The American Language Study Guide

The American Language by H. L. Mencken

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Contents

Introduction

As a journalist, Henry Louis (H. L.) Mencken had little work during World War I because of his pro-German sympathies. To stay busy, he explored a subject that fascinated him: the evolution of American English from British English. The result, *The American Language*, was published in 1919. Mencken began working on the book in 1910, while still working for the Baltimore *Sun.* After the book's publication, Mencken received additional material from people all over the country. As a result, revised editions of the book were published in 1922, 1923, and 1936, and supplements were released in 1945 and 1948. These additions included more examples and explanations of regional expressions, dialects, and other speech developments and characteristics. Mencken's interest in identifying uniquely American cultural features is evident in his work in *The American Language.* He sought to discover traditions native to the United States, and his exploration of American English turned up many such traditions.

To Mencken's□and his publisher's□surprise, the lengthy volume was an immediate bestseller. With an initial release of only fifteen hundred copies, the book sold out rapidly. Its popularity is attributed to the logical, easy-to-follow presentation of research and theories couched in Mencken's characteristically witty, spirited prose. Today, it is read mainly by students, as it has retained its value as a seminal work in American linguistic study.

Author Biography

H. L. Mencken was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 12, 1880, the eldest of Anna Margaret and August Mencken's four children. August co-owned a cigar factory with his brother, and their success enabled him to buy a three-story brick home for his family. Mencken spent most of his life there, living elsewhere only during the five years he was married to Sara Powell Haardt (1930-1935). August paid special attention to his sons, fostering their talents and praising their accomplishments. When he was eight, Mencken developed a keen interest in reading and writing, which led to exceptional study habits. At the age of almost sixteen, he graduated at the top of his class at Polytechnic Institute.

Reluctantly, Mencken joined his father and uncle in their business, but when August died suddenly in 1899, the boy pursued his interest in journalism. He began working for the Baltimore *Morning Herald,* becoming an editor in 1903, but when the paper closed in 1906, he went to work for the Baltimore *Sun* as the manager of the Sunday edition. Mencken's lengthy career with the *Sun* (1906-1917 and 1920-1948) included a widely read column called "Free Lance" that lasted from 1911 to 1915. This column gave Mencken a forum for his witty, irreverent commentary. By 1909, he was also a book reviewer for The *Smart Set* magazine. This led to his association with two other men with whom he launched *American Mercury* magazine in 1924. Mencken's personality was a major force behind *American Mercury's* success with critics and readers. The publication was also a proving ground for up-and-coming writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, Somerset Maugham, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, Ezra Pound, and Sara Teasdale.

Mencken maintained consistent views throughout his career and, as a result, his work went in and out of favor. His glib writing style, for example, was unappealing to readers during World War I and the Great Depression, but it was vogue in the Roaring Twenties. During World War I, Mencken stayed busy by writing *The American Language* (1919). The evolution of American English fascinated him, and his book is still considered a major contribution to the field of linguistics. During the Depression, Mencken continued to work by covering political conventions. Despite fluctuations in his popularity, he covered every convention from 1920 to 1948 (except for 1944) and was especially visible during the 1930s.

Mencken's career ended in 1948, when he suffered a serious stroke that left him unable to read, write, or speak clearly. For a man whose life was enriched by words, this was a severe blow. He lived for eight more years in his childhood home until he died of heart failure on January 29, 1956.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: The Two Streams of English

Americanisms began with the early settlers' need to describe their new land. Increasing awareness of changes happening to English resulted in two camps, one supporting the development of Americanisms, and the other staunchly protective of British English. With the American Revolution came a "national conceit" that led Americans to reject anything British and embrace anything uniquely American. As America grew, new words and new pronunciations of existing words emerged. British critics were suspicious, resentful, and hostile, resulting in a great rivalry.

Americanisms first made their way into literature by way of humorists such as Benjamin Franklin and Washington Irving. Later, dialect writers such as Mark Twain introduced regional humor.

Chapter 2: The Materials of the Inquiry

In this chapter, Mencken reviews the ways that scholars have defined and recorded American English. He explains that American English is characterized by its consistency across the country, its disregard for precedents and rules, its inclusion of words and phrases from outside influences, and its inclusion of new words and phrases.

Mencken devotes a section to reviewing the earliest attempts at defining and recording Americanisms in dictionaries, glossaries, and articles.

Chapter 3: The Beginnings of American

In this chapter, Mencken provides a historical context for American English. He discusses "loanwords"taken from Native-American languages and explains that colonists from other countries brought new words with them. Americans also invented words for new foods and for innovations in architecture, agriculture, and hunting.

Other words were assigned new meanings, and obsolete words were revived. American colonists, lacking current literature, adopted many archaic words from the Bible and from commentaries on the Bible.

Chapter 4: The Period of Growth

In chapter four, Mencken describes how the language changed as America became more settled. After the Revolutionary War, Americans were determined to define themselves and their new country on their own terms. American literature was beginning

to take shape, and because of anti-British sentiment, many writers looked to other European influences, such as Spain, Germany, and the classical writers.

Mencken discusses the different types of new words in detail. He writes about verbs, adjectives, and then nouns, noting differences between British English and American English. Among the areas in which American English and British English possess very different vocabularies are politics, drinking, and religion.

Certain areas of the country were more impacted by non-English influences than others. Increased immigration resulted in Irish, Jewish, Slavic, and Chinese cultures introducing words into American English.

Chapter 5: The Language Today

Despite efforts to direct the evolution of American English, it has its own direction and momentum. Suffixes and prefixes are one way in which words evolve. Back-formation is another method; an example of this is forming "to resurrect" from the existing noun "resurrection." Mencken observes that the press, in the interest of being concise and conforming to space limitations, often creates words through back-formation and abbreviation (as with "ad" and "gas"). Verbs are often created through back-formation, using nouns as verbs (such as "author") and adding -ize or -en to nouns or adjectives (such as "hospitalize" and "mistaken").

Chapter 6: American and English

Chapter six explores the presence of British English in America and American English in England. After the Civil War, the popularity of American humorists such as Mark Twain in England made Americanisms more accepted. Around the beginning of World War I, American movies became very popular in England, further infiltrating England with American English. Radio, theater, and newspapers were other sources of Americanisms.

To illustrate the differences between the two strains of English, Mencken presents a lengthy table of British English words in everyday life alongside their American counterparts. He then discusses areas in which there are significant vocabulary differences; these include schools, business, professions, nature, sports, music, and honorific titles.

The American tendency to use euphemisms is especially apparent with regard to professions and features of daily life. For example, Mencken observes that Americans prefer "mortician" to "undertaker" and "help" to "servant." The opposite tendency is evident in the terms Americans have for people of various ethnicity, and a table of derogatory terms for people of various origins illustrates this point. On the subject of forbidden words, the American tolerance for crude language is inconsistent across time and location. Mencken provides various examples of words considered profane in England but not in America, and vice-versa.

Chapter 7: The Pronunciation of American

The next few chapters contain a wealth of detail and factual information. Pronunciation is difficult to study because of the subtle differences within individual regions. Mencken cites the work of various phonetic experts and their methods.

Examples of differences in American and British pronunciations include differing syllable stress (as in "advertisement"), the American drawl and nasal tone, and the pronunciations of some vowels and consonants (such as the British tendency to drop the sound of "r").

Mencken again notes that American English is amazingly consistent. In fact, some researchers have found that dialects are on their way to conforming to the general speech patterns in America. Still, Mencken claims that there are three basic dialects: Western American, New England American, and Southern American.

Chapter 8: American Spelling

In early America, there was no authoritative guide to spelling. Noah Webster's work answered this need. English purists resisted American spellings. Mencken boldly states that "American spelling is plainly better than British spelling," citing the example of "jail" versus "gaol."

Americans are generally liberal in their spellings of loan-words. They frequently drop accent marks and do not italicize foreign words in common use. They are also unlikely to use masculine and feminine forms of words (like "blond" and "blonde") or to capitalize as often as the British.

Chapter 9: The Common Speech

Common errors in everyday American speech include the use of double negatives ("don't do nothing"), misuse of adjectives as adverbs ("Look up quick!"), and mismatching pronoun cases and verb tenses ("she have been"). Mencken comments that most grammatical errors in common speech relate to verbs and pronouns. Errors also are made in combining pronouns and adverbs (as in "that there"). The most common problems with nouns occur in making compound nouns and noun-phrases plural (as in "son-in-laws" instead of "sons-in-law") and with the genitive (as in "That umbrella is the young lady I go with's"). Adjectives pose few problems, although Americans often double the comparative or superlative (as in "more better").

Mencken observes that American English expanded so quickly that certain oddities arose. Examples include strange compounds, (such as "that'n" and "woulda"), the contraction "would've" being broken back out to "would of," and the insertion of an "a" between two words (as in "that-a-way").

Chapter 10: Proper Names in America

American surnames represent a wide range of nationalities, but they also reflect the efforts of immigrants to comply with American styles. Many immigrants changed their surnames (and first names) to similar-sounding American names. When family members were born on American soil, they were often given American first names. As Native Americans entered the mainstream society, they often left their tribal names behind.

There are regional differences within the United States in first names. Americans also have a propensity to give unusual first names to their children.

Colonists originally named places after places in England or after landscape features. Today, there are eight categories of place-names: people's names; names of other places; Native-American names;European names; biblical or mythological names; names describing the location; names of the flora and fauna of the area; and "purely fanciful names."

Chapter 11: American Slang

In this chapter, Mencken draws distinctions between slang and argot. The first refers to colloquial language considered below educated standards of language; the second refers to vocabulary specific to a group or profession, and it often includes slang. Mencken discusses some of the major contributors to American slang. Besides the French, Americans are the most prolific users of slang. At the time of Mencken's study, there was little serious study of slang in American English.

Mencken devotes an entire section to a discussion of the argot of criminals, noting that this type of language is international. Differences among the argot of criminals, prostitutes, and vagabonds are explained.

Chapter 12: The Future of the Language

In the final chapter, Mencken asserts that English, especially American English, is destined to remain the most widely spoken language in the world. English is the primary language spoken in the world's most influential nations and is the second language spoken in numerous others. The ongoing spread of English further ensures its importance in the future. Mencken contends that foreigners find English easy to learn because of its straightforward nature.

Chapter 1.1

Chapter 1.1 Summary

In the first introductory chapter, author H. L. Mencken begins by quoting Thomas Jefferson, who foresaw a "new American dialect," based on new circumstances that would call for "new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects." Mencken then takes the concept of an inevitably changing language back to Noah Webster's theories that held similar predictions based on "a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and sciences, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe. The author introduces his approach to English by discussing the trends of language development and its nature to change based on the evolution of people speaking that language.

Americans now know more about England and therefore more about how English evolves because they read more, learn more from newspapers, and travel more than did early Americans. Mencken concedes that his book is not based on "known laws of language" and does not work to prevent divergences he writes about. Rather, his book points out erroneous theories and false inferences Americans used to teach grammar and uphold the laws of standard English. The writer acknowledges that this artificial language matches in stateliness the ancient Latin, serves teachers and orators well, and furthers the endeavors of writers. At the same time, for the average American, English is remote and vague at best. The average speaker, he says, does not learn from professors the language he or she knows and speaks but "a dialect that stands quite outside [his/her] common experience."

Chapter 1.1 Analysis

H. L. Mencken was an astute and often witty writer in the early 1900s. As a newspaper writer, political commentator and book reviewer, he held language in high esteem. He saw it as a writer's tool for expression and for communication. In his introduction to this 1921 book, Mencken reveals his disdain for nonsense, connivance, and sham. He begins his thesis by discussing the fallibility of English. He bases his theories and opinions on the nature of a language that is held to false standards; is constantly changing; and is too vague or out of reach for the ordinary speaker who will never master formal English. Bad writing, he says, results in attempting to write but failing because of lack of practice. Good writing results from either disregarding elaborate training, writing without awareness of lofty language principles, or both. The impact of such methods, writes Mencken, shows as a kind of bilingualism. The writer or speaker is trained in artificial standards of speaking and writing, and at the same time must develop his or her actual speech where, when, and however possible.

For the author, formal or standard English is its own cause and effect. It changes because speakers of the language change, because speakers meet new speakers, and

because people invent, discover, and posit new technologies, tools, trends, and ideas. The evolution of America, he points out, contributes to the evolution of American English. At the same time, this ever-changing language, bastardized and borrowed, impacts people who never quite access the nuances and standards Mencken sees overdone, underdone, or lacking in American English.

Chapter 1.2

Chapter 1.2 Summary

Mencken introduces the neglect and dismissal of the vulgate as a "strange phenomenon" known to American professors but not to philologists and other scholars of language in other countries. To prove by example the existence of devotion to the vulgate elsewhere, the writer cites the serious devotion at the Sociyty des Parlers de France, of Dr. Otto Bremer in Germany, journals on language in Sweden, the movement to overthrow the official language and substitute it with peasant tongue in Norway, the reversionary efforts at the Real Academia Espasola de la Lengua in Spain, and the focused attention to common languages in Latin America. Conversely, he notes, in the United States, only one "usable" treatise exists, and it is rife with errors and omissions. At the same time, only one dictionary of "Americanisms" circulates, and it was written in England by an England-born lawyer.

The author remembers Noah Webster, the American Dialect Society, and the "occasional illuminations" of such writers as Richard Grant White, Charles H. Grandgent, George Philip Krapp, Thomas S. Lounsbury and Brander Matthews. However, he insists Webster was more a reformer than a student of English, and the mentioned writers do little to perform preliminary studies on the much-neglected American language. Further, Webster made defective observations, was more concerned with controversy, and was typically rejected when he petitioned for changes to the vulgate. Still, Webster is credited for making American spelling simpler and more logical. In the same respect, a few institutions attempt to study American. These attempts, though, are what Mencken finds pointedly dismissive or lacking. Besides a few cited efforts, all of which the writer finds seriously flawed or too late in coming, a general attitude prevails to ignore, neglect, or even "violently oppose" distinction between American and English. This, he continues, can be attributed to the ongoing resistance to change and the insistent furthering of conformity.

Chapter 1.2 Analysis

The author reveals his disgust for the dismissive attitude of American professors toward common English. After noting the definitive work of many other countries, Mencken decries the weaknesses of the few existing works focusing on the vulgate in America. He finds such efforts poor in quality, defective, evasive, wanting, or incomplete. He cites as example the work of the Dialect Society, which he claims studies around the subject never focusing directly. The *Dictionary of Distinctively American Speech*, he reports, was announced years earlier and has not yet appeared. *Modern Language Notes*, with "its bulky volumes," is emphatic on many languages but only carries an "occasional essay upon American." The evidence proves how unimportant daily language is to the American philologist, who shows little interest in words and speech of his own culture or country.

Mencken also pursues the reasons behind such neglect of the American language, suggesting the fear of losing structured laws of language take priority over the acknowledgement of an ever-changing American. Americanisms and slang threaten the proponents of formal English. For example, those like rhetoric professor at Amherst College, William C. Fowler, subscribe to the terrible possibility that Americans might "break loose from the laws of English language..." and run amok with Americanisms that represent nothing more than the anarchy of speech and the people using it. Despite the well-intended but failing attempts of the National Council of Teachers of English, George Phillip Krapp and others' essays on Standard English, and in like attitude to such writers as Dr. Brander Matthews of Columbia University (who writes denouncing the delight of Americanisms as he finds them), Mencken opposes retentive, limited, and limiting fears and focuses on Americanisms inevitably making their way into the lexicon.

Chapter 1.3

Chapter 1.3 Summary

Pointedly referring to Dr. Matthews' probable disdain, Mencken says that writers appear to "delight" in localisms. While Americans have adapted to British-English and the British find it more difficult to do the opposite, seeing an indignity in differentiation, both sides have come to admit there is a separation of British-English and American-English. This distinction is clearest in the ways of writers who, he says, are 1) increasingly focusing on the "growing difficulties of intercommunication;" and 2) find like Sydney Low does that the teaching of formal languages in both England and America should also include American-English.

American plays become a matter of confusion and contention, he writes. When a "racier" American play runs in England, writers like the London *Daily Mail*'s W. G. Faulkner make great efforts to understand and explain. Faulkner proceeds with a review and discussion by defining American-English words, such as *hoodlum, hobo, bunco-steerer, rubber-neck, drummer, sucker, dive,* as well as *dead-beat, flume, dub* and *stag*, the latter of which, Faulkner misinterprets and falsely defines. The effort and the subsequent erroneous defining of terms for his readers illustrates the levels of difficulty even the most learned and well-intentioned fall victim to. Worse, he notes, is the response to American by the same writers who first try to understand it. Mencken again quotes Faulkner, who blasts American slang in metaphorical terms as an "infectious and virulent corrupter of England's youth."

The protests also go to higher levels. The English offer disdain for Americanisms in medical journals, at the Versailles conference, and in English newspapers where English writers smirk at American newspapers and news writing. Likewise, he gives those like Cecil Chesterton credit for avoiding provincialism, when the newspaper writer says that he does not mean to in any way suggest American-English is inferior to British-English. He acknowledges the fairness of Manchester *Guardian* writers who had reviewed Henry G. Aikman's *Zell* by saying they could not judge American by English standards; and he adds that despite the English professors, the sense of differences in language continues to grow. He quotes George Ade, who writes in his travel book that should an American travel to England, he would find he does not "speak the English language." He includes Ade's scathing distinctions, which state that one language is correct, the other incorrect, that one is a "pure and limpid stream," while the other is "a stagnant pool swarming with bacilli." These sentiments are not new to Ade. Mark Twain had a decade earlier spoken of the English inability to appreciate American in its "utmost impurity." Writers such as W. D. Howells offer novels epitomizing the "revolt" against stiff English in favor of the American idiom; and speak of American as a "grammarless" tongue.

Chapter 1.3 Analysis

Emphasizing the attention American-English should have, as equal to British-English, French, Spanish and others, Mencken cites the acknowledgement of writers who admit the difficulties of conversion but who also suggest learning American-English. He says writers such as Kipling, Moore, Dickens, and Wells have addressed the matter, and quotes Low, who describes how and uncomfortable with American-English the Englishman is. He emphasizes that the ignorance of British people to American colloquial English further aggravates their lives in such areas as intercontinental trade - wherein their lack of understanding and ability "hamper" their efforts.

The author explores further how, if Americans study and practice British-English, it is necessary British study American-English. He cites examples of specific terms, colloquialisms and slang that would help bring British into the American lifestyle with more ease: such words as *Prince Albert*, *boob*, and *saltwater taffy*. He quotes Low saying they are as close to the Shakespearean dialect as "the dialect of Bayswater or Brixton," but they are as baffling as any foreign language, whether the British person has studied it indirectly or in a Greek or Latin work in school. Therefore, Mencken reiterates, the campaign must continue to adopt and adapt to the second language.

The author cites numerous instances where English writers explore the disparity between English and American. While it is rare that an Englishman "refrain from sneering" at Americanisms, there also are defenders. Mencken cites one such writer, the aforementioned W. Archer, who credits much English to America, which does not necessarily threaten to corrupt English, England, or American literature or journalism. When another writer, poet Richard Aldington, asks whether Americans are "to write the language they speak, which is slowly but inevitably separating itself from the language of England," or are to "write a devitalized idiom learned painfully from books or from a discreet frequentation of London literary cliques," Mencken implies that American-English is an extension of Americans defecting from Great Britain decades earlier.

Future chapters on the effects of physical change on American-English, which he reports is understandably affected: when the plain people of two countries come together, are mentioned, where he concludes it inevitably difficult to "exchange ideas" and make adjustments. In the case of wartime, for example, he notes that when American troops poured into France in 1917, the *Chicago Tribune* encouraged them to use the YMCA in Montaigne, where "American is spoken;" and *Illinoiser Staats-Zeitung* promised to feature daily articles "written in the American language."

Chapter 1.4

Chapter 1.4 Summary

Many works point how continental philologists are aware of the English and American lay observations, says Mencken. He notes evidence in the publication of separate editions of the same work of, for example, *Sprachf'hrer,* which appears in both *Amerikanisch* and *Englisch*. Despite these and other publications which acknowledge the awkwardness for non-Americans to grasp American, the author maintains continental Europeans still take for granted that English and American are two different languages now separated: 1) in French articles, comments still point to the "peculiarities of American;" and 2) Scandinavians such as Elias Molee write that acquiring correct English is a great burden for "people grown so mongrel in blood as the Americans." However, Molee's suggested new language, a mix of English, American, and German, is for Mencken too complex a grammar for anyone to adopt.

Chapter 1.4 Analysis

As a proponent of language in general, and of American-English in particular, Mencken exposes the ethnocentrism expressed in attitudes toward American English. Americans are mongrels. Americans should be replaced. Clearly, though, Mencken is intolerable. He counters that new suggestions for a new language are inept, too complex, and are making no progress in America.

Chapter 1.5

Chapter 1.5 Summary

Providing general characterization of American speech, Mencken claims that those discussing it point out 1) its general uniformity throughout America; and 2) its "impatient disregard" for rules and precedents of grammar. Both subsequently lend themselves to a great capacity for taking in and/or creating new words and phrases. Unlike other countries, in America there is a general dialect shared by the whole nation. He quotes President Taft, who states they "all speak the same language and have the same ideas," adding his is a comment affirmed by others - *New York World*, Gilbert M. Tucker, American observers. "...There is practically no difference between the American spoken in our 4,039,000 square miles of territory, except as spoken by foreigners.... From Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, no trace of a distinct dialect is to be found."

Chapter 1.5 Analysis

In an effort to redeem American English, Mencken sets out to prove that no other country has the "linguistic solidarity" that America has. He maintains that no other country approaches American English with such intent. Some countries refuse to even attempt to speak it, he says. The writer also expresses the unified pride of being the only country that has a shared "dialect" rather than a distinctly differing set of dialects. He supports this contention with examples of how the marked differences in England have the Lancashire miner and the Lincolnshire farmer possibly unable to understand each other, even though they both speak English.

Quoting Pickering, Mencken reminds readers that Americans' shared language is due to American restlessness and moving about the country. The people may have different pronunciation or intonation, he writes, but they share the foundations of grammar and vocabulary and so can travel from Boston to San Francisco and still be understood. The author concedes that there are, of course, different kinds of speech, common and polite; but common speech is shared by all of America, and even its "vagaries" replace the great dialectical differences of other countries.

The chief differences between English and American are rooted in the differences of environment and traditions of each. The English keep to a "relatively stable social order," he maintains, while Americans have no such regulatory confinement or containment. The English grammar stays "arrested in growth," while American grammar and syntax follow the changes of a country of people who dwell in change and novelty. The English prefer to "conserve that which is established" to say the new in the old way--their conservatism held strong in parliament and papers, on government boards, city councils, committees, and in syndicates and commercial firms. By contrast, Americans keep to no such conservatism or formalization in speech. As is found in education, institutions, economics, and government, politics, and religion, Americans

defy conformity, the old, history, and holding on to formalization. Americans create language as they go.

American is terse, vivid, bold, imaginative, and makes great gains in novelty by reduction of the complex, or by addition or modification of the extant. American, the author decides, is made by doing one or more of the following: 1) abbreviating to form "Americanisms" such as *O.K.* and *P.D.Q*.; 2) coining by borrowing parts of speech such as making *corral* from Spanish into a verb or making *bum* from German into a noun, adjective, verb, and adverb; 3) adding a prefix to a substantive to create a verb, where words like *engineer*, *chink*, and *stump* become phrases *to engineer, to chink, to stump*; 4) adding a prepositional prefix to an intermediate adjective, to make such phrases as *to boom;* 5) "torturing" nouns with harsh affixes, as in *to burglarize* and *to itemize*; 6) "groping" for the root, as in *to resurrect*; 7) changing from intransitive to transitive, as in "a sleeping-car *sleeps* thirty passengers;" 8) forming adjectives without changing substantives, as in *codfish* or *jitney;* 9) creating "bold" combinations such as *down-and-out, up-state,* and *flat*-footed; 10) "shading down suffixes to a barbaric simplicity" to create *scary, classy, tasty*; and 11) "working over adverbs until they tremble on the brink between adverb and adjective," as in the words *right* and *near*. By emphasizing and defining such specific ongoing changes to American English, then, Mencken admits vulgarization, condones attitudes toward novelty, and hails the language as does Sayce, whom he quotes as finding it "the living expression of the mind and spirit of a people, ever changing and shifting, whose sole standard of correctness is custom and the common usage of the community."

Chapter 1.6

Chapter 1.6 Summary

Mencken reiterates that pedagogues waste time classifying American. He claims White and Lounsbury have exhausted it in a most "preposterous" way, and says that though others continue to categorize Americanisms, there are no more to categorize. He cites the work of Pickering, which outlines the origins of Americanisms as 1) having formed new words; 2) having affixed new meaning to old words; and 3) having retained some words from the past, making them common. The author then shows how Bartlett added to Pickering's categories in 1859, adding 1) archaisms; 2) old words with new "senses"; 3) words retaining original meaning in the U.S. but not in England; 4) American adoption of English "provincialisms"; 5) newly coined words; 6) borrowed words; 7) Indian words; 8) "Negroisms"; and 9) peculiarities of pronunciation.

The writer cites University of Amherst's rhetoric professor William C. Fowler, who classifies borrowed terms by a) country of origin; b) circumstances by which terms come to be borrowed; and by c) miscellaneous Americanisms. Mencken adds a summarized version of the work of Schele de Vere, Clapin, Thornton, and Tucker, and discusses both the importance and redundancy of such work. He admires Thornton's work above all for its being the most "scientific and laborious," though he faults the work, saying the scope of such materials as grammar and syntax go beyond Thornton and the others' capabilities to capture every possible nuance and detail.

Chapter 1.6 Analysis

First, Mencken emphasizes the stunning significance of Americanisms. He records the outlined work of numerous professors, pedagogues, and linguists to show this. Next, however, Mencken contradicts his points. He insists on emphasizing the nature of American English as an ever-changing vulgate, yet chastises those who attempt to classify as wasting their time because there are no more Americanisms to classify. If American English is constantly changing and adding new words, would not the work be never-ending? Finally, it is interesting to see how each scholar observes the particulars of American English that are still of great concern for linguists eighty-plus years later. Though their labels are less politically correct - "Negroisms" are what are today studied as BE, Black Vernacular English, for example - their insight into the evolution of language by way of coinage, borrowing, and invention should be acknowledged.

Chapter 2.1

Chapter 2.1 Summary

The writer begins with a report of a rumored tale: during the American Revolution the plan was to abandon English as America's national language and replace it with, depending upon who is telling the story, Hebrew or Greek. True or not, Mencken says, what the tale does admit is the attitude of the mid- to late 1700s. Americans were passionately pro-independence and violently anti-English rule. He reminds readers that before the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin invented a new American alphabet, reformed spelling, and cited Webster's work, "endors[ing]" "revolt against English domination and his forecast of widening differences in the future." That future included a Congress, which instructed Franklin to use the language of the U. S. when he visited as Minister to France...two years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence from England.

As American independence grew, so did American language grow, says Mencken. Immigrants brought with them a hatred for the English. Those with too hearty a sentiment for Loyalists were driven back to England. At the same time, devoted Englishmen like Johnson and Boswell showed continued derision against all things American. He continues, discussing how Jefferson was admonished for attacking the "Gothic" ways of an antiquated English tongue, how Adams was mocked for his American composition that barely employed English, and how, by 1808, English critics were shaking their heads in concession to the fact that Americans had successfully strayed from their proper roots - in act and in linguistic choices. Proponents of Americanisms, such as Reverend Jeremy Belknap, tried to defend how English in America was merely surviving there, though it had died an archaic death in England.

Chapter 2.1 Analysis

Besides offering significant historical information that parallels and justifies the departure of American English from British English, Mencken also returns to discussing the earliest efforts of scholars and linguists to categorize and finalize American. After reiterating the impact on language of changing politics, beliefs, movements, and other events and circumstances, Mencken credits Belknap, Pickering, Channing, and others for their efforts at understanding and defending American English. That the language mirrors the people's circumstances is one of his most important focuses throughout the book. Also important are the men who first identified and upheld the new language, despite how it differed from English and regardless of how much resistance speakers of American faced.

Mencken, bringing back Pickering, also emphasizes the individual who first paid the closest and most thorough attention to the American language. Despite the insight into how American and English drastically differed, despite his defense against accusations

that the U.S. made a deliberate overthrowing of the old language, and regardless of how he made the usual mistakes of the "pioneer," Pickering was diligent and shrewd. He was an underestimated and under-appreciated scholar who made significant contributions to the study of American English.

Chapter 2.2

Chapter 2.2 Summary

More specific to his previous discussion of differentiation, the author launches into the sources of early, Americanisms. He maintains that the first "genuine" Americanisms were borrowed from "Indian" dialects. He credits scholars such as historian Robert Beverly and others with listing such borrowed words as, for example, *skunk*, *hickory, scuppernong, paw-paw, catalpa,* and *cougar.* These and many other words label items, beings, and places that the new Americans had no experience with prior to immigrating. Therefore American took on already formed terms and labels, says Mencken, explaining that this process involved forthright attempts to adopt new words or alter words to fit their lexicon, offering *isquontersquash* and *squantersquash,* and showing how they became *squash.*

Mencken also describes what he says philologists call the "law of Hobson-Jobson." Besides directly adopting and modifying words to meet linguistic needs, people also use a third procedure. They attempt to keep the original word in tact and to make it fit "harmoniously" into their own language. However, hearing the word spoken by another tribe and repeating it as best they can, they fail to pronounce accurately or to subsequently spell accurately the word heard. Mencken cites reports of Col. Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, who observed British soldiers in India repeated the words *Hassan* and *Hosein* but mispronounced them as *Hobson* and *Jobson*. So, the author confirms, this third way becomes a third influence on the creating of Americanisms.

Chapter 2.2 Analysis

When two cultures meet and commune, the newly created third culture needs a common language. Words with no basis elsewhere, with no "counterparts" in one's own experience or country of origin, are thus created by the borrowing of words from the second culture. With the new experiences comes new language to describe, express, or communicate those experiences. This is the author's premise as he considers the origin of the "genuine" Americanisms--which he finds must likely get its start from the Native Americans already living in America when the first immigrants arrive.

By now, Mencken has discussed three ways American English is started: 1) by borrowing and changing a word; 2) by borrowing and keeping in tact a word; and 3) by attempting to do the latter but accidentally mispronouncing, thereby recreating the entire word...or creating a completely new one.

Chapter 2.3

Chapter 2.3 Summary

Next, Mencken focuses on the importance of creating new words in early America. This act of basing completely new words on new experiences or circumstances is what he and others call "coining." He concedes that it is hard to imagine Puritans coining such verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and substantives as *to cowhide* and *to logroll*, *no-account* and *stumped*, *no-how* and *lickety-split*, and *bull-frog*, *hog-wallow*, and *hoe-cake*. He asserts, however, that the new form of proletariat American, stubborn and rebellious, was more than willing and equally capable to bring inventiveness to the language. These people settled as early as 1628, were the "blackguard roisterers," the artisans and sailors who brought, not niceness, but enterprise and resourcefulness to the American language. They brought wildness to the axe and plow...along with such colorful words and phrases as *bull-frog, canvas-back, mud-hen, cat-bird, razor-back, garter-snake, ground-hog, live-oak, potato-bug, turkey-gobbler, sweet-potato, poke-weed, copper-head, eel-grass, reed-bird, egg-plant, blue-grass, pea-nut, pitch-pine, cling-stone* (peach), *moccasin-snake, June-bug, lightning-bug,* and *butter-nut.*

The pioneers renamed things that already had names, though they were unaware of the existing names, reports Mencken. He quotes Beverly, writing about soldiers who dine heartily on salads with Jamestown weeds, which later became Jimson weeds, which had been previously identified by the English as *Datura stramonium...*though the colonists had no knowledge of this, for example. This ignorance included the re-naming of landscapes and natural elements, in a way that incorporated their literal descriptiveness. With new landscape, he notes, came a new mode of life and new words for the language.

Chapter 2.3 Analysis

The early Americans coined words to fit their experiences. Important to note is not only what words they coined but how they coined them. They labeled animals, insects, creatures, and things by comparing (*bull-frog*). They named things according to their sensory descriptions (*copper-head*). They also named things and beings according to their function or state (*potato-bug, cling-stone*). They coined, as Mencken offers for example, *shingle* and *frame-house*; *alderman* and *Indian-giver*; *hired-man* and *hired-girl*; *spelling bee*, and *sophomore*. In respect, readers can chart the colonists' progression and can consider how words still in use today got their meaningful starts. Because the new life brought new experiences, environment, uses, and circumstances, the Americans named and re-named, according to people's clever observations, complex values, and simple needs.

Chapter 2.4

Chapter 2.4 Summary

Many words, Mencken maintains, were contributions already in existence, just changed in meaning for new purposes. He gives a couple of examples, including how the word *lot* was debatably a) first used to label any parcel of land, or was b) used because land in New England was distributed by lot, but is, regardless, c) still used throughout America but hardly at all in England. Other words used today in American but not in English, or taken from the English and modified in form or meaning for American include the English *team,* meaning a pair of draft horses but in American coming to mean horses and vehicle, and the English word *corn,* meaning any edible grain, coming to mean only the Indian maize the colonists ate and learned to grow.

Chapter 2.4 Analysis

The author repeats that separation of American and English languages is an important distinction - doing so by way of numerous examples of words slightly modified, changed, or replaced in form, content, and meaning. Mencken also reiterates that this disparity reflects the hostile departure of two cultures...of the Americans as having liberated themselves from British authority and showing in many ways, especially in their language, their defiance and autonomy. Again, they did so by disregarding existing words, by borrowing then changing words, and by creating - or coining - their own words. They insinuated their own philosophies, sentiments, and ultimately their own meaning, making clear and instituting their separateness through their unique and adamant treatment of English.

Chapter 2.5

Chapter 2.5 Summary

The enormous difficulties of communication, Mencken reports, helped foster the sense of separation from England that Americans felt. These difficulties added to 1) the differences of culture and custom felt by a population of descendants of original immigrants in America and to 2) the new aristocracy forming in the colonies. Further, traveling to Europe took almost a year and was both dangerous and costly; and what literature the colonists had - though much came from England - they did not read. There were no allusions to Shakespeare, and the libraries contained no Addison, Steele, Bolingbroke, Dryden, Pope or Swift, tells Mencken, who cites Perry and other scholars' reports. He reasons because of that separation and subsequent isolation, words were impacted in one of two ways: they were continued in the colonies long after they had disappeared in England; and they became more and more Puritan in the colonies. Seventeenth-century language, the writer offers, continued in eighteenth-century America.

With the exception of a few "superior leaders," the colonies were developed, housed, and run by what he cites as "soldiers of fortune, amateur theologians, younger sons, 'advanced thinkers,' bankrupts, jobless workmen, decayed gentry, and other such fugitives from culture - in brief, Philistines...." These Americans make it easy to understand why Robert Lowell called them people who speak the English of Shakespeare. They spoke, he writes, archaic English.

Chapter 2.5 Analysis

Americans had done such a fine job of separating from the "Mother Country" that their descendants became physically and linguistically isolated. Mencken makes this point quite clear with examples of how many words - obsolete in England - were now exclusively American. For example, he shows, a word like *muss* is virtually non-existent in England by the mid- to late 1800s is commonly used in New England...the only other existing use of the word appearing in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (first performed 1606-07; first printed 1623). The issue for the colonists, then, was how by perpetuating their own language, based on the behaviors, attitudes, and actions of their forebears, they were developing not so much a new language but one which was grounded in or stuck in antiquity.

Chapter 2.6

Chapter 2.6 Summary

It is difficult to determine, says Mencken, the exact pronunciation of classical Latin, as every original speaker of Latin is long gone. However, he finds what Wilhelm Crossen "did for" the pronunciation of Latin is what Sweet did for the pronunciation of English...yet, he regrets, no one has come close to doing the same for American. With virtually no literature to help in this regard either, the writer offers examples of existing speech as it has been passed to and adopted by those living in the region. He explains the Bostonian broad *a*, for instance, is erroneous - having been unbrokenly passed down from the first Bostonians and being authoritatively distinguished from the pronunciation of the same *a* sound throughout the rest of the country. While the rest of the world - of English speakers - was saying the word *father* or *aunt* without the flattened, continental *a* but with the "vowel-tone of the human voice" of *wash*, New Englanders or Bostonians were saying the same words the way the *a* in *lather*, *bath*, and *cat* was pronounced.

Similarly, later colonists held on to consonant pronunciations that were evolving in Europe. As the author tells it, they remained adamant about not flapping double consonants, about not gliding over - or slurring - consonant sounds and combinations. For example, New England inhabitants continued to pronounce the *w* in *sword*, clearly and articulately, while elsewhere the *w* was becoming slurred or obsolete. Americans also dropped the pronouncing of the h in where and when, for example, but never "elided" the *h* in the first position in words like *herb* and *humble*. Mencken reminds that this categorized them in with those speaking Cockney vulgate, those in England who were not keeping up with the universally agreed upon pronunciation changes, that is.

Chapter 2.6 Analysis

Based on Mencken's determinations, apparently, a provincialism of sorts prevailed, although who more stubbornly clung to the "right" way of speaking is questionable. In the same respect, the intentions of pronouncing words with the "vowel-tone of the human voice" seem pedantic, or uppity, the proponents of such articulation deciding what is "natural" or belonging to real human vocalization of vowel- and other sounds.

Mencken does suggest that the later colonists remained "more faithful" than the English to vowel sounds and consonant patterns that were facing change. The later colonists retained speech patterns they had learned from the first settlers. According to the author, who cites numerous examples from Webster and others, the pronunciation changes were to one side indicative of language sounds as "affectations." The other side, the colonists, ignored or refused them. They were "faithful," it is implied, to language and usage belonging technically to the seventeenth century.

Chapter 3.1

Chapter 3.1 Summary

Mencken surveys how American English and British English had, by the beginning of the 1800s, become differentiated in both pronunciation and vocabulary. Growth was hampered, however, by two factors: 1) a lack of any substantive literature; and 2) an internal political disharmony. Washington warned the people against getting "engrossed" in the conflicts of other nations in his farewell address; Jefferson and Hamilton were bitter toward each other; Burr was typically pessimistic. Leadership problems trickled down to the people, thwarting their abilities to think and choose for themselves, says the author. They were fearful, unsure and intransigent. Before the success of the War of 1812, Mencken writes, the new republic was in the throes of *Sturm und Drang*, storm and stress. Jefferson, who was anti-British and pro-French, had a terrible fear of "monocrats." Demands of French Revolution doctrines threatened the poor debtor class with bankruptcy, and property owners responded with extremes. At the same time, Americans experienced a great Anglomania, he says, avidly copying English manners and mannerisms.

He further discusses the growth of the nation by telling how Jefferson brought his version of political reform to the new republic. Jefferson mandated that they abolish ceremony at court and that they put all discourse to Congress, up until then spoken, in writing. These reforms were highly approved, he says, and British party was dissipating. Still, there was residual doubt, democracy was experimental, and ratification of amendments - such as the Twelfth Amendment - were delayed, until Andrew Jackson took office. Jackson, writes Mencken, was the "archetype" of the new people. He was an Anglophobe, an iconoclast, a Philistine, who was pushy, ignorant, impatient, and intolerant of regulation and restraint. So, because he was one of them, confidence was restored, success came faster, "American" began to "stand for something," and American speech began to successfully distinguish itself from the speech of the mother country.

However, reminds Mencken, the literature of the people was lacking. As he quotes Pickering and Story, people were so bent on making a living in "professional and other business in America" that they had no time for, or inclination toward, developing literature. For the few writing, communication difficulties made book-circulation challenging. Americans did not read or care to read books, other than a select few; libraries were pitifully stocked or absent altogether; and learning was limited. Reading and education were left to the "intelligentsia," who kept English literature alive but at the same time imitative. These few subscribed to magazines from England and wrote journals, critiques, and other works in American. However, since the War of 1812, the English had banned "all things American," says Mencken, and so there was no exchange of intelligence other than for the English and Scottish critics, for example, to severely deny the existence of intelligent literary content, style, or substance in America.

The English found the Americans' use of language morally and linguistically disgusting, writes Mencken. They brutally attacked their opposing country for their barbarous use of English - for degrading their sacred language of Shakespeare and Milton, even after the few learned American men of letters wrote them to ease up or suffer the complete severing of the last ties existing between them. The English were relentless and did not let up until the threat of oncoming war made them think they might need America as a "rescuer." All these years, Americans were anything but typically or understandably defiant, Mencken reports. Instead, they became more self-conscious, endeavoring to once again imitate English manners, this time in letters. Writers like James Fennimore Cooper began to imitate English literary content, context, and style.

Then something snapped in American literary instinct. Cooper, then Irving, then others took bold steps, says Mencken, to Americanize their writing. They began using American settings, American characters, and American speech. In lectures, Knapp, and in a new edition of his dictionary, Webster, would bring back the defiance to keep America American in writing and speech. The English had, writes the author, overdone it, and American men of letters were becoming immune to their intimidating and bullying. This, coupled with the "disillusion and shock" of the Civil War and the influence of an irreverent Andrew Jackson, strengthened American convictions.

Chapter 3.1 Analysis

The inhibiting of the growth of language in the early part of the nineteenth century is, for Mencken, due to a lack of literature and to political conflict. The first perpetuated the absence of dignity and discouraged expansion. The second "conditioned and enfeebled" the consciousness of the culture. Americans showed solidarity at the front, but fell away from each other when individual interests brought suspicion, hatred, and hostility between different thinkers. Many times, these differences almost "wrecked" the new confederation. With the leaders showing such political differences, the people were at a loss for cohesion. They were suspicious, afraid, and showed a warring attitude that would result in a struggle one called the "war for independence." As the author quotes Lossing, the struggle became the War of 1812.

In the interim, however, though Jefferson brought some reform that met with general approval, the real growth came when Jackson took office. According to Mencken, Jackson was truly "of the people," likely because he was one of them. He grew up in "savage" surroundings, maintains the author, and was as anti-authority as those citizens growing up at the same time. The author reports, "Jackson was unmistakably of that company in his every instinct and idea...." The prevailing attitude, one that was nurtured with little schooling and with the tendency toward the wild and adversary, now looked with hatred toward any imitation of English manner. Morals, mores, and mannerisms became more distinctly American, as did American speech become more separated from English speech.

Respectively, literature was wanting. Banned by the English after 1812, the few works by American writers and scholars were severely criticized. After putting up with it for a

decade, writers like Irving, Cooper, Neal, and others admonished the British that they had better lighten up to save the small bit of good will still alive between the countries. Yet, the abuse toward American continued for another 100 years. The English did not let up until the threat of war and their needing America came, in 1914.

One of the greatest complaints against American-English was rooted in their barbarism and bad grammar. However, the denunciating came from those disgusted by the Americans' bastardizing of English. The critics of Americans taking English for their own by "arbitrarily" changing it would find fault in how Americans took an adjective like *clever* and used it to mean more than "pleasant or amiable." Appalled critics found new speakers using the word to describe houses, sums of money, ships, voyages, and cargo. This reckless treatment of language the English purists found senseless, witless, and incomprehensible...and therefore horrifying.

Yet, after a hundred years of political, social, and now intellectual abuse, men of letters began empowering themselves again - this time in written speech. Because of the influences of Jackson, because of the disillusionment the Civil War brought, and because of years of study and effort, writers were making the departure from the tired and redundant English attitudes. They were Americanizing their writing as they had their speech. As Mencken writes, they were men unified in conviction that "he who dallies is a dastard, and he who doubts is damned."

Chapter 3.2

Chapter 3.2 Summary

All the pretense and nationalism of American writers, says Mencken, was *not* to "protect" American speech but to protect American *belles letters*, what were known as "beautiful letters," quality literature. While a few bold and defiant ones remained faithful to American, then, the majority of writers were hungry for acceptance. Men such as Fowler or Griswold, he says, "followed in the steps of Macaulay" and other English writers. At the same time, writers like Robert Lowell and Walt Whitman were determined to break from the traditional and conventional. They experimented, challenged, and reached for new means of expression. These new changes in literature reflected the new and continued changes in language and speech. They fulfilled the wishes of Walt Whitman's innovative dreams, dreams that Whitman acted on in his own work, wherein the man of letters invented new words, coined new phrases, and influenced the language of America. The author describes, "...though conservatism lingered on the planes above Whitman, there was a wild and lawless development of the language on the planes below him.... The pressure from below broke down the defenses of the purists, and literally forced a new national idiom upon them." As Mencken reports, America had achieved a "literary declaration of independence."

Chapter 3.2 Analysis

According to the author, even though some few writers adamantly stuck to Americanizing language and literature, many wanted so badly to be considered qualified literati by the orthodox English that they humbled themselves. That is, they continued writing in English by imitating the forerunning English authors and playwrights of that time. Conversely, those more daring and more desperate to embrace the new nation and its new language intentionally flouted the "polite language of the pulpits," exchanging it for what Whitman defined as "new words, new potentialities of speech - an American, a cosmopolitan (for the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism) range of self-expression." These terms were used by the contemporaries who followed, Frost, Oppenheim, Sandburg, Lindsay, and others. Whitman's prophecy, Mencken says, had been fulfilled. While the conservatives survived, the "wild and lawless development of language" thrived, "forcing" them into recognition and ratifying a "literary declaration of independence."

Chapter 3.3

Chapter 3.3 Summary

The American vocabulary was expanding, based in large part on coining - done by both literary and non-literary Americans. Mencken offers numerous examples of characteristic coinage, providing proof of how Americans changed words and meaning by 1) turning nouns into verbs; 2) extending meanings of conventional words; 3) turning verbs into new state-of-being nouns; 4) creating new verb phrases to capture complex thought; 5) coining new adjectives; 6) assigning new uses to adjectives; and 7) replacing words with new words or similes.

Mencken claims the adjectives and verbs were less often changed or modified than the substantives were. Of the gaudiest of inventions were those words necessary to define and describe new objects, relations, circumstances, events, ideas, and expressions. The author determines that aside from loan words, which he offers to discuss later, there are three varieties of nouns created by the early Americans, a) words "rescued from obsolescence or changed in meaning," b) compounds "manufactured of the common materials of the mother-tongue," and c) "entirely new inventions." He believes that of all three varieties, the most characteristic are those in class b, because these words show how Americans reveal the tendency to use shortcuts in speech, rather than spew a glut of words to describe when a hyphenated word will do just as well. For example, *gigantic rain storm* may be replaced by *cloud-burst*. Likewise, other characteristics of coining include how Americans at that time grouped series of artificial words around a single prefix; again how their language development departed drastically from the British language; and, Mencken repeats, how imaginative and inventive Americans were with the English language.

Chapter 3.3 Analysis

While some coinages have been retired, Mencken says, many have remained. Offering examples, he shows how coinages have survived in meaning, according to the circumstances and experiences of Americans: 1) Nouns are changed to verbs. *Doxology* becomes *to doxologize*; *citizen* becomes to *citizenize*. 2) Conventional meanings are extended. *To deacon*, which originally meant, "to read a hymn line by line," comes to mean "to swindle or adulterate." 3) Verbs are extended to include state-of-being nouns. *To publish* becomes *publishment*; *to release* becomes *releasement*. 4) New verb phrases are created, establishing vivid and arresting imagery to convey complexity of thought: *to fill the bill, to fizzle out, to make tracks, to peter out, to plank down, to back water*. 5) New adjectives are formed: *non-committal, highfalutin, well-posted, two-fer, played-out, whole-souled, true-blue.* 6) Adjectives are given new uses. Slim, once describing a person, now also describes opportunities with *slim chance*, and attitudes or occurrences, as in *slim attendance*. 7) One word is substituted for another, or one word is replaced with a simile: *angry* becomes *mad* or *mad as a hornet*.

Coinage was more frequent in the substantives than in the adjectives and verbs. Because the Americans were constantly experiencing new circumstances, being exposed to new objects, and needed to express in new terms, they created new words and phrases, which Mencken separates into three classes, or three "varieties." Of the first are words that were almost obsolete, such as *deck* and *gulch* or words Americans changed the meaning of, such as *billion*. Of the second are words or "compounds," he says, "manufactured of the common materials of the mother-tongue," such as *gum-shoe, mortgage-shark, carpet-bagger, mass-meeting, dead-beat, shot-gun, stag-party, horse-sense, chipped-beef, buzz-saw, chain-gang* and *hell-box*. In the third class are the "entirely new inventions," such as *greaser, conniption, galoot, maverick, roustabout,* and *blizzard*.

Mencken reiterates the essentials of early American vocabulary expansion. He reminds readers that they developed a language that was differing so greatly from the English language in political and social areas that they had separate nomenclatures, whole sets of words that were completely new. He writes about their emergent need to shorten, take short cuts, and at the same time express in descriptive ways something new. As well, the author repeats that the establishment, growth, and use of a new and evolving vocabulary affirms how imaginative and inventive the early Americans were.

Chapter 3.4

Chapter 3.4 Summary

The language of the Americans took influence from the Algonquins, Mencken writes. The Americans not only used the Indians' language for the many new objects, he says, but borrowed their methods for naming, for using proper nouns. The contact with other cultures brought more language. The Americans who were in close proximity to the French in Louisiana and along the Canadian border, the people in Texas, and those further West borrowed words like *bayou, picayune, levee, chute, butte, lariat, lasso, ranch, loco* (weed), *mustang, sombrero, desperado, poncho,* and *broncho*. As well, he says, the Spanish influence is in words such as *ante, frijole, tamale*, and *tomato*.

Mencken reports that at the same time language was diversifying immigration was expanding. Germans, Irish Catholics, and Chinese were coming to America, bringing new languages with them. The Irish were speaking "the English of Cromwell's time"; the Germans brought dialects of Switzerland, Suabia, and the Palatinate; and the Chinese, who arrived starting in 1948, brought a lexicon that first lent itself to the people in the Pacific mining regions.

Chapter 3.4 Analysis

As the Americans settled new territory, making contact with new people, they borrowed more new words. By the mid-1800s, such Native American words as *squaw-man* and *happy-hunting ground* and such names as *Rain-in-the-Face* and *Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Wife* proved useful to the settlers. They also proved, by their creativity and vividness, the sense of humor of the American. As Mencken says, these names and word-phrases "made an instant appeal to the American humor...and were extensively imitated in American slang."

In addition, immigration brought major influences on American English that reached from the functional to foods to finances. Germans, for example, influenced the language with sauerkraut, *lager-beer, pinocle, wienerwurst* (often reduced to *wiener* or *wienie*), *frankfurter, bock-beer, schnitzel, leberwurst* (liverwurst), *delicatessen,* and *hamburger*. The Irish brought vivid words and phrases and contributed to the forming and shrinking of phrases into suffixes, such as *yes, siree* into *yesiree*. The Chinese brought such words as *yen* (which became *to desire*), *to flop-flop* (lie down), and *kow-tow, chop-suey, ginseng, joss, yok-a-mi* and *tong.*

Chapter 3.5

Chapter 3.5 Summary

Discussing pronunciation before the Civil War, the author introduces the chapter with a reminder that people like Noah Webster "sneered" at the broad *a*. This particular pronunciation was, again, considered an "Anglomaniac affectation." However, Webster changed his mind within twenty-five years, Mencken says. Having authority and ordaining the accepted use of the broad *a*, Webster influenced what is now the current pronunciations of ask*, last, master, pastor*, and others, adding over the years to *handsome, caterpillar, apple*, and more. Other authorities protested, but, with the New England schoolmasters in agreement with Webster, the complaints held no weight. Alternately, Mencken tells, Webster failed to influence and gain support for other forms of English pronunciation. His trying to get a word such as *deaf* pronounced *deef*, for instance, only lasted a bit.

Chapter 3.5 Analysis

The English Language was protected by the original speakers, so much so that the slightest change in pronunciation incurred disgust and disapproval. For example, the continued change in pronunciation of the *a* sound brought responses of classism or provincialism at its surliest. Mencken quotes scholar Grandgent, who notes, in 1917, "Our *grass* really lies between the *grahs* of a British lawn and the *grass* of the boundless prairies." However, authorities like Webster influenced some successful changes--though try as he did, other changes fell on *deaf* (not *deef*) ears. In many instances Webster failed to convince people to change or retain ways of speaking. He failed, for example, to get them to avoid pronouncing a *y* sound before the *u* in such words as *gradual* and *nature*, just as he failed to change numerous other pronunciations. Yet, he succeeded, too, in enabling Americans to adopt/adapt as was befitting their temperament, culture, and wishes.

Chapter 4.1

Chapter 4.1 Summary

The author devotes this chapter to taxonomy, showing two lists - terms in everyday use in English and those in American.

Chapter 4.1 Analysis

The lists of American and English are interesting for language students and others. Each list shows the similarities due to coinage and borrowing, and shows how in each case the American term stays close to or departs from the English form of the word/phrase. By studying such characteristics in comparison and in contrast, the student may better understand the speakers of each term. For instance, the English use the word *dust-bin*, while the Americans use the word *ash-can*. Readers might infer that dust is more prevalent than ashes in England and Europe, that ashes are more abundant in America, or that cleaning requires using the appropriate receptacle...a dust bin for the dirt, dust, and like, and an ash can for cleaning the hearth/fireplace.

Chapter 4.2

Chapter 4.2 Summary

Mencken next discusses differences in usage. The terms, he suggests, reflect divergent ways of life. The words are part of each countryperson's business, office activities, home life, dealings with family, sports, amusements, politics, and religion. Many examples follow, according to Mencken, showing the diversity of peoples and manners of speech. The *ground floor* is the entrance-floor for the English, while the Americans enter by way of the *first floor*, for example. A letter is *posted* in one country, *mailed* in another. In one place men wear *suspenders*; in another place they wear *braces*.

Chapter 4.2 Analysis

As linguistic students and scholars might have anticipated reading the taxonomy of the previous chapter, Mencken next addresses how the different lexicons reflect the different cultures' everyday experiences which, of course, differ, too. To exemplify how differing lifestyles are reflected in the different languages, he offers an anecdote: An Englishman asks an American what they do with so much fruit. The woman responds, "We eat all we can, and what we can't we can." This explains much, the author reminds. First, the pronunciation of the *a* sounds will fluster the Englishman. Second, the last *can* in the woman's statement refers not to a modal, not to *able to*, but to the habit of preserving fruits by way of a *canning* process.

Chapter 4.3

Chapter 4.3 Summary

Mencken considers honorifics, titles the English and Americans bestow on their "men of mark." Here again, the two countries diverge. The English are quick to bestow honorifics and equally careful to only honor those who deserve it. The Americans grant esteemed titles to professionals over a wide range of ranks. The author studies the distinctions further, giving examples of the different regards and naming practices as they apply to those in medicine, education, and the military, as well.

Chapter 4.3 Analysis

Making further distinction in attitude and language usage, Mencken notes how Americans are more inclusive about honorifics than are the English. For example, Americans give titles to all members of the healing profession, he says, regardless of rank, whereas the British withhold the title for many medical professionals. In America, an *osteopath* or a *chiropodist* is called a *doctor*; in England, even many surgeons do not bear the honorary title.

Remember, Mencken writes these observations in the early part of the twentieth century, so his findings include examples such as how in America "every pedagogue" is addressed as *Professor*, but in England the same title is "very rigidly restricted to men who hold chairs in the universities." A few decades later, *Professor* will also be bestowed on those who earn the honorific by way of education and experience.

Chapter 4.4

Chapter 4.4 Summary

Mencken covers euphemisms, first giving numerous examples of those the English use, then comparing English to American euphemisms. He provides examples used in labor, educational milieus, medicine, business, and the arts. He gives anecdotal examples to show the differences between American and English euphemisms and labels. He also discusses names attached to ethnicity, showing that the language and naming practices in England differ from those in America because of the sensitivity to connotations. For example, he describes how in America, the possible "influence of Jewish advertisers" leads to newspapers and other printed materials calling Jewish people *Hebrews*, whereas in England, he writes, Jewish people "...are in the main of considerable education, and so they are above any silly shrinking from the name of *Jew*."

Chapter 4.4 Analysis

Mencken seems to have a bit of fun discussing euphemisms with snarky comments about examples and humorous jabs at subjects of his anecdotes. The term euphemism, from the Greek for "good omen," means a word or phrase that sounds good, one that replaces a possibly offensive word or phrase. Here, then, the author considers the degree to which euphemisms of each culture are used by speakers to go out of their way to avoid offending. The English, he suggests, care less about offending menial laborers. For example, they use *servant* more frequently for people working in clerk positions, on the railroads, and in any inferior kind of work. Conversely, the Americans give more credit to workers, as they call them *employees* in general or use specific terms such as *lady clerk* rather than *servant*.

The distinction Mencken makes points to the more impersonal and detached attitudes of the English. This includes implications that class division was considered more carefully and was more important to one culture than it was for and to the other. As Mencken notes, quoting W. L. George, Americans take greater pains to label and title each worker of a profession with class and sub-class euphemisms. An usher at the theatre might be *the chief of the ushers*, though all he does is seat people, or the dean of a university is actually one of many deans in one of many departments on one of more than one campus. Americans consider a *university* a "collection of colleges," he and George explain; and when one asks to see *the dean*, as Mr. George did one time, the response will be "Which dean?" As George comments, "In that [one] building there were enough deans to stock all the English cathedrals."

Mencken devotes much of the chapter to ethnic euphemisms - in particular, to the use of the word *Jew* and its displacement term, *Hebrew*. He claims that those in America are sensitive to and have the clout to discourage the use of the word *Jew*. These people push, instead, using *Hebrew* over *Jew*. He contrasts this attitude with that in England,

where, he suggests, more educated, less prickly personalities have no problem being called *Jews*. However, he pursues, finding Americans follow a manifesto of sorts, creeds that include the following: 1) In the U.S. a "class of well-to-do commercial Jews" force the newspapers to "truckle to their every whim;" 2) One often encounters in the papers and elsewhere such "absurdities" as *Hebrew congregation* and *Hebrew holidays*; 3) The words *Jew* and *Jewish* are not objectionable; 4) the word *Jew* is a noun and should "never be used as an adjective or verb; and 5) the word *Hebrew* should not be used instead of *Jew*, because it connotes ancient history. Mencken finds these attitudes and subsequent naming practices "unfortunate," "silly," and a bane to writers who therefore must "retire behind" the extra work of wordiness...using *East side agitators* in place of *Jewish Socialists* and writing word phrases for *Hebrew members* who are, he implies, simply *Jews*. It is clear what Mencken's take is, then, on political correctness by way of euphemisms.

Chapter 4.5

Chapter 4.5 Summary

Here Mencken studies the differences and derivations of expletives and forbidden words. He opens with a discussion of different terms the Americans and English have for illness, explaining that English remains plain and more "proper," while American is undaunted in descriptiveness. For example, he writes, Americans will say they were *sick at the stomach* last night, but the English will not discuss their stomachs in the "presence of ladies," so will rely on such euphemisms as *Little Mary* for discussing past ills.

The author describes what contributed to the use of euphemisms to replace improper words. First, he notes that ladies and gentlemen of higher echelons decided on degrees of propriety and therefore on what words were and were not acceptable. Next, he reports that bans placed on specific words lent themselves to newspapermen changing other terms, accordingly. Finally, he explains how the passage of the 1873 Comstock Postal Act stimulated numerous word changes.

Mencken also shows how the avid censorship of language contributed to misinformation and to the subsequent negative impact on people's health. He shows, for example, how turning offensive medical terms such as *syphilis* into phrases like *social disease* prevented medical and other practitioners from informing the public about the post-war epidemics, making it hard for them to announce in newspapers and therefore to treat. However, the vice crusaders, says Mencken, forced the newspapers to use more honest, direct terminology. The confusion of illness and disease, that is, was because of the indirect language. Euphemisms were used to clean up the language and avoid offending sensitive readers, but people's efforts to be socially acceptable actually worked against those fighting disease. They were not permitted to name, announce, and thereby give treatment for such diseases. What had to happen, the author tells, is medical and other professionals would have to campaign for words to be returned to their true states; people would have to be honest and use language honestly. As one medical journal Mencken quotes says, they had to "look the evil squarely in the face and fight it openly."

Fighting the evil extended to fighting a language that was so particular about decency it was "indecent" to use the word *decent* in some regions. In the south, he notes, a young woman had no business using the word but further, knowing the difference between what was *decent* and what was *indecent*. With this example, Mencken launches into his discussion of forbidden words. He makes his own distinction regarding curse words, saying, "The average American...has a larger profane vocabulary than the average Englishman, and swears rather more...." With this he considers specific curse words of his time, how they change in status, how they are defined, whether they are softened with replacement words that "have no apparent meaning."

Chapter 4.5 Analysis

If euphemisms arouse Mencken's ire, expletives and forbidden words ignite it. Beginning his survey with comparisons, he shows how for the English, discussions or comments about one's stomach are improper; calling insects *bugs* is offensive. For Americans, however, some language is more direct. Calling the leg of a baked chicken the *second wing* is absurd, and a bug is a *bug*. In the same respect, Mencken notes, Americans carried euphemisms to the extreme. They nicened *cock* with *rooster*; *cow-creature, male-cow,* and *gentleman-cow* replaced *bull*; *pismire* became *antmire; to castrate* became *to alter*.

The language reform was well-intended. The higher classes determined which words were "offensive," and the newspapers followed suit by changing their written language. Good enough, to start, were the omissions of words such as *shirt* - which offended the gentile, the ladies. It was no big deal, either, to call a *whore house* a *sporting-house*. Everyone understood what such words referred to. However, the campaign on harsh language then extended to actual medical terms - and, as the author tells it, "Syphilis became transformed into *blood-poison, specific blood-poison* and *secret disease,* and it and gonorrhea into *social diseases.*" At first the term *social disease* would be understood as a sexually-contracted disease, especially if it were reported as having happened to someone else. Mencken reports it became "positively dangerous to print certain ancient and essentially decent English words."

However, to warn, advise, or encourage treatment of a social disease was to speak to ambiguous epidemics. People were not allowed to say which disease, and listeners and readers were therefore kept confused or misinformed. So Syphilis raged on in the military and in major cities where ladies of the night, houses of ill repute, and certain others were perpetuating what was only known as a "social disease." Mencken reports that in 1914, The Department of Health of New York City, announced handicapped efforts to diminish venereal disease. By 1918, the Army Medical Corps met with refusal of newspapers to print bulletins regarding venereal disease, and without correct terminology, no one could "correctly state the problem," prevent it from further damage, or treat it. It took the "crusaders" and the medical journal professionals to turn the practice of replacing offensive words with innocuous ones by campaigning for honesty in language.

With eyes on linguistic integrity, Mencken focuses on swear words: he considers Americans the more frequent users of profanity, and surveys specific profane words in terms of the following: 1) meaning; 2) origin; 3) development; 4) how they are modified for propriety; and 5) whether or when they were banned. The author uses examples such as the American *damn*, which, showing how it was altered or replaced with ridiculous euphemisms as *darn*; and he offers English examples such as *bloody*, which, he reports was actually banned at one time - it was so foul and had "acquired such abhorrent significance."

Chapter 5.1

Chapter 5.1 Summary

The author begins by reviewing how Americanisms "had gone over into English" and how English had begun to "get a foothold in the U.S." Both, he reminds, usually happened frequently and quickly. After giving an example, Mencken refers to Farmer, who surveys the introduction and assimilation process of a word. He discusses how this process transpires in four ways or means: 1) by American books, newspapers and magazines; 2) by sailors; 3) by travel/travelers; and 4) by American plays and movies.

It is important for Mencken to note the treatment of Americanisms. He studies the disdain for "American pollutions of the well of English." He shows how the English assimilated numerous Americanisms and documented them as having English origins. He also reiterates how at first the English denounce the language but then treat so much as their own that they fail to acknowledge or "forget" to acknowledge such words began in America, long before they were acceptable and before becoming naturalized in England.

Chapter 5.1 Analysis

In discussing the means of ingress of Americanisms, Mencken points to examples and to how the assimilation of Americanisms is treated. -Words are often taken from America and used inaccurately. First, for example, the English have taken the phrase *I should worry*, likely from Yiddish American, he writes, turned it "absurdly" into *I should not worry*, and acted as if the phrase began with them. Next, words such as *reliable, influential, talented* and *lengthy* - brought home by travelers and writers on the lecture circuit--are included in the in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, but of the four only *lengthy* is noted as "originally an Americanism." Further, Mencken writes how appalling it is that British authors, such as Pemberton, Wells, and even Kipling take American speech for their American character's speech and "make a mess of it."

Americanisms are also looked upon with disfavor, says Mencken. For example, words taken from American movies and plays and worked into phrases include "the *fall* of the year, a *stunt* they have in hand, their desire to *boost* a particular business, a *peach* when they mean a pretty girl, a *scab* - a common term among strikers - the *glad-eye, junk* when they mean worthless material, their efforts *to make good,* the *elevator* in the hotel or office, the *boss* or manager, and the *crook* or swindler." Such Americanisms are an embarrassment, decided so by writers Mencken quotes. He cites the commentary of Frederic Harrison, who says, ""Stale American phrases...are infecting even our higher journalism and our parliamentary and platform oratory."

Mencken notes that despite the many protests, most English speakers borrowed American words and phrases from the "tempting and ever-widening American

vocabulary," with many loan words introduced, used, and accepted as "sound English," even, he reports, the "most squeamish." The English adopted parts of American speech so well that when doing linguistic studies of their vocabulary, many people would gloss over the origin of a number of Americanisms, as if they were historically English. For example, words such as *demean*, *transpire*, *backwoodsman, know-nothing* and *yellow-back* are originally American, though the scholars do not, he remarks, "seem to know it" or because they seem to forget their American origin. Interestingly, the American "pollutions of the well of English" become items of high regard. Pride and possessiveness seem to eclipse negative, anti-American attitudes here...to the point of revision of linguistic history.

Chapter 5.2

Chapter 5.2 Summary

Having left previously with a doubt that the war contributed Americanisms to the English due to a lack of fraternization, Mencken begins here by adding that American soldiers did not likely pick up Briticisms. He asserts that it is on "far higher and less earthly planes" that Briticisms enter American speech, are accepted, used, and regarded well. He says that because the only English "fount of honour" in high regard in America is the high court, which Americans imitate in many ways, the only Briticisms in America are those borrowed from royalty and the aristocracy. Further, the more specific influence, he writes, is found in the theatre. He credits the theatre with the perpetuation of Briticisms. The storylines are concerned with "fashionable life," actors are British and then Americans playing British characters, and the speech, affectation, and pronunciation, of the current English, are therefore all the Americans revere and have to imitate. However, they cannot achieve the same pronunciation, intonation, inflection, for they do not have the same physiological makeup. Rather than speaking pure English, that is, Americans filter language through what Mencken identifies as Gaelic, Semitic, and/or Teutonic dialect. This, added to the many translations the English language undergoes in the imitation process, makes for what Mencken asserts is a diminished, guttural, crude replica of the haute culture.

The author continues by addressing the contributions to Briticisms made by the influences of the Protestant Episcopal Church. These influences, begun during the Revolution out of reverence or mania for all things English, extend to the people seeking one of the highest forms of acceptance through the holy church. They extend further to the children, to the preparatory and finishing schools that are also controlled or influenced by the church. The few who remain patriotic and faithful to an America against all things English protest the adoption of English terms. Their efforts to encourage linguistic autonomy is futile, though, for the majority of Americans in major cities remain devoted to the high courts, the high fashion, and the high elocution of England.

Chapter 5.2 Analysis

According to Mencken, Americans place such great value on aristocracy and royalty that they emulate the high courts in 1) what time they take meals; 2) style and types of correspondence 3) wedding customs; 4) their entertainment rituals; and in 5) "countless other directions," including language usage. Using New York as example, he notes how *stores* are turning into *shops*, signs that once said *For Rent* are turning into signs reading, *To Let*, and how *railway* is replacing *railroad* and *drawing room* is in the stead of *parlor*. The venue by which most Briticisms make their way into American vocabulary is, according to the author, the stage. Americans influenced by plays depicting the fashionable life in England, exposing them to English behavior, and offering them the

most current of English speech begin to imitate what he calls their "English colleagues." They take the stage to emulate British theatre and thereby imitate speech that spreads into everyday life. By example, then, the "American of fashionable pretensions," comes to eat soup, greet friends, shake hands, enter the drawing room, and use new words and phrases such as *path, secretary, melancholy and necessarily*.

However, because of the numerous levels of imitation, he insists, and because of the American's inability to achieve the same pronunciation required of the larynx of English people, Briticisms are guttural anomalies. They undergo a treatment that is four times removed: a word in English is expressed in imitation by a British actor mimicking English life, is copied from the English stage to the American stage by an American actor, is copied by the theatergoer, and is copied by the common person. By the fourth remove, the language is, as Mencken sees it, diminished and crude.

The writer suggests a second major influence is to be credited for American assimilation of English words and phrases - the Protestant Episcopal Church. He gives a number of reasons: 1) it was the center of Loyalism during the Revolution; 2) it has fostered an "Anglomania" ever since the Revolution; 3) "social pushers" of major American cities make a goal of entering and being accepted into its folds; 4) the clergy proudly imitate the highest English traditions; and therefore, 5) the parishioners emulate the English of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Further impact trickles down to the children, for they attend the preparatory and finishing schools typically controlled or heavily influenced by the Church. The results of such influences, writes Mencken, find such Briticisms as *headmaster, varsity, chapel*, *house-master, old boy, monitor,* and *honors* have now become part of American speech. The few who oppose the ingress fight to prevent Briticisms, remaining patriotic to America and seeing all things English as offensive. They warn against such terms as nasty, *good-form, traffic*, *to bargain,* and *to tub*. They are still outnumbered by those who are anglophiles, those who are socially advancing, and those who continue to keep the high courts of England in the highest esteem.

Chapter 6.1

Chapter 6.1 Summary

To introduce a study of tendencies in American-English, Mencken begins with what he cites is the spirit of America. He defines Americans as having 1) a general impatience of rule and restraint, 2) a democratic enmity to all authority, 3) an extravagant and often grotesque humor, and 4) an extraordinary capacity for metaphor. These characteristics, he suggests, "nourish" their language. He also reminds that as open, independent, and defiant as Americans appear, they are also conservative, cautious, and fearful of some particulars. As he quotes Wendell Phillips, Americans fear isolation, derision, and "all the consequences of singularity." The latter tendencies, toward purism, suspicion, and dread, however, are overcome. They are of the minority, Mencken notes, and they are overshadowed by a nationalistic view and a language that reflects that solidified view.

Chapter 6.1 Analysis

The author reiterates earlier observations of the general characteristics that make Americans who they are and therefore those that make the American language what it is. He cites the descriptions of colleagues who embellish this American spirit: because Americans are independent, because they have a natural inclination toward the fresh and new, they perpetuate a language that is ever changing. They re-write language as they re-write experience.

At the same time, though, Mencken considers the generalizations he quotes to be lacking the acknowledgement that Americans also carry an underlying conservatism. They are at times timid and fearful of the negative sides of independence - isolation and ostracism. Yet, he points out, the strength of the numbers and the power of nationalism override the fears and negativities. Subsequently, the language reflects the residual protectiveness of the nation, but at the same time reveals a solidarity, in such phrases as *to high-brow*, *to enthuse*, *to demagogue, to dope out, to fall down*, *to jack up,* and *to butt in*.

Chapter 6.2

Chapter 6.2 Summary

Of all the ways American iconoclasm reveals itself, the author asserts, one way is especially clear: the general disdain for "the niceties of Modern English." He gives examples showing how the American neglects otherwise important speech distinctions. He explains how natural forces, not etymology, contribute to this disregard of proper language. Besides being a "confection of grammarians," he says, further quoting the Fowlers, "idiomatic use of auxiliaries, [for example, will and shall]...is so complicated that those who are not to the manner born can hardly acquire it." Further, even those "to the manor born" have difficulty with the demands of orthodox language. Nevertheless, Mencken says, the examples of grappling or defying language conventions yield new class distinctions - between those who speak orthodox, pure English and those who ignore such distinctions.

Chapter 6.2 Analysis

Mencken maintains that Americans ignore the rigors of modern English. For example, they make no distinction between *each other* and *one another*. They do not make their speech accommodate the differences between *will* and *shall*. The disregard, he says, is not due to time or etymology, but to language's natural development. The will/shall distinction, for example, is not made in Shakespeare, is not found in the Authorized Version of the Bible, and it is absent in the essays and literature of the Queen Anne and Modern periods. Such determinations, special inflections, and speech choices, Mencken claims, are left only to the grammarians who insist on one word or word form over another. What is "barbarous" and what is acceptable, then, become reasons for some degree of class distinctions - the common speakers, Army men, and others in one class, and the *high-brows* in the other.

Chapter 6.3

Chapter 6.3 Summary

Mencken begins by writing that going back to the first growth of American dialect are these tendencies: a) toward the easy manufacture of new compounds; b) toward the transfer of words from one part of speech to another; c) toward the free use of suffixes and prefixes; and d) toward the easy isolation of roots and pseudoroots. He gives examples of these linguistic tendencies, showing how a word evolves from generation to generation. Determining that these three kinds of tendencies are especially active among the verbs and nouns, he offers further examples, including those formed in a humorous manner.

The writer continues, showing how the process of word formation next concerns blends, or portmanteau words. These words are combinations of two existing words to form a third, or are words given suffixes to identify something analogous. He explains that such new word-formation is done to "make one word do the work of two." The same goals apply to the next kind of word-formation, the abbreviation. As one scholar he quotes discovers, abbreviations are many and have been in use for centuries. For example, abbreviations such as O.K. go back to 1790, and N.G. is formed and in use by 1840. Abbreviations not only have a long history but are also used in every trade and profession, Mencken writes, and "innumerable in the slang of sport."

The author considers how the implications behind such word-formation tendencies explain the rift between English and American speech. He continues, discussing another kind of word-use, the use of formation of new compounds, novel verbs, and "racy neologisms." He also adds that hitching prefixes and affixes to verbs continues the processes of language development and highlights what is uniquely American about American language.

Chapter 6.3 Analysis

The American tendencies in speech and writing were what Mencken denotes as the "products" of self-consciousness about language. These tendencies go back as far as the Elizabethans. As an example, he gives the phrase *mobile vulgus*. It originated in Latin; became shortened to *mobile* during the Restoration; and then was clipped even more, to *mob*, in the "days of William and Mary." The author defines such a tendency as clipping or back-formation; and also adds folk etymology as a contributor to linguistic production.

Next is the blend, or what Mencken adds is called the portmanteau word. This word blends or combines two existing words to make a third with meaning contributed from both of the first two. For example Lewis Carroll often created blends such as *chortle*, made from *chuckle* and *snort*. In making blends, Americans also truncated or added

suffixes to base words to create analogous terms, in, for example, *printery*, to replace *printing office*, and *cafeteria*, to replace *coffee house* or *store*, and to make words such as *crispette*, *usherette*, and *kitchenette*. The intention, Mencken says, was to make one word do the work of two.

In the process of word-formation, American speech tendencies show how part of the English/American rift appears in the language. First there is the justification that word-formation processes are done out of a concern for "verbal economy." This includes the "disinclination" toward wasting words and the inclination toward the condensed, succinct, or dainty. Then, in the same respect, there is the "talent for metaphor." These point to what Mencken discussed in earlier chapters as the American need to detach from England and the American gift of creativity and innovation with language. The next kind of word-formation he discusses involves innovation, especially that in verbs, compounds, and "racy neologisms," risky new word-formations. These include, for example, *joy-ride*, *sob-sister*, *road-louse*, and *grape-juice diplomacy*, and, he suggests, are word-formations that are bold, many times humorous, and meet "genuine needs." All these word-formation processes as well as those of adding prepositions to verbs, finding new prefixes and affixes, and deliberately inventing new words for new objects, show how independent, inventive, and insightful Americans are in their development of what Mencken aptly calls Americanisms.

Chapter 6.4

Chapter 6.4 Summary

The writer begins a discussion of foreign influences by delivering the data of the period to show how the extent of influences from the outside is often underestimated. He avers that because of the thousands of new aliens, most of who do not bring English with them and most of who are not understood by natives, a constant pressure is exerted upon English in America. At the same time, English benefits from the influences of foreigners and foreign languages. While the English will accept the loan words less readily, Americans tend to bring enthusiasm and quicker acceptance to new words. Despite the emphasis on the impact of foreigners on American, he also notes, the foreigners face equally important challenges of assimilating and adopting their new language.

Chapter 6.4 Analysis

The author impresses upon readers the importance of foreign impact on American English. He cites the statistics, which include a hundred-year study of immigration numbers, and gives examples of the many countries and languages influencing American. For example, Mencken shows specific incidences of the practice of borrowing language from such immigrant countries of origin as Germany, China, Japan, Ireland, Italy, and Russia, and provides anecdotes for new language formation.

The impact of immigration, he explains, is twofold. First, the foreigner will simplify the language in his/her efforts to speak it. This in turn requires that the American reduce the language context so that it dispenses with "niceties and complexities" that the foreigner cannot master. Second, the foreigner "corrupts" American English with those "words and locutions he has brought with him." The American, however, benefits from the contributions to his language, is more hospitable and makes his language more hospitable to loan words, and uses even the uncomfortably "foreign" words now with increased self-consciousness. Therefore, the author concedes, the pressure and impact are on both sides and belabored by both sides. Americans must come to terms with an influx of words that battle each other for a place in the vocabulary. They must accept the expanding foreign infiltration; foreigners must work to understand a language that is predominant; and they must accept the borrowing of their language even when it will lose all foreign meaning or inflection. Mencken notes finally, that Americans come to such a task with enthusiasm, and foreigners meet their tasks with much success.

Chapter 7.1

Chapter 7.1 Summary

Introducing standard American punctuation, Mencken quotes Archibald Sayce, who says, "Language does not consist of letters but of sounds...." He adds that the history of phonology includes grammarians and etymologists neglecting this notion and staying too close to the deductive studies of words themselves. He discourages this approach, saying that people of a given race might write alike, but no two pronounce alike and might even have different styles. This results in the difficulty of determining an exact pronunciation for a given set or combination of letters. Moreover, the difficulty lies not in pronunciation but in intonation, and further in accent.

Mencken recounts the characteristics of the American voice. It is higher pitched than the British, although it is not altogether high-pitched but is rather consistently low-pitched and invested in a nasal twang. He also discusses the findings of comparative voice studies regarding syllables. For example, he quotes Marsh, who observes, the Swedes "debase their vowels and slide over their consonants;" the Southern peoples tend to "throw the accent toward the ends of their words;" and with certain words, the English accent the first syllable while Americans accent the second or third. In the same respect, the contrary tendency is true: Americans usually accent the first syllable, which he recalls as happening in words like *mamma*, *papa*, *deficit*, *adult*, and *ally*. With the latter examples, however, Mencken reminds that it is dangerous to over-generalize, and is better to focus on specific distinctions and differences. He models this safer approach by showing a series of differences in pronunciation of words by Americans and by the English. The author includes examples of elided consonants as "conspiracies against the consonants," and of "slaughtered vowels," all of which are, he says, part of a speech that is in American just as difficult for the English as English is to the Americans.

Chapter 7.1 Analysis

With regards to pronunciation and words, Mencken focuses on an important point: that to come up with exact signs, symbols and letters, for exact sounds is nearly impossible. First, no two individuals use the exact same pronunciation. Next, the efforts of past linguistic scholars have resulted in alphabets with 125-390 letters, finding it impossible to stick to an economy of signs. Finally, the dictionary makers attempted but failed to give precise evidence of all sounds of the human voice, which is, according to one phonologist, the only thing capable of giving value to the sound of words, "the most delicate, fleeting, and inapprehensible things in nature...."

The pronunciation of words is not even the most difficult to convey in words and letters. It is the intonation, reports Mencken, who quotes authorities of his day such as Archibald Sayce and George Phillip Krapp. So, the focus must turn to the English accent and to intonation. Mencken gathers the studies to recount characteristics of the

American voice which, he notes, 1) is higher-pitched than the British voice; 2) is typically low-pitched overall; 3) has a nasal twang which is caused by physical characteristics, thicker membranes caused by dry climate and drastic temperature fluctuations and possibly is due to the reported observations that Americans read more than the English do and take more care to pronounce new words; 4) is typically level in tone; 5) includes a tendency to pronounce the separate syllables of a word more carefully than an Englishman does; and 5) often sounds - to the British - "hesitating, monotonous, and indecisive.

Further determining the characteristics of pronunciation, Mencken concedes it is "unsafe" to generalize too easily. He proceeds to give numerous examples of the interpretation of American and English voice differences when pronouncing, for instance, words with the *r* sounds, including how a) Americans enunciate the *r* more clearly in many words, while the majority of British do not; b) the Americans' "persistent *r* sound" annoyed Henry James, who found it a "morose grinding of the back teeth;" c) the English gave up the habit that the colonists brought to America from England, when great men like Johnson protested against the "rough snarling sound;" and how d) the same English purists years later would bemoan the loss and the Poet Laureate would denounce the clergy's pronouncing "the sword of the Lord" as the *sawd of the Lawd*. Concluding with examples of other elided consonants and anecdotes to depict the "slaughter" of vowels, Mencken reminds readers that American speech is just as difficult for the British as British speech is to Americans.

Chapter 7.2

Chapter 7.2 Summary

The author devotes this pronunciation chapter to vowels. He introduces the book he believes the best for such a study, Krapp's *The Pronunciation of Standard English in America*, and reiterates that the difficulty scholars have is the same difficulty Krapp has, denoting sounds by way of signs. The writer launches into examples, beginning with the affectation of the *a* sound in many words.

The other vowels, he says, present fewer variations. They still have a history of change, including the *e* with its long, neutral, and substituting characteristics.

Chapter 7.2 Analysis

As can be expected, the writer discusses individual vowel sounds, the difficulty of discussing such sounds using signs or letters, and the differences in pronunciation and affectation. He begins with the *a* sound, which he reports is studied as 1) commonly, an affectation; 2) sometimes the compromised *a*; 3) other times rejected as being "too broad;" and 4) still other times rejected as being "too flat." In addition to numerous examples, Mencken includes a discussion of the differences in sound the *a* has in the English and in the American enunciation. For example, he shows, the word *piano* is pronounced with a broad *a* in America, whereas in England the *a* is flattened. Mencken studies the rationale and history behind each country's affectedness.

Though the other vowels offer fewer variations, they have a history and are affectations, as well. The *e*, for instance, has neutral characteristics, which in vulgar speech are evident in such words as *poem*, *diary*, *violet*, and *diamond* - which become *pome*, *di'ry*, *vi'let*, and *di'mond*. The long *e* disappears in words like *deaf*; and the *e* sound in place of the *ai* sound is retained in some words, such as in *chlorine*, but is forsaken in others, such as in the pronunciation of *iodine*. The *o* sound is made as a diphthong, when it is a long o and fully stressed, as in *doe* or *toe*; and is displaced by an *au* sound in words like *dog.* The u sound undergoes the least variation, as Americans scarcely produce any diphthongal quality. They pronounce the *u* as *oo*, as in *aloof*, *boot*, *broom*, and *food*; or the *uh* of *bush* prevails, in words like *butcher* and *soot*. The variations run to the extreme only in different pronunciations of *hoof* and *root*, which Mencken says he has heard pronounced both ways, with the *uh* and *oo* sounds employed. Most unusual is the different pronunciations of a word like *lieutenant*. The British say *left* for the first syllable, while the Americans say *loo* in the first syllable, making for the same person to be identified in sound as both a *left-tenant* and a *loo-tenant*.

Chapter 8.1

Chapter 8.1 Summary

American spelling takes the spotlight here. Mencken establishes a division between the two orthographies, charting both American and English word-spellings by the following criteria: 1) The omission of the penultimate *u* in words ending in *-our*; 2) The reduction of duplicate consonants to single consonants; 3) The omission of a redundant *e*; 4) The change of terminal -re into -er; 5) The omission of unaccented foreign terminations; 6) The omission of *u* when combined with *a* or *o*; 7) The conversion of decayed diphthongs into simple vowels; 8) The change of compound consonants into simple consonants; 9) The change of *o* into *a*; 10) The change of *e* into *i*; 11) The change of *y* into *a, ia* or *i*; 12) The change of *c* into *s*; 13) The substitution of *s* for *z*; 14) The substitution of *k* for *c*; 15) The insertion of a supernumerary *e*; 16) The substitution of *ct* for *x*; 17) The substitution of *y* for *i*; and 18) Miscellaneous differences.

The author then mentions that this list could be extended. It could also include compounds and derivatives. He quotes another writer who notes there are 812 American spellings that differ from the British spellings, but says that he includes enough examples to reveal the common tendencies in spelling.

Chapter 8.1 Analysis

After pages of examples of differences between American and English spellings, Mencken concedes that not all 812 are listed but are exemplified well enough to define a pattern of American spelling tendencies. These include numerous characteristics. First, Americans move more quickly than the English to simplify. Next, redundant and unnecessary letters have been dropped from whole groups of words. *Asphalte*, *annexe*, and *axe* become *asphalt*, *annex*, and *ax*, as the final *e* is not pronounced, anyway. Next, simple vowels have been substituted for degenerated diphthongs. *Anzhmia*, *anzhsthetic*, and *medizhval*, for example, become *anemia*, *anesthetic*, and *medieval*. Then, simple consonants have displaced compound ones. *Cheque* becomes *check*; *piquet* becomes *picket*; and *phial* becomes *vial*. Finally, vowels are changed to "bring words into harmony with their analogues." *Syphon*, *syren*, and *tyre*, respectively, become siphon, *siren*, and *tire*. In generalizing, Mencken finds at the bottom of spelling tendencies that "clarity and simplicity are served...."

Chapter 8.2

Chapter 8.2 Summary

Here the author devotes a chapter to the influences of Noah Webster on the American orthography. After acknowledging that writers and makers of other dictionaries did contribute, Mencken points out that it was Webster who "finally achieved the divorce between English example and American practice." Publishing his first tome in 1783, Mr. Webster followed that same year with a second spelling and orthography text. Both books made fast and profound impact on schools. Later versions were without rival. Printing presses were devoted so exclusively to Webster's guides that one printing press was built solely for a printing of his *Elementary Spelling Book*.

Webster's first dictionary appeared in 1806. As Mencken notes, it increased his influence on the language and on spelling. Besides its worth, it was without any real competition, for the only other valued publication belonged to Johnson, who so hated all things American that his compilations were forfeited, favored over by Webster's. Noah Webster continued to control the market and the mindset when it came to spelling, printed numerous editions. By 1828 with the publication of his first *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Mencken held the reins of the spelling and pronunciation of American English...and would do so for the next fifty years. His lexicography was first over John Walker, Worchester, and even, says Mencken, over the "best" dictionaries in England.

Including numerous examples of the new spellings and changes in spellings over time, the author also defers to the fact that not all entries were of Webster's design, and many others failed to "take root" as novel was to treat particular words. While Webster's reforms sometimes failed, and his reforms were academically attacked and linguistically challenged, for the most part his new words, loan words, changes in endings, silent letters, and other parts were adopted by his fellows.

Chapter 8.2 Analysis

By devoting attention to the most reputable and most influential of lexicographers, Noah Webster, Mencken emphasizes the success of American English. He addresses how Webster's spelling books and then dictionaries were the most used and had the most influence on the language...even over the top dictionaries in England, until the Concise Oxford appeared in 1914; and reiterates how America had the better dictionaries. Mencken even italicizes the first title to include the word *American*, showing, again, how strong the emphasis was on speaking and spelling one's own language and expressing his own preferences for *American* English over British English.

Mencken does defer where necessary, telling how some spellings and spelling changes were not Webster's but were "echoes" of previous lexicography; were sometimes

ignored by the populace, and were sometimes those Webster abandoned himself. For example, he writes, the change from *our* to *or* in words like *honour* (interchangeable with *honor*) is credited to the 1623, 1632, and 1663-66 folios of Shakespeare. Also, the idea to drop the silent letters in some words, such as in *head*, *built*, and *realm*, for instance, was an idea that went nowhere. Webster's reforms were dropped, challenged, and attacked. The majority of his work on loan and new words, however, was accepted and therefore naturalized, as Mencken puts it, by Americans.

Chapter 8.3

Chapter 8.3 Summary

Mencken announces that the superiority of American spelling is due to its rapid advancements despite English objections. English purists who refuse to take English lessons from overseas, he writes, root such opposition, in an "esthetic hatred." Later, however, the English would take on what they knew were "Americanisms." They adopted tendencies to drop silent letters, forego redundancies, and replace certain forms with others. The word-changes instituted by Noah Webster were now English word-changes introduced by America. The scholars in Great Britain, then, had only one more concern, he says, to agree on which spellings to adopt and which to dispense with.

Chapter 8.3 Analysis

American spelling remained superior, says Mencken, by advancing in spite of the extreme opposition in Britain. He maintains their protest was not because of academic or etymological objection but because English purists were appalled by America, American English, and English spelling perpetuated by people they detested. This, he reminds, was in the late 1800s. By the beginning of the 20th century, though, the English were submitting to such Americanisms as those that dropped the silent e, substituted vowels for diphthongs, and replaced certain outmoded spellings with more favorable ones. In other words, the same changes to spelling that Webster had instigated in America were being used in England. The biggest problem for the English would now be which Americanisms to use and which to ignore.

Chapter 8.4

Chapter 8.4 Summary

The writer explains the imitation of English orthography with two impulses: 1) the colonial desire to "pass as English" and 2) the American publishers' desire to find a workable spelling compromise between the two countries. Before copyright laws and the treaty between America and England, the British feared an infiltration of American-printed books and periodicals and the subsequent "corruption of English spelling." The fear was assuaged, however, as the English publishers held to a conservatism and forced Americans to compromise.

Chapter 8.4 Analysis

The challenges of developing their own orthography and imitating their English counterparts are apparent in Mencken's examples. For instance, the people of *Bar Harbor* would keep their shop and letterhead spellings as *Bar Harbour*; but the postmaster would stamp all mail Bar Harbor, or the "legal" spelling of the town. For the most part, however, publishers, haberdashers, theatre groups, and others stayed with the native orthography. When the British expressed concern that the many American books coming in to the country would "corrupt" English spelling, those conservatives with clout forced compromises; and when a question arose about an English publication's spelling usage, the order was to "employ English spelling." Therefore, there was no real conflict overseas from the superior spelling practices of America.

Chapter 8.5

Chapter 8.5 Summary

The Americans are responsible for the current reform of English-American spelling, says the author. After Webster and between 1875 and 1886, philologists gathered to form committees, propose new spellings, and report successful changes. These decision-makers had a reasonably easy time of their tasks, as Webster had spearheaded many of the changes earlier. Yet at the same time, the simplifications were the reason they met and sought agreement.

The solution came a little over a decade later. The "movement" took a proposal to the American Education Association to start with a short list of spelling changes. The experiment was successful at one level, stimulating donations from Andrew Carnegie, bestowal of the entitled Simplified Spelling Board, approval from President Roosevelt, and the president's assignment of their adoption by the Government Printing Office. The simplified spelling laws were established. However, Mencken suggests that the reform list is too far "ahead" of the public. It is too long. It has too many exceptions for anyone to be able to adjust fully. Furthermore, the list's "extravagance" alienated the AEA, which pulled out of the campaign. The overall results would have to wait to be revealed. However, Mencken writes his opinions just a few years after the reform's inception, so he admits he can only project the outcome.

Chapter 8.5 Analysis

According to the writer, American-English spelling reform is credited to America. An American pioneered the changes. Americans are the chief supporters of the changes. While Webster paved the way for continued spelling reform, and those carrying on the mission had an easy task for the most part, there were challenges. For example, they feared some simplifications were too crude and they saw others as too awkward, the latter making words too at risk for mispronunciation or misspelling. The philologists who gathered proposed winning solutions to these problems, however, and successfully garnered endorsement for their idea to start with a manageable shortlist of reformed spellings. This recommendation list included such words as program and catalog, which would exist as shortened versions of *programme* and *catalogue*.

Mencken reports that at the highest levels, the reformers were successful. They garnered attention, endowments, and further assignments and titles. They also, however, alienated the AEA, established an absurdly unmanageable list for public employment, and challenged spelling with bizarre and extremist changes that make for exceptions to those rules that Mencken says will never get applied. Though he is writing only a few years after these reforms were approved, and therefore has to project the outcome, he returns to his earlier attitude - that behind such far-reaching spelling reforms is the support of "the American spirit."

Chapter 8.6

Chapter 8.6 Summary

The author discusses the treatment of loan words by first asserting that English spelling is more conservative than American. He adds that this is so much the case that English critics often denounce national speech usage. They take issue with how the lack of proper assimilation is making their words "un-English." Because of "alien associations," they complain, even words once assimilated and naturalized are "driven back into their foreign forms." For example, "serious" English prose paragraphs are inundated with italicized French, the mere act of printing such is "an active force toward degeneration." The Society threatens to combat by discrediting such acts, and promises to thereby restore to English its old "recreative energy."

Mencken confirms the complaint by citing many examples of how the English must italicize and accent any foreign words they borrow. The writer then contrasts the American treatment of loan words, showing how they expect any "useful" foreign word to go through mandatory changes of spelling, pronunciation, and overall conformity.

Chapter 8.6 Analysis

Quoting members of the Society for Pure English, Mencken stresses the disdain of critics who find fault as follows: 1) literary taste with regard to borrowed words is on the wrong lines; 2) the governing notions are scientifically incorrect; and 3) the national character of their standard speech is impaired. Because of "alien associations," their borrowed terms were being spelled as foreign words instead of as English words, and were not being appropriately assimilated or brought into conformity. The tendency to assimilated happening less and less, they say in their caveat, even words once naturalized were now being made "un-English."

Confirming the complaints, Mencken gives examples of the aberrations forced upon the English by listing many words in their incarnations. He contrasts with examples of American loan words, which he shows do not retain as much foreignness. For example, once a word is adopted in America, the italics and accents are removed, so that *dipft* immediately becomes *depot* [second italics here for emphasis only], *tkte-b-tkte* becomes tete-a-tete, and names like *Piyrre* become, simply, *Pierre*. When American newspapers or other printers do keep the accents and italics, the author says, they often do so incorrectly. The third example is proof. For the most part, however, Americans did not use the diacritical marks for a couple of reasons. First, in keeping with their iconoclastic ways, they believe the foreign words need to adapt to American orthography. Next, they welcome words for which they have no equivalent, such as *napveti*, but shun the marks as cumbersome. According to Brander Matthews, whom Mencken quotes at length, the loan words Americans find useful undergo whatever changes necessary. They lose their accent marks, they may be spelled differently, their

pronunciation may be modified and they are made to conform to American speech habits. As well, Americans rarely distinguish between masculine and feminine endings, making words such as *blond* and *blonde* randomly interchangeable; and they adopt native forms for plurals or leave the foreign plural forms in tact, depending upon ease of use. In summary, as Americans borrow, they naturalize with more ease than the English do, a point Mencken makes clear throughout the chapter.

Chapter 8.7

Chapter 8.7 Summary

The author briefly considers a few more minor differences, here. He mentions the English and American techniques for capitalization, punctuation, and some last spelling differences, again emphasizing the conservative tendency that is greater for the English. One exception strikes Mencken as peculiar, however: in what he calls "an English work of the highest scholarship," *Cambridge History of English Literature*, titles, proper nouns, and traditional capitalized important nouns are in lower case. Traditional punctuation is changed. Spelling is different. Yet, the rest of minor characteristics continue to interest the author who pursues the origins, the trends, and the details of two distinct orthographies.

Chapter 8.7 Analysis

In a one-paged discussion, the writer distinguishes capitalization, punctuation, and a few spelling characteristics. With regards to capitalization, he again emphasizes the conservatism of the English over Americans, showing how the English capitalize proper nouns and nouns indicating people and things of importance. In contrast, he notes how Americans, in the last part of the 18th century, experienced a movement against the use of capitals. He cites examples of proper nouns in Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence that were made in lower case, such as *nature*, *creator*, and *god*. He then shows how the movement extended to days of the week and to titles; in the early 1820s and 30s, *Wednesday* was *wednesday* and *Mr*. was *mr*., for example.

The author points out one peculiar instance where an English work of the highest scholarship tends toward American spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. He gives examples from *Cambridge History of English*, showing how *presbyterian*, *christian*, and *baron* depart from English tradition; how commas, always appearing in addresses, are mysteriously absent and how periods and decimal points are used instead of the usual "upper dot of the colon." Yet he moves on, showing a few last differences in spelling for the English and Americans, and continues to emphasize the conservatism that prevails in one orthography over the other.

Chapter 9.1

Chapter 9.1 Summary

Introducing his common speech section with a chapter on grammarians, Mencken first reminds readers that so far he has concerned his study of a variety of language that is pretentious and self-conscious, that is mostly formal speech or discourse of the literate. He admits that this speech has been gleaned from carefully written materials such as speeches and books, but such materials do not accurately convey the nature of common speech. He notes that intentional bad grammar is a gift in literature giving the dialogue of common characters or showing the human tendency to err in esteemed characters; and he confesses delight in finding grammarians critiquing one another and making egregious grammatical errors themselves. Further, the author says, the best studies should consider the common unintentional grammar mistakes made by those who are not "conscious of doing any wrong."

This kind of speech is found, Mencken says, in the vulgar speech that meets with formalism. The conflicts and contrasts between the two become the focus, here. The author condenses the conflict to an analogy: the American schoolboy faces a teacher who instructs him on linguistic structure and organization. The boy is actually taught in the structure and organization of a language he never hears, seldom reads, and does not exist in the characters of books he does read. The effects of this, says Mencken, are twofold: 1) The boy finds little usefulness in this language, and so becomes bored with it or apathetic toward it; and 2) the boy gets little or no guidance in the language he does speak, save the negative reinforcement of attacks on his tongue. These effects culminate, the writer suggests, in all his instruction being "for naught." He does not learn the formal language, has no guidance in his own informal language, and is left to what become vulgar tendencies.

The folly of this ruination is not lost on good teachers, notes Mencken. The more insightful teachers understand, too, the causes behind this failed system. They acknowledge that grammarians with their grammar rules forget the disparateness of English, common sense, and Latin grammar, three things that Dr. Otto Jespersen points out as "having nothing to do with one another." Grammarians, in Mencken's findings, are characteristically ignorant of realistic facts about language; are too quick to fault any grammar that does not comply with their rules; and propose texts that are unintelligible to children, succumb to precedent, and are filled with "dull, flyblown pedantry." In addition, Mencken says, most efforts to improve existing grammar tend toward making the information more convoluted. The point is harsh but realistically points out that "what laborious stupidity shows at bottom is simply this: that the sort of man who is willing to devote his life to teaching grammar to children, or to training schoolmarms to do it, is not often the sort of man who is intelligent enough to do it competently." In particular, he adds, this grammarian is often not smart enough to deal with the "fluent and ever-amazing permutations of a living and rebellious speech."

Chapter 9.1 Analysis

In introducing his new unit, Mencken points out that most of his studies thus far have focused on formal language of literate men. He concedes that this material does not facilitate as well a study of common speech. It is more important is the spoken language that typically departs from orthodox English and recalling the origin of vulgar English. The author reiterates how American English originates in a "gigantic impulse" of egoistic people, iconoclastic people, people of experimental and impatient spirit, people living a new self-conscious freedom, people with the freedom to break a stable language to their many new needs, and people who would "war fiercely upon any attempt at formal regulation."

Keeping all impulses in mind, the author focuses on the last characteristic as he surveys the habits and nature of grammarians. What such a language encounters is formalism. This formalism is used, promoted, and distorted by grammarians. As the author suggests, this formalism is 1) artificial; 2) illogical; and 3) unintelligible. Further, it is invasive and erroneous in its neglect of and attempts to unfairly and erroneously alter vulgar speech and writing. As he quotes Matthews, linguistic laws are laid down which are "in blank contradiction with the genius of the language."

This appalling phenomenon occurs by way of grammars and grammar lessons that succeed in doing the opposite of what they intend to do. As Mencken puts it, grammarians work hard to teach students who do not speak the language, use the language, or see the language; the students also do not get further help with their own speech. Therefore, the grammarians are actually un-teaching, or teaching in ways that essentially destroy the very language they are trying to implement.

Grammarians cause the obstacles to speaking and writing, Mencken says, quoting Wilcox, by three means - over-classifying, creating multiple rules for one concept, and trying to treat English as if it were "highly inflected." Mencken offers examples from grammars, school primers and books, to show the obstacles of grammarians and their attempts at English reform. Mencken concludes that despite their attempts to make formal English accessible, grammarians succeed only in producing "a gigantic manufacture of classifications and sub-classifications, a colossal display of professorial bombast and flatulence!" The lessons are misdirected and misguided. The language is "monopolized by dullards." Children are taught a supposed national language by those who he says observe it inaccurately and expound it ignorantly. "Perhaps," the author frets, "the disease is incurable."

Chapter 9.2

Chapter 9.2 Summary

The writer begins by announcing he is wandering "afield." He suggests, first, that the art of prose has little to do with grammar school English or with the "loose and lively English spoken by the average American." Prose is not based on the language of grammarians or the unconscious speech of people, he claims, but on its own principles of everyday logic. The prose of books is virile, defiant, and is middle-American.

For Mencken, the nature of prose points to what Francis Hackett identifies as the huge gap "between the literate and un-literate American." The inferior man remains inferior despite the efforts to improve him; he is suspicious of any pretense and reticent to speak in ways he is taught for fear of ridicule by peers. Mencken reinforces his assertions by reviewing the studies done on students both in classrooms and on class work and on those same students when they were at play. Further speculation was attempted to distinguish the speech of differing locales. The conclusions Mencken arrives at, however, besides indicating that all dialects are still distinctively American, return to his point that American authors reflect and influence "glowing American speech."

Chapter 9.2 Analysis

What is important for Mencken to point out is that vulgar and grammarian English differ more from each other than they do from the English of prose writers like Aldous Huxley, R. L. Stevenson, or Sinclair Lewis. By closely surveying the studies of the vulgar language of students in conjunction with the language those students are taught to use in class work, the author reinforces his opinion that American literature is the epitome of the everyman, is representative of and impacting on middle-America.

Mencken analyzes the content of what he knows of as the only studies attempting to determine the characteristics of vulgar English. He explains how the study was implemented: upon the approval of the School Board of Kansas City, teachers were to do two steps - 1) turn over to the facilitator, Dr. W. W. Charters, the regular written work of students; and 2) record "all oral errors in grammar made in the school-rooms and around the schoolbuildings." Mencken discusses the results of the study in terms of inspecting their grammatical and syntactical habits - those taught in school and those learned indirectly at home. He explores the oral errors involving 1) verbs, past tense and perfect participles; 2) double negatives; 3) misuse of adjectives and adjectival forms for adverbs; and 4) difficulties with the objective case among pronouns. He also considers the localisms. The "savory dialect," containing both categories of speech and writing, is finding its way into American literature. For example, he mentions foreshadowing of the language in *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Bigelow Papers*. This language he reiterates is that of "car conductors in Philadelphia, immigrants of the

second generation in the East Side of New York, iron-workers in the Pittsburgh region, corner grocers in St. Louis, holders of petty political jobs in Atlanta and New Orleans, small farmers in Kansas or Kentucky, house carpenters in Ohio, tinners and plumbers in Chicago..." The general speech, that is, is authentically and uniquely American, middle-American.

Chapter 9.3

Chapter 9.3 Summary

Mencken discusses the verb at great length. He claims in his introduction to this chapter that the peculiarities of American speech originate primarily in the verbs and pronouns, so he explores verb usage to start. After explaining the existence and decay of noun cases, the writer transitions to the current verb conjunctions in use, and citing Lardner and Charters, gives examples of the more familiar American verb conjugations.

He continues by quoting Sayce on the causes of changes to language in general. These causes include "1) imitation or analogy, 2) a wish to be clear and emphatic, and 3) laziness." The third cause is likely how verb conjugation went from strong to weak. Exploring further, he concedes that though his ideas for changes in verb phenomena are not based on any law but on gut instinct, it is possible to discern logical causes but safer to stay with the "general habit of treating the verb conveniently."

Chapter 9.3 Analysis

Since Mencken determines that the verb is responsible for most of the peculiarities in American English, he pursues the history and use of verbs and verb forms. He explains how the Indo-Europeans probably began with eight noun cases; the oldest Teutonic dialect dropped to six noun cases; and Anglo-Saxon noun cases fell to only four. At the same time, he notes, Middle English dative and accusative cases decayed; and Modern English cases disappeared almost completely. He says we now, in his period, still use two verb conjugations and still inflect for number and person; and still use the pronoun objective case, inflecting for person, number, and gender. Among the examples of common, or familiar, American verb conjugations, which Mencken charts at length, are, for example, the "preterite" and past participle of present-tense verbs from *am*, *bet*, *cut*, and *dare* to *rench*, *shoot*, *speed*, *weep*, and *write*.

He lists these present-tense verbs and their simple past and past participle conjunctions to show the evolution and character of general tendencies. The first is verbs transferred from strong conjugation to weak conjugation. Citing Sayce's attribution to changes in language as tendencies toward imitation or analogy, a desire to be clear, and laziness, Mencken considers the latter, laziness, as the reason for the transfer of verbs from strong to weak.

For Mencken's purposes, the specific tendencies with verbs include 1) moving toward strong conjunction; 2) moving toward weak conjugation; 3) regularizing verbs; 4) following verb changes out of laziness or convenience; 5) giving some verbs *-en* and other suffixes; 6) substituting one case for another; and 7) adding a degenerative form of have to simple past auxiliaries. While he experiments with his approaches to verbs and explains what he sees as logical ways to conjugate it is not law-based. Rather it is

based on his instinct, on what he feels is right, he primarily asserts that the reasons for verb tendencies and changes over time transcend logic and pint, simply, to "verb convenience."

Chapter 9.4

Chapter 9.4 Summary

After offering a chart of inflected pronouns, listed by case, Mencken discusses the variations. He states that the only variations from standard English revealed in the chart are 1) the substitution of *n* for *s* - in words such as *yours*, which becomes *yourn*; and 2) an attempt at differentiation between logical and polite plurals by adding the "usual sign of the plural" to second person pronouns. First, to show that *n* replacing *s* is not an American innovation, the author shows a survey over time, revealing how such tendencies are found as far back as 1380, in John Wycliffe's Bible translation. Itis more apparent thereafter in Chaucer, in the Anglo Saxon orthography, and in modern American speech, such as in the Southern dialects. Next, to show the tendency of adding s to you in the nominative and objective of the second person plural is done to clarify the logical difference between the true and merely polite plurals, he explains primary and secondary devices used in different regions and dialects in America.

The author turns next to demonstrative and relative pronouns. He notes that there are two demonstrative pronouns in use, to which, he says, Americans add a third; the addition is also used as third person, objective case pronoun. Through examples, Mencken studies the origin of demonstratives, revealing that they are degenerative in form. He continues with a discussion of relative pronouns, determining their declensions, showing a chart of declensions, and explaining two important characteristics of relatives - a) the disappearance of the objective form of *who* and b) the appearance of the inflect form of *whose* in the absolute. Discussing the first characteristic, he considers substitutions and similarities, and shows how similarities in sounds caused confusion...thereby requiring a substitution for objective forms of the true second person singular.

The author also offers examples of the objective form in the nominative case, explains the complexities of the objective form in terms of relation to predicates, and shows a reversal of forms, or cases, and positions. He explains tendencies with reflexive pronouns, giving examples of reflexive pronoun use throughout history, from Anglo Saxon days to the 16th century. Mencken then closes with a discussion of pronoun agreement and typical pronoun shifts.

Chapter 9.4 Analysis

In a close study, the author explains personal pronoun inflections, demonstrative pronouns, relative pronouns, reflexive pronouns, and pronoun agreement. To grasp the importance of his surveys and studies, students might first consider the cases as they were defined in the early part of the 20th century.

First, then, as Mencken discusses inflections of personal pronouns, he focuses on the reason for adding *s* to *you* in the nominative and objective of the second person plural. He says that the tendency to say, for example, *yous guys*, is done in an effort to give clarity to the logical difference between the true plural, *you*, and the polite plural, *you*. Here it is clear that the addition of an *s* will distinguish the two, though he does add that in some dialects the distinction is made even clearer: in the Southern regions, for instance, *you-all* serves the same purpose.

Next, the writer explains demonstrative pronouns, noting that there are only two in use, *this* and *that*, with their plurals *these* and *those*. Americans, he says, add a third plural, *them*. They have also set up additional inflections - the adverbial pronouns *this-here, these-here, that-there, those-there* and *them-there*...which they used as analogous to the older forms *mine, hisn* and *yourn,* to wit, *thisn, thesen, thatn* and *thosen*. The latter were the first versions of the absolute form of the possessive. That is, the tendency moved from 1) adding an *n* to 2) adding an *s* to 3) also adopting/using the hyphenated adverbial pronouns.

Mencken next discusses relative pronoun tendencies. He offers a chart which identifies 1) the nominative forms a. *who*, b. *which*, c. *what*, and d. *that*; 2) the possessive forms for a. *whose* and *whosen* and b. *whose* and *whosen*; and 3) the object forms for a. *who*, b. *which*, c. *what*, and d. *that*. He asserts two important points about the relative pronoun paradigm: first, *whom* as the objective form of *who* disappears from speech. For example, vulgar speech comes to use "the man *who* I saw" instead of the earlier "the man *whom* I saw..." Second, he observes, "...there is the appearance of an inflected form of *whose* in the absolute, by analogy with *mine, hisn* and *thesen*." For instance, Mencken writes, while *whose* is always used in the conjoint relation, as in "*whose* hat is that?" and "the man *whose* dog bit me," the absolute *whosen* is sometimes substituted, as in "if it ain't *hisn,* then *whosen* is it?" This substitution clearly follows the kind of substituting and adding done with, for example, *n* after *your* - as in "*Yourn* assignment is to study Mencken's book."

Next, Mencken explains the confusion behind pronoun forms, giving specific examples of such form problems as the transfer of the objective form to the nominative in the subject relation. For instance, the tendency to parallel and merge subject and object is correctly done, in this period, by saying, "*Me* and *her* went to the store." But one would never say "*Me* went to the store" or "*Her* went to the store," as this is, in Mencken's time, too, bad grammar. Therefore, he says, the pronouns undergo a common inflection. As well, the pronoun in the predicate relation meets with strict rules. One says "It is *I*" or "I am *he*," but never says, "I am *him*."

These grammatical rules apparently have the same intent as those for reflexive pronouns. That is, he writes that the American vulgate and its forms clearly show that "it is in the spirit of the language" to "regard *self* not as an adjective but as a noun." From Anglo Saxon days, he says, the form was indicative in *Christ's self*, *Peter's self*, or *his self*. These parallelisms carry out in form to the modern ways of pronoun agreement where pronouns do not agree but shift. Acceptable then were such statements as "I tell *each one* what *they* make," from the early 1900s. Today, the tendency still prevails,

especially on television, where a couples' game show host will ask one partner about his or her mate's preference by saying, "What did your *partner* say was *their* favorite game?"

Chapter 9.5

Chapter 9.5 Summary

In his chapter on adverbs, Mencken announces the decay of all adverbial endings except *-ly*. He surveys the history of endings as additions to make new adverbs, considering the endings used by the Anglo Saxons, in Early Middle English, by Chaucer, by Shakespeare, and by early Americans. One of the more telling tendencies, he remarks, is that which helped to alleviate confusion. This tendency was to replace adverbs with adjectives.

Chapter 9.5 Analysis

By Mencken's time, concern for adverbs involved the lack of adverbial endings. The author bemoans the fact that all the endings except *-ly* disappear from the language. In Anglo Saxon, he reports, *-e* was first an ending to adjectives, then, with *-lic* an ending for adverbs. At the same time, since the -e ending on nouns, adjectives, and verbs was no longer pronounced, those *e*'s were dropped. The problem the author finds with these tendencies is twofold: 1) he begrudges how many adverbs came to be "indistinguishable from their ancestral adjectives;" and 2) he says what was worse was how many adverbs then became adjectives. Once the *-lic* or *-lice* ending was changed, in the Early Middle English, to *-like* and then to *-ly*, the changes came in changing adverbs to adjectives. From Chaucer's time on, he says, one finds innumerable instances. The result of what Mencken calls the "movement toward identity in form" is for him a disaster. For him, both the loss of adverbial endings and the replacement of adverbs with adjectives add to the confusion between classes of words.

Chapter 9.6

Chapter 9.6 Summary

The author remarks that only two areas of noun inflection contain variations. One is in the nominative case, he notes, and the other is in the genitive case. He finds one variation in a rule that is disregarded: that the -s to pluralize compound nouns goes at the end of the principle noun. The ending -s is now, he says, put at the end. He finds the other variation in a similar rule. When the noun is used as the object of the sentence, its relative parts are treated equally. That is, the verb of a singular noun is also singular; the verb of a plural noun must agree in plural form. This rule, too, has been mistreated, Mencken finds, making for more confounded, complicated language.

Chapter 9.6 Analysis

Mencken finds two areas of decay where noun inflection is concerned - one in a nominative case tendency and one in a genitive case tendency. The first rule is ignored, he says, as follows: a compound noun calls for the pluralization to be done at the end of the main noun. So, for example, one should say *mothers-in-law*. However, the tendency then became to put the *-s*, for example, at the end of the compound, so the variation holds the word as *mother-in-laws*. The second practice alters the genitive, and as Mencken reports, a "false singular" gets the plural treatment, making the false singular now a false plural. For example, he shows the possessive indication for whose umbrella... to be "That umbrella is the girl I go *with's*." Mary's umbrella would work and so would re-framing the statement to include a prepositional phrase. The noun here is not *with*, though; it is *girl*. The possessive is displaced, and therefore the genitive is mistreated.

Chapter 9.7

Chapter 9.7 Summary

Mencken remarks that English adjectives have a simple reputation: 1) they are only inflected during comparison; 2) they are typically used correctly by Americans; 3) many adjectives work for multiple meanings; and 4) the rare occasions of incorrect use happen as double superlatives or comparatives. After a few examples of the third tendency, and after justifying the logic behind some adjectival "errors," Mencken transitions to focus on the speed with which adjectives are made. He says they are made less rapidly than substantives or verbs, a phenomenon he likens to "more primitive varieties of speech." Suffixes are rare, and prefixes are limited. The author concludes that adjectives are American "rubber stamps" of speech, as many individual adjectives cover a range of meanings.

Chapter 9.7 Analysis

Characteristic of adjectives, says the author, is their only occasional mistaken use. Sometimes Americans say, "*more better*." This incorrectness is actually based on fairly sound logic. He explains that if a sick man gets *better* tomorrow, the next day he will be *more than better*.... He will, technically, be more better two days from now than he was *better* the day before that. It is also rare that the prime superlatives, better and best, are used in the best possible way. According to him, people almost always forget that "the comparative relates to two and the superlative to more than two - so he hears "...the *best* of the two," but never hears "...the *better* of the two."

Based on the assertion that adjectives are not made as rapidly as are substantives and verbs, Mencken shows by example how the only general-purpose adjectives are those with a *-y* ending, as in *daffy*, *nutty*, *dinky*, and *leery*, for example. Further, many of these are also all-purpose, sufficient for describing many states. *Funny*, for instance, can mean odd, humorous, and a whole "range of the unusual," while *wonderful*, too, is almost limitless in scope. Adjectives, then, are the ideal stamps for colloquial American, which, the author concludes, uses the rubber stamps of speech.

Chapter 9.8

Chapter 9.8 Summary

Next in his survey of common speech, Mencken focuses on the double negative. He surmises that perhaps vulgar American's chief characteristic is found in its "fidelity" to the double negative. After numerous examples of the double, triple, and quadruple negative, what he calls compound negatives, the writer speaks to how this convention was once acceptable in speech. The Anglo Saxons conventionally placed a form of *not* in front of a particle; and Shakespeare used it in many of his plays. Today, Mencken adds, the practice of saying, "No, it doesn't..." is easily understood and accepted, not as a double negative but as an implicit single one.

Chapter 9.8 Analysis

The convention of the double negative is for Mencken both remarkable and something to take lightly. In his explication of this tendency, he does not begrudge the ignorance of the incorrectness. He actually opens himself to appreciation. First, he gives examples of the double negative as it is used and understood - as a single negative - today. He shows that the correct clauses such as "I see nobody" and I couldn't hardly walk" are rare. They are now replaced with "I *don't* see *nobody*" and "I *couldn't hardly* walk." He admits that not only are the double negatives taken for meaning single negative statements, but such inappropriate speech formations were, as many others were, once quite "respectable." The Anglo Saxons, with a fully inflected language, Mencken reports, understood, for example, *ne-singan*, "not to sing," and *ne-wiste*, "knew not." Shakespeare was understood when his characters said, "I never was *nor never* will be...," in *Richard III*; "harp not on that *nor* do *not* banish treason...," in *Measure for Measure*; or "...thou expectedst not, *nor* I looked *not* for," in Romeo and Juliet. Today, a comment like "*No*, it *doesn't*" is also understood as a single negative comment. The usage tendency is in no way frustrating to Mencken, though, who finds the results of such construction practices almost poetic, claiming as he does such usage often results in "fearful and wonderful combinations of negatives."

Chapter 9.9

Chapter 9.9 Summary

Next in his book, Mencken devotes a chapter to additional syntactical peculiarities. He opens by quoting Sayce, who avers that language begins not with single words but with whole sentences. He then exclaims that when a language is new, quickly developing, and "unrestrained by critical analysis," there is a marked tendency to sacrifice the integrity of individual words for the well being of the complete sentence. Reclaiming past examples, the author adds such phenomena as *would've*, *could've*, *sort'a*, and *kind'a*...as well as *off'a* or *off'n*, as in "I bought it *off'a* John." Mencken adds a few more peculiarities, naming localisms, for example, but concludes that to offer up all of them would be to fill a volume.

Chapter 9.9 Analysis

Again Mencken treats particular speech tendencies with a light surveying touch. He gives examples of what happens to contracted word combinations to show how words are often "sacrificed" for the good of the sentence as a whole; but then he closes, saying to do an "exhaustive" study of American syntactic peculiarities would be to write a whole separate book.

Chapter 9.10

Chapter 9.10 Summary

The author opens with the caveat that, before beginning a study of speech sounds, it is imperative to carefully gather the materials. He regrets this approach "still awaits" a qualified and well-equipped phonologist. He concedes to naming a few select examiners of speech particulars, but faults them for lack of scope. Further, for Mencken, the required plotting of general speech characteristics stays wanting for existing dictionaries deal with pronunciation either too loosely or inaccurately, and other literature is insufficient. Therefore, he admits, whatever examination he does will be less than exact.

The writer then points out two "streams" of influence on vulgar American pronunciation: 1) inheritance from the colonial Americans and 2) that which comes spontaneously and from immigrant-influences. He continues with commentary on how the first influence is dying out, its diphthongs and misplaced vowels surviving for only so long until grammarians fight to remove or replace them, for example. The second influence is due, he says, to the prevalence of vowel sounds nearly impossible to master by the immigrant, who instead uses a neutralized, manageable, vowel sound. The writer credits this second influence with the "wearing down" process a disorganizing one affecting vowels as well as some consonant sounds. That is, some consonants are replaced with easier ones; others are eliminated altogether, as are whole syllables dropped, different syllables added, and sounds and syllables are blended or flapped.

The drastic changes to standard English pronunciation deserve close scrutiny by competent phonologists, says Mencken. Specific kinds of common speech, such as naturalized loan words, also deserve attention. While he maintains that some words are brought in by immigrants and so retain much of their original pronunciation, he finds many more loan words take on new syllabic treatment and intonation, which often accompany new meanings.

Chapter 9.10 Analysis

Though he concedes that a quality study of the sounds of vulgar speech is best handled by qualified phonologists, Mencken returns to his surly assessment of the state of pronunciation. He tells of the two major influences on American pronunciation, and gives numerous examples. While the first influence, inheritance of speech patterns from the colonial Americans, is dying out, he says, the second influence, spontaneous pronunciation impacted by immigrants, is not. With the former, the diphthong *oi* as in boy, for example, is replaced by the *i* sound of *wine*, is returned to its diphthong sound in 18th- century England, travels to America to be continued by those of "polite speech, but stays as the *i* sound with the common speakers, who through the days of the Civil War continue to pronounce *boil, hoist, oil, join, poison,* and *roil* as *bile, hist, ile, jine,*

pisen and *rile,* until the "school marms" begin to fight the pronunciation back to its original state.

With the latter influence, a number of characteristics are apparent. First, standard English, the author notes, has 19 vowel sounds, more than almost any other language. Therefore, the "immigrant facing all these vowel sounds" stumbles over the more complex ones...or finds them so impossible he/she changes their pronunciation. He or she will tend to neutralize such sounds as the *ur* vowel sound. Next, the "wearing-down" process impacts consonants, too. Sometimes the speaker utters an "easier" consonant sound, displacing the original. Other times, the speaker, Mencken says, drops the difficult consonant altogether, as one might with *handkerchief*, now pronouncing it *han'kerchief* - or, in full distortion, *hankerchiff*. Next, the articulation of all syllables of a word is forfeited, and the speaker drops a whole syllable, as he/she does, for example, with *extraordinary*, *boundary*, and *probation* - turning them into *extraordinary, bound'ry,* and *pro'bition*. Next, words are given added syllables: elm, film, lozenge, and athletic are somehow turned into *ellum, fillum, lozenger,* and *athaletic*. Finally, because the trend is toward disorganization by way of elimination, whole sentences are "wearing down." *What does he say?*, for example, becomes *Whaz ee zay*? and *Did you eat yet?* becomes *D'jeet yet*? Here, Mencken repeats, is room for the skilled and studied phonologists to closely investigate the rapid changes of vulgar American pronunciation.

Chapter 10.1

Chapter 10.1 Summary

Beginning with a 1919 narrative example of how "Americans all" included a list of soldiers' names that House of Representatives members Mondell and Wilson recorded. These names included, for example, Kristopoulos, Hucko, and Intili. Mencken remarks that this "unusual" group of names was compiled to show Congress that the "melting pot really was a melting pot that really melts." He stresses how any other list in America would have such names, making it clear that American people are no longer of pure British stock.

Turning to the New York phone book as reference, Mencken explains the phenomenon. He says that the fourth most common name is Murphy, which is Irish, and the fifth most common is Meyer, which German and/or Jewish. Conversely, a name like Taylor, which is a typical British name ranking fourth in Wales, is the twenty-third most common name listed in New York directories. In the same respect, he notes, the far South has names such as Gonzalez and Lopez, which far outrank the Smiths and Joneses. Names are changed for various reasons, among them 1) the play upon a name no longer significant to most; 2) continued efforts at "transliteration"; 3) social and therefore linguistic hostility toward England; and 4) neutralization and naturalization.

Chapter 10.1 Analysis

The author begins his discussion of surnames with lists of names in the military, those brought out into the open by Congress in 1919. These names, German, Jewish, Italian, Greek, and other anti-English names, show for Mencken to be evidence of a "melting" pot...one which less and less contains pure English ingredients. The names now prevalent in America, he says, are indicative of the social and political changes there: the general attitudes and approaches toward other cultures, that is, were extended to patronyms. Therefore, people changed their names. They did so for pronunciation purposes, for semantic reasons, and for purposes of neutralization and naturalization.

First, names "no longer significant to most" include, for example, a name like *Thugut*, which belonged to an Austrian diplomat. It began as *Tunicotto* in Italy, became *Thunichgut* in Austria, and was changed, finally to *Thugut*. Why? *Thunichgut* means "do no good." *Thugut* means "do good." The name-bearer clearly wanted his name to match his demeanor. Next, many names changed by way of transliteration, or translation. The same difficulties with accents on common words become cause for change of names. *F'rst* becomes Furst, and *Ltzwe* becomes Lowe. *Berg* loses its German *e*-sound for an English *u* sound, so a *bear* sound becomes a *burr* sound. *Pfund* becomes *Pound; Schumacher* becomes *Shoemaker;* and *Ktznig* is turned into *King*. Further, Mencken shows how the inability to spell and pronounce names originating elsewhere forces people to change, for instance, *Papadiamantopoulos* to *Moryas*, Josef *Karzeniowski* to

Joseph *Conrad,* or any other profoundly difficult Italian or Greek or Slav immigrant name to names that show efforts at naturalization and which reveal new allegiances, to names such as *Taylor, Jackson* or *Wilson.*

Another reason for names changing is the continued social and therefore linguistic hostility toward England and immigrants having anything to do with England. This enmity, combined with the need to naturalize, became a need to neutralize stereotypical attitudes. As the writer says, immigrant names came to be associated with inferiority, which, added to unfair competition and contempt and the subsequent derisive nicknames such foreign names suffered, immigrants changed their names. French were considered froggies; Italians were dagos and wops; and Chinese people were reduced to chinks. The minimizing incited already insecure peoples, stumbling over language, challenged by novelty, and combating social differences...so to empower themselves, they forced a name change. This complex motivation was felt particularly by the Jewish. So, foreigners with foreign names continued their naturalization: *Bielefelder* turned into *Benson, Pulvermacher* to *Pullman*. *Chicheng Li* was now *Charles Lee*. *Schwettendieck* was now *Dick*.

Chapter 10.2

Chapter 10.2 Summary

While non-Anglo Saxon Americans show willingness to change their names, Mencken says, they show even more willingness to baptize their children with American names. Favorite given names of the "old country" almost disappear. In addition, he notes, immigrants do not hesitate to change their own given names. New Americans continue to use Puritan influences, naming their children and taking on new given names for themselves that were in accordance with the "Praise God" attitude; they use names influenced by the "religious obsession" of New England; and they use surnames as given names, following what the author indicates is also a national habit. None of these tendencies, Mencken points out, are as frequent in England...or, are practiced at all.

Chapter 10.2 Analysis

The writer studies the practice of assigning given names by reminding readers that these same practices are non-existent or nearly non-existent in England. Americans who have immigrated easily and willingly give up their favorite given names for themselves and their children. The Irish give up *Terrence*, *Dennis*, and *Patrick*, Mencken shows, for "less conspicuous" names like *John*, *William*, and *George*. The Germans forsake *Otto*, *August*, and *Hermann* for *Lewis*, *Henry*, and *Charles*. *Mary* and *Alice* may be favored by the Jews, over such names as *Isidora*, just as they have, he continues, taken a liking to *Lee*, which replaces *Leon* and *Leopold* the same way *Lee* replaces the Chinese *Li*.

Now Americans, immigrants name in accordance with several practices of their new country. First, they take on Puritan influences, naming their children and taking on new given names for themselves that were in accordance with the "Praise God" attitude. They continue to use names such as *Faith*, *Hope*, and *Prudence* for women and such names as *Peregrine* for men. Next, they use names influenced by the "religious obsession" of New England, finding biblical names such as *Ezra, Hiram, Ezekiel, Zechariah,* and others to be ideal as "inciting" the continued derision of the England they despise. Finally, new Americans practice the national habit of using surnames as given and middle names, taking for their own such last names as Jackson, Washington, Lincoln, Irving, and Lee as given names for themselves or their children.

Chapter 10.3

Chapter 10.3 Summary

Geographical names become the focus next. The writer studies the poetic beauty of names proliferated throughout America that emulates or speaks to the richest and most beautiful of places in America. He adds, "No other country can match our geographical names for interest and variety." Acknowledging the profound studies of philologist Johann Jakob Egli, Mencken says that such studies contribute to the history of and to understanding the psychology of American people.

The first settlers, he says, were not all that imaginative. They used names from "home" or added New to geographical names back in England. Then, however, they began to travel, and seeing landscapes named by the aborigines with more "engaging" names, Mencken surmises, they likely adopted some of these. Back to unimaginative efforts, the pioneers, seeing rapid expansion, fell to duplicating the names of rivers and towns and the like. Even when a new name was found, he says, settlers typically also found it across the map. So it is not unusual to see the same names repeated thousands of miles across. Mencken reports that the duplication incensed The Geographic Board, who protested the "altogether too numerous" occurrences of names like *Elk*, *Beaver*, *Cottonwood*, and *Bald*.

Studying the nomenclature, Mencken reports eight classes of geographical names: (*a*) those embodying personal names of heroes and great ones; (*b*) those transferred from other and older places; (*c*) Indian names; (*d*) Dutch, Spanish, French, German and Scandinavian names; (*e*) Biblical and mythological names; (*f*) names descriptive of localities; (*g*) names suggested by the local flora, fauna or geology; and (*h*) purely fanciful names. These classes show the influences that contribute to what eventually becomes a nomenclature that contains geographical names that range from the banal to the melodious to the grotesque and sublime.

Chapter 10.3 Analysis

Mencken remarks on the nature of geographical names by speaking to their originality, their nature, and their origin. He finds many names repetitive and dull, springing from the lack of imagination or taxed imagination of the settlers, and he finds many others beautiful in sound, freakish in quality, or absolutely wonderful in nuance. The author attributes American geographical names to eight classes, all of which show the influence and impact of other cultures, the environment, and daily habits. That is, geographical names came by way of a) surnames of pioneers and heroes, such as *Washington*, *Cleveland*, *Dodge City*, and *Knoxville*; b) the names of other places, in the East and in Europe, such as *New London* and *New York*; c) already existing aboriginal/Indian names, such as *Nantucket* and *Merrimack*; d) names transferred or borrowed from Dutch, Spanish, French, German and Scandinavian names, such as

Brooklyn from *Breuckelen* and *Bowery* from *Bouvery*; (*e*) Biblical and mythological names, like *St. Mary's*; (*f*) names descriptive of localities, as in *Elk Bend*, *Bald Knob*, and *Bear Creek* ; (*g*) names suggested by the local flora, fauna or geology, such as *Willow* or *Primrose Lane*; and (*h*) purely fanciful names, including *Bulltown, Caress, Cinderella, Cyclone, Czar, Cornstalk, Halcyon, Jingo, Left Hand, Ravens Eye, Skull Run, Three Churches, Uneeda, Wide Mouth, War Eagle* and *Stumptown*. As arbitrary coinages or as names positioned differently by different countries - such as The Thames River versus The River Chicago - geographical names hold much interest for philologists like Johann Jakob Egli and writers like H. L. Mencken.

Chapter 10.4

Chapter 10.4 Summary

Regarding street names as he does proper surnames, given names, and geographical names, Mencken remarks at the unusual differences in American and British naming and numbering practices. Quoting authors like W. W. Crane and Rudyard Kipling, he notes the "strangeness" of such habits as using number names; omitting the word street; odd phrases used in street name directions; over-use of designations; "barbarous" pronunciations; and the re-naming or translating of old street names.

Chapter 10.4 Analysis

When it comes to the practices of naming and numbering streets, Mencken is disturbed by the "strangeness" of American tendencies. First, he attributes the use of numbers in place of names to "sheer poverty of invention." *Twenty-third* and *Sixteenth* are mindless American afterthoughts compared to the English wealth of street names, which is often more than ample, as they often have two names for one street. Next, he notes, naming without including the word street is odd. Whereas the English always add the word *street*, *road*, *avenue*, or other to a thoroughfare, the author says, the American's will give someone directions by telling the listener to go to the corner of *Sutter and Sixteenth*. Odd phrases used in street-name directions also baffle the writer, not because they are complex or confusing but because the *corner of Geary and Market* is just not as precise a naming but is "incongruous" at best to all outsiders. Over-use of designations such as *avenue*, *boulevard*, or *drive*, or *place*, *lane*, or *walk* reveals to Mencken an inappropriate kind of designation that minimizes by having far too many options for *street*. For instance, to name a street with avenue, when it is in a warehouse district, is to "corrupt" language or the art of naming, he implies. Finally, not only "barbarous" pronunciations but the re-naming or translating of old street names tells Mencken speakers care little for preserving originality and beauty of proper names. For example, he shudders at the bastardization of French street names, whereby *rue Royale* is reduced to an ordinary and dull *Royal Street*.

Chapter 11.1

Chapter 11.1 Summary

In his penultimate chapter, Mencken discusses American slang. He begins by noting that only one "extremely superficial" work exists on this part of language thus far; and he remarks that without studies of slang, American philology will "remain out of contact with the American language." The author then launches into an analysis of the social implications of slang. He quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes, who finds that the use of slang indicates "mental atrophy," and cites Ambrose Bierce's attitude toward slang users as those who "rob literary garbage cans on their way to the dumps."

The few efforts to study slang are made, he says, by those who attempt to define it. This is futile, for words once proper have been used as slang and words once considered slang have crossed over into everyday accepted use. Further, he claims, those scientists who discuss slang spend most of their emphasis on whether or not a word is truly slang. For Mencken, this is also a wasteful endeavor, for these scientists overlook important truths: first, slang is not mass-created but is introduced into the language by distinct individuals; second, its adoption depends upon ignorant people; and therefore, third, those people adopt the slang as a novelty, but do so too heartily and without imagination, thereby "debasing" language, making it and the speakers of slang appear "worn-out and worthless."

The author adds that slang's "worth" does not depend upon intrinsic value but on surrounding circumstances. The speaker and the speaker's mindset affect ultimately affect slang. How carefully the user treats words results in either a language free of slang or in the language of a parroter who has no sense of the limitations and nuances of words. Mencken confirms his assessment by showing examples through history, where slang was originally a creative term for something where the people had no word or where slang was an ingenious, satirical framing of language. The populace adopted the term or phrase; it was embraced by the masses; and it was so overused it turned to a slang that the current users had no understanding of regarding either origin or meaning.

Chapter 11.1 Analysis

Mencken makes two major assertions about slang, or about how it is treated. First, those intending to study slang focus on the wrong areas of study. He says that trying to define slang and trying to "prove" it is real slang are futile. First, slang changes in definition, or categorization. It is sometimes in, sometimes out; it is sometimes a word or phrase that is commonly accepted as everyday language, then a few years later is no longer accepted but remaindered to the language of the ignorant. After that, it may be re-introduced and accepted again.

Further, slang is instigated, not by a crowd or group, but by an individual. The term is spoken or written. The masses adopt it. Then the masses overzealously abuse the term and wear it out, making it clichy. Finally, reports Mencken, slang is slang because it is used by speakers who are ignorant of its origin and original meaning. It has been passed down so often and used so much it is now essentially worthless. The writer's examples of Shakespeare coining necessary words for things that had no word or label to express them and of newspaper writers introducing new words for the same reasons show this phenomenon. The originator is brilliant, creative, and innovative. He finds a lack of terminology and creates some, or uses a new word or phrase in a humorous, satirical way - to mock the king, for instance. The public so loves the new invention they begin using it. It then gets passed on, Mencken says, to America. Americans begin using the word(s) without a clue original value or true meaning. This theory confirms Mencken's attitude that slang is used by the ignorant masses who not only do not know the value or meaning but make the word so overused that it becomes "worn-out," worthless...slang.

Chapter 11.2

Chapter 11.2 Summary

In his final chapter, the author mentions one specific kind of slang - war slang. He explains by example and by quoting how the English army had more slang words and slang that was ore expressive, while the American army, "slow in manufacturing words," had little slang. Further, he notes, the French army was most prolific of all: they instigated what have now become dictionaries full of French slang. He adds that one does not have to look far to understand the "American backwardness" when it came to slang invention and use during the war. The Americans arrived late; the British were already there with "ready-made" slang by the dozens; and having little contact with the French, the Americans merely borrowed a little bit of the British slang. Therefore, Mencken concludes, the war-slang of the English, French, and Germans was "enormously richer" that that of the Americans.

Chapter 11.2 Analysis

H. L. Mencken wraps up his book, *The American Language: an Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, with one last comparison. He compares the slang of four countries' armies during World War I. He admits by citing the deferring commentaries of other writers that Americans were least inventive and created the least expressive slang. Fairly giving credit to those who created better slang which Americans borrowed, Mencken offers examples: slang for enemies and allies included *Fritzie*, *Boche*, *Frog* and *Froggy*. *Cootie*, *bus*, *chaplain*, and *Holy Joe* were among the richer terms, as were slang words like *Sears-Roebuck*, for a new lieutenant, *belly-robber*, for the mess sergeant; and *canned-monkey*, for canned beef, *gold-fish*, for canned salmon, and *punk*, for bread. Some terms, he explains, were already extant - so why create new ones? Other terms were borrowed or crafted as needs or humor warranted.

H. L. Mencken's overall study, analysis, and assessment of slang in this chapter and of language throughout his book point to the reasons for language creation and use. These reasons gave impetus to cultures concerned with purity, superiority, inferiority, independence, religion, work, family, environment, and many values...and with words to express all of the above and more. By studying the reasoning and the history, H. L. Mencken brought to serious students and scholars the language of America, whether it was haphazard, serendipitous, beneficial, coined, borrowed, better-than, worse-than, lacking, or uplifting for a country being developed sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly.

Characters

John Adams

The American statesman John Adams proposed in 1780 that the United States government establish an academy dedicated to the improvement and assessment of the English language. He argued that there were similar institutions in France, Spain, and Italy, but England had never established one, leaving the way clear for America to do so. Adams expected Americans to take the English language to new heights, and thus it made sense to him that America should be home to an academy of English. Years later, in 1806, a bill was proposed to establish this academy, but it did not pass. In 1820, however, the American Academy of Languages and Belles Lettres was established in New York, presided over by John Quincy Adams, John Adams's son. The purpose of this academy was to gather uniquely American words, terms, and sayings in an effort to promote the American language.

Charles Astor Bristed

Charles Astor Bristed was the first American to write a full-length defense of Americanisms. His treatise appeared in a volume of *Cambridge Essays, Contributed by Members of the University* in 1855. Bristed graduated from Yale University in 1839 and from Cambridge University in 1845.

W. W. Charters

Dr. W. W. Charters was the first researcher to seriously study the common English spoken by most Americans on a daily basis. He was a professor at the University of Missouri and then served as director of the Bureau of Educational Research at Ohio State University. He gathered data by having teachers record incidents of grammatical errors made by their students in and out of the classroom. His work resulted in a wealth of new data that revealed patterns in the types of errors made in everyday speech.

Benjamin Franklin

The American statesman Benjamin Franklin was a strong supporter of the social and political developments taking place in the young United States. Still, he was concerned about most of the changes in the language. He was one of the first to attempt to compile a spelling guide to help standardize spelling in America.

George Philip Krapp

George Philip Krapp, a professor at Columbia University, was the first person to research thoroughly the history and practice of American pronunciations. He used existing materials (dictionaries, glossaries, and spelling books) along with original research to conduct his studies. In a later edition of *The American Language,* Mencken credits the second volume of Krapp's *The English Language in America* (1925) as being the first exhaustive and authoritative collection of American pronunciations.

John Pickering

John Pickering was the first to compile a comprehensive list of Americanisms. This is distinct from Webster's dictionary, which included British English words along with American words. Pickering divided Americanisms into the following three categories: new words, new meanings for existing English words, and revived words no longer used in England.

Richard H. Thornton

In 1912 Richard H. Thornton compiled his *American Glossary,* which was one of the most thorough dictionaries of Americanisms. Mencken comments that its value is in its use of quotations, all dated, and its corrections of common misunderstandings about American English. Mencken adds, however, that because of its reliance on quotations, it is more valuable as a record of the written than the spoken language.

Noah Webster

In 1828 Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* was published. This was the first formal dictionary of American words and grammar. A supporter of John Adams, Webster maintained that America would be larger and more important than England and thus should take the initiative in redefining the standards of the language.

Webster's work was particularly important in establishing standards of spelling in American English. Prior to his work, there was little consistency in how words were spelled.

Themes

National Pride

Mencken carries the theme of American independence from England throughout the book. Besides breaking away from the British government, economy, and culture, early Americans soon broke away from the British English language. Just as Americans created a new way of life and self-government, they created new ways of expressing themselves. In some cases, they even took British words and revived or redefined them to make them American. Early American settlers took great pride in differentiating their English from that of England. They took great offense at being considered ignorant and barbaric by British visitors for their new words, pronunciations, terms, and dialects. As they struggled to establish a new nation, many Americans were unwilling to accept anything that seemed too British, including speech. The increasing tension between the two countries in America's early years led to hostility toward the British and created a strong sense of American solidarity.

Mencken also paints a clear picture of British pride. Early British travelers to the United States reported on the inferior manners of speech adopted by Americans, reflecting the protective pride they felt for their language. Although there was much resistance to Americanisms in British English, they eventually became accepted parts of the British vocabulary.

Inevitable Outcomes

Mencken demonstrates how the changes to the English language were a matter of course in America. New animals, foods, and landscapes, for example, required new words. The influence of the Native-American population was also an inevitable source of change in the American language. Once Americans started organizing themselves into new social and civic groups, new terms were necessary to describe these groups.

Settlers from all over the world brought their own languages, all of which eventually contributed to American English. Immigrants naturally grouped together in cities (or sections of cities) so they could continue to enjoy their native cultures. Wherever ethnic groups were concentrated, it was inevitable that some of their words would become part of the language of the area. Today, Americans all over the country use words derived from Native-American languages, German, French, Dutch, Spanish, Chinese, and other languages. Changes in pronunciation were also inevitable because of the "melting pot" nature of American society. With so many immigrants accustomed to different speech patterns and accents, words were subject to various pronunciations.

In America there are obvious influences of British English, but Americanisms are also present in British English. This, too, was inevitable. Mencken explains that British resistance to Americanisms was ultimately powerless to keep them out of everyday

speech. Because of the introduction of American writing and entertainment (such as movies) along with British commentary about America, it was inevitable that some words and phrases would cross over into British usage.

Style

Humor

Mencken uses his trademark wry sense of humor to make his linguistic treatise entertaining. Prior to completing this book, Mencken had poked fun at American scholars, but with this book, he found himself among them. Still, he applied the same writing style to his scholarly work that he had used in so many other forums. The result is a meticulously detailed book that is accessible and enjoyable to the general public. What could be very bland reading comes to life in Mencken's editorial comments. In chapter one, Mencken observes, "In every age, of course, there have been pedantic fellows who outschoolmarm the schoolmarms in their devotion to grammatical, syntactical, and lexicographical niceties." In chapter five, he writes, *"Outstanding* began its career among the pedagogues, and they still overwork it cruelly, but it is now also used by politicians, the . . . clergy, newspaper editorial writers, and other such virtuosi of bad writing."

Mencken aims his humor at the British and Americans alike. Commenting on the effects of the American cinema on British English, Mencken writes that American movies were "terrorizing English purists." In chapter one, he pokes fun at a British traveler in the United States who was baffled by a sign reading "Coffin Warehouse." In chapter four, he mocks the British for lacking imagination. He comments:

The English, in naming their own somewhat meager inventions, commonly display a far more limited imagination. Seeking a name, for example, for a mixture of whiskey and soda-water, the best they could achieve was *whiskey-and-soda.* The Americans, introduced to the same drink, at once gave it the far more original name of *high-ball.*

Mencken also had a reputation as a humorous commentator on American culture. This is evident in chapter two, where he writes, "Such a term as *rubberneck* is almost a complete treatise on American psychology." In chapter three, he comments on American disregard for decorum: "The early Americans showed that spacious disregard for linguistic nicety which has characterized their descendants ever since." Commenting on American arrogance, he writes in chapter six on the subject of euphemisms:

The American, probably more than any other man, is prone to be apologetic about the trade he follows. He seldom believes that it is quite worthy of his virtues and talents; almost always he thinks that he would have adorned something far gaudier.

Historical Survey

To support his presentation of the development of American English, Mencken introduces a wealth of historical and linguistic information. He writes about developments in the language by explaining how and why they came about, what writers or scholars had to say about them, what sort of debates arose between the

Americans and the British (or among Americans), and what publications were relevant. Extensive footnotes, an appendix, a glossary, and an index further support the text.

Mencken uses a logical progression of ideas to guide the reader through his treatise. The organization of the book along historical lines gives the reader a clear framework for understanding complicated material. Beginning with an overview of the issues explored in the book, he introduces the reader to the tensions between American English and British English. Next, he explains how scholars have attempted to define and record Americanisms as the field has expanded over the years. Once he provided the reader with this overview, Mencken delves into the evolution of American English in greater detail.

Mencken chooses a chronological approach, beginning with the earliest settlers and their struggle to redefine English to suit their new needs. Next, he explains how America's growing population and changing attitudes led to alterations in the language. Addressing modern-day usage, he reviews various parts of speech, demonstrating how each has changed so significantly that stark differences between American English and British English are evident.

The next section of the book explores the minutiae of language; Mencken describes American pronunciations and spellings and how they came to differ from those of British English. Next, Mencken addresses everyday speech by breaking it down into grammar, parts of speech, and peculiarities of everyday American English. After a review of the rules of proper names in America, Mencken returns to the subject of informal speech by discussing slang. Appropriately, he concludes the book by commenting on what he sees as the future of American English. Up to this point, he has demonstrated its ability to change and adapt, and he leaves the reader with the understanding that it will continue to do so.

Historical Context

Reading Habits in America during the 1910s

The 1910s saw significant changes in the reading habits of the American public. The market for books grew substantially. In order to sign on the best writers, many publishers approached them with ideas for planned works rather than waiting for completed manuscripts to consider. Books about war had an immediate audience in the years leading up to, during, and after World War I. Houghton Mifflin released more than one hundred war-themed books between 1914 and 1919. Means of distribution had to change with expanding readerships. Before World War I, 90 percent of books were sold by door-to-door salesmen and through catalogs. The rise of the bookstore followed; in 1914 there were 3,501 bookstores, mainly in urban areas, but this number soon grew and locations spread. A new generation of publishers entered the business, including Alfred A. Knopf, the publisher of *The American Language.*

Americans also enjoyed a new breed of magazines, called the "smart magazines" by writer George Douglas. Publications such as *Vanity Fair,* the *Smart Set, The New Yorker,* and *Esquire* combined elements of humor magazines and society magazines. Aimed at an intelligent, elite audience, these magazines offered information on a variety of topics alongside satire and opinion pieces.

Newspapers were changing, too. The press was shaped less by newspaper owners and more by editors. The result was more variety among newspapers, as different editors chose to cover and comment on news based on their own principles. Oswald Garrison Villard's approach to editing the *New York Evening Post* and *The Nation* was based on moral standards, while Adolph Ochs and Carr Van Anden edited the *New York Times* in hopes of producing a literary paper that presented news objectively. Still others were focused primarily on making money. A code of professional ethics emerged in the field of journalism around this time. This was due in part to the "yellow journalism" (the practice of exaggerating and sensationalizing news in order to boost readership) of the late nineteenth century, and in part to new university programs in journalism.

On the literary front, the years after World War I resembled other postwar eras. Disillusionment and the impulse to portray American life gave rise to works with American settings, American protagonists, and themes of individualism and overcoming adversity. In *The American Language,* Mencken notes that Mark Twain and James Fenimore Cooper rose in popularity. Most of the major writers in the 1910s were from the Midwest. Willa Cather was from Nebraska; Booth Tarkington and Theodore Dreiser were from Indiana; Carl Sandburg was from Illinois; and Sherwood Anderson was from Ohio. Not surprisingly, much of the literature of this time is set in rural communities. Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, published the same year as *The American Language,* takes place in a small Midwestern town. Some of the war-related novels of this period have become enduring fixtures of American literature. Cather won the 1923 Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, a story of a Midwestern boy who finds his place in the world

when he goes off to war. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms (1929)* is based on his personal experiences during the war.

American Linguistics

American linguistics has its foundation in the works of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield. Sapir and Bloomfield dominated the study of descriptive linguistics, which asserts that languages are related by basic units and structures (such as phonemes, the basic unit of sound in a language; morphemes, the basic unit of meaning; and syntax, the rules governing sentence structure) but are best studied as independent entities. Noam Chomsky took their ideas and developed his own theory of generative grammar. This theory states that language and cognition develop together because language is innate and thus becomes more complex as humans become more complex. Bloomfield spearheaded structural linguistics, which focuses on structures such as those mentioned above as language components. Boas, Sapir, and Bloomfield formed the Linguistic Society of America in 1924. Mencken mentions this organization briefly in *The American Language* (chapter one, section five).

Another major area of study within American linguistics is historical-comparative linguistics, which compares Indo-European languages (which include European languages along with their forerunners from Iran and parts of Asia, including the Indian subcontinent) and also studies the development of American English and its dialects. It is this area in which Mencken's work is considered a *tour de force.*

Critical Overview

The American Language was a surprise bestseller upon its publication in 1919 and is still respected as a classic work today. While some linguists dismiss the book as the work of a talented amateur, its admirers outnumber its detractors. Mencken's contemporaries praised the work as thorough, scientifically sound, intriguing, and entertaining. Praising the book for its scientific approach, W. H. A.Williams of *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online* describes it as "a work of solid, painstaking research." Brander Matthews, a founding member and president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, comments in a 1919 review for the *New York Times Book Review* that Mencken is "armed at all points" in this authoritative work. He describes the book as "interesting and useful; it is a book to be taken seriously; it is a book well planned, well proportioned, well documented, and well written," adding that he read it "with both pleasure and profit." Matthews goes on to note that while the differences between British English and American English are apparent, "nobody has ever marshaled this host [of divergences] as amply, as logically, or as impressively as Mr. Mencken has done." The only flaw the critic finds in *The American Language*is that Mencken is at times overly disrespectful of some of his predecessors.

Critics often comment on Mencken's ability to ease into the intellectual world after mastering popular writing. In the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* Willard Thorp reviews Mencken's various writing styles and observes, "Of Mencken's learned style little needs to be said. It has been praised, deservedly, since the first edition of *The American Language* appeared in 1919. Who would have supposed that a treatise on language could be so lively that the reader has to remind himself that he is being educated as well as entertained?" According to Williams, the book is important not just to the field of linguistics but also as a historical piece. He explains:

As a historian of language, Mencken was also a historian on an important aspect of American culture. That he produced such a brilliant and original work years before American cultural history had become a recognized and established field is merely one token of his achievement.

Edmund Wilson, Jr., a respected critic of literary and historical works, also applauds Mencken as a scholar and finds him to be a patriot in spite of himself. Wilson writes in a 1921 issue of *New Republic:*

The truth is that in the last few years Mencken has entered so far into the national intellectual life that it has become impossible for him to maintain his old opinions quite intact: he has begun to worry and hope with the American people in the throes of their democratic experiment. . . . This phenomenon seemed to make its appearance toward the last page of The American Language; and if it does not come to bulk yet larger we shall have one of our strongest men still fighting with one arm tied behind his back.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey demonstrates that the characteristics of the American language, as described by H. L. Mencken, point to other important features of American culture.

The United States is unique in a number of ways, but to historians and cultural commentators, it is especially interesting for its relative newness. America is unlike any other nation in its beginnings because it grew not out of circumstance and geography but out of intention. The first American settlers deliberately left their native countries and traveled to a new land to start a new way of life in almost complete isolation from their traditional cultures. These circumstances allow historians to trace the development of American culture in a way that no other country's culture can be studied. In *The American Language,* Mencken examines the evolution of language in the United States. His study is thorough and compelling, and it is particularly intriguing when compared to other important aspects of American culture because there are so many similarities. *The American Language* deepens the reader's understanding of American culture because the qualities that define the language characterize other American institutions and attitudes. According to Mencken, American English is adaptable, uniform, multicultural, individualistic, and influential, and has its own momentum. All of these qualities also appear in other segments of American culture.

First, American English is adaptable; this is, in essence, the thesis of Mencken's book. Vocabulary is the area in which the most change continues to take place. As society changes with the times, new words are needed, just as the first colonists needed new words to describe their new circumstances. Another important pillar of American culture that is flexible is the Constitution, on which America's unique form of government is based. The oldest document of its kind, the American Constitution could not have survived so long without being flexible. The spirit of the document has remained intact over the years, and the wording of the core document has remained unchanged, but amendments have been added as needed. For example, the founders did not allow women to vote because their society did not consider voting a woman's right. In 1920, however, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, giving women the right to vote. This is only one example of the Constitution's ability to expand to meet the needs of its changing people, just as the American language has done and continues to do.

Second, Mencken describes American English as uniform. At the beginning of chapter two, he writes that everyone who has studied American English has noticed that it is remarkably consistent across the country. While there are regional dialects and vocabularies, these are not as disparate as they are in many other countries, especially countries as large as the United States. He illustrates the point by claiming that a taxi driver from Boston could work in Chicago without facing a language barrier with his riders. By contrast, a taxi driver in India who moved a similar distance would likely have to learn a new language.

This linguistic consistency is reflected politically in the positive feelings most residents have about the American form of government. While many countries face disgruntled masses longing for a newer, fairer form of government, most Americans agree that the constitutional republic in which they live is fair and empowering. The way a nation's people feel about their government is an important contributor to overall well-being and contentment within its borders.

Third, Mencken also comments in chapter two that everyone who has studied American English has noticed "its large capacity for taking in new words and phrases." In numerous contexts throughout the book, Mencken emphasizes the multicultural qualities of American English. From the first settlers' encounters with Native Americans to the flood of immigrants from Europe in the nineteenth century, foreign languages have had a profound impact on English in America. This notion of the "melting pot" is a critical aspect of American culture. Americans take great pride in living in a country that welcomes people from all over the world and allows those people to bring the richness of their cultures with them. By folding in so many cultural influences, America becomes a fascinating mosaic of words, foods, music, clothing, customs, religions, and every other part of American life. The multicultural elements of American culture are impossible to miss. In America, these differences are not only encouraged and often celebrated, but they inspire new blends of cultures. Music, for example, offers a mixture of ethnic styles. In literature, many writers base their works on what it is like to be in America as a member of another culture.

Fourth, Mencken describes the American spirit as defiantly independent, a spirit that has been the force behind many of the changes in the language. Americans' determination to be different from the English and to assert their liberties made them unwilling to adopt British English intact. Instead, Americans created new words, gave new meanings to existing English words, and rescued other English words from obscurity. Independence is a core feature of American culture, and its effects reach into American economics, business practices, and policy-making, as well as law. The United States imposes fewer legal restrictions on both individual expression and on businesses than virtually any other nation.

Fifth, Americanisms have influenced other languages. In chapter six, Mencken discusses the many ways in which Americanisms have made their way into British usage. Later, he observes that American English is also used in other countries around the world. Despite being a relative newcomer on the language scene, American English is very influential. Similarly, America is extremely influential in the world, especially in terms of economics and the military. America's strong economy makes it a major player in the world market and the well being of other countries depends on the strength of the American economy. America buys from and sells to numerous nations worldwide, in addition to offering humanitarian aid to countries faced with famine, drought, oppression, and other strains. When the American economy was crippled by the Great Depression, European countries like Germany, England, and France were impacted. Militarily, America is also extremely influential. The Cold War, in which the Americans and the Soviets faced off in a sort of staring contest while they built up reserves of nuclear weapons, is evidence of the importance of American military strength to the

world. Without it, many believe that communism would have gained too much power during this time. More recently, there are examples of other countries (such as South Vietnam and Kuwait) relying on the United States for help in fighting their wars.

Finally, Mencken notes in chapter five that American English has a momentum of its own. It has not been subject to the efforts of those who have attempted to control its development. For such a young culture, the American way has demonstrated considerable momentum. A specific aspect of American culture that continually demonstrates momentum is the American dream of economic betterment. Immigrants and natives alike are drawn to the idea that in a land of opportunity, hard work and determination are rewarded with a better life. This dream is so strong that it propels people from harsh situations (at home or abroad) to create goals for themselves and pursue them even when faced with setbacks.

That the qualities that make up the American language are shared by so many other aspects of the culture should not be surprising. These are the qualities possessed by the people who perpetuate the language and the culture, after all. Americans, like their culture, accept change, possess similarities and differences, value independence, influence one another and the world, and have the opportunity to apply cultural momentum to their lives. In any cohesive culture, there is consistency among different elements□language, economy, government, art, attitudes□no matter how unrelated they may seem. Perhaps Mencken's contemporaries embraced *The American Language* because they saw themselves in it and thus believed in the integrity of the work. And perhaps this is why the book is so enduring;Americans continue to see themselves in it.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *The American Language*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Nelson examines the difficulty scholars have had in evaluating the impact The American Language and *Mencken have had on linguistics.*

Probably no one would take exception to [Raven] McDavid's observation that "a tremendous growth took place in American linguistics between the first edition of *The American Language* in 1919 and the fourth in 1936", but not everyone would feel entirely comfortable with his implication of a causal relationship. Mencken's influence on linguistics has proved difficult to evaluate, in part because it has been primarily literary and inspirational. Mencken kept to his own haunts and developed his own procedures, in which circumstance or accident sometimes played a part. He had no students who would institutionalize his ideas and developed no subfield to be identified with him. That is to say, he did not behave in ways that would make him comparable to the specialized, scientifically oriented linguists of the twentieth century.

The American Language is closer in kind to nineteenth-century scholarly enterprises on the grand scale, which aspired to be definitive rather than incremental. Mencken's contribution to his discipline, then, comes from an ancestral distance and is not so much practical as it is spiritual, if we may allow ourselves so un-Menckenian a concept. He is at his best as a cheerleader, an antagonist, and an exemplar - someone who points to great possibilities by assuming great tasks. In these qualities, as in little else, he most resembles Noah Webster among the doctors of the national language.

The book itself goes Webster one better. It remains approachable as a treatise on sociolinguistics, as a testimony of its peculiar time and place, or as an artifact, which is still powerful even though it may no longer be timely. It also remains just out of reach of any one of those approaches. The judgments that it or aspects of it have attracted over the years, while often shrewd, have almost of necessity been either stringently localized or too sweeping. Almost everybody would agree, probably, that *The American Language* is monumental; some might find it glorious in its way; but surprisingly few have felt able to identify its premises or weigh its evidence with any great degree of confidence.

One favorite way to duck the risk of evaluating a man who goes off on tangents, shuffles his assumptions, and writes, as Louis Kronenberger complained, in "a style in which it is impossible to tell the truth", has been to announce that he is an amateur, not subject, somehow, to the demands linguists might legitimately make on other linguists. Mencken himself made clever use of this evasion, which has the added benefit of placing him in good company. Much of the seminal philological work in America has been and continues to be done by dedicated amateurs. Roger Williams was one. Thomas Jefferson was another. John Bartlett was another. And so on. What amateurism may mean with regard to Mencken, however, except that he worked on his own, is not entirely clear. He was every bit as learned and at home with his learning as any academic linguist, although he may not have shared the academic's trust in methodology. It is true that he turned to philology for love more than money, but it is also

true that he almost certainly made more money at it than any of his professional contemporaries. Perhaps he may appropriately be called amateur because he was a man of letters rather than a scientist, who, like Samuel Johnson or Noah Webster, used philology as a way of expressing a personal vision of national and civilized values.

Such speculations and associations may yield a glimpse of the public man in the light of his discipline, although disagreements about his stature will continue to be sharp. The personal man is a different matter. Analysis can be a touchy business when dealing with so resolutely superficial a character as Mencken. Nevertheless, the book is so much of the man, and judgments about the man and the book are so inextricably linked, that curiosity, if nothing finer, would look for answers in Mencken's distinctive personality. It was the personality, of course, that earned him his great influence and celebrity. He was boisterous, supremely self-confident, and assertive to a fault, one of the most colorful self-promoters of his era, so cocky that, if he had thought of it, Wallace Stevens might have written his swashbuckling poem of 1922, "Bantams in Pinewoods," specifically about him. However attractive his psychic strut might have made him to his contemporaries, and many were infatuated with him, it could also lead him to snap judgments, not always good ones, or to aggressiveness for its own sake. The attitude was at least largely responsible for his indifference to the humility, patience, and disinterestedness that are implicitly required by any scientific inquiry.

The radical individualism is ultimately not so much an issue of style - how much of a noisy personality can one take? - as of character - at what juncture does cockiness become egotism, indifferent to introspection, inaccessible to correction? Mencken regarded himself as a man apart. That attitude, which he advertised blatantly, frequently involved the assumption that he was right and the world wrong simply because he was Mencken, born to the purple, so to speak, even if he was pretty much a party of one. It was at first partly a mask, of course, but over time the man grew into it. At its best, his Toryism made him a tough, courageous champion of individual liberties. However, the impulses that led him to confront with a kind of chivalric gallantry lynchers and comstockers alike also inclined him to arrogance, facetiousness, and a contemptuous dismissal of lesser breeds. His reputation will always be tainted by the mean-spirited bigotry he seemed eager to record for posterity during the last years of his creative life, after his outrage at the ascendancy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal embittered him, and he almost spitefully made himself into a smaller man than our admiration wants him to be.

Walter Lippmann asserted that if the clamorous personality were suppressed Mencken would be reduced to "a collection of trite and somewhat confused ideas." The division of mind and character is perhaps too sharp, but the observation that the personality indeed preceded and usually dominated the thought is unexceptionable. Mencken's self-consultations and characteristic impatience, not only with the subtleties but even the procedures of public debate, did indeed often result in reductionism. He would bring a slogan to the table, elevate his volume, and refuse to acknowledge amendments from the floor. Such tactics were useful for getting attention but ultimately impossible to sustain.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Mencken's reductionism are displayed in his basic argument about the divergence of American and British English. In a brisk retrospective review of the 1963 abridgment. W. V. Quine suggested that Mencken's showy dichotomy was in fact a careless fusion of five separate contrasts that were the book's true subjects: between U.S. and British English; between well-defined grammar and the older Latin grammar; between speech (which is basic) and writing (which is derivative); between colloquial and literary language; and between descriptive and prescriptive lexicography. Some process of reduction is obviously necessary to any imposition of order on accumulations of data. That Mencken's could be effective is clear from the power his dichotomy held over two generations of reviewers. However, as Quine's example insists, Mencken often risks turning argument into caricature, and sometimes he succumbs to the risk.

His mind was not supple in ways that would allow him to be educated by the particular requirements of a task. By the time he had reached his young manhood, so he claimed, he had developed all of the important opinions he would ever find necessary, and he went on repeating them until he lost the power to speak. They were the prejudices he cheerfully acknowledged in the titles of his famous series of opinionated books, an arrangement of set responses that lent his utterances great strength and forthrightness, and enabled him to produce a preternatural amount of lucid, consistent, usually entertaining prose. They narrowed his mind as they focused it.

In a celebratory essay, Raven McDavid argued that intellectual flexibility was in fact one of Mencken's strengths, demonstrated in part by his persistent corrections of his text. It is about as strong an argument in Mencken's favor as could be made from the evidence, but it eventually arrives at a dead end. Although his passion for collecting facts and noting them accurately was among his few wholly uncomplicated virtues, it did not move him to rethink the assumptions that held his facts together. His discussion of African loanwords, for example, has attracted some troubled commentary, particularly in recent years. When he contended in 1919 that the slaves brought only *gumbo, goober, juba,* and *voodoo* to the lexicon, and had "probably helped to corrupt a number of other loan-words", he was probably saying no more or less than might be expected of him. Such assumptions were of a piece with his milieu's alternately supremacist and indifferent attitudes toward African-American culture.

In succeeding editions the argument remained where Mencken left it in 1919, even though he had a surprising amount of interaction over the years with such African-American intellectuals as James Weldon Johnson and George Schuyler, whom he encouraged to make aggressive cultural statements on behalf of their race (Scruggs). He added to his original word list only a few explanatory sentences to the effect that Africanisms otherwise survived exclusively in Gullah, while African-American English derived either from poorly assimilated white speech or comic dialect-writing.

When he returned to the subject in *Supplement I*. Mencken filled out the record by noting the important new studies of the early forties about African cultural survivals and what Melville Herskovitz (whom Mencken cited) called "the myth of the Negro past." He acknowledged Lorenzo Turner's researches in Gullah and his arguments about the

influence of African languages upon specifically Southern African-American dialect, and he expanded on the etymologies of the loanwords on his list, which was essentially unmodified. It is surely to his credit that he gave Turner's important studies some exposure. There is no reason to suspect him of being personally sympathetic to revisionist arguments about issues of race in the U.S. At the same time, his description of Turner's work was simply part of an accumulation of data, without interpretation or application, so that he left unqualified his own original contention that African-American speech is derivative and its contribution to the common tongue limited to some half dozen marginal words.

He saw flexibility of mind as a sign of weakness, even when he encountered it among contemporaries who had rethought their positions because of the strength with which he argued his own. Charles Fecher and Fred Hobson have been among Mencken's most sympathetic and sophisticated observers, and both make a point of emphasizing, with approval, the absolute consistency of his basic ideas throughout his career. It was the same single-mindedness Edmund Wilson had described in 1921. "Mencken," he wrote, "once having got his teeth into an idea, can never be induced to drop it, and will only shake his head and growl when somebody tries to tempt him with something else." In the diary he maintained sporadically during the thirties and forties Mencken himself noted: "It always distresses me to hear of a man changing his opinions, so I never seek conversions. My belief is that every really rational man preserves his major opinions unchanged from his youth onward. When he vacillates it is simply a sign that he is stupid."

The formidable qualities of mind and personality, then, from which Mencken drew much of his strength, could by indiscriminate application turn to infirmities. They are the source of the two major faults in *The American Language.* The first is almost entirely a matter of the surface and derives from Mencken's fixation on the British, their incorrigibility, their airs of superiority, and the prestige enjoyed by their variety of the language. Once he had made his emotionally charged calls for liberation from British authority into an organizational principle, he was for practical purposes incapable of keeping his argument responsive to changes in the situation. Henry Bosley Woolf described the anachronistic stereotypes about British attitudes ("even when allowances are made for Mencken's tendency to exaggerate") that persisted into the McDavid abridgment of 1963. Particularly after the beginning of the Second World War, Mencken's fulminations about English traits increasingly assumed a decided, not necessarily unpleasant, period flavor.

He did not know the British vernacular or its distribution well enough to justify his *a priori* argument. Forgue, among others, has noted that Mencken's comparative nationalism compares unlike entities: a standard British, more often written than spoken, implicitly considered as monolithic, to colloquial American in all its wild irregularity. Mencken himself acknowledged then dismissed the problem in his preface to the 1921 edition. Over the years many critics have amused themselves by listing some of Mencken's inaccuracies or inconsistencies regarding British usage.

Errors in detail, however, in a study so rich with detail, are an incidental shortcoming of every edition of *The American Language* and are easily corrected. The more serious and enduring fault of Mencken's preoccupation with the competition of languages is the disproportionate importance it awards the British. Against his own volition, or so it seems, Mencken establishes the bases of his study in British English and in effect makes British usage normative, the referent from which linguistic change is measured and according to which comparisons are drawn. A similar distortion of emphasis in the extended lists of comparative vocabulary sometimes results in the comparison of strictly British usages or the chronicling of their changes. We learn, for instance, that in British schools the "lower pedagogues used to be *ushers,* but are now *masters* or *assistant masters (or mistresses)",* or we are provided a substantial word list from the "archaic and unintelligible [British] nomenclature" of music. While such matters can be interesting and valuable in themselves, pages of them are merely distractions in a study of American English.

The other major fault in *The American Language* lies at its heart. Mencken never could clarify or escape the contradictions inherent in his personal definition of *American.* He invoked, often in crude terms, breeding and the spontaneous authority of superior men to resist the biological and political implications of democracy, but he insisted on American freedoms, rejoiced in expressions of democratic energy - the more grotesque the better - and immersed himself in his American milieu as few people have. His conflicted feelings about his citizenship and emotional allegiances were often noted. "What Mr. Mencken desires," Walter Lippmann asserted in a review of *Notes on Democracy,* "is in substance the distinction, the sense of honor, the chivalry, and the competence of an ideal aristocracy combined with the liberty of an ideal democracy. This is an excellent wish, but like most attempts to make the best of both worlds, it results in an evasion of the problem".

Incompatible assumptions also result in an evasive model of the American language. Mencken, perhaps tactically, declined ever to address the question about the organic relationship of vulgate and standard his own analyses begged. In other words, how do yokels and gaping proletarians, who are more or less involuntarily spawning a language, also manage to make the language great: imaginative, metaphoric, daring of wit, and so on? He sidestepped the issue by identifying linguistic energy with American loutish ingenuity while assigning linguistic form to the British and their ill-fitting Latin grammars. Like so much of Mencken's behavior, that polarization reflects a need for unambiguous positions that shifts him back and forth between the Old World and the New, the past and the present. In the study, it leads to the conclusion that energy is good, or at least good fun, while form is bad.

Mencken, of course, would not have acknowledged so lame a proposition, but his tacit applications of it reduce to brittle allegory what should be the dialectical interplay of description and prescription, usage and sanction. In particular, the dualism drains his practical theory of the creative tension that would be generated by a rigorous ongoing interaction of the savage force with civil authority, be it academic, literary, or merely conventional, so that both form and energy are constantly limited and constantly renewed.

The observer of language who risks becoming, like Mencken, equally (and only) disdainful of both the schoolmarm and the yokel is left with nothing of the creative process to value except raw energy, pretty much for its own sake. The inconsistencies between the making and what has been made are left irreconcilable. Forgue attempted to reconcile them by arguing that Mencken intuits and makes us feel a kind of vitalistic model whereby the linguistic *élan vital* imitates the abundance and randomness of nature, thus becoming subject to a Darwinian process of natural selection, which sorts out the anarchic flux and sustains what fittest elements of language may survive.

Forgue's ingenious analysis of Mencken as an evolutionist abandons the search for *Homo faber* altogether, but it offers a uniquely plausible, internally consistent explanation of the relationship between Mencken's vulgar and standard American. Unfortunately, it was not Mencken's explanation. He understood from the first that he had a problem, as he acknowledged to F. C. Prescott in relating the American of educated people to that of the masses. In edition after edition, however, the intractability of the problem provoked him less to brilliant solutions than to virtuoso performances of the shell game. In his preface to the 1921 edition he acknowledged that his assumption in 1919 of two American dialects (which he did not define) had confused some readers, and he proceeded to discuss a four-dialect model, "a language of the intellectuals, another of the fairly educated (business men, Congressmen, etc.), another of the great American democracy, another of the poor trash." However, he attributed these categorizations to an anonymous "American scholar," was noncommittal about it, and apparently never consulted it again, even in the edition of 1921.

In his chapter on "The Common Speech" in 1923 Mencken employed a cursory, occasional distinction of vulgar American, correct American, and correct English, and he reported the same categories in 1936. These are precisely the formulations at work in 1919, and they remain wholly arbitrary. Over the years he made not even a gesture toward distinguishing standard (or correct) American from its vulgar ancestor. In fact, in all editions, after discussions of the early federal period are concluded, *American* almost exclusively connotes "vulgar American," and one need not be among the muddleheaded Britons Mencken scolded in 1936 to draw conclusions from the usage. An American Ph.D., the only one to study Mencken as a philologist, suggested that "the Vulgate is the language that the genuine American aristocrat will use naturally, both in his writing and his speech".

To the degree that Mencken is to blame for such howlers, he is so first because he could not resist comedy, with its inherent homogenizations, and second because he both conceived and represented a far too monolithic impression of what American might be. He had no real interest in a standard variety. Of what concern to him were the intellectuals, businessmen, and Congressmen nominated by the "American scholar" of 1921? Those fellows were learned idiots, pedants, Rotarians, boobs, Methodists. He had made a career out of making them howl.

So he allowed vulgar American to become a synecdoche for the language itself, but even then he remained indifferent to distinguishing among its many forms of vulgarity. The characteristic of American he identified first in all of his editions was its uniformity

throughout the country. It was unlike old-world languages because it lacked dialects. He appears to have obscured the distinction between two ideas about dialect when he assumed that because American was not fragmented into mutually unintelligible regional varieties, as might be found in England or China, it lacked significant geographical or social peculiarities altogether, except in a few items of the lexicon.

His inaccurate assumption, noted by McDavid, that "folk grammar" was consistent throughout the U.S. was at least in part also attributable to his indifference to the formal and empirical resources of science. Forgue pressed hard on that point. Mencken uses linguistics to express himself, Forgue complained; he relies on energy, enthusiasm, and humor instead of the tools of dispassionate inquiry and notation; he overdoes his reflexive defiance of authority. It is not easy to contradict Forgue. No one, probably, would care to deny that in his philological work Mencken was often attracted to curiosities rather than norms, used exaggeration as a method of judgment, and could resist anything better than an opportunity to crack wise.

Fair enough. He worked by memory, inference, and symbol. His vernacular dream of deep structure as a uniform vulgate, lying beneath standard forms like some volcanic substratum, battering and illuminating them, resembles other modern dreams of creative force. Such abstracted and idealized emblems in *The American Language* should remind us that Mencken was essentially an artist with an artist's conscience, poking among the secrets of origins and evolutions, who gathered evidence in order to substantiate the insights of art. His artifact displays the ambition as well as the messiness and inconsistency of many classic American books.

The American Language was from the first *sui generis.* Perhaps it will always be inimitable. Whatever its future, Mencken's future depends heavily on it. The unsealing and publication in recent years of his private autobiographical writings have taken the bloom off his personality. The passing political scene of 75 years ago that he so well loved and recorded so brightly seems remote now, even quaint. He never did amount to much of a rigorous thinker. But in his philology he found ways to coordinate all of his virtues, outsmart most of his shortcomings, and achieve a durable integration of vision and nourishment. The art remains, as always, more reliable than the artist.

Source: Raymond Nelson, "Babylonian Frolics: H. L. Mencken and *The American Language,"* in *American Literary History,* Vol. 11, No. 4, Winter 1999, pp. 668-98.

Topics for Further Study

Create a glossary of terms for a subject area not covered in *The American Language* For example, you may want to create a glossary of teenage slang or technology terms. Add an introduction in which you give some background or historical information about the terms.

Choose another aspect of culture, besides language, and explain how America has differentiated itself from England in that area of life. You may choose to write about fashion, entertainment, literature, or government. Prepare a presentation tracing and explaining the development of the differences over time.

Research ebonics, a method of teaching based on Black English. Based on your understanding of the arguments for and against this approach, what do you think Mencken would think about it? Write a letter to a newspaper editor as if you were Mencken, describing your opinions on the matter.

Linguistics is a lesser-known field of study but one with many practical applications. Interview (in person or by phone or email) a college professor of linguistics to learn about the scope and importance of this discipline. You may want to ask about the future of linguistics, too.

Review chapter six, in which Mencken discusses euphemisms and forbidden words. Consider his comments in the modern context of political correctness. Do you see any differences between the examples Mencken provides and what you see in today's society? What value, if any, do you see in shaping language to avoid offending or belittling anyone?

Compare and Contrast

1910s: The experience of World War I forever changes the way Americans feel about their position in the world. Never having been involved in a conflict of this magnitude, Americans feel patriotic but also disillusioned and fearful.

Today: In 2001, terrorists attack the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. These attacks on American soil leave Americans feeling disillusioned and fearful but also patriotic and united.

1910s: There is not yet a comprehensive linguistic history of the United States. Although the topic has received attention and study over the years, no one has compiled all data into a single volume.

Today: Mencken's *The American Language* is considered one of the most informative and thorough treatments of American linguistics. The field has broadened, and books are available containing up-to-date terms, slang, and influences. To date, however, no other author has compiled another volume as ambitious as Mencken's work

1910s: Bookstores are just becoming an important element of the publishing business. In 1912, the Washington Square Bookshop in New York City's Greenwich Village offers the Little Leather Library, a series of excerpts from the classics. This set is also sold through Woolworth's and sells an unprecedented one million units in a year.

Today: Book selling is highly competitive, with large traditional stores that carry tens of thousands of titles and online booksellers that offer, literally, millions. Sales have skyrocketed. In 1994, for example, a record seventeen titles sold over a million copies each.

What Do I Read Next?

Edited by Frederic Gomes Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, *Dictionary of American Regional English Vol. 1: Introduction and A-C* (1985) is considered the most comprehensive collection of words and terms unique to the United States, complete with definitions, pronunciations, alternative forms, dates, and examples of use. The book also includes articles, maps, and other relevant resources. Cassidy and Hall released subsequent volumes with additional information; volume two was published in 1991, and volume three was published in 1996.

A Mencken Chrestomathy (1949) and A Second Mencken Chrestomathy (1995), edited by Terry Teachout, contain selections of Mencken's unpublished works. Critics describe these books as valuable collections of Mencken's writing.

Bruce Mitchell's *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England (1995)* is an introduction to Old English for readers who find the language confusing and intimidating. Mitchell includes historical information to provide a context for the discussion, helping the reader to understand how the roots of the English language have become the English of today.

Peter Trudgill reviews the various manners of speech in England in *Dialects of England* (1999). Trudgill includes dialects from the distant past to the present, encompassing fifteen hundred years of language development. The style is not technical, and he provides historical and geographical information to further aid the student's understanding.

Further Study

Cairns, Huntington, ed.,*H. L. Mencken*: *The American Scene*, Vintage Books, 1982.

Cairns has gathered a representative sampling of Mencken's writing. Topics include journalism, politics, religion, and America. This book is considered a good introduction to Mencken's writing as a whole.

Crunden, Robert, ed., *The Superfluous Men: Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945, ISI Books, 1999.*

Crunden presents the writing of numerous social commentators in the first half of the twentieth century, years that span both world wars and the Great Depression. In addition to Mencken, writers such as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate are featured.

Manchester, William, Disturber of the Peace: The Life of H. L. Mencken, Harper and Brothers, 1951.

This biography is unique among those exploring Mencken's life because Manchester knew Mencken personally and wrote the biography with his help. The style is considered accessible and engaging.

Mencken, H. L., *A Choice of Days,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

This single volume contains excerpts from Mencken's three-volume autobiographical series. It was released on the one-hundredth anniversary of Mencken's birth.

Strachan, Hew, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War,* Oxford University Press, 2000.

Strachan has edited the work of experts from all over the world to present a total picture of World War I. Complete with numerous photographs and illustrations,this book answers questions about military endeavors,economics, the press, and social implications.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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