

Morris F. Goodman (1933 - 2025)

Morris Franklin Goodman, retired linguistics professor at Northwestern who specialized in pidgin and creole languages, Swahili and the northern Nigerian language of Hausa, language families and typology in Africa, and historical linguistics, died February 14 after a battle with cancer. He had a decades-long association with the Program of African Studies. He was 91 years old.

Morris's family history read like the great American immigrant story. His father, Abraham (his last name was changed from its Yiddish form to "Goodman" at Ellis Island), was born into a Yiddish-speaking family in Ukraine in 1890. The family lived in a shtetl near Gritsev, an area where pogroms against local Jewish populations had not been uncommon. According to Morris and a 1988 *New York Times* obituary on his father, the family moved to New York's Lower East Side in the first years of the twentieth century, and by 1907 Abraham was selling rhinestone-studded hair combs on the streets from a pushcart. Over the decades this business would eventually grow into Goody Products, a major manufacturer and distributor of hair-care products, sunglasses, and other beauty and fashion accessories.

The Goodman family moved to Brooklyn, where Morris and his two older brothers spent their early years. Sometime in the late 1930s-early 1940s the family relocated to Miami Beach, where Morris witnessed for the first time the effects of racial segregation and Jim Crow, experiences that would have a lasting effect on his sense of social justice. Sometime after returning to New York City, he enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio, majoring in art history because he had career plans possibly to become an architect, but by then he had also discovered his interest and talent in language.

Morris entered Columbia University's graduate program in linguistics in the mid-1950s, studying with Joseph Greenberg, whose groundbreaking--and controversial--work on language typology in Africa and later on classification of Amerindian languages in the New World would redefine the entire field of comparative linguistics. (Greenberg had received his Ph.D. in African anthropology under none other than Melville Herskovits at Northwestern a decade and a half earlier.) Morris also studied under Uriel Weinreich, a specialist in Yiddish, bilingualism, and language contact. Without question, the influences of Weinreich must have sparked Morris's interest in pidgin and creole languages, which by their very nature represent the quintessence of language contact.

Upon completion of his Ph.D. course work at Columbia, Morris spent two years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, writing his dissertation and working as a research assistant for a UNC faculty member. There Morris witnessed the same racial discriminatory laws that he had seen in Miami Beach years earlier, this time involving two movie houses in Chapel Hill that either barred Blacks from entering the theaters or confined them to inferior balcony seating, but this time Morris joined other demonstrators, white and Black, to demand equal treatment, and both theaters eventually capitulated and allowed Black patrons in.

In 1961 Morris completed his dissertation, a structural study of French creole varieties found

principally in Haiti, Madagascar (which, ironically had been a British, not a French, colonial possession), and two small island locales in the South Indian Ocean, Mauritius and Réunion, and several years later this research was published as *A Comparative Study of Creole French Dialects* (Mouton), which for years was the standard work on the topic.

Before coming to Northwestern, Morris did post-doc work at UCLA, where, among other things, he taught Swahili. One of his students was Ron Everett, a Black political activist in Los Angeles who later Africanized his name to Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga. In 1966 Karenga would create the pan-African holiday Kwanzaa, originally as a Black alternative to Christmas and then as a supplement to the Christmas season for African Americans.

When Morris arrived at Northwestern in 1966, he was joining a cadre of Africanist linguists that included Rae Moore (Moses), whose doctoral work at U Texas Austin had focused on Swahili; Richard Spears, who at Indiana University had specialized in the Mande languages found across a swath of West Africa; Hans Wolff, a German-trained Africanist who had done extensive inter-ethnic language research in Nigeria; and, of course, Jack Berry, founder of Northwestern's linguistics department, who was a pioneer in research on West African pidgins and creoles and compiler of several dictionaries on West African languages. Berry had established his career at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London before moving to the States. Some years later the linguistics department and NU's Program of African Studies welcomed Abraham Demoz, noted authority on Ethiopian languages and African sociolinguistics. In the late 1960s or early 1970s Morris also studied at SOAS in London.

During his career at Northwestern, Morris focused his research mainly on French-based creoles, but occasionally his work cast a wider net. He co-authored a major article on Nilo-Saharan languages for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and wrote a significant piece on "Languages in Contact" for the "Linguistics and Sub-Saharan Africa" volume in the *Current Trends in Linguistics* series. In the 1980s his attention moved to Dutch- and Portuguese-based creoles in the Caribbean or found along and off the northern coast of South America; one notable article was the monograph-length "The origin of Virgin Island Creole Dutch." During this time, he also examined Portuguese-based Papiamentu, a creole spoken in the Dutch Antilles islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.

Morris was a linguist, but he might have also been described as simply a language maven. He could speak – fluently or proficiently – French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Yiddish, Swahili, and Hausa; he had broad familiarity with pan-Semitic and possessed a strong grasp of the morphology of Hebrew, Arabic, and Amharic; he was familiar with the declensional and conjugational classes of Latin as well as of several Slavic languages; he could read Dutch; he had a decent command of "tourist Russian"; and he even knew a smattering of Japanese. For many years Morris taught a popular undergraduate course at Northwestern called "Languages of the World;" in it, students were introduced to the fantastic structural and lexical diversity of languages unrelated to English and its close western European ancestors, and to the world's diverse writing systems, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to the Cherokee syllabary.

Not surprisingly, given his penchant for words and mastery of lexical arcana, Morris was an

inveterate cruciverbalist. He almost always completed, in ink, the Friday and Saturday *New York Times* crossword puzzles, considered a good deal harder than the Sunday *Times* puzzles. And for good measure, every day he would solve the Sudoku puzzles in the *Chicago Tribune*, even those rated level-four most difficult.

Morris and the other Goodman men were apparently blessed with longevity genes: his father Abraham lived to be 98; his brothers Len and Phil both lived well into their 90s; and Morris was just three months shy of his 92nd birthday when he passed away. Moreover, Morris was as sharp at 91 as he was at 70. Requiescat en pace, Morris.

A memorial service was held for Morris in Wilmette on February 20, with burial taking place in New York.