

IN MEMORIAM: GÉRARD DIFFLOTH (1939-2023)

It is hard to imagine someone in the field of Southeast Asian linguistics who was not profoundly influenced by the work of Gérard Diffloth. For anyone who has heard him speak formally about his work, the breadth and depth of his understanding of Austroasiatic languages was spectacular. For those who had the chance to talk with him leisurely about his views on language in Southeast Asia, it was a winding journey through the sub-domains of linguistics into the worlds of entomology, metallurgy, migration, upland farming and more. His sense for how history, language and society have evolved together has illuminated the complexity of this fascinating region for more than six decades.

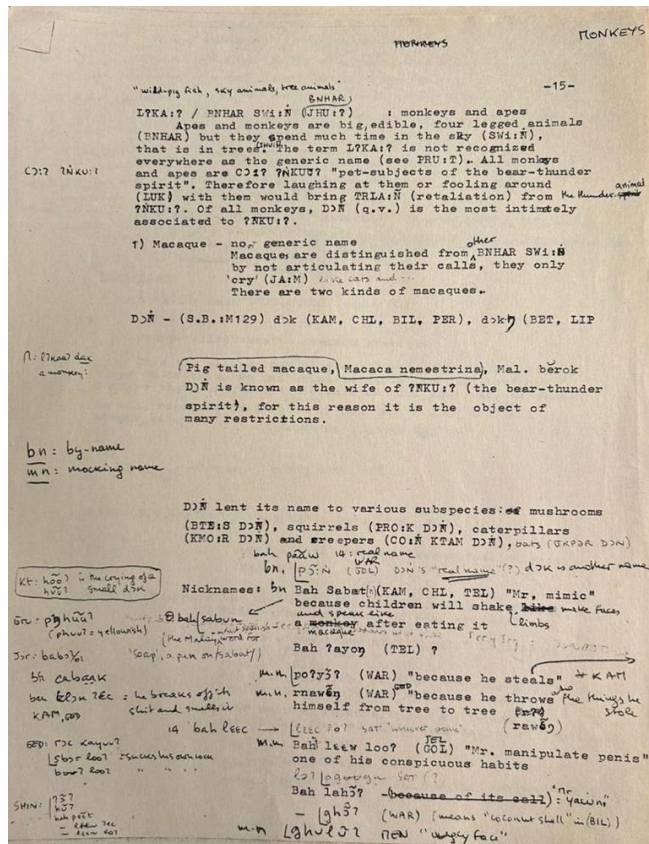
The technical precision, intellectual creativity, and ambitious scope of his historical linguistics approach were intimately informed by his early training in mathematics, journalism, and ethnomusicology. Gérard was born in Chateauroux, France, in 1939, and his education took him to the University of Paris, the École Supérieure de Journalisme de Lille, the University of California Los Angeles and finally the University of Chicago, where he wrote on the Dravidian Iru language. The experience of studying and working in the United States was transformative, but even in his later years, he spoke often of how his experience with French and German sociolinguistics during World War II, fascination with Gaulish etymologies of French toponyms and study of Farsi underpinned the development of his linguistic curiosities. He moved to a Southeast Asia position at Cornell University from 1988 to 1996, a historical linguist within that institution's tradition of area studies.

Gérard's work is epitomized for many by such meticulous studies in linguistic history and classification as *The Dvaravati Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur* (1984) and *The Wa Languages* (1980). Others continue to be inspired by pioneering theoretical and conceptual works like "Les expressifs de Surin, et où cela conduit" (1994) and "To Taboo Everything at All Times" (1980). We have not yet seen the full extent of his work on the history of animal names in Austroasiatic, through which he focused his social history on people's experience with co-animates rather than material culture, which he felt to be interesting but susceptible to "civilizational" forces. Names of birds, insects and mammals provided a solid foundation for recreating linguistic history for him, and this is evident in the way in which he applied the comparative method in Austroasiatic. During one of his many stays at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto, he began a talk for Kyoto University linguistics students saying, "I have been asked to speak about my philosophy for conducting fieldwork, but what I would really like to do is tell you about the history of the Khabit word for 'fish', *mʔuə*. It shouldn't be like that, but it is, and it is a wonderful story of history in Southeast Asia". As the co-organizer, I was not surprised. When we first met in 2010, he began by speaking of the social history of the tree monitor *Varanus bengalensis* – "As you know, *trkəət* in Khabit" – in the Austroasiatic world. He only knew that I had been studying that language for a year, but this was an invitation to his Austroasiatic research if one was willing to go off the path of basic vocabulary and descriptive syntax into the larger natural world in which languages are spoken. Gérard's considerations were deeply multidisciplinary yet in his writings he seemed to ignore disciplinary thinking entirely, exemplified in this work around animal names.

I would also find myself dropped into a fascinating landscape of poetics and play. The first time I visited Gérard in Siem Reap later that year, after dinner on the first night he said, "I think you have probably found some strange words in Khabit that mean just how they sound. What do they say about that?" We were soon in the thick of Surin Khmer expressives, with Gérard's partner Wongjaroen Somruan – known by many who knew Gérard as Som – explaining the micro-nuances of meaning, rejecting or accepting his words exploring the morphological paradigms, and pointing out how *ʔntriin* 'the sad feeling of lonely silence' must be said with falsetto voice and an elongated vowel. It was nigh impossible for Gérard to speak of expressives without frequent reference to his time with the Semai in Malaysia, where many of the most important foundations of his Austroasiatic work were laid. "Expressives are not said or spoken, they are shot. Like an arrow. That's what they say. Once said, they cannot be taken back. And the speaker doesn't care about what the speaker thought. They are expressives, shot at that particular time." For Gérard, expressives and tabooing animal names

were an interlinked part of language in the Semai forest. Experiences with this type of linguistic play fit nicely with his take on Rudy Keller's (1994) idea of an "invisible hand" in linguistic change.

Photo 1 caption: From Diffloth's unpublished reconstruction of Aslian proto-zoology based on Semai animal names (Photo credit: Jim Chamberlain)



Indeed, Gérard had a fantastic ability to see complex relationships clearly in his data and articulate his ideas so eloquently. But we must pause to recognize his intense commitment to fieldwork—directly with speakers of languages in the settings in which they are spoken, with Som always by his side. He relied on his finely tuned ear, countless black field notebooks and a rainbow of colored pens. He maintained a defiantly analog approach to his field research. He insisted that fieldwork was not a science, and that everyone had to develop their own field style. A more subtle message was that fieldworkers need to be guided by their understanding of the research context and driven by their desire to learn from speakers. Gérard did not work with word lists and voice recorders. However, when he conducted fieldwork, he had an expansive cognitive-historical map in his head that led him windingly through the vast world of native-speaker linguistic knowledge, directly into the depths of linguistic history.

We knew Gérard for his humble approach to collaboration and academic exchange, but nowhere could we see his respect and humility for his field more clearly than in his interactions with the thousands of people who worked with him tirelessly, from northeastern India to Hanoi, from Sipsong Panna to the Bolaven Plateau, from the Aslian highlands to the Nicobar Island coast, and of course his beloved northeastern Cambodia and Surin. Having studied so many languages in so many diverse situations across Asia, Gérard maintained a healthy suspicion of claims to universality, and he employed the highest empirical criteria of evidence for drawing conclusions. At times he was frustratingly stubborn on insisting for ever more evidence in support of a sound change or semantic variation. He loved to follow the possibility of complex phonological innovations, no matter how seemingly far-fetched. Many – most – of these ended in “I don’t like it.” But one was always left enlightened by the attempt. It was this deep engagement with so many spoken languages that led him to a model of classification in the Austroasiatic world that had many nested sub-branches of significant historical depth. Confidence in drawing out historical relationships was a matter of constant crossing between his theoretical brilliance and rich realizations emanating from direct field experience.

Photo 2 caption: *Working on Kacho', a Bahnaric language spoken in Rattanakiri province of eastern Cambodia, at the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 2015.*



He painstakingly coded his field notes, with different colors used with words to indicate different levels of classification within the family. Based on these notes, he created endless lists of cognates through which he followed the winding roads of phonological change, semantic shift and morphological transformation.

In addition to the Semai, there are several language-speaker groups that held a special place in Gérard's intellectual and personal life. His fascination with the depth of the Khasi languages was one of these – from internal phonological variation and lexical diversity, to expressives and morphology. In researching Khasi, he was challenged by the reality of how literacy can change language, which made him all the more dedicated to discovery in the spoken language of rural communities. Many of our discussions about Bit and related Austroasiatic languages of northern Laos were concluded with “You must go to Khasi!” Another language that dedicated his energies to was the Kuay of the Cambodia-Thailand border area. He went deep into the historical multilingualism of these speakers and their position in the Katuic branch, as well as the tradition of iron-working within the social and economic networks of Angkor. He also turned his efforts to such projects as the UNESCO-sponsored Kuay in Cambodia: vocabulary with historical comments (2011), which provides a historical view on the cultural language of the Kuay. When trying to gather information for this project, Gérard was in a Cambodian village where a marginal dialect had been spoken. The “last speaker” was an old, old woman who was not responding to the basic questions like “how do you say eat rice?” But when Gérard asked her about catching elephants, she sat up and spoke her Kuay variety clearly and lucidly for him for an hour and half. As he often said, fieldwork is about the people you work with and their lives.

The joy that was clearly visible on his face when eliciting words of historical significance with a native speaker was matched only by the endless enthusiasm he had for combing over his data, searching for cognates, developments, and connections. His last years were dedicated to working on Nico-Monic, another historical relationship that was for decades close to his heart drawing together his fieldwork on the Nicobar and Monic languages. Over the years Gérard was welcomed at research institutions, academic gatherings and social events around the world. He also graciously welcomed visitors to his Siem Reap home, where there was always a captivating and stimulating discussion to be had. He loved to share stories of fieldwork and listened to them with excitement as well. Gérard was extraordinarily generous with his ideas and guidance, particularly when approached with questions and conundrums coming directly out of observations made in the field.

In 2014, Gérard told the Kyoto University Center of Southeast Asian Studies Newsletter that “when a language disappears, it is as if a cathedral collapsed or a library was burnt to the ground.” We now feel the profound loss of Gérard's passing—his knowledge a cathedral or library its own right—but let us continue to be inspired and motivated by his boundless curiosity, his razor-sharp attention to micro-level detail and his passionate drive to understand the big picture of language and history in Southeast Asia. It is hard to imagine

Southeast Asian linguistics without Gérard Diffloth, but his intellectual legacy will influence us long into the future.

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