Having staked out the opposition, Daniels proceeds in the remainder of the book to offer evidence which contradicts both views. He provides the reader with a wealth of examples to support the basic contention that the danger to society lies not with the decline of language—whatever that may mean—but with the attitudes of the people who continually try to keep our language from changing. Daniels begins his offensive by tracing the roots of the language crisis, suggesting that it might have started 4,500 years ago in Sumeria when a teacher complained about the sudden drop-off in students’ writing abilities. Since the Sumerians invented writing, any earlier record would be hard to imagine. From that point, however, the "crisis" seems always to have been with us—even the Lord’s Prayer came in for its share of criticism because of its poor grammar.

During the early 1900’s in this country, the desire for language reform seems to have reached a feverish pitch, leading to the development of pledges such as the following which were to be recited fervently and faithfully by students:

I love the United States of America. I love my country’s flag.
I love my country’s language. I promise:

1. That I will not dishonor my country’s speech by leaving off the last syllable of words.
2. That I will say a good American ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in place of an Indian grunt ‘um-hum’ and ‘nup-um’ or a foreign ‘ya’ or ‘yeh’ or ‘nope.’
3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud, rough tones, by enunciating distinctly and by speaking pleasantly, clearly, and sincerely.
4. That I will learn to articulate correctly as many words as possible during the year.

Having amusingly yet accurately portrayed the history of the language crisis, Daniels then presents nine principles which he considers essential for understanding how language operates. These are drawn from research that clearly shows why the language critics’ predictions about the demise of the English language are wrong. What the critics suggest are signs of terminal illness, linguists point to as simply signs of a "healthy, normal language going about its business."

One of the most significant chapters in the book is "Matters of Taste"; here Daniels presents a persuasive case for the idea that language criticism often is the product of a highly individual and arbitrary sense of taste—the taste of the critic himself and, often enough, few others. Edwin Newman, William
Safire, Richard Mitchell (of The Underground Grammarian fame), and even the usage panel for the American Heritage Dictionary come in for heavy criticism from Daniels for what he considers their paramount desire to shape the language as they see it, not necessarily reporting how the majority of people use it. As Daniels notes, after reporting on his own experiment as a language critic, "once you enter the critic's frame of mind, once you attune your ear to a certain wavelength, you can find mistakes everywhere—even in the writing of self-conscious, well trained writing experts who are writing about writing itself."

But the problem goes deeper. Many of the critics through their constant harping on the decline of language skills endorse the present social order. They seem to fear any signs that suggest people are marching toward equality, social leveling, and the resulting "democratization of language." Although Daniels stops short of proposing that a language conspiracy may exist, he does note that we have done remarkably well thus far in perpetuating a number of myths about language that contribute to the continued divisions in our social, political, and economic order.

Other chapters worth noting include a detailed look at language deficiencies in standardized tests, the public's attitudes toward black dialect, and the place of political propaganda in American society. Each of these chapters offers carefully documented examples and linguistic facts. One of the most interesting discussions occurs in the chapter on political language. Here Daniels proposes a new reading of George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language." Daniels suggests that contrary to the popular interpretation of the essay, Orwell is actually more interested in challenging people's ideas and motifs than in examining how they express them. Orwell may have done us a great favor by encouraging us to be suspicious of political language, but his remarks have become so powerful, according to Daniels, that the accompanying comments about the decline of language and the uses of propaganda have not been examined carefully enough to reveal their flaws.

The book concludes with a discussion of the teaching of writing. After pointing out some of the misconceptions and highly prescriptive advice which appear in many of our contemporary grammar and writing texts, he singles out the National Writing Project as promising evidence that something is being done to counteract the critics' charges. He uses his own experiences in the Illinois Writing Project—he's a director—to outline the now familiar Writing Project model and concludes that experiences like the Writing Project are essential if teacher attitudes about language and writing are to change.

Famous Last Words offers us a refreshingly optimistic view of language use. One cannot help feeling that English will survive the present crisis as well as those yet to come. And, as Daniels points out, we may be lucky that the critics have chosen language as their target. Just think of all the trouble these linguistic crusaders could cause for us if they got into a less impractical line of endeavor.

Charles R. Duke  
Director, West Kentucky Writing Project

Book Review

WRITERS WRITING

by Lil Brannon, Melinda Knight, and Vara Neverow-Turk  
Boynton Cook, Publishers, Inc., 1982

Writers Writing is at once an aid to writer's workshops or peer editing groups in classrooms, an introduction to how writers write, a book for assisting teachers and students alike in discovering the writing/learning interaction, and one of the most involving books on writing I have ever read. It is not a book full of platitudes about "right approaches." Rather, it is a book which asks readers to reflect on their own processes and the processes of other writers. It helps readers to focus on their own writing and to use the context of a writing workshop to share and revise ideas; it demonstrates how "writing and revising are synonymous." It dramatizes the process of writing by using examples of how experienced and inexperienced writers see their composing process, of how they develop their ideas, of how they work with early drafts, of how they use the suggestions of other readers, and of how they complete their writing tasks. Throughout, Writers Writing engages the reader in the journey of discovering and rediscovering, of writing and revising. This is a book about writing in process, not a handbook full of rules and lessons.

In the introduction, the authors tell us what to expect: "You won't be exposed to rules and formulas; rather, you will be given a way of viewing writing: that it is fluid and spontaneous, that it is not a fixed sequence of activities (first you make the outline...), that what writers say is guided by the effects they are trying to create, that writing-and-revising is one act—forming, thinking, and writing happen all at once."

Chapters begin with a basic concept clearly presented and clearly stated in the chapter's title: (Continued on page 18)