

Coffee Farmers, Social Integration and Five Phonological Features: Regional Socio-Dialectology in West-Central Puerto Rico

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1. Introduction

This presentation draws on field research carried out between 1993 and 1997 in the community of Castañer and surrounding mountains in west-central Puerto Rico. The research has examined the social history of this mountain community, the maintenance and loss of a regional dialect, and the relationship between the two. The question addressed by this presentation is: Is it true that “strictly regional variation in Puerto Rican Spanish has been smoothed out, leaving ... vertical sociolinguistic stratification as the most significant differentiator”, as John Lipski suggests in his chapter on Puerto Rico in his book *Latin American Spanish* (Lipski, 1994: 328). Or is it possible that dialect maintenance linked to community ties and traditional regional economic activity continues to provide regional sociolinguistic identity.

2. Dialect Features

Dialect maintenance, in this case, refers to the maintenance of five identifying phonological features. The first two are the maintenance of /r/ and /l/ as opposed to the mixing of the two. Lateralization of $-r$ and rhotacism of $-l$ have been associated with Caribbean Spanish in general, and with Puerto Rican Spanish above all. Navarro Tomás’ study of Puerto Rican Spanish carried out in the late 1920’s indicates that “los pocos lugares en que l and r fueron diferenciados con bastante regularidad ... corresponden a las partes altas e interiores del oeste” (Navarro Tomás, 1948: 80). He found this to be especially true in the area of Lares and Adjuntas, precisely the area where Castañer is located.

Dialect maintenance, in this case, also refers to the maintenance of two vocalic features: high-final $-i$ and high-final $-u$. Although high-final vowels have been studied in relation to regional dialects of northern and western Spain and the Andean region of South America, in particular, they have rarely been the focus of study of variation in Puerto Rican Spanish. Nevertheless in his early study of the Spanish of the island Navarro Tomás indicates that “Los lugares en que se observó más abundantemente el oscurecimiento de las vocales finales y el paso de e , o , a i , u , corresponden ... a la zona oeste” (Navarro Tomás, 1948: 50). He also found “el núcleo más denso” to be between Ciales y la Aguada, that is, in the mountains running through Lares and Castañer in the western portion of the island.

Finally, dialect maintenance, here, also refers to the preservation of the posterior, usually velar fricative “long” rr that is the most defining feature of Puerto Rican phonology. López Morales’ (1983) study of San Juan in the last quarter of the 20th century associates this feature with individuals of rural origin. Navarro Tomás in the early 20th century found the velarization of rr to be most dense “en las alturas del oeste de la isla, (en los) retirados reductos de la tradición jíbara” (Navarro Tomás, 1948: 95). He associated it especially with the areas of Indiera Baja, Indiera Alta, and Indiera Fría just to the west of the community of Castañer.

3. Community and Methods

The community of Castañer is located under El Monte Membrillo and La Silla de Calderón, two of the highest peaks in the center of the region that witnessed the flourishing of “el oro negro,” or coffee, in the latter half of the 19th century. As the names of the nearby areas of Indiera Alta and Indiera Fría suggest, these mountains were a refuge for the indigenous population upon the arrival of the Spaniards. Early in the 1800’s the mountains also became a refuge for small farmers fleeing the development of the plantation, sugar industry on the coast. With the development of “black gold,” however, these small farmers or their descendants with few exceptions lost their mountain “fincas” ‘plots’ to growing “haciendas cafetaleras.” Hacienda Castañer, founded by Juan Castañer in 1868 (Díaz Hernández, 1983: 9), became one of the largest on the island. Originally small farmers, many local residents became “arimados” or “agregados” on the haciendas. What is the community of Castañer, today, was built on the site of Hacienda Castañer between 1936 and 1940 as part of a land redistribution program sponsored by the territorial government of Puerto Rico and the Roosevelt administration.

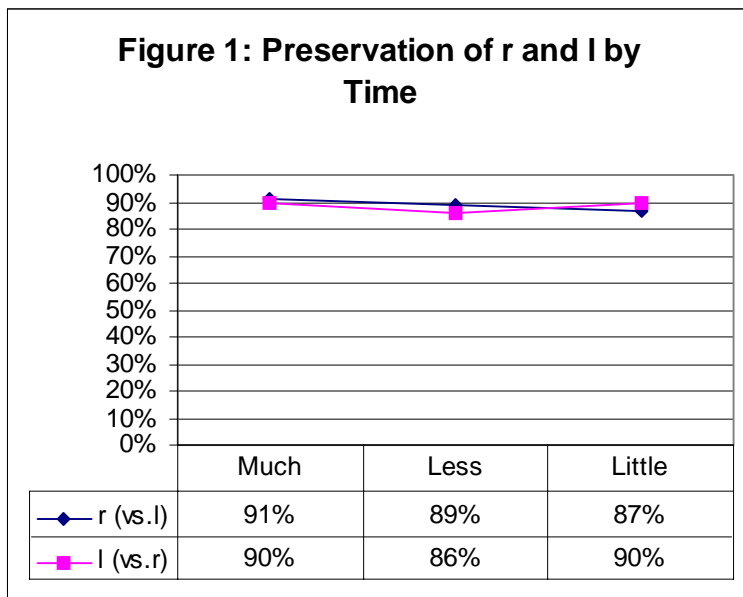
Castañer’s population, today, is roughly 2000; another approximately 2000 people inhabit the mountains immediately surrounding the community. This study focuses on males of three informant samples. The first sample is comprised of 30 males giving equal representation to three generations (65 and older, 40 to 64, and under 40). The second are 20 farmers, and the third are 10 return-migrants, individuals who have lived on the US mainland or in the San Juan metropolitan area and returned to make their homes in Castañer. Participating individuals are friends, or friends of friends, of the family with which I have lived in Castañer.

Speech samples were collected by means of recorded semi-directed conversations of one hour or more in length; biographical data result from an orally administered questionnaire.

4. Social Integration

Drawing on the sample of 30 speakers, 10 representing each of three generations, we will first examine maintenance of dialectal features in relation to ties to the community. The measures of community ties, or integration, are two: time spent in and away from Castañer, and membership in local groups and institutions. Time has been calculated based on a formula relating years spent in the town or surrounding area to years spent away. The formula is graduated for the different generations. Membership is based on belonging to local churches and health, savings and consumers cooperatives, as well as participating to at least some degree in the annual coffee harvest.

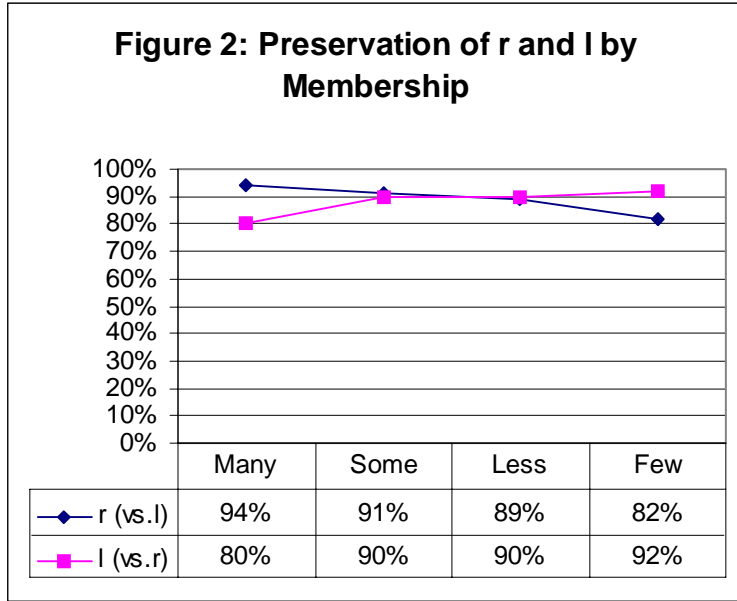
Figures 1 and 2 present results for the preservation of \underline{r} (as in ‘trabajar’ vs. ‘trabajal’) and of \underline{l} (as in ‘alcalde vs. ‘arcarde’) in syllable-final position. Data for the final \underline{r} are based in 150 sequential cases per individual; data for \underline{l} are based on 50. These figures indicate that speakers are still very capable of distinguishing the two liquids and that they do so with very high frequencies in the recorded conversations.



Although the distinctions are very fine, figures 1 and 2 do show that progressively more time spent in Castañer and more local memberships correspond with more preservation of r. The findings for r reflect the preservation of any non-lateral, including deletion. In the case of the preservation of l, Figure 1 reveals no clear trend in relation to time. And, as Figure 2 indicates, the trend in relation to memberships is the reverse of that just seen. More local memberships disfavor the preservation of syllable-final l, i.e., they favor r renditions (as in ‘arcarde’ vs. ‘alcalde’), which are associated in Navarro Tomás early study with the rural, southwestern corner of the island.

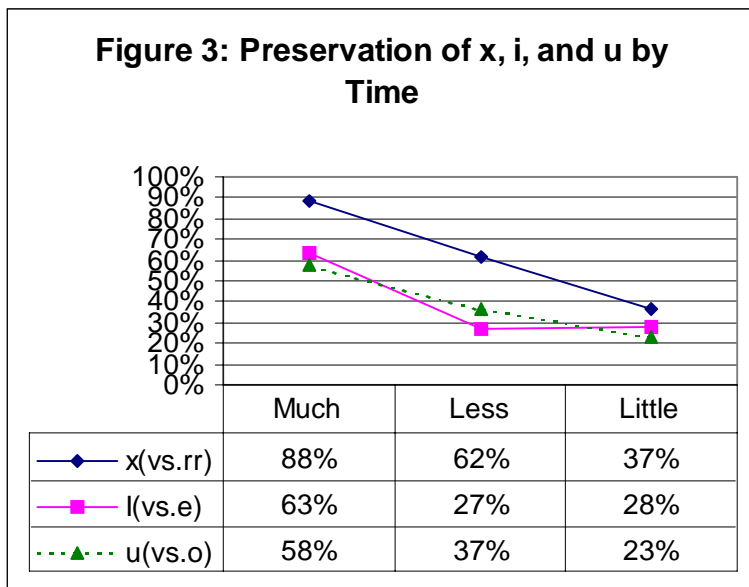
These results suggest that nonstandard and non-regional pronunciations of both r and l may have reached the status of sociolinguistic indicators among the Castañer populace. They are not, however, sociolinguistic markers. In the data neither shows effects for monitoring in shorter vs. longer utterances, or earlier vs. later portions of conversations.

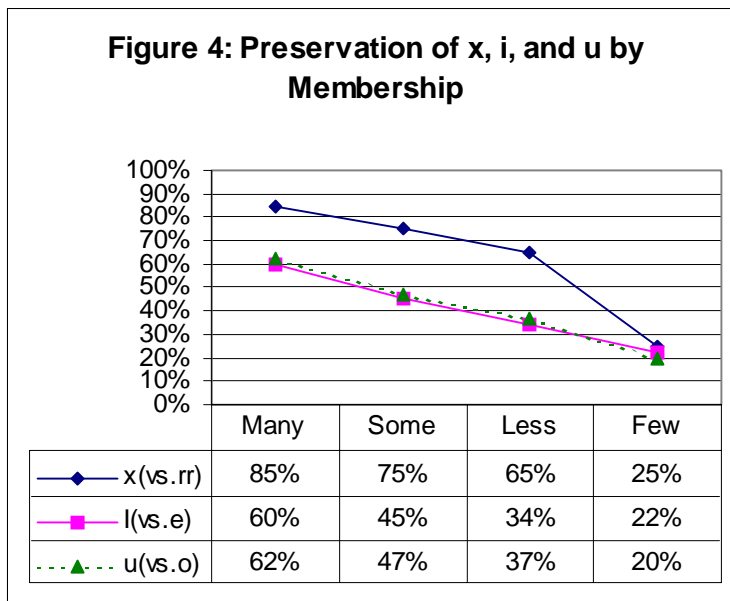
The results for the preservation of high -i and -u (as in ‘tuvi’ for ‘tuve’ and ‘hiju’ for ‘hijo’ and of velar long rr (as in ‘ca[x]o’ for ‘carro) are very different from those just seen. As figures 3 and 4 indicate, differing levels of community ties reflected in the measures of time and local memberships correlate with strikingly different frequencies of usage. Overall data for the final-vowel variables have been drawn from 120 sequential tokens per speaker. The findings in figures 3 and 4, however, reflect only occurrences after high-tonic vowels (as in the ‘tuvi’ and ‘hiju’ examples). This is the environment that Navarro Tomás associates most directly with high-final vowels in his study. Data for the long rr are based on an average of nearly 60 occurrences per individual.



For both the high-final vowels and velar rr, usage drops of dramatically in correlation with reduced levels of time and affiliation in the community. High levels of preservation are present but only among males who have spent “much” time and have “many” memberships. In general, results for these features are clearly stratified linking progressively higher and lower levels of preservation to progressively higher and lower levels of integration. The behavior encountered in these cases is consistent with that associated with sociolinguistic markers. There are not only wide swings in relation to social conditioning, seen here; in the data shifts also occur according to levels of potential monitoring in shorter vs. longer utterances, and between earlier and later portions of the recorded conversations.

In reality, velar rr and high-final i and u are not only markers but also sociolinguistic stereotypes in Puerto Rico. High -i and -u are recognized throughout the island when people speak of “la lechi de poti que se toma muchu en Lari.” And in López Morales’ 1979 study of “actitudes y creencias” toward the velarization of long rr, a clearly popular association between this feature and rural areas of the island is established.





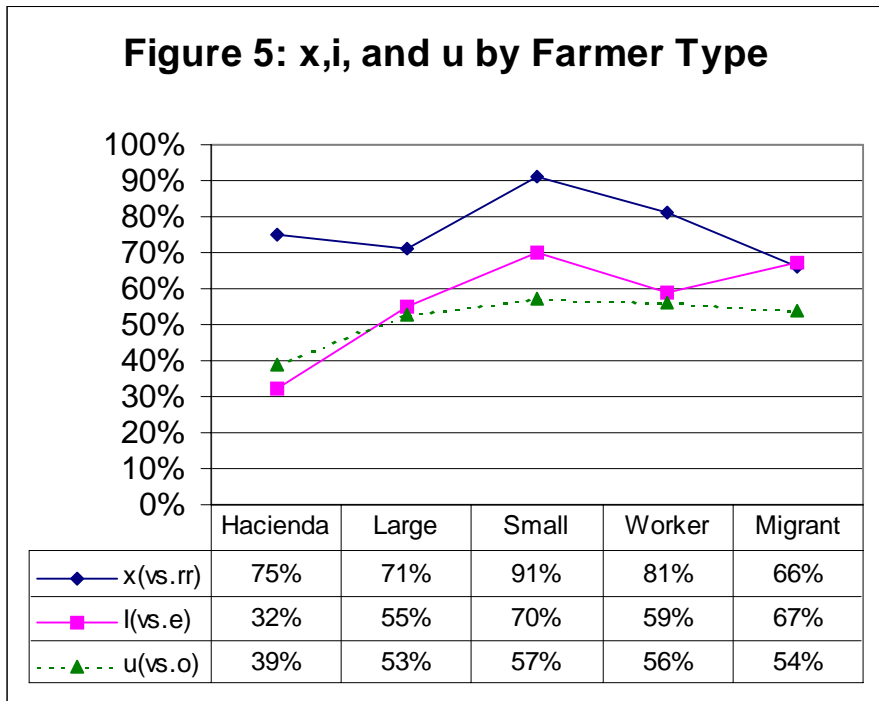
5. Farming Activity

It is clear, then, that social integration is a useful gauge in the study of these dialectal features, especially with respect to those that are markers, or even stereotypes. Another factor found to be associated with dialect maintenance in the data is that of “farmer” vs. “non-farmer” status. Overall, males dedicated to farming tend to be more frequent users of regional features than males who are dedicated to non-agricultural activities.

Although coffee no longer has the status of “black gold,” it is still the focus of agricultural production in the region. Whereas it was grown primarily on large haciendas at the end of the 19th century, it is now grown on farms of all sizes, and by individuals who own and operate their own farms as well as individuals that work on the farms of others.

In examining the maintenance of dialectal features in relation to farming, I will draw on the earlier mentioned samples of farmers and return migrants. The farmers have been divided into four categories: 1) owners of haciendas of more than 100 acres, 2) owners of large farms of 25 to 100 acres, 3) owners of small farms of under 25 acres, and 4) farm laborers. To these groups of five individuals each I have added an additional group consisting of five return-migrants who are also dedicated to farming.

The focus in this instance is on the features that are markers of regional usage. The overall data samples are of nearly 50 tokens per individual for the long rr and 120 tokens per individual for the two vocalic variables, although in the latter case, once again, only appearances after high tonic vowels will be reported, here. Results may be seen in Figure 5.



Overall use of velar rr is high, 65%, among the 30 individuals of the generation sample for the earlier analysis. Here, it is still higher, especially among those who do not belong to the return-migrant category. It ranges from 75% to 91% and peaks among the small farmers and farm laborers. The result of 66% for the return-migrants reaches the community norm as represented by the overall finding for the generation groups.

In the case of the high final-vowel features, usage once again peaks among small farmers and farm workers. The community norm as represented by the generation sample in both cases is 42%. Here, with the exception of the hacienda owners the range is from approximately 55% to 70% for the other categories, including the return-migrant farmers.

6. Conclusion

Before attempting to interpret the results encountered for feature preservation in this study, it is necessary to consider the question of speaker age. Trends by age are not very straight-forward in the first, or generation sample. In a number of instances, it is not the youngest age group that is least supportive of regional usage, but rather the middle. The middle generation is also the one that is most likely to travel outside of Castañer to find employment. When the effects of time and membership have been removed, the youngest generation at times supports regional features as much or more than the oldest. These observations with regard to age are outlined in the VARBRUL analyses presented in the Appendix.

At his point, if we consider Lipski's suggestion presented at the outset, it appears that the data examined based on recorded conversations with males in and around Castañer do indicate that usage is becoming more diffuse. With respect to the sociolinguistic markers (high -i and u and velar rr), in particular, usage open to non-regional forms increases along with progressively weaker community ties. Openness to outside norms is present as well especially among members of the middle generation. Yet there is also a linguistic focus present in the data. That is, there is maintenance of regional features among groups and individuals with closer community ties and rather generally

among males committed to the traditional agricultural economy of the region. These are indications that what exists at the present time may not be a regional dialectology. Rather, there may be a regional socio-dialectology associating established regional dialect features with individuals and groups most intimately tied to the life and the economy of the region in question, in this, the mountainous highlands of west-central Puerto Rico.

Appendix

VARBRUL Analyses of Features for Age, Time and Local Memberships

		High-final <u>-i</u>			
Age		Old = .45	Middle = .47	Young = .58	
Time		Much = .64	Less = .42	Little = .36	
Member-		Many = .66	Some = .54	Less = .44	Few = .32
ships					Significance = .000

		High-final <u>-u</u>			
Age		Old = .50	Middle = .44	Young = .56	
Time	Much = .61	Less = .48	Little = .34		
Member-		Many = .63	Some = .49	Less = .47	Few = .39
ships					Significance = .000

		Velarization of <u>r</u>			
Age		Old = .64	Middle = .39	Young = .58	
Time	Much = .76	Less = .40	Little = .31		
Member-		Many = .74	Some = .51	Less = .48	Few = .22
ships					Significance = .000

		Preservation of <u>-l</u>			
Age		Old = .55	Middle = .39	Young = .56	
Time	Much = .58	Less = .43	Little = .49		
Member-		Many = .34	Some = .50	Less = .58	Few = .59
ships					Significance = .010

		Preservation of <u>-r</u>			
Age		Old = .73	Middle = .41	Young = .34	
Time	Much = .47	Less = .47	Little = .60		
Member-		Many = .60	Some = .54	Less = .51	Few = .33
ships					Significance = .028

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