

## Book Review

**Serenella Baggio and Pietro Taravacci (eds).** 2020. *Lingue naturali, lingue inventate. Atti della Giornata di Studi (Trento, 29 novembre 2019)*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, pp. iv + 252. ISBN: 9788836131181.

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This volume, whose title is *Lingue naturali, lingue inventate* (*Natural languages, constructed languages*), collects nine contributions at a conference held in Trento on the 19th November of 2019. The topic of the conference is mirrored in the title of the proceedings. As explicitly stated (p. 3) by Serenella Baggio, one of two editors, the occasion for the meeting was to invite scholars with different expertise to reflect on the ideas put forward by Alessandro Bausani in his thought-provoking book *Le lingue inventate. Linguaggi artificiali, linguaggi segreti, linguaggi universali* (*Constructed tongues. Artificial languages, secret languages, universal languages*), published in 1974. This piece of information is decisive in order to understand the only apparent heterogeneity of the papers in the volume. Alessandro Bausani (1921–1988) was a leading figure in the field of the Oriental Studies: he was professor of Persian at the University “La Sapienza” in Rome, but he could also fluently speak or read about thirty languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Bahasa Indonesian, Vietnamese, Russian, Maltese. His attitude towards language made Bausani himself create a constructed language, *Markuska*. One of the points made clear in Bausani’s book is the following: “a constructed language whatsoever, be it sacred, practical, playful/childish or whatever else represents an approach to the problem of language” (Bausani 1974: 151, my translation; the original lines are quoted in Astori’s paper in this volume, p. 26). Bausani’s book did not get the attention of linguists as it would deserve when it was published, but as the conference organized three years ago in Trento shows it turns out to be a very stimulating reading even today because what is under discussion is language considered in its structural and functional peculiarities.

Some additional words are in order. Whereas the label “natural language” has a clear meaning, and refers to the natural-historical languages documented, the label “constructed language” could be interpreted at least in two ways: either a language created by someone, not necessarily a linguist, or a language reconstructed by some linguist, possibly in a philologically wrong way or by means of an incorrect methodology. In the present volume this label is used in both senses. To the former case belong the languages that readers can find, for instance in the

fiction novel *The lord of the rings*, to the latter the various languages belong that have been wrongly reconstructed such as Middle Persian, whose fortunes and misfortunes are treated in the paper by Marco Mancini (I will come back to this chapter below).

The volume comprises the following contributions: Serenella Baggio, Pietro Taravacci “Presentazione” (*Presentation*); Davide Astori “Quanto è naturale una lingua pianificata?” (*To what extent is a planned language natural?*); Emanuele Banfi “Forma e percezione di ‘parole’ in lingue storico-naturali tipologicamente diverse” (*Form and perception of ‘words’ in typologically different languages*); Franco Crevatin “Saperi riservati e usi linguistici: note su alcuni casi antichi” (*Restricted knowledge and linguistic usages: Various notes on some ancient cases*); Massimiliano De Villa “Dalla lingua di Adamo alla lingua pura: la riflessione del primo Benjamin sul parlare umano e sulla traduzione” (*From Adam’s language to the pure language: Early Benjamin’s reflections on human speaking and translation*); Francesca Dovetto “Vulgariser l’idée de la langue universelle alle soglie del XX secolo” (*Vulgariser l’idée de la langue universelle on the threshold of the XXth century*); Giorgio Graffi “I progetti di lingue universali nel Seicento: il loro ruolo nella storia della grammatica” (*Projects of universal languages in the XVIIth century: Their roles in the history of grammar*); Marco Mancini “Quando gli scienziati inventarono una lingua: il pahlavī nella filologia dell’Ottocento” (*When scientists invented a language: Pahlavī and the philology of the XIXth century*); Glaucio Sanga “In statu nascenti. L’infinito della lingua franca e il verbo nei pidgin” (*In statu nascenti. The infinitive of lingua franca and the verb in pidgins*); Andrea Scala “Manipolazione del significante e invenzione delle parole nel gergo: qualche considerazione a partire da materiali italo-romanzi ed etio-semitici” (*The manipulation of the signifiant and the invention of jargon words: Some considerations based on Romance and Aethio-semitic material*).

According to their content, the contributions could be divided into three subgroups following one of the aspects mentioned in the subtitle of Bausani’s volume: artificial, secret and universal languages. Since a detailed survey of each chapter is certainly beyond the purpose of the present review (and certainly beyond the expertise of the reviewer for each of them), only the core of the content will be presented for each contribution.

Three papers can be ascribed to the subgroup of the constructed languages: the contributions by Davide Astori, Marco Mancini, and Andrea Scala.

In his paper Davide Astori deals with Esperanto, the most famous and successful constructed language, at least thus far, showing that even an artificial language, once it enters the flow of history, cannot but change according to the typical social and cultural constraints that have occurred and still occur in every

language. Astori also mentions the fact that Esperanto is felt by some of its speakers as their “own” language in a process that is leading Esperanto towards the sociolinguistic conditions that are proper to a natural language.

Marco Mancini’s paper is devoted to an extremely interesting case, although completely different from the previous one: the gradual process that led to envisaging Pahlavī as an independent variety among the Iranian languages. Mancini’s paper, an extremely learned one and fundamental for everybody who wants to investigate how the study of Pahlavī developed, insists on the fact that what prevented scholars from identifying it and reading it correctly from the beginning was the fact that the logographic component of the writing system of Pahlavī was misinterpreted, consequently forcing to read Pahlavī in a wrong way.

Andrea Scala’s contribution is an interesting and very detailed survey on the apparently universal rules that can be rather frequently found in jargons, and in particular in the lexicon, exploiting material from Romance and Ethio-semitic languages. Scala focusses on the phonological mechanisms such as insertion, metathesis, or deletion of phonetic material employed in creating new words. In his conclusions, Scala stresses the relevance of jargons even for historical linguistics, since they show some peculiarities: for instance, innovations do not spread through lexical diffusion but remain isolated within the system.

Secret languages are treated by Franco Crevatin and Massimiliano De Villa.

In his concise contribution, Franco Crevatin deals with a couple of cases of the Hellenistic period in ancient Egypt, showing that, despite the globalization that certainly characterized that age, there was no fusion that took place between East and West.

Massimiliano De Villa’s chapter is a very abstract and difficult paper, devoted to the ideal language that, according to the philosophical system of Walter Benjamin, translation should produce.

To the subgroup of the universal languages can be ascribed the contributions by Francesca Dovetto and Giorgio Graffi.

Francesca Dovetto’s paper examines the period when the discussion about the origin of language started being in competition with comparative linguistics and the issue of a universal language. Particularly interesting are the pages devoted to the controversy between Michel Bréal and Léon Bollack who had invented a supposedly universal language, *la langue bleue* ‘the blue language’.

The chapter by Giorgio Graffi, a well-known specialist of history of linguistics, and of syntax in particular (Graffi 2001), deals with the two planned languages developed by the Scottish intellectual George Dalgarno (ca. 1616–1687) and the English clergyman and philosopher John Wilkins (1614–1672). After an essential but accurate analysis of Dalgarno’s and Wilkins’ linguistic systems, Graffi comes to the conclusion that the linguistic proposals of the two scholars must be understood

within the radical renewal of the grammatical tradition that took place in the 17th century and not as isolated or bizarre attempts to create new languages out of the blue, as it were.

Emanuele Banfi and Glauco Sanga have written two papers that are less easily grouped with the others insofar as they rather take into account the natural traits of language: Banfi's paper interestingly illustrates how words are perceived in typologically different languages, whereas Sanga's compares the status of the infinitive in the *lingua franca* and the status of verbs in pidgin, claiming that both varieties show some similarities with the phases through which babies acquire the human language.

A book like the one under review is not easy to read nor to evaluate: the range of topics dealt with is very wide, in some cases the topics are treated so meticulously that readers cannot lose attention nor read the pages absent-mindedly. In addition, readers would in a better situation if they already knew the ideas expressed in the book by Bausani from which this volume itself takes origin. The crucial question is: to what extent can a book like this contribute to historical linguistics? To what extent does it contribute to the general discussion on the relation between general and historical linguistics?

Let's start first with a necessary remark, only apparently out of thread. It is common opinion that historical linguistics and diachrony are almost perfect synonymous with each other. This is the reason why these two labels are interchangeably employed in the literature, very often to simply avoid repetitions that could affect and possibly mar the stylistic elegance of the page. However, at a closer inspection, things appear to be rather different. History and diachrony can only overlap partially: whereas diachrony is strictly intended as a formal approach to the history of languages, historical linguistics implies a much wider perspective on how to investigate them. Beside the regular and expected research about the language change of the different grammatical components over time, it also involves the history of research and the various ideas on language and language investigation expressed by different scholars, century after century. No matter to what extent this viewpoint could seem marginal or even irrelevant, there is good evidence that in fact such a viewpoint is frequently, even though implicitly, adopted and exploited. An easy way to demonstrate the correctness of this viewpoint is to consider the way in which papers dealing with historical linguistics are usually planned: they almost always present and discuss a certain number of previous proposals and their contribution to the debate, evaluating their content according to the scientific environment in which they were conceived and worked out. In this sense, history also plays a major role that it does not play in a purely diachronic approach. If this perspective is clear and acceptable, as I think it should be, the material collected in this volume turns out to be a real mine of precious

linguistic data from numerous languages, belonging to different linguistic families and from various historical periods. All data are very significant and useful, philologically reliable, and cast light on aspects that are frequently, but guiltily in my opinion, disregarded or even dismissed in historical linguistics. Undoubtedly, it reflects, among other aspects, one of the characteristics of the way of doing research in historical linguistics in Italy, i.e. an interdisciplinary approach that is not frequently met in contributions from other countries. The interdisciplinary approach also implies that the authors are aware and make use of all the literature on the topic under discussion, regardless of the language in which the articles are written, exploiting all that can help to illustrate and deepen our knowledge of the phenomenon under discussion. In this volume, the bibliographies at the end of the various chapters are very rich, and in some cases impressive.

In general, the contributions of the volume are of very high quality. They reliably present relevant and multi-faceted results of historical linguistic research in Italy and contribute to more general debates in historical linguistics. However, there are some downsides. Some contributions are written in a not always particularly reader-friendly traditional academic rhetoric. In both Astori's and De Villa's well-informed contributions, the text of the footnotes is frequently almost as long and informative as the main text. In Mancini's extremely learned paper, the reader is challenged by the density of the prose. In addition, the author mercilessly quotes from different languages (German, French, English, Russian, some words in Fārsī) without providing any translation and frequently reproduces symbols of different writing systems without any transliteration or transcription. All this raises the question: how many educated readers will be able to benefit from chapters like the ones I mentioned, although for different reasons? I suppose that the traditional style of presenting results prevents linguistics, as it is practiced in Italy today, from playing the role it deserves on the international stage.

In any case, this book is absolutely recommended for anyone who reads Italian. Those who have the patience to read the entire volume will be largely rewarded.

## References

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