A Study in Gullah as a Creole language, Supported with a Text Analysis

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Abstract   This paper investigates Gullah language in light of some of the discussions that have been revolving around it; such as the nature of Gullah, its history, the demographic setup, the linguistic situation, and the typical features. A text taken from the New Testament in Gullah Sea Island Creole is analyzed in light of a discussion of its features.

Keywords   The Sea Islands, Geechee-speaking Communities, British Dialect, Baby-talk, Africanism in Gullah, Decreolization, Code-switching, Identity Marker

1. Introduction

Earlier linguists considered Pidgins and creoles as inferior languages and this resulted in disregarding the latter completely. Lately, linguists have changed the previously mentioned attitude because they recognized that pidgins and creoles are just new languages enjoying their own origin, history, and typical linguistic features [1].

Gullah is a Creole language developed throughout the period of slave trade. Until recently, Gullah has been depicted as corrupted and unintelligible to the outsiders as it lacks many of the grammatical structure such as plurality, copula, gender distinction, uninflected verbs, preverbal markers, etc [2]. Actually, the Gullah language is part and parcel of the cultural and social environment from which it was derived. As for the Gullah people, they are a group of black Americans who speak a language which is akin to Sierra Leone Krio. They have been viewed as backward and ignorant as they have been thought to be speaking bad English [3]. They are famous for making crafts such as baskets, jewelry, and pottery [4].

The upcoming sections of this paper are organized within various aspects of Gullah. Section 2 discusses the nature of Gullah. Section 3, the history of Gullah, is concerned with providing background information regarding the region of the Sea Islands and the people inhabiting it. Section 4, the demographic setup, handles the population of Gullah speaking communities and their distribution. Section 5, the linguistic situation, is devoted primarily to the factors that contributed to the retention of Africanism in the Gullah dialect, and the views regarding whether Gullah is decreolizing or not. Section 6, the typical features, provides an elaboration of some of the linguistic features that characterize contemporary Gullah. In section 7, the text is taken from the New Testament in Gullah Sea Island Creole, with marginal text of the King James Version, (Matthew 5:1-5). It is analyzed in light of the typical linguistic features characterizing Gullah. Section 8 is concerned with the conclusion.

2. The Nature of Gullah

The Sea Islands are well known as Gullah or Geechee-speaking communities. Many researchers assume that the word Gullah may be derived from Angola because several African slaves were taken from Angola in West Africa. Gidzi is considered as a potential source for the word Geechee. The Sea Islands are located along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and the northeast part of Florida. The coastline has approximately a thousand islands and most of the islands are not suitable for human beings to dwell [4].

Gullah is a Creole language, as advocated by many linguists such as Jones-Jackson, Mufwene, and others. Gullah is a Creole language as it is the result of the combination between English and other languages spoken along the West African coast [4]. It is a Creole language because it emerged and passed through the same social and economic circumstances that other creoles passed through. It has many features in common with the other vernaculars. Moreover, The Gullah people have an African origin, which is also another characteristic shared by speakers of the other vernaculars [5].

3. Origin of Gullah

The origin of Gullah has been the focus of many linguists. Jones-Jackson in [6] explains that this language was first viewed as an "inferior dialect of English". There have been

two controversial points of view revolving around its origin. Some linguists such as George Krapp [2] and Woodson [7] believe that Gullah is the survival of British dialect and baby-talk. For them, Gullah is nothing but a very simplified and reduced form of English. This assumption of baby-talk characterizes early linguistics only and is no longer upheld at all today. On the contrary, Turner in [8] illustrates that Gullah is strongly influenced by African languages in many respects such as the sound system, semantic system, grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Turner asserts that those linguists have undervalued the influence of the African factor in Gullah. This is because they have counted only on the features that Gullah shares with certain British dialects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the baby-talk mechanism that the Europeans used while dealing with their servants. Thus, in order to solve any problem presented in Gullah, they resorted to the solutions introduced by the British dialects and baby-talk. Thus, linguists who are interested in conducting a research to explain Gullah should acquaint themselves with some knowledge of the African languages, which are the native tongues of those people. Turner's extensive research highlights that Gullah contains over three hundred loanwords from many different African languages and approximately 4000 African personal names.

4. History

Before the Europeans and the Africans lived in America; the Sea Islands were originally the homelands of the Indians, who were obliged to migrate in the early 1700s. Then, the Sea Islands became the habitat of the African slaves, some white farmers, and others including the ex-slaves and their descendants [4]. In 1708 the number of African slaves, who were taken directly from the West African coast to South Carolina and Georgia, reached approximately 100,000. The number of the previously stated slaves was much bigger than the number of the slaves who lived before in the West Indies. On the contrary to the slaves who came from different regions of America and the West Indies, the slaves who came directly from Africa to South Carolina had no previous knowledge of the English language. Those people were picked for their knowledge of how to cultivate rice, indigo, and cotton. During the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a persistent importation of African slaves because the nature of the crop required a continuous influx of slaves born in Africa not in other colonies [8]. This is because the plantation, harvesting, and processing of rice is an old African cultural tradition in which they had vast experience [4]. Thus, the labor of the black people was of a great importance. This consequently led to a constant intensification of Gullah. Therefore, the blacks were a majority in South Carolina and this was regarded as a unique situation among the North American colonies. The number of the white population on the Sea Islands was very limited because of the semitropical climate and the spread of diseases such as yellow fever and malaria.

South Carolina was also a spot for the slaves from other American colonies who showed a regular misbehavior.

Gullah islanders gained their independence during the Civil War (1861-1865). The first school established for the independent slaves was Penn school and it was built on Saint Helena Island. After 1890 the rice and cotton economy of both Georgia and South Carolina suffered from a sharp breakdown due to many destructive floods and storms. The rice plantations became gradually deserted by 1900. By 1970, the ratio of farmers reached 10 and 15 percent in Johns and Wadmalaw islands respectively, and consequently, the fields became once again marshlands. Before 1940 there was very limited number of bridges binding the mainland with the islands. This consequently resulted in their isolation, which resulted in turn in the perpetuation of Gullah. Later, there was a tendency towards building more bridges which contributed to facilitating access to and from the islands. Gullah people have been combating in order to maintain their traditions, culture, and customs [4]. A translation of the New Testament in the Gullah language started in 1979 and lasted for twenty five years. In 2005 the American Bible Society published De Nyew Testament.

5. Demographic Setup

Jones-Jackson in [4] illustrates that throughout the slave trade the whites were a minority compared to the black slaves in the Sea Islands coastal region. In 1830 the federal census figures indicated that the number of African and African-American inhabitants was extremely high. For instance, the number of whites in Georgetown district was 1,940, while the number of blacks was 18,000. Charleston County had 30,922 whites compared to 71,868 blacks by 1880, as pointed out by the federal census. The black people remained a majority in the sea island till 1940. In 1970, the blacks were no longer the majority, i.e. the federal census demonstrated that the black people formed 31.4 percent of Charleston County. This highlights that the number of the blacks in 1970 became less than that of the 1930's, which was more than 50 percent.

Only the economically flourishing areas of the Sea Islands witnessed great changes in population. For instance, James and Johns Islands in South Carolina showed considerable population increase. This is due to some factors such as the presence of suitable services, i.e. bridges and roadways which in turn facilitated the access to and from Charleston area, the increasing industrialization and commercialization in Johns Island, and the highly urbanized nature of the James Island. Those Islands were inhabited mainly by the whites. It is noteworthy that in 1940 black people were a majority of the Johns Island, i.e. they formed about 80 percent of the overall number of people inhabiting the Island. In 1970 the blacks formed about 41 percent of the island. This previously mentioned ratio continued to be comparatively the same till 1980.

On the contrary, there was no obvious change in the

population ratio in Edisto and Wadmalaw. Blacks constituted approximately 84 percent of the total population of Edisto. The blacks in Wadmalaw Island formed 85 percent of the overall number of people inhabiting the island in 1970, and then they became only 79 percent in 1980. The shortage of fundamental services such as water and sewer and the lack of main manufacturers led to that insignificant population development in both Wadmalaw and Edisto Islands. Jones-Jackson in [9] predicts that there would be very minimal population changes taking place on these remote islands in the future. Table1 summarizes the previously mentioned racial breakdowns for five of the Carolina Sea Islands from 1930 to 1980.

6. The Linguistic Situation

6.1. The Retention of Gullah

Gullah is spoken by approximately 250,000 ethnic population [10]. The Gullah people have retained their language and many of their culture, customs, and traditions than any other black people in the United States. There are two central factors that contributed to perpetuating Gullah as the language of the Sea Islands; the social and geographical isolation and the continuing importation of the African slaves directly from West Africa respectively.

Gullah slaves lived in isolated communities and had a peripheral communication with the white people. This is because of the semitropical climate, the diseased environment, and the geographical isolation. Although the semitropical climate of South Carolina and Georgia was perfect for rice plantation, it assisted in spreading some diseases such as malaria and yellow fever especially around the flooded rice farms because they were very convenient spots for the diseases to flourish in. On the one hand, the black slaves were able to resist these diseases as they had some innate resistance against them. On the other hand, the white people lacked this resistance and consequently were highly subject to be infected by those diseases. Thus, the white planters used to leave their plantations completely throughout certain rainy months of the year especially when fever was ample. Since these circumstances were totally unsuitable for the whites, this situation resulted in the minimal number of whites on the island [11]. The lack of adequate bridges binding the mainland to the more remote islands contributed to their geographical isolation. This consequently contributed to both their social and geographical isolation from the outside community [12].

Throughout the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century the African slaves were constantly imported to South Carolina and Georgia because of the expansion of the rice plantation which was producing profits on a regular basis. This created a persistent contact with the speech of the native Africans who were permanently imported direct from Africa, especially from rice-cultivation regions. This subsequently helped in intensifying the Gullah language. Therefore, the geographical and social isolation, and the persistent importation of the African slaves to South Carolina and Georgia resulted in retaining Gullah as the language of the Sea Islands [8].

Table 1. Racial Breakdowns for Five of the Carolina Sea Islands [4]

Year	Population	Edisto	James	Johns	Wadmalaw	St. Helena
1930	Total	1,948	3,058	3,264	2,054	4,626
	Black	1,693	2,419	2,826	1,813	4,458
1940	Total	1,955	3,913	3,534	1,858	4,266
	Black	1,717	2,709	2,633	1,607	3,961
1960	Total	1,589	13,872	6,252	2,326	6,048
	Black	1,306	4,168	3,260	1,980	4,994
1970	Total	1,374	18,969	7,530	2,024	5,718
	Black	1,115	5,217	3,104	1,719	4,278
1980	Total	1,345	27,719	9,296	2,440	8,134
	Black	1,124	6,173	3,975	1,935	4,934

6.2. Is Gullah Decreolizing?

Some linguists, such as Jones-Jackson argues that Gullah is in the process of post-creole because of some external factors and sociolinguistic circumstances, such as the building of bridges which facilitated education, the change of population, i.e. the white people and the tourists, the replacement of old words, and television [4,9]. Other linguists such as Mufwene argues against the previously mentioned view and asserts that Gullah is not decreolizing because Gullah is an identity marker for its speakers, education does not necessitate the loss of speech habits, and the Gullah people lack of real communication with the whites or the tourists [13].

Building of bridges facilitated the connection between the mainland and the islands. This in turn resulted in improving educational facilities and increasing job opportunities [4]. Jones-Jackson elaborates that there were a lot of whites who had moved into the Sea Islands to live there as demonstrated by the demographic data and that there was a large number of tourists visiting the islands [9]. This consequently resulted in the corrosion of the racial and conventional structure of some of the islands such as James and Johns. A lot of common words among the older generations were not recognized by the young children. This was because the parents wanted their children to be well-educated and in order to do this; the old vocabulary should not be passed on to them. These previously stated circumstances resulted in collapsing the solid social composition of the community which in turn resulted in stimulating people to move up the social ladder and modify the ways in which they used to speak towards Standard English [4].

Mufwene in [13] points out that Gullah is a marker of identity, culture, and history. Moreover, it is an in-group code to its speakers for purposes of communication. He argues that education does not presuppose quitting the conventional speech habits. On the contrary, it is a perfect chance for the educated people to get to know a variety of a language to which they can code-switch. The educated Gullah people could be treated as snob by the islanders if they forsake their speech habits. Thus, linguists who claim that Gullah is decreolizing, should have paid more attention to its importance as an in-group code and identity marker for its speakers. This is also supported by what Wardhaugh states with regard to code-switching; "Code-switching can arise from individual choice or be used as a major identity marker for a group of speakers who must deal with more than one language in their common pursuits" [14].

The white people, who moved in to live on the island, had very restricted influence on the speech habits of the Gullah people. This is because the whites and the blacks did not have a real interaction with each other. For instance, they went to different churches and their jobs used to be different from each other. Besides, the white planters and fishermen, who used to live on the island, were a minority.

Concerning the tourists, they had very limited contact with Gullah people. This kind of communication was represented in buying and selling the grass baskets and other famous products of the Sea Islands, and in also dealing with the guests in the hotels. This minimal contact could not affect local speech ways of the islanders. Most of the speech communities modify their speech habits when dealing with tourists just for the sake of facilitating mutual understanding. Therefore, the previously stated reasons indicate that Gullah people did not forsake their speech habits, and thus it is not decreolizing [13].

7. The Typical Features

Gullah demonstrates a great deal of certain distinctive syntactical and phonological features that set it apart from other varieties of African-American speech. The most distinctive systems in Gullah are the verb and the pronoun systems. Some of the most characteristic features of the verb system are the uninflected verb and the preverbal markers, verb reduplication, verb serialization, the introductory verb say, and the complementizer for respectively [4]. Gullah lacks a subject verb concord as exemplified in the speech of the informants [12]. The pronominal system in Gullah is affected to a large extent by the African pronominal system [4, 12]. Other categories of Gullah such as nouns, relative clauses, adjectives, mood, negation, and preposition will be discussed below. The phonological features in Gullah are embodied in the reduction of consonant cluster and following consonant vowel pattern. It is also represented in the replacement of some consonants with others.

7.1. Syntactical Features

Gullah shows tense and aspect with few preverbal markings such as *ben, bina, don, de,* and *gwine*. They are placed before the verb to clarify when an event took place. *ben* is used to refer to anteriority, i.e. past or past of the past, *don* indicates the completion of the action, *de* signals the progressive or durative action, and *gwine* is used to refer to future .In accordance with this; one single verb can be used in order to signal past, present, and future as verbs are not inflected. *De* is used to substitute the present tense forms of be, i.e. am, is, and are. Sometimes *de* is followed by a continuous form of another verb, when there is a reference to the future. Sometimes it can also be placed before the verb to signal present, past, or even future [4].

Reduplication is one of the features that characterize Gullah. Its main use is to refer to degree, quality, or duration. It is also used to intensify the meaning. Sometimes too much precedes or comes after some words in order to intensify the meaning or to change it a little bit. This relies on the intonation of too much. *Clean too much*, for example, refers to either very clean or obsessed with cleanliness [4].

Verb serialization is a feature of most of the Creole languages in which one, two, or three verbs are joined together and have the same subject, tense, and mood. Gullah language uses the word *say* in order to introduce a direct

quotation. It is used as a complementizer as in *we hear say you gone to da city* "We heard that you [were] gone to the city". The complementizer *fuh* or *fa [fə]* is used in Gullah in order to introduce clauses indicating purpose or intent. It is frequently followed by the infinitive. Nicholas in [15] points out that *fa true* is also used in Gullah as an intensifier to mean "really". Gullah shows an absence in subject verb concordance, i.e. the -s suffix in the third person singular is infrequent in the speech of contemporary Gullah. Finally, Gullah lacks the distinction between active and passive voice.

Gullah abides by a pronominal system in which there is no distinction between genders, i.e. the same pronoun *e* signals both males and females in both nominative and genitive cases. When it functions as an object, it becomes *im* or *um* to signal both singular and plural. For example, the translation of "He blinked his eye" or "She blinked her eyes" is *E blink e eye*. The lack of gender and case distinction is inherited from West African languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and others [4]. The pronoun *she* usually replaces the pronoun *her* especially in the nominative, genitive, and objective cases respectively, as in *She name is Pat*, *She can fix she own hair*, and *Do you know she*. Contemporary Gullah rarely uses the pronoun *it*. It is replaced with the pronouns *e* and */m/*. The latter replaces it in the objective case, as in *e miss m clean* "He missed it completely". In Gullah the objective case pronoun *us* is substituted with the nominative case pronoun *we*, as in *e come this close to we* "He come this close to us". Gullah language misses the possessive pronouns *his, hers,* and *its*. The Gullah people replace these possessive pronouns with *e* for masculine, feminine, and neuter, as in *e hurt e foot* "It hurt its foot", "He hurt his foot", and "She hurt her foot"[12]. The reflexive is formed in Gullah by adding the morpheme *se(l)f*, as in *mself/muhself, youself/ yeself, herself/sheself,weself/ourself,* and *dehself/demself* [5].

Another feature of the structure of Gullah is that it does not inflect the noun, i.e. there is no number suffix. Nominal plural is marked by the addition of *dem* to the noun, as in *dem boy* "the boys" or "those boys". Moreover, Gullah has associative plural in which the definite noun or a proper name is followed by *dem* or *nem*. It is used in order to link the referent with a particular group. A null complementizer or *weh*, akin to English "what", introduces factive relative clauses. There is also a possibility of using it as a relativizer in some nonstandard English varieties. For example, *everything Alison what say* corresponds to *everything weh Alison say* in Gullah "everything that Alison said" [5].

The category adjectives are used in Gullah, as in any creole based on English, without a copula in the predicative function, as in *Robert very tall*. Besides, they freely combine with preverbal markers [5]. There is a recurrent use of the *mo na* "more than" in Gullah to express comparative, while the superlative is expressed by *di moris* "the most" [8]. Mood is expressed through modal verbs such as *can, could,* or *coulda* "could've", *must, would, woulda* "would have", *may* and *might* [5]. Negation is formed in Gullah by four negative particles placed before the verb phrase such as *ain* (the wide

scope negator), *don, didn*, and *no*. *ain* seves as a negative focus marker as in *ain nobody ga worry wid you* " There's nobody/ There is not anybody that will worry with you". Sentence initial *duh* functions as a positive focus marker as in *duh Sara we duh talk about* "It's Sara we are talking about" [5] .The forms of prepositions are very limited in Gullah and the same form is used to serve many purposes, i.e. it is not clear whether the preposition is used in order to refer to a person on his way to a place or a person already there [16]. Gullah shows two types of relative clauses; factive and non-factive purposive relative clauses. The former are introduced by a null complementizer or by *weh,* while the non-factive relative clauses are introduced by complementizer *fuh* as *in a book fuhj da chillum fuh read* "a book for the children to read" [5].

7.2. Phonological Features

With regard to the phonological features, following consonant vowel consonant vowel pattern is one of the phonological characteristics frequently used in Gullah. This is indicated in some phonological processes such as aphesis, epenthesis, metathesis, syncope, and apocope. Gullah speakers alternate the stops */p/* and */k/* [7]. The voiceless stops */p/, /t/,* and */k/* are unaspirated at the beginning of stressed syllables in Gullah. This is very frequent in many African languages such as Bambara, Malinke, Ewe,and others. The voiced interdental fricative */ð/* is replaced by */d/*, while the voiceless */ θ /* is replaced by */t/*. This phenomenon is also well-known in West African languages. Furthermore, the Gullah speakers end the declarative sentences with a high, mid, or rising tone. Gullah people use "a level tone at the end of a question, whether or not yes or no is required for an answer" [8].

8. Text

The text highlights many of the syntactical and phonological features found in Gullah. Some of the syntactical features are exemplified in the use of uninflected verbs, associative plural, preverbal markers, verbal adjectives, comparative adjective, the pronoun *e* and its uses, the pronoun *um*, the use of negation, the use of *da* , the use of *fa*, and the use of the relativizer *wa* respectively. The phonological features are represented in the replacement of the voiced and voiceless interdental fricative */ð/* and */θ/* respectively, the replacement of the voiced labiodental fricative */v/*, the replacement of */h/*, and some phonological process such as aphesis, syncope, and apocope respectively.

Gullah is characterized by uninflected verbs and this is pointed out in many examples in the text as in *see, gone, seddown, come, staat, laan, say, rule, courage, tink,*and *blongst*. Associative plural is represented in the text where the nouns *crowd* and *ciple* are followed by *dem* as in *crowd dem, ciple dem* to connect them with a certain group. The preverbal marker *gwine* is used in the text to indicate future

as in *God gwine courage um* "God is going to encourage them". There are many cases of missing copula before adjectives, as in *dey bless* "they are blessed", *wa saaful* "who are sorrowful", *dey mo den* "they are more than". The comparative adjective *mo den* "more than" is represented once in the text. The pronoun *e* signals nominative case, as in *e gone* "he went", *e say* "he said", and *e ciple* "his disciples". The object pronoun *um* is used to refer to singular object pronoun, as in *roun um* "around him", and plural object pronoun, as in *fa laan um* "to teach them", *rule oba um* "rule over them", *courage um* "encourage them", and *blongst ta um* "belong to them". An instance of negation using *ain* is represented in *ain tink* "don't think" in which the negator precedes the verb. There is also an instance of double negation demonstrated in *ain hab no hope* "don't have hope".De Nyew Testament, 2005 (Matthew 5:1-5) [17]

Da is placed before the verb rule to indicate present tense, as in *God da rule oba um* "God rules / is ruling over them". It is also used in the text to replace the present tense form are, as in *dey mo den wa dey da* "they are more than what they are". *Fa* is used twice in the text; first, it is used as a complementizer introducing a purposive clause, as in *Jedus staat fa laan um* "Jesus started to teach them". Second, it is used as an intensifier to mean "really", as in *they bless fa true* "they are really blessed" .The relativizer *wa* is utilized in the text to introduce factive relative clauses such as *dem people wa* "those people that /who", *dem wa saaful now* "those that/who are sorrowful now", *dem wa ain tink* "those that/who do not think", and *mo den wa dey da* "more than what they are".

Regarding the phonological features, the text shows many of the characteristics that identify Gullah. These characteristics are evident in the replacement of the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ with /d/, as in *de* "the", *dey* "there or they", *geda* "together", *den* "then or than", *dem* "those", and *deysef* "themselves", the substitution of the voicelss /θ/ with /t/, as in *tink* "think", the replacement of the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ with the voiced bilabial stop /b/ as in *oba* "over", *hab* "have", the omission of /h/ in word initial position, the deletion of one or more sounds at the beginning of a word, i.e. aphesis, as in *ciple* "disciple", *geda* "together", *roun* "around", *cause* "because", and *courage* "encourage", the elimination of one or more sound from the middle of a word, i.e. syncope, as in *laan* "learn" and *wol* "world", and the omission of one or more sound from the end of a word, i.e. apocope, as in *an* "and", *roun* "around", *mo* "more", *wa* "what", *wol* "world", and *oba* "over".

[1] And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:	[1] Wen Jedus see all de crowd dem, e gone pontop one high hill. E seddown dey, an e ciple dem come geda roun um.
[2] And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,	[2] Den Jedus staat fa laan um. E say,
[3] Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	[3] "Dey bless fa true, dem people wa ain hab no hope een deysef, cause God da rule oba um.
[4] Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.	[4] Dey bless fa true, dem wa saaful now, cause God gwine courage um.
[5] Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.	[5] Dey bless fa true, dem wa ain tink dey mo den wa dey da, cause all de whole wol gwine blongst ta um".

9. Conclusion

Recently, pidgins and creoles have received much attention by many linguists and researchers; although they were ignored decades ago as they were regarded as unintelligible languages. Gullah is a creole language that possesses its own structure and heritage. The previously stated aspects of Gullah in this paper have contributed to presenting some of the views that have been revolving around Gullah as a creole language. The origin of Gullah is addressed in terms of either considering it only a survival of British dialects and baby-talk or dealing with it as also influenced by the West African languages. This paper highlights the history that affected the Geechee speaking communities and the demographic setup that sheds some light on the population of the region, their race, and distribution. Factors that contributed to the preservation of Africanism in Gullah and the views revolving around whether Gullah is decreolizing or not are the main points that shape the linguistic situation of Gullah. The typical features of Gullah explain how Gullah is affected by West African languages. They show the characteristics Gullah shares with other varieties and how it is distinctive, to some extent, from them. The text analysis functions as an illustration of the features of Gullah.

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