GUY B. JOHNSON REVISITED
Another Look at Gullah

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Guy B. Johnson's *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930) was one of the three volumes produced under the joint auspices of the Social Science Research Council and the Institute for Research in Social Science of the University of North Carolina. The other two works were Guion Griffis Johnson's *A Social History of the Sea Islands with Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930) and T. J. Woofter, Jr.'s *Black Yeomanry* (1930). These writings were by no means the first studies of the Sea Islands, located in the coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia, for as early as Civil War and Reconstruction times the life and culture of these islands has engaged the interest both of the serious scholar and the curious amateur. G. B. Johnson has written extensively on Afro-American folklife and folklore and on national and regional interethnic relations. He is widely recognized as a proponent of the notion of "white-to-black" (to use the simplest terms) transmission in explaining Afro-American cultural origins.

Melville J. Herskovits in his *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) argued in opposition to Johnson's views that Afro-American culture preserved—albeit in adapted form—many African-

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isms. In an article first published in 1945, Herskovits cited the Sea Islands as the region in the United States which ranked highest on a scale of African linguistic retentions in North America (Herskovits, 1966: 53). For information on the language situation in the Sea Islands in *Myth of the Negro Past,* Herskovits (1966) drew on pronouncements of Lorenzo Dow Turner (1938: 276, 279) calling attention to Africanism in Sea Island speech.

Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* appeared in 1949. Turner's magnum opus was based not only on extensive field research, but also on his study of African languages, and with its appearance all but the most persistent doubters were convinced of the status of Gullah as an important link in the Afro-English linguistic continuum. G. B. Johnson was one of the persistent doubters.

In December 1967, Johnson read a paper before the American Anthropological Association entitled "The Gullah Dialect Revisited: A Note on Linguistic Acculturation." In that paper, from which Don Yoder has provided lengthy excerpts, Johnson stated:

> I will say this: after forty years I would make only a slight modification of the earlier view that African traits were relatively scarce in the Gullah dialect, and I would still insist that in the long-run acculturation process the contribution of African language patterns to American English will be almost nil [G. B. Johnson, 1930: xiv].

Johnson proceeded to assert that in 1965 he had returned to St. Helena Island for the first time in 35 years, and in traveling all over the Island and hearing many people speak he did not hear a single phrase of old-time Gullah. He acknowledged that Gullah had not vanished completely from the whole Sea Island region, since that speech was still strong in the most isolated parts of the area and he was told that even "on St. Helena—and, I would judge, on Edisto and other easily accessible islands—the dialect has all but disappeared during the past

twenty-five years" (G. B. Johnson, 1930: xv). Johnson pointed to the breakdown of isolation as the reason for this situation. Highways, the islanders' acquisition of automobiles, the availability of new educational facilities, the advent of radio and television, the settling of large numbers of Euro-Americans on the islands—all these factors had operated to lessen the persistence of Gullah. Turning to the work of Herskovits and of Turner, Johnson (1930: xv-xviii) criticized what he called the inadequacy of their approach in terms of what he considered to be its main weaknesses:

(1) emphasis on trait diffusion
(2) the lack of any index of relative significance of specific items
(3) failure to assess the importance of the extreme dominance by the white man in the United States
(4) failure to maintain historical and cultural perspective

Guy Johnson, in short, accuses Herskovits and Turner of being overpreoccupied with African linguistic survival in Gullah, and of making slight of the fact, and effects, of Euro-American social dominance in the contact situation. It must be remarked, however, that Johnson's stance is fully consistent with the concept of white-to-black cultural transmission. For example, Johnson constantly refers to "the Gullah dialect"; and since he dismisses Africanisms as quantitatively negligible, Gullah must be, in his estimation a dialect of English, the only other available language resource in the circumstances.

One need not be detained at this point by a protracted discussion of whether Gullah is or is not disappearing from St. Helena, interesting and illuminating though this topic may be. It is nevertheless tempting to speculate as to whether Johnson may not have been misled into believing that "deep Gullah" was no longer to be heard by the very fact that his presence as a "white man" might have caused individuals who otherwise spoke "deep Gullah" to code-switch toward the Standard English usage. It is also unnecessary to deal at length with

Johnson's statement (1930: xv) that the "trait diffusion approach" of Herskovits

> neglects the creative aspect of the contact situation, i.e., the possibility that "A" [African language traits] in contact with "B" [English language traits] may produce consequences which are not simply derivatives of "A" or "B" traits *per se*.

For this is precisely the point made—more explicitly—by Herskovits (1941: 295-296) when he remarks that separation of Africans enslaved in America from others of the sample language and cultural community

> was no barrier to the retention of African customs in generalized form, or of their underlying sanctions or values. . . . An adequate basis for communications came into existence when the slaves learned words from the language of their masters and poured these into African speech molds, thus creating lingustic forms that in structure not only resemble the aboriginal tongues, but are also similar to one another no matter what the European vehicle—English of French or Spanish or Portuguese.

Turner (1949: v), for his part, clearly acknowledges a substantial English basis for Gullah when he states:

> Gullah is a creolized form of English revealing survivals from many of the African languages spoken by the slaves who were brought to South Carolina and Georgia during the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth.

Johnson's charge that the "trait-diffusion" approach of Herskovits and Turner disregards interaction between the languages involved certainly is not borne out by an examination of their statements.

It might be useful, perhaps, to attempt to explore other ways of looking at Gullah than those which have been used over the last four decades. This is not completely and absolutely to

discard the insights on the Sea Island speech which have been gained in the past, but rather to view the matter in terms of a framework which does not constrain discussion within procrustean confines of some earlier modes and terms of discourse. Thus we may suspend as irrelevant to the present discussion the vexing question of whether Gullah is more African or more English, and simply accept it as being composed of elements of both. It is possible then to propose the model of Whinnom (1971) who had discussed pidgins and creoles under the rubric of "linguistic hybridization." Utilizing this frame of reference borrowed from biology (duly avoiding inapplicable and inappropriate analogies), we may set aside the question of whether to classify Gullah as an African language or a European language, reassured by Whinnom's sagacious remark (1971: 110-111):

> No one ever caught a zoologist arguing about whether a mule was a horse or an ass. . . . Nor does the existence of pidgins and creoles mean that linguists have totally to revise their ideas on the classification of languages (tigons and ligers have not upset the Linnaean system).

We accordingly now take another look at Gullah, and also assess G. Johnson's remarks in terms of linguistic hybridization.

If the process, now usually referred to as "pidginization and creolization of language" (Hymes, 1971), is considered in terms of this approach, the term *primary hybridization* would apply, in the usage of linguists, to the phenomenon which is also referred to as "fragmentation," "the breaking up of a species-language into races (incipient species/dialects)" (Whinnom, 1971: 91). The process involves the spread of certain innovations within a given language to the extent that these adopted features serve to distinguish the innovating speech form from others related to it. (The origin and development of the Castilian dialect of Spanish is a good example of this.) The creole languages, among them Gullah, result from what

Whinnom calls *secondary hybridization;* this term refers to "the interbreeding of distinct species"—in this case, of the African language features with the English. This is what is referred to simply as *hybridization.* Native language-learning and bilingualism are situations in which factors affecting hybridization come into play; for here we have two distinct language systems coming into a competitive relationship in which there is either a strengthening of barriers between them, so as to maintain the integrity of their separate identities, or a breaching of barriers which makes possible the interfusing of systems.

It will be convenient to follow Whinnom a little further before we return to G. Johnson. Even though, as is generally held, all languages are capable of hybridizing with all other languages, there are barriers to hybridization. According to Whinnom (1971) these are to be conceived of as many superimposed, horizontal, penetrable layers. The resistance of any one layer can become quite severe, and the effect of a barrier, once breached, does not at any point stop entirely.

The four barriers in hybridization are: the *ecologial,* the *ethological,* the *mechanical,* and the *conceptual.*

The *ecological barrier* has to do with the more or less physical or situational conditions of actual contact between the languages in question. (In regard to Gullah, the fact of speakers of African languages coming into contact through the slave trade with speakers of English would be an illustration in point.)

The *ethological (or emotional) barrier* relates to the disposition of the speakers of the language in contact either to be tenacious of their own language (e.g., for reasons of emotional security) or to be unwilling or unable to resist the advance of the other language. (In the case of Gullah this would related to the conditions under which the language contact took place; that is, of European social dominance and African subordination.)

The *mechanical barrier* relates to the "outer form" of a language, namely its phonological structure, both in its

oral-aural aspects and in certain circumstances in regard to its writing system. (This would be exemplified in respect of Gullah, in the sound systems of the various African languages involved, on the one hand, and that of English, on the other.)

The *conceptual barrier* relates to inner form. According to Whinnom, this is "the mode of perception of reality which is conditioned primarily by the individual's native language, acquired in childhood, conditioned most notably by the semantic and syntactical structure of his language (ideas of hierarchy, contrast, relationship, etc., and of the analysis of events)." This would refer, in considering Gullah, to ancestral African modes of cognitive behavior reflected in Africanisms in the speech habits and folkways of Gullah speakers (Turner, 1949; Twining, 1977).

The foregoing is by no means a complete presentation of Whinnom's discussion of lingusitic hybridization. Whinnom's article is much more exhaustive and, understandably, authoritative. My purpose in suggesting Whinnom's approach is to provide an alternative way of talking about what G. Johnson has discussed in terms which reflected, consciously or unconsciously, early twentieth-century sociopolitical relationships and attitudes thereto related. To the extent that African peoples were subject to European social and political domination and thus to the power of Europeans (and of course this includes Americans) in defining Africans and the African world, it was perhaps inevitable that African characteristics should be perceived in a less than favorable light. It was to this sociopolitical reality that Herskovits addressed himself, with particular reference to the African-American interaction in the United States, in his *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941).

Herskovits's ideas challenged basic concepts upon which was based much of the ordering of interethnic relationships that were or could be subversive of prevailing notions of Euro-American superiority to Afro-Americans in all significant areas of human endeavor. It is evident, from his references to the works of Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois that

Herskovits was aware of some aspects of Afro-American intellectual history, and possessed even some sense of the direction that Afro-American scholarly activity might be expected to take. In brief, it is clear that to the greatest degree that was possible to him Herskovits attempted to explore the totality of the African world experience and to bring his findings to bear on the Afro-American situation. Johnson in 1967 seems finally to have admitted that Gullah is to be seen in the wider context of what he refers to as "pidgin English dialects around the world, because Gullah seemed to resemble 'pidgin' more than any thing else" (G. B. Johnson, 1930: xiv).

Perhaps the main problem of Johnson's approach to Gullah is that he seemed to regard it mainly as a U.S. phenomenon. Gullah is not for him a living entity created by the dynamic interaction of two cultures in contact, but an incidental outcome of the domination of English-speaking Euro-Americanss over people of African descent in America.

A culture-contact approach would, of course, recognize in perspective the *ecological* facts of the situation which produced Gullah: In the plantation slavery situation the Africans were indeed overwhelmingly subject to the sociopolitical control of the Euro-Americans. But the Afro-English creole, Gullah, did not serve as an instrumentality solely, or even principally in the end, for communicaton between the Africans and the Euro-Americans. The language, therefore, was subject to certain *ethological* considerations, which resided initially in the utility the language had for its native speakers in terms of communication with the dominant group, but more importantly which point to its use as the oral-aural medium in which and through which, as a distinct community, these African descendants lived and moved. The peculiar conditions existing between the two groups imposed different emotional attitudes of each of the groups concerning Gullah, according to an individual's group identification and his or her concomitant status.

It has been by no means unusual for scholars to regard Gullah as a poor attempt at communication *in English* by some

intellectually ill-equipped and perhaps deservedly disadvantaged exotics (Turner, 1949: 68). Johnson in 1930 expressed the opinion that Gullah "can be traced back in practically every detail to English dialect speech" (G. B. Johnson, 1930: 6). His position was only slightly changed in 1967. Johnson's preoccupation with the quantitative aspect of Africanisms in Gullah has led him, it would seem, to underestimate their qualitative significance within a wider context. Current research such as that represented in *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages,* edited by Hymes (DeCamp, 1971), and in the *Bibliography of Pidgin and Creole Languages,* by Reinecke et al. (1975), places Gullah in its relationship to the English-based pidgins and creoles not only of the Americans but also it should be noted, of West Africa. Gullah thus comes to be seen in its origin and nature as one of the products of a historic continuum of dynamic cultural and linguistic contact and interaction between Africans and English-speaking people. It is within this wider context, neglected by Johnson, that the phenomenon of creolization of language, hybridization in Whinnom's terms, occurred, giving rise to Gullah as well as to the Afro-English creoles of the Caribbean.

The *mechanical* factors involved in the confluence of linguistic elements which have produced Gullah would relate to the phonological and syntactical differences between the African substrate and English. Johnson seems to have no difficulty in recognizing the consequences for Sea Island speech of these differences, and is certainly innocent, it seems to me, of supporting any one of the outrageous explanations of Gullah sounds and grammar based on disparaging notions of African intellectual capacities or anatomical peculiarities.

The *conceptual* barrier (still following Whinnom) is perhaps one of the most subtle in its effects, for this barrier, as we noted above, has to do with one's perception of reality, and this perception is largely conditioned by substrate predispositions. It is of significance, apparently not substantially remarked by Johnson, that certain syntactical formulations, even turns of

locution, are to be found in the creole languages, irrespective of whether the European contact language is French, or Portuguese, or English (Taylor, 1971: 293-296).

This information was not available to Johnson in the earlier stages of his research, and thus it is easy to understand his failure to see Gullah in the expanded context of an African creole language continuum linking not only the English-based creoles but those related to the other European languages of the creole-producing contact situation as well.

Increased availability of education, improved communications, and greater mobility, among other factors, do make for a tendency toward de-creolization, and could in time bring about the end of the Gullah language. The necessity for Gullah speakers to code-switch, and their ability to do so, may well have misled Johnson into making an exaggerated report of Gullah's imminent demise.

G. B. Johnson, then, did not sufficiently consider factors other than the lexical in his assessments of Gullah. His judgments of the origin, nature, and present status of the Sea Island speech were circumscribed by his Euro-centric predisposition to see Gullah as a dialect of English rather than as a language in its own right. His approach, not surprisingly, led him to overestimate the importance of the indisputable quantitative fact that Gullah has a preponderantly English-based lexicon, and to minimize important qualitative sociolinguistic factors which were involved in the dramatic confrontation and dynamic interaction and linguistic and cultural interface encounter which took place between African peoples and speakers of the English language. His insistence on "white-to-black" cultural transmission caused him to overstress Euro-American sociopolitical dominance and to disregard African adaptive and creative capability.

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