



---

Volume 3

Issue 1 (N)WAVES and MEANS: A selection of  
papers from NWAVE 24

Article 6

---

1-1-1996

## Past Marking in Gullah

Tracey L. Weldon

---

## Past Marking in Gullah

# Past Marking in Gullah

Tracey L. Weldon  
North Carolina State University

## 1 Introduction

Through the years, there has been a considerable amount of discussion in the literature about decreolization in Gullah, particularly as it relates to the history of African-American Vernacular English.<sup>1</sup> Studies such as Stewart 1968, Dillard 1972, and Rickford 1974 have argued that examinations of decreolization in Gullah might reveal a continuation of the process which earlier gave rise to AAVE. Yet with the exception of a few quantitative studies such as Nichols 1976, Jones-Jackson 1978, and Mille 1990 relatively little is known about how the process of decreolization is manifested in Gullah through variation. In this paper, I explore variation in the marking of past temporal reference in the Gullah mesolect, with a focus on the variation between zero marking and past inflection in past contexts.<sup>2</sup>

### Unmarked Verb

1. The long cotton was a penny, but the short cotton you *get* two cent.  
*The long cotton was a penny, but [for] the short cotton you got two cents.*

### Past Inflected Verb

2. But when it *started*, I didn't born yet.  
*But when it started, I hadn't been born yet.*

Variation between zero marking and past inflection has been the focus of a number of investigations in AAVE and various intermediate creole continua situations. My study is guided particularly by the analyses of Fasold 1972 on AAVE, Patrick 1991 on Jamaican Creole, and Winford 1992 on Trinidadian Creole. I compare my findings with the results from these studies to determine what implications can be made concerning the AAVE-Gullah relationship, as well as the relationship between mesolectal Gullah and other intermediate creole varieties.

## 2 The Speaker Sample

The data for this study were drawn from 10 hours of conversation that I recorded during the summers of 1993 and 1994 in McClellanville, John's Island, and St. Helena's Island, South Carolina. The speakers that I recorded were all native to their respective communities, and most had spent no significant time outside of these areas. In total, 22

---

<sup>1</sup> I extend my thanks to Walt Wolfram for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. I accept full responsibility for any remaining errors.

<sup>2</sup> Preverbal markers such as *been* and *had* are also used in Gullah to mark events or situations with anteriority. However, their interaction with zero marking and past inflection in past contexts will be left for a later analysis.

speakers were recorded, the majority of whom were women ranging in age from 60 to 80 years old. Table 1 shows the distribution of these speakers by age and gender.

	Female	Male	
14-25	3	4	
60-80	11	3	
100+	1	-	
Totals	15	+7	=22

**Table 1. Distribution of speakers by age and gender**

Among the 14-25 year old age group, all of the speakers were students attending local high schools with the exception of one 25 year old male who had received his high school diploma and was working in forestry and bridge construction. In the 60-80 year old age bracket, the men were all farmers and most of the women, including the 104 year old, were no longer working but had previously held such positions as nannies, cooks, and housekeepers. None of the adults had obtained more than a grade school education. The neighborhoods in which these speakers live range from lower working class to lower middle class communities. They are among the least remote of the Gullah-speaking areas. McClellanville is located on the mainland, less than an hour's drive south of Georgetown. John's Island is connected by bridge to Charleston. And St. Helena's Island is connected by bridge to Beaufort. It is likely, therefore, that a more mesolectal variety of Gullah is spoken in these areas than on more remote islands.

### 3 Past Marking Variation in Gullah

#### 3.1 Linguistic Factors

Table 2 shows the distribution of zero marked and past inflected verbs in the Gullah data.

	Number of tokens	Percentages
Unmarked Verbs	616	49
Past Inflected Verbs	650	51
Totals	1,266	100

**Table 2. Distribution of zero marked and past inflected verbs in past contexts**

These figures show that there is a fairly even distribution of unmarked and past inflected verbs in the Gullah data, with a slight preference for past inflection. In previous studies, it has been shown that this variation is influenced by three primary linguistic constraints—verb type, preceding phonological environment, and following phonological environment. I considered the effects of these three factors on the Gullah data to determine whether there was any significant influence on the distribution shown in Table 2.

For the verb type constraint, I analyzed five subclasses of verbs, shown in Table 3.

Categories <sup>a</sup>	Examples
ED (stems ending in t/d)	<i>start/started, fade/faded</i>
VD (stems ending in vowel/glide)	<i>die/died, apply/applied</i>
CD (stems ending in cons. other than t/d)	<i>pass/passed, move/moved</i>
DM (past marking by ablaut/affixation)	<i>leave/left, tell/told</i>
IRR (all other irregular verbs)	<i>give/gave, go/went</i>

<sup>a</sup>Category headings are adopted from Patrick 1991

**Table 3. Verb type categories**

These categories and the verbs assigned to them more-or-less resemble those in Fasold's, Patrick's, and Winford's studies, cited earlier. There is some inconsistency, however, in the treatment of certain high frequency irregular verbs in these studies. In Patrick's study, *be, do, have, go,* and *say* are all excluded from the analysis to avoid the possibility of their high frequencies skewing the quantitative results. Winford's study excludes only *have, go,* and *say*. And Fasold's study seems to exclude only tokens of *be*. For comparative purposes, I considered two sets of tabulations for the Gullah data—one in which I included all five verbs in the overall count and another in which I excluded them. Table 4 shows the results of the first set of tabulations, along with a breakdown of the figures for each high frequency verb.<sup>3</sup>

Verb Type	No. Unmarked/ Total	% Unmarked
ED	27/38	71
VD	29/44	66
CD	116/158	73
DM	68/74	92
IRR <sup>a</sup>	376/952	40
<i>have</i>	16/123	13
<i>go</i>	12/51	24
<i>say</i>	88/115	77
<i>be</i>	38/189	20
<i>do</i>	20/159	13

<sup>a</sup>Includes all five high frequency verbs

**Table 4. Effects of verb type on zero marking in past contexts in Gullah**

Note in Table 4 that IRR verbs are the most frequently marked verbs in the data, showing only 40% zero marking, compared to the other four verb type categories, which range in zero marking from 66% to 92%. This distinction in the marking of IRR verbs may be a result of the fact that, with the exception of *say*, all of the high frequency verbs in this category are also frequently marked verbs, ranging from 13% to 24% in zero marking.

<sup>3</sup> At this stage, these and other figures presented in this paper represent only raw percentages. A more rigorous statistical analysis will be performed at a later time, in order to determine the corresponding factor weights for these figures and the statistical significance of the factor groups tested.

Table 5 compares these findings with the results reported for AAVE, Jamaican Creole, and Trinidadian Creole.

	ED	VD	CD	DM	IRR
Gullah	71 <sup>a</sup>	66	73	92	40 <sup>b</sup>
AAVE (Fasold 1972)	-	27	44	-	2 <sup>c</sup>
TC (Winford 1992)	53	51	74	45	45 <sup>d</sup>
JC (Patrick 1991)	52	50	80	57	70 <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in the table represent rounded percentages

<sup>d</sup>Excludes *have*, *go*, and *say*

<sup>b</sup>Excludes no high frequency verbs

<sup>e</sup>Excludes all five high frequency verbs

<sup>c</sup>Excludes *be*

**Table 5. Comparative effects of verb type on zero marking**

Note in Table 5 that IRR verbs are among the most frequently marked verbs in Gullah, AAVE, and Trinidadian Creole, but among the least frequently marked in Jamaican Creole. This pattern appears to be a result of the fact that the Jamaican Creole figures are the only ones in which all five high frequency verbs are excluded from the analysis. Table 6 compares these figures again, but with the high frequency verbs excluded from the Gullah count.

	ED	VD	CD	DM	IRR
Gullah	71 <sup>a</sup>	66	73	92	64 <sup>b</sup>
AAVE (Fasold 1972)	-	27	44	-	2 <sup>c</sup>
TC (Winford 1992)	53	51	74	45	45 <sup>d</sup>
JC (Patrick 1991)	52	50	80	57	70 <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in the table represent rounded percentages

<sup>d</sup>Excludes *have*, *go*, and *say*

<sup>b</sup>Excludes all five high frequency verbs

<sup>e</sup>Excludes all five high frequency verbs

<sup>c</sup>Excludes *be*

**Table 6. Comparative effects of verb type on zero marking**

While IRR verbs are still the most frequently marked verbs among the Gullah verb type categories, excluding the high frequency verbs significantly raises the percentage of zero marking in this category, making the figures more similar to Jamaican Creole. It is clear, therefore, that these verbs do skew the IRR verb results. Note also that by removing the five high frequency verbs from the overall count, the percentage of past inflected verbs also drops considerably, compared to the figures presented earlier in Table 2.

With or without the high frequency verbs included in the IRR category, there is a considerable difference in the marking of the two irregular verb categories (DM and IRR). In contrast to the IRR verbs, DM verbs are the least marked of all five verb types in the Gullah data. For this category of verbs, a change in vowel quality was considered to be sufficient evidence of past marking. Thus verbs such as *keep* were considered unmarked, while verbs such as *kept* or *kep* were counted as marked. Overall, the DM verbs were

almost categorically unmarked. It is difficult to compare these results with Fasold's percentages for AAVE, because the DM verb figures are not provided in his study.

	Number of tokens	Percentages
Unmarked Verbs	442	70
Past Inflected Verbs	187	30
Totals	629	100

**Table 7. Distribution of zero marked and past inflected verbs without the five high frequency verbs**

However, neither of the other two creole varieties show such drastic distinctions in the marking of DM as opposed to IRR verbs as found in the Gullah data. Gullah thus seems to behave differently from these varieties in its marking of irregular verbs.

Among the regular verbs, however, Gullah resembles the other three varieties in showing the least past marking with CD verbs (i.e., verbs whose stems end in consonants other than *t* or *d*). Past marking of these verbs results in the formation of word-final consonant clusters, which may or may not be variably influenced by phonological constraints. Figure 1 represents a hierarchy from Labov 1989, illustrating the effects of preceding phonological environment on *t/d* absence in AAVE and other American English varieties. This hierarchy summarizes the findings of Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, and Guy 1980, which all support the general consensus that the variable absence of final *t* or *d* in consonant clusters in English is the result of a deletion process that is influenced by phonological environment.

**Figure 1. Effects of preceding consonant on *t/d* deletion in English**  
(adapted from Labov 1989: 90)

/s/ > Stops > Nasals > Other Fricatives > Liquids  
More *t/d* deletion                      Less *t/d* deletion

To determine whether the past marking of CD verbs in the Gullah data was influenced by a similar hierarchy, I tested the effects of phonological environment on *t/d* absence with these verbs.

Preceding Environment	No. Unmarked/ Total	% Unmarked
Nasal	9/11	82
Stop	65/80	81
Fricative	3/4	75
Liquid	16/25	64
Sibilant	23/38	61

**Table 8. Effects of preceding phonological environment on *t/d* absence in Gullah (CD verbs only)**

Given the low numbers of tokens involved in these tabulations, particularly for nasals and fricatives, the figures in Table 8 may not provide the most reliable results. Note, however, that the Gullah pattern in Table 8 resembles the hierarchy in Figure 1 in showing that stops

and nasals favor *t/d* absence more than non-sibilant fricatives and liquids. The Gullah data differ from the English hierarchy, however, in that the sibilant constraint in Gullah shows the least zero marking, while sibilants in English are said to favor zero marking the most. Table 9 shows the effects of this constraint in Jamaican Creole.

Preceding Environment	% <i>t/d</i> absence
Sibilant	85
Stop	80
Fricative	75
Nasal	67
Lateral	58

**Table 9. Effects of preceding phonological environment on *t/d* absence in Jamaican Creole (Patrick 1991: 178)**

Compared to Figure 1, the Jamaican Creole pattern is closer to the English hierarchy than the Gullah pattern. The only difference between the English and Jamaican Creole results is the ordering of fricatives and nasals. Patrick concludes that preceding phonological environment has a "regular and significant" effect on *t/d* absence in Jamaican Creole. He argues that "this is strong confirmation that *t/d* deletion is at work in the JC continuum and is governed by sonority" (1991: 179). The Gullah data, by contrast, show no clear evidence of being governed by a sonority hierarchy. In fact, there appears to be no logical phonetic explanation for the pattern that emerges in Table 8.

The results for following phonological environment are shown in Table 10. Note here that Gullah speakers mark verbs for past tense less when the following segment is a vowel or consonant than when the following segment is a pause.

Following Environment	No. Unmarked/ Total	% Unmarked
Vowel	44/57	77
Consonant	57/76	75
Pause	15/25	60

**Table 10. Effects of following phonological environment on *t/d* absence in Gullah (CD verbs only)**

Fasold 1972 tested these same constraints for zero marking in AAVE and reported the results shown in Table 11.

Note in Fasold's data that following vowels strongly favor past tense marking, while following consonants and pauses strongly favor zero marking. These results are strikingly different from the pattern reported for Gullah, where there appears to be little difference in the effect of vowels as opposed to consonants. A comparison of these findings with the general English hierarchy shown in Figure 2 shows that following consonants generally tend to favor *t/d* absence while following vowels tend to favor *t/d* presence, as reported by Fasold.



Following Environment	% Unmarked <sup>a</sup>
Vowel	29
Consonant	76
Pause	73

<sup>a</sup>All percentages have been rounded

**Table 11. Effects of following phonological environment on /t/d absence in AAVE (bimorphemic clusters only)**  
(Fasold 1972: 67)

**Figure 2. Effects of following phonological environment on /t/d deletion in English<sup>4</sup>** (adapted from Labov 1989: 90)

Obstruents > Liquids > Glides > Vowels > Pause
More /t/d deletion                      Less /t/d deletion

Note in Table 12 that the Jamaican Creole data reveal a hierarchy similar to that reported for English.

Following Environment	% /t/d absence
Vowel	63
Consonant <sup>a</sup>	88
Pause	71

<sup>a</sup>Glides and /r/ were counted separately in Patrick's study

**Table 12. Effects of following phonological environment in Jamaican Creole** (Patrick 1991: 181)

Gullah, therefore, seems to differ from these other varieties in that the data do not reveal any significant influence from the following or preceding phonological environment. If past marking of CD verbs were part of the underlying Gullah grammar, one might expect to find a correlation between the patterns of /t/d absence and phonological environment which would suggest that a process of deletion was at work. Given the absence of such evidence in these data, it appears that there is instead a process of insertion at work in the marking of CD verbs.

The testing of these three linguistic constraints shows that zero marking in Gullah is generally preferred to past inflection, with the exception of four high frequency IRR verbs (*have, go, be, and do*), which show exceptionally high percentages of past inflection. DM verbs are near categorically zero marked. And CD verbs, which are the least frequently marked among the regular verbs, do not appear to be significantly influenced by phonological environment. These findings suggest that past marking is not part of the

<sup>4</sup> Guy (1980) has shown that the influence of pauses tends to vary arbitrarily from dialect to dialect.

underlying Gullah grammar, but is instead inserted with influence from morphological constraints. The insertion of past marking in Gullah is most advanced with IRR verbs and least advanced with DM verbs, with the marking of regular verbs falling somewhere in-between.

### 3.2 Social Factors

To determine whether social factors played a role in this process of insertion, I considered the effects of age and gender on past marking variability in Gullah. Table 13 shows the results of this investigation.

	Male	Female	Age Subtotals
14-25	6/19 (32%)	5/11 (45%)	11/30 (37%)
60-80	59/157 (38%)	537/1044 (51%)	596/1201 (50%)
100+	-	9/35 (26%)	9/35 (26%)
<i>Gender Subtotals</i>	65/176 (37%)	551/1090 (51%)	

**Table 13. Effects of age and gender on zero marking in Gullah**

While the distinctions between the factors for age and gender are not great, the general patterns that emerge are quite interesting. Note in the gender category that the male speakers marked verbs for past tense slightly more than the female speakers did. If we interpret the synchronic variation between zero marking and past marking as a sign of the gradual incorporation of the past tense marker into the Gullah grammar, these findings suggest that male speakers in the sample are slightly further along in this process of incorporation than are female speakers. This is actually the opposite of the pattern reported by Nichols in her 1976 study of variation in the use of complementizers, prepositions, and pronouns in Gullah. According to Nichols, males generally showed the most reluctance to incorporating English forms into their grammar. One possible explanation for the different results found in my study may be that the older males, in their work as farmers, were more exposed to English than the older females, whose occupations as nannies, housekeepers, and cooks tended to keep them closer to home. It is less clear, however, why the younger male speakers used more past marking in their speech than the younger females.

The results in the age category are even more puzzling. A comparison of the 14-25 year old age group with the 60-80 year old group reveals an expected pattern, with younger speakers showing less zero marking than older speakers. This pattern would suggest that younger speakers are the more innovative group in their incorporation of past marking into the Gullah grammar. However, the data from the 104 year old speaker shows an even lower rate of zero marking than that exhibited by the 14-25 year olds. Note in Table 14 that the verbs that this speaker marks most often are irregular verbs in the IRR category, which, as noted earlier, are the most frequently marked verbs in my data.

The low rate of zero marking in this person's speech may thus be a simple consequence of the fact that she used a large number of high frequency irregular verbs. The fact that this speaker has these marked verbs in her grammar, however, may suggest that older Gullah was not as basilectal as traditionally believed. Or it may suggest that a continuum of Gullah varieties has been in existence from early on, and this speaker may simply have acquired a more mesolectal variety from the very beginning.

	Male 14-25	Female 14-25	Male 60-80	Female 60-80	Female 100+
ED	0/0 (0%)	0/0 (0%)	6/7 (86%)	21/31 (68%)	0/0 (0%)
VD	1/3 (33%)	0/0 (0%)	1/1 (100%)	26/39 (67%)	1/1 (100%)
CD	4/5 (80%)	0/0 (0%)	6/8 (50%)	104/141 (76%)	2/4 (50%)
DM	0/0 (0%)	2/2 (100%)	6/6 (100%)	58/64 (91%)	2/2 (100%)
IRR <sup>a</sup>	1/11 (9%)	3/9 (33%)	40/135 (30%)	328/769 (43%)	4/28 (14%)

<sup>a</sup>Includes all five high frequency verbs

**Table 14. Linguistic and social constraints on zero marking in past contexts in Gullah**

#### 4 Summary and Conclusions

Among the three linguistic constraints tested, verb type had the most significant effect on past marking variation in the Gullah data. The Gullah figures resemble AAVE, Trinidadian Creole, and Jamaican Creole in marking CD verbs the least among the regular verbs. In the Gullah data, however, the low rate of past marking with CD verbs does not appear to be significantly affected by the preceding and following phonological environments. A comparison of the overall rates of zero marking in the four varieties shows that the Gullah figures are noticeably higher than those reported for AAVE but more-or-less comparable to those reported for Trinidadian and Jamaican Creole. The only noticeable difference in the rates of zero marking among the creole varieties considered is the near-categorical zero marking of DM verbs in the Gullah data. Given these results, it appears that past inflection is not the vernacular norm in the Gullah mesolect. Instead, it is variably inserted, with influence from morphological constraints. By contrast, the general consensus on AAVE is that past marking is part of the underlying grammar, but is subject to variable deletion based on both morphological and phonological constraints. Note, however, that in both AAVE and Gullah, IRR verbs are the most frequently marked verbs. And in both varieties, CD verbs are the least frequently marked of the regular verbs. Given these similarities in the verb type hierarchies, it could be argued that Gullah is simply less advanced than AAVE in its incorporation of past marking, but is undergoing a similar process to that which AAVE underwent at an earlier period. This is essentially the conclusion that Winford draws in his analysis of the Trinidadian data, noting that "the BEV distribution is consistent with the view that a similar pattern of insertion took place in earlier stages of this language, but advanced much further than in TE [Trinidadian English]" (1992: 329). Jamaican Creole seems to fall in-between AAVE and the other two creoles in its advancement of this process. While the rates of past marking in Jamaican Creole are more comparable to Gullah and Trinidadian English, the influence of phonological environment on the marking of CD verbs approaches the English hierarchy and leads Patrick to conclude that deletion rather than insertion is at work in the Jamaican Creole mesolect.

This study represents only an introduction to variability in past marking in Gullah. Future investigations may take into account the range of variability between preverbal anterior markers and their interaction with zero marking and past inflection in past contexts (see fn 1). One may consider the effects of predicate stativity and verbal aspect, both of which have been found in other studies to play a role in the transition from anterior marking to past marking in decreolizing varieties. And consideration may be given to past marking

variability in English as a second language, as discussed in studies such as Wolfram and Hatfield 1984, Wolfram 1985, and Bayley 1991, to determine whether these situations reveal any parallels to the decreolization process in creole varieties such as Gullah. This study lays the groundwork for such investigations by providing a sense of what factors are involved in past marking variation in Gullah and where Gullah stands in relation to other varieties, as far as this variation is concerned.

## References

- Bayley, Robert J. (1991). *Variation theory and second language learning: Linguistic and social constraints on interlanguage tense marking*. Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University.
- Dillard, Joe L. (1972). *Black English: Its history and usage in the United States* (New York: Random House).
- Fasold, Ralph (1972). *Tense marking in Black English: A linguistic and social analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics).
- Guy, Gregory (1980). "Variation in the group and the individual: The case of final stop deletion," in William Labov, ed., *Locating Language in Time and Space* (New York: Academic), 1-36.
- Jones-Jackson, Patricia (1978). *The status of Gullah: An investigation of convergent processes*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Labov, William (1989). "The child as linguistic historian." *Language Variation and Change* 1: 85-97.
- Labov, William, P. Cohen, C. Robins and J. Lewis (1968). *A study of the non-standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican speakers in New York City (Cooperative Research Project 3288). Vols. I and II*. (Philadelphia: U.S. Regional Survey).
- Mille, Katherine W. (1990). *An historical analysis of tense-mood-aspect in Gullah Creole: A case of stable variation*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Carolina.
- Nichols, Patricia (1976). *Linguistic change in Gullah: sex, age, and mobility*. Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University.
- Patrick, Peter (1991). "Creoles at the intersection of variable processes: -t,d deletion and past marking in the Jamaican mesolect." *Language Variation and Change* 3: 171-189.
- Rickford, John (1974). "The insights of the mesolect." *Pidgins and creoles: Current trends and prospects* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press), 92-117.
- Stewart, William (1968). "Continuity and change in American Negro dialects." *The Florida FL reporter* 6: 3-4, 14-16, 18.
- Winford, Donald (1992). "The BEV/Creole Connection Revisited." *Language Variation and Change* 4: 311-357.
- Wolfram, Walt (1969). *A sociolinguistic description of Detroit Negro English*. (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics).
- Wolfram, Walt (1985). "Variability in tense marking: a case for the obvious." *Language Learning* 35:229-253.
- Wolfram, Walt and Deborah Hatfield (1984). *Tense marking in second language learning: Patterns of spoken and written English in a Vietnamese community* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics).