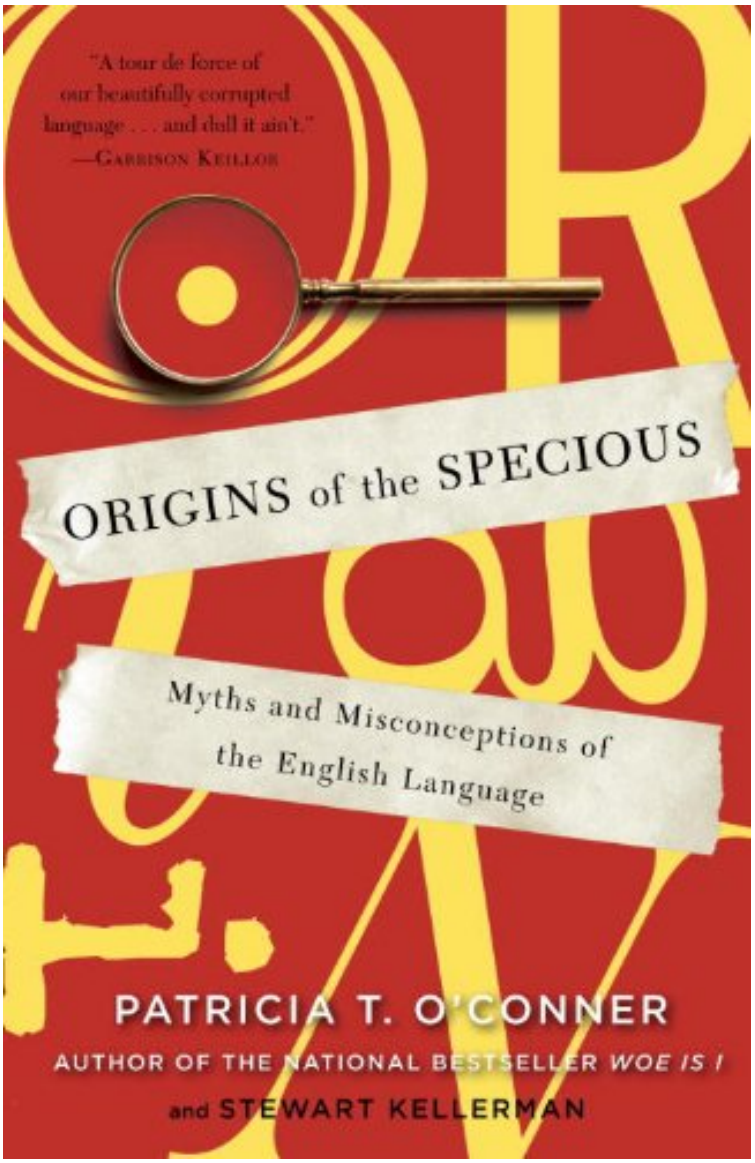
Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language



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[Read free ebook] Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language

Par Patricia T. O'Conner, Stewart Kellerman : Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDo you cringe when a talking head pronounces niche as NITCH? Do you get bent out of shape when your teenager begins a sentence with and? Do you think British spellings are more civilised than the American versions? If you answered yes to any of those questions, youre myth-informed. InOrigins of the Specious, word mavens Patricia T. OConner and Stewart Kellerman reveal why some of grammars best-known rules arentand never wererules at all. This playfully witty, rigorously researched book sets the record straight about bogus word origins, politically correct fictions, phony franais, fake acronyms, and

more. Here are some shockers: They was once commonly used for both singular and plural, much the way you is today. And an eighteenth-century female grammarian, of all people, is largely responsible for the all-purpose he. From the Queens English to street slang, this eye-opening romp will be the toast of grammarphiles and the salvation of grammarphobes. Take our word for it.ExtraitChapter OneStiff Upper LipsWhy Cant the British Be More Like Us?Winston Churchill gave the folks at Bartletts plenty of fodder for their books of Familiar Quotations: so much owed by so many to so few . . . blood, toil, tears, and sweat . . . this was their finest hour . . . and more. But he didnt describe England and America as two nations divided by a common language, though thousands of websites say so. What he did, though, was pass along a great story about how the two nations were indeed divided by their two Englishes at a meeting of Allied leaders during World War II.The enjoyment of a common language was of course a supreme advantage in all British and American discussions, Churchill wrote in The Second World War. No interpreters were needed, for one thing, but there were differences of expression, which in the early days led to an amusing incident. The British wanted to raise an urgent matter, he said, and told the Americans they wished to table it (that is, bring it to the table). But to the Americans, tabling something meant putting it aside. A long and even acrimonious argument ensued, Churchill wrote, before both parties realised that they were agreed on the merits and wanted the same thing.Im no mind reader, but Ill bet the Brits at the table felt their English was the real thing, while the Yanks felt apologetic about theirs. If theres one thing our two peoples agree on, its that British English is purer than its American offshoot. My in-box gets pinged every week or two by a Brit with his knickers in a twist or an American with an inferiority complex. A typical comment: Why do you refer to American English and British English Surely it should be American English and proper English. Ouch! Is their English really more properthat is, purerthan ours? Which one is more like the English spoken in the 1600s when the Colonies and the mother country began diverging linguistically?First of all, American English and British English are how authorities refer to the two major branches of English, and reflect the changes in the language since the Colonies separated themselves linguistically from England. The differences are many, but theyre minor from a grammarians point of view. Most have to do with spelling, pronunciation, and usage. En?glish grammar is English grammar no matter where you live, despite a few exceptions here and there.The truth is that neither English is more proper. In some respects American English is purer than British English: Weve preserved some usages and spellings and pronunciations that have changed over time in Britain. But the reverse is also true. The British have preserved much that has changed on our side of the Atlantic. In many cases, its nearly impossible to tell which branch has history on its side. Take table, the word that gave those Allied leaders such grief. In the eighteenth century, the phrase to lay on the table could mean either to bring up or to defer. By the nineteenth century, the Brits had preserved one of those meanings and the Yanks the other. So the verb table meant one thing there and quite another here.In case youre wondering who should get the credit for that crack about two nations divided by a common language, the answer is nobody exactly. George Bernard Shaw was quoted in 1942 as saying, England and America are two countries separated by the same language. But nobody is certain where or when he said it. What we do know is that Oscar Wilde said the same thing in different words in 1887: We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language.Sound BitesWeve all seen My Fair Lady, on stage or screen or iPod or whatever, and we all have our favorite scenes. One of mine is the bit where Henry Higgins, the arrogant professor of phonetics, first encounters the flower girl Eliza Doolittle at Covent Garden and is appalled by her Cockney accent. Higgins belittles her for turning the language of Shakespeare and Milton into such disgusting and depressing noise, and she screeches, Ah-ah-aw-aw-oo-oo. Fed up with her detestable boo-hooing, he sings, Why cant the English learn to speak?So what would a real Professor Higgins make of the way Americans speak? We dont have to look hard to find the answer, and many apologetic Americans may be surprised to hear it. Professor William A. Read, a distinguished linguist, put it this way in a journal of philology: The pronunciation of educated Americans is in many respects more archaic than that of educated Englishmen. This should be no surprise, he said, since the phonetic basis of American pronunciation rests chiefly on the speech of Englishmen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And those Englishmen sounded much like the Americans of today. The English accent that we now associate with educated British speech is a relatively new phenomenon and ?didnt develop until after the American Revolution.Look at the way the letter r is pronounced (or not pronounced), perhaps the most important difference in the speech of educated people in the US and the UK. Since Anglo-Saxon days, the English had pronounced the r in words like far, mother, world, church, and mourn. English speakers on both sides of the Atlantic pronounced the rs in these words when the Colonies broke away from

England. Most Americans still do. But educated people in Britain began dropping their rs in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Americans most likely to drop their rs were those, like New Englanders, who had strong commercial and social ties with the mother country.This dropping of rs in Britain ?didnt happen all of a sudden, and the sticklers of the day ?didnt take it lying down. The perception that the language was losing a letter was a cause of profound upset to some writers, the linguist David Crystal has written. The poet Keats, for example, was cruelly upbraided by critics for rhyming thoughts with sorts, and thorns with fawns. Lord Byron blamed a critical article for hastening Keatss death in 1821: Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article. But by the time Keats died, the dropped r was a standard feature of educated British pronunciation.The other letter thats a dead giveaway in telling a Brit from a Yank is the a in a word like past. We all know how an American would say itwith an a like the one in cat. And as anyone whos watched Masterpiece Theatre can tell you, the standard British pronunciation is PAHST. But it wasnt always so. The Brits used to say it the same way Americans do now. Here again, the Americans stuck with an old way of speaking, one the British abandoned about the same time they dropped their rs.The a, like the r, has ping-ponged in British pronunciation. Until the 1500s, the English did indeed pronounce words like bath and laugh and dance with an ah. But in the sixteenth century they began pronouncing the a in what we now consider the American way (as in cat). So things remained for the next two or three hundred years. This is the a that went to America on the Mayflower in 1620. And this is the a that both the Redcoats and the Colonists used during the Revolutionary War. Not until the 1780s did Londoners begin pronouncing their as like ahs again, and for a few decades the broad a and the short a battled it out. But by the early 1800s, educated Britain was saying BAHTH and LAHF and DAHNCE.Thats also about when literate Britons started pronouncing the h in herb. Before the nineteenth century, both the English and Americans pronounced it ERB. In fact, the word was usually spelled erbe for the first few hundred years after it was borrowed from the Old French erbe in the 1200s. The h was added later as a nod to the Latin original (herba, or grass), but the letter was silent. Today, Americans pronounce herb the way Shakespeare did, with a silent h, while the Bard wouldnt recognize the word in the mouths of the English.Speaking of aitches, some British speakers, especially on the telly, use an before words like historic or hotel, and some Anglophiles over here are slavishly imitating them. For shame! Usage manuals on both sides of the Atlantic say the article to use is a, not an. The rule is that we use a before a word that begins with an h thats pronounced and an before a word that starts with a silent h. And dictionaries in both Britain and the United States say the h should be pronounced in historic and hotel as well as heroic, habitual, hypothesis, horrendous, and some other problem h-words.When the British arent adding or subtracting an h, stretching out an a, or dropping an r, theyre chopping off whole syllables from words like secretary, necessary, military, extraordinary, satisfactory, literary, and others. Secretary, for example, is shortened to SEC-ruh-tre...Revue de presse"Every bartender in the land should have a copy of this vastly amusing and highly informative book. Then when some tipsy bore declares that posh derives from Port Out, Starboard Home, or that you must never say disinterested when you mean uninterested, he can bring it out from behind the jar of cocktail cherries, and smack him on the head with it." Simon Winchester, author of The Professor and the Madman and The Meaning of EverythingWith common sense and uncommon wit, O'Conner and Kellerman solve more mysteries than all the Law Order series combined. Origins of the Specious will teach you why it is OK to bravely split an infinitive, why using "ain't" ain't so bad, and why ending a sentence with a preposition is where it's at.David Feldman, author of the Imponderables book series"Origins of the Specious is a witty and informative guide to the perplexities of the English language. I enjoyed it immensely."Stephen Miller, author of Conversation: A History ofa Declining Art and The Peculiar Life of SundaysIt's right there on page 51: it's better to be understood than to be correctpull that out the next time someone corrects your grandma. This tour de force of our beautifully corrupted language is both. And dull it ain't. If you're planning to buy just one book of etymology this year, you've got it right in your hand.Garrison Keillor"Bestselling word maven O'Conner (Woe Is I) is that rare grammarian who values clear, natural expression over the mindless application of rules.Proper English, she contends, is what the majority of us say it is (though she can't resist making a traditionalist plea to preserve favored words like unique and ironic from corruption). Writers will appreciate O'Conner's liberating, common-sense approach to the language, and readers the entertaining sprightliness of her prose."Publishers Weekly"Happily freshSkillfully drawing on the Oxford English Dictionary and other research tools, the writers always present conversational prose with different kinds of wordplaysAn accessible tone and full of information." Library JournalFrom the

Hardcover edition.