

Pereltsvaig, Asya (2012), *Languages of the World. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 278 pp. ISBN 9780521175777. Price: £19.99 (paperback).

In this book, Asya Pereltsvaig, lecturer at Stanford University, sets out to give us an overview of the languages of the world and their structural diversity. Basing her description on concrete examples, she gives a typological view of the various language families, mostly, but not always, from a geographic starting point. The text is presented in a pedagogical and student oriented way that suggests great experience, both as a writer and a teacher.

After an introduction where she discusses basic concepts like *languages*, *dialects* and *accents*, *language families* and *language diversity* the author starts off with a rather short chapter on the Indo-European languages, followed by eight chapters on the linguistic situation in different parts of the world, which give a very good overview of the present-day situation. At the end of each of these chapters she focuses on a specific linguistic question that is relevant to that particular group of languages or to the geo-cultural situation, e.g. 'Lesser known Indo-European Languages', 'Universals and parametric theory of the languages', 'Field linguistics' and 'Language contact'. This is a very good way of keeping the reader's interest. She also successfully avoids a tedious repetitive catalogue description of the geo-linguistic situation of the world by focusing on general typology and on a few representative or enigmatic cases. This way the book should capture the students' (i.e. readers') interest in continuing their reading, thus deepening their knowledge and motivation. The reader is provided with intriguing and motivating questions throughout the book, which show the author's deep knowledge and capacity to synthesize the complex matter into comprehensible résumés. The author has also included some small grey boxes where she discusses specific topics such as 'Knights, riders and false friends', 'Pioneers of the Pacific' and 'Language diversity and density'. The book ends with two chapters on 'macro families' (the idea of nostratic languages and similar "macroviews") and 'pidgins, creoles and other mixed languages'.

The book is a truly exhaustive presentation of the languages of the world, focusing on the contemporary situation and the relationships between these languages, not only in terms of forming different "families" but also from a typological standpoint, which makes the reading more interesting and also offers a better scholarly perspective. This way the author is able to introduce the reader into such fields of vital linguistic interest as *language contact*, *field linguistics*, *universals* and the *officiality of languages* without a long repetitive presentation of all the world's languages but rather focusing on what is representative and characteristic, and this in itself makes the book more valuable as a textbook and as a stimulus. It is obvious that the value and utility of the book increases considerably because of this approach.

There is no mistaking the fascination and interest on the part of the author in attempting to systematize and pedagogize such an enormous scholarly field as that

of the languages of the world. The overall impression is very positive, and the book must be a great stimulus to any student interested in the topic of languages. I find the various comparative tables and maps particularly instructive.

Without trying to diminish the value and usefulness of this book I would like to point out a few critical observations that I have made from my personal standpoint. They do not need to be rectified in the book but they could be helpful for the reader and teacher who want to use the book.

The author herself declares that the Indo-European languages are of particular interest as they represent some of the most widely spoken languages of today (English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, French etc.). It would not have disturbed the balance of the project to dedicate some more pages to these languages. It seems that the author might have underestimated the interest in the various Indo-European languages that most readers of the book most likely will have. The examples given in the text are very instructive and useful for the understanding of different linguistic processes and their consequences. And the handy use of references to English grammar helps and guides the reader to see differences and problems in a very fruitful and simulating way. However the picture becomes a bit unbalanced when so much space, proportionally, is dedicated to Corsican in comparison to other much more widely spoken varieties that are not always so well-known, like Romanian; and in the following chapter on Finno-Ugric languages where Inari Sami (*Enaresamiska* in Swedish) is discussed but no other Sami variety, although Inari Sami is the smallest of the Sami groups. From a Scandinavian point of view this gives a feeling that something important is missing, and so is the case with the often forgotten Hungarian variety Csángo, spoken outside the Hungarian sphere of influence on the eastern side of the Carpatians in northern Romania. On the other hand it needs to be pointed out how well described the complicated differences between English, Scottish English and Scots are in this book. A more thorough description of the bigger and more well-known Indo-European languages would have been motivated, if the book is to be used as a textbook. However, linguistic controversies like the discussion on where Proto-Indo-European was spoken (Gimbuta's Kurgan theory and Renfrew's Anatolic one) are well presented and discussed, and they are given a reasonably objective presentation.

Some minor details disturb the very positive impression that is given, like when on page 93 the author says that *Inuktitut* has been given a co-official status in Greenland along with English. As Greenland belongs to Denmark it should of course be 'along with Danish'. To say that Catalan is a lesser known Romance language (page 31) surprises anyone dealing with Romance linguistics as it has been in the centre of most discussions on Romance languages for at least some twenty years. Likewise on page 30 the Romance languages are classified as *Italic*, which is unfortunate since the Italic languages normally include Latin, Sabellic, Umbrian, Oscan etc. whereas French, Italian, Spanish are referred to as Romance or sometimes as Latin languages. When the author writes that Finno-Ugric languages are spoken in eastern Scandinavia it is correct but it should be added

that it is also spoken in northern Scandinavia, thinking of the Sami and Finnish varieties that are spoken there. It could also be argued that the author has dealt unfairly with the Central-American languages after a long discussion on the Northern American indigenous language families. It is in Central America, particularly Mexico, that the Indian languages really thrive and the very brief treatment of important language families such as Mayan Nahuatl seems a bit unfair.

As a conclusion I would like to stress that I am very impressed by Pereltsvaig's book and by her way of evoking interest and motivating the questioning of "given truths". I would therefore highly recommend every linguistic library to get a copy of this book and stimulate its use in the teaching of languages, even in the context of the so-called mother tongue, in order to create a deeper understanding of the reality of the Other within one's own society. The book is not just a review of the languages of the world, but also of many salient issues in linguistics and how we perceive the sociolinguistic reality of our world, which is of utmost importance for the sociopolitical and human reality of today.

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