity of Cuba to the United States and the strong cultural and commercial ties between the two countries, stretching from the second half of the nineteenth century through the first years of the Cuban Revolution, the English language has had very little impact on Cuban Spanish. In addition to the lexical anglicisms found throughout the Spanish-speaking world—including *chequear* (to check), *parquear* (to park), and *lonche* (lunch, especially fast food)—there are only a few uniquely Cuban words derived from English. These include *blumeres bloomers* (woman's panties) and the now obsolete

fotingo, *Ford* + the diminutive suffix *-ingo* (old dilapidated vehicle). Following the 1959 revolution, the public use of anglicisms was strongly discouraged if not outright prohibited in Cuba. An apparent exception is the terminology associated with baseball, Fidel Castro's favorite sport; Cuban sports announcers continue to employ (with Spanish pronunciation) words such as *left fielder*, *shortstop*, and *strike* and *foul*. One possible consequence of the shift in attitudes toward anglicisms is the Cuban pronunciation of the English expression *o.k.*, once heard as *okey*, reflecting English pronunciation, and now as *oká*, the latter being a spelling pronunciation of the letters *o* and *k*.

FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY CUBAN SPANISH

Although Cubans themselves distinguish several regional and social varieties of Spanish, most outside observers fail to note these nuances. Speech traits common to all Cuban speakers include:

Syllable- and word-final *-s* is aspirated (pronounced like *h*) or eliminated altogether, except in the most formal recitation style. This makes *Los Estados Unidos* (the United States) sound like *Loh Ehtadob Unido*.

In Havana and the rest of western Cuba, *-r* (and sometimes *-l*) before consonants is often converted to a copy of the following consonant; thus *porque* (because) emerges as *pogque*, *puerta* (door) as *puetta*, and *algo* (something) as *aggo*. In central and eastern Cuba it is not uncommon for *-r* to be pronounced as *-l* in these same contexts, especially in vernacular speech, much as occurs in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This lateralization of *-l* is not regarded favorably in western Cuba, whereas the geminated pronunciation of *-r* and *-l* often passes unnoticed in casual speech.

Word-final *-n* is given a velar pronunciation like English *-ng* in *sing*; this occurs throughout Cuba and in virtually all styles and settings, and carries no negative connotation.

In terms of grammar, Cuban Spanish shares with its neighboring Caribbean dialects the practice of forming questions without interchanging the subject and the verb, normally when the subject is a pronoun: *¿qué tú quieres?* (what do you want?) instead of *¿qué quieres tú?*

Frequent in Cuban Spanish is the combination of preposition + noun or pronoun + verbal infinitive in combinations where a conjugated subjunctive form would occur in most other dialects of Spanish: *Eso sucedió antes de yo llegar aquí* [antes de

que yo llegara ...] (that happened before I arrived here); *para tú entender esto tienes que practicar más [para que tú entiendas ...]* (for you to understand this you have to practice more). This is a regional trait found elsewhere in the Caribbean and in some parts of South America and occurs in all speech styles.

Cuban Spanish contains a number of unique lexical items not found elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking world or endowed with different meanings in Cuba. A small sampling of quintessentially Cuban words includes *chucbo* (light switch), *fruta bomba* (papaya), *jimaguas* (twins), and *yuma* (United States, North American).

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SHIFTS IN POST-1959 CUBA

The Cuban Revolution yielded significant shifts in sociolinguistic attitudes toward varieties of Spanish. Cuban socialism resulted in the dissolution of obvious mechanisms favoring the speech of privileged groups such as private clubs and schools and expanded educational programs and literacy campaigns in formerly marginalized areas brought ever larger numbers of Cubans into the linguistic mainstream. The formerly frequent practice of emulating peninsular Spanish speech in schools (often staffed by nuns from Spain) gave way to a greater emphasis on more naturalistic Cuban Spanish, and avowed solidarity with revolutionary principles included avoidance of speech patterns felt to reflect elitist sympathies. Although Cuban Spanish always preferred the familiar pronoun *tú* (you) over the more formal *usted*, in contemporary Cuban Spanish *usted* is increasingly rare, as are address forms such as *señor* (sir) and *señora* (ma'am) instead of *compañero*/*compañera* (comrade).

Changing attitudes toward popular speech patterns are also reflected in radio and television broadcasting in Cuba. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, radio and television announcers in Cuba routinely employed a highly artificial diction that bore little resemblance to spoken Cuban Spanish, particularly as regards the full pronunciation of all instances of syllable- and word-final */s/, /t/, and /θ/*. Moreover, the speech of educated natives of Havana was implicitly considered to be the best Cuban Spanish, although many Cubans were aware that all Caribbean varieties of Spanish often were regarded with amusement both in Spain and elsewhere in Latin America. With the triumph of the 1959 revolution, the speech traits of Fidel Castro, who is from the easternmost portion of Cuba, permeated the airwaves for hours every day, and public speakers and professional announcers throughout the island emulated many of Castro's regional traits that previously had been considered low-status. Cuban radio and television personnel in

the early 2010s employ more realistic approximations to spoken Cuban Spanish, albeit with vocabulary and syntax appropriate to professional journalism. Vestiges of earlier Cuban radio and television locution can be heard on stations staffed by Cubans in the United States, including occasional clandestine shortwave radio broadcasts.

CUBAN SPANISH OUTSIDE OF CUBA

Even prior to the 1959 revolution—in fact even before Cuban independence—there were pockets of Cuban Spanish outside of Cuba, particularly in the United States. In Spanish-speaking countries, including Puerto Rico, Cuban Spanish is eventually replaced with local varieties after the first generation of immigrants. Only in the United States, where speakers of Cuban Spanish are more frequently in contact with English than with other dialects of Spanish, is there a significant retention of Cuban Spanish outside of Cuba. Beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century, Cuban nationalists—foremost among them José Martí—used the United States as a safe haven for launching revolutionary schemes. The first significant Cuban population in the United States was formed in Key West, where Cuban cigar makers established themselves as early as the 1830s. The largest permanent Cuban settlement in the United States prior to 1959 was in Tampa, where the Cuban cigar industry flourished through the first half of the twentieth century. The massive arrivals of Cubans in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in substantial Cuban communities in the greater Miami area and the metropolitan New York City area, and smaller groups in other large cities throughout the United States. Early scholarship on Cuban Spanish in the United States did not distinguish Cuban-American varieties from those spoken in Cuba; later studies have focused on the influence of English, including lexical borrowing, code-switching, and language shift. Beginning in the 1980s, research on Cuban-American Spanish took note of the increasingly diverse spectrum of regional and social dialects represented among Cubans in the United States, expanding the focus beyond Havana. Political difficulties often have encumbered the ready exchange of information about Spanish in Cuba and Cuban-American Spanish, but research in the early 2000s confirms that Cuban Spanish in the United States is not the monolithic entity it was once assumed to be; instead, it mirrors the complex and constantly evolving linguistic profile of Cuba itself.

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