

**An historic historical linguist (and then some): James M. Unger**

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On April 20, 2015, as Professor James Unger's final semester at OSU neared its close, a large and varied crowd of students, grad students, faculty and staff gathered at Ohio State's Faculty Club to fête him. The afternoon began with a lecture from him on topics treated in his recently published book, *Sangaku Proofs* (Cornell East Asia Series, 2015; *sangaku* 'mathematics/arithmetic'). When Jim's lecture, and the Q&A session that followed, had concluded, many Ohio State colleagues and students stepped up, one after the other, and spoke about why we consider ourselves fortunate to have had him—scholar, administrator and teacher—as a colleague. When it came my turn, I suggested that no one should have to take just our word for it, and therefore shared, reading aloud, a sampling of what some distinguished and influential scholars outside OSU have had to say about Jim Unger and his work. These selections are presented again here, with the unanimous and enthusiastic permission of their authors.

**Victor Mair**, scholar extraordinaire of China and Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania, commented:

“As a researcher, Jim Unger has one of the sharpest minds in the business. He has the ability to cut right through obfuscation and emotion and get to the crux of tough linguistic questions.

One of the first times I heard of Jim Unger was as the author of an article summarizing the conclusions of the Altaic panel at the Linguistic Society of America's 1987 Summer Institute, on the matter of an alleged Altaic language family. Although Jim is not an Altaicist by any means, it was he who was chosen to present the panel's conclusions. The article, published in 1990, still stands today as an unusually judicious assessment of what remains a contentious issue.”

Then there's **John Whitman**, Professor of Linguistics at Cornell University (and, at the time, also the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, NINJAL):

“[Jim] Unger is one of the leading experts on the history of the Japanese language in the world. He is a scholar of great distinction and productivity. His epochal 1977 dissertation on Japanese morphology and phonology is the reason that I myself am in the field of Japanese historical linguistics. Jim Unger has played a central role in this field for 35 years.”

“Unger has [also] published a number of important books in the general field of Japan studies, including a monograph (1987) from Oxford University Press on the Fifth Generation computer project, and another very important book on script reform in postwar Japan in 1996. Most recently, he has published a widely noted book on the role of contact in the genesis of the Japanese language from the University of Hawaii Press (2009). Professor Unger is unique among current Japanese

linguists in writing influentially on a wide range of non-linguistic topics. [His most recent book is an] investigation into the mathematical sophistication of Edo period *sangaku* (“mathematics “or “arithmetic”) in Japan.”

“[Jim] Unger is able to work on topics like these because he is brilliant. He is a highly accomplished musician and has a sophisticated understanding of mathematics. He is a polymath in the best sense of the word.”

**Bjarke Frellesvig**, of Oxford University, and author of the authoritative *A History of the Japanese Language*, from Cambridge University Press, speaks of Jim as follows:

“Professor Unger is without a doubt one of the most accomplished, distinguished and influential Japanologists today. His specialized field of study and research is Japanese linguistics, but his importance in, and impact on, the field of Japanese Studies extends far beyond that, with influential publications on key issues in Japanese culture and cultural history.”

“All subsequent serious work on early Japanese language has taken its departure in Unger's dissertation, and accordingly all progress in the field since then owes a great debt to his work.”

“Unger's research and publications outside of the specialized field of linguistics have been widely influential among scholars, students and also the general public with an interest in Japanese culture and history-contributions unmatched by his peers working in historical linguistics.”

“In addition to the impact of Unger's scholarly research and publications, he has contributed greatly to the development of Japanese studies worldwide but especially in the United States. ... It is unprecedented for a scholar of such accomplishments to contribute on the scale that Unger has in ensuring wider accessibility and higher quality at even basic levels of language instruction, not to mention the influence he has had as a department chair at three major universities.”

**Brian Joseph**, erstwhile long-time Chair of Ohio State's Department of Linguistics and Editor of *Language*, wrote this:

“I have recently finished co-editing a 6-volume work on *Historical Linguistics* in Routledge's Critical Concepts in Linguistics series (2014) for which my co-editor and I selected 106 key articles in historical linguistics that we saw as vital to understanding the field. The selection ranges over more than a century of scholarship, so obviously there was a huge amount of material to choose from. I mention this because among these 106 key articles was James Unger's 1990 article entitled “Japanese and what other Altaic languages”; to us, it presented a clear statement of a methodological problem associated with attempts to link Japanese from a historical perspective to other languages in Asia, and because that methodological issue comes up with attempts to tie together other languages elsewhere in the world, we saw his paper as outlining one of the “critical concepts” of the field. He stands in the collection along with such greats as Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir, Leonard Bloomfield, Morris Halle, Paul

Kiparsky, William Labov, and others. If you know a scholar by the company he keeps, this is evidence of considerable stature indeed.”

Finally, **Stephen Horn**, a DEALL PhD who last year completed a four-year research fellowship at Oxford University, had these things to say.

“Professor Unger has been and will continue to be an example to me of what a scholar and a teacher should be, and I frequently reflect on the things he has taught me, and always hold onto the enthusiasm for learning that he has shared with me.”

“When I arrived, he greeted me warmly and invited me into his office to chat in the office of the Department Chair. This was the beginning of a series of informal conversations that stretched throughout my time at OSU and turned out to be more valuable than any course or seminar. I took him at his word that first day when he told me I could consult him on any matter, and so kept coming back to his office week after week. I would leave each time with pages of notes and a head filled with plans.”

“But it was Professor Unger's insistence on respecting the intelligence of the authors of these texts in Middle Japanese, interpreting what they wrote as the result of meaningful choices made in specific contexts, that made me see how a deep understanding of the grammar of Pre-Modern Japanese could make such texts come alive. Seeing Professor Unger consider the various options for how a thing might otherwise be said in Middle Japanese made me realise that internalising the rules of a “dead” language to the extent that they become productive was not an unreachable goal. I had heard rumours that as an exchange student in Tokyo Professor Unger had tried to start conversation circles using Classical Japanese, but now I could see how these rumours might all be true.”

“When I was a freshman undergraduate, a long time ago, my supervisor was the rationalist philosopher Dr. Paul Kashap, who once said to us students, ‘If you are fortunate you may find someone whom you admire, and feel you want to be like that person. Remember that feeling.’ I [do!]”

So there you have it: full and eloquent confirmation of all the encomia delivered at our April 20 fête, and then some.

As the junior DEALL faculty member studying issues in the history of Japanese, I too have long been the beneficiary of Professor Unger's counsel. It started, of course, long before Jim came to DEALL, when, in about 1983, I got myself a copy of his 1977 dissertation. Later, at DEALL, first as Chair and then as a colleague, Jim was never too busy to answer questions or discuss a problem in the history of Japanese. More than once, an exchange in passing on a stairway or a campus sidewalk turned into a discussion that ranged as far as it had to, for as long as we had time. I'm sure I took away more than he did from these impromptu sessions. Thank you, Jim.

But, back to last April's UngerFest, where the above testimonials were first presented—When everyone had finished offering their remarks, Professor Unger was invited back to the podium, just before we turned to refreshments. He was brief. In expressing his

thanks, he cocked his head and cracked that the praise he'd just been listening to left him wondering if he hadn't died or something. I daresay the burst of laughter and applause that followed was loud enough to convince him that he hadn't.

Finally, as we start the new year, an expression of thanks is in order to Professor Unger and his wife, translator and interpreter Mutsuyo Okumura Unger, for the many open-house parties they hosted at New Year's, day-long gatherings with great food and live music to match. The Ungers now live in Maryland, Professor Emeritus Unger continues to work with DEALL PhD students on their dissertations, and we all get to look forward to seeing him again.