



FREDERICK WILLIAM PARSONS

OBITUARY

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The sad but peaceful death of Frederick William Parsons—affectionately known as ‘Freddie’—on November 2, 1993, at the age of 85, has deprived the international body of African language scholars of one of its major figures. His universal reputation was founded on his seminal and authoritative publications on Hausa, a major world language spoken mainly in northern Nigeria and the Republic of Niger, and he was generally acknowledged to be the leading Hausa scholar of the post-Second World War era.

Frederick Parsons was born on February 9, 1908. After studying Classics at Marlborough College, he went to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he took a first class B.A. (Hon.) degree in Classical Moderations and a second class honours in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (1931). While at Oxford, he helped to set up the University Junior Linguistic Society, together with the late C. E. Bazell, sometime Professor of General Linguistics at SOAS.

After leaving Oxford, Freddie entered the Colonial Administrative Service in 1932, and served for 12 years as a District Officer in the then Northern Provinces of Nigeria. His main responsibilities included liaison with, and training of, local chiefs and officials, in addition to supervision of Native Treasuries and Courts. During the Second World War, he acted as liaison officer between the colonial and local authorities in the construction of part of the north-south road from Kano to Lagos. In the course of his everyday forays into remote areas on foot, horseback, or by bicycle, he gradually acquired a formidable knowledge of Hausa.

In 1944, he was invalided out of the Colonial Service, and was appointed Lecturer in Hausa at SOAS in 1946. At the time, he was employed as a letting clerk for the Surrey County Council Education Department in Epsom, and in a letter of reference, the divisional education officer wrote of him that: ‘Educationally he is too good for the work he is doing, although I shall be sorry to lose him.’ At SOAS, he assisted another giant in the field—his great mentor the Revd G.P. Bargery. Bargery had collaborated with his father, Allan Chilcott Parsons, a former medical officer in northern Nigeria, in the preparation of his *A Hausa phrase book* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1924), and Freddie’s eloquent and touching 1967 obituary for Bargery appeared in *BSOAS* xxx, 2, 488-94. He was appointed Reader in Hausa at the University of London in 1965, a position he held until he retired in 1975, when he was elected an Honorary Member of SOAS. He was also a popular and conscientious President of the SOAS Senior Common Room, and was involved (with Jack Carnochan) in the production of several amateur dramatics performances. In retirement, he devoted himself with typical relish to the affairs of his village church (Christ Church, Holmer Green, Buckinghamshire) and parish council in Little Missenden.

In early 1951, Freddie Parsons returned to northern Nigeria on study-leave to ‘collect information with regard to [Hausa] dialects, vocabulary, and phraseology’. In the course of this research trip, he suffered a fracture of his left femur after falling off a horse in Zaria—‘I had forgotten the propensity of equines for doing the unexpected’ was how he characteristically described the mishap in a seven-page letter to the then Secretary of SOAS—and had to endure a hair-raising and very painful overnight ambulance ride to Nassarawa Hospital in Kano. He languished there for several months, and in the same

letter wrote: ‘When the wireless is working (which is not often!), I listen to the news in Hausa and Hausa-English lessons by radio, from both of which I have picked up quite a lot of new facts and information. Colleagues in my own department will, for instance, appreciate the thrill I had when in the course of a conversation one evening with one of the ward servants he spontaneously produced a derivative word-form GARGASA “hairy”, which I had previously only met in the dictionaries and which I was anxious to establish as a living example in a paper I am writing on “abstract nouns of sensory quality”.’ As anyone privileged enough to know him will attest, this episode captures the essence of the man more than anything—racked with pain in an unbearably hot hospital ward, but ever alert to and fascinated by the complexities of what he fondly termed ‘his language’ (and he *did* go on to publish the promised paper in 1955 as ‘Abstract nouns of sensory quality and their derivatives in Hausa’, in (ed.) J. Lukas, *Afrikanistische Studien* [Festschrift Westermann], Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 373–404.)

In all, Freddie Parsons taught Hausa with unbounded enthusiasm to more than 150 students across a wide spectrum, encompassing undergraduates, postgraduate researchers, colonial officers, businessmen and missionaries, and he always maintained a keen personal interest in the academic development and individual welfare of all his students. As a teacher his classroom style sometimes had an authoritarian touch about it, but he was always balanced and fair-minded enough to discuss his views with students who could challenge them in an informed and intelligent manner. There were occasions, too, when he did not see eye-to-eye with Hausa-speaking language consultants who produced linguistic forms which did not accord with his own expectations and judgements of acceptability. Some of the students within his orbit went on to take up key Hausa-teaching posts in European and Nigerian universities, in addition to appointments in television and BBC (World Service) radio, and in Nigerian government ministries. Other Hausaists who became established international figures in their own right were attracted to SOAS to work alongside Freddie, for example, Claude Gouffé (Paris) and Freddie’s contemporary Johannes Lukas (Hamburg). In 1976, he visited the University of Hamburg to give a paper on one of his favourite subjects—‘Modal particles in Hausa’. Following the presentation, Freddie and I were invited to dinner at the home of Johannes Lukas and his wife Annemarie, and what a rare privilege it was to hear the two of them exchange scientific views on Hausa and swap anecdotes about their experiences in Nigeria well into the evening.

Freddie was an active and valued member of several professional associations, including the Philological Society of Great Britain, the Linguistic Society, the UK African Studies Association, and the West African Language Society. In 1964, he taught intensive Intermediate Hausa as part of a summer school programme at the Institute of African Affairs, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA, and he also worked in an advisory capacity with programmers in the Hausa Section of the Voice of America. In 1966, he was the chief Hausa consultant at a UNESCO meeting in Bamako, Mali, convened to formulate a unified orthography for major West African languages, and then attended a UNESCO-sponsored seminar on Hausa and Fula in Niamey, Niger (together with David Arnott, his fellow Hausa/Fula specialist). In 1967, he was invited to a conference in Paris, organized to confront the problem of developing dictionaries, grammars and texts for literacy in (West) Africa, and in 1970, he was invited to teach at the Oriental Institute in Prague as part of an academic exchange programme. I have been told by more than one person that when he attended African language conferences on the international

circuit, he would simply write 'Freddie' on his name-badge—an indication of how his reputation preceded him. He was also a conscientious and helpful correspondent—people who wrote to him got a response, and if not immediately, this was usually because he was busy assembling copious and detailed comments.

Freddie Parsons is probably best known for his mould-breaking and still influential publications on the Hausa verbal system (*Afrika und Übersee*, 44/1, 1960, 1–36; *Afrika und Übersee*, 55/1–2, 1971, 49–96, 55/3, 1972, 188–208; *Journal of African Languages*, 1/3, 1962, 253–72). In these articles, Freddie reshaped our thinking about the Hausa verbal system by developing a descriptive and analytical model of verbal 'grades', a conceptualization which came to influence linguistic work on some other Chadic languages. He also published pioneering articles on the operation of grammatical gender (*African Language Studies*, 1, 1960, 117–36; 2, 1961, 100–24; 4, 1963, 166–207), his encyclopedic knowledge and meticulous attention to detail often spilling over into voluminous footnotes (one former editor confided to me that Freddie's pre-publication submissions could be nightmares to edit!). These and other data-rich papers are models of clarity and imaginative thinking, and his earlier translations into Hausa of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria (1959, with M. Husaini Adamu, *Tsarin Laifuffuka da Hukuncinsu*, Kaduna: Government Printer), and the Criminal Procedure Ordinance of Northern Nigeria (1962, *Hanyar Tafiyar da Hukuncin Laifi*, Kaduna: Government Printer) are also widely regarded as monumental accomplishments. In 1961, he was invited to Kaduna by the Northern Nigerian Government for final consultation on his translations with the Attorney General's Department. His resulting legacy is a body of linguistic description which continues to dominate modern Hausa scholarship, and his high citation-rate is an indicator of this enduring impact. It should be remembered, too, that he achieved all this without any formal academic training in Linguistics.

If Freddie had one scientific 'blind spot', it was his reluctance to accept that Hausa was phylogenetically a member of the Chadic language family (itself a co-ordinate branch of Afroasiatic). This resistance to the idea is encapsulated in his 1970 article 'Is Hausa really a Chadic language? Some problems of comparative phonology', *African Language Studies*, 11: 272–88, an increasingly untenable position which was to be forcefully and succinctly repudiated by Paul Newman in his 1971 response 'Hausa and Chadic: a reply', *African Language Studies*, 12: 169–72. The under-representation of British linguists in the expanding field of comparative Chadic studies is surely attributable in part to Freddie's initial 'flat earth' scepticism about the phylogenetic classification of Hausa. He was never a man to be driven by dogma, however, and he eventually conceded that his opposition had indeed been misplaced.

Freddie Parsons's overall output was quite prolific, and his published work—his bibliography totals 20 publications (see Graham Furniss and Philip Jaggard (ed.): *Studies in Hausa language and linguistics: in honour of F.W. Parsons*, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1988: xix–xx)—was really only the tip of a large iceberg. A major determining factor here was the amount of time and energy he devoted to the selfless and ongoing task of typing up a mass of pedagogical materials for use in class—as early as 1960, his research profile included a proposed Ph.D. thesis on 'Relative clauses in Hausa', in addition to a 300-page monograph on 'The vowel system of the radical in Hausa', but what he saw as his professional responsibility to his students meant that neither of these endeavours came to fruition.

Because so much of this work never saw the light of day, a decision was

made to organize his vast corpus of Hausa research/teaching materials into approachable categories, and make them available for research purposes in a more accessible form. The resulting 12-box collection—*A handlist of the papers of F. W. Parsons*, compiled by Constanze Schmalig, Graham Furniss and Philip J. Jaggard, SOAS Library, 1993—is vivid testimony to his extensive knowledge of and interest in a wide swathe of Hausa grammar, and it includes writings on a variety of linguistic topics, e.g. syntax, semantics, morphology and phonology, as well as several outlines of a never to be completed monograph on ‘The Hausa language’ (Section 10). An earlier collection of some of his unpublished work was published in 1981 (*Writings on Hausa grammar: the collected papers of F. W. Parsons*, edited by Graham Furniss, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms), and a Festschrift in honour of his eightieth birthday was assembled by colleagues and published in 1988 (Furniss and Jaggard (ed.), *Studies in Hausa language and linguistics*), including an overview of his professional life and list of publications. And Paul Newman offered a tribute to Freddie’s shaping influence in his 1991 paper ‘A century and a half of Hausa language studies’ (in Abba Rufa’i (ed.), *Nigerian languages: yesterday, today and tomorrow*, Kano: Centre for the Study of Nigerian Languages, Bayero University, 9).

A few weeks before his death, Graham Furniss and I went to visit Freddie and his immediate family—wife Pam and daughter Felicity—in Holmer Green, (graduate students would jump at the chance to join such ‘pilgrimages’ and meet this legendary man, quickly discovering a warm and modest personality beneath the imposing, eccentric and sometimes stern exterior). The conversation inevitably turned to his favourite subject; Pam adjusted his hearing aid, and I took the opportunity to question him about a particular linguistic problem. Out came a pen and scrap of paper (many of his incisive ideas were scribbled in barely legible form on the back of battered envelopes), the wheels started turning again, and there was the solution. True to form, Freddie had his finger on the pulse, right to the end!

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