

## STRICTLY SPEAKING: THE TRUTH ABOUT LANGUAGE STANDARDS

by

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In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived,  
 impurities are needed., and impurities in the soil  
 too, as you know, if it is to be fertile. Dissension,  
 diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are required:  
 Fascism does not want them, forbids them....it  
 wants everybody to be the same, and you are not.  
 But immaculate virtue doesn't exist either, or if  
 it does exist it is despicable.  
 --Primo Levi, "Zinc" in *The Periodic Table* (1975)

### Introduction

In these presidential addresses at our international conferences I expect the keynote address to focus on a certain important aspect of the set theme and for myself choose to address some broader or more basic matters, leaving it to individual participants to speak of specific aspects arising from their own studies and teaching experience in various languages. This year our subject is standardization of language and language standards. Our keynote speaker will trace for you the way in which a dialect became standard German. I am particularly happy that our keynote speaker is a professor of German, a foreign language that is currently facing a decline in American colleges and universities despite the fact that our entire US educational system, from the Kindergarten to doctorates in the best research universities, was constructed on German models. In fact US institutions of higher learning became research centers to keep Americans from going off to Germany for doctorates in the 19th century. Earlier, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this new republic here, it has been often said, seriously considered adopting German as the national language to distance these United States from Britain even more, although we settled for merely adopting the German *Thaler*, a dollar of 100 cents in lieu of Britain's pounds, shillings, and pence. We used to demand a reading knowledge of German for the highest degrees and that was to be standard German, not the Pennsylvania Dutch (*Deutsche*) or another dialect of German but the German of Luther's translation of The Bible. Not Austrian German or Swiss German or Bavarian German or anything like that but the German of scholarship, particularly in the sciences which came to be regarded as more important than the theology and belles letters which were the concern of our earliest institutions of higher learning here, institutions having been originally founded basically for the education of the Protestant clergy.

My remarks are going to be about varieties of English, focussed on American though there are other Englishes, in Australia, in Canada, and so on. Within each language there are numerous dialects, regional, social, professional, ethnic, instances of diglossia, etc., and there are related pidgins and creoles. There are many factors in the give and take of ordinary discourse that stand in the way of standardizing any national language. Indeed no language in use can be wholly standardized. There can be no one size that fits all. And there can be no iron rules for any language, for every day its speakers make changes in the lexis and even the meaning of so-called

established words, occasionally altering the meaning of words such as *disinterested*, occasionally changing spelling, word order, and more.

There are even fashions in conversation. Right now there is a public debate over new concepts, and new threats, in connection with personal privacy, but communication has broadened to reveal a great deal of what used to be held back, “Keeping oneself to oneself” is old-fashioned in the new world of the somewhat redundant word *interconnectivity*. It is amazing that online, if not face to face, what people reveal. That, however, is not to be discussed here. It is a topic for a different conference on language, for a whole big book. It all goes back to St. Augustine and Rousseau but the talking cure and the picture window opened a new era and Facebook and Twitter, etc., have made it go viral.

What is even more obvious is that in the Americas there exists a wide variety of people, indigenous (actually early arrivals) and later arrivals. At the time of the so-called discovery of the New World by Europeans there were peoples of various origins scattered across North, Central and South America, and there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different languages in use. We shall never know about all or even most of them. What we do know is that all the European powers that sought continued presence tried to impose their languages on the natives. Today only in Paraguay, where Guaraní is spoken, is a native language burgeoning and official (along with Spanish). The majority of the Paraguayan population speaks Guaraní—only some of those can write it—maybe a quarter of that number being bilingual, speaking Spanish also, and English and Spanish are used in trade and commerce and tourism. Guaraní has a minority use in Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil as well. We tend to think of North America as English speaking and Central and South America as speaking Iberian languages, Spanish and Portuguese, ignoring all or most other languages spoken here. In the United States and Canada the number of speakers of the aboriginal languages has been greatly reduced and some peoples and their languages have completely disappeared. Aboriginal languages with 100 or more speakers still are much more common in Canada than in the US, as Gunnemark (pp. 256–258) reports. When they die their cultures die.

In the case of the US there are still some speakers of aboriginal languages and many speakers still of European languages other than English and speakers of most of the whole world’s languages, for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideal of the Melting Pot, which assumed that all American immigrants would eventually speak “American” has proved to be illusory. We are a polyglot nation despite the desire of many to establish one American English for all, and so we must regard our nation and our speech as pluralistic. We cannot look forward to one official tongue. In my neighborhood the signs in the subway often appear not only in English but also in Chinese and Russian. Elsewhere in the city I have seen public signs in Haitian Creole and other languages. Smaller towns elsewhere can be more homogeneous, naturally.

We teach English in New York City’s schools but have to cope with students who speak at home an Africa, Asian, or other language and whose parents perhaps speak no English whatever. Even in the case where the entire family speaks American English that language is a bit different for different generations and in the schools the dialects of teachers and students may differ markedly from one borough of the city or even one neighborhood in a borough. The elementary and secondary school students do not arrive at college all speaking alike. The extent to which they approximate what used to be called College English and, lacking that, have to be placed in college courses in Basic Skills and Remedial English, varies over time and place. So do the results in attaining any such standard, whatever the teaching goals and methods. Moreover, the emphases regarding acceptable American and the methods of teaching all languages in

educational circles change over time. You can see that even college graduates cannot all be expected to have and use one American English.

Many US colleges strive for some sort of agreed upon competence. Every place from Surfboard College to Betterthan U now teaches a level of English composition formerly taught in grammar schools. The English Department in which I taught literary history and criticism now does little of that and offers Basic Skills, Communications, Creative Writing, Journalism, and Remedial English, practically abandoning the aesthetic approach to literature and concerning itself now with preparation for the workplace—and political agendas. Many universities offer doctorates in English with no courses required in linguistics or Old and Middle English or any reading knowledge of Latin, French, and German, as I had to face as a student. You can write your dissertation on Madonna or *The Simpsons*. Well, those have been done, but at this writing Lady Gaga is still available for advanced research. If you expect a degree from one of the few universities that still demand “an original contribution to knowledge” even for the PhD in the humanities you will have to find unusual topics. Maybe Bjørk, Oprah, or horror movies?

### Education

Public education is by no means very concerned with turning out professors of language and literature. It does graduate far more in these fields than there are available jobs but it is devoted to providing citizens with some command of the national language or languages. So they can earn a living. In countries as multicultural as the US public education cannot address all languages that, officially and unofficially, are active in the nation. It usually has to concentrate on one language as it pursues the goal of creating united citizens and employable workers and steady taxpayers and responsible voters. It cannot really impose one dialect, or count on students arriving with one dialect. There is diversity. It has even been argued that teachers with ethnic origins and ethnic dialects are best able to relate to ethnic students.

Currently there are not many hard and fast standards in US K-12 (elementary and secondary education) in regard to language. There is a national Department of Education, which some political factions want to disband, but the states decide much. Each state spends about a third of its budget on public education. The states vary widely in overall expenditure, expenditure per student, with different educational results. Local taxes support local schools, unevenly. To say an American has (say) a high school education means little unless one can specify it is from a good or a terrible school and an advanced or backward, rich or poor state. There is no equality nationally because of significant local financing.

Another factor in our country is that Americans do not as a rule agree with those who stick to strict rules. Let us have a reference to a popular work which you may or may not know, because of late there has been no core education, no canon of literature to unite us—which also has had an effect on the way we all speak differently. My example is Clarence Day [Jr.]. He was born in 1874, back when people were called Clarence. By the 1930s in his novel *Life with Father* he gave us the sort of established American who sent his son to St. Paul’s and ran his household and his business according to rigid upper-middle-class rules. The public was delighted with *Life with Father* in a book, as a play, and as a movie, because the old man was by then in action and outlook so old-fashioned as to be funny. Day tells us that his father believed “he had to insist on absolute order, simply because the alternative was absolute chaos”. Even by the 1930’s the Average American—I suppose somewhere there must always be such a person—was less stuffy, less sure of himself, less, to use a word hardly any American of today would ever use, latitudinarian. Our dictionaries are full of words we never use. If you check their dates of origin

you can get something of a picture of American development. The number of words in the lexicon far exceeds the active vocabulary of Americans who get by on some of what they have picked up and some of what they have learned in school, probably a great deal more of the former than the latter. This is just to say our vocabularies differ one from another.

The new middle class may not be as solid, stolid, and secure as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century middle of the roaders but to some extent this was the class that set whatever levels of approved discourse America was willing to admire and just perhaps adopt. If there ever was any real Received American it may have been what the socially ambitious middle class accepted before World War II made an even greater societal upheaval than World War I. Now we are told there is a War on the Middle Class and all its values and comforts are under attack. Our politicians, who used to talk about the poor, now talk incessantly about the middle class, because the middle class votes and the poor are chiefly in that half of the US population that does not vote. Or maybe it is because so many Americans that rank lower or even higher than that firmly believe or at least boldly state that they are middle class.

American language has not been taught by Clarence Day's middle-class persons. Teachers usually come from lower strata, lower middle-class or upper lower-class. They have sought secure jobs with no heavy lifting and have taught in various ways and with various degrees of success pupils of many different origins and levels of preparation and participation, all over the nation. They once were thought of bringing some culture to the boondocks in the person of the strict spinster presiding over the one-room school. Now we think those women's standards are not right for the modern world and schools are fancier, have more sport amenities, and do not pay so much attention to dills in the Three Rs (Readin', 'Ritin', and 'Rithmetic), as our national scores sadly prove. We are way behind, for example, Taiwan or Finland.

We do not have a solid standard in our public education and charter schools rather than ordinary public schools of late have created new inequalities. Few pupils are in expensive private schools like St. Paul's where an upper middle-class or upper class speech is acquired. Of the politicians who make the laws and the bureaucrats who oversee their financing and application and the officials and classroom teachers in what they sometimes call "the trenches" in the schools, few if any at all speak what anyone can regard as a widespread American. I recall that when John Lindsay, educated at St. Paul's, was mayor of New York City he made a special effort not to sound too St. Paul's. When offered a choice between a college graduate (Adlai Stevenson) and a college president (Dwight D. Eisenhower, who presided over but could never have graduated from Columbia) the American public enthusiastically chose the non-intellectual. They thought Stevenson talked too fancy. From the early Philadelphia lawyers until now, Americans tend to distrust anyone who sounds too highbrow.

In some parts of the country, to succeed in politics you absolutely must sound good ol' boy, down home, homeboy, and so on, even if you are as quick and slick as Huey Long. You don't tell voters you went to Oxford. You tell them you are from Hope, Arkansas. It is too late to be born in a log cabin but low does well while Cabot and Lowell do not.

Here's to dear old Boston.  
The home of the bean and the cod,  
Where Cabots speak only to Lowells  
And Lowells speak only to God.

More fractured a society than ever before, politically and economically and in many other ways, and having abandoned McGuffey's reader and using a variety of textbooks, our classrooms

differ. America is more than ever egalitarian and aspirational politically and if not well spoken more plain spoken if often ungrammatical. Many styles, even in language, now come from the badly educated in the ghetto, more candidly called the slum. Once only the poor wore denim jeans and teenagers tried to talk as if grown up. Not now. If you are under 30 you may have rolled your eyes at that.

If the young do learn not to be too highfalutin and do not learn in school anything that even pretends to be a formal national American language, we shall all just have to live with that. As long as they can communicate somehow, y'know what I'm sayin'? The teaching of children from the earliest ages to their teens is where any standard has to be inculcated but, looking at the majority of US public schools, where are children going to learn to speak well? Watching TV, streaming movies? Highly cultured talking heads and films in which the characters all speak a high-level English are too tiny a part of the media of popular culture to do the job. In fact, American culture is chiefly mass culture and what we may call the native language of our popular culture is not in the least elite.

Our culture is democratic. Its talk is demotic. Ours is the culture of a populist and pluralist society and one in which new is thought better than old, from Leavis' Great Tradition to Senile Citizens. The cultures of Down East and Down South, of the East Coast and the West Coast are quite distinct, in some aspects as different perhaps as the famous one percent and 99 percent, so what speech education could suit and reshape them all? We say the mixed salad has replaced the melting pot. Among much else there is some endive and some bits of bad tomato.

We rank educational effectiveness from one to 50 in this country's constituent states. The citizens of some states do not speak English nearly as "correctly" as others. (I disapprove of quotation marks to be vague but the term is so fuzzy the fact has to be stressed that way in this case.) Maybe tentativeness, which is becoming a more pronounced feature of American speech, have you noticed?, is due to a new uncertainty in regard to old values and a growing recognition of the iffy place of our country in world affairs. Don't just roll your eyes but think that over. Of course not everyone is tentative. There are also vocal and even violent partisans on both sides of political and religious issues now, fundamentalists and anti-fundamentalists, and Americans seem increasingly to be forgetting that one fundamental factor is the constitutional guarantee of free speech. We keep yelling at each other to shut up. We close our minds to all opposition. We do not listen to the Other Guy. We want to punish those who make us angry by expressing opinions we do not happen to hold. They are being politically incorrect, damn them! It is not just Americans who are guilty of this. In the UK a common expression is "I don't want to know". Is this something in the DNA of speakers of varieties of English, the language of recent and current imperial pretensions?

We seem to have our minds made up and do not want to be disturbed. About higher education, at various prices and with a vast range of language competence and requirements of proficiency in English and (where part of curricula) foreign languages we do not be able to agree on much. Performance goals and levels are cobbled together with an eye to what the consumer will buy by the state departments of education and the individual colleges and universities, run as businesses, which vary from amazingly good to abysmal. At all levels there is a vast range of offerings at ever higher prices. Wealthy people may be sending their tots to pre-schools whose tuition costs are higher than you paid to go to prestigious colleges. In some lower grades at expensive schools the kiddies are being taught not only polite and precise English but also Mandarin Chinese. After a semester or two of compulsory Foreign Language, in those places where that still is a requirement, students are not as well prepared to chat in French or Spanish (practically never Russian or German or Turkish) than they would be had they settled down for

two or three months with Rosetta Stone, which is more efficient than the schools. Or you can learn a language free online and listen free to foreign language radio and television. Learn Portuguese for Christmas and spend the holiday in Brazil, speaking almost as well and perhaps better than a college major. If schools in Utah can train young Mormon missionaries in foreign tongues so well that they can go abroad and ring doorbells to argue theology with the locals, why are so many Foreign Language graduates, even with doctorates, not nearly that well versed? You can teach yourself if need be and on the money you save by not taking a college course you can visit abroad. There you can perfect your skills by interacting with native speakers, and that cannot be equaled by a single teacher and a book. Or even machines in the Language Lab.

Everyone deserves to be at least bilingual. Many in so-called Darkest Africa speak two or three or more languages. Our concept of equality here in the US ought to mean equally good education for all in every state. That ought to mean basic language curricula for every grade of elementary and secondary education, national goals and honest tests, no promotion without meeting the requirements at each level, no admission to higher education without passing 12<sup>th</sup>-grade English and some *useful* level of a foreign language. The government ought to regulate both public and private education as it does so much of other business. The regulators ought to be trained educationalists (the word for the best paid people in the Ed Biz), not political hacks. They ought to be able to agree on some inform approaches and reasonable goals.

Right now there is none of that. Some states have educational policies and practices that are atrocious and some few have admirable ones. Everywhere, when it comes to free public education, it all depends on what the taxpayers where you happen to be are willing to put up for education for all. It is not free, the taxpayers pay for it, and not all students can benefit because at least some percentage is mentally incapable. The aim ought to be to provide to each person as much real education as they can take, no more, no less. This country seems to have confused equality of opportunity with equality of results. Some states start education sooner and offer better opportunities than others. Some elementary schools are far superior to others. Some states censor textbooks oddly, particularly history textbooks. Some US high schools teach no foreign language. Actually foreign language would more effectively taught before high school, side by side with English. In places where Spanish speakers are taught English should English speakers not be taught Spanish?

Do not expect teachers' unions or even Parent Teacher Associations gratefully to accept Washington demands regarding curricula or to welcome strict tests for both students and their teachers at all levels. Recent movements to test teacher effectiveness and to weed incompetents out of the system have been very strongly resisted. Testing will come. Eventually people balk at paying for what they do not receive. Firing the worst teachers will come much later, if at all, if in fact we can afford to let many go now that teachers are so ill paid that hordes are fleeing the profession. Some attempts to improve US education may produce bloody cage fights. Some other battles over responsibilities and turf and custom will be muted. Willingness to give up any benefits, however, many will think to be unthinkable. For years after the introduction of electric trains in this country the railroad union was able to insist on a stoker of non-existent coal being paid to ride on the engine in electric trains. Over the years sweetheart deals with the unions added substantially to the cost of every car out of Detroit until the industry faltered badly. Expect the teachers' unions to battle to the end. Their responsibility is not to the students but to the union members. As Al Shanker once replied when asked when US teachers would pay more attention to the needs of the students than to the teachers, "When students start paying union dues". Do not blame the teachers. It's the system. Just set the parents on them—after you somehow manage to get parents involved and to realize that teachers ought to do more than baby

sit, that parents have to teach too, that the young have to be educated in the home as well as the school if not also in the church, synagogue, mosque, or what-have-you. It's a team sport.

If the young cannot handle the language well, to what extent is the home, as well as the school, at fault? Does the home have books, good newspapers and magazines, and competent or at least ambitious older speakers, caring family, in addition to the TV? I realize that in these days of both parents working and some people carrying more than one job, just to get by, Adult night school and such which was carried along with parenting in the old days is not to be expected.

Those problems are seldom ever mentioned, let alone tackled. There is likewise a dominant conspiracy of silence—Edmund Wilson called it “a general conspiracy not to mention, not even to recognize”—what is currently “unspeakable,” “unthinkable,” and very much at odds with what we consider our inalienable right to freedom of speech. That agreement, like all of society's agreements, inevitably changes over time. That is its sole really standard aspect. At any time there can be a new openness, a new radicalism, a Supreme Court decision limiting the First Amendment, or even a new Sedition Act curbing communication. Bad times produce bad laws. Do not ask for too much principle from politicians—or school principals. Do not expect too much wisdom of politicians from petty local office holders to the political appointees of the Supreme Court. In a democracy the polls follow the polls. They want to be re-elected. If things are wrong the public is to blame. The public mind cannot be led by those running for office as much as it can be followed. Of course the public is never of one mind and occasionally not of right mind, but at least democracy, and this is its chief virtue, basically gives the voters what they think they want or need and demand. H. L. Mencken said they deserve to get that “good and hard”. The public wants what it wants when it wants it. And it never wanted to pay too much for anything even when it could. Right now the US public can't. We shall have to cut spending on language education in every department from English in kindergarten to the advanced training of diplomats who tinker and tailor and for soldiers and spies, all requiring foreign languages.

In all areas of education, which we at the moment believe everyone has as right to even if they cannot intellectually absorb it (No Child Left Behind), it is not my intent here in these remarks to get into such arguments as we hear from those who say public education is indoctrination and indoctrination ought to be avoided. Of course it is indoctrination. Even though civics is less commonly taught than it used to be, all members of a society need to be told, indoctrinated in its ways and responsibilities. I believe in indoctrination and in instruction (putting stuff in) even though ideally we should also engage in education (bring stuff out).

I would expand public education to involve the education of parents, as you read, often a weak link in the chain. The home already leaves too much for the school to do and often works against what the school is attempting. I do not agree with PM Lord Salisbury's remark that public education is nothing more than “cramming” information into “louts,” if only because it is impolite to call even louts louts and, more importantly, too often lately the cramming has not taken place at all and the students have been passed from grade to grade automatically (“social promotion”) whether they have learned enough, or indeed anything, or not.

Many of the freshmen I encountered in my classes at Brooklyn College, where I rose from the fairly easy work of instructor (“covering the material”) to full professor (presumably full of knowledge or professing to be so and willing if nicely asked to impart some of it) but I seldom was able to inspire seekers of certification for business to acquire education and the ability to think for themselves. About things at least as important as earning a salary. At BC/CUNY, with open admissions, even full professors had to teach Freshman English (at high college rates). I

often mused that my students had been cheated of good preparation for college and might just as well have not attended any high school at all. Four years earning some money and gaining some maturity that way might have stood them in better stead. Then they could sit a series of college examinations and be given a diploma. Many of them faced years of college after which they would enter the work force not much better prepared than if they had done so right after high school. Many of them, I thought, might have been better engaged reading five days a week important books and the best newspapers in a free public library or, if interested in Journalism, starting at the bottom at some newspaper, or starting in the mailroom of a magazine, or, if interested in Creative Writing, sitting in parks or Starbucks and writing until they got good enough or at least commercial enough to be published.

I never confessed that to them. Students had decided on college—and this was before people went to college because there were no jobs available for them—and it was my job to give them college. I never mentioned that one of them might have been entrepreneurial enough to record my lectures secretly and sell copies to others who were too busy at work to come to class. I never told them that the main thing college would teach them is discipline, showing up on time, following orders, meeting deadlines and tolerating what they call Mickey Mouse rules, and that quite a bit of discipline could be attained by becoming self-regulated and giving up things for Lent or being a loyal employee at any kind of job or being reliable and eating healthily, while if what they wanted from college was networking that would provide useful career contacts for later life then they would be better off in an Ivy League school, if they could get in, and with financial arrangements possible they might be able to afford that. I may venture to say a little something here about widespread deficiency among both English teachers and teachers of foreign languages.

I have mentioned Spanish before this, for Hispanics are now more numerous than more visible and more vocal, for the time being, minorities. Spanish is the most popular foreign language taught. It is easy to learn, very regular, with a vocabulary incredibly smaller than English. I know people who learned to speak Spanish adequately after three months in Mexico. Spanish has a pretty well accepted Madrid standard but Americans ought to learn an American Spanish, without the ludicrous lisp. Spanish teachers here too often are not very good in English although they are trying to make students bilingual. (Not as ought to be done at college level teach Spanish culture, history and literature to those who already know the language, to advanced rather than beginning students, for college is supposed to be higher, not basic, education.)

We could also notice that even the likes of Spanglish have rules or customs while being regarded by many as non-standard American, or that Ebonics (formerly called African-American Vernacular English) is a non-prestige dialect and is not a separate language. I say American Spanish is a language now that the US is a nation. It has been spoken here since long before the US became a nation. Let Spaniards say that Spanish in America is a non-prestige dialect of their cherished lingo. They are wrong. True, Cuban Spanish is a more closely regulated language due to government policies and supervision than Mexican Spanish or American Spanish. The Spanish we must teach in American schools, I argue, is the Spanish that Spanish speakers speak in the US. Or are we teaching Spanish not for daily use but for reading the classic literature of Spain? The two are not identical. In our institutions of supposedly higher education, Comparative Literature is often taught entirely with the reading and discussion in English of translated material. No wonder BC/CUNY merged Comp Lit with the English department.

One might attempt to show that some level of standardization actually occurs even in trade languages or pidgins and that these would be impacted were a Standard American ever established. In brief, some Americans are well educated and some are not, and as for language

some are well spoken and some are not. Americans like to think of themselves as practical people. So be practical and hang around with people who speak well. You make the best progress that way. Americans consider ourselves eminently progressive although ours is the sole nation still operating with an 18<sup>th</sup>-century constitution and old regions are now being strongly supported by fundamentalists, who want believers and non-believers alike to be guided by them. (Actually college is bad for that because two-thirds of believers who get college educations, the fundamentalists state in horror, lose their faith.)

We Americans have faith in being up-to-date. We are dedicated to teaching reading and writing for business, so our education in English puts the main emphasis on communication not for the humanities and the cultural heritage, not on the ability to read the classics of American and its British forebears, but for modern commerce and technology. (Every young person ought to be taught the technical language of this cyber-age, and before college.) Many Americans get by with no computer capabilities and a kind of local pidgin or Business American. Many Americans have only their mother tongue. Russian or Hebrew or Chinese or one of the languages of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is heard daily where I live in Brooklyn (NY). They are barely touched at all by the varieties of English spoken nearby and are not in the US mainstream. Linguistically, many Americans are in America but hardly part of America. Some of those were born here.

### **Pidgins and Creoles**

Most people who come here arrive with immigrant languages and have to learn some American English, and this fact has produced many US pidgins and creoles and dialects. Of pidgins the US has Chinook jargon (still not extinct), Gullah (with an interesting African basis), and Hawaiian pidgin (also found as a creole). We used to have the likes of New Jersey Amerindian, one of a number of early American trade languages. All of those trade languages are dead today and some even when they were in use were spoken by the white traders but not by the natives. We once had Mogilian, an offspring of Choctaw along the Mississippi, just a few traces now left at most. We still have Pochismo (Spanish-English of the Pachusos of Arizona and Southern California), and we have pockets of modern Hebrew and Scandinavian languages, etc.

Certain pidgins became creole languages, such as with the French in Louisiana, not to mention the pidgins and creoles of Liberia which former US slaves took there and caused to thrive. The questions of standard and non-standard are intimately bound up with making clear distinctions between informal trade languages, pidgins which become the mother languages of people and so are creoles, regional dialects and different fringe vocabularies of more or less closed groups, and various kinds of American with a certain infusion of foreign words derived from anything from Armenian to Zapoteco. There is likewise the matter of foreign languages spoken in the US which include old Pennsylvanian Dutch and much newer Cambodian and Yao. All of those are more or less influenced by the surrounding general American and may color it. In ordinary American even non-Teutons may say "OK by me" and non-Jews echo Yiddish, which even the Jews have pretty much abandoned. It all depends on how isolated the speakers are and on the fact that sometimes foreign languages leak words or constructions into general American, formal or informal. This is bad? (That sentence looks/does not look odd to you?)

France says you are not French if you do not speak French. Once France said if you were an Algerian Jew and spoke French, even if only French, you were not French. Can you become a Japanese citizen if you know no Japanese or just because you can speak Japanese? We used to say that to become a naturalized American you had to speak some kind of American and spend five years here learning it before applying for citizenship. That seemed reasonable at the time. It

seems no longer to be demanded. What do you think of the idea that if you are going to vote in the US you really should have to be able to follow US political discussion in some American dialect or other?

Could a single American ever be imposed on an unruly bunch like us, a nation founded in revolution, with a big Civil War in our history, with a penchant for being *agin the gummint*, with our love of inclusiveness in education, with so much ethnic and social and economic diversity? I cannot see how anyone could enforce unity. With language laws like the French of 1977? I don't think Americans would stand for it. We have always disobeyed the laws we do not like. That is part of our famed independent spirit.

### **A Geolinguistic Approach**

What I want to do here is to make some personal observations with some geolinguistic aspects. Instead of the extensive bibliographies usually attached to these addresses typically commenting on a large field of research studies, there are here only two works you need read, I offer my subjective but informed views on the difficulty of constructing a standard American in an immigrant nation where most of the languages of the globe are represented, large or small. I remark on what I consider to be the extremely unexpected possibility of there ever being a single global language would be established in these post-Babel days or in fact at any time in the foreseeable future, however useful worldwide that language, in the establishing of which America would have a leading part. I put the stress on sociodynamics impinging on language here, on current facts, because this is a meeting of geolinguists. We are pragmatic students of the way language is actually used rather than what some authoritarian academy might bless as correct. We try to keep up with modern changes. We note, for example, the new hand-held devices that can guess what words one is trying to use, that can correct typing errors or bad spelling and can translate a photo of a text without you typing at all. Soon you will not have to be able to read and write, just speak to technical devices and listen to their replies, all in your own language, presumably however strange your dialect because no academic training has standardized your ideolect, grammar or pronunciation nor any academy set your language as we like to say in stone.

The language changes every day. As with technology every once in a while there is what we like to term a tectonic shift, as now with old and young and cell phones. Among 18-28-year-olds, 41 percent own only cell phones, a mere 7 percent landline phones. Cell phones are by far the choice of what the *New York Times* (June 23, 2010, p. B2) calls "minorities, people making less than \$30,000 a year, and those who have never attended college". Got an old-fashioned home phone? You are more likely to use e-mail, even snail mail, and have conservative political ideas. You might even favor "straightening out the language" by means of a learned academy. But even a language academy could not address the social shift, what Louis Kronenberger in *Company Manners: A Cultural Inquiry into American Life* of a half a century ago already found, "a general sloughing off of what are classically known as the amenities".

The very word *manners* in Kronenberger's book title signals a defunct or moribund tradition. Thus far we have not been reduced, like Morose's servants in Ben Jonson's play *The Silent Woman* to communicating solely by gestures but we are increasingly aware of the weakness of words in a condition of flux and what contacts do to grammatical structures. We are likewise aware that education still faces problems of banishing illiteracy and making everyone more articulate in our Whatever World. With age we hear more from our bodies and also tend to quit trying to correct other people's grammar. Even the elderly are becoming less impressed by authority these days. To the astonishment of some, broadcasting nationally has not moved the

nation toward a single national language. We all speak regional American dialects, a few of which come close to being different America languages because they are pretty much incomprehensible to other Americans. Linguists love to study the differences. Geolinguists concentrate on language As Is, in action today with all its variety. Some others have a more historical or antiquarian approach. Most Americans think those specialists freaky.

### **Academies**

The first famous academy was Greek and it discussed and worshipped the Muses rather than mandated. There were later academies for special studies, the advancement and celebration of knowledge, not direction. In America the word *academic* means not important enough to be argued about. Ending a sentence with a word like *about* appears to most Americans to be a God-given right, not to be taken away from us in the land of the free and the home of the semi-educated. We generally do not like the *egg head*, the kind of American that President Eisenhower, or someone writing a speech that would go over well with Ike's audience, said takes far too many long words and a long time to tell far more than he really has to say.

As for fussbudgets about language, *fuggedabowdit*. One sort of linguist is the purist, the expert who wants everything scientific even when it is as basically so human as the gift of language. It was precision and purity that got people thinking about trying to control the language that was actually spoken and written. Quite different from any hope of a universal human language was the ideal of a standard national language, a pristine and private tongue which would lend cohesion to a national culture. Dante established the Tuscan dialect as basic Italian and in 1582 in Florence the *Accademia della Crusca* was set up to guard the purity of Italian. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany there was Luther's bible, as mentioned above. In early 17<sup>th</sup> - century France, Cardinal Richelieu established the *Académie française*, which still in the 21<sup>st</sup> - century has not got far toward completing the would-be standard dictionary of the language that was started in 1694. Language legislation however, keeps attempting to defend French against intrusions from foreign tongues, so politicians as well as the academicians, who are distinguished but not necessarily linguists, are involved in attempting to maintain stability in the face of change. Recent French modifications in spelling did not take very well. Every day some new French word may appear in the language that the French Academy wants to keep pure, ideally immutable.

Philip V founded a royal Spanish academy in 1713. Spanish worldwide is influenced by its dictates though some Spanish-speaking nations have their own languages, Cuban being closer to Castilian Spanish than the spoken and to some extent the written language of many South American nations. Portugal and Brazil have not been able to agree on a single Portuguese. A Portuguese *Academia das Ciências de Lisboa* goes back to 1779 and exerts some power over language planning but cannot effect standardization. As late as 1996 an effort to bring the languages of Portugal and Brazil together failed as too radical and the Portuguese of various former colonies in Africa, etc., departs distinctly from the Iberian variety which itself has regional dialects, some related to Galician and some still bearing the imprint of a long Arabic presence. The Spanish boast pure language and pure blood but because of the Moors have neither. Catalans have insisted on being called "a country within Spain".

The Swedish academy was founded in 1786 and now there is a Swedish Language Council. Sweden has its dialects, though considering the size of the nation not comparatively as many as on the single island of Sardinia, for example, and Swedish is anxious that Swedish not be replaced by English. Swedish is taught to immigrants, although English is common there as it is in many other European nations. The Norwegians have two varieties of their language, essentially the peasant language and the more formal language once called *Landsmål* and then *Riksmål* (National Language) and after 1929 called *Bokmål*, a spoken as well as a book language. Spelling was reformed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in 1907, 1917, and 1938, still again in 1959. *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian) and *Bokmål* both still work side by side, about three-quarters of the population actually speaking the former if somewhat less formal dialect. Iceland goes along with an ancient language, all on its own, and its speakers are more literate and read more per person than

Americans do. Modern Icelanders can read the old sagas in the original. Modern Britons, except for scholars, cannot read Caedmon's or Chaucer's English.

Some governments can attempt to impose laws on what can be published but no government can keep its citizens from speaking as they will or from *samizat*. *Parole* is free.

Moscow set a kind of standard for Russian by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, borrowing from various northern dialects and even more from the dialects of the south. "The republics are empowered to establish their own state languages" stated the Russian Federation in 1993. Russian is used throughout the new Russia and even is noticed in the Constitution of Ukraine. The Baltic States are trying to get rid of it. The Hungarians set up an imperial academy in 1830, the Israelis a modern Hebrew academy in 1953. The Netherlands has a committee for *Taalunie* (Standard Dutch) and it also covers pronunciation (which Standard English does not in Britain) and the Germans speak of a standard *Schriftsprache* which puts the emphasis as the word shows on the written form. The Chinese push for Mandarin instead of *fangyan* (regional language) but while the written language is universal the spoken languages are many. The Koran preserves one old form of Arabic and cannot be altered in any way but there are various kinds of spoken Arabic. Britain when the French set up an academy for language did not do so. The British formed the Royal Academy for science. Still the concept of the King's English (or the Queen's English) has long existed. Dialects are more respected; it is Britain's time of devolution. Previously scorned dialects such as Cockney or Yorkshire or Geordie and so on are heard at all social levels. A Northumbrian word such as *rammel* may be heard in new places. I heard it in London from someone with a Welsh accent. Where she got it I do not know. The British seem to adore diversity, though they mock Taffy the Welshman and others. Britons like diversity because it is playing into their traditional snobbery. But even the smallest variation can be a gaffe that can put one in a difficult social position or an unpleasant place in a touchy hierarchy. Some cling to so-called low dialects to "cock a snoot" at the "toffs". See a UK dictionary for translation.

## Variation

We have all sorts of US dialects, personal, social, regional, etc. Getting rid of dialects has never been a goal among us or the scattered, mixed, and snobbish UK population. Seventeenth- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century movements to form a British Academy for the language came to naught. So did various suggestions for spelling reform, despite the fact that George Bernard Shaw left his estate to fund that effort. In the US there were early efforts to conform to or differ from British English. Noah Webster did much to make American spelling different from British spelling, while school marmes taught grammar and vocabulary and elocution teachers instructed the socially ambitious of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some attempted some kind of internationally acceptable American. Elocution is no longer demanded in schools and colleges. Teachers now are not tested for their so-called accents before being hired.

Some minorities are demanding their own American languages. Hip-hop likes to spell outside the box. As the sign says at the new Harry Potter theme park at Universal in Orlando, “Please Respect the Spell Limits” and do not seek silly distinction in misspelling. Deliberate misspelling signals the desperate yearning for individuality that we see in the crazy or ignorant distortion of US forenames like Shon and P-Ter, Suze and Cyndi. Other variations may signal a yearning to fit in. Of course surnames have often been given American US respellings, and not only difficult Slavic and other such names but English, Scottish, Irish and other surnames as well. Some surnames have been translated into English and some half-translated (*Bloomberg*, *Greenberg*, *Steinway*). You could call such names Assimilated American.

Some anonymous American, perhaps it was John Quincy Adams, in 1780 proposed “a plan for perfecting the English language in America” with a society “consisting of members in each university and seminary” who annually would publish to “correct, enrich and refine it, until perfection stops their progress and ends their labor”. This got nowhere. There is never an end to language change so long as a language lives, and every language in use will have dialects, no rigid single form. Everyone in America speaks a dialect, ethnic, social, regional, professional, etc. Today many different kinds of American are spoken. The educated dialect of Middle America is often being said to be regular American. The majority of Americans does not speak it. Middle America to them is Flyover Country, unimportant in the eyes of the East Coast and West Coast which have greater impact on education and entertainment. The language one reads and hears daily depends upon the individual and each clings to it. There has been as much if not more resistance to any idea of a language academy or any official Standard American as there is to the English Only movement. As in the United Nations and the European Union, nationalism dislikes one single language for all, despite the costs cultural and economic. Politics trumps pragmatism.

What Adams, living in an era when America was smaller and more demographically homogeneous, did not notice was that America started multilingual and would remain so. The hyphenated-American of today is somewhat tied to her or his origins, though wanting to move far from them economically. She or he maintains fond feelings the Old World and the US hometown, often easier because it is left behind in the search to Be Me, an American goal. Will Americans ever stop being African-Americans or Italian-Americans or some other kind of hybrid and become simply American persons? Most certainly, in time, some say, and in time also pigs will not only fly but will pilot international jets.

The same desire for difference, for individuality, the same love of one’s town or state or way of life, very different in different parts of a vast nation, not only causes us to be sentimental

about, for instance, South Dakota or to be immensely proud, even if only recently arrived, of the Mini-Apple in Minnesota, sincerely believing that the people there are better and happier than in the Big Apple, which as any New Yorker will tell you is in downstate New York and, by the grace of God, in upstate New York. To people of this mind any large regulation is anathema. To them an academy to tell them what is the right way to speak is downright undemocratic. They have their dialects and cherish them, a bit sad if and when circumstances compel them to knock the rough edges off them in order to advance their careers, which of course are more important than country or any part of it.

The American Dialect Society (ADS)—so called because it was formed “back in the day” when American was considered not a language but a dialect of British English—is reflects those ideals. Every year it hails the cleverest new word that the public adopts. If this group of serious scholars has a fault it is simply that ADS pays too much attention to ignorant or careless if colorful underclass speech, the sub-standard rather than any standard. ADS concentrates mostly on some of the smaller and certainly less politically important minorities in this country with no majority, just hotly competing minorities. It does indeed deal happily and extensively with dialects, dialects of American, a vital and various tongue which I like to call mixturesque.

Our lexicographers, like our astrologers, stress impel rather than compel. American dictionaries are descriptive, not prescriptive, though they still mark what lexicographers consider low and they flee from the vulgar and obscene as if these were not common speech. Ethnic groups and social classes all have their own pronunciations and to a lesser extent their own grammar and syntax. Hollywood actors in realistic shows speak many low dialects and actors no longer adopt a sort of British delivery as they once did for the so-called legitimate stage and the early talkies. Indeed the RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) speech is far from universal in UK theater and broadcasting and general public life. We say we like Plain American but some of it is Fancy Autodidact. Foreigners don't know whom to emulate. They plaintively ask which of all the dialects they ought to learn. There is no one right answer to that question any more than there is one place they ought to move to and one occupation they ought to take up. It depends.

Foreigners might be given some small pointers such as beware of, never take up, the American habit of redundancy, of which *future planning* is one silly example. Americans occasionally resort to the kind of over-elaborate speech in formal use that reminds us of the old days of the self-educated and, later, the vocabulary-building schoolmarm of yore, but even the formal State of the Union Address on occasion includes grammatical errors, perhaps deliberately to suggest sincerity. Few seem to know the difference between *fewer* and *less* or that *none* takes a singular verb. I found that New York City high-school graduates could not be expected to know the meaning of terms such as *nominative* and *accusative*. One student guessed that *accusative* described the rhetorical style of partisan politicians. We Americans have wit if not sufficient knowledge. Sadly, with languages as with computers, common sense is not enough.

### **Which Variation Should You Learn?**

In the absence of a standard language, you must have a dialect. That is all that is available. How to communicate with us Americans? When foreigners ask, “What kind of American should I learn to speak to do business with you?” most of us are at a loss to say anything more than that the best idea would be to determine, if one can, whether one is going to live and work in New York or Atlanta, or California or Texas, or (as we say now) whatever. It is best to try to sound like a native wherever one finds oneself—unless of course one is peddling distinctiveness. Only a few people can get away with “sounding superior” as only a few can get

away with wearing some detail of uniform that is not regulation. Sensible people jeered or should have jeered Franklin D. Roosevelt for wrapping himself in an admiral's cloak. At one time FDR was a secretary of the navy (but there is no uniform for that) and only an admiral ought to wear any part of an admiral's uniform and that never without the rest of the outfit. There is no presidential cloak. Douglas A. MacArthur should have been told by the president, his superior officer whether he liked it or not, to stop wearing the hat of a field marshal of The Philippines. He was supposed to wear a US general's hat. He was supposed to be in uniform, not unusual.

Don the wrong duds or adopt the wrong accent and Americans laugh at you. We are very sensitive about such things, very critical, very conformist. The society folks who attempted to sound Awf'ly Bridish were despised by many Americans. The once recommended Mid-Atlantic compromise between the educated US and the educated UK speech is certainly out of favor today. We do not think it sounds as macho as Americans, even women, ought to sound. It's not down home. "You're in America. Speak American." But what kind of American? There is no authority to enforce rules. If Americans want to drawl or mumble or honk or raise the voice at the end of non-interrogatory phrases or sentences or be ungrammatical there is, hey, guess what, no one to, like, you know what I mean?, get them in line. Americans do not like being regimented. They resent being pushed. They balk. As a great American, Yogi Berra once said about our orneriness: "If someone doesn't want to do something you can't stop him."

As "Saki," the British humorist, would say, an American's speech ought to be, like a gentleman's socks, unobjectionable, not noticed as remarkably different. In a multicultural and very mobile society one may have to command a number of social dialects and use them appropriately with different people and in different circumstances just as one needs a varied wardrobe for different occasions and different manners and even mores in different groups. Groups may be large such as those who respond to "workers of the world, unite" or the Church Militant or the Uuma or smaller, in for example a school or political or social organization, all of which have their customs and language peculiarities and clothes. Consider the clothes and disguises in your language closet. Some things there you have not worn for years but still resist sending of to the Salvation Army. In some things you feel most comfortable even if not chic and temporarily different. There are also some things that do not fit but seemed to be bargains at the time you acquired them and some language that belongs too far back a time and place. Some things you think you may diet and still fit into. And so it goes. You have more personal dialects than you usually realize, or frequently use. You are not as monolingual as you may imagine.

Americans traditionally do not like to wear the same thing all the time. Even in uniforms they often do not like to be told what to do, though, confusingly, they will permit fashion to tell them what to wear. Academies that attempt to regulate the language are essentially trying to preserve logical communication and the readability of the nation's literary heritage. They mean well. They work best in cultures where elite views are respected. They call on common beliefs that are widely shared and honored. They work where uniformity is prized over freedom of expression and where an established power elite can be *dirigiste* (a French word, of course). Americans do not welcome the Maoist *Little Red Book* or a plain Mao uniform for all citizens. We will not accept a one party system simply to get things done. In fact we do not trust our government and so we have set it up to have crooks catch crooks, even if they sometimes conspire to do bad things and sometimes clash and can do nothing to break a stalemate. We like to call that a Mexican standoff but it is truly American. It suits us sometimes. Sometimes we have "nothing to wear," or say.

### **Dress and Address**

For a moment, let us think of language in terms of clothes, which similarly make first and lasting impressions as we present ourselves to the world. Dress has various uses in social strata. Americans accept and enjoy uniforms for certain professions, even the military's "fruit salad" of medal ribbons on the chest reminiscent of Boy Scout badges. We have the business clothes of what we used to call "the man in the gray flannel suit," but Americans prefer individualism and often informality (Casual Fridays) and many *make a statement* by wearing peaked caps backwards or raising very high or lowering hemlines or wearing no brassieres, no neckties. We have certain clothing customs but of late women no longer are required to cover their heads in church and men can take their jackets off (more to look busier than be cooler) in circumstances where previously they could not. White, which used to be required at funerals before black became the rule, no longer is absolutely necessary for brides. Women's speech no longer needs to be more restricted than men's. We no longer warn men that "there are ladies present" and indeed *ladies* is now a word one must hesitate to use. We have begun to tolerate unisex clothes and even transvestism to a certain degree. Attempts of language police to enforce political correctness are widely resented. It is compared to affirmative action, another sound idea that got out of hand. The language quirks as well as the clothes of teenagers are adopted by adults, and in America *adult language* is synonymous with obscene language.

Overall, American speech has begun to reflect not only the youth culture's power but also the presence of many languages here beside English. Plus (that's *also*) there is increasing informality. Many people no longer feel not only do they have to wear black to funerals, or even attend funerals, which they say depress them. T-shirts, once underwear, are seen all over and in fact, with writing on them, have become a special American method of communication. There is less need for dress-up clothes or extra careful or fancy language, so that American is becoming slangier, more *parole* even in the *langue*, less strictly grammatical, and more vulgar in all senses of the word, in writing as well as in daily speech. Great precision we call lapidary and we distrust it. Rhetoric=lies, so we say. "It is I" sounds prissy.

### **Spoken Language Tends to Defy Rules**

A domineering nation such as France can attempt to control what is officially published but no nation can make everyone chat alike. There are careful speakers and careless ones. There are illiterates even in nations where huge amounts are spent on education and ever more people who speak the language with foreign accents and constructions derived from their mother tongues or family backgrounds. The way the nation speaks is not the same way that the nation writes. David Crystal in his *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (p.52) conveniently summarizes for us the factors in spoken language that militate against standards. Are we to hope for a standard written English despite the way that all speakers of all varieties of English treat the language in the international marketplace of cultures every day? Crystal is worth quoting with some abridgment on the very geolinguistic topic of, language in action, the language as daily spoken:

- The language is often inexplicit, because the participants [in dialogue] can rely on context.....
- There is no careful thematic planning governing the way a conversation proceeds...changes in subject matter....in multicultural contexts switching between dialects or languages....
- Speech is usually quite rapid, with many of the sounds of careful pronunciation being omitted or altered in the interests of preserving naturalness and fluency....

- The clear-cut sentence patterns known from the written language are often missing...requiring the application of different grammatical rules from those found in good writing....
- The vocabulary of everyday speech tends to be informal and domestic, limited and inexplicit....
- There is not a great deal of usage variation on the part of individual speakers, often involving the unconscious use of deviant or non-standard forms....

### **Pedants and People**

Pedants. Aren't those men who fool with little boys, many Americans may ask. People who want to correct us? Prigs are now pigs. The whole world has tried to correct us on certain American attitudes and actions and we have stood up against all such interference. We interfere elsewhere; no one should interfere with us. Tell us how to speak? We know how to speak, and because we are Americans what we speak *is* American. Sure, someone might try to lay down a formal written standard but one can never standardize the essential language, everyday speech, which in the long run makes written language what it is for common people and not what the grammarians think it ought to be. Our language is not as subtle as ancient Greek with its three different words, with three different concepts involved, for what we call *time*. If anyone insisted on attempting to mandate correct language one would also have to teach people correct thinking and then instruct them to speak as they write, and that in a world where teachers of communication tell students to write as they speak and favor self-expression over rigid conformity.

By the way, if one teaches language one will have encountered the problem that arises from the actual everyday speech of students, which they consider perfectly OK and unnecessary to replace, and also from the fact that students have never had a course of logic in their lives, which makes it difficult to reason with them about any necessity for precision of thought or expression. They also seem to be in trouble with what Sartre calls "the illusion of causality". Students seem quite content with their limitations and like low language. My students feared Freshman English as arbitrary, dictatorial, extra credits to pay for, a hard course in place of a more useful or, because they were career minded, taking effort that might be better expended on something more related to making money. It was only when I convinced them that they did not have to give up the dialect they spoke, which they found familiar and adequate, but could add to their advantage a formal English for formal use, that they conceded that that might be a good idea. When I told them speaking and writing better might get them better jobs, then they responded favorably. But 10 themes per student in a class of 25 to be written, corrected, and revised in 15 weeks was hard on teacher and students. I was not an adjunct; I had electives and graduate courses to give as well.

They were afraid that their Freshman English would keep them on campus to the detriment of their day job and deathly afraid of losing their identity if they acquired a strange new dialect. They did not care if their ordinary speech was widely accepted; they had not thought of moving to some other part of the country or very far from their social level, which all of them defined as middle-class even if they were poor. They cherished inalienable rights to be themselves and be praised for that. Activists may wish to assert personal rights and privileges and seek advantages but they and many others resent the likes of language correctness and political correctness and indeed any limitations on their expressing themselves, from bad language to good taste rules. Boyz and grrrls may fool with spelling to signal transgression or

simple individuality. The elite may adopt low language on occasion to be cool. The ignorant struggle with *caret*, *carrot*, and *karat* and often spell phonetically because they do not read much, hardly ever in dictionaries. But Americans, old and young, rich and poor, educated and untaught, all seem to resent deeply anyone tinkering with their language because they are more or less aware that those who would make you speak differently would make you think differently. Tell me how to think? Change me in college? How dare you even try!

Those who object that there is too much low language or departure from logic—"I could care less" means the same thing as "I could not care less," as you have too often been told—are often regarded as language fascists, the kind of people who want to lord it over you, the kind who want to rule from the heights of a pile of books. We anti-authoritarian. Americans reject the kind of people who seem unaware that much of what we express is in sentence fragments and is not logical but psychological. Get it? We are getting away as a culture from formality. We say it is restrictive, old-fashioned, undemocratic, unnecessary, and intolerable to free spirits like us. All hail the new generation that reads in Jennifer Egan's new novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* a sentence like: "if thr r childrn thr must b a fUtr, rt?" All hail the cultural diversity that has produced s dialect for rappers, another for Kid Komunikators with little machines in their mitts. We are invited to accept a winespeak and a WallStspeak, etc. Every stratum of society and every profession and every business and every clique has its own speech. Scholars, especially in the soft sciences and literary criticism, by this means try to exclude outsiders. They wind up talking to themselves. You know what we call people who talk to themselves.

### **Our Attitudes toward Language**

Americans distrust articulateness. We call demagoguery eloquence. Politicians seldom or never write their own speeches although Reagan was The Great Communicator and Obama is said to be a great orator. I think most people in that high office in our lifetimes deserve the epithet that some opponent gave President Reagan, The Acting President. They are reading a script. There are rules about its style and, if any, content. Politicians like advertisers deal in slogans ("Yes We Can"). Those are the most obviously effective of speechwriter creations. "Staying on message," preferably vague, so one can turn on a dime if the campaign demands it, is the principal goal, because obfuscation is the safest way not to lose single-issue partisan voters. The most inventive of American wordsmiths these days are the largely ungrammatical and foul-mouthed rappers. They represent not only one rift in our divided society but also an interesting if disturbing aspect of US political speech. All American speech is political speech to some degree. Even the American tradition of pulpit oratory has shifted from religious dogma to the social and political issues. It is sad that we are not as good at politics as we are at technology.

Most elementary and secondary school students are not learning American rhetoric or grammatical rules at grade level. Recent tightening of standards for English and mathematics has shown up the outrageous inflation of K-12 grades. In New York City one school that boasted 81 percent of students were working at grade level has had to reduce its estimate to the more accurate 18 percent. With high schools failing, college education has to teach make-up English. Its faculty did not get their doctoral degrees in that or for that and so are both incompetent and indignant. The college faculty then does Remedial so poorly that a shocking number of college graduates cannot handle the subjunctive, do not know where to place words such as *only* in a sentence, and may not be able to distinguish between *its* and *it's*.

Now that three females attain the bachelor's degree for every two males who do, women, who are said to have more talent for language learning than men, may possibly begin to make a

change in this country where men consider precise language prissy and careless speech and vulgarity macho. But I do not expect that, because US women are become more like US men. Even their forenames say so. There is also abroad in our body politic the desire that every single American get a college degree. That if it is ever really tried it will only bring colleges down to the level of the least apt of all students. It will turn out as badly as the well-meaning but stupid idea that every American family ought to buy a house (called a home). Some people are not mentally equipped for college just as many are not well off enough to buy a house and not useful enough to earn the money to do so.

We definitely have problems and not only with women who have a new aggressiveness and actually interrupt *us* for a change. Women are changing our language and even what masculinity means. We also have problems with foreigners who cannot manage English here. We need to improve American literacy and American education at all levels. We need to do something about the language for sure but we do not want a standardizing academy. All our language planning has to adapt to that fact.

My recent book *Language in Action* explains how I managed to teach freshpersons (a new coinage) Freshman English when they believed they already could speak what they think of as regular English. (It is regular only for who and where they are.) I taught not to diss their spoken and written English but asked them to regard Freshman English as a second language, a formal suit or dress they could don instead of jeans when occasionally necessary, as for college papers and hiring and working appearances. I taught them enough basic logic so that they could discuss and compose logically. I alerted them to certain useful techniques of writing a simple essay. I showed them how to avoid enough common errors so as to be able to pass muster with most of those who would demand "correct" English from them at work. I prepared them to communicate in a manner not exceptional but passable, unexceptionable. That is all they needed. They were in college not to become articulate humanists but to be trained for jobs. A few wanted to be creative writers (as if all writing were not creative) but those I told had little chance of becoming rich and famous but if they could not be dissuaded then I suggested they quit school, get some kind of job to support themselves, and try to collect some experience which they could mine for subject matter. Surely that was better than taking classes in creative writing from novelists whose novels if and when published sold so few copies that the writers had to teach for a living.

My students are more fully described in my book but I am not so vain as to imagine readers here will have read it or go and read it, so I repeat some of what I previously published, for you. Those students certainly did not master perfectly correct and fluent, elegant American English but they don't need to. They were going to be the doctors and lawyers and other professionals and the so-called professional realtors and plumbers and salesmen and managers and so on of the future. All such can and likely will retain the dialect with which they got to college. From me they learned not to abandon old ways but to add another string to their bows, not to replace the language they commonly spoke at home and with friends but to be capable of eliminating in formal writing the errors or supposed errors (splitting infinitives, ending with prepositions, etc.) that might be held against them. They were warned that ours is a highly competitive society. They were advised that in the battle they ought not to have to yield any advantage when it comes to language. They learned to be satisfied with good enough, whatever improvement could be made at college pace and during the average 6 years, rather than the traditional 4, they would be in college. They worked pretty hard in college and many of them worked many hours a week outside of college, needing the money. They did rather well considering that they arrived not well educated in high school and actually only partly

constructed, you know, for they were young and science tells us that the human brain is not complete until the age of 21.

My students learned to adapt to the expectations of those who judge them on supposedly superficial matters of language. I told them college could assist them to adapt to the real world, the world of work. In the years when I was teaching jobs actually awaited them on graduation.

### **Adaptability**

One of the problems of English, British or American, is that, with the exception of Basic English, which has not caught on as much as was expected of a usefully simplified international form of communication, is the warp speed of language warp, mostly effected by addition. Both Englishes are inveterate and ingenious borrowers of vocabulary from other languages. Cognates may make it somewhat easier for foreigners to pick up British and American English, so lack of rules for purity actually contributes to wider adoption.

When British and, increasingly, American English is adopted in foreign countries their own proliferation of regional and social dialects not only can cause difficulties and changes but the nature of the native languages also impinge. Thus we have, for instance, Singlish in Singapore and many other such hybrids elsewhere. There are at least as many varieties of both British and American English outside those countries as there are dialects, regional and social, within those countries. This goes beyond, of course, the pronunciation differences to be heard in (say) English in Canada or India.

In India there are many schools now training speakers of American and British varieties to be able to cope with the needs of international telephone communications for business. “Your Friendly Delta Airlines reservation agent,” says Donald S. McAlvany in his doomsday *Intelligence Advisor* for July 2010 “is in Pune, India.” If you have a sharp ear for pronunciation you still usually recognize that someone taking a commercial order on the telephone is perhaps speaking not from Boston but from places as distant as The Philippines or farther away. For these telephone personnel, some kind of standard American is required because they want to sound as authentically non-foreign as possible. In very precise English is usually the dead giveaway of a foreigner such as the critic John Simon. He sounds too cultivated to be a native—I do not mean Native—American. Americans regard perfection as artificial, stilted, and a bit sinister. Americans believe anything new is better. We may possibly abandon this trait if and when we become aware that the new is not going to be nearly as nice for us as things used to be. Meanwhile we like novelty even as we fear that changes may be for the worse.

### **New Englishes**

There is progress in developing an international commercial English. There are likewise varieties of English invented to accommodate situations in which workmen natively speaking a variety of languages have to communicate in the shared tongue of English, with a PetroEnglish for the petroleum business, an AirBus English for the aircraft industry, etc. The European Union honors a number of languages. It does not, like a single nation in which several languages or many languages are spoken, designate one language as official. If it did that select language would come to be seen as better than all the others. National face would be lost. The constituent members of the union accept a Euro coin with a single design on one side and designs for the various member countries on the other side but they are not willing to give up as much sovereignty, as they see it, as to accept one euro design or one language for all. Their union is not

a language union. So it must spend a huge amount of time and money in translating from one language to another directly or (as with Maltese) from one bridge language to another and then into the target language. Business, putting efficiency over all, is ready to carpenter a useful if limited English for the work site. We would love to have one single International English for global business. But there is none, nothing universally accepted. That there could be one and that anyone could learn it those voices from India on the telephone make obvious.

There is a sort of governmental EuroEnglish. It came into being so that EU members could converse in a shared if neutral practical tongue, in the absence of political agreement on one single language that national pride and other factors has resisted. In the EU view, German for all is totally impossible despite Germany's key position in the organization. Any variety of English, British or American, to the EU reeks of imperialism. The French are especially afraid that speaking British or more likely American will cause people to have the mindset of that language. Some readers here will recall my saying that before. They fear the Americanization of the French *mentalité*. Still there is a kind of Brussels English/American. Right now the Belgians may be seeking some kind of rapprochement because they are threatened with the breakup of the nation along linguistic lines. Maybe a French-speaking country and a Flemish-speaking country—and why not give the Dutch-speaking part, which is smaller, to Holland? Belgians have tried to be pragmatic and find ways of the Dutch and Flemish speakers getting along. The Belgians run trains on which some coach has a teacher of French for the Flemish speakers or a teacher of Flemish to the French speakers. Some foreign universities sold a big problem by the fact that they teach in English.

In The Netherlands, people speak a lot of English. You will not hear much German there. In Germany people often can speak British or American and they will resort to such a thing if a Berliner and a Bavarian do not want the problems and embarrassment of dealing with two dialects of their native language. A Pole may speak with a Greek in a kind of American. A French person usually will not use American even if (s)he can. As an air force officer attending a NATO course, I experienced everyone present speaking English, except the French. Outside of meetings the French might speak English or American to the rest of us. The meeting room was equipped with simultaneous translation English/French and French/English but not Danish, etc. An Englishman actually complimented a Dane on his eloquent British and the Dane jokingly replied, "You have to remember that Britain was once a Danish colony". Nationalism is always an important factor. We can expect it to grow in importance this century. I happen to believe it is the greatest threat to world peace that we have to face.

The Japanese and Chinese learn English, but English speakers seldom learn Asian languages, considering them not only too difficult but that monolingualism in English is all that the world requires. The American of Japanese and Chinese has its own characteristics, inevitably. Seldom does anyone learn to speak a foreign language with faultless in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. There is also the question of what variety of the foreign language to attempt to command. Does one need it for formal diplomacy, for commercial or legal business, for teaching or social purposes, for tourism, or what? Some business is conducted in English, such as aviation, just as some business is conducted in US dollars (oil). Any such thing benefits from an international standard, but naturally the dollar, for instance, could be replaced by another currency or a basket of currencies. Any international language could, with difficulty, be replaced by a single other language or by a basket of languages. People would have to be taught.

Finally on the subject of teaching, consider corporations. US politics is run by corporations. They finance our elections and they have a whole team of lobbyists for each and

every member of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Corporations essentially and sometimes literally write our laws. They control higher education. They decide what scientific research will be funded. They have caused almost all our colleges and universities to be conducted not only as businesses but for business. College education is largely education for employment in business. The student of Sanskrit is looking forward to being paid as a professor of Sanskrit.

Corporations for their own national and international interests need to see that the work force is capable in the national language and useful foreign languages. Even some US executives are learning Arabic, Chinese, and other languages now and at least as well as the military is doing for national defense and overseas offense in establishments in California and Washington DC, etc. It is more than worrying about translation. It is about being able, literally, to speak the other person's language. You are not a master of a foreign language until you stop the habit of thinking in English and translating it into the foreign language; you must think in the foreign language. If you cannot manage the foreign language you need translators. Most of us to some degree have to decode everything we hear or read even in our own language. How to render "It don' make me no never mind" or "whatever" in any other language is really a problem. A great deal can never be completely translated. We approximate.

### Getting It Across

In the absence of sufficient departure from monolingualism, perhaps many translation problems will be solved by hand-held devices, eventually working better than the translation programs now in our computers. They usually do a passable job. They are not as clumsy as the fabled two characters of Chinese that mean *invisible* and *insane* that are said to be the wrong Mandarin translation of "out of sight, out of mind".

Programming well requires truly exceptional input from teams of unusually talented experts in what would ideally be, but are not, standard languages. Handling new, colloquial, idiomatic or vague or deeply culturally imbedded words throws up difficult and sometimes insuperable barriers. There would have to be carefully governed updates of computer systems all the time. *Ironic* does not always mean what it used to mean and users may differ in intent in using it. Translation would also necessitate some regularity in the same way that computers have introduced separate British English and American English grammar, syntax, and spell checks, none of them perfect. What the literary critics like to call the richness of ambiguity would have to be faced, just as the computer now tells us that this or that stylistic flourish or slangy expression is wrong or should we say ill-advised. The subtly altering emotional touches and resonances of words and ways of putting them would have to be taken into account, a stupendous undertaking for understanding.

At the moment computers try to keep thing regular but have accepted the regularly irregular spelling of British and American (an *s* in *island*, and an *o* in *people*) and the British are allowed *clew*, *kerb*, and *tyre*. What the computer cannot tolerate are Mark Twain's high flights of dialect and James Joyce's and Samuel Beckett's wild departures from what the critic High Kenner has called the "idiot consistency" of plain old traditional narrative or even the styles of David Eggers and other realistic modern writers. Computer analysis is stymied by the word choice and word order in a great deal of poetry. As for precision and clarity, there is an arty cult, you may know, that echoes a line in a Goddard film in which a character says, "If you understand what I am saying perhaps I did not make myself clear".

There are obscure puns in modern literature as well as surreptitious visual puns in modern films and surreal flight of fancy and there is the stream of consciousness writing and the works of Gertrude Stein and Joycean self-indulgent play that may demand far too much time and effort from readers, not to mention poetry's addiction to weird syntax and bizarre reference. As a satiric song once said of T. S. Eliot

You'll find when you are reading T. S. Eliot's tome  
It takes a heap of references to make a pome.

The rules of good prose (clear, concise, concrete) do not seem to apply to modern poetry, so personal, usually so obscure. There are proverbs of the folk that cannot be literally translated; one must find a more English way of rendering the Russian "seeing a bear behind every bush". "Make it new" has taken on a whole new significance. One is never taking something solid from one standard language to another standard language. One cannot standardize poetic language, and Wordsworth's love of "language such as men do use" is not very popular in verse, free verse, or prose passed off as verse, one of the commonest forms of artistic or would-be artistic communication these days, any more than our hip-hop and rap are easily taken over into other languages, for there are novel ways used to avoid being careful to use proper grammar or real rhymes as opposed to half rhymes or mispronunciations. Also, if some dictator were to make all fooling around with some standardized language a punishable offense we should never have the likes of a noun becoming a useful verb, like *impact*. That's creative. Though some purists deplore that use of *impact* noun  $\Leftrightarrow$  verb is at least as old as Shakespeare, who did it a lot. He also coined several thousand brand new words, many of them with the prefix *un-*. How about *un-uning* (restoring to the positive) or *nabu*, my original inventions at this moment for New And Bloody Useful. You saw them here first!

Insofar as creative writing always likes to delve into new coinages and adventurous constructions it would be ill served by any standardizing. Literature which "makes it new" is fundamentally never completely translatable, not from language to language or even from era to era in the same language. But even ordinary conversation may involve what Eliot called "not what I meant at all". Today Americans say that they "send a signal" rather than using the verb *communicate* and this may possibly hint at some appreciation on their part of the unlikelihood of always getting a message across, to use a common teenager word, *totally*. We are waving, not drowning in intelligibility. We make a stab at conveying our ideas and emotions. You see what I mean? We may be constrained by subtle lurking rules but we are striking out for newness. By *striking out* I am making no reference at all to baseball.

Linguists to command full information transfer would have to know a great deal more about the languages and cultures in which they specialize, as well as more about fundamentals of all language, before they could reliably tackle all this translation. So far they have not solved the problem of spelling English which as early as the mid-16th century John Hart realized made learning to write the language unnecessarily difficult. Much later Thorsten Veblen put his finger on the way that spelling could be taken as a way to distinguish the privileged from the underprivileged. Good spelling is a mark of class because its difficulty means that some people have had more leisure to learn the arbitrary. Correct spelling is a mark of conspicuous consumption by the leisure class. The other faults of American were listed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by James Fenimore Cooper, who was not without the same vices of the autodidact: "an ambition of effect, a want of simplicity, and a turgid abuse of terms". Today, even with compulsory public education, to street talk there has been added a nasty penchant for the ridiculously newfangled and the snobbish use of the lowest speech for amusement and color. We have to clean up more

than American spelling and pronunciation and speak and write our own language far less carelessly before we try to peddle it on the worldwide market. We need to make it more accurately translatable, too, insofar as we can.

### Fixing Things

The problem goes beyond the difficulty that spelling poses to anyone who would learn English. It goes beyond the need to understand the strict rules of grammar and syntax, which nonetheless leave great opportunities for almost infinite creativity. We must appreciate the need to avoid *utilize* in place of *use* and see that to translate French *demande* as “ask” and not “demand” (which has caused uproars over treaties). On top of all that there are cultural constraints in a given society regarding who can be addressed and how and what you are not permitted to say and there are facts about what concepts exist or do not exist in that language, what is appropriate at various levels of society and in various locales and circumstances.

To communicate to Chinese speakers one might have to make the computer device present written characters which they then could *read* into one or more of their hundreds of dialects or languages, translating on their own from picture to sound. In fact translating into written text rather than speech would always be more reliable than a machine pronouncing the words in a dialect different from the one the person receiving the information actually speaks. Mechanical input would also have to cope with the likes of this sentence in a variety of American “Ah be mos preshutif efeen yuh wud shuh uh, mofo”. I can manage some French and Spanish but I have no idea how to get the essence of that over into either of those two languages and I do not believe that if by some miracle I could perfectly manage Japanese I could or would even try to do so. In fact, no grownup has much of a chance at *completely* mastering any foreign language. Science is now beginning to realize that a talent for learning language(s) is inborn, like a talent for singing or drawing.

If any language were completely set in stone, which is an impossibility, there would be no social classes distinguishable by the way they speak, and think. True, if any language were completely standardized it could most easily be translated into any other standardized language. That is never to be expected. Translations of all languages and even pidgins or trade languages, sign languages, etc., demand a lot of agreed upon decisions and can have standard (which is to say prestige) varieties. There can be non-standard and sub-standard varieties but these also are not without agreed upon rules. Without rules there can be no expectation of getting anywhere near the conveying of meaning. Even then there are words and ideas that exist in one language and not in another and there are irony, sarcasm, jocularly, and so on. When *meat* in Spanish is only the equivalent of *beef* in English, misunderstanding lurks, just as it does in older English documents in which *meat* meant any kind of food as in “meat and drink” or the word *sweetmeat*. We always must cope with what words intend. Sometimes they have changed their meaning from time to time or place to place. There can even be personal spins put upon them. We do like standard spelling of our chaotic tongue. Misspelling by the proles was a snotty basis of our 19<sup>th</sup> century humor, a cheap shot. That is basically over. But we still make fun of people who “have accents” and psychologists have found we distrust people who do not speak as we do.

Communication is never utterly perfect. Even tone of voice can drastically alter what words say. We are lucky we can get across to each other at all, and the more civilization progresses the more necessity there is that we try that. As we listen to others we constantly translate in our own minds what we hear. As with a play or any other literature, the audience is always part author. As Auden said, the words of the poet—and every word was “once a poem,”

Emerson noted —are altered in “the guts of the living”. Terms demand agreed upon definition. To expatiate on that would run into the reader’s political prejudices. Discussing what is meant by *democracy* courts disagreement. To many or maybe all one may not be able to deliver all one means, let alone be certain of acceptance.

To sum up regarding translation, we may agree that it would be easier if each language had a rigid standard and a set dictionary for itself and for bilingual dictionaries, and that lexicon was easily and regularly updated. That is impossible, and standardization would kill the poets, as was said, the very people who make the best texts and the best translations.

### **Getting Across**

We keep trying to understand how cognition and speech and writing work and how human beings communicate with each other even in the language of words, which is not nearly as subtle as the language of music or the visual arts or as exact a tool as the language of mathematics or other sciences. Science actually has to use arbitrary symbols and a dead language for terms so that once defined terms stay defined. Mathematics can be international. The increasing need to communicate fuzzier facts and opinions and emotional content as well as we can in a number of important world languages is not only going to put quite a number of other smaller and/or weaker languages right out of business. It likewise will make some dab at standardization necessary in each and every language. It will affect language learning and national language policies at all levels. Precisely where this standardization is going to come from and what it will mean to interlanguage and intralanguage communication is very hard to imagine or predict. .

To say that academies can govern this and international communication can be standardized brings up against the fact that we might possibly call a single basic language called English can have more than one national academy, say British and American among others. Arabic currently has three separate academies. A global academy is not possible for any language. The more widespread the language the greater is the problem. The academies that exist today can no more be rigid a national constitution. Even our own constitution demands continual reinterpretation and sometimes drastic changes that we call amendments but which actually may go quite against the clear intentions of the constitution’s first authors, though we ignore that. For example, however better the new law is, the rejection of the Founders’ statement that slaves are to be counted as 3/5ths of a human being and the adoption of full citizenship for them, full rights as free human beings, is not an amendment of the original idea. It is a complete replacement of the Founders’ idea by a better one. It replaces; it does not modify. It is strictly unconstitutional even as it faces today’s more enlightened reality. The Supreme Court, charged with upholding the constitution, has had on occasion to rule unconstitutionally, for political and practical purposes.

### **What Happens Now**

That said about change, what next? Globalization may be more threatened by divergent national interests in a more demanding world but we are all on what Buckminster Fuller called Spaceship Earth and we have to stay here until we ruin it for life as we know it and have to move to some other planet if we can. Mercury is near but impossible. Mars is too dry and too cold. We would have to change its environment before we could live there. No hurry, the death of our sun is far off, but huge alterations take long planning and long work. When we use up Mars, we shall have to move again.

Meanwhile, here on Earth, whatever sovereign nations think they have to do to survive and thrive, commerce and to a certain degree culture will be increasingly global. Political environments will have to be managed. In those circumstances the creation of one or more and more or less standard international prestige languages is only practical. It may be that some sort of compromise of British English and American English, already together the world's second language, can and will be found. That global lingua franca should have a large body of everywhere accepted features with opportunities and directions for locally necessary additions to the basic lexicon as presented in an international dictionary prepared by an international body of experts. The lexicon must be stripped of all obsolete and untranslatable words and omit anything purely regional or narrowly national or deemed non-standard or sub-standard. This is not for understanding the culture's literary heritage but for commerce now.

What all Englishes need more than standardization now is simplification. They are unnecessarily difficult to learn. Fewer rules can mean more speakers, more speakers will mean more variety. Let us not wait for Tennyson's federation of the world, just notice that the whole world would benefit from one easily learned and basic international medium of exchange with everyone ideally also bilingual in a leading national language or even various national languages. Just note that—and realize that the world is never going to have that.

For that purpose a thorough spelling reform of all Englishes would seem to be a good start. But then all speakers would have to pronounce vowels and consonants exactly the same way, which they do not and never will. Spelling would have to be phonetic if the language is easily to be written, but English spelling has obviously failed to keep up with sound changes. The alphabet we have needs serious revision. One economic alphabet would need to be adopted for the international language while national languages could and probably would retain their historic alphabets. In the international spoken and written language the terms of science and humanities would need to be standardized or additional specialized dictionaries created. A basic, easily learned language, everywhere taught, and taught by far better teachers and methods than we have today, would be nice to have.

Such a standard international language could even be the language of global higher education, most news broadcasting and entertainment, the internet and other computer technology with which every child ideally ought to be conversant. Once Latin united the learned of the west, even though those who could use it were comparatively few. Non-alphabetic written Chinese serves a large number of different spoken languages. Should a global language be non-alphabetic? A global language would be a boon to all mankind, as in fact would be universal health care and opportunities for every child to receive as much education as the child could assimilate and employ. That seems Pollyanna. The use of *Pollyanna* suggests a need for a shared body of literary knowledge. Universal language would remain ideal but unlikely if an hardly to be expected single world government were to exist. Hope, as we in the US have recently learned, is neither a plan nor a protection. Ideal we Americans consider the opposite of real.

Really, many high ideals simply put do not fit with the facts. Take human rights, which many of us believe ought to involve the freedom and the dignity of the individual and the protection of heritage and of languages and cultures which embody them. I have before this expressed the candid opinion that, quite unfortunately, no amount of good intentioned passing of declarations of human rights can guarantee that sovereign nations will comply with any international dictates they do not like. Each sovereign nation will always operate as its traditions and perceived current best interests prompt. Sovereign nations grant or deny privileges rather than inalienable rights to the citizens under laws the nation determines. Other states may cavil and may even set good examples and proclaim universal entitlements but other states are not

likely to always or even often to persuade. Schools do not effectively teach us to argue. Different strokes for different folks make any one-world plan iffy.

The fate of all languages and cultures is in the hands of a wide variety of societies. Any international proclamations are faced with sovereign powers of nations and their ingrained practices and prejudices. Confronted with that, any movement for a global language, however ideal, must bow to the choices of various nations. We have never been able even to talk them out of going out to destroy each other. Most years of your life your nation has been at war with some other nation or nations over some question or other. The stupendous cost to humanity has never produced a rejection of that destructiveness. It has never delivered the much vaunted “peace in our time”. There is no peace in our time. There is not going to be world peace in anybody’s time. There never has been. Those who want peace want it on their own terms. We may well go to war over that. The belligerent will always want war and as C. E. Montague has said, “war hath no fury like a non-combatant”. As fewer of us, relying on mercenary forces to fight for us, are personally involved and see combat on TV rather than in person, wars are more likely than ever before.

### **What Happens Next**

There is a war of languages, too. In the light of that, thus far at least I can see at most only a number of commercially useful Englishes around the globe. I see no effective standardization now in any of the Englishes. There is no single and standard international language, even if America attempts the cultural outreach that produced the beneficent effects of the British Council. Remember that? That group even while it was producing huge benefits to foreign nations, as well as advancing its primary objective of strengthening the overseas bastions of British culture, was accused of cultural imperialism (which was true) and even international espionage (which was not). The French investment in *francophonie* has been about as successful but also is accused of colonialism or cultural imperialism. Nationalism causes recipient nations to fear domination by foreigners quite as much if not more than feeling gratitude for assistance. The kind of assistance a nation wants is always basically in line with the national ambitions and the national culture. There can be no standardization of those. Nations can be rented, as it were, but in the end they cannot be bought. They resist language hegemony being thrust upon them. Even the most tyrannical power would have only a knife at a gunfight. It might censor the press and the internet, bug telephones, and open mail but it cannot write the rules of daily speech, not even for social harmony and the national interest. We say we are occupying Iraq and Afghanistan for their own good but those nations are well aware we are there in our own interest. They will eventually turn on us.

St. Vincent de Paul was aware that when you help the poor you must beg their pardon, and cannot expect always the gratitude to which you might feel entitled. Even the good he suggested we all do for others was fundamentally self-serving; it was to save our own souls. Stop and think of the extent to which altruism is self-serving.

Self-interested nationalism, which George Orwell recognized as merely “power hunger tempered by self-deception,” whatever you think of globalism, is actually on the rise. Expect some nations to break up along ethnic and language lines. Look for some alliances to collapse under military or financial setbacks. In the future, regionalism and ethnic dissension and divisive religion, currently gaining ground, will be more pronounced. One World is far off. It might be created only by an attack from outer space, if then. We are all connected in terms of the environment and trade, which is largely supranational, but we still are the same old contentious

human beings, striving for survival and advantage, that we always have been. Moreover, under duress we are becoming less altruistic and perhaps even less aware of the necessity for our own long-range best interests as a planet. The failure of communism, which at least in theory was to make life better for all, has made the world more complex. Countries in a zero sum game are more competitive than when there were, to some minds, only two great opponents, Them and Us.

Even then there was the Third World, and now there is more diversity and competition than ever for prominence and progress. To emerging nations there are some nations that are in decline and some we say have already failed. Some say that the concept of a level playing field should make us optimistic about world affairs but games can end in a loss or a tie and maybe a rematch. We speak of the arena of international politics, but *arena* comes from the Latin for the sand which sopped up the blood of gladiatorial violence, as I too often point out. We no longer speak of a War to End War. We are talking of the Next War even as we struggle to get out of two current wars which are not going at all well but, presumably, will not deter us or others from future combats. Meanwhile, we worry about our own overseas conflicts and what we used to call a War on Terror at home. That, in fact, is in its earliest stages; and so far that has been financially debilitating but not devastating. Someone has said the US as whole is not at war in Afghanistan and Iraq but “at the mall”. Things could get much worse.

Other nations we hardly think about are torn by wars and genocide and tribal conflicts, fights over scarce resources, and the death throes of failing regimes. This promises to worsen soon. Conflicting national interests produce more and more conflicts all the time. The whole thing seems to be speeding up every day. We can hardly follow what is happening. We find ourselves confused and despondent, maybe rather desperate. Out of that, war usually comes for us. It has done so for all the 200,000 years since *Homo sapiens*, unfortunately not always wise, climbed down from a tree in Africa. Look at Africa now. Look at what the struggle for needed oil has produced. Consider what the struggle for scarce food and water will mean when those problems get really bad. In the conflicts do not expect language to solve all problems.

In language difference there is danger. One crisis for us is inherent in the very nature of capitalism just as other trials are inherent in the final instability of tyranny and in fact of democracy, which Tocqueville long ago predicted would in America end with the poor majority voting to ruin the rich. Divisiveness between different forms of government and between haves and have nots is always perilous. Destruction always disrupts. As financial crises and incredibly expensive natural disasters strike we are seeing more and more individuals and states turning against those responsible for the crises, those who blithely acted irresponsibly. We are blaming those who have oppressed minorities. We are blaming those who have thrown away money on minorities for political gain. We are running out of cash to pay for Band-Aid solutions. We are becoming fed up with the many who have deliberately or ignorantly taken huge risks. We accuse them of assuming debts which they knew they could never pay. The famous American Dream of home ownership has produced a financial nightmare. It was a huge political mistake. It has had serious political fallout, and it has hardened party differences so that political paralysis threatens and political language grows more adversarial. The president calls debating in Congress “bickering” and opponents” the party of no”.

The gap between the well off and the needy has widened. The sympathy for the underdog has eroded. That is so un-American we must stop and cite an example. Let us choose chaotic New Orleans as a single example of a sad story with which we are getting all too ungenerous about misfortune. Look closely at the language. *Misfortune* used to characterize the situation in New Orleans suggests bad luck when the fact is that there was bad planning and a

host of indefensible actions in local government, national government, and industry. BP, a British company of which US pension schemes and others here own half the shares, had an accident with a deep-water oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, as the world knows. That happened after our regulators accused it of 760 different faults and gave it unwarranted waivers. All other drillers in the gulf also had reported faults but nowhere near as many as that. The oil industry was never properly regulated. Many like BP received dangerous government giveaways and industry-favorable treatment from the Department of the Interior. The company and the government share responsibilities but BP will have to pay all damages. It will recoup them if it can. It will sue its partners and insurers and everyone possible will sue them. No responsible government bureaucrats will be fired or jailed. There so far has been only a token reshuffling, for business purposes, at BP. Lawyers are becoming very wealthy. The US taxpayers, pension plans, college endowments, etc., will bear much of the burden. BP will go on; this is just another phase in the history of BP, formerly British Petroleum, originally (brace yourself) Anglo-Iranian Petroleum. As soon as the public will bear it there will be further drilling in the Gulf. Later there will be more catastrophes. In business there is no profit without risk, so risks will be taken.

Accidents happen, through the failure of technology or human error. The president has promised all steps will be taken so that “it will never happen again”. That is a ridiculous and dishonest guarantee. Danger is always there. Danger to New Orleans also lurks because of siting a tourist destination city below sea level in a known hurricane zone and foolish decisions to build an economy and running its government like one of the casinos of what has cruelly been called the Redneck Riviera. Hewing to the Mardi Gras line, something for nothing, “throw me something, Mister!” Gulf states have supported both fishing and oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and seen no threat. Any shallow- or deep-drilling has its perils. Rigs can and may accidentally fail. Even with no drilling at all the arrival at ports of oil tankers means that inevitably, eventually if not frequently, there will be potentially catastrophic oil spills.

Stay with NOLA and what for the moment may seem like a departure from the subject of language. With the damage from Hurricane Katrina still evident, clearly New Orleans is an environmental hazard. The damage from the spill from the *Exxon Valdez* in Alaska has not completely disappeared two decades later. A giant oil spill off the west coast of Africa shows damage still apparent five decades after the accident. How much will this sort of thing cost the environment and various governments and oil companies? As for language, how can we solve problems if we do not define and discuss them honestly? What is going to happen to education if and when corporations have to cut back on their investment in Business English and other critical languages as well as science and technology? Already funding of science is declining and humanities are suffering even more. Language is essential but business seldom appreciates its importance financially, socially, or politically.

### **The Expense**

Who will speak about who will pay for everything? The oil companies out of profits? Government, which is to say taxpayers, because government has no money but what it takes from taxpayers? In US, 47 percent of citizens pay no federal taxes. *Mother Jones* says 67 percent of US companies pay no income tax, though they have to spend many millions buying our legislators and as we say “framing the narrative”. Why should a nation’s taxpayers, people ask, foot the bills for those who have been gambling and come to grief? How far can you go soaking the rich? Why should the prudent bail out the imprudent, with regard to mortgages or jobs or anything else? Farther afield, why should prudent Germans bail out corrupt and shortsighted

governments of the imprudent PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain)? We will try, after much debate.

There are possible reasoned answers to such questions, especially if one considers the larger picture and society's and commerce's interrelationships. As the behavior of some people grows ever more irresponsible, however, and the costs grow ever more staggering, the careful are beginning to be ever less sympathetic and ever less charitable. You can sense that in their comments. They are worrying whether they can afford to or morally must do good if it costs a great deal. Billionaires are thinking they ought to chip in more but the average American says she or he had better be tight with money because times are tough. It is the new era of *sauve qui peut*. It is a time of "rethinking" entitlements which are sometimes the right thing to do and often no more than political-bribe handouts to which people have become accustomed. Today most of our 50 states are actually on the verge of bankruptcy, actually worse off financially than Greece. Have we started to talk sensibly about that? Are we talking realistically about our imperium?

All empires rise and fall. Greece and Rome left lasting legacies, materialist Carthage none. Even in decline there are cycles of up and down, good talking points. In 1952 Frederick Lewis Allen in *The Big Change: 1900 - 1950* wrote of the US (p. 227 in my paperback edition 1961 of this once much reprinted, now forgotten, book):

There are those who argue that during the past half century, despite the spread of good living among its people, it has been headed in the Carthaginian direction; that it has been producing a mass culture in which religion and philosophy languish, the arts are smothered by the barbarian demands of mass entertainment; freedom is constricted by the dead weight of mass opinion, and the life of the spirit wanes. There are millions in Europe, for instance, to whom contemporary American culture, as they understand it, is no culture at all; to whom the typical American is a man of money, a crude loud fellow who knows no values but mechanical and commercial ones. And there are Americans aplenty, old and young, who say that achievement in the realm of the mind and spirit has become ominously more difficult in recent years, and that our technological and economic triumphs are barren because they have brought us no inner peace.

Now more than half a century later we are having culture wars and we are in one of the several major economic crises that the US suffers every century. In 2010 and for the future, in the light of these unpleasant realities, it may be that our relationship to the rest of the English-speaking world is so damaged and to the rest of the world is so unattractive that the establishment of English as a standard for global communication, indeed the final fate of our empire, is dire. Time will tell.

To come back closer to our basic topic here, as this approaches its end, in the present climate of opinion, who actually believes that a Standard American can be established? Gore Vidal, in an essay about Louis Auchincloss' novels, novels written very elegantly in elegant educated WASP language. He is not much read. Where would most Americans be able to pick up a command of the best speech of the small WASP minority? Vidal, an elegant and educated writer himself, laments that here in America "to say that one English sentence might be better made than another is to be a snob, a subverter of the democracy, a Know Nothing enemy of the late arrivals to our shores and its difficult language". No, to try to establish any precise and patrician American English is, if nothing else, politically a non-starter. Moreover, if it were

possible it could not be funded. Who would pay for a formal standard language? Not the wealthy WASPs who have it as a precious badge of their historic superiority. They would not wish to give up advantage, especially now that they are under siege by the majority. Not the rest who resent the WASPs even in decline and think them too connected still to Britain and colonialism and most recently what most Americans fear is dangerous European socialism. No, not here and not anywhere else is there any extensive and expensive plan such as setting up language policies for worldwide progress. Nor is there any political will behind a Worldwide English, nor indeed any true believers in a new artificial language, only a small group of enthusiasts for Esperanto and other such inventions. All of those have European language roots and would not fit the emerging continents and the coming masters of the earth who look as if they will be living in Asia.

Would a standard international language be good for the world, west and east, north and south, supplementing and not replacing other languages? Indubitably. But who will finance that? China, India, or the US, the world's largest debtor nation? Some other nation or group? If anything did eventuate because of the action of some other nation than the hard-pressed US or the UK do you imagine that choice would be English? I do not think so. If the world ever came to adopt universal democracy, and seems scant likelihood of that, whatever Americans might say they wish, surely the majority would rule and however numerous the speakers of various Englishes were the global standard would be dictated by the speakers of the language that form the biggest part of the world's population. It could not be like a United Nations set up by some strong national powers that had no intention of giving away what they considered their right to veto what the vast majority of the members of the organization wanted. A world language even if there were one would not be American designed, owned and operated. Few Americans have ever realized that.

## Conclusion

We Americans habitually expect to pay for what we get and sometimes are even ready to pay for what we do not get, such as first-rate universal education. When it comes to charity, Americans can be generous but we do not like being told to shell out. If tax deductions for charity have to disappear so that tax revenues can rise to help pay our expenses shall we still be generous? As for paying our debts or establishing a useful standard, we hate to be told to shape up.

We resist regulation. Rudolph Guilian when mayor of New York City was called a fascist because he tried to enforce the law forbidding people for their own good not to cross in the middle of the block. We won't enforce or eliminate national laws on the books concerning marijuana and illegal immigration and states such as Arizona are taking it upon themselves to deal with immigration policies. Some Americans say law enforcement is punitive. We are famous worldwide as rebels who overthrew British rule and taxation from abroad. That was, as good colonials, insupportable in the light of our historic rights. Establishing Standard American goes against freewheeling America's traditions. Even requiring all citizens to be able to read and write American is widely seen to be oppressive of minorities. The word that silences most reasonable discussion here is *racist*. Moreover, we have already run up more debt than we can handle. Establishing an international language would cost us and the rest of the so-called rich world more than the poor world, and in this impoverished nation of ours, with the highest poverty rate in 50 years, nearly half of our population living below the poverty line, huge sums of money that we do not have. We have already printed more money than is wise. It would be a generous

gesture but it would require many to give much for the good of all. History does not suggest to any thinking person that people will willingly do so.

One cannot even appeal to patriotism or the charity demanded in all three Abrahamic religions or the real values of international goodwill. It would create conflict. I do not think Americans respond well to those appeals or that they now would willingly fight a war like World War II again, a war of necessity, a war of principle. I don't think we could draft young Americans in a cause however admirable that would cost this fairly comfortable if over-extended nation great sacrifice in blood and treasure. Do you? Now America patriotism appears to mean getting back to 18<sup>th</sup>-century values or even older Christian values and telling the government to demand less, not more, of each of us and likewise if possible do a lot more for everyone and a lot cheaper, and of course with no real pain to anyone. .

It is American to end on an upbeat note but who can envision a standard American or a standard international language, excellent as it would be for all the nations of the earth? In our faction fractured, multicultural America undergoing such rapid change. Suddenly there is Katrina, phishing, guitar heroes with air guitars, soccer moms, tea baggers, new words all the time, not to mention an increase every day in the number of Americans who are baffled or careless about *like*, *I* and *me*. There is little possibility of any set and unchanging, one-rule-obeying American language, domestic or exportable. We have rules, but different sets of rules for each cohort and county. We rejoice in the likes of "who dat?" and other deliberate "illiteracies". We like to think ourselves individual, free of imposed Chinese "harmony".

The real and important standardization topic that we do not address is that in social dialects within a language there are basic rules designed to distinguish one such dialect from others. These rules keep the cohorts differentiated. They mark the differentiation of social strata. They separate the classes. They put in their place those guilty of the omission of the pronounced *r* or *t* and other consonants or mangling or confusing of vowels, the people who are (in Nancy Mitford's designations) U or non-U, high or low on the social ladder. In addition to personal quirks we all have regional and social dialects. All of those militate against the possibility of any universal standard. In the case of English for example, they create the situation mentioned by Shaw in *Pygmalion*: whenever anyone speaks English it causes many other people to despise her or him. Language snobbery is what I mean. I speak, as geolinguists far too often do not, of language and class. Unless or until we are all of the same class--don't hold your breath--we cannot have standardization of language. In addition, with low speech used by high-class people for color or humor, etc., and lower-class people aping their so-called betters, clear borders of usage are hard or impossible to draw. As we say now "guess what?": the whole question of standards and standardization is questionable.

So far we do not even have officially what the British called a Received Standard. Today Britain is fractured. It is a nation now far less than traditionally Anglo-Saxon. Britain is usually now not called Great Britain as before. Britain was once generally but now no longer is simply called England. That country is multicultural, not really a United Kingdom because less united as devolution has been forced upon it. The Queen's English is very unlike that of her subjects, not only at home but in Canada and elsewhere. Indeed in Britain we see a hint of the world of the future. So when people say that the British have a Received Standard language already and at the very least the US ought to have one, we really must ask: received by whom? Or, as many Americans say today, by who?

This article is already long. A couple of bibliographical sources will suffice. Any other matters in the text can be researched online. That has changed the whole world of writing and referencing. But you knew that.

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