

Beyond the Words: Diversity in American English

¹¹ The motto of the United States of America, *E Pluribus Unum* means “out of many, one.” But one *what*? Valid points are made on both sides of the English Only debate, of course, but I have yet to hear an argument for English as the official language of the United States that respectfully acknowledges the *pluribus* (“many”) part of our motto. A surge of resistance, the urge to protect what we love, or what is familiar, is an understandable first reaction to what appear to be efforts to dilute, bastardize, or submerge so vital and intimate a possession as our language. But to whom does “our” language belong? The evolution of American English into a rich expression of our culture is, upon even a casual inspection, a drama of sorts. The English we defend is a testament to the multicultural nature of the United States. Native speakers of the languages some would like to stamp out have contributed some of their best to American English, and they are not the only groups to have done so. A broader definition of American is required for a just solution to the language debate. Beneath the words and structure of American English, we are inventing, defining, and expressing our collective and individual selves. Our American culture is evolving as we speak.

¹² The adolescent British colonies of North America fought the Revolutionary War for the freedom to invent themselves. Among many more consequential outcomes, they changed the spellings of some English words (*colour* to *color*, *favour* to *favor*, *theatre* to *theater*, etc.) and invented many new ones. The word *presidential* did not exist until the U.S.. had a need for it. Webster’s dictionary was written to help immigrants to the U.S.. with the spelling and especially the pronunciation of American English words (as opposed to the British version). Some rules of etiquette were also revised in the revolutionaries’ efforts to symbolize and ritualize their freedom. Our complicated system of wielding a knife and fork is one such example. British table manners are infinitely less contrived, but we were determined to separate ourselves, even in trivial ways. As the United States spread across the continent, each new territory, more and more distant from its source, took on its own character, which then asserted itself on

the language. Different climates, terrain, and occupations required new words to express new experiences.

^{¶3} No living language stands still, however much we might wish at times that it would.

Concentrations of people with common ancestry inevitably included words and expressions from their first language in their use of English. Many of those words have been in common usage for decades or longer. I would not want to try to get along without *Irish stew*, *filet mignon*, *hors d'oeuvres*, *chow mein*, *minestrone*, *tortilla*, or Seattle's beloved *espresso* and *croissants*. Aren't we all on the town for *Cinco de Mayo*, *Mardi Gras* and St. Patrick's Day? These additions to English reflect cultural changes, people working with the tools at hand to define and express themselves. The "official" language must accommodate all of us. This evolution indicates forward motion; it is something in which we can, if we choose, take great pride.

^{¶4} One of the least threatening examples of people trying to define themselves uniquely while making a statement about the majority language's inability to accommodate them is the slang of teenagers. Their customized language can vary greatly from group to group depending on their life experience and the degree to which they feel excluded. I listen intently to my son and his friends defining their experience. *Plag*, for example, is an adjective, with the very same meaning as *dorky*, *unhip*, *out-of-style*, unfashionable. None of the other words, though, quite captures what his group, in his time, means to express. *Doe*, an adjective, means *good*. The adjective *booty*, on the other hand, is negative. *Booty*, some will remember, was youth slang years ago, but as a noun (a body part, actually) and with more positive connotations. Young people customize the tools of communication they inherit. This is brilliant since as it increases the tools' usefulness, they are customizing themselves, as well. Yet, this hallmark of youth does not frighten us; we trust they will grow out of this stage.

^{¶5} Women of all races, too, have slowly, and at great personal cost, forced American English to yield to their realities. The 14th edition of *Emily Post's Etiquette* is considered by many to be the bible of manners. Ms. Post states, "Ms. has no meaning (other than manuscript) and . . . the only possible pronunciations are either unattractive or unwieldy. I recommend avoiding it . . . except for a woman who is living with a man and is neither married or single" (17). Luckily, most of us do not consult Emily Post as often as we consult our own sense of what works for us. The courtesy titles traditionally allowed women

do not serve the reality of family structures and business life today. Whether Ms. Post agrees with it or not, *Ms. lives*. Women added the word *feminism* to the language of freedom when none other would serve. The expressions *palimony*, *single parent*, and *latch-key children* were incorporated to describe new situations. Old words took new or additional meanings: *partner* and *significant other*, for example. As the roles of women, and the definition of family, expanded, it became necessary to invent and reinvent words to describe American life. American English must evolve to make possible the inclusion of all of the diverse experience of the people of America. While some perceive the feminist movement to be threatening to the fabric of society, I doubt many believe women eventually will outgrow their cause.

¹⁶ Will the Native, African, and Hispanic Americans mature past their need to make the language accommodate their experience? We have no reason to believe so. Nor will Asian Americans or new immigrants grow out of their desire to assure, sometimes by operating their own schools, that their children will carry forth their heritage. James Baldwin, in his essay “Black English,” says, “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances or in order not to be submerged by a reality they cannot articulate” (184). Currently, one-third of the American people do not trace their roots to Europe. Some Americans of European descent are already experiencing what it means to be a minority. No wonder our knee-jerk reaction is fear. Americans accustomed to the privilege afforded majority groups fear the indignities, isolation, and prejudice minorities have endured. Efforts to control, or energy spent judging, the multicultural nature of the U.S. or the evolution of American English will not keep these changes in the ethnic balance of the population from occurring. What we can do, however, is change the way we feel about our multicultural society. We can learn to value it.

¹⁷ Our instinct to protect what we know and understand, and to fear the unknown, often serves our needs—mindless instinct also serves the other animals. I think we should remember, as well, that many things set us apart from the other animals; our ability to choose is at the top of the list. We can choose to acknowledge the positive value of our diversity. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard” (127). It would serve us all to accommodate in our definition of *American*, the voices of all those who make their homes here. A thoughtful look at the evolution of the American English we love and defend might provide clues to a just answer to our “official language” question. The need to maintain a standard of language through which we can make ourselves

understood in government, business, and literature internationally is legitimate. The need and moral obligation to encourage the evolution of an English language as well as the respectful acknowledgment of the importance of other languages that effectively capture and allow expression of our American experience are not so easily met. If we Americans were to actually become who our Constitution says we are, those who do not speak English may just be inspired to learn.



Works Cited



- Baldwin, James. "On Black English." *About Language*, 4th ed. Ed. William H. Roberts and Gregoire Turgeon. Geneva: Houghton-Mifflin, 1995. 184-86.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Where do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon, 1967.
- Post, Elizabeth L. *Emily Post's Etiquette: A Guide to Modern Manners*. 14th ed. New York: Harper, 1984.
- Story of English: Pioneers, Oh Pioneers*. Videocassette. MacNeil-Lehrer/Gannett Productions/BBC PMI Films, 1986.