

Joseph H. Greenberg

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Joseph H. Greenberg, undoubtedly the most important African linguist in the second half of the 20th century, passed away on May 7, 2001. Greenberg was born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 28, 1915. He received his B.A. (Phi Beta Kappa) from Columbia University in 1936, and his Ph.D. in anthropology from Northwestern University in 1940. His Ph.D. thesis was on traditional, non-Islamic Hausa religion.

During World War II (1940–1945), he served in the United States Army Signal and Intelligence Corps. After the war, he spent a year on a Social Science Research Council Fellowship and then took a teaching position in Anthropology at the University of Minnesota (1946–48). This was followed by an appointment at Columbia University (1948–62). While at Columbia, he served for five years as co-editor of the journal *Word*. In 1962 Greenberg moved to Stanford University, where he was Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics. He officially retired from Stanford in 1985, but remained professionally active until the time of his death.

Greenberg was an unusually prolific and wide-ranging scholar with some 250 publications to his credit. His initial reputation was established through his monumental work in the area of African linguistic classification. This was published first as a series of articles in the late 1940s and then ultimately in reworked and revised form as *The Languages of Africa* (1963), a work that thirty-five or more years later still stands as the cornerstone of African language classification. In his work, Greenberg dismantled the then standard classification of Meinhof and assigned all of the languages of Africa into one of four phyla: Afroasiatic (which did away with the distinction between Semitic and so-called “Hamitic”), Niger-Congo (= Niger-Kordofanian) (which incorporated Bantu as a lower-level constituent), Nilo-Saharan (the most contentious of his groupings, which contained languages as distant as Songhai and Maasai), and Khoisan (which combined the former “Bushman” and “Hottentot” languages as well as the Tanzanian outliers Sandawe and Hadza).

Greenberg also provided original classifications in other geographical areas as well, most notably his controversial Native American classification (see *Language*

in the Americas, Stanford University Press (1987)), and his recent large-scale grouping of the languages of Europe and Asia (see *Indo-European and Its Closest Relatives: The Eurasiatic Language Family*, Stanford University Press (2000)). In addition, he made major contributions to the theory and methodology of classification. Apart from language family classification, Greenberg is best known for his groundbreaking work in the fields of language typology and language universals (see *Universals of Language*, ed. by J. H. Greenberg, MIT Press (1963)).

Throughout his career, Greenberg received numerous honors. He was awarded the Haile Selassie Prize for African Research (1967) and the Talcot Parsons Prize for Social Sciences (given by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1996). He received three separate Guggenheim fellowships and was invited twice to be a fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences. He was an elected member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society, and was the First Distinguished Lecturer of the American Anthropological Association. He held the office of President of the Linguistic Society of America, of the African Studies Association, and of the West African Linguistic Society.

Greenberg was honored by two festschrifts: *Linguistic Studies Offered to Joseph Greenberg on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, 2 vols., ed. by Alphonse Juillard, Anna Libri (1976–1977), and *Studies in Typology and Diachrony: Papers Presented to Joseph Greenberg on his 75th Birthday*, ed. by William Croft, Keith Denning, and Suzanne Kemmer, Benjamins (1990), and by the publication of two collections of his articles: *Language, Culture, and Communication: Essays by Joseph H. Greenberg*, ed. by Anwar S. Dil, Stanford University Press (1971), and *On Language: Selected Writings of Joseph H. Greenberg*, ed. by Keith Denning and Suzanne Kemmer, Stanford University Press (1990).

Greenberg's own thoughts about his intellectual approach can be found in his "On being a linguistic anthropologist," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15: 1–24 (1986), "The influence of WORD and the Linguistic Circle of New York on my intellectual development." *Word* 45: 19–25 (1994), and in Paul Newman, "An interview with Joseph Greenberg," *Current Anthropology* 32: 453–67 (1991).

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