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“A Broad Fluid Language of Democracy”: Discovering the American Idiom

Kenneth Cmiel

“Of course the English Language must take on new powers in America,” one popular book of the 1850s claimed. “Was it supposed that the English Language was finished? But there is no finality to a Language! The English has vast vista in it — vast vista in America.”

Between the Revolution and the Civil War, the idea of an American English was invented. It was an idea hotly debated, for not everyone thought a national idiom was either a good thing or even possible. American literature might be doomed to the second-rate, the North American Review feared, because our language was from a nation “totally unlike our own.” The difficulties were acute: “How tame will his language sound, who would describe Niagara in language fitted for the falls at London bridge, or attempt the majesty of the Mississippi in that which was made for the Thames?”

Debating the category “American English” was part of an effort to imagine a nation, to construct some cohesive “thing” called the United States of America. Into fights over words, writers might pour all their profoundest hopes and deepest angst about the American nation. At stake was nothing less than control over the nation’s public identity.

But if discussions of American English were bound up in nineteenth-century ideologies of nationalism, they also revealed something even deeper in Western cultural life — something about the relationship of invention to discovery in modern theories of knowledge. To invent, as the eighteenth-century rhetorician Hugh Blair noted, is to make something new; to discover is to find what’s there but hidden. Galileo invented the telescope; William Harvey discovered the circulation of blood.

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1 William Swinton, Rambles among Words: Their Poetry, History, and Wisdom (New York, 1859), 287.
3 Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783; reprint, London, 1825), 100.
John Locke had argued that humans invent language. That belief, which was part of larger changes in attitudes toward knowledge, underlay much eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discussion of language. The attitude was expressly instrumental, assuming that the earth was almost infinitely malleable and that the task of humanity was to shape the world to its will. Crystal clear language was one tool needed for this project, and it needed inventing.

Mid-nineteenth-century romantic philologists, however, had a decidedly different approach. Instead of thinking about how words should be invented to help master a pliable world outside, they argued that language, properly understood, might help us feel a part of that world, help us feel at home here. Locke's linguistic instrumentalism, in their eyes, had generated a sense of "rootlessness" that must be combated. Romantic philologists tried to recover the deep spiritual truths buried in our words, truths that might tell us who we were. They turned, in other words, from invention to discovery. In nineteenth-century linguistics, "discovery" became one response to the fears generated by modernity's culture of invention.

While language debates were connected to issues of nationalism and the culture of invention, they also were tied to the liberating implications of democracy. Early modern language theories all suggested ways of ordering the language. Lockeans or anti-Lockean, nationalist or anti-nationalist—all declared what language "was," in its essence. Consequently, each identified something outside the pale, something that would no longer be "English." Specifics varied. For one theory the illegitimate might be Americanisms; for another, words that were too imprecise; for still a third, English derived from the Latin. But whatever the differences, all theory accepted the idea that language had to be controlled, disciplined.

But while theory tried to bind language, the facts of language spoke against such discipline. Didn't words that were imprecise, unidiomatic, or vulgar tumble merrily into the flow of discourse regardless of whether theory called them English? In the early nineteenth century, this debate between theory and fact, linguistics and language, was complicated by politics. Once the idea of democracy, however imperfectly realized, began framing the political horizon, theory intent on disciplining language became problematic.

The poet Walt Whitman was one of the first to grasp this. His fragmentary writings on English in the late 1850s marked a real turning point. Whitman dreamt of an unbound American language. He urged Americans to enjoy the unruly words erupting all around them, to revel in the plebeian, the sensual, the crude. In this way, Whitman thought, earlier debates might be transcended. Americans would discover who they were by inventing a speech. And by warmly accepting all English, the national would become cosmopolitan. In the 1850s, at least, Whitman fervently believed a liberated language would create an American English that would sing in harmony—a native grand opera. While many of Whitman's specifics are ignored today, his commitment to an unbounded language persists—in some ways right into contemporary post-structural theory.
Europeans had commented on the new diction of American colonists in the eighteenth century. But such comments swelled after the 1780s. Not surprisingly, it was then that the phrases “American English” and “American language” appeared. Americans, the argument ran, were adding new words to the language or adding new meanings to old words: political terms like gubernatorial, presidential, and caucus; strange neologisms like lengthy, belittle, and illy. By the middle of the century the list of Americanisms (real or imagined) ran into the thousands, including terms like banter, budge, calculate (guess), carry on, fellow countrymen, full blast, hurry up, lickspitile, and odoriferous. And there were hundreds of others that are utterly alien to us today, words like giraffed (humbugged), puckersopple (embarrass), and squinch (quench).

Between the 1790s and the 1830s, Americans who wrote on language responded to the innovation in two broad ways. One group defended a linguistic cosmopolitanism that was skeptical of any idiomatic nationalism. Journals like the Monthly Anthology, the Port-Folio, and the Knickerbocker Magazine jumped to condemn any “freeborn Boozer” or “citizen Sambo” who, “independent of precedent and rule,” dared to “clip the King’s English.” On the other side were those linguistic nationalists who dreamt of a uniquely American idiom.

Most of both groups, however, shared certain assumptions, one of the most important being that language was a social convention. This was the linguistic version of social contract theory. Locke, in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, had made the argument, counterposing it to the idea that language was directly given to humans by God. The notion that there was some sort of “natural” connection between words and things has a long history, ultimately reaching back to Plato’s Cratylus. While God had given us the capacity to speak, Locke argued, particular forms of language were arbitrary and conventional. The primary purpose of language was to express ideas. Since we expressed them to others, however, our words had to have a common currency. Words acquired meaning, however imperfectly, from the “tactic Consent” of all speakers. Ideas about the conventional nature of language, while not universally accepted, percolated through educated thought, becoming a staple of much eighteenth-century linguistics, including the very important tradition of Scottish rhetoric.

By the 1750s, the language-as-convention theory also translated into a distrust of universal grammar (also known as philosophical grammar), the notion that there

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5 “Domestic Occurrences,” Port-Folio, July 11, 1801, p. 223.

were universal rules governing all languages. (This idea remains alive today in the linguistics of Noam Chomsky.) Theories of universal grammar can be traced back to thirteenth-century scholastic philosophy; they posit a basic connection between syntax and reason. While almost all late eighteenth-century linguists continued to believe there was something called philosophical grammar, by the middle of the century there was a new and widespread sense that it had no place in practical linguistics. Discussion of universal grammar was relegated to speculative philosophy.7

Locke's ideas about language were part of a wider shift in Western epistemology. Charles Taylor has observed that after Galileo, partisans of the new began picturing knowledge as representational. Whereas knowledge had been connected with discovering the order God put into the universe, it now was associated with building an accurate picture of external reality. For Locke and René Descartes, knowledge was a product of an active mind. This epistemological shift, notes Taylor, was tied to a new and grandiose faith in the ability of humans to manipulate reality. Locke's contention that language was not a gift from God but a human invention was but one illustration of that new conception of knowledge.8

Such thinking put a premium on clarity. For a Lockean, presenting a perfectly accurate picture of our ideas became the first linguistic virtue. Precision was a god.9 And since language was a human invention, made by fallible people in the course of their intersubjective dealings, it was especially important to guard against vagueness. Here too Locke is an example—several chapters of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding discuss the imperfections of words. But this notion was by no means Locke's alone. Through the eighteenth century, key rhetorics, grammars, and dictionaries simply assumed that the language had to be watched. If not disciplined, language might degenerate, its mirrorlike character tarnished by imprecision.10

Provincialisms were one sort of illegitimate language. The very word provincialism, conjuring up distance from the center, an enclosed existence, conveyed a message at odds with eighteenth-century elite cosmopolitanism.11 Such words had to be resisted. David Hume had wondered about his Scotticisms in the 1740s; John Witherspoon invented the term Americanism in 1781; provincialism itself dates from 1770.12

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9 As Martin Heidegger pointed out, this was new: "Greek science was never exact, precisely because, in keeping with its essence, it could not be exact and did not need to be exact." Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, tr. William Lovitt (New York, 1977), 117; for an example, see Aristotle, The Ethics of Aristotle, ed. J. A. K. Thomson (Baltimore, 1953), 27–28.
12 John Clive and Bernard Ballyn, "England's Cultural Provinces: Scotland and America," William and Mary
The debate over the newly emerging American language was filtered through such categories. Conservatives who decried the invention of an American language in the early nineteenth century regularly drew attention to the problems of provincialisms. Provincialisms were “food for local prejudices,” one southern writer noted in 1837. The New Englander John Pickering, in his 1816 book on American provincialisms, described them as “corruptions [that] have crept into our English.” Three decades later John Bartlett of Rhode Island, in his *Dictionary of Americanisms*, called them “perversions.”

Behind these thoughts, not surprisingly, were other fears. Language theory merged into politics. It is no surprise that Pickering was a Federalist and later a Whig. For those critical of the emerging American English, language was contributing to the disintegrating forces of the times. It “is remarkable how debased the language has become in a short period in America,” one British visitor claimed in 1839. One year later the *Knickerbocker Magazine* reported that the “greatest danger” to the language was “innovation.” Americans would be “wise” to listen to British critics of American English.

National stereotypes being formulated in the early nineteenth century were seen as embodied in the language. One of the more galling Americanisms was the verb *progress*. As a noun, the word was legitimate, but as a verb it was more than suspect. That its use as a verb surfaced in the United States in the 1790s was just too much of a coincidence to be ignored. It annoyed many Brits and made numerous Americans uncomfortable. As a verb, *to progress* indicated an activity, an ongoing process. It was a state of being (“they are progressing”) instead of the more limited and specific act that was the noun (“they made progress”). To its critics, *to progress* was ugly in itself, a declension from a more precise usage, but it also was a depressing sign of an emerging way of life, indicative of the inability of Americans to sit still.

But if key terms had sinister resonance, it was not primarily the esoteric hermeneutics of words like *progress* that raised questions. The problem was the whole drift of the dialect. Accent, grammar, spelling, vocabulary—all were ugly and vague, all muddied communication. New Yorkers, according to one British visitor, had “a snivel and a drawl, which, I confess, to my ear, is by no means laudable on the score of euphony.” Another visitor, Frances Trollope, reported that she rarely

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"heard a sentence . . . correctly pronounced from the lips of an American." Something in the expression or accent always jarred "the feelings" and shocked "the taste." James Fenimore Cooper in 1838 complained that "false accentuation" was common in America (engine pronounced "engyne," virtue became "virtu," and fortune, "fortun"). Charles Augustus Murray, still another visitor from Britain, reported after visiting Easton, Pennsylvania: "It would kill a grammatical purist to spend a week in that vicinity."16

In the early years of the nineteenth century, cosmopolitan critics equated native provincialisms with "American." And a number thought that there was a real danger that a new language, incomprehensible to England, would eventually surface in the United States. One typical foreign observer worried in the early 1830s that unless Americans changed their habits their speech would eventually become "utterly unintelligible" to the English. The Americans "have only to 'progress' in their present course," he added, "and their grandchildren bid fair to speak a jargon as novel and peculiar as the most patriotic American linguists can desire."17

This was a common fear in the early years of the century. Mutual incomprehension, if not imminent, loomed in the not too distant future. To the Bostonian John Pickering, who was among the fearful, this would hurt the United States far more than Britain. Americans would not be able to read British authors, Pickering thought. American literature, in turn, would have limited appeal. Even worse, according to Pickering, American science, commerce, law, and religion would all be cut off from "the language of the nation, from which we are descended."18

Such worries stemmed from a conception of dialect far different from ours. In the early nineteenth century, provincial dialects were perceived to be densely different from the speech of rulers, very real barriers to communication, closer to what we might call a separate language. While dialect speakers might understand "standard" speech, they could not understand even the neighboring shire's idiom. And elite speakers had limited understanding of regional speech outside their own locale. Thus "standard" speech was cosmopolitan in a very precise sense, lifting "refined" people out of their province and into a larger world through a language whose realm of "tacit Consent" was much wider.19

In the course of the 1830s and 1840s, however, the fear of mutual incomprehension disappeared. Instead, those fearing American English increasingly drew atten-

17 Hamilton, Men and Manners in America, I, 230.
18 Pickering, Vocabulary, 9–10. Also see Jonathan Boucher, Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words (London, 1832), xxiii.
19 On the problem of dialect in France (where in 1863 one estimate was that one-quarter of the population spoke no French at all), see Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914 (Stanford, 1976), 67–94. In Italy, according to Jonathan Steinberg, as late as 1861, "no more than 2 to 3% of the Italian population would have understood Italian." Jonathan Steinberg, "The Historian and the Questione della Lingua," in The Social History of Language, ed. Peter Burke and Roy Porter (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), 198.
tion to the growth of regional dialects within the United States. The title of John Bartlett’s 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms* is actually a bit misleading; Bartlett was keenly aware of regional variation.

Samuel Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lessons* provides a good example. The best-selling book of its kind in the 1830s and 1840s, it indicated a knowledge of provincial idioms that earlier grammars lacked. *The keows be gone to hum, neow, and I’mer goin arter um*, was, to Kirkham, the New England way of saying *The cows are gone home, and I am going after them*. In the South, they said: *Is that your plunder, stranger?* instead of *Is that your baggage, sir?* Kirkham also included examples of dialect from Pennsylvania and New York. He was among the first American linguists to indicate some awareness of ethnic variation. While the Irish said *Let us be after pairing a wee bit*, Kirkham noted, it was “correct” to say *Let us parse a little.*

Behind this discovery of American provincialisms in the 1830s and 1840s was the betterment of travel and communication. The explosion of print, the building of roads, the spread of steam travel in the first decades of the nineteenth century helped change perceptions of regional speech in a number of ways. First, they eliminated the fear that the United States and Great Britain would create completely different languages. That in turn allowed for a redefinition of *dialect*. By the 1840s, provincial dialects in the United States were interpreted as vulgar variations of standard speech, which might raise questions of precision but did not promise fundamental incomprehension.

Finally, those same forces of communication and mobility meant further discovery of regional speech. John Russell Bartlett, who in 1848 compiled the first dictionary including western, southern, New England, and middle Atlantic seaboard regionalisms, got the idea for his book listening to dialects on an upstate New York canal. By 1859, when the second edition came out, Bartlett had spent three years working in Texas, New Mexico, and California. New popular literature also contributed. Regional humor emerged in the 1830s and 1840s—the southwestern stories about Davy Crockett and Sut Lovingood; the New England stories of Jack Downing—these books were full of dialect and absolutely central to the new recognition of American provincial speech. For more refined audiences, American travel literature including passages in dialect, from Anne Royall in the 1820s to Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1850s, also helped spread the same knowledge.

The new interest in regional dialects was fed by politics as well as technology. The entrance of democracy into the political imagination had profound linguistic implications. To be sure, the actual horizon of early nineteenth-century democratic thinking did not stretch civic participation beyond white males. Nevertheless, the

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concept of democracy, of rule by the people, itself implied that the language of
rulers had to adjust to the language of citizens, that popular speech would vie with
Lockean precision as a linguistic norm. It became harder to ignore regional idioms,
harder in general to ignore any undisciplined language. Bounded speech now faced
a legitimation problem.

Everywhere, it seemed, wild, undisciplined language was erupting in the 1830s
and 1840s. Linguistic extravagance appeared at every turn, the disciplined language
of refinement ignored or laughed at. Tall talk, fantastic overstatement in the service
of self-aggrandizement, burgeoned in popular literature. Thus we hear the fictional
Davy Crockett claiming he could “walk like an ox, run like a fox, swim like an eel,
yell like an Indian, fight like a devil, spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad
bull, and swallow an Injun whole without choking if you butter his head and pin
his ears back.” As important was the playful invention of extravagant vocabulary.
One could read in the 1847 *New York Tribune* of a stationmaster who had “ab-
squatulated with funds” or hear someone else talking about being “teetotaciously”
swallowed up. Finally, the use of plebeian idioms on the political stump—rustic
regionalisms, popular slang, and other vulgarities—tied the carnivalesque challenge
directly to the new politics. In the 1860s, after listening to a stump speech in
Galena, Illinois, a French aristocrat moaned that the “wild use of language” might
be inevitable in a democracy. The “American people,” he thought, “especially here
in the West, love these raw, bloody, slabs of butcher’s meat.”

Earlier writers like Witherspoon and Pickering had thought that Americanisms
must be wiped out. But by the 1840s, writers who recognized American regional-
isms had no such illusions. Provincial dialects were inevitable. John Bartlett and
Samuel Kirkham simply hoped to keep refined English away from the con-
taminating “perversions” of popular speech. While the older conservatives had
worked in a setting defined by fear of French radicalism, for the new conservatives
the reference point was Jacksonian democracy. For the former, Americanisms sig-
naled a dismissal of moderate Anglo traditions. For the latter, American regional-
isms were signs of the leveling of modern democracy.

But whether they feared incomprehension or wanted a buffer against the wild
language of popular speakers, all these writers wanted to save an Anglo-American
language. It was an expressly cosmopolitan attitude toward speech in general and
English in particular. (“*Nationality,*” Pickering noted, “is a new word, and is not
to be found in the dictionaries.”) Too deep an attachment to an American English
would cause profound loss.

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22 Richard Dorson, ed., *Davy Crockett: American Comic Legend* (New York, 1939), 30; John Russell Bartlett,
*Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States*
(Boston, 1859), 2, 474; Ernest Duvergier de Hauranne, *A Frenchman in Lincoln’s America* (2 vols., Chicago, 1974),
I, 281–82, 283.

23 See Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1848), xv, xviii.

24 For some examples of this animationalistic attitude toward language, see James Madison, *Letters and Other
York, 1829), 9; and the comments by John Trumbull and John Marshall in American Academy of Language and
Pickering’s 1816 essay stated the cosmopolitan presumptions quite precisely. It was not that Americans could not coin needed words nor that American authors had to defer to British. (Buried here is the notion that language is a human invention used to express our ideas.) But Americans wouldn’t just accept any word from Scotland or Ireland, Pickering reasoned. Americanisms, similarly, should not be uncritically accepted elsewhere. Language, after all, had to be guarded. The ultimate point, to make sure it is not lost, was this—the English language was not national. Americans were “members of that great community of family which speaks the English language.” The “final arbiters” of good English were “the body of the learned and polite of this whole community.”

Not everyone thought an American English signaled decline. “Let us then seize the present moment,” wrote Noah Webster in 1789, “and establish a national language, as well as a national government.” In fact, only a few were as bold as Webster (and he himself would become more timid in later years). Nevertheless, people like Webster, Thomas Jefferson, and William Cardell did champion the right of Americans to invent their own idiom.

These writers disliked what they saw as the carping criticism of conservatives. Noah Webster wrote a pamphlet responding to Pickering’s book on Americanisms, claiming that Pickering had made hundreds of errors. The terms brush, constitutionality, and presidential were perfectly fine, according to Webster. So too were demoralize (in the sense “to become immoral”), profanity, and that often-attacked Americanism lengthy. Another writer in 1814 argued that a national language was “ours by right of conquest.” Independence gave Americans the right to make their own laws, linguistic as well as political. British criticism was an “attempt to interfere with the privilege of speech.”

Practical and patriotic reasons combined to justify new language. Webster thought that British English was corrupt, that the distance between the two nations was too great for commonality, and, most important, that an American language would forge national bonds. Thomas Jefferson disliked the British criticisms of American speech and thought circumstances so different in the two countries that an “American dialect” was inevitable. Other southerners agreed, including Thomas Robertson, governor of Louisiana, and George McDuffie, later governor of South Carolina. Given “the novelty of our situation,” McDuffie said, “we must innovate upon our vernacular language.”


26 Noah Webster, Dissertations on the English Language (Boston, 1789), 406.


28 Webster, Dissertations on the English Language, 20, 21, 35–36, 405–6; Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., The Writings
For Webster and William Cardell, the new language would not come about unless it was actively pursued. Jefferson, on the other hand, thought an American idiom would arise if not strangled in the crib by pedantic conservatives. This difference in part reflects different assumptions about language. Jefferson viewed language as a social custom. New language had to be invented to express new ideas. It was for this reason that Jefferson disliked William Cardell's dream of a national academy. Any effort to "fix" the language would be tragic. In what is almost a direct paraphrase of Locke, Jefferson warned that "judicious neology can alone give strength and copiousness to language, and enable it to be the vehicle of new ideas." 29

William Cardell, however, was one of a group of linguists reviving notions of philosophical grammar. For writers like Cardell, grammar was not arbitrary and convention but a blind guide. 30 That view was a return to the notion that syntax ultimately relied upon the universal rules of logic.

In 1820s America, this generated its own form of nationalism and revealed another aspect of the culture of invention. For Cardell, it was not that the United States would create a distinct English, separate from Britain. Rather the United States was uniquely placed to be the first nation to establish a truly rational language, one grounded on philosophical grammar instead of arbitrary custom. Britain, moored in its rank traditions, could not see the light. The United States, on the other hand, was free, cut loose from history. "We are beginning in some degree, not only a separate nation, but another world, and opening a new destiny for the race of man." For Cardell, the recognition of new truths would allow Americans to invent a new language. 31

This was the position of a number of linguistic nationalists of the 1820s. John Sherman, in The Philosophy of Language Illustrated (1826), thanked God that he belonged to a race of "innovators" and was a citizen of a republic "which had its birth in innovation." In The American System of English Grammar (also 1826), James Brown wanted readers to know that his goal was not merely linguistic independence from Britain. He hoped Americans might realize that language was "an emanation from God" instead of an arbitrary custom. History could be overthrown for a language of democracy and reason. James Fenimore Cooper, in the 1820s, argued that precisely because the United States had no commonly accepted cultural capital or social elite, it was poised to adopt a far more "reasonable" English than Britain. The "known laws of language" were replacing fashion as the standard. 32
Noah Webster's position varied over time. In 1789 he was a fervent linguistic nationalist. At the same time he argued that the basis of language was shared custom. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, he had discovered universal grammar, foreshadowing Cardell and the nationalists of the 1820s. Americans might produce a philosophically correct language in ways that British custom could not. But by the end of his life, Webster was back to arguing that the basis of language was universal spoken custom. And as Richard Rollins has shown, Webster's famous 1828 dictionary was not a nationalistic document. Webster was convinced that the United States and Britain would share a common language, in the 1820s telling one British traveler that there were but fifty differences in idiom between the two countries.\(^{33}\)

In their nationalistic moments, writers like Webster, Cardell, and Jefferson tied the invention of new language to national pride. It is important to note, however, what sort of nationalism they were interested in. There was no trace of the protoromantic sense of language and nation expressed by Johann Herder in the 1780s. Webster, Cardell, and Jefferson were late Enlightenment figures, and their linguistics was high Enlightenment.

Herder had argued that language and culture should define political formation. Language communities, rooted in custom, came first; the political state followed.\(^{34}\) In his *Dissertations on the English Language*, however, Webster saw the new political institutions as the base point, the culture as what came after. Webster envisioned his national language as a way to cement bonds to the regime. Similarly, Jefferson thought that new language was generated by republican principles. And for the nationalistic grammarians, language was not an organic growth of a people, but something that could be radically altered by philosophic principles, principles capable of being put into practice because the United States had abandoned tradition. Whatever their differences, all those committed to more American speech placed culture in the service of politics.

This was a common form of Western nationalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, associated in particular with the French Revolution. Intellectually, it came from a reform tradition with a mentality just the opposite of Herder's. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Frenchman Claude-Adrien Helvetius, the Englishman William Godwin, and the American Joel Barlow, among others, took eighteenth-century associationalism further than Locke himself had. Human beings were so malleable, they argued, that mores were the products of educational arrangements. It followed, and quite explicitly, that the form of government would shape the character of the people.\(^{35}\)


When connected to revolutionary politics at the end of the century, this thinking implied that the nation was not based on the inherited language of a people, but "on the freely expressed will of the inhabitants." This was a nationalism grounded on an ideological commitment to self-determination and preoccupied with "a homogeneous set of institutions and a centralized republican government." Such a conception of nationality did not mean language was trivial. It only meant that preexisting language was not the basis of citizenship. Indeed, like Webster, French revolutionaries in the 1790s began thinking of how they could eliminate patois and create a national language as support for the new republican government.36

This linguistic nationalism did not last beyond the 1820s, shattered by the explosive drama of Jacksonian speech. Even when Noah Webster argued for an American English, he could accept the effusion of regional jargon no better than his cosmopolitan opponents. The absquatulate or galoot of Alabama, the burglarize or by golly of New England, or the git out of the West—these words, and the conception of democracy they implied, flew in the face of a disciplined national speech that might both create a sense of American unity (an American "general will") and be a finely chiseled tool for presenting our ideas to fellow citizens. Jacksonian language games, on the other hand, conjured up a sense of democracy rooted in an existential respect for people as they are. By the 1840s, the philosophical grammarians faced a daunting problem: The facts of the language were making their linguistics unsteady.

Those writers ideologically tied to Enlightenment cosmopolitanism might best be termed "progressive conservatives" or "caretakers of progress." They combined a sense that language had to be watched, carefully controlled, and not split from the British with the notion that language was steadily progressing. Each custom would be better than the last but only if language continued to be carefully guarded by the refined and literate.

Those favoring an American English tied their sense of language to early nineteenth-century ideologies of nationalism most commonly associated with the French Revolution. They might best be called "constructive nationalists." These writers thought a national language would cement the new regime; and a republican regime, conversely, would encourage linguistic progress.

But while differing in crucial ways, both groups thought that we created language to better express our ideas. In other words, both understood language as a human invention used to represent the world. All conservatives and many nationalists continued to think of language as an arbitrary convention, just as Locke had. Nationalists like Cardell, who revived notions of philosophical grammar, did so to push the inventiveness of language even further. Human speech could for the first time

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escape history and autonomously invent a fully "rational" syntax. And linguistic progress was connected to progress elsewhere—language was a tool used to help control the world around us. Both cosmopolitans and nationalists understood language in terms of the West's culture of invention.

Between the 1830s and the 1860s, romantic language theory slowly altered debates about American English. The theory generated a very different sense of the ties between language and nation, one that was part of a rejection of Lockean notions of language. While earlier linguists thought of language as molded to the state, for romantics language and ethos were primary, defining what the state might be. In this sense, the national language was not "invented," as Webster and French revolutionaries had thought. It was the job of intellectuals to bring that language to light, to uncover, to discover, what was already there.

This theory refigured older debates about cosmopolitanism and nationalism. For most midcentury linguists, the new philology contributed to a belief that the American idiom was in reality the purest form of Anglo-Saxon English left on the earth. It denied the existence of American English and suggested deep connections between the mid-nineteenth-century United States and a glorious Anglo past. But for a few writers, notably Walt Whitman, the new linguistics could be stretched to speculate on the coming of an indigenous American idiom.

The new linguistics came to the United States between the 1830s and the 1850s. By the 1850s, philology was a remarkably popular subject among men and women of letters. The British author Richard Chenevix Trench published the popular Bible of the new thinking, *On the Study of Words*, in 1851. Four years later he followed with his *English: Past and Present*. And works like Maximilian Schelle de Vere's *Outlines of Comparative Philology* and George Perkins Marsh's *Lectures on the English Language* were also well known. People like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson all studied the new philology.

In theory, the linguistics was nationalistic. According to Schelle de Vere, "the language of a people" was "the embodiment . . . of its spiritual life." Philology could trace "to the minutest detail" the "various mental qualities and moral instincts" of a people's idiom. These instincts and idioms, moreover, were the product of long historical evolution. A language realized itself as it unfolded through time. Such notions, of course, can be traced back at least to Herder in the 1770s. This was not the elite cosmopolitanism of earlier American conservatives. Nor was it the constructive nationalism of Webster or Jefferson. It was, rather, a historical nationalism, one that presumed a deep and long-standing resonance between people and language.

This historical cast made etymology very important. The further back you went, the closer you got to the core. “The living import of a word lies in the root,” Josiah Gibbs of Yale claimed. “He who has a clearer sense of the root, . . . will have a clearer sense of the meaning.” The history of words would uncover the spiritual meaning of the people.39

Indeed, the “spiritual” was at the center of the new linguistics, more important even than nationalism. Here the new philology was expressly anti-Lockean. No longer were words mere conventions. Words were never, “however strong the seeming, mere arbitrary symbols of thought.”40 There was a necessary connection between word and idea, necessary because language was part of a spiritual order. This order was variously expressed as God, mind, spirit, reason, logos, the transcendent — but all the new philologists made the point in one way or another. Modern philology had to study the interior of words as well as their exterior. And mid-nineteenth-century philologists took for granted that this “interior” was religious, embodied in a people but more than simply a culture ethos. All the philologists, after all, knew that in the beginning was the Word (it is logos in the Greek original) and the Word was made Flesh.

It was the job of the etymologist, then, to uncover the hidden spirituality of language. This was necessary because time eroded the poetry of words. Conventions went stale, words that once buzzed with implication now seemed plain and common. Philology would recover the “uncanniness of the ordinary” packed in each word but now hard to see.41

This philological project was rooted in romantic objections to Lockean modes of thinking and the modern culture of invention. Language was no longer considered a human construction; truth was not understood in terms of crystal-clear ideas. Instead, for romantics, language was part of a transcendental order; and truth was an uncovering of what was there but hidden. As Hans Aarsleff has noted, in this strain of romantic Platonism, “to know is to remember.”42 Attention shifted from what humans created to a discovery (or recovery) of who they were. Truth was no longer conceived of as an accurate picture of our subjective ideas; it was now the revelation of an imminent order.

One of the more succinct statements of the new theory was Elizabeth Peabody’s 1849 essay simply entitled “Language.” Peabody chastised Horace Bushnell’s God


40 Benjamin Dwight, Modern Philology: Its Discoveries, History, and Influence (2 vols., New York, 1869), II, 278. Dwight argued that the “subjective period of perpetually self-measuring consciousness, and of cool anatomical self-criticism, as indicated . . . in the philosophy of John Locke, has happily now wellnigh passed away.” Ibid., II, 323. On the spiritual dimension in general, see ibid., I, 141–47; Schele de Vere, Outlines of Comparative Philology, 25; Gibbs, Philological Studies, 3–6; George P. Marsh, Lectures on the English Language (New York, 1860), 260–63.


42 Hans Aarsleff, From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History (Minneapolis, 1982), 38. I owe this whole paragraph to Aarsleff’s discussion; see ibid., 51–41.
in Christ for restating “the old and superficial theory, that language is, after all, arbitrary, the creature of convention.” Instead, Peabody claimed, as Plato had claimed in the Cratylus, words “must have something of a universal character.” Language was a “necessary product.” It is what it is “precisely because it could not be otherwise.” There was, Peabody added later in the essay, “a logos in the forms of things” that serve “as types or images of what is inmost in our souls.” This form was embodied in grammar and words: The “outer world which envelops our being is itself language, the power of all language.”

While Bushnell was correct in tracing “the national characteristics” of words, Peabody thought that he was wrong to stop there, for words could unveil the structure of the mind. “For what is language?” Peabody asked. “It is the picture and vehicle of all that has been present to the mind of Humanity, stretching back beyond all histories and other literatures; and its bearings are incalculable upon the discovery and retention of truth, as well as upon the discipline and activity of the human mind.” Words were connected to an order imminent in the universe, which moved through custom but which was far more. It was not a question of inventing appropriate words but of discovering their hidden poetry, a poetry that was at bottom religious.43

The new philology shifted attention away from what Americans were creating and toward an understanding of their heritage. One of its key findings was that almost all of the so-called Americanisms were really old British provincial dialect. Indeed, the central and ironic discovery of this theoretically nationalistic philology was that in fact no national idiom existed. Schele de Vere would report in 1872 that “as yet there is no American Language.” Marsh said the same thing in Lectures on the English Language (1860). The title of Alfred Elwyn’s Glossary of Supposed Americanisms (1859) gave it away. “This little work,” he wrote, “was undertaken to show how much there yet remains, in this country, of language and customs directly brought from our remotest ancestry.”44

Another purpose was to contradict the criticisms of American words so prevalent in previous decades. According to Elwyn, the British travelers and writers who twitted us “upon the supposed peculiarity and oddity in our use of words” were just parading their own ignorance. But if Elwyn and the others critiqued earlier linguistic conservatives, they did not, as Jefferson had, defend the right of Americans to invent their own dialect. Rather the romantic philologists spoke of their realization of what the words in question actually were. “The simple truth is, that almost without exception all those words or phrases that we have been ridiculed for using, are good old English; many of them are Anglo-Saxon in origin, and nearly all to be heard at this day in England.”45

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44 Marsh, Lectures on the English Language, 66; M. Schele de Vere, Americanisms: The English of the New World (New York, 1872), 5; Alfred L. Elwyn, Glossary of Supposed Americanisms (Philadelphia, 1859), iii.
45 Elwyn, Glossary, iii.
Writers like Elwyn and James Russell Lowell emphasized the ties between Old English and New England. *Aggravate,* for “irritate,” Elwyn found in Forby’s *Vocabulary of East Anglia.* *Hop-scotch* was in reality a mutation of *hop-score,* the latter widely heard in Hallamshire. A word like *squirm* was not really an American invention but from the south of England. Chaucer used *gab.* These philologists, moreover, did not just investigate vocabulary. As Maximilian Schele de Vere observed, the New England drawl was nothing more than “the well-known Norfolk ‘whine’.”

While New England speech was important, even a Brahmin like Lowell did not restrict himself to that dialect. Using *allow* for *affirm* (“I allow that’s a good horse”), a locution prevailing “in the Southern and Middle States,” Lowell found in Richard Hakluyt’s sixteenth-century prose and even further back in Old English. As early as 1829 an article appeared in the *Virginia Literary Museum* attacking Pickering for not seeing “that many of the reputed Americanisms are common in the Provinces of England.” The unnamed southerner who wrote that article was among the first to suggest that looking for the sources of words might change our understanding of them. Later, Schele de Vere, who taught at the University of Virginia, made the same point. Southern states in the seventeenth century got “a strongly marked vocabulary” from “her cavalier-settlers and countless indentured-servants,” he wrote. These were “faithfully and with Southern conservatism preserved.” Thus the southern *afeared* is just the old Saxon for *afraid; centrical* resisted the more modern *central;* and that notorious southernism *reckon* (“I reckon I’ll go to the store”) could be readily found in the King James Bible.

How this retrieval of Old English was used to counter earlier criticism can be seen in the reinterpretation of the verb *to progress.* For this too was discovered to be a piece of forgotten English, widely used in Devonshire, from where, as Schele de Vere noted, “a great number of the early settlers” had come. *Progressing,* the activity, no longer seemed *just* American; it was now part of the Anglo-American way. James Russell Lowell could not resist sarcasm: “Surely we may sleep in peace now, and our English cousins will forgive us, since we have cleared ourselves from any suspicion of being original in the matter.”

While the most important part of the language was Anglo-Saxon, philologists also celebrated the capacity of the language to borrow from varied sources. Place names like *Harlem,* *Flushing,* and *Poughkeepsie* came from the Dutch, as did *boss,* *cookie,* and *Santa Claus.* From the Spanish came *cavort,* *negro,* and *vamoose.* *Loafer,* *noodles,* and *sauerkraut* were originally German. Even the Irish, while not contributing much yet, were expected to add to the language in the near future. In fact, the only noncontributors were African Americans. This last claim, while not

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surprising in the mid-nineteenth century, would not be challenged in mainstream linguistics until the 1970s when such scholars as J. L. Dillard began arguing that Africanisms have made significant additions to American English.

Even Indian languages had made useful contributions. Not only words like *squaw, squash,* and *tomahawk,* even more important were the place names, terms like *Pawtucket, Potomac, Appomattox,* and *Susquehanna.* Indian words were safe largely because philologists could only imagine the natives as a doomed race. Indian place names were useful because they lent the United States a historic register philologists feared missing. Schele de Vere found it unfortunate that so many Indian names had been erased by the Anglo-Saxon. Indian place names, while "not legitimately included in a very strict definition of the term Americanism" were "almost the only really old things which we have, the only relics left to remind us that human beings roamed over our hills and floated on our waters before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth." Tied to this was a sense of the alien as exotic. Indian names were "so musical and full of meaning, and ours so harsh and commonplace, that we should have been gainers by the exchange."49

That English would take so many words from other languages was meant to reflect on the English-speaking people. After all, it was argued, there was nothing new in this practice. English assimilated thousands of words from the French, Latin, and Greek after the Normans invaded in the eleventh century. Schele de Vere thought the English language "omnivorous." To Benjamin Dwight, the genius of the language was its ability to construct unity out of diversity. The "wonderful energy of its self-assimilating powers" revealed "its own individuality, as a language."50

If one feature of the language (and people) was its omnivorous assimilation of outside idiom, far more important was its terse, sinewy power. Images of power and strength pervade the romantic discussion of the English language, all based on the Anglo-Saxon roots of the tongue. While usually this was not explicitly associated with masculinity, such an association often seemed just below the surface. Occasionally, it could become explicit. Lowell, in this vein, called Lincoln's Gettysburg Address "truly masculine English." Another typical writer found the language's "strong aspirate, its open vowels, its close consonants, its army of monosyllables, its straightforward idioms" all representing "a race bold, daring and abrupt, full of enterprise, driving on its aim with an outbursting energy which no obstacles can bind."51

The new philology turned away from the earlier Lockean notions of arbitrary language and its commitment to the culture of invention. Words were now linked to historical mores that could not be altered by simply changing linguistic conventions. Words were expressive of lived traditions. At the same time, however, this theoretically nationalistic philology was in practice subverting any sense of linguistic nationalism. There was no American English.

49 Schele de Vere, *Americanisms,* 11-12.
Romantic philology ordered language in its own way. Etymology was destiny; our roots framed present possibilities. Received tradition, not imposed clarity, became the means of disciplining the language. Relying upon tradition, however, did not imply the wholesale rejection of modernity. Rather, it allowed philologists to interpret things like nineteenth-century "progress" as a traditional Anglo-American ideal. Romantic linguistics was a resource to capture and channel those explosive cultural forces swirling about at the center of the century.

The "nationalistic anti-nationalism" of romantic philology did three pieces of cultural work at the same time. First, wild extravagant speaking, the untamed speech of the early nineteenth century, was dismissed as an assault on Anglo-American mores. Popular literature was antitraditional. *Absquatulate* or *teetotalisms* were ugly rejections of Saxon English. All the romantic philologists were disgusted by the new language games of the early nineteenth century. In this they did not differ at all from earlier defenders of refined speech like Witherspoon or Pickering.32

Second, the descriptions of English as "omnivorous" and "powerful" expressed support for the expansionism of the Anglo-Saxon peoples around the globe. Not only British imperialism but the western expansion that decimated the Indian population all seemed "natural" given the characteristics of the people and their language. There was just no question for George Perkins Marsh that contemporary English was already what Greek and Latin were to the ancients—the language heard all over the world. (He got his geography wrong here. Ancient Latin was not heard outside the Roman empire.)33 The forceful energy associated with English, as well as its capacity to absorb from other sources, made it an ideal global idiom.

In this sense, the new linguistics remained cosmopolitan. But it was not the cosmopolitanism of an educated social stratum that Pickering espoused. It was an imperial cosmopolitanism of a chosen people. And here, the spiritual, supracultural aspect of the new linguistics was especially useful. As a number of the philologists had noted, nationalism was fine but language was far more than the values of a people. It was the spiritual *in* a people. The double edge of this theory, both individualizing a nation and expressive of a universal truth, was already contained in Herder's formulations some eighty years back.34 In the mid-nineteenth century, it was easily used to support expansion. Anglo-Saxon peoples had certain universal traits that needed to be spread over the earth. This was history unfolding.35

The denial of American English served a third purpose as well. As the nation fell apart in the 1850s it was unclear what, if anything, northerners and southerners

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held in common. Romantic linguistics suggested an answer. The English language, now understood as an expression of a people's spirit, was shared by all.

Nations are, as Benedict Anderson has noted, "imagined communities." Nationalities have to be invented, people convinced they belong. And those who at one point might see themselves as part of a nation at another stage will not. As Ernest Renan said in 1882, nationalism is a "daily plebiscite." But the ideology of historic nationalism, of a nationalism that is not imagined, but there, embedded in blood or language or custom, became important to the generation prior to Renan. For a writer like Jules Michelet, what was crucial was recovering the memory of the ancient French people. This was not a nationalism that thought culture should follow citizenship, a notion expressed by French ideologues in the 1790s and in 1789 by Noah Webster. Nor was it the nationalism of Renan in the 1880s or of roughly contemporary proponents of "Americanization" in the United States, people who freely admitted that nations were forged by getting people to forget what had divided them in the past rather than remembering common histories. Anderson points out that the historicist strain of nationalist thought, derived from Herder, became important in western Europe after the first blush of revolutionary nationalism had passed and while civil discord was prominent.56

Parallel forces were at play in the United States. When Lincoln referred in his first inaugural to the "mystic chords of memory" that bound the nation together, it must have struck most Americans—northern and southern alike—as a folly. This was a "nation" getting ready to war with itself. Nevertheless, the phrase expressed that same historically rooted nationalism of Michelet—and the historical philologists. Ironically, the denial of a new American English served nationalistic ends. Etymology told citizens that they were one, that their roots, quite literally, were the same. Here were those "mystic chords of memory" that Lincoln spoke of. It was probably the only ideology of nationalism possible in the 1850s and 1860s.

Despite their preoccupation with etymology, romantic philologists were far more ambivalent about modernity than later writers who developed their themes.57 They did not repudiate Victorian notions of progress so much as try to channel them in particular directions. Some did press to stop linguistic change, but others thought it reasonable to "invent" new terms when the need arose.58

At moments like this, moments scattered in between their paens to historical memory, the romantic philologists edged back toward the culture of invention. But instead of seeing linguistic invention as a social compact monitored by the cultivated, midcentury philologists proclaimed the poet the real maker of words. While

57 I am thinking here of Martin Heidegger, who builds on a number of the themes of romantic philology.
58 Marsh, Lectures on the English Language, 17; Dwight, Modern Philology, 1, 141–44; Schele de Vere, Americanisms, 3, 4; Trench, On the Study of Words, 130–72. Trench stated that the most common reason for new words was a new spiritual state of a people. When in "the appointments of highest Wisdom new moral and spiritual forces begin to work, and stir a society to its depths," new terms must be found to express this. God, in other words, not human invention, is the critical catalyst. Trench, On the Study of Words, 138–39.
this strain of thought rested in the background for most romantic philologists, when it took over it could even sustain the dream of an American English.

It did for Emerson. His commitment to an American idiom was not separate from his larger sense of the inventiveness of language. But Emerson was not the one most interested in inventing an American English in the 1850s. That was the poet Walt Whitman.

Whitman had read books like Schele de Vere’s *Outlines of Comparative Philology* and Trench’s *On the Study of Words*. In the last half of the 1850s, Whitman sketched out two short essays on American English, wrote extensive notes for a lecture (never given) on the same topic, and collaborated on a book called *Rambles among Words*, a popularization of the new philology.

In his writings on language, Whitman repeated a number of romantic themes. English was distinguished by being “composite” yet “united.” It was vigorous, rough, and strong. Transcendental notions were evident. Language was not “arbitrary,” as it was for the Lockeans, but the “most precious inheritance from all the legacies of the past.” Not did Whitman see truth as a matter of making clear pictures of our ideas for other people: “Whatever satisfies the soul is truth.”

But Whitman used these themes in his own way. “In America an immense number of new words are needed,” he claimed. The “life-spirit of American States” had to be grafted onto the language. Whitman was quite sure of it: There had to be an American English.

Whitman was far more interested in what had to be invented than in discovering what was already there. He took the creative side of romantic linguistics, that which made the poet the “maker” of new words, and expanded its importance so much that it obliterated the conservative sense of a language bounded by its history. Whitman was no etymologist, his politics wouldn’t allow it. English “is not a fossil-language,” he said, criticizing the other philologists, “but a broad fluid language of democracy.”

Whitman, in fact, was trying to transcend the very dispute between invention and discovery. Whitman spoke of easy movement from the past to the future, always, at least in the 1850s, with the accent on what was to come. The great poet “drags the dead out of their coffins,” Whitman wrote, and says to the Past: “Rise and walk before me that I may realize you.” It is in this vein that Whitman claimed that an American English did not yet exist but was in the process of being born. A democratic people would discover who they were through their very act of self-invention.

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64 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 12. It might be most accurate to say that in Whitman invention swallows discovery.
Whitman did not proclaim himself the genius poet who would invent the new language. The true poet, he thought, was the people themselves. Whitman's job was to record a people making itself in language. But even here he differed from the historical philologists. For Whitman, far more than the other romantic philologists, tried to fashion a sense of language that embraced the new language games of nineteenth-century America. Whitman was intent on conceptualizing an unbounded language.

The "Real Dictionary" of the people was far more than those dead wordbooks collected by pettifoggers, Whitman thought. American English would not come into its own until we acknowledged all the energy and diversity of English as spoken. The words of fighters, gamblers, thieves, and prostitutes ought to be collected, he thought, the bad words as well as the good, for "many of these bad words are fine." He loved the words of barrooms, boatsmen, and technology, of politics and the body. The American language had to capture it all. "A perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, or do any thing, that man or woman or the natural powers can do." Those who couldn't turned "helplessly" to the "dictionaries and authorities."65

Whitman repeated the claim that English drew from all sorts of European tongues. But for Whitman, American English had a special edge, enriched as it was "with contributions from all languages, old and new." And while Whitman shared with the conservatives an appreciation for English borrowed from Indian languages, he was absolutely alone in suggesting in the 1850s that "hundreds of outré words" from slaves moved into the common speech of the nation. And even more surprising, Whitman thought that what he called "nigger dialect" would be critical to the future of American English. African-American accent in particular hinted at "the future modification of all words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America."66

The one thing Whitman hated about American speech was its nasal twang. And like all romantic philologists, he thought pronunciation a direct reflection of the soul.67 Since Whitman thought truly great language was music, it was imperative that the offensive "flat tones" vanish. Slave speech would help, Whitman thought, but so too would Italian opera (he was a fan) and women. All three would make the language more musical.

Whitman dreamed of a time when "women shall not be divided from men." He explicitly mentioned women as "equals" several times in his notes on language and

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spoke of women taking their place in “Politics, Business, Public Gatherings, Processions, Excitements.” But if women (and slaves and opera) brought musicality into the language of white men, for women (no mention of blacks in this regard) it worked the other way as well. Women had to be as strong and forceful as the language. There was no love for gentility here. (“Sometimes I have fancied that only from superior, hardy women can rise the future superiorities of These States.”) The language would be powerful, then, but far more explicitly than the conservative linguistics, not strictly speaking manly. It was the “glory and superb rose-hue of the English language” that it could become, according to Whitman, “the tough skin of a superior man or woman.”

Just as Whitman tried to transcend the invention/discovery dispute, he also pictured American English as both national and cosmopolitan at the same time. It was not the refined cosmopolitanism of a philosophe. Nor was it the imperial cosmopolitanism of a George Perkins Marsh. It was an earthy, rugged version, a version including the words of whores and slaves and loggers, of war and birth and sex. It included homoeroticism. Nor was this, it should be added, a nationalism that envisioned the “people” as a unified entity. America was, in Whitman’s own words, a nation of nations. The Leaves of Grass, he once told Horace Traubel, was a “language experiment,” trying to catch the “new potentialities of speech” in America. For “the best of America,” Whitman added, “is the best cosmopolitanism.”

In the 1850s, Whitman’s was a minority view. But in the years after the Civil War, the idea of an unbounded language would become commonplace, although by no means universally accepted. Linguists turned to the colloquial, with succeeding generations trying to incorporate more and more variations of speech. Literary modernists and postmodernists would argue that language experiments were crucial.

Everything wasn’t permitted, of course. We still have our police—copyeditors, class idioms, stylistic customs, disciplinary constraints. That the language of a journal like this is patrolled with keen boundaries will surprise no one. But current borders must be erected on a field defined by an initial presumption that all language is equal, a field, in other words, that opens onto the democratic horizon.

With the appearance of the notion of democracy, the dialectic between fact and theory alters. Before Whitman, when theory strove to bind language, words outside did not challenge theory, they proved it. For John Witherspoon, provincialisms did not undermine Locke’s theory of language, they rather reinforced its import—if imprecision was rampant, then there was ever more need for clarity. After Whitman, however, this changes. When language is connected to the democratic idea, those

68 Whitman, American Primer, 13, 21.
70 Whitman, American Primer, viii–ix.
facts of language lying outside a theory become a challenge. How dare you exclude provincialisms? Working-class speech? Vulgarities? African Americanisms? Facts undermine theory, exposing the limits of particular visions of democracy. That which is excluded must be legitimated as an exception to the general rule.

Contemporary post-structural theory celebrates linguistic freedom as the bursting of boundaries. In this it reveals itself to be on our side of the Whitman divide. But it is precisely this aspect of post-structural theory (and politics) that raises questions among its critics. Can such toleration sustain a national identity? Or will the language (and nation) just spin out of control, the whole disintegrated into the parts?

Post-structural dreams of escaping boundaries are often connected to a language theory claiming that crucial metaphors have a life of their own, that discourse always threatens to trap us. The grid of language imposes order on the world, suppressing the sheer diversity of reality. Roland Barthes puts it especially dramatically. Language, he claims, "is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist." Since discourse always threatens to control us, undisciplined speech becomes an act of freedom. With post-structuralism, a new dialectic of invention and discovery is posed: The inventive play of language can only be set free through the persistent exposure (discovery) of language's limits.72

This translates into an effort to transgress borders. The goal is to let diversity emerge through an unequivocal respect for difference, an idea, of course, that is very Whitmanesque. But if respect for difference and the smashing of borders were aspects of Whitman's 1850s musings on American English, he differed in one important way from current theorists. Whitman did not see any contradiction between disorder and order, between the elaboration of difference and an embrace of the whole. He did not think that any conceptualization of American English, by the very virtue of its being a conceptualization, would inevitably constrict the language. His transcendentalism was critical here. For Whitman, a cosmic order held all. "The English language is grandly lawless like the race who use it," Whitman wrote. But then he caught himself: "or rather, [English] breaks out of the little laws to enter truly the higher ones." In the end there was unity.73

Contemporary post-structuralism draws on themes that Whitman was among the first to introduce—the elaboration of difference, the respect for unbounded language. But contemporary post-structuralism often rejects the other side of Whitman—the integrative side. The respect for other is emphasized while the gesture of embrace is suspect as subservive of difference. "Consensus," Jean-François Lyotard dryly informs us, "has become an outmoded and suspect value."74 Post-structuralism's the-

73 Whitman, American Primer, also see Nancy Rosenblum, "Strange Attractors: How Individualists Connect to Form Democratic Unity," Political Theory, 18 (Nov. 1990), 581–85.
74 Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian
oretical disdain for "wholism" or "totality" all too often encourages this very sus-
picion.75

No doubt Whitman's own solutions raise questions. I can't imagine his transcen-
dentalism winning many contemporary adherents (to say the least). Similarly, his
utterly unreflective mix of difference and nationalism invites scrutiny. But if the par-
ticulars are problematic, the project might still have something to say to us. For
Whitman, unlike many contemporary writers, assumed that respect for difference
could be complemented by a clasp to the bosom, that unregulated speech might
be tied to a sense of belonging that even included nationalism. To understand this
is to unpack Whitman's own claim that "the best of America is the best cos-
mopolitanism."

Is it possible that current theory has once again blinded us? That efforts to expose
the limits of language have ironically limited our own sense of how people might
live together—limited, in other words, our own democratic horizon? Perhaps the
dance of language and linguistics will have to take a new turn, with facts, once more,
speaking to theory. If this happens, we can be sure that it will also entail a new turn
in modernity's unfolding dialectic of invention and discovery.

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75 For a discussion of this problem from an epistemological standpoint, see Azade Seyhan, Representation and
politics, see Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley,
1984), 510–37; and Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essen-

One theorist associated with post-structural thinking who might be compatible with Whitman is Mikhail
Bakhtin. While Bakhtin complained about certain notions of totality, he also talked about "open unity" in ways
that sound like Whitman, seems to have thought of a national language as an "open unity," and at times hinted
that unity and diversity might be combined only because there was a higher spiritual force. Gary Saul Morson
and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: The Creation of a Prosäst (Stanford, 1990), 55–56, 60–62, 236–37; M. M.
Bakhtin, Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, tr. Vern W. McGee (Austin, 1986), 60, 100. Whatever Bakhtin himself
might have thought, however, contemporary writers more often than not use his idea of the carnivalesque to the
exclusion of any other, a tactic that emphasizes differentiation at the expense of the more complex Bakhtinian no-
tions of the dialogic truth and open unity.