

New Perspectives on African American English: The Role of Black-to-Black Contact

SIMANIQUE MOODY

Variation in African American English linked to contact with Geechee

Introduction

One of the most widely researched language varieties in the field of sociolinguistics is African American English (AAE), a term used to describe a range of English dialects, from standard to vernacular, spoken by many (but not all) African Americans as well as by certain members of other ethnic groups who have had extensive contact with AAE speakers. Most linguists agree that AAE developed from contact between enslaved Africans and predominantly English-speaking Europeans (who spoke a range of English vernaculars) during the early to middle period of colonization of what is now known as the United States of America. Consequently, research on the development of AAE is traditionally framed in terms of the degree of contact with white English vernaculars, both during and after AAE genesis, with white vernaculars playing a primary, if not exclusive, role (McDavid & McDavid, 1951; Mufwene, 1996; Poplack, 2000; Poplack & Tagliamonte, 2001). Though some analyses of AAE allow for substrate influence from creole and/or African languages in its development (cf. Winford, 1997, 1998; Rickford, 1998, 2006; Wolfram & Thomas, 2002; Holm, 2004), many studies place a particular focus on Earlier African American varieties or Diaspora varieties, such as the Ex-Slave Recordings, Samaná English, and Liberian Settler English rather than contemporary AAE varieties spoken within U.S. borders (cf. Rickford, 1977, 1997, 2006; DeBose, 1988; Schneider 1989; Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila, 1991; Hannah, 1997; Singler, 1998, 2007a, 2007b; Kautzsch 2002). This research has helped further linguists'

understanding of AAE yet does not reflect its full history in the United States.

This article examines AAE in contact with the African American creole language Geechee (also known as *Gullah* or *Sea Island Creole*, especially in South Carolina) to give a broader perspective on its sociolinguistic history and to show that long-standing contact with black language varieties has influenced the grammatical structure of AAE in southeast Georgia. Key grammatical features reflecting this historical contact include variable plural marking (e.g. *five dollars can't buy plateØ*), postposed *dem* as a nominal pluralizer (e.g. *the light dem*, '*the lights*'), unstressed *bin* as a past marker (e.g. *his head bin harder*, '*his head was harder*'), and first-singular zero copula (e.g. *I Ø glad*, '*I'm glad*'). While much of the current research on AAE has moved beyond the origins debate and focuses more on linguistic outcomes



SIMANIQUE MOODY has a PhD from New York University. She is an Assistant Professor at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics and the Bachelor of International Studies Programme at Leiden University. Her research examines regional variation in African American language varieties. Her other scholarly interests include language contact, language change, and language and identity in the African diaspora. Email: s.moody@hum.leidenuniv.nl

of contemporary relationships between African Americans and other American ethnic groups (cf. Childs & Mallinson, 2004; Childs, 2005; Blake & Shousterman, 2010; Paris, 2011), this article sheds new light on understudied aspects of the origins and development of AAE to explain contemporary regional variation found therein.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article are based on research I conducted in the coastal and inland southeast Georgia counties of Glynn, Liberty, McIntosh, Pierce, and Ware (shown below in Figure 1) from 2005 through 2011 together with follow-up observations undertaken in 2012–2014. The coastal counties of Glynn, Liberty, and McIntosh are part of the region of Geechee cultural and linguistic influence, while the inland counties of Pierce and Ware lie outside of this region. Gullah/Geechee is spoken in certain islands and coastal mainland areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. In Georgia, *Geechee* is an endonym that refers to both the language and its speakers. *Gullah*, associated primarily with communities in South Carolina, is the term commonly used in the scholarly literature in linguistics. When referring to the creole variety spoken in Georgia, I use *Geechee*, the preferred term in the communities in which I work.

My research participants included 51 working-class and lower-middle-class African American women and men ranging in age from 21 to 90 who were natives of southeast Georgia. I audio-recorded roughly 70 hours of interviews and everyday interactions in these communities after having spent time with participants in a variety of social settings. I also surveyed a smaller sample of working-class and lower-middle-class whites ranging in age from 18 to 80 who were natives of this region to rule out the possibility that the linguistic features under examination were present in their speech.

Overview of AAE-Geechee contact in Georgia

A study by the National Park Service (2005) reports that the current boundary of the Gullah/Geechee region stretches longitudinally from the city of Wilmington in coastal North Carolina to Jacksonville in coastal northeast Florida (including various islands along the coast), and laterally from the Atlantic coast to approximately 30 miles inland

from the shore. Although most scholars conclude that inland African American varieties in Georgia show little to no evidence of Geechee or any other creole language being spoken, numerous Ware and Pierce County residents in my study highlighted a community of Geechee speakers in Pierce County, who, unlike the indigenous coastal Georgia Geechees, are descendants of African Americans who migrated from South Carolina to Georgia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Similarly, other scholars (personal communication) have provided anecdotal evidence of the existence of Geechee-speaking communities in inland areas of Georgia. Moreover, some African American language varieties in southeast Georgia contain features that have not been associated with AAE or Geechee. For these reasons, *Geechee* is used in this article as a cover term for the creole variety thought to have developed in South Carolina in the 1700s and been transported to Georgia shortly thereafter where it continued on its own linguistic trajectory (cf. Turner, 1949; Wood, 1975; Hancock, 1986; Mufwene, 1993; Winford, 1997; Rickford, 1997), as well as for other undocumented creoles or decreolized varieties that might have developed due to the socio-historical and demographic conditions existing on individual coastal Georgia plantations.

Both Geechee and AAE developed as a result of language contact, and though they share some lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic similarities, contemporary AAE is viewed as a dialect of American English, while contemporary Geechee is classified as an English-lexifier creole similar to varieties spoken in the Caribbean (e.g. Bahamian Creole English, Barbadian Creole English, Trinidadian Creole English). Various linguistic theories regarding the genesis of Geechee have been proposed ranging from (a) its descent from a Barbadian creole purportedly spoken in the 17th century (Cassidy, 1980, 1986a, 1986b, 1994), to (b) its divergence and subsequent creolization from a metropolitan English variety acquired by enslaved Africans brought to South Carolina from Barbados (Hancock, 1980), to (c) its divergence from an earlier form of AAE via basilectalization – the development of distinctive, less-intelligible linguistic features (Mufwene, 1993), to (d) its representing an earlier stage in the development of AAE varieties (Stewart, 1968).

Little research exists on the nature and linguistic outcomes of past and present-day contact between AAE and Geechee and its effects on the African American language varieties spoken in Georgia (but see Stewart, 1968; Weldon, 1998, 2003a,

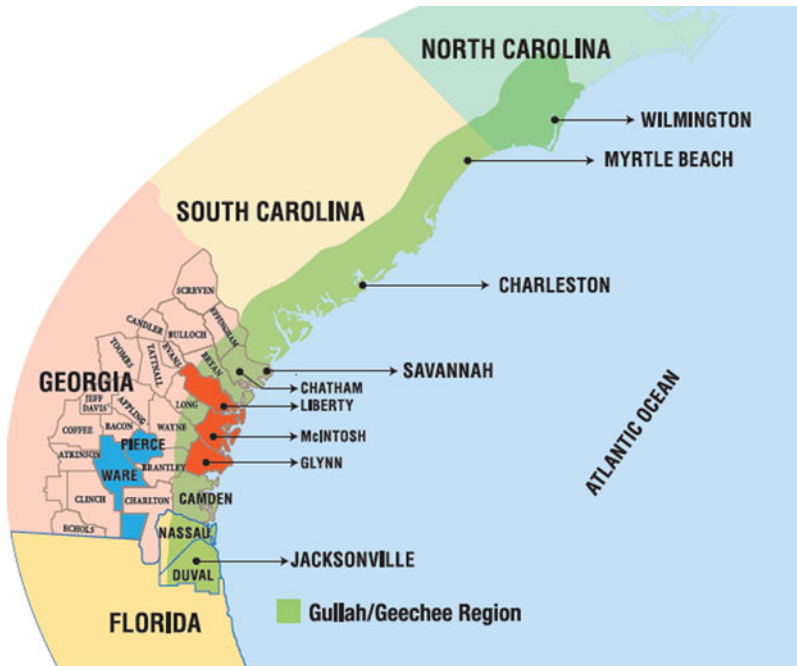


Figure 1. Map of Glynn, Liberty, McIntosh, Pierce, and Ware Counties

2003b; and Kautzsch & Schneider, 2000 for South Carolina). In South Carolina, for example, Kautzsch and Schneider (2000) provide evidence to suggest that AAE varieties spoken in the coastal mainland were once more similar to Gullah/Geechee than they are today, particularly in areas where African Americans outnumbered whites. Similar arguments could also be made for AAE varieties spoken along the Georgia coast. In fact, many AAE speakers in Georgia still preserve in their speech linguistic features that have parallels in creole languages and whose examination could provide a more accurate view of the range of AAE varieties that were spoken prior to the 20th century.

There still remains a lot to be discovered about the relationship between AAE and Geechee considering that both the degree of mutual intelligibility among these varieties as well as Geechee's exact trajectory into Georgia and Florida are poorly understood. Over 200 years of sustained contact with Geechee in the coastal Georgia mainland has influenced AAE and vice versa, with sociocultural and linguistic ramifications that are present even today. In coastal Georgia, Geechee speakers and AAE speakers live and work together, and they intermarry, worship, and socialize together. Nevertheless, language remains one of the key

markers that distinguishes these two groups of African Americans.

Examination of morphosyntactic features of southeast Georgia AAE varieties

This section presents the key morphosyntactic features in southeast Georgia AAE, which I argue serve as evidence of its historical contact with Geechee. These features have been described as either non-existent in AAE and other white English varieties or occurring only in a very restricted set of AAE varieties. Moreover, these same features are found in Geechee. Understanding the structural similarities and differences between AAE and Geechee is fundamental to recognizing their degree of linguistic overlap in southeast Georgia. Specifically, I show that it is precisely in the places where AAE and Geechee differ structurally that one can find evidence for the ways in which Geechee might have influenced the morphosyntax of AAE. Given the history of contact between AAE and Geechee speakers as well as the similar sociohistorical contexts of their language development, especially in the coastal Georgia region, it is reasonable to attribute the

presence of these features in AAE to contact with Geechee.

Plural marking

Plural marking, both rates of *-s* absence and types of plural markers used, differs in AAE and Geechee and represents one area in which the grammatical influence of Geechee on AAE in coastal Georgia can be observed. Geechee is characterized by high rates of plural *-s* absence (cf. Mufwene, 1986; Rickford, 1986), use of the postnominal pluralizer *dem* (e.g. brother *dem*, ‘brothers’), as well as the use of quantifiers with unmarked nouns (e.g. *five or six horse*Ø *behind it*, ‘five or six horses behind it’) to indicate plurality. Most descriptions of AAE, on the other hand, reveal near categorical presence of the plural *-s* ending on regular nouns (see e.g., Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969) and no use of postnominal pluralizer *dem*. In coastal Georgia, plural *-s* absence is found at higher rates among African American speakers than has been reported for most other regions in the U.S., particularly in the speech of people aged 65 and over. Moody (2011) reports that speakers regularly exhibited plural *-s* absence rates ranging from 7–40%, with some speakers, especially those over the age of 65, having *-s* absence rates as high as 60–70%. These rates of *-s* absence were found, even when excluding nouns of measurement and currency (e.g. *pound, cup, cent*), which often exhibit higher rates of *-s* absence in other vernacular English varieties. These high rates of *-s* absence in coastal Georgia AAE-speaking communities, much higher than any reported for AAE varieties in other parts of the U.S., and higher than those found in inland southeast Georgia, can most likely be attributed to contact influence from Geechee.

Speakers of AAE varieties in southeast Georgia also use features such as postnominal plural *dem* and quantifiers with unmarked nouns to denote plurality (e.g., *plenty plum*, ‘plenty of plums’), all of which are associated primarily with Geechee. Postnominal plural *dem*, found in Geechee and other English-lexifier creoles, is not included in any of the major descriptions of AAE (but see Spears, 2010, who notes the existence of plural *dem* in a restricted set of AAE dialects). Thus its occurrence in southeast Georgia AAE varieties is quite probably linked to historical contact with Geechee. One significant difference between coastal and inland southeast Georgia AAE varieties is that speakers of inland varieties use plural *dem* (also pronounced as *nem*) only with nouns that have human referents (e.g. *cousins dem*, ‘cousins’),

whereas some speakers of coastal Georgia AAE varieties permit the use of *dem* with nouns with both human and non-human referents (e.g. *foot dem*, ‘feet’), though the latter is found mostly in speakers over the age of 65. The use of postnominal plural *dem* in doubly-marked plural constructions as in *sisters dem* and *mothers dem* is a feature that has not been described for AAE. The coastal/inland distinction in the distribution of plural *-s* absence rates and postnominal plural *dem* in AAE reflects the degree of contact with Geechee, with the widest distribution of these features found along the coast, where Geechee is also spoken.

First-singular zero copula

Another structural difference between AAE and Geechee is found in the way copula and auxiliary forms of the verb *be* are used. While both Geechee and AAE permit the absence of inflected forms of the present tense verb *be* (e.g. *you* Ø *in my way*, ‘you’re in my way,’ *she* Ø *my best friend*, ‘she’s my best friend,’ *they* Ø *gone*, ‘they’re gone’), the use of zero copula in first-person singular environments (e.g. *I* Ø *glad to see you*, ‘I’m glad to see you’ or *I* Ø *waitin’ on you*, ‘I’m waiting on you’), is associated primarily with Geechee and is also a general feature of many Atlantic creoles. Rickford (1998: 163) notes that first person [singular] copula absence does not occur in modern AAE varieties; however, AAE speakers in coastal and inland southeast Georgia exhibit *am* absence, as illustrated below:

- (1) *I* Ø *the one come here looking for a job*
‘I’m the one who came here looking for a job’
- (2) *I guess I* Ø *poseta just wait on you forever*
‘I guess I’m supposed to just wait on you forever’
- (3) *He ‘on’t know the kind of shape I* Ø *in*
‘He doesn’t know the kind of shape I’m in’

Although a few linguists (personal communication) have reported hearing instances of first-singular zero copula in varieties of AAE spoken in other parts of the U.S., there is little to no published research documenting this feature in AAE. Thus, the fact that this feature and the others discussed in this article have now been documented in southeast Georgia AAE varieties is significant, as it reveals an even greater degree of structural similarity and linguistic continuity between certain AAE varieties and Geechee than has previously been described.

Unstressed *bin* as a past marker

To date, there has been little research on unstressed past marker *bin* in AAE. Most studies have taken the position that either unstressed *bin* does not occur in contemporary AAE (cf. Labov 1998; Winford 1998) or that it is ‘declining in frequency’ (Rickford 1977: 207). Green (2002: 58) describes a restricted use of *bin* functioning as a ‘unstressed past marker’ that ‘can occur with a time adverbial.’ Green (2002: 169) notes that this unstressed *bin* is used as a ‘type of tense/aspect marker with *had*’ but concludes that ‘[b]eyond this use, it is not clear that present-day AAE uses *bin* to mark simple past.’ Spears (2008: 523), on the other hand, writes that ‘unstressed *been* [i.e. *bin*] occurs in at least some varieties of AAV[ernacular]E in addition to Gullah and other creoles,’ adding that it can be used as a past or pluperfect (past perfect).

Unstressed *bin*, one of several forms of *bin/been* found in contemporary AAE varieties in southeast Georgia, differs from both General English *have + been* and stressed BIN. Unlike General English perfect *have been*, which indicates that a situation or some part of it started in past time while having current relevance or continuing at the time of speaking, and unlike stressed BIN, which is described as a remote perfect marker that locates a situation or some part of it in the remote or distant past while also having relevance to present time (Labov 1972; Rickford 1973, 1975, 1977; Green 1998, 2002), unstressed *bin* in these Georgia AAE varieties marks the simple past and can also be used to mark anteriority. The examples below highlight these different verbal markers in coastal Georgia AAE varieties: (4) General English perfect participle *been*, (5) stressed BIN, (6) unstressed *bin* that occurs only with *had*, and forms of unstressed *bin* that occur without *had* in (7) and (8).

- (4) I Ø *been* workin’ all day
‘I’ve been working all day’
- (5) Girl, that man *BIN* working there
‘Girl, that man has been working there for a long time (and he still works there)’
- (6) He *bin had* ‘em a long time
‘He has had them a long time.’
- (7) He *bin* older than you
‘He was older than you’
- (8) You say he *bin* doin’ fine before they operated on him, ain’ it?
‘You say he was doing fine before they operated on him, right?’

Green (2002) cites other occurrences of unstressed *bin* found in literary sources representing

earlier African American speech (including Geechee) including *bin lef*’ for simple past *left* (p. 166), *bin try* for simple past *tried* (p. 169), and *bin done*, which is also described as marking simple past (p. 191). Examples provided by Spears (2008) include unstressed *bin* followed by the verb *had* as well as other verbs (e.g. *lef[t]* and *broke*). Neither Green (2002) nor Spears (2008), however, provides examples of unstressed *bin* surfacing without a following verb (i.e. as a copula), which reveals a wider syntactic distribution in my data than what has been described in existing scholarly literature. The examples below, which occur primarily in coastal Georgia AAE varieties, show anterior *bin* used as a type of copula or linking element in past environments (e.g. for *was* or *were*) and followed by verbs other than *have*.

- (9) That *bin* some hard money back in them days
‘That was some hard money back in those days’
- (10) Ain’ nobody but her knew I had *bin* lef’
‘Nobody but her knew I had left’

When used as a past copula, unstressed *bin* does not take a continuative reading. Examples of unstressed *bin + had*, however, are often compatible with a perfect interpretation, though it is possible that the perfect continuative interpretation in these instances is derived from both the context and the verb *have* together with time adverbials as in (11) below.

- (11) I got a cavity. I *bin had* it for a long time.
‘I got a cavity. I’ve had it for a long time.’

Apart from the examples in Green (2002) and Spears (2008), unstressed *bin* is generally not described as a feature of contemporary AAE. The existence of past or anterior *bin* in English-lexifier pidgins and creoles (including Geechee), however, is well documented (cf. Maurer et al., 2013) and could provide clues to explain its occurrence both in its restricted use (i.e. *bin + had*) described by Green (2002) and its wider use in southeast Georgia AAE varieties. Cunningham (1970, 1992) provides examples of unstressed *bin* in South Carolina Gullah varieties that pattern like some of the examples in my southeast Georgia data in which *bin* functions as a past copula. Cunningham (1970: 64) describes *bin* as a ‘past tense indicator’ and notes that it ‘always precedes the verb or predicating adjective that it marks.’ In Cunningham’s data (1970: 64), verbs preceded by unstressed *bin* remain uninflected (e.g. ‘*bin see*’ for *saw* and ‘*bin feel*’ for *felt*). The use of unstressed *bin* followed by uninflected verbs is

unattested in my recorded data, but speakers from both coastal and inland areas report that they understand this grammatical construction, though they do not use it themselves. Finally, examining unstressed *bin* in AAE has implications for the origins of stressed BIN in AAE. Several scholars have considered the relationship between stressed BIN and the past or anterior *bin* found in creoles (cf. Rickford, 1977; Winford, 1992, 1993, 1998; Labov 1998); however, these studies posit an unstressed past or anterior *bin* similar to or related to the creole *bin* as a putative source for stressed BIN without considering unstressed *bin* in AAE, which could serve as the missing link between the two.

This section has provided conclusive evidence of the use of unstressed *bin* in contemporary AAE varieties, documenting both where in the U.S. it is found and highlighting some of its similarities with the unstressed *bin* found in Geechee. It further suggests that examining unstressed *bin* in AAE rather than distant English-lexifier creoles could explain the origins and development of stressed BIN, especially when considered together with constructions of unstressed *bin + had*, which are often compatible with a (remote) perfect reading. The widest distribution of unstressed *bin* in southeast Georgia AAE varieties, which includes its use as a past copula in addition to auxiliary verb, is found only along the coast, where Geechee is also spoken. This reveals once again a coastal/inland distinction in the patterning of certain linguistic features in this region as a result of the contact between coastal AAE speakers and Geechee speakers.

Conclusion

This article has examined contemporary AAE in southeast Georgia to show that sustained contact with Geechee has influenced aspects of its grammatical structure. I introduced and discussed morphosyntactic features, including plural *-s* absence, postnominal plural *dem*, unstressed past marker *bin*, and first-singular zero copula, which best illustrate the contact influence of Geechee on some of the AAE varieties in this region. My data reveal coastal and inland distinctions in the patterning of several features described in this article, namely high rates of plural *-s* absence, postnominal *dem* as a pluralizer for non-human referents, and unstressed *bin* as a copula, all of which are found mainly in coastal Georgia where speakers of AAE and Geechee have had longstanding contact with one another.

This research is positioned at the intersection of debates regarding the origins and development of AAE and its past and present-day relationship to Geechee and reveals an even greater degree of linguistic continuity between the two varieties than has previously been documented. It is impossible to consider AAE or Geechee in southeast Georgia without allowing for the effects of contact, and in exploring the grammatical diversity of AAE varieties in this region, this article offers new insights into the extent of regional variation in AAE. Indeed, a broader perspective, beyond that which focuses solely on the role of white English vernaculars, is needed in studies of both AAE and Geechee, and this work contributes to a more complete understanding of African American language in the U.S. Deep South, highlighting the link between contact among diverse groups of African Americans and grammatical variation in AAE.

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