Language & Society

**Language in Its Social Setting** Language is a social phenomenon. In America — as anywhere — it’s shaped by contact, conflict and incredible cultural complexity. [Dennis Baron](http://www.pbs.org/speak/words/sezwho/socialsetting/#baron) explains.

* ***Is email ruining the language?***
* ***Can I be fired for speaking Spanish on the job?***
* ***Are we less literate than we used to be?***

These questions reflect how language is a social phenomenon. Although many linguists believe that humans are genetically programmed to learn language, it takes social contact to flip the switch that makes us talk. So linguists study not simply the sounds, grammars and meanings of the world’s languages, but also how they function in their social settings

Language varies according to the social structure of a local speech community. For example, American English has varieties, dialects that are subsets of the larger linguistic whole called English. Some dialects vary by geography: In the North, you put the groceries in a bag; in the South, you put them in a sack.

**Language expresses group identity**

Language also expresses solidarity or group identity. Language can separate insiders from outsiders, those in the know from those who didn’t get the memo, the cool from the pathetically unhip, and, in the case of the Biblical shibboleth, friend from foe.

Members of small groups such as families, couples, friends, roommates and work groups all give their language a spin suited to the group’s interests and experience. Members of a profession develop a jargon, an internally efficient job-related shorthand that permits them to impress, mystify or stonewall outsiders. In simple two-person conversation, language may reflect power differentials: One person may take charge while the other plays a subordinate role.

We sometimes label the language of larger social groups a social dialect, with differences in pronunciation and usage based on social class, ethnic factors, contact with other languages, gender or age. Let’s take a look at some issues in social dialects.

**Ebonics Emerges**

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) — sometimes known as Black English or Ebonics — is used by many African Americans, particularly those from working-class or inner-city areas. Black English clearly differs from other varieties of English in its vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, but simply attaching it to one population group oversimplifies a complex situation.

Many African Americans do not speak Black English; many non-African Americans who live in inner cities do. Complicating matters further, African American influence — music, fashion, language — on American culture is very strong. As a result, some white American teenagers from the suburbs consciously imitate Black language features, to express their own group identity and shared opposition to mainstream culture.

Many people — African American or not — look down on Black English as an undesirable or ignorant form of the language. Others see it as a proud and positive symbol of the African-American experience. A few political activists or Afro-centrists insist that Ebonics isn’t a dialect of English at all but rather a separate language with roots in Africa. And many people accept Black English as an important social dialect but argue that its speakers must also master standard English in order to succeed in America today.

The debate illustrates a larger sociolinguistic point. We *all* master several different varieties of our language, standard and less so, that we deploy depending upon social contexts. In unfamiliar social situations, we feel linguistically inadequate and “don’t know the right thing to say.” Yet we can pick up the lingo of a new context if we are exposed to it long enough.

**Word Wars between the Sexes**

Gender differences in the use of English are subtle. Nonetheless, notions of men’s and women’s language use abound: Men are said to swear a lot, to be more coarse and casual. Studies claim that American women know more color terms and men know tool names; that women use more qualifiers and diminutives; and that young women are more likely than men to end a declarative sentence with a rise in pitch, as if it were a question? In meetings or other professional contexts, men are said to speak more than women and interrupt them more often. On the other hand, women seem to carry the burden in mixed-gender conversations.

Clearly, these stereotypes aren’t very trustworthy. It’s probably not so much gender as gender *roles* that influence linguistic behavior. As gender roles change, gender differences in speech frequently disappear. Women who work as mechanics know the names of tools, and men who paint and decorate have to know their color terms.

Gender roles change, but they may not disappear. For example, although the taboo against women swearing has eased, both men and women students still report some degree of discomfort when women swear in mixed company.

**Department of Ms. Information**

In the 1970s, the U.S. Department of Labor rewrote its extensive list of job titles to eliminate gender bias, making language less patronizing, more accurate and inclusive — by, for example, replacing “stewardess” with “flight attendant.”

The case of the missing “Miss” illuminates more change. For some time people sought an alternative to Miss or Mrs. that did not indicate marital status, a title that would parallel the masculine title Mr. “Ms.” took root (after decades of failed starts) in American usage in the 1970s, pronounced Miz to distinguish it from Miss. Since then, Ms. has undergone an interesting shift. Many young women use it either as a trendy alternative to Miss, or to indicate an unmarried woman (widowed or divorced) of their mother’s generation. It’s a good example of what can happen when planners decide a word should mean one thing, but users of the language adapt it to mean something else.

Another interesting development in gender-neutral vocabulary is the rise of *you guys* as a new kind of second person plural in American speech. Even though *guy* is usually masculine, the plural *guys* has become, for most people, gender neutral — and can even refer to an all-female group.

**Minority Report**

Human history can be viewed as what happens when groups of people speaking different languages encounter one another. The result isn’t always pretty: language contact can lead to mutual understanding but also social conflict. Although it’s the speakers who unite or clash, language often symbolizes what unites or divides people — and linguistic minorities often find their right to use their native language severely restricted by laws requiring the majority language in all sorts of situations.

**In the U.S., diversity tends to give way to one common language: English**

The United States is founded on diversity and difference. In religion and ethnicity, we are a composite people. However, when it comes to language, diversity tends to give way to one common language: English. And although the very title *Do You Speak American?* suggests the broadness of American speech, there have always been Americans who feel that if you don’t speak the “American” language, you may not really be an American.

Americans initially accepted French in Louisiana and Spanish in California and the Southwest territories, but soon began requiring English-only in all public transactions. Government policy initially eradicated Native American languages, but has recently switched — in an effort that may come too late — to try to preserve them and encourage growth. Similarly, depriving African slaves of their linguistic roots was one way of controlling them.

Language loss is common for immigrants to the United States. During the pre-World War I waves of immigration from non-English-speaking countries, it was common for second-generation speakers to be bilingual in English and the language of the land they came from, and the third generation to be monolingual English speakers, unable to converse with their grandparents. There is some evidence that the switch to English has speeded up since the 1960s, skipping the bilingual middle generation altogether. Parents are monolingual in Spanish or Hmong or Ukrainian. Their children speak only English.

American schools have never dealt comfortably with their non-Anglophone students. In the 19th century, bilingual schooling was common, particularly in the heavily German areas of the Midwest. As immigration increased, public schools shifted overwhelmingly to English as the language of instruction. The Americanization movement of the early 1900s reinforced assimilation to English, often punitively. But there was no concerted effort to teach these students *how* to speak English. It should not be surprising that in this sink-or-swim environment, many students simply sank: More than half of students dropped out at the height of the great wave of Eastern European immigration.

**Teddy Roosevelt warned the U.S. was in danger of becoming a polyglot boarding house**

Teddy Roosevelt once warned that the United States was in danger of becoming a polyglot boarding house. Instead we became a nation of monolingual English speakers. Language teachers tell a joke: What do you call a person who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call a person who speaks one language? American.

Immigration reforms in the 1960s brought an influx of speakers of Spanish, as well as Russian and a variety of Asian languages —yet English continues to dominate the United States. In the 1970s, court-ordered bilingual education attempted to deal with the problems faced by minority-language speakers in the schools. Ideally, such programs use the students’ native languages to instruct them in basic subjects (reading, writing, math, science and social studies) so that they don’t fall behind while they get up to speed in English.

Highly effective when done well, bilingual education has been controversial because many people fear the programs are designed to preserve minority language, not to teach children English. California voters recently rejected bilingual education in favor of English immersion programs. Supporters of bilingual education fear that this reduction in language support services that signals a step back to the isolationism of the early 20th century.

Americans will continue to face issues of assimilation and minority language rights. Opponents of immigration see the English language as endangered and call for laws to make English the nation’s official language. Still, the U.S. Census has reported for several decades that English is spoken by 95 percent or more of U.S. residents. Although bilingualism may be on the rise, the children of non-English-speaking immigrants are abandoning their heritage languages, becoming monolingual speakers of English with record speed.

**Sociolinguistic Short-Takes**

* *Do people swear more today than they used to?* We have no way to quantify how much people used to swear, or even how much they swear today. It would be fair to say that people today swear more in public (and on radio and television and in film) than they did in the 1940s or 50s.
* *Is the language of blacks and whites diverging?* Some observers worry that the social distance between whites and African Americans may be increasing, which could in turn lead to greater linguistic differences.
* *Is E-mail ruining the language?* Critics object that it encourages misspelling and grammatical error, makes people lazy, and is impersonal and overly informal. Even so, standards for e-mail started to emerge as soon as it became common. E-mail programs come with spell- and grammar- checkers, advanced formatting capabilities, and graphics and sound. Many e-mail writers want their e-mails to read as if they have been written by someone who knows how to do things right.
* *Where do language standards come from?* Language standards— ideas about correct spelling, usage, grammar, and style — emerge by consensus within communities of language users. In some countries, government offices or language academies devise language policy, draw up standards and attempt to enforce them. There are no such mechanisms for English, though teachers, editors, writers, and self-appointed experts serve as language guardians, transmitting ideas of correctness and attempting to secure their adoption. Despite their efforts, there is no single standard of correctness in English. Instead, there are multiple standards that emerge from fluid communication contexts.
* *Can I be fired for speaking Spanish on the job?* That depends. Federal courts frequently side with the workers’ right to use any language they want, particularly when on breaks or talking privately. The courts also allow employers to specify the language to be used when employees deal directly with the public, and more than half the states have adopted English as their official language — a designation more symbolic than enforceable. English doesn’t need the protection of being an official language: the number of English speakers in America is rising and will not decline anytime soon. No other language, including Spanish, is positioned to become the majority national language. However, designation of English as official can put a chill on the use of other languages. In a period of increased globalization, a knowledge of the world’s languages should help rather than hurt the U.S. position among the nations of the world.
* *Are literacy rates really too low?* We all agree that literacy — the ability to read and write — is one of the most important things that people need to succeed. Yet as experts disagree over how to define and measure literacy, the stakes have gone up. Is a high-school education enough? Can we say that a given score on a standardized test guarantees a comparable level of performance in real-world reading, writing, and calculating?

Every few years we have a literacy scare. Most recently, a report in the 1990s warned that almost half of American adults couldn’t read, write, or calculate at adequate levels. At the same time, the vast majority of people interviewed considered their reading, writing and math perfectly adequate for their jobs and other everyday tasks. So, the assessment could simply mean Americans are too complacent about their literacy … or that testing doesn’t really measure what we need to know.

After a report on literacy in crisis, politicians legislate more standardized testing. This forces schools to redirect their efforts to get students past the standardized tests. Scores go up, things settle down for a while, then the next report comes out and the crisis cycle starts again.

Standardized tests have some ability to predict actual performance. But when schools devote too much time to test-taking skills and too little time to the actual literacy practices the tests are supposed to measure, actual progress is stymied. A more reliable measure of literacy might be the amount of time spent in and out of class on reading, writing, and numeracy. A 2003 report from the Brookings Institution indicates that two-thirds of American high school students spend less than an hour a day on homework. This suggests that students don’t spend enough time on actual literacy tasks — and that is something that no test can address.

**Summary**

Language is a social phenomenon. Because language arises naturally and inevitably in all human groups, linguists study not simply the sounds, grammars and meanings of the world’s languages, but also how these languages function in their social settings. Many linguists believe that humans are genetically programmed to learn language, but it still takes social contact to turn on the switch that makes us talk.

American English has varieties, called dialects, that are determined by social factors. For example, the geographical dialects of New England, the Midwest, the South, New York City, or Texas came about through the interaction of people who settled in those areas.

We attribute other varieties of American English to ethnic factors (Black English); to contact with other languages (Spanglish); to gender (the linguistic battle of the sexes); or to age (teenspeak). But these varieties, too, come about through social mixing and/or isolation, differences in status and power, and economics and politics. Factors such as education, social class and occupation also shape our language.

Because our social networks tend to be complex, we all use multiple versions of our native language. We may speak differently when we’re with friends, relatives or strangers; when we’re at home, in school or on the job. The context of communication — its purpose and audience —determines whether our words are spoken or written, formal or informal, full of slang or technical jargon, off-color, colorful, or colorless. The social context of communication also affects the degree to which our language approaches or avoids the norms of correctness that our speech community deems appropriate to the occasion.

Social contact and social conflict both shape language. When World War I produced strong anti-German feeling in the United States, some Americans abandoned words of obvious German origin, such as frankfurter and sauerkraut, in favor of hot dog and liberty cabbage. More recently, anti-French feeling led some Americans to replace French fries with “freedom fries.” Such gestures are purely superficial — symbolic, and in the case of liberty cabbage and freedom fries, temporary. However, linguistic prejudice can run deep and cause lasting damage.

America is a nation forged from many cultures. As a result, controversies erupt over the use of minority languages or nonstandard varieties of English — on storefronts or on the job, in the voting booth or the classroom. The press, the legislatures, and the courts become forums for noisy debate about the legal rights of speakers of minority languages and dialects.

On the international scene, sociolinguists are looking at how American English influences other languages through popular music, film, television, and the Internet. Speaking American can be a status symbol — yet can also conjure the unwelcome image of an arrogant superpower.

The social aspects of American English often reflect a wide range of nonlinguistic issues. Language is social. Sociolinguists study how it shapes and reflects such issues as school success or failure, patriotism or prejudice, democracy or imperialism, and more on the local, national, and international levels, in order to paint a more complete picture of how language in America works.

**Suggested Reading/Additional Resources**

* Chaika, Elaine. *Language: The Social Mirror*. 3rded. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1994.
* Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999*.*