

IN MEMORIAM

William Bright

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With one lip, with two lips,

A metaphorical couplet from classical Nahuatl oratory, signifying “indirectly poetic speech”; also the title of William Bright’s Linguistic Society of America presidential address (*Language*, 1990)

William Bright, friend and colleague, died on October 15, 2006, near Boulder, Colorado. Bill received his Ph.D. in linguistics from Berkeley in 1955. He taught linguistics and anthropology at UCLA for 29 years until his retirement in 1988. Up to the time of his death he was adjunct Professor at the University of Colorado. He wrote more than 200 books, articles, and reviews, of relevance to many disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, literature, psychology, and sociology. He was the editor of *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America, from 1965 to 1987. He was a leading figure in the field of sociolinguistics, and he edited *Language in Society* from 1993 to 1999.

Bill’s research dealt with North American indigenous languages, especially languages of California, and in particular Karuk; Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs; Cakchiquel Mayan; and Dravidian languages of India. It included such endeavors as grammatical description; dictionary making; historical linguistics, including areal-typological approaches; sociolinguistics and language and culture; ethno-poetics; writing systems; and onomastics. He was extremely committed to the study of endangered languages and literatures. A festschrift for Bill, *The life of language: Papers in linguistics in honor of William Bright*, edited by three of his students (Hill, Mistry, and Campbell, 1997; Mouton de Gruyter) demonstrates the range and variety of his interests as well as the many people he has influenced.

A full assessment of Bill’s scholarship and publications will appear elsewhere. Much of his work was dedicated to editing. Since he was editor of *Language in Society* and since I collaborated in several of his editorships and have been in touch with people who collaborated with him in other editing projects, I will focus on this important aspect of his career.

In addition to editing two major journals, *Language* and *Language in Society*, Bill was also the founding editor of *Written Language and Literacy* (1998–2003) and the editor of the books *Studies in California Linguistics* (1964), *Sociolinguistics: Proceedings* (1966), *Coyote stories* (1978), *The collected works*

of Edward Sapir, *American Indian languages, volume 5, part 1* and *volume 7* (1990) and *volume 10* (1992), *The International encyclopedia of linguistics* (1992), and the series *Oxford studies in anthropological linguistics*. He was also involved in preparing careful editions of his own writings: with Anwar Dil, *Variation and change in language: Essays by William Bright* (1976), *American Indian linguistics and literature* (1984), and *Language variation in South Asia* (1990), and, with Peter T. Daniels, *The world's writing systems* (1996), and *Native American placenames of the United States* (2004). Bill was a wonderful collaborator in joint publications, as I know from personal experience. In all his editing endeavors, Bill was eager to encourage and assist younger scholars, giving unflagging support to many individuals in early stages of their careers. One manifestation of this is the wonderful set of books in the Oxford series.

Many people have written to me about their relationship with Bill as an editor of their work or their collaborator in the editing process. I think it is appropriate to quote some of them, as they reflect Bill's passionate commitment to collaboration and support as part of the editing process and give a sense of his personality and humor. I also think he would have appreciated this collage, an edited collection of voices from his network of colleagues, friendships, and family.

"I've been so saddened by the news of Bill's passing. I just wanted to ask you to make sure that you include in your obituary something about Bill's big heart: he was very supportive of young scholars, for example, and he and Lise [his wife] always welcomed me in their home, where I felt 'at home.' I will always remember Bill's big smile. I don't think I ever saw him look unsmiling, grim or angry (not even when he was a professor and I a student at UCLA)."

Carmen Silva-Corvalán, University of Southern California,
Language in Society Editorial Board

"I'm really saddened. . . . I met Bill Bright on a few occasions and he told so many interesting stories that I became endeared to him. He told us one story that strongly showed how tenacious he was. He was teaching at a university in Mexico City when that devastating earthquake hit. Well, the university president explained to him that due to the high cost of repairs and reconstruction of the buildings they would not be able to pay him. Just because of the tremendous affection that he had for his students, he stayed and taught courses for five months without pay. About a year later the deficit in wages were finally fulfilled.

Another story: He once told me not to send hard copies for him to review because by the time proofs arrived he'd be riding elephants while vacationing in India. I'll miss him."

Morrell Gillette, Journals Department,
Cambridge University Press

“He made a wonderful contribution to sociolinguistics and though I never met Bill I always found him a courteous and appreciative editor.”

Janet Holmes, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand,
Language in Society Editorial Board

“Bill . . . was very important to me because he accepted my first linguistics article (for *Language*) way back in 1970. I was just fresh out of grad school and I couldn’t believe my manuscript was being accepted. Then, I met him at various conferences . . . over the years and we became friends. When he was editor of *Language in Society*, I think he published two of my articles. He was a very generous editor, very wise and very forgiving. He was also a good friend; one could count on him to be willing to comment about works in progress, etc. He leaves an empty place in the field.”

Carol Myers-Scotton, University of South Carolina (Emerita),
Language in Society Editorial Board

“Bill Bright was a major figure in the field of linguistics, whom I knew only by reputation when I was a graduate student. In addition to his hugely influential role as the longstanding editor of the linguistics society’s flagship journal, *Language* – a role he filled with unfailing fairness, efficiency, and talent, so that he had the respect of linguists of all theoretical stripes – I also knew him as a pioneer in the field of sociolinguistics, the branch of the field that examines linguistic phenomena in their social context. Only a year or two out of graduate school, I had the good fortune to apply for a position at UCLA. Though I wasn’t offered the job, I was offered something far more valuable: I made the acquaintance of Bill Bright, who turned out to be one of the first senior scholars to pay attention to my work and treat me as a colleague. We went on to become friends as well as colleagues. It was a friendship I treasured, because in addition to his scholarly contributions, Bill was a supremely thoughtful and kind person.”

Deborah Tannen, Georgetown University,
Associate Editor, *Language in Society*

“It is sad to hear of death of William Bright. This a great loss to all of us who are students of language and society. He came to Japan several times. I had the honor to be with him and spend some time going to Kabuki Theater and going to the mountain area called Tateshina, Nagano. He liked Japanese things, especially food which seems to have been good for his health. We were fortunate to have him give two talks [in 1994] at Japan Women’s University, one of which was entitled ‘The view from the editor’s desk: 28 years of American linguistics’ and he talked on his view of American linguistics from 1966 to 1987 as the editor in chief of *Language*, as the editor in chief of the *International encyclopedia of*

linguists through 1991 and then as the editor in chief of *Language in Society*. This [was] very informative and interesting as it [had his] personal touch.”

Sachiko Ide, Japanese Women’s University
Language in Society Editorial Board

“I must be one of the few American linguists who edited Bill’s work more often than he edited mine. For years, he contributed a placename column to the *SSILA Newsletter* and would send me the file as an e-mail attachment a month or so before the issue went to press. I would print it out, make a few editorial changes, and mail him a galley in the *Newsletter*’s two-column format. It would always be rushed back to me with one or more of my emendations re-emended, daring me to re-re-emend. It was a game in which we tried to catch one another out in the finest points of style. Bill, of course, nearly always won, but it was characteristic of the man—an editor like no other—that he could wield his red pen (only metaphorically did he ever use a blue pencil) with such lightness of heart and with such a twinkle in his eye.”

Victor Golla, Humboldt State University
Editor, *The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas Newsletter*

“We will miss him, won’t we? Such a wonderful solid friend and mentor for so many years. I do think Bill’s editorial contributions are especially significant and he thought so too.”

Jane Hill, University of Arizona
Editor Emerita, *Language in Society*

“Well, on my father’s side, one thing to consider is that he was famous in his world when I was young, and he knew what it was like to be scrutinized by the public, particularly by those you publish. He edited thousands of manuscripts for publication, whereas I’ve only completed a few hundred. Among the many books he edited, as a ‘first reader,’ were all of mine, every single one. He was my biggest fan, and believed in me more than anyone I’ve ever known. He never disrespected the power of sexuality, erotic language, or the magnitude of sexual politics. He was so proud of me and his granddaughter, Aretha. His sense of social justice, and the power of poetry and language to change the world, has inspired me all my life.”

Susie Bright, Bill’s daughter and a well-known writer of erotica

And from me:

“I first met Bill at the 1966 LSA Summer Institute at UCLA and took two courses with him, one which explored generative transformational approaches

IN MEMORIAM

to Classical Nahuatl and another on language and culture. They both showed me Bill's creative mind and openness to different approaches. Our relationship developed over the years and Bill invited me to become involved in several of his many editing projects. He also was a great supporter of my work, for which I will be forever grateful."

Joel Sherzer, University of Texas
Associate Editor, *Language in Society*

I end with some words by Bill himself, poetically attesting to his love of editing: "I want finally to say a few words about the editorial work which, in the past ten years, has occupied so much of my attention. I enjoy this job: it puts me in touch with linguists of every type, in every part of the world; it keeps me abreast with the most stimulating new developments in linguistic thought; it gives me the satisfaction of helping my colleagues to disseminate their ideas in widely readable forms; and it lets me have the great fun of dealing with types and printing and publishing . . . Whatever contributions I may have made to linguistics through teaching and research, I take a special pleasure in what I am able to contribute as an editor, and hope that the history of our field will show my efforts to have been useful" (in Anwar Dil, ed., 1976, *Variation and change in language: Essays by William Bright*:272–273).