

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



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The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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ROBERT A. FREIDIN



Robert Freidin, professor of linguistics in the Council of the Humanities, will transfer to emeritus status on July 1, 2016, after 32 years on the Princeton faculty. Bob was born in Los Angeles, California. He received his B.A. from the University of California–Berkeley in 1966 and then enrolled at Indiana University in Bloomington with the intention of pursuing a Ph.D. in English literature.

The Ph.D. program at Indiana included a required course on the history of the English language, the second half of which contained a unit on the phonological development of modern English. This sparked Bob’s interest in linguistic theory, which was then confirmed at the Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute in 1968 — his first encounter with syntactic theory in its modern form. Bob received his Ph.D. in English language and linguistics for a dissertation titled “Interpretive Semantics and the Syntax of English Complement Constructions,” supervised by Roger Lass, whose class in the history of English had sparked Bob’s interest in linguistics in the first place.

Bob’s early career was peripatetic. He taught at Purdue for six years, first in the Department of English and then in the Department of Audiology and Speech Sciences. Afterward, with funding from the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Institute of Mental Health, and thanks to an invitation from Noam Chomsky, Bob spent three years, from 1976 to 1979, as a visiting scientist in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There, he attended Chomsky’s seminars and worked closely with his students and colleagues, many of whom would become lifelong friends and collaborators. From there, Bob moved briefly to Brown and then to McGill, both times as a member of the Department of Linguistics. While at McGill, Bob was invited to visit Princeton’s Program in Linguistics, where he spent a year as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures before being appointed to a tenure-track position in the Department of Philosophy. As a first-year assistant professor, Bob

was named director of the Program in Linguistics, a position he held from 1985 all the way to 1997. Bob came up through the ranks as the sole linguist in philosophy, where he remained an active member until linguistics was consolidated in the Council of the Humanities in 1997.

Bob's work in linguistics is marked by a firm commitment to the biolinguistic approach to the study of human language pioneered by Chomsky and others beginning in the 1950s. This approach begins from the premise that human beings have an innate faculty for constructing and computing with linguistic representations, the structure of which massively constrains the space of possible human languages. The central aim of linguistic theory, on this view, is to provide a formal characterization of the initial state — sometimes called Universal Grammar — and of the processes that lead from it to the adult speaker's knowledge of his or her language. Bob's many contributions to generative linguistics focus on syntactic theory, the study of the finite computational system that somehow generates the infinite set of well-formed sentences. Since its inception, generative syntactic theory has identified a vast proliferation of previously unnoticed syntactic phenomena that any theory of grammar must explain, together with an elaborate formal apparatus for developing such theories. Bob's work in syntax has focused on core phenomena: the theory of binding, the theory of movement, and the theory of case. His classic paper on the transformational cycle — "Cyclicity and the Theory of Grammar" (1978) — established that what had previously been regarded as a fundamental principle of grammar could in fact be derived from more basic and independently motivated principles. "Disjoint Reference and *Wh*-Trace" (1981), coauthored with Bob's longtime friend and collaborator from his days at MIT, Howard Lasnik, is both a contribution to the nuts and bolts theory of anaphora and a model study of how attention to the detailed study of syntactic phenomena can shed light on the structure of the language faculty. These papers, and indeed all of Bob's work in syntax, are marked by both an extraordinary concern for rigorous analysis and the desire to connect these detailed investigations to larger questions about the basic structure of the human capacity for language.

In more recent years, Bob has turned his attention to the history of generative linguistics. While the general outlook in the field has remained relatively constant over the decades, the theoretical apparatus has undergone a series of remarkable shifts over the course

of Bob's career. In a series of essays, beginning with "Conceptual Shifts in the Science of Grammar: 1951-1992" (1994) and "Exquisite Connections: Some Remarks on the Evolution of Linguistic Theory" (coauthored with Jean-Roger Vergnaud, 2001), Bob traces the empirical and theoretical motivations for these changes, the raw materials for which are collected in his landmark six-volume collection *Syntax: Critical Concepts* (coedited with Howard Lasnik, Routledge, 2006).

As a teacher, Bob has introduced generations of Princeton students to the scientific study of language through his teaching in LIN 201 ("Introduction to Language and Linguistics") and LIN 212 ("Human Language: A User's Guide") and through his sequence of courses in syntax, beginning and advanced. As a direct result of his Princeton classes, Bob has published two important textbooks, *Foundations of Generative Syntax* (MIT Press, 1992) and *Syntax: Basic Concepts and Applications* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), the latter the first introductory text to present the subject from first principles within the framework provided by the so-called minimalist program.

Beyond the classroom, Bob has been a central figure in the field, serving as an editor of journals (*Linguistic Inquiry* and *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*) and a tireless organizer of conferences and workshops. In 1989, Bob joined with Ken Safir of Rutgers to found the Jersey Syntax Circle, an effort to bring linguists in the area together for workshops on topics of common interest. The most recent meeting was a conference titled "Prospects for the Theory of Syntax," held at Princeton on April 15, 2016, to honor Bob's contributions to linguistics and featuring talks by Bob's former student Jon Sprouse '03, Howard Lasnik, and Noam Chomsky.