



Milton M. Azevedo. *President's Message:*  
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*Saludos, saudações, greetings.* I would like to begin this first chat at the President's Corner by thanking those of you who voted for me in 2007, thus honoring me with my third opportunity to serve our Association in a formal capacity. I will do my best to live up to your trust.

I would also like to thank those colleagues whose term on the Executive Council has just ended, for their invaluable contribution to our Association, and to offer a warm welcome to the new members, with whom it will be my privilege to work.

Since I joined the AATSP in the early 1970's, our profession has encountered quite a few challenges, but perhaps none as critical as those we face at present. One aspect of today's challenges concerns the complex issues raised in a document of crucial relevance, namely the MLA report entitled "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," originally published in the MLA's journal *Profession 2007* and available at <<http://www.mla.org/flreport>>. Comments, criticisms, clarifications, and collaborative responses to the report have been released, most recently in *Profession 2008*. Several concerns have been raised, paramount among them the need to reorganize academic programs and departments to replace what the report described as a "two-tiered language-literature structure," a process that would include reconsidering the role of language program directors in department governance. Furthermore, a new department structure must take into account the distinction, both curricular and programmatic, between high-enrollment language departments such as Spanish, struggling departments such as German and French, and departments of less commonly taught languages.

The 2008 MLA convention featured sessions devoted to discussing the report, and judging from comments made by panelists and members of the audience, it is apparent that while there is a wide range of opinions, there is also a shared feeling that change is imperative for the survival of foreign languages as an academic field, intellectually viable and responsive to current needs. Far from being a negative outcome, this divergence of views underscores the report's success in provoking debate about the goals of language departments and the perceived need of change in order to ensure that those goals are fulfilled. Needless to say, although the MLA report focuses on university and college-level matters, the issues it raises have implications for all levels of instruction, including K-12 and community colleges.

Another set of challenges arises from the unique situation of Spanish as an academic discipline closely linked to the position of the Spanish language in the United States. According to U.S. Census data, the Hispanic population has grown from slightly over 35 million in 2000 to an estimated 45 million in 2008. As regards the language, according to the 2000 U.S. census, slightly over 28 million people declared to speak Spanish at home, which represented an increment of over 10.5 million in relation to the 1999 census. Depending on which figures one chooses, the United States is the fourth or fifth country in number of speakers of Spanish. Although this extraordinary datum does not imply the United States is a Spanish-speaking society—in the sense of one in which the language is used in all communicative contexts—it does mean that, as an academic discipline, Spanish is in a privileged situation in relation to other languages. No language other than English has such presence in everyday life, particularly in media readily accessible via radio, television, or the Web. Not surprisingly, enrollments in Spanish language courses have reached an all-time high throughout the country. Ironically, this surge of interest comes at a time when financial troubles are leading to cancelling classes, postponing much-needed faculty searches, and increasing course enrollments to levels that turn seminars into lecture courses and make it difficult, if not impossible, to use class time for developing meaningful communicative ability. Furthermore, the welcome growing presence of heritage speakers in our departments should also encourage us to reflect on the fact that much research is needed on issues such as language loss and replacement, the methodology of teaching heritage speakers, and the process of

reacquisition of a once-native language (Valdés *et al.*, 2006, 2008). Consequently, rather than constituting a reason for euphoria, the fact that so many students sign up for Spanish classes should fill us with a sense of increased responsibility and encourage us to meditate on and debate the role of Spanish in our society. Arguing that Spanish is no longer a foreign language (Alonso 2007), some scholars have proposed that Spanish departments rethink their character and mission, positioning themselves within the scope of American/U.S. studies, not only to reflect Hispanic culture(s) within this country, but also to establish working relationships with Hispanic/Latino communities in their vicinity. These theoretically and pragmatically thought-provoking ideas require serious consideration, with due attention to details such as what would become of Portuguese, which is generally housed (often in the attic, as it were, but that's another story) under the same roof as Spanish. In a hypothetical reconfiguration of Spanish Studies as part of American Studies, would Portuguese be seen as an unrelated foreign language? This might be problematic, considering that Brazil is part of Latin America, and that students in Luso-Brazilian studies often come from Spanish, as double majors, or minors, or under other arrangements. Suitable accommodation would also be needed for faculty who teach and do research in both Spanish and Portuguese.

As members of the profession, we may hold a variety of views about these issues, but we cannot afford to ignore them. Since these challenges affect all of us, it is urgent that we engage in a continuing dialogue on the most effective ways to meet them in order to carry out our mission as teachers and to strive to maintain a position of leadership in our profession. This is a collective project that requires us to act together —*¡todos a una!*

I send you all my best wishes for a very productive new year.

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### **Works cited**

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