TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR EMERITUS BEN OHIOMAMHE ELUGBE, FNAL, FWALS (14TH MARCH 1946 –JULY 2025)[1]

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I met Prof. Ben Elugbe shortly after I gained admission into the Department of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Ibadan in the 1992/1993 Session. When Prof. Elugbe returned from his sabbatical leave at the Ogun State University (now Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU), he was elected as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ibadan (UI). My Ph.D. supervisor (Rev. Sr. Uwalaka of blessed memory) was concerned about my orthographic representation of tense elements in my data and suggested that I should discuss the data with Prof. Elugbe. I met Prof. Elugbe in the Dean's Office, and he immediately suspended what he was doing and spent hours with me over my data. That valuable discussion opened my eyes to the interlocking agreement relations within the basic clause in Lamnsoˊ. Prof. Elugbe's readiness to help younger colleagues navigate difficult research and career situations was of no common compare.

Prof. Elugbe was born on Thursday, 14th March, 1946 in Otuo, Owan-East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. He attended Anglican Grammar School, Igara, before gaining admission into the University of Nigeria, Nsuka (UNN) to read English. When the Nigerian civil war dislodged him (and many others) from UNN, he relocated to the UI to continue his studies. He became a foundation student of Linguistics at UI from where he graduated in 1969 with a Second Class (Upper Division). He had native-speaker competence in 5 Nigerian languages alongside English and a working knowledge of German and French. Prof. Elugbe earned his Ph.D. in 1974. His doctoral thesis is titled *Comparative Edoid Phonology* in which he carried out a systematic comparison of tone patterns across the four proposed branches of Edoid languages. This reconstruction resulted in the identification of nominal tone melodies, which are combinations of tone on a noun class prefix and tone on a nominal stem. These findings set the stage for further research on Edoid tone and its relationship with Proto-Benue-Congo and Proto-Niger-Congo. He identified and distinguished fortis and lenis nasals as well as plosives in these languages. Elugbe's Ph.D. thesis is a master-class in precision and intellectual rigour. It focuses on the formal accuracy of data analysis. It is in this work that Elugbe's scholarly integrity and methodological rigour are in full display. Any article or book on Edoid languages is incomplete without a reference to Elugbe's (1974) *Comparative Edoid Phonology.* He was promoted to the rank of Professor of Linguistics at the University of Ibadan in 1987.

His research collaboration with Prof. Philomena Omamor resulted in the publication of *Nigerian Pidgin: Problems and Prospects* in 1991, a landmark work that legitimized Nigerian Pidgin as a language of commerce, faith, and everyday life. He disentangled Nigerian Pidgin (NP) from the English language, emphasising its unique grammar, vocabulary and structure to demonstrate that NP is a language in its own right. Elugbe established the link between the origin of Africa's cross-border languages and the indigenous languages of the peoples of Africa (as they existed) before the arrival of the colonialists, who dismembered the African continent into different separate countries. His work helped NP to gain recognition in international contexts, including translations of religious texts like the *Jehovah's Witnesses' Pidgin Bible*. His advocacy continues to inspire new generations of linguists, especially in the fields of pidgin studies and endangered language documentation.

Elugbe and Williamson (1977) (*Reconstructing Nasals in Proto-Benue-Kwa)* examines the environment of nasalised vowels, tracing the source of nasalisation of the V segments in Proto Edoid to an early Proto Edoid form in which the velar nasal -C_2- [ŋ] occurred. Elugbe (1989) (*Comparative Edoid: Phonology and lexicon)* isolates the Proto North Central Edoid (PNCE) group of languages and describes Ẹdo, Ésàn and clusters of Ora-Emai-Iuleha, Yekhee, Uneme and Ghotuo in an attempt to reconstruct the probable nasal

[1] This tribute is an edited version of the tribute read by the author during the Night of Tributes in honour of Prof. Ben Elugbe organised by the University of Ibadan in Trenchard Hall on September 5th, 2025.

environment for the 'inherent nasal vowels'. Prof. Elugbe was immeasurably knowledgeable in Linguistics and had the ability to spot, connect and explain the missing link within complex data. He championed the documentation and preservation of Nigeria's minority languages, modernizing orthographies and ensuring their survival in academic and cultural contexts. His extensive research output established him as a leading authority in African linguistics, earning him a fellowship in the Nigerian Academy of Letters (FNAL) and the Fellowship of the West African Linguistic Society (FWALS). He ultimately served as President of both academic bodies. As Editor of the *Journal of West African Languages* (JWAL), Prof. Elugbe not only masterminded the revival of the journal, but he insisted that only articles with all the trappings of thorough research and high academic standards were published in JWAL.

Prof. Elugbe was a thorough-bred university administrator who headed the Department of Linguistics and African Languages in UI at three different times: 1979-1980, 1985-1987, and January to July 1985. He served as Director of the University Media Centre from 1989-1992. He was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1995-1997 (a period during which he also served briefly as the Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration)). He was appointed the Executive Director of the National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba and served in that capacity from 2004-2007. He helped to move NINLAN to its permanent site and upgraded NINLAN to a degree-awarding institution. Beyond teaching, he chaired several committees that reshaped university structures and policies, leaving a lasting imprint on the Nigerian higher education sector. He served as External Examiner and Professorial Assessor to a plethora of Universities in West Africa and beyond. He served the Nigerian Academy of Letters (NAL) as Public Orator, Secretary and later President. He was President of the West African Linguistic Society (WALS) between 2004 and 2013. As the President of WALS, he stirred the Society through very difficult times, and he continued to offer counsel and support to the leadership of the Society till his last day on earth. He was a member of the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) Prize for Literature Committee, helping to shape Nigeria's most prestigious literary prize. In 2014, Prof. Elugbe was honoured with the rank of *Officier de l'Ordre du Merite de l'Education Nationale* (Officer of the Order of Merit of National Education) by the government of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire for his contributions to African linguistics, particularly his comparative work on Nigerian and West African languages.
Prof. Elugbe was an outstanding researcher, a good teacher and an honest man. Prof. Elugbe trained generations of linguists, many of whom became professors, researchers, and language experts in Nigeria and abroad. He emphasized that defending the indigenous languages of Africa is defending humanity, a philosophy that guided his lifelong commitment to linguistic diversity.

Sadly, Professor Emeritus Ben Ohiomamhe Elugbe, FNAL, FWALS passed away on the 17th of July, 2025 at age 78. He leaves behind a legacy of scholarship, mentorship, and advocacy for Nigerian and African languages. Now that Prof. has gone to rest with his Maker, part of our beautiful world of linguistics has gone with him, too. Sir, the WALS family are sincerely thankful to God Almighty for the life you lived. We recommit ourselves to working tirelessly for the growth of WALS and promise you that we will ensure that WALS continues in the direction you and your contemporaries envisaged. We deeply value your simplicity and genuinely appreciate you for letting your students sip from your deep knowledge of Linguistics. Goodnight to our teacher and friend.

In the quiet chambers of language… you stood tall.
A custodian of voices… preserving them all.
From Edo's heart… your wisdom took flight,
Illuminating tongues… with scholarly light.

You mapped the pathways… where words entwine,
Guarding traditions… making them shine.
A bridge between past… and futures anew,
Each dialect cherished… each culture in view.
Leader of minds… with vision so vast,

Your legacy anchors… too strong to be past.
The West African Linguistic Society knew,
A steward of truth… steadfast and true.
Though time may silence… the mortal frame,
Your work resounds… an eternal flame.

In every syllable… in every phrase,
Your spirit endures… deserving of praise.
So let us honour… with reverent song,
The scholar whose impact… will echo long.
Prof. Elugbe… your name shall remain,
A beacon of language… a timeless refrain.