When Laura Williamson from Edinburgh University Press asked me whether I would like to produce a new edition of this textbook, my first reaction was to be flattered. But, of course, what Laura said was rich in possible interpretations. I still remember being confused by just this kind of utterance at primary school, and failing to understand that the teacher’s “Would you like to sit over there?” was actually an instruction rather than just a slightly odd question.

With more experience of language under my belt, naturally I understood Laura’s question as an indirect request. But, inevitably, I also wondered whether there was a shade of meaning along the lines of ‘we need a new edition, because there is so much wrong with the existing edition’.

I still don’t know whether that meaning was intended – I didn’t dare ask. But the opportunity to go back and revise a text like this is always welcome, and of course I found all sorts of places where what struck me as crystal clear six years earlier strikes me as a bit murky now. So I’ve welcomed the chance to try to filter out some of these issues. I’ve also attempted to plug a few gaps in coverage, while trying not to go on at unwarranted length.

This book retains much of the structure of Patrick Griffiths’s original edition, and draws on many of the examples he introduced. Therefore, much of the credit goes to him, and to the people to whom he generously gave credit, notably Heinz Giegerich, Anthony Warner, Kenji Ueda, and Janet and Jane Griffiths. For my part, I’d also like to thank Ronnie Cann for his detailed comments on the second edition and Hannah Rohde for her comments on and support with the third edition. And, of course, thanks go to the team at Edinburgh University Press for their encouragement, professionalism and, above all, patience.