

A brief history of the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics

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In 1919—just after World War I—the brilliant Jesuit internationalist Rev. Edmund A. Walsh, S.J., went to Europe and became convinced of the need for a school to train students for America’s foreign service, hoping that if people could sit around a table and resolve their differences diplomatically, wars could be avoided. To that end, he founded the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Thirty years later, in 1949, Father Walsh went back to Europe after World War II and came to the conclusion that if people were going to discuss their problems diplomatically, they should know each other’s languages. He therefore founded the Institute of Languages and Linguistics as part of the School of Foreign Service. This Institute later became the School of Languages and Linguistics.

The man to whom Father Walsh turned to implement his plan for a language-competent American society was Professor Leon Dostert. Professor Dostert was born in France in 1904 and was brought to the United States after World War I by American soldiers for whom he had served as an interpreter. During World War II he was commissioned in the U.S. Army as a major and assigned as liaison officer for General Giraud, an interpreter in French for General Eisenhower. Professor Dostert was promoted to the rank of colonel in 1945; after the war, he became chief of the language division of the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal. There he introduced the idea of simultaneous interpretation and translation. He then served as director of simultaneous interpretation at the United Nations and played a significant part in the organization and training of interpreters. After that he returned to Georgetown at Father Walsh’s request. In addition to establishing the Institute of Languages and Linguistics—including a state-of-the-art “multilingual room” and language laboratory—in 1949, Dr. Dostert began the annual Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics (GURT), and the series of monographs that reported the proceedings of the Round Table each year.

Legend has it that the first Round Table meeting was so small that all the participants could sit comfortably at the same round table. At those early meetings the themes focused on linguistics as applied to language teaching, testing, humanistic study, and allied subjects. During the years when the institute became the School of Languages and Linguistics (SLL), with Dr. Robert Lado as its first dean

from 1960 to 1973, the themes were chosen to examine the major linguistics topics of the time—such as contrastive linguistics, generative grammar, transformation theory, tagmemic description, semantics, and syntax.

In 1973 I succeeded Dr. Lado as dean of the School of Languages and Linguistics. Having previously worked in the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Office of Education in language research and materials development for the less commonly taught languages, I tried to foster a close relationship between GURT and the federal linguists. A pre-GURT session was added to the program, featuring the government-based Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and examining language use in the public sphere as well as the classroom. The Round Table meetings were timed to include a weekend, to open the program to language teachers in the area. This cross-fertilization between classroom and academia led to fruitful explorations of topics such as bilingual education, standard English, and the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

One of the major developments in linguistics in the 1960s was the emergence of sociolinguistics. The Georgetown University Round Table became a forum for this subfield of linguistics when it was still in its infancy. In 1969 the School of Languages and Linguistics won a \$460,000 Departmental Science Development Grant from the National Science Foundation, with which it set up a sociolinguistics program within the linguistics department. Among the new faculty members were Roger Shuy, the director of the program, and Ralph Fasold, both of whom had collaborated earlier in researching African-American English in Detroit and Washington, D.C. The increasing theoretical importance and social relevance of sociolinguistics was reflected in several key GURTs. First was the historic 1972 GURT organized by Roger Shuy around the theme “Sociolinguistics: Current Trends and Prospects.” Next was the 1981 GURT organized by Deborah Tannen with the theme “Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk,” followed by the 1984 GURT organized by Deborah Schiffrin titled “Meaning, Form, and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications.”

GURT 2000, which I co-chaired with Heidi Hamilton, was titled “Linguistics, Language, and the Professions: Education, Journalism, Law, Medicine, and Technology.” It combined the sociolinguistic and applied themes that have characterized the focus of GURT and the focus of the Georgetown University linguistics department, under whose auspices succeeding GURTs will reside. The meeting that gave rise to the current volume, GURT 2001, was co-chaired with Deborah Tannen.

Since its beginnings as a response to wartime experiences of language needs, the Georgetown University Round Table has been a forum for presenting cutting-edge scholarly work and for examining changing national needs in languages and linguistics. It began with the idealistic hope that research in linguistics would lead to practical, peaceful solutions to human conflict. May this fine tradition continue forever.