EUGENE ALBERT NIDA

Eugene Albert Nida, 44th president of the Linguistic Society of America, died on August 25, 2011, at the age of ninety-six in Madrid, Spain. Nida was born in Oklahoma City on November 11, 1914, and his family moved to Long Beach, California, when he was five years old.

Nida became interested in working as a missionary Bible translator at an early age, and majored in Classics at the University of California, Los Angeles, in order to lay a foundation for understanding the Biblical source languages; he graduated summa cum laude in 1936. That same summer, he trained to become a missionary translator with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and shortly thereafter began work on Rarámuri (Tarahumara) in Mexico. His first publication, in an in-house SIL journal (Nida 1937), was a brief account of that language. Nida was forced to return to California in 1937 because of ill health, which changed his focus from doing Bible translation work in the field to training others to do so; he continued to teach for SIL every summer until 1953. He earned a master's degree in New Testament Greek from the University of Southern California in 1939, and his experience at SIL having convinced him of the value of linguistics for missionary translation work,[1] he completed the Ph.D. program in Linguistics at the University of Michigan in 1943, under the direction of Charles Carpenter Fries, Leonard Bloomfield, and Edgar Sturtevant. That same year he was ordained a minister in the Northern Baptist Convention, joined the staff of the American Bible Society (ABS) in New York, and married Althea Lucille Sprague. Althea and Eugene settled in Greenwich, Connecticut, and were together for fifty years until Althea's death in 1993. At ABS, Nida served as Associate Secretary for Versions until 1946 and then as Executive Secretary for Translations until he retired in 1984. He was a delegate to the conference that founded the United Bible Societies (UBS) in 1946, and in 1967 he helped forge an agreement between the UBS and the Vatican to undertake joint Bible translation projects worldwide. In 1970, the UBS appointed him as its Translations Research Coordinator, and throughout the 1970s he chaired the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project. Nida continued to be active in the field for two decades following his retirement. He published a memoir, *Fascinated by languages* (Nida 2003), and his last scholarly publication (Nida 2004) appeared in an Italian conference proceedings when he was ninety years old. He moved to Green Valley, Arizona, shortly after Althea's death, and then to Brussels, Belgium, where in 1997 he married the translator and interpreter Dr. María Elena Fernandez-Miranda, who survives him. Nida was honored with a festschrift (Black & Smalley 1974), a collection of his papers (Dil 1975), and a tribute to his career as a Bible translator (Stine 2004); he was also the recipient of several honorary doctorates, and in 2001 the ABS established the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship in his honor.

Bloomfield had a profound impact on Nida's thinking about language. His Ph.D. dissertation, *A synopsis of English syntax* (Nida 1943), was a systematic description of English syntax based on Bloomfield's theory of immediate constituents, but it received

[1] For Nida's opinion on the importance of linguistics for missionary work, see Nida & Wonderly 1963.

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relatively little attention until SIL published it many years later (Nida 1960). By contrast, his two-volume textbook *Morphology: The descriptive analysis of words* (Nida 1944), which was designed to teach beginning linguistics students how to do morphological analysis on the basis of Bloomfield's conception of the morpheme as '[a] linguistic form which bears no partial phonetic-semantic resemblance to any other form' (Bloomfield 1933:161), immediately received enthusiastic reviews by Trager (1944), and by Hockett (1944) in *Language*. Hockett compared Nida's textbook favorably with such standards as Bloomfield 1933 and Bloch & Trager 1942 for teaching would-be linguists HOW to go about discovering the structure of words, and concluded: 'Anyone who is going to carry on linguistic analysis for any purpose should be taught with this book' (Hockett 1944:255).

Nida's textbook dealt with all aspects of morpheme identification and classification. Because of Bloomfield's disparagement of mentalist semantics, most of Nida's contemporaries focused on phonology and syntax, the purely formal aspects of linguistic analysis, and ignored semantics. But Nida, while espousing Bloomfield's antimentalism, realized that translators could not be properly trained if they were not taught how to do semantics. Hockett indicated that he agreed with Nida about the place of semantics within linguistics by making a substantial effort in his review to show how Nida's treatment of the meaning of morphemes could be improved upon. He maintained that Nida had made 'two contradictory statements' about the subject, one to treat it as 'the logical sum of its meanings in specific contexts', and the other as 'the logical PRODUCT [Hockett's emphasis] of the meanings of all the larger expressions which contain it', that is, as 'that meaning which is common to all its occurrences' (Hockett 1944:254).[2] Hockett illustrated the difference with the Chinese morpheme *dǎ*, which using the logical sum method means 'strike; send out (as a telephone call or telegram); obtain by conventional means', whereas using the logical product method means 'empty active verb used in many conventional combinations, the meaning of the combination stemming mainly from the goal which is added'. Hockett argued for adopting the logical product method.

Nida revised his textbook for publication in a single volume by the University of Michigan Press two years later (Nida 1946), and Hockett again reviewed it in *Language*, not to discuss the revisions, but rather to question the WISDOM, as he put it in his previous review, of Nida's 'stick[ing] close to what we know' (Hockett 1947a:273). Hymes and Fought (1975:1039) summarized Hockett's new recommendations as first to adopt 'an explicit, unidirectional procedure', and second to avoid the use of process statements.

Nida undertook a further revision, which appeared three years later (Nida 1949), and which served as the introductory text for morphology and linguistic fieldwork for several generations of linguistics students. It was reprinted thirteen times, the last time in 1978. Genuine-language data were used in nearly all of the 137 problem sets in the main body of the book. Over fifty languages were exemplified; for forty-five of those languages, primarily indigenous languages spoken in Africa and the Americas, Nida drew on published sources, his own field notes, and examples supplied by about fifty

[2] Hockett may have gotten the idea of logical sums and products from Henry Leonard and Nelson Goodman's calculus of individuals (Leonard & Goodman 1938), which being a nominalist system of logic was a good fit for Bloomfieldian semantics. However, Nida's attempt to describe the meanings of morphemes was not part of a systematic logic, but simply an effort to codify current best practice in describing the meanings of both bound and free morphemes. In discussing Nida's treatment of the meaning of morphemes in later versions of his textbook, I continue to use the terms 'sum' and 'product', but omit 'logical'.

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fellow missionary linguists. His use of such a wide variety of linguistic material for pedagogical purposes was unprecedented, and has served as a model for linguistic pedagogy to this day. Nida also followed the advice in Hockett's second review to avoid description in terms of process by 'treat[ing] the morpheme together with its allomorphs as the fundamental feature', rather than by 'setting up morphological and phonological processes as basic to the descriptive methodology' (Nida 1949:v),[3] and by making the order of presentation more unidirectional. However, Nida retained both the sum and product methods of defining the meaning of a morpheme. First, his requirement that the various meanings of a morpheme in all of its occurrences have a 'common semantic distinctiveness' or 'meaningful contrastiveness', which he called its 'sememe', is a product method. Second, his extension of the analogy allomorph : morpheme :: allophone : phoneme (Hockett 1947b:322, Nida 1948:420, n. 13) to include alloseme : sememe is a sum method:[4] '[W]e may describe each morpheme as having a SEMEME …, and each sememe (the meaningful contrastiveness of any morpheme) would then be subdivided into ALLOSEMES. … Just as we describe the various allomorphs of the plural suffix in terms of their distribution, so we may describe the various allosemes of *out* in terms of their distribution' (1949:155). Nida then listed four allosemes of *out* as 'exterior to a delimitation', 'result of a process', 'surpassing degree', and 'selectivity', each occurring in a different environment, exactly like Hockett's sum method of listing the various meanings of *dă*.[5]

The book received a very critical review from Trager (1951), however. After mentioning that he had reviewed the first version of Nida's textbook 'at length and enthusiastically', he reported that using the second version in a graduate course had 'tempered [his] enthusiasm as [he] discovered many theoretical lacunae and faults'. While approving of Nida's inclusion in the third version of 'problems based on real languages' (Trager 1951:126), he still found much in it not to his liking. His chief objection, as Hymes and Fought (1975:1040) observed, was to Nida's inclusion of semantics as part of linguistics, which he raised repeatedly throughout the review. For example, he objected to Nida's identification of the English suffix *-er* as two morphemes that are identical in form but different in meaning ('agentive' when attached to a noun, 'comparative' when attached to an adjective), contending that 'it is by the distributional facts that these two morphemes are distinguished' (Trager 1951:128).

Nida did not respond directly to Trager's review; he had, however, previously argued against Trager's position, attributed to Bernard Bloch, Zellig Harris, Hockett, C. F. Voegelin, and Rulon Wells (citing papers of theirs that had appeared in *Language* between 1942 and 1947), that distributional facts are 'all that fundamentally counts' (Nida 1948:418). Also, in his last published effort to codify Bloomfieldian semantics (Nida

[3] As Hymes and Fought (1975:1040) observed, however, Nida (1949) retained process-based descriptions in dealing with morphophonemic alternations, the most striking example being his account of the classical Greek perfective prefix as '/C_1e/, by which we mean that the first consonant of the stem (including the change from aspirated to unaspirated) is repeated and followed by /e/' (p. 15).

[4] Nida (1949:155) described another sum method, namely to 'depict the meaning of a morpheme as an area, and plot the central (or primary) meaning and then describe various peripheral meanings', but did not develop it further.

[5] That Nida viewed both the product and sum methods of defining the meanings of morphemes to be acceptable alternatives is clear from his instructions for problem 110: 'Define the sememes of the morphemes in the following forms. This may be done by means of one definition to cover all of the environments or by the use of allosemes' (Nida 1949:157). In subsequent problems, his instructions were simply: 'Define the meanings'. Nowhere in the textbook, however, did he give an example of a product definition of a sememe, suggesting that he preferred the method of listing the allosemes.

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1951), he pointed out the contrast between his and Trager's views on the place of semantics in linguistics: 'Purely structural studies have their place, but they are incomplete without recognition and adequate treatments of the semantic factors involved, not only in the data of the language, but in the process by which such data are classified and described' (1951:1). To which he added a footnote that read: 'However, for a different view of such problems, see [Trager & Smith 1951]'. Finally, it is perhaps fitting that Nida published a comprehensive statement of his mature theory of semantics twenty years later in a festschrift for Trager (Nida & Taber 1972).

By the late 1950s, Nida had moved beyond Bloomfield's anti-mentalism and had begun to develop an eclectic approach to semantics, together with pragmatics, that did not rely on any single linguistic framework (Nida 1958). This approach, as described by Nida and Taber (1975 [1972]:103),

> adopted as a point of departure two very important facts about semantic relationships. In the first place, languages exhibit in use surprisingly little genuine ambiguity … . In the second place, the different meanings of single lexical units are far more separate in semantic space … than the related meanings of different terms.

To account for the first of these facts, Nida and Taber contended that in discourse, 'the intended meanings of terms are clearly marked by the context' (p. 104), where by 'context' they meant, as in Nida's earlier approach, both the nonlinguistic settings and circumstances, and the features of the linguistic environment, made up of the syntactic features of the terms and the 'semotactic' (i.e. semantic) features of the cooccurring terms, and by such marking, they meant the elimination of ambiguity. Then on the basis of the second fact, they proposed that the technique of componential analysis be extended beyond 'sets of terms which correspond to structured relationships in the external world, e.g. kinship terms' (p. 111) as in Goodenough 1956 and Lounsbury 1956, and provided several examples.[6] Finally, they noted that the second fact made it difficult to analyze the relationships among the different meanings of a single term, and proposed for that purpose a diagrammatic method that elaborated on the method in Nida 1949:155 mentioned in n. 4. Several years later, Nida published a textbook, *Componential analysis of meaning* (Nida 1975a), and a monograph, *Exploring semantic structures* (Nida 1975b), in which he laid out the procedures for systematically doing componential analysis and for analyzing semantic domains, for example, constructing ontologies, and in Nida 1975a gave as an example an ontology for the concepts found in the Greek New Testament, then in preparation for a New Testament Greek dictionary (Louw & Nida 1988).

Nida coupled his semantic approach with information theory to define a concept he called 'dynamic equivalence', which holds between a passage in a source language and its translation in a receptor language, provided that the translation would have the same, or very similar, impact on audiences in the receptor language in the present time as the passage in the source language text presumably had on audiences in its time. He found that the process could be both sped up and improved if the information in the source text were broken down into 'kernels', comparable to the kernel sentences of early transformational grammar, and restructured so as to be idiomatic in the receptor language.

[6] Nida and Taber (1975 [1972]:112–13) objected to treating the components as binary features for a variety of reasons, and accepted as a virtue the resulting redundancy inherent in their analyses (e.g. of the set {*crawl*, *hop*, *run*, *skip*, *walk*}), suggesting that it overcomes a deficiency in the theory of componential analysis pointed out by Burling (1964). The analysis they proposed for *redeem* (pp. 120–21) suggests that the components could take the form of open sentences, which would tie this work to Nida's work on the theory of translation discussed below.

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Nida presented an overview of this approach in his 1968 LSA presidential address (Nida 1969) as a 'science of translation' inasmuch as it combined aspects of linguistic theory, such as transformations and componential analysis, with information theory, and was not simply an ad hoc 'process of matching surface forms by rules of correspondence'.[7] He also envisioned the theory of translation as having the potential 'to provide linguistic science with new insights into structure and with improved methods for testing hypotheses' (1969:483). He thought of translation, properly construed, as a branch of comparative linguistics, more specifically comparative semantics, which by providing high quality translations for many language pairs would fill the need for 'a thoroughgoing comparison on a level of dynamic equivalence'.[8] He went on to speculate that translation could also provide a dynamic TYPOLOGY of languages, imagining what sorts of typological comparisons would be enabled by the availability of massive numbers of dynamically equivalent translations among the world's languages (1969: 495). It is safe to say over forty years later that Nida's vision for a comparative semantics along these lines has yet to be achieved.

Nida's work on translation, and on Bible translation in particular, attracted an enormous following. Nida is widely regarded today as the father of modern Bible translating. Not only did he revolutionize the field through his concept of dynamic equivalence, but he was also instrumental in helping to carry out translations of significant parts of the Bible in over 200 languages, including English. He demonstrated that the methods he developed could be used by native speakers of indigenous languages, provided they had access to semantically well-annotated source texts, of which Nida himself coproduced eleven (ten on New Testament books, and one on an Old Testament book) on behalf of the United Bible Societies, starting with Nida & Bratcher 1961 on the Gospel of Mark and ending with Nida & Ellingworth 1983 on the Letter to the Hebrews.

Except for his presidential address, Nida did not publish in *Language* after 1948, and he published only one more time in the *International Journal of American Linguistics* after 1958, an article that discussed the various types of contact languages, especially pidgins and koinés (Nida & Fehderau 1970). He occasionally published articles in less well-known linguistics journals and chapters in books on linguistics, and late in life came out with a linguistics monograph, *The sociolinguistics of interlingual communication* (Nida 1996), but these did not attract widespread attention among linguists, and interest in his work among linguists working outside the field of translation waned. Nevertheless, Nida's interest in linguistics as a whole never flagged, nor did his loyalty to the LSA.[9]

Shortly after completing his term of office as LSA president, Nida began serving as the Society's unpaid investment advisor, and continued to do so for over twenty-five years, providing guidance to both the Finance and the Executive Committee.[10] In the early 1980s, he drew up a plan for the LSA endowment, identifying investments in companies

[7] The theory of dynamic equivalence was first expounded in Nida & Taber 1969, and later (as 'functional equivalence') in Nida & de Waard 1986.

[8] Not to mention training material for machine learning of dynamic equivalences across the world's languages.

[9] Nida also made an effort to educate the Bible translation community about linguistics; a notable example is his paper 'Words and thoughts' (Nida 1974) in *The Bible Translator*, which sharply criticized linguistic relativism, made a compelling argument for linguistic universals, and summarized his theory of dynamic equivalence in a short and simple paragraph at the end.

[10] I thank Margaret Reynolds for providing recollections of her interactions with Eugene Nida during his service as the LSA's investment advisor.

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doing business with South Africa that needed to be sold in order for the LSA to meet the criteria of the Sullivan principles, and then led the effort to purchase the condominium in Washington, DC, that has housed the LSA Secretariat since 1985. His leadership throughout this period contributed both to the LSA's growth as an independent organization and to its financial stability, and he is fondly remembered by everyone he worked with as a bundle of energy and enthusiasm, and at the same time as gentle and kind. [D. Terence Langendoen, *University of Arizona*, langendt@email.arizona.edu.]

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