

## **Introduction**

Upon taking “Language, Identity, and Variation” this semester, I have been confronted about the way in which I understood sociolinguistic topics, such as the arguments on nature versus nurture, the connections between language and biology, how language plays an integral part in our quests to construct our respective identities, group membership and participation dynamics, among many others. Throughout the months-long experience, I have understood that many themes within those topics cannot be addressed in black and white terms. There are various shades of gray that color everyone’s reality and perception of reality. To delve into subtopics within sociolinguistics field in an according and humanistic manner, having an informed and empathetic mind is imperative.

Human experiences are varied, for a myriad of infinite reasons. Many factors influence the way in which we see the world and how we construct our identities. In fact, the way in which we see the world heavily lies on the way our identities were constructed, and vice versa. Therefore, factors such as upbringing, exposure to certain ethnic groups, experiences within diverse communities, and other influences tied to the acquisition of a first or second language, cannot be absent from our analyses. They provide a completer and more detailed picture for us to respectfully affirm or consciously differ in dialogues centered on understanding the world we live in, as well as the people we share distinct degrees of spaces with.

This work reflects the arduous yet renewing introspective exercise I engaged in throughout the entire semester, in search of a more correct way of not only understanding the way I relate with people in Puerto Rico, but also, the way people in Puerto Rico see me and my family members. My parents consider themselves Nigerians and American citizens, my brothers consider themselves Nigerian-Americans, and I consider myself a Nigerian and Puerto Rican

with American citizenship. I now understand how three distinct ethnic identities can exist in one household, which is why I believe that other people's declarations concerning their own ethnicities should also be carefully studied and explored.

### **First case**

This scenario considers an adult who was born and raised outside of Puerto Rico and now lives in Puerto Rico, participates in Puerto Rican culture, has learned Puerto Rican Spanish and English, and identifies as Puerto Rican. I would confidently agree with the way in which this person identifies themselves, and members of the individual's community would be inclined to do so as well.

Authenticity is associated with truth and genuineness, authoritative agents, and honest representation and judgement. Members of the Puerto Rican community, in this case, would be conscious of how this individual reacts and speaks in distinct settings and situations. They would base their perceptions of the individual's perception of self, according to the way the individual incorporates internalized cultural traits and practices, into their everyday interactions. The prime example for this individual, of what is entailed in achieving an authentic Puerto Rican identity, are the actual Puerto Rican people. For said individual to be viewed as an authentic Puerto Rico, he or she must have seen how Puerto Ricans respond to those distinct situations.

Language use plays a pivotal role in this case, since the individual does speak Puerto Rican Spanish and English, which I assume is done in an unforced and amicable way. Doing so closes any barriers or distances that surface markers, such as physical traits and accents, could induce during their interactions with other Puerto Ricans. Also, their continual exposure to Puerto Ricans, in terms of location, makes their asseveration on their ethnicity more valid. Ethnicity, for me, is determined by one's introspective analysis upon sharing social and cultural

characteristics and life experiences with the people that surround them. It is a personal feat that must always be respected, without the individual falling into crossing. For this individual to be considered an authentic member of the Puerto Rican community, I believe he or she should be honest about their ancestral roots, which could be tied to their genetic makeup. The more open one is about their background, I believe the more it facilitates the process of being accepted into an ethnic group and being embraced by the members of that same community. Essentially, this individual is right in considering himself or herself as a Puerto Rican, to me, for valid reasons. A person, with the same exact characteristics but adheres to another ethnic identity, would be right in doing so as well. This is explained in more detail, in the following two sections of this work.

### **Second case**

This second scenario considers an adult who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, still lives in Puerto Rico, but does not participate in Puerto Rican culture, prefers not to speak Puerto Rican Spanish or English, and identifies with a culture from elsewhere. Although this person certainly has Puerto Rican nationality, which is primordially driven by their reality as a bona fide resident and citizen of the island, there are many factors that could affirm and validate their stance concerning their ethnicity.

Firstly, this individual may have been born to parents that are not Puerto Rican and most likely identify with their culture from elsewhere and have maintained their respective cultures alive in their household. During my elementary school days, I blatantly denied Puerto Rican influences that were very much present in my identity, due to the amount of bullying I received from racist Puerto Rican peers. At the time, in a private Christian school in Mayagüez, Black-skinned Puerto Ricans were a rare sight; much less, African children with accents as they were acquiring Puerto Rican Spanish. For various years, people would look at me, notice my

traditional clothing, and tell me that I was clearly not Puerto Rican, to which they would ask me where my parents were from. After communicating how I was Nigerian in Spanish, they would ask how long I have been in the island for, with a confused and inquisitive look on their faces. Once they would hear that I came to Puerto Rico before turning 4 years old, they would contradict themselves and say, “ah, pero tú eres Boricua; no eres Africana na”. Such comments adversely influenced my own perception of self, until I matured and realized that I could embrace both cultures and for appropriately valid reasons, call both cultures my own and have authentic members from both cultures affirm and agree with my perception of self.

Oftentimes, ethnicity is confused for nationality. Different ethnic groups can share the same nationality and people from different nationalities can form part of a same ethnic group. An example of this would be children born in the United States to Jamaican and North Korean parents. Although their ethnicities are distinct, they share a common nationality as American citizens. Also, dark-skinned individuals with Nigerian and Cuban ancestry could share different nationalities but by residing in the United States, classify or even pass as African Americans. I believe it all comes down to the way one sees himself or herself, which leads me to compare my brothers with this individual.

My three brothers do not speak Puerto Rican Spanish as fluently as me, nor do they speak it as much unless situations require it. They also tend to speak more English outside of the family nucleus, even though they are accustomed to the language. After holding various conversations with them over the years, I have learned that they identify as Nigerians and African Americans, although they acknowledge the presence of Puerto Rican characteristics in their taste for food and vocabulary use. In addition, most people call them by their Igbo nickname and English middle name, by their own request. I, on the other hand, always have people call me by my Igbo

nickname and do not mind when they call me by my full name. A few months ago, when my brothers and I went out to eat, a waitress started to take our orders in Spanish. My middle brother, who is quite stubborn and had recently come back from an internship in Louisville, KY, adamantly kept replying in English, to which the waitress started to respond in English. She was highly uncomfortable and evidently, insecure in her use of the language. When it was my turn to order, I spoke in Puerto Rican Spanish which made my brother roll his eyes. Once she left, we spoke about how either he or she had to sacrifice their comfort to communicate with each other. My brother clearly did not want to speak in Spanish, to which the waitress had to forego her own comfort and get the job done in English.

The encounter I had with my siblings and waitress also demonstrates how language can be a distancing or unifying agent, although it is the former for the individual in this case scenario. Deciding not to engage in conversation in what is typically Puerto Ricans' first language, Spanish, informs them of a disinterest in identifying oneself with their speech community. Puerto Ricans who are exposed to the individual in this case scenario most likely notice their reluctance in communicating with them, which leads them to simply not consider the person as an authentic part of their community. Even if this individual has Puerto Rican ancestry, as well as Puerto Rican parents who were raised in Puerto Rico, not wanting to engage in everyday conversations or matters in dialects that characterize their regions, creates significant distance between the individual and other Puerto Ricans.

Surface markers such as typical physical features would not only make the person pass as an authentic Puerto Rican, but confirm Puerto Rican ancestry, regardless of their personal stances. Although most Puerto Ricans would not deny the individual's Puerto Rican heritage, I do believe that the individual marginalized himself or herself first from the Puerto Rican

community and upon both experiencing and realizing such, authentic Puerto Ricans would further separate and distance themselves from the individual. This resonates with the case of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who claims to be part of the African American community and was rejected by them once the truth of her ethnicity was revealed. Even though she negates her “whiteness”, white people would marginalize her even after determining that she indeed is white, and most African Americans would simply dismiss such a notion.

### **Third case**

The third and final scenario describes an adult born and raised outside of Puerto Rico, who currently lives elsewhere. However, this adult lived in Puerto Rico throughout their teenage years, participates in Puerto Rican culture, and identifies as Puerto Rican. I believe this individual strongly appreciates the Puerto Rican culture, which is admirable, but there is a line between culture appreciation and crossing.

An example that comes to mind which asserts my stance concerning this case, would be my parents. Both my mother and father were raised in Nigeria during their formative years and emigrated to the United States before they turned 30 years old. They have visited the African continent numerous times since then, and every Nigerian they encounter, both within and outside their family tree, still sees them as authentic Nigerians. They communicate with all their family members and country people with the dialects that characterize the regions they are from, such as Igbo and Pidgin English. They have always been in tune with all the sociopolitical and economic issues that occur in the communities they were raised in, the towns, bigger regions, and entire nation. I would daresay that they are more informed about what goes on in Nigeria than a considerable number of Nigerians in Nigeria.

My parents have been American citizens for more than 30 years, and surely pass as African Americans or Nigerian Americans, even though I have never heard them claim to be American. They assert their American citizenship when certain situations merit that verbal assurance but remain steadfast in their identity as “100% Nigerians”. Both have worked among and with thousands of individuals from different nations, especially Puerto Ricans for the past 20 years. They have a strong appreciation for the Puerto Rican culture after spending more than 20 years on the island, but no one could ever catch them calling themselves Puerto Ricans. Both joyfully interact with members of the Puerto Rican community, in Standard English and their “not so fluent” Spanish, which makes Puerto Ricans appreciate and accept them without minimizing their identity as Nigerians who have made a home in the island.

I have witnessed how Puerto Ricans introduce them to other Puerto Ricans, and proudly say that my parents are Nigerians who are an integral part of the Puerto Rican community. They do the same with my siblings as well. My parents always sympathize with the Puerto Rican people and left their comfort zones to further explore the culture. For example, my mother has gone to San Juan on some occasions to protest the government’s lackadaisical abuse regarding teachers’ retirement options. Both strongly support protests that are held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May and formed part of Puerto Rican history by speaking out against Ricky Rosselló in Summer of 2019, although resistance and protests are embedded in their Nigerian identity. However, my parents did what I thought was the unthinkable for prideful Nigerians that rarely enjoy competitive sports: wear green Colegio shirts and go all the way to Ponce, with me and my youngest brother, to cheer on my middle brother who was competing in the Justas’ track and field events. These are practices that are quite synonymous with Puerto Rican pride.

Similarly, my oldest brother plays Caribbean music with rising Puerto Rican composers and is also heavily embraced in those contexts. My family members consistently affirm their Nigerian heritage, via practices as simple as adhering to the English language as much as they can, but also evidently love partaking in Puerto Rican culture, which Puerto Ricans strongly respect and validate.

If the person in Case 3 was submerged in a context where he or she is exposed to various Puerto Ricans, or a setting that seems like a Puerto Rican village, I would respect their judgement on their ethnicity. Place, location, physical settings, or anything similar plays an important part in asserting whether one has an authentic view of their self or not. Therefore, I believe that Puerto Ricans near that individual would be the best judges to determine whether the person is infelicitously crossing or is an authentic part of the Puerto Rican community.

## **Conclusion**

Respect is a trait that must always be evident in all our encounters with people from diverse backgrounds. Our own ideologies that govern mental processes involved in observing cultural practices should always be guided by empathy, information or education, and readiness to learn more. These should be at the forefront of any intellectual exercise that seeks to understand the interconnectedness between language, identity, and variation.

A memory came to mind as I was drafting this paper, which serves as a reflective way to conclude it. The memory was of an Ecuadorian woman who met me the very first week she moved to Puerto Rico two years ago. A few weeks after relating with her, she told me, in the presence of other Puerto Ricans, that I was the most Puerto Rican person she had ever met. This is something that Puerto Ricans, who prefer expressing themselves with more “refined” or formal vocabulary, tell me a lot even though they mean well and thoroughly enjoy carrying



conversations with me. This Ecuadorian woman learned numerous sayings like “papelón”, “qué vaina”, and “clase loquera” from me first, which always left her in a flabbergasted state. This woman has worked in various nations for decades and has always been immersed in international settings. She would laughingly say, in the presence of more than 60 Puerto Ricans, that she had never met someone who was so bold and confident in two cultures at the same time. She said that I was a sight to behold, wearing my Nigerian traditional wear, proudly responding to my Igbo name, and fluently speaking Spanglish to a Bilingual population, naturally mixing in Puerto Rican sayings and African quotes, and effortlessly representing a relatable image to Puerto Ricans. In this memory, I can see the reconciliation between the nature aspect of myself, in which biological markers point towards my being Nigerian; but also, with the nurture element, evidenced in the way I was raised in a Puerto Rican context, and has made me the person I am today.