



English: American Style: How Americans Invented Themselves and Their Language

Jeffrey McQuain

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Synopsis Those six words, uttered by Al Jolson in America's first talking feature film, *The Jazz Singer*, electrified audiences and announced the end of the silent movie era. But they also sum up so much about the American language. Jazzy, slangy, grammatically suspect and spoken by the son of immigrants, they self-confidently promise a wealth of words to come. America has kept the promise. Since before we were a nation, we've been adding our coinages to the treasury of the English language. But that hasn't always made speakers of the "King English" happy. The first reports of an American dialect, made by British visitors to "the colonies," denounced it as "barbarous." [and] filled with improprieties and vulgarisms." Thomas Jefferson was belittled for creating the word, "belittle"; and lengthy diatribes attacked the American adjective, "lengthy" But American independence, assertiveness and pure cussedness conquered the linguistic purists. Despite British resistance to the American evolution, the New World demanded new words, and we supplied them. "Talk talk" developed from our love of tall tales. The bragging, boastful, buoyant frontier spirit, epitomized by Davy Crockett's claim that he could "outspeak any man," led to an invented language of mile-long words. Thus, expressions like "teetotaciously exflunctified" appear even in serious news paper editorials.

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