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2010 Election Results

In the elections conducted last fall, Marianne Hirsch (comparative literature, Columbia Univ.) was elected second vice president of the association. Hirsch will serve in that office from 10 January 2011 through the close of the January 2012 convention and will automatically become first vice president in 2012, serving in that office through the close of the January 2013 convention. Her term as president will begin after the close of the January 2013 convention and will continue through the close of the January 2014 convention.

Barbara K. Altmann (Univ. of Oregon), Debra Ann Castillo (Cornell Univ.), and María Herrera-Sobek (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) were elected members of the Executive Council for four-year terms (10 January 2011 through the close of the January 2015 convention). Altmann represents the field of French, and Castillo and Herrera-Sobek represent the field of Spanish. In terms of membership categories, all are regular members of the association.

Fifty-six new representatives were elected to the Delegate Assembly. Eighteen delegates were elected to represent special-interest categories in the assembly, and thirty-eight delegates were elected to represent seven geographical regions in the United States and Canada. A listing of all members of the Delegate Assembly can be found at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/del_assembly_members).

In addition, new members were elected to the division and discussion group executive committees. The listings of executive committee members at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/danddg for the divisions and www.mla.org/dgroupexcomm for the discussion groups) have been updated to include new committee members' names.



Los Angeles Convention Center



MLA Vice President Russell A. Berman presents the William Sanders Scarborough Prize to Monica L. Miller.

Winners of MLA Prizes Announced

The winners of twelve annual and five biennial awards given by the MLA were recognized at the January 2011 MLA convention in Los Angeles. Russell A. Berman, then first vice president of the association, announced and presented the prizes at a ceremony preceding the Presidential Address on 7 January. A complete list of this year's prizewinners appears on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/awards_winners).

The MLA's prizes are awarded under the auspices of the Committee on Honors and Awards, which appoints the members of the selection committee and determines procedures, deadlines, and criteria for eligibility for all prizes. Deadlines for upcoming prizes are located at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/awards_competitions). To submit books or to obtain detailed information about any of the prizes, call or write the coordinator of book prizes at the MLA office (646 576-5141; awards@mla.org).



Through Languages to Literacy

These are difficult times for our profession. Our annual convention put a spotlight on the topic *The Academy in Hard Times* and the deteriorating conditions for both instructors and students in higher education: the erosion of tenure; the growing number of faculty members without job security or full-time employment; challenges to faculty governance; and program closures, which both restrict student opportunities and eliminate faculty positions. The MLA draws attention to these developments and, especially through our leadership in the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, promotes strategies to resist them. This activism is at the core of our mission; indeed, our constitution specifies the purpose of the MLA as “further[ing] the common interests

of teachers” of the modern languages and literatures. Our common interests surely include preserving tenure, ensuring job security, maintaining conditions conducive for teaching and learning, and upholding faculty governance of degree programs.

The battles over these issues are currently framed by budgetary concerns, and not only in North America; the austerity measures in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe have produced restricted access to higher education (in the form of tuition hikes) as well as reductions in humanities offerings. To resist the degradation of working conditions in higher education, we have to insist on the connection to learning conditions for students. Fortunately, recent reports provide some hard data that can help us make our case to the public.

In December 2010, the MLA released its triennial report on enrollments in languages other than English in US colleges and universities (www.mla.org/2009_enrollmentsurvey). Between 2006 and 2009, enrollments in language courses increased by 6.6% (Furman, Goldberg, and Lusin). Students are evidently clamoring for more opportunities for second language acquisition. Enrollments in each of the ten most studied languages have increased, in some cases dramatically (Arabic is up 46.3%) and in some cases moderately (German is up 2.2%). Yet the report also shows a drop-off in graduate enrollments, a warning that there may not be sufficient numbers of language teachers in the future. I urge all MLA members to study the report to understand the state of second-language learning. Equipping ourselves with facts is all the more important because budget-cutting administrators are prone to claim that interest in languages is declining. The MLA report proves the contrary. Individual programs can see their enrollments over time in the “Language Enrollment Database, 1958–2009” (www.mla.org/flsurvey_search), and if a particular program sees declining enrollments, it would be necessary to examine local circumstances and the nature of the curriculum. The

recommendations of the MLA report *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* can provide guidance for program redesign. Students clearly want to learn languages; we have to make sure that our programs are successful.

Hold on to that snapshot of second-language enrollments in college and consider now another report that tells us about reading skills in high school. In December 2010, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*, the 2009 results for the Program for International Student Assessment. PISA measures the achievements of fifteen-year-old students in literacy, mathematics, and science; the study paid particular attention to reading. For US educators, the results are far from heartening. The United States ranks only fourteenth in reading (26). High school readers perform significantly better in top-ranking Shanghai-China, South Korea, and Finland and in near-the-top Hong Kong, Singapore, and Canada. (The report devotes particular attention to Canada and to educational reform in Ontario [65–81].) Understanding poor performance in secondary education is crucial, since the insufficiently prepared high school student turns into the poor reader in our college classrooms. The report touches on many factors that contribute to high school education. One concerns me in particular: what kind of second-language preparation do students receive before college?

It is in this question of language that the two above topics—second-language learning and (first-language) reading skills—converge. According to the National Foreign Language Center report *Resource Guide to Developing Linguistic and Cultural Competency in the United States*, studying a foreign language can improve one’s native language skills and contribute to better performance in other academic subjects (Wang, Jackson, Mana, Liau, and Evans 7). Yet foreign language opportunities are rare in US elementary schools, where early learning could have an important impact. To put this in an international context: language study begins in the Netherlands at age five, in Singapore at age six, and in Finland at age seven. In the United States the starting age is typically fourteen (8). Most industrialized countries require early study of one foreign language (and several require early study of more than one); in the United States, in 2008–09, only eleven states and the District of

On the MLA Web Site

[Language Enrollment Survey](#)

[News from the MLA](#)

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Columbia had any second-language study as a high school requirement (Ingold and Wang 3).

One predictable result is that some 80% of Americans describe themselves as monolingual, but more than 50% of Europeans older than fifteen can carry on a conversation in a second language. Here, however, something else needs pointing out. Second-language learning enhances first-language abilities. Yet US students have far fewer and less-articulated opportunities to learn another language than do their peers in other industrialized countries. It comes as no surprise then that their English skills suffer: this helps explain the disappointing PISA results. Our deficiencies in second-language learning are turning into a first-language literacy problem. This shows up in the reading problems of students entering college.

This literacy challenge brings me back to my opening topic, the hard times we face in the academy. To make the argument to the public for faculty teaching conditions, we need to emphasize the importance of student learning, particularly in the language fields. Whether our specialty involves interpreting complex literary works or enhancing student ability to speak in the idiom of another culture, we are all language teachers. The success of the struggle to defend our professional status, our prerogatives within institutions, and the place of the humanities in higher edu-

cation depends on our ability to demonstrate to the public the foundational importance of all language learning.

Russell A. Berman

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Members are invited to comment on the president's column at www.mla.org/fromthepres.

Delegate Assembly News

At its meeting on 8 January 2011 in Los Angeles the Delegate Assembly took the following actions.

The assembly conducted elections for the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee, the Nominating Committee, and the Elections Committee. The names of those elected can be found in the relevant committee listing at www.mla.org/comm_gov.

The assembly approved an amendment to rule 1 in the appendix to the Delegate Assembly Bylaws. In addition to requiring that those who speak during the assembly meeting identify themselves by stating their name and institution, the rule now encourages speakers also to indicate the constituency they represent.

In addition to annual reports from the association's standing committees, the assembly received three reports that did not require action: the report of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC), the executive director's report, and the Finance Committee's report. Delegates had the opportunity to comment on or ask questions about the reports. The assembly also received a report from the Committee on Amendments to the Constitution that presented a constitutional amendment for the assembly's approval. The assembly approved the amendment, the purpose of which is to raise the threshold for membership ratification votes on resolutions. Following the provisions of article 13.D of the MLA constitution, the Executive Council, in February, will conduct a review of the fiduciary issues posed by the amendment. If the amendment poses no fiduciary problems, the council will forward it to the

membership for ratification. The membership ratification vote will be conducted later this year.

In other business, the assembly approved one resolution that was submitted by an MLA member. The resolution will be forwarded to the Executive Council in February. Following the provisions of article 7.B.3 of the MLA constitution, the council will conduct a review of the constitutional, legal, and fiduciary issues posed by the language of the resolution. If the resolution does not pose any constitutional, legal, or fiduciary problems, the council will forward it to the membership for ratification later this year.

A complete report of the Delegate Assembly meeting will appear in the May 2011 issue of *PMLA*.

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Calls for Papers for the 2012 Convention in Seattle

The 2012 convention will be held in Seattle from 5 to 8 January. Calls for papers may be submitted until 1 March 2011 at www.mla.org/cfp_main; calls will not be edited before they appear on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/conv_papers). Members should familiarize themselves with the guidelines for the MLA convention, which appear on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/conv_procedures), before writing to the organizers listed in the calls for papers. If not provided, organizers' addresses are available in the members' directory on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/member_search). All participants in convention sessions must be MLA members by 7 April 2011. A member may participate as speaker, presider, or respondent only twice (e.g., by organizing and chairing a meeting, reading a paper, or serving as a speaker, presider, or respondent) at a convention.

Organizers are responsible for acknowledging all submissions and responding to all inquiries.

All requests for audiovisual equipment must be made by the chair of the session on the appropriate program copy forms and must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. on 1 April 2011. Because the need for audiovisual equipment is a major factor in the scheduling of meetings (and because the movement of equipment is both costly and hazardous), the deadline is firm. Participants must indicate their audiovisual needs when they respond to a call for papers and should check with the chair of the session or with the MLA convention office to be sure that the necessary equipment has been ordered by 1 April 2011.

Members without Internet access who need a printout of the calls for papers should write or call the MLA office to have a copy mailed to them (membership@mla.org; 646 576-5151).



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TIM THOMPSON

Department Chairs' Hotel Reservations

In August 2011 the MLA convention office will e-mail chairs of departments that are paid members of ADE or ADFL by 1 June 2011 early information about making hotel room reservations for the MLA convention. These chairs will also be able to make hotel reservations online through the ADE or ADFL Web site. ADE and ADFL chairs of departments that are participating in the e-mail discussion lists will be notified. This early notification does not guarantee that department chairs will be able to reserve a suite for interviewing job candidates at the convention, but it does give them the best opportunity to do so. Please note that suites may not be reserved through the MLA Web site. Chairs who would like membership forms or information about their departments' 2010–11 membership status should contact Roy Chustek at the MLA office (646 576-5133; rchustek@mla.org).

Call for Contributions to Approaches Series

The Publications Committee has approved the development of a new title in the Approaches to Teaching World Literature series: *Approaches to Teaching Baudelaire's Le Spleen de Paris*, edited by Cheryl Krueger. If you wish to contribute to this volume, please visit www.mla.org/approaches and follow the link to the survey.



Sharon Lynette Jones records a video for the Narrating Lives Project during the 2011 MLA Annual Convention.



Return of the Pensative Daughter: Survival English

What happens when we lose a language? I don't mean in the sense of forgetting a heritage language or never learning it well. My mother lost her mother tongue that way: a child in arms when she passed through Ellis Island in the 1920s, she spoke Sicilian when she was little, then learned English like a native, gradually ceding her grasp of the language that bound her to her parents. Even in her last years, despite dementia, she could remember some phrases in Sicilian, most of them related to her mother's cooking or to her father's colorful blasphemies. My route was overland: I lost partial command of my native language when I acquired Spanish at age sixteen during a year in Guatemala. So complete was my transformation from *gringa* to *chapina* that,

on returning to the United States, I found I could no longer speak English—or English only.

Reverse culture shock is a well-documented phenomenon that happens to those who, having made the long and difficult adaptation to a new culture and language, subsequently find themselves going through the unexpected repetition of that adjustment process when they return to their place of origin. The academic community has paid attention to the experience with the goal of helping students readjust to campus life (see Gaw). One of the most difficult aspects of my return had to do with first-language attrition (or inhibition): “After immersion in a foreign language, speakers often have difficulty retrieving native-language words” (Levy, McVeigh, Marful, and Anderson 29). Further, reducing the cognitive accessibility of the native language serves second language acquisition well by blocking interference. So there I was, all blocked, reduced, and inhibited. I remember saying to my mother that I was in a pensative mood. “Pensive,” she corrected me. I would say I didn't feel like doing something by noting, “I don't have *ganas*.” My colleagues at the MLA are used to my speaking this way even today. My cognitive process has me reaching for whatever pops into my head first when I'm trying to express myself, and if it's the wrong language, I do a quick mental translation. There are times when I cannot make the switch from the Spanish I retrieved to the English I might need. I think, dream, and live bilingually, and I'm grateful for it and for the career it has facilitated.

And yet my bilingualism kept me from fitting in when I returned from Guatemala. With the exception of the French Canadian student in my French class and the Mexican American in my Spanish class, there were not many peers who understood my in-betweenness. The high school Spanish curriculum wasn't designed for advanced learners. My Spanish language ability was most certainly at the superior level, but I had to wait until I got to college to be exposed to course work beyond the introductory phase.

So how well are we meeting the needs of students who arrive on campus knowing second languages, possessing heritage abilities, or returning from study abroad? As some universities reduce or eliminate their advanced offerings in the most commonly taught languages after Spanish, such as French, German, Italian, or Russian, I am left to wonder what “pensative” students who return from a semester in Italy (the second most popular destination after England) or France (the fourth most popular) should do on those campuses. How

will they ward off second-language attrition, which linguists tell us begins to happen within weeks after stopping language immersion or study? How will they attain the advanced learning that will make them translanguagual experts, lifetime practitioners of language, and teachers of future generations? Every time a college or university closes off an opportunity for advanced learning, another link in the language pipeline is broken. Students who learn one language well have been shown to possess the aptitude to learn other languages, even those classified as difficult for native English speakers, such as Arabic or Chinese. I can't imagine what my reimmersion into American education and society would have been like had I not known that advanced language, literary, historical, and cultural study lay on my horizon.

In the years following my return from Guatemala I could pass as a native of that country. (So much for the theory that total second language acquisition is nearly impossible after adolescence.) Eventually, however, after a semester abroad in Spain and visits to that country just about every year since, I changed my accent, vocabulary, and cultural framework to be aligned with Guatemala's *Madre Patria*, and now I am often taken for an *española*. I have not been in Guatemala since the early 1970s, but I was swiftly transported back in my imagination last year when I read Guatemalan American Francisco Goldman's novel *The Long Night of White Chickens* (written in English). The use of *vos* (in Spain one would use *tú*) and the repetition of the interjection *pues*, which Goldman felt compelled to use despite writing in English, sounded so familiar to me. Pues, sí. Because of my translanguagual and transcultural competencies, developed over a lifetime, and my literary education—also representing decades of study and pleasure—I feel most useful when I work, on behalf of MLA members, to promote language study at all educational levels.

The most recent MLA language study shows clearly that in US institutions of higher education, interest in languages as measured in absolute course enrollment numbers continues to grow: we saw an increase of 6.6% in the period from 2006 to 2009 (Furman, Goldberg, and Lusin). Spanish, French, and German continue to be the most commonly studied languages, but there was around a 20% increase in enrollments in less commonly taught languages, and between 1998 and 2009 enrollments in Arabic have increased by 537.3%. In some quarters, these findings are being manipulated to undergird a shopworn criticism that Americans are learning the *wrong* languages, as if studying the ones deemed key to national security needs of the moment could solve the country's overall

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language deficiencies (see Haass; Berman's response to Haass; and McWhorter, with Berman's reply). When it comes to learning, there are no wrong languages (not even my survival English, replete with code-switching and syntactical and lexical interference). Acquiring languages and analyzing their linguistic structure and literary and cultural traditions are pursuits that not only enrich our lives as individuals but also make us more capable members of society. To lose sight of this truth would be the greatest act of language attrition imaginable.

Rosemary G. Feal

Note

This is the third in a series of columns on "survival" language. The earlier two columns—"Survival Spanish" (Summer 2007) and "'Tan Cerca de Dios': Survival Poqomchi" (Spring 2008)—can be found in the *MLA Newsletter* archive (www.mla.org/nl_archive).

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Comment on this column at www.mla.org/fromtheeditor.



2011 MLA Convention