

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CARIBBEAN SPANISH

Dilyara Yakubova, Elena Pleuchova, R. García Muñoz

Kazan Federal University

suleymanovad@gmail.com, elena.pleuchova@mail.ru, farolino@hotmail.com

Abstract. This article dwells on the phenomenon of the Caribbean Spanish and considers the arguments that prove and that argue against its existence. The authors express their understanding of the Caribbean Spanish as a number of national variants that can be grouped together on the basis of systemic similarities at all language levels and portray the distinctive features of the variants with the emphasis on the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the lexis. They highlight the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that influenced the formation of specific characteristics of the Spanish language in the region, such as the history and geography of the region, ethnic and political factors, as well as the linguistic situation. Finally, the authors describe the structure, content and potential of the glossary of Caribbean Spanish created with the purpose of systematization and classification of specific lexis of the region.

Keywords: Caribbean region, Caribbean Spanish, national variant, lexeme, lexis, glossary, indigenism, africanism

1. Introduction

The Spanish language that the conquerors brought up to Latin America evolved in different ways, depending on the region and the influence of native languages. Moreover, much depended on the level of cultural development of each particular region. For example, it is impossible to compare the area of the river La Plata with areas of Central America – home of a highly developed culture of the Maya and Aztec, or the Inca culture in the Andes [1].

Despite the fact that each Spanish-speaking country in Latin America has its own national variant of the Spanish language, scholars have identified several major dialect areas, including the Caribbean region. The Caribbean Sea washes the shores of eleven countries: Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Puerto Rico [2]. They are different in size, political regime and way of life, but they have a common marine border. Apart from geographic neighborhood and partly due to it, these countries are characterized by similar linguistic phenomena that allow classifying eleven different variants of the Spanish language into a single group.

Here, it is important to mention that the Caribbean Spanish belongs to the group of coastal Spanish, which is opposed to the mainland Spanish. One of the implications of this fact is that the Caribbean Spanish is only typical for the coastal territory of the Republic of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and the southeastern part of the Yucatan Peninsula, where Mexico is located [2].

2. Phenomenon of the Caribbean Spanish

Specialists differ on the question of whether native speakers of these countries perceive the similarities among the variants spoken in them. According to some experts, they do [3, p. 45]; while others argue that natives of each Caribbean country consider their own variant as unique and different from others [4, p. 526].

The existence of opposite opinions is due to the fact that the same situation can be viewed from different positions: from the outside, as researchers do when they focus on similarities in the search for common patterns, and from the inside, as native speakers do hence obtaining a better vision of differences among the language variants. For instance, the natives of Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico believe that their respective variants are impossible to confuse. Even media people and not only average language speakers make effective use of a series of linguistic phenomena that characterize the language variant of their own country.

Another important issue is that until recently specialists in Latin dialectology worked in silos, making it impossible to conduct comparative studies between the variants of

the Spanish language due to the lack of reliable, homogeneous and balanced basis for comparison. The 1970s saw the emergence of research works in this field based on a similar methodology that allowed conducting quantitative studies in order to obtain objective data and compare language variants, including in the Caribbean region [4, p. 527].

Some scientists doubt on the existence of the Caribbean Spanish arguing that there are significant differences in vocabulary between the variants. According to H. Lope Blanch, only Mexico can be divided into 17 regional dialect in terms of differences in lexis [5, p. 44] (although as we have already mentioned, only part of Mexico belongs to the Caribbean Spanish region).

Other comparative studies of vocabulary come to opposite conclusions; for instance, a research on the “human body” vocabulary held in the Antilles showed that more than 90% of lexemes were common to the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Puerto Rico [6, p. 53]. In fact, all attempts on dialectal zoning of Spanish in Latin America coincide in placing the three West Indian islands within the same area that some experts consider as the most compact and uniform of all. So did in the first half of the XXth century Pedro Henriquez Ureña [7] and all the subsequent studies confirmed, rectified or specified the division proposed by this Dominican philologist.

The authors of this article share the idea that the Caribbean Spanish is not a single variant, but a number of national variants that can be grouped together on the basis of systemic similarities at all language levels. Their existence is due to a number of linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

3. Factors That Have Influenced the Formation of the Caribbean Spanish

There are several explanations for the phenomenon of the Caribbean Spanish. The study of linguistic situation, ethnic composition and history of the Caribbean countries has proved the determining role of such factors as the origin of the first colonists, language contacts and political situation.

Presence of many indigenisms in the lexis of the Caribbean Spanish is due to the fact that before the arrival of colonizers this territory was inhabited by indigenous tribes of

Arawak Indians (e.g., Taino, Siguayo in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, Siboney, Guanahanabei in Cuba). In the pre-colonial period over 1000 Indian languages were present in Latin American countries. The African heritage is due to the influence of African tribal languages (Kikongo, Iqbal, Yoruba, Ewe, Ashanti, etc.) that were spoken by slaves brought up to this region of the colonizers.

As for the origin of colonists, the Spanish conquerors who came to the Latin American continent were from different areas of the newly formed Kingdom: Hernán Cortés (Mexico) was born in Extremadura, Pedro de Heredia (Colombia) was from Madrid, Castilla and Pedro Alonso Niño (Venezuela) – from Huelva in Andalusia. Among them prevailed those who came from Andalusia and the Canary Islands. The newly formed Caribbean countries adopted the Andalusian norms of the Spanish language, as opposed to the standard Madrid ones, which can be explained by the important social and political situation of Seville and trade links between the capital of the New World and the peoples of Cuba and Haiti. Today, in the Caribbean Spanish there are many lexical correspondences between the Canarian and Andalusian Spanish, from the one hand, and the Caribbean, from the other. Here are some examples of lexical contributions of the Canarian dialect: in the Venezuelan national variant – *pitar* ‘mugir’ (to moo), *bocoy* ‘persona gruesa’ (fat man), in the Cuban variant – *agrioso* ‘agridulce’ (sweet and sour), *maguado* ‘decepcionado’ (disappointed), in the Mexican variant – *jumadera* ‘borrachera’ (booze), throughout the Caribbean region – *facistol* ‘bromista’ (joker) and *bizcorneado* ‘bizco’ (cross-eyed) [3, p. 79].

The Spanish language brought by on the newly discovered continent, mixed with local languages and dialects to form in each country a unique variant. Differences with the Iberian standard arose primarily in the conversational language, and then the most stable of them penetrated into the higher realms of communication, including in the literary language, and acquired the status of standard [8].

Other languages that coexist with Spanish in the Spanish-speaking America have different origins: various types of creole languages that emerged on the basis of Spanish (palenquero, papiamentu), English (languages of Central America), mixed languages (border areas of Uruguay). It also experiences the influence of other

European languages (German in the south of Chile, Welsh in Argentina). During the XIX century, many Europeans came to some of the countries in the Caribbean region and left their heritage in the vocabulary (the French and the British in Colombia). We should also mention a great influence of American English and European languages in some national variants, such as Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan and Puerto Rican. Among political factors that influence the formation of variants is the political status of the country. For example, the lexis of the national variant of Spanish in Puerto Rico, which is an unincorporated territory of the United States, contains many anglicisms. Another extralinguistic factor of great importance is the geographical situation that has determined the existence of differences in the vocabulary of the peoples of the mountainous areas and valleys. Different historical development and migration processes have affected the topographical names, some of which are rooted in Indian and African past.

The above-mentioned factors shaped and continue shaping the uniqueness of the conceptual sphere and language picture of the world of peoples living in the Caribbean region that are reflected in the similarities in the variants of Spanish spoken by them.

4. Common Features of the National Variants of Spanish in the Caribbean Region

Features that are common to all national variants of the Caribbean region can be traced at all language levels. Some phonetic phenomena are typical for all variants of the Spanish language in Latin America, such as “seseo”, or pronunciation of the sound [c] like [s], and “yeísmo”, or lack of difference between the sounds transmitted by graphemes “ll” and “y”. Others are specific to the Caribbean area, although can be found in other regions as well. Among them are the following: breathy pronunciation of the sound expressed by the letter “j” ([‘ka.ha] ‘caja’), pronunciation of nasal “n” like velar at the end of words ([‘ pãŋ] ‘pan’) and attenuation of the sound [d] between vowels ([‘deo] ‘dedo’). One of the most known features of the Caribbean Spanish is the weakening of final consonants in the position after vowels ([mi’ta] ‘mitad’). In different countries of the Caribbean, this trend affects different consonants, for example, [s] in

the Dominican Republic, Venezuela and Panama, and [d] in Cuba. This characteristic is the hallmark of the Caribbean Spanish and reflects the innovative spirit of the language of the region [3].

The opposition of sounds [r] and [l] receives different manifestation in various areas, and thereby determines variation among parts of the Caribbean. The most frequent case is replacement of [l] by [r] ([ˈpjer] ‘piel’) that characterizes primarily the language of the inhabitants of Puerto Rico being most common among lower classes, women, the elderly and the villagers. An opposite phenomenon consists in replacing of [r] by [l] ([haˈblal] ‘hablar’). The Dominican variant has transformation of [r] in the [i] ([ˈveide] ‘verde’), while in Cuba [r] and [l] are often substituted by the neutral alveolar similar to [d]. The phenomenon that is typical to all the Caribbean area is assimilation ([cob.ˈbata] ‘corbata’) [3].

As for the grammar, there is a tendency to preserve the SVO (subject-verb-object) word order in all types of sentences. A typical case is the use of this structure in questions (“¿Qué tú quieres?”) and adding a subject before the infinitive when the subject of the action expressed by the infinitive does not coincide with the subject of the action expressed by the main verb (“Ella llamó para tú poder salir”). The use of personal pronouns in subject position is one of the manifestations of this trend. Among other grammatical features are the “queísmo” phenomenon, i.e. omission of the preposition “de” in certain structures (“me di cuenta que no llevaba dinero” instead of “me di cuenta de que no llevaba dinero”), omission of preposition “a” before the direct object with the meaning of animacy and distribution of “tú - usted – ustedes” system of treatment [3].

The biggest differences with the standard Spanish are observed in the lexis. There are concepts in the Caribbean Spanish that are associated with the phenomena generally unknown in Spain for natural reasons, such as related to the geographical location (Mexico: abajeño ‘relativo a la región del Bajío’ (belonging to the region of El Bahío)), flora (Cuba: abá ‘arbusto euforbeo silvestre’ (wild bush from the Euphorbia family)), fauna (Honduras, Nicaragua: cacarico ‘camarón pequeño de río’ (small river shrimp)), material and spiritual culture (Guatemala, Mexico: tascalate ‘bebida preparada a base

de maíz, cacao, achiote, azúcar y canela' (soft drink from roasted corn flour, cocoa, sugar and cinnamon)) [9].

A general differentiating feature of national variants of the Spanish language in the Caribbean region is the presence of indigenisms and africanisms. A large number of indigenisms belongs to the thematic groups of plants and animals, household items and clothing, food and drink, religious concepts and agricultural terms. The legacy of Indian languages is less present on the morphological and syntactic levels (for example, the frequent use of diminutive and augmentative suffixes).

The indigenous languages of the Caribbean that brought the largest number of words into Spanish are the Arawak (guanajo 'pavo' (turkey)), and Taino (ají 'guindilla' (hot pepper)), on the one hand, and the Caribbean (curare 'veneno de planta' (plant poison) and Kumanagoto (catire 'rubio' (blonde)), on the other [3, p.55].

Although the presence of indigenisms and africanisms is characteristic of the entire Caribbean region, different variants have experienced influence of different languages, e.g., indigenous: Nahuatl in Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Panama, Quechua in Colombia, and African: Kongo in Puerto Rico. The African component is especially evident in the national variants of Venezuela, Dominican Republic and Cuba. We should also mention that many of the indigenisms and africanisms that are present in some dictionaries are archaisms or not at all familiar to the native speakers [4, p. 530].

5. Glossary of the Caribbean Spanish

In order to systemize and classify the specific lexis of the national variants of Spanish in the Caribbean countries, a group of scientists of Kazan Federal University including the authors has created a glossary of nouns. For every lexeme of the glossary, the authors provide its translation into Russian, its definition in Spanish and in Russian, the country or countries where it is used, lexicographic annotations and additional cultural and linguistic information if available. In case of polysemic lexemes, all this data is provided for every meaning of the lexeme. Today, the glossary contains more than 10000 entries, where each entry corresponds to one meaning.

The main lexicographical sources for data collection were the Dictionary of Americanisms of the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language [10] and “Spanish-Russian dictionary. Latin America” [9], among others. Neither of the dictionaries contains a tag that indicates the belonging of the lexeme and its meaning to the Caribbean region, which can be explained by the fact that there are significant differences in the lexis of variants, as was stated earlier in the article. However, we have observed that, as a rule, when several countries are listed as area of distribution of a lexeme and one of them is a Caribbean country, other countries also belong to this region. In many cases, countries listed in the same group are geographical neighbors, for example, 1) Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico; 2) Honduras, Guatemala; 3) Guatemala, Mexico. In these cases, the similarity in the lexical composition can be explained by a relatively close contact between the inhabitants of these countries. However, some countries that share specific lexemes are located away from each other, for example, 1) Colombia, Mexico; 2) Venezuela, Guatemala, - and more research is needed to explain the origin of this similarity in each case.

It is also necessary to mention the discrepancy of linguistic material in different lexicographical sources. A comparison of data referring to the Caribbean region revealed numerous inconsistencies, for example, 1) dictionaries differ on lists of lexemes; 2) dictionaries give different definitions of the same lexeme; 3) dictionaries indicate different areas of use of the same lexeme and the same meaning. In order to solve these discrepancies and compile a glossary with updated information, we are currently conducting a field study, where natives of eleven countries of the Caribbean region are asked to fill in a questionnaire indicating if a lexeme and its definition is familiar to them and giving their own definitions to lexemes.

The information collected for the glossary has allowed conducting a series of studies to analyze the specific vocabulary of the Caribbean, including the description of lexis of the national variants [11], their semantic realia [12] and thematic vocabulary groups such as “flora” and “fauna” [13, 14], among others. Some observations have found their reflection in this article.

Our future intention is to transform the glossary into an automated dictionary that will allow the search of lexemes on alphabetical, thematic and geographical basis, depending on the needs of the user.

Conclusion

The similarities in the variants of Spanish in the Caribbean area prove the likeness in the mentality of their speakers and the existence of the phenomenon of the Caribbean Spanish. This is mainly due to the geographical proximity, the same geographical origin of the colonizers, the influence of indigenous languages and the similarity of the biosphere in the countries of this region.

At the same time, within the Caribbean area the language is heterogeneous and depends on the following factors: interaction with different indigenous languages, influence of geographical factors and biosphere that differ from place to place and social, historical and political factors that are characteristic of each of the countries.

Therefore, every Spanish-speaking Caribbean country along with the Castilian Spanish has its own language variant that contains dialectal elements and that has experienced the influence of the indigenous substrate. Therefore, this linguistic diversity requires systematization, being thus a research object for a group of scientists from the Kazan Federal University.

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