

FROM AMBIVALENCE TO ACCEPTANCE:
AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS
LINGUISTIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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England and America are two countries separated by a common language.

—George Bernard Shaw

Students of foreign languages inevitably learn that fluency in a particular country's language requires fluency in its culture. The converse is also true—to understand a language is to be aware of the subtle nuances of a society and its traditions. Language and culture are inextricably entwined. As John Adams, second President of the United States, expressed it in a letter to the President of Congress in September 1780, "the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and manners of the people."¹

It should not come as a surprise, then, to know that, as the American Revolution drew to a close, members of the Continental Congress toyed with the idea of discarding English as the national language in favour of Greek, French, or Hebrew.² At first glance, it seems this choice would have been only logical. To reject the

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language of Great Britain would have been to reject its culture, to create a separation between the mother country and the nascent nation that would transcend any geographical and political divisions. But the proposals were never seriously considered. As Roger Sherman, the Connecticut delegate to the Continental Congress put it wryly, in a classic example of simple American pragmatism, “it would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it was, and *make the English speak Greek*.”³ (emphasis original)

The fact was that renunciation of the English language and culture was at the time neither desirable nor necessary. Years of colonial life and almost complete isolation from Europe had indeed led America to develop her own culture, quite distinct from the English in many aspects, not least in language. Yet in the period immediately following the American Revolution, many Americans were still unprepared to admit to the differences between their country and the motherland. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 had given rise to an intense new national pride and consciousness, but there was at the same time a lingering affection for English culture.⁴ It was not until after the War of 1812 that Americans began to acknowledge their own national identity. The attitudes of Americans towards the undeniable divergence of their language from British English in the early national period—the period in American history from independence to roughly 1820—mirrored these patterns of thought, reflecting the country’s progress from ambivalence to a firmer acceptance of a distinct American culture.

Differences between the branches of English spoken in Britain and America have long been a fascination. Early in the history of the United States, American leaders Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson both speculated that the differences were such that the American language would in time diverge from English just as Portuguese had from Spanish and Swedish from Danish.⁵ In 1920, a writer for *Harper’s Magazine* even went so far as to propose that the language of America be renamed “Unitedstatish.”⁶ But one must keep things in perspective. Given the vast numbers of immigrants who have arrived in America over

the centuries, it is surprising that British and American English differ as slightly as they do.⁷ The situation is a far cry indeed from what John Pickering, known as “the most distinguished philologist⁸ to which the western continent has given birth,”⁹ feared might transpire, writing in an essay in June 1816:

Let us then for a moment imagine the time to have arrived, when Americans shall no longer be able to understand the works of Milton, Pope, Swift, Addison, and other English authors, justly styled classic, without the aid of a translation into a language that is to be called at some future day the American tongue!¹⁰

Still, differences between American and British English do exist, and though not extreme, they are significant enough to have afforded centuries of debate and discussion.

One of the earliest comments on the American stream of English came in 1735, when British traveller Francis Moore described in his accounts the city of Savannah, Georgia: “It is a mile and a quarter in circumference; it stands upon the flat of a hill, the bank of the river (which they in barbarous English call a bluff) is steep and about forty-five foot perpendicular.”¹¹ Moore’s use of the word ‘barbarous’ is sure to have sparked controversy, but he was at least correct in noting a distinction between English and American speech. By the time Moore visited Georgia, the language spoken in America had already been diverging from British English for a century, since the first settlers arrived in Plymouth, in what is now Massachusetts, in 1620.

From the start, the language of America was destined to grow away from that of Britain. The first British settlers came from the lower social classes. Most had little formal education and hence neither wrote nor spoke according to accepted British standards.¹² Having chosen to emigrate in the first place, in many cases fleeing persecution for rejecting British religion and politics,¹³ these early settlers must surely have been naturally tough, self-sufficient people, and quite unlikely to conform to any authority, least of all one in distant England.¹⁴ A practical and creative outlook, rather than adherence to social norms, was imperative for survival in the unfamiliar environment of the New World—an

attitude from which sprang the characteristic American pragmatism that has since been applied to all aspects of life, including language.¹⁵

New experiences required new vocabulary. The colonists sometimes used their own language to name unfamiliar things—*foothills, undergrowth, clearing*¹⁶—and at other times adopted Native American words: *hickory, persimmon, squash, coon, moose, possum,* and *skunk*.¹⁷ As the frontier moved westward, English colonists encountered other European settlers and absorbed foreign words into their language: among many, *prairie, levee,* and *butte* come from French; *buckaroo, stampede,* and *poncho* are derived from Spanish.¹⁸

Of course, language continued to evolve back in Britain as well. Just as new words were being added to the American lexicon, words were also continually being created in Britain. Old words that had been in use when the colonists had emigrated either died out or acquired new meanings.¹⁹ Moreover, given the immense geographical distance between Britain and America, Americans were inevitably left out of British linguistic trends. For example, during the Revolutionary period, when social contact between the two countries was at its most limited, Received Pronunciation first emerged in Britain. Defined as the speech of educated people living in southern England,²⁰ it served, in the words of the 18th century orthoepist²¹ Thomas Sheridan, as “a sort of proof that a person has kept good company, and on that account is sought after by all, who wish to be considered as fashionable people, or members of the beau monde”—essentially a form of snobbery.²² This standard of Received Pronunciation is what today most clearly distinguishes a British speaker from an American.

By the time America formally declared independence from Britain in 1776, the divergence of the two streams of English was already clear. Noah Webster—an American-born, Yale-educated schoolteacher, lawyer, linguist and fervent nationalist²³—put it aptly in 1789: Britain was simply “at too great a distance to be our model, and to instruct us in the principles of our own tongue.”²⁴ What remained uncertain was the public attitude to-

wards these differences in relation to issues of national identity. With the Revolutionary War had come a heightened awareness of the differences between the two countries. Several historians note the post-Revolution tendency, on both sides of the Atlantic, to identify and emphasize points of contrast between America and Britain. Some people of the time extended this attitude to the discussion of the American language. William Thornton, the architect of the Capitol, British-born but an ardent supporter of American ideals,²⁵ declared fervently in 1793:

You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported, for the oppressed of various nations knock at your gates, and desire to be received as your brethren. As you admit them, facilitate your intercourse, and you will mutually enjoy the benefits. The *American Language* will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion and resting upon truth as its only regulator.²⁶

But not everyone was as passionate about the new national identity. Many people were reluctant to leave behind their English heritage. The Declaration of Independence had severed political ties with Britain, but Americans still gravitated towards the cultural centre of London. The city had always represented power and prestige, and many Americans had sought to acquire the traits and manners—language included—of sophisticated Londoners.²⁷ No political document could change this mindset instantly. Until the middle of the 19th century, *English Grammar, Adapted to Different Classes of Learners*, published by Lindley Murray in 1795, was by far the most popular textbook in America, selling more than 1 million copies over the course of 55 years. The textbook presented an interpretation of refined English usage that was highly appealing to Americans who still held the English language and culture in awe. This obsession over British English continued well into the 20th century—it was not until the 1920s that American schools and colleges adopted the study of their own literature.²⁸

Some people, in particular Noah Webster, were exasperated by the cultural allegiance many Americans still had to Britain. Webster lamented in 1790:

A fundamental mistake of the Americans has been, that they considered the revolution as completed, when it was but just begun. Having raised the pillars of the building, they ceased to exert themselves, and seemed to forget that the whole superstructure was then to be erected. This country is independent in government; but totally dependent in manners, which are the basis of government.²⁹

This rather disdainful view of the persistent attachment to Britain served as a major motivating factor in Webster's spelling and pronunciation reforms.

Before considering the details of Webster's proposed orthographical³⁰ changes, one should take note that the rationalization of language was not a solely American but rather an international concern. Order in language has long been associated with order in society. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued in the 17th century that without language, "there had been amongst men neither Commonwealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears and Wolves." John Adams pointed out in his 1780 letter to the President of Congress that many European nations, notably France, Italy and Spain, had established academies whose purpose was to "fix and improve their proper languages," but that "the [English] government have never found time to interpose in any manner."³¹

Aspirations to order and improvement of the American language certainly played a significant role in the reasoning behind the reforms proposed by Webster and others. For example, Webster dropped the second *l* in words such as *travel* and *cancel* and changed the *-ce* in *defence*, *offence* and *pretence* to *-se*, all with the view of making spelling more logical.³² But given the political and cultural climate, patriotism cannot be neglected as an equally important driving factor. The proposed corrections to American spellings that appeared in Webster's *Compendious Dictionary* of 1806 represented a bold effort to both simplify and distinguish the American language. Not surprisingly, though, these attempts to distance the American language from the British were met with even less enthusiasm than the natural divergence had been.

Most of Webster's suggested simplifications, such as *imagin*, *iland*, *farewel*, *crum*, *fether*, *wo*, *ake*, *tung*, *skreen*, *soop* and *spunge* never caught on.³³ People are always resistant to change, and as one scholar pointed out, rather dryly, "there are a few subjects, and spelling is one of them, about which people refuse to be ruled by their intellects."³⁴ This may well have been the case. But on another level, the rejection of these ideas can also be attributed to the fact that they were too far ahead of Webster's time to be welcomed. Unlike Webster, many Americans were at the time still hesitant about the identity of their nation and may not have assigned the same nationalistic importance to their use of language. The failure of Webster's spelling reforms—the fact that English spelling today is still highly irregular and often very confusing—demonstrates a general reluctance on the part of Americans to adopt sudden, radical changes to the language that would distinguish them from their British counterparts. To be fair, some changes did find their way into American English—while Britons write *honour*, *plough* and *centre*, Americans use the simpler, more intuitive *honor*, *plow* and *center*, indicating, if nothing else, a certain degree of American pragmatism.

Endeavours in the area of pronunciation were no better received than those in the field of orthography. It might be argued that the situation hardly merited such fuss. In Britain, dialects were so varied that, as Webster observed in 1789, "the people of distant counties in England could hardly understand one another."³⁵ American speech was far more homogeneous. John Witherspoon, the first man to write at length about the differences between American and British English, noted in 1781 in a series of papers titled *The Druid*:

Being much more unsettled, and moving frequently from place to place, [Americans] are not so liable to local peculiarities either in accent or phraseology. There is a greater difference in dialect between one county and another in Britain, than there is between one state and another in America.³⁶

Still, regional differences in pronunciation did exist in America, and Webster sought to eradicate them with the goal of creating a greater national unity in language.³⁷ The bigger con-

cern of Webster and his peers, however, was not the mere *existence* of dialect, but rather the social distinctions that differences in pronunciation tended to highlight. In Britain, the particular way in which a man walking down the street spoke identified him with a specific social caste.^{38, 39} Author James Fenimore Cooper, who, though American, had always held standards of pronunciation and speech in high regard, wrote in his book *The American Democrat* about the expectations of gentlemanly speech:

The utterance of a gentleman ought to be deliberate and clear, without being measured. All idea of effort should be banished...His language should rise with the subject, and as he must be an educated and accomplished man, he cannot but know that the highest quality of eloquence, and all sublimity, is in the thought, rather than in the words, though there must be an adaptation of the one to the other.⁴⁰

To Webster, the pronunciation of English words had long been corrupted by the whims of “self-appointed setters of a fashion in speech”⁴¹ with the effect and intent of creating an elite class of those few individuals who had mastered the labyrinth of English pronunciation. The rest of the population remained baffled and unenlightened.⁴² Rejecting the social stratification that differences in spoken language brought about, Webster simply advocated the use of the pronunciations most common among the ordinary American people.⁴³ Spellings would correspondingly change to reflect the most current pronunciation, making the language much easier to learn.⁴⁴ Anyone could acquire the pronunciation of an educated person.⁴⁵ The language would be more democratic, more egalitarian, and decidedly more American.

But these ideas about standardized, logical and democratic pronunciation were, like the reasoning behind the “improved” spellings, either too radical or, equally likely, still too far ahead of their time to be widely accepted. There were always some patriots to embrace and acclaim these reforms. Most scholars and indeed most ordinary people, however, were still doubtful of the national identity. For this reason, and perhaps for others as well, they were reluctant, if not simply unwilling, to adopt the changes.⁴⁶

Public attitudes changed, however, with the outbreak of war against Britain in 1812. The war awakened many Americans to the fact that the United States was indeed separate from Britain. James Kirke Paulding, author of *John Bull and Brother Jonathan*, which compares the political tensions between Britain and America to a family dispute, commented in his book in 1812:

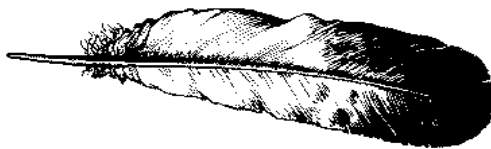
It is a thousand pities to see father and son fighting and squabbling, when they ought to be a stay and a staff to each other in the troubles of this distracted world. Still, when the father deals out to the son nothing but unkindness, and makes use of his superior power to depress rather than to exalt his offspring, it is not to be wondered at if the ties of relationship are broken forever.⁴⁷

A change in the way Americans viewed their language coincided with this shift in national outlook. This development was in Webster's favour. He had long realized the necessity of a dictionary of American English in a changing nation and changing times. In addition to the fact that America had simply developed its own lexicon, the technological advances of the 18th century had drastically improved and upgraded the quality of life for the average American citizen. An increasing number of people were literate, but the existing dictionaries were largely inadequate in providing the definitions for the hundreds of everyday words that had entered the language since their publication.⁴⁸

Webster's first dictionary, the *Compendious Dictionary* of 1806, had attracted stinging criticism from ultraconservatives who objected to its inclusion of thousands of "Americanisms and vulgarisms,"⁴⁹ branding them as "heresies."⁵⁰ On the other hand, 22 years later, after the War of 1812, the *American Dictionary of the English Language*—Webster's masterwork and the first significant dictionary of American English—earned resounding praise from all across the nation. Newspapers that had once denounced Webster as a "contemptible creature" and "prostitute wretch" now referred to him as "America's own Dr. Webster."⁵¹ Some institutions still bore grudges against Webster; his radicalism, as well as his arrogance and boastfulness had never earned him many friends.⁵² But the *American Dictionary*, containing 70,000 words, many of which were previously reviled Americanisms, soon be-

came the authority for publications, publishing houses, legislatures, courts, colleges, and schools.⁵³ America had fought as a truly separate nation against Britain for the first time in the War of 1812, and the significance of this event had not been lost on the American people. The publication of the *American Dictionary* was, in effect, a second declaration of independence. Public acceptance of Webster's work showed that America was also finally ready to acknowledge her own national identity, to assume cultural and linguistic as well as political autonomy.

By the time of the publication of the *American Dictionary*, much had changed in the American outlook since 1776. It had taken the better part of 50 years, but the ambivalence of Americans about the distinct linguistic and cultural characteristics of their country, their reluctance to fully sever ties with the motherland, was fast fading, soon to be replaced by acceptance and even pride in a unique national identity. Language and culture are far from static, and American English has continued to evolve in tandem with American ways of life. Today, just as the American language is recognized and respected around the world as its own, independent branch of English, the American culture is unmistakably distinct from its British roots. The members of the Continental Congress, who wondered at the close of the American Revolution whether they should abandon English as the national language to reinforce the new separation from Britain, really had nothing to worry about after all.



¹ John Adams, "Letter to the President of Congress, Amsterdam, 5 September 1780," in The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations Charles Francis Adams, Vol. VII (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1852) p. 249

² John Hurt Fisher, "British and American, Continuity and Divergence," English in North America, The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume VI, John Algeo (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 59

³ Quoted in Fisher, English in North America p. 59

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59

⁵ Robert Keith Leavitt, Noah's Ark, New England Yankees and The Endless Quest (Springfield, Massachusetts: G&C Merriam Company, 1947) p. 14

⁶ Rupert Hughes, "Our Stkish Language," in Harper's Magazine (May 1920) p. 846, Quoted in H.L. Mencken, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1936) p. 77

⁷ M. M. Mathews, The Beginnings of American English: Essays and Comments (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931) pp. 10-11

⁸ One who studies the language.

⁹ Mathews, p. 64

¹⁰ John Pickering, "Essay," in A Vocabulary or Collection of Words and Phrases which have been supposed to be peculiar to the United States of America (1816), Quoted in Mathews, pp. 10-11

¹¹ Quoted in Mathews, p. 13

¹² Mathews, p. 4

¹³ Tristan Traviolia, "Pilgrims," Encyclopedia of American History: Colonization and Settlement, 1608 to 1760 vol. 2, American History Online Online (5 May 2005)

¹⁴ Robert Claiborne, Our Marvelous Native Tongue: The Life and Times of the English Language (New York: Times Books, 1983) p. 200

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205

¹⁷ Mathews, p. 2

¹⁸ Claiborne, pp. 212-214

¹⁹ Albert H. Marckwardt, American English, Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) pp. 72-73

- ²⁰ “Received Pronunciation,” Oxford English Dictionary
- ²¹ One who studies pronunciation.
- ²² Quoted in Fisher, p. 73
- ²³ Daniel M. Cobb, “Webster, Noah,” Encyclopedia of American History: Revolution and New Nation, 1761 to 1812 vol. 3, 2003, American History Online Online (5 May 2005)
- ²⁴ Quoted in Claiborne, p. 210
- ²⁵ Daniel Preston, “Thornton, William,” 2000, American National Biography Online Online (23 April 2005)
- ²⁶ Quoted in David Simpson, The Politics of American English, 1776-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1986) p. 25
- ²⁷ Fisher, p. 63
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65
- ²⁹ Quoted in Simpson, p. 55
- ³⁰ Relating to spelling.
- ³¹ John Adams, “Letter to the President of Congress”
- ³² Harlow Giles Unger, Noah Webster: The Life and Times of an American Patriot (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998) p. 252
- ³³ Leavitt, p. 30
- ³⁴ Mathews, pp. 45-46
- ³⁵ Quoted in Simpson, p. 103
- ³⁶ John Witherspoon, “The Druid, No. V,” Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser (9 May 1781), Quoted in Mathews, p. 16
- ³⁷ Simpson, p. 102
- ³⁸ Fisher, p. 27
- ³⁹ See the discussion of Received Pronunciation earlier in this paper.
- ⁴⁰ James Fenimore Cooper, “On Language,” in The American Democrat, or Hints on the Social and Civic Relations of the United States of America (Cooperstown: H. & E. Phinney, 1838) p. 116
- ⁴¹ Leavitt, p. 32
- ⁴² Simpson, p. 57
- ⁴³ Leavitt, p. 32
- ⁴⁴ Simpson, p. 58
- ⁴⁵ William Thornton, Quoted in Simpson, p. 59
- ⁴⁶ Leavitt, p. 32
- ⁴⁷ Quoted in Simpson, p. 124
- ⁴⁸ Leavitt, p. 16

⁴⁹ Noah Webster, "Letter to Thomas Dawes, August 5 1809," in Mathews, p. 48

⁵⁰ "Review 20—No Title," The American Monthly Review (1832-1833) (1832): 93, APS Online Online (5 May 2005)

⁵¹ Unger, p. 303

⁵² Leavitt, p. 34

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 35

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