

REMEMBERING MICHEL FERLUS (1935-2024)

Michel Ferlus passed away on March 10th, 2024, aged 88 years old. Asian wisdom has it that there need be no heavy hearts at the funeral of someone who has lived to such a ripe old age. But those whose lives are turned towards science are contemporaries in research, irrespective of age, and when a precious dialogue partner disappears, the mind revolts against stupid death for taking away someone who still had so much to do and say. Michel Ferlus, a scientist at heart, retained into retirement and old age his keen interest in pursuing research, and his absence is now sorely felt.

An eminent specialist in the historical linguistics of East Asian languages, Michel Ferlus was a quiet, discreet scholar and an independent mind. His depiction of Haudricourt (for whom he had the greatest scientific admiration) is an apt description of his own temper: “He shunned academicism, not out of hostility, but by temperament; he was uncomfortable with public attention and hostile to vapid social occasions; he only felt truly at ease with his peers and disciples: with those who appreciated his skills and were able to engage in meaningful dialogue with him” (Ferlus 2011a).¹ They both viewed scientific discoveries and their publication as two vastly different things. “To me, the writing up is the leisurely part: it’s a reward of sorts [when one has made a discovery], and I don’t care a straw about the reader” (Haudricourt & Dibia 1987:113).² Ferlus took the stance that people sharing his research interests would make the effort to find out about his papers and read them without his having to bring his findings to colleagues’ attention by submitting them to highly-rated venues in general linguistics. He preferred to limit the editorial effort by entrusting his discoveries to specialized journals with which he was familiar, or even just disseminating them in the form of conference handouts. Moreover, English was not among the languages in which he felt comfortable, and he preferred to write in French – although he did publish several articles in English (including Ferlus 2003; 2004; 2008; 2009a-b; 2010; 2011b; 2013, 2014). He had special relish for the memory of rare occasions where he and another ‘Western’ scholar chose Lao as the most suitable shared foreign language to have a conversation. A consequence of his socializing habits, which were at variance with the academic mainstream, is that the circle of linguists who appreciate his work is not huge. It is hoped that the present note can serve as an invitation to read his papers and experience the sense of encounter that was felt by the happy few who knew him.

Michel Ferlus was born into a family of farmers in Lot-et-Garonne, in the French Southwest. His parents chose to talk to him in French rather than in their native Occitan (unlike the choice they had made for his elder siblings), in the hope that it would make things smoother for him at school. He soon disproved his parents’ naive expectation that they could hold conversations without their youngest son understanding: he picked up the local dialect of Occitan quickly, alongside with French. Things did go well at school. But Michel Ferlus was not entitled to a scholarship to go into higher education, because his family owned the small plot of land that they cultivated, and hence were classified among the better-off in terms of the categories set up by the postwar welfare state policies, which gave priority to wage-earners (the proletariat). As the income from farming was not enough for his parents to afford the costs of higher education, Ferlus took up a position as school supervisor in Paris in order to pursue a university degree. The job of *surveillant d’externat* is referred to colloquially as *pion*, that is, literally, a pawn, underlining its low social status. The gap between his peer group as a school supervisor (*le pionicat*) and the care-free upper-class students at the

¹ Original text: “Fuyant l’académisme, non par hostilité mais par tempérament, mal à l’aise devant la médiatisation, hostile aux mondanités, il ne se sentait vraiment en confiance qu’avec ses pairs et ses disciples, c’est-à-dire avec ceux qui appréciaient ses compétences et qui pouvaient valablement dialoguer avec lui.”

² Original text: “Pour moi l’œuvre c’est l’amusement, la récompense et je me moque du lecteur.”

school (Henri IV, France’s most reputable high school) left a lasting impression on Michel Ferlus as he struggled to complete his bachelor’s degree in Human and Social Sciences. Taking a nostalgic trip to the Quartier Latin in recent years (on the way back from his last field trip in Southeast Asia), Ferlus mentioned a local saying: that once one had been admitted to Henri IV, one had a lifetime to cross the street – into the Panthéon, a mausoleum for the remains of distinguished French citizens. He added “I’m afraid that does not apply to the pawns!”

After completing his B.A., he went on to earn a living as a teacher, continuing his education through self-study. His central interest was in historical linguistics, ever since he was drawn to it in the late 1950s by reading Haudricourt’s 1948 article “The phonemes and vocabulary of Proto-Tai”. The whole method was new to him, but “[t]he clarity of the writing and the reasoning encouraged me to persevere, and I ended up finding this way of reconstructing the sounds of the mother tongue of present-day Thai dialects extremely ingenious. I was fascinated (and still am today) by the feat that consists in reconstructing the sounds of a language that has disappeared forever.”

He availed himself of an opportunity to go to Laos as a language teacher. He spent his free time in the villages around Luang Prabang, where he focused on Khmu (Khamou) as a language to do serious research on. But when he met André-Georges Haudricourt in 1962 (back from his first stay in Laos) to discuss his copious field notes, Haudricourt did not express interest in supervising his research, directing him towards other scholars instead. These leads were not fruitful, and Ferlus never completed a master’s degree or Ph.D. Instead, he received informal guidance from Haudricourt in the course of written correspondence. This nonstandard curriculum may have a share in explaining his somewhat solitary later habits as a scholar. While he did his fair share of service to the field (e.g. sitting on the Comité national, the board in charge of selecting researchers at the CNRS entrance examination – a duty which he fulfilled with exemplary impartiality), he preferred attending to his own work and did not actively seek opportunities for building a team or nurturing students.



Sharing a drink from the jar (Laos, 1965-1966). From Michel Ferlus’s collection ([hal-03715541](https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03715541))

Ferlus approached the history of sound systems and techniques with common sense, in a down-to-earth way (“les pieds sur terre”, to quote the title of a book by Haudricourt and Dibie that Ferlus often cited). He did not like the term “field linguist” (linguiste de terrain), which in the view of some colleagues tends to have demeaning overtones (the person who collects data for theoretical linguists to exploit seriously). Like others (such as Michel Launey), he argued that “field linguists” are simply linguists who go to the field to collect missing data. Still, Ferlus was very much a man with practical experience (un homme de terrain), fundamentally committed to serious fieldwork and language description. “Theories come and go, descriptions remain.” Linguistics is an empirical science, and fieldwork on judiciously selected varieties is the way to advance research. Ferlus liked to tell an anecdote about theories and language data: one day, a colleague of his was walking around looking thoughtful and concerned. When Ferlus asked whether there was anything the matter, his colleague answered solemnly: “I am looking for the right language to serve as a testing-ground for my theory.” To him, that was a perfectly ridiculous thing to say, which made no scientific sense. Ferlus’s uncompromising, no-nonsense approach to research was that the linguist’s job is not to juggle with abstractions, but to understand linguistic facts and, as the need arises, to build theories from the facts, gradually progressing through increasingly high levels of abstraction.

Ferlus had remarkable talent for grasping principles and visualizing structures, in languages and in other areas too. He reported rewiring his house himself and noting analogies between electrical circuits and sound systems: there exist many different possible combinations, and there are various ways to switch from one to another, even though they are mutually exclusive at a given time point. Accordingly, Ferlus had respect for other people who had practical experience. Thus, he admired Eugène Freyssinet, the major pioneer of prestressed concrete: he emphasized that Freyssinet was known to experiment constantly and observe construction works with the greatest attention, trusting to observation and research, not to established doctrines.

Ferlus also had a deep interest in history, archeology and ethnology, and he connected them to linguistic observations with great virtuosity. For instance: in Khmu, ‘two’ is /kbaar/. Taking this form as conservative, and dating this very form *kbaar back to a stage predating the split between Khmuic and Vietic, the regular laws of Vietnamese historical phonology lead to the expectation that, in Vietnamese, the present-day reflex should have an initial /v/ (the result of spirantization of /b/ in medial position within a cluster, via a /β/ stage), a rhyme /-aaj/ (through merger of final -l, -r and -j), and a low tone, A2: category A because the syllable had neither final -h nor final glottal stop, and register 2, the low register, because the initial was voiced at the point when the two-way tone split took place. So the expected reflex of ‘two’ *kbaar in Vietnamese is /vaajA2/ (in Vietnamese orthography: *vài*). But the actual word for ‘two’ in Vietnamese is /haajA1/ (*hai*), with High tone (A1). On the other hand, the expected reflex (/vaajA2/, orthographic *vài*) is found in Vietnamese, with the meaning ‘a few, a couple’. Vietnamese thus has a regular reflex of *kbaar, as well as an unexpected form for ‘two’. (Michel noted that the Vietnamese linguist Nguyễn Văn Lợi had also made this observation.) Michel Ferlus’s historical hypothesis is as follows: a group of hunter-gatherers who did not do a great deal of counting – like some Amazonian groups that mostly count ‘one, two, three, many’ (e.g., Teko/Émérillon, in the Tupi-Guarani family (Rose 2003:194–196) – adopted at one point the base-10 system of another group with which they were in touch. Their earlier term for ‘two; a couple of’ did not disappear, but remained with the meaning ‘a couple of, a few’ (now distinct from the figure ‘two’). Ferlus proposed the hypothesis that the language that underwent this influence was a Khmuic language: a language close to Ksing Mul (Xinh Mun; interestingly, the language, spoken in Houaphanh province, Laos, and Sơn La province, Vietnam, is considered autochthonous by neighboring groups). The donor (replacive) language was Proto-Vietic, in which ‘two’ is reconstructed as *haar. That is quite an audacious scenario to build on the basis of just one word. But the hypothesis is grounded in a clear piece of reasoning, proceeding top-down from phonetic rules to arrive at discoveries. Likewise, Ferlus became aware of dialectal words such as Vietnamese *đàng* for ‘path’ (the standard form is *đường*), computing them top-down from reconstructions, then looking for them in dictionaries. Ferlus encouraged prospective joiners to the field of historical linguistics by pointing out that it was not necessary to be trained as a Classicist: comparative work consists in establishing phonetic correspondences between dialects, and in reflecting on how present-day forms had appeared, from a (hypothesized) common origin.

Conversations with Ferlus constantly linked up with his research topics. In 2014, during fieldwork in Trưng Dương (Nghệ An, Vietnam), a lunch of rice porridge with eel (*cháo lươn*) provided him with an

opportunity to point out that such must have been the earliest way of cooking rice: as a brouet in which the crushed, or coarsely husked, grain was cooked in excess water. He neatly summed up the linguistic analysis by which he had arrived at the conclusion that the invention of the large pestle (which enabled rice to be hulled without crushing the grain) and saturated cooking with water had spread together from the same cultural source. The word ‘pestle’ was derived from the verb ‘to husk’ through addition of an instrumental infix -r-. A comparison among Austroasiatic languages, combined with a reconstruction for the Vietic group and a theory about early influence from Chinese, led him to place the invention of the pestle in the north of present-day Vietnam, at the time of the Đông Sơn culture: the first millennium BCE (Ferlus 2009a).

The hypothesis needs to be revised, as the pestle and its Austroasiatic name are now recognized to have earlier (pre-Đông Sơn) attestations. As pointed out in a recent study of Vietic etyma, early Chinese loanwords, and supporting archaeohistorical data (Alves 2022:29), pestles have been found in the Phùng Nguyên culture (2000-1500 BCE), which is associated with Austroasiatic groups. Indeed, ‘pestle’ is reconstructed in Proto-Austroasiatic, mostly recently by Sidwell (2024), with supporting widespread attestations among the branches. Michel Ferlus was never uncomfortable with his hypotheses and conclusions being disputed on scientific grounds and improved upon – as is perfectly normal and healthy in scientific research. He would delight in the finding that the use of the -r- infix is now considered to date back at least 4,000 years, recognizing an even deeper history than he had assumed for this item of Austroasiatic technology.

From the time when he was awarded a position at CNRS until the end of his life, Ferlus made the most of his full-time position as researcher, which allowed him to go to the field at any time of the year. His scientific production extended steadily over six decades, from the 1960s to the 2010s, covering considerable ground in terms of languages and topics, including the history of writing systems (e.g. Ferlus 1999) as well as the history of languages. His practice of comparison among related languages gradually led him to broaden the scope of his work: from (masterly) case studies, he came to hypothesize general (panchronic) patterns, which he recognized beyond the language families with which he was most familiar (Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai). Thus, he built on his knowledge of register phenomena in Southeast Asia to place reconstructed syllable types ‘A’ and ‘B’ of Old Chinese in a new light (Ferlus 2009b; Pain 2020: 19–30). He also proposed a hypothesis on early Austronesian expansions (Ferlus 2009c) that constitutes an alternative to the ‘Out of Taiwan’ hypothesis for Austronesian diversification and dispersal proposed by Bellwood and Dizon.

A constant is that Ferlus did not deviate from historical linguistics. He considered instrumental phonetics as a distinct discipline, not indispensable to do good historical linguistics – even though he had attended with great interest classes by Marguerite Durand, and appreciated the insights into the workings of the vocal tract that experimental phonetics can contribute. Likewise, he had strong interest in archaeology, but never considered taking part in archaeological projects in the Indochinese peninsula. He said that he had to live up to the hopes that Haudricourt had pinned on him when he recommended him as a CNRS researcher, and that there was no question of going off on a tangent. But there was another reason why he was attached to historical linguistics: in this field, it is possible to construct a line of reasoning, confront it with neat observations, and arrive at a clear and precise conclusion, which can be set out in a few pages.

Like Haudricourt, Ferlus was a hallmark name in Southeast Asia. He had excellent relations with colleagues in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. He worked, in particular, with Thongpheth Kingsada of the Laos Institute of Social Sciences, and with Trần Trí Dõi of Vietnam National University (Hanoi), and had sustained exchanges with Nguyễn Tài Căn and Nguyễn Văn Lợi. He followed closely all the publications that came out on languages of Southeast Asia, and took a benevolent interest in the work of younger scholars and language workers (such as Guillaume Jacques, Frédéric Pain, Pittayawat Pittayaporn, Matthew Deo, Phạm Thị Kiều Ly, Shen Ruiqing...). Albert Badosa Roldós, currently a Ph. D. student, turned to Michel Ferlus to receive guidance on which language to do fieldwork on, adopted Ferlus’s suggestion to investigate the Mã Liềng language, and found it to be an excellent choice. At his home in the quiet village of Casseneuil, Ferlus received visitors from Europe, Asia and elsewhere, who benefited from erudite conversations about Southeast Asian linguistics and also from guided visits to nearby sites of archaeological or historical interest.

Ferlus encouraged colleagues to go to the field in Vietnam, a country with fabulous linguistic diversity, and also to avail themselves of the wealth of documents in the library of the Foreign Missions in Paris, in the Maspero collection, and in other collections that are little used by researchers. He himself made the generous

choice to open to the public the audio recordings he had made in the field from 1963 to 2003: with hindsight, he acknowledged the heritage interest of what were originally simple working documents (Ferlus 2017).

Among his fondest memories were moments of recognition by his peers. One such moment was when Haudricourt commented about the comparison of Laven and Nha Heun (Ferlus 1971) “you must have made it all up: it is too good to be true!” Another was when René Gsell (a linguistics professor who was well-read on an extensive range of languages, including Thai and Vietnamese), during a talk on a new theory about Old Chinese (Ferlus 1998), raised his hand and voiced out loud the conclusion that Ferlus was gradually working up to (by bringing out telltale patterns in a two-way split of the vowel system): “This is a register language!” The publication of a Chinese translation (by Shen Ruiqing) of his 2009 *Diachronica* article on Old Chinese was also a source of pride for him, as he hoped that it would help foster wider discussion of his hypothesis.

Michel Ferlus did not care for role models, and certainly never thought of himself as one. Yet he leaves us with an inspiring example to simply live our lives, pursuing what we want to do, what makes us feel useful and fulfilled.

If we were to close our farewell with a few notes of music, we would choose a tune from the musette accordion, remembering his endearment for the outmoded, nostalgia-tinged music of riverside country dances.

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