The Code-Switching and Confluence of Languages in Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993)

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Abstract: “The Code-Switching and Confluence of Languages in Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993)” is an essay/article written to produce and analyze thought on the style of code-switching of Spanish-English bilinguals. Santiago’s memoir details her young life in Puerto Rico in a rural home and society and then how she had to transition when she and her family moved to New York. Code-switching is when, in reference to Spanish and English, a person who speaks English will substitute an English word or phrase for a Spanish word or phrase. This occurs primarily with bilinguals. In *When I was Puerto Rican*, Santiago includes some Spanish words in her English context (because her primary language is English), practicing code-switching. This essay demonstrates the fundamentals of code-switching, how it is detailed in *When I was Puerto Rican*, and how events in history aided to its modern formation.

“Code-switching” and the confluence of languages has been a linguistic manifestation of the encounters between people of different cultures. Specifically concerning Spanish and English between the Caribbean and the United States, the convergence of these two languages has greatly heightened with the ever-continuing influx of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. This is primarily due to migration movements as well as U.S. influence in Puerto Rico, which became a commonwealth of the United States in 1898. This essay is going to analyze the linguistic impact of the U.S. influence in Puerto Rican society that has caused linguistic interferences in language and at the mechanics of code-switching in Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican*. This is to demonstrate how the acculturation of Spanish-speaking societies has facilitated the phenomenon of code-switching and what effect this confluence has had on the people as they incorporated themselves in the U.S. To first understand the linguistic impact of code-switching, one must first understand its technicality. Roberto R. Heredia and Jeffrey M. Brown explore the logistics of this linguistic process in their article “Code-Switching” as they describe how bilinguals tend to blend their languages when they communicate and how the amalgamated sentences follow a specific structure. Heredia and Brown describe it as the “phenomenon [that] occurs when bilinguals substitute a word or phrase from one language with a phrase or word from another language.” The investigators discuss code-switching by referencing Spanish-English bilinguals and Chinese-English bilinguals. In addition, they give an example of the mechanics associated with code-switching by considering a specific sentence and studying how multilingual individuals incorporate more than one language:

(1) *I want a motorcycle VERDE*. In this sentence, the English word “green” is replaced with its Spanish equivalent. A noteworthy aspect of sentence (1) above is that the Spanish adjective “verde” follows a grammatical rule that is observed by most bilingual speakers that code-switch. Thus, according to the specific grammatical rule-governing sentence (1) above, sentence (2) *I want a VERDE motorcycle* would be incorrect because language switching can occur between an adjective and a noun, only if the adjective is placed according to the rules of the language of the adjective. In this case, the adjective is in Spanish; therefore, the adjective must follow the Spanish grammatical rule that states that the noun must precede the adjective (1) (Heredia & Brown).

John M. Lipski (2005) poses an interesting and legitimate topic in his article “Code-switching or Borrowing? No sé so no puedo decir, you know.” He discusses how multilinguals will code-switch by speaking Spanish and adding an English word every now and then. Some of these words in
It would appear that the placement of English *so* and similar items {(*but, anyways, I mean, and you know*)} into Spanish discourse in the United States began as insertion among immigrants and among vestigial or transitional bilinguals, and evolved lexicalization. (7)

It evolved into lexicalization because people get used to saying a particular phrase and thus incorporate it into their vocabulary. An example of *so* used and an example of *you know* used from Lipski’s article are “...y yo soy el mayor de la familia, *so* yo tuve que ir a trabajar...” and “…una película que tenga un tema, *you know*, Ud. sabe, un tema especial...” (5). Likewise, *so* crosses many boundaries in language and as specified by Lipski, “*so*-insertion is one of the few bilingual switching phenomena to occur in both bilingual and second-language speech” (3). “The incorporation of *so* potentially represents a window of opportunity, highlighting the means by which functional elements from one language gradually insert themselves into another language during bilingual encounters” (3). This could be happening due to the question of time, due to that while the speaker is saying “*so*” he is providing time to think of the next sentence in Spanish. Code-switching occurs in a variety of ways, one of which is, where Lipski (2005) states, “*calques* of idiomatic expressions in English [calques being another word for *loan translation*] are frequent when speaking Spanish, with fewer cases of Spanish calques in English discourse, and numerous loans from English are present.” And, relating to the previous paragraph, Lipski details that “unassimilated English words may be freely inserted whenever the Spanish word is unknown,” which is what is normally seen when code-switching is witnessed. An example he provides is “*Anyway, yo creo que las personas who support todos estos grupos como los Friends of the Earth son personas que are very close to nature.*”

Lipski (2005) references Spanish-English bilinguals, French-English bilinguals, Italian-English bilinguals, as well as languages from distinctly different families such as Korean, Japanese, Tagalog, Arabic, Hebrew, Cantonese, Berber, Nahuatl, and Polish, but I am specifically discussing the linguistic tendency of bilingualism in Puerto Rican diaspora. This tendency occurs gradually and not deliberately with the contact of English language because they are completing the action of incorporating something new into their vocabulary. When a Hispanic person comes to a new area he/she initially is still extremely attached to their language, culture, and ideals. Leisurely, they begin to accept more and more of U.S. culture and begin to slightly change. This is when code-switching is especially prominent—when the speaker uses his/her own language and borrows a term (or “functional item” according to Lipski [3]) from another language that he/she knows very well.

The introduction of Puerto Rican people to U.S. society and vice versa occurred due to some specific historical events. Starting with some basic history, Puerto Rico achieved its independence from Spain in 1898 and then became a colony of the United States following the Treaty of Paris. The Jones Act in 1917 then granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship. In 1947 the Puerto Ricans elected their own governor and in 1948 their first elected governor was Luis Muñoz Marín. Finally, in 1952, Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States. Additionally, Operation Bootstrap (in Spanish known as *Operación manos a la obra*) was established in 1947. It transformed Puerto Rico from an agricultural economy into an industrial economy that was incredibly developed. Operation Bootstrap created strong economic growth, but the rapid modernization was disadvantageous in that there were negative social effects, like the accompaniment of “an absolute decrease in employment” due to the introduction “of industries of higher productivity,” (Economy: Operation Bootstrap). The time period of Operation Bootstrap was also a time when Puerto Rican migration to the United States (especially “Nueva York”) increased considerably.

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The effects of U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico through the Operation Bootstrap and other acts created to control the commonwealth’s economy is shown in Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir, “When I was Puerto Rican.” Santiago’s memoir details her life as a child living in Puerto Rico.
She begins her life living in the rural Mancun, Puerto Rico with her mother, father, and two sisters. She grows up with the hardships of living in a rural area but is content. Her father is not around very much and her mother has three other children in her young life. When her mother gets a real job because they need money, Esmeralda (Negi) has to do more work as the oldest child. They have to move to places such as Santurce, and stay with family/friends dealing with a variety of living conditions. Due to one of her younger brothers getting terribly injured Esmeralda’s mother starts going to New York occasionally until finally the entire family (minus her father) move to New York. Initially Esmeralda hates living in New York and the language barrier is a struggle for her. She struggles some at school but tries incredibly hard because she wants to do better, especially when she tries to get into a performing arts school. The memoir ends with Esmeralda finally getting into the performing arts school (not because the interviewers were impressed by her performance, but because they were impressed by her courage—which is demonstrated throughout the memoir) and eventually attending a year at Harvard, just showing how far she came.

Esmeralda experienced many things at a young age, especially during a few scenes where imperialism is discussed and detailed through her experiences. Some of these encounters with imperialism include when her father briefly discussed it with her, when she was introduced to it through another student, and primarily through the centro communal; the centro communal was a community center provided by the government where the children would go receive free breakfast and informational tips and parents received education on diet and hygiene for their children (it was educational programming from the U.S.). This initial step of educational programming from American culture permeating into Puerto Rican society is where the confluence of Puerto Rican Spanish and English occurs. Code-switching begins here on a larger scale with the permeation of American culture and this is shown in Nilita Vientós Gastón’s article The Supreme Court of Puerto Rico and the Language Problem where she discusses how since the United States took over Puerto Rico there has been confusion as the United States has implemented its primary language of English, especially into the teaching of it into Puerto Rico’s schools. Throughout Santiago’s memoir she utilizes code-switching. Concerning Santiago’s specific case, she grew up in Puerto Rico and then moved to New York when she was a teenager. She struggled at first but soon assimilated into U.S. culture, which she reflects in her epilogue of the book. Now, English is her primary language and that can be seen as she writes her memoir in English. The code-switching occurs as she incorporates Spanish words occasionally that better describe something from her childhood more accurately than an English word could. Examples of this are words like asopao because an English word cannot describe a “meat or fish soup thickened with rice and potatoes,” (271)—a soup basically made out of leftovers—or a bodega which is a “neighborhood grocery store” (272) (When I was Puerto Rican). Another fantastic example of this is when Negi (Esmeralda) finds a tapeworm in her underwear and calls it a solitaria and then her mother gives them all (she and her siblings) a broth of her own concoction called purgante (69). Purgante describes this concoction better than an English word like “medicinal soup” would because purgante is more specific because in Spanish it has more meaning to it or more details associated with the word. This is how code-switching works; a word from one’s original language might describe a thing or situation better in their mind than the new language. This shows that there are multiple causes of code-switching—this previous example and also if a person who speaks English as a first language were trying to speak Spanish and did not know the Spanish word for a specific situation; so, that person forms his/her Spanish sentences and inserts the English word where it is needed. Dana Cole creates a correlation between language and identity in her article “A Linguistic journey to the border.” She describes how “language is an integral aspect of identity, both on a personal level, and on a broader social level” and even goes on to quote Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa who has stated “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language.” She discusses the evils of robbing a people of its language, because this is what happens when colonization occurs, which is almost what happened to Puerto Rico when it became a colony of the United States (now it is technical-
ly a bilingual society, even though many Puerto Ricans who live in the island are not fluent in English). Language is a powerful thing and code-switching makes it even more powerful. Cole discusses why it can be so powerful when she quotes Anzaldúa again saying, “because language can be manipulated, it can also be used as a means to express, reinterpret, redefine and revolt against a static unitary notion of identity and the social world.” Extracting the correlation out even further, code-switching and the manipulation of language causes creative flexibility and innovation, thus drawing out even greater possibilities for a culture. Cole goes on to discuss the relationship between language and identity further by saying how “language is a key component of ethnicity” and nationalism and positively helps people differentiate themselves. This relates to what most Hispanics and Puerto Ricans have been dealing with for years and are also dealing with right now—how their identity is associated with their language. Santiago relates the difficulties felt through her memoir and also through what she personally says on her website by talking about how her identity changed based on her language. She explains this with:

“When I returned to Puerto Rico after living in New York for seven years, I was told I was no longer Puerto Rican because my Spanish was rusty, my gaze too direct, my personality too assertive for a Puerto Rican woman, and I refused to eat some of the traditional foods like morcilla and tripe stew. I felt as Puerto Rican as when I left the island, but to those who had never left, I was contaminated by Americanisms, and therefore, had become less than Puerto Rican. Yet, in the United States, my darkness, my accented speech, my frequent lapses into the confused silence between English and Spanish identified me as foreign, non-American.” (278)

The title of her memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican*, demonstrates a transitional period because she was raised in a Spanish-speaking household but with the contact with U.S. culture in the mainland, she gradually favored the English language towards her mother tongue to communicate—when in the United States, she was Puerto Rican; when in Puerto Rico, she was American. She has lost her nationality due to language as she talks about in her memoir. It is a curious thing to witness the different facets of how language is beneficial towards a person in their diversity but can then be harmful to them. It becomes harmful when they begin losing touch with where they came from and their roots, but it is beneficial in that it helps them gain some leverage in becoming a part of a new society. Different degrees of “transculturalization” occur with Spanish-speaking peoples and this is where the difference between language identities occurs. When a person is bilingual, it makes them more diverse and possibly more powerful. When a Spanish-speaking person comes to the United States and English then becomes their primary language, as in Santiago’s case, it can be detrimental to how their nationality is viewed by their own people. The confluence of Puerto Rican culture and American culture has a push-pull relationship. Go too far and you will not be accepted in your original culture, do not go far enough and you will not be accepted into your newly acquired culture.

A linguistic impact has occurred due to U.S. influence in Puerto Rican society. Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. have changed due to assimilation, but that is truly only natural given the circumstances. People in general make the mistake of looking at it as a negative thing and it can be looked at two different ways as this junction is either causing a dulling of the Puerto Rican nationality or making it more diverse. In reference to code-switching Paul Anisman mentions that “the error here is to assume that simply because the original tongue of an immigrant group is largely replaced by English, that this means that there is no longer a linguistic identity.” He discusses what happened when New York born Italians, Jews, and Irish no longer utilized their national tongues but that “it is certainly conceivable that the English they speak may exhibit substantial differences which can in fact iden-
tify speakers as members of a particular ethnic group.” Another point he makes regarding culture and stereotypes is that:

When we find survivals of culturally specific behaviors in second or even third generations, it is anthropologically naïve to assume that these behaviors are motivated by some mysterious desire to accommodate stereotyped expectations. Rather, it is anthropologically sound to conclude that cohesiveness is nourished by common behaviors, attitudes and values, and that try as we may to ignore these facts of life, we, as humans, perpetuate those behaviors having the most positive (favorable) social consequences within our most intimate groups. (Anisman)

He says this to show that people are not trying to be stereotyped, it just happens because they are finding commonalities between themselves and others around them in similar circumstances. In relation to Puerto Rican identity and diaspora, the identity is not lost. The confluence of cultures and the act of code-switching do not make a nationality lose itself—they just further come together to create two diverse, well-cultured types of people.

The confluence of Puerto Rican culture and American culture is a truly fascinating subject. The assimilation of both cultures is causing such beautiful integration, not just the integration of people and language, but of art, music, ideas, thoughts, and new ways of thinking. The confluence of Spanish and English opens up the borders to creativity, especially linguistic creativity. Like Dana Cole mentions, it has caused the “breaking free of reified linguistic structures and constraints, [providing] the means to open up new ways of knowing and thinking and [enabling] a new set of dialogues to emerge.” That is what code-switching does—it breaks down the barriers, the constraints that keep two languages and cultures apart.

References