

“*Tú no eres calle/ You ain’t street*”: The rise of AAVE-influenced Spanish in the U.S.

Relatively little research examines the nature of the possible varieties of Spanish surfacing in NY due to contact (Otheguy 2001, and his subsequent work are notable exceptions), and even fewer studies investigate the effect of ‘non-Standard’ English on Spanish in any part of the U.S. The current paper makes a case for the emergence of a Spanish variety that appears to have originated fairly recently in the northeastern United States. We provisionally coin the term *Lengua Reggaetona* (LR) for this “new” variety of Spanish. This paper constitutes our first-pass description and analysis characterizing LR’s basic structural components.

LR likely arose in the South Bronx (metropolitan New York) in the 1960s-1970s from sustained interactions between Spanish-dominant Puerto Ricans and African Americans, the latter being monolingual English speakers using in-group African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in this neighborhood setting. Thus, LR is the product of contact between two language varieties—Puerto Rican Spanish (perhaps more generally, Caribbean Spanish) and AAVE— both viewed by prescriptivists as degenerate forms of their respective languages, Standard Latin American Spanish and Standard American English. We examine the socio-historical context of LR, describing in detail the speech community which, as we propose, instantiated the creation of the variety at issue. In particular, we consider the complex sociocultural factors (e.g., race, country of origin, social class, etc.) unique to this community that have led to growing implementation of LR as a means of expression among Latino youth.

Empirical support for the emergence of *Lengua Reggaetona* comes from detailed analyses of texts and song lyrics from prominent reggaetón (Spanish “rap”) artists. The majority of reggaetón artists are by necessity bilingual (with varying levels of bilingual proficiency ranging from AAVE-dominant to Puerto Rican/Caribbean Spanish-dominant speakers). Some identifying linguistic behaviors manifested in LR are code-switching, calquing, and the implementation of loan words and translations. Additionally, and where the primary focus of this paper lies, is the ongoing convergence in LR to a set of distinguishing morphosyntactic structures shared between the two source languages, with intriguing and innovative relexifications (per Winford 2003) of AAVE items into Spanish grammar:

- a. “*Ta’ bien, pues checkiamo/h/* ’Ight, well we’ll check each other later” (Calderon 2003).
- b. “*Como si te conocería de atra/h/* As if I knew you from back (then)” (Calderon 2003).
- c. “*Ni que fronteando/* Wasn’t even frontin” (Guanábanas 2004)

Each of these utterances deviates structurally from standard Spanish and even given knowledge of Standard American English and Standard Latin American Spanish, the exact meaning of the phrases probably will not be comprehended.

To round out our account, we explore the status of *Lengua Reggaetona* as a linguistic code. Specifically, the question to be addressed is whether LR constitutes i) a (micro-)variety of Spanish; or ii) a burgeoning and independent new language in its own right, perhaps to be ultimately categorized as a creole; or iii) some other type of grammatical knowledge. Couched in this discussion are significant implications for language genesis and language change.