

SOME REMARKS ON THE ORIGIN OF AFRO-PUERTO RICAN SPANISH

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ABSTRACT. A number of proposals have tried to account for the genesis and development of a set of Afro-Hispanic language varieties, the vernaculars that formed in Latin America from the contact between African languages and Spanish in colonial times (Sessarego 2021). This article presents a sociohistorical and linguistic analysis of Loíza Spanish (LS), an Afro-Puerto Rican vernacular spoken in Loíza, Puerto Rico by the descendants of the Africans brought to this Caribbean island in colonial times to work as slaves on sugarcane plantations. This article assesses the evolution of this variety and its implications for creole studies. In so doing, it contributes to the long-lasting debate on the reasons behind the paucity of Spanish-based creoles in the Americas (Granda 1968 *et seq.*).

Keywords: Afro-Puerto Rican Spanish, Loíza, creole languages, (de)creolization

RESUMEN. Una serie de propuestas han tratado de dar cuenta de la génesis y desarrollo de un conjunto de variedades lingüísticas afrohispanicas, los vernáculos que se formaron en América Latina a partir del contacto de las lenguas africanas y el español en la época colonial (Sessarego 2021). Este artículo presenta un análisis sociohistórico y lingüístico del español de Loíza (EL), una variedad vernácula afropuertorriqueña hablada en Loíza, Puerto Rico por los descendientes de los africanos traídos a esta isla caribeña en la época colonial para trabajar como esclavos en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar. Este artículo evalúa la evolución de esta variedad y sus implicaciones para los estudios de las lenguas criollas. Al hacerlo, contribuye al prolongado debate sobre las razones detrás de la escasez de variedades criollas de base española en América (Granda 1968 *et seq.*).

Palabras clave: español afropuertorriqueño, Loíza, lenguas criollas, (des)criollización

1. Introduction

Within the field of Hispanic contact linguistics there is a heated debate about the nature and origins of the varieties that formed in the Americas from the contact of African languages and Spanish in colonial times (Granda 1968 *et seq.*). This discussion, which has generated multiple controversies at the academic level, has been labeled by Lipski (2005: ch. 9) as the “Spanish Creole Debate”, and deals with the relative paucity of Spanish-based creoles, as opposed to the widespread use of creole varieties of English and French (Holm & Patrick 2007). Indeed, in the Americas, the only varieties of Spanish that have traditionally been classified as Spanish-based creoles are Papiamentu (spoken in the Netherlands Antilles) and Palenquero (spoken in the former maroon community of San Basilio de Palenque, in Colombia),¹ while, in Asia, the Chabacano varieties of Zamboangueno, Caviteño, and Ternateño (spoken in the Philippine archipelago) are found.

In recent decades, several hypotheses have been provided by a set of authors in an attempt to explain this linguistic asymmetry (see Sessarego 2021: ch.1 for an overview). One of these models, known as the Decreolization Hypothesis (Granda 1968, 1978),

¹ A number of authors would even suggest that these creoles are actually Portuguese-based, rather than Spanish-based. For a review, see Schwegler (1996), Jacobs (2012) and McWhorter (2000).

suggests that a Spanish creole once existed in Latin America, and that it rapidly decreolized after the abolition of slavery by the end of the 19th century by progressively assimilating to Spanish due to processes of standardization and schooling. According to Granda (1968, 1978), this decreolization process would have left behind a set of *rasgos criollos* “creole features” (Granda 1978: 335) in the majority of the Afro-Hispanic vernaculars currently found in the Americas, so that these grammatical elements would be evidence of a past creole phase for these varieties.

While several proposals have embraced some version of Granda’s Decreeolization Hypothesis (Otheguy 1973; Megenny 1993; Perl & Schwegler 1998; Schwegler 1999; Guy 2017), others have come to question its validity, providing linguistic, sociohistorical, and even legal data to offer alternative explanations for the paucity of Spanish Creoles in the Americas (Mintz 1971; Laurence 1974; Lipski 1993; McWhorter 2000; Sessarego 2017). The debate on the origin of these varieties is still very much open in the present day (see Lipski 2005; Sessarego 2021). This being said, the main purpose of this paper is not to provide a definitive solution to this problem, but rather to add information to it, particularly regarding the nature and origin of a little-studied Afro-Puerto Rican vernacular, Loíza Spanish (LS), a black dialect spoken in the municipality of Loíza, Puerto Rico by the descendants of Africans brought to this Caribbean island to work as slaves during the colonial era.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers a discussion of the Decreeolization Hypothesis. Section 3 provides an overview of slavery in Puerto Rico and, in so doing, it demonstrates that the characteristics that have traditionally been held responsible for creole formation in other Caribbean colonies were not present on this island. Section 4 depicts an analysis of the “creole-like” features that were detected during our fieldwork in Loíza. It is shown that such grammatical phenomena can be analyzed as traces of advanced second-language acquisition strategies, as well as rural vernacular traits, which do not necessarily imply an earlier creole stage for this dialect. Finally, section 5 summarizes the paper and provides the final conclusions.

2. The Decreeolization Hypothesis

The first Hispanist to formulate a hypothesis to account for the scarcity of Spanish-based creoles in the Americas was Granda (1968, 1970, 1978). According to this author, as Spanish slavery was no different from the forced-labor systems implemented by the other European powers, Spanish creoles likely existed in Spanish America. Hence, the contemporary absence of such contact varieties in those territories could only be explained as the result of a decreolization process, that is, an approximation to the standard norm due to contact with Spanish after the abolition of slavery. According to Granda’s proposal, this process of decreolization left some traces behind. For this reason, some grammatical features of such a previous creole stage would still be detectable in the speech of several black communities in Latin America.

The Decreeolization Hypothesis has been adopted by a number of scholars (Otheguy 1973; Schwegler 1991, 1996; Guy 1981, 2004, 2017). In particular, Otheguy (1973: 334-335) has even suggested that the *habla bozal*, traditionally understood as a limited L2 version of Spanish learned in the Americas by *bozal slaves* (African-born captives), was in all likelihood a full-fledged Spanish creole spoken in the Spanish Antilles during colonial times. According to this author, the similarities between Caribbean Spanish and creole

languages (i.e., reduced number agreement across the Determiner Phrase, high rates of overt subject pronouns, presence of non-inverted questions, etc.) should not be considered coincidences, but rather should be seen as evidence of a past creole phase for the Spanish dialects of the Caribbean.

The supporters of the Decreolization Hypothesis have, for the most part, based their claims exclusively on linguistic data, without providing much sociohistorical evidence to back their model. For this reason, their proposals have been questioned on some occasions, in particular for the Afro-Hispanic varieties of Cuba and the Dominican Republic (Mintz 1971; Laurence 1974; Lipski 1993; Ortiz López 1998). Conversely, with the exception of a few studies (Álvarez -Nazario 1959, 1974; Mauleón-Benítez 1974), little attention has yet been paid to the Afro-Hispanic varieties of Puerto Rico. This paper aims at filling this gap by providing both a sociohistorical and a linguistic analysis of LS to better understand whether a Decreolization Hypothesis may be feasible to account for its origin and current nature.

3. Slavery in Puerto Rico: A sociodemographic account

The colonial and postcolonial history of Puerto Rico is strongly related to the socioeconomic development of the rest of the Caribbean. This section provides some sociohistorical data with the purpose of analyzing the dimensions of the slave trade to this region to better understand whether the sociodemographic conditions for the formation of a Spanish creole have ever been in place on this island.

As indicated in Curtin (1969: 88), the African slaves taken to Spanish America over four centuries represent less than 15% of the total number of black captives introduced into the Americas (see Table 1). In fact, to adopt Berlin’s (1998) dichotomy, it may be stated that most, if not all, the Spanish colonies were not “slave societies”, but rather “societies with slaves” (Sessarego 2014). This means that all over Spanish America there were African captives engaged in a variety of occupations; nevertheless, at least until the sugar boom of the 19th century in Cuba, black slavery had never represented the main economic driver in any of the Spanish colonies (Andrés-Gallego 2005; Cushner 1980; Brockington 2006).

Table 1: African slave importations to European colonies in the Americas

Colonies	16th century	17th century	18th century	19th century	Total
Spanish	75,000	292,500	578,600	606,000	1,552,100
Portuguese	50,000	500,000	1,891,400	1,145,400	3,586,800
English	-	527,400	2,802,600	-	3,330,000
French	-	311,600	2,696,800	155,000	3,163,400
Dutch	-	44,000	484,000	-	528,000
Total	125,000	1,675,500	8,453,400	1,906,400	12,160,300

In this regard, Curtin’s (1969: 88) statistics show that almost half of all slaves brought to Spanish America were introduced into Cuba (see Table 2). It is for this reason that, if a

Spanish creole had developed and then disappeared in the Americas (as suggested by the Decreolization Hypothesis), it would be there where some records of such a language should be found (Clements 2009: 70). However, no historical data seem to confirm the existence of such a restructured variety, while the demographic information available for the colonial period clearly show that blacks almost never outnumbered whites prior to 1811, when more Africans were introduced to the colony as the result of the development of the sugarcane industry on the island (Masó 1976). If we consider that Puerto Rico received only a fraction of the black captives that were introduced into Cuba (77,000 according to Table 2), then it appears reasonable to assume that the probability of an Afro-Puerto Rican creole language forming on the island during the colonial period was quite reduced. Indeed, even during the sugar boom of the 19th century, when most Africans were introduced into the island, the enslaved population of Puerto Rico never represented more than 12% of the total population (Álvarez Nazario 1974: 77).

A comparison of the rates of free-to-enslaved people in Cuba and Haiti prior to the Haitian Revolution certainly adds further information to the debate to understand whether a Spanish-based creole was likely to develop in the Spanish Caribbean. In fact, as Clements (2009: 78-79) points out, the total number of slaves in Cuba by the time of the Haitian revolution in 1789 was 84,590 (31% of the total population), while in Haiti they numbered 453,000 (98% of the total population). These data clearly show that the sociodemographic picture of the Spanish Caribbean diverged quite significantly from that of Haiti. For this reason, equating Spanish slavery to the forced-labor systems implemented by other European powers in the Caribbean—as assumed by the Decreolization Hypothesis—does not reflect an accurate picture of colonial reality; see also Mintz (1971), Laurence (1974) and Sessarego (2017) on this point.

Table 2: Distribution of the estimated slaves in Spanish America

Country	Number
Mexico	200,000
Cuba	702,000
Puerto Rico	77,000
Dominican Republic	30,000
Central America	21,000
Ecuador, Panama, Colombia	200,000
Venezuela	121,000
Peru	95,000
Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia	100,000
Chile	6,000
Total	1,552,000

As for the Puerto Rican context, Álvarez-Nazario (1974: 72) offers a rough breakdown of the evolution of the importation of black slaves to the island over time (see Table 3). His total number (from 54,000 to 75,000) aligns—to a good extent—with the figures estimated by Curtin (77,000), and shows that the introduction of a black workforce increased

significantly during the 18th and 19th centuries, as a result of the Haitian Revolution, which triggered the development of the sugarcane industry across the Spanish Caribbean.

Table 3: African slave importations to Puerto Rico (15th-19th centuries)

16th century	from 6,000 to 8,000
17th century	from 8,000 to 12,000
18th century	from 20,000 to 30,000
19th century	from 20,000 to 25,000
Total	from 54,000 to 75,000

Black slavery lasted for almost four centuries in Puerto Rico, from the early phases of the Spanish colonization of the island, in the late 15th century, until its abolition in 1873. However, as in the rest of Latin America, the formal abolition of slavery did not automatically imply better living and working conditions for the Afro-descendant population of the colony (Bas-García 2009). In fact, the post-abolition system was designed in a way that forced most black Puerto Ricans into debt. In many cases, former slaves became *peones*, or debtors of their former masters, who had to keep working for them to pay their debt back. *Peonaje* endured into the 20th century on the island and had negative long-lasting consequences on the socioeconomic wellbeing of the Afro-Puerto Rican community up to the present day (Ungerleider-Kepler 2000).

The following sections will provide sociohistorical information on the evolution of the Afro-Puerto Rican community over time to understand whether a Spanish-based creole might have developed in Puerto Rico at some point. Three main historical phases have been identified: 1) Before the Haitian Revolution (1510-1791); 2) From the Haitian Revolution to the abolition of slavery (1791-1873); 3) Post-abolition (after 1873).

3.1. Before the Haitian Revolution

According to Puerto Rican historian Díaz-Soler (1974: 30), the first Afro-descendants who arrived to the island were put to work in the royal mint. These individuals consisted of two black captives, who had been taken to Puerto Rico in 1510 to produce gold coins. Over the 16th and 17th centuries, black slaves were gradually introduced to partially replace the indigenous Taino working force, which quickly shrunk as a result of European diseases, war, and the harsh working conditions imposed by the Spaniards (Rouse 1994; Brinton 1997; Bernárdez 2009).

Álvarez-Nazario (1974: 74) estimated that by the end of the 16th century some 3,600 people lived on the island (see Table 4). Of these, 2,000 were whites, 1,000 were blacks, while 600 were mixed-race individuals. Race mixing, in fact, was common across the Spanish Caribbean, and the offspring of the white masters with their black slaves were often freed at birth. This practice contributed to the rapid development of a free Afro-descendant sector of the population on the island (Mintz 1971; Laurence 1974).

Table 4. Population of Puerto Rico by the end of the 16th century

Whites	2,000 (55%)
Blacks	1,000 (28%)
Mixed race	600 (17%)

During the 17th century, the colony went through a phase of economic hardship. Álvarez-Nazario (1974: 74) indicates that some 8,000-12,000 slaves were probably introduced to the island during that period (see Table 3), and admits that the lack of detailed demographic information makes it difficult to reconstruct the evolution of the different racial groups over that century. Nevertheless, from a linguistic point of view, it should be noted that the captives brought to Spanish America during this early phase of the conquest were not only *bozales*. Thus, they were not exclusively black slaves who came directly from Africa and who could only speak African languages. Quite conversely, during the 16th and 17th centuries, a good number of the slaves who entered Spanish America came from Spain, where they had lived for some time before being taken overseas. They were called *ladinos*, could speak Spanish (either natively or as an L2), were Christians, and knew the customs of Spanish life (Palmer 1976; Restall 2000; Brockington 2006; Wheat 2016).

Given these data, it is therefore likely that the captives introduced into Puerto Rico during the first two centuries from the beginning of the colonization of the island did not creolize Spanish. Rather, in all likelihood, they already spoke the colonial language or had a relatively good access to it and managed to acquire it.

During the 18th century, the local economy gained some traction, in part thanks to the agricultural policies implemented by the end of the previous century by Governor Miguel de La Torre, who provided incentives to move to the region for European settlers and also for fugitive slaves escaping from the surrounding English, French, and Dutch colonies (Álvarez-Nazario 1974: 75). Indeed, de La Torre's policies would give out lots of land to settlers and grant freedom to escaped slaves, if they decided to settle on the island, work to develop the agricultural sector and convert to Catholicism. The sugarcane business gradually grew and the local population increased significantly. Álvarez-Nazario (1974: 75) provides a breakdown of the total population on the island by 1765 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Puerto Rican population by 1765

Whites	14,344 (36%)
<i>Pardos</i> ² and free <i>morenos</i> ³	20,719 (52%)
Black slaves	5,037 (12%)

Data in Table 5 show that the majority group at this point was the “*pardos* and free *morenos*” (52%), followed by the whites (36%) and the black slaves (12%). This demographic information provides important insights into the composition of the Puerto Rican population: it shows that the vast majority of the Afro-descendants on the island were free (20,719), while only a reduced number of them were slaves (5,037). In addition,

² *Pardos*: mulattos.

³ *Morenos*: blacks.

it shows that race mixing was common and that free whites (14,344) were almost three times the number of black captives.

When these data for Puerto Rico (12% of slaves) are compared with the information reported by Clements (2009: 78-79) for other Caribbean regions at the time of the Haitian Revolution (year 1791), it can be observed that the percentages of slaves calculated for Cuba (31% of the total population) and Haiti (98% of the total population) are significantly higher. Overall, this sociodemographic scenario indicates that 18th-century Puerto Rico was nothing like the perfect place for a Spanish creole to form. Conversely, the available data appear to show that the Afro-descendant population present on the island had probably a relatively good exposure to Spanish and, thus, Afro-Puerto Ricans were likely to acquire the colonial language during this colonial phase.

3.2. *From the Haitian Revolution to slavery abolition (1791-1873)*

The Haitian Revolution caused the collapse of the sugarcane industry in Haiti and the subsequent development of that same industry across the Spanish Caribbean, which tried to supply the international market with the sugarcane products that Haiti could no longer supply (Villagómez 2005). This phase is characterized by a more significant introduction of an African workforce to the Spanish colonies of the region and a parallel development of bigger sugarcane *haciendas*.

In the specific case of 18th-century Puerto Rico, a set of economic incentives attracted numerous planters to move to the island and thus increase its sugarcane production. The local population almost tripled in the final decades of the 18th century and continued to grow during the 19th century (Dietz 2018). Nevertheless, the overall percentage of black slaves continued to be quite reduced—if compared with that of other European colonies in the region—and never surpassed 14% of the total population (Blanco 1948: 74).

In order to draw additional planters to Puerto Rico, Spain issued the *Cédula de Gracias* in 1815, which offered favorable conditions for sugar production and sale. In particular, the *Cédula* abolished some taxes, such as those on the importation of slaves, and provided six acres of land per family member, plus three acres for each slave they could bring (Baralt 1981; Dorsey 2003). Despite the significant increase in the Afro-descendant population owing to the expansion of the sugar business, slavery in Puerto Rico never reached the scale seen in the English and French Antilles, not even during the sugar boom of the 19th century (Álvarez-Nazario 1974: 77) (see Table 6).

Table 6. Population of Puerto Rico in the first third of the 19th century

Year	Whites	Free Mulattos	Free Blacks	Slaves (Blacks and Mulattos)	Total
1802	78,281 (47,97%)	55,164 (33,80%)	16,414 (10,06%)	13,333 (8,17%)	163,192 (100,00%)
1812	85,662 (46,81%)	63,983 (34,96%)	15,833 (8,65%)	17,536 (9,58%)	183,014 (100,00%)
1820	102,432 (44,42%)	86,269 (37,41%)	20,191 (8,76%)	21,730 (9,42%)	230,622 (100,00%)
1827	150,311 (49,66%)	95,430 (31,53%)	25,057 (8,28%)	31,874 (10,53%)	302,672 (100,00%)
1830	162,311 (50,12%)	100,430 (31,01%)	26,857 (8,29%)	32,240 (9,96%)	323,838 (100,00%)
1836	188,869 (52,89%)	101,275 (28,36%)	25,124 (7,04%)	41,818 (11,71%)	357,086 (100,00%)

In the first decades of the 19th century, Puerto Rico became the place of arrival for whites, blacks, and mixed-race individuals from the Iberian Peninsula, the Canary Islands, Latin America, and other European colonies (Álvarez-Nazario 1974: 77-78). Free people represented 88% of the total population, while slaves never exceeded 12%. Despite the significant increase in the black labor force in the period spanning from 1750 to 1850, which led Puerto Rico to shift from small farms to medium and large plantations, this Caribbean island continued to be a “society with slaves”, rather than a “slave society” (Moya 2003: 329). Thus, the available demographic data do not seem to support a likely process of creolization for Afro-Puerto Rican Spanish, not even during the “sugar boom”.

By the second half of the 19th century the sugar industry entered a phase of economic crisis, partially due to the political processes that eventually led to the abolition of slavery in 1873 (Figueroa 2005). During those years the introduction of a black workforce onto the island stopped, so that the chances of a creole language forming during that period are even more reduced.

3.3. Post-abolition

The third and final phase (1873-present) concerns the post-abolition period, characterized by a progressive acquisition of civil rights by Afro-Puerto Ricans. During this phase it is possible to observe a constant increase in the number of whites, coupled with a parallel decline of the black and mulatto populations, thus further reducing the possibilities of Spanish creolization (Table 7) (Álvarez-Nazario 1974: 78-79).

Table 7. Population of Puerto Rico before and after the abolition of slavery (1873)

Year	Whites	Blacks	Mulattos
1872	328,806 (53,19%)	31,635 (5,12%)	257,709 (41,69%)
1877	411,712 (59,48%)	39,781 (5,75%)	240,701 (34,77%)
1887	471,933 (62,46%)	36,985 (4,9%)	246,647 (32,64%)
1897	573,187 (63,77%)	35,824 (3,99%)	289,808 (32,24%)
1899	589,426 (61,84%)	59,390 (6,23%)	304,352 (31,93%)

Twenty-five years after the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, the Spanish-American War dictated the end of the Spanish rule on this Caribbean island, which came under the control of the United States with the signing of the Treaty of Paris (Orama-López 2012). The Puerto Rican sugar productivity quickly benefited from modern American technology (Shekitka 2017). Indeed, the sugar industry boomed (331% increase in productivity), but did not generate much employment for the local population, which soon revealed a reason for the migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States (Ayala & Bernabe 2007).

Currently, Puerto Ricans who self-identify as “blacks” for the purposes of the United States census constitute 12.39% of the total population (United States Census Bureau 2010). They reside in great numbers in the municipality of Loíza, where Afro-descendants constitute 64% of the residents. The following section is devoted to the analysis of this community and its sociohistorical evolution in relation to the development of the sugarcane industry on the island.

3.4. Loíza: colonial development and current-day poverty

Due to its location on the plains of the Atlantic coasts of Puerto Rico, Loíza was the ideal place for the production of sugarcane. Thus, during the colonial phase, the hacienda system significantly developed in the region, and, for this reason, Loíza currently hosts the largest Afro-descendant population on the island (Mayo-Santana & Negrón-Portillo 2007).

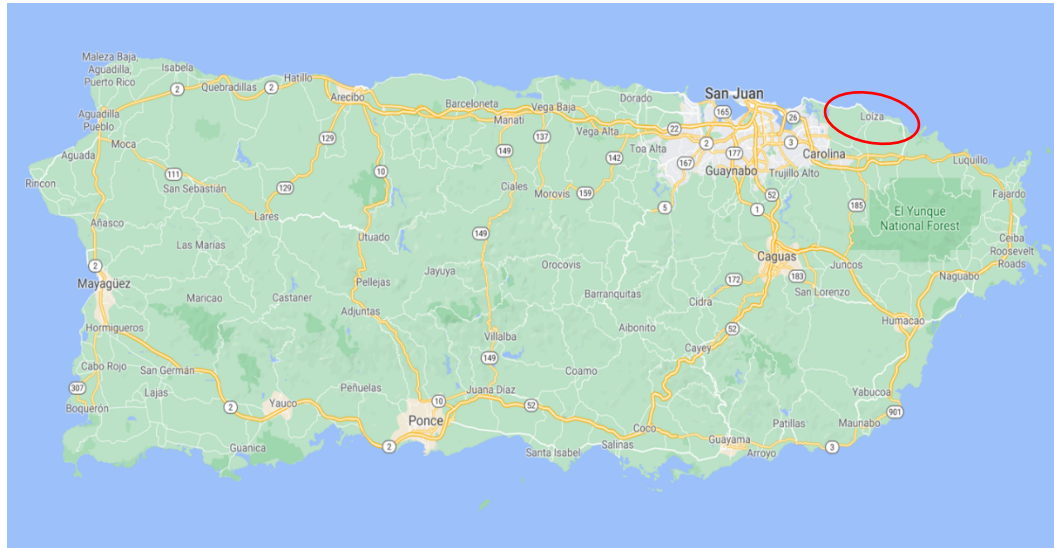


Figure 1. Loíza, Puerto Rico (Map data ©2021 Google)

The first sugar mills to be built in Loíza date back to the 16th century. However, until the sugar boom of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the production of sugarcane was for the most part carried out by small and middle-sized plantations, which did not require the massive introduction of an enslaved workforce. Indeed, even during the decades of the expansion of the sugar industry, the demographic figures reported for this region were nothing like the English and French Caribbean (Mauleón-Benítez 1974; Ungerleider-Kepler 2000).

As Ungerleider-Kepler (2000: 39-40) shows, only 18% of Loíza’s population was made up of slaves in 1828, during the sugar boom, while the rest (82%) consisted of free inhabitants, either whites (13%), mulattos (27%), blacks (17%) or other mixed-race individuals (25%) (Table 8). These data also indicate that racial mixing was quite common, since more than 50% of the total population was either belonging to the “mulattos” or “other mixed-race individuals” groups.

Table 8. Population of Loíza in 1828

Whites	Free Afro-descendants			Slaves	Total
	Mulattos	Blacks	Other mixed-race individuals		
556 (13%)	1,133 (27%)	714 (17%)	1,053 (25%)	724 (18%)	4,198 (100%)

A few years prior to the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico (in the 1860s), the sugar industry began to decline in Loíza (Picó 1986). Slavery abolition in 1873 implied that most of the region’s slaves became *peones* ‘peons’, who kept working in the haciendas in exchange for food and lodging (Meriño-Fuentes & Perera-Díaz 2009). In the 1940s, due to the Agrarian Reform, most *peones* became small landlords, who received a part of the land on which they used to work in the hacienda (Stahl 1966).

Nowadays the living and working conditions of the majority of *afroloiceños* are quite precarious. In addition to being an economically and socially depressed region, US census data indicate that the majority of the inhabitants of Loíza live below the poverty line (67%), with 8% illiteracy, and with a rate of unemployment among the highest on the island (Ungerleider-Kepler 2000: 47-49). The economic and social isolation of the municipality of Loíza is, in part, exacerbated by its geographical location, surrounded by rivers, canals and the ocean, and connected to the nearby capital city of San Juan only by the *ancón*, a transport boat, which ships across the *Río Grande de Loíza* (Ungerleider-Kepler 2000: 44). Taking into consideration the peculiar socioeconomic isolation that Loíza has been experiencing since the abolition of slavery (a century and a half ago), it is hard to imagine how a Spanish creole—if it ever existed in the region—would have decreolized so completely due to processes of standardization and schooling.

4. Aspects of Loíza Spanish grammar

The main purpose of this section is to analyze a set of grammatical features found in LS, which have been repeatedly reported for a large number of Afro-Hispanic dialects and that, in some cases, have been identified as potential indicators of a previous creole stage. The goal is to show that such linguistic phenomena are also well-attested patterns found in advanced second-language (L2) varieties of Spanish and in a number of non-standard native varieties; thus, they should not necessarily be ascribed to a previous creole phase for LS or for any other Afro-Hispanic vernacular (Sessarego 2021).

Linguistic data were collected in Loíza, Puerto Rico, during summer 2020. Sociolinguistic interviews were carried out with 53 native speakers of the local variety. Findings show that LS does not show the intense grammatical restructuring that characterizes Spanish creoles such as Papiamentu (Jacobs 2012) or Palenquero (Schwegler 1996). Nevertheless, it does present certain phonological and morphological reductions, as well as some African lexical borrowings, which testify its nature as an Afro-Hispanic contact vernacular. Given these grammatical characteristics, LS is understandable to any speaker of standard Spanish and, in broad terms, it may be classified more as a “Spanish dialect” than a “Spanish creole” (McWhorter 2000: 10).

The following are some of the grammatical features retrieved from the fieldwork carried out in Loíza, which have previously been described in the literature as vestiges of a prior creole stage (Granda 1968; Otheguy 1973; Álvarez & Obediente 1998):

- (1) Frequent use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subject pronouns:
*Si **tú** quieres algo, **tú** lo tomas.*
 ‘If you want something, you take it’.
- (2) Instances of lack of subject-verb agreement:
*Me **encanta[n]** los pueblos como Loíza.*
 ‘I love small towns like Loíza’.
- (3) Variable gender agreement in the Determiner Phrase (DP):
*Este perro siempre tiene **mucho hambre**.*
 ‘This dog is always very hungry’.

- (4) Reduced number agreement across the DP:
*Mira que **chiquita[s] mis mano[s]**.*
 ‘Look how small my hands are’.
- (5) Sporadic presence of bare nouns in argument position:
*[**Los] jueye[s] son bueno[s] aquí.***
 ‘Crabs are good here’.
- (6) Lack of subject-verb inversion in questions:
*¿**Qué él quiere** de nosotros?*
 ‘What does he want from us?’
- (7) Cases of agglutination of the article with the following noun:
*Hoy **lagua [el agua] [es]tá fría.***
 ‘Today the water is cold’.
- (8) Copula reduction by aspiration or apheresis:
*La cosa [**es]tá que arde.***
 ‘The situation is on fire’.
- (9) /t/ reduction on infinitive verb form:
*Me va [a] **da[r]** algo.*
 ‘I am dying here’.

Examples (1-9) show that LS presents a set of grammatical features that deviate from standard Spanish. Nevertheless, all of these linguistic phenomena have also been commonly reported for several Spanish contact varieties (Klee & Lynch 2009) and vernacular dialects (Zamora-Vicente 1989; Lipski 1994).

It would be a mistake to ascribe the aforementioned features to a previous creole stage for LS, not only because the available sociohistorical information reported in section 3 strongly suggest otherwise, but also because most of these grammatical elements appear to occur every time Spanish enters into contact with other languages (Sessarego 2021). Thus, phenomena such as those reported in (1-6) are systematically encountered in advanced varieties of L2 Spanish (Montrul 2008, 2016; Geeslin 2013), while examples such as those of (4) and (7-9) can easily be found in a number of rural Spanish dialects (e.g., rural varieties of Canary Island Spanish, Andalusian Spanish, Murcian Spanish, to name a few) (Alvar 1996), for which the (De)creolization Hypothesis is certainly not applicable.⁴

As elaborated in more details elsewhere (Sessarego 2021), all of the aforementioned features—commonly detected across the Afro-Hispanic languages of the Americas and found also in LS—appear to be either quite widespread vernacular phenomena (e.g., various types of phonological and morphological reductions), or to be the result of processing constraints applying across several linguistic interfaces, which can be

⁴ Due to space limitations, it is not possible to provide a detailed account of the phenomena reported in (1-9). For a more in-depth analysis on the nature of such phenomena, see Sessarego (2011) on the notion of vernacular universals and Sessarego (2021) on the persistence of default configurations in contact-driven grammatical restructuring.

commonly encountered in all cases of language contact, and, thus, do not necessarily imply a (de)creolization process for the varieties presenting them (e.g., high levels of overt subject pronouns and lack of subject-verb inversion in questions → syntax/pragmatic interface; phi-agreement reductions → morphology/semantics interface, bare nouns in argument position → syntax/semantics interface) (Sessarego 2013, 2019). Therefore, the linguistic evidence for LS does not appear to support the Decreolization Hypothesis for this Afro-Caribbean vernacular. Rather, linguistic data suggest that this variety may be better characterized by a combination of rural vernacular features and advanced SLA traits, which were nativized and conventionalized at the community level in a region that traditionally had never been under much of the standardizing pressure that is usually exerted by urban society and formal education.

5. Conclusions

This article has presented some sociohistorical and linguistic evidence to examine the origin and evolution of LS, an Afro-Hispanic vernacular spoken in Puerto Rico by the descendants of Africans brought to this region to work as slaves on sugarcane plantations. In so doing, it contributes to the Spanish Creole debate (Lipski 2005), a long-lasting topic of discussion in the field of contact linguistics.

According to sociohistorical data, the conditions for the development of a Spanish creole in Puerto Rico were never in place. Rather, a series of economic, social and demographic factors appear to have favored the acquisition of Spanish by the Afro-descendant population. In particular, in sharp contrast with the scenario characterizing the English and French Caribbean during the colonial phase, Puerto Rico was never a “slave society”, but rather a “society with slaves” (Berlin 1998), in which enslaved and free blacks had relatively good access to the colonial language. Along the same lines of analysis, linguistic data show that LS presents only limited degrees of grammatical restructuring. This is exemplified by a group of linguistic features common to most contact varieties of Spanish and to certain vernacular dialects. These set of grammatical phenomena, though partially deviating from standard Spanish, should not necessarily be ascribed to previous creole phase for this dialect (Sessarego 2021).

In conclusion, both linguistic and sociohistorical data do not appear to support the Decreolization Hypothesis for LS. On the contrary, our findings suggest that this variety may be better characterized as the result of moderate processes of grammatical restructuring, which were nativized and conventionalized in a rural community, not traditionally much influenced by urban pressure and the linguistic norm.

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