

# Language in the USA

This textbook provides a comprehensive survey of current language issues in the USA. Through a series of specially commissioned chapters by leading scholars, it explores the nature of language variation in the United States and its social, historical, and political significance.

Part 1, “American English,” explores the history and distinctiveness of American English, as well as looking at regional and social varieties, African American Vernacular English, and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Part 2, “Other language varieties,” looks at Creole and Native American languages, Spanish, American Sign Language, Asian American varieties, multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and English acquisition. Part 3, “The sociolinguistic situation,” includes chapters on attitudes to language, ideology and prejudice, language and education, adolescent language, slang, Hip Hop Nation Language, the language of cyberspace, doctor–patient communication, language and identity in literature, and how language relates to gender and sexuality. It also explores recent issues such as the Ebonics controversy, the Bilingual Education debate, and the English-Only movement.

Clear, accessible, and broad in its coverage, *Language in the USA* will be welcomed by students across the disciplines of English, Linguistics, Communication Studies, American Studies and Popular Culture, as well as anyone interested more generally in language and related issues.

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## Themes for the Twenty-first Century

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Contents

*List of figures*      vii  
*List of tables*      ix  
*List of contributors*      xi  
*Acknowledgments*      xii  
*Foreword*      xiii  
*Editors' preface*      xvii

Part 1 American English

1 American English: its origins and history  
RICHARD W. BAILEY      3  
2 American English and its distinctiveness  
EDWARD FINEGAN      18  
3 Regional dialects WILLIAM A. KRETZSCHMAR, JR.      39  
4 Social varieties of American English WALT WOLFRAM      58  
5 African American English LISA GREEN      76  
6 *The Dictionary of American Regional English*  
JOAN HOUSTON HALL      92

Part 2 Other language varieties

7 Multilingualism and non-English mother tongues  
JOSHUA A. FISHMAN      115  
8 Creole languages: forging new identities  
PATRICIA NICHOLS      133  
9 Native American languages AKIRA Y. YAMAMOTO  
AND OFELIA ZEPEDA      153  
10 Spanish in the Northeast ANA CELIA ZENTELLA      182  
11 Spanish in the Southwest CARMEN SILVA-CORVALÁN      205  
12 American Sign Language CEIL LUCAS AND  
CLAYTON VALLI      230  
13 Asian American voices: language in the Asian American  
community THOM HUEBNER AND LINDA UYECHI      245  
14 Linguistic diversity and English language acquisition  
ROBERT BAYLEY      268

vi	Contents
<hr/>	
<b>Part 3 The sociolinguistic situation</b>	
15	Language ideology and language prejudice ROSINA LIPPI-GREEN 289
16	Ebonics and its controversy JOHN BAUGH 305
17	Language planning, language policy, and the English-Only Movement TERRENCE G. WILEY 319
18	Language in education LILY WONG FILLMORE 339
19	Adolescent language PENELOPE ECKERT 361
20	Slang CONNIE EBLE 375
21	Hip Hop Nation Language H. SAMY ALIM 387
22	Language, gender, and sexuality MARY BUCHOLTZ 410
23	Linguistic identity and community in American literature JAMES PETERSON 430
24	The language of doctors and patients CYNTHIA HAGSTROM 445
25	The language of cyberspace DENISE E. MURRAY 463
26	Language attitudes to speech DENNIS R. PRESTON 480
<i>Index</i>	493

Figures

1-1	An Old Curiosity Shop	<i>page</i> 14
3-1	The Speech Areas of the Eastern States	43
3-2	Dragon fly	45
3-3	The North I	47
3-4	The Northern Area	48
3-5	The Midland and the South	49
3-6	The North and the South	49
3-7	The Southern Area	50
3-8	Vowel systems in the Eastern USA	51
3-9	Urban dialect areas based on the acoustic analysis of the vowel systems of 240 Telsur informants	54
4-1	Example of sharp stratification	67
4-2	Example of gradient stratification	68
6-1	The <i>DARE</i> map of the United States with a conventional map for comparison	97
6-2	Darning needle, mosquito hawk, snake doctor, snake feeder (4 maps)	99
6-3	Blue norther, gum band, jam cake, lawyer, leader, money cat (6 maps)	100
6-4	Indian pudding, bank, draw, kaput (4 maps)	103
8-1	Estimated population by race in South Carolina (east of the mountains)	137
8-2	Coastal South Carolina and Georgia	138
8-3	Hawaiian Islands	146
8-4	Southern Louisiana	147
12-1	SUMMER, UGLY, DRY	232
12-2	DEAF in the Hold–Movement–Hold model	232
12-3a	The ASL signs TREE and CAT	233
12-3b	The ASL signs WRONG and LOUSY	233
12-4a	The ASL sign MICROWAVE	234
12-4b	Full fingerspelling J-A-N-E	234
12-4c	Reduced fingerspelling #FAX	235
12-4d	The ASL sign ITALY and the LIS sign ITALY	235
12-5	The ASL sign 9 MONTHS	236
26-1	A Michigan hand-drawn map	481

viii	List of figures	
26-2	Computer-assisted generalizations of hand-drawn maps showing where southeastern Michigan respondents believe speech regions exist in the USA	481
26-3	Means of ratings for language “correctness” by Michigan respondents for US English	484
26-4	Means of ratings for language “pleasantness” by AL respondents for US English	487
26-5	Three social status group judgments of lower “occupational suitability” of “inconsistent r” production	489

Tables

4-1	Relative frequency of variable phonological and grammatical structures in four social groups in Detroit, Michigan	<i>page</i> 66
5-1	Examples of AAE linguistic patterns	89
7-1	Mother tongue of the native-of-native parentage of twenty languages (1940–70), with percent increase 1940–70 and 1960–70	120
10-1	Hispanics in the six northeast states	185
11-1	For the USA and Southwest states: total population; number and percentage of Hispanic population; number of persons five years of age and older who claim Spanish at home	206
11-2	Hispanic population in California by place of origin	209
11-3	Percentage increase of the Hispanic population and of the Spanish speaking claimants five years of age and older in the Southwest, 1980 to 1990	211
11-4	Los Angeles County, ability to speak English by those who report speaking Spanish at home	213
11-5	Southwest states, ability to speak English by those who are five years of age or older who report speaking Spanish at home	214
13-1	Immigrants by country, 1965 and 1970	252
13-2	Demographic data on Asian Americans, 1990	253
14-1	Most commonly spoken languages other than English, 1990 and 2000	270
14-2	Population who speak languages other than English at home	271
14-3	Generation, nativity, and language use among selected ethnic groups, 1976	274
14-4	Spanish home language claimants as a percentage of the Hispanic population	275
14-5	Percentage and number of the populations of interest for ESL classes, by participation status and adult characteristics: 1994–95	278
14-6	Characteristics of adults who reported a main barrier to attending ESL classes: 1994–95	280



x	List of tables	
17-1	Historical highlights regarding the status of English and of efforts to restrict other languages	328
18-1	US and California immigrant and student population, 1997	351
18-2	A decade of anti-immigrant, anti-diversity voter initiatives in California	354
19-1	Percentage use of negative concord by jock and burnout girls and boys	371
19-2	Percentage use of innovative vowel variants by jock and burnout girls and boys	372
26-1	The two factor groups from the ratings of all areas	483
26-2	Mean scores of individual factors for North and South	486

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Finally, we wish to dedicate this book to Charles A. Ferguson, a founding father of modern sociolinguistics, who died in 1998, and to his spouse Shirley Brice Heath, who has made and continues to make significant contributions to sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication.

# Foreword

The French are funny about their language, as everyone knows. But then, so are the Germans, the Italians, the Belgians, the Canadians, the Turks, the Slovaks, the Russians, and the Sri Lankans. And so are we in the United States, for that matter, although we tend to make only an intermittent public fuss about it. In many other nations, “the language question” is a persistent topic for newspaper editorials, television talk shows, and parliamentary debates, and occasionally the source of major political crises. In the USA, discussions of language tend to rumble along in Sunday-supplement features and the usage screeds arrayed in the language shelves at the back of the bookstore.

Every so often, though, controversies over the language erupt into a wider national discussion in America. That has happened perhaps half-a-dozen times in the last half century. In the early 1960s, there was a furor over the publication of the Merriam-Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary*, which took what critics regarded as an excessively permissive attitude toward usage – it refused to condemn the use of *ain’t* for “am not,” and it included the “incorrect” use of *like* as a conjunction, as in “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.” The dictionary’s derelictions were front-page news for months – *The New York Times* condemned it as a “bolshevik” document, and the *Chicago Daily News* took it as the symptom of “a general decay in values.”

Other recent American language controversies have followed more or less the same pattern – they flare into wide discussion for a relatively brief period, and then, when the point is made, they subside again into the back pages of the national consciousness. From the 1960s onward, for example, there has been a series of debates sparked by efforts to reform the English vocabulary in the interest of social justice, some of them involving the feminist program of eliminating sexist usage, and some involving the introduction of new terms to describe groups defined by race, ethnicity, physical condition, sexual orientation, and the like.

Then there was the English-Only movement, which received a huge amount of national attention from the mid-1980s onward, as several groups tried to have English declared the official language of the country and eliminate bilingual programs and services. The campaign resulted in the adoption of English-Only measures by a number of states, and continues today in the form of state initiatives aimed at ending bilingual education.

In December of 1996, the great “Ebonics” controversy was set off when a local school board in Oakland, California announced it would be adopting a new

approach to helping inner-city African American students to master standard English. The program was widely but inaccurately reported as recognizing African American English – or “Ebonics,” the term used by the school board – as a legitimate language of instruction, and as rejecting the need for students to master the standard language. The resulting controversy raged for months, as virtually every major newspaper editorialized against the Oakland program, and cartoonists and Internet wags had a field day with Ebonics jokes.

Those affairs remind us that while we Americans like to think of ourselves as easy-going about language, our feelings about it actually run very deep, and it can take only the slightest pretext to arouse our national passions – the appearance of a new dictionary, the adoption of a speech code at a university, or the action of a local school board. In fact, a certain forgetfulness about the importance of language is one of the abiding characteristics of American language attitudes – every language controversy seems unprecedented.

There are historical reasons for this. The United States hasn’t had a continuously tumultuous linguistic history in the way many other nations have. We have always had a single dominant language – and a relatively homogeneous one, without the major divisions of dialects that most European nations have had to deal with in the course of their nation-building. American English may have notable regional and class differences, but they are nowhere near as broad as the differences that have separated the regional varieties of nations like France, Germany, or Italy. And while there are some varieties that depart substantially from the standard English pattern, they have been spoken by marginal or disempowered groups, so haven’t been deemed worthy of serious consideration by the mainstream media until recently.

True, America has never been without large communities of speakers of languages other than English – indigenous peoples, the language groups absorbed in the course of colonial expansion, like the French-speakers of Louisiana and the Hispanics of the Southwest, and the great flows of immigrants in the period between 1880 and 1920 and over the past thirty years or so. And from the eighteenth century onward there have been energetic efforts to discourage or suppress the use of other languages. But these episodes have generally been local or regional rather than national affairs, and interest in them has generally waned as language minorities became anglicized or as waves of immigration decreased.

It isn’t surprising, then, that assimilated English-speaking Americans are apt to take the dominance of standard English for granted – and, often, to become irritated when linguistic diversity obtrudes itself. “This is America – speak English,” people complain, with the implication that the identification of English with American national identity was always unproblematic and natural before recent times, and that earlier generations of immigrants eagerly abandoned their native languages for English in the interest of becoming “true Americans.” That has become a central element of American linguistic mythology, and it helps to explain why English-speaking Americans tend to think of the mastery of a foreign language not just as a difficult accomplishment, but as a suspicious one. Teaching students

a foreign language, the Nebraska Supreme Court opined eighty years ago, must “naturally inculcate in them the ideas and sentiments foreign to the best interests of their country.” While few people today would put that point so baldly, a great many people still have the sense that a loyal American can’t serve two linguistic masters.

That attitude contributes to many Americans’ readiness to support English-only measures and to believe claims that America is faced with a “dangerous drift toward bilingualism.” By the same token, Americans become indignant when they believe that a school board is maintaining that a nonstandard variety is “just as good” as the standard language, when everyone has been taught since the seventh grade that features like the “double negative” are illogical forms of speech.

In fact these are just two signs of a chronic American blindness to the complexities of our sociolinguistic history and of the contemporary linguistic situation. As the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes observed more than twenty years ago in his foreword to the 1981 *Language in the USA*, “The United States is a country rich in many things, but poor in knowledge of itself with regard to language.”

Since then, to be sure, there has been an enormous amount of scholarship and research that has illumined the variety and richness of the American linguistic scene, much of which is summarized and explained in the chapters of this book. These questions aren’t restricted to the role of languages other than English and the status of the minority language varieties like African American English or the ongoing efforts to preserve Native American languages. They also extend to the particular problems faced by the users of American Sign Language, to the efforts of groups to forge linguistic identities for themselves, and to the challenges faced by anyone who speaks English with an accent that happens to be stigmatized.

These questions have become far more urgent over the past twenty years. Courts, legislatures, government agencies, corporations, public officials, college administrators – there’s scarcely a sector of American life that hasn’t found itself having to make complex decisions about language policies and programs, as the United States tries to come to terms with the challenges of diversity. Too often, people respond to these issues by appealing to “common sense” ideas about language, which usually amount to no more than myths and folklore. Indeed, to linguists who have studied these questions, most of these “everyday common sense” ideas about language sound very much the way an appeal to “everyday common sense” ideas about inflation would sound to an economist – they’re hardly the grounds that you would want to rely on for making policy.

But an understanding of language diversity is important for other reasons, as well. As the chapters in this *Language in the USA* make clear, there is virtually no important social issue or cultural development in American life that isn’t somehow signaled in language. The changing consciousness of gender roles, the emergence of hip hop culture, the development of new communications media like the Internet, the sociology of adolescence – all of these phenomena have a linguistic side that isn’t significant just for its own sake, but sheds a particular light on the social phenomenon it’s connected to.

In the end, that’s the greatest cost of the conventional ideas and attitudes that people tend to bring to language. If you come to language with the ready-made categories that society prepares for you – “good” and “bad,” “correct” and “incorrect,” and the like – you will almost certainly be deaf to its complexities and subtleties.

Take the various uses of the word *like* that have become popular among adolescents and, increasingly, among other speakers as well: “I was like standing there and she like came up to me,” or “So I was like, Hello?” To listen to a lot of columnists and critics, *like* is no more than a meaningless noise or the sign of an alarming decline in communication skills among adolescents. But charges like that are always self-deceptive – do those critics really mean to claim that they spoke in polished, slang-free sentences when *they* were teenagers? Worse still, they miss the point. As shown in a chapter of this book, *like* is actually doing a subtle kind of conversational work in adolescents’ speech, one you can attend to only if you are willing to set your linguistic preconceptions aside.

*Language in the USA* will unquestionably be an important resource for policy-makers and decision-makers, and it should make us all better citizens, attuned to the sociolinguistic complexities of the contemporary American scene. But perhaps my greatest hope for the book is that it will help to make us all better *listeners*, as well – both to the diverse voices around us and to our own.

Geoffrey Nunberg

# Preface

It is almost a quarter of a century since Cambridge University Press published *Language in the USA*, edited by Charles A. Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath. In his foreword to the 1981 volume, Dell Hymes noted that it was “the first book to address the situation of language in the United States as something to be known comprehensively and constantly to be better known.” Since then, *Language in the USA* has come to be widely used and appreciated as a resource for students of language, for teachers, and for a general public seeking a comprehensive, accessible introduction to the linguistic richness and variability of the United States.

While deeply inspired and influenced by *Language in the USA*, the present volume is not intended as a revised edition of the original, and even less as a replacement for it. Several chapters in the original have become classics in their own right. Others are timeless. Even those that seem less relevant now are of historical interest. We plan to draw on both volumes in our classes, and we believe other readers will also want to retain the resources of both. Only four of the original *Language in the USA* authors (Fishman, Nichols, Wolfram, and Zentella) recur in this book, and in each case they do so with new chapters.

The purpose of this new volume is to take a similarly comprehensive, but necessarily selective, look at language in the USA, but through the lenses of today’s issues and contemporary developments – ones that characterize the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since 1981, there have been significant changes in the sociolinguistic and political situation in the USA, and we have gained greater understanding about language and language variation in American society. We are certainly more conscious today of multilingualism and dialect variation and their educational and sociopolitical implications, as witnessed by recent public controversies, political campaigns, and state ballot initiatives centered on these issues. And while our nation is an older nation now, it is infused with extraordinary linguistic vitality from the everyday talk of adolescents and the words and music of hip hop artists.

Some of our chapter titles are brand new simply because their subject matter was completely or virtually non-existent a quarter of a century ago, as with the chapters treating the language of cyberspace, rap and hip hop, the Oakland Ebonics controversy, the English-Only movement, and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Other phenomena discussed in the present volume but not the 1981 volume did exist earlier (as with American Sign Language, Asian American



voices, adolescent language, and the relationships among language and gender and sexuality), but they were not then as salient, not then as well studied, and not then recognized as of such theoretical or social significance as they are today. Still others (such as issues having to do with language and education, especially bilingual education) are discussed in both volumes, but dramatic new developments like the passage of Proposition 227 in California (in 1998) and Proposition 203 in Arizona (in 2000) have become focal points for significant educational, political, and legal debate and warrant the additional focus on them here.

Other changes include the fact that we now treat Spanish in two chapters (instead of one) and that Spanish is highlighted in other chapters, in recognition of its increased prominence throughout the United States. *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century* also has three general chapters on English dialects instead of one, with separate chapters on regional and social variation, and a chapter dealing exclusively with the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Contrary to the possible perceptions or hopes of some, dialect variation is not disappearing in the USA.

The chapters in this book are grouped into three broad sections: Part 1, dealing with varieties of American English; Part 2, exploring other language varieties in the USA (including creole and Native American varieties, and Spanish on the East Coast and the West); and Part 3, focusing on the sociolinguistic situation (including language ideology, language attitudes, slang, the language of doctors and patients, the representation of ethnic identity in literature). Our introductions appear at the head of each chapter, and it is our hope that this placement will invite more student readers than might be drawn to introductions grouped together at the beginning of the volume or preceding each section.

*Language in USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century* is a shorter book than the 1981 volume, despite its having a few more chapters. The marketing constraint on its length meant omitting certain topics we would otherwise have included. Inevitably, some readers will miss topics that were treated in the earlier volume but not here. We hope that all readers will find favorite chapters in the current volume and that its perspectives will launch inquiries into topics of interest among student readers, policy makers, and the educated public. In his foreword, Dell Hymes described the 1981 volume as “a resource to citizens, a spur to scholars, a challenge to those who shape policy and public life.” We believe that description has turned out to be accurate, and we believe the content of the current volume is much enriched by the spur the original volume provided.

John R. Rickford

Edward Finegan