

# American English(es)



American English(es):  
Linguistic and Socio-cultural Perspectives

Edited by

Roberto Cagliero and Anna Belladelli

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## INTRODUCTION

ROBERTO CAGLIERO AND ANNA BELLADELLI

The recent and notorious Tucson Books Ban, which does not allow Spanish American texts to be taught in some Arizona schools, shows once again the tension which lies at the basis of the definition of American English. Englishes, in fact, because of the contribution given by the most diverse ethnic groups, such as those kidnapped from Africa to be employed as slaves, survivors of native American tribes systematically exterminated in the past, and later on European Jews escaping from pogroms, Europeans and Asians escaping from poverty, and more recently Central and South Americans, mostly Spanish speakers who have been and keep on emigrating to the U.S. in search of more decent living conditions.

Under such geographically extended and socio-cultural premises, the concept itself of minority becomes obsolete if not theoretically nonsensical, and that is why in the title to the first section of this work we use “minority” between inverted commas. One cannot but look at specific, local yet symbolically general manifestations of American English, which, albeit quite distant from a Standard version of the language—a version defined and being modeled by the minority of individuals reading the news—, do offer general insights on how language shapes and affects American society, mostly as far as group relations and conflicts are concerned.

What might sound as a justification is actually the demonstration of the need for multiple points of view on American Englishes, as offered by the essays in the present volume. There is no discipline, neither in the humanities nor in the soft sciences, that can provide an all-encompassing representation and interpretation of the linguistic facets and socio-cultural implications related to the use, and oftentimes manipulation, of English varieties in the United States. Working from this assumption, we decided to single out three language-related phenomena which are currently relevant to the academic and cultural debate about the United States, namely the obsolescent representation of minority vs. hegemonic varieties of English, the latest developments of the Spanish vs. English controversy,

and the increasing exposure of slang in public contexts. Then, we called for the contribution of English and American Studies scholars whose expertise draws on diverse and often contrasting approaches, ranging from corpus linguistics to cultural studies, from lexicography/lexicology to discourse analysis.

## 1. “Minority” and American English

Some readers might be puzzled not to find a chapter on African American English in a section on “minorities”. We decided to avoid this variety for at least two reasons: first, because it has been investigated more than any other so-called “ethnic” variety of English spoken in the U.S. (besides “white Anglo” varieties, of course, which have been granted a non-ethnic status from the very beginning); and secondly, because the discrimination against speakers of non-standard American English—historically perpetrated on African American children and adults—is nowadays renewed and exacerbated on Latinos (cf. Part III). Contributions on Jewish American English and Native American English, the latter being confined to reservations also in the Academia, were included so as to counterbalance the astonishingly scarce number of studies vis-à-vis other “ethnic” varieties of AE.

**Luisanna Fodde** opens this section discussing the uniformity of American English in reference to the issues of ethnicity and diversity. She first offers an overview of American society as linguistically diversified from the very beginning and the myth of a common language, recently reinvigorated by the debate on English as the supposedly official language of the United States. Standardization of American English goes hand-in-hand with the vision of America as a refuge for people coming from different cultural and linguistic contexts, a pastoral view often contrasted by a xenophobic and racist attitude which permeates the development of Standard American English. Within this scenario, “ethnicity” and “race” are crucial concepts, to be seen as vehicles of tolerance or exclusion according to the viewpoint of those who use them. The Ebonics debate and the English-only movement represent the most visible social conflicts depending on those issues, which must be considered—according to Fodde—within the context of space, raising the question of spatial relationships in language. The development of American English can then be described in terms of urban place and environment, and of community memories. Space and language are thus constantly shaping the duality of the so-called “hyphenated Americans”, an additional point in proving that American English is constantly influenced by its politics of space.

Dilemmas and ambiguities, being part of such a multi-ethnic politics of place, come out strongly in American literature, as seen in examples the author takes from Zora Neale Hurston, Mario Puzo, and Alice Walker.

**Nicola Maurizio Strazzanti** analyzes the idea of Jewish American English (JAE) as a socio-cultural variety of SAE in contemporary trans-ethnic America. Looking at American Jews as an ambivalent minority of insiders/outsideers in contemporary U.S., the author goes through the history of American English(es) as hyphenated Englishes, adding meta-linguistic awareness (in Lyotardian terms) in order to highlight what he calls a polymorphic linguistic system, an anti-Newtonian setting of heterogeneity. Within this context JAE tells a tale of ambivalent integration and trans-coding from the old to the new world, a tale of stereotypes and English illiteracy. Strazzanti sees this “nation” as a “dissemiNation” (Norn Bhabha’s coinage), i.e., a nation based not on geographic and linguistic frames of reference but rather on the Diaspora, on the displacement from territorial to textual. The author claims that JAE projects then a differential space, constantly overlapping and rewriting identity as complexity, as in Cynthia Ozick’s stories. Semantic shifts from Yiddish to Jewish English clearly show this dynamics between adoption and adaptation, on the horizon of a de-territorialized linguistic sensibility, as described by Deleuze and Guattari when discussing Kafka’s famous text on Yiddish.

**Stefano Bosco** looks at Native American English (NAE) as a variety suffering from that very forgetfulness imposed upon Native Americans. Although the existence of indigenous languages in America has been repeatedly discussed, less attention has been given to a linguistic reality which fully belongs within the debate on minorities. If such a non-standard variety does in fact exist, in order to define it one must consider the federal government’s policies regulating its usage. An example of how difficult its definition is comes, for instance, from the data offered by a 2006-2010 survey, estimating that only 15% of American Natives actually speak a Native American language at home. Linguistic policies date back to the first missionary schools and assimilation policies, embodied by the Indian Boarding Schools, aimed at discouraging Natives from using their own vernacular. The ideology of English-only might have actually started within this scenario, which follows the history of American politics until the late Sixties. At that time, the government slowly started giving Native languages recognition and tools for survival as well. The question of a Native American heritage is supported by its contribution to SAE as a separate entity from British English. Originally considered as a pidgin, it is only recently that NAE has been acknowledged as a non-standard English

dialect and as a subject worth of linguistic investigation because of its cultural and social relevance. Bosco proceeds then to discuss Lumbee English spoken by Lumbee Indians in North Carolina, and to underline the existence of a Native American slang, although insufficiently recorded in dictionaries, which give more credit to slang produced by other minorities. Native American colloquial English, or Rezbonics (from Ebonics) is expectedly given more visibility on the Internet, thus continuing the conflictual yet assertive relationship between NAE and SAE.

## 2. Spanish/Inglés

Although a recent survey by the Pew Research Center shows that in 2010 Asian immigrants have for the first time outnumbered Latinos<sup>1</sup>, the linguistic and social struggle of the so-called Hispanics still holds a predominant place in the debate on “minorities”. This section is accordingly dedicated to the most recent perspectives on the Spanish, Spanglish, and American English continuum.

**Donna R. Miller** opens this section with a passionate contribution on the policies of the “English Only” movement in the USA, and on their limiting and negative effects on speakers of Spanish and other “minority” languages. After describing the assorted movements which have advocated the exclusiveness of English in the classroom and in institutions, the author provides a socio-cultural and historical analysis of their argumentations and discursive practices. Despite a wide spectrum of rhetoric nuances, from extremely xenophobic to more tolerant views, all movements aim at passing a constitutional amendment establishing English as the official language of the USA. The roots of this conflict date back to the early stages of the nation, passing through Roosevelt, who wished English learning to be compulsory for every naturalized citizen, and coming up to the present day, where the claimed superiority of English over “other languages” is actually a form of discrimination against native speakers of Central and South American varieties of Spanish. Far from being a merely linguistic matter, this long-term struggle seems to aim at a political goal—to create institutional and legal conditions for prohibiting any institutionally-fostered form of bilingualism, all in the name of the linguistic-cultural “unity” of the nation.

The deep emotional and cultural implications of bilingualism are dealt with in the next chapter, where **Anna Scannavini** offers a rich overview

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>  
[Accessed July 24<sup>th</sup> 2012]

of the differing attitudes felt and staged by Puerto Rican writers when asked to describe their lives with two languages. The author's focus is on the self-representations that these writers construe for the media, and conversely, on the ways in which the media shape, redirect, and exploit such descriptions of one's identity. For instance, while being a bilingual teacher is looked down upon as an attempt to corrupt the purity of English in the classroom, claiming to be a bilingual writer has gained cultural currency and marketing value in the publishing world since the 1970s. This chapter explores which forces, if any, are active in the experience of these artists as bilingual writers and in their elaboration of bilingualism; moreover, it aims at shedding more light on how differing attitudes towards one's language(s) are interwoven in one's writing.

While some bilingual writers may enjoy a certain degree of success at the bookstore on account of their "ethnic" flavor, many others have recently suffered from a hideous form of discrimination, known as the Arizona Books Ban. As described in the chapter written by **Elisa Bordin**, in January 2012 the Arizona Department of Education released a list of literary works, textbooks, and scholarly essays, to be excluded from school curricula due to their allegedly anti-American messages, and to their power to instill ethnic "solidarity" in pupils, expected instead to be raised in the name of "individuality". As a response to this act of institutional censorship, socially engaged students, workers, and intellectuals, have started to use Spanish, Spanglish and code-mixing in general in public events, both to express their moral and political stance vis-à-vis the latest State decisions, and to offer a linguistic representation of an alternative society where language diversity and Americanness are no longer construed as opposing notions. However, instead of conveying open-mindedness and inclusiveness, the use of Spanish in formal or public communication is mostly seen as an act of belligerent rejection of U.S. institutions and Anglophone citizens at large.

U.S. media, and more specifically the entertainment industry, play a crucial role in shaping Spanish as a language used to exclude non-Hispanophones from conversations, or to cover schemes and verbal abuses directed to them. Such discriminatory representation is restricted to the languages spoken by migrants and stigmatized minorities (Italians, Latinos, Asians), while displaying one's fluency in Dutch, Norwegian, or French (provided it is Parisian and not Louisiana French Creole!) is mostly seen as a cultural asset, not as a malicious device to exclude the Other. For this reason, this section closes with a conversational and pragmatic study of a TV fictional dialogue where both American English and Spanish are used. **Daniela F. Virdis** chooses the popular TV series *Nip/Tuck* and carries

out a fine-grained analysis of a scene where a native speaker of Spanish—who happens to be a criminal—and two Anglophone plastic surgeons (one monolingual, and one who speaks Spanish as a foreign language) make arrangements for facial surgery. The author explores the multilayered pragmatic uses, power shifts, and cultural implications, entailed in the employment of English, Spanish and code-mixing within the same linguistic exchange. The analysis is intriguing because the selected dialogue draws on a highly codified social practice, namely doctor-patient interview, where the professional superiority granted to the doctor is magnified as the two (white and Anglophone) surgeons belong to the ethnic and linguistic elite, and where the ethical clarity conventionally expected from them is not fully met, since one of the doctors eventually uses both languages to deceive his colleague into accepting an illegal agreement with the patient.

### 3. Hunting for slang

Researching American slang nowadays is not only a way of looking at a specific register of a macro-regional variety of English, but rather a chance to recognize the mutual relationship between U.S. society and the globalized world, based upon exchanges of economical as well as linguistic nature.

The feedback of American English on British English, discussed by **Ramón Martí Solano**, is one of the most telling phenomena of this kind. The author investigates American coinages imported back into world Englishes contexts and into Great Britain, and often taken for granted (no matter how hostile British culture seems to be to the American one) to the point of no longer being labeled as American in current dictionaries. Referring to the language of the media as the ideal environment for phraseological research, in the opening section of the essay the author examines what can be regarded as strictly American phraseology. Having analyzed general corpora as tools for slang and phraseological research, and the need of online newspaper archives to support investigations as this one, Solano discusses how dictionaries and thesauri treat multi-word lexical items. In the final section, the electronic archives of the British newspaper *The Guardian* constitute the basis for showing the pervasiveness of American items in British media discourse, due to the massive presence of American media in the international context, and to the dissemination of expressions formerly limited within the USA.

Originally seen as a “vulgar” form of communication, slang is discussed by **Roberto Cagliero** as a linguistic reality taking on a progressively more

relevant position in American culture, to the point of being accepted as part of the canon and considered worth of specific attention, as the various slang dictionaries available on the market seem to prove. The author provides a brief overview of recent definitions of slang, showing how its adventures have always been defined within a “political” scenario of meanings and connotations, often shifting when included by the real political arena, as examples from U.S. presidential campaigns exemplify. But how much space do dictionaries offer to contain those sudden and often limited variations which constitute the moveable texture of slang? According to the author, paralinguistic elements, political correctness, and opacity in the origin of slang words, create an even more complicated situation which dictionaries find it hard to cope with. The question of authoritativeness, raised by such complex interferences and juxtapositions, becomes self-evident when it comes to investigate the ways dictionaries treat terms as *cool*, *nigger*, or swearwords. The first observation to be made is that dictionaries are never innocent and never neutral—in deciding to call a word offensive, colloquial, or vulgar, they do take a political position which has to do more with sociolinguistics than with lexicography. At the same time, one must consider that slang is three centuries old in United States, and the recent case of Lighter’s unfinished dictionary provides a good example of the difficulties a publisher goes through in order to sustain the effort of a comprehensive dictionary. Whereas the publishing industry shows economic and political concerns over slang, the academic world looks at dictionaries as minor forms of research, as trivia games when compared to metalexigraphic research.

The last two chapters of the present volume investigate the use of slang in popular media products created in the USA. **Anna Belladelli** carries out a short-term diachronic study on two nouns, *buddy* and *chick*, which are no longer categorized as slang in dictionaries but nevertheless started their life within American English as such. Both words, albeit originated in male discourses, have undergone a gradual shift in usage, semantic and cultural values, and pragmatic force. The author observes their occurrence in a popular magazine such as *Time*, and analyzes them both quantitatively, thanks to the tools afforded by corpus linguistics, and qualitatively, using a CDA-inspired framework. The combination of these approaches allows for a more general interpretation of the cultural and social changes that have brought to the current use of *buddy* and *chick* as a label to represent oneself or other male or female adults.

A synchronic account of slang is offered by **Elisa Mattiello**, who focuses on American English slang as a lexical and morphosyntactic variety, and describes its features both in natural language production and

in fictional dialogue, namely in the famous and successful TV series *Friends*. The author first provides a detailed lexicographical account of English slang in general, and U.S. slang in particular, with regard to its morphology, semantics, and contexts of use. She also offers a wide range of examples taken from the sitcom, so as to prove how crucial a tool slang is for shaping and representing the social nuances and the psychological features of the characters. For this reason, she finally compares the employment of slang in *Friends*' dialogues to the one made in the TV series *Everwood*, proving that this "generational" variety is effectively used to make a distinction between fictional characters who need to be linguistically constructed as "adults" and those who are (socially, if not biologically) to be ascribed to the "youngsters" category.

**PART I:**

**“MINORITY” AND AMERICAN ENGLISH**

# CHAPTER ONE

## AMERICAN ENGLISH: DIVERSITY, ETHNICITY AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE

LUISANNA FODDE

### **1. A mythical common language**

The dilemma between linguistic assimilation and linguistic pluralism has highlighted the debate over American English for the last 200 years. Since colonial times, the question of uniformity of the language spoken in the American territory was often pointed out. Its uniformity and so-called “unadulteration” was even admired. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the English language spoken in the United States seemed to have already acquired a distinct character. The term “Americanism” was coined in 1781 by the Scotsman John Witherspoon (Mathews 1931: 14).

However, as is well-known, the distinct character of American English was nothing but the historical and socio-linguistic combination of many factors, which included lexical borrowings and “colonial lag”, i.e. the retention of earlier linguistic features by a transplanted civilization (Cf. Markwardt 1958: 80, in Trudgill 1999: 327). Also, another important factor to be mentioned is the incredible diversification of the American population since its birth. Such diversified society, as David Crystal points out, needs not only a standard variety, but also many non-standard varieties: “Their function is different. Nonstandard varieties exist in order to express local identities, at a regional level. A standard variety exists to foster intelligibility, at a supra-regional level” (2004: 508). It goes without saying that non-standard varieties include ethnic dialects as typical expressions of local, cultural and racial, not just regional identities.

The myth of a common language, seen as the single and only means of

expression of a nation is in total contrast with the above claim. English-only legislation, which came to the fore in the 1990s and was immediately popular, especially in some Southern and South-Western states, perpetrates the idea that only one language is acceptable and only English can guarantee the appropriation and consolidation of America's common cultural and socio-economic goals and ideals. Such notion is in total contrast with the principles applied by the Founding Fathers of the colonial and post-colonial times. In the United States in fact, at least until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, multilingualism and multiculturalism were commonly accepted, especially in schools. German, French, Polish, and later Italian and Chinese, were regularly taught in various parts of the US territory and accepted as alternative forms of expression. Moreover, the spread of English in the US territory led to an unprecedented linguistic diversity. Such diversity was caused and shaped by a number of factors, which included on the one hand the decentralized political organization of the new nation, which favored the consolidation of regional, cultural and ethnic identity; and on the other the continuous mobility of the American population, a mobility which fostered language communication and exchange.

At the same time, other internal and external forces were contributing to the characterization of American English as the standard language of the United States. From official and intellectual circles, many scholars were advocating the creation of common American cultural values, which could not exclude linguistic ones. Noah Webster was probably the greatest representative of such group, at least for his contribution to the creation and belief in American English as the common language of the United States. He certainly gave American English an official status and identity (cf. Fodde 1994).

At the same time, cultural accommodation and dialect leveling contributed to the realization and standardization of the language spoken in the United States: "As people speaking very different kinds of English found themselves living alongside each other, sharing common aspirations, a great deal of accent and dialect leveling took place" (Crystal 2004: 431).

## **2. Ethnicity and Diversity in the historical development of American English**

Thus, at least until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the process of standardization of American English was very similar to the British one. The historical evolution of the English language in the American territory since the

middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its steady, yet not dramatic divergence from British English has been thoroughly and systematically studied by scholars from both sides of the Atlantic for more than two centuries (cf. Mathews 1931; Mencken 1960; Marckwardt 1980; Romaine 1998; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998). The process of standardization of American English went through the same historical pattern as British English, at least until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The emerging of economically prestigious social strata of population played a major role, alongside geographical distribution, in attributing first to the North-Eastern dialect and later to the Mid-Western dialect the primary position of Standard American English, or SAE (Lippi-Green 1997: 58). It is to be added, however, that strictly speaking the notion of SAE refers typically to a variety of English “devoid of both general and local socially stigmatized features, as well as regionally obtrusive phonological and grammatical features” (Wolfram and Shilling-Estes 1998: 283). *General American* is instead the term commonly given to the phonological variant, and used as a general standard of reference.

Conversely, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the historical developments of the two countries brought different ideological attitudes toward language. Language attitudes and politics started to change and to diverge from those in Britain while ethnic and racial factors influenced the stigmatization of non-standard varieties.

On the one hand, the cultural and social characterization of the United States as a multi-ethnic refuge for hundreds of different people had indeed a very strong impact on American English since the earliest waves of immigrants. Its vocabulary and its phonology were changed, as well as its conversational patterns, with various forms of code-switching or language transfer from native to non-native languages. On the other hand, the social and ethnic changes brought about by the process of diversification of American society were influential in defining and characterizing the standard language. Whereas in Britain class and social position were determinant in favoring one dialect over another, in characterizing British Standard English and especially in determining a standard language ideology and standard language policies, in the United States the socio-economic consequences created by slavery, by the Civil war, and later by recurrent waves of immigration, constructed a language ideology and shaped language attitudes focused entirely on racial discrimination, ethnic division and xenophobia (cf. Milroy and Milroy 1988: 160).

Thus, in the United States, the expressions “ethnicity” and “race” have assumed positive and negative values. When positively considered, ethnicity expresses a sense of belonging to one’s own culture and people,

and language becomes the utmost representation of such bond because it is through language that ethnicity expresses itself. When negatively considered, ethnicity and race have fostered social and cultural stigmatization, exclusion and xenophobia.

In the definition of a dialect, ethnicity can be a very important feature, even though, from a sociolinguistic point of view, “what is popularly identified as “ethnicity” may be difficult to separate from other social factors such as region and social class” (Wolfram and Shilling-Estes 1998: 165). On the other hand, unlike racial differences which are obviously evident, ethnic distinction is maintained through dialect speech, which becomes the easiest way of recognizing members of a different community and/or race. The terms “race” and “racism”, in this respect, involve absolute exclusion, as they are reflective more of the inner part of ourselves, more of the sense of being than that of belonging. As has been noted elsewhere, while ethnicity is tolerance, race is absolute exclusion. Race is corruption, stigma, de-based behavior (cf. Fodde 2002: 45).

Consequently, speakers of non-standard varieties may be regarded as “sloppy”, “lazy” and “deprived”. Sometimes, when race and ethnicity are involved as elements for language judgment and attitudes, their morality is even questioned. However, within the same community, the stigmatized features of a variety are regarded as solidarity tools and means of expressing a sense of belonging to the community. In this respect, attempts to deny them or to use more standard and non-stigmatized features within the community are considered as snobbish and pompous (cf. Macedo 2003: 34-39; Schmidt 2006: 98-99).

These concepts and misconceptions are at the basis of the Official English Campaigns and English-Only Campaigns carried out since the early 1990s, as a consequence of the well-known “Ebonics” controversy. The followers of those campaigns favor the approval of a Federal law whereby “no person has a right, entitlement, or claim to ...act, communicate, perform or provide services or provide materials in any language other than English...” (Cf. Crawford 1992). English-Only legislation points to the existence of an “uncommon culture”, to uncommon cultural values and expressions, which are thus relegated “to the margins, creating a de facto silent majority” (Macedo 2003: 36).

However, some positive actions and consequences have been brought about by the Ebonics controversy and the English-Only movements. Never before those years had the cultural debate over dialects and standard and non-standard varieties been so animated and spread out across the United States and Europe. American ethnic varieties and dialects were scrutinized and thoroughly studied and many critical essays have appeared since then.

African-American English in particular became the most highly praised protagonist of such debates and the object of many scholarly dissertations. Among the results of such analysis is the final claim that AAE is a systematic, rule-governed dialect spoken by many youngsters throughout the American territory as their only means of communication. Moreover, it is scholarly recognized as the most homogeneous dialect spoken in the US, both diachronically and synchronically, as well as the most widely spread in a very vast territory (cf. Mufwene 2001). Debates on the theory of divergence of African American English from Standard American have occupied a great number of scholarly magazines and texts, especially in relation to such syntactic features as the zero copula, invariant *be* and the aspect verb particles used to contrast realis and irrealis actions, as *done*, *been/bin* and *finna* (cf. Fodde 2010; Green 2004: 76-90).

Together with African-American English, Latino English has played an important role in characterizing language and socio-cultural diversity in the United States. This variety of American English has reached a very high number of speakers, thanks in particular to the rise of Spanish as the second language spoken in the United States. Unlike African American English, the Spanish varieties spoken in the US are less homogeneous and more concentrated in urban areas (cf. Stavans 2003). Many sub-variants of Latino English have emerged in the last 50-60 years, such as NYLE (New York Latino English), the linguistic product of Latin American immigration to New York starting in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Spanglish, Inglañol, EspanGLISH, Espanglés are the many general terms used to define the linguistic phenomenon of language blending, transfer and interaction, which include such interesting features as code switching, lexical borrowings and direct translations.

### **3. The politics of place: a theoretical framework**

As Merlini Barbaresi rightly claims, “the enormous literature on space conceptualization and on space linguistic frames testifies to the importance and interest in this aspect of human cognition” (2003: 25). Indeed, space is conceptualized by psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics primarily in thorough and wide terms (cf., for example, Bloom et al. 1999; Miller and Johnson Laird 1976; Fillmore 1982; Merlini 2003).

Environments are experienced from specific points of view along specific routes. At first we perceive space from our own point of view and establish references from our own standpoint (egocentric perspective); then we establish relations with our outside world and with the others, so allocentric references come to aid, namely those systems which are

external to our environment (i.e. the north-south, east-west references).

Recent findings in cross-linguistic semantics have revealed that the domain of space is not similarly partitioned across all languages and cultures (Pederson et al. 1998). One conclusion of this line of typological research has been that languages use just three frames of reference: absolute, intrinsic and relative. Thus, technically speaking, spatial language distinguishes 3 different uses of language: deictic, intrinsic and extrinsic, which correspond to the three bases of spatial references, i.e. the viewer, other objects, and external sources (cf. Tversky 1999: 469).

As is well-known, deixis in English refers to the person who is speaking, the “I”, the place from where he/she is speaking (the “where”), and the time of utterance (the “now”). What concerns us in this particular case is obviously the place deixis, the “where”, relative to the location of one of the participants in the speech event, normally the speaker (Levinson 1983). Examples of place deixis in English are typically *this*, *that*, *here* and *there*. A more specific and cognitive definition of place deixis is given by Miller and Jason-Laird who define it as “the linguistic system for talking about space relative to a speaker’s egocentric origin and coordinate axes” (1976: 396. In Tversky 1999: 466). The deictic use of language was referred to by Levinson as “relative”, because it uses the speaker’s viewpoint to calculate space relations.

The intrinsic use of spatial language especially favors human beings and those entities such as houses or cars that are spatially oriented due to their inner characteristics: right, left, above, in front, right. It goes without saying that for such entities, the reference point of view is that of the entity’s or object’s natural and intrinsic properties, sides or features. One typical example of intrinsic use of spatial language would be: “My car was left in front of the house”, where the front of the house—or tent, or stadium—is of course its natural front side, and my location in relation to the house is absolutely irrelevant. The third frame of reference or use of spatial language is the extrinsic one, which uses fixed points of reference, external to the reference points of the object being described, such as the canonical cardinal points. According to Tversky, the intrinsic interpretations of space generally dominate deictic ones, and when in doubt, the speaker will always add the phrase, “From my point of view”; “As I am looking at it”, to make his utterance more specific and precise (Tversky 1999: 469).

As Merlini points out, spatial relations are fundamental for indicating similarities between cognition and language: “this is an essential condition for the receiver’s interpretation, as it allows her/him to trace back the speaker’s process whereby s/he has moved from a cognized visual scene to a linguistic presentation of it, and thus to achieve a conceptual reconstruction

of the scene solely on the basis of the linguistic version” (2003: 15). As she interestingly continues, what is relevant also appears to be the speaker’s role who, when moving from cognition to language, is free to choose one of the three frames of reference described above, the “deictic” one—or viewer-centered—, the “intrinsic” one—related to any object in his view—, and the “extrinsic”,—or absolute—relative to a fixed, or conventional reference point. “The choice is not arbitrary, of course, and, once it is made, constrains the text pragmatically, which is tantamount to saying that there are fat chances of incurring inconsistencies, if the speaker does not comply with the “rules” of the modality s/he has freely chosen” (Ibid.: 15). And such modalities, when observed from a socio-linguistic perspective become extremely important to the present analysis.

From a socio-linguistic point of view, spatial descriptions, like most discourses, occur in a social context, with real addressees or implicit ones. The way people shape the places they live in or the places they encounter in their social interactions, in private and public settings, acquires great relevance in socio-linguistic research. This type of research becomes interesting from a multi-ethnic point of view especially when such shaping and construction is carried out through discourses of identity. Members of all communities, of all national and ethnic backgrounds use language to “negotiate conflicting ethnic and gender perspectives, class alignments, and hopes and fears for their neighbourhood” (Modan 2007: 6). This is one of the many reasons why the language of space, even in a socio-linguistic analysis, becomes a way of describing society not only from a socio-linguistic perspective, but also from a political one. One way of observing such an analysis could be through “the politics of place”, through how members of a set community define the place they live in and are familiar with, through discourses of identity. And we cannot but stress once more how the common definition of discourse never detaches language from context.

Let us go back to what Merlini Barbaresi states when describing the chosen modality to describe space. Such modality of space description also involves the order of presenting information. Speech, because of its linearity, disregards perspective. Thus, with some noteworthy and famous exceptions from literary masterpieces, the natural order of space, as it appears to the speaker’s or observer is normally chosen.

The best way to convey space in the natural order is that of mental tours, which abound in spatial descriptions. These mental representations, along with the actual real space, are made up of many unique elements, which have been defined as a network of landmarks corresponding to our cognitive differentiation of space. Through mental tours, space is newly

reconstructed in a two-dimensional transfiguration of identity. Once represented by our personal mental perception, the space described is simplified in form, images, and meanings (cf. Fodde and Memoli 2007). Thus, mental tours are designed by a sequential addition of details.

Unlike geographic maps, mental tours—made up of many single mental maps—translate the urban geography into a draft of personal space which is always partial. Through mental maps the city materializes itself again in a two-dimensional transfiguration of identity, participation, belongingness, into a representation of the relationship between the citizen and space (cf. Fodde and Memoli 2007).

Thus, when we describe space, changing from our cognitive realization to our linguistic presentation of it, we translate our mental maps into our linguistic representation of space reality. It goes without saying that language plays a crucial role in shaping space identity and making language maps out of mental maps. As much as all reality surrounding us, places are not neutral and their meaning not fixed. As people interact with their friends and neighbors, they shape the place they live in through discourse. At the same time, the same place can be given different renditions and interpretations, according to the addressor's interest and viewpoint. Different images can be used by different inhabitants and/or users of the same place to marginalize some people rather than others, to shape space according to one's own representation: "The sociologist Christopher Mele made a similar argument in his historical analysis of the images that residents, the real estate industry, and media outlets presented of New York's Lower East Side from 1880 to 2000. He found that, while residents often promoted an image of the neighborhood as tough or artsy or alternative, real estate executives commodified that image in order to sell up-market residential and retail space" (Modan 2007: 318).

#### **4. The politics of place in American Language and Literature**

Up until now the two terms "space" and "place" have been used almost indiscriminately in the present article. However, some scholars have attributed to each of them a different meaning, which we chose to adopt. While the term space is used to define the physical features of a geographic area, the term place should be used instead to refer to areas that are socially, culturally and linguistically experienced and interpreted (Modan 2007: 334). According to this distinction, place seem to have a more cultural meaning, while space represents its geography, its actual physical and morphological structure.

So, for example, one may seek to describe the history of American English in terms of urban place and environment. From this point of view, it is not too difficult to note that ethnic communities, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, are defined by spatial boundaries where identities are reinforced and molded. To give an example, the representation of New York's Little Italy, or of the hundreds of Little Italies spread around the US territory, is nowadays mainly visual, and we have a very thorough, organized and extensive collection of visual examples, both diachronic and synchronic, of the staging of Italian symbols. Interestingly enough, even though not surprisingly, most of these symbols refer to urban commercial activities, with food and catering as the main protagonists. Shop signs indicating commercial activities of the various kinds not only are ethnically identified as Italian because of the typical names and surnames contained, but also because the descriptions of the products and services they advertised are in both languages, Italian and English. Apart from these evident symbols of ethnic connotation in the American cities, some other, less visual signs have affected their ethnic characterization. Thus, ethnic urban contours were created and detected not only through visual symbols, but through a medley of ethnic features, not necessarily physical, which could be clearly perceived mainly by insiders. In this particular context, language and dialects have played a very important role in characterizing ethnic space in the United States. As language shapes boundaries of belonging, it becomes textual space, defining ethnic characters and places. Through the years, these ethnic territories have evolved, so that today they represent a sort of home from home: reserves, symbolic homelands, offering protection and conferring force. They have provided safe ground along America's cultural frontier. At the same time, these same physical realities—houses, shops, intersections, neighborhoods and cities—are a repository of a community memory. Although partially lost, the residential areas of the various ethnic communities of the United States still retain, at least partially, their original ethnic atmospheres—their charm and their vivacity—so that they are able to propose the sort of urban socio-landscapes which constitute an invaluable and meaningful reservoir of cultural communal identity.

It is therefore possible to identify in these urban spaces a certain unvarying quality which, over the years, has imbued the American landscape with a definable character. The molding of the American space in order to recreate one particular ethnic community—Italian, African-American, Jewish, Chinese—has also set limits against other ethnic urban realities. Space and language together have been transformed to help shape the duality of what has been generally called “the hyphenated American”,

and to overcome language and cultural obstacles:

He walked along McDougal Street. Here were the black-and-white couples, defiantly white, flamboyantly black: and the Italians watched them, hating them, hating, in fact, all the Villagers, who gave their streets a bad name. The Italians, after all, merely wished to be accepted as decent Americans and probably could not be blamed for feeling that they might have had an easier time of it if they had not been afflicted with so many Jews and junkies and drunkards and queers and spades [...] (Baldwin 1960: 251)

In the urban, heterogeneous, diverse, and sometimes tough environment, hyphenated Americans of all kinds seek acceptance or defy it. Thus boundaries are created and removed, and used to index separation or inclusion: “[...] clustering ethnic, economic, and architectural homogeneity/heterogeneity, fearlessness and fear, order and disorder, etc., around the constructs of city and suburb enable social actors to use any of these characteristics to index any of the others, or to index urban or suburban identity” (Modan 2007: 107). Thus, Modan continues, certain features can be used to index a defined status, such as wealth that can be used to index order, or filth that can be used to index disorder and fear.

American-English is constantly being influenced by its politics of place. It’s something anyone can perceive, especially when in contact with any urban reality. Ethnic symbols, images, signs, nuances, permeate the language now spoken/heard/read/ captured in the US. All such narratives and discourses are clear representations of a legacy, the testimony and staging of a heritage.

In street conversations, code-switching is the norm:

Anita: “Hola, good morning, como estás?”

Mark: “Good, y tú?”

Anita: “Todo bien. Pero tuve problemas parqueando mi carro this morning”.

Mark: “Sí, I know. Siempre hay problemas parqueando in la area at this time”.

In such conversations, each turn takes a symbolic value, is indexed according to the place where it is performed, to the protagonists and to the role each protagonist has.

Ethnic identity is inextricably linked to language, not just the language people use, but also the language they don’t use: English at times, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Jewish at other times: “I may speak English, but that doesn’t make me less Mexican” (Mendoza Denton 2008: 108).

Language and dialect choices, the dilemma of using one language/dialect rather than another has many socio-linguistic implications. Family and community values are often in contrast with the values promoted by institutions which foster education and literacy to reach mainstream social and economic aims. Thus the process of choosing to speak the dialect instead of standard English, of switching between one language and English is governed by precise socio-linguistic and psychological constraints, which must be taken into account when discussing ethnic dialects and language diversity (cf. Lippi-Green 1997: 61-62).

In literature, the politics of place is portrayed in a variety of ways depending on the author's background, his/her subject matter, and the time of writing. As James Peterson points out, "situational contexts from the pragmatic milieu for sociolinguistic variation" (cf. Peterson 2004: 432). In American hyphenated or ethnic literature, we find interesting examples of what role language plays in the characterization of ethnic contexts and place.

Indeed, in American literature, examples of the ambiguities and dilemmas of a multi-ethnic politics of place are not infrequent. They can be blatantly straightforward:

Next to the bakery, toward 31st Street, was the grocery, its windows filled with yellow logs of provolone in shiny, waxy kins and prosciutto hams, meaty triangles hanging in gaily colored paper [...] (Puzo 1964: 5)

However, most of the time they appear more subtle, as in the following example by the same author:

Each tenement was a village square; each had its group of women, all in black, sitting on stools and boxes and doing more gossip. They recalled ancient history, argued morals and social law, always taking their precedents from the mountain village in southern Italy they had escaped, fled from many years ago [...] (Puzo 1964: 6)

In narrative discourse place is defined by evocative lexis, precise locative simili, slang, chaining strategies with appropriate verb choice:

Whut would Ah do wid dat lil chunk of a woman wid you around? She ain't good for nothin' expectin' toh set up in uh corner by de kitchen stove and break wood over her head. You'se something to make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit tuh die. (Hurston 1937: 206)

That's all Ah wants tuh know. From now on you'se mah wife and mah woman and everything else in de world Ah needs. (Hurston 1937: 187)

He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. (Walker 1985: 11)

But me, never again. A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more. (ibid. 15)

Well, next time you come you can look at her. She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie. (ibid. 18)

Here, the African-American vernacular plays a dominant role. Some features of the dialect are present—double negative, erratic verbal coordination, copula absence, and phonological speech transfer—along with high literary prose, which gives high pragmatic force to the piece.

As we have tried to show, the ethics of culture and language sameness is unattainable despite political and linguistic attempts to reform and to coerce. Evidence of language variation, transformation, and preservation in the United States, as elsewhere, point to an unprecedented liveliness of the English language fostering, instead, a strong “ethics of difference” (Derrida, in Macedo 2003: 47). The ambiguities of American English—like other dialects of the same language—find a great and lively platform of representation in the politics of place and in its rendition in the many forms of language manifestation available now.

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