MORRIS SWADESH

Morris Swadesh, who was born 22 January 1909, succumbed to a heart attack on 20 July 1967 in Mexico City. At the time of his death he was Professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

Swadesh received his early training in linguistics at the University of Chicago under Bloomfield and Sapir. In 1931 he went to Yale University to continue his graduate work with Sapir, who had been called there to head the new Department of Anthropology. Throughout Swadesh's life, Sapir was to remain a potent influence. Yet, at the same time, the many-sided interests and the vigorous originality of Swadesh's thinking made him a unique figure in linguistics. Because of his bold and venturesome mind, he became at times a controversial figure.

From the beginning, he displayed a two-pronged interest in empirical research and in studies of broad theoretical problems. Even before receiving his doctorate, at the age of twenty-four, he had worked with several American Indian languages (Nez Perce, Nitinat, Chitimacha) and had collaborated with Sapir on a monograph, *The expression of the ending-point relation* (1932); in the next few years he produced several articles which contributed to the early formulation of the phoneme concept.

Teaching positions were hard to come by during the depression of the 1930's, particularly for linguists. After some short-term and part-time teaching at CCNY (summer, 1935) and at Yale (1936–37), he received an appointment as Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin (1937–39). This was followed by work in Mexico, where he was principally engaged in the Tarascan Project, a pioneer venture in applied linguistics. As part of the project, he prepared material for the teaching of Tarascan in the schools of Michoacán; he taught courses to native Tarascans and to prospective teachers in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán; and he was instrumental in launching a Tarascan newspaper. These years in Mexico (1939–41) were filled with many tasks. In Mexico City he taught at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and at the Escuela de Antropología e Historia. He fulfilled the duties of several offices—director of the Consejo de Lenguas Indígenas, director of linguistics in the Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas, and president of the Linguistic Section of the 29th International Congress of Americanists (Mexico City, 1939).

The approach of war brought him back to the United States. After a period of officer training, he became a first lieutenant in the Signal Corps. During his period of service (1942–46) he was enabled, fortunately, to direct most of his energies to linguistics, aimed at the preparation of material for the armed forces. He wrote pamphlets for the Office of Strategic Services, edited dictionaries, and worked in the New York City office of the Linguistic Section of the War Department, known as '165 Broadway.' The linguistic work that he carried on during the war reinforced his Mexican experience; it intensified his desire to

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make linguistics useful and to interpret it to the man in the street. This was a theme, though a subordinate one, that continued throughout his life. It was evidenced in his publications, beginning with his booklet for Mexican teachers of Indian pupils (1940), continuing through the textbook, *La nueva filología* (1941), the OSS pamphlets (1944, 1945), the books with frankly catchy titles—*Talking Russian before you know it* (1945), *Chinese in your pocket* (1947)—and the encyclopedia and newspaper articles (1951, 1956, 1959), and ending with *Los mil elementos del mexicano clásico* (1966), a practical handbook for students wishing to learn to read Aztec texts.

Following the war and his discharge from military service, he took up new activities and explored new lines of inquiry. During his tenure as a Guggenheim Fellow (1946–48), he became editor of *Word* (1946–49); and he had a brief period of teaching at CCNY (1948–49), his last teaching position in the United States. In his research he turned increasingly to comparative studies. His previous work in Chitimacha now led to comparative treatments of Chitimacha with Atakapa (1946, 1947), and his experience with Mexican Indian languages resulted in an analysis of proto-Zapotec phonology (1948).

It was in the context of this new emphasis on comparative linguistics that his ideas on glottochronology were developed. A paper presented at a Viking Fund conference in 1948 was his first formulation of the glottochronological method, which was to become a major source of stimulation to American linguists for a decade or more. It opened new avenues of exploration and led to many spirited and sometimes bitter controversies. But Swadesh was not one to shrink from controversies. With characteristic gusto he maintained a continuous involvement in the discussions of glottochronology, answering criticisms, organizing the collection of basic vocabularies, applying the method to new groups of languages, and working out new methodological refinements. He was convinced that the method was useful, not only for measuring the time depths of languages known to be genetically related, but also for demonstrating more remote and previously unsuspected relationships. As time went on, he became increasingly intrigued with the possibility of finding broader linguistic relationships, continental and even global in scope, based upon fundamental resemblances in phonological and morphological systems as well as upon correspondences in lexical items.

The early 1950's were painful years for Swadesh. In his brief probationary appointment at CCNY (1948–49), he had embarrassed the administrative powers by vigorously championing student demonstrators. Being a man of powerful convictions, he was inclined to be as uncompromising in battle for a social or political idea as he was in advancing a linguistic theory. As a result of this episode and of other less publicized ones, he became labeled unambiguously as a 'leftist' during the noisiest period of the McCarthy Era, and university administrators were unwilling to take the risk of hiring him.

For a time he received research grants from the American Philosophical Society (1949–53). Meanwhile, some of his friends were trying to help him obtain a position, either in this country or in Latin America. At last, in 1956, he was again called to Mexico, this time to fill the post of professor at the Escuela

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Nacional de Antropología e Historia, in which he remained to the time of his death. This teaching position was accompanied by a number of other appointments. He had a continuing research post at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, which provided him with many facilities for study and publication. He acted as consultant at the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (1956) and in the Secretaría de Educación Pública (1956–57). With his untiring and restless energy, he carried on these duties at the same time that he conducted his own research and encouraged and collaborated with his students.

He did not allow his work in Mexico, however, to isolate him from the mainstream of linguistics. He continued to be active at linguistic meetings—those of the Linguistic Society of America, the Symposia on the Classification of North American Indian Languages, the International Congress of Americanists —where he was able to meet younger scholars as well as former colleagues and to learn of their current research and interests. In addition to the articles, monographs, and books which he wrote in Spanish and published in Mexico, he continued to write in English for publication in the United States. He maintained contact with other linguists and with students outside Mexico by seasonal teaching positions, usually during the summer, at the University of Washington, Columbia University, the University of Ghana, Syracuse University, and the University of Alberta.

After the storms and frustrations of his career in the United States, Mexico offered him a more congenial atmosphere and some measure of serenity for his work. To him Mexico was the 'país cordial y humano, que ha nutrido mis inquietudes intelectuales', as he expressed it in the dedication to his *El lenguaje y la vida humana* (1966). He became increasingly productive during the last decade of his life. It is tragic that he should have been cut off at a time when he had reached the crest of his powers and was enjoying the most rewarding satisfactions in his professional work and his personal associations.

Perhaps the words of Dell Hymes (*American Anthropologist* 66.957, 1964), in a review of *Tras la huella lingüística de la prehistoria* (1960), will stand as a balanced assessment of Swadesh's contributions to linguistics:

> His boldness prompts scoffing, and his oft-revised schemes are attached with uncertainties, but boldness and uncertainty cannot help but go hand in hand at such a stage (as they did for his master, Sapir, whose swashbuckling vision of relations of a half-century ago we have since learned to admire), especially when one man attempts so much of the common problem so largely alone. Swadesh has gone straight to the heart of the scientific general problem, and persisted there, and therein is his enduring relevance and strength.

STANLEY NEWMAN, *University of New Mexico*

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