

Fox, Anthony 1995: *Linguistic Reconstruction. An Introduction to Theory and Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xvii + 372 pp. (Hardback £ 35.00, Paperback £ 10.95).

*Linguistic Reconstruction* appears in the series ‘Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics’ as a landmark for future volumes. This book is not only an excellent undergraduate handbook, it is possibly the best state-of-the-art coursebook for subjects connected with historical linguistics and especially with the history of the English Language.

Dr. Fox states (p. vi) that “This book originated as a two-page handout which was distributed to students in a brief general course on historical linguistics ... The handout was intended to supplement this discussion and exemplify the methods. That it has expanded to its present book-length size is due part to a dissatisfaction with the materials available to students, but also in part to my own growing interest in this topic, and my desire to explore both the origins and development of the methods, and the current state of this area of linguistic theory and methodology.” These aims, no doubt, have been achieved by the book. But I think that some emphasis is also to be made on the clear-cut distinctions and expository clarity and brevity that the author uses in his presentation and explanation of the history of linguistic thought in relation to linguistic change, together with a scholarly and very much didactic approach to the main points under scope.

In a book of these characteristics, it is only normal that its users will also find aspects that could be different —although not necessarily better. For instance I have found slightly disappointing that bibliographical references to particular languages are not just scarce, but almost non-existing at all. I know that this is a general handbook on general (or universal) topics dealing with historical linguistics, but the very essence of the comparative approach implies the use of particular languages. Hence that I presume that some further information for the student who would follow other courses dealing with or related to Historical Linguistics or the History of particular languages would call for a supplementary effort in this area. Thus I have been unable to find allusions to R. Hogg’s books on Old English (1992a, 1992b) or on metrical phonology, or to Denison’s *English Historical Syntax* (1993), and I am also unable to procure myself information about other specific bibliography on either

the history of English or on that of any other major Western language from the sources quoted in the book (not even on German, being Dr. Fox's main foreign field —see Fox 1984—, unless we may consider that Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* and other 19th c monographs quoted are quite enough).

A second connected point that called some attention refers to the discussion of the Indo-European stages of origin, evolution and extension. Fox offers a magisterial discussion of the English review of the problem since Victor Gordon Childe put it forward in 1926, to Colin Renfrew's 1987 suggestive ideas. However, when the insular perspectives are confronted with other opinions, mostly originated in Germany, but also in Spain (Tovar 1954 is quoted, but nothing later by the same Tovar —as his 1982 monograph—, or by other Spanish scholars attached to German linguistic thought such as Rodríguez Adrados —1976, 1982—, or Villar Liébana —1971, 1991—, etc.), or in Italy (for example G. Devoto 1962; or the earlier G. Bonfante —although Fox quotes a seminal article of his published in *Word* in 1945); there is very little else than brief mentions. Even the French school of Indoeuropeists is partially ignored.

All the question of the so called *Altindoeuropäisch* that in the end appears to have implied the retraction of European history some 3,000 years back from the dates considered usual until some 10 years ago, would call for further discussion and illustration in this section of the work. Especially because this point will reappear later in the book (pp. 279-291) when Fox deals with Glottochronology, although that second context is not directly linked with the discussion on "Old Indo-European." It finally resurrects in pages 308-321 where Fox comes again on the original homelands of the Indo-European peoples. In these matters, H. H. Hock's (1991[1986]) *Principles of Historical Linguistics* is still better in scope and aims than the present handbook. It is also more detailed than *Linguistic Reconstruction* in matters dealing with new versions or a rephrasing of Grimm's and Verner's Laws (see Fox pp. 21-23) and the problems of the methodological approaches to reconstructing sound systems. However, Fox's book is much better than Hock's when reviewing summarily the main philological schools, their thought and the impact and effect that have caused on other contenders, together with a clear-cut presentation of morphological and lexical problems. The abundance of figures in many chapter —for example chapters 4 (19 figures), 7 (19 figures) and 9 (15 figures)— is also worth commenting, because all of them are impeccable and very useful.

Another minor point that concerns the list of references is both a strong dependency on English-speaking sources: although this is not just normal, it is also natural in the sense that the book is aimed at younger students, and a scarcity of recent items: there are less than 10 books or articles later than 1992 out of some 430 entries. It might be the case that nothing else interesting enough was published while the book was being finished. Something that happened by March 1994 according to the author.

To finish with this critical complaint about books on books, there is a most laudable point in *Linguistic Reconstruction*: that the author provides an interesting reading list at the end of each chapter that will encourage reader to provide themselves with further ammunition from other sources. Although Fox's commentaries on the further references he selects for implementing his own discussion are listed without commentary, i.e. these "further reading" items are "as it is", they are helpful in different ways. On the one hand we are offered a shortlist of the sources that Fox considers to be more reliable or at least interesting, and on the other the list is enigmatic and non committed enough to allow speculation about why this is on the list and why that (that is listed in the final references) is not. Occasionally some clues may appear in the notes or in textual cross-references, but in most cases the reader's own interpretation seems to be favoured.

*Linguistic Reconstruction* is divided in 12 chapters that we can consider under three points of view. There is a first introductory chapter (pp. 1-16) where Fox argues in favour of the imperious need that future graduates in languages have of historical linguistics. He also states his views on the problems and methodology and poses iron-hot questions on the status, scopes and limits of the discipline. In the end he is a firm defender of the faith, and although many of us were previous believers, his reciting of an agnostic creed for comparison and reconstruction leaves us much reassured in it.

Chapters 2 to 6 (pp. 17-121) form the second part of the volume. This part is devoted to the comparative method, and its execution in the volume is excellent: background and development since the 19th c (chapter 2); the modern 20th c times (chapter 3); and immediately a thorough discussion on procedures both basic and applied of the issues studied (chapters 4 and 5). Chapter 6 is finally devoted to models alternative and official: Stammbaumtheorie, Wellentheorie, Regularity, Analogy, etc.

Chapters 7 to 12 (pp. 145-329) discuss Reconstruction, the second topic under Fox's approach. Internal division is similar to that of the previous section: a historical development (chapters 7 and 89 now grouped with a more formal (or formalized) approach, plus specific examples (chapter 9) with well peppered illustrations from a variety of languages both ancient and modern. Then (chapter 10), new trends implying Typology and reconstruction, and (chapter 11), Quantitative methods (much in vogue today). It is particularly in Fox's analyses and discussion of Statistical procedures where I find him most brilliant and scholarly. Fox appears to be in favour of quantification ... provided that qualification and probabilistic razors were applied on the sheer possibilities provided by mass data. I think that it is not just witty and remarkably intelligent on the part of the author's, but it also helps the reader to understanding his (I think) profound respect for the intellectual work of other people.

The final chapter on Reconstruction, Culture, and Society, and especially in section 12.3 (Prehistoric Homelands, pp. 308-322) brings back the issues of Language origin and development. Fox is coherent and aims home: "... the prospect of learning something not only about the forms of reconstructed language but also about the society and culture of its speakers is an appealing one. Here, as elsewhere in reconstruction, we can accept the method as a possible source of information, but must be cautious in interpreting the results in historical terms." (p. 326). Actually, we should also mention that section 4.6, the Conclusion to chapter 4, together with section 8.5 —a conclusion to both reconstruction and the comparative method—, are excellent epitomes that help the reader to abstract summarily what the author has established as the essential points of his discussion.

*Linguistic Reconstruction* is then not just very good reading for the general student of historical linguistics, it is an excellent book for the more advanced or the professionally oriented towards these matters that since a century and a half ago have been central to the study of languages in academic curricula. In a way, it is a battlecry for our origins and a whole handbook on the strategies and logistics of how students should be taught and encouraged to work on their own (let us remember the selective and select "further reading" sections at the end of each chapter) by means of offering facts and plausible interpretation.

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