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Speaking English in Spanish Harlem: The Role of Rhythm

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Abstract

This study investigates how community change is reflected in language, by examining the English of 28 Puerto Rican-identified native English speakers across two generations. Prosodic rhythm, which has been shown to differentiate Latino Englishes from other American English varieties including contemporary African American English, is measured here using the Pairwise Variability Index (Low, Grabe and Nolan 2000). Results indicate that New York Puerto Rican English speakers in East Harlem maintain syllable-timing (a substrate influence from Spanish) across-the-board, even when contact with African American English is evident at other levels of the grammar. PVI scores are higher for younger speakers (indicating more stress-timed speech) than for older speakers (indicating more syllable-timed speech) and younger speakers show a more even spread of PVI scores than older speakers do. Age differences appear to be linked to social factors like ethnic integration of housing, Spanish usage and social networks. Finally, results point to men showing more similar, syllable-timed speech, while women show more variation when it comes to speech rhythm. The results of this study shed light on how contact between members of different ethnoracial/linguistic groups who live in close proximity may produce dialect change, and also reveal the ways in which speakers negotiate their own linguistic identities as part of a community in transition.

Speaking English in Spanish Harlem: The Role of Rhythm

Cara Shousterman*

1 Introduction

The New York City neighborhood of East Harlem, also known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio, has played a significant role in the field of sociolinguistics as it has been the site of groundbreaking work on Puerto Rican English (Wolfram 1974) and Spanish-English codeswitching (Poplack 1980, Zentella 1981). Research for these studies took place in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when the New York City Housing Authority had just completed construction of large public housing complexes in the area that would have a substantial demographic impact. For instance, while Puerto Ricans and African Americans had long been living together in East Harlem, they typically resided in separate buildings on separate blocks. With the introduction of high-rise public housing projects, members of these two ethnic groups would come to live in the same buildings, often on the same floors, which effectively increased contact between them over the last 50 years. Moreover, as the children and grandchildren of the first generation of Puerto Rican migrants grew up as native speakers of English in contact with other native English speakers, the Puerto Rican community's language began to shift from Spanish and Spanish-English codeswitching to primarily English.¹ This raises the question, what kind of English is being spoken by Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem today, in light of the changes the community itself has undergone? In what ways has it been influenced by Spanish, African American English, and mainstream U.S. English (Lippi-Green 1997)?

This study compares Puerto Rican English across two generations of speakers to determine how community-wide changes that have taken place in Spanish Harlem over the last half century are visible at the linguistic level. Prosodic rhythm, which has been shown to differentiate Latino Englishes from other American English varieties including contemporary African American English (Carter 2005, Fought and Fought 2002, Thomas and Carter 2006), is measured here using the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI; Low and Grabe 1995). PVI measurements have been used productively in a number of sociolinguistic studies involving contact situations (e.g., Coggshall 2008, Fought and Fought 2002), particularly to tease out substrate effects in varieties that are influenced by differently-timed languages. They are used here to help determine: (1) the extent to which rhythm in Puerto Rican English is sensitive to contact with more stress-timed varieties of English and (2) the extent to which rhythm may be changing over time within the Puerto Rican English-speaking community, in line with residential and demographic changes that have taken place.

2 The Community

East Harlem is one of the largest predominantly Latino communities in New York City, with about half (49.8%) of its residents identifying as Hispanic (American Community Survey 2006-2010). Non-Hispanic blacks (including people of African American, West Indian and continental African backgrounds) also make up a significant portion of East Harlem's population at 31.6%.²

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¹In this paper, I use the term "generation" most often to talk about groups of individuals of similar ages. However, when "generation" is preceded by an ordinal number such as "first" or "second", I am referring specifically to migrant generation, indicating how far removed a speaker is from the moment of familial arrival to the mainland U.S.

²For the U.S. census and the related American Community Survey, "Hispanic" is explicitly considered to be an "origin" and a separate category from race. Thus, a resident who identifies as Hispanic on either survey is also asked to choose a race (e.g., black, white). Many Hispanics identify racially as black in this instance, as distinct from non-Hispanic blacks, and may do so in their daily lives as well.

Presently, when large-scale gentrification is occurring all over New York City and changing the racial and ethnic makeup of its neighborhoods, it is no small feat that East Harlem has managed to retain a majority that is comprised of Latino and non-Hispanic black residents. Although gentrification is visibly occurring in East Harlem, its progress appears to be slowed by at least two factors: (1) a high concentration of public housing and (2) a fairly high crime rate, even by New York City standards. In terms of housing, East Harlem has the second highest concentration of low-income housing projects in the U.S., which accounts for 24 projects in 1.54 square miles. Combined with the highest violent crime rate in Manhattan (Police Department City of New York 2014), this area has not seen nearly as much gentrification as West Harlem (home of Columbia University) and Central Harlem (site of Labov's 1972 *Language in the Inner City*) have in the last few decades.

While many residents of Spanish Harlem do indeed speak Spanish, this study surveys the New York Puerto Rican community at a particular moment in time when many of its members were born on the U.S. mainland and grew up speaking English almost exclusively, both with their peers and their U.S. mainland-born parents. They are the second and third generation (and beyond) of a longstanding migrant community, and their spoken language is a reflection of this status. It is not completely unexpected then that East Harlem's Puerto Rican community is shifting to English, as studies have shown that many U.S. mainland-born Latinos are completely monolingual in English, with retention of Spanish beyond the second generation uncommon (Fought 2003, Schecter and Bayley 2002, Veltman 1990, Zentella 1997). Furthermore, among Latino communities living in New York City, it is Puerto Ricans who show the lowest levels of Spanish-language retention (Kasinitz et al. 2008:254). For many New York Puerto Ricans, speaking Spanish is no longer crucial to marking their ethnic identity, and they rely instead on other social and linguistic resources to do so. As Fought (2006:70) points out, "the linguistic expression of identity for Latinos and Latinas in the USA is not only or even primarily signaled by an ability to speak Spanish."

This is where Puerto Rican English comes in. Puerto Rican English is a non-mainstream variety of American English characteristically spoken by native English speakers in the United States who identify as being of Puerto Rican descent.³ It shares both grammatical and phonological features with other non-mainstream American dialects, particularly African American English (Anisman 1975, Ma and Herasimchuk 1968, Poplack 1978, Silverman 1975, Urciuoli 1996, Wolford and Evanini 2006, Wolfram 1971, Wolfram 1974, Zentella 1997). What differentiates Puerto Rican English from African American English is that it also contains linguistic features that are the result of contact with Spanish, which can be seen at every level of the grammar. Puerto Rican English is thought to have emerged following the large-scale migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. after World War II (Slomanson and Newman 2004). This dialect came into formation as young first generation migrants and second generation children of migrants acquired English natively, sometimes after they had learned Spanish as a first language and sometimes while they learned Spanish simultaneously. For these young people, many of their models for English-language use were adolescents and adults who had not learned English natively and whose spoken variety of English contained numerous features that were influenced by Spanish. In this study I focus on one such feature, syllable-timed rhythm, whose presence in Puerto Rican English appears to be a substrate influence from Spanish.

3 Methodology

3.1 Speakers

For this study, I collected data while volunteering at an after-school program (which I call Horizons), beginning in the fall of 2010 and ending in the summer of 2012. In many ways Horizons is a microcosm of life in East Harlem and its demographics are represented in the people who work there and attend its programs. This is because Horizons' target population and staff are made up of

³The term "Puerto Rican English" covers a wide range of ways of speaking from very casual to very formal, as spoken by a range of individuals from different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although it is characteristically spoken by speakers of Puerto Rican descent, it can be spoken by anyone of any ethnic background.

families from the immediate area; participants are majority Latino and African American, and come primarily from low-income backgrounds.⁴ In total, I conducted 60 interviews with the staff at Horizons, as well as their friends and family. Interviews took place in empty offices or classrooms, and consisted of casual conversation about family, friends, Spanish language use, movies, TV, music, relationship to Horizons, growing up in the neighborhood and changes seen in the neighborhood. They were mainly one-on-one interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes that were recorded on a digital recorder with wireless lavalier microphones. A year after the completion of the sociolinguistic interviews, I conducted a follow-up survey with the same participants, where I asked directed questions based on ethnographic information I had collected during the first round of interviews. All interviewees were New York-born (or arrived as infants) and identified as Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, West Indian or multiethnic. Roughly half of the 60 interviews took place with speakers of Puerto Ricans heritage, and they are the focus of the present work. Here, I examine the speech of 28 Puerto Rican-identified native English speakers from two age groups: (1) a younger group, made up of teenagers and young adults ages 15-30 who worked as summer youth at Horizons or who were the children of Horizons staff, and (2) older adults ages 45-60, who were primarily Horizons core staff and their friends and family.⁵

3.2 Prosodic Rhythm

Prosodic rhythm is thought to differentiate Latino Englishes from other American English varieties including contemporary African American English (Carter 2005, Fought and Fought 2002, Thomas and Carter 2006). Generally speaking, Spanish is considered to be a syllable-timed language, where all syllables are roughly equal in duration, while English is considered a stress-timed language, where syllables that receive stress are longer in duration than unstressed syllables (Pike 1945). These timing patterns exist on a continuum, rather than representing absolute differences (Miller 1984, Rasmus, Nespore and Mehler 1999), and the rhythm of Puerto Rican English is thought to fall somewhere in between the two varieties (see Figure 1), so that it is more syllable-timed than other varieties of English, but less so than Spanish (Thomas and Carter 2006). This results in a phenomenon where listeners hear both stressed and unstressed vowels being pronounced in their full, unreduced forms, rather hearing unstressed vowels reduced to schwa. It produces what some listeners describe as a staccato-like sound.

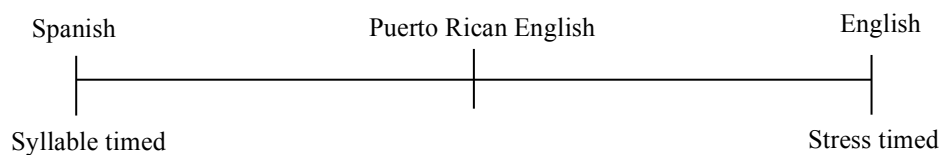


Figure 1: Rhythm of Puerto Rican English.

Prosodic rhythm is measured here using the Pairwise Variability Index, or PVI. I made use of Low, Grabe and Nolan's (2000) PVI formula (first introduced by Low and Grabe 1995), which has been modified by Thomas and Carter (2006) for spontaneous speech. This method measures rhythm of speech by comparing the duration of the vocalic portions of adjacent syllable pairs, while controlling for speaking rate. To find an individual speaker's PVI score, duration measurements are taken for the vocalic portions of two adjacent syllables. Next, the difference between them is calculated. The absolute value of this difference is then divided by the mean of the two vocalic segments. After completing this procedure for the vocalic portions of 200 pairs of adjacent

⁴Because I find that the interviewees from Horizons to be an accurate representation of East Harlem's Puerto Rican population, I use the terms "Horizons speakers" interchangeably with "East Harlem Puerto Ricans" (or the like) throughout this paper.

⁵I consider a native speaker of English to be anyone who acquires fluency in English in a naturalistic setting before puberty (a time often thought to be the critical period for first language acquisition). This can be with or without the simultaneous acquisition of Spanish (or another language) as a native language.

syllables, the median value is selected. The formula for PVI measurement is shown below:

$$\frac{|\text{Duration1} - \text{Duration2}|}{\frac{\text{Duration1} + \text{Duration2}}{2}}$$

The PVI formula essentially determines how similar or different two syllables are in length, and returns a numerical score. A score closer to 0 indicates more syllable-timed speech, while more stress-timed speech is indicated by a score further from 0. To further illustrate, I present a schematic diagram in Figure 2, which shows the differences between a pair of adjacent vocalic segments. In the pair on the left, the segments are quite different in duration, indicating more stress-timed speech (and a score further from 0). On the right, the segments are more similar in duration, indicating syllable timed (and a score closer to 0).

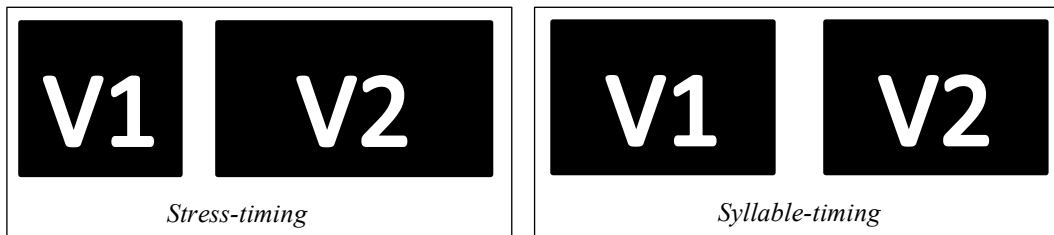


Figure 2: Stress-timing vs. syllable-timing.

To measure rhythm in Puerto Rican English, I followed the protocol outlined in Thomas and Carter (2006). Spectrograms were generated in Praat using a window length of 5 ms and a viewing range from 0 to 5 kHz. In order to mitigate the effects of pre-pausal lengthening, all syllabic feet before a pause, hesitation marker, repair or restart were omitted from measurement. 200 tokens were extracted per speaker, and the first five minutes of interview excluded from analysis. As an addendum to Thomas and Carter’s protocol, I restricted my analysis to speech where the topic was family and friends, as work by Lim (2010) and Nielsen (2012) has shown that PVI varies by topic for many speakers.

To get an idea of the range of PVI scores that occur for different languages and dialects, we can consult the work of Thomas and Carter (2006), who measured prosodic rhythm in spontaneous speech for a diverse array of populations (see Figure 3, below).

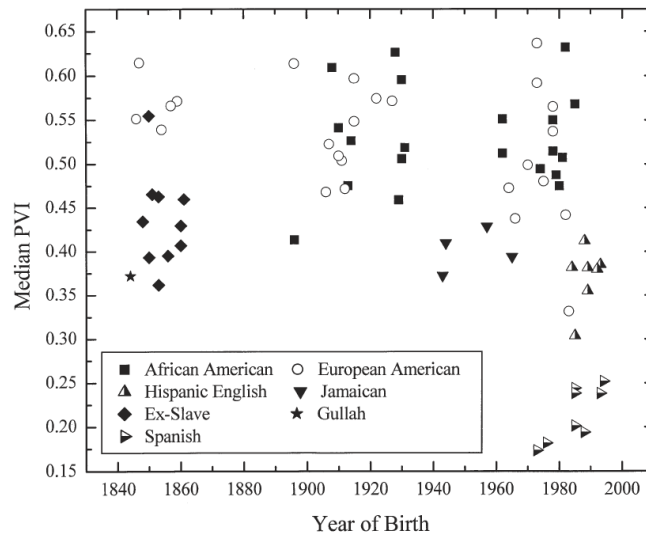


Figure 3: Median PVI scores from Thomas and Carter 2006.

In Figure 3, PVI scores are presented for contemporary African Americans (represented by shaded squares) and European Americans from North Carolina (unshaded circles), African American ex-slaves who were born before 1870 (shaded diamonds), contemporary speakers of Spanish (half-shaded sideways triangle) and Jamaican creole (shaded inverted triangles), and a group Hispanic English speakers, made up of second language English speakers of Mexican heritage from North Carolina (half-shaded upright triangles). Speaker median PVI scores are on the y axis, and year of birth is on the x axis. This chart provides three findings that are of particular importance for the current study:

- (1) Typical PVI scores for speakers of contemporary African American English and European American English tend to be .45 or higher. Contemporary African American English and European American English are typically considered to be more “stress-timed” dialects of English. This suggests that .45 is the rough boundary that separates stress-timed dialects of English from syllable-timed ones.
- (2) Many speakers of African American English born prior to 1870 fall below .45. Thomas and Carter argue that this indicates that a change took place in African American English over time, so that while it used to be more syllable-timed like Jamaican Creole, it has since become more stress-timed like European American varieties.
- (3) Typical PVI scores for speakers of Hispanic English fall between .30 and .43. Again, this supports the notion that .45 may be the cut-off for dialects to be perceived as syllable timed or stress-timed. Their scores are positioned just above those for Spanish speakers, who exhibit the lowest PVI scores of all.

In following section, I present the results of a rhythm analysis for Horizons speakers, and show how they line up with Thomas and Carter’s findings.

4 Results

The results from my study are shown in Figure 4, which displays the median PVI scores for each of the 28 speakers in this study on the y axis, along with their years of birth on the x axis. Here, men are represented by unshaded triangles and women are represented by shaded ones. In the previous section I pointed out some of the guidelines that Thomas and Carter’s (2006) findings provide for what may constitute typical PVI scores for different linguistic varieties. Critically, speakers of contemporary African American and European American English typically have median PVI scores above .45, and Hispanic English (Mexican) speakers typically have scores ranging from .30 to .43.⁶ For Horizons speakers, the majority of PVI scores fall below .45, with only three speakers (Oscar, Kevin and Laura) having scores slightly above this baseline (.47, .50 and .47 respectively). With the exception of these three speakers, Horizons speakers have scores that range from .29 to .44, which are similar to Thomas and Carter’s (2006) Hispanic English speakers.

The results in Figure 4 indicate that PVI is conditioned by age. In my sample, younger speakers have a higher mean PVI score, .45 ($SD = .34$), than older speakers’ .41 ($SD = .31$), $t(5598) = 5.189$, $p < .01$, two tailed. Additionally, younger speakers show more intra-group variation in their PVI scores than the older speakers, who cluster together for the most part. Speaker sex appears to be a conditioning factor in PVI variation as well. While the women’s scores are fairly evenly distributed, the men appear to be more clustered together, with two obvious outliers, Oscar and Kevin.⁷ A t -test comparing men and women was not statistically significant because the difference

⁶Here I use the term “European American” following Thomas and Carter’s (2006) usage. Otherwise, I use the term “mainstream U.S. English” to refer to the variety that is commonly associated with European Americans in the U.S.

⁷While Oscar and Kevin have little in common with each other, they differ from their respective age/sex groups in their own unique ways. Kevin has a very strong affiliation with African American music, language and culture, much more so than anyone else in the sample. His father reported to me that Kevin often claims African American ethnicity when filling out paperwork, even though he has no African American family members. Oscar, on the other hand, describes himself as an “outsider” and a “loner”, and is the only speaker to have spent nearly a decade away from his community while he was incarcerated in his twenties.

between these two groups is not necessarily in their means, but rather in the distribution of their members' respective PVI scores. A side-by-side comparison of men's score and women's score is shown in Figures 5a and 5b.

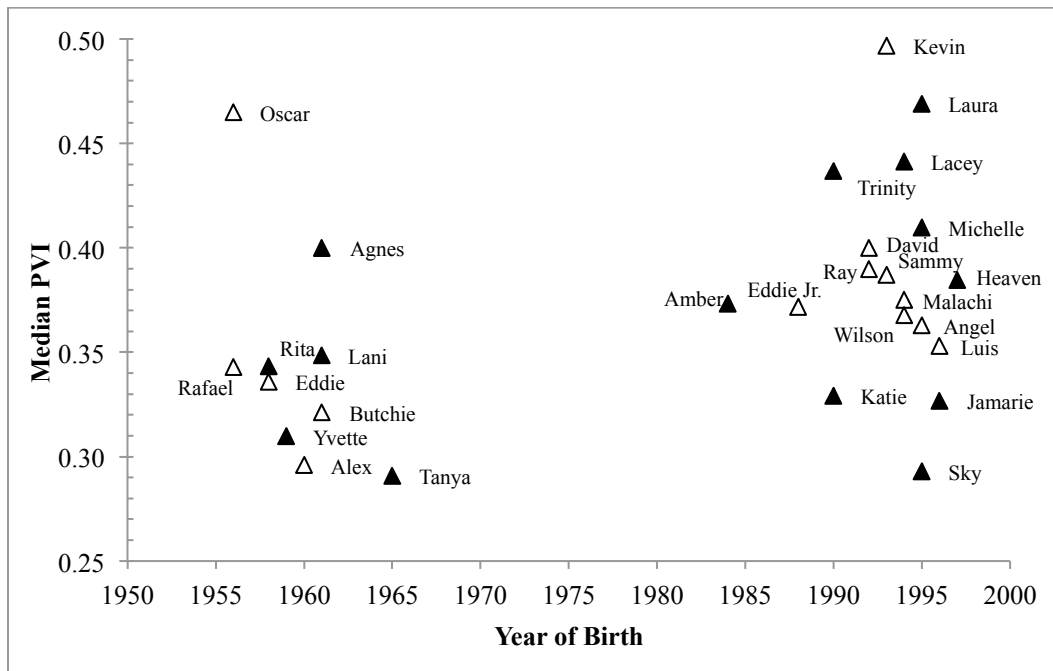


Figure 4: Median PVI scores for Horizons speakers.

Unshaded triangles (\triangle) = Men, Shaded triangles (\blacktriangle) = Women

5 Discussion

Across the board, Horizons speakers speak English in a way that is relatively syllable-timed when compared to that reported for the average speaker of contemporary African American English or European American English. First and foremost, this finding suggests that there is a coherence between dialects that have a substrate influence from Spanish; here, between Thomas and Carter's (2006) Hispanic English speakers of Mexican Heritage and East Harlem's Puerto Rican English speakers. It may also provide support for the idea that non-native English speakers (similar to Thomas and Carter's Hispanic English speakers) were critical to the formation of Puerto Rican English. Next, while few Horizons speakers have PVI scores that surpass .45 (the cut-off point for dialects that are typically considered stress-timed vs. those that are considered syllable-timed), the younger speakers do show higher PVI scores (more stress-timed) than older speakers, who show lower PVI scores (more syllable-timed). From an apparent-time perspective, this generational difference may be indicative of an early stage of dialect change where the community as a whole may eventually become stress-timed, such as that which has been described by Thomas and Carter for African American English. However, it is still too early to tell, as too few speakers in my study have PVI scores that surpass .45.

It is also important to note that when a trend is shown for two generations of speakers in a migrant community, it does not necessarily predict that the trend will continue in the expected direction. As Dubois and Horvath (2000) showed for three generations of Cajun English speakers in Louisiana, communities with a migrant history can show a v-shaped pattern for substrate variables, where the oldest and youngest generations show the highest usage of the variable, while the middle-aged generation shows a decrease in its usage. Labeled "linguistic recycling", the authors attribute this to a cultural renaissance where "young Cajuns are once again expressing pride in the Cajunness" (Dubois and Horvath 2000:292). Coggsball (2008) found a similar pattern for younger

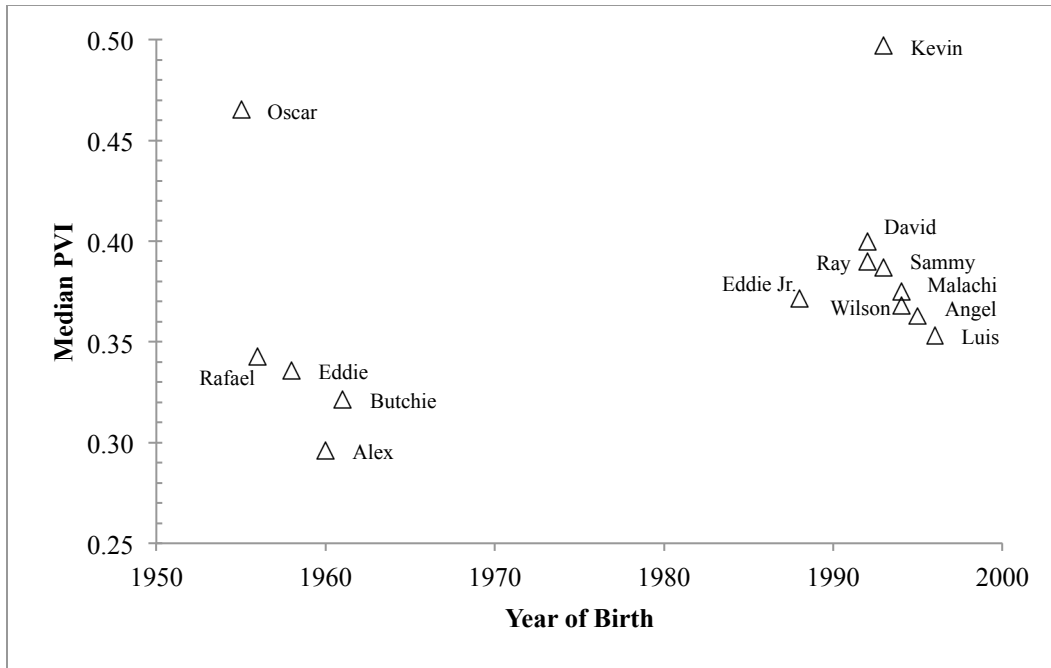


Figure 5a: Horizons Men's median PVI scores.

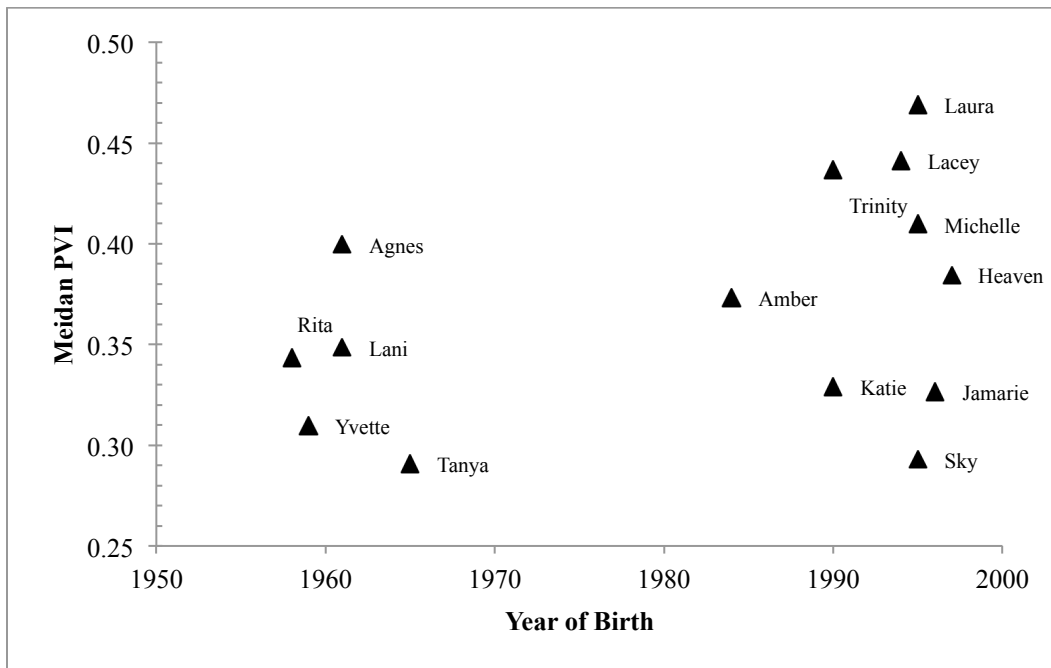


Figure 5b: Horizons Women's median PVI scores.

Lumbee Indians in North Carolina, who showed more syllable-timed speech than the older generation. Their use of syllable-timing in this case may have been linked to their increased access to a pan-Indian movement.

Dubois and Horvath (2000) highlight the importance of considering community-specific social factors that may influence the retention or avoidance of substrate features by its speakers. For Horizons speakers, there are a number of community-specific external factors that are not only meaningful to speakers, but are also particularly tied to age. Summarized in Table 1, they include housing (the type of building you grew up in), language (whether or not you speak Spanish) and social networks (whether or not you hang out mostly with other Latinos). The importance of these factors was originally uncovered through interviews and ethnographic observations, and subsequently asked about in the follow-up survey. In terms of housing, I find that while older speakers typically grew up in low-rise tenement buildings that were homogenously Puerto Rican, about half of the younger speakers grew up in high-rise housing projects, which were (and continue to be) fairly ethnically diverse, while the other half grew up in privately owned apartments that were also quite ethnically diverse. Moreover, while all of the older speakers report speaking Spanish, with four older speakers claiming to speak it well, less than half of the younger speakers report speaking Spanish, and only one younger speaker claims to speak it well. The majority of younger speakers claim only to understand Spanish but not speak it. Finally, in the follow-up survey, I asked speakers to list their five closest friends. While the majority of older speakers listed only other Latinos as their five closest friends, the majority of younger speakers report having both Latinos and non-Latinos as their five closest friends. Because these variables were skewed by age, they could not reliably be run in a multivariate analysis with younger and older speakers together. Clearly more work is needed to understand how these variables interact with one another and with age, but in the meantime they may provide some indication of how changes in the dialect from one generation to the next are occurring in tandem with changes that are taking place in speakers' lives.

	Older speakers	Younger speakers
Housing	Majority grew up in private tenement buildings, only two speakers grew up in high-rise housing projects.	A little over half grew up in high-rise housing projects, the rest in privately-owned apartments (some of which are tenements).
Language	All report speaking Spanish, with four reporting that they speak it well.	A little under half report speaking Spanish, with one claiming to speak it well. The majority report only understanding Spanish but not speaking it.
Social networks	Majority listed only other Latinos as "five closest friends".	Majority report having Latinos as well as non-Latinos as "five closest friends".

Table 1: Social factors that are linked to age.

In addition to age, Horizons speakers show differences in PVI scores according to sex, such that women have a more even distribution of PVI scores, while men tend to be clustered together with relatively lower, more syllable-timed scores. If the difference between the older and younger generation is indicative of a shift towards more stress-timed speech for the community as a whole, then it is not surprising that women are showing more variable PVI scores, given that women are often the first ones to adopt linguistic variants carrying overt prestige (Labov 1990). Stress-timing is associated with mainstream U.S. English, which is a standard variety and thus an overtly prestigious way of speaking. Like African Americans in previous generations, younger Puerto Ricans are acquiring more stress-timed speech, possibly shifting the community towards the more mainland American stress-timed variant, away from that of their migrant parents or grandparents. What is not known is whether this is a dialect change that will continue, with subsequent generations of New York-born Puerto Ricans having speech that is as stress-timed as mainstream U.S. English. With Horizons' speakers currently maintaining fairly syllable-timed speech across-the-board, it is

hard to imagine Puerto Rican English losing its characteristic Spanish-influenced rhythm any time soon. Syllable-timing appears to be a marker of Puerto Rican identity, and it differentiates Puerto Rican English speakers from those who speak African American English or mainstream U.S. standard English. As studies like Dubois and Horvath (2000) and Cogshall (2008) have shown us, substrate features that are linked to ethnicity are important to groups for whom maintaining an ethnic identity is important, and oftentimes even if they fade away, we will eventually find them making a comeback.

6 Conclusion

To summarize, results from this study indicate that Puerto Rican English in Spanish Harlem is overall relatively syllable-timed, and consistent with the English of Thomas and Carter's (2006) Hispanic English speakers of Mexican heritage in North Carolina. In terms of age, PVI scores are higher for younger speakers than for older speakers and younger speakers show a more even spread of PVI scores than older speakers do. Age differences appear to be linked to social factors like ethnic integration of housing, Spanish usage and social networks. Finally, results point to men showing more similar, syllable-timed speech, while women show more variation when it comes to prosodic rhythm. But even with so much difference in PVI values between speakers, we still find that the majority of speakers have PVI scores that line up with another Latino English variety, and very few approach those of mainstream African American or European American English. I argue that whatever process is happening that causes some speakers to speak in a way that is more stress-timed, this process is being mitigated by what appears to be an over-arching effort by the community to keep Puerto Rican English more syllable-timed, likely as a marker of Puerto Rican identity. Maintaining syllable-timing thus differentiates Puerto Rican English from African American English and mainstream U.S. English, and maintains a connection with other Latino Englishes.

Puerto Rican identity is something that is real and tangible to residents of East Harlem and other New York City neighborhoods with a dominant Latino population. Being Puerto Rican is frequently discussed in relation to language (speaking or not speaking Spanish), music (whether or not you like Spanish language music), how you do your hair and what kinds of foods you eat. Walking down the street in Spanish Harlem, you will see Puerto Rican flags hanging in windows, on cars, on clothing and jewelry. Every year in June, the day before New York City's official Puerto Rican day parade, Puerto Ricans come from all over the city gather in Spanish Harlem to celebrate their heritage at the annual Puerto Rican Festival, where they can buy traditional food and drinks, wear the colors of their country and wave its flag for all to see. This speaks to a certain pride in being Puerto Rican that is robust in Spanish Harlem, and maintained even as the community undergoes changes. What this study shows us is that although the Puerto Rican community in East Harlem may be experiencing language shift from Spanish to English, this shift is mitigated by the need for community members to maintain Latino ethnic and cultural identities. This can be observed in language use, as speakers find new resources for asserting an identity that differentiates them from others with whom they are in contact. For New York City-born Puerto Ricans, this resource is at the level of speech rhythm, where we find that one can maintain a cultural identity even without speaking Spanish.

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