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# CONTEMPORARY GULLAH SPEECH

## Some Persistent Linguistic Features

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**Within recent years**, many federally funded programs have been devoted to the study of Black speech in America. Some great achievements have resulted from these programs, including the development of new curricula, better teacher-training programs, and a reversal of negative attitudes not only for Black students, but for all students who speak a nonstandard variety of English. Given the history associated with the study of “proper” or standard English usage, these accomplishments are no small feats.

My only quarrel with the research undertaken on Black languages thus far is that it does not take into account other varieties of black speech. Most of the research has been undertaken with youths in the inner cities of New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, and elsewhere. There appear to be few,

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if any, random samples taken from the rural areas of the South that historically have had dense populations of Black speakers. Yet, what seems to have emerged is a list of features that are understood to be characteristic of Black speech in general. True, most of the features listed by Labov (1972), Wolfram (1969), Fasold (1972), and others are indeed characteristic of northern inner-city speech. But there are other speech varieties in Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina that do not conform with the inner-city varieties, and that have received far less attention. These speech varieties do represent a smaller segment of the total Black population; nevertheless, their speech is distinct and should not be assigned to the general category of Black dialect. Such an assignment can be misleading. Some educators in South Carolina, for example, were given a list of features characteristic of Black speech, and these features had little correlation with the language of the Black students that they teach. The problem rests primarily with the general attitude that all Black people in America who speak a nonstandard variety of English speak what is generally referred to as Black dialect. This concept is, of course, false.

The information contained in this article was compiled primarily for teachers, administrators, and students in the Charleston, Georgetown, Beaufort, and other public school districts along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. The features commonly associated with Black dialect do not correspond to Black speech in these areas because the students do not speak Black dialect. They speak contemporary Gullah.<sup>1</sup> Gullah, also commonly known as Geechee, is a language spoken historically by African-Americans residing on the islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. While some linguists feel that the language is dead or dying, residents of the islands, teachers, and administrators with a high concentration of island students, will surely disagree.

I have compiled, as nontechnically as possible, a description of *some* of the most persistent features in contemporary Gullah speech. While the list is by no means exhaustive, the features

outlined may be of theoretical interest to those desiring to make historical linguistic comparisons, or of practical interest to those desiring to develop better teaching aids but who do not feel secure with their knowledge of contemporary Gullah features. The communication process can be infinitely improved if both teacher and student know what a Gullah feature is, and in what grammatical positions it can be expected to appear.

Before discussing the selected features, it is important to clarify several facts about Gullah in order to distinguish it from the speech of other Black Americans. First, Gullah is *not* synonymous with the term "Black dialect" linguistically or socially. Gullah is linguistically defined as a creole language and inland Black speech is defined as a dialect of English. A dialect of English is used here to refer to a variant of the English language peculiar to a particular region or social context. In America, most dialectal variations present few major comprehension barriers to other speakers of American English outside a particular region. Gullah, on the other hand, is considered a language because in most instances it still lacks the mutual intelligibility with English that is afforded most varieties of American English. Consequently, it falls within the realms not of a dialect, but of a language.

Second, Gullah, like other authentic creole languages such as Jamaican and Guyanese Creole, resulted from the merger of English and West African languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Twi, and others (see Turner, 1949). While Gullah and Black dialect do share common racial ancestors, geographical isolation and social factors combined to nurture and produce divergent language developments. Until the early 1940s most of the Sea Islands were separated from the coast of the United States; even today, some of the more remote islands are accessible only by boat. On these more remote islands the children are ferried to the coast on a school boat in order to attend public schools. Unlike inland Black communities, the Gullah-speaking communities historically have had little contact with whites. In some districts along the coast of South Carolina, federal census

figures of 1830 revealed that the African population outnumbered the European by as much as 180 Blacks to every 19 whites (Wikramanayake, 1973). The few white families that have historically made their homes on the islands do speak Gullah, and readily admit to speaking it. Most say they learned it as a first language from their parents, neighbors, and island playmates.

Today the Black islanders are still in a majority, and still enjoy the freedom and liberties of geographically imposed isolation, often including the election of their own mayors and other law officers. The impact of outside social forces such as better transportation and educational facilities are not yet intense enough to greatly influence and modify such historical traditions as extended families, child-rearing practices, religious and other socially cohesive customs. Commensurate with these historical practices, Gullah still thrives as the language of familiarity to the Sea Island communities.

Third, and perhaps most important, few features associated with Black dialect are features of Gullah. True, like Black dialect the lexicon of Gullah is composed primarily of English words. Even so, there are a host of African derived words in Gullah that are generally unknown to inland Black speakers, including *gula*, pig; *yɛnt*, to lie; *yɛri*, *yeddy*, to hear; *bɛx*, to annoy; *adobe*, roof covering; *unu*, you; *gumbi*, a medicinal weed; and many others (see Turner, 1949; Jones-Jackson, 1978a). Most linguists agree, however, that lexicon is perhaps one of the most arbitrary features that languages borrow from each other, and it is in this area that languages tend to borrow most extensively. As Givón (1973) explained, when different linguistic groups come in contact, it is natural that the area of most acute linguistic conflict will be the lexicon, which, again, is the area that languages are likely to borrow most from each other to resolve the communication conflict. But, according to Givón, languages seldom borrow grammar. Thus, in working in areas where Gullah is spoken, it does well to understand that while the lexicon is primarily English, much of the underlying grammar is rooted in West African languages such as Igbo,

Yoruba, Efik, Twi, and others; these account in part for some of the unusual sentence patterns in Gullah.

In keeping with the objectives of this article, I have used Wolfram's "matrix of cruciality" to select for discussion two categories of grammatical features still persistent in contemporary Gullah speech, and which are important for students to control in situations where they will be expected to use a form of standard English.

### FEATURES RELATED TO PRONOUN USAGE

One of the most significant grammatical patterns clearly distinguishing Gullah from inland Black dialect and standard English is seen in the pronominal system. It is in this system that one can still observe clear demarcations between European and West African language patterns. For example, English has historically employed separate pronouns to refer to masculine *he*, *him*; feminine *she*, *her*; and neuter genders *it*. Some West African languages from which Gullah is in part derived, such as Yoruba, Igbo, and others, do not make a formal distinction between forms used to refer to masculine, feminine, or neuter genders. In Yoruba / *ó* /, for example, is a pronoun used in the nominative case as a reference for *he*, *she*, and *it*. /*rɛ*/ is used in the objective case to mean *him*, *her*, and *it*. The same form /*rɛ*/ is used in the possessive case to refer to *his*, *hers*, and *its*. Other West African languages such as Igbo, Ewe, and Gã have similar systems (Turner, 1949).

Gullah speakers seem to have inherited this pattern of using a single pronoun to refer to masculine, feminine, and neuter genders. Today, many speakers, including children, still adhere to this Africanlike pronominal system. Unlike English, which uses distinct pronoun forms to distinguish between the sexes, Gullah often use *e* or *he* (/i/ or /hi/)<sup>2</sup> to refer to masculine, feminine, or neuter genders in the nominative case. There is no confusion when these forms are used. When a female is the subject of conversation, *e* or *he* is generally used as an apposi-

tive to specify the previously named person—as in “my mother, *e* was in church.” This practice of using a single pronoun for a range of functions is common in many Asian languages as well. I would like to emphasize that the pronoun *she* is used in Gullah as well as *e* and *he* in reference to females. Because the language is in a state of flux, there are a number of variants used within a given community. However, Jones-Jackson (1978a) conducted a survey in which all possible third-person singular pronoun variants were tested and compared to determine the frequency with which each variant occurred. In the analysis of variants marking feminine gender, the findings revealed that of the 67 times that the Gullah speakers in the survey used a third-person feminine pronoun in the nominative case, the form *e* was selected 37 times, *he* 19 times, and standard English *she* only 10 times. It is significant to mention that speakers whose overall performances reveal alternation between *e* and *he* as feminine references (these forms are also used as masculine references), seldom, if ever, used the standard English form *she*. It is significant because such usage strongly suggests that these speakers do not formally distinguish between masculine and feminine gender, and that their pronominal system is still reflecting the influence of certain West African patterns.

#### ABSENCE OF THE PRONOUN *HER*

While *she* is heard in contemporary Gullah speech, it is most often used as a substitute for *her*, which is a pronoun seldom heard. The appearance of *her* is rare in the nominative case, and even more rare in the genitive and objective cases. Most characteristic of contemporary speech, one hears *she* substituted in syntactical positions where standard English usage would require *her*, as in the following examples:

Gullah: Do you know *she*?

English: Do you know *her*?

Gullah: She name is Pat.

English: Her name də Pat.

Gullah: She can fix she own hair.

English: She can fix her own hair.

Considering the underlying West African structure of Gullah speech, whereby one pronoun can perform a range of functions in a number of syntactic positions, one can clearly understand the logic inherent in the speaker's grammar.

#### ABSENCE OF THE PRONOUN *IT*

Like the pronoun *her*, the pronoun *it* is missing in most varieties of contemporary Gullah. Jones-Jackson (1978a) found that the creole pronouns *e* and /ə m/ replaced *it* 97% of the total number of times that a neuter pronoun was needed in subject position, as in "the rain, *e* də come": "It is raining." Likewise, the data revealed that əm, a historical marker, was substituted for *it* in the objective case 96% of the total occurrences. Note the following examples:

Gullah: e miss əm clean.

English: He missed it completely.

Gullah: e know əm, but *e* can't call əm.

English: She knows it, but she can't remember it.

The objective case pronoun əm in Gullah should not be confused with, or thought to be a contracted form of either *them* or *him*. As Bickerton (1973) pointed out for Guyanese Creole, a language with behavior patterns similar to Gullah, any etymological connection between English *him* or *them* is questionable because *m* has no preaspirated allomorphs such as *him*, *is*, or *her*, nor can əm be contracted like *them* to produce 'em. In contemporary Gullah, əm continues to be used as the primary objective case pronoun substituted in syntactic positions where standard English commonly uses *him*, *her*, and *it*.



### ABSENCE OF THE PRONOUN *US*

*Us* is still another pronoun often missing in Gullah speech. In syntactical positions where English grammar requires the objective case pronoun *us*, Gullah speakers substitute the nominative case pronoun *we*:

Gullah: *e* come this close to *we*.

English: He come this close to *us*.

Gullah: Several of *we* *bən* there.

English: Several of *us* were there.

### ABSENCE OF POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

The English genitive or possessive case pronouns were excluded from surveys conducted by Nichols (1976) and Jones-Jackson (1978a) because of the infrequency with which they appeared, especially for third person singular. Possessive pronouns such as *his*, *hers*, and *its* are generally missing in Gullah speech. The speakers appear either to avoid constructions in which English possessive pronouns must be used, or they substitute the creole pronoun *e* for masculine, feminine, and neuter (sometimes *she* for feminine); or they substitute, in place of *his*, *hers*, and *its*, the definite article *the* alone, or in conjunction with the word *own* (*the own*) (see Cunningham, 1970, for more detailed variation.)

Gullah: The wife aint *də* home.

English: My wife is not home.

Gullah: *e* hurt *e* foot.

English: It hurt its foot. (Depending on context)

English: He hurt his foot.

English: She hurt her foot.

Gullah: She can cook *she own*.

English: She can cook *hers* (her own).

The works of Turner (1949) and Cunningham (1970) offer systematic linguistic analyses of Gullah speech that are useful

to educators who want to know more prevailing linguistic differences between Gullah and standard English. If teachers know some of the differences between the pronominal system of Gullah and that of standard English, the theoretically they should be better equipped to point out these differences to their students. Again, I would like to stress the point that the pronominal features outlined here are not features characteristic of inland Black speech.

## **THE VERBS**

The verb system is another system that distinguishes contemporary Gullah from inland Black dialect and standard English. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of all salient features of the verb system in contemporary Gullah (see Turner, 1949; Cunningham, 1970). The uninflected verb and the preverbal markers are deeply ingrained in contemporary Gullah speech and are thus paramount to understanding how tense is marked in the language.

### **THE UNINFLECTED VERB**

Historically, Gullah speakers have maintained a "strongly marked aspectual system with little or no formal indication of tense" (Cunningham, 1970). Accordingly, a single verb-system may be used to refer to a past, present, or a future action. Turner (1949) explains that little importance is directed to the actual time that an action took place; rather, it was the mood and aspect of the action that impressed the speaker at the moment that are important. This, too, is a pattern common in West African languages such as Ewe, Mandinka, Kimbundu, Yoruba, and others, which are also contributing languages of Gullah (Turner, 1949).

This morphological pattern of not inflecting verbs for tense still continues in contemporary Gullah speech. Instead of using an English system of postverbal marking with -ed, -s, and -ing,

for example, Gullah speakers use a system of preverbal marking whereby the participles /də/, /bɛn/, /bɛnə/ and /dɔŋ /, the principle tense and aspect indicators, appear *before* the main verb to signal when an event occurred. Observe their appearances in the following constructions, which were obtained by asking Gullah speakers to produce the semantic equivalent of the English sentences with reference to shelling peas:

I shell them. (tenseless)	I shell əm.
She shells them.	She (e, he) də shell əm.
I am shelling them.	I də shell əm
I shelled them.	I bɛn shell əm.
I have been shelling them.	I bɛnə shell əm.
I have shelled them.	I dɔŋ shell əm.
I had shelled them some time ago.	I bɛn dɔŋ shell əm.

The preverb də, in "I də shell əm," can often be heard and understood as "I shelled them," as well as "I will shell them." The preverb bɛn is the primary marker of past tense in Gullah and genenerally replaces *was*, *were*, *-ed*, and the past tense of irregular verbs such as *felt*, *left*, *wet*, *come*, *saw*, *set*:

- Gullah: I bɛn around eleven year old.  
 English: I was around eleven years old.  
 Gullah: Several of we bɛn there.  
 English: Several of us were there.  
 Gullah: He bɛn leave.  
 English: He left.

#### ABSENCE OF -ED

The *-ed* past tense marker seldom appears in contemporary Gullah speech. In fact, in a survey in which *-ed* morphemes were counted against the number of times that a Gullah

speaker used *bɛn* to mark past tense in sentences such as “the weather looked bad,” the results were conclusive in showing that the *-ed* morpheme was not in the grammar of the speakers tested. The speakers either marked past tense with *bɛn*, as in “the weather b n bad;” or they left the verb unmarked as in “the weather look bad.”

The *-ed* morpheme has also been noted to be absent in a number of inland Black dialect speakers. While linguists (Labov, 1972; Wolfram, 1969; Fasold, 1972) have undertaken studies to show that though *-ed* is deleted in Black dialect, its deletion is only a surface manifestation; they feel that *-ed* has the same grammatical function of marking past tense in the deep structure of Black dialect as the *-ed* of standard English. They show that *-ed* is in the grammar of inland Black speakers, but is deleted through a series of phonological rules (see Labov, 1972). This may well be the case for contemporary Black dialect. Historically, however, it seems to be a more natural language process that some inland Black speakers, like present day Gullah speakers, have never acquired *-ed* as a past -tense grammatical category. This would seem more logical (though I admit languages are not always logical) than Black dialect speakers acquiring a grammatical rule for marking past tense with *-ed* only to acquire another phonological rule to delete it again.

#### ABSENCE OF -S SUFFIX

Historically, Gullah has not been marked for subject verb concord and there is no synchronic data to suppose that it is marked for it now. As was the case with the *-ed* suffix, the *-s* suffix is rare in contemporary Gullah speech. Its absence cannot be accounted for by any grammatical or phonological deletion processes. A quantitative investigation to determine the frequency with which the *-s* suffix appeared on main verbs (especially third person singular) showed that 19 out of 21

speakers showed no number concord at all. The two who revealed any traces of concord produced sentences that were neither acceptable as Gullah nor standard English speech; e.g., "I goes over there" (Jones-Jackson, 1978a).

Gullah speakers share this grammatical feature with some Black dialect speakers. Labov, who based his investigation on quantitative data and structural clues, concluded that the *-s* suffix in the grammar of the consultants participating in his Detroit study. Rickford (1974) points out that in decreolized varieties of Gullah (varieties more similar to English) one can find constructions that are completely absent in earlier descriptions of "Gullah," but are matched exactly in many inner-city varieties of Black dialect. I suggest that the reverse is also true. There are constructions that have been *present* historically in Gullah speech and are still matched exactly in many varieties of northern and southern Black speech. The absence of *-ed* and *-s* in both speech varieties, for example, strongly suggests Black dialect evolved from a creole ancestor like Gullah.

## NOUNS

### ABSENSE OF *-S* (PLURALITY)

Unlike standard English, which indicates plurality by adding *-s* or *-es* to nouns, Gullah does not inflect the noun in any way to suggest whether it is singular or plural. Distinction is made through the use of a qualifying demonstrative pronoun or numeral adjective. Turner (1949) demonstrates in great detail that this practice has basis in Igbo, Efik, Yoruba, and other West African languages that influenced Gullah.

### MASS NOUNS

Cunningham (1970) notes that the Gullah characterization of mass nouns into singular and plural is not synonymous with

that of standard English. According to her, the Gullah speaker appears to analyze the referent of the noun into its component parts and in accordance with this, supplies them with plural determiners. Note the following (Cunningham, 1970):

Gullah: them lumber  
 English: the, that lumber  
 Gullah: them sand  
 English: the, that sand

#### COUNT NOUNS

Count nouns refer to nouns that can be counted, such as boys, shoes, horses, and the like. Standard English requires that the noun be inflected with *-s* or *-es* to agree in number with its quantifier. In Gullah, plurality is signaled by cardinal numbers: one, two, three, . . . , or by the singular and plural demonstratives *this* and *that*, *these* and *those* respectively. As Cunningham (1970) notes, the singular demonstratives often perform as plurals as well:

Gullah: That one (man) had five wife.  
 English: That man had five wives.  
 Gullah: e ben take two of that pill.  
 English: She took two of those pills.  
 Gullah: The boy, them də hunt rabbit.  
 English: The boys are hunting rabbits.

Wolfram observes that the plural suffix is occasionally absent in Black dialect, which results in some speakers saying *He took five book*. But he notes that in his studies this pattern is infrequent. While Black dialect speakers do share a few of the features characteristic of Gullah speakers, on the whole, the languages and the cultures are still quite divergent. The Sea Islands remain rather closed communities; the language of these communities will continue to survive as long as the communities remain intact. The children are learning contem-

porary Gullah as a first language. Consequently, their first introduction to standard English may be in the classroom.

The issue of whether Gullah-speaking children should or should not be taught standard English in the classroom does not appear to be much of an issue to Sea Island parents. Most Black parents and educators who are residents of the islands feel that standard English should be taught without question.<sup>3</sup> With better educational facilities and job opportunities becoming more readily available in the cities and nearby resorts, the islanders for the most part perceive the acquisition of standard English as a means of social mobility both on and off the islands. Verbal and writing skills are highly valued and those who possess them are often rewarded handsomely (socially and financially) to interpret, advise, and offer communicative assistance to the church, school, and other members of the community.

The islanders are keenly aware that their speech differs from that of Blacks and whites in the inland parts of the United States. Educators in areas where this language is spoken, as well as the general American educational system, should not only be made aware of the differences, but—of equal importance—they should be made aware of how these differences came about. Such an awareness, if approached with a positive attitude, will go far in instilling pride not only in Gullah speakers, but in Black dialect speakers, who are unaware of the tremendous African influence still within the culture as well as the linguistic system of the Sea Islands.

## NOTES

1. I use the term "contemporary Gullah" to describe the language as it now exists on the Sea Islands. It is being influenced by outside motivational forces such as better transportation and better educational facilities. These forces, however, are not yet strong enough to influence the language to the extent that it has become indistinguishable from Black dialect or standard English.

2. The values for the Gullah vowel symbols used in this discussion are as follows:

- i—the vowel sound in he
- I—the vowel sound in bit
- ɛ—the vowel sound in met
- ə—the vowel sound in about
- ɔ—the vowel sound in saw

3. I owe special thanks to Mrs. Dorothy Brown, a resident, teacher, and parent of Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina for her assistance in helping to clarify and understand parental attitudes on the general acceptability of teaching standard English in the classroom.

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