

# 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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# EDWIN S. WILLIAMS



**E**dwin Williams, professor of linguistics in the Council of the Humanities, will transfer to emeritus status on July 1, 2017, after thirty-one years at Princeton, twenty-seven of them on the faculty. He arrived for the first time in 1966 from his native Chattanooga, Tennessee, graduating with an A.B. in English in 1970, when Commencement drew national attention for the combination of Bob Dylan, cicadas, and peace armbands. Later that year he moved further north to Cambridge, Massachusetts, enrolling in the Ph.D. program in linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where his adviser was Noam Chomsky, and from which he received his Ph.D. in 1974. After a one-year stint in Paris, he took a job as an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst, where he rose through the ranks before returning to Princeton in 1990.

The title of Edwin’s doctoral dissertation, “Rule Ordering in Syntax,” says a great deal about its author, who has gained for himself an enviable international reputation for innovative scholarship across a range of subjects in the study of language as a science. In the first place, Edwin is a syntactician—someone who studies the internal structure of clauses and sentences in world’s languages—and he has a legendary ability to see and then formalize with the utmost clarity hitherto unspotted linguistic rules and organizational tendencies. Furthermore, pellucidness of argument begins for him at the top: eschewing subtitles, he prefers titles to be basic descriptions like “Predication,” “Against Small Clauses,” “There-Insertion,” “NP Trace in Theta Theory,” “Reciprocal Scope,” and “Island Fever”—the last demonstrating that he will sometimes allow his wit, much in evidence on social occasions over a glass of wine, to enter into a title, provided the simplicity remains.

With five books to his name (four of them published by the MIT Press), as well as a coedited volume and over seventy-five scholarly articles (many of them in MIT’s flagship linguistics journal, *Linguistic Inquiry*), Edwin is by any standard a prodigious scholar. His output is even more impressive when one takes into account his holistic view of linguistics. Unlike many syntacticians, he regularly

ventures—in teaching as well as research—into morphology and semantics (early in his career he published a highly cited paper on phonology as well: “Underlying Tone in Margi and Igbo”); indeed, his views on the lines that usually separate such subfields as morphology and syntax lie outside the mainstream, as is obvious from the extraordinary collection of ideas presented between covers in *Regimes of Derivation in Syntax and Morphology*, published in 2011 in the prestigious Routledge Leading Linguists series. Edwin is rightly proud of being someone who goes his own way while never losing the admiration of colleagues who are more theoretically rigid. Aside from his desire not to be part of the herd, another hallmark of Edwin is his willingness, even eagerness, to correct published views that, after careful reflection, he no longer holds. These are admirable traits.

Edwin’s work often starts small: how it can be, for example, that the English sentence “What John is is what Mary is” does not mean that John is Mary? But he has earned particular renown for his ability to move from individual phenomena to matters of considerable theoretical importance, as in his 1986 monograph with Anna Maria Di Sciullo, *On the Definition of Word*, which tackles a fundamental issue that those who are not linguists may never have thought was an issue at all.

Much in demand as a speaker worldwide, from his beloved Vienna to São Paulo, Edwin was invited to deliver the Henry Sweet Lecture to the Linguistics Association of Great Britain in 1995 and the keynote lecture to the Generative Linguistics in the Old World (GLOW) conference in Wrocław in 2010. He has held visiting positions at MIT, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, and the University of Quebec at Montreal. At the University of Massachusetts, he received a Faculty Fellowship Award for Distinguished Research and Scholarship (1986). At Princeton he has been on the dissertation committees of many students, including ones who now hold faculty positions at Bucknell University and New York University, and he has been a stalwart adviser to many of the ever-increasing number of talented undergraduates who are independent concentrators in linguistics or earn a certificate in the subject.

Edwin returned to Princeton as part of the University’s commitment to building a world-class program in linguistics.

This building has taken longer than anyone would like, but without Edwin's stellar record of teaching and research, it would never have happened at all. His colleagues wish him great happiness in retirement: much music, food, and wine—and many more linguistic discoveries.