

First Names in Puerto Rico: A Change in Progress

Joan M. Fayer

When two or more languages come in contact, there may be deviations from the "norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language" (Weinreich 1). This deviation, which has been called interference, may affect the phonology, syntax, and lexicon of the languages in the contact situation. It may also affect the naming system. In a country which has had significant sustained contact with another culture and language, the traditional system or pattern of choosing names for children may undergo a change. Such a change in progress is occurring in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico was discovered by Columbus in 1493, and Spanish colonization of the island began in 1508. Spanish soon became the dominant language and culture. By the middle of the sixteenth century, only eighty Indians still inhabited the island (Golding 43). Spain ruled Puerto Rico until 1898 when, as a result of the Spanish-American War, the island was ceded to the United States. Puerto Rico is now a commonwealth associated with the United States and elects its own governor, and Puerto Ricans are United States citizens. Most Puerto Ricans are bilingual to some degree, either by schooling (English is a compulsory subject from first to twelfth grade), working situations, or as a result of living in the United States for extended periods.

Contact with the United States did not begin with the Spanish-American War, however. There was trade between the American colonies and the island before the American Revolution. This contact greatly increased after 1898, and today both the English language and American culture are evident in many aspects of life, especially in tourism, business, education, and entertainment. The influence of English on Puerto Rican Spanish has been the focus of several studies. German de Granda, in his analysis of the process of linguistic interference in Puerto Rico, found that the greatest influence that English has had is on the lexicon. He adds, however, that most of these borrowed words are also

used in other parts of Latin American and in Spain (163-64). De Granda noted a more subtle type of influence that English was having on Puerto Rican Spanish. English was forcing on Spanish a choice of linguistic alternates that were most similar to English, causing a convergence of the lexicon and syntax of Puerto Rican Spanish with English (166-70). In another study Paulino Pérez Sala found that there were only three syntactic constructions in Puerto Rican Spanish in general use that were due to English influence and ten others that were used by members of the upper class (126-27). In general it has been felt that the effect of English on Puerto Rican Spanish has been minimal. The effect on other parts of the culture is more evident. One of these is the naming system.

From 1982 to 1985, at the University of Puerto Rico, I distributed to students in undergraduate and graduate linguistics classes questionnaires asking for the first names of four generations of members of their families (Appendix 1). The average age of the students in the undergraduate classes was twenty and in the graduate classes twenty-six. The students completed the questionnaires at home and brought them to the next class, where the data were used in discussions of methods for analyzing variation in language. Because of the limited time in class available for analysis of the data, we did not include middle names in the study.

Later, to assure consistency with other studies, I checked all names for nationality in standard dictionaries (Woods, Tibon, and Withycombe). Not all names in Puerto Rico can be classified as Spanish or English. Some names such as *Ivette* and *Marie* are associated with other cultures. Others such as *Ciara*, *Josean*, and *Genoneva* seem to be newly-created names or variations of established names. There are also names based on reverse spelling such as *Ille* from *Nelly*. I have included these names in the classification "Other." I found no examples of English translations of traditional Hispanic names such as *Concepcion* and *Maria de Los Angeles*.

I divided the study into generations as follows: Generation I, grandparents; Generation II, parents; Generation III, the students and their siblings; and Generation IV, any children, nieces or nephews of the students. A chi-square analysis of the change in names by generation is significant at the .001 level. The overall change from Generation I to Generation IV is also significant at the .001 level. This indicates that there has been a change in progress each generation. Table 1 shows that in Generation I, for both men and women, ninety-six per cent of the names are Spanish and three per cent are English. There is a gradual change over the generations until by Generation IV fewer than sixty per cent of

| GENERATION | SPANISH | | ENGLISH | | OTHER | |
|--|---------|--------|---------|--------|-------|--------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| I (Grandparents N= 354) | 96% | 96% | 3% | 3% | 1% | 1% |
| II (Parents) N=201 | 89% | 86% | 11% | 10% | 1% | 4% |
| III (Students and siblings N = 287) | 61% | 75% | 31% | 17% | 8% | 8% |
| IV (Children, nieces, and nephews) N = 218 | 8% | 22% | 34% | 23% | 59% | 55% |

Table 1. Percentages of Four Generations of First Names in Puerto Rico.

the names for both men and women are Spanish. In Generation IV more men (36%) than women (23%) hold English names. A chi-square analysis of the differences in naming patterns for men and women is significant at the .001 level. We may explain this gender difference by the different roles that men and women are expected to play in Puerto Rican society. Although there has been a great deal of change recently, it is still assumed that men will be more active in the business world than women. Because English is required in many jobs, parents may feel that giving sons English first names makes them “acceptable” in the business world. Richard D. Woods (xiv) gives assimilation as a reason for Anglo names that are neither Spanish or English, but names that may be classified as “Other” (22%). This too may represent the expectations that parents have for their daughters. Since it may not be perceived as important for women to have careers, they are permitted to have more fanciful names. Woods, in writing about Mexican-American first names, says, “a first name is indicative of parental or familial interest in the destiny of the bearer” (xiii). Jane Morgan, Christopher O’Neill, and Rom Harré find that in Spain personal characteristics are still associated with names (18). If the naming pattern can

be seen as a reflection of both the culture and the dominant language of the country, then the data presented here indicate that Puerto Rican parents would like their sons to be more closely identified with the American culture. Woods states, "The given name in any culture is a unique possession often connoting ethnicity, religious tradition, age, and a degree of adherence to a dominant culture" (xiii). In addition, names can also indicate changes in progress.

The gradual shift to the use of more English first names reflects interference in the sense described by Uriel Weinreich. As Spanish and English have remained in contact in Puerto Rico over the years, the naming system has become more English-based. English first names are becoming more common.

Christina Guerra Lozano, in a student paper done in one of the classes in which we gathered the data¹, reported similar findings. She examined the baptism records from 1780 to 1980 of San Mateo Catholic Church in San Juan. There is no prohibition in Puerto Rico against non-Spanish baptismal names. In 1780, ninety-six per cent of the names were Spanish and four per cent were other. This was more or less the pattern until 1965 when Spanish names were sixty-four per cent. By 1980, Spanish names had dropped to fifty-two per cent. The relatively late rise in English names in this study may be because these names were from church records and as such may represent a more conservative portion of the population. Nevertheless, the overall pattern over a two-hundred-year period indicates that the same shift from Spanish to English is occurring.

Not only have the percentages of English and Spanish names changed, but the reasons for giving children their names have also changed. In the past, a child was often given the name of the saint on whose day the child was born; most homes had calendars on which all the saint days were noted. The data supplied by one class revealed that in Generation I approximately sixty per cent of the names were given for this reason. In the Roman Catholic tradition, if a child is not given the name of the saint on whose day he or she is born, then the child is given the name of another saint so that he or she could be baptized. Our data show, however, that by Generations III and IV no children received their names because of the days on which they were born. In Generation III these were the reasons given: liking the name, dreams, names of relatives and friends, and no reason.

There is another way that a change is taking place. In Puerto Rico, the language of the home and the family is Spanish, and English is used in business and public life. It would be natural to assume that Spanish *apodos*, nicknames,

would be common even for those with English names, but just the opposite is sometimes the case. A name used as a nickname for a person with a Spanish first name may be the English translation of the Spanish name or it may be an English diminutive for the equivalent of the translated Spanish name. It is not uncommon for a person named Ricardo to be called *Richard* or for *Jorge* to be called *George* by family and friends. *Jaime* may be called *Jimmy*; *Juan*, *Johnny*, and so forth. Although this is not unusual, it is rather difficult to explain. When the people who have these English names are questioned, they are often surprised that such a question is asked. Some respond that it is just the way it is.

The explanation may be that English is viewed as an international auxiliary language, and therefore has some kind of prestige. It may also reflect the influence of American media. Almost all movies in Puerto Rico are American, as are movies on video cassettes. American television programs are shown with and without Spanish dubbing on local channels. American music is popular, particularly among teenagers. Names can also provide a connection with an ethnic group (Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré 13). The use of English names for nicknames may provide this identification for many Puerto Ricans. Christopher P. Andersen says, "Whatever the reason behind them, nicknames are crucially important in determining how one is viewed by others and how one views oneself" (88-89). An American nickname or diminutive may or may not bestow prestige, but its value is certainly more positive than negative in Puerto Rico. The naming system in Puerto Rico is changing, but it is difficult to predict if this change will accelerate or stabilize. Part of the answer probably lies in the future status of the island. If the current commonwealth status changes to either statehood or independence, radical changes might occur in the naming pattern. In Puerto Rico in the past, the corpus of names used was ninety-six per cent Spanish. Now non-Spanish names constitute over forty per cent of the corpus. When cultures have sustained contact, there may be interference, "the rearrangement of patterns that result from the introduction of foreign elements into the more highly structured domains of language...and some areas of vocabulary" (Weinreich 1). In Puerto Rico the naming system is also subject to this interference.

At the moment the change seems to be gradual in the direction of English and other names. Like most language change this change seems to be out of the level of awareness, and it is only by the analysis of succeeding generations that the shift becomes apparent. If it continues at the present rate, in the next

hundred years Betty, William, and John may become more common names than Maria, Jose, and Juan. As language is constantly in the process of change, so is the naming pattern. In situations in which languages and cultures are in contact, this change may be accelerated. This may be true in other language contact situations as well. However, the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in each situation are different. Only a detailed study of each situation could determine if this is true.

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras

Appendix 1

Questionnaire - First Names in Puerto Rico

Please complete by writing the first names of all your family members in each generation. Bring this to the next class meeting.

Generation I - First names of grandparents.

Generation II - First names of parents

Generation III - Your first name and names of all your brothers and sisters.

Generation IV - First names of your children, nieces, and nephews.

Notes

1. A copy of this research is on file at the Department of English, College of Humanities, University of Puerto Rico. For information write to Joan M. Fayer, Box BG, University Station, Rio Piedras, PR 00831.

Fayer

Works Cited

- Andersen, Christopher P. *The Name Game*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.
- Golding, Morton J. *A Short History of Puerto Rico*. New York: New American Library 1973.
- Granda, German de. *Transculturación e interferencia lingüística en el Puerto Rico contemporáneo*. San Juan: Ateneo Puertorriqueño, 1969.
- Guerra Lozano, Cristina. "Study of the Origin of Names of Children in the Church of San Mateo." Unpublished essay. 1983.
- Morgan, Jane, Christopher O'Neill, and Rom Harré. *Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Pérez Sala, Paulino. *Interferencia lingüística del inglés en el español hablado en Puerto Rico*. Hato Rey, Puerto Rico: Inter American University Press, 1973
- Tibon, Gutierre. *Diccionario etimológico comparado de nombres propios de personas*. Mexico: Union Tipográfica Editorial Hispano Americana, 1956.
- Weinreich, Uriel. *Languages in Contact*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.
- Withycombe, E.G. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon P., 1950.
- Woods, Richard D. *Hispanic First Names: A Comprehensive Dictionary of 250 Years of Mexican-American Usage*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P, 1984.

Announcement

WHIM

WORLD HUMOR AND IRONY MOVEMENT

INTERNATIONAL HUMOR CONFERENCE

1989: APRIL 18-22, LAIE, HAWAII: (CONFIRMED)

CONTACT: Margaret Baker and Jesse Crisler; Box 1904; Brigham Young University-Hawaii; Laie, Hawaii 96762-1294; TEL 808-293-3600, or 808-293-1738

1990: OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA: (TENTATIVE)

CONTACT: Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, Editor, THALIA: Studies in Literary Humor; English Department, 175 Waller; University of Ottawa; Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5; TEL: 613-231-2311, 613-744-1993, or 613-564-3411

1991: MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA: (TENTATIVE)

CONTACT: Peter Crofts, President: Humour, Comedy, and Laughter League; 24 Station Street; Sandringham; Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3191; TEL: 011-613-598-3671, or 03-598-3671.

1992: OPEN DATE:

1993: GABROVO, BULGARIA: (TENTATIVE)

CONTACT: Stephen Furtounov, Director; House of Humour and Satire; 5300 Gabrovo, Bulgaria; TEL: 066-2-72-29, or 066-2-93-00

WHIMSY

WORLD HUMOR AND IRONY MOVEMENT

SERIAL YEARBOOK:

NOTE: WHIMSY Proceedings are available for \$10.00 each. **CONTACT:** Don L. F. Nil- sen; English Department; Arizona State University; Tempe, AZ 85287; TEL: 602-965-7592, or 602-968-1709

WHIMSY IV: Humor Across the Disciplines (1986)

WHIMSY V: American Humor (1987)

WHIMSY VI: International Humor (1988)

WHIMSY VII: Midwestern Humor (Available April 1, 1989)

WHIMSY VII will be available from Victor Raskin, Chair, Linguistics Program; English Dept.; Heavilon Hall; Purdue University; West Lafayette, IN 47907; TEL: 317-494-3780, or 317-494-3782, or 317-743-3094