

**DWIGHT LeMERTON BOLINGER**

**MEMORIAL MINUTE  
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DWIGHT LeMERTON BOLINGER

BORN August 18, 1907  
DIED February 23, 1992

**D**wight Bolinger, one of the most influential and respected linguists of his time, was born in Topeka, Kansas on August 18, 1907. He developed an interest in language by chance. Being obliged to work his way through Washburn College, he sold suits door-to-door in the Mexican-American neighborhoods of Topeka. To increase his effectiveness, Dwight took some Spanish courses, and soon gave up his concentration in mathematics and music in order to major in Spanish. He went on to get a master's degree from the University of Kansas in 1932 and a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin in 1936, both in Spanish literature.

Though his dissertation was on the Spanish novelist Pío Baroja, his interest in words led him to collaborate in 1936 on a small publication, called *Words*, put out by an English teacher in Los Angeles, Omar Colodny. Dwight recorded and analyzed new words and expressions as he came across them. His column, "The Living Language," resulted in an exchange of letters with some of his readers, among them Henry L. Mencken, the dean of nonacademic writing about language. These exchanges marked the beginning of a vast correspondence with every major linguist in the world as well as with many others who shared his passion for words.

His first taste of anything approaching linguistics came in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin,

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where he was one of a small group of students working under Antonio G. Solalinde on editing medieval texts. He was fascinated by the ideal of making exactly the right choice of words, and word hunting became an obsession that continued throughout his life.

What finally completed Dwight's conversion from literature to language was the first few years of teaching Spanish to undergraduates. A determined search for improving practical classroom teaching techniques led to an investigation of the question of word order and parallel usage in English. He found himself analyzing grammatical structures and looking for better ways of dealing with what is today called contrast grammar. It was a first glimmering of what became "Linear Modification" a decade later.

His first chance to make language an object of serious study came in 1943, when he obtained a Yale University Fellowship that left him free to do his research in his own way. His next move took him to the University of Southern California's Spanish Department where his new job again required concentration on language teaching. After only two years he became department head and remained so for thirteen years. Among his many duties was heading a special committee appointed by the then Mayor of Los Angeles to resolve the controversy regarding the correct pronunciation of "Los Angeles."

Meanwhile his ground-breaking article on the subject of intonation led to a research fellowship at Bell Telephone's Haskins Laboratories to work on questions of stress, juncture, and pitch. The series of resulting papers finally gave him recognition as a linguist. He was asked by the Modern Language Association to head up a committee to write a textbook that would give practical application to new linguistic insights. The resulting text, *Modern Spanish*, the product of an "unbelievably successful job of diplomacy within scholarship," (as one of his former colleagues put it) was an

important part of the audiolingual revolution and a model textbook for several generations.

An appointment as visiting linguist at Boulder led to a full-time teaching appointment there. He remained at Boulder until 1963, when he received an offer from Harvard where he was to do his last ten years of teaching, dividing his time between the Department of Linguistics and the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures where he served as Language Coordinator. Because of his training in Latin, he had a familiarity with all Romance languages and hence was admirably suited to advise teaching fellows at all levels of instruction. Thus, in his role as teacher of teachers, Dwight Bolinger set up the teacher training program in the Department of Romance Languages and coaxed high standards of performance from those he trained.

Dean Whitla remembers Dwight Bolinger's constant preoccupation with improving the Harvard Placement Test. It attained such a level of perfection under his supervision that since his retirement from Harvard in 1973 no one has felt the need to change it. It is still administered to our students as he left it.

Remembering his years at Harvard (1963-1973) Dwight fondly recalled Roman Jakobson and Noam Chomsky whom he found at nearby MIT and whose liberal political views he shared. Yet, he was an anti-formalist and the theories Chomsky advanced were anathema to him. As linguistics fell more and more under the spell of the highly abstract Chomskyan school ("theorizing in the stratosphere," as Bolinger once called it), he kept himself unattached to the current dogmas and his work remained firmly rooted in actual usage. In an era of formalism, he spurned the grand theories, stuck to convincingly analyzed usage and presented his work in a highly readable style. A beacon of common sense, his interest lay in the observation, recording and analysis of what people said, meant, pronounced and used.

Dwight was equally noted for his humanitarian views, which he eloquently voiced in a small volume published in 1941, entitled "What is Freedom? For the Individual -- For Society?" and in "Language: The Loaded Weapon" (1980). For the latter, in which he warned that the manipulation of language is "the most devastating form of social control [of our time]," he obtained the George Orwell Award by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Upon retirement he moved to Palo Alto and took a lively interest in the Stanford Linguistics Department where he was visiting professor until his death. He still carried on his voluminous correspondence with a worldwide company of scholars and researchers -- answering usually by return mail -- at the same time that he kept on writing and publishing.

The complete list of Dwight Bolinger's publications number 16 books and well over 300 articles. He served as president of the Linguistics Society of America in 1972, the Linguistics Association of the U. S. and Canada, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a corresponding member of the Royal Spanish Academy and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy.

His wife, Louise, died in 1986. He is survived by a son, Bruce, of Nevada City, California; and a daughter, Ann McClure of Aberdeen, Scotland; a sister, Mary Barker of Red Bluff, California; a brother, William, of Versailles, Missouri and three grandchildren.

Professor Dante Della Terza  
Professor Joaquin Francisco-Coelho  
Dr. Marlies K. Mueller  
Professor Francisco Márquez (*Chairman*)