

LASS, R. *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997. (XXIII + 423). ISBN: 0-521-45924-9 (Pb)

Let me begin this review with what could well be its final conclusion. Lass's stimulating and daring book is a highly recommendable piece of reading for all those interested in historical linguistics or in linguistics in general.

My reasons for such an assertion are mainly based on the general lines inspiring the essay, very much apart from the ones we are getting more and more used to these days. Lass's book is not an introductory book, nor a teaching companion, nor does it aim at objectivity. On the contrary, it is defined as an 'adult textbook', 'addressed to colleagues, advanced students' and fellow linguists (xiii), unashamedly subjective, i.e. 'programmatically and polemical' (xv). Hence its controversial and distinctive nature, which makes the book attractive from the very beginning.

A good example of Lass's own idea that outputs of historical linguists are vulnerable to criticism and evaluation (289), the book's main interest is to openly defend the author's epistemological and theoretical standpoints, and offer them as a solid base for fruitful debate (which they will undoubtedly raise). More specifically, Lass goes through the complex foundations of historical linguistics, evaluating in detail our scholarly access to the past, to reach a coherent definition of the study of language and language change.

For that purpose Lass selects part of his well known preoccupations —as explicitly put forward in previous essays (1978, 1980, 1986)— and revises them together in the light of new readings. Special interest is aroused by very general topics, such as the nature of historical metalanguage, the meaning of history in linguistics, the role of the (historical) linguist as myth-maker and scientific storyteller; the relationship between linguistic history and linguistic structure; the kind of information we get from direct and indirect sources of data, or the scientific nature of the so-called reconstructed languages versus that of the documented ones. To give solid ground to his theses on these and other particular topics, Lass runs through different study cases, most of them taken from Germanic and other Indo-European languages, which serve as examples or counterexamples to prevailing views.

However, it is in the limits Lass imposes on the scientific study of language and language change where the deepest controversy lies. Here Lass places himself most clearly against the more generally accepted views, at times with unnecessary aggressiveness.

Establishing systems as the main interest any serious linguist should have, Lass defends a modified view of structuralism, which leaves aside any action-based perspective on language and consequently on language change. Psycho-social and pragmatic considerations of any kind, i.e. speakers, hearers, situations, motivations, or goals, however interesting and attractive they may be, lie outside the scope of the discipline. Moreover, as they do not contribute to explaining the real and changing nature of language (325ff), there is no point in 'misdirecting scientific efforts' (xviii), allowing them to interfere with linguistic description as such.

Lass's alternative assumptions recognise the strong influence of the ever-fascinating writings of the evolutionary biologist S.J. Gould. Language is therefore

conceived of as a complex and historically evolved system, fully comparable with other such systems. Like them all, language exhibits a dynamic and self-regulating behaviour and tolerates reasonable levels of disfunctionality, i.e. of linguistic junk or garbage. Change emerges from this junk out of chance or necessity. It is these changes and the subsequent restructurings of the system that linguists should describe.

Nevertheless, the real question remains whether this view of language is really so unique or, even more importantly, presents radical incompatibility with other considerations one could make on the process of linguistic change. It is in this dialectic fashion that Lass chooses to reintroduce the problem, though perhaps not the happiest one.

Lass's deeply skeptical attitude, drawing clearly from his assumed deductive positivism (336) leads him into an unyielding categorical position, at times unfair to his opponents (even derogatory in his reference to them, see 350, 345f, *passim*). Being strictly rigorous and a hyperdetailed defender of his own theses, he rubs away other author's views (Anttila, Vennemann, Shapiro, Eco or Saussure, to mention only a few) either by presenting counterexamples in isolation, or stretching their lines of argumentation to extremes where none of them would dare to take them. Lass does not allow for gradients or clines of any kind, and escapes all descriptive refinement when considering such matters as meaningfulness, functionality or teleology in language. In turn, his concentration on phonological issues —though justified by reasons of personal interests and limitations— plays an important role in maintaining his theoretical tenets. Phonology happens to be the most mechanical, unconscious and law-abiding level of language, thus safest and most suitable to his observations. Duly accepting Lass's seriousness of approach to science for over thirty years, the reader gets the impression that the more recent insight procedures, based on probabilities and tendencies rather than rules, easily drift into feelings of intellectual unrest. All too easily they get reduced to mere self-indulging generalizations of intuitions with little real value and only pseudo-academic interest.

On the other hand however, the new scientific paradigm which keeps pushing strongly since the seventies looks much more coherent than what Lass may force us to believe. Despite the place he has chosen to occupy within the linguistic community, some of the concepts and ideas favoured in this book remain close to those defended within models Lass enjoys rejecting. To give but a few examples, his idea of linguistic junk or garbage can be easily paralleled to linguistic fringes or peripheral spaces of cognitive studies, and his 'exaptation processes' do not differ too much from what other researchers see as shifts in the force of attractors or changing foci of attention.

No doubt there remain many problems to be solved in order to explain the changing nature of language. As Lass himself recognises, the gap between the micro-pragmatic side of language and its more conventional, stable and systemic appearance is very hard to bridge. But the radical defence of language independence versus the clearly interacting psychological and social systems does not seem to be the clearest way to success. On page 365f, Lass compares language with mathematics. '(M)athematics', he argues, is a product of the human mind, and yet is also autonomous of anything peculiar to psychology'. Apparently, though, things begin to get fuzzier in these traditionally clear fields too, and serious doubts are cast on their independence from human minds. (See G. Johnson 1998, '¿Son las matemáticas una invención?', *El País* 4.3.1998).

I shall conclude with a plea for more books like this one. They reflect the natural scientific strains to shape clear and honest landscapes out of otherwise scattered data, avoiding indulgence in the deepest human desire to reach irrefutable explanation. An excellent reflection on what we are engaged in.

#### WORKS CITED

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Paloma Tejada Caller  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
Departamento de Filología Inglesa  
Facultad de Filología  
28040 Madrid, Spain