

**WORD ON THE STREET: DEBUNKING THE  
MYTH OF "PURE" STANDARD ENGLISH BY  
JOHN MCWHORTER, PH.D., JOHN  
MCWHORTER**

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"Important, eye-opening, and a pleasure to read."—Steven Pinker



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## Review

"Word on the Street is one of the best books ever written on language and public affairs." -- Steven Pinker, author of The Language Instinct and Words and Rules

## About the Author

John McWhorter is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. A specialist in pidgin and Creole languages, he lives in Oakland, California.

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Though there is a contingent of linguists who fight the fact, our language is always changing--not only through slang, but sound, syntax, and words' meanings as well. Debunking the myth of "pure" standard English, tackling controversial positions, and eschewing politically correct arguments, linguist John McWhorter considers speech patterns and regional accents to demonstrate just how the changes do occur. Wielding reason and humor, McWhorter ultimately explains why we must embrace these changes, ultimately revealing our American English in all its variety, expressiveness, and power.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

28 of 36 people found the following review helpful.

There is indeed no such thing as "pure" standard English

By David Thomson

John McWhorter convincingly argues that there is no such thing as an absolutist standard English forevermore etched in stone. The very first section of this beautiful book is aptly entitled "Language: A Living Organism." McWhorter takes to task those laboring "under the common illusion that a language ought be a static, unchanging system." It should be immediately added that language is an intrinsically nebulous activity. A word is meaningless unless used in a particular context. Even the infamous "n" word

may have a positive connotation when used among friends. So-called Black English is simply another form of communication that pragmatically works for some people. The only valid question is whether these individuals sufficiently understand each other. If the answer is yes, then it minimally qualifies as a language. Alas, every group of people embracing a minority language must compromise and accept a standard language that best responds to the needs of the overall majority. There are, though, no set rules in achieving this goal. A democratically premised culture must do its best to resolve this never ending messy and thankless task. Feelings will inevitably be hurt, and feathers will be ruffled. Democracies are not perfect institutions, only far better than all of the alternatives.

"Put simply, the term language is shorthand for a collection of dialects, of which one happens to be used by the elite and written down, while the others are not," insightfully declares McWhorter. One might also point out that all human beings have the ability to invent a new word. However, others must be converted over to accepting any such attempt at originality. Words constantly evolve, and some prominent today may disappear tomorrow. McWhorter and I almost certainly agree that the conceded nebulosity of language is no reason to succumb to the nihilism of the philosophical deconstructionists. Both of us harshly view the Stanley Fishs and Jacques Derridas of the academic community. A human being's developed virtue of prudential judgment is more than adequate to guide them through the challenge of ascertaining a workable consensus meaning for each and every word.

McWhorter's brilliant work is not merely an Afro-American scholar's effort to confront the conventionally conservative white language establishment. On the contrary, this esteemed professor has written a masterpiece on the very nature of language itself. "Word on the Street" should be in everyone's personal library.

28 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

Is *\*A Whole Nother\** a Legitimate English Phrase?

By Kevin Currie-Knight

These are the types of questions John McWhorter sets out to answer. In the process, he will piss off school teachers, grammarians of the rigid sort, those who exalt the Classics solely for their now-essoteric and lofty language, and a slew of others. (Read some of the below reviews for proof).

His basic idea is that there is no such thing as a pure standard English and his arguments (as witnessed in the first, and most theoretic, chapter) are quite convincing, though I can't pretend I didn't agree with him going in. Language, instead of being a fixed system with immutable rules, is a pragmatic tool for communication that, like any pragmatic tool, is mutable to the *\*felt necessities of the times\** (O.W. Holmes's phrase).

McWhorter dishes out example after example - English to Spanish to the creole languages of Africa - to show that language is not only always in flux, but many of the changes that would be called *\*degenerations\** now will actually turn out to be... well... improvements. He gives rigorous examples to show that some of the rules leading to more awkward speech, like the rule against split infinitives or that of never ending sentences with prepositions, were based on arbitrary attempts to cram Latin rules onto English and that, particularly in spoken language, have proved to be somewhat futile.

All of this leads to some provocative essays on the practical usage of language. The most provocative of these essays might be the one in which McWhorter makes a strong and reasoned plea to start transforming Shakespeare into more modern prose. It is not only that we don't talk in Shakespearean lingo anymore, but that many of Shakespeare's word-choices, allusions, and phrasings are so far beyond the way we speak, that only the most educated of language-lovers could pick up on their *\*original meanings.\** (Admit it; even though we love Shakespeare, we enjoy him more as an obscure intellectual exercise, rather than as the entertaining writer he deserves to be.)

Other essays have a more practical application, like the discussion of \*he\* as a personal pronoun of \*neutral\* sex. McWhorter writes that while this won't do, all the other proposals - \*she,\* \*s/he\* and \*he or she\* - are not adequate replacements for various reasons. But what about \*they\*? We all seem to use it in speech: \*Tell the student that they may pick up their test.\* And it sounds right, so far as today's speech goes. But the grammar police are once again at it and insist that we can't use \*they\* because it connotes a plural, rather than singular, entity. The argument for why this is wrong is too long to get into and McWhorter does a good job with it. Needless to say, McWhorter is against the grammarians.

The only essays I had a bit of a hard time with are the ones on ebonics. To be expected, McWhorter certainly argues well that ebonics is not simply lazy speech or slang, but is as legitimate a dialect as those of the deep south (where \*you want to\* might be pronounced \*yaunt to.\*) The problem I had though is that while he gives a good discourse on the \*proper rules\* that can be discerned in black English, he seems to contradict himself. By showing us the \*proper rules\* to be found in ebonics, showing that as a dialect it is quite legitimate, he has trouble convincing us that this does not contradict his initial thesis that there are no PURE standard rules of languages or dialects, but rather that they are always in flux. As the reader will note, he tries to reconcile these two theses but in the end, hardly resolves them.

Nevertheless, this book is a great antidote to the overly-strict formalism of grammarians. For the record, he is not a nihilist that blithely suggests an 'anything goes' approach. While necessary for pragmatic purposes of communication, rules, McWhorter argues, are not things that (a) cannot be broken and (b) cannot change over time for the better. Rules always have changed and presumably always will, whether grammarians like it or not.

45 of 54 people found the following review helpful.

A Great Book for English Nuts

By Christopher G. Rywalt

This is a great book I wish to recommend to all grammar Nazis. It's going to ruin my copyediting, but it's really turning my head around about English and languages in general.

Essentially, McWhorter goes and beats the ... out of grammarians from the perspective of a linguist. Apparently linguists, who deal with language as it is spoken and written by humans, cannot stand grammarians, who are, to use this book's phrase, "obscure martinets."

No little synopsis here can do the book justice. McWhorter has three main discussions, which are great fun. In the first, he talks about the feminist problem -- can we use "they" as a singular pronoun? In the second, he argues quite convincingly that it's about time we started translating Shakespeare into a language modern humans speak. And in the third, he discusses Black English, and how it qualifies as a legitimate dialect, every bit as subtle, nuanced, and important as so-called standard English.

But never mind all that. Everyone who plays with language for fun should read the book for this paragraph:

"For example, William F. Buckley is a prime example of someone who is articulate in standard English. Although many of us might bemoan the frigid paleoconservatism of his utterances themselves, there is no denying his enviable agility in wielding vocabulary, syntax, and allusion for all they're worth."

Paleoconservatism -- now that right there is a great addition to English.

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