

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION  
ROBERT L. POLITZER**

**(1921-1998)**

Robert Louis Politzer, Professor of Education and Romance Linguistics, Emeritus, of Stanford University, died January 26, 1998, after a fourteen-month struggle with cancer. Born on March 21, 1921, in Vienna, his life and career epitomize several remarkable achievements and also reflect the most important developments in applied linguistics and in American academic life during the twentieth century.

Forced to leave school as a young man because of the growing Nazi threat, he immigrated to the U.S. with his older brother Henry in 1938. He never saw his parents -- Holocaust victims -- again. When World War II was declared, Politzer enlisted and served in the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence to defeat Nazi Germany. After the war, his initial graduate training led to a doctorate in Romance Linguistics, obtained with Mario Pei at Columbia University, where he pursued inquiries in dialect interrelationships in a manner growing out of the European tradition of linguistics which emphasized philological derivations. Aware that the field was moving in new directions (and having some GI benefits still available while waiting for his wife, Frieda, to finish her own doctorate), he completed a second doctorate in political philosophy at the New School for Social Research. He served with distinction on the faculties of Harvard and the Universities of Washington and Michigan before coming to Stanford in 1963. At Stanford, he advised and sponsored more than 200 students earning doctoral degrees in applied linguistics and language education. He is survived by his wife, also a distinguished linguist and teacher; four sons, Stephan, David, Theodore, and Thomas, and their families.

Politzer's own research, and consequently that of many of his students, reflected not only the respect for linguistic relationships typical of structuralist approaches but also then-rapidly developing applications of psychometric techniques to issues in language and education. His publications, numbering in the hundreds over his career, shaped the evolution of the field of applied linguistic inquiry. They included methodology texts for language teachers of French (published 1960, second edition

1965), Spanish (1961), German (1968), and English as a Second Language (1972), all developed within a framework of applying the analysis of linguistic structure to pedagogical issues. However, Politzer did not let pedagogical approaches go untested: particularly notable all during his professional life were his acumen and creativity in generating detailed and sophisticated empirical studies to assess various aspects of language learning and teaching. From the early 1960's all through the 1980's, his articles appeared regularly in premier journals such as Language Learning, The Modern Language Journal, Foreign Language Annals, Hispania, International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, and TESOL Quarterly. Much of the research reported in these venues was first undertaken through the many grants he brought to Stanford, where he was instrumental in the establishment of the Stanford Center for Research and Development on Teaching (now CERAS, the Center for Educational Research at Stanford). Though a prolific and respected scholar in the world of mainstream foreign language teaching, he was never bound by conventional views of language instruction and pioneered the careful linguistic description of dialects of English and Spanish in the US, investigating important educational issues and reaching out to larger academic audiences in journals such as Atisbos, Journal of Chicano Research, Bilingual Research Journal, and Bilingual Review. His extensive program of research on Black English and Chicano Spanish, conducted from the late 1960's to the 1980's, remains a model of detailed description, documentation of student and community attitudes, and sensitive exploration of related teaching training issues, all grounded in acute awareness of the concomitant social and cultural influences on language structure, use, and choice. His meticulous scholarship enlarged both the methodological tools and the topics typical of applied linguistic research over more than three decades.

Politzer's family, friends, colleagues, and a large group of his graduates gathered at Stanford on February 22, 1998, to celebrate his life and testify to his influence on them. Their comments illuminate his life and legacy and demonstrate the impact his work has continued to have on applied linguistics as evident in three themes distilled from the comments of those who knew and worked with him:

Humanity. The first is a deep sense of human connection and compassion for the human condition. Despite a personal manner thought rather formal (his graduate students joked that he never appeared on campus without a tie, even in the hottest

summer weather) he clearly enjoyed close relationships with his family and his students. He lived through the immense personal tragedy of the loss of most of his family in the Holocaust to establish with his wife Frieda a family he loved dearly, and often used stories about them in his teaching. He once recounted an anecdote about Roman Jakobson, the great phonetician, who said that all English-speaking babies formed first words that followed the [CVCV--consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel] pattern (e.g. 'mama'). One of the Politzers' boys' first words, 'oosh' for shoe, did not follow this; when Politzer raised this with Jakobson, the latter scowled "I am not responsible for deviant behavior." Politzer thus cautioned his students that academic idealizations did not always reflect the full range of human variation.

Politzer also established deep human connections to his students, who numbered in the hundreds. He practiced affirmative action long before there was such a thing. Among his students, there were a large proportion of women before that was fashionable, many of African-American or Hispanic backgrounds, many of them the first in their families to attempt college, let alone graduate degrees; and many students deemed, by the standards of the 1960's and 1970's, "too old" to profit from graduate study, although many went on to distinguished and productive careers. Because of Politzer's lifetime work, the faculties of American universities and research corporations look different--as a current political slogan has it, they look more like America. This commitment to providing advanced training was not borne of trendiness, but out of a comprehensive vision of the truth of things. Long before deconstruction entered literary interpretation, Politzer acted on the conviction that one could not theorize, investigate, or prescribe the language behavior adequately without including women and men, old and young, and native speakers of all varieties studied, not just as informants, but as active researchers and interpreters of data and shapers of the policies related to those interpretations.

Knowledge. The second theme was Professor Politzer's rigorous commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, including the critical evaluation of theory and the meticulous work of gathering and analyzing relevant data. As the holder of not one but two doctoral degrees, Politzer was a pioneer in the application of statistical techniques to language-related data. He showed a lifelong dedication to understanding quantitative investigative tools and using them appropriately. Politzer was well aware of the limitations as well as the promise of statistical approaches. He often emphasized to his

students that one should never confuse statistical with pedagogical significance; both were important, but different, concepts.

He was a shrewd and insightful critic of intellectual theories that oversimplified the complexity of human experience. In class, he often observed that "phenomena don't change much, but labels for them do." He liked to remind students how difficult it was to foresee intellectual trends, relishing the anecdote of a graduate student at Harvard in the mid-1950's who had shown him a manuscript written by her husband, one Noam Chomsky. Politzer's then-considered opinion was that "it wouldn't amount to much," as he would later note with a wry chuckle after Chomsky's work altered the landscape of theoretical linguistics. Notes from the lectures in his graduate classes are peppered with constant reminders that the very terms "non-standard," "dialect," and "disadvantage" demonstrated not linguistic realities but the way powerful social and political forces framed the realities of language, that responsible scholarship had to recognize and contend with this social coding, and that truly original theory, intelligent focused investigation, and astute interpretation are needed to challenge the facile and misleading labels all too common in public discussion.

Humor. All who entered Robert Politzer's life cherished his multilingual humor and wit. His students always learned that, while the work of scholarship is to be taken seriously, scholars were people too, subject to all the usual human foibles. Bob's humor was legendary, and sometimes extended into the realm of commentaries on soccer and opera, two of his enduring enthusiasms. In teaching, he often used himself as an example, once illustrating the discomfort that results when verbal and non-verbal behavior did not match by describing how disconcerting it was to revisit Vienna knowing the dialect perfectly but "not knowing how low to bow" to Austrian university colleagues. He regularly cautioned against erroneous snap judgments made about a person's linguistic capabilities based solely on physical appearances, as exemplified by the Italian waiters who insisted on speaking to Politzer completely in infinitives despite his native command of both their standard language and northern Italian dialects. Furthermore, he was quick to puncture any assumption that academic terms captured human truths any more effectively than common expression. In a graduate class twenty years ago (February 9, 1978, to be specific), Politzer declared "as soon as a term is understood by a wider community, those in the in-group must invent another term to

ensure exclusiveness” and further observed that the two best examples of this were linguists and teenagers.

Despite great pain and personal loss, Robert Politzer achieved a life marked by the genuine and abiding love of family, friends, and students; dedication to the pursuit of truth, commitment to the empowerment of groups whose voices were not always heard; and the gift of wit that balances the weight of knowledge. He brought the tragedy of early twentieth century Europe into illuminating and provocative engagement with contemporary North American linguistic issues, and did so with wisdom, rigor, and reverence for knowledge and for life. His colleagues at Stanford and elsewhere and his many graduates mourn his loss, celebrate his accomplishments, and amplify his influence.

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