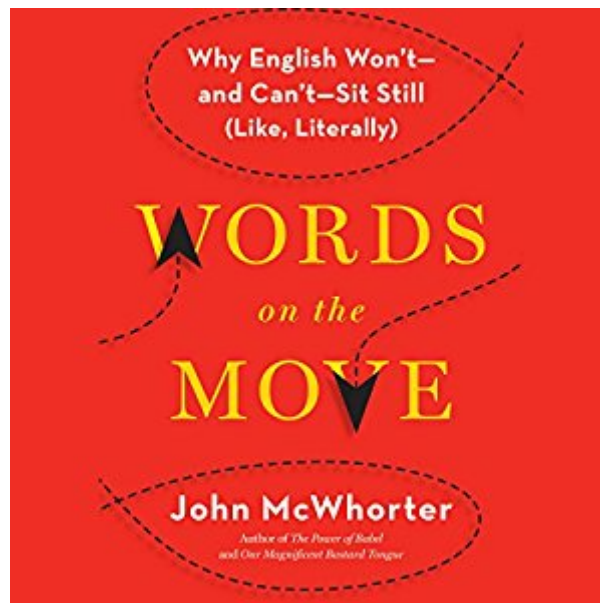




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# Words On The Move: Why English Won't - And Can't - Sit Still (Like, Literally)



## Synopsis

A best-selling linguist takes us on a lively tour of how the English language is evolving before our eyes - and why we should embrace this transformation and not fight it. Language is always changing - but we tend not to like it. We understand that new words must be created for new things, but the way English is spoken today rubs many of us the wrong way. Whether it's the use of literally to mean "figuratively" rather than "by the letter" or the way young people use LOL and like, or business jargon like what's the ask? - it often seems as if the language is deteriorating before our eyes. But the truth is different and a lot less scary, as John McWhorter shows in this delightful and eye-opening exploration of how English has always been in motion and continues to evolve today. Drawing examples from everyday life and employing a generous helping of humor, he shows that these shifts are a natural process common to all languages and that we should embrace and appreciate these changes, not condemn them. *Words on the Move* opens our eyes to the surprising backstories to the words and expressions we use every day. Did you know that silly once meant "blessed"? Or that ought was the original past tense of owe? Or that the suffix -ly in adverbs is actually a remnant of the word like? And have you ever wondered why some people from New Orleans sound as if they come from Brooklyn? McWhorter encourages us to marvel at the dynamism and resilience of the English language, and his book offers a lively journey through which we discover that words are ever on the move, and our lives are all the richer for it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A new book about language by John McWhorter is always a treat. He has a knack for explaining things about language in ways that are clear, crisp, witty and interesting. *Words on the Move* takes aim at the idea that there is a 'correct' form of English, where words like "like" aren't used as fillers, where "LOL" doesn't happen, and where there are "correct" meanings (or pronunciations) of words at any given time. McWhorter is no "anything goes" relativist, but this book is devoted to arguing that language is ALWAYS in flux - both changing over time and place - and to expect it to "sit still" is asking language to behave in ways it just can't. Each chapter is devoted to exploring different ways that language changes. First, we talk about those little known pragmatic functions of language where a lot of change happens; words like "like" or "you know," are words that are less meant to convey an idea and more to add pragmatic and expressive color to sentences. Language needs those expressive words (or...emojis?) and words like that are not extraneous. Words also change their pronunciations, and this often has to do with very gradual changes in how people hear (and thus speak) certain words. The word "like" used to be pronounced "leek" and one can understand how the "hard e" could gradually change into a "soft e" which becomes a "hard i." (And have you ever noticed how the nursery rhyme Jack and Jill rhymes "daughter" with "after"? There's a reason; the spelling didn't change but the pronunciation did.) Words also change by combining and sometimes, after combining, dropping one of the syllables entirely. Again, the word "like" (pronounced "leek") used to be attached to adjectives like "slow" ("slow-leek" meaning "slow like"), until at some point, people heard it as "slowly" And more recently, "cellular phone" becomes "cell phone" which gets shortened further by dropping the word "phone" and just saying "cell." There are many more examples like this, each quite fascinating. But the moral of McWhorter's language story is that words, meanings, grammars, and pronunciations always change. Language is a sort of living thing that we collectively create and recreate. And if you think that your version of language is the "correct" one and that "that's not what \_\_\_\_ is supposed to mean," there is an excellent chance that you are using words and language in a way that the same would have been said about you by purists of the 1850's. The only reason we think the way we speak is the correct way is because that's the way we learned it.

John McWhorter is spot on when he says that people don't like the fact that language changes. I'm one of them. We learn the meaning or pronunciation of a word, or rules of grammar, and we don't want to concede that what we know to be "wrong" has suddenly become right, or at least acceptable. I grind my teeth when I hear someone using impact as a verb, but I have come to accept that people are

going to do so whether I like it or not. As irksome as the truth might be (‘Novelty is unsettling,’ the book tells us), McWhorter is right: language is mutable. A living language will inevitably acquire new words, change the meaning of old ones, and turn the rules of grammar upside down. I remind myself of that every time I hear someone complain about alleged faults in word usage or grammar (quite a few of those complaints are aired in nasty comments to reviews). If you think (as I do) that people frequently and persistently misuse the word “literally,” that’s because you have not (as I have not) accepted that the meaning of “literally” has changed. McWhorter tells us that we just need to deal with it. Sadly enough, he’s right. As cranky as I can get about unsettling changes in the meaning of words, I fully support McWhorter’s mission, which is to make readers understand that the meaning of a word is determined by how people are using it right now, not by dictionary definitions. It takes dictionaries some time to catch up. Dictionaries like American Heritage, where panels of “experts” decide what a word means, strike me as trying to impose authoritarian order on the democratic, or possibly anarchic, evolution of language. I totally make fun of the way younger people use the word totally, but language belongs to the young as much as it is the domain of stuffy old farts like me. McWhorter explains that totally now implies fellowship or shared sentiment, so “what looks like slackjawed devolution actually contains a degree of sophistication.” He also explains that words of acknowledgement, including totally, are among the most likely to change. Sometimes changes in language are eminently sensible. Other than high school English teachers, who really cares if a writer splits an infinitive or ends a sentence with a preposition? Good writers have always known that some rules are made to be broken, at least when breaking them makes sentences easier to read. As McWhorter also recognizes, that doesn’t mean rules should not be taught (even rules that serve no real purpose), but the world doesn’t come to an end when a rule is so commonly broken that it dissolves into dust. A chapter on grammar struck me as less interesting than other chapters, simply because indefinite articles and other words of grammar are less interesting than nouns and verbs. A chapter on pronunciation is a little too wonkish, but parts of that chapter are illuminating. Most readers are familiar with the vowel shift, but McWhorter explains how vowels are still shifting (something we might perceive as regional accents). Does any word have a proper pronunciation? Since the word will probably be pronounced differently a couple of hundred years from now, fretting about what “proper” seems pointless to people who are not social strivers or

using pronunciation to signal their place in society. More entertaining is a chapter that explains how new words come into existence. Some are obvious (camera + recorder = camcorder), others not so much (flash + gush = flush). It's also possible to make new words by changing the accented syllable (e.g., the transition of "suspect" from verb to noun). The last chapter explains why younger people obsessively use the word like and why older people, anal tendencies notwithstanding, should resign themselves to the evolutionary nature of language. McWhorter writes in a lively, amusing, energetic style, eschewing jargon or explaining it when he needs to discuss the finer points of linguistics. He introduces his personality into every chapter, making even dull material engaging. His wide-ranging discussion touches on Black English, emoticons, and a variety of other subjects. He explains the evolution of scores of words, many drawn from Shakespeare, and then explains why Shakespeare's plays are so difficult for a modern reader to understand (at last, it's okay to admit that you're often baffled by Shakespeare's meaning). Any fan of words, including stuffy curmudgeons, should find *Words on the Move* to be educational and amusing.

I am giving it to my son for Christmas as he is a linguist. As a professor, this is really an intriguing book for all who love a play on words and how to work with words. I really liked it and think many people the formulation of words and phrases are monumental in a child's life and he/she is willing to be enticed by the movement of words will love this book.

I have SUCH high regard for McWhorter, and this was a bit of a disappointment. I really hate it when an author tells me what he'll cover in the next chapter or the nest few pages. Just do it. He's brilliant, but this was rather boring.

Everything I expected from someone of John McWhorter's caliber, making it easy to digest hard-nosed research in relatable English.

If you picture linguists as stuffy pedagogues intent on getting us all to talk more correctly, then witty iconoclast John McWhorter will be a refreshing revelation. He doesn't mind that "literally" now means something more like "figuratively" and he can go into great detail about the uses of all those seemingly meaningless "likes" many of us pepper our speech with. McWhorter

not only accepts that language is continually changing, he seems to delight in that fact and it's easy to be caught up in his fascinations and enthusiasms. The book is full of interesting descriptions of the evolving histories of some of our everyday English words, and McWhorter even speculates about word use and sound changes to come. Combining humor and a deep understanding of the needs of human communication, this book about how languages works is both entertaining and enlightening. I read an advanced review copy of this book provided to me at no cost and with no obligation by the publisher through LibraryThing. Review opinions are mine.

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