Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
CARLOTA S. SMITH

Professor Carlota S. Smith of the Department of Linguistics at The University of Texas at Austin died on May 24, 2007. She joined the faculty of The University of Texas at Austin in 1969 and was named the Dallas TACA Centennial Professor in the Humanities in 1991.

Carlota Smith was born in 1934 in New York City. She received her undergraduate education at Radcliffe College, graduating in 1955. She began her graduate education in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1950s, studying with Zellig Harris, who had also directed the graduate work of Noam Chomsky. In 1961, Professor Smith spent a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she was one of the first women students to work with Chomsky. In 1964, she received her M.A. and, in 1967, her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, and then joined the faculty of The University of Texas at Austin.

Professor Smith’s contributions to linguistics encompassed work in English syntax, child language acquisition, tense and aspect, and discourse interpretation. Her first publication, on the syntax of complex modifiers in English (Smith 1961), dates from her period at M.I.T., and her second (1964) further developed her ideas about modifiers and relative clauses in English. This was soon followed by an influential joint publication with Elizabeth Shipley and Lila Gleitman (Shipley, Smith, & Gleitman 1969) on first language acquisition. She continued to write about various problems in English syntax and language acquisition, but by 1975 her attention began turning more and more to tense and aspect, culminating in 1991 with the publication of the very important book The Parameter of Aspect. Her work on aspect involved close analysis of several languages with very different systems for marking time. She chose English, French, Russian, Chinese, and Navajo to work on, developing in the process close and in many cases long-term working relationships with other linguists and speakers of these languages. In the years since the publication of the book, a number of students at UT have extended her analysis to their own languages or to languages they work on (Korean: Ahn, 1995; ASL: Rathmann, 2005; Mandarin: Yeh, 1993 and Ren, 2008; Q’anjob’al: Mateo Toledo, 2008; Iquito: Lai, 2009).

In the period just before her death, Professor Smith had again turned to tense and aspect in her research, with particular interest in tenseless languages (for instance, Mandarin). Meanwhile, however, she had always had an interest in the interpretation of sentences within discourse, and in 2003, Cambridge University Press published her second book, Modes of Discourse. In this work, she combined her interests in tense and aspect with her interests in interpretation; in particular she was convinced that such interpretation is heavily dependent on the surrounding discourse. While her first book was distinguished by the attention she paid to data from a variety of spoken languages, the second book used written English, including newspaper and magazine articles and literary works, as a source for data. She was thus able to explore the linguistic side of her lifelong interest in literature.

Professor Smith’s wide-ranging intellect served not only her research but also the development of this institution. She was a faculty affiliate of women’s and gender studies at UT Austin from its founding in the early 1980s. Crucially, she was the ranking member of the committee that first proposed the creation of a women’s studies program to then-Dean Robert D. King in 1979. For most of the 1980s, she served on the Women’s Studies Steering Committee and was also chair of the Faculty Women’s Organization from 1994-1995. She served as chair of the Department of Linguistics from 1981-85, making her the first woman chair in
the College of Liberal Arts. She was director of the Cognitive Science Center from 1987 to 1994. In recognition of her contributions to linguistics and to UT, she became one of the first women in the College of Liberal Arts to receive an endowed professorship.

To perpetuate her memory, the family, friends, and colleagues of Professor Smith have endowed a graduate fellowship, the Carlota S. Smith Memorial Fellowship. This fellowship is the first endowed fellowship in the Department of Linguistics.

Carlota Smith’s legacy to the Department of Linguistics, the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies, and to The University of Texas has many dimensions. It is personal, intellectual, and scholarly. It comes to us from her many gifts. She had the gift of focus that assured that she was wholly engaged in whatever activity she took part in. She had the gift of curiosity that made her always want to know more – about a person, about an idea, about language, or anything else. She had the gift of joy that found and inspired pleasure in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. She was elegant, and tough, and sympathetic. She was a wonderful friend, teacher, colleague, and scholar.

References


This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Richard P. Meier (chair), Nora C. England, and Gretchen Ritter.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on June 9, 2009. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.