NOAH WEBSTER'S THEORY OF LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM

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Abstract:

Noah Webster (1758-1843), through his dictionaries, grammars, linguistic theories and activities on behalf of reform, was instrumental in securing the prominent place that the teaching of language now occupies in American school curricula. His work caused the English of the United States to have the relative uniformity it presently has, and created the belief that popular speech and idioms were correct and should be the basis of language learning. His reforms in textbook format and his efforts in securing copyright legislation were likewise important. Perhaps his most significant legacy was the successful fostering, through language study, of a strong consciousness of nationality. (In English) (F.M.L.)

Resumo:

Noah Webster (1758-1843), através dos seus dicionários, gramáticas, teorias lingüísticas e atividades em prol da reforma, serviu como instrumento para estabelecer o lugar proeminente que o ensino de línguas ocupa hoje em dia nos currículos das escolas norte-americanas. Suas obras deram à língua inglesa dos Estados Unidos a relativa uniformidade que atualmente tem, e levaram a acreditar que a fala popular e idiomática eram corretas e deveriam servir como base da aprendizagem de línguas. Suas reformas nos formatos de livros escolares, e seus esforços para conseguir legislação para direitos autorais, foram também importantes. Talvez sua herança mais significante seja o encorajamento, através do estudo de língua, de uma forte consciência de nacionalidade. (Em inglês) (F.M.L.)

Some years ago, an American national weekly magazine featured a story on a new "war" declared by puristic and patriotic Frenchmen against *Franglais*, a pidgin French-English that has inundated *la belle langue* with neologisms from America.[1] A professor of comparative languages at the Sorbonne, René Etiemble, was quoted as affirming that "The French language is a treasure. To violate it is a crime. Persons were shot during

(1) *Time*, November 29, 1963, p. 80.

the war for treason. They should be punished for degrading the language". French zeal in launching an offensive in defense of their language is rooted in their feelings of national identity. Whereas French was once the world's diplomatic and cultural language, only sixty-five million people now speak it as a first language. English, however, is spoken as a first language by two hundred and fifty million people, and as a second language by hundreds of millions more; indeed, it is becoming the universal tongue of trade, diplomacy, science, and scholarship because of the dynamism of American technology and culture, and because English is a flexible, expressive, and relatively simple language.

Such French chauvinism about language is not surprising to those who recall the history of the French Academy in the seventeenth century. But France was in advance of other Western countries in its early attention to national characteristics and institutions. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century that civilization was generally considered to be determined by nationality, and the principle was put forward that man could be educated only in his own mother tongue, not in the languages of other civilizations and other times. Classical languages, and the literary creations of other peoples who had reached a high degree of civilization, came to be regarded as inferior to the local language and literature. This kind of nationalism implied the identification of the state or nation with the people, and it supported the principle of determining the extent of the nation according to ethnographic principles. From this period on, then, nationalization of education and national life went hand in hand with that of states and political loyalties.

In many instances, poets and scholars emphasized cultural nationalism first. They reformed the national language, elevated it to the rank of a literary language, and delved deep into the national past to find materials for the identification of a national character. Foremost among such reformers in the United States was Noah Webster, the lexicographer whose name is a virtual synonym for the word dictionary. Webster was born on 16 October, 1758, in West Hartford, Connecticut, the son of a rugged Yankee farmer. He entered Yale in 1774, and despite a junior year that was interrupted by participation in the Revolutionary War, he graduated in 1778 in the same class with Joel Barlow, the poet, and others who made it Yale's most distinguished up to the Civil War. Professors Timothy Dwight and John Trumbull had already begun to liberalize the Yale

curriculum, and to substitute English composition and English literature for a portion of works from antiquity. For several years after graduation, Webster variously taught school, served as a clerical worker, and was admitted to the Connecticut bar in 1781. Because he could not afford to open a practice at first, he returned to teaching school, this time moving to Goshen, New York, where he made the beginnings of his true career.

His Yankee philosophy, and the exposure to modern materials at Yale, made country-school teaching an unpleasant task for Webster, for he found contemporary schoolbooks deficient, frequently erroneous, and totally neglectful of the American scenes with which his students were most familiar. He observed that the American Revolutionary victory over Britain was only a military one, and that Americans still depended on England for their cultural affairs. The textbooks available to him, if not prepared and printed in England, at least were uniform in their English view of things, their attitudes, assumptions, and postures. His student's readers contained stories on the customs, history and geography of Britain. Outside the classroom, Webster noted that, in manners and dress, Americans, half a dozen years after the Revolution, still imitated the English; in religion, they relied upon England because there was still no American Anglican bishop; in science, boys received their educations in London or Edinburgh rather than at home; in literature, Shakespeare, Addison, and Milton were the revered gods; and in the theatre, plays, actors, and diction were all Thoughly Englisy.

Moreover, Webster discerned that the great number of immigrants pouring into America from all parts of Europe were creating a number of dialects, a factor which would undermine the "perfection" of American speech. Without schools and proper books, he concluded, the national language would be corrupted. If Americans wanted national solidarity (and Webster was convinced that it was highly desirable), it needed three essentials then lacking: (1) a national language, (2) an institution of schools, and (3) a national government. It was in this period of teaching and reflection in remote Goshen, New York, that Webster formed the nucleus of his work on the first speller, *The American Spelling Book, Part One of The Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1783), which ultimately sold more than 100,000,000 copies, and provided much of his income throughout his life.

Webster always stated that he looked to the schools for aid in bringing about the uniformity of language which he deemed essential to the healthy political life of the nation. The reader which was the third part of the *Grammatical Institute* had an apt paraphrased quotation from Mirabeau on its title page: "Begin with the infant in the cradle; let the first word he lisps be Washington". Webster desired to develop a simple system of elementary education which would regularize American speech and language, in which moral and religious truths would be propagated, and a love of country would be fostered. Since the process had to begin in the earliest stages of childhood, he objected to the dull routine of conventional rote methods of teaching. He deplored the study of time-wasting subjects which never would be of practical value, and he decried the favoring of ancient and modern foreign languages over English, except in the education of professional men. The education of Americans, Webster held, should be scientific, pragmatic, and have at its core the indoctrination of students in those things which are peculiarly American. And by no means should there be only an education for the elite: "When I speak of diffusion of knowledge, I do not mean merely a knowledge of spelling books and the New Testament. An acquaintance with ethics, and with the general principles of law, commerce, money and government, is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state."[2] These views came to be shared by many of Webster's contemporaries, although as theories they were not put into practice until the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the public school systems were developed.[3]

Before turning to Webster's vehicles of reform, the textbooks, it might be helpful to enumerate the various manifestations of the New England heritage wich distinctively influenced his nationalistic theories. At least three major factors in his experience were at play in his thought. One was the encouragement of work as an end in itself. Idleness was frowned upon in the Puritan ethic, and the Yankees developed into rugged, individualistic businessmen. This, in turn, introduced a democratic and humanitarian strain into the New Englanders' philosophy. As Yankee

(2) Harry Warfel, *Noah Webster, Schoolmaster to America*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936. Warfel quoting Webster, p. 180.

(3) Ervin C. Shoemaker, *Noah Webster, Pioneer of Learning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936, p. 304.

peddlers expanded their sales to the Southern states, they, like Noah Webster who gave a lecture tour there, saw the Negro slave as an object of profound pity, "because his animal docillity and ignorance had made him the dupe of lazy white men."[4] A second influence on Webster was that form of local government peculiar to New England, the town meeting. Connecticut had no constitution until 1818, and its balloting for elected officials was not secret before that time. A minority of certain families held the control of the state, and it gave the electorate a government of old, experienced, and sage counselors. Although hardly democratic, this condition gave Connecticut a stable government-one of the three essential elements for the perfect nation envisioned by Webster. Finally, the doctrines of Calvinism, as expressed through the Congregational churches of New England, had a direct bearing on Webster's thought. In Connecticut, the Congregationalists enjoyed the privileges of a state church, and much like their compatriots in Massachusetts, made their parish and town meetings indistinguishable. Their tenets included strict discipline and steady habits, decorum, and generally a "Sunday behavior." Webster summed up many of these feelings in a letter he wrote when he was thirty-eight years old.

> (Good republicans) are formed by a singular machinery
> in the body politic, which takes the child as soon
> as he can speak, checks his natural independence and passions,
> makes him subordinate to superior age, to the
> laws of the state, to town and parochial institutions-
> -initiates him in the business of government by making
> him an active party in local regulations, and in short
> moulding him into a peaceable citizen, an intelligent
> man, an independent, but rational freeman.[5]

In the famed *American Speller* of 1783, his first published work, Webster called for an American language.[6] He removed place names and

(4) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 18.

(5) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 21.

(6) Noah Webster, *A Grammatical Institute, of the English Language, Comprising, An Easy, Concise, and Systematic Method of Education, Designed For the Use of English Schools in America. In Three Parts. Part I. Containing A New and Accurate Standard of Pronunciation...*; Hartford: Printed by Hudson and Goodwin, for the Author, 1783.

abbreviations from the English speller he had used as a model, and replaced them with names suitable to America. He included a complete list of towns in Connecticut in his first edition, and placed alongside each town its population and distance from the state capital. When he found how greatly teachers favored this appeal to local pride, he repeated it for the different editions in the various states. Webster's first spelling book also provided each student with a chronology of important dates in American history-not an especially profound piece of documentation since the country was still so young.

The speller's main attention was to language reform: an attempt to unify spelling and pronunciation-and thus "to demolish these odious distinctions of provincial dialects which are objects of reciprocal ridicule in the United States." The plan involved spelling reforms like substituting an *or* ending for *our* (labor/labour), and the *er* ending for *re* (center/centre). He rid American spelling of many double consonants, and established the *s* over the *c* in words like *defense*. He also fixed characteristically American spellings like *notably, jail, wagon, plow, mould,* and *ax*, omitted the silent letters in many words, and substituted letters with a definite sound for those that were vague and indeterminate.

In 1786 Webster advocated a new alphabet method to teach children to spell and read, and he proposed a single system of notation to be universally adopted by schools. To each distinct vowel sound he gave a number, and this figure, placed above the proper letter in each word, directed the reader's pronunciation. The standard of pronunciation that he used was standard usage, or as he called it, "general custom." He further refined his idea of an alphabet reform into an entirely new phonetic alphabet, one that would make English as foreign a language to Englishmen as to Germans. He planned to have Benjamin Franklin (who enthusiastically supported his work), and George Washington (who modestly encouraged Webster's publishing endeavors) endorse the plan, after which he believed Congress might see fit to enact a law standardizing it for all printing in America. By this radical means, "Americans could create their own literature, unhampered by the competition of overseas authors. Shakespeare, Milton, Addison, and Pope would lose their strangle hold on the mind of the western world; the genius of the new empire, thus freed from effete, king-ridden thoughts, would burst forth with Minervan

(7) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 140.

eloquence."[7] It is in such exuberant effusions that Webster reveals the dynamic force which gave impetus to his many activities: "his patriotic fervor, his chauvinistic support of the spread-eagle doctrine."[8]

Although his new alphabet never caught on, Webster made an interesting defense of the advantages he expected from such a reformation in a letter of 1786. Its nationalistic justifications are quite explicit:

1. It will render the acquisition of the language easy for both natives and foreigners. All the trouble of learning to spell will be saved.
2. When no character has more sounds than one, every man, woman, and child who knows his alphabet can spell words, even by the sound without ever seeing them.
3. Pronunciation must necessarily be uniform.
4. The orthography of the language will be fixed.
5. The necessity of encouraging printing in this country and of manufacturing all our own books, is a political advantage, obvious and immense.
6. A national language is a national tie, and what country wants it more than America?[9]

Webster espoused an "alphabet" method to teach children to spell and read, one which was countered by the "word" method of Horace Mann and other progressive educators. But, helped by the popularity of the *American Speller*, Webster's technique gained the strongest hold until well into the present century.[10] Yet another interesting feature of the *Speller* was that Webster removed most of the religious material standard in earlier English spellers. For it he substituted *Poor Richard*-type precepts, brief exhortations to lead good lives, and proverbial phrases, counsels, and maxims. The famed blue-backed *Speller* "planted seeds of poetical wisdom" like:

(8) Shoemaker, p. 303.
(9) Letter to Timothy Pickering, 25 May 1786. In Harry R. Warfel, ed., *The Letters of Noah Webster*. New York: Library Publishers, 1953, p. 51.
(10) Shoemaker, p. 304.

When wine is in, wit is out.
A good cow may have a bad calf.
You must not buy a pig in a poke.
Let not your tongue cut your throat.
He that lies down with dogs must rise up with fleas.[11]

Webster's extreme reforms, such as the entirely new alphabet, were not introduced into the *Speller*, but those introduced generally were those that have been adopted. Some of his ideas were abandoned and other were modified. Many of them, however, were put into practice in his 1806 dictionary. The spelling reforms began to disappear in the 1807 and 1817 school dictionaries, and were removed in wholesale lots in the 1865 editions. After Webster's death, in 1834, "the majority of the few remaining queer spellings were regularized. In some cases both the conventional and reformed spellings were given in the dictionaries, the conventional occupying first place."[12]

Webster's spelling books and dictionaries never employed an accurate or adequate marking system for pronunciation. His best efforts along these lines were the warnings against improprieties of pronunciation in the *Dissertations on the English Language*.[16] There has been considerable debate on the question of whether or not the pronunciations that Webster advocated were representative of American speech. Recent studies offer the opinion that it was fairly representative, with a distinctive leaning toward New England speech.[17] At least one obvious effect of Webster's reforms is still with us in the mid-twentieth century: although he argued for a spelling that would follow pronunciation, the tendency in America now is for pronunciation to following spelling. Thus, with rare exception for minor regional dialectical changes, the spoken American language has become the relatively uniform entity that Webster called for. How this came about is in no small part due to the influence of the *Speller*, which was as ubiquitous as the Bible before it was supplanted. The first edition in 1783 of five thousand copies sold out in nine months, one and

(11) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 63.
(12) Shoemaker, p. 301.
(13) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 53.
(14) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 68.

one-half million copies were sold by 1801, twenty million copies by 1829, and seventy-five million copies by 1875 (about which time sales ran about one million copies annually), all for a grand total of about 100,000,000 bought to educate young America.[18] As Webster's biographer, Harry R. Warfel, states, "No other secular book has reached so many minds in America as Webster's Spelling Book, and none has played so shaping a part in our destiny."[19] The *Speller* became a cultural Declaration of Independence. "In a moment of magnificent egotism", Warfel says of Webster, he assumed the tone and role of "School-master to America, and attorney in defense of America's latent possibilities for self-sufficient nationality."[13] Obsessed with the importance of his reforms, and of the need of publicity to disseminate his ideas, Webster sent copies of his first speller to college libraries shortly after its publication, and asked them to preserve them as examples of America's literary independence. Harvard University today has its "fresh, unmutilated, calf-bound copy, a precious rarity housed in the Treasure Room."[14]

Imitations of the *American Speller* sprang up everywhere, and each copied Webster's nationalism. The word "American" became indispensable in the titles of textbooks in this country, and authours vied with each other in patriotic eloquence. To protect his copyright of the 1783 *Speller*, Webster traveled through the states, lobbying at the various legislatures for copyright laws. His success in this endeavor was noteworthy, and it is mostly due to his early battling for such laws that American authors today are protected by rigid and generous copyright laws.

The next of Webster's works in the series which he called *The Grammatical Institute*, was the *Grammar* (1784).[20] It never became very

(15) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 84.

(16) Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language: With Notes, Historical and Critical. To Which is Added, By Way of Appendix, An Essay on a Reformed Mode of Spelling, With Dr. Franklin's Arguments on that Subject.* Printed at Boston, for the Author, by Isaiah Thomas and Company, 1789.

(17) Shoemaker, p. 301. *Cf.* Karl Erik Lindblad, *Noah Webster's Pronunciation and Modern New England Speech: A Comparison*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954.

(18) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 71.

19) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 53.

(20) Noah Webster, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, Comprising, An Easy, Concise, and Systematic Method of Education, Designed For the Use of English Schools in America. In Three Parts. Part II. Containing, A Plain*

popular because it was too argumentative against older grammarians, experimented too much, and was too learned for children and their modestly-educated schoolmasters.[15] Like the speller before it, the grammar was based on usage, but not all its conclusions were correct, and even later, revised editions failed to catch on. His assumptions in the work of grammar reform were (1) a recognition of the fact that the English language is an anomalous language, difficult for children and foreigners to learn, and (2) a desire, as before, to be free from England in all things-free from literary as well as political dependence on the mother country. Webster protested against the archaic methods used in teaching grammar (even though his own show some fondness for the Latin methods of the past), and a good student of his works has evaluated his contribution as probably hastening the day "when teaching of grammar became more rational, when instruction gave cognizance to inductive methods, and actual practice in expression was employed."[21] If not widely influential, the *Grammar* at least reinforced Webster's own view that the best grammar is one which is formed on the spoken language, and not vice versa, a principle later enunciated in his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1828.[22]

In the following year Webster published a forty-eight page tract of considerable nationalistic significance, *Sketches of American Policy* (1785).[23] Not an outline of a detailed form of government, the work is rather a group of arguments designed to impress on the consciousness of readers the absolute necessity of a union of the states.

and Comprehensive Grammar... And an Essay Towards Investigating the Rules of English Verse. Hartford: Printed by Hudson and Goodwin, for the Author, 1784.

(21) Shoemaker, p. 305.

(22) Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language.* New Haven, 1828.

(23) Noah Webster, *Sketches of American Policy. Under the Following Heads: I. Theory of Government. II. Governments on the Eastern Continents. III. American States; or the Principles of the American Cosntitutions Contrasted with Those of European States. IV. Plan of Policy for Improving the Advantages and Perpetrating the Union of the American States.* Hartford: Printed by Hudson and Goodwin, 1785.

> The American states, so celebrated for their wisdom and valor in the late struggles for freedom and empire, will be the contempt of nations unless they can unite their force and carry into effect all the constitutional measures of Congress, whether those measures respect themselves or foreign nations.[24]

In recommending that a constituion be adopted to take the place of the Articles of Confederation, Webster gave utterance to a thought generally held by opinion-makers of his age, and his attendance at the important Constitutional Convention in 1787 is good evidence of the recognition given to his meaningful contribution to the federal cause. In the last pages of his *Sketches* Webster makes an impressive plea for a national spirit:

> We ought to generalize our ideas and our measures. We ought not to consider ourselves as inhabitants of a single state only; but as Americans; as the common subjects of a great empire. We cannot and ought not to divest ourselves of provincial attachments, but we should subordinate them to the general interest of the continent; ... as a citizen of the American empire, ... (an individual) has a national interest far superior to all others.[25]

In 1788 Webster founded a national periodical, *The American Magazine* (New York), which did not last beyond a year. Earlier in the year of publication he had proposed the magazine to Jeremy Belknap, and solicited his advice and help in starting it. The plan of the magazine, Webster asserted, would be "to comprehend every species of useful information in the United States, – in short, so as to make it a federal publication."[26] Its material would be collected from all of the states, and distributed "to every part of America." "Such a plan well executed", he concluded, "would remove prejudices and gradually cement our union."

(24) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 116.
(25) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 117.
(26) Warfel, *Letters*, p. 74-75. Webster letter to Jeremy Belknap, 9 February 1788.

The *Reader* completing the three-part *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* appeared in 1785, its purpose "to furnish common English schools with a variety of exercises for reading and speaking at small expense."[27] The paucity of such anthologies had previously forced schoolteachers to use the Bible for recitations. Webster opposed this practice because of the Bible's antique style, and because he believed that "familiarity breeds disgust, levity, and wickedness."[28] In a letter to John Canfield in 1783, Webster best explained his thoughts behind a reader of the type he produced:

> ... next to the sacred writings, those books
> which teach us the principles of science and
> lay the basis on which all our future improvements
> must be built, best deserve the patronage
> of the public. An attention to literature
> must be the principal bulwark against the
> encroachments of civil and ecclesiastical tyrants
> and American liberty can dies only with her *Maecenases.*[29]

Thus the *Reader* was a work comprising mainly American selections. Yet its first edition was evidently not a sufficiently nationalistic collection for Webster himself, for two years later, in 1787, he revised it, changing the title, and expanding the size from 186 pages to 372 pages.[30] His guiding principle in the choice of the selections was stated in the book's introduction:

(27) Noah Webster, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language; Comprising An Easy, Concise and Systematic Method of Education; Designed For the Use of Schools in America. In Three Parts. Part III. Containing the Necessary Rules of Reading and Speaking, and a Variety of Essays...* Hartford: Printed by Barlow and Babcock, for the Author, 1785.

(28) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 86. It is interesting to note that later editions of the *Reader* ommited this controversial point.

(29) Letter to John Canfield, 6 January 1783, in Warfel, *Letters*, p. 4. Maecena was a Roman patron of literature and art.

(30) The new title became: *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking. Calculated to Improve the Minds and Refine the Taste of Youth. And Also to Instruct Them in Geography, History, and Politics of the United States. To Which is Prefixed, Rules in Elocution, and Directions for Expressing the Principal Passions of the Mind.* Philadelphia: Young and M'Culloch...1787.

> In the choice of pieces, I have not been inattentive to the political interests of America. Several of those masterly addresses of Congress, written at the commencement of the late revolution, contain such noble, just and independent sentiments of liberty and patriotism, that I cannot help wishing to transfuse them into the breasts of the rising generation.

The revised edition included, among other selections, the following: the Orations of Warren and Hancock on the Boston Massacre; four Addresses of Congress; the Declaration of Independence; Washington's Farewell Orders to the Army and the Circular Letter; selections from the speeches of Governor William Livingston, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Governor Edward Rutledge, and Joel Barlow, two poems by Philip Freneau; and, for the first time in a schoolbook of the United States, a history of the discovery and settlement of North America, a history of the Revolutionary War, and a section on the geography of the thirteen states. No less uncharacteristic of the times, Webster wrote a chapter on the Adventures of General Putnam, and another on the History of Pocahontas. Among his few concessions to English literature in the *Reader* are two scenes from Addison's *Cato* , the drama so phenomenally ubiquitous throughout the colonies; these dialogues he used to illustrate the virtue of modesty.

Webster had begun his program of linguistic nationalism with "a vague emotional ecstasy, but in his years of study and travel he had found a valid philosophical basis upon which to establish it."[31] By this time, for example, he could articulate his thoughts of what the American character was like. His view appears to be an idealization of a type, albeit it is, like most myths, founded upon certain general truths. In describing the persons and character of the Americans, he wrote:

> The inhabitants of the northern states are generally tall, bony and muscular; and less corpulent

(31) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 180.

than their English ancestors. They are remarkable
for their industry, invention and perseverance.
They make the most diligent farmers and mechanics –
and the most active, bold and hardy seamen on earth.
They are distinguished for their habits of subordination
to parental and civil authority, which
render them peacable, obliging and hospitable; but
educated in perfect freedom, and with a strong sense
of personal independence, they spurn at every assumption
of superiority, and treat with contempt and
detestation, any man who is overbearing in his
manners. The vices of drunkenness, tipling,
gambling, trickiness in mutual dealings, profanity
and the like, are found among the more corrupt
members of the community. But the great body of
the people, who are freeholders, with estates in
fee which furnish them with means of subsistence,
maintain the character of good sense, discernment
and pure morals; living in the constant attendance
upon religious worship, and adorning their profession
of christians, by a correspondent practice.[32]

To encourage the sale of his books and extend the sphere of influence of his ideas, Webster went on the lecture circuit in the Southern states from May, 1785, to November, 1786. Before setting out, he expressed concern over the reception he would get; he feared his cause would be unpopular because of America's continued reliance on English institutions.

Two circumstances will operate against me. I am
not a *foreigner* I am a *New Englander*. A foreigner,
ushered in with titles and letters, with half my
ability, would have the whole city in his train.
But let my fate be what it will, I am convinced
I am right.[33]

(32) From "General Viewns of the Inhabitants of the United States", in Noah Webster, *Elements of Useful Knowledge*. New Haven: Sidney's Press, 1806. Vol. II, p. 206.

(33) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 135.

These lectures were gathered up into a collection and published in 1789 as *Dissertations on the English Language.*[34] The theme of the talks was that American "customs, habits and language, as well as government, should be national." He constantly referred to American English by calling it "Federal English." The fundamental mistake of Americans, Webster wrote, was their notion that the Revolution had been completed when the last shot was fired. To him it had just begun, for a new governmental foundation was not enough. In the non-political aspects of society (amusements, luxuries, vices, clothing, language, and manners), he complained, they were imitating Europe.

> It is a singular phenomenon (he wrote regarding
> the matter of dress), and to posterity it will
> appear incredible, that a nation of heroes, who
> have conquered armies and raised an empire,
> should not have the spirit to say, we will wear
> our clothes as we please.[35]

Having our own ideas of fashion would bring us a new feeling of independence, increase the production of local manufactures, and keep American money in the country.

Webster's call to arms in the *Dissertations* is a true measure of the new effectiveness in his style and thinking:

> *Now* is the time, and *this* the country, in which
> we may expect success, in attempting changes
> favorable to language, science and government...
> Let us then seize the present moment, and establish
> a *national* language, as well as a national government.
> Let us remember that there is a certain
> respect due to the opinions of other nations.
> As an independent people, our reputation abroad
> demands that, in all things, we should be *federal*;
> be *national*; for if we do not respect *ourselves*,

(34) See f.n. 16 supra.
(35) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p 154.

> we may be assured that *other nations* will not respect us. In short, let it be impressed upon the mind of every American, that to neglect the means of commanding respect abroad, is treason against the character and dignity of a brave independent people.[36]

After examining the language among the yeomanry of America, Webster declared that the people of America, especially the English descendants", speak the most *pure English* now known in the world".[37] There is hardly a foreign idiom in it, and though it retains a few obsolete words, these exceptions are nevertheless melodious and expressive. Most of all he praises the people's retention of "correct phrases" – as opposed to "the highly improper and absurd substitutes introduced by pretended refiners." Studies in the present century corroborate Webster's evaluation of the purity of American English. They find it a valid, scientific fact that a people, migrating from a homeland, insulated as America was by a wide ocean from contact with the evolving mother tongue, will preserve almost in purity the speech that was with them on their departure.[38] Webster understood this, and held that the future separation of the American and English tongues was necessary and unavoidable not only because the Atlantic Ocean would spare America from the gradual assimilation of the European languages, but also because the American language will be influenced by new local causes, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in the arts and sciences – and contact with the Indians. Though his last point never came to be, it is not difficult to see about present day America the obvious effects of the other causes he predicted.

It was in his *Dissertations* that he expressed better than anywhere else in the corpus of his work his profound desire to see a strong, solid, and prosperous America created through the means of an efficient, homogeneous, national language. To support his old arguments for altering orthography to create a unique "American Tongue", he reiterated the

(36) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 129.
(37) Webster, *Dissertations*, p. 288.
(38) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 128.

point that to simplify the spelling would facilitate learning of the language for students and foreigners. It would make pronunciation more uniform in the United States, and thereby eliminate class rank, "remove prejudice, and conciliate mutual affection and respect." Moreover, his plan would diminish the number of letters in the alphabet about one-sixteenth or one-eighteenth-thus saving a page in eighteen, a considerable matter in the publishing business. The capital advantage of this plan, be maintained, was to make a vast difference between English and American orthography, which would have sweeping political consequences. In the first place it would encourage the publishing and translating of books in the United States.

> Besides this, a *national language* is a band of *national union*. Every engine should be employed to render the people of this country *national*; to call their attachments home to their own country; and to inspire them with the pride of national character. However they may boast of Independence, and the freedom of their government, yet their *opinions* are not sufficiently independent; an astonishing respect for the arts and literature of their parent country, and a blind imitation of its manners, are still prevalent among the Americans. Thus an habitual respect for another country, deserved indeed and once laudable, turns their attention from their own interests, and prevents their respecting themselves.[39]

A particular barb in Webster's side was this matter of the American reliance on Great Britain, and especially the acceptance of its "authorities." To ignore our own authorities in favor of foreign ones, Webster reasoned, places a check against our own improvement. It puts an end to inquiry in our own country, and consequently leaves us with no spirit of

(39) Webster, *Dissertations*, pp. 397-98.

investigation.[40] Certain unusual spellings inherited from abroad especially pained him.

> North America is destined to be the seat of a people more numerous, probably, than any nation now existing with the same vernacular language, unless we except some Asiatic nations. It would be little honorable to the founders of a great empire to be hurried prematurely into errors and corruptions by the mere force of authority. Yet what but the mere authority of names could lead Americans into such barbarisms in speech as *shuperstition, constitshution, keind, gyuide, advertise, if he do*, and many others.[41]

Webster argued that new words should not be introduced into a language "without reason or contrary to its analogies", whereas "a living language must keep pace with improvements in knowledge and the multiplication of ideas..."[42] In this regard, his defense of the following new word is interesting.

> *Americanism* is well coined and is as legitimate and as necessary as *Anglicanism, Gallicism, or Hebraisms.* In my Dictionary I have, through oversight, ommitted its most usual significance. For *Americanize* I can cite no authority, but it seems to be as necessary as *Latinize* and *Anglicize.* Every nation must have its *ism* and its *ize* to express what is peculiar to it.[43]

There is no need for authorities on language, insisted Webster, nor is there room for their opinions or caprices. The authority of individuals can always be called in question, he maintained. But if the language standard is based

(40) Letter to Joel Barlow in 1807, in Warfel, *Letters*, p. 295.
(41) Letter to the Governors, etc., of 1798, in Warfel, *Letters*, p. 177.
(42) Letter to John Pickering, December, 1816, in Warfel, *Letters*, pp. 368-69.
(43) *Ibid*, pp. 350-51.

on universal, indisputed practice, there is unanimous consent, and standards will be like the law of the land."[44] It will be honorable to us as a nation", Webster wrote to all the trustees and officers of instruction at American colleges in 1798, "and more useful to our native tongue and to science, that we examin (sic) the grounds of all rules and changes before we adopt them, and reject all such as have not obvious propriety for their foundation or utility for their object."[45]

"Rapid changes of language", Webster theorized, "proceed from violent causes."[46] If the United States were to be conquered by a nation speaking a different language from that of this country, there is little doubt that rapid changes would occur. But "it is contrary to all rational calculation that such will ever happen." So, removed from the danger of corruption by conquest, our language can change only with the slow operation of the causes mentioned above. That Webster did not here anticipate the massive waves of European immigration later in the nineteenth century, and the considerable effect on the American language of these large number of alien peoples, is not to be held against him; rather it points up the fact that America can never be as isolated and impenetrable as she would like to think she is.

Webster's optimism sometimes encouraged daring flights of imagination which as a Yankee he had to bring back to earth rather quickly. For example, on 19 October, 1807, he wrote to Joel Barlow:

> It is time for us to begin to think for ourselves. Great Britain is probably in her wane, and I look forward to the time when her descendants will *reflect* some light back on the parent nation. But immense hosts of prejudices are to be subdued.[47]

(44) Webster, *Dissertations*, p. 29.
(45) Letter to Governors, etc., in Warfel, *Letters*, p. 177.
(46) Webster, *Dissertations*, p. 35.
(47) In Warfel, *Letters*, p. 293.

Especially interesting from the position of examining Webster's nationalism, are the reasons he gives in the *Dissertations* for speaking and writing our own tongue with "ease and correctness." In the first place there are the pleasures of reading and conversing which will be ours. Secondly and thirdly, we will have the advantage of accuracy in business, and we will meet the necessity of clearness and precision in communicating ideas."[48] The fourth is a political reason: "provincial accents are disagreeable to strangers, and pride and prejudice incline men to treat the practices of their neighbors with some degree of contempt."[49] The fifth reason is based on honor: "As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government."[50] Reason six provides us with the example of Europe – a continent "inhabited by nations, whose knowledge and intercourse are embarrassed by differences of language." Reason seven reminds us that the language of Great Britain can no longer be our standard when we consider that the state of the English language in Europe is "almost confined to an island and to a few million people." Furthermore, the English language is in direct contact with others in language changes; ours to a much less degree feels the assimilating causes.[51] And finally, the eighth reason: not to have uniformity of language will further widen the class gulf.[52]

At the conclusion of his lectures, Webster made a moving plea to his audiences. America was, he said, in a situation most favorable to great reformations since the minds of its men had been awakened. It was a time of great exertion, one calling forth the powers of invention.

> Attention is roused; the mind expanded, and
> the intellectual faculties invigorated. Here
> men are prepared to receive improvements which
> would be rejected by nations, whose habits have
> not been shaken by similar events... Delay...
> may be fatal; under a tranquil general government,

(48) Webster, *Dissertations*, p. 18.
(49) Webster, *Dissertations*, p. 20.
(50) *Ibid*, p. 20.
(51) *Ibid*, p. 21.
(52) *Ibid*, p. 24.

the minds of men may again sink into indolence, a national acquiescence in error will follow; and posterity be doomed to struggle with difficulties, which time and accident will perpetually multiply.[53]

At the heart of Webster's nationalistic program was the idea of constantly evolving institutions, many of which are echoes of the New England tradition in which he was bred. He was opposed to any form of "superiority of birth", or any artificial, aristocratic tradition of hereditary honors. He abhorred what he called "two instruments of despotism", viz., a state church and a standing army, and he favored popular control through a representative government in which the will of the majority was always to prevail. Constitutions, Webster believed, should change as conditions warrant, since "government originates and takes its form from the genius and habits of the people."[54] And, in turn, national unity was to be achieved through the social control of education in a system which (1) eradicates "dissocial passions" and prejudices, and (2) fosters "a growing intercourse", which would "harmonize the views of all citizens."[55]

Webster's *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), incorporated many of the tenets of his linguistic faith, and his greater dictionary, that of 1828, which had 70,000 entries, and between 30-40,000 definitions that had not appeared in any earlier dictionary, were both subjected to severe criticisms in their times. He was chastised for the "Americanisms" included in the work, for his unconventional preference for American usage and pronunciation over British, and for his inclusion of non-literary words, especially localisms, vulgarisms, and other *isms* he had listed.[56]

These few works, and some of lesser importance by Webster that were unavailable to the present writer, played a role in the development of a unified American culture and national spirit, the import of which cannot be overstated. None of Webster's works was fully original – each

(53) *Ibid*, pp. 405-6.
(54) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 117
(55) *Ibid*, p. 117
(56) Shoemaker, p. 301

was modeled on the book of an English or American author – but all of his non-original works showed freshness and invention; he didn't follow his models slavishly. He took independent Yankee ground, and "adopted material freely and added to it so as to meet the needs of the new-born republic."[57] He was inconsistent, and noticeably shifted positions at times, particularly in the grammars and language reforms. But it is to his credit that he was the first to admit guilt. ("I have in the course of my life, been often obligated to change my opinion.") And his changes were usually based on conviction rather than a fear of the opinions of the critics. The authorities on his life and work are agreed that his sincerity was beyond question, and that most of his shiftings were due to an honest effort to observe and record actual usage.

Webster died on 28 May 1843, at the age of eighty-five. In his long lifetime, he had written serious studies in many disciplines: politics, economics, medicine, physical science, and language. He had founded three New York publications, the *American Magazine* (1788), the *American Minerva* (1793), and the *Herald* (1793). His books, theories, and pronouncements produced a wide interest in the English language, and it was due to his activities on behalf of his proposed linguistic reforms, that he was instrumental in securing the prominent place that English was later to occupy in the curricula of American schools. His intense interest in language awakened others to its importance. Is there anyone who would now deny the truth of this statement he made in a letter to college officials of his time?:

> As language is the medium of all social intercourse
> and the principal instrument by which
> science, arts, and civilization are preserved
> and propagated from age to age, and from nation
> to nation, it is of great importance that its
> general principles should be well understood by
> those who superintend the education of youth.[58]

(57) Shoemaker, p. 303ff.
(58) Letters to the Governors, etc., in Warfel, *Letters*, p. 173.

Thus, awareness of the significance of language teaching has probably caused American speech to be as uniform as it is today, and American spelling to be in general more simple than English spelling. Likewise, the deliberate manner in which American's pronounce their words is said to be caused by the fact that they are spelling-conscious -- a product of Webster's work.[59] As important as his theorizing and pronouncements, Webster's most salient contributions to American education were his publication of textbooks, and his successful efforts for copyright laws. His financial remuneration from compiling work and authorship drew others into a field which before that time guaranteed no security. Because of his many activities, the intrinsic value of his texts and dictionaries, the aggressive business methods he employed to increase the sale of his texts, and his indomitable courage, energy, and perseverance, Webster aroused a great interest in the study of language, the fortunate implications of which have carried down to our own day.

Perhaps more importantly, and Harry R. Warfel believes that Webster was aware of it, his most significant gift was the successful fostering of a consciousness of nationality. Schoolchildren who used his books felt America was a unique land, one capable of going its own way and of achieving primacy. Webster made a distinctive contribution to America's feeling of democratic idealism in identifying the relation between popular education and popular sovereignty, in using logical democratic reasoning for his assumptions, and by arguing that popular speech and idioms were correct and should be the basis of textbook instruction.[60] His place in the panorama of the history of ideas in America is properly conspicuous.

(59) Shoemaker, p. 302.
(60) Warfel, *Schoolmaster*, p. 94.