

REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS/BESPRECHUNGEN

History of linguistics. Ed. by Giulio Lepschy. Volume I: *The Eastern traditions of linguistics*. London & New York: Longman. 1994. Pp. xx, 203.

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For speakers of European languages, the starting point of the history of linguistics is usually set at ancient Greece. That is where Robins, for example, begins his popular *Short History of Linguistics*. Robins justifies his decision to begin with Greece thus (p. 11):

It is simply that the Greek thinkers on language, and on the problems raised by linguistic investigations, initiated in Europe the studies that we can call linguistic science in its widest sense, and that this science was a continuing focus of interest from ancient Greece until the present day in an unbroken succession of scholarship, wherein each worker was conscious of and in some way reacting to the work of predecessors.

If we are to take Robins' reasoning as representative for the field as a whole, we begin the history of linguistics with Greece because (1) the work of the Greek thinkers can be considered 'science'; and (2) their work is the starting point of an 'unbroken succession of scholarship' leading up to where we are today in [Western] linguistic thought. One is tempted to conclude that a naïve (as opposed to supercilious) kind of Eurocentricism, lack of familiarity with non-European languages and cultures, plus comfort with familiar formats of thinking and exposition also have something to do with the matter. In writing the history of linguistics, we gravitate toward theories and concepts rather than painstaking formalistic descriptions of a specific language, or narrow analyses of limited domains. So we often give up on 'alien' traditions, after making the judgment that *x* culture does not *have* a history of linguistics that falls within the range of our expectations of what we can accept and work with.

Anyone familiar with the Pāṇinian tradition would be apt to argue that (1) the linguistic thought of the ancient Greeks is not necessarily the earliest 'scientific' thought in the field. And (2) begs the questions of whether we must look only at traditions with a traceable historical link to our own modern field of study, or that have an immediately recognizable bearing on it, as we attempt to write the history of the language sciences, a history of the field as a whole. However, if we do not 'begin' with Greece, we must choose some other starting point. And once we have made our selection of which other traditions to include, we need to answer the question of how to integrate them into a more global kind of history of the linguistic sciences.

The problems are many. Assuming we can overcome the barrier of working with less familiar languages, such as Chinese, Sanskrit, ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Hebrew and Arabic, the next challenge is the nature of the material we find. Much of it will strike us as isolated, individualistic, and language-specific traditions that are hard to relate to what is familiar in our own experience. But Robins himself says (p. 4):

In order not to impose the standards of linguistics today on the decision on what to admit as linguistic work from the past, we may agree to understand as part of the history of linguistics any systematic study directed towards some aspect or aspects of language envisaged as an interesting and worthy object of study in its own right.

This statement perhaps holds a key to dealing with those linguistic traditions we have trouble incorporating into a linear, Hellenocentric historiography. We must look at bodies of linguistic

thought which have heretofore been largely ignored – or undiscovered – by the mainstream, and consider them in their own context without first trying to hammer out all the perceived kinks and fit them into the mold of what we already know and acknowledge as ‘history of linguistics’. The first step, then, is simply to learn about the content of these traditions, while strongly resisting the urge to bend them in any way to our personal liking.

The volume under review, subtitled *The Eastern Traditions of Linguistics*, is an effort to address this area of relative neglect in current studies in the history of linguistics. The approach adopted in this book is not to worry about smooth adaptation and integration of less familiar traditions into the mainstream, but simply to present whatever the culture in question has to offer in a form consistent with its own original nature, as it evolved in its own context. The reader must consequently be prepared for a mixed bag that reflects the disparate origins and developmental directions of the various traditions.

The book was originally published in Italian, though four of the five chapters were first written in English, and one in French. The idea to come out with an English language edition was an excellent one, since the book offers information that really ought to be accessible to the vast English-reading public.

The first chapter, “Chinese”, by Göran Malmqvist (1-24), presents a rather standard account of traditional linguistic studies in China, particularly phonological and lexicographical studies, with some thought on language (“Rectifying names”; which may actually be more about politics than language) by the Legalist philosopher Xún Zǐ thrown in. The material chosen for this chapter is similar – though much abbreviated – to that included in typical modern Chinese language histories of the Chinese linguistic tradition, such as Pú (1990). Malmqvist explicitly omits etymological character studies, Western linguistics-influenced thought trends, and comparative Sino-Tibetan studies. Since a number of works in these three areas are already available in Western languages, Malmqvist rightly seeks to fill in a major gap in Western acquaintance with traditional Chinese materials not exclusively pertaining to the Chinese writing system.

The bulk of this chapter concerns itself with introducing individual lexicographical works with varying purposes. Skipping over the earliest character primers, Malmqvist begins with the *Ēryǎ*, a compendium of glosses for words that appear in ancient texts. He continues on to the *Fāngyán*, supposedly a lexicon of dialect material from about the first century A.D., the *Shuōwén Jiězhì* etymological dictionary of the Han dynasty, then major subsequent works reaching into the late 19th century.

Having finished this chapter, the reader may feel like s/he has just gone through an exotic grocery list of ‘word books’. Although there may be some truth to this, Malmqvist’s presentation does in any case give the attentive reader a reasonably accurate picture of where Chinese linguistic energy was invested over the centuries. In this sense, his account grounds a reader in a more or less Chinese view of the subject, rather than being a Western construction of ferreted out and remolded elements. It is somewhat regrettable, though, that the bibliography was not expanded to include at least Jerry Norman’s *Chinese* (1998, Cambridge Univ. Press) and S. Robert Ramsey’s *The Languages of China* (1989, Princeton Univ. Press), as further related reading. Also annoying is the omission of tone marks – toneless romanized Chinese syllables are often as incomprehensible to someone who knows Chinese as to one who doesn’t. Adding the Chinese characters themselves would have been even more helpful. With most typesetting currently being done by computer, typographical difficulties are no longer a valid excuse.

George Cardona’s emphasis in his chapter on “Indian Linguistics” (25-60) is naturally on the Pāṇinian tradition. (Happily, full diacritics are included for the Sanskrit words in this chapter.) The chapter gives a detailed account of both the major historical figures of traditional Indian linguistics as well as a generally clear outline of the content of their work.

Because the essay is so tight and loaded with information, it is highly useful for reference, but it is for the same reason tough to chip away at when read 'straight'. If the reader who is unfamiliar with traditional Sanskrit grammatical terminology sedulously compiles his/her own glossary of specialized terms as s/he encounters them, it is manageable, but it is still rather arduous to get through. Assuming the reader is willing to make the required effort, however, this chapter can be rewarding. Just getting a feel for the kind of concepts the Indian grammarians and phonologists awarded a separate term reveals much about how remarkable their work was: *savarṇa*, for example, refers to 'homogeneous' sounds, *karaṇam* is 'active articulator'.

The accounts of the ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, and Akkadian traditions (by Janet H. Johnson, Miguel Civil and Erica Reiner), described in the chapter entitled "Linguistics in the Ancient Near East" (61-96), are the most similar to each other, particularly since they come to like conclusions, i.e. that there was in the cases of these languages not much of what Western linguists would call a "linguistic tradition" at all. Often we have no more than a few occasionally bilingual word lists, or verb paradigms, from which to deduce the existence of some kind of systematic linguistic study. It seems clear that with only the scanty materials currently available, anything that could be called 'linguistics' is truly a product of reconstruction, in contrast to the cases of China and India.

The reader may feel as though he has somehow ended up with a different book in hand by the time he gets to the chapter on "Hebrew Linguistics" (97-163) by Raphael Loewe. This chapter is certainly the most divergent from the others, as well as the longest, and the one with perhaps the most smoothly reading prose style. It also offers the most extensive set of notes – 204 in all – and reference bibliography.

This chapter explores in considerable depth the place of language in the Jewish culture and religion. No analogy of this is found in the other chapters, certainly not to this extent. It also departs somewhat from the main topic to go into an array of religious issues – difficult to separate from any aspect of Jewish culture – and spends much time on the history of the various diasporas of the Jewish people, treating in the process the histories of local languages like Ladino and Yiddish that were adopted by Jews in their new homes. These accounts, while interesting and informative, perhaps do not have a direct bearing on Hebrew linguistics; the chapter is more a history of the Jewish people and their languages than it is a straight history of Hebrew linguistic thought. The reader may thus ask if this information belongs in this chapter at all. If one does not have too many preconceptions about what he 'should' get from this book and this chapter, it maybe doesn't matter. The main objection, in the reviewer's opinion, is that this additional material makes the book a bit lopsided, since similar content is generally not covered in the other chapters. Ultimately, though, it is up to the reader to decide whether this a major flaw, within the range of tolerable variation among chapters, or even a strength.

The last chapter of the book, written by the late Henri Fleisch (1904-1985), is on "Arabic Linguistics" (164-185). Arabic is the youngest tradition treated in this volume: the earliest Arabic writing dates only to the fourth century A.D., and it does not come into its own until the sixth. Aside from signs of linguistic sophistication culled from poetic traditions, the mainstay of Arabic linguistics as presented in this chapter is the works of the grammarians whose focus was the language of the Koran. Attention to grammar stemmed from the need to teach proper Arabic to new converts to Islam, but these studies eventually came detached from purely doctrinal studies of the Koran. The chapter introduces Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* of the late eighth century, a normative grammar described as the Arab world's crowning achievement in language studies, and the basis of the idealized standard adopted by all Arabic-speaking countries, regardless of variations in the local vernacular. The study of Arabic grammar was divided into four branches: lexicon, morphology, syntax, and derivation,

reflecting a relatively high level of linguistic sophistication and understanding among the Arabs of their own language. More information on this rich tradition is now becoming available to Western scholars through a number of works published at least since the author's death (cf. the various volumes in John Benjamins' "Studies in the History of the Language Sciences" series; the volume editor should consider adding these as well as other recent publications to the bibliography in a future edition.) Yet the author ends his chapter thus (180): "...we can see how vain it is to look in the works of Arab grammarians for any anticipation of modern linguistics, structuralism or the like, which were all completely outside the scope of their ideas."

We can safely conclude that such an anticipation does not emerge from any of the non-Western traditions surveyed in this volume. So this leads us to ask several general questions about how to read and use materials like the ones in this book: Is our inability to contrive any links to Western linguistics to be interpreted as some kind of shortcoming of the traditions surveyed? Was somebody else *supposed* to come up with a Platonic or Bloomfieldian system of study? And what do we *do* with this introductory knowledge we have gained of non-Western linguistic traditions?

The purpose of looking at non-Western traditions should be simply to see what other cultures in other times have done. This can provide objective and contrastive background material with which to look at the Greek-based traditions. We must avoid falling into the trap of trying to look for precedents of modern developments where they simply do not exist, and in the process distorting what we do find, somehow underrating its value, or writing it off as irrelevant. The traditions that emerged in each culture reflected specific needs, interests, idiosyncratic preoccupations, or even certain historical 'accidents'. The historian's job is not to express disappointment when he fails to find an independently evolved tradition in tune with the Greek one, but simply to report and delve into whatever tradition did grow up in a specific context. Although this volume intends to do just such a thing, some of the authors sometimes seem to lose track of this objective, or they sound as though they are apologizing for not having something 'better' to offer their readers. This orientation could perhaps use some rethinking and revision. Once more people have a greater understanding of these traditions, the new input will gradually be better integrated into 'mainstream' history of linguistics in a natural way. Getting more people to read books like this one is a key step in this process. The quality of information included in these books, however, is a crucial issue.

It might be useful at this point to draw contrasts with a few works that cover some of the same ground as the Lepschy volume. A comparison will be made of their treatments of the Chinese tradition, since that is what the reviewer is best acquainted with.

The chapter on "Chinese" in Esa Itkonen's (b. 1944) *Universal History of Linguistics* (1991) seems to be an effort to extract some kind of philosophy of language out of general Chinese intellectual history, rather than looking first at what the Chinese themselves tend to consider representative of Chinese linguistics, e.g. historical phonology and etymological studies of Chinese writing. Itkonen partially justifies his attempt to cover cultures he is less familiar with, e.g. Chinese, together with those he knows better, e.g. Indian, by citing 'unity of perspective' as a desirable goal. It is clear in this case that quality suffers when precedence is given to such an objective. By comparison, the Malmqvist chapter is more apropos and informative about linguistic works.

Itkonen has a valid point regarding unity, however, and the Lepschy volume does in some sense lack consistency of style and approach. A more serious problem is that potentially fruitful studies on points of intersection among the various traditions are not pursued. For example, it is often cited that Chinese phonological studies were inspired mainly by knowledge of Indian linguistics brought over to China with Buddhism. But exactly how this cross-fertilization took place is less well known. This maybe could be included in a future

English language study.

The approach adopted by Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) in Part II of her *Language, the unknown* is closer to that of the Lepschy volume than to the Itkonen book, though like Itkonen, Kristeva writes about each tradition herself. Unlike with Itkonen there is less problem with the nature of the material chosen (e.g. philosophy vs. linguistics), but serious problems with accuracy and reliability. The author seems to not really be an expert in any of the chapters on non-Western traditions. This nagging feeling is further confirmed by a Chinese character on p. 76 which has been typeset upside-down, and by an account of the origin of Chinese writing on p. 78 that is full of errors.

A further volume that touches on about the same set of non-Western traditions as Lepschy is Georges Mounin's (1910-1993) *Histoire de la linguistique des origines au XXe siècle* (1970). In contrast to Lepschy, Mounin spends relatively more time on the sections on Egypt (15 pages), Sumer and Akkad (10 pages), and India ("Les Hindous"; nine pages) than on China (five pages) and the Hebrew tradition (three pages). A mere nine pages are devoted to the Greeks and five to the Romans, by contrast, and the latter two come at the end of the chapter "L'Antiquité", with no special typographical honors – an interesting physical touch that somehow places all the traditions on a par with each other. The amount of space allotted to each non-Western tradition is actually quite admirable, considering that the entire 11.5 x 18 cm. volume is only 230 pages in length, and touches on everything from the origins of language to William Dwight Whitney (1829-1894).

But again, Mounin is apparently the sole author/compiler, and the presentation on "La Chine antique" is limited in scope and depth, and overly preoccupied with the Chinese writing system and character construction, though it does introduce the two-character *fǎnqiè* system of phonetic representation and the Chinese conception of 'full' or content words vs. 'empty' function words. It is good that this chapter – along with the others on non-Western traditions – is there at all, but it is really not adequate and contains outdated and misleading information (e.g. the monosyllabic myth). And recalling Itkonen, the bibliography is heavier on philosophy than on linguistics.

One might conclude, after this admittedly incomplete survey of accounts of non-Western linguistic traditions in two Western European languages, that the Lepschy volume has chosen the more desirable path. It steers clear of the danger of a sole author biting off more than he can chew by having a specialist write each chapter. No reader wants to spend time poring over new ideas that may be seriously off base. The tradeoff is indeed a loss of unity and cohesion, but these drawbacks, in light of the problems with the Kristeva book in particular but the other two as well, are in the end quite tolerable. Kristeva may be more readable, but that does not do much good when the content is not to be trusted.

A final problem is how the Lepschy book is to be used. As a source of general background on unfamiliar traditions for the conscientious scholar, it seems acceptable. If the book is to be used in teaching an undergraduate history of linguistics course, however, some obstacles need to be overcome. In addition to the lack of a unified approach, the difficulty level must be considered. It might be necessary for the instructor to 'predigest' the material, particularly for chapters like that on Indian linguistics, then simplify it for students in lectures and handouts, maybe supplementing it with more easily accessible readings. Part of the predigestion process might entail placing each tradition into a familiar context of knowledge the undergrad probably already has. As the book stands, the average student will have a hard time finding hooks in his closet of existing knowledge to hang the new information on, though more advanced students could perhaps manage the original.

In short, this book is a welcome contribution to the writing of a more global history of linguistics. More books like it need to be written, and more people need to read them.

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