



# Myths, Lies and Half-Truths of Language Usage

*John H. McWhorter*

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Length: 12 hrs and 18 mins

Is English broken? Do bad grammar, slang, and illogical constructions signal a decline in standards of usage? Do e-mail and text messages corrupt the art of writing? In short, is our language going to the dogs?

It's easy to think so, just as it's easy to listen to people speaking a foreign language and think that they're doing something more complicated and interesting than we're doing in speaking English. But English is complicated and interesting too. Consider the real truth behind these widespread beliefs:

English is in crisis: False. English has been undergoing fundamental change for centuries. Novelty and caprice have created not just slang but the very foundations of what we think of as the best parts of English. Latin is more perfect than modern languages: False. By historical accident, Latin became the standard for grammatical rigor. But countless languages, including English, are Latin's equal in precision and expressive power.

Grammar should be logical: False. A double negative is unacceptable in standard English because it implies a positive. But many languages use it without misunderstanding, along with other constructions that defy strict logic.

Texting degrades writing: False. Text messages and e-mail are not crowding out other forms of language. Instead, they fill an important niche—informal writing—that until now had no adequate outlet.

The modern attitude toward English is filled with such misconceptions that obscure the true picture of what a marvelous language it is. Far from being a language in decline, English is the product of surprisingly varied linguistic forces, some of which have only recently come to light. And these forces continue to push English in new directions—in defiance of those who long for an age of formal perfection that never existed.

Taught by acclaimed linguist, author, and Professor John McWhorter of Columbia University, *Myths, Lies, and Half-Truths of Language Usage* dispels the cloud of confusion that clings to English, giving you a crystal-clear view of why we use it the way we do and where it fits into the diverse languages of the world. After completing these 24 lectures, you will think about how you use English in a new way, listen to others with discernment and fascination, and take joy in speaking such a wonderfully idiosyncratic tongue.

Course Lecture Titles

24 Lectures

30 minutes / lecture

Alarm over the Decay of English

Surprises in the Ancestry of Old English

Not Exactly Anglo-Saxon

Don't Forget the Celtic Connection

From Insider Language to Lingua Franca

English as Easy German

The Viking Conquest of English

How the Words of Modern English Emerged

Black English—The Streamlining Continues  
Honored Conceits of Blackboard Grammar  
Pronoun Fashions Come and Go  
Wrong Then, Proper Now—and Vice Versa  
A Procession of Accidents and Fossils  
The Pursuit of Logic in Language  
Clarity as the Logic of Language  
20th-Century Fashions from Strunk & White  
The Kinds of Grammar You Don't Hear About  
Linguists Uncovering Grammar We All Use  
Speech versus Writing—Different Languages  
Speechmaking—From Oratory to Plain Speaking  
The Old and New Styles of Writing  
Got Poetry? Language with Spice  
Why Texting Is Misunderstood  
The Living Past and Future of English

Dig beneath the Surface of English

Like an archaeologist sifting through clues to a vanished civilization, Professor McWhorter highlights the many features of English that sound normal to a native speaker but that linguists find puzzling and also revealing:

Meaningless do: The only languages that use do in the way English does (as in "do not walk") are the Celtic languages such as Welsh, which were spoken by people who lived among the early English and influenced their language in many subtle ways.

Fossilized mistakes: The little green legume often eaten with carrots was formerly called pease in the singular. The word was gradually misinterpreted as plural because of the final s sound, and a new singular form was assumed to exist: pea.

"Heritage" Old English: One of the mysteries of Modern English is that it resembles a heritage version of Old English. A heritage language is one learned imperfectly at home, typically by immigrant children who acquire a different dominant language.

Hear English with New Ears

In the first part of the course, you address historical mysteries about English. Your investigation begins 2,500 years ago with Proto-Germanic, the language that gave birth to the Germanic languages. From there, you trace the shifting path that eventually led to English—a Germanic language like no other—which lacks grammatical gender and practically all case endings and conjugation markers. "Something happened to English," says Professor McWhorter, and by the end of Lecture 9 you will have pieced together evidence from many different languages that explain our tongue's unique evolution.

In the second part of Myths, Lies, and Half-Truths of Language Usage, you focus on modern controversies about how English is used, which take on new clarity in light of the historical background covered earlier in the course.

These lectures give you a fresh perspective on the language, allowing you to understand it more fully:

Pronoun problems: "Billy and me went to the store" is considered incorrect, because the subject form, I,

should be used instead of me. But then why does "Me and Billy went to the store" sound so much more fluent than "I and Billy went to the store"?

Lie/lay confusion: Lie and lay exemplify an old pattern in English, in which the vowel is altered to make an intransitive verb transitive. But as with another such pair, drink and drench (where drench originally meant "to force to drink"), the traditional lie/lay distinction is irreversibly withering away.

Dangling participles: "Driving through town, the crowds looked ominous" is deemed ungrammatical, because it suggests the crowds were doing the driving. But what about "Judging from her appearance, she was quite tired," which has the same construction but is widely accepted?

Terminal prepositions: The rule against ending a sentence with a preposition is largely the work of 18th-century clergyman Robert Lowth, who had so internalized the rhythms of Latin that he wished to impose a similar structure on English, which has a much more flexible relationship with prepositions.

## A History of Defying Rules

These examples and many more in the course represent a few of the flash points in English's long history of defying rules, a process that occurs in all languages. In a vivid analogy, Professor McWhorter says that the effort to keep English the way it used to be is like trying to dry off the beach with a towel. One of the jobs of linguists is to pull back the camera and take in the big picture to see how languages naturally evolve, and to predict where they're going next.

As you discover in *Myths, Lies, and Half-Truths of Language Usage*, the evidence is all around you: in the speech you hear in public places and on television, in the always-innovative slang of the young, on the printed page and Internet, and in your own mouth. "Part of being a healthy society is being proud of one's language," says Professor McWhorter. In this exciting course, he gives you every reason to be a proud, informed, and more self-aware speaker of English.

## Myths, Lies and Half-Truths of Language Usage Details

Date : Published July 8th 2013 by The Great Courses (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN :

Author : John H. McWhorter

Format : Audible Audio 13 pages

Genre : Humanities, Language, Nonfiction, Linguistics

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# From Reader Review Myths, Lies and Half-Truths of Language Usage for online ebook

## Cheryl says

I read the Course Guidebook that accompanies the DVDs.\* It's not narrative, so it's shorter than a book, but isn't as quick a read as a book of comparable length. It is, of course, much less time-consuming to read than to watch. I have decided not to play the DVDs because I feel that I got a very good idea of the information that McWhorter shared, and of the points he was making.

And it was all fascinating, and entertaining, too.

I like the structure, with vocabulary terms and questions to consider at each chapter/ lesson, and a glossary at the end, and references/ further readings in both positions.

I appreciate that the author/ professor acknowledges the perspective of those of us who are prescriptivists, and even admits to some 'errors of usage' that make him wince, while coming down firmly on the side of descriptivism. He talks about the history of English, and compares it in many interesting ways to many other languages... and he analyses Strunk & White and 'Black English'... and only the most stubborn pedant will still be able to speak of 'correct grammar' after experiencing this course.

Most of us amateur linguists have covered much of this ground before. In fact, he leaves out some things, for example Webster and the ascension of American English. Nor does punctuation get more than a passing mention. But he also introduces concepts and influences less frequently explored in pop linguistic work, for example the extensive influences of Robert Lowth and of William Cobbett on early prescriptive usage, and Charles William Eliot and Mario Savio on modern oratory.

"If we are to impose order on our language, then we have to realize that what we are attempting to impose order on is already, in itself--in a way that we can't change--violently, marvelously, and joyously disorderly."

Now, I have decided to rate this 'Great Course' four stars, because I enjoyed the handbook so much. And I do recommend it to those of you who do know who David Crystal and Lynne Truss are, and who should have Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences on your shelves somewhere. But remember, I can't vouch for his presentation on the screen or as an audio... I bet it's great, but I can't promise.

I'm going to look for actual books by McWhorter, and investigate his bibliography for further reading.

\*One final note: my library has this tagged as DVD. I don't know if that's true. They might just be audio CDs but it's not convenient for me to check, sorry.

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## Nick Nelson says

It was a very interesting discussion into the history of the English language as we know it. The things he had to say were very interesting!

He tried his best to mimic the accents, where at first I did find it amusing, toward the end of the lectures I

found them not only somewhat annoying, but somewhere between rude and being an arse. From the first episode, this guy just rubbed me the wrong way. He's very smart and he knows he's smart, which to me illustrates something immature about his self-awareness. So in a fancy way I'm saying he's kind of a dick.

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## **Jostalady says**

I thoroughly enjoyed these lectures! John is an engaging presenter with the right mix of interesting story, humor and range of voices and accents. I am very happy to hear his perspective on grammar and hope more people will go through this course before trolling the internet for perceived errors to target.

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## **Mark Jr. says**

Absolutely loved this. McWhorter is a brilliant lecturer (and at 1.75 speed, he sounds superhumanly brilliant =). As I began, however, I wasn't sure how much more McWhorter had to teach me given the other things I've read and enjoyed by him. I'm happy to say I stand humbled and enriched and, hopefully, a little closer to "educated." Language is endlessly fascinating.

Particularly helpful for me: McWhorter explores the cultural reasons behind the impossible-to-miss "informalization" of American English over the last century. There was a day when even casual speech, when quoted in a newspaper, had to be—it just had to be—"formalized." People are quoted in old newspapers as saying things that no one could possibly say in real life, only write. Senators up till not all that long ago wouldn't dream of delivering anything on the Senate floor but a flowery, formalized, oratory. Now hardly anyone speaks in a formal tone. Why? McWhorter points to the anti-authoritarian 1960s and to the self-assurance America gained as a nation in the mid-20th century (i.e., now that we're on top of the world we can relax). He doesn't point to texting.

In fact, he proposes a helpful new taxonomy through which to view texting. Think of a graph of four quadrants mapping speech and writing on the side and formal/informal on the top. In which we have formal speech ("fundamentalist oratory" is his repeated example), informal speech (all other speech, pretty much), formal writing (most of our writing now) and a new category: informal writing (e-mail and—especially—texting). Great. Texting fills in an empty gap. It's creative and interesting—and if you don't believe me, use one of McWhorter's common strategies and examine texting in other languages. It's clever in Japanese. It doesn't ruin writing in German. Nor in America.

Random: he also explained how Edward became "Ned." I am forever in his debt. You gotta listen.

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## **Magen says**

**3.5 stars** This is similar enough to his other Great Courses audiobook, *The Story of Human Language* that it is not necessary to listen to both. I'd recommend *The Story of Human Language* over this one if you are only going to read one.

The biggest problem I had with this series is that the framing needed to be stronger. He covers a lot of topics,

but it isn't always clear what is a myth, lie, or half-truth. Otherwise, the content is fascinating and it definitely impacted the way I think about grammar. His audiobook, *The Story of Human Language*, changed the way I think about language. While there is overlap between the two books, I greatly enjoyed listening to each and found enough content in each to feel it was worth the time to listen to both.

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### **Laurel says**

John McWhorter has turned me into a linguistics nerd. I love his lectures. They are so full of interesting tidbits that I wouldn't know where to begin to try to summarize them. What really makes them so enjoyable, though, is the way in which he presents the information. He's very casual and humorous, while still being incredibly informative. If you have any interest in the evolution of human language, I'd recommend pretty much anything by him. His course *Language A to Z* is his shortest and probably a better introduction than this one, though.

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### **Emma says**

I found this fascinating and loved it. I listened to it regularly and could listen to it many more times. That probably is more of a reflection of my interest on the subject, than on how sad my life is... honest! ;) I would listen to John McWhorter read anything to be honest. I will buy any more of these courses when I see it has John McWhorter's name.

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### **Brian says**

I learning about all the misconceptions I have about what English is. I've long known that languages change, but I've never known the extent of the changes during the evolution of English. I thought I knew how English was supposed to be spoken, and I know people who think, like I thought, that English has a "proper" way to talk and an "improper" way. I knew that English changes, as all languages change, but I didn't know the extent "proper" English doesn't exist. There are words we think are improper, even though they used to be considered proper. There are words that we think are proper that used to be thought crude. I recommend this course to anyone who has an interest in the English language.

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### **Troy Blackford says**

This was funny, engaging, and above all, informative. Some of the stuff McWhorter covers in here is stuff you will think about every day, if you are concerned at all with language. I will definitely continue to read McWhorter's stuff. His voice is at once authoritative and approachable, and he's funny as well as learned.

People who are speakers of language (this will include most people reading this review, I'm guessing) will find a lot to interest them here.

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## **Tyler Wenzel says**

There were a few lectures I found to be a bit dry or difficult to get through, but overall 90% of them were great, and some were just fascinating. Highlights include the perspective granted by how other languages operate and some of the historical changes English has undergone.

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## **Ryk Stanton says**

I love this kind of thing - learning about how our language evolved (McWhorter would insist "morphed" was the right word) and the little intricacies that makes words so fascinating. I'm such a language geek.

This is only available as an audiobook, as part of the Great Courses series, and is 24 halfhour-long lectures given by James McWhorter. Listening to him talk, I am forced to reflect on my own teaching, though. I think he and I have some of our speaking foibles in common - specifically, he talks too fast, adds tangential comments he thinks are witty, and subvocalizes at times. Because of this, I was tempted to only give it four stars; however, I love the content so much and admire McWhorter's dedication to becoming the linguist he is that I went ahead with five.

If you are interested in words and language, as I am, you should check this out.

Oh, and added bonus: for 30 minutes a day (roughly the drive to and from work, right?) you can gain the knowledge of an entire college course in just two weeks! (I actually wish each lecture came with a study guide or quiz, available as a .pdf)

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## **Neil Pearson says**

This is a great listen. I think the first few lectures were my favourite because it's a perfect blend of history, science and linguistics and I discovered so much in such a short time. The rest of it is more concerned with our fixation on English somehow decaying and how wrong that assumption is. Interesting elements how grammar obsessives derive from one author who (incorrectly) believed English grammar had to be made more Latin and how "daughter" used to rhyme with "laughter". The discussion that text/email was the missing "informal writing" from English language was a different way of looking at the medium too. McWhorter is a natural lecturer/teacher with an ability to talk intelligently but never patronising and peppers with enough fun asides to keep the listener hooked.

That's two great lecture series by him - need to find some more material that doesn't overlap.

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## **Christine says**

I love listening to John McWhorter's lectures. The time passes quickly, I almost don't feel as if I am listening to a lecture. I feel as if I'm sitting down to lunch with an old friend and we are having an intelligent discussion on how English evolved and our language usage today. I don't feel as if I am in 3rd grade being "lectured to". He doesn't present information in a dry manner. I listen to a lot of teaching company lectures. Some professors present the information in a dry, straightforward manner where I would find it more interesting to



let's say stick an ice pick in my eye than continue listening. John McWhorter makes it interesting by using examples from his personal life to illustrate certain concepts. And he has such a joyful attitude, showing the listener how fun the English language is. He makes funny quips, does lots of impersonations of various people including Ed Coch, Marie Dressler and even himself. It really enriches the listening experience. Perhaps this is more a review of his teaching style than the course because so much of what engages the reader is the presentation style.

The first part of the course is the history of the English language. The second and most interesting part is about controversies on how English is used. I did not realize that grammar has so much more depth than just words put in a certain order. "Grammar is a wild, wet, wonderful realm of things more than just rules that people break". I didn't realize that the word " got" conveys a meaning all on its own. The got passive such as in I got hit means that something bad has happened to you or the unexpected happened to you. Anyway, that's just one example. As you can tell, I love his lectures and you should definitely listen.

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### **Tom Rowe says**

I always love listening to John McWhorter lay down the real rules of language. Lots of fun!

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### **Brenda says**

Good lessons on how much English has changed and still changing. Professor McWhorter is always entertaining; I actually laughed out loud a couple of times.

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