

BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2021.01.36

How dead languages work

Coulter George, *How dead languages work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. viii, 224. ISBN 9780198852827 \$25.00.

Review by

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Preview

The book under review is an introduction to seven Ancient and Medieval languages which are culturally relevant for English native speakers. Six of them are Indo-European—Ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Old English, Old Irish and (Middle) Welsh—and the last one, Hebrew, belongs to the Semitic language family. As hinted by the title, the author aims at providing information on how these languages “work”, that is to say, how each of them is phonologically, morphologically and syntactically structured, and how this contrasts with Modern English.

Each chapter is devoted to one or two languages. The author begins with a presentation of some of the phonological features of each language. He mostly concentrates on characteristics which are visible in loanwords in Modern English and on peculiarities which might sound exotic to English native speakers. Thus, in his description of Ancient Greek phonology, he focuses for instance on the spelling of Greek loanwords in English (p. 14); and initial mutations in Irish are exemplified by doublets such as *Seamus* and *Hamish* (p. 163). He then proceeds to describe some of the most interesting morphological and syntactic features of the language. Thus, readers learn about participles in Ancient Greek, absolute participial constructions in Latin (p. 61), conjugated prepositions in Celtic (p. 169), construct state in Hebrew (p. 205-206), etc. The author’s experience in teaching a first-year undergraduate seminar about these languages shows in his explanations, in which he relies as much as possible on parallels taken from languages which are likely to be familiar to the reader. Thus, in order to explain the lenitions of intervocalic consonants in Celtic, he compares them with the pronunciation of intervocalic *d* in Spanish *nada* (p. 161); Latin ablative absolute is illustrated with expressions such as *deo uolente* which are calqued in contemporary English (*God willing*) (p. 62); and the perfective use of the Germanic prefix *ge-* in Old English is connected with the similar function of the Latin cognate prefix *com-*, *con-* in *nectō* “tie, fasten”, *connectō* “tie, fasten together, tie completely”, and in Spanish *comer* “eat” < Lat. *com-edō* “eat up, consume”, from Lat. *edō* “eat” (p. 121-122).

Young undergraduates and people without experience in highly inflected languages should read the book from cover to cover, as several concepts are progressively introduced. The category of case, for instance, is presented in the chapter about Greek (p. 20-22). In the chapters devoted to Latin and Sanskrit, it is assumed that the reader already knows how the

five Greek cases work, and information is provided only on what is not represented in this latter language, i.e. ablative for Latin (p. 60), and instrumental and locative for Sanskrit (p. 142-146). The book deals with an impressive list of linguistic phenomena. Most of them are fundamental for comparative Indo-European linguistics, including the contrast between synchrony and diachrony (p. 103-104), sound laws and their *Ausnahmslosigkeit* (p. 101), Wackernagel's Law about the placement of clitics and postpositives (p. 29), the role of shared innovations in the diachronic classification of languages (p. 99), examples of grammaticalization (p. 112), etc. Topics relevant to other branches of linguistics are also introduced. Thus, for instance, the author briefly defines pragmatics and word order typology, and mentions the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS, p. 82) in a discussion about the placement of the verb in Latin poetry. Introductory literature on almost each of the linguistic topics is provided in footnotes, e.g. p. 82 on pragmatics, p. 113 on grammaticalization in the Germanic verbal system, p. 141 on diffusion of sound changes and the wave model, etc.

It might be argued that some discussions are either too superficial or overly ambitious. Indeed, the explanation about *Umlaut* in English *sit*, causative *set*, and *lie*, causative *lay* is probably difficult to follow without the Proto-Germanic reconstructions (p. 106-107), and Celtic initial mutations may not be the easiest thing to grasp for readers without experience either in historical linguistics or highly inflected languages. On the other hand, some remarks on phonetics lack precision (e.g. p. 35, where the sound change **hl > l* in initial position in German is attributed to the fact that **hl*-was “comparatively difficult to articulate in this environment”). The most questionable point, however, is that the author seems to give the idea that ancient languages “work” differently from modern languages: although it cannot be denied that Germanic and Romance languages have undergone a “morphological simplification” (p. 214), this is not always the case in other branches of Indo-European (to give but one example, Baltic languages developed four secondary cases, which are well attested in Old Lithuanian texts of the 16th century). However, the intended audience justifies such simplifications, and, in our experience, it is precisely this mixture of exotic linguistic features and relatively accessible explanations that best awakens the interest of students for historical linguistics.

Finally, linguistics is not the only focus, as small passages of culturally important texts are introduced, translated, and commented upon for each of the languages discussed in the book. These passages, generally consisting of a few lines, provide a first taste of the different genres which are representative of a given language. Thus, Greek texts include a short passage of the *Iliad*, a few sentences of Thucydides, and an extract of Paul's epistles; for Latin, George analyzes extracts of Lucretius, Horace, and Tacitus. For languages which are more exotic for classicists, such as Sanskrit, Old English, and Old Irish, George provides only one text, respectively the *RigVeda*, *Beowulf* and the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*; and Hebrew is illustrated with a few sentences of the Old Testament. For each text, information about the cultural context and relevancy is provided, as well as glosses or word for word translations. The focus of the commentary often lies on lexical and stylistic features: for example, George discusses the implications of the use of βουλή about Zeus for the theology of the *Iliad* (p. 29); p. 84-85, he carefully looks at the effects achieved by the use of a chiasmus in Horace's *Ode* 4.7. Another highlight of the book is the place given to important traits of the poetic language: Homeric formulas (p. 35-41), Latin scansion (p. 93), Old English alliterations and *kenningar* (p. 124), and Indo-European poetic language (p. 34 about Greek κλέος ἄφθιτον and Sanskrit *śrávaḥ... ákṣitam* “imperishable fame”).

Attention is often drawn to the choices faced by translators, in order to encourage the students to read the original texts. For instance, the author discusses the difficulties in translating what he terms “Thucydides’ abstract language”, quoting up to five different English translations of Thucydides 3.81.5 and showing that seemingly easy expressions, consisting of basic lexicon, such as the prepositional phrase ἐς τὰ ἔργα and the genitive ὀνομάτων, are in fact far more complex than their English rendition suggests. About Latin, George (p. 74) rightly insists on the need to “defamiliarize individual words” and to avoid mechanically substituting the corresponding loanword in English for Latin words. Regarding Hebrew, George (p. 202-212) shows that some differences between the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version are due to different stances of the translators regarding the necessity to remain as close as possible to the original, even when that means repeating constructions which are not very natural in English and have become typical features of Biblical language, e.g. “and it came to pass” to render the *waw*-conversive form *wa-yhî* “and there was”.

On the whole, this is an excellent book, and it should prove a very stimulating introduction to ancient languages in general and to comparative linguistics for students and for interested laypersons. The author claims that he wishes to convey enthusiasm for learning the languages discussed in the book, as well as to acquaint students with a certain degree of linguistic diversity, and he masterfully succeeds in doing this.