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## Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK PETERSON,  
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

This month we have a submission from one of the classes of active SLA member Claudia Strauss, associate professor at Pitzer College. They decided to tackle the sensitive question of what part English plays in being an American. The full results of their study can be found at [http://bernard.pitzer.edu/%7Ecstrauss/linganth/Presentations/Ling\\_powerpoint\\_presentation\\_files/v3\\_document.htm](http://bernard.pitzer.edu/%7Ecstrauss/linganth/Presentations/Ling_powerpoint_presentation_files/v3_document.htm).

### The English Language and American Identity: Views From Native and Non-Native Speakers

By Joy Bhosai and Nicole Clarke

"English is the business language of the new global order," says one native-English-speaking American. But another feels, "Anything that adds to diversity is good." While the US has no official language, English undoubtedly plays a key role in constructing American national identity, and English is indisputably dominant over all other languages in the country. However, disputes about the role of English are often found in the national news, debates over bilingual education, and official government publications. And on the local level, individuals encounter other languages everyday, from the hospital waiting room to the workplace. With all of this diversity, to what degree does the English language contribute to a sense of national identity?

At Pitzer College, part of the Claremont consortium in Southern California, our "Language, Culture and Society" class conducted a national survey of almost 100 people to address this question. This two-part survey—one for English-speaking-only residents and another for non-native English-speaking residents—was designed to identify ideals about English's relation to national identity. The survey included questions such as "Is speaking English an essential part of being an American?" and "Do you agree with the following statement: 'I believe that not speaking English is a personal problem, not a problem for the nation?'" Additionally, the survey examined the role of English in personal situations (eg, in the grocery store or at work). The results were compared with participant demographics.

We found that more non-native speakers felt that speaking English was an essential part of being American than native English speakers. Also, non-native speakers more often said that English should be the official language of the US. While less than 35% of English-only speakers reported that English was an essential component of national identity, 62% of non-native

English speakers felt that it was. At the same time, while non-natives felt learning English was essential to establishing Americanness, there was a negative correlation between the level of education of non-native speakers and the idea that English is an essential part of being American: the more educated non-native speakers were, the less they felt that English was an essential element of being American.

On the more personal level, native English speakers were less at ease hearing another language when participation level was high. For example 61.5% of respondents said they would be only somewhat comfortable hearing other languages in a hospital waiting room, and 91% said they would be uncomfortable if their doctor and nurse began speaking to each other in another language. Non-native English speakers responded that they would feel comfortable using their native tongue except in predominantly English-speaking social situations. For example, a significant majority felt hesitant to use their native language in front of coworkers. Non-native language speakers' experiences varied in situations where code switching was involved. Spanish speakers recounted more instances of verbal and non-verbal criticism by English speakers than any other language group. Asian-language speakers felt most hesitant to use their native language in front of English-only speakers. European language speakers described no discomfort in speaking their native tongues in code-switching situations.

So why do the vast majority of non-native English speakers feel that English constitutes American identity? We believe that it is because English is a very tangible part of being American, and learning English is a tool that non-native English speakers can use in order to gain social, cultural, and linguistic capital. Therefore non-native speakers may feel that English largely defines what it means to be an American. However, native English speakers already possess such capital. American identity for them, then, is less about language than it is for non-native speakers.

But that said, debates over language were nonetheless important for many native English speakers. For some, English is heavily connected to American identity. English-only advocates, for example, feel that efficient communication in one language is vital to the nation, and unites the various cultures that exist in the US. On the other hand, others feel that linguistic diversity should be preserved, being both a point of cultural pride and a reminder that America is a land of immigrants.

But one of the most interesting things for us was no respondent—either native speaker or not—ever questioned the notion of a static American identity. Perhaps it is this assumption—that being an American is not something fluid or dynamic, but something to be acquired or achieved—that makes language issues often so contested.

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## Society for Medical Anthropology

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### Medical Anthropology and Medical Humanities

By Cecil G Helman (Royal Free and U College Medical School, and Brunel U)

Recently I had the privilege of giving a Keynote lecture on *Anthropology and Medicine: A New Partnership* to the Oxford Forum for Medical Humanities, at Oxford University. The forum has recently been established to promote the interdisciplinary discussion of topics relating to medical humanities. Open to Oxford students and faculty from all departments, it is particularly popular among students of clinical medicine, but also of philosophy, anthropology, medical ethics, history, theology, law, and the basic sciences, who are interested in the interface between their specialty and medicine.

To me, the positive response to this lecture, and to similar ones recently, indicates a growing acceptance of medical anthropology within the medical world—not as an autonomous subject, but as part of the larger, and expanding project of "Medical Humanities" in this country. Only recently has medical anthropology been included as one of the basic "medical humanities" within British medical schools, and this inclusion is likely to increase its future acceptability. The reasons for this new acceptance are clear: they include the increasing diversity of the British population (a recent study showed London to be the most multi-lingual city on earth, with only two-thirds of its 850,000 schoolchildren having English as a home language, the rest speaking 307 different languages); the growing crisis (and cost) of the biomedical paradigm here, as expressed in the National Health Service; and the proliferation of "alternative" healing sub-cultures, many of them imported from the non-industrialized world.

Although anthropologists might query the supposed relationship between studying the medical humanities and becoming a *humane* practitioner, we should welcome medical anthropology's inclusion in this new movement. Like medical anthropology, it is critical of the current biomedical enterprise, but it also carries much less postcolonial "baggage" here than does anthropology. It is also free of the paradox of medical anthropology in the UK: of being a rather elitist intellectual discipline, but one that is still rather marginal in its ability to influence actual health policy and practice.

### Applied Medical Anthropology Taught at the Universidad de La Habana

By Linda Whiteford (U South Florida)

In February 2003, two medical anthropologists from the University of South Florida and a med-