

On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part Six)

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This article, the sixth about how contemporary Ameriglish provides insights into mainstream America,¹ treats selected items of vocabulary having to do with education.

Ameriglish is something learned, and being able to use it is a talent that is cultivated through socialization. Education, the process of learning things, can be both formal and informal, yet it is so intertwined with language that education and language reinforce each other. Here is a passage from George Jappe's *Adventures with "Multiculturalism" in the United States* – a reader that the author has used in courses taught at two highly rated universities in Japan – which highlights this interrelationship:²

Education is a tricky business. It can never achieve perfect – or even reasonably good – results across the board, but it can provide a foundation of knowledge and skills upon which to build something better, more useful, more enjoyable. And it all begins with language.

Language in general is what has made the human being an extraordinary creature, as in not just a discrete species among the other forms of life on this planet, but also an actor that has been able to do amazingly complex things on that stage. It is, again in general, the key component of "culture," of what in essence has been the human condition. In more narrow contexts, languages have shaped or helped to shape specific cultures and contributed to what specific groups of people have been able to do. Without communication, be it down-to-earth or abstract, a lot of what people have done over the ages would not have been possible, and language – vocabulary, grammar, tone of delivery, conventional usage, and such like – has been "communication" at its best. Messages, in general, can be conveyed more quickly and perhaps more effectively through language than through complete demonstration and experience on their own.

Language therefore occupies the most important seat in education and, whether noticed or not, pervades education at all levels and in all subjects.

When put into an American context, education in the United States begins with learning the American language (Ameriglish), which is the medium through which

people become *de facto* members of American society – acquiring and, reciprocally, contributing to American culture – as well as learn all sorts of things, and through which they become cultural teachers for others. Education in this sense is obviously a lifelong process, but its most important contribution to the molding of individuals is throughout their formative years, when knowledge and skills are cultivated alongside social expectations; for the most part, this is generally done via formal establishments which have been sanctioned by a secular authority and operate within legal guidelines that promote an honorable pedagogical mission. What follows in this article, then, is a discussion of important items of vocabulary which provide insights into what formal education in America entails.

Although the word “education” would seem to be rather easy to define, it is not.³ The English (and Ameriglish) word comes from a Latin verb which can be translated as “to bring up,” “to raise,” and “to teach,” thereby allowing for a very broad interpretation, rather than the usual narrow one that focuses on schools and similar institutions with formal curricula for a variety of subjects. To bring somebody up, or to raise somebody, suggests that education is limited to the period of youth – to be understood in a vague sense because, legalities aside, “youth” varies in personal, generational, and cultural contexts – when parents, teachers, and other adults exert a tremendous amount of influence over what a more-or-less dependent person does, yet the third translation given – to teach – makes it possible to understand “education” as a potentially lifelong activity, from cradle to grave, depending on personal circumstances. Still, the fact that people might always be learning, and thus be taught, something new is generally trivial when compared with what is learned in youth, and adults who have been members of mainstream society and then attend an institution for further education cannot do so without the general body of academic knowledge and skills that were acquired in youth; both of these observations, then, suggest that when approaching the subject of “education,” it is best to focus on institutions and activities which are specifically designed to bring up or to raise individuals so that they can become reasonably competent, adult participants in society. This is not, of course, to deny that there are roles for other institutions (e.g. churches, libraries, clubs, sports programs, work places) and people not specifically imparting approved knowledge and skills in formal education (notably, parents and other family members, other adults in the community who essentially serve as role models, friends and other young people, and people accessed through visual, printed, and auditory media); these, too, play an important role in bringing up or raising

young people, but here the focus is on what most people in America and probably elsewhere in the advanced, industrialized world associate with the word “education” – formal, secular schooling that extends into the upper teens or, increasingly, into the twenties.

When the Ameriglish dictionaries were being compiled, four impressions had been acquired as to what “education” meant in the United States; the most important one, from the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*,⁴ is this:

[1] something to do with knowledge and understanding and skills and responsibility.

Although this rather vague explanation fits the expectations for “education” as mentioned above, the other three appear to be provocative:

[2] a variety of activities which are supposed to cultivate and develop and promote self-esteem; a means to control minds and behavior; the cure to any problem which can be thought of.

None of them, however, is without foundation: cultivating self-esteem so that individuals feel good about themselves and what they have done has become an important goal within formal education over the past thirty to forty years, at least in the United States; education is a means to train people so that they can function according to the cultural expectations within their milieu; and education is often considered to be a means to find solutions to problems and to inform others in the hope that selected solutions or proposals will be followed up on. Each definition in item [2], then, conveys a positive sentiment, although there is room for cynicism along the respective lines of mediocrity or even incompetence being promoted as young people are made to feel better about their abilities than conventional wisdom dictates they ought to, education being a device to inculcate values and behavioral patterns that make it possible to manipulate individuals for unpleasant and even sinister purposes, and education serving as a tool to promote special interests or propaganda with potential socioeconomic consequences. As intertwined and subjective as they are, these positive and negative sentiments do color education in America, and hints are provided as the text works through what is in essence an explanation of item [1].

The four elements of item [1] are knowledge, understanding, skills, and responsibility. Although these appear to be easy words to figure out, it is worthwhile noting here that they may best be interpreted along the following lines: a recognition of whether something is true or valid, rather than false or not valid, which is to say an accumulation of facts and sound ideas or explanations (knowledge); an ability

to reason and to explain why something is or is not what it is (understanding); the physical and mental means to be able to do something (skills); and an awareness that decision-making entails consequences, good or bad, that can have a meaningful impact on one's life (responsibility). There are a variety of ways in which knowledge, understanding, skills, and responsibility are imparted in educational institutions, and these include using books and other written materials, explanations and demonstrations by teachers, engaging students through assigned tasks to be done in class or elsewhere, making evaluations based on how well students have done, and meting out rewards and punishments. The contents of an educational program and how tolerant educational authorities are of deficiencies in reaching the goals set, of course, are a function of the perceived needs of general society, so in the case of the United States it is worthwhile recalling that it is a secular, post-industrial, capitalist country which prides itself on promoting such things as democracy, the rule of law, individual freedoms, equal opportunity for its citizens and (to some extent) others who happen to be living there, and what might be called a materialist "American Dream" or a life with at least modest wealth achieved through one's personal efforts. Preparing young people to function within this society is the core of American education, and many end up pursuing occupations and lifestyles which do not require being an adept in academic subjects or being in good physical condition; those who wish to build on the educational core of being able to function within mainstream society and to study subjects seriously, and with the possibility of acquiring marketable expertise that could lead to a potentially lucrative lifestyle, may do so, but this is generally done at their own or somebody else's expense.

Education in America may be split into compulsory and elective streams, even if such vocabulary is normally not used. The compulsory stream is one in which young people, mostly between the ages of six and eighteen, are required by law to attend a school or otherwise be engaged in a state-sanctioned program of study; the elective stream mainly is that of so-called "higher education," which is to say the various colleges, universities, and professional schools. Compulsory education may be referred to as "elhi," explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* to be

[3] elementary school and high school with middle school or junior high school in between, grades one to twelve in the typical educational system.

This means that there are three levels of compulsory education, with that in the middle going by one of two names. From the same dictionary, here are the respective explanations of "elementary school," "middle school," "junior high school,"

and “high school”:

[4] the first five or six grades of compulsory education;

[5] (generally) the sixth to eighth grades of compulsory education;

[6] (usually) the seventh to ninth grades of compulsory education; [and]

[7] from the ninth or tenth grade of compulsory education to the twelfth grade.

For these items, the word “grade” refers to a designated year of study, or level or rank, within an educational sequence; children who do their entire compulsory education in American schools tend to complete all twelve grades within twelve years from starting first grade (usually at age six), although there are cases of some students having to take longer (if they want to complete high school beyond the age of eighteen) and, conversely, others who finish in eleven or less years (i.e. they were promoted to at least one grade beyond where they normally would be for their age). Whether a particular school district uses a six-three-three (elementary, junior high, (senior) high), five-three-four (elementary, middle, high), or other format depends on local conditions, often to do with the number of children and the number of schools within the district, and the main goal for students is to complete a high-school curriculum and thereby graduate with a “high-school diploma,” there generally not being a “graduation” from or a diploma awarded for finishing an elementary, middle, or junior-high school.

Compulsory education allows for physical and social development, but its main thrust is to be found within academic disciplines, first with subjects that make it possible for children eventually to function within general society and that also provide intellectual foundations for increasingly difficult subjects. Three fundamental skills which are cultivated throughout the early years of formal education and are reinforced as the education continues are literacy (the ability to read and write), numeracy (the ability to use numbers), and graphicacy (the ability to understand visual or pictorial information). The first is most important, and it is cultivated through a study of the American version of the English language, usually throughout the entire twelve years of compulsory education, and subject titles such as “English,” “language,” and “language arts” are used for courses dealing with vocabulary, grammar, proper speech, formal oral presentation, spelling, syntax, writing in its various forms, and English-language literature; it is also promoted through the study of other subjects since most require students to read and, to a lesser extent, to write. Numeracy is acquired through courses on mathematics, which begins with arithmetic and eventually takes most students through algebra and geometry by the time the ninth

or tenth grade has been completed, while graphicacy can be learned through such subjects as mathematics, geography, and basic natural science as well as through using computers and related technology.

As for the subjects which are related to developing these fundamental skills, study of the national language is the most important since it provides the framework not just for most communication between people in the United States but also for building knowledge and conceptualizing in an American fashion. Although this language may be qualified as “American English,” in the United States it is usually referred to simply as “English,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* notes to be [8] the unofficial official language of the United States of America.

What this means is that although there has been no legislation to give (American) English the status of being the language through which discourse on matters of importance is to be conducted, in reality that is the case, as it is with most oral and written communication between people in the United States. Other than “English” and “language,” another term that can be encountered in schools for the study of the national language is “language arts,” which the same dictionary explains to be:

[9] a subject in which school children learn how to use (American) English or how it has been used or both.

There are two reasons, under the entry for “language,” as to why this might be important; the first, rather dryly, is that a language is “a means of communication mainly between human beings,” but the second is more sinister, being that “language” comprises

[10] vocabulary and grammar which is finely tuned so that the speaker or writer is pleased and has control but that the listener or the reader might be confused until hours or days or weeks or years have been spent deciphering what is meant.

Hence, a person who does not learn to use Ameriglish well runs the risk of being exploited by individuals and institutions which can and are in a position to manipulate the language for their own benefit, as is the case with many contracts that get signed and thereby agreed to legally for such important purposes as obtaining employment, renting, taking out a mortgage, purchasing a vehicle, and receiving medical treatment. Most of the children in American schools were born and have been growing up within the United States, but children from some immigrant families do face a serious linguistic handicap and thereby qualify for special courses under the rubric of “English as a Second Language” or “E.S.L.,” which can be linked to “bilingual education” or, as the same dictionary suggests, a program for “cultivating skills in (American) English and another language which an immigrant just so

happens to know.”

Two broad fields of study which tend to get linked together, at least in rhetoric about American education, are mathematics and the natural sciences. Abbreviated as “math,” mathematics does get taught so that young people might be able to progress to the stage of acquiring sophisticated talents in such fields as statistics, calculus, and theoretical physics, but for most people it has meant learning to make basic calculations in everyday life; the entry for “mathematics” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, though, hints rather strongly as to why this subject does not interest most people in America today:

[11] a subject or discipline which deals with numbers and coded letters and symbols and how they function in various ways together and which is not too important these days because machines will take care of any numerical problems that come a person’s way.

Because they have come to be associated with technological progress, “math and science” can often be encountered together as subjects which need to be emphasized more in American education, and in this context “science” refers to the first of these three definitions for the word in the same dictionary:

[12] the natural sciences, any part or parts of the natural sciences, any one of the natural sciences whose name can’t be thought of at the moment of discourse.

During compulsory education before high school, most Americans have been exposed to physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and astronomy in a general sense, and high schools tend to offer courses devoted to at least the first three, usually in a combination of being obligatory (especially biology) or elective. The study of “science,” however, suffers from two problems; one, as with “math,” is that it is too difficult for many young people, and the other is that in the United States – as is mentioned in the same entry as that with item [12] above – science is considered by politically active Christians to be “the rival or outright enemy of religion,” meaning that there is an ideological deterrent which affects directly or indirectly many young people who might otherwise take an interest in natural science, especially biology and geology, and cognates such as the physical (or biological) side of anthropology.

Still, the word “science” has a broader meaning of knowledge which has been acquired from methodological study of things real, hence the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* also contains this explanation:

[13] any academic discipline which is connected to culture and derives theories or explanations based on a method which arguably could be used in the natural sciences.

Generally, such disciplines are classified as the social sciences – in academia, the

likes of sociology, cultural anthropology, human geography, political science, and economics – and young people in the United States get an introduction to them through something known as “social studies,” which the same dictionary briefly explains to be

[14] history and geography and sociology mainly.

Sociology touches on basically anything dealing with interactions between human beings – for example, socialization, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, family, and deviance – so this part of “social studies” is relatively easy for young people to connect to their lives in the present and as they might unfold in the future. Related is the study of government, which might be done under that name or as “civics,” being

[15] a subject which is usually studied in high school and which explains how at least the federal government works and what the rights and responsibilities of American citizens are.

The other two disciplines listed in item [14], however, are not as easy for many students in school to relate to their lives, so the dictionary provides cynical definitions for “geography” and “history,” both beginning with “a not-so-important subject ... which involves learning about and remembering” and respectively ending as:

[16] where places on the planet Earth are; [and]

[17] when certain things took place and when certain people lived.

Both subjects, of course, are more complicated than these definitions suggest, but the argument is valid: many young people are faced with having to learn what to them is abstract and, directly at least, inconsequential to their lives. Although both subjects do get linked to memorization – and professional geographers, notably, have been active in promoting “geography bees” (“knock-out competition[s] in which contestants aim to provide correct answers to questions about selected places on the planet Earth” in the same dictionary)⁵ – they actually are explanatory disciplines which complement each other and which provide bridges for two major pedagogic sectors, geography being a combination of social science and natural science, and history being a combination of social science and the humanities. Of the humanities – notably history, literature, philosophy, and the fine arts – the main subjects studied in American schools seem to be the history of the United States, the history of the state in which a certain school is located, and American and some British (e.g. Shakespeare) literature.

Courses in language arts, mathematics, natural science, and social science account for the bulk of compulsory education in the United States, but they are complemented by other subjects such as art, music, and physical education, while some high schools

offer courses for vocational training. Whereas the curricula for elementary schools generally comprise required courses, at the middle- or junior-high-school level some elective courses are available and there tend to be more, both in subjects and in percentage of a student's schedule, of them at the high-school level, thereby allowing young people to make choices based on what they perceive to be potentially interesting and/or useful for life after graduating. Among the elective courses which might be offered are those in or about mathematics beyond algebra and geometry, the natural sciences (specifically as, for example, chemistry or physics), foreign languages, English-language literature, the history of parts of the world, business, automobile mechanics, and agriculture. What is offered, of course, depends on the geographical and economic circumstances within a school district or state as well as on the availability of teachers with the appropriate certification.

Another aspect of education in the United States – and one which is often overlooked or not recognized, especially by people who have grown up entirely within the country – is cultivating “patriotism,” explained briefly in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* as “taking pride in America and/or in being an American.” This is done not only by learning about the United States through courses on history and government, but also by daily recitals of the “Pledge of Allegiance” and learning to sing a host of songs which glorify America and/or its military. Reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance,” whether at the beginning of a school day or at any other event, is a ceremony that centers on

[18] a solemn and virtually sacred oath declaring loyalty to the American republic and which is memorized by nearly everybody in America as “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

In a sense, this falls under the concept of education being “a means to control minds and behavior” (see item [2]), as it technically requires the reciter to accept the political status quo and its existing rhetoric: if somebody were to think that America might be better served by a different type of republic than it has or even by something different such as a monarchy, that it might be better to split America up into smaller countries, that America ought to acknowledge its status not as a republic but as an empire, that anarchism in one form or another would be better than a republic, that God is not above the nation or does not even exist, and/or that liberty and justice are not available “for all” within the republic, for example, then that person would need to keep quiet during recitals of the pledge, at the risk of social and even educational consequences. Among the patriotic songs which are learned

or at least sung in schools are “The Star-Spangled Banner” (the national anthem), “America the Beautiful,” “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” and “God Bless America,” while others with religious and/or militaristic overtones such as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “The Army Goes Rolling Along” seem to have been rather common in elementary-school music curricula.

Multiculturalism and political correctness, concurrent and complementary ideological paradigms of the last twenty-plus years, have certainly infiltrated American education and serve as another example of how education can be “a means to control minds and behavior.” In many parts of the country where there has been a rather rapid diversification of racial, national, and ethnic stock in particular, this is obviously useful for trying to cultivate a harmonious or tolerant society, but it might also be helpful for people living in less diversified areas not just for being prepared to encounter different types of people when going or moving elsewhere but also for creating a national mindset that acknowledges the country as a human mosaic. Both paradigms go beyond physical stock and address such cultural factors as gender, sexuality, religious practices, language, clothing, and cuisine, yet their objective of cultivating tolerance of diverse human practices is tempered by what is acceptable according to American laws and understanding, something which can be confusing and even frustrating for some immigrants at least. Not everybody in America, in part or in toto, agrees with these paradigms, so sociopolitical stress has developed alongside them, as is hinted at by the respective explanations of “multiculturalism” and “political correctness” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[19] a philosophy or ideology by which practitioners of the American way of life try to convince themselves that they are tolerant and appreciative of as well as even accept or enjoy the existence of other ways of life in their midst and even to pretend to consider or to treat those other ways of life as more-or-less equal to the American way of life in terms of status and respect.

[20] a sociopolitical movement which aims to pretend that differences between people do not exist or at least to soften acknowledgment of differences in the event that they can’t be completely ignored; a polite form of behavior or social outlook which endeavors to convert the theory of this movement into reality and which is often forced on people who might very well see the world a bit differently and possibly as it really is.

Still, mainstream education in the United States probably serves its young people well by trying to have them understand the positive aspects of multiculturalism and political correctness, even if it ultimately does come down to American rules and laws being what determines which cultural practices are actually permissible. As

with patriotism, the promotion of multiculturalism and political correctness is not an academic objective within compulsory education, but one which is interwoven with other activities and aims at character formation.

Students in American schools are evaluated for their academic progress and, under a term such as “citizenship,” social behavior. Although the systems for evaluating vary from place to place, and have even changed over time, the general thrust has been to provide “grades” for completed academic projects which can be manipulated mathematically to give a relative assessment for a subject over a certain amount of time (e.g. six weeks of instruction) and a full term (e.g. a semester, or half of an academic year). To give an idea of how grading might be done in an American school, here is the explanation for “grade” in this context in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[21] an A or B or C or D or F or some qualified variant or a number usually ranging from zero to four with up to one decimal figure which gives an idea about how well or poorly a student has or had done on a project or in a course.

The letter grades have traditionally been used throughout the country, and it is not difficult to convert the letters to numbers or vice versa (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0), but what exactly they represent is not always clear. A typical, purportedly objective, guideline is that the passing grades cover ten-percent ranges (A for 90-100%, B for 80-89%, C for 70-79%, D for 60-69%) and the failing grade (F) is any number below 60%, yet not every project can truly be evaluated in such a rigid mathematical manner – as would be the case for compositions, reports, essay components on tests, speeches, and other oral recitals – and many projects which appear to be mathematically sound need not be because of how components are weighted or, especially in the case of a quiz or test, what is selected. Another guideline is to “grade on a curve,” which theoretically means to give grades according to a bell-curve distribution built around a substantial percentage at the equivalent of “average” – e.g. A’s and F’s at 10% each, B’s and D’s at 20% each, and C’s at 40% – but, as the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* observes, usually comes across as meaning

[22] to use a system of evaluation which allows mediocre to bad students to look better than they are in terms of knowledge or skills or both.

Subjectivity, even in mathematically grounded grading, is an important aspect of evaluation, and this has been complicated by the promotion of self-esteem (see item [2]) over the past thirty or more years. A very good way to make a young person feel good is to make better assessments than are deserved, and this has led to “grade

inflation,” which the same dictionary notes to be

[23] a process by which evaluations in a school ... become better as well as less credible when viewed against a benchmark in the past.

This leads in the direction of not only promoting “excellence” but also putting it within the reach of far too many students, giving the impression that “excellent” has come to mean “average,” “ordinary,” or “normal.” Still, the grades are supposed to provide a relative impression of accomplishments and progress, and the key word appears to be “achievement,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* explains to be “the end result of a project which can be used as proof of ability to do something else” and, more importantly,

[24] the main purpose or goal of education and work and other human activities.

This connects education with general society and provides a cultural marker: achievements – things completed and preferably acknowledged by others – are valued in American society, so learning to complete projects at school in ways that are acceptable or gradable in a passing way is preparation or training for life within mainstream society beyond school.

For most children in the United States, compulsory education such as that which has been discussed above is state-sponsored and paid for by taxes levied at the state and local levels. State and local authorities therefore determine how educational programs are put together – e.g. which subjects are required and for how many contact hours over how many years, which subjects can be offered as electives, how grades are decided and registered, and which extracurricular activities may be pursued under the auspices of a school – and it would seem that a favorable consensus exists throughout the country for this apparent, decentralized approach to education, “apparent” being included because the core subjects tend to be more or less the same from state to state and among school districts. Under the assumption that there have been serious problems within American education, especially in regard to appropriate levels of literacy and subjects such as mathematics and natural science, the federal (national) government has become involved in recent years by providing some funding in exchange for school students showing sufficient progress on standardized examinations which are given according to the so-called “No Child Left Behind” legislative act of 2001. According to the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, this act

[25] was designed with the intent of raising levels of education throughout the United States by the federal government offering financial incentives for states and school districts and schools and teachers to demonstrate that their pupils had

generally met criteria which could be measured numerically through examinations. That “No Child Left Behind” has been controversial and its efficacy has been challenged is not important here, but it has provided an opportunity to try to establish something like national standards of academic achievement in terms of literacy (reading and writing in Ameriglish), “math,” and “science.” The act was a result of nationwide acknowledgment of serious defects within American education as of 2000, the year that George W. Bush and Albert Gore made it a major campaign issue when they were competing for the presidency, and in essence it could be interpreted as a means to address the problems of “dumbing-down” and the so-called “education gap” that had become endemic throughout the country, and which are respectively explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* to be:

[26] the process of lowering standards in such things as knowledge and skills where a reasonably high level of intelligence used to be required and/or of encouraging people to pay attention mainly or only to things that are ridiculous or stupid or banal or at least requiring little intellectual activity; [and]

[27] the difference in training in regard to knowledge and thinking and behavior and such like between at least two sets of people as determined by somebody who controls or influences institutions and programs that deal with learning.

Such problems continue to linger throughout the country, of course, and whereas “No Child Left Behind” is disparagingly linked to the presidency of George W. Bush (r. 2001-09), any attempts by the administration of Barack Obama (in office since 2009) to get involved with education might get reproached under the banner of “Obamacation.”

Although most young people receive a compulsory education which is “free,” some attend private schools which require fees to be paid – usually by parents – and some receive supplementary forms of education in such things as religion, special talents such as ballet or music, and sports that are also paid for. Such forms of education are based on decisions which transcend the demands of society for molding children into exploitable souls upon finishing school, and the results depend on what the institutions offer as well as personal effort, not just on the amount of money paid. As a young person progresses into non-compulsory education, financial ability to cover the expenses becomes an important factor since so-called “higher education” is elective – in the sense that being a “college student” is a lifestyle choice – and therefore not considered to be sufficiently in the public interest for general society to pay for. Over the generations, some students have qualified for full or partial scholarships, most have paid their way through either by themselves and/or with

help from their family, and others – notoriously within the last generation – have taken out loans that need not be easy to pay back. With the exception of community colleges which might accept any applicant who has graduated from a high school or has earned a G.E.D.,⁶ which is considered to be equivalent to a high-school diploma, the various colleges and universities set their own parameters for accepting students, and these are based on academic record, scores on standardized examinations such as what used to be called the Scholastic Aptitude Test (now simply the “SAT”), in some cases extracurricular activities, and ability to pay. Whereas there might be many institutions in America which do not have a high threshold for admission, it ought to be noted that many American universities are not easy to get into as they do look for academic potential on the basis of high-school grades and scores on at least one standardized examination.⁷

“College” – not “university” – is the key word in the United States for higher education, and the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* defines “college” in this context as

[28] any educational institution which ranks above high school and at which a large majority of the students are eighteen years of age or older and where the teachers are generally referred to as professors.

“Going to college” is a major lifestyle change for many young people – it can involve living in a different place and learning to take complete responsibility for what is done from moment to moment – and there are two typical routes for beginning a collegiate education. One, and the more traditional, has been to enter a four-year institution directly, but over the last couple of generations it has been reasonably common to begin at a “community college,” explained in the same dictionary as

[29] a local educational institute or establishment which provides a variety of learning and recreational opportunities beyond or similar to or lower than what is possible at the high-school level.

Community colleges vary in quality, but their two main functions are to provide courses for the first half of a typical four-year college or university degree and to provide a means for “continuing education,” the latter being explained as

[30] the pursuit of knowledge and skills which is generally not linked to a diploma or degree or some other formal award but which might be useful for getting a job or a better job or for improving oneself or for making life a bit more enjoyable.

“Continuing education” can entail courses in almost anything – for example, standard college courses of an academic nature, courses for learning a vocation or for professional development, and courses which are based on personal interests or hobbies – but for students who are interested in earning credits toward a college or university degree, they might collect them with the intention of earning an “associ-

ate's degree" and/or of transferring the credits to a four-year institution where a "bachelor's degree" might be earned. The most common "associate's degree" is the "Associate of Arts" which, under "A.A.," the same dictionary notes to be "a low-ranking academic degree which attests to the equivalent of the first two years of approved college study having been completed." More important, of course, is the "bachelor's degree," the most commonly pursued ones being the "Bachelor of Arts" and the "Bachelor of Science," which are abbreviated as "B.A." and "B.S." and attest "to the equivalent of four years of approved college study ... having been completed" with a so-called "major" (subject of specialty) respectively "in something other than the natural sciences" or "in at least one of the natural sciences."

Whether a degree is completed or not, many people in their late teens or twenties who "have gone to college" filter into mainstream society and take up jobs, some of which may be related to the academic experience received at college, but many of which can be done without it. Among those who do finish their bachelor's degrees – and are awarded a "diploma" for "graduating" – are some who continue their studies at a higher level and often with a reasonably clear professional objective in mind. Programs and courses for such students are offered under a variety of institutes which in general discourse are referred to as "schools" and qualified either generically or specifically according to circumstance. The most commonly used expression is "graduate school" or, when abbreviated, "grad school," which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* defines as

[31] an educational institution which is attached to a university or college and which offers professional training or courses to cultivate advanced knowledge and skills after a four-year college or university degree or its equivalent has been earned.

"Graduate school," then, may be considered as an all-encompassing expression, but it usually is applied to institutes which offer advanced degrees at two levels in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. In common parlance, the lower level of "grad school" degrees are referred to as "master's," and these generally come in two types, the "Master of Arts" and the "Master of Science," which are explained in the same dictionary, under their most commonly encountered abbreviations of "M.A." and "M.S.," as "an academic degree which attests to the equivalent of one or two years of approved graduate-school study," respectively "of a subject other than one in the natural sciences" and "of a subject in the natural sciences," "having been completed." The higher level of "graduate school" entails further study and a detailed, supervised research project which for many is professional

training for a career in academia; the degree earned is mostly known as a “Doctor of Philosophy” – which seldom has a direct relationship with the academic discipline of philosophy – and is typically referred to by its abbreviation “Ph.D.” (each letter being pronounced), which the same dictionary notes to be “an academic degree which attests to the completion of an approved program of study and research in any subject or discipline and which lasts at least one year beyond the M.A. or the M.S.”

Although “graduate school” is a generic expression, there are a few types of postgraduate institution which tend to be referred to more specifically, based on what is studied at them. These provide training for professions which, on the grounds of their potential for earning high incomes and thereby being a means for a materialistically comfortable life, enjoy highly favorable reputations in the United States. The newest entrant to this group of institutions – to a large extent related to the socioeconomic rise of the outrageously wealthy “C.E.O.” (chief executive officer) in “Corporate America” since the 1980s – is the “business school”; although the term might be used for an undergraduate school or college which offers a “Bachelor of Business Administration” or “B.B.A.,” it is most commonly applied to a postgraduate one, as noted in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[32] an educational institution which ... offers courses to cultivate knowledge and skills for a career in commerce or finance or something similarly related to economics after a four-year college or university degree has been earned.

Although a “business school” might offer a “Ph.D.,” the most sought-after degree from such an institution is the “Master of Business Administration” or “M.B.A.” because it can be used in the professional labor market, where most students would eventually like to be in their pursuit of money and whatever advantages that might bring in life. Two other types of institution which offer degrees which can lead to highly paid professions, and which have enjoyed very good reputations longer than have the business schools, are known as “med school” and “law school.” “Med school” is short for a “medical school,” which the same dictionary explains to be

[33] an educational institution which ... offers courses to cultivate knowledge and skills for a career as a doctor of medicine after a four-year college or university degree has been earned.

Somebody who graduates from a “medical school” is likely to have earned an “M.D.” or “Doctor of Medicine,” which generally requires not only academic courses but also work as an intern over several years, and can pursue life as a “doctor,” one of the most cherished positions in American society. A variant of the “med school,” although usually not referred to as such, is the “dental school” or, as the same

dictionary puts it,

[34] an educational institution which ... offers courses to cultivate knowledge and skills for a career in dentistry after a four-year college or university degree has been earned.

Two degrees which may be encountered as having been earned by a “dentist” are the “Doctor of Dental Medicine” and “Doctor of Dental Surgery,” respectively abbreviated as “D.M.D.” and “D.D.S.,” and these degrees are usually finished within four years of matriculation. A “law school,” the other type of postgraduate institution which has had a longstanding reputation for providing training that can lead to a life of wealth and even sociopolitical influence, is

[35] an educational institution which ... offers courses to cultivate knowledge and skills for a career as a lawyer after a four-year college or university degree has been earned.

Most graduates of a “law school” hold a degree known as the “J.D.” – for “Juris Doctor” or “Doctor of Jurisprudence” – that is typically completed in three years, and many pursue a respected life practicing law as a “lawyer” or “attorney,” while some use the “J.D.” and practical legal experience as a stepping-stone for a life in politics.

Regardless of the level of education completed, in part or in full, people in the United States drift into the society of adults-at-large where most of them engage in skilled or unskilled labor. For an attorney-at-law, doctor of medicine, dentist, aspiring C.E.O. within corporate management, and university professor, the professional training acquired beyond the bachelor’s level is obviously highly valued because the course and other work done toward the terminal degree not only defines the individual as an apprenticed professional but also, and more importantly for those who pursue expected options, opens doors within the profession; a very good, yet “undocumented” knowledge of a subject does not on its own merits qualify a person for a job or a profession based on sophisticated learning. As the metaphorical ladder of education is descended, the relationship between, on the one hand, the level of education and even subject(s) of specialty and, on the other, a person’s station in life (notably, occupation and wealth) becomes less clear. A “master’s” degree outside the subject of “business” is not necessarily a professional license or marketable for well-paying positions, and the situation for graduates with only a “bachelor’s” degree is sufficiently murky that a sane approach to a typical four-year degree would be to use the time spent “at college” to explore subjects and, more importantly, learn about life in a reasonably protected environment so that some social wisdom and personal character are cultivated in a positive fashion. Many “bachelor’s” degrees

and some “associate’s” degrees are nevertheless marketable at the lower end of skilled labor, so a diligent student can acquire some professional training and avoid being classified with people who graduated from high school only and who, along with those who did not complete high school, constitute a significant part of the American workforce.

This might be leading in the direction of insinuating that there is a correlation between a person’s station in life and level of education – which itself might reflect personal competence in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills, and responsibility – but often enough this is not the case in American society, and it is tempting to say that a substantial majority of people in the United States have received an education to a level beyond what they require to function in general society. An important reason is that, despite its great wealth as a country and its materialistic standards of living that are generally better across the socioeconomic spectrum than in most other countries, the United States has remained a workers’ country that has little time for esotericism, which a lot of formal education can come across as, or even aristocratic pretense; for many, then, whatever education offers that is not practical or useful in a down-to-earth sense can often turn out to be something suffered. Success in the United States is generally something to be won or achieved through real-world efforts, good luck or fortune, and/or a stash of liquid and other assets that can be played like cards in a poker game; for most people, formal education plays a much more limited role in preparing for “real” life than educators might like to admit, hence Americans tend not to be terribly enthusiastic about school-based education.

That said, there are some other points of a cultural nature which have been hinted at throughout this essay. As with the other essays in this series, the vocabulary was chosen from items which were recorded with the intent of providing cultural clues and insights, so an observant non-American reader who is not familiar with education in the United States ought to have caught on that American education does have its peculiarities and that some of them frame how Americans view education and its role in society. A few examples, especially aimed at Japanese readers since this essay is published in a Japanese journal, suffice: a “grade” covers a year of compulsory education, but it does not necessarily correspond with a “year” at a particular level (e.g. a Japanese might erroneously say “third grade of junior high school,” rather than “ninth grade” which could be the third year of junior high school or the first year of high school, and which would be the ninth year of compulsory schooling for most, although for some it could be the eighth, tenth, or even eleventh); study of the

national language, in one context or another, is a yearly enterprise in compulsory education under such terms as “English,” “language,” and “language arts” because America does not have an official “national language”; Americans have realized that studying “math” can be stressful or beyond the intellectual scope of many young people, hence they introduce it at a slower pace and let those who are not interested give up after an introductory course in algebra or geometry; as much as Americans and non-Americans might claim that the United States promotes “individualism,” an important part of compulsory education there cultivates a social conscience through social studies classes and promoting “patriotism” (elsewhere, generally called “nationalism”) and “multiculturalism,” which are especially pronounced at the “elementary school” level; American education is decentralized – mainly left to the states, school districts, and institutions (although those in higher education tend to acquire “accreditation” through a regional organization for that purpose) – and the national government plays only a small role and does not have, in terms of administrative reach and power, the equivalent of the Japanese Ministry of Education etc.; when it comes to higher education, Americans generally go to, or are at, “college”; and the highly sophisticated disciplines of medicine, dentistry, and law are studied at the postgraduate level and not for an undergraduate degree. A final point to be made here is that although there are problems within American education which have not been addressed in this essay (underachievement, misbehavior, insufficient interest on the part of parents and guardians, and the lengthy summer vacations which discourage learning are examples), most people in the United States seem to be satisfied with what is offered as compulsory education and with elective (i.e. higher) education being treated as a business investment that might lead the investor toward an intended goal, which invariably has something to do with socioeconomic “achievement.” Along the way, and regardless of the degree of success encountered, education in the United States Americanizes its recipients by using the American form of English – including items of vocabulary that are related to education itself – and otherwise preparing them for life within general society; in the spirit of item [2] in this essay, that does involve attempts to control minds and behavior (notably, the received language, types of knowledge and skills, patriotism, and the value placed on “achievement”) and to cultivate self-esteem (important for surviving in an “individualist” society) regardless of competence and such like.

Notes

1. The first five are in *Gengo Bunka Ronshû / Studies in Language and Culture* 31, 1 (2009): 173-191 [about types of person]; 31, 2 (2010): 3-19 [about sports-based vocabulary]; 32, 2 (2011): 33-50 [about popular political discourse]; 35, 1 (2013): 135-153 [about law and law-enforcement]; and 35, 2 (2014): 37-54 [about government and politics].

2. George Jappe's *Adventures with "Multiculturalism" in the United States / Comprising Insights into a Great American Hoax and Other Things of Relevance* (2012). This book was printed at Nagoya University and has been used as a reader for a variety of courses there and at Tokyo University; included are three chapters – "Education," "Education = Achievement," and "Why Education Is Important" – that are germane to this article, the cited passage being from the third mentioned chapter.

3. Here are three examples of how the word "education" is defined in standard dictionaries of American English: "a process of teaching, training, and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skills" (Oxford Advanced American Dictionary for Learners of English at <http://oaadonline.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>); "the process of training and developing the knowledge, skill, mind, character, etc., esp[ecially] by formal schooling; teaching; training" (Collins American English Dictionary at <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/american>); and "the activity of educating [= teaching] people in schools, colleges, and universities, and all the policies and arrangements concerning this" (Macmillan Dictionary at <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>). These citations and similar ones, copied from websites on 24 August 2013, emphasize the transfer of knowledge and skills through institutions for that purpose, as does this one from a typical paperback dictionary which the author often uses for casual reference: "the act or process of educating," which is "develop[ing] the faculties and powers of (a person) by schooling" (from the entries for "education" and "educate" in the *Random House Webster's Everyday Dictionary* (New York etc.: Random House, 2002), 166). Education, of course, does not have to be linked to a school, college, or university, and nor need it be "formal." Here is how "education" is explained at the beginning of the Wikipedia entry for "education": "a form of learning in which the knowledge, skills, and habits of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through teaching, training, or research" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>); the catch to this definition is that a person might acquire items of knowledge, skills, and habits that are different from most, or even all, of the members of the in-group, but at least it is suggesting that the transfer can occur in ways that need not be institutional.

4. George Jappe's *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary: A Means to Study a Dynamic Language and to Gain Insights into a Complex Culture* (2012), which incorporates most of the entries

from the four previously published Ameriglish dictionaries and has some changes and a good number of additional entries (altogether there are 2892 entries); the earlier dictionaries are George Jap's *Ameriglish Dictionary* (2007), *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), and *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2009). All five dictionaries were printed at Nagoya University.

5. Popularized after a national competition was organized in 1989, geography bees are modeled on the spelling bees which have been around for much longer and, similar to the spelling bees, require extensive memorization. When working on two articles about geography in the early naughts, the author of this one noticed that the Association of American Geographers was keen to promote geography bees, even though it wanted to change the image of geography from being a memorization-based subject (discussed briefly in Simon R. Potter, "Another Closing Frontier?: Observations on Geography in American Academe," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 13 (2002): 131-155 (especially 141-142)). It is not known whether the geography bees have enhanced geographical education or the image of the discipline, but if there has been any substantial success, it would seem that other disciplines would be encouraged to follow the same pedagogical route and thereby promote more memorization.

6. The "G.E.D." goes by different names, as mentioned in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*: "a General Education Diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma or a high-school General Equivalency Degree which is earned by passing General Education Development tests and which suggests that a person has acquired a combination of knowledge and skills that can be assumed to be similar to those of people who graduated from a high school."

7. American colleges and universities can be ranked according to the degree of difficulty for matriculating, and the widely used Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges* includes these categories: most competitive, highly competitive, very competitive, competitive, less competitive, and non-competitive. It is worth pointing out for Japanese readers in particular that these categories could also be applied to Japanese institutions of higher education and, in conjunction with comparative sample lists from both countries, lead to questioning the often quoted belief in Japan that "Japanese universities are difficult to get into, but American universities are easy to get into."