

FAITH IN LINGUISTICS:  
AN OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF  
THE SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS

AN HONORS THESIS  
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# **Faith in Linguistics**

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An Honors Thesis by  
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# Abstract

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) is one of the world's largest and most influential players in the academic field of linguistics, but has only become so through a complex philosophy at whose base is evangelical Protestantism. William Cameron Townsend founded SIL in 1934 with the central goal of translating the Bible into every living language on earth. Looking to begin the project in Latin America, Townsend realized that he could only gain access to minority language communities through state-sanctioned channels (i.e. signing contracts with Latin American governments), and thus presented his organization as an academic group looking to do literacy work with indigenous languages. Over time this controversial but successful strategy created an organization able to significantly influence the field of linguistics on many levels. This thesis attempts to fill two holes in the existing literature. Firstly, chapters 1 and 2 provide a succinct "handbook" to SIL so that readers can gain a cursory yet holistic understanding of the founding and growth of the organization, focused on the Latin American branches. Secondly, chapters 3 and 4 qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the linguistics work which SIL has accomplished in Latin America. The underlying conclusion of these chapters is that SIL has made a crucial, positive contribution to the science of linguistics and, most importantly, currently stands as the field's 'de-facto default' organization for raw data collection and aggregation.

*Many Thanks to my readers who dedicated their time and effort to improving this work, and all of my interviewees who provided me with so many fascinating perspectives and precious insights. I am indebted to you all.*

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## Listing of Abbreviations:

ALMG	<i>Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala</i> , Academy of the Mayan Languages of Guatemala
CAM	Central American Mission
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FLEX	Fieldworks Lexical Explorer, an SIL software program (in development)
FUNAI	<i>Fundação Nacional do Índio</i> Brazil's National Foundation of the Indian
IJAL	International Journal of American Linguistics
ILC	International Linguistics Center (Arlington, Texas)
INI	<i>Instituto Nacional Indigenista</i> , National Indigenist Institute (Mexico)
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
JAARS	Jungle Air And Radio Service
LRUTSHB	Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior (book by Kenneth Pike, published 1960)
LSA	Linguistic Society of the Americas
NACLA	North American Conference on Latin America
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OWL	Ordinary Working Linguist
PLFM	<i>Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín</i> , Francisco Marroquín Linguistic Project (Guatemala)
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i> , Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (Mexico)
SEP	<i>Secretario de Educación Pública</i> or Ministry of Public Education (Mexico)
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
WBT	Wycliffe Bible Translators
WCC	World Council of Churches

# Introduction

## *The What and Why of this Thesis*

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (hereafter SIL), originally founded in 1934 as an evangelical Bible translation organization with the goal of translating the New Testament into every living language on earth, is “the most extensive linguistic operation in the world.”<sup>1</sup> SIL has initiated projects in 2,550 languages spoken by 1.7 billion people on all six habitable continents, and produced over 35,000 published documents. SIL currently lists more than 6,000 members<sup>1</sup> working with over 1,200 language communities.<sup>2</sup>

SIL’s history stretches back farther in Latin America than in any other region. Founding father of the organization, William Cameron Townsend, first established the organization in Mexico (1936) and Peru (1945). Over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, SIL became one of the largest providers of linguistic and bilingual education materials throughout the region’s minority language communities, working on the extreme, isolated periphery of political and economic systems. SIL stands alone not only in terms of size or

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work I will use a variety of terms to describe the members of SIL International, Inc. These include, but are not limited to, ‘missionary,’ ‘linguist,’ and ‘participant.’ Because these members bridge a variety of disciplines and roles, I will employ each term freely as I feel most appropriate to the subject matter at hand.

production, but also in many other features, a unique organization in the history of the planet.

No 'average' missionary organization, SIL combines religious, political and scientific facets to create a large, complex organism. First, SIL as a legal entity does not even encompass the entirety of the translation project, as it shares membership with two other corporations: The Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT) and the Jungle Air And Radio Service (JAARS). Beyond personnel, the tight-knit triumvirate also share some corporate structure and the common doctrine of bringing all human beings the Word of God. A myriad of smaller satellite organizations dedicated to specific tasks such as fundraising, training, and recruitment, operate under the auspices of these three pillars with various terms of attachment. Second, many national governments have signed official contracts with SIL, which greatly complicates the picture by pulling the realm of politics and international relations into the organization's sphere of influence. Third, SIL members produce not just Bibles, but an unprecedented volume of linguistic research as well, enough to have significantly shaped the academic field of linguistics. SIL therefore operates within a vast peculiar mix of contexts from mud huts in the Amazon, to statehouses in Lima, to the halls of prestigious U.S. universities.

This thesis is the result of a year's worth of research which, although extensive, afforded neither sufficient time nor resources to cover SIL from all angles in all places. The materials gathered included the resources of the Howard Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University. The Interlibrary loan system served as a source of supplementary primary and secondary source documents. Finally, I conducted interviews throughout the year both in person and over the phone with researchers, some from within SIL, and

others who had made contact with the organization in their studies. Unfortunately, despite plans hatched to travel to Yarinacocha, Oaxaca, and Dallas, the opportunity to get into the field never materialized. Because the day to day operations of SIL occur almost exclusively in remote areas, the dearth of field experience leaves the answer to some questions truncated or nonexistent. Secondly, this work focuses on the SIL in Latin America, and refers to operations in other parts of the world only when entirely necessary.

This thesis will attempt to fulfill two purposes, both of which fall into the vein of filling lacunas left by other authors. First, Chapters 1 and 2 will provide a handbook of sorts and short summary of SIL's Latin American operations from the updated vantage point of 2008. Despite the plethora of historical publications which document SIL, none provide a concise, holistic, historical overview. Second, Chapters 3 and 4 will analyze in depth the contributions SIL has made to the linguistic sciences. A comprehensive review of the linguistic contributions of the SIL by a non-SIL author is glaringly absent from existing works. Because SIL projected with such fervor their authority in the fields of linguistics, translation, and bilingual education, authors outside the organization tend to subsume these aspects of the organization within and beneath the implicated anthropological, political, and economic byproducts of Bible translation.

### *A Brief Review of Existing Literature*

The Summer Institute of Linguistics serves as the subject of an ample and diverse body of literature. The position of the institute at the nexus of religious, social, political, and scientific disciplines has drawn attention from a widespread base of authors, both

academic and otherwise. The span of SIL literature mimics the interrelatedness between the disparate spheres in which SIL, as a whole, participated. While some authors report monochromatically on specific facets of the program, many works express the complexity of the organization through a variety of perspectives, which when combined lend three-dimensionality to the ideology, policies, actions, and results of SIL programming. Sources hail from the marble corridors of U.S. academia to sweaty, cluttered offices of local newspapers in Guatemala.

Categorizing works on SIL is useful to understand the historical process of the organization's evolution vis-à-vis the publications which relate this experience. First, the literature published by the SIL and SIL members composes perhaps the largest single body. These publications include everything from vernacular pamphlets made for local distribution to linguistics articles of the highest caliber, written for internationally-proclaimed linguistics magazines. Most of these works are catalogued in the SIL Bibliographies, and now the online Ethnologue database which will be explored further in chapters 3 and 4. SIL members have also published parallel works through other publishing houses such as novels, biographies, and personal accounts of experiences related to the organization.

The second major group of publications began to surface in the 1970s and includes a large body of critical literature on the organization written by non SIL members. In Latin America, categories within this group include newspaper stories and editorials, fiery polemics by leftist political activists, studies by local and national universities, and reports resulting from governmental investigations. Extra-regional critiques appeared during more or less the same period, and subdivide into popular news

media sources, reports by NGOs and academic councils, conference debates, individually published academic journal articles, and a cadre of books which address the SIL in varying degrees of detail.

The two most noteworthy volumes to cull from this group are David Stoll's "Fishers of Men or Founders of an Empire?" and Soren Hvalkof and Peter Aaby's "Is God an American?" As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Stoll was inspired by the first major U.S. publication on SIL by an outside party, Laurie Hart's "Pacifying the Last Frontiers: The Story of the Wycliffe Bible Translators." (1973) His research would lead him to Latin America for two years during 1975-1977, at the height of the controversy which surrounded SIL for a decade. Returning to the U.S., Stoll consolidated his research over several years into the single most comprehensive publication on SIL.<sup>2</sup> Despite its depth and scholarly quality, the book still bears the an immutably harsh tone. The work clearly attempts to clarify the situation in the plainest terms possible, but the attitude underlying the writing is unsympathetic to SIL's plight. "Is God American?" (in which Stoll authored two chapters) is a similar work in terms of stance, but each chapter is a separate article by a different author. Some chapters explicitly and vehemently use inflammatory terms like 'ethnocidal,' which Stoll tends to resist. Both works represent the academic culmination of the criticism leveled against SIL.

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<sup>2</sup> When the Hart's article appeared in the North American Congress on Latin America's *Latin America and Empire Report* in 1973 David Stoll was working on a Bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan. He realized, along with others, that the linguistic mastermind of the SIL, Kenneth Pike, was a tenured professor at the university, and published a summary of the report in the Michigan Daily, in which he asked for Pike's reply.

D. Stoll, phone interview by author, November 2008.

Post-1985 publications by outside sources in both Latin America and the rest of the world dropped precipitously as the first wave of authors shifted their focus toward broader issues. Protestantism in general, bilingual education, indigenous movements, and NGOs captured more attention. In general, these publications have implications for SIL, but make only tangential acknowledgments, or simply fail to specifically address the organization altogether.

After a decade's pause, Gerard Colby and wife Charlotte Dennett published "They Will Be Done," (1995) a lengthy documentation of the intertwined rise of SIL and the Rockefeller family. Both veteran journalists, the authors first investigated SIL Brazil in 1976, intrigued especially by the possibility of uncovering connections to the CIA.<sup>3</sup> While entertaining, the book reads more like a journalistic exposé than a scholarly work, and the subject matter focuses heavily on the interpersonal and business connections of SIL. The value of the work lies in its extremely detailed prose which glosses over practically nothing. Even a decade out, however, SIL is still subjected to a caustic, investigatory tone.

Only after two decades did a less abrasively written scholarly publication appear. The author, Todd Hartch, decided to research SIL as a convenient combination of his interests in Bible translation and Mexico while still at Yale Divinity School. The thesis he wrote eventually became "Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, State Formation, and Indigenous Mexico, 1935-1985."<sup>4</sup> Extremely well researched and written, the only unfortunate aspect of this work is that it does not cover SIL beyond Mexico. Hartch dedicates the bulk of the piece to a detailed history of SIL, but also

comments briefly on the arguments presented in previous works in the conclusion, which provides one of the only available perspectives on SIL activity post-1985.

Their strengths notwithstanding, none of these works, or any of the less noteworthy publications produced, contain a compact history of SIL or its crucial contributions to the field of linguistics. The books cover the history of the organizations across hundreds of pages, whereas articles only introduce those aspects applicable to their theses. In linguistics, dedicated linguistics books and journal articles occasionally recognize the theoretical contributions of SIL. Marcel d'Ans quantitatively reviews the work of SIL Peru in 1981,<sup>5</sup> and David Stoll includes a chapter on the International Linguistics Center in his comprehensive book in 1983. More obscure studies have reviewed SIL academic work in Brazil, their Bible translation theory, and their strategies of bilingual education. The data amassed at regional bases and in Dallas has flowed into an infinitum of scholarly publications by non-SIL authors (SIL members express concern that many times this data does not properly credit SIL origins).<sup>6</sup> Seemingly unmentioned entirely are the technical tools which SIL has contributed, most importantly the enormous database of linguistic information and articles maintained by SIL, Ethnologue. The purpose of this work is to fill these holes, thereby patching together a complete image not just of what SIL has taken from indigenous communities, but also what they have given back to these people and those who study them.

## Chapter 1

# Faith in all Languages

SIL lacks a succinct historical overview as such, and thus the primary purpose of this chapter is to synthesize the diverse perspectives of many authors into a brief narrative of the development of the organization. This task becomes quite ambitious given the complexity and geographical breadth of SIL operations, as well as the charged atmosphere which still to this day surrounds their name. No chronicler of SIL can claim utter neutrality: this is an intricate organization which pervades not just disparate spaces and contexts, but also the deepest human motives and emotions. For those within the SIL, particularly early on, “this was a lifetime commitment,”<sup>1</sup> perhaps the ultimate faith project. Many outside scholars, especially those writing books, dedicated years attempting to understand the massive and complex organization which could test their deepest morals. This work is intended to be as accurate and dispassionate as possible, but with a subject like SIL, makes no formal claim to neutrality.

At the very least, SIL sits at the nexus of three overlapping spheres of influence: Anglo-American evangelical Protestants, Latin American governments, and indigenous

peoples. Within these spheres, SIL must balance the many outcomes, both direct and indirect, which its work engenders in the areas of politics, healthcare, education, technological proliferation, economics, and religion, not to mention the sciences of linguistics and anthropology. To unravel the many events in each of these areas which shaped SIL's Latin American trajectory we must begin, of course, with the context of the organization's founding.

The deepest underlying motivation for SIL is religious, specifically a dogmatic faith in evangelical Protestantism. In Latin America, the Catholic religious hegemony showed various signs of weakness by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although often referenced as one of the world's most Catholic regions, the faith was far from universal, and often included more nominative adherence than true devotion to the traditional hierarchy headed by the Pope. The influence of this religion, particularly in the rural and indigenous regions targeted by SIL, instead drew on "cultural and national identifications."<sup>2</sup> As an organization the Church aligned closely with the political and economic oligarchies ruling many countries, and thus depended heavily on state patronage for support. This reliance, however, could quickly become a devastating disadvantage as peasant armies supplanted elites in violent coups as in the Mexican Revolution. An ossified, elitist, and thinly spread Catholic clergy could not staunch the trickle of North American Protestants who, in the years following WWI began to target the region for their missionary enterprises.

The incredible success of Protestantism in Latin America over the past century has also inspired various detailed publications. In his book Is Latin America Turning Protestant? David Stoll outlines three basic tenets of Protestant doctrine:

“(1) the complete reliability and final authority of the Bible, (2) the need to be saved through a personal relation with Jesus Christ, often experienced in terms of being ‘born again,’ and (3) the importance of spreading this message of salvation to every nation and person, a duty often referred to as the Great Commission.”<sup>3</sup>

Small, statistically insignificant communities of Protestants had resided in Latin America since the first waves of northern-Europeans, like the German Lutherans in Brazil, immigrated in the mid-nineteenth century. During the 20s and 30s a new wave, characterized as ‘faith missions’ and primarily originating in the United States, trickled into certain areas. Pastors arrived with the exclusive intent of creating local, non-immigrant congregations. Their success drove a sharp growth in Protestant numbers.<sup>4</sup>

Faith missions, in contrast with older Protestant groups who received much scorn as an alien minority, slowly increased regard for the religion by emphasizing, beyond doctrine, a commitment toward economic and social progress. By the 1930s, progressive governments began to witness and recognize the valuable educational and healthcare services which these groups introduced, and so showed them greater favor. Intellectuals praised their passionate commitment to enterprise and individualistic capitalism, particularly in the context of an era of anti-monopolism.<sup>5</sup> Their contribution to communities in both urban and rural settings drew new attention and support. Under the aegis of one of the many organizations seeking to establish new churches in previously uncharted territories, a young Presbyterian Bible salesman named William Cameron Townsend first sailed to Guatemala.<sup>6</sup>

## *Guatemala and the Formation of SIL Ideology*

Not many sources report the details of William “Cam” Townsend before he began work as a foreign missionary. Born in 1896 into a lower-middle class family of Southern California, Townsend attended Occidental College in Los Angeles but dropped out to serve several years as a salesman for the Los Angeles Bible House.<sup>7</sup> Under the auspices of this organization he sailed to Guatemala in 1917 to sell Spanish Bibles near Antigua. After two years he joined the Central American Mission (CAM), a fundamentalist conglomeration and brainchild of some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s most renowned Protestant revivalists that had parceled Central America into various regions for evangelization. CAM advocated that the Millennial Kingdom of Peace would come after the Second Coming of Christ and viewed the foreign mission as necessary to bring the Word to any and all people possible before the turn of the millennium. Unlike his predecessors, though, Townsend did not deem social reform a wasted effort in this satanic world. He also noticed that CAM’s message, spread exclusively in Spanish, could not reach the monolingual majority of the indigenous population.<sup>8</sup>

Townsend settled in a Kaqchikel-speaking community on the coast called Sta. Catarina and over the next fourteen years learned the language to the point where he could translate the Bible. He also founded the Robinson Bible Foundation which, with generous financial backing from U.S. sources, built a center including a school, beds, medical clinic (supplied with effective western treatments for prevalent parasites like hookworm), electrical generator, a coffee processing plant, and agricultural supply store.<sup>9</sup> During these years Townsend grew intimately concerned not only with the impoverished and excluded situation of the Latin American Indians, but also with the

previous missionary practices which incorrectly or insufficiently addressed the indigenous people and culture, and thus inevitably failed to win indigenous converts.

As Townsend sought the roots of indigenous misery, he found them first in the mixed-race '*ladino*' middlemen who acted as the sole economic and social portal to general society for monolingual indigenous communities and who were closely associated with stagnant Catholic religion. These elites, he deduced, had a vested interest in maintaining the economic and social status quo, and therefore had no desire to improve the Indians' education, literacy, or bilingualism, nor did they wish to inspire the values of self-improvement or capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Townsend blamed Mesoamerican indigenous society itself. In the syncretic culture, he found the same types of oppression which European cultures imposed, but from the inside. Numerous saints required many days of festivals laden with the obligatory purchase and excessive consumption of food and alcohol. Modern healthcare scarcely reached most communities, which preferred spiritual 'witchdoctors' who mandated payment but, in his view, returned no effective care.<sup>11</sup> Townsend thus viewed the Maya who surrounded him as trapped from both within and without, and he searched for an exit strategy, a way to break the mold.

Townsend's fundamentalism immediately posed conversion to Protestantism as the ultimate salvation for indigenous peoples, but he had to first confront the question of why the current missions did not attract many indigenous converts. The primary answer he found was that the illiterate monolinguals had no access to scripture. Many Indians could not read, and even those who could did not have the Bible in a language they could understand. Although syncretism reigned supreme in indigenous communities, the clergy

refused Bible translation, fearing negative exegesis.<sup>12</sup> Likewise Protestant missions like the Central American mission concentrated on *ladino* overseers as converts instead of indigenous subjects. Townsend's superiors already showed signs of unease that he had adopted local practices, clothing, and language.<sup>13</sup> Unmoved by their concerns, Townsend gradually formulated his plan and ideology which would later shape SIL.

In the end Townsend wanted indigenous-run, self-sufficient evangelical congregations. This goal, however, would not be permanently achievable without a significant restructuring of society, and the addition of various parallel programs to provide prerequisite knowledge and skills to the indigenous communities. The first two steps toward these congregations had to be a group of literate individuals with a Bible in their native tongue. Thirdly, only the removal of the aforementioned cultural shackles and inculcation of a thoroughly Protestant mentality in the larger society could ensure the congregations' eventual survival and expansion. Finally, always a deft socialite and, at this point, a dabbler in politics, Townsend knew that many of Latin America's Catholic statesmen and newly liberal governments would require significant convincing to even allow Protestant missionaries to operate within their borders, particularly with aboriginal populations, who had always been politically sensitive. Townsend knew whatever organization he might create had to address all of these problems.

The solution which Townsend eventually found was so simple as to be encompassed in a single word: linguistics. The emergent science, freshly invigorated by the first widespread publications of German Edward Sapir (1921)<sup>14</sup> and American Leonard Bloomfield (1933),<sup>15</sup> could provide Townsend's religious goals with the scientific credibility and prestige he would need to convince governmental officials of his

organization's legitimacy. Having already used some of Sapir's less Eurocentric perspectives in his deciphering of Kaqchikel,<sup>16</sup> Townsend could use linguistic theory to train evangelicals in the United States to translate scripture into many indigenous languages. Once given access to the communities they would set up literacy programs, provide modern healthcare supplies, and subtly begin attracting local evangelical converts as linguistic informants to begin translation work. Conversion and translation would thus happen as only a part of a larger reformulation of society which would win praise in the community, and at the governmental level. Townsend hoped that by importing an ideology of capitalistic individualism, western technology, and modern medicine, he could insert the missionary/linguists into the place of the old *ladino* middlemen as the preferred brokers of goods and services from larger society.<sup>17</sup> From this powerful position the evangelicals could reform indigenous society and create a community of entrepreneurial, bilingually educated, and above all, Protestant individuals capable of self-advancement in their national society.

As this ideology fermented, Townsend's mind had already begun to envision where he would first send his linguists, and one area called above all: the vast and unexplored Amazon basin. To his fellows in the Central American Mission his plan seemed extravagant, grandiose, and unrealistic.<sup>18</sup> For centuries the tribes of the Amazon had been targeted by Jesuits, slave catchers, rubber tappers, and even some military operations, but remained elusive, eternally able to rely on the size and inhospitability of their native terrain to blend and forever maintain isolation.<sup>19</sup> Townsend proposed using airplanes, and a radio network to contact and concentrate tribes, but the complexity and cost of such an operation baffled less technologically minded missionaries. Individual

Bible translations would be incredibly labor-intensive and reach only tiny populations, some opined, and finally the concept of indigenous-run congregations in native tongues ran counter to the generally paternalistic practices of fundamentalists in Guatemala.<sup>20</sup>

Sometime between 1931 and 1933 Townsend decided to use Mexico as the initial operational theater instead of the Amazon. The first piece fell into place in Panajachel, Guatemala, when he met by chance with Moisés Sáenz, Mexican Under-Secretary of Education, who was vacationing and visiting rural schools. Both missionary-schooled Presbyterians with common ideologies, the two became friends and Sáenz left a letter expressing his commendation of Townsend's work in Guatemala and his welcome in Mexico.<sup>21</sup> Sick with tuberculosis and beleaguered by the continued and overwhelming lack of support for his ideas in Guatemala, Townsend traveled back to the United States in 1932 and sought the help of L. L. Letgers, the field secretary of the Pioneer Mission Agency and a trusted friend. At a prayer meeting in August of 1933 "the Lord revealed his will for...Mr. W. C. Townsend of Guatemala to make a trip to Mexico City for the purpose of meeting with the government to get permission for sending men into the Indian tribes to learn the languages and to translate the Bible into those Indian tongues."<sup>22</sup> Just two months later, a letter from Sáenz arrived urging the two men, Townsend and Letgers, to visit Mexico.<sup>22</sup> So began the chapter which would bring Townsend to Mexico and ultimately make SIL a living reality.

### *Mexico and the Founding of SIL*

During the early 1930s, Mexico was far from a missionary's haven, and the establishment of SIL in such an environment demands explanation. The first key lay in

the inaugural implementation of the dual identity, that is, veiling religious intent with official credentials, which would last throughout SIL's history until the present. With the Mexican Revolution in full swing, successive liberal governments systematically and sometimes violently targeted the Catholic Church as one of many societal ills which brought Mexico to its knees and submitted the nation to the will of the United States. Realizing this, Townsend and Letgers devised a plan to enter Mexico without missionary credentials. Having officially divorced themselves of all formal ties including the Central American Mission, the two men used Sáenz's letter to cross the border and made their way to Mexico City.<sup>23</sup> This instance represents the first of what later critical authors would view as 'deceits,' whereby the two men concealed their deeper goal behind a veil of government sanctity. In this case, the concept behind Mexico's anti-clerical 1917 Constitution was to reduce the muscle of the Catholic hierarchy in state affairs, no so much to quell worship among the people. By reducing their religious profile without sacrificing belief, therefore, Townsend and Letgers in fact acted in accordance with the law and its intent.<sup>24</sup>

The second key to success in Mexico was Townsend's understanding of the importance of personal connections. His charm and keen attitude opened doors to many important figures. During the first trip Townsend and Letgers followed a trail of names, some friendly Americans, others Mexican officials, from dinner parties to embassy lounges and touring rural schools. Key among these was Rafael Ramírez, director of rural education in the Ministry of Public Education (SEP). Still cautious of rejection, Townsend only indirectly and subtly referenced the subject religion and Bible translation

in his conversations, and always left the officials enough room for plausible deniability.<sup>25</sup> After the trip the two returned to begin their training camp.

The third and final key to the organization's founding was the lucky congruence of Townsend's proposed plan with a body of intellectual thought that had already begun to circulate in the Mexican intelligentsia called *indigenismo*. Many Mexican intellectuals had begun to believe in the gradual incorporation of indigenous cultures into the national one through greater understandings in anthropology and linguistics. Advances in these areas would lead to more effective systems of cultural and linguistic integration (particularly bilingual education) and the eventual absorption of indigenous cultures into the national one. The great similarity between *indigenismo* and Townsend's ideology was demonstrated by what SIL members refer to as the 'miracle of Tetelcingo.'<sup>26</sup>

On January 21, 1936, President Lázaro Cárdenas, known for his extensive visitations to the countryside, paid a visit to a small town just south of Mexico City where Townsend had set up a project.<sup>27</sup> The reasons for this visit, and for the resulting friendship between the two men, are many and complex.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, both men shared a singular concern for the indigenous people of Mexico. Townsend's program which combined "linguistic research, practical help, and spiritual guidance" also meshed well with Cárdenas' general preoccupation with removing the Catholic influence from rural and indigenous education. Simultaneously Cárdenas probably understood that as an American Townsend himself had certain attractive qualities and connections that could help assuage the festering disapproval of his government in the United States, in part

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed accounts of the unusual and somewhat surprising relationship between a socialist President and an American fundamentalist see Hartch, Chapter 2 and William Svelmoe's chapter in Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker, *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2003), p. 171-186.

derived from derogatory Catholic propaganda. Independent of the reasons for the visit, the result was the sound endorsement of Mexico's President.<sup>28</sup> The events of the previous twenty years of Townsend's life came to a head at this meeting which solidified the welcome of his linguists in Mexico for several years to come.

By the time SIL grew firm roots in Mexico, Townsend had already formulated the general tenets of strategy that would govern the subsequent expansion of the organization around the globe. Access to indigenous people necessitated governmental favor, which SIL would gain through Townsend's personal knack at befriending officials in the right places. Once in place, programs would need to evince their indispensability to both the communities and governments, which meant that the missionaries would need to provide results in the form of solid academic work, functioning schools, and other services (depending on context) of value to both parties. Finally, as mandated by the Great Commission, these strategies would be replicated around the world without bounds until every living language had a New Testament. These three aspects separate SIL from other missionary enterprises, for although the basic motivation is religious, the implications of SIL's program reach much further than simply conversion and the creation of congregations.

### *The Foreign Missionary's Work at Home*

Many noteworthy early developments of SIL as an organization occurred not abroad or in the field, but in the United States. Letgers and Townsend began their "Summer Training Camp for Pioneer Missionaries" in the summer of 1934, renting an old farmhouse in Sulphur Springs, Arkansas for \$5 per month.<sup>29</sup> The name later changed

to “Camp Wycliffe” after twelfth century theologian John Wycliffe who is credited with first translating the Bible into English.<sup>30</sup> Even despite the warm welcome afforded the translators in Mexico, Townsend could not take any extra risk, and still dreamed of his operation’s expansion into the Amazon and beyond. He knew that such a blatantly religious name would be a liability when dealing with most governments and negotiating what he would still present as purely linguistic and anthropological ventures. William Nyman, the fundraiser for the group, incorporated the organization in 1942 in California under two names: the name Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The exact nature of the relationship between SIL and WBT is perhaps one of the most slippery aspects of the entire operation. Decades later, the Janus-faced structure would constitute one of the most significant allegations against the organization during a period of controversy discussed further in Chapter 2. In general, fundraising and all representation to the U.S. donor base would fall under the auspices of WBT, while linguists in the field and all actions concerning foreign governments would be represented by the SIL.<sup>31</sup>

During the first year only two pupils attended the summer training sessions, and the second year only five. The growth of members occurred slowly and was limited by space and facilities. Among the first attendees, however, was a young man from Connecticut named Kenneth Pike who took the course in 1935 and then taught during the summer of 1936.<sup>32</sup> Pike would become a well-known name in linguistics and a figure of such importance to SIL as to rival even the founder (*see*: Chapter 3, “Theoretical Contributions”).

Townsend's Spanish-Kaqchikel Bible never circulated widely even in Guatemala, and despite his enthusiasm for linguistics, the field would remember him as only "a devoted but linguistically naïve missionary."<sup>33</sup> In Townsend's mind, however, SIL's religious goals necessitated scientific understanding and thus he endeavored to create truly competent field linguists with trustworthy credentials. By 1941 Regents at the University of Oklahoma approved an affiliation with SIL granting university credit for SIL courses and providing facilities.<sup>34</sup> Later programs sprang up at the University of North Dakota, University of Washington, and the University of Texas at Arlington. In 1978, SIL built the current official headquarters complex, the International Linguistics Center (ILC) within the Dallas city limits, but only minutes from the Arlington campus. Academic affiliations provided more than just training facilities and expertise, however, for they allowed SIL to obscure religious objectives under university-accredited programs and actual degrees, a facet which first proved useful in Townsend's next adventure in Peru.

### *Peru: Strategic Expansion*

When SIL arrived in Peru in 1943, the Amazon region, although far from virginal, was still largely unpopulated and devoid of infrastructure. Within a few years, however, SIL demonstrated the viability of an educational program in the face of daunting challenges, and the structure of the Peruvian program became the model for most new SIL branches even on other continents. The growth patterns of SIL Peru reveal the key importance of technological advance and, once again, timely coincidence with renewed non-missionary interests in the region.

The first SIL representative to enter Peru was longtime friend of Townsend and head of SIL-to-be, Kenneth Pike, who, “based on his war-time work in teaching English as a foreign language,” received an invitation from Minister of Education, Enrique de la Rosa, in late 1943. Concerned that SIL may have already become associated with Protestant proselytization in Mexico, Pike presented a plan which highlighted their new academic affiliation and named SIL the ‘Linguistic Institute of the University of Oklahoma.’<sup>2</sup> On June 28, 1945, President Manuel Prado approved the SIL contract with the Ministry of Education.<sup>35</sup> Stoll summarizes the terms of the contract:

In exchange for an office in Lima, visa and import privileges, and the right to operate airplanes and radios, SIL would study each indigenous language, prepare primers, interpret for the authorities, organize linguistic courses, discourage ‘vice by all means possible,’ and translate ‘books of great moral and patriotic value.’<sup>36</sup>

Freshly kindled business interests in the Amazon, which meshed intimately with both Peruvian and American governments, were essential to the signing of the initial contract. The Second World War inspired the U.S. to search for alternative springs for many natural resources, and in the Amazon they found rubber, quinine, and most importantly, petroleum. Townsend “found [his] mission tailor-made to the needs of U.S. policymakers...American missionaries had always accompanied American businesses abroad, but the political climate in postwar Latin America gave Townsend’s new crop of missionary translators and educators a special appeal to U.S. ambassadors who were charged with securing markets and resources for the American economy.”<sup>37</sup> 1942 also marked Peru’s victory against Ecuador in a conflict concerning the two countries’ oil-rich

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<sup>2</sup> The exact methods of contact and reasons for de la Rosa sending Pike this invitation remain unclear. An SIL source claims that Pike traveled to Peru with the American Bible Society and while there contacted government officials. For reference see: Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 103-104, and Pike, “*The Summer Institute of Linguistics: its work and contributions*,” 3.

Amazonian borderland. President Manuel Odría, Prado's successor, supported Townsend's aviation-based plan as a means of bringing military expertise and equipment from the U.S.<sup>38</sup> As firm nationalists, both presidents strongly believed in the value of the Amazon for its natural resources and possible colonization, and both also agreed that the SIL would be the most important organization to introduce the indigenous population to the new realities of western expansion, all while providing a nascent infrastructure.<sup>39</sup>

By 1948 Townsend created the third important corporation tied to SIL: the Jungle Air And Radio Service. Until this point operations were held together shakily only by a jeep and several two-way radios provided by the U.S. Embassy. A U.S. Army Air Corp Mission pilot Larry Montgomery contacted Townsend in 1946 offering a Grumman Duck, a navy amphibious plane, for a cheap price.<sup>40</sup> The plane proved its worth and even served as the sole rescue transport for a crashed Peruvian military plane in 1947, but required far too hefty of an investment to achieve the potential which Townsend envisioned. Furthermore, a small fleet would require a hanger, runway, mechanics, more pilots, fuel, and parts.<sup>41</sup> The missing piece was funds. Townsend sought money successfully by soliciting several wealthy evangelicals including the son and heir of Quaker Oats founder Henry P. Crowell, and thus JAARS was born.<sup>42</sup>

With the necessary technology in place, the structure of the SIL in Peru developed on three tiers. Furthest out in the field small teams, often pairs of researchers, made contact with new groups asking first for linguistic informants who could teach their language to the newcomers. After 1953 SIL embarked on a joint venture with the Peruvian Ministry of Education to set up indigenous-run bilingual schools. Particularly

devout converts would be sent to a second-tier regional base with a SIL bilingual school and put through teacher training (which included intense Bible study) and then returned to their communities as teachers with a government salary.<sup>43</sup> SIL leaders in the U.S. and Peruvian government officials in Lima formed the final tier which coordinated overall operations and provided funds. This pattern of operation continued unabated into the 1970s despite the continuous presence of various dissenting voices, among them Catholic Bishops, intellectuals, and even heterogeneous factions within SIL membership itself.<sup>3</sup>

*Beyond the Amazon: To All Nations*<sup>4</sup>

As the Peruvian program gained traction and training centers continued to pump out new recruits, SIL looked to expand. Even before Peru, in 1944, SIL opened up a base of operations in Denver to work with indigenous groups in the United States and Canada. During 1950s alone Latin America witnessed branches opening in Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil, while in Southeast Asia centers sprang up in Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Papua New Guinea. Over time other Latin American programs started in Colombia, Panama, and Suriname. In Asia, SIL signed contracts (some with the state, some not) in Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Australia, and several island nations in the Pacific. The most recent advance, initiated in 1962, occurred in Africa where linguists have operated in forty-three countries.<sup>44</sup> Here it is worth mentioning that the states already mentioned host official SIL centers or at least have signed governmental contracts with the organization, while many other countries with

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the internal disagreements within SIL *see* p. 39, 48-49.

smaller indigenous populations have also been targeted by groups of SIL linguists without the construction of formal programs.<sup>5</sup>

Following Townsend's vision, essentially a policy of infinite expansion, SIL achieved stable and sustained growth. Recruitment has seen ups and downs, but the trend of continuous expansion has not stopped even until the present. According to the 2008 Annual Report SIL currently has over 6,000 members active in 2,000 language communities.<sup>45</sup> With seventy-five years of hindsight critical questions remain: Did contracting governments receive the promised services? How have indigenous tribes reacted to SIL incursions? Finally, if the answer to these questions requires qualification, what other factors contributed to produce the success of this organization?

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<sup>5</sup> The Ethnologue website ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)) contains a complete listing of all countries to which SIL publications have applied.

## Chapter 2

# The Tide Turns

A fiery controversy, composed of two separate but related components, engulfed SIL between approximately 1971 and 1981. Firstly, attention both in the U.S. and abroad shoved the increasingly high-profile organization into the international spotlight and, particularly in the halls of U.S. academia, infused the very name SIL with an air of notoriety. Backed by fresh perspectives in anthropology, critics left few facets of the Institute unscathed. Secondly, during the same period many governments argued internally over whether to continue supporting SIL with state contracts, and furthermore whether to allow SIL presence within their borders. For a variety of reasons, some well-founded and others seriously misguided, several states opted to sever ties with SIL through various tactics including outright expulsion, contract cancellations, and non-renewals. While the veracity of individual allegations will be discussed later in this Chapter, the generally accusatory attitude of critical academic authors stemmed from investigations of how SIL philosophy shaped their programs, and how those programs affected indigenous communities in the field.

On the other side of rosy statistics and smiling handshakes a frustratingly complex and far less positive history of SIL began to unfold the moment the missionaries arrived. The homey gringos, brave and determined as they may have been, could not possibly have comprehended the backlog of problematic issues they faced. For several decades most SIL members operated under the aegis of SIL and SIL alone, barring occasional visits from governmental officials at the regional bases. The indigenous groups dealt with their American visitors and vice versa in isolation. The rapid multiplication and propagation of these religiously-motivated linguistic tyros into the extreme periphery was fraught, therefore, with more risks than yellow fever. Once again, the timely coincidence of external factors and internal changes fomented what would become in the 1970s a decade-long international controversy.

The first and subtlest signs of trouble emanated from two epicenters: Vietnam and Mexico. As the conflict in Vietnam grew heated, university students spearheaded a new school of thought which looked unfavorably on the established structures of the day, most notably the recently articulated military-industrial complex and Washington's foreign policy. Simultaneously, in Mexico, universities hosted anti-establishment groups motivated not by foreign crises, but instead by the domestic clientelism endemic to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) regime. Student movements radicalized throughout the 1960s until the famous Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968.<sup>1</sup> Both movements, although far removed from SIL in principle, birthed new generations of researchers. In the U.S. they began to delve deeper than their predecessors into the covert dealings of the national government, particularly the omnipresent Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In

Mexico, *indigenismo*, the school of thought which had permitted SIL's initial success, came under fire.

Even while U.S. troops buttressed Vietnam against communism, Latin America's precarious and often radicalized political scene also occupied significant airtime, both in the press and on Capitol Hill. This attention popularized new perspectives on economic relations, born out of the university-centered, anti-establishment thinking, which cast the U.S. as a bully aligned with stagnant oligarchies and at least partially at fault for the impoverished situation of the continent's general populace. The infamous CIA actions of the 1950s and 60s only evinced and strengthened these viewpoints. As military assistance flowed freely to rightist regimes, a new generation of anthropologists recognized "the velvet-gloved alternative to the iron fist of armed conflict,"<sup>2</sup> foreign missions. During the same period Mexican anthropologists questioned the role of these foreign visitors in indigenous communities with fresh eyes. The criticism drew ever more proximate to SIL as conferences and journal articles in both the U.S. and Latin America now began to include strong denunciations of *indigenismo*, and all this at a time when SIL's heightened visibility pushed it ever-further into the public eye.

Partially as a result of active advertisement, and partially as a simple byproduct of logistical expansion, SIL drew increasing attention. Starting in 1956, "Operation Auca" splashed SIL's name across national headlines. During 1955, five missionaries tied to SIL, Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Edward McCully, Jr., and Roger Younderian, attempted to directly contact a fiercely independent group of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Huaorani. After learning some of the language from an exiled young woman named Dayuma they circled the main Huaorani village in an airplane, dropping gifts and

shouting messages over a megaphone. On January 3, 1956, Nate managed to land the plane on a sandy strip of riverbank close to the village. Within a week all five men died by the point of Huaorani spears.<sup>3</sup> Several major publications in the U.S. ran the story as an example of the heroism of American missionaries abroad, transforming the protagonists into "icons of evangelical spirituality and missionary commitment."<sup>4</sup> In 1957, Rachel Saint, Nate's widow, toured the U.S. with Dayuma and another famous convert, Chief Tariri of the Shapra tribe in Peru, appearing on Ralph Edwards' program "This is Your Life," and with Billy Graham in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

Abroad new SIL centers popped up in national capitals and regional bases expanded. A new, "highly visible" center in Mexico City gave the organization a "quasi-official" air difficult to ignore. Ever increasing numbers of missionary/linguists poured forth from SIL training centers, and in many towns SIL presence became commonplace. To cap things off, Townsend convinced the U.S. Senate to initiate a "Bible Translation Day" in 1964, and SIL leadership to sponsor a pavilion at the World's Fair in New York City in 1966.<sup>6</sup> In short, at a time when the academic world conspired to turn the tables against what they saw as an antiquated model of foreign service, SIL was becoming one of the largest and most visible targets.

The first academic (i.e. non-journalistic) denunciations only mentioned SIL in conjunction with larger, national establishments. Verbal criticism of SIL surfaced during discussion at the International Congress of Americanists' 1970 meeting in Lima.<sup>7</sup> During July of the same year, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla and Arturo Warman, two anthropologist participants in the radical student movement in Mexico City, published *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana* ("This is what they call Mexican

anthropology”<sup>1</sup>), a broadside against the traditional anthropological establishment. This collection of articles openly accused SIL’s close partner, the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (National Indigenist Institute or INI), of ethnocide and internal colonialism. In response, the World Council of Churches (WCC), the backbone of “historical” Protestant denominations (non-evangelicals and non-Pentecostals)<sup>8</sup> organized a conference to take place in January 1971. With both Bonfil Batalla and SIL representatives present, all member churches signed the Declaration of Barbados which denounced *indigenismo* as a tool of western expansion which exploited indigenous cultures within their state structures in much the same way as U.S. influence exploited dependent Latin American governments. Investigation of Protestant influence in Mexico commenced in earnest.<sup>9</sup>

Criticism grazed the SIL program in Mexico, but began in earnest in Colombia. The extreme complexity of the situation in Colombia during the early 1970s defies brief explanation. A volatile mix of landed elites, mostly cattle ranchers, Catholic clergy, some under the influence of the Second Vatican Council<sup>2</sup> and some not, marginalized groups of Guahibo Indians, governmental armed forces, and evangelical missionaries each pursued their own goals. SIL could not find a strategy that would appease the various opposed factions and still accomplish their translation goals. Blame flew from all directions and migrated from the countryside to the Bogotá press where politicians

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s translation from Spanish

<sup>2</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) inspired significant reformation in some sectors of the Catholic Church and is credited with the birth of ‘liberation theology,’ a philosophy which asserts that exploitation (as by capitalistic means or otherwise) is a sin to be combated. Some priests interpreted this doctrine as justification for political activism, usually on behalf of the poor. Latin America has ever since witnessed competition within the clergy between these ‘liberal’ and more ‘conservative’ views.

For more *see*: Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

disputed the value of an official relationship between SIL and the state. A plan drawn up in 1972 recommended a phased withdrawal and replacement of SIL participants with Colombian personnel. The plan never manifested significant results, but the controversy tarnished SIL's reputation.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of these events, North American anthropologists began to take notice of SIL. First to the press in the United States was a 1973 report by the North American Council on Latin America (NACLA) by Laurie Hart. This report, "Pacifying the Last Frontiers: The Story of the Wycliffe Bible Translators," for the first time covered the history of WBT and SIL in a single third party document. Hart orients the article strongly towards the emergent anthropological views of the time contending "the translation mission of WBT/SIL serves the interests of U.S. imperialism and local exploiters, *not* of indigenous peoples."<sup>11</sup> The significance of the article lay in its wide circulation among a broad swath of U.S. academia, and in that it synthesized the many facets of the operation into a comprehensible whole. From this point onwards the controversy became global.<sup>3</sup>

The first country to expel SIL was Peru in 1975. As the contract renewal date loomed in January 1976, criticism swelled. The political balances of the delicate military government under Juan Velasco Alvarado finally tipped and motivated the creation of a committee to investigate SIL's jungle operations. From this point on the debate over the SIL contract stayed in the fickle hands of the bureaucracy in Lima which was already experiencing significant stress after the coup d'état by General Francisco Bermúdez. After several months' consideration and argument (which centered on accusations of SIL as a communist plot and left religious questions untouched) the branch received a letter of dismissal in March 1976 a letter from the Minister of Education. A period of insecurity

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<sup>3</sup> For full citation see bibliography: Hart, Laurie

followed which witnessed a tentative 5 year renewal of contract and yet another retraction. Many noteworthy conservative figures in the military and educational system came to SIL's aid, petitioning and personally campaigning for reinstatement. Finally, in 1979, the Ministry of Education formulated and signed a new 10-year contract.<sup>12</sup>

Several other countries offered SIL less opportunity for negotiation. During 1969 the Indian government, with whom SIL never signed a contract (preferring to work through private Universities in Poona), revoked all the visas provided to SIL personnel.<sup>13</sup> The Vietnam branch and its Cambodian component pulled out just before April, 1975 when North Vietnamese troops toppled the government of Saigon.<sup>14</sup> Nigeria also ended their contract the same year.<sup>15</sup> Nepal terminated the state contract and ordered all SIL personnel out of the country in 1976, citing laws which prohibit catechization in all religions except Hindu.<sup>16</sup> A complicated set of occurrences led Brazil's *Fundação Nacional do Índio* (National Foundation for Indians or FUNAI) to end relations in 1978 and declare an official expulsion without a firm date.<sup>17</sup> September 21, 1979 marked the end of official relations between the SEP and SIL in Mexico and a few months later the Ministry of the Interior ceased renewing the visas of SIL personnel. In May 1981, two days before dying in a plane crash, Ecuadorian President Roldos Aguilera signed Decree 1159 which severed all governmental ties with SIL.<sup>18</sup> Panama allowed the twenty SIL members from the Central American Branch to operate a full two years after the end of their ten year contract, but in July 1981, after a number of indicative actions, finally expelled them.<sup>19</sup>

The years of denunciation left SIL "sundered forever"<sup>20</sup> in many parts of the world. What had researchers found so odious about SIL when at first so many had lauded

the organization as progressive and effective? Why did governments, particularly in Latin America, so swiftly reject the group to whom they had so willingly granted permission and sometimes outright hegemony over indigenous education?

### *Accusations*

International interest, piqued during the 1970s, inspired a number of research projects. The resultant publications varied in their quality and depth of research. Most noteworthy are the works of Stoll, Hvalkof and Aaby, Colby and Dennet, and Hartch as discussed previously. The earlier literature, published during the early 1980s, condemned the SIL project on numerous and diverse charges. Excluding particularly extraneous claims, however, these accusations centered on the following: (1) Cooperation with the CIA and other covert embedded forces of U.S. imperialism, (2) linguistic malfeasance whereby under-schooled missionaries parade as qualified linguists, (3) active ethnocide through practices of mass assimilation, (4) political neutralization of tribes and thereby inherent support of repressive regimes, (5) division of communities along religious lines, and (6) two-faced trickery using a scientific blanket to receive state support and mask a religious goal.<sup>4</sup> As far as the first and perhaps most heavily discussed charge, no hard evidence has ever surfaced. Authors poignantly remark though, that circumstance and indirect implication lend strong credence to the possibility. The area of linguistics will be investigated further in the succeeding chapter. The final four charges overall represent much more valid, if incomplete, points.

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<sup>4</sup> This list appears in incomplete form in Hartch (158-159) in the section which deals with the controversy in Mexico. I have expanded the list to accurately summarize the sources included in my Bibliography.

## *Effects of SIL Presence in Indigenous Communities*

The overarching ideological and methodological unity of SIL causes characteristic patterns to emerge on many levels. Ideologically SIL began well-equipped to promulgate a uniform package simply as an exemplary member of the fundamentalist Protestant movement. Impressing the need for a personal relationship with God and utter dependence on the Bible unifies evangelical dogma. The emphasis on the individual as the central player allows wiggle room for personal interpretation but discourages collective group exegesis, and therefore limits wandering down precarious paths based on syncretism or social organization. Layered over this basic set of beliefs, the ‘Townsendian’ principles which inspired SIL’s early expansion became deeply engrained in the institutional culture. These beliefs, as previously described, involved appeasing many different actors including members, governments, academics, and donors, each with diverse intentions and expectations. The vision of Bible translation thus transformed into an enormous project which in most cases, particularly including the governmental component, implicated a near total makeover of indigenous society and left the practice of that transformation in the hands of a few briefly trained, poorly traveled missionaries. In retrospect, the organization faced a monumental task with facets bound to incite criticism from several directions from the very beginning.

The degree of blame which SIL deserves depends on a number of highly subjective observations. One important distinction to make is whether SIL was “at fault” or simply “responsible” for changes induced in indigenous communities. One must decide whether SIL, as a whole or in part, could have possibly predicted the ramifications of their work, particularly when surrounded by such unfamiliar and dynamic contexts. In

other words, which changes were induced with knowledge and forethought, and which occurred unexpectedly?<sup>21</sup> The other crucial consideration, particularly germane to the capitalistic economic changes enacted, is whether or not the changes could have been avoided even negating SIL presence. I would claim that neither question has a single satisfactory answer applicable to all situations.

Most projects began with a pair of missionaries who initiated contact with an indigenous group and sought invitation to work and live within the community. The motivation and timing differed between locations, but the contact and requests often came supplemented with trade goods (rock salt, metal cooking vessels, buttons, machetes, etc.<sup>22</sup>) and modern medicine.<sup>23</sup> Once established as at very least guests in the community, the pair began the next stage, the construction of infrastructure and the request for linguistic informants. Depending on the situation, ‘infrastructure’ could mean building a centralized village, clearing an airstrip, or sometimes simply establishing a space for a school. Depending on the size of the community and observed need, groups sometimes supported more translators and more infrastructure as time passed.

SIL unified tribes spatially, but divided them both materially and socially. The manner in which SIL selected and compensated linguistic informants immediately produced the rifts in the social fabric of traditional communities. Strongly opposed to traditional ‘gift’ or ‘reciprocal’ practices, SIL ensured that linguistic informants received ample compensation for their services including, when necessary, housing, food, and material goods such as clothes, tools, cooking utensils, etc.,<sup>24</sup> which immediately offset their material (and hence, in most cases, social) status.

The new system of capital and exchange brought to indigenous groups by SIL, based purely on western notions of capitalistic individualism, greatly impacted customary economic practices. SIL actively sought the subversion of traditional systems of exchange and community work ethics. One of the largest differences scholars cite between SIL and historical indigenous evangelization projects is the development of modern technology which allowed missions to maintain a much tighter and more integrated web of supply and communication.<sup>25</sup> In this sense JAARS proved a crucial vehicle of cultural importation not only by maintaining distant outposts supplied with current technology and the resources necessary for its operation, but also by representing the unprecedented strength and extension of the west's capacity to network and organize on a vast scale. Over time these groups became accustomed to the pervasive presence of the western technological diaspora.

As time passed in many communities, the SIL school became the central reference and representation of western civilization, but even early on some community members rejected or selectively accepted the SIL paradigm of existence. Some outright refused integration, sticking to their original domiciles and traditions. Some moved further away. Others accepted a compromise along a sliding scale of acculturation. Evidence indicates that the key divider among societies was between *creyentes y no-creyentes* (believers and non-believers) in the professed Christian doctrine. The rift between these two phratries often increased over time, culminating in physical separation, exclusive social activities, and prohibition against intermarriage.<sup>26</sup> Divisions could run along other faults as well, including political lines.

The ideological unity of SIL responded to external challenges by consolidating around those principles which leaders perceived to have the highest possibility of allowing continued work among indigenous communities. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the governments of the western hemisphere were drawn into much closer quarters by a U.S. foreign policy defined by the Cold War. The staunch anti-communism propagated by the region's wealthiest and most militarized player reached deep into the peripheral societies of Latin America. Learning from experiences like those of ill-fated Liberation Theologians in El Salvador, SIL personnel stressed that their project lay outside the realm of politics and quietly quelled resistance to pro-U.S. governments. The oft-cited scriptural justification of SIL's ostensibly apolitical attitude is a translation of Romans 13:1 "Obey the government for God is the one who put it there."<sup>27</sup> Emphasis, therefore, fell on the transformation of the heart and the gift of literacy as the only means of social amelioration.<sup>28</sup> In a myriad of individual cases, SIL walked the thin line between political neutrality and political repression. The sheer number of accusations of political repression from so many individual sources seems to indicate that occasionally, for the sake of survival and expansion in the tense atmosphere which pervaded both governments and indigenous communities, individual members chose to subdue risky political actions.

#### *Tailing Off: Back to Normalcy?*

Years of constant condemnation and the resulting loss of contracts and entry privileges left irreparable cracks in SIL hegemony, but by no means did the program become inoperable. The Peruvian case provided the most extreme example of

governmental vacillation, but not the only one. Colombia's 1972 plan for phased withdrawal never took effect. Controversy raged from all sides over the next decade, but no official action produced results. Even when M-19 guerrillas kidnapped an amateur translator, Chester Bitterman, in 1981 from SIL's Bogotá base and demanded the withdrawal of SIL from the country, both the Colombian government and President Reagan closely followed the official policy of non-negotiation. Bitterman was found dead after 47 days.<sup>29</sup> After contract termination in Mexico and throughout the early 1980s various factions of the government and academia struggled to eject SIL entirely, but never succeeded. Townsend and other leaders spoke personally with President López Portillo of Mexico in January 1981 who reinstated the organization as a private entity permitted to operate within Mexico but without governmental ties until the completion of the entire translation project. SIL strengthened rumors of ejection already circulating by withdrawing personnel, but most of these members could legitimately have claimed project completion.<sup>30</sup> During 1986 the Ecuadorian branch, which had maintained a low profile for five years, felt confident enough to propose a new contract to the Febres Cordero regime. Vice-President Blasco Peñaherrera supported the new relationship, but could not put the new program into effect before the election of Rodrigo Borja who cancelled the contract project partially in response to pressure from indigenous groups.<sup>31</sup> In Brazil, SIL continued to operate officially unimpeded as an NGO.

One of the final dramas to play out coincidentally occurred in Townsend's original land of inspiration, Guatemala. SIL worked through the bloody civil war, but could not survive the return to elected government. During the early 1990s the new regime effectively removed SIL without officially ejecting personnel. The governmental

contract was not renewed, and nor were the leases on SIL property in Guatemala City. The new conditions gave missionaries the choice to receive reassignment to another country from the Dallas headquarters, or stay as unaffiliated individuals (supported by their own means or evangelical funds). Many opted to stay.<sup>32</sup> As time placated official responses to criticism, the international fervor also subsided.

The marked decline of critical publications post 1985 represents not so much changes within SIL as it does a response to intertwined externalities whose ripple effects touched all corners of Latin America. The upshot of these circumstances was that SIL could no longer work comfortably without significant competition from new actors offering similar services with comparable terms of exchange to both governments and indigenous people.<sup>33</sup> Firstly, as in Guatemala, the widespread ‘return to democracy’ brought newly elected governments who tended to look critically on the organizations their predecessors had supported, especially those rife with criticism. Secondly, the onset of neoliberalism in the economic sector trimmed the state and its ability to provide services, particularly in the periphery, while also economically disaffecting the impoverished sector. In many cases new foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stepped in to help fill the gaps and respond to demands.<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, the continuous and rapid growth of other Evangelical missionary organizations forced SIL volunteers to share their communities with increasing numbers of alternative missionaries hailing from various denominations. As a consequence, SIL’s influence declined as alternative actors and ideologies flooded into the indigenous periphery.

Despite losing several government contracts, the ‘trial by fire’ years may have actually benefited SIL. However zealous the anthropologists’ reports, they publicly

identified the most serious faults of the organization and forced members and leadership to reconsider their strategies and methodology. SIL members, particularly Kenneth Pike, had identified the risks and downsides of the Townsendian approach years earlier.

Outside pressure coincided with internal stresses caused by the logistical difficulties of maintaining the JAARS network of bases, particularly in the Amazon. These forces allowed some inside of SIL to push through needed reform against stodgy opposition, or in the words of David Stoll, “the nerds’ vote finally won out over the flyboys’.”<sup>35</sup> The 1970s and 80s stand as a testament to the resiliency of the organization.

The SIL of today is not the same organization it was fifty years ago. The “seat of the pants”<sup>36</sup> operation which began in Mexico has gradually morphed into a professional entity of great size and influence. Outside scrutiny only accelerated an already ongoing inner struggle towards greater efficiency, transparency, and intellectual prowess. This steady ideological change has transformed SIL from a Bible salesman’s grandiose vision into a well-regulated organization with real claim to academic integrity. Current SIL publicity materials now heavily emphasize the scholarly nature of linguistics, translation, bilingual education, and literacy training. “Faith based” is a term often employed to avoid sticky political issues and an aspect of ideology and membership that SIL no longer makes any attempt to conceal.<sup>37</sup>

If withstanding controversy represents strength, then the deep reforms which SIL has gradually implemented are a signal of flexibility. Just as in the short term SIL appears so resolutely resistant to change, over the long term the organization displays a flexible capacity for deep change. The linguistic facet of SIL demonstrates this adaptive ability perhaps better than any other.

Finally and most significantly, the Americas prove every day less fertile grounds for living languages without a New Testament. SIL programs in most Latin American countries are mature.<sup>38</sup> At this point of near completion, with the majority of work in years past, how do academics view SIL contributions in the Latin America? Does linguistic expertise in any way assuage anthropological naïveté? Has the field of linguistics over-exploited or underutilized SIL resources, or has SIL tarnished the field's name by using it to shield ulterior motives? The next chapter will address the subject of SIL's linguistics work in Latin America.

## Chapter 3

# Linguistic Contributions: A Qualitative Analysis

Is the Summer Institute of Linguistics, as declared by some, a fraudulent misnomer or, as the organization maintains, an upstanding institute of academia? The reputation of the largest linguistic operation in the world is at stake. The extended period of SIL's stay in Latin America and the diversity of conditions in which the institute has operated significantly complicate the answer to this question. When the program began, linguistics as a discipline separate from anthropology, philosophy, dialectology, and philology, had barely found a toehold in the halls of North American and European universities.<sup>1</sup> During the first years, as one of the only organizations gathering data in remote Latin American languages, SIL publications received warm welcome in the most prestigious journals.<sup>1</sup> As the discipline grew over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ensnared a new generations of young minds, SIL gradually slipped into the margins of academia both in the field and in print. Still, even presently, to discuss the field of

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<sup>1</sup> See: Ethnologue Serials Index, [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)

Interesting note: Of the publications in the International Journal of American Linguistics (IJAL) roughly 50% appeared before 1970. Accounting for the growth of the organization, this steady rate of publication does not make intuitive sense.

linguistics without referencing SIL would be to ignore the field's largest and most geographically widespread actor.

SIL is truly a dominant player in terms of personnel, funds, and the collection of raw linguistic material. Through capturing donations and recruits from all corners of the U.S. evangelical population, as well as smaller participant groups from Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand, SIL has experienced sustained growth since inception and has maintained vast resources in many corners of the globe. This presence has produced an unfathomable quantity of data, working papers, and polished publications. The effect of so much aggregated data and organized description of so many languages have clearly rippled throughout many corners of linguistic study. Historically, SIL has trained and financed a number of highly influential linguists such as Eunice Pike, Eugene A. Nida, Sarah Gudschinsky, David Tuggy, William Wonderly, and Robert Longacre who can justifiably claim to have advanced their respective fields well beyond pure data collection.

Just like all other facets of the organization, critiques have lambasted their linguistic practices as well. Also paralleling the other spheres of SIL influence, this criticism has some valid and indisputable claims. The fact that SIL's linguistic practices are checkered with questionable actions and motives, however, does not preclude a positive balance for the institute's overall contribution to the region. SIL thus deserves respectful recognition as a powerful linguistic entity, even when this reputation may be discolored by political or religious tendencies.

*Theoretical Contributions:*

If “Uncle Cam” can lay claim to SIL’s ideological inspiration then “linguistic Einstein,” Kenneth L. Pike was the father of SIL’s linguistic legitimacy. Born in Connecticut in 1912, Pike attended the second session of Camp Wycliffe in 1935. Inspired, he traveled that winter to Mexico with Townsend to study Mixtec. The next summer he taught the summer training courses in Arkansas. In 1937 Pike attended the summer session of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA)<sup>2</sup> where he took a course with Edward Sapir, perhaps one of the most famous linguists of all time and, along with Leonard Bloomfield, the co-father of American Structuralism. This school of thought would reign over U.S. linguistics and Pike’s work until Noam Chomsky’s introduction of Transformational Grammar in the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> By 1942 Pike earned his PhD from the University of Michigan where he would work the bulk of his career, from 1948 until retirement in 1978.<sup>2</sup>

Pike is by far and away SIL’s best-recognized contributor to the field of theoretical linguistics, a position he occupied by publishing a three-part volume, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (LRUTSHB, 1960). The theory presented in this volume became known as “Tagmemics,” a name derived from the basic unit of analysis employed called the “tagmeme.” First developed by Pike, the theory underwent extensive revision even beyond the second edition of LRUTSHB in 1967, and enjoyed input from several other linguists (all SIL affiliated) including Eugene Nida and Robert Longacre.<sup>3</sup> To fully grasp the bases of the theory one must first lay the contextual groundwork.

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<sup>2</sup> The LSA was the brainchild of Leonard Bloomfield, and served as one of the principle instruments which separated and defined the discipline of linguistics. For more *see*: Sueren, 157, 192-193.

<sup>3</sup> For a more complete history of the development of American linguistics and an explanation of American Structuralism *see*: Sueren, 183-211. For more on Transformational Grammar *see* Sueren, 242-252.

As Pike developed his theory during the 1950s, the world around him was flush with structuralist thinking. A rush of new technology, including the first computers, could increasingly devise statistics and measurements from huge data sets, gleaning patterns from previously unquantifiable and immeasurable phenomena. In linguistics, the trend began in phonetics where statistics opened new insights into the distribution of sounds and their role in defining word meaning. Soon aspects of mathematical study spread to other sub-disciplines as well, and some linguists began to devise tentative models of language using, at least in part, formulaic constructs as opposed to the philosophical or logical theories of their predecessors. One of the most interesting and unique features of tagmemics is that even within this highly defined and structural style of study, the theory can expand beyond language into human behavior and cultural practice

Tagmemics rests on three basic assumptions. The first is that the same data can yield different insights when viewed from different perspectives. The basic idea is that meaning can never be separated from the context or observer. Pike uses the metaphor (borrowed from physics) of light as a particle, wave, and field. Each method of interpreting the same data about a physical phenomenon produces useful, practical, and distinctive understandings. The two most relevant perspectives for language are “etic,” (alien or outsider), and “emic,” (a native speaker’s viewpoint). The second, more abstract assumption bears on the tagmemes themselves and asserts that they are discrete units of analysis defined as ‘contrastive identificational features’ (to be explained further). The third assumption, also regarding tagmemes, is that they carry form and meaning jointly, rather than splitting them into syntax (or grammar) and semantics.<sup>4</sup>

Central also to Tagmemics is the “Hierarchical Principle,” which claims a single type of structure can be applied to essentially all features of language, all the way from phonemics up through syntax and grammar to lengthy discourse. This structure is also generally relevant to all languages. For the purposes of explanation tagmemics divides language into three general ‘domains’: phonological, grammatical, and referential. The phonological group contains the smallest units such as the phoneme and syllable. The grammatical domain encompasses words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and conversation. The referential level embodies the communicative aspect of linguistic interaction, that is, what is being talked “about,” or what is being referenced. This set contains stories, events, identities, and relationships.<sup>5</sup> With these principles established one can now investigate the tagmeme itself.

The tagmeme, as already stated, is the basic unit of analysis for tagmemics, but each unit ends up quite complex. Using words as exemplary tagmemes simplifies the elucidation of these units so long as one understands that the same concepts apply to all levels of language under the hierarchy principle. Each tagmeme carries four characteristics: slot, class, role, and cohesion. Slot refers to a class or set of words. In a transitive English sentence like “John bit the sandwich,” would contain the slots for the subject, transitive verb, and object. Each slot can be filled with a class, or such as a noun/noun phrase or transitive verb/verb phrase. Pike developed the role marker of tagmemes in response to a dilemma: how to define the difference between the two tagmemes “John” in the sentences “John bit the sandwich,” and “John was bit by the sandwich”? Each tagmeme thus carries a semantic definition, in this case the ‘giver’ or ‘receiver’ of the transitive verb. The cohesive facet of tagmemes also arose out necessity.

Some words, for instance, ‘govern’ aspects of other words in a sentence. A familiar example is the gender markers on many romance language adjectives which are defined by the nouns they describe. In this case the adjectives are ‘governed by gender cohesion.’ In the simplest case tagmemes on one hierarchical level construct the tagmemes on the next, but ‘level-skipping’ is also common. <sup>6</sup>

Notation:

Slot	Class
Role	Cohesion

Example:

*“Andrew punched the robber”*

*Andrew:*

Subject	Noun Phrase
Actor	# > <sup>4</sup>

For many years SIL promoted tagmemics as the rebuttal to the claim that the organization did not contribute to theoretical linguistics and thus did not engage in the highest levels of linguistic debate. Pike and others promoted the theory through the institute’s courses, and thus hundreds if not thousands of field linguists were trained to produce tagmemic research material. For many languages investigated by SIL the only extant materials are tagmemic. Beyond descriptive manuals, tagmemics overflowed into

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<sup>4</sup> # references a separately defined governance rule. The > symbol to the right indicates that the tagmeme is the governing agent, where a > to the left would indicate that the word was the subjugated tagmeme.

bilingual education, literacy, and language learning projects. Certain aspects such as ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives appear consistently in anthropology and ethnomusicology.<sup>7</sup> Former SIL member Katherine Langan explains that tagmemics held a “hollowed spot,” especially at the University of Oklahoma sessions when Pike was alive, but even in the mid 1970s SIL training courses in both North Dakota and England taught mixed theoretical courses depending on the professor.<sup>8</sup>

Noam Chomsky’s transformational and generative conceptualizations of grammar, which appeared during the same years, greatly overshadowed Pike’s magnum opus.<sup>9</sup> SIL schools taught their own mixes and brands of theoretical linguistics, but rarely was tagmemics taught standalone. Other SIL linguists have, on occasion, substantively contributed to theoretical debates, but Tagmemics, and thus the institute as a whole, would have no lasting impact on theoretical linguistics. Yet when viewed in light of the founding principles of the organization (first and foremost the translation of the New Testament), theory matters little compared to the pragmatics of descriptive linguistics.

### *The Ordinary Working Linguist*

Ordinary Working Linguists, known as OWLs within SIL, compose the bulk of field personnel. As one of the minority SIL members who holds a both an M.S. and a Ph.D. (from Georgetown University nonetheless in Sociolinguistics) Katherine Langan worked alongside many OWLs in Guatemala, and can comment on them from the perspective of higher academia. She describes OWLs as “enthusiasts in linguistics, but usually only to the point of Bible translation.”<sup>10</sup> The role of this base-layer of SIL

personnel, their training, and the materials they produce has adapted over time to the surrounding political and academic pressures.

In a phone interview David Stoll recast Langan's "enthusiasts" as, at least during the first decades of operation, by and large linguistic novices. He explained the lack of expertise as a result of SIL priorities which sought young, motivated, college-educated evangelicals, but made no requirement for a background in linguistic studies. Training sometimes consisted of two or three summers at Camp Wycliffe or the University of Oklahoma, factories for producing career missionaries with just enough linguistic knowledge to translate the Bible into any language on earth. This first wave of recruits from the 30s, 40s, and 50s, overall produced very basic works which, as with Townsend's Kaqchikel Bible, were used only minimally in their intended indigenous communities.<sup>11</sup>

During the early years academic prowess received less priority than strategic expansion, which implied quickly training large numbers of recruits. Townsend had envisioned the organization primarily as a widespread mechanism of Bible translation. His adroit salesmanship and acute sense for politics had made this vision a success. A minority group, with Pike as a figurehead, pursued the science of language deeper than pure Bible translation. These figures filled the upper tiers of SIL's academic hierarchy, but, at first, held relatively little sway in the operations of the organization.<sup>12</sup> As the discipline of linguistics grew steadily through the 1960s and 70s, however, academic prestige in the field became a more sought-after commodity and thus more difficult to attain.<sup>13</sup>

Todd Hartch (non-SIL), who researched SIL as a student at Yale Divinity School, opines that the linguistic elite in the organization perceived this change as early as the

1960s. Hartch, whose written work demonstrates his ability to understand SIL from a surprisingly “emic” perspective, frames two major problems which Pike and others knew even early on would later constitute the underpinnings of most criticisms of SIL’s academic work. The first, directly related to the changes in linguistics as a whole, was SIL’s waning capacity to produce materials at a level concurrent with contemporary advances. The second was a problem of information flow. The gargantuan stockpiles of data compiled by the OWLs often collected dust in SIL files without ever reaching the larger linguistic audience in publications.<sup>14</sup> University-sponsored linguists from the U.S. and Latin America collect linguistic data for the purpose of publishing, but lack the financial backing and manpower to collect large swaths from various, geographically disparate and inaccessible locations. Collectively, OWLs encountered the opposite problem: funds and data capacity came easily, but the ability to turn that data into publishable articles proved a far scarcer commodity. Pike and others worked hard to correct these problems, but could not succeed quickly enough to avoid criticism when anthropological and political concerns landed SIL in hot water in the early 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

Stoll also witnessed the internal readjustments occurring within SIL during his two years in Colombia 1975-1977. By the time controversy erupted SIL had already begun to realize that its network of Amazonian bases was fiscally and logistically unsustainable. The slow dawning of this insight, combined with mounting external pressures to maintain a lower profile, undermined the voting power of the ‘flyboys.’ Additional external criticism from academia based on the aforementioned issues swung the balance of power even further towards the ‘nerds.’ The shift in power resulted in a major commitment to more graduate degrees for field personnel. The new mantra of

translation which emerged throughout the 1970s and 80s relied on a modernized conceptualization of translation practice, including much more ‘involved’ efforts with heavy native consultancy.<sup>16</sup> The informed practice of translation also required ever stronger and more detailed foundations in descriptive linguistics which, internal to SIL, gained ever augmenting prestige.

### *A Checkered Past...*

Historically, SIL has fallen behind the field on several important issues regarding the indigenous communities’ right to self-determination. SIL repeatedly clashed with indigenous organizations and alternate linguistic institutes over the orientation of published materials, the training of native-born linguists, and, perhaps most famously the “alphabet wars” of Guatemala and Mexico which determined the orthographies of native languages.

Judith Maxwell, linguistics professor at Tulane University and specialist in the Mayan languages of Guatemala spent decades working in SIL-influenced communities with an alternative linguistic organization called the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM). Out of this extended experience, she draws several basic criticisms of SIL’s linguistic practices. Firstly, the linguistic publications produced particularly in the early years but even up to the 1970s bear the distinctive, antiquated marks of Townsend’s linguistic principles. Early OWLs did not consider dictionaries and grammars the property of the community, but instead tools for the outside world to access the language of that community. Dictionaries, for instance, included glossing (translations) from Spanish or Portuguese into the minority language, but not the reverse.

Of course, this attitude was not unique to SIL during the first decades of operation, but the organization definitely spent much longer adjusting as alternate perspectives overtook most other linguistic organizations.<sup>17</sup>

Maxwell's second major critique is that SIL, seeking to prolong government dependency, resisted the movement to train indigenous linguists. Hartch lays the foundations of this story by explaining that advances in the popularity and quality of linguistic work in the United States during the same period did not correlate with a similar rise in Latin American academia. Even during the 1980s Latin American universities graduated precious few linguistic majors, of whom practically none were willing to dedicate years to miniscule, underdeveloped communities.<sup>18</sup> Finally Stoll tells that under-funded state linguistic programs could not handle the quantity of work necessary to document and produce materials in all languages, especially in linguistically dense regions. Even with mounting reasons for suspicion, governments found a SIL a convenient go-to when publishing materials in indigenous languages.<sup>19</sup>

As with the fomentation of political movements, SIL entered the grey area between non-participation and active repression. Christina Abreo, daughter of Protestant missionaries with a group called Freedom Ministries, moved to Guatemala in 1988 when she was a senior in high school. She describes SIL field programs as having a “detrimental”<sup>20</sup> effect on indigenous linguists. By this time the practice of training a language's speakers to analyze the language for themselves was an expected piece (if not the central goal) of any long-term linguistic field project. Ajpub' García Ixmatá, an indigenous Maya linguist with the PLFM claims that “with their bottomless well of

resources they created the linguistics department at the Universidad Mariano Gálvez and yet only people from the city graduated.”<sup>21</sup>

Hartch rebukes the notion that the reluctance to train native linguists had but one dimension, adding that the financial situation of most linguists narrowed their methodological choices. OWLs raise their own funds and receive direct sponsorship for their projects from their home congregations and individual donations. This policy allows SIL the flexibility of expanding without depending on fundraising as an organization.<sup>22</sup> Administrative costs and capital investments generally flow from a few wealthier donors and peripheral associations.<sup>23</sup> such as Wycliffe International (formed 1942)<sup>24</sup> the Wycliffe Associates (formed 1967).<sup>25</sup> Donors funded their friends and relations, but convincing them to give their dollars to indigenous linguists was a more difficult proposition. Developing an indigenous core of linguists in the name of Bible translation did not mesh well with the original ideology of the program which had for many years succeeded in raising such enormous amounts of money.<sup>26</sup> This type of mental shift would occur only slowly and with ample pressure from the outside.

Finally, SIL demonstrated stodgy resistance to trends in linguistics in the colloquially termed ‘alphabet wars.’ “Anytime you are talking orthography you are talking politics in one way or another,” says Mike Cahill, the current International Linguistics Coordinator in Dallas.<sup>27</sup> SIL first ran into this fact in Mexico during the 1930s. Morris Swadesh, a non-SIL linguist working with the Mexican government, successfully developed and officially established phonetic alphabets for several indigenous alphabets. As a staunch advocate of cultural integration, Townsend privately expressed his desire to keep the alphabets as close to Spanish as possible to facilitate an

easier transition. As a believer in submission to governmental powers, however, he counseled SIL members not oppose the orthographies.<sup>28</sup> Over the years, the same situation would arise time and again in different language communities and governmental settings.

Maxwell tells the story of the most public alphabet war, which occurred in Guatemala between 1984 and 1987, as a linguist who actually participated. The PLFM was founded in 1969 by a group of foreign linguists who cooperated with local Mayans with the stated goal of “supporting and preserving Mayan languages.”<sup>29</sup> The organization began to produce materials in the 1970s using independently derived orthographies. SIL Guatemala did not directly react to the presence of the PLFM with any gusto until the *Segundo Congreso sobre los Alfabetos* (Second Congress of the Alphabets) in 1984.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to standardize and consolidate the various alphabets used in publishing indigenous language documents, the Guatemalan government called a meeting of various organizations. Representatives from both SIL and the PLFM attended. Many native linguists berated the SIL alphabet as overly assimilatory. The congress, in which only the indigenous were allowed to vote, adopted the PLFM model with minor changes, sparking strong opposition from SIL.<sup>30</sup>

The alphabet change presented SIL with a legitimate dilemma, but the nature of the resistance which followed shows serious markings of illegitimate malcontent. Thirty years’ worth of publications constituted a staggering volume of work that would have to be transcribed into the alternate orthography. SIL therefore agreed to follow the new system from that point on, but refused to alter existing works. When in 1987 the

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<sup>5</sup> The First Congress of the Alphabets occurred in 1945. Although overall a similar affair with a similar purpose, the session did not result in multilateral agreement and organizations continued to employ a diversity of alphabets.

Guatemalan government legally formalized the rules for orthography in the *Acto sobre los Alfabetos* (Alphabets Act), SIL reacted by contacting the UN human rights ombudsman and attempting to have the law declared a violation of human rights. The organization claimed (rather extraneously) that new transcriptions of Mayan surnames would invalidate existing legal documents (wills, trusts, ownership documents, etc.) spelled in the existing alphabet. The effort stands as a testament to the rigidity of SIL as an organization, and failed to generate sympathy in Guatemalan government.<sup>31</sup>

After the sound rejection of the SIL alphabet in favor of another hybrid model in 1984 and concurrent founding of the state-sponsored *Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (ALMG, Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala) the central government began to actively investigate their three-decade relation with SIL. Opting to siphon power away from the foreign institute and towards a national group, the Guatemalan state did not renew SIL's contract in the early 1990s. Individual members were allowed to stay, but the new terms forbade SIL from operating as an organization.<sup>32</sup> The alphabet war cost SIL dearly.

The alphabet wars in essence manifest a much broader regional problem which SIL could not evade: languages and politics, particularly in Latin America, intertwine extensively, and at some point any organization involved in the former will find itself caught in the often volatile caldera of the latter. The fact that SIL's linguistic practices are checkered with questionable actions and motives does not preclude a positive balance for the institute's overall contribution to the region.

## *Descriptive Contributions*

Descriptive linguistics is by far and away the greatest academic strength of SIL, and that for which they are most renowned. The current opinion of SIL's work in descriptive linguistics from members both inside and outside the organization is resoundingly positive. The central goal of Bible translation has shaped an organization particularly well adapted to descriptive linguistics and data collection. The narrow nature of this goal has allowed SIL to focus expertise heavily a single subdiscipline. SIL recruits understand that their field assignments will last years if not decades, and thus The International Linguistics Center in Texas is uniquely capable of producing careful, methodical, and accurate descriptive linguists. Religious goals also encourage OWLs to integrate as fully as possible into the local community. Linguist Harry Howard asserts, "They are the ultimate field workers."<sup>33</sup>

With thousands of researchers spread throughout the world, SIL outstrips all other organizations in terms of its capacity to collect linguistic data, and thus many linguists rely on SIL as a primary source. Hartch summarizes the general sentiment in his books' conclusion by stating, "The simple fact that their dictionaries and grammars are often the first and sometimes the *only* linguistic materials available in many Mesoamerican languages makes their contribution to the science of linguistics quite valuable."<sup>34</sup>

Beyond compiling high quality linguistic information SIL has also constructed systems to make that data accessible. Larger branches often maintain a library open to all researchers. To catalogue publications, many branches produce their own bibliographies. A centralized Bibliographic collection, composed of just seventy-three works by thirty-three authors, appeared just six years after the incorporation of SIL in 1948.<sup>35</sup> Six more

additions appeared up until 1992. Early additions listed only works by SIL members, but later expanded to include works published by SIL but authored by non-members (many of them native speakers).<sup>36</sup> In recent years SIL has set the public accessibility of data as a high priority, a task made easier by advancing technology.

The name “Ethnologue” applies to an SIL-sponsored catalogue of the world’s languages began in the 1950s.<sup>37</sup> The institute has dedicated resources to steadily expand and refine the collection which presently stands as one of the principal cornerstones of linguistic research worldwide. Mostly due to the enormity of the task in terms of both man hours and funding, Ethnologue stands alone as the only continually updated quasi-comprehensive language database. After publishing an addendum to the print Bibliography in 1997 the organization initiated a project to make the whole collection available online.<sup>6</sup> The impressive internet database now includes the references for the vast majority of SIL works as well as worldwide language statistics. All of the world’s languages have a listing, three-digit code, estimated number of speakers and estimated geographic location. “Ethnologue has the same or better information than many indigenous institutes. Sometimes [those institutes] even use data from Ethnologue for their statistics.”<sup>38</sup>

As the “de-facto default,” Ethnologue is not without significant fallacies. Even an organization of SIL’s size cannot simultaneously survey and monitor 6,000+ language communities. Only a fraction of the statistics on Ethnologue come directly from an SIL source, with the rest emanating from a hodgepodge of the best information available. Many languages do not receive much attention, and thus even the best information can be

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<sup>6</sup> Print version: “Bibliography of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.” Dallas: 1992  
Online Resource: [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)

decades old and highly inaccurate. In terms of distribution, “some areas are hyper-differentiated while others are under-differentiated.”<sup>39</sup> Like the Bibliographies, the publications listed on Ethnologue include works published through SIL but authored by non-members. “As with any reference source, it is important to know what it’s based upon.”<sup>40</sup>

Through both data collection and compilation, SIL has unquestionably shaped the field of descriptive linguistics, perhaps even more than any other single actor. “No one else even comes close.”<sup>41</sup> The narrow, concrete goals and large size of the program endow upon the organization unique abilities and opportunities. Ethnologue, in many senses, represents the long-in-coming, “admittedly imperfect,”<sup>42</sup> and yet essential culmination of SIL’s linguistic labor, and while others in the field guard their praise, no one can impugn its critical importance to the field.

### *Other Contributions*

Two final contributions stand out as particularly noteworthy. The first is the “highly appreciated”<sup>43</sup> availability of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) fonts. These fonts, available free of charge,<sup>7</sup> greatly ease the process of phonetic transcription on computers, a useful tool for many linguists in various subdisciplines. Secondly, a group from the Indonesia branch developed a basic MS DOS computer program with the aim of “taking the drudge work out of linguistic analysis.”<sup>44</sup> The program became known as Shoebox, named for the typical storage method for the infinitum of note cards of transcribed data gathered by the average field linguist. The various functions of the

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<sup>7</sup> [www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org), tab: “What we provide” choice: “Fonts and writing systems”

program parse and sort data into useful categories and patterns. The updated version is known as Toolbox.<sup>45</sup> SIL members also express excitement over new software in development and currently nearing completion called Fieldworks Lexical EXplorer (FLEX) which should offer significant improvements and new capacities.<sup>46</sup> Although not the only source of IPA fonts or linguistic analysis software, SIL is one of the most common providers and one of only a handful who offer even basic resources without charge.

### *SIL and Endangered Languages*

In 1991 a series of papers published in the widely regarded linguistic journal ‘Language’ sparked what would become the Endangered Languages Movement.<sup>47</sup> In light of the rapid disappearance of minority languages worldwide, this movement seeks to address the issue of language extinction. The motive behind these investigations is primarily to document minority languages before their disappearance, but secondarily to provide communities with the resources to preserve their languages should they desire to do so. Given its intense and longstanding involvement with minority languages, SIL could not avoid attention from linguists interested in this new vein of research.

Townsend may have intended to facilitate community transition into majority languages, but the results of SIL presence in language communities over the past seventy years show a wide variety of outcomes. “SIL is a mixed blessing in the world of endangered languages – an organization about which one should be careful not to over-generalize,” cautions linguist Dennis Holt.<sup>48</sup> Gregory Anderson, director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages which specializes in ‘salvage linguistics,’

(the practice of recording of dying languages) agrees with Holt. In several languages of the Bolivian Amazon, for instance, even extended SIL presence did not prevent their ultimate extinction. On the flipside, he says, little evidence exists to show that SIL induces language death. The most generalized patterns show up in areas of high language density and/or bilingualism where for whatever reason SIL establishes translation projects in one language but not another. As one might expect, when one language receives the significant resources needed to define an alphabet and establish a tradition of literacy its chances of survival grow greatly when compared with another in the same region that does not. For the most part, however, SIL and the endangered languages movement can only be compared on a case-by-case basis.

The SIL perspective on the issue harks back to the basic tenets of the organization which, despite working in similar fields with similar communities, do not overlap with those of the Endangered Languages Movement.<sup>49</sup> Bible translation is a labor and capital intensive operation in every case, and thus SIL only rarely assigns OWLs to languages that do not seem to have a healthy future. Anderson suspects that individual members lament language loss on the same level as secular linguists, as the death of a unique window into the patterns of human cognition, but their primary interest resides with the wellbeing (spiritual and otherwise) of communities rather than the language as an entity in and of itself.<sup>50</sup> Cahill claims that currently SIL is also sponsoring a nascent program in ‘salvage linguistics.’<sup>51</sup> This program, although still small compared to the organization as a whole, may denote a slow doctrinal shift. If there is anything that past experience can show, it is that SIL will very gradually respond to persistent trends.

## Conclusion

SIL is a fascinatingly complicated organization which grew from a single man's imagination into a vast and powerful corporation. In chronicling this organization and its contributions, I have tried to emphasize and illuminate the complexities which negate practically all assertions blanketing the entire organization. No single statement about SIL could capture the nuances of reality, especially with this group whose reach extends into so many realms in so many places, and has done so over such a long period. Of utmost importance, however, is comprehending the depth of emotion which surrounds SIL on all sides, and the high stakes which surround any opinion given about them. Likely some party will take issue with my claims and statements as well. While writing, I concentrated on maintaining a scholarly approach which neither praised nor condemned to excess. The result is hopefully a work which represents SIL faithfully, as an organization which has achieved remarkable success, and like any other, made significant errors in the process.

This project, while comprehensive in many aspects, has ample openings for continued investigation. SIL operations worldwide, specifically in Africa or Southeast Asia surely contain unique histories, ideologies, and interplays with the local context which deserve elucidation. Within linguistics, the development of SIL's most popularly employed resources including Ethnologue, Toolbox (and other computer programs), and the IPA fonts merits a more profound analysis. On the quantitative side, I could not obtain several important sets of numbers: the number of personnel listed by branch and year, the number of religious publications by year, and the financial support given by

different actors to each branch by year. All of these datasets would have enriched the analysis and revealed further enlightening trends.

*For the Future:*

10 years ago SIL formalized basic goal statements:

SIL International is a faith-based organization that studies, documents, and assists in developing the world's lesser-known languages. SIL's staff shares a Christian commitment to service, academic excellence, and professional engagement through literacy, linguistics, translation, and other academic disciplines. SIL makes its services available to all without regard to religious belief, political ideology, gender, race, or ethnic background.<sup>1</sup>

The statement reiterates a strong commitment to sharing as well as collecting information, a practice which requires publication. SIL publications worldwide began to decline in 1993. Cahill explained that an internal study proposed that the reasons lie not within the organization, but in the general field of linguistics. Articles which appear in the best-known linguistic journals like the International Journal of American Linguistics (IJAL) have shifted to become more polished, advanced, focused, and theoretical. Intimidated, some OWLs now perceive their descriptive work as inadequate for publication.<sup>2</sup> This study and the explicit commitment to academic pursuits has driven continued efforts to raise the academic credentials of all members, including OWLs.

SIL continually moves towards mainstream academic practices. Policy increasingly encourages the role of linguists as consultants, who find and train community members to do linguistic work rather than producing the materials themselves. This role implies that OWLs make shorter, less invasive visits into communities, and generally work with more than one language during their time with SIL.<sup>3</sup> The organization is also shifting towards doing more language survey work, the

gathering of statistics about the condition of languages (number of speakers, dialects, rate of contraction/expansion, etc.), than ever before.<sup>4</sup> The mainstreaming of practices and more sensitive response to the wants and needs of the academic community forecasts a possible role for SIL in the future, as a survey and data collection organ, even after the completion of the translation project.

For the time being SIL continues to find fertile grounds for translation, but the rapid depletion of languages worldwide and continuous growth in personnel portends decreasing returns and the eventual completion of the grand project. The accomplishment of Townsend's original vision begs the most crucial question: what will SIL do after its goal has been reached and, if there is a future beyond this goal, on what basis will they solicit funds and volunteers? Finding alternative activities or purposes in minority language communities does not pose a large challenge, particularly considering the poverty in which so many minority language speakers live. Perhaps the slow swing towards an emphasis on literacy, education, and linguistic survey work results from cognizance of the limited future of translation on the part of SIL management, and signifies the path the organization will most likely follow. Whatever policy SIL eventually settles upon will surely cause ripples which extend far beyond the evangelical community, and into the many spheres of SIL influence.

# Notes

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## Introduction

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- <sup>3</sup> Carmelo Ruiz, "Review of 'Thy Will Be Done' *The Conquest of the Amazon*," Cephas Library [http://www.cephas-library.com/church\\_n\\_state\\_rockefeller\\_and\\_evangelism.html](http://www.cephas-library.com/church_n_state_rockefeller_and_evangelism.html)
- <sup>4</sup> T. Hartch, phone interview by author, December 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Marcel D'Ans in Søren Hvalkof and Peter Aaby, *Is God an American?: An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics* (Copenhagen: International Work Group For Indigenous Affairs, 1982), p. 146-148.
- <sup>6</sup> K. Langan, phone interview by author, November 2008.

## Chapter 1

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- <sup>2</sup> David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), p. 58.
- <sup>3</sup> David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin, 50.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin, 50.
- <sup>6</sup> Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon : Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 42-43.
- <sup>7</sup> Eunice Victoria Pike in *A William Cameron Townsend en el Vigésimoquinto Aniversario Del Instituto Lingüístico de Verano* (Mexico, D.F.: La Tipografía Indígena Cuernavaca, 1961), p. 3-4.
- <sup>8</sup> Colby and Dennet, 42.
- <sup>9</sup> David Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? : The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 1983), p. 38.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, 30-35.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, 31-32.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 36.
- <sup>13</sup> Colby and Dennet, 43.
- <sup>14</sup> E. F. K. Koerner and R. E. Asher, *A Concise History of the Language Sciences* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1995), p. 297.
- <sup>15</sup> Pieter A. M. Sueren, *Western Linguistics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 193.
- <sup>16</sup> Colby and Dennet, 44.
- <sup>17</sup> Stoll, "Fishers or Founders," 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Colby and Dennet, 49
- <sup>19</sup> William T. Vickers in Søren Hvalkof and Peter Aaby, *Is God an American?: An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics* (Copenhagen: International Work Group For Indigenous Affairs, 1982), p. 51-55.
- <sup>20</sup> Colby and Dennet, 46-48
- <sup>21</sup> Jan Rus and Robert Wasserstrom in Hvalkof and Aaby, 164.
- <sup>22</sup> Hartch, 1-3.
- <sup>23</sup> Stoll, "Fishers or Founders," 62-65.
- <sup>24</sup> Hartch, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 7.

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- <sup>26</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 68
- <sup>27</sup> Hartch, 9.
- <sup>28</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 69.
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- <sup>32</sup> Sueren, 211.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 211.
- <sup>34</sup> George L. Cross in “*A William Cameron Townsend en el Vigésimoquinto Aniversario Del Instituto Lingüístico de Verano*,” 13.
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- <sup>36</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 103
- <sup>37</sup> Colby and Dennett, 198.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 198.
- <sup>39</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 102-109.
- <sup>40</sup> Colby and Dennet, 199.
- <sup>41</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” 104
- <sup>42</sup> Colby and Dennet, 202.
- <sup>43</sup> Luis A. Pereira F. in Hvalkof and Aaby, 115.
- <sup>44</sup> The data for this paragraph was drawn from two sources: Stoll, “*Fishers and Founders*,” Table I beginning p. 319, and Palomino, p. 9.
- <sup>45</sup> SIL International, “SIL International 2008 Update.” <http://sil.org/sil/annualreport/index.html>. (accessed 4/13/09).

## Chapter 2

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- <sup>3</sup> See: Goffin, 58-63, and Stoll “*Fishers and Founders*,” Chapter 9.
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- <sup>6</sup> Hartch, 134-135.
- <sup>7</sup> Maria C. D. M. Barros, “A missão Summer Institute of Linguistics e o indigenismo latino-americano: história de uma aliança (décadas 1930-1970),” *Revista Antropológica* 47, no. 1 (2004): 78.
- <sup>8</sup> Hartch, 143.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 143-147
- <sup>10</sup> Stoll, “*Fishers or Founders*,” Chapter 6, and Hart, 25-29.
- <sup>11</sup> Hart, 29.
- <sup>12</sup> Stoll “*Fishers or Founders*,” 204-210.
- <sup>13</sup> Alisedo, et. al., *El Instituto Lingüístico de Verano* (Mexico, D.F.: Revista Proceso, 1981), p. 66.
- <sup>14</sup> Stoll “*Fishers or Founders*,” 93.
- <sup>15</sup> Goffin, 74.
- <sup>16</sup> Stoll “*Fishers or Founders*,” 242.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 219-222.
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<sup>23</sup> Hvalkof and Aaby, 56, 70, 82, 92.  
<sup>24</sup> Bernard Arcand in Hvalkof and Aaby, 81.  
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<sup>27</sup> Stoll, “*SIL and Indigenous Movements*,” 85.  
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<sup>30</sup> Hartch, 161-162.  
<sup>31</sup> Goffin, 74-75.  
<sup>32</sup> J. Maxwell, personal interview by author, October, 2008.  
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<sup>34</sup> J. Buxton and N. Phillips, eds., *Developments in Latin America Political Economy*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 137-139.  
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### Chapter 3

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<sup>3</sup> Jones in Koerner and Asher, 314-315.  
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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 317  
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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 319  
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<sup>9</sup> M. Cahill, phone interview by author, December 2008.  
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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>13</sup> T. Hartch, phone interview by author, December 2008.  
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<sup>15</sup> D. Stoll, phone interview by author, November 2008.  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>17</sup> Maxwell, interview  
<sup>18</sup> T. Hartch, phone interview by author, December 2008.  
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<sup>20</sup> C. Abreo, personal interview by author, October 2008.  
<sup>21</sup> Ajpub' García Ixmatá, personal interview by author, November 2008.  
<sup>22</sup> William A. Smalley, *Translation as a Mission: The Modern Mission Era, 1792-1992* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1991), p. 77-78.

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- <sup>35</sup> Alan C. Wares in Brend, 25.
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- <sup>39</sup> G. Anderson, phone interview by author, December 2008.
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## Conclusion

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