

# MEMORIAL RESOLUTION JOSEPH H. GREENBERG

(1915- 2001)

Joseph H. Greenberg, Ray Lyman Wilbur Professor of Social Science, Emeritus, died at his Stanford home on May 7, 2001, exactly six months after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He is survived by his wife, Selma.

Joseph Greenberg was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1915. From an early age he evinced precocity in two areas, music and languages, and before his fourteenth birthday he was giving public concerts of the classical piano repertoire. At the same time he had already taught himself Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin, and had picked up some German and Yiddish from his parents. He chose to attend Columbia University rather than a conservatory and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1936. Following graduation he went to Northwestern to study anthropology and received his Ph.D. in 1940. From 1940 to 1945 he served in the army in North Africa and Italy. Following the war he taught for a year at the University of Minnesota before returning to Columbia, where he taught from 1948 to 1962. In 1962 he came to Stanford, where he remained for the rest of his life.

While at Stanford he was not only a professor of Anthropology, but also helped to found the Linguistics Department and organized the African Studies Center in the 1960's. In the 1970's he formed the Joint Center for African Studies with U.C. Berkeley. As a linguist he received virtually every honor available, including being the first linguist elected to the National Academy of Sciences. He was also awarded the Talcott Parsons Prize in the Social Sciences shortly before his death. Other honors included the Haile Selassie Prize for African Research, the presidency of the Linguistic Society of America and membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

Greenberg first became internationally famous in the 1950's for a sensational classification of African languages. At the time Africanists had been unable to classify the continent's 1,200 languages into language families such as Indo-European, except in a few cases such as Semitic and Bantu, which had long been recognized. In his final classification, published in 1963, Greenberg reduced this extreme diversity to only four large families. One of his outstanding discoveries was that Bantu, whose geographical area covered large expanses of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, was just a subgroup of a larger group that included many of the languages of West Africa. Though this classification was at first severely criticized by some Africanists, it won gradual acceptance over a period of more than a decade and is today the foundation of African historical linguistics.

The key to Greenberg's revolutionary African linguistic classification was a method that he termed "mass comparison" of languages. While other scholars were poring over individual languages in order to understand their internal structure and their relationships to the most immediate related languages, Greenberg raised a fundamental objection. Scholars were attempting to reconstruct protolanguages in order to justify their assertion of genetic relationships among languages. But, Greenberg asked, how did they know in advance what languages to choose to compare in this way? Before beginning to reconstruct the protolanguage

they evidently had a solid idea of what languages to compare. That idea, Greenberg observed, was based on shared similarities among the languages.

Greenberg reasoned that it should thus be possible to determine the family trees of linguistic groups on the basis of shared resemblances, even before the protolanguage was reconstructed. As a result, he began to employ a method that systematically compared the vocabulary of languages, word for word and sound for sound. To the extent that systematic correspondences could be found between two languages, the languages were related. And the more systematic and more frequent those resemblances were, the more closely the languages were related. The "mass" in "mass comparison" refers both to the number of languages and to the number of words in the sample. Greenberg observed that the larger the number of languages being compared, and the larger the number of vocabulary elements being compared, the more likely it was that accidental similarities between a word in one language and in another would fall by the statistical wayside.

Of course, this work took place before the advent of the computer as a linguistic research tool. For his mass comparisons, Greenberg simply maintained vast numbers of bound notebooks in which he lined up words in one direction and languages in the other. He wrote in pencil to facilitate corrections. Many of his notebooks have been donated to Stanford's library.

Greenberg's success with the African language classification is perhaps what led him to his next venture into unknown territory, namely language universals. In 1962 he published an article called "Some Universals of Grammar with Particular Reference to the order of Meaningful Elements." On the basis of what today seems a modest sample of thirty languages Greenberg asked such simple questions as which of the six possible orderings of the subject, verb, and object actually occur in the world's languages, and, furthermore, what are the correlations between this word order and the order of other constituents, such as the adjective and noun. This paper, which is one of the most frequently cited linguistic articles of all time, led to a new interest and a new approach to the field of typology, which deals with similarities among languages that are not necessarily historically connected, in contrast to his classificatory work dealing with similarities that are historically connected. While the fields appear quite distinct, Greenberg was also able to show how knowledge of typology could inform classification in certain ways in that knowledge of typical paths of typological development helps to identify the very comparanda of historical linguistics. For example, demonstrative pronouns tend to become both third-person pronouns and definite articles, and finally, in some cases, nothing more than a fossilized relic attached to words in a sporadic manner and without any apparent meaning, what Greenberg called a Stage-III article.

This new approach to typology was explored in exhaustive detail in Stanford's 14-year Project on Language Universals, co-directed by Greenberg and Charles A. Ferguson. This project employed a half-dozen scholars per year to do extensive cross-linguistic comparisons of phenomena ranging from vowel harmony to noun classifier systems. The project culminated in the four-volume set *Universals of Human Language*, edited by Greenberg and published by Stanford University Press in 1978.

Once these volumes were complete, Greenberg returned to questions of linguistic taxonomy for most of the rest of his life, first classifying the virtually unexplored languages of New Guinea into a single family in 1971. In 1987 he published his most controversial book, *Language in the Americas*, in which he classified all New World languages into just three families, in stark contrast to the several hundred families that had been the prevailing view.

Greenberg put most New World languages in a single family he called Amerind. The other two families---Na-Dene and Eskimo-Aleut---were not controversial. The acrimony directed at Greenberg's classification has been compared with that directed at Darwin, and in fact one scholar called for Greenberg's classification to be "shouted down" before he even saw the book. However, a year after Greenberg's book appeared Stanford Professor of Genetics Luca Cavalli-Sforza found that, on the basis of gene frequencies, the New World populations fell into the same three groups that Greenberg had identified on the basis of language, and more recent work with MtDNA and the Y chromosome show similar results.

Greenberg's final work was a two-volume study of Indo-European's closest relatives. He called this family Eurasiatic and it included, in addition to Indo-European, most of the languages of Northern Asia (Uralic, Turkic, Mongolian, Tungus, Korean, Japanese, Ainu, Gilyak, Chukchi-Kamchatkan) as well as Eskimo-Aleut in North America. The first volume, detailing the grammatical evidence for this family, appeared in 2000 and the second volume, covering the lexicon, was completed shortly before his illness and will be published this year by Stanford University Press. Finally, it should be noted that on the very day that Greenberg passed away, a five-year project on the evolution of human language---incorporating both the genetic and typological perspectives that Greenberg pioneered---was being planned at the Santa Fe Institute by Greenberg's long-time friend and ally, Murray Gell-Mann. In April 2002 there will be an international conference at Stanford to honor the many contributions that Greenberg made to linguistics and anthropology.

Despite his enormous fame, based on truly fundamental discoveries, Greenberg was a quiet and unassuming man who treated all people with the same dignity and respect. His intellectual legacy will in many ways direct the course of linguistics in future decades and he will always be missed by those who were fortunate enough to have known him

Committee:  
John Baugh  
James Fox  
Will Leben  
Merrit Ruhlen