Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of "Pure" Standard English

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Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of "Pure" Standard English Details

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sologdin says

great idea for a book, though a bit to be desired in the execution. that said, I used it as the master text in a course for undergraduates on the myth of standard English. supplemented it with a history of English (which makes the point handily about the absence of standard English), hughes' *swearing*, smithermann's *talkin' and testifyin'*, and the chapter's in eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* that discusses the rise of English as a discipline. good class for me, though the students hated me by the end, poor bastards.

Deb says

I give this a mixed review. Parts of it are excellent. I like the beginning where he lays out the ways that languages change. The chapter on singular "they" is excellent, short and sweet. The chapter introducing Black English is also good. Chapters I don't care for -- the one on Shakespeare makes a good point (the English of Shakespeare's time is different enough to need translation for presentation for contemporary audiences) but is excruciatingly long. (Where was the editor?) The Black English chapter is followed by two more that go into great detail about whether or not Black English has significantly different grammar (and especially influence from West African languages) to be considered that distinct -- his own take on the Ebonics argument -- and to require special accommodations in the classroom. And he also gives his perspective that inner city African-American anti-school culture is what is causing the most problems for African American kids, not language differences. He's entitled to his perspective, but the complicated politics of this and the debate on AAVE origins make this too complex a work for a casual audience, especially for freshmen, IMHO. The polemical, persuasive tone doesn't bother me when the point is fairly accessible (don't feel insecure about your language, all languages change, down with prescriptivism, all dialects are equally valid!) but when he gets into the specific politics of whether or not AAVE has creole origins, or the culture wars over Black schooling and inequality, it seems to be too specialized on the one hand and too complicated politically on the other. Also, as I've suggested above, it is inconsistent in style and tone. It just doesn't hang together as a whole. So I'll use a few chapters from this in my freshman class, but wouldn't use the whole book. Having read or skimmed parts of about four of McWhorter's books now, I admire his passion and his ability to write books so quickly, but I'm frustrated that none of them really works for me as a text for the general beginner.

Mahala Helf says

Read the final 3 chapters for a poignant and personal interpretation of one man's experience as well as practical but unproven suggestions on how to improve elementary school teaching of African -American students. His evidence for the success of immersion was purely anecdotal(even though it fits my experiences, too).
Prof totally convinced me Black English is a legitimate dialect of English to be cherished, but African only in rhythm/sound.I enjoyed the comparisons with Creole(his field of study) . the beginning chapters were labored & repetitive, although his points could have been fascinating
Seems like a wonderfully caring, conscientous guy trying not to get put in a box. He really gives respect to

other viewpoints, presenting them well.

Rick says

Most of McWhorter's arguments are cogent, but I still don't agree with his overall claims. Nonetheless, I think Jill needs to read the last chapter for her dissertation (if, for no other reason, than to have something to argue against).

Keith says

This book provides lively look at several aspects of modern English from a linguist's perspective.

The book starts with a few chapters discussing the myriad ways that languages and dialects change over time. McWhorter shows that languages are not static and immutable, rather they are constantly evolving over time, like a lava lamp, to use one of McWhorter's favorite metaphors. These opening chapters are pretty much a shortened version of McWhorter's more recent book, The Power of Babel.

Through most of the remaining chapters, McWhorter discusses different aspects of modern English through the lens of language change. There are discussions of a lot of (sometimes) controversial rules that some "authorities" try to propagate, with McWhorter arguing that these rules are generally pointless. It's hopeless to try to preserve old bits when the language has moved past them (e.g., "whom"). Likewise it's pointless to fight against new evolutions in language ("hopefully" and the use of "they" as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun).

More interesting for me was the chapter on Shakespearean English. McWhorter describes how often Shakespeare uses language that is, essentially, foreign to the modern audience. Mostly this is a matter of word meanings and idioms. But McWhorter argues that many of us have to work so hard to understand a Shakespeare play (in the theater) and miss so much of its meaning that we really should be performing Shakespeare in translation---translation into modern English.

The final three chapters of the book are devoted to a discussion of *Black English*. The book was originally published shortly after the 1996-7 controversy over the teaching of *Ebonics* in the Oakland schools. And in many ways it is largely a vehicle for McWhorter to make his argument about this issue. McWhorter pokes holes in many linguistic misconceptions surrounding the debate and offers his views on the pedagogical challenges of teaching kids a new dialect at school and discusses the larger hurdles facing Black English speakers in American schools.

All in all, this was an entertaining, informative, and thought-provoking book. Some of the sections on Black English feel a bit dated, as they are focused on rebutting arguments that were put forth 15+ years ago. But even so, it was still a good read.

In reading the book, I was disappointed that McWhorter didn't draw some connection between his chapters on the folly of prescriptive rules in grammar and usage and his chapters on Black English. It seems to me that both of these issues touch on the topic of how language is used as a marker of class and status. McWhorter rightly argues against people who disparage Black English as linguistically inferior to Standard

English. At the same time, he acknowledges the value in teaching everyone to speak Standard English. While the prescriptivist rules about split infinitives and "hopefully" may not have a solid linguistic basis, I would argue that they are examples of the same issues that come up with Black English. Failure to follow these rules can be viewed as an indication of inferior education, intelligence, and social background---just as many people treat Black English. Thus, to the extent that these rules are followed to sound like the educated and elite, it doesn't matter whether they have a sound linguistic basis.

On a completely different note, I found the cover photo on the hardcover edition of the book puzzling. It is a black-and-white shot of a city street in the late afternoon, with long shadows throwing everything into relief. Obviously this ties in with the title of the book, *The Word on the Street.* What's funny about it is that somebody obviously wanted to emphasize the canyon-like effect of looking down a city street and stretched the picture to make it longer and narrower. The result, however, is that all of the cars and trucks on the street are oddly out of proportion.

Carlos says

This book was just wonderful. I've read books about the folly of prescriptive grammar but this is the first one that moved beyond discussing it as an abstract concept. McWhorter shows us how we came to glorify the English of yesteryear and denigrate the current one by ignoring the constant change that dominates all language. In one of the best, and most honest, discussions regarding the language of Shakespeare, McWhorter makes the argument that it is sheer folly to pretend that Shakespearean English is intelligible to a modern audience. He dissects some of the most famous lines in Hamlet to prove the point that we are robbing Shakespeare of his wit by insisting on reading it in the original language. He makes the comparison with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and how we have accepted that we can only read them in a Modern English translation (aside from the academics that decide to devote their energy to mastering Middle English). He similarly dwells on the reality of a language being a range of dialects and highlights the social stigma of the non-standard ones, especially Black English. He highlights the way in which Black English has been misunderstood simply because people refuse to recognize the reality of non-standard varieties of English as English and place all sorts of moral judgements on it. His discussion on the way that Black English has been blamed for the educational disparities between African-American children and their white counterparts is nothing short of phenomenal. After finishing this book, I can't help but think that this book should be a required reading for any English-speaking person.

kate says

Totally necessary for anyone who would even attempt to criticize modern American language...I was never overly concerned with or interested by lingustics before reading this, and I've certainly made a turnaround since.

Though I don't necessarily agree with the Anglicist paradigm in black vernacular, McWhorter still provides engaging and relevant arguments (whether you agree or disagree).

Ed says

Very thought provoking. I never thought about English this way and I liked the detailed refutation of treating Black English as just another variation of English. I read this a little bit every day over breakfast. It was a great way to start the day.

Riah says

This book just pretty much isn't worth reading. The take home point is that the English we actually speak is fine. This is broken up into three sub ideas. 1) If a finicky grammar rule makes something sound awkward, ignore it. 2) Shakespeare should be "translated" into modern English so people can understand it. And 3) Black English is English. The first point makes sense but isn't exactly groundbreaking, the second I disagree with very, very strongly and the last is painfully obvious (although apparently whether Black English was English or a separate language, requiring bilingual education treatment in schools was a controversy in 1996, which led to this book). I picked this book up because it said it would consider English's lack of a gender-neutral third person pronoun, but the chapter on it was so slight as to barely register. Basically he says "just use they because everyone does anyways" and that's it. So I was disappointed.

Camilla says

I thoroughly enjoyed the first half of the book, which was humor and light-hearted and endlessly entertaining as the author discussed the differences between prescriptivism and descriptivism and the basic pursuit of linguistics in general. It felt like I had transported myself back into Varieties of English, which was possibly my favorite undergraduate course. Then I hit the chapters on Black English. Don't get me wrong--I'm as interested in the argument over Black English as I am every other topic addressed in the first few chapters. The difficulty lay in the extent of the argument in this book. I didn't understand based on the title (which I feel is misleading since it doesn't specifically address the controversy of Black English as being the main focus of the book)that this book would be a written rebuttal by the author toward the 1996 Oakland School District decision to teach Ebonics as a stepping stone for black children on their way to better reading and writing scores. John McWhorter, the black linguistics professor from UC-Berkeley and author of this book, did not agree with the school district's decision.

He proceeded to dedicate 140 pages of the 260-page book to laying out his reasons for disagreeing, which were valid and plausible and well-researched and persuasive. I agreed with him on many points and admired his eloquent writing as he did so. He did spend some fifty pages laying out why and how Black English is its own language and then spent the following fifty pages laying out why and how Black English is merely a dialect of standard English and isn't different enough to warrant an entire foreign-language course for Oakland, CA students to take. I was a bit confused about that.

I now feel enlightened on the Ebonics issue.I remember growing up hearing my family scorn the idea of teaching a substandard, ignorant dialect. I now understand better that teaching Ebonics in school is still a lame idea, but only because treating the Black dialect like an foreign language won't serve to increase reading and writing scores in standard English for black students. as McWhorter outlined in his book, there

are several other more relevant causes for low test scores and Black English is not one of them.

Overall I enjoyed the first hundred pages, was interested in the next 160, and would probably not recommend the book for those looking for a light read.

Ushan says

Essays on English, specifically on African-American Vernacular English. McWhorter says that it is a dialect of English, about as far from normative English as the Nottinghamshire dialect of English spoken by Lady Chatterley's eponymous Lover, which is not very far. It has nothing to do with creoles; there is a creole language spoken on South Carolina's Sea Islands, called Gullah, which is similar to Jamaican Patois, but the vast majority of African Americans never spoke it even during slavery. Slave speech is attested in much early American literature, and the only slave who speaks something like a creole is Jupiter in Edgar Allan Poe's The Gold-Bug, which is, unsurprisingly, set on an island off the coast of South Carolina.

Growlingsoulpup says

This man is the Captain America to every Grammar Nazi. 'Nuff sed.

John says

Very, very good, but I got sidetracked and had to send it back. I do like Mr. (Dr?) McWhorter's style of writing though - very good blend of linguistic scholarship and popular understanding. I will read more by him, happily.
The biggest thing I got from this (and professional "linguists" are probably not surprised by this, but it was new to me) was the idea that "standard" English is still, despite it's historical dominance, a dialect. Everything is a dialect, but some of them win.

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maybe says

Compact and entertaining. It's posited as a challenge to the notion of a "standard" American English, and that it surely is. There are many occasions when the author is given ample opportunity to delve into the politics of language and to discuss the social (and political, economics, etc) aspects of language pedagogy and standardization, but it rarely happens. l A lot of times the writing finds itself ever so lightly lost in its swaths of trivia, none of which are *too" tangential and all of which are juicy enough to keep the show going on their own.

Collin says

Here's the one-sentence description of this book: if a grammar rule forces you to say something awkward or that sounds wrong, then it's a safe bet that what is "wrong" is the grammar rule.

--update
Some of the points he discusses:
-All languages are always changing.
-Just because something in language is "illogical" doesn't mean it's wrong.
-Whom is unnatural because it's the sole remnant of what was hundreds of case endings in Old English. Its death is inevitable.
-They/their is a perfectly acceptable singular pronoun, precisely because everyone uses it that way.
-Not splitting infinitives and not ending sentences with prepositions aren't even real rules of English. They're faux-Latin.
-Shakespeare is boring/tedious because he essentially wrote in a foreign language (late Middle English?). Many many words meant different things then than they do now, and what is almost incomprehensible to us would have been readily accessible to people at the time. We should translate Shakespeare into modern English to renew the joy in the experience.

But what McWhorter *really* wanted to write about was the controversy of classifying Black English ("ebonics") as a foreign language and teaching English as a second language to kids who speak BE. He devotes 3 full chapters to this, much much more than he devotes to any other topic. I didn't care 3 chapters worth.

--update: Goodreads says that this book has an average rating of 5.65 out of 5 stars. So to the list of reasons why this book is good, please add 'supernatural powers that trump/transcend math.'