



MADE — IN — AMERICA

*An Informal History of the English
Language in the United States*

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Chapter 9

THE MELTING POT: IMMIGRATION IN AMERICA

I

By the early 1830s, America's cotton trade with Britain had become so vast that up to a thousand ships at a time, a significant portion of the Atlantic fleet, were engaged in carrying cotton to Liverpool. The problem was that most made the return journey largely empty. Casting around for a convenient cargo for the return trip, the shipowners hit on an unusual one: people.

Never mind that their ships were never intended for passengers, that a crossing could take up to three months with the human freight crowded into fetid holds that were breeding grounds for diseases like trachoma and malignant typhus (which in the nineteenth century was so closely associated with Atlantic crossings that it was called *ship fever*). People were willing to endure almost any hardship to get to America if the price was right, and by packing the passengers in and giving them almost nothing in the way of civilizing comforts, the fares could be made not just low but effectively irresistible. By mid-century a one-way ticket in *steerage* (so called because it was near the ship's steering mechanism and thus noisy) could be had for as little \$12 from Liverpool to New York, and for less than \$10 from Dublin. All but the most miserably destitute could scrape together that.¹

Millions did. From 150,000 in the 1820s, the number of immigrants to America climbed steadily with each successive decade: 600,000 in the 1830s, 1.7 million in the 1840s, 2.3 million in the 1850s. All this was happening in a much more thinly populated America, of course. The three million immigrants who came to the United States in the decade 1845–1855 arrived in a country that had a population of only twenty million. In just twenty years, 1830–1850, the proportion of foreign-born immigrants in America rose from one in a hundred to one in ten.

Never before had there been such a global exodus—and not just to the United States, but to Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, anywhere that showed promise, though the United States took by far the largest share. Between 1815 and 1915, it took in 35 million people, equivalent to the modern populations of Norway, Sweden, Austria, Ireland, Denmark, and Switzerland. Seven million came from Germany, roughly five million each from Italy and Ireland (1.5 million more than live in Ireland today), 3.3 million from Russia, 2.5 million from Scandinavia, and hundreds of thousands from Greece, Portugal, Turkey, the Netherlands, Mexico, the Caribbean, China, and Japan. Even Canada provided a quarter of a million immigrants between 1815 and 1860, and nearly a million more in the 1920s.² For smaller countries like Sweden, Norway, and Ireland, and for regions within countries, like Sicily and the Mezzogiorno in Italy, the numbers represented a significant drain on human resources. This was especially true of Ireland. In 1807 it was the most densely populated country in Europe; by the 1860s it was one of the least.³

Once across the ocean the immigrants tended to congregate in enclaves. Almost all the migrants from Norway between 1815 and 1860 settled in just four states, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. In much the same way, two-thirds of the Dutch were to be found in Michigan, New York, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Sometimes they were given active encouragement to congregate. In the first half of the nineteenth century, several German societies were formed with the express intention of so concentrating immigration in particular areas that they could, in effect, take over. One German spoke for many when he dreamed of Pennsylvania becoming “an entirely German state where . . . the beautiful German language would be used in the legislative halls and the courts of justice.” Not just in Pennsylvania, but in Texas, Missouri, and Wisconsin there were earnest hopes of colonizing all or at least a significant part of those states.⁴

In factory towns, too, immigrant groups were often concentrated to an extraordinary degree. In 1910, Hungry Hollow, Illinois, a steel town, was home to 15,000 Bulgarians. At the same time, of the 14,300 people employed in Carnegie steel mills in western Pennsylvania, almost 12,000 were from eastern Europe.⁵

The bulk of immigrants settled in cities even when their backgrounds were agricultural, as was generally the case. So effortlessly did Irish, Poles, and Italians settle into urban life, we easily forget that most came from rural stock and had perhaps never seen a five-story building or a crowd of a thousand people before leaving home. Often they arrived in such numbers as to overturn the prevailing demographics. In a single

year, 1851, a quarter of a million Irish came to America, and almost all of them settled in New York or Boston. By 1855, one-third of New York's population was Irish-born.⁶ As immigration from northern Europe eased in the third quarter of the century, the slack was taken up by eastern European Jews. Between 1880 and 1900 an estimated one-third of the Jewish population of Europe came to America, and again settled almost exclusively in New York.⁷

By the turn of the century, New York had become easily the most cosmopolitan city the world had ever seen. Eighty percent of its five million inhabitants were either foreign-born or the children of immigrants.⁸ It had more Italians than the combined populations of Florence, Genoa, and Venice, more Irish than anywhere but Dublin, more Russians than Kiev. As Herman Melville put it: "We are not so much a nation as a world." In 1908, a British Zionist named Israel Zangwill wrote a play about the immigration experience that gave Americans a term for the phenomenon. He called it *The Melting-Pot*.

The popular image, recreated in countless movies and books from *The Godfather* to *Kane and Able*, is of an immigrant arriving wide-eyed and bewildered at Ellis Island, being herded into a gloomy hall and subjected to an intimidating battery of medical tests and interviews, being issued a mysterious new name by a gruff and distracted immigration official, and finally stepping into the sunshine to realize that he has made it to the New World. Except possibly for the last part, it wasn't quite like that.

For one thing, until 1897 immigrants didn't pass through Ellis Island, but through Castle Garden, a former opera house on the Battery. Even after immigration facilities were transferred to Ellis Island, only steerage passengers were taken there. First- and second-class passengers were dealt with aboard their ships. Nor was Ellis Island (named for an eighteenth-century owner, Samuel Ellis) the drab, cheerless institution we might imagine. It was a beautiful, richly decorated complex with first-class health facilities, a roof garden with inspiring views of lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, and good food for the relative few who were subjected to detention. Its Registration Hall with its brass chandeliers and vaulted ceiling containing 29,000 tiles handset by Italian craftsmen was possibly "the grandest single space in New York," according to *The New Yorker*.⁹ Although immigration officials were unquestionably hard-worked—they processed up to five thousand arrivals a day and just over one million, four times Ellis Island's supposed capacity, in a single peak year, 1907—they performed their duties with efficiency, dispatch, and not a little compassion.¹⁰ (Many were themselves immigrants.)

Though the list of those who could be denied admission was formidable—it included prostitutes, lunatics, polygamists, anarchists, those with “loathsome or contagious diseases,” those deemed likely to become public charges, and some ninety other categories of undesirables—only about 2 percent of applicants were denied entrance, and so few were given names they didn’t willingly accede to as to make the notion effectively mythical. Far from being a cold and insensitive introduction to the New World, it was a dazzling display of America’s wealth, efficiency, and respect for the common person, one that made many truly believe that they had passed into an earthly paradise.

On landing in Manhattan the new immigrants would immediately find further manifestations of the wondrousness of America. Often they would be approached by fellow countrymen who spoke their language, but who were friendlier, easier in their manner, and far more nattily dressed than anyone they had seen at home. With astounding magnanimity, these instant friends, or *runners* as they were known, would offer to help the newly arrived immigrant find a job or lodgings and even insist on carrying their bags. Then at some point the immigrant would turn to discover that his new friend had vanished with his belongings, and that he had just learned his first important lesson about life in a new land. Few newly arrived travelers weren’t fleeced in some way within their first days.

Most of the millions of lower-class immigrants settled in the four square miles that were the Lower East Side, often in conditions of appalling squalor, with as many as twenty-five people sharing a single windowless room. As early as the 1860s, three-fourths of New York City’s population—more than 1.2 million people—were packed into just 37,000 tenements. By the end of the century the population density of the Lower East Side was greater than that in the slums of Bombay.¹¹ In an effort to improve conditions, a law was passed in 1869 requiring that every bedroom have a window. The result was the air shaft. Though a commendable notion in principle, air shafts turned out to be a natural receptacle for garbage and household slop, and thus became conduits of even greater filth and pestilence.

Crime, prostitution, begging, disease, and almost every other indicator of social deprivation existed at levels that are all but inconceivable now. (But not murder; the rate is ten times higher today.) A study of Irish immigrants to Boston around mid-century found that on average they survived for just fourteen years in America. In 1888, the infant death rate in the Italian quarter was 325 per 1,000. That is, one-third of all babies didn’t survive their first year.¹²

Gangs with names like the Plug Uglies, Dead Rabbits, and Bowery

B'hoys roamed the streets, robbing and *mugging* (an Americanism dating from 1863; also sometimes called *yoking*) with something approaching impunity. Although New York had had a police force since 1845, by the second half of the century it was largely corrupt and ineffectual. Typical of the breed of nineteenth-century policeman was Chief Inspector Alexander "Clubber" Williams, who was brought up on charges no fewer than 358 times but was never dismissed or even apparently disciplined, and who was so magnificently talented at corruption that by the time of his retirement he had accumulated a yacht, a house in Connecticut, and savings of \$300,000.¹³

Against such a background, it is hardly surprising that many immigrants fled back to Europe. At one point, for every one hundred Italians who arrived in New York each year, seventy-three left. Perhaps as many as a third of all immigrants eventually returned to their native soil.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the trend was relentlessly westward. The pattern for European immigrants was for one group to settle in an enclave and then disperse after a generation or so, with a new concentration of immigrants taking its place. Thus when the Irish abandoned their traditional stronghold of the Five Points area, their place was taken almost immediately by Italians. The old German neighborhoods were likewise taken over by Russian and Polish Jews. But there were finer gradations than this, particularly among the Italians. Natives of Genoa tended to accumulate along Baxter Street, while Elizabeth Street housed a large community of Sicilians. Calabrians congregated in the neighborhood known as Mulberry Bend. Alpine Italians—those from areas like Ticino in Switzerland and the Tyrol near Austria—were almost invariably to be found on 69th Street.

Immigrant groups had their own theaters, newspapers, libraries, schools, clubs, stores, taverns, and places of worship. Germans alone could choose from 133 German-language newspapers by 1850, some of them, like the *New York Staats-Zeitung* and *Cincinnati Volksblatt*, nearly as large and influential as their English-language counterparts.¹⁵ Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers by the 1930s had a choice of a dozen daily newspapers, one of which, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, had a circulation of 125,000. Nationally, even Norwegians had forty papers in their own tongue. It was possible—indeed, in some cases not unusual—to live an entire life in the United States and never use English.

Dutch, for instance, remained widely spoken in rural New York well into the nineteenth century, some two hundred years after the Netherlands had retreated from the continent. The celebrated abolitionist, feminist, and public speaker Sojourner Truth, for instance, was raised as a slave in a Dutch household in Albany and spoke only Dutch until she

reached adulthood.¹⁶ According to Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "a few native speakers [of Dutch] survived in the remoter parts of the Hudson Valley as late as 1941."¹⁷

Though the Dutch were only a passing political presence in America, their linguistic legacy is immense. From their earliest days of contact, Americans freely appropriated Dutch terms—*blunderbuss* (literally "thunder gun") as early as 1654, *scow* in 1660, *sleigh* in 1703. By the mid-eighteenth century, Dutch words flooded into American English: *stoop*, *span*, *coleslaw*, *boss*, *pit* in the sense of the stone of a fruit, *bedpan*, *bedspread* (previously known as a *counterpane*), *cookie*, *waffle*, *nitwit* (the Dutch for I don't know is *Ik niet wiet*), the distinctive American interrogative *how come?* (a literal translation of the Dutch *hoe kom*), *poppycok* (from *pappekak*, "soft dung"), *dunderhead*, and probably the *caboodle* in *kit and caboodle*. (*Boedel* in Dutch is a word for household effects, though J. L. Dillard, it is worth noting, mentions its resemblance to the Krio *kabudu* of West Africa.)¹⁸

Two particularly durable Americanisms that emanate from Dutch are *Santa Claus* (out of *Sinter Klaas*, a familiar form of *St. Nicholas*), first recorded in American English in 1773, and *Yankee* (probably from either *Janke*, a diminutive equivalent to the English *Johnny*, or *Jan Kees*, "John Cheese," intended originally as a mild insult).

Often Dutch words were given entirely new senses. *Snoepen*, meaning to slip candy into one's mouth when no one is watching, was transformed into the English *snoop*, meaning to spy or otherwise manifest nosiness.¹⁹ *Docke*, "doll," became *doxy*, a woman of easy virtue. *Hokester*, an innocuous tradesman, became our *huckster*, someone not to be entirely trusted. *Doop* to the Dutch signified a type of sauce. In America, transliterated as *dope*, it began with that sense in 1807, but gradually took on many others, from a person of limited mental acuity (1851), to a kind of lubricant (1870s), to a form of opium (1889), to any kind of narcotic drug (1890s), to a preparation designed to affect a horse's performance (1900), to inside information (1910). Along the way it spawned several compounds, notably *dope fiend* (1896) and *dope addict* (1933).

Still other Dutch terms came to English by way of nautical contacts, reflecting the Netherlands' days of eminence on the seas, among them *hoist*, *bumpkin* (originally a short projecting spar; how it became transferred to a rustic character is unclear), *bulwark*, *caboose* (originally a ship's galley), *freebooter*, *hold*, *boom*, and *sloop*.

As Dutch demonstrates, a group's linguistic influence bears little relation to the numbers of people who spoke it. The Irish came in their millions, but gave us only a handful of words, notably *smithereens*, *lallapalooza*, *speakeasy*, *hooligan* (from Gaelic *uallachán*, a braggart),²⁰ and *slew*

(Gaelic *sluagh*), plus one or two semantic nuances, notably a more casual approach than in Britain to the distinctions between *shall* and *will* and the habit of attaching definite articles to conditions that previously lacked them, so that whereas a Briton might go into hospital with flu or measles, we go to *the* hospital and suffer from *the* flu and *the* measles.

The Scandinavians imparted even less. With the exception of a very few food words like *gravlaks* and *smorgasbord*, and a few regional terms like *lutefisk* (a fish dish) and *lefse* (a pancake) that are generally unknown outside the upper Midwest and the books of Garrison Keillor, their linguistic presence in America escaped emulation.

Italian was slightly more productive, though again only with food words—*spaghetti*, *pasta*, *macaroni*, *ravioli*, *pizza*, and the like. The few nonfood Italian terms that have found a home in English, like *ciao* and *paparazzo*, came much later and not through the medium of immigration.

German, by contrast, prospered on American soil. Germans had been present in America from early colonial times—by 1683 they had formed their own community, Germantown, near Philadelphia—but the bulk of their immigration came in two relatively short later bursts. The first, numbering some ninety thousand, happened mostly in the five years from 1749 to 1754 and was largely completed by the time of the American Revolution.²¹ From 1830 to 1850 there was a second, larger influx focused mostly on urban areas like St. Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo, and New York, in several of which the German cultural impact was not just enormous but dominant. An editorial writer for the *Houston Post* noted at the outbreak of World War I, “Germany seems to have lost all of her foreign possessions with the exception of Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati.”²²

Only a few German words naturalized into English date from the earlier period of immigration, notably *sauerkraut* (1776), *pretzel* (1824), and *dumb* in the sense of stupid (1825). Most Americanized German terms arose during or soon after the second wave: *to loaf* and *loafer* (1835); *ouch*, *bub*, and *pumpernickel* (1839); *fresh* in the sense of being forward (1848); *kindergarten* (1852); *nix* (1855); *shyster*, probably from *Scheisse*, “shit” (1856); *check* in the sense of a restaurant bill (1868); and possibly *hoodlum* from the Bavarian dialect word *hodalump* (1872). Rather slower to assimilate were *delicatessen* (1889); *kaput* (1895); *fink*, from *Shmierfink*, a base character, literally “a greasy bird” (1892); *kaffee-klatzsch* and *hockshop* (1903); and *scram* (1920). From German speakers, too, came our habit of saying *gesundheit* (“health!”) after a sneeze and *so long* upon departing, of using *how* as an intensifier (“And how!”), and of putting *fest* on the ends of words (*songfest*, *foodfest*, *slugfest*, *talkfest*).

Many German terms underwent minor modifications of spelling to

make them accord with English practice, so that *autsch* became *ouch*, *krank* (to be ill) became *cranky*, *zweiback* became *zwieback*, *Schmierkäse* became *smearcase*, and *Leberwurst* became *liverwurst*.

Equally productive, if somewhat less diffused through society, was Yiddish (from Middle High German *jüdisch deutsch*, "Jewish German"), brought to America by eastern European Jews beginning in about 1880. Though based on German, Yiddish uses Hebrew characters and is written from right to left like Hebrew. It originated in the early twelfth century in the Jewish ghettos of central Europe. As Jews dispersed through Europe, they took Yiddish with them, enlivening it along the way with borrowings from Aramaic, Hebrew, various Slavic and Romance languages, and finally English. By the late nineteenth century it was the mother tongue of some eleven million people, a quarter of whom ended up in the United States.

As with the Germans, Jews came to America in well-defined but far more culturally distinct waves—first a small block of Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal (*Sephardic* means Spaniard in Hebrew) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, from the 1820s through the 1880s, a much larger group of Ashkenazi Jews (named for the scriptural figure Ashchenaz) from elsewhere in western Europe, particularly Germany, and finally, from about 1880 to 1924, a tidal wave of eastern European Jews, most especially from Poland and Russia.

Members of the first two groups, generally educated and comfortably off, moved smoothly into American life. Many of the great names of American business and philanthropy—Guggenheim, Kuhn, Loeb, Seligman, Schiff, Lewisohn, Morgenthau, Speyer—trace their origins to the first and more particularly second waves. Those in the final diaspora were by contrast almost universally ragged and poor. At least one-quarter could not read or write. To the "uptown Jews," these new arrivals were something of an embarrassment. They referred to them as "barbarians" or "Asiatics," and regarded speaking Yiddish as a mark of poverty and ignorance.²³

But it was these poor eastern Europeans who would more than any other group reshape America's concept of itself. They would help to create Hollywood and give us many of our most cherished creative talents, from the Marx Brothers to the composers George Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Both of the latter would get their start in the New York music district known as Tin Pan Alley (so called because of the cacophony to be heard there), Gershwin with "Swanee" and Berlin with the 1908 hit "Yidl with Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime," a song that, in the words of the writer Marvin Gelfind, "speaks volumes on the process called assimilation."²⁴

Among the Yiddish words that found their way to a greater or lesser extent into mainstream English were *to kibbitz*, *schmaltz* (literally “chicken fat”), *schlemiehl*, *schlock*, *keister* (rear end), *nosh*, *phooey*, *mashug-gah* (crazy), *schmo* (a backward person), *schnozzle*, *to schlep*, *chutzpah*, *schikse* (a Christian female), *bagel*, *pastrami*, and *glitch* (from *glitschen*, “to slip”), plus a raft of expressions: *I should live so long*, *I should worry*, *get lost*, *I’m coming already*, *I need it like I need a hole in the head*, and others beyond counting.*

Many Yiddish terms convey degrees of nuance that make them practically untranslatable, except perhaps through humor, a quality never far off when Yiddish is under discussion. *Chutzpah*, for example, is usually defined in dictionaries as a kind of brazenness, but its subtleties cannot be better conveyed than by the old joke about the boy who kills his parents, then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he has only recently been orphaned.

Such was the scale of immigration that by 1930 more than 35 percent of white Americans were foreign-born or had at least one foreign-born parent.²⁵ Confined as they often were to ethnic enclaves by a combination of economics, prejudice, and convenience, it is a wonder that the country didn’t splinter into scores of linguistic pockets. But it didn’t, and for several reasons. First, as we have already seen, most people moved on as assimilation and economic circumstances permitted. An area like that around Hester Street in New York might remain Yiddish-speaking for several generations, but the speakers were a constantly changing mass. For the most part, foreign immigrants couldn’t wait to learn English and circulate in the wider world. Indeed many, particularly among the children of immigrants, refused to speak their ancestral tongue or otherwise acknowledge their ethnic grounding. By 1927, *Time* magazine noted, older Jews were complaining that the younger generation didn’t understand Yiddish.²⁶ At about the same time, H. L. Mencken was noting: “In cities such as Cleveland and Chicago it is a rare second-generation American of Polish, Hungarian, or Croatian stock who even pretends to know his parents’ native language.”²⁷

Children not only refused to learn their parents’ language but “would reprove their parents for speaking it in front of strangers.”²⁸ As the his-

*It should be pointed out, however, that the closeness of German, Dutch, and Yiddish often makes it impossible to ascribe a term positively to one camp. *Spook* and *dumb* could be either Dutch or German in origin, and *nosh*, *schlemiel*, and *phooey*, among others, are as likely to have entered American English from German sources as Yiddish. More often than not, the influence probably came from two directions simultaneously.

torian Maldwyn Allen Jones has put it: "Culturally estranged from their parents by their American education, and wanting nothing so much as to become and to be accepted as Americans, many second-generation immigrants made deliberate efforts to rid themselves of their heritage. The adoption of American clothes, speech, and interests, often accompanied by the shedding of an exotic surname, were all part of a process whereby antecedents were repudiated as a means of improving status."²⁹

"Every immigrant who comes here should be required within five years to learn English or leave the country," barked Theodore Roosevelt in 1918. In fact, almost all did. Of the 13.4 million foreign-born in the United States in 1930, all but 870,000 were deemed by census enumerators to have a workable grasp of English, and most of those who did not were recent arrivals or temporary residents (many Italians in particular came for a part of every year when there was no farm work to be had at home), or felt themselves too old to learn. Although many urban, nonnative speakers could get by without English, most chose not to. There were, to be sure, troubling disparities. Only 3 percent of German immigrants did not speak English in 1930, while almost 13 percent of Poles and 16 percent of Italians (rising to over 25 percent for Italian women) existed in linguistic isolation.³⁰ But even the worst of those numbers would become negligible within a generation.

The erosion of linguistic enclaves was inevitable in urban areas where the mingling of immigrant groups was necessary and unavoidable. But what of more isolated communities? At the turn of the century throughout the Midwest there existed hundreds of towns or clusters of towns inhabited almost exclusively by specific linguistic groups. Iowa, for instance, had Elk Horn (founded by Danes), Pella (by the Dutch), and the Amana Colonies (by Germans), among many others. In each of these places, the local populace was homogeneous and sufficiently isolated to escape the general pressure to become Americanized. Even if they learned English in order to listen to the radio and converse with outsiders, we might reasonably expect them to preserve their mother tongue for private use. Yet, almost without exception, they did not. By the 1930s in such towns, English was not just the main language spoken but the only one. Even those German immigrants who came to America with the intention of founding a *Kleinedeutschland*, or Little Germany, in Texas or Wisconsin eventually gave up the fight. Today, it is unusual to find almost anyone in any such town who knows more than a few words of his ancestors' tongue.

Only one group has managed to resist in significant numbers the temptations of English. I refer to the speakers of the curious dialect that

is known generally, if mistakenly, as Pennsylvania Dutch. The name is an accident of history. From the early eighteenth century to almost the end of the nineteenth, *Dutch* in American English was applied not just to the language of Holland and its environs but to much else that was bewilderingly foreign, most especially Germans and their language—doubtless in confusion with the German word *deutsch*.

The Germans came to Pennsylvania at the invitation of William Penn, who believed that their ascetic religious principles fit comfortably with his own Quaker beliefs. The German influx, eventually comprising about 100,000 people, or a third of Pennsylvania's population, was made up of a variety of loosely related sects, notably Mennonites, Schwenkenfelders, Dunkards, Moravians, and Amish. It was the Amish in particular who spoke the Palatinate dialect of High German that eventually evolved into the tongue that most know as Pennsylvania Dutch. To the Pennsylvania Dutch the language is called *Muddersrschprooch*. To scholars and the linguistically fastidious it is *Pennsylvania German*.

For a century and a half, Pennsylvania German was largely ignored by scholars. Not until 1924, when Marcus Bachman Lambert published his *Dictionary of the Non-English Words of the Pennsylvania-German Dialect*, with some seventeen thousand entries, did it at last attract serious attention. Even now it remains relatively neglected as a topic of academic interest, which is a pity, because few dialects provide a more instructive example of what happens to languages when they exist in isolation. As the linguist and historian C. Richard Beam has put it: "In an age when there are billions of dollars available for trips to the moon and destruction abroad, it is very difficult to procure even a few hundred dollars to help finance the production of a dictionary of the language of the oldest and largest German language island on the North American continent."³¹

Because it has always been primarily a colloquial, spoken dialect, very different in form and content from standard German, Pennsylvania German presents serious problems with orthography. Put simply, almost any statement can be rendered in a variety of spellings. Here, for instance, are three versions of the same text:

Die Hundstage kumme all Jahr un bleibe sechs . . .

De hoons-dawga cooma alla yohr un bliva sex . . .

*Die Hundsdaage kumme alle Yaahr un bluwewe sex . . .*³²

During its long years of isolation, Pennsylvania German has become increasingly distinct from mainstream German. Many words bear the unmistakable mark of English influence, others preserve archaic or dia-

lectal German forms, and still others have been coined *in situ*. The drift away from standard German can be seen in the following:

<i>Pennsylvania German</i>	<i>Standard German</i>	<i>English</i>
aageglessler	Brillen	eyeglasses
bauersleit	Bauern	farmers
bauerei	Bauernhöfe	farms
elfder	elf	eleven
feierblatz	Kamin; Feuerplatz	fireplace
eensich ebbes	etwas; irgend etwas	anything
Febber	Februar	February
dabbich	ungenschickt	clumsy
alde daage	Alter	old age
Schtaagefensich	zick zack	zigzag
Grischtdaag	Weihnachten	Christmas
Nei Yarick	New York	New York

A striking feature of Pennsylvania German is its wealth of curiously specific terms. Notions and situations that other languages require long clauses to convey can often be expressed with a single word. For example:

fedderschei—the condition of being reluctant to write letters.

aagehaar—an eyelash hair that grows inwardly and irritates the sclera.

dachdrops—water dripping from a roof

aarschgnoddle—the globules of dung found on hair in the vicinity of the anus (and, no, I cannot think why they might need such a word)

At its peak in the nineteenth century, Pennsylvania German was spoken in communities as far afield as Canada, the upper Midwest, and the deep South. Today, according to Beam, it constitutes “but the remnants of a unique German-American folk culture, so rapid has been the process of acculturation.”³³ Estimates of the current number of speakers range as high as sixteen thousand—up to a quarter of the inhabitants of Lehigh, Lebanon, and Berks counties in Pennsylvania are said to still speak it³⁴—but the trend is implacably downward.

II

If one attitude can be said to characterize America's regard for immigration over the past two hundred years it is the belief that while immigration was unquestionably a wise and prescient thing in the case of one's

parents or grandparents, it really ought to stop now. Succeeding generations of Americans have persuaded themselves that the country faced imminent social dislocation, and eventual ruin, at the hands of grasping foreign hordes pouring into its ports or across its borders.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson responded to calls for restrictions on immigration by asking, a trifle plaintively, "Shall we refuse the unhappy fugitives from distress that hospitality which the savages of the wilderness extended to our fathers arriving in this land?"—though even he feared that immigrants with their "unbounded licentiousness" would turn the United States into a "heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass."³⁵

From the earliest days, immigrants aroused alarm and attracted epithets. For the most part, early nicknames for foreigners were only mildly abusive—for example, calling the Germans *cabbageheads* or *krauts* (from their liking for sauerkraut)—or even rather backhandedly affectionate. This was particularly the case with the Irish, whose reputed fondness for drinking and brawling and lack of acquaintance with the higher mental processes inspired a number of mostly good-natured terms of derogation, so that a police station was an *Irish clubhouse*, a wheelbarrow was an *Irish buggy*, bricks were *Irish confetti*, and an *Irish beauty* was a woman with two black eyes.

But as time went on, such terms grew uglier and more barbed, and tended to cluster around harsh mono- or dissyllables that weren't so much spoken as spat: *chink*, *kike*, *dago*, *polack*, *spic*, *hebe*. Some of these had been floating around in English long before they became common in America. *Polack*, for a Pole, was current in Elizabethan England and can be found in *Hamlet*. *Chink*, for a Chinese, appears to have been coined in Australia. *Sheeny*, for a Jew, arose in the East End of London, where it was first noted in 1824, but what inspired it is unknown. *Kike*, an Americanism first recorded in 1917, is thought to come from the *-ki* terminations on Jewish names like *Levinski*. *Bohunk*, probably a blend of *Bohemian* and *Hungarian*, is also of American origin and dates from the early 1900s. *Spic*, for Latin Americans, is said by Mencken to derive from "no spik Inglis." *Wop*, from *guappo*, a Neapolitan expression for a dandy or fop, was brought from Italy but took on its unseemly, more generalized shadings in the New World. (The theory that *wop* is short for "without passport" is simply wrong.)

Geographical precision has never been a hallmark of terms of abuse. *Guinea* began, accurately, as a term to describe an African in the late eighteenth century, then attached itself to Italians in the 1880s. *Dago* originated as a shortening of *Diego* and was at first applied to Spaniards before becoming associated with Italians, Greeks, Mexicans, and anyone

else suspiciously foreign and swarthy in the 1880s, as did *greaser* (dating from as far back as 1836) and the more recent *greaseball*. Many others are much less commonly heard now, notably *skibby* for a Japanese (possibly, if somewhat mysteriously, from *sukebei*, "lewdness"), and the even more obscure *gugu* for a Filipino, which some authorities believe is the source for *gook*.

Until the closing years of the nineteenth century, America preserved most of its official racist animus for blacks and Indians. But in 1882, it added a new category when Chinese were expressly denied entry to the United States through the Chinese Exclusion Act, and those already here were forbidden the rights and protections of citizenship. In 1908 the exclusion was extended to most Japanese immigrants through an arrangement known as the Gentleman's Agreement. Throughout the early decades of this century, Orientals were compelled to attend segregated schools, and barred from owning property, providing landlords with considerable scope for abuse.³⁶ As late as the early 1950s, the immigration quotas for Asian countries were niggardly to say the least: 185 for Japan, 105 for China, 100 each for Korea and the Philippines.

But beginning in the 1890s, as the flood of immigrants from the poorer parts of Europe turned into a deluge, racism became more sweeping, more rabid, and less focused. Anti-immigrant fraternities like the American Protective Association and the Immigration Restriction League sprang up and found large followings, and books like Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (which argued "scientifically" that unrestricted immigration was leading to the dilution and degeneration of the national character) became best-sellers. William J. H. Traynor of the American Protective Association spoke for the mood of the country when he argued against giving the vote to "every ignorant Dago and Pole, Hun and Slav" and all the other "criminal riffraff of Europe" that washed up on American shores.³⁷ Such sentiments appealed not only to the masses but to people of considerable eminence. The Immigration Restriction League numbered among its supporters the heads of Harvard, Stanford, Georgia Tech, the University of Chicago, and the Wharton School of Finance.³⁸

Even Woodrow Wilson, who many would argue was as enlightened a President as we have had this century, could write in his *History of the American People* in 1902 that recent immigrations had been characterized by "multitudes of men of lowest class from the south of Italy, and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland" who collectively were endowed with neither skills nor energy "nor any initiative of quick intelligence." The Chinese, he added a trifle daringly for the time, "were more to be desired, as workmen if not as citizens."³⁹

When several Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans for associating with blacks, President Theodore Roosevelt made appropriate lamentations in public, but remarked in a letter to his sister that he thought it was really “rather a good thing” and added derogatory comments about the tiresomeness of “various dago diplomats” who had protested to him about the lynchings.⁴⁰ Even Margaret Sanger, the esteemed birth control activist, was motivated not by a desire to give women more control over their destinies, but by a utopian urge to reduce the lower orders through carefully imposed eugenics. “More children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control,” she wrote.⁴¹ Never before or since have intolerance and prejudice been more visible, fashionable, or universal among all levels of American society.

In 1907, to give vent to the growing concerns that America was being swept to oblivion by a tide of rabble, Congress established a panel called the Dillingham Commission. Its forty-two-volume report concluded essentially that immigration before 1880 had been no bad thing—the immigrants, primarily from northern Europe, were (by implication) industrious, decent, trustworthy, and largely Protestant, and as a result had assimilated well—while immigration after 1880 had been marked by the entrance into America of uneducated, unsophisticated, largely shiftless, and certainly non-Protestant masses from southern and eastern Europe. It maintained that the Germans and Scandinavians had bought farms and become productive members of American society, while succeeding waves of immigrants had merely soaked up charity and acted as a drag on industrial earnings.

As evidence the commission pointed out that 77 percent of arrested suspects in New York City were foreign-born, as were 86 percent of those on some form of relief, and the poor were not just overwhelmingly, but almost entirely, of immigrant stock.⁴² When the commission investigators examined housing conditions in New York, they could not find a single case of a white native American living in a tenement. The commission concluded that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had increased overall unemployment and depressed wages.

In fact, all evidence points in the opposite direction. It was *because* America had a base of low-wage, adaptable, unskilled labor that it was able to become an industrial powerhouse.⁴³ For over half a century, American business had freely exploited its foreign-born workers, paying them appalling wages, dismissing them wholesale if they agitated for better pay or conditions, and replacing them with new supplies of compliant immigrants when necessary. Now it was blaming them for being poor and alienated. It failed to note that those who turned to crime

or sought relief were only a small part of the immigrant whole, most of whom were loyal, productive, law-abiding citizens.

Fired by the oxygen of irrationality, America entered a period of grave intolerance, not just toward immigrants but toward any kind of antiestablishment behavior. The Sedition Act of 1918 made it illegal, among much else, to make critical remarks about government expenditure or even the YMCA.⁴⁴ So low did standards of civil liberty fall that police routinely arrested not only almost anyone remotely suspected of sedition, but even those who came to visit them in jail.

In 1917, in an effort to weed out unfit immigrants, a literacy test of sorts was introduced. Most aspiring immigrants now had to show that they were capable of reading at least thirty words—though, oddly, the words didn't have to be English. Why a Croat who could read thirty words of Croatian was perceived to be better prepared for life in America than a fellow Croat who could not was never explained.

At the same time, the questions that were asked of immigrants at ports of entry became far more searching and insinuating. Arriving in America in 1921, G. K. Chesterton was astonished at the probing interview to which he had to submit. "I have stood on the other side of Jordan," he remarked later, "in the land ruled by a rude Arab chief, where the police looked so like brigands that one wondered what the brigands looked like. But they did not ask me whether I had come to subvert the power of the *Shereef*; and they did not exhibit the faintest curiosity about my personal views on the ethical basis of civil authority."⁴⁵ Finally, in 1924 a quota system was introduced and America's open-door policy became a part of history.

By this time, however, immigrants everywhere were proving the iniquity of the prejudice against them. Eastern European Jews in particular showed a model regard for education and self-improvement. By 1927, two-thirds of New York's twenty thousand lawyers were Jewish,⁴⁶ and thousands more had built distinguished careers as academics, musicians, playwrights, journalists, doctors, composers, entertainers—in almost every field of human endeavor not barred to them. Having faced four decades of complaints that they did not work hard enough, Jews now found themselves accused of working *too* hard.

A quiet drive began to ration Jewish admissions to many universities (echoing present-day concerns over Asian domination of institutions of higher learning), and there arose a new expression, *five-o'clock anti-Semitism*, by which was meant that people were prepared to work with Jews during the day, but would not dream of socializing with them at night. For at least another three decades, Jews would remain casually excluded from large parts of the American mainstream.

Not until the 1960s could they hope to be admitted to non-Jewish country clubs, college fraternities and sororities, and other bastions of gentile life.

But the prejudice the Jews experienced paled when compared to that meted out to the most visible, least voluntary of all minorities: black Americans. It may come as a surprise to learn that blacks were one of the *least* numerous of groups to enter the United States, exceeded in number of arrivals by Swedes, Sicilians, Poles, and most other national or ethnic blocks. Between 1505, when the first consignment of black slaves arrived in the Caribbean, and 1888, when slavery was finally outlawed in its last New World stronghold, Brazil, an estimated twelve million black Africans were transported across the Atlantic. The overwhelming majority, however, went to Brazil and the Caribbean. Just 5 percent—about half a million people—were imported into what was to become the United States.⁴⁷

For obvious economic reasons, blacks were encouraged to propagate freely. As early as 1775, they accounted for 40 percent of the population of Virginia, 30 percent in North Carolina, Maryland, and Georgia, and well over 60 percent in South Carolina.⁴⁸

Though the physical cruelties to which they were subjected have perhaps been somewhat inflated in the popular mind—most were at least passably fed and clothed by the standards of the day; it was, after all, in the slaveowner's interest to look after his property—the psychological humiliations to which they were subjected are immeasurable. It was not merely the imposition of involuntary servitude but the denial of even the most basic human dignities that made American slavery so singularly odious. David Hackett Fischer reports how a visitor to Virginia “was startled to see ladies buying naked male slaves after carefully examining their genitals.”⁴⁹ Female slaves were routinely regarded as sexual playthings by owners and their overseers. Scarcely a plantation existed that didn't have a sprinkling of *mulattos* (originally a Spanish term denoting a small mule), and visitors from outside the South were often taken aback at encountering a light-skinned slave bearing a more than passing resemblance to their host. (Sally Hemings, the slave woman who may have been the long-standing mistress of Thomas Jefferson, was in fact his late wife's half sister.)

Slaves were commonly wrenched from their partners—about a quarter ended up so separated—and mothers divided from their children with a casualness that strains the heart even now. A typical advertisement of the time read: “NEGROES FOR SALE. —A negro woman 24 years of age, and two children, one eight and the other three years. Said negroes will be sold separately or together as desired.”⁵⁰ In a thousand ways,

black Americans were daily reminded of their subhuman status. As the words of a slave song had it:

*We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust,
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us de huss . . .
We skim de pot,
Dey gib us de liquor
An say dat's good enough for nigger*⁵¹

Almost everywhere they were kept in a state of profound ignorance. Learning of any sort was assumed to be an invitation to insubordination. Joel Chandler Harris had his fictional creation Uncle Remus remark: "Put a spellin-book in a nigger's han's, en right den an dar' you loozes a plowhand. I kin take a bar'l stave an fling mo' sense inter a nigger in one minnit dan all de schoolhouses betwixt dis en de state er Midgigin."⁵² In consequence, their awareness of the world beyond the plantation bounds was often stupefyingly limited. Frederick Douglass recounted in his autobiography that until he secured his freedom he had never even *heard* of New York and Massachusetts.⁵³

Even if they managed to secure their freedom, they scarcely enjoyed the fruits of democracy. By 1820, America had 233,000 freed blacks, but they weren't in any meaningful sense free. White workmen refused to work alongside blacks or to allow them apprenticeships, so their prospects of worthwhile employment, much less advancement, were exceedingly meager. Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana would not allow even free blacks to settle within their boundaries. Even where they were allowed to settle, they were subjected to constant indignities, which they had to suffer in silence. Every child knew that he could pelt a black person with a snowball without fear of reprisal. Even in the case of the most serious grievances, blacks were often denied the rights of habeas corpus, trial by jury, or to testify in their own behalf. Almost nowhere were they allowed to testify against whites.

Though slavery was widely detested in the North, only a handful of idealistic eccentrics saw abolition as a prelude to equality of opportunity. Even Lincoln, in his debates with Stephen Douglas, made his position clear: "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. . . . I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. . . ." ⁵⁴

Most preferred to think of blacks as happy-go-lucky, childlike creatures who wanted nothing more from life than something good to eat and a chance to sing and dance. The popular image was captured in the song "Jim Crow," popularized by Thomas D. Rice in the mid-1830s:

*Come, listen all you gals and boys,
I'se just from Tucky hoe;
I'm goin' to sing a little song,
My name's Jim Crow.*

What is remarkable is how long-lasting this imagery proved. Well into the 1940s, *Time* magazine was still commonly referring to blacks as "pickaninnies" and reveling in news snippets in which black people fell down wells or otherwise came amusingly a cropper. Hollywood roles for blacks were largely limited to the shuffling, eye-rolling, perennially timorous and befuddled types played by actors like Stepin Fetchit and Buckwheat Thomas. The 1950s saw the stereotype extended with television characters like Amos 'n' Andy and the faithful Rochester on the *Jack Benny Show*, while in the wider world of commerce almost the only black face one saw was the smiling countenance of Aunt Jemima, a fat and irrepressibly happy black woman who clearly saw no higher gratification in life than to fix pancakes for white folks. Elsewhere blacks simply didn't exist. Even a program like the *Andy Griffith Show*, set in the fictional arcadia of Mayberry, North Carolina, appeared to take place in a surreally all-white world.

On the few occasions when blacks were treated more seriously, it was almost always with a degree of patronizing ignorance that now simply takes one's breath away. As late as 1949, the author of a nationally syndicated newspaper science column could solemnly inform his young readers that the American Negro was constitutionally incapable of pronouncing *r*'s in words like *cart* and *horse* because "his lips are too thick." Almost no scholarly attention was devoted to black Americans. The few books that focused on them, like *The Negro in Africa and America* (1902) and *The Negro in American Life* (1926), took it as a given that blacks were incapable, except in certain exceptional cases, of higher cerebral activity. Often, it was asserted that their distinctive speech habits were an inevitable consequence both of their impaired mental powers and of their physiology, as in this passage from *The Negro in American Life* discussing the Gullah dialect:

Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers . . . wrapped their

clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as . . . speech.⁵⁵

And this, I urge you to bear in mind, was a scholarly work. Even the most eminent of linguistic scholars found it impossible to credit blacks with even the most modest capacity for linguistic innovation. In *The English Language in America*, George Philip Krapp contended: "American words brought into the language through the negroes have been insignificant in number. . . . A few words like *juba*, a kind of dance, *banjo*, *hoodoo*, *voodoo*, *pickaninny*, exhaust the list of words of non-English origin."⁵⁶ Of Gullah—now widely regarded as the richest, most expressive, and most ethnically pure of all the Afro-American dialects in America—Krapp contended that "very little of it, perhaps none, is derived from sources other than English."

Almost every term of black speech was claimed to have its roots in English. *Jazz*, Krapp insisted, was an old English dialectal word. Another scholar went so far as to pronounce that *moke*, once a common word for a black person, came from the Icelandic *möckvi*, "darkness."⁵⁷ That even an eight-year-old child could see a certain implausibility in the idea of black Americans picking up and employing a term that had originated on a chilly island two thousand miles away didn't matter. What was important was that the credit had to go to some source other than the blacks themselves.

Not until a black academic named Lorenzo Dow Turner and a Swede named Gunnar Myrdal began studying black speech in the 1940s was it accorded serious, scholarly investigation. Turner and Myrdal quickly established that certain syntactical features of Gullah, a dialect still spoken by some 250,000 people on the Sea Islands off South Carolina and among neighboring coastal communities, were clearly traceable to the languages of West Africa, and also appeared in other New World patois as far apart as Brazil and Haiti, which clearly precluded British dialectal origins. Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) suggested that as many as six thousand Gullah words showed signs of concordance with West African terms.⁵⁸

Turner and Myrdal showed, among much else, that the Wolof *hipikat*, denoting a person who is attuned to his environment, literally "has his eyes open," is the most plausible source for *hepcat*, *hip*, and their many variants.⁵⁹ Other words almost certainly of ultimate African origin are *chigger*, *gumbo*, *banjo* (at first also spelled *banjou* or *bangy*), *jitter*, *cola*, *yam*, *zombie*, *juke*, *goober*, *tote*, *okra*, and *boogie-woogie*, though many of these, like *banjo*, *chigger*, and *gumbo*, reached America by way

of the Caribbean, often after being filtered through an intermediate language.

Even Teddy Roosevelt's *speak softly and carry a big stick* appears to have its roots in a West African proverb. Likewise, "Yankee Doodle Dandy" shows a striking similarity to a slave song from Surinam, which goes

*Mama Nanni go to town
Buy a little pony.
Stick a feather in a ring,
Calling Masra Ranni.*⁶⁰

Other terms that have been credited with African roots include *bogus*, *banana*, *gorilla*, *funky*, *phony*, and *jazz*, though in each instance the evidence is largely conjectural. *Jazz* is one of the most hotly disputed terms in American etymology. Among the suggested possibilities are that it comes from *Chaz*, the nickname of an early ragtime drummer named Charles Washington, or from *chasse*, a kind of dance step. Others have linked it to various African or creole sources. In any case, its first use, in the South among both blacks and whites, was to describe sexual intercourse. It wasn't until after World War I that it entered the wider world conveying the idea of a type of music. Quite a number of African-American terms contain some forgotten sexual association. *Boogie-woogie* appears originally to have signified syphilis. *Juke*, from the West African *dzugu*, "wicked," originally carried that sense in English. Eventually it came to signify a brothel and then, by about 1930, a cheap tavern where lively music was played—a *juke joint*. *Jukebox* dates from 1937. *Blues*, a term popularized if not invented by one of its greatest exponents, the cornet player W. C. Handy (his "Memphis Blues" was written in 1910; "St. Louis Blues" followed in 1914), also originally had "a strong sexual significance," according to Mencken, though he doesn't elaborate.⁶¹ So, too, did *rock 'n' roll*.

Among the many neologisms that certainly or probably were created in America by blacks, and have subsequently filtered into the wider world, we find *to blow one's top*, *gimme five* for a handshake and *high five* for a congratulatory handslap, *ragtime* (also obscure, but possibly arising from its ragged syncopation; it was first recorded in 1896), *bad* in the sense of good, *cool* in the sense of being admirable, *def* for excellent, *to get down* in the sense of to attend to pleasures, *case* in the sense of personal business ("get off my case") *square* for a boring person, *to lighten up* for relax, *right on*, *uptight*, *jive*, *to chill out*, *to bad-mouth*, and *geek*. In addition, there are scores, perhaps hundreds, of other terms that are used

primarily by blacks: *hood* for neighborhood, *dippin'* for being nosy, *to beam on* for to stare impolitely ("you beaming on my girl?"), *honky* for a white person (of uncertain derivation, but possibly from *hunky*, a shortening of *Bohunk*), *blood* for a fellow black, *411* for reliable information (from a phone company number for directory assistance), and *fess* for an insincere promise.

Finally, a word about descriptive terms for black people. *Negro* is Spanish and Portuguese for "black," and was first noted in English in 1555. *Nigger* appeared in 1587 and was not at first a pejorative term but simply a variant pronunciation of *Negro*. *Sambo*, a Nigerian word meaning "second son," was not originally pejorative either. *Uncle Tom* comes, of course, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though its use in the general sense of a servile black hasn't been found earlier than 1922.

Blacks were generally called *blacks* or, more politely, *coloreds* until the 1880s, when *negro* increasingly became the preferred term. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in 1909 and, despite its own choice of name, soon launched a campaign to have *negro* given the dignity of a capital letter and accepted as the standard designation for black people. By 1930, *Negro* had been adopted by almost every large disseminator of information in the United States with the single notable exception of the U.S. Government Printing Office.⁶² *Black* made a resurgence during the early 1960s, almost entirely displacing *Negro* by about 1970, and has since been joined by many other suggested designations: *African-American*, *Afro-American*, *Afri-American*, *Afra-American*, and *Afrikan*.⁶³