I would like to welcome you to the 2003-04 academic year at the Language Laboratories and Archives. In this issue of The Native Speaker you will find practical information that will help you use the LLA more effectively. Kay Yang has provided information about software solutions for creating tests and other applications for language study. She and Barbara Need have compiled a list of the LLA’s recent equipment purchases. We hope you find them to be useful additions to the resources we offer to the language teaching, learning and research communities. Lastly, in a new installment of his column, "From the Archives", Joseph Toth describes some of the advantages and disadvantages of using Digital Audio Tape (DAT) for archival backups of recorded materials.

There are some new changes at both sites of the LLA that have occurred since the last issue of this newsletter. I am happy to announce the installation of a new Toshiba photocopier at the LFRC. Many of you already know that this machine arrived right at the beginning of Autumn Quarter. Since October our staff has been busy giving out new copy codes and scheduling training sessions on the copier. Additional sessions will be scheduled, so please ask a staff member or check the postings at the LFRC about upcoming training events. Some of the topics to be covered soon are: scanning documents as TIFFs or PDFs, emailing the scans directly to your own email address, accessing your copier account, and photocopying directly from a computer. Finally, Greg Davidson has completed some major updates to the equipment reservation system that provide it with more features and make it easier to use. Further enhancements are scheduled for Winter Quarter!

In looking over some of the old editions of the NS, I rediscovered a statement that Karen Landahl made in the Fall ’98 issue (#2.1), which is just as relevant today as it was then. She wrote: "We all expect the Labs to provide equipment, services, archives and places to work; but most importantly, the Labs provide an opportunity to build a community of scholars interested in human language—whether that interest focuses on language teaching, research, or the development of course materials." Today, five years later, we continue to focus on improving the quality of our services and resources for language teachers, learners and researchers, striving to meet their expectations for support. At the same time we continue to foster the vision of building a community of dedicated language scholars.

Michael Berger, Manager
The LLA considers the use of software and computer program development to be a crucial part of the ever-changing field of language instruction. In our efforts to remain up-to-date on the latest advances in this area, the LLA sends staff to conferences and workshops to gain familiarity with new computer applications and other technical advances in the field of language study.

From June 17 to 21, 2003, the 8th biennial conference of The International Association for Language Learning Technologies (IALLT) was held at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. This year, I attended the conference for the first time and had a chance to learn about new technologies related to teaching and learning foreign languages.

I was most interested in the sessions that presented or demonstrated computerized courseware-authoring applications. One of these sessions featured TestFabrik, a template that allows an instructor to design multimedia foreign language tests. This application, available in both Mac and PC versions, tests four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. While this application simplifies the use of audio, video and graphics, certain aspects are limited. For example, students demonstrate their listening skills by writing down what they remember after hearing a passage a couple of times. In the workshop, an argument arose as to whether or not this is a good way to test listening skills because this scheme also would require memorization and writing skills. This debate highlighted the limitations of a single application, and the importance of having instructor involvement in the design of any testing program. In spite of these limitations, TestFabrik provides many features that language instructors need. I have a copy of the software and anyone who is interested in using this application is welcome to test it out. TestFabrik was developed by Mr. Daniel Soneson, a professor at the Foreign Languages Department of Southern Connecticut State University, and is distributed for free.

Another impressive product demonstrated at this conference was MaxAuthor, an application developed by the University of Arizona Computer Aided Language Instruction Group (UACALI) in affiliation with the Critical Language Program and the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs (NASILP). This is a comprehensive authoring tool that supports more than 40 different languages. One feature of MaxAuthor is that it allows an instructor to develop courseware content by recording audio files onto the computer (which is, however, not a recommended practice). Once the content has been created, MaxAuthor can automatically generate vocabulary flashcards that aid in student review. The program also allows teachers to design multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank exercises. In addition, there is a footnote function, which allows various types of annotations to be entered. Currently, MaxAuthor is only available for computers running a Windows operating system, but courseware may also be published on the Web where anyone can access it, regardless of their computer’s operating system. However, to take full advantage of MaxAuthor’s features, the developers recommend that a stand-alone application be created for use on a PC. More information about MaxAuthor can be obtained at the following URL, http://cali.arizona.edu/docs/wmaxa/.

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Throughout the past academic year, the LLA's preservation efforts continued to receive major attention. These efforts remain, in fact, a top priority at the Labs. Older materials are slowly decaying, and any sort of recording may become inaccessible due to lack of proper equipment on which to play it. The good news is that we have applied for a preservation grant that, if approved, will allow us to accelerate the task of backing up our archives and putting them on line as well. Such dissemination also serves as a form of preservation.

For the task of preservation, we remain committed to the digital audio tape (DAT) as the archival-storage medium at the Language Labs, though we are aware that new digital media continue to appear, that could, soon make the DAT format obsolete. As far as we are concerned, however, the DAT retains several distinct advantages: 1) the recording length of the longest DAT reaches 124 minutes; 2) the miniature size of the DAT cartridges saves a considerable amount of storage space; 3) our DAT recorders lay down time code on each tape so that we can precisely locate any point on a recording; and 4) as long as DAT players exist, we can play any tape recorded in that format (whereas other current or future digital media may require special ports or software).

In addition, copying to DAT allows for a great deal of flexibility in preparing a high-quality master for dubbing to other media (as compared to, for example a CD). Let me explain. In backing up most of our old tape recordings, I need only select the proper running speed and set the proper playback level ("volume") before I am ready to proceed. Then I simply let the tape play continuously from beginning to end. With some old recordings, though, I encounter any number of difficulties. One such recording I worked on in the past year presented several challenges: not only were the original "takes" done at varying speeds but at unpredictable volume levels amid passages of complete silence or sheer noise. As I encountered these difficulties, I had to stop the DAT, make an adjustment and then resume recording. With our present CD burner, for example, such stopping and starting is not possible. Once the DAT is finished, I have an "edited" version of the original that can function as a "master" for burning CDs, be transferred to a computer for web distribution, and serve as an archival copy as well.

That being said, I must also describe the disadvantages of DAT. All the problems ever associated with audio tape in general present themselves here: stray magnetic fields may damage the data on the tape, a playback machine may chew up the tape, and chemical changes over time may render the tape unplayable. More critically, the "reading" of the data on the DAT is accomplished by a rotating head (similar to the one in a videocassette player). In time, repeated playing will stretch the tape, leaving it permanently curved rather than flat. As a result, the playback head will not be able to read the tape accurately. Our solution to all these contingencies is to always make a secondary DAT back-up from the primary one, so that, if the secondary is ever damaged, we can generate a fresh copy from the primary. The final contingency I have already alluded to: it is only a matter of time before the DAT format itself becomes obsolete. Until then it will have to suffice, pending the arrival of the "final" and "definitive" archival-storage medium!

Joseph Toth, Manager Emeritus of the LLA. Since his retirement in 1998 he has worked on a part-time basis at the LLA as an assistant for special projects.

The satellite program recording studio at the U of M, Ann Arbor
Camcorders
With assistance from the generous Mellon and Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies (CEERES) grants, the LLA has purchased three more digital camcorders. These camcorders have extruded microphones, which produce better sound than the earlier models. They also can capture high-resolution still images, and provide more stable shots when recording, because they are bigger cameras than the older models. Researchers and teachers, who study the countries covered by the CEERES have first priority to the camera purchased with funds from the CEERES grant.

DV(Digital Video) tape recorder/player
A DV tape deck is now available at each site of the LLA. The newer DV recorder at the LFRC has professional-level functions and will be used in developing pedagogical projects employing video. The older model will continue to be available at SS4 at all times for student projects. With this unit, digital video on tape can easily be converted to VHS format, which is still the format primarily used for class presentations.

Auxiliary items for video projects
The LLA has acquired two small but very useful A/V items for video field recording: a shoulder rest for a camcorder and a microphone "fish pole". The shoulder rest aids in steadying a camera when it is hand-held. The "fish pole" allows one to bring the microphone close to the subject even when the camera itself is at a distance; in this way, sound quality is much improved.

DVD players
The demand for DVD players and media has been growing while demand for VHS cameras and playback decks has been declining. Both SS4 and the LFRC now have multiple DVD players, some of which are multi-region, multi-system units.

CD recorders
The LLA has purchased two new CD recorders. One is portable and available for check-out at SS4. The other one is a CD-to-CD recorder, which allows easy editing from CD to CD. This is also available at the SS4 along with other equipment in the audio-transfer rack. The older CD recorder, which has been used for a couple of years at the Language Labs, has been moved to the LFRC so that teachers can have access to a CD player/recorder there, as well.

Field recorders
With funding from the Mellon and CEERES grants, the LLA has purchased a variety of other recording devices for researchers and developers to take into the field. In addition to a new Sony DAT field recorder (bringing our total to 5), we have acquired a smaller Sony DAT recorder—about the size of a Walkman™—which is more convenient to carry and less obtrusive in the interview situation. We are also moving into new technologies with the acquisition of a solid state digital recorder which saves audio to a compact flash card. Moreover, the solid state unit allows direct transfer to a computer via a USB connection.

Microphones
The CEERES grant also allowed the LLA to purchase new microphones. With the growth in digital recording and the number of people taking equipment into the field, we saw a need for three new lapel mics from Sony (which have been used by an Ethnography class with very good results). Clipped to the subject’s clothing, the mics are unobtrusive and remain at a fixed distance from the speaker’s mouth. In attempting to explore new options in recording technologies, we have purchased a boundary mic as well. This type of microphone is placed in a central location between a number of speakers, perhaps lying flat on a table, and picks up the voices of all the people sitting around it. Finally, we expect that another new purchase—a headset microphone—will be used like the lapel-type in interview situations.

Barbara Need, the Manager for the Language Labs (SS4 site), is also Archivist and Computer Specialist for the LLA. Kay Yang is Manager and Multimedia Specialist at the LLA.
LLA Workshop

Computerized Language Exam

On Wednesday, November 12th, at the first LLA Workshop of 2003-’04, Kay Yang, multimedia specialist at the LLA, discussed computerized language exams. She demonstrated multimedia versions of the current Spanish placement test and competency exam. Key features of the multimedia tests include playing back audio clips and keeping track of time with a built-in time controller. The time controller also allows students to take a test individually at any time. Once students finish taking a test, this application will generate answer sheets for examiners to grade. The students’ answers to the multiple-choice portion of the test can be automatically graded. Though the test used for the demonstration was in Spanish, similar tests can be composed in other languages. After the demonstration, there was a discussion about the use of such programs, how they can be improved, and their place in the future of language testing.

LLA Matching Funds

Each year the LLA provides matching funds to teachers who would like to purchase pedagogical materials. The applicant must obtain consent from the chair of their department and secure the commitment of their department to cover 1/3 of the cost of the materials. The LLA will then fund the remaining 2/3 of the cost. These funds are rather limited so applicants are encouraged to submit fairly modest requests. For more information contact Michael Berger at 2-9772.

The computer program Hot Potato was also presented at IALLT ’03. Hot Potato is currently in development at the University of Victoria. The merit of this application is that it reduces the time needed to publish courseware on-line, and it is easy to collect segments to make a bigger project later on. There are six modes available in this application: interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and fill-in-the-blank exercises. A current PC-based beta version of this application supports the entry and display of Unicode. The overall trend in this type of software supports Unicode, which improves the accessibility of applications that develop diverse language courseware, since it allows entry and display of a wider set of character types than ASCII. For more information on Hot Potato, visit http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/.

Finally, I attended an interesting presentation by Debra Hast and Claire Bradin Siskin from the University of Pittsburgh. Their American Sign Language (ASL) course has recently made the transition from analog to digital for videotaping students. By using a digital camera and videocapturing software (called BTV), students record their narration and save it as a QuickTime movie file. After compressing the file, the instructor watches individual movie clips and gives feedback to the students via a digital video file as well. Both students and instructors at the University of Pittsburgh have evaluated this activity positively. Last year, a somewhat similar system was set up on campus at the University of Chicago. The application used is "SquidCam", which allows people to communicate visually, verbally or with text in real-time over a network. Although the video quality in this system is not as good as digital taping, which can be saved as a standard video file (such as QuickTime movie format), students can receive comments from their instructors instantly and there is no need to save documents. This considerably reduces the time required to save video files, in addition to saving computer disk space. Although it was intended to be used by ASL students and instructors, this system can also be adapted for different uses. More information can be found at http://edvista.com/claire/pres/asl_iallt2003/.

THE NATIVE SPEAKER

is the newsletter of the Language Laboratories and Archives, edited by Michael Berger and designed by Kay Yang. Comments, inquiries and submissions can be directed to the editor, Michael Berger. For more information, please visit our website at http://humanities.uchicago.edu/lla.

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