

Tributes to Dwight Bolinger

Dwight Le Merton Bolinger was born in 1907 and died on Sunday, February 23, 1992. He was known to most linguistics for his work in intonation. He was professor emeritus of Harvard University and Stanford University. The following excerpts were shared on "Linguist," a university electronic network.

This is to let y'all know that one of our most cherished associates, Dwight Bolinger, died last night at 11:30 PM at a hospital in Palo Alto. For the many of us who have been inspired by Dwight's work and encouraged by his generous sharing of his time and knowledge, this is a true loss. Dwight has never spared himself, his time and his unfailing attention and wit in encouraging young people in their work. While few people in linguistics could actually boast him as their professor, scores could justly claim him as their teacher. Dwight never allowed his temporal age to interfere with his unbounded enthusiasm, nor dull his curiosity, nor curtail his delight in talking to rank beginners about the subject dearest to his heart—language. Through the thick and thin of structuralist dogmas, Dwight was a beacon of common sense and inspiration to all of us who persist in the simple-minded assumption that language is about communication. Dwight was a gentleman of the old school who could nevertheless appreciate the young and their foibles. We will miss him sorely.

—Talmy Givon

I don't expect to attend a memorial service for Dwight Bolinger, and so would like to pretend that this network is a gathering of his friends and colleagues, come together to toast his passing. I hardly knew him, personally, having met him only twice, but I remember the first time I sent him a paper, more than ten years ago, when I really was, if not a rank beginner, a complete unknown. He sent back four pages of comments, all flattering and a mild query: I had cited Quine as the source of the witty observation that when we invite meaning into a linguistic description, he is sure to bring along some uninvited rowdy friends as well. As it happened, Bolinger had written something along those lines himself—was this a case of convergence? As I discovered over many years, so many of the ideas, and so much of the poetry, which I misattributed to Quine and others, or thought

to have discovered myself, I owed to him. I salute his brilliant mind, and his sweet and generous heart. He was the greatest.

—John Haiman

I want to second John Haiman's touching tribute to Dwight Bolinger. I never met him, but had brief contacts with him via correspondence on a number of memorable occasions and have always admired him not only for the astuteness of his observations but for the panache with which he delivered them. No doubt it is this which inspired Jane Hill, in her 1970 review of *Aspects of Language* (Lg. 46.667–670) to describe him as “up to his elbows in the muck of language”—a marvelously apt characterization.

I think of something someone said after the death of the pianist Glenn Gould, which applies as well here: he's gone, and the rest of us are just going to have to get used to it.

—Michael Kac

I have a story also about Dwight's kindness to fledglings. I had been out of graduate school for about a year when I met Dwight. I went up to introduce myself to him at some kind of gathering and he said, “Oh, yes, I just quoted you in a paper I'm working on.”

—Susan Steele

Dear colleagues,

Like John Haiman I cannot attend a memorial service for Dwight Bolinger, but I will gladly and sadly take a moment to recall a man whose delight in the discussion of language was so evident. I met Dwight only once, and recall him clearly. I feel now that a little light up the road that we are all travelling has just gone out. Talmy—thanks for letting us know. Peace,

—Ed Keenan

It saddened me very much to hear of Dwight's passing. I didn't know him very well, but I was very impressed with the seemingly inexhaustible supply of knowledge he had at his fingertips. For example, at the Stanford Child Language Conference in 1984 I gave a paper about the acquisition of “even though” subordinate clauses. As a side comment, I noted that the form “although” is acquired even later, and seems to have a slightly different meaning, implication, whatever... Dwight was in the audience. He came up to me after the

paper and told me of a paper written in 1948 for publication but never actually published about that very subject. Later he sent me a copy. If I remember correctly it was by Bloch (I can check, but I'm responding to this topic without preparation—and I clearly don't have a memory anywhere near as impressive as Bolinger's). Those of you who knew Bolinger well can say with authority what kind of person we have lost. I can't say that, but based on my limited experience I realize we lost a lot. More than we'll probably ever realize.

—Benji Wald

I'd like to add my sentiments to those expressed by colleagues for Dwight Bolinger. He was an especially important scholar to me because my work is on intonation. I feel so very lucky to have been able to meet and talk to him—in spring of 1990, when I was in Palo Alto for a brief visit, he invited me to his home for a meeting, because he was too weak to attend my talk. We had a wonderful conversation, full of performed examples of contours, delighted glimpses of recognition as we exchanged observations...and when we politely noted our disagreement on certain issues, he shook my hand with both of his. It was a memorable experience; I left his house feeling like he embodied a standard in scholarship.

We have lost a remarkable man.

—Cynthia McLemore

Yes—linguistics has lost a great scholar and the human race a magnificent human being. To misquote an old union song, Dwight would no doubt now be saying, "Don't mourn for me, work and teach and save the environment."

—Vicki Fromkin