African Influences in Caribbean Spanish

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Barring a few rare, yet controversial exceptions like Icelandic or Tabas I 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 superimpositions; (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 altogether, 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 com mingling 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 contact 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 guáyabo ‘sugar-cane juice or liquor’), flora and fauna (e.g. quinquembó ‘acrid fruit and its tree’ and change ‘monkey’), musical instruments and dance (e.g. bongo ‘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 ongoing 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-
A number of phonetic characteristics attributed to Afro-Hispanic speech are evidenced in the above passage; to name the most salient: (1) ladmascism in intervocalic and word-final, preconsonantal positions as well as sporadically in the consonant cluster /gr/ as in zinolaśa’ser,’ quentidela ‘qui tierra,’ niegla ‘negr,’ and pol ‘por’; (2) syllable-final /s/ deletion as in par ‘pues,’ decimo ‘decimais,’ an vie ‘han visto,’ medramo ‘medramos,’ and tiznamo ‘tiznamos’; (3) mid-vowel raising as in zinolaśa and sinol ‘serial,’ (4) insertion of the alveolar nasal /n/ in quentidela ‘qui tierra’; and (5) deletion of word-final consonants particularly /l/ and /d/ as in amoś’ amor, sinó, and graveldá ‘gravela’.

A few traits not solely of a phonological and/or phonetic nature include paragogic vowels as in zinolaśa, sporadic concordance issues with respect to gender as well as subject–verb agreement as in sinola don Sambuco and yo ‘hacer’ and para que moderite, the frequent use of the copula same from the verb ser, a combination of both ser and estar, and less frequently monophonotization and diphotonotization in logo ‘juego’ and niegla ‘negr,’ 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 playwright La juego de gallon, o el negro bocal (taken from Cotton & Sharp, 1988, p. 209):

JOSE: ¡Ah, Nazaria! ¿Tu mira señorita ancho como taha mirando? y niña Ferencia tambí, ¿tu quería?
NAZARIA: Déjate, José, de estar mirando cosas que no te toman... ¿Quién me mete un negro bocal como tú estar pensando en merecer y en amoría? Acá 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 hace aquí en la sala metido?

JOSE: ¿Ah, Nazaria, no son tu corazón? Tú siempre ta hablando a mí con grandísima rigo. Yo ta querí mucho a tu, grande, grande asi son mi sufriente. Aquí yari, yari mucho si tía ta querí mismo.
Furthermore, we find prolific final consonant deletion as in misía ‘miér’ve, tambói ‘también’, querí ‘querer’, and conció ‘corazón’, the use of the copula son in no son tu corazón and discrepancies of gender concordance as in grandísima rígo ‘grandísimo rigor’ and mi sufrímena ‘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 phonetically 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 can proceed to the typological nature of the receiving language, which is typologically and phonetically similar to all of the languages present in the Peninsula since the sixteenth century. The aspiration and/or deletion of intervocalic /d/ and /ɾ/ as well as the neutralization of /d/ and /ɾ/ and /l/ and /r/ as well as 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 /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ as well as that of intervocalic /d/ and /ɾ/. 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 would seem to support the hypothesis of 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 the 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 historical prior of existence in Spain in addition to the Canary Islands predating their appearance in the middle of the eighteenth century in the Peninsula since the sixteenth century. The vocalization of final /i/ 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 fishermen of Tenerife. The numerous linguistic similarities between Andalusian, Canarian, and Caricano language of the receiving language, to support the hypothesis of 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.”

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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 /r/ in Puerto Rico, Hammond (2001, p. 378) maintains that:

there are numerous complications that make the genesis of the velar and uvular realizations of /r/ 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 /r/ 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/ → [ɾ], 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, /ό/ → [h] or Ù in Bolivia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Paraguay; /-e/ → Ø and /-ε/ → [I] or /-ε/ → [ɾ] in Chile; /-e/ → [ɾ] in Guatemala and Nicaragua; and /-ε/ → [ɾ] 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 ethnonymic 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 uni-dimensional 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.

References


