1. Robert MacNeil says, “Americans consider themselves egalitarian and un-snobbish about accents, but they’re full of notions about how not to speak.” Do you agree that Americans are opinionated when it comes to language? What might be some examples of this? Has anyone ever instructed you to change your speech? Do you think that person was right to correct you?

2. MacNeil describes English in New York City as “a language that fuels the great publishing empires. From the city that never sleeps—24/7, on TV, cable, radio, electronic media—come the words and ideas that define American culture and market it to the world. You can make a case that New York City is now the global capital of the English language.” Do you agree? How do you feel about English being used around the globe? For what reasons would people use English rather than another language?

3. a. People who make a living in language-related professions are often divided into two camps that MacNeil refers to as *prescriptivists* and *descriptivists*. Language teachers, editors, and other people whose job it is to work with what they consider correct English are likely to take a prescriptivist stance. The linguists and social worker you see in Episode 1 can be considered descriptivists because they are interested in how language is really used rather than prescribing how to use it. *New York Magazine* theatre critic John Simon and *Oxford English Dictionary* editor Jesse Sheidlower show themselves to be on opposite sides of this language debate. How can you tell which of the two is a prescriptivist and which is a descriptivist? In general, are you more of a prescriptivist or a descriptivist? As you continue to view the series, keep this dichotomy in mind and consider which camp each of the people featured falls into.

   John Simon claims that in his experience “language can always disintegrate further,” and “there is no bottom.” Do you believe that the English language is disintegrating? If so, what measures would you propose to save English? Do you agree that language can always get worse? What would be the outcome if English continued to disintegrate? What would the language be like then?

4. Dr. Cutler claims that White male teens “who are sort of afraid of women or young women and are in the process of trying to figure out how it is that one deals with them” are often attracted to “hard core rappers” because these rappers illustrate a type of “masculinity that doesn't perhaps exist in the safe White suburbs.” What assumptions about gender identity and gender roles underlie this claim? What is meant by “types of masculinity”? Is there more than one type, and, if so, what types are there? What forms of masculinity are available in White suburbs that aren’t available to “hard core rappers”? Do girls ever engage in dialect crossing as Dr. Cutler describes it? Why or why not? If possible, provide examples of people you know who cross dialects.
Do You Speak American? Discussion Questions

5. Linguist Dennis Preston conducts research about language ideology—what people think about different regional varieties of English. In the first episode, he asks people on a train to draw on maps where they think the best and worst American English is spoken. Where do you think good American English is spoken? Where is the worst spoken? Explain.

6. There is a popular belief that Americans are sounding more like each other all the time—that is, that variations in language are being lost because of the influence of mainstream media. However, Dr. William Labov and others in the series present evidence that certain aspects of language, such as pronunciation, are becoming less similar across different groups, depending on such factors as geographic region. Does this surprise you? If Labov is right, what might be some reasons that the English used in mass media does not seem to have an influence on individual speech?

7. Dr. John Baugh does research on what is called language profiling, or how people are judged according to how they speak. Are you surprised that people who speak African American or Chicano English are treated differently than mainstream English speakers over the telephone? Do you think it is possible to tell people’s ethnicity and socioeconomic status based only on how they talk?

8. Baugh says, “It’s often assumed by Blacks as well as Whites that African Americans speak bad or lazy English. In fact, Black English has roots as deep and a grammar as consistent as Scottish, Irish, or any other of the Englishes spoken around the world.” What is Baugh referring to when he says “roots as deep and a grammar as consistent as any other of the Englishes”?

Episode 2

1. Spanky and Cody James both have adopted a Southern style of speaking, although it is not a native speech variety for them. Ranch owner Linda Blackburn has also taken on the local style of speaking since moving to Texas. What might have motivated these people to change the way they talk? Do you know anyone who has done this, or have you done it yourself? Do you ever notice that you speak differently depending on where you are and with whom you are speaking? Listen carefully to the way Dr. Guy Bailey sounds when he speaks with MacNeil and when he speaks with Willy. What differences do you notice in the way he talks to the two men? Why do you think he changes his speech, and do you think he himself is aware of it?

2. Does it seem to you that the English varieties associated with Whites and African Americans in the United States are becoming more different from one another? Do you agree with MacNeil’s statement that “More separate languages mean more separate peoples”? To what extent do the multiple varieties of English spoken in America divide groups of people? Do separate languages divide people in America? What about in other countries?

3. Newspaper columnist Molly Ivins describes the English used in Texas. What distinctive characteristics does English have in your region? Why do you think people in your region speak the way they do?
Do You Speak American? Discussion Questions

4. Allan Wall expresses the opinion that people who live in the United States should all speak English, and he believes that English should be made the official language of the United States. Do you think the United States needs to make English its official language? What would this accomplish? Who might benefit from such a policy? What does it mean to have an official language?

Episode 3

1. The linguist Dr. Carmen Fought says that Chicano English is a distinct speech variety. Many speakers of Chicano English, she says, don’t even know Spanish. She expresses the view that Spanish is in danger of disappearing in the United States but that English is not threatened. Compare this point of view to that of Allan Wall. Do you think Latino people in the United States should maintain their Spanish and also learn to speak English? What is the value for people in the United States of speaking more than one language?

2. At P.S. 100 in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, students are taught how to translate from their home language into mainstream English. Does this seem to be a good way of teaching mainstream English? Why or why not? Noma LeMoine, Director of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Academic English Master Program, says, “Our task is to help move [students] toward mastery of the language of school in its oral and written form, but to do that in a way where they are not devalued or where they feel denigrated in any way by virtue of their cultural and linguistic differences. Because when you begin to devalue youngsters and make them feel that who they are doesn’t count, then we turn them off from education.” Do you agree with her? Do you expect that their program will be successful “in keeping students interested in education and bolstering their self-esteem”?

3. a. The third episode talks about young people as linguistic trendsetters. Listen to the way that teenagers speak in the cafeteria in Irvine. Do you think that the way they speak English will make it into a variety of settings, such as offices or newscasts?
   b. Do you find any of the words these teens use to be offensive? If so, why? What associations do the words call to mind? Do you think the words have the same associations for these teens? Is it possible for a word to lose old meanings and take on new ones?

4. With the surfer George, MacNeil watches footage from The Story of English. George says that the Surf Punks featured in that program talk much like surfers talk today. Why do you think their speech variety has not spread into everyday American speech? Listen to the speech of Steve the skateboarder and Jake the snowboarder. Do you think the average American will one day sound like these men? Do you think these men would continue to use this speech variety in later life, for example in a political career? Do you think they use this variety in all situations today?

5. One of the participants in San Francisco’s Gay Pride Parade says, “If we can use the word queer so many times that it just becomes a normal word in our language without any consequence, then I think we [gays and lesbians] see ourselves as being more empowered. So it sort of proves the point that you can change the meaning of words.” Do you agree? Is this an example of a word changing meaning?
Do You Speak American? Discussion Questions

a. Stanford researcher Dr. Cliff Nass works with voice technology, including matching voice and gender to specific products. He tells MacNeil that the original version of the BMW sedan featured a female voice but that Germans reacted negatively to it. Was this reaction based on the voice alone or on other factors?

b. Does it seem to you that certain objects, like cars, are male or female? What characteristics would make a product masculine or feminine? Can you think of people you know who don’t show the typical characteristics of women and men, including typical qualities of female or male speech? Do you have the typical speech characteristics of your gender?

7. Nass says that humans are “voice activated,” that “when the brain hears something that sounds even remotely like human speech, we bring to bear all the rules and expectations that we do when dealing with other people.” Do you agree? Have you ever encountered a situation in which someone’s voice didn’t seem to match their appearance? What physical characteristics do you associate with certain voice qualities?

8. XD Huang says that people who speak mainstream English are more likely to have success interfacing with computerized voice recognition systems. What does this say about the expected audience for such features? Have you had any difficulty getting a voice recognition system to understand you? If so, why do you think this happened?

9. Who speaks American? Do you? Have your opinions about language in the United States changed as you watched the series?