

# THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SEVENTH EDITION

**John Algeo**

Emeritus, University of Georgia

**Carmen Acevedo Butcher**

Scholar-in-Residence, Shorter University

Based on the original work of  
**Thomas Pyles**



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## CHAPTER

## 9

Late Modern English  
(1800–Present)

The history of English since 1800 has been a story of expansion—in geography, in speakers, and in the purposes for which English is used. Geographically, English was spread around the world, first by British colonization and empire-building, and more recently by American activities in world affairs. English has also become the “operating standard” for the two-billion-plus users of the global cultural phenomenon that we call the Internet (Geoffrey Nunberg in Graddol 50). In 1985, Braj Kachru described the spread of English using his Concentric Circles Model, proposing three circles of English: the Inner Circle of first-language speakers (L1) in countries where English can be said to be the primary language, the Outer Circle of second-language speakers (L2) in countries where English has wide use alongside native official languages, and the Expanding Circle of foreign-languages speakers (EFL) in countries where English has no official standing but is used for ever-increasing special purposes. As the global village grows, and English with it, the historically and geographically based Kachruvian approach is being adapted to accommodate the new sociological realities of the Internet age. Of great importance is that one-third of the world’s population speaks some form of English.

In a *Daily Mail* article of January 23, 2012, “Why do the English need to speak a foreign language when foreigners all speak English?” polyglot British journalist David Thomas describes the phenomenon that is World English:

This is the language of science, commerce, global politics, aviation, popular music and, above all, the internet. It’s the language that 85 per cent of all Europeans learn as their second language; the language that has become the default tongue of the EU; the language that President Sarkozy of France uses with Chancellor Merkel of Germany when plotting how to stitch up the British. . . . It unites the whole world in the way no other language can. It’s arguably the major reason why our little island has such a disproportionately massive influence on global culture: from Shakespeare to Harry Potter, from James Bond to the Beatles.

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## SOME KEY EVENTS IN THE LATE MODERN PERIOD

The following events during recent centuries significantly influenced the development of the English language.

- 1803 The Louisiana Purchase acquired U.S. territory beyond the Mississippi River, doubling the size of the United States and ultimately resulting in westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean.
- 1805 A victory over the French at the battle of Trafalgar established British naval supremacy.
- 1806 The British occupied Cape Colony in South Africa, thus preparing the way for the arrival in 1820 of a large number of British settlers.
- 1819 Spain agrees to cede Florida to the United States for \$5,000,000.
- 1828 Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* was published.
- 1830 Indian Removal Act was passed by U.S. President Andrew Jackson's Congress, leading to the Trail of Tears.
- 1840 In New Zealand, by the Treaty of Waitangi, native Maori ceded sovereignty to the British crown.
- 1857 A proposal at the Philological Society of London led to work that resulted in the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1928), reissued as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), 2nd edition 1989, now revised online.
- 1858 The Government of India Act transferred power from the East India Company to the crown, thus creating the British Raj in India.
- 1861–5 The American Civil War established the indissolubility of the Union and abolished slavery in America.
- 1869 The Union Pacific railway went west as the Central Pacific railroad went east, creating coast-to-coast communication in the United States.
- 1898 The four-month Spanish-American War made the United States a world power with overseas possessions and thus a major participant in international politics.
- 1906 The first public radio broadcast was aired, leading in 1920 to the first American commercial radio station in Pittsburgh.
- 1914–18 World War I created an alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom.
- 1922 The British Broadcasting Company (after 1927, Corporation) was established and became a major conveyor of information in English around the world.
- 1927 The first motion picture with spoken dialogue, *The Jazz Singer*, was released.
- 1936 The first high-definition television service was established by the BBC, to be followed by cable service in the early 1950s and satellite service in the early 1960s.
- 1939–45 World War II further solidified the British-American link.
- 1945 The charter of the United Nations was produced at San Francisco, leading to the establishment of UN headquarters in New York City.

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- 1947 British India was divided into India and Pakistan, and both were given independence.
- 1961 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* was published.
- 1973 Inventor Martin Cooper made first call on mobile phone.
- 1983 The Internet was created.
- 1992 The first Web browser for the World Wide Web was released.
- 2004 Facebook was launched.
- 2005 YouTube was created.
- 2006 Twitter was launched.
- 2007 An estimated 363 billion text messages were sent in the United States, 429 billion in China, and 2.3 trillion worldwide.
- 2009 The World Wide Web contained over 25 billion pages.
- 2010 The Internet had over 2 billion users (up 480% from 2000 figures), the online *Oxford English Corpus* contained over 2 billion words, 4 billion texters sent 6.1 trillion texts, and the first unassisted off-Earth tweet was posted from the International Space Station.
- 2011 Facebook had 800 million active users, YouTube 490 million, Twitter 225 million (140 million tweets a day), and U.S. Postal Service suffered a \$5.1 billion loss as first-class mail fell more than 20 percent since 2006, from 100 million to 78 million, with current volume projected to fall 50 percent by 2020.

## THE NATIONAL VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

The world's total number of English speakers may be more than a billion, although competence varies greatly and exact numbers are elusive. The two major national varieties of English—in historical precedent, in number of speakers, and in influence—are those of the United Kingdom and the United States—British English and American English. Together they account for over 400 million speakers of English, with the United States having approximately four times the population of the United Kingdom. Other countries in which English is the major language with a sizable body of speakers are Australia, Canada, India, the Irish Republic, New Zealand, and South Africa—the inner circle of English. But English is or has been an official language in other parts of the Americas (Belize, the Falklands, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies), Europe (Gibraltar, Malta), Africa (Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe), Asia (Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Pakistan, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka), and Oceania (Borneo, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Philippines)—the outer circle. English also plays a significant role in many other countries around the globe as a commercial, technical, or cultural language—the expanding circle.

Despite its vast geographical spread, English in all of its major national varieties has remained remarkably uniform. There are, to be sure, differences between national varieties, just as there are variations within them, but those

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differences are insignificant compared with the similarities. English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American.

Of those two varieties, British English has long enjoyed greater prestige in western Europe and some other places around the world. Its prestige is doubtless based partly on its use as the language of the former British Empire and partly on its centuries of great literary works. The prestige of British English is often assessed, however, in terms of its “purity” (a baseless notion) or its elegance and style (highly subjective but nonetheless powerful concepts). Even those Americans who are put off by “posh accents” may be impressed by them and hence likely to suppose that standard British English is somehow “better” English than their own variety. From a purely linguistic point of view, this is nonsense; but it is a safe bet that it will survive any past or future loss of British influence in world affairs.

Yet despite the historical prestige of British, today American English has become the most important and influential dialect of the language. Its influence is exerted through films, television, popular music, the Internet and the World Wide Web, air travel and control, commerce, scientific publications, economic and military assistance, and activities of the United States in world affairs, even when those activities are unpopular.

The coverage of the world by English was begun by colonization culminating in the British Empire, which colored the globe pink, as a popular saying had it, alluding to the use of that color on maps to identify British territories. The baton of influence was passed about the middle of the twentieth century, however, to the United States. Although no one had planned this development, English has become (somewhat improbably, considering its modest beginnings on the North Sea coast of Europe) the world language of our time.

#### CONSERVATISM AND INNOVATION IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Since language undergoes no sea change as a result of crossing an ocean, the first English-speaking colonists in America continued to speak as they had in England. But the language gradually changed on both sides of the Atlantic, in England as well as in America. The new conditions facing the colonists in America naturally caused changes in their language. However, the English now spoken in America has retained a good many characteristics of earlier English that have not survived in contemporary British English.

Thus to regard American English as inferior to British English is to impugn earlier standard English as well, for there was doubtless little difference at the time of the Revolution. There is a strong likelihood, for instance, that George III and Lord Cornwallis pronounced *after*, *ask*, *dance*, *glass*, *path*, and the like exactly as George Washington and John Hancock did—that is, as the overwhelming majority of Americans do to this day, with [æ] rather than the [ɑ] of present-day British.

It was similar with the treatment of *r*, whose loss before consonants and pauses (as in *bird* [bɜ:d] and *burr* [bɜ:ɹ]) did not occur in the speech of London until about the time of the Revolution. Most Americans pronounce *r* where it is spelled because English speakers in the motherland did so at the time of the

settlement of America. In this as in much else, especially in pronunciation and grammar, American English is, on the whole, more conservative than British English. When [r] was eventually lost in British English except before vowels, that loss was imported to the areas that had the most immediate contact with England—the port cities of Boston, New York, and Charleston—and it spread from those ports to their immediate areas, but not elsewhere.

Other supposed characteristics of American English are also to be found in pre-Revolutionary British English, and there is very good reason indeed for the conclusion of the Swedish Anglicist Eilert Ekwall (*American and British Pronunciation*, 32–3) that, from the time of the Revolution on, “American pronunciation has been on the whole independent of British; the result has been that American pronunciation has not come to share the development undergone later by Standard British.” Ekwall’s concern is exclusively with pronunciation, but the same principle applies also to many lexical and grammatical characteristics.

American retention of *gotten* is an example of grammatical conservatism. This form, the usual past participle of *get* in older British English, survives in present standard British English mainly in the phrase “ill-gotten gains”; but it is very much alive in American English, being the usual past participial form of the verb (for instance, “Every day this month I’ve gotten tons of spam e-mail”), except in the senses ‘to have’ and ‘to be obliged to’ (for instance, “He hasn’t got the nerve to do it” and “She’s got to help us”). Similarly, American English has kept *fall* for the season and *deck* for a pack of cards (though American English also uses *autumn* and *pack*); and it has retained certain phonological characteristics of earlier British English, discussed later in this chapter.

It works both ways, however, for American English has also lost certain features—mostly vocabulary items—that have survived in British English. Examples include *waistcoat* (the name for a garment that Americans usually call a *vest*, a word that in England usually means ‘undershirt’); *fortnight* ‘two weeks,’ a useful term completely lost to American English; and a number of topographical terms that Americans had no need for—words like *copse*, *dell*, *fen*, *heath*, *moor*, *spinney*, and *wold*. Americans, on the other hand, desperately needed terms to designate topographical features different from any known in the Old World. To remedy the deficiency, they used new compounds of English words like *backwoods* and *underbrush*; they adapted English words to new uses, like *creek*, in British English ‘an inlet on the sea,’ which in American English may mean ‘any small stream’; and Americans adopted foreign words like *canyon* (Sp. *cañón* ‘tube’), *mesa* (Sp. ‘table’), and *prairie* (Fr. ‘meadow’).

It was similar with the naming of flora and fauna strange to the colonists. When they saw a bird that resembled the English robin, they simply called it a *robin*, though it was not the same bird at all. When they saw an animal that was totally unlike anything that they had ever seen before, they might call it by its Indian name, if they could find out what that was—for example, *raccoon* and *woodchuck*. So also with the names of plants: *catalpa* ‘a kind of tree’ and *catawba* ‘a variety of grape’ are of Muskogean origin. Otherwise, they relied on their imagination: *sweet potato* might have originated just as well in England as in America except for the fact that this particular variety of potato did not exist in England.

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On the whole, though, American English is a conservative descendant of the seventeenth-century English that also spawned present-day British. Except in vocabulary, there are probably few significant characteristics of New World English that are not traceable to the British Isles, including British regional dialects. However, a majority of the English men and women who settled in the New World were not illiterate bumpkins, but ambitious and industrious members of the upper-lower and lower-middle classes, with a sprinkling of the well-educated—clergymen, lawyers—and even a few younger sons of the aristocracy. For that reason, American English resembles present standard British English more closely than it does any other British type of speech.

### NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WORD CHOICE

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There are many lists of equivalent British and American words, but they must not be taken too seriously. Many American locutions are perfectly well understood and used in Britain. For instance, *automobile*, said to be the American equivalent of British *car* or *motor car*, is practically a formal word in America, the ordinary term being *car*; moreover, the supposedly American word occurs in the names of two English motoring organizations, the Royal Automobile Club and the Automobile Association. Similarly, many British locutions are known and used in America—for instance, *postman* (as in James M. Cain's very American twentieth-century crime novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) and *railway* (as in *Railway Express* and the *Southern Railway*), though it is certain that *mailman* (or today *letter carrier*) and *railroad* do occur more frequently in America. Similarly, one finds *baggage* listed as the American equivalent of British *luggage*, though Americans usually buy "luggage" rather than "baggage." *Undershorts* is the American equivalent of British *underpants* for men's underwear, although the latter is perfectly understandable in America. *Panties* is the American equivalent of British *pants* or *knickers* for women's underwear, although the American term is known in England too.

There are many other hardy perennials on such lists. For 'annoyed, hostile,' *mad* is supposedly American and *angry* British, though Americans use *angry* in formal contexts, often under the impression that *mad* as a synonym is "incorrect," and many speakers of British English use *mad* in the sense 'angry.' In older English, *mad* was frequently used in this way; for example, in the King James Bible of 1611, Acts 26.11 reads as follows: "being exceedingly mad against them I persecuted them even unto strange cities," which may be compared to the 1961 *New English Bible*'s "my fury rose to such a pitch that I extended my persecution to foreign cities," a wording that does not improve what did not need improvement in the first place. *Mailbox* is supposedly American for British *pillar-box*, though the English know the former; they also use *letterbox* for either of two things: a public receptacle for mailing (i.e., "posting") letters or a slit in a door through which the postman delivers letters.

*Package* is supposedly American and *parcel* British, though the supposedly British word is well-known to all Americans, who have for a long time sent packages by parcel post (not "package mail"). *Sick* is supposedly American and *ill* British, though *sick*, reputed to mean only 'nauseated' in England, is

frequently used by Brits in the supposedly American (actually Old English) sense of 'unwell,' from the Old English word *séoc*, used as early as the late ninth century. Thus the twentieth-century actor Sir Ralph Richardson wrote, "I was often sick as a child, and so often lonely, and I remember when I was in hospital a kindly visitor giving me a book," in which only the phrase "in hospital" instead of American "in the hospital" indicates the writer's Britishness. *Stairway* is supposedly American and *staircase* British, although *stairs* is the usual term in both countries and *stairway* is recorded in British dictionaries with no notation that it is confined to American usage. Finally, *window shade* is supposedly American and *blind* British, though *blind(s)* is the usual term throughout the eastern United States. There are many other equally weak examples.

There are, however, many genuine instances of differences in word choice, though most of them would not cause any serious confusion on either side. Americans do not say *coach* for an interurban *bus*; *compère* for M.C. (or *emcee*, less frequently *master of ceremonies*) in a theatrical or television setting; *first floor* (or *storey* [sic]) for *second floor* (or *story*) (a British *first floor* being immediately above the *ground floor*, which is an American English synonym for *first floor*); *lorry* for *truck*; *petrol* for *gas(oline)*; *pram* (or the full form *perambulator*) for *baby carriage*; or *treacle* for *molasses*. Nor do they call an *intermission* (between divisions of an entertainment) an *interval*; an *orchestra seat* a *seat in the stalls*; a *raise* (in salary) a *rise*; or a *trillion* a *billion* (in British English a *billion* being a million millions, whereas in American English it is what the British call a *milliard*—a mere thousand millions—although the American use is becoming more common in Britain). Many other words differ, but they are neither numerous nor important in everyday speech.

### AMERICAN INFILTRATION OF THE BRITISH WORD STOCK

Because in the course of recent history Americans have acquired greater commercial, technical, and political importance, it is perhaps natural that the British and others should take a somewhat high-handed attitude toward American speech. The fact is that the British have done so at least since 1735, when one Francis Moore, describing for his countrymen the then infant city of Savannah, said, "It stands upon the flat of a Hill; the Bank of the River (which they in barbarous English call a *bluff*) is steep" (Mathews, *Beginnings* 13). American journalist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) treats the subject of British attitudes toward American speech fully and with characteristic zest in the first chapter of *The American Language* (1–48) and also in the first supplement (1–100) to that work, which is wonderful, if misnamed, because there is no essential difference between the English of America and that of Britain.

The truth is that British English has been extensively infiltrated by American usage, especially vocabulary. The transfer began quite a while ago, long before films, radio, television, and the Internet were ever thought of, although they have certainly hastened the process. Sir William Craigie, the editor of *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, pointed out that although "for some two centuries . . . the passage of new words or senses

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across the Atlantic was regularly westwards ... with the nineteenth century ... the contrary current begins to set in, bearing with it many a piece of drift-wood to the shores of Britain, there to be picked up and incorporated in the structure of the language" (*Study of American English* 208). He cited such Americanisms in British English as *backwoods*, *beeline*, *belittle*, *blizzard*, *bunkum*, *caucus*, *cloudburst*, *prairie*, *swamp*, and a good many others that have long been completely acclimatized.

In recent years, many other Americanisms have been introduced into British usage: *cafeteria*, *cocktail*, *egghead*, *electrocute* (both in reference to the mode of capital punishment and in the extended sense 'to kill accidentally by electric shock'), *fan* 'sports devotee,' *filling station*, *highbrow*, and *lowbrow*. American *radio* has superseded British *wireless*, and TV has crowded out the somewhat nurseryish *telly*, though the word showed up in a large way in the late 1990s, as children and their long-suffering parents tuned into a British BBC pre-schoolers' show featuring brightly colored, pudgy Teletubbies who became all the fin-de-siècle rage and were often referred to by British TV-viewers as "Tellytubbies." The ubiquitous OK seems to occur more frequently nowadays in England than in the land of its birth and may be found in quite formal situations, such as on legal documents to indicate the correctness of details therein (see Allan Metcalf's OK). These and other Americanisms have slithered into British English in the most unobtrusive way, so that their American origin is hardly regarded at all except by a few crusty older-generation speakers. Since they are used by the English, they are "English," and that is all there is to it.

The following Americanisms—forms, meanings, or combinations—appear in the formal utterances of VIPs, as well as in the writings of some quite respectable authors on both sides of the Atlantic: *alibi* 'excuse,' *allergy* 'aversion' (and *allergic* 'averse'), *angle* 'viewpoint,' *blurb* 'publicity statement,' *breakdown* 'analysis,' *crash* 'collide,' *know-how*, *maybe*, *sales resistance*, *to go back on*, *to slip up*, *to stand up to*, *way of life*. *Fortnight* 'two consecutive weeks,' a *Briticism* to most Americans, is being replaced by American *two weeks*.

The convenient use of noun as verb in *to contact*, meaning 'to get in touch with,' originated in America, though it might just as well have done so in England, since there is nothing un-English about such a conversion: scores of other nouns have undergone the same shift of use. The verb was first scorned in England, with the *Spectator* complaining in 1927, "Dreiser should not be allowed to corrupt his language by writing 'anything that Clyde had personally contacted here'." But the verb *contact* disturbs no one nowadays. As Mencken observes in his early twentieth-century *American Language*, Americans were prone to boast of their linguistic superiority while the British felt that Americans were simply "determined to hack their way through the language, as their ancestors through forests, regardless of the valuable growths that may be sacrificed in blazing the trail" (28, 94). Actually, the two Englishes were never so far apart as American patriotism and British insularity have painted them. National linguistic attitudes have sometimes manifested themselves in a prideful American "mucker pose" and an overweening British assumption of superiority. "How snooty of the British to call a tux a dinner jacket!" "How boorish of the Americans to call an egg whisk an egg beater!" The most

striking of such presumably amusing differences, however, are not very important, being on a rather superficial level—in the specialized vocabularies of travel, sports, schools, government, and various trades.

## SYNTACTICAL AND MORPHOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Syntactical and morphological differences are numerous but just as trivial as those in word choice. With regard to collective nouns, for instance, the British are much more likely than Americans to use a plural verb form, like “the public are. . . .” Plural verbs are frequent with the names of sports teams, which, because they lack the plural -s, would require singular verbs in American usage: “England Await Chance to Mop Up” (a headline, the reference being to England’s cricket team, engaged in a test match with Australia) and “Wimbledon Are Fancied for Double” (also a headline). This usage is not confined to sports pages: witness “The village are livid”; “The U.S. Government are believed to favour . . .”; “Eton College break up for the summer holidays today”; “The Savoy [Hotel] have their own water supply”; “The Government regard . . .”; and “Scotland Yard are. . . .” In the past, such subject-verb agreement differences plagued British takers of the American GMAT, seeking entrance into U.S. MBA programs, since this test features a Sentence Correction segment in which collective nouns pair with singular verbs, but today such instances are ordinarily worded in past tense, avoiding such complications by writing “The Navy said” instead of “The Navy says,” where the British-minded exam taker would expect “The Navy say.”

The following locutions, all from British writings, might have been phrased as indicated within square brackets by American writers. Yet as they stand they would not at all puzzle an American reader, and the bracketed equivalents may be heard in British:

Thus Mgr. Knox is faced by a word, which, if translated by its English equivalent, will give a meaning possibly very different to [from, than] its sense.

When he found his body on Hampstead Heath, the only handkerchief was a clean one which had certainly not got [did not have] any eucalyptus on it.

You don’t think . . . that he did confide in any person?—Unlikely. I think he would have done [would have] if Galbraith alone had been involved.

I’ll tell it you [to you].

In the morning I was woken up [awakened] at eight by a housemaid.

There are many differences other than *different to* in the choice of prepositions: for instance, the English householder lives *in* a street, the American *on* it; the English traveler gets *in* or *out of* a train, the American *on* or *off* it; but such variations are of little consequence.

## BRITISH AND AMERICAN PURISM

Perhaps because pronunciation is less important as a mark of social status in America than in Britain, American attitudes put greater stress on grammatical “correctness” based on such matters as the supposed “proper” position of *only*

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and other shibboleths. For some people it seems to be practically a moral obligation to follow “good” grammar in choosing forms of personal pronouns and *who* strictly by what they think is the proper case; eschewing *can* to ask for or give permission; shunning *like* as a conjunction; referring to *everybody*, *everyone*, *nobody*, *no one*, *somebody*, and *someone* with singular *he* or *she*; and observing the whole set of fairly simple grammatical rules that those who are secure have never given much thought to.

Counterexamples to these supposed rules of usage are easy enough to come by. “Who are you with?” (i.e., “What newspaper do you work for?”), asked Queen Elizabeth II of various newspapermen at a reception given for her by the press in Washington, D.C. Though *who* for *whom* and a terminal preposition would not pass muster among many grammarians, they are literally the Queen’s English. In the novel *The Cambridge Murders*, a titled academic writes to a young acquaintance, “Babs dear, can I see you for a few moments, please?” There is no indication that Babs responded, “You *can*, but you may not,” as American children are sometimes told. *Like* has been used as a conjunction in self-assured, cultivated English since the early sixteenth century—as in a comment by an English critic, Clive Barnes: “These Russians dance like the Italians sing and the Spaniards fight bulls.”

The choice of case for pronouns is governed by principles quite different from those found in the run of grammar books. Winston Churchill quoted King George VI as observing that “it would not be right for either you or I to be where we planned to be on D-Day,” and Somerset Maugham was primly scolded by an American reviewer for writing “a good deal older than me,” even though Milton and Shakespeare both treated *than* as a preposition when they felt like it, following *than* with *whom*, with *me*, and so forth. Furthermore, the use of *they*, *them*, and *their* with a singular antecedent has long been standard English, news certain to shock many a grammar teacher; specimens of this “solecism” are found in Jane Austen, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Thomas De Quincey, Lord Dunsany, Cardinal Newman, and others. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen writes: “I would have everybody marry if they can do it properly,” one of many Austen examples celebrated on the “anti-pedantry” website cheekily titled *Jane Austen and other famous authors violate what everyone learned in their English class*, found at <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/austheir.html>. Lord Chesterfield, that model of elegant eighteenth-century usage, is no different, and the OED cites him as having written, “If a person is born of a gloomy temper . . . they cannot help it.”

To be sure, purists abound in England, where the “rules” originated, just as they do in America. They abound everywhere, for that matter, for the purist attitude toward language is above all a question of temperament. Moreover, English purists are about as ill-informed and inconsistent as their American counterparts. Most purported “guides” to English usage, British or American, are expressions of prejudice with little relationship to real use. Notable exceptions—reliable and thorough reports of how disputed expressions are actually used as well as what people have thought about them—are *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* by E. Ward Gilman, and *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* by Pam Peters.

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### DICTIONARIES AND THE FACTS

The most important and available sources for information about the facts of language are dictionaries. Since 1800, the dictionary tradition, which had reached an earlier acme in Dr. Samuel Johnson's work, has progressed far beyond what was possible for that good man. Today English speakers have available an impressive array of dictionaries to suit a variety of needs, and these lexical wonders are available in paper editions, on Kindles, on smartphones, on the Internet, and on CD-ROMs, to name a few possibilities.

The greatest of all English dictionaries, and indeed the greatest dictionary ever made for any language, is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). It was begun in 1857 as a project of the Philological Society of London for a "New English Dictionary," and that was what the work was called until the Oxford University Press assumed responsibility for it. The principal editor of the dictionary was James Murray, a self-educated, somewhat volatile Scotsman who enlisted his family to work on the dictionary in a special room he called the "Scriptorium," where he kept two tons of Philological Society source quotations (<http://www.oed.com/page/editors/dictionary-editors#burchfield>). Published in fascicles, the OED was completed in twelve volumes in 1928, thirteen years after Murray's death and seventy-one years after it had been proposed. But that was not the end of it. In 1933, a supplementary volume was published, largely filling lacunae from the early volumes. Then, after a hiatus of forty years, Robert Burchfield brought out four new supplementary volumes (1972–86) that added new words that had entered the language since the original publication, especially scientific and technical terms, also World English vocabulary, colloquialisms, and slang, including entries considered questionable by the first editors, such as four-letter Anglo-Saxon words. In 1989, a second edition of the dictionary was published in twenty volumes, combining the original with Burchfield's supplements and adding yet more new material. One woman alone, Marghanita Laski, supplied a quarter of a million citations to these, making her the OED's "supreme contributor"; Burchfield described her memorably as "writer, broadcaster, journalist, and lexicographical irregular supreme" (Stavans 75; Brewer 226, 289).

In 1992, an electronic version of the second edition was published on CD-ROM, and in 2000, the OED was made available online. At its December 2010 relaunched website, <http://www.oed.com/>, the OED's electronic files continue being updated, corrected, and made available by subscription, and lexicophiles the world over discover that most university libraries, other institutional libraries, and many public libraries provide free onsite access to the OED. Its third edition is constantly undergoing a comprehensive updating of all 615,000-plus words, with batches of 2,500 new and revised words and phrases being added online in regular updates.

What distinguishes the *Oxford English Dictionary* is not merely its size, but the fact that it aims to record every English word, present and past, and to give for each a full historical treatment, tracing the word from its first appearance until the present day with all variations in form, meaning, and use. Furthermore, the dictionary illustrates the history of each word with

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abundant quotations showing the word in context throughout its history. Quotations are often the most informative and useful part of a word's treatment, and there are over 3,000,000 of them.

Nothing else like the *OED* has ever been done. One can, however, imagine that both Samuel Johnson and James Murray would be fascinated by the online *Oxford English Corpus* (*OEC*), a singular lexicographical resource that presents in electronic form a collection of written and spoken texts with over two billion words of real twenty-first-century English. The *OEC* contains a variety of works in English from around the world dating from 2000 on, from literary novels and academic journals to newspapers and magazines, and from the Hansard archive of House of Commons debates to the informal language of e-mails, blogs, and Internet message boards. Eighty percent of the *OEC*'s text is British and American English, with the remaining twenty percent (over 400 million words) consisting of varieties of English from areas such as India, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Corpus analysis software allows revolutionary insights into this representative slice of contemporary English. It creates detailed statistical profiles of words and their collocates, revealing patterns of word formation and also allowing new discoveries about the lemma, or base form of a word, including that only ten different lemmas account for 25 percent of all the words used in the *Oxford English Corpus*: *the, be, to, of, and, a, in, that, have, and I*.

America's greatest dictionary is *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, edited by Philip Gove and first published in 1961. It is quite a different work from the *OED* but is the prime example of its own genre, an "unabridged" (i.e., large and comprehensive) dictionary of current use. Its publisher, the Merriam-Webster Company, carries on the tradition of Noah Webster's dictionaries of the early nineteenth century. Webster had peculiar ideas about etymology, but he has been called a "born definer," and his dictionaries were the best of their time in America or England. *Webster's Third* has in it nothing whatever of old Noah's work, but it carries on his practice of innovation and high quality in lexicography. With its supplements of new words, *Webster's Third* remains one of the best records of the vocabulary of current English in its American variety.

Many smaller dictionaries are excellent. Notable are *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition, available online with audible pronunciations and a thesaurus, and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 6th edition, both with CD-ROM versions.

## NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PRONUNCIATION

For the pronunciation of individual words, much the same situation holds true as for word choices: the differences are relatively inconsequential and frequently shared. For instance, in *either* and *neither*, an overwhelming majority of Americans have [i] in the stressed syllable, though some—largely from the Atlantic coastal cities—have [ai], which is also found elsewhere, doubtless because of its supposed prestige. The [i] pronunciation also occurs in standard British English alongside its usual [ai]. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate* and the

*Shorter Oxford* each give both pronunciations without national identifications, although in reverse order.

British English has a pronunciation of each of the following words differing from that usual in American English: *ate* [et], *been* [bin], *evolution* [ivəluʃən], *fragile* [fræʒaɪl], *medicine* [medsɪn], *nephew* [nevju], *process* [proses], *trait* [treɪ], *valet* [vælit], *zenith* [zenɪθ]. But the *Shorter Oxford* records the following "American" pronunciations without a national label: *ate* [et], *been* [bin], *evolution* [evəluʃən], *medicine* [medəsən], *nephew* [nefyu], *trait* [tret], *valet* [væle]. The pronunciation [et] for *ate* occurs in American speech but is nonstandard. For *nephew*, [nevju] is current only in Eastern New England, Chesapeake Bay, and South Carolina. The British pronunciation [proses] for *process* is used in high-toned American speech.

The prevalent American pronunciations of the following words do not occur in standard British English: *leisure* [liʒər], *quinine* [kwainɪn], *squirrel* [skwərəl] (also *stirrup* and *syrup* with the same stressed vowel), *tomato* [təmeto], *vase* [ves]. But the prevalent British pronunciations of all of them exist, though indeed not widely, in American English—that is, [leʒə(r)], [kwɪnɪn], [skwɪrəl], [təmato], [vaz].

The British pronunciation of *lieutenant* as [leftənənt] when it refers to an army officer is never heard in American English; [lutənənt] was recommended for Americans by Noah Webster in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). Webster also recommended *schedule* with [sk-]. It is likely, however, that the historical pronunciation with [s-] was the one most widely used in both England and America in 1828. The usual British pronunciation is with [ʃ-], although [sk-] occurs there as well.

Other pronunciations that are nationally distinctive include (with the American pronunciation given first) *chagrin* [ʃə'grɪn] / ['ʃægrɪn], *clerk* [klɑ:k] / [klɑ:k], *corollary* ['kɒrələri] / [kə'rɒləri], *dynasty* ['dɪnəsti] / ['dɪnəsti], *laboratory* ['læbrətori] / [lə'brɒrət(ə)rɪ] or ['læbrət(ə)rɪ], *miscellany* ['mɪsələni] / [mɪ'selənɪ], *premier* [prə'mɪr] / ['prɛmyə] or ['primyə]. American *carburetor* ['kɑ:bəretər] and British *carburettor* [kəbyu'retə] are, in addition as well as to being pronounced differently, variant written forms, as are the words *aluminum* (again, Noah Webster's choice) and *aluminium*.

As for more sweeping differences, what strikes most American ears most strongly is the modern standard British shift of an older [æ] (which survives in American English except before *r* as in *far*, *lm* as in *calm*, and in *father*) to [ɑ] in a number of very frequently used words like *ask*, *path*, and *class*. Up to the very end of the eighteenth century, [ɑ] in such words was considered lower-class. This shift cannot, however, be regarded as exclusively British, inasmuch as its effect is evident in the speech of eastern New England. Present American usage in regard to such words is not consistent: a Bostonian may, for instance, have [ɑ] (or an intermediate [a]) in *half* (and then perhaps only some of the time), but not in *can't*, or vice versa. According to John S. Kenyon (183), "The pronunciation of 'ask' words with [a] or [ɑ] has been a favorite field for schoolmastering and elocutionary quackery." Indeed, one hears American TV personalities pronounce [ɑ] in words like *bat*, *happy*, and *dishpan hands* that were not affected by the aforementioned shift.

The use of British or Bostonian [ɑ] in what Kenyon calls the *ask* words, supposed by some naive American speakers to have higher social standing than the normal American [æ], is fraught with danger. With speakers who use it naturally, in the sense that they acquired it in childhood when learning to talk, it never occurs in a great many words in which it might be expected by analogy. Thus, *bass*, *crass*, *lass*, and *mass* have [æ], in contrast to the [ɑ] of *class*, *glass*, *grass*, and *pass*. But *classic*, *classical*, *classicism*, *classify*, *passage*, *passenger*, and *passive* all have [æ]. *Gastric* has [æ], but *plaster* has [ɑ]; *ample* has [æ], but *example* and *sample* have [ɑ]; *fancy* and *romance* have [æ], but *chance*, *dance*, and *glance* have [ɑ]; *cant* 'hypocritical talk' has [æ], but *can't* 'cannot' has [ɑ]; *mascot*, *massacre*, and *pastel* have [æ], but *basket*, *master*, and *nasty* have [ɑ]; and *bastard*, *masquerade*, and *mastiff* may have either [æ] or [ɑ]. It is obvious that few status seekers could master such complexities, even if there were any real point in doing so. There is none, actually, for no one worth fooling would be fooled by such a shallow display of linguistic virtuosity.

Somewhat less noticeable, perhaps because it is more widespread in American English than the use of [ɑ] or [a] in the *ask* words, is the standard British English loss of [r] except when a vowel follows it. The American treatment of this sound is, however, somewhat more complicated than the British. In parts of the deep South, it may be lost even between vowels, as in *Carolina* and *very*. But in one way or another, [r] is lost in eastern New England, in New York City, and in most of the coastal South. Away from the Atlantic Coast, it is retained in most positions.

There are other less striking phonological differences, like the British slightly rounded "short o" [ɒ] in contrast to the American unrounded [ɑ] in *collar*, *got*, *stop*, and the like. Yet in western Pennsylvania and eastern New England, a vowel like the British one can be heard in these words.

British English long ago lost its secondary stress on the penultimate syllables of polysyllables in *-ary*, *-ery*, and *-ory* (for example, *military*, *millinery*, *obligatory*). This subordinate stress is regularly retained in American English, as in *mónastèry*, *sécretàry*, *térritòry*, and the like. The secondary stress may be lacking in American *library* (sometimes reduced to disyllabic ['laɪbrɪ]), but it regularly occurs in other such words.

Intonational characteristics—risings and fallings in pitch—plus timbre of voice distinguish British English from American English far more than pronunciations of individual words. Voice quality in this connection has not been much investigated, and most statements about it are impressionistic; but there can be little doubt of its significance. Even if they were to learn British intonation, Americans (such as Bostonians, whose treatment of *r* and of the vowel of *ask*, *path*, and the like agrees with that of standard British English) would never in the world pass among the British as English. They would still be spotted as "Yanks" by practically everyone in the British Isles. Precision in the description of nationally characteristic voice qualities must, however, be left for future investigators.

In regard to intonation, the differences are most noticeable in questions and requests. Contrast the intonation patterns of the following sentences, very

roughly indicated as they would customarily be spoken in British and American English (it is usually difficult or impossible to tell whether a singer is English or American because the intonational patterns in singing are those of the composer):

BE: Where are you going to be?

AE: Where are you going to be?

BE: Are you sure?

AE: Are you sure?

BE: Let me know where you're going to be.

AE: Let me know where you're going to be.

It is most unlikely that tempo plays any part in the identification of accent, British or American. To Americans unaccustomed to hearing it, British speech frequently seems to be running on at a great rate. But this impression of speed is doubtless also experienced in regard to American English by those English people who have not come into contact with American television shows, movies, and tourists, if there are any such English. Some people speak slowly, some rapidly, regardless of nationality; moreover, the same individuals are likely to speak more rapidly when they know what they are talking about than when they must "make conversation."

The type of American speech that one now hears most frequently on national television, especially in commercials, eliminates regional or individual characteristics discernible to untrained ears. The extent of the influence and prestige of those who speak the commercials may be gauged by the astronomical sums spent on such advertising. Perhaps this form of speech, based to a large extent on writing, may in time become a standardized nationwide dialect.

## BRITISH AND AMERICAN SPELLING

Finally, there is the matter of spelling, which looms larger in the consciousness of those who are concerned with national differences than it deserves to. Somewhat exotic to American eyes are *cheque* (for drawing money from a bank), *cyder*, *cypher*, *gaol*, *kerb* (of a street), *pyjamas*, and *tyre* (around a wheel). But *check*, *cider*, *cipher*, *jail*, *curb*, *pajamas*, and *tire* also occur in England with varying frequency.

Noah Webster, through the influence of his spelling book and dictionaries, was responsible for Americans settling upon -or spellings for a group of words spelled in his day with either -or or -our: *armo(u)r*, *behavio(u)r*, *colo(u)r*, *favo(u)r*, *flavo(u)r*, *harbo(u)r*, *labo(u)r*, *neighbo(u)r*, and the like. All such words were current in earlier British English without the *u*, though most Britons

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today are probably unaware of that fact; Webster was making no radical change in English spelling habits. Furthermore, the English had themselves struck the *u* from a great many words earlier spelled *-our*, alternating with *-or*: *author*, *doctor*, *emperor*, *error*, *governor*, *horror*, *mirror*, and *senator*, among others.

Webster is also responsible for the American practice of using *-er* instead of the *-re* that the British came to favor in a number of words—for instance, *calibre*, *centre*, *litre*, *manoeuvre*, *metre* (of poetry or of the unit of length in the metric system), *sepulchre*, and *theatre*. The last of these spellings competes with *theater* in America, especially in proper names. It is regarded by many of its users as an elegant (because British) spelling and by others as an affectation. Except for *litre*, which did not come into English until the nineteenth century, all these words occurred in earlier British English with *-er*.

The American use of *-se* in *defense*, *offense*, and *pretense*, in which the English usually have *-ce*, is also attributable to the precept and practice of Webster, though he did not recommend *fense* for *fence*, which is simply an aphetic form of *defense* (or *defence*). Spellings with *-se* occurred in earlier English for all these words, including *fence*. *Suspense* is now standard in British English, though *suspence* occurred earlier.

Webster proposed dropping final *k* in such words as *almanack*, *musick*, *physick*, *publick*, and *traffick*, bringing about a change that occurred independently in British English as well. His proposed *burdoc*, *cassoc*, and *hassoc* now regularly end in *k*, whereas *havock*, in which he neglected to drop the *k*, is everywhere spelled without it.

Though he was not the first to recommend it, Webster is doubtless to be credited with the American practice of not doubling final *l* when adding a suffix except in words stressed on their final syllables—for example, *gróvel*, *groveled*, *groveler*, *groveling*, but *propél*, *propelled*, *propeller*, *propelling*, *propellant*. Modern British spelling usually doubles *l* before a suffix regardless of the position of the stress, as in *grovelled*, *groveller*, and so forth.

The British use of *ae* and *oe* looks strange to Americans in *anaemic*, *gynaecology*, *haemorrhage*, *paediatrician*, and in *diarrhoea*, *homoeopathy*, *manoeuvre*, and *oesophagus*, but a bit less so in *aesthetic*, *archaeology*, and *encyclopaedia*, which are occasional in American usage. Some words earlier written with one or the other of these digraphs long ago underwent simplification—for example, *phaenomenon*, *oeconomy*, and *poenology*. Others are in the process of simplification: *hemorrhage*, *hemorrhoids*, and *medieval* are frequent British variants of the forms with *ae*.

Most British writers use *-ise* for the verbal suffix written *-ize* in America in such words as *baptize*, *organize*, and *sympathize*. However, the *Times* of London, the *OED*, the various editions of Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary*, and a number of other publications of considerable intellectual prestige prefer the spelling with *z*, which, in the words of the *OED*, is "at once etymological and phonetic." (The suffix is ultimately from Greek *-izein*.) The *ct* of *connection* and *inflection* is due to the influence of *connect* and *inflect*. The etymologically sounder spellings *connexion* and *inflexion*, from Latin *connexiō(em)* and *inflexiō(em)*, were once favored spellings in England, but are now rarer even there.

Spelling reform has been a recurring preoccupation of would-be language engineers on both sides of the Atlantic. Webster, who loved tinkering with all aspects of language, had contemplated far flashier spelling reforms than the simplifications he succeeded in getting adopted. For instance, he advocated lopping off the final *e* of *-ine*, *-ite*, and *-ive* in final syllables (thus *medicin*, *definit*, *fugitiv*); using *oo* for *ou* in *group* and *soup* (as in Campbell's *\*soop*); writing *tung* for *tongue*; and deleting the *a* in *bread*, *feather*, and the like. But in time he abandoned these unsuccessful, albeit sensible, spellings. Those of Webster's spellings that were generally adopted were choices among existing options, not his inventions. The American financier Andrew Carnegie and President Theodore Roosevelt both supported a reformed spelling in the early years of the twentieth century, including such simplifications as *catalog* for *catalogue*, *clasp* for *clasped*, *gag* for *gauge*, *program* for *programme*, and *thoro* for *thorough*. Some of the spellings they advocated have been generally adopted, some are still used as variants, but many are now rare.

## VARIATION WITHIN NATIONAL VARIETIES

Despite the comparative uniformity of standard English throughout the world, there clearly are variations within the language, even within a single national variety, such as American English.

### KINDS OF VARIATION

The kind of English we use depends on both us and the circumstances in which we use it. The variations that depend on us have to do with where we learned our English (regional or geographical dialects), what cultural groups we belong to (ethnic or social dialects), and a host of other factors such as our sex, age, and education. The variations that depend on the circumstances of use have to do with whether we are talking or writing, how formal the situation is, the subject of the discourse, the effect we want to achieve, and so on. Differences in language that depend on who we are constitute dialect. Differences that depend on where, why, or how we are using language are matters of register.

Each of us speaks a variety of dialects; for example, a Minnesota, Swedish-American, male, younger-generation, grade-school-educated person talks differently from a Tennessee, Appalachian, female, older generation, college-educated person—each of those factors (place, ethnic group, sex, age, and education) defines a dialect. We can change our dialects during the course of our lives (an Ohioan who moves to Alabama may start saying *y'all* and dropping *r*'s), but once we have reached maturity, our dialects tend to be fairly well set and to vary only slightly, unless we are very impressionable or very strong influences lead us to change.

Each of us also uses a variety of registers, and we change them often, shifting from one to another as the situation warrants, and often learning new ones. The more varied our experiences have been, the more various registers we are likely to command. But almost everyone uses more than one register of language in daily activities like talking with young children, answering the

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telephone when a friend calls, meeting a new colleague, and saying good night to one's family. The language differences in such circumstances may not be obvious to us, because we are used to them and tend to overlook the familiar, but a close study will show them to be considerable.

One variety of language—in fact, the variety that has been almost the exclusive concern of this book—is **standard English**. A standard language is one that is used widely—in many places and for many purposes; it is also one that enjoys high prestige—one that people regard as “good” language; and it is described in dictionaries and grammar books and is taught in schools. Standard English is the written form of our language used in books and periodicals and is therefore also called **edited English**. It is, to be sure, not a homogeneous thing: there is plenty of what Gerard Manley Hopkins called “pied beauty” in it, more in fact than many persons realize. Its variety is part of the reason it is useful. Standard English is standard not because it is intrinsically better than other varieties—clearer or more logical or prettier—but only because English speakers have agreed to use it in so many places for so many purposes that they have therefore made a useful tool of it and have come to regard it as a good thing.

### REGIONAL DIALECTS

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In contrast to standard English are all the regional and ethnic dialects of the United States and of other English-speaking countries. In America, there are three or four main regional dialects in the eastern part of the country: **Northern** (from northern New Jersey and Pennsylvania to New England), **North Midland** (from northern Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia through southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania), **South Midland**, also called **Inland Southern** (the Appalachian region from southern West Virginia to northern Georgia), and **Southern**, or **Coastal Southern** (from southern Delaware and Maryland down to Florida, along the Atlantic seaboard).

The farther west one goes, the more difficult it is to recognize clearly defined dialect boundaries. The fading out of sharp dialect lines in the western United States results from the history of the country. The earliest English-speaking settlements were along the eastern seaboard; and because that area has been longest populated, it has had the most opportunity to develop distinct regional forms of speech. The western settlements are generally more recent and were usually made by persons of diverse origins. Thus the older eastern dialect differences were not kept intact by the western pioneers, and new ones have not had the same opportunity to develop. Because of the increased mobility of the population and the greater opportunities for hearing and talking with persons from many areas, distinct new western dialects are slow in coming into existence.

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The scholarly study of American dialects began in 1889 with the foundation of the American Dialect Society. The chief purpose of the society was the production of an American dialect dictionary, though it would be a long time in coming. From 1890 to 1939, the first efforts began: the Society's journal *Dialect Notes* published lists of local words and phrases, *American Speech* began contributing research, and the Publication of the American Dialect Society (PADS) published relevant material from 1944 on, but work on the



American dialect dictionary project did not begin in earnest until the 1960s when Frederic G. Cassidy was appointed editor. Before Cassidy's death in 2003, three volumes of the eventual five appeared, and almost a quasiquintennial after its first purposing, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE), as it is now known, has been published by the Belknap Press of Harvard under the continuing editorship of Joan Houston Hall. It is the most thorough and authoritative source for information about all varieties of nonstandard English in America and has been compared with the *Oxford English Dictionary* in stature. John Algeo describes its accomplishment: "DARE is for the twentieth[-] and twenty-first-century study of nonstandard varieties of American English what the original OED was for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century study of the standard variety of British English. . . . a major work of scholarship" ("In Memoriam" <http://dare.wisc.edu/?q=node/182>). The digital version of DARE is projected to go online in 2013 at <http://dare.wisc.edu/>.

In 1925, the first issue of *American Speech* appeared. A magazine founded by three academics—Kemp Malone, Louise Pound, and Arthur G. Kennedy—it presents information about English in America in a form appealing to general readers. The journalist-critic H. L. Mencken inspired it and was also responsible for some of the liveliest writing ever published on American English in his monumental three-volume study, *The American Language*. In 1970 *American Speech* became the journal of the American Dialect Society.

Another project to assess the regional forms of American English is the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, which originally was intended to cover all of English-speaking North America but later was divided into a series of regional projects, of which three were published: the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, edited by Hans Kurath; *The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest*, edited by Harold B. Allen; and the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States*, edited by Lee Pederson.

An engaging and informative presentation on American dialect diversity is *American Tongues*, a documentary that was originally broadcast as part of the PBS television series *POV* (*Point of View*) and now available on DVD. Produced by the Center for New American Media, with the advice of some of the leading dialect authorities of the day, the film presents the human side of regional and social dialects—the comedy, the angst, and the pride that can come from "talkin' different." It gives an accurate and honest portrayal of how Americans talk and of what they think about the way they themselves and others use the English language.

#### ETHNIC AND SOCIAL DIALECTS

The concentrated study of ethnic and social dialects is more recent than that of regional ones but has been vigorously pursued. American English includes a very large number of ethnic dialects. Spanish-influenced dialects include those of New York City (Puerto Rican), Florida (Cuban), and Texas and California (different varieties of Mexican). Pennsylvania Dutch is actually a variety of High German brought to America by early settlers and here mixed with English. Jewish dialect, derived from Yiddish, is important in New York, but has had pervasive



influence on informal speech throughout the country. Scandinavian, especially Swedish, immigrants to Wisconsin created a distinctive ethnic dialect there. Louisiana has Cajun dialect, so called because the French-speaking settlers came from Acadie (or Acadia), their name for Nova Scotia. The Appalachian region has a distinctive dialect derived in part from its early Scotch-Irish settlers. The United States has had settlers from all over the world, and wherever communities of immigrants have settled, an ethnic dialect has sprung up.

The language of African Americans, one of the most prominent ethnic groups in the United States, has been studied especially from the standpoint of its relationship to the standard language. Two questions are involved, according to Ralph Fasold: (1) How different are the speechways of present-day blacks and whites? (2) What was the origin of African American English (AAE), that is, the typical language of African Americans, especially as it differs from that of their neighbors? Formerly known as Black English by sociolinguists and sometimes referred to as Ebonics, African American English has long attracted study. In the early 1970s, John Rickford worked with teachers Pat Conroy and Frances Jones in a two-room schoolhouse on South Carolina's Sea Island (experiences Conroy documented in his book *The Water Is Wide*), and Rickford points out that such educators do well by their students if they take into account the "structural, rhetorical, and expressive characteristics" of African American vernacular language (*African American Vernacular English* 283).

The extent of the present-day linguistic differences between African Americans and whites has often been exaggerated, however. The distinctive African American vocabulary exerts a steady and enriching influence on the language of other Americans; for example, *nitty-gritty* came from African American use, as did *jazz* earlier, and *yam* much earlier. Pronunciation differences are notable; the typical African American pronunciation of *aunt* as [ant] is unusual for most other Americans (although it is the standard British way of saying the word). African Americans are also more likely than whites to drop the [t] from words like *rest* and *soft*; to use an *r*-less pronunciation of words like *bird*, *four*, and *father*; and to pronounce words like *with* and *winning* with [f] rather than [θ]. Differences in grammar include consuetudinal *be* (uninflected *be* to denote habitual or regular action, as in "She be here every day") and the omission of *be* in other uses (as in "She here now") as well as the omission of the -s ending of verbs (as in "He hear you"). Most differences—whether of vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar—tend, however, to be matters of degree rather than of kind and do not impede communication.

The origin of African American English has been attributed to two sources. One is that African Americans may have first acquired their English from the white Americans among whom they worked on the plantations of the New World, and therefore their present English reflects the kind of English their ancestors learned several hundred years ago, modified by generations of segregation. Another is that African Americans, who originally spoke a number of different African languages, may have first learned a kind of pidgin—a mixed and limited language used for communication between those without a common tongue—perhaps based on Portuguese, African languages, and English. Because they had no other common language, the pidgin was creolized, that

is, became the native and full language of the plantation slaves and eventually was assimilated to the English spoken around them, so that today there are few of the original creole features still remaining.

The difference between the two historical explanations is chiefly in how they explain the divergent features between African American and American white speech. In the first explanation, those differences are supposed to be African features introduced by blacks into the English they learned from whites or else they are survivals of archaic features otherwise lost from the speech of whites. In the second explanation, they are supposed to be the remnants of the original creole, which over the years has been transformed gradually, by massive borrowing from English, into a type of language much closer to standard English than it originally was. The historical reality was certainly more complex than either view alone depicts, but both explanations doubtless have some truth in them. The passion with which one or the other view is often held may reflect emotional attitudes more than linguistic facts.

#### STYLISTIC VARIATION

Style in language is the choice we make from the options available to us, chiefly those of register. Stylistic variation is the major concern of those who write about language in the popular press, although such writers may have little knowledge of the subject. A widespread suspicion among the laity that our language is somehow deteriorating becomes the opportunity for journalistic and other hucksters to peddle their nostrums. The usage huckster plays upon the insecurity and apprehensions of readers. One such guru ominously asked, "Will America be the death of English?" Such linguistic alarmism does no good, other than making a buck for the alarmist, but it also does little harm; it is generally ineffectual. Such drivel may, however, be somewhat annoying for excellent students of the history of the English language, who know better. The best-informed and most sensible treatment of good English is *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, already mentioned.



One stylistic variety of perennial interest is slang, primarily because it continually renews itself. Over the years, slang has met with diverse judgments. The nineteenth-century writer Ambrose Bierce, nicknamed "Bitter Bierce" for his biting satire, was particularly prone to run off at the mouth about slang, denouncing it as "the speech of him who robs the literary garbage-carts [garbage cans] on their way to the dumps," and in his 1909 language usage guide, *Write It Right*, Bierce minces no words impugning examples of what he puristically dubs "slang," making it clear that such language gets his dander up:

*Afraid*. Do not say, "I am afraid it will rain." Say, I fear that it will rain.

*Avoirdupois* for *Weight*. Mere slang.

*Bogus* for *Counterfeit*, or *False*. The word is slang; keep it out.

*Brainy*. Pure slang, and singularly disagreeable. (6, 10, 11)

On the other hand, Ralph Waldo Emerson found slang useful, Walt Whitman called it "the wholesome fermentation and eructation of those



processes eternally active in language,” and Carl Sandburg praised it as “a language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands, and gets to work” (Mencken 556n).

By all accounts, slang is a deliberately undignified form of speech implying that the user is “in,” with special knowledge about the subject of the slang term. The language may be a sexual or scatological taboo term signaling that the speaker is not part of the establishment, it may be protective language disguising unpleasant reality (such as *waste* for ‘kill’), or it may save the user from fuller explanation (such as the apologetic interjection *my bad* for ‘it’s my fault’).

No single term will have all of these characteristics, but all slang shares several of them (Dumas and Lighter). *Cougar* in its twenty-first-century sense of ‘an older woman seeking a sexual relationship with a younger man’ shares the sense of ‘predatory’ associated with its older literal meaning of ‘a large American feline quadruped,’ as it focuses on the taboo reversal of the traditional May–December romance. *Noob*, on the other hand, is not new slang but is a variant of *newbie* ‘newcomer.’ *Noob*’s popularity has grown with the Internet’s young gaming and social media culture, where it has come to mean that someone’s ‘naïve, clueless behavior’ is making that person look ‘obnoxious, stupid,’ also often used by a teenager of Generation Z to tease his or her hapless parent of Generation X as that parent fumbles with Netflix.

Because of slang’s changeability, it proves hard to study. By far the best treatment is the incomplete dictionary of slang on historical principles by Jonathan E. Lighter, who observes: “One rule of thumb about slang is that the more prevalent the object, activity, or behavior being described, and the more intense its psychological salience, the more numerous and diverse the slang terms available to describe it”; therefore, he says, most slang terms are for “good,” “bad,” “sex,” “drunkenness,” and also “nonsense” (Lighter “A Lot of Nonsense,” *Atlantic Monthly* and Weintraub).

#### VARIATION WITHIN BRITISH ENGLISH

As we have seen, the British Isles had dialects from Anglo-Saxon times onward, and there has been a clear historical continuity in them. Present-day dialect variation derives in the first place from the Old English dialects as they developed in Middle English. Those dialects were affected by historical events, such as the Viking influence in the Northern and East Midland areas and the growth of London as the metropolitan center of England, which brought influences from many dialects together.

Geographical dialects are not divided from one another by clear boundaries, but rather phase gradually into one another. However, Peter Trudgill (*Dialects of England*) has divided present-day England into a number of dialect areas on the basis of seven features of pronunciation: *but* as [bət] or [bʊt], *arm* as [ɑrm] or [ɑ:m], *singer* as [sɪŋə(r)] or [sɪŋgə(r)], *few* as [fyu] or [fu], *seedy* as [sɪdi] or [sɪdi], *gate* as [get] or [geɪt], and *milk* as [mɪlk] or [miuk]. The sixteen dialect areas he identifies are combined into six major ones, still corresponding at least roughly to the Middle English dialects, respectively: Southwest, East

(including the Home Counties around London, Kent, East Anglia, and a southern part of the old East Midland), West Central, East Central, Lower North, and Northeast (Northumberland, Tyneside, and Durham). Trudgill concludes his study with a double glance backward and ahead (136):

The different forms taken by the English language in modern England represent the results of 1500 years of linguistic and cultural development. It is in the nature of language, and in the nature of society, that these dialects will always be changing. . . . But unless we can rid ourselves of the idea that speaking anything other than Standard English is a sign of ignorance and lack of "sophistication", much of what linguistic richness and diversity remains in the English language in this country may be lost.

### WORLD ENGLISH

Although American and British are still the two major national varieties of the language, with the largest numbers of speakers and the greatest impact worldwide, there are many other vibrant as well as evolving varieties of English used around the globe. Today English is used as a **first language** (a speaker's native and often only language), as a **second language** (in addition to a native language, but used regularly for important matters), and as a **foreign language** (used for special purposes, with various degrees of fluency and frequency). Other important first-language varieties of English are those of Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa.

English is extremely important as a second language in India and has official or semi-official use in the Philippines, Malaysia, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, and other countries in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and elsewhere. It is the international language of the airlines, of the sea and shipping, of computer technology, of science, and indeed of communication generally. When a Japanese business firm deals with a client in Saudi Arabia, their language of communication is likely to be English.

Chinese has far more native speakers than any other language, and Spanish and Hindi are competitors of English for second place. But English has more nonnative speakers than any other language, is more widely disbursed around the world, and is used for more purposes than any other language. The extraordinary spread of English is not due to any inherent virtue, but rather to the fact that by historical chance it has become the most useful language for others to learn.

In the course of its spread, English has diversified by adapting to local circumstances and cultures, so there are different varieties of English in every country. However, because the heart of its usefulness is its ability to serve as an international medium of communication, English is likely to retain a more or less homogeneous core—an international standard based on the usage of the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet each national variety has its own character and contribution to make to world English. Here we look briefly at two quite different varieties, Irish English and Indian English.

PODEL  
9.11



## IRISH ENGLISH

Irish English is an old national variety with close links to both Britain and America. It has had an influence far greater than its number of speakers or the political and economic power of Ireland. Because large numbers of Irish men and women emigrated or were transported to the British colonies and America, their speech has left its imprint on other varieties of English around the world. The influence of Irish English on that of Newfoundland and the Caribbean, for example, is clear. In addition, many of the common features of Australian and American English may be due to a shared influence from Ireland.

Irish influence began early. Irish scribes created the model for Anglo-Saxon writing habits, as mentioned in Chapter 3. Irish authors have been part of the mainstream of English literature since the eighteenth century: Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Edmund Burke, and Maria Edgeworth from the earlier part of that period, and from the twentieth century: William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, John Millington Synge, James Joyce, Sean O'Casey, and Samuel Beckett.

Present-day Irish English is the historical development of seventeenth-century British and Scottish English. English had been introduced to the western isle some five hundred years earlier (about 1170), when King Henry II decided to add Ireland to his domain. The twelfth-century settlers from England were Normans with Welsh and English followers. Through the thirteenth century, the Middle Irish English of those settlers spread in Ireland, after which it began to decline in use.

The Normans were linguistically adaptable, having been Scandinavians who learned French in Normandy and English in Britain. When they moved to Ireland, they began to learn Gaelic and to assimilate to the local culture. As a result, by the early sixteenth century, Middle Irish English was dying out, being still spoken in only a few areas of the English "Pale" (literally, a palisaded enclosure), the territory controlled by the English.

Because of its declining control over Ireland, the English government began a series of "plantations," that is, colonizations of the island. The first of these were during the reign of Mary Tudor, but they continued under her successors, with English people settling in Ireland, and Scots migrating to Ulster in the north. By the middle of the seventeenth century, under the Puritan Commonwealth, English control over Ireland and the position of the English language in the country were both firm.

The Modern Irish English of the Tudor and later "planters," or settlers, was not a development of Middle Irish English, but a new importation. It continued to expand so that by the late nineteenth century Ireland had become predominantly an English-speaking country, with Gaelic spoken mainly in western rural areas. The independence of most of Ireland, with the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, intensified the patriotic promotion of revived Gaelic (also called Erse) in the south, but its use tends to be more symbolic than practical.

Toward the northeast of the island, Irish English blends into the variety of Scots brought across the sea by settlers from the Scottish lowlands, who

outnumbered English settlers in that area by six to one. Consequently, in parts of the northern counties of Donegal, Derry, Antrim, and Down, the language popularly used is Ulster Scots, a variety of southern Scots, rather than Irish English.

Among the distinctive characteristics of Irish English is the old-fashioned pronunciation of words like *tea*, *meat*, *easy*, *cheat*, *steal*, and *Jesus* with the vowel [e] as in *say* and *mate* (a pronunciation noted in Chapter 7, 159–60). Stress falls later in some words than is usual elsewhere: *affluence* and *architecture*, for example. *Keen* 'lament for the dead' is a characteristic Irish word widely known outside Ireland, and the use of *evening* for the time after noon is a meaning shared with dialects in England (from which it was doubtless derived) and with Australia and the Southern United States (whither it doubtless came with Irish immigrants). *Poor mouth* 'pretense of being very poor' is another expression imported from Ireland into the American South.

Especially characteristic of Irish are such grammatical constructions as the use of *do* and *be* to indicate a habitual action (as in "He does work," "He bees working," and "He does be working") as opposed to an action at a moment in time (as in "He is working"); that construction may have been an influence on African American English. Also, Irish English avoids the perfect tense, using *after* to signal a just-completed action: "She is after talking with him," that is, "She has just talked with him."

Other Irishisms of grammar include the "cleft" construction: "It is a long time that I am waiting" for "I have been waiting for a long time"; rhetorical questions: "Whenever I listened, didn't I hear the sound of him sleeping"; and the conjunction *and* used before participles as a subordinator with the sense 'when, as, while': "He was after waking up, and she pounding on the door with all her might."

### INDIAN ENGLISH

English, although a relative latecomer to India, is one of the subcontinent's most important languages. It is, after Hindi, the second most widely spoken language in India. Because India includes so many different languages, many incomprehensible to other speakers in the country, an interlanguage is needed. Efforts to promote Hindi as the sole national language have met strong resistance, especially in the south, where the native languages are non-Indo-European and local pride resists northern Hindi but accepts foreign English.

The entry of English into India can be traced to as early as the end of the year 1600, when Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the East India Company of London merchants for a monopoly of trade in the Orient. Missionaries and missionary schools followed the merchants. In the nineteenth century, the British Raj (or government in India) was formed and promoted English instruction throughout the land. For young Indians to make their way in life, they needed to assimilate to English culture, particularly the language, and so an Indian dialect of English came into existence.

The pronunciation of Indian English is greatly influenced by local languages and thus varies in different parts of the country. For example, [t], [d],

and [n] may have a retroflex articulation, with the tongue curled back and touching the roof of the mouth. Initial [sk-], [sl-], and [sp-] do not occur in Hindi, so Indian English has [ɪskul] for *school*, [ɪslɪp] for *sleep*, and [ɪspiʃ] for *speech*. The sounds [w] and [v] may not be distinguished phonemically, so *wet* and *vet* are pronounced alike. In some Indian languages, aspirated and unaspirated stops, such as [t] and [tʰ] are different phonemes, and voiced stops such as [bʰ] and [dʰ] may be aspirated. The vowels [e] of *fate* and [o] of *boat* are often articulated as pure long vowels [e:] and [o:], rather than the phonetic diphthongs [ɛɪ] and [əʊ] of other varieties of English. Also, Indian English may be syllable-timed rather than stress-timed like British and American. Stress-timing pronounces strongly stressed syllables with about equal intervals between them, so hurries over intervening unstressed syllables, something like “aTIME – toSLEEP – andbeQUIet,” creating a syncopated effect. Syllable timing gives approximately the same intervals between all syllables regardless of their stress, something like “a – time – to – sleep – and – be – qui – et,” creating a staccato effect.

Grammatically, native Indian languages also affect Indian English. Questions may be formed without inversion of the subject and verb: “Why you are saying that?” An invariable tag question is used: “We are meeting tomorrow, isn’t it?” Progressive forms are used for stative verbs: “He is knowing English well.”

The most numerous differences are probably in vocabulary. Many native Indian words are imported into Indian English, of which the following are a very small sample, emphasizing some that have entered wider English use: *amah* ‘nurse,’ *babu* ‘Indian gentleman,’ *baksheesh* ‘gratuity, tip,’ *banyan* ‘fig tree,’ *bhang* ‘marijuana,’ *chit* ‘note,’ *crore* ‘ten million,’ *dhota* ‘loin cloth,’ *dinghy* ‘small boat,’ *ghee* ‘clarified butter,’ *kedgerie* ‘a dish of rice and other ingredients,’ *kulfi* ‘a type of ice cream,’ *masala* ‘a blend of spices,’ *memsahib* ‘European lady,’ *nabob* ‘person of wealth or prominence,’ *nautch* ‘professional dancing entertainment,’ *pachisi* ‘a board and dice game,’ *pishpash* ‘rice soup,’ *rooty* ‘bread,’ *sepoy* ‘policeman, soldier,’ *shalwar* ‘baggy trousers,’ *shampoo* ‘massage,’ *swaraj* ‘home rule,’ *tabla* ‘pair of hand drums,’ *tandur* ‘earthen oven,’ *vina* ‘a musical stringed instrument,’ and *walla* ‘person connected with a particular occupation.’

## THE ESSENTIAL ONENESS OF ALL ENGLISH

We have now come to an end of our comparative survey of the present state of English. Clearly, much more remains unreported. As Edmund Spenser writes in the *Mutability Cantos* concluding his *Faerie Queene*, the dominant earthly force is the ‘ever-whirling wheele /Of Change’ (ll. 1-2, in Butcher *English Today* 13), and the Internet only accelerates that global linguistic whirling. Linguist David Crystal coined the phrase *Internet linguistics* for the scientific study of all manifestations of language in the electronic medium. *Computer-mediated communication* (CMC) involves any exchange of ideas transacted through two or more networked computers, including e-mails, instant messages, chat rooms, bulletin boards, *LISTSERVs*, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), blogs, audio-video chat, social networking sites such as Facebook, and texting, among others.

What should have emerged from this brief treatment is a conception of both the essential unity and the engaging variety of the English language in all its national, regional, social, and stylistic manifestations. Look at all the Englishes: Philippine English, Hong Kong English, South African English, Canadian English, Welsh English, Korean English, Singaporean English, New Zealand English, Scottish English, Japanese English, International English, Liberian English, BBC English, Malaysian English, German English, Spanish English, Yorkshire English, African American English, Jamaican English, Lancashire English, Australian English, Hawaiian English, Irish English, Indian English, American English, and so forth and so on (Butcher *English Today* 14).

What, then, it may be asked, is the English language? Is it the speech of London, of Boston, of New York, of Atlanta, of Melbourne, of Montreal, of Calcutta, of Seoul? Is it the English of the metropolitan daily newspaper, of the bureaucratic memo, of the quick e-mail, of Facebook wall posts, of the contemporary poet, of religious ritual, of football sportscasts, of political harangues, of loving whispers? A possible answer might be, none of these, but rather the sum of them all, along with all other mergers and developments that have taken place wherever what is thought of as the English language is spoken by those who have learned it as their mother tongue or as an additional language. However, at the moment, the most influential form of English is the standard one written by British and American authors—and it should be obvious by now that the importance of that form is due not to any inherent virtues it may possess, but wholly to its usefulness to people around the world, whatever their first language.

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