

Gullah Geechee style-shifting as mediation in intercommunity performance contexts*

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Abstract

For Gullah Geechee, an English-lexified creole language spoken along the coast of the southeastern United States (Hancock, 1980; Opala, 1987), intercommunity performance events are characterized by an enregistered ethnolinguistic repertoire (Benor, 2010) and shaped by outsider ideologies. This creates two intra-performance styles: a more acrolectal register approaching the language norms of other local varieties and a curated variety that combines basilectal features and stylization (Coupland, 2001) for the purposes of mediating interactions with outsiders. The current study explores the relationship between these two distinct styles of Gullah Geechee performance register (Brown, 2005; Smith, 1999), and the ability of speakers to mediate within their ethnolinguistic repertoire to produce distinct voices for intercommunity purposes.

1 Introduction

An English-lexified creole language variety located along the southeastern coastline of the United States and outlying Sea Islands, Gullah Geechee is typified by small speaker population and a distinct sociocultural speech community until relatively recently socially and geographically isolated from mainland and mainstream American English (MAE) speakers (Opala, 1987). This southern Lowcountry area is also characterized by a thriving tourist industry, which alongside historical and geographical appeal is based on a sociocultural cross-exhibition of southern, African American, and Gullah Geechee identities. The expression of these identities, while navigating perceptions of authenticity by intracommunity members, are also expected to conform to certain circulating expectations by non-local visitors and

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outsiders (Correa & Graves, 2015; Hargrove, 2005). This dichotomy can be visualized as variable language practices as perceived by outsiders and utilized in intercommunity interactions: a more acrolectal register approaching more closely language norms of other local varieties, i.e. Southern American English (SAE) and African American English (AAE), and a ‘curated’, ‘idealized’ variety that adopts a combination of basilectal intracommunity features and extracommunity expectations for the purposes of creating an identity for consumption by tourists and other outsiders. Both of these styles negotiate discourses of authenticity and linguistic authority in different manners, and both are actively involved in the construction and embodiment of Gullah Geechee personhood under the gaze of the outsider listening subject (Mufwene, 1993).

The effects of variation (whether conscious or unconscious) between these curated and non-curated registers as style shifting in the context of public, performed persona in this particular community have been somewhat covered by the literature (Brown, 2005; Smith, 1999), but how this expression, construction, and embodiment of sociolinguistic personhood and personae is maintained in the intercommunity-centered performance represents an avenue for continued exploration. The current study explores the relationship between these two distinct styles of Gullah personhood construction, and the ability of speakers to mediate within their ethnolinguistic repertoire to produce distinct voices for intercommunity purposes. Because Gullah storytellers act as cultural brokers of the ‘face’ the community wears to the public in curated interactions (Bailey, 2001; A. L. Roberts, 2019), they present a robust opportunity to observe the ways community members interact with, and either reinforce or disrupt, the expectations and pressures of the extracommunity. Three prolific Gullah storytellers and community figures were selected for the purpose of examining these interactions and the identities indexed by this diglossia (situating Gullah Geechee as a language separate from, but interconnected with English, the deliberate use of which exists alongside of terms such as style/register-shifting, polylectaly, translingualism, etc); not only due to their position as intercommunity liaisons but their documented utilization of register-shifting within a polylectal variety for the purpose of distinguishing the importance of Gullah Geechee language as a marker of authentic community membership.

2 Curated identities

Because the questions motivating this research invoke notions that link place, identity, and indexicality, the framework laid out in Johnstone et al.’s (2006) seminal study of Pittsburghese and similar tetherings of semiosis and style (Hall, 2019; Remlinger, 2018; S. J. Roberts, 2004) provide a theoretical foundation of the sociolinguistic mechanisms of enregisterment affecting the indexing of these identities. It also supplies an applied, ethnographic approach to eliciting metadiscursive

and metapragmatic information from participants, which often must consider how much speaker awareness and control (Babel, 2016) affect their immediate styles and larger accretions of stance. Gullah Geechee personhood is a complex intersection of sociocultural resources (Smalls, 2012), including locality, ethnicity, and markedness that are bound up within the ethnolinguistic repertoire (Benor, 2010; King, 2018) from which speakers draw resources of relationality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Some of these features are shared with adjacent community language practices (Moody, 2015) and do not index Gullah Geechee in isolation, indicating a type of intersectional bricolage where linguistic resources can be highly contextual based on audience and purpose. The community historically has been geographically isolated and linguistically marginalized (Jones-Jackson, 1986, 1987), creating a strong tether between locality and covert prestige with membership taking linguistic, cultural, geographic, or genealogical markers. Thus, the community has become characterized by its socially insular nature, where speakers are acutely aware of evaluations of outsiders and adjust language practices accordingly. These metalinguistic sensitivities illustrate the enregisterment (Agha, 2005) of Gullah Geechee's contemporary expression, representing intersectionalities of class, race, and place, awareness of these intersectionalities by members of the community, and the divergent language attitudes that can arise through the perception of authentic performances by both intra- and extracommunity.

As a historically stigmatized speech community, the onus on Gullah speakers to perform linguistic accommodation to conform to the expectations of overt prestige ideologies while simultaneously often being able to escape the monolithization and erasure imposed by the white listening subject reflects how these language practices are perceived, categorized, and systematically controlled by hegemonic forces within the raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Although conflated and flattened by the stereotyped perspectives of outsiders (Irvine et al., 2000), we can still recognize a third-order indexicality (Silverstein, 2003) in particular represents the phenomenon by which these multiple styles of Gullah Geechee can come to index separated, curated personae through unconscious and conscious language variation by Gullah Geechee speakers. In particular the metalinguistic awareness and indexation of 'authentic' Gullah Geechee voice-as-person as a source of pride (in the face of historical linguistic anxieties from prescriptivist pressures) represent a recontextualization of this indexical ordering, wherein speakers can embody more fully the Gullah Geechee identity and double voicing while pushing back against hegemonic stigmatizations (Ruffins, 2008). Who gets counted as authentic and through what language practices is a persistent consideration of intercommunity identity work, especially when the effects of these questions are examined in-group members of marginalized communities (Bucholtz, 2003; Jackson, 2002); Gullah Geechee's characteristics of isolation and a variable distinction of linguistic and cultural identity often dictated by outsider depiction, exoticization and commodification (Jones-Jackson, 1978, 1984) reflects this on a localized

level within a diachronic ethnocentric hegemony.

However, metalinguistic and metadiscursive awareness reflected by Gullah Geechee community members in public performance indicate an acute understanding of this dual function of cultural curation and identity demarcation, simultaneously existing within and circumventing the enforcing expectations of the extracommunity. The speakers used in this study use a conscious shifting between basilectal and non-basilectal stylized representations of Gullah Geechee for purposes of education or entertainment while simultaneously indexing the salience of their distinctive personae and its linguistic and cultural distance from other communities, i.e. distinction linked with positive stance-making (Bucholtz, 2009; Kiesling, 2009).

3 Methodology

Data was collected from digital media footage of Gullah Geechee speakers, in particular those who are outspoken community ‘leaders’ or representatives in the public eye. Three speakers were chosen for the study: Carolyn White, Anita Singleton-Prather (‘Aunt Pearlie Sue’), and Marquetta Goodwine (‘Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation’). All speakers are female, native Gullah Geechee speakers originating from historically Gullah areas (Charleston, Beaufort, and St. Helena Island, respectively). Each speaker has multiple public appearances, all appearing across video-sharing sites, personal sites, blogs, educational sites, etc. This media represents an array of genres including interviews, both educational and informative, and storytelling and narratives for entertainment purposes. The videos were chosen on the basis of including multiple moments of perceptually salient style-shifting between multiple varieties, reflecting native-speaker polylectal intuitions and metadiscursive awareness.

In terms of linguistic analysis, the videos were analyzed with consideration of the effects of stylization in various discursive frames (Du Bois, 2007); style shifts were typologically indicated and categorized by where shifts occurred, their context, motivation, and purpose (Bell, 1984), and indications of intraspeaker variation or reported/quotative speech. In order to find sections indicative of style shifting, the speaker’s linguistic repertoire was examined in moments of ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ speech. In none of the videos do speakers present a basilectal stylized voice throughout; rather, they have at least two distinct voices: an informative, acrolectal-approaching register and a basilectal, stylized performance voice. The marked speech was compared to known linguistic features of Gullah Geechee, including morphosyntactic and lexical (Cunningham, 1970; Turner, 1949), phonetic and phonological (Klein, 2011, 2014; Weldon, 2018). By looking at the presence, saturation and robustness of these features, the salient moments of intraspeaker voice and intraspeaker variation could be demarcated. The marked speech could also be distinguished prosodically in many cases, using metrics such as articulation

rate (Thomas, 2007) and intonational elements that were distinct from non-stylized speech patterns.

4 Analysis

Because of the varied sources and genres across multiple platforms, the videos themselves presuppose certain audiences, with their intended purpose also incorporating information about the interviewers, documentarians, or uploaders themselves. This positions the speakers, both in scripted and unscripted situations, as considering the referee design during their recorded performances, itself a reflection of the unmarked outsider listening subject (Bell, 1984). This indicates a metadiscursive and metapragmatic awareness of speakers mediating between their everyday lived identity and the personae projected onto both the invoked and actual audiences. These inner and outer identities are taken up variably based the demographics of these audiences, including notions of locality, group alignment, and ethnicity, which shape and are shaped by the ideological expectations and evaluations of the out-group. For example, during the Caroline White Wikitongues video¹, she is speaking to an off-camera interviewer, whose questions or prompts are mostly edited from the recording to give the video mostly the appearance of a narrative monologue. There are components of reminiscence and self-reflection during the storytelling frame, but these moments are also co-instantiated with acknowledging the interviewer by speaking to them directly.

1. 35 and thinking about *dat*
 36 the ancestors were um um
 37 used to talk about the ***buckrah***
 38 I bet you you don't know who the *buckrah* is
 39 woo: Lord
 40 the *buckrahn* is-
 41 the *buckrah* is the plantation owner.

In the above excerpt, Caroline is switching discursive frames between narrating events to direct incorporation, where she makes explicit the divide between herself as intracommunity and the interviewer as extracommunity ('I bet you you don't know who the *buckrah* is.'). The Gullah Geechee term *buckrah* 'white person' is repeated several times for the informational benefit of both the interviewer and the invoked, presupposed audience before its definition is given. Later it is contextualized even further without acrolectal framing. This expression works because it

¹(Wikitongues, 2013)

is entailed by the previous introduction of *buckrah*, as well as its definition given from the earlier language-sharing contextual frame; compare the non-acrolectal feature final R-ABSENCE in *ownah* with R-FULNESS in the initial introductory realization of *owner*. In order for this style shifting to perform its various functions, as stated above a level of metalinguistic competence is required.

2. 2 down in the plantation now they used to (.)
- 3 call the ya:hd,
- 4 like you say yard,
- 5 in Gullah that's the *yahd*
- 6 *now hunnachillun go play in de yahd*
- 7 *hunnachillun* that mean
- 8 more than one *chillun* (1.0)
- 9 more than one child.
- 10 *hunnachillun* in Gullah.
- 11 more than one
- 12 *go in de yahd fo play*
- 13 and then you go out in the yard

In (2), this shifting with metalinguistic intuition and informative-frame performance functions can again be observed. White begins a direct comparison, again between the feature R-PRESENCE/ABSENCE as index of community dis/alignment ('like you say yard, in Gullah that's the *yahd*'). This is followed by a phrasal shift, including the introduction of an as-of-yet undefined term. This shift reflects a stylized Gullah Geechee utterance and also introduces another lexical item, *hunnachillun* '(you pl.) children'. This word follows the established language-sharing pattern as both *yahd* and *buckrah* in (1), where the word is introduced, defined, repeated, and used in larger basilectal phrasal utterances. This reinforces the hypothesized relationship between the styles: while audiences impose an expectation of 'authentic' or 'actual' Gullah Geechee from these storytellers, a saturation of basilectal structures would actually alienate them, feeding into the linguistic anxiety of the hegemonic majority listener because of a lack of mutual intelligibility (in increasing distance of linguistic proximity to Gullah, i.e. AAE, SAE, MAE) and the tacit expectation that status quo listeners should be exposed, but not overexposed (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Hill, 1998). These stylized structures are used strategically to co-index authenticity as a community member and distinction from interviewer and listener while performing the persona invoked. The more acrolectal counterpart is used for narration, language- and information-sharing frames; although the language practice itself may more resemble the imagined audience, content and

epistemic claims make explicit the stance between interviewer and speaker, and to frame items that can later be used in entextualized isolation.

GullahNet is a series produced by South Carolina Education Television (SCETV) website for k-12 students, [KnowItAll.org](https://www.knowitall.org) (Commission, 2021). A particularly interesting feature of this website is its ‘Gullah Tales’ sections, which contains animated video and audio of the fables ‘Bossy Elephant’, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, and ‘Three Little Pigs’, as read by Aunt Pearl Sue. There are two versions of each story, designated as ‘English’ and ‘Gullah’ by the website. Sharing one speaker, this indicates a diglossia, where the speaker has mastery over both varieties, supplementing the intradiscursive data above which signals more continuous polylectaly. Rather than defining both guises as two voices within the same creole language repertoire along a creole continuum, the institution has perpetuated the raciolinguistic ideology of a less-marked variant as being English and a marked performance as the othered Gullah Geechee. By designating English and Gullah versions, it also impresses the expectations of the speaker’s identity by the perceived audience. The purpose of the English version is to present children and educators with a more ‘intelligible’ variety for educational purposes, approaching an acrolectal variety. By contrast, the Gullah version is characterized by its stylized performance and basilectal linguistic features, as in the example from ‘Little Red Riding Hood’² below.

3. English version	Gullah version
1 Let me tell you bout a brave little girl	me gon tell oona bout a brave li gyal
2 most people	now most people round dese pahts hea
3 call her Little Red Riding Hood	call uh li Red Ridin Hood
4 but her grandmother	but uh granmammy
5 just called her Red	her jus call uh Red

The English version spoken by Aunt Pearl Sue is highly acrolectal, resembling archetypal ‘storyteller speech’ in terms of both register and prosody. The Gullah version by contrast is saturated with basilectal Gullah Geechee linguistic features including lexical (*oona* ‘you pl.’), syntactic (*me gon tell* ‘I’m going to tell’), and phonological (*li gyal* ‘little girl’). The two versions are consistently parallel in narrative structure, allowing for comparative guise-matching between the two and allowing for the audience to translate terms and constructions they find unfamiliar, but do exhibit some periphrastic variations. In the above example, the English version omits any additional information after *most people*, while the stylized Gullah version extrapolates the structure with *round dese pahts hea*. This adds an additional exoticized, performed element lacking in the unmarked English variety that

²(Commission, 2021)

reflects the stereotyped expectations of a Gullah Geechee storytelling experience, drawing on ideologies of familiarity, comfort, and locality invoked in depictions of Gullah Geechee folk tales and storytelling. These sources show that linguistic stereotypes and movements between second-level and third-level indexicalities are distinct elements of the intercommunity performance; bifurcation of curated and non-curated, spontaneous and planned performances are constantly being reproduced in these environments where Gullah Geechee personhood and resulting claims of authenticity and authority are expected to be indexed and embedded within the discursive context.

4.1 Domains of stylized speech

Because this study emphasizes the distinction between conscious (non-)stylization of a creole variety, it is important to delineate the specific domains of discourse in which the occurrence of stylization is most salient. The identification of these domains is by no means the only discrete boundaries of where the stylization occurs, rather representing common themes in which basilectal features were consistently used. These domains are REPORTED AND QUOTATIVE SPEECH, LANGUAGE-SHARING, and EPISTEMIC TURNS AND ENREGISTERED STANCE-MAKING. Each of these domains can also be characterized as not only being representative of basilectal stylization, but also as opportunities for the speaker to illustrate her metalinguistic and metadiscursive awareness in understanding the expectations of her performance and her linguistic choices to reinforce or disrupt those expectations. Caroline White's Wikitongues video is used in the following sections to illustrate the typology of these discursive frames and stylization that are linked to these moments of performance.

4.1.1 Reported and quotative speech

In Caroline White's videos, much of the performance by the speaker during the given interview centers around the voices of others. Importantly, in embodying her role as intercommunity liaison and linguistic broker, the speaker shifts between a basilectal stylized voice (bolded) when quoting members from within the community, as well as providing a hyper-acrolectal stylized voice (italicized) when quoting persons located in the extracommunity.

4. 122 and so they call me up (4:00)
 123 *say Ms. White*
 124 I was out then you know grown
 125 *um we would like you to come down to Avery*
 126 *to do some storytelling cause we have some*

- 127 *um people from all over the world coming*
 128 I say **oh do say**
 129 **hunna wan me for come down eya now**
 130 **fuh talk Gullah fuh de people en dem en I been eya you tell me**
 131 **say don talk em**
 132 well I say okay I'll come
 133 so my girlfriend **them** would say
 134 **you mean you gon to speak Gullah fuh dose white folk**
 135 I say I **sho is**
 136 **I go fuh talkin to dem (4:30)**
 137 **cause when I done talk em I got my check**

In lines 123, 125-127 the speaker is quoting a voice from the ‘prestigious’ Avery school, a private school in Charleston with historic ties to both the Gullah Geechee community and a site of Gullah Geechee language and identity mediation (Smalls, 2012). During these moments of reported speech, she uses acrolectal features commonly associated and indexed with acrolectal or more standard-aligned Englishes, including marked instances of lack of participle *-ing* nasal fronting (‘storytelling’, ‘coming’), which is lexically present elsewhere in her ‘unmarked’ speech. She also switches between three voices in this excerpt: the Avery voice, her basilectal reported response, and the basilectal reported response of her friends. All of these voices represent metapragmatic stylization and a conscious shift in phonological, syntactic, and lexical features to produce each identity.

4.1.2 Language-sharing

Because of the educational frame of the video, there are several sections where the express purpose is to provide examples of Gullah Geechee at both the individual word level, as well as embedded within larger discursive phrases. In order to facilitate this intercommunity language sharing, the speaker switches between stylized speech to indicate when she is sharing the language example, contextualizing and embodying it, and nonstylized speech to denote what the basilectal elements mean and also to establish her stance as an authority on the language itself.

5. 171 down in the plantation now they used to (.) (6:01)
 172 call the yard,
 173 *like you say yard,*
 174 in Gullah that’s the **yahd**

- 175 **now hunnachillun go play in de yahd**
 176 **hunnachillun** that mean
 177 more than one **chillun** (1.0)
 178 more than one child.
 179 **hunnachillun** in Gullah.
 180 more than one
 181 **go in de yard fuh play**
 182 and then you go out in the yard

In this example, two Gullah Geechee linguistic elements are overtly introduced: the phonological markedness of *yahd* ‘yard’, and the lexical item *hunnachillun* ‘children’. The language-sharing frame is established in line 173 by indexing the extra-community stance of the listening subject discursively (‘like you say yard’). Then the terms are embedded in a stylized utterance in 175. White uses a pattern of repetition to establish the Gullah Geechee pronunciation of the terms before closing the frame in lines 181 and 182 by giving a completed basilectal utterance and its following acrolectal ‘translation’.

4.1.3 Epistemic turns and enregistered stance-making

Like the reported and quotative speech and language-sharing examples above, much of the interview also establishes the authenticity and authority of the speaker and her performance of the language, which is accomplished by demarcating the listening subject as an extracommunity member and simultaneously indexing her own knowledge of intracommunity practices. This is not done as an overtly face-threatening stance; rather, it reinforces her position as an intercommunity liaison who then fulfills the expectations of the extracommunity of the speaker as performing a curated role.

6. 200 I like to tell people about it
 201 and so far speaking in Gullah
 202 it doesn’t embarrass me not one bit
 203 cause when we get together
 204 you know my age group (7:00)
 205 we sit down eya
 206 and talk to one another and *you wouldn’t understand a ting we talkin about*
 207 and thinking about that

- 208 the ancestors were um um used to talk bout the **buckrah**
209 I bet you don't know who the **buckrah** is
210 ooh Lord
211 the **buckrah** is- **buckrah** is the plantation owner
212 that's the word **buckrah** means plantation owner

In this example, the epistemic turn is produced in lines 206 and 209, where White establishes that as an intracommunity member she has access to knowledge and practices of the community, which out-group members would either not be able to understand, or need to have explained to them as in the case of *buckrah* 'plantation owner, white person'. This kind of stance-making through the enregistered language stylization accomplishes multiple functions simultaneously—it reinforces White's position as intercommunity liaison, the out-grouping of the audience, and produces another language-sharing frame in which she can switch styles to index both her linguistic authenticity and authority.

These domains of stylized speech certainly do not occur in isolation of one other; in fact, there are often overlapping domains and genres occurring at the same time, in which stance is consistently reinforced through shared experience and linguistic example. The speaker's metalinguistic and metadiscursive awareness allows her to switch between stylized and non-stylized registers, with which she can consciously adapt to the expectations of the listening subject and out-group audience. However, it becomes clear that when these domains are at their most distinct, more instances of conscious stylization do appear. It is also in these domains where an enregistered variety is most salient as expressions of basilectal curated Gullah Geechee, which are markedly distinct than the more mesolectal and acrolectal style used throughout by the speaker.

5 Conclusion

The findings support the hypothesis that there are two salient varieties within intercommunity intermediary Gullah Geechee that are co-influenced by the metalinguistically-aware navigations of in-group speakers during intercommunity performance and by the expectations of overt prestige groups by speakers in these discursive environments: an acrolectal register used to make epistemic claims, frame educational and knowledge-sharing moments while invoking more overt prestige language practice ideologies and the other being an stylized, basilectal style for outside audience consumption and to index claims of in-group authenticity; both voices are constructed through resources within the ethnolinguistic repertoire, and all of these resources are components of the embodiment of the speaker as part of the community and as the Gullah Geechee individual.

Speakers are able to shift between stylized, basilectal and non-curated voices in order to index specific personae for specific performances and for various stylistic and discursive purposes, simultaneously reinforcing the boundaries between in-group and out-group members and while taking positive and affective stances of authenticity-producing, authority-maintaining, and information-brokering emergent across the interdiscursive environment. This highlights the continuing imposition of exoticized expectations on Gullah Geechee speakers, drawing from persistent stereotypes and outsider evaluations of indexical, enregistered elements of Gullah Geechee personhood that themselves products of curated language performances. This continues to inform micro-level interactions and circulates macro-level raciolinguistic ideologies, limiting the discursive spaces in which it is 'appropriate' for Gullah Geechee speakers to utilize their ethnolinguistic repertoire in a way in which the majority of features that do not assimilate or accommodate to MAE norms are not stigmatized by the status quo or hegemonic institutions. However, the deft maneuverability of speakers between stylized and non-stylized moments also shows how Gullah Geechee speakers can covertly circumnavigate these limitations and use the demarcations to create spaces of linguistic solidarity and authority. This stylized shifting occurring during intercommunity performances need not to be framed as solely for the benefit of outsider listener subjects, rather it speaks to the agency of Gullah Geechee persons within the social framework of the American South, and how metapragmatic and metadiscursive awareness and control can be important aspects of identity in terms of community belonging, negotiating tensions of intercommunity alignments, and language maintenance and expression.

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