

Paper submitted for consideration for inclusion in:
*History of Linguistics 2008: Selected papers from the International Conference on the
History of the Language Sciences XI (ICHoLS XI), Potsdam, Germany 28 August–2
September 2008* (Gerda Hassler, Ed.)

Gender and the language scholarship of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the context
of mid twentieth-century American linguistics

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE THIS PRELIMINARY DRAFT
WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

Margaret Thomas
Boston College
Chestnut Hill MA 02467
<thomasm@bc.edu>
Revised 5 March 2009

Gender and the language scholarship of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the context
of mid twentieth-century American linguistics

Abstract

Low levels of participation by women scholars in mainstream American linguistics in the mid twentieth century contrast with evidence of productive engagement in language study and analysis by women missionary-linguists affiliated with SIL International from the 1940s. This paper explores why SIL, unlike early twentieth-century academic study of language, seems to have consistently valued women's linguistic work.

1. Introduction

In *Women, Language and Linguistics*, Julia S. Falk (1999) narrates the lifework of three American women who contributed to the study of language in the first half of the twentieth century. Alice Vanderbilt Morris (1874–1950) promoted the international auxiliary language Interlingua; Gladys Amanda Reichard (1893–1955) researched Native American languages and cultures, especially Navajo; and classicist E. Adelaide Hahn (1893–1967) became the first woman to serve as President of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). All three moved in professional circles that included few other women, much less women who held leadership roles. Early to mid twentieth-century American linguistics was rather unreceptive to scholarship by women: Joos (1986:9), for example, remarked offhand about the “routine ignoring of all female scholars”. This renders the

accomplishments of Morris, Reichard, and Hahn all the more remarkable, although Falk shows that their contributions have since received little attention.

However, during the lifetimes of these three women and continuing up to today, at least one current in the study of language flowing outside mainstream American linguistics shows a strikingly different profile in the participation of women. In this context there was robust, sustained, and productive involvement of both sexes in language study and analysis, on what approached an equal footing. This work was produced by members of a controversial organization about which many present-day linguists have strongly mixed feelings, the Christian evangelical Bible-translation group SIL International, formerly the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Paradoxically, during the interval in which women like Morris, Reichard, and Hahn faced gender-based “participation obstacles and exclusion” (Falk 1999:21) within mainstream American linguistics, the contributions of women members of SIL to the study of language were readily accepted and highly valued. Alongside men, women SIL affiliates collected and analyzed original linguistic data, and published both descriptive and theoretical work. That work was respected by their missionary colleagues of both genders, and taken seriously within mainstream linguistics.

2. Women in mainstream mid-twentieth century American linguistics

In a series of case studies of linguistics in the first half of the 20th century, Falk (1995, 1999) depicts an academic culture unequally receptive to women’s versus men’s scholarship. Four characteristics of that culture stand out. First, the rate of participation

by women in academic study of language was low. In 1925, of the 274 original members of the LSA, 11% were female; women amounted to 10–15% of the membership of the society in its first decade (Falk 1999:21). Newmeyer (1990:44) despairs of estimating the number of practicing women linguists between World War I and II. However, one might extrapolate the proportion of women in the field from the general distribution of faculty members by gender. Pollard (1977:188) reported that female PhDs teaching in all fields in the US *fell* between 1932 and 1962, from 32% to 22%.

Second, women who joined the LSA wielded little power in it. For 10 of its first 20 years, no woman was elected or appointed to a leadership role (Falk 1999:21). During World War II, a few women held prominent positions (including Hahn's presidency in 1946). Then another decade passed before any woman was elected or appointed to an LSA office or major committee. Moreover, women rarely served as editors or editorial board members. Disterheft (1990) studied the distribution of gender in 7 linguistics journals from 1960. During the interval in focus here (up to 1970) only about 5% of editors or editorial board members were women.

Third, women scholars published less than men. Falk (1999:24) indicates that women authored 2% of the material published between 1925 and 1935 in the LSA's flagship journal *Language*. Disterheft's (1990:106) analysis starts in 1960, during which year she attributed 9% of articles in *Language* to women, and no reviews. In the 27-year interval between 1944 and 1970 (chosen for reasons mentioned below), I could attribute fewer than 5% of works in *Language* to women. With 89% attributable to men (and 6% unidentified by gender), males outnumbered female authors more than 17 to 1. That ratio

represents a proportionally lower level of accomplishment even relative to women's depressed levels of membership in the LSA.

Fourth, many women scholars worked under sub-optimal conditions, in ways difficult to quantify. Women were more likely than men to hold positions of lower academic rank, or to teach at women's colleges, where support for scholarship was sparse. Furthermore, women's intellectual independence was not always encouraged: Falk (1999:178) relates how Reichard was persistently defined as disciple of Franz Boas, even long after she had graduated from his direct supervision. Women's career development sometime relied on external factors such as wars that engaged men elsewhere, or marriage to successful male scholars (Falk, 1999:24)—although the latter sometimes negatively affected a woman's professional life (Newmeyer 1990:44–45).

These factors characterize academic study of language in America in the early to mid twentieth century. As late as 1971 there were still linguistics departments that by policy did not hire women (Ioup & Hirschman 1972). Although present-day analyses of the distribution of academic rank reveal rough parity between males and females (COSWL 2008; Balcom & Clarke 2004:77), comprehensive gender equality is only very partially signaled by such numbers.

3. Women's participation the Summer Institute of Linguistics / SIL International: Outside mainstream linguistics

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that gaps between the involvement of women versus men in language study did not obtain in every context, even in the early to

mid 1900s. There was at least one context where, from the 1940s, women's opportunities for participation, leadership, publication, and—to some extent—intellectual independence were distributed differently than in mainstream linguistics.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics was founded in 1934 in rural Arkansas by the Protestant evangelist William Cameron Townsend (1896–1982), as a cross-denominational Bible-translation training program. SIL trainees study indigenous languages in a fieldwork setting, toward the goal of translating Christian scriptures into every extant language. Ancillary to this purpose, they teach literacy skills to minority populations, and provide medical, agricultural, or transportation aid. SIL also publishes dictionaries, grammars, and linguistic analyses addressed to missionary and secular scholars. Townsend's first students worked in Guatemala, then expanded to Peru and Ecuador. By the late 1950s SIL was active in the Philippines, Brazil, and Papua New Guinea; Southeast Asia and Africa followed (Hvalkof & Aaby 1981:17–21). In 2008 SIL counted 5300 active members, with over 1800 languages having been studied (<http://www.sil.org/sil/>). Many members are now trained at the SIL-affiliated Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (GIAL), located near the organization's international headquarters outside Dallas, Texas, before being placed abroad. SIL field linguists sometimes live under very rugged conditions for decades, often raising families, while they study local vernaculars so as to translate the Bible. SIL is funded through private donations and government contracts that support the organization's educational activities.

SIL and its associated fund-raising organization Wycliffe International have been the object of extensive public critique. Many have objected that SIL strategically

downplays its religious motivation to gain access to minority populations (Stoll 1982). Some host countries complain that SIL meddles in local politics, while outsiders blame SIL for not doing enough, or doing the wrong things, to protect indigenous peoples (Hartch 2006). Anthropologists challenge the legitimacy of SIL linguistics (d'Ans 1981), or fault SIL for exploiting their technological or medical expertise to impose Christianity and capitalism on vulnerable ethnic groups (Hvalkof & Aaby 1981, King 1994). Linguists censure SIL for translating the Bible instead of preserving indigenous language traditions (Epps 2007). Journalists and political analysts accuse SIL of promoting American military and economic interests, or even of involvement in CIA-supported espionage (Colby & Dennett 1995). On one or more of these grounds, some linguists have developed such strong reservations about SIL that they have stopped using computer fonts SIL has developed for little-studied languages, stopped consulting SIL's *Ethnologue*, an online catalog of 6,912 languages, and stopped using SIL's electronic *Bibliography*, which compiles 20,000 sources of information about minority languages (Epps 2007)—all accessible for free on SIL's website.

Leaving open this very serious and consequential debate, one aspect of SIL culture that has escaped notice is the unusual distribution of gender among the organization's linguists. SIL's original 1934 training program was exclusively directed to men. However, its organizers (all married males) presupposed their wives' participation in missionary linguistics, even though some, such as Townsend's first wife Elvira, were obviously not suited to the task (Svelmoe 2001). By the third year, two single women were reluctantly accepted; one was a sister of Kenneth Pike, a rising star in the

organization. A parallel women's training camp was briefly set up, but abandoned by 1938. When the first SIL-trained women manifestly succeeded in their assigned work in Mexico (Pike 1956), organizers began incorporating women freely. By 1952, 78 of 142 trainees (55%) were women; by 1944, 67% (Smelvoe 2001:540; 548). Subsequent membership counts show women outnumbering men at rates around 60% (WBT 1963, 1984). In 2003, GIAL's Master's degree program in linguistics enrolled 56% women, suggesting that the current generation of recruits continues to favor women (Ross 2003).

The numerical advantage of SIL women over men mirrors the fact that 60% of American PhDs awarded in linguistics now go to women (COSWL 2008). What distinguishes SIL is the sustained predominance of women linguists going back to the 1940s, when they were only marginally represented in mainstream American linguistics. However, SIL resembles mainstream linguistics in that only recently have women taken on high-profile institutional roles. In 1963, women held none of 33 top administrative positions in SIL (WBT 1963). By 2007, 29% of officers were women (<http://www.sil.org/sil/>).

Women have, however, always played a distinctive institutional role in SIL, in that they carry much of the responsibility of presenting the organization to the public. Since the 1950s women have published personal narratives about missionary linguistic work (Pike 1956, Wallis & Bennet 1959, Wallis 1960, Slocum 1985), capturing a huge popular readership and serving as a key publicity tool for SIL. The prime exemplar is probably Elliot (1957), a memoir of the author's work among the Huaorani of Peru, who had earlier murdered her husband and four other SIL missionaries. In addition, the

organization early recognized the fund-raising potential of women missionaries, so that SIL public relations materials prominently feature photographs of women—navigating a dugout canoe, or praying in a makeshift outdoor kitchen (WBT 1963:35; 37). One essay tells a story of “two slender white girls” who set out to analyze the language of “vicious killers and head-hunters” in the Peruvian jungle. Missionary-linguist Loretta Anderson is quoted on site summing up the experience, with stunning naivete: “It’s not easy, but it’s a lot of fun. And how rewarding!” (Hall 1963:44). Another public-relations initiative includes a mesmerizing photograph of SIL missionary wife Lee Kindberg cradling an infant as she picks her way across an Amazonian jungle clearing behind her husband, who is holding the hands of two of their other four small children. None of the Kindbergs is making eye contact with what the text depicts as “a shy, welcoming group of Campas [indians]”, whose postures communicate uncertainty or wariness more than hospitality (WBT 1963:48–49). Therefore, while women did not serve as SIL officers in the 1940s and 1950s, their participation was deliberately highlighted, adding human-interest appeal that was likely effective in furthering SIL’s goals.

In addition, SIL women published linguistic work. SIL’s online *Bibliography* records materials produced as early as 1936, but large numbers of works didn’t appear until 1944. I will focus on the years 1944 to 1970, because Rensch’s (1977) selective catalogue of SIL publications in linguistics covers that interval. Women make up 35% of the authors Rensch cites. To check the validity of that figure I searched the SIL *Bibliography* year by year. Excluding publications that are strictly pedagogical (e.g. literacy program primers) but including reviews and ethnographic and ethno-linguistic

materials, the 880 instances of authorship by women between 1944 and 1970 represent 38% of the total pool. 59% of instances of authorship are attributable to males; 4% are indeterminate. Women's writings constitute a diverse corpus, some quite sophisticated. For a randomly chosen year—1949—I counted 22 instances of authorship by women, compared to 13 by men. (Some works are co-authored; some authors published more than once and therefore count more than once, so that the numbers of publications may not match the number of authors). Women published titles like *Tzotzil texts and dictionary*; “A note on Huasteco baby talk”; “Tojolabal phonemes and verb morphology”. Women's writings appeared in a range of media, including top journals like *Language*, *International Journal of American Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Boletín Indigenista*, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, and *American Anthropologist*. I also tabulated articles, monographs, and reviews published by SIL personnel in the mainstream journal *Language* from 1944 to 1970. Of 36 SIL-related authors who published articles or monographs in *Language* during that interval, 12 (33%) were attributable to women, as were 2 of 16 reviews. Thus relative to mainstream women linguists, SIL-affiliated women were less disadvantaged in getting their work published in a prestigious journal like *Language*.

4. Why did SIL-affiliated women's experience differ from that of women in mainstream linguistics?

These facts imply that SIL-affiliated women worked in a climate more hospitable to women's scholarship than that of mainstream linguistics. It is salient that although a

large proportion of SIL publications are authored by husband-and-wife missionary-linguist teams, unmarried women authors are also strongly represented, as are married women who published independently, or who co-authored works with colleagues of either gender. SIL participated in a conservative mid-twentieth-century gender-based social order that discounted women's status compared to that of men (Tucker 1988: 37–47; Robert 2002b); nevertheless, SIL women worked alongside men on a relatively even footing in the profession of missionary linguistics. This fact seemed to be taken for granted, so that differential treatment of the two genders is remarkably absent in the execution of SIL's core linguistic-religious endeavors.

There may be a number of reasons why SIL-affiliated women in the 1940s through 1970 did not confront the special obstacles that faced mainstream scholars like Morris, Reichard, or Hahn. First, American Protestant women had participated since the 1800s in foreign missionary work, which Robert (2002a:69–70) represents as an outlet for the expression of women's leadership capacities that would not then have been tolerated at home, especially in fields like religion and medicine. Building on this cultural trend, adventurous women seized upon the challenges of SIL fieldwork, early establishing themselves as capable of success. This attracted other women, creating a critical mass. Valian (1998:309) reports research showing that in contexts where “gender schemas” matter in people's perceptions of others, “women will be more fairly evaluated if they are at least 25 percent of [a] group.” From the 1940s onward, women made up about 60% of SIL members. Second, as an institution, SIL capitalized on the presence of women. At home, women served as effective instruments for gaining public attention,

and thus financial support. In the field, SIL considered women evangelists more disarming than men, or at least less threatening to initially inhospitable indigenous peoples (Tucker & Liefeld 1987:322–323). These two factors cemented the value of women to the organization. Buoyed by a sense of being valued in the environment of SIL, women invested in their talents in ways that built up that environment, committing themselves to acquisition and analysis of indigenous languages.

This is not to say that gender bias was absent from the professional, much less personal, lives of SIL missionary-linguists. Certainly the organization has not self-consciously tried to promote gender equity. Rather, SIL views its linguistic output is a by-product of its central task of translation for the purpose of religious conversion. In pursuing that goal linguistic work needs to be done, and its accomplishment matters more than the gender of those who do the work (Elliot Leitch 1974). Against this background, the complex of attitudes and beliefs that constitute gender bias may have been eroded, or at least suspended. Women members of SIL took advantage of that suspension, and their success created an environment hospitable to linguistic work by women. The historical paradox is that this took place within a very socially conservative sub-culture, during an interval when academic linguistics was inattentive to, and profited little from, women's intellectual gifts.

References

- Balcom, Patricia, & Sandra Clarke. 2004. "Academic Career Paths in Linguistics".
Canadian Journal of Linguistics / Revue canadienne de linguistique 49.75–105.
- Colby, Gerald, & Charlotte Dennett. 1995. *Thy Will Be Done: The conquest of the Amazon*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- COSWL [Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics]. 2008.
<www.lsadc.org/info/pdf_files/COSWL-Handout-Jan2008.pdf>.
- d'Ans, Andre-Marcel. 1981. "Evaluation of SIL's Scientific Work During 25 Years in Peru". *Hvalkof & Aaby* 1981.146–148.
- Davison, Alice & Penelope Eckert, eds. 1990. *The Cornell Lectures: Women in the linguistics profession*. Washington, D.C.: COSWL.
- Disterheft, Dorothy. 1990. "Women in Linguistics: Recent trends". Davison & Eckert 1990.89–110.
- Elliot, Elizabeth. 1957. *Through Gates of Splendor*. New York: Harper.
- Elliot Leitch, Elizabeth. 1974. "The Place of Women in World Missions". *Jesus Christ: Lord of the universe, hope of the world* ed. by David M. Howard, 123–129.
Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity.
- Epps, Patience. 2007, January. "Linguists and Missionaries: An Amazonian perspective".
Presentation at LSA Symposium on Missionaries and Scholars, Anaheim, Calif.

- Falk, Julia S. 1995. "Portrait of Women Linguists: Louise Pound, Edith Claflin, Adelaide Hahn". *History of Linguistics 1993* ed. by Kurt R. Jankowsky, 313–320. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- _____. 1999. *Women, Language and Linguistics: Three American stories from the first half of the twentieth century*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, Clarence W. 1963. "Two Thousand Tongues to Go". *Wycliffe Bible Translators* 1963.43–45.
- Hartch, Todd. 2006. *Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, state formation, and indigenous Mexico, 1935–1985*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama.
- Hvalkof, Søren, & Peter Aaby, eds. 1981. *Is God an American?* Copenhagen: International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs.
- Ioup, Georgette & Lynette Hirschman. 1972. 'Report from the LSA Women's Caucus.' *LSA Bulletin*, 53: 16–18.
- Joos, Martin. 1986. *Notes on the Development of the Linguistic Society of America*. Ithaca, New York: J. M. Cowan & C. F. Hockett.
- King, Linda. 1994. *Roots of Identity: Language and literacy in Mexico*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University.
- Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1990. "The Structure of the Field and its Consequences for Women". *Davison & Eckert* 1990.43–53.
- Pike, Eunice V. 1956. *Not Alone*. Chicago: Moody.
- Pollard, Lucille A. 1977. *Women on College and University Faculties*. New York: Arno.

- Rensch, Calvin R. 1977. "The Contributions of SIL in Linguistics". *The Summer Institute of Linguistics: Its works and contributions* ed. by Ruth M. Brend & Kenneth L. Pike, 85–128. The Hague: Mouton.
- Robert, Dana L. 2002a. "The Influence of American Missionary Women on the World Back Home." *Religion and American Culture* 12:59–89.
- Robert, Dana L. 2002b. *Gospel Bearers, Gender Benders: Missionary women in the twentieth century*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Ross, David. 2003. "The Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics (GIAL): Preparing heart and mind for cross-cultural service." *Christian Higher Education* 2.139–153.
- Slocum, Marianna. 1985. *The Good Seed*. Orange, Calif.: Promise.
- Stoll, David. 1982. *Fishers of Men or Builders of Empire? The Wycliffe translators in Latin America*. London: Zed.
- Svelmoe, William Lawrence. 2001. *A New Vision for Missions: William Cameron Townsend in Guatemala and Mexico, 1917–1945*. Ph.D. dissertation, Notre Dame.
- Tucker, Ruth A. 1988. *Guardians of the Great Commission: The story of women in modern missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books.
- _____ & Walter Liefeld. 1987. *Daughters of the Church: Women and ministry from the New Testament times to the present day*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books.
- Valian, Virginia. 1998. *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Wallis, Ethel Emily. 1960. *The Dayuma Story*. New York: Harper.

_____ & Mary Angela Bennett. 1959. *Two Thousand Tongues to Go*. New York:
Harper.

Wycliffe Bible Translators. ['WBT']. 1963. *Who Brought the Word*. Santa Ana Calif.:

Wycliffe Bible Translators.

_____. 1984. *Pass the Word: 50 years of Wycliffe Bible translators*. Santa Ana
Calif.: Wycliffe Bible Translators.