2024. *Proc Ling Soc Amer* 9(1). 5736. https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v9i1.5736.

# The history of the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of Oklahoma

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**Abstract.** I provide an account of the Summer Institute of Linguistics's (SIL) relationship with the University of Oklahoma (OU) from 1942–1987. SIL ended its linguistics summer sessions at OU in 1987 when constitutional issues were brought up about a public institution supporting an organization with openly evangelical roots. I conclude by revisiting questions raised in Dobrin's (2009) collection on the relationship between SIL and secular linguistics.

**Keywords.** history of linguistics; institutional critiques; Oklahoma; University of Oklahoma; SIL International

**1. Introduction.** The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), known also as SIL International, began offering linguistic training at the University of Oklahoma (OU) in 1942 on the main campus in Norman, Oklahoma. OU was the first public institution that hosted SIL's summer sessions. SIL had a relatively harmonious relationship with the university until the 1980s, when constitutional issues were brought up about a public institution sponsoring an organization with openly evangelical roots. This paper is an account of the history of SIL at OU. I begin with background on SIL, its beginnings at OU, its close relationship with OU during the 1950s and 1960s. I then turn to the 1980s when anthropology faculty at OU submitted a report surrounding the nature of the OU-SIL relationship and how that relationship brought up issues surrounding the separation of church and state. SIL decided to cease its activities at OU in 1987. I conclude by revisiting questions raised in Dobrin's (2009) collection on the relationship between SIL and secular linguistics.

1.1. METHODOLOGY. The facts reported below come from archival research at the Western History Collections at OU, from documents found in 49 boxes in the OU presidential collections. The material in these boxes includes letters, contracts, journal articles, reports, audits, flyers, and syllabi. I also report on information from documents I obtained from SIL archives in Dallas that pertained to OU. Oral history interviews with SIL members and OU faculty members present during the 1980s helped contextualize the information I found in archival materials.

1.2. POSITIONALITY. Before I begin, I would like to position myself in relation to the field of linguistics and this project. I am an assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma in the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics. Since 2015 I have been doing fieldwork in Chiapas, Mexico with the Ch'ol language, a Mayan language spoken by a quarter of a million people. My interest in this topic began when I visited the textile collection at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. There I saw many artifacts from Chiapas, and even from the same Ch'ol-speaking region where I work. In the donor files, I found that one of the

* I would like to thank the Western History Archive at the University of Oklahoma for their assistance in locating the many documents on the Summer Institute of Linguistics. I would also like to thank Claire Nicholas and Ella Crenshaw at the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History where the seeds for this research were planted. I am grateful for SIL International in Dallas for sending me additional archival material. I would also like to thank Paul Minnis, David Levy, and Morris Foster for providing me with contextualizing information at the time of SIL and OU in the 1980s. I would like to thank Mike Cahill for his insight on the Summer Institute of Linguistics and for comments on this project. I would like to thank the audience of the 2024 Linguistic Society of America whose comments and questions enriched this paper. Author: Carol Rose Little, University of Oklahoma (little@ou.edu)

Figure 1. Description of this picture from SIL's website: "122 students attend SIL's ninth summer of linguistics training courses. This is the first year that classes are held at the University of Oklahoma. This first of many institutional partnerships continues for more than thirty years (until 1987). Townsend's concept of SIL as a non-sectarian organization is put into writing and becomes official policy." (SIL International 2024b)

donors of the Ch'ol artifacts was Evelyn Aulie, née Woodward, who was the co-author of the Ch'ol-Spanish dictionary (Aulie & Aulie 1978), with her husband, Wilbur. Both spent decades in Chiapas as SIL missionaries, learning Ch'ol, translating scripture and working on literacy materials. Looking further into the history, I found that SIL had been hosted at OU from 1942–1987. During the summer of 2023, I decided to research the relationship between OU and SIL.

One of SIL's core areas of contributions listed on their website is scripture translation. When researching for this project, many have been curious about my religious background. I was raised with Christian (Protestant) traditions, celebrating Christmas, but never went to church regularly.

**2. Background on SIL.** According to their website, SIL is a "global, faith-based nonprofit" whose "core contribution areas are Bible translation, literacy, education, development, linguistic research and language tools" (SIL International 2024a). Since the 1930s SIL has been training linguist-missionaries so they may live in remote areas of the world, and learn and study local languages to translate the Bible. As one member of SIL told me, apart from the Linguistic Society of America, SIL is probably the organization with the largest number of people with doctorates in linguistics in the United States.

William Cameron Townsend began SIL, first known as Camp Wycliffe, in 1934 in Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. He had an epiphany while working with Kaqchikel speakers in Guatemala when one asked him "Why doesn't God speak our language? Was he only the God of English and Spanish speakers?" (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2023). Townsend spent ten years learning and translating the Bible into Kaqchikel. He then decided to train other missionaries to do the same for many other under-documented languages worldwide by offering linguistic training sessions. Less than a decade after its first training session, the organization grew into two affiliate organizations: Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL.[1]

[1] At the time that SIL held its first summer session at OU, it was already its own organization and Wycliffe Bible Translators was another. There is much to be said about Wycliffe Bible Translators and the very close relation-

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|---|---|---|
| Joseph Brandt | 1941–1943 | |
| George L. Cross | 1943–1944 | (interim) |
| | 1944–1968 | |
| John H. Holloman, Jr. | 1968–1970 | |
| Pete McCarter | 1970–1971 | (interim) |
| Paul F. Sharp | 1971–1978 | |
| William Banowsky | 1978–1985 | |
| Martin Jischke | 1985 | (interim) |
| Frank E. Horton | 1985–1988 | |

Table 1. OU Presidents during the time that SIL was held

**3. Beginnings at OU and the Cross years.** Della Brunsteter was a faculty instructor of French at OU who had attended one of SIL's training sessions in Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. In a letter to OU President Brandt, she was impressed by the "superior instruction to anyone preparing to study an unwritten language...if the group can be brought here I believe we would have an ideal set-up for stressing Indian languages as part of the cultural contribution of our own state."[2] She garnered support from the American linguistics community, such as Leonard Bloomfield, who endorsed SIL's program and praised Brunsteter's efforts in getting SIL to OU: "I have never been able to understand why those of our state universities which have American languages at their very doorstep, have ignored this field of research."[3]

SIL held its first summer institute at OU in 1942, where SIL's student body doubled (Svelmoe 2009). Interesting, Svelmoe (2009:633) reports that at first Townsend was reluctant to hold SIL at OU: "because of the ramifications of moving the operation to a major secular university. 'We are very hesitant . . . about going to the University', he reported, 'and are only considering it because they have been so insistent that we begin to think that perhaps God has a purpose in it'." Though, as Svelmoe (2009) suggests, the nature of moving SIL to OU influenced Townsend to clearly delineate the scholarly nature of SIL's linguistic work and its sectarian side. Shortly after SIL's first session, Brandt stepped down from the presidency and George L. Cross became president.

SIL enjoyed a long and supportive relationship during Cross's presidency at OU. He was the longest serving president since OU's establishment. Courses taught by SIL were listed in OU's course catalogue. Contracts show that the Modern Languages Department provided $1,000 towards the operations of SIL from their budget and the university paid 40/45, almost 90%, of the student fees.[4] Throughout the time SIL held sessions at OU, Cross held SIL in high regard and kept in continual correspondence with Townsend. At first, they addressed letters to each other as

ship to SIL. I refer the reader to Aldridge (2018) and Epps & Ladley (2009) for more information. Epps & Ladley (2009:640) reports that SIL "is also the twin of Wycliffe Bible Translators, which has as its goal 'to bear fruit among new believers who also become rooted in God's Word', primarily through Bible translation." It seems that the split into two affiliate organizations was in direct response to beginning sessions at OU, a public institution. SIL was in fact incorporated before Wycliffe Bible Translators.

[2] Brandt 1941–1942, Number 9665, Box 23.

Footnotes like these indicate the OU president's last name, the year of the box pertains to, the number and the box number. All sources cited like this are from the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma.

[3] Brandt 1941–1942, Number 9665, Box 23

[4] Holloman 1970, Number 04842, Box 31

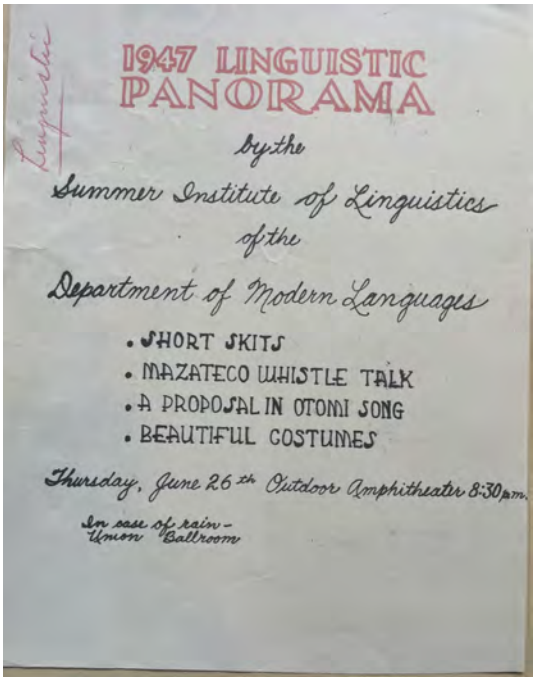



Figure 2. A flyer advertising an event by SIL at OU. Cross 1946–1947, Number 12592, Box 24

"Dr. Cross" and "Mr. Townsend", but by the 1960s, they wrote each other as "George" and "Uncle Cam." Because of SIL's high productivity in peer-reviewed linguistic articles and other scholarly works, in 1949, Cross tried to have OU listed as an affiliation for SIL members who publish in academic journals. However, a letter from an editor of the *International Journal of American Linguistics* stated this would not be possible.[5]

A speech Cross gave at at SIL's 25th Anniversary Luncheon in Mexico City in 1961 exemplifies his esteem of SIL and Townsend:

> As the years have gone by, my respect and admiration for this program has increased. I have been impressed with the complete and detached dedication of the members of the Institute to the cause which they serve. I have developed feelings of great respect and warm affection for the leaders of this great project, especially the amazing Cameron Townsend who is able to do the difficult things immediately and the impossible ones if given a little time.[6]

Cross's high regard of SIL's scholarly work benefited SIL in many ways. In 1956, OU donated an airplane, christened "Friendship of Oklahoma" for SIL's use in Bolivia.[7] In 1963, the US government disqualified SIL applicants from funding for National Defense Foreign Language Fellowships on the grounds that SIL is considered a sectarian organization. SIL requested that Cross comment on this for the US government and in May 1963, Cross defended SIL as nonsectarian: "as a state institution, we have never encountered any sectarianism in this program,

[5] Cross 1949–1950, Number 12635, Box 66
[6] Cross, Emeritus 1944–1980, Number 12362, Box 6
[7] Cross Emeritus 1940–1980, Number 12362, Box 6


Figure 3. Map of university land enclosed with a letter about possible areas for SIL to have their headquarters. Cross 1966–1967, Number 04762, Box 356.

which is of a profoundly scholarly nature, working literally at the frontiers of linguistic study."[8] The scholarships for the students (who were at Cornell University and University of Washington, and had taught for SIL at OU) were reinstated in June 1963. At the end of his presidency, Cross looked into having SIL headquartered in Norman, OK and even found a plot of university-owned land that he send to SIL as a potential place for their headquarters. Eventually, however, SIL settled on establishing headquarters in Dallas, TX where they still are today.

SIL founder Townsend also thought highly of Cross. In a preliminary draft for a documentary entitled "The Year 2000 and the Bible" to be submitted to National Educational Television, one scene reads:

> Dr. George Cross, President of the University of Oklahoma introduces Dr. Kenneth L. Pike, world renowned linguist and President of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Pike at blackboard explains a bit about the modern science of descriptive linguistics. Some trainees working on Oklahoma Indian languages with informants from various tribes dressed in tribal regalia.[9]

It is unclear if this documentary proposal was submitted and there is no indication that it was ever made.

After Cross retired, SIL continued to have its summer sessions consistently at OU. Subsequent archival material after Cross retired in 1968 suggest that the relationship between SIL and OU would never be as strong as during Cross's presidency. Documents in the presidential boxes of Holloman, Sharp and Banowsky mainly contained contracts, articles written by SIL members published in peer-reviewed journals, and course syllabi.

[8] Cross 1962–1963, Number 12246, Box 222
[9] Cross 1967–1968, Number 04780, number 374

Figure 4. A photo enclosed in a letter from Townsend to Cross asking if Cross can help SIL secure airplanes and two-way radios. The description written on the back of the photo reads "The Peruvian Minister of Education arriving at our Jungle Base Mar. 17, 1956, for the graduation of Indian teachers from the training course he sponsors under our supervision." Cross 1955–1956, Number 12706, Box 136. No photos in Cross's archival material were found of the Friendship of Oklahoma.

**4. 1980s: SIL leaves OU.** At the beginning of the 1980s, OU was going through financial difficulties and a financial audit was conducted on SIL's operations at OU.[10] It was uncovered that the university was operating at a deficit with SIL. Around that time, some anthropology faculty were investigating the relationship between OU and SIL.

4.1. ANTHROPOLOGISTS SUBMIT A REPORT TO THE FACULTY SENATE. In 1985, a group of anthropology professors submitted a report highlighting possible legal problems: OU had been subsidizing SIL's presence, raising issues of a public institution subsidizing an openly Christian organization. The "Report Concerning the Status of the Summer Institute of Linguistics" by Paul E. Minnis, John H. Moore, and Stephen I. Thompson from the Department of Anthropology, [11] highlighted SIL's religious goals, use of their affiliation with OU to gain access to work and proselytize in foreign countries, and that, at least in 1955, to be accepted into SIL "applicants must be evangelical in faith." The faculty stated "we believe that SIL's association with the University raises several basic legal and ethical issues, especially the constitutional separation of church and state." The three main issues were (1) "SIL's status within the University violates the fundamental ethical and legal separation between secular and sectarian institutions" (2) "SIL's association with OU adversely affects the ability of some OU faculty to conduct their research" and (3) "We

[10] Banowsky 1981, Number 11610, Box 98
[11] Horton 1985–1986, Number 11715, Box 3

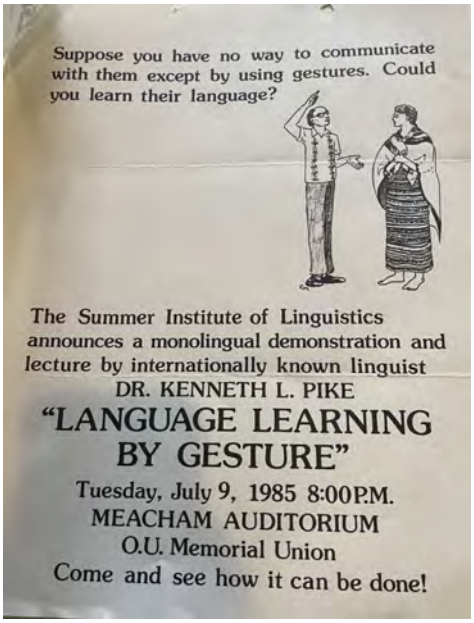



Figure 5. Many demonstrations like this one were done throughout the years at OU. Horton 1985–1986, Number 11715, Box 3

see little benefit from OU's close relationship with SIL...Although SIL conducts classes and provides OU academic credit for their courses, few OU students utilize SIL and fewer still have become students at OU after completing SIL training."

Two anthropology faculty members wrote letters indicating their problems carrying out research because of SIL. One described that he encountered "a surprisingly high level of suspicion and resistance from my potential informants" in Ecuador. He wrote that SIL "had a very negative image in both of these communities..the primary source of this hostility was their practice of proselytizing on behalf of their own version of Christianity among a population that was already Christian."

In the report, a 1984 letter from the chair of the University of Washington Department of Anthropology, where SIL used to hold summer sessions, stated that "the association between his department and SIL was terminated because it offered few advantages and had become a detriment for field research." The faculty senate president appointed three faculty members to a committee to look further into the relationship between OU and SIL.

One member was Rick Tepker, a law professor and constitutional law scholar. He found that SIL is

> openly and candidly a component of an organization that views its Christian evangelical mission as paramount....Their mission, however idealistic and admirable, cannot be an appropriate mission of a functioning part of a governmental agency. On balance, it seems probable that the current close academic affiliation between OU and SIL violates the Establishment Clause.

Tepker's memo also highlights another issue that faculty at OU took with SIL: its uncanny autonomy with respect to its selection of faculty and courses. Officially, the provost's office had

to approve and appoint instructors, but in practice SIL had "complete discretion" in selecting faculty and developing course content for courses listed in the OU course catalogue. This is a level of independence enjoyed by no university department at OU. Tepker's memo also brought up complaints about discrimination in SIL's hiring practices. Most instructors were affiliated with SIL or Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT). At the time, to be a SIL member also meant one had to be a member of Wycliffe and to be a member of these organizations "individuals must affirm specific Christian doctorine as a condition to membership in WBT and SIL." Even though non-SIL members are not prohibited from being employed, the fact that 36/39 of instructors at the 1985 OU institute were SIL and WBT-affiliated and the remaining three were former members led Tepker to conclude that SIL's hiring practices were discriminatory.

Tepker concluded that since no other court case similar in nature had been presented, there was not a clear path forward with respect to the church-state issues:

> The OU–SIL relationship presents constitutional issues that are far too interesting and far too difficult to allow certain predictions or judgements. Both the advocates and the critics of the current relationship can point to substantial legal authority to sustain their position.[12]

The final blow for SIL, however, was not a legal issue, but rather a course audit. Another committee at OU looked into the courses being taught by SIL, finding redundancies in SIL courses with OU courses, such as Cultural Anthropology, which was also taught in the Department of Anthropology.[13] The committee was also surprised at courses listed under a linguistics designator with no linguistic content such as "Interpersonal Relations Across Cultures", whose required readings included texts like *Bonding and the Missionary Task*. The committee also took issue with SIL's theoretical approach to linguistics, Tagmemics, developed by Kenneth Pike, one of SIL's most famous members and SIL's first president, during a time when the Generative linguistic approach, a theoretical framework pioneered by Noam Chomsky, was being widely taught (as it still is today in many American doctoral linguistics programs). The Tagmemic approach never gathered much steam outside SIL, as it seems no other scholars outside of SIL ones worked and published under this framework. The audit recommended that the Department of Anthropology approve, or even teach themselves, any future SIL courses.

4.2. RESPONSE FROM SIL. In response to the reports at OU, SIL sent out a number of letters to faculty in linguistics and affiliated departments in the US and Canada to assess SIL's courses and garner support.[14] Many of the letters they received expressed regret to hear of what was going on at OU ("the news that the University of Oklahoma rejected your linguistics courses for not adequately reflecting the main currents of contemporary theory was extremely distressing to me"). A minority of the dozen or so letters did suggest updating the Tagmemic approach in SIL's syllabi ("the course descriptions you sent me do look dated and narrow...you might find that a lot of cleaning up and refurbishing is called for at the Oklahoma shop.")

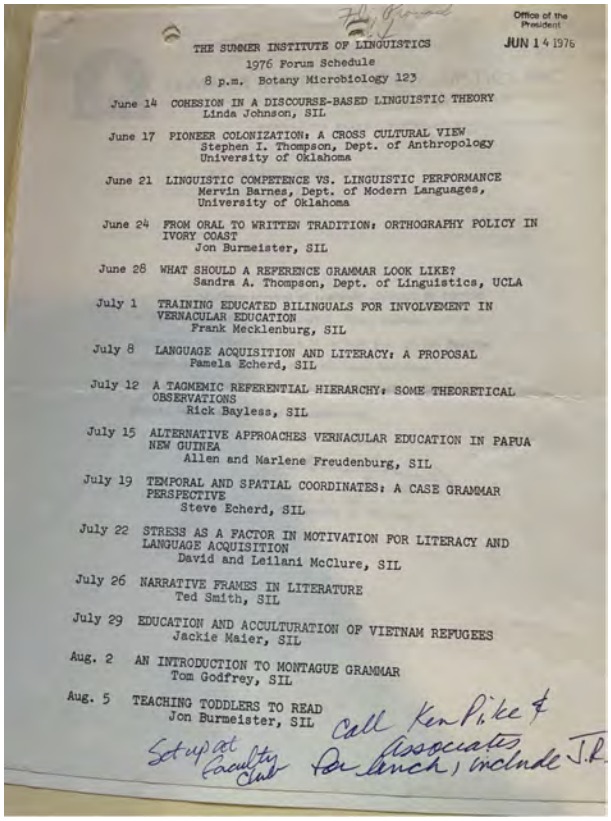
In an undated document from SIL titled "Situation At Norman SIL", it is expressed that

[12] Horton 1986, Number 11739, Box 27
[13] Horton 1986, Number 11739, Box 27
[14] SIL Archival material

> it is clear that this action is a rejection of the Tagmemic approach to linguistics which has been the central focus of our program at Norman...the committee's position is undoubtedly over-strong and from many points of view unfair to our program. It makes unwarranted assumptions about the state of linguistics in today's world (the generative approach is not the only respectable one in the scholarly field) and it makes exceedingly uncharitable judgments on the value of our courses and the degree to which they take account of modern linguistic theories and methodologies.

Another undated document from SIL titled "Closure of SIL school at Oklahoma University" states "our linguistic colleagues and friends on the OU staff appeared to have taken a severe battering in the process that led to the linguistics committee's rejection of our courses."

Ultimately, SIL decided to leave OU: "we judged it wise to treat the conclusion of our program there as inevitable and therefore concentrate our attention on a manner of closure most likely to preserve SIL's reputation and the friendships established over the years." SIL held their last institute in 1987. Kenneth Gregerson, president of SIL in 1986, responded to the criticism in a letter to OU by maintaining that SIL is "committed to scholarly service to all" and that despite that a goal of SIL is to translate the Bible into all languages, SIL was not a "religionist" institution. SIL's 1988 sessions were held at the Universities of North Dakota and Oregon, and at their headquarters in Dallas.



Office of the President
JUN 14 1976

THE SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
1976 Forum Schedule
8 p.m. Botany Microbiology 123

June 14 COHESION IN A DISCOURSE-BASED LINGUISTIC THEORY
Linda Johnson, SIL

June 17 PIONEER COLONIZATION: A CROSS CULTURAL VIEW
Stephen I. Thompson, Dept. of Anthropology
University of Oklahoma

June 21 LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE VS. LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE
Mervin Barnes, Dept. of Modern Languages,
University of Oklahoma

June 24 FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN TRADITION: ORTHOGRAPHY POLICY IN IVORY COAST
Jon Burmeister, SIL

June 28 WHAT SHOULD A REFERENCE GRAMMAR LOOK LIKE?
Sandra A. Thompson, Dept. of Linguistics, UCLA

July 1 TRAINING EDUCATED BILINGUALS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN VERNACULAR EDUCATION
Frank Mecklenburg, SIL

July 8 LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LITERACY: A PROPOSAL
Pamela Echerd, SIL

July 12 A TAGMEMIC REFERENTIAL HIERARCHY: SOME THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS
Rick Bayless, SIL

July 15 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES VERNACULAR EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA
Allen and Marlene Freudenburg, SIL

July 19 TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL COORDINATES: A CASE GRAMMAR PERSPECTIVE
Steve Echerd, SIL

July 22 STRESS AS A FACTOR IN MOTIVATION FOR LITERACY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
David and Leilani McClure, SIL

July 26 NARRATIVE FRAMES IN LITERATURE
Ted Smith, SIL

July 29 EDUCATION AND ACCULTURATION OF VIETNAM REFUGEES
Jackie Maier, SIL

Aug. 2 AN INTRODUCTION TO MONTAGUE GRAMMAR
Tom Godfrey, SIL

Aug. 5 TEACHING TODDLERS TO READ
Jon Burmeister, SIL

Call Ken Pike & Associates for lunch, include J.L.
Set up at Faculty Club

Figure 6. An example of the courses taught during SIL's session at OU from their 1976 summer session. Sharp 1976, Number 04978 Box 111

4.3. BROADER CONTEXT. The break from OU came at a time when there had been a backlash against SIL, especially amongst anthropologists. For example, in *Is God an American?* (Hvalkof & Aaby 1981), had just been published: a volume with 12 contributing articles and an introduction and history of SIL by the editors, many of them scathing critiques of SIL. The first report at OU came on the heels of these criticisms from the 1970s and 80s.

On the legal side, the church-state issues raised in the 1980s would probably not have been a problem when SIL first became affiliated with OU in the 1940s. The Lemon test used in Tepker's memo came from a Supreme Court ruling on Lemon vs. Kurtzman in 1971. This test was used to determine whether governmental actions have violated separation of church and state. Very recently, the law has changed around using public funds for religious education. In 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that state programs that provide tuition to schools cannot exclude religious schools. Soon after this ruling, in June 2023, Oklahoma approved the nation's first publicly funded Catholic charter school, loosening the boundary between church and state.

**5. Conclusions and looking forward.** In an article on linguists' relationship with Indigenous peoples, Rice (2022:8) "encourage[s] all linguists to reflect upon their own practices and upon the history and structure of linguistics in order to... address problematic aspects of our discipline and its history." SIL has created valuable resources and scholarship on under-documented and under-resourced languages which are utilized by academic linguists (Dobrin 2020), but their motivations are spiritual, a point of contention that has been expressed by many secular linguists. SIL continues to bridge a gap "between academically produced knowledge about language on the one hand, and real-world problems on the other" (Dobrin 2009:619). It is important to think about how "academic linguistics might foster the creation of secular linguistic institutions to help serve this important role" (Dobrin 2009:619). I believe that this includes better resource development (and including such work towards progress in one's academic career), more flexible grant funding, and emphasizing capacity building in communities that speak under-resourced languages. I hope that with this case study on the history of SIL at OU, those in the discipline can better understand its roots and continue to improve on gaps and shortcomings.

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