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LANGUAGE AS A FUNDAMENTAL SIGN OF PUERTO RICANNESS

According to those who have studied the relationship that exists between a people's speech and the fundamental essence displayed by the instrument of expression that a nationality uses to communicate, language becomes, in basic ways, an honest and clear reflection of the community of speakers' own way of being and developing. In absolute terms, a people and its particular linguistic system mutually conform and feed each other. Collectively, the nation's speakers make their language their effigy, and the language, in turn and in its own way, molds the way of being, thinking, feeling and acting by the natural members of that society. This rule, which we now keep in mind, is fulfilled fully in the case of our Puerto Rican nationality. The Spanish language, which is natural to us as children of this land, is the language through which we communicate to the world our being as Spanish and Spanish-American, this language interwoven with our characteristic ingredients from the Caribbean and New World land where we were born - with its indigenous, African, and island contributions in form and meaning. This language, I repeat, dressed in the internal and external laws of its physical context with the vital substance that infuses our individual and collective ways of being rooted in the same territory, this native land, the location where God has chosen for us to see the light for the first time. And in our peculiar and personal way, as individuals and as a nation, it is transubstantiated and translated by phonetic currents, morphological and syntactic, lexicography and of phraseology, in the limited surroundings of our island nation and in the geographic surroundings of the external world beyond our coasts with which we draw, through words, the conceptions of our daily reality and the reality that transcends the space and time where we find ourselves.

The time we have been developing the Spanish that is used daily in spoken use and transmuted in the work of art, poured onto the written page destined for the presses, is still brief. The five hundred years of history we will be commemorating next November, in the course of the years and centuries that began with the transplant of our Spanish from the Iberian shore of the Atlantic to the Antillean shore on this side of the ocean, has given birth, with the replanting on American soil, to new directions of evolution in time. These directions have allowed it to continue growing and developing in the mold of universal access to the main unit, in those minority influences that represent vital parts of its own expressive dynamic personality, but whose transcendence, without working against the future of the marvelous Spanish language that we have in common across the expanse of two worlds, contributes, in turn, to the essence of new qualities and reflections of light in the course of its evolution.

During the half a millennium of Puerto Rican linguistic history that we are about to complete, the first two centuries of colonization - the 16th and 17th - were the foundational era of dialectical principles on Caribbean soil that would predominate, at least in the pronunciation of terms of Spanish origin. The duality of the phonetic revolution caused by the Reconquest in Spain and the resettlement of new territories that were slowly taken from the power of the Moors, new ways of articulating the Castilian language spread from Seville

to the geographic areas of Andalusia recently freed from the Arabs. This Spanish of Andalusia was exported, early on, to the islands and continental coasts in the Americas across the Atlantic where the conquest made its first historic steps under the power of Castile and Leon. Sheltered by Spanish settlers mainly from Andalusia during the early era of Spanish colonization, the new forms of Spanish were planted in the Atlantic: the "seseo" pronunciation of "z" or "c," the conversion of "s" at the end of a syllable or word into an aspirated "h," and the opening before the "h," the use of the old aspiration of the "h" - which in old Castilian was silent - instead of the new "j" that was used in central and northern Spain, but not in Andalusia, the vulgar exchange of the "r" and the "l" at the end of the interior syllable and at the end of the word, and, finally, the pronunciation of the "ll." Thus, since the beginnings of the Spanish colonial centuries, the Spanish that was transplanted to the Caribbean territories came to respond more closely in its pronunciation to the norms of Seville than to Toledo or Madrid. This phonetic speech of Andalusia would have to conform in Antillean use with the arrival in the 16th and 17th centuries, but continuing and growing stronger in the 18th and 19th centuries, of colonizers from the Canary Islands, where the language that was re-established beginning in the 15th century is also predominately from Andalusia, because the expeditions that repopulated these islands that Spain made its own in the Atlantic near the coasts of Africa came from the ports of Andalusia. These colonizers from the Canaries, "islanders," as they were called here and in other parts of the tropical Americas, also brought with them to our islands the echoes of their own particular lexicon. The Spanish of the Canary Islands was, early on, pronounced like that of Andalusia, but its vocabulary was not traced mainly to Andalusia, but rather to the tendency to name things in ways that were molded in the Canary Islands.

To be able to understand and accurately estimate how deeply embedded in the soul of Hispanics in general and the Spanish Caribbean in particular are the roots of our Spanish and Spanish-American linguistic essence - the nuclei of fundamental support of our linguistic lineage of Puerto Ricanness - we must examine, from the specific point of view of vocabulary, how perfectly daily speech fits within the framework of Spanish expression in the Caribbean. The Caribbean extends from the islands - our Greater Antilles - to the coasts of our brother countries on "*Tierra Firme*," the name that was given early on during colonial times to the continental territories along the Antillean archipelago in equatorial and Central America.

Under the unity presented by our Spanish language, through its vast reign across two worlds, each member nation in the Spanish-speaking community shows important essences of its being and differentiating natures through the wide variety of lexical usages native to each national or regional land. In the case of the Spanish that was transplanted and developed in the Indies, the richness that has come to make up the distinctive uses of the spoken and written word in our times - the Americanisms, as we call them today - insert in important ways the characteristic and characterizing index of expression that is exclusively ours, with the multiple frameworks of Spanish nationalities on this side of the Atlantic. For various historical reasons, however, the trend toward variation in this aspect of Antillean lexicography that shows itself in the numerous divergences from country to country, has long been countered by a defined propensity toward a shared destiny that leads us to share many features from the vast number of words that are more correctly called Americanist in the regions that can be grouped together - based on the community of linguistic use - in the brother countries of the Spanish American world. This, for example, can be seen from the beginning of the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean region.

From the original center of the Spanish of the Indies, the base of dispersion and the center of political-administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical and cultural prestige, located in the Antillean city of Santo Domingo de Guzmán, spread through all the territories later colonized in the Caribbean Basin, both on the islands and on the continent, the first gathering of defined Americanisms: sounds such as *hato*, *estancia*, *encomienda*, *encomendero*, *mazamorra*, *quebrada*,

etc., that represented the adaptation of old Castilian words to the realities of new lands or other words gathered from the islands' indigenous languages -- *sabana, seboruco, conuco, barbacoa, aja, casabe, naboria, or naboría*, etc., and others, such as *canoas, bohío, cacique, iguana, hamaca, tabaco, maíz, and huracán*, that would become incorporated into general Spanish. Or, some of the African words used earlier in the New World, such as *ñame, guineo, monicongo, manicongo or congo, mariagola, guarapo*, etc. Those words have almost all been preserved to today in Spanish Caribbean speech, many of them, as is natural, with varying force from one country to another in their modern form. It may be the case, for example, that *hato*, which continues to be a living reality in rural use in the Venezuelan plains, only continues in Puerto Rico in rural and urban municipal names -- *Hato Rey, Hato Tejas, Hatillo*, etc. -- as an empty vestige of the active meaning, mute testimony to the old times of the Spanish colonial past.

As seen from the examples above, there are three currents that operated *ab initio* on the innovation of the vocabulary of early Spanish in the Caribbean: first, the use of old words from the Iberian peninsula -- Castilian, western, sailing terms, military words, etc. -- to describe similar things in the colonial setting, along with the derivation of new terms from pre-existing Spanish voices and the creation of original names through figurative language; second, the assimilation of indigenous words from the islands (and, later, also from the continent), as well as words from the lips of African slaves and their early descendants on the islands. Soon, from the colonies in the 16th century, the influence would be felt in our Caribbean lands of the immigrants from the Canary Islands who began to settle among us in huge numbers.

The Canary way of speech in island and continental territories of the Spanish Caribbean would come to constitute, over time, one of the main points of our local way of communication in the Americas, weaving together the islands and the continental areas with new ties of dialectical unity that were specifically ours. A study clearly shows that countless words in the Atlantic archipelago came from there. Old Spanish words whose use today is in decline were preserved in the Canary insular use -- *hoya or rehoya, abra, cabañuelas, cuadril, pasmo, rehundir, amañarse, sancocho, zagalejo*, etc. Also, terms of Portuguese and western Spanish origin in the islands, some of them with sailing origins -- *banda, furnia, chubasco, hacio, or hacióto, virazón, burga(d)o, matojo, aguaviva, chola, cielo de la boca, botar, fañoso, gago, gamba(d)o, enjillarse or enjillirse, engo(d)arse, manguarse, jiribilla, desinquietao, frangollo, millo, mojo or mojito, lasca, bochinche* and derivations. Other usages from the Canary Islands, developed formally or semantically from the local lexicon that would take on other meanings in our Caribbean lands: *terrero, tabaiba, apalastrarse, tonino, sanano, gofio, tirijala, pastel*, "a typical Christmas dish," etc. Of special importance and interest in the Antillean and general Caribbean vocabulary, inherited from the Canary Islands, are the multiple words related to the old ways of making sugar in presses and cockfighting. Both activities were imported from the islands, the former in the 16th century and the latter in the 18th century. Beyond mere isolated mentions, the linguistic influence of the Canary Islands on our speech in Puerto Rico, the Antilles and the Caribbean appears in the links between general Spanish and usages more typical of the archipelago: *un bando de una partida de, una de, un cacho de* (or, as an exclamatory, *¡qué cacho de...!*, *cerrarse* (someone) *de negro, coger or tener fundamento, ir cayendo* (someone in something), *pegar con*, (a person), *venir siendo* (someone in relation to the parentage of another person), *ir a tener, dar bandazos or barquinazos, estar a rey*. With these expressions -- words and phrases -- the ear and the soul have been nurtured by the mother language in these American tropical latitudes -- Antillean Venezuelan and Colombian on the coast -- flood us with vital resonances of situations, actions and feelings underlined in daily life.

The first registry of lexicological Americanisms published by Antonio de Alcedo¹ in 1786-1789 allows us today to have an idea of a substantial part of the regional vocabulary that was used commonly in the last decades of the 18th century in Cartagena de Indias, where the author was settled, with explanations of usages in a variety of cases from New Granada to Quito (where Alcedo came from) and from Peru. Also, a large number of words that the

author cites are words from the early days of Spanish in the Antilles, which makes it possible today to reconstruct and fully consider, based on Alcedo's data, a wide pan-Caribbean picture of community expression, with particular reference to the linguistic aspect of the words, which already existed two centuries earlier, with roots that unquestionably reach back to the earliest colonial history in our lands. The writer's reports tend to focus first on the important fact that the Spanish of the Caribbean islands and the neighboring continental territories preserves the legacy of indigenous words with insular Arawak roots. The most general words in American usage that Alcedo notes are mostly regional Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban words that appear in the historical texts from the late 15th century and others that do not appear in those ancient papers, but have remained part of the Antillean lexicon, such as those related to the flora and its fruits and other products: *ají, bejuco, cabuya, caimito, caoba, capá, ceiba, corozo, guanábana, guayaba, hácana, hicacos, jeníquén* or "*henequen*," *jobo, maguey, maíz, mamey, mangle, maní, moniato, papaya, pita, pitahaya, tabaco*; to the fauna: *carey, comején, jején, hicotea, iguana, manatí, nigua*; names of miscellaneous domestic and personal items: *batea, canoa, hamaca, macana*; food, *cazabe*; and the land, *sabana*. This list allows us to appreciate the number of words of pre-Spanish origin that circulated in the Spanish of Puerto Rico and the Antilles, as well as other territories of the Spanish Caribbean, in the final decades of the 18th century.

Another aspect of vocabulary noted by Alcedo that is characteristic of the Caribbean tropical Americas is the series of terms that we call our own *criollismos*, or original expressions with Spanish roots that have developed specifically Antillean forms and meanings in the daily life of the islands, many of them still in use today in our national societies. The writer often paused in his descriptions to offer us colorful looks at the local customs in the tropical zones of the Americas. Among these words, some still refer to distant medieval usages in Castile, a continent and content unchanged by time, such as *prieto*, "the same as the color black," but for the most part these words are true recreations or revisions of speech from the particularities of life on this side of the Atlantic at that time. There were various references to racial classification in a society that was continuously in the process of fusing three distinct ethnicities: *cuarterón, quinterón, salta atrás, tente en el aire, zambo*. Also preserved was the word *cimarrón*, born in the 16th century to describe a slave that flees his owner. In reference to clothing, there were terms such as *chamarreta*, "a certain kind of jerkin with sleeves," and *listadillo*, "cotton handkerchief commonly with blue and white stripes." For fauna, there were names such as *aquililla*, "a light horse," a word that Navarro Tomás found was still used in rural Puerto Rico in 1927-28; *picaflor*, "hummingbird," *zancudo*, "a certain kind of mosquito," etc. For flora, there were various words such as: *coco* and the derivative *cocada*, "a sweet made from shredded coconut and sold by blacks in the streets"; the American phrase *palo santo* for "lignam vitae," *palmito* "edible heart of the palm," *piña, plátano*, with this latter word referring to the plantain fruit still called the same thing today as well as additional allusions to other banana-like fruits, "a species of plantains that are distinguished by names such as *bananos, guineos, dominicos* and *cambures*," etc. The African lexicon is represented in Alcedo's registry by words such as *zambo, bananos, cambures*, mentioned above, as well as others such as *congo*, "caste of blacks," *guarapo*, "a common drink made of cane juice," *malaqueta*, "Tabasco pepper," *moteta, ñame* or *iñame*, "the edible root," and *patilla*, "watermelon."

The fact that each country put its own seal on the on the huge number of words that circulated in the island and coastal territories of the Caribbean Basin would have to conform later with other lexical references of the Spanish of Cuba, particularly the *Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces cubanas* that Esteban Pichardo would publish in several editions beginning in 1836. Works of the past century, such as that by Pichardo, confirm the appearance of a way of speaking from the pan-Caribbean soul that, under the equalizing force imposed by general Spanish, shows in reality a unifying or quasi-unifying form of expression in the common lexicographical usage in our geographic region of the Spanish Caribbean.

Our living and latent spirit of Puerto Ricanness, a lasting and irrevocable sign of the Spanish-speaking people, despite the disorganizing designs by certain politicians today, is based on the path of history on a valuable accumulation of experiences of speaking a language of immense universal prestige. The nobility of that language, proven over the years and centuries, requires from all of us today a willingness to love, to be loyal to, and to defend our deep roots as a people and a nation.

Of the mother language, Gabriela Mistral has said and written: "Speech is our second possession, after the soul, and it may be that we have no other possession in this world."

FOOTNOTES

¹In "Vocabulary of the Provincial Voices of the Americas," included in the *Geographic Dictionary of the West Indies*, Madrid, 5 Vols. 1786-1789.