

main objective is to save the reputation of this kind of humor from its “politically correct” critics. Specifically, Rappoport sets out to debunk two pieces of criticism: that this type of humor is inherently prejudiced against minorities, and that it contributes to anti-minority prejudice in society. The author argues that humor cannot be the automatic vehicle of prejudice because its reception is inevitably context-dependent. Different audiences react differently to the same words at different points in history. Also, racial, ethnic, and gender humor is widely performed and enjoyed by members of minorities. As to the second piece of criticism, Rappoport hypothesizes that this kind of humor, the often outrageous comedy of performers like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, renders intergroup hatred ludicrous and thus contributes to the destruction of prejudice and the decline of the significance of ethnicity in America. Ethnic humor immerses increasingly sophisticated mass audiences in the risky but entertaining and cathartic mud bath of human folly (racism, homophobia, misogyny) and then has them emerge cured from their own prejudices and hypocrisy.

In chap. 1, the author proffers support for the widely recognized folk theory of racial-ethnic humor, the sword and the shield. This type of humor, the argument goes, can injure but it can also function within minority groups as a source of pride and a useful means of effective adjustment to the majority society. Chap. 2 provides an overview of humor theory, with special attention to Freud. Chap. 3 surveys theories of the positive social functions of racial, ethnic, and gender humor. Chap. 4 summarizes the social psychology of ethnic slurs and stereotypes. Chaps. 5 and 6 provide a historical overview of what the author regards as the engines of contemporary racial and ethnic comedy: Jewish and African American humor. Chap. 7 presents a brief examination of gender-related humor. Chaps. 8 and 9 discuss what it takes to be a successful comedian in 21st-century America, and chap. 10 makes the case for the potential benefits of racial-ethnic humor in society.

I found Rappoport’s overview of contemporary insult comedy and the questions he asks about its role in society thought-provoking. However, I was left wondering what empirical evidence he might have for his claims regarding the beneficial social effects of racial and ethnic comedy, besides his many years of experience interacting with college students. I also remained skeptical about the classical liberal argument that confronting insulting material is the recipe for liberation from one’s own smallmindedness, and those who can’t “take it” are either not in step with the times or are wed to their hypocritical, middle-class norms. As intriguing as it sounds, Rappoport’s hypothesis regarding the power of offensive racial, ethnic, and gender humor to act as a social lubricant calls for the analysis of actual communicative events in which such humor succeeds or is “taken too far.”

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HARALD WEINRICH, *The linguistics of lying and other essays*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. Pp. vii, 148. Pb. \$18.95.

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This book examines the nature of lying by considering the correlation between language and thought, language and reality, and language and context. In the five essays included, Weinrich relies on literary and philosophical works from Aristotle to Zola to propose his argument that linguistics can examine how language hides thoughts and how truth becomes distorted into lie. He weaves a sophisticated philosophy of the ways in which language is true or untrue, and the mechanisms of linguistics, literature, and life that signal these truths or untruths.

The first essay, “The linguistics of lying,” explores how linguistics can be used to describe what happens in language when truth is distorted into lie. Beginning with a discussion of lexical versus textual meaning, Weinrich proposes that while lexical meanings are “broad, vague, social, and abstract,” textual meanings are “narrow, precise, individual, and concrete.” He concludes that words in isolation do not lie, but sentences in context do. Thus, he contends, lying should be assessed not on the Augustinian definition of a lie – the intention to deceive – but on the reality in which the sentence

is uttered. Weinrich also examines linguistic devices such as metaphors and irony, which clearly contradict reality and could be considered lies, but which do so with signals marking them as special devices.

The next four essays continue his examination of how language hides thoughts, but do so with an orientation toward literature, social norms, and virtues rather than toward linguistics. In "Jonah's sign," "Politeness, an affair of honor," "Politeness and sincerity," and "The style is the man is the devil," Weinrich ponders such questions as whether a tall tale can reveal an important truth; how honor became a male virtue with rigid boundaries while politeness became a female virtue, full of subtleties and nuances; when, historically, politeness of manner was at its height and when it fell to be of less importance than sincerity; and how style, intrinsic and unique to each writer, potentially overrides content. Relying heavily on literary and philosophical references to make their points, these essays examine the ethics and morals that complicate the issue of defining the concept of lying.

As a linguist, I found the first essay to be most relevant for linguistic readers; however, I appreciate that Weinrich brings other perspectives on language to his book. While less linguistic in nature than "The linguistics of lying," the other four essays nonetheless examine his overarching question of how language hides thoughts. Although it is clear that Weinrich is writing as a philosopher, anyone interested in language will enjoy these essays.

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THOMAS E. MURRAY AND BETH LEE SIMON (eds.), *Language variation and change in the American Midland: A new look at 'Heartland' English*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2006. Pp. ix, 319. Hb \$165.

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The editors of this volume have brought together an excellent collection of original essays that discuss issues of importance in the accounting of language patterns in American English and, in particular, in the definition of the "Midland" as a dialect area. As Simon states in an introductory piece, "The scrutiny given Midland dialect here raises fundamental issues regarding the basic notion of DIALECT and, consequently, how we theorize patterns of language variation" (p. xi). The essays present the results of empirical work using modern methodologies that incorporate statistical, archival, ethnographic, and textual investigations. These studies provide a fairly comprehensive picture of the Midland and its speakers, but they go beyond this to provide insight into the dynamics of language change and geosocial patterns.

The volume opens with an introductory section including two pieces by the editors. The first, Simon's "Introducing the Midland: What is it, where is it, how do we know?," examines some of the challenges that linguists face in the effort to define REGIONALITY and the Midland region, and portrays the volume as "a companion to Timothy Frazer's (1993) 'Heartland' English." The second, "What is dialect? Revisiting the Midland," by Murray & Simon, discusses the controversy surrounding the existence of the Midland English dialect. The editors firmly conclude, in agreement with Kurath 1949 "that Midland dialect does, in fact, exist" (2). To support this statement, they offer a list of 17 grammatical items that "define and validate a Midland variety of American English" (15). Their claim is not that these features occur exclusively in the Midland nor that everyone in the Midland uses them, but that it is the particular combination and frequency of the 17 items that are evidence of a Midland grammar.

The remaining essays, all valuable and interesting to read, and including plenty of maps, tables, and figures to illustrate the findings, are organized into three parts. Part I, "The evolving Midland," includes three papers. Leading off is Sharon Ash's "The North American Midland as a dialect area," which presents lexical, syntactic and phonological data that show the coherence of the geographic core of the Midland and the less similar features in the geographically peripheral areas. The two