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Ponlo To' Junto: Humor e Linguagem entre os Produtores de Conteúdo Porto-Riquenhos no TikTok

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Abstract: This study examines two Puerto Rican TikTok content creators, SammySolo and CarlosCalderon who aim to engage bicultural and bilingual millennials and Gen Zers Latinx audience. I am interested in the way these TikTokers develop a unique linguistic ideology regarding the use of Puerto Rican vernacular, specifically the use of Spanish, Spanglish, and accents. This work analyzes how humor is used as a tool to critique hegemonic linguistic ideologies regarding the use of Spanish in the United States and as a pedagogical tool and emphasizes its ability to convey culturally the complexities surrounding the linguistic experiences of young Puerto Ricans, in contrast to the hegemonic linguistic ideology. This ideology favors “neutral Spanish,” stripping regional accents, Spanglish, and cultural nuances to create a homogenized, standardized form that aligns with commercial and media interests. This article highlights the power of humor in cultural translation, its resistance to dominant narratives related to language, and the Puerto Rican linguistic ethos (the linguistic choices, including vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and pronunciation). Furthermore, it examines whether the use of humor might serve as a means of critiquing traditional media's monolingual and unaccented linguistic legacy, exploring if these influencer-led content channels can act as alternative media platforms that transition content, formats, and language away from mainstream norms.

Keywords:

Linguistic ideology, TikTok, Puerto Rico, millennials, GenZ, Latina/os

Resumen: Este estudio examina a dos creadores de contenido puertorriqueños en TikTok, SammySolo y CarlosCalderon, quienes buscan atraer a una audiencia Latinx bicultural y bilingüe compuesta por millennials y miembros de la Generación Z. Me interesa la manera en que estos TikTokers desarrollan una ideología lingüística única en relación con el uso del vernacular puertorriqueño, específicamente el uso del español, el spanglish y los acentos. Este trabajo analiza cómo se utiliza el humor como una herramienta para criticar las ideologías lingüísticas hegemónicas en cuanto al uso del español en los Estados Unidos y como herramienta pedagógica, enfatizando su capacidad para transmitir culturalmente las complejidades de las experiencias lingüísticas de los jóvenes puertorriqueños en contraste con la ideología lingüística hegemónica. Esta ideología favorece el "español neutro", eliminando los acentos regionales, el spanglish y las nuances culturales para crear una forma estandarizada y homogenizada que se alinea con los intereses comerciales y mediáticos. Este artículo destaca el poder del humor en la traducción cultural, su resistencia a las narrativas dominantes relacionadas con el lenguaje y el ethos lingüístico puertorriqueño (las elecciones lingüísticas que incluyen vocabulario, sintaxis, gramática y pronunciación). Además, examina si el uso del humor puede servir como un medio para criticar el legado monolingüe y sin acento de los medios tradicionales, explorando si estos canales de contenido dirigidos por influencers pueden actuar como plataformas mediáticas alternativas que transformen los formatos de contenido y el lenguaje alejándose de las normas convencionales.

Palabras-clave:

Ideología lingüística, TikTok, Puerto Rico, millennials, GenZ, Latina/os

Resumo: Este estudo examina dois criadores de conteúdo porto-riquenho no TikTok, SammySolo e CarlosCalderon, que buscam atrair uma audiência Latinx bicultural e bilíngue composta por millennials e membros da Geração Z. Tenho interesse em como esses TikTokers desenvolvem uma ideologia linguística única em relação ao uso do vernáculo porto-riquenho, especificamente o uso do espanhol, do spanglish e dos sotaques. Este trabalho analisa como o humor é utilizado como uma ferramenta para criticar as ideologias linguísticas hegemônicas em relação ao uso do espanhol nos Estados Unidos e como ferramenta pedagógica, enfatizando sua capacidade de transmitir culturalmente as complexidades das experiências linguísticas dos jovens

porto-riquenhos em contraste com a ideologia linguística hegemônica. Essa ideologia favorece o "espanhol neutro", eliminando os sotaques regionais, o spanglish e as nuances culturais para criar uma forma padronizada e homogeneizada que se alinha aos interesses comerciais e midiáticos. Este artigo destaca o poder do humor na tradução cultural, sua resistência às narrativas dominantes relacionadas com a linguagem e o ethos linguístico porto-riquenho (as escolhas linguísticas que incluem vocabulário, sintaxe, gramática e pronúncia). Além disso, examina se o uso do humor pode servir como um meio para criticar o legado monolíngue e sem sotaque dos meios de comunicação tradicionais, explorando se esses canais de conteúdo liderados por influencers podem atuar como plataformas midiáticas alternativas que transformam os formatos de conteúdo e a linguagem, afastando-se das normas convencionais.

Palavras-chaves:

Ideologia linguística, TikTok, Porto Rico, millennials, Geração Z, Latinas/os

1. Introduction

Puerto Rican singer, Benito Martínez, aka Bad Bunny, a prominent figure bridging the late Millennial and early Gen Z generations—often referred to as Zillennials—sparked debates following his performance as host on Saturday Night Live (NBC) in which he incorporated Spanish, often without translation. In the opening monologue, he stated:

People are wondering if I can host this show because English is not my first language. I don't know if they know, but I do whatever I want. I can host this show in English. I can order McDonald's in English. I can have sex in English. But I prefer sex in Spanish because it's just better. (Saturday Night Live, 2023)

The artist then shifted to speaking in Spanish and gave a shout-out to Latinxs¹ globally, particularly those watching him in Puerto Rico. He also noted the captions on the screen that read "Speaking in non-English," referencing a previous controversy where CBS failed to provide closed-caption translations for his performance at the 2023 Grammys, instead displaying

¹ The term "Latinxs" is employed in this project to embrace a gender-neutral and inclusive approach to describing individuals of Latin American descent. This choice reflects a broader trend within cultural and academic dialogues that seek to acknowledge and respect the diverse gender identities that exist within this community. By using "Latinxs," this work aligns with contemporary efforts to move beyond traditional gender binaries encapsulated in the more conventional "Latino" or "Latina," thus encompassing all who may not identify strictly within these categories.

“Singing in non-English.” In an editorial piece for *The New York Times* discussing the issue at the Grammys, Puerto Rican scholar Yarimar Bonilla (2023) argued that Bad Bunny's performance and the unapologetic use of Spanish is a subversive and political act that challenges the status quo and has helped embolden his fans to embrace their non-English languages and identities. In his performance at *SNL*, by choosing to mainly speak Spanish, mostly without translation, on a popular American platform like *SNL*—which has traditionally been criticized for its lack of diversity—Bad Bunny challenged monolingual expectations and made a bold statement, refusing to conform to Anglophone norms.² Bad Bunny engages in a critique to traditional industry linguistic uses as an extension of instances in the career of the artist in which he was confronted because of his lack of fluency in English, resistance to speak the language and embracing Puerto Rican vernacular not only through music but also in dialogues.

This incident not only thrusts the Spanish-language into the limelight of mainstream media debates but also underscores the specific nuances of Puerto Rican vernacular, which often remains underrepresented not only in English media but also in Spanish-language television. As a Zillennial, Bad Bunny's influence is profound, resonating strongly with the often-called TikTok generation,³ which values authenticity, cultural expression, and digital savviness. His actions on platforms like *SNL* challenge hegemonic monolingual tradition and pave the way for a more inclusive understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity, aligning seamlessly with the values and media consumption habits of younger, digitally native audiences. While Bad Bunny's linguistic interventions during his music and TV host performances have garnered widespread media attention, similar efforts are being undertaken by other Puerto Rican influencers on platforms like TikTok. These content creators are actively engaging in their own forms of cultural and linguistic representation, using the platform's unique format - short-form, vertical videos with a focus on user-generated content and engaging, interactive features- to highlight and celebrate the richness of Puerto Rican vernacular and culture. Through their videos, these

² Yarimar Bonilla, “Bad Bunny Is [Winning in Non-English],” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/11/opinion/bad-bunny-non-english-grammys.html>.

³ The term “TikTok Generation” refers primarily to Generation Z, individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, who have grown up with digital technology and social media as integral parts of their lives. This generation is characterized by their affinity for short-form video content, creativity, and authenticity, which are central to the appeal and function of TikTok. TikTok has become a cultural phenomenon, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing an outlet for creativity, entertainment, and community engagement. The TikTok Generation values authenticity and realness over polished and curated content, which distinguishes their social media consumption from previous generations. They use the platform not only for entertainment but also for learning and self-expression.

influencers not only aim to entertain but also educate their audiences on the nuances of Puerto Rican Spanish, effectively broadening the scope of language and cultural appreciation among a global audience.

In this article, I examine how Puerto Rican content creators on TikTok, Sammy Solo⁴ and Carlos Calderón⁵ use humor to challenge the norms of monolingualism, promotes the normalization of Spanglish, bilingualism and translanguaging, and reflects on the diversity of accents and slang. I am interested in looking at these digital manifestations as a resistance to 1) linguistic ideologies in the mainland, but also 2) to challenge the neutral, Walter Cronkite-style Spanish, prevalent in Spanish Language Television (SLT) in the U.S. This form of Spanish, characterized by its unaccented, generic, and neutral nature (Turow, 1997; Rodríguez, 1999), has been identified by Arlene Dávila (2012) to subtly promote a 'Mexicanization' of Spanish on networks like Univision and has excluded Puerto Rican vernacular.⁶ Also known as Puerto Rican

⁴ SammySolo, known on TikTok as @sammysolo_, is a popular content creator from Puerto Rico. With a following of 72.1K and over 2.2 million likes, he is celebrated as the CEO of "Boricuas Be Like." His content often reflects the vibrant culture of Puerto Rico, resonating with a broad audience.

⁵ Carlos Emmanuel, popularly known on TikTok as @carlosecalderon, is a distinguished content creator hailing from Puerto Rico. Up until 2024, He boasts a robust following with over 1.4 million followers and has amassed more than 90.6 million likes on his posts. His content, rich in music, dance, and Puerto Rican cultural elements. He actively engages his audience by sharing content that not only showcases his dynamic personality but also celebrates his cultural heritage. He is also active on Instagram under the username @carlosecalderon.

⁶ María Vaquero (2014) highlights several essential aspects of Puerto Rican Spanish and its historical evolution in her description. She notes that Puerto Rican Spanish is a fundamental component of Puerto Rican culture and a significant element of its collective identity, reflecting cultural syncretism over the centuries. Throughout its history, Spanish in Puerto Rico has incorporated aspects of Taíno and African languages, as well as influences from English, due to the island's status as a U.S. territory. Vaquero explains that Spanish in the early colonial centuries was not uniform but rather a set of "ways of speaking" influenced by various regions and sociocultural levels of Spain. From the 16th to the 19th century, the island's Spanish was enriched with words borrowed from indigenous and African languages, adapting, and transforming into a unique dialect. In the 19th century, costumbrista literature, such as Manuel Alonso's *El Gíbaro*, deliberately reflected the features of Puerto Rican Spanish. The modernization of dialectal studies in the 20th century allowed for a more scientific understanding of Puerto Rican speech, recognizing the unity of the language within the diversity of regional varieties. Puerto Rican Spanish is characterized by its innovative profile, influenced by the Andalusian dialect and a Creole base. Dialectal and sociolinguistic studies have identified specific phenomena such as the loss of final "s" and the neutralization of final "l" and "r," situating Puerto Rican Spanish within a series of processes shared by other Caribbean dialects. Puerto Rican lexicon is a living testament to its history, documenting the adoption of novelties and the presence of human groups over time. Influences from English, indigenous languages, and Africanisms have enriched the vocabulary of Puerto Rican Spanish. Vaquero also discusses the situation of Spanish in the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States, where contact with English has led to phenomena such as code-switching and linguistic borrowing. Spanish has maintained its predominance in Puerto Rico despite over a century of coexistence with English, reinforced by the re-establishment of Spanish education in the mid-20th century. Finally, the relationship between politics and language in Puerto Rico is highlighted, with laws throughout the 20th century regulating English and Spanish in education and government, culminating in the co-official status of both languages established in the 1990s. In summary, Vaquero's analysis provides a detailed view of Spanish's evolution, characteristics, and current situation in Puerto Rico, emphasizing its importance as a central element of Puerto Rican cultural identity.

Spanish, Puerto Rican Vernacular, distinct in its vocabulary, syntax, and phonetics due to influences from Taíno, African languages, and English, exhibits unique pronunciation and colloquialisms, enriched by English anglicisms, reflecting the island's history and cultural ties with the United States. Additionally, I investigate humor's role in TikTok as a pedagogical tool, particularly in its ability to culturally translate the intricate linguistic experiences of Puerto Rican millennials and GenZers, contrasting them with dominant linguistic ideologies.

To conduct this analysis, I completed an online ethnography of two TikTok content producers. This involved a detailed textual analysis of their posted content, where I examined thematic elements, narrative structures and linguistic dynamics. Additionally, I monitored and documented audience interactions, noting reactions and comments to gauge viewer engagement and response patterns. Situating these content creators within a linguistic and generational framework is imperative. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the nuances in their communication styles and the specific linguistic strategies they deploy to connect with targeted demographic cohorts, enhancing our comprehension of how generational identities and linguistic choices intersect in digital content creation.

2. Navigating Linguistic (Self) Perceptions of Puerto Rican Vernacular

Tuna es la que canta, en español se come atún.
(*Tuna* is the one that sings, in Spanish, we ate *atún*).
Public Service Campaign, Sacred Heart University

In 1995, the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón (in English Sacred Heart University) launched a public service announcement (PSA) to promote the “correct” use of the Spanish language in Puerto Rico.⁷ The campaign, titled “Idioma defectuoso, pensamiento defectuoso,” run for more than a decade on TV and radio waves, and its soundbites became iconic on the island’s popular culture. The copy of the PSA, written by Puerto Rican writer Luis López Nieves, says:

⁷ The advertisement “The language is the blood of the spirit: Defective Language, Defective Thinking,” featured 20 prominent personalities from the country. It was a campaign in defense of the Spanish language, created and written for the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón. Directed by Eduardo Fabián and produced by Salvatore Nolfo, president of Vícom, in 1995. There were two scripts, each 60 seconds long, for television and radio. The entire production was a donation from Vícom to the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón. It was filmed on June 28-29, 1995, at the Vícom studios.

El idioma es la sangre del espíritu. Háblalo bien, con orgullo. No digas “nice”. Di chévere, tremendo. No digas “size”. Di talla, tamaño. Tampoco digas “Estoy en shock”, Mejor decir atónito o perplejo. “Brown” es incorrecto. Usa marrón, castaño, pardo. Tuna, es la que canta. En español, se come atún. Idioma defectuoso, pensamiento defectuoso.⁸

The spot had the participation of local journalists, comedians, a former Miss Universe and other celebrities who appeared for free as interlocutors of the campaign. I was fifteen at the time, and I remembered vividly family and friends repeating the catchy phrases and correcting each other’s use of Spanish based on the recommendations provided by the PSA.

But the campaign was not a random act. It emerged two years after one of Puerto Rico’s largest public manifestations in defense of Spanish language. On January 24, 1993, approximately 100,000 Puerto Ricans gathered in a massive demonstration in the streets of San Juan to protest the imposition of English as a co-official language and defending the role of Spanish as the sole official language on the island. The protest, sparked by legislative actions and the stance of governor, Pedro Roselló,⁹ turned into a significant act of cultural nationalism, emphasizing the island's cultural and linguistic identity. The peaceful demonstration, involving intellectuals, artists, politicians, and citizens, highlighted a strong resistance to perceived external cultural influences, particularly from the U.S. (Orgambides, 1993).

Luis Sánchez-Ayala (2011) argues that Puerto Ricans on the island not only speak Spanish but also view it as essential to maintaining their cultural identity and resisting “Americanization.”¹⁰ He points out that campaigns like those from Universidad del Sagrado

⁸ Literal translation to English: “Language is the spirit's blood. Speak it well, with pride. Don't say 'nice.' Say cool, tremendous. Don't say 'size.' Say dimension, magnitude. Also, don't say 'I am in shock,' better to say astonished or perplexed. 'Brown' is incorrect. Use maroon, chestnut, bay. Tuna is the one that sings. In Spanish, one eats tuna fish. Defective language, defective thought.” Ciudad Seva. (2009, May 28). Idioma defectuoso, pensamiento defectuoso - El idioma es la sangre del espíritu - II [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prKieu92qQo>

⁹ The Official Languages Act of 1902, which gave English and Spanish co-official status, was superseded in April 1991 when Spanish was declared the sole official language of Puerto Rico. Despite this change, the government maintained its operations in Spanish at the local level and in English at the federal level. Furthermore, public schools persisted in conducting education primarily in Spanish while still requiring English instruction. Shortly after Pedro Rossello took office in January 1993, the law mandating Spanish as the only official language was revoked, reinstating the policy from 1902. Consequently, both Spanish and English were once again designated as the official languages of Puerto Rico. This reinstatement included a provision stating that “both English and Spanish shall be used without preference, and as needed, translations and oral interpretations between the two languages shall be provided.” (Puerto Rico Official Languages Act; Act No. 1 of January 28, 1993)

¹⁰ Torres (2016), in explaining the key ideas of the “Americanization” of Puerto Rico, states that the invasion of Puerto Rico by the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War triggered a process of U.S. cultural influence that spread throughout the region, increasing as the United States expanded its economic and military power over Central America and the Caribbean. Under U.S. jurisdiction, Puerto Rico underwent an intense process of assimilation similar to that experienced by many European immigrants upon arriving in the United States. This process, driven by social welfare policies and the progressive movement, educated Puerto Ricans to integrate into society according

Corazón advocate for a “correct” use of Spanish devoid of Anglicisms, equating language purity with Puerto Rican identity. Yeidy Rivero (2005) further illustrates this by examining how Puerto Rican comedy, such as the sitcom “Mi Familia,” navigates the tensions between cultural identity and Americanization, often critiquing pro-statehood views by showcasing the difficulties with English and affirming Puerto Rican identity through Spanish. The series contrasts Americanized Puerto Ricans (Nuyoricans) with island residents, discussing cultural authenticity and portraying Americanized traits as a form of cultural betrayal.

These debates between “los de aquí” (those from here[islanders]) and “los de allá” (those from there [the diaspora]) have persisted for decades. For instance, digitally, the creation and proliferation of the hashtag #YoNoMeQuito, aimed to promote Puerto Rican pride as a response to the structural issues caused by the island's fiscal crisis, have created tension between Puerto Ricans on the island and those who migrated to the U.S., especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria (Meléndez & Hinojosa, 2017).¹¹ As I discussed elsewhere, the campaign, which was intended as a rallying cry for resilience and development in Puerto Rico, but it was reinterpreted online, creating a divisive narrative between island residents and the diaspora, thereby simplifying the complex identities of those Puerto Ricans in transit (Avilés-Santiago, 2018). The

to American social standards, a process known as Americanization. However, in Puerto Rico, this concept is complex and contentious, varying according to the social, political, national, and ethnic perspective of the individual. For the majority of Puerto Rican political leaders, the arrival of the Americans signified the hope for social, economic, and political liberal reforms. As a result, they advocated for the immediate incorporation of Puerto Rico as a state into the American federation. However, for most Americans, especially the ruling class, Puerto Ricans were not deemed capable of self-governance or of assuming the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens. From an imperial perspective of white Protestant supremacy, Puerto Rico was viewed as inhabited by a racially mixed population of Hispanic extraction, Catholic religion, and aristocratic government, necessitating a long process of "Americanization" to civilize them. In 1900, the U.S. Congress passed the Foraker Act, organizing a civil government in Puerto Rico and subjecting it to metropolitan control, with economic changes that benefited the United States and negatively impacted the Puerto Rican economy, especially the coffee sector. Economic and political Americanization was accompanied by an attempt at cultural assimilation through public education in English. However, this policy faced multiple challenges and did not censor the use of Spanish or traditional Puerto Rican cultural expressions, with Spanish being part of the school curriculum. Public education switched to Spanish as the language of instruction in 1948, with English as a second language. Protestant missions also exerted cultural influence, promoting a participatory structure in religious administration and forming Puerto Rican leaders in these churches. The imposition of U.S. citizenship in 1917 facilitated Puerto Rican migration to other states in search of opportunities, forming communities that preserved Puerto Rican culture. Participation of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Army also served as a significant cultural influence, providing education and avenues for material and social progress. After World War II, U.S. cultural influence was consolidated globally through the film, television, music, interactive games, and Internet industries, although this cultural exchange was also influenced by the recipient societies. Despite political and economic control and the powerful U.S. cultural influence, Puerto Rican cultural expressions have been sufficiently strong and dynamic to preserve and evolve, adapting and Puerto Ricanizing forms of American culture.

¹¹ Figueroa, L. R. (2023). #YoNoMeQuito: Mensajes de terapia para la crisis económica en Puerto Rico. *Caribbean Studies*, 51 (2), 33-61. For an insightful analysis on the hashtag #YoNoMeQuito, read this article.

divisiveness included language as part of the rhetoric. Nevertheless, the debates concerning language use in Puerto Rico are dynamic and nuanced, extending beyond a simplistic black-and-white perspective.

3. Evolving Attitudes and Linguistic Dynamics Among Puerto Ricans in the U.S. and Puerto Rico

National conversations—such as the defense of the Spanish language, the “Idioma defectuoso, pensamiento defectuoso” PSA, and the mockery in popular culture of poor Spanish skills—reflect attitudes prevalent in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Since then, demographic shifts and increased movement between the U.S. and Puerto Rico have led to changes in both linguistic practices and perceptions of language. According to census data, a minority of Puerto Ricans claim to be fluent in English; only 17.9% of the population rated their English-speaking ability as “very good” in 2000. However, by 2010, this figure increased to 29%, likely due to technological advancements and greater access to English-language media, with further data from 2020 indicating a slight increase to about 30%, suggesting that the growth of English fluency among Puerto Ricans has plateaued (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Interestingly, younger Puerto Ricans, particularly millennials and Generation Z, are more fluent in English, with many considering it their first language. I see that trend in my family, as an early millennial, my fluency in English is better than my siblings’ (GenX) but not as proficient as my nephews’ and nieces.

However, the perception of language use in Puerto Rico is very nuanced. Brenda Domínguez-Rosado's work highlights the evolving attitudes towards American English (AE) and Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS) among Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in the diaspora. For example, her research documents a shift in perceptions, showing a growing acceptance of AE and a more inclusive view of Puerto Rican identity that embraces diasporic individuals who may not speak PRS (Domínguez-Rosado, 2015). Similarly, Sobrino-Triana (2018) examined Puerto Ricans' attitudes toward their own language, finding a strong positive association between language and identity. However, the study also revealed that Puerto Ricans are aware that their variety of Spanish does not align with the idealized versions found in other countries, such as Spain or Colombia. This evolving self-perception among Puerto Ricans on the island mirrors

broader linguistic dynamics within Latina/o communities in the United States, where Puerto Rican Spanish is similarly challenged, contested, and often subjected to stereotypes.

Ana Celia Zentella (2014) argues that Caribbean Spanish is unfairly stereotyped due to its pronunciation changes, such as the deletion of final consonants, a linguistic feature that doesn't receive the same criticism when present in French. She highlights how, in the United States, the Spanish and English dialects spoken by Latinxs are used as tools of linguistic oppression, with institutions and the public labeling these variants as "deformed" or "non-standard," which contributes to a sense of linguistic inferiority and accelerates the loss of Spanish. This discrimination is evident against dialects like Chicano English and Puerto Rican English, which are also stigmatized as being influenced by African American English. With tensions surrounding language both on the island and in the diaspora, further complicated by the continuous movement of Puerto Ricans between the island of Puerto Rico and the mainland United States—which emphasizes the fluidity of their identities and the sociocultural and economic factors influencing their migration (Duany, 2003)—I am interested in observing social media networks as a dynamic snapshot where new ways of thinking Puerto Rican vernacular are reproduced, resisted, debated, and circulated.

In this regard, Puerto Ricans in digital spaces use platforms like TikTok to confront the complex and nuanced reality of language use in English, Spanish, and Spanglish. The digital space acts as a digital contact zone, where individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact and collaborate in ways that make visible the clashing of dominant cultural and linguistic hegemonies (Panthee, 2012; Pratt, 2002). In this context, humor emerges as a compelling instrument of resistance, enabling Puerto Ricans to subvert and challenge these linguistic hegemonies while fostering a sense of community and cultural pride.

4. Humor and Language in Digital Spaces

The research on humor and culture within media studies has predominantly focused on the portrayal of Latinidad in traditional media platforms, critiquing the often-monolithic representations that overlook the rich diversity within the Latinx community (Avila-Saavedra, 2011; Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Pérez-Casas, 2016; Rivero, 2005; Valencia, 2012). Significant work has explored how humor serves as a medium for cultural expression and identity negotiation among Latinx communities.

For instance, Megan Wells (2011) highlighted comedian George Lopez's use of code-switching to emphasize his Latinx identity and resonate with bilingual and bicultural audiences. Similarly, Eva Cooper (2008) discussed how John Leguizamo's stand-up comedy not only incorporates ethnic humor to establish cultural closeness but also to confront and critique cultural stereotypes. Amber Workman's (2018) analysis of Gustavo Arellano's "Ask a Mexican!" column further illustrates how humor can foster dialogue and enhance mutual understanding among Mexican and Mexican American communities, with digital platforms playing a crucial role in amplifying and validating diasporic identities.

Building on these perspectives, Avilés-Santiago and Méndez (2023) examine the stand-up "Latin History for Morons" by John Leguizamo, investigating how humor intertwined with language challenges detrimental stereotypes while sometimes unintentionally reinforcing them. Merouan Bendi (2019) suggests that effective humor involves a relational network where the producer, recipient, and the subject of the joke must share a common cultural background to fully appreciate the humor, highlighting the necessity for cultural translation as defined by Sarah Maitland (2017). Maitland posits that cultural translation, akin to linguistic translation, involves negotiation and adaptation, which are essential for fostering meaningful interactions and identity formation in increasingly diverse global societies.

Despite some advances in this research area, the discourse on how humor, language, digital spaces, and Latinidad intersect is still burgeoning. Studies have shown platforms like Flama, Pero Like, and mitú use humor to cater specifically to bicultural and bilingual millennial audiences (Avilés-Santiago, 2022). These platforms, however, are not immune to the influence of corporate interests, which can shape the content and narratives they produce.

This project focuses on TikTok, a platform of grassroots expressions of humor, language, and cultural identity, offering a less restrictive and more decentralized digital environment. It mainly explores how Puerto Rican linguistic expressions on TikTok engage with broader concepts of Latinidad. This exploration aims to determine if such interactions manifest as forms of cultural resistance, identity affirmation, or simply as adaptations of Puerto Ricanness within the broader Latinidad landscape, reflecting the complex identities of digital citizens today. Before moving forward, it is vital to outline the identitarian parameters within which these content producers operate and the specific audience they aim to engage, ensuring a thorough analysis of their digital linguistic and cultural practices.

5. Billennial¹², GenZ and the TikTok Generations

The “TikTok Generation” encapsulates young digital natives, primarily from late Millennials and Gen Z, who actively engage with the social media platform TikTok, using it as a significant avenue for self-expression and cultural interaction (Herman, 2019). This generation is characterized by their creative use of the platform to navigate and shape their identities through thematic content that reflects internal and external perceptions of self, showcasing a complex portrait of being empowered yet vulnerable (Cheng Stahl et al., 2022). The platform serves as a digital stage for entertainment. It emerges as a unique space for political engagement and societal discourse, marking a pivotal shift in how young people participate in social media dynamics (Shutsko, 2020).

Latinxs on TikTok represent a dynamic and influential demographic, engaging deeply with the platform for entertainment, cultural expression, and brand interaction. The platform serves as a crucial space for Latinx Gen Z users, who use TikTok to explore and express their bicultural identities, effortlessly switching between English and Spanish or adopting Spanglish, reflecting a broader trend of linguistic fluidity among young Latinxs (Valdes-Fauli, 2023). Additionally, Latinx content creators on TikTok are filling important cultural and educational roles, offering insights into Latina/o traditions and history, thereby forging a sense of community and identity among viewers. For instance, popular TikTok campaigns utilize Spanglish and regional music styles to resonate with young Hispanic audiences, enhancing brand relatability and reach. Additionally, content creators leverage the platform to bridge cultural gaps, using their bilingual capabilities to create content that appeals to Spanish and English-speaking audiences, thus amplifying the platform's role in cultural education and connectivity (Alfonso, 2021).

Building on the discussion of linguistic flexibility and digital innovation, as I previously explored (Avilés-Santiago, 2022), legacy Spanish-language television networks such as Univision target Latina/o bicultural and bilingual millennials, referred to as "billennials." Their strategy utilizes a linguistic flexibility approach, which, while progressive for traditional media, remains bound within a framework of curated content tailored to commercial objectives. This

¹² Billennial is a neologism “coined recently by Univision, the giant in Spanish-language TV broadcaster in the United States, the word “**billennial**” is a synthesis of bilingual and millennial” (Phippen & National Journal, 2015).

contrasts sharply with TikTok's decentralized, user-driven content production, which allows for a broader range of creative expression and linguistic representation.

In contrast, TikTok allows for a more organic expression of bicultural identities, where users dictate the narrative and explore their linguistic diversity without the constraints of neutral Spanish (Avilés-Santiago, 2022). The distinction between these platforms highlights a significant shift in media consumption and identity formation. Whereas legacy media has begun to acknowledge the need for greater linguistic and cultural flexibility, platforms like TikTok have catapulted these concepts to the forefront of global youth culture. This is evidenced by the extensive use of the platform by Gen Z to articulate their identities through humor, language, and political commentary, challenging traditional norms and fostering a new form of cultural literacy that embraces the complexities of a multilingual, multicultural society (Cheng Stahl et al., 2022; Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

Through TikTok, Puerto Rican content creators exemplify the dynamic interplay between language and identity, navigating the nuances of their cultural and linguistic heritage in ways that resonate deeply with a global audience. This engagement disrupts monolingual and monocultural paradigms and underscores the evolving nature of Latinx identities in the digital age, providing a counter-narrative to the often homogenized portrayals in traditional media.

6. “Ahora, Ponlo To’ Junto”: Samuel Marrero's Linguistic Bridge on TikTok_

Samuel Marrero, popularly known as sammysolo_ on TikTok, is a Puerto Rican content creator and entrepreneur based in the Bronx. He is renowned for his videos about Puerto Rican vernacular and signature phrase “Ahora, ponlo To’ Junto” (“Now put it all together” in English). Samuel acts as a slang translator, articulating words or phrases in Spanish, and then, following the prompt “Ahora, ponlo to’ junto,” he reveals the Puerto Rican vernacular equivalent or interpretation. The videos maintain a consistent style; they feature Samuel on the right side of the screen conversing with his jumpcut alter ego on the left, breaking down words or phrases into syllables. One version of Samuel uses a distinctive hand gesture, simulating the merging of two elements, as he says “Ahora, ponlo to’ junto”. Then, the other Samuel reveals the unique Puerto Rican rendition of the phrase or word.

For instance, Samuel’s inaugural video, which garnered over half a million views, launched the series “Ahora, ponlo to’ Junto” centered on the word “Naranja” (Orange). In this

video, Samuel methodically breaks the word into syllables, “Naran-ja,” before instructing, “Ahora, ponlo to’ Junto,” which translates to “china.” In Puerto Rico, both the fruit and the color are commonly referred to as “china” rather than “naranja.” The word “china,” used in Puerto Rico to denote both the color and the fruit, exemplifies a distinctive linguistic adaptation within the island’s vernacular. Historically, this term likely originated from the 19th-century maritime trade when oranges imported from China reached various global destinations, including Puerto Rico. The vivid color of the fruit may have prompted locals to adopt “china” for both the fruit and its color, reflecting the origin of the oranges. This usage is notably intriguing to other Spanish speakers from Latin America, where “china” typically refers to the country (China), not the fruit. Samuel’s utilization of this term in his video employs humor to delineate the nuances between Puerto Rican vernacular and the Spanish spoken in other Latin American regions. After the video’s success, Samuel continues creating videos of that kind. Some of the most viewed videos explored the following concepts:

Spelled Word (Other Hispanics)	Verbal Command	Puerto Rican Vernacular (Boricuas Be Like)
1. Estados-Unidos	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Allá fuera
2. Men-tira	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Embuste
3. Ma-estro	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Mistel
4. Pa-ñal	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Pampel
5. Des-nudo	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Esnú
6. Hela-do	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Mantecado
7. Cere-al	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Conflei
8. Cal-dero	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Olla
9. Empare-dado	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Sandwich
10. Fri-joles	Ahora, ponlo to’junto.	Habichuelas

Table 1. Concepts explored in the Samuel’s most viewed videos. (Source: Own elaboration)

In his videos, Samuel employs humor as a pedagogical tool to elucidate the intricacies of Puerto Rican vernacular. Notably, the content creator refrains from judgment regarding the terms used, instead positioning himself as a cultural translator of concepts that, while shared, have distinct nomenclature in Puerto Rico. When Samuel refers to terms that he will translate into Puerto Rican vernacular as those used by “Other Hispanics,” he implicitly employs “Hispanic” as a pan-ethnic umbrella term, overlooking the potential diversity of terminology within this group. For instance, the word for “helado” (in Spanish, ice cream) is “nieve” in some parts of

Latin America.¹³ Furthermore, many of the words translated into Puerto Rican vernacular in Samuel's videos are either Anglicisms (e.g., “mistel,” instead of mister, “pampel,” instead of pampers, and “confeli” instead of corn flakes) or grammatically incorrect words (e.g., “esnú” instead of desnudo).

Nevertheless, Samuel's approach emphasizes the validity of the meanings, eschewing claims of correctness in favor of playfully offering alternative versions of the words. This approach may stem from Samuel's residency in the Bronx, a diasporic community with a substantial Puerto Rican population, yet one that coexists with other Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean nationalities. As a diasporic subject, Samuel likely navigates the linguistic challenges of a cultural contact zone where cultural translation and linguistic negotiation are commonplace.

The audience engagement with SammySolo's TikTok content exemplifies a profound communal interaction, illustrating the platform's significant role as a cultural expression and exchange conduit. This interaction is particularly vibrant among viewers who recognize and celebrate their linguistic nuances within SammySolo's humorous educational videos. Such exchanges in the comments section reinforce the platform's utility as a communal space and enrich the discourse surrounding linguistic identity in a digital era. These dynamics support the broader narrative of the research, highlighting how digital platforms serve as contemporary arenas for identity formation and cultural preservation, as evidenced by the active participation and shared cultural resonance among SammySolo's diverse audience. The commentaries provide a rich, user-generated context that underscores the significance of digital spaces in shaping and expressing multicultural identities, aligning with the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in the study.

Samuel Marrero's engagement on TikTok exemplifies the dynamic interplay of language, culture, and identity that mirrors observations similar to Ana Celia Zentella's (1997) arguments in her book *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Samuel employs a range of linguistic styles—from formal Spanish to colloquial Spanglish—demonstrating the fluidity and adaptability characteristic of Puerto Rican communities. His presence on a global platform

¹³ The term “nieve” is used to refer to ice cream particularly in Mexico. This usage stems from the word's literal meaning of “snow,” reflecting the cold and frozen nature of the dessert. In Mexico, “nieve” can be used interchangeably with “helado,” though “nieve” often specifically refers to ice cream made with water, resembling more of a sorbet or snow cone in texture.

like TikTok serves as more than just entertainment; it acts as a vital expression of cultural and linguistic resilience, providing a digital space where language reinforces identity and asserts a presence in a dispersed diaspora. Furthermore, Samuel's interactions with his audience extend beyond mere content delivery to embody a process of cultural transmission and linguistic socialization. His videos educate and transmit rich cultural values and linguistic nuances inherent in Puerto Rican vernacular. Through his engaging content, Samuel not only entertains but also educates, shaping his viewers' linguistic preferences and cultural perceptions. This reflects a broader shift where digital platforms become contemporary spaces for cultural preservation and identity formation.

7. Lost in Translation: The Cultural Humor of Carlos Calderon on TikTok

Carlos Emmanuel, known on TikTok as @carlosecalderon, is a Puerto Rican content creator who, as of 2024, has amassed a following of over 1.4 million and more than 90.6 million likes. His content, less thematically structured compared to other subjects of study, primarily captures vignettes of his daily life, including comedic sketches and participation in popular TikTok trends. His offerings are notably organic, encompassing a range of activities from culinary explorations and travel to musical endeavors and social interactions. Notably, his series "Puerto Rican phrases that just make sense" exemplifies a fusion of humor with linguistic insights, distinguishing it within his broader portfolio.

In his series, Carlos employs humor to translate Puerto Rican idioms into English. The videos feature an almost ethereal aesthetic, with scenes of Carlos contemplatively sipping coffee by a window. Each video commences with the introductory phrase, "Puerto Rican phrases that just make sense." Edited in sepia tones and accompanied by subtle background music, the series introduces each idiom with a sudden interjection. This editing choice situates the content creator within the cultural context of Puerto Rico, presenting in English while incorporating Spanish text. Notably, many of the sayings Carlos translates carry vulgar or derogatory connotations that, when rendered into English, diverge significantly from their original implications. The dialogue script for each video¹⁴ unfolds as follows:

¹⁴ This video successfully attracted significant attention with 113,200 views, 1,657 comments, and 14,500 shares. Retrieved from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@carlosecalderon/video/7327422253858032939?lang=en>

- *Puerto Rican phrases that just makes sense.* – spoke in a soft voice.
- “*Qué carajo tu miras welebicho.*” —abruptly interjected both verbally and textually. The voice is loud and carries a distinct Puerto Rican accent. The textual representation also includes the phonetic pronunciation of the phrase¹⁵.
- *Which translates to “Those eyes remind me that I am loved”. This is an amazing phrase to use to your loved ones, especially your parents.* – spoke in a soft voice.

Another video¹⁶ states:

- *Puerto Rican phrases that just makes sense.* – spoke in a soft voice.
- “*Ay puñeta, carajo, coño, me cago en la óspera.*” —abruptly interjected both verbally and textually. The voice is loud and carries a distinct Puerto Rican accent. The textual representation also includes the phonetic pronunciation of the phrase.
- *Which translates to “Sunshine, and good vibes.” This is an amazing phrase to use with your loved ones when you feel amazing, especially your parents.* – spoke in a soft voice.

The phrase “Ay puñeta, carajo, coño, me cago en la óspera” represents a cascade of Spanish profanities commonly expressed in Puerto Rico to convey intense emotions such as frustration or surprise. “Ay puñeta” and “carajo” can be likened to the English interjection “Damn!” reflecting significant emotional intensity. “Coño” functions as a more potent expletive, similar to more severe swear words in English. The term “me cago en la óspera,” a less offensive variation of “me cago en la hostia,” introduces humor to temper the phrase’s harshness, typically used among close acquaintances or within relaxed, informal settings. The response to the video underscores the role of humor in cultivating community among viewers, primarily through the familiar cultural and linguistic elements of Puerto Rican expressions. These interactions not only spotlight the communal enjoyment of culturally specific humor but also bolster audience engagement, introducing depth and personal stories that resonate with the audience’s group identity.

In examining Carlos Calderon’s TikTok material, Delia Chiaro’s (2005) insights on the challenges of translating humor across cultural and linguistic divides are particularly relevant.

¹⁵ The grammatically corrected Spanish phrase is “¿Qué carajo miras tú, huelebicho?” which literally translates to “What the hell are you looking at, dick-sniffer?”

¹⁶ In analyzing the video by Carlos Emmanuel on TikTok, it is important to note the caption “another one for the gringxs, you’re 🤗 welcome 🤗” which plays a crucial role in framing the content’s cultural and humorous elements. This video has garnered considerable engagement with 23,300 likes, 303 comments, and 3,173 shares, indicating a strong resonance with the audience. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@carlosecalderon/video/7341861328102935850?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7368252132561536555

Chiaro argues that humor is often untranslatable because it is deeply ingrained in specific cultural contexts. Calderon's method of presenting Puerto Rican sayings that lose their original intent in translation illustrates this concept, highlighting these expressions' distinctive and culturally bounded nature. This deliberate untranslatability not only preserves the uniqueness of Puerto Rican humor but also fosters a sense of belonging among those who share the cultural background. Chiaro notes that such untranslatability enhances in-group solidarity, as native speakers and cultural insiders appreciate the humor in ways that outsiders might not. This exclusivity strengthens group identity and cohesion, underscoring the richness and complexity of cultural expressions that remain inaccessible to global standardization. Moreover, Calderon's content demonstrates how humor, deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts, can counteract the homogenizing effects of globalization by sustaining a distinctive cultural identity. In this context, humor that fails to cross cultural boundaries survives and flourishes, reinforcing the unique identity of the community from which it originates.

8. Conclusion

This analysis underscores the pivotal role of Puerto Rican influencers on platforms like TikTok, who actively engage in cultural and linguistic representation. They are not just challenging the dominant linguistic ideologies that have long shaped perceptions of Spanish in mainstream media, but they are also educating a global audience. Through the innovative use of TikTok's format—short-form, vertical videos that prioritize user-generated content—creators like Sammy Solo and Carlos Calderón entertain and educate a global audience about the richness of Puerto Rican vernacular and culture. These influencers utilize humor and engaging content to deconstruct monolingual norms and promote a normalized use of Spanglish, bilingualism, and translanguaging, reflecting Puerto Rican Spanish's diverse accents and slang. The broader implications of their work relate directly to Ana Celia Zentella's advocacy for recognizing linguistic diversity in the U.S. as a strength rather than an impurity. By showcasing the dynamic interplay of language through code-switching and hybridity, these digital platforms counter the homogenization tendencies seen in traditional Spanish-language television in the U.S., which often promotes a neutral, unaccented Spanish. This digital resistance is crucial for preserving linguistic diversity and maintaining democracy and combating linguistic profiling. Moreover, engaging these content creators with their audiences provides an essential insight into the

generational shifts in language perception and use among Puerto Ricans. As evidenced by the interactions on TikTok, there is a clear departure from pursuing linguistic purity and embracing a more authentic representation of Puerto Rican linguistic identity. This shift is about more than resisting Americanization or the Mexicanization of Spanish on networks like Univision. Still, it is also about affirming a Puerto Rican identity that is fluid, dynamic, and intertwined with the island's history and cultural ties to the United States.

In conclusion, the work of Puerto Rican TikTok influencers exemplifies how digital platforms can transcend traditional media boundaries to foster a more inclusive and accurate representation of cultural and linguistic identities. Their efforts align with the academic discourse that supports the value of linguistic diversity and challenge the historical narratives that have sought to marginalize dialects and linguistic expressions that deviate from the standard norms. These digital spaces allow for the preservation of linguistic diversity and promote a deeper understanding of how language functions as a tool for cultural expression and identity formation in the modern world. This is a vibrant demonstration of how user-generated content on platforms like TikTok can profoundly influence and reshape the linguistic landscape, offering new avenues for cultural and linguistic advocacy in an increasingly digital age.

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