History

Introduction

The University of Chicago Digital Media Archive (DMA) has existed as an independent facility only since July 2006. It retains from the former Language Laboratories and Archives ("the LLA") the portion of its space dedicated to archiving and media processing/preservation along with much of the LLA's audio, video, motion picture and computer equipment. In addition, this space now houses all of the LLA's extensive collection of texts and mechanically recorded materials on such media as Edison-type cylinders, audio tapes, phonograph records, videotapes and motion-picture films. Since these materials accumulated thanks to the activities of three generations of linguists, language instructors and anthropologists at the University, it is worthwhile reviewing the history of the LLA, which closed its doors for the last time in June 2006.

Postoscope

A projector to project images from cards or pieces of paper, used before 1970 in the LLA for lecture-demonstrations.

Early History

The University's earliest laboratory for the scientific study of language phenomena was founded by Clarence A. Parmenter. He taught at the University from 1914 till 1953, and as a member of both the Linguistics and the Romance Languages Departments, he did pioneering work in the field of phonetic theory and methodology. In the decade before he received his Ph.D. (1921), he pursued part of his doctoral studies in France, the country then most advanced in the experimental study of speech physiology. At the Institut de Phonétique in Paris he absorbed innovative instrumental techniques, which he subsequently championed back in the United States. Upon his return to the University he set up a thoroughly modern phonetics laboratory, equipped for x-ray photography, airflow measurements and oscillograms of speech. Improvements that he was to make in his x-ray techniques eventually permitted him to resolve the articulatory points in the vocal tract, thus making possible his major contribution to phonetics - the first scientific description of the distinct articulatory postures of vowels. Although his laboratory was dismantled long before any "language laboratory" existed on this campus, Parmenter's legacy lives on at the LA in the form of phonograph records he gathered over the years in such languages as French, Spanish, English, Italian, German and Catalan.

World War II

The background of the LLA also included the experience of the United States in attempting to teach foreign languages to its citizens during both the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War. Even before the U.S. commenced hostilities late in 1941, the Armed Forces realized the necessity of training their personnel to speak the languages of the war zones. Under the aegis of the US Armed Forces Institute (USAFI) and the American Council of Learned Societies, the newly fledged discipline of linguistics had ample opportunity to demonstrate its capacity to analyze modern spoken languages and to develop methods for teaching them. Among those recruited to this endeavor was Norman A. McQuown, who summarized the results of these efforts: "The surprising news that Americans, given the incentive and the opportunity, with adequate time and materials, could learn foreign languages well, went far toward destroying a psychological block against foreign language study which had built up over many years of isolation, inadequate support, and frustration." McQuown subsequently brought to the University his collection of books and phonograph records produced under the USAFI program. These materials formed the better part of the language laboratory's collection in the 1950s, and they remain in the DMA to this day.
Filmosound

A 16mm sound film projector, last used in the 1970s by Mr. McQuown.

Founding of the Language Lab

Given this background, McQuown - not surprisingly - spearheaded the effort to set up a language laboratory at the University of Chicago. In 1952 he prepared a report in which he reviews faculty sentiment in favor of a central facility where sound recordings might be stored, where fresh materials could be recorded and where students might listen to recordings in order to gain accurate pronunciation. He wrote: “In the year which has elapsed, the original proposal... has now developed into a plan for a linguistics laboratory,... which would... have the following dual function: 1) it would serve as a center where graduate students might receive training in the techniques of linguistic research; 2) it would function as a service center to which academicians interested, in one way or another, in language... might have recourse for aid in the solution of their problems, both theoretical and practical.” He concluded: “All problems in which language is involved in one way or another may eventually be brought to a linguistics laboratory for aid in their solution.”

Despite these hopes and ambitions the beginnings of the language laboratory at the University of Chicago were not auspicious. A report prepared around 1957 by McQuown's colleagues, Eric Hamp, et al., explains: “In June, 1954, as the result of nearly a year of active planning and in close connexion with arrangements for the Linguistic Institute of that year, a modest start was made on the installment of a Language Laboratory.” Located in Classics 410 and maintained on a permanent basis as of 1955, the lab consisted of nothing more than a room (apparently the size of a classroom) fitted out with a miscellany of equipment, which would eventually include reel-to-reel tape recorders of varying quality, microphones (also of varying quality), around 12 listening booths linked to a makeshift control console, and ad hoc storage areas for the collection of tape recordings and phonograph records. The staffing of the lab was minimal, consisting normally of a single student technician working part-time. Throughout most of the seven academic years (i.e., 1955-56 through 1961-62) that the lab existed, it was open for individual study at least fifteen hours each week. As of the fourth year (1958-59), it appears that extra hours were scheduled (i.e., 25) in Winter and Spring Quarters.

The recorded materials available to students were quite modest, consisting mostly of tape recordings made by the faculty as well as the 35 sets of language records from World War II provided by McQuown. Although modest, this inventory of recorded materials nevertheless allowed the staff to boast: “The language laboratory now has one of the most complete tape libraries of language courses in the world. According to the U.S. Government survey in 1958, the University has the only language laboratory materials in the U.S. in the following languages: Aztec, Bengali, Ochuc, Tzeltal, Welsh, Dutch and Hungarian....”

Ford Foundation Grant

As early as November of 1957 the inadequacies of Classics 410 moved McQuown to raise the question of building an entirely new laboratory. He and his colleague, Eric Hamp, subsequently played a critical role in the planning and implementation of the facility that eventually became the Language Laboratories and Archives. Funding for building it was virtually guaranteed on January 6, 1961, when the Ford Foundation made a grant to the University of Chicago "for Non-Western Area Programs and Other International Studies".

Dictaphone

A dictating machine used about a century ago in offices.
Construction of the facility, officially dubbed the "Ford Foundation International Studies Language Laboratory", proceeded during 1961-62, and it finally opened for business on Monday, October 22, 1962. Located in the basement of the Social Science Research Building, the Lab's physical plant consisted of a suite of eleven rooms, sound-proofed throughout, and completely air-conditioned thanks to a self-contained system. In addition to office areas for the staff the suite included a large listening room for patrons, a control room, a recording studio, a seminar room, a library (archive), a technical laboratory and a maintenance shop. An article in the March 1963 issue of University of Chicago Magazine described the language laboratory as "probably the most complete and best equipped language laboratory in the country".

Eric Hamp served as acting academic director in the first year of operation, to be succeeded by Norman McQuown, who remained in that post till his retirement from teaching in 1979. Originally, staffing also included a full-time technical director, but this position was eliminated in 1971. From that date on, Joseph Toth became the de facto supervisor of the lab's day-to-day activities. Under various titles he would continue to manage the Social Science site for the next 26-and-a-half years: i.e., till his retirement on January 1, 1998. From that time till June 2006, Barbara Need managed the Social Science site. (She now manages the new Language Archives.) In 1979 Robert D. Hummel, professor of German, took over as the first permanent academic director of the Language Laboratory, serving for six years. In 1985, Karen L. Landahl, associate professor in the Department of Linguistics, assumed the post, changing the name of the Lab to "Language Laboratories and Archives" (LLA) in 1988. On April 1, 1996 she became the academic director of the enlarged LLA, formed with the incorporation of the Language Faculty Resource Center in Cobb Hall. After Ms. Landahl's death on February 2, 2003, the post of academic director was discontinued.

Recent History

For more than four decades the LLA (that is, the original site in the Social Science building) served thousands of patrons from the University community. (A facility expressly created for language instructors was set up in the 1980s, the Language Faculty Resource Center in Cobb Hall). Most of LLA's patrons over the years were undergraduates coming in to complete class assignments. At the same time numerous graduate students and a few faculty members used the workrooms and equipment of the Labs to do original research. Special programs such as the Peace Corps and English as a Foreign Language were also accommodated here.

For course development in foreign languages the most active periods were the ’60s and the ’90s. In the early days generous government funding subsidized the creation of extensive language courses, particularly Spoken Yucatec Maya, Spoken Quiché (Maya), Introduction to Bengali, Part I, and Marathi: A Text for Learning to Speak and Read Marathi as a Foreign Language. In the ’90s another federal grant (from the Department of Education) allowed the LLA to bring the first two courses into the digital age by making text and sound available on CD-ROM. Among other noteworthy projects was the development of an interactive multimedia program in Norwegian called MacNorsk. The DMA has applied for further grants to make these (and other) courses available on-line. (Click here for more information about grants awarded to the Language Archives and its predecessors.)

The earliest research into language phenomena carried on at the Social Science site involved the field of kinesics, or the study of "body language". For a number of years Norman McQuown used the facilities of the Labs to teach a course on how facial gestures and body movements contribute to the act of communication. In the 1990s Karen Landahl and her students applied sound-analysis software to reveal the features of Japanese and Norwegian that are especially difficult for English speakers to master. They also explored the use of visual feedback to help students acquire these sounds. All along, too, any number of graduate students used the Labs' equipment and facilities to do field work and subsequently work up their data for presentation.

Language Labs and Archives

In July 1985 Karen L. Landahl, associate professor in Linguistics, became the fourth academic director of the Language Laboratory. She came to the facility with the express purpose of restoring its research capacity and maintaining the Archives while enhancing the pedagogical support and developmental functions. In line with this mission and in the 1988-89 academic year, she changed the name of the facility to its present designation, the Language Laboratories and Archives. Making "laboratory" plural emphasized the broad range of research that was carried on there; the addition of the word "archives" not only reminded everyone of the fact that the LLA possessed archives - but it let the world know that as a kind of library, the facility enjoyed all the privileges of "fair use" that the copyright laws entitle libraries to exercise.

Ms. Killean proposed to retire from teaching at the end of the 1995-96 academic year. The time was ripe, therefore, for the LLA and the LFRC to be merged, since they had overlapping constituencies (the language faculty) and complementary facilities for language learning, course development and linguistic research. The merger became official on April 1, 1996, and Karen Landahl assumed the directorship of the combined entity. The name "Language Laboratories and Archives" was retained as an umbrella designation for the two sites combined. As a practical matter, the designation "Language Faculty Resource Center" stayed, while the former LLA took on a new title as the "Social Science site".

In February 2003 we learned of the untimely death of Karen Landahl. Although she is no longer with us, we will continue to maintain her standards in supporting teaching and research.

Prepared by Joseph J. Toth, May 2003; edited by Barbara Need, January 2006