

“HERE’S THE THING”: HOW AMERICANS TALK NOW

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If you scoff at language study,...how save in terms
of language will you scoff?

--Mario A. Pei

Introduction

The 19th century was the Industrial Age, the age of machines, two of which were the telegraph and the telephone, crucial means of communication consistently improved since prehistoric grunts and jungle drums. The 21st century has seen the blossoming of the information age, and that has featured communications technology that far outshines the periods of coal and steam and even typewriters, of which the manufactured ceased a couple of years ago—gone with most uses of carbon paper and fountain pens and a lot of handwritten letters delivered by a money-losing postal service. Communication is changing in both scope and speed as new machines appear. We no longer really fear the robots taking over as they do in the Czech play *R.U.R.* Losing out to machines has for a long time been no real threat. Here is Wilson (p. 561) on robots (from the Czech for “worker”) developing artificial intelligence and taking over the world as parodied by Samuel Butler in *Erewhon*, which of course means “Nowhere”. Wilson quotes a letter that Butler wrote shortly after the publication of *Erewhon* (1872):

“When I first got hold of the idea I developed it for more fun and because it amused me and I thought would amuse others, but without a particle of serious ...and developed it and introduced it into *Erewhon* with the intention of implying: ‘See how easy it is to be plausible, and what absurd propositions can be defended by a little ingenuity and distortion and departure from strictly scientific methods.’”

In this brief article without such playfulness and distortion I propose to argue that modern media, including wonderful machines, are shaping and will continue to shape human communication, altering language and thought, literature and behavior. It will effect vast changes in the modern world and at a rate we already are beginning to find amazing. Changes that once took generations now occur in a few years, from 1G to 4G on certain devices, you know. Language has always changed but perhaps never as quickly, as radically since the Great Vowel Shift. Languages are perishing every year and all that is not extinct is subject to distortions or new directions. Active languages can now be typed into machines and even conveyed by gestures. Soon there will be no need for such input but simply speech.

Technology is giving a voice to so many, often enabling people to communicate by machine and not face to face. It has increased our frequently wild irresponsibility, not only in the revelation of personal facts that one may in time come to regret but bullying and defaming which one feels one can get away with, arguing freedom of speech. *The Economist* said in 2013:

Although many people think that the anonymity that veils their online rants is absolute, plenty of jurisprudence argues otherwise. If a target of anonymous attacks can make a credible claim of defamation, he or she has some legal right to find out who is doing the defamation—First Amendment notwithstanding.

How We Talk Now, Right?

Here some comments on that subject here without, to use a term from wine snobbery, a “lack of structure”—All popular media with whatever limits both reflect and shape our thoughts and expression. The movies taught us how to pick up girls and kiss and smoke even when they also told us that married couples had to sleep on twin beds and men and women together on a couch or bed had to keep one foot on the floor. Today they are reflecting as well as shaping how we talk. Today smoking in movies looks old-fashioned (because it is) and old TV series on which married women wore aprons and were subservient to their husbands (but recall *Gather Knows Best* and *I Love Lucy*) are politically incorrect. So is a lot of our language. We are less free than we used to be, more under surveillance, but more rebellious, less likely to follow rules of grammar and syntax or anything else. Certain traditional frauds. Our original constitution was a fraud: how if all men are created equal did it allow slavery and if men and women are equal how did it take so long for women to get the vote?

There is a certain amount of fraud in “Yjis is America, so you can freely speak your mind”. You can’t, because you live in a nation with lots of different kinds of toes that you may step on—but never with impunity. Your neighbors are the thought police and the language police. Though we all believe in freedom of speech we Americans often want to restrict it to those who agree with us. Policing language is as common now as when the Victorians referred to a bull as a *gentleman cow* and watched their tongues because *there are ladies present*. Technology has taught us FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and condemned many to be always *in touch* (but less so with *face time*) or in extended communication, maybe only 140 characters.

The language of poetry can no longer, if it ever could, be what Wordsworth said he wanted (words “such as men do speak”). Although realism has long been a major feature of modern American fiction, remember that realism is not reality any more than reality shows on television mirror the truth. Often we don’t want the truth. Jack Nicholson in a movie says we can’t handle the truth. What we want and get is realism, verisimilitude, like truth, not truth itself but action that can pass as real even though the explosions are incredibly frequent. We get not truth but art, which Picasso defined as “a lie about the truth”. (I quote that too often, but then repetition is another obvious marker of modern communication and quoting still survives though increasingly all authority is challenged.) The lie is most evident in the dialogue of drama. For the stage or screen, actors have to wear so-called straight makeup in order to appear that they are not made-up at all. So the much touted realistic dialogue of playwrights such as David Mamet, the American speech that sounds so authentic, is really authorial, deliberately but artfully contrived. It is not the way people actually speak American at all. That might be tedious or too vulgar, etc. The dialogue of *Girls*, written for TV by Mamet’s daughter Zosia, seems to be a *leetle bit* phony, exaggerated report on the babble of the young. But TV is not real. Just realistic.

Here is a young person in an ambitious theater piece called *Life and Times*, a venture into semi-articulate Wagnerian popera (pop opera, dude), first seen in Oklahoma, reviewed by Charles Isherwood (p. C9) when presented to a hip audience in New York’s SoHo: “God, this must be so boring for you!” is one of its lines. Perhaps that ought to start “O my God” (ubiquitous online as OMG).

“So I was—I was pretty—like—serious kid, though. I mean I—I do remember—like—liking everybody, but—and it wasn’t like I was shy....It wasn’t like I was like—but I was just like, ‘eh,’”

Eeeew! That is real sorta close but totally not right on the Now, if you will. For one thing, every sentence fails to begin with "well, y'know". And there are not any “and uh” and “but ah” instances. How off is that? I mean you’re gonna be real be really real, OK?

Not just young people talk somewhat like that. So do the middle-aged. The same issue of the *Times* described a man of 59 as “middle-aged”. In my personal opinion that is not kosher unless the guy is sure to live to 118—but death panels look like likely to me, down the road, you see where I’m coming from or where we’re going to? Words like *middle-aged* have been redefined and so have whole professions that depend on word mongering. For instance, a recent poll revealed that the percentage of the US public that believes that politicians tell the truth has sunk to an unlucky 13. The citizens’ estimate of the worth of Congress is also at historic lows. This is due to bitter partisan campaigning and a politics of “dirty tricks” which goes much farther back than the current administration. Most of all the sad decline of political discourse that has caused legislative paralysis and now Joe Public says “you can tell they are lying because their lips are moving”. What good is participatory democracy if the governed won’t participate—or government if it cannot govern? Debasing language has led to debasing of government. That and the cheap politics and single-issue cliques warring with each other, creating their own jargons, not comprehending or valuing the statements of others.

The most potent group in both Red and Blue States is the young. The extent to which tentative, if not airhead, adolescence continues in US life, with concomitant—excuse the latinity, google it up if you have to—dominates all US speech—well, let’s not *go there*. Rather, consider the other extreme, the easy flow of the syrupy prose associated with grown-up self-pampering in luxury goods, for instance. Unable to afford to purchase a house, residents of slums and semi-slums are buying luxury cars and all sorts of people who have to spend 30 percent of their incomes on apartment or condo living like to treat themselves to expensive coffee or cupcakes or chat in extravagant terms about cigars, wine (as price we like to call *astronomical*), cheese (such as goat & cow’s milk cheese from Upstate NY at \$34 a pound), and so on. You need not be given examples of winespeak and other pretentious talk, worse than mindless old psychobabble or current dishonest political palaver. People pose and lie and *bloviate* in hype and pomposity even as they *do* baby-talk like *veggies* and *bye--bye*. Some of the British do the same; witness *ta* (“thank you”) and *ta-ta* (“goodbye”). The ill-educated of both nations cannot quite manage *should* and *would*, *lay* and *lie*, or make the verb agree with the subject, or pronounce consonants such as *d*, *r*, *t*, etc., likewise mangling vowels. They also may be illogical and also ape the so-called primitive languages of Africa that lack comparative and superlative adjectives and really use the equivalent: *really*, *really really*, and *really really really*. You never do that;? Alright, its not you, it’s I. How about “just between you and I”? Ever hear that?

It is difficult to keep up with all the generational, ethnic, regional and social differences and other changes in America and we are increasingly retreating into niches linguistically and lifewise. Personally, I myself think—this just me, of course—that among the most significant are the inputs of the young, people of color (formerly colored people), gays and lesbians, and women (who speak and write differently from men, you know) who are increasingly like the Kirsten doll, marketed at \$110 as “a pioneer girl of strength and spirit”. Each slice, group, and tribe and *sexual orientation* may lament certain changes as going to hell in a handcart because the traditionally American optimism is fraying at the edges, personally and politically. Domestically incomes have gone down “in real terms” for the last dozen years, politics is infighting at city,

state, and national levels, and our secretary of state recently has had to boast how many miles she has traveled rather than how many diplomatic successes she has had abroad. Our imperium is on the skids and language and empire decline together. (Sorry about that.)
From Friedman (p. A 21) we get

The only reason your currency is being crushed, your savings rapidly eroded by inflation, many of your college graduates unemployed and your global trade being impeded and the risk of war hanging overhead, is because your leaders won't accept a deal...

Of course Friedman is referring to Iran, not the US, but nevertheless.... In the age of rogue states and the war on terror, everyone becomes their own enemy and values sink.

The Decline of American

America has not only an empire in decline but a language in decline. Increasingly humanity online is not communicating in English. Who's responsible, who can say? There is immense irresponsibility evident in American life of late, from lying to obtain mortgages for which one is not qualified to walking away from a house that is under water (worth less than the contract one has signed to pay back, with interest). This relates to many other aspects of US life. Irresponsibility is also evident in our language use. That is a blight on American discourse at least as important as the often irresponsible rhetoric of bitterly partisan political debate in our deeply divided Union and the growing crudeness and sometimes vulgarity and obscenity as well as incivility in American conversation and writing that led to Affirmative Action and word policing and movies and TV that warn of "language," which is sort for "adult language" which to Americans means vulgarity or obscenity. And, oddly, not so much the language of grownups but of teenagers.

Some may praise a new openness and honesty in our language. Others may deplore its increased use of slang, the grammatical errors of the ignorant and the clumsy jargon of the ill-educated, but on the whole American at least is vigorous and colorful and has moved away from the pomposity and love of "two-dollar" words of earlier centuries. Instead of unnecessary polysyllables we today are more like to perpetrate redundancies such as *future planning* and we love *laundry list* where *list* would suffice, as well as *at this particular point in time* instead of *now*. American has always faced the extremes of the downright and the pretentious, the peculiar, the evasive, and the euphemistic. But we generally stick to what poet Marianne Moore called plain American "which cats and dogs can speak". Our poetry grows ever more inscrutable but our daily speech and most of our fiction, drama, cinema, etc., is straightforward if often brash. We may not have the elegance of the French, but we cannot be accused, as someone once accused the French, of being eloquent but with nothing to say. We like to "have our say" and we say it.

Our language has fast change, no national standard and hatred of regulation (Katz & Rose), a vast lexicon, and weird spelling much harder to learn than many other languages. It has nevertheless been adopted, in various forms, as the world's second language. We may never succeed in changing the world to suit our preferences, we may never teach the globe the democracy we profess if not always practice, but we have given it our language if not differentiating between how our male and female citizens speak it differently.

Voices from the Underground

Mass production, mass culture, mass advertising, all are influenced by the desire for the widest acceptance of goods and message, the lowest common denominator. The sales pitch is to an ever more ignorant mass, the buyers of novelty. We have never had and in so patchwork a society as America probably can never expect a standard language or even English Only. Though others may accuse us of mongrelization, we praise diversity. In a distinctly divided society there is no alternative. The old concept of Good English belonged to a less progressive time and even then was “more honored in the breach than the observance”. Early America established regionalism and mass communications connect but do not conquer that. From the time American broke away from its British parent the language has been more various, more colloquial, more vividly slangy, increasingly democratic. As civil rights expanded here so did the language, admitting the speech of the underclass that now says *bad* for *good* and *cool* for what used to be *hot*. It misuses *hopefully*, speaks of three or more alternatives, spells words *boyz* and *grrlz*, pronounces one word it loves “duh-TEAR-ate,” invents verbs like *conversate*, can’t spell because hardly reads, and *could care less*, *irregardless*.

We have cheated the poor of adequate education. Education like income has increased for the few at the top financially and worsened for the Average Joe. That in a nation with universal suffrage might be dangerous in politics if it were not that half of the enfranchised does not bother to vote. We spend more than any other nation per capita on public education and yet the results are deplorable. Millions have got through school by social promotion and dropped out as soon as possible. Once we struggled to give a sound grammar school education to all. Now few schools teach grammar adequately, anyone can get through high school except those who see it as pointless, and there is a movement to guarantee college to everyone whether they can qualify to enter, let alone earn a diploma, or not. *No Child Left Behind*--not even those who can’t make it no matter how hard they try. Many who can’t make it we call *special* and spend extra on, out of pity or charity.

It was not charity but commerce that dictated free public education (or business education at taxpayer expense). In the UK the Elementary Education Act (1871) although it took some years to catch on improved language skills and in the US in the 19th century; dedicated schoolmarms strictly taught the Three R’s (“readin’, ‘ritin’, ‘rithmetic) and better elocution than that phrase in itself might suggest. Today in more *permissive/progressive/pragmatic* times correctness is derogated as *judgmental/ discriminatory/divisive* and correctness as H. G. Well’s uncle says (p. 63) of Latin: “no good to you, of course...except to pass exams with”. So many Americans consider it a constitutional right to be semi-ignorant or speak a low dialect in order to *do your own thing* even as you wear peaked caps backwards or, when that gets *old/tired*, sideways as a racist statement or an outsider’s attempt at *soul*. In the US the Anglo majority is *history* (“over and done with”) and old words such as *majority* and *minority* are to be redefined in a nation where there is no majority, just hostile alliances of minorities and where in some states (California and Texas, for example) so-called minority people are the majority. We have those who have a hard time getting into the best (often private) schools and the Top 10 universities or even into public institutions which once were free and now are beyond the means of the poor. Education is largely funded by local school taxes; if you live in a poor place you get a poor education automatically unless you can be bussed (at too great expense to the education budget). Therefore our cherished goals of equality of unequals and fairness in diversity in some sense means willingness to do without national standards, a whole range of educational opportunities many of which are unacceptable (Affirmative Action and a few other band-aid quota systems, and a confused and confusing mix of marvelously educated and word-class, adequate for business,

semi-literate and illiterate Americans). Basically, education is approaching here the financial divide of the 1 percent and the 99 percent. We have some outstanding universities, many poor colleges, and a preponderance of bad elementary and secondary schools. No wonder Johnny Can't Read and remedial English is taught in colleges, too expensively.

Each cohort has its own values and virtues and successes and failures, dialects and shifting status. Now that the US is the inheritor of the British Empire and is failing as Britain did to be the world's policeman, I often think of Kipling, The Bard of Empire (and its discontents). He wrote of *In the Neolithic Age*:

There are nine an sixty ways of constructing tribal lays
And—every--single—one—of--them—is--right!

Why not adopt that as a guide for the late struggles of the Age of American Imperialism? With all our recent military and diplomatic failures abroad, where increasingly the US is in disfavor, the American language is still much favored around the world. Why “fix it if it ain't broke” as it is, tough and ready but also ready for world use? I say the US struggle with language, indeed our struggle with everything, is “right”. We have a vital if often wildly disorganized society. Mayor Koch of New York City claimed he had to deal with “tribal politics” and he did. So why not try to accept gracefully—or, to gracefully accept, splitting the infinitive and to hell with it!—all the many dialects of the tribes North and South and East and West, young and old and all of different colors and what we used to call “conditions of servitude”? It's messy but it can work. I believe we have to be practical, face the realities, and try to retain hope regarding the potentials. Even if we can keep warring states in the federation without another civil war—750,000 casualties, 150,000 of them unknown soldiers, the result a wound that has not fully healed some 150 years later—and diametrically opposed political platforms and notions (in the US we call them *philosophies*) that are seemingly incompatible, even with incomes incompatible and futures mortgaged and maybe very unattractive, we may *get by*. Let *Get By* be the *new norm*. American is not *A-OK* but it's working even if it is kicking the can or worms down the road. For now, forget about American exceptionalism. How about American *pretty good*? Look at what we have accomplished without racial purity, a national religion, an official word police academy, or closed doors against the hopeful of Kipling's “lesser breeds without the Law”. A microcosm of the whole world the US is better off than most of it.

As Kipling says of “tribal lays” let us continue as redundant American might say “inclusive, not exclusive”. Always recognizing that if dialects differ too much they become foreign languages, and Americans have never been good at foreign languages. But then we argued that we did not have to be anything but monolingual, giving the excuse that British English was enough like our own and that was working globally and that as for other foreigners they could damn well learn our language because we were *the coming thing*.

At home today we have many speakers of foreign languages in our very midst but we seem willing to let them be if they cannot or will not Speak American. The Hyphenated-American of whom we used to complain in *melting-pot* days now boasts hyphens as indicators of cultural variety and enrichment. (S)he is now is not so much discriminated against. Pockets of German speakers, Hebrew speakers, even Chinese and Cambodian speakers live here, even as monolinguals. They are tolerated as are enclaves of Mormons or Mennonites, *Boys Towns* (formerly *gay ghettos*) and singles sets, in fact more or less *gated communities* of all sorts. Still, unless you are a retired successful (in the US that means rich) businessman or an independent *trustifarian* or one of the poor *takers* who are just now taking a beating in the public discourse, you have to face the fact that if you want a job even in a *multiculi* society you must meet the

standards, whatever they are, in language as well as everything else, that those who hire and fire chance to set, mostly personally. Laws can be passed about what you can say or do but can always be got around by clever Americans. From our earliest days we had dissenters and *Philadelphia lawyers*. Getting *away with it* is a national sport. Our language is heavily impacted (*impact* now a verb, and why not?) by our *don't tell me what to do* ways. Live Free or Die! Don't Tread on Me! Don't tell me what I can say! I'm ME! Has any American ever said "I'm I"? Certainly not *moi*! Language and fads and fashions in American humor, using both native and foreign words and dialects, is a subject for some other forum, or series of books, a large one for each and every medium.

But one great truth can be stated in a sentence: The way you speak, seriously or in jest, does *nail* you, one way or another, and everyone likes people who speak their own language and shares their decisions as to what is acceptable or outrageous, appropriate or illegal or vulgar or obscene or politically incorrect or *whatever*. (Slangy *whatever* marks a whole new stage in US thought.) Always communication, however casual, does require getting ideas across. We like to be individuals but we are part of various groups. And not just within groups but between groups there has to be some sort of agreed upon basis, for comprehensibility. We do not welcome disagreement. One major recent change in the US is that we increasingly hate to listen to what we find un-pleasant. The amount of chatter, trick or tweet, interaction, is ever greater. Welcome or offensive, with all the ideas we actually pay attention to, and we talk more than we listen, we must grasp the meaning of the words we encounter. Ideally we pick up on the emotional content and all the references and nuances and *vibes* as well although that is growing ever more difficult as we live more and more *niche* lives and have less and less of shared experiences and core curricula and other cultural touchstones and inheritances. An acceptable American for foreigners to learn is one that can bridge language and cultural lacks and can function as the lingua franca of the globe until the mantle of Top Nation passes. Foreigners may never get all our references to pop culture's icons and arts, all of the words that come into more or less general use from (say) African-Americans and Hispanics and sexual and political deviants and sports and books and films and television and all the rest. Anyone who claims to know American, however, ought to be able to expect to *catch the drift*, get the gist, identify our *power points* and even our attitudes toward what we say and write. They will never understand, if indeed any linguist ever will, why certain words remain in the *ghetto* or *hit the big time*, why we took *tortilla* from Mexico but Spanish gives a quite different meaning to the word, how *out* became a verb and *kick the can down the road* grew so popular, and why *24/7* seems to be as useful worldwide as *OK*. Like God, language works in mysterious ways its wonders to perform. Margaret Fuller said she accepted the universe. Accept language. As is. As with accepting the universe, as someone responded to Ms. Fuller, what else can you do?

I happen to believe that we ourselves can be creative, principally because we have language, and perhaps are put here to improve Creation, to be a little creative ourselves, to correct some of God's mistakes or at least complete some of His plans. You may disagree. That's fine with me. Disagreement, I think, can sharpen our tools of thought. I only wish that modern American in action was more open to contrary opinions, and that we listened more. We certainly are much listened to, elsewhere.

The global popularity of our media and our literature and our worldwide political and financial power combine to make our American language worth perfecting and spreading. For all its complexity and problems, American is of vast importance and practical use in even more than the 122 foreign countries visited by our now retiring (as I write) secretary state during her four years in the post. If she had little success it was not because she could was unable to speak the foreign languages because though translators were required in some instances, a great many of

the foreign leaders with whom she met spoke American. On the horizon is a new factor that will change things: computer devices will translate any major language into any other major language. A handheld device will replace a lingua franca. Already instead of learning a foreign language or stuttering out phrases we find in our little books of (say) modern Greek or Arabic (printed for us in our alphabet, of course) some of us have traveled with *neat* and not very expensive devices that can ask for use (or show a native speaker in his language a written question or remark) where the pen of my aunt or the nearest good restaurant or inexpensive hotel is—in the local lingo. Language programmers will always be needed but the time is coming when the Average Joe or M. Untel and so on will not need to be able to speak any foreign language. The *geeks* will handle everything for us all. That, of course, created a dangerous group of experts who could *do hieroglyphics* in pharonic Egypt or monastic clerks who could read and write while Europe's medieval masses could not, but *hey*—we do try to get attention to what we say even if it is not always clear, *you know what I mean?* Awareness of not getting across adequately is ever more obvious in our speech.

Meanwhile we perform as well as we can in our own language activity and the question to ask, whatever brand of American you speak and at whatever level you command it, family language and in-group chat, social status marker, regional differentiation, professional or other jargon, ethnic or sexual orientation or any other kind of variance, is this: Am I getting the results I deserve or, more quintessentially American, what I want?

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