

## The Awful English Language

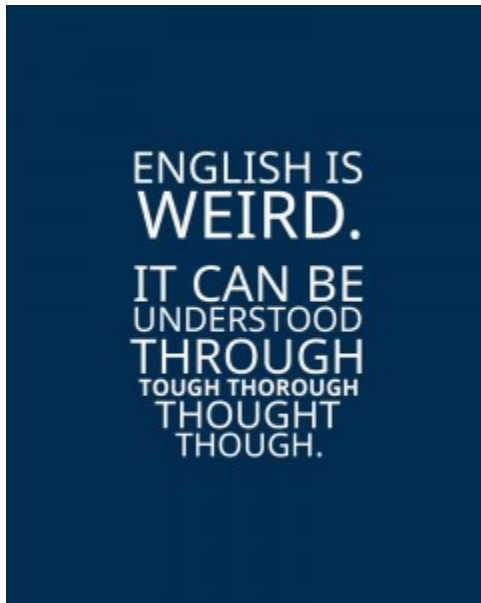
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Let's face it, Americans are notoriously inept when it comes to learning other languages. Unlike Europe, where many people speak several languages because dozens of nations with distinct tongues adjoin one another, the United States only has Canada to the North and Mexico to the South.

Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the United States. So you would think it would make sense for us to learn Spanish. But how many of us have taken Spanish classes in high school (or even college) and can manage only such phrases as "Una Cerveza mas por favor" (one more beer, please) or "¿Como te llamas?" (What's your name?)?

Then there is Canada—an English speaking country, except for those French-speaking diehard traditionalists in places like Montreal. Okay, some Americans may argue that Canadians speak English weirdly, as in *aboot* rather than *about* and *uoutside* rather than *outside*.



Nonetheless, Americans can travel to Canada and get along just fine without worrying about a significant language barrier. Cultural barriers are another matter, but I won't go into those here.

Centuries ago, I took high school French, and I think the only phrase I still recall is: "Comment allez-vous aujourd'hui?" (How are you today?).

Later in life, I learned German, but only because I was based for almost three years in a small Bavarian town in a signals intelligence detachment, married a German woman, and minored in German at the University of Kansas. Later, I learned Japanese while living there almost ten years as a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*.

And that brings me to the purpose of this post. When I was teaching journalism as a professor at the University of Illinois, I used to spend part of a class talking about what I called “*The Awful English Language*.”

We Americans complain about learning other languages because we say they are hard to learn. But think about the non-English speaker who has to traverse the illogical and contradictory muddle that the English language is.

It is filled with homographs—words of like spelling that have more than one meaning. Then there are heterodoxies. That’s a homograph that is also pronounced differently.

Also, English tends to be a combination of prefixes, suffixes and borrowed words from several other languages. As a result, we end up with endless combinations of words with unpredictable, sometimes contradictory, meanings.

While some parts of the English language are relatively straightforward, such as the fact that nouns only have a single gender, it is the spelling and phonetics that often boggle the mind. There are so many silent letters – knock, knee, knight – and plurals that just don’t make sense.

The plural of ‘box’ is ‘boxes,’ yet the plural of ‘ox’ is ‘oxen,’ not ‘oxes.’ We see these arbitrary formations happen all the time in the English language, as well as words that sound similar yet are spelled differently, or sound the same but are used in different contexts.

Now for a brief homily about the English language and how it got so damned complicated. Ahem, bear with me, please.

The English language belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages but has been influenced over the centuries by many different languages. English is considered to be a “borrowing” language, and that is why it developed the complexity that non-English speakers and even we native speakers find frustrating today.



English can be categorized into three groups: Old English (or Anglo-Saxon), Middle English and Modern English.

The invasion of the three Germanic tribes (Saxons, Angles, and Jutes) who came to the British Isles in the fifth century A.D from places now known as Northwest Germany and the Netherlands significantly impacted the English language. Their dialects mixed with English throughout the years.

Danes and Norsemen, also called Vikings, later invaded the country. Hence, Old Norse and Latin words are also found in the English language. The Anglo-Norman French of the dominant class also heavily influenced vocabulary after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Hence, we have a mongrel language blended from dozens of tongues, dialects, and idioms.

There. That wasn't so bad, was it?

Now, take a look at these gems and maybe then you will begin to pity the non-English speaker who must learn English.

- The bandage was wound around the wound.
- The farm was used to produce produce.
- The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.
- We must polish the Polish furniture.
- He could lead if he would get the lead out.
- The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.
- Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.

- A bass was painted on the head of the bass drum.
- When shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.
- I did not object to the object.
- The insurance was invalid for the invalid.
- There was a row among the oarsmen about how to row.
- They were too close to the door to close it.
- The buck does funny things when the does are present.
- A seamstress and a sewer fell into a sewer line.
- To help with planting, the farmer taught his sow to sow.
- The wind was too strong to wind the sail.
- After a number of injections, my jaw got number.
- Upon seeing the tear in the painting, I shed a tear.
- I had to subject the subject to a series of tests.
- How can I intimate this to my most intimate friend?
- Why do our noses run but our feet smell?
- I did not object to the object.
- Freddie filled in his form by filling it out.
- Why do performers recite a play, yet play at a recital?

Had enough? No? Then think about these conundrums of the English language.

If lawyers are disbarred, and clergymen defrocked, does it not follow that electricians can be delighted, musicians denoted, cowboys deranged, models deposed, or drycleaners depressed?

Laundry workers could decrease, eventually becoming depressed and depleted.

Even more, bed makers could be debunked, baseball players debased, landscapers deflowered, software engineers detested, underwear manufacturers debriefed, and even musical composers will eventually decompose.

On a different note, though, perhaps we can hope that some politicians will be devoted.



**Pete Seeger**

Yes, English is a crazy language. In fact, that was the title of a song that Pete Seeger used to sing years ago. Here are a few excerpts:

*“English is the most widely spoken language in the history of the planet.*

*One out of every seven human beings can speak or read it.*

*Half the world's books, 3/4 of the international mail are in English.*

*It has the largest vocabulary, perhaps two million words,*

*And a noble body of literature. But face it:*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!*

*There's no egg in eggplant, no pine or apple in pineapple.*

*Quicksand works slowly; boxing rings are square.*

*A writer writes, but do fingers fing?*

*Hammers don't ham, grocers don't groce. Haberdashers don't haberdash.*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!*

*If the plural of tooth is teeth, shouldn't the plural of booth be beeth?*

*It's one goose, two geese. Why not one moose, two meese?*

*If it's one index, two indices; why not one Kleenex, two Kleenices?*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!*

*You can comb through the annals of history, but not just one annal.*

*You can make amends, but not just one amend.*

*If you have a bunch of odds and ends and get rid of all but one, is it an odd or an end?*

*If the teacher taught, why isn't it true that a preacher praught?*

*If you wrote a letter, did you also bote your tongue?*

*And if a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat?*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!*

*If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught?*

*Why is it that night falls but never breaks and day breaks but never falls?*

*In what other language do people drive on the parkway and park on the driveway?*

*Ship by truck but send cargo by ship? Recite at a play but play at a recital?*

*Have noses that run and feet that smell?*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!*

*How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same*

*When a wise man and a wise guy are very different?*

*To overlook something and to oversee something are very different,*

*But quite a lot and quite a few are the same.*

*How can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell the next?*

*English is cuh-ray-zee!"*



Of course English is a creation of humanity, not computers, and it reflects the creativity of the human race, which, of course, is not a race at all. That is why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible.

There are also dozens of illogical idioms we hear every day. Such as:

"Head over heels" (in love, for example). Surely the phrase should be "heels over head."

"Meteoric rise" (to fame, for example). Meteors don't rise. They fall.

"Quantum Leap" (meaning a big change). A quantum leap is a very small change, but at least it is large on the scale of atoms.

"To leapfrog" over something. Surely it should be "frog leap" over.

He "turned up dead." That's used mainly in the US. Turning up, even when you are dead, takes real determination.

"Back-to-back" meaning consecutive, e.g., back-to-back wins. It should be "back-to-front," I think. The end of one thing is followed by the start of the next thing and not the end of it. Unfortunately, "back-to-front" already has a different meaning.

Finally, there are these ten meaningless and irritating English clichés and expressions that should be banned forever. I cringe whenever I hear them, which is everyday—especially by news readers and political pundits on television.

- At the end of the day
- At this moment in time
- The bottom line
- I personally
- With all due respect
- It's a nightmare

- Fairly unique
- Shouldn't of (ouch!)
- 24/7
- It's not rocket science-

PS: Why doesn't 'Buick' rhyme with 'quick'?