



IN MEMORIAM

Mary Richie Key
Professor of Linguistics, Emerita
Irvine
1924– 2003

Mary Richie Key was born in Julian, California on March 19, 1924. She graduated with a B.A. in education from Westmont College (1944). She also worked as an aircraft riveter during the Second World War, when she met and married Harold Key. After the war, the couple spent almost two decades in Mexico and Bolivia working among native American Indian communities for the Wycliffe Bible Translators and doing research on the local languages. Mary attended linguistics summer sessions sponsored by the Linguistic Society of America at the University of Chicago (1954), at the University of Michigan (1959), and at UCLA as a postdoctoral visitor (1966). She had earned her Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Texas in 1963. After three years as an assistant professor of linguistics at Chapman College (1963-1966), she was among the first faculty members hired at UC Irvine, where she was appointed assistant professor in the English Department (1966). In 1970, she received a full appointment as Associate Professor in the School of Humanities' Program in Linguistics, which she had helped develop, and which later became a full-fledged department within the School of Social Sciences (1990). Mary was promoted to full professor in 1978 and retired in 1991. She continued to be active in her research throughout her retirement. She died in Tustin on September 5, 2003. She is survived by her daughter Mary Ellen Ellis and her son Tom Key. Her eldest son, Hayden, died in 1984. Mary and Harold Key had divorced in 1964. Mary had married Audrey Patton in 1976. He died in 1996.

A moving memorial for Mary Key was conducted on the Irvine Campus on November 7, 2003, where family members, friends, students, and colleagues paid their respects, remembered Mary in touching and sometimes humorous testimonials, and celebrated her full and productive life. As individuals who knew Mary, many of those present at this memorial were only aware of a relatively small facet of her personality, of her life, and of her accomplishments. The informal exchanges of memories about Mary which took place at that gathering allowed all participants to reminisce fondly about her and also to form a more complete picture of her than the partial and different images we each had previously carried in our minds.

Mary Key showed a precocious interest in things linguistic. For example, she began studying various alphabets when she was just eight years old. She actually pursued this line of investigation later on in her professional life. In 1966, she reviewed for the *International Journal of American Linguistics* a book by William Smalley entitled *Orthographic Studies: Articles on New Writing Systems*, and in 1968, she wrote an article on "The English spelling system" for the *Elementary School Journal*. Mary's interest and curiosity about languages never left her, and she was still doing research for her pet project, her *Intercontinental Dictionary Series*, up until the very end of her life. As she was working in her home office not long before her death, Mary overheard a gardener outside her house singing in a language that she recognized to be Aztec, one of the many American Indian languages that she was familiar with. She was delighted to be able to go out and talk to this gardener about his language. This sense of wonderment and excitement enlightened Mary's life throughout. At the beginning of her academic career in 1963 and 1964, Mary Key published three extremely diverse articles concerning American Indians: One was about their music ["Music of the Siriono (Guaranian)"], which appeared in the journal *Ethnomusicology*; another was on a linguistic topic ["Analyzing stress in Chama (Tacanan)"], which appeared in the first issue of the *Chapman College Research Bulletin*;

and a third dealt with Bolivian pottery ["Resin- glazed pottery in Bolivia"], which appeared in the journal *American Anthropologist*. These three almost simultaneously published pieces are early illustrations of the wonderful extent of Mary Key's enduring, insatiable, and multifaceted curiosity about the world.

At UCI, when Mary Key was a member of the English Department, and just an assistant professor, she was very early called upon, by Sam McCulloch, the founding dean of the School of Humanities, to give impetus to the process of establishing a linguistics major. A Linguistics Committee was formed, of which she was the chair, and linguistics at UCI was soon launched, in cooperation with the School of Social Sciences. Over the years, UCI's Undergraduate Program in Linguistics grew to be one of the largest and most successful such programs in the nation. Mary Key was instrumental in providing the foundation for this development and for UCI's distinguished linguistics tradition.

Mary Key published more than 100 reviews, articles, and books in professional journals and publishing houses in a great variety of countries, including the US, Europe, Mexico, South America, Japan, and Korea. Her research interests encompassed a broad spectrum in the field of linguistics, in particular phonology, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, nonverbal communication, language and gender, and the history of linguistics.

Mary Key's language expertise also extended far and wide, ranging from her studies of English and Spanish dialects to her main specialty, American Indian languages, especially those of Mexico and South America, on which she conducted extensive field work. Her Ph.D. thesis was on the Tacanan languages, which are spoken in Bolivia, where she spent some eight years with her family (1954-1962).

One of Mary Key's major research interests was historical and comparative linguistics. She worked within this domain with increasing intensity and passion, even after her retirement as professor emerita in 1991. She was driven by her desire to go beyond the conventional wisdom in the field of historical and comparative linguistics, and to try and establish long- distance genetic relationships across languages, using linguistic evidence as well as anthropological evidence bearing on population migrations through the ages. I still remember the occasion of Mary Key's Humanities Inaugural Lecture in 1981. The title of her presentation was "Intercontinental Linguistic Connections", and it was a fascinating lecture, extraordinarily well attended by campus members, including Chancellor Daniel Aldrich.

This line of research led in turn to what I earlier referred to as Mary's pet research project, the Intercontinental Dictionary Series, the idea to create easily comparable computerized lexicons of Non- Indo-European languages, on the model of what had been done before, in print, for Indo- European languages. Such dictionaries, systematically covering languages spoken in areas such as South America, Australia, the Middle East, and so on, would bring together newly gathered data as well as old data scattered across the continents and often difficult to access, thereby producing an invaluable linguistic data- base for comparative phonological, semantic, and cultural studies. For this on- going project, Mary Key enrolled the cooperation of linguists from the world over. She was herself directly responsible for the South American part of the project, and in more recent times had launched her own exploration of languages spoken in the Middle East, in particular Iraq. She was truly indefatigable. Her Intercontinental Dictionary Series project is continuing under the general editorship of Professor Bernard Comrie, from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

Bernard Tranel