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TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR GILBERT ANSRE (1930-2026): FOUNDING COUNCIL MEMBER OF THE WEST AFRICAN LINGUISTIC SOCIETY (WALS/SLAO)

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The news of the passing on of Professor Gilbert Ansre on February 27, 2026, took me by surprise for three reasons: First, on the occasion of the Legon, Ghana West African Language Conference (WALC) 2023, the WALS Executive Committee made a courtesy call on Gilbert Ansre, and he seized the opportunity to make a video call, sending a warm message to me. Second, during the Dakar WALC 2025, Gilbert Ansre sent a congratulatory message to the participants, *"together with Professor Ayo Bamgbose – the two living African relics of the beginnings. This message is sent without the foreknowledge or consent of Ayo, but he has done worse to me*". I responded by endorsing the message. Third, later on getting to know about the demise of Dr. Emmanuel Nii Mensah (a former Secretary-Treasurer of WALS) and the Tributes some of us wrote on him, Gilbert acknowledged the Tributes and added a postscript: *"P/S. For only Professor Bamgbose: Ayo what is this that we have done?...a worldwide learned Society. When you have stopped laughing, call +233 243 508038. Take care & Bye"* For someone who has humorously interacted with me, even in recent times, his sudden death pained me.

WALS was founded at WALC 1965 at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, which was the Fifth Congress. It was not just a newly learned society. It inherited most of the activities of the Ford Foundation-sponsored West African Languages Survey. In addition to the Congresses, WALS continued the publication of the *Journal of West African Languages,* which was started by the Survey in 1964, the Monograph series, grants for research and attendance at and increasing participation of African scholars in linguistic research in the region and cooperation between participation between scholars from the so-called francophone and anglophone countries. It was in this connection that the first President of the Society was Professor Joseph H. Greenberg (USA), Chairman of the Survey until 1965, and the first Secretary-Treasurer was Dr. (later Professor) Ayo Bamgbose (Ibadan). The other members of the inaugural Council of the Society were: Professor Robert G. Armstrong (USA and Ibadan), Professor Maurice Houis (Strasbourg), Professor Eldred Jones (Fourah Bay College), Dr. (later Professor) Marcel Bot Ba-Njock (Yaoundé), Dr. (later Professor) Coulibaly-Bakari (Ouagadougou), M. (later Professor) Serge Sauvageot, and Mr. (later Professor) Gilbert Ansre, who also became the president of WALS from 1990 to 2000. The wisdom of the Survey carried over into the Society can be illustrated from an event at the founding meeting of WALS. The Constitution of the Society was being considered clause by clause, and the session dragged on past the time allotted. The French members were anxious to leave to attend the cocktail party which the French Ambassador had invited the francophone participants to. The Chairman then raised the question whether we should adjourn without completing the work or keep the French Ambassador waiting. The saving grace turned out to be the intervention by our elderly, highly respected Malian poet and historian, Hampaté Ba, who, in a deep voice, simply said, ***"On reste"***, meaning that we should stay on and complete the work.

With this background of how Gilbert Ansre was involved not only before but at the founding of the Society and beyond, we can now see clearly the contribution he made to language research in West Africa. Since linguistics was not a subject taught in practically all universities in West Africa until about 1962, African students who went to study linguistics abroad did so from qualifying in another subject. For example, Gilbert studied Theology, Latin and Greek at the University College of the Gold Coast (affiliated to the University College, London) and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Divinity, London, 1952. It was when he went to Hartford Seminary Foundation in Connecticut in 1959-1961 that he moved into linguistics, taking a Master of Arts degree with a thesis entitled *The Tonal Structure of Ewe* in 1961. This thesis dealt with tone in a traditional manner, pointing to its phonemic and syntactic role in lexical meaning as well as tone changes across phrases and sentences according to grammatical structures. The extension to orthography in terms of tone marking is

probably influenced by Professor William H. Welmers with whom Gilbert Ansre co-authored the manual *A start in Ewe* (1960).

The next stop for Gilbert was the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where he had a chance of moving into syntax, using the theory of Michael Halliday, "The Scale and Category Theory of Grammar", which was also the theory I used for my own thesis at the University of Edinburgh in 1963. Gilbert completed his PhD thesis, *The Grammatical Units of Ewe: A study of their structure, classes and systems* in 1966. Unfortunately, the thesis was not published as a monograph; in subsequent publications, aspects of the syntax were published in learned journals.

Gilbert first joined the Institute of African Studies, Legon, Ghana, under the leadership of the distinguished African musicologist, Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia. He fought for the establishment of a Department of Linguistics and Ghanaian Languages at the University of Ghana and was later made the first Director of the Language Centre. Gilbert deserves credit for the pioneering roles he played in language and linguistics, with the stimulating influence he gave to his students and colleagues to continue research work in various aspects of Ewe. This stimulation made one of his colleagues, Professor Allan Duthie, devote a lot of time to research on Ewe. Allan Duthie and I studied under Dr. (later Professor) Michael Halliday at Edinburgh University in the Diploma in General Linguistics course in 1960, before Allan went on to the University of Manchester, where he took his PhD in 1964.

It is difficult to cover the totality of Gilbert's contribution to knowledge, but there are some areas which can be identified and highlighted. These areas are syntax, sociolinguistics and Bible translation.

In syntax, Gilbert introduced the novel terminology "verbid" in his paper "The VERBID – A CAVEAT TO SERIAL VERBS" *The Journal of West African Languages,* Vol III No. 1, 1966. The point of his introducing this term is to warn that certain verb-like items, which cannot be conjugated like verbs, are not verbs but verbids. Gilbert takes issue with Westermann on Ewe and mentions other languages in West Africa. To cite one example in Ewe, there is a lexical item **ná** with the meaning "give". The same item, which is found in combination with verbs but has a meaning such as a preposition "to" or "for" should not be considered a verb but a verbid. Hence, if there is a sentence with a literal translation "She gave oranges and bananas", there is a proper verb, "give". However, if the sentence is "She bought oranges, give me" (= "She bought oranges for me"), the second element should only be considered a verb because it has been bleached of certain characteristics of verbs. Many scholars of Serial Verbal Constructions (SVC) argue that the bleaching of the second element arises precisely from the combination in this construction.

In sociolinguistics, Gilbert has been active in language standardization, language survey, language policy, especially in education and multilingualism and its effects. There are two particularly influential publications in this regard. Gilbert's "Four Rationalizations for Maintaining European Languages in Education in Africa", first published in the journal *Kiswahili* 1977 (setting out why the erstwhile colonial languages have continued to be preferred), proved to be popular and even reprinted in subsequent publications. The rationalizations for preferring English or French as a medium of instruction in education are (i) cost, for example, of textbooks as well as teaching materials and teacher training for a mother-tongue medium, (ii) the continued need for international communication (which English or French facilitates), (iii) the advancement of national communication and unity which a language such as English makes possible in a multilingual situation where languages are tied to ethnic divisions, and (iv) the lack of adequate vocabulary for teaching scientific concepts in indigenous languages.

Gilbert competently refutes these four rationalizations by showing that: teaching in English is more expensive because of inadequate teaching and the failure and drop-out rates, only a minority of the population is involved in international communication, multilingualism does not necessarily involve disunity, nor does English (which is spoken by a minority) foster national cohesion, and language can be developed to expand its vocabulary to express scientific concepts.

The second influential publication in sociolinguistics by Gilbert is *Madina, Three Polyglots and Some Implications for Ghana.* Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana,

1977. This publication arose from a Madina Project which was sponsored by the Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois, USA, in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. The Director of the Project was Professor Jack Berry, a linguist from Northwestern University. What Gilbert's publication investigates is: If there are people who are fluent in three languages, what makes them choose these languages, and what are the implications for education in Ghana? The findings from the study are that language is acquired for pragmatic use. Hence, Akan is the dominant language for commerce and trade. English is next for employment and formal school education, and Hausa is third for communication with migrant traders from the northern regions, particularly among the Islamic community. This hierarchy tends to lead to language shift. When children speaking other languages move into this type of community, they adopt the same hierarchy. Hence, there is a need to look into mother-tongue education and avoid language endangerment by translating educational materials into other Ghanaian languages.

When it comes to Bible translation, Gilbert, as a linguist, is well qualified to see that literal translation must not be the approach, but culturally sensitive and meaningful translation. He was involved in the translation of the Bible into many other languages and, in doing this, he was able to engage in vocabulary creation and expansion as well as orthographic reform. An example of how a linguist approaches a translation that is meaningful to readers of the Bible in their own language is the translation of "bread" in most African languages of the famous declaration by Jesus, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) and in the Lord's Prayer "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Translators of the Bible opt for a generic translation that can be equated to "food" in general i.e., something to eat. However, in the Passover Feast, when it is said, "And he took bread" (Luke 22:19), "bread" is interpreted as a staple food which is specific. In Ewe, the generic translation is **nuɖuɖu** while the specific one is **abolo.** I understand that **abolo** is now more popular in modern translations of the Bible because it is more readily understood as a meaning of "bread".

Beyond his academic excellence, how was Gilbert as a person? There are two aspects of his character which strike me. The first is his simplicity. Extremely approachable, getting on with both young and old, colleagues and students and nationals and foreigners. A distinguished and highly respected Professor, Hall Master of Akuafo Hall at Legon, a Presbyterian Minister, his simplicity extends to his dressing. Gilbert was usually casually dressed in short-sleeved shirts on shorts or trousers. In all the years I knew him, I never saw him in his clerical robes as a Minister, except in a photograph.

The second aspect of his character is his humour. Watch him when he spoke, it was also with a smile, which probably had followed or was about to follow a joke. In my opening paragraph to this Tribute, I referred to his message to Dakar WALC 2025 in which he humorously called himself and me "the two living African relics" of the founding of WALS/SLAO. Another example I must cite was a discussion about the role of grandfathers. He said when his children were complaining about grandfathers indulging and spoiling their children, his response was *"It's the duty of grandfathers to spoil your children and your own duty to train them"*.

Gilbert, you will be sorely missed not only in Ghana but also in the international community of linguists, particularly in WALS/SLAO. **Osofo**, as I fondly call you with your clerical title, Adieu. Rest in peace in the bosom of our Lord, Jesus Christ.