

REPORT OF THE KILLIAN AWARD SELECTION COMMITTEE
(For Presentation at the Faculty Meeting of May 17, 1978)

by

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Mr. President:

I report the decision of the Killian Award Selection Committee with somewhat mixed feelings. Of course it is a privilege to chair a Committee set up to honor Jim Killian and the tradition of excellence Jim nourished at M.I.T.; and it is agreeable to have wise and experienced colleagues on the Committee -- Professors Sylvain Bromberger, Edwin Kuh, John F. Elliott, Lisa A. Steiner -- all able to weigh differences in values and claims with tact, knowledge, wit, and insight; and certainly it is a pleasure to record -- on behalf of the faculty of M.I.T. -- our keen admiration for the extraordinary professional accomplishments of one of our colleagues and to do so in the tangible and memorable form of a Killian Award.

Why then mixed feelings? Simply -- and this has been the experience of previous committees as well -- that it is mind-boggling as well as embarrassing to review the superb achievements of many of our colleagues and their extraordinary contributions to M.I.T., and yet be limited to only one award. But even a dozen awards, as Professor Alexander observed last year, would hardly suffice.

There was no simple solution. We gave primary consideration to professional excellence and scholarship and service to M.I.T.; but these basic criteria turned out to be necessary but not sufficient conditions to produce only one nominee. Therefore, as was the case for previous committees, we mustered several additional criteria: service to the profession or discipline, student-faculty impact, lecturing skill, age of the potential recipient; in addition, what a previous committee labeled "anticorrelation with fields of previous recipients"; and finally -- but not least -- extraordinary distinction not yet adequately recognized within and outside the M.I.T. community. Only by taking account of all of these factors were we able to agree unanimously and with great assurance on the Killian Award Lecturer for 1979: Professor Morris Halle.

CITATION

Morris Halle, born on July 23, 1923 in Liepaja, Latvia, spent his childhood and early adolescence in that country and grew up speaking Latvian, German, Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish -- not a bad start for a future linguist. He arrived in the U.S. in 1940, added English to his repertoire, graduated from high school and entered the College of the City of New York with the intention of becoming an engineer. Two things saved him for linguistics: a strong aversion to mechanical drawing and the Army draft. After his discharge, remembering mechanical drawing, he decided to become a Slavist. He attended the University of Chicago, earned an M.A., moved to Columbia University to study under Roman Jakobson, and when Jakobson joined the faculty of Harvard University,

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Morris Halle followed him there. His Harvard Ph.D. thesis, later published as The Sound Pattern of Russian, is still considered a classic in the field. The relationship with Prof. Jakobson quickly changed from student to collaborator. This collaboration bore rich fruits over many years, the first result being the important monograph, Preliminaries to Speech Analysis (also co-authored by C. G. M. Fant).

When Halle joined the M.I.T. faculty in the Fall of 1951 as Assistant Professor of Modern Languages, his first job was to teach undergraduates French, German, and Russian. Soon thereafter, he helped to bring Noam Chomsky to M.I.T., initially as Assistant Professor of Modern Languages, with similar duties. There was no program in Linguistics at M.I.T. then; research in phonetics and other aspects of language occurred under the aegis of R.L.E. and a program on Mechanical Translation. Halle and Chomsky joined some of these efforts, initiating then their memorable and extremely influential collaboration. A few years later, in 1961, the M.I.T. Corporation approved -- largely at the instigation of Halle and Chomsky -- a graduate program in Linguistics. Halle became its first administrator and kept that position until 1977. He also headed the newly formed Department of Linguistics and Philosophy in 1976-77, the first year of its operation.

Only four years after the creation of the graduate program in Linguistics, i.e., in 1966, a report published by the American Council on Education, entitled "An Assessment of Quality Graduate Education", contained a rating of graduate programs in various disciplines across the United States. The graduate program in Linguistics at M.I.T. was rated No. 1. Another survey was made in 1970, and again M.I.T. was rated No. 1. There have been no surveys since 1970; probably the situation has not changed. What is more, the departments rated immediately after M.I.T. probably are programs whose most important staff members are Ph.D.'s trained at M.I.T. This view is supported by the number and quality of applicants for graduate study in Linguistics at M.I.T. from all over the world, and by the number of persons who wish to conduct postdoctoral work in the unpretentious quarters of Building 20.

M.I.T.'s position as the capital of Linguistics we owe largely to Halle. He has assembled and retained an extraordinary staff of linguists. He has convinced funding agencies of the importance of the research in linguistics conducted at M.I.T. Not least, he has transformed the education of linguists.

The distinguishing characteristic of the graduate program in linguistics at M.I.T. is training through problem solving. Students are thrust into problem-solving situations almost immediately after they arrive here. They must, from the outset, engage in original research. This approach may not seem noteworthy to an M.I.T. audience. But when Halle introduced it, it was an unheard-of way of training linguists. Graduate students in linguistics were expected to master a literature rather than a research craft. They spent most of their time working in libraries, reading well known treatments of old problems. Halle's innovation has reached far beyond the M.I.T. campus. M.I.T. graduates, as we noted, now staff the best program in linguistics in this country; and they introduced Halle's methods in the departments they helped to build during the past 13 years.

Halle's scientific work is devoted primarily to the search for the invariant elements and rules underlying the sound patterns of human languages, and the principles of their organization. Its core encompasses the study of the sounds of speech, the organizing of sound systems in specific natural languages, and historical linguistics. But its periphery extends beyond pure linguistics to acoustics, physiology, and psychology. In addition, Halle made a major contribution to the understanding of the nature of poetics and metrics.

Halle's work is far too technical to be dealt with in any detail in this brief citation. However, some idea of its nature and importance may be gained from the following remarks. From the physical point of view, speech utterances consist of unsegmented continuous waves. The linguist, however, concerned with speech production and speech recognition, must view these utterances as sequences of discrete elements which correspond roughly to the sounds a native speaker can recognize and distinguish as linguistically significant. Roman Jakobson hypothesized that each of these elements must itself be a complex of more fundamental elements called "distinctive features". However, this hypothesis led to a number of critical questions. How are these "distinctive features" to be identified? How many are there? What rules govern their simultaneous and successive combinations? How do these rules interact with each other and with other linguistic rules, and in particular, with the rules of syntax? In what order can they apply? How do the "distinctive features" relate to the way sounds are produced in the vocal tract? How do we account for the fact that some languages share origin, but do not share the same rules? How do these rules change over time? Halle pursued these and related questions and provided answers to them. But this enumeration of questions omits an essential aspect of the problem they posed. No solution -- no interesting solution -- could be hoped for without the creation of a complex conceptual and notational system. Halle forged such a system: this represents one of his more important achievements.

Through similar efforts in metrics, Halle has also shown that the composition and appreciation of poetry, in whatever language it is written, requires the application of rules that poets somehow know, although they generally cannot voice that knowledge.

Halle has written a number of books and more than 80 papers, several regarded as classics. A number of these publications have been jointly authored, notably with Roman Jakobson, with Noam Chomsky, with Ken Stevens, and with Jay Keyser and a few others. Halle would be the first to insist that the credit that we are giving him must be shared with others. That is undoubtedly true, but it in no way diminishes the extraordinary significance of his contributions.

Much more could be said -- had we the time -- to bring out the originality of Halle's work; also, we don't quite know how to convey the sparkling interplay of Halle's observations (based on a vast knowledge of detail about a multitude of languages) with the conceptual innovations that illuminate the underlying realities.

A final observation is in order about Halle as a teacher and Halle as a human being. Jay Keyser tells of an occasion when he came to him with a problem about Middle English. Halle almost immediately told Keyser that the solution to the problem would not be found by looking at Middle English, but by looking at Old French. Halle was right. This anecdote illustrates well Halle as his students and colleagues see him: at once literate, informed, theoretically perspicuous, and with a sure instinct of where to look.

In the introduction to a Festschrift published a few years ago in his honor, two former students observed:

'Morris's contributions to the field of linguistics have certainly not been limited to his own publications. His primary influence on just about all of us --- has been his contribution to our work. Most of us would probably own up to having published at least one idea that was basically Morris's, and we have all, in one way or another, gotten from him more than is easily acknowledged, through arguments, comments on papers, conversations, and so on. The particular value of his classes, also, has been not so much in the factual material they convey (which could, after all, be conveyed in other ways) as in the fact that they genuinely make you think. What Morris says in class and on other semi-public or private occasions is often outrageous, but it sets off something productive in his listeners, and of course in himself. And the ensuing arguments, which may be a long time in maturing, invariably lead somewhere useful. It is impossible not to get excited in Morris's classes, and this more than anything else has created the sometimes peculiar life style connected with graduate study in linguistics at M.I.T.

'A paradox of Morris's teaching has always been the fact that with this ability to produce creative thought in others, he couples an unrelenting insistence on disciplined argument, on the difference between devices that work and solutions to problems.'

Beyond the rigor, there is also ample evidence of Halle's gracious human qualities which explains why he is so beloved and admired by those who have encountered his warmth and friendship, his generosity and good judgment, his erudition and wit.

Linguistics is not a discipline in which many occasions exist for the awarding of prizes and honors. True, Morris Halle is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and he has been elected both Vice President and President of the Linguistic Society of America. He is also constantly invited to address linguistic departments and associations here and abroad, and his colleagues and former students have published a Festschrift in his honor. So his accomplishments have, in fact, been recognized. But we think it appropriate to go even further. "A great man", Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "is a strategic point in the campaign of history, and part of his greatness consists in being there." In selecting Morris Halle for the Killian Award, we wish to underline our good fortune in having him here as our colleague at this strategic point in the history of Linguistics and of M.I.T.