

IN MEMORIAM

Margaret Langdon

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Margaret Langdon, prominent linguist and professor Emerita of the Linguistics Department of the University of California, San Diego, died on October 25, 2005, in Bishop, California, where she had moved recently to be with her daughter. She was the primary expert on the linguistics of Diegueño, now often referred to as Kumeyaay, an indigenous language (or set of very closely related languages) of San Diego County.

Margaret Langdon (nee Storms) was born in Belgium, and spent her childhood there, her teen years marred by the traumas of World War II. Anxious to put bad memories behind her, she emigrated to the United States after the War, her first job in this country being for the Belgian airline Sabena. Eventually, she became a student in the Linguistics Department at the University of California at Berkeley, receiving her Ph.D. in 1966. As a graduate student, she came to San Diego to do fieldwork on Northern Diegueño, working closely with two fluent speakers of Mesa Grande Diegueño (also known as 'Iipay Aa), Ted Couro and Christina Hutcheson. Through her work with them, she created the first substantive grammatical description of the language for her dissertation.

During this time, she also met her husband-to-be, Richard ("Dick") Langdon, who owned a piece of property in San Diego where he developed a large orchard of lychees and other exotic fruits while he supported himself as a plumber. Dick, a lanky six-footer, was raised along with several even taller siblings by their 4' 10" Chinese mother, who had been brought to the United States by her American husband. He had left the family when Dick and his brothers and sisters were small,

and their diminutive but tough mother, who barely spoke English, raised them by herself in San Diego. Dick was a roamer of the back roads of San Diego and Baja California, and had many Kumeyaay friends himself. For the adventurous Margaret, there was no better match.

Luckily, this was the time when UCSD was just starting to develop as a full-fledged campus of the University of California, and Leonard Newmark, the founding chair of the Department of Linguistics at the young campus, offered Langdon a position. With her husband, her home (built by Dick), a child soon to come, her language of study, and a job she was to excel at all in San Diego, Langdon was there to stay.

Langdon taught at UCSD until her 1991 retirement, chairing the department from 1985 to 1988. She and her family also maintained close relations with Kumeyaay communities, visiting and being visited, accepting the Kumeyaay way of life as part of their own. They attended peon games and other tribal functions, often with students. Langdon and her daughter Loni held a memorial ceremony for Dick a year after his death in 2000 in the traditional Kumeyaay manner, with a feast and performances by bird singers. Life at the Langdon's was filled with diversity. Parties at their house were generally attended by a mix of professors and students, plumbers and tree growers, Kumeyaay singers and peon players, and friends and relatives of all kinds.

At a time when many of her colleagues were interested only in what a given language could reveal about linguistic theory, Langdon was concerned with language as a complex and internally coherent system. This concern is evident in her descriptive work on Mesa

Grande, notably *A Grammar of Diegueño: the Mesa Grande Dialect* (1970), the *Dictionary of Mesa Grande Diegueño* (which she published under the names of language consultants Ted Couro and Christina Hutcheson, in 1973), and several texts (Langdon and Couro 1984; Langdon and Hymes 1998; Langdon 2001).

Throughout her career Langdon recognized linguistic diversity in the Diegueño area. She addressed the topic implicitly through her involvement in numerous distinct tribal dictionary projects and language programs and explicitly in several papers (e.g., Langdon 1970a, 1976c, 1991a), concluding in 1991 that at least three distinct languages could be recognized within the Diegueño dialect continuum.

Originally trained as an Indo-Europeanist (e.g., see Langdon 1964, 1966; Malkiel and Langdon 1969), Langdon was also fascinated by the prehistory of Diegueño and the other Yuman languages, and the larger, still controversial Hokan stock of languages with which they are connected. She wrote many papers on the comparative or historical morphology and phonology of these languages. She also received a large grant from the National Science Foundation to compile extensive vocabularies and lexicons of Yuman, making a relatively early use of large-scale computational comparison.

Langdon was keenly aware of language as a vital part of the heritage of its speakers, and devoted much of her career to working with Native American communities to preserve this heritage. Children stopped learning Diegueño several generations ago, part of the world-wide decline in indigenous languages as the global economy and world languages overran them. Yet the descendents of the last speakers are making efforts nowadays to learn their ancestral tongues, even if they can only learn them as second languages. Professor Langdon was a pioneer in what is now a growing field of “linguistics for the community”—in her case, developing publications and materials for second-language learning by Kumeyaays. Among the first of its kind was a book of language lessons, *Let's Talk 'Iipay Aa: An Introduction to the Mesa Grande Diegueño Language* (1975), co-authored with Couro. This user-friendly book, along with the *Dictionary* cited above, is still used today (in photocopied form, since it is out of print) in Kumeyaay language classes. In order to write these books, Langdon devised a practical orthography, again one of the earliest of its kind, that could be easily

typed without special symbols. This writing system is immortalized in such venues as the name Kumeyaay Highway, on Interstate 8 in San Diego County. *Let's Talk 'Iipay Aa*, written in collaboration with an eager set of graduate students, was a book full of excellent grammar lessons, which—when mastered along with the vocabulary from the dictionary—would allow learners to develop impressive conversational proficiency. It is a labor of love, with idioms, stories, songs, and illustrations blended in with the lessons. More recently, the Barona tribe worked with Langdon to produce a new dictionary for their own community, published by the tribe. She had begun work on a revised and expanded edition when illness overtook her; one of her former students has now taken over the project.

Langdon was also the founder of a long-lived annual workshop on Yuman languages and their distant relatives within the Hokan stock. Later these Hokanists were joined by linguists working on Penutian, another stock based partly in California. Through this annual meeting, a strong core of linguists from many places and backgrounds found camaraderie and intellectual partnership. The workshops produced working paper proceedings that were often the first publications of graduate students, and contain an enormous amount of otherwise unpublished information on Yuman and other Hokan languages. As a service to everyone studying Yuman languages, Langdon also kept a running bibliography of publications, which she passed out at the workshops, and eventually published (1996c). The same year, she worked with other scholars to produce other useful bibliographies, on Hokan, Chontal, and Jicaque (Jacobsen and Langdon 1996; Waterhouse and Langdon 1996; Langdon and Jacobsen 1996b).

Langdon also developed an archive of Yuman languages in the Linguistics Department at UCSD, affectionately known as the “Yuman Room,” which included all publications on Yuman languages and large collections of unpublished field notes of many linguists. Before moving to Bishop, she made arrangements for the unpublished materials in the Yuman Room to be housed in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley.

Langdon was a talented and generous mentor to her students, as well as to students from elsewhere who crossed her doorstep. Her door was always open to them, and she never gave the impression that she needed to be doing something else other than talking to them. Her

students were welcome in her home, and she and her husband and daughter maintained lifelong friendships with them. It was through her leadership that the Yuman languages became one of the best-studied language families in California, with students doing dissertations and other research on the various languages in that family under Margaret's tutelage, and later with the guidance of her own students turned professors. Langdon's students have become professors in most of the major universities of the West.

Langdon is survived by her daughter, Loni Langdon of Bishop, California, by a sister in Belgium, and by the many students and colleagues who held her beloved.

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