VI. LINGUISTIC RESEARCH AND AFRICAN SURVIVALS

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In the study of African survivals in New World culture the linguist, like the ethnologist, has certain large handicaps to overcome. In the first place, there is the insistence on the part of a large number of people, including many authorities on language, that no African linguistic survivals are to be found among New World Negroes. Inasmuch as my own research in this field during the past few years has been concerned with the speech of Negroes in the United States, especially with respect to African survivals, my remarks will be directed toward this aspect of the problem. I shall read a few quotations from the writings of some of those American students of language, and of a few other writers, who are responsible for this wide-spread but mistaken impression.

Ambrose E. Gonzales, who edited several volumes of Gullah stories, and whose interpretations and reproductions of Gullah have been generally accepted as accurate, says that “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. . . . As the small vocabulary of the jungle atrophied through disuse and was soon forgotten, the contribution to the language made by the Gullah Negro is insignificant, except through the transformation wrought upon a large body of borrowed English words.” (The Black Border, pp. 17–18). Gonzales then published what was taken to be a complete glossary of Gullah. This contains about 1700 words, most of which are English words misspelled to indicate the Negro’s mispronunciation. The other words in the glossary that are in reality African terms have been interpreted as English words which the Negro was unable to pronounce. For instance, the English phrase *done for fat* is given as being used by the Gullahs to mean *excessively fat* (the assumption being that in the judgment of the Gullah Negro when a person is very fat he is done for). But if Gonzales had had enough training in phonetics to reproduce the word accurately, it would have been *dáfa*, which is the Gullah word for *fat*, and if he had looked into a dictionary of the Vai
language, spoken in Liberia, or consulted a Vai informant, he would have found that the Vai word for fat is dafa (\(\sim\)* literally, mouth full.

Many other items in Gonzales' glossary which, because of his lack of acquaintance with the vocabulary of certain African languages, he interprets as English, are in reality African words. Among other Gullah expressions which he or other American writers have interpreted as English, but which are African, are the Mende suwagga (\(\sim\), to be proud (explained by Gonzales as being a corruption of the English swagger); the Wolof tir, small (taken by Gonzales to be an abbreviated form of the English little, in spite of the fact that the Gullah also uses little when he wishes to); the Wolof bay (banj, bonj), tooth (explained by the Americans as a corruption of bone); the Twi fa, to take (explained by the Americans as a corruption of the English for); the Wolof fut, to be nude (assumed by the Americans to be the English foot); the Wolof d3ogol, to rise—used in Gullah in the term d3ogol goard, rise-up board, seesaw (explained by the Americans as juggling board); the Mende loni (\(\sim\), stands, is standing (explained by the Americans as a corruption of the English alone, said of a child who is beginning to walk—Mende taloni (\(\sim\), he is standing, Gullah iloni, he is standing; in Mende i loni (\(\sim\)) means he is not standing; etc.

Apparently influenced by Gonzales' interpretation of Gullah, the late Professor Krapp of Columbia University, author of many publications on the American language and considered an authority in this field, without having acquainted himself either with Gullah or with any of the African languages spoken in those sections of the West Coast from which the Negroes were brought to the United States as slaves, writes in this fashion regarding Gullah: "The Gullah dialect is a very much simplified form of English, with cases, numbers, genders, tenses reduced almost to the vanishing point. . . . Very little of the dialect, however, perhaps none of it, is derived from sources other than English. In vocabulary, in syntax, and pronunciation, practically all of the

*Indication of tone, an important element in African languages is as follows: (\(\sim\)) high, (\(\sim\)) middle, (\(\sim\)) low; (1) high to low, etc.

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forms of Gullah can be explained on the basis of English, and probably only a little deeper delving would be necessary to account for those characteristics that still seem strange and mysterious.” “Generalizations are always dangerous,” he continues, “but it is reasonably safe to say that not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or Negro syntax can be proved to have other than an English origin.” (“The English of the Negro”, *American Mercury*, June, 1924). Mr. H. L. Mencken, in the 1937 edition of *The American Language*, says that the Negroes have inherited no given-names from their African ancestors and that the native languages of the Negro slaves seem to have left few marks upon the American language (pp. 112, 523). On one Georgia island alone, St. Simons, near Brunswick, I have collected more than three thousand African words that are used as given-names. So far as I know, Mencken never made any inquiries of the Gullahs concerning their given-names.

Dr. Reed Smith, of the University of South Carolina, says: “What the Gullahs seem to have done was to take a sizeable part of the English vocabulary as spoken on the coast by the white inhabitants from about 1700 on, wrap their tongues around it, and reproduce it changed in tonality, pronunciation, cadence, and grammar to suit their native phonetic tendencies, and their existing needs of expression and communication. The result has been called by one writer, ‘the worst English in the world.’ It would certainly seem to have a fair claim to that distinction.” “There are,” he continues, “curiously few survivals of native African words in Gullah, a fact that has struck most students of the language”; and he lists about twenty words which he thinks may be African in origin, though he cites no parallels for them in African languages. *(Gullah*, pp. 22, 32). Dr. Guy B. Johnson, contributing one of the chapters in T. J. Wooster’s *Black Yeomanry*, is of practically the same opinion as Smith. He says: “There are older Negroes in the Sea Islands who speak in such a way that a stranger would have to stay around them several weeks before he could understand them and converse with them to his satisfaction. But this strange dialect turns out to be little more than the peasant English of two centuries ago, modified to suit the
needs of the slaves. From Midland and Southern England came
planters, artisans, shopkeepers, indentured servants, all of whom
had more or less contact with the slaves, and the speech of these
poorer white folk was so rustic that their more cultured coun-
trymen had difficulty in understanding them. From this peasant
speech and from the ‘baby talk’ used by masters in addressing
them, the Negroes developed that dialect, sometimes known as
Gullah, which remains the characteristic feature of the culture of
the Negroes of coastal South Carolina and Georgia. . . . The
grammar of the dialect is a simplified English grammar taken over
from the speech of the poorer whites. . . . The use of many ar-
chaic English words no doubt contributes to the belief held in
some quarters that the sea island Negroes use many African
words.” (pp. 49–51). It should be noted, however, in fairness to
the writers whose views on Gullah have just been quoted, that the
Gullah Negro when talking to strangers is likely to use speech
that for the most part is English in vocabulary, being different in
this respect from his speech when he talks to his associates and to
the members of his family. My first phonograph recordings of
the speech of the Gullah Negroes contain fewer African words by
far than those made when I was no longer a stranger to them. One
has to live among them to know their speech well.

So much, then, for this first handicap that faces the linguist
studying African survivals in American Negro speech. I doubt
that scholars studying African linguistic survivals in other parts
of the New World will find this handicap so great as those working
in America. I should think that in Brazil, for example, it would be
taken for granted that there are such survivals.

Another handicap that affects the linguist, as well as the eth-
nologist studying African survivals in the New World, is the lack of
adequate historical documents relating to the importation of
slaves to the New World. This handicap is apparently much
greater for scholars working in Brazil than for those working
elsewhere in the New World. For those of us who have been
working in the United States, the work of Professor Elizabeth
Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade
to America, has been most helpful. With the aid of this work I
was able to decide upon what West African languages I should study in preparation for my work in the United States; and thus far a fairly high correlation has been revealed between the number of slaves reported as coming to South Carolina and Georgia from certain sections on the West Coast, and the number of West African words I have found surviving in Gullah from the languages of those sections. We need more such studies.

A third handicap that the linguist must face is the lack of adequate ethnological studies of the different tribes on the West Coast. We are fortunate in having such an excellent work as Dr. Herskovits’ two-volume study of tribal life in Dahomey. W. D. Hambly’s analysis of tribal life among the Ovimbundu in Agola, and H. Labouret’s study of the Mandingoes have also been helpful to me; and I shall be happy to have available the findings of the field-work done by Dr. Bascom and Dr. Greenberg of Northwestern on certain tribes in Nigeria, the Yoruba and Hausa. Similar studies are needed of the Wolof, Bambara, Mende, Vai, Twi, Ga, Fanti, Temne, Susu, Kongo, Mandinka, the Ibo and Efik tribes, the Fula, and others. I cannot emphasize enough the values of such studies to the linguist when properly done. Accurate descriptive data of this kind are important for any comparative work; they are especially important for one comparing African and New World linguistic phenomena, since the African’s speech is so perfectly an expression of his life in all of its phases. And I think that the most objective studies of this kind are to be expected from scholars on this side of the Atlantic and from the Africans themselves, rather than from European scholars.

Another very serious handicap which the linguist has to contend with is the lack of adequate grammars and dictionaries of the West African languages. Most of these that deal with languages spoken in British West Africa have been prepared by missionaries who have had little or no training in linguistics. Of course, there are exceptions, such as the work of Westermann, Ward, Melzian, Rapp, and of two or three Africans; but on the whole the available material is woefully inadequate. Much better work has been done on the languages of French West Africa, especially the work of Delafosse and Labouret, but there is much that needs to be
done here also. Such treatment should include an analysis of the sounds, intonation (this has been sadly neglected in the past), morphology, and syntax, a good dictionary (with the lexical tones of the words indicated), and an extensive collection of texts. Studies of languages on the West Coast that are not so well known might prove to be fruitful sources of much of the speech of New World Negroes, because of the way in which the slaves were seized before being imported to the New World, since even when we know the point of departure, we are not sure that the slaves spoke the language of that place. Indeed, it is probable that in most cases they did not. The study of vocabulary is especially important. I am convinced, for instance, that a great many Mende and Vai were sold on Harris Neck, Georgia, and on other plantations nearby, because most of the African words I have collected there are from these languages. Practically all of the African songs the Gullahs sing in this area are in one or the other of these two languages, as are the African words and phrases interspersed throughout the folk-tales. Likewise, there must have been a great many Kongos sold on St. Simons Island, Georgia. In many families on this island, the names of all the children are Kongo words. This is true also of many of the names of birds, animals, and plants.

Beginning with Angola and passing up the coast, I may briefly mention the languages which, appearing to have exerted the greatest influence on New World speech, need most to be given scholarly treatment. In Angola itself, Umbundu and Kimbundu, for our purpose, are greatly in need of such scholarly treatment. The Kimbundu Grammar of Chatelain (1889) needs to be brought up to date, and should include an analysis of the tones of the language. A good dictionary of this language is also needed. The same needs are indicated for Umbundu. The Rev. Wesley M. Stover's grammar of this language, published in 1885, is out of print. It needs to be revised and made to include an analysis of the tones of the language. Helen Stover's The Umbundu Language (Bailundu, 1918) I have not, as yet, had access to. Sanders and Fay's dictionary of this language (1885) is also out of print, and neither this nor Stover's dictionary includes the lexical tones of the words.
Amandus Johnson's *Mbundu English-Portuguese Dictionary* (Philadelphia, 1930) I have not seen. I am told that Dr. Merlin W. Ennis, who is now in the United States, has considerable linguistic data on Umbundu, which when published should be of great help to linguists working on New World language survivals. In a conversation I had recently with the Reverend H. C. McDowell, who spent eighteen years as a missionary in Umbundu country, I was told that the Umbundu influence on Brazilian culture is greater than has been supposed. He informs me that Angola calls itself the “Brazil of West Africa.” I believe that Brazilian scholars are inclined to the view that the Nigerian and Dahomean influence has probably been greater in Brazil than that of Angola.

I was interested to find in Dr. Arthur Ramos’ list of topics suggested for investigation the following: “Comparative Study of the Influence of Yoruba and Kimbundu on Portuguese,” and “African Languages Introduced into Brazil.”

For the Kongo language, the best linguistic work I know of is the Rev. W. Holman Bentley’s *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Languages*, published in London in 1887. It is an excellent book, but needs considerable revision. From the point of view of orthography it is easy to use, but it contains no information concerning the tones of the language. Texts in this language are also greatly needed.

In the Cross River region the important languages for our purpose are Ibo, Efik, and Ibibio, though there are others which, if studied, might throw light on the language situation in the New World, such as Ogoni, Andoni, Abua, and Bali. Dr. Ida C. Ward, Head of the Department of African Languages at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, has made an excellent analysis of the tones of Ibo and Efik—in my judgment the best study of this kind that has been done for any of the West African languages, though Melzián’s studies of tone in Bini and in Duala are also important. But good grammars of Ibo and Efik are needed. The grammar of Ibo by the Reverend J. Spencer, a native of Sierra Leone, is rather elementary, and R. F. G. Adams *A Modern Ibo Grammar* is also too sketchy to be of much value for our purpose. I know of no good dictionary of Ibo. *The Dic-
tionary of the Efik Language, by the Reverend Hugh Goldie, published in Edinburgh in 1900, is the best dictionary of Efik, but it is out of print; its orthography needs to be modernized, and it gives no information concerning the lexical tones of the words. It contains a brief grammar which needs to be expanded and treated on more scientific principles.

For material relating to the languages of Western Nigeria, Melzian’s Bini Dictionary and his Bini Grammar should be useful. So far as I know, there is no adequate Yoruba grammar or dictionary; that by the Reverend Samuel Crowther, a native, published in 1843 (later edition, 1852) is still, I believe, the best study that exists. The section on grammar is very brief and inadequate, and the tones of the words are not explained, while the orthography needs also to be modernized. Gaye and Beecroft’s Yoruba Grammar, which was published in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1914 (second edition, 1923), is brief, but does make an effort to indicate the tones—how accurately I am at present unable to say. Another dictionary of Yoruba was edited by the Reverend E. J. Sowande in 1911, but is out of print. A later work, Dictionary of the Yoruba Language (1913, 1931), published at Lagos by the C. M. S. Bookshop, makes an attempt to give the lexical tones of the words, and though brief, is useful. Apparently the best available linguistic works on Hausa are the Reverend G. P. Bargery’s Hausa-English Dictionary, and the English-Hausa Vocabulary, with Some Notes on the Hausa People and their Language, by D. Westermann; C. H. Robinson’s Dictionary of the Hausa Language, and the same author’s Hausa Grammar. There are also A Fulani-Hausa Phrase Book and A Fulani-Hausa Vocabulary by F. W. Taylor. Bargery’s work is quite voluminous and contains an explanation of the tones, though Mr. Greenberg of Northwestern University, I believe, is not greatly impressed with this part of the work.

The languages of Togo and Dahomey have been best treated in the works of Westermann and Delafosse. This included Westermann’s Ewe Dictionary and his Ewe Grammar, both of which are scientific in their treatment of the sounds and tones of the language. Delafosse’s Manuel Dahoméen contains no analysis of the tones of F₂, but is otherwise useful, though the dictionary is too brief to
be of any great value for our purpose. For the Gold Coast languages, we are well supplied with linguistic material in works such as Christaller's *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Twi*, Rapp's *Introduction to Twi*, and Balmer and Grant's *A Grammar of the Fante-Akan Language* which, however, does not indicate the tones; a dictionary of Ga is greatly needed. Grammars and dictionaries of the languages of Sierra Leone and Liberia that give information concerning tones are greatly needed in Vai, Mende, Temne, Gizi, and in some of the Kru dialects. Mrs. Aginsky's study of Mende, however, includes an analysis of the tones, and Dr. M. H. Watkins has begun a study of Vai which will include an analysis of the tones. Delafosse has written an excellent grammar and dictionary of Mandingo and its dialects, while Labouret's *Les Manding et leur Langue* is also useful. Bazin's *Dictionary of Bambara* is out of print, but is a very useful study and should be enlarged and revised.

It should be noted that most of these linguistic studies of West African languages which I have mentioned are not to be found in the libraries of the United States; fewer than ten per cent of them are in this country. Another point to be considered in this connection is the importance of encouraging West Africans to study in American colleges. Those from British West Africa prefer studying here to studying in London; and if means were available, many from French West Africa would study here rather than in Paris.

In investigating the speech of Negroes in the New World with respect to African survivals, it would seem to me that one might well begin with a number of descriptive regional studies, if the distribution of the Negroes calls for regional studies. There might also be descriptive studies based on social classes wherever conditions in a given locality warrant them. There will be less occasion for these in the United States than in the West Indies, Brazil, and some other areas of the New World. In the United States, the most fruitful sources of African linguistic survivals are naturally in the South, among ex-slaves and their descendants in regions where there has been a minimum of contact with white people, Coastal South Carolina and Georgia being especially fer-
tile. Other areas for work of this sort are Louisiana, southern Alabama and Mississippi, eastern Florida, eastern North Carolina, eastern Virginia, etc. Whatever historical data can be secured bearing on the earliest settlement of Negroes in these regions will be useful. It is well to select informants who are natives of the region, whose parents and grandparents were natives of the region, and who have had a minimum of contact elsewhere. In each region the greater number of the informants should be above sixty and with little or no education. Worksheets for interviews should be prepared that call for such information as will serve a study of the sounds, syntax, intonation, morphology, and vocabulary of the speech of the region. The worksheets should also call for life histories of each informant, and all responses to questions should be recorded in phonetic notation. Copious textual material should be collected on phonograph records. This might consist of folktales, proverbs, narratives of religious experience, sermons, secular and religious songs, invocations and prayers of the fetish cults wherever they exist, accounts of social and economic conditions among the informants, reminiscences of slavery, and any other data it is possible to collect. All of this will facilitate the study of the syntax, intonation, and morphology, and to a certain extent the sounds and vocabulary; but to secure an extensive vocabulary will require a special procedure. Such collections of descriptive linguistic material, secured from Negroes in different sections of the New World and properly organized, should serve as the basis for all comparative studies. Wherever ethnological studies of the Negroes have been made in a region—such, for instance, as Dr. Herskovits’ studies in Dutch Guiana and some of the work of Dr. Arthur Ramos in Brazil—the linguist’s problem in that region will be greatly facilitated. It is possible that a study of the speech of certain white persons in regions where contact between the races has been close will also reveal some African linguistic survivals.

On the whole, very little work on the speech of Negroes in the New World has so far been undertaken—that is, undertaken in a really scientific way. About three years ago, a phonetic analysis of the speech of Negroes in Guilford County, North Carolina, was