An Interdisciplinary Journal

<http://www.netsoljournal.net/>

Volume 3, Issue 2, pp.56-58, Fall 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24819/netsol2018.08>

Date Submitted: December 4, 2018 **Date Accepted:** December 28, 2018

Book Review

Elephant in the Room: The Dysfunctional State of Affairs in Indo-European Language Studies

Asya Pereltsvaig and Martin W. Lewis. *The Indo-European Controversy: Facts and Fallacies in Historical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Key Words: Indo-European, Linguistics, Language, Historical Linguistics

Gregg L. Carter

Idea Quest College Preparatory, Edinburg, Texas

The underpinnings of academic integrity reside in the researcher's application of, and adherence to, the methodological standards established within the various disciplines, which help to ensure the accuracy of information as it moves from educated speculation to popular acceptance. Moreover, any deviation from these standards, intentional or not, carries with it adverse implications – popular acceptance of a fallacious theory by an uncritical population tends to produce a ripple effect and the potential for misapplication or outright abuse. Of course, the aforementioned is – while plausible – merely a worst-case scenario. All the same, information – regardless of its accuracy – spreads rapidly in our modern world, and it is all too difficult to displace an idea once it gains traction.

The Indo-European Controversy: Facts and Fallacies in Historical Linguistics, is an effort by Asya Pereltsvaig and Martin Lewis to shed light on a recent study that, despite glaring methodological inadequacies, managed to garner mass popular acceptance within certain circles of the academic and in popular media. Implied in this corrective effort lies the great challenge: stemming the spread of bad information and getting the metaphorical toothpaste back in the tube.

In August 2012, numerous media outlets in the US and across Europe announced the end of a debate that has raged within the linguistic community for generations – an answer to the origins of the Indo-European Languages. The source from which this excitement arose was an article that appeared in *Science* entitled “Mapping the Origins and Expansion of the Indo-European Language Family” by a team of scholars led by Russell Gray and Quintin Atkinson – both of the University of Auckland’s department of Psychology. Using techniques designed to construct evolutionary family trees and to map the spread of viruses, the Grey/Atkinson team claimed to have “decisive support” that places Indo-European origins in Anatolia 8000 to 9500 years ago. In doing so, their findings ostensibly nullified previous theories of origin, not to mention their supporting methodologies, with one click of the mouse.¹ Indeed, it is the massively destabilizing nature of the Grey/Atkinson study that Pereltsvaig and Lewis, both of Stanford University, take issue. Not only do they call into question the validity of the Grey/Atkinson model and its claims, but they likewise question why such an overtly flawed hypothesis managed to garner such widespread acceptance among academics and members of the mainstream media – most of whom possessing little or no background in the field of Indo-European Linguistic studies.

The Indo-European Controversy is almost allegorical in its structure and organization, as the authors sought to demonstrate – through both form and function – a fidelity to traditional modes of research methodology. The book is one hundred thirty-five pages of text, which is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on the history of ideological conflict that plagues the field of Indo-European studies. It begins by following the evolutionary development of methodological trends in the field of comparative philology from the eighteenth century to the present. The following chapter builds upon this previous discussion by addressing the two opposing theories that dominate Indo-European studies: Colin Renfrew’s Anatolian hypothesis and the more recent Revised Steppe Theory most closely associated with the works of J.P. Malory and David Anthony.

Part II contains a critique of the “Mapping the Origins” article, beginning with a critical evaluation of the research methodology used within the Grey/Atkinson approach and demonstrating the approach’s incompatibility with Indo-European language studies due to the numerous methodological failures of the model employed. Perhaps the most damning revelation from Pereltsvaig and Lewis concerns a willingness on the part of the Grey/Atkinson team to trivialize significant errors, justify sloppy mistakes that produce faulty data, and ultimately avoid criticism or accountability due to their methods seductively simplistic appeal.

Part III is a survey of evidence from scholars using more mythologically-sound techniques to explore the Indo-European question. Pereltsvaig and Lewis argue that linguistic archeology and contact data rarely reveal conclusive evidence; however, that which does appears to support the Steppe Theory. The authors introduce the reader to the field of Linguistic Paleontology, highlighting research that posits, among other things, that it was the evolution of wheeled technology that stimulated Proto-Indo-European linguistic fragmentation. From this, Pereltsvaig

¹ Remco Bouckaert, et al. “Mapping the Origins and Expansion of the Indo-European Language Family.” *Science*, August 24, 2012: pp.957-960. (957).

and Lewis use this sociolinguistic and anthropological information to suggest why Indo-European languages prevailed.

The authors conclude in Part III with a nod to technology's contribution to the study of the Indo-European question. Specifically, the text addresses an alternative method for computing language connectivity using the Parametric Comparison Method, which is a program that uses generative syntax as a basis for comparing linguistic parameters. Pereltsvaig and Lewis tidy up their work with the inclusion of a thirty-five-page bibliography, a seven-page glossary, twenty-pages of annotated maps, and seven-pages of graphs in support of their findings.

The Indo-European Controversy succeeds on several levels. It is a fine example of a peer review response to careless research. The authors maintain an even tone throughout the book, attacking bad science and methodology while avoiding personal attacks. Moreover, it is important to note the authors are critical of the Grey/Atkinson team's handling of its data, not the mathematical principle of the model itself. As such, there is no hint of academic turf protection in this book. Its intended audience are students and scholars of Indo-European philology but has value as an introductory text for anyone interested in the study of historical linguistics. The authors ability to demonstrate for the reader solid mythological processes of inquiry gives the book additional value to students. However, the text highlights a serious problem within the historical linguistic community – a general lack of interest within the population. If so, Pereltsvaig and Lewis produced a wonderfully insightful book that does little more than preach to the choir.

In retrospect, perhaps the most obvious criticism of “Mapping the Origins” concerns the language used by the Grey/Atkinson team throughout their paper. In doing so, they seem to alienate through negation, anyone who may wish to question their highly questionable conclusions. Such a strategy not only sets a bad example in and outside the academic community, the act of affixing terms such as “decisive” in an article whose goal is simply to “highlight the role phylogeographic inference can play” seems irresponsible to the point of folly.