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of a 19th century New York lawyer; from German *Scheisse* 'excrement' or *scheuss-* 'abominable'; from Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*; from Gaelic, Gypsy, Yiddish, or Dutch sources; from Old English *chiche* 'stingy'; from *shy* in one of the meanings 'disreputable', 'short of money', or 'to avoid') are each discussed by C in Ch. I, in lengths ranging from a short paragraph to almost seven pages. Complete details are provided in all cases, so that future scholars will not need to retrace any of C's steps. The earliest attestation hitherto noticed is July 11, 1846; but in Ch. II, C presents 188 attestations—all from a New York newspaper, the *Subterranean*—174 of which predate this. It is debatable whether presenting all these quotes, some of them quite lengthy, is really necessary; they occupy 21 pages in a book only 124 pages long. C's decision to include them presumably reflects his desire to publish every last scrap of evidence for the benefit of future researchers; and they certainly provide a good taste of the courtroom antics of that time, which ultimately contributes to the reader's understanding of the development of the term. Ch. III addresses the *shysters'* activities more specifically, and the campaign against them by Mike Walsh and George Wilkes; over 40 pages are devoted to direct quotation here, with a number of the quotes several pages in length. Ch. IV, 'Analysis and conclusions', is by far the most important step in C's argument; he presents a July 29, 1843, conversation between Walsh and Cornelius Terhune (who was considered by Walsh to be a *shyster*), which essentially debates the 'correct' meaning of *shyster*. Walsh appears to use the word for lawyers who are either dishonest or incompetent, whereas Terhune insists the term should be used only for incompetent lawyers (he himself may be dishonest, but he is no *shyster*). C uses this conversation to infer, first, that *shyster* had not been in use very long (96); and second, that only Terhune and his closest associates could have been using it (97). Walsh reports the conversation in the *Subterranean*, but refrains from giving a definition for *shyster* for fear of prosecution for libel and obscenity; C takes this as 'a clear reference to the origin of *shyster* from Ger. *Scheisse*' (99). He then states that this 'can be refined to *shyster* < *Scheisser* (= an incompetent person)', probably via *shiser* 'worthless fellow' from London criminal slang (100). The book concludes with all-too-brief sections on further semantic developments of the term (to include dishonest of-

ficials of various sorts), its spread beyond New York City (initially to Philadelphia), and some parallels to the term *smart Aleck*. There is also a partly annotated bibliography and an index.

A number of my colleagues shared my own initial reaction to the title of this book: 'How could one write a whole book on just one word?' The best answer is provided by a remark of Eric Hamp's, quoted by C in his preface, that he is 'constantly amazed at what can emerge from the CAREFUL study of a subject'. My personal preference would have been for a book containing fewer quotes, but more information on other topics (such as further development and spread, or the connection to London criminal slang); but one must admire the painstaking detail with which C has conducted and presented his research. Apart from its obvious audience of etymologists and those interested in slang, this book will appeal to linguists who, like myself, can go to look up a word in an etymological dictionary, spend several hours most enjoyably, and then come away having completely forgotten what word it was that they went to look up in the first place. [SHEILA M. EMBLETON, *York University, Toronto.*]

The Sumerian language: An introduction to its history and grammatical structure. By MARIE-LOUISE THOMSEN. (Mesopotamia: Copenhagen studies in Assyriology, 10.) Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1984. Pp. 363. Kr. 163.93.

Sumerian is the oldest attested language on earth; our earliest texts date from about 3000 B.C. It existed as a spoken language for at least a millennium. After its demise, it continued in use as a literary and liturgical language for another millennium.

Sumerian has been known to scholars for about a century. It is of interest to students of the Ancient Near East because it was a major culture-carrying language of Mesopotamia, sharing that role with Akkadian. The language has been less studied by general linguists, however, and it is not as well understood as Akkadian. For one thing, it is a language isolate, with no known living or dead relatives. Second, it is written in a complicated cuneiform script which takes much time to master. The script was originally mnemonic in nature; this means

that, in early Sumerian texts, many grammatical elements which we know were present in the spoken language are not written; their existence can only be inferred from much later spellings. To some degree, the script is morpheme-bound, masking such features as morphophonemic alternation. There has been no large-scale treatment of Sumerian in English. Two exist in German (Falkenstein 1959, Römer 1984), but both suffer from a rather wide-scale transference of Indo-European and Semitic grammatical categories onto Sumerian—as well as a sometimes confusing mixture of diachronic and synchronic levels.

For a scholar who decides to write a grammar of Sumerian, the first question is: Which stage of the language should be described? Because the earlier texts are formulaic in content, they show little grammatical variation. Also, because of the originally mnemonic nature of the script, not all morphemes are represented in the writing. The texts which show the most grammatical variation, and at the same time the most explicitness in the script, are literary texts copied in the Old Babylonian period (about 2000–1600 B.C.) It is difficult to say when such texts were COMPOSED; some may date from centuries before they were committed to writing. While these texts would seem to be the logical basis for a grammar, they were written down at a period when Sumerian was no longer spoken. The native language of the scribes was Akkadian, a Semitic language. Thus, these texts are subject to extensive Akkadian interference (in fact, this influence is seen as early as 2600 B.C.) This means that these Old Babylonian texts contain 'errors', which a speaker of earlier Sumerian would have considered 'wrong'. The choice, then, is either to describe an earlier stage of the language, where the texts show minimal grammatical variation and where the script masks the morphology, or to describe a later stage, where the language was under Akkadian influence. Thomsen has chosen the latter approach, arguing that the sheer wealth of forms is preferable for a description of the morphology and syntax.

Although I might argue with points of detail in T's work, in general it is a solid, up-to-date description of Sumerian, reflecting current scholarly consensus. It includes sections on the 'History of the Sumerian language', 'Writing and linguistic reconstruction', the 'Textual material', and the 'Grammar' itself (some 250 pages). There are remarks on unusual orthographies, and a selective bibliography. This book

will certainly be welcomed by anyone working in Sumerian.

My major criticism is that, for anyone not trained in cuneiform script, T's book will be very difficult to use. All examples are presented in transliteration (no cuneiform appears in the book), and in a transcription reflecting our current interpretation of the phonology and morphology. T's 'Some comments on the transliteration' are extremely sketchy. A linguist interested in looking at Sumerian will find it difficult to understand how T's transliteration and transcription work. This is unfortunate, because Sumerian needs to be studied by general linguists, not just by Assyriologists.

The book would also have benefited from typological observations. Progress in Sumerian is most likely to be made by linguists trained in languages typologically similar to Sumerian—rather than by Assyriologists, who are normally trained only in the Indo-European and Semitic languages.

To sum up: general linguists will have a difficult time using the information in this book. Neither can it be readily be used as a pedagogical grammar; there is far too much detail. However, for those familiar with the principles of cuneiform script, and especially for those who already have an elementary knowledge of Sumerian, this is a very useful work; it will be a standard reference for some time. [JOHN HAYES, *UCLA*.]

Nilo-Saharan language studies. Ed. by M. LIONEL BENDER. (Northeast African studies, Monograph 13.) East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1983. Pp. 374. \$14.85.

This collection of 14 articles, all based on personal fieldwork, is destined to become a standard reference for Nilo-Saharanists. The book's most impressive feature is the sheer quantity of new data on neglected languages, including data on eight of the nine branches of the family.

B's introduction presents his updated classification of NS, proposing a new subclassification within Eastern Sudanic. He also reconstructs some isomorphs for NS as a whole, as well as for certain subgroups.

R. NICOLAI's description of Songhay is the best over-all presentation of this language to