

OBITUARIES

DWIGHT BOLINGER

Dwight Lemerton Bolinger, teacher of linguistics, died on February 23 aged 84. He was born on August 18, 1907, in Topeka, Kansas.

DWIGHT Bolinger was one of the most influential and respected figures in the fields of linguistics and of Spanish language studies. His interest in the expressive power of language had a practical application. Always noted for his humanitarian views and for his vigorously-expressed opposition to the policies of the American government, he produced in *Language: the Loaded Weapon* (1980) a revealing and thoroughly-documented study of how language can be, and is, used at all levels of power for deliberate obfuscation.

The most characteristic, and perhaps the most fundamentally important, aspect of his contribution to language study was his conviction that its goal is not, or should not be, the impossible one of forcing the complexity of human language into a single descriptive system, but that of appreciating the infinite range of its communicative resources and the delicacy with which they are employed by ordinary speakers.

Bolinger graduated with a BA from Washburn University, and then took an MA from Kansas University and a PhD from Wisconsin University, where he took up his first teaching post as Spanish instructor in 1936. From then until his retirement in 1973 he held posts at various American universities, the last being professor of romance languages and linguistics at Harvard. He was elected president of the Linguistic Society of America in 1972 and president of the newly-founded Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States in 1975. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a corresponding member of the Royal Spanish Academy, and (in 1990) a corresponding fellow of the British Academy.

His publications number well over 300 books and articles, including *Aspects of Language* (1968, revised 1977), *Degree Words* (1972).

field in which his most important work was accomplished, was lifelong. It showed itself in his student years in his fascination with collecting synonyms. His method of teaching Spanish to first year students led to a professional concern with grammatical structures; to illuminate the idiosyncrasies of Spanish grammar, he sought for parallel usages in English, thus demonstrating connections which had not previously been observed.

Another early interest, music, was applied to his linguistic investigations to produce his extensive and invaluable work on the intonational patterns of English and Spanish; an important scholarly achievement was to demonstrate, in an era when American linguistics seemed bent on reducing all language description to the permutations of a limited number of units, that the complexities and subtleties of intonation simply could not be adequately described in terms of a system of "pitch phonemes".

Bolinger's linguistic writings were invariably characterised not only by his easy, lucid and often witty style, but by a brilliant capacity for observing and analysing subtle differences of meaning in deceptively similar expressions. At a time when linguistics was dominated by the highly abstract Chomskyan school ("theorising in the stratosphere" as Bolinger once called it) his work was firmly grounded in actual usage. He invariably carried a notepad on which he jotted down any fragment of conversation which might serve to illustrate a grammatical or stylistic argument, and an attractive feature of his writings was his use of patently real-life examples.

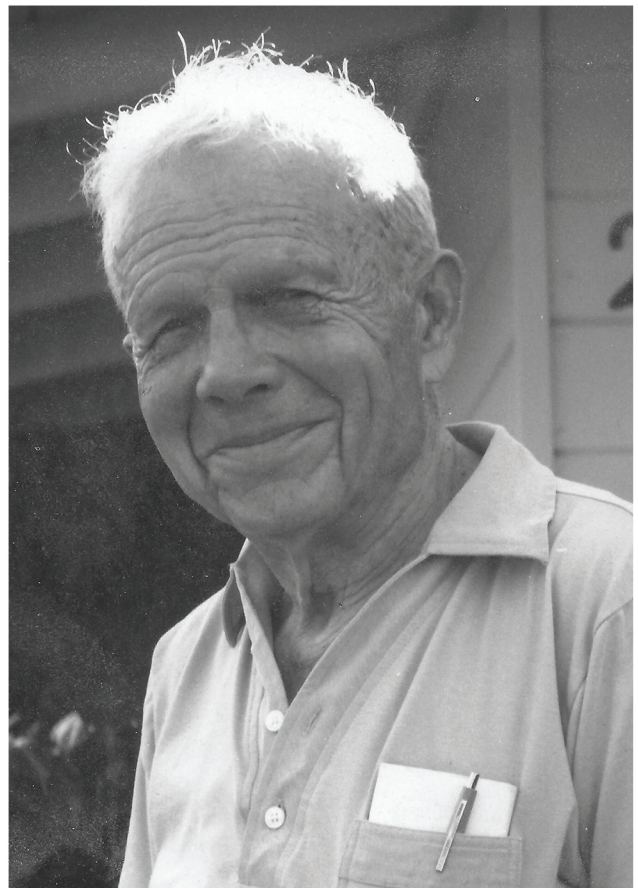
In a long and active career, coinciding with the most argumentative years in the history of linguistics, Bolinger made and retained contact with a world-wide company of scholars and researchers in the field. Not the least noteworthy aspect of his academic life, and a sign of the personal quality of the man, is that in a field in which impassioned controversy was endemic, his

publications number well over 300 books and articles, including *Aspects of Language* (1968, revised 1977), *Degree Words* (1972), *Meaning and Form* (1975), and *Intonation and its Parts* (1986). His last published work was *Essays on Spanish: Words and Grammar* (1991), a collection of previously-published articles, each with a new introduction.

Bolinger's interest in language, ultimately to be the

worthy aspect of his academic life, and a sign of the personal quality of the man, is that in a field in which impassioned controversy was endemic, his relations with colleagues, differences of opinion notwithstanding, were unfailingly friendly.

Bolinger's wife Louise, née Schrynmaker, whom he married in 1934, predeceased him in 1986. His is survived by a son and a daughter



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