



# Spreading the Word: Language and Dialect in America

*John McWhorter*

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The idea that there is one "best" English is so intuitively plausible and so relentlessly inculcated in us that it is only natural to attempt to uphold this "Standard" among our students. Our error is in thinking that anything that deviates from this Standard is wrong. In *Spreading the Word*, linguist John McWhorter proves that these nonstandard dialects are not bastardizations of Standard English, but alternate variations upon the basic plan of English, of which the Standard is but one.

With a general focus on classroom applications, McWhorter makes accessible to teachers, teacher educators, and administrators basic language principles that are commonly accepted by linguists, but rarely disseminated to a general audience. Using data from several different languages, McWhorter shows that the speech differences we hear in America are qualitatively equivalent to those heard in other parts of the world where the same differences are not considered "bad language." He links his thesis not only to "prescriptive grammar," but to more immediate issues facing classroom teachers, such as Black English and code switching between Spanish and English. A complete chapter is dedicated to showing how mixture between languages is a worldwide and natural phenomenon, rather than a language-ravaging "accident."

*Spreading the Word* closes with a brief overview of eight of the most spoken languages in this country that are least like English. In doing so, McWhorter helps us come to view the language palette that exists in our classrooms as an asset not a problem. Most of all, he reinforces our best instincts about accepting and celebrating our students' language, while giving us solid grounds for doing so.

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