Exposing Prejudice

Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class

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Puerto Rico. Our contingent of twelve or so VISTA volunteers was sent to Puerto Rico to serve as teachers' aides in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Program, under the aegis of Instrucción Pública, the Puerto Rican Board of Education. Although those of us who did not speak Spanish went with the understanding that we would be taught Spanish when we got there, we were informed upon arrival that Instrucción Pública and ACTION (the federal agency that administered VISTA) had decided that we would be better English teachers if we did not speak Spanish. We taught ourselves as best we could with our training supervisor's covert help and after six weeks were assigned to schools in small towns in the eastern half of the island. I was assigned with two other volunteers to Cidra.

Once there, I found that ACTION had given the elementary school where I was assigned no clear idea who I was or what I was doing. I had been sent in mid-November, a month before the semester ended for Christmas break. Not knowing what else to do with me, the school's principal assigned me to cover the third and fifth-grade ESL classes, since the regular ESL teacher was out on leave and the classes were being covered by other teachers. The instructional materials, based on descriptivist linguistic principles, were supposed to ease students into English. In theory they outlined language structures based on common usage patterns that were supposed to help students learn to converse. This is not what happened in the classroom. Students regarded the lessons as a game, a drill, or a source of boredom, but there was little evidence that they saw themselves learning a viable language. Yet outside school they were surrounded by bits of English in advertising, product labels, and store names. Their classmates, relatives, and neighbors had lived in New York, New Jersey, Hartford, or Chicago. English words and phrases were common in their Spanish.

My painfully limited Spanish left me immensely frustrated in the classroom, and while I resented the situation into which I had been put, I resented even more the situation into which my students had been put. Yet, I did not want to quit. I decided I would create a situation to benefit both students and teachers, since they had no choice about learning English in the curriculum. When the new semester started in January, I suggested that I take the two groups of students that seemed most out of place in regular ESL classes: those who were the farthest ahead because they had recently come from the continental United States and were beyond the limits of the instructional material; and those who were the farthest behind and suffering from the language version of math anxiety. The first group was easy. My job was to boost their reading and writing skills. For the second group, I could do little more than give them some sense of control, however small, over reading, writing, or speaking English.

I was intrigued by the sense that what the kids knew as "English" in the classroom was to them a very different entity from the "English" that faced advertising, print, and casual slang. I was even more intrigued by the fact that while many Puerto Ricans seemed to shy away from being irritated by, or even actively resent an extensive exposure to English, some seemed to welcome it. My two VISTA housemates and I had not long been in town before we began to meet children, adolescents, and a few young adults who had lived many years in U.S. cities, or as they put it, oficina ("outside") Puerto Rico. Several said they felt peculiar and uncomfortable about the way family and neighbors reacted to their English, teasing or scolding them for acting as if they were showing off and "acting American."

After I left Puerto Rico in 1971, I worked for a year and a half as a junior counselor at the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC). MRC had begun receiving Spanish-speaking referrals and wanted a caseworker in the office who could cover such clients. When I began taking these cases, I found that the usual diagnostic tests and procedures that MRC used were only available in English so I looked for Spanish-language versions. I also made my first appointments in the clients' homes rather than in the agency, to put them at ease and, if they were young, to meet their parents in familiar surroundings. My supervisor soon told me that I spent too much time and effort on these clients and that my job was to find out whether or not they met agency guidelines for services and if they did not, to close the cases. I contacted a senior administrator about developing a centralized set of resources for Spanish-speaking clients. Some weeks later, my supervisor told me that they had discovered an "irregularity" in the way I had been hired and that I would be let go or transferred to another office. The bottom line, as I should have realized, was the number of successfully closed cases that came out of each office. My supervisor did not welcome the active recruitment of complex Spanish-speaking cases. I decided it was time to apply to graduate school.

When I began my dissertation fieldwork in the fall of 1977, I spent the first four months in Cidra where I had lived as a VISTA volunteer, partly to relearn Spanish and partly to reaffamiliarize myself with the background of the people with whom I would work in New York. Again I found people who shied away from English; again I met a few people who had lived in U.S. cities and wanted someone familiar to talk to. The people I knew in Puerto Rico who were comfortable with English had lived in the continental United States or had gone to private or Catholic school in Puerto Rico; some had done both. Those who had gone to private or Catholic school were usually middle class.

I also met several people who had learned English as immigrants or children of immigrants in New York or Chicago and who sought the chance to use it with me. The irony is, in the continental United States they had experienced English in precisely the kinds of working-class contexts that conflated language with class and race and where they would have felt least comfortable around a middle-class white.

I give this brief sketch to make the point that it is not the code per se which carries the meaning, but how the code is perceived and taken up. If a Puerto Rican who must have known linguistic and race prejudice from Americans in Brooklyn or Jersey City is eager to seek out and speak English to an American in a small town in Puerto Rico, the important issue is that person's sense of control over English and the politics that structure that sense of control. In the U.S., urban neighborhoods in which this study is set, many factors converge to rob Puerto Ricans of control over almost any aspect of their lives. Language is a lightning-rod for this convergence because, ideologically, it is something which
Americans are supposed to be able to control. In Puerto Rico, knowing English is a sign of success and control over a definingly American practice. When Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico display that knowledge, they evoke resentment. For Puerto Ricans who have lived for years in continental U.S. cities, the English they learned there, familiarly switched with Spanish and probably shared with black friends, has become a part of them, and it is hard to give up (see Zentella 1990 for further discussion).

The People in This Book and How We Came to Know Each Other

When I started this research in 1978, I planned to study the social structure of bilingualism by charting ways that English, Spanish, and code-switching fit into local domains of family, neighbor, school, and work relations. I expected to find clearly marked domains of English or Spanish usage, as suggested by the Fishman et al. (1971) model, with clear patterns of switching that matched the speech events making up the Puerto Rican bilingual speech community's day-to-day life. I planned to study these through interviews and tape recordings of routine code-switched conversations. I thought English would be associated with an American identity or American cultural values, and Spanish with intimate family values. I soon felt the frustration of focusing on English and Spanish when I wanted to talk about politics. It took me years to rethink my approach along the lines developed in this book, yet the evidence seemed all around me.

I chose New York because I wanted a site where Puerto Rican neighborhoods had long been established. In January 1978 I took a job as linguistic consultant (studying language use among Puerto Rican and African American teenage boys) with a research and resource group on the Lower East Side. I worked there until September 1979. Many of my initial contacts were made through the four other members of the research group, including the director, Jagna Shariff, and the secretary, Nilsa Buon, who also took part in the research for this book. The five of us tutored after school, ran interference with city agencies for local residents, and ran a summer program for local children, with day trips, lunches supplied by the city, and an arts and crafts program that I organized and taught. In this way I first came to know local children and eventually their mothers and the rest of their families, a process which took some months. I worked with eight families, seven Puerto Rican and one African American. My 1984 doctoral thesis, an ethnography of routine bilingual behavior and networks on New York's Lower East Side, was based on this research. Once I finished it, I felt it concentrated too much on "the stuff inside" the boundary, that is, the behavior that marked one as bilingual, and that I had concentrated too little on the emergence of boundaries. I decided not to publish it, but it did contain the seeds of the approach taken in this book.

I remained in touch with several of the families from the 1978-1979 study, or I should say, they remained in touch with me. In 1982 I returned to New York for five months to do the interviews on which the second half of this book is based.

At this point I worked intensively with nine people: Milagros (Millie) Wright and her daughter, Cathy, Marilyn Mejia and her brother José, Eugenia (Jenny) Pacheco, Jenny's son Luis Molina, Luis' wife Rosalina (Rosie), Rosie's mother Generosa (Tay) Román, and Nilsa Buon, Millie, Cathy, Marilyn, José, Jenny, and Luis all took part in the 1978-79 work; Cathy, Marilyn, José, and Luis had been my after-school tutees. Everyone in the 1988 study appears under his or her own name. We decided to use real names because of the ways in which people participated. The 1988 interviews and the follow-up interviews done in 1991 involved discussion, questioning, and argument that structured the interviews and, in many ways, the writing itself.

People reflected on and analyzed their experience and helped develop the object of study, the informing theory and the methods of investigation. This text was complexly created. Using real names gives credit where credit is due.

When I began the 1988 research, I spent three months keeping track of points that surfaced in ordinary conversations, such as how it felt to be the butt of racial teasing or to be treated as if one knew nothing. I brought my laptop computer to people's homes, raised the points I had tracked, and asked people to expand and analyze them. These discussions shaped questions that formed the basis of subsequent tape-recorded interviews. People told stories and anecdotes illustrating the general principles we discussed: the politics of class relations; the conflation of race and class; the experience of being marked; the thin line between "advancing yourself" and "acting white." This material was supplemented by 1991 interviews exploring people's perceptions and analyses of "poor" and "middle-class." As Fox puts it, ethnography is not a place but a stance, the construction of a frame of inquiry. The frame that governs this study has been interactively, often accidentally constructed, pulling in "the relations from afar that structure inequality in local, everyday life" (Fox 1991:95) in what Appadurai (1991) calls the shifting, non-localized, globally connected ethnoscope. The problem this book addresses evolved over fourteen years in which periods of ongoing conversation alternate with periods of limited contact. Much turned up in what seemed to me ordinary talk; much was said in 1979 interviews that took me years to understand, especially when people talked about respect, defense, acting white, having the wrong accent, or trying to get the right words. Nevertheless, I found it easy to explain my theoretical base to the people I worked with because it was familiar territory to them. They frequently think and theorize about the experience of prejudice. When, in this book, I show how they do this, I am not explaining "native" theory in "real" (i.e., academic) terms. I am showing how all of us arrived naturally, over time, at an understanding of the informing dynamics.

This book does not present a generic New York Puerto Rican, because no such entity exists. I worked with a small group of people, mostly women—many women than men felt comfortable talking about language and prejudice with me. I show in detail how people conceptualize and confront problem situations and map them onto English and Spanish, focusing on the complexity, depth, and consistency of their constructions and reflections. Above all, I emphasize the social and
The most visible and influential authors of racializing discourses occupy power positions. They are in a position to say a great deal, and the people racialized are not in a position to say much in return. Ethniciizing discourses allow some voice to ethnicities to speak for themselves and their "group" as long as they do so in ways that fit the interests of the nation-state—hence the emphasis on ethnic achievement and ethnic community. The problem is, however, people may try to ethniciize (having fewer other options for respectability) their success depends largely upon their political/economic base. The growing business presence of Asian-Americans has made it possible for them to be cast by media and politicians in more ethniciizing, less racializing terms than they were a few decades ago. Hispanic Magazine emphasizes upward mobility and political activity among Latinos, casting them as a social force to be reckoned with and culturally respected.

Racializing discourses equate language difference with disorder, with images of illiterate foreigners flooding the United States and refusing to speak English or hordes of the underclass speaking an accented English with "broken" grammar and "mixed" vocabulary. In ethniciizing discourses, linguistic differences are delegated to venues where difference is carefully contained in folkloric performance, religious expression, or ethnic press and broadcasting media. Difference is safe when it cannot impede the "natural" progress of social mobility in the United States, but language difference is spoken and written about as an insurmountable barrier to such progress. People may safely retain their own language so long as it does not show in their English, which must display no more than a slight accent and occasional quaint expression. Pragmatics—the social interpretation of meaning—does not enter the picture. Ignored are the facts that people face information barriers that go beyond word meaning or that certain accents put speakers at risk of being judged as stupid or unworthy of notice.

Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Other Others

U.S. racialized perceptions developed in conjunction with the institution of slavery, with aggressive engagement of Native Americans, and the expansionist policy of Manifest Destiny. Horsman (1981) traces the growth of U.S. self-identity as "Anglo-Saxon" from the late 1700s in newspapers, books, scientific treatises, religious tracts, and political speeches. Black slaves fit into the lowest level of the racial hierarchy, as unfitted by nature for any place in society other than slave labor. Indians presented a more complex picture, at least initially, when many Americans (influenced by Enlightenment principles) saw them as savage but as part of the same order of creation. After 1800 polygenist race discourses multiplied, justifying slavery and expansionist policies by positing separate creations for separate and inferior races. By 1850 the race-hierarchy model was firmly ensconced in public consciousness as "science." The United States was thus imagined to have a natural right to sweep aside the Indians and Mexicans who stood in the way of U.S. expansion. Racial discourses developed steam, encompassing "other white races" who would "be absorbed into the existing mass while non-white races would be rigorously excluded from equal participation as citizens" (Horsman 1981:189).

The racial opposition of American and Mexican was well under way by 1840:

In confronting the Mexicans the Americans clearly formulated the idea of themselves as an Anglo-Saxon race. The use of Anglo-Saxon in a racial sense, somewhat rare in the political arguments of the 1830's, increased rapidly later in the decade and became commonplace by the mid 1840's. (p. 208)

As the United States became increasingly concerned with spreading Anglo-Saxon Christian civilization across the continent, Mexicans were cast as failures, a "mixed inferior race with considerable Indian and some black blood" (p. 210). The "Mexican character" was seen as idle, animalistic, vicious, shiftless, dumb, ineffective, cowardly, and mongrel increasingly lumped in with Indians and blacks (see also Steinberg 1989:21–24). Meanwhile, the United States was busily looking to its advantage with Mexico. Since the 1830's U.S. citizens had been moving into Texas, the New Mexico territory, and California. Eventually President Polk attempted to buy the territory but Mexico did not wish to sell. Territorial disputes broke out, U.S. settlers declared independence from Mexico, and war was declared in 1846. In 1848 Mexico ceded what is now California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico for $15 million and relinquished all claims to Texas. The U.S.-Mexican boundary was set at the Rio Grande.

As U.S. racial perceptions of Mexicans evolved, they formed the basis for perceptions of Caribbean Latinos. President Polk had also wanted to buy Cuba but the Spanish were not selling. President Fillmore in 1852 hesitated to pursue the purchase of Cuba only because it would bring too many Cubans into the United States. As Fillmore told Congress (Congressional Globe, 32nd Congress, 2nd session, appendix, p. 1):

Were this island comparatively destitute of inhabitants, or occupied by a kindred race, I should regard it, if voluntarily ceded by Spain, as a most desirable acquisition. But, under existing circumstances, I should look upon its incorporation into our Union as a very hazardous measure. It would bring into the confederacy a population of a different national stock, speaking a different language, and not likely to harmonize with the other members. (cited in Horsman 1981:283)

To the United States, the worth of Caribbean, Mexican, and Central American people lay in direct proportion to the raw materials and labor that they provided. Themselves natives of complex racial systems, Caribbean and Latin people found their encounters with the United States placed them squarely in the category "Other." Both the United States and Spain racialized, displaced, and often killed indigenous people, but where the United States did so without incorporating them into the economic or social system, Spain incorporated indigenous people into the bottom rung of their production system as peasants. Unlike the U.S. race model, the Spanish model afforded some degree of racial continuity from the
Spanish-born peninsular to the local-born azielo of Spanish family (the landowner and professional class) to the "mixed blood" mestizos of Spanish and Native American descent (farmers, possibly small business owners) to the indígena or indio (Native American peasant farmers). Thus, raza in Latin American usage has a connotation substantially different from that of race in the United States. Where the latter is a discrete, binary, naturalized classification, the former can mean a people, a lineage, a social group; it has finer shades and intermediate categories. Race is assessed as combinations of personal characteristics and social circumstances. Latin raza is about a complex identity in the New World. Race in the United States basically codes European versus non-European descent (Touzelot 1990). To U.S. eyes, most Latin Americans were (and are) racially Other, as disconnected from the Anglo-Saxon as are Indians.

In the same climate, the "new migrations" of southern and eastern Europe, while providing a labor reserve for work that native-born, white Americans could not or would not do, were seen as immoral, unhealthy, and unintelligent. Discriminatory policies were justified by "scientific" measurement. Objectifying and measuring difference in the United States has deep roots in nation-building: the first population census was mandated by the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Through much of the nineteenth century, measurements of population growth and diversity fueled pride in the success of the American experiment (Conk 1986:160). But as the republic's labor pool filled with people who were not northern European or not European at all, growth seemed less wonderfully progressive. A quarter of the U.S. work force was foreign-born by 1910; in the same year, the Dillingham Commission (a congressional investigation of immigration) reported that 58 percent of the mining and manufacturing workers in twenty major industries surveyed were foreign born (Steinberg 1989:36). The National Origins Act, passed in 1924, sought to control dangerous foreign elements by allowing a maximum of 150,000 immigrants a year with 75 percent allocated to Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany. These proportions, based on immigrant demographics in the 1920 census, were thought to represent a reasonable U.S. racial balance (Conk 1986:164).

Limits on immigration from southern and eastern Europe were further justified by "hard data" supplied by the new science of intelligence testing and by sociological surveys. In 1921 Robert Yerkes administered intelligence tests to Army recruits. He mapped his results onto what he saw as a distribution of innate intelligence, placing the mental age of Anglo whites at 13.08, Europeans at 10-11 (Russians 11.34; Italians 11.01; Poles 10.74), and Negros at 10.41. Yerkes's arguments were further developed by C. C. Brigham in his 1923 work A Study of American Intelligence. This "became a primary vehicle for translating the army results on group differences into social action" (Gould 1981:224).

In a survey of articles published in the American Journal of Sociology between 1895 and 1935, Phelan (1989) describes numerous sociological studies of racial habits, character traits, superiority, and inferiority. Of particular interest is a 1916 survey in which various sociologists were asked to rank ten groups (classified as white Americans, Germans, English, Hebrews, Scandinavians, Irish, French, Slavs, Southern Italians, and Negroes) by personality trait.

White Americans were ranked first in intellectual ability, cooperation, leadership and efficiency, while Germans ranked first on self-control, moral integrity and perseverance, and Hebrews were first on aspiration. Southern Italians and Negroes were ranked ninth and tenth respectively on all traits except sympathy, on which Negroes were second (after the Irish) and Southern Italians were third. Of particular interest is the ironic conclusion of the study: "The object of this study is to urge upon sociologists the wider collection of data and its precise arrangement, so that expressions of personal opinion may yield to widely accepted statements of fact, and the general affirmation may give place to quantitative estimates." (Phelan 1989:381-390)

By the 1920s, academic racializing was being challenged by Franz Boas and his anthropology students at Columbia University, and by Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and their students and colleagues in sociology at the University of Chicago. Boas stressed the universality of culture and the absence of any inherent connection among race, culture, and language. Park and Wirth proposed the existence of a race-relations cycle, whereby groups moving into the United States passed through five stages (contact, competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation), each group retaining its territorial locus until dispersed by assimilation. Boas and Park have been criticized for underestimating the importance and endurance of cultural difference in the social construction of race (see Szwez 1975 on Boas; Stanford 1985 on Park). Nevertheless, the very fact that they saw race as a construct was a signal development. Park, with his stress on assimilation, was closer than Boas to the 1930s "good ethnic citizen" philosophy by which churches, unions, and political parties recruited immigrant membership. By World War II public education (beginning with citizenship classes) had come to be seen as the primary vehicle of assimilation. Assimilation meant the "good citizenship" enjoyed by the successful ethnic.

By the 1940s, ethnicizing discourses had also emerged in popular portraits of ethnic working-class families striving to "make it." Ethnic literature and radio programs presented the working class as the immigrant point of entry into U.S. society. The idea that the working class was also a point of departure into a life of social mobility was the advertising theme of the 1950s. Developers and manufacturers traded heavily on the image of the young man with the young family moving up in the world, from city to suburb, to a life of modern convenience and popular luxury, a move subsidized by servicemen's benefits and the establishment of credit. Lipson (1986) compares 1940s radio and 1950s television versions of programs about ethnic families— The Goldbergs, Life With Luigi, I Remember Mama. Where radio presents such details of working-class life as apartments in the Bronx, old furniture, or relatives and boarders living with the family, the television versions of the same programs presented houses in the suburbs inhabited by nuclear families buying new furniture on the installment plan. On television, the working class was
representation of social structure and linguistic behavior but does not get at the interpretation of variability. The sociolinguistic index is a sophisticated and useful analytic construct but it does not belong to a voice.

Social actors hear voices—manifestations of social action—not strings of phonemes. Accents do not reduce to phonemes for the same reason that kinship does not reduce to blood or sex, nor race to physiognomy or genes. As Schneider (1980 [1968]) explains kinship:

There are certain cultural notions which are put, phrased, expressed, symbolized by cultural notions depicting biological facts, or what purport to be biological facts. Sexual intercourse and the attendant elements which are said to be biological facts insofar as they concern kinship as a cultural system are of this order. Kinship is not a theory about biology; but biology serves to formulate a theory about kinship. [p. 115; italics in original]

And as Gould (1979:232) explains race:

Geographic variability, not race, is self-evident. No one can deny that Homo sapiens is a strongly differentiated species; few will quarrel with the observation that differences in skin color are the most striking outward sign of this variability. But the fact of variability does not require the designation of races.

An accent, like kinship and race, is a category of location which proceeds from a center, a point of reference from which people as social actors orient their sense of who they are, where they belong, and what their actions mean to each other in Weber’s sense of social action (1978:385–395). In the United States, the heart of a person’s social world is made of relations with people who look and sound like oneself, who share origins, language(s) and accent, and who, above all, share common blood as kin. Shared race/ethnicity is meaningful when it designates people who could be kin through common descent. All these axes connect people in primary ways to a world that existed before them and that will continue after them. The signs that mark categories of belonging mean different things to those sharing lifelong routine experience than they do to those looking in from the outside, such as social analysts. The same signs may be interpreted differently depending on the interpreter’s point of reference: people hear me as white, American, Northern, Eastern, or central New York.

An accent implies the existence of boundaries, but boundaries are much harder to locate than are centers or focal points. Accents have a deictic quality, pointing out from the speaker’s “zero point” in time and space, so the center is fixed in a way that boundaries are not. This sense of pointing out from the speaker is missing from the sociolinguistic phoneme variable. The variable indexes a category of person (e.g., a certain percent of lower-middle-class males will pronounce the first sound of the word “that” as [d] in certain environments), but this indexes a point in an abstract structure, not a point in a situation of speaking. As Benveniste (1971[1956]) argues, language only becomes discourse when it does index the moment of speaking, at which point the indexical also becomes the deictic. Once that happens, the interpretation of deictic elements—pronouns, tense markers, time and space adverbs—depends on who, when, and where the speaker is.

The deictic quality that gives accents their indeterminate nature has important consequences for analysis. Variables and variable rules were designed for a relatively static model in which the primary concern is statistical probability of behavior in tightly defined contexts. As Dittmar (1983), Romaine (1982:240ff), Pousada and Greenlee (1980), and Mannheim (1991) have variously argued, the appropriate unit for sociolinguistic study is that which starts from the problem of social meaning, not that which is most readily quantified. Pousada and Greenlee, who worked with bilingual Puerto Ricans in East Harlem, are particularly critical of the asocial, ahistorical, and aprocessual aspects of conventional sociolinguistics.10 The problem is not with multivariate analysis, which characterizes current variable rule work, but with the ways in which social factors are formulated to fit the analysis of variables. Gould’s point on race is well taken here: multivariate analysis of human genetic variation confirms the impossibility of understanding race as anything other than a social construct. Similarly, multivariate analysis in sociolinguistics can show a social complexity of linguistic practice that does not correlate isomorphically with social categories. This raises the important question of how categories of person are constructed and how they fit into the local political/symbolic economy.11

Metacommunicative Politics

Irvine argues that analysts should examine the ways in which specific code properties are meaningful to speakers, both as discrete, autonomous, or rule-ordered linguistic elements and as “ideas about social relations, including ideas about the history of persons and groups” (1989:253). Linguistic elements and ideas form a system in which:

Verbal skills and performances are among the resources and activities forming a socioeconomic system; and the relevant knowledge, talent and use-rights are not evenly, randomly and fortuitously distributed. (p. 255)

The code properties of English, as experienced and understood by the people in this study, carry race/class risk insofar as they figure into an American ideology of correctness. Not all language segments are subject to correction, nor is correctness always an issue. Correctness lies not in the forms per se but in their relation to the politics of context. What works fine in the inner sphere, metacommunicating safety and familiarity, is a “mistake” in the outer, sending very risky messages. It is no surprise that Ryan and Carranza (1975) found Mexican-American students much more likely to rate a “Mexican’ accent as solidarity at home than in the classroom, where students are most aware of accents as cultural capital. If correction is possible,
it is (ideologically speaking) the individual's responsibility to know what to correct and how to do it. People who do not correct their language cannot disconnect race from class or rewrite race as ethnicity. They abdicate any hope of metacommunicative control. Where "mistakes" reinforce white ideas about "lowlife" Puerto Ricans, correct language provides a chance to challenge that stereotype, to be seen instead as a hard-working Hispanic-American and to open the closed doors of a class-structured social environment. For Rosie and Luis Molina, metacommunicative control is what schooling should be all about. They stress the merits of their children's new school:

RM: That's why I like this school that the kids are at because they give them proper—what is it called? They're teaching them how to speak English, proper words, no mistakes—

LM: Grammar and pronunciation—

RM: Grammar, that they cannot know what race you are.

**Metacommunicating Exclusion**

When Nilsa Buon started her current job, she said she made a conscious effort to keep English and Spanish absolutely separate. She succeeded at first to the extent that her boss did not know she was Hispanic. But the effort was tiring. After a few months she could not keep it up, and she felt the two languages start to scramble. She said she had always been painfully conscious of how she sounds and how she might be judged at work. She finds it exhausting to stay in English if she is talking to someone "very educated" such as "my boss or sometimes even you." At such times she feels her "Spanish accent" just "slipping under the door," as if something were oozing through the cracks. Her imagery is straight out of *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966): language pollution, matter out of place, uncontrolled, unpurified.

Tay Roman explains the importance of knowing "right words" in controlling others' perceptions of her:

**TR:** We want to explain something and we can't. And we try and we try and we try and we can't explain what we want to say. And I get nervous. I get—you know, I would like to sometimes to disappear because like it just seems something against me. And I want to defend myself. I don't have the right words to explain myself. I need somebody else to do it for me, you know? Maybe I would be able to do it but I get nervous and I'm afraid. Maybe what I'm gonna say is not right.

**BU:** And what would happen if it wasn't right, what would be the result?

**TR:** Well, it could be a lot of things, because if I say something—I mean, if I think I am saying something that would be helpful for me and maybe I'm saying something that is gonna be against me. I don't know because—I don't know—maybe I don't know what I'm saying.

Saying the right words casts her in a positive light ("helpful for me"); saying the wrong words casts her in a negative light ("against me"). She conveys a sense of struggling with unwieldy pieces that do not quite fit together:

**BU:** So . . . that's when you find yourself in a position when it's hard to defend yourself—

**TR:** Yes, it's hard. If you don't speak good English, if you don't know how to explain yourself; how to say things clear, it's difficult. That's why you get nervous and you get confused and everything.

She stresses the importance of clarity. Clarity and order define boundaries when status is on the line; what is orderly *enough* depends on context. Responsibility for getting it right is not an issue when people talk about understandable things and when the terms of understanding can be negotiated, as is more likely to be the case with neighbors:

Well, I have a friend here that's a colored lady, and uh, if I say something that is not right, she will correct me. And if she says something that I don't understand she will explain me. I will ask, you know, what you mean with that word, and she will explain to me. I don't have no problem.

Metalinguistic recourse is available: she can ask her neighbor to explain things. But when there is a status difference, the responsibility for negotiating meaning is hers alone:

Because I feel that that person is on top of me. You know, I think that that person, not—I don't mean that she is better than me. But I think that is a person that is on top of me and I'm afraid to, you know, I don't have the confidence. If she says something and I don't understand it, maybe I will ask her once. But twice, I'm afraid to do it. Because some persons, you know, they don't like a person to ask a question more than once. . . . If I ask them a question and they answer me and I don't understand them and I ask them a question twice and I see some kind of faces that they do or, like, ooh, you know, she asks me the same question again, then I feel—I feel bad. That's why I am afraid to ask questions twice.

"Good" English is always implicitly, usually explicitly, measured against the written standard. Tay has taken classes for some years with just that standard in mind. Formal schooling is one's primary, perhaps only, access to explicitly codified rules. But "getting the degree" takes a considerable investment of time and effort that can be a real hardship for working-class people, especially women. Jenny Pacheco's story is particularly vivid and painful. She had been taking courses at Hostos Junior College in the Bronx and had been doing well, when her son was killed. She decided to drop her courses rather than risk failing. She went to see one of her professors (translated from Spanish, see endnote for original):

He told me, "The best thing you did was not come to take the exams because if so, you would have failed." So then, here I am with the pain of my son's death. And he hits me with this, when he was the first professor I talked to. Because he wanted to. He was one of the harshest ones that made me suffer with English. He's black. He said to me "why don't you know how to read English well? You
know that I make you read" . . . I almost never raised my hand to talk because I was scared of saying something wrong and having them laugh at me, you know—no, not that. But when he made me read, I had to do it. And I read English badly because I didn’t—I understand everything but I don’t read it right. So he told me "why do you read English so poorly?" Then I left and that gave me such grief that I’m squeezing myself [rubbing her chest with grief]. Because I came back from Puerto Rico [after her son’s funeral] with that pain to face this bullshit that I didn’t go see any (other) professor, I came back crying, I came back here. And because of him, I let them throw me out. . . . Without knowing if I could pass the test, because he—the fact that I couldn’t read English fast and fluently in front of the class didn’t mean that I couldn’t read it to myself and figure out what you’re trying to tell me on paper. I could have done that exam and I could’ve gotten, God only knows, if maybe even perfect, because I could read it for myself, what I didn’t have was the fluency to read it aloud.12

Jenny’s dilemma is as follows. As far as this teacher is concerned, the communicative bottom line, shaping his perception of everything she does and says, is her classroom and test performance. In effect, she is her test score. So she wants to give school her best shot. She must do so in a system that makes minimal allowance for emergencies, for grief and loss, for travel and funeral arrangements that must be made with limited funds. Her story is not unusual and not particularly extreme. Working-class women in night school are constantly faced with demands made on their time, energy, and resources by the lives for which they are responsible. Moreover, working-class urban-minority people are generally at greater risk from accidents, inadequate health care arrangements, and violence than are middle-class white people, and their lives are shaped by a disproportionate degree of death and illness. One of the especially pernicious "hidden injuries of class" is the sheer lack of protection from complex and difficult circumstances. Class advantage brings not only money and status but far greater financial and social resources for handling emergencies, illness, and grief (see Rapp 1987).

When people face situations where they may be stigmatized, accents become risky, as Niña described above; when people do not face such situations, accents are not risky. Luis and Rosie Molina describe this contrast:

BU: Does [your accent] come out all the time or do you just feel it sometimes?
RM: No entiendo. [I don’t understand.]
LM: To me, to me it comes out—
RM: Explain to me.
LM: OK, to me it comes out when I’m dealing with just mostly—
RM: —white folks.
BU: When do people make you really conscious of how you talk?
LM: When I’m dealing with white folks. Where I work now? They always, always, these guys, A is white, B, he’s from Guyana, . . . then there is C who is also white, Irish white.13 And they let me know the fact that they—in a way they sort of remind me who I am. . . . You know, it’s like when I speak they let me know that I am Hispanic.

Luis, like Niña, has constant contact with whites in a work situation where race and class differences are much sharper and language a much riskier issue than around the neighborhood. Luis sees the leaky accent issue in terms of his co-workers’ perceptions of his speech. They seem to Luis to look for ways to distance his speech from their standard so as to highlight their perception of his worth as a person. Race ("Hispanic") frames notions of linguistic impurity and blurred boundary ("interference"), hence Luis feels judged as not trying hard enough to overcome the limits of race and be a good ethnic American. Such linguistic morality is central to ethnicizing discourses and is a yardstick that minoritized people often use against each other. It is no accident that Luis mentions Guyanese along with two white co-workers. If what Luis speaks is not "really" English (due to interference), he can be regarded as not "really" American.

The inability to control language boundaries is most risky when a person is faced with a difference in status and authority. When Niña Buon talks to someone who speaks much less English than she does, she does not face a sense of confusion or loss of control. When faced with the opposite situation, someone whose Spanish is better than hers, she feels fine about her English yet may well find her Spanish inadequate. But in those situations, she does not face the same consequences. The fluent Spanish speaker is unlikely to be in a position to hire, promote, pass, fail, or grade her. Marilyn Molina describes the same phenomenon and nicely lays out the dynamics of outer-sphere English:

BU: Is the way you feel about being teased about Spanish in Puerto Rico the same as how you feel if the landlord got on you about your accent?
MM: No, because we only get Spanish from our parents but we get English from everywhere here, the schools and everywhere so if you make a mistake in English, you feel worse.

Metacommunicating Solidarity

The other side of exclusion is the mutual solidarity that can be felt among the excluded. José typifies this in terms of "good" versus "accented" English (notes):

JM: When I have friends that speak OK, good English, I get to not like it anymore. I like to be with people who have an accent because otherwise I feel strange—they all have that same tone, the same voice.
BU: How does that make you feel?
However, José Mojica (1988) describes the same dynamic from outside, when the excluding language represents someone else’s in-group:

I be talking to—you know there’s Chinese people also there [in his program] and I don’t know what else, Italian people there too. And they be talking, right? And something stops and I start hearing Chinese. And I say, are they still—are we still communicating and stuff? . . . I don’t know what happens. Inside, I’m mad. But I don’t want to show it, I don’t want to say, “am I still in this?” Or maybe they just want to be themselves.

6. How do you feel about Americans speaking Spanish to you?

This is a question of defense against outer-sphere invasion by white Americans. Hardest hit are those who feel vulnerable in English. Jenny Pacheco and a neighbor (N) (1988):

JP: With you I speak Spanish and however much you say to me, I understand you, and I’m someone interested in you learning it.

N: But you know, most of all, also, this should be considered, the fact that you should feel proud when you’re speaking a language that’s not your normal language . . . it makes me feel good personally to speak the American language knowing behind that, that I know a second language.

JP: But because of that—it’s because of that that we feel proud [of speaking English] because we want to be at their same level. Because they want to make us [be] seen as Hispanics, as if we are under them.

Jenny adds:

JP: If you—not you because I understand you very well—but someone who—an American who comes and makes some conversation and says a lot of words with a lot of effort. And I have to keep telling him what he’s going to say to me. It’s not in my interest for that person to learn Spanish because it’s not a relation of mine. . . . No, it’s the relationship of the person and it doesn’t interest me whether or not they speak Spanish, so it bothers me. 10

When the ability to defend yourself in English is an important source of symbolic capital, there is an important difference between speaking no English and speaking some English. If people can defend themselves in English but are forced to speak Spanish, they are robbed of the chance to acquire symbolic capital, or as Jenny put it, “We want to be at their same level.” Moreover, if the American is less than fluent in Spanish, the Puerto Rican has to do the linguistic work for both and still gets no symbolic capital. José Mojica (1988 notes) further spells out the dynamic:

Or like an American comes and talks to you in Spanish. You’re already used to them in English but if they talk to you in Spanish it’s like their personality changes, like they’re trying to make you feel less in life, less important. I don’t like when they speak my language in a different [accent]. If everyone’s going to speak English the accent is OK.

An American who speaks Spanish without invitation is invasive, as José and Marilyn explain:

BU: So if an American social worker wanted to talk to you in Spanish, it would be like going into your house uninvited, it would make you feel—

JM: Uncomfortable.

MM: Unless they explained they wanted to practice, then it’s OK. Otherwise no.

José elaborates:

BU: Getting back to Americans speaking Spanish—is it an invasion?

JM: Right. When my social worker speaks Spanish it’s not so comfortable because of the English accent in the Spanish and it’s hard to understand when they’re talking your language with an accent. It’s not the same with English, this is America, everyone’s supposed to know English but you don’t have to speak Spanish for me. English is OK, I talk English. If I go with my mother, it’s OK for my mother to understand, but not for me.

“OK for my mother to understand but not for me” means the difference between his mother knowing no English (which makes defense a moot point) and him knowing some English (which allows him to play for symbolic capital). “Practicing” Spanish focuses on formal rather than social skill and is less invasive.

BU: You told me this the last time I was here [in 1979], you told me I didn’t sound real in Spanish.

JM: I remember.

BU: So the difference between an American asking to use Spanish to practice and an American just using Spanish is what?

JM: Making fun of you.

BU: If I just started to talk to you in Spanish and you knew I was American, how would you react?

MM: I would tell you in Spanish and then a word in English so you would know I knew it and if they kept on in Spanish I would stay in Spanish.

BU: Even if they seemed American?

MM: Yes.

JM: Not me. You go to their level, I wouldn’t.

Luis and Rosie spell out a position very much like José’s (1988 notes):

BU: How do you feel about Americans who try to speak Spanish with you?

RM: It doesn’t bother me.
I'm glad they [Americans] are making the effort... See, I like it. I think it's nice that someone should make an effort to speak a language that I like.

Millie sees how someone less fluent might be affected and she translates symbolic capital into economic terms (1988):

For myself personally it doesn't really bother me. Some people feel threatened, you're taking something away that they have, that they had gotten naturally or whatever. That's a plus for them, because like I said before you already have a plus because you have white skin, that's your plus that you have. And if you have that and you're able to talk like I talk too, and if we both go to get a job, they're going to give the job to you before they give it to me. So you've taken something away from me. That's a threat.

Linón (1979) describes how students from Mexican immigrant families appropriated the term "Chicano" as a public symbol of political/ethnic unity in ways it irritated working-class Mexican-Americans. "Chicano" was for them a private multivalent symbol and making it public was exposing and invasive. Here, a private and multivalent Spanish is made public, and, what is worse, it appears to be appropriated by condescending outsiders who assume that any Puerto Rican must naturally want to speak Spanish with anyone who comes along. This is racialization insofar as Spanish is seen to stand for being Puerto Rican: people are seen as part of a mass, with their individual skills and preferences ignored. People resent being denied the chance to ethnicize by defending themselves in English.

Conclusion

As the people in this study talk about their experiences of race, class, and language control is a recurrent theme and a key element in the opposition between Puro Rican and white. Control emerges as a feature of specific outer sphere relations, when white employers forbid Spanish on the job, when white bosses or co-workers engage in racialized jokes, when white landlords use "fancy language" to effectively silence back-talk, when bureaucratic officials are able to mandate "the real story," when Latin gatekeepers pretend not to know Spanish, when white gatekeepers address Puerto Ricans they do not know in Spanish. Respect encodes the sense that the client, tenant, or employee deserves equal footing and defense encodes a way in which that footing might be achieved. Outer-sphere institutional are, however, notably lacking in actual mechanisms for evening up the communicative footing. So bilinguals carry the burden of appearing ordered, unracialized, ethically controlled. But this burden leaves bilinguals in a delicate position: at what point are they seen to cross the line into "acting white"?

The hegemony that saturates these communicative actions stays in place because the Puerto Rican client, employee, or patient has little control over their metacommunicative frame. Much of what people recount in this chapter is the perception of the ways in which communicative routines reproduce a conflict...
of race and class. As Foley (1990) documents in his study of the reproduction of class/race culture in a small town in South Texas, a “clear counter-hegemonic class consciousness” (p. 195) does not develop precisely because of the way class operates in America. If the terms of cultural definition are explicitly about class immobility and domination, then race cannot be turned into ethnicity, and domination is more readily recognized for what it is. When the terms of cultural definition are explicitly about class mobility as every individual’s moral imperative and when race can be recast as ethnic-American identity, then social domination is not easily recognized, and it is much more difficult to resist. Onto this dynamic is mapped the English-Spanish boundary.

Notes

1. Dates in parentheses indicate which year the interviews were done. The word “Notes” indicates interviews written directly onto my laptop computer; otherwise interviews were recorded and transcribed. Jenny Pacheco’s interviews are translated from Spanish; the Spanish originals are provided in footnotes.

2. Spanish original: “Ah, pero si ustedes los hispanos siempre viven en acomplir, nunca quieren usar patrones, nunca quieren progresar”—“No, siempre está la frase,” “Ustedes los hispanos.”

3. Spanish original: Bueno. Hablamos personas que venimos y, por una razón o otra, nos vamos a trabajar, por ejemplo, en el welfare y se hace el servicio social. Entonces, ella se acomplía del idioma de que es hispano y que siempre no tienen por debajo de tapete, como decimos nosotros vulgarmente, entonces ella trata de asimilarse al americano. Por el complejo que se ha creado por el idioma. Porque nosotros tenemos complejo por el idioma del inglés, no por el nuestro. Porque un hispano es como un americano. Tú eres americano y tú te metes adentro del gobierno y como ese es tu idioma, por mas que tú te siestas mucho, ese es tu idioma y tú lo vas a decir. Tal es como tú lo aprendiste o te lo enseñaron o se aprendió de pequeña. Eso nos pasa a nosotros. Hablamos nuestro idioma, el español. Pero entonces, al ir a una reunión de americanos, queremos asimilarnos al americano, para que no nos den el racismo por la lengua.

4. Spanish original: Cuando dan la noticia en los canales americanos, ellos siempre dicen si, o por ejemplo, un cubano... un hispano, o un colombiano, mata aquí, ellos dicen “el hispano” casi siempre dicen el puertorriqueño. Porque para el blanco, aquí los hispanos son puertorriqueños. No les importa que sea cubano, colombiano, hondureño, de donde sea, dicen “el hondureño tal mato a tal tal de tal.” Pero cuando se da una noticia de un blanco, ellos nunca te dicen a ti “un blanco tal mato de tal tal de tal”: “Mr. Fulano de tal hizo este acto.”

5. In my discussion of culturally encoded intent versus social results, I draw on Silverstein’s (1976) notions of function, (roughly corresponding to Austin’s 1962 illocutionary intent) and function. (Austin’s perlocutionary force). I prefer Silverstein’s formulation. Austin sought to account for the non-truth value effect of oaths, promises, and other “deeds done in words” and so concerned himself largely with classes of verbal formulae. Silverstein treats the perlocutionary as an indexical process. By doing so, he locates speech acts in defining cultural categories much more explicitly than Austin does, which makes his approach applicable to a wider range of linguistic phenomena and to a more general theory of cultural construction.

6. Sometimes the mapping is quite explicit. When Cathy’s white supervisor at Friendly’s told her she didn’t “act black,” she asked what he meant by black? He pointed to a co-worker who was, as she put it, “real dark, thick lips, not too bright.”

7. As Adelina Mendez put it (1979 interview), “I know they speak English and it’s because they’re raised here, sometimes it’s hard for them to speak Spanish, so I try to follow them... but when I see somebody that they are not kids, and they just want to make believe, that’s when I get mad.”

8. Spanish original:

JP: Bueno, significa que, por ejemplo, yo, como soy hispano, voy a mi trabajo. Yo tengo cuatro superiores menos, y un supervisor irlandés. Todos son americanos. Hay dos manujenes, son hispanos. Pero ellos en ningún momento nos hablan español. Se quieren pasar por americanos también. Entonces, uno es hondureño y el otro hondureño. Pero tu puesto bien importante dentro del área donde yo trabajo—te estoy hablando del houskeeping. Entonces, si viene, por ejemplo, una de las meseras, la supervisora, y me dice a mí en inglés, “no, Pacheco, tu tienes que hacer esto.” Pres, right? Si, ella viene y tú lo tienes que hacer. Entonces—ya, yo no me voy a defender porque yo no como nos leyes y yo le digo: ella, por ejemplo, “limpa esa sangre,” yo en mi trabajo no estoy supuesta a limpiar sangre. Si ella viene y me dice: “tú lo tienes que hacer,” yo tengo un poco de inglés que a ella le puedo decir “No, I don’t have to do it.”

BU: So es como—lo que estoy pensando, es cuando una persona puede—se puede defender, puede decir en efecto, mira, soy una persona y tú me tienes que—how do I want to say this? Me tienes que—

JP: Respetar.

BU: UUum-hnn. Porque... me parece a mí que el mayor problema... es el problema del respeto, porque es si uno no respeta a otra persona como habla, como—

JP: Si una persona se expresa así a mí, yo no le puedo respetar. . . . Yo tuve ese problema. El supervisor irlandés mió uno una vez donde me a decirme: “tú tienes que hacer esta la limpieza general en este piso, desde arriba hasta abajo, el piso, camas, todos, todo, todo.” Entonces yo le digo: “que no, que yo en un día no puedo hacer el trabajo que se supone que se haga en seis días que está el piso.” Me dijo: “que lo tienes que hacer.” Entonces yo le digo: “y él me dio un paño que yo tenías limpiando, y me sacudí así el piso. Yo tenía el pelo largo, no me lo había cortado. Me sacudí el pelo. Cuando me dijo el limpiando, por eso, yo le dije a él en inglés, aquel día, “lo hiciste porque tú te crees que yo aquí soy bosura porque yo limpio.” Pero no es así. . . . Te voy a faltar el respeto ahora, te voy a decir lo que tú me dijiste a mí. Porque tú me trataste a mí mal, y del que me trataste a mí es como yo te voy a tratar a ti. Ahora sí te respeto, te respeto porque tú eres mi supervisor. Y tú eres trabajador igual que yo. Tú no tienes porque faltarle el respeto.” Entonces, la delegada de la unión me dijo a mí, “bueno, qué pasó, y explica tus razones y que lo que pasó a ellos.” “Bueno, pues este y este, y me dijo, no me dijo que cogí el paño de la mano, pero me sacudí el paño de la mano y me rozó el pelo, [exclam.] No se me respetó a mí. Por eso, yo no le respeto a él. Y me tiene que romper ese respeto,” y le dije a él, y “sí tú no me rompes el respeto que tú me dijiste a mí, yo te voy a llevar a la corte. . . .” Porque él, como supervisor, y como hablaba en inglés, se podría defender con los otros dos que a pesar de que son hispanos no quieren dar a enton su bruto y hablar el español “Pues,” él dijo aquí “yo me voy a ganar y ella va a perder el trabajo.” Pero entonces no pude porque—yo no me puedo defender muy bien con el inglés. Pero tampoco me dijo que nadie me falta el respeto. Mi inglés es malo, y yo poco que he podido aprender, yo me defiendo con ello.