

Unpicking colonial perspectives from Puerto Rican English

Sally J. Delgado
University of Puerto Rico at Cayey

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Nkrumah explains how—even after independence—education, economics and power systems perpetuate colonial mindsets (1965). In Puerto Rico, which remains an “unincorporated territory” of the United States after its 1899 acquisition from Spain, neocolonialism abounds. Recent studies in linguistic colonialism focus on defining and mitigating the spread of colonial languages (Banat, 2021; Ameen, 2023) while promoting indigenous forms of expression (Crandall, 2023; Diko, 2023). But in Puerto Rico, colonial Spanish and subsequently, colonial English are so deeply engrained in the culture of the colonized that there are no viable alternatives to reclaim. In such contexts, Castellanos Brieva notes that deviation from colonial standards serves to highlight cultural resistance (2013, p. 39). Generations of Puerto Ricans have used their creativity and linguistic innovation to differentiate the local variety of English from the U.S. standard first imposed in 1902. Yet, its dialect features are typically dismissed as ESL “errors” in an education system that maintains exonormative standards rather than recognizing systemic variations that evolved in the particular linguistic ecology of the island.

This project begins the challenging work of recording, documenting, and understanding the features of Puerto Rican English on its own terms, disentangled from monolingual native-speaker ideologies, among a new generation of speakers who embrace language-fluid spaces online and increasingly claim ownership of their English (Delgado et al. 2022). Ongoing objectives of the three-year project are to document the features of Puerto Rican English in terms of its phonological, lexical, syntactic, and paralinguistic features. Data collection involves perception surveys and linguistic fieldwork with 200+ participants across the island in two recording activities. Individuals participate in semi-structured interviews by reading a text and responding to open questions, and groups of 4-5 participate in unstructured, spontaneous conversations motivated by minimal prompts. The recordings and associated transcripts and metadata for an anticipated 2,500 minutes of speech will be accessible in the Digital Library of the Caribbean for research, education and general interest. Although the aim of this project is to document the variety rather than test any specific hypothesis against the data collected, trend analysis based on pilot testing and data collected so far indicate that although speakers reject the imposition of exonormative standards and accommodate to distinctly Puerto Rican language practices that reference English’s language contact with the island’s vernacular Spanish, many retain internalized legacies of colonialization that prompt them to devalue their own variety of English or contextualize competency through neocolonial paradigms.

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