

VARIETIES OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Language has sometimes been compared with a tree: from a trunk grow limbs, from the limbs grow branches, and from the branches grow twigs. Unlike a tree, there are cross-connections between limbs and branches, and even with the tree trunk itself. In this study, the trunk of the language tree is the English of Great Britain during the late seventeenth century. Three great limbs that have grown from this trunk are American English (including Canadian), Australian English (sometimes called Strine), and South African English.

Some of the cross-connections with American English include words developed in Britain since the division, called British Colloquial, which have been borrowed by American English. They include DIBBLE, TWIT, and ACK-ACK.

Most Australian slang is peculiar to that continent. However, a few of the words, such as DINKUM, have entered other limbs, including the American. The same thing can be said of South Africa. Some of their invented words, including DINGUS, have passed on to America.

Many Americanisms began as slang or trade-names and have become legitimate words: BLIZZARD, MAVERICK, BLOOMERS, SHYSTER, BOGUS, SPLURGE, SPRY, and WILT.

Some of the American branches include American French. When the early French voyageurs saw the Indians smoking pipes, they had no names for the implements, so they invented one. Since the pipe-stem was a hollow cylinder, they took the old French word for "reed", calamelus, and changed it to CALUMET. This became one of the earliest new words to be invented in the New World.

When the British drove the French out of Acadia, they migrated to southern Louisiana. There they intermarried with the Spanish settlers and formed a unique culture, including a distinct French dialect, Cajun. From it, we borrowed JAMBALAYA.

The Conquistadores ran into many plants, animals and customs for which they had no name. Sometimes they adopted the native name, COYOTE. Sometimes they would give it an equivalent Spanish name, ARMADILLO. Sometimes they would invent a name. Many of these invented names have passed into English: CANTINA, CANYON, TANGO, LAGNAIPPE, LARIAT.

German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania before the Revolutionary war were known as Pennsylvania Dutch. They gradually

adopted the English language, but retained many German words. They also invented a few new words, including HEX.

The region along the swampy South Carolina and Georgia coast had a population that was heavily black before the Civil war and almost totally so afterwards. In this linguistic isolation there developed a dialect called Gullah or Geechee, a word that may derive from the Gola tribe of West Africa. The dialect has contributed at least two words to English, GUMBO and GOOBER.

Some linguists say Black English is the only true English dialect to develop in America. It is spoken by children and uneducated blacks in ghettos, and is said to have evolved from plantation speech. Its structure, grammar, syntax and pronunciation have been thoroughly documented. It has been seriously proposed that Black English be taught in public schools as a second language. A feature of Black English is its use of slang. It is difficult to say which words originated in the dialect and which were borrowed from other facets of our culture. HOKEY is a word that originated in Black English and was passed on to Standard English.

English has borrowed words from more than two hundred other languages. However, these are a few that have developed at home.

A ONE, NUMERO UNO, CAT'S MEOW, SLAP-UP, LOLLAPALOOZA

These expressions, all slang synonyms for "excellence", aptly describe Walter W. Hunsinger's \$75 Picturesque Expressions: A Thematic Dictionary (Gale Research Company, Second Edition, 1985). Each example is accompanied by a short discussion and etymology (50 to 200 words). The result is very reminiscent of Eric Partridge's A Dictionary of Catch Phrases, but far more extensive in coverage - more than seven thousand entries are found here. The book is a delightful browse. To aid the reader in locating closely-related expressions, the book is arranged in approximately 600 thematic categories, from Abandonment to Zealousness. A few examples:

Awkwardness: all thumbs, awkward squad, bear's service, bull in a china shop, butterfingers, catch a crab, flub the dub, have two left feet, hog in armor
Exhortation: Bible-thump, one for the Gipper, soapbox orator, Soapy Sam, son of thunder, tub-thumper
Nonsense: applesauce, balderdash, banana oil, bunkum, cock and bull story, fiddlesticks, go to Bath, moonshine, tommyrot