

LANGUAGE CONTACT PHENOMENA IN LOUISIANA ISLEÑO SPANISH

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AMONG THE VARIETIES OF SPANISH spoken in the United States, perhaps the most curious is the *isleño* dialect of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, now reduced to a few hundred speakers after having survived nearly 200 years in the swamps of eastern Louisiana.¹ The original *isleños* arrived from the Canary Islands in the Spanish territory of Louisiana, in the area known as Tierra de los Bueyes, at the end of the eighteenth century, and, despite subsequent occupation by French and later American governments, they scarcely changed their life style and their linguistic habits.² Less well known is the fact that the first wave of *isleños* was later followed by sporadic arrivals from other areas of Spain, and that particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, an apparently significant number of natives of Andalucia, Galicia, Asturias, Valencia, and other parts of Spain moved into the *isleño* communities and cast their lot with the descendants of Canary Islanders (Guillotte 1982). The amount of linguistic influence of these later Spanish immigrants has yet to be determined, and even the demographic proportions of Peninsular Spaniards and Canary Islanders may only be guessed at, given the lack of accurate documentation, but it is evident that the term *isleños* refers as much to the heartland of this group, Delacroix "Island" (in reality an inland area surrounded by bayous) as to the insular origin of the Spanish settlers.³

Due to the geographical and cultural isolation of the *isleños*, from the turn of the nineteenth century until the 1940s, most members of the community were monolingual Spanish speakers, although some creole French crept into the *isleño* lexicon over the years, and only with the opening of the first schools in St. Bernard Parish, well into the twentieth century, did *isleños* learn English as a group. The oldest surviving members of the *isleño* community, over about 60 years of age, learned Spanish as a first language and suffered linguistic and social problems upon first attending school, in which then (as now) classes were conducted entirely in English. Many older *isleños* were raised thinking that they were in Spain and that the entire nation in which they lived spoke Spanish, so complete was the cultural isolation, even from the nearby *villa* of New Orleans. In the twentieth century, several factors combined to effect a

complete linguistic shift, from Spanish to English, as the predominant language among the *isleños*. The educational system is foremost among these factors, as the St. Bernard area was gradually penetrated by schools and other government institutions. A severe hurricane in 1915 completely destroyed the Delacroix settlement and nearby communities, causing the *isleños* to reside temporarily in New Orleans. Subsequent hurricanes, most recently Betsy in 1965, had the same effect, and in the latter case many *isleños* left the region, never to return permanently. World War II brought many male *isleños* into military service, thus augmenting the incipient cosmopolitanism of this region, and the building of roads through the swamps, the opening of ship channels, and the construction of electrical power and telephone lines into lower St. Bernard Parish brought the *isleños* into easy and direct contact with the rest of Louisiana and the nation. Today, although many *isleños* in the towns of St. Bernard Parish still follow the traditional professions of fishing and fur trapping, an increasing number have turned to jobs in nearby petrochemical complexes, and few *isleños* under the age of 50 speak Spanish, although some younger community members understand the language. Since cultural contacts with English-speaking Louisiana and marriage outside of the *isleño* group have increased, even older *isleños* ordinarily converse in English, although bilingual language switching is common and many gatherings of older residents provoke spontaneous and sustained use of Spanish.

Of importance for the evaluation of *isleño* linguistic behavior is the total isolation of this group from any other Spanish-speaking or bilingual Spanish-English groups in the United States. The *isleño* community has been untouched by linguistic developments affecting other Hispanic groups in the United States, and, until the last generation, most *isleños* were not actively aware of the existence of other stable bilingual Spanish-English communities in this country. Whereas a certain element of doubt and controversy surrounds the possible non-Canary linguistic heritage of *isleño* Spanish, the bilingual contact phenomena found in the *isleño* community may in no way be causally related to developments found elsewhere in the United States. For this reason, the examination of bilingual language behavior among the *isleños* provides an interesting test case for theories of Spanish-English bilingual interaction, since it provides virtually the only case within the United States where possible transmission or contact with other bilingual communities can be ruled out. The following remarks will focus on the salient points of bilingual phenomena among the *isleños*, particularly the incorporation of Anglicisms into *isleño* Spanish.

As in other bilingual communities, the influence of English on *isleño* Spanish may be divided into phonological, lexical, and syntactic phenomena, which will be treated in turn. Up until the last generation of true Spanish speakers, English phonological influence was virtually non-existent among the *isleños*, for the simple reason that few spoke English fluently, and those that did retained a Hispanic accent under most circumstances. There are a few younger *isleños* who, while speaking Spanish reasonably well, occasionally introduce English phonological elements, particularly the English /r/, alveolar pronunciation of /tr/, dark syllable- and word-final /l/, and schwa pronunciation of unstressed vowels. These phenomena are sporadic, however, and no true speaker of *isleño* Spanish exhibits these interference patterns in a consistent fashion. Among speakers who use Spanish only infrequently, such interference is common at the beginning of a conversation, but normally fades after a few minutes of sustained Spanish speech. It may even be that some of these characteristics are not direct consequences of English, since reduction of unstressed vowels is common in rural dialects of the Canary Islands, whereas a retracted /l/ is characteristic of the speech of some areas of Cataluña and Valencia, whence came the families of at least some of the *isleños*. In *isleño* speech, suprasegmental transference from English may also be perceived, since among the youngest speakers, use of contrastive stress for emphasis (*es MI casa* "It's my house") is increasingly common, although this is not found among older speakers, who learned Spanish as a first language.

Lexical Anglicisms are frequent in speakers of the last generation of *isleño* Spanish and in general follow the same pattern as in other Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. Although at first, creole French elements were the most common source of foreign borrowings in *isleño* Spanish, for at least a century English has been the nearly exclusive non-Hispanic linguistic influence, particularly in the areas of technology, where the archaic Spanish brought by the first *isleños* was not up to the task of expressing all the complexities of life in St. Bernard Parish. In the formation of verbs, the productive suffix *-iar* is the most frequent in *isleño* Spanish, for example *troliar* 'trawl', *trapiar/trampiar* 'trap'. Also found are loan translations such as *grocería* 'grocery store', *esquife* 'skiff', *guachimán* 'watchman', *troque* 'truck', *farmero* 'farmer', *suiche* 'switch', *lonchar* 'eat lunch', in addition to many calques of English expressions using existent Spanish lexical items, such as *atender* 'attend school', *seña* 'sign', *flete* 'freighter', *jurar* 'swear (curse) at', *jugar* 'play music', *aceite* '(crude) oil', *preguntar por* 'ask for, request', and so forth. These combinations are frequent in other Spanish-English contact situations, and may logically be expected to arise spontaneously in geographically isolated

areas, given the significant parallel morphology in both languages.⁴ Similar combinations and uses of English semantic values for Spanish lexical items are found in bilingual communities in the United States, Belize and the Atlantic coast of Spanish-speaking Central America, Trinidad, and in Gibraltar (see Holm 1982; Moodie, forthcoming; Lipski 1985b, 1986, in press a). New creations arise with ease, as the remaining Spanish-speaking *isleños* generally think in English even on those occasions when they speak Spanish, without presupposing previous contact with other bilingual groups, which in the case of the *isleños* is essentially nonexistent.

Among the Anglicisms found in *isleño* Spanish, the most interesting involve syntactic transference, for in this dimension there is more room for variation, and the correspondence between *isleño* Anglicisms and those found in other bilingual communities is of greater value in the search for quasi-universal values that shape bilingual contact phenomena. Although among bilingual *isleños* there are a few whose Spanish abilities are so limited that these individuals are clearly thinking in English at all times, in most cases, syntactic carryovers from English are more subtle and represent either lexicalized formations or constructions which arise spontaneously when a speaker is faced with the need of producing a difficult combination which has never before arisen in the local Spanish dialect. Of the lexicalized syntactic Anglicisms, perhaps the most curious and significant is the group of expressions based on *para atrás*, pronounced [patráh] in *isleño* Spanish. The use of *pa tras* as a translation of the English verbal particle *back* is well attested among bilingual speakers of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and (more recently) Cuban origin in the United States, and has even been transferred to some residents of Puerto Rico. It is also found in the isolated Spanish dialect (of Mexican origin) of the Sabine River area, between Texas and Louisiana, in the Spanish of Gibraltar, and occasionally in bilingual areas of Central America, including Belize, and in Trinidad.⁵ Among the *isleños*, use of *pa tras* cannot be traced to contact with other bilingual groups, although among the latter speech communities, it might be possible to postulate a single source for *pa tras* combinations.⁶ Examples from *isleño* Spanish include the following:

Yo hablaba pa trah en ehpañol 'I talked back in Spanish'

El se fue pa trah Ehpaña 'He went back to Spain'

Siempre venían pa trah 'They always came back'

¿Cuándo vas a vent pa trah? 'When are you coming back?'

Ven pa trah mañana 'Come back tomorrow'

Dios quiere que nunca vengán pa trah 'I hope to God that [those times] never come back'

Te ponía el pie pa trah 'They put your foot back'

The most significant facet of these combinations is that constructions with *para atrás* do exist in all dialects of Spanish, in the sense of physical movement in a backward direction (*Él se echó para atrás* 'he fell backward') but in the sense of adverbs or verbal particles as used in English, Spanish does not normally use this form. At the same time, readily available lexical items are found in Spanish, corresponding to phrasal verbs with *back* in English: these include *devolver* 'return, give back', *regresar* 'return', *volver* 'return', *responder* 'answer, talk back', and *pagar* 'pay back'. There are no other common cases where Spanish has translated an English verbal particle or phrasal verb by an adverbial combination; forms such as *sit down*, *knock over*, *blow up*, and *pass by* rarely have any effect on the Spanish of bilingual communities, and when English does penetrate Spanish syntax, only the root verb, never the particle or adverb, is translated. This is not the proper forum to discuss aspects of Spanish and English grammar which facilitate use of *para atrás* as a calque of English *back*, but the existence of these configurations in *isleño* Spanish, as well as in Gibraltar and other bilingual communities outside of the United States, indicates that some quasi-universal tendencies have shaped the syntactic carryovers into Spanish, since the Anglicisms in the *isleño* dialect have arisen independently of events in other speech communities.

Another less common but nonetheless viable syntactic Anglicism among the *isleños* is the dropping of the definite article in the generic subject or object position:

Me parece que [la] gente son gente 'It seems to me that people are just people'
Lo aprendimo en [la] ehcucla 'We learned it in school'
Porque [la] educación jace mah pirata 'Because education makes more scoundrels'

These constructions are only found among the last generation of true Spanish speakers, and occur sporadically together with correctly formed sentences. Related to these combinations is the use of the gerund with nominal force, following English patterns; in *isleño* Spanish this occurs only rarely: *No vamo a hablá de robando [robar]* 'Let's not talk about stealing'.

In the area of subject pronouns, generic use of *tú* and *usted* for impersonal subject is frequent among the *isleños*, as is the categorical use of redundant subject pronouns, following the English patterns:

El decía que (él) podía pará una manguera 'He said that he could stop a water spout'
Yo quiero que tú sigah tu vida como (tú) ehtá 'I want you to continue your life just like it is'

Si usted va mucho afuera, mira el tiempo que (usted) pierde 'If you go out much, look how much time you waste'

Tú coge una criatura y (tú) le comienza a dale cualquiera cosa 'You take a baby and you start to give it something'

In the Caribbean Spanish dialects, and to a lesser extent in Andalusia and the Canary Islands, it is frequent to find constructions involving an infinitive with nominal subject, instead of the more usual construction involving *que* and a subjunctive form. Although some have attempted to discover English syntactic patterns behind this nonstandard but increasingly common Spanish pattern, its use in regions with no demonstrable English influence rules out direct transference of Anglicism. In the *isleño* dialect, such constructions are extremely common, in fact nearly completely supplanting suborbinated clauses with conjugated verbs.⁷ A small but representative sampling includes:

El pagaba gente dí en la cubierta 'He paid people to be on deck'

Jesucrito noh ponía la idea qué nosotros jacé 'Jesus Christ gave us an idea of what to do'

Pa un niño nacé, tenían partera 'For a child to be born, they had midwives'

Eso no é pa loh pato poné loh huevo 'That isn't so the ducks can lay eggs'

Era duro pa yo meterme con esoh niño inglese 'It was hard for me to get along with those English-speaking kids'

Tú tieneh que ser sosedano americano pa ti tené un bote 'You have to be an American citizen to have a boat'

Se curan sin naide jacé nada 'They cure themselves without anybody doing anything'

Although such combinations are attested in other areas, their nearly exclusive use among the *isleños* suggests the direct syntactic influence of English, undoubtedly aided by the previous existence of suitable patterns in the popular Canary and Andalusian dialects that formed the original basis for *isleño* Spanish. The fact that these combinations are found among even the oldest *isleños*, who were raised speaking no English and whose command of English even today is probably below their abilities in Spanish, rules out an origin in English syntax, but the extraordinarily high frequency of occurrence of infinitives with subjects has not been recorded in any other dialect of Spanish and points to a gradual drift in the direction of English syntactic patterns.

As a final item of bilingual interaction in the *isleño* community, let us consider cases of code shifting, incorporating both Spanish and English elements within the confines of a single sentence. Such switching behavior is frequent in other bilingual communities in the United States, and has been shown to be constrained by quasi-universal syntactic tendencies, which in most cases prohibit grammatical violations in either of the

two languages, and which require essential syntactic congruence of the equivalent sentences in both languages, following the point of the actual shift.⁸ In the *isleño* community, code switching is not as common as in many groups of bilingual speakers of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin in the United States, since true bilingualism has not been a feature of *isleño* speech for more than about two generations. The extremely rapid and nearly total linguistic shift from Spanish to English among the *isleños* precluded a sustained period of stable bilingualism which normally results in spontaneous code-shifted discourse. Among current *isleño* Spanish speakers, code shifting is normally found during conversations held in Spanish, when the speaker is temporarily unable to access the word in Spanish; shifts are almost always in the direction Spanish to English:

Venía un twister sobre la tierra 'A twister was coming over land'

Eso é necesario pa ello exist 'That's necessary for them to exist'

Si todoh fueran como tú, entonces ehtuviera all right 'If everybody were like you, then it would be alright'

Habría que darle un sleeping pill 'We should give her a sleeping pill'

Elloh digest cualquiera cosa 'They digest anything'

La gente era mah religious 'Folks were more religious'

Cocinaba red beans, no meat, na mah que loh beans 'We cooked red beans, no meat, just the beans'

Son los business d'ello 'It's their business'

Dijo que lo día repeat 'He said he was going to repeat it'

El farmero eh el backbone de la nación 'The farmer is the backbone of the nation'

The only case in my corpus of a bilingual translation in which the Spanish item occurred first is *Era muy lihta muy ehmart* 'She was very smart'—where, unlike most cases in *isleño* speech, the Anglicism *smart* was pronounced with Spanish phonology. In other cases, a bilingual translation from English to Spanish ensued, following the prevailing tendencies among bilingual Hispanics in the United States: *Cogió un par de pliers, una tenaza* 'He would grab a pair of pliers'. Frequently code-shifted words include the tags *alright* and *well*, frequently used to introduce sentences in Spanish.

True intrasentential code shifts are relatively rare in *isleño* speech, in which a smooth transition is made from one language to the other; examples include:

Ella é un bingo lady, you know 'She's a bingo lady'

Era un pedazo de papel y that was your report card 'It was just a piece of paper'

Yo era un muchacho joven pero anyhow that's what I did 'I was a young boy but . . .'

Era mucho dinero involved in it 'There was a lot of money . . .'

Tiene que ehtar sweet, you know 'It has to be . . .'

In all of these cases, the major syntactic constraints governing code switching (no violation of grammatical rule in either language, essential syntactic congruity following the switch of the equivalent sentences in both languages) are maintained. Moreover, nearly all observed intrasentential switches in *isleño* speech are of the anticipatory sort, where a particular idiomatic expression or proper noun in English, or the sudden introduction of an English word, carries the remainder of the discourse from Spanish to English. Younger *isleños* speak little Spanish, and although they may occasionally introduce an expression such as *adios* 'good bye' or *hasta mañana* 'see you tomorrow', they are not capable of code-switching. The oldest community members never really learned English sufficiently well to be considered balanced bilinguals, and their assimilated and unassimilated lexical Anglicisms result from simple unavailability of equivalent Spanish terms. Among the last generation of true *isleño* Spanish speakers, the only legitimately balanced bilingual speakers, the shift from Spanish to English and the geographical dispersion of the *isleños* have prevented the establishment of groups of bilingual speakers in close daily contact who could freely engage in bilingual discourse. In the Delacroix community, still the closest knit and most homogeneously *isleño* settlement, code shifting is more common, but even here the generational split is noteworthy, and little really bilingual speech takes place.

Although many of the Anglicisms and possible indirect English influences on *isleño* Spanish are typical of those found in other bilingual Hispanic communities, their incorporation into the speech of the *isleños* represents a unique set of circumstances among Spanish-speaking groups in the United States. The language shift from nearly totally monolingual Spanish usage to virtually monolingual English competence occurred in an extraordinarily short time, and a group which had originally depended upon the original stock of Spanish words, plus later introductions by subsequent immigrants from Spain and the Canary Islands and by creole French speakers, suddenly turned unconsciously but naturally to English for expansion of the lexicon and for replacement of words which for whatever reason dropped out of the local Spanish dialect. The existence of Anglicisms among the *isleños* which exactly parallel those found among other bilingual groups cannot be ascribed to direct contact, and the rapidity with which they have been incorporated into the speech of originally monolingual Spanish speakers whose lexicons contained none of these elements demonstrates that stable periods of balanced bilingualism are not necessary to produce such phenomena as intrasentential code shifting and syntactic transference. The study of *isleño*

speech provides a linguistic test-tube situation, in which the interpenetration of English and Spanish may be observed in relative isolation from extraneous influences, away from the contact of other bilingual groups. Anglicisms in *isleño* Spanish serve as evidence in at least the following cases: (1). the essential syntactic restrictions governing Spanish-English intrasentential code switching; (2). the probable multiple locus of constructions involving *para atrás* in United States Spanish; (3). a confirmation of the suffix *-earl/-iar* as the only productive verbal ending for the formation of new loan words and neologisms; (4). a refined identification of the patterns of transference from English words to fortuitously similar Spanish forms, and the creation of lexical Anglicisms based on productive phonotactic transformations; (5). a demonstration of the non-necessity of stable, long-lasting bilingualism to produce the contact phenomena discussed above, particularly code switching and syntactic transfer; (6). a separation of linguistic and attitudinal variables, since, despite early problems with monolingual Spanish-speaking children first attending school, Spanish language usage among *isleños* has not been socially stigmatized, and nearly all bilingual *isleños* are proud of their ability to speak the language (Beardsmore 1982; Lipski, in press_c).

Continued study of the speech of the *isleños* and other relatively isolated bilingual communities will permit additional refinement of hypotheses regarding Spanish-English interfacing, linguistic attitudes, and language shift and death. The present remarks are offered with the hope of stimulating further research into such speech groups, before the evidence they provide to theoretical linguistics is irretrievably lost.

NOTES

1. See Mac Curdy (1950, 1975). Mac Curdy (1959) describes a historically and genetically related dialect, the *brulis* speech of south-central Louisiana. More recently, the *isleño* dialect has been studied extensively (particularly in the area of folklore and oral traditions) by Armistead (n.d., 1978, 1981, 1983, 1985).

2. See Fortier (1894, 197–210), Morales Padrón (1951; 1977, 211–91), Smith and Hitt (1952, 103–8), Din (1972, 1975), Shaw (1972), Villere (1972), Forsyth (1978), Montero de Pedro (1979), and Tornero (1980).

3. Guillotte (1982) provides demographic information; for an overview of the features of *isleño* Spanish which may be attributed to various Peninsular and Canary Island dialects, see Varela (1979), Lipski (in press_b, forthcoming_c).

4. See, e.g., the articles in Hernández, Cohen, and Beltramo (1975). See also Fishman, Cooper, and Ma (1971), Galván and Teschner (1977), Peñalosa (1980), and Sánchez (1983).

5. See Pérez Sala (1971), Sánchez (1972), Varela (1974), Lipski (1975, 1976, forthcoming_a), Reyes (1976), and García (1977, 1979, 1982). The Sabine river

dialect, descended from the speech of eighteenth-century Spanish immigrants from Mexico, is still spoken by a small group of individuals outside of Nacogdoches, TX, and around Zwolle, Ebarb, and Robeline, LA. This dialect has rarely been the object of linguistic study; Armistead (n.d., 1985) mentions this dialect, and some lexical characteristics are offered by Armistead and Gregory (1986). A historical survey of the Louisiana communities around the former Spanish outpost of Los Adaes is offered by Gregory and McCorkle (1981). See also my extensive description of this dialect (Lipski, forthcoming_b).

6. Research among the *isleños* was conducted between December 1984 and May 1985. Particular thanks are due to the following members of the *isleño* community, without whose assistance the research would not have been possible: Antonia Gonzales, Frank Fernández, Irvan Pérez, and Rogelio López; thanks are also due to Professors Beatriz Varela and Joseph Guillotte of the University of New Orleans.

7. This combination is in all probability not an Anglicism, since it is found throughout the Caribbean dialects of Spanish, in the Canary Islands, and in southern Spain. See, for example, Kenniston (1937, 550), Henriquez Ureña (1940, 230), Flórez (1946, 377), Navarro Tomás (1948, 132), Padrón (1949, 168), Kany (1951, 146), and Ramos (1976, 93). Its use among the *isleños* may be intensified by English syntactic patterns, particularly with respect to the use of object pronouns instead of the subject pronouns found in other dialects (*para TI tener* instead of *para tú tener* or standard *para que tú tengas*).

8. For the principal theoretical models see Timm (1975), Lipski (1977, 1982, 1985a), Pfaff (1979), Poplack (1980), and Poplack and Sankoff (1981).

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