

## American English

As we did with metaphors before, let's take a break from pure etymology and memorizing forms to look at a phenomenon of language which should be dear to many of you, how American English developed, primarily out of British English. In this presentation we'll examine the origin of not only the American way of speaking — our unique vocabulary, accent and manner of speech — but also the influences which created it and the impact it's had on the modern world.

That a new brand of English developed in America should come as no surprise to any of you. It's a direct extension of the dictum in evolutionary biology that "separation leads to speciation." That is, put distance between two groups of the same creature and they will begin to drift apart, and as long as they have no contact, they'll eventually start to look different. In the case of American English, the pressure to evolve along its own path was particularly strong. All the new things, places and customs which existed and developed in the New World naturally called for new words. Thus, starting in the seventeenth century, the gap between English speakers in England and those in America — the Atlantic Ocean essentially — all but guaranteed a new "species" of language would arise.

Even more interesting, one would think that the English spoken in England would represent the language in its purest, oldest form, but no! *All* languages are constantly changing, even those in their native lands, and colonists living in a faraway land who aren't privy to the way the language is evolving back home will often preserve archaic terms and expressions which become lost in the mother country. This is true not only of American English but other language systems as well. Icelandic, for instance, preserves archaic features which disappeared in other Scandinavian languages after the settlement of Iceland. Besides that, language can change for its own sake. Speakers misinterpret, forget or misremember the expressions and vocabulary they inherited from their ancestors, especially when they live in a "new world" filled with novelties and settled by adventurers who are often non-conformists eager to revolutionize their communities. What else were the first Europeans who came to live in America but rebels, and not just political renegades but linguistic free-thinkers as well?

The very name America shows well how haphazard and dynamic this "new world" of speaking could be. America, the name, is the product of a gross misunderstanding. It was coined by the map-maker Martin Waldseemüller sometime around 1500 CE. Waldseemüller mistakenly credited the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci with discovering the New World, when the first southern European to cross the Atlantic and return was Christopher Columbus. Not only had Vespucci not gotten there first, he'd never actually set foot on the continent of North America. All he'd visited was South America and a few of the Caribbean Islands.

When the mistake was brought to Waldseemüller's attention, he corrected it in his future maps, but too late! The name had caught on, and "America" it's been ever since. A fun side note here is the Italian name Amerigo is based on the German name Haimirich which would later evolve into Henry in English. So, America is "Henry-land." All you Henry's out there should be very proud.

Among the first English-speakers to settle in America were the Pilgrims who arrived at a critical moment in the evolution of our language. For instance, a new verb form *-s*, as in *comes*, *does*,

has, had recently begun being used in place of the older form *-th* (*cometh, doth, hath*). An even bigger change, the old pronouns *thou/thee* were being replaced by *you*. Imagine how different American English would have been if the Pilgrims had arrived before these transitions occurred. Americans would have innocently retained *thou comest* and *he cometh* without knowing those forms had fallen out of fashion in the old country. These archaisms might never have left the language and then how different our English would be from British English!

Even without that, the differences proved to be quite profound. English speakers back in Britain dropped other Elizabethan expressions which Americans inadvertently preserved. “Fall,” for instance, in the sense of “autumn,” was originally a joke based on its counterpart “spring.” Plants spring in spring so they should fall in fall. Hilarious. Other Elizabethan-isms Americans held onto include:

- “mad” in the sense of “angry”;
- the verb “to progress” (vs. the noun);
- a “deck” of cards which the British call a “pack” — “deck” is a joke based on the resemblance of a stack of playing cards to a ship;
- “trash” in the sense of garbage, which Shakespeare was perfectly comfortable using in his play *Othello*, for instance (“Who steals my purse, steals trash”) but later Brits were not;
- and a raft of other words and expressions: gotten, platter, mayhem, chore, skillet, ragamuffin, I guess, maybe, rare meat.

Ironically, in preserving these terms and expressions, Americans later reintroduced many of them to Britain, so their linguistic past came back to haunt the British. Along with these also came the return of some Elizabethan pronunciations such as the *-r* at the end of words like “far” (versus the modern British “fah”) and the flat a-sound (as in “fast”) which the British had largely abandoned by the end of the eighteenth century. All these features of English lived on because Americans retained them in their early, seventeenth-century form. Otherwise, they would have been trash maybe, I guess, and no one would have gotten to take this class in fall term. Boy, that would make me mad fast.

Like all new creations, American English is the product of many influences, not just the English language which gives it its basic form but all the other languages and cultures of the New World, especially those used by European colonists as well as native peoples too. Early on, Dutch, French and Spanish made a significant impact on English; later, German, Irish, Chinese and African languages had their say.

But let’s begin with the true first peoples of America, the Native Americans once known as Indians. From their languages many borrowings entered English, plant names, for instance: squash from *isquonterquashes* (a Narraganset word), hickory from *pawcohiccora* (an Algonquian word), and several others including tobacco, persimmon, pecan, tomato, maize and hominy. Indeed, these plants represent not just linguistic riches but a dietary wealth found in the new vegetables themselves which were imported across the Atlantic and improved the health of Europeans back home after colonization. The fact is, the diversity of vegetables and edible plants native to America was much greater than those found in the Old World. Just imagine life without tomatoes, corn, lima beans, potatoes and yams, along with the protein they bring to any table.

Without them, no pizza, no chili, no French fries, not even a bloody Mary. How did the Romans conquer the world without pizza?

The names of animals unique to the Americas also derive mainly from Native American languages: raccoon, chipmunk, possum, skunk, moose. The same is true of things and people associated with native cultures: canoe, hammock, powwow, squaw, moccasin, wigwam, papoose and tomahawk. Some words of native origin entered English not directly from Indian tongues but through other languages such as the word “coyote,” originally from the Aztec language. “Coyote” came into English via Spanish.

The names of Native American tribes and places also generated new vocabulary in American English, monikers like Manhattan, Chippewa and Iroquois. However, some native names proved infeasible, for instance, the lake named *Chargogagomanchaugagochaubunagungamaug* which means “You fish on that side, we’ll fish on this side and nobody gets to fish in the middle.” That’s not a name; that’s a treaty. It got changed. Other Native American names were simplified. The Hoochinoo tribe, renowned for its homemade liquor, gave us the word “hooch,” slang for alcoholic beverage.

Besides Native Americans, other European settlers and the languages they spoke made a huge impact on English in North America. If you think about it, this is really just an extension of the ongoing process in which foreign words have been entering our tongue since Roman times. The Norman invasions, for example, imported much Latinate vocabulary, so when Latin-based languages like Spanish and French later influenced English in the Americas, it was just a continuation of the age-old pattern of Latin words infiltrating English. It’s worth noting that the consistency of this influence holds up whether English speakers are the conquered, as they were during the Middle Ages, or the conquerors, as it was during the colonial period. Our enduring eagerness to embrace foreign words shows clearly that English-speaking culture has little sense of the purity of the language, unlike the French who have worked long and hard to keep derivatives from other languages out of theirs — not that it’s worked, but they *have* tried.

After the colonization of the Americas English admitted many words of Spanish origin, often with little or no change: rodeo, bronco, buffalo, avocado, mustang, burro, fiesta, canyon, mesquite, mosquito, ranch, corral, mesa, lasso, cinch, vigilante and bonanza. Others were changed to accommodate English-speaking mouths. *Vaquero*, a Spanish word for “cowboy,” became buckaroo. *Vamos*, Spanish for “let’s go,” became “vamoose,” or “mosey,” as in “mosey along.”

Naturally many of these words are of Mexican origin, as opposed to Iberian (European) Spanish. These two types of Spanish have a relationship similar that of American and British English. Indeed, many of the “Spanish” words which entered English in the Americas are really better understood as Mexican, for instance, stampede and cafeteria and, one of my favorites, hoosegow from the Mexican word *juzgado* meaning “prison.” Like the majority of these Mexican-Spanish imports into English *juzgado* goes back to a Latin word, in this case, *judicare* (“to make a judgment”). Likewise, fiesta goes back to a Latin word, *festā* (“holidays”). Siesta comes from the Latin word for “sixth,” referring to the sixth hour after sunrise when it’s common to take a nap. Rodeo had its origin in Latin *rotare* (“to drive in circles”), a reference to corralling animals.

During the colonial period, French words also entered English *en masse*, having a greater impact in the northern part of the US which bordered French-speaking settlements. Spanish influence was naturally greater in the South. Words like prairie, dime, caribou, toboggan, bayou, levee and depot all entered English through French. Here's another. See if you can figure out what English word comes from French *gaufre*, meaning "waffle, honeycomb." Think of an animal. That's right! Gopher! Because gophers dig tunnels in the ground that crisscross each other and leave a honeycomb pattern. What about *chaudière*, meaning "boiler, furnace"? Think soup. Yes, chowder. And finally just as with Spanish, some Native American words entered English through French, for instance, place names like Detroit, Illinois, Beloit and Sioux, as in Sioux City. Caribou, toboggan and bayou, which I mentioned above, also belong to this category.

But perhaps the most interesting of all the foreign imports into English in the early American period are those which come from African languages. It's impossible to bring over as many people as the American colonists did from Africa without some cultural and linguistic traffic both directions. So while the white settlers imposed their language and way of life on the Africans they enslaved, the languages of the oppressed also had an impact on the English being spoken by their masters. From a variety of African languages we get words like gumbo, goober (peanut), voodoo, juju, bwana and jukebox. Originally, the word was jook-house, a term for a house by the side of a road, a motel of sorts, and because these sorts of establishments served the needs of a traveling, mostly male population, the word became synonymous with brothel. Gives a whole new flavor to the phrase "put another dime in the jukebox," huh?

The most fascinating of these African-based words is mumbo-jumbo. One theory holds that it was originally *mama-djambo*, a word in the Mandingo dialect, which refers to a healer or medicine man who protects men and terrorizes women. Back then women were seen to have dangerous magical powers from which men needed protection. The meaning of *mama-djambo* was later extended to any witch doctor who provides protection from objects of fear. Later, in a transmuted form "mumbo-jumbo," the word signified an African magical formula which would, of course, have been incomprehensible to English-speakers, and so in this usage the word meant "nonsense." After that meaning had developed, the circus showman P.T. Barnum in the 1880's purchased an exceptionally large elephant and named it Jumbo because Jumbo sounded African to him. Henceforth, "jumbo" came to signal anything especially huge.

Once the United States was formed as an independent nation, foreign influence only grew. Between 1670 and 1840 there were only something on the order of a million European immigrants at most to North America, but from 1840 to 1900 that number rose to thirty million, most coming from northern Europe, in particular, Germany, Italy and Ireland (because of the potato famine in 1845). By the turn of the century, New York City housed more German speakers than any city in the world except Berlin and Vienna. As a result, there were over eight hundred German-language newspapers published in America. Bringing large numbers of non-English speakers to our shores, immigration has always been a part of American culture.

With that, there's no way German words could *not* make their way into English: pretzel, cookbook, kindergarten, noodle, dumb and ouch. That's right. When you cry out in pain, you're talking German. A closely related language Dutch also made an impact on English, giving us

words like coleslaw, waffle, snoop, spook and cookie. But perhaps the Dutch word which has made the greatest impact on English was none other than Yankee, the origin of which is unclear but some linguists trace it to the name Jan Kees (literally “John Cheese”). Jan Kees was a generic term used for Dutchmen, the way we say “John Doe” when we’re referring to an unnamed person. How exactly Yankees came to mean Americans, particularly those living in the northern half of the US, is not clear, but somehow the Dutch turned their term for themselves into slang for any American. Those crafty Hollanders! They steal land from the sea, and they give other people their own name. How sly! Just for the record, I come from Dutch heritage. That explains why my quizzes are so tricky.

The Irish also bestowed some words on us — lollapalooza, shillelagh, and shamrock — as did immigrants from East Asia, the Chinese, for instance, who imported into English words like yen, chow (“food”) and kowtow (“bow low to show obedience”). From Tibetan even we get the word sherpa, originally a native guide who escorts a mountain climber to a summit. Later it took on a new meaning, almost certainly because of its humorous appeal: “an assistant who prepares a political leader for a ‘summit’ meeting.” Haha.

But when it all comes down to it, you can’t just throw all these languages into a pot and cook up American English. Our way of speaking has a unique quality which can’t be traced to any particular culture or language. This is seen most clearly in the bold-and-brassiness of the vocabulary early Americans concocted all on their own, words like “belittle,” which Thomas Jefferson coined, and compound names for animals: bullfrog, turkey gobbler, copperhead, lightning bug, eggplant, grasshopper, catfish and mockingbird. Why did early Americans like making up words like that? Who knows? Probably because they knew it would irk the British.

Among the vast array of unique Americanisms are words and phrases like “log-rolling, commuter, striptease, gimmick, baby sitter, teenager, telephone, radio, butt in, bawl out, bonehead, sidetrack, hangover, fudge, joyride, stunt, park, hindsight, scrawny, know how, fill the bill, stay put, bank on, go-getter, dumbbell, boob, razz, raincheck and even . . . keep a stiff upper lip!” Yes! That most British of attitudes is in fact originally an American expression. From American government come another whole set of neologisms: congressional, caucus, presidential, gubernatorial, state house and congressman.

In and around all these creations lurks a love of colorful, exuberant language, that yippy-aye-oh-kai-yah, wildcat-wrasslin’, hell-for-leather, lip-flappin’ chitter-chatter you hear from Yosemite Sam and other caricatures of early Americans who say things like “hornswoggle, cattywampus, rambunctious, move like greased lightning, be in cahoots with, bodacious, face the music, bark up the wrong tree, and saw wood (sleep).” To those could be added even more outrageous inventions, now extinct: monstracious, teetotaciously, helliferous, conbobberation, and obfliscate, none of which I know what mean. All I can say is they sound really American.

But if there is a single linguistic invention which ranks above all others as America’s gift to the world it’s — okay, are you ready for this? — okay. That’s it: okay. Okay exists now in such a broad array of languages across the globe that it’s far easier to cite the ones which don’t have it. Besides that, “okay” functions in a wide range of uses, more parts of speech than not. It can be an interjection (“Okay, here I am.”), an adjective (“That’s okay.”) — and at that the adjective can

denote mild approval (“It was okay [but I didn’t really like it].”) or wild enthusiasm (“Okay! [Now we’re cooking!]”) — it can also serve as an adverb (“It went okay.”), a noun (“All this needs is your okay.”), and a verb (“So will you okay this please?”). If we could find a way to make it a conjunction, a pronoun and a preposition, “okay” would function as every part of speech. For a four-letter word, that’s okay.

So where did it come from? Theories abound. Some say it was originally an acronym for a Sac Indian chief “Old Keokuk,” or for a shipping agent “Obadiah Kelly,” or a reference to our eighth president Martin Van Buren whose nickname was “Old Kinderhook,” or to a popular type of cracker “Orrins-Kendall,” on which “O.K.” was stamped to indicate quality. Other theories trace the word back through its sound to a Finnish word *oikea*, or a Haitian phrase *aux cayes* indicating high-quality rum, or a Choctaw word *okeh*.

But the most convincing etymology posits “okay” as a contraction of an expression “oll korrekt” — the misspelling is intentional — a joke based on the accent of German speakers who, you will remember, were beginning to flood into America in the late 1830’s. In other words, our most successful linguistic export ever is a product of racist, anti-immigrant humor. Lovely, and likely to be the real source of the word, at least inasmuch as the oldest attested use of “okay” in print is in the Boston Morning Post on March 23, 1839. Okay’s actual creation would have been prior to that, somewhere in the common parlance of American English-speakers at that time, but since we have no recordings from the day, we can only track etymologies through the written word. However, the fact that okay first appears in the Boston area does not mean it was invented there, only that it first surfaces in print in that region. Moreover, words are not living things and do not necessarily have to have one clear parentage. Multiple sources can produce and sustain a single word, so “okay” may be the offspring of several etymologies which coincidentally collaborated in its birth.

As the American variety of English developed, it began to drift away from the way its mother tongue was being spoken back in the homeland. Actually, both Englishes were evolving and changing, meaning neither is purer in historical terms than the other. One outstanding difference, though, is the accent. British and American English sound very different. How and when did that happen? It’s hard to say. Again, we have no recordings and must resort to the printed word, but unfortunately printing doesn’t print accents.

The best we can do is look in the historical record for people citing differences in the way American and British people speak, and the first evidence for that clearly comes from the British side, which suggests that the pressure of American-sounding English is weighing more heavily on the British than the other way around, often to the extreme distaste of those in Europe. Early Americans, in general, were looked down on by more than one British writer. Samuel Johnson called our ancestors “a race of convicts,” which is true to some extent since the British used certain American colonies as penal outposts. When talking movies began to be circulate globally, the American style of speaking aroused strong sentiments among the British. A member of Parliament in the day is recorded as saying “The words and accent are perfectly disgusting, and there is no doubt that such films are an evil influence on our language.” A colleague of his is known to have added “If there is a more hideous language on the face of the earth than the American form of English, I should like to know what it is.”

All the same, the American style of speaking has made an impact on the King's English. Brits use American expressions freely, even when the meaning is confusing or obscure. For instance, they are willing to say someone "looks like a million dollars." Shouldn't that be "a million pounds"? But then I guess the sense would change, wouldn't it? In their cars, Brits "step on the gas." Shouldn't they be stepping on the petrol? But that sounds like killing a bird.

Worse yet, we and our British coevals can also use the same expression to mean different things. When we say "homely," we mean "unattractive." They mean "like home," often with a positive connotation. When they say "presently," they mean "in a little while, later." We mean "soon," like "now!" Weirder yet, they "post" a letter — assuming anyone posts letters anymore — we "mail" one. But in doing so, they use the British Royal Mail and we use the US Post Office. Explain that please.

If you "knock up" someone in Britain, you visit them by knocking at their door, very different from the American sense of the expression. When they urge someone to maintain their spirits and not give up, they say "Keep your pecker up!," which will get you thrown out of many decent establishments on this side of the Atlantic. Conversely, on their shores, if you should announce that you're "stuffed," you won't be understood as being full after a meal, you'll be saying you're pregnant. That was some turkey you ate there, friend. And finally "bum" is a word which can cause real havoc. To us, it's a homeless person. To them, it's the part of your body you sit on. Imagine the confusion in England when Hollywood distributed a film designed to raise the spirits of those who had lost their jobs during the Great Depression, a film entitled "Hallelujah! I'm a Bum!" Well, the only place to go from there is up?

Let's end this presentation by testing your knowledge of British English. I'll give you a Britishism. You tell me the definition. [If you don't know what any of these British expressions mean, you can look them up in the dictionary, or watch the video presentation where I give you the answers. But I don't want to spoil the excitement here in the transcription by showing you the answers.] Have fun! Keep your pecker up! Or should I say, "It'll be a lark!"

courgette	bonnet	fruit machine	rubber
candy floss	wing	dressing gown	dustman
berk	silencer	smalls	nappy
catapult	joiner	torch	lumber
braces	number plate	to grizzle	dual carriageway
pullover	underground	adjustable spanner	
sweater	subway	to hump	
biscuit	flyover	geyser	