

Cases of Linguistic Conflict: African American English in the U.S., Puerto Ricans in the U.S., and Roma in Europe

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Project Overview: An Online Encyclopedia of Global Ethnolinguistic Conflict

This project, overseen by Dr. Stanley Dubinsky and Dr. Michael Gavin, seeks to raise awareness of linguistic conflict as a class of global conflict by creating the world's first online encyclopedia of language conflict cases. Included in each encyclopedia entry are sections such as a general overview, a historical and linguistic background of the conflict, a timeline of events, and "stories", which provide a more in-depth look into select people and moments important to the conflict.

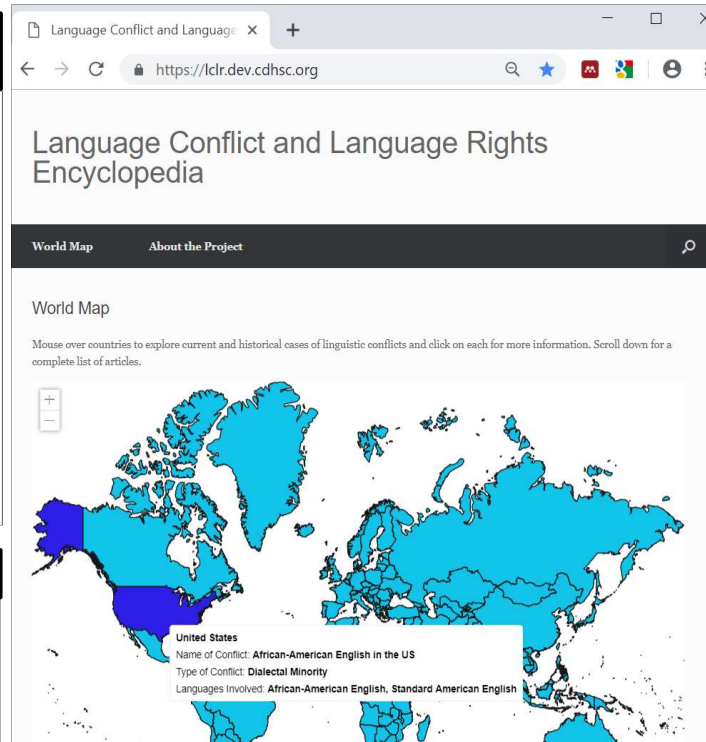
Given that a main purpose of the encyclopedia is to make high-level linguistic research accessible to the general public worldwide, the website itself has been carefully developed to be both interactive and engaging, and the entries on the individual linguistic conflict cases are written to balance utmost accuracy with ease of understanding. Although there are only seven completed entries on the site thus far, the ultimate goal is that it contains a record of every case of linguistic conflict worldwide, and continues to exist and be updated as new developments occur.

African American English in the United States

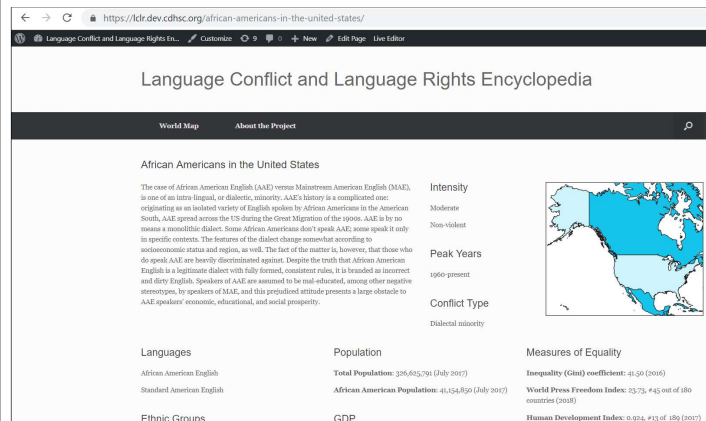
I conducted the research and composition for this entry, and entered it into the website. It is one of the seven fully completed entries on the site as of April 2019.

African American English (AAE) is a dialectal minority in the United States, that is, African Americans are perceived as speaking a wrong version of the dominant language, English. The stigma associated with AAE ripples outward, resulting in negative educational and socioeconomic effects for African Americans. One famous example of this is the Oakland Linguistic Profiling Experiment by John Baugh, begun in the late 1980s. The experiment found proof of rampant discrimination against African Americans on the basis of linguistic profiling; people speaking AAE were often refused the opportunity to see a house that a person speaking Mainstream American English (MAE) received easily when trying to set up real estate appointments over the phone.

Restricted access to housing, however, is just one of the many reasons why this language conflict case is important. Stigmatization of AAE also contributes greatly to the achievement gap between African Americans and Caucasian Americans. Children who speak African American need scholastic support and instruction in MAE in a manner similar to those students who speak a first language other than English. The negative associations white Americans have with AAE, however, mean that they refuse to "taint" their schools with bridge instruction in AAE. Thus the achievement gap between African Americans and Caucasian Americans is never fixed at the beginning of students' careers, and only grows with every further grade.



The home page of the encyclopedia. The world map is interactive, and will pop up with information about the language conflict cases in each country when you mouse over the country, as shown here with African American English in the United States.



The first section of the encyclopedia entry on African American English.

Puerto Ricans in the United States

The research for this case is complete and the sections of the entry have been written. My partner, Brianna Surratt, and I are in the process of inputting our work into the website, and it should be fully complete by Discover USC. Below is an excerpt from the historical background, to give some idea of the writing style of and the information included in the encyclopedia. In a slightly atypical move, but in order to more accurately represent the divergent forms of discrimination Puerto Ricans have faced, I split the historical background into two sections: "Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico" and "Puerto Ricans Living in the Mainland United States".

Excerpt from the Historical Background section: Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico

The United States first acquired Puerto Rico in 1898 as a part of its expansion into the Caribbean and the Pacific after the Spanish-American War, and Puerto Rico remains a U.S. commonwealth today. Puerto Ricans were finally granted US citizenship in 1917 as a result of the Jones Act, but it took until 1950 for the United States to allow them to elect their own governor and write their own constitution. Puerto Rico's in-between status is contentious, and the question of language is at the heart of the issue. 95% of the Puerto Rican population speaks Spanish, while only 20% speak English, and official business is conducted in Spanish. The continued prevalence of Spanish exists despite many efforts by the U.S. to the contrary, including a "Language Law" passed in 1902 that declared both Spanish and English to be official languages of the island. This law was followed by a three decades-long movement pressuring the Puerto Ricans to make English the official language of instruction in their schools and to add "intense teaching of American history" (Dubinsky and Davies, 2018) to the curriculum. Puerto Rican legislators have for their part also tried to make Spanish the required language of instruction in public schools to protect themselves from the American encroachment in 1913, 1933, and again in 1947, but their efforts were vetoed by the U.S. appointed governor or the sitting U.S. President each time.

Roma and Romani language in Europe

Currently working on: an entry on the Roma and Romani language in Europe. The synopsis is as follows: The Roma are a people with a long history of wandering and statelessness, a fact which has contributed greatly to their current language conflict. Influenced by many different languages, the Romani language is actually a collection of diverse dialects. The Roma are heavily discriminated against and have been since their original migration into Europe in the 11th or 12th century. As a population that is racially distinct from Europeans and without any literary tradition or organized religion of their own, the Roma have never "belonged" in any country they settled in. Today they remain stateless and scattered, a fact which makes legal defense of Romani difficult. There is currently an effort to codify and then propagate a standard dialect of Romani in order to revitalize the language; Romani is listed as "definitely endangered" on the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2017), meaning that Romani children are no longer learning the language as their mother tongue in their homes. The future of the Roma and Romani remains to be seen.