Do You Speak American?

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit"; a documentary on the English language, as spoken in the U.S., is airing on PBS.

ROBERT MACNEIL

On Columbus Avenue in New York, a young waitress approaches our table and asks, "How are you guys doin'?" My wife and I are old enough to be her grandparents, but we are "you guys" to her. Today, in American English, guys can be guys, girls, or grandmothers. Girls call themselves guys, even dudes. For a while, young women scorned the word girls, but that is cool again, probably because African-American women use it and it can be real cool—even empowering—to whites to borrow black talk, like the word cool. It is empowering to gay men to call themselves queer, once a hated homophobic term, but now used to satirize the whole shifting scene of gender attitudes in the TV reality show, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." As society changes, so does language, and American society has changed enormously in recent decades. Moreover, when new norms are resented or feared, language often is the target of that fear or resentment.

How we use the English language became a hot topic during the 1960s, and it remains so today—a charged ingredient in the culture wars, as intensely studied and disputed as any other part of our society. That is appropriate because nothing is more central to our identity and sense of who we are and where we belong. "Aside from a person's physical appearance, the first thing someone will be judged by is how he or she talks," maintains linguist Dennis Baron.

Many feel that the growing informality of American life, the retreat from fixed standards, ("the march of casualization," The New York Times recently called it)—in clothing, manners, sexual mores—is reflected in our language and is corrupting it. They see schools lax about teaching grammar and hear nonstandard forms accepted in broadcasting, newspapers, politics, and advertising. They believe the slogan "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" is so embedded in the national psyche that few Americans would now balk at the use of "like" (instead of "as") because that usage is fast becoming the new standard. They hate such changes in the language and they despair for our culture.

Others, however, believe language is thriving—as inventive and vigorous as English was in the time of the Elizabethans—and they see American English as the engine driving what is now a global language.

This deep disagreement is one of the issues explored in a survey producer William Cran and I recently completed and a three-hour documentary, "Do You Speak American?"

We address the controversies, issues, anxieties, and assumptions swirling around language today—some highly emotional and political. Why are black and white Americans speaking less and less like each other? We explain. Does Hispanic immigration threaten the English language? We do not think so. Is our exposure to national media wiping out regional differences and causing us all to speak the same? We think not. Is the language really in serious decline? Well, we have quite a debate about that.

The people who believe so are known as prescriptivists: those who want us to obey prescribed rules of grammar. They do not mind being called curmudgesons and they alternate between pleasure and despair—pleasure in correcting their fellow citizens: despair that they cannot stop the language from going to hell in our generation.

The Prince of Prescriptivists

One of the leading curmudgesons of our time—he has been called the Prince of Prescriptivists—is John Simon, theater critic for New York Magazine, and he comes to do battle in "Do You Speak American?" Simon sees the language today as "unhealthy, poor, sad, depressing, and probably fairly hopeless." In the foreword to a new book, The Dictionary of Disagreeable English, he writes: "No damsel was ever in such distress, no drayhorse more flogged, no defenseless child more drunkenly abused than the English language today."

The enemies for Simon are the descriptivists, those content to describe language as it actually is used. They include the editors of great dictionaries who, Simon charges, have grown dangerously permissive, abandoning advice on what is correct and what is not. He calls descriptivist linguists "a curse on their race."

One such individual is Jesse Sheidlower. American editor of the august Oxford English Dictionary. Does he believe the language is being ruined by the great informality of American
life? “No, it is not being ruined at all,” he replies. Sheidlower believes that Simon and other language conservatives actually are complaining that linguists and dictionary writers no longer are focused on the language of the elite. They look at the old days and say, “Well, everything used to be very proper, and now we have all these bad words and people are being careless, and so forth.” In fact, he insists people always have spoken that way.

“It’s just that you didn’t hear them because the media would only report on the language of the educated upper middle class,” Sheidlower points out. “Nowadays . . . we see the language of other groups, of other social groups, of other income levels, in a way that we never used to.

“Language change happens and there’s nothing you can do about it.” To which Simon replies, “Maybe change is inevitable—maybe. Maybe dying from cancer is also inevitable, but I don’t think we should help it along.”

Helping it along, to Simon, would mean surrendering to the word “hopefully,” one of his pet peeves. “To say, ‘Hopefully it won’t rain tomorrow’—who, or what, is filled with hope? Nothing. So you have to say, ‘I hope it won’t rain tomorrow.’ But you can say, ‘I enter a room hopefully,’ because you are the vessel for that hopefulness.”

Sheidlower replies that modern computer databases make it possible to check texts back over the centuries: “We see that ‘hopefully’ is not in fact very new. . . . It goes back hundreds of years, and it has been very common even in highly educated speech for much of the time.”

This battle—the stuff of angry skirmishes in books, magazines, and seminars—is only one part of what makes our language news today. Other findings may surprise many people because they challenge widely held popular conceptions, or misconceptions, about the language.

Our study took the form of a journey starting in the Northeast, down to the mid-Atlantic states, west to the Great Lakes, Midwest, Appalachia, then toward the South, through Louisiana, Texas, and California into the Pacific Northwest. In linguistic terms, we traveled through the main dialect areas of the nation. Professional linguists, students of the science of language, were the key to our understanding of the forces changing the language as rapidly as the society has changed in the past 50 years.

While computers, information technology, globalization, digital communications, and satellites have revolutionized how we work, equally potent revolutions have occurred concerning the home, family structure and marriage, sexual mores, the role of women, race relations, and the rise of teenagers as a major consumer and marketing force. With this has come alterations in our public manners, eating habits, clothing, and tolerance of different lifestyles—all of which have been swept by a tide of informality.

Linguists Spring into Action
Observing how these rapid social changes have altered our language have been the linguists, whose new branch of the social sciences really came into its own in the 1960s, followed more recently by sociolinguistics, the study of how language and society interact. They have produced a body of fascinating research that usually is couched in technical language difficult for non-linguists to understand. Dozens of linguists have lent their skills to help us translate their findings, and marry their scholarship to our sampling of the actual speech of ordinary Americans in all its variety, vitality, and humor, drawn from the widest social spectrum. They include waitresses, cowboys, hip-hop artists, Marine drill sergeants, Border Patrol agents, Mexican immigrants, Cajun musicians, African-American and Hispanic broadcasters, and Silicon Valley techies (who try to make computers talk like real people), as well as writers and editors, teachers and teenagers, surfers and snowboarders, actors and screenwriters, and presidents and politicians.

Did they all sound the same? One of the most common assumptions is that our total immersion in the same mass media is making us all speak in a similar manner. Not true, claim the linguists. We are not talking more alike, but less.

One of the enduring themes in American life is the pull of national against regional interests and regret for local distinctiveness erased in the relentless march of uniformity. It surfaced in the song “Little Boxes” by Pete Seeger, about people put into little boxes of identical houses made of “ticky tacky” and who all come out the same. Today, with more and more national franchising of basic elements—food, mobile homes, clothing, hotels, recreation—the U.S. can seem like one giant theme park endlessly duplicated, the triumph of the cookie cutter culture and its distinctive art form, the national TV commercial.

Paradoxically, however, language is one fundamental aspect of our cultural identity in which growing homogenization is a myth. While some national trends are apparent, regional speech differences not only thrive, in some places they are becoming more distinctive. Local differences, pride, and identity with place are asserting themselves strongly, perhaps as instinctive resistance to the homogenizing forces of globalization. One remarkable example is the speech of urban African-Americans, which is diverging from standard mainstream English. After decades of progress in civil rights, and the growth of a large and successful black middle class, African-American speech in our big cities dramatically is going its own way.

Two linguists, Guy Bailey, provost of the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Patricia Cukor-Avila of the University of North Texas at Denton have documented this. For 18 years, they have studied a small community in East Central Texas they named “Springville,” which appears to live in a time warp from a century ago, when it was the center for local cotton sharecroppers, black and white. Little remains now but the original general store. During the late 1930s, the Works Progress Administration recorded the voices of elderly blacks, some former slaves, some the children of slaves.

One of them, Laura Smalley, was born to a slave mother. She was nine at the time of Emancipation in 1863. She told how the slave owner kept them ignorant of Lincoln’s Proclamation for six months. “An’ I thought ol’ master was dead, but he wasn’ . . . He’d been off to the war an’ come back. All the niggers gathered aroun’ to see ol’ master again. You know, an’ ol’ master didn’ tell, you know, they was free . . . . They worked there, I think now they say they worked them six months after that, six months. And turn them loose on the 19th of June.
That’s why, you know, they celebrate that day. Colored folks celebrates that day.”

Black and White Dialects

Reviewing the speech of Smalley and others, the linguists were taken by how similar it was to the speech of rural whites of that time and place, but now dissimilar to the speech of blacks today. Features characteristic of modern black speech, what linguists call African-American vernacular English—such as the invariant “be,” as in “they be working,” or the deleted copular, leaving out the auxiliary verb in “they working”—were absent.

Here are samples of modern speech of African-Americans in large cities:

“When the baby be sleep, and the othe’ kids be at school, and my husband be at work, then . . . I might can finally sit down.”

“She told David they Mama had went to Chicago to see her sister and her sister’s new baby.”

These examples show the invariant “be,” and the construction “had went.” Bailey and Cukor-Avila say that these features did not exist in black speech before World War II. They conclude that, after the great migration to the North from World War I to the 1970s, blacks were segregated in urban ghettos, had less contact with whites than they had in places like Springville, and their speech began to develop new features, as all human speech does when people are separated culturally and have little communication.

This has serious consequences in efforts to reduce the school dropout rate among blacks. Not only white teachers, but many African-American instructors, despise the “street talk” or “slang” as they call it, and often treat the children as if they were stupid or uneducable. In 1979, a Federal judge in Detroit ruled that an Ann Arbor, Mich., school, ironically named after Martin Luther King, Jr., was discriminating against black kids because of their language and ordered the school to remedy it. Yet, the prejudice lives on elsewhere. In 1997, Oakland schools tried to get black speech recognized not as a dialect of English but a separate language, Ebonics, to qualify for Federal money to teach English as a second language. That backfired amid furious protests nationally from black and white educators.

What is shocking to linguists is the manner in which many newspaper columnists excoriate black English, using terms such as “gibberish.” In the linguistic community, black English is recognized as having its own internal consistency and grammatical forms. It certainly is not gibberish (which means something unintelligible) because it works effectively for communication within the urban community.

One of the first to give black English this measure of respect was William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania, who testified at a Senate hearing during the Ebonics furor in 1997: “This African-American vernacular English . . . is not a set of slang words, or a random set of grammatical mistakes, but a well-formed set of rules of grammar and pronunciation that is capable of conveying complex logic and reasoning.”

To linguists, the fault lies not in a particular dialect, but in what attitudes others bring to it. Steve Harvey, an African-American who hosts the most popular morning radio show in Los Angeles, told us: “I speak good enough American. You know, I think there’s variations of speaking American. I don’t think there’s any one set way, because America’s so diverse.” He added, “You do have to be bilingual in this country, which means you can be very adept at slang, but you also have to be adept at getting through the job interview.”

Now, without fanfare, some Los Angeles schools have been trying a more sympathetic approach to help minority students become bilingual—by teaching them the differences between African-American Language, as they call it, and Mainstream American English. We visited PS 100 in Watts to watch fifth-graders play a “Jeopardy”-like game in which they won points for “translating” such sentences as “Last night we bake cookies.”

Teacher: “What language is it in?”
Student: “AAL.”

Teacher: “It is in African-American Language. What linguistic feature is in AAL?”
Student: “Past-tense marker-ed.”
Teacher: “Past-tense marker-ed. That’s cool! And how do you code-switch it to Mainstream American English?”
Student: “Last night we baked cookies.”
Teacher: “You got five hundred more points.” Big cheers from the kids.

So, four decades after the passage of landmark legislation outlawing racial discrimination, the news is that it blatantly survives in language. Columnists would not dream of describing other attributes of being African-American with epithets like “gibberish.” They could, however, get away with it in writing about black language, which remains a significant barrier to success in school and ultimately in the job market and housing—pathways to the American dream.

Ironically, as much as it is despised, black English is embraced and borrowed by whites, especially young whites in thrill to the appeal of hip hop music. There are divergences just as dramatic within the English of white Americans. Around the Great Lakes, people are making what Labov believes are “revolutionary changes in the pronunciation of short vowels that have remained relatively stable in the language for a thousand years.”

Labov is director of an effort to determine the boundaries of different dialects within American speech. Traditionally, that was achieved by comparing distinctive local or regional words people used for everyday things. One surviving example is the different terms for the long sandwich that contains cold cuts, cheese, and lettuce—a grinder in some parts of New England; a wedge in Rhode Island; a sub in Boston; a hero in New York; a hoagie in Philadelphia; a submarine in Ohio and farther west. By drawing lines around places where each term is used, linguists can form maps of dialect areas. Many such regional terms
are dying out because old craft skills are replaced by products marketed nationally. Labov leads a new method in which the different ways people pronounce words are recorded with colored dots on a map of the U.S. Connecting the dots produces the Atlas of North American English.

Labov and his colleagues found startling pronunciation changes in cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit and New York State’s Rochester and Syracuse. On a computer in his office in Philadelphia, we heard a woman say the word “black,” then the complete phrase: “Old senior citizens living on the word ‘black,’ and it was apparent that she was pronouncing “block” like “black.” Similarly, another woman mentions what sounds like “bosses.” The full sentence reveals she means “buses.” “I can vaguely remember when we had ‘bosses’ with the antennas on top.”

When one vowel changes, so do the neighboring ones: “caught” shifts toward “cot,” “cot” toward “cat,” “cat” toward “kit” or “keeyat.” Labov thinks these changes are quite important. “From our point of view as linguists, we want to understand why people should become more different from each other. We’re all watching the same radio and television; we live side by side. And it’s important to recognize that people don’t always want to behave in the same way.”

Labov has a theory that, behind changes like these, are women, the primary transmitters of language. Traditionally enjoying less economic power than men, women rely on the symbolic power offered by words. Labov believes women are more apt than men to adopt “prestige forms” of language and symbols of nonconformism—new or “stigmatized forms” that can acquire a kind of “covert prestige.” Labov writes that women are quicker and more forceful in employing the new social symbolism, whatever it may be. Working on his landmark study, “The Principles of Linguistic Change,” he identifies a particular type of woman—working class, well-established in her community—who takes pleasure in being nonconformist and is strong enough to influence others. He sees parallels between leadership in fashion and language change. Most young women are alert to novelty in fashion; some have the confidence to embrace it and the natural authority to induce others to follow.

These are mysterious forces working on our language from underneath, as it were, and producing startling changes that, far from homogenizing our speech, actually create more diversity. Despite all the forces of global and national uniformity in products and trends, Americans clearly still want to do their own thing linguistically. An example is Pittsburgh, where the local dialect, or Pittsburghese, is celebrated, constantly talked about, and made a commodity. They know themselves as “Yinzers,” from “yinz,” the plural of “you,” or “you ones.” They use “slippy” for “slippery”; “red up” means to “tidy up”; and “anymore” as in “Anymore, there’s so many new buildings you can’t tell which is which.” In downtown Pittsburgh—pronounced “dahntahn”—the question, “Did you eat yet?” sounds like “Jeet jet?” If you haven’t, the response is, “No, jeew?”

Barbara Johnstone, a linguist from Pittsburgh, thinks the pride in their local speech is a way for Pittsburghers to talk about who they are and what it means to live there. People treasure their local accents, because where they come from, or where they feel they belong, still does matter. In the words of California linguist, Carmen Fought, “People want to talk like the people they want to be like.” This contradicts the common assumption that media exposure is making everyone sound the same.

**Local Accents Prevail**

Yet, amusingly, people often are quite unaware of how their own speech sounds to others. Linguists we met were full of stories about people in Texas or coastal North Carolina with strong local accents who were convinced they sounded like Walter Cronkite. It happened to me. I grew up in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, so fascinated with words that I called a memoir of my childhood *Wordsstruck*. Even in my own family, I often heard the same words said differently. My grandfather, from Nova Scotia’s south shore, said “garidge” while his daughter, my mother, said “gar-agh.”

Until I first came to the U.S. in 1952, I was unaware how different my speech was even from that of neighboring New England. I was 21 and (briefly, thank God!) an aspiring actor, thrilled to be working in a summer theater in Massachusetts. The first time I stepped on to the stage and opened my mouth, the director said, “You can’t talk like that.” I was stunned, not knowing until that moment that I was pronouncing “out” to rhyme with “oat,” and “about” with “about”—still the common Nova Scotian pronunciation. Anxious not to close any career doors, I immediately began trying to modify the “oat” sound, but 50 years later, when I am tired or back with my brothers in Canada, I still slip into the pronunciations I grew up with.

What appears to be the determining force in whether regional dialects survive or disappear is not media influence, but rather the movements of people. We talked to John Coffin, a lobsterman in South Freeport, Me. Once a quiet fishing and ship-building harbor but now a bustling outlet shopping center, the town has attracted so many new visitors and residents that Coffin fears the Maine way of speaking—with its characteristic “ayeh” for “yes”—is disappearing: “I think in this area it’s going to be a lost thing,” and that makes him sad. “I’d like to think my children and grandchildren talk that way, whether people laugh at you, wherever we go—whatever.” Do people laugh at his Maine accent? “Oh, yes, lots of times. When I was in the military, they made fun of me wicked.”

“Wicked” is a typical Maine word, meaning “very,” as in “wicked’ good.”

This homogenizing trend is obvious on some of the islands, like Ocrakoke, off the coast of North Carolina, home of the Hoi Toiders, people who pronounce “high tide” as “hoh toid.” These islands have become meccas for individuals from elsewhere building vacation homes, displacing locals and their dialect.

Still, the national media are having some effect: Labov notes two sound changes that have spread nationally, probably from California. One is the vowel in “do,” which increasingly sounds like “dew.” Labov calls it “oo-fronting”; the sound is produced more to the front of the mouth. You also hear it in the word “so,” which sounds like “so-ew.” Another trend, more noticeable among young women, but also some men, is a rising inflection at
the ends of sentences, making statements such as “The bus station is around the corner” sound like a query. One of the regions where “oo-fronting” is common is the South, where there are changes just as dramatic as those in the North. Southern ghosts do not say “boo,” but “baw.”

The most prevalent shift is that Southerners increasingly are pronouncing the “r” at the ends of words such as father. In part, this is due to the large migration of Northerners to Southern cities. Partly it is the historic decline in influence of the coastal Southern areas that once boasted the great slave-holding plantation culture, and the kind of r-less pronunciation we associated with languard belles posing in hoop skirts on the porches of ante-bellum houses. This advancing “r” marks the growing prestige of what linguists call Inland Southern, the speech deriving from Appalachia. That pattern goes back to the earliest days of British settlement, when people from parts of England who did not pronounce “r” settled the coastal areas, while the Scots-Irish, settlers from Northern Ireland who spoke with a strong “r,” moved into the hills of Appalachia because the easily-cultivated coastal land already was taken.

Their speech has been given a huge boost by the rise of country music, no longer a regional craze, but a national phenomenon. Those who “sing country,” wherever they come from, “talk country” and “talkin’ country” has become a kind of default way of speaking informal American. It is considered easygoing and friendly. Pres. George W. Bush has made it his trademark, with no disadvantage politically because, like him, a great many Americans say, “Howya doin’? Doin’ fine!” and they are not more particular than he is about making subject agree with verb in sentences such as, “There’s no negotiations with North Korea.”

The economic rise of the South has had another startling result. So many Americans have moved into the South and Southwest and happily adopted Southernisms—such as “y’all” and “fixin’ to” and pronouncing “I” as “all,” not the Northern “eye-ee”—that more Americans now speak some variety of Southern than any other dialect. That is the conclusion of linguist John Fought, who believes that, as the population shift to the Sun Belt continues, “In time, we should expect ‘r-full’ southern to become accepted as standard American speech.”

That news will come as a shock to Northerners conditioned over generations to despise Southern talk, considering it evidence of stupidity and backwardness. In the film “Sweet Home Alabama,” the good ol’ boy played by Josh Lucas says to his Northernized wife, Reese Witherspoon, “Just because I talk slow, doesn’t mean I’m stupid.” The context leads the audience to believe him.

The comedian Jeff Foxworthy still fills huge theaters North and South with his hilarious routine ridiculing Southern speech and Northern attitudes towards it. He kills them with his list of Southern “words:”

“May-o-naise. Man, a’s a lotta people here tonight,”
“Urinal. I told my brother, ‘You’re in a lotta trouble when Daddy gets home.”
“Wichadidja. Hey, you didn’t bring your track with you, did you?”

Northern attitudes to Southerners may be ameliorating slightly, possibly because it no longer is uncool in Northern cities to like country music and the culture that goes with it. Yet, an ingrained sense of the prestige of some dialects and scorn for others is very much alive. Linguist Dennis Preston of Michigan State University has spent years studying the prejudices Americans have concerning speech different from their own. He joined us on a train west from Philadelphia, demonstrating his regular technique. Establishing quick rapport with other passengers, he got them to mark on a map of the U.S. where they thought people spoke differently. Almost without exception, they circled the South and New York to locate the worst English. Referring to New York, a Pennsylvania woman told Preston contemptuously, “They say waader!” Preston asked, “What do you say?” “Water!” she declared proudly.

A Distinct New York Voice

Preston, though, detects another emotion creeping in beneath the scorn, and that is pleasure. People may think Southern or New York speech is not good, but they find them charming, and that must be partly an effect of media exposure, for instance, to the sympathetic New York characters in the TV series “Law and Order.” Linguists believe that broadcasting and the movies help all Americans understand different dialects, perhaps appreciating the diversity in our culture. Moreover, no matter how they themselves speak, Americans learn to understand the language of network broadcasters, which is the closest thing to an overall American standard. That standard coincides with the speech that Preston’s subjects inevitably identify as the best American speech—that of the Midwest—because it has the fewest regional features.

That Midwest standard is relevant to the cutting edge of computer research in Silicon Valley. There is heavy investment in efforts to make computers speak like us and understand us. The researchers believe they will achieve that in 10 to 15 years but it is an incredible challenge.

What these efforts demonstrate is how infinitely complex our language and understanding of it is, how meaning turns on the slightest changes in intonation, how vast any computer database must be to catch all the nuances we take for granted. How do you program a computer to avoid those charming errors in context which foreigners make in perfectly grammatical sentences? For instance, a sign in an Egyptian hotel states: “Patrons need have no anxiety about the water. It has all been passed by the management.” Or, this in a Swiss hotel: “Due to the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedrooms, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose.”

The effort to make computers understand speech raises other questions about the future of language. Will the technology, and the business imperatives behind it, create an irresistible drive toward more standard speech? If so, which accents or varieties of American speech will that leave out? Whom will it disenfranchise because of their dialect—African-Americans, Hispanics, Cajuns in Louisiana”? A couple of years ago, the police chief of Shreveport, La., complained that the computer voice-recognition system used to route nonemergency calls did
not understand the local accent. Researchers point out, however, that if you speak like someone from the Midwest, computers will understand you.

The emerging technology is irresistible for business. When United Airlines introduced a computerized voice-recognition system for flight information—replacing live bodies—it saved a reported $25,000,000. As these systems become more sophisticated, a lot of companies will want them to replace expensive warm bodies. Inevitably, more and more of our lives will involve talking to and being understood by computers. Being understood will be increasingly important. Will the technology work to reinforce existing linguistic stereotypes—about your race, ethnicity, gender, or where you live—or help to break them down? Will we have to talk as computers would like us to in order for them to obey us?

During the California portion of filming “Do You Speak American?” I drove a car equipped with an elaborate voice-recognition system. I speak a version of standard broadcast American English, and I tried to enunciate clearly. Occasionally, it worked, but often it did not and the car kept saying, “Pardon me? Pardon me?” and I gave it up.

Everything in the American experience, each new frontier encountered—geographical, spiritual, technological—has altered our language. What kind of a frontier are we crossing by teaching computers our most fundamental human skill, that of the spoken word?

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