

In Memoriam: Karen Landahl

David Pankratz
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Karen Landahl, 1951-2003

It was with great sadness that we received the sad news that Karen Landahl has passed away.

Karen was an esteemed IALLT colleague and friend, and she will be dearly missed. She had been a valuable IALLT member for many years. She served as Assistant Editor of the IALLT Journal—and then Associate Editor when that position was created—from 1993 to 1998 (Volumes 26-31). During her tenure, she worked with Editors-in-Chief Marie Sheppard and Pete Smith. Karen was an active IALLT member in numerous other ways. She attended many IALLT conferences and presented sessions at them, usually devoted to her specialty, phonetics. She was also a member of MWALLT, the Midwestern regional group.

In her institutional capacity, Karen was Professor of Linguistics at the University of Chicago. She also served as Associate Dean for Computing and Language Technologies, Humanities Division, and was the Academic Director of the Language Laboratories and Archives, University of Chicago.

Karen Landahl's primary areas of research were phonetics and first and second language acquisition. In her dissertation work at Brown University she was one of the first people to show that children have different styles of acquiring language, a serious challenge to Chomsky's claim that all sounds are already inherently present. At the University of Chicago she had a reputation among students for being very dedicated and also quite demanding. Her interests in phonetics, computers and language learning converged in her research, leading to the development of the Visipitch software program, which displays the tones of a human voice on the computer. In one project English speakers used it to learn Japanese, and Japanese students learned English using the same program. According to the University of Chicago News Office, students found that "when training with single words, students could learn to produce

tones correctly, but not hear them correctly, while training with whole sentences improved both understanding and speaking—a discovery with both theoretical and practical consequences.”

Battling a cancer that took away her ability to speak, the last years of Karen’s life were both terribly difficult and remarkably successful. She flung herself into her work whenever possible, focussing on topics related to her condition. According to the obituary released at the University of Chicago, at the time of her death she was working on four manuscripts that came out of her recent experiences. They include: “Speechless: On Being Dumb”, which explores what life is like without speech; “Prayer”, in which she gave consideration to what ‘prayer’ may mean after having so many friends and relatives tell her that they were praying for her; and “Darmok”, which describes a teaching aide based on one of Landahl’s favorite episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

On a personal note, I know that Karen was especially fond of IALLT, not only because of its mission, but also because of the down-to-earth focus of the organization, its emphasis on problem solving, and the genuine interest and compassion its members typically show for one another. We will truly miss her professionalism, her tenacity, her wit and her caring. Finally, I happen to know that Karen was an enthusiastic opera buff; I pray that the angels are singing for her now.

Any comments to share about Karen can be directed to me or to Barbara Need, University of Chicago, at language-lab@uchicago.edu, who is in touch with Karen’s family, including her parents. ♦