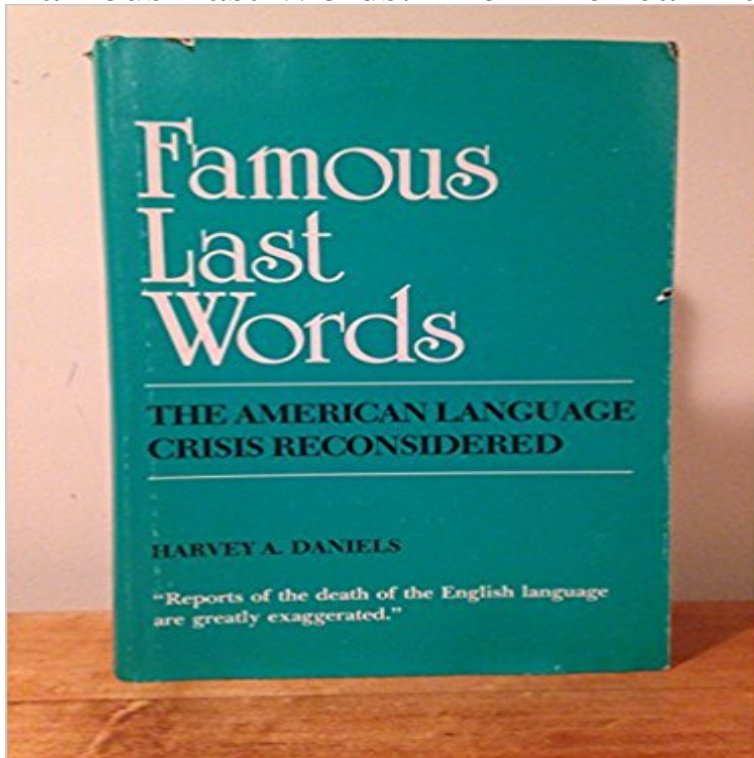


Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered



The deathwatch over American English has begun again, writes Harvey A. Daniels who, basing his arguments on data from professional linguists and language historians, proves that there is no reason to panic over the fate of the mother tongue, noting that reports of the death of the English language are greatly exaggerated. Critics who zero in on the deteriorating state of the language ignore larger, more basic issues. Further, they threaten to bring back old or inspire new teaching curricula and techniques which will hinder rather than enhance our children's opportunity to develop their reading and writing and speaking skills. Paradoxically, those critics who claim overreaching importance for the language tend to trivialize the study of language through their steadfast preoccupation with the form of language. These critics encourage us to continue using minor differences in language as ways of identifying, classifying, avoiding, or punishing anyone whom we choose to consider our social or intellectual inferior. Daniels refutes the idea that a literary crisis rages throughout the United States. He discredits the idea of the deterioration of language. In support of his conclusions, he marshals the forces of history, showing that panics concerning the state of the language have occurred at regular intervals at least since 2400 B.C. Using the data and tools of the linguist, Daniels asserts that language cannot die, that it changes constantly, and that attitudes toward language are social attitudes. Having established this point, he discusses at length our diminished prejudices against certain nonstandard dialects, our befuddled and uncompromising attempts to teach writing, the complex difficulties facing English teachers as the crisis enters its second decade, and the prospects for developing some respect for linguistic pluralism in

America.

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