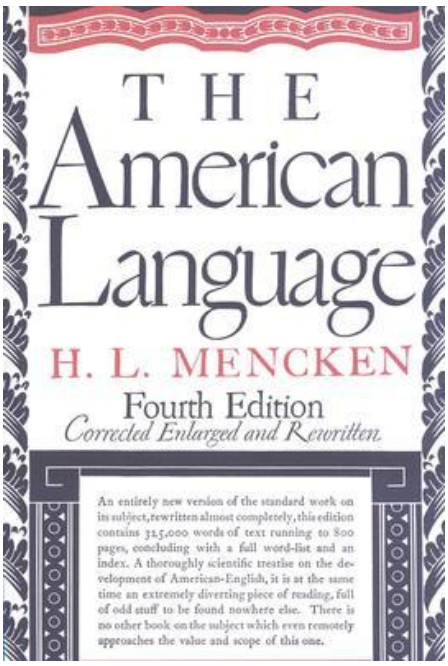

The American Language

H.L. Mencken

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The American Language, first published in 1919, is H. L. Mencken's book about the English language as spoken in the United States.

Mencken was inspired by "the argot of the colored waiters" in Washington, as well as one of his favorite authors, Mark Twain, and his experiences on the streets of Baltimore. In 1902, Mencken remarked on the "queer words which go into the making of 'United States.'" The book was preceded by several columns in *The Evening Sun.* Mencken eventually asked "Why doesn't some painstaking pundit attempt a grammar of the American language... English, that is, as spoken by the great masses of the plain people of this fair land?" It would appear that he answered his own question.

In the tradition of Noah Webster, who wrote the first American dictionary, Mencken wanted to defend "Americanisms" against a steady stream of English critics, who usually isolated Americanisms as borderline barbarous perversions of the mother tongue. Mencken assaulted the prescriptive grammar of these critics and American "schoolmarms", arguing, like Samuel Johnson in the preface to his dictionary, that language evolves independently of textbooks.

The book discusses the beginnings of "American" variations from "English", the spread of these variations, American names and slang over the course of its 374 pages. According to Mencken, American English was more colorful, vivid, and creative than its British counterpart.

The book sold exceptionally well by Mencken's standards-1400 copies in the first two months. Reviews of the book praised it lavishly, with the exception of one by Mencken's old nemesis, Stuart Sherman.

source: *Wikipedia*

The American Language Details

Date	:	Published June 27th 1936 by Knopf (first published 1919)
ISBN	:	9780394400754
Author	:	H.L. Mencken
Format	:	Hardcover 816 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Humanities, Language, History, Linguistics, Reference, Writing

From Reader Review The American Language for online ebook

Nose in a book (Kate) says

This is a difficult book to categorise. It’s part reference book, part textbook, part history, part sociology. Mencken combines his own knowledge of etymology and philology with a huge array of sources in order to cover the rather large question of how the American language evolved into its then-current state.

He begins by comparing British English (which he calls plain “English” throughout) and American English (which he calls “American”) in terms of words and phrases. What I liked was that he strove throughout to reflect the actual language spoken, rather than just formal written language, though he did use the latter to prove when words and phrases had passed into the “accepted” lexicon.

My favourite part was the historical section, which traced changes in the language from the first settlers onward. Mencken explained how isolation from the “mother country” allowed some words ot be corrupted or to change in meaning, while others retained meanings or pronunciations that became obselete in Britain. The new Americans acquired words from people they came into contact with; initially American Indians, French and Spanish settlers, and later people from all over the world. And then of course there was Noah Webster, who I’d love to learn more about.

However, it has some major flaws too.

Read my full review: http://www.noseinabook.co.uk/2016/01/...

Elise R says

It was definitely dense, but I'm glad I read it! It's a really interesting look into Americanisms and both their promotion and the struggle against them. It's of course outdated and I found myself disagreeing with some of what Mencken says, but overall very interesting. I'd recommend this for anyone interested in language.

Austin Gisriel says

A fascinating study of the English and American languages. Mencken's philosophy of language and its teaching was quite eye-opening, especially for a former English teacher, but this is NOT for the faint of heart. You must have a real interest in the structure of language to even attempt this. It's a textbook, really; one that feels as if I began reading in 1978.

William Schram says

A fascinating study of the history and spread of Americanisms and American influenced English. Initially, many native English people were quite against the so-called vulgarisms of early Americans, but after a time, they came into wide acceptance and use even by purists. Mostly this happened after "talkies" came over to

England.

It includes a study of regional dialects and other things as well. A wonderful scholarly work.

Anyone interested in language should read this. The only real issue with it is that it isn't very current. This particular edition was published in 1971. So obviously a great deal of evolution has gone on with the English language since it is a living creature, getting expanded all the time.

In any case, it is a great book, and even though it is quite scholarly and dry, I wasn't really bored with learning where OK comes from or anything like that.

Bryan Jones says

I expected much more out of this book than what I got. While regretfully I am not a student of other languages, I nonetheless have a deep appreciation for the nuances of the English langauge and its byproduct - the American lanaguage. Mencken research is exemplary, but, in the end, the book read too much like a dictionary.

Abhishek says

An interesting "philological" (Mencken's word of choice, but I suppose "linguistic" would be more apposite today) study of American English. This work reveals just as much through Mencken's actual scholarship, which was considerable, as it does through the datedness of the work (which was written in 1919). For instance, Mencken remarks that the tendency to add an s after words ending in -ward (forward/forwards, toward/towards, etc.) is an American development, but it's clear to anyone who cares to pay attention to such things today that the version without the s is more widespread in the United States, and the version with the s is more widespread elsewhere. ("Elsewhere" to Mencken meant Great Britain exclusively.) This shows how essential it is to consult philological accounts from different periods when studying the history of a language.

Other things that surprised me is the sheer number of American innovations that are so common today in English everywhere that it never occurs to you that they might have been Americanisms. Mencken compares this creative tendency in American English to that which was current in G. B. in the Elizabethan period.

I was also amused to note how alarmist commentators in the nineteenth century were when it came to the divergence of American English from British English. They claimed that by the twentieth century American and British English (the former of which Mencken consistently refers to as "American" rather than "American English") would be as different as German and Dutch. This, as we know, is manifestly not the case, and American English (unless you count Internet speak, I suppose) has reached a comfortable stasis of sorts in which radical innovations are few and far between.

Barbara says

I read this mostly because H.L.Mencken is a master of language. I appreciate his ability to turn a phrase, his high intelligence, humour and majestic scorn...

But this book is also the fruit of much research and so, even a century after it was published, is interesting for its subject matter. Being antipodean and therefore having developed a tri-lingual familiarity with English, I was fascinated and delightfully amazed at what time and geography have done to the mother tongue.

Mike says

If you are interested in linguistics or etymology then this book and its sequels are must reads. The author of this 700 page book is amazing (Supplement 1 is also 700 pages). However, I could not get past page 253. I looked for this book because Richard Rodriguez, the author, thought that this was a great history book and it is. I even bought it together with Supplement 1. However it is really slow, too slow. Sort of like reading logarithmic tables. But it will stay in my library just in case.

Todd Stockslager says

Fourth Edition corrected, enlarged, and rewritten.

Massive study of American--English with the overlay of new words, pronunciations, spellings, and usages, in the chaotic wild of the New World. Mencken's classic is so old (the shock hits when you realize that the 60s he is referring to are the 1860s!) that the world was still relatively much newer then, so much of what Mencken writes seems archaic now.

It is interesting to read many of the same arguments that we consider modern in Mencken's classic prose; turns out "ebonics" isn't a new idea at all, but the acceptance of spoken vernacular as the right and rightful future of the language was a live debate in Mencken's day. It is also interesting to read some of the established and accepted slanguage we use today rated as new and even "racy", and conversely, read similar words and phrases considered outre then that are still--outre, if not forgotten.

Because of its age and weightiness, this book is better read as a historical document, not a live discussion of language. For example, the 100-pages of appendix covering the influence of English on various foreign languages as spoken in the United States is strictly for academic specialists in those languages. But for word lovers and linguistics, there is still a feast of well-aged profundity here.

Orin says

A rollicking romp through the business of the English language. I admit that I skimmed through the chapters on speech and proper names out of sheer laziness on my part. The last chapter should be read by all. There are many excellent observations: "rubberneck is almost a complete treatise on American psychology" (p. 92). Footnote 2 on page 559.

Dayla says

I really enjoyed reading H.L. Mencken. I might not agree with what he has to say, but I recognize that he was

a man of his time. However, Mencken did say things in such an interesting way. I am about to launch into Mencken's book "In Defense of Women." As his misogynistic chatter would indicate, he probably isn't going to be in support of feminist goals. But, he will say it in such an interesting way.

East Bay J says

Mencken's *The American Language* is a fascinating look at the ever changing nature of language. His premise is that the English spoken by the English differs significantly enough from that spoken by United States residents and that they are, in fact, two very different languages spoken by two very different cultures.

This book's 1921 publication date underlines the changing nature of language. Many, many words given as examples here are no longer used in this country 90 years after the publication of *The American Language*. Often in the course of reading this book, I came across words Mencken would refer to as being commonplace in American speech but that were news to me. Jap-a-lac is a fine example. What the heck is a jap-a-lac? Turns out it was a product manufactured by the Glidden Varnish Company and later loaned its name to a rye whiskey based cocktail.

Speaking of cocktails, Mencken lists several in the chapter *Expanding The Vocabulary*, originating in the States, including, "horse's neck, Mamie Taylor, Tom And Jerry, Tom Collins, John Collins, bishop, stone wall, gin fix, brandy champarelle, golden slipper, hari kari, locomotive, whiskey daisy, blue blazer, black stripe, white plush and brandy crusta." The more alcoholically inclined among us will recognize several of these but many have passed on to the great cocktail graveyard in the sky.

Also interesting were the musical terms from page 132. Mencken says, "In music the English cling to an archaic and unintelligible nomenclature, long since abandoned in America." These terms include *breve* for a double whole note, *semibreve* for a whole note, *minim* for a half note, *crotchet* for a quarter note, *quaver* for an eighth note and so forth, all apparently deriving from something called "plain chant," the precursor to Gregorian Chant.

Another change since '21 is that we are significantly less apt to use racist terminology or ideas, especially in a scholarly text of this nature. Mencken is clearly educated and education is the ostensible enemy of ignorance. However, in the chapter *Loan Words And Non English Influences*, Mencken states that a number of loan words from the Chinese, "have remained California localisms, among them such verbs as *yen* (to desire strongly, as a Chinaman desires opium)." On page 211, Mencken refers to an African American as a "darkey." Or how about, "But in the United States there is a class of well to do commercial Jews of a peculiarly ignorant and obnoxious type - chiefly department store owners, professional Jewish philanthropists and their attendant rabbis, lawyers, doctors and so on..." This sort of thinking was perhaps more acceptable in the 20's but would be met today with derision if not outright animosity.

I was unaware that, at one time, the word *tenderloin* was used to denote a "gay and dubious neighborhood." The word apparently originates from Alexander "Clubber" Williams, an 1870's New York police captain. After a transfer from an obscure precinct to one in West Thirtieth Street, Williams stated, "I've been having chuck steak ever since I've been on the force and now I'm going to have a bit of tenderloin."

In examining the American fondness for acronyms, Mencken discusses O.K. and its origins. One etymology has it coming from the American Indian word, *okeh*, meaning "so be it." I was tickled to see Mencken reference Okeh Records, which he refers to as, "a popular series of phonograph records."

The American Language is successful as a study of English but also functions as a history text. It is packed full of facts and information, though sometimes things take on a sort of listing quality (not like a ship, like list after list after list) and things often seem a bit random. Regardless, this book would be very interesting to the philologically minded.

Danny says

The American Language is a work in lexicographical historiography and philology on the American dialect of English. Mencken offers a detailed account of the history of the emergence of what he calls the American language from the colonial period until the first half of the twentieth century. He does so in order to fill in what he calls the huge gap in the scholarship. He notes the irony that barely any studies of the American dialect have been produced by Americans, while the latter have produced detailed studies of multiple other dialects and languages. A debate emerges in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century between purists and reformers about how English ought to be used and regulated in the United States after the country declared its independence from Britain. Mencken is gleefully Anglophobic, which is great; he argues for the richness and vitality of American English--it's protean, loose-footed, barbaric brilliance. Yes, it is often vulgar and incorrect, he says, but this is the inevitable tax that Americans must pay in what he thinks of as one of the most exciting phases in a language's development. British English after Johnson, in his view, is conservative and stiff. American English has a strong impulse toward neologism and metaphor. There's is an irregularity and ready-to-handless about American English that is similar to the English of Elizabethan England, when the language was still malleable and unhampered by extensive lexicographical regimes. The pedagogues in general have taught a version of English far-removed from what is spoken by the everyday people; they in addition to Americans of social pretentious generally defer to British authority in terms of usage. (Mencken doesn't like pedagogues.) But the common people, who determine the fate and the destiny of the language, are blithely indifferent to the forms of British usage, and make up the language "as they go." This has incited the indignation of many on both sides of the Atlantic. Mencken writes in the tradition of Noah Webster, who sought to differentiate British and American English in his American Dictionary of the English Language. He refuses to mindlessly defer to British English and affirms the vigor of American English, which he ultimately argues will supplant British English in the long term.

Katie Knight says

So far this is great, though I can't take a lot in one sitting. But if you want to hear how snippy Brits got over American usage (esp. Charles Dickens when it comes to the word "fix"), by all means take a look.

Bob says

I'm treating this like one of those books of quotations you receive for Christmas -- read a little dab here and another there -- really what other way could you read it? What makes it fascinating is that his analysis was done about 75 years ago, so the language has changed a great deal since then -- often in the directions he predicts, but frequently not.
This is the 4th ed. (1936): it originally appeared just after the war and was revised in 1921 and again in 1923. In 1945 he published a "supplement" (in 2 volumes!) which followed the outline of the present edition, but included entirely new material sent him by his correspondents.

A lot of the fun is Mencken's style, which is elegantly playful. I think he would have made a challenging friend.
I was stunned to see a quotation from Alistair Cooke, then (1936) an announcer on BBC.

Curtis says

I've wanted to read this for awhile, and eventually decided to pick it up during my recent *Dresden Files* sprint, to cleanse the palate between Harry Dresden's various lengthy and often amusing beat-downs. It took me awhile to finish, but honestly not as long as I thought it would, which is perhaps a testament to Mencken's ability to compellingly weave a tale about something as simultaneously ordinary and urbane as the everyday language in which we speak.

The main body of the book can be split into roughly three parts. The first five chapters covers the history of American as a language. Chapters V through VIII provide various grammatical explanations of "standard" American language, as it existed in Mencken's day. Chapters IX through XI focus on vulgar American language. After a short chapter with Mencken's predictions on the future of the language (XII), there's a long Appendix exploring more than two dozen languages that exist in various parts of the U.S., primarily in immigrant communities.

By and large, the most interesting part of the book for me was those first few chapters exploring the history of the language. Mencken very effectively shows how there mere fact of arriving in America forced explorers and settlers to begin developing their own language to describe the new plants, animals, landscapes and peoples they encountered. One of my favorite anecdotes is Mencken's description of the evolution of the word "raccoon" as people attempted to transcribe it from its original Native American pronunciation:

Thus, in Captain John Smith's "True Relation," published in 1608, one finds mention of a strange beast described variously as a *rahaugcum* and a *raugroughcum*. Four years later, in William Strachey's "Historie of Trevaile Into Virginia Britannia" it became an *aracoune*, "much like a badger," and by 1624 Smith had made it a *rarowcun* in his "Virginia." It was not until 1672 that it emerged as the *raccoon* we know today.

Mencken doesn't only focus how new words come into the language. He also shows how America's separation from England prevented developments in the parent tongue from replicating in American. For example, while Shakespeare was busily coining words and phrases in Elizabethan England, the American language had little opportunity, initially anyway, to benefit directly from his inventiveness. Such differences due to separation weren't limited to new vocabulary. Existing words also changed their meaning, including which words were acceptable to speakers of "standard" English. Mencken points to a number of cases in which perfectly legitimate English terminology and phraseology survived in America but became disused in England, and then later became known as Americanisms, although they could more accurately be called archaisms that had simply fallen out of vogue.

Mencken also spends a lot of time showing how American language absorbed the language of other cultures. Many more words than "raccoon" have their roots in Native American language. Likewise, contact with the various explorers, settlers and later immigrants brought new words and phrases into the language. Most interestingly, however, Mencken notes the propensity of Americans to simply create new words to accommodate ideas as they are needed. Some of these stick around, though many tend, eventually, to fall by the wayside. And it's hard to predict which will remain ahead of time.

Mencken is also quite fond of word lists. At one point, he lists a stunningly large number of supposedly offensive words that I could only laugh, both at its size and the relative mildness of its members, before wondering whether he had a private list of more uncivil terms — and how I might get my hands on it. However, as might be expected, at times such lists are a little tedious. Part of why I like the earlier chapters so much is that they tell a story, weaving words and word groups together with their historical context and how they both affected and were affected by the people who used them. In the last few chapters, Mencken tends to ditch narrative and undertake the role of cataloger. I would be lying if I didn't admit to glossing over some portions of the last several chapters. Likewise for the Appendix.

That said, overall Mencken does an excellent job of balancing scholarship with storytelling. For anyone who has even the slightest interest in American as a language, there are a lot of treasures to uncover, and undoubtedly you will come away with ideas and inquiries to pursue further. This was the last edition Mencken produced, and it still remains a compelling read today. Although there have been other books written about the American language (or aspects of it) since 1936, I suspect it would be difficult to find any that are more enjoyable.

An expanded version of this review is available at CurtisWeyant.com

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Matt says

This book was an eye-opener for me. It was fascinating to read about the evolution of the English language from the Revolutionary War to the 1930s. The author is old-school witty and clearly cares a lot about communication and language.

Since reading this book, I've been trying to add some words to my vocabulary. Words like exluncticate, absquatulate, go-ahead-ativeness...

This is a fun book.

Eric Chevlen says

I had thought that Mencken was simply a humorous curmudgeon, but this book reveals that he was in fact a scholar with the heart of a lexicographer. Ultimately, however, the book could not hold my interest beyond about a third of it. It began to read like a laundry list of differences between the English and American languages. I could recommend this book for dilatory browsing, but not for a cover-to-cover page-turner.

Leonard Pierce says

This is simply an essential book for anyone who wants to know how and why the American version of English developed the way it did. Mencken did a tremendous amount of scholarship here, but he doesn't lose his irascible sense of humor and cynicism. Note to "Deadwood" fans: the creators relied heavily on this work when crafting their characters' speech patterns.

dana says

No, not a dry read at all! Despite the 1930's publication, it's fascinating to read the opinions of the transformation of the English language on American soil...and its effects on the global populate via 2008. I loved the original derivation of words, especially growing up "Pennsylvania Dutch". The best part was sounding out the words with their regional dialect.

Did you know that "yes, siree!" came from the Irish CCD "Yes, certainly"?

I read this after hearing David Milch describe the writing on HBO's Deadwood. He's such an amazing individual, I love to hear him talk about anything; his insight on human nature is spot on.

Maybe I'll get around to reading the two additional companions at about 800 each!