

A Tribute to Bert Peeters (1960–2021)

Lauren Sadow and Kerry Mullan

Bert Peeters was an exceptional scholar and colleague who left us prematurely on 22 February 2021 as a result of brain cancer. Bert's life and his work were infused with a passion for French linguistics, semantics, culture, applied ethnolinguistics and language pedagogy. He will be long remembered for his ability to combine these fields and for bringing Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) research to European scholars.

Bert was born in Aarschot, Belgium in 1960, to Jos and Christiane Peeters-Renwart. Christiane was a primary school teacher and Jos was a business owner of a shop selling alcohol and tobacco. Bert and his sister, Els, were raised in Belgium. Bert's love of languages was established early. In primary and secondary schools he hated the sciences—chemistry, physics, and geography—but enjoyed French. At university he combined his great love for literature with French and Italian Studies, then moved into historical grammar and linguistics. Bert met his wife Monina in 1981 and they were married in Aarschot on 23 July 1984.

After his undergraduate studies, Bert taught French in high schools and evening schools before being offered a scholarship to begin a PhD in 1987 in the Department of Linguistics at the Australian National University in Canberra. He was awarded his PhD less than two years later in 1989 for a thesis titled 'Commencement, continuation, cessation: A conceptual analysis of a set of English and French verbs from an axiological point of view'. His PhD supervisor, Professor Anna Wierzbicka, became a close friend, and Bert's collaborations and friendship with Anna would continue throughout his life.

Following his PhD, he worked at the University of Tasmania for eighteen years as a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. During this time, he held a number of administrative posts including Associate Dean for Humanities and Head of Department and Deputy-Head of School, among others. In 2007 he took up a new post as Senior Lecturer in French Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney where he was promoted to Associate Professor of French Studies. From 2007–2008 he was the Co-Director of the IUEU (Innovative Universities European Union Centre) consortium. After he left Macquarie University in 2014, Bert returned to Canberra and the ANU as an honorary Associate Professor. In recognition of his many contributions to scholarship, Bert also held honorary positions at Griffith University (Brisbane) and at the University of Antwerp (Belgium).

Bert's work always combined an interest in big ideas with attention to detail; it was interdisciplinary, varied and highly collaborative. He visited many universities overseas, including most recently in 2019 when he spent several months in Russia at Novosibirsk State University. He had close and warm links with scholars at many other universities, including the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, and these relationships fostered many of his best-known publications.

He wrote few monographs, but instead preferred to showcase the work of others through editing and co-editing books with colleagues. His co-editing credits include *Cross-culturally speaking, speaking cross-culturally* with K. Mullan and C. Béal in 2013, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing; and in 2009, *Tu ou vous : L'embarras du choix* with N. Ramière, published by Lambert-Lucas. Most recently he sole-edited *Heart-and soul-like constructs across languages, cultures, and epochs*, published by Routledge in 2019. In his role as editor, he mentored many early and mid-career researchers with his special blend of logic, wit, and love of words. All in all he edited more than a dozen books and journal special issues and wrote more than thirty book chapters, almost sixty journal articles, around 100 book reviews, plus a number of other publications. His list of publications runs to twelve pages and is notable for the many witty titles and clever turns of phrase.

The present authors were themselves co-editors with Bert on a book project in honour of our colleague and friend Professor Cliff Goddard—Peeters, Mullan and Sadow eds., *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication* (3 volumes), (New York: Springer, 2020).

Professor Goddard played a key role in Bert’s professional and personal life through the overlap in their interests in ethnolinguistics and ethnopragmatics. Another recent project which Bert was very passionate about was his collaboration with Professor Maria Giulia Marini at ISTUD Italy on creating translatable and accessible narrative medicine forms. This project embodied all the things in which Bert believed strongly: not only connecting excellent researchers with good ideas, but the application of research to other fields outside of academia, to serve the wider community.



Photo from Bert Peeter’s private collection

In 1980, Bert first published on historical French grammar and had an extensive publication record before undertaking his PhD. His publications then continued a theme of uniting language, culture, and applied ethnolinguistics, including his 2014 chapter ‘C’est pas ma faute : Analyse ethnophraséologique’ in A.-M. Cozma, A. Bellachhab and M. Pescheux (eds.), *Du sens à la signification. De la signification aux sens : Mélanges offerts à Olga Galatanu* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014); and ‘Râler, râleur, râlite : discours, langue et valeurs culturelles’ in C. Claudel, P. von Münchow, M. Pordeus, F. Pugnère-Saavedra and G. Tréguer-Felten (eds.), *Cultures, discours, langues : nouveaux abordages* (France: Éditions Lambert-Lucas, 2013).

He researched semantics in three languages, English, French, and Dutch, and his work was also translated into Russian. For example, his 2017 article ‘APPLIED ETHNOLINGUISTICS is cultural linguistics, but is it CULTURAL LINGUISTICS?’ originally published in the *International journal of language and culture* was republished in Russian in *Zhanry Rechi (Speech Genres)*, 2017.

Bert’s service to scholarship included being a member of the editorial committee/advisory boards for thirteen academic journals and book series such as *Journal of French Language Studies* (since 2006), *La linguistique* (since 2007), *Revue de sémantique et pragmatique* (since 1997), *Romance Philology* (1998–2003), *Cahiers de praxématique* (since 2009), *Revue internationale de linguistique française* (2011–2013), *Cahiers de lexicologie* (since 2018), and *Sounds – Meaning – Communication*, book series, Peter Lang (since 2015). Bert was also contributing editor to *French Studies: Language and Linguistics*, *Year’s Work in Modern Language Studies*, Leiden: Brill (since 2016), and book review editor for *Journal of French Language Studies* (since 2013). Within the NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) community, one of his greatest contributions was as creator and manager of the nsm-approach.net bibliographical database, <https://nsm-approach.net> (since 2017). As a strong advocate for the community of scholars and researchers, Bert set up and managed mailing lists to connect people to one another in both his main research areas, French Studies in Australia (Oz-French), and NSM. (Both mailing lists have been taken up by the authors of this tribute and will be continued.)

Bert was diagnosed with brain cancer in December 2019, after which he faced two rounds of surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy with his usual strength and determination. He is survived by his beloved wife, mother, and sister. As a testament to Bert’s legacy, members of his research communities will build on his extensive research, ensuring that it continues and is not forgotten. Bert’s life and work touched innumerable colleagues on every continent and he will be greatly missed.

Macquarie University / RMIT University

A modified version of this obituary appeared in *Etnolingwistyka*:
<https://journals.umcs.pl/et> .—Eds.