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The myth of the dumb Puerto Rican : circular migration and language struggle in Puerto Rico
Focuses on the character with which the link between language and identity has become invested in Puerto Rico, against the backdrop of migration and education. Author describes the efforts on the part of some of today's politicians and cultural elites to inculcate a 'historical myth' that revolves around the detrimental effect that contact with the English language is assumed to have on the mastery of Spanish, and on 'Puerto Rican identity'. She concludes with an estimate of the general effect of the language struggle on Puerto Rican identity.

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THE MYTH OF THE DUMB PUERTO RICAN:
CIRCULAR MIGRATION AND
LANGUAGE STRUGGLE IN PUERTO RICO

INTRODUCTION

It has struck many observers that, in spite of a daily English lesson throughout elementary school and high school, most high-school graduates in Puerto Rico read, write, and speak English poorly, if at all. Even among those island Puerto Ricans who speak English well, observers often note a certain reluctance, or fear to speak English. In contrast to, for example, Dominicans, many Puerto Ricans seem to feel that by expressing themselves in English, they are somehow putting their identity at stake.

What is at issue is not the fact that language and identity are related: What I want to highlight below, is the peculiar character with which the link between language and identity has become invested in Puerto Rico, and the efforts on the part of some of today's politicians and cultural elites in Puerto Rico to inculcate what may be called a historical myth. A historical myth may be defined as a story or an oral tradition, generally a flattering one, invented and developed with respect to the history and identity of a people. In the Puerto Rican case, the myth revolves around the detrimental effect that contact with English is assumed to have on the mastery of Spanish, and on "Puerto Rican identity."¹

Most historical myths were at one time generally believed. Only in hindsight did some come to be seen as fables or falsehoods. In Puerto Rico, the process of the myth-making and mystification regarding the relation between

1. The research on which this article is based focused on Puerto Rican identity, in a context of massive circular migration. It included fifteen months of fieldwork, mainly in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, during the period 1994-96 (see Kerkhof 2000). An earlier version of this article appeared as Working Paper 13 in the series *Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities*, of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

the mother tongue, learning English as a second language, and Puerto Rican identity is still in full swing.² This allows an exploration that addresses not only the myth-making itself, but also the reactions to it on the part of the very people in whose name the language struggle is waged.

The attempts at myth-making are interesting not only in relation to Puerto Rico's charged political climate, but also in view of the massive, long-term, and increasingly circular migration. Strikingly, migration is a non-issue in Puerto Rico. Yet, as is illustrated below, the migration dynamic plays a crucial role in both the process of myth-making and mystification regarding Puerto Rican identity, and in the reactions to it on the part of common people in Puerto Rico.

Since the key principles of nationality and citizenship – including language(s) – are taught in schools, education may be the best background against which to illustrate the case. The public-school setting highlights the often traumatic character of the encounter between return migrants and islanders, on both sides. The public-school setting also draws attention to the pivotal role of Puerto Rico's most important twentieth-century politician, Luis Muñoz Marín, founder of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), in power between 1940 and 1968, and the driving force behind Puerto Rico's 1952 *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA) or commonwealth status. Regarding migration and identity, a crucial point is that Muñoz spent more than twenty years of his life in the United States. When reviewing the post-1968 decades of struggle for political power, and the shifting ideological leanings of the PPD with respect to language and identity, the legacy of the cultural policies that emerged under this powerful return migrant governor have to be taken into account.

In sum, against a backdrop of migration and education, I address the myth-making and mystification process and the ideas of some intellectuals involved in it; the historical and political context in which the myth thrives; the reception of the myth on the part of teachers, students, and parents, and finally I give an estimate of the general effect of the language struggle on Puerto Rican identity.

2. In the course of my fieldwork, I came across several bits and pieces of the myth. Most of it I learned incidentally, during informal talks with teachers and students, and from television advertisements and political speeches during the campaign for the November 1996 elections. A review of the literature dealing with the two laws on the official language(s) of Puerto Rico was also useful (see Delgado Cintrón 1993b, 1993c, 1994).

ELITES AND MYTH-MAKERS

In both traditional and modern societies, myth-makers play a crucial role. In general, myth-makers serve the interests of economic elites, who want to lower the cost of governing by promoting a group identity and a cultural hegemony. Elites therefore need storytellers to shape the cultural order they wish to promote within society. Among the key figures performing this task are intellectuals, who are eligible for elite status themselves, and teachers, who serve as the principal dissimulators of group myths (Barreto 1998:35-36). The cultural markers elites use to define their society have to be acceptable to the population at large. Moreover, they have to be traits of identity that both distinguish the group from other groups, and are susceptible to elite control. For these reasons, elites often present language as the defining quality of group identity (Hobsbawm 1990; Barreto 1998; Van den Bersselaar 1998).

A focus on language may, of course, lead to internal problems, since, contrary to popular belief, in virtually none of the world's nation-states does one find linguistic unity. As language policies are often the vehicle for political strife at all levels of society, the effect of language struggles may be devastating. The detrimental effect is not limited to such well-known cases as Belgium and Canada; since decolonization, many African and Asian countries, too, have become engaged in language struggles, in which both the status of the language of the former colonial power and the status of local vernaculars may play a part.³ In Africa, raising a single vernacular to the status of national language is inevitably arbitrary, given the genesis of many frontiers. Drawn with a ruler by the former colonial powers, they cut straight through the linguistic wealth of the continent. Some African countries, South Africa for example, have opted for a different solution, by establishing up to a dozen vernaculars as national languages.

In the Puerto Rican case, the Spanish language became a marker of Puerto Rican identity only after the 1898 U.S. invasion. The Americans set up a public school system where English served as the medium of instruction. This language policy met with mounting resistance on the part of Puerto Rican educators, teachers, and politicians. During the decades following the U.S. invasion, the regulations for language use in Puerto Rican schools were changed several times, in favor of Spanish. In 1949, Spanish officially became the language of instruction at all levels of Puerto Rican public education. But the life histories of elderly people suggest that, in practice, the policy of using English as the language of instruction had been abandoned long before that.

3. For Belgium, see Van Istendael 1993; for Canada, see Handler 1988, Taylor 1994, Barreto 1995 and 1998, Baumann 1999:107-20; for Africa, see Soyinka 1988:82-94, Davidson 1992, Van den Bersselaar 1998; for India, see Rushdie 1991:64-5.

The Big March for the Language, committee. From right to left: Milton Soltero, David Noriega, Rafael Castro Pereda, Carmelo Delgado Cintrón, José Ronaldo Jarabo, Fernando Martín, Velda González, Ruben Berríos, Luis Amauri Suárez, Zayas, Ricardo E. Alegría, Federico Torres Montalvo, Eduardo Morales Coll, Marco A. Rigau, Padre Pedro, Severo Colberg Toro, Héctor López Galarza, Carlos Vizcarrondo. Foto *El Nuevo Día*, Ismael Fernández.

The 1949 switch to Spanish was not the end of the language struggle, neither in education, nor in society at large. In the post-1949 period, three developments (which will be addressed in more detail below) stand out: the deterioration of public education, the proliferation of private schools, and the politicization of the language issue in society in general. The latter development stems from the controversy about Puerto Rico's constitutional status in a context of narrow margins between electoral victory and defeat. The first victory (in 1968) of the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) marked the transition to, in effect, an evenly-balanced two-party political system (Anderson 1988). Since 1968, with the PNP aspiring to full U.S. statehood, the other main party, the PPD, aiming for an enhanced form of autonomy, and the tiny Partido Independista Puertorriqueño (PIP) advocating sovereignty, political positions in Puerto Rico have become increasingly expressed in an idiom of culture and identity (Dávila 1997). The annexationist PNP tends to present Puerto Rico as bilingual, a position that would facilitate its incorporation into the United States. The rival parties PPD and PIP focus on Spanish.

In the 1990s, the power struggle culminated in two language laws. The first, issued by a PPD governor in 1990, and supported by both the PPD and the PIP, declared Spanish the only official language. The law made its use compulsory in all government and commercial institutions on the island. In 1992, following the electoral victory of the rival PNP, this law was abolished. Instead, both Spanish and English were established as official languages.

At the occasion of signing what its opponents called "the bilingual law," there was a large protest demonstration, organized by the *Comité del pueblo en defensa del español* (The People's Committee in Defense of Spanish). A photograph of "The Big March for the Language," as the demonstration was called, appeared in the newspaper *El Nuevo Día*. The photograph, reproduced on the facing page, shows the politicians and intellectuals who make up the leadership of the language movement. Holding the banner of "The People's Committee in Defense of Spanish" are intellectuals heading cultural institutions in Puerto Rico, an occasional journalist, the leadership of the PIP, and the PPD and PIP legislators who authored the 1990 law that established Spanish as the only official language. As its name indicates, the movement claims to represent "the people."

Strikingly, neither of the two language laws mentions migration. Yet, migration is at the core of the question how one should define the Puerto Ricans as "a people." Today, almost half the number of ethnic Puerto Ricans live on the U.S. mainland. The mainland-based Puerto Ricans used to define themselves as Hispanics, or as Spanish-speaking. But the reality is that their skills in Spanish are often limited, in particular among the U.S.-bred generations. From the 1960s onward, the migrants started to return to Puerto Rico in numbers that practically exceeded those of migration to the mainland. In the lower-class Mayagüez neighborhood where I did fieldwork, an estimated 40

percent of my neighbors had lived on the U.S. mainland at one time in their life. Of the migrants who returned from New York to Puerto Rico in the 1990s, 40 percent were U.S.-born (Navarro 2000).

In Puerto Rico, migration is a non-issue. Yet, the migration dynamic is central to Puerto Rican identity, and to the myth-making process regarding the way language and identity are related. This can be illustrated by a song. In 1996 the singer José Noguerras brought out a CD containing the song *El Nietecito* (The beloved grandson). It tells the tale of a bright child whose achievements in school had earned him the nickname "Socrates." As the youngest of seven children and the only male grandchild, he is the pride of his grandfather. However, there is one subject in which the boy fails miserably: English. When subjected to *el difícil* (the difficult one) the boy does not do well. He becomes tongue-tied and his hair stands on end. Not knowing what else to do, the grandfather finally sends him to the United States and enrolls him "in English quarters," a situation that will force him to learn *el difícil*. Then a prolonged silence sets in. Seven years pass without a word from the grandson. When at last a letter arrives, the grandfather learns that his grandson still does not speak English, while, as the boy writes, his Spanish is vanishing. By return of mail, the old man summons his grandson to come home, lest he end up dumb. The song ends with a dialogue between the lead singer (the grandchild) and the chorus (the grandfather), in which the former elaborates his argument, while the latter responds by repeating the same line: "Hurry up and move back before you end up dumb!" The singer sings:

I went to New York to learn English. Now I don't know Spanish. I understand everything the other way round.

A B C D E F G! Ay! I don't know! It's all the same to me!

El difícil and I don't go together, even though they sell it with sweet talk [or – the phrase has a double meaning – "for it is stuffed with poison" (*si es que es con bola*)]. I'm going back to my native soil and to my Spanish language.

Ay, help me, dearest granddad. I will be so happy to return to my enchanting island.

I don't know if it is *brown* or if it is *marrón*. I am having problems with my Spanish.

What you want me to do? What I say is the truth! *Suavecito* [gently] ... *Please! Don't push me too hard!*

I just don't learn English! I'm forgetting my Spanish! Send me a ticket so that I can return immediately! English is for making progress, but if I forget my roots it will move me backwards. Granddad! Here I come!⁴

4. *El Nietecito*, which was written by Peter Velázquez, is on the CD *Entrega Inmediata* (Música Estival 045), by José Noguerras, produced in 1996 in San Juan: Música Estival inc., Ascap. The translation is mine.

This song is an excellent example of the ideology of language and identity as it flourishes in Puerto Rico. In it, the argument develops from how it is impossible for a Puerto Rican child to learn English in school, via the suggestion that the resistance to learning is, in fact, an expression of intelligence – the boy perceives a hidden danger in English (*si es que es con bola*) – to the conclusion that the price for learning English is simply too high. It is incompatible with one's Puerto Rican roots. The migrant situation – with its nightmare scenario of losing language and identity – is at the core of the argument. From the dialogue part, one concludes that the boy shows every sign of having turned into what islanders call a *Nuyorican*. However, the song does not limit the Puerto Rican identity problem to the context of the U.S. mainland. The last line, which links learning English to both progress and forgetting one's roots, shows that this subject matter is also relevant to the situation on the island.

Before turning to the issue of identity politics in Puerto Rico, I will provide some data which could form the basis for *El Nietecito II*, for it is clear that the song stops at a convenient moment, i.e. with the announcement of return and the suggestion of a happy ending. One is left with the expectation of an emotional reunion with the loving grandfather, and a quick recovery of language and identity. However, the life stories of Neoricans who have returned to Puerto Rican soil over the last three decades belie such a happy ending.

THE NEORICANS' EXPERIENCE OF RETURNING TO PUERTO RICO

The U.S.-raised generations who returned – most of them were in their teens – met with strong rejection on the part of the island population. This was not only because of their linguistic abilities. Other aspects of identity also played – and continue to play – a part in the rejection. Schools emerge from the Neorican accounts as the most hostile environment. For some it was a brief experience. They could not stand the rejection and immediately dropped out. An example of the situations informants encountered may help to explain why, in most cases, time has not mellowed the Neoricans' memories of their first day at a Puerto Rican public school. Ivette, who returned in 1981, when she was nearly fifteen, recalled:

My mother went with me. She explained to the principal ... he called in an English teacher, who said: "Let's find out how her Spanish is." Because I said I spoke Spanish. And my mother, too: "She speaks Spanish." Because at home we spoke Spanish. And with my father and my grandmother and my aunts I spoke Spanish. And I always understood everything. But when he [the teacher] showed me a history book in Spanish, I couldn't read it. I stared at the book, and then burst into tears. And my mother said: "But Ivette, you *can* read!" But I was unable to read Spanish ... They lowered me a grade because I didn't know Spanish. *And all the classes were in Spanish!* (Ivette:2-4, emphasis in original)

The rest of the day, as teachers talked on and on, Ivette beat her brains out searching for words with which to start a conversation with her classmates. Yet, she remained silent, “Because,” she said, “what was I going to say to them? Rice? Beans? I’m going to bed? I’m hungry? Mami? Papi?” For the first time she realized that in the United States she and her friends – who all saw themselves as Hispanics – used to speak English among themselves. It also began to dawn on her that she was from a particular kind of family, one in which verbal communication (which at least was in Spanish) was limited to only a few phrases. That day she came home crying: “I told my mother I wanted to go back [to the United States]. That I would not go to school anymore.”

During the next few weeks in school, Ivette learned that her clothes were considered indecent – and by extension, that she was, too – because she used to wear shorts and tight jerseys. A decade later, this was a common way for high-school students in Puerto Rico to dress, but at that time the girls at her school wore, according to Ivette, high-necked dresses with skirts well below the knee. Her classmates continued to refer to her as a *Nuyorican*, even though she kept telling them that she had not lived in New York. Things started to improve a little when she became friends with two Neorican girls from a different class. However, the distance between her and the islanders remained. “They would see us as problematic youth,” Ivette said, “just because of the way we talked and laughed, and because of the way we liked to dress.”

Ivette’s story is not an exceptional one. From the life stories of return migrants, one can conclude that the most common way to welcome Neorican children was to lower them a grade and leave them to fend for themselves. In some cases, the teachers did not even introduce them to the rest of the class. In other cases, they introduced them as an “American” girl or boy. In the stories, the lack of consideration by teachers and classmates stands out. Some felt that the teachers sided with the class, or even encouraged the class to ostracize the newcomers. They also recalled that teachers were reluctant to intervene in conflicts. For example, when a ten-year-old boy complained about the constant jeering of “Yankee go home” behind his back, the teacher simply told him to ignore it.

Neorican males quickly became associated with drugs. In some cases, this perception was right. One of the reasons behind the return flow is drug use by teenage children. Another reason why Neoricans might be more inclined to engage in drug dealing in Puerto Rico is that they value economic independence from their parents much higher than their island peers do. Since there are no after-school jobs for students in Puerto Rico, the drugs sector is virtually the only way they can obtain money. But Neoricans who had nothing to do with the drugs business were also potentially suspect, because of their different style of dress. They would also walk up and down the street with their friends, which was seen as suspect behavior.

Their linguistic behavior also made the Neoricans suspect. "In the 1970s, the simple fact of speaking in English made someone suspect in the eyes of the police," one minister stated. His four children had returned to the United States, "because of prejudice." One daughter was in her last year of high school when the family moved to Puerto Rico. The principal of the local school was unrelenting in his decision to lower her a grade. This meant that she had to go to school for an extra year, which she refused to do. It was only some months after their arrival, and with the help of an influential church connection, that they found a school willing to give her a chance. Since the school was in San Juan, she too left home. But she graduated within three or four months, as her father recalled with satisfaction.

Beléndez Soltero (1994:290-91) summarizes how most islanders see Neoricans:

They use English as their principal medium of communication, and an "incorrect" or highly accented Spanish; they eliminate the formal you (*thou, usted*) because the formal you is not used in English, perceived by the non-migrant group as disrespect and undue familiarity on their part; they are more aggressive and they have different customs and rather alien adopted values.

For the difference in communication styles, see also Rodríguez Cortés (1987) and Lorenzo (1996). Obviously, the arrival of Neoricans in Puerto Rican schools stirred up an array of feelings about language and identity among Neoricans, island students, and teachers. Teachers who are themselves return migrants hold that the encounter with mainland-raised Puerto Ricans is traumatic for their island colleagues. One reason is that the latter often feel quite uncomfortable about English. This is partly for political reasons: Most teachers oppose the idea of statehood. Next to anti-American feelings, the teachers' limited skills in English also play a role. The Neoricans confront island teachers with the latter's often bad pronunciation of English.⁵ Moreover Neoricans have a different communication style. In general, they prefer open communication and saying things straight out – an unmistakable sign of being ill-bred in the eyes of many island Puerto Ricans.

THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF A RETURN MIGRANT GOVERNOR

The negative reaction of island teachers toward Neorican students also has to be seen in the light of the history of the language struggle in education, and

5. A man who returned in the 1960s recalled that during an English class, he told his teacher "in the most respectful manner I could think of" that it was not pint but paint. "Are you sure?" the teacher kept asking. He paid her the respect she was entitled to, by saying that he was almost sure of it.

the subsequent politicization of the language issue by the Puerto Rican political parties. To get an idea of the issues involved, it is helpful to start with a look at Luis Muñoz Marín's policies and views. The story of Puerto Rico's foremost twentieth-century politician (he stayed in power from 1940 to 1964) can be told – but in Puerto Rico never is told – as that of an incredibly successful return migrant, who used the cultural and social capital he accumulated in the United States to create a position of near absolute power in Puerto Rico. Muñoz was fourteen when he moved to the United States, and, apart from an occasional visit, he only returned in 1932, at the age of thirty-three, married to an American.⁶ As is the case with most Puerto Ricans who have lived in the United States for a long time, in particular during their teens and young adulthood, a complete adaptation to the island society cannot have been feasible for Muñoz. In many aspects, he identified with the United States. Elsewhere I have argued that Muñoz's migration experience strongly reflects upon Puerto Rico's 1952 commonwealth status, and on its postwar economic development model (Kerkhof 2000:56-68). Indeed, ELA, or commonwealth, may well be seen as the very embodiment of an ambiguous return migrant identity.

Though on an individual level Muñoz derived much of his cultural baggage and political style from his U.S. education, his party's policies had to fit the island situation. Under his leadership, along with the 1952 commonwealth status and the economic development model that tied Puerto Rico's economy firmly to the United States, a policy of cultural nationalism emerged. Various scholars have pointed out that the cultural politics issued by the PPD served to counter both the mounting pro-statehood forces and the PIP separatists (Dávila 1997; Gil 1992). They were probably also meant to reconcile the PPD's own leadership with commonwealth status.

The PPD-sponsored policy to affirm, promote, and protect a distinct Puerto Rican identity was based on an essentialist definition of culture as a property that could be retained or lost, rather than as a way of life and everyday culture (Dávila 1997:4-5, 43). But the speeches and memoirs show that Muñoz's own conception of culture was more complex. He did use a more anthropological definition of culture, termed as "attitudes, habits, values" (Muñoz Marín 1953:3). Muñoz's culture-as-daily-practice policies were channeled not through the official cultural institutions, like the Instituto Puertorriqueño de Cultura, but through Muñoz's political speeches and through the Department of Education.

Muñoz's main speech in this field, "La personalidad puertorriqueña en el Estado Libre Asociado" was delivered on December 29, 1953, at the General Assembly of the Teachers' Association of Puerto Rico. This speech has become known as the "Agapito's Bar" speech. In it, Muñoz tackled the theme

6. In the late 1930s, when still married to Muna Lee, Muñoz fell in love with Inés Mendoza, a teacher, who later became his second wife.

how “the personality of the Puerto Rican people” should develop under the 1952 commonwealth status. In the speech, Muñoz expressed his appreciation for both U.S. and Puerto Rican culture – but not to the same degree, it appears. While the tone of identification with the United States stood out, the way Muñoz referred to Puerto Rican culture betrays criticism: That a culture chooses to abandon “inertia” and “to adopt positive values that it does not have of its own” is not a sign of “inferiority,” nor does it “depersonalize,” Muñoz (1953:6) pointed out. The speech also rejected some assumptions and conceptions that were central to the island’s cultural elite debate on identity. For example, although he expressed it in an implicit way, Muñoz clearly rejected the opposition between the spirituality of Hispanic “culture” and the plain materialism of U.S. “civilization.” In the speech, Muñoz also stressed the importance of learning English, while he criticized the mixing of English and Spanish, as in the sign “Agapito’s Bar.” After he had explained his view, Muñoz Marín tackled the teachers about their responsibility to instill what he saw as the right values in the Puerto Rican people.

Interpretation of the reception of this speech, whether by the audience of the time or by later audiences, is not easy.⁷ The general adoption of “Agapito’s Bar” to refer to the speech may lie at the core of the issue. According to Muñoz, language was about the only aspect of Puerto Rican culture that should remain “pure” and unchanged. Some educators must have been struck dumb with regard to the re-education tasks imposed upon them. But given the alliance of the Teachers’ Association of Puerto Rico with the PPD, it was difficult for them to react.⁸ Moreover, the language struggle had created anti-American feelings among the Puerto Rican educationalists that clashed with the views expressed in the speech. Some of the audience must have taken the governor’s criticism of Puerto Rico’s culture as an affront. Though many may have shared Muñoz’s fears that the people’s personality might be lost in “an inextricable *burundanga*⁹ (mess) of which you can’t make head or tail,” these

7. An anthology of the debate about culture and identity in the social sciences in Puerto Rico by Rivera Medina and Ramírez (1985) includes the speech, but Ramírez is brief about it. He uses it to emphasize that even Muñoz was concerned about the impact of sweeping social changes on the culture, language, and personality of Puerto Ricans. López Yustos (1992:148-49) points out that the speech was one of the most conceptual ones Muñoz Marín ever gave. The speech did not receive proper attention, he adds, because everybody focused on Muñoz’s funny remarks about Agapito’s bar.

8. The Teachers’ Association of Puerto Rico was founded in 1911 with the aim of undoing the imposition of English as the vehicle of education (Osuna 1949; Benítez Nazario 1989). The final battle to restore Spanish was waged between 1946 and 1948. The victory was attributed to the PPD.

9. Note that, while advocating the avoidance of English loanwords, Muñoz Marín uses a word of African origin. In Puerto Rico, the African and Taino linguistic legacies are generally seen as enriching. In contrast, English loanwords are seen as endangering Puerto Rico Spanish.

fears may have deepened upon hearing his ideological stance and his directives for changing “the Puerto Rican personality” (Muñoz Marín 1953:3).

Another point is that the teachers must have felt irritated with the general situation in public education. In 1949, Spanish had officially become the language of instruction, a victory that was attributed to Muñoz and his PPD. But the shift in language policy did not show at the level of daily practice. Older people in Puerto Rico recall that it took “many, many years” to replace the English text books with Spanish ones, if they were actually replaced at all (see also Eliza Colón 1989:125-26). In the beginning, there was no policy at all with regard to teaching the Spanish language and Spanish literature. While after 1949 there continued to be instructions to teach and materials for teaching the daily English class, the directives with regard to the teaching of Spanish – as defined in the annual report of the school year 1951-52 – was “to orient the teachers toward the revision of the curriculum *on their own initiative*.”¹⁰

The stories of people who went to school in the decades after 1949 indicate that teachers may have interpreted rather freely the suggestion that they should teach Spanish as they saw fit, and that often the teaching practice continued to be shaped by the view – a legacy of the previous five decades – of English and Spanish as *competing*. Some recall that their teachers made the class complicit in their disregard for the official policies that stipulated that the daily English class should be taught in English. Others remember the English class as an exercise in “subversion,” during which the importance of Spanish was highlighted. In 1965, the general supervisor of the English section of the Department of Education stated that the negative attitudes toward English was the main problem faced by his department (Hull, quoted in Eliza Colón 1989:125). The feelings about the language policies concerning Spanish and English thus remained closely tied.

IMPACT OF LANGUAGE POLICY ON PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION

Edith Algren de Gutiérrez (1987), who analyzed the language policy in public schools during the period 1898-1949, cogently argues that the movement for restoring Spanish as the language of instruction in public education, turned into a movement *against* the teaching of English in Puerto Rico's schools. The image of linguistically crippled individuals became associated with teaching in English. She also remarks that there is a class interest in

10. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education 1951-52* (San Juan, 1953) quoted in Eliza Colón (1989:127), her italics.

keeping English restricted. Algren de Gutiérrez's argument brings one of the paradoxes of the Spanish-based construction of Puerto Rican identity fully into the picture. The point is that in the post-1949 period, most parents who can afford it have sent their children to private schools where English was (and in some cases, still is) the language, or one of the languages, of instruction. This preoccupation with learning a different language than the mother tongue can be found also in other contexts where a particular language – often the (former) colonial language – gives access to jobs in the government administration, see, for example, Van den Bersselaar (1998). Yet, the class that sends its children to private schools also produces the leading characters of the contemporary Puerto Rican Spanish-only ideology. Before addressing some of the latter's ideas about language and identity, it is helpful to have a closer look at public and private education.

It is commonly held in Puerto Rico that the increase in private education was largely a reaction to the general deterioration of public education. Since the 1950s, several commissions – both Puerto Rican and foreign – have defined Puerto Rican public education as “in crisis.” These commissions attributed the crisis to the rapid increase in school enrollment, coupled with a shortage of schools, materials, and qualified teachers, and the lack of a clear educational philosophy (for an overview see Eliza Colón 1989:43-92). Recent literature indicates the continued relevance of these factors (Benítez Nazario 1989; Lebrón de Oliva 1991; Solís 1994). While in 1940 less than 4 percent of all Puerto Rican children went to a private school, the figure in 1960 was over 10 percent, and from 1975 to the mid-1990s it was around 15 percent (Torruellas 1990; López Yustos 1992). A retired school inspector I interviewed in 1996 summarized the trend: “As public education deteriorated, people sent their children to private schools. It was because of the quality of education. It was not for reasons of prestige.”

Strikingly, the rapid growth of private education ran parallel to the disappearance of English as the language of instruction in public schools. As Muntaner (1990:246) has pointed out, “It was not until Spanish was decreed the medium of instruction in the public school system that non-public schools began to sprout.”¹¹ Given the value many parents attached to English, it is

11. The growth of private education may also be seen in relation to the industrialization effort, which had attracted many non-Puerto Ricans, often on a temporary basis. Foreign couples as well as Puerto Ricans who had married a foreigner usually preferred to send their children to schools where English was used. This group might also see religion as a problem. Most private schools were Catholic. For example, when the bilingual school of the Inter-American University in San Germán closed its doors in the early 1970s, a parent group started a non-religious private school where English was – and still is – the language of instruction. The school, which is called Seso (Brain), is now one of the most prestigious in the region, the monthly fee is US\$ 200.

likely that the switch to Spanish as the language of instruction was itself seen as a deterioration of the quality of public schools.¹² The retired school inspector quoted above holds that parents believe it is crucial for their children to master the English language. His own daughters went to public school during the 1950s and 1960s. "Like the majority of public-school students," he recalled, "they graduated from high school without being able to read, write, or speak English," even though their public school had special programs for talented students. One day he caught his daughter, who was in the special program for English literature, with a book by Shakespeare translated into Spanish. "But in school we discuss it in Spanish," she said. When he reported the incident to his superior, the latter told him: "Hands off!" The professional maneuvering space for school inspectors was limited: "One could supervise the materials, but not the quality of the teachers, nor the way the classes were given." When asked whether he saw a solution to the problems of public education, he said: "I am pessimistic. I have seen so many innovations. In fact, it would require the de-politicization of Puerto Rico."

Most studies also relate the prolonged crisis in education to the political context. Under Muñoz the pro-American ideology of the public school curriculum remained unchanged, with the only difference that after 1949 the message was transmitted in Spanish (Benítez Nazario 1989; Eliza Colón 1989; Solís 1994). In the post-Muñoz decades, education became a battlefield of the rival political parties. Because of the constant changes, the effect of the various educational reforms that have taken place since the 1950s – if they were actually put into practice – can hardly be assessed (Eliza Colón 1989:43-92). What also stands out is the demoralizing effect of all the subsequent plans and policies on public-school teachers (Benítez Nazario 1989). With the structural crisis of public education, the rate of bilingualism declined in Puerto Rico. In 1970, about half the island's inhabitants were able to speak English (Education Board, quoted in Eliza Colón 1989:64). Despite an exponential increase in school enrollment, twenty-five years later the proportion of bilinguals had diminished to less than 20 percent.

Private schools have been much less subject to political influences. The Department of Education has traditionally avoided getting involved in language planning activities carried out by the private sector. Traditionally, most private schools used to be administered by religious congregations. The teachers used to be U.S. nuns and brothers. Today's teachers are mostly Spanish speaking, but private schools generally do offer some form of bilin-

12. The writer Ana Lydia Vega (1994:11) confirms such concerns. In 1952, her parents sent her to a Catholic elementary school run by Irish-American nuns. English was the language of instruction. The choice of school was not inspired by religious feelings – her father was decidedly anti-clerical – but by the conviction that she had to learn English well.

qual program, to attract upper-class students (Muntaner 1990:49-50). Some private schools train students specifically for further study at a U.S. university, where as many as 80 percent of their students end up. In other private schools, a much smaller percentage of students continue their education in the United States. These schools train students for a university education in Puerto Rico, for which more passive English skills (reading) are seen as sufficient, or as the maximum realistic proposition (Torruellas 1990). Although the quality of both public and private schools may vary, the overall score of private education is much better. Over 75 percent of all students admitted to the University of Puerto Rico between 1965 and 1986 came from private schools (Rivera McDowell quoted in Torruellas 1990:2).

POST-MUÑOZ POLITICS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF A PRECURSOR

Muñoz Marín's retreat from politics – he retired as governor in 1964, and as senator in 1970 – practically coincided with the first electoral victory of the PNP. A change in the political idiom accompanied the changing power balance. Culture and identity became the key concepts for marking the distinct positions of the rival political parties (Dávila 1997).¹³ The change to a culture-focused political idiom does, of course, not mean that cultural issues were considered the most important ones, by either the politicians or the electorate. Economic issues, for example, have remained key themes in political discourse. An interesting question is how the now prevailing political idiom of culture and identity has become linked to such issues as economics, citizenship, and language.

Regarding language policy, the most striking development is the major shift of the PPD. In the post-Muñoz setting, the PPD has dropped the policy of promoting bilingualism and has committed itself instead to the defense of Spanish. The PPD's language policy reflects the need to distinguish itself from its rival, which has also assumed the cultural nationalist stance. The PNP promotes the concept of *jíbaro* statehood, i.e. the idea that becoming a state of the United States would not affect Puerto Rico's language, culture, or identity. PNP politicians argue that the Spanish language is not on the table when it comes to negotiations with Congress about statehood. In view of the rhetorical consensus about Spanish, the position with respect to the status of English in Puerto Rico has become the marker of the respective PPD and PNP

13. Dávila shows how the cultural nationalism of the PPD led to an inward-oriented, folkloric view of culture. The party's political rivals became associated with a more open, universalist idea of culture. She remarks that the "two dominant parties ... have, at different times, deployed both similar and divergent views of culture to further their political interests." (Dávila 1997:253).

positions regarding language. While the PNP prefers to present Puerto Rico as a bilingual country – a position that would favor incorporation into the United States – the PPD policies seem to be inspired by the idea of keeping bilingualism restricted.

Since the 1970s, the PPD has adopted an increasingly nationalist and anti-American stance, moving away from the Muñocista legacy. Apparently, its political rival is willing to fill the gap. During the campaign for the November 1996 elections, it struck me that the PNP leaders presented Luis Muñoz Marín as a key precursor and example. This appropriation of a precursor goes beyond mere political rhetoric aimed at the lower-class segment of the electorate, which cherishes the memory of Muñoz. The dominant themes in the 1996 speeches of the pro-statehood Governor Pedro Rosselló resembled Muñoz Marín's speeches of the 1950s and 1960s (see Muñoz Marín 1992). Only such issues as migration and overpopulation were missing. All the other main themes were reviewed: The stressing of economic growth as a key goal, the importance of U.S. citizenship, the issue of having permanent ties with the United States, and the importance of a good education. The optimistic tone was similar too. The only difference was that the 1996 PNP politicians linked sound economic development and a future of progress to the option of full U.S. statehood, whereas Muñoz used to present this as the promise of the commonwealth status.

With the statehood advocates taking over the rhetoric of cultural nationalism as well as the Muñocista development discourse, and ending up tying dignity to both “*jíbaro* statehood” and “decent income levels,” the PPD has become cornered in the defense of language, culture, and identity. The PPD's narrow focus on “Puerto Rican culture and identity” enables the PNP to present itself as the actual heir of the Muñocista ideals. There is certainly something to say for it, because in retrospect, against the backdrop of the now prevailing political idiom of Puerto Rican culture and identity, Luis Muñoz Marín, and Luis Ferré (the founder of the PNP) look more like peers than adversaries. They shared, at least, a universalistic outlook, a definition of culture as a dynamic process of change, a preference for close ties with the United States, cherishing U.S. citizenship, and a view of bilingualism as both culturally enriching and an advantage in terms of economic competition.

THE HEROIC STRUGGLE OF A PEOPLE

The bills in favor of Spanish of the last decades have often been a joint venture of the PPD and the *independentistas* of the PIP (for an overview of the language legislation, see Delgado Cintrón 1993a, 1993b, 1994). The PPD's Spanish-based identity politics culminated in the 1991 law that made Spanish the only official language of Puerto Rico. It abolished a 1902 regulation that did not say anything

explicit about official languages. The 1902 arrangement said that Spanish and English could “indistinctly be used” in government agencies.¹⁴ From different sides it was argued that there were political motives behind what opponents labeled the “Spanish Only” law.¹⁵ However, according to Governor Hernández Colón (PPD), the aim of the 1991 law was to affirm Puerto Rican identity: “With this law we declare our mother tongue to be the most precious sign of our identity” (Estrada Resto 1991).

In the very year that Spanish became Puerto Rico’s only official language, the jury of the prestigious Spanish language and literature prize, the *Premio Príncipe de Asturias de Letras*, decided to award the prize to “the people of Puerto Rico” for their strong defense of Spanish.¹⁶ In a solemn ceremony in October 1991, Crown Prince Felipe de Borbón handed over the prize to the Puerto Rican governor. By that time, the list of those seeking exemption from the requirement to conduct their affairs in Spanish included the Governor’s Office, eleven of the sixteen departments, and a wide range of public corporations and agencies.¹⁷ The PNP campaigned for the 1992 elections with the promise to abolish the “Spanish Only” law. Indeed, the first thing Governor Rosselló (PNP) did after taking office was to declare Spanish and English the two official languages of Puerto Rico.

During my fieldwork, the public debate and the mass demonstrations in support of, or in protest against, the respective language laws were still on the minds of most people. Views on the topic were expressed instantly. Most people from the lower-income groups immediately tied the language legislation to politics and education. Comments often took the form of criticism of the PIP separatists – criticism in which class identity resonated strongly. People would jeer: “*Their* children go to private schools, and then they go to the United States to study. *They* all speak English.” It seems, then, that while the PPD has moved up in the nationalist direction, the PIP separatists serve as the scapegoats, carrying the blame for cultural policies which are perceived as harmful by PPD supporters.

14. Ley con respecto al idioma que ha de emplearse en los departamentos, tribunales y oficinas del gobierno insular, February 21, 1902.

15. The law project developed simultaneously with preparations for a referendum (the first since 1967) on the future status of the island, which, after much delay, finally took place in 1993. One newspaper wrote that the PPD legislative majority had aimed “to drive a wedge between Puerto Rico and the United States at a time when the island was knee-deep in the plebiscite process” (Editorial, *San Juan Star*, January 6, 1993). For a detailed account of the 1991 law and the general mood in Puerto Rico at the time, see Morris 1995: 57–61.

16. Acta de concesión del Premio Príncipe de Asturias, Madrid, April 20, 1991, p. VII.

17. See Delgado Cintrón 1994:616–21.

Tropes of language are powerful. As metaphors, they mobilize people for political purposes, and as myths they provide both explanations and legitimations of policies. In Puerto Rico, the focus on the defense of Spanish provides nationalists of all kinds – from cultural nationalists to political separatists – with the image of a determined and victorious people. A people who, by sticking stubbornly to Spanish, have triumphed over the United States – the most powerful nation in the world.

With the 1992 law that established both Spanish and English as national languages, this image of a victorious people crumbled. The PIP and PPD opponents called the 1993 law “the bilingual law.” Among people who oppose statehood, the term “bilingual” may have a negative connotation, because in this group one can find the idea that learning English as a second language is a political move toward statehood. Even researchers may see learning English as a political issue, which is clearly connected to “the past and present efforts of American and Puerto Rican leaders ... to make the Puerto Rican people bilingual.”¹⁸

In the 1996 election campaign, it was not the PIP, but the PPD which fomented the anti-English feelings. The PPD instills and exploits the fear that the Spanish language will disappear from Puerto Rico. For example, a 1996 campaign spot for the PPD showed a girl speaking who suddenly had her mouth taped with plasters. While addressing a lower-class audience, a local PPD candidate referred to this ad: “If you don’t want to end up like that girl in the ad, vote for us.”¹⁹ This example makes clear that the PPD policies designed to counter the pro-statehood forces evoke not only the heroic struggle of a people, but also the image of a people without language – the image of a dumb Puerto Rican.

CULTURAL ELITES AND MYTH-MAKING

As was argued above, intellectuals used to play a key role in the creation and elaboration of identity myths. In the Puerto Rican case, there are several factors restricting the creation of stories of group identity. Among the most important factors are: The different political ideals regarding U.S. citizenship and the ties with the United States, the fact that, in many aspects, Puerto Rico’s material culture has become rather similar to that of the United States, and the migration dynamic. Against this background, island-based cultural elites have come to see the Spanish language as the most important base from

18. Eliza Colón 1989:145-46. For her argument against compulsory teaching of English in Puerto Rican public schools, see pp. 111-46.

19. Political campaign speech (PPD) by Fernando Bayrón Toro, in the neighborhood El Seco, Mayagüez, October 15, 1996.

which to fabricate identity stories. As a cultural marker, the Spanish language transcends political differences. The focus on Spanish enables the cultural elite to neglect other aspects of Puerto Rican identity. For instance, a point often neglected is that identity has an economic dimension. A focus on economic issues would confront the elites with the question how Puerto Rico's material culture reflects upon identity, and how, both in the island society and among Puerto Rican migrants in the United States, social mobility is closely connected to the mastery of the English language. The choice of Spanish as a marker of Puerto Rican identity also reflects a blindness to the linguistic consequences of a long-term mass migration that has acquired an increasingly circular character.

Both the Puerto Rican myth-making process and the political and cultural actors involved in it may be illustrated by having a look at the "Committee of the People in Defense of Spanish." As the photograph shown above reveals, the movement's leadership consists of PIP and PPD politicians and intellectuals heading cultural institutions. The movement's efforts to promote Spanish in all areas of Puerto Rican life are embedded in a cultural nationalism that builds on the tradition of the victorious language struggle in public education (See Delgado Cintrón 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994; Castro Pereda 1993).

The political motives underlying the language struggle have been outlined above. In the following I address some of the ideas put forward by two intellectuals who belong to the movement's leadership. One of them is Carmelo Delgado Cintrón, a law specialist, who was also one of the instigators of the 1991 law that declared Spanish the only official language. In 1993 he became head of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP). The other is Rafael Castro Pereda, a journalist, who is author of a book on the idea of the centrality of language in the creation of a national identity.

From their writings, one concludes that these two see the 1949 victory of the Spanish language as a landmark on the long road toward defeating English. After the law that declared Spanish the official language was signed, Delgado Cintrón (1993a:51) wrote:

Although, with the law of April 5, 1991, which declares Spanish the only official language, we have won this new phase in the language struggle, *bilingualism, which is a many-headed hydra*, continues to exercise its reprehensible effect, for instance in the linguistic ghetto of the Federal Court.²⁰ The point is not to put down other languages, like the English language. The latter will continue to be present in the social life of the Puerto Ricans. What is at issue is the defense of our cultural heritage, of that which constitutes our cultural *raison d'être*.²¹

20. The Federal Court of Justice is, in effect, a U.S. court, where the language spoken is English.

21. The translation and italics are mine.

Delgado Cintrón, like many who defend Spanish, stresses the importance of learning English for any individual. But the hydra metaphor makes it clear that the actual struggle of *the people* is against the many-headed monster called “bilingualism.” The example seems to reflect the views of a large part of the island’s academics and students. According to observers, when in 1992 a conference on bilingualism was held at the University of Puerto Rico, the big surprise for the Puerto Rican student population was that all foreign speakers considered bilingualism to be something positive.²² In contrast, during the 1990s, among cultural elites in Puerto Rico, the meanings, causes, and effects of *bilingüismo* and *pseudo-bilingüismo* were hotly debated.²³

One of the key contributions to the Puerto Rican debate about bilingualism was Rafael Castro Pereda’s book *Idioma, historia, y nación*. In one of the book’s essays, Castro Pereda provides an interpretation of the available education statistics, which is interesting for the arguments presented here because given the close connection between cultural and political elites in Puerto Rico, the arguments that influential intellectuals put forward may well come to guide policy makers. The essay in question is entitled “Acabemos con el nulingüismo” (Let’s stop the zero-lingualism). In it, Castro Pereda links the poor grades of Puerto Rican students in Spanish, English, and mathematics to the low scores on Spanish among Puerto Rican students (see also Eliza Colón 1989:69-70; Muntaner 1990). The argument is that teaching English over a period of twelve years (i.e. in primary and high school) does not leave enough time to teach Spanish properly. Castro Pereda links the assumption that the educational system neglects Spanish to the poor overall scores of Puerto Rican students, with the remark that without sufficient mastery of language, abstract thinking is not possible. Thus, a relation between the poor scores in Spanish, English, and mathematics is established and the cause defined: The result of teaching both languages is that Puerto Rican children are left without any language. They have become “zero-lingual.” Along this line of thought, in order to become a “dumb Puerto Rican,” one need not leave Puerto Rican soil at all.

The literature of the language struggle is saturated with comparable, and equally untenable ideas and conclusions. One can trace some of these to the pedagogical concerns voiced during the first half of the twentieth century. These arguments were quite valid when used for the situation they justly

22. Regarding bilingualism there is otherwise a marked difference between technicians and those who work in the humanities and social sciences. Technicians generally have no problem with the fact that English is the lingua franca of their academic discipline or their career in civil society.

23. See Duchesne Winter 1991; Castro Pereda 1993; Delgado Cintrón 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Díaz Quiñones 1993. See also the transcripts of the hearings about the language law projects in Delgado Cintrón 1993b and 1994.

sought to correct. Yet, when taken out of context and shaped to fit or to resist present political positions, arguments against teaching English as a second language are far from convincing.

It is possible that many Puerto Rican intellectuals reject the myth-making and mystification which form part of the language struggle. Yet, it is significant that some of them have found it necessary to make explicit their worries about the language policy with regard to teaching English.²⁴ The dilemma for Puerto Rico's cultural elites is clear: Given the traditional monolingualism of the United States, the fears of Puerto Rican intellectuals and political leaders that Spanish will be neglected under statehood are by no means unfounded.²⁵ However, the defense of Spanish in the given politicized context inevitably creates an impossible climate for teaching English. Even though intellectuals separate the defense of Spanish from the importance of learning English, Puerto Rican political leaders may explicitly link the two.

While some Puerto Rican cultural elites nurture identity myths for political reasons, the Puerto Rican case suggests that in a context of massive and circular migration, the reception of such myths by the different social groups is quite uneven. To make this final point, a brief return to the Neoricans and to public education in the mid-1990s, may help to show that, and why, public school teachers may be particularly receptive to the myth, while parents and students are much less receptive to it.

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE 1990S

Education was a key topic in the 1996 election campaign because an education reform, a project of the incumbent PNP administration, was in progress. The idea was to turn all schools into community schools in which the parents had a say (Solís 1994). However, not everyone welcomed the education reform. A spokesman for the Teachers' Association of Puerto Rico (which is officially associated with the PPD) told me that the association opposes "Rosselló's community school project," which "amounts to the privatization of public education." The association fears that the salaries of public-school teachers will fall to the level of teachers of private schools. In the community-setting, fringe benefits may be lost, too. Only headmasters of public

24. Vega (1994:18) for instance states: "As a teacher of French, I am profoundly worried by the educational policy with regard to English in our country" (my translation).

25. An example may help to make the point. In 1996, an informant who ran a bilingual children's library in Mayagüez (all volunteer work) visited the then recently opened new public library in San Francisco (California). It shocked her that there was only one small shelf of children's books written in Spanish.

schools receive a larger salary, as an incentive to turn their school into a community school.

From the way teachers were welcomed back to work at the start of the 1996-97 school year, one can conclude that the crisis in public education was still full-blown. "We're going back to school! Good luck! School year 1996-97." The picture under the headline of *Asoma* – the journal of the Teachers' Association of Puerto Rico – shows four laughing children in neat school uniforms. But the message of the association's president on the next page was in a somber spirit:

Happy return to the place of our mission and effort. Every day we are convinced that our profession is worthy of praise and recognition. The teacher faces challenges we can qualify as *mystical*. He (she) has to grasp the dilemma of these generations which grow up in a complete state of solitude. The children who attend our schools are from dysfunctional families. We are confronted with children without a father or mother, raised by grandparents or close relatives, lacking values and the love of school. Therefore, the teacher has to become a special and exemplary person, in whom the schoolchild may see an example to follow.²⁶

Perhaps the word "mystical" best captures how teachers are at a loss when it comes to the question how to do their work. Admittedly, the circumstances were – and still are – extremely difficult. Newspapers and studies define public schools as a no man's land, in which drug-dealing, armed violence, vandalism, and crime flourish.²⁷ The constant pressure of real and imagined dangers has created a climate of fear that favors scapegoating. Virtually everybody is looking for someone to blame. The president of the Teachers' Association (quoted above) blames problem families. Yet, though problem families are certainly over-represented in the one-parent family setting, most Puerto Rican families – whether nuclear or extended – do not fit his description. It is simply not true that all public-school children (i.e. more than 85 percent of all children in Puerto Rico) live in a dysfunctional family.

Most parents in the lower-income groups would laugh at the suggestion that teachers are the moral role model for their children. Among them, the opinion that teachers fail is widespread. Teachers arrive late, are ill, or have a workshop to attend. Since there are no substitute teachers, classes are suspended almost daily. If teachers do finally turn up, they fail to do their job, parents maintain. Then parents are expected to make up for all that lost time by teaching their children at home, they pointed out, referring to the amount of homework children have. A point that contributes to the criticism of teachers is that parents felt that their children are not safe at school. In a drugs-rid-

26. José Eligio Vélez Torres in *Asoma*, August 1996. The translation and italics are my own.

27. See, for example, *El Nuevo Día*, March 31, 1996.

den environment, one cannot leave children – who are ideal drug couriers – unsupervised in the schoolyard, as is customary in Puerto Rican public schools.

When confronted with the general low opinion of parents, one elementary-school teacher shrugged and said: “They’re babysitting clubs, schools in Puerto Rico.” She holds that parents have absolutely no esteem for teachers. Nor do they take the schedule seriously: They simply drop their children off at school and pick them up again when it suits them. Sometimes children do not show up for days, or even weeks, and some move to the United States.²⁸ Other informants commented that many lower-class parents do not care about matters concerning school, and that this attitude sometimes rubs off on their children.

At the high-school level, the picture of structural crisis is similar. Strikingly, among high-school teachers the image of Neoricans has changed considerably. When asked in what way Neoricans are different, several teachers replied that they are better students. They said that Neoricans are more serious, disciplined, responsible, and interested than the average island-bred high-school student. Indeed, the only Puerto Rican teenager I ever caught doing homework was Helen, a cheerful, U.S.-bred fifteen-year-old. One afternoon I dropped in and found her with a schoolbook open on her knees. She gestured at it and said: “At school they say I am a nerd – a *nerdo* like they say here. *Nerdo!* Isn’t that ridiculous?” Then she added: “Okay, I *am* a nerd. That’s because I don’t want to end up like my mother.” According to Helen, her mother had been on welfare for twenty-three years. “If you’re on welfare for so long, you become lazy,” Helen said. Since she argued a lot with her mother, Helen went to live with her grandmother in Puerto Rico. In school they did not lower her a grade. In comparison to other students of her age, she is ahead in nearly all subjects. In the United States she had studied Spanish as a second language. She speaks it properly, though now and then she cannot find the word she wants.

Helen has discovered that not speaking Spanish perfectly is not taken lightly in Puerto Rico. “Look at what happened to me today,” she continued. “Something happened to me today, and I can’t believe it really happened.” That morning, the math teacher had been talking about *jinetes* (horsemen) and *caballos* (horses). Since the teacher pointed at the numerator and the denominator of the fraction, Helen could follow the class without a problem. Yet, it bothered her that she did not know the meaning of the word *jinete*. So she asked: “What is a *jinete*?” Her classmates reacted to this with howls of deri-

28. This contrasts sharply with an observation by Benítez Nazario (1989:7) – based on a report on drop-outs by the Department of Public Instruction – who in his study of elementary schools writes that “drop-outs cannot be counted anymore because school administrators are absent too often to maintain an up-to-date record of it.”

sion. How could someone ask such a stupid question? Helen recalled that at first she was perplexed by their reaction. Then she countered:

Okay, all you boys! Now listen to me! If you think *that* was a stupid question, the next time the teacher asks how much twenty-five times one is and all of you keep silent, *I* will be the one who has a good laugh. For, to me, *it is really stupid* not to know an answer to such a simple question as that!

She concluded, with satisfaction: "Well, *that* silenced them."

Helen's story provides various new ways to interpret "the dumb Puerto Rican." She commented that the climate in school is not at all competitive, and the tests are so easy that a five-year-old could pass them. She had also noticed that if you speak English in Puerto Rico, people consider you a genius. To Helen, the English class at school is of no use. "In the United States, I was reading Shakespeare. Here it's all little-baby stuff." Another main difference from the United States is that in Puerto Rico, students have more responsibility, as Helen put it. She explained this by adding that the decision to attend classes or not is left to the students. Often hours are free, because teachers are ill or pregnant, or absent for other reasons. Another difference is that students go home for lunch, and many do not bother to return for the two afternoon classes.

Several other recently returned Neoricans told similar stories. One of them was a university student who had come to do a technical study in Puerto Rico. It struck him that during their first year in college, virtually all island-raised students enroll in an English course. "They could choose something more challenging," he commented dryly. Though he, too, noted that a person who speaks English well is considered a genius in Puerto Rico, he was unaware that for his peers, the biggest challenge may be to learn English.

From this picture of public education in the 1990s, two conclusions relevant to the argument presented here may be drawn. First, against this background, it is futile to discuss the influence of teaching English on the mastery of Spanish. Such factors as absenteeism, the lack of books and proper teaching methods, and the demoralized state of teachers, students, and parents, provide a far more plausible explanation for the poor test results of Puerto Rican children. The second conclusion is that public-school teachers may be expected to be particularly receptive to the language-identity myth, for the obvious reason that this myth explains and legitimates failure in a way that keeps the blame from the teachers' shoulders.

RECEPTION OF THE MYTH

The structural crisis of public education and the charged political climate provide a fertile breeding ground for myth-making. During my fieldwork, I

found on all levels of Puerto Rican public education the idea that learning English will badly affect one's ability to speak Spanish. Even some university teachers discouraged students from enrolling in an English course, by warning them of the negative effect it would have on their Spanish. Underlying the assumption that learning English will destroy one's capacity to speak one's mother tongue is the objectified conception of "national culture" as a property that can be lost. Commonly held views among teachers are that it is impossible to learn English as a second language in a Spanish-speaking environment, and that children can learn English only if it is used as the language of instruction in school. Pseudo-scientific theories are popular, too. One teacher said: "Puerto Ricans have a genetic inclination to reject English."

The statement concerning the genetic disposition of the Puerto Rican people shows that efforts by teachers to explain why Puerto Rican students fail to learn English may further contribute to the language-identity myth. The teachers are, admittedly, in a difficult position. Whether teaching history, Spanish, geography, or English, teachers have to come to terms with the way they themselves were educated during the Muñocista era. They also have to take a stance with regard to the views expressed in the materials they currently use, and to defend their way of teaching vis-à-vis the students' parents, who may have different political leanings.

It is hard to estimate the position of teachers who are themselves return migrants. Some appear to be frustrated and spiteful about their experiences with bilingual education in the United States. This perspective may strengthen convictions that learning a second language is not possible. In contrast, others were not at all receptive to the idea that exposing Puerto Rican children to a daily English class is a form of psychological torture. A colleague of the teacher who coined the "genetic disposition" theory is a math teacher who worked in the United States for more than a decade. He remarked that teaching children from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds had been one of the most beautiful experiences he had ever had. When the topic "teaching English" was brought up, he immediately interrupted with the statement: "I bet the rest of my life's salary that if I get six-year-olds and they give me a free hand with them, they will leave high school fully bilingual." He then added, with a shrug, that he is not qualified to teach English.

Puerto Rico's university teachers of English, who face the task of giving a remedial course which has to make up for many lost years, are also outspoken. When referring to the responsibility of the Puerto Rican state with regard to public instruction, one of them said: "It's a *crime* not to teach Puerto Rican children English." It often deprives them of a college education. "Of the large majority that never make it to that level," she added, "many will end up in the United States."

In general, the views of parents – both islanders and return migrants – contrast sharply with the mythical and mystical ways in which some of their com-

patriots from the teaching profession voice the problem of teaching children English as a second language. People from the lower social strata angrily compare public education with the education they themselves received, with private education, or with public schools in the United States. Return migrants are more outspoken about education than those who have never left Puerto Rico. When asked about the differences between the United States and Puerto Rico, virtually all female returnees with school-going children said that public education was much better in the United States. The migration experience may also shape the feelings about the education they themselves received in Puerto Rico. When asked what it was like to be instructed in English at school, one woman said: "I will tell you one thing. *You learn it.*"

Since return migrants desperately want their children to learn English, they are hardly susceptible to the myth which connects language acquisition to identity loss. But they do believe that one should learn English as a child. The general belief is that adults are incapable of acquiring a second language. Another widespread perception is that the best, or only, way to learn English is to make it the vehicle of instruction. Several parents referred to bilingual education in the United States. They "took their children out of bilingual" because they had failed to learn English, they said. Evidently, return migrants think that children only learn English when it is used as the language of instruction also in the Puerto Rican context. In fact, many island-bred parents share this view. One reason for this is that in the 1930s and 1940s, when English was still the vehicle of instruction, Puerto Rican public schools *did* produce high-school graduates who mastered English. An additional point among lower-class people is the comparison with the situation (real or imagined) in private education. When asked to name the best private schools in the area, people stressed those that teach in English. In their eyes, it marked the quality of education.

Although both return migrants and island-bred lower-class parents seem to be less susceptible to the myth than teachers, there are some points complicating the people's views about the way language and identity are related. A key point is that people know that language skills can be lost. Islanders see that the U.S.-bred children of relatives and neighbors often speak a highly deficient form of Spanish. This may confirm existing fears on the part of the island population that in Puerto Rico, too, the Spanish mother tongue may easily be lost. In contrast, return migrants see their children, who arrive in Puerto Rico as English speakers, quickly become Spanish monolinguals. Since children are rigidly conformist, even Neoricans who had arrived when they were twelve or thirteen had "lost" their English. However, the return migrants blamed this on the deficient education. "Here they teach only a few words, but not English as a language," they said. Or: "They teach it because they have to. But they put no effort into it." All in all, return migrants are less susceptible to the myth than islanders.

Return migrants from the professional middle class, whose children go to private schools, are not that susceptible to the myth either. Though the majority of the upper-class people vote for the pro-statehood party, for this group the issue whether or not children should learn English is not really a political one. At this class level, it is simply beyond question that one should learn English. It is seen as an indispensable part of one's general education. Often the expectation is that their children will go to a U.S. university. In general, upper-class people consider the access to the non-Hispanic world, which English gave them, as enriching. Even so, as a consequence of the ideological climate in Puerto Rico, some upper-class Puerto Ricans may feel uneasy in situations where they have to speak English. Otherwise, among the upper-class parent group, the criticism of Puerto Rican public education stood out, too. "In the United States one can send one's children to public school," they said. "Here we have to pay a lot of taxes and we get nothing in return. On top of the tax-load, we have to pay private school fees."

Interestingly, even parents who support the PIP (generally upper-class people) may send their children to schools where English is used as the language of instruction. The argument I heard in one such case (a local PIP leader) was twofold: The school in question was the only one in the region with a non-religious educational philosophy, and that in a globalizing world, it is important to learn English.

CONCLUSION

As the Puerto Rican case shows, a context of continued constitutional ties, globalization, and circular mass migration reduces the appeal of language-based identity myths. While the language struggle has historical roots in public education, over the course of the twentieth century, the backdrop has changed rapidly. The native language of most people in Puerto Rico is Spanish, but many Puerto Rican migrants in the United States use English as their first language. In the meantime, English has become a crucial language in Puerto Rico, too. In this context, policies to restrict the teaching of English are bound to meet with protest on the part of the population. This resistance started in the upper classes during the 1940s, and has now spread to the lower social classes.

The segregation of the upper and lower classes into private and public education, respectively, set in when English began to disappear as the medium of instruction in public schools, first in the lower grades, and then at high-school level. The final step, the 1949 official shift to Spanish, took place under Muñoz. The identification of the Spanish language with Puerto Rican identity was a key part of the policy of cultural nationalism the PPD promoted. It is likely that, having spent most of his formative years in the United

States, the Spanish language was actually one of the few traits of Puerto Rican culture that Muñoz himself could wholly identify with. Strikingly, the pro-American ideology in public schools remained unchanged during Muñoz's leadership. In the post-Muñoz decades both the PPD and its rival, the PNP, have moved up in the cultural nationalist direction. The PPD developed a narrow focus on the Spanish language, while dropping its earlier policy of promoting bilingualism. In the PPD and PIP political rhetoric, bilingualism became associated with the statehood advocates, and with losing one's "Puerto Rican identity." In contrast, speaking Spanish became a symbol of the heroic struggle of a people against "Americanization."

In this charged political context, Neorican children and adolescents started to arrive, in ever larger numbers. Upon arrival many of the lower-class returnees spoke a code-switching mixture of English and Spanish. This must have confirmed the fears of, in particular, the island teachers, who seem to be rather susceptible to the language-identity myth, that in Puerto Rico, too, the Spanish mother tongue may easily be lost. Moreover, since the Neoricans resented the derogative term "Spanglish" with which islanders brand their speech, they defined themselves as "bilinguals."

Although one can find some uneasiness about the language question among the common people in Puerto Rico, the irony of the effect of the post-1949 politicization of the language struggle is inescapable. Fifty years after Spanish was restored as the language of instruction in public education, some children of the higher social strata still receive their entire education in English. The prestige that English-language private schools have constitutes one reason why such an education is seen as attractive also by the lower classes. The migration experience plays a key role in the parents' desire for their children to learn English. But today, even lower-class parents who have never left Puerto Rico see English as the most important measure of a good education.

The myth that learning English affects one's "Puerto Rican identity" is one of the effects of the local politicization of the language issue. It also reflects the refusal on the part of some of Puerto Rico's cultural and political elites to face the realities of circular migration. Obviously, the anti-English ideology is harmful for the Puerto Ricans, who, because of the prolonged mass migration, have become a linguistically divided people. Puerto Rican fiction is already split into a Spanish and an English part, and the two are isolated from each other. But it is particularly when one realizes that the linguistic division cuts across virtually every Puerto Rican family, that the question arises what some of today's political and cultural elites in Puerto Rico are doing to the Puerto Rican people, by stressing and reinforcing language as boundary of identity. Monolingualism adds to the friction within migrant families, in particular in the lower social classes, where families serve as a migration channel.

Perhaps the most striking point is the overwhelming pragmatism of the population, in contrast to the ideological fervor one finds among some politicians and intellectuals. Most lower-class people are not susceptible to the myth-making. They are also quite aware that the deterioration of public education, and the consequent rise of private education, has greatly reinforced class boundaries. The private schools serve as a constant reminder that Puerto Rican children are perfectly capable of learning English without losing their Spanish. Moreover, in comparison with public education in the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rican public schools score poorly, according to return migrants. In sum, the migration dynamic seems to lead to a growing tension between the politically inspired views on education on the part of some of the local elites, and the more practice-oriented views of a highly mobile population that is increasingly focussed on life on the U.S. mainland.

Obviously, the massive circular migration calls for a different approach to constructions of identity, ethnicity, and national identity. For example, the now prevailing language-based identity construction in Puerto Rico contributes to the stereotyping of Neoricans as non-Puerto Ricans. But of course, stereotyping is often mutual. The stories of recently returned Neorican teenagers suggest that the low quality of public education is one of the factors underlying the Neorican view of island Puerto Ricans as immature, inert, and dumb.

Most Puerto Rican studies about language policies and education are written from the viewpoint of continued colonialism, and this is also the position of the intellectuals who are active in the language movement. It is a framework that does not make an analysis of the language question any easier. As Salman Rushdie (1991:64) has pointed out, it is not always necessary to take up the anti-colonial or post-colonial cudgels against English. The English language ceased to be the possession solely of the English some time ago, he observes. By now, English is the world language because of "linguistic neo-colonialism, or just plain pragmatism on the part of many of the world's governments and educationists, according to your point of view."

The crucial emotional point is that, in the Puerto Rican case, the colonial language has become a kind of "inner boundary" of Puerto Rican identity. The challenge for the twenty-first century is obvious: To make the "dumb" Puerto Rican speak again, in both Spanish and English. Given the complexities and sensitivities of the historical and the contemporary political context, this will be a hard job. A crucial step with regard to teaching English as a second language in Puerto Rico, is that island Puerto Ricans must accept and appropriate English as a language that, in terms of native speakers, has become one of the two Puerto Rican languages.

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