

IN MEMORIAM

Pierre Bancel (1958–2025)

MAGALI BANCEL

Pierre Jean Bancel, French linguist, translator, and editor, was born in Paris on 17 August 1958 and passed away in June 2025. For four decades, he pursued one of humanity’s oldest questions: how language began. His work combined scientific discipline with philosophical depth and a quiet conviction that understanding language is inseparable from understanding what it means to be human.

Education and Early Career

Bancel studied at the Université Lumière Lyon II, where he earned a Master’s degree in Language Sciences with a focus on comparative linguistics, instrumental phonetics, and Bantu languages. Trained in both the humanities and empirical science, he sought to bridge precision and imagination—a balance he would later describe as “the only path capable of revealing new truths, though constantly threatened from both sides.”

Fluent in several languages and deeply versed in the classics (Latin, Greek, Old French), he reflected a lifelong fascination with the diversity and unity of human expression. After teaching in Paris, he worked for leading French publishers such as *Éditions Le Robert* and *Larousse*, contributing to major dictionaries and editorial projects. He later served as an editor and proofreader for *Le Monde*, *Courrier International*, *Pour la Science*, and *La Recherche*.

Research on the Origins of Language

In the 1990s, Bancel joined the Association for the Study of Language in Prehistory (ASLIP) at Harvard University and began publishing in *Mother Tongue Journal*. There he met lifelong collaborators, Merritt Ruhlen, Alain Matthey de l’Etang, and John D. Bengtson, with whom he would develop a rigorous yet daring body of comparative linguistic work.

Their collaboration took off after Bancel’s French translation of Merritt Ruhlen’s *The Origin of Language* (Belin, 1997), a book that profoundly influenced him. An entry in Ruhlen’s global etymology list, the kin term *kaka*, sparked their joint research. As Matthey later recalled, “with *kaka* it was the jackpot: the term appeared across hundreds of languages worldwide with the meaning ‘maternal uncle.’” This discovery became the foundation of a two-decade investigation into

what they called *Proto-Sapiens*, a hypothesized ancestral system underlying all human kinship and pronoun structures.

Their most cited studies include:

- *Tracing the Ancestral Kinship System: The Global Etymon kaka* (2002)
- *Kin Tongue: Nursery Terms in Relation to Language Acquisition* (2005)
- *Where Do Personal Pronouns Come From?* (2010)
- *Brave New Words* (in Lefebvre et al., *New Perspectives on the Origins of Language*, 2013)
- *The Proto-Sapiens Prohibitive/Negative Particle ma* (2019)
- “On the Pronoun Roots *n* (1 sg) and *m* (2 sg)” in *The Native Languages of the Americas* (2021)

Together, these works sought to illuminate how the first human words emerged from biological, cognitive, and social evolution—a bold endeavor conducted with scholarly discipline and intellectual courage.

Translator and Mediator of Ideas

Pierre Bancel’s translations helped shape linguistic discourse in France. He brought into French two major works by Stanford linguists: Merritt Ruhlen’s *The Origin of Language* and Joseph H. Greenberg’s *Indo-European and the Eurasian Language Family*, thus giving French readers access to the American school of macro-comparison. His meticulous, lucid translations were praised for both scientific accuracy and literary elegance.

Later Years and United Nations Service

From 2010 onward, Bancel worked as a translator for the United Nations in New York, Geneva, and Vienna, while continuing his linguistic research. He served as co-editor of *Mother Tongue Journal* from 2021 until his death. His colleagues valued his sharp editorial eye, exacting standards, and generosity with younger researchers.

The Species Pump Hypothesis

At the end of his life, Bancel completed a major synthesis: *Steps in the Evolution of Human Language: The Species Pump Hypothesis*. This book, the result of more than twenty years of research, proposed that the emergence of language was not a gradual cultural accident but an evolutionary transformation—a “species pump” that converted pre-linguistic hominins into *Homo sapiens*. It reflects both his scientific imagination and his conviction that language was the decisive leap that made humanity possible.

Intellectual Influences and Convictions

In his final reflections, Bancel cited the thinkers who shaped his worldview: Greenberg, Darwin, Dawkins, Marx, Freud, and above all the naturalist E. O. Wilson, whose integrative vision of biology and ethics he deeply admired. He wrote that he had always tried to “marry scientific rigor

and creative imagination,” following the example of mentors who combined experiment and intuition.

He saw his work as a continuation of this lineage, a search for order and meaning within the apparent chaos of languages, always tempered by humility: “If we were wrong, at least we closed one dead end. But I leave confident that we have most probably opened a new avenue.”

Character and Legacy

Those who worked with him remember a formidable intellect and a demanding editor who never accepted imprecision, but also a generous and disinterested collaborator who believed ideas belonged to everyone. As Alain Matthey wrote, “You were an extraordinary and formidable companion of intelligence ... certainly the most generous and selfless of men.”

Pierre Bancel leaves a legacy of intellectual independence, cross-disciplinary curiosity, and a body of work that continues to inspire linguists exploring the origins of speech. His writings, translations, and editorial contributions remain a testament to a mind that sought, against all odds, to glimpse the first human words—and through them, the birth of humanity itself.

Magali Bancel
November, 2025