



## Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?

By Edwin L. Battistella

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**Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?** By Edwin L. Battistella

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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## Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others? By Edwin L. Battistella Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

What constitutes "bad" language? Is it slang? Curse words? In this academic volume, Battistella, a professor of English, examines language's relationship to social conditions and constraints and argues for relativism in looking at language. He maintains that hard-nosed, traditional ideas about what is "good" and what is "bad" are open to debate, and that labeling English as either "good" or "bad" is simplistic and unnecessary.

Battistella suggests "how we might think more productively about language." After broadly introducing his topic, Battistella focuses specifically on writing, grammar and so-called "bad" words ("Usage is less a matter of permanent fixed traditions than it is a matter of flexible and contextual conventions"), and also includes chapters on American attitudes toward immigrant foreign language speakers and accent use. While much of the complex subject matter could intimidate readers unfamiliar with linguistics or etymology, those interested in learning how language evolves will find this book an informative read.

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### Review

"Battistella has indeed identified issues central both to our society at large and to the American educational system. He shows us that all too often, what citizens and teachers believe about language, grammar, and so-called proper English reflects folk-beliefs from deep in centuries past. These common myths about the nature of language carry vast ripple effects in how we treat people and educate our young. In user-friendly and lively terms, linguist Ed Battistella explores bad language--a topic both timely and crucial to our nation."--Rebecca S. Wheeler, Department of English, Christopher Newport University

"Important"--Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*

"The beauty of this book is that it responds to widely held beliefs about the nature of language--that there exist fairly monolithic language standards that people ought to aim for. ... The author of *Bad Language* astutely recognizes that these beliefs provide fertile ground for introducing fundamental perspectives and findings from linguistic research to students, scholars in other fields, and the general public."--Carolyn Adger, Center for Applied Linguistics

On *Chicago Tribune's* Top 10 books on language in 2005: "This book reminds us that language is the basis of the last acceptable prejudice: There is no snobbery as safe as looking down your nose at people for their grammar, vocabulary or accent. As Battistella shows, this kind of condescension often comes from misunderstandings and myths about the way language works."--Nathan Bierma, *Chicago Tribune*

### About the Author

Edwin Battistella is the Dean of Arts and Letters and Professor of English at Southern Oregon University.

## **Users Review**

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