

Book Review

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Do You Speak American?, by Robert MacNeil and William Cran. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005. 240 pp. Hb.\$23.95; pb.\$13.00

A common current myth about American English is that it is being ruined by mass media. Even Prince Charles has claimed that the “bloody” Americans are ruining the English language. Noted writers such as E. D. Hirsch (1987) and Edwin Newman (1974) assert that English is in its postmortem stages because of so much linguistic variation. However, according to Robert MacNeil and William Cran in their book *Do You Speak American?*, this variation is a result not of linguistic misuse or decay, but rather of America’s increasing diversity and ongoing population shifts.

Sociolinguistics focuses on the phenomenon of language variation in society. By studying the sounds, grammars, and meanings of different dialects, sociolinguists examine how language functions in society and why it varies. Cognitively oriented linguists believe that humans learn language innately, but sociolinguists believe that it takes social interaction to make language happen. Because America has a diverse linguistic population shaped through years of contact, conflict, and vast cultural complexities, American English is constituted by a variety of dialects that are as much social as geographical.

The purpose of *Do You Speak American?* is to explore the world of American dialects and the ever-shifting standard of American English. If Charles Kuralt (1985) was the great television journalist who took us *On the Road* to see America’s great and beautiful diversity, MacNeil and Cran are his counterparts in the area of linguistic diversity. This book’s journey begins in the Northeast, continues through Appalachia and the Deep South, and finishes in the West in California.

One of the major contributing factors to the multidialectal nature of American English, according to the authors, is population shift. American dialects have arisen as an effect of people moving from one place to another, a phenomenon that within the context of American history is related to territorial

conquests, such as Mexican land acquisitions (Spanish) or purchases such as the Louisiana Purchase (French), as well as to internal migration (e.g., east coast to west coast). For instance, MacNeil and Cran cite convincing evidence to support the claim that the /r/ sound, which so typifies American English, migrated west from Philadelphia. According to the authors, Philadelphia has shaped American speech more than any other east coast city because it is the only eastern city to pronounce its /r/'s. Numerous urban dialects of American English are /r/-less, including varieties spoken in Boston, New York, Richmond, Savannah, and Charleston.

MacNeil and Cran additionally argue that the South is becoming the largest dialect area in the United States, pointing out that more Americans “speak Southern” than any other regional dialect. They attribute this growth to what they call the *bleedover effect*, a phenomenon in part caused by the development of bridges and roads that have allowed Northerners and Southerners to cross over the Ohio River more easily, facilitating dialect merger. They also attribute this effect to more Northerners accepting Southerners as equals: for instance, a Southerner can now go to practically any urban center in the North and hear southern-grown country music. One other southern linguistic issue discussed by MacNeil and Cran is the fact that African American English, as spoken throughout the southern and eastern part of the United States, is more consistent than the American English dialect associated with Anglo Americans. According to the pioneering sociolinguist William Labov (1982), this consistency is attributed to racial segregation in many eastern and southern cities, since desegregation never occurred for many African Americans.

MacNeil and Cran conclude their book by discussing diverse and developing dialects in California. They attribute this diversity in part to California's history: California's first non-Native American people spoke with various foreign and American accents as a result of the influx of a variety of immigrants at the turn of the 20th century among Mexicans, Japanese, Russians, Easterners, and Midwesterners. An example of this is a variety of California English associated with the Mexican American population of Chicanos, called *Chicano English*. According to linguist Carmen Fought (2003), Chicano English developed because of historical contact between southwestern English and Spanish. When Spanish speakers socialized and participated in various networks throughout the Southwest, they innovated a historically distinctive identity. Mexico ceded California to the United States in 1848; because of this, the Mexican population has had the longest continuous linguistic history in the state. Spanish-English bilingualism among Mexican Americans in the Southwest has had a tremendous impact upon Chicano English, influencing the development of Spanish-like vowels among native speakers of English. According to Fought, an example of this in California is that the vowel in the second syllable of, for example, *nothing* has come to sound more like *ee*

among subgroups of Chicano English speakers. Finally, California *Spanglish*, like most American dialects, is a reflection of the politics, history and various intersecting communities that have crossed in its historical path. California is a very strong example of how the United States will show an even greater degree of linguistic variation as it continues to grow and become more diverse.

Prescriptivists such as Hirsch (1987) and Newman (1974) would undoubtedly criticize books like MacNeil and Cran's as glamorizing American dialects. They have asserted that American English is declining in our society because of institutions such as schools and the mass media that neglect grammar and introduce various forms of slang. In contrast, however, MacNeil and Cran claim that the linguistic diversity eschewed by prescriptivists is actually a positive development, reflecting a society that has not only become more diverse but also more accepting of this diversity. For instance, a final push in this new language shift is coming from women. According to Labov (1982), language shift is frequently innovated by women, who are a generation ahead of men in adopting new pronunciations and speech styles.

One area that MacNeil and Cran neglect to discuss in sufficient detail is the issue of population shift. If population shift causes linguistic variation, as the authors claim, then they should provide more explanation for reasons that motivate people to move or not to. Another area that calls for more in-depth analysis is the issue of diversity. America is a very diverse nation, yet some cities and states experience this diversity while others do not. MacNeil and Cran neglect to give us any details or examples that could help answer the question as to why some Americans continue to struggle for desegregation, particularly African Americans and Native Americans.

In conclusion, *Do You Speak American?* does a very good job of producing concrete examples of how the field of sociolinguistics views the relationship between language and society. What MacNeil and Cran help us uncover is that the pluralistic nature of American English is not the result of poor education or sinister media. On the contrary, the American language is a resilient and complex social structure that is far too complicated to be united under a homogenous label. For MacNeil and Cran, language variation is as American as mom's apple pie.

References

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