

On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part One)

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The George Jap series of books compiled in recent years began as a literary attempt to relate some experiences of immigrants in the United States with the idea of questioning whether America is truly a multicultural society.¹ What had become rather clear in the run-up to drafting the bulk of *American Nightmare?* (2006) in the summer of 2005 is that while America can appear to be “multicultural,” when it comes down to doing business and living in mainstream society, it is not. There are zillions of laws, rules, and common practices which require foreigners who intend to stay in the United States to adapt to the American way of life, but there is no coercive mechanism to have Americans adapt to foreign ways. It is in the common practices, attitudes, and experiences within mainstream society – not in the idealistic or even normative words and concepts of scholars, journalists, politicians, and other (aspiring) elitists – that the essence of American culture is better understood, and it has been in this spirit that *American Nightmare?* and the other books listed in note 1 have been put together.

As noted in one of them, the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), it was a casual discussion with two “wannabe” academics – both “White” Americans by birth and older than myself – that served as a trigger to write *American Nightmare?* In the discussion, I had spoken about my recent (spring 2005) attempt to persuade the manager of a sports club, an American of East Asian (apparently Korean) descent, to be flexible with a Japanese national who had wanted to suspend her membership for a couple of months at relatively short notice; my appeals to his understanding or sympathy, especially since he or a close relative might have been in the position of having to go overseas without months of planning, and to take a “multicultural” approach to the problem were rebuffed with a “rules are rules” attitude. After hearing the story, one of the colleagues laughed and said that he loved the “academic” approach as an exercise in glorious futility, but the other remarked along the lines that “one word describes America when it comes to virtually anything

to do with immigrants and multiculturalism – hypocrisy.” The latter had taken an academic interest in Vietnam (where he had been sent on at least one military “tour”) and, through his marriage to and at least one child with a Vietnamese woman, had direct exposure to difficulties which “Asians” (or “Orientals”) can face in the United States. This was not the first time that analyses of a similar nature by Americans had been encountered – notably, during the autumn 2004 and winter 2005 terms at the University of Washington, a “Black” American colleague and I used to enjoy talking about what a sham “multiculturalism” was – but the use of the word “hypocrisy” somehow was inspirational. Given not only personal observations and experiences, but also those of immigrants from several countries (notably Japan, a few former Soviet republics, and India, but also others), it seemed that it could be cathartic to write down at least some of the stories, if not to do anything but to have fun while engaging in cultural study or research.²

As writing *American Nightmare?* progressed over the summer, it clicked that the United States had been going in an ideological direction that was shaped by a fascination with computer-based technology and – particularly in the domains of government and business, which affect basically everybody, but also within journalism and education – a tendency to do some rather creative things with the “English” language. Leaving aside the issue of technology, that of language had been causing considerable confusion and even stress, and is likely to continue to do so, not only for immigrants but also for Americans raised in the country. Often enough there seems to be deceptive intent behind how language gets used in the United States, and the subprime loans, some multilevel marketing schemes, and the “enhanced interrogation” that have been in the news in the last few years, for example, are not disconnected from linguistic abuse. Deciphering the language, at least for somebody not raised in the United States, requires a considerable knowledge of standard English plus a willingness to accept the deviousness and rudeness of American culture, one that throughout most of this decade had reverted to a “capitalism-red-in-tooth-and-claw” paradigm, and how that deviousness and rudeness affects the way people communicate verbally.

The importance of the American language – dubbed “Ameriglish” in the George Jap series – in coming to terms with American culture is such that several of the chapters in *American Nightmare?* address the issue directly or obliquely, and a glossary under the title “Excerpts from an Ameriglish Dictionary” is in the middle of the book with many definitions and explanations, at first glance, being for amusement

or bordering on total cynicism. That glossary, however, is based on real linguistic observations and experiences and serves as the pivot in the book to take readers from chapters with confusing, mystical, or almost ridiculous content to chapters that are rather straightforward or at least easier to understand, and thereby suggests that to start making sense of a new country, it is necessary to experience episodes of idealization, frustration, weirdness, and confusion until something snaps to make a clearer view of reality possible. As suggested by the title of the chapter immediately after “Excerpts,” “So Now You Know Why Education Is Important!,” acquiring practical skills in Ameriglish is a major step toward understanding, and more importantly for doing well in, contemporary America. Exactly how it is taught as a specific subject – English or “language arts” in the schools, English as a Second Language (ESL) in colleges, or some other designation – depends on whatever regulations, methodologies, materials, and so forth particular states, boards of education, colleges and universities, other institutions in the language market, and instructors have approved or decided upon, so there is no point in trying to generalize about how the likes of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation are taught or acquired in a formal setting. But one thing which might be overlooked, without reflection, is that practically all of American education is rooted in and oriented toward Ameriglish, and the language is of course picked up by children in social settings outside formal education, something which very well might not be true for many adults who have moved to America from other countries.

Cultures are generally defined by their languages because it is through language that thoughts are processed, values are conveyed, and things basically get done. To come to terms with American culture – which incidentally is not specifically defined in the George Jap books, although there are plenty of hints – it is particularly helpful to examine Ameriglish vocabulary. Unlike its grammar (not as rigid as language teachers and scholars might prefer it to be), spelling (close enough is often good enough), and pronunciation (generally cultivated according to social and geographic influences), Ameriglish vocabulary provides insights into what things – mainly objects, activities, and values – are important in American society and how they can get expressed. Regularly encountered Ameriglish does not have, for instance, a rich vocabulary about snow and camels, but it does have intriguing depth when it comes to such things as political ideals, law, business, types of person, and (notably when applied to other things) sports, that is about things which have a strong impact on life in the country. The items which are recorded in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*

(2007), an expansion of the chapter “Excerpts,” were essentially a follow-up to *American Nightmare?*, but those in the next two dictionaries – *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* and *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (both 2008) – as well as the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* that is in progress were collected with an examination of mainstream Ameriglish in mind and contain sample sentences or tracts to accompany the definitions and explanations. When collecting vocabulary items for the dictionaries, what has not been of interest are words and idioms that appear to be specific to subcultures, but rather, oral and written items that are clearly for national consumption or certainly appeared to be understandable across the various socioeconomic divides of American society.³

This spring (2009) provided an opportunity to go through the emerging *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, a work that comprises entries in the four previously mentioned dictionaries as well as others not in them, with an analytical comb to see what categories of vocabulary could be created and what those categories might reveal about American culture. Among the categories that arose are several which get to the heart of what constitutes American culture in general, and they deal with government (especially politics and law), patriotism and the military, society in general, business and economy, sports, sex and other things related to the body, drugs (legal and illegal), education, and types of person. Since the original objective of the George Jap enterprise was to question multiculturalism in America, the last major category – types of person – is addressed in this article (after all, no people = no culture), and the others will be discussed subsequently.

To begin, a person with American nationality or, as Americans tend to prefer, citizenship is quite commonly called an “American,” which does not reveal anything else about that person (e.g. sex, race, ethnicity, religion, ancestry). There are, of course, many “legal permanent residents” (LPRs) in the country who cannot legally claim to be Americans, but who nevertheless play an important part in society, so the umbrella term “United States person” has been coined to refer to anybody who is either such an immigrant or an American citizen, apparently with the intent of not (in a legal sense) discriminating between the two sets. That seems to be about as far as creating a common identity goes when dealing with types of person in the United States, for – as is well known – the ancestral heritage of the country encompasses all of the major regions in the world where people have settled, and Americans, as individuals or in groups, have long taken an interest in their ancestry. In many cases this involves listing mathematical ratios to say where the ancestors came from, but

in others it involves emphasizing a particular type of ancestry, leading to a host of categories that fall under the umbrella term “hyphenated Americans,” in which the word “American” is preceded by an adjective with or without a hyphen. Occasionally, these hyphenated terms appear to stress the non-American part and therefore come across as centrifugal to national unity, but the intent is usually harmless and often to advertise the concept of human diversity in the country. Still, two such terms are worth comment, not just to provide examples, but also to demonstrate how a qualifying word (perhaps naively) can invite controversy.

The first is “African-American” or “African American,” sometimes clipped to “Afro-American,” which has enjoyed currency in the last three decades to describe the people who had for at least a couple of centuries been known as “Negroes,” a term that seems to have fallen out of favor. Also commonly called “Blacks” (“Negroes” translated into an older English word), African-Americans do have ancestry in the continent of Africa, and most have ancestry in North America that can be traced to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century slave trade, in which captured Negroes were transported from Africa to the Americas, yet the expression is fraught with problems of meaning. Notable is the possibility for somebody to think that “African-American” means “Black” or “Negro” (and thereby apply the term to people who have nothing to do with the United States),⁴ as well as the fact that not every American with ancestry in Africa need be Black, while – a bit of philosophical deviance here – it can be added that according to current anthropological theory every human being, Americans included, can trace his or her ancestry to eastern Africa.

The second curious “hyphenated” term is “Native American,” which was coined in an attempt to correct the geographical error, traced to Christopher Columbus’ voyage to the Antilles in 1492, inherent in the word “Indian” when it refers to the people of Mongoloid stock whose ancestors had settled in the Americas well before Europeans had a clue about their existence. In what became the United States, the “Indians” in or adjacent to its territory were not “Americans” for well over a century after independence from Britain (declared in 1776), so there was probably no sense of urgency in coining a new expression. Even after these people in the United States were granted American citizenship in 1924, “Indian” or “American Indian” generally sufficed, but in the 1970s there seems to have been a movement to fit them into the something-American nomenclature. Because it was obvious that “Indian American” would not solve the semantic problem, “Native American” was somehow dreamed up and put into circulation, regardless of the fact that there are other people who were

born and (in most cases) raised in – that is, are “native” to – the United States, and whose ancestral lineage could include several generations in the country.

In regard to ancestry, a rather lengthy list of other hyphenated Americans could be made – some common, self-explanatory examples are Asian-American, Japanese-American, Italian-American, and Cuban-American – but there are also non-hyphenated terms that refer to ancestry or ethnological stock, some of which enjoy acceptability across social divides, but some of which might be acceptable in some cases and pejorative in others. Color-coded terms (notably White, Black, Yellow, and Red) – despite the fact that they have little to do with the real color(s) of the people described – have been relatively safe, although some people avoid using them so as not to appear “racist” or “discriminatory.” Similarly, referring to an American as if he or she were a national of the country of ancestral origin, or at least of a dominant country of ancestral origin, is likely to be safe, but it can border on the ridiculous when, for instance, “Japanese” and “Italians” have basically nothing to do with Japan and Italy in a deep, not superficial, cultural context;⁵ in this regard, a person who actually is a national (or citizen) of another country might have to have his or her nationality qualified (“a real Korean”) or expressed in a roundabout way (“a native of Ireland”). A set of vocabulary exists to refer to people who use, or at least some of whose ancestors used, the Spanish language, which by now is the secondmost used language in the United States; the most acceptable term seems to be “Hispanic,” but others include the relatively too broad “Latin,” or (via Spanish) “Latino” and “Latina,” as well as the often too narrow “Spanish” (most are mixed-bloods), while the word “Mexican” has to be used with caution, in some cases even when referring to people from Mexico.

There are of course controversial words which refer to racial, national, or ethnic stock. Many have been created by changing sounds and/or shortening longer words, and they are generally considered to be inappropriate for use in polite society and other social settings in which at least a modicum of courtesy is expected, this being due to the fact that they have been used in a derogatory sense, although quite often they have been and continue to be used with jocular or no bad intent by some people. Among them are “Nigger” (from Negro), “Chink” (from “Chinkwaw,” for Chinese and other people who, by appearance, might be Chinese),⁶ and “Spic” (from Hispanic), but – being exceptions to prove the rule or, as some Americans might complain, examples of “reverse-discrimination” – “Brit” (from British or the less known Briton) seems to be perfectly acceptable in any context, as does the broadly

used acronym “WASP” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) which clearly associates a type of person with a flying creature notorious for its ability to sting rather painfully (a wasp). Supplementing such words are others that are also generally considered to be impolite or derogatory to some degree, but which contain cultural and/or historical insights. Whites who are culturally rustic and not well-off have been called such things as “white trash,” “yahoos,” “cowboys,” “local yokels,” “hillbillies,” “honkies,” and (the seemingly all-purpose) “rednecks,” while (“real”) English people can be called “limeys” (see what happens when you find a cure for a disease, scurvy in this case), and Mexicans have been referred to as “wetbacks” (from crossing the Rio Grande), “migrants,” “migrant workers,” “undocumented aliens,” “illegal immigrants,” and “immigrants,” the last often being used to the point that it would be reasonable for a child growing up in America today to think that “immigrant” and “Mexican” are synonymous.⁷

Such vocabulary as that given in the last four paragraphs addresses racial, ethnic, and national identities, which form the core of “multicultural” and/or “diverse” America, but there are other terms that strengthen this image by revealing other differences among the people in the United States. Perhaps foremost among them, given the historical role of religion in forming and crystallizing cultures, are those which denote religious affiliation. Quite often, the impression given in regular discourse is that the word “religion” applies to a branch of Christianity (notably Catholic or Protestant), a denomination of Protestant Christianity (e.g. Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Amish), a newer type of Christianity (notably Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses), or “non-denominational” Christianity, which clearly has to do with the fact that it has been the (sub)divisions within Christianity that have historically defined most Americans in terms of religious identity. Still, Christianity itself has, rather properly, been classified as a religion, and it is not uncommon to hear many Americans use both “Christian” and a narrower term to define themselves in this regard. From Christianity also come such terms as “good Christian” (a morally sound person), “Good Samaritan” (either somebody who has helped a person in danger, or a member of a group by that name which helps the needy), “Creationist” (somebody who maintains that the story, at the very beginning of the “Old Testament” in the Bible, about how everything came into being over the course of six days is the literal truth), “Christian Fundamentalist” (generally, a Protestant who believes that the Bible is the absolute truth and who might very well be of the opinion that America is supposed to be a Christian country, run

according to a certain interpretation of the Bible and related teachings), and “God” (a metaphysical creature whose existence and powers are constantly debated, and to whom zillions of appeals are made). Still, and despite ongoing debates about what qualifies as a “religion,” religious identity has certainly been accorded to Jews and Muslims – the latter group of course including the “Islamic Fundamentalists” who have enjoyed notoriety in recent years, but are mostly living outside the United States – and it seems that Americans are quite content to acknowledge that there is such a thing as “Eastern religion” or even to be more specific and let Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism, for example, each be called a “religion.” Furthermore, a host of other philosophies and/or ways of life that somehow touch upon the mysteries of life and might have something like rituals or ceremonies can also be accorded such an honor.

Other terms pertain to what people are, a few examples in this and the next paragraph sufficing as illustrations which relate to the fundamental dichotomy of humanity and its spinoffs. Being male or female is for the vast majority of people in the United States a gift or curse of nature, or an “act of God,” and Americans continue to notice the differences between these two sets of people, as attested to in formal settings by the countless application and “Affirmative Action” forms which virtually demand that the applicant identify his or her “sex,” sometimes called “gender.” A promising neologism that appeared in a newspaper column about Hillary Rodham Clinton’s candidacy in 2008 – and evidence that sex or gender might not escape creative hyphenation – is “uterine-American” for a female, which also promises to open the door for other hyphenated expressions for both sexes. In common discourse there are many words which distinguish between male and female, some being generally acceptable (notably “man/woman,” “boy/girl,” “guy/gal,” and “sir/ma’am”) and others ranging in acceptability to the point that they can offend some people because of allusions to animals (“bastard/bitch”) or what can be taken as derogatory references to reproductive organs (e.g. “dick/cunt”).

Sexual activity being of great interest to at least many Americans, their language offers a diversity of terms which can be applied to people according to their behavior in this regard, most notably to those who engage in homosexual activities (“gay” and “lesbian” seem to enjoy acceptability across the board, but others such as “homo,” “queer,” and “fag” can be taken as insults, while expressions derived from certain types of sexual act are generally best avoided in polite society, and perhaps even in an article such as this). Whenever two or more people engage in sexual activity with

each other, they are generally referred to as “partners,” which means that other types of partners – say, in business or in dancing – have to be qualified. In the case of homosexuals who have a rather stable, “monogamous” “relationship” and claim to be running a household together, they are nowadays politely called “same-sex domestic partners,” while heterosexuals doing the same thing might be called such things as “house mates,” “roommates,” “boyfriend and girlfriend,” or even “husband and wife” depending on preference and/or legal status. Finally, in this regard, a “family” can be any group of people (plus, in some cases, at least one animal) who somehow claim to be “related,” via law or custom, and kinship within the immediate family has been increasingly qualified with the prefixes “step-” (parents to children and vice-versa) and “half-” (siblings to each other) because of the increasing tendency for teenagers and adults to breed with more than one partner.

That said, the vocabulary in the last seven paragraphs has touched on the main components of what Americans appear to consider the core of their “multicultural” society – race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex or gender, and sexual orientation – culminating with an observation about the family as the institution which traditionally, in the United States as well as elsewhere, has been the forum for procreation, raising children, and social stability. Judging from the fact that not only do these categories exist, but also that there is a kaleidoscope of terms to refer to them in varying shades of acceptability, it is easy to assert that the United States is “multicultural,” yet there is a superficiality to it all. When compared or contrasted to two other large, “multicultural” societies within recent decades, the Soviet Union and India, it becomes clear that the United States has more in common with the former than the latter. The Soviet Union was and India continues to be multi-racial, multi-ethnic or multi-national, and two-sexual, but there are/were significant differences when it comes to language and religion, the Soviet Union having emphasized Russian and (virtually a religion) Leninism, while India is truly multilingual, has different religions that are lumped together as “Hinduism” or are spinoffs, and has one of the world’s largest Islamic populations. Throughout most of its history, one of the tasks of the Soviet Union was to create the “New Soviet Man” (or Person), very much akin to forging an “American” or, collectively, the “American People” through the “Melting Pot.” The so-called “political correctness” movement which has been thrusting “multiculturalism” and respect for “diversity” onto the American population in the last two decades is, arguably, a close philosophical relative of Soviet communism, although with class warfare downwards rather than upwards.

Education (mind-control) and law (force) have been instrumental in its ascendancy, with both predicated in vocabulary that often tends to hide or disguise or blur the diversity which is supposed to be admired or respected.

The Melting-Pot theory, based on an analogy to how useable iron was made during the American Age of Industrialization (roughly the fifty years from the end of the “Civil War” to World War I), essentially asserted that people with different backgrounds could, through the process of acculturation, become Americans with similar values, behavioral patterns, and the like. To an observable extent, this did happen among a substantial proportion of the “White” immigrants who stayed in America, and was more clear in regard to their descendants who generally had no choice but to be American, yet interacting with this mainstream society were “minorities” who did not quite fit in even though they too were Americans. Those who have in recent memory been coined the “historic minority,” the Negroes, were at the forefront of the Civil Rights Era that seems to have fostered different attitudes toward unlike peoples (essentially those of “color”) in the generation which came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. A byproduct of this were the two food-based models – the “Salad Bowl” and, unqualified here since there are at least two variants, a “Stew” – to describe American society with an aim of shedding respect on its various racial, ethnic, and national groups and celebrating “diversity,” an honorable enterprise if there ever was one. Yet, since “political correctness” and “multiculturalism” set in throughout the 1990s, and younger people have grown up under their auspices, the resulting vocabulary has created confusion, while many Americans do not seem capable of realizing that toleration of differences in physical stock and appearance does not equate with toleration of differences in cultural activity.

Taking the confusion rooted in terminology first, rather obvious differences in appearance between people are often supposed to be ignored (“Do you see that guy in the sweater over there in the corner?” “The Mexican guy?” “Um, the guy in the sweater ...”) or not stated directly (“People whose skin color is the same as mine ...”), which would seem to work in the opposite direction of celebrating diversity, that is by trying to pretend that people are not different. Yet, on the other hand, they can be distinguished by quasi-euphemistic, posh-sounding, but potentially misleading expressions (e.g. African-American, Native American, Oriental) which suggest that people can be put into rather broad, but not exactly intellectually rigid, categories. Words which address specific ancestry, furthermore, can add to the confusion by giving the impression that an American is not an American and thereby

serve to deemphasize the nationality of non-Americans, as for instance when a third-generation U.S. citizen claims equal use of the word “Japanese” as somebody who is a “real” national or citizen of the independent state (country) of Japan. Of course, sometimes a person can even opt to belong to a group, usually a “minority,” on the grounds of an ancestor a couple of generations removed, even though judging from appearance, the link might very well have an ulterior motive, while there are occasions when a person of mixed ancestry has to choose one and only one category, in a sense thereby denying part of his or her lineage.⁸

Besides being applied to race, ethnicity, and national origin, the principle of creating confusion through euphemistic terminology often enough finds an outlet in regard to physical and mental difficulties – “disabilities” – by attaching “impaired” or “challenged” to another word, so that an expression like “visually impaired” can refer to a person with somewhat poor eyesight all the way to someone who is completely blind. Although the idea seems to have originally been to eliminate negative biases toward handicapped people, those for whom life is truly difficult to negotiate, the vague terminology has allowed for questionable classifications and usages, an example being the “test anxiety” syndrome which seems to afflict some undergraduate college students who, basically, are no more than a bit worried about (not) being able to demonstrate sufficient knowledge within a designated time frame and who try to use a clinical expression to try to fool some teachers. Conversely, though, there is usually a (somewhat) expensive catch for people with a true disability, being that “documentation” (and therefore medical diagnosis and possible treatment) is required for it to be recognized, which is just another way of assuming that – despite genes and, for example, differences in how dopamine-producing centers work – all people are the same unless an “officially” approved self-declaration is made. Then, and providing that at least one law exists to prohibit excluding the “impaired” or “challenged” person from whatever activity he or she wishes to join, appropriate accommodations can be made or (in a positive fashion) the disability can be pretended not to exist.

Other examples of confusing terminology related to bodily appearance could be given, but are not necessary for the main thrust of this essay, which is to be found in the second observation that concludes the paragraph two removed above. That many Americans, especially those who champion “political correctness,” do not seem to understand that tolerating differences in physical stock and appearance does not equate with tolerating differences in cultural activity is an important assertion

because it poses a hard-core challenge to “multiculturalism.” An immediate objection would be that the toleration does go beyond physical stock and appearance, and the evidence is to be found in the myriad of “ethnic” restaurants – even in small settlements – throughout the country,⁹ while the likes of social interactions between different people, types of clothing associated with foreign cultures, a variety of languages, and stores catering to certain “ethnicities” are rather easily observed in the more “diverse” or even “cosmopolitan” places. Whereas this objection has validity, it ignores such things as the superficiality, Americanization, and tangentialness of a lot of what does exist, these being remarked upon in the next three paragraphs.

“Superficiality” is used in the context of shallowness, of not reaching deep into the heart of mainstream American culture and the mannerisms of a vast majority of Americans who continue to exhibit cultural traits that predated the “political correctness” movement and even the Civil Rights Era. This culture is rooted deeply in the achievements of the “Melting Pot” – a way of life forged by Americanization, according to dominant English-speaking Whites influenced by a late-eighteenth-century model of political democracy and strains of predominantly Protestant Christianity, as the United States became an industrial power – and it is still there for anyone to see and experience, although some of its influential adherents do voice concern about its vulnerability under the strains of the multi-continental, multi-racial, multi-national, and multi-lingual nature of immigration in the last two decades. Whereas there might have been some erosion of the core values and expressions of them, the source of this erosion is from within the mainstream culture as it incorporates outside influences and (more importantly) technological changes, something that is more of a natural process than one brought on by hostile alien forces. What is often missed is the fact that the newest wave of immigrants is undergoing a similar process as previous waves, one which will be more clear in the generations of their children and grandchildren, and this is acculturation into the American way of life as it is shaped by political, legal, economic, and technological possibilities. When it comes to the souls of the people in the United States, this assimilation into American society or its mainstream culture by immigrants – the core of “diversity” today – is more profound, and far more likely, than (traditional, conservative, ordinary, or such like) Americans converting to “foreign” or even “un-American” ways.

Just as immigrants tend to, and their descendents generally do, acculturate so that they can fit reasonably comfortably into American society, so too are imported elements of foreign cultures subject to Americanization. This is particularly true of

those elements which become a part of “the market” or otherwise could affect the public interest, and which therefore have to be squared with American expectations and law. Taking ethnic cuisines as an example, since (after physical appearance) such restaurants generally come to mind as typifying “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” it is certainly possible to prepare and even market foods that are the same as, or very similar to, whatever is consumed in other countries, but there can be limitations because of unavailable supplies, the costs of imported materials, and/or an insufficient consumer base for “the real thing.” Such limitations, of course, require adapting to reality and can lead to the likes of catering to American expectations (e.g. “Mexican” food is supposed to be a test of spice-endurance, a “Chinese” meal must end with a fortune cookie) or confusions (“Japanese” and “Thai” restaurants often include what are really Chinese dishes in their menus), providing American utensils for eating (basically a fork and a spoon), offering standard American foods (e.g. steaks, burgers, french fries) as alternatives for customers who might be uncomfortable with “ethnic” cuisine, and having standard American beverages (notably carbonated soft drinks) on the menu. Two other examples of foreign activities that have been subjected to Americanization in recent years are the “sauna” and “yoga,” both popularized mainly through fitness clubs; the first has become a relatively low-temperature (around 80°C) sweat-room in which people wear clothes and even – while fully dressed in sports clothing, including sometimes with shoes on – warm up or soften their muscles before a physical workout, while the latter has come to mean stretching exercises (i.e. hathayoga) and relaxation, both of which seem to miss the point of these things in Finland (for bathing) and India (for spiritual purposes).

Still, as much as “multiculturalism” might be noticeable, it is also peripheral and even tangential to mainstream American society. Because the conventional education systems indoctrinate school-age children of immigrants – whether American citizens or (as with generation one-point-five – children who immigrated with their parents – for at least the first five years in the country) foreign nationals – into the American value system and teach them how they might flourish in mainstream American society, the people who are truly connected to foreign cultures are the first-generation adult immigrants, and even for many of them the bonds to the “old country” weaken over time. Cultural traits of the first-generation immigrants can become interpreted as idiosyncrasies by the subsequent generations, often because certain activities, values, and ways of behaving are not useful for surviving or doing well in American society. Also, whatever the first generation does in the United

States that is unconventional for mainstream American society is usually within the private domain and a continuation of behavior that was acquired while young. Although some things do get passed on to the subsequent generations (e.g. religious affiliation, some cuisine, some language), most of this is considered personal business beyond the reach of public life, and some activities that are perfectly acceptable in the country of origin can be illegal, or at least “against the rules,” in the United States. In this context, a lot of the foreign cultural traits – the components of “multiculturalism” – are not only on the fringe of American society, therefore “peripheral,” but also mainly fading links to other societies, hence like “tangents” (lines touching the periphery of whatever is observed, but leading somewhere else).

The fact that foreign cultural traits generally get watered down and even dropped within two or three generations, as the descendants of first-generation immigrants opt for American cultural common denominators, should raise questions about the depth of “multiculturalism” and leave a critical observer left to wonder if the term does not really mean, without worrying about a definition, “different physical stocks.” In contrast with the comment in the opening paragraph of this essay, for instance, that there is no coercive mechanism to make Americans adapt to foreign ways, it must be noted that there are laws and regulations which prohibit derogatory and otherwise discriminatory behavior on the grounds of race, ethnicity, and national origin, which often enough are based on physical appearance. Immigrants and other “minorities” who have done well in American society have generally done so by adopting typical, mainstream American values and behavioral patterns, as hinted at by such terms as “twinkie,” “oreo,” and “banana” which refer to people who are not as “melanin-impaired” as a typical “White” person, but whose cultural patterns suggest a conversion to “White” values.¹⁰ It is also worth noting that many Americans, regardless of their physical appearance, will refuse to alter their mainstream behavior to accommodate the wishes of people from other cultures, as many Japanese find out when they ask workmen to take off their shoes before entering a residence, or will refer to such things as rules, laws, or “business as usual” to justify not having to wade into the world of cultural relativity.

When things like this are taken into account, it can be said that Americanization is still a dynamic force and that, unlike the increasing number of people of different physical stock who might be changing the collective appearance of Americans, American culture is not being changed in any amazingly dramatic way. There are many traits and values in the mainstream culture which have been cultivated over at

least several generations, which do not promise to evaporate into thin air any time in the near future or probably ever as long as there is a United States of America, and which immigrants, their offspring, and other foreigners in the country accommodate and, especially over the generations, acquire. Even though considerable leeway is given to the first generation of immigrants (and foreigners who do not intend to stay in America), the subsequent generations – by birth and/or upbringing American – are expected to cultivate typical American behavior, customs, and values and to respect American symbols.¹¹ The education systems, the work places, the way of doing business, and social pressure contribute to this, as does the unofficial national language, “English” (i.e. Ameriglish).

As noted previously, a language is usually the key component of a culture, and Ameriglish plays an important role in cultural standardization within the United States. Throughout the whole country, this language is used not only by Americans across the spectrum of “diversity” but also by non-Americans, including many “Hispanic migrants” and (especially) their children, when it is necessary to communicate outside a foreign-language in-group, at best a “subculture” within the United States. The fact, however, that there has been a somewhat vocal movement to make “English” the “official” language of the United States suggests that some Americans are worried that their cherished way of life is under threat, but this movement has not gotten very far for the simple reason that no such recognition, plus appropriate legislation to support it, is required – Ameriglish has long been the de facto national language, and nobody seems to want to deny it that status. Given its centripetality to life in the United States, and that it is acquired by most newcomers and certainly by their children, Ameriglish serves as a reminder that America is not exactly a “multicultural” society despite the human “diversity” referred to throughout most of this article.

Notes

1. The original volume is *American Nightmare? Being Notes Upon The Great American Hoax Of Multiculturalism And Other Things* (2006), which has an educational *Workbook* (2007) and a shorter, more thematically structured version under the title *Adventures With “Multiculturalism” In The United States* (2008). Three dictionaries have been published – *Ameriglish Dictionary* (2007), *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), and *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008) – while a *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* and, compiled

mainly from the others, a *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* are still in progress.

2. As in the George Jap books, further details about the individuals are withheld for reasons of privacy; it is, however, useful to note the “racial” and “national” backgrounds to get across the point that people who are supposed to benefit from “multiculturalism” might not feel that they do. Other accounts from immigrants and a couple of intriguing personal experiences came up after the text for *American Nightmare?* was essentially complete, and these might be related in a future monograph since they might cause some foreign academics and students to question their ideas about American academe.

3. Following the approach taken for *American Nightmare?*, the methodology used for the dictionaries has been one of anthropological fieldwork – going straight to the primary sources, written and oral – and not worrying about whatever secondary sources might be available. This has mainly involved collecting information by listening to people talk, asking younger people for new-wave vocabulary that is or promises to be widespread, watching a variety of television programs (especially general news, political analyses, sporting events, and popular elimination shows), consulting newspapers for a variety of readerships, reading books about American social issues, perusing documents, and reading advertisements and signs. Most of this research has been done in the United States since late 2003, but it is worth mentioning that for some items, tapping personal memory which goes as far back as the late 1960s and consulting newspaper articles in Japan, but clearly written for American consumption, have been useful either for determining meanings or for verifying usage.

4. Students at one college jokingly took this a step further in my course on cultures and began substituting “African-American” for the adjective “black” (as in the color), and they took a particular liking to my “African-American” wool cap with “White Trash” on it. On a less sardonic note, many years ago a Japanese national spoke about an “African-American” family who, it turned out, were from Nigeria and were thoroughly African, not at all American; since she likely picked up the expression from a Japanese Americanist and took it to mean 黒人 (*kokujin*, black-person), the episode has left me wondering how many people might, quite innocently and regardless of nationality, think that “African-American” is now the proper or polite expression for “Negro.”

5. Those in Japan are probably by now aware of Japanese-Americans who have discovered in Japan that they are not Japanese, but this sort of discovery that it is culture, not nature, which defines a person is more common with Americans, and even children of legal permanent residents, who travel to their ancestral homelands than might be suspected. Those inside the country, of course, are often unaware of how culturally removed from their ancestral homeland(s) they are. One incident that has stuck in the mind since the summer

of 1982 involved a White American in New Mexico saying that he thought the United States should be more active in beating up on other countries like Great Britain had just done with Argentina because that was the right thing to do, not because he was “English” since he was “Danish.” Of course, this character was not Danish either, which was obvious from his speech, demeanor, and American “patriotism,” but it did not seem worth the bother to inform him that not all of the English (real ones, that is, and not to mention other Britons) were for the war with Argentina, which he appeared to have thought to be the case. Also, I remember reading a political cartoon in 1988 in which the runner-up to be the Democratic Party’s candidate for U.S. President, Jesse Jackson, was shown walking away and looking back at the winner, Michael Dukakis, wondering if America was ready for a “Greek” president; although this was satirical because a major question that year was whether America was ready for a “Black” president (Mr. Jackson), it is worth noting that if Mr. Dukakis had have been Greek, he would never have held high public office in the state of Massachusetts, let alone have had the opportunity to seek his party’s nomination for the presidency.

6. “Chinkwaw” evidently was how Americans heard nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants refer to their country of origin, “Qīngguó” (清国, the “country of the Qīng” dynasty), and “Chinese” itself has been encountered as a synonym for “Oriental” or “Asian,” that is East Asian (Chinese, Korean, Japanese), plus other people (e.g. Vietnamese, Mongolians) who appear to meet the physical criteria. Another term for an East Asian, “Gook,” seems to have gone out of use but, as related by a teacher of geography at university in the 1970s, its origin is amusing – when the American army evicted enemy troops from places in southern Korea during the 1950-53 war, Koreans would express their support by calling out “Miguk” (미국, America) as the Americans went through; having heard passionate chants of “me gook,” the Americans casually agreed with the likes of “okay, you gook,” and the term “Gook” eventually became an item of Ameriglish vocabulary.

7. The terms beginning with lower-case letters in this sentence are generally written without capital letters, hence the apparent break with previous entries. Conventional spelling rules of capitalization are usually applied to those words which relate to a geographical place (e.g. American, African, Japanese, Indian, Brit) or are considered to be (derived from) a proper noun (e.g. Latin, Hispanic), but others are liable to being started with an upper-case or a lower-case letter (e.g. Negro/negro, Black/black, Chink/chink), while for some reason, “white” tends not to be capitalized and occasionally “Native American” becomes the clearly confusing “native American.” For purposes of human dignity, in this article, upper-case letters have been used to start “White” and the other words that could go either way.

8. Cynical for sure, but might not the day be coming when any United States citizen who presents mitochondrial DNA as evidence can claim to be “African-American”? On a more

informative note, applying for a Social Security card requires choosing only one category, and there was one observed occasion at a college in which a Japanese national without American citizenship ended up ticking a box, as suggested by an office worker, to claim to be “Asian-American” since no other suitable option (including “other”) existed.

9. As an example, Aztec, New Mexico has a population of just over 6000 (six thousand) people and has three “ethnic” restaurants (Thai, Chinese, and Mexican). Tangentially, it has also been possible to buy Marmite, a nutritious British spread, at the largest grocery store in the same settlement, but very few Americans have even a clue as to what it is.

10. Perhaps “Twinkie” and “Oreo” are the “correct” spellings, but I have opted to begin them with lower-case letters to provide a sense of consistency with “banana” as well as to distinguish these terms from the foodstuffs by those names (akin to the use of “spam” and “Spam”).

11. Explaining this would be a lengthy process, but some examples ought to give an idea of what would be expected from members of generation one-point-five and beyond. A couple of more-or-less absolutes would be a practical knowledge of Ameriglish, treating the American national flag (the Stars and Stripes, Old Glory) as a sacred artifact, and having the Pledge of Allegiance memorized. Most would have learned to fear “law” as if it were an omnipotent deity and, exceptions acknowledged to exist, to value money over conscience or ethics, while a good percentage would have accepted or at least pay lip service to the typical claims that America is “the Land of the Free,” it is a “free country,” its people are “free,” and the “free market” is the best forum for economic activity. “Business as usual” – commerce, or any other activity, intertwined with deception and/or cheating – would most likely be considered a valid activity or a reasonable excuse, and many would “support the troops” for defending the country or the (hardly ever explained) “American way of life.” A significant amount of value would be accorded to “rights,” “opinions,” “sticking to one’s guns,” “individualism,” and even “democracy,” while the topic of “God” would range from a mere distraction that nevertheless requires some discourse to a complete obsession. On a more mundane level, the behavioral patterns would likely include a rather large combination from among talking in short phrases and having exchanges that do not exactly test the intellect, talking and even acting as if one is tough, talking loudly so that attention is guaranteed, shaking hands for purposes of business and to show agreement or companionship, dressing rather casually to very casually, slumping or slouching or otherwise appearing not too respectful, eating with a fork only and otherwise not cultivating table manners, not taking education too seriously because most of it is not necessary for life in the real world, being obsessed with how one’s body smells and looks, leading a life that would end without an automobile or a pick-up truck, being fascinated with anything mechanical, having a diet in which beef and sugary

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carbonated beverages are essential elements, and taking an interest in one or more of the four major team sports (or, to reconnect with the first example in this note – a knowledge of Ameriglish – at least having an understanding of common metaphors from baseball, football, and basketball).

