

CHAPTER 4: THE IMPRINT OF HISTORY (17:28-28:30)

This section discusses the historical context, particularly the slave trade, that developed African American Language (AAL) in the United States. Various linguistic origins and influences on AAL are described.



KEY POINTS



Slave history and linguistic isolation

From the 16th to 19th centuries, approximately 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World via the transatlantic slave trade. 10.7 million survived and disembarked in the Americas and the Caribbean. Approximately 450,000 arrived in the United States. These Africans spoke a variety of West African languages, yet none of these languages survived the Atlantic crossing intact. As linguist John Baugh explains, this slave history produced a unique immigrant group in regards to language use due to the extreme extent of linguistic isolation. Individuals were typically isolated from other speakers of their language while on the coast of West Africa and during the Atlantic crossing. Once they arrived in the United States, they were sold and segregated into households including some larger plantations. They were prohibited from reading and writing and denied access to education for hundreds of years.

Linguistic origins and influences

As linguist Walter Edwards explains, slaves had to form languages using linguistic properties from surrounding language varieties. Varieties of AAL emerged from these linguistic contact situations with influences from West African Languages and Southern American English varieties, as well as those with roots in England and Ireland. There is some disagreement among linguists regarding the precise origins of AAL. Some believe that the roots of AAL were heavily influenced by earlier European American dialects. Others believe that AAL is a descendant of a creole (a language that emerges in situations of contact between speakers who have no common language among them). And still others contend that AAL was importantly shaped both by regional European American dialects of English and influences from West African languages.

Gullah

Gullah or Geechee is an African American creole language variety spoken in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia. The language and culture of the Gullah-Geechee people is heavily influenced by West African languages and cultures. The linguistic isolation of speakers and density of African Americans on island communities has contributed to its longevity and resistance to assimilation.

In the film, Victoria Smalls delivers part of the Lord's prayer in Gullah:

"We Papa een heaben, leh ebrybody hona you name cause you da holy. We pray dat soon you gwine rule oba de we. Wasoneba ting you want, leh um be een dis wol, like same like e be dey

een heaben. Gii we de food dis day an ebry day. Fagib de bad ting we da do. Cause we fagib dem dat do bad to we." (Matthew 6:9-12)

Compare this to the New Revised Standard Version:

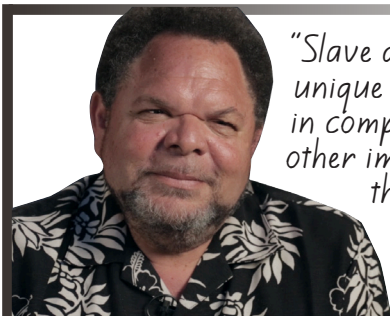
"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:9-12)

And to the New Century Version:

"Our Father in heaven, may your name always be kept holy. May your kingdom come, and what you want be done, here on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us the food we need for each day. Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us. And do not cause us to be tempted, but save us from the Evil One." (Matthew 6:9-12)

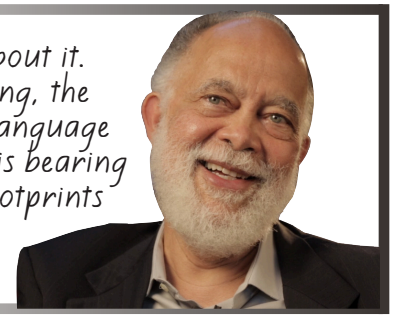
The Caribbean connection

As a result of their shared slave history and the fact that many U.S. slaves were first enslaved in the Caribbean, similarities exist between AAL varieties and Caribbean languages. For example, they share the feature 'reduction of final consonant clusters' in words like col' for cold and bes' for best discussed in the Exclusion and Language Systems section of this guide.



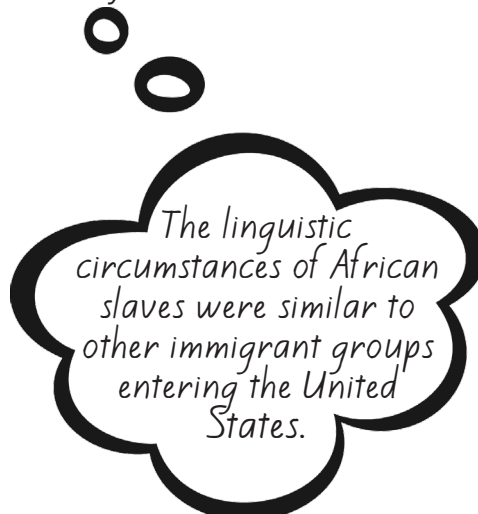
"Slave descendants have a unique linguistic heritage in comparison to every other immigrant group that came to this country." -John Baugh, linguist

"So that's the beauty about it. The way they're behaving, the way they're using the language is very systematic and is bearing out the patterns, the footprints of history." -John Rickford, linguist

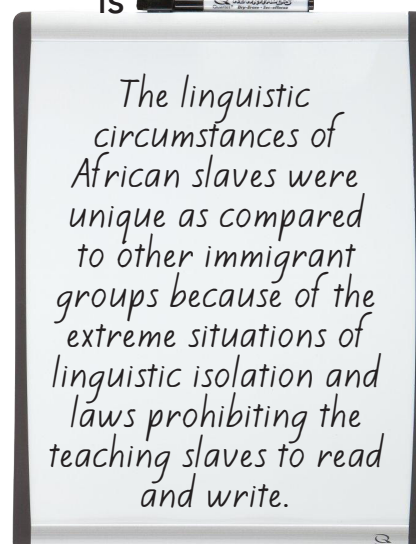


COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus is



FUN FACTS



U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was raised as a Gullah speaker in coastal Georgia. Though Gullah was his first language, he avoided speaking it in public for fear of being perceived as uneducated. He has cited this as a reason for not speaking much on the Supreme Court bench.

Check out these articles on the topic:



"The Real Reason Clarence Thomas Rarely Speaks"



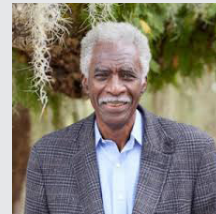
"Thomas Agonistes"



From 1994 to 1998 a television show called Gullah Gullah Island aired on the Nickelodeon network.

The show, starring Natalie and Ron Daise, was inspired by Gullah Culture and by Ron Daise's home, the Sea Island, Saint Helena Island, South Carolina.

Emory Campbell, featured in the documentary, is a community leader among the Gullah people and author of *Gullah Cultural Legacies*. In 2005, he received the Carter G. Woodson Memorial Award for his work preserving Gullah heritage and improving community living conditions. In 2008, he was elected Chairman of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission.



The Penn Center is an African American cultural and education center as well as a significant historical site on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina. Formerly the Penn School, it was one of the first schools founded specifically for the education of African Americans, including the formerly enslaved. Both Victoria Smalls and Emory Campbell worked at the Penn Center and several of the documentary's interviews were conducted at this location.



Explore the Penn Center's website for more information on its long history



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. How would you feel if you could no longer speak your first language or be around others who spoke it? What would you do?
2. Have you ever been to a non-English speaking country where you spoke little or none of the native language? How did you go about trying to communicate? What strategies were successful?
3. In what ways do you think learning to read and write has influenced your spoken language? Have you ever seen a word or phrase written and realized it was different than what you thought it was? *TEACHER TIP: two examples may be students interpreting "would've" as "would of" and "for all intents and purposes" as "for all intensive purposes".*

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some factors that have contributed to the development of AAL? What other languages and dialects influenced AAL?
2. What is significant about the Caribbean in relation to AAL?
3. According to John Baugh, what is unique about the linguistic circumstances of African slaves as compared to other immigrant groups who came to the United States? Why is it that the West African languages did not survive the Atlantic crossing intact?

POST-VIEWING

1. In the film, Dye Scott-Rhodan describes her experience of growing up in a Gullah-Geechee community where everyone spoke the same way. When she went to college, she realized that people in other regions spoke very differently. Have you ever had a similar experience? How did it make you feel? If not, how do you think you'd feel about your language if you visited a place like the Gullah-Geechee community?
2. When talking about Gullah-Geechee, Dye Scott-Rhodan remarks, "some they call it broken language but we say broken to who?" The language has historically faced harsh criticisms calling it 'substandard,' 'broken English,' or spoken by 'uneducated, poor Blacks.' What do you think is the effect of being told your primary language of communication is 'broken?' Who decides what is considered broken English and what is considered standard English?
3. AAL has been characterized by society as a sign of laziness and ignorance. In the film, linguist Walter Edwards describes the development of AAL thusly, "What they did was to invent new languages, new varieties taking linguistic properties from the surrounding varieties and creating new forms. These are creations of people put in an absolutely horrible set of circumstances and out of that milieu came new language forms." Does this description change any of your own perceptions of AAL?
4. What can language tell us about history? Why is it important to study and understand the histories of language varieties?

Additional Resources

Green, L. J. (2002). *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This textbook, aimed at students, describes the patterns of AAL at each level of language—sound system, word formation, sentence structures, and discourse routines. It includes discussions about the role of AAL in education, secular and religious realms, literature, and media. Each chapter is paired with exercises for students.

Rickford, J. R., & Rickford, R. J. (2000). *Spoken soul: The story of Black English*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

This text discusses both current and historical dimensions of AAL. It highlights the powerful connections between language and society.

Campbell, E. S. (2008). *Gullah cultural legacies: A synopsis of Gullah traditions, customary beliefs, art forms and speech on Hilton Head Island and vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia*. Hilton Head, SC: Gullah Heritage Consulting Services.

This book, based on Emory's own experiences of growing up on Hilton Head Island, includes information and terminology of the Gullah culture past and present.