

# **A Retrospective and a Look into the Future**

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## **2005 NCOLCTL Walton Award Acceptance Speech**

When Antonia called me to tell me that I had been nominated for this very special award, I must admit I was quite taken aback. First, because I think of this award as being one for those who lead rather than for those who are foot soldiers in the field. And second, my heart sank when I realized that I had to give a speech! I love being a heckler from the benches, but giving a speech is a much more daunting challenge.

### **Lessons Learned**

Look at us! From a handful of people who gathered around one conference table at the National Foreign Language Center in 1990, we are now an organization that has yearly conferences. We have a journal. We are networked. We are developing an amazing number of resources. Our institutes have become more numerous and our influence is spreading. No longer do most people look at us oddly when we mention the less commonly taught languages. The word “exotic” has pretty much disappeared from the common conversation. We have gone from desperately looking for beginning materials in so many languages—whether they are in Arabic, Zulu, Indonesian, Chinese, or Hindi—to where we are clamoring for advanced teaching materials in many of them. We have been developing frameworks for learning and teaching. We are mining the advantages of technology. Undertaking such endeavors means to me that the field of less commonly taught languages is formidably addressing its needs, unlike the sounds of muted desperation that characterized so many of our early gatherings.

We now have functioning teachers’ associations for LCTLs—some with their own meetings and their own publications. And for those of us who are also interested in the more detailed analyses and theoretical approaches to languages, the number of papers that deal

with LCTLs presented at meetings, such as the Linguistic Society of America, has increased quite a bit. We have come, as the saying goes, a long way!

My main interests and activities have revolved around encouraging the development and dissemination of materials for LCTLs. Alongside that work has been a fascination with issues of how language policy affects common and public life, both here and in countries around the world. Thanks to the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), I've had the good fortune to pursue both those areas. Even when there hasn't been funding for this work, CAL has been generous in allowing me space to continue to collect and disseminate information on LCTLs. Of course one of CAL's hallmarks has been to encourage all types of language learning in our effort to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture.

Over this 40-year period, I have learned some lessons. First the good ones!

*Lesson Number One:* The LCTL field was courageous. The first volume on teaching materials for the LCTLs appeared sometime in the mid-1960s. It was a 5x7, slim publication of perhaps 35 pages. Frank Rice, head of the CAL publications program, and one of the original linguists to develop dialect materials in Arabic, had been collecting the information on 3x5 cards because CAL had been receiving queries about materials in the LCTLs. That list grew to something like 12,000 entries by the late 1970s, mostly developed by people who simply loved the languages they had learned to speak and took it upon themselves to make the information available. During the time I worked on the Survey of Materials for the Less Commonly Taught Languages, I came to appreciate and respect the hundreds of authors who took the step (often stepping off the edge of a cliff!) to describe languages, develop materials, and make them available. We look back on some of those and cringe because the teaching approach was not of the best quality, and certainly not learner-oriented! The illustrations were primitive and there were no fancy computer programs to make things look pretty and professional. But with little or no money, and certainly very little sponsorship, they produced work on which we have been able to build. I learned that there are more people than one can count who love languages and are willing to do

something about making them accessible. So to those hundreds of authors, some of whom are in this room, I say thank you!

*Lesson Number Two:* Connections are central. A lesson that I learned early in delving into LCTLs, and have continued to learn, is that this field, more than any other field, is a sharing field. Connections are what drive us. I don't think I've encountered groups of scholars, teachers, and students, whether they were in the government, academia, the school system, or the mission field, to name a few, who have been as generous and as accommodating to one another in helping each other become better language learners, teachers, and researchers. Yes, like a lot of good folk, we like our turf, but on the whole we have been generous with one another—with our information, with our time, and with our expertise. And so to all of you, I again say thank you. I hope that 20, 30, 40 years from now someone will be able to say the same thing about us. I firmly believe that it is this cooperative spirit that has brought us this far.

*Lesson Number Three:* Vision is fundamental. Despite deep skepticism about the winds of change that sometimes blow through fields of study, I have also come to appreciate the need to listen to those with a vision. One such person was Ron Walton. He chose the same path that other visionaries, such as Charles Ferguson, J Milton Cowan, Richard Lambert, and James Alatis, chose. There are others too. What these people had to offer us was a vision that the less commonly taught languages can and indeed should be commonly accepted and can and indeed should be taught and learned in all spheres of life. They were articulate in their enthusiasm and, one might add, in their passion. Their hard work set the imaginations of many on fire, and those imaginations then passed the fire on to many of us. To them we owe particular thanks.

So look around tonight. From a tiny band of people, we are many. And who says we can't transform the less commonly taught languages field from the Cinderella of the foreign language teaching profession to its princess!

## Lessons to Learn

Despite our accomplishments and the lessons we have learned, we still have lessons that I think we need to pay attention to carefully. We have a long way to go yet. The road that is ahead of us has many possibilities, but it also contains dangers of which we need to be cognizant. Three dangers in particular come to mind.

One danger that looms is the limited access we have to funds. When funds do become available, we often find ourselves bowing to forces with which we are not terribly comfortable.

A second danger has to do with careless rhetoric. This happens frequently because issues of language sometimes come like tsunamis and we have to respond quickly. The results of less-than-careful talk can take a long time to remedy.

And finally, because articulation in our education system in this country is so disjointed, the agenda regarding language learning is often driven in ways that are not necessarily in the best interests of language learning and certainly not in the best interests of this country.

Let's look at what lack of access to funds does to us. Despite my thankfulness for the support of the International Research and Studies program of the Department of Education, which in my opinion has been the single most sustained effort for language learning outside of the defense and diplomatic fields, we must realize that we are now being driven by what comes under the umbrella of "National Security." The International Research and Studies section of the Department of Education is a tiny office in many ways—it has doled out small amounts of money to lots of people. And, as our needs have increased to meet the demands of our students, our clients, and the public, there has not been a matching increase in funds to meet those needs from the Department of Education. So we often find ourselves standing like beggars at the door, asking for small amounts of money to do huge jobs! So we start looking for ways to finish the language description, the text, the dictionary, cultural materials, or developing assessments and so forth, and standing in the wings, particularly in the last three and a half years, with the money that is available to complete our work, is the Department of Defense.

Not that we are averse to monies from the Department of Defense. Unfortunately, however, DOD money comes with strings attached that don't give us the flexibility to do the work we really need to do to further this field. I know there have been many criticisms of academia; and of how slowly we train our students; and of how we don't bring them up to par, etc.; and of how we train our students to read literature, but they can't say a word in the language. These criticisms are valid in many ways, but if I am an advanced learner and speaker of Arabic, I'd better also know how to recite poetry! That may not be the case in Chechen, but each language has its own requirements. There is a real danger that when we are driven by the needs of only one facet of our public policy, it sets the agenda—in this case how we “do language.” The needs of national security are real, and they cannot be ignored, but that's not the entire picture, hence the danger—the danger of looking on language as utilitarian rather than a real means of communication. We need to be careful of not being totally co-opted by the fact that we are so hungry.

In a fast-moving world, to speak of careless rhetoric may be stepping onto slippery ground, but I think it is one of the dangers we face in the LCTL field.

U.S. language policy is basically carried out in a seat-of-the-pants manner. It puts us at a disadvantage when it comes to promoting the learning of foreign languages. There is little if any planning about language needs relative to our national and international policies. Three and a half years after September 2001, we're still gasping about the fact that there aren't enough Arabic speakers to fill our government needs, much less our commercial needs and our academic needs. And we seem to be unable to learn from the past. A very good example of this lack of learning appeared recently in a column from the Hoover Institution, of all places, where Peter Berkowitz and Michael McFaul (2005) claim that studying Islam and the language attached to Islam might strengthen this nation. I wondered whether Berkowitz and McFaul had read about the United States' history in the Middle East and what a difference knowing the language and culture of a people has made. There is a wonderful description of the meeting between FDR and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in 1945 published by Americans for Middle East Understand-

ing, Inc. (2005)—the first diplomatic encounter between a U.S. president and an Arab monarch. By cultivating an incredible sense of cultural appropriateness and by taking along the only fluent speaker of Arabic in the Department of State, FDR was able to acquire the pipeline concession for Aramco that thus began our long involvement with Saudi Arabia.

In our haste to respond to needs and provide solutions, I think we often tend not to be so careful. Today we tell inquirers and our funders that we should “draw on the heritage language communities.” Well, what does that mean? Although there have been some serious discussions about “heritage languages”—and some good work, one might add—we have not been careful, in our rush to meet strategic needs, to consider what drawing on heritage language communities may mean. The Pakistani immigrant who is here on an H-1 visa to work in the technology industry is not going to give up his lucrative work to sit in front of a screen and translate text at one-third the money he’s making. And his children are not learning Urdu or Sindhi, but are far more interested in melting into the society in which they find themselves. The example of the FBI having received thousands of resumes and letters of interest from Arabic speakers after September 11th, and having netted very few who would qualify for the work the agency needed, should be instructive. So when we bandy around a term like heritage language speaker, we need to be very clear as to what we’re talking about—not only to ourselves, but to our policy makers and our funders.

A good example of this comes from my own experience. At a recent Concordia Language Villages (CLV) meeting, where plans are underway to institute an Arabic Language Village in the summer of 2006, the group kept talking about how this immersion program would be such a wonderful thing for heritage language speakers. (CLV has 14 languages and they have something like 6,000 kids come through for 2-4 weeks of intensive language experiences.) So we were merrily going along, thinking “heritage language,” when the director of the Korean program pulled us up short. He said that in all the years that he had been involved in CLV, with the exception of the Nordic language background kids, they had seen very few heritage language students come through those programs. It was all those English speaking parents who were sending their kids to learn Ko-

rean, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, Italian, Finnish, etc.! — perhaps we need to be careful about proposing solutions that just might not be there.

There are other not-so-careful terms. “Advanced language learner” is one. What does that mean to the world beyond the language learning/teaching fraternity? The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) are good standards to have, but we have done a very poor job of translating those into simple, clear language that our policy makers, our funders, and the general public can understand and use.

The danger, to which we on this road contribute, is lack of clarity. We should not promise more than we can deliver; we should be clear about what we’re discussing; and we should stand firm in not allowing ourselves to respond to the quick pill. The quick fix only creates more chaos, and if our policy makers and funders have not understood this, it’s because we have not been careful and clear enough in making our case.

One last term with which I think we need to be careful can be found within our circle. The latest fad that has blown down our road has been K-12. Most of us here work in the world of adult language learning. To our credit, for quite a while now, we’ve been talking about the need to introduce language learning earlier rather than later. So we have turned to the K-12 world and have been appalled at what we’ve seen—not enough trained teachers, not enough resources, no curricula, and no frameworks. More importantly, we’ve not seen enough interest, or found minimal or nonexistent accreditation. The list seems endless! So what do we do? We first go to our funders and policy makers and we tell them that we’re going to tell the K-12 language learning field how to shape up! Well folks, we understand very little about the K-12 world. We have not grasped the fact that our education system is local—that long before we create these wonderful plans, such as the K-16 Chinese language flagship program, we need to get these districts to buy into it first. A conversation with Richard Tucker of Carnegie Mellon, who with Richard Donato from the University of Pittsburgh has been working with a school district that has bought into an articulated Spanish program, is also instructive. It has taken them ten years (yes, ten), along with a slew of motivated and bright graduate students, to create a good articulated pro-

gram, which is now entering 8th grade. Dick says that it's taken yearly meetings with the school board and parents and continual monitoring to bring the program to where it is now. Imagine what it will mean with Chinese or Arabic or Swahili or Korean or Vietnamese.

If we are going to approach the K-12 world, we are going to have to listen to the people who run these programs and by listen I mean really listen. We are going to have to meet with districts and district supervisors. We are going to have to lobby for accreditation. We are going to have to allow the K-12 world into our world, and let them tell us what they need, not the other way around. As Robert Robison from the Montgomery County Schools recently said, and I paraphrase, we can provide the K-12 language teaching community all the advice we can give, but at the end of the day, we are going to get the students they send us. That's what we will get! So a little bit of humility is in order and let us be careful when we're talking about the K-12 arena.

The final challenge that I will mention today has to do with what is in the best interests of our country.

Despite the fact that I have cautioned about the pitfalls in the agenda that national security needs are driving, I also want to say that Dick Brecht is right that the Department of Defense, the diplomatic community, and even some of the commerce community "got it" about the value of learning languages to a proficiency far beyond finding the nearest restaurant. One should commend these agencies for actually putting funds into addressing how a learner can become more proficient. One may quarrel with the plans and the approaches, but the fact of the matter is, they got it! Unfortunately, the Department of Education didn't get it! Although there is legislation being submitted to increase the amounts of funding for language and area related activities at the university and college level, it is miniscule once one looks at the figures, and there is absolutely nothing being done about the K-12 area. In fact the FLAP (Foreign Language Assistance Program) grants are consistently slated for zero funding in each budget year. So until there is an understanding that a relationship exists between K-12 and the tertiary world, we can talk about language learning all we want, but we are not going to get the pool of trained proficient foreign language speakers that we so desperately need. We will have to start them mostly from zero when they get to

college. If we're going to do our field a service, we are going to have to step outside of our adult world and begin the long, tedious process of somehow bringing the Department of Education around to "getting it." True, the K-12 part of the Department of Education is stuck with the demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, but we need to remind the NCLB folk that foreign language is considered a core subject. And for those who say it's unfair to compare the two, I say where there is a will there is a way. We need to help the U.S. Department of Education find the will to put foreign language on an equal footing with reading, science, and math.

In closing, I'd like to remind ourselves that although we are a small group compared to other disciplines, we have enormous strengths. We know how to take risks. We know how to do a whole lot with very little. We are a collegial people. And we are a field with a vision.

Thank you again for the honor of this award and for patiently listening to me.

### References

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