Introduction

For more than a decade, Geoff Nunberg has provided us with commentary on the relationship between language and culture. He's covered rhetoric on racism, technology, business, education, and pop culture with intelligence, wit, and humor. In recent months, he has observed the inadequacy inherent in our verbal response to the events of September 11th.

In an article printed in the *Los Angeles Times*, Nunberg wrote, "In the wake of the attacks, official America needed something else: language that would reassert control of a world that had gotten terrifyingly out of hand." But what did we come up with? Old-fashioned words of "high Victorian indignation" which evoke "the moral certainties of a simpler age, when the line between civilization and barbarism was clearly drawn." Forsaking its everyday language, our culture sought old ways to assert its righteous indignation.

With similar keenness, Nunberg's collected essays, *The Way We Talk Now*, examines ways in which our use of language provides insight into American ideology. English, with a larger vocabulary than most other languages, presents us with an amazing opportunity to use and misuse words as we attempt to express ourselves. American English, a product of our "melting pot" culture, is especially given to creative uses of language. Nevertheless, many of us recoil at these innovations: for some the misuse of a word or phrase is like fingernails on a blackboard. Others are more lax, allowing that
most any usage is acceptable if it is common enough. Nunberg takes a stand between these extremes.

"Geoff is not one of those smug language experts who nag you about your grammar and accuse you of ruining the English language. He may have the best ear in America for listening to how the English language is changing, the best mind for interpreting those changes, and the most amusing way of explaining it all. He makes me think about language and laugh at the same time." — Terry Gross, host of NPR's Fresh Air

In this collection Nunberg, a consulting professor in the Department of Linguistics at Stanford and chair of the Usage Panel of The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, examines a wide range of language peccadilloes and pitfalls:

• In "The Software We Deserve," he points out the perils of electronic grammar checkers, so commonly used in everyday work life.

• In "Sex and the Singular Verb" he takes a look at traditional grammatical bugaboos.

• In "Affairs of State" he illuminates how the words we use betray our prejudices about illicit love.

About the Author

Geoffrey Nunberg has published many articles in the scholarly and popular press and made numerous radio broadcasts on language and linguistics, the cultural implications of digital technologies, and language and policy issues. For this work, he was given the 2001 Language, Linguistics, and the Public Interest Award by the Linguistic Society of America.