

Legacy: The vowel systems of Liberia's Englishes  
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African Americans settled on the West African coast in 1822, founding what became Liberia. The Settlers have never been more than 5% of Liberia's population, but the Settler elite formed an oligarchy whose control stood unchecked for 150 years, reduced only by a 1980 coup. The varieties of English spoken in Liberia today reflect the basic ethnic divide (Hancock 1974, Singler 1997). Liberian Settler English (LSE) descends from nineteenth-century African American English while Vernacular Liberian English (VLE) has its origin in the West African Pidgin English that arose in the eighteenth century.

The present study examines the LSE and VLE vowel systems. The data comes from elderly speakers with little or no education. Four were Settlers from Sinoe County, LSE monolinguals, and four were Monrovia-born, Bassa-VLE bilinguals. Speech from sociolinguistic interviews, submitted through Praat to FAVE, yielded 6,265 vowels. Bailey and Thomas (1998) present vowel charts showing the eleven-vowel system of African Americans born in the mid-1850s. It is hypothesized that modern LSE speakers will have retained the eleven-vowel system. Bassa has a symmetrical seven-vowel system. It is hypothesized that the Bassa speakers' VLE will have this seven-vowel system, achieved by conflating KIT-FLEECE, FOOT-GOOSE, STRUT-THOUGHT, and TRAP-LOT.

Pillai scores (Hay, Warren, and Drager 2006) were calculated using FAVE output in order to determine whether pairs of vowels were distinct. Apart from merging KIT-FACE (not KIT-FLEECE), VLE speakers showed the "full system," i.e. with ten distinct vowels. Though this was not what was hypothesized, a vowel system for English that reflects English phonotactics is hardly surprising.

Unexpectedly, the LSE quartet did merge the vowels: FOOT-GOOSE (3 out of 4 speakers), STRUT-THOUGHT (3/4), KIT-FLEECE (2/4), and TRAP-LOT (2/4).

Hostility in Liberia between Settlers and indigenous groups has historically been at its most extreme in Sinoe. On the basis of Liberia's ongoing ethnic dynamics and the Sinoe Settlers' resistance to acquiring Klao and Sapo, the Niger-Congo languages of Sinoe, it seems highly unlikely that the Settlers' reduced vowel inventory can be explained as resulting primarily from the influence of these languages.

I propose instead that the primary explanation lies in the past, coming from inside the Sinoe Settler community, not outside it. In the nineteenth century, the US Navy intercepted slave ships en route to the Western Hemisphere. They brought the ships' captives to Liberia, 5700 in all, of whom 4700 came in 1860. The captives came from the Congo River; the sole exception was a large group of Yorùbá, who were sent to Sinoe. While not outnumbering the Sinoe Settlers, they comprised a significant minority.

Like the Settlers, the Recaptured Africans—called Congoes—had no pre-existing ties to Liberia’s indigenous population. They entered into the lower echelons of Settler society and became so fully a part of that society that today the term “Congo” applies (pejoratively) to Settler society as a whole. Given the Yorùbá presence historically in Sinoe Settler society, the character of the Sinoe LSE vowel system can be viewed as reflecting the Yorùbá seven-vowel system.