**Nosotros somos dominicanos: Language and Self-Definition among Dominicans**

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This chapter examines the language situation of the immigrant and U.S.-born Dominican populations of New York, which, despite increasing numerical and socio-political prominence, have gone largely ignored. These Dominican communities exhibit a high degree of language loyalty, which is remarkable in the context of the dominant English language and in the proximity of other dialects of Spanish, from which the Dominican vernacular differs markedly. Many of these differences are stigmatized, and yet the dialect persists with minimal disturbance. The question arises as to why speakers don’t abandon these low-prestige forms in favor of the more conservative General Latin American Spanish norm (through leveling) or in favor of the dominant language, English (through language displacement or loss). The answer lies in the unifying and separatist functions of the Dominican vernacular.

The first section of this chapter presents an overview of the linguistic features of the dialect at issue; though syntax is not the focus of the work, this section points to data that should prove of inherent interest to syntacticians. Section 2, the kernel of the work, considers Dominican Spanish in its socio-historical context, both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States. The data on linguistic forms, usage, and attitudes reveal that while Dominicans have viable alternatives for escaping linguistic prejudice, they remain fiercely loyal to their native dialect which binds them to their Hispanic past and isolates them from their African and African-American neighbors.

1. **Dominican Spanish and its properly linguistic import**

   The diversity of the dialects of Latin American Spanish has stimulated significant popular interest and scholarly attention (cf. Lipski 1994). What invariably emerges from the literature is the uniqueness of the dialects of

Spanish spoken in the Caribbean, with the Dominican Republic at the forefront of linguistic innovation. Henríquez Ureña (1940) and Jiménez Sabater (1975) present the most complete analyses of the dialect, detailing the lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics that identify this dialect of Spanish and distinguish it from the Spanish spoken in other Latin American nations and from the established norm. As expected, variations in the lexicon abound. The introduction of Taíno/Arawak indigenisms such as ají, cabuya, and guanándana and Africanisms such as hame, cochinho, and féferes reflects historical contact, and continued innovations in the lexicon attest to the vitality of the language, and to Dominicans’ tendency to language play in particular:³

(1) a. Hay un conjunto de frases propias del país, y hay cosas que se ponen de moda... De un tiempo acá se ha usado mucho, cuando una persona es muy diestra en algo, decir esa persona es un caballo o un toro. En cualquier nivel social tú oyes, «Fulano, ve donde² ese médico, que es un caballo».

b. Yo recuerdo que en una compañía allá en Estados Unidos, un dominicano le dijo a un centroamericano, «Mira, pásame esa vaina para darle un coñazo a esta desgracia ahí». Él no entendió. Si me lo dice a mí, yo le doy cualquier cosa, porque eso es una vaina, eso es una desgracia, eso es una pendejada.

There are also regional variations in pronunciation, particularly of syllable-final consonants. Especially noteworthy are the processes that affect syllable-final liquids, the most prevalent being lambdacism, glide formation, and rhotacism. For example, the items faltar, faltus, and faltaban may be rendered with distinct pronunciations in the capital city of Santo Domingo, in the agricultural countryside of the Cibao Valley, and in the southern region:³

(2) a. Norm: [faltár], [fáltas], [faltábán]
b. Santo Domingo: [faltál], [faltál], [faltábán]/[faltábá]  
c. Cibao Valley: [fajá], [fajá], [fajá]/[fajá]
d. Southern coast: [fartár], [fártu], [fartábán]/[fartábá]

The dialect has also experienced a decrease in morphological distinctions which may be due to reduction of other alveolar consonants. A common feature is the weakening of syllable-final /s/, which may be subsequently elided altogether, as illustrated in (2).⁴ While Henríquez Ureña’s (1940: 139) early survey of the language revealed that “en la dicción culta se procura evitar la modificación,” some fifty years later Lipski (1994) estimates the consonantal reduction to be so common as to be nearly categorical, even among educated speakers.
Also attested across regional and social dialects are the velarization and elision of syllable-final /n/, though, as indicated, the nasalization remains on the preceding vowel.\(^5\) These consonantal changes have given rise to incipient phonological restructuring, and have had significant consequences in the verbal system, eliminating distinctions across numerous verbal paradigms: \{-s\} marks the second-person singular, and \{-n\} marks the third-person plural.\(^6\) In the traditional linguistic literature, such distinctions encoded by richness of inflectional endings have been linked to the availability of null subjects.\(^7\) Thus, we would predict that the loss of morphological distinctions would occasion the rise of overt pronominal subjects.\(^8\) This is not the case in Dominican Spanish. In marked contrast to General Latin American Spanish, in which subject pronouns are typically expressed only for emphatic purposes, Dominican Spanish allows for subjects to be freely employed without added pragmatic meaning, as in (3). (Note that the morphophonological reductions at issue are not reproduced in the transcripts.)

(3) Overt subject pronouns with specific and non-specific human reference

a. Yo no lo vi, él estaba en Massachusetts, acababa de llegar, pero muy probable para el domingo pasado, que fue Día de las Madres allá, él estaba en Nueva York. . . . El estaba donde Eugenia, y yo creo que él se va a quedar allá hasta que . . .

b. Simplemente tus padres te dicen, «Bueno mi hijo, todo lo que tú me pidas yo te lo doy, pero tu carrera tú tienes que hacerla tú».

c. Déjeme yo contarle . . . yo le dije que no se le puede echar plato a la casa sin tú hablar con los otros hermanos tuyos. . . . porque después cuando yo me muera, tú te vas a hacer dueño de la casa tú solo.

d. Ellos me dijeron que yo tenía anemia . . . Si ellos me dicen que yo estoy en peligro cuando ellos me entran la aguja por el ombligo, yo me voy a ver en una situación de estrés.

This marked use of subject pronouns has proliferated throughout the pronominal system, so that even verb forms that remain phonologically distinct with respect to person and number are nonetheless accompanied by the subject pronoun. These subject pronouns may be overtly expressed without emphatic force. Therefore, we might invoke paradigmatic pressure or parametric shift in accounting for the preponderance of subject pronouns in evidence, a proposal that finds support in the use of pronouns even with inanimate subjects, (4a), and the overuse of the impersonal neutral pronouns tú and uno (4b). And perhaps the most intriguing and most telling characteristic of the dialect is the introduction of the non-referential pronoun ello, which is completely devoid of content and
force; the overt expression of the expletive, exemplified in (4c), is striking, as it has no equivalent expression in other varieties of Spanish.

(4) a. Overt subject pronoun with non-human reference

[Re: river] Él tiene poca agua.
[Re: buses] Ellas se saben devolver en Villa; ellas pasan de largo.

b. Impersonal neutral pronouns tú and uno

Uno habla reglarucito aquí.
A uno le dan una película y se desmayan.
A mí me gusta allá, pero entonces, como uno tiene su negocio aquí . . .
uno no va a coger para allá para trabajarlo a otro.
Uno se da cuenta que uno es adulto ya . . . Tú haces lo que tú te propones hacer.

c. Overt expletive pronoun

Ello llegan guaguas hasta allá.
Ello había mucha gente en lay-a-way [stand-by].
Ellos querían renovar el centro para el turismo y ello hay mucha gente que lo opone.
Porque ello no hay luz, aquí no hay luz, no – Ya agua hay, y va a haber más agua todavía . . . sí, ello viene un poquito ya en la llave ya.

Jiménez Sabater (1975: 164–165) provides an explicit statement of the interrelation of all of the aforementioned properties:

En el habla dominicana actual parece sentirse cada vez más la necesidad de diferenciar la segunda de la tercera persona del singular utilizando los respectivos pronombres antepuestos al verbo. Estos se mencionan, cuando menos, una vez en cada oración o período. . . En la zona del Cibao estas expresiones más o menos redundantes coinciden curiosamente con la utilización del pronombre fósil ello como sujeto antepuesto a verbos ‘impersonales.’

Another prominent feature of Dominican Spanish is the pattern of word order attested in declaratives, interrogatives, and infinitival constructions. The word order of declaratives in General Latin American Spanish is relatively free, demonstrating a sensitivity to pragmatic considerations such as theme–theme requirements and syntactic considerations such as verb class. In contrast, word order in Dominican Spanish is relatively fixed – subject-verb-object –
irrespective of subject type or verb class, a fact frequently noted in the literature. Further corroboration for the fixing of the preverbal position for subjects is the fact that the pattern is maintained even in questions, where the General Latin American Spanish norm requires that the verb appear in second position, preposed to the subject. As shown in (5a), in Dominican Spanish the preverbal position is available to pronouns and full NPs alike. This lack of inversion in questions is noted in Henríquez Ureña (1940) and by Jiménez Sabater (1975: 169), the latter stating that the preverbal positioning of subject pronouns in questions “es prácticamente general en el español de la República Dominicana.” The dialect also employs an additional strategy as a means of circumventing the inverted order, the pseudo-cleft illustrated in (5b). This could explain the focus strategy, in (5c), whose null operator is very pronounced in the Dominican vernacular (cf. Toribio 1992, 1993b).

(5) a. Interrogatives

¿Qué yo les voy a mandar a esos muchachos?
Papi, ¿qué ese letrero dice?
¿Qué número tú anotaste? . . . ahora tú vas a ver si sale.
¿Cuánto un médico gana?
¿Y con quién Fredi está allá?

b. Pseudo-cleft

¿En qué es que tú te vas a graduar?
¿Dónde fue que tú estudiaste?
¿Qué es lo que ese muchacho me trae?
¿Cuánto fue que él me dijo que costaba?
¿Cuándo es que ustedes se van?

c. Focus strategy

Yo quiero es comida.
Ese niño está es enfermo.
Tú trajiste fue una sola maleta nada más.
Mamá tiene que ir es al mercado.

More interestingly, Dominican Spanish permits overt preverbal subjects in non-finite (infinitival and gerundive) clauses, as in (6). The attested subject-infinitive order stands in marked contraposition to that observed in General Latin American Spanish, in which the subject follows the infinitival verb (cf. Toribio 1993a).
(6) Infinitival clause

A la carne se le mezcla limón para usted lavarla.
Mira muchachito, ven acá, para nosotros verte.
Tienes que ir a cambiarle un dinero a estas mujeres antes de ellas irse para
allá.
Ella vive enferma, sin los médicos encontrarle nada.
En tu estando con ella, nada te pasa.

While Henríquez Ureña (1940) reports the preverbal positioning of subjects in
infinitival clauses as possible for the expression of pronouns, it is described by
Jiménez Sabater (1975: 169) as having displaced the canonical postverbal
positioning only three decades later:

propagado ya a aquellos casos en que el infinitivo viene
acompañado de un sustantivo y no de un simple pronombre
como sujeto. Podríamos pensar que se está extendiendo un
esquema ‘sujeto-verbo’ en el cual un orden riguroso de las
palabras (sujeto precediendo al verbo) sería rasgo relevante.

To recapitulate, the linguistic patterns manifest in Dominican Spanish
reveal that it has expanded to encompass phonological rules and grammatical
constructions that are not uniformly reproduced in the dialects of other Latin
American nations today.10 Viewed from a properly linguistic perspective, these
latter observations, which are systematically corroborated (cf. Toribio 1993b,
1996, 1999a, 1999b), suggest that Dominican Spanish is undergoing a shift from
one grammar to another, “un hecho perfectamente explicable dentro de las
posibilidades que ofrece el mismo sistema español” (Jiménez Sabater 1975:
169).11 (Consult Toribio 1999a, 1999b for a syntactic-theoretical account of
intralingual variation.)

2. Dominican Spanish in its social context

Aside from its import to theoretical linguistics, there are additional aspects
of dialectal variation that merit scrutiny. For instance, are speakers aware of
the linguistic novelty? If so, do they have a favorable judgment of the innovations?
Would they abandon the vernacular for a more conservative variety? Are there
any social correlates? Questions such as these were explored in interviews with
Dominicans in the Dominican Republic and in New York in fall of 1998. The
guiding inspiration and motivation for examining these and other affective and
social factors that enter into language loyalty is found in Johnson’s (1998) thesis
on Dominican cultural and racial identity. While that work did not highlight the
nature of the linguistic issues of interest here, the connection between language
and cultural identity, on the one hand, and between language and race, on the
other, was an essential underlying theme.
2.1. Language attitudes and language loyalty

As we saw in Section 1, the Spanish dialect of the Dominican Republic distinguishes itself in significant linguistic respects from the prescribed norm for the Spanish language. This assessment is substantiated in subjective evaluations culled from interviews with Dominicans of diverse backgrounds. The excerpts in (7) attest to Dominicans’ sensitivity to variation and the remarkably low esteem in which the dialect is held:

(7) a. Los dominicanos tenemos el problema que hablamos con faltas ortográficas. . . . Aquí se habla con falta ortográfica, no sólo se escribe, sino que se habla también. (DR#2; upper class male; age 35)

b. Aquí es . . . como decimos allá en los Estados Unidos, es un broke English. . . . No sé por qué los niños no hablan un español mejor que el que hablan, que es tan pobre. (DR#9; middle class male returnee; age 62)

The Dominican vernacular remains stigmatized and aesthetically undervalued, especially among the Dominican middle and upper classes, for lacking certain features of an idealized standard – the Northern Peninsular Castilian variety:

(8) a. Me gusta como hablan los españoles. . . . Para como hablan los españoles y como hablamos nosotros aquí, hay mucha diferencia – Me gusta la forma de ellos hablar, su acento y todo, eso me gusta – ellos tienen más modalidad que uno hablando. (DR#37; middle class male; age 30)

b. El [español] de España es como más fino. La lengua española vino de España, ¿no fue? (DR#29; middle class male; age 54)

c. En España, que es la madre de la lengua española, hablan muy bien el español. (DR#24; middle class male returnee; age 55)

d. El argentino habla muy europeizado, para decirlo así. Tú aquí le dices a alguien, «Vos estáis» y te miran medio raro. (DR#2; upper class male; age 35)

Conversely, specific regional dialects are discounted or disparaged for incorporating other, less agreeable characteristics, namely, those of the Haitian Creole of the neighboring nation:

(9) a. La región que habla mal, que hablan medio cruzado, es en Vaca Gorda, porque ahí son todos prietos.12 Es como la lengua que se les cruza, son gente medio haitianados. (DR#25; working class male; age 70+)

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12. Prieto: Term indicating someone who speaks with a foreign accent or who is not proficient in Spanish.
b. Por aquí en El Rodeo había una descendencia haitiana; en esa área del Rodeo no se hablaba bien el español. Ellos usaban a veces unas palabras dialécticas, que a veces uno mismo ni las entendía, esa misma clase de gente, haitianos, que se mestizaron ahí. Yo recuerdo que a veces ellos hablaban delante de uno y uno no entendía las palabras. (DR#24; middle class male returnee; age 55)

c. Los prietos ronchuses de por allá hablan como jmmpf, ¿no es verdad? Como cosa de bruto. (DR#3; middle class female; age 50+)

In this predilection for the northern Peninsular variety and emphatic disavowing of the inevitable influence of the Haitian Creole, Dominicans affirm their hispanidad, an historical obsession that is part and parcel of the Dominican national endowment (cf. Baud 1996). This favoring of the Peninsular variety – la lengua original y pura – persists in the U.S., where the Dominican dialect is but one of many. As shown in (10), in the linguistic potaje that is New York, Dominican Spanish is characterized as campesino, while other dialects are merely “different.”

(10) a. I think España [speaks Spanish best]; they have an <s> and a good accent. Everybody else speaks Spanish different. (NY#44; working class male; age 15)

b. Dominicans don’t speak Spanish well. I’m not saying that I speak perfect Spanish or perfect English. . . . All you see is Dominicans that are from el campo. Everybody knows right away that they’re Dominicans; you get embarrassed because of those people. (NY#42; working class female; age 30)

c. Si te pasas un día en mi trabajo, te dieres cuenta que la forma de yo hablar es una mezcla de todos los diferentes tipos de razas de países. El problema es que donde yo trabajo es una fachanica y estoy ahí más porque puedo hablar español. Entonces hay muchas personas de diferentes países y cuando llega una persona por decir, de Puerto Rico, pues yo tengo que saber cómo es que ellos hablan y a qué es que ellos se refieren cuando hablan de algo específico. Entonces cuando viene otra persona de, vamos a decir, del Salvador, que hablan también español, yo tengo también que tratar de entenderlos a ellos. Entonces es un trabajo muy interesante. Y la gente me dice, «Pero tú no hablas como los dominicanos.» (NY#45; working class female; age 24)

It is readily apparent from the foregoing excerpts that Dominicans are most conscious of their ‘radical’ pronunciation, especially in view of other highly conservative Latin American varieties, but their lexical regionalisms and syntactic innovations evade self-censure. Thus, as noted by García et al.
(1988: 505), while Dominicans may regularly substitute *casimmente* for *casi* and *ayama* for *calabaza*, the more educated Dominicans “have a more conservative pronunciation, that is, one that follows more closely the orthography of the language.” Moreover, the aforementioned dialectal features (e.g., the overt expletive and reduplicative negation in *Ello no hay mangos no* and the assertive copula represented in *Las mujeres levaban canastas era*) are rarely abandoned, for they simply reflect *el habla dominicana*. In other words, radical pronunciation will identify one as poor and uneducated, whereas particular lexical regionalisms and grammatical constructions merely distinguish one as Dominican (Toribio 2000).

These innovations may appear unsystematic, even deficient, to the untrained ear, but the Dominican dialect is neither. Indeed, as elaborated in Toribio 1993a, 1993b, the variety is both systematic in itself and is also related systematically to the standard. Still, this difference between local vernacular and conservative norm significantly impacts Dominicans in the U.S., where educational policy dictates that only the standard variety of the minority language is taught. Children and adolescents who are exposed to Dominican Spanish at home acquire a variety that is different from the standard modeled by educators. Indeed, the increased presence of Dominicans in the schools has raised difficult questions about the most appropriate means of accommodating the dialect while effectively promoting the school norm. The observation in (11) is offered by an informant who served as an instructor in a trade school in a large Dominican community in the U.S.:

(11) Yo conocí muchachos, que han nacido allá en Estados Unidos, que nunca conocían la República Dominicana y hablaban con una... más fuerte que cualquier gente de un campo de aquí. Ese caso lo vi yo en un muchacho que nació en Lawrence, Massachusetts. Y tú lo oías hablando y tú creías que estaba hablando con un muchacho de cualquier campo de Salcedo, porque los papás eso era lo que hablaban. Y ellos estudiando español en la escuela y estudiando inglés, y hablaban común y corriente como cualquier cibaño, cibaños de los que hablan malo. (DR#28; middle class male returnee; 51)

One solution has been to enroll students in introductory or ‘remedial’ Spanish classes where they can be taught how to speak ‘properly.’ In these classrooms, they are ridiculed by peers who openly demonstrate negative attitudes towards their dialect. They also receive little sympathy from educators who fail to appreciate the ways in which dialects differ or the practical difficulties and familial and community alienation that adopting a normative standard may impose.
(12) Hay gente que dirían, «La hija de Nano vino privando en fisna,18
pronunciando la 's' hasta donde no va», pero no: si tú aprendiste a hablarlo
bien, tú aprendiste. (DR#28: middle class male returnee; age 51)

It is not surprising that many youngsters seek to distance themselves from their
stigmatized language variety, even among in-group peers, reserving the
language for the intimacy and safety of the community and home. In this
situation, language displacement towards English may become an important
option for escaping linguistic prejudice.

2.2. Language vitality: Spanish as an economically viable language in
Dominican enclaves

The observed depreciation of the Dominican dialect by speakers themselves
is at odds with the attested vitality of Dominican Spanish in the U.S. diaspora.
Dominicans are extremely language-retentive, maintaining and advancing the
Dominican Spanish dialect even in the context of other more conservative Latin
American dialects. As the most monolingual of the Hispanic groups in New
York (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990), Dominicans demonstrate extensive
Spanish language usage in the private home domain with family members, as
well as with in-group members such as with friends, classmates, and co-workers,
and in the extended out-group domains of the community (cf. García et al.
1988).

The continued use of the Dominican vernacular is a strong indicator that the
immigrant community considers its language to be an important feature of its
identity, a positive assertion of dominicanidad. (However, this sustained use is
not necessarily a rejection of the negative evaluations that speakers themselves
may harbor.) There are strong affective and instrumental factors that favor
maintenance. The dialect provides a link with their past and with their fellow
speakers abroad, and therefore it helps to promote the group's feeling of unity
and national identity. In other words, the sustained language maintenance among
Dominicans in the diaspora owes in large part to the nature and extent of their
ties with their homeland; they are intensely loyal to their home country - they
are Dominicans first, Latinos second - and for many, return to the homeland is
not a myth, but a mandate.

Substantial numbers of Dominicans were driven to migrate, temporarily,
they supposed, during the state of political turbulence and economic instability
precipitated by the assassination of the ruling dictator, Trujillo, in 1961 (cf.
Wijardi and Kryzanek 1992). Many entered as transient immigrants, and stayed
to find employment, married citizens or resident aliens (the normal route to
legalizing immigrant status), requested additional immigrant visas for family
members, and stayed on (Johnson 1998);
(13) a. Nos fuimos [a los Estados Unidos] buscando un futuro mejor. Mis hijos nacieron allá. (DR#31: middle class female returnee; age 48)

b. Yo me fui para allá porque mis hijos me pidieron. (DR#40, working class female; age 80+)

Today, about one million Dominicans reside in the U.S., concentrated predominantly along the eastern seaboard with an estimated 69% in New York. Dominicans have continued to immigrate in large numbers, at an average of over 22,000 per year between 1990 and 1994 (cf. Lobo and Salvo 1997). These dominicanos ausentes are received into communities that are culturally and linguistically familiar, thereby easing the settlement process (cf. Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998). Dominican presence is especially strongly felt in the social and economic life of Washington Heights in upper Manhattan (variously known as 'Quisqueya Heights,' 'el pequeño Cibao,' and 'el platano'), where in the local bodega, dominicanos can find food stuffs such as casabe and longaniza, gamble on the illegal numbers game, and catch up on island politics, all in their native, regional island vernacular. As described by Suro (1998: 198–199), Washington Heights "was not built as a place where newcomers could start the process of becoming Americans. Instead, the purpose was to allow its inhabitants to become transnationals or simply to remain Dominicans."

In fact, most Dominicans, especially those of the older generations, are never fully integrated into the fabric of U.S. society; instead, they maintain un pie aquí y el otro allá, guarding the hope of returning to the Dominican Republic. And even the younger generations return to the island for regular visits for Holy Week and Christmas, summer vacations, and family weddings and funerals. As a result, they share this Dominican/American identity, "the state of mind that permits them to remain actively linked to life in the native land while also becoming acclimated to the values and norms of the receiving society" (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998: 156).

2.3. Contrasting cultural constructions of race: Language in its separatist function

Despite their notable advances, Dominicans in the U.S. have encountered a great deal of ill-fortune, and the 'American dream' of social advancement and the 'Dominican dream' of rapid return have remained elusive (cf. Guarnizo 1997, Wucker 1999). The great majority continue to toil long hours in blue-collar jobs in factories and service industries, earning just enough to send remittances to relatives left in the Dominican Republic. Their underemployment is variously attributed to a restructuring of New York City's manufacturing sector, high rates of (female) single-parent households, and low levels of English language acquisition (cf. Grassmuck and Pessar 1996). Further augmenting these
disadvantages is the barrier of racial discrimination, which proves especially
disconcerting for Dominican immigrants, who, as noted by Pessar (1997: 144),
“come from a society where to be purely white (which includes most
Dominicans) is to be non-black.”

Indeed, throughout its history, the Dominican Republic has held an
unofficial policy against negritude, and an official policy of affirmation of the
island’s Spanish roots (cf. Baud 1997). The result has been the propagation of
the sentiment that African heritage is negative and shameful and an enforcement
of white supremacy, positions that Dominicans publicly disavow but privately
uphold. In part this denigration of African heritage dates to the war of
independence against Haiti, and to the subsequent Haitian occupation of Santo
Domingo in the early nineteenth century. More recently, the Trujillo
dictatorship, which lasted three decades, further enhanced these racial attitudes
in profound ways. Promoting his ideology of hispanidad, which defined
Dominicans as the most pure Spanish people in the Americas, Trujillo began a
national political effort to save the Dominican nation from ‘Haitianization’ that
lives on today:\footnote{23}

(14) Nosotros perdimos unas elecciones porque al candidato lo acusaron de
haitiano. Lo humillaron, le hicieron de todo. Cuando lo necesitaron para ir
al Club de París a intervenir por República Dominicana con un atraso de
una deuda era blanco y buen mozo, pero cuando quiso ser presidente ya es
prieto y feo y haitiano. Y aquí hay negros, negros, más prietos que el
haitiano... a mí me da pena y vergüenza como pensamos nosotros.
(DR#28; middle class mule returnee; age 51)

Many Dominicans continue to endorse the limpieza de sangre, opposing
Haitian immigration and Dominican-Haitian intermarriage on the grounds that
they threaten the national culture:

(15) a. Usted no quisiera que una hija suya se casaría con un haitiano, porque
vemos la poquedad de ellos, y su color también... Uno no quisiera
que se unan para entonces uno tener esa raza... ¿Racista? No. Es que
¿cómo es que una mujer tan buena moza, de una estatura buena se case
con un haitiano? (DR#3; middle class female; age 50+)

b. Los haitianos... son demasiado brutos, los pobres. Yo no me casaría
con una haitiana, no. Consuma lo nuestro que es mejor que lo
extranjero. Para una haitiana, mejor una americana... es más blanca.
¿Usted sabe lo que es uno casarse con una haitiana? No conviene, no.
(DR#29; middle class male; age 54)

Such anti-Haitian sentiment is frequently given voice by persons in power –
politicians, scholars, and other social critics (cf. Wucker 1999). Haitians are
blamed for all manner of social ills, from low wages and high unemployment, to malaria and syphilis, to overall moral deformity and societal stagnation:

(16) Aquí en el país hay alrededor de un millón de haitianos que viven aquí. Ya los obreros de la construcción en la República Dominicana son haitianos en un ochenta por ciento... los picadores de caña de los ingenios azucarero en un noventa por ciento son haitianos también. Lo que son los trabajos más duros que se hacen actualmente: la caña y la construcción. Pero ¿qué pasa? Eso al mismo tiempo es una mano de obra barata, es una demanda agregada en la economía, pero también representa el atraso de la sociedad dominicana. Mientras aparezca un hombre que trabaje por pocos pesos una jornada de trabajo, una persona nunca va a tener un tractor en el campo, porque esa mano de obra está barata y está ahí. Igual sucede en la construcción: tú siempre vas a ver, durante mucho tiempo hasta que esto no cambie, un hombre con un pico y una pala. (DR#2; upper-class male; age 35)

The national propaganda proved so effective that many Dominicans believed, and continue to believe, that the Haitians were the only blacks on Hispaniola. To cite the historian Moya Pons (1981: 25), “Dominicans perceived themselves as a very special breed of Spaniards, living in the tropics with dark skins.”

Today, light-skinned Dominicans, and even dark-skinned members of the upper class, call themselves ‘white.’ As one upper-class dark-skinned Dominican explained, “blanco es de la mente”:

(17) Cuando aquí se dice que una persona es blanca es no solamente por la tez de la piel, se mira en el grado de astucia, de inteligencia, en la forma de sus pensamientos. Se dice fulano es blanco, piensa como blanco, o sea, que es una persona que no es bruto, que tiene una habilidad de ver las cosas un poquito más allá de la nariz. (DR#2; upper class male; age 35)

The vast majority call themselves mestizo or mulato, though even within these categories, numerous subtle shadings are recognized (e.g. trigueño, grifo, palito claro, indio oscuro, jibaro, canela, moreno).24 This classificatory strategy conflicts with the contrasting conceptions of race in the U.S., where to be partly black is to be non-white, and color ensures social marginalization:

(18) a. We don’t consider ourselves black and we don’t consider ourselves white. White people don’t consider us white, we’re like peach. And the black people consider them brown, so Dominicans are between black, brown, and peach. (NY#41; working class male; age 11)
b. Para los blancos somos al negro... El blanco no distingue entre claros y el negro, sino todo lo conceptúa en el mismo marco. (NY#46; working class male; age 60+)

As a consequence, even the better-educated, lighter-complexioned elite may struggle for day-to-day existence alongside African-Americans in the U.S. As aptly observed by Grasmuck and Pessar (1996: 290), the dilemma arises "when Dominicans with African features or dark skin, regardless of their social sense of self, find themselves identified by many in the United States as Black and are discriminated against on that basis (rather than language, for example), and are often not prepared to interpret discrimination on these grounds."

Just as in the preceding centuries of interaction with their Haitian neighbors, then, Dominicans have sought to firmly distinguish themselves from their African roots and African neighbors. In contemporary U.S. society, this emphasis on *hispanidad* has resulted in a strengthening of the Spanish language among immigrant and U.S.-born Dominicans:

(19) a. Sure, you're Hispanic, but you're considered black – when you talk, they can tell. (NY#42; working class female; age 30)

b. En el habla ya se sabe. Hay negros cubanos y hay de otros países. (NY#46; working class male; age 60+)

For while there exist a number of other markers of identity, such as social group, geography, religion, cultural traditions, and race, for many New York Dominicans language is the most salient. As articulated by one young informant:

(20) La cultura dominicana incluye mucho el idioma. Yo diría que ser dominicano y hablar [español] es importante, por no decir original. El dominicano que no hable [dominicano] puede sentirse igual de orgulloso, pero le falta algo. (NY#45; working class female; age 24)

3. Conclusion

To conclude, language loyalty in the Dominican diaspora is a strong indicator that the Dominican dialect is an important feature of Dominican ethnic identity. For although it may not be a full-fledged linguistic variety to which overt prestige is ascribed, the Dominican dialect enjoys a considerable measure of covert prestige as a symbol of national or group identity: it serves a unifying and separatist function, binding Dominicans to their Hispanic past and isolating them from their African and African-American neighbors.
Notes

1. This work draws on several primary sources. Preliminary speech samples were collected in the Dominican Republic in 1992 by the author, and additional data was gathered in New York in 1997 by Kimann Johnson. In 1998, the author again traveled to the Dominican Republic and New York to complete more extensive interviews for a larger study of Dominican Spanish; data was collected from 46 speakers in diverse geographical regions. The language samples presented in Section 1 are drawn principally from the 1992 data set, and those in Section 2 from the more recent interviews conducted in 1998. This research was generously funded by the Faculty Research Assistance Program and the Academic Senate of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

2. The donde is a locative, functionally equivalent to Italian da and French chez.

3. Of these forms, the lateral liquid of the capitaleño carries the greatest cultural and political capital, as expected, and the northwestern cibañeo pronunciation the least. As one informant acknowledges, “El capitaleño se mofa del cibañeo hasta en las comedias por la <i>. Cae gracioso. . . . En la televisión te ponen un cibañeo y le ponen la <i>, y te hace reír. [Y la <i> no?] No . . . la <i> no. . . . Quizás sean los cheques de la capital.”

4. The two-step process is as follows: the segment loses its supralaryngeal features and only the aspiration remains, and then the consonant slot is lost altogether.

5. More precisely, the /s/ is velarized in syllable rhymes (cf. Harris 1983). The segment fails to undergo the customary assimilation of place features; it is rendered as the velar nasal, save in the context of labial consonants, to which it assimilates.

6. In most tenses and moods, the loss of syllable-final /s/ has resulted in the convergence of second and third persons; in the imperfect and conditional, first, second, and third persons are rendered homophonous.

7. Many researchers have tried to relate the null subject property to rich verbal inflection, pointing out that languages such as (General Latin American) Spanish have an agreement system which is quite complex, whereas languages such as English have one which is very poor. Chomsky (1981) suggests that in null subject languages, Agreement in Infl makes it possible to recover the information made unavailable by the fact that the subject is phonetically missing. Elaborating, Rizzi (1982) proposes that the characteristic property of null subject languages is that their verbal inflection is specified with a feature [+pronom], i.e., it has clitic-like pronominal properties. In this mode of inquiry, Lipski (1977) proposes that the Spanish subject pronoun cliticizes onto the verb, recovering the person and number features that may be lost by the weakening of verbal agreement. Such an account, fails, however, since these subject pronouns do not demonstrate the behavior common to clitics. For example, as noted by Suter and Lizardi (1995), these pronouns can be separated from the verb by negation. In addition, unlike clitics which are, by definition, unstressed, pronouns such as nosotros and ustedes must be stressed.

8. By some accounts, it is the paucity of inflectional distinctions which has caused the retention of subject pronouns as a means of identifying the subject of the verb (cf. Hochberg 1986). However, the diversity of inflectional systems that license null subjects makes clear the difficulty of arriving at an adequate notion of inflectional richness (cf. Toribio 1993b, 1999b).
9. It merits pointing out that null subject pronouns are indeed available to the speakers sampled; within one speaker’s speech there are segments that are replete with overt referential subject pronouns, whereas others contain very few, and the overt ello appears in only a subset of the contexts where it is theoretically possible. Such intradialectal variability is central to the syntactic-theoretical analysis proffered in Toribio 1993b, 1999a.

10. One might conjecture that these innovations reflect the lasting contribution of the African languages that were carried to the Caribbean region. However, Lipinski (1994: 133) presents extensive data which “suggests that no major innovation in pronunciation, morphology or syntax in Latin American Spanish is due exclusively to the former presence of speakers of African languages or of any form of Afro-Hispanic language, creole or otherwise.” And speaking specifically to the continued contact with the Haitian creole of the adjoining nation, Lipinski (1994: 237) states, “the impact of Haitian Creole on Dominican Spanish is largely confined to the rural border region, and to life on the sugar plantations.”

11. Although not presenting an analysis for this change, Jiménez Sábaté (1975: 168) cautions against attributing the influence to linguistic contact with English:

Es de dudarse que estemos ante un fenómeno de interferencia del inglés o de ninguna otra lengua extranjera. Un rasgo morfosintáctico tan característico difícilmente habría podido calar de modo tan profundo en una masa analfabeta como la de nuestro país, donde predomina, antes bien, el arcaísmo castellano – o la evolución de tendencias lingüísticas natamente hispánicas – y en la que apenas se cuentan escasos préstamos léxicos de otros idiomas, por oposición a lo que sucede con otras zonas antillanas como Puerto Rico en donde también es corriente este orden de palabras.

12. Prieto is a descriptor, typically used as a term of endearment, but also used derogatorily, for a person with dark skin.

13. We would be remiss not to invoke historical memory at this juncture: in 1937 the national military was mobilized to the western frontier, where soldiers were ordered to kill as many Haitians as they could find; these ‘offending’ Haitians were identified by their inability to offer a native Dominican pronunciation of the word perejil – the assumption being that the uvular trill of Creole speech would reveal the speaker’s Haitian identity. Such maneuvers remain in place (cf. Toribio 2000).

14. This participant’s pronunciation and syntactic constructions were the most demonstrative of dialectal leveling.

15. Several of the New York informants indicated that when they spoke Spanish, they were regarded as poor and uneducated, but when they spoke English, their pronunciation betrayed them only as Hispanic: the clear implication is that Dominicans, among all Hispanics, are most disadvantaged. This finding is consonant with those of García et al. (1988).
16. However, Dominicans' self-conscious evaluation of their pronunciation over other linguistic properties does not correspond to the assessments of other Hispanic groups towards the Dominican vernacular. Many of the phonological features (e.g., the /r/-reduction and /u/-velarization) may resonate with speakers from other Latin American nations, who signal the lack of inversion in questions and the overuse of subject pronouns as uniquely Dominican; in fact, this propensity for overt preverbal subject pronouns has earned Dominicans the appellation of "Joe's" (yo's), as argued by one informant.

17. These linguistic differences, or more accurately peer and teacher attitudes towards these distinguishing linguistic characteristics, probably play an important part in the educational underperformance of many Dominican students. See Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998 and Grasmuck and Pessar 1996 for interpretations of the 1990 U.S. Census data on academic achievement.

18. *Privar en fina,* or 'to put on airs' with an epenthetic [s].


20. The characteristics of these Dominican communities coincide with those of the specific Dominican residents within its boundaries. To quote one informant (DR#33, middle class male returnee, age 62), "Aquí hay sitios que uno va a Nueva York y sabe de dónde son esa gente, de una parte de Santiago, de Jánico, de San José de las Matas. Desde que uno habla con unas de esas personas uno sabe que son de por ahí."

21. In the 1990 census, 50% of Dominicans in New York City identified themselves as mulatto or other and 25% self-identified as black. Grasmuck and Pessar (1996) note that skin color is a significant predictor of poverty, with black and mulatto Dominicans suffering higher poverty levels than white Dominicans.

22. As stated by Torres-Saillant and Hernández (1998: 4-5), "The fact that Dominican independence, the formal emergence of Dominicans as a people, occurred as a separation from the black republic of Haiti, and that racial self-differentiation has subsequently been used in nationalist discourse, has added levels of complexity to the racial identity of Dominicans, inducing in the population a reticence to affirm their own blackness openly despite the overwhelming presence of people of African descent in the country."

23. Though Dominicans disclaim charges of racism, the correlation between privilege and race is evident, and recent incidents of racial violence between Dominicans and immigrant Haitians have forced many to reevaluate the issue of race. However, discussions of race remain a somewhat taboo topic among Dominicans (cf. Cambeira 1997, Sorensen 1997).

24. These are buttressed by reference to related desirable or undesirable physical characteristics, e.g., hair textures and size of the nose, lips, hips, and buttocks.

25. This struggle to define themselves in terms of difference from Haitians at home has led to conflicts in relations with African-Americans abroad. This theme is further developed in Toribio 2000.
References


