

Presentation By: Lindsay Walker LING 801 Fall 2011 SFU

**Gullah:**

Only remaining creolized form of English

Spoken as first language by African Americans from North Carolina to Florida

**Gullah & AAE:**

Gullah is a significant part of the debate about the origins of African American English (AAE)

Part of this debate is the function of *ain't* in AAE and its origin

- Is it a tense/aspect neutral monomorphemic negator as in creole varieties?
- Is it a negated auxiliary as in white nonstandard varieties of English (WNSE)?
- Weldon (1994) believes it is the latter and that alternation between *ain't* and *didn't* is simply a trace from creole origins.

Weldon concludes that AAE and Gullah are still quite difficult to compare on this issue as Gullah has been borrowing English constructions and seems to be in the process of decreolization, while AAE has already been decreolized.

**Methods:**

Data collected in mid-early 90s on John's Island, St. Helena Island and McClellanville, S. Carolina (10 hrs)

Recordings from 1980s from Mt. Pleasant and Awendaw S. Carolina (5 hrs)

6.5 hrs – casual conversation

8.5 hrs – interviews

7M; 14F; 60+ years old

Grade school education or less; never spent any significant amount of time out of the area

Only the effects of gender and style will be analyzed

**Analysis:**

|         | Copula Constructions  | Non-Copula Constructions   |
|---------|---|--|
| Present | 7 variants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>ain't</i> occurs with 75% freq</li> <li>- all other variants marginal</li> <li>- plural/2P forms highly variable</li> <li>- full forms are rare (<i>are not, is not</i>)</li> </ul>  | 3 variable environments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1. Non-stative predicate; <i>don't</i> vs <i>doesn't</i>; 3PS</li> <li>- 2. Stative predicate; <i>don't, ain't, doesn't</i>; 3PS</li> <li>- 3. Stative predicate; <i>don't, ain't</i>; all other subjects</li> </ul> 2 categorical environments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1. Non-stative predicate; <i>don't</i>; all other subjects</li> <li>- 2. Stative predicate; <i>don't</i>; plural subjects</li> </ul> |
| Past    | 6 variants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>wasn't</i> occurs with 49% freq</li> <li>- <i>didn't</i> occurs with 25% freq and only with adjectival predicates</li> <li>- <i>ain't</i> occurs with 7% freq – past time reference specified by context</li> <li>- sentences with <i>been</i> are negated with <i>ain't</i> or <i>didn't</i></li> </ul> | 2 variants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>ain't</i> vs <i>didn't</i> with inflected verbs</li> <li>- <i>ain't, didn't, don't, ain't been, didn't been</i> with non-inflected verbs</li> </ul>   |

### **Copula – Present time:**

- Lack of full copula
- Preference for *ain't*
  - o Indicates that the present negative forms of English copula are not well established in the Gullah data

### **Copula – Past time:**

- *didn't* (in adjectival environments)
- *ain't been* (with noninflected verbs preceded by *a*)
  - o These creole-like variants seem to be most resistant to incorporation of *wasn't*

### **Non-copula present do-support construction:**

#### Variable Environments

- 1. Non-stative predicates never use *ain't* because this results in a past time interpretation
- 2. *Ain't* is categorical in stative predicate environments with 3PS subjects.
  - o Conversational setting (not surprising because it is least standard)
  - o Non-multiple subjects (opposite pattern to AAE – due to low number of tokens?)
  - o Female speakers (surprising – females more likely to use standard variants, however other studies of Gullah show this pattern)
  - o Phonological environment (surprising – CVCV pattern usually preferred. *Ain't* occurs after vowel, *don't* with consonant creating a VV/CC pattern)
- 3. *Ain't* never used by males or in interviews. Used in stative predicates with 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and zero subjects

### **Non-copula past do-support construction:**

- Inflected verbs
  - o *Didn't* occurs with noun phrase subjects
  - o *Ain't* occurs with zero subject and preceding pauses
- Non-inflected verbs
  - o *Didn't* favored with zero subject, preceding pause and by male speakers
  - o *Ain't* favored in conversational settings

### **Summary:**

Gullah behaves as a mesolectal or upper-mesolectal creole variety

All variable forms exhibit variation between English-like and creole-like forms.

- But – frequencies and patterns of variability are not consistent
  - o Eg. The non-copula past construction favors *ain't*. All other do-support constructions favor *don't* and *didn't*. Present copula constructions favor *ain't*. In past contexts, *wasn't* is the most frequent but varies considerably with *didn't* and *ain't been*.

Non-copula past pattern in which *ain't* varies with *didn't* occurs in both Gullah and AAE, but not in other varieties of English

- Lends support to idea that Gullah/Gullah-like creole is source of the alternation in AAE

But

- In this construction, Gullah has two variations and AAE has only one
  - o *Didn't* is better established in Gullah than in AAE
  - o *Ain't* is better established in AAE than in Gullah
- Suggests that *ain't* in past contexts is a new phenomenon - makes it difficult to connect Gullah and AAE in this debate

In Weldon 1994 (p. 390), *ain't* in AAE thought to behave as three distinct auxiliaries representing negative forms of *be*, *have* and *do*.

- However, in Gullah *ain't* seems to act as tense-aspect neutral, monomorphemic negator.
  - o Extremely variable
  - o Most frequent in environments shown to be resistant to copula incorporation (suggests it is unlikely that *ain't* in these situations is a negative copula)
  - o In Mufwene (1993b) it is argued that because *ain't* can combine with “virtually any tense, mood (except for the imperative), or aspect marker” (100) it should be analyzed as a monomorphemic negator in Gullah.
  - o *Ain't* does not occur in tag questions (this would have supported its interpretation as a negative form of *be*, *have*, or *do*)

Parallels in use of *ain't* in past-*do* constructions support connection between Gullah and AAE

- Gullah may be undergoing decreolization
  - o Incorporation of English forms
  - o Perhaps affected AAE earlier in history

Comparing Gullah and AAE as each develops may shed light on this issue

### **Discussion:**

Weldon noticed several significant variations between utterances acquired from interviews and those from casual conversations. Do you think an account of variability requires utterances from both formal and informal formats in order to present a clear picture of usage? Why or why not?

In some cases the effect of gender was a significant factor in the variability of forms, but there were twice as many female recordings as male. Is this a problem?

Do you agree with Weldon's conclusion that *ain't* acts as a monomorphemic negator in Gullah? Why or why not?

If AAE and Gullah seem to differ on most patterns of variability (other than those parallel uses of *ain't* in past-*do* constructions) can we reliably make a connection between some Gullah-like creole and the development of AAE? Or is it more reasonable that AAE developed separately and just happens to share a similar pattern with Gullah?

What other avenues of exploration would make the picture clearer (in terms of the connection between Gullah and AAE)?

### **Conclusions:**

While this study is important in terms of adding to the current dialogue about AAE and its connections to English and creoles, it is still limited in its ability to make any definitive claims. The data examined is quite limited (in some cases only one or two examples of a variant) and so the percentages of use for some variants are not easily interpreted. However, Weldon notes in the article that she believes further investigation into the development of Gullah and AAE over time give a better picture. It seems that further research as suggested, combined with the preliminary data in this study, might serve to provide a more satisfying result.

