

UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Root of Languages

Recognized as a linguistics trailblazer, UC Santa Barbara professor Bernard Comrie is being honored by the British Academy for demonstrating the highest standards of achievement and scholarship.

Selected for the Neil & Saras Smith Medal, Comrie will be formally decorated at a ceremony Wednesday, Sept. 27, in London. “I certainly wasn’t expecting anything, so when I received the first unofficial notification a few weeks ago I was dumbfounded,” Comrie said. “When I checked the list of previous awardees, I was even more surprised.”

Established in 2013 by Neil Smith, professor emeritus at University College London and a fellow of the British Academy, the medal is awarded annually. Past winners include Noam Chomsky, professor emeritus at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and often described as the “father of modern linguistics”; William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania and founder of variationist sociolinguistics; and University of Cambridge professor Sir John Lyons, founding editor of the *Journal of Linguistics*.

A national body for humanities and social sciences, the British Academy presents awards in several categories. “This year’s winners, be they academics, broadcasters, writers or entrepreneurs, have all demonstrated excellence in their respective fields,” said Professor Sir David Cannadine, president of the academy. “They have blazed new trails through their disciplines, shown dedication of the highest order and, through their work, furthered understanding of what it means to be human.” Among those also being honored is Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales.

Noting few awards exist for linguistics, Comrie said: “It is always good to know that one’s work is appreciated, though I see this as encouragement for my work in the future and encouragement to younger scholars in the field.”

Comrie specializes on language universals and linguistic typology — studying and classifying languages based on their structural and functional features. Since he joined UCSB’s Department of Linguistics in 2002, his research has focused on interdisciplinary evidence to solve problems in language prehistory. For instance, he said, the Haruai language in highland Papua New Guinea does not closely relate to languages in neighboring geographical areas. With cooperation from population scientists, Comrie found evidence through genetic markers that the people who spoke Haruai migrated sometime in the past from lowland New Guinea.

Moving forward, Comrie — who joked that at 70 he is “the baby” among previous medal winners — intends to finish analyzing data he’s gathered over decades and write up his findings, including those on the grammar of Tsez, spoken in the North Caucasus near the Black Sea, and Haruai.

“In addition, I have started work with an Italian colleague, Raoul Zamponi, to analyze traditional languages of Great Andaman in the Andaman Islands of India,” he said. “All of these languages are extinct, though we have documentation of various levels of extent and quality, which were compiled by non-linguists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.