Maria Cristina Nisco

Language and Identity in the United States: the Case of Gullah

One can't wander far in this coastal community that calls itself America's oldest seaside resort town without hearing people speaking a mysterious, rapid-fire language that somehow echoes the West Indies and Africa. The speakers aren't tourists, but members of the Gullah-Geechee culture. Theirs is a rich, uniquely American quilt: so wide it stretches from the saltwater creek that has fed generations here all the way to the White House and the nation's first African-American first lady.

(*USA Today*, 22 April 2011)

Although English is the most widespread language on the Internet, leading many to provocatively predict the advent of a monolingual (English) Net with its apocalyptic threats for linguistic and cultural diversity, the Internet has also proved to be the ideal medium to preserve minority languages.[1] Anyone interested in protecting and supporting an endangered language can use the Web to draw attention to it and to share local information. As several studies conducted in the last two decades have shown, a remarkable number of languages – apart from English – survive and proliferate thanks to and through the Internet.[2] In Nunberg's words: "[w]hat makes the Net different from most of the communication technologies that preceded it, is how much it does to preserve linguistic distinctions. The telegraph, the telephone, the radio all made the world smaller. Now finally we have a technology that helps to keep the world big and polyglot".[3]

A series of initiatives have been proposed with an increasing emphasis on the necessity to sustain the linguistic diversity of humanity and to give support to the expression and dissemination of the greatest possible number of languages in meaningful contemporary domains including everyday life, commerce, education, writing, the arts and the media. However, according to a report elaborated for UNESCO by the Expert Group on Endangered Languages – an international group of linguists that was asked to develop a framework for determining language vitality in 2002 and 2003 – even languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; they estimated that about 90% of all languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century.[4] Language heterogeneity then seems to be at great risk considering that about 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages and, conversely, about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by about 3% of the world's people.[5]

With slightly fewer than 200 endangered languages and about 250 living languages, the United States provides an interesting case in terms of linguistic heterogeneity, not only because of this great diversity in itself, but also because the country is home to one of the more widespread and influential varieties of English, Standard American English (SAE), to which the development of the Internet has

[1] See Sharon Goodman and David Graddol, *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996); see also David Crystal, *Language and the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[2] See Geoffrey Nunberg, "The Whole World Wired", *Anglistica*, 3.1 (1999), 229-31; originally published in 1996, as "The Whole World Wired. Commentary Broadcast on 'Fresh Air'", *National Public Radio*. See also David Crystal, *The Language Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), and David Graddol, *English Next: Why Global English May Mean the End of English as a Foreign Language* (London: British Council, 2006).

[3] Nunberg, "The Whole World Wired", 230-31.

[4] See UNESCO, ed., *Language Vitality and Endangerment* (2003), <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/projects/ >, February 2011; unless otherwise specified all websites were accessed in February 2011.

[5] Harvey Russell Bernard, "Language Preservation and Publishing", in Nancy H. Hornberger, ed., *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas: Language Planning from the Bottom up* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 139-156.

always been connected. The focus of this essay will be on one of the minority languages that, once in danger of disappearing, is now said to thrive in the 21st century, among the many (more or less vulnerable or endangered) languages of the US that 'exploit' the beneficial effects of the Net: Gullah.

Gullah, which evolved along the coastline of the Southern United States (mainly in the Sea Islands, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, with small clusters in New York City and Detroit), is an English based creole language that was not classified as such until recent times.[6] It represents an emblematic case, one of the most significant hidden pockets, setting it apart from Standard American English because it is often described as unintelligible to SAE speakers.[7] In the 1970s, representatives of the Summer Institute of Linguistics conducted a survey to determine how many people still spoke the Gullah language and, to their amazement, they found that out of over 100,000 speakers, 10,000 were monolingual, namely they exclusively spoke Gullah (and a survey among Gullah speaking high school students revealed that most of them spoke English only as a second language).[8] Coming to more recent times, despite the fact that the Summer Institute of Linguistics counted a Gullah population of 250,000 people in 2000, with a number of monolinguals ranging from 7,000 to 10,000,[9] the section 'Language Use' of the US Census Bureau provides discordant detailed data on the topic. The Table dealing with the languages spoken at home and the ability to speak English of the population (5 years and over) for the years 2006-2008 shows that 225,488,799 people speak only English at home, while 55,076,078 people speak a language other than English at home; within this group, there are 352 speakers of Gullah, and among them 18 seem to speak English less than 'very well'.[10]

Assuming that a language exists insofar as there are speakers willing and able to use it – and this willingness and ability of people to use the language are a measure of that language's vitality and evolution – the essay will attempt a discussion of the current status of Gullah based mainly on metalinguistic data regarding people's attitudes towards Gullah, and on the vitality of the language in particular as used in modern forms of online communication, especially in websites promoting the Gullah language and culture, blogs, forums and social networks focused on the subject. The Internet can be plausibly considered as an authentic social environment 'inhabited' by users/members who are drawn together by shared interests and common goals. They form what can be termed as 'communities of practice', namely communities gathering people engaged in a collective process in a shared domain of human endeavour (it could be a tribe learning to survive, a clique of pupils defining their identity at school, and so forth).[11] In pursuing their interest, the members of a community adopt specific communicative and linguistic strategies. Further on this point, as Crystal has noted, in informal settings on the Internet (for example in discussion groups), people tend to use distinctive features (like accent or dialect) to mark their own nationality and identity: "on the world stage, if you wish to tell everyone which

[6] Mufwene classifies Gullah as a creole, assuming that a creole is the output of a restructuring process in which the contact of the different metropolitan varieties brought over by the European colonists with the other languages of speakers of both the immigrant and preceding populations produced a 'feature pool'. The variety from which the creole inherits most of its vocabulary is called 'lexifier', and English is the lexifier of Gullah. See Salikoko S. Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3-7.

[7] *Sea Island Creole English*, <http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=gul>.

[8] Joseph A. Opala, "The Gullah Today", <http://www.yale.edu/glc/gullah/08.htm>.

[9] *Sea Island Creole English*, <http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=gul>.

[10] *Language Use Report*, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/>. The report was released in April 2010. The reports relating to the same data released in 2007 and 2004 do not even mention Gullah individually.

[11] See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and "Communities of Practice: a Brief Introduction" (2006), <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>.

[12] David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144-45.

[13] Braj B. Kachru, "Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: the English Language in the Outer Circle", in Randolph Quirk and Henry G. Widdowson, eds., *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 20.

country you belong to, an immediate and direct way of doing it is to speak in a distinctive way. … International varieties thus express national identities"[12] – or, in the case of Gullah, a community identity. While a language is moulded by the local people, it becomes able to carry their meaningful experience. It is exactly this function of English as the language of cultural identity for speakers all around the world that encourages the development of local and creole forms.[13]

Forms of communication involving Web technologies, today not surprisingly, seem to play an important role in keeping both language and culture alive. Therefore, while giving an account of the widespread and significant efforts in preserving and celebrating the Gullah language and culture on and through the Web, this essay will first offer an overview of the main reported features of the language, drawing on the extensive work by the most authoritative scholars who have researched on Gullah and on its connections to the historical events from which it originated, namely colonialism and slavery.

The Gullah language – the socio-historical background and its main features

> Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thicks lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by the other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia.
>
> (A.E. Gonzales, *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast*, 1922)

Gullah or Geechee is thought to be a creole derived from Elizabethan English and West African languages. Thousands of enslaved Africans, mostly from Angola and Sierra Leone, survived the Middle Passage and reached the coastal South of the US. The name 'Gullah' has uncertain origins: it may derive from Angola or from Gola, an ethnic group living on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border area in West Africa where the Mende and Vai territories came together, or from Galo, the Mende word for Vai people. Some scholars have also suggested that the name has Native American origins: the Spanish called the region of South Carolina and Georgia after a Native American tribe, Guale. Geechee is another term that is often used together with Gullah: according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.), it is meant to be a disparaging term for a person who speaks a nonstandard local dialect, as in Savannah (Georgia) or Charleston (South Carolina), probably coming from the Ogeechee River (Georgia) along which distinctive forms of Black English were spoken.[14]

The language developed in the rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia (which served as some of the main ports for European slave traders' ships –

[14] *Geechee*, <http://www.wordnik.com/words/Geechee>.

Charleston being the 'slave capital of the American South') where 85-90% of African slaves lived and worked in the coastal plantations owned by 5% of the European colonial population. Although the climate of the region was excellent for the cultivation of rice, it proved equally suitable for the spread of tropical diseases (some of them, like yellow fever and malaria, were unintentionally brought by the slaves). While the slaves had some resistance to such diseases, their masters were extremely vulnerable, which determined the low number of white people and a condition of enduring isolation for slaves and (later) Gullahs. Over the centuries, this isolation within the US has been probably vital to the survival of the community, which speaks a language – also known as 'Slave English' – that, according to many accounts, has remained unchanged for nearly three centuries.[15]

For years, scholars regarded Gullah as broken English or as a dialect of English, but then, in the 1930s, linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner (who was researching African languages) noted a high number of similarities between Gullah and West African languages, regarding the use of nouns, pronouns, verbs and tenses. Despite the many assumptions tracing the peculiarities of Gullah almost entirely to the British dialects of the 17th and 18th centuries and to a form of baby-talk adopted to facilitate oral communication between masters and slaves, Turner revealed the considerable influence of several West African languages upon Gullah, and described it as the living evidence of the survival of African people away from home. His extensive knowledge of West African languages and his scientific and comprehensive analysis of Gullah led him to define it as a creolized form of English – rather than a very 'bad' English – featuring striking similarities with African languages especially as regards vocabulary, but also in sounds, syntax, morphology and intonation.[16]

After nearly thirty-five years, Turner's pioneering work was re-examined by linguists such as Rickford, Mufwene and Nichols searching for a better understanding of creole and trying to explain the emergence of creole languages in North America as a result of contact and variation in the sociohistorical ecologies of language evolution.[17] In particular, by applying the concept of ecology (mainly borrowed from biology) in linguistics, Mufwene claims that language evolution is driven primarily by the interplay of local ecological factors that are mostly socio-economic. He thus treats the development of creoles as a consequence of normal interactions in specific ecological conditions of linguistic contacts. The 'environment' in which a language finds itself (with factors such as time of arrival, demographic strength of the speakers, economic power, population structure, etc.) affect – if not completely determine – the way it has evolved locally.[18]

The significant contributions of Todd, Romaine, Chaudenson, Singler, and Mufwene – among others – have further highlighted the relevance of population movements and contacts in linguistics, emphasizing the sociohistorical environments in which these languages emerged.[19] Language evolution in the colonies is strictly related to their geographic ecologies since these played a pivotal role in favouring the particular economic systems that the colonists would develop. So, for instance,

[15] Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (London and Boston: BBC Books, Faber and Faber, 1992 [1986]), 209-28.

[16] Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), v.

[17] See John R. Rickford, "Ethnicity as a Sociolinguistic Boundary", *American Speech*, 60 (1985), 99-125, and "Social Contact and Linguistic Diffusion", *Language*, 62 (1986), 245-90; Salikoko S. Mufwene, "Number Delimitation in Gullah", *American Speech*, 61 (1986), 33-60, "Restrictive Relativization in Gullah", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 1 (1986), 1-31, and "Why Study Pidgins and Creoles", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 3 (1988), 265-76; and Johanna Nichols, *Linguistic Diversity in Space and Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[18] Mufwene, *Ecology*, 75.

[19] See Loreto Todd, *Modern Englishes: Pidgins and Creoles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Suzanne Romaine, *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (London: Longman, 1988); Robert Chaudenson, *Des iles, des hommes, des langues: essais sur la créolisation linguistique et culturelle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992); John Victor Singler, "The African Influence upon Afro-American Varieties", in Salikoko S. Mufwene, ed., *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 235-253; and Salikoko S. Mufwene, *Language Evolution: Contact, Competition and Change* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[20] The case of trade colonies is also worth mentioning since most of best-known pidgins developed in the European trade colonies in Africa and the Pacific. Contacts between European traders and their non-European counterparts were occasional mercantile encounters and employed structurally reduced linguistic systems that served basic and limited communicative functions.

[21] Mufwene, *Ecology*, 89.

[22] Turner also lists the corresponding languages spoken in the above-mentioned areas: Wolof, Malinke, Mandinka, Bambara, Fula, Mende, Vai, Twi, Fante, Gã, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Bini, Hausa, Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Kongo, Umbundu, Kimbundu, and a few others. Turner, *Africanisms*, 2.

[23] G.P. Krapp, "The English of the Negro", *American Mercury*, 2 (1924), 191.

[24] Ambrose E. Gonzales, *The Black Border. Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (Columbia SC: The State Company, 1922), 18.

[25] P.E.H. Hair, "Sierra Leone Items in the Gullah Dialect of American English", *Sierra Leone Language Review*, 4 (1965), 79-84.

[26] Salikoko S. Mufwene and Charles Gilman, "How African is Gullah, and Why?", *American Speech*, 62.2 (1987), 120-39; Mufwene, *Africanisms*, 183, and *Ecology*, 45; Patricia Ann Jones-Jackson, *The Status of Gullah: an Investigation of Convergent Processes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1978) (dissertation).

[27] Ian F. Hancock, "A Provisional Comparison of the English-based Atlantic

the distinction between exploitation and settlement colonies is useful to determine the kinds of interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans. In exploitation colonies, Europeans were not interested in developing local roots (they merely hoped to make some money and return home for retirement), so they mostly kept their language for themselves, helped in communication by a local elite to whom they taught it. Settlement colonies, instead, were intended as new and permanent homes (replacing Europe), where Europeans were more committed to seeing their language prevail, not only as a lingua franca.[20] Focusing on the dynamics of the local ethno-linguistic and ethnographic ecology of language (and the colonial circumstances in which it developed), Mufwene has defined Gullah as a "special rice field phenomenon, which developed in conditions similar to sugar cane plantations, which required large slave labor and produced the most drastic disproportions between Europeans and Africans".[21]

Therefore the massive presence of slaves and their descendants in the United States accounts for the origin and nature of Gullah. During the one hundred years prior to 1808, at least 100,000 slaves were 'imported' from Africa (mostly from areas such as Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Gold Coast, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Angola) to South Carolina and Georgia, something which continued even after January 1, 1808, when the Slave Trade Act became operative and the African slave trade became illegal.[22] Scholars have initially underestimated the extent of the African influence on Gullah and deemed it unnecessary to study any of the languages spoken by slaves in the New World. In fact, according to an old and rather unanimous opinion, "not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or Negro syntax can be proved to have any other than an English origin";[23] furthermore, "[t]he words are, of course, not African, for the African brought over or retained only a few words of his jungle-tongue, and even these few are by no means authenticated as part of the original scant baggage of the Negro slaves".[24] On the contrary, according to historian P.E.H. Hair, Sierra Leonean languages seem to have made a major contribution to the development of Gullah, in particular Mende (spoken almost entirely in Sierra Leone) and Vai (found on the borders with Liberia and Guinea).[25] Having quantitively identified such contributions, Hair concluded that South Carolina and Georgia were the only places in the Americas where Sierra Leonean languages had exerted anything like that degree of influence.

There are two main views about the origins of Gullah, that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. According to some scholars, Gullah arose and developed independently on the coastal rice fields of South Carolina and Georgia early in the 18th century, soon after the British colonists and their African slaves settled in Charleston from Barbados.[26] Following the other view, Gullah would be the ancestral language that gave rise to modern English-based creoles in West Africa as well as in the Americas (where it possibly influenced Jamaican Creole and Guyana Creole too).[27] So it is deemed that some of the slaves who survived the Middle Passage and were brought to South Carolina and Georgia already knew the

Guinea Coast Creole English before they left Africa. All the later creole languages would therefore derive from it, and they would fall into a broad family group that Ian Hancock has called "English-based Atlantic Creoles" – on the basis of their similarities in opposition to Standard English (SE).[28] Among the features that Gullah shares with English-based Atlantic Creoles we find: use of preverbal free morpheme rather than verbal inflections for tense and aspect (*bin* for past, *go/ga* [gə] for future, *duh* [də] for progressive and *done* for perfect); partial gender and case distinction in the pronominal systems (*him* used for all three genders and both as subject and object); use of an invariant relativizer *weh* derived from 'what' – or perhaps from 'where'. However, further positions have recently emerged: Mufwene, for instance, admits that one could also argue that Gullah is structurally between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Caribbean English creoles since there is no clear structural boundary between Gullah and AAVE – although, interestingly enough, AAVE is closer to white nonstandard varieties of English in North America than Gullah is.[29]

According to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), Gullah is somehow related to the Bahamas Creole English and Afro-Seminole Creole (there seems to be 90% of lexical similarity with the latter that is an English-based creole spoken by Black Seminoles – namely descendants of free blacks or runaway slaves – in scattered communities in Oklahoma, Texas and Northern Mexico).[30] It is, furthermore, defined as barely mutually intelligible with SE to the extent that, in the 1960s, the US Government also launched a bilingual education project for children who were considered to be at risk of failing to learn the necessary language skills because of their linguistic and cultural diversity.[31]

Gullah has remained undocumented for a long time for a number of reasons, among them the fact that it was not identified as a distinct language until the mid-18th century, until after rice plantations increased in size and number, thus fostering Gullah's divergence away from SAE. The earliest written source in Gullah is probably William Gilmore Simms' *The Book of My Lady* (1833), together with a few reports in 18th-century newspapers of some runaway slaves speaking 'broken' English.[32] Turner's aforementioned 1949 study based on field research in isolated rural communities was the first scientific report on the language: he interviewed Gullah people, made recordings and detailed notes, and proved that Gullah was strongly influenced by African languages in its vocabulary and grammar (syntax and morphology), as I will briefly discuss below.

Gullah vocabulary primarily derives from English (which is the principal lexifier), but it also features more than four thousand words of African origins and a great number of personal names. Turner discovered that the Gullah territory was the only area of the United States where African naming practices had been maintained: "in some families on the Sea Islands, the names of all the children are African. Many have no English names, though in most cases the African words in use are nicknames".[33] Sometimes these African nicknames – also known as pet names or basket names – were given in addition to English names for

Creoles", *African Language Review*, 8 (1969), 7-72, and Hancock, "West Africa and the Atlantic Creoles", in John Spencer, ed., *The English Language in West Africa* (Longman: London, 1971), 113-22.

[28] Hancock, "A Provisional Comparison", 7-12.

[29] Mufwene, *Ecology*, 165; see also Mufwene, "Gullah: Morphology and Syntax", in Edgar Schneider et al., eds., *A Handbook of Varieties of English: a Multimedia Reference Tool*, vol. 2 (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004), 358-59.

[30] *SIL International*, <http://www.sil.org/> The information is available in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, a resource that is constantly updated and accessible on the Internet at <http://www.ethnologue.com/>

[31] M. Paul Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Sixteenth edition (Dallas, Tex.: SIL International, 2009). Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com/> and <http://www.csbsju.edu/education/knowledge-base/kb-iii.htm>.

[32] Mufwene, "Gullah: Morphology and Syntax", 357.

[33] Turner, *Africanisms*, 40.

official use. Nicknames were used almost exclusively in everyday life, to the point that Gullah people could hardly remember their English names. When choosing them, they adopted the same methods their African ancestors employed to name their children: names describing the child's physical condition and appearance or character and temperament, names describing the manner in which the child was born, describing conditions of weather, names drawn from African mythology and folklore, from the animal world or relating to magic and religious festivals.

As for common words, Turner identified Mende, Vai and Fula words and phrases in Gullah songs and stories, and he also noted that a number of texts in Sierra Leonean languages were preserved by Gullah. His study collected all the African words heard in daily conversations, words that have remained almost unchanged in meaning and pronunciation since the slaves were brought to the US. Some Gullah loanwords from Sierra Leonean languages include: *joso* ('witchcraft') from the Mende word *njoso* ('forest spirit'), *gafa* ('evil spirit') also from the Mende word *ngafa* ('masked devil'), *wanga* ('charm') from the Temne word *an-wanka* ('swear'), *do* ('child') also from the Mende word *ndo* ('child').[34]

[34] Ibid., 40-43.

Concentrating on grammar, especially on syntax, some of the most striking similarities between Gullah and various West African languages are:

> (1) the absence of any distinction of voice, namely of passive constructions – while English has two voices, active and passive, Gullah expresses the passive voice in a construction that would indicate active voice in English. So instead of saying *A crow can be eaten* (it is edible), a Gullah speaker would say *A crow kin eat*. Or, instead of *He was beaten*, a Gullah speaker would say *dɛm bit əm*, namely *They beat him*. Many West African languages, such as Ewe, Yoruba, Twi, Fante, Gã, include this feature;
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> (2) the comparison of adjectives – Gullah sometimes uses the verb *pas* (meaning 'to surpass') to indicate the comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives (e.g. *i tɐl pas mi* 'He is taller than me', lit. 'He is tall, surpasses me'), although *mo na* 'more than' is used more frequently for comparatives and *di moris* 'the most' for superlatives. Similarly, in many West African languages such as Ibo, Fante, Ewe, Twi, a verb meaning 'to surpass' is used with the adjective to express the comparative and superlative degrees;
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> (3) the frequent repetition (reduplication) of words and phrases – which is very common both among Gullahs and West Africans especially in narrative.[35]

[35] Ibid., 202-22.

As for morphology, Turner analyzes similarities in form between the nouns, pronouns, and Gullah verbs and those in West African languages under the categories of (1) number, (2) tense, (3) case, and (4) gender.

> (1) Number – in Gullah there is no plural marking on nouns, that is to say that they all have the same form in the singular and the plural (the only possible distinction involves preposing *dɛm* to the invariant noun or the use of a numeral quantifier, e.g. *dɛm bɐi* 'the/those boys', *fɐiv dɐg* 'five dogs'); verb forms also remain unchanged throughout the singular and plural, so both forms are uninflected (e.g. *mi go, unə go, i go, wi go, unə go, dɛm go*). There is a precedent for these practices in many West African languages, among them Ibo, Ewe, Yoruba, Efik, Fante.
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> (2) Tense – little importance seems to be attached to the actual time when an event takes place (Gullah speakers tend to focus rather on the manner of the action – mood – or on its character – aspect), therefore the form of the verb used to refer to present time

is often the same as that used to refer to the past. There is usually no change in form even when the future is intended. Preverbal morphemes mark both tense and aspect. The preverbal *bin* denotes anteriority, while *ga* or *gwine* express the future; as for aspect, the marker is a free pre-verbal morpheme, namely *duh* [də] followed by a verb stem or by a present participle for the progressive (*how you duh do?*/*how you duh doin?* for 'how are you doing?'), and *done* for the perfect combined with the verb stem (*Uh done eat dat one?* for 'I ate/have eaten that one already').

(3) Case – the nominative forms of the personal pronoun (e.g. *mi* 'I') are the same as the accusative forms (e.g. *mi* 'me') and the forms of the possessive (e.g. *mi* 'my') – as in Ibo, Gã, Yoruba, and Ewe also. Nouns feature the same form in all cases, they are uninflected.

(4) Gender – a very common method to indicate the gender of a noun is by prefixing to the noun the word *woman* or *man* (e.g. *umə cail* 'woman child', that is 'girl').[36]

[36] Ibid., 223-31.

The Gullah sound system also features the strong influence of African languages. Several sources concerning Gullah phonology are available. Turner's phonetic transcriptions published in his *Africanisms* are certainly the best known; some of his original field notes including phonetic transcriptions and phonological comments (archived at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, with duplicates at the Avery Research Center of the College of Charleston) are a notable resource since they comprise eighteen hours of audio recordings with over two hundred individual tracks. Another important set of phonetically transcribed texts dating from the mid to the late 1970s is found in Patricia Jones-Jackson's work.[37] Among the main sound patterns identified are aphesis and nasal velarization. Aphesis is the omission of word-initial stressless syllables and it is a very common process to be observed in many varieties of English – with varying frequency. Turner's transcriptions of aphesis display the following instances: *'nough* for *enough*, *'bacco* for *tobacco*, *'thout* for *without*, *'pen* for *depend*, *'zamin* for *examine*, *'pose* for *suppose*, and so forth (some aphetic items such as *'nough* or *'cause* are frequent throughout the varieties of English, others like *'bacco* or *'pen* are rarer). Nasal velarization is the production of an alveolar nasal as a velar nasal in syllable-final position (a feature that seems to be shared by Gullah, Sierra Leonean Krio and Caribbean English creoles). Some instances from Turner and Jones-Jackson's works are: *dow[ŋ]* for *down*, *drow[ŋ]* for *drown*, *'rou[ŋ]* for *around*.[38]

[37] Jones-Jackson, *The Status of Gullah: an Investigation*, and Jones-Jackson, "When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands", *National Geographic* (December 1987), 132-46.

[38] Turner, *Africanisms*, 42, and Jones-Jackson, *The Status of Gullah*, 57-58.

Gullah, language vitality and public policy in the US

The official data provided by the US Census Bureau seem to suggest that the Gullah language is rather endangered, if not on a path toward extinction, with its 352 reported speakers. However, the Gullah/Geechee language is not among the 191 languages identified in UNESCO's Interactive Atlas of the world's languages in danger (with varying degrees of vitality ranging from vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered to critically endangered, extinct, or revitalized).[39] In order to assess a language's vitality, the team of experts and linguists working for UNESCO has identified nine factors that are deemed extremely useful for

[39] *UNESCO Interactive Atlas*, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap> On the issue of endangered languages see also Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley, *Endangered Languages. Current Issues and Future Prospects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Suzanne Romaine and Daniel Nettle, *Vanishing Voices: the Extinction of the World's Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

characterising a language's sociolinguistic situation. They have been schematised in the following diagram.
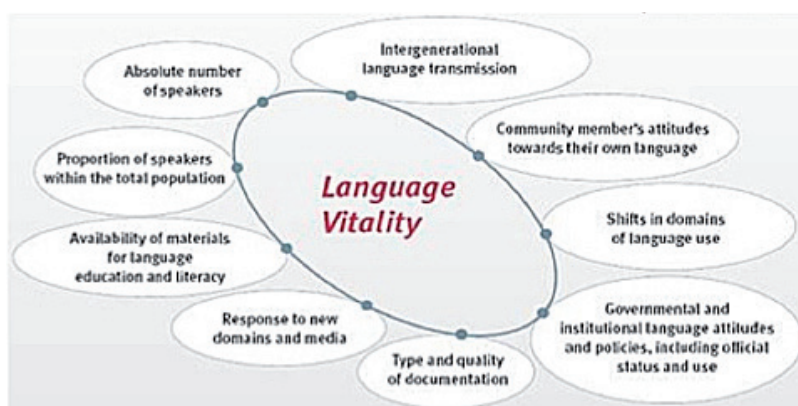

Fig. 1. UNESCO's factors of language vitality and endangerment

These factors are proposed as general guidelines to be applied to the different local contexts. Some of the major ones among them – such as 'governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies', 'availability of materials for language education and literacy', 'shifts in domains of language use', 'response to new domains and media', and 'community members' attitudes towards their own language' – are particularly significant in the case of Gullah, and will therefore be employed in this article to investigate the status of the Gullah language today.

As for the first two factors mentioned above, governments and institutions may have explicit policies and/or implicit attitudes toward dominant and non-dominant languages: they can protect non-dominant languages, they can encourage ethnolinguistic groups to maintain and use them or, on the contrary, to abandon them by providing education exclusively in the dominant language. Indeed, it is generally agreed that education in a language is essential for its vitality, literacy being a source of pride. So whether or not the language is employed for educational or literacy purposes appears relevant to evaluate its vitality. Some communities tend to strongly maintain their oral traditions or to develop a variety of written materials, ranging from grammars, dictionaries, texts, children's books, to some kind of practical orthography or no orthography at all.[40]

In the case of Gullah, despite the body of narratives and studies existing for it, there has been little recognition of it within public policy, which has deeply affected its status in education and literacy programs in the US. Back in the 1950s, after decades of segregated schools, in an attempt at integration that provided public schools for all black children in the state of South Carolina, many Gullah-speaking children were given the opportunity to receive education for the first time. With a slowly-growing public awareness, in 1975, the Charleston County School Board set up a program to instruct teachers in Gullah, although lack of intelligibility between Gullah and English speakers still remained throughout the school system. In fact, instructional material was only in English, which

[40] UNESCO, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 12-15.

required some of the (black) teachers who understood the creole to help children in the transition from Gullah to AE.[41] Since such help was unsupported by the educational system, in the case of teachers who were not familiar with the creole, Gullah-speaking children had to resort to the use of other children as interpreters to understand instructions.

Another project funded by the US Department of Labor is also worth mentioning: in 1976, the Sea Island Language Project was launched to teach English as a second language to Gullah-speaking adults in order to enhance their job opportunities. Despite the efforts, the situation continued to be critical in the areas where Gullah was spoken: "The high levels of illiteracy in the region are regularly bemoaned in education circles and an extensive adult education program has been underway in South Carolina since the mid-1960s, but there is little official recognition of the basic language differences which might be the source of widespread reading problems among the black population".[42] Students speaking creole languages have often been perceived as having language problems, and then placed in ESL or speech therapy classes. Instead, as Lise Winer has stressed, creole languages are important resources in the classroom, as long as teachers do have some knowledge of their students' linguistic and cultural background:

> [a]ny approach to the teaching of students whose first language is English Creole, recognized or not, must include knowledge about and acceptance of the language and its culture varieties. Without an awareness, on the part of teachers, administrators, and others, of the validity of creoles and an understanding of their relationship with English, the students' progress will be continually short-circuited.[43]

Referring back to UNESCO's factors to assess Gullah's vitality, we can say that in this case language and literacy acquisition seems to mostly depend on the community, Gullah being neither protected nor adequately supported by the education system and the government. Despite the existence of a Gullah orthography and some little written instructional material (as the previously-mentioned studies demonstrate), the language does not seem to be, or to have been, part of the school curriculum in the US.

Although many South Carolinians today might claim that Gullah has disappeared, a relatively recent and comprehensive survey on language variation in the US, based on field research, can offer central insights on the viability of the language: "[Gullah] can still be heard in rural areas where Gullah-speaking communities have had a long history. … Today it is most often heard among the very old and the very young because it is learned as a language of the home".[44] While some people never leave their community of birth, thus continuing to speak creole and, in addition, one or more varieties of English if they have public jobs, those who move to urban centres leave their young children with older members of the community "for long periods of time as a solution to child-care problems".[45] This seems to be pivotal with regard to language transmission and vitality. Indeed, 'intergenerational language transmission' is one of the assessment factors of

[41] Patricia Nichols, "Creoles of the USA", in Charles A. Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath, eds., *Language in the USA* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 76.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Lise Winer, "Teaching Speakers of Caribbean English Creoles in North-American Classrooms", in Arthur Wayne Glowka and Donald M. Lance, eds., *Language Variation in North-American English: Research and Teaching* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1993), 195.

[44] Edward Finegan and John R. Rickford, eds., *Language in the USA. Themes for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139.

[45] Ibid. Despite the fact that several Gullahs migrated to New York at the beginning of the 20th century (especially to Harlem, Brooklyn and Queens), parents typically send their children back to the rural communities of South Carolina and Georgia during the summer holidays to keep a contact with Gullah traditions thanks to grandparents, uncles and aunts who have remained in the regions. See "Gullah", <http://blackhistory.com/content/63995/gullah>.

language vitality identified by UNESCO: the most commonly used factor in evaluating the vitality of a language is whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next.[46] There are different degrees of endangerment concerning intergenerational transmission, ranging from safe (when the language is spoken by all generations), stable yet threatened (when the language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with uninterrupted intergenerational transmission), unsafe (when most but not all children and families speak the language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains like the home), to definitely endangered (the language is no longer being learned as a mother tongue by children; parents can still speak it to their children, but they do not usually respond in it), severely endangered (when the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations), critically endangered (if older people only remember part of the language but do not use it since there may not be anyone to speak with), and extinct (there is nobody who can speak or remember the language).[47]

With a specific focus on Gullah, the previously-mentioned survey on language variation also highlights that an interesting linguistic process seems to occur. It seems that many speakers learn and use the language as children, but once they move away from their territories for education and jobs, they start using African American English or Standard American English, then, surprisingly, when they return to their communities in retirement, they 're-creolize' their speech – which consequently makes it quite difficult to estimate the number of Gullah speakers with a high degree of accuracy.[48] Quite often re-creolization can be viewed as a means to (more or less deliberately) mark and assert a specific ethnic and cultural identity, which is something that people returning to live in their territories of origin might feel free to do, when no longer obliged to use the dominant language for socialization or professional purposes. [49]

Gullah is still, however, felt to be the language of a community whose members are known for preserving more of their cultural and linguistic heritage than any other African American community in the United States.[50] Their strength and cohesiveness in maintaing their common legacy has led to the designation of the so-called Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (announced in 2006) to preserve "America's most unique culture, a tradition first shaped by captive Africans brought to the southern United States from West Africa and continued in later generations by their descendants".[51]

No later than June 2011, a team of educators and educational consultants from the State of South Carolina launched a project to study the strong connections between the United States, particularly South Carolina and Georgia, and the Sierra Leonean cultural and linguistic heritage. According to the project director, "[t]he project is critical not only to education in South Carolina but to schooling across the US because of direct links between Sierra Leone and the Gullah culture and language of South Carolina as well as the larger African American community across the United States".[52] Their aim was to give future generations a different

[46] Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Clevendon: Multilingual Matters, 1991).

[47] UNESCO, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 7-8.

[48] Ibid. As is well known, creoles change over time, usually moving closer to the dominant language: this is decreolization. However, they can also move in the opposite direction, or recreolize.

[49] Ronald Wardhaugh, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Chichester and Oxford: Blackwell, 2011 [2010]).

[50] Emory Campbell, *Gullah Cultural Legacies: a Synopsis of Gullah Traditions, Customary Beliefs, Art Forms and Speech in Hilton Head Island and Vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia* (Hilton Head Island, US: BookSurge Publishing, 2008).

[51] *Gullah/Geechee*, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm>

[52] Africa News, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201106060276.html> (published on 6 June 2011)

awareness of the African American identity and legacy. Overall, such initiatives, programs and projects are meant to encourage African Americans to research their linguistic and cultural roots, highlighting the importance of continuing the studies on Gullah.

Gullah and its current status on the Internet: the online Bible

Perhaps the greatest material linguistic achievement in the Gullah language to date is represented by the completion of the translation of the New Testament (*De Nyew Testament*), whose launch was one of the most noted events of the 2005 Heritage Days celebrated on St Helena Island. A number of different people and organizations were involved in the project that dates back to 1979; then, after 26 years of translating, editing, and checking, the text was finally released to the public. The Gullah translation of the New Testament is also provided online in the attempt to make it widely accessible through the web and easily searchable in its digital format by navigating around the Bible on the website. The reader can click on a chapter number and scroll to any verse. Below is a sample from John 13: 34-35:[53]

[53] *The Gullah Nyew Testament*, <www.gullahbible.com>, January 2011.

Gullah Nyew Testament	New International Version 2010 in SE
An now A da gii oona a nyew chaage. Oona fa lob one noda. Same fashion A done lob oona, same fashion oona fa lob one noda. Ef oona da lob one noda, ebrybody gwine know dat oona me ciple dem.	A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Table 1. Extract from the Gullah Bible

Apart from the religious aims of the project, the publication of the Gullah version of the Bible online was also a means to focus on the language and on its importance throughout the community. In 2011, a five-CD set of readings from the Gullah Bible, "Healin fa de Soul" ("Healing for the Soul"), was also released to let everyone hear the words spoken in creole. It is the largest and most accessible collection of Gullah recordings made available to the public to date, and constitutes a better opportunity to study the language (allowing younger generations to follow the passages in print as they hear the audio) as well as to make it known to non-Gullah speakers. As some newspapers reported – *The Gullah Sentinel* among them – since the publication of the Gullah Bible and its accompanying CDs, there has been tremendous interest from non-Gullah speakers trying to read the language, but not knowing if they were doing it correctly. "[E]veryone can now hear those words in the creole language spoken by slaves and their descendants along the Sea Islands of the nation's Southeast coast. People can buy [the CDs] and personally own them, […] they have a much better opportunity to study the language" said

[54] Campbell is an activist who has worked incessantly to preserve the traditional Gullah communities of the Sea Islands. He is a former director of the Penn Centre, that was founded in 1862 as one of the nation's first freedmen's schools after the Civil War. During the 1960s, the Centre was chosen by Martin Luther King Jr and the members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a training site and for strategic planning.

[55] Bruce Smith, "Gullah-language Bible Now on Audio CDs", <http://news.yahoo.com/gullah-language-bible-now-audio-cds-163456799.html> published Nov. 25, 2011.

[56] UNESCO, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 9.

[57] Ibid., 13.

[58] Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 1-2.

Emory Campbell[54] as reported in the article "Gullah-language Bible now on audio CDs" published on *Yahoo! News*.[55] He further added that "the recordings show an important step in the acceptance of Gullah, which native speakers tried to abandon for decades because they were taught to be ashamed of their heritage".

In several cultural and ethnic contexts, religion appears as a significant domain where the use of a language may be encouraged and strengthened, the translation and completion of the Gullah Bible constituting an important achievement for the language that potentially gains a more 'recognized' status. Indeed, one of the other factors identified by UNESCO's team of experts in the study of language vitality regards the 'shifts in domains of language use': "where, with whom, and the range of topics for which a language is used directly affects whether or not it will be trasmitted to the next generation".[56] It can be actively used in all discourse domains for all purposes – thus being the language of interaction, identity, creativity and entertainment – or it can be used in limited or highly limited domains, such as festivals and cerimonial occasions where members of the community meet, sometimes using the language for communicative exchange, sometimes understanding the language but not being able to speak it.

Apart from the religious domain to which the Gullah language has already shifted in its written form, another domain (involved in such a shift), or, rather, another medium, and its range of domains, remains emblematic with regard to linguistic vitality: the Web. As a matter of fact, 'response to new domains and media' can be said to be a major factor, since "[n]ew areas for language use may emerge as community living conditions change. While some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into new domains, most do not".[57] New media, including the Internet and broadcast media, encourage communities to meet the challenges of modernity, which will be the specific focus of the following part of the article.

Gullah and its current status on the Internet: learning the language

The emergence of new communication technologies, like the Internet, as mentioned at the outset, has often been accompanied by fears concerning the risks that an English-dominated Web could spell the end of other tongues. Minority languages and varieties were deemed in danger of ending up as "Internet casualties"[58] once confronted with the uniformity imposed by globalization. However, despite initial fears of the Internet being a homogenous linguistic medium, the Web has proved to be surprisingly heterogenous in that it has gathered a large number of languages and varieties reflecting the many backgrounds, needs, purposes and attitudes of its users. In this respect, the different types of presence of Gullah online represent an interesting (and ambivalent) case.

The Internet also seems to host several experiments that deal with Gullah with overtly didactic purposes. The website *Gullah Net*, for instance, is presented as a tool for the teaching of the language. As stated in its overview, it was designed

to introduce Gullah culture and language on the Web to "children" – although people of all ages can actually enjoy the site – and to reveal the complex links existing between language, culture and history.[59]

The website features a series of sections dealing with Gullah history, people and traditions, as well as with tales, music, cooking and events. By surfing the site, potential learners can be involved in a series of activities ranging from reading about different subjects to listening to folktales narrated both in English and Gullah by Aunt Pearlie Sue (a storyteller created by Anita Singleton-Prather, a native of the Sea Islands, who tries to carry on the African tradition of storytelling on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean). They can listen to some Gullah songs after being taken on a musical journey through the blues, the meaning of African drums and songs used to communicate on plantations, and they can even write their own songs by interacting with the website. Moreover, in order to promote literacy and communication skills, there is also a computer-based activity called *The Creative Literacy Project* that is available online to public and private school teachers and educators.

The section 'Gullah in the classroom' offers some classroom activities and lesson plans for different curricula and levels, and it suggests a number of trips to museums, institutions and festivals to improve knowledge of Gullah culture and traditions. Learners are provided with a glossary, a bibliography and a list of resources subdivided into categories: children's books (music), children's books (folktales), CDs, websites, videos, with links to further materials. Some of the most interesting video resources on Gullah – among them 'Gullah Translations' (1994, 26:40 min.), 'From Barbados to Carolina: the Colony of a Colony' (1999, 60 min.) – are available at ETV (Educational Television), which is one of the nations's leading educational broadcasting systems and a very active centre for the many projects it launches: in 1958 South Carolina began an experiment in teaching by television at a local high school, which was a great success, and in 1960 the General Assembly created the South Carolina Educational Television Commission that, since then, has provided programs for public television and radio.

ETV's educational web portal, the website *Knowitall*, features moreover a series of 'Gullah' links and websites for students (from elementary to high school), parents and teachers, with a collection of resources designed for classroom use. Users can easily access interactive sites, activities, simulations, virtual field trips, and streaming videos. Following different grade levels, students have the chance to explore a wide range of subjects connected to the history and culture of the geographical area where Gullah is spoken.[60]

The website *Gullah Tours* is also worthy of note as far as language is concerned. Besides proposing tours with a guide to explore the Gullah geographical area, in particular the Charleston area, and to visit historical sites such as the Old Slave Mart (the market where slaves were auctioned after being inspected), the urban slave quarters, the Underground Railroad (where run-away slaves hid until they

[59] *Gullah Net Overview*, <http://www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/main/overview.html>, January 2011. Since the website is written in Standard English, it does not presumably address Gullah children or adults exclusively but anyone who is interested in the Gullah language.

[60] <http://www.knowitall.org/index.cfm>

reached the North), the site also shows some sections that specifically deal with language.[61]

The Lord's Prayer
Translated to Gullah by Alphonso Brown

Listen to the Lord's Prayer in Gullah

Our Fadduh awt'n Hebb'n, all-duh-weh be dy holy 'n uh rightschus name. Dy kingdom com.' Oh lawd leh yo' holy 'n rightschus woud be done, on dis ert' as-'e tis dun een yo' grayt Hebb'n. 'N ghee we oh Lawd dis day our day-ly bread. "N f'gib we oh Lawd our trus-passes, as we also f'gib doohs who com' sin 'n truspass uhghens us. 'N need-us-snot oh konkuhrin' King een tuh no moh ting like uh sin 'n eeb'l. Fuh dyne oh dyne is duh kingdom, 'n duh kingdom prommus fuh be we ebbuh las'n glory. Amen.

The Twenty Third Psalm
Translated to Gullah by Alphonso Brown

Listen to the 23rd Psalm in Gullah

De Lawd, 'E duh my sheppud. Uh een gwoi' want. 'E meck me fuh lay down een dem green passuh, 'E Khah me deh side dah stagnant wahtuh. 'E sto' muh soul; 'E lead me een de pat' ob right-juss-niss fuh 'E name sake. Aae doh Ie wark shru' de whalley ob dem grayb yaad Ie een gwoi' skayed uh dem dead people, fuh Ie know de Lawd, 'E duh deh wid me; 'E stick wha' 'E khah een 'E han' 'n de staff een de udduh han' gwoi' cumpit me' 'E fix up uh table fuh me fuh grease muh mout' 'n muh enemies een gwoi' git none. 'E 'noint muh head wid uhl. Muh cup obbuh flo.' Sho' nuff all 'E goodnes,' 'n 'E muhcy gwoi' be wid me all de day ob muh life 'n Ie gwoi' lib deh een de house ob de Lawd fuh ebbuh 'n ebbuh. Amen
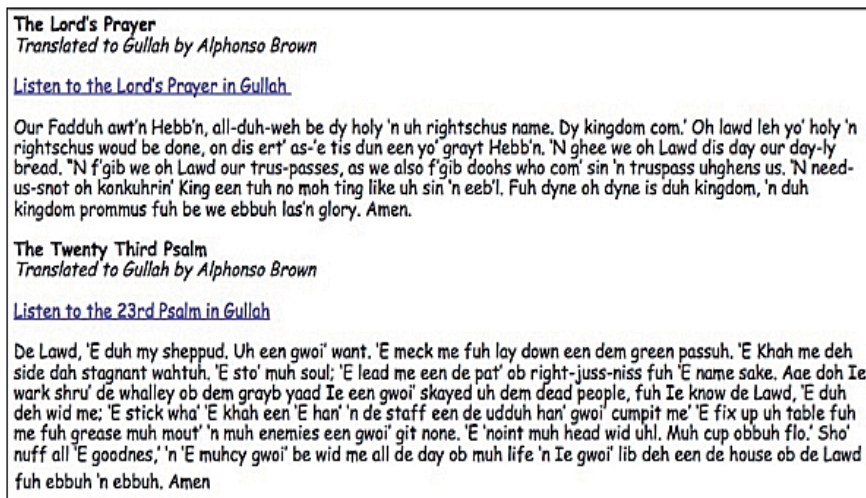
Fig. 2. Gullah translations of a prayer and a psalm from the section 'Hear and Read Gullah' of the website *Gullah Tours*

Net-users interested in the connections between the Gullah heritage and American history can also view a Gullah translation of Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream" (1963), seen as suggesting Gullah culture and traditions as a symbol of cultural pride for all African Americans across the US.

"I Have A Dream," by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Translated to Gullah by Alphonso Brown

Ie say tuh unnuh teday, mye frien', eeb'n dough we duh face dees haad time yuh ob teday 'n temorruh, Ie still hab uh dreem. 'E uh dreem wuh staat way down een America dreem.

Ie hab disshuh dreem dat one day dis America gwi' come up 'n be tru' mout' ob de law wah call de Creed: "We hol' dees trut' fuh be sef-ebbuhdent, dat all man duh mek equal."

Ie hab uh dreem dat one day on de red hill ob Georguh dat chil'lun ob one tym slayb 'n chil'lun ob one tym slayb ownuh gwi be able tuh gedduh down at de welcom' table ob brudduhhood.

Ie hab uh dreem dat one day eeb'n de state uh Mississippi, a place haad-hadded wid de fire ob wrong, haad-hadded wid de fire ob push'n we down, gwi' be mek obbuh like uh hebb'n ob freedom 'n jussis.

Ie hab uh dreem dat my fo' leetle chill'n gwi one uh dees day lib een America weh deh een gwi' be judge by de culluh ob deh skin but by dey weh dey khaah 'e sef. Ie hab uh dreem teday!

Ie hab uh dreem dat one uh dees ol' day, way down een Allybameh...yeh, right down een Allybameh, dat leet'l black by's 'n leet'l black gals gwi' be able fuh jy'n up han' wid leet'l white by's 'n gals 'n wark tegettuh like sistuh 'n brudduh. Ie hab uh dreem!
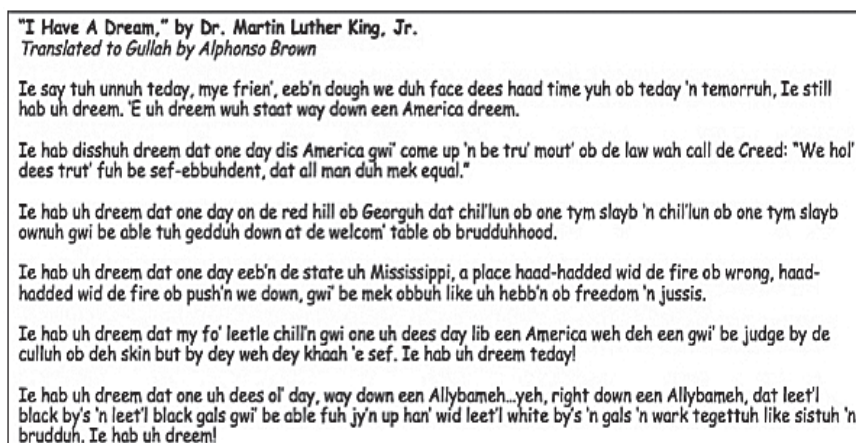
Fig. 3. Gullah translation of Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream"

By employing a variety of semiotic resources combining verbal and visual meanings, the World Wide Web provides extremely eclectic and stimulating ways to learn languages in general, and Gullah is no exception. Indeed, a few minutes' Web browsing will bring to light large quantities of multimodal and hypertexted pages that can be read as non-linear texts, namely without a fixed sequence but rather in a manner that is dictated by the reader's interests, clicking on relevant

'hot spots' while following the different paths allowed by the website. At the same time, the users' experience of the Gullah world can be said to be constructed by the very websites they surf, with their detailed and inviting descriptions of places, events, cultural and linguistic phenomena. The creole is employed as a symbolic code to represent the reality they are trying to narrate and promote, while eliciting the users' participation and engagement in a cultural and didactic 'exchange'. With interactivity becoming a key term in the design and structure of websites to achieve information processing and communication, the Web appears as a virtual classroom where language learners can share their experiences with other learners all over the world, concentrating on individual and collaborative work. They can be put in contact with up-to-date information about a language in the form of online dictionaries, usage guides, articles, quizzes, exercises, self-assessment tasks and other language learning activities and resources.

While attempting at improving the knowledge of Gullah to both Gullahs and non-Gullahs, such websites invariably stress the importance of origins, implicitly trying to restore some dignity to traditions and legacies that had long been covered with shame, to convey the awareness of and pride in being African American by uncovering a common heritage that is significant not only to the African American community but to the United States as a whole nation. The fact that Gullah culture and traditions have reached all the way to the White House – the first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama, being of Gullah origins – has certainly contributed to its re-discovery and appreciation.[62]

Gullah and its current status on the Internet: blogs, forums and social networks

The Web offers a home to all languages and cultures as long as their communities have access to a functioning computer technology.[63] According to Crystal, this is the most notable change since it began; despite being initially a totally English medium, the Internet's globalisation has resulted in a steady growth of the presence of other languages.

Due to such a linguistic richness, the Web also hosts an unprecedented array of opportunities for linguistic and metalinguistic analysis. In Crystal's words: "whatever complaints there may have been in the past, over the lack of availability of 'authentic materials', there must now be a general satisfaction that so much genuine written data is readily available".[64]

Therefore, an investigation of the "authentic materials" available online has been attempted here, in search of "genuine" data allowing a more accurate picture of the current status of the Gullah language, its vitality and actual use as far as this is reflected or realized on the Web. An investigation of its presence on the Internet has been first carried out in blogs and forums since they have become an important interaction place in cyberspace for self-expression (where users/members who are drawn together by shared interests, common goals and identities, are thought

[62] <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2010/February/20100217163730GLnesnoM0.1222498.html> See also <http://www.gtowntimes.com/story/quilt-michelle-obama-s-family2008-12-26t07-10-00> that features an exhibition called "Quilts for Obama": following the theme 'From a Gullah Slave Cabin to the White House', it displays a quilt with ten squares of scenes from Michelle Obama's family history.

[63] Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 216.

[64] Ibid., 235.

[65] See Lesley Milroy, *Language and Social Networks* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 14, and Mikaela Cordisco, "'Blogspeak': 'Blogal' English in the 'Global' Village", *Anglistica A.I.O.N.,* 10.1-2 (2006), 61.

[66] Cordisco, "'Blogspeak'", 69-75.

[67] See Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, and Rebecca Blood, *The Weblog Handbook* (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002).

[68] <http://whotalking.com/> The research was carried out by searching for the discussion groups and web pages relating to the keywords 'Gullah/ Geechee', and data publication dates ranged from a few hours to four years before the search.

to exploit all the linguistic resources at their disposal, possibly including – in our case – their knowledge of Gullah). Blogs and forums are some of the most commonly used electronic media today; they often form tight social networks consisting of varying degrees of community to which people consciously feel they belong.[65] Linguistically, the cohesiveness and the communicative strategies and dynamics of the community appear to be an interesting field for investigation not only because the traditional distinction between written and spoken language is blurred[66] (indeed, the blending of speech and writing probably helps when focusing on a creole language that is mainly characterized by the oral dimension), but also because they are a socially interactive and conversational genre, featuring reciprocal comments and responses of a dialogic nature that are regularly updated with entries and pictures.[67] Moreover, the archiving function of blogs and forums allows access to what could be defined an online database of natural language.

In order to manage the huge number of potential sources available on the Net, the search was conducted firstly by employing the search engine *Whotalking* (through which one can check out real time results of who is talking on social media sites like blogs, forums, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Yahoo answers*, by typing the topic in any language),[68] and secondly by directly surfing the emerging most relevant websites concerning the Gullah community.

The first point to stress is that most of the results found from blogs and forums were, however, *about* Gullah but written *in* English. On the level of contents, the texts retrieved partly commemorate people having largely contributed to the cultural life of the community, they partly advertise festivals, performances, conferences, and newly-opened museums with collections and exhibitions on the culture of slave descendants, they sometimes deal with heritage tourism promoting the exploration of the Sea Islands and they express their joy and appreciation for the online publication of the Bible 'in the beautiful and musical Gullah language'. The following are typical examples selected among the many available. Some of them specifically tackle the question of language, whether it be African-American Vernacular English or Gullah, and its recognition.
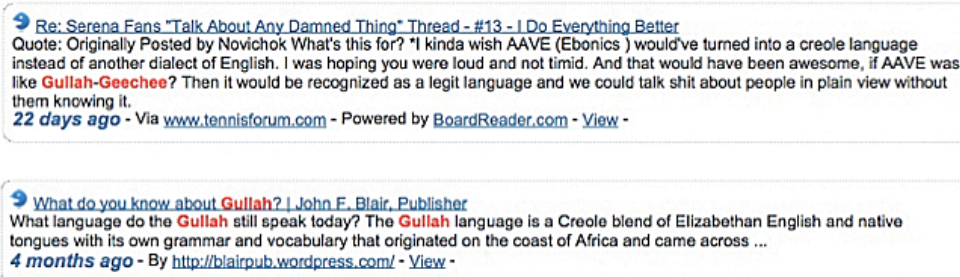

Fig. 4. Screenshots featuring samples of texts retrieved in forums and blogs with the words 'Gullah'/'Geechee', Whotalking.com
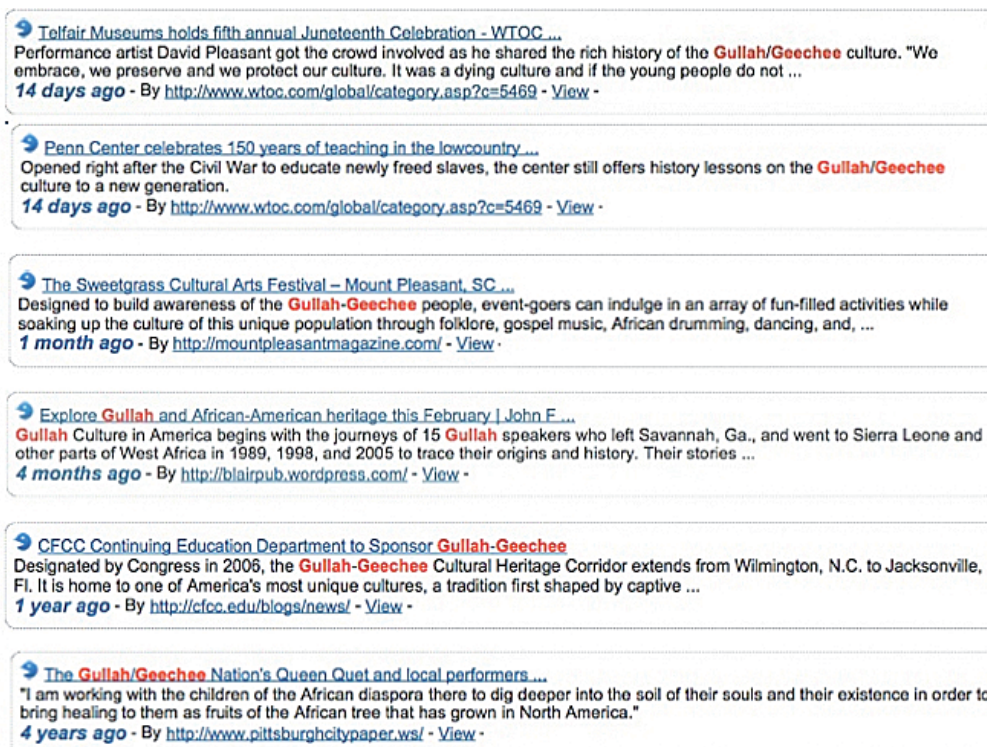
Fig. 5. Screenshots featuring samples of texts retrieved in forums and blogs with the words 'Gullah'/'Geechee', Whotalking.com

Some of them emphasize the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Gullah/ Geechee people, highlighting the importance that young generations embrace and protect it, while being as involved as possible in lessons, exhibitions and events that are meant to build or increase their awareness and to heal the existence of "the African tree that has grown in North America" (to quote the words displayed in the last message reported below).

While the messages previously reported only represent a selection (on the basis of their relevance) of the many dozens of messages published online in the last four years on blogs and forums, the only messages found that are even partially written in Gullah are blogged on the Gullah/Geechee Nation blog – apparently the 'official' blog of the community – that mainly presents the various activities and celebrations taking place both within the United States and all over the world, keeping the community updated on the relevant initiatives and achievements of Queen Quet (the selected and elected head-of-state and spokesperson of the Gullah/Geechee Nation).[69] The following are some of these rarer actual uses of the Gullah language, where it appears to be self-consciously employed with purposes that are linked to its promotion both on the Gullah/Geechee Nation blog and on the Gullah/Geechee Riddim Radio blog.

[69] *Gullah/Geechee Nation Blog* <http://gullahgeecheenation. wordpress.com/ >. The Gullah/Geechee Nation also has another blog, <http://www.myspace. com/gullahgeecheenation/ blog>, featuring a lower number of followers, but still regularly updated. Queen Quet – whose real name is Marquetta L. Goodwine – is a native of St. Helena Island (South Carolina), she's author, performance artist and founder of the Gullah/ Geechee Sea Island Coalition. She also runs her own website <http://www.queenquet. com/>.
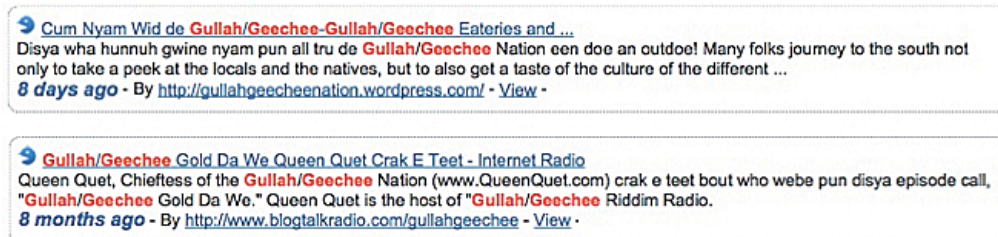
Fig. 6. Screenshots from the *Gullah/Geechee Nation Blog* and the *Gullah/ Geechee Riddim Radio Blog*

Queen Quet, indeed, appears as a pivotal figure in keeping the Gullah culture and language alive. In 1999 she spoke at the United Nations' 55th Session of the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on behalf of the Gullah people, as its representative: she told the delegates the story of how her ancestors were kidnapped from West Africa and forced to work in another continent and she did it using her language, Gullah, in an international arena. "They were stunned and captured when [she] started speaking in Gullah" since the electronic devices they were using to translate languages, would not work for Gullah.[70] Then, in 2008, she was also invited to participate in the United Nations Forum on Minority Rights.

From a linguistic point of view, what emerges from the online data concerning her incessant work for her people, both in the form of the messages she posts on the Internet and in the form of the videos uploaded on *YouTube*,[71] Queen Quet seems to make great use of code-mixing: she mixes Gullah and English within the same utterance, speech, or written text, which is central in relation to language use and the individual, the social and cultural values attached to it, the communicative strategies, language attitudes and functions within particular contexts. Despite being located within the US, the community (here represented by Queen Quet) tries to signal its parallel recognition of roots that are located outside the US, in West Africa, by using a language that is not Standard American English. Whereas, through code-mixing, it is usually the case that "English has been used to *neutralize* identities one is reluctant to express by the use of native languages or dialects",[72] the use of Gullah in an utterance is a linguistic strategy that works against this neutralization: instead of 'unloading' the linguistic code from its cultural and emotional connotations (English has been long – and mistakenly – regarded as providing a code with no cultural overtones, as able to neutralize discourses in terms of identity),[73] an extremely 'loaded' code, such as Gullah, is intentionally chosen to foreground a specific cultural identity. The deliberate choice to mix two codes, English and Gullah, therefore, entails the aim to explicitly claim or mark one's belonging to the community. Speaking Gullah on public occasions, in national and international contexts, is a means to highlight a strong binding force among Gullah people, and to express group solidarity and cohesion. The choice of linguistic code – which is often connected to the emotions, values and attitudes that are to be implicitly or explicitly conveyed –

[70] *UN Session Hears Gullah Language* <http://www. islandpacket.com/man/ gullah/un.html>.

[71] Further references to videos on *YouTube* will be given later on in the article.

[72] Braj B. Kachru, *The Alchemy of English. The Spread, Functions and Models of Non-Native Englishes* (Oxford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1986), 9.

[73] Kachru, *Alchemy of English*, 9-10.

bears significance not only for the individual but also, and more importantly, for the society or the community which the individual (in this case, Queen Quet)

is addressing. Her code-mixing behaviour thus appears as a highly symbolic act showing the role that language choice plays in maintaining certain kinds of bonds and boundaries within society.

The Gullah/Geechee Nation blog also features a Fan Page providing the link to its Facebook page hosting some discussion where members actively share their ideas, support actions and proposals, advertise festivals, official meetings and informal parties, suggest viewing interesting videos on *YouTube*, publish pictures of their ancestors, and so forth. In some of the most recent posts (displayed below) people largely share their experience in tracing their roots and family origins, proud of their heritage; however, these posts also show how little Gullah itself is actually used.
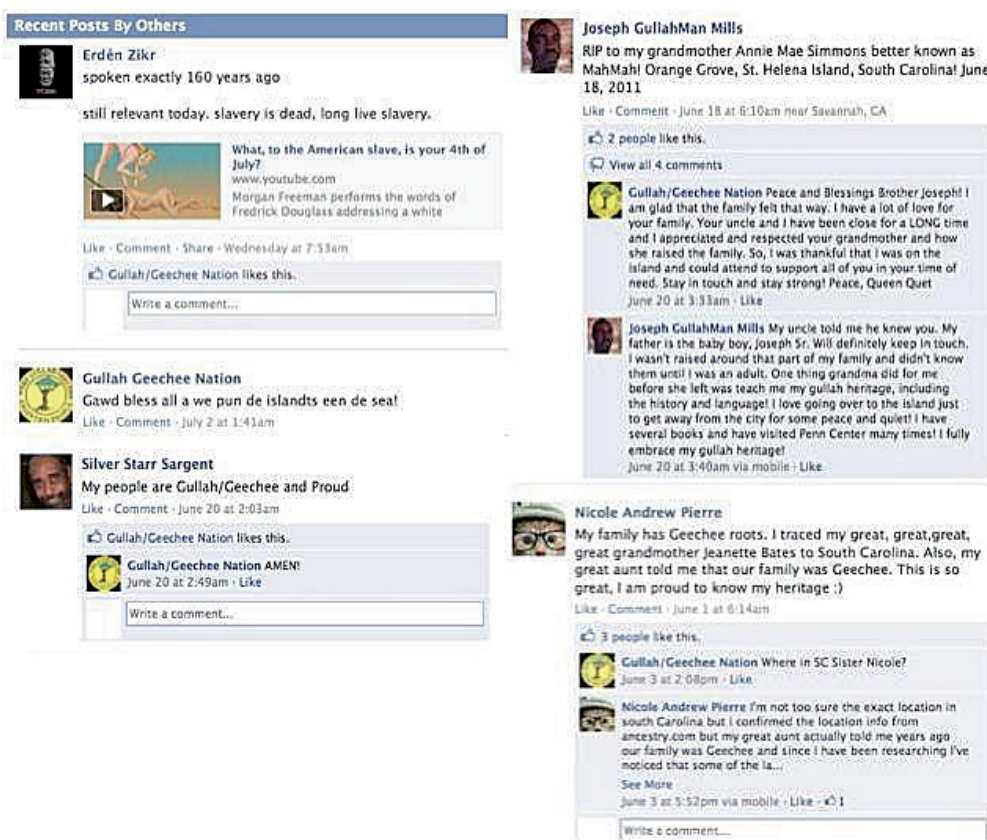

Fig. 7. Screenshots from Facebook pages on Gullah language and culture, Facebook.com

There is a widespread and remarkable insistence on discourses emphasizing Gullah cultural and linguistic legacies, as the most recurring words in the online texts – "African American(s)", "heritage", "preservation", "community" – show. The semantic network that these words create seems to bear an emotional weight that aims at giving a feeling of pride in being Gullah or of Gullah origins,

rediscovering the long forgotten trails of the Africans' forced migration to the so-called 'New World'. Rather than giving information, such texts almost invariably express and communicate the addressers' emotions and attitudes about the language and their Gullah roots. In this view, it might be helpful to refer again to UNESCO's factors, in particular to the one concerning 'community members' attitudes towards their own language' which, according to the team of experts, would be an essential element to evaluate language vitality. Indeed, members of a community are not usually neutral towards their own language: they may see it as essential to their community and identity and promote it, or they may be ashamed of it and, consequently, not promote it. More specifically,

> [w]hen members' attitudes towards their language are very positive, the language may be seen as a key symbol of group identity. … [M]embers of the community may see their language as a cultural core value, vital to their community and ethnic identity. If [they] view their language as a hindrance to economic mobility and integration into mainstream society, they may develop negative attitudes towards their language.[74]

[74] UNESCO, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 14.

In this case, despite the rarity of the online messages actually written *in* Gullah (the fact that many Gullah speakers may be unfamiliar with Gullah spelling conventions possibly hindering the written use of the language), members of the community and Net-users seem to have very positive attitudes towards the language and culture. Even though they learn and use Standard American English or other varieties of English when they move out of the territories of birth for education and jobs, they still think of their Gullah heritage and language as a central part of their identity (therefore contributing to maintaining it alive).

Additional texts retrieved by *Whotalking* in both social networks *Facebook* and *Twitter*, show several attempts at encouraging people/users/members to join the interests of the community, giving a chance to be increasingly involved in the community's life and its achievements. The examples below seem to be a call to action by promoting cooperation and interaction, while they directly engage the addressees in the reading of the latest edition of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's ezine (which is, however, written in English), while they exhort their readers to follow the Gullah/Geechee Nation website and blog on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, or to watch TV Nyashun Nyews (a program broadcast by GGTV, Gullah Geechee TV, that is the official TV station of the Gullah/Geechee Nation).
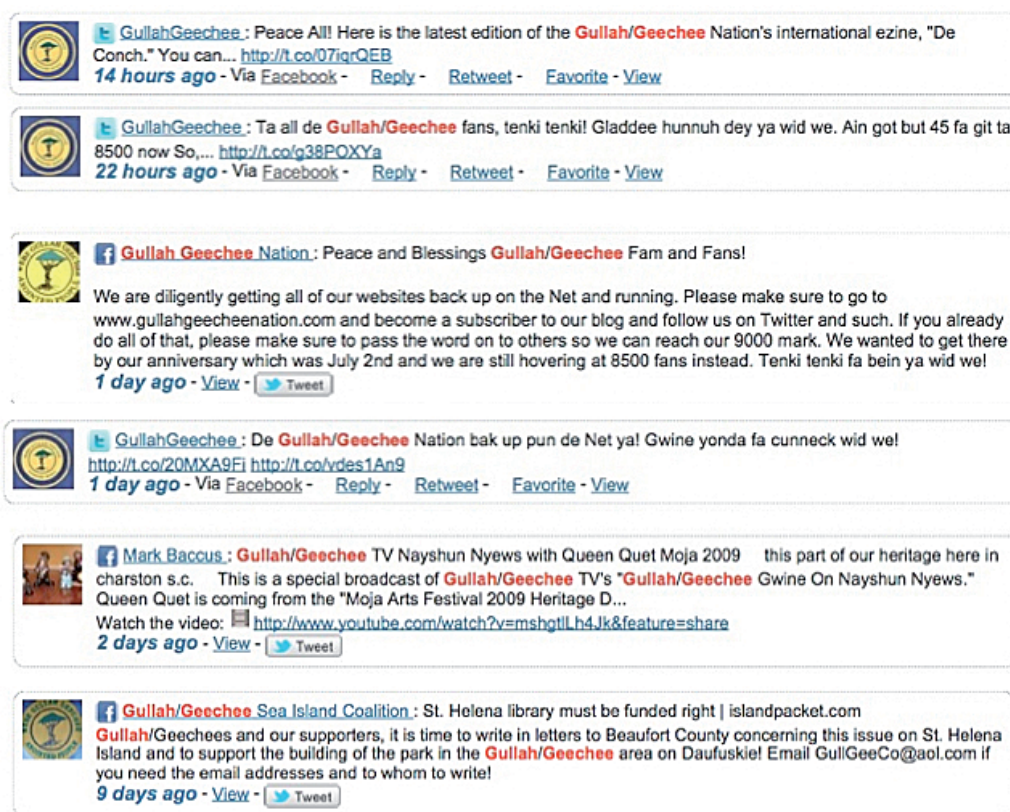
Fig. 8. Screenshots from Facebook and Twitter pages, Whotalking.com

Once again, the great majority of these messages (sometimes stretches of short online conversations, others isolated posts and tweets) is written in English, with just a few of them in Gullah.

Gullah and its current status on the Internet: YouTube and the web-radios

Apart from the written evidence of the numerous attempts at keeping the Gullah language and culture alive by giving it a higher visibility through the Web there is also some oral evidence that seems worthy of note since the Gullah language has been mainly characterized by orality – creole languages being often tied to the oral tradition.[75] Searching for the terms 'Gullah/Geechee' through the search engine *Whotalking* as far as *YouTube* is concerned, a relevant number of results was retrieved. Most of them were again in English, generally dealing with the preservation and protection of the Gullah culture, so the choice of the language is probably linked to the fact that they aim at reaching a wide audience of people, to spread the information regarding Gullah as much as possible. This is the case of the videos *Gullah Doc Trailer*,[76] *Gullah/Geechee People*,[77] and many others. However, some videos do give a hint at what the Gullah language might be today (or might have been) and at whether or not it is used self-consciously. The videos *Gullah Culture Presentation*[78] and *Gullah 101*,[79] for instance, are both recorded on Boone Hall Plantation (in Charleston, South

[75] Raymond Hickey, ed., *Legacies of Colonial English. Studies in Transported Dialects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[76] *Gullah Doc Trailer* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCYBf-1yHmI>.

[77] *Gullah/Geechee People* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lBzkFjdJrQ>.

[78] *Gullah Culture Presentation* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDIb8SGQd3s>.

[79] *Gullah 101* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGcWNI6TyXg>.

Carolina), one of America's oldest working and living plantations, where guided tours are organized to let visitors experience what plantation life was like: they both feature live presentations with 'performers' seemingly speaking in Gullah, to the extent that some of the comments to one of the videos in particular express the viewers' (partial or total) inability to understand what the performer is saying.

Gullah 101
Dude speaking **Gullah** at the Boone Hall plantation in Charleston, South Carolina.

The only reason I can half-way understand is because of growing up around some of my Jamaican relatives. I was surprised to see how close Gullah is to Jamaican Patwa. You even use some of the terms like unna and ooman.

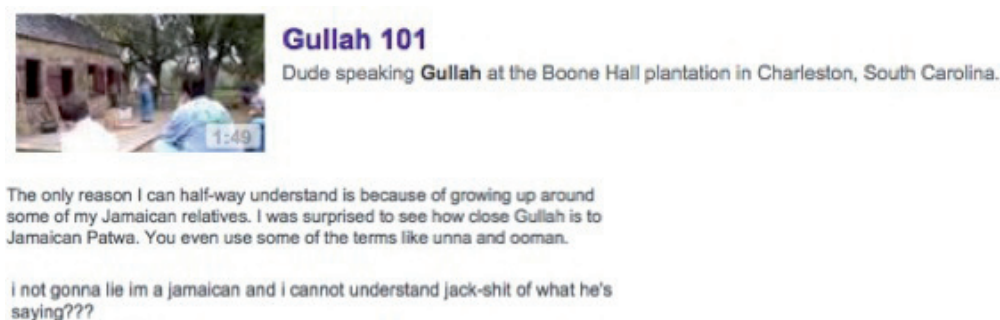i not gonna lie im a jamaican and i cannot understand jack-shit of what he's saying???

Fig. 9. Screenshot from a YouTube video

Other relevant videos on *YouTube* are *The Skin Quilt Project* (focused on the Africanisms in the Gullah/Geechee and African-American culture, and providing some examples of the differences between Gullah and English),[80] *Gullah/Geechee TV Nayshun Nyews with Queen Quet* (where Queen Quet interviews the co-founder of the Gullah/Geechee Nation International Music&Movement Festival switching from Gullah to English),[81] *A lesson in speaking Geechee* (which features a public meeting held during Sapelo Island Cultural Festival in 2011),[82] and the more recent *Speaking the Gullah and Geechee* (where Sista' Gal talks about the language while the viewer can read English subtitles on the screen).[83]

Monologues, performances and the interviews realised by Queen Quet seem to be the only videos (multimodally) recording some Gullah language on *YouTube*. However, in the attempt to find some oral evidence of the language, another research was carried out in search of conversations in Gullah as possibly emerging from the websites and archives of web-radios, their programmes and phone-in sessions. The Gullah Geechee Radio Network (GGRN "the voice of the Gullah/Geechee people") – offering live music and talk from the Sea Island culture of South Carolina – seems to use only English in its frequent promotional messages concerning a programme that is on air on Sunday afternoon discussing the problems faced by the black community in the US (messages that usually precede the last played music tracks).[84] Another important web-radio for the Gullah community is the Gullah/Geechee Riddim Radio[85] where Queen Quet discusses several initiatives to be launched to continue to promote the heritage of the community, to protect human rights, or to provide details on celebrations going on in the area. In the one-hour programme she hosts, she usually starts speaking in Gullah and later switches to English for those who do not understand Gullah but want to share information about the Gullah-Geechee Nation (her choice of code depending on the effects she tries to achieve and the functions

[80] *The Skin Quilt Project* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spN8piH-wDA>.

[81] *Gullah/Geechee TV Nayshun Nyews with Queen Quet* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpIGUO_6RWk > .

[82] *A Lesson in Speaking Geechee* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9p8-o7_j69M>.

[83] *Speaking the Gullah and Geechee* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQLHrHqxy6g>.

[84] *Gullah/Geechee Radio Network* <http://www.gullah-radio-network.com/>. The information about the language used in the promotional messages is limited to the occasions in which the web-radio was followed for the purposes of this article.

[85] *Gullah/Geechee Riddim Radio* <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/gullahgeechee>.

she tries to perform). In both cases, no phone-in sessions could actually be found.

Unfortunately, what emerges from the research carried out for this study is that conversations in Gullah currently seem to be lacking online; something which does not imply, of course, that the language is not employed in everyday face to face interactions, nor indeed, that there does not exist a web-radio where live phone-ins in Gullah do occur. However, the fact that a concerted search has not found any for the moment is itself still an important indicator of both Gullah's diffusion and the modes in which it is to be found, in different online contexts. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence of spontaneous, everyday use of Gullah on the web, those who are interested in hearing the language can still 'experience' it to some degree on the Web.

Conclusion

Although the predominant use of English in most of the online communicative interactions concerning Gullah in websites, blogs, forums, and social networks, raises some doubts regarding the true viability[86] of the Gullah language and the degree or type of procedural or declarative knowledge of the language – be it active or passive – that the community members and internet users have, Gullah certainly has a social, political and affective significance (connected to the fact that it is the carrier of a community's cultural identity) but, most of all, it appears to have a symbolic importance. The Internet seems to allow members of the Gullah community to project and manage their own identity, by creating a (new) self in the virtual reality (through blogs, forums, and social networks), by offering infinite possibilities of self-representation to its members (apart from the language they choose to use, be it English, Gullah or a 'Gullah-flavoured' English).[87]

Whether the language is 'alive', 'endangered', or 'dying', the term is perhaps only partially applicable to Gullah, insofar as it is probably, at least, "mythically alive"[88] – as shown by its cultural vitality that appears at present to be superior to its linguistic vitality on the Web.

Far from having exclusively informational and referential purposes, the texts *about* the Gullah community, culture and language (even if not *in* Gullah) express strong affective and emotional meanings. Such texts can be regarded as 'acts of identity' (using Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's words), inscribing an extremely powerful sense of identity and belonging, and uncovering the community's social and ethnic solidarity and cooperation through their use of language: "Linguistic behaviour [can be seen] as a series of acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles".[89] A language variety can thus be said to play a complex role in establishing the relationships within social and regional communities, since it becomes a marker of group identity. Within the Gullah community, this kind of identity marker is probably stronger among older generations that possibly do speak the full language in their homesteads or when they speak with other members of the community who have always lived in the

[86] In order to be able to investigate the viability of the language, some local fieldwork would be necessary, which is, however, beyond the scope of this study that exclusively focuses on the presence of the Gullah language on the Web.

[87] Thanks to Jocelyne Vincent for suggesting the metaphor of a 'Gullah-flavoured' language and, most of all, for her invaluable support, guidance and patience while editing this article.

[88] Poet and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney suggests that Irish Gaelic is only mythically alive, but it can still serve the purpose of promoting political and cultural nationalism (Heaney cit. in McCrum, Cran and MacNeil, *The Story of English*, 177).

[89] Robert Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller, *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 14.

Gullah areas. The fact that, since the 1960s, tourist and resort development on the Sea Islands has threatened to push Gullahs off the family lands they have owned since they gained freedom, has also caused a sense of nostalgia in the elderly and the displaced who have left the area to find a job in the urban centres. Gullah is the language that was spoken at the time of slavery and after its abolition and it is what they have spoken all their lives too; perceiving it as being partly American and partly African, older generations feel they pay homage to their African roots when speaking it. As Janey Hunter, a native speaker of Gullah living on the Sea Islands, said while being interviewed for the video series *The Story of English*: "I ain't ashame of myself. ... I can speak different language all right but I still speak Gullah language. ... Of course it's not all American, part is African. Because I believe that was our home, Africa. That's where all this language come from".[90]

In the struggle to preserve and promote the Gullah identity through language and culture, the community has undergone a process of change that has gradually extended its boundaries towards also becoming a cyber community, a Web community whose population of Net-users creates a significant network for communicative practices. The concept of practice appears fundamental in relation to the idea of 'community of practice' applied in linguistic contexts: while pursuing their interest, engaging in a collective process in a shared domain of human endeavour, the members of a community of practice develop a repertoire of resources and practices based on their common commitment. In the case of Gullah, indeed, the Net offers evidence of countless efforts to bring some interest back and to get the people active, using modern forms of communication, something which is certainly remarkable and worth noting. New communication technologies such as those provided by the Internet, on the Web in particular, have extended the reach of interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, and the increasing flow of information has expanded the possibilities to form a community, and has also called for new kinds of communities based on shared practices.[91] The Gullah community seems to be experimenting novel ways to survive and thrive in the 21st century, pursuing linguistic and cultural preservation whatever channel it may take. Newer generations are tentatively searching new ways to get a sense of their identity as it develops over time, to shape and re-vitalize a fluid 'Gullah self' that is in a constant process of (online and offline) formation and reformation, and the Gullah language seems to be instrumental in this process of re-vitalization. Whether or not the language itself will be able to (re-)gain viability across domains and functions, and be re-vitalized beyond symbolic or mythical vitality is another open question.

[90] See the episode 6, "Black on White" in *The Story of English* (the nine-part television series produced by the BBC in 1986, and released after the book written by MacNeil, McCrum, and Cran), in particular from 9:35 to 10:40.

[91] See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, and <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>.