



Richard Leaman Leed

January 31, 1929 – December 5, 2011

Richard Leaman (Dick) Leed was above all a passionate language teacher. He was born and grew up in Lititz, in southeast Pennsylvania, and could trace his ancestry to Mennonites and other early German-speaking settlers. After undergraduate studies at Oberlin with time out as a school French teacher, he came to Cornell in 1954 to study Slavic linguistics. While still a graduate student he was asked to teach in the Division of Modern Languages, and continued teaching until his retirement in 1994. His doctoral thesis (1958) dealt with the history of Czech, but almost all of his teaching both before and after its defense was in Russian.

A memoiristic section of Dick's website accurately states: "The major field of activity in my academic career was Slavic linguistics, particularly Russian, and particularly Russian language pedagogy." He also was interested in the history of the Slavic languages and developed courses in that area. His title was Professor of Linguistics, but he cultivated the science of linguistics specifically for its ability to further language teaching. Nearly all of his publications were textbooks or reference materials, two genres requiring at least as much research as strictly theoretical books and articles.

Not all readers will recall the context in which the Division of Modern Languages (later Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics) arose. During World War II the U.S. Government suddenly needed to train soldiers and civilians in many languages never previously taught in North American institutions. It, quite sensibly, enlisted practitioners of the then young science of linguistics. In what later became known as the Army Method, a linguist would work with a speaker of an Asian or European language in a classroom of students. The speaker would lead the learners in many hours of 'drill' while the linguist would analyze the language and provide explanations in careful, understandable doses. The skills attained were sufficiently striking that some of the pioneers thought of introducing the Army Method at Cornell. The Arabic linguist J. Milton Cowan established the DML in 1946, hiring wartime linguist colleagues and, more and more, Cornell's own linguistics Ph.D.s like Leed, experienced in one or more of the dozens of languages to be taught.

These early faculty members had also made notable contributions to theoretical linguistics, but Leed ruefully observed the center of gravity shift from language teaching in the direction of pure theory, even during his own chairmanship of the Department in the 1970s. This he saw as an unintended consequence of the rise of the Chomskyan approach to linguistics; though Chomsky's earliest co-workers had known and analyzed many languages, some later adherents seized on Chomsky's apparent claim that languages were so similar deep down that one could find out everything just by working on English. (Leed countered this in his own way, as cited by John Bowers below.)

Another tenet Dick stood by was that all change is bad. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, he changed the direction of Russian language teaching at Cornell, putting it on the path of modernization and flexibility that it has followed ever since. Through all administrative reorganizations it has continued to equip students with solid skills that they have put to unexpected uses. Among the instructors of all other languages taught at Cornell, he was likewise seen as the source of wisdom and support.

Leed was an early user of computers for what we would now call desktop publishing. Several of his textbooks were self-typeset on an early 1980s Terak for which he created Russian-alphabet fonts.

Dick was one of the Russian-English translators at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 (site of the Nixon-Khrushchev debate). Thereafter he did not seek research stays in the Soviet Union, a choice that freed him from a dilemma felt by some fellow Slavists. He could give his unvarnished opinion of the Soviet system without concern that the authorities might deny him a visa.

In retirement Dick continued a favorite pastime, writing letters to newspaper editors giving his frank and often contrarian views on burning questions of the day. He turned from Russian to early English language studies. Working out the rules for dividing Shakespeare's lines into metrical feet, he applied these rules to 'scan' all the plays. He developed a consistent spelling system for Chaucer's language, reflecting the pronunciation more faithfully than the poet's own, and demonstrated it on six of the Canterbury Tales. His web site <http://www.shakespearescanned.com/> has his scanned texts of Shakespeare, his respelled texts of Chaucer with audio files of his own reading, his many argumentative letters to newspapers, his unofficial history of language teaching at Cornell, his thoughts on reinterpreting parts of the Bible, and his family history. Shortly before his death he instructed his son Andy to keep the site in existence as long as there was interest in it. And indeed, not only do general readers find the site, but the Linguistics Data Consortium of the University of Pennsylvania has shown interest in the corpus of verse data.

A humorous autobiography and a brief C.V. are on the Russian program's site <http://russian.cornell.edu/index.cfm?MainFrameURL=russian.web/people/rl.cfm>.

Dick was known for his appreciation of many periods and genres of music, but most of all Bach and earlier composers. In the 1970s he would gather colleagues at his home to sing and

play on various instruments even such demanding cantatas as *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*. In keeping with his love of music, the memorial scholarship established in his name in Jefferson County, Iowa, supports Fairfield High School graduates wishing to study either languages or music.

He is survived by two sons and a daughter, their respective spouses, and several grandchildren.

Professor John Bowers, one of Leed's successors as department chair, when notifying colleagues of Leed's death summed up his life and works in a few sentences: "Dick will be remembered by those who knew him as a man of strong opinions who delighted in a good-tempered joust with anyone willing to take him on. He was a skeptic and a traditionalist who delighted in puncturing the verities of liberals but was also one of the most genuinely kind and caring individuals I have known. Dick was a scholar of Russian and founded the excellent Russian language program which continues to this day. In place of the universalist creed of Chomskyans, Dick substituted his own dictum: 'All languages are more or less like Russian.' Dick was devoted to music, especially the music of J.S. Bach, and to the sheep which he and his wife Gerry raised for many years on their farm on Garrett Road." Much beloved by many, he is sorely missed.

Wayles Browne, Chairperson; Slava Paperno, John Wolff