

Geschichte der Grammatiktheorie: Von Dionysios Thrax bis Noam Chomsky. By Oliver Jungen and Horst Lohnstein. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007. 305 pp. ISBN 978-3-7705-4355-7. € 39.90 (PB).

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It is a good time for the history of grammar. More linguists than ever before are investigating their predecessors. Year after year new historiographies appear. The latest addition to the already considerable number of general surveys comes from Germany and was written by a team of two from the University of Cologne — Horst Lohnstein, professor in Germanic linguistics, and Oliver Jungen, a research associate in the *Forschungskolleg* “Medien und kulturelle Kommunikation” who is also a journalist at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The pair have already published a textbook *Einführung in die Grammatiktheorie* (Jungen & Lohnstein 2006).

The *Geschichte der Grammatiktheorie* falls into seven chapters: 1, “Systematische Einführung” (11–23); 2, “Historische Einführung” (24–31); 3, “Griechische Grammatik” (32–53); 4, “Römische Grammatik” (54–76); 5, “Mittelalterliche Grammatik” (77–107); 6, “Neuzeitliche Grammatik” (108–183); and 7, “Moderne Grammatik” (184–278). A bibliography (279–293) and two indices complete the work.

In what follows, I shall focus on what I consider the two weakest parts of the book: the two introductory chapters and the chapter dealing with Greek grammar.

To study the history of a science such as grammar, one has to have a clear understanding of what that science is. In the first chapter, the authors note that today, the term ‘Grammatik’ is generally understood in either of two ways: as a system of rules for a language, or as books about such a system. (In the latter case, it might have been better to speak of a theory rather than of books.) These two uses are said to be unsatisfactory, on the grounds that they suggest a normative and thus prescriptive rule system. (As it stands, this seems to be an obvious *non sequitur* — Chomsky, for example, has never argued in favour of prescriptivism.) Instead the authors propose to take ‘Grammatik’ in the sense of “ein speziesspezifisches Kenntnissystem [...], das auf natürliche Weise erworben wird [a species-specific knowledge system ... which is acquired by natural means]” (p.12). No further explanation is provided; the authors merely refer to the elementary discussion by Frank Palmer (b. 1922) in his *Grammar*, in German translation (1974: 13). I wonder what the “Studierende in den Philologien und der Sprachwissenschaft”, for

whom the work is destined, will make of this (incomplete) definition: ‘Kenntnis-system’ is a technical term; how is one to understand ‘natürlich’? etc.

More importantly, while an understanding of ‘Grammatik’ along the lines of the definition just cited might be justified in a work of contemporary linguistics, in a historiography of grammar it is clearly inappropriate: how many grammarians, prior to the 20th century, intended to theorise on a certain kind of species-specific knowledge system? To study the history of grammatical science, one needs a notion of grammar that can encompass the investigations of former generations.

Which brings us back to the two uses of ‘Grammatik’ discussed at the beginning of the chapter. For if grammar is understood in the sense of a theory of the linguistic rule system, the study of its history *is* possible: such a conception can indeed already be found in antiquity, for example in the second-century A.D. grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus (e.g., *Synt.* 1.2.3); and it would also roughly correspond to the understanding of grammar as expressed by Chomsky (b. 1928) in *Syntactic Structures* (1957, e.g., p. 49).

Incidentally the term ‘Grammatiktheorie’, which occurs in the title, is nowhere defined explicitly; but given the authors’ definition of ‘Grammatik’, the reader will have no great difficulty in inferring its intended meaning: a theory of the cognitive system in question. Despite the authors’ having drawn these terminological distinctions, roughly half the occurrences of ‘Grammatik’ in this book have the sense of ‘Grammatiktheorie’ (see, for instance, the chapter headings listed above).

If one intends to give an account of the history of a science, the question of what the science was called in the past is secondary, of course: any historiography of logic, say, starts with Aristotle, even though Aristotle did not use the term λογική to speak about his inquiries. Yet, on the other hand, a focus on the activity (as opposed to its name) does not mean that one does not want to know when and how the present term or one of its past equivalents — in our case γραμματική, *grammatica*, and their derivatives — received its current meaning. Unfortunately, the little the authors have to say on this topic is very vague: for instance, they claim that in antiquity, “the term ‘grammar’ exhibits its broadest range of meanings, namely the whole field of the language arts and of the language sciences — even the field covered in German in the 19th century by the concept of *Philologie*”¹ (p. 13). In truth, the notion of grammar underwent a number of rather radical changes in the first few hundred years of its existence (see, e.g., Schmidhauser 2010: 499).

1. “[...] weist der Terminus *Grammatik* seine breiteste Bedeutung auf, bezeichnet den gesamten Bereich der Sprachkünste und Sprachwissenschaften, sogar das, was im 19. Jahrhundert durch den Begriff *Philologie* abgedeckt wird.”

In the *Vorwort*, the authors announced their intention to illustrate “that a single discourse of grammatical theory, which refers to itself in many ways, extends throughout Western culture”² (p. 9). What exactly they mean by this is unclear. One way to understand their claim would be as follows: over the last 2,500 years people in Europe with an interest in language in general tried to understand and develop the theories of their predecessors. Now it is true that until recently, grammarians in the West did not read what, say, their Indian counterparts had written on the subject. The same can be said of any traditional discipline, though, be it philosophy, rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, or what have you. In this vague sense, then, the authors’ claim is true — obviously true, I should add, for it is a platitude.

Since it cannot have been the authors’ aim to offer banalities, one should certainly try to understand their idea in another, stricter sense — in the sense that there is one school of thought, as it were, one way of approaching questions on syntax, semantics, and so forth. Thus understood, however, their claim becomes dubious: for it seems to me that, on the contrary, there is a multitude of discourses; only in retrospect (and from very far away) can one speak of a single voice. To give one example out of many, at the beginning of his treatise on connectives (213.3ff.), Apollonius Dyscolus discusses the existing accounts of the matter, and in particular contrasts the philosophers’ with the grammarians’ approach: in the second century A.D., then, scholars recognised at least two different traditions in the study of language. It is no different today: the field now includes generative syntacticians, formal semanticists, philosophers of language, and many others. Typically the different groups interact little, if at all, with one another. How one could describe such a state of affairs as a single discourse I fail to see.

Various other remarks in the book suggest that the latter, non-trivial interpretation is indeed what the authors had in mind. In the first section of the first chapter, for example, they seem to rephrase the above claim with the following words: “die Erforschung grammatischer Fragen [ist] als *einen* Prozess aufzufassen [the investigation of grammatical questions is to be understood as one single process]” (p. 12). A process is a series of changes with some sort of unity to it; and something’s changing consists in its losing or gaining at least one property. In speaking of a process, then, one presupposes there to be some *one* thing undergoing it — which, as we just saw, is clearly not true in the case of the study of language. And besides, processes in general have a certain temporal coherence as well as a structure. In respect to the former point, one could perhaps take ‘coherence’ in a wide sense, including, say, events such as the reading of Apollonius by Priscian (early 6th cent. A.D.), although more than three centuries divide the two

2. “[...] dass sich ein einziger grammatiktheoretischer Diskurs durch die abendländische Kultur zieht, der in vielfacher Weise auf sich selbst Bezug nimmt.”

men. As for the point about ‘structure’, however, I do not see how this can be addressed. For the history of grammar is riddled with mistranslations, misreadings, misinterpretations. Works of genius were lost relatively early on, as in the case of the oeuvre of Chrysippus (c.280–c.207 B.C.); works of little independent merit had a tremendous influence throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, as in the case of the *Techne*. Only the excessively short-sighted can believe there to be some rational design underlying the development of science.

Related to this conception of the history of grammar as a single process is what one might term the authors’ teleological progressivism. As they say at the beginning of the second chapter: “insgesamt ist eine kontinuierliche Zunahme an Komplexität festzustellen [on the whole, a continuous increase in complexity is to be observed]” (p. 24). The idea is as well-known as it is naïve: antiquity provided a first, primitive account; which the Middle Ages refined and extended; and only Modernity was able to transform into a proper science. No one disputes that the grammatical theories of the present day are vastly more complex than anything previously devised. Yet from that observation one cannot deduce — as the authors do (p. 9) — that the development of grammatical science followed a more or less linear trajectory. The level of sophistication and insight attained by the Stoa and the Alexandrian grammarians, say, was not reached again till the 17th century: sceptical readers are invited to take a glance at the battered remains of Chrysippus’ *Logical Investigations* — for example, his discussion of imperatives (*P. Herc.* 307 coll. xii–xiii = *FDS* 698; cf. Barnes 1986).

More might be said about the first two chapters. But let us proceed to chapter three, on Greek grammar. The first three sections, on the Sophists (5th–4th cent. B.C.), Plato (c.428–c.347 B.C.), and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) respectively, are generally acceptable; infelicities include an account of Plato’s distinction between names and verbs in terms of the — Aristotelian — notions of substance and accident (p. 36).

The section on the Stoics (3rd–2nd cent. B.C.) is poorly thought through and written. One wonders, for example, what the authors could have had in mind when distinguishing a category “der körperlosen Körper [of bodiless bodies]” (p. 43). And what exactly were they trying to say with the sentence “Gleichwohl galten die Verben den Stoikern nur in Verbindung mit Subjekten als komplette Lekta [nevertheless, the Stoics regarded verbs as complete lekta only when they are joined to subjects]” (p. 46)? Verbs can never form *lekta*; and the notion of subject is alien to Stoicism. Overall the authors display a striking lack of historical sensitivity. For example, although they mention Chrysippus’ distinction of the five elements of speech — viz. name, appellative, article, verb, and conjunction — (p. 43), in what follows they simply speak of “Nomen” (p. 45) and even of “Substantiv” (p. 46). The discussion of the Stoic notion of *lekton* is especially nebulous: it is

suggested, for example, that the distinction between voice and *lekton* originated in the distinction between “*ónoma* (im allumfassenden Sinn, nicht nur als Nomen) und *rhēma* [*ónoma* (in the most general sense, not only as noun) and *rhēma*]” (p. 45) — for the “*Lekta* [...] sowie die Verben sprechen *über etwas*, während die übrigen Wortarten lediglich etwas benennen [*lekta* ... as well as the verbs speak *about something*, while the remaining classes of word merely name something]” (p. 45). While it is true that many parts of the Stoic system remain controversial, this proposal is nonsense.

The reader is then led to “dem ersten Gipfel der Klassifikation [the first peak in the history of grammatical classification]”, incarnated by Dionysius Thrax (c.170–c.90 B.C.) (p. 47; cf. the blurb on the book’s backcover). This misjudgment alone disqualifies the entire section. There is no reason to believe that Dionysius in any way represented a climax in the history of linguistic thought. No one in antiquity considered him so. The little we know of his work suggests that he closely followed Stoic thought: for instance, he considered names and appellatives two different parts of speech. The authors do mention that there are good reasons to regard the main part of the small work known as the *Techne* as a compilation composed some five centuries later (p. 47); yet “Inzwischen ist dieser [...] These in der Forschung widersprochen worden [in the meantime, scholars have argued against this ... thesis]” (p. 49). I know no scholar today who *defends* the opusculè’s authenticity.

The last section of the chapter on Greek grammar is devoted to Apollonius Dyscolus. There are a few misapprehensions: for instance, Apollonius does not claim that “Das Minimalequipment eines Satzes besteht aus einem Nomen und einem Verb [the minimal equipment of a sentence consists of a noun and a verb]” (p. 52). An example of a one-word sentence would be a verb in the imperative like λέγε “Speak!” or a noun in the vocative such as Πάτροκλε “Patroclus!” (e.g., *Adv.* 124.12; *Pron.* 53.16). In the main, however, the section is informative.

The following chapters on Roman and Medieval grammar are more solid. The long Chapter 6, on “Neuzeitliche Grammatik”, is the best part of the book. The even longer next chapter, on “Moderne Grammatik”, discusses various grammatical theories of the last century, from the structuralism of Saussure (1857–1913) to Chomsky’s minimalism. The result, however, is not so much a historiography as a collection of textbook-like entries on the various grammars: the section on “Generative Grammatiktheorie”, for example, expounds Chomskyan ideas in some detail and for more than thirty pages; yet *Syntactic Structures* — undoubtedly one of the more important works in 20th-century linguistics — is not even mentioned (nor listed in the bibliography). Equally surprising is the absence of a number of leading figures: how dare one forget, say, Gottlob Frege (1848–1925)? His work was essential for that of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (p. 181), Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1890–1963) (p. 204), Richard Montague (1930–1971) (p. 207), and many others.

A few final words on formal matters. The book is well-produced — nice typeface, good paper, pleasant layout.³ There are two annoyances, though: First, the authors rarely provide references; for example, they write “eine Inkonsistenz, die noch Heidegger monierte [an inconsistency which Heidegger still criticized]” (p. 160) — but where? And when references are provided, these are mostly to secondary literature. In the chapter on Greek grammar, for instance, only seven references are given: to Gérard Genette (b.1930), Wolfram Ax (b.1944), Jan Pinborg (1937–1982), Vincenzo Di Benedetto (b.1934), Heymann Steinthal (1823–1899), Carlo Gallavotti (1909–1992), and Karlheinz Hülser (b. 1942). Secondly, the bibliography is unsatisfactory. It purports to present select recommended readings, listed more or less according to chapter. Yet these include only *studies*. (The bibliography to Chapter 7, on what the authors call modern grammar, mixes studies with primary texts.) Furthermore, not all items mentioned in the running text are included: for example, I looked in vain for the bibliographical details for a certain paper by W. T. Fitch (b.1963) and M. D. Hauser (b.1959), published in 2004 (p. 11).

Some parts of the *Geschichte der Grammatiktheorie* — Chapter 6, in particular — are interesting and even illuminating. *In toto*, however, I much regret to say, the book under review cannot be recommended as an introduction to the field.

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3. One finds approximately one typographical error per five pages. For instance, I found the following in the third and fourth chapters (pp. 32–76): p. 41: stoa poikile (not entirely in italics); p. 43: Logik (position in the diagram); p. 43: köperlosen; p. 44: phnes; p. 44: Apellativum (cf. three lines below: “Appellativum”); p. 51 and p. 53: Appollonios; p. 56: Academia (instead of “Academica”); p. 67: Versfüsse (position in the diagram); p. 68: excelentissimus; p. 68: adverbo.

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