

July 14, 1990

Dear Dr. Bolinger,

D.L. Bolinger--a Man who has Changed my Life
Recollections of Study in the U.S. as Gaijins (1951-1952) (ed. The Collins
Club Editing Committee. Printed at FUJIWARA PRESS, July 13, 1990)
Isamu ABE (Univ. Texas)

I went to the U.S. for study aboard the USNS Gen. Collins and stayed there for about a year. Before returning to Japan, I ventured to write a letter from UT where I was placed to Dr. Bolinger (then at Univ. Southern California) whose works had given me a tremendous impact on me. Intonation was his field of research and it was a subject on which Japanese teachers of English were not doing much research at that time.

What I did was something quite unconceivable to do in the traditional Japan I knew--that is, a mere obscure student writing a letter to a distinguished scholar at first hand and asking him questions. So I could hardly believe my eyes when, contrary to my expectations, he gave me a reply in which he provided a very detailed piece of advice on two typescript sheets of paper about how to get hold of some important works I would need for my research in the future.

Back in Japan, I started sending letters as advised to the various scholars of the world. All of them, to my surprise, gave me a warm reply. This marked the very beginning of my subsequent correspondence with Dr. Bolinger relating to matters academic, and our letters to each other virtually crossed over the heavily Pacific--several times indeed in the week when we were most occupied with the job.

I later managed to have a book on English intonation I had been laboriously working on published--all thanks to him. A glance at the book will tell you that mention is made of Bolinger in a number of places. This researcher's life indeed revolved around him. His face which I had not yet seen was conjured up in the morning and also in the evening.

In the mid 1960's, I was asked without any previous notice to apply for the Fulbright Research Scholar program. I suspected that Dr. Bolinger had made secret arrangements for me out of his kind consideration. I went to the U.S. a second time and I was placed at Columbia University. One day, in my spare time, I paid a visit to his home in Boston where I saw him in the flesh for the first time in my life. He was a really gentle, fatherly sort of man. And busy as he was, he spared no pains in taking me around Boston.

It was just about this time that I discovered that I was not the only non-American scholar who was 'enjoying a favor' from him. I marveled at the magnitude of his open personality.

I compiled together with a Japanese friend who is no more alive some of Dr. Bolinger's works into a book which was published in Japan in 1965. On the title page of this book is his photograph and his signature.

His academic standpoint, defined in a word, is 'unorthodoxy.' Dr. Bolinger as I saw him seemed to be a lone wolf who was behaving as such of his own free will. In the eyes of a foreign scholar like me, he seemed to be actually being ignored as a heretic by the dutiful followers of the then dominant American academic school. However, no one could deny his real worth. He was later nominated

as the President of the Linguistic Society of America--a linguistically most distinguished organization--one that might well be called the best of its kind in the world. That meant that he had now become a very big figure for me. Actually, however, his correspondence with me had become more informal, more domestic than the time when I first went to the U.S. Bolinger, a scholar, I found was also Bolinger, a man. He is even now too big for me. I start my letter to him with Dear Dr. Bolinger to which he replies quite casually Dear Isamu.

I had an opportunity to set foot on American soil once again--slightly more than ten years ago. I called on him at his Palo Alto residence to which he had moved after retiring from his job at Harvard University. During this visit, he showed me a binder crammed tight with letters and writings and he said, "This is from you." The binder, believe it or not, contained the whole mailed matter I had sent to him from Japan since I started my correspondence with him. He accompanied me all the time I was staying in Palo Alto--as a guide. He talked vehemently about academic matters that interested us both--at Stanford University where he was a guest professor and at home--in a manner as if grudging spending time otherwise. I remember that Mrs. Bolinger who was sitting by his side once gave me an "I-can't-help-it" look and smile.

When the time to leave came, I took a picture of Dr. Bolinger, Mrs. Bolinger and my wife before the front door. And back in Japan, I had the picture that was to be my family treasure developed, but nothing had come out on the picture probably because of mishandling. I sent him a letter to that effect. He said in his reply that that would serve as a good excuse for my having to come back to America to take a new picture. I have not visited the U.S. since. If I were lucky enough to do that, now, I would no more be able to take a picture like the one I took at that time. Mrs. Bolinger has died recently leaving her husband behind.

I shall retire in spring this year at the age of 70. Dr. Bolinger's book (pp.421) was published in 1986, and more recently another book (pp.470) was published in 1989. Complimentary copies of the two books are with me. He is 83 years old now, but his passion for a scholarly mission has not in the least abated, nor has his unorthodoxy worn out with age. I feel as if distance between Dr. Bolinger and me in terms of scholarly aspirations and achievements has grown wider now than when I first began my contact with him by letter.

I am an utterly unfilial son--I am even now heavily dependent on him. But I am in a way uncomplaining and satisfied, because my fosterfather is a No.1 American scholar and an excellent man as well.
(Orientation at Denver Univ.)

What you have just read is from the book: Recollections of Study In the U.S. as Garioans (1951-1952). The book is a collection of notes / articles contributed by 162 (out of the total 471) Garioa Exchange students from Japan who went to America aboard the USNS Gen.Collins in July, 1951.

Each contributor tried in his/her own way to give a short account of what they got from their study in your country. A reunion of the '51 Garioans was held only yesterday--July 13, Friday, the very day when exactly 39 years ago they left Japan, nobody knowing what lay in store for them. A copy of the book rather overdue but fresh from the press was distributed to each contributor to celebrate the occasion.

I herewith enclose a photocopy of my original written in Japanese with my rather hastily done English translation. Please receive it as a tiny tribute of respect and affection I pay to you for all the unsparing assistance and guidance you have been giving me for nearly 40 years.

I hope that your doctors will find a way out and you will get better even though it may take some more time. I am concerned about your condition. So is Konishi. So is Tsuchiya. So is Yahata. And so are all the Japanese scholars who know you.

Sincerely,

Isamu