

ADFL and Its Constituency: 1968-88

Richard Brod

IT IS ironic that in this age of proficiency measurement, I offer as my credential for writing a historical overview of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages no definable skill or quantifiable competency (e.g., no "three plus" in wisdom or prescience) but simply "seat time": seventeen years in the same position. Disregarding for the moment the danger of petrification that attaches to any such lengthy tenure, I rest my claim to authority on my experience in editing sixty-four issues of the *ADFL Bulletin* and planning twenty-five summer seminars. And, as things now stand, my colleagues at MLA headquarters and I are probably the only people on earth with access to the complete file of seventy-one issues of the *Bulletin*. (If others can make this claim, we ask them to identify themselves, so that we may acknowledge and reward their loyalty and support.)

Certainly the *Bulletin* is an excellent source of information about the thinking of the most articulate leaders of ADFL's past, and indirectly about the field as a whole. Even before ADFL was formally established in 1969, its organizers actively solicited from campuses current reports on the dimensions and impact of what seemed at the time an epoch-making epidemic: the movement to diminish or abolish institutional requirements in foreign languages. As it turned out, a distressing number of colleagues had something to report ("Requirements: Some Status Reports"). During the fall of 1969, one of the founders of ADFL, Douglas Alden of the University of Virginia, selected and edited an additional set of reports, to enable readers of the *ADFL Bulletin* not merely to share their colleagues' distress but also to learn from their colleagues' successes when, in fact, the language departments had managed to ward off hostile attacks ("More Status Reports," "Requirements: More Status Reports").

Yet the general posture was defensive and led early in 1970 to an earnest warning from readers that, rather than allow its *Bulletin* to become a wailing wall for complaints, ADFL should focus on examples of creative initiative and constructive response. This, in the absence of a formal editorial policy, became the guiding principle of the *Bulletin* and was made explicit in an early issue ("Departmental Reports").

That readers in 1970 would take the trouble to communicate their concern to the editor can be interpreted as a sign that the newly formed organization was indeed needed and wanted by its constituency. Another sign was membership, which reached 764 in the first year, rose above 900 soon thereafter, and has ranged between 950 and 1,000 ever since. Other indicators were the strong positive response to the creation of the MLA Job Information Service, in which ADE and ADFL would play a major role, and the response, in terms of both participation and quality of papers, to the series of ADFL summer seminars that began in 1971. Yet another sign was the strong commitment of the ADFL Executive Committee, whose functions were to make policy choices and to reflect the needs of the various segments of the constituency it represented.

While carefully maintaining independence and autonomous control over the content of the *Bulletin*, the seminars, and other meetings, ADFL over the years has also acted as an "arm" of the Modern Language Association, coordinate with ADE. As such it has been seen by many as the MLA's principal vehicle for publications and meetings on professional and pedagogical matters, attempting to serve members of both ADFL and MLA and, to the extent they can be reached, members of the wider profession as well.

Encompassing a broad spectrum of topics, issues, and approaches, the *Bulletin* and the meetings of ADFL have generally reflected trends in the wider profession. And they have had the good fortune to attract authors and speakers from a variety of institutions. Not all the authors and speakers were nationally prominent, of course, but a past editor can take pride in having enabled members to read the views of many who were, including Theodore Andersson, George Bonham, Allan Cartter, Joseph Duffey, John Fisher, Joshua Fishman, James Frith, Claire Gaudiani, Sol Gittleman, Sven Groennings, Diether Haenicke,

The author, currently Director of Special Projects at the Modern Language Association, served from 1969 to 1986 as Coordinator, later Director, of ADFL.

Rose Hayden, Kai-yu Hsu, Eleanor Jordan, Herbert Lindenberger, Georges May, Robert Mead, Andre Paquette, Jean Perkins, Henri Peyre, John Rassias, Henry Remak, Wilga Rivers, Frank Ryder, William Schaefer, Roger Shattuck, Frederick Starr, Humphrey Tonkin, and W. Freeman Twaddell. These authors and contributors and dozens of others, plus the members of the Executive Committee over the years, have given ADFL its unique voice and have helped to lead the organization by taking initiatives and by responding to the trends and events of the last twenty years.

In attempting to characterize those trends and events I have found it useful (and refreshing to the eye) to interrupt the flow of prose in this essay by presenting a chronology that goes back, if not to the ovum, at least to the point in time (1952) when the Modern Language Association undertook to ride the wave of history with activities intended to change and strengthen the teaching of foreign languages in the United States. Following the chronology I attempt to characterize the most obvious trends.

A Selective Chronology of Events Affecting Foreign Language Education in the United States, 1952-88

- | | | | |
|---------|--|---------|---|
| 1952 | MLA obtains a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to establish its Foreign Language Program. | 1966 | The peak year for foreign language entrance and degree requirements: 89% of BA-granting institutions have a degree requirement in foreign language. |
| 1954 | First edition of William Riley Parker's <i>National Interest and Foreign Languages</i> published. | 1966-67 | The MLA creates and endows ACTFL as an individual membership organization for teachers of all languages at all levels; ACTFL holds its first annual meeting in December 1967. |
| 1955 | MLA sets up the Faculty Exchange at its convention as a service to job seekers and departments. | 1967-68 | MLA explores the need for an organization parallel to ADE that would meet the needs of foreign language departments. |
| 1957 | The USSR orbits its first sputnik satellite. | 1968 | Peak year for foreign language enrollments in higher education: US total is 1,127,363. |
| 1958 | Congress passes the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). | 1968 | At the MLA convention, an organizational meeting proposing the creation of an association of foreign language departments attracts over 400 participants. |
| 1959 | Founding of the Center for Applied Linguistics. | 1969 | MLA Executive Council creates ADFL; first <i>ADFL Bulletin</i> appears. |
| 1959-65 | NDEA funds support salaries for state supervisors, installation of language laboratories, summer institutes for language teachers, and graduate fellowships and research in less commonly taught languages and area studies. | 1970 | A national survey shows a significant decline in the percentage of institutions that have foreign language requirements. |
| 1966 | The Association of Departments of English, founded independently, becomes part of the MLA. | 1971 | ADFL holds its first summer seminar, at Middlebury College. |
| | | 1971 | The MLA Faculty Exchange is replaced by the Job Information Service; ADE and ADFL help obtain full participation by departments. |
| | | 1972 | Founding of the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) as a coalition of professional organizations. |
| | | 1973 | ADFL and ADE hold a joint summer seminar at Washington University. |
| | | 1973-75 | American Council on Education conducts its International Education Project. |
| | | 1974 | Legal separation of ACTFL from MLA. |
| | | 1974-75 | MLA conducts a survey of innovative curricula in foreign languages. |
| | | 1975 | Survey of foreign language requirements shows that only 53% of BA-granting institutions still have a degree requirement. |
| | | 1976 | ADFL increases the number of summer seminars from one to two. |
| | | 1976 | MLA holds a planning conference at the Rockefeller Foundation office. |

- 1977 Representative Paul Simon urges appointment of a presidential commission on foreign languages.
- 1977 MLA obtains grants for five task forces to make recommendations concerning language study.
- 1977 MLA and Georgetown University hold a national conference in support of Representative Simon's initiative.
- 1977 MLA inaugurates *Profession* to distribute more widely the best articles in the *ADE* and *ADFL Bulletins*.
- 1978 MLA task forces recommend a shift in focus from seat time to proficiency goals.
- 1978 President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies begins its meetings and hearings.
- 1979 President's Commission holds regional hearings, issues final report.
- 1979 Foreign Service Institute invites academic language specialists to a workshop on the oral-proficiency interview.
- 1979-82 NEH and Exxon Foundation support program-development workshops for college language department representatives during four successive MLA conventions.
- 1980 The Washington office of the JNCL established to promote implementation of the President's Commission's recommendations; JNCL's founding organizations make major commitments to support the office.
- 1980 Foreign language enrollments in higher education reach a low point, 18% below 1968 levels.
- 1982 ACTFL issues provisional proficiency guidelines: a generic set and language-specific sets for French, German, and Spanish.
- 1983 Foreign language enrollments in higher education show an increase of 4.5% above 1980 levels.
- 1983 MLA appoints a commission to make recommendations concerning foreign language education.
- 1983 Local professional collaboratives of teachers and professors form the nucleus of the Academic Alliances network.
- 1983 US Department of Education issues *A Nation at Risk*.
- 1983-85 Several major reports on secondary and higher education are issued; most of them recommend foreign language study as an essential component of education.
- 1984 JNCL surveys show significant activity in support of language study in more than forty states.
- 1984-85 The MLA foreign language commission conducts a study of graduate education.
- 1985 The MLA commission holds a national conference on graduate education.
- 1985 The MLA *Job Information Lists* show significant increases in advertised positions.
- 1986 MLA appoints an advisory committee on foreign language programs.
- 1986 Foreign language enrollments in higher education show an increase of 3.9% above 1983 levels.
- 1988 The Secretary of Education endorses foreign language study as an essential component of a model high school.

Some Continuing Trends in the History of the Language Teaching Profession

Looking at the chronology, and reflecting on what I have noted above in my brief review of the *ADFL Bulletin*, I see three continuing trends in the language teaching profession: (1) a movement toward professional unity across language lines and, as an ideal at least, across the barriers between schools and colleges, (2) a movement toward professionalization and greater accountability, and (3) a movement toward greater public visibility and more systematic attempts on the part of the profession to influence consumers, decision makers, and potential allies in the educational arena. It seems useful to reflect both on the direction in which these movements have taken us and on the path in which they are likely to continue.

1. The trend toward professional unity within the foreign language field is so tangible that it can be documented, not only in the steady growth of the budgets, membership rolls, and achievements of the JNCL, but also in actions taken by various organizations within our field, independent of their participation in the JNCL. To cite a few examples: ACTFL has collaborated on several occasions with two or more AAT organizations in sponsoring joint annual meetings; ACTFL has moved to include representatives of the regional language teaching conferences on its Executive Council; the various state organizations—that is, those that represent teachers of all languages—have

grown stronger; Academic Alliances has enabled teachers of various languages at all levels to develop permanent mechanisms for professional collaboration in local contexts; and teachers of all languages at all levels have understood the need to collaborate locally in making their case before school boards, legislative committees, state and local agencies, and the community at large.

Most of these developments have coincided with the growth of the JNCL over the last ten years or so, a period in which the profession saw its fortunes reach a low point and then begin to rise again on a wave of renewed public interest and support. Given this history, one cannot escape the conclusion that language professionals, both individually and in their organizations, have naturally understood the need for unified response to the challenges and the opportunities of the time. While this movement has been encouraging to those who believe in the concept of *e pluribus unum*, the unity of the field is still relatively fragile, and the profession still has a formidable unfinished agenda. Among other things, we need to (1) define the ways in which our sovereign organizations can focus their resources on significant educational objectives; (2) find ways to reach individual professionals who are otherwise unreached by organizations; and (3) better define and explore the connections between levels of education, between foreign languages and English, between modern languages and classics, between languages and linguistics, and between language professionals in North America and their counterparts around the world.

2. The movement toward professional accountability also has a long history, has made considerable progress, and has a substantial agenda for future action. In modern times, the movement goes back at least as far as William Riley Parker's *National Interest and Foreign Languages*, which endeavored to place the MLA's Foreign Language Program (founded and directed by Parker) in the context of public expectations of language instruction in schools and colleges. The need for redirection and retraining of language teachers became a matter of consensus between the leadership of the profession, as represented by the MLA, and "the public," as represented by the federal government that ultimately (in the 1960s) funded, under the National Defense Education Act, an extensive program of summer institutes for teachers (together with other supportive programs). The creation of ACTFL and ADFL, later in the same decade, incarnated the MLA's wish to maintain, extend, and institutionalize the process of professionalization that had already begun.

By the late 1970s the concept of proficiency measurement had begun to take root within the profession. Inspired by the practice of the Foreign Service Institute and other government agencies and confirmed

in their thinking by the recommendations of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies and other groups, leaders in the field—foremost among them the leadership of ACTFL—developed strategies for bringing both the theory and the practice of oral-proficiency interviews to members of the language teaching profession. Grant projects, meetings, conferences, books, and articles have been abundant, and no recent professional activity in our field has more properly deserved to be called, as it generally is, a "movement."

As of this writing, the movement has reached several hundred individuals and a significant number of universities, state agencies, and other organizations. Like any movement, it has generated orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and controversy, and many observers would regard those phenomena as signs of health and continuity. It has had impact already; and its future impact is likely to be considerable, for it promises at least partial solutions—if not ultimate answers—to the perennial problems of measurement, articulation between school and college, qualifications for teaching, and "truth in advertising." The profession cannot afford to ignore the challenges raised by the movement, and its impact as an organizing principle for thinking about curriculum and measurement is as likely to be permanent as are any of the ideas that have emerged in the professional literature in recent years.

3. Finally, the era of ADFL has witnessed a trend toward greater public involvement in determining the goals of foreign language instruction in the United States. In many ways, this trend has been the expected and—in most respects—desired response to the premises of Parker's *National Interest and Foreign Languages*, for it recognizes that foreign language study enriches not only the students who pursue it but also the society of which they are a part. Without diminishing the importance of teachers and institutions in shaping curriculum, the movement has helped define the role of the public and of public agencies in supporting language study and in providing the necessary funds and leadership for research and development and for general and specialized forms of in-service training for faculty members. In recent years, this role has been defined for various times and circumstances by the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979), by about forty state commissions and task forces, and by numerous private groups and organizations that have made recommendations concerning curricula in schools, colleges, and universities.

In a world governed by lobbying, the rules of marketing, and the struggle for visibility, the language profession has made excellent use of its national lobbying agent, the JNCL, based in Washington, DC. Outside Washington, and especially at the state level,

the field has relied on the efforts and experience of local volunteer leaders, some of whom have been very effective. Media coverage, however, has been generally spotty and passive, and the profession has not been centralized or wealthy enough to afford the kind of promotion that products and causes normally need to succeed in American society. But it continues to have access to its prime marketing targets—educational decision makers—and has learned to make remarkably good use of the customary channels for reaching and influencing them.

In addition to paying attention to marketing, the language profession also needs to help a poorly informed public clear away the cobwebs of folklore and fuzzy thinking about language and begin to think about it more rationally and realistically. Language is an organ that virtually every human being possesses, but while most of us are far more conscious of language than we are of, say, the pancreas, our knowledge of the inner structure and functions of language is about on the same level as the average person's knowledge of the pancreas or spleen. And yet we all pontificate about language, and even highly educated laypersons who would be skeptical about medical folklore will tolerate unproved hypotheses, sweeping generalizations, and myths about language and language study. We operate in a classic vicious circle: if language teachers were less marginal and more central to American education, and thus more highly respected as a profession, the lay public would be more inclined to defer to us and less likely to believe its own myths and biases; conversely, if the public deferred more to the profession—or even knew that one exists—our status would be higher and our authority greater.

In the meantime, while we wait for the status of the field to improve, work goes on. In the last several years, at least, the language profession has been well served by leaders and innovators in our own ranks, and to an increasing extent also by funders and supporters from outside. Creative approaches to the teaching of basic skills, to the teaching of culture, to the teaching of languages for special purposes, to measurement, and to the use of audiovisual media and computers are abundant; collectively, the profession has learned much about how its academic programs function within their institutions and about what conditions are most likely to lead to success; and it has learned to value articulation between levels and careful attention to its mission in teacher training. There have been successes in all these areas; and now the profession needs to be reminded of these achievements and encouraged to build on them. That role is certainly part of the tradition of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages and one that the association can be expected to continue to play as it leads and follows its constituency into a new century.

Works Cited

- "Departmental Reports." *ADFL Bulletin* 1.4 (1970): 29.
- "F[oreign] L[anguage] Requirements: More Status Reports." *ADFL Bulletin* 1.2 (1969): 9-11.
- "F[oreign] L[anguage] Requirements: Some Status Reports." *ADFL Bulletin* 1.1 (1969): 7-10.
- "More Status Reports." *ADFL Bulletin* 1.3 (1970): 5-10.