

African Influences in Caribbean Spanish

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Barring a few rare, yet controversial exceptions like Icelandic or Tasaday in the Philippines, evidence strongly suggests that languages typically do not exist in a vacuum nor develop in complete isolation. That is, they are inclined to be influenced by varying degrees of contact with other cultures and their respective languages, potentially resulting in a wide variety of linguistic outcomes. Undoubtedly as old as language itself, language contact refers to a situation in which speakers from two or more speech communities, motivated by certain geographic, social, political, and/or economic factors, come into direct or indirect contact with one another. As a result, a number of social and linguistic variables can theoretically bear a marked impact on the consequence(s) of contact-induced change: (1) the duration and intensity of contact as well as the number of speakers involved; (2) the role of imperfect learning in the interference process; (3) the original linguistic substratum and subsequent linguistic superimposures; (4) a culture's relative geographic isolation; (5) the types of social, political, and economic relationships between the groups involved; (6) the universal markedness of a feature in the target language; (7) the degree to which a structure is embedded in a language's grammar; and (8) the typological similarities or differences between the source and recipient languages, to name a few (Thomason, 2001). Nonetheless, whether these contact-induced changes pervade the lexical, phonological, phonetic, morphological, and/or syntactic component(s) of a language through such characteristics as the loss, addition, or replacement of features, whether a new contact language emerges, or whether a language disappears all together, change in one or all of the languages involved is an unpredictable yet inescapable and prevalent consequence of the juxtaposition of two or more cultures and their corresponding linguistic systems.

There is perhaps no better illustration of a contact situation teeming with linguistic potential as well as controversy than that which occurred during and subsequent to the conquest and colonization of the New World. Specifically, this contact situation, beginning in the mid to late fifteenth century, profoundly influenced the development, enrichment, and diversification of the Spanish language. Seeing as the indigenous populations throughout Latin America comprehensively failed to provide a reliable source of manual labor due in part to their uncooperative nature as well as their purposeful or accidental decimation at the hands of western epidemic diseases, millions of sub-Saharan Africans lacking a shared common language were forcibly imported from

Portuguese-owned West African colonial settlements to southern Spain only to become slave labor for the mines and plantations of the New World colonies. Under diverse socio-historical circumstances and demographic conditions and over a time period of nearly four centuries, many different dialectal and temporal varieties of Spanish came into contact with a plurality of West and Central African languages, distributed among, at minimum, six prominent and typologically divergent language families (Lipski, 2005).

Despite the fact that an ethnographic commingling had obscured any reliable demographic and linguistic evidence of the earliest African arrivals, for the greater part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Hispanic Antilles primarily served the function of a maritime way station for cargo and slave-carrying vessels between Spain and the more lucrative areas of Spanish America. Moreover, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) prompted the total disbandment of all sugar cane plantations and labor forces in the now former French colony. As a result, the Hispanic Caribbean, particularly Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, rapidly became the principal localities of the sugar cane industry, and, as such, witnessed a proliferation in slave importation, both legal and illegal, from Africa as well as other areas of the Caribbean, including other English, French, and Dutch colonies. Furthermore, while other Latin American colonies gained their independence from Spain by the 1820's, Cuba and Puerto Rico maintained their colonial loyalty until 1898. These factors in the history of the Antilles have without a doubt left a lasting impression on the culture and language of this dialectal region of the Spanish-speaking world.

Taking into account the duration and intensity of geographic, cultural, and linguistic con-

tact as well as the social and economic relationships between these two ethnically, culturally, and linguistically dichotomous communities, one would naturally anticipate a certain degree of cultural and/or linguistic influence, be it reciprocal or unidirectional. In fact, the impact of African heritage is not only patent in the physical attributes and cultural practices of many Hispanic Americans, but also in the lexical contributions which are undeniable as well as undisputed, particularly with respect to vocabulary pertaining to food and drink (e.g. *malango* 'large banana' and *guarapo* 'sugar-cane juice or liquor'), flora and fauna (e.g. *quimbombó* 'acidic fruit and its tree' and *chango* 'monkey'), musical instruments and dance (e.g. *bongó* 'bongo drum' and *samba* 'samba dance'), and people, especially regarding their appearance and behavior (e.g. *bembe* 'thick-lipped person' and *sanaco* 'a fool') (Cotton & Sharp, 1988, pp. 218-9; Lapesa, 1997, p. 562). More controversial, however, are the purported influences of an African legacy on the morphological, syntactic, and especially phonological components of Caribbean Spanish, which have had dialectologists divided in an on-going debate for almost as long as these two cultures have been in contact. There are those in favor of a predominant and evident African influence with respect to more than just the language's lexicon and those who feel that it serves a minor, cursory function in the enrichment of the language, if even that.

Bearing all this in mind, the goals of this present paper are two-fold: (1) to provide an impartial overview of the data and analyses that have been offered in defense of an African influence with respect to the phonological and phonetic development of the major insular Caribbean Spanish dialects; and (2) to critically analyze and evaluate all of the supposed corroborative evidence in order to demonstrate that the spe-

cific phonetic peculiarities attributed to this particular dialect area are a result of multiple processes and influences, both internal and external, as an exclusively African origin does not adequately account for the shared diversity and unity of the Spanish language on both sides of the Atlantic. We believe the present analysis to be important for the fields of Caribbean Spanish in general and insular Caribbean Spanish in particular by affording a multidimensional view of the development of New World Spanish. We sincerely hope that this study may provide a foundation for future research on the phonological and phonetic influences that African languages supposedly had on the evolution of the Spanish language.

Fueled by a relatively small number of extreme and unique phonetic manifestations, proponents of an African origin or, at the very least, a marked African influence on the phonetic and phonological evolution of the Spanish of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico justify their assumptions with two distinct, unrelated sources: demographic data based on slave population density and distribution throughout the whole of Latin America, and literary representations of Afro-Hispanic speech. The bulk of these particular phonetic traits demonstrate a general tendency toward CV syllable structure and encompass: (1) the deletion of post-nuclear consonants, primarily /r/, /l/, and /s/; (2) the velarization of syllable- and word-final /n/; (3) the semi-vocalization of final liquids, more commonly known as liquid gliding; (4) the phonetic neutralization of both the multiple and simple vibrants in favor of the latter; (5) the phonetic neutralization of intervocalic /d/ and /r/ in favor of the flap; (6) the regressive assimilation of word-internal, syllable-final liquids; (7) the nasalization of word-initial /ʃ/ and /j/ as in *chato* > *ñato* 'cowardly' and *llamar* > *ñamar* 'to call';

(8) the velar and uvular realizations of the multiple vibrant in Puerto Rico; and (9) the phonetic neutralization of syllable- and word-final liquids (López Morales, 1971; Nathan, 1978; Zamora Munné & Guitart, 1982; Lipski, 1987, 1994, 2005; Megenney, 1999). According to those who are in support of the Africanist theory, the categorical presence of post-nuclear consonant weakening is directly traceable to substantial and long-standing contact with sub-Saharan slaves. Conversely, many of the dialects of Spanish that exhibit consonant retention in these same environments did not historically experience significant transatlantic slave trading. In other words, those dialect areas with the highest frequency of final consonant weakening tend to coincide with those regions having had the greater proportion of slave trafficking during the Colonial era; that is, the Caribbean Basin as well as the Pacific coast of Colombia and Ecuador.

To further substantiate their views, Africanists rely on meticulously selected literary, folkloric, and anecdotal sources from both Spain and Latin America dating from the Golden Age (circa 1492 until approximately 1681) through the nineteenth century. Golden Age authors include dramatists, playwrights, and poets such as Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, among many others. The following is a brief excerpt from a theatrical work of Lope de Vega (1965, pp. 145-6) entitled *El santo negro Rosambuco de la ciudad de Palermo* which demonstrates a number of characteristics attributed to slave speech in general (i.e. not specific to the Caribbean) such as /r/ → [l] / V__V, __C, __ #; /s/ → Ø / __ #, __ \$; vowel raising; intrusive nasals; and /d/ and /r/ → Ø / __ #:

*Ah, sinola don Sambuco
¿de quentiela sasuncé?
¿Samo de Santa Tamé,
de Angola samo, maluco?
Pue que á quereye dipongo,
il alma que yan si aliegra,
decimo logo a la niegra
si samo de monicongo...*

*¿An vito el perro samalo
tener a la niegla amó!
¡Yo hacer embuste á sinó
para que molerte a palo!
Gravedá tiene, pol cierto,
que con vos muy bien medramo,
aunque niegla no tiznamo,
no falta quien anda muerto. (p.145-146)*

A number of phonetic characteristics attributed to Afro-Hispanic speech are evidenced in the above passage; to name the most salient: (1) lambdacism in intervocalic and word-final, preconsonantal positions as well as sporadically in the consonant cluster *gr* as in *sinola* 'señor', *quentiela* 'qué tierra', *niegla* 'negra', and *pol* 'por'; (2) syllable-final /s/ deletion as in *pue* 'pues', *decimo* 'decimos', *an vito* 'han visto', *medramo* 'medramos', and *tiznamo* 'tiznamos'; (3) mid-vowel raising as in *sinola* and *sinó* 'señor'; (4) insertion of the alveolar nasal /n/ in *quentiela* 'qué tierra'; and (5) deletion of word-final consonants particularly /r/ and /d/ as in *amó* 'amor', *sinó*, and *gravedá* 'gravedad'. A few traits not solely of a phonological and/or phonetic nature include paragogic vowels as in *sinola*, sporadic concordance issues with respect to gender as well as subject~verb agreement as in *sinola don Sambuco* and *yo hacer* and *para que molerte*, the frequent use of the copula *samo* from the verb *sar*, a combination of both *ser* and *estar*, and less frequently monophthongization and diphthongization in *logo* 'luego' and *niegra* 'negra', respectively.

Though the representation of Afro-Hispanic speech for the whole of Latin America continued unabated for many centuries, the bulk of this type of literary expression specific to the Hispanic Antilles was thought to have originated in the creative minds of Cuban folklorists, playwrights, journalists, poets, and novelists such as Fernando Ortiz, Francisco Fernández, and Creto Gangá, to mention a few. Dominican and Puerto Rican writers added to the corpus of Afro-Caribbean literature albeit of less prolific proportions. The language that is portrayed in these texts reflects the varying degrees to which the African population learned the language of the linguistic superstratum, ranging from extremely rudimentary Spanish to speech that is almost indistinguishable from colloquial non-African Caribbean Spanish. A perfect example of these quite polar linguistic differences is observable in a conversation between an African born slave, José, and one born in Puerto Rico, Nazaria, as seen in an excerpt of the Puerto Rican play *La juega de gallos, o el negro bozal* (taken from Cotton & Sharp, 1988, p. 209):

JOSÉ. ¡Ja! Nazaria ¿Tú mirá señorita anoche cómo taba miringando? y niña Ferrerica también. ¡Ja! ¡qué duce!

NAZARIA. Déjate, José, de estar mirando cosas que no te importan. ¿Quién mete un negro bozal como tú estar pensando en merengue y en amoríos? Acaba de limpiar las botas y vete a hacer tus oficios. Ahorita el amo se levanta, y no tienes nada hecho por estar charlando toda la mañana. ¿Qué haces aquí en la sala metido?

JOSÉ. ¡Ah, Nazaria, no son tu corzoná! Tú siempre ta jablando a mí con grandísima rigó. Yo ta queré mucho a ti: grande, grande así son mi sufrimienta. Aquí yari, yari mucho si tú ta queré mi corazó.

Furthermore, we find prolific final consonant deletion as in *mirá* 'mirar', *tambié* 'también', *queré* 'querer', and *corazó* 'corazón', the use of the copula *son* in *no son tu corzoná* and discrepancies of gender concordance as in *grandísima rigó* 'grandísimo rigor' and *mi sufrimienta* 'sufrimiento'.

Two important components of both phonological theory and contact-induced change strengthen the plausibility of a significant African influence on the phonological and phonetic development of these three primary insular Caribbean Spanish dialects: (1) the principle of universal markedness as it relates to syllable structure; and (2) the typological similarities between the two linguistic systems involved, few though they may be. Although there is great variation with respect to the types of syllables that are phonotactically licensed by any given language, no known language exists in which the CV type of syllable, commonly termed the most basic or core syllable, is not present. Born out of the Prague School, the concept of markedness continues to profoundly influence current phonological theory. According to Crystal (2003, pp. 283-4), "an unmarked property is one which accords with the general tendencies found in all languages; a marked property is one which goes against these general tendencies- in other words, it is exceptional". Bearing this definition in mind, one could then characterize the CV syllable as unmarked given its state of cross-linguistic naturalness. In contact situations, marked features are typically more difficult to learn and thus less likely to be acquired by speakers of either speech community. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that two linguistic groups sharing similar tendencies toward an open syllable structure could have, at the very least, influenced one another. In more specific terms, the African slave populations which largely exhibited a very high

degree of final consonant deletion could have reinforced and/or further impelled certain internal phonological processes already in progress in the insular variety of Caribbean Spanish with which they came in direct contact.

In spite of the extreme linguistic diversity not only between the many language families of the African subcontinent, but also between the languages themselves within a particular genealogical classification, a number of common tendencies, some quite similar to those found in Caribbean Spanish, have been suggested. The vast majority of the African languages that came into contact with Spanish categorically lacked coda consonants and even those few that did minimally permit word-final stops and nasals exhibited no instances of syllable- and word-final /r/, /l/, and /s/. Furthermore, the large proportion of Bantu-speaking Africans imported during the seventeenth century did not systematically distinguish between /r/ and /l/ and some languages like Kikongo, for instance, only possessed the lateral liquid in their phonemic inventories. In addition, other common characteristics of the African languages in general are the neutralization of /r/ and /l/ as well as that of intervocalic /d/ and /r/. If we accept the popular proposal that grammatical interference tends to be limited only to those features that typologically correspond with the structure of the receiving language, it is feasible to assume, at least in the sphere of phonetics and phonology, that the minimal extent of typological overlapping between both languages would foster the likelihood of structural borrowing. According to Jakobson (1962, p. 241), "a language accepts foreign structural elements only when they correspond to its own tendencies of development". Therefore, the typological congruency between the source and recipient languages is not solely focused on the state of the recipient language

before any changes occurred but rather on the potential for future changes. The African substratum accentuated the already present tendencies toward articulatory efficiency through the over-generalized elimination of syllable-final segments and the reduction of syllabic complexity overall.

A number of salient cultural and historical factors contribute to the high level of scholarly skepticism surrounding the many purported African influences, specifically those of a phonological and phonetic nature, with respect to Latin American Spanish in general and insular Caribbean Spanish in particular. To begin, a few of the phonetic phenomena attributed to an African substrate have a well-documented history of prior existence in Spain in addition to the Canary Islands predating their appearance in colonial Spanish America (De Granda, 1994; Lapesa, 1997). The aspiration and/or deletion of syllable- and word-final /s/ have been attested in the Peninsula since the sixteenth century. The velarization of final /n/ appeared in Peninsular vernacular during the Middle Ages. Mozarabic speech of the twelfth century, particularly in Toledo, demonstrated frequent neutralization of final liquids, and liquid gliding was historically attested in the speech of older generation fisherman of Tenerife. The numerous linguistic similarities between Andalusian, Canarian, and Caribbean varieties seem to support the development of a generalized Spanish probably stemming out of Andalusian and Canary Island origin. This is particularly plausible if one takes into account the fact that most vessels bound for the New World sailed from major port areas in southern Spain as well as made an obligatory stopover of significant length in the Canary Islands. However, when the paucity of adequate demographic information detailing the number, regional distribution, and specific cultural heri-

tage of the African slaves throughout colonial Latin America, the social relationships and extent of contact with native Spanish and/or Portuguese speakers, and the data relative to their transportation routes are examined in light of the fact that Spain purchased the majority of its slave labor from the Portuguese during the first two centuries of colonization, the matter gets linguistically complicated. Couple that with massive undocumented African population shifts that occurred as a result of the dissolution of the Haitian sugar industry in the eighteenth century and the clandestine trading of slaves that flourished in the nineteenth century, primarily from slave outposts of the Lesser Antilles and Curaçao, it becomes virtually impossible to isolate each potential linguistic variable and thus precisely determine the origin of the influences.

Aside from a smattering of more recent publications based on interviews of elderly Afro-Cubans, thereby affording a more accurate reconstruction of nineteenth century African-influenced speech, Africanists have traditionally based their hypotheses on purely non-experimental data, particular literary sources dating back to the Golden Age which are riddled with linguistic inconsistencies. A brief yet telling example is observable in a few phrases written by fray Diego de Ocaña (ca. 1604) which imitate the speech of his servant (excerpt taken from Frago Gracia, 1999, p. 193): (1) *Yo no so diablo, ¿qué decí, Jesús, Jesús?*; (2) *Jesú conmigo, ¿viene labar la pierna y toma diablo?*; and (3) *So Diablo y no quiero entrar*. Most if not all of these authors were by no means linguists or anthropologists and, being from a predominantly affluent upbringing, their direct contact with African slaves would have probably ranged from minimal to nonexistent. As a result, how can one exclude with any certainty the possible intrusion of exaggeration, parody, stereotyping, or utter

fabrication? Accordingly, the published result renders an incomplete and inaccurate representation of African Spanish.

Lastly, the phonetic traits ascribed to African substratal influences might well be evidence of a number of internal synchronic developments stemming from broader diachronic tendencies that affected not only Spanish but a number of other Indo-European languages. With regard to the posterior realizations of the multiple vibrant in Puerto Rico, Hammond (2001, p. 378) maintains that:

there are numerous complications that make the genesis of the velar and uvular realizations of /r̄/ in the Spanish of Puerto Rico unclear, particularly in light of the fact that this phonological change involving the posterior realization of standard Spanish alveolar /r̄/ is attested in the historical development of French, German, and many other languages for which clearly no African or American Indian substratal influence can be claimed.

The simplification of the multiple vibrant, /r/ → [r], is another common diachronic tendency. Even though all of the Romance languages inherited a geminate rhotic from various dialects of Vulgar Latin, the fact that only Spanish has maintained /r/ in its phonemic inventory suggests the articulatory difficulties posed by said segment (Hammond, 1999, p. 134). Finally, like most of the Indo-European languages, the Romance group is diachronically and synchronically prone to reduce phonetic material in coda position through phonological weakening. Final consonant reduction is not foreign to other areas of the Spanish-speaking world where an African presence had not been as historically noteworthy as it had been in the Caribbean, for instance, /-s/ → [h] or Ø in Chile, Bolivia,

El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Paraguay; /-r/ → Ø and /-r/ → [l] or /-l/ → [r] in Chile; /-n/ → [ŋ] in Guatemala and Nicaragua; and /-d-/ → [r] in Nicaragua as well (Canfield, 1981; Lipski, 1994).

The phonological and phonetic peculiarities of Caribbean Spanish have traditionally been attributed to a number of interrelated factors: (1) an indigenous substratum; (2) an Andalusian influence; (3) massive sub-Saharan slave populations; and (4) independent developments within the language itself. However, when one considers how quickly the indigenous populations of the insular Caribbean were killed off almost immediately after colonization began, aside from a few lexical items, it is highly improbable that they contributed to the phonological evolution of the Spanish language. Furthermore, while there has been little doubt that the Caribbean slave populations were an important social factor, numerous dialectologists have been reluctant to attribute any linguistic influence to these sub-Saharans, aside from a handful of lexical borrowings, principally because of an ethnolinguistic coincidence unique to the New World. In other words, concurrent with massive importations of west and central African slaves to the islands and coastal regions of Latin America, colonists from Spain, especially Andalusia, were tending to settle in these same areas. As a result, too many linguistic variables and unreliable demographic evidence make it almost impossible to confidently attribute any particular phonetic features to slave speech. In conclusion, the linguistic heritage and evolution of insular Caribbean Spanish cannot be unidimensional and should be ascribed to a number of interrelated factors including evident Andalusian contributions coupled with internally-induced changes as well as independent developments, many of which were reinforced by the linguistic interference of the African languages which exhibited

similar phonological and phonetic tendencies.

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