

# Life, liberty and the pursuit of modern English

## How the English language has evolved since our country was founded 250 years ago

By Megan Neely, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story is part of our coverage for [America's semiquincentennial](#).

After the United States gained its independence 250 years ago, influences from across the seas slowly began to fade, including the way Americans talked. But when and how exactly did the accents change and the meanings of words morph into what we hear today?

According to linguists in Arizona State University's [Department of English](#), the transition to a new era of North American English began rather quickly.

"There were all the Indigenous groups, Dutch, French and German speakers (in America), so it's something that (was) always shifting," said [Karen Adams](#), a professor emeritus of English. "From the time English speakers started communicating with Indigenous speakers about new things they'd never seen, it started to change.

"Language is always evolving."

Adams studies and teaches about language in its social and linguistic context. Linguistics examines the sounds of languages as well as the meaning, grammar and how it can shape social interactions.

"It's really important to realize how linguistically diverse North America became, very quickly, after the French and the English — among others — arrived, because there was this linguistic complexity," Adams said.

Adams said that in the Detroit area, where she grew up, "so many things are French, because there were French speakers there."

But in New England, the dialect of members of Boston's historic upper class was influenced by cross-continental travel.

“One of the things that people have researched on the New England coast is that people were more likely — especially people who had more wealth — to be sending their kids back to England for education, for example, or going back for work,” Adams said.

“There are some really charming and good films from the '60s and '70s. There's one that has two older gentlemen from Boston in it, known as Boston Brahmins. They're talking to each other in this very English-sounding accent, and they say, ‘Well, how many people do you think still talk like us?’ and it’s not that many,” she said. “They recognized that they were in the great minority, so they didn't have R's in certain words, and had vowels pronounced in different kinds of ways.”

Assistant Professor [Peter Joseph Torres](#), with the Department of English, examines linguistic changes over time in his courses, looking at the last 250 years and how these changes have stemmed not only from how the language sounds, but also from the meaning behind words.

“The language has never stayed still, and a lot of that will be from where you are. When you're isolated in different areas, then you pick up different varieties or different ways of saying the same thing,” Torres said.

For example, the word “nice” meant “foolish,” “ignorant” or “senseless” in Middle English<sup>1</sup>. Now the word generally means “pleasant,” “agreeable” or “kind.”

As for the word “villain,” it meant “farmhand,” “peasant” or “low-born rustic” in Middle English, but later came to mean a “wicked person” or “evil character.”

“English has always changed; it's never been the same,” he said. “If you go back during the Old English days with the word ‘knight’ ... we think about horses and armor, but back then, it would have meant a young boy.”

As technology and online spaces continue to grow, Torres sees North American English continuously evolving, whether through proper nouns such as “Google” becoming verbs or through the creative uses of existing words, as seen in terms like “nepo baby” and “tradwife.”

“When we're celebrating 250 years of North American English, we are really celebrating 250 years of a language that came from different people that came together from different influences,” he said.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

<sup>1</sup> A form of English used in England from roughly the time of the Norman conquest (1066) until about 1500.

## Main image



Photo courtesy of Meghan Finnerty/ASU