

press release

Q & A With Robert MacNeil

*In **DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?**, the follow-up to his award-winning 1986 documentary *The Story of English*, which premieres nationally on January 5, 2005 from 8-11pm (ET) on PBS (check local listings), celebrated journalist and writer Robert MacNeil travels across the United States exploring the vibrancy of the many ways Americans speak English. Here, he shares his perspective on the series, its themes and what it means to speak “American.”*

As a native Canadian, what do you find so interesting about American dialects?

What’s interesting, to Canadian ears, is how much diversity there is in American speech. There always has been, from the earliest patterns of settlement here to all the waves of migration. In Canada, there is diversity, but it’s subtler. And what was also interesting to us, learning from all these linguists, is how not only do these differences [in American dialects] persist, but in some cases they’re even growing stronger.

Are there any other countries whose language has the same kind of dialect variety?

Britain does. There are patterns of speech in Britain which go back to the Viking invasions of the eighth century, and the migrations from Denmark and Friesland, all of which created the basis for the English language. There is a huge variety of dialects in England, and then of course there’s Scotland and Ireland and Wales, which have their own different dialects.

Why do this follow-up to *The Story of English* now?

For a lot of reasons, it’s a good time to look at the language, and it’s also just fun. The discipline of linguistics, which really came into its own in the 1960s as part of the social sciences, has spawned, in more recent decades, the sort of sub-discipline of socio-linguistics – the way language and society interact. And that discipline has come up with all kinds of fascinating things. There is the controversy about whether or not the language is going to hell in this generation, because the schools aren’t teaching grammar in the same disciplined way they used to, or because the media broadcasts so much informal speech that a lot of people hearing radio and television these days hear all kinds of non-standard English. Then there is the controversy of whether Spanish is a threat to English, and the continuing controversy over Ebonics or African-American vernacular English – and the contempt with which it’s treated, not only by white teachers but sometimes by middle-class, well-educated black teachers. Then there is the rise of new dialects – the whole influence of California – and the cutting edge in computer science, teaching computers to talk like us and what that’s going to mean.

What are some of the changes you observed this time around, 20 years after *The Story of English*?

American society has changed radically, and continues to change. It is a much more informal society, much less respectful of social authority. The whole society has loosened up enormously



in 20 years and certainly in the 40 years that I've known it, and that naturally has produced huge changes in the language. One of the examples I love is the expression "you guys." I'm nearly 74 and my wife is almost that old, and we go to a restaurant in New York and some young waitress with a bare midriff comes up and says, "What'll you guys have?" "You guys" has become a generic form of address no matter what age, sex, or position in life you are.

And also, we've become a society that is a great deal more forthright in talking about sex and everything that implies. We have made huge advancements; we've led the world in liberation for women, and to a very large degree striving for racial equality, and tolerance in gender differences, and all of that is reflected in the language. The gays in San Francisco in our series say that you can actually change the meaning of the word "queer," a term that used to be homophobic and hateful. By embracing it themselves they claim they've changed the meaning of it. Look at television series like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

About one-seventh of the American population moves every year. This is a very restless, moving society. And when people move, even if they're just moving to a new neighborhood, or moving across the country, their children are going to speak differently than they do. They'll go to a school, they immediately want to speak like the kids they're in school with, and that causes changes in the language. Another major influence is the huge migration to the South and Southwest from the Northeast and the Midwest over the last 20, 30 years. As one of the linguists in the series says, "Southern" is now the principal dialect, which is kind of amazing.

And looking ahead, where do you think the language will be in another 20 years?

I don't know, and I don't think the scholars know either. In the series, William Labov, the man who discusses the changing vowel pronunciation around the Great Lakes, believes that that will continue to develop that way. There's another factor in this: the resistance of some communities to being overwhelmed by national trends. They have enough of national trends in shops and supermarkets and brands of food and clothing, and they like to express their local identity by kind of recognizing the way they speak as a badge of that identity. A good example of that is Pittsburgh, where they're still speaking Scots-Irish English. So there's a kind of war, a struggle, which may be mirrored politically around the world too, between the forces of uniformity, globalization of goods and services, and media, and the forces of localism – with people just saying "Damn it, I want to be who I am." Of course the other thing that's going to affect our language is continuing migration.

What was the biggest challenge you faced while making *Do You Speak American*?

Turning what is fairly abstract material with many different facets to it into something that has intellectual coherence. We didn't want to just skip around the country and do all Hispanic stuff, all African-American stuff, all Southern stuff. It was Bill Cran, the producer, who was also the producer of *The Story of English*, who came up with the idea of doing it as a journey across the country. And I think doing it as a journey makes it visually a little more interesting and provides a kind of logic.

One of the topics covered in *Do You Speak American* is the idea that certain regional dialects may be dying out. How real is that possibility?

It's of concern to the people who see *their* dialect disappearing, because it's a part of their identity that's going, but all the linguists believe it's wrong to blame the media for it. A good example are the islands off the Carolinas, which have become hugely attractive as vacation places for rich Americans; you know, they go out on these islands and they build great big houses on the beach, and the locals get sort of priced out. And it becomes a vacation hub and a service area and is no longer the traditional community. And that is why Gullah, for example, is dying out. These

population changes are happening in Maine too. In South Freeport you can go and shop in outlets for just about everything you could imagine, 24 hours a day. Lots of people have moved in to work in [the outlet] stores, but there are also lots of people who commute all the way to Portland or even to Boston. The lobsterman we talked to there says he doesn't hear his grandchildren talking the way he used to, he sees [the dialect] gradually being eroded.

What are some of the key socio-linguistic issues today?

The changes in the South are really fascinating. What used to be regarded as a sort of refined Southern speech, the way Scarlet O'Hara talked, the coastal or plantation Southern, is vanishing and its speakers are being replaced by people who either moved in from the North or are changing their pronunciation to speak with a hard "R." And it's that hard "R" from Appalachia and the Scots-Irish which is now beginning to dominate Southern speech, and that I think is a huge revolution.

I think our series makes the argument both ways on whether Hispanic migrants are a threat to English. I think it comes down to the linguists saying it is not a threat, because Spanish speakers are learning English generationally at the same rate as other immigrant groups did, even though there are big concentrations of Spanish speakers, and older speakers can go on speaking Spanish and not even learning English.

And we had quite a debate about whether the language is in serious decline. That's a debate that a lot of Americans have in their own homes.

The series deals with the topic of Ebonics and other "non-standard" forms of American English. Where do we draw the line between respecting where students come from and ensuring that they learn "standard" or "classroom" English?

I think I'm persuaded by people in the series like the linguist John Baugh and Noma LeMoine, that unless you respect their cultural difference, you can't help them into becoming bilingual. Like Steve Harvey says in the series, "You really gotta be bilingual these days," and bilingual meaning whatever home dialect you come with, you have to learn standard American if you want to get on in this society.

Why does it seem that some cultures – African-American, Hispanic – have influenced our language more than others? Why don't we hear bits of Yiddish, Polish or Swedish, for instance, mixed in to modern "American?"

I think we did hear more of those a few generations ago, when the German and Yiddish populations, for example, had such a very big influence on the garment industry and later in Vaudeville and in the movies. All kinds of Yiddish-isms and literal translations of German passed into the language – the American expression "what gives?" comes directly from a translation of German. But we've absorbed all that and it isn't as obvious to us now.

What about Americans makes us so resistant to learning a foreign language?

The British, until fairly recently, were also resistant to learning foreign languages, so I think it may be an Anglo-Saxon thing! And of course a number of things happened. One is, so many people around the world have had to learn English, because it's the language of commerce and trade, that Americans, like the British, can travel and be understood. The other is that this country, from the very beginning, was such a huge natural market. The Europeans, in the years since the second world war, have created this common market and tried to break down the trade barriers between all the different countries. America had that from the very beginning. And wherever you went, you spoke English. Basically, without ever being official, English became a lingua franca for a

whole continent, including Canada. And so there was no need [to learn another language]. And if you look at Europe, it's about the size of the United States, but all these different countries that were separated centuries ago by bad communications developed their own languages, and when you crossed from one to another, if you wanted to deal with them, you had to do something about that. America never had that difficulty.

What do you hope people will take away from this series?

I hope that, as Walt Wolfram, the linguist who goes down the Ohio River with us, said, I hope they come away with an appreciation for the diversity of this country. That it's valuable, that we don't all have to be the same to be good Americans. That people in the South aren't stupid because they talk differently and people in New York aren't stupid because they talk differently. I hope that some kind of tolerance for the oddball ways that people talk in different parts of the country is agreeable.

Which of the dialects you encountered is your favorite?

I'm kind of interested in the way that the California dialect is developing, because you do hear it across the country... the business of the rising inflection at the end of sentences whether they're questions or not – “My name is Robert MacNeil?” [Linguist] Carmen Fought said to us, “I can imagine in 10 or 20 years getting on an airliner in California and having the pilot say, “We're going to be flying at 50,000 feet?””

What surprised you the most as you traveled around the country?

Three things surprised me. One was the vowel changes around the Great Lakes. That is, when you hear a woman say “black” and then the whole sentence is actually “...all the senior citizens living on one black” and you realize that the vowel in “block” has become “black.” Then I found the movement of the “R” into Southern speech fascinating. And the fact that Southern, through the influence of migration and country-western music, is becoming the largest dialect in the states ... because Northerners have had such a prejudice against it always. And I find it interesting that the media are not homogenizing the language. That while they may spread some influences, people in different communities want to be themselves.

What's covered in the companion book that isn't covered in the series itself?

There's a bit more historical content in the book, because there's more room for it.

And what can you tell us about the DVD release?

There will be the DVD of the series itself, and then there are all kinds of outreach and educational materials on Web-enabled DVDs that are being developed through MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. And there are going to be teaching guides for high school and college teachers, and a lot of material that can be used as educational follow-up.

Do you miss daily journalism?

I don't. By 1995 [when MacNeil retired from *The NewsHour*], I had been in daily journalism for more than 40 years and I figured I wanted to do something else. I set out at the beginning, when I was a very young man, after getting over briefly wanting to be an actor, thank God, wanting to be a creative writer, so I've been able to go back to that.

What can we expect from your next project?

Well, my next project, I think, is going to go back to novels. I have three novels out, and others in the works.

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