
Obituary: M. Lionel Bender

August 18, 1934 – February 19, 2008

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By Grover Hudson

Marvin Lionel Bender, a prominent figure in Afroasiatic and Ethiopian linguistics for 50 years and whose works are among the authoritative sources on Omotic and Nilo-Saharan linguistics, died on Tuesday, February 19, 2008 in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

Born August 18, 1934 in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, he received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Dartmouth College in mathematics, in 1956 and 1958, and Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin, in 1968. His Ph.D. dissertation was a generative study of Amharic verb morphology.

After M.A. studies, Bender taught mathematics in Ghana and then in Ethiopia, at Haile Sellassie I University, where he became interested in Amharic and then linguistics, and so returned to graduate school, at Austin, where his dissertation was directed by Emmon Bach.

After Ph.D. studies Bender was immediately recruited to the research team of the Language Survey of Ethiopia, a Ford Foundation project (part of the five-nation Survey of Language Use and Language Teaching in East Africa), the other members of which were J. Donald Bowen, Robert L. Cooper, and Charles A. Ferguson. Bender was the only one with experience in Ethiopia and knowledge of Amharic, the Ethiopian lingua franca. The survey report, *Language in Ethiopia*, was published in 1976 (Oxford University Press), including several chapters by Bender, some co-authored with Ethiopian linguists. Words he wrote in the preface suggest the understanding about research conclusions which was to characterize his many books and articles in Ethiopian linguistics: 'an attempt to summarize the state of the art...and not a new source of orthodoxy'.

Over the years in the often contentious field of Ethiopian linguistics, in which different national and scholarly traditions compete, his freely expressed conclusions from research -especially concerning Omotic and Nilo-Saharan classification, in which his work became foundational- were frequently controversial, and just as often to be superseded by findings of his later work. He was among the first to take up the hypothesis of Harold Fleming about the status of Omotic as a separate branch of Afroasiatic, and that of Robert Hetzron about the internal classification of Ethiopian Semitic. Importantly, he succeeded in having both hypotheses accepted by the survey team and written into *Language in Ethiopia*.

When the survey was finished, Bender was appointed to the research group in Universals of Language at Stanford University, where he valued his continuing relationship with Ferguson and, newly, with Joseph Greenberg. In 1971 he joined the Department of Anthropology at

Southern Illinois University (1971-2000), where he remained until retirement and for a time served as Department Chair.

His early research was to explore, with Ethiopia as an example, Ferguson's idea of 'language areas', and Greenberg's method of mass comparison as a basis for genetic language classification and a way to bring empirical process to bear in a little documented and diverse linguistic setting such as Ethiopia, with some 75 languages in four families. As Greenberg's classification of African languages had brought order and rationality to the broad field of African linguistics, Bender's would similarly serve Omotic and Nilo-Saharan. His early work also applied lexicostatistical methods to Ethiopian languages, work which his mathematics background prepared him for, but which sometimes enraged conservatives, who failed to distinguish lexicostatistics and glottochronology, or failed to see that his often original conclusions about Ethiopian-language relationships were more a test of the method, and working hypotheses, rather than attempts to establish 'a new source of orthodoxy'.

He was the first to systematically sort through the many problems of Ethiopian-language nomenclature, which had arisen from decades of research in four European languages and competing use of ethnic-group names, self-names, and Amharic names, and failure to distinguish dialect and language, and he was the first to attempt a catalog of all the languages and named dialects of Ethiopia, including a first attempt at a comprehensive genetic classification: *The Languages of Ethiopia* (Anthropological Linguistics 13.5, 1971).

Turning to Omotic, Bender took to the field and began to fulfill the need for descriptions of many of these divergent Afroasiatic varieties. His thorough knowledge of prior work, ability to question informants in Amharic, and the new data he acquired enabled him to provide the first internal classification of this group, in his *Omotic: a New Afroasiatic Language Family* (1975), and eventually his *Comparative Morphology of the Omotic Languages* (2000), and *Omotic Lexicon and Phonology* (2003). He obtained grants, including from the National Science Foundation, to study Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan languages.

Soon he took up Nilo-Saharan, an extraordinarily diverse family, with often poorly accessible members. In order to provide the Ethiopian academic community, in and around Haile Sellassie I University (now Addis Ababa University), with an affordable introduction to these largely ignored and often despised peoples and their languages, he self-published, in Addis Ababa, *The Ethiopian Nilo-Saharans* (1975). Bender authored the only dictionaries on two of these languages: Gaam (1980) and Kunama (1996), and edited six volumes of Nilo-Saharan papers. On a Fulbright-Hays fellowship, he lectured at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. His latest book on this family was *The Nilo-Saharan Languages: a Comparative Essay* (1996). He valued his time in the Sudan, but loved Ethiopia, where he returned many times. His Omotic and Nilo-Saharan works are a major contribution to the preservation of endangered languages.

Co-edited with Gábor Takács and David Appleyard, his *Afrasian: Selected Comparative-Historical Afrasian Linguistic Studies in Memory of Igor M. Diakonoff* (2003), to which he contributed the

'Afrasian overview' and another article 'the Omotic lexicon', is probably now the best introductory source on Afroasiatic linguistics.

After retiring from Southern Illinois University, he continued to write and publish with energy, despite failing health, and was completing a book on Cushitic phonological and lexical reconstruction, about which he was expected to present in March at the North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics (NACAL), a meeting which he rarely missed and twice organized.

According to the obituary written for the Carbondale community, his ashes will be scattered in Baja California, Mexico, where he and his sons often vacationed in recent years, and perhaps an area which brought back for him memories of fieldwork in the west Ethiopian countryside.

Memorials may be made to the Council for Secular Humanism, in Amherst, NY (www.secularhumanism.org/).