

Excerpt from:

## INVENTING ENGLISH

A Portable History of the Language

Seth Lerer

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS : NEW YORK

Columbia University Press : *Publishers Since 1893* : New York   Chichester, West Sussex

Copyright © 2007 Columbia University Press  
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lerer, Seth, 1955-

*Inventing English* : a portable history of the language / Seth Lerer.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10 0-231-13794-X (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13 978-0-231-13794-2 (cloth : alk. paper) ----

ISBN-10 0-231-51076-4 (e-book)

ISBN-13 978-0-231-51076-9 (e-book)

1. English language—History. 2. English language—Etymology. 3. English language—Old English, ca. 450-1100. 4. English language—Middle English, 1100-1500. 5. Linguistics. I. Title.

PE1075.L47 2007

420.9—dc22

2006030652



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.  
This book is printed on paper with recycled content.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10

## He Speaks in Your Voice

### *Everybody's English*

EACH YEAR, I GIVE ABOUT A DOZEN LECTURES to community groups, libraries, small colleges, and local public gatherings. I tell them of my teaching and give outlines of the history of the English language as a way of illustrating how our speech and writing change. I stress that changes in themselves are neither bad nor good; we cannot rein in alterations in the grammar of the everyday or stop the flow of new words. I tell them about Samuel Johnson and his *Dictionary*, about Anglo-Saxon scribes, about Chaucery and Chaucer, Shakespeare and the orthoepists. I read passages from literary dialects, quote Webster, Mencken, Mailer, and Cab Calloway. When it ends, I take some questions, and the first, inevitably, is: "Why doesn't anyone speak English anymore?" Such questions come from people stymied in the bank line, lost on buses in once-known but now unfamiliar neighborhoods, crossing streets while hip-hop shatters their silences, counting change in grocery stores. New groups of immigrants have filled old social niches; part-time employees more familiar with text messaging than check endorsing serve their customers; music and media displace the pace of life once lived in waltz time. A sea of words breaks over us, and we are lost.

When people ask why nobody speaks English anymore what they are really asking is: Why doesn't anybody understand *me*? Language now changes in a lifetime, and the shifts that I have charted toward the close of this book—war, ethnic diversity, popular culture, and literature—make the speed of verbal passage seem as fast as technology. In 1999, a story in the *New Yorker* magazine called attention to this seeming speediness of language change. That winter, signs started appearing throughout Manhattan with some familiar words used in odd ways. *Round* seemed to mean "cool." *February* connoted "out of style." *Fresno* meant "classic rock." Each poster

had the logo of MTV and the words "Stay Tuned" emblazoned on it. In an interview with the magazine, Allan Broce, an MTV executive, reported: "We made 'em all up. We did it to create buzz. So much that appears on MTV is about buzz, and we wanted to reinforce our position as the place in TV and music where buzz starts." This was, as the *New Yorker* called it, "a commercial substitute for slang." Behind each word was something of a puzzle (I prefer to think of them as modern versions of the Anglo-Saxon riddles or Old English kennings). Round is the opposite of square; February is, by all accounts, an unstylish, forgettable month; Fresno, as the executive explained, "is kind of passé and not the hippest thing in the world." These are, as the *New Yorker* goes on, "plastic etymologies," word histories for a history-free generation.

Beyond the humor of this little story lie some basic questions. Are words commodities, and can we sell them as we sell commercial products? Can we shape a generation's taste in language as in music, art, or hemlines? Can one arbitrate the culture of the word, make something up and make it stick? Years after this account ran in the magazine, I find no evidence that anybody uses any of these words. You cannot sell a language. Verbal arbiters from Samuel Johnson to James A. H. Murray tried, and failed, to keep words in or out. Words are like fashions, and one's personal vocabulary is as much a store of styles as one's garage, houses, cars, tools, or patio furniture. In a commodity culture, language is up for sale.

Still, this may not be new. During the period of British rule in India, for example, language took on the flavor of the exotic. English was something of a stew, and words from other languages became its spices. Like spices, sought-for overseas by travelers and traders, words can be bought and sold to saffron our tongue. Or, like the fetishes and fans from distant lands, words become objects of desire, things to mount on mantelpieces to display our journeys.

One of the most fascinating documents in English literary and linguistic history is *Hobson-Jobson*, a dictionary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and expressions put together in the 1880s by Colonel Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell. Their "Introductory Remarks" remain as much a classic of lexicographical positioning as Johnson's *Plan* and the preface to his *Dictionary*; Webster's introduction to his *American Dictionary*, or the many comments, introductions, and accounts of Murray and the *OED*. "Words of Indian origin," they begin, "have been insinuating themselves into English ever since the end of the reign of Elizabeth." *Insinuating*: words creep in, by stealth or artifice; they snake their way into the everyday. It is a highly charged word,

a Miltonic word ("Close the Serpent sly, Insinuating": *Paradise Lost*, 4.348). Words such as *calico*, *chintz*, and *gingham*, Yule and Burnell note, "had already effected a lodgment in English warehouses and shops, and were lying in wait for entrance into English literature." Are words like some satanic stowaways in English Eden? "Such outlandish guests grew more frequent 120 years ago." *Outlandish*, at its heart, is from another land. These are the interlopers into language. And yet, as with all new immigrants, eventually rights of social use evolve. "Of words that seem to have been admitted to full franchise, we may give examples"; some words have been around so long that they have now been given rights to vote, or citizenship in the lexicon. "There are a good many others, long since fully assimilated, which really originated in the adoption of an Indian word"; *assimilate*, *adopt*: these are the words of national identity and family legitimacy.

Where do the words of *Hobson-Jobson* come from? Many of them are from Indian languages: Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Sinhalese, and others. Many, too, are from the languages of earlier colonial and trade nations: descendants of Dutch, Portuguese, and French terms. Others come from even earlier contacts, from Arabic-speaking slavers and traders, or from China. The words in *Hobson-Jobson* are at times "corruptions," at times "hybrids," as if cross-breeding made them flower into rust or roses.

The editors single out several words in their "Introductory Remarks" that, upon close inspection, reveal the virtuoso juggling and judgments of all lexicographers. Take the word *curry*. Originally, it connoted not the main dish of a meal but the enhancement to the cereal or rice that constituted its center. It was a kind of relish or a condiment, and Yule and Burnell go back to reports from ancient Greece and late Roman antiquity to illustrate the history of Indian culinary habits here. And yet, they go on, curry may have been inspired by the foods of early Europe itself. "The medieval spiced dishes," they announce, "were even coloured like curry," and they quote what they call "the old English poem of King Richard, wherein the Lionheart feasts on the head of a Saracen—"

sodden full hastily

With poder and with spysory

And with saffron of good colour.

(281)

Even the basic spices may have had a European origin. Red pepper, they aver, "was introduced into India by the Portuguese," and, in the end, what

we think of as a "curry" may well be an English transformation of these Indian and colonial materials. Indeed, by the time of William Thackeray's novel, *Vanity Fair* (1848), curry has been domesticated in the English household, as they quote: "Now we have seen how Mrs. Sedly had prepared a fine curry for her son" (but just to be precise: *Vanity Fair* is set some thirty years or so before its publication, and that curry meal had been prepared for a son just returned from India—so, in the novel's fictional world, this food may well have been less familiar than in the historical time of its publication).

To read through this entry is to see not simply etymology or literary history but politics at work. *Hobson-Jobson* takes a term, one might well say the term, of distinctive Indian identity and makes it European: curry was, in some sense, already there in the Middle Ages (no accident, too, that they quote a passage about Richard the Lionhearted eating a Saracen's head—a little allegory of the English conquest of the East). Its basic elements were imports. Its true form is a hybrid of English, European, and Indian. But to read through this entry, too, is to get a sense of what *Hobson-Jobson* thinks of language itself: that language is a kind of curry, and new words are relishes that spice it up.

Language is also something of a house, and many cultures have among the legacies of conquest and high culture words for architecture that betray a history of contact (witness the Romance-language words in English: *foyer*, *mansard*, *cupola*, *dome*, *rotunda*, *patio*, and so on). *Hobson-Jobson*'s entry for *verandah* is a touchstone for such inquiries. The central question here is whether this is an Indian word at all. One line of argument, they report, is that the word comes from Portuguese and Spanish *baranda*. Another is that it comes from the Sanskrit *veranda*, from the verb *var*, meaning to cover. Wherever it comes from, it was certainly one of the earliest words to emerge from European contact with the Indian subcontinent (*Hobson-Jobson* quotes from the writings of Vasco da Gama from 1498).

But why such an attention to this word? Surely, there are many other household terms of equal philological challenge. In this dictionary *verandah* is another kind of metaphor, a figure for the Anglo-Indian experience. From the range of quotations *Hobson-Jobson* offers, it is obvious that the verandah was a space of interaction, a place in between the closed domestic (and hence, European) rooms of living and the landscape of the local and the other. From 1809, they quote: "In the same verandah are figures of natives of every cast and profession." From 1810: "The veranda keeps off the too great glare of the sun, and affords a dry walk during the rainy season."

And from 1816: "And when Sergeant Browne bethought himself of Mary, and looked to see where she was, she was conversing up and down the verandah, though it was Sunday, with most of the rude boys and girls of the barracks." Such quotations illustrate the social space of the verandah: a place where the English and the Indian can mix, either literally or symbolically; a place that permits the European to experience the landscape, but with covering and shade; a place where a well-born woman can converse with rude boys and girls.

The verandah is the space of language: it enables us to bring together disparate elements from different origins; it keeps us dry and shaded when experiencing the outside. There are many words in *Hobson-Jobson* that give voice to this idea of liminal or bordered spaces: words such as *thug* (originally, an intruding robber who throttled his victims); compounds such as *competition-wallah* (someone who entered the Civil Service through competitive examination—a system developed after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857); and *Hobson-Jobson* itself (presented as a corruption of the Islamic cry, "Ya Hasan! Ya Hosain"). These words, and many others, are the verbal equivalents of the verandah or the curry: exemplars of mixing or cross-breeding.

They are, too, from the point of modern historical linguistics, exemplars of how words enter into language and how new locutions form themselves. They all have, to varying degrees, such qualities as onomatopoeia, metonymy, synecdoche, and what the *Cambridge History of the English Language* calls "burlesque metaphor." This idea is a favorite of mine, as it classifies what we often think of as the most creative or colorful of local expressions: *sing*, "to turn informer"; *Arkansas toothpick*, "hunting knife"; *cowboy Cadillac*, "pickup truck"; *oreo*, "a black person aligned with white political interests" (Algeo, *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, 6:225). Indeed, *Hobson-Jobson* itself soon became something of a burlesque metaphor, as H. L. Mencken could note the phenomenon as early as the first edition (1919) of his *American Language*: "Its variations show a familiar effort to bring a new and strange word into harmony with the language—an effort arising from what philologists call the law of Hobson-Jobson." Now, to my knowledge, there is no "law of Hobson-Jobson" in the philological code, and this quotation, which made it into the second edition of the *OED* (s.v., *Hobson-Jobson*), seems as much about scholarly self-reference as it does word history (I'm sure, frankly, Mencken caught on to the term because it simply sounded funny or arcane to him—much as he would coin such locutions as the "booboisie," or much as he would linger over "jeep" and its sonic silliness).

Burlesque metaphor, for all its equally mock-philological impact, seems in the end unable to describe these different kinds of phrases. Like the MTV terms that never caught on, they are something more like riddles or kennings (how are "cowboy Cadillac" or "competition-wallah" any different, really, from "the road of the whale" or "God's candle"?). Our words are often burlesques—a term that came from the Italian *burlesca*, meaning a theatricalized caricature, and that emerged, by the eighteenth century in English, to connote a species of dramatic exaggeration. "Burlesque metaphor" implies, now, something of a theater of word use, a kind of vaudeville of new coinages or loan words. Indeed, many of us like to think of such words, and the speakers of their forms of origin, as burlesque actors on the stage of language—as if we were witnessing a parade of stage accents, costumed skits, or semantic stripteases.

But there is far more to world English than burlesque. That of India embraces not just the curiosities of *Hobson-Jobson* but a prose style that, in the hands of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth, rivals that of Dickens. Australian English offers more than rhyming slang and folk songs and has emerged, in the final decades of the twentieth century, as the vernacular of film and television. Anglophone African literature spans the range of J. M. Coetzee's South Africa to Ben Okri's Nigeria. World English voices more than cola ads or Internet sites. It articulates a vision of imaginative fiction and social change.

A whole book could be written on the subject (and some have been). But what I want to stress, in closing my own book, is how we have become a world of English voices: how imaginative writing makes a speaker present, and often the voice of that speaker has, if not an American accent, then an American audience. English has become the language of commerce, entertainment, computation, and reportage, but it has, as well, become the language of sport. The rhetoricians I grew up with—my Odysseus, my Stentor, my Daniel Webster—were sportscasters. The voices on the radio were voices of the picture makers. Drawing, in part, on the traditions of the war reporter, the sportscaster colored our imaginations of events (the phrase "color commentary" is now used to refer to the interpretations offered by professional athletes turned sportscasters). Theirs are the colors of a rhetoric redolent of what Mencken called, nearly a century ago, the "hallmarks of American." The American, recall his phrasing, "from the beginning has been the most ardent of recorded rhetoricians. . . . He exercises continually an incomparable capacity for projecting hidden and often fantastic relationships into his speech" (99).

Nowhere in modern fiction is this capacity as incomparable as in the opening of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (2001).

He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.

It's a school day, sure, but he's nowhere near the classroom. He wants to be here instead, standing in the shadow of this old rust-hulk of a structure, and it's hard to blame him—this metropolis of steel and concrete and flaky paint and cropped grass and enormous Chesterfield packs aslant on the scoreboards, a couple of cigarettes jutting from each.

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game.

The sky is low and gray, the roily gray of sliding surf.

The "he" of this opening is the African American young man who skips school for the most important baseball game of the age: the Giants-Dodgers playoff game of 1951. But to what does the word "American" refer? Is it the apposition of voice, the characterization of the language of the youth? Or is it an apostrophe, an address to the reader—you, the American? The central metaphor for DeLillo's postwar America is not the melting pot but the sports stadium. Notice the words here: *migration, revolution*. Spectators come from all around, anonymous thousands, and the opening of *Underworld* cannot but recall, in my medievalist mind, the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* where he describes how pilgrims "from every shires ende" find their way to Beckett's shrine.

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. But it is also what makes the history of a language. Throughout this book, I have attended to tales of desire: the need for Caedmon to give voice to faith, for Frederick Douglass to inscribe himself into his master's copybook; the challenges that sexual desire poses to writers, whether they be Chaucery scribes writing up an account of a rape or African American poets and musicians serving up

platters of sexual delectables. Sing me something. The angel that comes to Caedmon comes to all of us, as we speak in our, and your, voice to express the beginning of things.

For DeLillo, the ball park is a kind of Eden, and the paradox of *Underworld's* opening lies precisely in the ways in which that Eden is the site of personal transgression: the young boy playing hooky, or the dignitaries in the stands (J. Edgar Hoover, Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, Toots Shor) whose lives will be entwined in deceit. Have we fallen, too? My public questioners would have me believe so, as their sense of an English in America is now a corrupt thing, its grammar marred by e-mail and the Internet, its spellings shattered by decades of public-school indifference, its accents edged by immigration. What would they make of this e-mail I received from a student in my Chaucer class in 2004?

prof. lerer—

on my way out to class today i got a piece of glass stuck in my foot.

it was bleeding and hurting a lot so i had to come back and clean it up.

sorry about the absense, but i'll get the notes from someone.

apologies

Sure, there are misspellings, failures of capitalization, run-on colloquialisms—all of them hallmarks of an e-mail style designed not, I believe, to mime precisely speech, but to create a kind of faux simplicity. E-mail articulates a studied informality, a carefully framed indifference to the rigors of epistolarity (I still write e-mails as if they were business letters; my students, clearly, do not). But what this e-mail voices, too, is something of a legacy of an American poetics. Modern American poetry is as studied in its informality as such electronic messages. It challenges the conventions of form and rhetoric, gives voice to voice, yet always lets us know that it is a voice captured on the page. On reading this student's message, I could not but be struck by its resemblance to another letter of apology, this one from William Carlos Williams.

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast.

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold.

Williams's poem from 1919 has the same lilt as my student's message. Both are, in essence, notes tacked on to the kitchen walls of life. They are essays in *ab-sense*—in the ways in which we try to make sense of absence. And they both are letters of apology. I've plucked forbidden fruit. Our fall-status only asks forgiveness. We live in a world of Babel, where our lilt lies only in apology. Witness the rising ending of our spoken sentences. Once reserved for suburban teenagers, this habit now seems everywhere (some linguists have referred to it as "uptalk"). All utterances seem to be questions now. We're always asking for assent, as we speak both unsure of ourselves and somehow guilty as charged.

We should not see our language as debased. The history of English is a history of invention: of finding new words and new selves, of coining phrases that may gather currency in a linguistic marketplace, of singing to the cowherds or to the burlesque theater of self. The mead, the hog meat, the curry, the plums—all are the nourishments of language, the things that have made my foray into history so tempting and so tasty. A nation's language, to recall Mark Twain, is a large matter. And so all I have been able to do here is offer up a sampling. If on the way I've cut my foot, forgive me. I was so anxious to get you these notes on time.

## APPENDIX

### English Sounds and Their Representation

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, I have described the sounds of English and their changes using the terms of articulatory phonetics and a version of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Here, I review the ways of representing those sounds.

Vowels can be held long or short. They can be located in the back of the mouth or the front; they can also be located high or low in the mouth. Vowels can also be single sounds (as in the word "meet"), called monophthongs. Or they can be double sounds (as in the word "boy"—*ɔɪ* + *ɛ*), called diphthongs. We can represent the mouth schematically as a kind of grid, and thus locate vowel sounds on the axes of that grid. Here, for example, are the major vowel sounds of modern spoken English (illustrated by representative words).

|           |          |                    |
|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Front     | Central  | Back               |
| High meet | big, bug | loop               |
| Mid get   |          | so                 |
| Low       | cat swan | put, saw<br>father |

The long *a* as in "father" is a low back vowel; the long *ee* sound as in "meet" is a high front vowel; and so on. Some vowels are further back than others (the *a* in "father" is further back than the *o* in "so"). Some are further front (the *ee* in "meet" is further front than the *a* in "swan").

There is also a low mid-vowel sound known as a *schwa* (*/ə/*, which is the unaccented vowel sound in a word like "the" or at the end of "sofa").