Growing Up Bilingual

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Puerto Rican Children in New York

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BLACKWELL Publishers

First published 1997

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Blackwell Publishers Inc.
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148
USA

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF
UK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zentella, Ana Celia.
Growing up bilingual : Puerto Rican children in New York / Ana Celia Zentella.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-55786-406-3 (hbk : alk. paper). — ISBN 1-55786-407-1 (pbk : alk. paper)
1. Bilingualism in children—New York (N.Y.) 2. Puerto Rican children—New York (N.Y.)—Languages. I. Title.
P115.2.Z46 1997
420'.4261'097471—dc20

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Plantin
by Graphicraft Typesetters Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Hartnolls Ltd., Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

Growing Up Bilingual

Con gratitud y amor para los que me criaron bilingüe y me enseñaron a respetar todas las culturas: mi adorado papá mexicano Ahmed Zentella (Q.P.D.), mi queridísima madre puertorriqueña Mónica Zentella Elías, y mi hermana extraordinaria, Nolda Vivó, la cual reune lo mejor de nuestros tres mundos.

Acknowledgments

I began the acknowledgments in my dissertation with "It's a long way from the South Bronx to a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania." Writing this book about children who grew up in *El Barrio* helped me realize that it wasn't such a long way after all. The fundamental discipline, linguistic skills, and cultural knowledge that the book required were part of my life in the South Bronx, as they are part of the lives of *El Barrio*'s children. In my case, many individuals and institutions made it possible for me to develop those skills and knowledge. I wrote this book for them, especially my mother, father, and sister, and in the hope that it will enable others to appreciate the strengths – and respond to the needs – of Puerto Rican and other Latino children in this country's *barrios*.

Many people served as caring mentors and models of committed scholarship, and I am deeply indebted to them for their encouragement and support. Shirley Heath and Charles Ferguson, who embody a rare combination of ethics and excellence, made many comments on early drafts. Joan Manes's keen editorial eye and linguistic knowledge were invaluable in seeing me through to the end. Fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation at Bellagio, Italy, and the Stanford Humanities Center provided the space and time to write. Scholars in both places, including Sissela and Derek Bok, Sandra Green, Felicity Nussbaum, helped clarify basic themes. Others who read chapters and/or discussed specific points with me included John Baugh, Carol Drisko, Maryellen García, Marge Martus, Ellen Peyser, John Rickford, and Bambi Schieffelin. Margaret Seliger, María Ríos, Sandra Rosario, and David Jackson worked on the preparation of the manuscript, and Linda Auld's copy editing skills were impressive. Students and friends consoled and encouraged me, especially David Bragin – who graciously contributed the art work – Don Cecchi, Chuck Matthei, and last but not least, Barbara Webb. My husband, Roberto Cabot (*¡imi papito chulo!*), sustained me with his love, *y su paciencia infinita*. My greatest debt of gratitude goes to the families of *el bloque*, particularly "Isabel" and her children, for their honesty and affection; they make me proud to be a fellow New York Puerto Rican. *Este libro eh pa' ellos, y pa' to'a mi gente, con mucho amor. Bendición.*

Key to Transcription Conventions

Spanish words are italicized.
("Double quotes within parentheses") contain the English gloss of preceding Spanish word(s), or of Spanish segments on the line above.
Cited linguistic examples are within "double quotes."
[Square brackets] contain contextual information.
Dash- marks a sudden cut-off in the word or sound.
XXX indicates unintelligible speech.
. . . indicates deleted word(s).
*precedes ungrammatical form(s).
<Angled brackets> indicate reference to a grapheme.
/slæšIz/ enclose phonemic transcriptions.
/h/ indicates the aspiration of Spanish syllable-final /s/ by speaker.
(-s) indicates the deletion of Spanish syllable-final /s/ by speaker.
(-last part of word follows hyphen, enclosed in parentheses) indicates deleted syllable-final phoneme(s), for example *pa(-ra)*.
(beginning of word precedes hyphen enclosed in parentheses-) indicates deleted syllable-initial phoneme(s) in Spanish, for example *(es-)tá*.
(#;#) indicates child's age in years and months, for example (2;8) = two years, eight months.

aux = auxiliary
imp. = imperfect
pret. = preterit
subj. = subjunctive
sing. = singular
pl. = plural

So Your Name Isn't María Cristina
Sandra María Esteves

. . . .
She was just a young woman. Another *Puertorriqueña* among many.
Desperate to define self within worlds of contradictions.
Caught somewhere inbetween the *casera* traditions of Titi Julia
and the progressive principles of a Young Lords cousin.

I'll admit she was barely a child, with no definitions of her own.
No recognition of her vast cultural inheritance.

She didn't used to know herself.
Having to pick and choose from surrounding reflections.
Needing alternatives to focus by.
So she found them here and there,
tried them on for size and feeling,
taking pieces from different places,
coordinated like a wardrobe,
sometimes elegant, most times plain. . . .

She watched how you fixed your own faucets,
defending yourself against heartless violations.

How you marked out your path with defiant resistance
agains all forms of enslavement.
How you fought, yelled back,
at those who wanted you to fail, expected it, crossing you.

She watched it all, and learned from the watching
that weeding the garden is constant to its cultivation. . . .

The point is she grew,
and watched, and studied, and learned,
awakening into womanhood.

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"Hablamos los dos. *We speak both:" Studying Bilingualism in the Community Context*

One day in *El Barrio* (New York City's East Harlem) in 1979 I asked a nine year old of Puerto Rican background what language she spoke with her sisters and brothers. "*Hablamos los dos*. We speak both," she answered casually, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to speak two languages and to alternate between them. I was struck by her offhand tone and the seamless welding of Spanish and English which proved her point vividly. I knew from personal experience as well as from my research that her remark masked the complexity of her ability, its cultural implications, and its repercussions for her academic and social well being. I knew too that the grammatical skills she had in two languages and her knowledge of two cultures were not sufficiently understood, rewarded, or developed. Indeed, they were often blamed for her lack of progress and that of her community. Yet, many children who stopped speaking Spanish did not get far in the outside world, and they severed important links to their families and culture. Because bilingualism had been such a source of personal strength and of broader cultural, racial, and political understanding in my life, I wondered why it is so often considered a problem, particularly for poor Spanish-speaking communities in the United States.

Over the next decade I observed how the efforts of that child and her friends, and later their children, to endure their neighborhood's escalating poverty, AIDS, drugs, and violence affected the course of their bilingualism and their educational progress. Bilingualism was an integral part of family life and community identity, but children were less preoccupied with growing up bilingual than with growing up, surviving. Standard proficiency in two languages was only one of the unwarranted sacrifices they were forced to make. In some ways their experiences echoed those of other immigrant groups who lost their languages, but in other fundamental ways, most

notably the fact that their homeland and its language policies were controlled by the United States, they departed from that tradition. Old models that asked, "Are they striving to Americanize or not?" fell short of capturing their reality. They were neither passive victims irreparably damaged by oppressive forces or heroic poor winning out against all odds. The political, socioeconomic, racial, cultural, and linguistic forces which impinge upon New York Puerto Rican (NYPR) children, and their responses to those forces, provide a little known picture of what it is like for them and many others to grow up in the US at the end of the twentieth century. The role of Spanish, English, and what some call "Spanglish" are of particular consequence.

In the hope of encouraging new imaginings of bilingualism for the entire nation, and a more empowering bilingualism for the next generation of NYPR children in particular, this book offers an inside view of the languages and lives of the children of *el bloque* ("the block"), one impoverished but vibrant NYPR community, between 1979–93. It walks readers through part of the nation's longest settled Puerto Rican neighborhood, *El Barrio* ("the neighborhood"), and introduces them to 20 families, with particular emphasis on five children.

"Doing being bilingual" the NYPR Way

The title "Growing Up Bilingual" masks the complexity of the process and the product. It is more accurate to talk about how children and their community go about "doing being bilingual" (Auer 1984: 7), by trying on, discarding, integrating the many ways of speaking and behaving that surround them, until, with the help of their co-constructors, they create the particular blend that identifies them as an NYPR, or "Nuyorican." The coining of the term Nuyorican, although stigmatized for many, is itself evidence of the recognition that their identity is similar to but different from that of island Puerto Ricans and other New Yorkers.[1] The form and content of their bilingual and multidialectal communication tell us how children learn to construct an NYPR identity that is really multiple and shifting identities, as befits a linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse community, and also tell us about the high price they pay when their new syntheses are disparaged and assailed.

As all children "learn how to mean" (Halliday 1973), they grow up learning how to use language in ways peculiar to their group, and they come to recreate a model of the culture of which they are members. The model that children of ethnolinguistic minorities reproduce is subject to the "symbolic domination" (Bourdieu 1991) of the dominant class of monolingual English speakers, that is, to that class's definition of legitimate and illegitimate language and culture. It is subject also to the competing definitions of

surrounding but stigmatized groups, particularly African Americans. Much of what NYPR children learn to do and say reflects accommodation and resistance to conflicting pressures on their community's view of what is most valuable in life. NYPR identity is not a given, an automatic membership granted by birthplace or parentage, or an accumulation of linguistic features, cultural artifacts, or group customs with meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Instead, "in any given actual situation, at any given actual moment, people in those situations are actively constructing their social identities rather than passively living out some cultural prescription for social identity" (Ochs 1992: 11). NYPR children adopt and transform the cultural recipe in ways that they communicate bilingually and multidialectally. Relationships among language, setting, and meaning are not fixed. Switching into Spanish in public or into English at home does not necessarily communicate intimacy or distance, respectively. Children who integrate linguistic features of several worlds sometimes defy traditional language conventions, or blur the boundaries in their re-configurations. It is precisely the ability to co-author and co-interpret conversations against a multicultural and multidialectal backdrop that enables NYPRs to identify each other. Like basketball players who know where to hit the backboard in order to score a point, or *salsa* dancers who can follow a new partner's every turn, their interactions rely on shared linguistic and cultural knowledge of standard and non-standard Puerto Rican Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African American Vernacular English, Hispanized English, and standard NYC English, among other dialects. Speakers understand the overt and covert messages of fellow community members because they can follow varied linguistic moves and fill in the gaps for other speakers or translate for themselves. In the process they ratify each other's membership in the community and contribute to the re-shaping of NYPR identity. The complexity of the issues requires a different way of studying how NYPRs go about "doing being bilingual," and the crisis conditions of the community demand it.

The Community's Needs and the Limitations of our Knowledge

The families in this study belong to the second largest Spanish-speaking group (Mexicans are the largest) and one of the most disadvantaged and least understood groups in the US. Puerto Rican ways of living and of loving and raising children are misrepresented by the depressing statistics that define them nationally. New York is the city of the greatest Puerto Rican concentration; it is home to 896,763 of the country's 2.5 million Puerto Ricans. NYPRs have the lamentable distinction of having the highest

poverty rate of any group in the city: 55 percent in 1990 compared to 33 percent for African Americans, 32 percent for other Latinos, and 12 percent for whites (Institute for Puerto Rican Policy 1992). The youthfulness of the group (over one-third are of school age) makes education, the traditional hope for a way out of the ghetto, a burning issue. Conventional explanations for why NYPRs have the lowest high school completion rates for persons 25 years of age and older (45 percent in 1991, compared with 56 percent of other Latinos, 66 percent of Blacks and 72 percent of whites, Institute for Puerto Rican Policy 1992: 8) often cite language. It is assumed that Puerto Rican children drop out because they do not know English, because they know the wrong kind of English, or because their bilingualism is cognitively confusing. Because of the harsh reality in which NYPRs raise their children, I argue (below) for an anthro*political* linguistics that never loses sight of that reality and struggles to change it. *Growing Up Bilingual* was written because so little is known about the varieties of Spanish and English that are spoken by NYPRs, the practices that socialize children to and through bilingual speech and literacy, and the values linked to each language.

Bilingualism has been studied all over the world, as leading texts document (Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Grosjean 1982; Vaid 1986; Appel and Muysken 1987; Hamers and Blanc 1989; Romaine 1989; Hoffman 1991), but frameworks based on other nations often are not applicable to the study of language minorities in the US. A landmark annotated bibliography by Teschner, Bills, and Craddock (1975) focused on the Spanish and English of US Latinos, and noted the limitations of the Hispanist thrust of much of the research. Since then, nearly a dozen collections of articles have documented various aspects of the languages of US Latinos (Amastae and Elías-Olivares 1981; Durán 1981; Fishman and Keller 1982; Elías-Olivares 1983; Elías-Olivares, Leone, Cisneros, and Gutiérrez 1985; Wherritt and García 1989; Coulmas 1990; Bergen 1990; Klee and Ramos-García 1991). Additionally, the Working Papers published by the Language Policy Task Force of the *Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños* ("Center for Puerto Rican Studies") between 1978 and 1988 were devoted to the Spanish and English of one block in *El Barrio*. The starting point of most of the past research has been on specific features of the languages or on the switching between them (code switching), not on the context that gives rise to bilingualism and the ways in which children learn to switch. As a result, we have partial portraits of interlocutors, rules, and usage, but no in-depth understanding of the process of becoming bilingual in any Spanish-speaking community in the United States.[2] The little insight we have into US Latino mother-child interactions (García and Carrasco 1981; Lindholm and Padilla 1981; Laosa 1981; García 1983; Moreno 1991), is mainly from experimental settings. Because code switching is so maligned, the majority of work has focused

on that phenomenon, for example, patterns of code switching (McLure 1977; Valdés 1976), a Mexican-American family case study (Huerta 1978), characteristics of speaker and hearer who switch (Poplack 1981b), the role of code switching in educational settings (Genishi 1976; Olmedo-Williams 1979; Zentella 1981c, 1982), discourse functions (Gumperz and Hernández-Chávez 1975; Valdés 1981; Zentella 1982; Alvarez 1991; Torres 1992) and the syntactic rules of Spanish-English code switching (Pfaff 1975; Poplack 1980; Sankoff and Poplack 1981; Woolford 1983; Lipski 1985; Di Sciullo et al. 1986). These studies have built upon, contributed to and been challenged by studies of code switching in many areas of the world (Gumperz 1976; Blom and Gumperz 1972; Berk-Seligson 1986; Bentahila and Davies 1983; Myers-Scotton 1976, 1993a, b, c; Heller 1988; Eastman 1992a).

Research on Spanish-English code switching has established its rule-governed nature but the methodology has been disparate, with little unity between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Baker 1980; Zentella 1990a). Furthermore, most of the research on US Latino bilingualism has been carried out among Mexican Americans who differ historically, culturally, and linguistically from Puerto Ricans, and the bulk of it has been at the sentence level, ignoring the larger discourse and social context. Of particular theoretical importance is the failure of previous research to analyze how bilingualism and community identity build each other, for example, the specific ways of viewing and using varieties of Spanish and English that bond NYPR community members to each other while allowing individual ways of being an NYPR.

In the end, communities differ from each other, and each bilingual's story is unique. Five children's stories are woven throughout the book. Within a community, speakers share rules for the structure of their linguistic codes and for the socially appropriate ways of speaking them (Hymes 1974). The speech community's language patterns are related to cultural norms which reflect, and are shaped by, larger political, socio-economic, and cultural forces (the social context). Additionally, the type of bilingualism that results is shaped within the constraints of what it is possible to say and perform with human language in general and with the specific dialects in contact in particular (the linguistic context). The unique configuration of each community's links between aspects of the social and the linguistic contexts are never divorced from the community's notion of what it is important in life to communicate – their language–world view connection (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986).

When the isolated bilingual is replaced by the speaker and his/her community in natural interactions, an often dazzling complexity of norms and interpretations is unearthed. The holistic objective of ethnography approaches this complexity by immersing the ethnographer in the life of the community in search of the whole pattern:

> Major intravariations in the uses of speech may be assumed to be systematically related to the constituents of culture patterns, including aspects of the social structure, cultural definitions of the situations of action, the cultural philosophy and value system, and their patterned interrelations (Albert 1972: 74).

Quantitative methods can be powerful allies, that is, they can produce statistical evidence of the relationship between the speakers' gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc., with particular linguistic variables, but they cannot supplant qualitative methods if the goal is to go beyond "How does this community talk?" to "Why does this community talk this way?" Each community's use of language is part of a coherent whole, and both quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to adequately analyze linguistic rules in relation to the whole. This task is facilitated in some ways and hampered in others when the researcher belongs to the ethnic group under study.

The Ethnic Researcher as Community Member

The initial process of identifying and becoming part of an NYPR community presented singular challenges, some of which were the repercussions of the urban blight that characterizes inner city areas. Others had to do with the special situation of being a member of the community in some respects only. The especially devastated condition of the South Bronx, which had lost 50–100,000 housing units in the "nightmare decade" of the 1970s (Lemann 1991), made it impossible for me to study the NYPR community that I knew best. The block where I had lived for the first 20 years of my life was reduced to war-like rubble that two US presidents walked through and promised to revitalize. In truth, no predominantly Puerto Rican section of the city remained intact after the housing reshuffling which followed the upheavals of the 1960s; Manhattan's East Harlem lost 27 percent of its population between 1970–80 (Donnelley Marketing Information Services 1987). Finding an intact NYPR community was difficult, but the logistic problems were complicated by personal ones. I had to come to grips with the advantages and disadvantages of being a member of the same ethnic group that I intended to study, and how this affected traditional ethnographic concerns. With the benefit of hindsight, I see that my efforts to adapt methods of site selection, participant observation, tape recording, and data analysis to the reality of one community in *El Barrio* also were efforts to reassure myself that the gaps between my acquired middle class existence and their poverty were bridgeable.

I chose *El Barrio* because of its historical importance, its central location and size, and because it contained communities in the time-honored