

Right Now

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TRIGGER-HAPPY IDIOMS

Language Wars

LEST YOU TAKE these English words for granted, consider this: when the United States was founded, only 40 percent of the people living within its boundaries spoke English as their first language. Widener Library's shelves hold testaments to our multilingual past: 125,000 imprints, from newspapers to novels, in languages other than English, all written

by American residents throughout U.S. history.

Today, about 87 percent of U.S. residents speak English as their first language. What happened since 1776 is a matter of history—of contest, conflict, even persecution. In the antebellum South, for example, slaveowners and traders sometimes cut out the tongues of slaves unable or unwilling to speak Eng-

lish. When General Benjamin Butler was commanding the Union troops occupying New Orleans in 1862, he had some Francophones executed—specifically, some scholars believe, to discourage the use of French. In subsequent decades, Blackfoot Indians sent to boarding schools were forbidden to speak their native language, and were beaten if they did so. During World War I, certain state and local governments proscribed speaking German in public, hoping to dampen old allegiances among the nation's six million German immigrants. And throughout U.S. history, other less dramatic factors have con-



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tributed to English's emergence as our dominant tongue.

Far from seeing English as the spoils of conflict, however, many Anglophone Americans may be unaware they speak a particular language at all. English is like the air they breathe: natural, given, right. "The social fiction is that English isn't there," says Marc Shell, Babbitt professor of comparative literature and professor of English, who recently published an article, "Language Wars," in the *New Centennial Review*. "We never think about it. We just completely take it for granted." Shell's collection of essays, *American Babel*, will be issued by Harvard University Press later this year; he is also working on another book on language conflict. Language is rarely a given, Shell says—a fact of which many groups are painfully aware. Language, he asserts, is a key battleground for national and cultural conflict.

Most observers tend to explain political conflicts around the world as the result of racial, ethnic, religious, or territorial disputes; we rarely see language as a direct and fundamental cause. "What I'm trying to do is reintroduce the category of language into our thinking about political conflict," says Shell, himself an immigrant from bilingual Quebec. Doing so puts many clashes in a new light. Take the war in the Balkans, for example. In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic ordered Albanians to speak Serbian. They refused. Shell believes it's useful to see their refusal as a

specific cause of conflict—more useful than understanding the war only in ethnic and religious terms.

The role of language in political conflict is important, Shell says, simply because tensions over language are increasing. With 6,700 languages in the world, by some scholars' count, and only 225 "nation-states"—and with the nation-state and its ideal of a unifying single language in decline—complex webs of resistance, dominance, and cooperation among language groups grow. Paradoxically, the webs can be so complex, Shell says, that we lose sight of conflicts' linguistic roots.

There's another fundamental reason to look to language as the source of tension: it is more tangible than race or religion. Scholars increasingly understand race to be a fiction: belonging to one or another group is more a social and historical matter than a biological one. It can be difficult to tell by looking at a person to which race or ethnicity she considers herself to belong: a Serb can look like an Albanian. Similarly, "You can pretend a Jewish person is Christian," Shell says, "but if he speaks a different language, you can't pretend he speaks yours."

As one of the most important elements of a culture's identity, language is also incendiary. A group's language can feel essential to its very existence. It's no surprise that often

the more vulnerable a group feels, the greater its devotion to its language. "There are different qualities of allegiance," Shell says. Francophones tend to have a more explicit allegiance to their language than Anglophones do. "Most Americans don't have a close tie to their language of which they are aware. Most don't believe, for example, that God spoke English. But if we are Muslim, we may believe that God spoke Arabic, or if we are Jewish, Hebrew."

In the United States, conflicts over language persist, particularly in places with large immigrant populations. Having passed an initiative in 1998 that prohibits teaching schoolchildren in any language but English, Californians may be more cognizant of the possibility of "language wars" than other Americans. But Shell can imagine future scenarios with national scope. "If or when we have to negotiate a treaty with Canada or Mexico; if Puerto Rico joins us as a state; if we form a North American union like the one in Europe," he muses, such events could pose particular challenges to English. "If only there weren't diversity in the world," he says wryly, "everything would be so much easier."

~NELL LAKE

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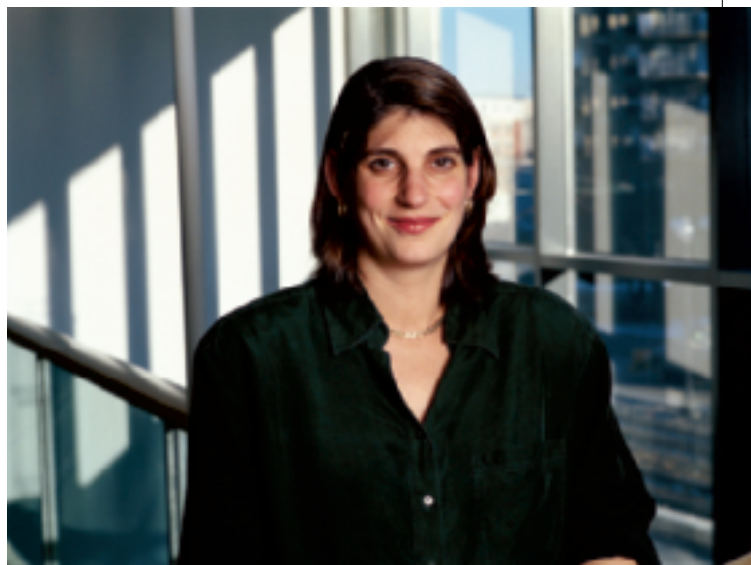
HEARTS AND MINDS

Muscle of Optimism

MOST PEOPLE think of the human heart as a fist-sized, valve-studded chunk of muscle, a pump bright red as Superman's cape and nearly as strong as the man of steel himself. After all, it generally keeps squeezing for more than 70 years. But Americans are realizing that their hearts may be the weakest link—that part of their bodies most likely to fail.

Heart disease kills more Americans an-

nually than any other ailment. Medical researchers currently strain to reverse the trend. But recently some new hope has appeared, from the annals of folk wisdom. According to Laura D. Kubzansky, M.P.H. '97, assistant profes-



Laura Kubzansky has found a link between heart disease and "explanatory style."

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further, Kubzansky found that the optimists were generally better educated and tended to consume less alcohol than the pessimists.

To define optimism and pessimism, Kubzansky used the concept of “explanatory style,” formulated by noted University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman, as identified by the MMPI. Optimists explain negative events in their lives as due to transient, external factors that are specific to the immediate circumstances. In contrast, pessimists tend to explain such setbacks as caused by stable

factors with an internal locus (i.e., their “own fault”) and a global aspect that applies across a wide range of situations, generating an ongoing tide of bad luck. In the case of positive events, of course, the explanatory styles are reversed.

The strength of the mental muscle of optimism amazed Kubzansky. “I thought there would be an effect, but I thought it would be much smaller and harder to see,” she says. “[This] cuts your risk in half.” While the mechanism of optimism’s buoyant effect is unclear, Kubzansky’s research may help health models evolve.

Negative emotions, she explains, currently carry more medical weight—for example, in the preponderance of research on how depression affects physical health. Kubzansky wants to explore the role of positive emotions. “The picture’s not all bad,” she says. “We spend a lot of time thinking about stress and depression. But the idea that it’s not just the absence of the negative, but the presence of the positive, is important.” ~NEIL SHEA

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THE MERCHANTS OF VENICE

Malls on the Median

ON A SUNNY Saturday afternoon in Los Angeles, a woman buys a funky '50s-era dress. A recent immigrant from El Salvador sells a dozen blue-corn tamales. And a stylish couple pay cash for a vintage Eames chair. It may sound like another day at the mall, but there is not a credit card or cash register in sight. These transactions occur on front lawns, between cars stopped at traffic lights, and in the vast

vacant lots of this sprawling city.

By transforming median strips, sidewalks, and front lawns into commercial spaces and attracting clientele of varying classes and ethnicities, street vending and yard sales help redefine the social and economic structures of Los Angeles. Professor of urban design and planning theory Margaret Crawford argues that such informal activities expose community spirit and optimism long written off by

urban critics and historians. “These activities identify neighborhoods and communities. They bring disparate groups together,” says Crawford, who teaches at the Graduate School of Design. “They reveal the city to people.” She examines such issues in “Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life,” an essay included in *Everyday Urbanism*, a book on Los Angeles that she coedited. Her analysis draws on years of ethnographic observation as well as interviews she conducted with street vendors throughout the city.

Crawford’s praise stands in stark con-

Sidewalk sale: clothing hung out not to dry but to sell



A shopping cart of oranges offered for sale on a median strip in Los Angeles

trast to the standard architectural criticism of Los Angeles, which disparages the city as a parade of theme-park-style shopping malls and glitzy retail districts. Most critics contend that these commercial interests have devoured public space, and that the city suffers from a resulting dearth of town squares or parks—the traditional areas that encourage community interaction and discourse.

Taking a contrary line, she enthusiastically points out oases of public interaction—in the form of street merchants and yard sales—emerging from unexpected, and heretofore undesirable, areas. She heralds a counter-movement of citizens who are turning public and private spaces into unofficial shops. “Within the totally desolate landscape, there are hives of activity,” she says. “They work in the nooks and crannies of the economy.”

In a way that transcends traditional images, Crawford has redefined public space to include “everyday space”: sidewalks, empty lots, front lawns. But when these bits of common turf are converted into ad-hoc retail venues, Crawford argues, they transform mundane and undesirable space into vibrant places.

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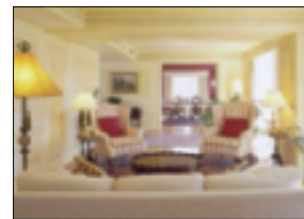
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Yard sales in Los Angeles take place throughout all social strata.

In certain neighborhoods, yard sales are daily social events. In Watts, for example, a father-son team sells mattresses of all sizes, piled in lopsided columns, from their paved-over front “lawn.” In East Los Angeles, Latina women who hawk clothing from their yards “create a strong female community, in addition to augmenting income,” Crawford says. And Latino men set up informal car-repair shops where neighbors inevitably congregate.

Garage sales spill into West Holly-



wood and other posh districts. In fact, yard sales have become so popular in Beverly Hills that the city now permits households only two per year.

According to Crawford, street-level entrepreneurs humanize the harsh urban environment. Sidewalk vendors, for example, use the chain-link fences surrounding empty lots to display colorful clothes, rugs, and flags. “The chain-link fence becomes a mural of humanity, and the vacant lot becomes a soft landscape,” she says. “The transformative possibilities are extremely positive.”

Some people complain that unlicensed urban commerce undermines zoning restrictions and property values. “[Traditionally], we call yard sales ‘blight,’” Crawford acknowledges. But she adds that as citizens use everyday space (often illegally) to sell wares from their houses, they blur the distinctions separating public, private, and commercial areas. “The

most private things are spread out for everyone to see,” she says. And even though public displays of domesticity—such as homeless people sleeping in parks—can disturb us, Crawford welcomes street vending and yard sales as catalysts for change. “These activities help us understand space and urban process. They allow us to rethink what is desirable,” she says. “And they suggest new possibilities and

useful designs.”

—CATHERINE DUPREE

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SPINAL CHORDS

Cortices in C Minor

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN on music: lighting up all over the place. Mark Jude Tramo, M.D., Ph.D. '98, an assistant professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, and others in his field are studying what happens in the brain as it listens to and processes music.

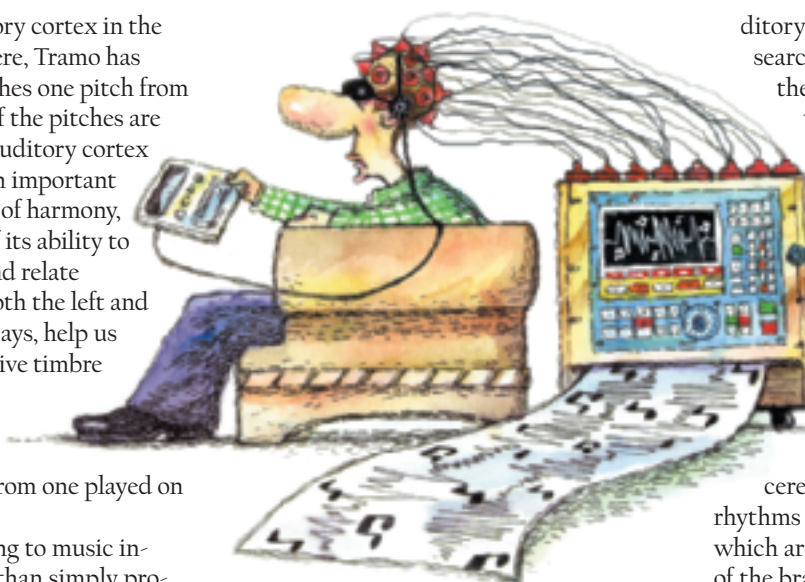
They have found that the music experience, unlike more localized activities such as speaking or silent reading, “maps” everywhere. As our brain makes sense of and enjoys a tune, it is involved in a complex process of interrelated tasks, using many of its regions.

Tramo's studies have used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) on epilepsy and stroke patients, portions of whose brains have been damaged. By determining which music-processing functions patients are unable to perform, Tramo has deduced which parts of the brain are involved in certain music-related activities.

First and primary in music perception are the auditory cortices. Lying near our ears, each about the size of a thumb, the auditory cortices process such elements of music as melody, harmony, and timbre. It

is primarily the auditory cortex in the brain's right hemisphere, Tramo has found, that distinguishes one pitch from another, particularly if the pitches are very close. The right auditory cortex also appears to play an important role in the perception of harmony, most likely because of its ability to distinguish pitches and relate them to each other. Both the left and the right cortices, he says, help us recognize the distinctive timbre of musical instruments—in distinguishing a middle C played on a trumpet from one played on an electric guitar.

But because listening to music involves, happily, more than simply processing sound and sound patterns, it engages much more of our brains than the auditory cortices. ("Imagine how much of the brain lights up when we dance!" wrote Tramo in a 2001 article for *Science*.)



If a swing band spurs us across the floor or we simply tap out its rhythm with our fingers, the motor areas in the frontal cortex and cerebellum, as well as the au-

ditary cortex, become active. But researchers in Japan have found that the motor areas are also active when we are listening and merely *thinking* about tapping our fingers. Different types of rhythms trigger different areas of the brain. If the rhythm is metrical (i.e., it can be expressed by an integer ratio such as 1:2), as is the case with most Western music, we use the left frontal cortex, the left parietal cortex, and the right cerebellum. For nonmetrical rhythms (a ratio of 1:2.5, for example), which are more difficult to tap out, more of the brain is involved: both the left and right parietal cortices and the left and right cerebellum, activity in the frontal cortex shifting to the right hemisphere. In addition to motor activity, a piece of music is likely to evoke emotion and, if

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the piece is familiar, memories as well. These activities involve still other parts of our brains. The parts of the brain that process emotion are also involved if the music makes us feel joy, break out in a sweat, or get goosebumps. The medial temporal lobe is active in memory, so we use that when a piece triggers memories: of a lost love, say, or just the music exam we took junior year. Yet another area dampens our responses to music: Tramo

**Mental operations
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nition generalize to
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ory and abstraction.**

has found that the anterior, inferior portion of the frontal lobe helps to inhibit intense emotional and visceral responses to a familiar piece or song, helping to ensure that we behave in socially acceptable ways.

All of the structures in the brain that process music, Tramo and other researchers have found, also contribute to other forms of cognition. Could music, then, make us smarter? The question has interested educators and parents in recent years. While the famous "Mozart effect" (the claim that passive listening to Mozart boosted children's intelligence) has largely been discredited, there is preliminary evidence that certain kinds of music study can improve performance in other subjects, like math. Such findings make sense in light of the wide array of brain structures that music stimulates. "Many of the mental operations involved in music cognition generalize to other aspects of cognition, such as memory and abstraction," says Tramo, a guitarist himself. "Active participation in music is a good way to exercise the brain."

~NELL LAKE

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