

Book Review

Alessandro Del Tomba. 2023. *The Tocharian gender system. A diachronic study in nominal morphology* (Brill's Studies in Indo-European Languages & Linguistics 25). Leiden & Boston: Brill, pp. xx + 435. ISBN: 978-90-04-53289-2.

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The book describes the complex and enigmatic Tocharian gender system from a synchronic and diachronic perspective. It is an impressive work with a large amount of detail in exemplifying various usages of the system. Further, the book contains a large deal of innovative and careful philological work on different examples. However, there are also some topics that could have been further explained, as well as some conclusions where alternative solutions would be possible.

The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) gives an overview of the two Tocharian languages, A and B, a history of their description, as well as an outline of the Tocharian grammatical gender system, including references to earlier descriptions of gender. The introductory chapter, though serving its purpose, is a bit short and lacks a solid general background and introduction to the topic. This, since the next chapter (Chapter 2) “The gender system of Tocharian. A synchronic and typological overview” describes the Tocharian system from a general and typological perspective in a much more careful and detailed manner. It would have been preferable to have some background already in the introductory chapter, where the general topic is outlined. Why look at gender systems? Why Tocharian? And so forth.

Chapter 2, describing the gender system of Tocharian, starts with a typological introduction which delves into specific features of gender systems in general and how they are defined and organized. This serves as a solid background for the rest of the chapter describing the specific features of the Tocharian system. A special section (pp. 22–36) deals with the gender *alternans*, which is an innovation (and a retention) of the Tocharian system, and therefore of high interest. The definition of the *alternans* as a *gender* category (cf. p. 26) is interesting here, as *alternans* is characterized by agreement in masculine (singular) and feminine (plural) and therefore does not fulfil the criterion of being a gender by the agreement criterion. The argument posed in the book is that the *alternans* is semantically a coherent category. However, as also discussed in the chapter, since the neuter is preserved as a category in the pronominal paradigm (with unique forms), but not in the nominal paradigm, the typological match of neuter and *alternans* is not straightforward. As commented (p. 36), the neuter in the demonstrative paradigm is to be regarded as a frozen

remnant of the Indo-European forms and thus not a living paradigm. Leaning on the claims by Luraghi (2011) and Corbett (1991) that gender systems are in a process of grammaticalization from generic nouns → classifiers → pronominal demonstratives → attributive demonstratives → determiners → agreement markers is problematic as this was obviously not the trajectory of the Tocharian gender system. There is disagreement in the Tocharian literature on this issue, e.g., in favour of a two-gender system (Carling and Pinault 2023) or in favour of a three-gender system (Adams 2013). In general, the description of the gender system in this chapter is exhaustive and has a great level of detail (pp. 36–65). But the claim that Tocharian has a “formal assignment system” (p. 36) is not entirely in line with the definition of Tocharian as a three-gender system, as there are only two formal morphological categories (masculine or feminine). The section about semantic patterns is a bit thin and many of the claims here seem a bit pointless, such as “floristic terms are sorted into all three genders”, “body parts are masculine or feminine”, or “animals are always masculine or feminine”. For instance, there is a long etymological and philological excursion (pp. 53–56, more than half of the section) about the terms for ‘water’, TAB *āp* (feminine), TA *war* TB *wār* (masculine). It would have been of greater interest to obtain an exhaustive overview of the distribution of gender of various concepts and categories. Such statistics could easily be extracted from existing dictionaries (Adams 2013; Carling and Pinault 2023). The last section of this chapter overviews the gender system of Proto-Indo-European (pp. 58–65) with references to the latest literature on the topic.

The following chapter “Gender in the inflection of the noun” is very long and could have been better split up into further chapters. The chapter describes again the basic approach of the book that Tocharian is a three-gender system, but in which the third gender, *alternans*, is different from the Indo-European neuter (which is considered to be frozen in the pronominal paradigm). Following an overview of the Tocharian nominal inflection system, the chapter describes the three main research focuses: (1) how the Proto-Indo-European feminine gender evolved in Tocharian, (2) how the Proto-Indo-European neuter evolved, and (3) if Proto-Indo-European neuter is continued into the third gender *alternans*. The chapter then carefully goes through the different feminine inflectional paradigms and makes a careful etymological and diachronic analysis of the words represented by the different classes, connecting them to the Indo-European feminine types: the non-ablauting **eh2*-type, the ablauting **h2*-type, the ablauting **ih2*-type, and the non-ablauting **ih2*-type. The chapter has several highlights, one of them being the careful treatment of the basically feminine *okso-* and masculine and feminine *āršāklo* type (Sections 3.5.2.1–3.5.2.7), of which the origin is highly debated by Tocharian scholars (p. 155). This problem is dealt with by a careful reconstruction of different steps in the process of change, including morphological change and gender in the various pre-states of Common Tocharian and Tocharian A and B. Another highly valuable discussion

concerns the *wertsya* type (Section 3.5.3) of mostly inanimate, masculine or feminine, which the author connects to the Indo-European *deví* and *vrkí* types. Even though the evidence for the connection must be considered relatively weak (which is also discussed in the section) with few persuasive examples of the connection, the discussion of the individual lexemes, their reconstruction and possible evolution serve as an important contribution to the discussion on this enigmatic inflectional class.

The section on the evolution of the Proto-Indo-European neuter is the core of the entire book, as it deals with the problem of whether the Tocharian alternans corresponds to the Proto-Indo-European neuter. An important point of reference is the Proto-Indo-European distinction between thematic and athematic neuters, of which the athematic neuters mostly continue as alternans in Tocharian. This has been discussed previously, but the problem remains how the Proto-Indo-European thematic neuter is continued in Tocharian. The book presents an exhaustive overview of the various lexemes of this type, reconstructing their etymology and morphological prehistory. These developments are highly complex with many steps of analogical levelling and gender change in the prehistory of Tocharian that have blurred the picture. The reconstructive overview shows a merger with the masculine, which is not surprising; here, the author adds some parallel examples from the evolution of thematic neuters in Latin. An additional chapter (Section 3.6.2) deals with the evolution of the thematic neuter plural, showing how it must have merged with the feminine, giving rise to the alternans inflectional setup. Again, the book makes an exhaustive and detailed overview of the inflection types, the etymology and morphological reconstruction of the important lexemes. The chapter confirms the theory that the Proto-Indo-European neuter developed into the Tocharian alternans by merging the singular ending setup with the masculine category and the plural ending setup with the feminine category.

Chapter 4 deals with gender in the inflection of the pronoun and adjective. The Tocharian demonstrative paradigm is interesting with more forms and distinctions than most other Indo-European languages. The chapter initially focusses on the reconstruction of the forms, including the various reflexes of the four-way deictic system of Tocharian demonstratives (pp. 252–260), which is a welcome and useful overview. Section 4.6 covers the complicated adjectival system and how different form classes have developed, continuing Indo-European morphological categories. The combination of detailed reconstructions of different layers of Tocharian and a rich variety of examples for each type makes this overview of the adjective an important contribution to previous literature. The section describing different theories about the emergence of the feminine gender in Tocharian is also informative and welcome.

The final chapter, “Retrospective and conclusion”, summarizes the different topics of the book, most importantly the theory that the genus *alternans* is a real gender, continuing the Proto-Indo-European neuter. The arguments in favour of that theory (p. 347), supported by parallels in Romance languages (from Latin to Standard Italian and Romanian), include the feature of having specific agreement patterns, lack of formal distinctions between nominative and oblique, patterns and behaviour of assignment that are specific, and a characteristic of including exclusively inanimate nouns. As mentioned in several instances in the book, this is essentially a typological distinction. Gender, mainly following Corbett (1991) and several other authors dealing with gender from a typological perspective, is defined as a feature that is coded by marking on an agreeing element other than the noun itself. This definition is not without problems in a case such as Tocharian, where the agreeing elements only have a two-way distinction (masculine-feminine). The final chapter would have gained from a more detailed, cross-linguistic and typologically oriented discussion on these problems. Preferably, gender in languages other than Indo-European could have been brought in here. As it stands, the final chapter is astonishingly short and leaves many questions open, which is unfortunate. Aside from that, the book is generally of a very high value, being a careful and profound study on the gender system, the different forms and categories of gender and the diachronic development of the morphological components of the system, including careful etymological studies of different individual nouns. It will be a stepping stone for further research on Tocharian gender and diachronic morphology.

References

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