

"I seen it..."

"He don't got no..."

"She wented to the libarry."

"Its more better."

THE RANGE OF THE MOUSE

AROUND TOWN

Language, the basic tool of human communication, is undergoing a slow death throughout America. From TV talk shows, where celebrities describe themselves as "most humblest," to rap music, all the way down to everyday conversational speaking styles, the spoken word is dying from misuse and neglect. English, a language animated by a mere twenty-six letters, was the tool of thought for such luminaries as William Shakespeare, Ayn Rand, James Baldwin, Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The alphabet, once the building blocks of humankind's dreams and achievements, now suffers from a terminal illness characterized by casual illiteracy.

"I seen it" is such a common element of the vernacular people are no longer embarrassed by the term's use. Syntax, the skeletal structure of English usage, is an anachronism. It is not uncommon to hear college students, even at the graduate level, express a desire to "conversate" with their friends and family members. The blame for this corruption often falls on such media venues as television, radio, rap music, Al "Double Negatives" Sharpton and the Internet. While technology can certainly facilitate the downward spiral of language can it be blamed as the primary cause? No.

The American mindset, even in such a cosmopolitan urban setting as New York City, remains trapped in a zone of arrested development, locking the populous in a state of perpetual adolescence. As any high school student can attest (and some gladly do) if a fellow student excels in Algebra, Chemistry or Math, their ability is regarded as a neutral trait. If, however, a student, particularly a male, is unusually articulate or possesses a superior vocabulary, their skill is treated with scorn, suspicion and mockery. As in generations past, such students are accused of using "big" words to convey a thought, express an original point of view or illuminate an idea. For boys who are "guilty" of this crime, even their masculinity is often times questioned by their peers. To a great extent, the American public education system plays a large role in passively promoting this type of scholastic bigotry. Academic testing often consists of multiple choices, filling in the blanks and true/false options. On the rare occasions when students are asked to write an essay about a subject the teacher is met with groans of despair. Is it any wonder that in the United States the spelling bee is considered to be an "intellectual" exercise? Will there ever be room in the United States for a thinking bee or speaking bee? -I-M-P-R-O-B-A-B-L-E.

In George Orwell's prophetic novel, 1984, the state sanctioned language of Newspeak developed under the external but direct control of the government. As one character in the book noted, "Newspeak is the only language in the world where the vocabulary grows smaller rather than larger from one year to the next." In today's world the English language shrinks by constant misuse and through what some grade school

teachers once called a "lazy tongue." By way of example, the term "last year" underwent a verbal transformation into "lass sheer." As subway and bus riders throughout the city can attest, cell phone usage requires, for the most part, only a two term vocabulary - "like" and "ya'know." Those who insist on using and thus propagating bastardized English (you know who you are) state that their speaking habits are fine because, "It don't make no difference how I talk, 'cause people know what I'm sayin." This is a specious argument. The silence associated with the parlor game of Charades allows an individual to convey a message. It does not, however, allow for nuance, texture or tone. Up until recently, graffiti was never mistaken for a sonnet.

Some critics argue that adherence to strict rules of grammar and usage represents an academic snobbishness that inhibits the natural growth and dynamics of language; others contend that it smacks of racism and is the end product of intellectual provincialism. Their arguments do not, however, take into account the emerging role of two prime elements that are reaching their respective states of critical mass: Social Change and Emerging Technology. According to the latest census figures there are now almost a third of a billion people who live in the United States. By sheer numbers, their impact on the culture results in an assimilation of slang, techno jargon and acronyms into everyday speech habits. "Texting" which relies heavily on using abbreviated phrases, is quickly rendering the conventional written word as obsolete. In the language of "texters", this development results in a loss of balNs (balance) and can certainly result in FUD (fear, uncertainty, and disinformation).

As a sidebar element to this, technology plays a greater role in human life than anyone had ever imagined. Even the most rabid technophobe must admit, albeit reluctantly, computers occupy a continuing, critical and growing place in daily life. Cities, suburbs and even remote jungles are now within the range of the mouse. The internet, iPods, cell phones and Blackberries all allow individuals to live within a self-imposed private dimension that encourages social isolation. Using these devices, people "communicate" with one another. What is the end result? We now have a society where people talk too much but say too little. Conceivably, there will come a time whereby language skills will have degenerated to such an extent people will no longer have the ability to read the basic instructions on how to operate their computer systems. The social implosion and ramifications resulting from these unstoppable and contradictory developments cannot be overstated. If this happens, the picturegraphs that once adorned the walls of caves may well be tomorrow's cutting edge technology. Many will consider this projection to be an extreme example of pessimism. Perhaps they can go to the "libarry" and research the matter, that is, if they are still able to tell the difference between a book and a blog. ■