

A New Look at Afro-Hispanic Phonology: The Case of Equatorial Guinea

We have little direct evidence of the African-Spanish interface in the New World,¹ since in few areas were Africans living in conditions which would permit the kind of linguistic disjunction which produced creoles, and as a result much of what is postulated about the assimilation of Spanish by African natives or their descendents must be based on interpretations of literary imitations or by scrutinizing the few remaining dialectal pockets which offer vestiges of earlier more widespread Afro-Hispanic speech forms. The lack of extensive direct evidence is significant, for in addition to obvious African lexical influence on Latin American Spanish, certain phonetic traits have been variously attributed to African substrata, at times with little or no external justification. Those opposing such theories usually demonstrate the same features in areas far removed from African influences, but cross-dialectal comparisons are rare.

This article will present data on the least-known Spanish-speaking area of the modern world, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, formerly Spanish Guinea, being the only Spanish-speaking nation in sub-Saharan Africa and the only region where Spanish has ever existed in stable bilingualism with African languages. Equatorial Guinea provides a potential test case for hypotheses regarding African phonetic influences on Spanish, since the native Equatorial Guinean languages belong to the same macro-Bantu groups whence came large quantities of slaves brought to the Americas. For the sake of brevity, I will refer readers to the excellent sociolinguistic profile of Equatorial Guinea offered by Granda (1984), and to the general survey of Guinean Spanish found in Lipski (1984b), from which specific data will be drawn in the following sections. Although

Spanish is spoken with varying abilities in nearly all parts of the nation, the following remarks will be confined to the speech of the capital, Malabo, where fieldwork was conducted in 1983 and 1984, which represents the cultural center of Equatorial Guinea.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea, which came into independent existence in 1968, consists of two major disconnected territories:² the island of Fernando Poo (now named Bioko) and the mainland territory of Rio Muni. Fernando Poo is located in the Gulf of Guinea just south of Nigeria, while Rio Muni is nestled between Cameroon and Gabon. There are also some small islands, including Annobon, in the south Atlantic Ocean beyond Sao Tomé and Príncipe. The linguistic profile is equally heterogeneous, resulting in part from the colonial history and in part from recent forced population shifts. In Rio Muni, the main language is Fang, also spoken in neighboring areas of Gabon. Traditionally found in the interior of the continent, the Fang have taken over the capital of Rio Muni, Bata, although the coastal area has habitually been populated by the playeros (Combe, Bujeba, Benga, etc.) who speak related languages. Annobon islanders speak fa d'ambó, a Portuguese-based creole. Fernando Poo is the linguistically most complex area, since it was the first to be discovered and colonized by Europeans, and has received successive influences from numerous areas.³ The native tribe is the Bubi, who speak a Bantu language distantly related to Fang. There is also a small nucleus of Fernandinos, descendents of freed slaves from West Africa, who speak pidgin English, also spoken by imported Nigerian laborers.

The Spaniards always maintained a substantial presence on Fernando Poo, reaching at times a figure as high as five percent of the total island population. A few soldiers were stationed in this territory, and there was always a contingent of businessmen, but the dominant Spanish population was represented by two factions: the religious community and the cocoa-planting

community. The former group provided nearly all the education and were instrumental in implanting the Spanish language in the colony. Despite the fact that the first post-colonial regime, of Francisco Macias, expelled nearly all foreigners from Equatorial Guinea, a large number of Spaniards have returned as technical advisors, following Macias' overthrow in 1979, and Equatorial Guineans continue to enjoy the possibility of daily contact with native Spanish-speaking advisors, medical and religious personnel.

Most of the religious figures who served on Fernando Poo spoke some variety of the Castilian, Aragonese or Catalan dialects. Among the cocoa planters, a Catalan monopoly was established (Péllissier 1964) so that within a few years all plantation owners, overseers, merchants and shipping agents were Catalan or Valencian. For the average Guinean in Malabo, contact with Spaniards meant contact with Catalans, whose Spanish dialect included little use of the phoneme /θ/, a strongly velar fricative /x/, word-final alveolar /n/, weak intervocalic /d/, a coronal /s/ resistant to effacement, no neutralization of implosive /l/ and /r/, and use of vosotros. The Castilian dialects were more propagated by the Church and the military.

Let us now turn to hypotheses regarding Spanish-African interfacing in the Americas. It is necessary to begin even earlier than the dawn of the conquest, for Spanish already contained thousands of African slaves and freedmen in the 15th century, and speakers proceeding directly from Africa (bozales) apparently spoke a deficient Spanish which figured prominently in the works of many Golden Age writers (Weber de Kurlat 1962; Chasca 1946; Granda 1978). The tendencies attributed to black speakers in Golden Age literature include: (1) problematic concordance, particularly noun-adjective and subject-verb; (2) loss of syllable- and word-final /s/; (3) interchange and loss of /l/ and /r/ in all positions; (4) simplification of verbal and pronominal paradigms, generally in favor of a single, minimally inflected form. It is clear that the Golden Age

writers were better authors than linguists, especially given the inconsistency of their attempts at representing bozal speech, and yet the reported tendencies undoubtedly existed.⁴ It has also been suggested, and much of the evidence is quite convincing, that the bozales in Spain spoke a creole Portuguese first, through contact with the Portuguese (since most came from Lisbon or from the Portuguese factorías in Africa), and that bozal Spanish is in reality a relexification of earlier creole Portuguese (Naro 1978; Granda 1978:216-233). Once Hispanized, these Africans naturally lost the distinguishing linguistic traits of their origin, but the subsequent massive importation of African slaves into the New World reopened the question of an Africanizing influence on Spanish. Although the African lexical contributions are uncontested, the phonetic dimension is more problematic, for currently no 'black' pronunciation of Spanish exists in any area, although sociolinguistic stratification may suggest a speaker's racial origin in some dialects. That earlier stages of semi-creolized Spanish existed up until the present century is attested variously by the Palenquero dialect of northern Colombia, the congo dialect of northeastern Panama (v. Drolet 1980; Lipski 1984c), by Papiamentu and by literary and folkloristic fragments (Alvarez 1959, 1974; Granda 1978; Otheguy 1975).

Leaving aside possible earlier creolization, many investigators have postulated a more all-pervasive influence of African languages on Spanish American phonetic patterns, consisting essentially in consonantal modifications. The most frequently cited tendencies are: (1) aspiration and particularly loss of implosive /s/; (2) neutralization and loss of implosive /l/ and /r/; (3) velarization of word-final /n/. Syllable- and word final /s/ frequently disappears in the following areas of Latin America: the Antilles (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic), Panama, both coasts of Colombia, Venezuela, and coastal Ecuador. Even today, the African influence can be seen in these areas,

and these regions were characterized by heavy slave traffic, with the African or mulatto population often outnumbering the European population during the colonial period. In these same dialects, /l/ and /r/ suffer extensive neutralization or loss, with the details varying regionally, while velarization of word-final /n/ also occurs in the same areas.

The very same phonetic traits mentioned above also occur, often with greater intensity, throughout southern Spain, including Andalusia, Murcia, Extremadura and the Canary Islands. Velarization of word-final /n/ is also found in Galicia and /l/ and /r/ are neutralized in some areas of northern and central Spain. These similarities have been responsible for the andalucismo theories of American Spanish. The Andalusian influence was presumably transmitted via port areas in close contact with Andalusia, and nearly all the areas which suffer heavy African influence were also principal ports:⁵ Santo Domingo, Havana, San Juan, Portobelo, Cartagena, Caracas, Guayaquil, etc. It is difficult to separate the variable of African influence and Andalusian/coastal influence; there are some ports whose phonetic tendencies are more conservative (in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile) but these areas came into prominence much later in the colonial period, whereas areas such as Veracruz and Mexico City, Potosí, Bolivia and highland Colombia, which had significant slave populations in the early colonial period, were characterized by a rapid dilution of the African groups (Cf. Rout 1976; Aguirre Beltrán 1958; Mellafe 1975; Estupiñán Tello 1967).

In the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea, in addition to a number of interesting morphological and syntactic singularities, there occur a number of phonetic manifestations which separate this dialect from other Spanish dialects, as demonstrated in Lipski (1984b). On the other hand, the behavior of the phonological parameters most closely associated with Afro-Hispanic theories is most significant, for Guinean Spanish manifests an extraordinary resistance to

consonantal neutralization and effacement. For example, a word-final /n/, both prepausal and prevocalic, is uniformly alveolar, despite that several native Guinean languages have final velar nasals. As for the liquid consonants, although /r/ and /r̄/ have been neutralized in favor of [r], /l/ and /r/ maintain their phonological integrity in all positions, as shown in the figures of Table 1, (v. App. A).

It bears noting that among Catalan speakers, it is not uncommon for word-final /r/ to be weakened or lost altogether, while implosive /l/ and /r/ are never neutralized. The conclusion to be drawn is that African influence is not sufficient in itself to account for the frequent neutralization of implosive liquid consonants found in many Spanish dialects, and highlights the differences in the linguistic contact situations which produced the various dialect zones. The coastal areas of the Caribbean and South America were in closest contact with Andalusia and the Canary Islands, where neutralization and loss of /l/ and /r/ is common, and the postulated imperfect learning of Spanish among African speakers confined to slavery or menial labor conditions could be expected to extend and generalize a tendency which already existed in the Spanish spoken in their presence. Table 2 (v. App. B) gives comparative data on the behavior of /l/ and /r/ in several key dialects,⁶ and shows the greater affinity of Malabo Spanish with the dialects of central Spain and Cataluna, rather than with southern Spain and the Caribbean.

The behavior of word-final /n/ also bears reiterating, since it has been claimed that the velarization of word-final /n/ in many American Spanish dialects may be an Africanism.⁷ This of course overlooks the fact that velarization of /n/ is equally common in all of Central America, in highland Ecuador, and in all of Andalusia, Extremadura, Galicia and parts of the Canary Islands. However, as in the case of neutralization of /l/ and /r/, a heavy African contingent in the population may conceivably have further extended an

already existent tendency. This is so particularly since in most dialects of Spain and the Canary Islands word-final /n/ is not as frequently velarized before a following vowel (un amigo) whereas in the Caribbean and Central America such velarization is the norm. It is not beyond the bounds of probability that the African influence increased the tolerance for intervocalic velarized n, not normally found in Spanish. We also note that in both central Spain and in Cataluña and Valencia, word-final /n/ is given a uniformly alveolar articulation, as in Malabo.

Aspiration and especially loss of /s/ has often been associated with African influence in New World Spanish, despite the fact that this phenomenon is characteristic of all of southern Spain, as shown in Table 3 (v. App. C).⁸

Evidence comes primarily from the literary 'habla de negro,' and from the fact that in Latin America, /s/ is most frequently lost in those areas which had a high concentration of African speakers during the entire colonial period. These same coastal areas were in close contact with Andalusia and the Canary Islands, whose speech already contained at least the seeds of the reduction of /s/, so that bozales and socially marginalized black criollos would imitate and extend a phenomenon which characterized their surroundings. In the earliest literary examples, /s/ is lost only in word-final position, and only where it is grammatically redundant, in the desinence -mos and in words such as Dios and Jesús (Lipski 1981); the same occurs in many creole Portuguese dialects. Later generalization of loss of /s/ to all positions may reflect Andalusian phonetic tendencies rather than African phonotactics.

The data on phonetic realization of /s/ in Malabo are presented in Table 4 (v. App. D). Loss of /s/ is not a phonetically-motivated process, since the usual intermediate stage of aspiration almost never appears. Word-internal implosive /s/ is not as frequently lost and is hardly ever aspirated, thus casting some doubt on the idea that purely phonetic processes have obtained.

Moreover, it is demonstrated in Lipski (1984b) that /s/ is most frequently lost when forming part of the verbal suffix -mos, or when purely lexical, in a fashion which closely parallels the literary attestation of bozal speech of earlier centuries.

The overall behavior of /s/ in Malabo reflects the intersection of the Catalan/Castilian linguistic base and the tendency to eliminate redundant desinences. We have already mentioned that none of the native Guinean languages uses suffixation as a morphological process. At the same time, these data undermine claims that African speakers' avoidance of word-final consonantal desinences was the only factor responsible for the high degree of consonantal reduction found in the Caribbean dialects. A more likely hypothesis would combine the African phonotactic pressures (v. Table 5, App.D) with the Andalusian/Canary linguistic base common to much of coastal Latin America, in which consonantal reduction was already in progress.

The data from Equatorial Guinea are in themselves not conclusive, but they do permit a refinement of hypotheses regarding the necessary role of various extra-European influences in the formation of American Spanish. Additional study of other little-known dialects and bilingual situations will undoubtedly add still further information on the question of Spanish languages development across the globe.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Otheguy (1975), Granda (1969).
- 2 Background on Equatorial Guinea may be found in Pélissier (1964), Ndongo (1977), and Granda (1984), among others.
- 3 Fernando Poo was discovered by the Portuguese in 1469-74. It was ceded to Spain in 1778, although the Spaniards never settled the island until the end of the 19th century. The English set up an anti-slavery tribunal in 1827, and in the latter half of the 19th century a group of Cuban freedmen established themselves on the island.
- 4 Naro (1878:320) offers the most comprehensive theory in this regard.
- 5 This theory was presented in its clearest form by Menéndez Pidal (1962).
- 6 The Latin American data are reported in Lipski (forthcoming a, b). The data from Spain/Canary Islands were collected during a Fulbright Fellowship in 1983. In each area, ten middle-class speakers formed the data base, with each providing approximately one half hour of taped interview material, which was analyzed to yield quantitative data. Latin American data represent the capital cities of each country.
- 7 This has most recently been suggested by Otheguy (1975).
- 8 The Latin American data are reported in Lipski (1983, 1984a, forthcoming a, b). The Spanish data were collected as explained in note 6.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE 1.

Realization of /r/ and /l/ in Malabo Spanish

/l/ ##		/r/ C	
[l]:	91.3%	[r]:	95.7%
[r]:	2.1%	[l]:	0.2%
[∅]:	6.7%	[∅]:	4.1%
N=	745	N=	2665
/l/ # C		C /l/ V	
[l]:	82.8%	[l]:	97.4%
[r]:	2.6%	[r]:	2.6%
[∅]:	14.6%		
N=	1340	N=	973
/l/ C		C /r/	
[l]:	88.9%	[r]:	100%
[r]:	4.7%	[l]:	0%
[∅]:	6.4%		
N=	855	N=	2156
/r/ ##		V /l/ V	
[r]:	81.9%	[l]:	98.5%
[l]:	1.0%	[r]:	1.5%
[∅]:	17.6%		
N=	910	N=	1711
/r/ # C		V /l/ V	
[r]:	89.3%	[r]:	100%
[l]:	0.3%	[l]:	0%
[∅]:	10.3%		
N=	1452	N=	4164

APPENDIX B

TABLE 2:

Realizations of /l/ and /r/ in several Peninsular and Latin American dialects (in percentages).

		r	l	∅		r	l	∅		r	l	∅
Barce- lona	/r/C	98	0	2	/r/#C	96	0	4	/r/##	83	0	17
	/l/C	0	99	1	/l/#C	0	98	2	/l/##	0	95	0
Madrid	/r/C	99	0	1	/r/#C	99	0	1	/r/##	97	0	3
	/l/C	0	100	0	/r/#C	0	100	0	/l/##	0	99	1
Cáceres	/r/C	96	0	4	/r/#C	88	2	10	/r/##	47	0	53
	/l/C	0	84	16	/l/#C	1	81	18	/l/##	0	56	44
Granada	/r/C	89	1	9	/r/#C	65	1	34	/r/##	27	1	72
Murcia	/r/C	82	10	8	/r/#C	71	20	9	/r/##	64	8	28
	/l/C	2	78	20	/l/#C	0	75	25	/l/##	0	50	50
Sevilla	/r/C	84	2	14	/r/#C	70	0	30	/r/##	29	0	71
	/l/C	38	43	18	/l/#C	18	47	35	/l/##	0	38	62
Las Palmas	/r/C	73	12	15	/r/#C	59	17	24	/r/##	28	8	64
	/l/C	23	65	12	/l/#C	2	73	25	/l/##	28	36	57
Cuba	/r/C	47	8	45	/r/#C	35	10	55	/r/##	43	39	28
	/l/C	1	86	13	/l/#C	3	81	16	/l/##	4	85	11
Domin. Rep.	/r/C	22	50	28	/r/#C	25	51	24	/r/##	49	32	19
	/l/C	3	89	8	/l/#C	2	88	10	/l/##	2	79	2
Panama	/r/C	86	1	13	/r/#C	77	2	21	/r/##	65	6	29
	/l/C	2	77	21	/l/#C	0	81	19	/l/##	2	87	11
Puerto Rico	/r/C	23	41	37	/r/#C	11	60	29	/r/##	28	64	8
	/l/C	1	91	8	/l/#C	0	85	15	/l/##	1	90	9
Vene- zuela	/r/C	51	13	36	/r/#C	42	20	37	/r/##	74	10	16
	/l/C	7	83	10	/l/#C	2	80	18	/l/##	3	89	8

APPENDIX C

TABLE 3: Realizations of /s/ in several Peninsular and Latin American Dialects (in percentages)

		s	h	∅				s	h	∅			
Barce- lona	sC	99	1	0	s#C	92	8	0	s##	95	4	1	
	s#∅	100	0	0	s#V	96	4	0					
Madrid	sC	94	6	0	s#C	69	29	2	s##	82	12	6	
	s#∅	92	8	0	s#V	96	4	0					
Caceres	sC	2	91	7	s#C	0	94	6	s##	9	8	83	
	s#∅	23	77	0	s#V	0	95	5					
Granada	sC	0	82	18	s#C	0	85	15	s##	1	2	97	
	s#∅	0	15	85	s#V	2	50	48					
Murcia	sC	1	70	29	s#C	0	91	9	s##	18	11	71	
	s#∅	36	36	28	s#V	38	41						
Sevilla	sC	0	95	5	s#C	0	91	9	s##	5	2	93	
	s#∅	69	10	21	s#V	1	46	54					
Las Palmas	sC	2	85	13	s#C	0	89	11	s##	2	17	81	
	s#∅	75	25	0	s#V	0	92	8					
Cuba	sC	3	97	0	s#C	2	75	23	s##	61	13	26	
	s#∅	48	28	25	s#V	10	53	27					
Domin. Rep.	sC	8	17	75	s#C	5	25	70	s##	36	10	54	
	s#∅	50	5	45	s#V	17	22	61					
Panama	sC	2	89	9	s#C	1	82	17	s##	25	6	69	
	s#∅	69	17	14	s#V	2	39	59					
Puerto Rico	sC	3	92	5	s#C	4	69	27	s##	46	22	32	
	s#∅	45	32	23	s#V	16	53	31					
Vene- zuela	sC	7	40	53	s#C	3	47	50	s##	38	16	46	
	s#∅	57	26	17	s#V	125	52	33					

APPENDIX D

TABLE 4: Realizations of /s/ in Malabo Spanish

/s/ ##		/s/ #C	
[s]:	87.7%	[s]:	76.5%
[h]:	1.9%	[h]:	8.5%
[∅]	10.4%	[∅]	15.0%
N=	2844	N=	4554
/s/ C		/s/ # V	
[s]:	92.5%	[s]:	92.1%
[h]:	4.8%	[h]:	0.0%
[∅]:	2.7%	[∅]:	7.9%
N=	5666	N=	2150

TABLE 5: Phonotactic constraints of the principal indigenous languages of Equatorial Guinea.

language	closed syll.	phrase- final C	phonemes /l/ -/r/ C	sC	no	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	yes
Fang	no	yes	yes	s#	no	r#	no	l#	rare	-n#	yes
				s#	no	r#	no	l#	rare	-n#	yes
										#ŋ-	yes
Bubi	no	no	yes	sC	no	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	no
				s#	no	r#	no	l#	no	-n#	yes
										#ŋ-	yes
Combe/ Ndowné	no	yes	yes	sC	no	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	no
				s#	no	r#	no	l#	no	-n#	yes
										#ŋ-	yes
Benga	no	no	yes	sC	no	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	no
				s#	no	r#	no	l#	no	-n#	no
										#ŋ-	yes
Bujeba/ Bisiô	no	yes	yes	sC	no	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	no
				s#	no	r#	rare	l#	no	-n#	yes
										#ŋ-	yes
Ambô	yes	yes	yes	sC	some	rC	no	lC	no	-n#	yes
				s#	rare	r#	no	l#	rare	-n#	no
										#ŋ-	no