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# Cultural Commentary: Bananers, Hooking Up, Political Correctness: Bridgewater Students Observe the English Language

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## CULTURAL COMMENTARY

### Bananers, Hooking Up, Political Correctness: Bridgewater Students Observe the English Language

Barbara Apstein

**B**ridgewater undergraduates eat pizzer and bananers. They describe their friends as “wicked cool.” They are concerned about, sometimes puzzled by, politically correct language. These are some of the observations recorded in student journals for a course I teach called “History of the English Language.” As its title implies, “History of the English Language” devotes a good deal of attention to the past — the English of Beowulf, Chaucer and Shakespeare. Yet awareness of our contemporary language environment is equally important, and the journals are designed to increase students’ sensitivity to the language around them. A number of professional journalists and linguists, such as William Safire, who writes a weekly “On Language” column for The New York Times and Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, chart linguistic change on the national level. The students’ journals provide a more youthful and more local perspec-

tive on the current state of English, as the following excerpts illustrate.

#### BANANERS, PIZZER - WHATEVAH

The dropped “R” has been identified as a characteristic of New England speech since colonial times; generations of Bostonians have endured questions from smirking outsiders about where they “pahk the cah.” Despite the large influx of out of state residents in recent decades, the dropped “R” seems to be holding its own as a feature of local pronunciation. Many Bridgewater students became aware of their own dropped “R”s when they began to talk with roommates from other parts of the country: “After several semesters of verbal abuse, I have become acutely aware of my Boston accent,” one student reported. “I realized that I say “regahd” for “regard,” “whatevah” for “whatever” and “mayah” for “mayor,” and understood for the first time why I have always written “quater” instead of “quarter.”

The lost “R” reappears, however, tacked on to the end of words like “pizza” and “banana.” Thus, students noted, a native of eastern Massachusetts in a grocery store might inquire, “Whey’ah can I find the bananers and the frozen pizzer?”, describe a poetic verse as a “stanzer” and come up with an “idear” for a paper.

“Whey’ah” illustrates another point about regional pronunciation, that many Massachusetts residents add extra syllables to certain words: “four” is pronounced “fo’wah” and “stairs” “sta’yahs.” One student quoted her grandmother, who lives in Quincy, uttering sentences like “I gotta go ovah they’ah because I can’t take the sta’yahs.”

Another local peculiarity is a tendency to add “s” to words like “all”: “Alls ya have to do is take the square root...” “Last time I checked,” one journal-writer noted, “there was no ‘s’ at the end of the word ‘all.’”

#### WICKED COOL, TONIC, ALL SET

Contact with new roommates and travel to other parts of the country provided students with information about local vocabulary as well as pronunciation. Only in the Bay State, apparently, does “wicked” mean “exceptionally good” (as in the sentence “Robin’s party last weekend was ‘wicked cool’”). Also puzzling to non-natives is “packy” (short for “package store”) for “liquor store.” “When I suggested that we make a “packy run,” one student reported, “I was met with blank stares of puzzlement.” Another localism is the word “tonic” for carbonated drinks. One student recalled that an elementary school teacher had asked the class to bring in “tonic” for a Halloween party, which led to the following clarifying exchange:

“What is tonic?” “It’s soda.” “Oh, you mean pop.” “What is pop?” “Soda.”

The multi-purpose phrase “all set” seems to be a more recent addition to Bridgewater students’ vocabulary. “A waitress asks ‘Are you all set?’ meaning ‘Are you ready to order?’; twenty minutes later she can repeat the phrase, this time meaning “Do you want to order anything else?” “All set” can also be used to express disgust or annoyance; “I’m through with him/that,” as illustrated in sentences like the following:

“I’m all set with that guy. He is such a player.”

“I’m all set with bell bottom pants. They look freakish.”

#### PHAT GEAR AND HOOKING UP

As might be expected, Bridgewater undergraduates proved to be knowledgeable observers of what might be termed generational vocabulary or teen-age slang. Slang, they realized, serves not only to communicate information but also to indicate membership in a desired social group. Sometimes slang takes the form of shortenings, as in “Later” for “See you later.” “Sup” is short for “What’s up?”

“Chill” means “relax.” Students also noted the prevalence of “like” as a filler: “I was, like, O. K.” and the entrance of terms like “phat” from African-American slang: “‘phat gear’ means a good brand, something stylish.”

“Hooking-up,” another current phrase, has a range of possible meanings, from “getting something as a favor” (as in “My friend hooked me up with her employee discount at Cambridge Soundworks”) to “having some kind of intimate relationship with another person.” As one journal entry pointed out, the vagueness of the term can lead to ambiguity: “Hooking-up can refer to something as innocent as a good-night kiss or something as serious as sleeping with someone. Therefore, when a girl confides to her friends that she hooked-up with a cute guy she met over the weekend, she could be describing a whole range of different encounters. Because this term is so ambiguous it can spark a mass of rumors. In one case, when the girl told her friends that she hooked-up, a boy listening in on the conversation assumed she meant she slept with the guy and announced it to the whole school. It is pretty scary how a term can change an innocent kiss to a night of wild passion.”

#### **POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, CAUTIOUS POLITICIANS AND LOOSE WOMEN**

The spring 1998 semester provided several illustrations of the political dimension of language. The April issue of Boston Magazine published an article about Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chair of African-American Studies at Harvard, under the headline “Head Negro in Charge.” To some members of the black community, this phrase, with its echoes of plantation days, was deeply offensive, while others defended the provocative title. Students noted that black rappers routinely use the far more offensive word “nigger” in their songs; one journal-writer observed that the word “seems to be acceptable when

black people use it among themselves.” Another student recalled that Martin Luther King Jr. had used the word “Negro,” that subsequently “black,” and “Afro-American” were favored, and that currently “African-American” is the preferred term. Clearly, the naming of racial and ethnic groups is a sensitive matter.

The spring of 1998 also provided plenty of examples of the linguistic evasions politicians use to avoid telling the truth or taking a position on a difficult question. With the Monica Lewinsky story and the President’s denials very much in the news, many Americans pondered the question of exactly how Bill Clinton would define the term “sexual relationship.” On the other hand, the President’s response to the tragic shooting of a teacher and four children by their elementary school classmates in Jonesboro, Arkansas was, as one student noted, “cautious and non-committal.” “After the shooting, President Clinton called a press conference and, ducking the gun control issue, said that ‘I have brought together experts on school violence to analyze these incidents.’”

The semantics of gender were discussed in several journals, including this one:

One of the most disturbing observations I have noticed is the fact that there are so many more degrading names for promiscuous women than for men. The politically correct term for a woman who sells her body is ‘prostitute.’ Likewise, males who are paid for sexual favors are known as ‘male prostitutes.’ However, there are a multitude of synonyms for female prostitutes, such as: hooker, whore, jezebel, slut, etc. Today, many of these terms are used to describe females who do not sell their bodies, but are promiscuous nevertheless. For example, the girl can be described as loose, easy, dirty, slutty, used, or as a hussy, harlot or wench. In our society, it is clear that women who are promiscuous are not respected. However, there seems to be a double-standard. In many ways, “getting around” for a man is almost

considered a mark of status; such a man is referred to as a stud, a lady’s man, a smooth-talker, a player, a heart-breaker, etc. Even the word ‘gigolo’ does not have the same degrading connotation as those words used to describe women. What I want to know is, why is it Okay for men to sleep around and not for women? If women are looked down upon for being promiscuous, shouldn’t men be held to the same standards?

#### **FOUR-LETTER WORDS**

As part of their preparation for careers in secondary education, a number of “History of the English Language” students were required to spend many hours observing high school classes. This gave them an excellent opportunity to observe teen-age language habits. Many noted the fact that four-letter sexual and excretory terms once considered taboo have become part of the casual conversation of many young people. “Profanity,” one student observed, “has become part of their everyday language. When the high school students were asked not to use profanity, they apologized, but only minutes later would use another profanity. This was not done out of disrespect; it is simply the way they speak.” The class agreed that young people are heavily influenced by the increasing sexual explicitness and vulgar language on television, in cartoon shows like “South Park,” and in popular music.

The students observed language use in many places — in their dorms, at home, on television, at work. They listened to the speech patterns of grandparents and the slang expressions of friends. They analyzed the kinds of errors made by foreign-born speakers and their own problems in trying to learn foreign languages. At the end of the semester, most agreed that the journals had increased their sensitivity to language; as one student noted, “This assignment has made me more aware of the diversity of speech and a better listener and observer.”