After Words: The American Language
Using Interpretive Design to Provoke
Critical Reflection on Language Privilege

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Abstract

After Words: The American Language Using Interpretive Design to Provoke Critical Reflection on Language Privilege

This thesis proposal explores the ability of exhibition design to covertly provoke consideration of complex or socially taboo content through interpretive, participatory, and interactive experiences. After Words: The American Language will take place at the Planet Word Language Museum in Washington, DC, which is scheduled to open in the winter of 2019. The goal of the exhibition is to engage visitors with the uncomfortable topic of inequality in the American class structure, and how it is reflected in the English language, through an interactive museum experience. This exhibition will explore the evolution of English through the lens of the systems which shaped it, a concept also known as sociolinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and society. The target audience for this exhibition is professional adults, ages 25 to 65. Since the goal is to challenge perceived stereotypes in American English speakers, this exhibition has potential for significant social impact, especially in Washington, D.C.
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Introduction

“There is no such thing as an ugly accent, like there’s no such thing as an ugly flower.”

Through the development of signs and symbols, humans created language, a system of communication which has become increasingly more sophisticated over time. Today, English is the contemporary lingua franca, surpassing both Latin and Greek as the universal vernacular for trade, politics, and even air travel\(^2\). Under this umbrella are many dialects and accents that contribute to the rich and varied lexicon of the English language. In America, these unique dialects have been formed through circumstance and condition. Specifically American phenomena including colonization, music, and politics have helped shaped vocabulary and pronunciation throughout the history of the country.

*After Words: The American Language* will explore the evolution of the English language through the lens of the systems which shaped it, using the concept of sociolinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and society. The interpretive goal of this exhibition is to engage visitors with concepts of privilege and prejudice in the American class structure through an interactive museum experience. By forgoing the traditional museum trope of employing historical motifs and chronological configurations, this exhibit presents complex ideas to the viewer in an approachable and compelling way. While a conventional museum approach might alienate visitors or come across as patronizing, a participatory experience feels more like a consensual conversation\(^3\). This approach enables visitors to learn about the development of language through fun.

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“Enshrined in a language is the whole of a community’s history and a large part of its cultural identity.”

This exhibit invites participants to learn about the complexities of the American sociolinguistic landscape through interpretive environments and interactive elements.

This proposal will explore the ability of participatory design to engage an audience in a conversation about privilege and prejudice in America.

English is the lingua franca of planet earth, the preferred language in business, politics, and international travel. It is the most widely learned second language and dictates popular culture all over the world. In America, the varied accents and dialects of English speakers connote class and status. In the past few years in particular, America’s current political and socio-economic climate has come to an ominous precipice. Communities which have long felt abused and neglected are beginning to confront each other in their search for equality and recognition. Aspects of social discord and disconnectedness can be traced back to differences in education, upbringing, and values which are reflected in the way we speak. These disparities in vocabulary and grammar help enforce the damaging misconception that ‘we’ are better than ‘them.’ “In a pluralistic society, people struggle to deal with difference. One of the ways in which we typically deal with difference is by drawing really clear lines of belonging and not-belonging. To be able to signal “who is with me” and “who is not with me”—in-groups

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and out-groups—is extremely significant for human beings.”

A museum exhibition that addresses the way in which our language contributes to the oppressive force of systemic inequality in America is timely and relevant.

Although written language and spoken language can be mistakenly considered the same concept, they are distinct mediums which operate independently of each other, “To study writing was not to study language. All languages were spoken through nearly all of their history by people who did not read or write; the languages of such people are just as stable, regular, and rich as the languages of literate nations.”

Written language developed after spoken language as a method of idea preservation and dissemination, “...the written language is something which can be controlled. It is not a natural medium of language, as speech is. It has to be learned, through formal processes of teaching, usually in school. If a country is to have a standard language, it has to be taught. And writing is the best medium for introducing it.”

The standard English taught in schools is rarely used colloquially in everyday life. More likely, the vernacular spoken in the average American home is a regional dialect that reflects the conditions under which it developed: community, social practice, socio-economic class. This continually widening rift between English taught in school and English spoken in the home contributes to damaging misconceptions about the validity of vernacular dialects.

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Exhibition Goals

By attending After Words: The American Language, visitors will learn how words develop meaning and how grammar changes over time. Visitors will also learn why people speak English differently across America, and appreciate how historical events, music and literature, and burgeoning technology shape English. After their visit, visitors will have a basic understanding of the following key messages: a) English has many distinct accents and dialects; b) English is constantly evolving; c) there is no correct way to speak English.

Exhibition Content

The exhibition content is divided into three sections. The introduction will prime the visitor for the exhibit and explain why this topic is important, not only to society as a whole, but to the visitor personally. Language as a class identifier, and the idea of the ‘other’ will be introduced, as well as the concept of language as a tool of the people. The visitor will understand that the exhibit is not organized chronologically, but divided into sections based on what kind of factors influenced the development of English in America. The major content sections in the exhibit are Accent and Identity, Art, Music, and English, and English in America Today.

The first content section, Accent and Identity, gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the different regional dialects and accents of English in America and how they developed through migration and the colonization of the country. Americans today have formed communities based on their shared identity and the accent that accompanies it. Recognizing your own manner of speech in another human solidifies the bond of sameness and shared origins. When Europeans first began colonizing the North
American Continent, they encountered numerous foreign languages, some of which were familiar, such as French and Spanish. Others, like the indigenous languages of the native people, were completely new. Terminology from these languages were quickly adopted into the English lexicon in order to identify geography, such as “Connecticut” and “Illinois”, and name flora and fauna such as “raccoon” and “coyote”. A huge portion of our modern American vocabulary has origins in French and Spanish, and collision with these languages resulted in dialects still spoken in some parts of the states, such as Cajun English in Louisiana and Gullah from Georgie and the coast of South Carolina. Americans today have formed communities based on their shared identity and the accent that accompanies it. Recognizing your own manner of speech in another human solidifies the bond of sameness and shared origins.

The second content section, *Art, Music, and English*, highlights developments in culture and entertainment that influenced English grammar and vocabulary, from Shakespeare to modern Hip Hop. Shakespeare, who is widely considered to be one of the greatest writers of all time, manipulated syntax and syllable length with abandon. He employed iambic pentameter throughout his writing, shortening and rearranging words as necessary in order to fit the rhythmic pattern. It is believed that Shakespeare can be credited with inventing and introducing nearly 2,000 words to the English language.

Modern Hip Hop, which finds its roots in the Black musical tradition of rhythm and blues, should be credited as a huge innovator and influencer of English. In order to survive, both physically and spiritually, slaves maintained a strong connection to their

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native cultures, against all odds. Songs, music, and stories to pass down through the generations were often the only means of keeping their heritage alive\(^{14}\). African tribal languages melded with Southern English to form the roots of what today is known as Black English\(^{15}\). Here the visitor is also introduced to the beginnings of how spoken English became a powerful indicator of American class structure. Rappers invent new slang and the American public immediately incorporates it into their everyday speech. Today’s rap artists have vocabularies twice as extensive as Shakespeare’s\(^{16}\), and employ rhyme patterns considerably more complex than the iambic pentameter\(^{17}\). Music and pop culture are constantly pushing English in new directions, stretching it to its limits.

The third content section, *English in America Today*, explores the current socio-political climate in our country. The hyper-partisanship in our government is exemplified in the divide of our citizens, which is again amplified by the differences in the way we speak. This section gives visitors the opportunity to explore the connection between the way we speak and the prejudices we unknowingly harbor against each other. Just as accent is a way to find those who we are like, it can also be a way to identify those we are different from. With the advancement of technology and social media, our language and method of communication is evolving faster than we can keep up with it; hurling insults and accusations has become to default, as opposed to conducting civilized conversations. It is becoming more important than ever that we take the time to slow down in order to understand each other.

Throughout the exhibit, visitors will be presented with questions for contemplation in vinyl on the wall adjacent to related interactives. The questions will

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engage the participants in consideration about privilege as it relates to language, and the role of English in systemic inequality in America. Some example questions are: Why is Shakespeare revered while Hip Hop is undervalued? Can there be an error in grammar that is both common and incorrect? What can I do to better understand my fellow Americans?

Site

The site for this exhibit will be Planet Word, a language museum slated to open in Washington, D.C. in 2019. The museum will open in the historic Franklin School building in Franklin Square, in the heart of downtown D.C.

Planet Word Language Museum

Planet Word Language Museum has been selected as the site for this exhibition primarily because its values and missions perfectly align with the goals of the exhibit. As outlined in their vision statement, the museum’s primary goal is to inspire a love of language through “unique, immersive learning experiences.” A museum for everyone, Planet Word welcomes people of all ages regardless of English fluency, so that visitors will see that connections can be made, and change enacted, through the power of words. The museum will offer multi-sensory and physical activities, innovative exhibits, and community classes and workshops.

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Washington, D.C.

The location of this exhibition in central Washington D.C. presents a wide audience from many different backgrounds and sets of experience. Washington is home to an international community; twenty-three language other than English and Spanish are spoken in the city. The convergence of English with such a diverse variety of foreign languages results in manifold accents and English dialects. Washington D.C. is home to some of the country’s finest educational institutions, and a survey done by the U.S. Census Bureau (Figure 1) found that it is the most educated city in America with nearly 50 percent of the population having Bachelor’s degrees as of 2014. This fact combined with D.C.’s enormous diversity makes it the perfect city for this exhibition.

Figure 1: Data from U.S. Census Bureau

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The Franklin School Building

Designated as a National Historic Landmark, as well as being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Franklin School (Figure 2) originally opened in 1869\textsuperscript{21}. Alexander Graham Bell successfully tested his invention called a ‘photophone’, which transmitted sound via light-waves, on the roof of the building in 1880. Located only a few blocks from the White House, at the time of its completion the Franklin School was one of the most prominent buildings in Washington, with a large clock on the exterior façade that served as the primary timepiece for the neighborhood.

![Franklin School Building](image)

\textit{Figure 2: Franklin School Building}

The interior of the building is one of thirteen in D.C. given interior landmark protection, and remains largely untouched since the building’s closure several decades ago. The building’s original and preserved interior includes fourteen classrooms with windows, central heating and ventilation systems, and an enormous third floor Great

Hall for public lectures, musical performances, and student exhibitions. The Great Hall, which can seat 1,000 students, is the room in which the exhibit will take place (Figure 3).

![Third Story Floor Plan, Franklin School](image)

**Figure 3: Third Story Floor Plan, Franklin School**

Adolf Cluss, the architect, was a prolific designer and his buildings can be seen all over the city\(^{22}\); a few of the more recognizable are the Eastern Market, the Arts and Industries Building, and the Sumner School Building. The Franklin School Building combines two genres of architectural style, modern Renaissance, also known as Renaissance Revival, and a German style called “Rundbogenstil,”\(^{23}\) which is characterized by rounded archways and smooth building facades. Cluss describes the building in a variety of terms, all of which can be distilled down to a general feeling of elegance and simplicity, “a wise sobriety is observed in the use of modest, severe, and delicate ornaments, couples with a scrupulous care to apply them only where the style calls for them, so as to attain that seemly comeliness, that elegant exterior, which is powerful to diffuse good taste among the people at large, by pre-eminently among the growing generation.”\(^{24}\)

\(^{22}\)“Franklin School.” Adolf Cluss Website.

\(^{23}\)“Franklin School.” Adolf Cluss Website.

Choosing a historical landmark for the exhibit poses a unique set of challenges. No significant changes can be made to the structure of the building, meaning no walls can be altered or removed. Designing an exhibition in a building with narrow doorways can be problematic; visitors can easily become crowded in a bottleneck and become discouraged from entering an exhibit, visitor flow can become interrupted and awkward, exhibit floor plans must be reworked for smaller spaces. Temporary walls and partitions can reconfigure the space in order to achieve the desired atmosphere. Floor to ceiling windows in the Great Hall let in an enormous amount of daylight which can cause glare and unwanted shadows.

Hosting the exhibition in the Franklin School also presents the opportunity to capitalize on its educational origins and beautiful architecture. When Planet Word Language Museum moves into the building, the Franklin School will be given a new
purpose; aspects of this adaptive reuse, which will be explored in the exhibit design strategy.

Audience

Linguist David Crystal states, “Accents and dialects are both inward-looking, fostering group solidarity, and outward-looking, fostering group difference. ‘We are like us, and we are not like them.’ The more speakers there are, of course, and the more they encounter each other, the more the distinctive features of an accent become noticed, imitated, exaggerated, and satirized.” The phenomena of accents and dialects are closely connected with issues that concern American society; systemic racism, education crisis, and significant economic disparity. The ultimate goal of the exhibition is to foster notions of equality and to challenge perceived stereotypes regarding language. With that goal in mind, this exhibit is designed specifically for college educated and professional Americans, ages 25-65. This group is more likely to harbor certain prejudices, consciously or subconsciously, against people who speak a dialectal version of English that does not fall within the prescribed norm.

The Smithsonian Institution published a study which found that tourists visiting Washington, D.C. have the personal resources like time and finances that enable them to travel. People with said privilege are more likely to have higher levels of

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education who seek intellectually stimulating experiences, specifically with non-traditional subject matter. Data from 2010 reflects core museum visitor demographics as merely 9% minority population\(^{29}\) (Figure 4), making the large majority of museum visitors white. White, educated tourists are most likely to speak Standard American English (SAE) which is taught in the traditional American educational system. It is important to recognize that even if someone is not overtly prejudiced, their opinions and resulting actions may be informed by false assumptions.

![Figure 5: Museum Visitor Demographics, AAM](image)

The greatest challenge while designing for this demographic is how to alter their perception without making them feel as if they are being judged and persecuted. It has been proven time and time again that it is almost impossible to convince someone using aggressive confrontation. The goal of this exhibition is to convey the key exhibit messages without alienating the audience. Complex ideas about language privilege and

structural inequality will be covertly communicated through linguistically inspired interactives, without watering down content. Interactive components that appeal to physical, verbal, aural, and visual learning styles will reach the widest audience possible within the exhibit.

Design Strategy

The design goal of the exhibition is to create an unexpectedly elegant environment which reflects the nature of the content, as well as utilizing the inherent personality of the exhibit space. Two key metaphors guide the design strategy for this exhibit: fabric, and adaptive reuse.

Fabric as a Narrative Device

The first metaphor draws similarities between fabric and the exhibition topic. Both fabric and language can be shaped in order to best serve their immediate function; they can respond to circumstance as necessary, they are flexible and versatile, and can perform more than one purpose at a time. This metaphor will become materialized through deliberate use of fabric and scrims throughout the exhibit.
The primary narrative device will be achieved by a molded structure which imitates the elasticity and appearance of fabric, which will wind through the exhibit from room to room (Figures 6 and 7). This will serve as a linear device for visitors to follow throughout the exhibit, as well as the supporting structure for interactive media and text panels. Just like the evolution of English was an organic and fluid process, the fabric-like structure will impart a sense of harmony and intrinsic organization. The structure will climb up and down walls, graze the ceiling and floor, and in some places go through the wall even where visitors cannot. It will communicate a feeling of elegant continuity to the visitors, while keeping their imaginations engaged on a subconscious level.

Using white scrim as opposed to exhibit walls will allow the visitor to view other galleries in the exhibit, to a certain degree (Figures 8 and 9). As a result, the entire exhibit will have an ethereal quality with softly diffused daylight from the windows filtering through all of the separate rooms.
This light will be supplemented with fluorescent backlighting mounted underneath the fabric-like molded structure, and focused spotlights as needed on interactives. Daylight from the windows will be filtered through the scrims, allowing the natural flux of circadian light, which translates into an environment that reflects the constantly changing landscape of the English language. Instead of blacking out the windows and creating artificial light, utilizing scrims will exist in juxtaposition with the original architecture instead of ignoring it. Doorways as well as the interstitial areas will take the shape of amorphous fabric tunnels, integrating the transitional periods between content areas into the overall design narrative.
Incorporating Existing Architecture into Design Elements

The second metaphor, adaptive reuse, refers to the architectural theory of repurposing a historical building for a use\(^{30}\). Just as the Planet Word Museum will repurpose an old school building for exhibition space, language is constantly undergoing a similar process reworking when words find new meaning through repetition and necessity. As visitors engage with the exhibit content, they will find themselves with a historically educational environment juxtaposed with a modern exhibit design aesthetic.

The Franklin School was built in the German style of ‘Rundbogenstil’ which is characterized by repeating rounded archways. The doorways and windows are all crowned with elegant arches, which will be echoed by the round, looping shapes of the fabric-like structure. The narrative device structure will mirror the windows and doorways, following their gentle arch, complementing the historic architecture. In some places the narrative device will gradually diverge to interact with the next door or window, mimicking the whimsical flightiness of the English evolution.

Interpretive Strategy

The goal of this exhibition is to covertly engage visitors with the concept of systemic inequality in America through the lens of spoken English, by using interpretive environments and interactive experiences.

\(^{30}\text{Kennedy, Katie. "Adaptive Reuse: How can we make old buildings more sustainable?"}\)
Interpretive Goals:

1. Observe the development of language meaning and grammar over time
2. Understand how society and culture influence English in America, and visa-versa
3. Appreciate the amazing diversity and adaptive nature of the English language

Interpretive Strategies:

1. Interactives designed for individuals and group experience
2. Visual metaphors: adaptive reuse—achieved through incorporation of site architecture into design, and the fabric of the English language—utilizing fabric elements throughout the exhibit
3. Immersive audio environments where visitors can be surrounded by the complex landscape of American English

Adaptive Reuse as an Interpretive Strategy

The primary interpretive narrative device will be an uninterrupted ribbon-like structure weaving throughout the galleries in the exhibition. The exhibit will capitalize on the historical architectural qualities of the site to comment on the intersection of tradition and modernity in society, and the nature of language to constantly reinvent itself. Feeding visitors this metaphor covertly through design elements will reinforce the didactic content experienced through the interactive elements and text panels.
Interstitial Spaces

Interstitial spaces in exhibits can be hallways, doorways, and other spaces that typically aren’t used for content. By activating these interstitial spaces, the exhibit can maximize its potential. This exhibit is divided into three distinct content areas, separated by interstitial hallways. In order to enter the next content area, visitors must pass through a hallway that stretches the length of the gallery, no more than 5 feet wide.

The hallways will be completely draped in white fabric, creating an amorphous, billowing shape. (Figures 10 and 11) The visitor will be surrounded by a rich soundscape of layered audio recordings comprised of different American English dialects and accents, played at alternating volumes. The effect will be immersive, but never overwhelming. The goal is for the visitor to be in awe of the huge variety of English
dialects and accents that are spoken in our country, and to consider them in an artistic
framework as beautiful and interesting.

Visitor Experience Narrative

The experiential sphere of After Words reaches beyond the walls of the physical exhibit. The typical visitor narrative begins with online social media. Facebook and Instagram are extremely powerful tools in today’s society, with the ability to influence public interest and opinion. The hashtag #AfterWords is trending on both websites, accompanied by articles and visitor photos, sharing both positive and less than positive reviews of others’ experiences. By searching the hashtag on Instagram, the visitor can get a taste of the deeply interactive quality of the exhibit, short clips of friends playing games in the museum or trying to imitate a thick Boston accent while giggling wildly. It is very possible that the visitor has never heard of Planet Word at this point, as it is a new museum which has not garnered the same level of recognition as the Smithsonian institutions. Falling deeper into the rabbit hole might result in some light research about the origins of the museum and notable history of the Franklin Building itself.

Discovering that Alexander Graham Bell conducted his famed museum of the roof piques the adult visitor’s interest on an academic level—the importance of the telephone is not lost even on the average citizen. The newness of the museum, combined with the intrigue of a fun and visually beautiful exhibit cements the visitor’s desire to share the experience with their social media friends. A trip is planned with a spouse or friendly coworker. Both parties are pleasantly surprised to find that the museum is free of charge.

The museum is easy to find, directly adjacent to Franklin Square in downtown Washington, D.C. Dozens of bus lines stop around the perimeter of the park, and the McPherson metro stop is a block away. Making the smart decision to use public
transportation in order to avoid the headache of finding street parking, the visitors approach the building from the west, walking down I St. The Franklin School Building is beautifully restored and adorned in banners advertising the exhibit, and pedestrians on the street can see museum visitors through the large decorative windows. Entering the exhibit, the visitors must wait in a short queue, most tourists are down by the mall, but Saturday crowds are still present. The crowd divulges a diverse interest in the exhibit topic—visitors of all ages shuffle impatiently, shifting from foot to foot. Young families, teenage friend groups, and adult tourists have all heard about the exhibit through social media or an advertising campaign.

Once through security, the ascent to the exhibit begins either in the elevator or in the stairs. In the stairwell visitors find their silhouette outlined in a black and white projection of English words, ranging from the mundane to the ridiculous. The younger visitors already have their cellphones out, recording short clips on Snap Chat, or uploading selfies to their Instagram stories. At the top of the stairwell the visitors are presented with the introduction panel, which is situated slightly off to the side in order to avoid problematic crowding at the entrance. The exhibit title, “After Words: The American Language,” is on the wall in black vinyl letters. Some visitors stop and read the short intro text while others blow past it entirely, drawn into the exhibit through the decorative arched doorway and white scrim tunnel.

The visitor’s first impression is in appreciation of the beautifully constructed environment in which they find themselves. The entire gallery is encased in a white scrim bubble of sorts, which contains the exhibit and makes it distinct from the historic Great Hall of the Franklin School. The scrim is transparent so the visitors are able to see the decorative architectural elements of the room; aging but preserved crown molding on the floor and ceiling, arched windows and doorways with original cathedral style glass windows, black and white marble tiled floors. The gallery is divided into distinct sections
by more of the white scrim; daylight filters in from the grand windows through the entire
gallery and visitors can see other people walking in other sections, but not so much as to
be distracting from the section they currently find themselves in.

The first section of the exhibit is called, “You Say Tomato, I Say Tomato: Accent
and Identity.” In this section visitors learn about the different regional dialects of English
in America, from Cajun to Midwestern, and how they evolved. Small groups of visitors
gather around various interactives, listening to short audio clips, and attempting to
identify where the speaker is from based on their pronunciation and vocabulary. They
can practice speaking in an accent that is different from their own, learn to shape their
mouths in order to produce the recognizably long vowels of a Chicago accent. Some high
school students are entranced by an interactive map of the United States where visitors
can trace migration patterns across the country and follow the evolution of American
English dialects as the language encountered influencing circumstances. There is a
recording booth where visitors are welcomed and encourage to read aloud a piece of
prose and add their voice to an accent database.

After engaging with the interactive elements in the first section, the visitors find
themselves looking for a way to enter the next areas of the gallery. There are two
openings in the gray scrim wall, which is slightly more opaque than the white scrim
which covers the rest of the gallery. One opening is large enough for multiple people to
pass through at once, while the other is smaller and more discrete. Only noticeable while
looking back towards the entrance, the second opening is slightly obscured and secretive,
only large enough for one person to slip through. After passing through one of these
portals, the visitors find themselves in a darker but still ethereal corridor. Light filters
through the scrim more in some places than in others, creating an unearthly quality,
which invokes awe in the visitors, who walk quietly through the space. The space is
categorized by the pockets of sound the visitors encounter as they make their way
down the corridor. Audio recordings of different voices play throughout the space, reciting vaguely familiar prose and poetry. Some voices are stronger than others, imbued with personality, both male and female, young and old, confident and shy. If the visitor listens closely, they can hear all the recordings playing at the same time, which when tuned out become a soft hum in the background. Each voice only becomes distinct and noticeable on its own when the visitor enters the sphere of sound each recording occupies. The result is a gentle cacophony of speech, presented without commentary or explanation. Visitors walk around the space in a daze, mouths slightly agape, ears turned upwards, eyes wide in appreciation for the bewitching harmony of the American linguistic soundscape projected throughout.

From within this interstitial space, visitors can enter one of two other sections. The second section is called “Through the Grapevine: Art, Music, and English.” A quote from Hans Christian Andersen is immediately visible on the wall as the visitor exits the tunnel, “Where words fail, music speaks.” This section is larger than the first, and is located on the west side of the building, with five tall windows transmitting cool daylight throughout. In the far corner, there is a small lounge area where visitors can recline and watch music videos and movie clips. Visitors have the opportunity to learn about the evolution of English through hip hop and modern culture, how slang developed as a result of music, and even write their own song or poem. There is a karaoke station where visitors attempt to rap along to complex lyrics, or match the bouncing rhythm of iambic pentameter in Shakespearean sonnets. Visitors have the opportunity to play a game where they attempt to identify the celebrity based only on the sound of their voice. Even visitors who are less familiar with popular culture and contemporary music are fascinated by the huge influence artists have over the American English dialectical sphere.
The visitor returns to the interstitial corridor in order to enter the final section of the exhibit. Some choose to linger once more in the enchanting space, while others walk directly into the third gallery which is called, “Stating the Union: English in America Today.” This section is slightly more confrontational than the previous two. News reports echo across the gallery, filling the space with the sound of Donald Trump’s recent interview and Barack Obama’s acceptance speech from 2008. In this section visitors have the opportunity to learn about the role language plays in the political landscape, how it divides and connects us, and why representation of different accents and dialects matter. The final opportunity for interaction is near the exhibit exit; a large comment wall where visitors can write directly on a white board wall and share their opinions and experiences. Suggestions for the exhibition, times where they have felt prejudiced against because of the way they speak, words they love or dislike, quotes that are meaningful to them.

After leaving the exhibition, visitors eagerly share clips and photos from their experience on social media, adding their commentary about the exhibition. Some visitors leave with a new opinion or point of view that they had not previously considered; some heard an accent they had never heard before, others learned something about themselves and the preconceived notions they carry with themselves through their daily lives. Others leave without gaining deeper knowledge of language privilege, having just had a fun and lighthearted experience.
Conclusion: Discovery Through Design

“Language has no independent existence apart from the people who use it. It is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end of understanding who you are and what society is like.”

The very concept of design implies intention and deliberate action in order to produce the desired end product. From schematic and conceptual design, leading into the realized design of the physical space, *After Words* evolved into a more well developed and visitor-friendly experience.

Developing the physical design in three dimensional space brought some truths about the exhibition space to the surface. Despite the immense height of the thirty-four foot ceilings and twelve foot windows, the Great Hall of the Franklin Building began to feel extremely crowded when filled with all the design elements which were originally developed in the conceptual stage of the project. Schematic diagrams and spatial iterations helped to map out visitor flow through interactives and transitional spaces. In order to create a cohesive and comprehensible exhibit experience, some of the intended elements needed to be eliminated or simplified.

By examining the influencing factors that shaped English, the language that all Americans experience, this exhibit calls attention to privilege as it relates to language and the role it plays in systemic inequality. These interactives engage the visitors in an unassuming way that creates a more accepting and relaxed state of mind, so that the audience does not feel persecuted or threatened. Through effective exhibition design, museums have the ability to break down social barriers that reinforce misconceptions about class structure in the United States. *After Words: The American Language* gives visitors the tools to start important conversations within their own communities.

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Appendices I: Precedents

“Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices” (The British Library)

An exhibit in London ran from November 2010 through April 2011 called, “Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices”\(^{32}\) chronicled the evolution of the English language through history. This exhibit was largely defined by the nature of the institution that hosted it; the British Library. The development of English was tracked through historic texts in the Library’s collection, like a King James Bible from 1611.\(^{33}\) The exhibit also featured programming like live performances of Beowulf, a lecture given by David Crystal, and a living archive compiled of short recordings of contemporary English speakers. The exhibit was hugely comprehensive and tackled the subject chronologically.

Aside from being artifact heavy, the greatest difference between ‘Evolving English’ and The American English Experience is that it was designed from a British point of view. This exhibit is primarily concerned with American English; how our language was shaped by American history, events, and culture. The British Library utilized its enormous collection of artifacts to assemble the exhibit.

Take-Aways

- The success of this exhibit depends on examining the American relationship with language and how it influences American systems in particular
- How can visitors engage with language without putting a focus on literature and physical artifacts?


\(^{33}\)“Evolving English: On Top of the World.” *The Independent*. 

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• Can this exhibit be more successful in creating meaningful conversation by limiting its scope to a shorter time frame?

“In Order to Control”

An art installation called, “In Order to Control,”34 presents a different approach to interacting with language. Nota Bene, a multidisciplinary studio in Istanbul, created an interactive typographic installation that was exhibited in Turkey, France, the Netherlands, and the United States in 2015 and 2016. A text on ethics and morality was projected on the floor, and when people stepped on the text, it took the shape of their bodies on the adjacent wall. This installation engages the participant both mentally and physically, seeing themselves manifested in the text they are reading, resulting in self-reflection directly related to the textual subject matter.

Figure 11: In Order to Control Participant

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Take-Aways

- Some content can be left up to the visitor to interpret simply by interacting with it in an unexpected way.
- Provide visitors with the opportunity for self-reflection, can be experienced privately or publically.

“The Archaeology of the Netherlands” (Rijkmuseum Van Oudheden Leiden)

A Netherlands based exhibit design firm called Kinkorn produced an exhibit for the Rijkmuseum Van Oudheden Leiden on the Archeology of the Netherlands. The primary narrative structure in the exhibit is a white ribbon-like configuration that weaves throughout the galleries, supporting text panels and artifact cases (Figures 13 and 14). The uninterrupted structure represents the continuity of history, the artery that connects all events in a chain of consequence. The presentation of objects and text in an undulating environment gives the content a sense of context and relevancy. The designers support their narrative device with a quote from Marcus Aurelius, “What follows is always connected to its past.”

Figure 12: Archaeology of Netherlands Exhibit

Take-Aways

- Not all exhibit messaging needs to be overt, visitors understand and appreciate metaphor
- A linear narrative device does not need to be didactic or rigid.

“Head-In” (Berlinische Galerie)

In 2009 Berlin based firm Magma Architecture created an installation called ‘Head-in’ to exhibit a collection of their architectural models. The installation featured a stretched fabric structure supported above the floor by an aluminum frame (Figure 15). In order to see the objects on view, visitors must insert their heads into openings in the fabric structure, where the models are suspended (Figure 16). The nebulous, orange fabric structure occupies almost the entire gallery space, arresting visitors visually and physically immediately upon entry. The fabric structure engages participants with a sense of play, curiosity, and offers an unexpected design experience that is complex, but

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not complicated. The main feature of the exhibit also functions as the tool through which to experience the exhibit, enhancing the visitors’ interaction with the content.

Figure 14: Head-In Exhibit View

Figure 15: Head-In Exhibit View 2
Take-Aways

- Introducing a sense of play into an exhibit does not mean undermining its weight or importance. Visual design is not trivial—it is an integral part of the visitor experience.
Appendix II: Design Documentation

Figure 16: Bubble Plan Iteration A

Figure 17: Bubble Plan Iteration B
Figure 18: Bubble Plan Iteration C

Figure 20: Content Diagram Iteration A
Figure 21: Content Diagram Iteration B

Figure 22: Content Diagram Iteration C
Figure 23: Visitor Journey Map Iteration A

Figure 24: Visitor Journey Map Iteration B
Figure 25: Visitor Journey Map Iteration C

Figure 26: Interpretive Content Mapping
Works Cited

https://ed.ted.com/on/kg3xD91P.


Images


Figure 3. Third Story Floor Plan, Franklin School Building, Washington, D.C. Digital image. Accessed November 16, 2017. http://franklinschooldc.org/Franklin_School_DC/Photos_and_Plans/Pages/Franklin_Cluss_1870a.html#4


Figure 6. Dual City Sessions Exhibit View. http://www.artless.co.jp ALOG/exhibition/page/5/

Figure 7. In gutter Verfassung. http://bjoernmeier.com/#!/entry/in-guter-verfassung/

Figure 8. Robert Irwin, Varese Scrim (2013). https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/349169777341804880/

Figure 9. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manus x Machina Exhibition View. Dezeen. https://www.dezeen.com/2016/05/02/oma-exhibition-design-metropolitan-museum-of-art-costume-institute-manus-x-machina-fashion-technology/


Figure 17. Bubble Plan Iteration A. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 18. Bubble Plan Iteration B. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 19. Bubble Plan Iteration C. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 20. Content Diagram Iteration A. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 21. Content Diagram Iteration B. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 22. Content Diagram Iteration C. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 23. Visitor Journey Map Iteration A. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 24. Visitor Journey Map Iteration B. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 25. Visitor Journey Map Iteration C. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.

Figure 26. Interpretive Content Mapping. Drawn by Chloe Alexander.