



# Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?

*Edwin L. Battistella*

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Is today's language at an all-time low? Are pronunciations like *cawfee* and *chawklit* bad English? Is slang like *my bad* or *hook up* improper? Is it incorrect to mix English and Spanish, as in *Yo quiero Taco Bell*? Can you write *Who do you trust?* rather than *Whom do you trust?* Linguist Edwin Battistella takes a hard look at traditional notions of bad language, arguing that they are often based in sterile conventionality.

Examining grammar and style, cursing, slang, and political correctness, regional and ethnic dialects, and foreign accents and language mixing, Battistella discusses the strong feelings evoked by language variation, from objections to the pronunciation *NU-cu-lar* to complaints about bilingual education. He explains the natural desire for uniformity in writing and speaking and traces the association of mainstream norms to ideas about refinement, intelligence, education, character, national unity and political values. Battistella argues that none of these qualities is inherently connected to language.

It is tempting but wrong, Battistella argues, to think of slang, dialects and nonstandard grammar as simply breaking the rules of good English. Instead, we should view language as made up of alternative forms of orderliness adopted by speakers depending on their purpose. Thus we can study the structure and context of nonstandard language in order to illuminate and enrich traditional forms of language, and make policy decisions based on an informed engagement.

Re-examining longstanding and heated debates, *Bad Language* will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers engaged and interested in the debate over what constitutes proper language.



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