

## ***Boricua* speech and new phonological variants: Puerto Rican Spanish, *reggaetón* style**

This paper examines the distribution of three phonological variables—(rr), (-r) and (-s)—in a corpus of songs representing the blend of hip-hop and reggae that is now the most popular rhythm among young Latin Americans. The analyses investigate to what extent this new genre, known as *reggaetón*, reflects both the use of pronunciations identified as typical of Puerto Rican Spanish and the phonological trends recently adopted on the Island. Specifically, this paper looks into velarization of (rr) and lateralization of syllable-final (r)—which are associated with a *boricua* style of speaking (i.e., a linguistic projection of core Puerto Ricanness)—and two non-standard variants that are mostly favored by Puerto Rican teenagers (and whose social meaning has only recently received scholarly attention): the realization of (rr) as a flap [r] and the articulation of word-final prevocalic (s) as a glottal stop [ʔ] (Valentín-Márquez 2005, 2006).

The corpus is comprised of twenty-five international hits popularized by Puerto Rican *reggaetoneros*, based on the titles most frequently appearing in seven Latin American charts from December 2004 to June 2006. The variants' occurrences in the music corpus were compared to their frequencies in several Puerto Rican communities, based on previous studies that have analyzed phonological variation on the Island (e.g., Navarro Tomás 1948, López Morales 1983, Medina-Rivera 1997).

Among other things, the current findings indicate that, in the *reggaetón* songs: (1) lateralization of (-r) was the stigmatized variant most frequently used and its frequencies were similar to the percentages found in urban communities of the Island as opposed to its more remote areas; (2) not a single case of velarization of (rr) was produced; and (3) the occurrences of [r] and [ʔ] were similar to those found for younger speakers in the studies that have analyzed the social meaning of these variants (Valentín-Márquez 2005, 2006).

These results are interpreted in light of the role that mass media plays in the potential incorporation of non-standard phonological variants into normative use. The discussion also considers implications for the way Puerto Rican Spanish is perceived in the Hispanic world. Furthermore, the analysis deals with the question as to why velarization of (rr) was the only variant that did not appear in *reggaetón* songs. Although recent investigations suggest that [x] is losing its stigmatized status in several communities on the Island (e.g., Medina-Rivera 1997, Valentín-Márquez 2006), the fact that this articulation is not used in songs that do adopt other stigmatized features confirms the variant's less resistant response to conservatizing efforts—compared, for instance, to that of lateralization of (r). Whereas velarization of (rr) is the feature most frequently mentioned by Puerto Ricans as distinctive of their way of speaking, and adults often associate it with an in-group prestige of national identification, the results are also interpreted in relation to the preference of younger speakers for lateralization of (r) and their recent adoption of the glottal stop to both project a generational identity and reinterpret the linguistic construction of a Puerto Rican national identity.

### Selected References:

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- Valentín-Márquez, Wilfredo. 2006. *El Debilitamiento de /-s/ y la Construcción Lingüística de Identidades Sociales en Puerto Rico*. Paper presented at the Third International Workshop on Spanish Sociolinguistics, Temple University (Philadelphia, PA), April 6-9, 2006.