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English in North America

Edited by John Algeo

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## I EXTERNAL HISTORY

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*John Algeo*

### 1.1 History, external and internal

The history of a language is intimately related to the history of the community of its speakers, so neither can be studied without considering the other.

The external history of a language is the history of its speakers as their history affects the language they use. It includes such factors as the topography of the land where they live, their migrations, their wars, their conquests of and by others, their government, their arts and sciences, their economics and technology, their religions and philosophies, their trade and commerce, their marriage customs and family patterns, their architecture, their sports and recreations, and indeed every aspect of their lives. Language is so basic to human activity that there is nothing human beings do that does not influence and, in turn, is not influenced by the language they speak. Indeed, if Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) was right, our very thought patterns and view of the world are inescapably connected with our language.

It is, of course, possible to view the history of a language merely as internal history – a series of changes in the inventory of linguistic units (vocabulary) and the system by which they are related (grammar), quite apart from any experiences undergone by the users of the language. We can describe how the vocabulary is affected by loanwords or how new words are derived from the language's own lexical resources. We can formulate sound laws and shifts, describe changes that convert an inflected language to an isolating one, or a syntax that puts an object before its verb to one that puts the verb before its object. That is, we can describe a language purely as a formal object. But such a view will be abstract, bloodless, and often lacking in explanation for the linguistic changes.

Because language is a human capacity, the history of a particular language is linked with that of its speakers. As a part of a total culture, a language

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cannot be completely separated from the culture of which it is a part. To extend Meillet's dictum cited by Salikoko Mufwene (at the end of § 8.3), a culture is a system in which everything hangs together. Therefore to understand the whole culture, we must understand the language; and vice versa, to understand the language, we must understand the culture. The effort to trace the history of a linguistic system and its units (lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic history) is the diachronic aspect of microlinguistics. The effort to trace the history of the speakers of that language is the diachronic aspect of macrolinguistics.

This chapter does not offer a history of America, but rather a brief account of political and social events that can reasonably be seen as having had a significant influence on the English language. Some events of great moment in other ways are therefore treated lightly or not at all, and other events of small import in themselves, but with consequences for the language, are treated at greater length. The difference between the two kinds of events is, to be sure, a matter of judgment.

With respect to the events it reports, the aim of this chapter is that of Max Lerner (1987, xvi) in his cultural history of America – not to present either “a rosy and euphoric picture seen in a haze of promise or an unsparring indictment” but rather “to avoid both these sins . . . the sin of complacency and the sin of self-hatred.”

The external history of American English has involved a number of factors with profound effects on the language: population mobility, innovation, discontinuity with the past, decentralization, democracy, a large land area, and a large and ethnically diverse population.

First among those factors is mobility. The colonists were by definition a moving population, but as settlers they did not simply settle in. Rather they continued moving. Americans have consequently always been a peripatetic population. The history of America has been described as one of an expanding frontier, from the first settlements along the Atlantic coast to “a small step” for a man onto the surface of the Moon.

The second factor follows from the first: mobility requires adaptability and innovation. Change of location requires change of lifestyle. The first colonists could not live in the New World just as they had in the Old. They had to adapt. Later immigrants likewise had to adjust to the new conditions they found. Change and adaptation became hallmarks of American life. Innovation became the norm of American life – in social structures, technology, and attitudes.

Innovation led to a third factor: a sense of discontinuity with the past and of perpetual youth. We can never be actually separated from our past,

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but a perception of separation affects our view of ourselves. American life and language are, to be sure, unmistakable continuations of the life and language of England. And, indeed, in certain respects, Americans have been more conservative than Britons. But in other respects they are less bound to former ways. The emphasis of the “New” World has been on its newness and its break with the Old World. Immigrant populations typically retain a sentimental attachment to the “old country,” but assimilate into the new pattern of life, while inevitably changing that pattern by their assimilation. The result is a perpetual sense of newness. In Oscar Wilde’s bon mot, “The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three [today four] hundred years.”

Another consequence of mobility has been decentralization. The very structure of American government is one of a federal union of states, which retain certain prerogatives and rights. On many matters, there is no single American law, but fifty different laws. So also, though Washington, DC, is the governmental capital of the nation and New York City is a commercial capital, there is no cultural capital in the nation. No location in the United States corresponds to London as the center of the United Kingdom.

A related factor is that of democracy or, perhaps more accurately, “social mobility.” The latter term’s first recorded use in the *OED* is from 1925, by Pitirim A. Sorokin, founder of the Department of Sociology at Harvard: “We used to think that in the United States . . . social mobility was greatest.” Equality of life in America can be and has been exaggerated. Class differences certainly exist, based on wealth, fame, education, profession, connections, and other such factors, although they may be less clearly defined and more permeable than in some other places. But there is no inherited American aristocracy to rule or serve as a model. It is part of the American myth that the only aristocracy in the land is one of merit. Myths may be untrue, yet they are powerfully influential.

In physical size, the United States is nearly as large as the entire European continent, with even greater variability in climate and topography. The sheer size of the country presents English speakers with a wide environment to respond to and with extensive resources to draw on. The major stages of territorial expansion of the United States after the post-Revolutionary settlement with Britain at the Treaty of Paris (1783) were the Louisiana Purchase from France (1803), the Florida cession by treaty with Spain (1819), the admission of the Republic of Texas (1845), the Oregon acquisition by treaty with Great Britain (1846), the Southwestern cession by conquest from Mexico (1848), the Gadsden Purchase of territory in southern

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Arizona and New Mexico from Mexico (1853), the Alaska Purchase from Russia (1867), and the annexation of the Republic of Hawaii (1898).

In population, the United States is nearly five times as large as the United Kingdom, having grown from a little under 4 million in the first census of 1790 to just under 250 million in 1990. The more people who use a language, the more opportunity there is for the language to change in diverse ways.

Moreover, the mixture of ethnic groups, which began in Colonial times and has never ceased, constantly brings diverse foreign influences to bear on American English. America has always been a land of diverse immigrants. The Amerindians were early immigrants from Asia, and the process of migrating and mixing has never ceased. English has always been, and continues in Britain today to be, heavily influenced by other languages. But the diversity of such influence and the common level on which it operates are probably greater in America than in any other native-English-speaking land.

## 1.2 Periods in the history of American English

The history of American English can be conventionally but usefully divided into three periods whose beginnings are marked by critical events in the history of Americans (Algeo 1991). Those periods are –

- The Colonial period, initiated by the establishment of the first permanent English-speaking colony at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Though English speakers had established contact with the New World, both directly or indirectly, before this time, the Jamestown colony began the creation of a new variety of the language. Three factors brought this new variety into existence: the exposure of English speakers to new experiences on the American continent that required new ways of talking about them, the begetting of a native population to whom those experiences and the new ways of talking were normal, and the obstacle that distance made for communication with their fellow English speakers in the motherland. The result is what might metaphorically be called the gestation period of American English.

- The National period, beginning with the American Declaration of Independence from England in 1776. Political independence brought with it inevitably – and in the case of the new United States, swiftly – a quest for cultural independence that included linguistic self-awareness. Many American colonists had from the beginning displayed independence and self-assertion. Indeed, their desire for independence – economic, governmental, and ecclesiastical – was a factor in the foundation of several of the colonies, though economic ambition on the part of the sponsors of various colonies also played a prominent role. After the American

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Revolution, the heady feeling of freedom from King and Parliament led to an assertion of other sorts of independence. During this period, English-speaking Americans spread over the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in the process absorbing and being influenced by the cultures of other settlers. To continue the metaphor, this period might be called the childhood and adolescence of American English.

- The International period, beginning with the Spanish-American War of 1898. Though the Spanish-American War was hardly more than a skirmish – a “splendid little war,” as it was called at the time – it was the turning point between some historical needs and the means of satisfying those needs. The needs were for new frontiers, new markets, and a new sense of purpose.

America had begun as a frontier land; when the first settlers arrived, the entire eastern seaboard was frontier. As the settlers spread inland, the frontier continually receded to the west. By the end of the nineteenth century, the continent had been spanned and the expansion-minded and expanding population looked for new frontiers to absorb its surplus restlessness. In addition, after the Civil War, the successfully cohesive nation underwent an explosion of economic power. America had always been a supplier to other countries, but now it needed new markets to serve and be supported by.

Perhaps most important, America’s sense of national purpose, defined very early in its history and adhered to faithfully, was one of “manifest destiny.” Although that catchphrase is now often regarded with irony as chauvinistic hubris, a sense of social and collective calling has been basic to the national consciousness. It underlay the foundation of the earliest New England colonies, whose members listened to the words of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.14): “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.” Today, we may regard the Puritans’ belief that they were that “city set on a hill” as self-righteous arrogance, but it was a motivating force for them. The Founding Fathers also went about their task of creating a new nation with a sense of historical inevitability and purpose. The nineteenth-century belief that it was America’s “manifest destiny” to expand over the continent from east to west was only one expression of a much wider sense of national purpose. But when that expansion had been accomplished, the nation felt called upon to look for its destiny elsewhere.

The immediate results of the Spanish-American War included the independence of Cuba, the acquisition of the territory of Puerto Rico by the United States, and the forced sale of the Philippines by Spain. But the long-range result was the movement of America into international politics. The Spanish-American War was followed by the nation’s late entry into World War I, critical entry into World War II, and decisive role in bringing about

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the fall of the Iron Curtain, thus ending the division of the world into two evenly balanced power camps.

The spread of the English language and its culture over the world is a major event in human history. That spread was effected chiefly by two impulses: the creation of the British Empire, which was at its height in the nineteenth century, and the spread of American technological and economic hegemony, which reached an apogee at the turn of the twentieth into the twenty-first century. The worldwide dissemination of English, most recently in its American variety, affects other languages around the globe, but it also affects English, which is changed by its contacts with other languages, just as it changes them. So one sequel to that “splendid little war,” lasting only a few months, was the influence that American English has come to exert on other languages and the reciprocal influence they exert on English through its American variety. The otherwise minor Spanish-American War marked the maturity of American English and its entrance onto the world stage.

The future is always uncertain. It is practically certain that other English-speaking countries will come to play an increasing role in the world history of English, and it is probable that some of them will in time become principal players on that field, joining or perhaps displacing Britain and America. It is also possible that the English language will one day be replaced as the dominant means of communication for science, technology, commerce, and world culture generally. But that day gives no sign of dawning soon. During the foreseeable future, world culture (as distinct from local, national, and ethnic cultures) is being expressed through the English language, and increasingly through its American variety.

How the big consequence of the present-day role of American English on the world stage developed from the small beginnings of colonial settlement and how English was changed in America during the process is the subject of this book. The focus of this chapter is on the experiences of Americans during the four hundred years of their history as those experiences impacted the language they speak.

### 1.3 The Colonial period

The English language began to be influenced by the New World long before any English speakers settled there. That influence came partly from the exploration of North America by English adventurers, and partly indirectly from contacts between English speakers and other Europeans with experience in the New World. But such influences were on English generally; they

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did not create a new variety of the language. For the latter to come into being, it was necessary that communities of English speakers should settle in America and be cut off from easy and frequent contact with their fellows in the motherland.

The process of diversification between British and American English began with the settlement of Jamestown by about a hundred colonists in 1607. That colony was also the site in British America of the first cultivation of tobacco, the first representative governmental body (which evolved out of the 1619 House of Burgesses), the first African slave population, and the first Anglican Church. It was, however, never a thriving colony, partly because it was built on unhealthy marshland and partly because the first settlers were not self-sufficient. They were “gallants” faced with an inhospitable landscape and none of the amenities of civilization they had known (Kraus 40).

The first permanent New England colony was Plymouth, settled in 1620 by Pilgrims. They, unlike the Puritans, had left the Anglican Church and sought to establish their own separatist theocracy in America after having spent a dozen years in Leiden, Holland. The Pilgrims were a closely organized minority in the colony, who controlled it during its early decades. Plymouth Colony was not chartered, but became part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691.

The major English colonization of America started about 1630. David Hackett Fischer (1989) has proposed a history of settlement of the American colonies in four major waves, involving different places of origin, classes and customs, places of settlement, and times. His argument is that the total life of the colonists falls into four cultural patterns, embracing dialect, housing styles, attitudes toward life, religion, superstitions, food, dress, education, entertainment, government, naming, childcare, family customs, values, and indeed folkways and mores generally. He further postulates that these four patterns of culture continued after the Colonial period, assimilating new immigrants from non-English countries, and that they still exist in contemporary forms marking basic differences in the national life. Fischer's is the most ambitious theory of American cultural history ever put forward.

There were, to be sure, other movements of settlers and other cultural complexes than Fischer's four primary ones, but the latter were these:

- (1) Puritans from eastern England to Massachusetts Bay, 1629–41.
- (2) Gentry and their servants from southern England to Virginia, 1642–75.
- (3) Quakers from the North Midlands and Wales to the Delaware Valley, 1675–1725.

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- (4) Common people from northern England, northern Ireland, and Scotland to the Appalachians, 1717–75.

Fischer's overview of the settlement and subsequent history of America is subject to the flaws of all grand generalizations and can be criticized in various of its details and as an oversimplification. Nevertheless, it provides a useful schema for tracing and relating together the external and internal history of America.

### 1.3.1 *Puritans in New England and the northern colonies*

The first great wave of settlement was the Puritan migration, which took place during a decade (the 1630s) of great social uncertainty in England. King Charles I was attempting to rule without Parliament, and Archbishop William Laud was trying to purge the Anglican Church of its Puritan faction and to require high-church practices like genuflection and chanting, anathema to the Puritans. In addition, the cloth industry, in which nearly a fourth of the early New England colonists had worked, was depressed. During the decade, more than 20,000 Puritans emigrated to Massachusetts, leaving some English towns half depopulated. At the end of the decade, the migrations suddenly stopped and even reversed, with Puritans returning to England. In the 1640s the Civil War broke out which was to result in the establishment of the Commonwealth and the temporary dominance of Puritan interests in England.

The primary motive for the Puritan emigration was religious and political, although the settlers included some economic refugees as well. The Puritan leaders came to Massachusetts to found a new Zion on the new continent. They were largely educated and middle class, with a notable absence of lower-class members, and they came not singly but by families. Although they came from all over England, East Anglia was their principal place of origin. The typical Puritan leader was well-educated, a graduate of Cambridge, with a strong religious and social commitment. The typical Puritan follower was a craftsman – literate, urban, disciplined, and pious. The Massachusetts colony was remarkably homogeneous, especially in its leadership.

The institutions and attitudes of the New England colonies were very influential: “Their heavy reliance on the Bible, and their preoccupation with platforms, programs of action, and schemes of confederation – rather than with religious dogma – fixed the temper of their society, and foreshadowed American political life for centuries to come” (Boorstin 1958, 19). The



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Puritan insistence on written laws and agreements, rather than on an oral common law, foreshadowed the American Constitution as a secular bible.

The colonists brought with them the speechways of their native counties. The “Norfolk whine,” associated with a high-pitched nasality, was the forerunner of the “Yankee twang” of eastern New England (Fischer 57–62). From Massachusetts, the New England colonists ultimately migrated southward to New Jersey, eastward to Maine and Nova Scotia, northward to Canada, and westward to upper New York and on to the Pacific coast. In doing so, they took with them their customs and dialect, which became the basis of the Northern dialect of American English.

New Hampshire’s first settlement was established in 1623, although the region was not named after the English county until 1629. Between 1641 and 1679, the region was under the government of Massachusetts. In 1679, it was made into a royal province.

Rhode Island was settled by dissidents from the Massachusetts Bay Colony – by Roger Williams and his congregation in 1636, by William Coddington and Anne Hutchinson in 1638, and by others later. A confederacy of the settlements was established in 1647, and a royal charter issued in 1663 became the foundation of the colony’s government well into the nineteenth century.

Connecticut was also first settled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1633 and 1638. Settlements in that region were united under a single government in 1665.

### 1.3.2 *Catholics in Maryland*

In one of the minor emigrations, the English settled Maryland in 1634 under the leadership of Leonard Calvert, younger brother of Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore. The colony was intended as a haven for Roman Catholics, but because of a lack of Catholic colonists, Protestants were in the majority from the beginning. The economic base of the colony was tobacco farming, using indentured servants from England and, after the late 1630s, African slaves. Religious tolerance was established by law, but applied only to those professing a belief in the divinity of Jesus, and denial of the Trinity was a capital crime. The city of Baltimore was founded in 1729.

### 1.3.3 *Cavaliers and others in the South*

The second great wave of English settlement, to Virginia, took place during the Civil War and the resulting Commonwealth and Protectorate

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(1642–60), when Royalists were not in favor in England. The nickname of the state, “Old Dominion,” may allude to the loyalty of its colonists to the exiled Charles II. The dominance of the Puritan oligarchy in England during the Commonwealth and Protectorate sent large numbers of cavaliers to Europe and Virginia. Virginia’s elite, many of whom were younger sons of English gentry, were Royalist in politics and Anglican in religion. Two-thirds of them were from the south or west of England; and a third had lived for some time in London.

Whereas the New England settlers were primarily middle class, Virginia settlers were mainly lower and upper class, or at least would-be upper class: “In England in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century the ambition of a prosperous tradesman was to become a country gentleman” (Boorstin 1958, 99), and Virginia offered that possibility. The ruling elite, of whatever origin in the motherland, were only a small fraction; 75 percent of all immigrants were indentured servants. Most of the Virginia colonists were rural rather than urban, farmers or unskilled laborers rather than craftsmen, and illiterate. Three quarters of them were males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. They came from the same southern and western counties as the elite.

Features of Virginia speech have been traced to the dialects of southern and western England (Fischer 256–64). Citing such scholars as Bennett Wood Green (1899) and Cleanth Brooks (1985), as well as Hans Kurath (1972, 66) and Raven McDavid (1967), Fischer (259) concludes:

Virtually all peculiarities of grammar, syntax, vocabulary and pronunciation which have been noted as typical of Virginia were recorded in the English counties of Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Oxford, Gloucester, Warwick or Worcester.

The upper classes of Virginia, and later South Carolina, maintained a closer and more sympathetic connection with the establishment in the motherland than did those of any of the other colonies (Fisher in §§ 2.8.3, 2.9). The speechway that developed in these colonies blended upper-class and lower-class British usage with later influences from the African slave population. It became the basis of the Southern dialect of American English.

Following earlier efforts by the Spanish and the French to settle the Carolina coast, in the 1650s Virginia settlers began moving into the territory that had been called Carolina as early as 1629. In the 1660s a royal grant established the colony of Carolina and settlers from England arrived in 1670. The colony was governed from Charleston, founded in 1680. North Carolina was set apart and governed by a deputy from Charleston, and