

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SPANISH LANGUAGE LOYALTY AMONG BLACK AND WHITE DOMINICANS IN NEW YORK

Almeida Jacqueline Toribio

Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT

This study continues a line of research whose aim is to examine the sociolinguistic dimensions of Dominican societies and in particular the extent to which social identity may be mediated via linguistic attributes. Of interest for the present discussion are the different social structures that delimit the linguistic behaviors of black versus white Dominicans in New York. As will be shown, the Spanish language serves a dual unifying and separatist function, binding Dominicans to their Hispanic past and isolating them from their African American neighbors.*

1. Introduction

In previous work (Toribio 2000a), I present a broad sociolinguistic profile of the Dominican community of interest, achieved by reference to language forms and evaluations unveiled in interviews conducted in the Dominican Republic and New York. The principal issues that occupied that study are two: (1) the presentation of the salient linguistic features that distinguish Dominican Spanish from the established standard Latin American Spanish norm, and (2) the examination of the contributions of language in the construction of self and differentiation from others. The latter, the sociolinguistic kernel of the preceding work, considers Dominican Spanish within its sociohistorical context. In particular, it contemplates the social significance of language variation, language diffusion, and language displacement, and subsequently reflects on the role of language in marking group boundaries and membership. In interpreting the introspections proffered, it is suggested that the reality of the limitations imposed by racial ideologies in the United States may have important consequences in the linguistic behavior of the New York Dominicans studied. For example, for the informant quoted in (1), language is recognized as conveying information about Dominicans' position in U.S. society, and was exploited in the "act of identity" (cf., Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1997).

- (1) *Para los blancos caemos al negro. . . . El blanco no distingue entre claros y el negro, sino todo lo conceptual en el mismo marco. . . . En el habla ya se sabe.*

*This paper was presented at the colloquium "Language, Ideology, Linguistic Minorities and Language Shift" convened by Rakesh Bhatt at the Third International Symposium in Bilingualism, held at the University of West England in April 2001. I am grateful to the participants of the colloquium for their encouraging comments. The project was funded by the Research and Graduate Studies Office at Pennsylvania State University.

(For the whites we fall in the black. . . . The white person doesn't distinguish between the light and the black, instead s/he conceptualizes it all in the same frame. . . . In the speech, you know.) (NY#46; working-class male; age 60+)

This and other similar impressions registered in Toribio (2000a) suggest that although their heritage language forms are readily identified and recognized as being of low prestige, New York Dominicans would derive little benefit from acquiring a pan-Hispanic norm or relinquishing their native language in favor of English; as concluded by one reader, the deficit would be double for the Dominican immigrant who relinquishes linguistic (and cultural) ties and nonetheless remains the object of racial discrimination. Such speculation invites additional work, and to that end, this study examines the correlation between language loyalty and issues of perceived discrimination and acculturation. It should be clear that inherent in such a proposal is a recasting of questions that have occupied the interests of researchers in social psychology. Accordingly, though not my principal aim, the following paragraphs contain some cursory discussion of the issues surrounding the psychology of race and acculturation among Dominicans.¹

2. The Present Study

Interpreting my previous work on Dominican speech communities through the lens of the antecedent literature in social psychology (cf., Núñez 1999 for an overview), the present study examines what correlation, if any, obtains between Spanish language loyalty and levels of perceived discrimination and acculturation among black versus white Dominicans in New York. The prediction is that black Dominicans in the United States will differ from white Dominicans in perception of discrimination, and as a consequence, the former would remain loyal to their Spanish language, drawing on its separatist function in distinguishing themselves from African Americans. Conversely, white Dominicans are predicted to be more likely to eschew the Spanish language in the process of acculturation into American society, as indicated in changes in cultural—including linguistic—behaviors. The language data to be scrutinized are drawn from individual interviews with thirty participants representative of both sexes and diverse ages and socioeconomic classes. As in Toribio (2000a), the main method of data elicitation is a modified interview technique, informed by the insights of ethnographers: all informants were invited to participate in a discussion on Dominican cultural traditions and societal norms with a known Dominican investigator. A guiding set of questions encompassed three broad areas: personal information, indicators of linguistic insecurity, and perspectives on Dominican ethnicity in the Caribbean and abroad. The sessions were recorded and subsequently analyzed and interpreted with an eye toward assessing speakers' exploitation of linguistic forms in the communication of social meaning.

Two Dominican families are represented in this exploratory study. At the time of evaluation, both families were living in lower-middle-class suburbs of eastern New York; the communities were comparable in comprising elevated proportions of Spanish speakers from the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries, and there was a marked presence of African Americans. The parents in both families share an awareness that is appreciable among Dominicans in New York: their Spanish language is viewed as an important feature of Dominican identity. This belief is supported in their activities: in addition to participating in the customary events of their extended families (e.g., birthdays, baptisms, weddings, and funerals), they engage in a diversity of individual

Spanish-language behaviors on a regular basis, such as listening to Spanish-language radio stations, watching Spanish-language television programs, and attending Spanish-language religious services. Thus although they have acquired English and regularly practice it in the workplace, Spanish dominates in their in-group domains. The children, too, demonstrate parallels in the distribution of the languages in their repertoires: Spanish language use is maintained with Spanish-dominant speakers, such as older adult relatives; Spanish and English are both used with siblings and friends; and Spanish is displaced in favor of English in school settings. Thus, for all of the participants, Spanish and English together constitute their linguistic and communicative competence in a singular sense, and their language performance may draw primarily upon English, primarily on Spanish, or on a combination of the two, as required by the situation. However, the families differed in their phenotype, and, as will become evident, in their motivations and efforts toward Spanish language retention and use. We consider each family in turn.

2.1 *The Torres Family (Black Dominicans): Nelda, Daniel, Nelson, and José*

For the Torres family, as for many of the families interviewed, the Dominican dialect provides the material around which community and family are configured. Nelda has taken an active role in teaching Spanish language and literacy to her children (and she offers apologetic self-effacing mumblings at having been remiss in her lessons with her youngest, José). She deems the Spanish language crucial in serving as a link with her parents and her extended family abroad. But more than that, she imparts with the Spanish language a positive assertion of *dominicanidad*:

(2) *A mí me gusta que tengan sus raíces. Uno se siente bien de que ellos se sepan perfectamente bien su idioma. No quiero que olviden sus raíces.*

(I like that they have their roots. One feels good that they know their language perfectly well. I don't want them to forget their roots.) (Nelda, age 42)

At the same time, Nelda is firm in her conviction that English language proficiency must be acquired by those who immigrate to the United States; naturally, she offers not affective, but instrumental motivations, which are in turn emulated by her children:

(3) a. *Si estamos en este país, tenemos que aprenderlo [el inglés].*

(If we're in this country, we have to learn it [English].) (Nelda, age 42)

b. *Él puede hablar español pero tiene que aprender inglés para hacer muchas cosas: para trabajar, salir a comprar cosas . . .*

(He can speak Spanish but he has to learn English to do lots of thing: to work, to go shopping . . .) (Nelson, age 13)

Consonant with this orientation is a prescriptivist tendency that privileges a standardized norm for the English language—that of the white majority:

(4) *A mí me gusta oír los anglosajones. El anglosajón tiene buen acento y habla claro, claro. La pronunciación y el vocabulario también. No es discriminación.*

(I like to listen to Anglos. The Anglo has a good accent and speaks clearly, clearly. The pronunciation and the vocabulary too. It's not discrimination.) (Nelda, age 42)

Of course, it is a social evaluation that confers prestige on certain features and stigma on others. Nelda privileges the Anglo-American accent, believing that Dominicans' African appearance, especially when combined with African American speech, will elicit unfavorable stereotyped reactions. It was important, therefore, that her children speak a "good" (i.e., non-Afro-American) English. In fact, in further acquitting herself, she points unsympathetically to her stepdaughter, who was counseled by school officials to enroll in remedial speech classes where she was taught to suppress undesirable African American speech traits.²

(5) *La consejera me preguntó, "Ella es afro-americana?" Le dieron un training para hablar, y mejoró bastante, y ya no la confundían.*

(The counselor asked me, "Is she Afro American?" They gave her some speech training, and she improved a lot, and now they don't mistake her.) (Nelda, age 42)

More generally, Nelda discounts all varieties of English that depart markedly from the sanctioned standard. Not even Spanish-English bilingual teachers are exempted from her negative assessment; she would not enroll her children in bilingual education programs because, in her judgment, the teachers did not speak English "properly."

Yet, as noted, there exists a counteracting set of norms that attach significant importance to the native vernacular. This loyalty to cultural traditions such as language may be a result, in large part, of the nature and extent of Dominicans' social and emotional ties to family and homeland.³ And in addition to this unifying role, the Spanish language also plays a vital separatist function for Dominicans in the United States. For instance, although he indicated a desire to lose his "deep accent," Nelda's husband, Daniel, values his language forms as revealing of his identity. For, if Dominicans are not distinguishable from African Americans by overt markers such as physical appearance, language affords one simple and effective way for them to identify themselves:

(6) *I went to college two years for English, y no se me ha perdido el acento. (. . . and I haven't lost the accent. . .) I have an accent that is very deep. . . . When I'm in the woods over there, they see me, I'm not white, so what I am? I'm minority. . . . (They know I'm not black) when they hear me speak. (Daniel, age 46)*

The linguistic dilemma in which Daniel imagined himself is regularly experienced by his sons. Nelson and José are often mistaken for African American at school, and they disambiguate their situation with self-labeling or through language performance:⁴

(7) a. *They're prejudging you. They look at you and they say, "You're black." You tell them, or you start speaking Spanish, or they find out later on. . . . It bothers me because black people act different than us, they do different things than us. And people come up to you, Oh, you're black," and I'm, "No, I'm Hispanic," and they treat you different. (Nelson, age 13)*

b. *People, like, ask me if you know English and Spanish . . . I say, like, "Yeab," and then, like, one of the Spanish kids come, and then, like, I have to talk Spanish . . . and then if they say, "Yes," that means I do know it, and if they say, "No," it means I don't speak Spanish. [They are testing me] because they can know me well. . . . They always find out [I'm not African American] because they ask me weird questions, like, how old am I [in Spanish]. I get very confused and I forget everything. (José, age 8)*

And while it would be disingenuous to suggest that the children employ their Spanish language principally in its separatist function, it is unquestionable that moments of social

insecurity have heightened their consciousness of what it means to be black and Dominican in the United States. At the very least, it contributes in large measure to language loyalty:

(8) *I love to speak Spanish. . . . [You don't] lose your Spanish . . . it's all in the mind.*
(José, age 8)

These attitudes expressed by the members of the Torres family, and the resultant loyalty to the Spanish language, concur with the findings reported in the psychological literature on acculturation, a broad concept that encompasses changes in cultural behaviors that occur when two distinct cultures come into contact (Landrine and Klonoff 1994; Phinney 1990). Speaking specifically to the acculturation of Hispanics into the fabric of U.S. society, Vásquez et al. (1997) conclude that darker-skinned individuals may believe that their ability to assimilate into mainstream society is limited because of the history of race discrimination, and as a result, those individuals may turn to their native cultural tradition (e.g., language) for identification. It merits pointing out at this juncture that the barrier of racial discrimination (whether perceived or real) proves especially disconcerting for Dominicans, who, as noted by Pessar (1996, 144), "come from a society where to be partly white (which includes most Dominicans) is to be non-black."⁵ In fact, even darker-skinned Dominicans call themselves "white" (cf., Baud 1997).⁶ This classificatory strategy clearly conflicts with the contrasting conceptions of race in the United States, and Dominican immigrants quickly discover that in the United States to be partly black is to be non-white.⁷

2.2 The Álvarez Family (White Dominican): Celia, Felipe, and Manuel

Unlike the Torres family, the Álvarez family has been spared much of the misfortune that is based in racial discrimination; of fair appearance, their assimilation into the mainstream society has been facilitated.

(9) *Whenever you move, you have to adapt to the society that you're around. . . . [Progress] depends on the individual. The [United States] is where you can set your goals and accomplish whatever you want.* (Felipe, age 32)

As implied in 10a, Celia is seldom recognized as Dominican, and in 10b, Felipe demonstrates that he has appropriated the discourse and exclusionary practices of the dominant society.

(10) a. *Mucha gente cree que todos somos prietos y en el trabajo me dicen, "¿Qué? ¿Tú, dominicana?!"*⁸

(Many people think that we're all black, and at work they say to me, "What? You, Dominican?!")

b. *I think they [African Americans] feel they're minorities same as us, so we have to try to team up. [An alliance] . . . but it's more speculation than anything else . . . You would run into an African American and he's into the old times when there were slaves and he feels that everyone is against him. And then you run into someone, like, "Hey, that didn't happen to me. . . ." And also you feel that you run into African Americans who all they want to do is play the race card game. . . . I really get tired when people start calling for race. Same thing with Dominicans, they play the race card also.* (Felipe, age 32)

Nevertheless, the Álvarez parents will not soon relinquish their Spanish in favor of the dominant national language, for it carries high cultural capital—it delivers them from being fully engulfed by the host culture:

(11) *I took Manuel with me to the game and we're practicing, and there's a shortstop and he goes, he asked Manuel whether he speaks Spanish and Manuel said no. And I said, "Manuel, don't lie," because I was speaking Spanish to him. And then he [the shortstop] made a comment, and I said, "Well, what do you categorize yourself as?" Like, "Italian," and I said, "Well, do you speak Italian?" He said no. I said, "Well, I'm Spanish: "¿Cómo tú estás?" Yo me siento muy bien. Mi nombre es Felipe." He got so pissed. . . . You know, he's got a little nice Infiniti, he's got some nice rims, he's got a nice little Italian sticker on the car, Italian things inside the car. "You don't know Italian." I got my Dominican flag in there, I'm Dominican. I know Spanish. (Felipe, age 32)⁹*

Felipe's pride in his Dominican culture and in his Spanish language is echoed by Celia and by their son, Manuel.

(12) a. *A lot of people look at it as a disadvantage . . . "Oh, you're Spanish." But the way I look at it is this: blessed, you're blessed to speak two different languages. (Felipe, age 32)*

b. *Es importante—¡somos hispanos!*

([The Spanish language] is important—we're of Hispanic heritage!) (Celia, age 34)

c. *I'm happy to be Dominican because my parents are Dominican and I don't want to be the only one that's English [-speaking], that doesn't know Spanish in my family. . . . and I'm glad that I'm a Dominican that talks English and Spanish. (Manuel, age 11)*

As with many Hispanic children, Manuel's command of Spanish and English may afford him a unique dual identity that allows for the articulation of both Dominican and American values. It should be noted, however, that he identifies more closely with the linguistic and cultural norms of the larger society; this is observed in Celia's admission that others assess Manuel's behavior as "contra-Dominican."

(13) *Está orgulloso de ser dominicano, aunque algunos dicen que él es contra-dominicano.*

(He is proud to be Dominican, although some say that he is contra-Dominican.) (Celia, age 34)

It is, of course, not surprising that in the social conditions attendant to the societal dichotomies of the United States, many Dominicans, given the appropriate social impetus and opportunity, will seek to distance themselves from their native language, reserving the vernacular for the intimacy and safety of the community and home. Such a functional distribution of languages has become a real option for escaping linguistic prejudice and for becoming assimilated into the English-dominant U.S. society. Sadly, it is also in this situation that attrition of the minority language may ensue (cf., Appel and Muysken 1987; Seliger 1996).

More injuriously, like his father, Manuel has become the perpetrator of social acts that could work to his own disadvantage. As illustrated in 14, it is *he* who imposes the linguistic litmus that sorts out friend from foe.¹⁰

(14) *Sometimes African Americans are, like, brown colored. And there are people in Dominican Republic who are brown colored. But some African Americans don't talk Spanish. So, you could tell if that person talks a lot, a lot of Spanish, you can tell that they're not African American. But he says that his mom is from Dominican, and I was, like, "Give me some words in Spanish," and he was, like, "Hola." And he says some stuff and he looks like an African American, but then he showed me a picture from the Dominican [Republic] and I was, like, "Oh."* (Manuel, age 11)

It cannot go unremarked that Manuel requires substantiation beyond minimal language samples. This may owe to the fact that he himself would not fare well in such a trial: he reports to speaking little Spanish. For him, Dominican identity is not founded in language:

(15) *I don't like to talk Spanish. . . . Even if I only know a little bit of words, I keep saying I'm still Dominican Republican. . . . A Dominican who doesn't speak Spanish is still a Dominican.* (Manuel, age 11)

This mindset contrasts markedly with the sentiments of Nelson and José Torres, for whom distance from the immigrant language is not an option; in their experience, a Dominican who doesn't speak Spanish is African American.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the issue of Spanish language loyalty among Dominicans in New York has been shown to be highly complex. For black Dominicans, the language may be employed to its separatist advantage, isolating them from their African American neighbors. For white Dominicans, the minority language may be in competition with acculturation into the dominant social structure.¹¹ To be sure, future work is indicated in further corroborating these findings. In addition, the present study encourages attention to Spanish-language attrition, the reduction in Spanish-language competence and use with recessivism to English, in this population. A preliminary analysis of the speech samples collected reveals significant evidence of linguistic decline in the Spanish-language productions of the Álvarez family as compared with those of the Torres family.

Notes

¹As in Toribio (2000a), a caveat holds: Although the study is concerned primarily with aspects of the discipline of sociolinguistics as broadly conceived, its focus is different from that of other studies that take an interest in the functional distribution of speech forms. More specifically, this study departs from those whose emphasis is in analyzing social structures by appeal to quantifiable linguistic data. It does not present replicable models or statistical evidence of unique language behavior among Dominicans, but attends instead to the careful and deliberate description of language use as social phenomena. This work thus proceeds with the aim of furthering the understanding of the structure of society through the analysis of language and, as such, may be best situated within what generally defines the sociology of language, rather than sociolinguistics proper.

²Of course, while the advantages of adopting normative speech patterns may be obvious to educators, the matter is far from transparent for many children, and all that may be effected by teachers' exhortations in the direction of uniform standards is an increase in any linguistic insecurity that pupils already sense (cf., Lippi-Green 1997; Wardhaugh 1998).

³As discussed in Toribio (2000a), many Dominicans, especially those of older generations, are never fully integrated into the fabric of U.S. society; instead, they maintain *un pie aquí y el otro allá* (one foot here and the other there), guarding the hope of returning to the Dominican Republic.

⁴Ironically, in the Dominican Republic, "offending" Creole pronunciation is interpreted as compromising a speaker's Haitian identity. As Toribio (2000a) asserts, "Just as in preceding centuries of interaction with their Haitian neighbors, Dominicans have sought to affirm their Spanish cultural heritage and firmly distance themselves from their African roots. In the Dominican Republic, the result was a strengthening of *hispanidad*; in contemporary U.S. society, it is a strengthening of the Spanish language."

⁵In the 1990 census, 50% of Dominicans in New York City identified themselves as mulatto or other and 25% self-identified as black.

⁶As one upper-class dark-skinned Dominican explained, "Blanco es de la mente" (whiteness is in the mind) (cf., Toribio 2000a). But the vast majority of Dominicans call themselves *mestizo* or *mulatto*, though even within these categories, numerous subtle shadings are recognized—e.g., *trigueño*, *grifo*, *indio claro*, *indio oscuro*, *jabao*, *canela*, *moreno* (all forms produced in interviews). These are commonly buttressed by reference to related desirable or undesirable physical characteristics, such as hair textures and size of the nose, lips, hips, and buttocks (cf., Johnson 1998).

⁷As aptly observed by Grasmuck and Pessar (1996, 290), the dilemma arises "when Dominicans with African features or dark skin, regardless of their social sense of self, find themselves identified by many in the United States as Black and are discriminated against on that basis (rather than language, for example) and are often not prepared to interpret discrimination on these grounds."

⁸*Prieto* is a descriptor, often a term of endearment, but also commonly used derogatorily for a dark-skinned person.

⁹It is common for Hispanics in the United States to self-identify as "Spanish"; also attested is the classifying of English speakers as "English."

¹⁰This is reminiscent of the biblical passage of the Gileads' identification of comrades through the pronunciation of the word *shibboleth*. Consult Toribio (2000a) for additional examples from recent Dominican history.

¹¹As acknowledged in Toribio (2000a), this is not a novel finding, but an established sociolinguistic (and ethnolinguistic) fact: The presence of stigmatized minority languages is closely bound to the affirmation of a distinct ethnic identity. These findings are viewed as supporting Giles's ethnolinguistic identity theory, which suggests that when ethnic identity is perceived as important, individuals will make themselves favorably distinct on dimensions such as language.

Works Cited

- Appel, R., and P. Muysken. 1987. *Language contact and bilingualism*. New York: Routledge.
- Baud, M. 1997. Constitutionally White: The forging of a national identity in the Dominican Republic. In *Ethnicity in the Caribbean: Essays in honor of Harry Hoetink*, edited by G. Oostindie. London: Macmillan Caribbean.
- Giles, H. 1977. *Language, ethnicity and intragroup relations*. London: Academic Press.
- Giles, H., and R. St. Clair. 1979. *Language and social psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Giles, H., and W. E. Robinson. 1990. *Handbook of language and social psychology*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Grasmuck, S., and P. Pessar. 1996. Dominicans in the United States: First- and second-generation settlement, 1960-1990. In *Origins and destinies: Immigration, race, and ethnicity in America*, edited by S. Pedraza and R. G. Rumbaut, 280-92. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Johnson, K. 1998. Dominican cultural and racial identity. Senior honors thesis, Program in Latin American and Iberian Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Landrine, H., and El Klonoff. 1996. The schedule of racist events. *Journal of Black Psychology* 22: 144-68.
- Le Page, R. B., and A. Tabouret-Keller. 1985. *Acts of identity: Creole-based approaches to ethnicity and language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Lippi-Green, R. 1997. *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Núñez, J. 1999. Perception of discrimination, acculturation, and self-esteem in black and white Latinas/os. Masters thesis, Pennsylvania University.
- Phinney, J. S. 1990. Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin* 108: 499-514.
- Seliger, H. 1996. Primary language attrition in the context of bilingualism. In *Handbook of second language acquisition*, edited by W. Ritchie and T. Bhatia, 605-25. New York: Academic Press.
- Tabouret-Keller, A. 1997. Language and identity. In *The handbook of sociolinguistics*, edited by F. Coulmas, 315-26. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Toribio, A. J. 2000a. Language variation and the linguistic enactment of identity among Dominicans. *Linguistics: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Language Sciences* 38: 1133-1159.
- _____. 2000b. Setting parametric limits on dialectal variation in Spanish. *Lingua* 110: 315-341.
- _____. 2001. On Spanish language decline. In *Proceedings of the 25th Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development*, edited by A.H.J. Do, L. Domínguez, and Al Johansen, 768-79. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1991. *Persons of Hispanic origin in the United States: 1990*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Vásquez, L. A., E. García-Vásquez, S. Bauman, and A. Sierra. 1997. Skin color, acculturation, and community interest among Mexican American students: A research note. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 19: 377-386.
- Wardhaugh, R. 1998. *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Copyright of Bilingual Review is the property of Bilingual Review. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.