

[Review of:] **Simeon Polshin. (Proto-)Indo-Iranian: historical phonology and basic lexicon.** München: LINCOM, 2024. vi+111 pp. ISBN: 9783969391921.

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Simeon Polshin's book is an attempt to reconstruct Proto-Indo-Iranian basic vocabulary in addition to revising the existing reconstruction of Proto-Indo-Iranian phonology. It must be noted with regret that neither of these two goals can be considered successfully achieved.

In the Introduction, the author rightly notes that the material of only a small percentage of Indo-European languages is actively used in comparative linguistic studies and, not without reason, he calls this situation paradoxical. It should not, however, be forgotten that lexical data from different languages are not equally important for proto-language

reconstruction. For example, Sanskrit, Avestan, and Old Persian, being chronologically closer to their common ancestor language, can provide a comparative linguist with a greater amount of valuable information than, say, Hindi, Modern Persian, or Pashto. Polshin does not seem to take this well-known fact into account, and this may be one of the reasons why his reconstructions are in many cases fundamentally flawed.

A separate section of the book addresses the classification of Indo-Iranian languages. The author's classificatory scheme is sharply at odds with the traditional scheme. The main point of discrepancy is the postulation of the branch called DNO and comprising Dardic, Nuristani, and the so-called "Outer" languages. The latter, according to Polshin, include some lects usually classified as Indo-Aryan, i. e., Hindko, Gujar, and Himachali, as well as one dialect (Ushojo), which is traditionally believed to be a local variety of Dardic Shina. As an argument for the existence of the DNO branch, Polshin cites a relatively large number of common lexical isoglosses. However, many, if not most, of these isoglosses seem to be extremely doubtful. Notably, lexicostatistical counts presented in [Kogan 2016] have shown that Hindko, Gujar, and Himachali must unquestionably be classified within the Indo-Aryan branch. The presence of common historical phonological innovations could be strong evidence for the genetic unity of the DNO group, but there is no mention of such innovations in the book.

The author's view of Proto-Indo-Iranian phonology differs from the generally accepted view in many respects. However, nowhere in the book will the reader find any argumentation against predecessors concerning a preference for particular reconstructions. Polshin seems to simply ignore much of the previous research. That being said, his "unorthodox" hypotheses in many cases look ill-founded and self-contradictory. To illustrate this, I will give some examples.

Polshin reconstructs the Indo-Iranian prototype of OIA *keśa-* 'hair' as **kēs*¹ and considers it a reflex of PIE **kes* 'comb' (pp. 59–60). Such reconstruction suggests, inter alia, that, contrary to the traditional

¹ The author's system of notation is a real challenge for the reader. Polshin does not follow the traditional way of representing reconstructed Proto-Indo-Iranian phonemes, and no clear explanations of the characters he uses are given in the book. For this reason, e.g., the exact phonological values of the underscored letters *ḍ*, *ḷ*, *ṇ*, *ṛ*, *ṛ̥*, *ṣ* remain obscure.

view, PIE **e* did not change to *a* in Proto-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Aryan.² On the other hand, OIA *daśa* ‘ten’ is derived by Polshin from PII **das*, which he believes to be a reflex of PIE **dekʷm-t* (pp. 98–99).

PII **o* as reconstructed by Polshin has in Old Indian the reflex *o*, e.g., in *gola-* ‘ball’ < PII **gol* ‘round’, *doṣā-* ‘evening’³ < PII **dos* ‘yesterday’, but also as *a*, e.g., in *kaṇṭaka-* ‘thorn’ < PII **ko(n)t*, *dharitri* ‘earth’ < PII **dhor*.

According to Polshin, OIA *h* is a reflex of PII **z* in such words as *hari-* ‘green’ < PII **zil̥t* ‘yellow’, *hima-* ‘snow’ < PII **zim*, *hṛdaya-* ‘heart’ < PII **zerd*. In other lexemes, however, the Old Indian reflex of the same Proto-Indo-Iranian phoneme in the same position is held to be *j*: *jara-* ‘old’ < PII **zar*, *jambha-* ‘tooth’ < PII **zim(bʰ)*, *jānu-* ‘knee’ < PII **zōn(gʰ)*.

One cannot help asking: why does each of the aforementioned proto-phonemes have divergent reflexes in Old Indian? The list of examples like the ones above could be continued. The number of inconsistencies in Polshin’s reconstruction is quite great.

The largest section of the book (pp. 27–110) includes an Indo-Iranian etymological database. It consists of a number of entries, each containing an English gloss, a Proto-Indo-Iranian reconstructed form, and some lexical material of textually attested as well as modern Indo-Iranian languages. The organizing principles of the database are not always clear. In almost every entry there are a lot of words which are clearly etymologically unrelated to the reconstructed prototype. The validity of many reconstructions is doubtful. In some cases, the author unreasonably separates lexemes traditionally considered to be cognates. For example, he postulates two Proto-Indo-Iranian roots with the meaning ‘hand’: **hātʰ* (> e.g., OIA *hasta-*, Hindi-Urdu *hātʰ*) and **das(t)* (> Av. *zasta-*, Pahlavi *dast*, etc.⁴). The reason for distinguishing two etyma here is hard to understand, given that the Old Indian and Old Iranian forms show impeccably regular sound correspondences.⁵ In this and similar

² On the development of PIE vowels in Indo-Aryan and Iranian see, e.g., [Beekes 2011: 141].

³ Not *dosia*, as it stands in the book.

⁴ Inexplicably, among the Iranian forms the author does not cite Old Persian *dasta-* ‘hand’, which has Pahlavi *dast* as a regular reflex.

⁵ For the correspondence of Old Indian *h* to Avestan *z* and Old Persian *d*, cf. also, e.g., OIA *hiraṇya-*, Av. *zarañiia-*, Old Persian *daraniya-* ‘gold’; OIA *aham*, Av. *azəm*, Old Persian *adam* ‘I’; OIA *gūhatē* ‘hides, conceals, covers’, Av. *guzaēta* ‘he would con-

cases Polshin seems to multiply entities beyond necessity. Most entries of the database contain a number of false etymologies, their total number being truly enormous.

The Indo-Iranian lexical material itself is not always reliable. Many words quoted by Polshin are very unlikely to exist in their respective languages. As a specialist in Kashmiri, I can say that such lexemes as, e.g., “*mašūr*” ‘big’,⁶ “*barosū*” ‘count’, “*kharab*” ‘down’, “*lyk^hun*” ‘come’, “*wāran*” ‘black’, “*ruz*” ‘go’, “*diny*” ‘hand’, “*bār*” ‘wide’, “*buc^har*” ‘rain’, “*dnorū*” ‘stick’, labelled in the book as Kashmiri, are totally absent from dictionaries and look like mere ghost words.⁷ The same holds true for Av. “*aḡarn*” ‘day’, “*kx^wāra*” ‘year’, Bengali “*d^hrā*” ‘fish’, “*bnd*” ‘near’, “*sp^hr*” ‘road’, “*yātrā*” ‘see’, Indus Kohistani “*ān*” ‘left’, Sindhi “*knū*” ‘dog’,⁸ “*ng^hāx*” ‘eye’, “*mk^hī*” ‘head’, “*xāt^hī*” ‘person’, “*jād*” ‘heart’, and great many other lexical items.

Another serious drawback of Polshin’s database is the presence of numerous typos. Some of them can seriously mislead the reader, e.g., the Hindi-Urdu word *bāyā* ‘left’ appears in the book in two different variants: “*bājā*” and “*bāyām*” (p. 69). The former variant, which is undoubtedly a typo, is labelled as Urdu, whereas the latter one, being a transliteration of Devanagari, is presented as Hindi. This gives the false impression that Hindi and Urdu are two different, albeit related Indo-Aryan languages, whereas in reality they are, as is widely known, the two literary styles

ceal’, Old Persian *apa-gaudaya* ‘you should hide’. For more details, see, e.g., [Johnson 1917: 77].

⁶ Here and below, I cite Polshin’s pseudowords in quotation marks.

⁷ It seems appropriate to quote here the true Kashmiri equivalents of Polshin’s fictional forms. They are: *boḍ* ‘big’, *ganzirāwun* ‘count’, *bən* ‘down’, *yun* ‘come’, *kruhun* ‘black’, *gachun* ‘go’, *athi* ‘hand’, *khol* ‘wide’, *rūd* ‘rain’, *haṭ*, *lūr* ‘stick’.

⁸ The number of non-existent lexical items labelled as Sindhi is especially great. Many real Sindhi words are cited in distorted transcription, often without vowels. The author explains this by saying that “Sindhi short vowels are not visible in its Perso-Arabic script” (p. 18). This is, however, a lame excuse. In a number of dictionaries of Sindhi and English, the Sindhi material is given not only in Perso-Arabic but also in Roman and/or Devanagari script. See, e.g., [Lekhwani 2001; Rohra et al. 2011]. It should be noted that Sindhi is not the only language whose material is sometimes transcribed in this strange “vowelless” manner. Cf. the above-cited Bengali pseudowords “*bnd*” ‘near’ and “*sp^hr*” ‘road’. I wonder how Polshin would explain these, given the fact that Bengali is not written in the Perso-Arabic consonantal script.

of the same spoken language, sharing common basic vocabulary and identical in terms of historical phonology.

In general, Polshin's book gives the impression of a work done in a slipshod way and hardly possesses any scholarly value. The author has set ambitious goals for himself but through incompetence has totally failed to achieve them. Perhaps, the only worth of the book under review is the fact that it once again corroborates the well-known idea: no research can be successful if the researcher is ignorant of past knowledge.

Abbreviations

Av. — Avestan; OIA — Old Indo-Aryan; PIE — Proto-Indo-European; PII — Proto-Indo-Iranian.

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