

DACE PRAULIŅŠ, *Latvian. An Essential Grammar*. London & New York: Routledge, 2012, 249 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-57692-5.

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Descriptive grammars of Modern Latvian written in English are still something of a rarity, and any such book will be warmly welcomed by linguists as well as by the growing number of people learning Latvian all over the world. It is for the latter group that Dace Prauliņš wrote this book, and it would be unfair to review it as a scholarly contribution to the analysis of Latvian grammar. In the introduction, the author explicitly states that the volume is “not aimed at academic researchers who are looking for a more in-depth treatment of Latvian grammar, although I hope they will still find the overview useful” (1). Given the scarcity of available material in English, this book will doubtlessly be used by linguists looking for information on various grammatical phenomena, and this short review offers a look at what they will find.

Content and structure follow the long established and widely known canons of traditional grammar: there is a short Introduction (1–6), a chapter on Pronunciation and orthography at the beginning (7–23) and one called Syntax and punctuation at the end (208–217), while the greatest part of the book focuses on morphology, treating the traditionally distinguished parts-of-speech one by one: Nouns (24–50), Pronouns (51–65), Adjectives (66–76), Adverbs (77–86), Numerals and quantifiers (87–103), Verbs (104–168), Prepositions (169–176), Conjunctions (177–185). Functional and syntactic aspects are usually included, for example, the use of the indefinite and definite endings in the chapter on adjectives, the syntax of the passive and the debitive constructions in the chapter on verbs; only the functions of cases are treated in a separate chapter Cases (186–207). At the end of the book we find two appendices, a bibliography of printed and on-line sources, and an index. The internal structure of individual chapters, the division into sections and their respective order, is less well founded and sometimes appears random — especially in the chapter Cases, where various functions of the genitive and the dative are listed in a rather confusing way. It seems that the author was guided by different and sometimes conflicting principles.

In general, two perspectives are noticeable throughout the book: (i) the perspective of a learner whose native language is English and who does not know much about grammatical description and terminology, and (ii) traditional Latvian grammar as described in practical grammars for native speakers of Latvian. These perspectives coexist most harmoniously in the chapters on nominal morphology, where the declension of nouns, pronouns and adjectives as well as the most important rules of word-formation are explained in a comprehensible way in line with traditional grammar (but happily without having unnecessary ‘instrumental’ and ‘vocative’ forms in the tables). The greatest clash between the two perspectives appears in the chapter on verbs. Conjugations and verb classes are presented entirely in the traditional Latvian way — conjugation classes are distinguished according to properties of the stem (and not the choice of inflectional endings), and a large number of subclasses is listed, based on historical principles which are not revealed; the reader can only wonder why verbs are grouped in such a clumsy way. This description will hardly be appreciated by the target group — the naïve Anglo-Saxon learner — and is also of little use to linguists with a more general interest, except perhaps scholars well versed in Lithuanian and historical Baltic morphology. In another section of this chapter, the presentation of participles starts from the point of view of the English language — the participles with the formants *-oš-*, *-ot*, *-dam-* and *-am/ām* are presented first, most probably because they are translation equivalents of English participles with *-ing* in various of its functions.

As is often the case in grammars of this type, concepts that linguists wish to separate are occasionally confounded: letters and sounds (in the description of sound inventories and sound changes in Chapter 2), sentence structure and punctuation (“There are a couple of differences from the way English uses relative pronouns in sentences. The first is the use of commas”, 60), form and function (for example, vocative forms and the function of addressing someone). When the author speaks of the ‘meaning’ of a form or construction, she mostly has in mind the possible English translation equivalents. For example, the clause *Brokastis ēda plkst. 08.00* (‘breakfast.ACC eat.PST.3 at 8:00 am’) is described on page 208 as “an impersonal sentence with a passive meaning” and given the translation ‘Breakfast was had at 0800 (hours)’. From a Latvian point of view, there is nothing ‘passive’ in this sentence. English words as an

object of description are consistently given in simple quotation marks, for example: “Pronouns are either words which substitute for nouns, e.g. ‘he’, ‘you’, or they have an adjectival function, e. g., ‘my book’, ‘that tree’.” (p. 51). This convention contributes to the confusion of meaning and English expressions.

The book is advertised as being especially user-friendly and accessible to laymen, cf. the following fragment of the blurb: “a concise, user-friendly guide to the basic grammatical structures of Latvian. Presenting a fresh and accessible description of the language, this engaging grammar uses clear, jargon-free explanations to set out the complexities of Latvian in short, readable sections”. However, the avoidance of technical terms (‘jargon-free’) does not always make things simpler, and the explanations are often formulated in a way that the linguist may find touchingly naive or simply annoying, without giving the non-linguist a clear understanding of what is meant¹. Furthermore, there is inconsistency in the use of labels (for example, ‘consonant interchange’ on page 16, but — much better — ‘consonant change or *alternation*’ on page 28) and in descriptions (first we are told that only first conjugation verbs end in *-t*, but other verbs end in *-āt*, *-ēt*, *-īt*, *-ot*, *-ūt*, but later we have to take off the ending, meaning *-t* for all verbs). A little more ‘jargon’, consistently used, would have made many explanations throughout the book more comprehensible and precise. Instead of introducing terms that are not necessary for the description of Latvian facts (such as ‘inclusive plural pronoun’ in the example cited in the footnote), the author could have used some more terms that are (such as ‘stem’), and add a glossary to help readers unfamiliar with linguistic terminology. Introducing terms by giving examples is generally a good way, but introducing terms used for the description of Latvian by giving English examples is tricky, and the examples have to be chosen with particular care. For example,

¹ Here are some samples: “Prepositions are used with nouns or pronouns to indicate position in a particular location or time but they do also have other functions” (169); “When using the debitive mood [...] the nominative is used for what we might logically think of as the logical object of the sentence” (188); “In a passive construction the subject is still nominative.” (186); “Latvian has an unusual way of saying, for example, ‘my husband and I’ which translates as *mēs ar vīru* lit. ‘we with (my) husband’. The *mēs* is called an *inclusive plural pronoun* because it includes the husband.” (53); [describing the pronunciation of diphthongs:] “iu –like the abbreviation EU, but said quickly”, “uo – like ‘wa’ in ‘wasp’ but without the initial airy sound” (11).

English *so* is not a good example for a conjunction (p. 177) as it has many different uses.

A great strength of the book is the large number of examples which very nicely reflect contemporary Latvian usage of words and constructions. They are taken from a variety of genres, and many are interesting to read not only because of the point they illustrate, but also because of their content. Occasionally an example may be a bit too long and difficult for the target group (advanced beginners and intermediate level), but most examples are well chosen. All examples are translated into idiomatic English; sometimes a literal translation is given in addition to understand the construction. While sources are rarely mentioned, it is obvious that many examples have been taken from press texts and especially from texts published on the Internet. In the latter case, a few mistakes have escaped the notice of the author or editor, notably concerning punctuation. In one instance this has led to a wrong classification of an example: in the sentence *Ir pagājis gads, [!] kopš mana iepriekšējā raksta* ‘Almost a year has passed since my previous article’ (182), the word *kopš* ‘since’ is (according to the framework used) not a conjunction but a preposition, the comma is wrong and the example is wrongly placed among complex sentences.

On the whole, the number of errors and misprints in this book is comparatively small — certainly much smaller than in Matthiassen (1997). It can thus be recommended as a source of information about Latvian inflectional and derivational morphology. Linguists may also learn some interesting things about Latvian syntax from the examples, though the explanations offered are often poor and sometimes misleading. There is not much said about phonology, and the general introduction should better be skipped. Learners of Latvian will appreciate Appendix I (*Second-/third-conjugation verbs ending in -ēt/-ēties*) and the first part of Appendix II (*Reverse retrieval of verbs and nouns: First conjugation verbs with stem changes*), while the second part listing nouns with stem changes seems less important; instead, a full list of sixth-declension nouns might have been more useful.

REFERENCE

MATHIASSEN, TERJE. 1997. *A Short Grammar of Latvian*. Columbus OH: Slavica Publishers.