BOOK REVIEW


Tore Nesset’s How Russian Came to Be the Way It Is provides a compact introduction to the history of Russian for readers with different interests and academic backgrounds. On the one hand, it is a welcome and attractive textbook for students of Russian linguistics. On the other hand, the book can serve as a useful tool for those who are already specialists in, for instance, general linguistics, Modern Russian language, Russian history or Russian literature and would like to get acquainted with the main developments in the history of the Russian language. Nesset points out the relevance of historical linguistics for students of Russian, and he has indeed succeeded in creating an inspiring, motivating and pedagogical material. A basic knowledge of Modern Russian is, however, necessary in order to take in the information – and enjoy it.

The structure of the book is very clear. In the Introduction the author addresses different types of readers from students to scholars, but motivates students of Russian by promising answers to many problematic exceptions in Russian grammar. The main pedagogical idea of the book is that “today’s exceptions are yesterday’s rules”. Knowledge of the history of Russian strengthens students’ language skills in contemporary Russian. The book may be read from cover to cover or the reader may pick up separate chapters or sections.

The first three chapters give background information on history, literature and linguistics. The Scene places the Russians and their language among the other Slavic nations and languages in today’s world and describes the historical background to the Slavic languages in the Indo-European family of languages. It then reviews the history of Russian from Pre-Slavic through Common Slavic and Old Rusian to Middle and Modern Russian. Here Nesset uses the term “Old Rusian” – justifiably – instead of Old East Slavic or Old Russian, finding the latter misleading, because the language in question is the ancestor of Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian, whereas “Old Rusian” refers to the state of Rus’. The author then presents three hypotheses about the primordial home of the Slavs and concludes in favour of the mid-Dnieper hypothesis. The historical background covers the period from the Slavic migrations until the time of Peter the Great. The Texts gives background information about writing, alphabets, texts and literature in Kievan Rus’ and Muscovy with representative samples of Old Rusian texts in different genres. The author then compares the modern and medieval concepts of literature and discusses three hypotheses about standard language in Kievan Rus’: the Church Slavic hypothesis, the Old Rusian hypothesis and the diglossia hypothesis. He notes that the diglossia hypothesis seems too narrow and rigid to do justice to the richness of variation in medieval texts. In the Toolbox – with the student reader in mind – the author gives an excellent description in simple terms of the main linguistic tools necessary in analyzing the history of the Russian language.

Chapters Four to Eight deal with morphology from the perspective of a student of contemporary Russian. Every chapter begins with questions that most students will have asked when studying Modern Russian and presents examples of familiar but “strange” grammatical forms: Why do some masculine nouns such as слава have -о, and not -ы, in the nominative plural? Do you know the etymology of сегодня? Why does Russian make a distinction between short and long forms in adjectives? Did you know where the numeral сорок comes from? Where do all the consonant alternations come from? While describing the morphological features of Old Rusian the author brings out and explains such exceptional forms in Modern Russian. Moving on to nouns Nesset gives the reader a “soft landing” by first presenting the declension system of contemporary standard Russian. He then proceeds smoothly to the description of the declensions, number, case, stems and gender of Common Slavic and Old Rusian. Now it is easy for the student to get acquainted
with Old Rusian pronouns, adjectives and numerals. As the author states, numerous exceptions make the verb a major challenge in Modern Russian. So, the verbs are discussed in greater detail. The chapter is as clear as the previous ones with clarifying tables and enlightening text samples, but is probably more challenging for the students.

Chapter Nine provides a compact overview of Old Rusian syntax with wellchosen examples. Again, describing the structure of sentences in Old Rusian, the author highlights curious contemporary structures that can be traced back to Old Rusian syntactic constructions, such as вчера он домой. The syntactical concepts – like concepts in other chapters – are skilfully explained by way of examples from Modern Russian, e.g. the definition of a clitic. At the end of the chapter, the author sums up the main syntactic differences between Old Rusian and Modern Russian.

From the student’s perspective, it is a good solution to have phonology only after morphology and syntax in Chapters Ten to Thirteen, since historical phonology undoubtedly constitutes a greater challenge for the student.

Yet again, Nesset starts the chapters with intriguing questions: Why do we say Ленинград, but Новгород? Why does сон lose /о/ in the inflected form сна? Why is Москва pronounced with an unstressed [a] in the first syllable? The author travels with the reader from Late Proto-Indo-European through Pre-Slavic, Common Slavic and Old Rusian to Modern Russian following the main phonological developments of vowels and consonants. Along the way, the reader gets answers – equipped with clearly defined concepts – to these and many other questions that puzzle the students of Modern Russian. Describing Russian stress and vowel reduction, the author gives a student-friendly account of the change from tone-based system of Common Slavic to stress-based system of Contemporary Russian. He also presents the main stress patterns in Modern Russian with admirable clarity.

Chapter Fourteen offers readers a fascinating Visit to ancient Novgorod and acquaints him with specific linguistic – phonological and orthographic – features of the Old Novgorod dialect in the birch bark letters, short personal or business letters that were already introduced in The Texts. The reader most probably becomes so curious about the letters that he immediately goes to the recommended webpage. The author mentions an interview of Andrej Zaliznjak, in which he “laments the fact that the Novgorod perspective has not made its way into university courses on the history of the Russian language”. Fortunately, Nesset takes the lament seriously.

In the Epilogue, the author offers some reflections on the three kinds of information in the book and the relationship between them. The three types of information, facts about the history of the Russian language, historical background knowledge and tools from linguistic theory, are presented as corners in a triangle. Historical background offers the context for interpretation of linguistic facts, and linguistic theory offers the theoretical tools for hypothesis testing. Nesset emphasizes the importance of interpretation and hypothesis testing and hopes to have convinced the reader that “historical linguistics is not just something you read about in books, but also something you do”. It certainly is desirable – and most probable – that after reading the book students will be tempted to continue travelling through historical linguistics in their own research projects.

The book contains four useful appendices: morphological tables, major differences between Old Church Slavonic and Old Rusian, chronology of major sound laws and – last but not least – an example of a captivating text analysis: an analysis of a passage from the Primary Chronicle. The text is first placed in its historical context and then given an interesting morphological, syntactic, phonological and sociolinguistic description.
Tore Nesset’s *How Russian Came to Be the Way It Is* is a welcome contribution to the literature on the history of the Russian language, especially for students. Apart from being a useful tool for specialists, the book is a skilfully simplified overview. With students readers in view, Nesset provides a good introduction at the beginning of each chapter. He also explains the basic concepts very clearly taking examples from contemporary English and Russian. In addition he introduces the viewpoints of other researchers in a student-friendly way. At the end of each chapter there is a useful brief summary. Furthermore, the author provides the reader with helpful, commented reading recommendations. All the tables, chronologies and maps throughout the book will be a great help to students.

In conclusion: a student’s guide, written by a linguist with excellent pedagogical skills, is a valuable find.

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