



KIEFFER, CHARLES MARTIN

KIEFFER, CHARLES MARTIN (b. Cernay, 4 February 1923; d. Cernay, 14 June 2015; [Figure 1](#)), French linguist and ethnographer of Afghanistan most remarkable for his study of endangered languages. Taking an ethnolinguistic approach, he was very attentive to dialectal particularities and to areal contacts.

Born in Cernay in northeastern France, Kieffer's mother tongue was Alsatian. Later in life, Kieffer devoted part of his time to the description of Alsatian as spoken in the regions of Mulhouse, Cernay, and Thann. He was also interested in Western Yiddish. During World War II, he left occupied Alsace, joined the French resistance, and, after Lyon was liberated from Nazi control, he joined the first division of Française Libre. He was decorated with the *Croix de guerre* and was accepted at Saint-Cyr, but eventually left the army.

Mainly self-taught in the research area in which he excelled in the 1960s, Kieffer was, according to Gérard Fussman (p. 135), chiefly a field worker, while he was an outstanding researcher. Kieffer's formal academic background was literature and philosophy. He earned his undergraduate degree from Aix-en-Provence in 1946, followed by a postgraduate degree in Sorbonne. His first steps into the Orient took him to Cairo, where he began to learn Arabic. He soon was hired as a French-language teacher at the *Esteqlāl* Lyceum in Kabul, where he set about to learn [Kāboli](#) Persian, in which he rapidly achieved native-like competence and which later became his language of inquiry throughout Afghanistan. Kieffer went on with learning [Pashto](#) and then [Ormuri](#), which marked a turning point in his career.



Kieffer played an essential role in the compilation of the *Atlas linguistique de l'Afghanistan* (ALA; on which, see [Redard](#)), to which he acted as a project manager. Between 1962 and 1965 he split his time between the ALA and the [Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan](#), to which he was a secretary. He then was affiliated with Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. In 1968 he moved to Bern in order to work on the maps of ALA under the direction of Georges Redard and in collaboration with Sanaullah Sana. (See Kieffer 2003, 1974, 1986, 1989.)

Ormuri and Parači. In 1959, during an excursion in the Lōgar (see [Baraki Barak](#)), Kieffer encountered some Ormuri speakers and conducted a number of surveys, which shed new light on the linguistic arrangement of Afghanistan. (Both Redard and Georg [Morgenstierne](#) had conjectured that Ormuri had gone extinct ever since Émile [Benveniste](#)'s journey in Afghanistan in 1947.) Kieffer's research on Ormuri from 1962 to 1971 led to a *thèse d'état*, which was defended in 1975 at the Sorbonne and published in part in 2003.

Fifty years after the discovery of Parāči (see [AFGHANISTAN vii. Parāči](#)) by Morgenstierne, Kieffer travelled on foot in September-October 1973 around the valleys of Šotol, Ğočulan, and Pačaġān, where Parāči was still spoken, and not only studied the language with its dialectal varieties, but also conducted an extensive ethnographic study. (On Ormuri and Parāči, see Kieffer, 1972a, 1975a, 1977, 1979, 1980.)

In the field of dialectology, Kieffer also worked on Wakhi, Bactrian Arabic, “Turk-Mongol” residuals, and [Hazāragi](#) (see [HAZĀRA iv. Hazāragi dialect](#)).

Pashto (see [Afghanistan vi. Paštō](#)). Half of the 252 localities explored for ALA concerned Pashto. Kieffer carried out a remarkable dialectological analysis, leading to new findings in Pashto phonology. He argued for the existence, beside the classical consonantal isoglosses (realization of /ǧ/ and /ǰ/), of a vocalic isogloss in Waziri (Kieffer, 1975b, pp. 8-10, 16). This arrangement differs from the traditional geographical division of the four varieties of Pashto. Kieffer was deeply touched by the Pashto language and culture, and gave Pashto names to his two children, Nangyalay and Malālay.

Kieffer's *Tabous, interdits et obligations de langage en Afghanistan* (2011) is the best proof of his desire to become immersed into rural Afghan society. He pointed out time and again in his publications that his work was not the result of research in the traditional sense, but simply the report of observations



made on the ground. To establish close and reciprocal relationships with his informants, calling on an interpreter was out of the question. The medium languages Kieffer used for language documentation were Persian and, seldom, Pashto. Consequently, the random materials collected from uneducated informants belong essentially to these two languages. To this, one should add the Arabic formulas obtained from learned persons, that is, the clergy and academics.

Kieffer tried to understand the influence of society on language. He came to the conclusion that society applies a twofold pressure on the speakers' linguistic performance: (1) a negative pressure, which enacts prohibitions: the "taboos" reflected by animal names, avoidance terms, as well as "things" that cannot be said according to rules linked to religion, ethics, and tradition; (2) a positive pressure, which is manifested in the usage of terms testifying respect of taboos or conventions, apotropaic formulas, forms of courtesy and condolences, techniques for neutralizing blasphemy, and a list of gratuitous curses used by young people in order to avoid the embarrassed silence (Kieffer, 2011, p. 35). In a similar vein, though not compulsory, the usage of popular terms intended to win trust. Beside these prohibitions and obligations, Kieffer records numerous specialized terms, which are of high ethnographic interest.

Kieffer contributed these articles to *Encyclopaedia Iranica*: [Abdāli](#); [Acəkzi](#); [Afghan](#); [Afghanistan v. Languages](#); [Afridi](#); [Aḥmadzi](#); [Baraki Barak](#); [Barf](#); [Hazāra iv. Hazāragi Dialect](#); and [Ormuri](#).

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