

# The Association of Latin-American Linguistics and Philology (ALFAL)

## *Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina*

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The Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina, was created during a meeting held by the University of Chile's Instituto de Filología (Viña Del Mar, 20–5 January 1964). According to its first President, the Brazilian linguist Joaquim Mattoso Câmara Jr, the idea of its foundation had been previously discussed by a group of Latin-American linguists, during the Ninth International Congress of Linguistics held at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in August 1962. The main concern at that point in time was to foster research in such areas as Spanish, Portuguese and Amerindian linguistics, philology, and Latin-American literature, as well as in first and second language teaching.

Shortly after the foundation of ALFAL, Donald Solá and other leading scholars launched the Interamerican Program of Linguistics and Teaching of Languages (PILEI, in its Spanish-Portuguese acronym), again in Chile, 10–14 August 1970.

From then on, ALFAL and PILEI worked together, although in different ways: ALFAL with its biannual congresses, PILEI with its collective projects of research, institutes and symposia. The demise of PILEI in 1981 put an end to this pattern, which led ALFAL to host the projects of research previously managed by its partner.

Currently the Directorate consists of Ataliba T. de Castilho, president, State University of São Paulo (Brazil); José Moreno de Alba, secretary, National Autonomous University of México (Mexico); Orlando Alba, Brigham Young University (USA). The Directorate is helped in its decisions by the Advisory Committee, whose current members are Adolfo Elizaincín (Uruguay), Alba Valencia Espinoza (Chile), Carmen Silva-Corvalán (USA), Germán de Granda (Spain), José Antonio Samper Padilla (Grand Canary), and Paola Bentivoglio (Venezuela). Regional Deputies help the Directorate to get in touch with the 1400 affiliate members, most of them Latin America residents, although ALFAL has associate members also in North America, Europe, and some countries in Asia.

ALFAL has so far organized 12 congresses: I (Montevideo, Uruguay, 1966); II (São Paulo, Brazil, 1969); III (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1971); IV (Lima, Peru, 1975); V (Caracas, Venezuela, 1978); VI (Phoenix, USA, 1981); VII (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 1984); VIII (Tucumán, Argentina, 1987); IX (Campinas, Brazil, 1990); X (Veracruz, Mexico, 1993); XI (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1996); XII (Santiago, Chile, 1999). The XIIIth Congress is scheduled for Costa Rica, 2002. All proceedings have been published, and alongside the proceedings, ALFAL sponsors the annual journal *Lingüística*, now numbering 11 issues, and from time to time publishes the *Cuadernos de Lingüística*, 9 issues, and the *Boletín Informativo*, 11 issues (9 + 2, in the New Series).

Numerous Research Committees are active, and the following issues will be a focus for the attention of both the Directorate and the individual membership.

(a) *Deepening the Knowledge of Latin-American Linguistic Complexity.* The activity of ALFAL relates to a geographical area which was already linguistically complex before European settlers arrived. Huge populations spoke hundreds of Amerindian languages, some of which

survived after the arrival of Europeans. Millions of people still speak Aztec, Maya-Quiché, Quechua, Guarani, Mapuche, and Chibcha, described as the *lenguas 'mayores' or 'generales'*.

Romance languages introduced by Latin-Europeans gave birth to the 'New Romania', which means 300,000,000 Spanish speakers in Hispano-America and 167,000,000 Portuguese speakers in Brazil, not to mention millions of French-speaking Canadians. Conservative as well as innovative trends began to influence the aforementioned languages after they came into contact with Amerindian and African languages in the new environment created by three centuries of colonization, followed by intensive immigration during the 19th century.

This background provides several issues to be discussed by ALFAL's Research Committees: (a) the improvement of our knowledge of Amerindian languages; (b) knowledge about changes in Romance languages; and (c) the importance of Latin American literature. Let us consider the first two issues.

Amerindian linguistics has experienced an important growth during the last 20 years. If a Latin-American linguist is destined to make a real contribution to linguistic theory, this will certainly occur in the Amerindian field. Researchers in this field usually face enormous difficulties to perform their work, but even so they have successfully documented and analysed more than half the living Amerindian languages. A problem not sufficiently addressed is the involvement of people speaking Amerindian themselves in the work of documenting and describing their own languages.

Latin-American linguists have become concerned about the growth of urban communities, a rise of 20 percent at the beginning of the 20th century to 80 percent at the present day. What would be the consequences for Latin-American Spanish and Portuguese when they shift from predominantly rural to predominantly urban varieties? Juan M. Lope Blanch, from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and a former President of ALFAL, addressed this issue by launching in 1996 the Hispano-American-wide 'Proyecto de estudio de la norma urbana culta'. He inspired Brazilian linguists to work in a similar project, locally known as the NURC project, which commenced in 1969. A great number of interviews were recorded and analysed in both projects, encouraging a better understanding of spoken language mechanisms.

The first proposals concerning the history of Latin-American Spanish were offered by Guitarte and Lope Blanch. The research began in the late 1980s, under the chairmanship of Beatriz Fontanella de Weinberg, replaced after her death by Elena Rojas Mayer, both from Argentina. Historical Linguistics has witnessed a rapid growth in Brazil, thanks to the work of Joaquim Mattoso Câmara Jr, Rosa Virgínia Mattos e Silva, Fernando Tarallo, Carlos Alberto Faraco, Mary Kato and others. These collective projects are currently having much success, and ALFAL plays an important role in this. Latin-American linguists have developed a new way of developing their research, in spite of the difficulties they face due to budget cuts undergone by their universities. I strongly believe that the search for new partnerships could represent an answer to such difficulties. The Research Committees will play a decisive role in this issue, integrating different specialists inside ALFAL on the basis of new research projects.

(b) *Language Teaching*. As a multilingual continent, Latin America poses several problems in the field of language teaching. Let us take a quick look first at the teaching of minority languages, and thereafter at the teaching of foreign languages. Broadly speaking, Indigenous Education experienced two major impulses. In the first one national government thought it was their task to 'civilize' Amerindians, integrating them in the dominant community whose language was the one taught. From the 1970s bilingual education took place, allowing an 'explosion of differences' which led to the construction of social identities different from the 'national' one. The linguist's role changed to the 'elucidação conceitual da reflexão lingüística conduzida pelos próprios falantes, que se constituem em pesquisadores de suas próprias línguas'.

The general globalization we are presently witnessing brings to the teaching of foreign languages some interesting debates. The European Council of Languages recently stated that monolingual citizens risk suffering from a kind of 'linguistic deficiency' in the coming century if they remain monolingual. Each one has to be proficient in at least two foreign languages. But if we simply transfer the needs of multilingualism to Latin America, what languages should be taught? It is arguable that at least Spanish, Portuguese and Guarani must be taught, if the MERCOSUL / MERCOSUR bloc keeps its present size. The members will face debates on such issues as the improvement of their school system, the creation of a favourable environment for the intensive teaching of foreign languages, and also the teaching of history, geography, natural sciences in languages other than the mother tongue, which in turn implies properly trained personnel. Linguistics could greatly contribute to these discussions. ALFAL could provide a suitable framework in this area, as it has already done in its almost four decades of life.

(c) *Getting Involved with a Globalized World.* The 1990s witnessed some political transformations which would have been almost unbelievable a few years before. Nations which warred against each other in the past and consequently developed a deep loss of confidence as to their neighbours are now taking firm steps toward economic and political integration. The global development of institutions like ASEAN, NAFTA, EU and MERCOSUL/R indicates that the traditional divisions between regional, national and international cultures can no longer be maintained: in R.E. Hamel's words, 'surgindo terceiras culturas desterritorializadas como a nova cultura empresarial, a eletrônica, a ecologia e múltiplas expressões de sincretismos e hibridações'.

Hamel's predictable syncretisms and hybridizations could be thought of as an important target for Latin American scholarly associations such as ALFAL. As a result of centuries of colonial culture, countries of the subcontinent developed a kind of indifference towards their neighbours, as well as an entrenched 'living alone', solipsistic way of life, even in matters of science and scholarship. Now the time has come to confront this political culture and try to adjust it to modern challenges. In this respect ALFAL may play a modest but vital role, steering its membership towards important subjects of research. Changing a culture is not an easy task, and this one could be just a first step, backed by the success of our collective research projects.

Within MERCOSUL/R a cultural policy debate is in progress, led by the Universities Association of the Montevideo Group (AUGM). This Association was created in 1991, shortly after the signing of the Asunción Treaty which gave birth to the MERCOSUL/R. AUGM aims at improving the formation of human resources devoted to research and the transference of knowledge among participants, as well as contributing to the process of academic integration at all levels: Meneghel (1998). Several universities participate in the Association, which presently focuses on a linguistic policy for the subcontinent. ALFAL could help in the debate, since it represents other countries not yet participating in MERCOSUL/R. In short, integrating people through research is currently a clear challenge that ALFAL cannot ignore.

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