Vivien Law

The History of Linguistics in Europe
From Plato to 1600

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1 Getting ready to study the history of linguistics

1.1 What does this book cover?

This book is about the history of linguistics in the West from its beginnings in the fifth century BC up until 1600. Although linguistics in many cultures outside Europe – in India, the Judeo-Arab world and China, to name only three – is at least as complex and as developed as linguistics in Europe and its American cultural offshoot, this book concentrates on Europe alone. There are now a number of good introductions to the non-European linguistic traditions by specialists, and it is misleading to treat these rich traditions as if they were merely an appendage to Europe. As for the chronological coverage, you'll find that up to the Renaissance, the intellectual history of western Europe can be discussed as a fairly coherent whole (if only because of the perspective which our distant vantage-point lends us). The Renaissance constitutes a major turning-point in western history, a turning-point marked by a new-found awareness of the outer, material, world, and consequently of external differences between nations, races, languages, customs, artefacts and so on. The markers of national differences, once perceived, contributed to the ever sharper definition of distinct national ways of experiencing the world, as much in intellectual life as in any other sphere. So from about 1600 on it becomes increasingly difficult to survey the history of linguistics in Europe as a whole; rather, you really need to focus separately on England, France, Germany, the Low Countries, Sweden, Bohemia, Italy and Spain, and their mutual interaction. So that you won't be left completely up in the air in 1600, chapter 11 summarises the main developments in linguistics since then – but I hope you won't rely on that alone!

1.2 Getting ready

Because this subject is different from anything you are likely to have studied before, and uses different methodology and even different habits of thought, it will be worthwhile to make explicit some of the assumptions we shall be building on. They can be summed

up in three questions:

1. What is meant by 'the history of linguistics'?
2. What background knowledge do you need in order to study the history of linguistics?
3. What do we actually do when we study the history of linguistics?

1.3 What *is* the history of linguistics?

Let's first get clear what it is that we are studying: what is the history of linguistics? It is *not* the history of a language, nor is it historical linguistics, the discipline which deals with the principles underlying language change; rather, the history of linguistics is the discipline which investigates what people thought about language long before we were born. It is concerned with the various forms which the discipline we call 'linguistics' took in the past, with the diverse ideas that past thinkers had about language, and with the texts in which they recorded their ideas. The history of linguistics is a branch of intellectual history, for it deals with the history of *ideas* – ideas about language – and not directly with language itself. One could argue that the natural academic home of a historian of linguistics would be a department of intellectual history; however, since intellectual historians are usually interested in the history of politics and philosophy, on the one hand, or in the history of science and medicine on the other, nearly all historians of linguistics work within departments of linguistics or languages. Like other intellectual historians, historians of linguistics work at one remove from real-world phenomena: they consider language as filtered through human cognition. Just as a historian of science isn't interested in fossils in their own right, but wants to know how scientists interpreted them in days gone by, so historians of linguistics are not directly concerned with problems like the relationship between language and reality, or how many linguistic levels there are, or the nature of ergativity; rather, they want to know how people have tackled such problems in the past. Did they ask the same questions as we do? If not, why not? What kinds of answers did they find satisfying? Do we find their answers acceptable today? Why – or why not? Essentially, then, we are dealing with *people* and their ideas about a uniquely human phenomenon.

1.4 What background knowledge do you need in order to study the history of linguistics?

Any kind of intellectual history makes considerable demands of its practitioners. Forget all those stories about history being 'easy'! To start with, you need a fair amount of historical knowledge, notably the intellectual history of the period you are studying – the trends and fashions, the buzzwords and slogans, the ideas in the air, and of course mainstream thinking in science, philosophy and religion, three areas which have played a crucial role in shaping other disciplines, linguistics included. Other kinds of history may also be helpful: political history might, for instance, account for a sudden shift in the intellectual affiliations of a particular region as the result of a military conquest. Social and economic history can help us to understand events such as the spread of literacy, the

growth of print culture, and changes in the availability of education, all of which have consequences for the history of linguistics. And of course an awareness of the changing linguistic map of Europe is vitally important: how can you hope to understand what Dante said about the Romance languages if you have no idea of the linguistic situation in his day? The first requirement of the historian of linguistics is thus a basic knowledge of all relevant branches of history. For our purposes, however, relatively little historical knowledge is assumed in this book. To fill in possible historical gaps, boxes signalled here and there in the text will introduce the background knowledge needed to place the history of linguistics in context, from Pythagoras and the Seven Liberal Arts to printing and the price of grammar books. There are also boxes that explain the history of certain terms and concepts, and boxes that explain who first came up with a particular idea.

The second fundamental requirement of a historian of linguistics is a knowledge of some form of contemporary linguistics. If you know nothing at all about modern ideas about language, whether in the form of traditional grammar or comparative philology, or in the guise of the latest syntactic or phonological theories, then you will probably find it difficult to make sense of what people were saying about language even two hundred years ago, let alone twelve hundred years back. Given the diversity of people's backgrounds, technical terminology will be kept to a minimum in this book, but some awareness of the language of traditional grammar will be assumed. (If any of the technical terms puzzle you, a basic dictionary of linguistics such as those listed in the bibliography to this chapter (pp. 11–12 below) will help to demystify the jargon.)

Thirdly, it helps to have a reading knowledge of the language or languages relevant to the themes and periods you are studying. Even a linguist of world renown like Noam Chomsky laid himself open to criticism when he made his first foray into the history of linguistics (*Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (1966)) because of his apparent failure to realise that many of the seventeenth-century thinkers he was studying – and some he overlooked – published some of their most important works in Latin. Consequently, the picture he painted of the linguistic thinking of the period was inadvertently distorted, drawing as it did only upon French-language texts. You are about to embark upon a programme of study which will introduce you to texts written in a number of European languages: Ancient Greek and Latin, Old English, Old Icelandic, Occitan, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew and others besides. Because few people can read all these languages, you'll find passages from relevant texts quoted in translation in this book to give you an idea of their flavour, and references to published translations are to be found in the bibliographies. Many of the most important linguistic texts from ancient Greece and Rome have been translated into English. By contrast, linguistic literature from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has tended to be overlooked by translators. As for secondary literature, where the professional historian of linguistics should be able to read articles in the five 'conference languages' at least – English, French, German, Spanish and Italian – you will find references in the bibliographies to materials in these and occasionally other languages. No one expects you, as a student, to read them all! By and large, you'll find you can get a long way with English alone, but to go more deeply into certain areas, you may well need to branch out into foreign-language materials. I've sometimes supplemented references

to English-language materials in the bibliographies with references to articles in other languages which overlap to a greater or lesser extent with English-language materials, to maximise your chances of finding relevant material. Occasionally, where there are few or no relevant publications in English, foreign-language materials predominate.

The basic prerequisites for a historian of linguistics are thus a grasp of the main historical and cultural developments in the period under study; a basic knowledge of at least one model of linguistics; and a command of the relevant languages. Does this sound like a tall order? Compare it with what one distinguished scholar, the late Yakov Malkiel (well known for his work in Romance philology), considered necessary:

> Perhaps the four most desirable conditions for developing satisfactory working habits as a historian of linguistics are to have personally witnessed the rise and decline of one or more fashions; to have lived in several countries long enough to have absorbed their disparate intellectual climates, from grammar school to university seminar; to have cultivated, with a certain alacrity, more than one major genre of linguistic investigation; and to have focused attention, at least during one's years of apprenticeship, on a period definitely closed, with whose chief protagonists the writer has not been so closely involved, in terms of personal relations, as to have developed any bias, be it animus or subservience.[1]

Rather few historians of linguistics (apart from Malkiel himself) measure up to this demanding list! In practice historians of linguistics come from a wide range of backgrounds, and the subject is all the richer for the diversity of knowledge, questions, assumptions and approaches that they bring with them.

1.5 What do historians of linguistics do?

History – any kind of history – isn't just a matter of chronicling what happened when: that is only the beginning. The interesting part comes when you start asking *why*. Only when you ask why something happened at a particular time, in a particular place, involving those particular people, do you start to see patterns and to make connections; it is only then that history begins to make sense. What kind of answer do you give to a 'Why?' question? It's not like asking 'Who?' or 'What?' or 'Where?' or 'When?', which invite very limited answers. 'How?' allows rather more scope, but 'Why?' is the freest of all. If you ask, 'Why did the Soviet Union collapse?', you are free to give all kinds of answers. You might, for instance, invoke economic or political factors such as the breakdown of the command economy and increasing pressure from zones of interethnic conflict. An earlier generation of historians would have attached greater importance to the personalities involved, and might have tried to explain it in terms of the conflicting ambitions of individuals such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze and Boris Yeltsin. Still another historian might see it as the inevitable consequence of the artificial imposition of an unworkable totalitarian ideology. But no contemporary academic historian would say, 'Because Mercury was in conjunction with Mars.' That is not a valid answer according to present-day academic habits of thought. Yet such an answer would have been acceptable in some scholarly circles as late as the end of the seventeenth century. So the kind of answer that one gives to a 'Why?' question

depends very much on the intellectual climate of the time. It is coloured by the cargo of assumptions and prejudices that we all carry around with us. To become a good historian it is essential to become aware of these assumptions, or of as many of them as possible. Only if you are aware of at least a few of your own assumptions can you begin to understand someone else's way of thought – a way of thought which might be based upon quite different assumptions. This does not mean that you have to drop your present-day assumptions when studying the history of linguistics, and still less that you should adopt those of another age. What matters is that you should be able to imagine what it would feel like to hold a different view. (The White Queen's comment in *Through the Looking Glass* would be good training for any intellectual historian: 'Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' Just make sure that you know they are impossible!) Very many people believed that the world would come to an end in the year 1000: how would you behave if you *knew* for sure, as surely as you know the sun will rise tomorrow, that the world will self-destruct on the first of January? If you can live with that idea for a few minutes, you will be better placed to understand the mass panic that gripped people as the year 1000 approached.

Of course, it's not just a matter of empathising with the period you are studying, although it is important to do so if you are to arrive at any understanding of it. Another very real problem is that our prejudices and prior knowledge to a large extent determine what we notice – and overlook. Einstein once remarked, 'It is the theory which decides what we can observe.' Of course, if that were always true, we would not be able to see anything unexpected; but in order to notice things which don't fit in with our preconceived notions we have to wake up to what these notions are and what they exclude. Ideally, we will adopt an approach closer to the working methods of an anthropologist. Anthropologists go to a foreign environment and join in the life of people there, trying to figure out the inner logic behind the way in which they organise and justify their way of life. Since the best way of learning how something works is to try it out oneself, anthropologists relearn how to think, using the logic and assumptions of the people under study. They 'try on' these unfamiliar habits of thought and live with them for a while, before returning home to analyse them. Ideally that is how we should behave as historians; but we have a problem the anthropologist does not have to face: we can't buy ourselves a ticket to Renaissance Italy or Anglo-Saxon England. Instead, we have to proceed by cultivating the anthropologist's attitude to the written texts which are our informants: we need to learn to listen to what they say with openness and acceptance. That doesn't mean that we have to accept every statement as true in our world, for much of what we read will be quite unacceptable – wrong – in the context of today's linguistics. Nonetheless, by asking what it was like to hold that 'wrong' belief we may well achieve a deeper understanding of the past than we will by sneering at it. Let's take an example. Throughout the Middle Ages and well into the sixteenth century, Jews, Muslims and Christians, scholars and lay people alike, believed – *knew* – that there were precisely seventy-two languages in the world – no more and no fewer. As historians, we can respond to this in two ways. We can say (as did many historians of an earlier generation): 'Oh, how stupid! It's obvious that there are more than seventy-two languages. Couldn't they just count up all the languages they knew about?' In reacting like this you create a

barrier within yourself out of your superiority and your preconceptions, and in so doing you cut yourself off from the possibility of understanding why people held that view, and what its consequences were. Alternatively, you can try to suspend judgement for a moment and ask yourself what assumptions about the world you need to hold in order to believe that there are, always have been and always will be seventy-two languages. You will probably have a different view of time and of processes of change from ours. Your ideas about how languages originate and diversify will not be those held by linguistics professionals today. In short, your mental universe will be quite different from that of a person living in present-day Europe or the English-speaking world. How might your ideas come to change? Imagine that you are living in the sixteenth century, with the fact that the world contains seventy-two languages a secure part of your knowledge about the world. As you grow up, one explorer after another returns from expeditions with reports of yet more totally unexpected languages. After a while, it dawns on you that the tally of languages must surely exceed seventy-two. You count them up, and sure enough, the total is well over the time-hallowed number. What do you do now that the empirical data conflict with inherited knowledge? It's not easy to set aside a fact passed down for many centuries with the weight of authority behind it. (How do you feel when you are told that something you were taught at school is wrong?) You might begin to think more critically about the issues surrounding linguistic diversity. Where have all these languages come from? Are they really languages in the full sense of the word, or could some of them be dismissed as mere dialects? Could one 'save the appearances' by giving more careful attention to the distinction between 'language' and 'dialect'? Could some of these languages be explained away as transformed versions of older or newer ones? But help! That would imply that languages change through time. As sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers grappled with these questions they gradually arrived at many of the concepts and ways of thought which underlie today's historical linguistics. That belief in seventy-two languages, so easy for us to deride, was in fact enormously stimulating and creative: today's historical linguistics would not be the same without it.

We, as historians, would miss all that if we simply dismissed such a notion as 'wrong-headed' and 'naive' and hurried on to something more 'scientific' (i.e. closer to what we ourselves believe). By projecting our own beliefs and our own criteria of scientificity onto the past we miss much more than we see. If we are to learn anything in the course of our reading, we should approach each text with an attitude something like this: 'This text made sense when it was written. How should I read it in order to appreciate what it meant to its author and the people it was written for?'

In order to enter into any text from the past intelligently, you need two qualities, empathy and knowledge. Empathy you cultivate within yourself; knowledge is what this textbook is meant to bring you. The more background knowledge you can acquire about each period you study, the better: exhibitions, visits to historical sites and exhibitions, museums and galleries, books about cultural and intellectual history, other works written during the era under study – all these help you to develop a sense of how people thought and felt and related to the world in the epochs that we shall be considering. How people thought about language in any era is closely paralleled by their way of thinking about the world at large. So from time to time in this book you will find

comments about the world-view of a particular age. Without that sort of background knowledge, the history of linguistics runs the risk of turning into a listing of theories and 'discoveries', the intellectual historian's equivalent of the much-derided 'battles and dates' of the traditional historian.

1.6 Why study the history of linguistics?

Justifying the history of linguistics in an age concerned above all with relevance and cost-effectiveness isn't easy. How can one claim that the past is 'relevant' to the present when countless people are getting on perfectly well without knowing about it? Historians like to trot out the old saying, 'Those who forget their history are doomed to relive it'; at one level, this may be true, but are present-day phoneticians or syntacticians really going to make the same mistakes as their fourteenth-century predecessors? Even if their conclusions look superficially similar, they will have been reached by very different routes. Other historians claim that studying history will give you new ways of solving contemporary problems. It's an attractive idea, but I have yet to come across a single present-day linguist who admits to having found the answer to a current problem in old books. Today's linguists, like scholars in every other discipline, pride themselves on their ingenuity and originality. Only when they have worked out a solution themselves do they begin to wonder whether anyone else ever had the same idea. So knowing about the history of linguistics is likely to be of *direct* use to the practising linguist only marginally, if at all. The real reasons for studying the subject lie deeper than that.

Each of us assumes that our experience of the world is uniquely well-rounded; other people are one-sided and a bit blinkered. As we get older, we realise that everyone secretly holds the same view: even your best friend perceives you as one-sided. Just as it is easier to see someone else's one-sidedness than one's own, so whole generations assume that their particular way of looking at the world is the only right one. We lose a great deal by going along with this collective one-sidedness. We sleep through many areas of experience, dismissing them with easy put-downs: 'Unscientific!' 'Materialistic!' 'Just so much religious fantasising!' 'Leftist hogwash!' 'It's all psychological!' And that all-purpose label drawn like a heavy dusty curtain across one thing after another, blocking out a ray of light just waiting to fall upon some neglected corner of experience: '*Boring*!' If we become aware of how one generation is utterly convinced of the centrality of its priorities, only to see their children plunge with equal intensity into a totally different approach to life, we learn to beware of complacently accepting – or worse still, parading – our one-sidedness in a world which confronts us with ever more subtle issues. By 'trying on' the ideas of a great range of people from the past we cultivate an ability to see things from another person's point of view, a skill which we can carry over into everyday life.

And that sense of perspective should help us to find our right place in time too. Of course we see the whole of history as conspiring to bring about the present, and in a sense this is true. At the same time, though, we are part of a present which is conspiring to bring about a whole series of futures; we are in transition, just as much as every past era was part of a process of transition and change leading ultimately to us. If in

studying the history of linguistics we avoid the temptation to focus only on the bits that foreshadow our own preoccupations, but look too at the ideas which didn't live on to the present, we will develop a much stronger sense of the ebb and flow of ideas, an ebb and flow of which we are part, just as our predecessors were.

All this applies equally well to any branch of intellectual history. What does the history of linguistics have to offer that one could not find just as well in the history of philosophy, or the history of science, or the history of anything else? As our academic disciplines are organised at present, there is a gap right at their heart. What discipline deals with the human being? Anatomy, biochemistry and molecular biology deal with the physical structure and substance of the body; physiology, biology and genetics with life processes; psychology with the mind and emotions; anthropology and sociology with human interaction and organisation; philosophy with man's place in the universe; and theology with man's relationship to the spiritual; but no single discipline brings all these together. If we were to study the history of all these disciplines, we would be able to grasp how our view of the human being has changed through time. We would be better able to understand why our picture of the human being is so disjointed, and to take the first steps towards restoring its lost wholeness. In practice, though, who is in a position to understand the development of disciplines as diverse as anatomy, psychology and theology? Despite its fragmentation into subdisciplines, linguistics offers us a short cut, for language (as linguists are fond of saying) mirrors the nature of man. From its physical basis in the vocal tract and sound waves to its life in human interaction and its potential for awakening knowledge of the invisible and the unspoken, language encapsulates the diversity which characterises the human being. Consequently, views about language are a guide to views of man; by studying the history of linguistics, we can form a pretty good idea of how people saw the human being in any given epoch. The one-sidedness that we perceive in the past warns us to be alert to the one-sidedness of the present: where is our understanding lacking? Can this be remedied? Can we heal the disjointedness? It is here that the history of linguistics has something to offer which no other branch of intellectual history can.

1.7 Being aware of language and doing linguistics: are they the same?

Linguistics entails a way of thinking which is abstract, analytical and systematic. To think about language in this manner we have to stand back from it and reify it, making it into an object 'out there'. That is a paradox, for language cannot exist without us. Yet to carry out all those analytical procedures that we take for granted – to think of language as a system independent of the speaker, or to divide a word into morphemes, or to represent a sentence diagrammatically – is to take a step away from the reality of our daily experience. This process of distancing ourselves from the phenomena is so much a part of our modern way of thinking that we do so unquestioningly, totally accepting the inherent paradox.

But there are still some places in the world where this is regarded as a strange thing to do. And if you go back far enough in history, you come to a time when no one thought in this way. And yet, even in the most ancient times from which records

have come down to us, people were very much aware of language. This stanza from a hymn in the *Rig Veda*, one of the collections of hymns for use in the Brahmin rituals of ancient India early in the first millennium BC, gives us a glimpse of a totally different experience of language:

> Speech was divided into four parts that the inspired priests know. Three parts, hidden in deep secret, humans do not stir into action; the fourth part of Speech is what men speak.[2]

Our modern intellectuality can make very little of this. What are the four parts of speech? Why can we not activate three of them? What is meant by 'stirring into action'?

The association of speech and action is central to very ancient texts. Compare this passage from an Egyptian creation myth:

> Thus all the gods were formed . . . Indeed, all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded. Thus the *ka*-spirits were made and the *hemsut*-spirits were appointed, they who make all provisions and all nourishment, by this speech . . . Thus life was given to him who has peace and death was given to him who has sin. Thus were made all work and all crafts, the action of the arms, the movement of the legs, and the activity of every member, in conformance with this command which the heart thought, which came forth through the tongue, and which gives value to everything.[3]

It is the performative aspect of speech, its ability to bring about an effect in the world, which is celebrated in these very ancient writings. The power of speech – not, of course, the debased words of everyday speech, but the divine creative Word – to bring the world itself into existence is the example *par excellence*; but even in later literature, such as the epics of Homer, it is the performative function of speech which is stressed. (Curiously, this is an aspect of language which has only recently been taken up into modern linguistics via the subdiscipline of pragmatics, although it was studied for many centuries as an aspect of rhetoric.) In texts such as these it is clear that we are not dealing with linguistics. Speech is here being *experienced*; the self-conscious *distancing* from it which makes intellectual study possible has not yet taken place. The experience of the mysterious creative power of speech is universal; not so the distancing which leads to linguistics. Virtually all peoples have myths in which the Word creates, and most peoples have myths about the origin of human speech. But that does not lead to the development of linguistics. Nor does it follow that contact with speakers of foreign languages necessarily brings about the appearance of linguistics, any more than literacy inevitably leads to it. Granted, the analysis required to create a phonemic writing system is a very sophisticated kind of analysis; yet it seems to take place at a partly conscious level. There is not a single case of the invention of a writing system leading directly to the more detailed investigation of phonetics, phonology or linguistics in general; rather, literate peoples tend to ascribe the origins of their writing system to a mythical demigod, as if to underscore the small part played by the consciously reasoning mind.

Let us take two examples:

1. The ancient Egyptians were able to write before 3000 BC, but in the course of the first 2,500 years of their civilisation they wrote nothing that has come down to us

about the structure of their language or other linguistic issues. Only when they came into contact with the Greeks, who by the end of the first millennium BC had developed a lively tradition of language-consciousness, did the Egyptians begin to think and write about their language.

2. The Jews were able to write from early in the first millennium BC, and their culture was a highly literate one, with not only the Torah and other religious texts being recorded in writing from very early times, but also extensive law codes, commentaries upon religious and legal texts, edifying tales and many other works. Yet they wrote almost nothing that one could regard as linguistics until the tenth century AD, after they had come into contact with the Arabs and their flourishing tradition of philosophical and grammatical thinking. But the Jews were well able to solve practical problems of a linguistic nature. Early in the Christian era, for instance, Jewish scholars realised that the lack of vowel signs in the Hebrew alphabet was a great inconvenience, for Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures and of religious ritual, was no longer anyone's native language, and young people were increasingly uncertain about which vowel went where. They therefore devised a quite complex system of vowel signs which they described in detailed treatises. But this did not immediately lead to anything more. The practical problem which confronted that generation of scholars had found a solution: an appropriate linguistic 'technology' had been devised without recourse to linguistic 'science', so to speak. So dealing with a practical linguistic problem does not necessarily lead to the development of linguistics.

Nor can we say that possessing the terminology needed to talk about language – *metalanguage* – is necessarily a sign of a nascent linguistics. It has been said that all speech communities have the basic terminology needed for everyday metalinguistic discourse. This basic terminology includes words for:

sentence/saying/utterance
word/name
sound/letter
vowel
consonant

To take the further step required to develop a technical language which can cope with all the peculiarities of a natural language entails a very substantial conceptual leap – the leap from using language instinctively to thinking about it consciously and systematically. Language is so much a part of ourselves that this act of distancing oneself from it in order to study it is often experienced as something quite painful: how many children *enjoy* learning grammar, no matter how imaginatively they are taught it? The desire to abstract and generalise, and thereby to construct a systematic description of a language, is not necessarily connected with a practical need (although it may be). There are millions of people around the world today who have learnt to speak a second language fluently and grammatically without ever having opened a grammar book; untold millions in the past accomplished the same feat. So what is it that makes people take the step of standing back and distancing themselves from language in order to think about it?

Further reading

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