

## **Spanish Ability and Use among Second-Generation Nuyoricans**

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### **Introduction**

The language use of Puerto Ricans in New York City, and specifically in the East Harlem community, has been extensively researched by the Language Policy Task Force of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. In general, the Task Force studies have portrayed a stable bilingual community in which Spanish and English are used extensively, both separately and in mixed form (Language Policy Task Force 1980, 1982). Contrary to what scholars since Fishman (1967) have stated, the Centro has maintained that the nondiglossic, that is, the noncompartmentalized, use of both Spanish and English in the East Harlem Puerto Rican community is not leading to language loss.

The Puerto Rican mass migration to New York peaked between 1945 and 1965. And thus, many bilingual adults in the Puerto Rican community are of the second generation, having been born in New York of Puerto Rican parents. It is this bilingual second generation that accounts for the stable nondiglossic use of Spanish and English in the Nuyoricans community, although their Spanish language ability varies significantly. For some Nuyoricans, their Spanish variety is a mere reflection of Puerto Rican Spanish, for others a distinct contact variety with elements from English, and yet, for others, a hybrid that reflects the high degree of interpenetration of both systems.

We report here the results of a study that looks at the degree to which different factors are responsible for the variation in the Spanish language ability and the Spanish language use of Nuyoricans. This is an important question, for parents and educators need to know whether individual demographic factors, psychological factors, familiarity with the monolingual context, or other factors in the bilingual community such as the past language use in childhood, the study of Spanish in school, or the present language use in society have any effect in determining the Spanish language ability of bilingual second-generation adults. Ethnolinguistic intergenerational continuity will ultimately be possible only for those who are proficient in Spanish, and pressure must be exerted in different directions depending on which are the determinants of Spanish language ability.

Our paper reports the result of a multiple linear regression which measures the effects of several factors on the Spanish language ability of twenty-six second-generation Nuyoricans. We wanted to find out which were the real determinants of Spanish ability. We included in our model eight *independent variables* which have been identified in the literature as important in determining minority language proficiency and maintenance. These independent variables were grouped around three different thematic clusters and appear here listed within their conceptual framework:

1. *Individual factors*

a) demographic factors

1. Age (Var.1)
2. Sex (Var.2)
3. Education (Var.3)

b) psychological factors dealing with attitude toward bilingualism and Spanish (Var.4)

2. *Monolingual familiarity factors* dealing with time spent in the island (Var.5)

3. *Bilingual community factors*

- a) past language use in childhood in home (Var.6)
- b) study of Spanish in school (Var.7)
- c) present language use in community (Var.8)

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## **The Study**

Initial contact with the participants was made by Milagros Cuevas, a second-generation Nuyoricana who has lived since birth in what was once known as Hell's Kitchen because of its slums and crime. Now known as Clinton, this area extends from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson River in midtown Manhattan. People in the area know Cuevas as a teacher and community resident, and they provided her with names and telephone numbers of other residents who were also second-generation Nuyoricans. These initial participants then provided names and telephone numbers of others.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 and had a mean age of 30 and an average of 13 years of education. Over half of them had studied Spanish in school, and their attitude toward bilingualism was quite positive, indicating much support toward the use and maintenance of Spanish in their community and in the United States.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and took approximately one hour to two hours. Three tasks were completed during

that time. The participants were first asked in Spanish to describe what was happening in a photograph depicting a fair that was held in a local school attended by Latino children and adults. These picture description tasks were taped and later transcribed. They were evaluated according to two measures: a measure of Spanish language quantitative use, and a measure of Spanish language qualitative use. For the quantitative measure, a ratio of diffusion was derived which was basically the percentage of Spanish words in comparison to English words used in the entire discourse. For the qualitative measure, an evaluation was made of the Spanish discourse according to three criteria: fluency, phonology, and grammatical accuracy. A rating of 5 (excellent) to 1 (very poor) was given for each of these criteria. These two measures constituted our Spanish oral ability score.

Second, in order to measure the participants' Spanish literacy ability, a cloze test in Spanish was designed and administered immediately after the picture description task. Only one of the participants was unable to complete the test. In fact, some who had received quite low Spanish oral ability scores did quite well in the cloze test.

The first and second task provided us with the three measures that became our index for Spanish ability, namely, (1) Spanish language quantitative score, (2) Spanish language qualitative score, and (3) Spanish literacy score. The z-scores (a derived score that uses standard deviation units) on these three measures were summed and became the *dependent variable*, *Spanish ability*.

The third task for our participants was to answer a series of demographic and sociolinguistic questions corresponding to the eight *independent variables* identified above. These questions were asked in English, although some chose Spanish to answer.

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### **The Results**

The results of the multiple regression and the correlations obtained between the six *continuous* variables appear as Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Rather than discuss the findings in isolation, we pose and then discuss the four sociolinguistic principles, derived from the statistical analysis, which characterize the determinants of *Spanish ability* and the *Spanish use* of second-generation Nuyoricans.

1. The only significant predictors of *Spanish ability* are the present social use of Spanish in the community by the individual as well as his or her level of education.
2. There is a life-line of *Spanish use*.

3. *Spanish use* is more prevalent among the young.
4. *Spanish use* is not related to time spent in the monolingual country.

### 3.1—

#### ***Spanish Ability***

The only significant predictors of *Spanish ability* are the present social use of Spanish in the community by the individual as well as his or her level of education. Table 1, showing the results of the multiple regression analysis, reveals that only two (out of the eight) independent variables met the .05 significance level for entry into the model. These two variables are the individual's present use of Spanish in the community and his or her level of education.

**TABLE 1.** Predicting Spanish ability

Variable	Multpl Entered*	R Square	N = 26		
			Beta In	F to Enter	Significance
1. PresUse	.5589	.3124	.5589	10.90	.003
2. Educ	.6990	.4885	.4205	10.98	.000

\*No other variable met the .05 significance level for entry into the model.

As indicated in Table 1 by the order of entry, the best single predictor of Spanish ability was the present social use of the minority language in the community by the individual, accounting for 31 percent of the variance in Spanish ability (RSquare = .3124). Social use of Spanish in the present was measured by totaling up questions asking about the respondents' use of Spanish in domains excluding that of the home with family. The domains included were neighborhood, clubs/organizations, church, work/school, television and radio, and printed media. It turned out that it is this social and public use of Spanish in the community that better predicts Spanish proficiency. Not surprisingly then, language use predicts, to a large extent, language ability. This is important since it indicates that bilinguals who wish to remain bilingual must actively use their languages in authentic communication. When a minority language is not used, the individual's language ability will atrophy, leading in the long run to language shift in the speech community. The only way then to guarantee the Spanish language maintenance of the Nuyoric community is to continue providing opportunities for Spanish language use in the community and in institutions.

Only one more predictor makes a truly independent (necessary, non-redundant correlate) contribution to Spanish language ability, and that is level of education (see Table 1). This is a most surprising finding since English-

only schools in the United States have traditionally spent much effort stamping out minority languages. Yet, for this second-generation sample living in a bilingual community, more education predicts more Spanish ability (oracy and literacy skills). This finding seems to confirm Cummins's concept of the interdependence between the two languages of bilinguals, as well as what Cummins calls the Common Underlying Proficiency (1981). If we had assessed English language ability, we would not have been surprised to find that an important predictor of English language ability would have been level of education. What our finding here seems to suggest is that regardless of language of education, education itself leads to better language and literacy ability in either language of bilinguals, as long as one lives in a community where Spanish language ability is valued and where Spanish is used. This is the case for these twenty-six Nuyoricans living in a bilingual community.

Our result regarding the importance of level of education as a predictor of Spanish language ability can also be explained by what we know about our sample. Among these second-generation native speakers of English, those who succeed in school and become professionals are forced to use Spanish in serving the community, thus their Spanish language ability in turn improves. For example, it was clear to us that the professionals in our sample with the most schooling were working as either bilingual teachers, bilingual social workers, or bilingual secretaries. All of them were using their Spanish language skills in some professional capacity. Yet, for the most part, those with little schooling were rarely using their Spanish at work. For example, the supermarket stock-boy who was a high school dropout made little use of Spanish at work. This is another important finding, for it confirms the importance of the ethnic enclave and the minority language in participating in the socioeconomic life of minority communities (for more on this, see Portes and Bach 1985).

It is important to point out that our finding regarding education is the opposite of what was found by Hudson, Hernández-Chávez, and Bills (this volume) for five Southwest states on the basis of the 1980 and 1990 censuses. There may be several explanations for our different findings. The most important reason for the discrepancy may have to do with how the two studies measured Spanish language ability. Whereas Hudson, Hernández-Chávez, and Bills used a self-report measure given by the census, our study actually assessed Spanish language ability, including not only oracy skills, but also literacy skills. Another reason for the discrepancy may have to do with the nature of the samples of the two studies. Our study included only twenty-six second-generation Nuyoricans living in a specific community known for its high density of Nuyoricans residents. The Hudson, Hernández-Chávez, and Bills study included all generations, a much larger sample which

was mostly Mexican American, and did not limit itself to one particular community. The differences are then significant, for it turns out that our study presents findings for predictors of Spanish language ability in a Nuyorican bilingual community, and not for individuals who may or may not be bilingual, may or may not live in a Latino bilingual community, and may or may not have been born in the United States. That is, our study is precisely of the determinants of the variation in Spanish language ability that exists in individuals within a community that has been judged to be bilingual. Ours is then a study of a bilingual community, the individuals who make up that community, and the factors that contribute to their ability in the minority language, which in turn can affect the language maintenance situation of the community. Furthermore, the differences between our findings and those of Hudson et al. suggest that second-generation Nuyoricans may have very different sociolinguistic behavior from other groups of second-generation Latinos. For other Latinos, second-generation status brings about U.S. citizenship and opens up the possibility of becoming full-fledged Americans. But all Puerto Ricans, regardless of place of birth, are U.S. citizens. Second-generation status only confirms their continuity as second-class U.S. citizens, a product of the Commonwealth status of the island. And thus, whereas increased levels of education of second-generation Latinos may lead to shift to English in an effort to achieve the American Dream, for Nuyoricans, more education seems to result in increased longing to know more about their people and their language.

Although level of education predicts Spanish language ability, studying Spanish in school does not come up in the regression as an important predictor. This finding reflects the poor practices of teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers in New York City schools. Some in our sample told us about the very unfortunate experiences they had in secondary level courses with teachers who constantly denigrated their Spanish variety. Others who had been placed in bilingual classrooms when they entered school told us how they didn't want to stay there because those classes were for those who had recently arrived and didn't know English. In short, no one in our sample had a positive Spanish language schooling experience as a child.

The multiple correlation of the regression, as seen in Table 1, ultimately reaches a magnitude of .699, which accounts for approximately half of the total variance in Spanish ability (.4885). This is a most important finding for it suggests that neither the age nor sex of the individual, nor the attitude toward Spanish, nor the familiarity with the island, nor the study of Spanish in school, nor even the past use of Spanish in childhood predict the individual's present Spanish ability. It is, however, solely the present social and community con-

text in which Spanish is used by the individual, as well as his or her level of education, that are important.

It is then instructive to realize that even if the minority language is used in a monolingual context, even if it is widely used in childhood, and even if it is learned in school, ability in the minority language will be limited unless it is used *here and now*. This finding is significant because it suggests that efforts to restrict the social and public use of Spanish such as that spearheaded by the English-only movement will have very significant effects on the Spanish ability of second-generation speakers, and thus, on the possibility for intergenerational continuity. It also seems to suggest that demographic diffusion of second-generation speakers and the resulting loss of a bilingual community would ultimately result in language loss and shift. Spanish in the United States cannot survive if limited to only a private-family function. It is the social and community use of Spanish in society that seems to have the most effect in Spanish ability. Rather than restricting the Low Variety to private domains as traditionally diglossic societies do, the survival of Spanish in the United States under the present conditions of large-scale immigration and stigmatized status seems to depend on its continued use in the community and in public domains usually dominated by English, while making sure that English does not displace Spanish from the private domain.

The fact that level of education is the other only variable which makes an independent contribution to Spanish ability is also significant, for it suggests that Spanish as a minority language in the United States behaves in much the same way as other more socially prestigious and less stigmatized languages. The more educated one is, the more Spanish ability one has, both in terms of oral ability, as well as literacy ability. Contrary to the myth that Spanish is mostly spoken by the uneducated, a higher level of education among *second-generation Nuyoricans* brings about better ability in Spanish.

The finding relating higher level of education to increased Spanish ability also contradicts the popular U.S. assumption that education brings about linguistic and cultural assimilation which in turn leads to structural incorporation (for the difference between linguistic/cultural assimilation and structural incorporation, see Skutnabb-Kangas 1979:2). This had historically been the case for white immigrants (Greer 1972). The assumption, however, has hardly been tested for groups that had previously been excluded from the socioeconomic mainstream, those referred to by Ogbu (1978) as 'caste minorities' (for a test of this assumption, see García, forthcoming). It turns out, then, that the increased educational opportunity that came about as a result of the civil rights era, especially in the form of open admission in the City University of New York, not only resulted in higher

levels of education for Nuyoricans, but also may have impacted on their views on language and ethnicity. From our findings one can surmise that increased educational experiences may have raised their language consciousness, and thus have resulted in increased ability in Spanish, as well as English, and in additive bilingualism.

### 3.2—

#### *A Life-Line of Spanish Use*

Although the past use of Spanish in childhood does not emerge as a significant independent predictor of Spanish ability in adulthood, it correlates strongly with present social use of Spanish in adulthood, as indicated in Table 2 ( $r=.69$ ). The strong correlation between present social use of Spanish in adulthood and past use of Spanish in childhood suggests a life-line in which those who use Spanish most in childhood are also those who use Spanish most in adulthood, and underscores the importance of the use of Spanish in the family with children. Likewise, there is a strong correlation between use of Spanish in the present and Spanish language ability ( $r = .56$ ), as well as use of Spanish in childhood and Spanish language ability ( $r = .53$ ). These results lead us to conclude that although, as stated previously, past use of Spanish in childhood *does not come up as an independent predictor* of Spanish ability, it is nevertheless important because it correlates strongly with both present use of Spanish in adulthood and Spanish ability. The use of Spanish in the home in childhood only becomes important if it leads to the social and community use of Spanish in adulthood. This conclusion confirms the assumption made earlier that the survival of Spanish among Nuyoricans is linked not only to its spread to public functions previously restricted to English, but also to its protection as the language of the family.

**TABLE 2.** Correlational table\*

<i>Age</i>	<i>Educ</i>	<i>Attitd</i>	<i>Monolg</i>	<i>PastUse</i>	<i>PresUse</i>	<i>Abl</i>
Age	.51	.06	.21		-.26	-.45
Educ		.24	.08		.19	-.07
Attitd			.22		-.01	.00
Monolg					-.03	-.02
PastUse						.69
PresUse						.56
Abl						

\*This correlational table presents correlations between the continuous variables in the study. They are age, level of education, attitude toward Spanish, density of contact with the monolingual context, past language use in childhood, present language use in the community, and Spanish ability.



Spanish intergenerational continuity is related to the use of Spanish by parents with children at home. But if these children are to speak Spanish as adults, they must have opportunities to speak Spanish in the community, both as children and as adults.

### 3.3—

#### ***Spanish Use among the Young***

Spanish use is more prevalent among the young. It is important to point out that there exists a relatively strong negative correlation between age and use of Spanish in the present (as indicated in Table 2,  $r = -.45$ , with age having been entered as a continuous variable). This result significantly suggests that older Nuyoricans use Spanish less in the present than younger Nuyoricans, although there is no correlation between age and Spanish language ability ( $r = .01$ ).

Younger Nuyoricans seem to be more overtly active in using Spanish and participating in Spanish language events than older Nuyoricans who participate less in these activities. The young Nuyoricans in our study came of age at a time when Spanish in the community was on the rise because of the increased numbers of recently arrived Spanish monolinguals and a more liberal language policy, the result of civil rights measures. Older Nuyoricans who still live in the community may have had only limited opportunity to use Spanish as they became adults, and therefore may not have 'reactivated' their Spanish, as adolescents assuming adult roles have been shown to do in the present by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Language Policy Task Force 1980, 1982). Language use being habitual, these older Nuyoricans simply have continued behaving linguistically in much the same way as they did before the 1970s. Our results do not suggest, however, that older Nuyoricans speak Spanish less well, just that they are less involved in Spanish-speaking activities. Our finding is important, for it indicates that Spanish language use is more often associated with young adults, rather than old adults, which is the case of aging speech communities approaching language death.

It is instructive to realize that this language activism of the young is overt, and not simply a psychological attitude loosely characterized as language loyalty. Indeed, there is no correlation between age and attitude (Table 2,  $r = .06$ ). Nor is there any correlation between attitude and either language use or ability. That is, despite the very positive attitudes of this speech community toward bilingualism and the use of Spanish, these do not impinge in any way in either its use or ability.

### 3.4—

#### ***Spanish Use and Time in Puerto Rico***

Spanish use is not related to time spent in the monolingual country. There is no correlation between time spent in Puerto Rico and either Spanish language use or ability (Table 2,  $r = -.02$ ,  $r$

= .09 respectively). This again is a significant finding, for it confirms the vitality of U.S. Spanish within the bilingual community. Those Nuyoricans who use Spanish most and know it best are not the ones who have spent more time in Puerto Rico, but those who have been active in the bilingual Nuyoricans community. Visiting or living in Puerto Rico only correlates slightly with attitudes ( $r = .22$ ). And thus we can conclude that contact with the monolingual context only serves to increase pride in one's ethnolinguistic group, but it results in neither greater use nor greater ability in the language.

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#### **Conclusion**

There are a number of lessons for U.S. Spanish language planners involved with the Nuyoricans community that can be derived from our study:

1. If the factors most responsible for the Spanish ability of second-generation Nuyoricans have to do with the status and prestige of both Spanish and its speakers in social and community life, then those interested in the intergenerational maintenance of Spanish need to focus on two factors: the expansion of Spanish as a community resource beyond the immediacy of its communicative use among monolingual families, and the improvement of educational opportunity for Nuyoricans. Planning to improve the status of Nuyoricans Spanish *and its speakers* seems to do much for corpus planning, breeding almost spontaneously a variety of Spanish that is closer to monolingual norms.
2. While Spanish is negotiated as a resource of the Nuyoricans community, it must continue to be protected as the language of the home. Status planning cannot simply address the esteem in which the Anglo majority holds Nuyoricans Spanish, but also that in which the Nuyoricans community views its language. Parents must continue speaking Spanish to their children. Spanish is mostly used in the community by adults who also had opportunities to use it as children in the home.
3. Young Nuyoricans must be given an opportunity to project their Spanish voices beyond the immediacy of the community. Speaking Nuyoricans Spanish must cease being seen as the characteristic of an aging, poor, and uneducated community, but as a resource of a young and socially conscious community that uses Spanish, alongside with English, to negotiate social and economic justice for the community at large.
4. The status and corpus planning associated with the maintenance of a Nuyoricans Spanish variety must be negotiated by the bilingual community itself. Contact with the island has no effect on the Spanish ability of second-generation bilingual speakers, since often their variety is denigrated in the monolingual context.

The prospects for Spanish language maintenance among Nuyoricans will depend on our increased understanding of the factors that determine Spanish language ability. Our study indicates that language professionals must work to raise the status of both Nuyoric Spanish and its speakers. This can be done by expanding the use of Spanish as a community resource, as well as by raising the prestige of their speakers by increasing their educational and, hopefully, economic opportunities. Only this, coming from bilingual professionals who are flexible when judging the discourse of their community, will strengthen and stabilize a Nuyoric Spanish variety.

## Notes

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