

## Conscious Differentiation and the Preservation of Gullah

According to Campbell, *dialect* “means only a variety (regional or social) of a language, which is mutually intelligible with other dialects of the same language” (172), whereas *language* “means any distinct linguistic entity (variety) which is mutually unintelligible with other such entities” (173). In many cases, the distinction between these two objects as defined is clear and in line with both tradition and our intuitive understanding of the terms. However, one case which exposes an underlying issue with these definitions is that of the creole language. While Campbell points out that the word *creole* is notorious for contention over its various proposed definitions, he defines it as “a pidgin which has acquired native speakers,” and defines *pidgin* as “a marginal language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language” (309).

In this paper we concern ourselves with Gullah, also often called Geechee, a language which is generally, though not unanimously, considered to be a creole, with roots in English and various African languages, and which is spoken in regions in and around South Carolina and Georgia (Smalls 148). We will consider how speakers of Gullah interpret its relation to English, especially in terms of mutual intelligibility, and how these interpretations may affect the survival of Gullah itself. In particular, in this paper we claim that an intentional use of Gullah features which are distinct from the local Standard English not only give Gullah a practical use, but act to preserve the language by popularizing basilectal features which act as sites of group identity, and subsequently resulting in basilectalization in everyday Gullah speech. We begin with an overview of Gullah, and why it is particularly useful for understanding questions related to ambiguous intelligibility and the proliferation of a creole language living alongside one of its parents. We then outline what exactly we mean when we reference the survival of Gullah. We

then consider collective memory, and how a perception among Gullah speakers of mutual intelligibility between Gullah and English could theoretically augment attempts to preserve and proliferate Gullah. From here, we consider how Gullah is consciously differentiated from English by speakers in some cases, and why this construct will be beneficial to the preservation of the Gullah language.

First, we note that Gullah is currently considered an endangered language, with an estimated 300 native speakers (Endangered Languages Project), meaning that simply due to a dearth of speakers, the language and most circumstances surrounding it will be largely homogenous. Additionally, it is rarely spoken with non-speakers (Mufwene, "Ecology" 75). Thus, many changes a language could incur via conversational contact will not apply here. Thus in the case of Gullah, small changes which may be insignificant for larger languages which may be affected by their surroundings in a more complex way may be able to have less obscured impact on the future of the language.

While there is an intuitive understanding of what is meant by the survival of a language, there is a bit of ambiguity which we must first clarify. Considering its opposite, Jones-Jackson points out two possible forms of language death: one referred to as such, and one referred to as decreolization (352). Language death refers primarily to the loss or replacement of existing characteristics of a language, whereas decreolization refers to the "elaboration and expansion of options and varieties resulting from the intrusion and imposition of a standard, but similar language" (Jones-Jackson 352). Note that the term *decreolization* may come from the conception that creole or pidgin languages will often begin with less elaboration and will acquire more over time, a conception which Jones-Jackson points out (352). When we refer to language death, and

thus language survival, we will be referring to both of these forms, though we may refer to *language death proper* if we wish to only consider the loss and replacement of existing features.

Now although our main argument considers a benefit to the survival of Gullah from perceived mutual unintelligibility, we wish to first present a point which considers a possible benefit from perceived mutual intelligibility, which will provide a broader understanding of the processes of preservation available to Gullah in its current state and clarify which aspects of perceived unintelligibility we will be relying on later on. This point appeals to *collective memory*, which is described in McGrattan & Hopkins as “a diversity of understandings both of what pasts ought to be evoked or described or celebrated, and of the particular contents that representations or evocations of each of these pasts should incorporate or articulate” (493). Consider what past is preserved by the fact that Gullah is rarely spoken with non-speakers today, assuming that Gullah is considered by speakers to be a dialect of English. The consensus that Gullah is a dialect of English would of course imply that the original reason for not speaking the language in the presence of non-speakers was not due to an issue with mutual intelligibility. In fact, this consensus is indeed held among Gullah speakers, as Hamilton points out that Gullah speaking children believe that they are speaking English, as she did in childhood (51). Furthermore, Hamilton also notes that the actual reason is rooted in historical distrust: she considers the

extreme secrecy of Gullah-speaking communities, where informants told [Lorenzo Turner] they had “fared so badly at the hands of strangers that they are suspicious of anyone whom they do not know very well” and also that the “curiosity” and “lack of understanding” of outsiders was “a source of great annoyance to them and increase[d] their reticence” (56-57).

Collective memory frequently retains these sorts of “events that have some kind of inarticulate, traumatic resonance; events which provoke struggles over ownership, authorisation and,

ultimately, political (de)legitimacy” (McGrattan & Hopkins 490), so it would be reasonable that this reason was entered into the collective memory of Gullah speakers. Now as Assmann and Czaplicka point out, collective memory which manifests in shared practices is among that which “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (130), so this entry into collective memory can contribute to the strengthening of group identity of the community surrounding the Gullah language. And since Mufwene points out that a strong group identity is one of the things which is contributing to the survival of Gullah (“Ecology” 72), we have that a consensus among speakers that Gullah is a dialect of English could have some aspects which would be beneficial to the survival of Gullah. With this squared away, we may now consider our main argument, concerning the benefits of perceived unintelligibility between Gullah and English.

Now since we already provided evidence that Gullah speakers perceive Gullah and English to be mutually intelligible, one may expect any proposed benefits of a perceived unintelligibility to be purely theoretical. However, this is not the case. In order to notice both perceived mutual intelligibility and mutual unintelligibility between the same two languages, we consider how Gullah speakers modify their speech to further distinguish it from English when they wish to do so, a process which we will refer to as *conscious differentiation*. This phenomenon is documented by Smalls, via an interview with a woman who “discussed a particular ‘way of talking’[] that she did not necessarily designate as Gullah, but which seemed to be meaningfully connected to her own Gullah selfhood” (153). In particular, this “way of talking” was referred to as “another level of[] language” which could allow one to “speak about a white person in their presence without them knowing it,” among other things (Smalls 154), as

would be possible in that area in general for any language which was mutually unintelligible from English.

Now this sort of “way of talking” is of course going to have practical use for Gullah speakers especially. Recalling Hamilton’s consideration of distrust of outsiders within the community, one can see why being able to speak about outsiders in their presence would be useful on its own. However, we claim further that this tool also contributes to a sense of group identity. One possible justification for this would be that the usefulness of this tool may bring to modernity the distrust of outsiders and thus the reasoning behind this distrust as well, allowing us to invoke collective memory as we did with the consensus among speakers that Gullah is a dialect of English. However, we consider primarily the historical trajectory of Gullah and its relation to this intentionally altered speech pattern. In particular, Gullah has historically undergone the process of *basilectalization* (Mufwene, “Ecology” 70), which is the process in which the *basilectal* features—those less associated with the prestige language, in this case English—have been cultivated (Mufwene, “Languages” 11441). Mufwene points out that people who leave the region and “return, often after long periods of residence in New York and similar cities, typically revert to this vernacular,” and that “some of Gullah’s most basilectal features come from such speakers, after they have idealized their speech according to a stereotype that is not quite an accurate picture of the variable vernacular spoken by the community members they left behind” (“Ecology” 72). This is given as evidence of “the strength of community identity as an important factor in helping Gullah thrive against fears of its extinction” (Mufwene, “Ecology” 72). Thus this “way of talking” provides a site for Gullah speakers’ group identity formation, especially for speakers returning to the community after a period of time, as they see these

features as important to Gullah identity, and reciprocally they will cause basilectalization via their idealized speech.

We want to note that while basilectalization may endanger certain attributes of Gullah, any possibly endangered attributes are more likely going to be those which are seen in English as well. Considering language death proper, the loss or replacement of existing features, we note that the less prestigious features—that is, those which are not seen in English, the prestige language—are those which will be cultivated. While a ‘cultivation’ may in fact consist of changes over time, these features are not immediately endangered by this process. Furthermore, decreolization would involve the acquisition of English features, which of course we would not expect over the course of the basilectalization process. Thus although basilectalization will have an effect on the language, it will in large part preserve features which are unique to Gullah, and will not meet either of our criteria for constituting language death.

Now our claim is that the use of basilectal features in this process of conscious differentiation will result in an increase in basilectalization in everyday Gullah speech as well. And since we have already shown that this “way of talking” contributes to a sense of group identity, and that a sense of group identity begets the process of basilectalization, this is clear. It is important to note however that we have not necessarily claimed that the features which are more prominent in our conscious differentiation will be eventually prominent in the same way in everyday Gullah, even though both alterations to Gullah could roughly be categorized as basilectalization. We only claim that the use of basilectal features in consciously-differentiated Gullah provides a site for group identity formation, which in turn results in a separate process of basilectalization in everyday Gullah.

Now that we have made our argument, we will address two counterpoints which we anticipate. First, we point out two seemingly conflicting ideas which we have referenced: one that Gullah is not spoken around non-speakers, and one that it is, after it has undergone conscious differentiation. Mufwene's source for the first claim, which he published in an article in 1988, comes from a high-school student (75), and although Smalls does not explicitly give the age of Lola, her interviewee, it is noted that Lola's parents lived together before the 1950s (153), whereas the article itself was released in 2011. Thus, we may expect that either the reticence to speak Gullah in the presence of outsiders is decreasing over time, or that recently it has faded among older people. The latter of these does not pose a threat to our argument, as the reticence would remain a significant part of the upbringing of Gullah speakers, allowing it to lead to group identity by the way we have already described. The claim that people are less reticent to speak Gullah in the presence of outsiders now than in the past is more pertinent, but we can still point out that a reticence to speak Gullah *with* outsiders highlights the same historical distrust, given that we know that speakers consider Gullah to be a dialect of English. And this sort of reticence is still very much the case: if Lola is emphasizing basilectal features of Gullah in order to make herself unintelligible to outsiders, then she is relying on those outsiders not knowing those basilectal features, and thus also on other Gullah speakers being reticent to speak Gullah with these outsiders, who may live in or frequent the area.

Regarding our second counterpoint, we relied on historical distrust of outsiders being a feature of the past which needed to be modernized. However, such a distrust is certainly still present today, at least in some form, as the choice to not speak Gullah with outsiders is very much an active one, though it may have declined or changed over time. While this appears to be a possible issue with our argument, a closer look at the mechanism of collective memory

resolves that group identity can still gain utility from distrust in the past even if still exists in the present. Assmann and Czaplicka distinguish between practice-focused and discussion-focused collective memory, referring to them as *cultural memory* and *communicative memory*, respectively. Without communicative memory, it is true that a modern distrust may not connect a person to a historical one. However, a communicated understanding of the relationship between past and present connects the two: one understands that the modern distrust, and the corresponding reticence to share Gullah with outsiders, is intimately connected with a historical distrust, and the fact that this distrust has persisted so long, to say nothing of the intensity of the initial relations which may have initiated this distrust, is a site of group identity in and of itself, for the same reason that the distrust itself is in the first place.

One point which we wish to make as well is for those interested in determining what sort of actions may be taken to preserve Gullah into the future. In particular, a reader may come to an understanding that because an active reminder of historical distrust can strengthen the identity of the community surrounding Gullah, an attempt to share the Gullah language and culture with the world may come at the cost of this mechanism which preserves it. However, this is not necessarily the case. The changing nature of speakers' reticence to speak Gullah with and around outsiders indicates that this reticence may change forms over time, while still being maintained. Even if testimony is given to some trusted outside sources (including not only those which we have mentioned, but many others, which have increased in number since the 1950s), the stigma which Gullah receives from outsiders, which Mufwene mentions (72), is still going to be present in some capacity, so one can certainly study Gullah and provide information about it to the world without destroying this mechanism which is a factor in its survival.

In conclusion, although Gullah is considered by speakers to be a dialect of English, and it may undergo a process of preservation as a result of this, we have shown that there is a different process of preservation which relies on aspects of Gullah which are unintelligible to English speakers. We see two facts regarding the basilectal features of Gullah. One, the secrecy surrounding these features may highlight the collective memory of historical distrust of outsiders. Two, these features can be used as a tool to speak privately in the presence of outsiders, maintaining their relevance. The first of these strengthens group identity by the vehicle of collective memory, assuming that the historical distrust of outsiders becomes an entry into collective memory, and the second strengthens group identity by the fact that speakers who leave and return to the community consider these features to be important aspects of Gullah identity in and of themselves. Thus since group identity in Gullah has been shown to result in basilectalization, we see basilectalization, and a by-and-large preservation of features unique to Gullah resulting from the second of these processes, and assuming that historical distrust of outsiders has entered into collective memory, we see such a preservation resulting from the first process as well. A productive topic of further research would consider whether this historical distrust has in fact entered into collective memory, which would provide evidence that our first process is also a factor in preserving Gullah. While basilectalization is not identical to a complete preservation of Gullah, which would also preserve features present in English, hopefully this account of existing methods of preservation of certain features of Gullah will not only inform active efforts to preserve Gullah, but contribute to an understanding of other creole languages in similar situations as well.

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