

**Obituary**  
**Charles Albert Ferguson**  
**July 6, 1921 – September 2, 1998**

With the death of Charles Albert Ferguson (“Fergie” to his friends, colleagues, and students) on September 2, 1998, in Palo Alto, California, at the age of seventy-seven, the field of sociolinguistics lost a scholar of unusual depth, breadth, integrity, and kindness.

Since 1988, Ferguson had been Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Stanford, where in 1966 he became the first full-time appointee and first chairperson of what was to become the Department of Linguistics. He had also held academic appointments at universities on five continents, and was a frequent participant in the LSA Summer Linguistic Institutes. He was a charter member of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic, the Arabic Linguistic Society, and TESOL; president of the Linguistic Society of America (1970); and first president of the International Association for the Study of Child Language (1973–75). A Guggenheim Fellow, Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he was also the recipient of the 125th Anniversary Award from the State University of New York at Buffalo (1971); he received honorary doctorates from Stockholm University (1989) and Georgetown University (1991). From its inception in 1972 until 1991, he served on the editorial board of *Language in Society*.

Ferguson was a pioneer in the field of sociolinguistics (cf. Huebner 1997); the dedication to him in the recently published history of sociolinguistics (Paulston & Tucker 1997) attests to his leadership in the field. But for more than fifty years, his contributions spanned many areas of linguistics. His interests developed early, and in an identifiably Fergusonian style. Typically, his studies were rooted in a casual observation of language in use. In the tradition of Sapir (e.g. 1929, 1949), whom he admired for his interest “in every aspect of human language behavior” (Ferguson 1997:7), he characteristically investigated phenomena in some limited, manageable, but potentially revealing domain, often something considered peripheral to legitimate inquiry by many linguists. What unifies much of his work is his concern for “the problem of how individual competence relates to a system that is conventionalized, i.e., shared by members of a community” (Enkvist et al. 1992:10–11).

Ferguson was born and raised in a working-class family in Philadelphia. His father died when Ferguson was twelve; but with the help of a scholarship, he attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his B.A. in Philosophy (1942), and an M.A. (1943) and Ph.D. (1945) in Oriental Studies. There he studied linguistics with Zellig Harris. He also studied a rich variety of languages, including Bengali and Arabic, both of which remained areas of lifelong interest. (A collection of his Arabic papers was recently published as Ferguson 1997). A

fellowship from the Intensive Language Program of the American Council of Learned Societies provided a laboratory for linguistic fieldwork both in Arabic and in language learning – which he viewed not only as a beneficiary of, but also a contributor to, linguistic theory (e.g. Ferguson 1951, Huebner & Ferguson 1991). For much of the rest of his career, he operated with what he called “a professional tension between solving practical language problems and doing academic linguistics” (1995b:8).

Among the first linguists appointed to the language section of the Foreign Service Institute (1945–55, along with Henry Lee Smith and Carleton T. Hodge), Ferguson developed teaching materials in Arabic and set up the FSI branch Arabic language school in Beirut. During that time, he began to define the parameters of what he later came to call a “language situation,” an aggregate of dialects, registers, and genres, and their patterns of acquisition and use by and among linguistic communities. The first super-national language situation he investigated was that of South Asia. His first published article (Ferguson 1945) was in this area; and later, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored program in descriptive linguistics, he taught at Deccan College in India. In 1957, he organized a symposium on South Asia for the 1959 meeting of the American Anthropological Association, from which came a major volume on the topic (Ferguson & Gumperz 1960). Over his career, he published nearly twenty articles on South Asia.

Perhaps Ferguson’s best-known work on language situations involved the register variation described in “Diglossia” (Ferguson 1959), first published while he was on the faculty of the newly established Middle East Center at Harvard University (1955–59). He borrowed the term from work by the French Arabist W. Marçais (1930–31), and he brought to it a detailed description of a specific type of language situation, with a set of refutable hypotheses relevant to both sociolinguists and social scientists in general. The article has been reprinted, both in English (e.g. Giglioli 1972, Hymes 1964, Ferguson 1971b, 1995a) and in translation (Italian, Giglioli 1974; Spanish, Garvin & Lastra 1974; Romanian, Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu & Chițoran 1975; German, Steger 1982, Raith et al. 1986; Portuguese, Fonseca & Neves 1974). At least two important linguistics journals have devoted whole issues to the topic: *Langages* 61 (1981) and *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 10:1 (1991). Hudson’s extensive bibliography on diglossia (1992) contains 1,092 entries in sixteen languages since 1959. A more recent bibliography contains almost 3,000 entries (Fernández 1994). The concept of diglossia has provided particularly fertile ground for South Asian sociolinguists (cf. De Silva 1976, Shapiro & Schiffman 1983, Krishnamurti 1986).

Ferguson’s observations on register began with his work on folk literature. His analyses of proverbs and riddles specified both the formal linguistic structures of each genre, including register differences, and the actual patterns of use in the speech community in relation to the apparent literal meaning of the proverbs (e.g. Ferguson & Preston 1946a,b). Another domain to analyze with respect to issues

of register and genre was politeness formulas. For Ferguson, the distinction between register analysis and genre analysis involved two questions: “What kind of language is appropriate for this message type?” and “What is the internal structure of this message type?” His observation (Ferguson 1967) that most Arabic proverbs are in Colloquial Arabic, with fewer in Classical Arabic, is a comment on register, but his analysis of the two-part and optional three-part exchange structure is one of genre. Ferguson’s work on sports announcer talk (1983) remains a model of how to approach register analysis.

Ferguson saw the kind of discourse agreement evidenced in formulaic speech as on a par with morphological agreement, and equally worthy of attention from linguists (Ferguson & Barlow 1988:7–8). His concern for pre-patterned speech in greetings and politeness formulas generated bodies of literature on its role both in language acquisition (first and second) and in other areas of language use (e.g. Coulmas 1981).

Ferguson’s first published paper on simplified registers (“Arabic baby talk,” 1956) also dates back to this period, and it too began with casual observations in everyday encounters – specifically, of how people address children. His subsequent work on Baby Talk (BT) spawned a generation of literature on the role of caretaker talk in the development of a child’s communicative competence (cf. Snow & Ferguson 1977).

Ferguson later expanded the notion of simplified register to include foreigner talk (FT), a term he coined in 1968 for an international conference on pidginization and creolization (Ferguson 1971). By emphasizing the conventionality of simplified registers, rather than their idiosyncrasies, Ferguson argued that they are a “part of the total communicative competence of speakers of American English” (1975:389), and therefore must be included within the linguist’s field of inquiry. His pioneering work on BT and FT led the way in exploring both the nature of language addressed to second-language learners (e.g. Clyne 1981) and other simplified registers, including amateur radio communication, academic note-taking, and courtroom speech (Ferguson 1985).

As founder and first director of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL, 1959–66), Ferguson was instrumental in developing resources in the less commonly taught languages, in responding to the worldwide demand for English teaching, and in promoting the study of urban dialects. At a time of increasing attention to issues of national development, he drew attention to the language factor in that process, through such CAL-sponsored language planning activities as the five-nation Survey of Language Use and Language Teaching in Eastern Africa (Bender et al. 1976, Ladefoged et al. 1971, Whitley 1974, Ohannessian & Kashoki 1978) and the Survey of Second Language Learning in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Ferguson’s introduction of working heuristics for analysis of language development has influenced other linguists, often in areas distinct from language planning. In some cases, e.g. “languages of wider communication,” his concepts are still used unchanged more than thirty years later. In other cases, e.g.

“standardization,” they have spurred subsequent studies that have modified or replaced these terms. National sociolinguistic profile formulas of the kind proposed by Ferguson were particularly influential in Indonesia (Alisjahbana 1971) and Mexico (Uribe Villegas 1969).

As first chairperson of the newly formed Committee on Sociolinguistics of the Social Sciences Research Council in 1963, Ferguson was instrumental in establishing the research agenda for this new field. He remained a member of that committee throughout its existence. The first major activity of the committee was the 1964 Seminar on Sociolinguistics at the LSA Summer Institute at Indiana University, chaired by Ferguson. Papers from that seminar appeared as a special issue of *Sociological Inquiry* (Lieberson 1966). Also arising from that seminar, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Linguistics, was an interim bibliography of the field by Pietrzyk (1967).

Between 1963 and 1973, the committee sponsored or cosponsored a number of other important functions, many of which resulted in important publications on topics including the acquisition of communicative competence (Slobin 1967), language problems of developing nations (Fishman, Ferguson & Das Gupta 1968), language planning (Rubin & Jernudd 1971), pidginization and creolization (Hymes 1971), language attitudes (Shuy & Fasold 1973), and input and language acquisition (Snow & Ferguson 1977). The committee was also instrumental in the creation of the journal *Language in Society*.

At Stanford from 1966, Ferguson continued to pursue longstanding interests while developing new ones. After his association with the Survey of Language Use and Language Teaching in Eastern Africa, he envisioned a similar description of the language situation in the US. The result was *Language in the USA* (1981), a volume co-edited with Shirley Brice Heath, whom he married in 1979. Although his interest in child phonology can be traced to earlier contacts with Roman Jakobson at Penn and Harvard, at Stanford he was able to pursue those interests intensively. The Child Phonology Project, initially funded in 1967 by the National Science Foundation, continued until 1991 and culminated in the volume edited by Ferguson, Menn & Stoel-Gammon (1992). The NSF also sponsored the Language Universals Project (1968–77), with Ferguson and Joseph Greenberg as principal investigators. The results were disseminated through a series of twenty “Working papers on language universals” and by the four-volume *Universals of Human Language* (Greenberg et al. 1978), in the preface of which Ferguson outlined his evolving interests in universals.

Ferguson looked for universals not only of phonology and syntax, but also of register and genre – not only in diachronic change through normal transmission, but also in the contact-induced change of pidginization, in the developmental change of first- and second-language acquisition, and in the shift to simplified registers (see Traugott et al. 1986, Barlow & Ferguson 1988).

For Ferguson, the search for universals also entailed a careful examination of what is unique to individual cases. His insistence on the inclusion of individual

variation in patterns of acquisition, use, and loss of first and subsequent languages into a general theory of language challenged the traditional notions of “native speaker” and “mother tongue,” which he called a “mystique [that] ... should probably be quietly dropped from the linguists’ set of professional myths about language” (1982:vii).

Among his other areas of interest, Ferguson’s numerous articles on language and religion (see Religious Bibliography, Ferguson 1995a:23–24) grew in part from his own quietly but deeply held religious beliefs. In these works, he examined the complex of religious factors that interact with other social factors (economic, political, demographic, and geographical) to give rise to, facilitate the spread of, or impede such sociolinguistic phenomena as register, genre, dialect variation, language maintenance and shift, language attitudes, and the development of literacy. Ferguson’s broader interests in literacy were reflected in the frequent reference in his work to writing systems – their forms, functions, and acquisition – and in the half dozen or so papers he wrote directly on the topic.

Methodologically, Ferguson was sympathetic both to quantitative, micro-sociolinguistic methods and to macro-sociolinguistic approaches. In his own work, however, he seemed most comfortable with “informant work,” in the anthropological tradition of descriptive linguists, and with the careful scholarly examination of secondary sources, in the tradition of European philologists. As a mentor, he was exceedingly kind, patient, and honest. He took great pains with his students, and great pride in them. Their many outstanding accomplishments in all area of linguistics are a tribute to his tutelage.

A complete bibliography of Ferguson’s publications through 1984 appears in the two-volume Festschrift presented to him on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday (Fishman et al. 1986:577–90). His *Sociolinguistic perspectives: Papers on language in society, 1959–1994* (Ferguson 1995a, reviewed by Wolfram 1999) contains an additional bibliography covering publications from 1985 through 1995 (325–28), and a separate bibliography of his work on language and religion (23–24).

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