
Marcel MacGhonaichail (1908 – 1948).

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Marcel MacGhonaichail (1908 – 1948), known to his friends as "Dim Sum", could have been the leading comparative linguist of his time, if he had published more before his tragic early death.

He grew up quadrilingual. His mother (Katriona MacGhonaichail) was Scottish, and from her he learned English and Gaelic. He also used her family name in professional life. His father ("Charlie" Cheung Ka-Ling) was from Hong Kong, and from him Marcel learned Cantonese. The family lived for several years in East Africa where his father worked as a travelling vacuum cleaner salesman, and from the nurse who looked after him Marcel learned Swahili (as well as gaining a smattering of other local languages from the cook and the gardener). He acquired his first name from his French grandfather, but never learned to speak more than schoolboy French. After a somewhat mixed schooling, he studied "Arch & Anth" (Archaeology and Anthropology) at King's College Cambridge.

This was followed by the fieldwork for which he first became famous, on the language Chukkuch, spoken by only three families of semi-nomadic yak herders along the lower Tunnut River in central Siberia. His claim to have discovered the world's only palindromic language, in which all words are the same pronounced forwards or backwards, is still (quite rightly) disputed by linguists. In his famous article [1] he also claimed that it is the only known language to form interrogatives by reversing, *in toto*, the word order of the corresponding declaratives. Hence the traditional greeting used in spring:

pi:p maldrommordlam unu aprpa? [Is today the first day of April?]
xax! aprpa unu maldrommordlam pi:p! [Yes, indeed!]

During his later fieldwork in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, he acquired several wives and several more languages, including Benabena, Kamano

and Yagwoia. His fieldwork motto (and language learning method) was: "One more wife, one more language".

His fieldwork assistant Karl-Heinz Blutdruck was his companion for many years, and although full of praise for Marcel's fieldwork, he was always scathing of his language learning abilities, of which he famously said: "Marcel may be able to make a marriage proposal in twelve languages, but he can't get his German genders right". Blutdruck also described the circumstances of Marcel's tragic death in a remote village in Papua New Guinea:

"Marcel was delirious after one of his frequent bouts of malaria, and in his confusion he spoke in Scottish Gaelic to one of the village elders. By a rare coincidence, the Gaelic expression for *I think we're in for more rain today* sounded to the elder like a deadly insult in the local ritual language. Marcel was immediately taken and killed. It is said that his bones provided soup for the whole village for a week." [2]

MacGhonaichail left behind several (not particularly sad) wives, but only one (not particularly good) book [3], which was printed at his own expense by a small publishing house in Port Moresby.

[1] MacGhonaichail, M. (1938) Chukkuch: left to right and right to left. *Journal of Lesser Known Languages*, 38, 2: 62-83.

[2] Blutdruck, K.-H. (1952) *Travels with a Polyglot*. London: Chatto.

[3] MacGhonaichail, M. (1944) *From Babble to Babel*. Port Moresby: PNG Print.