

## **The Past Doesn't Stay Behind Us: RC 25 in Historical Perspective by Celine-Marie Pascale<sup>5</sup>**

The International Sociology Association established “Research Committee 25, Sociolinguists” in the [late 1960s](#). When the RC was founded, it filled a need among linguists from around the world who had faced limited conference opportunities. Sandi Michele de Oliveira, a linguist by training, joined the RC in the 1990s and explained that at the time: “the term ‘sociolinguistics’ encompassed the broad range of studies that brought together issues of language and society. By contrast, the term ‘language and society’ was associated more specifically with the field of anthropology.”

Although most of the bulletins from the early years have gone the way of 3.5” diskettes, Sandi was able to locate a link to an ISA bulletin [included here](#) to give everyone a sense of the times. At one point in the early development the RC had a print journal as well as a newsletter regarding events, grant opportunities and calls for articles. Sandi served for several years on the executive board with then-president Dede Boden. Sandi and Max Travers later stepped in as acting co-presidents when Dede Boden died in 2001; and in 2002, Sandi was elected president of the RC. When I arrived in 2006, for the XVI World Congress held in Durban, South Africa, the RC was under the leadership of its [10<sup>th</sup> executive board](#).

As you likely know from experience, a World Congress is an extraordinary experience that draws about 5,000 scholars from around the globe. Durban, less than 10 years from the end of apartheid, was a vibrant city in transition. Located, on the eastern edge of South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province, the city is home to beautiful beaches and world-famous botanical gardens. Colonial, African, and Indian influences seemed to shape every aspect of this industrial city. Unfortunately, in 2006 the remnants of apartheid never seemed to be far behind. Conference attendees were sternly warned about violence and armed police seemed to be everywhere.

I remember going with a small group of colleagues one afternoon to visit a restaurant said to serve as an informal LGBT community center. As we walked back to the hotel, police stopped us and forced us into the back of their windowless van. Nervous glances among us escalated as the police ignored all our questions. The van itself, with built-in restraints, was terrifying. When the van stopped, we had no idea where we were. Police brusquely released everyone and admonished us never to return to that neighborhood where they found us. I was too nervous to look around until after the police left. Then I realized that we were standing in front of the ISA conference hotel. Fresh from that adrenaline rush, I walked into my first RC 25 business meeting with the [executive board](#). Then-president Sandi Michele de Oliveira, Max Travers (treasurer), Isabella Paoletti (newsletter editor), and long-time RC member Roland Terborg were engaged in a deep debate over the precarious future of the RC.

Over the years, RC25 membership had steadily declined. Sandi noted changes within the discipline of linguistics that affected the RC membership. “As sociolinguistics became more embedded within the discipline of linguistics, sociolinguists had greater conference opportunities and less interest in the RC.” It was also true that by 2006 few of the linguists who were members of RC 25 had joined the ISA. This had a big impact on the RC, since the ISA allocates RC sessions and funding based on ISA membership. In addition, given that the ISA is a sociology conference, few ISA members had interest in attending RC sessions that did not

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take up sociology. The overall result was that by 2006, RC 25 had grown small and insular. It could no longer sustain itself.

As I recall the 2006 business meeting, discussion centered on the dissolution of the RC. In hopes of saving the RC Sandi made the bold suggestion: change the name to Language & Society. I remember that suggestion being met first by silence and then by resistance. There seemed to be little interest in reinventing the RC. Yet Roland Terborg and Sandi made persuasive arguments that a name change would give the RC a chance to grow. In that meeting, it was easy for me to see how the name change would enable the RC to engage more actively with the ISA membership and I enthusiastically joined their efforts. By the end of the business meeting the board voted to officially change the name to Language & Society. That year, Sandi and I were elected as co-presidents to shepherd the transition from 2006-2010 along with Roland Terborg, Paramasivam Muthusamy, and Ilkka Arminen (vice presidents), Jenny Perry (secretary), Isabella Paoletti (newsletter editor) and Melanie Heath (treasurer).

In 2008, the ISA held its First World Forum in Barcelona, Spain. To prepare for this conference, I poured over past ISA conference programs to develop a call for sessions that would draw sociologists as presenters and also generate interest among ISA members in RC 25 scholarship. Isabella and I organized the RC 25 program, which included over 100 papers in 20 sessions. We also developed two joint sessions: one with TG03, Human Rights & Global Justice and another with RC 05, Racism, Nationalism, Indigeneity and Ethnicity. That year the RC sessions included presentations by sociolinguistics, sociologists, as well as communication and gender studies scholars all focused on issues of interest to other members of the ISA. Barcelona was an exciting conference. Our membership grew to include scholars from 24 countries from Finland to Brazil, from the United States to Malaysia. The enthusiasm of the moment carried the RC as we celebrated over a collective dinner with 44 scholars. The RC 25 dinner reception was so popular that became a tradition for all RC conferences.

As is always the case, scholars roamed city shopping on Las Ramblas, visiting museums, and of course touring La Sagrada Família. The ISA had warned participants of street crime. Even so, for some of our members, Barcelona was a difficult experience marred by the theft: wallets, passports, and cameras seemed to melt into air. Sometimes it was the work of pick pockets; sometimes we encountered more elaborate schemes with thieves posing as immigration officials. Yet we bonded over the experiences, good and bad, as we went on to rebuild the RC as an intellectual home for scholars studying language and society.

Elections for the 2010-2014 cycle brought the RC a new board. With gratitude we bid farewell to the outgoing board and welcomed a new one: Celine-Marie Pascale (president); Ilkka Arminen (vice-president); Taiwo Abioye (membership), Melanie Health (treasurer) Daniela Landert (webmaster) and Federico Farini (newsletter editor). Later that year, when Ilkka stepped down Amado Alarcón completed the term as the RC vice-president. As a new board we faced daunting tasks that included responsibility for institutionalizing the transition while also organizing conference.

The work of the new board was an intensive process that lasted for years. We prepared for our first conference the XVII World Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden, 2010, by strategizing how to develop sessions that would draw sociological papers and significant ISA audiences, as well as how to ensure that every session had a full panel, while also building relationships with other RCs through joint sessions. In Gothenburg, our program included 128 scholars who participated in 16 sessions; one joint session with RC 32 Women, Gender & Society, a business meeting, and a dinner reception for members.

Despite this success, the transition from linguistics to sociological studies of language was challenging. It was clear to the executive board that not all papers in our sessions actually *focused* on language. Consequently, we worked to develop structures to codify and differentiate the focus of RC 25. We needed to be distinct from the more familiar work of linguistics and

qualitative interviews. This effort required a clear statement of what it means to study language—to look at language, not through it. We developed epistemic guidelines for organizers, a review panel for proposals, and new web content. The board also revised the RC structure and bylaws, which were passed by a general membership vote.

As part of this effort to revitalize the RC, the executive board turned its attention to the newsletter. For eight years Isabella Paoletti, with the assistance of Federico Farini, had capably produced a compilation of news, announcements, and original scholarship. In 2010, the board agreed we had grown robust enough to be able to support both a newsletter and a journal. Federico Farini's leadership skillfully guided this transformation (read more about this on page 13). At that same executive board business meeting, Stéphanie Cassilde, who was then new to RC 25, agreed to work with the board to develop criteria for faculty and student awards and then to work with Federico to link the awards to the newly developing journal. We worked intently for hours at that meeting. When the meeting concluded at 22:30 (10:30 pm), we walk out into Sweden's bright sunlight where the day seemed to start all over again with an enormous meal and dancing at local clubs. By 2011, the RC had grown to 175 members, making it among the largest in the ISA.

The Second World Forum took us to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2012. World Forums tend to be considerably smaller than World Congresses and the was the case in Buenos Aires for the ISA and for RC 25. Amado Alarcón and I organized RC25 sessions at the conference which included 12 regular sessions with 68 scholars, one joint session with RC14, Sociology of Communication, Knowledge & Culture, our business meeting, shared meals, a reception with awards, and a working meeting for the RC 25 journal editors and authors. In Buenos Aires, scholars made concerted and consistent efforts to address linguistic inequities by providing slides in Spanish as well as English. This was new in my experience of the ISA and a welcome change for all. Bilingual presentations helped to facilitate rich conversations among audience members.

Of course, every conference seems to have its own set of crises. In Buenos Aires, it was toilet paper. The ISA had not understood that it was to provide for the cost of toilet paper at the conference. We arrived to find empty toilet paper dispensers in every single restroom. Ultimately, the crisis (and the panic that ensued) contributed to interesting conversations among strangers and resolved in just a few days.

Buenos Aires is a city with a rich nightlife—if you know where to find it! In search of tango, RC members roamed the winding streets late into the night getting lost more often than I can remember doing in any city. Was it the remarkable local wine or the fact that life in tango clubs only start in the small hours of the morning? We never knew, but eventually we found our way. That year we made new relationships with South American colleagues that have endured through the years.

In 2014, Amado and I again organized the RC 25 program, this time for Yokohama, Japan. This program included 125 participants across 13 regular and two joint sessions (RC 30, Sociology of Work and RC 32 Women, Gender & Society). As usual we also held a business meeting and a reception. It was an honor to have served the RC for eight years and time to step down. Our regular election cycle of 2014 once again concluded with gratitude as we bid farewell to outgoing board members and welcomed new ones: Amado Alarcón (president) Federico Farini (vice-president) Stéphanie Cassilde (secretary), Nadezhda Georgieva-Stankova (treasurer), Trinidad Valle (newsletter editor), Keiji Fujiyoshi (webmaster). Notably this was the first board transition for Language & Society. Many people understood the success of this transition as evidence that the structures and expectations that we had established for Language & Society were working. Then, again on schedule, we welcomed a new board in 2018 presided over by Stéphanie Cassilde (president), Keiji Fujiyoshi (vice-president), Mark Fifer Seilhamer (treasurer), Vivian De Melo Resende (secretary), Anna Odrowaz-Coates (newsletter editor) and

Maud Mazaniellow-Chezol (webmaster). Under Stéphanie's leadership, the RC has increased its mandate to build a more globally inclusive globally community. Transitions between executive boards always have tested RC structures and community. Still, we had not yet faced the ultimate test of our community and for the ISA itself: a global pandemic. The executive board faced the pandemic with equal measures of effort, vision, and creativity. Like so many RC members, I am deeply indebted to them for all they have done to maintain the intellectual home of RC 25, *Language & Society* for scholars around the globe.

It has been professionally and personally gratifying to have been a part of the effort to establish RC 25 as a vibrant source of sociological studies of language. We have developed and maintained vibrant conference programs, an international journal, competitive awards for scholarship, and a valuable newsletter. I will be forever grateful to the linguists who first organized the RC and to their vision that enabled them to pass the baton to sociologists. It is easy for me to imagine how much poorer my career would have been without my colleagues in RC25. I know I am not alone. At every conference—sometimes over espresso, sometimes over wine—I've listened to scholars talk about the importance of the RC to their professional careers. While circumstances are improving, for much of my career very few national sociology associations have valued the study of language & society. To the extent that we have gained ground, I believe it is because RC25 provided an intellectual lifeline to many. And in turn, the presence of these scholars in conferences, in meetings, as journal authors and newsletter contributors that makes the RC possible. It exists because we exist. And in profound ways, we exist because it exists.