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KENNETH LEE PIKE
1912–2000

A Biographical Memoir by
THOMAS N. HEADLAND

*Any opinions expressed in this memoir are those of the author
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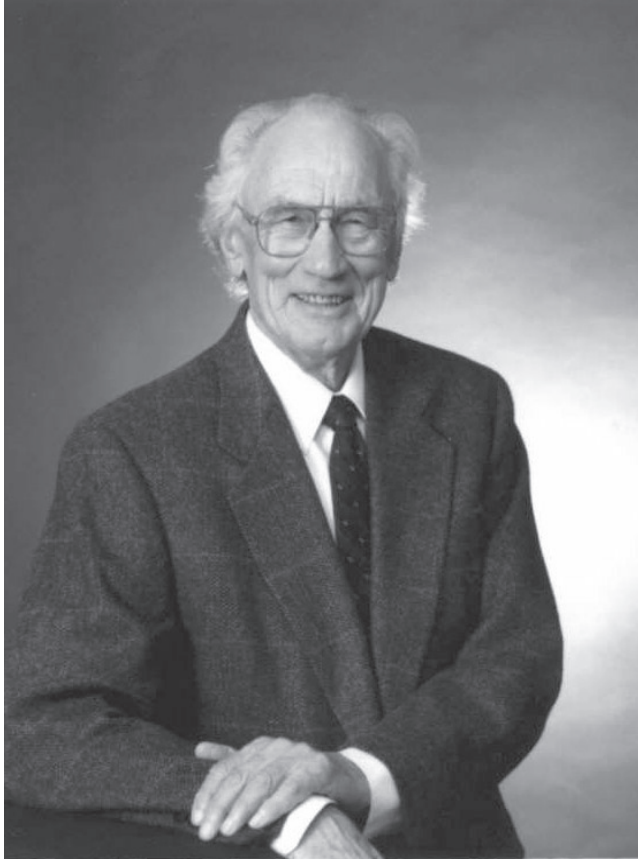


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J Kenneth L. Pike

KENNETH LEE PIKE

June 9, 1912–December 31, 2000

BY THOMAS N. HEADLAND

KENNETH L. PIKE, AGE 88, internationally recognized linguist, educator, and Christian thinker, died in Dallas, Texas, on December 31, 2000, after an illness of only five days.¹ Evelyn Grisette Pike, his wife and closest friend since their wedding in 1938, and their oldest daughter, Judith, were at his side. Ken Pike was born in East Woodstock, Connecticut, on June 9, 1912, the seventh of eight children of a country doctor. He received his bachelor's degree in 1933 from Gordon College (then in Boston). In 1935 he joined the Summer Institute of Linguistics and served in Mexico, studying Amerindian languages. He received his Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Michigan in 1942 under Charles Fries (Leonard Bloomfield was also on his dissertation committee) and later served for 30 years on the faculty at the University of Michigan.

Pike was the recipient of 10 honorary doctorates and professorships from universities around the world, including the University of Chicago, Université René Descartes, University of Lima, and Albert-Ludwigs University in Freiburg, Germany. His leadership included serving as president of the Linguistic Society of America, president of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, and from 1942 to 1979 president of the Summer Institute of Linguistics

(now SIL International). He was chair of the University of Michigan Linguistics Department from 1975 to 1977 and director of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan at the same time. For a quarter of a century he divided his time between Michigan and SIL, as director of the SIL school at the University of Oklahoma and helping to establish other SIL schools around the world. He lectured in 42 countries and studied well over a hundred indigenous languages in the field, including languages in Australia, Bolivia, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nepal, New Guinea, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Sudan, and Togo. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1985.

Ken Pike's contributions to the field of linguistics combined with his dedication to the minority peoples of the world brought him numerous honors. He was a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Merit from the Philippines and the Dean's Medal at Georgetown University. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 15 years in a row and for the Templeton Prize three times. At the time of his death he was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the Linguistic Society of America, the American Anthropological Association, professor emeritus of the University of Michigan, and president emeritus of the SIL. At least 25 encyclopedias have published entries on him. He published 30 books, over 200 scholarly articles, another 90 articles for popular magazines, 8 poetry collections, and numerous other works—Scripture translations, individual poems, instruction workbooks, videos, and audio recordings. For a list of his publications up to 1987 see Brend (1987); for a complete list up to 2003 see Spanne and Wise (2003).²

Pike's last trip overseas was to Irian Jaya, Indonesia, in 1995, where he was the plenary speaker at the International Conference on New Guinea Languages at Cenderawasih

University. He was actively lecturing and writing until 1997 when his health required him to slow down. His last book publication was his five-volume set of poems (Pike, 1997a). He published three articles in 1998 (1998a,b,c), two in 1999 (1999a,b), and two posthumously (Pike, 2001; Peterson and Pike, 2002).

Pike's life can be seen in patterns of decades, each producing publications in its disciplines. During the 1940s his emphasis was on developing a science for the sounds of languages: phonetics and phonemics, tone and intonation (Beddor and Catford, 1999). In the 1950s he focused on anthropology and language in relation to culture, developing his holistic view. The 1960s involved mathematics, and the 1970s were devoted to grammatical analysis. During the 1980s Pike developed his areas of interest in philosophy, publishing his book *Talk, Thought, and Thing* (1993). *Current Anthropology* published "An Interview with Kenneth Pike" in 1994 (Kaye, 1994), in which Ken shared publicly for the first time some of his own personal experiences in academia. In the last year of his life he wrote a more personal account of his interactions with a number of famous scholars.³ That account was published posthumously in 2001 (Pike, 2001). His website today is at <www.sil.org/klp>.

Pike became recognized as one of the United States' most distinguished scientists. He was first known in linguistics through his famous textbook *Phonetics* (1943), his development in the 1950s of his theory called *tagmemics*, and through his popular "monolingual demonstrations." Later he became recognized in anthropology through the growing popularity of his *emic/etic* concept. I review these below.

PIKE'S CONTRIBUTION TO LINGUISTICS

Pike's major theoretical contribution in linguistics was his development of *tagmemics*, an important theory in

American linguistics until the paradigm shift toward Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar theory in the 1960s. Pike's *magnum opus* on tagmemic theory was first published in three volumes in 1954, 1955, and 1960, and then in a second edition in 1967. For those not willing to work through that mammoth 762-page volume Pike later wrote a popularized version of just 146 pages that explains his theory at a level undergraduate students can handle. Subtitled *An Introduction to Tagmemics* (1982) and translated into Japanese, Korean, and Spanish, it became his most popular theoretical treatise. His most widely used book, though, and a true classic, is his *Phonetics* (1943). Published almost 60 years ago, it is still in print and used as a text in courses today.

Pike's practical contribution in linguistics was in his amazing ability to train so many students to learn, analyze, and publish data on unwritten minority languages. One of his major goals was to help colleagues with their linguistic challenges. To that end he established linguistic workshops around the world, in which he and his junior colleagues helped thousands of field researchers and Bible translators with difficult analytical challenges in aboriginal languages. When Pike first went to live with the Mixtec people in southern Mexico in 1935, he knew no Spanish, nor did the San Miguel Mixtecs. So he began learning their language monolingually, since there was no common language. This method eventually developed into his famous pedagogical monolingual approach for learning hitherto unknown tribal languages.

Who would have guessed then that there were some four to five thousand such languages spoken around the world that were unidentified and unknown even to linguists in the 1940s? This holistic approach to language learning became Pike's trademark. He eventually taught thousands of his students how to learn such languages by using the

method that he demonstrated countless times in his legendary monolingual demonstrations over the decades. (The method is explained by Pike [1999b] and described best by Makkai [1998].) Today those students have produced thousands of linguistic documents on 1,200 indigenous languages in 50 countries. (See <www.sil.org/acpub/biblio/> for a bibliography of 12,000 academic publications on minority languages and cultures by SIL field workers.) Most of those languages had never been studied before, most are spoken by just a few hundred to a few thousand people, and almost all fall under the category of what is called today *endangered languages*, defined as those likely to become extinct in the twenty-first century.

I was one of Pike's students. I personally met Ken in Mexico City in 1957, when I was an undergraduate student majoring in anthropology at the University of the Americas there. I asked him for an appointment, and he answered, "How 'bout now?" We talked for over an hour that night. That, and hearing him give a guest lecture the day before, changed the direction of my life. The following summer of 1958 I headed up to Norman, Oklahoma, where I took my first linguistic course under him at the University of Oklahoma. I attended two more summers under him at Norman (1960 and 1961), joined his organization (SIL), and left a few weeks later for the Philippines with my bride, Janet Headland.

In April 1962 Janet and I began living with the Casiguran Agta, a Negrito hunter-gatherer society of just 600 people living in eastern Luzon. After one year of our using Pike's techniques for learning an unwritten language, applying his monolingual approach with our Agta hosts, Pike came to the Philippines, in 1963, to conduct one of his linguistic workshops for SIL workers. For three months he met daily with several SIL field linguists at the SIL workshop center,

including Janet and me and our two Agta “informants” (as we called them then). The two data papers we wrote at that workshop were eventually published in scholarly outlets (J. Headland, 1966; T. Headland, 1967). Pike coauthored them and had two of his senior research assistants submit them for publication. Our names, however, appeared as the sole authors in both essays. Even though Pike did much of the work, he didn’t include his name as a coauthor on either essay. That was often his style. He was not even acknowledged in a footnote.

In later years, after Janet and I left the Agta in 1986 to move back to the United States, Ken and I became close friends. He and Evelyn and Janet and I got together often for social fun, often in their home or ours (just 10 minutes apart in Dallas). Ken and I began attending anthropology conferences together, speaking together at seminars, and coauthoring essays. Some people think of me as Pike’s last student, since I was still learning from him up until he died. We had our last visit sipping tea together in his home, just four days before he passed away.

PIKE’S CONTRIBUTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY

Pike’s major contribution in anthropology was his development of the *emic/etic* concept. First coined by Pike in 1954, the two terms are found in common usage in the vocabularies of most anthropologists today, and the distinction between emics and etics has proved very useful to them (see Franklin, 1997). In fact, most anthropologists today use insights about the different perceptions of reality of various cultural groups as the principal conceptual tool of their trade. The *emic/etic* distinction underlies a basic contribution to modern anthropology, a tool for understanding other cultures. Anthropologists make their living at least

partly because of their unique ability to make the distinction between *emic* and *etic*.

The highlight of Pike's role in the American Anthropological Association came in 1988. At the AAA's annual meeting that year in Phoenix a public debate was scheduled between Pike and Marvin Harris on their differing uses of the *emic/etic* concept. The debate, which went on for four and a half hours with 600 anthropologists in the audience, was vigorous but cordial. It resulted in a book titled *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Headland et al., 1990). One unforgettable, amusing incident occurred during this otherwise serious dialogue. During the discussion period a man in the audience asked Pike a question. In answering him Pike was describing an incident that happened to him in Russia, but he couldn't remember a name. He then looked out over the audience and suddenly said, "Evelyn, are you out there? Who was that man we had dinner with in Moscow?" Evelyn was sitting in the back of the auditorium. She stood up and said, "Ken, that was Dr. So-and-So." Pike said, "That's right." And he finished answering the question. I was the symposium moderator at this debate; when I went to the microphone to call on the next person, I first said to the audience, "Let me stop here, colleagues, to tell you who that was in the back of the room. That was Kenneth Pike's wife, Evelyn Pike, and they are here with us this week celebrating their golden wedding anniversary." Everyone started to applaud. Then Pike, without a moment's hesitation, stood up, leaned across the table, and blew his wife a kiss. The audience, perhaps restless after four hours of sitting, broke forth with cheering and whistles. It was an entertaining moment in a long and otherwise humorless panel that anthropologists still remember today.

PIKE'S CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGION

Throughout his career Pike was keenly interested in the religious aspect of his work, as seen in his relationship with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He, Angel Mecerías, and Donald Stark completed the translation of the New Testament into the San Miguel Mixtec language in 1951. Pike was above all a Christian philosopher. He was a convinced theist who influenced thousands of people toward religion. He wrote numerous religious articles and books. Such books include *With Heart and Mind* (Pike, 1996 [1st ed., 1962]) and *Mark My Words* (Pike, 1971). In *With Heart and Mind* Ken defended scholarly and intellectual approaches to Christianity, maintaining that Christian faith and academic scholarship can be intimately integrated. As Hugh Steven wrote (1989, p. 16), "To understand and appreciate Pike, one must know he is both scholar and Christian; that his faith in Christ is at once full of energy, without pretense and rooted in Biblical depth."

PIKE WAS A MULE!

Ken Pike never had any internal conflict integrating his personal faith in God with his scholarship, nor his call to missions with his professorship at Michigan. But this was a problem for some academics who wondered whether Pike left his brains at the door when he went to church. Pike wrote his *Heart and Mind* volume to help those people understand that he did not. He recently wrote two shorter essays describing his dual calls to missions (Pike, 1997b) and to linguistics (Pike, 1998a). And his sister, Eunice Pike (1981), wrote a biography of Ken to explain his unique integration of faith and learning. Pike once told this story to help people understand his role as a Christian scholar:

In 1980 while Evelyn and I were lecturing in China, we were honored at a dinner at Beijing Foreign Studies University. I was seated next to a Chinese gentleman who had just returned from lecturing at Berkeley. When he learned who I was he said, "Ah yes, I heard about you while I was in the USA. But I also heard you are a missionary. So which are you, a missionary or a linguist?" I thought fast and told him I was a hybrid, a mule. His expression caused me to explain myself. Mules are the result of breeding between a horse, wanted for its speed, and a donkey, wanted for its strength and ability to walk over rocks in the road. When you want to combine the two qualities you have a mule. So sometimes I'm a horse and sometimes I'm a donkey, but I'm always a mule. I am both a missionary and a linguist. [Recorded by Ruth Carr and Ken Pike in 1988, and used here with Carr's permission.]

An example of how this played out in Pike's life can be seen in some of the letters he received over the decades from scholars who were influenced by his quiet faith in God. Here is an example, a letter from a Russian scholar who Pike befriended when he was a Fulbright scholar in Moscow in 1988, before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Dear Professor, Thank you for your paper. . . . It is a good contribution to the development of our mentality. . . . Many innovations are expected here [as a result of recent political upheavals]. . . . Thanks to the depolitization of higher educational establishments, there has appeared a possibility of abolishing party meetings, party bureau sittings, and so on. . . . My loss of belief in Stalin caused my sessation from the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. Paraphrasing the statement made by Pascal, "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every person and it can never be filled by any creative thing but can be filled by God we may know through Christ." I must admit that the vacuum formed in my heart is open to Christ but it is not very easy for a former fanatic communist and atheist to make a decision. Your book *Ken Pike: Scholar and Christian* [Eunice Pike, 1981] is especially dear to me now as it depicts the ideal of the Christian gentleman in work and life. . . . So I am trying to study Christianity and wish I would ever dare to go to Shrebu [pseudonym] Church to be baptized. . . . I have to queue for hours to buy something eatable or salt cabbage to last through the winter. But man shall not live by bread alone. Yours sincerely. [Written to

Kenneth Pike, dated November 20, 1990, from Russia; the original letter was written in English, and is archived in the Pike Special Collection; the spelling here remains as in the original. Words added for clarification are in square brackets.]

And there are many other academicians today who are grateful for Pike's scholarly help in the past. Forty-six scholars came together after Pike's death to put together a large volume, a collection of their own essays, in honor of Pike's memory (Wise et al., 2003). It stands today as a tribute to Pike's life and scientific influence.

CASE 75-2: PIKE'S ORGANIZATION ACCUSED OF ETHNOCIDE

Not everybody liked Pike, however. He was criticized often enough in the academic world because of his tagmemic theory. But he was mainly controversial because of his religion and because he was the president of SIL, an organization whose primary aim is the translation of the Bible into preliterate indigenous languages. Pike wrote replies to the public charges against SIL and its sister organization Wycliffe Bible Translators. The first printed criticism of Pike came from David Stoll (1974), now an anthropology professor at Middlebury College, in the *Michigan Daily* when Stoll was just 23 years old. Pike replied in the same newspaper (Pike, 1974). In 1975 some members of the American Anthropological Association filed a formal charge of ethnocide (destroying indigenous peoples' cultures) against the SIL to the AAA's Committee on Ethics (the latter's Case 75-2). In May of that year the AAA wrote a letter to the SIL describing the complaint and inviting SIL to formally respond; Pike replied in a 15-page letter dated May 21. After spending a year investigating the charges, the AAA's Committee on Ethics submitted its report to the AAA Executive Board. The committee decided unanimously in favor of SIL against the complainants. In a letter dated September 20, 1976, to

Pike, AAA Executive Director Edward Lehman stated, "At its 85th meeting in May [1976], the [AAA] Executive Board accepted that [Committee on Ethics] recommendation, also by a unanimous vote." A more recent attack from anthropologists, this time accusing SIL of genocide, was published in *Anthropology Newsletter* in 1997 (Edelman, 1997). Pike replied also to that, and the AAA published it in a later issue of the newsletter (Headland and Pike, 1997). To accuse Pike's students of genocide was so extreme that even long-time SIL critic Stoll (1997) criticized Edelman's editorial.

* * *

Ken Pike was an extraordinary man. He loved life. He had a passion to challenge people to think. He wrote poetry. He laughed. He used his mind to solve linguistic puzzles and share the methods he discovered with others. He furthered science. He was a true scientist, scholar, philosopher, poet, pioneer, and author. He was a man who shared his life, knowledge, and love with countless people around the globe. He was a gentleman in the highest sense of the word, an elegant man who noticed and spoke with the most unpretentious person in a crowd; a shy child would catch Ken's eye, and he would engage the child in conversation.

In 1999 SIL began work on what has now become the *Kenneth L. Pike Special Collection*, a part of the *Language and Culture Archives* of SIL International, in Dallas, Texas. This archival storehouse today includes thousands of documents on or by Pike, his wife Evelyn Pike, and his sister Eunice Pike. His correspondence collected there spans almost 70 years. The collection is open to scholarly academic researchers.

Kenneth Pike is survived by his wife, Evelyn; three adult children, Judith Schram, Barbara Ibach, and Stephen Pike;

three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren; and one sister, Eunice V. Pike.

Pike's poem "The End" expresses the feelings of his students and colleagues.

The End

Regarding Daniel 12:9-13, and "the end of the days."

In tears, then joy!
 Life in contrast
 Sets the pace
 Of learning
 Good, through bad . . .

Both now and "then"
 Hold to trust,
 In God, in time
 To light our stars,
 Forever there.

(Pike, 1997a, vol. 2, p. 102)

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Karl Franklin, Evelyn Pike, and Calvin Hibbard (archivist of the Townsend Archives at SIL in Waxhaw, North Carolina) for helping me check facts and dates of the events reviewed in the present memoir. The author of this memoir wrote an earlier and shorter version of this memoir that was published in *American Anthropologist* (vol. 103, no. 2) in June 2001.

2. A database list of Pike's publications can also be found online at <www.sil.org/acpub/biblio/>.

3. In Pike's 2001 posthumous essay he reminisced about his dealings with America's early twentieth-century linguists, including Edward

Sapir (1884–1939), Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), Charles Fries (1887–1967), George Trager (1906–1992), Charles F. Voegelin (1906–1986), Bernard Bloch (1907–1965), Zellig Harris (1909–1992), Charles Hockett (1916–2000), Michael Halliday, (1925–), and Noam Chomsky (1928–), and with early American anthropologists Leslie White (1900–1975), Marvin Harris (1927–2001), and Dell Hymes (1927–).

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