The History of Linguistics in Europe

Authoritative and wide-ranging, this book examines the history of western linguistics over a 2,000-year timespan, from its origins in ancient Greece up to the crucial moment of change in the Renaissance that laid the foundations of modern linguistics.

Some of today's burning questions about language date back a long way: in 400 BC Plato was asking how words relate to reality, and medieval philosophers put forward one hypothesis after another to explain the interaction of language and mind. Other questions go back just a few generations, such as our interest in the mechanisms of language change, or in the social factors that shape the way we speak. Vivien Law explores how ideas about language over the centuries have changed to reflect changing modes of thinking. A survey chapter brings the coverage of the book up to the present day.

Classified bibliographies and chapters on research resources and the qualities the historian of linguistics needs to develop provide the reader with the tools to go further.

The late VIVIEN LAW was Reader in the History of Linguistic Thought at the University of Cambridge, and Fellow of Trinity College. Her books include *The Insular Latin Grammarians* (1982), *History of Linguistic Thought in the Early Middle Ages* (1993), *Wisdom, Authority and Grammar in the Seventh Century* (1995) and *Grammar and Grammarians in the Early Middle Ages* (1997).

Vivien Law

The History of Linguistics in Europe From Plato to 1600

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521563154

First published 2003

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Law, Vivien.
The history of linguistics in Europe from Plato to 1600 / Vivien Law.
p. cm.
ISBN 0 521 56315 1 – ISBN 0 521 56532 4 (pbk)
1. Linguistics – Europe – History. I. Title. II. Series.
P81.E9 L39 2002
410′.94–dc21 2002017400

ISBN 978-0-521-56315-4 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-56532-5 Paperback

To my parents
and to the memory of Bobby Robins,
who waited a long time for this book

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Preface

'You're writing a textbook on the history of linguistics? That's impossible: only a team can do it now.' That was the reaction of a French colleague when, back in 1990, I told her I was writing this book. On a practical level she was right. As the German scholar Peter Schmitter pointed out a year later,[1] the history of linguistics was then growing faster than any other subdiscipline of linguistics. Even in the late 1980s, over five hundred publications were appearing annually in the history of linguistics, more than twice as many as in syntax, semantics or phonetics, its nearest competitors. No one person can claim to have read all the literature, or even a large percentage of it, much less all the primary literature – all the writings which touch upon language, whether by philosophers, theologians, grammarians, psychologists, anatomists, educationalists or indeed linguists – from every era and every corner of Europe. We are necessarily specialists. All the same, however, most historians of linguistics have to teach. When we pluck up the courage to do so, we overcome our private panic at the torrent of secondary literature and the daunting jungle of sources, in order to guide our students to the overviews from which they can get some sense of the overall shape of the subject. Naturally we linger in our own favourite spots, hurrying past those of our colleagues with scarcely a glance. What we lose by being selective, though, we gain by becoming alive to the grand themes and recurring patterns of the 2,500 years of European intellectual history. This sense of perspective (albeit a personal one) is what disappears between the cracks in a multi-authored history, for the writers of the separate chapters are inevitably sensitive to some issues and themes and blind to others. Continuity is hard to maintain, no matter how rigorous the editor. The panoramic view enforced by teaching gives such sweeping themes a chance to emerge. Not that meticulous detailed research doesn't have a place, though: without it the generalisations would lose their authority.

So, far more than is the case with a research monograph, I must acknowledge my debt to the (usually) responsive students and colleagues who, wittingly or unwittingly, have helped to shape this book since I started to teach a course in the history of linguistics in 1981, and far more directly since 1989, when Peter Matthews suggested that I write this textbook. More particularly, the comments since 1996 of undergraduates on drafts of several chapters have helped to illuminate a number of obscurities.

Andrew Wolpert's 'Spirit of English' classes at Emerson College, East Grinstead, where I taught for two week-long blocks in 1997 and 1998, responded very differently (but no less helpfully), challenging me to explain *why* these issues mattered – something which exam-conscious Cambridge students are more prepared to take on trust. Several people have generously commented on drafts of portions of the book – Ildi Halstead, Andrew Linn, Peter Matthews, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, R. H. Robins, Irène Rosier, Nick Shackleton and Chris Stray. Ildi, as well as spotting several infelicities of one sort or another, pointed out parallels with present-day linguistics which, by and large, I'm afraid I've left the reader to supply. Bobby Robins threw himself with gusto into the challenge of improving 'the book that is to replace me', as he put it (time will tell!). Indeed, his and Ildi's delighted response, and that of several other advance readers (not least the anonymous American reader for the publisher), is what has kept me – a researcher rather than a textbook-writer by temperament – going, for the going has been hard. Even though such recondite points as precisely which planets were in conjunction in the third week of December 1991 could (thanks in this case to Adam Perkins at the Cambridge University Library) be checked, in very many other cases the line between the verifiable (and verified) fact and the commonplace taken over from other writers had to be drawn far earlier than this pedantic perfectionist finds acceptable. Writing the history of European linguistic thought is a task of no less magnitude than a history of European literature would be. Many people have helped to make it possible: my students, who, ever since I gave my first lectures, in 1976, gently taught me to favour accessibility over erudition; fellow historians of linguistics, whose warm regard and measured judgements in encounters at conferences and over e-mail has supported me more than I can tell; the staff at the Cambridge University Library, a magnificent working environment without which this book, and the two and a half decades of research on which it is based, would have been, if not impossible, at least very much more difficult; and, last but not least, the tolerant staff at Heffers, Cambridge, who never uttered a word of complaint on seeing their bookshop used as a bibliographical resource. Many individuals have helped with points ranging from checking a reference to supplying me with relevant offprints or lending books too obscure for even the Cambridge University Library; among them are Anders Ahlqvist, Wolfram Ax, Mildred Budny, Henry Chadwick, David Cram, András Cser, Gillian Evans, Russell Evans, Suzanne Evans, Karin Margareta Fredborg, Jonathan Harrison, Louis Holtz, Ann Hutchison, Jee Yeon Jang, Simon Keynes, Tony Klijnsmit, Anneli Luhtala, John Marenbon, Ann Matonis, Brian Merrilees, Christos Nifadopoulos, Nicholas Orme, Marina Passalacqua, Fabrizio Raschellà, Irène Rosier, Vivian Salmon, John Saunders, Marion Saunders, Peter Schmitter, Pierre Swiggers, Kees Versteegh, Alfons Wouters. My thanks to them and to the numerous others who have helped and supported me, directly or indirectly, in the twelve years that this book has taken to write. The staff at the libraries whose materials have contributed directly to this book deserve thanks – the St John's College Library and the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge; the British Library, London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Worcester Cathedral Library; the Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Leiden; the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; the Stiftsbibliothek, St Gallen; the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the

Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg; the Biblioteca Nazionale, Naples; the Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragò, Barcelona. Despite all the efforts of these people and institutions mistakes will no doubt remain: my fault rather than theirs. What I wanted above all was to write a book that would at once be readable and stimulate *you* to think about the implications of thinking about language. Thinking about thinking is, after all, one of the most human things we can do.