

# **¡A mi abuela no le gusta hablar inglés!**

A critical sociological discourse analysis of the English-only language policies imposed on Puerto Rican society and the island's response and push against language colonialism.

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## Introduction:

*“Puerto Rico is a beautiful island.  
It belongs to the United States  
Our children speak English and Spanish  
And salute our flag every day”* (Denis, 2015).

### *Historical Context*

Puerto Rico, called Boriquén initially by the native Taino population, is presently considered one of the oldest existing colonies in the world. For over 500 years under Spanish rule, Puerto Rico was exploited primarily as a sugarcane and coffee plantation colony. Enslaved African and indigenous populations were forced to labor under cruel conditions while forming a lucrative slave economy for the Spanish crown before the abolition of slavery in 1873 (*World of 1898: International Perspectives on the Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress, 2022). In 1897, the island’s inhabitants were granted self-government under new Spanish legislation called *La Carta Autonómica* (Denis, 2015; *World of 1898: International Perspectives on the Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress, 2022). Puerto Rico’s budding self-government abruptly ended with American militarized occupation of the Island during the Spanish-American War.

In 1898, America won the war and, with the Treaty of Paris, acquired previously held Spanish territory in addition to extending its military occupation of the island and taking over as the sovereign power of Puerto Rico (Denis, 2015; *World of 1898: International Perspectives on the Spanish - American War*, Library of Congress, 2022). As a growing imperial empire influenced by the doctrine of manifest destiny, the American government was determined to *quickly* establish Puerto Rico as an example of successful Americanization and colonial rule (Arroyo, 2016). A territory that would be loyal and prove an asset economically, culturally, and militarily to the American project and its expanding globalized presence (Denis, 2015; *Puerto Rico and the United States in Search of a National Identity: Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth-Century Puerto Rico*, Library of Congress, 2022).

Before the American takeover of Puerto Rico, the island’s educational system used Puerto Rican vernacular Spanish as the language of instruction for all institutions (Del Moral, 2019; Clacher, 1997). The United States government was quick to institute a secular public-school infrastructure mirroring the educational system of the American mainland while simultaneously changing the language of instruction from Spanish to English. The U.S. government also created a Department of Education that included the commissioner of education, whose role at the time was to prioritize and usher in an era of Americanization on the island through the educational infrastructure (Maldonado-Valentin, 2016; Martinez, 1997). In addition to heading Americanization efforts within the public school system, the commissioner of education was also head of insular and municipal operations on the island. These operations controlled the financial assets of all school sites and teacher placement, maintained an overall say in the curriculum, and finally controlled the language of instruction (Denis, 2015).

Through the Department of Education, one of the many tactics used to assert American culture onto the island would quickly be tried and implemented, but not without facing significant pushback from various corners of Puerto Rican society. The method of colonization under examination in this paper is the implementation of language policies requiring the use of the English language, first in the educational sector and later throughout all governmental offices (Arroyo, 2016). Additionally, it examines the continuous impact of language colonialism on Puerto Rican society, including the pushback the U.S. government faced when attempting to use language policy and planning as a tool for cultural erasure and the Americanization of the island.

Therefore, considering the multi-faceted layered impact the language policies have had on the different stratifications of Puerto Rico's society, the research question is this: What do Puerto Rico's language policies teach global society about the struggle to maintain a united cultural identity amidst continuous colonial subjugation?

There are three major themes further explored under the arch of the research question of which the findings will also be categorized:

1. **Early Americanization Efforts:** The trajectory and impact of language colonialism, via language policies, on the Puerto Rican socio-cultural identity
2. **Beginning Praxis of Decolonization and Dissent:** Continuous pushback against ongoing language colonialism by the majority voice of the public represented through popular local media, elected leaders, and localized dissent (captured by various news media).
3. **Future of Puerto Rico:** How the ongoing historic movement in reaction and response to the language policies is one part of many of Puerto Rico's decolonization process and work towards more robust self-governance.

This research study will build off existing qualitative and ethnographic data exploring the ongoing impact of language colonialism on Puerto Rican society. Moreover, it will aim to situate Puerto Rico as an essential case study in decolonization and resistance within ongoing Caribbean and Latin American studies, especially neighboring Caribbean nations impacted by colonial-era foreign policies, language imperialism, and, in some cases Amero-Europinization efforts.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Decolonial Theory*

A decolonial theoretical framework helps to define the socio-political infrastructures and policies integrated into Puerto Rico's government. Applying a decolonial framework and approach to Puerto Rico's political and cultural infrastructures allows for a nuanced examination of the ongoing legacy of Americanization policies and practices within Puerto Rico's overall governance, unified national identity, and cultural preservation. Moreover, the decolonial framework is interdependent on establishing historical analysis in examining the intergenerational transmission of inequalities within the island's surrounding community.

Applying a decolonial approach to Puerto Rico's socio-cultural infrastructures primarily addresses the attempt at "deculturalization" of Puerto Ricans to implement a unified American cultural hierarchy on the Island, disrupting the cultural preservation of native Puerto Ricans. This approach will also address the imperialistic and social implications of "English Only" policies on the Island. Finally, the decolonial framework examines the historical realities and infrastructures of Puerto Rico and the United States – for example, it will work within a sociological discourse analysis and methods approach, analyzing data from different periods while assessing the legacy of several of the United States government's-imposed policies on Puerto Rico.

### *Language Colonialism*

The idea surrounding these language policies is that American values and culture can more readily be adopted if the dominant language *is* switched from Spanish to English on the island (Atilas-Osoria, 2016; Bannan, 2020). In addition to the Official Language Act of 1902, *seven language policies have been* implemented over time by the U.S. government via the commissioners of education and further executed by U.S.-appointed governors. Furthermore, the issue of language, assimilation, and colonialism has received direct federal involvement from congressional members and representatives and U.S. presidents, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was frustrated that the island's population had not yet reached successful English or bilingual attainment (Arroyo, 2016).

With the pressure the Commissioners were facing to rapidly shape the new generation of Puerto Ricans on top of creating a bilingual state, along with Roosevelt's big stick imperial policies, the United States government's response to Puerto Rico became increasingly hostile. This impacted the language policies, which fueled the already tense relationship Puerto Ricans had with the United States government. Soon, symbolic meaning was assigned to language, English symbolizing colonial authority and Spanish symbolizing the start of the national identity of Puerto Rico. Over time, sociocultural symbolism took on more and more layered meanings, impacting any chance of English being seen as a global tool versus what it was being seen as a tool of imperialism.

Moreover, the back-and-forth policy changes and inconsistencies aggravated the Puerto Rican public because the policies negatively impacted students and their opportunities for later upward social mobility. The movement against English and its ties to the nationalist formation established proto praxis for decolonization, independence, and the struggle for self-actualization and identity formation.

These language policies and their impact on the educational, economic, and governmental sectors of Puerto Rico, all contributing factors to Puerto Rico's more significant national and cultural identity, have been criticized as forms of language colonialism and, thus, an extension of American imperialism. With the implementation of language policies and their corresponding political eras and controversial commissioners came the heightened rise of nationalist and independence movements. In addition to growing political movements was the continuous evolution of the collective Puerto Rican identity. One that was complex, diverse, vibrant, and nuanced, and at times, would challenge the colonial project in which it had been forced to partake.

Aside from the political actors who used the controversies surrounding the use of language for their ends, other vital variables spoke out time and time again against the policies and the ongoing changes brought about by them. These were educators, teacher associations, students, members of popular Puerto Rican culture (poets, authors, artists), and day-to-day communities. These different populations from across all strata of Puerto Rican society used local newspapers, bulletins, and protests to express their dissent at Americanization efforts, especially those done through language policies, which had a long-lasting negative impact on the educational structure and system. This dissent was often met with violent resistance from the State, causing oppressive repercussions against the Puerto Rican people.

Political leaders from the nationalist and independence parties advocated on behalf of the Puerto Rican public at political forums across Latin America as well as in front of congressional hearings, using the intersections of language, identity, and culture as significant speaking points when advocating for the sovereignty of Puerto Rico (Gutiérrez, 1987; Martínez, 1997). These hearings often called out the apparent tactics of colonization and extreme violence used against the Puerto Rican people.

Meanwhile, in the fight to maintain Spanish as the dominant language of instruction in classrooms and the dominant language for other sectors across the island, symbolic cultural application of English versus Spanish began to form. This also led to different parties attempting to keep a cultural identity separate from American norms and culture. There is an ongoing historical trajectory in wanting to maintain the integrity of Puerto Rican identity, preserve the Taino/ African / Spanish / Puerto Rican heritage, and solidify Puerto Rico as a sovereign country and nation amidst the Latin American – Caribbean American global economy. The prevailing problem is American colonization and its massive negative impact (disaster capitalism, language colonialism, environmental imperialism, military occupation, etc..) blocking the pathway to Puerto Rico making self-determining decisions for itself as a nation, a people, and as global citizens and participants in an increasingly postcolonial postmodern society. This problem has been noted by

These early stages of decolonial practice brought with it the preservation of indigeneity, both Taino and African ancestry. The early 1930s - 1950s marks a foundational era of decolonial praxis for the Puerto Rican people. During this particular time period, Puerto Rico saw the heightened movements of the Nationalist *Party*, which resulted in parallel student activist movements on both the island and mainland United States. The rise of Puerto Rican nationalism communicated to the United States government a continuous desire for a self-governance that allows all nuances of *Puerto Rican* identity to be preserved for decoloniality and independence as a people from imperial rule (Bannan, 2020). Again, this resulted in a particularly tumultuous era of State versus the people (Denis, 2015). All the while, language and identity maintained a core role in Puerto Rico's formation as a nation.

The Americanization and deculturalization process implemented against Puerto Ricans through the systematic restructuring of the island's educational system and government offices has had a long-lasting impact on the communities within Puerto Rico. According to recent studies, about 15% of students and youth ages 15 – 25 were considered illiterate because they could not read or write in English (Pousada, 2017). Moreover, according to 2010 census data, only 11% of Spanish-speaking households reported being able to “Speak English very well” (Arroyo, 2016). The legacy of these language policies has had a catastrophic and disruptive impact on present-day Puerto Rico and its ideal future. The legacy of colonization, the push for self-governance, decolonization, and a maintained unified cultural identity make the study of language colonialism on Puerto Rican society and culture relevant.

## Methodology

### *Data Collection*

A qualitative approach was used as the foundation in the methods of research in answering the following research question and its key supporting themes:

What do Puerto Rico's language policies teach global society about the struggle to maintain a united cultural identity amidst continuous colonial subjugation? And,

1. **Early Americanization Efforts:** The trajectory and impact of language colonialism, via language policies, on the Puerto Rican socio-cultural identity
2. **Beginning Praxis of Decolonization and Dissent:** Continuous pushback against ongoing language colonialism by the majority voice of the public represented through popular local media, elected leaders, and localized dissent (captured by various news media).
3. **Future of Puerto Rico:** How the ongoing historic movement in reaction and response to the language policies is one part of many of Puerto Rico's decolonization process and work towards more robust self-governance.

A sociological discourse analysis was used as the primary qualitative approach when analyzing and coding the data for this research question.

In addition to the Official Language Act of 1902, an additive to the Foraker Act of 1900, Puerto Rico has seen seven language policies. These language policies range in date from 1898 to 1952. The Educational Policy Analysis Archives has created a classification and overview of the seven language policies of Puerto Rico, which is shown in Table 1.

Although the final language policy officially ended with the Villaronga term, in 1952, Commissioner Candido Olivera attempted to change the language policy to that of the predecessor of Villaronga.

To the present day, different political parties who have obtained power in Puerto Rico have gone back and forth on how to implement the final language policy or if a new one should be created. Currently, the Villaronga policy stands, but not without significant political back-and-forth competition (Arroyo, 2016; González, 2008).

Utilizing the seven language policies and their scope of influence over the daily lives of Puerto Ricans as parameters for data collection, I was able to situate and historically contextualize the reaction and responses of the Puerto Rican people from stratified areas of Puerto Rican society and the responses and reaction of the United States government into three main periods:

1. Period One: 1898 - 1934
2. Period Two: 1934 - 1950
3. Period Three: 1950 - Present Day

Each period fits into the respective themes of the research question, which are **early Americanization efforts (1)**, **the beginning praxis of decolonization and dissent (2)**, and **the future of Puerto Rico (3)**. These groupings intended to draw special attention to crucial occurrences from each period without abandoning the historical context, shaping, even intensifying, the events taking place over time. These key occurrences, such as assassinations, political protests, and episodes of state violence, highlight the growing dissent of the Puerto Rican people across the different stratification of Puerto Rican society and the evolving relationship between the U.S. government and Puerto Rico as a nation.

Notably, the intersections of language, identity, nationality, and culture were constant in nationalist, student, and varied independence movements. Therefore, making the issue of language and education, identity, autonomy, and other important socio-political and sociocultural factors a consistent, revolving front-and-center concern for much of Puerto Rico's political and global history.

Finally, the groupings draw attention to the micro and mezzo life of Puerto Ricans, who, over time, have had shifting relationships with the language policies and the different eras of political discourse said policies ushered in. This often resulted in layered symbolic meaning and complex cultural attitudes being assigned to both English and Spanish –especially as it continues to maintain a mixed reception on the island, despite the growing presence it has on the island.



Table 1  
*Language policies in Puerto Rico's education system: 1898-present*

Administration	Time Period	Spanish	English
Eaton Clark	1898-1900	Absent in the curriculum.	Medium of instruction across all content areas.
Brumbaugh	1900-1903	Medium of instruction in elementary grades.	Taught as a subject along with Spanish for the rest of the content areas. Used as medium of instruction in Higher grade levels across content areas along with Spanish as a subject.
Faulkner-Dexter	1903-1917	Taught as a subject.	Used as mean of instruction in all grade levels across content areas with Spanish as a subject.
Miller-Huyke	1917-1934	Used as medium of instruction across content areas for grades 1-4. Used as medium of instruction along with English as a transitional Bilingual program for grade 5.	Used as medium of instruction in grades 6-12 across content areas.
Padin	1934-1937	Medium of instruction in elementary grades.	Taught as a subject along with Spanish for the rest of the content areas. Used as mean of instruction in Higher grade levels across content areas along with Spanish as a subject.
Gallardo	1937-1945	Used as medium of instruction in grades 1-2 along with English as a subject. Used as medium of instruction along with English as dual bilingual program.	Taught as a subject in grades 1-2. Used as medium of instruction in higher grade levels along with Spanish as a subject.
Villaronga	1949-present	Used as medium of instruction across grade levels.	Taught as a subject across grade levels.

*Source.* (Algreen De Gutierrez, 1987; Canino, 1981; Resnick, 1993).

With these components in mind, the data that was collected for this research is sourced from archival material taken from *Centro: Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Library of Congress Hispanic Division, Education Policy Analysis Archives*, and periodical clippings taken from *The New York Times*. Moreover, the following texts were used as primary sources given their history, first-hand experience as major actors in Puerto Rico's political and social spheres, and overall extensive personal collection of material which aids in the understanding of crucial events discussed later in the findings and analysis:

- a. *War Against All Puerto Ricans* by Nelson Antonio Denis
- b. *The Movement Against Teaching English in Schools of Puerto Rico* by Edith Algren de Gutiérrez
- c. An Ethnographic Study of Students 1997 → *Students' Reflections on the Social, Political, and Ideological Role of English in Puerto Rico*
- d. An Ethnographic Study of Students 2012 → *My Cousin Talks Bad Like You: Relationships Between Language and Identity in Rural Puerto Rican Community*

The data collected from *Centro: Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, the *Library of Congress Hispanic Division*, the *Education Policy and Analysis Archives* and *War Against All Puerto Ricans*, and *The Movement Against Teaching English in Schools of Puerto Rico* consists of mixed media portraying the American takeover of Puerto Rican education, U.S. response to growing nationalist movements on the island, and various government and congressional correspondence regarding education, language, and dissent in Puerto Rico. The data found in both ethnographic studies highlight the evolution of symbolic interaction with both the English and Spanish languages as well as provide raw data into two different growing populations over a period of time and their relationship with English and Spanish and the residual impact the language policies have had on the children's schooling, attitudes, and community.

The periodical clippings taken from the *New York Times* contain important historical events relevant to Puerto Rico's struggle with the U.S. government concerning language, identity, and independence. Each periodical offers unique insight into the public's attitudes on key issues and the importance of language's literal influence and power. The clippings chosen for this research paper are reports of student activism, on and off the island, centering on developing Puerto Rican identity, reports detailing ongoing dissent regarding English as a primary language of instruction, and eventually transitioning Puerto Rico to a fully bilingual state. Finally, there are reports that detail protests and acts of the state vs. people and people vs. the state violence on the Island.

The data collected and gathered has been coded and analyzed using sociological discourse analysis and managed and organized using Atlas.ti, a digital data analysis tool and organizer. All data will be contextualized and placed into the three main themes supporting the research question. It had been previously hypothesized that with the findings, subthemes relevant to the research question would be found and assist in coding the data, thus providing an essential nuance in the overall timeline of how Puerto Rico has shaped its identity amidst colonial rule—and in this context, with the impact of language imperialism shaping its ongoing relationship with itself and the United States government.

## *Codes and Themes*

Using Atlas.ti, an inductive approach was used during the first round of open coding. Although the research question contains three main themes; **early Americanization efforts (1)**, **the beginning praxis of decolonization and dissent (2)**, and **the future of Puerto Rico (3)**, all open codes were sorted into code groupings:

1. Advancing Puerto Rico: infrastructure, quality of life, future, post-colonial (13 filtered codes)
2. Colonization (298 filtered codes)
3. Decolonization: praxis of decolonization (78 filtered codes)
4. Dissent: Puerto Rican dissent, beginning challenge of colonization, disruption (55 filtered codes)
5. Education: education policy, teacher, and student experiences (609 filtered codes)
6. Historical self: Puerto Rican history, historical context, preservation (60 filtered codes)
7. Identity: Puerto Rican, sociocultural, heritage (496 filtered codes)
8. Language: policy, planning, colonialism, language education (337 filtered codes)
9. Politics: socio-political, Puerto Rico, status (753 filtered codes)
10. Puerto Rican Nationalism: nationalist, independence, national identity (244 filtered codes)
11. Social conditions: ongoing social inequalities, day-to-day life (523 filtered codes)
12. Socio-economy: economy, exploitative labor, capitalism, social inequalities: poverty (359 filtered codes)
13. State violence (137 filtered codes)

After the open codes were sorted into their code groupings, the groupings were then sifted into the appropriate research themes:

1. **Early Americanization Efforts**
  - 1.1. Colonization (298 filtered codes)
  - 1.2. Education: education policy, teacher, and student experiences (609 filtered codes)
  - 1.3. Language: policy, planning, colonialism, language education (337 filtered codes)
  - 1.4. Socio-economy: economy, exploitative labor, capitalism, social inequalities: poverty (359 filtered codes)
2. **The Beginning Praxis of Decolonization and Dissent**
  - 2.1. State violence (137 filtered codes)
  - 2.2. Politics: socio-political, Puerto Rico, status (753 filtered codes)
  - 2.3. Decolonization: praxis of decolonization (78 filtered codes)
  - 2.4. Dissent: Puerto Rican dissent, beginning challenge of colonization, disruption (55 filtered codes)
  - 2.5. Puerto Rican Nationalism: nationalist, independence, national identity (244 filtered codes)
3. **The Future of Puerto Rico**
  - 3.1. Historical self: Puerto Rican history, historical context, preservation (60 filtered codes)
  - 3.2. Identity: Puerto Rican, sociocultural, heritage (496 filtered codes)
  - 3.3. Social conditions: ongoing social inequalities, day-to-day life (523 filtered codes)

### 3.4. Advancing Puerto Rico: infrastructure, quality of life, future, post-colonial (13 filtered codes)

These code groupings remain relevant and within the boundaries of the research themes. These coding groups further nuanced the discourse, symbolism, and both the historical and sociological context of the textual data. As a result, this enriched the overall findings of this research paper. The code groupings sorted into their respective research themes allowed for a deeper analysis into the nature of how extensive and disruptive the web of colonization was, and continues to be, to Puerto Rico's overall socio-political, economic, and cultural existence. Further emphasizing how the ongoing question of language, education, and its intersection with identity, autonomy, and other important socio-political and sociocultural factors is but one symptomatic extension of the colonial impact.

Moving on from the coding, the data was assembled into three historical periods, allowing for a historical contextualization of the findings and analysis. The periods: Period One (1898 – 1934), Period Two (1934 – 1950), and Period Three (1950 – present day) were crafted using the language policies as the boundaries and context as to when to end and begin a new period. Moreover, the research themes and their code-grouping were assigned to each period, giving insight into significant patterns and happenings related to the compounded intersectional impact and tensions the language policies were having on stratified Puerto Rican society.

The goal of organizing the various periods, themes, and code groupings is to create a timeline of salient events that include analyzed cultural artifacts. This timeline aims to answer the research question about how language colonialism, through language policies, continues to affect the formation of a united cultural identity in Puerto Rico during colonial subjugation.

#### *Data Analyses*

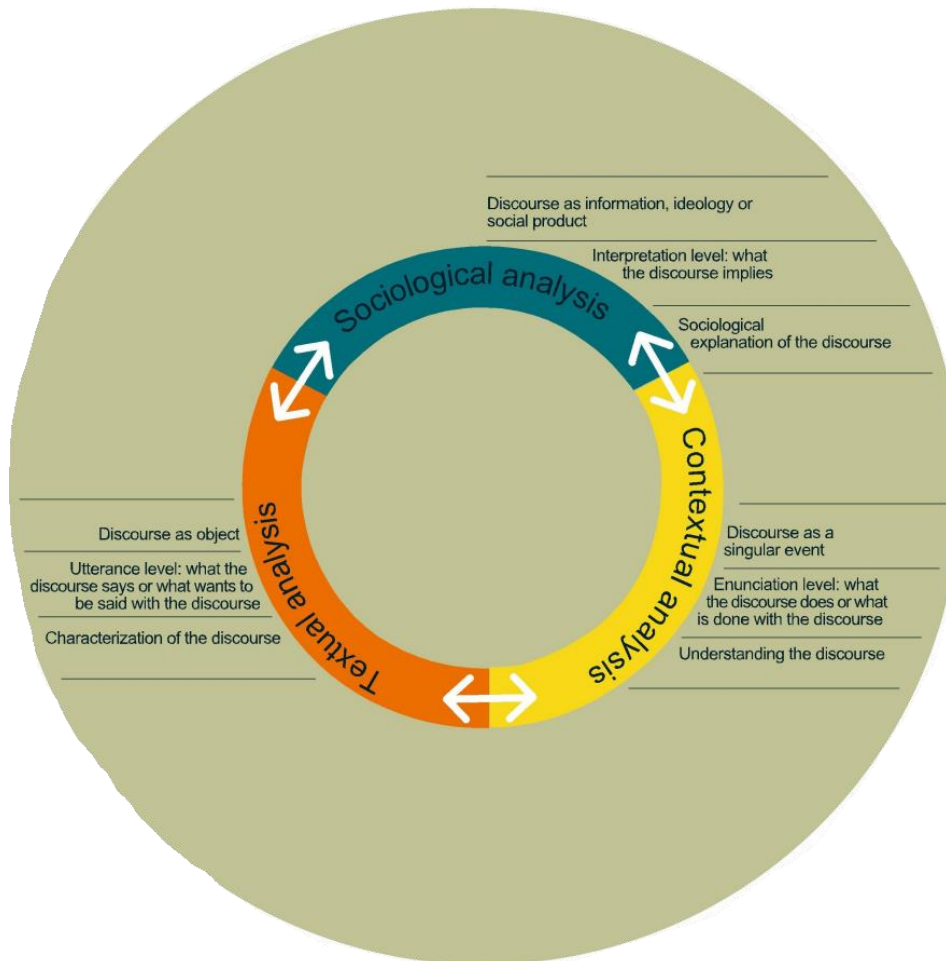
The sociological discourse analysis was conducted using a three-step process:

1. Textual analysis
2. Contextual analysis
3. Sociological analysis

Textual analysis was used as the first step when determining which data is relevant to the research process and how it should be systematically processed and understood. The textual analysis examines the composition of the data (Ruiz, 2009). During the textual analysis, coding commenced, and data was sorted according to the three key themes shaping the research question; particular attention was taken when examining racial undertones, patriotic language, the language of dissent, mentions of identity, and language acquisition. Secondly, contextual analysis delved into the deeper and surrounding meaning of social life, cultural practices, and political framework, influencing the discourse material (Ruiz, 2009).

Combined, textual and contextual analysis led to a sociological analysis, which ended in the final interpretation of the data. During the final interpretation of the data, I incorporated the key concepts highlighted in the theoretical framework, namely decolonial and cultural theory, to better synthesize the data. Finally, I relied on an extensive literature review of ongoing research into language colonialism in Puerto Rico and ongoing public responses to the language policies to better frame the boundaries of my research and final analytical input.

A visual of how the sociological discourse analysis was followed can be viewed in the following diagram (1) below.



### *Validity and Reliability*

Given that the data of this research is pulled from national databases, public archives, and federal correspondence, the data is highly accessible for any future studies to be conducted on this topic. Due to part of the data coming from primary sources archived in national databases and from existing studies examining similar but different variables within language colonialism in Puerto Rico, the data can also be found to have high reliability.

Finally, this research expects to continue to build a nuanced contextualization of the ongoing legacy of colonization and Puerto Rico's historic movements toward decoloniality. Additionally, it aims to examine, further, the impact variable actors such as educators and both public and political dissenters have had on pushing towards the reshaping and reimagining of a unified cultural identity in Puerto Rico, one not dependent on colonial-era laws, policies, and governances. This research aims to be situated alongside ongoing Puerto Rican literature focused on decolonization, cultural identity and preservation, and self-governance within the context of Caribbean studies and scholarship.

### *Ethics and Positionality*

It is essential to state that as a researcher, my positionality influences how I approach and examine the data. I am a diasporic Afro-Puerto Rican individual with living and deceased relatives who have lived through the language policies enacted in Puerto Rico from the 1930s – to the present. I was surrounded by adults with mixed experiences and relationships with both English and Spanish, who regaled me with stories of Puerto Ricans from their childhood who held a complicated and nuanced relationship with the American educational school system and the requirements to learn English. Some did not enjoy speaking English because of the way they were treated when the push for English was at its height or how the American public treated Puerto Ricans moving to the “El Norte” (The North) for better economic opportunities after these policies negatively impacted their local economies and governments.

I have grown up hearing the stories of the panicked American public towards the growing Puerto Rican population and the erasure of our indigeneity from American memory. Because of such a heritage, I am influenced and driven to conduct my research in the fields of colonization, decolonization, and language and identity.

Throughout this research, I must challenge myself to examine data from as holistic a lens as possible while exploring the feelings that may arise in myself. In contrast, I challenge any pre-existing notions or biases relating to Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States of America.

Finally, regarding ethics, my data collection does not take me into direct contact with any individuals and does not require any intrusive collection of personal material or private information; all data is collected from public national resources. All data will be kept anonymized and stored in an external encrypted storage device, only handled by myself.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### *Symbolic Interaction and Meaning Assigned to Language*

A prevailing pattern and early finding that kept revealing itself with the data was the way the colonial relationship existing between the United States of America and Puerto Rico wrapped English and Spanish into a complex symbolic knot. One that became highly politicized during the rise of nationalist and independence movements, and presently continues to be topic of research. Arguably, given the complexity and depth of history, the languages themselves have become intangible, yet powerful cultural and historical artifacts, under constant dissection and examination.

English undeniably and inescapably exists throughout the island of Puerto Rico, yet the relationship the Puerto Rican public has with English is steeped in complexity. It would be reductionist to say that English and Spanish exist on strict binaries of colonizer versus the colonized and that the symbols assigned to them have changed very little. On the contrary, with colonization having a contextualizing factor, both languages exist in relationship to the Puerto Rican people, with great nuance. Overtime, English and Spanish have taken on additional symbolic meaning along with shifts in the cultural application, interaction, and navigation of the languages.

The politicalization of English along with its colonial history, made it initially difficult for the language to exist *simply* as a “global bridge” for when Puerto Ricans enter the global socio-political economy (Mazak, 2012). Moreover, with the colonial contextualization of the language, coupled with the language policies implemented over several periods of time, accessibility to English attainment as a tool for upward social mobility became difficult for many on the Island. English began to symbolize class status, elitism, whiteness, foreigner, colonizer, and power (Clachar, 1997; Mazak, 2012). Early American curriculum in Puerto Rican classrooms taught, one, a social reality many Puerto Ricans did not and would not have access to, and two, that Spanish was everything the American dream and American assimilation was *not*. Meaning that Spanish was antiquated, associated with laziness, and that the Spanish Puerto Ricans spoke, also a colonial language, was improper *bad* Spanish (Mazak, 2012; Del Moral, 2019). This was not so thinly veiled cultural erasure and language colonialism, not done by a few bad apples within the classroom, but systematically implemented in the curriculum for all public schools on the island and then again reinforced by American media and the end-all-be-all U.S. presidents and their congressional cabinet when addressing the Puerto Rican people (Denis, 2015; Del Moral, 2019).

The rise of nationalism from the 1930s through the 1950s, the violent suppression of Puerto Rican identity and culture in response to Puerto Rican nationalism, and the early stages of present-day decolonial practices have radically shifted the relationships with English and Spanish on the Island and all the intersectional identities and struggles associated with the languages.

The shifting symbolic tiers associated with English and Spanish are seen throughout the data across the different periods. With these symbols, one also has the shifts in interactions with the languages and how the language policies brought about these changes, if not was the impetus for the start of both languages' complex history, usage, and relationship on the island. The symbolisms surrounding English and Spanish are important for a discourse analysis because they point to the fluidity and complexity of different populations' (from the political elites to the rural school child) attitudes and interactions during key historical moments and eras throughout the use of the language policies. It also functions as a bridge from the language policies, the attitudes, and responses to them, to the nationalist uprisings and the state response to those national uprisings to, finally, the present-day conditions of Puerto Rican society. Again, it must be highlighted how richly intersectional these topics and realities are.

## *Period One: 1898 – 1934*

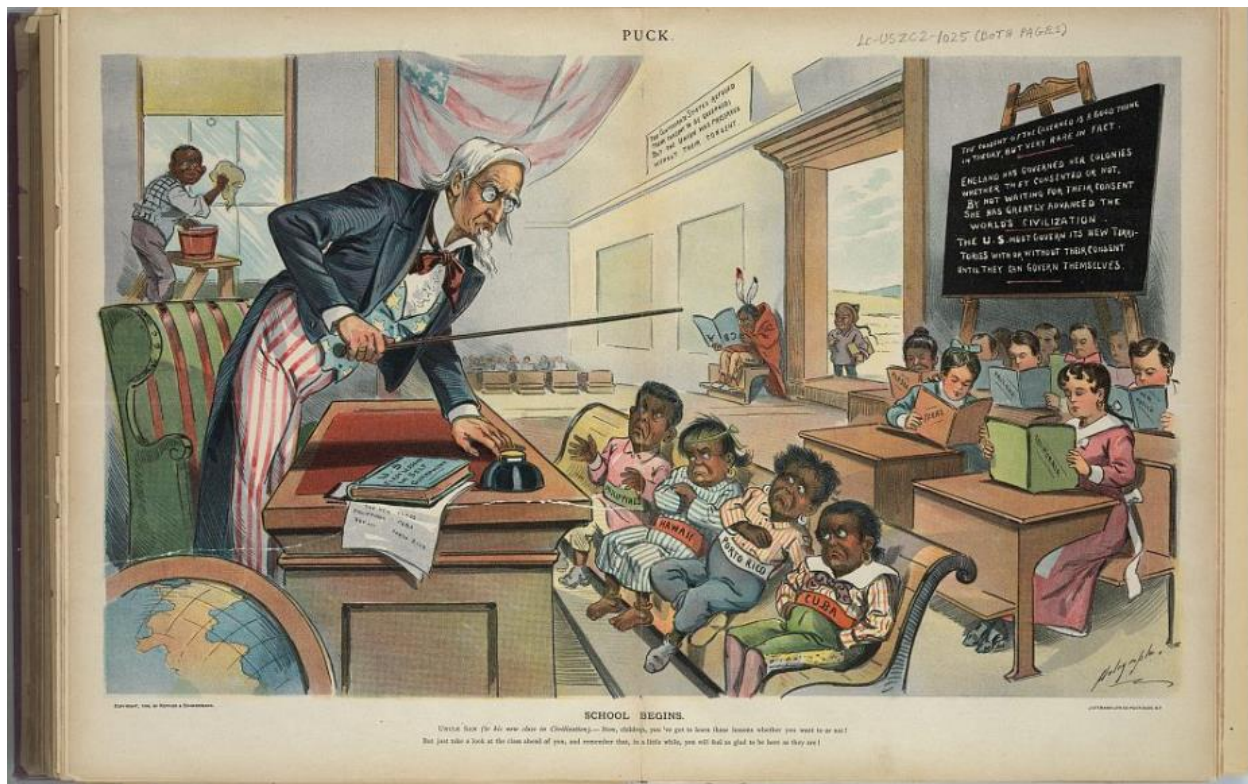
### *Early Americanization Efforts*

The language policies of 1898 through 1934 can be categorized as the beginning of the United States government's attempt at early Americanization efforts. These early efforts took the form of changing the language of instruction from Spanish to English, under the Eaton Clark administration and then later maintaining English as the primary mode of instruction for upper primary and secondary grades during the Huyke administration (Arroyo, 2016). Moreover, the public-school systems in Puerto Rico required a curriculum that mirrored that of the education in the United States mainland. The curriculum that students received in their classes was irrelevant to the lives they lived on the island, showcasing how out of touch the Americanized institution was with the local population (Del Moral, 2019; Maldonado-Valantin, 2016). Additionally, the standardized lessons taught to Puerto Ricans echoed the negative perceptions of the collective American imaginary and popular sentiment held about the island's inhabitants at the time.

An example of the popular circulating media can be seen below in the political cartoon titled *School Begins* by Louis Dalrymple, depicting Uncle Sam teaching self-governance to the newly acquired territories of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines (Dalrymple, 1899). The image depicts the nations as dark-skinned, "disheveled," and "upset" looking children who have not yet adopted the attire of "sophisticated" American clothing. In the background, an African American child is cleaning the windows, looking over his shoulder, presumably to hear the lesson, whereas a Native American individual holds an alphabet book upside down. Standing outside, a Chinese child peers into the classroom. In this political cartoon, the colonized nations are infantilized by the U.S. government, represented through the paternal Uncle Sam character. Uncle Sam, in the position of authority, takes on the responsibility of teaching such physically unruly and uncomfortable "children" (nations) the lesson of "self-governance." There is a blackboard with texts hailing the British empire for its role in "civilizing" most of the known world and teaching its colonial subjects self-governance. Below this praise is text arguing that the United States has a responsibility to do the same civilizing action towards its own colonial subjects – which, according to the image, is not limited to the newly acquired territories but the territories that had been "conquered" within the mainland United States because of following manifest destiny (Texas for example and previously held Native American land). Overall, education is shown in this image as a tool of Americanization, which is equated with perfected self-governance (therefore qualified to teach it), and additionally seen as a tool of American enculturation.

The sentiment towards Puerto Ricans during the early stages of Americanization was that they were a people unfit to govern themselves (Denis, 2015) and were not ready for sovereignty, directly going against the period of self-governance the island held prior to its military occupation by the United States. During the Huyke administration, the dominant curriculum instituted favored a colonial narrative that taught Puerto Rican children that their Spanish heritage was outdated and not useful for the American project coming to their shores. African and Indigenous identity were virtually erased during this administrative period, as students were taught that indigeneity had died out with the start of Spanish colonization (Del Moral, 2019). It was also during this administrative period that the rise of nationalism began to take place.





## *Period Two: 1934 – 1950*

### *Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement: Language and Cultural Identity*

The period between 1934 through 1950 had become increasingly contentious. The nationalist party had begun to gain strength in numbers and voice as they centered their movement around the ongoing language policies of the island. The leaders of the nationalist movement began to assign political and nationalist symbolism to the English and Spanish language. Primarily, the leaders focused on the how the language policies were an extension of colonization threatening to erase the island of its culture and further prevent Puerto Ricans from self-determination and rightful sovereignty on a micro, mezzo, and macro level (Denis, 2015). It is through this politicization of the language policies that language intersecting with identity became the center of a movement fighting for autonomy, independence, and decolonization of the island. With these desires, the nationalist party aimed at cultivating a culture that would allow Puerto Rico to be its own active, self-actualizing, self-determining participant in the growing global politics and economy of the Latin and Caribbean American countries.

In this manner, the nationalist movement was also implementing a rhetorical war against the United States that soon shifted into a more tangible realm with the involvement of student activism and day-to-day Puerto Ricans echoing growing disapproval of the United States government's colonial grip over the island (De Gutiérrez, 1987; Denis, 2015).

Pictured below in chronological order from 1912 – 1950 are several article clippings from the New York Times headlining what can be described as the growing discontent of the Island with

the U.S. government. Eventually, leading to one of the most devastating and horrific examples of State violence against its territory in American history – The Ponce Massacre of 1937 (Palm Sunday Massacre).

## DECLARES PORTO RICO WANTS AUTONOMY

**Cay Coll Cuchi, on His Way to Spanish Celebration, Says the Island Is Ready for It.**

### PREFERS CANADIAN SYSTEM

**Porto Ricans, He Declares, Count on Roosevelt to Grant Them Self-Government if He Is Elected.**

## 7 IN PUERTO RICO ARRESTED IN PLOT

**Albizu Campos and Six of His Nationalist Aides Later Are Freed on \$10,000 Bond Each.**

### GUARD UNITS MOBILIZED

**Leaders Accused of Scheming to Overthrow the Insular Regime of the U. S.**

## 2 IN PUERTO RICO KILL POLICE HEAD AND ARE SHOT DEAD

**Nationalist Youths Murder Col. E. F. Riggs in Revenge for University 'Massacre.'**

### SLAIN AT HEADQUARTERS

**Wider Plot Is Rumored as the Police Chief at Utuado Is Also Shot by Agitators.**

## 7 DIE IN PUERTO RICO RIOT, 50 INJURED AS POLICE FIRE ON RIOTING NATIONALISTS 26 SEIZED IN PONCE

**Disorder Grows Out of Overruling of Mayor on Allowing Parade**

### MARCHERS IGNORE BAN

**Police Say a Nationalist Began Clash—They Use Riot Guns and Pistols on Crowd**

### CLASH IN HEART OF CITY

**Demonstration Was Planned in Behalf of Eight Now in Jail on Sedition Charges**

The New York Times articles show an increasingly growing violent relationship between the U.S. government and the Puerto Rican people, particularly the members of the nationalist party during that time period.

It would not be till a couple years later during a congressional hearing that congressman Vito Marcantonio would call the actions of Governor Winthrop and his administration during the events leading up to the Ponce Massacre and following as “tyrannical,” and “stripping Puerto Rican Citizens of their civil rights,” (Marcantonio, 1939). Congressman Marcantonio would continue to be, for the next ten years until his untimely death, one of the biggest political advocates for the end of colonization of all forms on the island of Puerto Rico.

### *Period Three: 1950 – Present*

*Puerto Rico is an example of active decolonization.*

From the 1950’s onwards, Puerto Rico has seen an ebb and flow to the nationalist and independence movements that shaped its ever-growing identity, culture, and politics. The activist movements did not stay on the island but also continued on the mainland, merging with ongoing civil rights movements such as the Black Power movement and labor movements, which centered on Black and Latin voices.

Puerto Rico has also continued to push forward with a decolonial praxis that has drawn the attention of the United Nations; most recently, Philip Alston, special rapporteur on economic conditions and poverty, visited the island in 2017 following the devastation of the hurricanes. Alston’s report on the conditions of Puerto Rico reinforced the tragedy of colonization and its ongoing impact, citing multiple civil and human rights violations perpetrated by the United States government against the island.

Recent events like the hurricanes that have ravaged the island, ongoing forms of disaster capitalism, and neo-colonization have kept Puerto Rico active in decolonial efforts as it fights to establish an identity – cultural, social, and political – that will best benefit the people of the island and their future and presence before a global social economy and polity.

Amid ongoing decolonial praxis, Puerto Rico’s language and identity crisis and controversies surrounding the language policies continue to circulate in its political forum. In 2019, Puerto Ricans upset and distressed with the ongoing treatment of their public school systems, and consequently, their students, moved to have the current commissioner of education removed and shortly following their removal, moved to have the governor of Puerto Rico replaced (Brusi, 2021). The impetus for this was the same issues that stirred the nationalist uprising of the 1930’s: threat of cultural erasure via poorly implemented Americanization policies (Brusi, 2021).

As was stated in *The Movement Against Teaching English in Schools of Puerto Rico* the issue surrounding language and the language policies will continue to exist so long as the status of Puerto Rico remains unsettled (De Gutiérrez, 1987). Thus resulting in the continuation of intersectional sociological issues deeply connected to language, identity, culture and autonomy.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The research question for this paper is, what do Puerto Rico's language policies teach global society about the struggle to maintain a united cultural identity amidst continuous colonial subjugation? From the data gathered for this paper and it pointing to the ongoing decolonial struggle of Puerto Rico, the research question opens up into many intersectional sociological realities that would require further study and investigation.

What is understood however, is that the island of Puerto Rico has a long established praxis of decolonization and continues to move forward with cultivating an identity and culture that benefits not just the Puerto Ricans on the island but diasporic Puerto Ricans globally and within the United States.

The language policies have shown how violent and disruptive colonization is to the formation of a nation, people, culture, and society. The language policies teach global society that colonization is never a stationary event or legislation but that the rules and laws coming from a colonial era continue to leave a residual impact on the present functioning of our society and can impact even a nation and people's ideal future.

The data revealed that it was impossible to discuss the language policies without also situating the colonial history of Puerto Rico along an appropriate timeline and arc, bringing the eras of colonial rule from different legislative periods into modernity, examining them, and seeing how they continue to have an impact on the island today. What was learned and will continue to be discovered is that colonization, even of the past, has a continuous effect on the present realities and futures, impacting every strata of society and its people.

The research themes of the paper help to continue nuance the issue of language colonialism in Puerto Rico and see it as the intersectional, ongoing reality that it is. The themes allow for a complex, histological view of colonization, and in this instance, language colonialism, via language policy and planning.

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