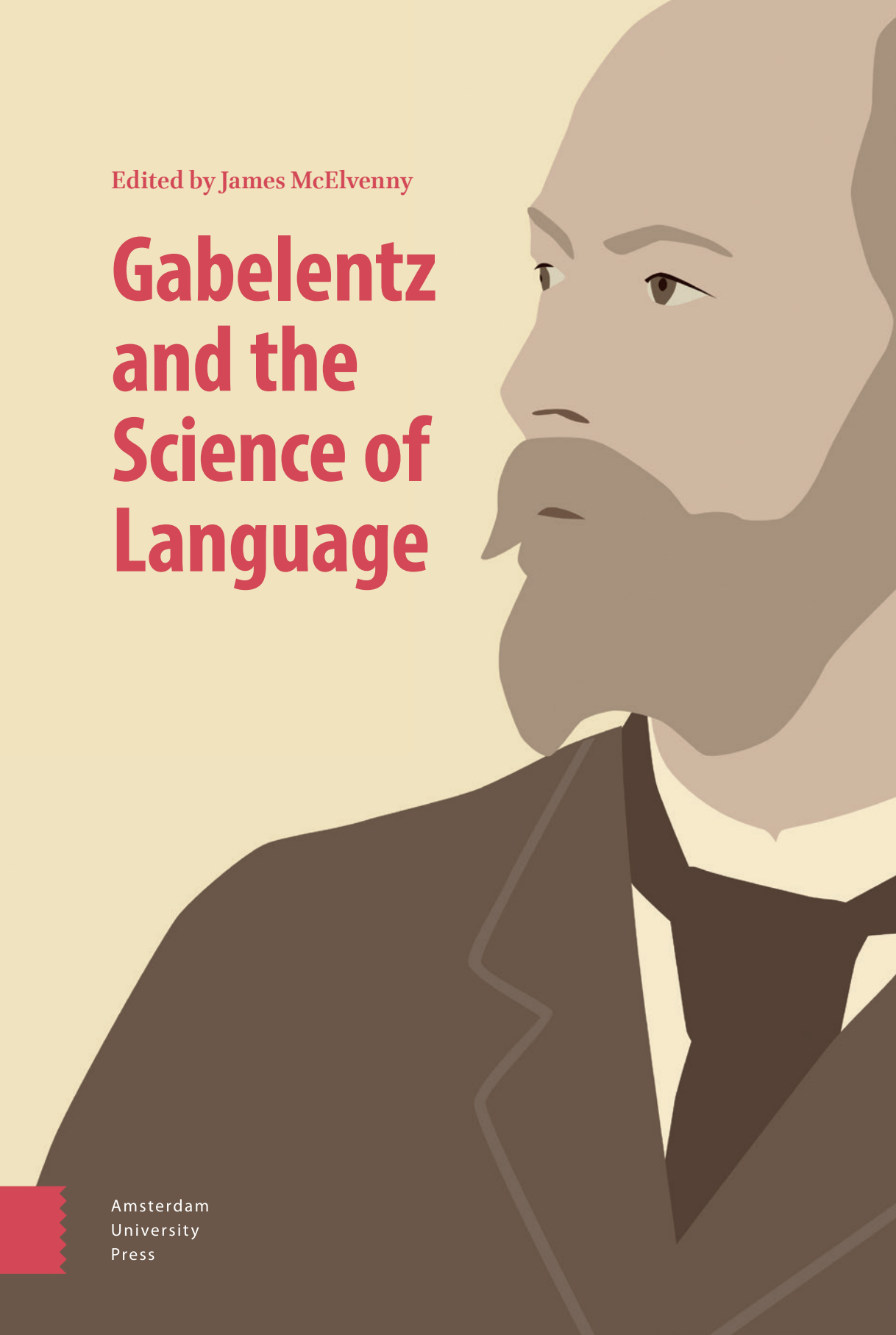
Edited by James McElvenny

Gabelentz and the Science of Language



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1 Introduction

James McElvenny

Abstract
This chapter begins by introducing Georg von der Gabelentz and his place in the history of linguistics. It then outlines the content of this volume and its relation to existing Gabelentz scholarship.

The last decades of the nineteenth century represent a crucial period in the history of linguistics. This is the era in which the historical-comparative method, the flag-bearer of the new scientific language study of the nineteenth century, reached the peak of its institutional dominance and its most extreme form in the Neogrammarian school. But it is also the eve of the structuralist revolution, whose mounting challenges overwhelmed the historical paradigm and swept it away shortly after the turn of the century.

An outlier in this intellectual environment is the German sinologist and general linguist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893). As Professor of East Asian Languages first at the Neogrammarian stronghold of the University of Leipzig from 1878 to 1889 and then Professor of Sinology and General Linguistics in Berlin from 1889 until his death in 1893, Gabelentz was present at the chief centres of linguistic scholarship of the time. His work was marked, however, by an adherence to the seemingly antiquated doctrines of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Reviewing the posthumous second edition of Gabelentz's (2016 [1891]) magnum opus, *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (The Science of Language), the Indo-Europeanist Ludwig Sütterlin (1863–1934) summed up the contemporary reception of Gabelentz when he remarked: 'Even though its first edition came out as recently as 1891 and its second edition in 1901, Gabelentz's book seems to us like a remnant of a former time: with him dies a point of view that in the end was established by Wilhelm von Humboldt' (Sütterlin, 1904, p. 319).[1]

1 Original: 'Das Buch von der Gabelentzens mutet uns, obwohl seine erste Auflage erst 1891 erschienen ist und die zweite 1901, schon wie ein Ueberbleibsel aus vergangener Zeit an;

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But Gabelentz was not simply old-fashioned: he sought to update the Humboldtian programme as a means to overcoming the perceived limitations that linguistics had acquired through the course of the nineteenth century. He hoped to revive the study of 'general linguistics', which he conceived as the broad investigation on the Humboldtian model of the human capacity for language (see Elffers, 2012). This programme was opposed to the narrow focus of the Neogrammarians, whose work concerned itself almost exclusively with historical sound change in Indo-European languages. Although some Neogrammarian theoreticians – such as Hermann Paul (1846–1921), whom Gabelentz (2016 [1891], p. 143) cited favourably – allowed themselves to wander in the realm of general linguistics, Gabelentz criticized the historical-comparative school for its tendency to treat its restricted technical concerns as the totality of scientific linguistics:

> Most of us have limited our research to one or another language family, and the genealogical-historical school has demonstrated such brilliant progress that we should not begrudge them a certain amount of self-satisfaction. Nothing seemed more reasonable than to say: in linguistics progress occurs entirely and exclusively within this school; those who remain outside it may call themselves philologists, philosophers of language, even language experts or polyglots, or whatever they like, but they must not pretend that they are linguists and that their subject is linguistics. Whoever speaks like that confuses the small field that he is ploughing with the meadows of a large community, and, to use a Chinese analogy, thinks like someone who sits in a well and maintains that the sky is small.
> (Gabelentz, 2016 [1891], p. 12)[2]

Historical-comparative linguistics still features prominently in Gabelentz's *Sprachwissenschaft*, but is treated only in the third 'book', or major section,

es stirbt mit ihm eine Betrachtungsweise aus, die sich in letzter Linie von W. von Humboldt herschreibt.'

2 Original: 'Die Meisten von uns haben ihre Arbeit auf die Erforschung der einen oder anderen Sprachfamilie beschränkt, und die genealogisch-historische Schule hat so glänzende Fortschritte zu verzeichnen, dass ihr eine gewisse Selbstgenügsamkeit nicht zu verdenken ist. Nichts lag näher, als zu sagen: Der Fortschritt der Sprachwissenschaft ist ganz und ausschliesslich bei dieser Schule; die draussen mögen sich Philologen, Sprachphilosophen, wohl auch Sprachkundige, Polyglotten nennen, oder wie es ihnen sonst beliebt, sie sollen nur nicht sich für Linguisten, nicht ihre Sache für Sprachwissenschaft ausgeben. Wer so spricht, der verwechselt den kleinen Acker, den er pflügt, mit der Flur einer grossen Gemeinde und urtheilt, um mich eines chinesischen Vergleiches zu bedienen, wie einer, der im Brunnen sitzt und behauptet, der Himmel sei klein.'

of this work. The other three 'books' deal with the place of linguistics as a science among other sciences (Book 1); the study and description of individual languages (Book 2); and general linguistics, covering mostly the nature of human language and cross-linguistic typological comparison (Book 4). The broad themes Gabelentz addresses and their arrangement lead Morpurgo Davies (1998, pp. 299-300) to attribute an 'inescapable air of modernity' to Gabelentz's book in her survey of late nineteenth-century theoretical works in linguistics, and it is these qualities that make Gabelentz a key transitional figure from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. His critique of the Neogrammarian mainstream and efforts to modernize traditional linguistic thought provide an invaluable window onto the field in this period. In addition, his own theoretical and technical innovations are frequently cited as anticipating many later ideas, including modern approaches to typology, grammaticalization and structuralist theory (see McElvenny, 2017).

This volume brings together a selection of texts that illuminate Gabelentz's life and work, and his place in the scholarly environment of his time. There is already a considerable body of secondary literature on Gabelentz, most of it in German (e.g. the classic Richter & Reichardt, 1979, or the more recent Gimm, 2013). In the past few years, the Berlin Ost-West-Gesellschaft für Sprach- und Kulturforschung (East-West Society for linguistic and cultural research) has spurred on research in this area with a number of anthologies containing previously unpublished archival materials alongside old and new essays on Gabelentz (e.g. Ezawa & Vogel, 2013; Ezawa et al., 2014). This volume is a further contribution to this genre which, through the choice of English as the language of publication, is intended to make Gabelentz scholarship more accessible to an international audience. The contents of this volume are quite heterogeneous, ranging from biography to translation to academic exposition, and have been deliberately chosen to provide a representative sample of some of the diverse directions research into Gabelentz and his work has taken. Each chapter is self-contained and can be read in isolation, although points of contact between the chapters are highlighted through cross-references.

Vogel and McElvenny open the volume in Chapter 2 with a biographical essay concentrating on the role played by Gabelentz's family background and his upbringing in shaping his linguistic and Sinological interests. Gabelentz's father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1807–1874), was himself a renowned language scholar who published several studies of 'exotic' languages, wrote pioneering works on linguistic typology and, through his library at the family estate in Poschwitz, assembled and made available a major research resource for European linguists at the time. The Gabelentz children were

raised in a world of languages and were encouraged to partake in their father's scholarly passion: linguistics and language study were very much a family affair. This chapter explores the interplay between Gabelentz's family and his academic career, drawing principally on personal correspondence, manuscript biographies penned by Gabelentz's sister, Clementine von Münchhausen (1849–1913), and oral tradition within the family.

In Chapter 3, the focus of the volume shifts to Gabelentz's contributions to linguistic theory with Elffers's account of his role as a pioneer of information structure. Alongside such figures as Henri Weil (1818–1909), Hermann Paul and Philipp Wegener (1848–1916), Gabelentz is widely considered to be among the first generation of theorists to address questions of information structure. Beginning with his earliest linguistic publications on 'comparative syntax' and continuing throughout his career, Gabelentz explored the discourse effects of word order through an empirical investigation of a wide variety of languages. This chapter undertakes a detailed examination of the evolution of Gabelentz's ideas in this area, their place in the contemporary intellectual environment and their influence on later scholarship. In particular, it shows how Gabelentz's account was embedded within the linguistic component of *Völkerpsychologie* developed by H. Steinthal (1823–1899), in many respects an offshoot of the Humboldtian tradition.

Chapter 4 turns to a puzzling but revealing episode in Gabelentz's career, with Hurch and Purgay's exploration of his Basque-Berber studies. Discussions of Gabelentz's *œuvre* tend to omit the fact that he attempted in some of his later writings to demonstrate a genealogical connection between the Basque and Berber languages. Based on an examination of Gabelentz's texts, unpublished notes and correspondence, as well as several contemporary reviews, this chapter examines Gabelentz's proposal and what it shows about his theoretical views vis-à-vis historical-comparative linguistics and his place in the linguistic community of the time. It shows how Gabelentz's critique of the prevailing historical-comparative approach led him to abandon all established methods and draw wildly implausible conclusions. Even the most vehement critics of the Neogrammarians, such as Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927), looked on uncomprehendingly at the turn Gabelentz had taken.

In Chapter 5, Willems investigates the philosophy motivating Gabelentz's perspective on the study of language as reflected in *Die Sprachwissenschaft*. The dominant philosophy underlying most linguistic work in Gabelentz's day looked to a psychological conception of language. In his own work, Gabelentz of course drew on and responded to this conception, but his *Sprachwissenschaft* nevertheless strikes another chord, which sets it apart from contemporary sources. In this chapter, Willems argues that Gabelentz's

book is particularly noteworthy for its wide-ranging bottom-up approach to linguistic phenomena and its propensity to conceive of language both as object and instrument of enquiry in a sense akin to the 'reflexive' stance that would later become a hallmark of Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) phenomenology. In particular, Willems discerns the 'phenomenological mindset' in the way a different philosophy of the language sciences and theory of meaning take shape in *Die Sprachwissenschaft*.

Chapter 6 closes the volume with an English translation of 'Content and Form of Speech', one of the core theoretical chapters of *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, which addresses the notion of 'form' in language and speech, and its opposites, 'content' and 'matter'. 'Form' is a key concept in much nineteenth-century linguistic scholarship, which was employed in various senses to a number of different ends, playing a particularly important role in Humboldtian approaches to typology. In this chapter, Gabelentz provides a wide-ranging survey of existing views on 'form' in language – including extensive quotations from other authors – and develops his own position. This text is therefore useful not only as a statement of Gabelentz's own thinking, but also as an overview of opinions in the field at the time. The translation is accompanied by a short introduction and notes that contextualize the text and help the present-day reader to follow the historical debates.

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