

## Dr. D.L. Bolinger: The man and his scholarship

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As reported in the May (1992) issue of this journal, Dr. Dwight LeMerton Bolinger died on February 23. He was Emeritus Professor of Harvard University and Visiting Emeritus Professor of Stanford University. He was 84. I heard that he had been stricken with myeloma some time around May of 1990 but was under the impression that he was completely cured. This was primarily because he was since very actively involved in many activities including editorial consultant for the new edition of the *Lighthouse English-Japanese Dictionary* (1990), author of *Essays on Spanish: Words and Grammar* (1991), and co-chair of the Editorial Consulting Committee for *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (1992) with A. McIntosh; all of which is far more than would be expected of a person over 80 years of age. In this article, I would like to focus on Dr. Bolinger, the man, and his scholarship, as a way of remembering him; the reader is referred to the *Dictionary of Names of English Language Scholars* for his vita, professional activities and major academic contributions.

The name "Bolinger," immediately conjures up in my mind the figure of an independent, original scholar, who, at the time of revolutionary change from structural linguistics to transformational generative grammar, refused to belong to and transcended any particular school or faction, and who was extremely active in an amazingly wide range of linguistic fields with deep insights and perspective.

The next trait I would like to comment on is Bolinger's academic attitude, which, in order to describe I quote R. Quirk in the Foreword of *Meaning and Form* (p.vii -viii): "Though content to describe himself as merely 'a diligent native speaker', he combines clinical skill and data-rich experience with the scientific intellect of the inquiring theorist. In consequence, working always in the spirit of 'Omnia probate - quod bonum est tenete', he challenges strongly and fashionably held views by confronting them with the incontrovertible data of usage, analyzed with subtle perception." I concur wholeheartedly with Quirk.

It seems that there are no linguists as productive as Bolinger was, or, if any do exist, they must be quite rare. Furthermore, he was just as active as ever, even after reaching seventy years of age. Until his death, he generally wrote more than 5 articles a year, and any one of them was energetic and full of originality and insight, giving us perpetual intellectual stimulus. Moreover, in between his article writing, he also wrote books; which is really a super-human feat. According to the information sent by his family, his works include 15 books and about 320 articles. With English and Spanish as central pillars, his works deal with a wide variety of topics including politics and society in addition to language. All of these writings impress us as if they were high mountains whose peaks had never before been scaled. It is difficult to imagine such vitality and drive from Bolinger's gentle appearance alone.

Lastly, speaking of gentleness, there are few scholars who are as approachable and eager to help other people as Bolinger was. According to certain scholars' commentaries, he was always willing to receive any kind of question, and he even sent linguistic data if the researcher so requested. In Japan too, there are countless people among my personal acquaintances who received advice from him through correspondence. No one was as

prompt in answering questions and giving comments and kind advice on research papers as he was. I cannot possibly be the only one who was attracted by someone who was such a benevolent fatherly figure in spite of his international fame.

In looking at his vita, we learn that he majored in Spanish in college and that he spent 27 out of his 37 years of teaching (1936-73) teaching Spanish until he moved to Harvard. For an average person, '27 years' constitutes the end of one's professional life. One could say then that it was after his retirement that he was exposed to linguistics for the first time in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard. This was precisely the time when the American linguistics world was undergoing its most drastic changes, and the University of Southern California, where he taught from 1944-1960 did not yet have a linguistics department. Furthermore, there were no Annual Meetings of the Linguistic Society of America on the West Coast until 1969. Therefore, Bolinger had been completely outside of the world of mainstream American linguistics. As he said in the Preface of *Forms of English* (1965), "Linguistics is my business, though I came too late to get it in my blood", his start in linguistics was indeed late. If I may present my own speculation, his late arrival probably added to his original inclination to dislike the dogmatic, mainstream way of thinking. Many articles in *Forms of English* harshly criticize structural linguistics. For example, in the first essay, 'Intonation: Levels versus Configurations' (which originally appeared in *Word* 7, 1951, when structural linguistics was at its peak) he is diametrically opposed to the central claim of structural linguistics that 4 pitch levels and 3 terminal junctures can correctly describe English intonation.

At the same time, Bolinger criticized those American linguists who switched from structural linguistics to transformational grammar, saying that "most American linguists, like American Rotarians and American Baptists, are enthusiastic joiners," and lamented their lack of loyalty. To make such a statement at a time when new linguistics was becoming a fad required a great deal of courage and he must have been firmly committed to his own beliefs about linguistics. He went on to say that "Perhaps being somewhat of an outsider has helped me to see one or two of the ten or a dozen questions treated here more clearly than if I had tangled with them hand to hand," highlighting his advantageous position of outsider which enabled him to observe things from a distance and with a quiet sort of confidence.

Before long transformational grammar reached its prime. Since structural linguists had excluded semantics entirely, Bolinger did not agree with their approach from the beginning. However, he welcomed transformational grammar early on since transformational grammar did treat semantics seriously. But, after transformational grammar established itself as the new orthodoxy, Bolinger seemed to resist the new authority. He states in his letter to a transformational grammarian: "...But my formation was largely through resistance to structuralism rather than adherence to it....I welcomed the opening up of new lines with the advent of TG, but when that became a new orthodoxy I felt myself as much on the outside as ever." For example, 'Adjective in English: Attribution and Predication' was published in 1967 when the Whiz Deletion transformation was one of the most widely accepted transformations because of its seemingly logical argumentation. In considering the use of adjectives, Bolinger pointed out the relationship between syntax and semantics, and further between syntax and pragmatics, and he criticized the inadequacy of generalizing and formalizing a certain linguistic phenomenon based on syntax alone, ignoring actual usage. He pointed out that this critique is not limited to adjectives, but extends to the current theory-oriented attitude in the field. This was a ground breaking article.

His criticism of standard theory took a much clearer form the following year in the publication of 'Judgment of Grammaticality'. Arguing against the interpretive semantic

model espoused by N. Chomsky, R. Jackendoff and others, Bolinger became inclined to support the generative semantic approach espoused by people such as G. Lakoff, J. R. Ross and others. It seems that he thought that each school tries to generalize and formalize language based upon theories alone, but in actuality things cannot possibly be that simple. There was no end to his energetic critical spirit and questioning mind, tackling such issues as: 'Are those data judged as ungrammatical by some linguists actually ungrammatical?', 'How does your theory account for these data', 'How about interpreting your results this way rather than the way you are claiming', and so on.

Next, we must take into consideration the fact that Bolinger was a Spanish teacher for many years. When teaching Spanish and Spanish grammar as a language teacher, one must necessarily confront the practical problem of how to teach reading, writing, and speaking in the target language rather than teaching abstract linguistic theory. Concrete issues such as contrastive analyses between English and Spanish also become important. His obituary for R. Long (1906-76) (*TESOL*, Vol. 10, No.2), traditional grammarian and his long-time friend, sounds as if Bolinger, the language teacher, is talking to Long, a fellow language teacher-friend who taught English to foreign students for many years. At the same time, the obituary sounds much like a harsh warning to the linguistic era which tended to rely too heavily on theory<sup>1</sup>.

However, Bolinger was different from Long even as a language teacher; he taught Spanish, which was not his native language. His proficiency in English, a Germanic language, as well as in Spanish, a Romance language, probably helped him to 'see' Language more clearly than ordinary American linguists in many ways. Although not a well-known fact, Bolinger wrote 3 books and many articles on Spanish. His research in Spanish must have contributed significantly to his study on general linguistics and English linguistics. Let us now put the spot light on this area.

A considerable number of his papers are contrastive studies of the two languages, such as 'Modes of Modality in Spanish and English' (1970); but some are not. For example, 'Linear Modification' (1952) seems to have gained insight from Spanish word order, and it was introduced to Japan quite early (Tatsu Sasaki, "Aspects of Languages" 1966). Simply stated, the contents are as follows: in *Juan canta* (John sings) and *Canta Juan* (Sings John), the former normally means 'John sings for a living'; the latter, 'John is singing now'. According to Bolinger, *canta* in *Juan canta* "narrows" the meaning of *Juan* (Bolinger calls this phenomenon "modification") and the sentence comes to mean "John makes a living by singing, not doing other things.", while in *Canta Juan*, *Juan* modifies *Canta*, and the sentence takes on the meaning of "the person who sings next is none other than John". The same line of thinking is applicable to the case of "Adj. + N" vs. "N + Adj." such as *un hermoso edificio* (a beautiful building) vs. *un edificio hermoso* (a building beautiful). He extends this idea to English as well, such that the former, i.e., Adj + N, designates an "inherent characteristic, and the latter, i.e., N + ADJ, a "temporary" one. He later developed this idea even further in 'Essence and Accident' (1973) and other writings. The same thing can be said about word order and English adverbs. Consider the following pairs of examples.

( She sweetly kissed him.  
Le dio un dulce beso. (=She gave me a sweet kiss.)

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a partial quotation from the obituary: "Ralph Long, the writer, is impossible to separate from Ralph Long, the teacher....The explanations in his grammar were meant to be used (sic) by students struggling to express themselves, not to impress a colleague or bolster a theory."

( She kissed him sweetly.  
*Le dio un beso dulce.* (=She gave him a kiss [that was] sweet.)

It seems to me that Bolinger's 'broad-to-narrow' sequence is related to 'from general to specific' and also corresponds to Jan Firbas's (1957) 'theme-to-rheme' sequence. Several other terminologies exist such as 'from topic to comment', 'from known to unknown', 'from old information to new information', etc. but they all seem to discuss the same phenomenon. In considering a sentence as a unit of discourse, this line of thinking has more or less established itself as common sense to many researchers today.

Observe the contrast: Do you see her Tuesdays? No, Tuesdays I stay home./ \*No, Mondays I see her./ ?No, I see her Mondays. This is a case of cumulative contrast, and it is one of the important points from the perspective of sentential relationships. It is quite important to note that at the time when the maximum unit of linguistic analysis was the sentence, Bolinger was already paying attention to discourse, which goes beyond the level of the sentence. Later he wrote several articles such as 'Pronouns in Discourse' (1979) where the concept of discourse is crucial. What is important for Bolinger is that discourse contexts become the standard for grammaticality judgments.

It is precisely for this reason that he takes a different position from the Chomskyan school in discussing grammaticality in the aforementioned article, 'Judgment of Grammaticality'. Bolinger considers contextualization as essential and tries to address the issue of grammatical judgment by setting up various possible contexts for a given sentence. A good example would be his explanation of the following sentence, which is normally considered ungrammatical, *Anybody hadn't better try that with me!*, (*Meaning and Form*, p. 23). His explanation of this sentence clearly expresses his view of language and his view of grammar.

Thus, the influence of Spanish is seen in his perspectives on discourse and pragmatics. Similarly, it seems that his notion of 'the opposition of form and meaning' also comes from his influence of Spanish. This can be seen as an extension of his position in 'Linear Modification', etc.: the meaning difference effected by word order naturally should be observable in the meaning difference effected by other grammatically parallel constructions. It would seem that his accumulation of interest in this area finally crystallized into his well-known idea: 'if the form is different, then the meaning is different'. This has become his impenetrable belief which was elevated into his philosophy of language. Take for example, the pair of sentences, *I noticed (that) you were there*, where the existence/nonexistence of that constitutes an opposition. The traditional explanation was that the existence of that avoids ambiguity or signals a difference in speech levels. In his *That's That* (1972), he tried to show that there is in fact a meaning difference between that-less sentences and sentences with that, even in the case of this kind of syntactic formal difference. *Meaning and Form* (1977), as illustrated by the title, is the culmination of his year-long ideas about 'form and meaning'.

When looking at his list of publications, we find titles such as 'What is freedom?', or 'A Common-Sense Solution to the Canning-Lid Crisis' (1975) which are rare titles for works by linguists. Where did his interest in politics and social problems come from? Bolinger mentions the influence of his father, Arthur, in his same letter to the transformational grammarian, "I must confess that I am not 'deep' into the question of language and the law, but the subject has always fascinated me (my father was a lawyer, and I had to sharpen my wits to contend with that)!... It may be natural in a sense to hear such things from someone who grew up and was educated in a family whose father's profession was law. It seems that he always retained his interest in the question of language and the law, and that it was manifested later as the unique chapter, 'Language and

the Public Interest', which he added to the second edition of his widely acclaimed *Aspects of Language*. In *Language, The Loaded Weapon* (1980) he directly confronted various questions regarding how language is related to society. This kind of research had been neglected in mainstream linguistics, or rather shall we say, it was impossible to treat. *Language, The Loaded Weapon* could only have been written by someone like Bolinger.

Finally, we must touch on phonetics, especially intonation, as one of his most important fields of research. It is almost as if wherever we see the word intonation, Bolinger was a pioneer in that field. In 1980, phoneticians of the world dedicated a Festschrift to him, *The Melody of Language Intonation and Prosody*, Waugh and Schooneveld (eds.), which shows what an important position this particular research field occupies in his entire linguistic activity. In the literature sent to me with the news of his death, I found a passage saying that "Bolinger's original interest was music composition." and that his minor in college was music. It must be that his inherent love of music was the source for his life-long interest in research on intonation. Beginning with 'Spanish Intonation' (1945), there are almost 40 articles in this field. However, the culmination of his research of over 40 years are the two volumes, *Intonation and Its Parts: Melody in Spoken Language* (1986) and *Intonation and Its Uses: Melody in Grammar and Discourse* (1989). Together they amount to nearly 900 pages, and I have no doubt whatsoever that they will remain as an everlasting magnum opus of his lifework.

In the above, I have tried to catch only a glimpse of Dr. Bolinger as a man and his scholarship. I am afraid that I may have left out too much. If I may borrow words from *Aspects of Language* (p. 552), I will have to say that "Another blind man is describing this linguistic elephant." I would be very happy if this short essay could serve as a preliminary and temporary bridge for the true introduction to Bolinger, the man, and his scholarship. May his soul rest in peace.