

**press release**

ROBERT MACNEIL RETURNS TO PBS AS HOST OF ***DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?***, A CROSS-COUNTRY EXPLORATION OF THE HISTORY, DIVERSITY, RICHNESS, AND ONGOING TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

Three-Part Series, A Follow-Up To MacNeil's Award-Winning 1986 Documentary *The Story Of English*, Is Slated To Premiere Wednesday, January 5, 2005 From 8-11 P.M. On PBS

With four times the number of people who speak Britain's version of English, the American language is as much a global influence as this nation itself. But thanks to influences like migration and immigration, race, class and ethnicity, film, music and technology, the sound of "American" is ever-changing. Nouns become verbs. Vowel pronunciation shifts. Slang becomes standard. And from New England to the West Coast, Michigan to Louisiana, Philadelphia to Appalachia, one dialect can be barely intelligible to speakers of another. So exactly how do we define American English? Is it the French-infused Cajun spoken on the bayou? The Chicano spoken on the streets of inner-city Los Angeles? The urban black language of hip-hop and rap? Surferdude? Valley Girl? Midwestern? And who decides which form is the most correct, the best?

Celebrated journalist and writer Robert MacNeil, in his first PBS documentary since leaving *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* in October 1995, ponders these questions and poses new ones in the three-part series ***DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?***, a cross-country journey exploring the vibrancy, energy and flashpoints of the many ways Americans speak English and the inextricable link between our language and broader cultural issues of race, gender, social standing, and power. Premiering Wednesday, January 5, 2005 from 8-11 p.m. on PBS (check local listings),



the series follows MacNeil as he traverses the United States, conversing with characters from all walks of life in an effort to find out just what “American” sounds like. Along the way, he spotlights controversies like bilingualism, Ebonics and political correctness; asks whether or not the country has “dumbed down” the language too much; traces the history of regional dialects and looks at the ways they reflect local cultural identity; and explores the conclusions we draw about fellow Americans based on the way they speak.

In Michigan, Stanford University linguist John Baugh demonstrates an ongoing experiment in “linguistic profiling.” He places three telephone calls to the same realtor regarding a rental apartment, using an African-American accent, a Latino accent and finally, his own, a neutral American accent. Often, he gets very different responses depending on the accent. Further emphasizing the danger of stereotyping based on accent or dialect is the story of three young men who, in 1979, were among only a handful of black students at the Martin Luther King, Jr. School in an affluent suburb of Detroit. When they spoke the version of English they heard at home in the projects – African-American English – their teachers made the assumption that they were simply unintelligent and could not be educated. When their poor grades proved inconsistent with their high scores on standardized tests, the boys’ mothers sued the school administration, with lawyer Ken Lewis arguing that the children had been discriminated against. Seventeen years later, that argument would serve as the backbone of the controversial 1996 Oakland, California case in which educators deemed “Ebonics” – African-American English – a separate language.

Baugh maintains that discrimination like this is rooted in a lack of understanding. White Americans, he tells MacNeil, often assume African-Americans speak “bad” or “lazy” English, when in reality, their way of speaking links back to the days of slavery. On the west coast of Africa, traders made sure that the slaves they penned up together spoke different languages and could not discuss or plan a revolt. In order to communicate with one another, the imprisoned slaves developed their own pidgin – a blend of their native African languages and the English

they'd learned from the Americans. Remnants of this blend – dialects like Gullah and Geetchee – can still be heard in places like the islands off South Carolina's coast.

Spanish, too, is a tremendous part of “American,” having arrived here via immigrants from Central and Latin America who flock to the cities and across the Mexican border. ***DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?*** visits the Texas town of El Cenizo, where Spanish has become the “official” language. In a Los Angeles park, MacNeil and linguist Carmen Gought listen in as teenage boys exhibit Latino accents and expressions even though they don't actually speak Spanish. On Linda Blackburn's ranch in eastern Texas, authentic cowboys explain the Spanish roots of words like *rodeo*, *bronco*, *stampede*, and *corral*.

In fact, the English spoken by some of the most iconic Americans is shaped by outside influences and still bears the marks left hundreds of years ago. New England lobstermen – and Bostonians as a whole – don't pronounce the “r” at the end of words like “father” because the early British colonists who first settled the area didn't. Even the uniquely American twang of North Carolina mountain men like the late, beloved storyteller Ray Hicks – caught on camera before his death in 2003 – has Scotch, Irish and German lineage. In Louisiana, Tante (Aunt) Sue, the owner of Fred's Lounge, speaks English with a Cajun accent and sounds much more French than Southern.

“Outside influences” can take many forms. In New York, for instance, ***DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?*** explores the way hip-hop, rap and Instant Messaging have contributed new words and expressions to colloquial American. In Los Angeles, screenwriters Amy Heckerling (*Clueless*) and Winnie Holtzman (*My So Called Life*, *Once and Again*) are on hand to discuss Hollywood's impact on the language, and further up the California coast, surfers and skaters “translate” the way they speak.

Countless factors shape and re-shape “American,” but certain basic grammar principles remain constant. What is being done to ensure that our students learn “classroom” English – vital

to their future success in the workplace – but still maintain the rich culture of the languages they might hear and speak at home? In one segment of the film, MacNeil observes a teacher with a creative answer to that question – a mock *Jeopardy!* game in which the pupils must differentiate between the way they would say something at home and the way they would say it at school.

Ultimately, MacNeil and the series assess the future of the American language. Are the colorful dialects that mirror America’s make-up dying out? Is language something that should evolve with society, or remain a constant? MacNeil sits down with scholars on both sides of the issue. John Simon, a theater critic for *New York* magazine, fears that Americans are increasingly flouting the rules of syntax and grammar, and in the process, sowing the seeds of the language’s destruction. Jesse Sheidlower, American editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, maintains that the infusion of new words makes our way of speech stronger, and that the country’s inventiveness is the reason our version of English is the world’s most influential.

Interspersed with these conversations are chats with leading scholars like Bill Labov, director of the *Atlas of North American English*, who believes that Philadelphia shaped American speech more than any other city. He also points out that despite homogenizing influences on language in America such as television, Americans from one region to another sound less alike than ever before. Other featured experts include John Fought, who has long studied Southern culture and country dialect; Guy Bailey and Patricia Cukor Avila, who research dialects of African Americans in Texas; the writer Kinky Friedman, a professional “Texan”; and Cliff Nass, a Stanford University professor with an expertise in voice-activated technology.

“Redneck” comedian Jeff Foxworthy reveals the meanings of words like *manaze* (pronounced “may-naze”) and *witchudidga* (pronounced “witch-uh-did-ya”), while country singer Cody James – who actually grew up in Oregon – demonstrates how “talkin’ country” is really just an informal way of speaking American. To the west, in the Lone Star state, columnist Molly Ivins shares her thoughts on “Texan,” and in Los Angeles, comedian Steve Harvey pontificates on

speaking African-American and Patricia López, host of the Los Angeles-based music program *Mex 2 the Max*, exemplifies Spanglish.

**DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?** has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, promoting excellence in the humanities. Additional funding is provided by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Ford Foundation, Rosalind P. Walter, and The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

**DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?** is a MacNeil/Lehrer and Paladin InVision production with Thirteen/WNET New York in association with KLRU, Austin, Texas. Robert MacNeil is the program's reporter and host, and William Cran is producer and director. The series was written by MacNeil and Cran. Susan L. Mills is executive producer for MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and Jody Sheff is executive producer for Thirteen/WNET New York.

.....

MacNeil Lehrer Productions produces *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*, which airs weeknights on more than 300 local PBS stations, as well as other programs for public, commercial and cable television. MLP will also produce complete broadcast coverage of the 2004 Democratic and Republican national conventions for PBS. Other recent television programs produced by MLP include *Debating Our Destiny: A History of Presidential Debate*; *LadyBird*, a profile of LadyBird Johnson; *Via Dolorosa*; *Empire of the Bay*; *The Story of English*; *The Heart of the Dragon*; *the Learning in America series*; and; *Bah! Humbug!*, all for public television, as well as *C. Everett Koop, MD* for NBC, *The Wizard: Thomas Alva Edison* for the Disney Channel and *Non-Lethal Weapons* for the Discovery Channel. MLP is also the leading force behind the *By The People: America in the World* civic engagement project.

.....

Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Stage on Screen*, *Secrets of the Dead*, and *Cyberchase* – as well as the work of Bill Moyers – to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The Thirteen Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. With educational and community outreach projects that extend the impact of its television productions, Thirteen takes television “out of the box.” And as broadcast and digital media converge, Thirteen is blazing trails in the creation of Web sites, enhanced television, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, educational software, and other cutting-edge media products. More information about Thirteen can be found at: [www.thirteen.org](http://www.thirteen.org).

.....

Press Contacts:

**Debra Falk**

Thirteen/WNET New York  
212.560.3013  
Falk@thirteen.org

**Caroline Oman**

Thirteen/WNET New York  
212.560.3057  
Oman@thirteen.org

**Rob Flynn**

MacNeil Lehrer Productions  
703.998.2174  
rflynn@newshour.org