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the word on the street

fact and fable about
american english

John McWhorter

When we talk to each other, what do we really say? What makes speech correct? What is language anyway, and how does it define us?

In *The Word on the Street*, John McWhorter reveals our American English in all its variety, beauty, and expressiveness. Debunking the myth of a "pure" standard English, he considers the speech patterns and accents of many regions and ethnic groups in the U.S. and demonstrates how language evolves. He takes up the tricky question of gender-neutral pronouns. He dares to ask, "Should we translate Shakespeare?" Focusing on whether how our children speak determines how they learn, he presents the controversial Ebonics debate in light of his research on dialects and creoles.

The Word on the Street frees us to truly speak our minds. It is John McWhorter's answer to William Safire, transformed here into everybody's Aunt Lucy, who insists on correcting our grammar and making us feel slightly embarrassed about our everyday use of the language. ("To whom," she will insist, and "don't split your infinitives!") He reminds us that we'd better accept the fact that *language is always changing*—not only slang, but sound, syntax, and words' meanings—and get on with the business of communicating effectively with one another.

At once timely and accessible, *The Word on the Street* is filled with examples from popular culture and keyed into media headlines. Fresh from the frontline battles of the "culture wars," John McWhorter doesn't shy away from controversial positions, and is cowed by neither conservative critics nor the politically correct. Wielding reason and humor, he wins us back our language and restores it to all its richness and power.



photo by Jane Scherr

The Word on the Street Fact and Fable about American English

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John H. McWhorter is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. Born in Philadelphia, he earned a master's degree in American Studies at NYU and received his Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford University. He taught at Cornell University before entering his current position at Berkeley. He specializes in pidgin and creole languages and is the author of *Toward a New Model of Creole Genesis*. One of the few accessible linguists, he has been interviewed widely by the media, including NBC's *Today*, *Dateline NBC*, National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. He has also taught black musical theater history at Berkeley and is currently writing a biography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

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