

# The Spanish Language in Antigua and Barbuda: Implications for Language Planning and Language Research

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A Spanish-speaking community now constitutes a sizeable section of the population of Antigua and Barbuda as the result of immigration from the Dominican Republic, particularly after 1981, the year of the country's independence. The permanence of this community can be seen in such developments as the establishment of Spanish-speaking churches and the appearance in the capital of business signs in Spanish. The change in the linguistic landscape of the country has implications for language planning and language research. This paper examines the fire service, education and disaster preparedness as indicators of the extent to which, in sensitive areas, there is an awareness of what the situation requires. It also identifies areas for linguistic research in this situation of languages in contact.

## Origin of Antigua's Spanish-speaking Population

To anyone who has maintained fairly frequent contact with Antigua and Barbuda in the last twenty years, it is surprising to note that some of the most current and reliable sources of information list English and a dialect of English as the only languages spoken in the country, despite the existence of a variety of Dominican Spanish<sup>1</sup> spoken by a fairly significant sector of the country's population.<sup>2</sup> The absence of this detail could indicate that the compilers of such references are unaware of this development. It could also be the case that external organisms, while aware of the change, prefer to defer any acknowledgement of it until the authorities of the country have declared it official.

It cannot be denied, however, that in an interesting twist of history, Antigua, first a replenishing station for Spanish adventurers after discovery by Christopher Columbus in 1493 and then an English-speaking British colony and independent country to the exclusion of virtually all other languages, is now home to a community of hispanics.<sup>3</sup> Figures for the most recent census were not available at the time of writing. However, a table of Work Permits Granted by Country of Origin Between 1997 and 2002 informs that 242 such permits were issued to *quisqueyanos* or persons from the Dominican Republic in 1997, 203 in 1998, 289 in 2000, 153 in 2001 and 314 in 2002, a total of 1201 for the period, exclusive of 1999, for which the document provides no figures for any country. Used as a guideline rather than as an absolute indicator of the number of new arrivals annually, these figures and others in the table still indicate that after Guyana, Jamaica and Dominica in that order, the number of permits delivered to *quisqueyanos* exceeded those granted to nationals of such Caricom countries as St Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago. For estimates of the total current population of Spanish-speaking immigrants, Johnson (2001) refers to personal communication and word of mouth reporting that place their number in 2000 between 3,000 and 10,000, in a total country population of 67,000 persons for the same year. The discrepancy between the unofficial figures and those released by government is inevitable given the difficulty in recording data on an immigrant community some of whose members may prefer their status to be unknown to the authorities.

A significant section of the community is said to be descended from Antiguans who emigrated to the Dominican Republic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in search of employment. A lax visa system and favourable conditions of citizenship induce them to choose Antigua and Barbuda rather than the United States or one of the Latin American countries. In Antigua and Barbuda they generally obtain low paying jobs and some of the women seek employment in the sex trade either willingly or because they were unable to find the attractive jobs which they were told awaited them in their new community (Johnson 2001).

Twenty-two years after its independence, the country therefore has to see to the language needs of a non-English speaking group that is permanent despite allegiance to the culture and country left behind and the hope to return there. This community will expect to take part in the life of its adopted home, availing itself of all services and enjoying all rights accorded the rest of the population, not the least of which is the right to employment and to safety. Competence in the new language is a major means of access to these rights and services. It is therefore not too soon for observers to analyse the situation in order to determine the extent to which the new language group is being prepared to gain that access.

## Institutions Assessed

The study is only a preliminary step towards a larger one that will examine in detail the teaching of Spanish and English in the primary and secondary schools. Language practices in the fire service, the National Office of Disaster Services in the Ministry of Labour, Cooperatives and Public Safety and the primary school system were targeted through interviews of senior officials, as well as a written communication in the case of the primary school system. In the fire service, an awareness of the need for the personnel to have at least work-related competence in Spanish was expressed. However, no measures to provide that competence were identified. The National Office of Disaster Services, on the other hand, has gone beyond the stage of mere awareness, identifying concrete steps for the dissemination of information and for the enhancement of the language competence of its personnel. It has several recorded messages in Spanish to alert hispanic residents in the event of a hurricane and plans to have its documents translated into Spanish for the information of those residents.

A language policy is also taking shape in the primary schools, not surprisingly, since the school is very often the first forum for contact with the standard language in many communities of the Caribbean. A Spanish programme was launched on the 1st of February, 2001 by the Ministry of Education. According to verbal and written information from one teacher, a Haitian, involved in the programme, it encompasses two urban primary schools, namely, those of Greenbay and the Villa, and the Potters and Liberta Primary Schools, which are urban. All four districts are characterised by a high concentration of *quisqueyanos* and were therefore very good choices for the implementation of this programme. What is surprising is that if at its inception the aim may have been to teach English to monolingual speakers of Spanish, it is now designed to teach Spanish to children of a Spanish-speaking background who are now bilingual, as well as to monolingual speakers of a variety of English. The situation is described as follows by the teacher in charge of the programme, who is Haitian:

Au niveau primaire nous avons commencé au jardin d'enfants jusqu'au bout; c'est-à-dire à la fin de la classe primaire. Il s'agit de groupes mixtes, les enfants anglophones et les enfants hispanophones ensemble. Les cours d'espagnol sont pour les enfants hispanophones aussi importants que l'anglais pour les enfants anglophones à l'école. La majorité d'entre eux ont pris la naissance en Antigue; ne parlent pas réellement espagnol. Les parents parlent avec eux un dialecte; un dialecte dérivé de la langue espagnole.

At the primary level, we begin in kindergarten and take them up to the end, the end of the nursery section, that is. The groups are mixed, with English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children together. In the schools, classes in Spanish are just as important for the Spanish-speaking children as English is for those who speak English. Most of the Spanish-speaking children were born in Antigua. They don't really speak Spanish. Their parents speak dialect with them; a Spanish dialect.

Two points seem to emerge from this statement. The first is that a variety of English is becoming the dominant language of children who are born in Antigua of Spanish-speaking parents. Secondly, their competence in Spanish is considered weak enough for it to be taught to them as a foreign language. This attrition is in keeping with patterns reported by Portes and Hao (1998) of dramatic loss of high level competence in Spanish among first and second generation hispanic students in Miami and San Diego. The phenomenon explains why both categories of Antiguan pupils are together in a Spanish language programme and provides interesting territory for the linguistic study of the two languages in contact in this Caribbean country.

The picture in education would not be complete without reference to ESL programmes for adults. Though not part of the present study, they must be mentioned as an indication of the extent to which English proficiency opportunities are

created for the benefit of the new immigrants. Johnson (2001) examines two such programmes and the reactions of hispanic women who were enrolled in them. The programmes do not appear to have had an encouraging measure of success, the women complaining of a lack of interest on their part and of having to travel long distances to get to the classes. These programmes must be seen, nevertheless, as a *bona fide* attempt on the part of the authorities to make the Spanish-speaking immigrants bilingual.

## Implications for Language Planning in Antigua and Barbuda

Judging from the three areas investigated, it can be said that there is commitment on the part of the authorities to meet the language needs of the population of *quisqueyanos*, even if, in one case, nothing has been done beyond an identification of that need. What is required, however, is a more concerted effort, a policy that will minimise if not eliminate the possibility of discontent in either language group. To devise such a policy, two possible developments are to be considered. In the first, the culture of the hispanic sector could merge with that of the dominant group if immigration from Latin America declined drastically. That merger is even more likely if supported by a decline in Spanish competence among children born in Antigua of hispanic origin. On the other hand, sustained immigration could make the *quisqueyanos* a larger force to be reckoned with, more vocal and more concerned about its rights, and a successful Spanish programme in the schools, coupled with sustained immigration, would be a bonus for the status of the language. If the latter scenario presents itself, the dominant language could feel threatened and any tensions which exist between the two groups could be heightened as a result.

The authorities might therefore wish to engage in preventive language planning. They have as close examples of bilingual and multilingual societies with declared language policies, such cases as Quebec, the mainland United States and Puerto Rico, Honduras and Belize. The debate on the role of majority and minority language is particularly intense in North America, where educators, language specialists, politicians and other interest groups are lined up in support of English Only, or of the opposing position: English Plus. While it may never be possible to eradicate the tensions that pit one language group against another in a multilingual society, early government intervention is important in the case of Antigua if only because a country contending with the social issues related to underdevelopment and limited resources does not need the added burden of a faction of its population at a linguistic disadvantage. However, language planning must not be seen as the granting of liberal concessions to a new group that may be viewed with suspicion by the population that preceded it. It is therefore important to involve the adult English-speaking community in the process, in such a way that if they cannot match the enthusiasm about Spanish that the pupils in the Spanish programme of the primary school reportedly demonstrate about the language, they can at least see that bilingualism offers them some benefits.<sup>4</sup> Daily meaningful Spanish lessons could be transmitted on television and radio and aspects of the culture of the Dominican Republic highlighted. It might be pointed out to the anglophone community that Antigua and Barbuda is now in a position to precede other CARICOM countries in realising a declared goal of CARICOM: that of broadening the knowledge of Spanish so as to strengthen economic and cultural ties with Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

## Implications for Language Research and Language Teaching

A key element of the design and implementation of a language policy is the contribution of language specialists. Huss (1990) argues that the language programme created by the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 proved costly and ineffective because language specialists had little to do with it. Such specialists can advise, for example, on the kind of language programmes that would maintain the interest of adult learners, so as to minimise the high drop out rate in the ESL programmes referred to earlier. The opportunity presents itself here for language professionals of the tertiary institutions of the region to design audiovisual teaching packages, particularly for adults, with themes and images that are familiar to the learners. Given the profile presented of the older hispanic population in Antigua and Barbuda, it is not likely that a textbook approach to the teaching of English as a second language will have much success.

A rich research field also awaits linguists and sociolinguists. In Antigua and Barbuda, *quisqueyano* Spanish has been added to a language tapestry made up of Antiguan, Jamaican and Guyanese dialects of English, and Dominican French

Creole.<sup>6</sup> It remains to be seen what influences will be exerted in any direction on the phonology, morphology and syntax of the three language groups. It is even conceivable that Spanish in the Dominican Republic could change under the influence of its former citizens now resident in Antigua and Barbuda if they resettle in their homeland in significant numbers.

## Conclusion

Some initiatives have been taken at an official level in Antigua and Barbuda to provide for the language needs of the country's new hispanic population made up largely of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. However, a more vigorous language policy must be pursued in which the non-immigrant population sees benefits that can accrue to it. To be effective, the policy must have the input of language professionals, who have an essential contribution to make as advisors and as the designers of attractive and relevant language packages. The existence of Spanish among the country's array of dialects is a rich source of research for linguistics and sociolinguistics

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because reference is made in the paper to the island of Dominica, a member of CARICOM, the term *quisqueyanos* will be used to refer to the population of the Dominican Republic so as to avoid ambiguity. It is derived from *Quisqueya*, the indigenous name of that country, whose people consider it an authentic label. It is assumed that, in context, the term *Dominican Spanish* is not ambiguous.

<sup>2</sup> It was impossible at the time of the research to determine if any *quisqueyanos* have settled in Barbuda. The complete name of the country is retained in the paper in most instances, as a mark of full respect for the sister island.

<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that the country had a bilingual population with the arrival of Dominicans in massive numbers in the 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> The Haitian teacher in charge of the Spanish programme in the four primary schools reports that the pupils of both language groups are very enthusiastic and hate missing a Spanish class. His statement in French was made via e-mail correspondence. The teacher's subsequent face-to-face comments suggest that budgetary constraints and the unavailability of qualified local *quisqueyano* teachers restrict expansion of the programme.

<sup>5</sup> As stated for example in the Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the Permanent Secretariat of SELA (Sistema Económico Latinoamérica)

<sup>6</sup> As massive as its presence was in Antigua and Barbuda, Dominican Creole seems not to have had an effect on the lexicon of Antiguan speech. Research is needed to test the hypothesis that it is in decline in the twin island state.

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## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the following persons for their assistance in obtaining information for the preparation of this article:

- Mr Alex François, school teacher
- Miss Turkessa West, teacher at the Antigua State College
- Mr Baldwin Joyce, Superintendent of the Antigua Fire Department
- Mrs Patricia F. B. Julian, Director of the National Office of Disaster Services, Ministry of Labour, Cooperatives and Public Safety
- Mr Austin Josiah, Chief Education Officer
- Dr Ermina Osoba, Resident Tutor, School of Continuing Studies
- The Reverend Romeo Challenger, Greenbay Moravian Church
- Dr Egberto Almenas, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill
- Dr Pedro Welch, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill

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HTML last revised 23rd July, 2004.

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