

NORTH AMERICAN LANGUAGES

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Overview North America has been a melting pot of languages which has been incredibly dynamic as new waves of settlers, immigrants, and groups arrived, moved, and subsequently left. The pressure to assimilate has influenced languages and accelerated their disappearance in some cases.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis people came to North America from the land bridge across the Aleutian island arc, and so it can be assumed that their language had as its origin the same origins as the Eskimo-Aleut languages. Later, as they dispersed themselves across the continent, they evolved into different language groups.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The basic language groups in North America formed after 1200 BC when the people who crossed the land bridge on the Bering Strait fragmented and moved in different directions, essentially differentiating themselves. One major group consisted of the southwest Pueblo, whose language became that of the Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, and more.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Algonquian and Athabasca groups split off from the main group and formed their own language. While it had certain elements in common with the others in the Plains, Southwest, and West, the Eastern Woodlands forms of address and words used to describe states of being, forms for address to ranking women, and also relationships set them apart.

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): Although there is no clear linguistic trace that connects the Mississippian with the Maya, we know because of their artifacts that they had extensive trade relationships. Thus it is probable that they shared a common language and also that their beliefs were also built into the grammar; for example, the way that words indicated the belief that all words could cast spells and cause inanimate things to become animate beings.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Indigenous Languages: The core indigenous languages continued to evolve and differentiate themselves into sub-sets of the larger linguistic blocks. Many times the tribes that shared the same root languages were also involved in alliances – for defense and also cooperation. This was most particularly the case in the Eastern Woodlands and in the Pacific Northwest. The major language groups in the indigenous peoples include the Macro-Algonquian, the Muskogean, the Na-Dene, and the Aleut. There were more than 300 individual languages at the time of first contact by the Europeans, with a great deal of linguistic diversity.

Dutch Colonies: Dutch was spoken in New Amsterdam (New York) and up the Hudson River. The extent of the language use was evidenced by place names, which to this day persist. For example, the suffix “kill” denotes a stream or a river.

Spanish Colonies: Spanish was spoken and it was very much the same as that of the Iberian Peninsula, a fact that is supported by the fact that the isolated Spanish speaking communities living in the southern reaches of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado and New Mexico do not speak Mexican Spanish, but one that resembles the Spanish of the conquistadores of the 16th and 17th centuries.

French Colonies: French, and a kind of Creole that blended Native American languages with French. The French spoken in the Americas was spoken by Catholic trappers, fur traders, priests, and

government officials in Canada and in some of the colonies. It was very connected to that of bourgeois France. However, another dialect of French emerged, and that was one that was spoken by the Protestant Huguenots who had fled Holland, England, and Belgium to escape religious persecution. French was their adopted language, and it was a blend of French and other languages.

English Colonies: The English colonists spoke various dialects of English, along with Gaelic (Irish) and Welsh. The English settlers in New England spoke what was very close to a Kings English. Many younger sons and dissidents from Ireland, Wales, and Scotland emigrated to the colonies where they clustered together in communities, often united by their denomination of Protestantism (Scottish – Presbyterian, Northern English – Methodist, Anabaptists – Baptists, just to name a few). The English of the entitled class usually practiced High Church of England, which was Anglican, or Episcopalian in the colonies.) The Irish were largely Catholic, with a few Anglican / Episcopalian.

Nineteenth Century

English: English expanded and continued to be the dominant (and unifying) language the United States and the territories. However, very distinct local dialects emerged, hardened, as it were, by political group affiliations and isolation (as in the case of Appalachian or barrier island dialects). Southern American English emerged as a regional dialect, as did New England “Yankee” English and “New Yorker,” ideolects.

French: The French spoken in North America continued to speciate or evolve. The French of Quebec and northern Vermont was full of neologisms and a unique way of speaking which broke down the discourse of respect (the formal “you” was eliminated), making it more egalitarian and reflective of the democratic social structure of Quebec. The Creole of the Mississippi Delta, esp. New Orleans, had a blend of English and African, making it not so much democratic as syncretic, fusing African beliefs, rituals, rites and encantations with a more formal French. The result was often unsettling to French visitors.

Spanish: In the 19th century, the Spanish spoken in North America north of the Rio Grande changed, due to the influx of Mexicans who established ranches and businesses in what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. They spoke the Mexican dialect of Spanish while those who lived in the former New Spain capital of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in isolated mountain communities continued to speak the Spanish of 16th-century Spain, the language of the conquistadores.

German: Two types of German emerged during the 19th century. There were the Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch) Amish, who spoke High German of the 18th century, and also the German immigrants to Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas who were wheat farmers and ranchers. Their German was more akin to the 19th-century German of Europe.

Scandinavian languages: The influx of Swedish and Norwegian immigrants to Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin resulted in pockets of native Scandinavian speakers, as well as a pronounced regional accent and the use of Swedish and Norwegian words in everyday talk.

Italian: Italian immigrants flocked to New York in order to escape political and economic hardship. They established ethnic enclaves in cities where they influenced the local culture in very profound ways; not only with the language and customs, but also with religion (Roman Catholic) and cuisine.

Creole: Creole emerged in Louisiana as a blend of French and English, and it was often associated with voodoo and other occult practices. The individuals who spoke Creole tended to be of mixed heritage, and their families had generally been in New Orleans for generations.

Cherokee: The survivors of the brutal relocation march, the “Trail of Tears,” established their new tribal governance and lands in what is now eastern Oklahoma. Sequoyah, a distinguished leader and scholar, helped the Cherokees develop their own written language in order to preserve the language itself, and to avoid having to use the alphabet / writing systems of the oppressors.

Twentieth Century

Creole French: Creole French continued to evolve in Louisiana, and be known also as “Cajun.” The use of Creole French or “Cajun” expanded and was more or less mainstreamed as musical forms such as zydeco incorporated Creole lyrics and they gained popularity.

Native American Languages: In the 20th century, many native speakers of Native American languages began to die without teaching the language to their children. The practice of forced assimilation through boarding schools accelerated the decline in the number of native speakers. To combat the loss of their languages, many tribes established funds to record conversations of Native speakers and to create dictionaries and language guides. They also began teaching and studying the language and the oral narratives in colleges and universities.

Mexican Spanish: Mexican Spanish began to dominate the Southwest U.S. as the most prevalent second language, while the archaic Spanish of the mountainous north of New Mexico (Sangre de Cristo mountains, etc.) began to lose speakers.

Cuban Spanish: Cuban asylum seekers and economic refugees after the Ariel boat lift, and the rise of Fidel Castro flocked to Florida, where they became a very important demographic group. Their Spanish is related to that of Cuba, with many unique words and pronunciations.

Puerto Rican Spanish: Individuals from Puerto Rico as well as the Dominican Republic moved to New York during the 1950s, and then again when economic times were difficult in the **Caribbean**. In addition to a unique vocabulary and dialect, the Caribbean Spanish also came with new types of music and cuisine, all of which were very influential in New York, New Jersey, and along the northern East Coast.

“CNN” English: When CNN broke new ground and offered 24-7 news broadcasting coverage, a new American accent was born. It was an American accent, but devoid of many of the characteristic pronunciations or word choices of the East Coast (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, etc.), or of California. Although located in Atlanta, the CNN accent was in no way southern. This broadcast dialect quickly became the “standard” for American pronunciation.

Asian Languages: Vietnamese and Hmong languages became important in many urban communities after the fall of Saigon, when the U.S. welcomed the former allies of the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Eruptions of violence and war in different countries in Asia resulted in additional important pockets of language and culture, including Pashtun, Urdu, Hindi, Mandarin, Cambodian, and Tagalog.

Discussion/Questions

1. Among the earliest civilizations in North America, there were a number of different groups that had a great deal in common, and yet split off from each other. Discuss the role of migration, branching out of groups, and trade routes (commerce) in the development of individual languages.
2. Identify the four main languages spoken in the colonies and describe how the language created unity and a sense of identity, and how the language created a critical bond between the settlers and those sent to protect the Europeans who were settling the lands that belonged to Indian nations.
3. In the 19th century, waves of immigration introduced new languages into the “melting pot.” Describe the groups, the languages they spoke, and comment on the relationship between their native languages, English, and striving to achieve the American Dream.
4. In the twentieth-century, many different subgroups of languages formed based on the lands of origin and also the reasons for their arrival in the continental United States. Identify one example of a diaspora and describe how and where the language might have an impact on communities and on the native speakers. Also, will the language stay the same while the language spoken back in the country of origin stays the same?

Readings

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