WOLF LESLAU

Wolf Leslau was undoubtedly the greatest Semiticist linguist of the past century—many would even say of all time.[1] He was born in Czestochowa, Poland, on November 14, 1906, and died in Fullerton, California, on November 18, 2006. The centenarian was working almost up to his final day on a descriptive grammar of the Ethio-Semitic language Gogot. As with so much of his work, his grammars were based on material he had collected doing fieldwork, in this particular case many decades before. He published more than fifty volumes and more than two hundred articles in a variety of international journals over a long and distinguished career of seventy-plus years, and he is known as a most prodigious contributor to Ethiopian linguistics (including three enormous projects of particular importance, Leslau 1979, 1987, 1995) as well as an important contributor to Semitic comparative and historical lexicography, and folklore and oral literature. His publications (written chiefly in English, but also in French, Yiddish, and Hebrew) ranged across descriptive grammar, comparative grammar, lexicography, grammatical/phonological and lexical reconstruction, etymology, language classification, borrowing, anthropological and cultural linguistic topics (e.g. folktales, argots, riddles, songs, proverbs, taboos), translation, bibliography, reviews, and even recordings of Ethiopian traditional music.

Leslau moved to Vienna in 1926 with the grand sum of the equivalent of ten US dollars in his pockets, and graduated in 1929 with an A.B. in Semitic languages from the University of Vienna, where he studied under Viktor Christian and Wilhelm Czermak; he also took a diploma that same year from Vienna's Hebräisches Pädagogium. It was also in Vienna that he met and married his wife Charlotte, with whom he had two daughters. After relocating to Paris in 1931, Leslau continued his linguistic studies at the Sorbonne and the École Nationale des Langues Orientales. He received his Licence-es-Lettres in 1934 from the Sorbonne, from which he would also earn his Docteur-es-Lettres (D. Lit.) in 1953. He also earned a diploma from the École des Hautes Études with the publication of his dissertation (Leslau 1938). His teacher and mentor in Paris was Marcel Cohen, one of the most prolific linguists of the twentieth century, and he studied as well with Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, George Colin, William Marçais, and René Labat.

After having taught in Paris for several years, Leslau was arrested by the French police and interned in a camp for foreigners upon the outbreak of World War II. The winter of 1939–40 in the internment camp in the Pyrenees was particularly harsh, due to the severe cold with no fires or hot water available. In 1941, he was transferred to the Camp des Milles, near Aix-en-Provence, an area not controlled by the Germans. Miraculously, days before the camp was taken over by the Nazis, Leslau escaped with his wife and baby daughter with the assistance of an international rescue organization, and arrived in the United States in 1942. Along with other European refugees, Leslau soon began teaching in New York at the École Libre des Hautes Études, the Asia

[1] [Editor's note] Wolf Leslau was not a president of the LSA, the group of prominent linguists on whom *Language* obituaries typically focus, but he was a major figure in our field, and thus an obituary seemed warranted and was commissioned, as *Language* policy allows, at the editor's discretion.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Institute, and the New School for Social Research. He accepted a professorship at Brandeis University in 1951, and in 1954, he served as Visiting Professor at the University College of Addis Ababa.

The following year, already having accumulated fifteen years of teaching experience, he began his long and distinguished tenure as Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Linguistics at UCLA, which remained his home institution until his death. He was founding Chair of the Department of Near Eastern and African Languages (now Near Eastern Languages and Cultures) and served as its first Chairman from 1959–65, and he again chaired the Department from 1974–76. He also played a key role in the establishment of the federally funded UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies (now called the Gustave E. Von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, named after a distinguished Islamist colleague whom he first met during his student days in Vienna, and whom he also joined at the Asia Institute). Among his most noteworthy activities at UCLA, Leslau directed several Amharic-language programs for the US Peace Corps (the first being in 1963). Indeed, he dedicated his *Amharic textbook* (1967), the book he wrote to teach the language to Peace Corps volunteers, to the memory of President John F. Kennedy. (He was very happy to have been invited by President Kennedy to the White House for an official state dinner for Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie in 1963, and proudly displayed for many years the menu from that occasion on the wall of his Fullerton, California study.) He retired from UCLA in 1976 as Professor Emeritus, and accelerated his scholarly output over the next thirty years with a truly amazing number of outstanding and long-lasting contributions, including Leslau 1995, one of the finest reference grammars for any Semitic and/or Afroasiatic language available, and numerous shorter grammars of other Ethiopian Semitic languages.

It is almost impossible to contemplate any other linguist ever matching the quality and quantity of his numerous pioneering research efforts. Volume 9 of the German periodical *Aethiopica* (edited by Siegbert Uhlig) was dedicated to him as 'the grand maître of our field', noting that:

> Leslau has served the academic world for many decades, having erected a lasting monument for himself by his everlasting energy and indefatigable dedication. His kind personality, engaging manners as well as the cooperative skills he revealed in his dealings with African colleagues have been his distinctive mark. The fundamental works his efforts have produced will stay with us for many decades to come.

Leslau was awarded many grants and fellowships for his research, beginning with a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946 for fieldwork in Ethiopia that was renewed the following year. His research grants, including from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of Education, were frequent and numerous and enabled him to undertake many projects. For decades, these projects revolved around Amharic, Ethiopia's national language, and they include a comprehensive English-Amharic dictionary, a textbook, a conversation book, and a volume of cultural readings, written with Thomas Kane in 2001 when Leslau was ninety-five (Leslau & Kane 2001). One of his Amharic dictionaries has even been translated into braille through the initiative of the Misrach Handicraft Training and Rehabilitation Center, Addis Ababa.

An overview of Leslau's scholarly record speaks for itself. His early research on Modern South Arabian languages (especially Leslau 1938) was the catalyst for his crossing over to the Horn of Africa for his lifelong study of both Semitic and Cushitic Ethiopian languages. Leslau's first article had been on Mehri (Leslau 1933), one of the six modern South Arabian languages, spoken in southern Oman and northern Yemen. It should not be forgotten that ancient and modern South Arabian languages are closely related to the ancient and modern Ethio-Semitic languages, constituting a single linguis-

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tic subbranch. Obviously, experts in South Arabian would want to see how that 'language' had developed on African soil. Leslau's focus of interest progressed south in Ethiopia, beginning with Tigrinya in the north, then Amharic of the central highlands, and culminating in the 'Gurage' complex of languages and dialects in the south, languages for which he became the acknowledged authority, even before his three-volume *Etymological dictionary of Gurage* (1979). He traveled to Ethiopia for fieldwork in nine of the years between 1946 and 1974, and to Aden in 1950.

I last saw Leslau in August 2006, in Park Vista, an assisted-living facility in Fullerton adjacent to Morningside, a retirement community to which he and his devoted wife Charlotte had moved in the mid-1990s. I told him of my intention to do fieldwork in Dhofar Province, southern Oman, on Hobyot and Bathari, which are endangered Modern South Arabian languages with fewer than one hundred speakers remaining for each, and he wished me success. Until recent years, Leslau continued at Park Vista his habit of regular morning and afternoon hours at the desk. Years after retiring from UCLA, in his eighties, he learned to use the MacIntosh computer, and the use of Amharic and Semitic language fonts.

One recognizes throughout Leslau's career the theme of what he himself called 'the comparative and etymological approach' (1988:xii). Noteworthy publications in this regard include Leslau 1957, 1958, 1964, 1969, 1982, and his magnum opus, his 1987 *Comparative dictionary of Ge'ez*, perhaps the best resource on Semitic etymology. He excelled not just in lexicography, however, but also in the phonological and grammatical aspects of comparative Semitic and comparative Ethiopic. An especially important work in this area is Leslau 1956, in which he compared all the known grammatical features of Gafat with the other Ethio-Semitic languages; he had sought out the last four speakers of this language, in a remote village near the Blue Nile River, in 1947. Leslau 1945 and 1958 also focus on Ethio-Semitic comparisons. Special mention must also be made of his anthropological prowess, the result of his use of elicited texts of cultural interest as the source of linguistic data; see, for example, his 1950, 1951, 1964, and 1982 works. Leslau is furthermore well known for his work on linguistic borrowing (Leslau 1945, 1990). A nice collection of many of his favorite articles can be found in his 1988 retrospective volume, which was modeled after Cohen 1955.

Leslau's underlying lifelong philosophy and strategy for research was to delve into those areas in Semitic linguistics about which little, or nothing at all, was known. The influence of Marcel Cohen on Leslau personally and on his career is clear. Indeed, one discovers many parallels between Cohen's own meteoric rise and that of his star pupil. Both had pan-Afroasiatic interests looking beyond Semitic (see Cohen 1947), and both were intrigued by the decidedly exotic and at that time barely known area of spoken Ethio-Semitic languages and dialects. Even though Leslau had mastered Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic) during his collegiate years in Vienna, he decided to move to Paris to study under Cohen, then the foremost authority on Ethiopian languages. Leslau himself (1988:x) reports that it was Cohen 1936 which 'opened up a new world for me and exerted the greatest impact on my scientific activity . . . The information given in Marcel Cohen's book prompted my decision and desire to undertake field work in Ethiopia'. And fieldwork he did for much of his career, traveling to Ethiopia every two or three years from 1946 until 1974, with stays of three to eleven months each time. His first fieldwork experience, however, occurred in Paris where he attacked Tigrinya, which resulted in Leslau 1941, still an essential resource on this important language. Sometimes fieldwork opportunities came knocking on his front door. Ethiopians who spoke

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a plethora of languages and dialects regularly visited his Westwood home near the UCLA campus to work with him as consultants and informants. Many of the modern Ethiopian languages were terra incognita and required documentation and analysis. Leslau was the major contributor to his own goal to have Ethiopian Semitic languages make their due contribution to comparative Semitic; see especially Leslau 1941, 1950, 1964, 1982, and 1999.

South Arabian and Ethiopian matters aside, every linguist concerned with Semitics in general or with details of any one of the Semitic languages ancient, medieval, or modern has, in all likelihood, read some of Leslau's scholarship, because his work touched on perhaps all of the languages and numerous dialects. Moreover, his research crossed over the boundary of pure Semitic into the kindred Ethiopian languages. Typical of his work in the latter field is Leslau 1959, an original fieldwork inquiry into an Omotic Ethiopian tone language, even though tone was an aspect of phonology with which he had no prior experience.

Few can truly appreciate the enormous sacrifices Leslau's family had to make as he risked his health, often under hazardous conditions, gathering the flora and fauna of his science. In connection with his field trip to Endeber to work on Chaha, he fell ill and had to be carried to the main road on a stretcher for twelve hours. My own field experiences with similar problems with malaria, heat, gastroenteritis, hepatitis, and so on in West and East Africa give me some insight into what he must have endured. The family struggled, too, in their years in Paris, where Leslau taught Hebrew among other things, and in New York City as refugees during the World War II years.

Finally, a few remarks about his teaching are in order. The myth that good researchers cannot teach well, since, reportedly, faculty often get promoted on the quality and quantity of their published work and are indifferent to teaching, is demonstrably false in this case, inasmuch as Leslau was a teacher extraordinaire, in fact, as good a teacher as anyone I have ever been privileged to see in action. He was at all times prepared and prompt for his classes, and encouraged student interventions, including challenges. In 2004, ninety-eight years old, he presented the invited lecture at the 32nd annual North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics (NACAL) in San Diego, and enthralled the standing-room-only crowd with humorous reminiscences of fieldwork experiences in Ethiopia.

Leslau was awarded many prizes for his research, including the Haile Selassie Award for Ethiopian Studies in 1965, which recognized his scholarship on Ethiopia and the fact that he had 'striven to encourage young Ethiopian scholars to take an interest in the scientific study of their own culture and linguistics'. He also received the Faculty Research Lectureship at UCLA in 1965, and he was awarded the Lidzbarski Gold Medal in 1996. He served as president of the American Oriental Society from 1984–85. At the age of ninety-eight, he published the last of his approximately fifty books: Leslau 2004. He was honored with three festschrifts: Segert & Bodrogligeti 1983, Kaye 1991, and Hudson 1996. For an annotated bibliography of Leslau's writings through 1990, see Devens 1991 (then three hundred items; more than a dozen were to follow). [†ALAN S. KAYE, *California State University, Fullerton.*[2]]

[2] [Editor's note] It was on the basis of a proposal by Alan Kaye, a formidable scholar in his own right, that I agreed to commission this obituary. Tragically, Alan himself died before it could be completed, succumbing on May 31 of this year to bone cancer (which emerged while he was engaged in the work on South Arabian referred to here on p. 872); a true professional to the very end, just days before he died Alan arranged for Grover Hudson of Michigan State to complete the manuscript. I hereby acknowledge with gratitude (and sadness) Alan's diligence and thank Grover for putting the finishing touches on the obituary.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

REFERENCES

COHEN, MARCEL. 1936. *Nouvelles études d'éthiopien méridional*. Paris: Librarie H. Champion.

COHEN, MARCEL. 1947. *Essai comparatif sur le vocabulaire et la phonétique du chamito-sémitique*. Paris: Librarie H. Champion.

COHEN, MARCEL. 1955. *Cinquante années de recherches linguistiques, ethnographiques, sociologiques, critiques et pédagogiques*. Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck.

DEVENS, MONICA S. 1991. Annotated bibliography. In Kaye, xxxv–lxviii.

HUDSON, GROVER (ed.) 1996. *Essays on Gurage language and culture dedicated to Wolf Leslau on the occasion of his 90th birthday*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

KAYE, ALAN S. (ed.) 1991. *Semitic studies in honor of Wolf Leslau on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday, November 14, 1991*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1933. Explications et rapprochements à propos de quelques éléments du vocabulaire mehri. *Comptes rendus du groupe linguistique d'études chamito-sémitiques* 1.35.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1938. *Lexique soqori (sudarabique moderne) avec comparaisons et explications étymologiques*. (Collection de la Société de Linguistique de Paris 41.) Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1941. *Documents tigrigna (éthiopien septentrional): Grammaire et texts*. (Collection de la Société de Linguistique de Paris 48.) Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1945. The influence of Cushitic on the Semitic languages of Ethiopia: A problem of substratum. *Word* 1.59–82.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1950. *Ethiopic documents: Gurage*. (Viking Fund publications in anthropology 14.) New York: Viking Fund.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1951. *Falasha anthology*. (Yale Judaica series 6.) New Haven: Yale University Press.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1956. *Étude descriptive et comparative du gafat (éthiopien méridional)*. (Collection de la Société de Linguistique de Paris 57.) Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1957. Some mutilated roots in Ethiopic. *Lingua* 6.268–86.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1958. *Ethiopic and South Arabic contributions to the Hebrew lexicon*. (University of California publications in Semitic philology 20.) Berkeley: University of California Press.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1959. *A dictionary of Moča (southwestern Ethiopia)*. (University of California publications in linguistics 18.) Berkeley: University of California Press.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1964. *Ethiopian argots*. The Hague: Mouton.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1967. *Amharic textbook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, and Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1969. *Hebrew cognates in Amharic*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1979. *Etymological dictionary of Gurage (Ethiopic)*. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1982. *Gurage folklore: Proverbs, beliefs, and riddles*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1987. *Comparative dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1988. *Fifty years of research*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1990. *Arabic loanwords in Ethiopian Semitic*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1995. *Reference grammar of Amharic*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF. 1999. *Zway Ethiopic documents: Grammar and dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

It is perhaps fitting that this mention of Alan's passing should come in this issue in which the final book notice ever is published, as he was a most prolific contributor to that section of the journal, writing over one hundred notices in his career.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

LESLAU, WOLF. 2004. *The verb in Mäsqan as compared with other Gurage dialects*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

LESLAU, WOLF, and THOMAS L. KANE. 2001. *Amharic cultural reader*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

SEGERT, STANISLAV, and A. J. E. BODROGLIGETI (eds.) 1983. *Ethiopian studies dedicated to Wolf Leslau on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2008.0014 Published online by Cambridge University Press