

IN MEMORIAM:
GÉRARD DIFFLOTH (1939–2023)



FIGURE 1: Gérard Diffloth and his partner Somruan Wongjaroen, 11 August 2022 © Catherine Scheer

Prof. Gérard Diffloth¹ passed away in Surin, Thailand, on August 14, 2023, at the age of 84. Born in Châteauroux on 13 February 1939, he attended college in Paris, where he obtained his baccalaureate in 1956. Influenced by his Polytechnician father, he earned Certificates in general mathematics and physics at the University of Paris in 1959. However, Gérard felt less attracted to the hard sciences and enrolled at the Lille Higher School of Journalism (ESJ-Lille), which was then affiliated with the Catholic University. He graduated with honors in 1962.

Despite completing his journalism studies, Gérard remained unsatisfied.

He subsequently moved to the United States to pursue linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In 1968, he defended his doctoral thesis, *The Irula Language, a Close Relative of Tamil*. The very last sentence of his thesis—“The study of such obscure languages as Irula, even though toilsome, may provide a standpoint from which we gain new perspectives on better-known languages like Tamil” (p. 146)—exemplifies his unique wry humor, marked by irony and understatement, which was a notable charm of his conversation. The quality of his work immediately secured him a position as an Assistant in theoretical linguistics in the Department of Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he

¹ The French original of this obituary was published in the *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 109: 23–33. Republished with permission.

remained for five years. Gérard Diffloth then advanced to the University of Chicago, Illinois, where he served as an Assistant Professor (1973–1976), Associate Professor (1976–1978), and finally Professor of Linguistics (1978–1986) in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics.

Leaving Chicago—“because it was really too cold in the winter”, he once told me, only half-joking—he became a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Asian Studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, eventually heading the Department from 1988 to 1998. Personal reasons led him to leave Ithaca;² his former wife, the mother of his son, continued to teach Korean there, retaining his last name.

After nearly exhausting two years of leave allocated for field research, Gérard was admitted in 2000 as a member of the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and was immediately appointed to the EFEO Center in Siem Reap, Cambodia. He remained associated with the center until 2012, well beyond his retirement in 2004. He also spent a year at the Research Center on Southeast Asia at Kyoto University and a year and a half at Academia Sinica in Taiwan.

Between 2013 and 2020, Gérard Diffloth generously shared his expertise at the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) in Siem Reap, assisting doctoral and post-doctoral students who visited annually. He was lavish with his knowledge, especially with his colleagues at the

EFEO in Cambodia. Each of us had many opportunities to receive, often nonchalantly, nuggets of his erudition and method.

The extraordinary frugality of his lifestyle, his complete immersion in the heart of village life among the Khmers of Siem Reap, and his apparent indifference to any form of comfort—especially his avoidance of air conditioners—seemed to have reduced his universe to one of disembodied linguistic research. Practical life’s advantages or disadvantages seemed to matter little to him. Instead, he was entirely captivated by linguistic details: a particular syntagm, the length of a vowel, the articulation of a consonant. These aspects absorbed him much as a painting captivates an art enthusiast. Each lengthened vowel and hissing consonant were situated within the complex perspectives of historical phonology, a field in which he was a universally respected specialist for all languages of the Mon-Khmer group.

Gérard’s tremendous fortune in the later years of his career was meeting his companion of the last thirty years, Somruan Wongjaroen (សំរាបុណ្យ វង់ម៉ែនីលូ) —our luminous friend Som. She not only watched over him but also deeply understood the issues, requirements, and methods of his research [FIGURE 1]. Throughout his fieldwork in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and India, she became Gérard’s assistant in the most academic sense of the term. Over the years, she mastered the nuances of central Khmer and Surin Khmer, her native languages, as well as Thai and Isan dialects.

One of Gérard Diffloth’s major contributions to the study of the Khmer language concerns the “expressives”,

² Gérard Diffloth’s papers are held at the Cornell University Library under reference #6313 in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. However, these papers are incomplete without the archives from the period 1998–2023—his “treasure”, as he used to call it—kept at his home in Siem Reap.

an unlimited set of non-lexicalized morphemes particular to Khmer and other Mon-Khmer languages. These expressives are formed spontaneously or arbitrarily through phonetic imitation of the lexemes to which they are attached, providing nuanced meanings. Often neglected by lexicographers due to their descriptive challenges, these “wild adverbs”, as he sometimes called them, encapsulate “all the spirit of invention, humor, poetry—in a word, the living soul of the Khmer language and its closely related languages”.

Gérard emphasized that simply listening to public speeches, everyday gossip, or spats reveals this richness, noting that existing dictionaries offer only a weak idea of the immense wealth of the living Khmer language. His article on this topic, “Les expressifs de Surin, et où cela conduit” (*The Expressives of Surin, and Where It Leads*), published in the 2001 issue of the *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO), draws smiles from those who have not read it, perhaps unaware of its profound insights.

His ambitious project was to map the distribution of speakers of all Austro-Asiatic languages, which span an immense crescent from central India, with the Munda, to central Malaysia, with the languages of the Orang Asli, and even the Andaman Islands, with Nicobarese. In the historical and phonetic description of the languages along this vast crescent, Gérard’s main contribution focused on the Mon-Khmer group, from the languages of the Khasi populations in Meghalaya, Assam, to those spoken in the southern Malay Peninsula.

His inventory revealed that approximately 150 so-called minority indigenous languages of this group are still spoken

in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, West Malaysia, Burma, and certain parts of central, northeastern, as well as insular India.

Gérard Diffloth recognized that the distinction between “national” languages, or “written languages”, and “minority” languages is a modern construct that disappears as one goes back in time. He often had to remind various “local authorities” and certain activist groups of this fact, especially when controversies over nationalities arose. He was amused and dismayed by the irredentist interpretations that the political figures of the Khmer Republic extrapolated from the linguistic works of the Khmer-Mon Institute (ខេរត្តនាស ខ្មែរមេន) between 1972 and 1974. He also experienced the exquisite sensitivity of certain audiences when he stated that the Vietic or Viet-Muong languages form a branch of the Mon-Khmer group. Moreover, he was astonished by the violent local censorship that suppressed one of his most important works, the second volume of *The Dvāravatī Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur* (1984), despite its publication by the most prestigious university press in Thailand.

The list of Gérard Diffloth’s publications is considerable. Alas, his relentless drive to push his research further, combined with the relative isolation in which he worked, limited the dissemination of his findings. He had a methodical preference for transcribing his field investigation results and a reasoned rejection of electronic recording techniques prevalent in many linguistics departments. Additionally, a form of paralysis of the will that came with age prevented him from publishing his magnum opus of the last thirty or

forty years: the *Electronic Etymological Dictionary of Austro-Asiatic* (EEDAA).

Those privileged few, like myself, who witnessed Gérard's rare demonstrations of the spectacular power of this tool and gathered his few explanations, now tremble at the thought that this phenomenal database is stored on a single computer's hard drive. We fervently hope that a major institution will support a competent researcher in publishing this gigantic material, a task Gérard was prevented from completing due to illness and death.

The *Electronic Etymological Dictionary of Austro-Asiatic* (EEDAA) comprises a cluster of relational databases containing dictionaries of known Austro-Asiatic (AA) languages, enriched with etymological insights. It strives to provide reconstructed words from the earliest historical stages of these languages, leveraging the word-processing capabilities of electronic databases alongside the comparative methods of historical linguistics. By focusing on the Austro-Asiatic family, the EEDAA offers a systematic exploration of the ancient conceptual heritage of central Indian and Southeast Asian cultures.

Ultimately, the aim of the EEDAA was to chronicle the evolution of ideas shared and developed over centuries among speakers of Austro-Asiatic languages. Such a historical narrative promises to shed much-needed light on the prehistory and archeology of this densely populated region, particularly focusing on mainland Southeast Asia.

Gérard Diffloth initiated this Austro-Asiatic database in the mid-1970s. Since then, he conducted extensive periods of linguistic fieldwork across

every country in mainland Southeast Asia. The database now integrates a significant amount of personally collected information alongside published data from various sources. It currently encompasses approximately 330,000 lexical entries, spanning the entire Austro-Asiatic family.

His reconstruction of the history of these languages is stratified into four distinct time-depths: 15 Branches, 4 Divisions, and Proto, which represents the oldest accessible level of Austro-Asiatic.

He reconstructed approximately 2,145 Proto-AA lexical items, representing the oldest reconstructible words known for the Austro-Asiatic (AA) family. These etyma are pivotal for exploring potential relationships with other language families in the region, such as Austronesian, Kra-Dai, Miao-Yao, and Tibeto-Burman. Each Proto-AA etymon is defined by its reflexes in two or more of the four lower Divisions of the AA family. The four Divisions of Proto-Austro-Asiatic documented in Gérard Diffloth's database are:

- Khasi-Pearic (North AA), with 2,497 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Khmero-Vietic (East AA), with 2,799 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Nico-Monic (South AA), with 1,746 reconstructed lexical entries.
- Sora-Korku (Munda sub-family), with 603 reconstructed lexical entries.

His proposed historical stratification of the family into these four ancient Divisions represents a novel approach in AA studies. These Divisions occupy an intermediate position in time between the oldest Proto-Austroasiatic level and the more recent Branch level.

The geographic labels like “North AA”, etc., are rough indicators of the current locations of the languages. Gérard was cautious not to propose theories of ancient migrations, although he believed that this prehistoric Division level could serve as a valuable cultural and geographic framework for future studies on ancient DNA lineages and migrations in mainland Southeast Asia.

Gérard Diffloth classified the Austro-Asiatic languages into fifteen branches, each representing an intermediate historical layer between the Division level and the directly observable AA languages:

- From the North AA Division: Khasian, Angkuic, Palaungic, Pearic, Pramic (Khmuiic), and Mangic branches.
- From the East AA Division: Khmeric, Bahnaric, Katuic, and Vietic branches.
- From the South AA Division: Nicobarese, Aslian, and Monic branches.
- From the Sora-Korku Division of AA: North Munda and South Munda branches.

Several of these branches have long been recognized in linguistic literature. For instance, the Khmeric branch consists solely of Khmer and its local varieties, whereas the Bahnaric branch encompasses over 30 languages. Notably, languages like Mnong, counted as one Bahnaric language, actually consist of 13 distinct varieties forming three sub-branches in South Vietnam and East Cambodia.

Gérard’s classification posits at least, currently, 150 directly observable Austro-Asiatic languages, although observing them can yield uneven results due to linguistic diversification and varying levels of documentation.

For instance, Kuay, dispersed across Thailand (Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon provinces), Cambodia (Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, Kampong Thom, and Kratie provinces), and Laos (Pakse province), encompasses at least 37 linguistically diverse varieties. Documentation ranges from comprehensive dictionaries to brief notices spanning only two pages.

In his database, Khmer is represented by eight varieties, but only two (Surin Khmer and Standard Khmer) have been extensively documented. The remaining six varieties, studied *in situ* by him, remain largely undocumented in print.

Regarding what is commonly referred to as the Khasi language, spoken in Meghalaya, India, and small northern areas of Bangladesh, Gérard’s extensive fieldwork revealed over fifty varieties. Many of these are significantly divergent and mutually unintelligible, leading him to classify them under the higher-level Khasian “Branch” in the database. This branch includes 11,048 proto-entries and 28,814 observed Khasian lexical entries.

In some instances, the EEDAA includes languages known only through one or two briefly documented varieties. Take, for example, the Chuang language of Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, which contains 1,305 directly observed lexical entries. Unfortunately, it is likely no longer spoken today: during Gérard’s last fieldwork visit in 2012, he encountered only five native speakers, all in their 70s.

Gérard Diffloth’s EEDAA currently operates as a relational database using the “4D” database program, version 11.9. This electronic database comprises 51 interconnected files, each representing

a language and structured similarly into a traditional dictionary: phonetic spelling of word-entries, meanings, and remarks. Notably, every word-entry includes phonetic details, even for historically reconstructed words. Throughout the dictionary, each phonetic word-entry has been meticulously segmented into its components: final consonant, stressed vowel, medial consonant, tone (if applicable), unstressed vowel, and more. This segmentation allows for instant searches and listings of these segments, either individually or in any combination—a capability not feasible with traditional dictionaries. This feature is essential for etymological research, endowing the entire EEDAA with unique scholarly value.

Undoubtedly, reconstructing the intricate tree structure of Gérard's computer tables and recapturing his dynamic approach—from millennia-old Proto-Austro-Asian etymons to contemporary terms liberated from the constraints of everyday usage and time—will require significant effort in his absence.

Among all his ancestors, Gérard often fondly recalled his paternal great-grandfather, Théophile Homolle (1848–1925), a figure vividly preserved in family memory. Though Gérard never met him, Théophile left an indelible legacy as a historian, Hellenist, and esteemed member of prestigious institutions such as the École française d'Athènes, the Collège de France, and the Institute. He culminated his career as director of the National Library, following his tenure at the Louvre, which abruptly ended in 1911 amidst the infamous theft of the Mona Lisa by Vincenzo Peruggia.

May Gérard Diffloth's grandchildren, who unfortunately never had the opportunity to meet him due to life's circumstances separating him from his daughter Natalie and his son Antoine, cherish the same intellectual and emotional connection to their extraordinary and erudite grandfather, Gérard.

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KEY PUBLICATIONS³

- 1980: The Wa Languages, *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 5(2): 1–182.
- 1984: *The Dvāravatī Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn

University Printing House, 402 pages.

- 2011: *Kuay in Cambodia: A Vocabulary with Historical Comments*. Phnom Penh: Tuk Tuk Editions, 133 pages.

³ Gérard Diffloth has authored over 40 articles and several monographs on Austroasiatic languages spoken across northeast India, southwestern China,

Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. For a detailed list of his publications up until 2009, refer to his obituary originally published in BEFEO 109 (2023).