

RASMUS RASK. Investigation of the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language. New edition of the 1993 English translation by Niels Ege. With an introduction by Frans Gregersen (Amsterdam Classics in Linguistics, 1800-1925, vol. 18). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 2013. *livi + XII + 289 pp.

Reviewed by Leonid S. Chekin

This founding text of Indo-European comparative linguistics was completed two hundred years ago, in 1814, in response to the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences' 1810 prize question about the source of the ancient Scandinavian language. Rask was awarded his prize in 1815, but the *editio princeps* appeared only in the beginning of 1818. Louis Hjelmslev included an exemplary critical edition of the text in the three-volume collection of Rask's selected works (there are two versions of this collection, with commentaries in Danish, Rask 1932-1935, and German, Rask 1932-1937). Hjelmslev's edition became the basis of a translation into English by Niels Ege, that was planned in 1968, but published only in 1993 as volume XXVI of the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague*. The original publisher of Niels Ege's translation went out of business, the book went out of print, and the translation was offered to John Benjamin for photographic reprint. As the original files were 'as close to perfect as humanly possible', the new editor, Frans Gregersen, decided that 'it would have been an immense waste of effort to do anything but reproduce photographically the original edition of the translation' (p. *vii).

This decision represents a lost opportunity. The initial chapters look fairly clean, but even a cursory reading further into the book yields more than a dozen typographical errors, three of which are on one page (168, line 2 'this is also agrees' should be 'this also agrees', line 16 'feninine' should be 'feminine', line 17 'also conforms'

should be 'it also conforms'). Most errors of this nature could have been easily corrected today by spell-checking software.

A different type of technical error is exemplified by the table of correspondences between Moesogothic, Icelandic, and Greek vowels (the term 'Moesogothic' is applied to the Gothic language of Ulfilas, for which Rask developed an original system of transliteration using the Greek alphabet). Besides its potentially confusing problems with format and the misspelled word 'Grreek', the table wrongly shows, in the Moesogothic column, *ai* instead of *ai*, *au* instead of *au*, *ax* instead of *ax*, *ix* instead of *ix*, *ex* instead of *ex*, *au* instead of *au*, and *avi* instead of *avi*; in the Icelandic column, *ae* instead of *a*, *a* instead of *á*, *ι* instead of *í*, *o* instead of *ó*, the first *v* instead of *u*, and the second *v* instead of *ú*; in the Greek column, *ax* instead of *ax*, *ix* instead of *ix*, *ex* instead of *ex*, and *oi* instead of *oi* (p. 156).

A careful comparison between Danish and English might have further perfected the text. Rask could hardly apply the word 'preposterous' to even the erroneous conclusions of Peter Frederik Suhm whom he elsewhere named among those scholars *quorum nominibus semper gloriabitur Scandinavia* (Rask 1819: 3). The word *urimelig* in the Danish phrases would be better understood as 'unreasonable' or perhaps 'inappropriate' rather than 'preposterous' (p. 108, 109).

Other periods of Rask's scholarly prose lose some of their elegance in the translation. For example, the agglomeration of adverbs in the phrase 'what was listed here undoubtedly already fully entitles us to the conclusion' (p. 136) presents Rask as more self-assertive than in the Danish original. I am not trying to cast doubt on Niels Ege's heroic and admirable work; most of my occasional samples show that the translation was very faithful, but a new edition could benefit from some minor editorial input.

One could also contemplate restoring the original Arabic and Hebrew scripts, which Rask used for his examples from 'Asiatic languages' (p. 285). The Hjelmlev edition preserved the scripts, but in the 1993 edition Arabic and Hebrew words were Latinized,

perhaps due to technological limitations of available computers and printers.

Most importantly, this two-hundred-year-old text cries out for commentary, at least in form of some footnotes. The book is aimed at non-Scandinavianists (hence the English translation). Would a non-Scandinavianist understand such references as 'the old Danish tongue' (p. V)? Another set of problems is due to the fact that Rask referred to his contemporaries and predecessors by their name only with no further bibliographic data. In two significant cases he did not even provide the name of 'the German reviewer' who had disputed some ideas from Rask's previous book (pp. 67-68, 227). The cases are significant because the name of the reviewer was Jacob Grimm. For those undeterred by such challenges, there are even more difficult puzzles. What does the word *positsio*, faithfully copied by the translator from the Danish original, mean in the following description of a Greek letter?: 'Of the consonants, the only one to be noted is ζ, which was pronounced sd by the Ancients, which is seen quite clearly from the fact that it makes *positsio* in the poets' (p. 158).

Providing a commentary, either new or at least partially based on Hjelmlev, would have greatly improved the perception of the text. Niels Ege referred interested students to Hjelmlev's edition. Indeed, the book in its present state could be best enjoyed when accompanied by the Danish original and Hjelmlev's commentary. Perhaps in 1968 in Copenhagen, when the translation was originally planned to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the *editio princeps*, access to Hjelmlev's volumes was not an issue. Today they are not available in many corners of the English-speaking world.

The relatively brief introduction by Frans Gregersen only partially substitutes for the missing commentary: the discussion of Rask's exact contribution to Indo-European studies could have been much more detailed. The introduction, however, includes a good survey of the different periods in Rask's life, of the optimism and unlimited opportunities that are evident in the text of the *Investigation*, and

the steady decline after the Asian voyage. Gregersen offers some new interpretations, although his hypothesis about Lovise Nyerup, to whom Rask proposed in 1827, reads like a scene from A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, the Booker prize-winning romance about the fictitious Victorian poet who travelled to Brittany to give birth to her illegitimate child (p. *xxviii).

The most successful parts of the introduction are those where Frans Gregersen convincingly demonstrates that both Rask's essay, written in response to the Royal Academy's question, and his subsequent work were a product of tension between the pressures of the Danish national school and his individual genius, a tension which was sometimes beneficial and sometimes destructive.

Gregersen further develops Otto Jespersen's (1918: 75) assessment and positions Rask as the mentor of all Danish linguists. The biographical note about the translator, Niels Ege (1927-2002), 'one of [Louis] Hjelmslev's brightest students' (p. *xxxix), provides additional color to this picture of uninterrupted succession.

Despite the limited editorial involvement, the new publication will make one of the finest achievements of the nineteenth-century linguistics more accessible to an international audience. One hopes that it will be the first of many tributes to the great linguist on the occasion of the bicentennial of his most famous publication.

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