Africanist Receives Distinguished Professorship at Founders Day

The rank of distinguished professor is the most prestigious academic appointment that Indiana University offers.

In a career that has spanned 35 years and taken him to four continents, Paul Newman, professor of linguistics at Indiana University Bloomington since 1983, has garnered an international reputation for his scholarly contributions. His works are cited by Africanist and theoretical linguists the world over, and leaders in his field consider him the founder of modern comparative Chadic linguistics (a family of more than 140 individual languages spoken in northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, and central Chad).

Moreover, with his nearly 800-page magnum opus, The Hausa Language: An Encyclopedic Reference Grammar, Newman has proven himself to be the world’s leading authority on Hausa, a major language spoken in Nigeria, Niger, and across West Africa by more than 35 million people. [“It] is one of the greatest grammars written of any African language—I have heard numerous scholars comment on it with awe,” says Larry Hyman, professor and chair of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. Noting Newman’s mastery of both descriptive and historical analysis, as well his contributions to issues of concern to general linguistics, Hyman concludes, “In all respects and with whatever criteria you apply, Paul Newman is one of the most distinguished researchers and teachers working in any aspect of our field today.”

Newman has authored or co-authored 12 books, contributed more than 100 articles and reviews, and, in the late 1970s, founded the prestigious Journal of African Languages and Linguistics at the University of Leiden where he held a named professorship. Most recently, his co-edited book Linguistic Fieldwork has helped to reawaken interest in empirical descriptive research.

His colleague Samuel Obeng, associate professor of linguistics, credits Newman’s role in guiding the careers of his IU colleagues: “Professor Newman’s mentoring of junior faculty is unparalleled... [He] personally read through some of my manuscripts and helped me to broaden and strengthen my research.”

“Many other scholars, young and old, owe much to Paul Newman’s guidance and interactions,” adds Hyman. “He is a person who thrills in exchanging ideas, presenting his work, and serving as a good listener to others.”

Newman continues to inspire others through his many roles. As Harold Conklin, Crosby Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University notes, “Paul Newman is an exceptional scholar, teacher, writer, philosopher, anthropologist, linguist, ethnomusicologist, administrator, and colleague.”