

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sea Island Creole¹

This is the English-based creole spoken by Afro-American slave descendents on the islands (and in rarer instances, the mainland), along the South Atlantic coast of the United States. In addition to the English element, this creole tongue has many linguistic characteristics which are ascribable to a West African substratum, resulting from the languages spoken by the slaves who were brought to this area during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

1.1.1 THE COMPLEXITY OF THE SEA ISLAND LINGUISTIC SITUATION AND ITS BEARING ON THE PRESENT WORK

Today, the linguistic situation on the Sea Islands (SI) is a complex one. Standard English (SE), a winning competitor, is spoken alongside the Creole.² If these linguistic systems remained distinct, the task of isolating one from the other for analytical purposes would be a simple one. However, linguistic interference exists, in varying degrees, according to age, education, social aspiration, and situational context. Added to this already complex situation is the influence of dialectal features common to Southern American English in general.

Anticipating these problems, I

1. decided on the type of informant that would be most likely to have retained the strongest creole syntactic system. For discussion of informants, see section 1.2.
2. made a list of syntactic construction types (a) which Turner (1949: 209–231) pointed out as being West African in form and (b) which are common to creole tongues closely related to SI Creole. These gave me some indication of construction types for which I might be on the alert.

3. chose conversational topics (for sessions with my informants) which would be likely to elicit a spontaneous and continuous response.³ Consequently, interest in the topics themselves seemed to overshadow any concern for linguistic form.
4. investigated very carefully any constructions elicited which were neither SI nor forms of non-standard English that are common to many sections of the country. I also sought creole parallels to the various types of English constructions which were included on my questionnaire.

Hopefully, the Creole constructions (in the data) outweigh those of the other co-existing linguistic systems. It stands to reason that I have given primary consideration to constructions known to be Creole in nature and to those which differ from any other version of English with which I am familiar. However, no attempt has been made to weed out of the data that which is *exclusively Creole*. That is to say, it is my intention to present a syntactic analysis of a tongue known to be Creole, rather than an analysis of only that which is Creole in that tongue. I can make no claim to an ability to do the latter, since unlike Beryl Bailey (1966: 5) in the case of Jamaican Creole, I have no native *Sprachgefühl* on which to rely. Further, the present analysis is in no way an attempt to trace the history of the tongue or to distinguish à la Labov, systematic variation or style shifting.

1.1.2 THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL ATTITUDES ON SEA ISLAND CREOLE

Sea Island Creole, conspicuous to outsiders because of its uniqueness, has been a target of much criticism and ridicule. Even some of those supposedly enlightened writers, who believed solely in an English origin for this dialect, made derogatory statements (not warranted by their subject matter) about the Islanders and their tongue.⁴ Today, caricatures of SI Creole are still on the market—the creators of which, ignorantly, assume that its speakers enjoy this type of attention.

So conscious have the Islanders become of these attitudes that they have come to resent even the titles “Gullah” or “Geechee” by

which outsiders label them and their speech (see note 1 to this chapter). These outside attitudes have not been without consequence as far as the SI Creole tongue is concerned. Convinced by this time that their language really is inferior, each Islander, regardless of age or social status, will speak the best version of Standard English accessible to him, if he is aware that his language is being observed.

Unfortunately, it would appear that there is little hope of consistent preservation of the tongue, in any capacity, by any deliberate effort on the part of the young people on the Islands. For the teenagers that I encountered, the Creole is a source of humor, and few would admit to any more than a passing acquaintance with it. For young adults who aspire to social heights, it is practically taboo. From all indications, unless there is a revolutionary change in attitude, Sea Island Creole, a tongue meeting all requirements for effective communication, will be a language of the past.

Even though I arrived on the Islands a stranger, a number of factors contributed to my intensive investigation of the language: (1) I was introduced to the Islanders by people who are well liked and highly respected in the area. Consequently, I generally was not regarded with suspicion. (2) I was first introduced to educated Islanders (both native and non-native) in my own age group, with whom I could relate easily and to whom I could explain the nature of my intended work. These young people, who regarded my project with increasing interest, gave me invaluable assistance: by taking me to prospective informants (in some instances, relatives) who met the desired qualifications; by supplementing my data with Creole constructions familiar to them; and by helping me to understand what I heard during the initial sessions. (3) I lived among the Islanders; amiable and hospitable, they welcomed me into their homes. This gave me an opportunity to observe many extra-linguistic situations which helped me to understand what my text material was all about and, of even greater significance, an opportunity to observe the unguarded Creole-to-Creole speech that contributed much to my source material.

1.2 Sources of Data

The field research on which the main body of this study (Chapters 1–8) is based was conducted on Johns, Edisto, and Yorges Islands, South Carolina, during April and May, 1969.

Aiming for what one might assume to be the purest form of SI Creole in existence today, I sought elderly informants with little or no formal education who were natives of the islands and had spent little, if any, time away from home. I found several informants who not only met these qualifications but who also proved excellent in terms of providing the extensive textual material necessary to syntactic analysis. With these informants, few “go on” signals were required of me for the continuation of a discourse. This, fortunately, afforded fewer opportunities for verbal interference, from me, with their natural language patterns. I have termed informants of the above type, **TEXTUAL INFORMANTS**. They are introduced, under that heading, in the Appendix.

It was not long before the need for a second type of informant became apparent. I found that any direct questioning, regarding the *way* anything was said, seemed to inhibit my textual informants' subsequent conversational spontaneity during any given session. Therefore, I elicited the services of persons with basically the same qualifications as the textual informants (except that of age). These persons all, for one reason or another, considered their connection with the Creole tongue somewhat indirect. These informants were proficient not only at responding to items in my questionnaire but also at correcting my non-grammatical Creole constructions and providing closely related constructions to ones which happened to be in question at any given time. Informants in this category are called **TECHNICAL INFORMANTS**; they, too, are discussed in the Appendix, under the appropriate heading.

The grammar presented here is based on: (1) approximately twelve hours of recorded data, resulting from sessions with the indicated informants; (2) data obtained as a result of extensive note taking over a two-month period, whenever the opportunity presented itself (see sec. 1.1.2). It follows, then, that this grammar is not an attempt to exhaust all syntactic possibilities of the constructions handled herein. It is, however, an attempt to

provide a definition of the SI Creole sentence which is as accurate as possible, for the data collected.

1.3 General Remarks About Creole Languages and Their Shared Characteristics

Some tongues closely related to SI Creole are Sierra Leone Krio and the Cameroons Creole, both of West Africa; Jamaican Creole, spoken on the island of Jamaica; Sranan and Saramakan, both of Dutch Guiana (Surinam); and the Creole of British Guiana. These languages share many striking parallels in grammatical structure.

Not only the aforementioned, but all creole languages seem to be characterized by an almost total absence of inflectional morphemes. Grammatical relationships are signaled by independent particles and word order. A creole grammar might be expected, then, to contain an extensive syntactic treatment but a meager morphological one.

1.4 Previous Studies Regarding Sea Island Creole

Until recently, the general contention among observers of SI Creole has been that it is an unsystematic, corrupt form of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English which was employed, by overseers and masters, in communicating with the Creole slave ancestors. Some authors expressing this belief are: A. E. Gonzales, George Krapp, John Bennett, Reed Smith, and Mason Crum.⁵ Since SI Creole shares some of the characteristics of various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British dialects, most of these writers assumed that all of its features could be attributed to a British origin. Features that could not be accounted for by this means were regarded as ones for which only further investigation (along the same lines) was needed. Generally, these authors refused even to consider the possibility of an African linguistic influence on the Creole tongue, except, perhaps, for a few lexical items. The evidence presented in support of their own belief (for those who bothered to offer evidence) is a little less than convincing. It usually appears in the form of a list

of terms which Creole and various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British dialects supposedly have in common.

As far as linguistic analysis is concerned, Reed Smith's presentation in his *Gullah* (1926) probably best represents the work done by advocates of the British-origin "theory." Smith gives a four-page listing of the most salient features of SI Creole pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. Considered in the light of modern linguistic techniques, his presentation can hardly be considered scientific, and as the amount of space devoted to it might suggest, hardly comprehensive. The remainder of his work consists of words, phrases, proverbs, and lexical archaisms found in Sea Island Creole.

In 1949 Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* was published. This work, as Thomas Pyle puts it, is "the best treatment of Gullah—actually the only authoritative one" (1964:223). Turner regards the language of the Islanders as a creolized form of English, containing many linguistic traits common to the West African languages spoken by the slaves who were brought to the Sea Island area during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Turner, 1949:v). Turner offers convincing support for his argument by giving numerous examples of phonological features and lexical items common to both SI Creole and various West African languages. The Creole morphology and syntax are handled briefly and, as is in keeping with the author's purpose, only as they reveal correspondences to West African morphology and syntax. Hence, a comprehensive syntactic analysis of Creole syntax is not given.

More recently, William Stewart, in two articles (1967, 1968), briefly compares some grammatical characteristics of SI Creole, as represented in various nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literary works, with non-standard Black American English in general.

Gullah, A Dialect of English or West African? (1967) and *Plans for Gullah in Retrospect and in Prospect* (1967), two unpublished papers, embrace my previous work on SI Creole. The former, comparative in nature, was devoted to presenting additional evidence of Turner's Creole theory; the latter, to outlining my general notions regarding future work with SI Creole and to indicating specific, uninvestigated, linguistic characteristics which warrant(ed) close examination—syntactic features included among these.

Some comparative material, of the type included in the first paper, is also handled in the second.

As far as I know, the present study is the first full-length treatment of the syntax of Sea Island Creole.

1.5 The Model

The type of linguistic description employed here is, in great part, the transformational model set forth by Beryl Bailey in her *Jamaican Creole Syntax*.⁶ Bailey's model, in turn, is based largely on Robert B. Lees's version of transformational analysis (1960).⁷ She has made certain modifications, however, which have been dictated either by the Jamaican Creole language itself or by her own descriptive preferences.

Hopefully, the present grammar will be indicative of at least partial achievement of Bailey's goals (1966:xiii): to provide a model for the description of creole languages related to Jamaican Creole. So similar are SI Creole and Jamaican Creole that her presentation has proven invaluable in this undertaking. As a general practice, I have followed Bailey's model as closely as possible.⁸ I found a genuine need for the major divisions of her work, including the section on word classes, which she has included preceding the generative-transformational grammar proper. On a more specific level, some of her categories (e.g., *specifiers* and *delimiters*) have made a great contribution to the simplification of this grammar.

Bailey's model, however, has been modified in certain respects during the course of the present work. Some modifications have been necessitated by the nature of SI Creole itself. Others have been motivated by my own preference for handling certain constructions in a different way. In the latter instance, I have generally relied on the methodologies of Lees (1960) and Chomsky (1958).

The model employed here, then, is a product of pre-*Aspects* transformational theory. While, basically, this model has proven adequate for this description of SI Creole, it does pose some fundamental theoretical problems, some of which will be pointed out at relevant points in the grammar.