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A final research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of:
Master of Arts in English Linguistics

21 May 2020

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College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus

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Curaçao and Puerto Rico: Two cases of Linguistic Imperialism

0 Abstract

This study examines two cases of linguistic imperialism in the Caribbean, that of the imposition of Dutch by the Netherlands in their colonial island dependency Curaçao where Papiamentu is the main home language, and that of English by the United States in their colonial island dependency Puerto Rico where a Caribbean variety of Spanish is the main home language. In particular, the effects of colonialism on language use and language policy are considered, along with their impact on questions of identity and language acquisition. After a brief summary of the colonial history and linguistic landscape of each island, the nexus between language and identity in the two territories is compared and contrasted. The results indicate that, while there are significant differences in relation to inputs and causal factors between the two islands, the similarities between them in relation to effects and outcomes are remarkable. These similarities suggest that each island has much to learn from the other when it comes to issues such as the use of the home language as a language of instruction in schools and the promotion of multilingualism.

1 Introduction

As have all of the other islands of the Caribbean, Curaçao and Puerto Rico have experienced colonization. The former was claimed initially by the Spanish and later the Dutch, while the latter was claimed by the Spanish and later the North Americans. Both islands have been exposed to various different languages throughout history, but each currently has more than one official language. In the case of Puerto Rico, Spanish and English are the official languages, while Curaçao
has Papiamentu, Dutch and English. The official languages in both these islands include one language imposed by the colonizer, and another that is the home language spoken by the general public. Both islands have been impacted by linguistic imperialism, which has engendered struggle to decide which language should ultimately be used. For more than 60 years, Puerto Ricans have been refusing to acquire English because they feel it is not part of their identity. Curaçaoans have held on to their native language and have gone far to consolidate the status of Papiamentu as the main language of Curaçao, all while struggling with Dutch.

This essay explores the relation between identity and language, comparing the cases of Puerto Rico and Curaçao. Both islands share common resentments towards their colonizers, resulting in serious language policy issues and language barriers, but each island has found different ways to confront these issues. In the case of Curaçao, the colonial language Dutch, which is a foreign language for the great majority, is the language of instruction in most schools. Papiamentu, a first language for most of the population, has been implemented as the language of instruction in some schools, which has instilled a sense of pride in the people of the island. In Puerto Rico, the local varieties of Caribbean Spanish, which is the first language for the great majority, is the language of instruction in most schools. The U.S. tried to impose the colonial language English as language of instruction in Puerto Rican schools for the first half of the 20th century, and the result has been widespread negative attitudes towards the United States and resistance to English. To conduct this comparative study, the following research questions were generated:

1. How have Curaçao and Puerto Rico’s respective colonial histories shaped their language policies, and how have these policies provoked a rejection of the colonizers’ languages?
2. How and why do the Curaçaoan and Puerto Rican public identify with their home languages?
3. What is the relation between identity and language acquisition in Curaçao and Puerto Rico?

2 Curaçao: Historical, political and linguistic background

In the southernmost part of the Caribbean Sea lies the largest of the Dutch Leeward Islands. Located right between Aruba and Bonaire, Curaçao was a major historical hub both for the sale and distribution of enslaved people as well as for linguistic contact. The island was once the political and economic center of the Dutch Caribbean and played a prominent role in the colonization of the Caribbean. Willemstad’s natural harbors enabled the swift distribution of trade goods throughout the region and proved to be an ideal capital city for the island. Originally, the Spanish colonizers were not interested in the island because it was not suitable for the production of cash crops. It was not until the island’s second conquest by the Dutch that the island’s full potential for capitalist marketing and distribution was exploited. Because of its strategic location and proximity to Venezuela, the island would become a regional trading center by the end of the 1600s.

Over the centuries, many different peoples established themselves on Curaçao, and this influenced not only the ecology, but also the cultures and languages of the island, with both negative and positive outcomes. Contact among all of these different peoples brought about the emergence of Papiamentu, the Iberian lexifier Creole spoken today by the majority of the population as one of their first languages. Archaeological evidence indicates that from about 2500 years BC, the first peoples known to inhabit Curaçao were indigenous peoples, who probably
spoke languages of both the Arawakan and Caliban language families, many of which are still spoken today on the northern coasts of Venezuela, the Guianas and Colombia. Speakers of Caquetío, an Arawakan language, appear to have been the most numerous indigenous peoples on the island when the Europeans arrived (Van Buurt, 2010). With the arrival of the Spanish in 1499 and then the Dutch in 1634, the number of people of European descent and especially the number of enslaved people of African descent quickly grew. Both the Spaniards and the Dutch enslaved the indigenous populations of the island as well, and the numbers of people of indigenous descent diminished relative to those of African descent.

By the time that chattel slavery was abolished in Curaçao in 1863, the island had played a key role in the transatlantic trade in the enslaved for almost 200 years. This trade involved the capture of peoples living on or near the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa to be sold to European traders. Africans successfully prevented the Europeans from establishing colonies in Africa from the arrival of the Portuguese in the 1400s all the way until the 1800s, so for four centuries, the Europeans were only able to set up small trading stations on or near the coast, with the permission of the local people. This meant that the actual capture of enslaved individuals was often carried out by certain groups of Africans, who were supplied with weapons by the Europeans to conquer their neighbors and capture as many people as possible. Thus, by systematically pitting one African ethnic group against another, the Europeans were able to destabilize West and Central African societies and the resulting wars ensured a constant flow of captives for sale.

Once the European traders obtained these captives, they were usually imprisoned in the dungeons of European slave trading stations or in shackles on European holding ships on the African coast for months at a time, before spending more months in chains in the hulls of European transport ships crossing the Atlantic. Needless to say, the mortality rates were high, as was the
social, political, economic, and psychological damage done to Africans on both sides of the Atlantic. The captives who survived capture and trans-shipment were then purchased as enslaved laborers by the colonial ruling classes in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas (Dijs, 2011).

Although they were confronted with unimaginable challenges as a result of enslavement, African descended peoples in Curaçao and the rest of the Caribbean resisted on every level. Politically, for example, they were in constant rebellion, with many escaping enslavement to become maroons. Economically, for example, enslaved women gradually took control over local food production and markets. Culturally, for example, they created the vibrant Caribbean music that has taken the world by storm. Linguistically, for example, they created the creole languages of the Afro-Atlantic, one of which is Papiamentu. These traditions of resistance not only contributed to the abolition of slavery on Curaçao in the 19th century, but also to the eventual movements for greater independence from the Netherlands in the 20th century.

After World War II, the empires of the European colonial powers were gradually swept away by movements for independence. As the Netherlands became increasingly obliged to grant some degree of independence to its colonies, the islands of the Caribbean which had been colonized by the Dutch (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten) were incorporated (1954) into a new entity called the Netherlands Antilles. The Netherlands Antilles functioned as a semi-autonomous region within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and Curaçao maintained its colonial status as the capital and seat of political power for the Caribbean part of the kingdom. As was the case for most of the territories around the world that achieved their political independence during this period, the Netherlands Antilles not only adopted most of its political and civil institutions (parliament, courts, schools, etc.) from its former colonizer, but also remained economically dependent on its former colonizer. In this sense, the colonial order was
replaced by a neo-colonial order, in which the Netherlands Antilles was nominally independent, but still very much dominated by the Netherlands.

Another aspect of this neo-colonial order was the political dependence of the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles on Curaçao. In reaction to this, the island of Aruba claimed increased autonomy and separated itself from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986, while still remaining in the Dutch Kingdom. This process of dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles culminated in the referendum of 10 October 2010 (popularly known as ‘10-10-10’), when St. Maarten and Curaçao voted for more autonomy and status similar to that of Aruba, while Bonaire and Saba voted for less autonomy to become municipalities of the Netherlands itself. Only St. Eustatius voted to preserve its former status within the Netherlands Antilles, but, with the other islands voting differently, there was no longer a Netherlands Antilles to belong to, so it was forced to become a municipality within the Netherlands like Bonaire and Saba.

The parliamentary system that Curaçao adopted from the Dutch has led to a proliferation of political parties and frequent changes of government. This has had a negative impact on language policy in general and on language policy in education in particular, whereby, for example, schools are given contradictory signals from the government about which language or languages should be used as the language(s) of instruction and initial literacy.

The origin of Papiamentu has been highly debated among linguists, but those facts aside, it is the major home language used in Curaçao, even after over three centuries of Dutch colonization. During the first 150 years of their rule over the island from roughly 1650 to 1800, the Calvinist worldview and capitalist economics espoused by the Dutch made them reluctant to share their language and culture with the enslaved. Alongside the Dutch, however, the Curaçaoan economic elites included a significant number of Sephardic Jews, who spoke Portuguese and other
Iberian languages, as well as an Iberian lexifier creole that they had learned over the two previous centuries as a result of their involvement in slave driven plantation agriculture on the Upper and Lower Guinea islands off the coast of West Africa and Brazil. In contrast to the Dutch, the Sephardim readily used this Iberian lexifier creole with the enslaved, some of whom were already familiar with it before they arrived in the Caribbean.

Up until 1800, the Dutch were also reluctant to allow the enslaved access to their Calvinist churches or to formal education, so that Catholic missionaries from the South American mainland eventually evangelized the enslaved on Curaçao. These missionaries used the Iberian lexifier Creole Papiamentu, which had rapidly become the most widely spoken language on the island, as the language of the church, translating the Bible and other Catholic texts into Papiamentu. As part of their religious instruction, a number of the enslaved learned to read and write Papiamentu as well. With these Spanish speaking missionaries playing such a key role in the development of the language, the main Iberian influences over the language shifted from Portuguese to Spanish.

With the victory of the enslaved in Haiti and their successful defeat of chattel slavery and the plantation regime there at the beginning of the 1800s, the Dutch were forced to radically reconfigure their system for the exploitation of the labor of African descended people in Curaçao and the rest of the Americas from one based on the coercive control of the whip, to one based on the discursive control of religion and education. In order to do so, they found it necessary to provide formal education to the newly emancipated African descended majority on the island, so that Dutch language, Dutch culture and Dutch identity would be adopted as the norm. For this reason, they formulated language policies that were designed to replace Papiamentu with Dutch, but they ultimately failed. Papiamentu remains the language spoken by the overwhelming majority on the island today, while Dutch is still spoken by only a very small minority. One of the main
reasons why Papiamentu has survived is the fact that it functions as an identity marker for the people of Curaçao.

3 Dutch, Papiamentu and language policy in Curaçao

Papiamentu is the main home language for 250,000 people today, primarily in Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (also known as the ABC islands). While there are differences among the varieties used on each island, people from the three islands can understand one another, which means that the variation among them is minor (Wiel 2010). A particularly contentious point of debate among creolists is whether the lexicon (vocabulary) of Papiamentu is mainly of Spanish origin or of Portuguese origin. In this work, I will use the term ‘Iberian lexifier Creole’ to refer to Papiamentu to avoid taking a position in this debate, given the fact that both Spanish influences (via, for example, the priests from South America) and Portuguese influences (via, for example, the Sephardim and the enslaved who were familiar with a Portuguese lexifier creole spoken in West Africa) can be attested in the historical record.

The theories that see Papiamentu as a Spanish lexifier Creole trace the emergence of the language to the arrival of the Catholic priests from South America. There can be no doubt that these priests and their varieties of Spanish played a decisive role in shaping what we know today as Papiamentu, but these theories erase the rich linguistic history of Curaçao that preceded them. The theories that see Papiamentu as a Portuguese lexifier Creole trace the emergence of the language to the arrival of the Sephardic Jews in Curaçao along with the Dutch in the mid 17th century. Once established on the island, this population dominated many aspects of the local economy, including the trade in the enslaved. The Sephardic theory often assumes that the first
Jewish population on the island had Portuguese and perhaps a Portuguese lexifier Creole as a home language.

In the final analysis, it is not only extremely difficult, but in fact counterproductive to designate Papiamentu as exclusively Spanish or Portuguese. Multiple groups of Sephardim came to Curaçao, some of whose families had lived for generations in Portugal and may have used Portuguese as a home language, and others whose families had lived for generations in Spain and may have used Spanish or a particular Sephardic variety of Spanish (Ladino) as a home language. Moreover, in the 17th century, before Portuguese and Spanish had undergone definitive centralization and standardization, it was difficult to draw a neat line between the two languages. Finally, the peoples of Curaçao and the rest of the Dutch Caribbean have always been pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural and pluri-identified, so that during the early centuries of Dutch colonialism when Papiamentu emerged, it is very likely that much of the population had varieties of both Spanish and Portuguese as part of their linguistic repertoire.

Both of these theories also ignore and erase the significant impact of African descended people on the emergence of Papiamentu. As mentioned above, some of the Sephardim as well as some of the enslaved arrived in Curaçao already familiar with a West African contact variety whose words can primarily be traced to Portuguese, but whose phonology, grammar, semantics and pragmatics can be traced in many instances to the Niger-Congo languages spoken along the West Coast of Africa. Another debate among creolists centers on which group of Portuguese lexifier Creole speaking enslaved peoples had a definitive impact on Papiamentu, those who were traded from the Upper Guinea islands off the northern part of the West African Coast such as Cabo Verde versus those who were traded from the Lower Guinea islands off the southern part of the West African Coast such as São Tomé and Principe.
Many Papiamentu speakers are surprised to find that when they arrive in Cabo Verde, for example, they can use Papiamentu to communicate with the people there, so that Papiamentu can in many ways be seen as a mutually intelligible dialect of an Afro-Atlantic Iberian lexifier Creole spoken in both the Caribbean and in West Africa. But in the final analysis, it makes little sense to try to determine whether it is the Upper Guinea or Lower Guinea Islands that were the principal ‘source’ for Papiamentu, given the fact that: 1) the enslaved were traded to Curaçao from all of West Africa, including both the Upper and Lower Guinea islands; 2) people, including the enslaved, were in constant movement between the Upper and Lower Guinea islands; 3) the Niger-Congo languages spoken along the entire coast are both typologically and genetically very similar; and 4) the people of West Africa themselves have always been pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural and pluri-identified, so that people living in the Upper Guinea Islands would have Lower Guinea Island varieties as part of their repertoires and vice versa.

Knowing the pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural and pluri-identified history of Curaçao and the rest of the ABC islands, it is difficult to see how only one language could solely influence the creation of Papiamentu. By the time that Papiamentu emerged, multiple communities had been inhabiting these islands. Because no one specific population was secluded enough to develop the language independently, it must be the result of multiple influences. This pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural and pluri-identified legacy persists on the ABC islands up until the present. Being fluent in more than one language, the people of these islands often engage in code-switching, or the interchanging of different languages during any given stretch of discourse (Muysken, Kook and Vedder 1996).

In the English, French and Dutch Caribbean, creole languages are widely spoken. In most of the territories colonized by the English and the French, the official language (English or French)
is also the lexifier language of the Creole that is spoken as a home language by the majority of the people (English lexifier Creole in the territories colonized by the English, and French lexifier Creole in the territories colonized by the French). This is not the case in the Dutch Caribbean. Because of the early colonial policies of the Dutch which discouraged the use of Dutch by the enslaved, the few Dutch lexifier Creoles ever spoken in the region were limited in the number of their speakers and became extinct before the end of the 20th century. Instead English lexifier Creoles became the home languages of the majority of the population of Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten, while the Iberian lexifier Creole Papiamentu became the home language of the majority of the population of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

This means that, while the English and French lexifier Creoles are usually considered by most of their speakers be ‘broken’ versions of the official languages English and French, speakers of Papiamentu do not see their language as a ‘broken’ version of the official language Dutch, or even as a ‘broken’ version of Spanish or Portuguese. Thus, Papiamentu generally has a less stigmatized status among its speakers than do the other creole languages spoken in the Caribbean. That said, Papiamentu has only recently enjoyed anything approaching the official or unofficial status that Dutch and other European languages have always enjoyed in Curaçao and the rest of the Dutch Caribbean.

Even though Dutch has never been spoken as a home language by more than a small minority on Curaçao, Dutch has been the language of instruction and initial literacy ever since the beginning of state sponsored universal education on the island. According to Faraclas, Severing & Weijer (2008), “in 1992, 83.3% of the population [of Curaçao] spoke Papiamentu in their households, while 8.6% spoke Dutch. In 2001, 80.8% spoke Papiamentu while 9.3% spoke Dutch” (p. 247). There is a consensus among specialists in education that students have the greatest chance
for academic success if they are allowed to learn their subjects and initial literacy in a home language (and Papiamentu is a home language for the majority on Curaçao), while they have the least chance for academic success if they are forced to learn their subjects and initial literacy in a foreign language (and Dutch is a foreign language for the majority on Curaçao).

The results of Dutch-only education have been nothing short of a disaster for the great majority of the people of Curaçao. Up until the present, the education system on the island systematically deprives most of the students of the opportunity to realize their academic potential and to achieve academic success. Instead, the schools serve the small minority of students whose parents happen to speak Dutch. In response to the catastrophic results of Curaçaoan students in terms of high failure rates, high repetition rates, low test scores, low retention rates, etc. there has been increasing pressure to change the language policy in the schools. In 1982 some primary schools were transformed into mother tongue schools (Amauri, 2016), and by 1983, a framework to have Papiamentu as a separate subject was implemented via the Komishon pa Maneho di Papiamentu (commission for the management of Papiamentu).

In 2001, a new educational policy called Foundation Based Education was implemented in Curaçaoan schools. As part of this policy, Papiamentu was supposed to replace Dutch as the language of instruction in all primary schools. Unfortunately, many of the school boards on the island resisted this change in the language of instruction for a number of reasons, including refusal to accept Papiamentu as a language worthy of being used in formal settings, shortages of Papiamentu materials, lack of teachers trained to use Papiamentu in the classroom, etc. By 2007, the government was forced to allow each school board to decide its language of instruction, and today some primary schools use Papiamentu as the language of instruction, while others use Dutch (Faraclas, Severing, & Weijer, 2008). Perhaps the main reason for this setback, however, is that
the education system in general and the secondary schools in particular remain totally integrated into the education system of the European Netherlands. This means that the eventual goal of education in Curaçao remains first and foremost mastery of all literacy skills and all academic concepts in Dutch (Dijkhoff, 2010).

Meanwhile, the spread in the use of Papiamentu from less formal to more formal contexts continues on the ABC islands. For example, there are now more newspapers published in Papiamentu than in Dutch, more radio and television shows in Papiamentu than in Dutch, etc. (Clemencia, 2000). This has been the result of a bottom-up process; in which the language spoken by the people spreads despite efforts to stop it, causing the colonial language to lose some of its power. Dutch is also losing out to English, which has now become a strong second language for most of the younger people on the island. As a result of all of these trends, in 2007, the government designated Dutch, Papiamentu and English as the three official languages of the Netherlands Antilles. Even though the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved in 2010, these three languages remain the official languages of Curaçao and in Aruba, Papiamento (the name of the language is spelled with an ‘o’ at the end instead of a ‘u’ on that island) has also become an official language along with Dutch. Despite all of these changes, however, colonial and neo-colonial attitudes persist.

4 Puerto Rico: Historical, political and linguistic background

Puerto Rico was originally inhabited by the indigenous Taíno people, who named the island Boriquén. The Taíno spoke varieties of languages belonging to the Arawakan family, and hundreds of words from their languages remain in use in the varieties of Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico today, such as coquí (a small native frog), iguana (a native lizard), mabí (a fermented drink), and
Boricua (a term used to refer to Puerto Ricans). In 1493, Spanish explorer Cristóbal Colón landed on the island, and initiated the process of colonialism in Puerto Rico and during the next few years, the Taíno population was decimated by enslavement and disease. Since very few women came from Europe with the Spanish to the Americas during the first two centuries of colonization, Spanish men regularly co-habited with women of indigenous and African descent, and these women were responsible for indigenizing and Africanizing the bloodlines, customs and lifeways that persist on the island. So, while it is true that the Taíno experienced a demographic collapse, they still live on in the genes, language and culture of the Puerto Rican people.

By 1508, Caparra was established as the first settlement on the island and was governed by Spanish lieutenant Juan Ponce de León. Caparra was later abandoned in favor of an islet named Borinquen, which would be renamed as San Juan and declared the capital of the island in 1520. From the mid-1500s until the mid-1800s, the majority of the population of the island were of African descent, most imported as enslaved laborers. The rate of manumission was high, so that much of the African descended population of Puerto Rico were libertos. While most of the population of Puerto Rico lived in multi-ethnic communities in the hinterland outside of the areas of formal Spanish control, this would change with the fall of the French plantation regime in Haiti at the end of the 1700s, when many sugar plantation owners fled from Haiti to Puerto Rico. When they re-established their plantations on the island, they brought a large number of enslaved people of African descent with them. This influx allowed the Spanish to extend governmental control over the entire island and was accompanied by a policy of promoting massive European immigration to Puerto Rico in order to ‘whiten’ the island and counterbalance the newly arrived African descended populations working the plantations. Enslavement was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873.
In 1898, the Spanish-American War ended with the Treaty of Paris, in which Spain transferred its colonial rule over Puerto Rico to the United States. The new colonizers were eager to ‘Americanize’ the population, and this led to the imposition of English as the main language of instruction of Puerto Rican schools. Because English was not a first language or even a second language for the overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans, these efforts by the U.S. government to teach students in a language they had no exposure to outside the classroom inevitably led to failure. However, instead of reformulating more appropriate language policies based on Spanish, the home language of virtually all Puerto Rican learners, the U.S. colonial authorities experimented with any method they could find to impose English on the students, constantly tweaking their English-only policy initiatives.

After 50 years of rule by government officials appointed by the United States government, Luis Muñoz Marín became the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico in 1947. One of his most important policy initiatives was raising the status of Spanish to become the official language of the island, with English as the second language. By 1952, Puerto Rico had officially become a Commonwealth of the United States, (Stern, 1961). This status did not sit well with the public, since many restrictions were placed on the island in terms of trade and commerce. The people had experienced a half century of alienation which had forced them to re-affirm their Puerto Rican identity and Spanish and reject a North American identity and English.

To this day, the disastrous educational policies of the first 50 years of U.S. rule and the alienation cause by assimilationist North American policies are still evident in the negative attitudes held toward English by the Puerto Rican population. This situation is neatly summarized in Pousada’s (1996) article *Puerto Rico: On the Horns of a Language Planning Dilemma,* “… the greatest impediment faced by the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers has been the
public’s resistance to learning English… virtually every combination of Spanish and English was tried in Puerto Rico” (p. 500). Their negative experiences with forced assimilation to North American culture and the English language have put the population in a reactive mode, leading to the widespread rejection of English and the assertion that: “I am not a gringo.”

5 English, Spanish and language policy in Puerto Rico

The current goal of the Department of Education (DE) of Puerto Rico is native-like fluency and communicative competence in English. This goal, however, is neither reflected in the curriculum nor in the performance of the vast majority of students. The problem with ESL programming on the island is that it expects students to already have a strong foundation in English, under the erroneous assumption that because English is the official second language of the island, it is commonly used among most social groups. In the public-school system, students largely reject North American culture, and feel absolutely no connection with the English language. People in Puerto Rico can live their whole lives without having to speak English, mostly because the language is not used beyond the restricted networks of people who are genuinely interested in acquiring it. The combination of these factors creates frustrated teachers who barely speak English in their classrooms, and students who pass their English classes without actually learning the language.

The curriculum is not structured to reflect the complicated reality that Puerto Ricans face, and teachers oversimplify or alter the lessons to such an extent as to render them unaccountable to their original unreasonable objectives. Teachers are not provided with realistic content that actually targets their reluctant learners. This is part of the reason why students are not acquiring English successfully, or have completely rejected the idea of learning it. This could change, however, if
they adopted a different perspective. Perspective has everything to do with why Puerto Ricans are rejecting English in the first place, so it is no surprise that it could also play a role in fostering their acceptance of the English language.

Acquiring a language is normally very dependent on the degree which the learner identifies with the people and the culture associated with the target language. In the case of Puerto Rico, English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching wrongly assumes that Puerto Ricans share an unproblematic connection with the culture and the people of their colonizing nation, which is not the case. The unapologetic rejection of the North American culture has proved to be a hindrance to English acquisition by students on the island for various reasons, one of the main ones being that associating with North American culture is seen as a betrayal of Puerto Rican culture.

Among Puerto Ricans there is a strong belief that English belongs to the “gringos”. “Gringo” is a word with negative and offensive connotations that is used to describe North Americans, and students routinely call anyone whom they hear speaking English “gringo”. Students do not want to be branded a “gringo” and instead prefer to stick to their Boricua and Spanish “roots”. These “roots” themselves, however, are in many ways fragile, because they are buried under more than a century of North American political domination and many decades of North American cultural domination through the media, fast food, retail chains, and, more recently, the internet. This insecurity is exacerbated by the ambiguous, semi-autonomous Commonwealth status of the island under U.S. rule and constant out- and return migration to and from the U.S. that involves members of virtually every family on the island, making the definition of what it means to be a Puerto Rican highly problematic, even before adding an assimilative approach to the teaching of English to the mix.
Public school English teachers face an incredible challenge. Students are expected to write compositions in English, yet they lack some of the most basic writing skills in the language. This problem leads to teachers mostly using Spanish in their English classes instead of English. The use of Spanish seems to creep into the English class gradually, through frustration, leakage and patches until it becomes a Spanish class with an English facade. In her 2018 article *Language education policy issues in Puerto Rico*, Pousada states that: “Some of the teachers who stay behind on the island fall into the habit of teaching the English class in Spanish to accommodate the students’ limited English skills. This furthers a common perception among students that English is a “Mickey Mouse” course that one can pass without really making an effort or learning the language” (p. 228). Frustration with the learning of English spreads from the students to the teachers. This alone should be an indicator that the current approach to teaching English in Puerto Rico is on a downward spiral that must be reversed.

A typical linguistic practice commonly found today in Puerto Rican communities is constant code-switching from Spanish to English and vice-versa. Such translanguaging has variously been interpreted as: 1) the result of linguistic deficiencies, with speakers utilizing the switch in order to fill the gaps they might have in either language; 2) the result of high levels of competence in both languages, allowing speakers to weave the two together creatively to convey their message with maximum effect; and 3) the result of the emergence of a new variety, sometimes called “Spanglish”. Perhaps more than in most other languages, loan words from English have been nativized in Puerto Rican Spanish, indicating a deeper connection between the two official languages of Puerto Rico. Code-switching also plays a role in language attitudes.

Social class and political persuasion may have a significant impact on whether speakers choose to express themselves in Spanish, English or through switching between the two. Pérez
(2008) conducted a study on how code-switching is influenced by such factors on the island. She found that “Bilingual Puerto Ricans may or may not be aware of how their linguistic practices, in this case codeswitching, may become a reflection of power struggles in their sociocultural setting, and how their linguistic choices may signal an identity or identities that differentiate them from other Puerto Ricans” (p. 15). The study found that Puerto Ricans from lower class backgrounds tended to use Spanish with less code-switching than did others, while more affluent Puerto Ricans, especially those with more a positive view of U.S. culture, code-switched more often. She also concluded, however, that for Puerto Ricans who have lived many years in New York (Nuyoricans), code-switching was seen as a part of their Hispanic identity.

It is important to clarify that code-switching also depends on the style of conversation. For example, a typical newscast will tend to be delivered in formal Spanish with no switching, while among friends code-switching is often quite common. The fact is that Puerto Ricans identify most with Spanish, and not all of the population has adequate fluency in English to switch. Nuyoricans who may be very accustomed to code-switching might find that constantly doing so on the island could be perceived as obnoxious. Most assume, then, that code-switching is a deliberate and conscious choice, which may not necessarily always be the case. On the topic of code-switching in Puerto Rico, Haiman (1993) offers this perspective: “When New York Puerto Ricans return to the island they must abide by Puerto Rican ethnolinguistic rules and not impose their own… To be Puerto Rican in New York City a Spanish surname may suffice, but in Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricanness is dependent upon culture, and culture is embodied in language,” (p. 58). As can be seen, the phenomenon reflects patterns of how identity and language are linked in Puerto Rico.
6 How have Curaçao and Puerto Rico’s respective colonial histories shaped their language policies, and how have these policies provoked a rejection of the colonizer’s languages?

Puerto Rico has faced two major waves of linguistic imperialism. During the first wave of colonization experienced by the indigenous people of Puerto Rico at the beginning of the 16th century, the language of the colonizer, Spanish, came to replace the home languages spoken on the island before colonization. During the second wave of colonization experienced by the people of Puerto Rico starting at the beginning of the 20th century, the language of the colonizer, U.S. English, was rejected completely by the people in favor of Spanish, which had by then become their home language. Puerto Rico experienced a series of disastrous language policies after the U.S. occupation in 1898, which attempted to impose English as the language of instruction and initial literacy in the schools. This unfortunate situation stabilized somewhat after Spanish was officially recognized as the language of education in 1948. This is not to say that language security was restored to the people of the island, but only that English language receded as the main barrier between Puerto Ricans and academic success. Today, citizens of Puerto Rico can live comfortably with minimal to no mastery of English.

In a certain sense, it could be said that Curaçao has also experienced two major waves of linguistic imperialism. Caribbean history was heavily impacted by chattel slavery and the cash crop plantation system that it served. The resulting contact between indigenous Caribbean, African and European descended peoples had major linguistic consequences, both for Curaçao and for Puerto Rico. What was to emerge from this contact as the home language of the majority of Puerto Ricans is an Afro-Indigenized variety of a European language in the form of Puerto Rican Spanish, while was to emerge from this contact as the home language of the majority of Curaçaoans is a Europeanized variety of an African language in the form of Papiamentu. These different linguistic
outcomes can be attributed at least in part to differences between the early colonial policies of the Spanish in Puerto Rico and those of the Dutch in Curaçao.

During the first centuries of colonization, the Spanish encouraged contact between people of African, indigenous and European descent, and did not exclude anyone from their church or from legal status as a human being. This allowed African and Indigenous descended people to make Spanish language and culture their own but Africanizing and Indigenizing Spanish language and culture in the process, and varieties such as the Caribbean dialects of Spanish were the result. During the first centuries of colonization, the Dutch in the Caribbean and the English settler populations in North America discouraged contact between people of African, Indigenous and European descent, and deprived non-European descended people from access to their churches and from legal status as anything but chattel or private property. This did not allow African and Indigenous descended people to make Dutch and English language and culture their own, so they retained their African languages and cultures and Europeanized them in the process, through influence from the colonial masters and in an attempt to make them more acceptable to the colonial authorities, and creole languages such as Jamaican and Papiamentu were the result.

Massive resistance to chattel slavery throughout the Caribbean culminated in the Haitian revolution, which led to the abolition of chattel enslavement in the 19th century. At this point, the switch from coercively enforced chattel slavery to discursively enforced wage slavery made it necessary for the Dutch and the newly independent United States to attempt to implement more inclusive policies that would facilitate hegemonic control over the formerly enslaved through mechanisms such as evangelization and universal education.

Coercive domination depends on ensuring that the dominated classes think, speak and act according to the standards set down by the dominant classes. So, when the Dutch and the
Americans began to implement policies of universal education in the 19th century, they insisted that a standard variety of their European language (Dutch in Curaçao and English in Puerto Rico) would be the only language of instruction in the schools, systematically rejecting the use of any Europeanized African language such as Papiamentu or any Africanized European language such as African American English in the classroom. During this ‘second wave’ of linguistic imperialism, the respective colonizer of each island implemented language policies that completely excluded the home language of the majority of the students. Such policies have proved to be disastrous, not only in terms of the academic performance of the students, but perhaps more importantly, in terms of their alienation from both their own languages and cultures as well as the languages and cultures of the colonizer.

Although the alienation from and rejection of the language of the colonizer is a major force in both Curaçao and Puerto Rico, recent surveys of attitudes in Curaçao (Kester 2010) indicate that the extent to which the people of Curaçao have rejected Dutch is arguably less than the extent to which the people of Puerto Rico have rejected English. Interestingly, however, these same surveys indicate that negative attitudes toward Dutch language and culture are increasing in Curaçao, while recent investigative work in Puerto Rico seems to indicate that, after more than a century of categorical rejection of the language and culture of the U.S., the people of Puerto Rico are beginning to feel less averse to learning English. (Domínguez 2012).

Of course, the categorical acceptance or rejection of the language of the colonizer are not the only alternatives available. In the countries of West Africa and South Asia, for example, the people have accepted colonial languages alongside their ancestral languages into their traditionally pluri-lingual repertoire. Because pluri-lingualism is much more widespread in Curaçao than in Puerto Rico, there are many Curaçaoans who, while not feeling much cultural affinity to the
Netherlands or much in the way of identification with Dutch people, still find a place for Dutch in their linguistic repertoires along with Spanish and English. In a similar way, a growing number of Puerto Ricans have found a place for English alongside Spanish in their code-switching repertoires. This tendency seems to be growing along with ever increasing out-migration from Curaçao to Holland and from Puerto Rico to the U.S. There are just as many Curaçaoans in the European Netherlands as there are in Curaçao, and there are twice as many Puerto Ricans in the U.S. as there are in Puerto Rico itself.

Another factor that has made the rejection of Dutch more difficult in Curaçao less radical than the rejection of English in Puerto Rico is the fact that the home language of the majority of Puerto Ricans is an Afro-Indigenized variety of a recognizably European language, Spanish, that has relatively high prestige on a global scale, has been standardized and used in formal education, including universities, for centuries, has hundreds of millions of speakers, and has a vast amount of published material, while the home language of the majority of Curaçaoans is a creole language, Papiamentu, which has relatively low prestige on a global scale, has only recently been standardized and used in public education, has less than one half million speakers, and has a limited (but growing) amount of published material. This means that it has been much easier for Puerto Rico both to justify and implement a formal education system where the home language of the majority of Puerto Ricans is the language of instruction and initial literacy, than it has been for Curaçaoans either to justify or implement a formal education system where the home language of the majority of Curaçaoans is the language of instruction and initial literacy.

Dijkhoff (2014) states that “The old pro-Dutch elite, the new pro-English elite, and “revolutionary” pro-Papiamentu elite all agree that Papiamentu is not an option when dealing with education…Yet the future of Papiamentu depends ultimately on our own potential as communities
for allowing and promoting social change.” (p. 115). Although acceptance of the use of the language in formal education is growing, research indicates that there is still a long way to go. Other barriers to the use of Papiamentu in the classroom are the need for the creation and production of more educational materials in the language and the need for more teachers trained to give their lessons in the language. Horan (2012) compares the situation of Papiamentu in Curaçao with that of Irish in Ireland. After centuries of English political, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic imperialism, Irish had nearly been eradicated. But over the past few decades, the few remaining Irish speakers have taken it upon themselves to preserve and expand the language, which has involved a concerted effort to design and produce Irish language educational materials and to train teachers to use Irish as the language of instruction. When Papiamentu became the official language of Curaçao in 2007, the lack of materials and trained teachers was one of the major justifications used by school boards to retain the old Dutch-only system instead of opting for Papiamentu as a language of instruction.

In sum, it is only when we take into account the colonial histories of Curaçao and Puerto Rico that we can begin to understand and explain the striking similarities at the macro level and the significant differences at the micro level between the trajectories that language policy and language attitudes have taken on each island.

7 How and why does the Curaçaoan and Puerto Rican public identify with their home languages?

Languages carry with them cultures, modes of expression and identities. The phrase “Seguimos pa’lante,” in Puerto Rican Spanish has a different range of meanings than the English translation “We keep moving forward.” A person’s language has major impact on their identity
and personality. The identities of Curaçaoans and Puerto Ricans have been forged through a history of opposition to political, economic, linguistic and cultural imperialism, with consequences in terms of how readily the average Curaçaoan is willing to identify with Dutch people and their language and in terms of how readily the average Puerto Rican is willing to identify with North American people and their language.

Parents’ attitudes have a strong influence over those of their children. That said, parents are usually the last stakeholders to be considered and consulted when it comes to language policy and planning. In her dissertation, Joyce Pereira (2018) describes and analyzes the results of a survey that she conducted on the different opinions that parents in Aruba have towards Dutch versus Papiamentu as languages per se, and as languages of instruction in Aruba. She found that most parents, even those who speak Dutch, see Papiamentu as the language that best represents the identity of the people of Aruba, and therefore, a growing number of them see the logic in making Papiamentu a language of instruction in the schools. Many of Pereira’s results for Aruba have been replicated elsewhere in the ABC islands, including Curaçao (Kester 2010).

In her survey-based research, Kester (2010) found that high school students in Curaçao share many of these same attitudes with the Aruban parents interviewed by Pereira. In her study, titled Language use, language attitudes and identity among Curaçaoan high school students Kester investigated the relation between Antillean identity and Dutch identity on the island, with specific reference to the use of Papiamentu and Dutch in various settings. She found that the students utilized more Dutch when they spoke to teachers and other professionals, and more Papiamentu with friends and family. Given the pluri-lingual nature of Curaçaoan society, it seems that they decide which language to use according to their audience. Kester (2010) concludes, however, that they feel most comfortable with Papiamentu: “Language attitudes have become
even more positive among young people (high school students) in the course of the last decade…
due to the increase importance of Papiamentu in the education system and its recognition as one
of the official languages…” (p. 35). These positive attitudes toward Papiamentu are strongest
among the majority of students who are from working class backgrounds than among the minority
of student who are from more upper-class backgrounds, where it is often the case that one or both
of their parents speak Dutch at home.

After many decades of struggle against the imposition of English, Spanish is widely
recognized as the language of instruction and official communication in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican
Spanish is clearly an important element in notions of Puerto Rican identity, while English plays
no such role, except in cases of code-switching. It can safely be said that Puerto Ricans are
connected to their variety of Spanish in ways that go deeper than is the case in most other Latin
American countries. This is at least in part because, of all of the major Spanish speaking peoples
of the world, Puerto Ricans are the only ones who have experienced the attempted eradication of
their Afro-Indigenized variety of Spanish.

Because of this history of imperialistic imposition of English and North American identity,
Puerto Ricans often refuse to identify with North American people and their language. As a result,
the teaching of English, even as a foreign language, is more difficult in Puerto Rico than elsewhere,
and the enthusiasm for learning English which is so common in the rest of Latin America is largely
absent in Puerto Rico. Although bilingualism has gradually expanded over the years, English is
still seen on the island more as a tool to obtain a better paid job, than as an identity marker. Instead,
English is considered to be an intrusive language, an attitude that has been at least partly
responsible for the multiple failures of a series of bilingual educational programs on the island
(Torres, 2002).
In the pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural and pluri-identified societies of the Caribbean, the notion of ‘identity’ as a singular exclusive norm is perhaps inappropriate. Even in Puerto Rico, where the imposition of English has forced the population to make a zero-sum, binary choice in favor of Spanish instead of English, the common and increasing phenomenon of code switching between Spanish and English on the island demonstrates resistance against being forced into the straightjacket of a single language or a single identity (Soucy-Mercado, 1993). Allen (2016) states that “One might say that identity issues… show the complexity of managing a plurality of ethnicities… identities are constantly being negotiated, fervently debated, and convincingly claimed in ways and during circumstances that may not always be clear to outsiders, or even to insiders. As such, they merit more scholarly investigation,” (p. 124).

8 What is the relation between identity and language acquisition in Curaçao and Puerto Rico?

When the topic of identity comes into play, missing the relation between it and education is a mistake. A key factor in language acquisition and learning is motivation, and the most powerful type of motivation for language learning is the degree to which the learner identifies with the people who speak the target language. In her book, titled Being Bilingual in Borinquen, Pousada (2017) states that there are two types of motivations for language learning: instrumental motivation, which has to do with learning language in order to achieve some practical goal and integrative motivation, which can be seen as learning language in order to be able to adopt an identity similar to that of other speakers of the target language. In Puerto Rico, the instrumental motivation for learning English has traditionally been to succeed academically or professionally, but more recently this has extended to gaining better access to the electronic media. The integrative
motivation for learning English on the island has traditionally been to assimilate more to a North American identity.

Pousada observes that “English can be observed on commercial signs… in the print and broadcast media… It is also increasingly used in informal discourse among students on college campuses… Nevertheless, for many Puerto Ricans, English continues to be a foreign language…” (p. 13). Puerto Ricans often relate English to the United States, and this may increase integrative motivation on the part of those Puerto Ricans who favor statehood and full integration of their country into the United States, while at the same decreasing integrative motivation on the part of those Puerto Ricans who oppose statehood and reject integration of their country into the United States. While the presence of English on the island has increased, English is far from being a default option for either physical or social survival in Puerto Rico.

Because Dutch is taught as a European language using European cultural models in Curaçaoan classrooms and English is taught as a North American language using U.S. cultural models in Puerto Rican classrooms, students have a very hard time relating to and identifying with Dutch in Curaçao and with English in Puerto Rico. When students cannot relate to or identify with a foreign language, most will fail to learn it, and many will actually resist attempts to teach them a language that they see as having nothing to do with who they are and who they want to be. In her article titled *Papiamentu/o and identity in Aruba and Curaçao*, Wiel (2010) observes that Papiamentu is an identity marker in both Aruba and Curaçao that helps people distance themselves from their colonial pasts (Wiel, 2010). When Dutch is used in the classroom instead of Papiamentu, however, the colonial past becomes the colonial present.
9 Conclusion

Despite their different colonial histories, the relationships that hold today among language, identity and education are in a number of ways very similar in Curaçao and Puerto Rico. As such, there are many things that Puerto Ricans can learn from Curaçaoans and their struggles for the acknowledgement and valorization of Papiamentu, and many things that Curaçaoans can learn from Puerto Ricans and their struggles for the acknowledgement and valorization of Puerto Rican Spanish. Perhaps the main positive lesson that Curaçao can learn from Puerto Rico is that it is possible to make an Africanized and Indigenized Caribbean language (Puerto Rican Spanish) the official language of government and education, while the main negative lesson that can be learned is that the traditional Caribbean openness to learning many languages (including colonial languages) does not have to be sacrificed in the process. Perhaps the main positive lesson that Puerto Rico can learn from Curaçao is that one does not have to make a zero-sum binary choice between the home language and the colonial language, while the main negative lesson that can be learned is that colonial and neo-colonial attitudes toward Caribbean home languages, especially creole languages, need to be constantly questioned and challenged.

References


