

# Spanglish Store Names in San Juan, Puerto Rico

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IT IS WELL KNOWN that a great deal of acculturation, linguistic and otherwise, is affecting Puerto Rico; almost all such change now leads the island in the direction of the United States, and, linguistically speaking, of English. There is nothing particularly strange in the phenomenon so described, which may be observed wherever English and Spanish (or other languages) meet in the New World; nor is the hybrid language which develops extraordinarily different from any brand of English with a Spanish accent. There is, however, something rather special in the extent to which these developments take place, even across the geographical boundary of a great deal of water; and there is something even more special about the mechanisms by which it is manifested. In San Juan, the hybrid language<sup>1</sup> (*Spanglish* is current in the city) is often the preferred means of communication; Puerto Ricans, particularly teenagers, even use it for communication among themselves. Inside San Juan and out, the hybrid is likely to figure in signs and store names more than unmixed English; in San Juan, it is almost as common as Spanish. Despite the roughly comparable situation along the Mexican border, San Juan has a closer resemblance in the percentage of partially English signs to, say, Laredo on the Texas side than to Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side.

The tourist business is the most frequently cited cause; and undoubtedly the slanting, language-wise, in the direction of the English-speaking tourist is an important influence. But the movement may spread far beyond the usual paths of Yankee tourists. When, for example, a Santurce restaurant called *Under the Trees*, which is actually located under a group of trees, gains some measure of local

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<sup>1</sup> The designation *hybrid* is taken from Morgan E. Jones, *A Phonological Study of English as Spoken by Puerto Ricans Contrasted with Puerto Rican Spanish and American English*, (U. of Michigan dissertation, 1962, unpublished). *Hybrid* suggests comparison to *pidgin* and *creole*, but Jones convincingly distinguishes the terms.

fame, a tiny bar in Loiza Aldea may also come to call itself *Under the Trees* – although it stands on the barest spot in the village. English is a status symbol among Puerto Ricans, even that brand of English which is not likely to add to one's status elsewhere. Students given the task of tracing out status symbol influence upon signs readily admit that many areas in which the language chosen could not possibly have been determined by the presence of tourists or of resident "continentals" feature signs and names in English or quasi-English.

The translation into – or in the direction of – English, is not necessarily a factor in easy communication for anyone. The person who sees a "For Rent" sign outside San Juan with the further information

See Mr. Alvaro on the Yellow House

is not likely to make the correct interpretation unless he knows that Spanish interference patterns make trouble with English *in* and *on*; if he knows that, he probably could have read the Spanish. Outside San Juan, street signs like "No Park" and theatre signs saying "No Smoke" are more likely to provoke mirth than confusion, as are the signs

Mayor and Minors Repairs

and

Yunk

in Río Piedras, or *Car Us Sell* and *Chevrolet* in the same area.

Insofar as this confusion is orthographic, it is not without precedent in Puerto Rico. The folk speech is greatly different from the formal Spanish of educated Puerto Ricans and of other areas, and such signs as

Se Sirven Armuerzos<sup>2</sup>

are not uncommon. Final *-s* is pronounced only in very careful speech on the island, so that a sign in Río Piedras reading *Línea Río Piedra* (a público company) is far from unexpected; this phenomenon cannot be localized, since almost across the island, in San Germán, a supermarket sign reads *Nuestro Precio Son Lo Más Bajo*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Armuerzos" meaning "lunches" is the correct Spanish.

<sup>3</sup> The correct plural phrase would be "Nuestros Precios son los mas bajos."

But the most interesting manifestation of Spanglish is more basically linguistic than orthographic, and the practices are constantly paralleled in the speech patterns of Puerto Ricans. A very frequent factor here is the failure to adapt to the Noun-Noun pattern of English compounds. This mistake produces

Bird Land's Tabern

on a small bar in Santurce which the owner evidently wished to endow with some of the fame of Charlie Parker's scene of operations, without understanding just how that famous name was made up. Probably equivalent to the bar which belonged to Mr. Land (whose nickname may have been Bird!) is another genitive

The Bargain's Corner

in Río Piedras. There may be some misinterpretation here, since use of the plural in those compounds where standard English would use the "singular" (more exactly, the common) number is frequent (*Freshmen English* in the catalog at Inter-American University); the apostrophe may have been merely ornamental. Plurals in compounds (*Shoes Repair*) are the usual thing in local hybrid signs. Analogous forms, with hardly the shadow of a chance of identical origin, can be found in the English Creolese-speaking islands of what was once the British Caribbean:

Peanuts Vendor (Jamaica)  
Letters Box (Jamaica)  
Parcels Post (Jamaica)  
The mailsman (Antigua, spoken)

The genitive plural (there is hardly any significance to the forms in the hybrid, and therefore slight possibility of linguistic contrast) often intrudes as a complete ghost form:

El Retiro's Place  
Camelot Discounts House

Perhaps the culmination is *Charlie's Melodies' Bar* in Loiza Aldea, where virtually no English, even of the hybrid variety, is spoken.

At this late date, English vocabulary in such contexts is so commonplace as hardly to be worth noting; the Caribbean has it every-

where (e. g., Port-au-Prince's *Maison du Gentleman*). A few examples will show how thoroughly the habit of using English is worked into Puerto Rican naming practice. In Santurce, for example, there is the *Laundry El Brother*; the student who collected that form for me made the interesting comment that, after all, it "sounds better than *Lavandería El Hermano*." But *Lavandería* is so rare as to be virtually non-existent in San Juan; nobody would use it in preference to *Laundry* in naming his establishment. *Dry Cleaning* has replaced *Limpieza en Seco* even more completely, and is often combined with Spanish names. *La Cueva del Chicken Inn*, a restaurant in Hato Rey; *Las Flores de Mayo Express*; *La Comisaria Super-Market*, and others of the same type exemplify the pattern reasonably well. *Bar* is widely used with otherwise Spanish names (*Mono Bar*, etc.); if *Cantina* is understood, it is probably because Puerto Ricans have seen it in Mexican pictures. *Restaurant* is almost universal; I have not discovered *Restorante* in San Juan. In San Juan, the spelling *Garage*, which can be taken for either Spanish or English, is preferred; *Garaje* is occasionally to be observed outside the metropolitan area. A barber on Avenida Ponce de Leon splits the difference between *George* and *Jorge* and names his establishment *Gorge's Barber Shop*.

The term *Cafeteria*, usually spelled as in English, without an accent mark, is frequently used with both English and Spanish names. The pull of derivation from Spanish *café* is so strong, however, that it is never used of a self-service restaurant. *Self Service* moves into the gap, and is seen much more frequently in restaurant names than in the United States (e. g., *La Ronda Self Service*, which until recently operated in Miramar).

English tends to be the language of prestige and – despite the touchy implications of this statement – of respectability in Puerto Rico, and especially in San Juan. The Puerto Rican must be a real *jíbaro* not to be aware that bars which feature signs welcoming Americans in English are likely to add "*No se admiten damas solas*" in order to establish respectability, or that a variety store which has a sign in English requesting suggestions for better service has a sign below it in Spanish warning prospective shoplifters. With very few exceptions, those who wish to give their stores fashionable names choose English names. Thus *Delia's Boutique* (Avenida Muñoz Rivera, Río Piedras) is probably to be interpreted as a Spanish name

plus an English genitive ending plus a Gallicized form taken from American English. Likewise, *Maison Blanche* (*Guest House*) probably should be said to derive from American English habits of using French for pretension rather than directly from French. Those who have hope only for a modicum of prestige usually have only a little English, and their store names are in the hybrid.

The tendencies of the San Juan area extend generally throughout the island, although they may be weakened somewhat. Here and there, there are other traditions, such as the temporary *Lechonera* named *Come y Calla*<sup>4</sup> and the no less temporary *Cafetín* called *Toma y Dame* which appeared at the *Fiesta de Santiago Apostol* in Loiza Aldea, the least Americanized and possibly most Caribbean part of the island. In a few places, parts of Río Piedras for example, allegiance to the Spanish past and to Catholicism persists in names like *Zapateria La Fé de San Antonio*. The piraga carts, which sell iced products which Americans almost never sample, bear Spanish names if they have names at all. But a few more years may see changes even there.

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<sup>4</sup> This name ("Eat and Shut Up"), notably uningratiating to the customer, suggests comparison to Jamaican *Leave Me Alone* as reported by David DeCamp, "Cart Names in Jamaica," *Names*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (March, 1960), p. 16. Older Puerto Ricans have told me that such names were once common on the island, although there seems to be little certainty as to whether they occurred mainly at carnivals and *ferias*.