

Foreword

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A History of Language Philosophies

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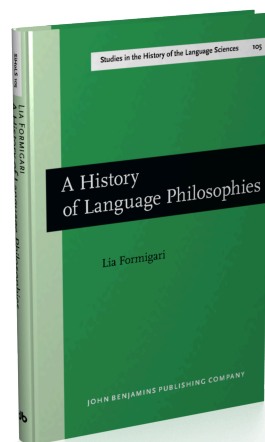
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Foreword

The standpoint of the present book, as I hope will be clear from the start, is that there can be no single perspective in the philosophical study of language. I have chosen to focus mainly on two approaches: the study of language as a cognitive tool and the study of its essential phylogenetic components. Language is always reluctant to be trapped exclusively in one domain or the other — the domain of liberty, the domain of necessity; the domain of the historical sciences, the domain of the natural sciences. Every time we isolate one of these domains, we realize we have answered only half the questions posed by theories. This happens if the notion of arbitrariness of signs is privileged at the expense of material, vocal, psychomotor language components, or vice versa; if language is considered exclusively as a product of nature or, on the contrary, of culture; if the role of innate mechanisms is stressed exclusively as opposed to learning, or vice versa.

As a result, I have tried to divorce linguistic-cognitive theories as little as possible from discussions on language as a specific instinct of humans as members of the animal world. My subdivision into cognitively-oriented chapters and anthropologically-oriented ones serves a practical purpose only. It helps distinguish different itineraries on the same map, avoiding the risk of getting side-tracked into roundabout routes, crooked alleys, or dead-ends. Cross-references among chapters must be taken as street signs suggesting other possibilities to those interested in following alternative routes or carving their own path.

The approach of a study is determined not solely by theoretical motives, but also, inevitably, by practical constraints. I might as well then say from the start what is *not* to be found in this book. Due to space limitations, it does not contain any history of individual language sciences (grammar, for example, or rhetoric). However, I have provided information on the great partitions of linguistic knowledge, and references that should help readers to orient themselves, highlighting the intersections of the philosophical study of language with the theory and practice of the language sciences. For reasons of space and competence, this book deals with only one intellectual tradition, the Western one; also, for the Middle Ages, the focus is exclusively on the Latin world.

The first chapter of the book reviews the epistemological areas that deal with language and languages, and discusses their methods, relations, and goals. Starting from Chap. 2, I have followed the chronological order of events. Thematic distinctions between chapters, however, will force readers to some to-and-fro. As a guide to readers, the name index has dates for non-living authors wherever possible, and the bibliography specifies the date of the first edition of each work. All this might seem superfluous to readers already versed in the subject, but might be useful to others. Acquiring spatial and temporal coordinates is one of the prerequisites for grasping logical and historical ones, and synopses remain a respectable aid for practicing the time-honored art of memory.

Given the difficulty of distinguishing between primary and secondary sources in contemporary debates, I have adopted the somewhat arbitrary bibliographical criterion of including all living authors in the second category, even those that can rightly be considered as classics of contemporary language studies and are treated as such in the book.

To the list of friends and colleagues I have already thanked in the preface to the Italian edition I must add Konrad Koerner, who once again has invited me to publish the book in the series he edits since 1973, and Gabriel Poole who induced me to revise various passages before subjecting them to the severe scrutiny of English prose. The Italian edition was dedicated to Luca and Gaia, who were learning to speak while I was writing the book. To them, who are now experimenting with writing, I dedicate the English one, too.

Lia Formigari
Rome, December 2003