PART 1

American English

1 American English: its origins and history

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Editors' introduction

This chapter explores the origins and history of American English, with an underlying focus on its linguistic diversity. *Guaiacum*, taken from the Taino language in the Bahamas in 1533, was the first American word to enter the English language. But, as Richard W. Bailey notes, English speakers migrating to the North American mainland and the Caribbean from the seventeenth century on had many other contacts with Native American languages, and influences from Native American languages on American English vocabulary were extensive. They include words like *chocolate*, *canoe*, and *powwow*, which have survived to the present day, and words like *mangummenauk* (an edible acorn) and *netop* ('a good friend'), which have not survived.

This chapter surveys the population growth and linguistic development of the USA century by century, repeatedly acknowledging the inputs from its various ethnic strands: for example, *bogus* (African), *juke-box* (African American), *cookie* (Dutch), *bayou* (French), *macaroni* (Italian), *geisha* (Japanese), *vigilante* (Spanish), *lutefish* (Swedish), and *bagel* (Yiddish). American English is more than the sum of inheritances from its input languages, of course, and this chapter details its many innovations, including initialisms like *AIDS*, manufactured words like *Kleenex*, derived forms like *antinuclear*, compounds like *rock star*, and shortenings like *bra*.

But at the heart of the story throughout is the relative multilingualism and multidialectalism of the USA and its corresponding linguistic attitudes and ideologies. In the seventeenth century, for instance, pidgin-like varieties of English were exemplified among both Amerindian and African speakers, and there was open respect for linguistic diversity and substantial interest in it. By the late eighteenth century, the USA was highly multilingual, more so than the average European nation then or now, and accommodations were being made in schools and churches for non-English varieties, German and Mohawk among them. But in the immigration-restricted half-century that followed World War I, the USA was more monolingual than ever, and multilingualism became "unpatriotic." Another issue this chapter traces across the centuries is how different American English is – and how different it should be – from British English. The fear that the two varieties would drift away to the point of mutual unintelligibility has proved to be unfounded, and American English combines both vibrant diversity and relative commonality.

"O my America, my new found land" wrote John Donne in the 1590s in a sensuous comparison of his mistress's nakedness with the "late discoveries" made on the

far western shore of the Atlantic. English adventurers had penetrated the mystery of the North American continent and had brought back wonders – animals and plants unknown in England, and even people, Manteo and Wanchese, Amerindians brought to Queen Elizabeth's court as part of the bounty of Walter Raleigh's 1585 voyage to Roanoke Island in present-day North Carolina. Those who missed the opportunity of introducing themselves to these visitors could read the whole story in Thomas Harriot's *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588). Modern enthusiasts for the details of space aliens merely continue the excitement these "new" people and their exotic homeland aroused in Britain four hundred years ago.

America was reflected in the English language half a century before these first-hand contacts, however. The first word of American origin to reach English was *guaiacum*. That word took a roundabout route from the Taino language of the Bahamas where it was used for a tropical plant and the medicine derived from its resin. In 1519, it appeared in a Latin medical treatise by Ulrich von Hutten, who regarded *guaiacum* as a cure for an affliction he suffered himself, a mysterious sickness associated with the siege of Naples that had ended in 1495 but was actually an export from the new world to the old. When the disease reached England, it was known as the *French pox* (the earliest known citation of this phrase is from 1503), and it was a devastating infirmity. By 1510, it had claimed ten million victims, a huge share of the world population at the time. Naturally there was great interest in finding a cure, and von Hutten identified, correctly, that the disease came from Columbus's first voyages to the Caribbean. He even was able to discern the Spanish mispronunciation of the Taino word; the Spanish write *guaiacum*, he said, but "the people of that yland pronounce with open mouthe Huaicum." Thomas Paynell, an advocate of scientific works in English rather than in Latin, translated von Hutten's book, and so, in 1533, *guaiacum* became the first word of American origin to enter the language. (Not until 1686, in a translation from an Italian poem, did English acquire another name for the disease *guaiacum* was supposed to cure, one taken from the name of the shepherd-hero of the work, *syphilis*.)

When speakers of English began to arrive on American shores to create permanent settlements, they found themselves in a very diverse linguistic culture. Historians of the language have interpreted the evidence very selectively and have offered as evidence of cultural contacts among the many languages of early America the borrowings from indigenous languages that have survived into modern usage. *Chocolate*, *canoe*, *iguana*, *tobacco*, *tomato* and other such words from the Caribbean and known everywhere suggest wonderment at the novelty of the American landscape and the things found in it. As evidence of how early American English reveals the experience of English settlers, however, they give a skewed and misleading picture. Other similarly exotic words were used in English and then disappeared. Thomas Harriot's book about Virginia has seventy-six of them, including *openayk* (a kind of potato) and *sacquenummener* (cranberry). Such words as these were used on an equal footing with *chocolate* and *tomato*, and it

was not obvious at the time which would survive and which vanish. If we look at *all* the words used by the colonists, a richer and more varied language community begins to appear.

Language history, then, has tended to select examples that have two qualities: features that reached and were used in a metropolitan center (in our case, London) and those that endured for two or many generations. But this approach is far too selective. For the people living at the time of American settlement, there was no way to foresee that *moccasin* would endure and *mangummenauk* (an edible acorn) would not. The history of the language needs to look not only at the center and the enduring, but also at the edges and at the evanescent. We need, in short, to look at how people used the linguistic resources available to them to interpret their experience and to communicate with others.

When people find themselves in a situation of "mixed languages," they behave in ways that are remarkably the same over time. Some are resolute in their monolingualism, refusing to even attempt to communicate with people who speak other dialects or languages. These people breed the linguistic attitude of *purism* and flatly reject any usages that they detect as being "foreign." Thus, in the nineteenth century, one English purist hated the foreign and "obscure" words of learned people and proposed that *witcraft* (which sounds so English) be used instead of the foreign word *logic*, and he thought that *birdlore* sounded far better than *ornithology*. In the twentieth century, a writer with similar views wanted to get rid of *piano* and replace it with *keyed-hammer-string*. (This peculiar preference for native words he called "Blue-Eyed English.") Other people become quite thoroughly multilingual, and can switch from one language (or dialect) to another with barely a trace to show which language (or dialect) is their "mother tongue." Most people, however, find themselves someplace between these two extremes: they know a "little" of another language (or dialect) and can use it to effect. Sometimes these touches of the "other" kind of speech are used in cruel jokes that assert the superiority of one way of speaking over another; sometimes they show a striving after a "real" command of that language (or dialect) as people attempt to "pass" for members of the community they revere. But even these people whose language reflects vicious hatred or excessive devotion to a culture other than their own are a minority.

Most of us seek to compromise linguistic differences and to tolerate diversity. If one person says *pail* and the other *bucket*, they may get along fine without giving up their preferences. In time, one term may begin to displace another and for many reasons. One may seem more "old-fashioned" and the other more "up-to-date." (Linguistic history often discerns that the apparently new and the actually old may be the same thing.) One may seem "rustic" (however that complex term is valued) and the other "cosmopolitan." One may seem "polite" and the other "rude." One may seem "evasive" and the other "frank." All of these ideas about the meanings of words (or grammatical structures or pronunciations) influence what will happen in the future, and it would be foolish to predict which of the two (or several) alternatives will prevail.

Language variety (which is everywhere) consists of a series of approximations, simplifications, and other negotiated differences. Linguistic historians, unfortunately, have often tried to make more sense of the history entrusted to them than the record allows. Our hindsight blinds us to how the past resembles the present. We demand that people speak to us in our "own language" at the same time we willingly (and even enthusiastically) yearn to communicate in the different and very attractive languages (or dialects) of those whom we admire. Emulation and disdain enter into a complex, and unpredictable, set of forces, and everyone (except the resolute monolinguals) participates. Categories like *koiné*, *contact language*, *lingua franca*, *mixed language*, *pidgin*, and *creole* are offered to make sense of what is quite normal: variety. We all speak "English" but no two of us speak it in the same way.

When English speakers came to America, they encountered a new context, and where there were the most languages there was the greatest mingling of them – in ways that still influence English. Nowhere was this mixture greater than in the Caribbean, and, just as English speakers had acquired *guaiacum* at second hand, so new words from the Caribbean entered English before English mariners had actually been there: *cocos* (later *coconut*), *flamingo*, and *furacane* (later *hurricane*) in the 1550s and 1560s. When they did arrive, they found themselves in *palavers* or conversations involving many languages, and from these talks words of American origin entered English with or without the mediation of the earlier arriving Spanish and Portuguese. Seaports and shipboard were where these conversations took place, and the ports of call were in Europe, in the Caribbean, and in West Africa from Sierra Leone to Benin. This long coast of Africa was called *guinea*, and the things associated with it, whether in Africa or America, sometimes had names involving that word – for instance *guinea pea* and *guinea pepper* (= *cayenne*), both in use before permanent settlements of English people had been established on the North American continent. But it was not just Amerindians and Africans who contributed to American English. Mariners and settlers began to speak with the Dutch in ways they never had before when they were separated from them by only a few miles of saltwater (thus giving the "Americanism" *cookie*) or with the Spanish (giving the "Americanism" *cockroach*) or with the Germans (giving the "Americanism" *cole slaw*).

These words, and others like them, did not arise as isolated examples but as part of a rich and diverse communicative context. Some of them were selected because they named things genuinely new to the colonizing English speakers, particularly names for unfamiliar animals (like the *skunk*) or plants (like the *pecan*). Some of these were drastically adapted from the Amerindian languages at their source – so, for instance, early documents in English refer to a vegetable written down as *isquontersquash*, which was soon reduced to *squash*, and the *wejack* acquired a simplified English spelling that seemed to make a sort of sense, *woodchuck*. Others were new applications of old words (like *robin*, though the English robin is a quite different bird) or of combinations of words (like *bluefish* for a succulent and new kind of seafood abounding in Atlantic waters).

It would be wrong, however, to presume that borrowing and adapting words was based on logic, some need to fill "gaps" with new labels when new experiences arise to conscious attention. In fact, change involving the intersection of two (or many) languages is not logical at all. Many new American English expressions emerged at the very center of speaking. *Netop*, for instance, was a word borrowed from one of the Algonquian languages of New England to express the idea of "a good friend," an idea that hardly needed a new term in English. An author in 1890, when most Native Americans had been exterminated or expelled from New England, recalled: "Fifty years ago, in New England, this word [*netop*] was not very uncommon among the older people. It meant a close friend, a chum, a companion." Early documents show that *netop* was a familiar term in the earliest days of colonization and was used by people with scant knowledge of Native American languages (or none).

European curiosity about the "new world" extended to the languages spoken there. In 1502, a Bristol merchant brought to England the first known Native American visitor (who, as was tragically common, soon succumbed to some European disease), and, after a half century of indifference, yet more were brought across the Atlantic to be inspected and studied. The great flowering of interest in languages, particularly ancient ones, in sixteenth-century England, fed curiosity about these newly encountered ones. (Since the biblical story of Babel was a firm foundation of belief, part of the inquiry was to discover if these North Americans might be a "lost tribe" and to see if their languages might resemble Hebrew, Syriac, or some other language of the biblical era.) Early in the next century, at least two English boys, Tom Savage and Henry Spelman, were sent as hostages to guarantee the return of some Native Americans of Virginia from a visit to England. They soon became bilinguals and were thus positioned to act as intermediaries between the two cultures. Through such persons, Native American influence on American English was much facilitated.

When Thomas Harriot arrived in Virginia in 1586, he already knew something about the language spoken there from many months' study with Manteo and Wanchese, the visitors brought to England the year before. (Wanchese was an unwilling guest, but Manteo was enthusiastic and was eagerly baptized. On their return to Virginia, Wanchese escaped to his tribal group, but Manteo – now known as "John White" – continued to act as an intermediary.) Harriot was a man of remarkable genius, particularly in mathematics, and in preparation for the Roanoke voyage he taught Walter Raleigh the rudiments of celestial navigation so the expedition might find its way in the open ocean. As the principal scientist among the adventurers, he presented a remarkable amount of information in his *Briefe and True Report*, and a page of his phonetic alphabet to represent the sounds of the language has only recently been discovered. Unfortunately most of Harriot's papers were destroyed in the great fire of London in 1666, but it is at least symbolic that the one complete sentence in Algonquian that survives in his hand is *Kecow hit tamen*, which he translated as "What is this?" (see Salmon 1996).

The arrival of the so-called "Pilgrims" in Massachusetts in 1620 brought town-dwellers into harsh contact with the American wilderness. Once again, bilinguals were present to bridge the communication barrier, this time in the persons of Squanto and Samoset. Squanto had been kidnapped from Cape Cod and had spent time in England; Samoset, from Maine, knew "some broken English" from contact with English fisherfolk who had been making seasonal voyages to the rich harvests of fish along the coast. As with Harriot's visit, relatively few of the expressions noticed by the immigrants from England endured (*wigwam* and *powwow* are two that did) but the *Thanksgiving* celebrated at the Plymouth Colony in 1621 eventually (and much later) evolved a special American holiday.

Roger Williams, a colonist who arrived in Massachusetts in 1631, provided the first thorough and published attempt to record Amerindian languages. Williams was expelled from Plymouth in 1635 for "new and dangerous ideas" and established a colony in modern Rhode Island – as he described it, halfway between the French (in present-day Canada) and the Dutch (in modern New York). In his *Key into the Language of America* (1643: 53), he propounded a radical idea: "*Boast not proud* English, *of thy birth & Blood,/Thy brother* Indian *is by birth as Good*." In the preface, he describes the death-bed conversation he had with a close friend, a Pequot named Wequash. As a seventeenth-century clergyman, Williams had a clear notion of the right way to die, and he exhorted Wequash to repent his misdeeds in life. Wequash replied: "Me so big naughty Heart, me heart all one stone." In these two sentences are revealed some aspects of the interlanguage that developed between Europeans and Native Americans: simplification of the pronoun system (so that *me* covers the territory of *I*, *me*, and *my*), deletion of forms of *be* (so that *is* does not appear in "me heart all one stone"), and generalization of some words (so that *naughty* covers territory usually discriminated into *sinful*, *wicked*, *evil*, *bad*, and other synonyms). For the most part, these various interlanguages had little long-term effect on American English, though the idea they represent is still current (in, for instance, "Me Tarzan, You Jane").

Barbados, in the Caribbean, offers an illuminating picture of the language mixture found on American shores. Established as an English colony in 1627, the island was a center for tobacco growing, a profitable crop for the newly addicted Britons. By 1642, the population had increased to 37,000, most of them indentured servants from the impoverished regions of England, Scotland, and Ireland, but some of them petty criminals, prostitutes, captured rebels from Ireland, and other persons not wanted at home. In the 1640s, proprietors discerned that sugar cane was a more profitable crop than tobacco, but the indentured servants and the others were unwilling to engage in the harsh work required to cultivate it. The solution was to import African slaves for the cane fields and to drive the white settlers away (many of them going to Jamaica or Virginia and the Carolinas). Departure and disease reduced the European-descended part of the population in Barbados, and the importation of Africans vastly increased.

By the time an English traveler arrived to report on conditions there, Barbados had been transformed so that Africans outnumbered Europeans by two to one.

Richard Ligon, publishing his book in 1657, offered three reasons to explain why a slave revolt had not taken place. The first two involved severity of treatment and public demonstrations of gunfire; the third showed that there was a severe language policy in place.

> Besides these, there is a third reason, which stops all designes of that kind, and that is, They are fetch'd from severall parts of *Africa*, who speak severall languages, and by that means, one of them understands not another: For some of them are fetch'd from *Guinny* and *Binny*, some from *Cutchew*, some from *Angola*, and some from the River of *Gambra*. (Ligon 1657: 46)

Of course no such policy of mixing people of differing languages could have any long-term effect, and English (in a form soon nearly unrecognizable to new arrivals) was the core language to which all the others contributed. And the model for English was not that of London but the one spoken in the outlying districts of England and of Scotland and Ireland. (Writing in 1655, an English law lord noted, "The prisoners of the Tower shall, 'tis said, be Barbadozz'd" – that is, exiled to Barbados – and these prisoners were unlikely to have spoken the prestige dialect of the day.) Despite the turmoil of exile to and exodus from Barbados, some of these features of English endured. For instance, the word *screel* 'scream' is still found only in three places in the English-speaking world: Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Barbados. Even today, pronouncing the consonant *r* after vowels (as in *fur* and *first*) is typical of Barbados, though not of Jamaica or of the southeastern part of the United States. This feature thus links Barbados to other parts of the Americas settled by Scots and Irish – for instance, eastern Canada and Appalachia.

More deliberate mixture of languages is well illustrated in the 1663 translation of the Bible by John Eliot into Natick, the language he encountered in colonial Massachusetts. This remarkable volume "introduced" to speakers of Algonquian the English word *Biblum* 'Bible' and a host of names like *Abraham*, *Isaac*, *Beersheba*, and other "exotic" terms borrowed into English from Hebrew. In these words, Eliot supplied the community he wanted to make literate (and Christian) with "foreign" words. But he also needed to interpret the pastoral culture of the biblical era to hunter-gatherers of the New England forest. How was he to translate *sheep* for a people who had only seen these animals grazing in their English-speaking neighbors' pastures? He used, of course, the term that the Native Americans had already heard, *sheep*, and from that borrowing he offered *s[h]ephausuonk* 'lamb' and *shepsoh* 'shepherd.' He also embedded English words in Algonquian grammar: 'wut*angel*sumoh God' (an "angel of the Lord") and '*horse*sumoh *Pharoh*' ("horsemen of *Pharaoh*"; italics added). Eliot was a wise and sensitive man, and he recognized that his intended audience did not categorize foreign farm animals as did his immigrant neighbors. So when he came to render the *cattle* that occupied the stable where Jesus was born, he called them what his Natick-speaking hearers (and readers) called them: *horses*.

Efforts like those of Williams and Eliot to place Native Americans and English people on an equal footing were not enduring. About 1674, Daniel Gookin, named

"Superintendent of the Indians in Massachusetts," wrote a proposal to English philanthropists to abandon efforts to make the native peoples literate in their own languages and to pursue "with all industry and diligence" the goal of encouraging them "to speak, read, and write the English tongue." Consequently, borrowings from the languages of the Atlantic seaboard diminished, but new American expressions continued to arise from the existing resources of the language: for instance, *Indian corn* (shortly reduced to *corn* and applied to a plant unknown in Britain), *husk* (the verb to describe removing the outer leaves from the ear), *roasting ears*, *Indian cake* (made from *corn meal*).

At the end of the seventeenth century, language variety was everywhere. Tituba, a central figure in the Salem witch trials in 1691–92, was a Barbadian living as a slave in the household of Samuel Parris in Massachusetts, and her "confession" precipitated the arrest of more than 150 people and the execution of nineteen of them. Her English shows only the slightest trace of her Caribbean origin, but a trace nonetheless.

> Q. "What Covenant did you make w'th that man that Came to you? What did he tell you."
> TITUBA: "he Tell me he god."
>
> (Breslaw 1996: 195)

Though the first Africans had come to the North American colonies in 1619, there is very little evidence of the languages they used or the English they came to speak. A fleeting example is found in a discussion of smallpox inoculation in a medical work by Cotton Mather and written in 1721. Mather learned about inoculation from an African servant of his, and then enlarged that knowledge by corresponding with medical authorities abroad. But the most persuasive voices were African.

> I have since mett with a Considerable Number of these *Africans*, who all agree in one Story; That in their Countrey *grandy-many* dy of the *Small-Pox*: But now they Learn this Way: People take Juice of *Small-Pox*; and cutty-skin, and putt in a Drop; then by'nd by a little *sicky, sicky*: then very few little things like *Small-Pox*; and no body dy of it; and no body have *Small-Pox* any more. (Mather 1972: 107)

Details of Mather's linguistic mimicry still survive in Caribbean English: *bambye* 'a little later,' *cut i skin* 'cut their skin,' *grandy-many* 'very many' (parallel to present-day *Granman* 'chieftain'), *sicky*, *sicky* (repetition of words to intensify the meaning as in *stupid-stupid* 'very stupid') (see Allsopp 1966).

In 1600, there had been no English speakers permanently resident in North America; by 1700, there were 250,000 persons of European and African origin. The eighteenth century, however, was one of astonishing growth, and by 1780 (when the Atlantic colonies freed themselves from the British monarchy) there were 2.8 million. (The share of the African American population increased from 10 percent to 20 percent in the same eighty-year period.) As settlements formed

into communities and some communities into cities, linguistic variety increased. At the time of the revolution, more than a fifth of European-Americans had some mother tongue other than English. As the century drew to a close, Americans of European origin formed themselves into distinct language communities. Some 17 percent of the population of New York and New Jersey was Dutch; 9 percent of Delaware was Swedish; and a third of the population of Pennsylvania was German. In the Northwest Territories, 57 percent of the European-descended population was French, and in Georgia 30 percent were from Scotland and Ireland.

There was no question that English would be the language of the new republic – despite a persistent myth to the contrary – but these linguistic and ethnic communities were far more diverse than any nation-state in Europe. It is surprising, in fact, that there is not more evidence in present-day English of this diversity. *Fardowns* (people from the north of Ireland) and *Corkonians* (from the south of it) were well-represented in the language community of the early republic, and Dutch and Germans gave some of their customs (and the names for them) to the national culture – for instance, *Santa Claus* from Dutch and *Kriss Kringle* from German. Isolation (self-sought or imposed) to some extent kept these communities apart.

Individual words distinctive of American English in the eighteenth century are not difficult to identify: *banjo* and *bogus* (from African sources), *bayou* and *portage* (from French), *cookie* and *cruller* (from Dutch), *caucus* and *barbecue* (from Amerindian languages). But they are mere remnants of what was once a language community of rich diversity. Few institutions promoted linguistic stability over large areas. Literacy levels were low, books scarce, and newspapers uncommon. Newcomers felt no reluctance about changing the names of the places they inhabited to fit new circumstances. In 1663, English speakers from Connecticut marched into New Amsterdam and, on the very day of their conquest, re-named it *New York*. *Wall Street* in that city conceals its Dutch origin; there was no wall there when it was laid out but a community of Walloons. But Dutch was not swept away. Writing in 1756, one observer of New York reported: "English is the most prevailing Language amongst us, but not a little corrupted by the *Dutch* Dialect, which is still so much used in some Counties, that the Sheriffs find it difficult to obtain Persons sufficiently acquainted with the English Tongue, to serve as Jurors in the Courts of Law" (quoted by Read 1937: 97).

Were readers of this chapter to be transported by time machine to the American colonies at the time of the revolution, they would find themselves in communities with as many languages (if not more) than any modern city in the same region. In 1753, Benjamin Franklin had lambasted the Germans in Pennsylvania: "Those who come hither are generally the most stupid of their own nation . . . ; and as few of the English would understand the German language and so cannot address them either from the press or pulpit, it is almost impossible to remove any prejudices they may entertain" (quoted by Heath 1981: 9–10). Yet Franklin's bigoted views did not prevail, and until the beginning of this century American schools offered instruction in German, recognizing as the US Commissioner of Education had