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Review

***Le prisme des langues* (préface de Claude Hagège)**
By Nicolas Tournadre
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Reviewed by George van Driem

This book is written in French primarily for *les amoureux des langues*, a formulation which appears in the author's synoptic "conclusions générales" at the end of the book. On his many travels and during his readings, Tournadre has accumulated numerous scrumptious tidbits of information, ranging from the inordinately complex Chinese ideogram designating a particular local type of soup (p. 282) to jokes based on the misunderstanding of *faux amis* between speakers of Slovak and Polish (p. 53). We can imagine that the audience envisaged comprises intelligent young lay readers and bright adolescents and young adults, some of whom might be enticed into studying or making a career of linguistics. The book reads like a tapestry of anecdotes, and the narrative is tightly woven and well structured.

The two-page preface (pp. 7-8) written by Claude Hagège, Tournadre's former mentor, makes a fitting opening because Hagège is the author of numerous highly readable books which excite both the lay reader and the linguist. This first book by Tournadre in the same popular linguistic genre manifestly strives to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious teacher. *Le prisme des langues* is a successful piece of writing. The overall structure of the book, however, exhibits the eclectic distribution of the author's interests. After a tiny introduction and some acknowledgements, the fundamentals of language and linguistics are introduced in what the *raconteur* of this tale calls his prolegomena (pp. 13-40). This exposition is followed by a lengthy discourse on orality vs. writing (pp. 41-103). The third chapter is another lengthy discourse entitled "Langues, politique et idéologie" (pp. 105-165). After this, the book is suddenly punctuated by a brief chapter dealing with ancestral memory and amnesia (pp. 167-187). Then a brilliant polemic ensues expounding the fact that languages are not all created equal (pp. 189-229). Then after a miniscule instalment on linguistic complexity (pp. 231-238), the author embarks on a long chapter on the "types de difficultés linguistiques" (pp. 239-289). Finally, the book concludes with a short teaser on historical linguistics (pp. 291-299), two and a half pages of general conclusions (pp. 301-303), appendices showcasing eighteen different scripts and a list of Chinese kinship terms (pp. 305-329), an incomplete bibliography (pp. 331-342) and a four-page index (343-346).

There are quite a number of notable things about this book. The Trans-Himalayan language family was both formerly and is still often called Tibeto-Burman, ever since this name was popularised in the wake of Julius von Klaproth's 1823 *Asia Polyglotta*, e.g. Hodgson (1857), Cust (1878), Forbes (1878), Houghton (1896). For this second most populous language family in the world, Tournadre introduces the term *famille sino-tibéto-birmane* (p. 294). In fact, this coinage was proposed in a talk by Jim Matisoff in 2012, on the second of three occasions where, in recent years,

he publicly recanted the Indo-Chinese or "Sino-Tibetan" model.[1] Although the term Sino-Tibeto-Burman is no doubt a trifle too unwieldy to outcompete its rivals, by using this term Tournadre at least nominally appears to distance himself from the so-called "Sino-Tibetanists" who, in the face of a glaring lack of evidence, continue to espouse an empirically unsupported phylogenetic model with a chequered history rooted in the racially based linguistic typology of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, aside from this one instance, Tournadre elsewhere consistently uses the term *tibéto-birman* for the language family (pp. 102, 109, 154 *et passim*). Tournadre is inconsistent, however, in his use of the term *famille*. Sometimes he refers to Tibeto-Burman as the *famille tibéto-birmane* (p. 19), whereas sometimes he refers to Tibeto-Burman as a *macrofamille* (p. 111, fn. 151), whilst the branches of the Trans-Himalayan language family, such as Sinitic or Tibetic, are in such contexts accordingly designated as *familles* (pp. 48, 107).

The lengthy chapter on language, politics and ideologies touches upon numerous heterogeneous topics from hermeneutics and Kabbalah to conflicts surrounding which variety of speech to use as a national language. In championing his own terminological coinage, Tournadre claims that "Depuis quelques années, le terme de « langues tibétiques » a remplacé celui de « dialectes tibétains » pour désigner les langues qui sont dérivées du vieux tibétain" (p. 109). Actually, Tournadre is probably the main person to use this term which he himself introduced. Nonetheless, the term "Tibetic languages" to designate the various tongues which derive from Old Tibetan is a felicitous term in both English and French and arguably deserves to be recommended above "Tibetan dialects," just as "Sinitic languages" is to be preferred above the traditional "Chinese dialects" when speaking about utterly distinct languages such as Cantonese, Teochew, Amoy, Mandarin and so forth. However, many Tibetologists will no doubt continue to speak of "Tibetan dialects." Moreover, the nomenclatural distinction between "Tibetan" and "Tibetic" vanishes in the Dutch and German languages, in which much Tibetological discourse is carried on both formally and informally. Yet Tournadre appears not to adhere strictly to his own prescription when he turns around and refers to Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, as a dialect (p. 110).

Tournadre is right to highlight the question of the use of toponymy as a political weapon. To illustrate this point he adduces various examples, such as the many English and Spanish names for the geographical features, promontories, islets and bays that comprise the Falkland Islands. It would have been germane in this context to mention that the Falklands were originally called the *Sebald de Weert Eilanden* "Sebald de Weert Islands." The Dutch East India vice-admiral Sebald de Weert, who first discovered and documented the archipelago in January 1600, before any Englishman or Spaniard had set eyes upon these islands, was quite pleased to discover that these islands could be modestly named after himself (Commelin 1646), and the name stuck in both Dutch and English for well over a century. Yet the Dutch East India Company would have no further use for these uninhabited islands, just as the Dutch Republic forewent colonising New Holland, currently called Australia, and, with an even greater lack of foresight, exchanged New Amsterdam and the New Netherlands for Surinam at the Treaty of Breda in 1667. Tournadre is right to point out that the Falklands islands were early on named *les Malouines* by the French, after the lovely port of St. Malo in Brittany.

[1] Matisoff publicly conceded that Sino-Tibetan was a false or at least empirically unsupported family tree model on 29 October 2009 at the 4th International Conference on Austroasiatic Linguistics at Mahidol University in Bangkok, on 24 February 2012 in a talk entitled 'The present state of Sino-Tibetan Studies: Progress and outstanding issues' at a special seminar for the Hakubi Project at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyōto University, and on 26 October 2012 at the Conference for Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Tournadre rightly depicts the obscuring of original Tibetan place names by their sinification (p. 120) as something more malevolent than the Argentine nomenclatural encroachments on the Falklands. He then puts such toponymical expansion in perspective by mentioning the Frenchification of Catalonian, Basque, Alsatian, Corsican, Breton and Provençal place names in France. Notably he fails to mention the French toponyms introduced in the historically Flemish portions of what today is northern France and in many parts of Wallonia in Belgium, for this phase in history represents a perennial French blind spot.

Tournadre devotes a two-page section to creoles and ostensible mixed languages (pp. 128-130). The topic of mixed languages is full of controversy, and at the same time there are numerous new developments in creole studies, such as the notional distinction between the emergence of creoloid traits vs. true creolisation, and this brief excursus merely scratches the surface. In Tournadre's lengthy *potpourri* on language politics and ideology, the aim is evidently to alert the avid young reader to the fact that such topics exist in linguistics. At this point, the author turns to the political use and abuse of language. Citing *Mein Kampf*, Tournadre quotes with approval the observations made by Adolf Hitler regarding the power of language as a political instrument (pp. 130-131). Perhaps it would have been a more apt choice to quote from, or at least mention, Orwell, since much of what Tournadre immediately goes on to highlight are the very phenomena that Orwell called Newspeak and Doublethink. Tournadre assails the scourge of political correctness, which prescribes the use of prolix and disingenuous euphemisms. He mentions how *clochards* are now called *SDF*, but this passage even in this new book already suffers from a touch of *ringardise* because the currently more politically correct term *sans-abri* has now already begun to overtake the dated abbreviation *SDF* in Parisian usage.

In discussing the phenomenon of *aseptisation linquistique*, he points out how French went from calling black people of sub-Saharan extraction *nègres* to calling them *noirs* to calling them *blacks* in an inflationary spiral of avoidance (pp. 133-134). He points out that the term *negr* in Russian is neutral, as it is in Dutch or Spanish for that matter. Tournadre is right to observe that whether or not a term is used in a derogatory way is very much a function of the illocutionary force with which a term is uttered. Tournadre notes that even the English word *nigger* can be used in an affectionate matter, as when a black grandmother uses the word as a term of endearment in addressing her own grandson. Tournadre argues that attempts to sanitise usage merely destroy the richness of the language and proposes that the words *nègre* and *negro* have a pleasant etymology, since *niger* in Latin denoted "glossy black" as opposed to *ater*, which Tournadre tell us denoted "matt black." Tournadre does not mince words when he denounces the politically motivated abuse of language and brands the Great Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China as the "Great Anti-Cultural Revolution" and the so-called Pacific Liberation of Tibet as the "Violent Annexation" of Tibet (p. 135). He notes that "la plupart des pays ont un ministère de la Défense et non un ministère de l'Attaque…" (p. 136), but he neglects to mention in this context that of course historically the French ministry used to be called the *ministère de la Guerre*, and Holland, Prussia, Japan and other countries likewise had a Ministry of War, whilst Britain used to have a *War Office*. There are, in fact, numerous other moments in the narrative where the book could have been enhanced with more insightful references to known history.

At one point, the discourse moves on to "Le genre grammatical, le sexe et l'idéologie" (pp. 150-158). This section is surprisingly anodyne, eschewing controversy as if being careful not to offend feminists, though this sub-plot too presents much rich and fertile ground. In German, female terms such as *Professorin* and *Dekanin* are used, and male terms which have traditionally been used in an

unmarked gender-neutral sense such as *Studenten* and *Assistenten* are fastidiously avoided by the politically correct in favour of less natural participial forms that are consequently also less aesthetic such as *Studierende* and *Assistierende* or unsightly written forms such as "StudentInnen" and "Sprecher_innen," which suffer from the added impediment of being unpronounceable. Upon the completion of her doctorate, a female *Doctor* is now sometimes designated a *Doctrix*. In fact, in this regard the German language naturally works the same way as French, where a male term such as *étudiants*, although grammatically masculine, is clearly the sex-neutral term, encompassing both male and female referents, whilst the feminine term *étudiantes* is sexually marked, explicitly excluding male students. Feminists in the German speaking countries have foisted upon the public the ruse that German does not work in the same way and that a term such as *Studenten* would exclude *Studentinnen.* In fact, the asymmetry of natural German usage is that the term *Studentinnen* excludes male students.

Oddly in Holland the very opposite tendency can be observed, and women prefer being referred to by the male designations, such as *antropoloog* "anthropologist" rather than *antropologe* "female anthropologist," let alone the jocular *antropologin* which would be construed to be even more belittling than *antropologe* by fault of the native female gender suffix, cf. *boer* vs. *boerin* "farmer." Though Dutch and German are so close, the feminist inspired politically "correct" avoidance of female designations in Dutch has unfolded in a diametrically opposite direction to the politically "correct" compulsion to use female forms in German. Both in Asia and in Europe, female Dutch ambassadors have objected to being called an *ambassadrice*. In response, the official nomenclature, as currently dictated from The Hague, prescribes that a female Dutch ambassador is to be called an *ambassadeur*, whilst the term *ambassadrice* is restricted to the wife of an *ambassadeur*. The protocol consequently leaves an awkward gap in the nomenclature for the husband of a female *ambassadeur*. The female term *ambassadrice* is perceived as demeaning both the function and the person who occupies it. Yet during the reign of Queen Beatrix, when this nomenclatural hysteria in Dutch first began, no Dutch feminist proposed that *Koningin Beatrix* be renamed *Koning Beator* in order somehow to enhance her stature and that of her station.

Tournadre does not shirk the challenge of directly assailing political correctness in terms designating race or ethnicity, but remains decidedly more coy in discussing concessions made to feminist political "correctness" in usage. This compulsiveness, which leads to the artificial avoidance of female designations in Dutch and the tendency to insist on them in German, is nonetheless recognised by Tournadre as a form of linguistic tyranny that reduces the richness of the language. Even those who disregard such unnatural German and Dutch usage in their normal speech may feel compelled to use the currently politically fashionable forms in, say, a research grant proposal or an official piece of writing nowadays for fear of being perceived as a sexist. Although Tournadre had no inhibition about quoting Hitler on the political use of language, he appears to have felt intimidated to stir up the hornet's nest of feministically enforced usage, evidently a topic too hot now to subject to too much scrutiny.

In the lengthy chapter (pp. 189-229) devoted to asserting that linguistic diversity is very real and that languages do not represent equivalent conceptualiations of reality, Tournadre adopts a stance at variance with that of his erstwhile teacher Claude Hagège, whom he quotes at the outset of the chapter (pp. 189-190), only to strike him down. Tournadre adopts the sensitive and knowledgeable stance taken by Pierre de Maupertuis in the 18th century, whereas Hagège, at least in the quoted passage, is shown to repeat an indefensible point of view similar to that espoused by François-Pierre-Gonthier Maine de Biran in the 19th century or by the semantically insensitive McWhorter today.

Tournadre introduces a treatment of linguistic relativity, which is an eclectic guided tour through some of the newer literature on an old topic. This section is good, but focuses on the newer English language literature since Sapir and Whorf. Tournadre fleetingly mentions Humboldt, but ignores the copious French literature on linguistic relativity by such luminaries as Pierre de Maupertuis and Étienne de Condillac.

Tournadre mentions the linguist relativist framework of Boas and Jacobson briefly in another context but overlooks that "la prétendue égalité des langues" is an *après-guerre* dogma that crept into linguistics textbooks as part of a now largely forgotten chapter in the history of political correctness. Therefore, it is not quite accurate to say that the incomplete list of modern proponents of linguistic relativity on page 200 have "exhumed" what Tournadre depicts as a long-forgotten perspective. Traditional contrastive grammatical studies have for generations almost invariably been both implicitly and explicitly couched in this very perspective of linguistic relativity, which was a highly dominant paradigm until the Second World War. Some of the earlier linguistic typology was racist, but very much of it was not racist at all. Yet after the war the baby was thrown out with the bath water. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* for Tournadre's brief excursus on "La remise en question de l'hypothèse d'equicomplexité" (pp. 231-238)

The next portion of the book (pp. 239-289) deals with types of complexity in language. Although this chapter, like most of the book, is primarily anecdotal in nature, all of the anecdotes represent well chosen and delightful examples of the points which Tournadre is attempting to illustrate. Finally, there is a tiny chapter (pp. 291-299) that points out the existence of the field of historical linguistic comparison. An instalment of this gossamer girth is obviously not intended to serve as an introduction to historical linguistics and language relationship, but strives to titillate the interest of a lay reader or potential student of linguistics. Most of the book makes entertaining reading, but just a few passages, where Tournadre's enthusiastic expository style begins to take on the nature of a soliloquy, are plodding. In general, Tournadre's prose is delightful, but not yet as exquisite as that of his former teacher Hagège. Most conspicuously, his erstwhile mentor is more precise and punctilious in matters of detail than Tournadre. Throughout the book, sources are cited or quoted that do not appear in the bibliography, e.g. Lemay (2008) on p. 105, Rey (1992) on p. 137, Desnos (1993) on p. 147, de Condillac (1798) on p. 152, Damourette & Pichon (1968) on p. 153, Weber (1997) on p. 196, van Driem (2001) on p. 102, etc. The diacritics distinguishing different vowels are simply omitted in the transcription of Brāhmī and Devanāgarī. Tournadre uses superscripts to indicate Cantonese tone, but lamentably uses no Hànyǔ Pīnyīn tone diacritics for any of his transcriptions of Mandarin throughout the book. No indication of phonological tone appears even when Mandarin forms are presented between square phonetic brackets. The author falls into bad Gallic spelling habits in the treatment of non-French surnames, e.g. "Buhler" for Bühler, "Van Driem" for van Driem, etc. This cavalier spirit of disregard towards non-French orthographic conventions is coincidentally the historical reason for the transmogrification of surnames in Belgium.

A salient moment in the book is when Tournadre undertakes to illustrate evidential marking in his favourite language, Tibetan (pp. 139-140). This is another hot topic, since so much linguistic discourse has in recent years been devoted to heated exchanges between the proponents of mirativity, in which some adopt an outright Platonic essentialist stance, and the analytical critics who, like Nathan Hill, advocate the semantically accurate description of language-specific grammatical categories. Not surprisingly, Tournadre's explanation of the meanings of the sentences adduced is accurate. However, his approach to the verb is not as paradigmatic as some linguists might like to see. Tournadre calls the form *bźag* "inférentiel" and *soṅ* "sensorial," but I predict that there are linguists

who will take issue with this analysis because these linguists will undertake to distinguish the temporal and evidential dimensions of the meanings of the categories in question. Hopefully, Tournadre, with his sensitive insights into the meanings of Tibetan forms, will continue to contribute to this ongoing discourse in the linguistic literature.

Tournadre's critical treatment of the conventional account of the meanings of French tenses (pp. 145-146) mirrors the brilliantly insightful and irreverently critical analyses of Petrus Cornelis Jozef Maria Paardekooper (1998) for Dutch tense categories. In fact, the tenses demonstrably do not mean what we were taught in our French and Dutch school books, and it is highly appropriate that descriptive linguists who have themselves conducted fieldwork in exotic places also undertake to reassess conventional wisdom on Occidental languages conventionally treated in a traditional mode. Several older and a few newer attempts to describe the grammatical reality of French conjugational morphology and of the grammar of the French language more generally are tucked away in the specialist literature, where they may hopefully be rescued from oblivion some day, for we have yet to see an exhaustive modern descriptive account of French grammar as the language functions today. The linguist who undertakes to do so in future may be a young reader who will be inspired by the infectious enthusiasm which Tournadre exudes in his scintillating *prisme des langues.*

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