Kara Michelin
American English: It’s, like, proper, okay?

In this year 2012 the world is steadily coming to an end and if we are to believe the authorities, language with it. “Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration,” declared Samuel Johnson in his Dictionary of the English Language, but what’s the marker for a language gone to spoil? Critics of English, specifically, may have varying theories on who’s to blame for the language’s ills, but among a body of linguists and laymen alike, one thing is certain: American English, with all of its alterations and linguistic impertinence, might not be intentionally ruining the language, but it sure isn’t doing it any favors.

In this paper I will first discuss the importance with which individuals vest linguistic maintenance and its ugly cousin, linguistic decay, examining the latter using the phenomena of slang. I will then counter that slang actually requires a sophisticated grasp of linguistic rules and posit why American phrases from “groovy, man” to “jockin my fresh” aren’t polluting the English language.

If I were to ask you to name various behavioral repertoires that assist your day-to-day survival, chances are “language” wouldn’t be in your top five responses. However, proper construction and usage of language meets functionally integral needs such as the maintenance of social networks, perception of time, even the construction of identity in a way that is unique to humans. Meaningful, complex manipulation of basic sound units is our capability alone, so it holds self-evident that we would be invested in its developmental trajectory. But first we need to agree on a basic framework for linguistic study; as we will see, the way we approach this phenomena greatly impacts whether we regard language on a downward trend at all.

According to one strand of tradition, language arises as an organic, biologically ineffable invention all humans share. This viewpoint is known in linguistic circles as the ‘poverty of the stimulus’ argument, and revolves around a perennial miracle: how is it that children produce rational language from scanty and insufficient evidence? Studies by Noam Chomsky and others investigating this occurrence produced intriguing evidence: children seem to follow the same steps in acquiring their first language and, oddly enough, make the same characteristic mistakes. These experiments ultimately produced a paradigm advocating a pre-wired sensitivity to the
structure of language, with some rules of grammar stamped on the brain. From this follows the belief that there is a right and wrong way to “do” language on a global communicative scale. Since genetic precedents provide direction, some people attest, we can assume that there are universally correct linguistic standards, separate from time and place.

These individuals are misguided.

That is not to say we have nothing to gain from examining linguistic production on a genetic scale, because the ability to learn and monitor this production must of course be innate. The human brain, after all, is unique in having the necessary hardware for mastering a language—that much is uncontroversial. However, as an explanation for how language operates in the public arena, it falls slightly short. Making nativist claims for elements of language can lead to the assumption that there is a linguistic status quo set down by the brain and that the hallmark of a “fit” language is one that remains unchanged and plays by the rules. This is the mindset that gives rise to linguistic purism, creating the myth of an “ideal language” from which all derivations/dialects are inferior and violate essentialist linguistic rules. Those who take it upon themselves to monitor their nation’s language, then, more often than not make it their priority to abide by traditions and resist change to their mother tongue as violently as possible.

Such instances are evident in countries where whole institutions revolve around regulation of the extant language. A notorious example is the Académie française, whose official authority is on the usages, vocabulary, and grammar of the French language, but has since become a concentration camp for phrases and terminologies that attempt to change it. As French culture has come under increasing pressure with the widespread use of English in media and technology, the Académie has tried to prevent Anglicization, often unsuccessfully. For instance, they recommended that some loanwords from English (such as software and email) be avoided in favor of words derived from French, like logiciel and courriel, respectively. This defensive purism sees alterations to the native language as an assault on linguistic roots. But, more importantly, it resents the influx of foreign ideas that require alteration of their language in the first place. According to the Académie this pressure from outside forces substitutes innate vocabulary and diminishes and/or endangers inter-generational connections between French’s present speakers and the literary remnants of their venerated ancestors.

Interestingly enough, however, while this conservatism is one of the first instances to receive global scrutiny, fear for the integrity of a language is nothing new, at least for France. For example, in an argument in 1843 between philosopher Victor Cousin and novelist Victor
Hugo, Cousin proclaimed that the changes to modern French were nothing but rot. He even purported knowing the exact year of the language’s downfall, remarking: “The decay of the French language started in 1789,” to which Hugo replied: “At what hour, if you please.” This anxiety persisted, however, with one of the leading linguists of the late nineteenth century, Gaston Paris, arguing that the very *birth* of the French language was mired in decay. French had emerged from Vulgar Latin, the dialect of the illiterate masses, who according to Paris had “gradually lost the proper and instinctive sense of laws of the language that they spoke, and let it be corrupted in their mouth, following the vagaries of the time, new needs, whims, and errors.”

Yet, this downward linguistic trajectory is not reserved for French alone. Critics of English believe that it’s in, to quote George Orwell, “a bad way,” meaning that our mother tongue has devolved into a ground-down Germanic nightmare, teetering on the brink of collapse. A century before Orwell, however, renowned linguist August Schleicher predicted that English will likely “sink into mono-syllabicity” and a century before him, in 1780, actor Thomas Sheridan complained that “English was…spoken in its highest state of perfection” in the reign of Queen Anne, 70 years prior. Yet, even going back to this time period, between 1702-14, reveals those like Jonathan Swift who himself wrote several diatribes about the imperfection of the language. So the English of today is not what used to be, is never what it used to be, and with each century presents some hater waiting for the moment when it’s going to tank. This is at the heart of what linguist Guy Deutscher refers to as “linguistic degeneration,” or, the fear that language changes, and always for the worst. Changes in word meaning, syntax, etc. represent tides of brutality bent on eroding the authenticity of the original language.

So now it’s time to bring degeneration a little closer to home. There’s no denying America’s role in what seems a widespread phraseological anxiety, specifically how the United States’ propensity to coin “improper” words and phrases incites global friction. Dissatisfaction with North American parlance dates back to the American Revolution, continuing in earnest into the 19th century. For instance, Thomas Hamilton’s “Men and Manners in America”, published in London in 1833, is rife with moral horror and grammatical disgust towards “the barbarisms” [viz., slang] propagated by English-speaking Americans of all classes, the learned and ignorant alike. Indignant, he notes:

“I will not go on with this unpleasant subject…but I feel it something of a duty to express the natural feeling of an Englishman at finding the language of Shakespeare and Milton thus gratuitously degraded. Unless the present progress
of change be arrested, by an increase of taste and judgment in the more educated classes, there can be no doubt that, in another century, the dialect of the Americans will become utterly unintelligible to an Englishman…”

I would be hard-pressed to say that Hamilton’s hypothesis is wholly accurate, as I’m pretty sure we’ve yet to publish a scholarly American-to-English translation manual. Yet, the underpinnings of this argument reflect a more timely criticism of Americanisms: language harnesses immeasurable amounts of soft power that alters our “taste and judgment.” Who is to say a country won’t use their cultural muscle to change the values and rewrite the traditions of another nation, here through the spread of slang?

And other countries have been noting and subsequently complaining about this globalization of colloquialisms. Words like “dude” and “cash” are rife in Bollywood, India’s reappropriation of American-style cinema, and viral webcasts like “OMG! Meiyu” exist specifically to introduce American slang to China. A November 2011 study conducted by The Economist asking over 650 Brits which Americanisms they use even revealed trends where prototypical British slang, like flat and pavement, have largely been replaced by their American equivalents, apartment and sidewalk, respectively. For all intents and purpose it seems as if America is hell-bent on forcing its “lesser-English” down other countries’ throats. What are we to make of all this?

We’ll get to this, but let’s quickly recap. We’ve addressed the desire for linguistic stability and fears surrounding the whispers of decay, which make some of us cling to our Goethe and Shakespeare and weep, but it’s time for a reality check and it’s time for a paradigm shift.

Most of these criticisms of American slang go back to that model of linguistics I previously introduced. Fears of altering English spring from the idea that each individual language today exists only as a cheapened dialect from some respective, “purer” language, which in turn arises from innate, biological rules. Deviations from uniform linguistic rules are seen as adulteration of a language and decay.

The simple truth, however, is that all languages change, all the time—the only static languages are dead ones. In a marked contrast to other linguistic models, Guy Deutscher identifies “cultural evolution” as language’s primary mover. According to this framework, language is the accumulation of unintended actions and is constantly recalibrating itself in the social sphere. If one wants to look for signs about how a language will “naturally” develop, one
should listen in the streets rather than consult an academy or look at ancient records. Yes, people adhere to and agree upon a system of old conventions for practicality’s sake, but variation is the key to maintaining a language’s heartbeat. We do not verbally communicate using a monolithic, rigid entity, but a flexible system that is given to alterations at any point in time. There is variation between the speech of people from different areas, of different ages, sexes, professions. And it’s these variations that cause change, because language is all about competing slang words and colloquialisms; ones that are more and more common eventually take over, becoming an established grammatical rule or phrase.

Unfortunately, people tend to overlook additions to language, as decay is a rather pervasive agent of change and is more observable to the naked eye. This usually leads people to overlook the forces of creation in the wake of destruction. For instance, linguists are apt to notice how the 15th century word *maked* (as in “God maked Adam”) eroded to the shorter *made*, moreso than they can track the creation of a phrase, like *to the back of*. Creation is a lot more complicated and usually, Deustcher argues, happens too rapidly to appreciate on a normal scale. As opposed to decay, which we can actually track using defined laws and principles that obey a temporal pattern, creation happens spontaneously day to day. Trying to isolate these generative forces becomes doubly problematic when one considers how often it’s *accompanied* by destruction. Allow me to explain. The fashioning of new words and grammatical rules reflects a desire to enhance our expressive range on one hand, but also our fickleness on the other. Speakers want to find fresh ways of articulation, but the strength of meaning of a particular word depends on its distinctiveness; the more often we hear it, and in less discriminating contexts, the less powerful the impression it makes as time goes on. This necessitates either the alteration of the word or the creation of a new one that takes its place. Creation and destruction, then, are linked.

What the watchmen of good usage, err, however, is in assuming that this process is something new or menacing. Words and phrases are always being replaced as overuse depletes their power. For instance, metaphors that become overextended lose their ability to represent an abstract and become stock-in-trade phrases, to be replaced by new metaphors. For instance, the word *sarcastic* comes from the Greek ‘flesh-tearing’, which was a surprising description for its day, but has since become pedestrian.

With regards to American English, it’s important to recognize these forces of creation, as they largely validate our rather enthusiastic spinning of slang. For those concerned about the
long-lasting, pervasive damage of American slang, as we just discussed, social presses subject language to a process akin to natural selection. Only the strong terms or phrases survive, while the rest are discarded and forgotten. For instance, how frequently do you hear someone say: “that Noel is one swinging hepcat, ya dig?” New slang needs to be created per generation, because like living organisms they have life spans. Worries, then, about the jargon of improper, callous Americans is unfounded; even if it does reach different pockets of the world, it isn’t there to stay.

Also, in acting as an agent of change, slang has to be aware of rather sophisticated baseline rules. When we hear a word or sentence pattern, it undergoes scrutiny, whether we’re conscious of it or not: we judge its acceptability according to a certain set of standards. When we say sentences like *walk much?* what we’re really saying is *do you walk much?*; the *do you* is understood by both speaker and auditor and can thus be eliminated. But what about the phrase *rude much?*; you wouldn’t say: *Do you rude much.* The understood component must then be *you’re being very rude*, which makes a lot less immediate sense. It is this quality of uncanniness, of not making sense, that makes *rude much* and other variations of slang rather clever; pairing an adjective with *much* doesn’t pass our acceptability judgments, but we can still make sense of it and break it down to make variations of our own. In other words, acceptability as slang depends on a sliver of unacceptability, of seeing how far one can linguistically bend the rules without sacrificing the content. In the words of professor Michael Adams at North Carolina State University, it’s linguistic jaywalking. This behind-the-scenes sensitivity to linguistic patterns, then, makes Americanisms undeserving of disapprobation, as it is more English’s revitalizing savior than its corruptor.

So, as a final thought, in 1892 Walt Whitman described slang as “the start of fancy, imagination, and humor, breathing into its nostrils the breath of life.” And I think I’m going to give Walt Whitman this; that our tempestuous rendering of language isn’t a portent of degeneration and isn’t as so much “good” or “bad” as it is a matter of taste and fancy. So to those who impugn American slang and mark it the apogee of Western linguistic decay, I say: “whatever.” Thank you.