SCM: This is an interview with Dr. Seymour Menton, Founding Chair of Foreign Languages and Literatures, May 30, 1990, in Humanities Office Building 360. Now, Seymour, the first question is, since I last interviewed you, which is 1974, what have been the developments in foreign languages?

SM: Well, if you are talking about methods of teaching foreign languages, Sam, probably the biggest innovation has been the introduction and the success of the natural approach, which was pioneered here by Tracy Terrell. The main aspect of that is teaching a conversational approach to foreign languages and not correcting the students. That's the biggest innovation. Do not correct their errors, with the idea that that inhibits them, and that when you learn to speak little by little, by listening to what the teacher is saying, the errors will gradually disappear. So it's the natural approach, and Tracy Terrell was here for many years before passing on to the University of California at San Diego. And he gave workshops all over Orange County and all over the country promoting this natural approach. And then he wrote a textbook which is now a best seller, in collaboration with
two graduate students of ours, Magdalena Andrave and Miguel Munoz.

SCM: One quick question here. Tracy died, did he not?

SM: No, he's still living but he's very ill, and unfortunately the prognosis is bad. In fact, this afternoon Dick Barrutia is driving down to San Diego to see him and we're preparing different homenajes for him.

SCM: How do you spell that?

SM: That's H-O-M-E-N-A-J-Y-S. I'm trying to think of what the exact equivalent would be in English. It's a ceremony honoring an individual, not necessarily because he's dying.

SCM: (inaudible)

SM: But it's used . . . In fact, last week I was in Mexico City and then to La-Sea-la, there was a conference on Mexican short story. And one of the high points of the meeting was an homenaje for Luis Leyel who is one of the grand old figures in Latin American literature. And he's now eighty-three years old, but still going strong, still doing research and very active.

SCM: Now that really doesn't cover, Seymour, everything that's happened. You've got new members in the faculty and new courses and things like that. Aren't you picking up more students than you ever did?

SM: Oh, sure. There are many neat things that have happened in the department. I thought you were asking more about general
trends in the teaching of foreign languages. Now, our Department of Spanish and Portuguese has grown a little bit. We now have, I think, fifteen full-time people, and I'm proud to say that's it's really an excellent department. In the national rankings, we rate in the top twenty, and I think we deserve to be really higher than that. Because if you look at the ratings, they coincide more or less with the prestige of the institution and not the reality of the department. By that, I mean that the Spanish departments at Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Stanford rank in the top five, even though those individual Spanish departments are relatively weak and definitely weaker than ours. So that if we were ranked solely on the quality of our department, I think we would probably rank in the top five. Every one of our faculty members is very active in research, publishing and attending professional meetings in the United States and all over the world. And within the last year or so, we have gotten, I think, very important recognition. The International Association of Hispanists, which is the most prestigious of all the organizations of Hispanists, which meets every three years, is going to have its August 1992 meeting here at Irvine, at UCI, and the Spanish Department is organizing it and hosting it. And there will be approximately 1,000 Hispanists coming here for a whole week, from Europe, Latin America and all parts of the United
States. And then also this meeting will coincide with the celebration of the quincentennial of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, so that we're also involved in doing a lot of fund raising for this event, which may have a budget of over $100,000.

SCM: That's very interesting, Seymour. And this is during the summer so they can live in the dormitories?

SM: Right, yes.

SCM: That's a wonderful thing.

SM: Yes. There is a Director of Conference Services here, Jeff Cole, and he's helping me organize it. Most of the participants will be housed in the dormitories, and I think they are charging something like $35 a night, including three meals each day, so that's very good.

SCM: Yes.

SM: Of course, some of the more affluent of our participants will want to stay in a hotel, and we are looking at different hotels and trying to bargain with them and get the best possible conditions.

SCM: My memory, Seymour, about hotels, is that the Sheraton Hotel is very reasonable. It has a free breakfast, you know, free continental.

SM: Yes.

SCM: And I had a friend from the University of Calgary come down for three or four days, and she really found the Sheraton
very good. Now, you've really taken care of my question two, Seymour: How has your department of Spanish and Portuguese progressed? And that's a great honor to have this Hispanists' conference.

SM: Yes.

SCM: Now, three, do you get as many students taking foreign languages? And did I hear that there's a new foreign language requirement going on in other schools? Did I not hear that right?

SM: Other schools outside . . . ?

SCM: No, no, they were talking about . . . Other schools, in the general education requirements, now have to take some . . . You know, they are very encouraged to take foreign languages.

SM: Yes. Yes, that's true, Sam. It used to be that a student could graduate UCI, outside of Humanities, without taking foreign languages, because there was one category in which foreign languages were lumped together with math and computer sciences. So that a student could fulfill that requirement by taking math or computer sciences or linguistics. That's no longer the case. They must fulfill the foreign language requirement. And I think they added one quarter to it, so that this will encourage students to take more foreign language in the high schools. And it will add to our enrollments. Of course, the problem is whether we have the teaching power to accommodate all those students, because
right now we are turning students away, in spite of the fact that we've had to increase the size of some of our lower division classes. So that I'm hoping that the financial situation of the university in general will enable the administrators to provide the necessary resources for us to teach those courses well.

Let me add one more thing to the previous question, Sam, about the prestige of the department. One thing that is in the works now, I don't know if it will develop or not, but if it does, it's really very exciting, and that is that the Spanish government is planning to establish a number of cultural institutes throughout the world, similar to the French Alliance Francaise and the German Goethe Institutes. And the consul, the Spanish consul in Los Angeles, after looking at many different colleges and universities in this area, has decided that UCI would be an excellent place to situate, to have one of these institutes here. So, right now, the Chancellor has appointed a committee and we have been involved in talks with the Spanish consul and, hopefully, that will develop into something very important here.

SCM: Well, that's particularly exciting, Seymour. When will this occur, if it does occur?

SM: Well, if it does occur, hopefully, we would have a building in place within maybe three years. And the reason for the
urgency is that the Spanish consuls are appointed for three-year periods, and this particular consul--his name is Garrigues . . .

SCM: How do you spell that?
SM: G-A-R-R-I-G-U-E-S, Eduardo Garrigues, he is very much interested in this project and he would like to see it through to completion before his term is up. He is also a good friend of our professor in Biology Francisco Ayala.

SCM: Oh, that's exciting. I've met Ayala. This is all very good for you and I think you've done a great job here. What about yourself, now, question four? You talked to us at the Forum about recent developments in Latin American novels and literature. What are you doing specifically?

SM: Okay, well, of course, I've been involved, as you know, in many different research projects in my twenty-five years at Irvine. And right now, for the past two years, I've gotten very excited about a new project which is the new historical novel in Latin America. One could say that since roughly 1979 the majority of the novels written and published in the Latin American countries have been historical novels, which differ in many ways from the traditional historical novel which was modeled after Sir Walter Scott's novels. The new historical novels, for one thing, usually have as protagonists not fictional characters but the famous historical figures themselves. People like Christopher
Columbus, Magellan, Cortez, Maximilian and Carlota, Simon Bolivar and people who are especially famous like that. At the same time, these novels also present the philosophical ideas which were made famous by the Argentine writer Jorge Borges, that reality and history also are unknowable, so that in some cases the authors play fast and loose with history. In other cases, they give conflicting views of historical events and historical characters. And it's just fascinating. I've always had an interest in history, and it's just fascinating to me to see how these historical novels are presenting history in many different ways.

SCM: Well, Seymour, would this involve rather a large book, wouldn't it?

SM: Yes.

SCM: Or two volumes?

SM: Yes, right. This is definitely going to be a book. I have three or four chapters written already and I'm now working on the theoretical introduction, trying to explain, first of all, the nature of these new historical novels, and then why they happen to occur at this particular time. Why are people writing historical novels from 1979 to the present? And how do they vary from country to country? Why are there more historical novels being written, let's say, in Argentina than in Chile? Or why does the Mexican historical novel suddenly crop up later than that?
SCM: That's very good and interesting, and I'll look forward to the book, Seymour. Now, the fifth question is a question as to... I don't know whether you've taken the follow-up tests of students who have taken foreign languages. The question really is how are your foreign language requirements for our students majoring in the School of Humanities which we put in at the very beginning twenty-five years ago and how has it been succeeding, in your view?

SM: Well, without real data to support my statements, Sam, because I think you need follow-up interviews on this, I think that at least in Spanish they have succeeded. The requirement has succeeded well because I think from the beginning the Spanish Department has placed a great premium on excellent teaching. And also, from 1965 on, as you know, we have appointed experts to supervise the teaching assistants. While in other universities, you know at that time in the late sixties, they were still assigning the job of supervising the TAs to the most recently appointed assistant professor, whether he be trained in applied linguistics or literature. And that system was a dismal failure, and I'm happy to report most universities today do have experts supervising the TAs, and that has improved the quality of teaching.

Also, I think, because of our location here in Orange County, we have been fortunate to get as TAs a relatively
large percentage of native speakers of Spanish, most of whom have come in with some teaching experience. So that one of the things that I'm most proud of in the department has been the high level of teaching across the board, from the lower division to, you know, the upper division courses and graduate courses.

SCM: An example of this, I presume, would be Zidia Webb supervising her TAs in Portuguese. Who does the French?

SM: Betty Guthrie.

SCM: Yes, Guthrie, G-U-T-H-R-I-E. Now, of course, I'm asking you about Spanish.

SM: Right.

SCM: Now, have you made your plans for the year 2000? And how big will your Spanish and Portuguese Department be?

SM: Well, it's hard to say. I think that we could use another, say, five FTEs by 2000. I understand that some departments are asking to double the size of the faculty. But I think that with five more we could really be truly one of the best departments in the entire country. We do have a couple of recent appointments that I'd like to comment on. Zidia Webb, our Portuguese teacher retired last year. She took early retirement and she has been replaced by an assistant professor with a Ph.D. from NYU. Her name is Anna Ferreira. That's F-E-R-R-E-I-R-A. She was born in Portugal but has relatives in Brazil and she actually teaches the Brazilian
dialect of Portuguese. And she already has her dissertation accepted as a book and she has given several papers at conferences and she looks very promising as a researcher.

We also appointed last year Juan Bruce-Novoa. His last name is hyphenated, B-R-U-C-E, hyphen, N-O-V-O-A, who's probably the number one specialist in Chicano literature in the country, in the world, in fact, and he's also very well prepared and has published quite a bit on Mexican literature. Right now, he's teaching in Germany, and in the fall he's going to be on leave teaching at Harvard, but he'll be back in the winter and the spring. And I think that was a major addition.

We also gave . . .

SCM: Do you think Harvard will keep him?

SM: There may be, but I don't know. I hope not. But he's moved here with his wife and son and they've bought a house in University Hills, so we're hoping that we can keep him.

We were also given last year a permanent position for an outstanding visiting professor, which means that each year we will have probably for two quarters some outstanding person. The first one will probably be Elias Rivers who's an outstanding, probably the outstanding American Golden Age specialist in the country. He'll be coming in the winter and spring of 1991. And then for the following year, we've already contacted Alfonso Sastre, S-A-S-T-R-E, who is one of
the most famous contemporary Spanish dramatists. So that will provide a constant stimulus for the department.

SCM: You favor this notion of a very distinguished person, a different person every year? Or would you, if you had your druthers, appoint a very distinguished person to be here permanently? Which would you prefer?

SM: Well, personally, I would definitely prefer the permanent position. But even if it were not a super star--because I think a permanent person, in addition to teaching and research--forms part of the department teach, participates in committees, directs dissertations, more. But we were told that it was the visiting professor or nothing.

SCM: Are you a member of ... Jack Peltason in 1966 said you inherited a super star, so you brought Pages, P-A-G-E-S, Larrey, L-A-R-R-E-Y-A. And he's back in Argentina or how is he?

SM: Well, unfortunately, Pages stayed with us, I think, it was only about two years, possibly three, but then he went back to Argentina. He had family there and he couldn't resist the call of Argentine politics. He is the director of an institute of Argentine literature there and, as far as I know, he's doing well. He writes occasionally. He may be getting close to retirement now. I suspect he is over seventy.
SCM: Well, that would be right because I know he was well along when we appointed him back in 1966. But he had his son with him, as I recall, but the rest of his family was back in Argentina. Going on now to question seven, Seymour, and moving away from the department. You've always been very conscientious, serving on senate committees. I know that you did so when I was Chair of the Academic Senate, and you yourself became Chair of the Academic Senate what year?

SM: Nineteen sixty-four.

SCM: In 1964 to . . .

SM: No.

SCM: Not 1964.


SCM: In 1984 to 1986. Could you tell me what you consider your main achievements were as Chair?

SM: Well, yes, Sam. I think it was a very interesting period because I became Chair of the Senate the same year that Jack Peltason became Chancellor. And I would like to take . . . well, take credit for three different areas in which I really worked hard. And I'm happy to say that I think my efforts have borne fruit.

The first area is one that I championed and campaigned for unsuccessfully for the first twenty years here, and that was the question of cultural diversity and internationalizing the campus. For those first twenty years, I had thought that
I was a voice crying in the desert, saying that Irvine was the least internationally oriented, of all the campuses in the United States. And I think that was true. And I think that it finally started to turn around, around the year 1984, thanks, in part, to the large influx of Asian students. Right now, I'm happy to see that the change in the feeling of the faculty, basically, and the administration, is that we now have as part of the breadth requirement a requirement for students to take--graduation requirement--to take two course involving both cultural diversity and international affairs. Defining it, the definition is loose.

At the same time, the new Dean of the Graduate School of Management for the first time is internationalizing their school, and he recognizes fully the importance of preparing business students to do business in the international climate. Also I'm happy to see that, I think it's two years ago, that a Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures was created in the School of Humanities. Sam, you recall that I appointed the first Chinese teacher back in . . .

SCM: Mrs. Loh.
SM: Mrs. Loh, I think it was 1966 or 1967.
SCM: (inaudible)
SM: Yes. And then we had Chinese and Japanese being taught here for a number of years, until they were eliminated during the
budgetary crunch in the 1970s. At that time they were being taught in Comparative Culture. And then there was a period of probably over ten years in which they were not taught. And then when the idea of teaching Chinese and Japanese came up again, unfortunately, most of our colleagues in Humanities voted against it. And it was only under pressure from the Vice Chancellor's office, Bill Lillyman, and the senate committees that they decided to accept the idea of having the Department of East Asian Languages. And also this is when the History Department appointed a specialist in Asia, Bin Wong.

SCM: Oh, yes.

SM: Bin Wong who was a . . .

SCM: And now we have Chang.

SM: And now you have another one. And I think that we are committed to the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures to appoint a total of, I don't know, five or six over the next few years. So that, I think, is, I feel, my most important achievement as Chair of the Senate.

The second thing that I campaigned for was to raise the quality of the students here, both undergraduate and graduate students. At the time when I became Chair, I think Irvine was getting the weakest students of all the UC campuses. And I think that that is now being turned around. I don't take credit for it, but I did do a lot of talking in those days
to people in the Admissions Office and in Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, and tried to impress on them the fact that we needed to do something to attract better students. I see it now in my own undergraduate classes, that the quality of the students and their preparation have improved. The same is true of graduate students. I think that we are now getting better graduate students. Little by little, Irvine is becoming better known throughout the country and throughout the world, and we no longer have to explain where Irvine is. It's an established university and it's only natural that we are attracting better students. And I think that will improve in the next few years, as potential teachers realize that there are going to be many job openings available for them in the 1990s and beyond.

The third area in which I worked hard as Chair of the Senate was in establishing the importance of UCI's interacting with the secondary schools and the community colleges, not only in the field of articulation, but also directly interacting with those schools, teaching, giving lessons and lectures, and talking to those teachers. Because if we can help improve the quality of the schools that feed us students, we are obviously helping ourselves.

Two of the people that have probably done the most in that area are Mare Taagepera in Chemistry.

SCM: How do you spell that?

SCM: And the first name?

SM: Mare, M-A-R-E. And the other person is Mike Fried in the Math Department, who was here about six or seven or eight years ago and then left and went to the University of Florida, realized he had made a mistake, and came back last year. And he's been very active also, although he is a top flight research person.

SCM: Well, those are fine accomplishments, Seymour, as Chair of the Academic Senate. And I know you've been interested in all these things. You might be interested about Chang here. They were trying to get him at Stanford. And so he got . . . He was up for his tenure, and he got his tenure as associate professor, and he got step two. So now, turning to the question of your serving on the Academic Senate, you used to go up to the Council meetings once a month, and sometimes committees took you there more often. And a lot of those meetings were at Berkeley. But the question of shared governance was always something I never was greatly convinced that President Saxon was that interested, really, in shared governance. We had to battle with him a fair bit. Now, you were there in the time of Gardner, were you?

SM: (inaudible)

SCM: Yes, well, what were your opinions there?
Well, I think that President Gardner has been a very strong president, a leader with his own ideas and his own agenda. At the same time, I consider him an extremely astute politician. So I think that he has worked well with the Academic Council. While I was on the council, one of those years Marjorie Caserio was the chair of the council, and I think she worked well with Gardner and he consulted her. Although I think that probably the shared governance is more important on each campus, and I think at UCI, in general, it has worked well. In our twenty-five years, I think it is quite an accomplishment that there have not been any major conflicts between the Chancellor and the faculty. One could not say the same about the other UC campuses during that period. The only problem, of course, is that it is an extremely time consuming job for those faculty members who do participate actively on the committees. And, unfortunately, some of our colleagues do not offer to serve on those committees, because they're very wont to concentrate on their research, which will be very rewarding to them in financial terms. And although I understand that and I am very much interested in spending as much time as I can on research, at the same time, I like to feel part of the institution and be a team player. And I think participating on those committees is one aspect of our work here.
SCM: Well, that's right, Seymour. And, of course, you're a very good teacher, and we want to stress good teaching. I notice that the president of Stanford wants to do something about getting really good teaching, but he said also research, you could do both.

SM: True.

SCM: Well, that's interesting that Stanford is making . . . As far as my daughter Ellen was concerned, she took a degree at Stanford in Classics and History, a double major, and she really thought the teaching was good. But the president of Stanford wants to stress it all the way down the line.

Now the last question is open-ended, really. Have we not covered anything that we should have talked about? And have you any suggestions for me as the Historian of UCI?

SM: Well, before I get to that question, Sam, I would want to add a few words on teaching, because I think you deserve some of the credit for that as the first Dean of the School of Humanities. I remember when you appointed me, you told me that you did not want to repeat the errors that had been made at Berkeley, which caused, in the mid-sixties, quite a notorious student revolt.

SCM: Oh, yes.

SM: And that more positive attitude toward teaching pleased me because I had always considered myself a teacher and always spent a lot of time preparing my classes, thinking of new and
more interesting ways to present the material. And in the recruiting of our first faculty in all of the languages, I can point specifically to some outstanding research scholars whom we did not even interview because we had heard that they were not outstanding teachers. And we were definitely looking for people who could be both good researchers and good teachers. And with a relatively light teaching load, I did not think at that time that it was unreasonable to expect both things. And I think that that has been successful, that it makes Irvine better than some of the other universities.

I think, Sam, that we have covered most of the important things. I think that I'd like to conclude by saying that I feel very excited now--almost with the same excitement with which I started here in 1965. All of us were extremely excited with the prospects of building a new university and trying out new ideas. And then, for about fifteen years, things were relatively stagnant here. There were no new resources available, the student body was not growing, and now, in the past five or six years, roughly, we've had a surge of students and monies being available for the construction of new buildings. There are new programs and everything is moving ahead, which I like very much, and I like to see change.
SCM: Well, you're certainly going to see change, Seymour. I think we're going up to about 26,000 students by the year 2005. We've had $300 million worth of construction over the past five years, and, of course, it includes one of the few things coming, like the Science Library. But this Proposition 111 is absolutely crucial. And Peltason told the retirees . . . I went along to that ceremony yesterday, where they gave a little plaque to those of the staff, not the faculty. And Jack said this is the most important referendum, you know, item, that the University of Irvine has ever had, because we will depend upon this. And Gardner made a pitch for it at a conference I was attending last week in Berkeley. But there is something I read in the paper. There's a coalescence of the various people opposing. They weren't very well organized, but now they are, and they're going around this question of the gas tax. Because the federal government, with incredibly lousy timing as far as we're concerned, talks about a gas tax, and making some other taxes, say, oh, sin taxes, they call them. (chuckling) Liquor and tobacco and so on. But they've really got to get the vote out on this. It's really very disappointing.

SM: Well, I certainly agree with you, Sam, on the importance of this referendum. But I'd like to put it in a larger frame. And I think that one of the reasons why the United States has declined somewhat as a world power is the reluctance of
politicians to propose new taxes. I think that if we want to improve the quality of life in the United States for everyone, we need more taxes. And I think the people, the individuals, have to be a little less selfish and have to be willing to pay for new programs, which in the long run will help the country and help them.

SCM: Now that's exactly right. That's what I've been saying for about ten years. This timidity on the part of politicians to suggest any kind of taxes, to raise things for what we need. But Gardner stressed very much the importance of that. And they have prepared a budget, should it not go through, and it definitely will be cutting back on things. And Irvine will cut back our momentum.

SM: Yes, right.

SCM: That's the problem. Well, Seymour, thank you very much for this very fine interview. It's been lots of fun. And it's nice to have another one from you now. What I'll do is . . . Well, I'll explain it to you when I turn this off what happens next.

END OF INTERVIEW