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This engaging collection of National Public Radio broadcasts and magazine pieces by one of America's best-known linguists covers the waterfront of contemporary culture by taking stock of its words and phrases. From our metaphors for the Internet ("Virtual Rialto") to the perils of electronic grammar checkers ("The Software We Deserve"), from traditional grammatical bugaboos ("Sex and the Singular Verb") to the ways we talk about illicit love ("Affairs of State"), Geoffrey Nunberg shows just how much the language we use from day to day reveals about who we are and who we want to be.

The Way We Talk Now: Commentaries on Language and Culture from NPR's Fresh Air Details

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Linda says

This wasn't as good as Going Nuclear, but there were some interesting pieces. I particularly enjoyed his take on Ebonics, and especially the closing piece, Valediction. Valediction is a poem that cleverly advocates for the death of some overused words: restructure, proactive, pomo, edgy. I NEED this for my office wall!

Anna says

This is a collection of relatively short commentaries that were aired on NPR's "Fresh Air." I decided to read this because of the focus on language and culture and had never heard the show. Overall I liked the essays but I found some to be much more interesting than others. My favorite sections were "Word Histories" and "Politics of the English Language" and I was honestly quite bored by the last two sections. This is one of those books where you might want to pick and choose or skim (like I did) over whatever isn't meaningful to you.

Noel says

A good book to take along on the bus or when you're going to be waiting for something- the essays are NPR segments, just a few pages each, and well-suited to bite-sized chunks of reading.

Fascinating as a mid-to-late 90's time capsule as well. All the talk about the internet as a frontier, cyber- this and e- that, dot coms and gen x as twentysomethings, is both quaint and nostalgic now that we're in the 2000's and many of us have been using the internet for ten or more years.

Sarah says

In the introduction to this collection of essays originally written for radio, Nunberg apologizes in advance if there's a blithe, superficial feel to this material. And there is, to a certain extent: it's clear these two-to three page essays were written for an audience listening with half an ear; they're not in-depth explorations of modern word usage.

They are, however, well-written and intriguing. No in-depth knowledge of linguistics is necessary to understand what Nunberg's getting at when he talks about why movie catch-phrases stick around far longer than those from television shows, or why "cool" is still as popular as ever, when "fab" and "dope" have died out.

This book has been my lunchtime reading for the past couple weeks, as the essays are perfectly sized for the spare minute and there's no need to recall exactly what you read the day before.

Matthew says

This was a great insight into the way American English is changing. Or rather, has changed, since this book was published in early 2000s. There is a lot that the author could add now, with the invention of smart phones and google, etc., but still a good read and gives you lots of conversation topics regarding language and how we shouldn't be so stuffy with grammar.

Erik says

With my love of all things English language, linguistics, and National Public Radio, I picked up this book by Nunberg thinking it would be a great follow-up to David Crystal as I'm waiting for the latter's next book on our wondrous language. Although I enjoy hearing his frequent segment on NPR's "Fresh Air", I will agree with Nunberg in his preface that these transcriptions of his show don't read as well as his listening to him deliver these pieces. Which goes to show that live performances of the written word are often much more powerful than silent reading.

Also, Nunberg is less the traditional linguist in the philological sense, and more a sociologist investigating the use and influences of words in modern usage. He is, however, a master of offering up a potpourri of incisive insights and speculations. His best in this volume, in my layman's opinion, include "Yadda Yadda Doo" (musings on catch-phrases from popular culture and entertainment), "The N-Word" (which doesn't need much of an explanation.), and "Only Contract" (which always given me a moment of pause whenever I'm writing).

Many of the essays contained herein have already been covered, or at least mentioned in passing, by that other popular (and perhaps greater) English language expert, Richard Lederer. If you ask me, I'll take Nunberg on the radio any day; and Lederer on a book in my hands.

Joy says

3/4 -- This may have been a misunderstanding on my part, but I was expecting a read more like Richard Lederer (*Anguished English*) not essays that had far less to do with words, English, and the usage of either.

There were a few interesting sentences here and there which applied; one of which is "...in the eighteenth century, Lord Chesterfield defined illiterate as 'a man who is ignorant of [Greek and Latin].'" from essay *Literacy Literacy*

And the essay 'Vietnamese for Travelers' made me laugh because I am relating in life with my high school (required to graduate) Spanish classes have given me little with which to communicate with clients in my office [Seriously, my knowing how to say "Do you like to read/dance/sing/eat..." has never come up. However, asking them where their pain is, or describing that pain does...and I'm trying to learn to say THESE THINGS now because I never learned them then.

Liz says

Collection of very short essays originally read as commentaries on NPR. Essays comment on the language/words/phrases we use in corporate and internet culture. I found the essays to be very dry, very highbrow, and very boring.

Denise says

This was my read for the 400 section of Dewey. The essays were enjoyable, but it was surprising to see how dated they already are regarding discussions of technology/internet, etc. The last essay was 2000, so it was an interesting walk down memory lane. Amazing to see how ubiquitous technology has become and how dependent we are on it when you look back.

Lucy says

72 Essays from NPR's Fresh Air from 1989 through 2000, grouped into: The Passing Scene, Word Histories, Politics of the English Language, The Two R's, Technical Terms, Business Talk. Essays in each group are in chronological order.

Well written and interesting, but now rather dated.

Sharon says

I never listen to NPR, but I enjoyed this book by one of their presenters. It's a collection of his musings on word origins and usage from the late 90's to 2000. Each entry is short and sweet and the way he thinks about language is interesting.

Maureen says

Fun, 2-3 page essays on language and culture, language and politics, etc. Complaining about corporate jargon of the late '90s feels a little dated now, but it's still kinda interesting to read the perspectives of adults on the culture when you were a kid. And there are some pretty fun quotes.

Jen says

I put this in my sociology category, because Geoffrey Nunberg is like a linguistic sociologist. (Or a

sociology-focused linguist?)

Any lit geek or English major will love this book -- that is, of course, unless you only majored in English by default because it seemed easier than, say, Finance.

I really enjoyed the book. It's a fairly quick read, but probably only if you have a large vocabulary. I don't think he's trying to show off, but he certainly likes to use words that most people would only encounter in the SAT. In the chapter entitled "Business," the author mocks business-speak in a way that would make the writer of Dilbert proud.

Most people don't stop to think about the words we use, why we use them, and where they came from. This book is an amusing little excursion to dig deeper into our language.

Jennifer says

They can't all be goodies. The linguistic topics covered in this book should be interesting but this writer's lack of insight made it feel like drudgery. Many of the entries just felt pointless. For a much better collection of short commentaries on this fascinating field I recommend Language Myths by Peter Trudgill.

Diane says

This was a fun and interesting read about the quirks and culture of our language in America. Some of the NPR pieces were time capsules of the 1990s -- the term *ebonics* has thankfully been passed over -- but most of the topics were still highly relevant. My favorite essays were on advertising, public relations, spelling bees and the history of the word *shall*. I would recommend the book to anyone who appreciates the nuances of communication.
