Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation

Chelyabinsk State University

Faculty of Linguistics

English Language Department

Paper

American Riddles

Student, group LTE 302

A.A. Dashkevich

Instructor A.A. Elistratov

Chelyabinsk

2010

INTRODUCTION

American Culture is a massive, variegated and changing topic. It is evident that part of the definition of contemporary American identity and significance in the world has emerged within the very hegemony of this culture and the English language and its diffusion worldwide since the Second World War. Whether talking about Hollywood cinema, suburbs, NATO or a pervasive commodity like Levi Strauss blue jeans, American culture has provided both a worldwide image of a complex “modern” society and a template for reactions to that society. Moreover,

American projections abroad have been shaped by American colonialism and war as well as decontextualized images from advertising, news, political rhetoric and mass media. In order to gain a basic understanding of the “Americanness” of products, practices and images, we should recognize the transformations that the American culture has undergone in different milieu worldwide. Yet, at the same time, American culture has changed in the past and is changing dynamically in the present through the very status of the United States as a meeting ground for world cultures, immigrant and transient. While globalism is a topic of intense current discussion, American culture has been global since the first encounters of Europeans and American Indians. One cannot talk of contemporary American culture and its language without recognizing African American music, Muslim education, Hasidic businessmen, Southeast-Asian temples, Hispanic urbanization, Japanese and British investments, European fashions, multiple varieties of Chinese food, and competing varieties of wine and whiskey as constitutive of a changing cultural landscape. Nor can one express these features without noting the conflicts erupting in diversity the polarizations and contests, as well as the renewals of American culture this same diversity can facilitate. It is prudent to conceive of American culture and its language as a process rather than as a finished object. The sheer size of the United States, its regional differences and the plethora of peoples and places within its boundaries also make any description and generalization a formidable task.

1. THE LAND, PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE

*“Out of nothing comes language and*

*out of language comes nothing*

*and everything.”*

Jane Tillman

The vastness and abundance of the land is one key to understanding the American character—how Americans think of themselves. Likewise, regional variations also help to define Americans’ understanding of themselves and introduce a certain diversity into what it means to be an American. Indeed, diversity is the hallmark of this nation of immigrants. The ethnic mix of the country has always been and remains ever in flux, and Americans have never been shy to borrow what they like from any ethnic group to the effect of redefining their culture and customs.

The hope for new lives with new opportunities that brought millions of immigrants to the United States in the past continues today. The United States has always been a nation of immigrants and therefore constantly in flux as new waves of migration from without and within redefined the American experience.

The United States is not the world’s biggest country, but most Americans like to think it is and act as if it were. The richness and enormity of American resources make the nation virtually self-sufficient in many areas, most notably in agriculture. With such abundance, Americans are big consumers with generally high incomes, at least by world standards. “America the Beautiful,” a patriotic poem and song by Katharine Lee Bates, sums up Americans’ emotion about their homeland: from sea to shining sea, beautiful, spacious skies overlook majestic purple mountains, amber waves of grain, and fruited plains. God shed his light on the United States, where freedom spreads across the wilderness and alabaster cities gleam. When this song is sung at public functions, it is not unusual for the audience to sing along, many with tears in their eyes.

For many Americans, the land itself is proof of a good God and a Godgiven destiny. Space—unknown and often unowned—gave early Americans in real terms a sense of individual freedom. This is an old tradition. When the Reverend Roger Williams of the Church of England arrived in Boston in 1631, he refused to serve the church there because he no longer believed in an established church. In fact, he had become, like the Puritans he later served for a while, a separatist, but too radical even for them. He criticized the Massachusetts Bay Company—even questioning the legality of its charter—and the churches. He befriended the natives and supported their ownership of the land. Williams refused to quiet himself or retract his positions and was given six weeks to remove himself from Massachusetts. He found his own space, Providence, where he could practice his own ideas the way he wanted. Eight years later, he had a royal patent for a united Rhode Island. For colonists and the immigrants who followed them, the New World was freedom from the constraints of the Old World and freedom to pursue individual wants and desires in a bountiful land.

Americans believe that if something—anything—exists, it can probably be found in the United States. To them it seems that the United States have it all, from all the extremes and everything in between. And Americans take pride in this, be it fallacy or not. They view themselves as industrious and inventive people who are constantly on the go, who value risk taking and its rewards. They like to think that any person born in the United States can grow up to be president, a belief attributable to their sense of independence, self-reliance, fair play, and hard work.

Yet the culture of the United States seems to be filled with contradiction. America fashions itself to be a peace-loving nation, but its armed forces have been involved in some 250 international military actions since the end of the eighteenth century, from Peru to Turkey, the Fiji Islands to Tripoli, Sumatra to Uruguay, and nearly everywhere in between. The U.S. Constitution gives citizens the right to bear arms but does not recognize equal rights for women. Hollywood films have defined American culture internationally, however erroneously, but have never been beyond censorship at home, rights to freedom of artistic expression and free speech aside. In the so-called Land of Equality, African Americans and Latinos earn less than whites, and women earn less than men. White educational attainment far surpasses that of most minority groups. In a society that values scientific advancement, debates about the teaching of evolution in public schools stubbornly persist in school boards across the country. Even presidential candidates have to declare themselves for or against evolution. These often deep ethnic, economic, political, social, educational, and religious divisions are, however, sources of vitality in American culture. In the end, the culture of the United States is based on a series of compromises, which, taken together, are a source of self-identity and pride for most Americans. Indeed, the Founding Fathers understood this quite well, creating a nation that, from its beginning, declared freedom and liberty for its citizens and let slavery stand. Americans believe they can work out their problems in time. They believe that their country is the best place to live on earth. In spite of the fact that the United States of America occupies a space in the Americas, specifically North America, only its citizens refer to themselves as Americans. In the U.S. lexicon, Americans do not include Canadians, Venezuelans, Argentineans, Hondurans, or any other citizens of nations in the Americas. This predilection for U.S. linguistic hegemony is maintained throughout the world the world by using the terms America and Americans to refer only to the United States and its residents.

**The Land and the Culture**

american culture language

The United States is a vast land that features most of the geological elements known to humankind: mountains, deserts, swamps, plateaus, glaciers, lakes, rivers, caves, volcanoes, canyons, mesas, seashores, plains, and even geysers and tar pits. The country was patched together over time, not always peaceably, out of Native American territories that had been settled and or claimed by England, France, Holland, Sweden, Spain, Mexico, and Russia. American culture was from the first, therefore, a conglomeration of all these early influences. Africans, brought to America in slavery, and the immigrants who eventually poured into the country from other nations also affected American culture and life from early times.

American culture, always in a state of redefinition, can be understood in terms of the nation’s increasingly diverse ethnic groups and the regional variations that engender differences in dialects, food, clothing, the arts, and even religion. Yet beyond ethnic and regional differences, there is something that is distinctly American. The citizens of the United States, clustered largely around the major cities, value the freedom to say what they want, dress as they like, eat what they want, and live where they want. They believe religiously that their hard work will be rewarded with a piece of the American pie.

Suppose you wanted to do a road trip to see the country, got in your car, and began traveling America’s nearly 4,000,000 miles of highways. No matter where you set out, what direction you took, or where you stopped, you would experience a kind of American megaculture created by corporate America. It is connected by interstate highways and defined by a common media universe, where English is spoken, dollars are traded, and peaceful commerce is maintained by an overarching belief in American values. From sea to shining sea, you could overnight at Holiday Inns, Ramadas, Marriotts, Hampton Inns, Days Inns, Hiltons, Econo-Lodges, and Sheratons. You could shop at Wal-Marts (America’s biggest employer), J.C. Penneys, Sears, and Targets. You could satisfy your hunger with all-American hamburgers at McDonald’s, Wendy’s, or Burger King; with chicken at Chick-fil-A, Church’s, or Kentucky Fried Chicken; with pizza at Pizza Inn or Pizza Hut;

with sandwiches at Subway or Arby’s; with fish at Long John Si lver’s; with

steak at Western-Sizzlin or Ponderosa; with Mexican food at Taco Bell; with Italian food at Fazoli’s or Olive Garden; with coffee at Starbucks; and with dessert at Baskin & Robbins or Dairy Queen. If you were in the mood for a delightfully tacky yet unrefined dining experience, Hooters would happily fill that need.

There is a certain comfort after traveling hundreds or thousands of miles that the currency has not changed, the language remains understandable, and the Big Mac at McDonald’s tastes the same as the Big Mac back home. Indeed, Americans take it for granted and would even expect to converse about the same major news stories with anyone they might meet along the way. This layer of megaculture is a kind of affirmation of America’s greatness, values, and way of life. Yet at the same time, it is also a monument to mass production and mass marketing designed to appeal to everyone and offend no one. Beyond the highways and the shopping mall parking lots, the many other layers of racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity may be discovered that exist in all the regions of America.

**Regional linguistic and cultural diversity**

Regions are difficult to define exactly, but there is no doubt that there are regional differences within U.S. culture that are based on early migration patterns, historical and current immigration patterns, topography, climate, and religion. These differences are expressed in language, custom, food, fashion, architecture, leisure activities, and the arts. On a wide scale, most Americans would agree that the nation divides culturally into East, West, North, and South, although to real southerners, any fellow American not a southerner may be considered just another Yankee. There are indeed some variations in the cultural identity of the people in these four broad regions.

Fifty-five percent of African Americans in the United States live in the South. Forty-nine percent of Asians and 55 percent of Mexicans live in the West. Forty percent of Americans who claim heritage of two or more races also live in the West.

Certainly, within and around these rather artificial boundaries are unique cultural areas. The East may be further divided between the Mid-Atlantic states and the states of New England, each area having evolved from different historical roots. The Midwest, in the center of the country, defies the easy boundary of the Mississippi River, straddling both its shores. Southern coastal culture differs from the culture of the Deep South. What might be called the Northlands near the Canadian border and in Alaska are sparsely populated lands that are unique and not easily classed into four regions. Some have spoken of the space between Boston and Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles and San Diego as being essentially densely populated megacities, gigantic cities of population centers of millions tied together by transportation lines and an urban culture. The mountain areas of Appalachia and the Ozarks have developed distinctive cultures during years of relative isolation. The Pacific Northwest, also geographically isolated during its early development, has developed special characteristics distinct from the general western culture. Certainly, the Southwest has likewise developed a regional culture that is neither entirely western nor southern.

One problem with trying to identify regions is that they have fuzzy boundaries. Another is that if you ask Americans how they identify themselves when asked where they are from, Texans will say Texas and Californians will say California. Alaskans do not identify themselves as westerners, and neither do Hawaiians. No one from a Mid-Atlantic state will identify himself or herself as a Mid-Atlantican. Yet New Englanders, southerners, midwesterners, and westerners do identify strongly with their regions. A buckeye from Ohio may just as well say “I’m from the Midwest” as “I’m from Ohio.” Only circumstance would determine the answer. If the Ohioan is talking with a fellow midwesterner, Ohio would be the obvious choice for the answer. If, however, a New York City native asks where he is from, the buckeye will answer that he is from the Midwest, in deference to the known

fact that that New Yorkers have a skewed geographical sense of anything west of the Hudson River.

**The People**

There are about 300,000,000 people in the United States now, ranking it third behind China and India, each with populations of more than 1,000,000,000 people. However, the population density of China is 359 per square mile, and of India, 914 per square mile. In the United States, on the other hand, there are only 82 people per square mile, well below the world figure of 125. This is attributable not only to the vastness of the country, but also to its generally temperate climate save for interior and northern Alaska. Russia, for example, has almost twice the landmass of the United States, but much of the land is uninhabitable, thus leaving it with only 22 people per square mile. Canada, with about the same area as the United States, has only nine people per square mile. Fourteen million Americans live in the 22 cities with populations between 500,000 and 1,000,000. The cities alone do not tell the whole story of where and how most Americans live. An entirely different kind of automobile-enabled culture has developed in the suburban areas that surround America’s great cities. When the suburban and other areas that are dependent largely on core cities are considered as metropolitan areas, a clearer picture emerges.

**So who are these Americans?**

America is now more racially and ethnically diverse than at any time in its history. Nearly 2 percent of the population claims the heritage of two or more races. Of those claiming a single race, whites still comprise the majority at over 75 percent. African Americans are a little over 12 percent of the population, American Indians and Alaska natives a bit under 1 percent, Asians 4.2 percent, and 2 percent claim some other race. Over 14 percent of the total population of any race claim Latino or Hispanic heritage. Fifty percent of Hispanics are Mexican in origin; 36 percent live in California, with large contingents of Cubans in Florida, and others in Illinois, Texas, and New York. Of whites, most claim a British ancestry, but about 22 percent are of German descent, and 18 percent are of Irish descent.

The mix keeps changing. Around 1,000,000 legal immigrants are admitted each year, 70 percent of them relatives of U.S. citizens. In 2002, for example, of the 1,063,700 admitted immigrants, 174,200 came from Europe; 342,100 from Asia; 60,300 from Africa; 404,400 from North America, of whom 219,400 were Mexican; and 74,500 from South America.

The number one destination for Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigrants was California. Most Cubans went to Florida.

New immigrants have tended to cluster in the large cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Houston, for example—where others of the same heritage are already ensconced. However, cities such as Las Vegas, Atlanta, Salt Lake City, and Minneapolis have growing Hispanic populations. Asian populations are growing in Denver, Seattle, Boston, Detroit, and Miami. In addition to this legal immigration, estimates are that there are 7,000,000 unauthorized immigrants living in the United States: 4,808,000 from Mexico, with sizable numbers also from El Salvador (189,000), Guatemala (144,000), Colombia (141,000), and Honduras (138,000). About 12 percent of the people in the United States were born elsewhere. Not surprisingly, 49,600,000 people, 18.7 percent of the U.S. population five years old and older, speak a language other than English at home. While some native-born Americans find this situation alarming, corporate America has welcomed these new consumers, especially those who speak Spanish, now America’s second language. Spanish can be heard frequently in Los Angeles,

San Antonio, and Miami, but all over America, packaging has suddenly appeared in Spanish and English, voting ballots may be obtained in Spanish, and bilingual signs have sprung up in retail stores, even in suburbia.

It is not just a platitude that America is a land of immigrants. The real story about America is not its growing and changing population, but its ability to assimilate new immigrants into the American dream. To be sure, the process is seldom quick and sometimes difficult. Somehow though, the once undesirable neighborhoods of America’s biggest and oldest cities segregating Italians, Irish, Jews, African Americans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, and Poles became centers for the pursuit of happiness American style. Americans like to think they live in a classless society. No one is better than anyone else—everybody puts his pants on one leg at a time. Americans do not bow, curtsey, or nod their heads when they meet friends or strangers. With a firm grip and a handshake, Americans look into the eyes of the people they meet and immediately begin a new relationship on an equal, first-name basis.

Most Americans believe that hard work, whether backbreaking physical labor or long hours at the office (some 45,000,000 people list their occupation as managers or professionals, the largest single occupational category), is the path to the American dream. It is understood that salaried employees who work only 40 hours a week will not move up in the organization. Doing the minimum shows no initiative. The good things hard work is expected to bring are financial independence, which is tantamount to personal independence, new homes, new cars, nice vacations, and a lifestyle of choice. Americans seem to enjoy showing off the bounty of their success. A big house, a big car, season tickets to football games—the things money can buy—tell everyone “I made it.” It is as if there were an imaginary ladder of success Americans try to climb, and near the top rung, money talks. Clinton cleverly juxtaposed the notion of work and play. Americans work hard and play hard, too, but what absolutely galls most Americans is anyone who tries to get ahead by cheating. Playing by the rules at work, at play, and in life is a basic expectation. What the rules are is not particularly important, and they are always subject to change. The idea that someone who was undeserving would get something for nothing is, however, almost too much to bear. This was viewed as the problem with the welfare system; people who could have worked were getting checks for not working—not playing by the rules. On the other hand, Americans pour out their hearts and willingly open their wallets for people who cannot help themselves or are victims of disasters. Likewise, millions of Americans volunteer in various social and religious organizations to help the less fortunate. It is not surprising that Americans are often viewed by others as too big for their britches. Americans’ expectation for things being done in the American way, whatever that may be, appears as arrogance. In fact, the American penchant for efficient use of time—gulping down fast food, always on time for appointments—seems to have created a robotic society tuned to the clock as if in the last two minutes of a football game. When expectations are not met—if a traffic jam causes one to be late, for example—Americans feel a certain stress that may manifest itself as haughtiness. Yet as self-reliant problem solvers, they also believe that whatever caused the system to go awry can be fixed.

**The Language**

The official language of the United States of America is . . . well, there is no official language. That is probably a good thing because if Congress declared an

official language, most Americans would refuse to speak it. Government and

government motives have always been viewed with a certain suspicion, and any attempt to regulate language would probably be considered a violation of cherished individual rights. Thus, in a sense, there are some 300,000,000 dialects of American English in the United States. The fact is, however, that language may be a clue to what region a person grew up in or lives in. It also may hint at social class, age, education, and ethnicity. When Americans hear expressions like these, they can usually size up the speaker’s background:

*Was you goin’ to town?*

*Like eeeeyoooo, that’s gross!*

*They are vacationing in Warshington!*

*The delegation arrived in Cuber to see Castro!*

*How ya’ll doin’?*

*Leave the paper on the stoop!*

*He’s all hat and no cattle!*

*Are you going to the shore this weekend?*

*Do she have the book?*

*So, yous wanna go get a cheesesteak?*

*That maht could work!*

*You betcha!*

*Let’s get a grinder for lunch!*

*I’ve got to red up the house already!*

*I asked for a soda, not a Coke!*

*Dame un bipeo later!*

*The machine’s all tore up!*

*Go out to the bahn and check on the horses.*

*Dose doyty boyds are nesting right under my window!*

Broadly considered, there are only two general dialects in the United States, northern and southern, each with numerous variations. The general northern dialect is spoken in all areas of the country outside the Old South of the Confederacy. Greatly influenced by the language of New England, further dialects of the general northern dialect developed with westward expansion. The Great Lakes dialect is spoken from Syracuse to Milwaukee, and its nasal As can be heard in Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland.

The North Midland dialect, with full Rs pronounced, stretches from south Jersey and northern Maryland across most of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and eastern Oklahoma. The western dialect, also with general northern dialect roots, is relatively new in linguistic history terms and is mixed with regional sounds. Subsets or subdialects of the western dialect include the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, central and northern California, and the interior western states. The general southern dialect has only two divisions. The southern dialect is spoken in the southeast from Maryland south to Florida and in the lowlands of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and east Texas. The South Midland dialect is spoken in the highlands and inland from southern Ohio through the Texas panhandle. Such broad classifications hardly do justice to the variety of the American language. Ethnic groups bring their own flare to the language—African Americans, Cajuns, Chicanos—and America’s major cities, notably Boston, New York, and San Francisco, have developed a distinctive patois. Teenagers of all ethnic groups continue to make and remake their own languages. Yet even in the face of this complexity and diversity, it has been argued that Americans’ mobility and the constant, flat sounds of so-called standard American over radio and television will wipe out regional linguistic variations. Linguistic boundaries may change and blur, but the fact remains that people in Boston do not sound anything like people in New Orleans. What is really important to the fabric of American life, however, is that Bostonians and New Orleanians, Texans and Michiganders, can all understand each other.

Any Englishman will tell you that there is an American accent. Language also has been a primary but contested issue, especially with new immigrants who have used the discourse of civil rights and ethnic identity to maintain language and media. Most, like their nineteenth-century forebears, still learn English rapidly by the second generation: schools are a major force in teaching language and social mores. Yet tensions may arise between bilinguals and English monolinguals, threatened by prerequisites associated with bilingual status. Mass media, since the turn of the century, have been seen as potent vehicles to teach immigrants language and customs. Hollywood studios, at the same time, often hid the ethnic origins of stars and producers in putting this American dream on screen. Americans' obsession with baseball manifested itself in the language. For instance the name of illustrious basketball player George Herman “Babe” Ruth has entered the language as an adjective for outsized. His accomplishments changed the game into one based on the home run or long ball, resulting in a sudden score with one swing of the bat, instead of a slower game. Yankee Stadium, opened in 1923 in the Bronx, New York, became known as the “house that Ruth built,” the most venerable of baseball’s venues. While the United States is an English-speaking nation, no official government pronouncement confirmed this—at least until the English-Only campaigns of the 1980s forced this upon state legislatures. Nonetheless, generations of those absorbed by American expansion and immigrants have acceded to the domination of English in education, public life, media and everyday life just as the nation’s projection abroad has gone through English channels. Older inhabitants—including American Indians, Hispanic and French residents and Hawai’ians—as well as generations of immigrants, have held onto their own languages for literary ceremonial and family uses, despite transgenerational pressures to assimilate. Newer immigrants, while adding the variegated presence of more than 300 languages (and variable government support) to an American melting-pot, show similar patterns of change over time. Hence, in the 1990 census, 80 percent of the population spoke only English, while half of the remainder spoke English as well as another language. After more than two centuries, American English—distinguished from its British mother tongue and other colonial developments—represents a unifying feature of American national identity discourse and media.

The unification of this distinctive language, however, has also recognized diversity and challenges as well as changes over time. By the early nineteenth century works such as Webster’s Dictionary and the McGuffey Reader distinguished American English from British counterparts. Distinctions have included forms and usages (often informal) and a rich vocabulary constantly supplemented by encounters with other speakers—Native American place names, diverse food names and basic vocabulary derived from multiple languages, including “buckaroo” (Spanish vaquero “cowboy”), “kibitz” (Yiddish and German words for being a busybody), “moccasin” (used by Virginians from 1612, from the Powhatan or Micmac), “shanty” (from the Irish sean tig “old house” or the French chantier “log hut”), “boss” (Dutch baas), “gung ho” (Chinese kung ho) and “juke” (Wolof dzug).

In the twentieth century while assimilation to English with some bilingualism remained the norm, mass media like the Spanish-language television Telemundo and Univision underscored new transnational support for other languages with large communities of speakers in the US—with 20 million Spanish speakers, for example, the United States ranks sixth among world nations in this language. Yiddish, although limited in speakers (200,000+), survived as a medium of expression in the US after Hitler’s devastation of Central European Jewry. Other important bilingual competencies in the US include French, German, Italian, various forms of Chinese, Tagalog, Polish and Korean, although many others have contributed to the expressiveness and vocabulary of American English. Meanwhile, Native American languages have been revived as expressions of national identity just as Hawai’ian and Hawai’ian pidgin have claimed renewed

emphasis. Perhaps the most controversial language variant of the United States is Black English (“Ebonics”). African slaves, forcibly imported into the United States, combined the vocabularies, structures and rhythms of African languages and speech of the slave trade with English. In isolation, these became strongly marked dialects like Gullah of the Southern coast. In other cases, Black English occupies a post-creole continuum, in which distinctive forms of tense and pronoun use, dual negatives and other features may be used in certain circumstances, but “corrected” in others, especially by speakers who switch fluently to Standard English. The role of Black English as a separate language has been debated by educators and linguists. Moreover, language structure shades over into distinctive styles of rhetoric, expressivity wordplay and music that also define an African American tradition of English used by public figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. or authors like James Baldwin and Ntozake Shange.

Other variations in American English reflect historical differences of region, immigration, class and education. American accents may be identified with cities (Brooklyn, New York City NY, Chicago, etc.), although migration also means that newer areas may lack any identifiable accent—one rarely speaks of a Phoenix or Seattle accent. Regional accents, in turn, tend to reflect associations of regional culture—identification of a New England accent with powerful history and Yankee harshness, or of a Southern accent with ease but a lack of development. Slang and jargons associated with particular groups have been vital parts of the reinvention of English from generation to generation. Some inventions have endured — from the ubiquitous “OK,” which may have African roots, to more recent ephemera. Professional jargons circulate rapidly through mass media, despite those critics who decry their obfuscation or lack of creativity. Slang, as a creation of those outside the mainstream, occupies an even more confusing position as the slang of youth becomes the home language of new generations. One notes shifts, for example, not only in individual words but in the vocabularies of profanity and sexuality that baby boomers use fluently in contrast to their parents (and perhaps to children who are ingrained in proper speech as they develop their own rebellions).

Language is also about style and American values of individualism, “popular culture” and consumerism. Again, culturally constructed divisions like the fluidity of black preaching, the supposedly hard-nosed criticism of big-city speech or the politeness of women represent both ideological constructs and language practices. Multiple media represent and participate in a continual recreation of American language and language practices. Hence, the phrase “Make my day” (from Clint Eastwood’s hard-edged cop in Dirty Harry) was recycled by Ronald Reagan as president, while the advertising slogan “Where’s the beef?” also appeared in political debates. Indeed, the ubiquity of English among 250 million speakers (as well as those who speak or “listen to” American products in other countries) has sustained music, literature, advertising, television and films as channels in which American English is continually reinvented and shared.

2. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, THE COMMUNICATIVE STYLE AND THE LANGUAGE

*‘Language can be a form of counter-history … Let*

*language shape the world. Let it break the faith of conventional re-creation.*

*Language lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, the*

*thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history’s flat, thin, tight relentless*

*designs, its arrangement of stark pages and that allows us to find an uncon-*

*straining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.’*

*DeLillo*

Most Americans see themselves as open, frank, and fairly friendly. If you ask them a question, they will answer it. They have nothing to hide. They cannot understand why people from other countries should have any difficulty understanding them. Unless, of course, there are language problems.

But most foreigners do have trouble understanding Americans (understand here means having a reasonably accurate set of ideas for interpreting the behavior they see). Even if they have a good command of English, most foreigners have at least some difficulty understanding what the Americans they encounter are thinking and feeling. What ideas and attitudes underlie their actions? What motivates them? What makes them talk and act the way they do? What makes them tick?

**Political Correctness**

First, a few words about terms. According to Gary Althen and his book American Ways, for the past dozen years or so, Americans have been quite concerned with what has come to be called “political correctness.” The term means different things to different people, but in general it refers to the notion that speakers and writers should avoid any words or phrases that might be considered “insulting” or “demeaning” to anyone. For example, restaurant waitresses (as well as waiters) are now commonly referred to as “waitstaff” or “servers” to avoid the implication that people who serve restaurant customers are predominantly females in a lowly station. Many people with what were formerly called physical or mental handicaps now prefer to be called “*differently abled*.” Writers and speakers are encouraged to avoid the exclusive use of the word he in any passage that refers to members of both genders. The word foreign, used for decades to refer to people from one country who were temporarily in another, has been criticized for implying strangeness, or being out of place. People who consider themselves sensitive to the feelings of people from other countries urge the use of international in its place. So, “foreign students” has generally been replaced by “international students,” “foreign visitors” by “international visitors,” and so on. People who consider themselves sensitive to the feelings of citizens of the Western Hemisphere outside the United States of America argue that it is unacceptably arrogant for people in the United States to refer to themselves as “Americans.” Everyone from the Western Hemisphere is American, they say. People in the U.S. should refer to themselves as “U.S. Americans,” “U.S. citizens,” or some such term.

**How do US Americans see themselves and foreigners?**

According to Gary Althen, an eminent American scientist and a profusive author of books on cultural differences, Americans do not usually see themselves, when they are in the United States, as representatives of their country, even though they are quite patriotic at times. The author adds that for a period following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Americans displayed considerable emotional attachment to their country. But that began to fade after several months. Usually, Americans see themselves as individuals who are different from all other individuals, American or foreign. Americans often say they have no culture, since they often conceive of culture as an overlay of arbitrary customs to be found only in other countries. Individual Americans may think they chose their own values rather than having had their values and the assumptions on which they are based imposed on them by the society in which they were born. If asked to say something about American culture, they may be unable to answer and they may even deny that there is an American culture and become annoyed at being asked such a question. “We’re all individuals,” they will say. Because they think they are responsible as individuals for having chosen their basic values and their way of life, many Americans resent generalizations others make about them. They may be offended by the notion that they hold certain ideas and behave in certain ways simply because they were born and raised in the United States and not because they had consciously thought about those ideas and behaviors and chosen the ones they preferred. At the same time, Americans will readily generalize about various subgroups within their own country. Northerners have stereotypes (that is, overgeneralized, simplified notions) about Southerners, and vice versa. There are stereotypes of people from the country and people from the city, people from the coasts and people from inland, people from the Midwest, minority ethnic groups, minority religious groups, Texans, New Yorkers, Californians, Iowans, and so on. The point here is to realize that Americans acknowledge few generalizations that can safely be made about them, in part because they are so individualistic and in part because they think regional and other kinds of differences completely distinguish Americans of various groups from each other.

Like people everywhere else, Americans, as they grow up, are taught certain attitudes toward other countries and the people who live in them. Parents, teachers, schoolbooks, and the media are principal sources of information and attitudes about foreigners and foreign countries. Americans generally believe that theirs is a superior country, probably the greatest country in the world. It is economically and militarily powerful; its influence extends to all parts of the globe. Americans generally believe their democratic political system is the best possible one, since it gives all citizens the right and opportunity to try to influence government policy and since it protects citizens from arbitrary government actions. They also believe the system is superior because it gives them the freedom to complain about anything they consider wrong with it.

Americans generally believe their country’s free-market economic system has enabled them to enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the history of the world.

Writer Bill Bryson puts the point this way:

“When you grow up in America you are inculcated from the earliest age with the belief—no, the understanding—that America is the richest and most powerful nation on earth because God likes us best. It has the most perfect form of government, the most exciting sporting events, the tastiest food and amplest portions, the largest cars, most productive farms, the most devastating nuclear arsenal and the friendliest, most decent and most patriotic folks on earth. Countries just don’t come any better.” (1989, 270–71)

If Americans consider their country to be superior, then it cannot be surprising that they often consider other countries to be inferior. The people in those other countries are assumed to be not quite as intelligent or hardworking or sensible as Americans are. Political systems in other countries are often assumed to be inadequately responsive to the public and excessively tolerant of corruption and abuse; other economic systems are regarded as less efficient than that of the United States. Foreigners (with the exception of Canadians and Northern Europeans, who are generally viewed with respect) tend to be perceived as underdeveloped Americans, prevented by their “primitive” or inefficient economic and social systems and by their quaint cultural customs from achieving what they could if they were Americans. Americans tend to suppose that people born in other countries are less fortunate than they are and that most foreigners would prefer to live in the U.S. The fact that millions of foreigners do seek to enter or remain in the U.S. illegally every year supports this view. (The fact that billions of foreigners do not seek entry is ignored or discounted.) Foreign visitors often find that Americans in general are condescending to them, treating them a bit (or very much) like children who have limited experience and perhaps limited intelligence. Foreign visitors are well advised to remember that it is not malice or intentional ignorance that leads so many Americans to treat them like inferior beings. The Americans are, once again, acting the way they have been taught to act. They have been taught that they are superior, and they have learned the lesson well. There are obviously many exceptions to the preceding generalizations. The main exceptions are those Americans who have lived or at least traveled extensively in other countries and those who have in some other way had extensive experience with people from abroad. Many Americans will also make an exception for a foreigner who has demonstrated some skill, personality trait, or intellectual capability that commands respect. British writers, German scientists, Korean martial arts specialists, and Kenyan runners, among others, readily have many Americans’ respect.

If you ask a Turk (for example) who is visiting the United States whether the Americans she has met think and act the way Turks normally do, she’ll probably say, without any hesitation, “No!” If you then ask her to explain how the Americans differ from the Turks, she will probably hesitate and then offer something along the lines of “Well, that’s hard to say.”

It is indeed difficult to explain how one cultural group differs from another. Anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, journalists, communication experts, and others have tried various approaches to explaining the distinctive features of different cultures but the issue is still widely debated.

**Social Relationships**

Recounting his stay in the US the late British journalist Henry Fairlie once wrote this: “One spring day, shortly after my arrival [in the United States], I was walking down the long, road street of a suburb, with its sweeping front lawns (all that space), its tall trees (all that sky), and its clumps of azaleas (all that color). The only other person on the street was a small boy on a tricycle. As I passed him, he said “Hi!” just like that. No four-year-old boy had ever addressed me without an introduction before. Yet here was this one, with his cheerful “Hi!” Recovering from the culture shock, I tried to look down stonily at his flaxen head, but instead, involuntarily, I found myself saying in return: “Well—hi!” He pedaled off, apparently satisfied. He had begun my Americanization. The word “Hi!” is a democracy. (I come from a country where one can tell someone’s class by how they say “Hallo!” or “Hello!” or “Hullo,” or whether they say it at all.)

But [in America] anyone can say “Hi!” Anyone does.” (1983, 12)

Like many foreigners, Fairlie was struck, even stunned, by the degree of informality and egalitarianism that prevails among Americans. Anyone can say “Hi!” to anyone. First names are used almost immediately. People (most of them) seem warm and friendly from the very start. Fairlie remembers his first meetings with the Suffragan Bishop of Washington and with resident Lyndon B. Johnson. Both greeted him with “Hi, Henry!” In most countries, such a thing simply would not happen.

There is a difference, however, between friendliness and friendship. While Americans may seem relatively warm and approachable upon first encounter, they may later seem remote and unreachable to many foreign visitors.

Superficial is the word many longer-tem foreign visitors use to describe Americans’ elationships with other people.

Some of them believe that it is only with foreigners that Americans tend to make friends slowly, if they make them at all. More observant visitors notice that Americans tend to be remote and unreachable even among themselves. They are very private, keeping their personal thoughts and

feelings to themselves. They are difficult to get to know on a deeper level.

Fairlie indicated that in his native country one person does not usually talk to another until the two have been introduced to each other by someone else. So it is in many countries, but not in the United States. Of course, such acquaintanceships may well begin when people are introduced to each other, but they may also begin when one person simply starts a conversation with another.

There is no need, Americans will say, to “stand on formality.” Why do people pursue relationships with others in the first place? Cultural differences in this respect can lead to misunderstanding and disappointment.

How do Americans get to know the people who might possibly become their friends? They meet each other at school, in offices, in religious and volunteer organizations, at sports facilities, through mutual acquaintances, and, as Fairlie learned, on the sidewalk. Anyone can say “Hi!” to anyone and can stop to ask a question. (Asking a question is a more common way of opening a conversation than making a statement is.) A tone of friendly informality is nearly always appropriate. Those people who do not wish to be engaged in a conversation with someone to whom they have not been introduced will make that fact clear by their response. The small-talk topics are common among Americans and are appropriate for interactions with new people.

**Friendship**

Foreign visitors sometimes feel betrayed by Americans whom they meet and who seem so kind and interested at first but who later fail to allow new acquaintances to really get to know them as individuals. That initial friendly “Hi!” may come to seem dishonest or misleading as the smalltalk continues and Americans’ ideas about important topics remain hidden. “They seem cold, not really human,” one Brazilian woman said. “Americans just can’t let themselves go.” To many foreigners Americans seem unavailable to build a close friendship with anybody. Although they may have a large circle of friends, they are likely to avoid becoming too dependent on other people or allowing others to become dependent on them. With the exception of their immediate families, they remain apart from others. They have not learned to do otherwise. This is not say that Americans never have close friendships. They do. Such relationships are relatively rare, however, and can take years to develop. However, it is not uncommon for close friends to go weeks, months, or even longer without seeing each other, especially if they live in different cities. They might or might not be in regular contact with their friends by telephone or e-mail. The most important characteristics of a close friendship, for many Americans, are the freedom to discuss private, personal matters as well as the persistence of the relationship over time and distance.

It is important to remember that there are exceptions to these generalizations. Some Americans are indeed willing to devote the time that is necessary to get to know new acquaintances well and to develop close friendships with them. They will talk openly about personal thoughts and feelings that other Americans rarely reveal.

**Compartmentalized Friendships**

Americans typically assume that when people gather to socialize, they will undertake some activity together. They may go to a restaurant for lunch or dinner, go to a movie, play cards, or “have a few drinks.” Americans do not usually assume that it can be pleasant or rewarding to sit and talk with other people for extended periods. (Americans would probably say “just sit” and “just talk.”) Their discomfort with such a lack of structured activity is often evident if they are forced to sit and interact with people they do not know fairly well.

In some ways teenagers are an exception to what has just been said. They often “hang out” (or just “hang”) with other teens—at a mall, in someone’s car, or at one of their homes. Even so, the sense they often convey is not that they are enjoying each other’s idle company but that they are looking for something to do or waiting for something to happen. Perhaps because of their emphasis on “doing things” with friends, Americans typically develop what have been called compartmentalized friendships. That is, they tend to have different friends with whom they engage in different activities. For example, Americans might have friends with whom they study, others with whom they go to the gym, and still others with whom they go shopping or dancing on Saturday nights. Likewise, co-workers who eat lunch together every day and occasionally go out for drinks after work may never set foot in one another’s homes or meet members of one another’s families.

**Gender Roles and Friendship**

In many countries a friend must be a person of one’s own gender. Most Americans, though, believe it is possible to have friends of the opposite sex, and they do not generally assume that a male and female will participate in sexual activity if they are alone together. This is not to say that Americans see no sexual component in a male-female friendship, but that they believe the people involved are capable of showing the restraint and maturity necessary to avoid sexual interaction if sexual interaction is somehow inappropriate for the situation. Thus, male and female business colleagues might travel to a conference together without anyone assuming their relationship has a sexual component.

**Relationships Prescribed by Roles**

The anthropologist Edward T. Hall in The Silent Language (1959) has described the United States as a “low-context culture,” meaning that there are relatively few rules or guidelines to prescribe behavior in particular situations. In a “high-context culture,” such as those of Japan, the Middle East, and much of Latin America, there tend to be agreed-upon guidelines for behavior in many specific situations. For example, a proper young Latin American woman does not allow herself to be in the company of a man unless some responsible third party is present. That is the rule, and everyone knows it. In Japan rules govern who sits where in a meeting, who speaks first, and which specific words are to be voiced in specific circumstances. In a high- context culture there are rules for many situations. In the United States, however, there are far fewer situations in which people’s behavior is governed by widely agreed-upon rules. Still, some roles generally entail certain expected behaviors. Such roles include customer, tenant, neighbor, and co-worker. While it is possible to observe regional and institutional variations in the behaviors described here, a few generalizations can be offered.

**Customer.** When shopping, dining out, or otherwise using the services of clerks, waiters, or other service people, Americans tend to show their respect for the ideals of equality and individual dignity. They treat clerks and others as more or less equal to themselves, not as people

they consider inferior.

**Tenant.** A tenant’s responsibilities are normally made explicit in the lease, or rental contract, the tenant signs. These responsibilities—paying a specified amount of rent by a specified date and properly caring for whatever appliances and furnishings the landlord provides—are the only ones that the tenant owes the landlord. In effect, the landlord-tenant relationship is governed by the rule of law. The law in this case is the lease. Particular tenants and landlords sometimes develop more personal relationships, of course.

**Neighbor.** A general rule among neighbors is to “mind your own business,” that is, don’t intrude in one another’s lives. Some neighborhoods are more friendly than others, meaning that more people in the neighborhood know each other and that the neighbors socialize with each other. However friendly the neighborhood, there is generally an expectation among Americans that neighbors will assist each other in times of emergency or very pressing need. It is considered reasonable to ask a neighbor to “keep an eye” on a house or apartment that will be vacant temporarily, as during a vacation. Newcomers to a neighborhood often take the initiative in inviting neighbors for coffee, a pastry, and a get-acquainted conversation. Or they may themselves be invited by neighbors for such a visit. Neighbors in an apartment building may have virtually no interaction with each other.

**Co-worker.** In general, co-workers treat each other politely and with respect, regardless of their status vis-à-vis each other. The boss says “Good morning” in a pleasant voice to the secretary and the file clerk; the latter smile and say “Good morning” back. Co-workers help each other with job-related matters, and they try to avoid open expressions of displeasure or other negative feelings toward each other. Although co-workers do not feel obligated to develop close relationships, they generally do feel they should contribute to keeping the emotional tone of the

workplace pleasant for all who spend the day (or night) there. Many Americans feel that the workplace should have a kind of family atmosphere, even while this general atmosphere of polite friendliness can mask what might be a very hierarchical method of operating.

**Courtesy and Gifts**

Among Americans, being courteous has a number of elements:

• Acknowledging another person’s presence or arrival, either verbally (if not with “hi!” then with “hello,” “good morning,” or some such greeting) or non-verbally, with a direct look, a nod, or a brief smile.

• Participating in at least a bit of small talk with people in whose presence one expects to be for more than a few minutes.

**Gifts**

According to Susan J. Szmania, Americans give gifts on a relatively small number of occasions and to a relatively small circle of people. Since offering gifts to people who do not expect them can be mutually embarrassing and can even lead to the suspicion that the gift giver is seeking to influence the recipient in an inappropriate way. Generally, Americans give gifts to relatives and close friends. Frequently they give gifts (flowers, wine, or candy are common) to hosts or hostesses. They do not normally give gifts to teachers (except perhaps elementary school teachers, who sometimes receive gifts from children in their classes), business colleagues, or other people who might be in a position to grant or withhold favorable treatment (such as a good grade in a class or a contract for a sale). In fact, giving gifts to people who are in a position to grant or withhold favors can be construed as an improper attempt to gain favor. Many states have laws strictly limiting the value of gifts that public employees can accept.

Christmas comes close to being a national gift-giving day in the United States. Except for adherents of non-Christian religions, Americans exchange Christmas gifts with relatives, schoolmates, and close friends. Other popular gift-giving occasions include birthdays, graduations, weddings, and childbirths. Some people give gifts on Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and Valentine’s Day. A “house-warming” gift is sometimes given to people who have moved into a new home. Americans commonly send a Christmas card to their friends, acquaintances, more-distant family members, and sometimes to business colleagues as well. Those who follow a non-Christian religion may send a holiday card to convey “season’s greetings” or some such nonsectarian message.

People’s behavior in public places, like their behavior anywhere else, is subject to cultural influence. Aspects of communicative style of Americans are evident when they are out in public.

**Rules for Behavior in Public Places**

Wherever groups of people are going in two opposite directions, Americans stay on the right side. This enables them to pass each other without physical contact and to progress as quickly as possible. Americans’ general aversion to touching others and being touched is clearly evident in public places. Americans will rarely crowd onto a bus, train, or other public conveyance the way that Japanese and Mexicans are famous for doing. They will simply avoid situations where extensive and prolonged physical contact with strangers is inevitable. Pushing one’s way through a crowd is considered quite rude.

When in a situation where physical contact is unavoidable, Americans will typically try to draw in their shoulders and arms so as to minimize the amount of space they occupy. They will tolerate contact on the outsides of their arms when their arms are hanging straight down from their shoulders, but contact with other parts of the body makes them extremely anxious. When they are in a crowded situation, such as a full elevator (“lift”) or bus, they will generally stop talking or will talk only in very low voices. Their discomfort is easy to see. In cases where they bump into another person or otherwise touch the other person inadvertently, Americans will quickly draw away and usually apologize, making clear that the touch was accidental.

CONCLUSION

It would be pertinent to end this paper in the words of Edward Sapir who said: “Language [is] a symbolic guide to culture. Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people. Linguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science.”

More than sixty years on, Sapir's profound insights have lost none of their validity or importance. There is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it. This applies in equal measure to the outer and inner aspects of life. An obvious example from the material, visible domain is that of social relationships. The existence of different customs and social institutions which have specific names in one language but not in others is also widely known. Most important, what applies to material culture and to social rituals and institutions applies also to people's values, ideals, and attitudes and to their ways of thinking about the world and our life in it. Thus, in a sense, words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking. Similarly, the outlook of an individual is never fully "determined" by the conceptual tools provided by his or her native language, partly because there are always alternative ways of expressing oneself. But a person's conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language. American language is about its culture, it is about America way of life, its style and American values of individualism, “popular culture” and consumerism. Multiple media represent and participate in a continual recreation of American language and language practices changing and refreshing it every day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Chapman, R. (1986) New Dictionary of American Slang, New York: Holt & Rinehart.
2. Dictionary of American Regional English (1985–) Cambridge, MA: Harvard. Flexner, S. (1976)
3. I Hear America Talking, New York: Simon & Schuster. Labov, W. (1972)

Sociolinguistic Patterns, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

1. Mencken, H.L. (1936) The American Language, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
2. Rickford, J. (1999) African-American Vernacular English, Malden: Blackwell.
3. Abrahamian, Ervand, ‘The US media, Samuel Huntington and September 11’, Middle East Report, 223, Summer 2002, 62–3.
4. Althen, Gary, Amanda R. Doran, and Susan J. Szmania. American Ways. 2nd ed. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2003.
5. American Social History Project, City University of New York. Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society. 2nd ed. 2 vols. New York: Worth, 2000.
6. Ashbee, Edward. American Society Today. New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.
7. Fischer, William C., ed. Identity, Community, and Pluralism in American Life. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.