

Gullah's Development: Myth and Sociohistorical Evidence

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INTRODUCTION

The term *myth* in the title of this paper is intended to be provocative, not disparaging, although I sometimes dwell on the nonfactual nature of the evidence adduced in some accounts of the development of African-American speech. The word *myth* underscores the assumption that historical discourse is not a report of facts but an interweaving of fact and fiction, often with ideologically induced distortions.

Writing about the development of a language variety is also writing a historical myth, as facts may be distorted to suit the ideology of authors in their attempt to explain phenomena that interest them. As in any historical discourse, the balance between facts and ideological distortions is a delicate one. Therefore, an important question for scholarship is: what is the degree of fit between fact and interpretation?

In this paper, I discuss my working assumptions, review some sociohistorical evidence concerning the development of colonial South Carolina, and assess its interpretation in some accounts of the development of Gullah. After highlighting shortcomings and strengths of competing analyses, I propose an alternative, which, I claim, distorts the facts the least and makes obvious some questions. The questions still need plausible answers. This paper continues my articulation of the sociohistorical ecology in the context of which the formation of Gullah must be interpreted. It outlines a research agenda more than it answers some of the thorny research questions that it raises, questions that should be at the center of the debate on creole genesis.

WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

First, according to the ideological background that molds my account, I will call a variety a creole if it was associated at some point in its genesis with a creole population. Current research on structural features of creoles and the sociohistorical conditions of their development has made it difficult to determine which contact-generated language varieties are creoles and which ones are not. As languages are typically identified in relation to the ethnicity of their speakers, characterizing a new class of creole language varieties in relation to creole populations may do no harm as long as no typological-structural claims are made a priori.

Second, regarding the origin of the structural features of creoles and other contact varieties, I see only two competing influences: lexifier (or superstrate) and substrate. The lexifier is the primary source of the lexical material, what Robert Chaudenson (1979, 1989, 1992) calls "*matériaux de construction*," and probably

of an important component of the grammatical principles of the new language varieties.¹

I consider the substrate element as one of the factors accounting for differences among new varieties lexified by the same language, keeping in mind that lexifiers themselves were not homogeneous and may not have been represented in the same makeup in different colonies. The definition of substrate influence needs to be expanded beyond the sense of the French term *apports*, features brought from substrate languages that may not be present in the lexifier, to include the determination of what features of the lexifier are selected into the contact variety. Substrate influence may thus account for structural alternatives among creoles which may equally be traced back to the lexifier, for instance, in the different ways the new varieties express the progressive, the habitual, or the perfect. For example, English contact varieties in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans have resorted to different strategies for marking the progressive/durative aspect, the perfect, and even relative clauses. Definiteness and plurality are not expressed in identical ways in Jamaican and Gullah.

I look at the bioprogram as a body of principles and constraints which, in part, guarantees that the outcome of the restructuring of the lexifier will be a language (Mufwene 1989). Contrary to Bickerton (1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1992), who claims creations almost *ex nihilo* from the point of view of syntax, I see the bioprogram as regulating how selected features get integrated into the new system, sometimes as competing variants. In other words, the bioprogram is not a factor of the same kind as the substrate and lexifier in the development of new contact varieties.

Third, contrary to Thomason and Kaufman (1988), I assume that the populations that developed Gullah and similar contact vernaculars had access to the lexifier. What makes the creole-development situation different from second language acquisition is that the lexifier varied and must have diverged substantially from anything spoken in the British Isles by the time the basilects emerged.

Fourth, I am assuming the model for the formation of contact vernaculars presented by Chaudenson (1979, 1989, 1992) and Baker (1990, 1993; Baker and Corne 1986) for French colonies in the Indian Ocean and the New World, and by Mufwene (1992) for South Carolina. According to the model, Europeans settled in and peopled their colonies in phases. In the first phase, lasting from ten to fifty years, they lived in small homesteads, made their living primarily farming and trading, and developed a technological infrastructure. Europeans generally outnumbered non-Europeans, integrated the latter in their homesteads, and often mated with them. These living conditions produced a sizable creole population, with several mulattoes, who spoke colonial varieties of the lexifier. These varieties differed minimally from those spoken by European colonists and may have reflected variation in the latter.

As colonization moved into the second phase, characterized by agricultural and mining, non-Europeans far outnumbered Europeans. Segregation was institutionalized, newcomers were seasoned by the creole or previously seasoned slaves, and plantation vernaculars emerged more and more different from the colonial varieties of the lexifiers spoken by the creole populations. Because no large

plantation was peopled overnight to produce the population disproportions ratios typically associated with creolization, we must assume that the new vernaculars diverged gradually from the European models toward the basilectal constructs often assigned to them. Since infant mortality was high during the second phase and the slave population increased mostly by importations from Africa, it is implausible that children formed the new vernaculars (Mufwene 1996a, b). The basilect may have stabilized by the time slavery was abolished. Or perhaps, with some variation in timing from plantation to plantation, the development of the new vernaculars may have stabilized when a permanent critical mass was reached.

The abolition of slavery marks the third phase, which was characterized for some communities by importation of non-European indentured labor. This period saw the formation of new African communities, such as those in Trinidad (see Warner-Lewis 1996), which preserved some of their African languages intact. Based on Lalla and D'Costa (1990) and Baker (1990), it may be assumed that since cross-plantation interactions among slaves were not regular during the earlier stages, some cross-plantation leveling must have taken place during this third, post-formative phase, especially toward the end of the 19th century. This factor may account for the relative regional uniformity of Gullah, despite claims by Smith (1926b) and Bennett (1908) for cross-plantation variation.

MYTHS ABOUT GULLAH'S GENESIS AND THEIR SHORTCOMINGS

With the above working assumptions, I now assess diverse interpretations of the genesis of Gullah and indirectly of AAVE. The oldest myth about Gullah's genesis lies in the now defunct claim that its structural peculiarities are due to the physiological features of its primary speakers, especially to what is characterized as their indolence, their clumsy tongues, and their fat lips.

Adam (1882) and Vinson (1882) are reported by (Baggioni 1988) to have spoken of Africans' inability to learn the allegedly "superior" IE languages:

Le créole diffère de nos patois précisément par son caractère artificiel: le patois est un langage naturel antérieur, latéral, secondaire au langage littéraire; le créole est l'adaptation d'une langue, et surtout en fait d'une langue indo-européenne, au génie pour ainsi dire phonétique et grammatical d'une race linguistiquement inférieure. (Vinson 1882; qtd. in Baggioni 1988:87)

'A creole differs from our patois precisely by its artificial character: a patois is a natural language anterior, lateral, and secondary to literary language; a creole is the adaptation of a language, and especially in fact of an Indo-European language, to the phonetic and grammatical genius, so to speak, of an inferior race'. (my translation)

This position is echoed in Bennett's (1908, 1909) account. What he describes as distorted retentions of English archaic dialectal features are:

... the natural result of a savage and primitive people's endeavor to acquire for themselves the highly organized language of a very highly civilized race [and] ... the endeavor of untutored Africans, deficient in sound-appreciation and delicate vocalizations, to acquire English through a Scotch medium, produced the singular inflections and enunciations which characterize the pure Edisto *Gullah*. (1908:338)

In *Gullah*, intellectual indolence, or laziness, physical and mental, which shows itself in the shortening of words, the elision of syllables, and modification of every difficult enunciation, results in phrases so disguised that it is difficult at times to recognize them, or, at sight, to comprehend the process of their derivation, so great has been the sound-change and so complete the disintegration. (1909:30)

The general attitudes held then toward the black race made this physiological explanation irresistible (see also Mille, this volume).² The determinative influence of the substrate languages set aside, it did not matter that many of the structural features of *Gullah* were in fact European.

Up to the 1930s, the Baby-Talk Hypothesis, according to which pidgins and creoles developed from child-like attempts by non-Europeans to speak European languages, seems to have been popular. It was invoked not only by Schleicherians such as Adam (1882) and Vinson (1882) to account for the genesis of French creoles, but also by Bloomfield (1933). Jespersen (1922) is a remarkable exception.

Krapp (1924) did not see the contradiction between the Baby-Talk Hypothesis and the English Dialect Hypothesis he substitutes for it:

The Negro speaks English of the same kind and, class for class, of the same degree as the English of the most authentic descendants of the first settlers in Jamestown and Plymouth [in Virginia].

The Negroes, indeed, in acquiring English have done their work so thoroughly that they have retained not a trace of any African speech. Neither have they transferred anything of importance from their native tongues to the general language. A few words, such as *voodoo*, *hoodoo*, and *buckra*, may have come into English from some original African dialect, but most of the words commonly supposed to be of African origin, e.g., *tote*, *jazz*, and *mosey*, are really derived from ancient English or other European sources. (190)

Krapp's position is repeated by Johnson (1930) and Crum (1940:101), who notes, "Gullah is predominantly English, a true English dialect; in fact more truly English than much of the English spoken in America today." While making allowance for the Baby-Talk Hypothesis (8), Johnson (1930) observes:

The most numerous class in the colony before the slave trade began to flourish was composed of indentured servants, laborers, and artisans. They worked side by side with the Negroes and came into contact with them in various other ways, and it was from them that the slaves learned most of their English.³ (7)

The Negro took over the English of the whites with whom he was associated, and he did it remarkably well. White speech has undergone some degree of change, moving a little nearer, perhaps, toward a standard American English, but, because of cultural isolation, the Negro lags behind, thus conserving the white man's linguistic past. (11)

Rebutting claims which attribute several of Gullah's peculiarities to African linguistic influence, he writes:

He [the Gullah speaker] has merely responded to the speech patterns with which he was confronted in the low-country by assimilating them in practically every detail. His speech comes nearer being a duplicate of eighteenth century English dialect to which he was exposed than the speech of some of our immigrant groups, say the Germans and the Scandinavians, comes to being a copy of nineteenth century English. (51)

It does not seem to have bothered proponents of the English Dialect Hypothesis that there was no native white dialect of English identical to either Gullah or AAVE. That is, even though the African-American is supposed to have preserved a variety that the European American has outgrown, no evidence is adduced to support the claim that there was a time in the development of American English when poor whites and the vast majority of African-Americans spoke the same language variety. Neither do they show how poor white Americans outgrew that variety which most African-Americans putatively preserved. Although this myth is not totally fictitious (assuming the English origin of most of Gullah's and AAVE's vocabulary and part of their grammars), its implausibility comes from its denial of the contribution of African languages to, at least, African-American speech itself.

With *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, Turner (1949) responds to both the English Dialect Hypothesis and the position held by Bennett and Gonzales. His position was that Gullah, which he identified as a "dialect" of English, "is indebted to African sources" (254). Having cited Sylvain (1936), he also resuscitated her position that Haitian Creole consists of Ewe grammar with a French vocabulary. It did not matter to most of his followers that he was not as specific as Sylvain in identifying a specific African language as the provider of Gullah's grammatical substratum, nor that he actually discussed little of Gullah grammar and focused more on its vocabulary. They created the myth of dominant African grammatical influence in Gullah.

The soundest critique regarding Turner's lexical evidence is Cassidy's (1983) observation that very few of the regular items, i.e., those that are not proper names, occur in the spontaneous narratives at the end of the book. Like Cassidy (1983), Mufwene (1985) concluded that the basket names studied by Turner (1949) are post-formative additions, as their phonologies reflect distortions imposed by an established English-like system. This finding is consistent with the positions of the present essay that Gullah developed gradually and in the direction of basilectalization, having started with closer approximations of colonial English.

Since Turner, there has been little debate on the development of Gullah, except for Cassidy (1986), discussed in Mufwene (1992). Most of the literature has been on the hypothesis that Gullah decreolized (i.e., debasilectalized) presumably in comparison with its Caribbean kin.⁴ Mufwene (1987, 1991a, 1991c, 1994) argues against this position, citing the sociohistorical evidence discussed below, asserting that early and late 20th-century Gullah texts do not differ.⁵

GULLAH'S DEVELOPMENT: WHAT SOCIOHISTORICAL EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

The Spaniards had settled in several places on the South Carolina coast since 1526. The British colonization of South Carolina began in 1670 with colonists and slaves from Barbados. They raised cattle and pigs, and a few traded meat and fur with the Indians (Wood 1974; Ver Steeg 1975). Their typical dwellings were homesteads (not plantations), which they shared with their African slaves, who remained a minority until 1700. Population was estimated by the Spanish governor in 1671 to be 30% African. A year later in the British colony it was "800 English and 300 Negroes," or 27% (Wood 1974:25). In 1700, the colony counted 3,000 (descendants of) Africans against 3,800 (descendants of) Europeans, showing a more rapid growth of the black population, due both to natural reproduction and to importations mostly from the West Indies. There were a handful of plantations then but not many, nor were these large enough to make South Carolina the rice plantocracy it became in the 18th century. Africans barely outnumbered Europeans in 1708, when 4,100 Africans were counted, against 4,080 European. In 1720 Africans became an important majority, totalling 11,828 against 6,525 Europeans (see also the table below). From this year to 1740, the population increased significantly, growing to 39,155 Africans against 20,000 Europeans. The following table, excerpted from Wood (1989:39), illustrates part of what he terms "the changing population" of the colony from 1685 to 1790:

	<i>Year</i>							
	1685	1700	1715	1730	1745	1760	1775	1790
<i>White</i>	1,400	3,800	5,500	9,800	20,000	38,000	71,000	140,200
<i>Black</i>	500	2,800	8,600	21,600	40,600	57,900	107,300	108,900

These figures reflect an increase both in the size and number of plantations, corresponding to the industrialization of rice culture on primarily the coastal plantations. After the first 50 years, however, the population grew more by importation from Africa and Europe. Indentured labor was imported from Europe in part to counterbalance, if not to offset, the African population. In 1720, South Carolina became a crown colony. The year also marked the institutionalization of segregation, barring regular social interaction between Africans and Europeans. Ver Steeg (1975:131) mentions the increasing "fear of black power" among the white colonists, which "led to the political response of the 1720s to propose and execute a township system to contain the territorial limits of slavery [to the coastal area],

thereby attempting to moderate its social-economic effect." The creole slaves, including several mulattoes (the epitome of racial creolization), lived with the new African slaves in separate quarters from the Europeans. With this, the creoles' speech, the counterpart of Chaudenson's (1979, 1989, 1992) *français approximatif* in the sense that it is not drastically different from white colonial speech—became the model and lexifier for the noncreole slaves.

Institutionalized segregation thus marks an important turning point, which led to the development of Gullah as an African-American variety distinct from European-American varieties. Abolition of slavery did not bring the *de facto* segregation of the populations to an end; to date African-Americans and European-Americans have remained basically separate communities. Although the less powerful group accommodates the more powerful one in switching to what creolists have called the acrolect, separate linguistic communities that follow different norms have emerged, even though they overlap in some respects.

Between 1745 and 1760, growth rates were reversed in favor of the European population. Elsewhere I argue that this shift makes the period between 1720 and 1750 the critical stage in the emergence of Gullah as a distinct African-American variety (Mufwene 1992).

Without more specific information, the above demographics, applied uniformly to the whole colony, might still lead to incorrect conclusions on the restructuring of language during the first half of the 18th century. To begin with, when coastal South Carolina switched to the naval stores and rice field industries between 1710 and 1720, this switch did not mark the discontinuation of trade and farming by some Europeans, nor did plantations replace homesteads. According to Ver Steeg (1975:112), trade especially "contributed to capital accumulation, providing one means of obtaining money and credit to buy land and slaves." As far as Gullah is concerned, we are dealing with a partial and uneven transformation, even though, according to Joyner (1991:218), rice fields of 100 slaves or more account for about half the slave population in 1790 and for 80% by 1810. Wood (1974:55) notes that "as late as 1720 there was probably more labor engaged in the production of meat exports and naval stores than in the growing of rice." As becomes clearer below, Gullah may have developed slowly and more or less separately, though not completely independently on each major plantation throughout the 18th century.⁶

The plantations which developed were more or less self-contained estates whose populations were not in regular contact with each other (e.g., Smith 1926b). Also, though it is generally reported that in coastal South Carolina the average disproportion of Africans to Europeans by the beginning of the 19th century was ten to one (e.g., Joyner 1989), the actual ratios varied from plantation to plantation (e.g., Joyner 1984). If the regular population disproportions that creolistics has relied on are taken seriously, the African-American plantation vernaculars that emerged must have varied from one estate to another, as suggested recently by Lalla and D'Costa (1990). That the variation is less obvious today suggests that some cross-plantation leveling must have taken place after the Civil War or the abolition of slavery (Mufwene 1991b).⁷

Gullah seems to have developed with different degrees of restructuring on large, naval store and rice plantations. This raises the question of what social and

demographic factors correlate with a particular linguistic output. Why did Gullah develop on the naval store and rice plantations and not on mainland tobacco and cotton plantations?

Coastal South Carolina is not a continuous piece of land on which European and African populations were more or less uniformly distributed during different phases of the colony's development. Historical sources suggest that plantations of different sizes existed at different times, in different places, with different population ratios, and often at a distance from one another. While one group could influence the linguistic development of another, especially whenever a new plantation started, there was also a lot of room for independent development. Cross-plantation contacts were not regular enough after initial development to influence further linguistic development. Meanwhile, in places where the homestead system was not discontinued and where small farmers outnumbered plantocrats, leading to a higher ratio of whites to blacks, it is unlikely that anything close to Gullah developed.

The above demographic data suggest that children may not have played as central a role in the development of Gullah as claimed by some hypotheses of creolization, including such less partisan analyses as Cassidy (1986). The birth rate was highest during the first forty to fifty years, a period during which the typical dwellings consisted of homesteads, in which the Africans were a minority and well integrated with the Europeans. The Europeans depended for their survival on Indians' and Africans' familiarity with the new subtropical ecology, in the same way Chaudenson (1992) posits the scenario for French colonies around the same time. Adult slaves needed to develop a full-fledged language variety from the first days of the colony, regardless of the extent of restructuring from the lexifier. Even if African parents developed a pidgin—as unlikely as this assumption is—their children during the first forty to fifty years of the colony must have spoken the kind of English spoken by the white children they grew up with. I surmise that the reason why no creole evidence has been reported from the 17th and early 18th centuries is that the language spoken by descendants of Africans sounded like that spoken by the descendants of Europeans.

The onset of the development of Gullah as a distinct African-American variety coincides with the adoption of the naval store and rice industries as lucrative investments, the massive importation of slaves directly from Africa, the high infant mortality among black creole and African labor, the growth of the population mostly by continuous importation of slaves, institutionalized segregation and—borrowing terms from Chaudenson (1989, 1992)—the “autonomization” and “normalization” of the new African-American vernacular.

Gullah must have developed gradually throughout the 18th century, since the plantations did not reach their critical population disproportions suddenly. The land-development scenario proposed here suggests that over the years the lexifier must have been restructured again and again, becoming increasingly different from its original shape as more and more new slaves arrived from Africa while more and more seasoned slaves died, and as the original lexifier became less accessible. That is, Gullah must have started in a form closer to the lexifier and developed in the direction of its basilect.

Thus, what creolists have characterized as creolization amounts to no more than the basilectalization of the new vernacular, a process that ended with the fall of the rice plantation industry. Since segregated life patterns for descendants of Europeans and Africans still exist, we have reason for treating hypotheses of decreolization with skepticism. First, inter- and intra-individual variation, commonly invoked to support claims of decreolization, must have started with the inception of Gullah and other new language varieties that emerged in similar contact settings.

The gradual development of Gullah would have made African linguistic influence on its structure(s) possible at any time during its formation. However, in order to determine the nature of specific African influences, one must take several factors into account, including the diverse forms of English that were brought to North America as well as the diverse languages that the Africans brought with them.⁸ As representatives of the different African ethnolinguistic groups did not all arrive at the same time nor in the same proportions on the different plantations, the scenario of language contact in South Carolina is now much more complex than previously assumed in the literature on creolization. We wind up with a wide pool of features, characterized by a lot of variation, to which a sophisticated selection model should be applied to account for the features that distinguish Gullah from other 17th-century language varieties (Mufwene 1996a, b). The English lexicon in Gullah is only part of the story. Other things to consider are how Gullah made choices from among lexical and grammatical options available in the lexifier and substrate languages and how some meanings were redefined. Future work is needed also to determine whether Georgia Gullah should be considered an extension of South Carolina Gullah and why these varieties should be considered one regional-ethnic variety in contrast with AAVE.

CONCLUSIONS

The sociohistorical scenario proposed here is clearly at odds with myths surrounding Gullah's origins, but it is consistent with the history of settlements in South Carolina. It highlights several questions which call for more research. It also points out that the process of language formation was more complex than the literature has shown. The question is not whether Gullah is primarily English or African but what principles regulated the selection of its structural features. Since neither the English nor the African elements were homogeneous, research must address how selection operated both within the lexifier as a combination of several varieties and within the diverse substrate languages.

Myths based on African physiology, English dialects, baby-talk, and dominant African influence inadequately explain Gullah's genesis. I suspect that in the end it will have become irrelevant to speak of creole genesis as a special phenomenon. Rather, it will have helped us understand better how new language varieties develop in contact situations. We will have more adequate pictures of the development of varieties such as Gullah and AAVE only through carefully considering social history.

NOTES

1. Lexifiers may vary in this respect from one setting to another. In addition, the interactional dynamics which obtain between speakers of the lexifier and those of the substrate languages determine the relative accessibility of variants in the lexifier.

2. Though I know of no linguist who has used such an explanation to account for the genesis of Gullah, it perpetuates a view that Baggioni (1988) characterizes as Schleicherian, which sees non-Indo-European languages as inferior.

3. This claim is similar to Chaudenson's (1989, 1992) explanation for the formation of "le français approximatif" in the first phase of colonization.

4. The latest publications on this subject matter are Jones-Jackson (1986), Nichols (1986), and Rickford (1986b).

5. Mille (1990) shows similarities between late 19th-century texts and contemporary texts recorded by Mufwene and by Jones-Jackson and corroborates Mufwene's position, which prompted her quantitative investigation.

6. Some plantations were offshoots of others, developed earlier by the same plantocratic family. Creole and seasoned slaves from the previous plantation helped start the new one, in part by training the unseasoned slaves.

7. In contrast, striking differences have been reported by Bennett (1908) and corroborated by native speakers, but I have found these difficult to detect.

8. Details of how to address these questions on Gullah's development are discussed in Mufwene (1992), with ample references to the relevant literature.