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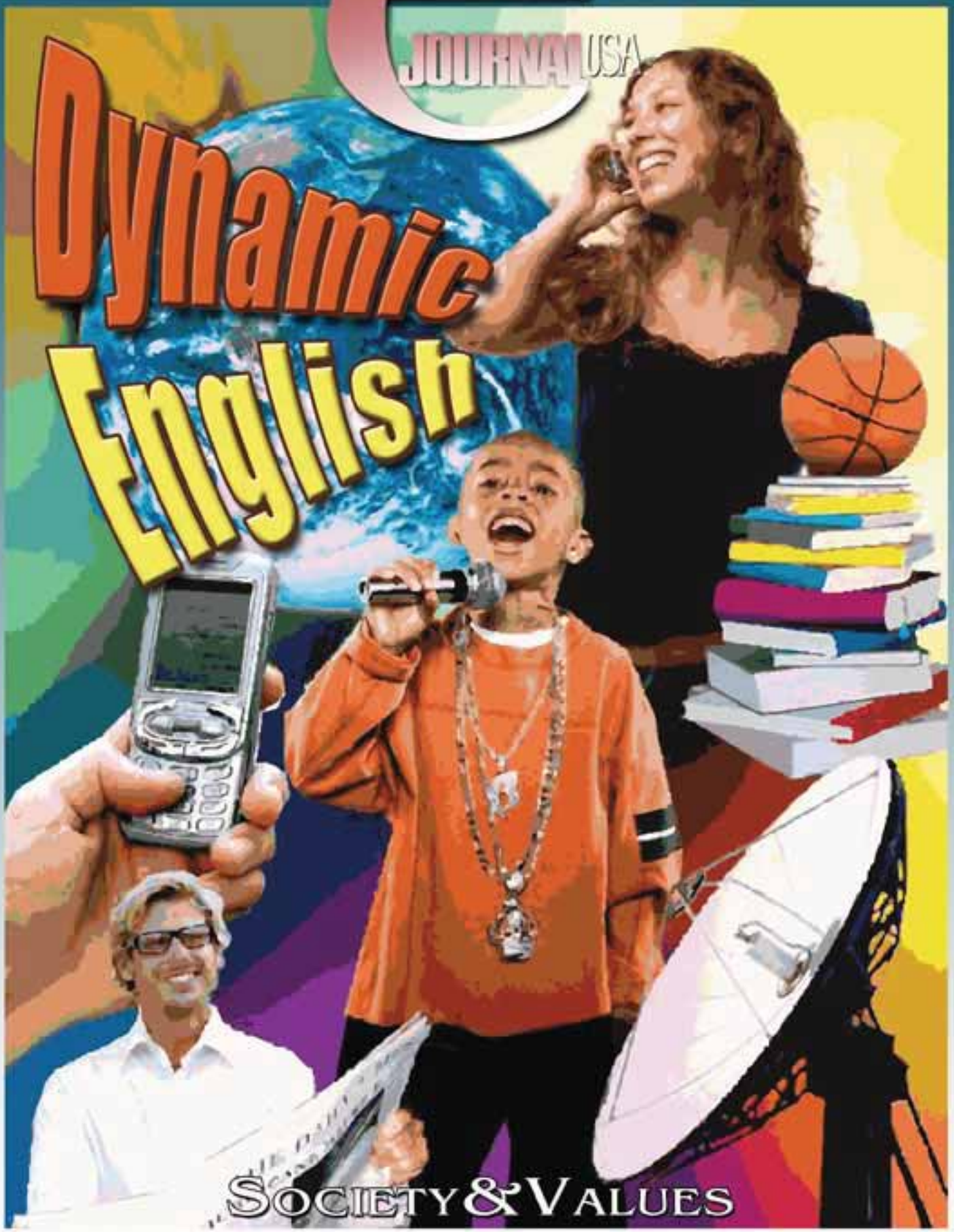
Dynamic English



Society & Values

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About This Issue

In his article "Change Is Gonna Do Ya Good," Ilan Stavans points out that the challenge for dictionaries and those who produce them is the fact that as soon as a list is made of every possible word, and each word's meanings, that list, and those meanings, are already beginning to be out of date. A similar challenge exists in describing the forces that influence a language in illustrating the types of changes, and in describing the process. We have titled this journal "Dynamic English" because it explores the way the world's most commonly used language is evolving in the 21st century under the pressures of technology, globalization, and immigration.

Most people encounter at least one new English word or usage each day, especially those who watch popular media or spend time reading blogs and other Web sites. Americans who spend time living in other countries are especially aware of changes in our language. Either we meet Americans abroad or return to the United States after an assignment in another country, to be surprised by new words and phrases and by how widespread they seem to be despite the fact that we've just encountered them. By the time I heard "24/7" for the first time, it was already in nearly universal use to indicate issues, services, or programs that are in effect 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And I won't soon forget the shock of briefing a college student who, upon learning something surprising, exclaimed, "Shut-up!" The fact that her advisors and fellow students found nothing unusual in this exchange was a clue that this might be a new use for the term I'd always been taught was rude. Apparently it had developed a meaning along the lines of "No way!" or "You're kidding!"

All living languages evolve, and English seems to change more readily than some others. In *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, linguist Seth Lerer reviews changes in English through the ages, from *Beowulf* through Chaucer, to Webster's efforts to create new spellings and usages in American English from the English forms, to current changes in the language. He credits Shakespeare alone with coining nearly 6,000 new words. Nor is this phenomenon new for the American version of the language. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) television network, which produced a series of programs entitled *Do You Speak American*?, credits Thomas Jefferson as the U.S. president who added the most new words (so far). The program's Web site explains

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"Ginormous" is one of about 100 new words to be added to the next printing of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

the relationship between language and culture this way: Language sows its own seeds of change; social context gives it the fertile ground to grow and spread.

But are these changes good? The creators of the PBS series asked, "Are we less literate than we used to be? Is e-mail ruining the language?" In his 2001 collection of essays, *The Way We Talk Now*, Geoffrey Nunberg points out that "American English has always been pretty open about borrowing words from other languages." His view is that mixing elements from different cultures, whether it's language or food, can produce new, interesting, and satisfying results. Nunberg finds more to criticize in experts who complain about language change, sure that they are smarter than the language (or its users), than in those who create and spread new words and uses. Lerer agrees with most of our contributors, writing, "We should not see our language as debased. The history of English is a history of invention: of finding new words and new selves, of coining phrases that may gather currency in a linguistic marketplace."

As Nunberg writes in the introduction to a 2004 collection of his essays, changes in language can serve as clues to important changes in society itself. Lists of characteristics and values that define American culture include words like change, innovation, melting pot, practicality, directness. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that American English is constantly changing and that those changes mirror other changes in the culture.

Robin L. Yeager

SOCIETY & VALUES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / AUGUST 2007 / VOLUME 12 / NUMBER 8

http://usinfo.state.gov/pub/ejournalusa.html

Dynamic English

4 Change Is Gonna Do Ya Good
ILAN STAVANS, PROFESSOR OF LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO CULTURE, AMHERST COLLEGE, AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS
English, like all living languages, is vibrant, unpredictable, and ever-changing.

7 Unraveling the Mysteries: Tools for Decoding Slang
A. C. KEMP, DIRECTOR OF THE SLANG CITY WEB SITE AND INSTRUCTOR OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDIES, MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
The Internet provides numerous Web sites that help readers understand American slang.

11 The Language of Blogging
REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS
Reprint from *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-Dissidents*

13 Youth Speak
ROBIN FRIEDMAN, JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR
Young people are at the forefront of coining slang expressions.

16 Game On! Sports and Recreation Idioms in American English
JEAN HENRY, AUTHOR AND TEACHER
Because of their popularity in the United States, sports and games have contributed many idioms to the language.

19 What's New? The Effect of Hip-Hop Culture on Everyday English
EMMETT G. PRICE III, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, MUSIC AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
The urban lexicon of the hip-hop generation has crossed over to mainstream America.

22 Spanglish: Speaking la Lengua Loca
ILAN STAVANS, PROFESSOR OF LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO CULTURE, AMHERST COLLEGE, AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS
In the United States, Spanish and English have mixed to form a hybrid language.

25 From Arabic to English
ALAN PIMM-SMITH, JOURNALIST AND TEACHER
Hundreds of English words derive from the Arabic language.

29 Arabic in the Saddle
GARY PAUL NABHAN, AUTHOR
Many English words relating to horses and horsemanship came from Arabic by way of Spanish.

31 Additional Resources

Video Online

• *ATT/Cingular Wireless Telephone Commercial: IDK, My BFF Jill*

A mother and daughter speak to each other using the letter system teens use for text messaging – broadcast of this humorous and exaggerated commercial included the subtitles shown.

AT&T commercial by BBDO

• *Hip-Hop*

This promotion for the *Independent Lens* television series documentary film about the phenomenon of hip-hop shows many of the images and introduces themes included in the Emmet Price article, "What's New? The Effect of Hip-Hop Culture on Everyday English," included in this journal.

Video courtesy ITVS

http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0807/ijse/ijse0807.htm

Change Is Gonna Do Ya Good

Ilan Stavans

© AP Images/Moscow-Pullman Daily News, Geoff Crimmins

Eight-year-olds look at their new dictionaries.

Language, by its nature, is a living, ever-changing force in society. The author celebrates that fact and discusses some of the influences that have contributed to the dynamism of the English language in particular. Ilan Stavans is Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. His books include Dictionary Days *(Graywolf) and* Love and Language *(Yale University Press).*

How many words are there in the English language? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), a total of more than 600,000. Each of us, of course, has the capacity to remember but a fraction. How many exactly? Depends on whom you ask. A person's vocabulary goes through dramatic transformation in life: from a handful of words by a babbling baby and the jargon-driven repertoire of the teenager, to the displays used by adults in different settings (home, work, friends, etc.). In truth, the inventory of words is never set. It isn't only that as individuals we are in constant change but language as such isn't static. The *OED*, as a historical lexicon, keeps on growing. It includes more entries today than ever. But a vast number of entries — they are called "voices" — are archaic, barely used today.

All of which points out two opposing forces constantly at work on our language: ephemerality and durability. Only dead languages are static. Think of Aramaic, for example. Its use today is generally limited to scholars of history or religion. Hence, there's no need to come up with equivalents for "fax," "soft money," and "steroids." Its lexicon is stable. On the other hand, many modern languages (for example Mandarin, English, Spanish, French, Russian, and Arabic) are in flux. To survive, they are constantly reaching out, importing foreign terms while, at the same time, exporting their database to other tongues. The large waves of migration

© AP Images/Shawn Baldwin

The mix of faces in this urban street scene mirrors the make-up of modern society in the United States, and helps explain how languages blend.

of the modern world, along with the instant technology we've devised (television, radio, movies, the Internet), encourage verbal cross-fertilization. How many Germanic words does the English language contain? And how many Anglicisms are accepted in Spanish? The answer, again: a lot. The tension between the ephemeral and the enduring is the key to life: A language cannot be altered so much as to erase its core; but the core alone doesn't make the language vibrant.

Needless to say, some tongues are more versatile than others. I was born in Mexico. Soon after immigrating to the United States in 1985 (to New York City, to be precise), I was struck by the resourcefulness of American English. A simple ride on the subway would bring me into contact with dozens of different tongues. The common element was everyone's desire to master English. Yet that desire clashed with the ubiquity of the languages people brought with them from their places of origin. The result was a mishmash, a Babel-like mix. In other words, no matter where I went, the English I heard was impure, contaminated, always interacting with other codes of communication. Like me, millions of immigrants learn English on the street. Some might have access to more formal training, but even they are shaped by the pervasiveness of popular culture. And pop culture doesn't adhere to strict rules. It enjoys being jazzy, unpredictable, chaotic. Hence, to understand how the language works through that means is to appreciate its freedom.

In my personal library I have a large collection of dictionaries. The majority are monolingual. A few are historical. I have some defined by national and geographic coordinates: a lexicon of Argentine Spanish, another one of English in the Southwest, and a third of French in Quebec. I have dictionaries shaped around a discipline: medical, sports, and advertising lexicons. Plus, I have bilingual and even multilingual ones, such as my two-volume Hebrew-Greek-Latin. Having them next to me serves as inspiration. The building blocks of all the poetry ever composed — from the Bible, Homer, and Dante, to Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Allen Ginsberg, and Derek Walcott — is included in them, in scrambled fashion, obviously. For me poets are "discoverers" of language: They make sense by bringing order to language, a new order, unlike any that came before.

Dictionaries are an essential tool for keeping a language in cohesive form. They are manuals of usage and receptacles of wisdom. They are also memory boxes containing the way past speakers utilized words. They can also be instruments of coercion. In times of political repression, tyrannical regimes use them as proof that rebels are misusing terms, i.e., misappropriating the

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From Nicaragua, Thailand, and Ecuador, these three new Americans join approximately 6,000 others from all over the world who became naturalized U.S. citizens at ceremonies in Miami Beach, Florida, on June 13, 2007.

collective heritage. What I find most endearing, and frustrating, in dictionaries, is their inefficacy. By nature, their ambition is always defeated. The moment a new hard-bound edition of the *OED* is released, its content is already dated. The thousands of words coined by people since the manuscript went to press aren't in it. Hence, as in the myth of Sisyphus, its makers have to get at it again, immediately, incessantly, endlessly. But they'll never fully succeed, for they are attempting the impossible: to contain language, to make it manageable. By its very nature, a living language is boisterous, its energy never-ending.

In an earlier paragraph I mentioned immigration. When it comes to American English — as the American journalist H.L. Mencken understood perfectly — its resourcefulness depends on the invigorating presence of immigrants arriving to the nation from every corner of the world. If the country performs its functions properly, those immigrants, in a relatively short period of time, will acquire enough English-language skills to become part of the social mosaic. But their assimilation is never a one-way street. As immigrants become Americans, the United States is altered too by their presence. This interchange is particularly recognizable at the level of language. Just as the Irish, Scandinavian, and Jewish newcomers became fluent speakers, so did the nation's tongue incorporate voices, expressions, syntactical patterns, and other verbal dexterities they brought along with them. And the rest of the population embraced those elements.

I'm hardly surprised to find out, as I often do, that a generous portion of lexicographers come from immigrant families. Their parents are the ones who learned English. Consequently, in the domestic realm, words were frequently contested. Why is this term spelled in such a way? What about its pronunciation? What are its roots? I know it from experience: Immigrants are converts. Having come to a language from outside, they embrace it with conviction, studying its rules with a zeal native speakers seldom share.

So to the question of how many words are there in the English language, my recommended answer is: not enough, ever. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Unraveling the Mysteries: Tools for Decoding Slang

A.C. Kemp

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How do you figure out what a word means if it's not in the dictionary?

English is often perplexing to students of the language and to native speakers alike. The author reveals several ways to find the meanings of new slang expressions. A.C. Kemp is the director of the American slang Web site Slang City [http://www.slangcity.com]. *She teaches in the English Language Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

Since I began teaching English-as-a-second language classes 12 years ago, I've often heard complaints from students that the more words they learn, the more unfamiliar words they encounter.

I understand their frustration. One of the greatest challenges in learning a language is mastering its vocabulary, and English is said to have more words than any other. While estimates vary, the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines more than 170,000 words in current use — a daunting number that continues to grow every year.

But while all those official words can make the language difficult for English learners, even more puzzling are the unofficial ones: the lexicon of the street, popular culture, and insider groups. Even native speakers can be baffled by these seemingly unbreakable codes, as any parent with teenage children will tell you.

That doesn't mean you can't find the clues to solve these linguistic mysteries, though. With a little work and an Internet connection, you can be a veritable Sherlock Holmes of English.

Often, the first step is to find out what you're looking for. In popular music, for example, singers rarely take care to pronounce words clearly. In fact, misunderstanding song lyrics is so common that there is a popular Web site *[http://www.kissthisguy.com]* devoted to such mistakes. To complicate

It can take master detective work to decode slang.

© AP Images/Tony Avelar

San Francisco-based rapper E-40 has created so many new words he calls himself the "King of Slanguistics."

© AP Images/The Tennessean, John Partipilo

The Simpson's Movie reminds viewers of the special exclamations and phrases the show has made famous.

© AP Images/Chris Pizzello

Kiefer Sutherland is the star of the television show *24*.

matters, when we hear a strange word, our brains naturally tend to substitute something more familiar. Thus, San Francisco rapper E-40's call for listeners to "get hyphy" (go crazy) may be heard as "get high fee" (be charged a lot of money) by those who don't know that regional slang expression.

Happily, there are a remarkable number of online song lyric sites created by fans, and, even better, musicians frequently post the words to their songs on their official Web sites. Likewise, many television and movie transcripts are available on the Web, in case you have questions about what you heard on *The Simpsons* or *24*. Typed directly from the finished programs, these documents are more accurate than scripts, which can change during filming.

Once you know what the word is, it's time to look for a definition. Believe it or not, it doesn't hurt to start with a standard dictionary. Many add new words every year, and you can conveniently search more than a dozen online dictionaries at the same time at Onelook *[http://www.onelook.com]*.

If you're looking for brand-new street terms and slang, the largest Web reference is Urban Dictionary *[http://www.urbandictionary.com]*. This site's content is user-generated; anyone can add a word and hundreds of young people do

so every day. The definitions are rated by other visitors for correctness, and the entry with the most positive feedback is moved to the top, resulting in better accuracy.

This system has advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, if there are not many votes, you can't be sure that a definition is correct. On the other hand, it encourages multiple submissions for the same word, increasing your chances of locating the facts you need. For example, the word "n00b", which describes a new and inexperienced player in online computer games, is very unusually spelled; you'd be unlikely to think of using zeros for the letter "O" unless you'd seen it that way in print. However, on this site, you can also find definitions for it spelled "noob," "nube," or "newb."

If Urban Dictionary is the place to go for new language straight from the teens that use it, the smaller Double-Tongued Dictionary *[http://www.doubletongued.org]* is a great spot for learning freshly coined slang and jargon you might find in print sources like newspapers and magazines. This site, which is frequently updated, includes definitions and numerous examples of real-life usage for terms in fields as diverse as business, sports, and politics.

Since many kinds of slang are specific to one group, if you are watching a skateboarding competition, reading a book about American cowboys in the 19th century, or listening to hip-hop music, you might want to consult a specialized reference. To find such insider guides, try searching online for your topic along with the word "glossary" or "dictionary." Amazingly, such mini-dictionaries exist for nearly every sport, hobby, and profession.

Whichever resource you consult, always remember that just as a good mystery writer throws red herrings (false clues) into the story, English can trick you with words that have more than one meaning. If an American teenager told you that your favorite T-shirt was "sick," for example, you might feel insulted. However, in slang, "sick" can be a glowing compliment. Read all the definitions and choose the one that best fits the context in which you heard it.

Still, it can be difficult to interpret the meaning of several street words used together, especially if the context includes obscure cultural references. For this reason, I developed Slang City *[http://www.slangcity.com]*, which offers detailed explanations of movie quotes and popular songs.

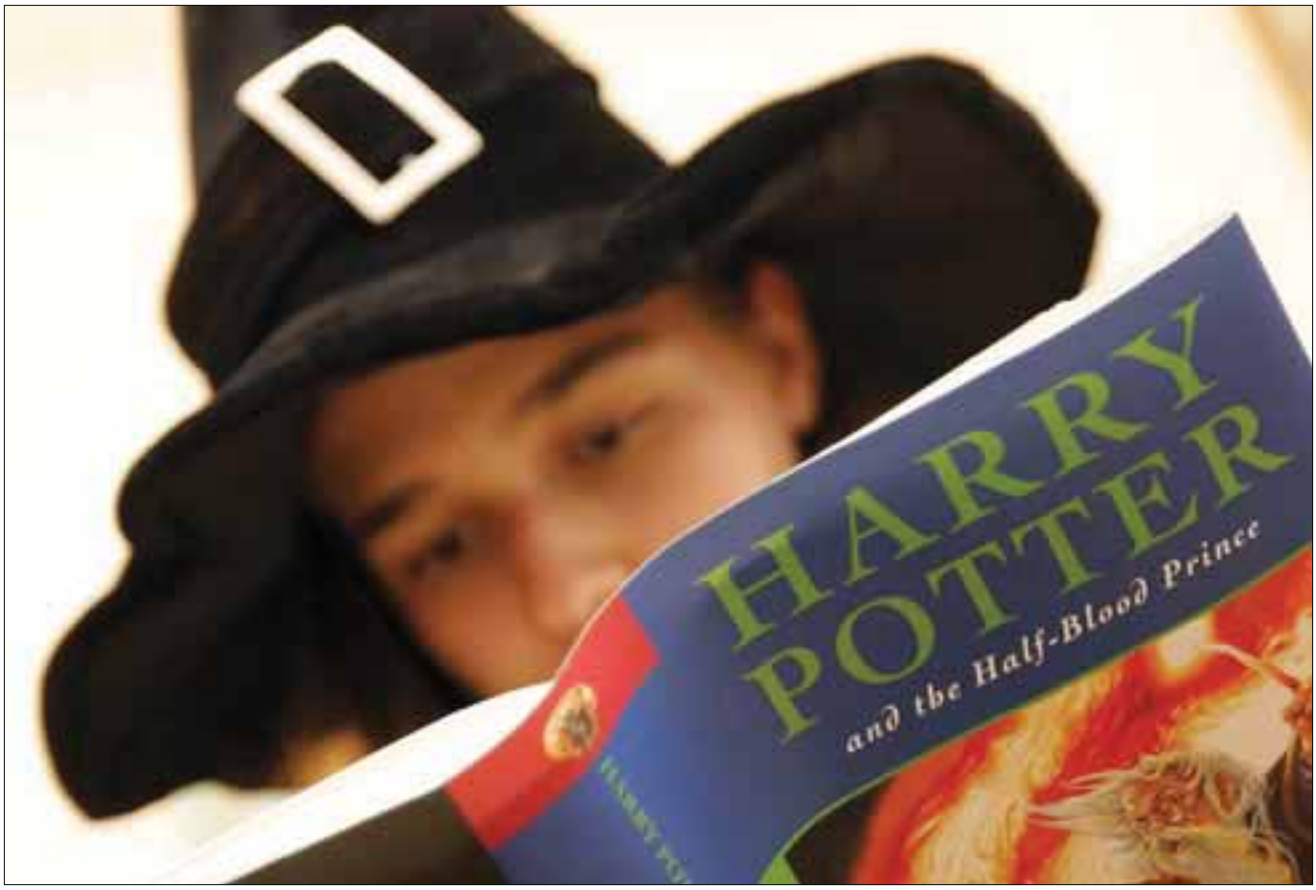
Finally, there are some cases in which, as we say in English, a picture is worth a thousand words. For instance, Urban Dictionary's definition of "skanking" explains that it is a dance to Ska music that looks like "running in place while flailing your arms." If that's hard to imagine, a quick search on YouTube *[http://www.youtube.com]* will provide you with dozens of videos showing how this strange dance is performed, as well as auditory examples of the musical style. You can also find visual representations of slang words for hairstyles, car accessories, gestures, and more on photo-sharing databases like Flickr *[http://www.flickr.com]*. Each picture is marked with descriptive tags, making it easy to find what you're looking for.

As you can see, for every kind of English, there is a resource online. Sherlock Holmes may have had just one Watson to help him, but for the detective of English words, there are hundreds of online assistants ready to reveal the language's secrets. Unraveling the mysteries of this constantly evolving language is just a mouse click away.

You might also want to check out some of these other sites not previously mentioned:

© AP Images/Cameron Bloch

YouTube videos can provide slang examples.



© AP Images/Franka Bruns

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and friends have given many new words to their audience.

A Sampler of Unusual Online Mini-Dictionaries

The Rap Dictionary: *http://rapdict.org*
Slang from rap music

Old West Legends: *http://www.legendsofamerica.com/WE-Slang.html*
1800s slang from the American West

Skateboarding Glossary: *http://www.exploratorium.edu/skateboarding/largeglossary.html*
Glossary of skateboarding terms from the San Francisco Exploratorium, including videos of tricks

Slang from the Great Depression: *http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA04/hess/Slang/slang.html*
Slang terms from 1928-1941

Song Lyric and Television/Movie Transcript Sites

Leo's Lyrics: *http://www.leoslyrics.com/*
Song lyric database that allows you to search for artist, title, or keywords

Drew's Script-O-Rama: *http://www.script-o-rama.com*
Scripts and transcripts from new and old movies and television shows

Twiz TV: *http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/*
Television transcripts from popular shows, including many new programs (Note: Unfortunately, this useful site features pop-up ads.) ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

THE LANGUAGE OF BLOGGING

From Pointblog.com

© AP Images/Bebeto Matthews

Blogging has earned Julia Langbein a loyal following among her readers.

Blog — Short for Weblog. A Web site that contains written material, links, or photos being posted all the time, usually by one individual, on a personal basis.

(To) blog — Run a blog or post material on one.

Blogger — Person who runs a blog.

Blogosphere — All blogs, or the blogging community.

Blogroll — List of external links appearing on a blog, often links to other blogs and usually in a column on the homepage. Often amounts to a "sub-community" of bloggers who are friends.

Blogware — Software used to run a blog.

Comment spam — Like e-mail spam. Robot "spambots" flood a blog with advertising in the form of bogus comments. A serious problem that requires bloggers and blog platforms to have tools to exclude some users or ban some addresses in comments.

Content syndication — How a site's author or administrator makes all or part of its content available for posting on another Web site.

Moblog — Contraction of "mobile blog." A blog that can be updated remotely from anywhere, such as by phone or a digital assistant.

Permalink — Contraction of "permanent link." Web address of each item posted on a blog. A handy way of permanently bookmarking a post, even after it has been archived by the blog it originated from.

Photoblog — A blog containing mostly photos, posted constantly and chronologically.

Podcasting — Contraction of "iPod" and "broadcasting." Posting audio and video material on a blog and its RSS feed, for digital players.

Post — An item posted on a blog. Can be a message or news, or just a photo or a link. Usually a short item, including external links, that visitors can comment on.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) — A way of handling the latest items posted on a Web site, especially suited for blogs because it alerts users

© AP Images/Karen Tam

A podcaster at work.

whenever their favorite blogs are updated. It can also "syndicate" content by allowing other Web sites (simply and automatically) to reproduce all or part of a site's content. Spreading fast, especially on media Web sites.

RSS Aggregator — A software or online service allowing a blogger to read an RSS feed, especially the latest posts on his favorite blogs. Also called a reader or feedreader.

RSS Feed — The file containing a blog's latest posts. It is read by an RSS aggregator/reader and shows at once when a blog has been updated.

Trackback — A way that Web sites can communicate automatically by alerting each other that an item posted on a blog refers to a previous item.

Web diary — A blog.

Wiki — From the Hawaiian word "wikiwiki" (quick). A Web site that can be easily and quickly updated by any visitor. The word has also come to mean the tools used to create a wiki (wiki engines). Blogs and wikis have some similarities but are quite different.

"The Language of Blogging" by Pointblog.com is excerpted and reprinted with permission from *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-Dissidents [http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/handbook_bloggers_cyberdissidents-GB.pdf]*, published by Reporters Without Borders *[http://www.rsf.org]*.

© AP Images/Dino Vournas

Jobspot provides wiki software.

Youth Speak

Robin Friedman

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Incoming message: How RU?

As long as there have been teenagers, there probably has been slang. Today's electronic means of communication — and the changing attitudes of some scholars — have moved slang from the realm of the spoken word to the written word with a greater degree of acceptance. Robin Friedman is a journalist and the author of several books for children and teenagers.

If you think the English language is getting shorter, you may be right. From news bytes to text-messaging to famously shorter attention spans, we're saying less — and relying on slang more.

Why?

Several reasons could be culpable, among them an inescapable saturation of technology combined with no-time-to-breathe lives, the ever-present temptation of teenage terminology, and the inevitable wheels of plain old evolution grinding — toward minus instead of plus.

With so much of our daily communications taking place online these days — and that doesn't include just e-mail, but text-messaging on increasingly teenier devices — it seems everyday English has been reduced to a code of accepted abbreviations, mysterious combinations of numbers and letters, and even symbols masquerading as facial expressions. :)

Often in all lowercase letters.

Certain numbers, "2" and "4" in particular, play starring roles — replacing, respectively, "to" and "for"— but the far more intriguing development is the embrace of the number "3" for the letter "e" ("b3" and "th3"), and the number "8" for the sound it makes ("gr8" and "l8r" for "great" and "later").

While some of these brave new acronyms can actually be self-explanatory ("u" for "you" and "ur" for "your") or fairly logical ("b4" for "before"), or can highlight the sounds the letters make ("qt" for "cutie" and "cu" for "see you") or act as abbreviations ("cuz" for "because"), or can be just straightforward acronyms ("bff" for "best friends forever"), some do border on strange ("peeps" for "people").

And, in one ironic case, the slang term exceeds its shorter ancestor ("i luv u" is now "i heart u").

Some terms that have been in circulation for quite a while are pretty recognizable: "lol" ("laughing out

© AP Images/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Chatting, whether person-to-person or electronically, is an important part of teenage life.

If you use "hot" (meaning "good" and also "attractive"), you'll seem with it, and alternatively — at least from a temperature point of view — if you use a word that has appealed to every generation since the Great Depression, you'll seem, well, "cool."

"Cool" is positively prehistoric by slang standards. It originated during the jazz culture of the late 1930s, but every generation since has embraced it as its own.

In fact, many expressions meaning the same thing as cool — bully, groovy, hep, crazy, bodacious, far-out, rad, swell — have not had the staying power of cool.

loud"), "btw" ("by the way"), and "imho" ("in my humble opinion").

Some, meanwhile, are bafflingly enigmatic: "iykwim" ("if you know what I mean"), "mtfbwy" ("may the force be with you"), and "wysiwyg" ("what you see is what you get").

At times, this alphabet-soup vernacular feels downright dizzying to everyone but linguists and computer geeks. But it's difficult to argue with its speed — or even its necessity — when forced to use a toothpick-sized contraption to reply to an office memorandum while driving a car (not recommended or legal but, unfortunately, all too common).

With the exception of "peeps," though, all of the above examples are mostly used in written slang. Spoken slang is a whole other story. And it's here that the younger generation truly has its say (pun intended).

Today's slang changes faster than yesterday's password. That's because words that were popular only a couple of years ago have lost favor — among today's teens — for no reason at all. These include: "phat," "sweet," "excellent," and "awesome" (which all mean "good"). So 1990s, "dude."

But, then, slang is short-lived by nature. In order for slang to be slangy, it has to have a feeling of perpetual newness. Slang is like fashion: never "in" for long. Americans eventually tire of even the most popular words, and by natural selection, only the strong survive.

So what's in these days? Meaning this month?

"Cool" is common not just with today's teens but with their parents as well. Adults are notorious for hijacking the lingo of their kids, but these days, knowing how to speak to this market — literally — can mean the difference between profitability and bankruptcy. The teenage demographic accounts for $170 billion a year in the American economy, according to the Taylor Group, a research firm that follows trends in the youth market.

That could explain why so much slang has crept into general usage, whether in media, popular culture, or daily use by older, more middle-aged generations ("stick it to the man," "you rock," "whatever," "old school," and "talk to the hand").

The inherent attraction of slang, after all, is in each generation's opportunity to shape its own lexicon. The result is a playful body of language that's used for its sense of linguistic fun.

Since some of these words have a tendency to originate in vice, however, they can be offensive. In fact, opponents have long charged that slang has a degrading effect on public discourse. This accusation, though, only attests to its power. After all, slang is, by definition, more clever than standard English. It's catchy, and it can produce flashes of humor and even poetry.

In 1961, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Third Edition — a respected tome published since 1898 — turned to popular publications for its entries, instead

© AP Images/John Raoux

This American teacher is reviewing with her students all the instant messaging (IM) language terms and spellings they are not allowed to use in formal writing assignments. Using them has become a habit for many students.

of polling a handful of academics, the way dictionaries were historically written.

The edition, which included slang for the first time, was called "monstrous," "deplorable," and "a scandal."

Today, however, all dictionaries include slang, though not everyone is happy about it. A movement known as "prescriptive" consists of scholars who believe dictionaries should teach people how to properly use language, going so far as to call their opponents "laxicographers" (instead of lexicographers) and accuse them of promoting illiteracy.

"Descriptive," meanwhile, refers to scholars who believe any language that's commonly used belongs in the dictionary. These scholars are more interested in successful communication than appropriate language; that is, it doesn't matter to them which words people use to convey language, so long as everyone understands.

Older generations may resist youthful changes to their language because of nostalgia for the good old days — or horror at the bad new ones.

In reality, however, there is no such thing as proper language, because language continually changes over time.

In the 1930s and 1940s, it was the swing and jitterbug culture that invented the hip talk of the day. In the 1950s, it was the Beat poets and fast-talking radio disc jockeys. In the 1960s, it was the hippies. Today's slang originates from hip-hop culture and rap music.

And, to that we say, "Capiche, yo?" ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Game On!

Sports and Recreation Idioms in American English

Jean Henry

© AP Images/Paul Sakuma

"Game On" is declared when a video game is resumed so all players are once again engaged.

Idioms derived from the sports and games played in the United States are commonly used in American English. The author gives examples of idioms used in everyday conversation and in the media. Jean Henry is the author of How to Play the Game: American English Sports and Games Idioms. *A retired teacher and professor of English as a second language, she has degrees from the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University, and she has done additional course work at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Oxford University in England.*

English is a dynamic and changing language. Because of the nature of the language, words and phrases are constantly being added or subtracted. "Carbon neutral" was added to last year's edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary* and named "word of the year" because of the concern about climate change. "Blog," "to blog," and "blogging" have entered the common lexicon. This dynamism is also true for idiomatic or metaphorical language and its use in the United States.

Idioms are words or phrases that cannot be understood literally, but are derivative. (Webster's dictionary defines an idiom as "a peculiar way of saying something which has become established after long use.") Idioms exist in all languages. They are, however, especially common in spoken American English.

American idioms are derived from many sources, including the culture of sports and games. Perhaps because of the informal atmosphere, language used by sports reporters, fans, and the players themselves has produced

© AP Images/Nikki Boertman

A professional basketball player executes a slam-dunk.

many words and phrases used in other contexts. Sports phrases are constantly changing: A "lay-up," an easy shot close to the basket in basketball that used to mean an easy task in the non-basketball world, has evolved into "slam-dunk" as increased size and athleticism have allowed players to elevate above the rim of the basket and forcefully slam the ball through it.

The knowledge of American idioms or metaphors, particularly those of sports and games, is essential to mastering colloquial American English speech. Games have captured the American heart and mind. Terms associated with play have become associated with work and business. To "pinch hit" or "carry the ball," two expressions from baseball and American football, used in their idiomatic sense rather than the literal, mean that a person will substitute or work on a project for a co-worker or boss. Failure to understand the games and the terms and idioms derived from them hinders communication.

The use of a word or an idiom changes with the popularity of the games played and the psyche of the country, the region, and the person using them. For example, idiomatic expressions based on sailing terms, such as "take a new tack" or "bail out," might be used more on the west and east coasts of the United States than in the heartland, and a person whose hobby is sailing will undoubtedly use them more frequently. There are many baseball and American football idioms used in the United States because of the widespread popularity of these sports.

At Condoleezza Rice's Senate confirmation hearings for the position of secretary of state, one Republican senator, using metaphors from American football, said about the nominee's response to questions, "…there was some bump and run defenses and tactics used against her but she never really got off her stride."

Some idioms will be international in use. "Always on the ball," a New York Ticketmaster advertisement with a picture of a ball, will be understandable in translation to persons worldwide. As will "game plan," used by Stanford University Professor David G. Victor when talking about President Bush's global goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. According to a June 1, 2007, article in the *New York Times*, Victor said that the goal would be "very difficult to be taken as seriously as it should be taken in the world without some kind of a clear [U.S. domestic] game plan."

Some are more difficult: A *New York Times* article of June 4, 2007, entitled "Romney Political Fortunes Are Tied to Riches He Gained in Business," says: "Bain [Romney's company] and its co-investors extracted special payments of over $100 million from each company, enabling Bain to make a healthy profit even before

© AP Images/Darron Cummings

This American football player is running with, or carrying, the ball.

"Mr. Foster is here. He just wants to touch base."

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re-selling the businesses — a practice know as 'getting back your bait.'" This refers to a fishing term.

Idioms are often difficult for the non-native speaker to learn in isolation from their original sources. Thinking in categories helps: Team sports, such as basketball and football, will have many of the same rules, terms, and fields as their international counterparts. Card games, hunting, and fishing are similar to the same games and sports in other countries. This framework or context of the game from which the term originated facilitates learning both of the literal and of the idiomatic usage. And familiarization with American games can also be enhanced by watching television broadcasts of baseball, football, and basketball games, or Olympic events.The context of a sentence is important. "Two strikes against him," a baseball expression, denotes that one strike is left before the batter, is declared out. The sentence, "He hit a home run to left field with two strikes against him," could be a sentence for a student to practice, since it requires an understanding of this phrase in its literal sense. The idiomatic meaning then can be practiced in a sentence such as "He had two strikes against him when he interviewed for the job, because he had no experience."

Some phrases, such as "play hardball" are more common in the derived or idiomatic sense. The sentence, "Let's play hardball on this contract," for example, means that one party intends to make little or no compromise in negotiating with the other party. This use is more typical than its literal meaning: to play baseball, a game that uses a ball made from a hard material.

In many cases, the student, businessperson, or politician at a conference might hear an idiomatic phrase and try to deduce the meaning from the context of the meeting. If there is confusion, the learner can ask someone later or use one of the many idiomatic phrase books or Internet sites available to find the idiom and its meaning. The student or professional person should then practice the use of the idiom with a friend, preferably someone who is conversant in colloquial English. ■

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What's New? The Effect of Hip-Hop Culture on Everyday English

Emmett G. Price III

© AP Images/Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette

Taking a break from painting a hip-hop-themed mural on the wall of a Michigan youth center, this artist shows off his break-dancing moves.

Expressions coined by urban youth have made their way into mainstream English via the so-called hip-hop generation. Emmett G. Price III, PhD, is an assistant professor of Music and African American Studies at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. He is the author of Hip Hop Culture *(ABC-CLIO, 2006) and editor-in-chief of the* Journal of Popular Music Studies. *He is also executive editor of the forthcoming three-volume* Encyclopedia of African American Music *(Greenwood Press, 2008).*

Language is the product of society. As a society changes, so does its language. One of the greatest signs of a changing language is the rapid expansion of its lexicons. Over the past 30 years, American dictionaries have grown at unprecedented levels. Words attesting to the rich contribution of global cultures to American culture, words created for scientific use, words recognizing technological advances, and, of course, words representing contemporary culture have expanded the English language. Yet, it is this last category that has altered the English language more rapidly than any other influence.

These changes are sparked by words created by youth and young adults who feel empowered to codify and label their own realities with new expressions: words that represent the new ponderings, new searches, new desires, and new ideas (even if the ideas really are not so new). In *The Hip Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana establishes the birth years of 1965-1984 as the criterion for admission into the hip-hop generation. It is obvious that Kitwana's closing year of 1984 is not wide enough, as we have witnessed the emergence of multiple hip-hop generations, each birthing new additions and approaches to the English language.

© AP Images/Stephen Chernin

Russell Simmons is a pioneer of the hip-hop movement and has served as a spokesman and advocate for the community.

Hip-Hop Culture

During the 1960s and 1970s — as the streets of New York City erupted in violence, social decay, and economic demise — young, multiethnic, inner-city kids devised their own solution to the traumatic challenges that they continually faced. Unifying the preexisting elements of rapping, graffiti, dancing, and deejaying (a method of using sound equipment and records to create totally new sounds and combinations from those originally recorded — scratching, rapid repeats of segments, remixes, etc.), these diverse youth created an alternative to the hopelessness found in their neighborhoods.

During the mid-1970s, this local phenomenon was ignored by mainstream America; yet by the 1980s, not only did hip-hop culture have a national presence, it was sought globally. Movies such as *Wild Style, Style Wars*, and, later, *Beat Street* and *Breakin'* allowed international audiences to experience the many facets of hip-hop culture, including the unique approach to speaking and writing English. By the 1990s, print and broadcast media and even video games were dominated by the presence and effect of hip-hop culture. Corporations such as Burger King, Coca-Cola, America Online (AOL), Nike, and Reebok launched advertising and marketing campaigns featuring hip-hop culture, responding to the popular/hip image of these elements and, at the same time, helping integrate them into the broader culture. Amidst the dancing, fashion, and numerous musical elements, what quickly struck the ears of many were the new rules for speaking, reading, and writing English.

Hip-Hop Language

Popular culture in the United States has had a unique effect on everyday English for many generations. African-American music, in many ways, has played a demonstrative role in this evolution. From the days prior to the emergence of the spirituals and the blues, African-American music has informed its listeners (early on, mostly black) of the current events and liberation strategies, using alternative language understood only by those within the cultural network.

Through the years, many of the words and phrases became integrated and used by outside communities who had figured out the context and definitions of these words. This process of cultural adaptation happened in many of the ethnic communities and enclaves within America, yet it was African-American music, containing much of this language, that informed much of American mainstream culture.

The language of hip-hop culture is an extension of past and recent vernacular. Words like "hot" (1920s), "swing" (1930s), "hip" (1940s), "cool" (1950s), "soul" (1960s), "chill" (1970s), and "smooth" (1980s) have been redefined and usurped into hip-hop language. Hip-hop

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Even official programs, such as this children's summer arts camp in Ohio, use hip, or hip-hop, themes and images to attract young audiences.

language is the next generation's answer to the age-old question — What's new?

The Impact of Hip-Hop Culture

The greatest impact of hip-hop culture is perhaps its ability to bring people of all different beliefs, cultures, races, and ethnicities together as a medium for young (and now middle-aged) people to express themselves in a self-determined manner, both individually and collectively. Hip-hop culture has influenced not only American English, but numerous languages around the world. Multicultural nations have vibrant hip-hop communities who have had to figure out what to do with these new words and phrases. From German Hip-Hop to Australian Hip-Hop to Pinoy Rap (Philippines) to Azeri Rap (Azerbaijan) to Rap Nigerien (Niger), hip-hop has had its effect on the languages of these nations and cultures.

Whether it is the addition of the phrase "bling-bling" to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2003 or the inclusion of the term "crunk" in the 2007 volume of the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, hip-hop culture is changing the nature, the sound, and the rules of the English language. Words such as "hood" (short for neighborhood), "crib" (which translates as place of residence), and "whip" (meaning car) have become commonplace within everyday conversation. Phrases such as "what's up" (hello), "peace out" (good-bye), and the extremely popular "chill out" (relax) are frequently used in television shows, movies, and even commercials for Fortune 500 corporations. American English is a living organism, and with vibrant mechanisms such as hip-hop culture and the rapid growth of technology, who's to say what we will be saying or writing in the next 30 years. Whether the United States is a "Hip-Hop Nation," as declared on the cover of the February 5, 1999, issue of *Time* magazine, or not, it is clearly evident that English has been greatly influenced by hip-hop culture. ■

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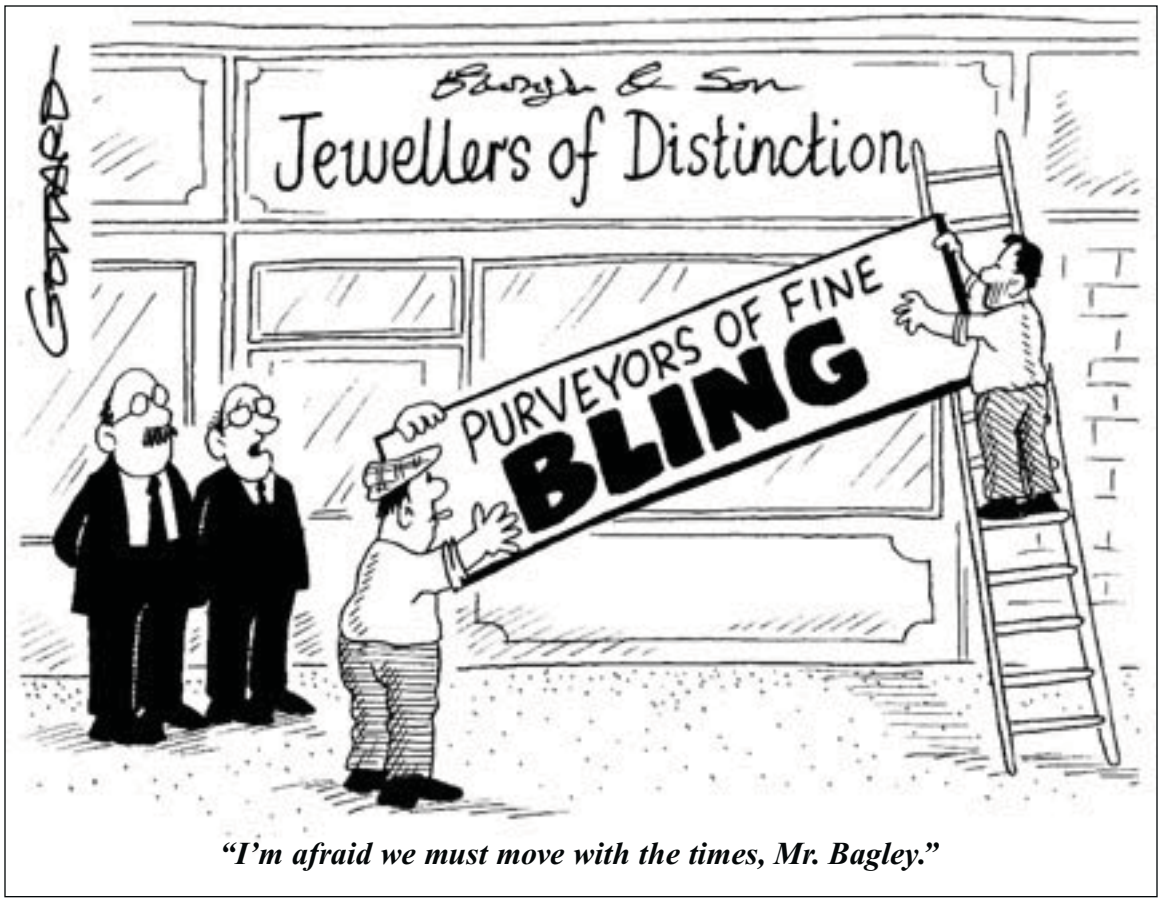


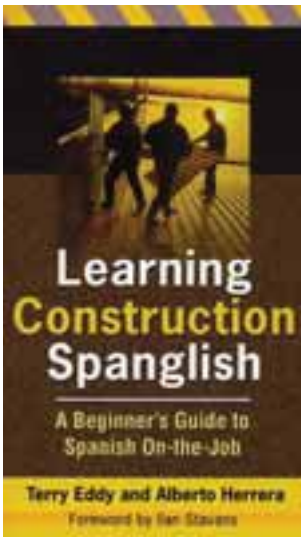
"I'm afraid we must move with the times, Mr. Bagley."

http://www.CartoonStock.com

This cartoon shows the current slang word replacing "Jewelry" on the sign above a shop. It was published in the United Kingdom.

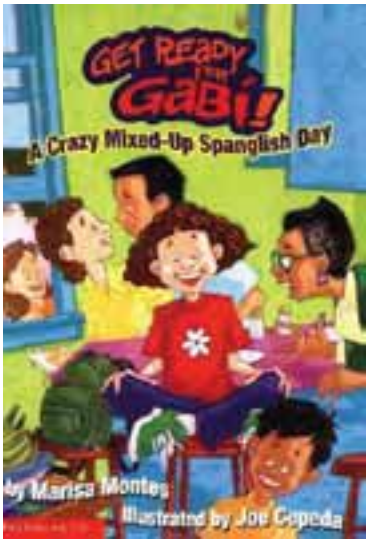
Spanglish: Speaking la Lengua Loca

Ilan Stavans



Learning Construction Spanglish, Terry Eddy and Alberto Herrera, © 2005 The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language, Ilan Stevens, © 2003, HarperCollins Publishers



Cover illustration copyright © 2003 by Joe Cepeda from GET READY FOR GABI! A CRAZY MIXED-UP SPANGLISH DAY by Marisa Montes. Reprinted by permission of Scholastic Inc.

Three of the many books that deal with Spanglish: *Learning Construction Spanglish* helps construction workers communicate in the increasingly mixed environment in which they work. *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language*, by author Ilan Stavans, describes the phenomenon that is Spanglish. *Get Ready for Gabi! A Crazy Mixed-Up Spanglish Day* is a children's book. [SCHOLASTIC'S Material shall not be published, re-transmitted, broadcast, modified or adapted (rewritten), manipulated, reproduced or otherwise distributed and/or exploited in any way withour prior written authorization of Scholastic Inc.]

The author explains how and why Spanish and English have mixed with each other in the United States to create a hybrid language, increasingly used not only in spoken but also in written form. Ilan Stavans is Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. His books include Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language *(HarperCollins) and* Lengua Fresca *(Houghton Mifflin).*

The growth of the Latino minority in the United States, some 43 million strong according to 2005 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, is at a juncture, forging a unique identity. Spanglish, the mixing of Spanish and English, used indistinctly on the street, in classrooms, among politicians, in the religious pulpit, and, of course, on radio, television, and the Internet, is the most distilled manifestation of that identity.

Historically, the roots of Spanglish date back to the American colonial period, during which Iberian civilization left its imprint in Florida and the Southwest. Up until 1848, when Mexico sold almost two-thirds of its territory (Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Utah) to its neighbor, Spanish was the tongue of business and education. It interacted with aboriginal languages. With the arrival of Anglos, Spanish and English began a process of hybridization. This process was reinforced at the end of the 19th century with the advent of the Spanish-American War. Americans arrived in the Caribbean Basin, bringing English along with them.

Whereas Spanglish is also heard in various parts of the Hispanic world, from Catalonia in Spain to the Pampas in Argentina, it is in the United States where it thrived. One is likely to hear it in rural areas, but it is in the major urban centers where Hispanics have settled — such as Los Angeles,

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The blend of Spanish and English can be challenging.

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The *Baldo* comic strip appears daily in about 200 U.S. newspapers. The teenage Baldo lives in the United States and blends his Puerto Rican heritage with the dominant culture. His world is full of blended elements, including the name of the shop where he works, Auto y Rod, Inc.

California; San Antonio and Houston, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Miami, Florida; and New York City — where its strongest influence is felt. However, there isn't one single Spanglish but different types: Chicano, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, etc. Its usage varies from one place to another and from generation to generation. A recent immigrant from Mexico in nearby El Paso, Texas, for instance, is likely to use certain elements that distinguish her from a second-generation Colombian-American in the northeastern state of New Jersey.

In general, there are three strategies all Spanglish speakers employ at some point: code-switching, whereby the alternating of elements from Spanish and English take place within the same sentence; simultaneous translation; and the coining of new terms that aren't found in either the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. For instance, "Wáchale!" for "Watch out!" and "rufo" for "roof."

There's a myriad of "border" languages around the globe, among them Franglais (French and English), Portuñol (Spanish and Portuguese), and Hibriya (Hebrew and Arabic). The fact that they are all controversial isn't surprising. Some see them as half-cooked verbal efforts, neither here nor there; others applaud their inventiveness. Spanglish, too, is polemical. It is proof, its critics argue, that Latinos aren't integrating into American culture the way previous immigrants did. I have a different perspective. Latinos already are the largest minority. Their immigration pattern isn't identical to that of other groups. For one thing, their place of origin is just next door. Their arrival is continuous, unlike other groups, of whom the majority arrived during a particular period. And a significant portion of the territory that constitutes the United States today used Spanish for centuries.

Plus, one needs to consider the impact of bilingual education, a federally funded program that spread nationwide in the 1980s. Hispanic schoolchildren who have gone through the program have a connection, however tenuous, with both Spanish and English.

© AP Images/Charlie Riedel

This six-year-old in Kansas learns in a dual-language, or bilingual, class.

Courtesy http//www.theredseat.com

Fans of the Boston Red Sox major league baseball team cheer their team in many languages, including Spanglish.

Cumulatively, these aspects explain why Spanish, unlike other immigrant languages, hasn't faded away. On the contrary, its presence in the United States is gaining momentum. But it doesn't exist in a pure, unadulterated state. Instead, it is in constant flux, adapting to new challenges.

I've been recording Spanglish terms for a decade — and have fallen in love with the phenomenon. In 2003 I published a lexicon of approximately 6,000 words and translated the first chapter of Cervantes' *Don Quixote of La Mancha* into Spanglish. I've continued translating and have now completed the first half of the novel.

Curiosity about Spanglish is abundant. Is it a dialect? Should it be compared with Creole? What are the similarities with black English? Will it become a full-fledged, self-sufficient language with its recognizable syntax? Linguists seem to have different responses to these questions. Personally, I answer to the latter question with a quote from linguist Max Weinreich, who wrote a multivolume history of Yiddish. Weinreich said that the difference between a language and a dialect is that the language has an army and a navy behind it. I also often call attention to the fact that in the last couple of decades, an effort to write in Spanglish has taken place in numerous circles, which means the form of communication is ceasing to exist at a strictly oral level. There are novels, stories, and poems in it already, as well as movies, songs, and endless Internet sites.

With a smile on his face, a student of mine calls Spanglish "la lengua loca." ■

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From Arabic to English

Alan Pimm-Smith

Courtesy Robin L. Yeager

The Blue Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. Although the word mosque has Arabic origins, today the word, like the mosques themselves, can be found in many non-Arab lands.

Hundreds of English words derive from the Arabic language. The author traces the origins of many technical, as well as common, terms. Alan Pimm-Smith is a free-lance writer who worked as a teacher and journalist in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries for many years. He now lives in Turkey.

How many words in the English language can you think of that are derived from Arabic? The immediate answer is, "Quite a few": mosque and minaret, bedouin and sheik, caliph and sultan, to name a few. Whether or not one knows any Arabic, it is safe to assume these words come from Arabic because they refer to Arab things as, of course, do the words camel, wadi, and dhow.

In some cases the English version of the word is as good as identical to its Arabic original, though others diverge in sound or meaning. Mosque doesn't sound much like *masjid*, and though we can use bedouin in the singular, it is in fact taken from *bidwan*, a plural form of *bedawi*. Dhow comes from *dawa*, though if you ask any of your Arabic-speaking friends, you'll find they don't know the word, as it's no longer in common use.

So far, no surprises: All the words mentioned refer to aspects of Arab or Islamic life, so naturally they are expressed in Arabic. But it may come as a surprise to learn that more familiar things, such as common fruits and vegetables, were once equally exotic. The fruits apricots, oranges, lemons, and limes, and the vegetables artichoke, spinach, and aubergine (eggplant) all have Arabic names, though they no longer taste or sound foreign. Lemon, for instance, came into medieval English from Middle French and before that from Middle Latin — with very little change in pronunciation in the process from the Arabic *laymun*. Artichoke, on the other hand, is hardly recognizable as coming by way of Italian from the Arabic *al-khurshuf*.

There are in fact hundreds of Arabic loan words in the English language, though few of them have entered directly. For the most part, they have come disguised as French, Spanish, Italian, or Latin words. For the past 1,000 years, English has been voracious in its appropriation of foreign elements, and French- and Latin-origin words now account for approximately half the modern English vocabulary. French was the language of the English court, the nobility, and parliament for at least 300 years following the Norman Conquest in 1066, and

© AP Images/Karel Prinsloo

Dhow comes from the Arabic *dawa*.

it remained the language of the law in England right up until 1731.

In medieval times, then, it was largely through French that Arabic words entered the English language. And perhaps the most noticeable thing about these words is that the majority of them are technical terms relating in particular to mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry. The word alchemy, which entered English in the 1300s, comes almost unchanged from the Arabic *al-kimya*, which itself is derived from Greek. Alkali, algorithm, alembic, and almanac entered the English lexicon about the same time. The syllable "al-" in these words comes from the Arabic definite article *al* (the). So, for example, alkali is derived from *al-qili*, defined as "the ashes of the saltwort plant." An alembic is an apparatus formerly used in distillation and the word comes from *al-inbiq*, the still.

Arab-Islamic civilization was at its height during the Middle Ages, and for 500 years or so Arabic was the language of learning, culture, and intellectual progress. Most of the classical Greek scientific and philosophical treatises were translated into Arabic during the ninth century. From this groundwork, Arab scholars, scientists, physicians, and mathematicians made great advances in learning that were then passed on to western Europe via the Islamic universities in Spain. For example, we owe the decimal system of computation to Arab mathematicians, based as it is on the Indian concept of zero — a word that, like its synonym cipher, comes from the Arabic *sifr*, meaning empty.

Arabic learning was widespread in medieval England from the 11th to the 13th century, and indeed beyond. Abelard of Bath, then one of the foremost scholars in Europe, translated the astronomical tables of al-Khwarizmi from Arabic into Latin in the early 1100s. Two common mathematical terms entered the language in this way: algebra and algorithm. The latter word is taken from al-Khwarizmi's name itself, while algebra comes from *al-jabr*, meaning "the reunion of broken parts"; it's a word that features in one of al-Khwarizmi's mathematical treatises, *Hisab al-Jabr w' al-Muqabala*. Curiously enough, both the Arabic *al-jabr* and the English word algebra also refer to the surgical treatment of fractures or bone-setting. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists definitions according to historical usage, gives the first meaning of algebra as "the surgical treatment of fractures" and quotes a citation from 1565:

"This Araby worde Algebra sygnifyeth as well fractures of bones, etc. as sometyme the restauration of the same."

One of the greatest contributions made by Arab scholars to the extension of knowledge was their development of the science of astronomy. If you look at a modern star chart, you'll find hundreds of stars whose names derive from Arabic: Altair, Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, Vega, Rigel, and Algol, to name a few. The derivation of the last of these is intriguing: It comes from the Arabic *al-ghul*, a word meaning "demon," from which the English word ghoul and its adjective ghoulish are also derived. Algol was named "the ghoul" by the Arabs because of its ghostly appearance, for, as an eclipsing binary star, it appears hazy and varies in brightness every two days. Beyond star names, many astronomical terms, among them zenith, nadir, and azimuth, also derive from Arabic.

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Terms for many spices and textiles and the word "coffee" came from Arabic.

The words talisman and elixir originate in Arabic alchemy, and the word almanac (*al-manakh*) comes from Arabian astronomy. Other technical words include caliper, caliber, aniline, marcasite, and camphor. We weigh precious stones in carats and measure paper in reams thanks to Arabic: *Girat* is a small unit of weight; *rizmah* is a bale or bundle. Two other words of interest in this category are average and alcohol. Average, our word for a commonplace mathematical concept, is in fact somewhat obscurely derived from the Arabic word *awariya*, meaning damaged goods. This came about because costs relating to goods damaged at sea had to be averaged out among the various parties concerned in the trade.

As for alcohol, this is derived from *al-kohl*, the fine black powder that is used in the Middle East as a sort of medicinal eye shadow. The relationship between the black powder and alcohol as we know it is hardly self-evident, but you can see the connection if you think of the powder — it's typically antimony sulfide — as the essence or pure spirit of a substance. Even as late as the 19th century, the poet Samuel Coleridge, in one of his essays on Shakespeare, could describe the villain Iago as "the very alcohol of egotism."

The preponderance of technical and scientific terms entering English from Arabic during the Middle Ages suggests accurately enough the general superiority of Arab–Islamic civilization in the area of scientific achievement during this period. Revealing too is the fact that the next broad category of Arabic words suggests an advantage in terms of luxury and creature comforts and, consequently, a higher standard of living.

By the time of Elizabeth I (1533–1603), English merchant seamen were discovering the world beyond the boundaries of Europe and bringing back rich and exotic objects, materials, and customs from the Middle East and beyond. Significantly, many of the Arabic words that travelers brought back with them at this time suggest a gracious, even luxurious style of living. Sugar, syrup, julep, sherbet, and marzipan are all Arabic in origin, though none of them would have featured on the grocery list of an Elizabethan housewife. Coffee comes from the Arabic *gahwah*, which originated in Yemen, and mocha from the Yemeni port city. Added to this are the fragrant spices caraway, saffron, and cumin, all of which have Arabic names.

There is a parallel richness suggested by the names of such exotic fineries as sash, shawl, sequin, muslin, mohair, damask, and cotton. Of these, muslin takes its name from Mosul in Iraq, where it was made, whereas sash is a variation of the Arabic for muslin, *shash*. The fabric damask, as one might expect, comes from Damascus. Even the word tabby, which we now apply to cats of a certain pattern, has its origin in a striped silk taffeta that was made in the al-Tabiyya district of Baghdad. The word

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The words camel, saffron (from crocus flowers), and jar all have Arabic origins.

Courtesy Robin L Yeager

of manufacture," or workshop, and before that from *sina'ah*, meaning "art, craft, skill," whereas magazine is borrowed from *makhzan*, "a storehouse." The trade-related word tariff is also Arabic in origin.

There are many other interesting words — adobe, crocus, genie, and popinjay, for example — that are sequin has its origin in Arabic *sikkah*, meaning a minting die for striking coins.

Sofa, alcove, jar, and carafe, each suggestive in some way of comfortable living, have also been borrowed from Arabic: sofa comes from *suffah* (a long bench); alcove from *al-qubbah* (the arch); jar from *jarrah* (an earthen water-vessel); carafe from *gharrafah* (bottle). Our vocabulary has also been enriched by the colors crimson, carmine, azure, and lilac, all of whose names are derived from Arabic. And as for leisure activities, there are such words as racket, as in tennis racket, from the Arabic *raha*, "the palm of the hand."

The Arabs were always a seafaring and trading people, so it is hardly surprising to find words related to these activities in the store of Arabic loan words. Sailors speak of mizzen masts because the word for mast in Arab is *mazzan*. Admiral, rather oddly, comes from *amir al-*, a truncated form of *amir al-bahr*, "prince of the sea." Arsenal derives from *dar as-sina'ah*, a "house all more or less garbled versions of Arabic words. Even the word garbled itself can be traced to Arabic, coming as it does from *gharbala* meaning "to sift or select," with reference to spices for sale, and shifting its meaning from there to the idea of mixing and confusing. But garbled or not, the store of words derived from Arabic has greatly enriched the English language. ■

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Arabic in the Saddle

Gary Paul Nabhan

Half a world away from where they originated, Arabic terms for horses, horsemen, and the tack that links them have found a new home in the desert Southwest of the United States. These terms came from Arabic into Spanish, and then into American English when the Spanish and the "Anglo" traditions met.

In the early eighth century, a Muslim army of Arabs and North African Berbers conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula. In its south, a region the Arabs called al-Andalus, a Syrian Umayyad prince whose dynasty had been replaced by the Abbasids established a kingdom and a burgeoning civilization around the year 750. In 1492 came two important events: the discovery of the New World — opening a whole new hemisphere to Spanish and Portuguese colonization — and the final expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Spain, who left a deep and permanent cultural imprint on the Spanish people.

© AP Images/Eric Draper

This girl prepares to ride her Arabian horse

As they colonized the New World, Spaniards — including Arab and Berber refugees — took along their horses, and the Arabic-origin words they brought with them for managing them are now deeply lodged in "cowboy lingo," the vernacular English and Mexican Spanish of the desert borderlands of the United States and Mexico.

I began listening to cowboy lingo after I moved to one of the great old ranching communities of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands in 1975. My wife and I now keep horses, sheep, and turkeys, and we have frequent contact with working cowboys, ranchers, and large-animal veterinarians, all of whom use Arabic-derived terms, introduced into the region more than four-and-a-half centuries ago, as casually and nonchalantly as my children use computerspeak.

For instance, they refer to a rider of exceptional skill as "one damn fine *jinete*," a term that once referred to a fluid style of riding developed in North Africa for the battlefield and which now refers to the rider himself. The word came from the Sonoran Spanish *xinete*, which was in turn derived from the Andalusian zanati, an echo of the name of the Zanatah tribe of what is now Algeria.

Sonoran vaqueros and the horsemen who've worked with them may still call their saddle an *albardón*, derived from the Iberian term *albarda*, which now means packsaddle and which came from the Arabic *al-barda'a*. Among the other tack such cowboys use is a leather belt they call an acion, from the Arabic *as-siyur*. A whip they call an azote — from the Arabic *as-sut*. Ringing straps are called argollas, from the

Arabic *allgulla*. Perhaps my favorite Arabic-derived tack term is a widely used word for a headstall or rope halter: hackamore. It came straight from the Andalusian *jaquima*, which echoes the Arabic *sakima*, something worn on the head.

There are also many terms for the colors of animals that can be traced back to Arabic origins. Because I am color-blind, it took me a while before I even began to listen to the terms cowboys use for the hide colors of horses, cattle, and even sheep. But I could certainly pick out an almagre, a rust-colored stallion, and I knew that the term came from the Arabic *al-magra*, "red earth."

The color term that most puzzled me, however, was the use of the name Alice-Ann for a sorrel, a horse that is rusty brown from nose to tail. It took me some time to realize that it came from the Arabic *al-azan*, a kind of reddish wood, via the Spanish *alazán*. Recently, I read a limerick by a man named Jac that played on the apparent double meaning of "*Alice-Ann*":

On the frontier a cowboy's best gal
Was called Alice Ann, and not Sal.
The trick is, of course,
That this friend was a horse
So an Alice could be a male pal.

Gary Paul Nabhan is the author of 20 books, including *Why Some Like It Hot* (Island Press, 2004), on the co-evolution of communities and their native foods, and a forthcoming essay collection from the University of Arizona Press, *What Flows Between Dry Worlds: Culture, Agriculture and Cuisine in Arabian and American Deserts*. He can be reached at gary.nabhan@nau.edu. ■

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A typical American cowboy herds cattle in Wyoming.

Additional Resources

Books

Berger, Harris M. and Michael T. Carroll, eds. *Global Pop, Local Language*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.

Ostler, Rosemarie. *Dewdroppers, Waldos, and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Pennycook, Alastair. *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Stenström, Anna-Brita, Gisle Andersen, and Ingrid Kristine Hasund. *Trends in Teenage Talk: Corpus Compilation, Analysis, and Findings*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA: J. Benjamins, 2002.

http://www.jerryking.com and http://fno.org

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English Teaching Forum
http://exchanges.state.gov/forum

Publication Catalog
http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/pubs/

Voice of America
VOA Radio English Course
http://www.dyned.com/voa/

NON-GOVERNMENT

American English
Public Broadcasting Service
http://www.pbs.org/speak/

English Daily
http://www.englishdaily626.com.htm

Urban Dictionary
http://www.urbandictionary.com

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