

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE AFMLTA, THE MIDDLE HISTORY OF THE MLTAQ

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of the early history of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations up to the early 1970s. From the early 1970s to 1983, the author was active in the MLTAQ and the rest of the paper provides an anecdotal history of that period. The history of the AFMLTA has been a long-term project, drawn out partly as a result of the author's own personal circumstances but especially because of the time it took to source relevant documents and interview relevant people. The Federation officially commenced on 1 January 1962 and its history since then has reflected the varying vigour of the languages field in Australia and the international status that the AFMLTA has increasingly acquired. Its influence on education in Australia has been profound as it grew from a small organisation largely Victoria-based and with mainly literary interests to a vigorous national body that has sought to assert the value and relevance of languages, not only to education but to Australian society in general and its relationships with the rest of the world. For much of its history, it was a conservative organisation that mainly saw its role as serving the teaching needs of the MLTA members. Increasingly through the 1970s, the MLTAQ took a lead in seeking to make the AFMLTA more dynamic with a specific role of trying to influence national and State language education policy.

The Presenter

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I INTRODUCTION:

In this paper I propose, first, to outline very briefly the early history of the AFMLTA to 1974 and how the MLTAs, including the MLTAQ, came together to form the Federation. I was also asked to speak on my personal memories of the MLTAQ, my involvement in which, coincidentally, starts in the early 1970s. This second section will be largely anecdotal.

II Pre-1962

The AFMLTA commenced on 1 January, 1962, a little more than two years after the foundation of MLTAQ. Because AFMLTA is a Federation of MLTAs, its early history is integrally involved in the early history of the MLTAs, especially MLTAV, which started in 1947. The *MLTAV Newsletter*, “a roneoed text of eleven pages” and the precursor of *Babel*, started in April 1948.

The first mention of events leading to the formation of AFMLTA appears in the minutes of MLTAV’s “Annual Committee Meeting” of 8 December, 1954, where there is reference to extension of the MLTAV membership to include an applicant from Western Australia and “teachers of other languages (including Classics and English)”. Another minute around this time also indicates interest in a national body:

(b) Need for a Constitution: - Mr Horwood said that if we hoped to become eventually the M.L.T.A. of Australia there was a need for a definite Constitution. ... [Minutes of the Annual Committee Meeting of MLTAV, 8 December, 1954]

It was another 6 to 7 years before decisive steps were taken to form the AFMLTA but, in the meantime, Keith Horwood was the driving force towards an Australia-wide organisation. In fact, there seems to have been some reluctance in the MLTAV towards the notion of a national body, even from so prominent a figure as Manuel Gelman who later became an enthusiastic supporter. That reluctance was partly because of a feeling that MLTAV was doing well enough on its own and fear that costs would be prohibitive for a national body. On the other hand, the old Melbourne-Sydney rivalry emerged with the fear that, if MLTAV did not take a lead, New South Wales, might do so. [Ben Roennfeldt and Geoff Adams, 16 August, 2004 and Mrs Bee Horwood and Chris Horwood, 4 October, 2005, personal communications].

There were several motivations for the formation of AFMLTA. First, there was the growing inter-state membership of MLTAV. Second, though the *MLTAV Newsletter*, eventually re-named *Babel*, was very successful, there was need to increase the subscription list to cover production costs. Third, there was strong interest in international relations and a national body was thought to provide the most appropriate base. In fact, ties had already been made with language teachers in other countries and especially with the FIPLV, with which MLTAV affiliated in 1956, long before federation. Fourth, oral history suggests that a key stimulus was Keith Horwood's desire to have French "stages" established and available to Australian French teachers but, to achieve this, support was needed from the French Government and Embassy and these bodies would deal only with a national body [Ben Roennfeldt and Geoff Adams, 16 August, 2004 and Mrs Bee Horwood and Chris Horwood, 4 October, 2005, personal communications]. Whatever the real relationship between the "stages" and the foundation of AFMLTA, the first Stage was announced in 1962, shortly after the commencement of AFMLTA [Manuel Gelman. 1962. MLTAV President's Report, 1962". Mimeograph. From his papers, made available by Sylvia Gelman].

The history of AFMLTA is integrally tied to the history of *Babel* since, over the decades but especially before the advent of country branches, for many members, *Babel* **was** AFMLTA and the viability of *Babel* determined the viability of the whole AFMLTA. The *MLTAV Newsletter* grew and diversified in content and, in April 1956, Newsletter No. 27 carried, for the first time, the title of *Babel* together with a sketch on its front cover showing the "Babel" building at the University of Melbourne (see the photo in the appendix). Though, in later years, it has often been assumed that the journal was named after the tower in the Biblical story, it was, in fact, named after the building housing the languages departments in the 1950s.

Another development relevant to AFMLTA and its activities occurred in 1955 when, at the Annual Meeting, Keith Horwood, reported on his efforts to obtain "pictorial background material for distribution to teachers", an activity which, later, flourished as the AFMLTA Materials Centre throughout the years that Keith was Secretary.

By 1957, MLTAV's membership was well over 300 with 44 interstate members: the notion of an association with nationwide coverage was gaining strength. A year later, the MLTAV Committee minutes noted that

... an inaugural meeting had recently been held in Sydney and an association formed. [The MLTAV Chairman, Professor Jackson,] suggested that we should consider our policy in relation to this new association. There was everything to be gained by affiliation, e.g., the printing of a common journal. [Minutes of MLTA Committee Meeting of 29 October, 1957]

Steps were taken to elicit such interest and later minutes note that "encouraging replies" had been received "to the question of a Federal association" though, it seems, mainly from senior academics. Some reservation was also expressed about adopting *Babel* as a federal journal ["Minutes of MLTAV Committee Meeting of Monday, 12 May, 1958"].

The first suggestion for a national conference appears in minutes in 1958 when one of the members suggested a "vacation conference with inter-state modern language teachers". In fact, it was another 18 years before, on MLTAQ's instigation, the first national conference of AFMLTA took place in Brisbane in 1976, convened by myself and supported by an enthusiastic and energetic MLTAQ committee.

A further step towards a national organisation (one that again reflects its integral relationship to *Babel*) occurred in 1958, when the MLTAV Committee approved that the "designation on the cover of *Babel* be amended to read *The Journal of the Modern Language Teachers Associations of Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia*". MLTAQ was formed in 1959 [see the 1959 MLTAV Secretary's Report] and took *Babel* as its journal from No. 12, November 1959 with the front cover being amended accordingly. The MLTAV President noted at the 1959 Annual Meeting that MLTAQ was now affiliated though, probably, the Secretary's description of being "associated" was more accurate. My own personal memories of MLTAQ started shortly after this when, in 1960, I returned to the Queensland Teachers College (now Kelvin Grove Campus of QUT), to re-train as a High School teacher. Don Munro, who lectured in French Teaching Methodology, encouraged the participants to join MLTAQ. Presumably, Don, who later became Director of the Institute of Modern Languages, was one of the founding members of MLTAQ.

By the meeting of 3 March, 1960, much stronger signs of interstate interest in a national organisation emerged but there are also signs of a degree of friction over the issue between NSW and Victoria. The minutes are revealing:

The Hon. Secretary read the letter from NSW MLTA suggesting a meeting to discuss a federal association. ...

Mr Horwood made the following points:

- 1. that [MLTAV is] ... the only Australian body affiliated with the FIPLV;*
- 2. that [it] already publish[es] a journal accepted by four other State MLT Associations; ...*
- 3. that a Federal association is desirable. [Minutes of Meeting of 3 March, 1960]*

Some MLTAV members, including Mr Gelman, opposed federation. Debate seems to have been vigorous though it is significant that the central issue seemed to be the question of *Babel*, reflecting what seemed to be the case for the following two decades, that *Babel* was seen as the key issue for AFMLTA until its wider role started to grow through the 1980s. It was finally resolved that MLTAV should express support to NSW for an Australian association, and emphasise that a federal journal was one of the main advantages and a prerequisite to federation, that Melbourne is geographically central, had an experienced association and so should be the meeting place, and that MLTAV was already affiliated with other states.

The momentum now started to increase. In late 1960, the MLTAV Committee proposed that a meeting of States be held in Adelaide, that Keith Horwood should represent MLTAV, and that he should invite the other states to attend a further meeting about federation in Melbourne later in 1961. That meeting took place on 26 August, 1961 and resolved to form the Federation. All States except Queensland were represented but Queensland had expressed its support by letter. A photograph of the delegates to that meeting is shown in the Appendix. No record has been found giving a complete list of the delegates to this meeting nor of all the people in the photograph. However, those that have been identified were (in the order they appear in the photograph):

Standing, from left to right in the photograph:

Keith Horwood (Victoria)
 Dr Elliott Forsyth (South Australia)
 Frank McClements (Victoria)
 Manuel Gelman (Victoria)
 Dr Anita Rogers (Victoria)
 ?
 Ron Prowse (Victoria)
 Geoff Adams (Victoria)
 Ron Horan (New South Wales)

Sitting, from left to right:

Ted Blom (Western Australia)
 Dr E. Penizek (Tasmania)
 ?
 'Lotty' Wilmott (Tasmania)

One of the surviving delegates to that meeting, Professor Elliott Forsyth, commented in 2006:

I think I was the delegate who went from Adelaide to Melbourne ... I confess that I don't have a clear memory of what happened ... but I do recall that there was complete agreement on the principle of forming the AFMLTA ... Keith was the main driving force. [Elliott Forsyth, personal communication, 13 May, 2006]

In the MLTAV President's Report later that year, Manny Gelman commented:

This year, your Executive and Committee gave much time and work to organizing ... a fully representative meeting of delegates of M.L.T.A.'s from all over Australia. ...

The provisional constitution ... will be put before you shortly. If you, and of course the other States, adopt this we will have brought into being a Federation of M.L.T.A.'s of Australia for a trial period of two years – an important milestone in our history. [Manuel Gelman. "President's Report – 1961". Mimeograph.¹]

Several points from the Provisional Constitution are historically significant: first, the governing body was to be a Federal Council comprising two representatives from each member association (Clause 6). Second, the Council was to meet as required (Clause 12) but, in practice, met biennially [Keith Horwood. 1968. "The Federation's first years". In *ML Newsletter*, No. 47, September 1974: 22 (see Appendix Three)]. Third, the only officer of the Federation was to be the Honorary Organising Secretary, Keith Horwood (Clause 7). Fourth, there was to be no President. Meetings were to be chaired by the local MLTA President but, since most of the meetings were held in Melbourne, the MLTAV President, Manuel Gelman, would have been the regular chair. Fifth, *Babel* was to be the official journal of AFMLTA. Sixth, the Provisional Constitution was to be in force for a trial period of two years (Clause 14). Seventh, the founding members were the MLTAs of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia (Clause 13).

The aim of the Federation was stated simply as "... to promote the study and teaching of modern languages in Australia" (Clause 2). The "functions" of the Federation were specified as:

¹ From papers kindly made available by Sylvia Gelman, Manny's widow, 12 September, 2005.

- a) *Exchange ... of ideas and information relating to the study and teaching of modern languages;*
- b) *Formulation of a unified Federal policy on matters ... relating to modern languages;*
- c) *... exchange visits by teachers ...;*
- d) *Representation ... at international gatherings and conferences;*
- e) *Publication of a journal ...*

Subsequently, the minutes record that MLTAV unanimously approved the provisional constitution and approved the payment of £5 (i.e., \$10) to AFMLTA.

III 1962 to 1965

The main work of the AFMLTA from 1962 to 1965 was centred in Melbourne with key figures from the MLTAV carrying out the work of AFMLTA. In particular, it was the drive, personal self-sacrifice and imagination of Keith Horwood that ensured that AFMLTA would be viewed favourably. Like many other teachers in those days, for myself as a young and appallingly under-trained teacher of French, AFMLTA and “Keith Horwood” were synonymous, the books, materials and other resources that he made available were immensely useful, and they ensured that the value of the national body would be recognised by both the member organisations and the rank-and-file language teachers.

The first Federal Council meeting of AFMLTA was held in the latter part of 1963 at the end of the “trial” period. Apart from the ratification of the permanent constitution, the meeting seems to have discussed the value of the Federation, the “real worth” of *Babel*, and the value of a list of articles on the “findings in lang. lab. work”. Two years later, the 1965 Council meeting amended the constitution to create the offices of President and Vice-President. Manuel Gelman was elected President and Ron Horan from NSW, Vice-President (see the photo in the appendix).

One of the new President’s activities is reflected in the MLTAV Committee minutes of a meeting in 1966. It seems that consideration was given to whether the President of AFMLTA “should be permitted to make statements, not necessarily Federation policy, to the press and to sign his name as President of the Federation”. Though this is commonly assumed to be a role for the President of an organisation, there seems to have been a reluctance in AFMLTA throughout its first two decades of existence to take a public stance on issues until, at the 1981 Council meeting, a Public Relations Group was established with

the specific role of making such statements through press releases, letters to the editor, and press, radio and television interviews [*AFMLTA Information Bulletin*, No. 1, February 1982: 2].

In 1965, *Babel* also amended its numbering system so that the first issue in 1965 was re-numbered as *Babel*, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 1. This editorial adjustment to the numbering system is the source of the considerable confusion over the AFMLTA's commencement date, for long thought to have been 1965..

One of the major activities in these first years was the “stages”, especially the “stage de Nouméa”. As a young and very naïve teacher of French, I attended the second one in January 1964. Forty years on, my memories of it are dominated by the receptions given by the French authorities, where they served caviar canapés, and by the Australian Consulate, where they served caviar sandwiches. My other memories include the awful food served in the dormitories, one memorable “dessert” being a spoonful of apricot jam esconced in the middle of an otherwise empty plate; other memories include the beautiful tropical land and seascape, the undoubtedly knowledgeable but interminable lectures given by significant French academics, and the “cricket” match which the “stagiaires” played against the local indigenous women – and lost.

In this period, AFMLTA activity focussed around four activities though the first dominated:

- (1) *Dissemination of information*
- (2) *Professional discussion of the teaching and study of all modern languages*
- (3) *Coordination and organisation*
- (4) *Representation of modern language teachers within and beyond Australia and promotion of their professional interest.* [Keith Horwood. 1968. “The Federation’s first years”. In *ML Newsletter*, No. 47, September 1974: 22]

IV 1966 to 1974

The period from 1966 to 1974 was mostly marked by a “steady as she goes” state under the direction of Keith Horwood. The leading officers of the Federation remained figures from the establishment period. In particular, Manuel Gelman was President, Ron Horan Vice-President and, when Manny stood down in 1969, Ron became President and Henk Siliakus, who had been involved in the early discussions and was an early Council delegate from South Australia, became Vice-President. When Ron stood down in 1973, Henk became President and the first “outsider”, the MLTAQ President, John Bissett, became Vice-President.

Interestingly, the minutes of this period show that the first discussion of the computerisation of AFMLTA records took place. The proposal was to use the University of Melbourne's computer for this purpose. As you know, it was almost 40 years before computerisation was to be implemented.

I will mention just two other matters from this period. First, in 1974, Keith Horwood died suddenly while on study leave in Britain. Keith had been the dominant figure in AFMLTA since its foundation and his sudden death was a severe blow to the organisation. Soon after, AFMLTA entered a period of some turmoil with marked tension between those who wanted to see change in the Federation, its role and how it viewed itself (a movement led by MLTAQ) and those who wanted it to remain a conservative organisation which did not seek to influence State or national policies.

The second major event in 1973-74, an event of long term significance to AFMLTA, was noted earlier: approval for the First National Languages Conference, which I convened but was organised by an outstanding group of people from the MLTAQ Executive. The conference eventually took place in 1976.

I would like now to take a very few minutes to convey some of my memories of MLTAQ during this tumultuous period of the 1970s and early 1980s.

My Memories of MLTAQ

As I commented earlier, I first joined MLTAQ in 1960 but I didn't become active until my return from studying in England in 1971-72. I was elected Secretary in 1972.

The following year, I was appointed as a Lecturer at the then Mt Gravatt Teachers College. That was significant because I recall sitting in my office one day feeling concern that language enrolments were plummeting Australia-wide, language teachers were depressed and were continually told that language teaching was of no value. I recall saying to myself, pretentiously and presumptuously, that if I was going to stay in this field I had to try to do something about it. I set out in my own mind to take a multi-pronged approach to the challenge: to raise public awareness of the value of language education, to seek to improve the quality of language teaching through active professional development in MLTAQ activities and through high quality pre-service language teacher education programmes, to try to make language teachers conscious that they belonged to a valued worldwide profession not inferior to any of the other professional organisations that held major conferences and got written up in the press and media, to make the public aware of the relevance of language education right across the curriculum and across society, and to ensure that the organisation of the profession was such that it could carry out these ambitious

tasks. In MLTAQ, we (not only I but the outstanding members of the MLTAQ committee) adopted (consciously or unconsciously) this ambitious plan.

The 1970s and into the 1980s were a period of intensive activity backed by massive political and social change. The 1970s were the time when, under the Whitlam Labor government but continued in the Fraser years, there was growing interest in the concept of multiculturalism. This seemed to give an opportunity to promote language education more vigorously.

Consequently, we in MLTAQ took hold of the opportunity, argued the importance of multiculturalism, and argued the vital importance of language education in a multicultural society. This was also the period when Australia was turning towards Asia and the first national report on the teaching of Asian languages and cultures had been released in 1970. We argued that the teaching of Asian and community languages was not, as many teachers of French and German feared, a threat to the profession but that, in arguing for them, we were arguing for the value of all language learning, indeed that French and German were as justifiably community languages as Italian or Greek.

This had two major effects on MLTAQ's organisation and activities. First, to avoid the fragmentation of the profession and realising the damaging effects that unilingual associations and the inevitable internecine fighting were having at that time in Victoria and South Australia, we emphasised that MLTAQ was for teachers of all and any languages but for those who wanted only to be involved in their own language, we established within the MLTAQ structure Special Interest Groups for individual languages.

Second, we sought to publicise the importance and value of multiculturalism and the relevance of languages across the society. We did so through numerous press releases, media statements, academic articles and public events. Probably the most successful of these were the large scale multicultural events we held in the Greek Community Centre. These took the form of a Greek dinner along with entertainment activities such as a multicultural concert or Greek dancing but we also took the opportunity, ourselves, to "preach the gospel" and had an eminent guest speak on multicultural issues and language education. On one occasion, we had the Aboriginal poet, Kath Walker, read some of her poems.

These activities had an effect, not only on teachers and the case for language teaching but sometimes on the community itself. I recall on one occasion a very prominent member of the Greek community coming up and saying to me that he had been "an ocker among ockers" but after attending one of our events in the Greek Community Centre, he realised that he could be both Australian and take pride in his Greek ancestry, he became active in the community and went on to take a leading role.

MLTAQ was particularly active in public relations. We set out to have at least one press or media release in front of the public every fortnight. In fact, it averaged at least one a week. These statements generally drew attention to the dire straits facing language teaching, on the one hand, and the importance of it on the other. Sometimes, they took up issues of race relations and, again, the relevance of language education to that issue. These public statements were not without effect: in those days, small Nazi organisations and various other groups of similar ideology were getting publicity and, on several occasions, my father who was living with me at the time, took threatening phone calls, sufficiently obnoxious that he went to the police about them. Needless to say, we ignored the threats and none were carried out.

In addition, however, we felt that it was not sufficient to send out short headline-catching press releases but we needed to provide serious argument for what we were claiming about the value of languages. Some of these statements took the form of longer newspaper articles, always presented with an MLTAQ by-line, or a journal article which we generally printed off and sent to as many politicians and education bureaucrats as we could identify.

There had been many short-term language teaching projects through the 1970s but the overall effect was minuscule. The only solution seemed to us to be to try to change national and State policy. Hence, in the late 1970s, with the enthusiastic support of MLTAQ and the reluctant support of what was still a conservative brigade in AFMLTA, we wrote several articles arguing for a national language policy and a national languages information and research centre to monitor and implement the policy. Fortunately, at that time I was an adviser to the Immigration Department for a new AMEP on-arrival program and, through the chair of that national committee, I had a direct line to the Department Secretary. I first realised the effect that we in MLTAQ were having when, during a 3 months stint teaching a course on language testing in China, I heard the Secretary on Radio Australia arguing for a national language policy and using the very words that we had written in the main article. It was not long after that, in 1982, that the Senate referred the matter of a national policy on languages to its Standing Committee on Education. This eventually led to the adoption of the first national policy in 1987.

Another major achievement for MLTAQ was the eventual foundation of the National Languages Institute of Australia. As I said a moment ago, we had advocated the creation of such an organisation at the same time as we developed the case for a national language policy. MLTAQ supported this vigorously but, again, the conservative old guard in the AFMLTA had viewed it cynically: the very name "National Languages Information and Research Centre" was coined by one of the pessimistic old guard who found it easier to sit, decry the national attitudes and criticise than to do as MLTAQ was doing and try to effect change. The acronym from the name, National Languages Information and Research Centre, becomes the "national lirc/lurk". Rather than surrender to

the old guard, the MLTAQ delegates adopted the suggestion. The proposal was re-written twice through the 1980s until eventually in 1989 the decision was taken at the national level to establish the NLLIA.

Let me mention again just one other activity that has now become a regular activity in all MLTAs and the AFMLTA, the State and national languages conferences. MLTAQ was not the first to hold such an event since MLTAV had had similar events for many years. However, it seemed to me, as I commented earlier, that we wanted to be able to demonstrate to language teachers and observers that we were a profession equal to any other, we could hold a major conference and do so, not just in a run-down classroom with a few reluctant delegates, but in a major hotel, in a comfortable environment and with speakers of significance. Hence, in 1973, we held the first MLTAQ conference and shortly afterwards set out to persuade AFMLTA to hold a national event. Again, the old guard cynically opposed the proposal because they doubted that language teachers were capable of holding or supporting such an event. Eventually, Council agreed and MLTAQ took on the organisation. As it happened, we almost proved the old guard correct. After starting the organisation, I went on study leave for the whole of 1975 and, when I returned, I found that little had been done, the then convenor had been telling people that the organisation was proceeding but it wasn't, and the Committee members were at the point of despair. The President changed, Gary Birch became President and the MLTAQ Committee set out to organise the first national conference with just 6 weeks to go before the scheduled dates. It was an exciting 6 weeks which helped to bond the Committee together, it brought in other enthusiastic members, and it set up MLTAQ for the next many years of vigorous activity. Not least, the conference was a rousing success and led the AFMLTA to adopt the concept as a biennial event.

As I look back, that period was one of the highlights of my own career but my strongest memories are of the satisfaction of working with the outstanding MLTAQ members of those years. Many of those names are familiar to you even today: Roger White, Zillah Bunn, Gary Murray, Gary Birch, Bev Bonning, Anna Van Hoof, Lester Ford, Natalie Garrick, and so on and on – I won't attempt to name them all for fear, 30 years on, of leaving some out.

In 1982, I became AFMLTA President and active in FIPLV soon afterwards. I also took a position for three years as head of a comprehensive teacher education school in Darwin and so was obliged to give up my active MLTAQ involvement.

So there are just a few of my personal memories of MLTAQ during a period of intense activity, of which I have mentioned only a very few. If you are interested in knowing more about the history of AFMLTA and, tangentially, the history of language teaching in Australia since the Second World War, I would refer you to the book I hope to complete later this year entitled *A Short History of the*

Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, 1962 to 2006. Since I am writing the history at the request of the AFMLTA Executive, the AFMLTA will have the first right of refusal to publish it, when and how.

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The Babel Building, University of Melbourne



8

Pre-1962 (contin.) The Founders of AFMLTA



12

**Manuel Gelman on right with Professor
Chisholm in Paris**



15

**Manuel Gelman receiving the first
AFMLTA Medal**



16