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The fate of form in the Humboldtian tradition: the *Formungstrieb* of Georg von der Gabelentz

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Abstract

The multifaceted concept of ‘form’ plays a central role in the linguistic work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), where it is deeply entwined with aesthetic questions. H. Steinthal’s (1823–1899) interpretation of linguistic form, however, made it the servant of psychology. The *Formungstrieb* (drive to formation) of Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) challenged Steinthal’s conception and placed a renewed emphasis on aesthetics. In this endeavour, Gabelentz drew on the work of such figures as August Friedrich Pott (1802–1887), Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1807–1874) and William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894). In this paper, we examine Gabelentz’ *Formungstrieb* and place it in its historical context.

1. Introduction

A multifaceted concept with a range of applications, ‘form’ has a long history in Western philosophy, with especially strong ties to aesthetic theory (see Tatarkiewicz 1973).¹ In the linguistic work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and many of his followers, various notions of form serve a key role in conceptualising language. In Humboldt’s own writings the aesthetic dimension is very much present but, by the middle of the nineteenth century, an alternative interpretation of

1 I would like to thank Manfred Ringmacher, Jean-Michel Fortis and the anonymous reviewers of *Language and Communication* for their comments on this work.

Humboldt's linguistic form, associated chiefly with H. Steinthal (1823–1899),² established itself – even if controversially – as a point of orientation in mainstream linguistic discourse. Steinthal rendered linguistic form the servant of psychology: it was treated as a window onto cognitive processes. The *Formungstrieb* (drive to formation)³ of Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) represents a challenge, presented towards the end of the century, to Steinthal's conception. Drawing on themes present in Humboldt and followers faithful to him in this respect, as well as arguments independently in circulation in contemporary linguistics, Gabelentz dismantles Steinthal's psychologistic treatment of linguistic form and places a renewed emphasis on aesthetics.

In this paper, we examine Gabelentz' *Formungstrieb* and its intellectual background. We begin in section 2 below with a survey of Gabelentz' point of departure, Humboldtian linguistic form as interpreted by Steinthal. We then turn in section 3 to Gabelentz' objections to Steinthal's views and show how the *Formungstrieb* was intended to present an alternative to them, substituting Steinthal's psychological explanations with aesthetic considerations. In section 4, we look at how his approach revived existing themes within the Humboldtian tradition. Finally, in section 5, we see how his arguments were informed by broader developments in the linguistics of the second half of the nineteenth century.

2. Material and form in language

Material and form – *Stoff* and *Form* – are the two complementary concepts that serve as the point of departure for Gabelentz' views on the aesthetic nature of language. The dichotomy was long present in theorising about language, and became, in various guises, a commonplace of nineteenth-century linguistics (see Morpurgo Davies 1975:652-682; 1998:212-219). Expressed in various vocabularies and embedded in different metaphysical schemes, a recurring feature of language classifications of the time was a distinction between material content-bearing linguistic elements, usually identified with word roots, and formal elements that served only to indicate relations between content, prototypically represented by inflectional endings. Of all the contemporary accounts of material and form in language, Steinthal's was one of the most nuanced and sophisticated, and it was to this formulation that Gabelentz was chiefly responding. As Gabelentz himself comments: 'Perhaps no one has written more, and more incisively, about material and form and formlessness of languages than Heinrich [sic] Steinthal' (*Mehr und schärfer hat vielleicht Keiner über Stoff und Form und Formlosigkeit der Sprachen geschrieben, als Heinrich Steinthal*; Gabelentz 1891:321).

For Steinthal there is an overarching sense in which all of language is form, in that linguistic expressions are nothing but representations of thought. This perspective was intended to counter the

2 Steinthal's given name was 'Chajim', but in print and in library catalogues he is variously referred to as 'Heymann', 'Heinemann' (his mother's maiden name) and 'Heinrich'. In his memoirs (reproduced in Belke 1971:379), Steinthal relates how in his earliest childhood there was no state-sanctioned register of births, deaths and marriages for the Jewish community in his home town and, as a result, his German given name was never officially recorded and was altered arbitrarily. In this paper we follow Steinthal's own practice and simply use his initial, 'H.'

3 In this paper, English equivalents are generally used for German technical terms, with the original German provided on the first occurrence. Gabelentz' coinage *Formungstrieb* is, however, used in its original German form throughout, since this term and its accompanying concept are the subject matter of the paper. All translations are my own.

view of Karl Ferdinand Becker (1775–1849), a late exponent in the German-speaking world of the *grammaire générale* tradition (see Becker 1827), which aimed to ground grammar in logic. As Ringmacher (1996:139-140) observes, Becker sought to assimilate the logical categories of scholastic definition with their grammatical equivalents. In scholastic definition, the *genus proximum* or subject of the definition is identified with material in the Aristotelian sense – i.e. the substance of the definiendum – while the *differentia specifica* or the predicate of the definition is identified with the form – i.e. its characteristics. In Becker’s scheme the grammatical subject of a sentence in language was therefore taken to be its material, the thought or concept that it was about, and the predicate was taken to indicate the formal relation of this thought to others. Steinthal’s objection was to say that since language is merely a representation of thought, no linguistic expression can directly contain elements of a thought. Just as a stage play or a portrait are imaginary representations of the world into which the real world does not enter materially, language can only reproduce the shape of thought and cannot be mixed with thought itself: ‘Language is nothing but form; its material, the thought, lies outside it. It is therefore pure form, since it is simply intuition, representation, appearance of the thought’ (*Die Sprache ist nichts als Form ; ihr Stoff, der Gedanke, liegt außer ihr. Sie ist darum reine Form, weil sie bloße Anschauung, Darstellung, Schein des Gedankens ist*; Steinthal 1855:360). However, continues Steinthal, the traditional logical distinction between material and form is still valid at the level of thought, and a language can be more or less reliable in representing this distinction. We may therefore legitimately talk of material and form in language:

But we have now found the point that would be relevant if language were to have developed a distinction between form and material, material and formal elements. It is simply a matter of whether the difference between material and form in the thought itself as well as for the logician *becomes also a distinction for language*; that is, that not all elements of the thought are intuited by the language and represented in the same way, but that language simultaneously intuits the difference of material and formal moments of thought and also represents this difference. Language would therefore remain purely formal, in accordance with its immutable nature, but it would be partly form of the mental material and partly form of the mental form.

(Steinthal 1855:361; italics above renders *Sperrung* in the original)⁴

This is the point at which Steinthal’s conception couples onto the broader discussion of material and form current in nineteenth-century linguistic discourse, and the various morphologically based language classifications that grew out of it. Humboldt’s writings served as one of the main points of reference in this discussion and as the chief stimulus for Steinthal’s own views. There was, according to Humboldt (1836:10), an ‘idea of perfection in language’ (*Idee der Sprachvollendung*), an ideal form that strove to achieve existence in reality through languages. As Trabant (chapter 8 of

4 Original: ‘Wir haben nun aber doch schon den Punkt gefunden, auf den es ankäme, wenn die Sprache in sich einen Unterschied zwischen Form und Stoff, materialien und formalen Elementen, ausgebildet haben sollte. Es käme nämlich nur darauf an, daß der Unterschied von Stoff und Form, welcher im Gedanken, sowohl an sich, als für den Logiker, vorliegt, auch für die *S p r a c h e w e r d e*; d.h. daß nicht nur alle Elemente des Gedankens von der Sprache angeschaut und gleichmäßig dargestellt werden, sondern daß dieselbe zugleich den Unterschied der materialen und formalen Momente des Gedankens anschau und auch diesen Unterschied darstelle. Die Sprache bliebe also ihrer unveränderlichen Natur gemäß rein formal; sie wäre aber theils Form des Gedankenstoffes, theils Form der Gedankenform [...]’

2012; 1986) explains in his exposition of Humboldt's philosophy of language, Humboldt saw language as the locus of the Kantian 'faculty of imagination' (*Einbildungskraft*), which in the process of linguistic production creates a synthesis of 'sensuality' (*Sinnlichkeit*) and 'understanding' (*Verstand*). According to Humboldt, a word in language is a combination of a physically perceptible sound and a concept; it is produced through a synthetic process that fuses the two parts, and it is only through this process that each, the sound and the concept, takes on a definite shape. He sees inflection as exhibited by the Indo-European languages as true grammatical form, since it is only here that the process of synthesis is properly achieved. The inflected word combines the concept and its relation to the rest of the proposition – expressed by the word root and affix respectively – into a single package where the individual identity of the concept is preserved. This is in contrast to isolating structures, as in Chinese, where the concept maintains its individual identity but the relation finds no formal expression, and incorporating structures, as in Nahuatl, where the relation is expressed, but only because one concept swallows up another (cf. Trabant 2012:143-147):

The Mexican [i.e. Nahuatl] method of incorporation attests to a correct feeling for the formation of the sentence in that it puts the indication of the relations within the sentence directly onto the verb; that is, at the point at which the sentence wraps itself together as a single unit. In this way, this method is distinguished essentially and advantageously from the lack of specification in Chinese, where the verb is not even clearly indicated by its position, but is rather often only materially recognisable through its meaning. [...] Sanskrit indicates each word as a constitutive part of the sentence in a very simple and natural way. The method of incorporation does not do this, but rather, wherever it cannot put everything together as one, allows indications to emerge from the middle of the sentence, much like peaks, which show the direction in which the individual parts must be sought, according to their relationship to the sentence.

(Humboldt 1836:169)⁵

A comparable notion of synthesis appears in the process of 'apperception' (*Apperception*), a crucial component of Steinthal's later psychologicistic theory of language, based on the associationism of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841; cf. Ringmacher 1996:118-121; Bumann 1965:63-70; Knobloch 1988:187-190; Levelt 2013:42-45). Gabelentz, too, described linguistic production in similar terms, as we will observe in the next section (see also McElvenny forthcoming:4). Further following the inspiration of Humboldt, Steinthal went on to elaborate the 'idea of language' (*Sprachidee*), an ideal towards which languages strive. In line with Humboldt, the essential criterion for judging how far a language has come in realising the idea of language is the formal means it employs in expressing the relations between concepts. The decisive point for Steinthal was whether a language possessed purely formal elements – making it a so-called 'form-

5 Original: 'Die mexicanische Einverleibungsmethode zeugt darin von einem richtigen Gefühle der Bildung des Satzes, dass sie die Bezeichnung seiner Beziehungen gerade an das Verbum anknüpft, also den Punkt, in welchem sich derselbe zur Einheit zusammenschlingt. Sie unterscheidet sich dadurch wesentlich und vortheilhaft von der chinesischen Andeutungslosigkeit, in welcher das Verbum nicht einmal sicher durch seine Stellung, sondern oft nur materiell an seiner Bedeutung kenntlich ist. [...] Das Sanskrit bezeichnet auf ganz einfache und natürliche Weise jedes Wort als constitutiven Theil des Satzes. Die Einverleibungsmethode thut dies nicht, sondern lässt, wo sie nicht Alles in Eins zusammenschlagen kann, aus dem Mittelpunkte des Satzes Kennzeichen, gleichsam wie Spitzen, ausgehen, die Richtungen anzeigen, in welchen die einzelnen Theile, ihrem Verhältniss zum Satze gemäss, gesucht werden müssen.'

language' (*Formsprache*) – or whether it merely repurposed material items to express relations – a 'formless language' (*formlose Sprachen*; see Ringmacher 1996:129-181; Bumann 1966:103-115; Morpurgo Davies 1998:212-219):

No nation can completely escape the formal aspect of content, but the different, contrastive nature of form and of content and their opposing relation is not captured everywhere, and in just the same way neither is the true sense of forms. The formal aspect is represented as material alongside the content, that is it is represented formlessly, and the representation itself, the language, then becomes formless. Here the formal element and the content are material of equal rank, standing next to each other in the linguistic representation – and so both are also expressed by many languages as linguistic material, without the formal moment being especially distinguished from the material moment. Such languages have therefore only material elements.

(Steinthal 1860:317; cf. 1850:72)⁶

The linguistic form that Steinthal seeks to capture is, however, not simply the morphologically realised 'outer form' (*äußere Form*), but rather also the 'inner form' (*innere Form*; see Steinthal 1860:316-317; cf. 1850:71-72). 'Inner form' is a term first coined by Humboldt – and is generally associated with him – but, as Borsche (1989) has shown, the received interpretation of the term owes a great deal to Steinthal's later use of it. For Steinthal, the inner form is the ultimate principle governing the structure of a language. It is a concept whose implications and consequences reach out into many different aspects of Steinthal's linguistic and psychological theorising (see Ringmacher 1996:99-110; Bumann 1966:116-139), but here we focus narrowly on its role in Steinthal's language classification. For these purposes, outer form is simply the sound that constitutes the perceptible component of the linguistic expression, while the inner form is – in the terms of Steinthal's psychologicistic theory – the 'intuition of the intuition' (*Anschauung der Anschauung*), the process through which the consciousness grasps its concepts: 'The intuition of the intuition is the placing of the intuition into sound, the combination of the two, the *inner linguistic form*; while the sound is the outer linguistic form, and the representation belongs to the material of the consciousness' (*Die Anschauung der Anschauung ist die Versetzung der Anschauung in den Laut, die Verbindung beider, die i n n e r e S p r a c h f o r m*; während der Laut die äußere Sprachform ist, und die Vorstellung zu dem Stoffe des Bewußtseins gehört; Steinthal 1855:304; italics in the translation renders *Sperrung* in original). The problem for language classification lies in deciding whether or not the perceptible outer phenomena of a language are a sign of genuine inner form. The outer form alone is not a reliable indicator of the formal nature of a language: 'The outer shape of the phonetic form is no indicator at all for the presence or absence of true inner form' (*Ueberhaupt ist die äußere Gestalt der Lautform kein Kennzeichen für die An- oder Abwesenheit wahrhafter innerer Form*; Steinthal 1860:320-321). Rather, the decisive factor is whether the

6 Original: 'Formelles an dem Inhalte kann keinem Volke gänzlich entgangen sein; aber die verschiedene, entgegengesetzte Natur der Form und des Inhalts und ihr gegenseitiges Verhältniß wird nicht überall erfaßt; und ebenso auch nicht der wahrhafte Sinn der Formen. Das Formelle wird als Stoff neben dem Inhalt, also dieser formlos vorgestellt; und das Vorstellen selbst, die Sprache wird dann formlos. Hier sind Formelles und Inhalt beide gleichberechtigter, neben einander stehender, von der Sprache zu bezeichnender Stoff – und so werden auch beide in gleicher Weise von vielen Sprachen als Stoff der Sprache ausgedrückt, ohne daß das formelle Moment von dem materiellen durch die Behandlung besonders geschieden wäre. Solche Sprachen haben folglich nur Stoffelemente.'

speakers of the language conceive of the linguistic elements they use as purely formal or not:

If a language is formless in principle, then it does not possess a single true form. If even only one true form were to have been represented in the mind of a nation that speaks a formless language, then it would not have quickly disappeared and left behind darkness like a lightning bolt in the dark night, but would rather ignite and produce a glow that would have melted the entire way of thinking of the nation into a different shape.

(Steinthal 1860:319; cf. 1850:73)⁷

One advantage of Steinthal's appeal to an inner formal principle in classifying languages is that he can claim compatibility with agglutination theory. According to agglutination theory – first proposed by Franz Bopp (1791–1867) and widely accepted in one version or another by mid-century – the inflectional elements of the Indo-European languages are historically derived from free-standing material roots in these languages (see Morpurgo Davies 1998:176-177). This presents an obvious obstacle, or at least a problem that must be resolved, for any language classification based strictly on outer form, since it introduces a fluidity between morphological classes. Steinthal (1860:279-284, 320-321) maintains absolute, immutable classes by arguing that form-languages are distinguished from those that are formless because they have always had two classes of roots, one material and one formal, which are distinct in their inner forms. It is the presence of these formal roots that licensed the development of inflections in the Indo-European languages and others of similar type. In the case of the modern 'analytic' Indo-European languages – which through their loss of inflection appear to be regressing to a less formal nature – Steinthal (1855:366-367) insists that their independent pronouns and prepositions are also truly formal elements, since they replace the verb and noun inflections of the older 'synthetic' languages. The pronouns and prepositions are simply an alternative manifestation of the same inner formal principle. This is not the case for formless languages, which have only ever possessed material elements to express relations:

In this way there are therefore languages which represent the intuition 'A behind B' as three material elements: 'A back B' (or in whatever order they may place these elements). Such languages represent the given form as material and so are *formless languages*.

(Steinthal 1855:366; cf. 1860:317-318; italics renders *Sperrung* in original)⁸

3. The *Formungstrieb*

Gabelentz does not deny the distinction between material and form in language, but he does seek to dissolve Steinthal's absolute dichotomy. He prefers to see differences of degree in form across the

7 Original: 'Ist eine Sprache dem Principe nach formlos, so besitzt sie auch keine einzige wahre Form. Wäre nur eine wahre Form in dem Geiste eines Volkes, welches eine formlose Sprache spricht, vorgestellt worden, sie würde nicht wie ein Blitz in finsterner Nacht schnell vorübergegangen sein und dicke Finsterniß zurückgelassen haben; sie würde vielmehr gezündet und eine Gluth erzeugt haben, welche die ganze Denkweise des Volkes umgeschmolzen hätte.'

8 Original: 'So giebt es also Sprachen, welche die Anschauung "A hinter B" als drei Stoffelemente darstellen: "A Rücken B", oder in welcher Ordnung sie nun diese Elemente aufstellen mögen. Solche Sprachen stellen die gegebene Form als Stoff dar, und sind also f o r m l o s e S p r a c h e n.'

world's languages, all created by the *Formungstrieb*: 'For my part, I see everywhere here differences of degree, more or less lively manifestations of the drive to formation, not actual opposites that would justify me denying the presence of inner or outer form in a language' (*Ich meinerseits sehe hier überall Gradunterschiede, mehr oder minder lebhaftere Äusserungen des Formungstriebes, nicht eigentliche Gegensätze, die mich berechtigten einer Sprache die innere oder äussere Form abzusprechen*; Gabelentz 1891:326).⁹ He takes on Steinthal's parameters – material and form, with the subdivision of inner and outer form – and proceeds to problematise them. The aesthetically motivated *Formungstrieb* is what emerges from the remains.

'What does its [language's] material consist in?' asks Gabelentz (1891:316). 'The answer presents itself immediately: in everything that arouses human thought' (*Worin besteht deren Stoff? Die Antwort giebt sich von selbst: in Allem was des Menschen Denken erregt*). Although he does not delve too deeply into psychological subtleties, Gabelentz broadly follows Steinthal's Herbartian approach. In Gabelentz' scheme, the thought as 'complete representation' (*Gesamtvorstellung*) is analysed into parts, 'individual representations' (*Einzelvorstellungen*). The individual representations are then combined synthetically and, through this process, the relations between the material individual representations are recognised and represented in language. Initially these relations are simply additional material but, when they are 'applied properly', they are no longer perceived to be material, but form:

More or less sharply, [the mental eye] recognises and distinguishes the relations of the material individual representation among one another [...] And depending on the mass and direction in which this occurs, such categories also push towards linguistic representation. Inasmuch as this is the case, these are, as a rule, at first not forms for the language-creating mind, but rather material to be formed. [...] Material elements are also the binding agent, the lime and cement; but they are also, when they are applied properly, no longer felt to be material, but rather only binding, forming forces.

(Gabelentz 1891:317-318)¹⁰

The further distinction between inner and outer form Gabelentz (1891:319) then resolves with a similarly straightforward and uncomplicated definition: inner form refers to the categories that receive special linguistic expression, while outer form is the means used to achieve this expression. At this point, Gabelentz (1891:319-327) embarks on an extended survey of the various uses made of the terms 'inner form' and 'outer form' by his predecessors – citing Steinthal, Humboldt, August Friedrich Pott (1802–1887) and, to a lesser extent, Friedrich Müller (1834–1898) – which leaves the

9 The first attestation of the term *Formungstrieb* in the published record is in Gabelentz' definitive statement on linguistic form, his 1889 article 'Material and Form in Language' (*Stoff und Form in der Sprache*), a preliminary version of a section of his magnum opus, *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (Gabelentz 1891:316-348). There is a second edition of *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, from 1901, which contains substantive additions made after Gabelentz' death by Albrecht Graf von der Schulenburg (1865–1902), Gabelentz' nephew and pupil. Here we cite the *Formungstrieb* text as it appears in the 1891 first edition of *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, since it represents the last version of the text to be penned and approved by Gabelentz himself.

10 Original: 'Mit mehr or minderer Schärfe erkennt und unterscheidet [das geistige Auge] auch die Beziehungen der materiellen Einzelvorstellungen untereinander [...] Und je nach dem Masse und der Richtung, in der dies geschieht, drängen auch solche Kategorien zur sprachlichen Darstellung. Insoweit sind auch sie in der Regel für den sprachschaffenden Geist zunächst nicht Formen, sondern zu formender Stoff. [...] Stoffe sind ja auch die Bindemittel, auch Leim und Kitt; sie aber werden, wenn sie richtig angewandt sind, nicht mehr als Stoff, sondern nur als bindende, formende Kräfte empfunden.'

impression of a rather chaotic theoretical landscape. As Gabelentz (1891:327) comments, he doubts ‘whether much clarity on the matter has been achieved through [the survey]. A lot of what has been repeated here concerns the outer form, and all of it is aimed at the evaluation of languages [...]’ ([...] *ob die Sache dadurch sehr an Klarheit gewonnen [hat]. Vieles des hier Wiedergegebenen betrifft schon die äussere Form, Alles zweckt auf die Werthabschätzung der Sprachen ab [...]*). The principal failing of his predecessors, reflected in the survey, was to rely too heavily on a superficial assessment of the perceptible manifestations presented in the outer form of languages: ‘We see,’ comments Gabelentz (1891:320) in his discussion of Humboldt’s position on inner form, ‘how everywhere here the outer form, the morphology, is in the foreground, but behind it the inner need of formation is sought’ (*Man sieht, wie hier überall die äussere Form, die Morphologie im Vordergrunde steht, dahinter aber doch das innere Bedürfniss der Formung gesucht wird*).

Outer form alone is not a reliable indicator of the inner formal nature of languages – this is, as we saw in the previous section, also Steinthal’s position. According to Steinthal, to decide if a linguistic element is purely formal we must know if it is treated formally in the mind of the speaker, without any traces of material content. By contrast, Gabelentz argues – using an example that answers to Steinthal’s ‘A back B’ above – that once a linguistic expression has been used to express a relation, it makes a sudden and irrevocable transition to being formal:

If a material word is even once taken into service as an expression of relation through generalisation of its meaning, then transition has taken place in the soul: the more general meaning is from then on the predominant meaning. This change may occur rather quickly and yet of course unnoticed. And when, for example, the parents still spoke metaphorically of the belly of a house, as in the belly of a person, then by the same words the children might think of the inside of a person and the inside of a house, and from here the way to being a true formal preposition or postposition is not far.

(Gabelentz 1891:318; cf. *ibid.*:384)¹¹

Despite their best intentions, Gabelentz’ predecessors unjustifiably afforded the outer phenomena of inflectional morphology a special status in assessing the crucial property of inner form (cf. Gabelentz 2011[1879]:357-359). Even Steinthal must answer this charge: as we saw in the previous section, he treated the inflectional endings attested in the classical Indo-European languages as decisive proof of the eternal formal nature of the family, including its modern analytic offspring.¹² Gabelentz (1891:250-253), by contrast, denies in his discussion of language history the exclusive status of any special formal apparatus in specific language families. He envisages a ‘spiral course of language history’ (*Spirallauf der Sprachgeschichte*; *ibid.*:250), where all languages follow a spiralling path through analytic to synthetic structures and back again. Modern Chinese, for example, is tending towards agglutination, while its parent, the strongly isolating Classical Chinese,

11 Original: ‘Ist einmal das Stoffwort durch Verallgemeinerung seiner Bedeutung als Beziehungsausdruck in Dienst genommen worden, so hat sich auch in der Seele ein Umschlag vollzogen: die allgemeinere Bedeutung ist hinfort die vorwiegende. Dieser Wechsel mag ziemlich schnell und doch natürlich unvermerkt geschehen. Und wenn z.B. die Eltern noch bildlich vom Bauche des Hauses sprachen, wie vom Bauche des Menschen, so mögen die Kinder sich unter denselben Worten das Innere des Menschen und das Innere des Hauses denken, und von da an ist der Weg zur wahrhaft formalen Prä- oder Postposition nicht mehr weit.’

12 Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) later dismissed Steinthal’s distinction with a similar argument (Wundt 1900:552-554; cf. Levelt 2013:189). Wundt does not cite Gabelentz or any other predecessors for this argument.

shows traces of an older agglutinative, perhaps even inflecting stage (ibid.:252).

Having dismissed the possibility of linguistic form as the simple representation of underlying thought, Gabelentz asks why our ancestors would have invented such seemingly superfluous devices as grammatical gender, congruence, conjugations and declensions, and why we maintain these to a greater or lesser extent in our languages today. He rules out an explanation in terms of the needs of communication alone (Gabelentz 1891:343; cf. Gabelentz 2011[1879]:388-389): ‘But many languages – if we take them by word and letter – say much more than is necessary for understanding, certainly also more than the speaker thought and intended’ (*Und doch sagen viele Sprachen, wenn man sie beim Worte und beim Buchstaben nimmt, weit mehr, als zur Verständigung nöthig ist, gewiss auch mehr, als der Redner gedacht und beabsichtigt hat*). Even grammatical devices that may seem more pragmatically motivated exceed the needs of communication. Here Gabelentz (ibid.:346) lists such examples as voice alternations, the distinction between predicative and attributive constructions, conjunctions and other means for combining clauses to form periods, and the more or less rigid rules of syntax and the eccentricities they permit in various languages. The source of all these devices, argues Gabelentz (ibid.:347), lies in our aesthetic drives. Grammar is a luxury (*Luxus*) that we grant ourselves; it emerges from the *Formungstrieb*, the drive we have to shape our speech as we please, according to our whims and fancies, rather than just providing a flat, objective description of the world. The *Formungstrieb* is simply part of the more general ‘play-drive’ (*Spieltrieb*), explains Gabelentz, using Friedrich Schiller’s (1759–1805; 1960[1795]) term for the general aesthetic drive to which he attributed all artistic efforts:

It is just a higher level of the play-drive, that joy at free, artistic formation, that in fresh fancy puts the stamp of its own individuality and mood on every creation. Even when the artistic achievement was still slight, that little surplus of effort that I made on my work over and above bare utility was already a piece of love, and gave the dead material a breath of the personal for all time. And precisely the same thing happened with language. The soul demands something more than that simple business-like style that says in objective clarity all that is necessary and nothing more. It wants to identify itself with the thing, how it relates to its world, temperamentally, fancifully, moodily. I repeat the expression from earlier: it wants not only to express something but also itself, and wants not only to more securely compel the listener to share a thought, but also share a feeling. Here it conducts its business to the full – it is indeed so rich that it adds some of its own ingredient even to the smallest bit, at first according to the inspiration of the moment, apparently without rule but always meaningfully; then as time progresses ever more under the force of habitual norms.

(Gabelentz 1891:344)¹³

13 Original: ‘Es ist doch nur eine höhere Stufe des Spieltriebes, jenes Gefallen an freier, künstlerischer Formung, das in frischer Laune jeder Schöpfung den Stempel der eigenen Individualität und Stimmung aufdrücken muss. Es sei die künstlerische Leistung noch so gering: schon jener Überschuss von Arbeit, die ich meinem Werke über den blossen Nützlichkeitsbedarf hinaus zugewendet habe, ist ein Stück Liebe gewesen und hat dem toten Stoffe für alle Zeiten einen Hauch des Persönlichen gegeben. Und ebenso geschah es mit der Sprache. Die Seele verlangte ein Mehreres als jenen Geschäftsstil, der in objectiver Klarheit alles Nothwendige sagt und weiter nichts. Sie will in der Sache sich selbst wiederfinden, wie sie sich ihrer Welt gegenüber gemüthvoll, phantastisch, launenhaft verhält, will, – dass ich den Ausdruck wiederhole, – nicht nur etwas, sondern auch sich selbst aussprechen, und wird um so sicherer den Hörer nicht nur zum Mitdenken, sondern auch zum Mitfühlen zwingen. Da wirthschaftet sie aus dem Vollen, – sie ist ja so reich; da wird auch dem Kleinsten etwas von eigener Zuthat angeheftet, erst nach der Eingebung des Augenblickes, scheinbar regellos und doch immer bedeutsam; dann je länger je mehr unter dem

The *Formungstrieb* is an essential part of human language, and all languages, to a greater or lesser extent, will show signs of its operation. Correctly judging the inner formal nature of a language requires a knowledge of how to productively use it equivalent to that of a native speaker. In the terms of Gabelentz' theory of grammar-writing (see McElvenny forthcoming:2-7), we need a *Synonymik*, an account of the fine distinctions in sense between expressions in a language that are otherwise propositionally synonymous:

From the outset we must recognise this drive in every human language. [...] The drive manifests itself differently in its degree and direction, and in this way only the deepest knowledge of the language can judge it justly. An exhaustive *Synonymik*, lexical as well as grammatical, would necessarily lead to knowledge of where and how much the language-forming spirit actuates the urge for subjective shaping of the world.

(Gabelentz 1891:347)¹⁴

Grammar is the residue of the formal choices that have previously been made in the language, by our ancestors and by us. In the earliest stages of language everything would have proceeded 'in gypsy-like freedom according to the inspiration of the moment' ([...] *in zigeunerischer Freiheit nach der Eingebung des Augenblickes*; Gabelentz 1891:363), where only a few incipient grammatical categories had a stable form (ibid.:363-365). But this initial freedom inevitably became constrained by the need for predictability in communicative intercourse and through simple habit, the product of mental and behavioural inertia:

In this way limits of the usual, pleasing, allowed will have been set to natural arbitrariness early in the use of language. Special customs formed in every language community, and if human language was originally one, then the evidence of this unity will have been cleared away very quickly.

(Gabelentz 1891:371)¹⁵

In language there is a progression along the continuum 'possibility – rule – law' (*Möglichkeit – Regel – Gesetz*), as Gabelentz (1891:370) entitled the concluding section of his discussion on form. What begins as just one among many possible means of expression chosen by a speaker becomes, through repeated use, the rule or standard form of expression, and then finally a law stipulating the required and only permissible form. This restriction can then be broken, leading to innovation in the grammar, but at this point the novel expression is no longer a free choice from among numerous possibilities, but rather an act of liberation from the law. Our free, artistic drive to shape our speech according to our moods and desires is therefore gradually weighed down and restrained by the

Zwänge gewohnheitsmässiger Normen.'

14 Original: 'Diesen Trieb müssen wir wohl von vornherein jeder menschlichen Sprache zuerkennen. [...] Nach Mass und Richtung äussert der Trieb sich verschieden, und insoweit vermag nur die eingehendste Sprachkenntniss ihn gerecht zu beurtheilen. Eine erschöpfende *Synonymik*, sowohl eine lexikalische wie eine grammatische, müsste zu der Erkenntniss führen, inwieweit und wo der sprachbildende Geist den Drang nach subjectiver Gestaltung der Welt bethätigt.'

15 Original: 'So mochten denn auch der naturwüchsigen Willkür in der Behandlung der Sprache frühe schon Schranken des Üblichen, Gefälligen, Erlaubten gesetzt werden. In jeder Sprachgemeinde bildeten sich besondere Bräuche; und wenn alle menschliche Sprache ursprünglich eine war, so mochten sich die Spuren dieser Einheit recht schnell verwischen.'

accumulated mass of past expressions. In order to be understood and out of sheer mental inertia we generally bear this weight. But on occasion we may push it aside, breaking the rules of grammar and renewing the linguistic system.

Steinthal of course recognised diversity in inner linguistic form across the world's languages; this is one aspect of the relativism inherent in the *Völkerpsychologie* of Steinthal and his colleague Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) that leads Kalmar (1987) to cast them as forerunners of Boasian cultural pluralism. For Steinthal, the inner linguistic form of each language represents a different subjective world:

Instinctive consciousness is therefore instinctive freedom, is subjectivity – that is, a subjective conception of the objective – and this grants the possibility of the greatest diversity in its product, the inner linguistic form. It will sometimes possess certain forms, sometimes not, sometimes such forms and sometimes other forms.

(Steinthal 1855:378)¹⁶

However, even though Steinthal recognises this diversity in inner linguistic form, he still perceives a fundamental, unbridgeable gulf between those languages with true formal elements and those without. While Gabelentz sees form developing gradually everywhere through individual expressive choices, Steinthal relegates consideration of expressive possibilities to the separate field of stylistics: 'While grammar treats language as material, the object of stylistics is the form that is given to language in order to represent a certain content in a certain form' (*Während die Grammatik die Sprache als Stoff behandelt, ist der Gegenstand der Styllehre die Form, welche der Sprache gegeben wird, um einen bestimmten Inhalt in bestimmter Form darzustellen*; Steinthal 1866:474, 478). That is, grammar studies the properties of a language as a material to be shaped into a particular representation, while stylistics studies the many ways in which the material can be shaped. Here Steinthal (*ibid.*:474) uses the analogy of a marble statue. Language as material is like the marble block from which the statue is made. The form is the shape imposed on the marble block by the sculptor, which reproduces the form of the subject that the statue represents. In language, there is a multitude of possible representations of any content and the 'speaking artist' (*redender Künstler*) has a free choice from among them: 'The same content permits many different representations – [the speaking artist] will decide which he will realise' (*Derselbe Inhalt läßt mannichfache Darstellungen zu, – [der redende Künstler] wird bestimmen, welche er ausführen will*; Steinthal *ibid.*:478).

The sense of 'form' Steinthal has in mind in his discussion of stylistics is the one in which all of language is form because it is nothing but representation. The sense targeted by Gabelentz, that in which some languages have special formal elements dedicated to representing the formal components of thought, is quarantined by Steinthal from these stylistic questions (see Steinthal 1855:139-140; cf. Ringmacher 1996:144-145). Gabelentz' critique breaks down this separation and introduces a continuum between grammar and style (cf. Gabelentz 1891:108-111). While Steinthal treats language structure as the material to be shaped into a representation of thought, which can be

¹⁶ Original: 'Das instinctive Selbstbewusstsein ist also instinctive Freiheit, ist Subjectivität, d.h. eine subjective Auffassung des Objectiven; und somit ist die Möglichkeit zu der größten Verschiedenheit ihres Erzeugnisses, der innern Sprachform, gegeben. Diese wird bald gewisse Formen besitzen, bald nicht, bald solche und bald andere.'

more or less suited to the task through the presence or absence of dedicated formal elements, Gabelentz sees language structure simply as solidified style.

4. Aesthetic elements in the Humboldtian tradition

In an opening footnote in his definitive statement on linguistic form, the article ‘Stoff und Form in der Sprache’, Gabelentz (1889:185) promises that his ‘views deviate significantly from those of [his] great predecessors and contemporaries’ (*Anschaungen aber weichen von denen hervorragender Vorgänger und Zeitgenossen erheblich ab*). While Gabelentz’ position is most certainly unique, it cannot be considered novel. It is perhaps best seen as the recalibration of factors. The aesthetic aspect of language was already prominent in the work of Humboldt and many of his followers, and was merely compartmentalised by Steinthal. Seen from this perspective, Gabelentz is simply placing renewed emphasis on aesthetics in determining formal structures.

A recurring motif in Humboldt’s conception of language is its primary role as a medium of free self-expression (see, e.g., Humboldt 1836:59-60), and from this perspective Humboldt explicitly drew parallels between language and art. For Humboldt, the synthetic process that combines sound and concept to produce a linguistic expression – the process which, as we noted in section 2, underlies his notion of linguistic form – is comparable to the activity of an artist imposing the image they wish to create on physical material: ‘In general language often reminds us of art, but it does so at most here, in the deepest and most inexplicable part of its process. The sculptor and painter also weds the idea to the material [...]’ (*Überhaupt erinnert die Sprache oft, aber am meisten hier, in dem tiefsten und unerklärbarsten Theile ihres Verfahrens, an die Kunst. Auch der Bildner und Maler vermählt die Idee mit dem Stoff [...]*; Humboldt 1836:103). Steinthal, as we saw in the previous section, placed the individual, creative aspect of this process under the rubric of representation, which he considered separately from the structure of languages. Humboldt, however, made no such distinction. As Schmitter (1982) argues, there is good reason to believe that Humboldt was not simply indulging in a superficial analogy: along with other parallels, Humboldt’s description of the synthetic process behind linguistic form recapitulates in both its contours and details earlier statements on artistic form in his specifically aesthetic writings. In this connection, we might also observe that one name Humboldt uses to refer to a force that drives the formation of the outer phonetic form (*Lautform*) that participates in the synthetic process is the *Bildungstrieb*, a term that shares an obvious likeness to Gabelentz’ *Formungstrieb*.¹⁷ The *Bildungstrieb* can be more or less strong in a language, leading to a corresponding level of development in the linguistic form:

The firm connection of the two main constitutive parts of language [the phonetic form and the inner linguistic rules] manifests itself primarily in sensual and imaginative life that in this way bloom in language, while a one-sided dominance of understanding, dryness and soberness are the unfailing consequences if a language is intellectually expanded and refined in a period in which the *Bildungstrieb* of the sounds no longer has the necessary strength, or the forces have operated in a one-sided way from the

17 Humboldt’s *Bildungstrieb* is most likely inspired by the *Bildungstrieb* of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840; 1791[1781]), the vitalistic force believed to drive the formation of living organisms. As an undergraduate, Humboldt attended some of Blumenbach’s lectures in Göttingen (see Quillien 2015:67-68).

beginning. Specifically, we see this in those languages in which some tenses are formed only with separate auxiliary verbs, such as in Arabic; that is, where the idea of such forms is no longer effectively accompanied by the drive of sound formation.

(Humboldt 1836:102-103)¹⁸

Humboldt also maintains the view that languages simultaneously provide a store of means individual speakers can use to express themselves creatively while at the same time placing constraints on their possibilities of expression. This represents in essence the same tension between innovation and inertia posited by Gabelentz.

By a word no one thinks of exactly the same thing as another person, and this still tiny difference ripples, like a circle in water, throughout the whole language. All understanding is therefore at the same time a not-understanding, all agreement in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence. In the way in which language is modified in each individual it reveals a *power* the individual has over it, which works against the force described above that it exercises over him. We can view its force (if we wish to use the expression of mental force) as a physiological effect; the power that comes from the individual is one that is purely dynamic. In the influence that language has on the individual lie the *laws* of language and its forms, in the reaction that comes from the individual a principle of freedom.

(Humboldt 1836:64-65; italics renders *Sperrung* in original)¹⁹

This underlying aesthetic current within Humboldt's writings was maintained in various guises by several of his followers. Perhaps most significant for the influence they had on Gabelentz are August Friedrich Pott and Gabelentz' own father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1807–1874), both figures whom Gabelentz held in high regard (see, e.g., Gabelentz 1886; 1888). While Pott endorsed Steinthal's embrace of the empirical comparison of languages in opposition to the *a priori* theorising of the *grammaire générale* tradition, he felt that Steinthal still brought too many preconceptions to the task. In Pott's (1863) critique of Steinthal (1860), we can recognise key elements of Gabelentz' later position. Language, according to Pott, serves a multitude of purposes, and the apparent synonymy that we encounter in language is actually the reflection of the fine distinctions in the numerous dimensions of linguistic expression:

Language has the task of *stimulating* us mentally to special feelings, representations,

18 Original: 'Die feste Verbindung der beiden constitutiven Haupttheile der Sprache [der 'Lautform' und der 'inneren Sprachgesetze'] äußert sich vorzüglich in dem sinnlichen und phantasiereichen Leben, das ihr dadurch aufblüht, da hingegen einseitige Verstandesherrschaft, Trockenheit und Nüchternheit die unfehlbaren Folgen sind, wenn sich die Sprache in einer Epoche intellectueller erweitert und verfeinert, wo der Bildungstrieb der Laute nicht mehr die erforderliche Stärke besitzt, oder wo gleich anfangs die Kräfte einseitig gewirkt haben. Im Einzelnen sieht man dies an den Sprachen, in denen einige Tempora wie im Arabischen, nur durch getrennte Hilfsverba gebildet werden, wo also die Idee solcher Formen nicht mehr wirksam von dem Triebe der Lautformung begleitet gewesen ist.'

19 Original: 'Keiner denkt bei dem Wort gerade und genau das, was der andre, und die noch so kleine Verschiedenheit zittert, wie ein Kreis im Wasser, durch die ganze Sprache fort. Alles Verstehen ist daher immer zugleich ein Nicht-Verstehen, alle Übereinstimmung in Gedanken und Gefühlen zugleich ein Auseinandergehen. In der Art, wie sich die Sprache in jedem Individuum modificirt, offenbart sich, ihrer im Vorigen dargestellten M a c h t gegenüber, eine Gewalt des Menschen über sie. Ihre Macht kann man (wenn man den Ausdruck auf geistige Kraft anwenden will) als ein physiologisches Wirken ansehen; die von ihm ausgehende Gewalt ist ein rein dynamisches. In dem auf ihn ausgeübten Einfluß liegt die G e s e t z m ä ß i g k e i t der Sprache und ihrer Formen, in der aus ihm kommenden Rückwirkung ein Princip der Freiheit.'

and to the formation of certain concepts and judgements. But the kind of stimulation is very *diverse*, depending on *logical, ethical or aesthetic, rhetorical, poetic* and other needs. This is the reason why there is not only an advantage in having *synonymous* expressions that are nearly identical and yet have *different* effects especially for feelings, but also the reason why it is necessary to have a store of turns of phrase and phraseological manners of speaking for essentially *the same thing* that is not too limited.

(Pott 1863:193; italics renders *Sperrung* in original)²⁰

This account of synonymy Pott illustrates largely with lexical examples, but its applicability to more strictly grammatical aspects of language is apparent, and Gabelentz' (1891:347) later plea for an 'exhaustive *Synonymik*, lexical as well as grammatical,' as the best means to capturing the formal nature of a language – which we examined in the previous section – provides further evidence of the kinship between these corresponding positions of Pott and Gabelentz.

Like Gabelentz later, Pott (1863:231-237) recognises the distinction between material and form in language, but rejects Steinthal's absolute dichotomy. Comparing the Indo-European and Ural- Altaic languages from a historical perspective, he sees no basis for claiming the presence of original formal elements in the former family while denying them in the latter. Looking at Chinese and the typologically similar Thai and Burmese, Pott questions Steinthal's impartiality in applying his formal measure. Steinthal, alleges Pott, seeks out specific grammatical properties of Chinese to bring it into the fold of form-languages, even though morphologically it is on a par with Thai and Burmese. It would seem that Steinthal could not bear to consign Chinese, a language of a great civilisation and literature, to the formless category. In his private notebook, Gabelentz (2011[1879]:358-359) later makes the same point (see McElvenny forthcoming:12).

The role of his father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz, in shaping Gabelentz' approach to language is reinforced by a subtle but recurring textual link between the two. In his theoretical expositions, Gabelentz (1869:377; 1875:160-161; 1891:102; cf. *ibid.*:109) repeatedly invokes the saying *le style, c'est l'homme* as a folk affirmation of the point that the style of expression casts light on how the world is conceptualised in each language and by each individual.²¹ Hans Conon employs the phrase in the same connection, as in his 1861 essay 'On the passive' (*Über das Passivum*), a typological investigation, on the model of Humboldt's (1830[1827]) 'On the dual' (*Über den Dualis*), of the expression of passive voice across a diverse selection of the world's languages:

If we want to achieve clear understanding about any phenomenon in language, then we

20 Original: 'Die Sprache hat die Aufgabe, uns geistig a n z u r e g e n zu besonderen Gefühlen, Vorstellungen und zu Bildung bestimmter Begriffe und Urtheile. Die A r t ihrer Anregung aber muß, je nach dem l o g i s c h e n, e t h i s c h e n oder ä s t h e t i s c h e n, r h e t o r i s c h e n, p o e t i s c h e n und anderweiten Bedürfniß, sehr m a n n i c h f a l t i g seyn. Daher nicht nur der Vortheil nahezu auf eins hinauslaufender und doch besonders für das Gefühl oft so überaus v e r s c h i e d e n wirksamer s y n o n y m e r Einzelausdrücke, sondern auch die Nothwendigkeit eines nicht zu knappen Vorrathes von Wendungen und phraseologischer Redeweisen für wesentlich D a s s e l b e.'

21 The saying is of course generally attributed to Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–1788), in his address upon induction into the French Academy in 1753. What Gabelentz repeats is a folk misquotation; Buffon (1872[1753]:24) in fact said: *Ces choses sont hors de l'homme, le style est l'homme même*. The original quotation represents the climax of Buffon's avowal of the importance of style and expression in capturing scientific truths; only knowledge that is elegantly expressed will be passed on, he argued.

have to examine the concept and the nature of language itself. Language, as the expression of human thought through articulated sounds, is the product of a necessity grounded in the mental nature of man. Just as breathing is a requirement of animal life, language is a requirement of mental life. But while animal life is the same for all humans and therefore the process of breathing is the same everywhere, the infinite diversity of the human mind causes a similar diversity of language, so that not only every group of people speaks its own language, but in reality every person does, and the phrase *le style, c'est l'homme* has its justification and profound meaning.

(H.C. Gabelentz 1861:451-452; italics added)²²

We can be certain that this is not just a superficial similarity in phraseology between father and son. Gabelentz (1891:462) counted his father's essay on the passive among the best examples of typological research (cf. McElvenny forthcoming:13), and Schulenburg (Gabelentz 1901:327) paid homage to the role of the father when he added, as a kind of motto, a quotation from the essay to the beginning of Gabelentz' discussion of inner form: language is '[...] not the expression of what is to be represented, but rather of the one who is representing; language, in the shape it shows itself to us, is not to be treated objectively, but subjectively' ([...] *nicht Ausdruck des Darzustellenden, sondern des Darstellenden, sie ist in der Gestalt, in welcher sie sich uns zeigt, nicht objectiv, sondern subjectiv zu fassen*; H.C. Gabelentz 1861:452-453).

An appeal to individual aesthetic considerations in accounting for linguistic structure was therefore already very much an established part of the Humboldtian tradition as it came down to Gabelentz. This aspect was simply able to resurface in his writings as he broke down the fixed psychological scheme of Steinthal's linguistic typology.

5. Contemporary arguments against material and form

Gabelentz also drew inspiration from outside the Humboldtian tradition: in particular, the arguments he deployed against Steinthal's division of material and form in language were more or less already present in broader contemporary linguistic discourse. By Gabelentz' time, there was a general movement, directed against the rampant psychologism of Steinthal, among other views, which saw language as a social institution, as a product of chance shaped by the functional-pragmatic needs of its speakers. A prominent leader of this new direction, and an unashamed polemicist whose targets included Steinthal, Humboldt, and August Schleicher (1821–1868) was William Dwight Whitney

22 Original: 'Wenn wir irgend eine Erscheinung in der Sprache uns zu klarem Verständniss bringen wollen, müssen wir auf den Begriff und das Wesen der Sprache selbst zurück gehen. Die Sprache, als der Ausdruck des menschlichen Denkens durch articulirte Laute, ist das Product einer in der geistigen Natur des Menschen begründeten Nothwendigkeit. So wie das Athmen dem thierischen Leben, so ist die Sprache dem geistigen Leben Bedürfniss. Während aber das animalische Leben bei allen Menschen gleichmässig und darum auch der Athmungsprocess überall derselbe ist, so bedingt die unendliche Mannigfaltigkeit des menschlichen Geistes eine gleiche Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprache, so dass nicht nur jeder Volksstamm, sondern in Wahrheit jeder Mensch seine eigene Sprache redet, und das: *le style c'est l'homme* seine Berechtigung und tiefere Bedeutung erhält.' The analogy between the physiology of breathing and the expression of thought through language is a recurring motif in the Humboldtian tradition. Steinthal (1867:viii) and Gabelentz (2013[1881]:26) both employ versions of this analogy. Pott (1863:218-219) enumerates several other physiological analogies in his critique of the morphological comparison offered by Steinthal (1860).

(1827–1894; see Nerlich 1990). We can be sure that Gabelentz knew at least the key writings of Whitney: quite apart from his high profile in the contemporary international linguistics community, Whitney's (1875) introduction to general linguistics *The Life and Growth of Language* is cited by Gabelentz (1891:145) as an example of an outline of the general principles of language history, alongside Hermann Paul's (1846–1921;1880) *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*.

The theoretical foundation that underlies Whitney's critique is his common-sense view of language as a human institution as opposed to the more 'metaphysical' views of language as the emanation of the psyche, or even as a natural organism. In a vein traced again by Gabelentz, Whitney argues that languages develop in the way they do simply because grammar is the accumulation of choices that speakers have made in concrete communicative situations: '[...] language is what its speakers make it: its structure, of whatever character, represents their collective capacity in that particular direction of effort. It is, not less than every other part of their civilization, the work of the race ; every generation, every individual, has borne a part in shaping it' (Whitney 1875:224). This is a position adopted also by several of Whitney's contemporaries, such as Michel Bréal (1832–1915), Johan Nicolai Madvig (1804–1886) and Philipp Wegener (1848–1916), and which became something of an orthodoxy towards the end of the century, as it was incorporated into Neogrammarian doctrine (see Nerlich 1990). Although, as we saw in section 3, Gabelentz dismissed communicative needs as the principal factor driving the development of elaborate formal devices, he did not deny the obvious role of language in communication. This is particularly pronounced in passages of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* that deal with historical language change:

Generally language serves intercourse; that is, two parties, between whom it should mediate, the 'me' and the 'you'. It is therefore independent of both parties: I have to speak so that you understand me, otherwise my speech fails in its purpose. In other words: your language must also be mine, I have to speak approximately the same way as you are used to speaking and hearing spoken. This habit is based on tradition, we are both bound to this tradition.

(Gabelentz 1891:191)²³

In this connection Gabelentz (1891:191-195) set up an opposition between two competing drives, towards 'comfort' and towards 'clearness' (*Bequemlichkeits-* and *Deutlichkeitstrieb*), that motivate linguistic change. These drives operate on all levels of language – phonetically, where indistinct articulation represents comfort for the speaker and drives phonetic attrition, which is counterbalanced by emphatic articulation for clearness; to grammar, where, for example, comfort led to the loss of inflection in the *lingua rustica*, and clearness elaborated new grammatical means in the modern Romance languages.²⁴ But even the concession to 'comfort' and 'clearness' is not maintained on an exclusively functional-pragmatic plane by Gabelentz. 'Clearness', in an extended

23 Original: 'Regelmässig dient die Sprache dem Verkehre, das heisst zweien Parteien, zwischen denen sie vermitteln soll, dem Ich und dem Du. Darum ist sie von beiden Parteien abhängig: ich muss so reden, dass Du es verstehst, sonst verfehlt meine Rede ihren Zweck. Mit anderen Worten: Deine Sprache muss auch die meine sein, ich muss annähernd so reden, wie Du zu reden und reden zu hören gewohnt bist. Diese Gewöhnung beruht auf Überlieferung, an diese Überlieferung sind wir beide gebunden.'

24 The details of Gabelentz' drives to comfort and clearness are no doubt original, but his notion of 'comfort' shows some similarities with Whitney's 'tendency to economy' (Whitney 1875:53 et passim), which also operates on both a phonetic and a semantic level (see Nerlich 1990:112-114).

sense, can be of temperamental and aesthetic nature:

However, the reason and purpose of the need for clearness is not always related to business: it can also be temperamental and aesthetic, and in this case we prefer to speak more of expressive, vivid, striking language than clear language. But it is still related to essentially the same clearness. The question is only: what is supposed to be indicated, what is meant? Clearness is served even by those forms and turns of speech in which the speaker manifests his subjectivity or wants to influence the mood of the hearer, those particles and phrases that give speech the character of broad temperament, considered thought or hefty excitement, the manifestations of modesty and politeness, circumlocutions of all kinds, euphemisms and their opposites, which emphasise particular properties of things. We might think of the many expressions for 'to die', 'to be drunk', etc. What is clear in this sense is no less the personal and tender than the factual and rough.

(Gabelentz 1891:195)²⁵

The strongest parallels between Gabelentz and Whitney can be seen in Whitney's arguments against the division of material and form in language, put forward most explicitly in an 1872 paper, 'On material and form in language', which was incorporated in an abridged, simplified form as chapter 11 of *The Life and Growth of Language*.²⁶ In both texts, Whitney offers an uncompromising defence of agglutination theory (Whitney 1872:88; 1875:89-97, 222), and broadens the outer formal franchise to include syntax as a legitimate but under-appreciated means of formation, citing the prototypical example of Chinese (Whitney 1872:81; 1875:221). The indisputable fluidity and diversity of form in the world's languages, argues Whitney, makes it impossible to draw a clear line between material and formal linguistic elements:

Nor is there any fixed and definite line to be drawn between the linguistic expression of material and that of form. There is rather a shading off from purely formal elements, synthetically expressed, through auxiliaries and relational words, into independent vocables belonging to parts of speech usually ranked as material. The same word has its more material and its more formal meanings and uses. [...] Many relations whose synthetic expression constitutes an important part of the grammar of one language are in another left to the mere collocations of the phrase [...]

(Whitney 1872:87)

Whitney's conclusion prefigures Gabelentz', that any apparent formal use of a linguistic expression immediately and necessarily implies the presence of form in a language. Any differences

25 Original: 'Nicht immer jedoch ist das Deutlichkeitsbedürfniss seinem Grunde und Zwecke nach geschäftlich: es kann auch gemüthlich und ästhetisch sein, und dann redet man wohl lieber von ausdrucksvoller, anschaulicher, eindringlicher Sprache, als von deutlicher. Und doch ist es im Grunde immer die Deutlichkeit, auf die es dabei ankommt. Es fragt sich nur: Was soll angedeutet werden, was wird bedeutet? Auch jene Formen und Wendungen in der Rede dienen der Deutlichkeit, in denen der Redende und Phrasen, die der Rede das Gepräge breiter Gemüthlichkeit, bedächtiger Überlegung oder heftiger Erregung verleihen, die Äusserungen der Bescheidenheit und Höflichkeit, Umschreibungen aller Art, Euphemismen und ihre Gegentheile, die der Sache besondere Merkmale abgewinnen, – man denke an die vielerlei Ausdrücke für sterben, betrunken sein u.s.w. Deutlich in diesem Sinne ist das Persönliche und Zarte nicht minder, als das Sachliche und Derbe.'

26 Whitney (1872) is directed primarily against Friedrich Müller (1871), who offers a particularly succinct and correspondingly unsubtle version of contemporary received opinion on material and form.

are differences of degree only:

[...] there is no real reason, no scientific accuracy, in calling certain languages, as distinguished from others, “form-languages,” as if the possession of forms were other than universal, or as if a part of human speech possessed “true forms,” while the rest had only apparent or un genuine forms. For, as we have seen, a form in language is simply the incorporate expression of an idea which is regarded as subordinate to a class of ideas, as they modification or the determinant of their relation ; and wherever that end is attained, there is form. And it is attained everywhere, only in varying extent, and by discordant means ; it is impossible to conceive of a language not in its absolutely incipient stage which should be destitute of form.

(Whitney 1872:92; see also 1875:222)

The consideration of formal means beyond morphology that Whitney advocates provides further clues to the development of Gabelentz’ own thoughts on material and form in language. After discussing inner form, Gabelentz (1891:327-342) outlines at length some of the outer formal diversity exhibited by the world’s languages. In additional passages of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* not in his original 1889 paper, Gabelentz (1891:348-365) then sketches two ‘formal means of the proto-language’ (*Formalmittel der Ursprache*; 1891:364), assumed to be present from the beginning of human speech and maintained in all existing languages: syntax (*Wortstellung*) and intonation and modulation of the voice (*Stimmungsmimik*). Under the former heading Gabelentz (1891:348-357) provides a summary of his notions of ‘psychological subject and predicate’, essentially topic and comment as understood in modern theories of information structure (see Elffers 1991 and Seuren 1998:120-133 for historical background). Under the latter rubric Gabelentz (1891:357-365) includes such phenomena as the tone of voice for different sentence types – interrogatives, commands, etc – but also expressions of fright, surprise and excitement, as well as onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. Morphology – the quintessential means of formation – is derivative of these more primitive means: agglutination takes us from syntax to inflection, while sound symbolism is the origin of the vowel alternations of the Semitic languages and Indo-European accent (Gabelentz 1891:334-335, 363-364).

Syntax lies not only at the beginning of Gabelentz’ account of the genesis of formal means, but would seem also to have played an important role in the development of his views on material and form in language more generally. Syntax was an enduring interest of Gabelentz; his earliest academic publications, the 1869 ‘Ideen zu einer vergleichenden Syntax’, and the much longer 1875 ‘Weiteres zur vergleichenden Syntax’, offer a generalising account of syntactic phenomena across a range of languages. These articles, through their very subject matter, expand the formal franchise by elevating syntax to a central place in the formal apparatus of languages. In the 1869 paper this remains largely implicit, but it becomes more explicit in 1875: ‘By my thinking, syntax warrants a much more importance place in grammar than is normally afforded to it’ (*[es] gebührt meines Bedünkens der Syntax eine weit wichtigere Stellung in der Grammatik, als die ihr gemeiniglich eingeräumte*; Gabelentz 1875:131-132). The increasing emphasis on the truly grammatical nature of syntactic phenomena no doubt has to do with the principal language that Gabelentz worked with professionally, namely Classical Chinese. Of course, Steinthal (1860:115) had also already

recognised the syntax of Classical Chinese as one of the properties of that language that made it a *Formsprache* – along with its particles, or ‘empty words’ (see also Ringmacher 1996:162-164) – but this did not impinge on his closet admiration of inflection. Gabelentz turned the tables on the traditional grammatical hierarchy, putting syntax before all else:

[...] the grammar of an isolating language is syntax alone. Now I grant that many of the modern Indo-European grammars stop at that point where syntax should begin. But this does not mean that syntax stops being an essential part of the grammar, but rather than those books stop being complete grammars. Indeed I believe a complete grammar must not only contain a description of syntax, but should in fact start out from the syntax.

(Gabelentz 1884:273)²⁷

In these early writings on comparative syntax we can detect many other features of the aesthetic sentiments Gabelentz later articulated more explicitly. In describing the rules governing the syntactic structure of German sentences, Gabelentz (1875:138) likens the speaker to an artist, who is presented with various rules of his medium, and who makes free use of them to paint the image that appears before his mind’s eye. In his discussion of the fixed word order of the modern Romance languages, and specifically French, in contrast to the freer word order of Latin, he talks about the tension between free expression and the increasing restriction that emerges through habit (Gabelentz 1875:159-161).

6. Conclusion

The *Formungstrieb* of Gabelentz is an aesthetically grounded individual creative drive that is taken to constantly repurpose and reformulate existing expressions in language. Linguistic form is nothing but the accumulated product of this drive. This aesthetic approach was developed chiefly in opposition to Steinthal’s psychologistic interpretation of the Humboldtian notion of linguistic form. While Gabelentz’ position most certainly represents a unique view on the question of form in language, it is not entirely novel. Humboldt and some of his followers, in particular Pott and Hans Conon von der Gabelentz, had already laid great emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of language. Gabelentz’ main achievement was to allow these considerations to resurface by cutting the psychological constraints Steinthal imposed on form. Even Gabelentz’ critique of Steinthal is not novel: by mid-century psychologism in linguistics was already under attack from other quarters, and Gabelentz’ arguments against Steinthal’s psychologism show unmistakable similarities to others current at the time, especially those of Whitney.

There is a temptation to draw a link between Gabelentz’ aesthetic conception of language and the slightly later ‘idealist’ position associated with Karl Vossler (1872–1949; 1904; 1905). Certainly there is agreement between Gabelentz and Vossler on key points, such as viewing linguistic

27 Original ‘[...] die Grammatik einer isolierenden Sprache [ist] lediglich Syntax. Nun hören freilich viele der modernen indogermanischen Grammatiken da auf, wo die Syntax anfangen sollte. Aber damit hört die Syntax nicht auf, ein wesentlicher Teil der Grammatik zu sein, sondern jene Bücher hören auf, vollständige Grammatiken zu sein. In der That glaube ich, eine vollständige Grammatik müsse nicht nur eine Syntax enthalten, sondern sie müsse geradezu von der Syntax ausgehen.’

structure the accretion of individual expressive choices, and the resulting emphasis on stylistics as the correct point of departure in language study. Both also trace their genealogy back to Humboldt, although Vossler comes to Humboldt through the intermediary Benedetto Croce (1866–1952; see Vossler 1904:v-vi, 94; cf. Cassirer 1923:119-121; Christmann 1974:11-21; Hall 1963). A key difference between Gabelentz and Vossler, however, is the argumentative context in which they developed their ideas. Vossler elaborated his idealism in opposition to the ‘positivist’ Neogrammarian orthodoxy that dominated contemporary linguistic scholarship. By contrast, Gabelentz – although critical of their totalising claims despite their narrow, technical treatment of language – did not deny the value of the Neogrammarians’ methods or results (see Gabelentz 1891:146; cf. Gabelentz 2011[1879]:392). Indeed, there are indications that he tried to emulate their formal methods as a way of rendering Humboldtian general linguistics a more rigorous enterprise (see McElvenny forthcoming:18; Plank 1991:430). Gabelentz is perhaps best considered an independent outlier in *fin de siècle* linguistics, trying to resurrect and maintain an older Humboldtianism in a world dominated variously by psychologism and positivism.

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