

**Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE)  
versus Polyglot America:  
A Survival Kit for Personal-Growth Learners**

by Robert Oliphant\*

*Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English versus Polyglot America (SWADE v PA)*, is a wake-up call for Americans, especially those who noticed that many Egyptian protesters during the “Arab Spring” spoke clearer American English than some of our own college graduates. The book also offers a big career-lift to worried Americans, young and old, who want to sharpen their pronunciation, increase the measurable size of their vocabularies, strengthen their public speaking skills, and jump start their self-confidence.

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## Chapter One. Public Turmoil and Private Optimism — An Introduction

This is not a false alarm book. What's here regarding Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE, for short) will ring true to most readers, especially the parts about dictionaries and China. Even more important, since this is primarily a how-to book, most readers will also recognize the need for a strong emphasis, especially today, upon pronunciation, vocabulary, public speaking, and confidence building.

Given the seriousness of the SWADE/ Polyglot America conflict, it seemed proper to include a description of my own background as a lexicographer (Dr. Johnson called us "harmless drudges). But after the first 600 lines, what's here will be plain talk backed up with plenty of encouragement.

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Hi! My name is Bob and I'm not exactly a supporter of Congressman Steve King's bill to recognize English as the official language of the United States. Instead I'm what might be called a global-political philologist whose research indicates that Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE for short) is already an international language — enough so to justify a book to help Americans themselves use it effectively and profitably.

By way of bona fides: As a somewhat chatty columnist for Education News, I've had to be reminded by a colleague that my training some years back as a philologist is worth mentioning in connection with this book. This is to say that I actually earned a PhD at Stanford (1962) in what was then called English Philology, doing so under the guidance of Herbert Dean Meritt, who had studied Indo-European philology at Princeton under Harold Bender, who in turn had served as chief etymologist for the magnificent 1934 Merriam Webster's unabridged dictionary.

As indicated by my academic record, my degree required courses in Old English, Middle English, Anglo Norman, Gothic, Old Norse, Old High German, Middle High German, Old Saxon, Old French, Provencal, and Medieval Latin — along with additional work Sanskrit, Classical Latin, and Greek. The global-political part of what's here goes back to my studies of medieval lexicography (e.g., "The Harley Glossary," Mouton, 1963), a field whose primary sources indicate the status of Medieval Latin as an international language in what was then a warring polyglot Europe.

To me, especially as a medievalist, that interaction can be described as a struggle for socio-linguistic power between specific languages and dialects. Our most famous victor in these struggles was Classical Greek, which was adopted by the conquering Romans as

an international language of culture and science. This was the victory which the great historian Edward Gibbon famously described as “taking the conqueror captive.”

As an actual language Greek itself survived. But it changed greatly over the years, just as Classical Latin survived in dialectal (“polyglot”) form as Italian, Spanish, and French. Logically, then, we should not be surprised to see spoken American English moving in a polyglot direction as a mixture of different dialects and even different languages, as celebrated today in the “Rainbow Coalition” and the “Heritage Language” movements.

Surprising enough, polyglot American English during the last few years, starting with the 2008 Beijing Olympics, has been competing against a new and powerful spoken international language for Planet Earth, namely, Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE, for short). As indicated by the “dictionary” in its label, SWADE is an explicit standard-pronunciation based on what’s presented in American dictionaries, along with dictionary-based definitions, and even dictionary-based tests.

For most of us SWADE’s dominance shows up when we encounter offshore telephone hustlers, nearly all of whom sound as though they’re speaking from cubicles in Chicago, not Mumbai or Manila. But SWADE also shows up in the dictionary-based pronunciation emphasis of so-called “American English” programs in hundreds of nations all over the planet with millions and millions of students all marching to the same phonetic, vocabulary, and public speaking drummers.

Where American children now study a bizarre mix of geographical and ethnic dialects (different “heritage” languages, too), the rest of Planet Earth is mastering the same “Chicago to L.A.” pronunciation as a basis for effective communication and global cooperation. Sometimes calling it “Sina English,” more students in China are now studying dictionary-pronunciation American English than in the USA itself — understandably so, given the crippling differences between Cantonese, Mandarin, and other Sino-Tibetan languages.

Neighborhood languages and dialects for neighborhood use, Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English for national and international unity — who needs a worn out concept like Official English when we’re already far closer to a world language, a world economy, and even a world society than most politicians are willing to admit publicly.

This is not to say that Congressman King and his many supporters are wrong. As I see it, their hearts are pushing the right philological panic button, especially when it

comes to recognizing the destructive force of American Polyglot English (APE) — a phrase which owes a great deal to Charles Ferguson’s seminal concept of “diglossia.”

OUR HOW-TO APPROACH . . . . Nobody likes to be screamed at, especially all through a multi-chapter book. So let me begin (quietly) by pointing that what’s here follows the great American tradition of self-help learning. This is to say that it offers a practical method (personal-best learning) for achieving a highly desirable 4-element goal (pronunciation clarity, vocabulary power, public speaking skill, and stronger self-confidence.)

Dale Carnegie’s title: “How to Win Friends” (method) and Influence People (goal) is a classic example of this twofold approach, along with Norman Vincent Peale’s “The Power (goal) of Positive Thinking [method].” By way of additional illustration, here are some of the top titles listed by Amazon on February 14, 2011.

Think [method] and Grow Rich [goal], The 7 Habits [method] of Highly Successful People [goal], The Four Agreements [method]: A Practical Guide to Personal Success [goal], Getting Things Done [goal]: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity [method], Instant MBA [method]: Think, Perform, and Earn like a Top Business School Graduate [goal].

I cite these titles to underscore optimism as a major American premise in our lives and in our work, especially when it comes to noticing the prosperous surprises who show up at our high school and college reunions. Hence I believe it’s proper for me as an “optilogue” to describe this book’s eight basic themes from a personal-experience perspective: one that echoes Arthur Hugh Clough’s “In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!/ But westward, look! the land is bright” (recited many times by Churchill during WWII).

As we’ll see, each theme is linked chronologically to wise and generous friends who helped me discover what I was working on, as opposed to preconceived notions. So my 8-point narrative takes up a little more space than a conventional introductory sketch. But I think this extra space is truly worthwhile if it persuades readers that the author is a trustworthy bloke and that what’s here is worth their time.

1) 1951-55: Public Speaking. . . . Early in 1951 I become a member of the three Krazy Kats, a jazz-entertainment trio that will teach me the importance of public speaking, i.e., “talking to strangers.” My fellow Kats, Rick Fay (clarinet) and Bill Stewart (guitar) are marvelous players and singers. I play keyboard, including accordion, and write what was then called “material.”

But we are starting out at the bottom of the entertainment heap as musicians who simply tell a few jokes, not much more, and must transform themselves into “never-give-up” entertainers. This means memorizing and performing short skits, of course. But it also means, especially for me, standing in front of a microphone and filling up empty time with jokes and ad lib chit chat.

As with television and radio announcers, filling up time calls for clarity of articulation, not just mainstream pronunciation. In addition, it calls for direct interaction with members of the audience, many of whom are often drunk to the point of downright hostility. This experience will teach me that those who “keep talking quietly and rapidly and move in close” rarely take a fist in the face.

Mildly hazardous though entertaining is, Rick, Bill, and I soon learn to take ourselves seriously as speakers and show people, not just musicians. Even better, there is never a harsh word between us. In time we achieve the satisfaction of seeing our weekly take more than double, followed by over 50 years of occasional contact and lasting friendship.

Four years later, now thirty, I decide to get an M.A. and a community-college teaching credential as a prelude to settling down in a respectable day job: ideally near a big city where I can transfer my American Federation of Musicians (AFM) membership and work casuals.

2) 1955-59): Vocabulary. . . . Though turned down at first by the Stanford Department of English, I manage to get probationary acceptance as an M.A. candidate. Since this entails taking Old English, I become enchanted by Professor Herbert Dean Meritt, who encourages me to pursue a PhD in English philology with an emphasis upon phonetics, etymology, and medieval manuscripts.

I just love the stuff and do well as a grad student. This is followed by a full time job at what’s now called California State University, Northridge (CSUN). There I transfer my AFM card from San Francisco to Los Angeles and write notes to local contractors announcing my availability. Some of them respond positively, including an invitation from Lawrence Welk to audition as a ragtime piano player (too much for my bebopper chops to handle, I decide).

3) 1959-1980: Alzheimer’s disease. . . . Leonard Jerden, a bass player I often work casuals with, invites me to help him out at the Veterans Administration Hospital in nearby Sepulveda. At that time it is filled mostly with WWI veterans, many suffering from senile dementia. Through Leonard I become acquainted with Dr. Arthur Cherkin’s “reality orientation” program as an alternative to drug-based treatments for

Alzheimer's. Far more than I realize, this experience will greatly influence my life later on.

Thanks to Herbert Meritt's training my philology career goes well: publications in reputable journals, a visiting professorship at Stanford (1965-66), etc. Returning to CSUN, I am promoted to full professor: a step which gives me both security and restlessness, enough so that I now experiment with creative work: musical theater at first, followed by my first attempt at a novel.

After my application for a philological grant (Old English glosses in Spanish locales) is turned down, my wife and I go to Spain for my sabbatical (6 months). During this time I work at my novel, which ultimately gets published. It is based upon an actual Alzheimer's case and an actual happy ending, thanks to the VA "reality orientation" program.

Hooray! My novel, published in 1980, strikes a nerve and sells well, along with making it into a book club (Reader's Digest) and the movies (starring Bette Davis). It even achieves anti-Alzheimer's clinical respectability via endorsements from the National Institution on Aging and Modern Maturity, along with adoptions as a textbook in a number of nursing programs.

Though the pharmaceutical approach to Alzheimer's becomes more and more powerful, I continue my missionary work, asserting that senile dementia (often miscalled "Alzheimer's") should be dealt with as a "vocabulary disease." In this connection I cite current diagnostic usage of vocabulary questions like, "What does the expression 'two heads are better than one' mean to you?"

4) 1981-1994: American Polyglot English. . . . I become interested in community colleges and educational reform, which leads to a federal English-as-a-Second-Language grant. It also leads to a lasting friendship (still active) with Charles Karelis, then director of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and later President of Colgate University.

On the down side, my ESL experience hits me in the face with the destructive social impact of American multilingualism, or "polyglossia." I am warned in advance by an experienced ESL teacher that my multi-lingual students "all hate each other much more than they hate the Anglos — especially the Vietnamese, who hate the Koreans; the Central Americans who hate the Mexicans; the Armenians, who hate the Turks; and the Israelis, who hate the Arabs."

Strong words. But I can certainly see my ESL friend's generalization play out via who sits where in my classrooms and who talks with whom, not to mention my own memories of the Croat-Serb hostility I grew up with in the Ohio River Valley.

Though painful, this realization spurs me to recognize the crucial bonding function of what Noah Webster called "the American Language, as opposed to the warring languages (e.g. German) and dialects of his day (hence his emphasis upon pronunciation and spelling). To me Noah Webster's emphasis upon an American language will always make sense, far more so than Churchill's woolly notion of the "English speaking peoples" (recently revived by Robert McCrum's catch-all notion of "Globish."

5) 1995-2004: Memorization and in-the-head creativity. . . . Now retired, I resume my interest in Alzheimer's and memory loss. I read with great interest an article by Norman Cousins describing how UCLA researchers hooked him up to an electroencephalograph and asked him to "concentrate." Cousins' "concentration" solution: to match up the Gettysburg Address with the tune to Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Somewhat abashed, since I had never learned the G.A., I try to duplicate the feat: memorizing the speech and then matching it up in my mind's ear with the tune syllable by syllable in 4-beat rhythm, e.g., "four SCORE and SEVEN YEARS aGO/ our FATHERs BROUGHT - - FORTH [rest]/ on this CONTinent a new NA- - TION/ con-CEIVED in LIBerTY [rest]."

My personal fear of Alzheimer's (there's some in my family), along with my age impels, me to invest a lot of self-therapeutic time in memorizing poetry and prose, including long pieces like *Lycidas*, *My Last Duchess*, *The Raven*, *The Bill of Rights*, etc. Following Cousins' musical example, I try my hand at melodic translation, e.g., matching "Casey at the Bat" with the melody to "McNamara's Band."

I even take up composing "bouts rimes," a classic poetic form (Yeats used it) in which one retains the rhyming words of a given poem and replaces the rest of it with new words that make their own kind of sense. For example, consider the first two lines of Milton's *On His Blindness*: "When I consider how my sight is SPENT (emphasis added)/ Ere half my days in this dark world and WIDE/."

By way of illustrating the process: my "bouts-rimes translation" of these two lines takes the following shape, "Suppose you had the money that's been SPENT/ Upon your education. Far and WIDE/ [this completed in line 3 by "your travels then might take you"]. Later I will extend this "in the head, in the dark" activity to other kinds of mental exercise.

6) 2005-07: Standardized testing. . . . I become acquainted with Richard Phelps through his “In Defense of Testing” feature in EducationNews.org., along with EN’s quick-witted editor, Jimmy Fitzpatrick. Via correspondence and his own publications, Richard introduces me to psychometrics as an attractive discipline and a potentially useful tool.

Later he will kindly help me clean up my prose and then publish much of my work in eBook form in connection with his Nonpartisan Education Review. Like Charles Karelis, Richard and Jimmy are younger intellectual friends who do me great honor by reacting to my work.

7) 2008-09: Electronic dictionary-based testing and Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English. . . . I become acquainted with Alfred Papallo, president of Eurofield Information Solutions (EIS), an Australian company. Its data processing triumphs include WordGenius®, which they have used to produce high speed electronic versions of the Random House dictionaries (college size and unabridged).

I’m bowled over by Alfred’s electro-phonetic innovations, which include audio versions that actually “pronounce” the individual phonetic elements in each word (a great favorite with Pacific Rim learners). During this time my personal experience also familiarizes me more and more with the “Chicago to L.A.” pronunciation of hard ball off-shore tele-salespeople (India, Philippines, China, etc.).

Suddenly I realize that what’s now at work today, thanks to Alfred and others, is a new international spoken language, i.e., Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE, for short). Later on, this realization will be strengthened by hearing via TV many Egyptian rioters express their feelings in SWADE with a higher level of pronunciation clarity than some American college graduates display. Even more striking is the fact that many other Americans also notice this embarrassing disparity.

Looking back, I see that my years have brought me full circle. First public speaking (1951); then vocabulary building: after this, Alzheimer’s and American polyglot English. Then full retirement in: a busy, busy time comprising memorization and standardized testing, along with dictionary-based learning and testing — all of this driven by random events that justify a certain amount of optimism regarding what has been pretty much a shuffle-the-cards life.

8) 2010-11: Optimism and the encouragement business. . . . Like most “-ism” words, “optimism” has several definitions in American dictionaries, the first of which (and hence the most frequent) is a mild “expectation of favorable events.”



Pondering this, I find myself invoking the example of my multi-generational extended family, as represented by a great granddaughter's recent statement to others that "Granpa is in the encouragement business, not the advice business." Looking back over the years I decide that optimism and encouragement have been my standard tunes all along, far more so than good judgment, I must admit.

So for readers who might be somewhat discouraged about their futures (who isn't, especially late at night?), I would first emphasize the role of UNCERTAINTY in our lives. Would Stanford have turned my second application down if I had not shown Professor Whitaker my professional pictures?

Would I have written my first novel if my grant application had been successful? Would I be writing a column for Education News without the encouragement from Richard Phelps and Jimmy Fitzpatrick? Would I have been drafted in late 1944 and killed in the Battle of the Bulge if I hadn't enlisted in 1942? For tortoises like me (the "stumbling majority"), a hope based on the recognition of uncertainty is surely far more essential than it is for the rich, the well born, and the precocious.

To me a second feature of optimism is its honest recognition that PERSISTENCE is what gets results seven days out of every week, far more so than talent or even influential relatives. To come right out with it, I never got top grades in high school or college. But somehow I was able to push myself in grad school and compete effectively. For me, as for most Americans, it's still a "tortoise friendly" competition, thank heaven, not a stacked deck.

My last feature is that of PERSONAL GROWTH, and my example is Professor Whitaker's horrifying statement to the assembled Stanford teaching assistants (including me) that "nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than your own personal growth — the students will learn on their own, won't they?"

We were all shocked, of course, but Whitaker spoke truth, and everyone knew it. Certainly we all respected him for his willingness to cut like a knife through the nonsense and hypocrisy that still floods schools and universities today.

Here again the edge goes to the tortoises, not the hares. If your goal is personal growth, after all, a low grade in a course that stretches your awareness has more personal-best value than an A and fulsome flattery from an educational charlatan.

Uncertainty, persistence, personal growth (UPP) — this is the three-legged chair that will best support the readers of this book and that I hope has made my overt Narcissism somewhat tolerable.

Apart from their own personal growth (measurably so) and career achievement, I'm sure that those who take what's here seriously can honestly be proud of themselves as American Language Patriots fighting multilingual American Polyglot English by celebrating the "Speak Up!" feature of Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English. Important though reading is, it's the quality of a nation's speech that holds it together and pushes it forward. If what's here encourages its readers to speak up and do so more and more effectively, it will have done its job well.

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As Chaucer's Host might put it "this is a long preamble" for a relatively short book. But my inspiration is Hans Selye, the great Canadian biochemist who explicitly described his research methods, including the role of chance, along with his scientific findings, most famously the concept of "stress" as a General Adaptation Syndrome. To me, as to others, his writing rang true; just as I hope mine will.

I should emphasize again that the chapters which follow took shape originally as separate articles. As a group they're more like a number of signboards rather than the step-by-step marching orders one gets from a textbook. For that kind of direction, I refer the reader to the other eBooks available for downloading via [npe.educationnews.org](http://npe.educationnews.org) (under "Articles & Books" or "Resources").

As for general reading, I suggest Francis Fukuyama's "The Origins of Political Order," especially the importance he attaches to the concepts of State, Law, and Accounting in the functioning of what he calls "democratic capitalism."

From a personal-growth learner's perspective, I suggest linking Fukuyama's concept of democratic capitalism to the concept of "socio-linguistic opportunity," as opposed to "multi-cultural divisiveness," which links up well with Fukuyama's two emerging threats to democratic capitalism worldwide, namely "patrimony" (rule by inherited wealth and power), and tribalism (ethnic loyalties and conflicts).

I hope this link makes sense to what I feel is my primary audience: personal-growth learners and their families. Quite frankly, I feel that our socio-linguistic opportunities are today threatened from without by Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE) and from within by multi-cultural divisiveness.

To put it another way, I feel that the perspective of personal-growth learning is far more essential today than in years past when formal education could take most Americans where they wanted to go in career terms. Practically considered, the USA is being conquered by SWADE, which was originally its own language: far more so than the

polyglot American Englishes officially sanctioned as “heritage languages” in current education policy.

It’s also potentially more productive, I feel. The climate I’ve described, though stultifying to our nation overall, nevertheless opens up many, many opportunities for those who take their own personal growth seriously and seek out career opportunities that in turn will take what they offer seriously.

As the saying goes, when the going gets tough the tough get going — just like the Great Depression or the chaos just after WWII. So here’s hoping that what’s here will help some of its readers flavor what lies ahead with optimism and energy.

So by way of an after-the-fact dedication: “Here’s to those who honestly believe that persistence trumps brains seven days out of the week.”

NOW AVAILABLE:

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A Survival Kit for Personal-Growth Learners**

Each of the following chapters can now be downloaded without charge by visiting the *Nonpartisan Education Review* web site, or by clicking on the links below.

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\*. ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A Stanford PhD, the author's best known book is the anti-Alzheimer's "A Piano for Mrs. Cimino," which was a Reader's Digest selection worldwide, and whose film version won a Monte Carlo award for Bette Davis. He is a columnist for [www.EducationNews.org](http://www.EducationNews.org) and his recent eBooks are available from [npe.educationnews.org](http://npe.educationnews.org) under "Article & Books" or "Resources." A veteran of WWII (Air Corps) and a former professional musician, he is an emeritus professor of English at California State University, Northridge.