Language in Society **36** (2007). Printed in the United States of America
DOI: 10.1017/S0047404507070832

SOL STEINMETZ AND BARBARA ANN KIPFER, *The life of language: The fascinating ways words are born, live, and die*. New York: Random House, 2006. Pp. xii, 388. Pb $16.95

Reviewed by JOHN EDWARDS
Psychology, St Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia B2G 2W5 Canada
jedwards@stfx.ca

In 1862, Max Müller published the first of his two volumes on *The Science of Language*, lectures delivered at the Royal Institution the previous year. The books are among the very earliest examples of "popular" discussions of important linguistic issues, and no doubt the first by a distinguished scholar. They set a standard that has been very frequently emulated, but very rarely equaled. We see in our own time an avalanche of popular books on language, all aimed at a broad and continuing interest that is hardly surprising in a subject of such immediate and ubiquitous presence. Of course, the quality varies immensely. There are basic problems even with the best of them, and the most basic of all are the reconciliation of an appealing scope with a reasonable amount of depth and, relatedly, the provision of some thematic continuity in treatments typically composed of a large number of entries. The most common results, then, are books that are something like dictionaries, something like encyclopedias and, often, something like cabinets of curiosities.

This book, by two lexicographers, charts a reasonably happy course in these difficult waters: There are lots of lists here but, since there is a structure and a story to be told, the lists have some real illustrative value. The name of the story, of course, is in the title and, over the course of seven major sections, Steinmetz & Kipfer take the reader from birth to death. They begin by describing how words arise and develop, and the discussion of back-formations and the various types of clippings, contractions, and diminutives is particularly good. In the section on semantic change, the authors outline some of the common reasons for variations and alterations, touching upon euphemism and the hazards of political correctness, as well as metaphoric usage and specialized vocabulary. They are right to point to necessity as the mother of specialization, but they do not tell the reader that the latter often arises more from conceptions of status and boundary-marking than from real need.

The authors return to matters of word development in a section that ranges from baby talk, to sometimes ephemeral neologisms, to nonce words and nonsense words. An 11-page treatment of eponyms stands out here; it is a well-constructed discussion of a subject that many know very little about, and one with some interesting byways – "uncapitalized eponyms" being a case in point. The penultimate section is devoted to borrowings: Why do these occur, and what does their provenance tell us about cross-cultural interactions? Why do some become "naturalized," while others remain in their foreign clothing? The section ends with a brief note on etymology, including one or two pointers to etymological abbreviations and conventions found in dictionaries.

Ending, as they should, with a discussion of word death, Steinmetz & Kipfer – like Mark Twain – suggest caution. Words fall into disuse for many reasons, but they rarely disappear altogether, even if their survival is only on paper. It seems paradoxical to think that whole languages, particularly those lacking written forms, may be more likely to die than any single word in a literate variety.

(Received 20 December 2006)

Language in Society **36** (2007). Printed in the United States of America
DOI: 10.1017/S0047404507070844

LEON RAPPOPORT, *Punchlines: The case for racial, ethnic, and gender humor*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. Pp. xv, 181. Hb $44.95.

Reviewed by DAVID BOROMISZA-HABASHI
Communication, University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003 USA
boromisza@comm.umass.edu

Written in a student-friendly style, *Punchlines* examines the state and development of racial, ethnic, and gender humor in the contemporary United States. The social psychologist Leon Rappoport's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404507070832 Published online by Cambridge University Press