

Linguistic Genocide Through Education

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What makes a human being unique? Is it the way we look or the different ways our mind operates? Whatever it is, all aspects are important, and they carry a distinctiveness that composes an identity worth protecting. The world is always changing and is always forcing us to change, especially when it comes to language which can be defined as our system of communication and an imperative component of the human identity. Currently and globally, language has become borderless and significant.

On a large scale, there are over 6,000 known spoken languages in the world (this number does not include different language dialects) that span across more than 200 countries (Hinton, 2001). However, different spoken languages have not always been commonly accepted, especially during the centuries of the establishment of the United States. To be more specific, the founding government of the United States embarked on a “linguistic genocide” for more than 200 years by conquering foreign lands (Okazaki & Teeter, 2009). Most commonly, the United States imposed many English-only language laws that forcibly shifted the current education system to the American education system and became a key tool the United States utilized to deculturalizing indigenous nations. Language can act as a gateway to stripping a person’s identity or as Hinton (2001) puts it, “Language is the key to and the heart of culture” (p. 9). Once that key is attained anything is possible. Throughout the centuries, many countries and ethnic groups had been occupied by the United States including those of the Hawaiian Islands and Puerto Rico, and throughout this paper, I will discuss how both suffered an inevitable language loss and how after all the iniquity caused by the United States, both groups rose up and fought for their native tongues by developing long lasting language revitalization programs for younger generations.

Since the late eighteenth century, Hawaii has grown to become a language mixing pot. The discovery of Hawaii by the English explorer Captain James Cook in 1778 opened a destructive door for colonial forces to enter Hawaii and within less than one hundred years have entire control of the Hawaiian Islands (Okazaki & Teeter, 2009). Native Hawaiians were powerless and endured many land and cultural losses, but their prime loss was the declination of their population. When Captain Cook first arrived, Native Hawaiians reached a population of more than one million, however, by 1920 that number reduced to 24,000 due to disease, infanticide, mass murder, and war. When an indigenous population decreases rapidly they lose so many significant aspects that can damage their future as a group which in the Hawaiian's case their native language of Hawaiian suffered tremendously.

By 1893, United States officials had already entered Hawaii, took control of the Islands, began developing military bases, overthrew the Hawaiian Monarch, and annexed Hawaii to the United States. Primarily white businessmen and U.S. government officials controlled Hawaii, and all Native Hawaiians had to submit to those in power. The U.S. government then forcibly replaced the Hawaiian language with English and stated that, “[English] is to be the medium of instruction in schools as well as communication for all government business” (Okazaki & Teeter, 2009, p. 11). The Hawaiian language was prohibited from being used and taught in schools and in the outside community. Anybody caught or exposed of speaking Hawaiian were physically punished and dealt with by governmental officials. Children were humiliated by their fellow peers or punished by white schoolteachers if they spoke Hawaiian, and older Hawaiian language speakers could not pass down the language to younger generations. By 1978, the recorded amount of Native Hawaiian speakers fell to 2,000. Colonization took a horrendous toll on the

Hawaiian language and forced speakers to hide underground and allow their once beautiful, growing language to slowly die out.

The beginning of the 1970's marked the Hawaiian Renaissance where Hawaiian language and culture, including hula, began to submerge from underground associations. A younger generation of native Hawaiians saw the urgent need to restore its dying language, culture, and land. Many education systems excluded the teachings of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Monarch and emphasized American values and ideals instead.

“The Renaissance was led by musicians such as the Sons of Hawai'i, Gabby Pahinui and Hui 'Ohana, scholars such as Mary Kawena Pukui, kumu hula George Na'ope (founder of the Merrie Monarch Festival), navigator Nainoa Thompson and others seeking to perpetuate and advance traditional Hawaiian knowledge and culture. The renaissance also would lead to the resurrection of the Hawaiian language” (Tsai, 2009, para. 11).

Young local Hawaiians and Japanese began to learn newer modern forms of hula and Hawaiian songs and inspired some to run and win seats in 1978 in the Hawaii State Constitutional Convention. “There they proposed constitutional mandates for the teaching of the Hawaiian language, history, and culture in all public schools, and for the recognition of Hawaiian as an official language [in Hawaii] along with English” (Okazaki & Teeter, 2009, p. 11). This stepping-stone for Hawaiians opened new doors and opportunities to possibly save their language and culture from complete extinction. The next step was not clear but forced many Hawaiian locals to consider regaining power of their education system once again.

Encouragement began to seep into some Hawaiian language educators, and after hearing about a newly developed Maori language immersion preschool, those educators established a non-profit organization entitled, 'Aha Pūnana Leo. The schools overall goal was to, “revitalize

and perpetuate the Hawaiian language and culture through the creation of a new generation of native Hawaiian-speaking children” (Okazaki & Teeter, 2009, p. 11). These schools immersed children from grades K-12 completely in the Hawaiian language and schools grew from one program to more than twelve statewide within a matter of years. Hawaiian educators were always thinking of new ways to reverse the terrible language shift that once took place within Hawaii, and many knew that full immersion was necessary for children to grasp on to the language and culture. According to Hinton (2001), “The most successful school-based language revitalization programs often create separate schools bypassing the main stream public school system altogether in order to have sufficient power to do culturally appropriate language teaching” (p. 10).

In 2002 Kalena Silva, head of the College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawaii-Hilo stated in the “Honolulu Advertiser,”

“There are about 220 children at the 11 Pūnana Leo preschools in the state. Another 1,000 to 2,000 have become fluent by taking classes in college or through other programs...a good conservative estimate is about 5,000, but the whole demographic have changed. Almost all the speakers are under [the age of] 50” (Wilson, 2002, paras. 11-14).

Although the number of native Hawaiian speakers has become exceedingly low compared to the 1800’s, the amount of speakers still continues to grow.

The Hawaiian revitalization movement grew to become known as one of the most successful models of language revival worldwide. Along with the success of the Hawaiian immersion programs, public schools were mandated to teach a course on the history of Hawaii and introduced a Kūpuna program, which allowed Kūpuna or elders to visit schools weekly for thirty minutes and discuss Hawaiian music, provide history, traditions, culture, and even

Hawaiian cosmology to students. Hawaii suffered indecent linguistic genocide caused by the United States, but they were able to overcome all problems and save their almost lost language. “Any community that has an immersion school in mind must realize that it will entail years of legal wrangling and figuring out ways to comply with all the local and state regulations. But it can be done—” (Hinton, 2001, p. 9). Hawaii’s efforts paid off significantly, and across America in the Atlantic Ocean, the small country of Puerto Rico would similarly have to try as well.

Hawaii was not the only civilization that was conquered and colonized by the United States. Many indigenous nations endured the robust occupations made by the U.S., and while Hawaii and others were fighting for their rights, so was Puerto Rico. The small autonomous country became a colony of the United States in 1898 at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War (Spring, 1994). Within months, U.S. forces entered Puerto Rico, built military bases, and implemented a new American education system. This education system first replaced the official language of instruction from Spanish to English, and then, forcibly introduced children to U.S. culture. According to Spring (1994), “[The] U.S. education policy emphasized building loyalty to the U.S. flag and institutions and implementing a process of deculturalization” (p. 28). By the year 1900, the first U.S. commissioner of education in Puerto Rico began the process of Americanization in Puerto Rican schools, and many procedures would soon begin to shift young Puerto Rican children allegiances from their home country to the United States. People cannot automatically gain the culture of the dominating group by learning the required language and as, “Frank V. Thompson argued that simply imposing language would not bring about Americanization,” (Baron, 1990, p. 138) which is exactly what American educators knew and would cumulate.

Schools brought in teachers who only spoke English thus replacing Puerto Rican teachers and/or forcing them to learn English as well. An American flag was given to every school where raising the U.S. flag was used to signal the beginning of the school day. Students were taught American national songs such as, “America,” “Hail Columbia,” and the “Star-Spangled Banner” (Spring, 1994). Students were forced to say the “Pledge of Allegiance” where their allegiance was shifted to the U.S. Later, national holidays such as the Fourth of July or President George Washington’s birthday became part of the allegiance-shift process. “Schools were told to impress on students Washington’s ‘noble traits and broad statesmanship’” (p. 33) to show students how Americans should be, thus meaning how Puerto Rican students should act. Slowly young, elementary aged students were transforming their views and patriotism from Puerto Rico to the United States.

Years went by before Puerto Rican teachers began speaking out about the education and language issue imposed by the U.S. “In 1912, Puerto Rican teachers organized the Teachers Association (TA) to resist the policies of the commissioner of education” (p. 35). The organization made many attempts and requests that Spanish be the language of instruction in schools with English taught as a subject. The TA wanted students to thrive in the Spanish language and regain control of their education systems. Although mostly teachers took part in resistance to the United States, many students did their best to get involved and save their heritage and language. One student, “Francisco Grovas was expelled [from school] for collecting signatures to support legislation that would require Spanish to be the language of instruction in Puerto Rican schools” (p. 35-36). Another protest for independence took place in 1921 during a graduation ceremony at a high school where a student began waving the Puerto Rican flag and others cheered. A wave of protests were seen as a possible chance that could lead to

independence for Puerto Rico, however, in 1921 that would change with the new commissioner of education in office.

Juan B. Huyke was the first appointed Puerto Rican as the commissioner of education. Although Puerto Ricans believed he would help change the education system and guide followers to independence in schools, Juan was the complete opposite. He favored assimilation with the United States and considered Puerto Rico to be “as much a part of the United States as is Ohio or Kentucky” (p. 36). Huyke resisted any attempts made by the TA for Spanish to be the language of instruction in schools and even required that high school seniors pass an oral English exam in order to graduate. School newspapers had to be written in English-only, and any teachers who were unwilling or able to use English only in schools were forced to resign. Huyke required much that would further force patriotism from Puerto Rico to the U.S. leading the TA and students to act out in firmer resistance. Protests broke out all across Puerto Rico, and university students, along with professors, made many protest marches. Students were expelled and professors either resigned or were released from their positions. Huyke addressed these people as being “aggressively anti-American” (p. 37), however, with the increasing amount of protests over school policies, Puerto Ricans would soon receive help from the next commissioner of education.

In 1930, Jose Padín was appointed commissioner of education by President Hoover and sought to resolve the issues with educational systems in Puerto Rico (Morris, 1995). Thus in 1934 the Padín Reform was implemented which once again allowed Spanish to be the sole medium of instruction in upper elementary schools. Many Puerto Ricans were overwhelmed and praised Padín for his support with the Spanish language. Although schools still used English textbooks, teachers were able to begin teaching Spanish in public schools. This was not the first

achievement made by the TA and their supporters. “On October 30, 1950, President Truman signed the Puerto Rican Commonwealth Bill... Commonwealth status gave Puerto Ricans greater control of their school systems; consequently, Spanish was restored in the schools” (Spring, 1994, p. 38).

Much success was obtained by Puerto Ricans for their school systems though they endured years of oppression and forced U.S. policies, and “When language restrictions are enacted [people’s] basic constitutional rights are trampled, it produces ethnic strife, and sabotages educational programs” (Crawford, 1990, p. 14). Puerto Ricans did not have the same constitutional rights as normal U.S. citizens (even after they were granted U.S. citizenship) so colonizing their homeland was easy for U.S. forces. Puerto Ricans fought for their race and ethnicity, culture, and heritage, especially to keep those aspects alive in the hearts of their children, and as I explained, educational programs were devoted for deculturalization rather than the education of students.

One question I pondered while writing this paper and still cannot fathom is what importance does English hold in society that the native Hawaiians would lose more than 90% of their speakers to it, that in Puerto Rico the U.S. would force English-only rules in schools, and that today, more than 316 million people speak English as a first language and another 300 million use it as a second language (Baron, 1990) while the numbers are still growing? Why do millions of people value English rather than their native language? Why do Americans such as James Crawford (1990) think that English needs legal protection?

Many times I have posed the question, “Why did you want to learn English?” to International students, and many times are their responses similar to others, “I want to get a better job in the U.S., or I know English will open more doors of opportunities for me.” Many

believe that learning English will bring more success and opportunities than other languages, but does learning, knowing, and speaking English always guarantee the promises it silently makes to first or second language learners? According to Baron (1990), “Research has shown that Hispanics who have become monolingual English speakers are not reaping the promised benefits of assimilation. Their competence in English does not readily translate into increased salaries and greater job opportunities” (p. 23). Millions of Americans speak English with perfection, but a great percentage of them live on the streets and cannot get a job. They speak English so where is their reward?

A man I have always looked up to is my Mexican grandfather David Montaña (Dah-veed Moan-tahn-yo, although he pronounces it Day-vid Mon-ta-no). He was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and moved to the U.S. when he was seven years old in 1948. He began school without any knowledge of the English language and fell short many times in his new school. His school’s language of instruction was English-only, and as he thrived in school he forced himself to speak only English. After graduating school, he could not find much in the work force and was denied acceptance into colleges he applied for. My grandfather was a dark man and (for a while) spoke with a strong Spanish accent. Even though he rarely spoke Spanish his accent stood with him, and as he grew older, he tried endless amounts of time to rid his accent from his speech.

After doing time in the United States Navy, my grandfather decided once more to apply for colleges in dentistry. However, instead of putting Montaña on his application for his last name, he simply put Montano (the ‘ñ’ is a Spanish letter in the alphabet). He was granted entrance to a college in Boston and flourished as a student. He told me, “My professors didn’t expect me to pass. They told me, ‘David, you probably won’t make it through.’ They said not many Hispanics can handle it all.” But he did pass, and he went on to more schools and in 1980,

he opened his own dental laboratory. He achieved what many people think English will do for them, but all rewards come with consequences. As I grew up, I always thought my grandfather was a *gringo* (a white man) because he talked so “white and proper.” He never spoke Spanish around me, and now when I try speaking Spanish to him he can barely remember how to put a sentence together. Yes, he accomplished what American English promises, but it came with a price. Only when my grandfather learned English did he grasp some kind of American identity or as Schildkraut (2005) wrote, “Only when one internalizes an American identity—in which the adoption of English as one’s true language plays a central part—will genuine equality of membership take place in one’s own heart and mind” (p. 183). Does this necessarily mean one will gain social equality or the riches of the American promise? I think not.

Over the course of this paper, I have discussed and explored the linguistic genocide caused by the United States, especially through education systems. Some can try to argue the U.S. implied bilingual education systems rather than just an English-only policy, however, bilingual education does not result in a language coming close to being extinct (Hawaiian). Nor do bilingual education systems imply patriotism exercises to shift loyalties to the colonizing country. Hawaii explored, fought, and successfully implemented revitalization programs to save its almost deceased language. Puerto Rico struggled against the U.S. education systems imposed, but natives resisted with great care for the sake of their children and country. Hawaiians and Puerto Ricans knew the English language itself did not hold the key to success hence the reason people fought and still do fight greatly for their language. English does not promise great careers or a granted life, but yet hundreds of languages are disappearing around the world because of the growing success of English. If people do not do all they can to keep their native language alive or take up the language of their ancestors, those languages will die. As Hinton (2001) puts it,

“For those languages, a day will come, and soon, when there are no native speakers left alive. The people who have devoted themselves to language learning in the last days of the native speakers’ presence can never learn everything the native speakers know. Even the biggest and most active revitalization programs, such as those for Hawaiian, which have large numbers of new speakers, find that the new generations speaks with a different kind of intonation from the old native speakers” (p. 11).

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