

Foreword

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/sihols.33.01for>

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The History of Linguistics in Italy

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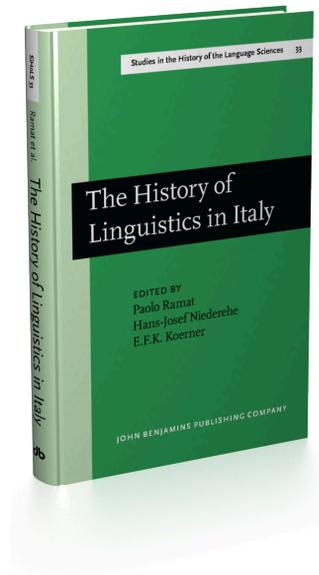
[*Studies in the History of the Language Sciences*, 33]

1986. x, 364 pp.

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FOREWORD

The present volume constitutes a reprint of the thirteen papers first published in *Historiographica Linguistica* IX/3 (1982), to which two articles have been added: Lo Piparo's account of Dante as an anti-Modista and Marazzini's re-evaluation of the work of Carlo Denina, which appeared in 1983 in the same journal. As well, indices of authors and of subjects, prepared by the second editor of the volume, have been added, thus making it a useful reference tool for those who want to acquaint themselves with the rich tradition of linguistic thought in Italy, given the absence of a more comprehensive history and historiography of the subject.

Writing a 'History of Italian Linguistics' would of course require many years of collaborative effort, since such a history would have to integrate the development of the particular linguistic thinking of a period with the general framework of Italian culture, not limiting the scope to indicating certain external factors and occasional links, but revealing on the contrary the subtle and often unconscious ties of this or that linguistic work to the surrounding cultural, socio-economic, and even political background.

The essays united in the present collection may offer an idea of what kind of critically minded, philologically and historically sophisticated research would be needed to come up with more than tangible results. Italy has for many centuries been a country in which literature and literary studies have enjoyed a leading role, and the still-to-be-written History of Italian Linguistics will have to take due note of the traditional ties between literary analysis and debate and grammatical and general linguistic argument (cf., for a recent example, Maria Corti's monograph of Dante).

However, in recent years there has been a trend to focus more on specifically *linguistic* aspects, placing philosophical or literary questions to the periphery of attention. I suppose that this has to do with the current trend to assert a more autonomous status for linguistics as well as its historiography. As a result, much more work is now done in the direction of a comprehensive description of the particular development of the study of language in Italy. The present volume may be seen as an indication of this trend and as a modest contribution toward a History of Linguistics in Italy.

H.H. Christman is probably right when he states that work devoted to the historical development of linguistics has had a fairly long tradition in Italy. Actually, it may perhaps been more substantial than that in most other countries (cf. the bibliographical note at the end of this foreword). Part of the reason for this traditional interest is that historicism in its various forms has been, like idealism, a mainstay of Italian culture. We may gather from Sebastiano Timpanaro's masterly essays on Ascoli (*Belfagor* 27/1972.149-76) and on his followers (*Belfagor* 35/1980.45-67) the profound, though by no means always obvious, links between the science of language and general culture. Indeed, these and other studies by Timpanaro may be regarded as paradigmatic examples of how the history of linguistics should be treated.

This new approach, no longer burdened by polemics and erudition for its own sake is, I feel, gradually leading to a more profound historical understanding of our discipline, its distant as well as its more recent past. The history of Italian linguistics has become, as a result, more complex and perhaps somewhat less certain than what we may find in the schematic reductions and convenient labels of many current histories of linguistics. It will, however, become much more credible precisely because of the attention paid to the complex of elements making up the whole

Despite certain serious lacunae, notably with respect to linguistic study in the medieval period and the place of Vico in Italian linguistic thought, the collection of papers here united covers a wide range of subjects. Indeed, the present volume reflects the poles between which research is moving nowadays: on the one hand, we have the re-evaluation of largely forgotten contributors to linguistic study (e.g., Carlo Denina around the 1800s, and Biondo Flavio, Leonardo Bruni and Guarino Guarini in the 15th century); on the other, some major figures in the history of Italian linguistics such as Dante and Leopardi are being revisited in the light of recent foci of attention and with different methods of research.

The first part of the present volume deals with Dante and the 14th and 15th centuries, ideally extending to Nencioni's contribution devoted to the Accademia della Crusca, whose fourth centenary has recently been celebrated, and which has succeeded in rejuvenating itself through the injection of modern methods and concerns. (In fact, Nencioni's paper could have been placed at the end of the book as a witness to the vitality of this century-old cultural and social institution.)

Our collection becomes, understandably enough, richer as we are approaching the present century. In the last portion some of the greatest

figures of the generation of linguists immediately preceding the current one are carefully analyzed. The result is a series of individual contributions to a number of focal points in Italian linguistic thinking. Take as an example the discussion of idealism in Italian linguistics in the first half of the 20th century, basically part and parcel of the philosophical outlook with which modern linguists in Italy have been forced to come to terms; compare the contributions by Rosiello, Segre, Ramat, and Christmann. (That this typically Italian view of language and linguistics has more remote origins may be appreciated from Lo Piparo's reference to Leopardi's metaphysical materialism.)

As Yakov Malkiel has pointed out in his acute diagnosis of the state of Romance and Indo-European studies in Italy, this country has drawn some benefits from the delay in the reception of certain new vistas coming from tone-setting countries, thus preventing many Italian linguists from uncritical acceptance of and blind adherence to any *novum verbum*. It appears that the long tradition of data-bound inquiry into language has acted as a filter towards overly generalizing and highly abstract theories. At the same time, it is also true, as Malkiel writes, that "Italian linguists are going through a good deal of painful soul-searching", trying to join the heritage of a particular school of thought with more open-minded, widely circulated ideas and proposals of language analysis from abroad.

The essays presented here should be considered as a contribution to this newer effort in historical studies. They do not assume a euphoric or heroic stance so typical of many histories of linguistics, a stance taken to task by Segre, where every new period 'triumphes over' its predecessor. Rather they attempt to make a serious contribution to a better understanding of the present by linking it to its past.

Pavia, June 1984

Paolo Ramat

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The following are critical accounts relating to particular periods in the history of Italian linguistics; they are listed in chronological order:

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Also see the contributions to the volume published by the Società di Linguistica Italiana (SLI) entitled *Dieci anni di linguistica italiana*, ed. by Daniele Gambarara and Paolo Ramat (Rome: Bulzoni, 1977) as well as, of course, the well-known histories of linguistics by Leroy, Malmberg, Robins, and others.

The SLI *Catalogo dell'editoria linguistica italiana*, ed. by L. Còveri (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), is very helpful as regards bibliography.