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I'll Fly Away: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of African-American Homecomings

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"Belali Mohomet? Yes'm, I knows about Belali. He wife Phoebe. He hab plenty daughtuhs, Magret, Bentoo, Chaalut, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima, an Hestuh…Marget, she my Gran…Belali, he frum Africa, but muh gran she come by Bahamas"
--Katie Brown, Sapelo Island resident, 1940.

As part of the 1940 Federal Writer's Project, the Savannah, Georgia Unit sought to authentically record oral traditions and life experiences of coastal African Americans in their own words. The study sought to produce an important artifact of African American culture through dialectal awareness, especially to preserve these dialects during an apocalyptic linguistic change. Among the many voices, Katie Brown's echoed reminisces of a family history. Combined with Cornelia Walker Bailey's memoir, *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man,* this historical documentation gives life to the cultural traditions brought by Bilali and other slaves when they were forcibly settled on the plantations of coastal Georgia. These forced settlement patterns arose from the antebellum institution of chattel slavery and continued postbellum with established settlements of the former slaves (most of whom identify their heritage as Geechee) who stayed in Georgia before and after the Great Migration of the early 1900s. Analyzing internal language features through their corresponding socio-cultural influences provides a written certification of a primarily oral heritage. Therefore, I focus my research lens on the settlement patterns that occurred both during and after slavery.

Historical American Linguistic Connections

To give historical linguistic context to my study, I offer a brief treatment of America's lexical beginnings. The American English dialect that developed in the first thirteen colonies in the 1700s produced a lexicon that would eventually subsume economies, societies, and cultures throughout the world into the 21st century. The ancestors of the Geechee people of Sapelo were involuntary contributors to this dialect.

During this time period, American lexicographers and linguists developed a uniquely American variation, known today as Standard American English (SAE) dialect. Beginning in 1828 with Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language,* an official documentation of written English language provided new spellings and pronunciations that were different from Standard British English. Examples of some of these differences are consonant drops (honour to honor) and grapheme reversal (centre to center). Webster sought to clarify spellings through these changes and also included new pronunciations of British words as he called on Americans to: "Let us then seize the present moment and establish a national language as well as a national government." While not as well known as other revolutionary speeches, these words echo early Colonial sentiment for an American lexicographical identity. These changes, however, did occur in a vacuum. Particularly in the Southern colonies, slave populations added to the phonological and morphological features of the new dialect. In 1800, there were 59,406 slaves in Georgia, compared with 162,686 other residents. By 1850 the slave population swelled to 381,682 and 906,185 respectively. The percentage of slaves to other residents went from 37% to 42% during those years. The dialectal variations that existed in the Southern colonies differed from those in the Northern colonies. Along with fellow revolutionaries, Webster chronicled new American English dialectal language in a descriptive way. His lexical records represent a phase in American English's development in which we became apprentices in discovering our shared dialectal identity. Noah Webster did not have the final word, though.

Building on the lexical trend of descriptive grammar that began with Noah Webster in the early 19th century, I assert that scholars may define the abstract idea of "American Identity" in a direct manner by looking at lexical choices in American letters and literature from the 1800s forward. The dialectal diversity present in the writings of both women and men from varied linguistic, social, and ethnic experiences clearly points to wide-ranging language differences, sometimes resulting in language disparity of socially disfavored groups.

Beginning in the 20th century, we find changes in dictionaries of American English such as the *Third New International Dictionary* in 1959 that provided descriptive assessments of English and averted from making judgments on whether or not a word was "substandard" in usage (Clark, p. 75). Although progressing to a more descriptive purpose, dictionaries of the middle 20th century still documented primarily Standard American English not as one of many dialects but as "the standard" against which phonological and grammatical elements of other dialects were judged. Then, a new version of Noah Webster entered the field in the person of linguist Dr. Frederic Cassidy. In the 1970s, Cassidy embarked on a project that would become not just a description of American English, but instead an equivalent record of all American dialects. Known as DARE, the *Dictionary of American Regional English,* commenced in the 1960s and resulted in four volumes (1985-2002) detailing home-learned and community-based words from A-SK. A fifth volume is schedule for publication by the end of this year.

As an academic reference tool, *DARE* provides sociolinguists and other scholars with a researched record of community language within America's dialectal regions. One of these regions is the Geechee community on Sapelo Island and mainland coastal Georgia. Because of the forced migration and settlement patterns during the colonial period in the Georgia low country, slaves contributed a great deal of linguistic and cultural heritage to this area.

The Colonized Speak with the Colonizers

Africans and their descendents had lived in the low country since the 1700s and comprised a majority of the population during the Colonial era. In fact, when the seventeen-year-old Georgia colony lifted its ban on slavery in 1750, settlers flocked to Georgia, bringing their slaves with them and importing others from slave camps throughout the colonies. Supplementing Cornelia Bailey's own account and corroborating the oral discourse of Katie Brown, slave records show importation of skilled agrarians from mostly West Africa and the Gold Coast (Asante Empire) to cultivate rice, indigo, and cotton in the colony. During this Colonial period, African slaves placed their distinct imprints on Colonial Coastal Georgia's language. "Africans introduced words, grammar, and tonal patterns into the Gullah language, which provided a lingua franca for Africans from different regions and offered a means for them to communicate with their white holders" (Knight, 2004). The pidgin became a creole and then African American English over the course of colonial and post-colonial time. Ruef and Fleischer further write that of the four million slaves in Southern states at the time of Emancipation, more than 70% worked in cotton and rice fields (447). In the postbellum South, many ex-slaves remained in settlements on or close to their ex-slaveholders. Those who bought land still depended on their former holders for economic transactions for necessities such as seeds, farming equipment, and tools. Those who did not own land became sharecroppers, in specious arrangements "secured by a lien against the crops of the ex-slaves, where the liens allowed landlords and merchants considerable authority over the former slaves" (447). In coastal Georgia, many ex-slaves on both the mainland and the Sea Islands continued to work on the sites of their former imprisonments. It was in these times and places that a linguistic memory maintained cultural and historical customs and their corresponding oral traditions.

In the September 2004 *Modern Language Quarterly*, Roland Greene offers support for this linguistic resistance and change as important in the development of American English: "both colonialism in the Americas and resistance as a countervailing concept are symptoms of early modern absolutism, and that when we look at either of these obverses, we are in fact seeing absolute power through its consequences (428)." This idea becomes critical to the examination of not just American English but the dialect of "Standard" American English (SAE). Greene strengthens his argument with a binary approach to the implications for American English employed by another field: "Moreover, humanism offers an intellectual setting for both colonialism and resistance; its maneuvers enable early modern thinkers to hold both terms in mind at once, in a reciprocal relation, and encourage the thinking past the colonial that clear a passage for the postcolonial." Jennifer Greeson writes a unique perspective in Volume 12.2 (1999) of the *Yale Journal of Criticism* when she explains the influences of both colonialism and post-colonialism on American English: Postcolonial approaches, then, stand as both relevant to and inadequate for describing the U.S. situation in the late eighteenth century, a paradox that has led many early Americanists to consider the rebelling thirteen colonies as simultaneously occupying both terms of the imperialist binary, at the same time colonized (vis-à-vis the British) and colonizing (vis-à-vis the American Indians, African slaves)."

Examining a Geechee Socio-historical Feature

American English is the product of both colonial and post-colonial influences. Therefore, as a language connected to it through forced colonization and post-colonial survival elements, so is Geechee. The Africans who settled in the Coastal Georgia region as a result of chattel slavery, and those who remained in this area after the Civil War, gave names to their communities including the mainland villages of Anguilla, Pine Barren, Jamaica, Jerusalem, Satilla, and Sanddfly. Accordingly, the Africans who did the same on the islands of St. Catherines, Ossabaw, Sapelo, and Blackbeard, contributed both to Colonial and Post-Colonial language changes in ways such as: 1. s-absence, 2. copula deletion, 3. consonant cluster and r- deletion, and 4. habitual use of "b." These features have been recorded in the extant record of the Federal Writing Project's *Drums and Shadows* (1940). All along the Georgia coast, in small villages and the larger metropolitan cities and suburbs of Savannah and Brunswick, African Americans like Katie Brown (of Sapelo Island) and Ben Washington (of Pine Barren) provided authentic recountings of history, genealogy, and folklore in the language of Geechee/Gullah. Washington spoke of spirits who hang around, root doctors who cure and maim, and religious services marked with drums, dance, and crosses. "Ise heahd bout bein cunjuhed an I know fuh true deah's sech tings as magic. Ef yuh ebuh see a cross mahk in duh road, yuh nebuh walk obuh it. Duh cross is a magic sign an hab tuh do wid duh spirits." At eighty-six years old, Mr. Washington and his wife Sarah lived within a few miles of a traversing highway, but they rarely went into the larger town of Eulonia: "We dohn nebuh go tuh duh road. We got ebryting we needs right yuh" (135). Another example of the shared linguistic features of coastal Georgia settlements came from the small community of former slaves who lived on Grimball's Point at the Northwestern end of the Isle of Hope, in what is now the suburbs of Savannah. The African Americans who lived here in the 1700s had descendents here in the 1940s. Little remains of the community today. As part of *Drums and Shadows*, one of the oldest residents, F.J. Jackson, remembered his boyhood days of working as a slave on George Wiley's plantation. After the Civil War, several families including Jackson's remained on the Island. Jackson himself moved into the wooded part of the Island, but returned to the "Big House" every Saturday night for the "Big Times:"

> "Dey hab wut yuh call shouts. We use drum an fife an we made duh drum frum holluh beehive lawg. I tell yuh how we done it. Yuh cut duh lawg an tak a deah hide an stretch obuh duh hole. Den yuh cut a hoop ban dat could lock roun duh lawg. Den yuh cut strips uh deah hide an make bans tuh hole duh head cuvvah tight. How yuh make duh fife? Well, yuh jis cut reed cane" (100-101).

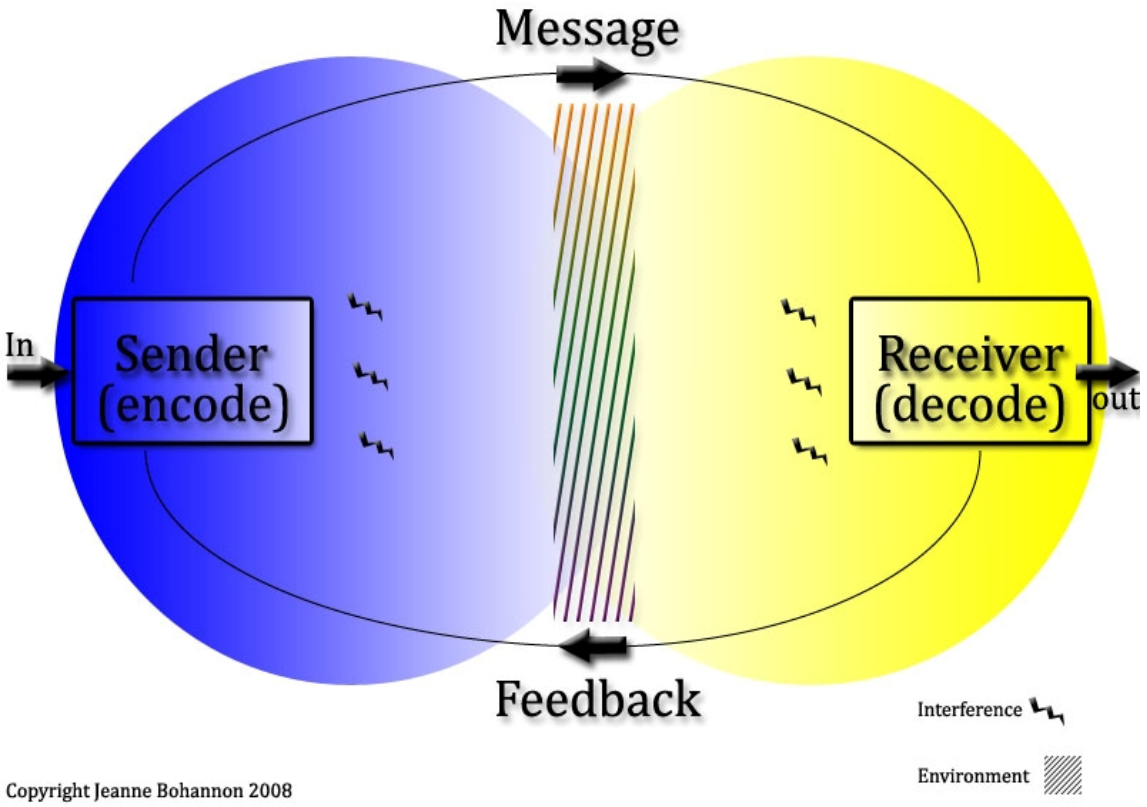
The Mainland African Americans spoke with the same dialectal markers as the Saltwater Geechees on Sapelo. Evidence for this comes from the same oral forms of /ʤʌst/~ /ʤɪs/, /ænd/ ~ /æn/, /θə/ ~ /də/, zero copula, and final consonant cluster deletion. The Saltwater Geechee forms of these pronunciations are the same, as noted by Cornelia Bailey's Memoir and its *Saltwater Geechee Dictionary Companion* that I am currently producing with Dr. Mary Zeigler. The similarities in the oral discourse speak to the settlers who came and stayed.

Settlement patterns of African slaves further influenced the metalanguage of Gullah, AAL, and American English through their folklore, medicinal knowledge, and mysticism. Cornelia Bailey provides evidence for this through her discourse on "root" healing, childbirthing techniques, and Mama's trickster tales of "Bre'r Rabbit. *Drums and Shadows* calls these items "survival elements" (159) that helped the African slaves hold onto their heritage. Examples of these elements are present in the discourse of Freshwater Geechees, as told by Ophelia Baker (MadamTruth, Sandfly): I tell good an bad nooz comin tuh yuh. Deah's a remedy fuh ebry trouble, an I hab dat remedy, fuh a spirit's hab brung it tuh me" (91). Similarly, Cornelia Bailey writes of Mama Lizzie and how "some folks said she once killed a man with her root" (194). Trickster tales that involve crafty animals and their fellow fauna victims were used to impart life lessons to the young. One such famous set of these centers around the world of Bre'r Rabbit. The plethora of these tales told by both Freshwater and Saltwater Geechees have been woven into America's cultural fabric, recounted in 19th century Plantation Fiction, and even provided the theme for a favorite Disney World ride! In current pop culture, Disney Enterprises represents the height of immersion, so by that cultural standard, the Geechee culture is central to its American counterpart.

In addition to these elements, Africans in coastal Georgia settlements created art, musical instruments, and culturally unique tools that remain today in the heritage of Georgia coastal communities and other American communities today. Harriet Powers' story quilts, which melded 19th century Christian and West African symbols, remain in the National Art Museum as artifacts to this heritage. Stomping feet create the drum rhythms central to Watch Night and Anniversary Day festivities on Sapelo Island (Bailey), just like they did in Katie Brown's time: "Wen hahves in, dey hab big gadderin. Dey beat drum, rattle dry goad wid see in um, an beat big flat tin plates" (Drums and Shadows, 159). Twenty-first century fishermen employ the same techniques for crafting cast nets as did their forefathers. The key to all of these elements comes from the continued settlement patterns of Africans both antebellum and postbellum in coastal Georgia. Accordingly, the settlement patterns drove the preservation of the cultural and historical components associated with them.

Interestingly, shared Colonial and Post-Colonial cultural interactions can also be seen in settlement patterns through place names of villages surrounding plantations such as Gowrie Island, in McIntosh County: Yankee Landing, Glencoe, Halifax, and Jerusalem. When examining a detailed map of this area, we find an interspersement of both African and European town names that still survives to this day. I suspect these names represent a cultural juxtaposition between Africans and Europeans. Looking again to Drums and Shadows, we find small towns populated by ex-slaves such as Yamacraw, Pin Point, Possum Point, and Sunbury

juxtaposed with towns populated by whites and blacks such as Wilmington Island, Darien, Townsend, and St. Simons Island. The settlement patterns of blacks and whites in Coastal Georgia represent both holdovers from an antebellum slavocracy as well as a few immigrants. The immigrants are mostly white, who inhabit vacation homes only part of the time.Cornelia Bailey draws distinctions between the "Saltwater Geechees" on the islands and the ""Freshwater Geechees" on the mainland, but the linguistic differences that have been recorded since 1940 reveal linguistic markers that also connect both islanders and mainlanders within at the features of Colonial Gullah and Post-Colonial African American Language (AAL). Specific features of these Colonial and Post-Colonial languages influence greatly their geographic and cultural colleague – American English.Because linguistic markers are part of spoken discourse, they have been woven into history and culture. Regarding oral discourse, syntactic form becomes moot, while semantics function becomes paramount. While syntactical forms evidence fluency in writing, these forms become cumbersome when speakers attempt to utilize them and often interfere with message reception. In my analysis of Geechee oral discourse, I have found that the community-based shared communication system extends beyond Sapelo Island to AAL speakers worldwide. After researching educational, sociological, and historical disciplines, I found a connection with Peter Berger's social constructionist model. In 1966, Berger, along with his colleague Thomas Luckmann, redefined Lev Vgotsky's social constructivist educational concept into a modern communication theory. Also known as symbolic interactionist theory, Berger's



argument postulated that humans see reality in both subjective and objective ways. We react, therefore, to outside stimuli in our environment based on our personal experiences. To make sense of this abstract idea, I created a communication model based on Claude Shannon's basic

communication structure that included Berger's idea of environmental subjectivity (Noll, p.3). As part of the postmodern communication movement, this model, shown in Figure 1, presents oral discourse as a shared subjective system of meaning between a sender and receiver. Language becomes "the most important sign system in human society" (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Taking Claude Shannon's communication theory and adding social context, Berger's theory also holds that humans view their world subjectively, based on their interaction and communication with their external environment. In spoken discourse, this model provides sociolinguists with a framework for understanding encoding and decoding of messages, interferences, and feedback. Meaning becomes principal and the environment between sender and receiver becomes vital to completing the message as intended.

Given the communication model detailed in Figure 1, I would assert the validity of the Geechee culture's oral tradition and its connection to AAL. The challenge in maintaining that culture ad finitum means recording cultural and linguistic markers in writing. Because written discourse can be both verified and archived, it contains evidentiary worth to preserve oral discourse. Believing in the importance of a rich, oral tradition and its value to micro- and macro-culture, this researcher asserts the need to scribe oral tradition into a written discourse, not to improve it or give it greater worth, but to preserve it as only written discourse can. Recording oral traditions of individuals, families, and communities within their specific dialects and languages can be used as a rhetorical tool to preserve and protect those languages.

Final Thoughts

Language is so much more than just what we humans write and speak. It is a cultural marker that iconically categorizes the human experience. Taken in the context of American English and its linguistic colleagues African American Language and Gullah, we can draw both social and historical conclusions about the interconnectedness of these elements in the settlement patterns of Coastal Georgia. Sapelo Island, with its isolated population of ex-slaves, still possesses commonalities with ex-slave settlements on the mainland coast. The development of Saltwater Geechee occurred side by side with the development of Geechee/Gullah on the mainland. This creates for me a linkage to shared African linguistic and cultural markers that make both of these languages unique from and yet connected to American English in its Colonial and Post-colonial forms. In this field of study, Sociolinguists take up the task of deconstructing spoken discourse into form and function. They then place the forms of human communication within societal and historical contexts in order to understand how humans confer meaning through various syntactic and phonological structures. For the Colonial and Post-Colonial languages spoken in America, context is woven into the twisted vine of a shared history that includes both voluntary and forced immigrations. Through an evaluation of our shared linguistic heritage, Americans of both citizenship and spirit become leaves on this metaphorical vine that continues to writhe and turn, creating new renaissances of spoken dialogue.

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