



Continuity and change: A review of *The United States of English*

Book Review

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Rosemarie Ostler, *The United States of English – The American Language from Colonial Times to the Twenty-First Century*

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Any author that decides to write a book about any given variety of English faces a problem. Should they focus on exceptionalism or exhaustiveness? You can take an exceptionalist stance and try to document all and only the features that uniquely identify a variety of English. This is difficult, if not impossible, since one of the chief characteristics of English is its promiscuity. Or you can adopt an exhaustive perspective and try to record all the features which the author thinks combine together to characterise the variety they are discussing. This is also difficult. But given the ease with which features move across varieties of English, their interwoven histories and their ongoing contact, it is probably the more common approach. Rosemarie Ostler’s book is an engaging read, full of all sorts of facts about English in the United States. The book never entirely resolves this existential problem – is US English special because of the sound changes that are continuing in American English even today? Or is it the productivity of the language, which has gleefully incorporated words, and grammar, from the indigenous cultures that English came into contact with in the Americas and the multitude of migrant communities that have settled the continent? This lack of existential certainty is unlikely to trouble fans of English – and goodness knows, there are plenty of them out there.

The cataloguists of American English vocabulary (the ‘word spotters’) will be fascinated by all the terminology that has been coined since the 16th century, in what eventually became the United States. Readers who might be interested in diving below the surface of ‘which word, where and when?’ will be equally well served by Ostler’s training in linguistics which permeates the book. She uses primary data to identify early features of settler pronunciation through non-standard spelling (e.g., ‘kittle’ for ‘kettle’; ‘bile’ for ‘boil’), and where she can, she carefully tracks these back to the British origins of different settler groups. This demonstrates the persistence of forms in tight-knit, early settler communities, an important principle of language change.

In general, Ostler presents technical linguistic facts accurately and in plain English. Her discussion of changes to past tense verb forms includes concise data and useful historical context. And she picks up on some of these observations later when she looks at where American English is today and where it might be heading tomorrow.

Ostler is keen to put American English in its social and cultural context. She pays attention to the changing demographics of the country and, perhaps more importantly, the relationships among its inhabitants. She is interested in how technological and cultural change shape language trends over time. In addition to discussing changes that can be attributed to migration, she highlights the importance of the motor industry, the Cold War and civil rights movements, computing, and the emergence of regional dialect appreciation societies. She illustrates the role that the documentation of regional varieties plays in the development of regional identity and local pride.

Ostler does a fine job of introducing the reader to the way language professionals view language. Language is treated both as an object of enquiry – her discussion of sound shifts and grammatical change are lucid and nicely-illustrated – and also as a

social phenomenon. Later chapters discuss ideologies of language and the political life of language, language and gender, language and the law. She can't go into any of these in much depth without shifting the overall balance of the book. It would transform the book from one that surveys the features of English in the United States to one that becomes an introduction to sociolinguistics. But she is to be applauded for raising key issues for readers to consider. Chapter 8 could be a lively starting point for a class discussion or an essay topic. ('Read Ostler and comment on your own experiences in one of the areas she touches on' or 'Read Ostler and find ten references that would allow you to start exploring one of these topics in greater depth'.)

Ostler includes some delightful facts such as the derivation of 'hooch' from Hootzahnoo/Hoochinoo, a town/village in Alaska that produced such concoctions. I also enjoyed her observation that some historically singular nouns that happened to end in *-(e)s* in Middle or Early Modern English have been reanalysed as genuine plurals over time (e.g., 'odds' and 'gallows'). But I think she errs in reproducing this class of words entirely from Noah Webster's account of them. The Oxford English Dictionary has examples going back centuries of 'news', 'riches', and 'victuals' with plural agreement.

The book does a nice job of foregrounding the input that minority varieties of American English have made to the mainstream. African American English gets quite a lot of attention. She gives welcome attention to the oft-neglected input of English usage from Hawai'i (which I personally believe is the actual source of some purportedly 'Californian' surfer innovations, but that's someone else's PhD topic). She attributes the spread of 'go for broke' to its use as a motto by the largely Japanese Hawaiian 442nd Regimental Combat Team and provides several sources for this. Her account might be even richer for knowing that 'broke' in Hawai'i Pidgin can signify extremeness, as in

'brok da mout' ('broke the mouth') referring to food of unsurpassable excellence.

I could object to some of her generalisations about pidgins and creole (e.g. pp. 66, 94) – I wish her use of source material for this sub-field were as up-to-date as it is for other features. And I don't think 'Red' (for Communist) 'probably alluded to the color of bloody revolution' (p. 73) – the Soviet army was, after all, officially the Red Army until 1946. It is also not exactly correct that the use of 'go' as a quotative verb 'was first heard among adolescents in the 1970s' (p. 216). The OED has attestations of 'go' introducing an utterance from the 16th century. Isabelle Buchstaller's magisterial 2014 book on quotatives sheds a lot of light on this. The pull towards an exceptionalist view of English in the United States means that Ostler can't make some useful and obvious connections with literature that would enhance her exhaustiveness.

However, these are minor issues. The book overall does an excellent job of enticing in the language enthusiasts and word spotters, and it provides them with a solid linguistic footing for their continued exploration of English in America. Ostler is to be congratulated for achieving such a fine balance between authority and accessibility.

Reference

Buchstaller, I. 2014. *Quotatives: New Trends and Sociolinguistic Implications*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.



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