

# The LINGUIST List

Official LINGUIST List Blog

## Featured Linguist: Adams Bodomo

Posted on [May 3, 2016](#) by [Anna White](#)



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How I become a linguist:

I studied linguistics and became a linguist for two reasons. First, I wanted to be a top diplomat for my country, Ghana, which would involve being posted around the world to represent my country. I figured that if I studied linguistics and foreign languages at the University of Ghana that would increase my chances, so I read Linguistics, French, and Swahili. Second, I wanted to help document and preserve my mother-tongue, Dagaare, a small language in northern Ghana. I succeeded in writing the first grammar sketch of the language, published at Stanford University titled *The Structure of Dagaare*. One of the most wonderful experiences young scholars will ever get in their academic life is seeing their first book and holding it in their hands. In my case it was even more dramatic because of the way it happened. After teaching

the structure of Dagaare for two years as a part-time lecturer at Stanford University I went back to Norway – I was writing a doctoral thesis at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology – to submit and defend my thesis. Then the publishers at CSLI , Stanford sent me copies of my book in Norway. However I never received them because I returned to Stanford campus for a conference event. Then I walked into the Stanford Bookstore and happened to look at a section of the Bookstore with a bookstand titled: “Stanford Authors”. Lo and behold, I saw my book and stood there for more than 20 minutes flipping through it unendingly – as if I was reading the texts for the first time when indeed it was I who wrote them in the first place. There were no selfies at that time, else I would have taken a memorable selfie about how it feels like to receive your first book.

After my doctoral dissertation I got a job at the prestigious University of Hong Kong and rose up through the academic ranks from postdoc to Assistant Professor to Associate Professor. Much of my work on Linguistics has been the descriptive and theoretical analysis of African languages using descriptive and formal frameworks like Lexical Functional Grammar and the Principles and Parameters approach. While working on African languages mainly, I have also done substantial work on Chinese languages like Cantonese and Zhuang and supervised many PhD and masters theses of students who come from all over the world: Africa, Asia, and the West (Europe and North America).

I am currently Chair Professor of African Languages and Literatures at the University of Vienna, and I am continuing to do research on general linguistic analysis, particularly of African languages, but also now look into how we can develop African language literature. I have come to the realization as a scholar interested in African and minority language documentation and revitalization that it is not enough to just document linguistic texts and their analyses; one must also ensure that speakers read and write in these languages. Literary work is very important for revitalizing African and lesser studied languages.

I am often asked who are my models. I tend to say that I really have no models because my journey is too unique to model after someone. I do however have many mentors back home in Ghana – Prof Dolphyne, Duthie and Dakubu – who taught me core linguistics; in Norway – Prof Lars Hellan, who was my PhD supervisor in Norway, and in the US at Stanford University – Prof Joan Bresnan who taught me LFG, and Will Leben, the general editor of the series – Stanford Monographs in African Languages, which published my first book. I am a lucky man; I am where I am today because of many men and women—great linguists and academics—who mentored me, but I don’t have space to list all of them.

A number of critical skills are necessary in order to become a good linguist: One, a critical, enquiring mind, two, attention to detail for discovering the intricacies of human mental processes through the use of linguistic structure, and three, the creativity to grasp the nuances of other people’s languages and cultures.

I also think that young scholars of linguistics must not study linguistics in isolation. I have

always sought to look at language studies from an interdisciplinary perspective within the humanities. The mission of the Humanities is to discover the inner nature of the human creature, including the intricacies of language, thought, and culture, and how this creature relates to its environment, leading, hopefully, to an appreciation and celebration of its inner beauty. We can even extend this to the Social Sciences which also study how humans relate to their environment. Humanities and the Social Sciences have intertwined missions but different methods of inquiry, so these groups of scholars, including linguists, can learn from each other about deep, introspective methods of inquiry in the Humanities to empirical, experimental and quantitative methods in the Social Sciences.

Linguistics is a very interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences discipline.

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