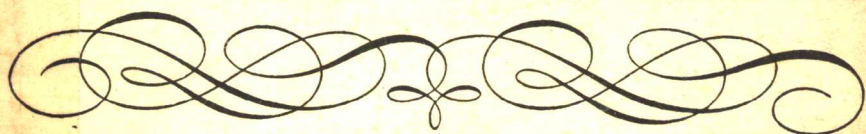


WORDS & WAYS OF American ENGLISH



AN ABSORBING, AUTHORITATIVE
ACCOUNT OF THE *Origins, Growth,*
AND *Present State* OF THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE IN AMERICA.



BY THOMAS PYLES

**Words
and Ways
of
American
English**

by Thomas Pyles

TO KEMP MALONE

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Preface

The years that have elapsed since the end of the first World War—a relatively brief period in the history of our country since its first permanent settlement by English-speaking people—have witnessed the growth of a very lively interest in the study of American English. This has manifested itself most notably in H. L. Mencken's three substantial volumes devoted to what he prefers to call "the American language"; in the late George Philip Krapp's less bulky but still formidable two-volume work *The English Language in America*; in the monumental *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, which is but the first part of the projected *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*; in the four-volume *Dictionary of American English*; in M. M. Mathews's two-volume *Dictionary of Americanisms*; and in a good many valuable works of more limited scope, including a host of monographs, articles, word lists, glossaries, and notes which have appeared in *American Speech*, in *Dialect Notes* (the first volume of which appeared as long ago as 1890), and in the *Publications of the American Dialect Society*.

The present book, which owes much to all these works and to many others which must regrettably go unmentioned here, is an attempt to provide for the lay reader a brief yet ade-

quate treatment of the English language as it has been and is spoken and written by Americans. The professional student of language will probably find little or nothing here with which he is not already familiar, although it is hoped that the presentation and interpretation of some of the material may strike him as fresh and perhaps controversial.

This book contains few of the impedimenta of scholarship. The temptation to use footnotes for documentation I have sternly and sometimes painfully resisted. I have no love for such unscientific terms as "flat" and "broad" *a* or "hard" and "soft" *g*, but they seem to have the virtue of being generally understood. I should have liked to use the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association to indicate pronunciation, but, for the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with them, I have refrained from using phonetic symbols. Consequently, no *eths* or *yoghs* will be found rearing their graceless, unloved heads in the pages which follow, and only once has an *e* been permitted to turn itself topsy-turvy to make a *schwa*.

In *The American Language* and the two supplements to that marvelously stimulating work, Mencken has dealt so fully and so well with the word stock of American English that any later writer must of necessity employ a good deal of his illustrative material. Indeed, there would seem to be little point in seeking out *recherché* examples simply because Mencken has used all the good ones. Nevertheless, although my debt to Mencken is tremendous in the chapters dealing with the American vocabulary, this book is quite independent of Mencken in its point of view as well as in its linguistic judgments.

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I am indebted also to the Johns Hopkins Press for permission to use in somewhat modified form the greater part of my "Innocuous Linguistic Indecorum" (*Modern Language Notes*, January, 1949) as the concluding paragraphs of Chapter VI; to Professor Kemp Malone, of the Johns Hopkins University, and to Professor Allen Walker Read, of Columbia University, for many helpful suggestions; to Mr. Andrew Nelson Lytle, author and historian, for reading Chapter VI and discussing it with me, though it should be said in fairness to him that he is not in complete sympathy with my attitude toward what in the early part of the nineteenth century was thought of as the West; to Mr. G. Legman and Mr. Harold M. Cohen for putting me right on some Yiddish etymologies; to Mr. Jess Stein and Mr. Robert N. Linscott of Random House, for good advice and editorial aid; and to my wife for overseeing the whole job of writing this book with loving albeit stern eye and for exercising her sound critical sense. Finally, a word of appreciation should be said for those long-suffering students in the University of Florida who listened uncomplainingly to lectures ostensibly devoted to *Beowulf* and Chaucer which somehow managed to include long digressions on such apparently irrelevant matters as American pronunciation, the origin of *O.K.*, and linguistic geography.

T. P.

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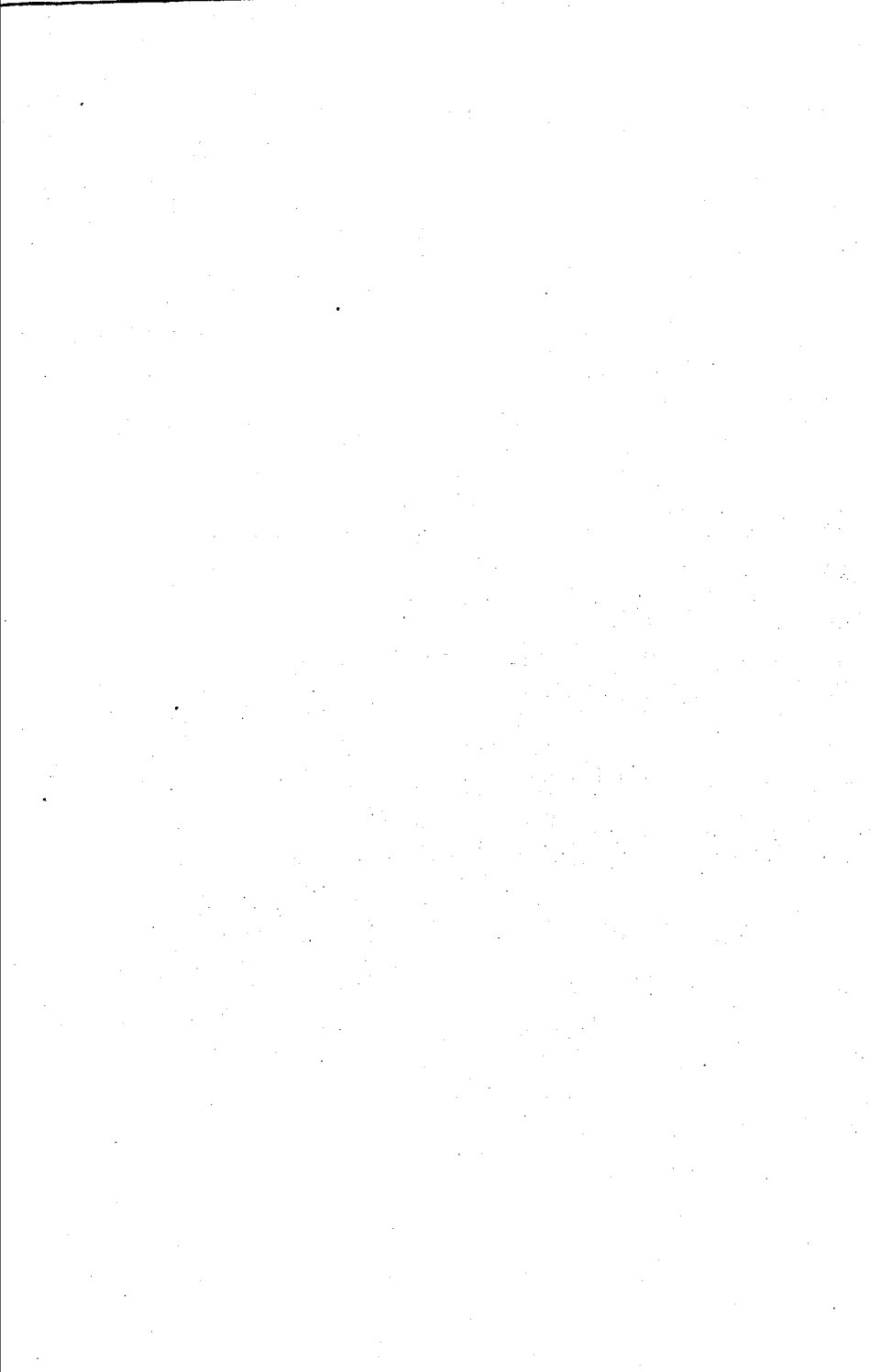
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Early American Speech: Coinages, Adaptations, and Survivals

The language of America, like America herself, has had a vigorous and interesting growth. We have seen to it, sometimes at the expense of our reputation for modesty, that all the world knows of America's political, economic, and cultural achievements, of her moral preëminence, of her technological genius—Yankee know-how, to describe it in native terms—in short, of America's contribution to civilization. This amazing development in less than three and a half centuries is mirrored to a large extent in the development of the

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American vocabulary. Such terms as *blue laws*, *sunbonnet*, *lightning rod*, *log cabin*, *almighty dollar*, *forty-niner*, *abolitionist*, *War between the States*, *dime novel*, *hash house*, *charley horse*, *linotype*, *Gideon Bible*, *Noble Experiment*, *G-man*, *hoodlum*, *New Deal*, *jeep*, *motel*, *ghost writer*, *baby sitter*, and *cybernetics* cannot fail to tell us something of the "American way of life" in all its fascinating and infinite variety, past and present. Moreover, American words, like the phenomena they name, have not stayed at home; indeed, some Americanisms, like *O.K.* and *telephone*, are known and used all over the world.

American English began as seventeenth-century British English. It was inevitable, however, that its subsequent development should diverge somewhat from that of British English, that a number of words, grammatical forms, and idioms lost in British English should survive in American English and, conversely, that American English should lose certain features of earlier British English which have been retained in England. It was equally inevitable that we should find new words, or adapt old words, to express concepts and to name institutions which arose in our New World, not to mention the more immediate task of finding verbal labels for topographical features and for flora and fauna which were new to English-speaking people.

By far the largest and most important group of early Americanisms are those coined from English metal. There is nothing characteristically American about the manner of their formation for the most part, although the circumstances that gave rise to many of them are peculiarly American. Some of them, whose use was not limited to exclusively American needs, have passed over into British English—usually after

a good deal of objection on the part of outraged British commentators. Others have made the Atlantic crossing quietly and unobtrusively.

When the Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon invented the word *Americanism* in a paper published in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* for May 9, 1781, he defined it as "an use of phrases or terms, or a combination of sentences, even among persons of rank and education, different from the use of the same terms or phrases, or the construction of similar sentences in Great Britain." His definition does not, of course, allow for the fact that "an use of phrases or terms, or a construction of sentences" may be at first characteristic of American usage and subsequently pass over into British usage or even become the common property of the entire English-speaking world. The definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "a word or phrase peculiar to, or extending from, the United States," is somewhat more satisfactory if only because it covers more ground, though it does not by any means tell the whole story; it will, however, answer present needs well enough.

A discussion of the distinctive word stock of American English obviously could not be limited to words adopted in this country from other languages, along with those which have first come into use here, either as innovations, like George Eastman's *kodak* and Oliver Wendell Holmes's *anesthesia* and *anesthetic*, or as normal developments of the English language in this country, like *land office*. It must also include words or expressions used in America with meanings different from those they bear in England, a number in which an older English meaning has been retained, and even some which, without any change of meaning, are neverthe-

less much more applicable to American than to English life and hence more widely used and understood in this country than in England.

For features of the American landscape the colonists used such words as *run* "streamlet" and its synonym *branch*, *bluff*, *foothill*, *rapids*, *pond*, *barrens*, *bottoms*, *bottom land*, *neck*, *cliff*, *watergap*, *watershed*, *divide*, *clearing*, *hollow*, *swamp*, *underbrush*, and *creek*. Such words as *spinney*, *combe*, *fen*, *wold*, *copse*, *dell*, *heath*, and *moor*, all still familiar in British English, soon became more or less obsolete in America. Some of these early Americanisms are compounds, some are applications of individual English words to new uses by modifying their meanings, and some are words which were (and may still be) dialectal in England. *Bluff*, for example, was originally an adjective applied to the bows of a ship when presenting a nearly vertical front. Its meaning was later extended to describe a bank or cliff which resembled the bluff bows of a ship. In the latter part of the seventeenth century the word began to be used as a noun in American English. Although the American sense is now well established in British usage, *bluff* has the distinction of being, as H. L. Mencken points out in *The American Language* (4th ed., New York, 1936), the first Americanism to be sneered at by an Englishman, in this instance one Francis Moore, an adventurer who wrote a book called *A Voyage to Georgia, Begun in the Year 1735* in which, describing the infant city of Savannah, he referred to "the Bank of the River (which they in barbarous English call a *bluff*)." The noun *bluff* "pretense" and the verb *to bluff* "to put up a bold front" occur a good deal later; they may just possibly be derived from the earlier topographical uses. *Creek* in British English designates a small arm of the sea, whereas in American English

it may mean any small stream. A *pond* in England is an artificial pool; in America, *pond* may also mean a small natural lake. It is not to be expected, of course, that all American adaptations should survive; some, like *bent* "bend of a river," have become quite obsolete.

Descriptive expressions for animals, birds, fishes, plants, and trees for which the colonists did not use the Indian words were formed of familiar English elements according to familiar English patterns. *Mockingbird*, *bullfrog*, *catfish*, *fox grape*, *garter snake*, *bluejay*, *ground hog*, *ground squirrel*, *ground pea*, *snap bean*, *barn swallow*, *muskrat*, *potato bug*, *canvasback*, *razorback*, *copperhead*, *peanut*, *rattlesnake*, *lightning bug*, *sweet potato*, *live oak*, *bluegrass*, *clingstone*, *slippery elm*, *black alder*, *eggplant*, *roasting ear*, and *popcorn* might just as readily have originated in England as here. The colonists chose to call the common swallow of North America and Europe a *barn swallow*, corresponding to British *chimney swallow*. The bird referred to in American usage as a *chimney swallow* is really a swift, and is indeed sometimes called a *chimney swift*. *Black alder* is one of many expressions of its type; there are about seventy composite names of plants, animals, birds, and fishes with *black* as one of their components, and almost as many with *blue*. The other words listed seem to require no special comment. *Bobolink*, *bobwhite*, *whippoorwill*, and *katydid* are imitative of the sounds made or supposed to be made by the creatures so named. Only rarely in the early days does one meet the pleasant fancifulness that inspired such words as *Johnny-jump-up*.

Frequently the colonists made an old word serve with slightly different meaning. The American red-breasted thrush, for example, was called a *robin*; the European bird

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which they had called a *robin* in Old England is somewhat smaller and has a yellowish-red breast. *Blackbird*, which in Europe denotes a wild bird allied to the thrushes, was applied in America to any of various birds having black plumage. A number of different brightly colored birds not closely related to the orioles of Europe were nevertheless given that name in this country, for example, the *Baltimore oriole*. Similarly, the European partridge is not the same as its American namesake, or rather namesakes, for in New England *partridge* designates the ruffed grouse and in Virginia the bobwhite quail. *Corn* was applied here to an altogether different cereal and lost its older general meaning "grain." *Huckleberry* is a variant of *hurtleberry*, which is in turn an older form of *whortleberry* "bilberry"; but the American huckleberry is quite a different fruit. *Beech*, *hemlock*, *walnut*, and *laurel* also acquired new meanings in the colonies.

Freshet now usually has the same meaning in British as in American English, but the present British usage would seem to be the result of American contamination, for in the eighteenth century the word meant only a stream of fresh water. The element "flood" was the contribution of the colonists. Similarly, *barn* designated a building for storing grain (the word is historically a welded compound of two Old English words, *bere* "barley" and *ærn* "house"); in American English it came also to mean a place for housing stock, particularly cattle. References to the *lumber room* in British fiction may well puzzle those American readers who do not live in certain parts of the South, principally Virginia, where the term is still current. *Lumber*, a term for disused articles of furniture and other cumbrous material which took up space, was employed by the American colonists to designate roughly cut timber, a meaning which British English

has gained while retaining the older meaning. The earlier sense survives in American English as a rule only in the derivative verb *to lumber* "to clutter."

In British English *store* usually means "warehouse" and in the plural designates a large commercial establishment selling different kinds of goods (what is called a *department store* in America), as opposed to smaller specialized establishments, which are known as *shops*: thus, "I buy most of our things at the stores," although *department store* is also now perfectly familiar in England. By the mid-eighteenth century *store* had come to be used in America for the type of establishment previously called a *shop*. *Hardware store*, first recorded in the latter part of the eighteenth century, would seem somewhat strange to an Englishman. He would probably know what *hardware* is, but in his own country he would buy nuts and bolts and spanners (in America, *wrenches*) at an *ironmongery*, an *ironmonger's shop*, or simply an *ironmonger's*. His wife, incidentally, would buy her cloth, linen, draperies, etc., at the *draper's* or *draper's shop*, not at the *dry goods store*, for *dry goods* has also changed its meaning in America; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it has limited its meaning, for the term in British English includes nonliquid goods such as grain as well as cloth. Nowadays *shop* is coming back into wide American usage as a designation for a retail establishment selling a particular type of goods, as in *leather goods shop* and *dress shop*, particularly in the large cities. The word has in fact a certain "tone" when so used in America; one is likely to pay more in a *boot shop* than in a *shoe store* and may even obtain a superior grade of merchandise for one's money. Presumably a *shoppe* is even tonier and more expensive. Meanwhile, however, long before this comparatively recent devel-

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opment, *shop* had acquired the specialized meaning "place for doing work," as in *carpenter's shop*, *barber shop* (earlier *barber's shop*), *machine shop*, and *blacksmith shop* (earlier *blacksmith's shop*), while the word had all along been used in what is thought of as the British sense in the derivative verb *to shop*, as well as in such compounds as *shopgirl*, *shopworn*, and *shoplifter*.

In an American *store* one is waited on by a *clerk*; in an English *shop*, by a *shop assistant*. This American use of *clerk*, which is also used as a verb, as in *to clerk in a store*, dates from the eighteenth century. In British English a clerk (pronounced *clark*) remains a bookkeeper or an employee who copies documents; he works in a business office perched on a high stool like Bob Cratchit or at a desk in a law office, and as a rule has no personal dealings with customers or clients. The frequent statement in histories of English literature to the effect that Charles Lamb was a clerk in the East India House has doubtless confused many of our schoolboys. In his *Modern American Usage* (Oxford, 1935) H. W. Horwill tells of going to one of the desks in a Philadelphia hotel and inquiring whether it was the desk of the hotel clerk, absent-mindedly using his normal British pronunciation *clark*. "No," was the reply, "this is the Hotel Lafayette."

Rock has been widely used in American English since early in the eighteenth century as a synonym for *stone*. In British English, as in some varieties of American English, *rock* means "stone as a substance, a mass, or a very large stone"; one could not speak of "throwing rocks" in England, as American moppets do, without being thought to indulge in American "tall talk." Perhaps American verbal prudery was partially responsible for the original avoidance of *stone* in most sections of the country. The word retained the ana-

tomical meaning it has in the twenty-third chapter of Deuteronomy until well into the nineteenth century, and Ozarkers still call a stallion a *stone-horse*, though not in the presence of their womenfolk. There must have been a time when the sexual meaning of the word was so much alive that it caused titters from the prurient even when used in its geological sense. Consequently it may have been avoided much as *ass* in the sense "donkey" as well as in its transferred sense "silly fellow" is avoided in American English today. Like *breast*, *stone* was doubtless felt to be particularly risqué in the plural number.

Balance in the sense "remainder" is an American development, as in "the balance of his money." Though it is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with the label "commercial slang" to limit its British use, it may occur in American English in the most formal contexts. *Team*, in British English "a pair of horses," extended its meaning here to include the harness and the vehicle drawn. A plot of ground was called a *lot* in American English because as early as the seventeenth century lots were actually drawn to determine the apportioning (or *allotting*) of common lands. Similarly, *to squat on land* would mean to an Englishman merely to assume a crouching position upon it for one purpose or another. Early in American English *to squat* acquired the specialized meaning "to occupy land without legal right," and it was not long before *squatter* was used to designate one who so occupied land and who frequently thus acquired his title to it. *Frontier* came early to take on a peculiarly American sense "the border of settled regions within a country." Previously the word had been used to designate a boundary between two countries, which is still its British English meaning.