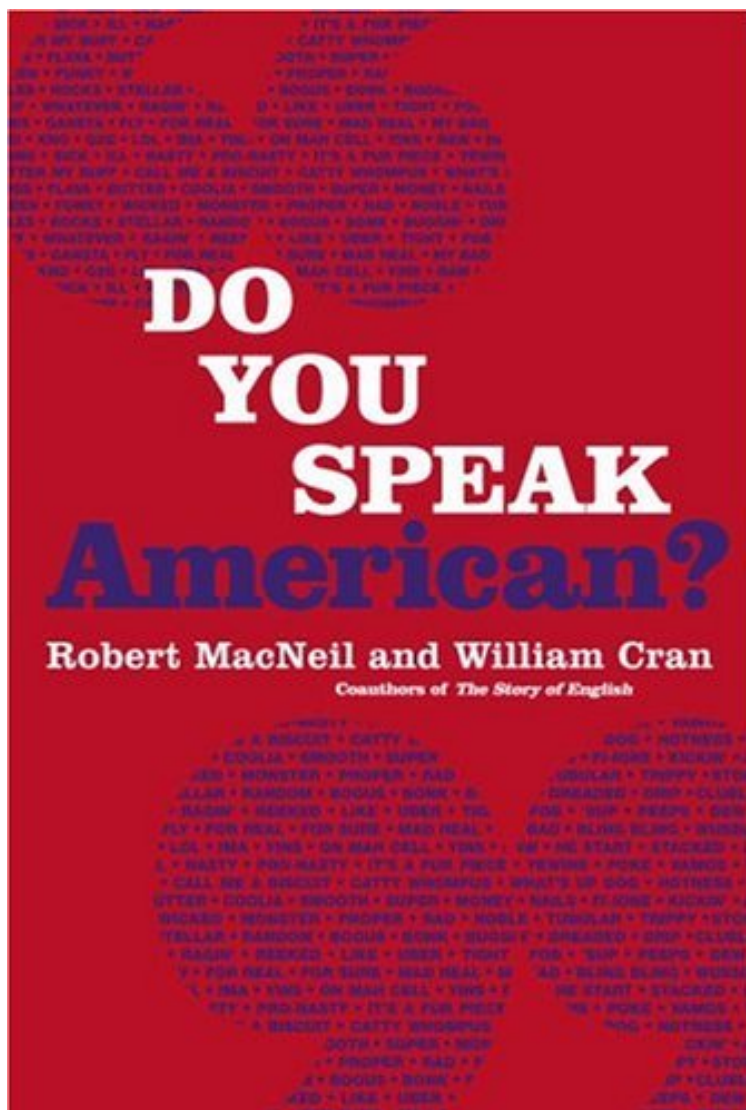


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Do You Speak American?



Par Robert Macneil, William Cran
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Par Robert Macneil, William Cran : Do You Speak American? before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Do You Speak American?:

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIs American English in decline? Are regional dialects dying out? Is there a difference between men and women in how they adapt to linguistic variations?These questions, and more, about our language catapulted Robert MacNeil and William Cranthe authors (with Robert McCrum) of the language classic The Story of Englishacross the country in search of the answers. Do You Speak American? is the tale of their discoveries, which provocatively show how the standard for American Englishif a standard existsis changing quickly and dramatically. On a journey that takes them from the Northeast, through Appalachia and the Deep South, and west to California, the authors observe everyday verbal interactions and in a host of interviews with native speakers glean the linguistic quirks and traditions characteristic of each area. While examining the histories and controversies surrounding both written and spoken American English, they

address anxieties and assumptions that, when explored, are highly emotional, such as the growing influence of Spanish as a threat to American English and the special treatment of African-American vernacular English. And, challenging the purists who think grammatical standards are in serious deterioration and that media saturation of our culture is homogenizing our speech, they surprise us with unpredictable responses. With insight and wit, MacNeil and Cran bring us a compelling book that is at once a celebration and a potent study of our singular language. Each wave of immigration has brought new words to enrich the American language. Do you recognize the origin of 1. blunderbuss, sleigh, stoop, coleslaw, boss, waffle? Or 2. dumb, ouch, shyster, check, kaput, scram, bummer? Or 3. phooey, pastrami, glitch, kibbitz, schnozzle? Or 4. broccoli, espresso, pizza, pasta, macaroni, radio? Or 5. smitherreens, lolapalooza, speakeasy, hooligan? Or 6. vamoose, chaps, stampede, mustang, ranch, corral? 1. Dutch 2. German 3. Yiddish 4. Italian 5. Irish 6. Spanish

From the Hardcover edition. *Extraitone* The Language Wars What grammarians say should be has perhaps less influence on what shall be than even the more modest of them realize; usage evolves itself little disturbed by their likes and dislikes. --H. W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage*

For centuries there has been a struggle between those who want our language to obey strict rules and those willing to be guided by how people actually speak and write. The first, who want to prescribe, are known as prescriptivists, while those content to describe usage are called descriptivists. The war between the two camps has blazed up with particular belligerence in our times, as language issues engaged social conservatives and liberals and became a factor in the so-called culture wars. Away from that intellectual battleground, ordinary Americans can be either gloriously relaxed about their language or, to use the popular idiom, decidedly uptight. A mild insecurity about language may be part of the American birthright, psychological residue from the one fiber in the colonial cord that was never quite severed. Language uneasiness is rife today, as generations of Americans leave high school much freer socially but without the linguistic confidence of earlier generations, who were better grounded in basic grammar. However informal and tolerant our society becomes, people know that the way they use language still matters. "Aside from a person's physical appearance, the first thing someone will be judged by is how he or she talks," says linguist Dennis Baron. Fear of such judgment may be feeding the free-floating anxiety that we have found, which manifests itself in adamant doctrines of correctness and the firm conviction that "other people" are ruining the language. If you cringe when someone says between you and I; bristle at the word hopefully; detest prioritize; if you cherish the distinction between disinterested and uninterested and deplore their being treated as synonyms; if you wonder what's happened to education when you hear criteria used as a singular then you are probably part of the large body of Americans who feel our language is in a state of serious decline. You may keep it to yourself or feel compelled to express your outrage at every opportunity. But the feelings are strong and very personal. You have the sense of being robbed of something precious to you, to the nation, to our basic cultural values, to your pleasure in knowing you are "correct," to your very sense of identity and where you belong in this society. You believe all of this is being wantonly destroyed by language barbarians among your fellow citizens, who, if you speak up, make you sound out of touch, hopelessly old-fashioned, and quaint in your concerns. But are you justified in being so upset? Many Americans who also care about the language don't agree with you. For example, Charles Harrington Elster, cohost of the radio program *A Way with Words* on KPBS, San Diego, believes our language "is thriving now probably more than at any time since the Elizabethans." He told the *San Diego Home/Garden Lifestyles* magazine, "I think the language itself is in great shape and growing like Topsy." Let's begin with those who do think the language is going to hell in this generation. Perhaps the most outspoken is the essayist John Simon. Dapper, cultivated, and acerbic, a leather briefcase tucked under his arm, he is a familiar figure on Broadway as the theater critic for *New York* magazine. Today, he sees the state of our language as "unhealthy, poor, sad, depressing, and probably fairly hopeless." Hopeless because he sees no improvement in the teaching of English in schools or colleges and "it's been my experience that there is no bottom and that one can always sink lower, or that the language can always disintegrate further." Simon says all this with a slight lisp and the faintest trace of a foreign accent. But what really gives him away as someone who is not a native-born speaker of English is that his grammar, syntax, and pronunciation are, if anything, almost too polished and correct. As a child in Yugoslavia, Simon spoke Serbo-Croatian, German, Hungarian, and French, and learned English only in high school. His family moved to the United States at the beginning of World War II, and Simon went on to earn a Harvard Ph.D. in English and comparative literature. He believes that coming to a language late can be an advantage, because one brings better credentials, linguistic, cultural, and emotional. Simon's own strong emotions about the state of American English came to national attention in 1980 with his book *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on*

Literacy and Its Decline. He wrote that language was "better" when he was a graduate student in the 1940s, when "people were not going around saying 'Come to dinner with Bill and I,' or 'hopefully it won't rain tomorrow.'" To explain what started the language "on a downhill course," he offered a sweeping indictment of students, teachers, women, blacks, Hispanics, homosexuals, advertisers, television, and the permissive revolution of the sixties, which dealt education "four great body blows": (1) the student rebellion of 1968, which, in essence, meant that students themselves became arbiters of what subjects were to be taught, and grammar, by jingo (or Ringo), was not one of them; (2) the notion that in a democratic society language must accommodate itself to the whims, idiosyncrasies, dialects, and sheer ignorance of underprivileged minorities, especially if these happened to be black, Hispanic, and, later on, female or homosexual; (3) the introduction by more and more incompetent English teachers, products of the new system . . . of ever fancier techniques of not teaching English, for which, if the methods involved new technologies and were couched in the appropriately impenetrable jargon, grants could readily be obtained; and (4) television the non-language and aboriginal grammar of commercials, commentators, sports announcers, athletes, assorted celebrities, and just about everyone on that word-mongering and word-mangling medium, that sucks in victims far more perniciously than radio ever did. In addition, Simon wrote, dictionaries were still relatively "prescriptivist," distinguishing between the correct and incorrect. "Descriptive (or structural) linguistics had not yet arrived that statistical, populist, sociological approach, whose adherents claimed to be merely recording and describing the language as it was used by anyone and everyone, without imposing elitist judgments on it. Whatever came out of the untutored mouths and unsharpened pencil stubs of the people sorry, The People was held legitimate if not sacrosanct by those new lexicon artists." Simon regarded the publication of Webster's Third New International Dictionary in 1961 as a "resounding victory" for descriptive linguistics and "seminally sinister" for its permissiveness. He attacked the "equally descriptive" Random House Dictionary and what he called the "amazingly permissive" Supplements to the Oxford English Dictionary. Simon was not alone in hating the new Webster's. Many did because its editors had dropped the colloquial or slang labels people were used to. To Kenneth Wilson, a scholar who admired the new dictionary, "nearly everyone who didn't like the book came back to one devastating fault: the book was permissive: it did not tell the reader what was right. It included words and meanings that nice people shouldn't use." He added that "for many it was as though someone had rewritten the King James Version of the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer in words taken from the walls of the men's room." In joining the chorus against Webster's Third, John Simon had not just entered the raging "dictionary wars," but had thrown down a most provocative and elitist gauntlet. William Safire, the conservative-libertarian political columnist for the New York Times, said Simon made him feel like a "left-winger." In his column "On Language" for the newspaper's Sunday magazine, Safire called Simon "the Prince of Prescriptivists." In one of the most provocative statements in *Paradigms Lost*, Simon presented an unapologetic defense of elitism: Language, I think, belongs to two groups only: gifted individuals everywhere, who use it imaginatively; and the fellowship of men and women, wherever they are, who, without being particularly inventive, nevertheless endeavor to speak and write correctly. Language, however, does not belong to the illiterate or to bodies of people forming tendentious and propagandistic interest groups, determined to use it for what they (usually mistakenly) believe to be their advantage. The only salvation, Simon concluded, was "the eventual creation of an Academy of the Anglo-American Language." That idea had been around for about three hundred years and consistently ignored. It was first proposed by Jonathan Swift, on the model of the French Academy, to dictate linguistic standards. His contemporary Daniel Defoe wanted to police the language to the extent that coining a new word would be a crime as grave as counterfeiting money. The English-speaking peoples shrugged that off, as they have all attempts to constrain their language sense. That is why there has been a natural or instinctive rebellion against rules from Latin grammar imposed on English during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because certain purists of the day thought our language had grown messy, like an unweeded garden, after the exuberance of Shakespeare and other Elizabethans. Instinctively, ... *Revue de presse* PRAISE FOR THE STORY OF ENGLISH "Highly enjoyable . . . A first-rate introduction to one of the most fascinating of subjects." --The New York Times "Rarely has the English language been scanned so brightly and broadly in a single volume." --San Francisco Chronicle