

Gullah Is Shrouded In Linguistic Controversy

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In South Carolina's sea island coastal region, many blacks and some whites speak a language known as Gullah. An estimated 250,000 Americans use the language to communicate informally. Many live along a 250-mile corridor extending from Jacksonville, N.C. to Jacksonville, Fla.

Gullah is shrouded in linguistic controversy, with linguists explaining that the controversy centers on the key questions: Where did the language originate; Is the language European or African in origin?

Until recently, scholars who studied Gullah have greatly underestimated the extent of the language's African element. They assumed that Gullah was traceable almost entirely to the British dialects of the 17th and 18th centuries, and to a form of baby talk used by masters and slaves to ease communication among themselves.

Today Gullah is considered a Creole language. Linguists generally believe that Gullah resulted from a merger of English and the languages used along the West African coast, including Yoruda, Mandinka, Ibu, Kongo, and many others.

It is also generally believed that Gullah took root in Africa, while its main development occurred in the United States. West Africa at the time of the slave trade was a region of several hundred mutually understandable languages. Whenever enslaved Africans came together, they were forced to find similarities in their languages and to develop new ways of communicating.

In South Carolina, Gullah further evolved from use on the South Carolina low country plantations, as master and slave sought to understand each other.

Dr. Charles W. Joyner, in his book "Down by The Riverside," explains how the process most likely occurred:

South Carolina's Story

The making of a state



"With the social dominance of the master serving as a strong incentive to learn English, the numerical dominance of the blacks facilitated their retention of African patterns of speech. While they lacked a common linguistic heritage, through trial and error in their efforts to communicate with one another, Africans increasingly became aware of the common elements in their diverse tongues. More and more they found other speakers of their own in similar African languages. Out of those opposing tendencies — to learn English and to retain African speech patterns — they created a new language."

Several varieties of Gullah can be heard in day-to-day conversation today, but the number of people who speak it the way it was spoken in the mid-1850s — the language's golden age — is very small.

Gullah can be a language of graphic imagery. "Dayclear," for example, means dawn, while "Unrabel e mout," for unravel his mouth, means to talk a lot. "Trut mout" means true mouth or one who will not lie.

Linguists say enormous differences exist between Gullah and standard English. They estimate that 90 percent of the vocabulary is English, while most of the grammatical and intonational features are West African.

The geographical isolation, the marginal contact with speakers outside the S.C. sea island communities, and the area's social and economic independence all contributed to an environment that allowed the language to survive. Even today, many black children of the sea islands still learn Gullah at home.

However, economic development has come to the sea islands and threatened the traditional ways. The Gullah language has survived primarily among blacks who depend upon farming and fishing, but the isolation that nurtured the culture in which Gullah flourished is rapidly ending.

In 1950, nearly all the residents of Hilton Head Island — where the buying of land from blacks has been greatest — were black. But by 1980 whites outnumbered blacks five to one. Enticed by high land prices, many black families — who used to will the land to their children — now sell their land and go to live in apartments. At the same time, blacks leave their traditional jobs for better paying, seasonal work in the resort industry.

Gullah speakers on sea islands, who are proud of their language and the traditions associated with it, worry about modernization and its threat to their way of life.