Part I

American English
Introduction

The principal language of the USA is English, the language transplanted from the British Isles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, molded by the subsequent history of the colonies and the new nation, and affected to some extent by interaction with English in the rest of the world and by contact with other languages. Americans have generally been satisfied to call their language "English," and when they need to differentiate it from other kinds of English, they are satisfied by adding their national adjective and calling it "American English." Occasionally, attempts have been made to name the language simply "American" as an entity distinct from the English of England, or Great Britain as a whole, or other parts of the English-speaking world, but these attempts have not succeeded, and it is only in a few foreign universities, in Germany, for example, where this distinction in name and subject matter is operative today.

The little question of the name of the language is symbolic of Americans’ views on the language itself. Americans do not have a language ideology which identifies nation and language; they do not fight for their language as the symbol of their nationhood as many other nations do. They are content to be one of a number of nations speaking the same language. They find it hard to understand the ambivalence of the Spanish-speaking world which accepts its multiple nationhood, but tends to follow the language conventions of the Academy in Spain. They find it harder to understand the Arabic-speaking world which tends to deny its multiple nationhood and seek an ideal Arab nation. Hardest of all for Americans to understand are nations whose members talk eloquently of dying for their language or tie their language to their religion or their political independence or their destiny in the world.

This is not to say that Americans have not been concerned at all about their language. From the earliest days of independence, political leaders, academic spokesmen, journalists, and other writers have talked about the quality of language in the United States, the differences between British and American English, the place of English and other languages in the USA, and the role of English in the world. Chapter 1 follows some of these concerns through history, showing how American attitudes toward language diversity have changed over the years and how American norms of English have arisen and been codified. The whole area of language in the USA is one which historians have not treated, and the history of American language policies and language attitudes is a field
that linguists and sociolinguists have hardly explored. This chapter breaks ground for research from both sides.

Americans give little thought to other kinds of English throughout the world, and university professors of English are usually just as poorly informed as ordinary citizens of the nation about the distinctive features of the language and literature of English-speaking countries other than Britain and the USA. Chapter 2 gives a unique view of American English from outside, and places the English of the USA among the other Englishes of the world. As English spreads across every continent as the most useful lingua franca in the present-day world, it is important for us to understand its uses as mother tongue, second language, and foreign language.

When English was transplanted to the New World, it was a language with deep dialect differences, reflecting the geographic divisions and social stratification of the British Isles and the differing influences of the Celtic languages spoken in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall, and the Danish and French spoken in Britain at different times and places. As is often the case with languages which spread fairly rapidly over language areas, the English of the American colonies underwent dialect leveling or homogenization. Early observers noted that American English lacked the highly divergent provincial and class dialects of Britain. Nevertheless, dialect variation developed in North America, derived from original British dialect differences, varied settlement patterns and demographic mobility, and the new geographical and social determinants. Chapter 3 outlines the major diversities of dialect variation in the contemporary USA and explains how linguists study the phenomena of variation. Strangely, the basic facts of regional and social variation are not discussed in traditional English language curricula in spite of the lively interest which Americans generally show in regional differences of vocabulary and pronunciation and in social differences of grammar. Recent popular publications and instructional units for high schools have begun to present some of this information, which is normally available only in professional journals and technical monographs. This chapter gives a balanced introduction to this material.

The languages of the western hemisphere are mostly indigenous Indian languages or transplanted European languages. Some, however, are newly created creoles, which have arisen as a result of language contact and pidginization processes. These creoles are especially evident in the Caribbean and the Guianan coast of South America, where English, French, and Spanish-based creoles are the mother tongues of substantial populations. In the USA, a few such creoles are spoken, most notably the English-based Gullah of the Sea Islands, Hawaiian Pidgin English, and the French-based creole of Louisiana. These languages are covered in Chapter 4, which gives basic information about the origin and present status of these languages. Another creole, the French-based language of the Metis, spoken in several northern states and in Canada, is discussed in Chapter 8 (Part II) on Native American lingua francas. Americans know little about these disappearing, unwritten languages which evolved in the New World to cope with
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communication problems in certain socially restricted multilingual settings. Chapter 4 helps to repair this lack of knowledge and appreciation.

The last chapter rounds out Part I by discussing the English used by the largest ethnic minority in the USA, the Blacks or Afro-Americans. In part this chapter connects with the preceding chapter on creoles because of the contribution which PIDGINS and creoles have made in the formation of the language of the American Black community. Unfortunately, the issue of the creole origin of Black English has become a point of controversy in American linguistics, drawing attention away from more productive questions. Whatley, however, gives space to the description of special ways of using language among Afro-Americans, letting us see the central role of language in the varied cultural expression of American Blacks. Her chapter gives some inkling of the riches a full description of the English of all the cultures of the USA would yield.
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English in our language heritage*

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The Constitution of the USA contains no reference to choice of a national language. Early national leaders chose not to identify one language as the official or national standard. The legacy of the colonial and Revolutionary periods includes tolerance of diverse languages and the absence of official selection of a specific language for use among the indigenous or a linguistic norm to be achieved by immigrants.

Some early national leaders, such as John Adams, proposed a national academy to regulate and standardize English, but these efforts were rejected as out of keeping with the spirit of liberty in the United States (Read 1936; Heath 1976c). Noah Webster’s prolific and energetic writings on the language of America (1789) helped keep the goal of a national language in the public eye in the first half century of nationhood. His grammar, sold about the country in company with his blue-backed speller and the Bible, helped set the mood for the American public to embrace the commercially published dictionary as an authority on language correctness. The public schools promised to all an “English” education, understood to be the study of English grammar and spelling, and the achievement of skills in composition, reading, and mathematics. Public education promoted the vision of a Standard American English, which those who would mark themselves as social-minded and civic-conscious individuals should acquire.

The legacy of the language situation in the United States is, therefore, the rejection of an official choice of a national language or national institutions to regulate language decisions related to spelling, pronunciation, technical vocabulary, or grammar. Yet Americans overwhelmingly believe that English is the national tongue and that correctness in spelling, pronunciation, word choice, and usage, as well as facility in reading and writing English, are desirable goals for every U.S. citizen. Nevertheless, numerous diverse languages and varieties of English have been maintained in communities across the United States, and there has never been federal legislation to eliminate them.

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Government funding has in recent decades supported the teaching of foreign languages. These seeming contradictions have been played out in the past as well as in the present period, when bilingual education, the linguistic and cultural diversity of the USA, and cries for basic skills in teaching and writing English (see Chapter 20) seem to tug the future of English in the United States in different directions.

Linguistic diversity was not unusual in colonial and early national America. Classical and modern languages played critical roles in the social and political life of the early nation. Separate settlements within the United States maintained their native tongues in religious, educational, and economic institutions; newspapers, schools, and societies provided instructional support for diverse languages. The use of these languages was encouraged, and intellectual leaders valued different languages for both their practical and their symbolic purposes. Throughout the nineteenth century, a bilingual tradition existed in public and private schools, newspapers, and religious and social institutions. It was not until the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century that legal, social, and political forces strongly opposed maintenance of languages other than English. Only then was a monolingual English tradition mandated in some states and espoused as both natural and national. During the 1920s, legal and social forces restricted the use and teaching of foreign languages, especially German (see Chapter 12). Since the 1960s, linguistic minorities among widely varying ethnic groups have stressed the multilingual, multicultural nature of the national society. These minorities have pointed out the necessity of bilingualism in education, judicial matters, and the world of work (see Chapters 21 and 23). These efforts to revitalize the bilingual tradition in the United States have brought forth questions regarding the historic and current role of linguistic uniformity in national unity and the place of English in our language heritage.

Solutions to the contradictions?

In 1855, a London publication squarely faced the issue of the future language of the United States:

Does the supremacy of the English language in the United States run any serious risk? Considering the great, and every year increasing number of continental emigrants who bring with them their languages and associations – considering that the Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent do not exceed one-third of the whole population, if indeed, they amount to that – is there no danger that, in course of time, the English tongue may be compelled to yield a part of its ground, and be in some regions, at least, supplanted? And, may not present or future tendencies to widen the political separation of the two countries [England and the USA] have some further effect on this, their great common bond of union? (Bristed 1855: 75)

Early in the twentieth century, the possibility of language diversity leading to political separation was once again raised. However, this time the question centered not on the issue of England and the United States losing the bond of a common tongue, but on the possibility of a national split within the United
States. Numerous discussions of language and nation suggested that without a forceful language policy establishing English as the national language and restricting the teaching of other languages, the United States would be fragmented into linguistic minorities seeking to establish their own separate states.

A cleavage in the language now would mean to us a cleavage of the nation in its most vulnerable if not in its most essential part. That, no matter what our origin, no real American can desire; for it is not a question whether we are to be part German or part English. We might survive with the national spirit cut in two; but should our German born citizens be successful in making German co-equal with English in our public schools, the Bohemians, who hate the very sound of the German language, will demand a similar chance for the Czecho [sic] tongue, and they know how to fight for what they want. (Steiner 1916: 102–3)

The author further warned that Hungarians, Finns, Scandinavians, and other language groups would “clamor for the same privilege.” and when that happened, “we may at once say good-bye to the unity of the United States.” The purge of foreign languages was to extend from classrooms to concert halls; no teacher should instruct in a foreign tongue; no singer should perform in any language other than English.

Since the 1960s, the possibility of a linguistically divided nation has been discussed with great fervor and frequency. Not surprisingly, the solutions currently offered are similar to those made periodically over the past two hundred years. In response to the BILINGUAL EDUCATION ACT designed to provide bilingual education for children whose MOTHER TONGUE was a language other than English, and subsequent laws extending and amending this Act, numerous discussions pointing out the possibility of a divided nation have appeared in the press, in court cases, and on the platforms of local parent-teacher organizations. Editorials have suggested that the current encouragement of bilingual education will take the USA on a road to cultural, economic, and political divisiveness. Parents of children who come to school without English have been characterized as lazy, un-American, and undeserving of American citizenship (e.g. Cunco 1975).

As is so often the case, easy interpretations from selected historical facts and rigid arguments such as those cited about equating linguistic and national unity do not bear up under comprehensive examination of the history of debates over language heritage. The question of the future of language as a national symbol and means of unification in the United States has been a frequent topic of debate with respect to one or another issue throughout the history of the country. In every case, language itself was not the central issue of debate, but became a focus of arguments made for political, social, or economic purposes.

During the colonial period, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were debated as the languages of elitism, intellectual pursuits, and mental discipline. In 1743, an unknown citizen of the American colonies argued that English was in peril for those who knew “common sense in English only” (American Magazine and Historical Chronicle 1743–4: i). He felt exaggerated emphases on Latin and Greek and heavy Classical ornamentation of English threatened the future of
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The centrality of language in social, political, and ideological issues accounts for both the frequency and intensity of language heritage debates. When Benjamin Franklin lashed out against the Germans in Pennsylvania in 1753, he feared their language would soon dominate the state. Of the Pennsylvania Germans, Franklin wrote:

Those who come hither are generally the most stupid of their own nation, and as ignorance is often attended with credulity when knavery would mislead it, and with suspicion when honesty would set it right; 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. Their clergy have very little influence on the people, who seem to take pleasure in abusing and discharging the minister on every trivial occasion. Not being used to liberty, they know not how to make a modest use of it. (Franklin 1959: IV, 483–4)

Placing Franklin’s pejorative statements in the context of political issues of the times indicates that they were motivated by his resentment of the Germans’ domination of local elections and his fear that they would not support his choice for colonial governor. Franklin’s comments also point out the willingness of speakers of one language to accuse speakers of other languages of immorality, unpredictability, and untrustworthiness. Throughout the history of the United States, whenever speakers of varieties of English or other languages have been viewed as politically, socially, or economically threatening, their language has become a focus for arguments in favor of both restrictions of their use and imposition of Standard English.

Ideological or political views about the status of a particular language may arise in response to issues which have no direct or necessary relation to language. Within these motivations, language may be considered a tool or a symbol, and politicians may not concern themselves with changing the language itself, but rather with promoting it for status achievement and extension to speakers of other languages. For example, within the United States, ideological adherence to English has been supported by the ideal of “a perfect Union,” a coming together of diverse peoples in a creative force. Individuals, groups, and the national government have promoted the idea at different times throughout our history that speaking the same language would ensure uniformity of other behavioral traits, such as morality, patriotism, and logical thinking.

Roles for foreign languages

During the colonial and early national periods, foreign language maintenance was an issue for churches, local politicians, educators, and special interest groups. In urban areas, speakers of foreign languages formed societies to promote the use of their native language as they developed ways of caring for orphans, widows, and children of families who could not afford to send their children abroad for education (see Chapter 14). For example, the German Friendly Society of Charleston, South Carolina required that its members speak German in the late 1700s. Individuals were supposed to maintain their knowledge of foreign languages through individual study, or with minimal help from such primary associates as they could find. Colonial and early national newspapers abounded with advertisements placed by individuals who would give instruction in foreign languages in their home or in the home of the pupil. A typical advertisement read: “A Young Frenchman, who has been resident about seven months in this town, has a desire to make himself useful to the publick—and believes he can be so in no other way so well as in the instruction of the
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youth of both sexes in the French language” (Massachusetts Spy April 19, 1772).

Arguments over the advantages of modern languages versus the Classical languages ran the gamut from the serious to the sublime and were often summarized in exaggerated terms by modern language instructors. One overly anxious tutor of German included in the advertisement of his services:

This being the original language of Europe, for which, as from the Celtic, its oldest dialect, the Greeks and Latins borrowed many hundreds of their words, as Sir Richard Steele observes in his English grammar; therefore, it is of greater antiquity than those of the Greeks and Romans – and as being the mother tongue, or the origin and source of the French and English, the radical knowledge, of these languages depend on it. (Aurora General Advertiser, Philadelphia, January 2, 1794: 9)

Bookkeepers who kept records in French advertised their services. Public brokers and translators were available for numerous languages.

There was, in addition, a keen interest among readers of early American periodicals in the language affairs of countries abroad. When the French circulated a petition asking that the language of public monuments be shifted from Latin to French, the petition was widely published in newspapers of the United States. Excerpts from the constitutions, scientific reports, and literature of the French were particularly widely distributed in American periodicals. General articles about language appeared frequently, and often asserted the equal value of all languages: “Sense is Sense in all Languages” and “in Point of Invention, all Men are on a Par” (American Magazine and Historical Chronicle 1743–4: vol.1, 1745: vol.2).

For some groups of the society, self-instruction in foreign languages was expected behavior; moreover, learning to read another language was viewed as a relatively simple task. Foreign languages were tools used to obtain knowledge not accessible in English. Many asserted both the ease and necessity of learning foreign languages. For example, Thomas Jefferson urged his daughter to read French daily, and he suggested to young correspondents that a speaking knowledge of French be acquired in Canada. He judged learning French “absolutely essential” and Spanish vitally important, because of both diplomatic interchanges and the history of Spanish influence in the New World. Jefferson himself learned Spanish by reading Don Quixote with the help of a grammar and dictionary. Self-education in foreign languages was also promoted for special vocational purposes. An 1834 grammar purporting to give in German and English colloquial phrases on every topic necessary to maintain conversation noted: “The prevalence of the German language in many parts of the United States should form a powerful inducement for men in every situation of life to become, at least partially acquainted with it. To the man of business, especially, a knowledge of the German tongue is of the first importance, as it will greatly facilitate his intercourse with a very valuable part of our population” (Ehrenfried 1834). Printers were recommended not only for their skills in printing, but also their knowledge of foreign languages. Most of the individuals