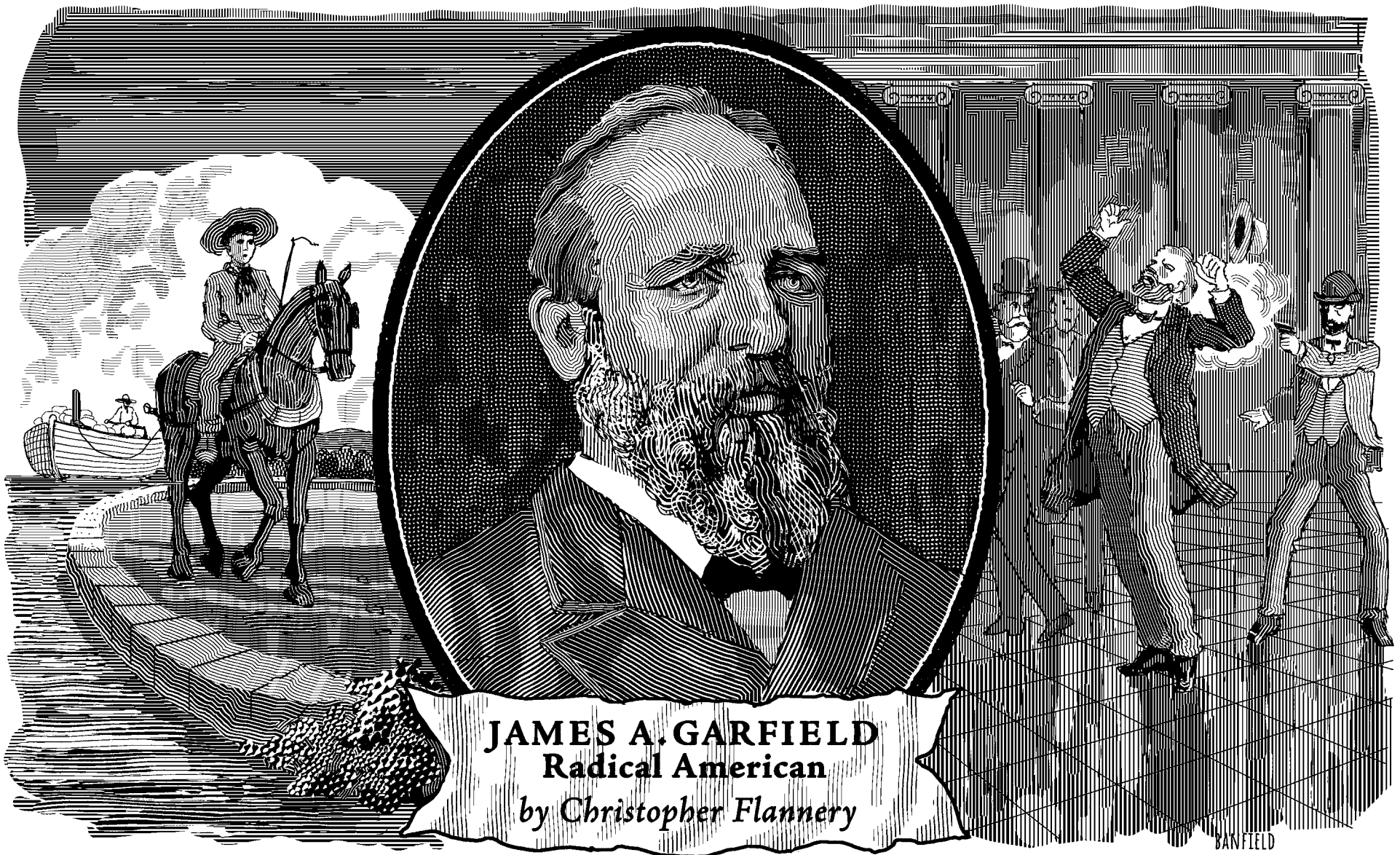


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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

## LINGUA AMERICANA

*The People's Tongue: Americans and the English Language*, edited by Ilan Stavans.  
Restless Books, 512 pages, \$35



Drawing by Frederick Opper, c.1902

LANGUAGE, LIKE A WILD CHILD, REFUSES to stand still. Change is its nature, its lifeblood, its motor force. Change is especially the rule in American English. In *The American Language*, H.L. Mencken assigns this to the American's "impatient disregard of rule and precedent" and "his bold and somewhat grotesque imagination, his contempt for dignified authority, his lack of aesthetic sensitiveness, his extravagant humor." Negative though all these qualities sound, in combination they have made for what may well be the world's liveliest language. Mencken viewed American English, with all its inventions, its colorfulness, yes, even its vulgarity, as the music accompanying the great American circus.

In his introduction to *The People's Tongue*, his impressively rich anthology about the formation of American English, Ilan Stavans notes that "this anthology shows the extent to which the nation's tongue is restless." Stavans includes a ten-page excerpt from Mencken's *The American Language* along with lengthy essays by Dwight Macdonald on the publication of the third edition of *Webster's New Inter-*

*national Dictionary* (1961), Susan Sontag on translation, and David Foster Wallace on the wars over language usage in America. Seventy other items—poems, bits from stand-up comedy routines and television shows, the Gettysburg Address, Walt Whitman on slang, rap song lyrics, et alia—cover various aspects of the subject of the ever-changing American language. Stavans, a Mexican-American and the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Humanities and Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College, includes an essay of his own on "Spanglish."

SO EXPANSIVE A BOOK GIVES ONE LOTS to argue with, nits aplenty to pick. The contribution on the subject of profanity is disappointingly bland. Stavans would have done better here to have reprinted George Carlin's monologue on "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." The two selections of rap lyrics leave out the dreaded n- and c-words, which just about every bit of rap I have ever heard fulsomely contains. I'm less than clear on what a long poem by Adrienne

Rich is doing in the book. Dwight Macdonald's name is misspelled McDonald. A wariness of violating, if not a distinct tendency toward, the politically correct plays throughout.

Then there are the omissions. The most glaring of these is that of the article "Americanisms" in the second edition of H.W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, which appeared in 1965, or 32 years after the death of Fowler, and so was probably written by the self-effacing but no less magisterial Sir Ernest Gowers. The article is among the 200 or so gems in that irreplaceable book, and begins:

It was a favourite theme of Mencken that England, now displaced by the United States as the most powerful and populous English-speaking country, is no longer entitled to pose as arbiter of English usage. "When two-thirds of the people who use a certain language decide to call it a *freight* train instead of a *goods* train, they are 'right'; then the first is correct usage and the second a

dialect." We are still far from admitting this claim, but in fact are showing signs of yielding to it in spite of ourselves. The close association of the two countries in the second world war and the continued presence of members of the U.S. Air Force among us have done much to promote American linguistic infiltration; and more is being done by the popularity of American products for stage, cinema, radio, television, and comic strip, and the apparent belief of many English entertainers that to imitate American diction and intonation is a powerful aid to slickness.

At the close of this paragraph there follows a list of roughly a hundred items that Americans and the English call by different names. To cite just one: what the English call a "vest" we call an "undershirt," and what we call a "vest" they call a "waistcoat." And, of course, what we phonetically pronounce a "waistcoat" the English pronounce a "was(t)kot."

**T**HE PEOPLE'S TONGUE PROVIDES A USEFUL reminder of the variety of American English and all that has fed into it over the years. The linguistic contributions from the continuous flow of immigrants into the country has perhaps contributed more than anything else to the ever-changing American language. The inflow over the decades of the Africans, Irish, Jews, Italians, and Hispanics have greatly enlarged American vocabulary, that of German immigrants less so; and in fact during World War I, when anti-German feeling in this country ran high, the word "sauerkraut" was changed to "liberty cabbage" and many among the vast number of people with the suffix "stein" on their names, so to say, "steened" themselves to seem less German. *The People's Tongue* reprints a 1918 proclamation from the state of Iowa that forbade the use of any foreign language whatsoever.

One doesn't envy those who have to learn English later in life. The language's phonetics present the first problem. Go explain why the "ough" in the word "rough" sounds nothing like the "ough" in the word "thorough," nor either like that in "plough." Stavans includes contributions from Amy Tan and Richard Rodriguez on acquiring English in homes where it was not the language their parents spoke. Jhumpa Lahiri, going the other way round, writes of falling in love with Italian and abandoning English to write her stories and novels in it. Louise Erdrich, who grew up with English, in mid-life attempted to learn the Ojibwe of her ancestors.

Learning American English figures to be even more difficult, in part because it is at once less pure than that spoken and written in England, but in even greater part because it is the result of a vast commingling of other languages and is perennially changing. On this point George Bernard Shaw is supposed to have said that "America and England are two countries separated by the same language." Think alone of the Yiddish contributions to American English: "chutzpah," "nudge," "schlep," "nosh," "schmuck," "schnook," "schmo," "klutz," "kvetch," and many more. A friend of mine named Matthew Shanahan once asked me if every word in Yiddish was critical in spirit. I replied that they were, including the prepositions and punctuation. Isaac Bashevis Singer has noted that Yiddish, as "a language of exile," has never been spoken "by military men, police, people of power and influence" generally. Do you suppose these two points, the critical nature of Yiddish and its being the only known language never spoken by people in power, are connected?

**A**MONG THE MOST PERCIPIENT PAGES IN *The People's Tongue* are Alexis de Tocqueville's on language among people in democracies from his *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville was not high on the respect for language shown by democracies. "Democratic nations love change for its own sake," he writes, "and this is seen as much in their language as in their politics." He found that, owing to "the constant agitation which prevails in a democratic community...many words must fall into desuetude, and others must be brought into use." Tocqueville discovered the propensity for "democratic nations to make an innovation in language consists in giving some unwonted meaning to an expression already in use."

Consider the way we in America have twisted the word "issue," once meant to stand for a matter in the flux of controversy, to become synonymous with "problem," so that an athlete, say, now has an issue with his elbow or hamstring. Or take "icon," once standing for a usually small religious painting, which is now used to convey a higher form of celebrity on any person thought worthy of veneration. Then there are "intrigue" and "intriguing," formerly used to denote mysterious or illicit behavior, now used to describe something of mild interest or vague fascination; "intriguing music" is even called into service. The problem here—it is, assuredly, no issue—is that, as Tocqueville argued, one can no longer call these words into service under their older, once primary meaning. An especially noteworthy example of this is the advent of the word "gay" as a synonym for homosexu-

ality. Once brought into this use, the old use of "gay" to mean light-hearted, carefree, brilliantly colored is off the books.

Tocqueville also remarked upon the penchant among democratic peoples for abstract language, noting that "an abstract term is like a box with a false bottom: you may put into it what ideas you please, and take them out again without being observed." Think here of "charisma." The word began life defined by Max Weber as

a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.

In this definition Jesus, Napoleon, Gandhi, and Churchill had charisma. In the America of our day charisma has been reduced to mere attractiveness, something your younger sister Tiffany might possess. And then, to finish the word off, it is now the name of a perfume by Avon.

**T**HIS PENCHANT FOR ABSTRACT LANGUAGE leads to our high tolerance in American English for euphemism. Thus a police chief in Texas, remarking on the killing of a recent mass murderer, says the police "neutralized the subject." Abortion, spoken of by politicians in favor of it, is referred to as "reproductive freedom" or "women's health," when, apart from cases of rape or incest, abortion is really redemption from ill-timed fornication. Without euphemism, the entire array of words that go under the rubric "psychobabble" would disappear.

Changing times of course call for changing language. "Necessity," as Thomas Jefferson had it, "obliges us to neologize." Digital culture has made it necessary to come up with an entire vocabulary of new words, beginning with "online," "website," "laptop," "smartphone," "blog," and more. This is not to speak of the various abbreviations e-mail (itself a new word) has brought into being: LOL, BTW, emoji, UR gr8, and many other shortened spellings. High style has never been the hallmark of digital culture, and style itself is generally gainsaid in favor of the rawest communication in computer converse. Apart from reprinting eleven pages of Donald Trump's insulting tweets about CNN and a few pages on the vexing problem of the spelling of English,





*The People's Tongue* does not deal extensively with the many changes in language brought about by digital culture.

Stavans includes a brief excerpt from Henry James's *The American Scene*, one in which James registers his own distance from the first generation of Italian and Armenian immigrants to America. In the excerpt he uses the word, his italics, "*abracadabrant*," and one is reminded that James's own favorite words were "summer afternoon." What, one wonders, would Henry James have made of the fairly recent neologisms "cisgender," "binary," "intersectionality," and "non-normative," bestowed upon the country by the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements?

**I**F DIGITAL CULTURE AND RECENT WOKE political movements have brought many new words into the language, political correctness threatens to eliminate even more. Tocqueville wrote about the absence in democracies of "men who are permanently disposed by education, culture, and leisure to study the natural laws of language, and who cause those laws to be respected by their own observance of them." Under political correctness that word "men" in Tocqueville's own sentence would have to be changed to "men or women" or perhaps "people," just as, many moons ago "chairman" lost its suffix of "man" and pronouns began flying about all over the joint.

The reign of political correctness is predicted in *The People's Tongue* in David Foster Wallace's "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage," an essay from 2001. "Although it is common to make jokes about PCE (referring to ugly people as 'aesthetically challenged' and so on), be advised that Politically Correct English's various pre- and proscriptions are taken very seriously indeed by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose own institutional dialects now evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police."

At the heart of Wallace's rambling essay is the battle between the prescriptivists and the descriptivists over what words ought to be allowed standing in American English. The descriptivists are inclusive in their standard, the prescriptivists tend to the exclusionary. For

the former extensive use signifies acceptance; for the latter correctness is crucial. If enough people use "hopefully" as an adverb without a verb, then it is acceptable to the descriptivist, while to the prescriptivist it is ungrammatical and hence *verboten*. The descriptivist stands welcoming at the gates of language entry, the prescriptivist plays the role of gatekeeper, not allowing just any word entry. The descriptivist is doubtless happy to have the additions to the language of "outlier," "weaponize," and "mind-set"; the prescriptivist can do nicely without them, thank you very much. In the battle between the two, the descriptivists, one need scarcely say, are winning, and figure to go on winning.

**W**HAT IS AT STAKE? ACCORDING TO Dwight Macdonald, in his 1962 attack on the highly descriptivist *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, the new, supposedly scientifically based dictionary

has meshed gears with a trend toward permissiveness, in the name of democracy, that is debasing our language by rendering it less precise and thus less effective as literature and less efficient as communication. It is felt that it is snobbish to insist on making discriminations—the very word has acquired a Jim Crow flavor—about usage. And it is assumed that true democracy means that the majority is right. This feeling seems to me sentimental and this assumption unfounded.

The point is seconded by Bryan Gardner in his *Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* (2000), which is quoted by David Foster Wallace in his essay:

The reality I care most about is that some people still want to use the language well. They want to write effectively; they want to speak effectively. They want their language to be graceful at times and powerful at times. They want to understand how to use words well, and how to manipulate sentences and how to move about in the language without seeming to flail. They want good gram-

mar, but they want more: they want rhetoric in the traditional sense. That is, they want to use language deftly so that it is fit for their purposes.

If you do not believe that political correctness exists, or you think that its pervasiveness is much exaggerated, I encourage you to test your belief by acquiring a red baseball cap, inscribing the words "Make America Straight Again" over its beak, and wearing it out of doors.

**I**NTERESTING FACTS PLAY THROUGH THE pages of *The People's Tongue*. We learn, for example, that it took Noah Webster no fewer than 26 years to bring out his great dictionary. The word "hello" entered the language as late as 1877. The normally calm John Stuart Mill could get worked up over the misuse of the word "transpire" to mean no more than "to happen": "This vile specimen of bad English is already seen in the dispatches of noblemen and viceroys: and the time is apparently not far distant when nobody will understand the word if used in its proper sense."

Perhaps most interesting of all is the assertion by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, co-founder of the first school for the deaf in America, that sign language has certain advantages over oral language:

The life, picture-like delineation, pantomime spirit, variety, and grace with which this may be done, with the transparent beaming forth of the soul of him who communicates, through the eye, the countenance, the attitudes, movements and gestures of the body, to the youthful mind that receives the communication, constitutes a *visual* language which has a charm for the mind, and a perspicuity, too for such purpose, that merely *oral* language does not possess.

Might it be that the language of digital culture, psychobabble, and political correctness cannot make incursions into sign language? If so, perhaps we should all give it try.

*Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of The Novel, Who Needs It? (Encounter Books).*

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