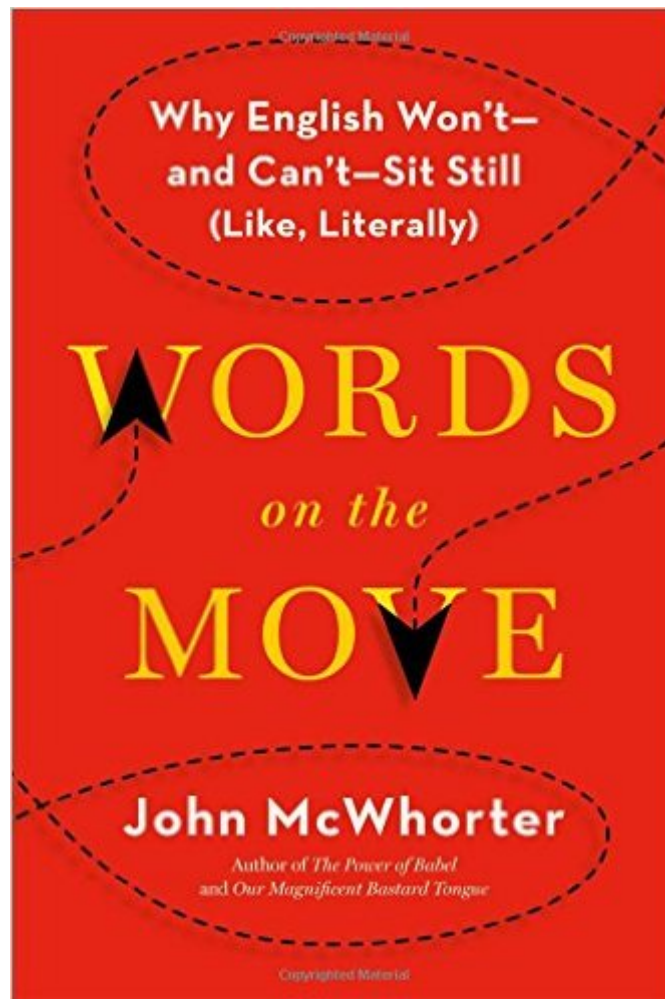


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# Words On The Move: Why English Won't - And Can't - Sit Still (Like, Literally)



## Synopsis

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

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A new book about language by John McWhorter is always a treat. He has a knack for explaining

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

If you picture linguists as stuffy pedagogues intent on getting us all to talk more correctly, then witty iconoclast John McWhorter will be a refreshing revelation. He doesn't mind that "like" now means something more like "figuratively" and he can go into great detail about the uses of all those seemingly meaningless "likes" many of us pepper our speech with. McWhorter not only accepts that language is continually changing, he seems to delight in that fact and it's easy to be caught up in his fascinations and

enthusiasms. The book is full of interesting descriptions of the evolving histories of some of our everyday English words, and McWhorter even speculates about word use and sound changes to come. Combining humor and a deep understanding of the needs of human communication, this book about how languages works is both entertaining and enlightening. I read an advanced review copy of this book provided to me at no cost and with no obligation by the publisher through LibraryThing. Review opinions are mine.

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