Gullah is an English-based creole spoken along the coastline of the Southeastern United States, mainly in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Its substrate languages include the West African languages Ewe, Hausa, Igbo, Kikongo, Mende, Twi, Vai, and Yoruba. It strongly resembles Krio, a major West African English-based creole spoken in Sierra Leone, and has been argued to have been influenced by Krio (Hancock 1980, 1986). According to Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949), a pioneer scholar of Gullah, many words from many different African languages have been retained in Gullah, including several hundred personal names.

African American Vernacular English has been argued to have its roots in Gullah, although Gullah is distinct in significant ways from both AAVE and Standard English.

**Sociohistorical background**

*Importation of slaves direct from Africa*

During the 1800s, many slaves were brought to South Carolina and Georgia direct from West Africa, principally from a section extending from Senegal to Angola. The lexicon of Gullah contains words and structures found in the following languages, all of which are spoken in the Senegal-Angola region: Wolof, Malinke, Mandinka, Bambara, Fula, Mende, Vai, Twi, Fante, Gâ, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Bini, Hausa, Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Kongo, Umbundu, and Kimbundu.

According to Turner (1949), slaves brought to the United States directly from Africa were considered less likely to organize rebellions than those brought from the West Indies, due to their limited contact with English. South Carolina legislation imposed greater import duties on West Indian slaves than on African slaves. Partly as a result, South Carolina had a larger population of native West African language speakers than other areas of the U.S. It was in large part the remoteness of the Sea Islands that preserved African culture and language influences among Gullah speakers. Bridges to the Sea Islands were not built until the 1950s.

There are various speculations as to where the term “Gullah” originated. One speculation is that the term might have derived from “Angola.”

**Gullah Phonology**

Vowels: [i, ɪ, e, ɛ, â, a, ə, u, o, ʌ, u]

Consonants:
- Labial: [p, b, m, p’, kp, gb, mb, mp, mw, φ, β]
- Alveolar: [t, d, n, t’, nt, nd, ns, θ, ð, s]
- Palatal: [ʃ, ʃ’, c, ɟ, ɲ]
- Velar: [k, g, k’, c, ɲd, ɲg, ɲk]
- Approximants: [l] and [r]
Substitutions from English to Gullah:

1. /θ/ → /t/ ex: ‘thank you’ → tank yu
2. /ð/ → /d/ ex: ‘this, that, them’ → dis, dat, dem
3. /ɛ/ → /ʌ/ ex: ‘bird, first’ → bɔd, fɔs

Gullah Syntax

- no distinction of voice (no ‘passive’ constructions)
- serial verbs
- the word do:
  - functions similar to preposition after verb of direction:
    2. i rvid do jäksnb.ɔr ‘He rides to (or toward) Jacksonboro’
    - also as incomplete predication (tense determined by context):
    3. en do h im sew mi ‘And it was he who saved me’

- the word sɛ:
  - used after verbs of saying, thinking, etc. (similar to complementizer):
    4. dɛn d i c ᵀ onItemClick ɲuk sɛn wɔd sɛd e ɡvɪn ɡɪt nɔt ɛn
    - then the children there in New York sent word saying they were not going to get anything

In Gullah the verb to come is frequently used adverbially before another verb in the sense of ‘finally’:
5. dɔ kɔm nɔv sɪ tuɗe... ‘Now, after all this time (or finally), I see today…’

- topicalization:
6. tu bask it, wɔx ɬ it kɔm tu? ‘Two baskets, what do they come to?’
7. rɛbl tɔɪm, wɔx dɛm dɔ jɪ yu? ‘Rebel time [slavery], what did it give you?’

- wh-movement:
8. wɔx₃ dɛm₂-₁ dɔ₁ ɬ jɪ₂ yu₂? ‘what are they giving you?’

Gullah Morphology

- no plural marking on nouns:
9. dɛm bɔd ‘those boys’
  ʃɔw wɔg ‘five dogs’

- no inflection on verbs:
10. mi go ‘I go’
    - ‘unə go ‘you go (sg.)’
    - i go ‘he goes’
    wi go ‘we go’
    - ‘unə go ‘you go (pl.)’
    - dem go ‘they go’
Word formations:

(11) *tebl tapa* ‘preacher’ i.e. ‘one who taps on the table’
    *tɔɭ* *unɔ mɔut* ‘hush, stop talking’ i.e. ‘tie your mouth’ (< Mende)
    *swit mɔut* ‘to flatter’ i.e. ‘to sweet mouth’
    *bad mɔut* ‘to curse’ i.e. ‘to bad mouth’

Gullah pronoun system

(12) NOMINATIVE

    *mi* (sometimes *di*) ‘I’
    *‘unɔ* ‘you’
    *i, hɪm* ‘he’

OBJECTIVE

    *mi* ‘I’
    *‘unɔ* ‘you’
    *hɪm, əm* ‘him’
    *fi* ‘her’

POSSESSIVE

    *mi, mɔdi* ‘my’
    *‘unɔ* ‘you’
    *hɪm ‘his’
    *fi* ‘her’

compare to Ibo pronoun system:

(13) NOMINATIVE

    *m3, mu3* ‘I’
    *ge3, gi3, i3, e3* ‘you’
    *ya3, ə3, ɔ3* ‘he’

OBJECTIVE

    *m3* ‘me’
    *ge3* ‘you’
    *ya3* ‘him,’ ‘her,’ ‘it’

POSSESSIVE

    *m3* ‘my’
    *ge3* ‘your’
    *ya3* ‘his,’ ‘her,’ ‘its’
According to Ethnologue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Coastal region from Jacksonville, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida, and especially on the Sea Islands off the Georgia coast. Small clusters in New York City and Detroit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alt. names</td>
<td>Gullah, Geechee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialects</td>
<td>Northeast Florida Coast, Georgia, South Carolina. Intelligibility of other English-based creoles is undetermined. Very close to Bahamas Creole and Afro-Seminole. Lexical similarity 90% with Afro-Seminole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td>Creole, English based, Atlantic, Eastern, Northern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnologue data from Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 15th Edition

Bibliography