

Do You Speak American?

Three 1-Hour Episodes

Why is the English spoken by Maine lobstermen so different from that spoken by cowboys in Texas? Does Spanish pose a threat to English as the dominant language in America? And what on earth do *yins*, *wickety wack*, *ayuh*, *catty whompus*, and *stomping it clean* mean?

Robert MacNeil travels cross-country to answer these questions and examine the dynamic state of American English – a language rich with regional variety, strong global impact and cultural controversy.

Premiering Wednesday, January 5, from 8-11 p.m. on PBS (check local listings)

Do You Speak American? – featuring celebrated journalist and writer Robert MacNeil in his first public television documentary since 1995 – is a celebration of Americans as seen – and heard – through the way we speak.

Episode 1

MacNeil's journey begins in Maine and winds around to Detroit after stops in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Ohio, and South Carolina. Along the way, he meets lobstermen who fear their unmistakable New England accents may be dying out. In New York, the series samples the power and energy of words generated by Wall Street and the worlds of advertising and publishing. **John Simon**, theater critic for *New York* magazine, and **Jesse Sheidlower**, principal North American editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, express their opposing views on the future of the language, while local teens translate the jargon of Instant Messaging. Linguist **William Labov** reveals that, years ago, a British accent was the mark of prestige; now that prestige has less currency. On a train to Pittsburgh passengers are asked to identify the areas of the country where people have the "best" accent today. On the islands off of South Carolina's coast, African-influenced Gullah and Geetchee sound so different from Standard English that the film employs subtitles. In Detroit, a hip-hop crew exemplifies a new trend, and the story of three boys involved in an important 1979 court case underscores the danger of stereotypes based on non-"standard" speech patterns.

Episode 2

Do You Speak American? heads into the Deep South for a look at Appalachian and "hillbilly," shaped by the Scots-Irish English of early frontier settlers like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. Footage of the legendary North Carolina storyteller **Ray Hicks**, who died in 2003, captures a prime example of the dialect, and in Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, "country talkin'" seems to be alive and kicking. MacNeil gets a first-hand glimpse into the world of CB radio thanks to **Spanky the Trucker**, whose nephew, the country singer **Cody James** – an Oregon native – discusses how speaking "country" had become a national trend. During a performance in front of a packed house, the popular stand-up comedian **Jeff Foxworthy** imparts the meaning of words like *manaze* (pronounced "may-naze") and *witchudidga* (pronounced "witch-uh-did-yuh"). Then, it's on to the bayou for a night of traditional dancing at Fred's Lounge in Mamou, Louisiana, where owner Tante (Aunt) Sue speaks English smothered in Cajun overtones. At a barbecue on the Bar J Ranch outside of Beesville, Texas, cowboys recite their poetry and point out the Spanish roots of words like *bronco*, *stampede*, *corral*, and *rodeo*. Songwriter and novelist **Kinky Friedman**, a

“professional Texan,” talks about *cattywhompus* and *larrupin*, and in Austin, journalist and commentator **Molly Ivins** sits down with MacNeil to share her thoughts on true Texan English. Finally MacNeil investigates the controversy created by the town of El Cenizo, Texas, which has adopted Spanish as its “official” language.

Episode 3

Now on the left coast, the series spotlights Spanglish – a hybrid of Spanish and English – with a segment on **Patricia López**, a video jockey on the local Latino television program *Mex to the Max*. It also explores Chicano – the thriving, distinct street talk of the Los Angeles Latino community – taking a trip to an inner-city park packed with urban teens accompanied by linguist **Carmen Fought**. MacNeil visits classrooms in which young students learn to translate Ebonics and the informal versions of English spoken at home into the classroom English they will need to succeed in the workforce. MacNeil gets a lesson himself in surfer-, skateboarder- and skater-speak. He meets up with screenwriters **Amy Heckerling** and **Winnie Holtzman** for a discussion about the impact of Hollywood on our language; comedian **Steve Harvey**, who says he sounds silly speaking anything other than “African-American,” but well understands the need for African-American children to be “bilingual”; and **Cliff Nass**, a Stanford University professor who poses thoughtful questions about the potential societal impact of voice-activated computers.