PREFACE

This volume of the <u>MIT</u> <u>Working</u> <u>Papers</u> <u>in</u> <u>Linguistics</u> marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the existence of the MIT PhD program in linguistics, and the editors have asked me to write the preface on the grounds that I am one of the few who have been here since it all started.

Looking back to September 1961 when the MIT PhD program in linguistics officially got underway, I have the very strange feeling that little has changed. In September 1961, like in every September since, we entertained great hopes for the incoming group which then as in every subsequent year contained not only PhD candidates but also a number of post-doctoral fellows and visiting scientists. We not only looked forward to teaching them all we knew, which was pitifully little (though, mercifully, we were then quite unable to see it), but we also hoped to learn much from them and from our teaching efforts. And these hopes have never been disappointed. Though, naturally, no two classes have ever been alike in talent, commitment, and enthusiasm, every class has contributed significantly to its own education as well as to that of the faculty.

Since out selection procedure is no different in its essentials from that of most linguistics departments in North America, we cannot attribute to it our extraordinary good fortune of having attracted, year after year, such a large number of very talented people studying linguistics. Our good fortune must rather be due to the process of self-selection: since 1961 this self-selection process has provided us with a large pool of outstandingly talented applicants among whom it has been almost impossible to choose poorly. I have no idea what lies at the basis of this self-selection process or why it has worked so well for us. That it has worked for us, and worked from the very beginning there can be no doubt.

Consider for example the first class of seven whom we admitted in 1961. During 1960-1, I was on sabbatical and when I left in the fall there had been no talk of any PhD program in linguistics. In typical MIT fashion, the program was officially approved in the spring of 1961 so that there was no time for us to advertise and let potential graduate students in linguistics know that we were in business. Thus, the seven who applied (and to the best of my recollection this was our total pool of applicants) came here more or less by accident. Yet the six of the seven who went on to get their PhD degree were, in

alphabetical order, Tom Bever, Bruce Fraser, Barbara Hall Partee, Terry Langendoen, Ted Lightner and Jim McCawley, all of whom have made notable careers in the field.

But if we cannot take credit for choosing the students who have studied at MIT, we deserve credit, I believe, for the training that we have offered to those who have chosen to come to MIT. The basic insight that has guided us has been that linguistics is in a period of rapid evolution and that any body of knowledge and doctrine that we might teach would therefore be obsolete long before those being taught are ready for retirement. Since no one can predict what particular body of knowledge is likely to be relevant thirty years hence, achieving mastery over a given body of knowledge cannot be the main purpose of the program. This is not to deny, of course, that a certain amount of basic knowledge always has been taught here, and students are expected to master it. But this is more in the nature of background. The central experience of students in our program has always been their exposure to ongoing research. We got the idea for this aspect of our program from other graduate programs at MIT, especially in the natural sciences and engineering, where participation in ongoing research has long been a central feature and we made this an integral part in the training of linguists. Specifically we made the research conducted by faculty, visitors and students the core of the teaching program. Students are exposed to the problems that others in the group are working on, and they discover what role they can (and/or would like to) play in this work, how they can utilize in this work the knowledge and the skills they already possess and what other knowledge and skills they must acquire to be effective. They interact with others working in the same area and this interaction furthers the education both of the students and of the persons with whom they interact.

This approach is based on the realization that for a researcher the process of learning new things never stops. Moreover, it recognizes explicitly that education is a two-way interaction where the teacher often learns as much from the student as she/he teaches him/her. Thirdly it implies that each member of a research group can and should contribute materially to the results that are obtained and that these contributions need not be delayed until the person has completed a prescribed course of study. Finally, it makes it clear that the ultimate responsibility for obtaining the proper training rests with each individual regardless of her/his status; faculty, student, visitor or PhD candidate. It is he/she who must decide where further efforts should be made and what should be allowed to go by the board.

As a result, students here are early disabused of the idea that all that is required of them is to attend the lectures, study the materials recommended and write the papers assigned, for the rest has been taken care of by the faculty and the faculty know best. This fact makes teaching in the MIT linguistics department occasionally difficult: arguments in class tend to be hard fought, and professors have been

told by students that their lecture contained nothing new, was totally mistaken, failed to take into account ideas that the critic had discussed with other graduate students months ago and found wanting, etc. It also is what makes teaching here most rewarding: the audience is of such high caliber that even the most elementary lecture can serve as a vehicle for new ideas. And the best thing of all is that one can always count on finding -- in the class, after class, or in the hall of building 20 -- someone who is as passionately interested in the same issues as you are and who is willing to discuss them with you at length.

A former MIT faculty member asked me some time ago how our students manage to get a degree in four years. I answered: "By working at it." He laughed and remarked that during the ten years that he had an office in building 20 he could not recall any time that he was in the building and there was not somebody in 20D-104. There is little doubt that people here -- faculty, visitors, and students -- work very hard. Having been in on it from the very start I must not fail to remark that for many of us the main reason for the hard work is that it is great fun: more often like a party than a chore. And as long as the linguistics program manages to give pleasure to those in it -- in addition to imparting knowledge -- it should not fail to attract scholars that make a difference.

Morris Halle