

REVIEW

Otto Jespersen: *A Linguist's Life: An English Translation of Otto Jespersen's Autobiography with Notes, Photos and a Bibliography.* Edited by Arne Juul, Hans F. Nielsen, and Jørgen Erik Nielsen. Odense: Odense University Press, 1995. Pp. xx + 380.

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'Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) is no doubt the best known Danish linguist in the English-speaking world' (back-cover flyleaf). His multivolume *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (Heidelberg/London/Copenhagen, 1909-49) and *Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin* (New York, 1921/London, 1922, with five reprints during his lifetime) would alone have assured his place among the great linguists of the outgoing 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.

The original Danish-language edition of Jespersen's autobiography appeared in 1938 under the title *En sprogmands levned*, i.e., 'A language-man's life'. While the title chosen for this English-language version, *A Linguist's Life*, is undoubtedly the only practical one, Jespersen himself points out that he did not call the book *A Philologist's Memoirs* 'because I have not wished to describe only my scholarly activities: my work for language teaching and auxiliary languages may excuse and explain deficiencies in my purely scholarly work' (4). Such a person was Otto Jespersen: undeniably a linguist of the first rank who was also greatly concerned with the practical side of the field (what today would be called 'applied linguistics'), including the learning and teaching of foreign languages, to which he made significant contributions; the teaching of Danish, for which he proposed (among other things) certain spelling reforms, some of which were to be adopted after his death; and international communication, for which he developed his own artificial language in competition with Esperanto and Ido. In this day, when the term 'linguist' often conjures up strict formalists of the Chomsky school, it is necessary to keep in mind that Jespersen was what Henry Kahane would have called a 'humanist-linguist'.

Paul Christophersen suggests in his Foreword that some of Jespersen's reminiscences from his early boyhood will be of little interest to linguists, who will naturally make up the greater portion of readers of the book, but I personally find this material endearing and not insignificant in that it shows that Jespersen came to language-study by a circuitous route. In any case, it is always interesting to learn about another individual's pleasures and struggles through life. An autobiography quite rightly touches on matters of a personal nature, otherwise it

would turn into just another (rather restricted) contribution to the history of the field.

The translation is a very apt one by Donald Stoner (who, curiously enough, receives no mention on the cover or title-page of the book itself) into British English, as is to be expected. American readers will occasionally chuckle at expressions like 'school-leaving examination' or 'right up my street', but Jespersen would have found nothing strange in them. After the Editors' Introduction (vii-xii) and the Foreword by Christophersen (xiii-xx), comes the autobiography itself (1-304, including 25 pages of photographs), followed by a Bibliography of the Writings of Otto Jespersen [published] During His Lifetime (305-370) and an Index (371-80). The bibliography was compiled by Gorm Schou-Rode.

Since most non-Scandinavian readers have little knowledge of Danish geography, history, or intellectual and cultural life, the text of the autobiography has quite rightly been supplied with copious notes by Jørgen Erik Nielsen explaining allusions to persons, places, and events. It would have been an even greater help had the editors also included a simplified map of Denmark indicating the placenames mentioned, since many an English-speaking reader will have no idea where, for example, Funen or the Limfjord or the Great Belt might be. Among all the persons mentioned in the text, I have found only one incomplete annotation: that for Ilmari Federn (229, n. 22), who is said to have taken notes at Jespersen's meeting with Edgar de Wahl but is otherwise not identified. The very complete Index is alphabetized according to English practice, i.e., the Danish letters *æ*, *ø*, and *å* are ordered with *a* and *o*. It is understandable that Jespersen's 'personal poems, of scant literary merit, appeared very unsatisfactory in English garb' (the Editors, vii), and thus were left in the Danish originals, but I am not completely certain that Chapter 17 (on Danish orthography) should have been left untranslated, no matter how unwieldy such a translation would have been, since it is undoubtedly true that the audience for this book will consist mainly of linguists, who can be expected to follow the argumentation even though they may not be familiar with Danish. After all, Jespersen's work dealing with his mother-tongue is an important part of his entire *œuvre*.

Jespersen's autobiography is both enjoyable reading and informative, particularly with regard to the vignettes Jespersen presents of the noted linguists of his day — he knew personally almost every figure of any importance among them, from Friedrich Brugmann and Vilhelm Thomsen to Henry Sweet and Eduard Sievers to Boudouin de Courtenay and N.S. Trubetzkoy, to name just a few. American readers will be particularly interested in Jespersen's impressions of the United States and its educational system, collected during two stays in this country, and his recollections of American colleagues, including Carl Buck, William Dwight Whitney, Raymond Weeks (the first phonetician to demonstrate the voicelessness of Danish 'voiced' obstruents), and many others. Also of interest is Jespersen's description of the outbreak of the First World War and its repercussions in a small neutral European country, as well as his views on attempts to foster international cooperation after the war and the rise of fascism that ultimately led to total disaster. Unfortunately, the autobiography ends with

the year 1938 and therefore does not include Jespersen's reactions to the German occupation of Denmark, which occurred just three months before his 80th birthday. Since Jespersen died in 1943, he did not live to see the remarkable ascendancy of English as an international language. His work in furthering artificial languages ('auxiliary languages', as he called them), including Volapük, Esperanto, Ido, Occidental, and his own Novial, seems now to have been oddly refuted by fate.

There are practically no typographical oversights: I note only 1821-29 for correct 1921-29 (139, n. 12). Concerning the very helpful notes, I would mention the following matters:

When Jespersen proposes that the Danish word for 'chess' should be spelled *sjak* rather than *skak* (29), there is a note (18) informing us that this proposed spelling 'makes sense only if the word is pronounced [sjøg] (and not [sgøg] as in present-day Danish)'. It is quite obvious that Jespersen was advocating the former pronunciation, since he cites Norwegian, Swedish, German, Russian, and other languages, all of which have pronunciations beginning with a fricative. The usual Danish pronunciation with [sg] is a hypercorrect form influenced by the usual correspondence German [ʃ] = Danish [sg], as in *Schuh* = *sko*, *Schiff* = *skib*, *Maschine* = *maskine*, etc., but the pronunciation advocated by Jespersen would correspond to French, English [ʃ] = Danish [sj] or [ʃ], as in *check* = [ʃɛg], etc.

The first poem on page 30 is clearly a take-off on the Norwegian national anthem, 'Ja, vi elsker dette landet', but there is no footnote to indicate that fact., although there is a note concerning the model for the next poem. There is also no indication of which American poem was the model for the one on page 243, and I cannot supply the missing information, either!

The editors have done an excellent job in making this important work accessible to a broad audience, not only through its translation, but also through the excellent editorial apparatus that makes the background comprehensible to us. Everyone interested in the human side of the history of linguistics will find this work well worth reading.

