

Lifestyle matters:

On the importance of the study of language and lifestyle in Puerto Rico

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Paper presented at the 50th Poznań Linguistic Meeting

The aim of this paper is to present partial results of the research project “Language, lifestyle, and identity. ‘Societal lifestyle diglossia’ in Puerto Rico”.

Puerto Rico has been politically linked to the United States since 1898. Although both Spanish and English have been co-official languages, Puerto Rico is not a bilingual society. Today, it is more correct to talk about “individual bilingualism” than “societal bilingualism” (cf. Pousada, 2008).

Building on the concept of “lifestyle diglossia” introduced by Mukul Saxena (2014), a new mode of interpretation of the Puerto Rican context was proposed. Saxena perceives the language choices people make as “inextricably linked to their chosen lifestyles”. Thus, “the lifestyle pursued by a particular group promotes one or the other language in different domains”. In the Puerto Rican context, English and Spanish have been linked to specific *lifestyles*. English is thus symbolic of socioeconomic prestige, even though it is also associated with U.S. cultural imperialism. It is embedded in a “U.S.-American modern lifestyle” associated with professional advancement and economic well-being. In turn, Spanish forms part of the “Puerto Rican local lifestyle” and is associated with the local identity and tradition. I perceive lifestyle diglossia in Puerto Rico as an outcome of the failed efforts to install societal bilingualism on the island.

Sociohistorical analysis was conducted to look at why and how the two languages came to become functionally differentiated within the Puerto Rican society. The analysis looked at the interplay between the “historical-structural factors” and the “agency”, which gave birth to the diglossic situation on the island (cf. Saxena 2014, Tollefson 2013): (1) how historical processes and structural factors, such as the political status of the island or cultural and educational policies, shaped the top-down language policies implemented on the island after 1898; (2) how Puerto Ricans responded to and challenged these arrangements “from below” (e.g. the defense of the Spanish language as the key element of the Puerto Rican identity, the importance of English language skills for migrants).

Primary and secondary sources were analysed.

The paper presents the historical development of *societal lifestyle diglossia* in Puerto Rico. The key findings are as follows. During the Americanization period (1898-1948) the English language became associated with the U.S. imperialism, whereas Spanish turned into an important element of the Puerto Rican identity. Under the local policy of cultural nationalism (c.a. 1950s-1960s), the position of Spanish was reaffirmed. However, during the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States (1945-1965) the English language proved to be an important instrument helping migrants incorporate into the American reality. It thus became associated with socioeconomic progress and well-being. Despite the “bilingualization” policy (after 1968) societal bilingualism failed to be installed on the island.

The paper concludes with some hypotheses about the possible impact of contemporary digital communication technologies and a “global lifestyle”, an integral part of which is the English language, on the Puerto Ricans’ attitudes towards both languages and their language choices.

References:

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