

Georg von der Gabelentz

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Summary

The German sinologist and general linguist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) occupies an interesting place at the intersection of several streams of linguistic scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century. As Professor of East-Asian languages at the University of Leipzig from 1878 to 1889 and then Professor for Sinology and General Linguistics at the University of Berlin from 1889 until his death, Gabelentz was present at some of the main centers of linguistics at the time. He was, however, generally critical of mainstream historical-comparative linguistics as propagated by the neogrammarians and instead emphasized approaches to language inspired by a line of researchers including Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), H. Steinthal (1823–1899), and his own father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1807–1874).

Today Gabelentz is chiefly remembered for several theoretical and methodological innovations which continue to play a role in linguistics. Most significant among these are his contributions to cross-linguistic syntactic comparison and typology, grammar-writing, and grammaticalization. His earliest linguistic work emphasized the importance of syntax as a core part of grammar and sought to establish a framework for the cross-linguistic description of word order, as had already been attempted for morphology by other scholars. The importance he attached to syntax was motivated by his engagement with Classical Chinese, a language almost devoid of morphology and highly reliant on syntax. In describing this language in his 1881 *Chinesische Grammatik*, Gabelentz elaborated and implemented the complementary “analytic” and “synthetic” systems of grammar, an approach to grammar-writing that continues to serve as a point of reference up to the present day. In his summary of contemporary thought on the nature of grammatical change in language, he became one of the first linguists to formulate the principles of grammaticalization in essentially the form that this phenomenon is studied today, although he did not use the current term. One key term of modern linguistics that he did employ, however, is “typology,” a term that he in fact coined. Gabelentz’ typology was a development on various contemporary strands of thought, including his own comparative syntax, and is widely acknowledged as a direct precursor of the present-day field.

Gabelentz is a significant transitional figure from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. On the one hand, his work seems very modern. Beyond his contributions to grammaticalization *avant la lettre* and his christening of typology, his conception of language prefigures the structuralist revolution of the early twentieth century in important respects. On the other hand, he continues to

entertain several preoccupations of the nineteenth century – in particular the judgment of the relative value of different languages – which were progressively banished from linguistics in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Keywords:

Wilhelm von Humboldt, H. Steinthal, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz, grammaticography, grammar-writing, language description, historical linguistics, grammaticalization, typology, syntax, structuralism, Chinese, sinology

1. Background and Biography

Georg von der Gabelentz was born on the 16th of March 1840 into an old aristocratic family in the small duchy of Sachsen-Altenburg, which in 1920 became a city and district in the central German state of Thuringia. From childhood Gabelentz was fascinated by languages, an interest that was imbued in him and encouraged by his father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1807–1874). He did not, however, initially pursue this interest professionally, but rather followed family tradition and studied law and public administration (*Kameralwissenschaft*). After graduation, he worked as a civil servant in the neighboring Kingdom of Saxony and, from 1871 to 1872, in the newly acquired German imperial territory of Alsace.

Even during his career in the civil service, Gabelentz found time for the study of languages and linguistics. His focus in this period was already on Chinese and other East Asian languages. In 1876 he completed his doctorate with a scholarly edition of the Chinese classic *Tàijítú* (太極圖) by Zhōu Dūnyí (周敦頤; 1017–1073). Two years later, in 1878, he became Extraordinary Professor of East Asian Languages at the University of Leipzig, which allowed him to devote himself full-time to his sinological and linguistic research. His *Chinesische Grammatik* (1881), a theoretically ambitious teaching grammar of Classical Chinese, dates from this period, although it of course builds on the foundation of his previous work. In 1889 Gabelentz became Ordinary Professor of Sinology and General Linguistics at the University of Berlin. Shortly after this appointment, in 1891, he published his magnum opus, *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* (*The science of language, its tasks, methods and results to date*), which incorporates in several places material he had already published elsewhere. Only two years later, at the relatively young age of 53, Gabelentz died, leaving a number of unfinished projects. Perhaps most significant here is his essay on “typology” (*Typologie*; Gabelentz 1894). This essay was the first published use of the term “typology” in a linguistic sense, although elements of the approach it proposes were already current in linguistic research. Many of Gabelentz’ more embryonic ideas were worked into the 1901 second edition of *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, which was posthumously revised and expanded by his nephew and pupil, Albrecht Graf von der Schulenburg (1865–1902).

As Gabelentz himself acknowledged, one of the most influential figures in his intellectual development was his father, Hans Conon, who not only cultivated Georg’s interest in language study but also shaped his theoretical orientation. Hans Conon was a keen amateur philologist, who produced several notable works. On the philological front, he compiled, in collaboration with the theologian Julius Loebe, a three-volume scholarly edition of the “Ulphilas” Gothic Bible (Gabelentz & Loebe 1836-1846). In a more linguistic vein, he wrote grammars of such languages as Manchu (1832) and Dakota (1852), and undertook one of the earliest historical-comparative studies of the

languages of Melanesia, which was published in two parts (Gabelentz 1861a & 1873). His early typological essay “Über das Passivum” (1861b), modeled on Wilhelm von Humboldt’s “Über den Dualis” (1907[1827]; English translation, “On the dual,” 1997), compared voice systems from a diverse selection of 209 languages (see Dobrucky 2013[1938]: 60-61; Gabelentz 1886). At the family estate in Poschwitz, Hans Conon assembled one of the largest and most diverse libraries in Europe of books in and about “exotic” languages, a collection that was further expanded by Georg. Hans Conon’s daughter, Clementine von Münchhausen, recounted her father’s pride at being able to provide a colleague with a volume that could not be found in Vienna, Paris, Berlin or London (Dobrucky 2013[1938]: 58).

On their shared theoretical orientation, Gabelentz (1886: 233) remarked, “In terms of a great part of my views on the philosophy of language, I do not know how much they are essentially my own and how much they come from my father. Perhaps more often than I am aware the core idea is his and its elaboration mine.” Following his father’s example, Gabelentz pursued what he described as the “Humboldtian” approach to language study, as opposed to the historical-comparative approach pioneered by Franz Bopp (1791–1867) and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863). While both father and son followed developments in historical-comparative grammar and even contributed to this field, their chief interest was directed towards understanding the character of languages and their speakers rather than the dissection and comparison of word forms and sounds. Their research extended also beyond the confines of the Indo-European family to embrace a broad range of the world’s languages in their full typological diversity (cf. Gabelentz 1886: 218).

2. Comparative syntax: psychological subject and predicate

Among Gabelentz’ earliest linguistic writings are his studies on “comparative syntax” (*vergleichende Syntax*; see Gabelentz 1869; 1875). This project emerged from his conviction that syntax is a core part of grammar and should not be relegated to the realm of rhetoric, as was usual in traditional European grammar-writing. Gabelentz (1875: 134) commented, “It seems to me that the phenomena of word order have been assigned to rhetoric more than is necessary and that in this way grammar has been thoroughly abridged.” This conviction was no doubt spurred on by his engagement with Classical Chinese, a language with little morphology, in which syntax takes on a correspondingly heavy load in conveying propositional content. In the imagination of many European linguists, the lack of morphology in Chinese rendered it a prototypical example of a “language without grammar” (cf. Gabelentz 1884: 273). Comparative syntax remained a key preoccupation of Gabelentz’ throughout his career, featuring prominently in *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (2016[1891]: 385-393) and flowing into his later proposal for typology.

Inspired in particular by August Schleicher’s (1821–1868) morphological formulas (see Schleicher 1859), which sought to establish an ontology of word forms in the world’s languages and to define the limits of their variation, Gabelentz undertook to provide a similar framework for the cross-linguistic investigation of word order (see Gabelentz 1869: 376-377). The centerpiece of his project are the complementary notions of “psychological subject” and “psychological predicate,” which essentially correspond to the opposition between “theme/topic” and “rheme/comment/focus” in modern theories of information structure. Gabelentz developed these notions in the context of the contemporary debate on the nature of the categories subject and predicate: a common observation of the time was that the grammatical subject of a sentence, which in European languages is typically

marked in the nominative case and triggers agreement with the finite verb, is often not the same constituent as that which would be considered subject – in the sense of topic – when the sentence is analyzed from a discourse point of view. A classic example invoked by Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 390) is the German idiom “Mit Speck fängt man Mäuse” (lit. “With bacon one [*nom.*] catches mice”), meaning that a good offer will attract everyone. In this phrase, the grammatical subject is *man*, while the subject from a discourse perspective is *mit Speck*. To describe this discourse subject, Gabelentz coined the term “psychological subject,” since it is taken to be the point of departure the speaker has in mind in constructing their utterance. The rest of the sentence, the “psychological predicate,” is what they want to say about this first thing mentioned. While Gabelentz was not the only scholar to propose a solution along these lines, he was among the first to comprehensively examine the problem and provide a framework to describe it (see Elffers-van Ketel 1991; Seuren 1995: 120-133).

The psychological approach Gabelentz takes in his work on comparative syntax – immediately visible in the names he gives his categories – was a commonplace in the linguistics of the time (see Knobloch 1988) and is also a feature of Schleicher’s morphological typology. The greatest influence on Gabelentz in this respect, however, is the *Völkerpsychologie* (psychology of peoples) of Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) and H. Steinthal (1823–1899), which in turn is informed by Steinthal’s interpretations of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s linguistic writings (see Klautke 2013). Underlying this psychological conception of language is the assumption that there is an intimate relationship between the structure of languages and the thinking of their speakers. This view and its consequences are explored further in section 5 in the discussion of Gabelentz’ proposal for typology.

Widespread among psychological approaches to language were attempts to trace back the putative evolution of human language in order to establish the original and universal categories present in all languages. Gabelentz believed that psychological subject was a candidate for such a category: “I believe that we have in this way come to know one of the oldest and so to speak embryonic categories of all human language. [...] If my deduction is correct, then this category must be present in all language, in however many different ways its effects may manifest themselves” (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 392-393). He posits the distinction between psychological subject and predicate as one of the properties of the earliest stages of human speech, which he sees recapitulated in child language acquisition (*ibid.*: 386-388).

Gabelentz’ solution to the subject-predicate problem, and the broader debate to which it was a contribution, fed directly into the development of present-day conceptions of information structure. The major milestone that marks the beginning of the modern era is the reframing of the debate in functional terms, which was pioneered by Vilém Mathesius (1892–1945), a leading member of the Prague Linguistic Circle (see Elffers-van Ketel 1991: 310-312; Seuren 1995: 120-133).

3. Grammar-writing

According to Gabelentz, learning a language amounts to understanding it “as it lives in the mind of the people that speaks it” (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 65). His conception of the nature of language rests on a synchronic descriptivist foundation much like that current in present-day linguistics. Every native speaker is treated as commanding their language perfectly – even if they are not versed in prescriptivist strictures – and for each speaker the language is an “organic” – i.e. structured –

whole that exists at a certain point in time (*ibid.*: 65-66). Such views are not original to Gabelentz, but were rather part of an emerging orthodoxy. While still very much embedded in the diachronic paradigm of the 19th century, both William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) and Hermann Paul (1846–1921) gave voice to similar sentiments (cf. Koerner 2008). The theoretical pronouncements of both Whitney and Paul were admired as much by Gabelentz (e.g. 2016[1891]: 143) as by leading neogrammarians (e.g. Delbrück 1919).

The optimal description of a native speaker's competence in their language can be achieved, argued Gabelentz, by looking at the language from the two complementary perspectives of the listener or reader and of the speaker or writer. In both cases, the language appears to its users as an organic whole, and the particular expression to be interpreted or produced must be considered in the context of all other possible expressions offered by the language (see Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 85-91). To capture the listener or reader's perspective, Gabelentz proposed the "analytic system" of grammar, which shows how linguistic expressions are to be broken down and understood. For the speaker or writer's perspective, he proposed the "synthetic system," which shows how to put together forms to express particular content:

The analytic system is concerned with the question: How is the language to be understood grammatically? That is: What are its grammatical forms? How can they be arranged organically? How are their diverse meanings to be explained systematically? Given is the form and sought is its meaning. That is the perspective of the one who receives the speech.

Now[, under the synthetic system,] we take the perspective of the speaker. To him is given the thought that he wants to express and he looks for the appropriate expression; that is, for the appropriate grammatical expression, since we are concerned here only with grammatical forms, not with the material words.

(Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 98)

Due to the diversity of linguistic structures across languages, the arrangement of the analytic system will vary from language to language. It will always begin, however, from the sentence, the putative primary linguistic unit in all languages, and then proceed to break it down into progressively smaller units (see Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 95-96). An example of what lower-level units a language might have can be found in Gabelentz' *Chineische Grammatik* (1881), which is arranged around his two systems. This grammar moves from the sentence to rules of word position, then auxiliary particles (which have scope over the sentence but are themselves subordinate to rules of syntax), and then to the level of individual words and the principles determining their parts of speech. The final topic treated in the analytic system is the division of the text into periods or sentences, which Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 96) describes as a "purely philological art," a hybrid of grammatical, logical and stylistic considerations.

While the details of the analytic system vary with the structure of the language being described, the synthetic system should be amenable to a more general cross-linguistic arrangement, since the categories that form the foundation of the synthetic system are assumed to be universal. There may, however, be a difference between languages in the categories that find explicit expression in the grammar (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 106). The synthetic system in Gabelentz' *Chinesische Grammatik*

starts with the formation of individual words and then moves on to how they may be replaced by pro-forms and ellipses in the sentence. The next level is made up of the functional categories subject, predicate, object, “psychological subject” (i.e. topic; see section 2), copulas and modality. This is followed by an exposition of the expression of different logical relations in the sentence. As with the analytic system, the synthetic system then blends into wider, not purely grammatical parts of the language description, in this case into stylistics (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 106-109).

The phonology and writing system of Chinese are included only as preliminary parts of the *Chinesische Grammatik*, since they have no functional or meaning-bearing properties. They are placed on the same level as introductory historical and cultural information about the Chinese language and its speakers, the place of the language from the perspective of historical-comparative linguistics, and a general summary of the structural characteristics of the language.

Although the Chinese grammar is the only full implementation of the two systems that Gabelentz made, he also sketched the structure of a Sanskrit grammar in his personal notebook (Gabelentz 2011[1879]: 356). He imagines the grammar as a sort of ring which once again begins with the sentence and breaks it into successively smaller units until arriving at word roots. The roots then serve as the primary material for the synthetic part of the grammar, which recapitulates each part of the analytic system to arrive back at the surface forms of the language. As in the case of the Chinese grammar, in the sketch of Sanskrit the phonology and writing system do not belong to the grammar proper. The phonological processes of sandhi, however, do appear in the grammar, since they are required in the analytic system to abstract away the forms of roots from actual words and in the synthetic system to produce words from roots. Figure 1 below is a reproduction of a diagram Gabelentz used in his notebook to illustrate the structure of a Sanskrit grammar. The labels have been translated into English.

FIGURE 1

caption: “Proposed structure for a Sanskrit grammar” (Gabelentz 2011 [1879]: 356)

Gabelentz’ analytic and synthetic systems draw on several sources in grammar-writing and linguistics more generally. As Ringmacher (2002) shows, grammars constructed around the two complementary activities of language production and reception have a long history. In particular, several pedagogical grammars of Chinese and other East Asian languages familiar to Gabelentz maintain this duality, such as those of Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788–1832; 1822) and Joseph Henri Prémare (1666-1736; 1831; see Ringmacher 2002: 162-163; Gabelentz 1878). Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 91) also cited Steinthal’s (1867) grammar of the Mande languages as being built on a similar plan, an observation that Steinthal endorsed (see McElvenny 2017). Another likely precedent is the opposition in lexical semantics between the “semasiological” and “onomasiological” points of view, a terminological contrast that was established only after Gabelentz’ death, but whose foundations were already laid in the first half of the nineteenth century (see Ringmacher 2002: 156-157; Ringmacher in Gabelentz 2011[1879]: 337). The relevance of this distinction to Gabelentz’ systems of grammar is attested by his repeated description of the synthetic system as a kind of *grammatische Synonymik* (e.g. Gabelentz 1881: 353; 2016[1891]: 99). *Synonymik* became a term of art within the semasiological tradition, used to describe the differentiation of synonyms for the purposes of practical expression of similar thoughts in speech.

The analytic and synthetic systems have not gone on to become mainstays of grammatical description in linguistics, but neither have they disappeared without a trace. The possible value of these two perspectives to grammar-writing is a theme often explored in modern literature, generally with reference to Gabelentz' pioneering work (see, e.g., Mosel 2006; Lehmann 1989). Closer to Gabelentz' own time, the early Danish structuralist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943; 1963[1924]: 63-64) sketched, with explicit reference to Gabelentz, an approach to grammatical description that embraced the two perspectives of the listener and speaker.

4. Agglutination and Grammaticalization

The leading paradigm of nineteenth-century linguistics was historical-comparative grammar, which reached the peak of its theoretical elaboration and institutional dominance towards the end of the century with the neogrammarians. Gabelentz was generally critical of the neogrammarians and their allies for their narrow technical focus and their tendency to cast their specific diachronic research on Indo-European as the totality of scientific linguistics (see Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 12; section 6). His discussion of historical-comparative work in the third part of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (*ibid.*: 143-316) takes a much broader and more speculative view of the field, which concentrates on underlying processes in language change. The discussion of the process of “agglutination” that Gabelentz provides there is often interpreted as one of the first complete statements of grammaticalization theory.

The term “grammaticalization” was only coined some twenty years after Gabelentz' death by the French linguist Antoine Meillet (1866–1936; 1921[1912]), and the field only began to take on its present form from the late 1970s onwards. Nevertheless, Gabelentz has been consistently highlighted in the subsequent historiographic literature for prefiguring Meillet in important respects (e.g. Lehmann 2015[1982]: 1-9; Heine et al 1991: 5-23; Hopper & Traugott 2003[1993]: 19-38). The term that Gabelentz himself employed, “agglutination,” labels an approach that is the forerunner of grammaticalization. According to agglutination theory, first proposed by Franz Bopp, the grammatical inflections of Indo-European languages have their origins in independent words that have become progressively closely bound to roots (see Morpurgo Davies 1998: 135 *et passim*). Meillet's work on grammaticalization continues and expands this theory: grammaticalization is the “attribution of a grammatical character to a word that was once independent” (Meillet 1921 [1912]: 131). He sees a continuum of forms in every language ranging from fully independent content-bearing words to affixes that have a purely grammatical meaning. Grammaticalization is the ever-acting and inevitable process by which these linguistic elements are “weakened” in their meaning and form, with the result that they move along this continuum from full words to affixes (see *ibid.*: 132). Additionally, he sees all languages as developing in a “sort of spiral” (*ibid.*: 140). As linguistic elements are weakened and worn away, they are replaced by new ones, which are in turn subject to the same process. The weakening results from simple repetition in normal usage. The introduction of new elements is driven by a desire on the part of speakers to be more “expressive” (*ibid.*: 135-136, 146 *et passim*).

As has been frequently pointed out (e.g. Lehmann 2015[1982]: 3-4; Hopper & Traugott 2003[1993]: 20-21; and Heine et al 1991: 9), these key elements of Meillet's account — the “weakening”, the spiral, and the complementary tendencies that lead to the spiral — were already present in much the same configuration in Gabelentz' own summary of agglutination theory. In the

following passage from *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (2016[1891]), a spiral conception of linguistic history is invoked, resulting from the opposing “drive to comfort” (*Bequemlichkeitstrieb*) and “drive to distinctness” (*Deutlichkeitstrieb*):

The history of languages moves across the diagonal of two forces: the drive to comfort, which leads to the wearing down of sounds, and the drive to distinctness, which prevents this wearing down from ending up in the destruction of the language. The affixes are slurred, and in the end disappear without a trace; but their functions or similar functions push again for expression. They receive this expression according to the method of the isolating languages, through word order or clarifying words. These words are in turn subject to the processes of agglutination over time, to slurring and disappearance, and meanwhile new replacements are prepared for that which is decaying: periphrastic expressions are preferred, whether they are syntactic structures or true compounds (English “I shall see” – Latin *videbo* = *vide-fuo*). The same principle is always true: the line of development bends back to the side of isolation, not in the old path, but in a closely parallel one. For this reason I compare it to a spiral.

(Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 269)

While it is perhaps true that Gabelentz was the first to offer such a succinct characterization of this apparent process, there are clear antecedents for all the principles he invokes in earlier linguistic scholarship. Of the spiral conception of history, he explicitly says, “Many have definitely come to this theory before me — I do not know who [was] first” (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 269; cf. Plank 1992). The specific opposition that he sets up between the drives to “comfort” and “distinctness” may be original, but considerations of this sort were not unknown in previous work. Georg Curtius (1820–1885), for one, had by mid-century already proposed “comfort” – using the same term as Gabelentz, *Bequemlichkeit* – in articulation as the driving force behind sound change. Slowing the progress of the phonetic “weathering” brought about by the tendency to greater comfort in articulation was the need to preserve the distinctness of meaning-bearing elements in words. Curtius’ formulation was already part of mainstream linguistic orthodoxy by Gabelentz’ time (see, e.g., Delbrück 1919: 172-173). Similar notions appear also in the work of William Dwight Whitney, with specific reference to the development of new grammatical forms through the process of agglutination (see Whitney 1875; McElvenny 2016b).

Although there is an undeniable historical connection between Gabelentz’ conception of agglutination and present-day grammaticalization theory, we must be cautious not to over-eagerly assimilate him to our modern world. What Gabelentz had in mind in his discussion of “comfort” and “distinctness” is in fact much more multifaceted and foreign to our own thinking than the existing historiographic tradition would suggest. Lehmann (2015[1982]: 4), Hopper & Traugott (2003[1993]: 21) and Heine et al (1991: 8) seem to confine Gabelentz’ drives to the phonetic plane. Hopper & Traugott, in particular, describe them as operating to effect only “renewal”; that is, the development of new means to express existing grammatical categories, whose forms have been worn away. But Gabelentz’ drives went beyond renewal and could be considered to touch on what is now referred to as “innovation,” or the creation of wholly new grammatical categories. This is of particular importance, since innovation is frequently cited — e.g. by Meillet (1921[1912]: 133) and Lehmann (2004: 184-186) — as the key property that sets grammaticalization apart as a unique process in human language.

According to Gabelentz, grammar is a “luxury” that we grant ourselves, which emerges from a “drive to formation” (*Formungstrieb*). This drive is the desire to shape our speech as we please, according to our whims and fancies, rather than just providing a flat, objective description of the world (see McElvenny 2016a). It is a fundamentally aesthetic drive: Gabelentz describes it as a species of the more general “play-drive” (*Spieltrieb*), using Friedrich Schiller’s (1759–1805; 1960[1795]) term for the putative force underlying all artistic efforts (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 381). On this level, the drive to distinctness is a temperamental and aesthetic urge. It is not simply a matter of amplifying a faded phonetic signal; it is also about branding the linguistic expression with the speaker’s own individual, subjective feeling (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 194). This subjective aesthetic strand seems to also be a feature of grammaticalization as conceived of by Meillet. His use of “expressive” links his theory to the aesthetically oriented stylistics of such figures as Charles Bally (1865–1947) and Leo Spitzer (1887–1960), who Meillet (1921[1912]: 148) in fact cites in this connection (see McElvenny 2016b).

Gabelentz no doubt deserves the place he has been accorded in the history of grammaticalization, but the selective treatment he has received provides an object lesson in the dangers of presentism in historiography. Our modern conceptions did indeed grow out of those of Gabelentz and other scholars who have come before us, but we must be careful not to simply assume that they were thinking like us or even that they were inevitably feeling their way toward where we stand now.

5. Typology

Like grammaticalization, typology is another subfield of modern linguistics to which Gabelentz would seem to have made a foundational contribution. Gabelentz is in fact responsible for coining the term “typology” in more or less its current linguistic sense. As in the case of grammaticalization, however, Gabelentz was continuing and extending an existing tradition and his conception of typology is not identical and in some respects even incompatible with present-day approaches.

Gabelentz first used the term “typology” (*Typologie*) in an 1894 paper “Hypologie [Typologie] der Sprachen: eine neue Aufgabe der Linguistik” (Typology of languages: a new task for linguistics), which sketched out the new research program that he envisaged. The term is rendered consistently in this paper as *Hypologie*. It is, however, clear from other sources, including Gabelentz’ personal notes, that the intended form was *Typologie*, and that this error only made it into print because Gabelentz passed away before he was able to correct the final proofs of the paper. As Plank (1991: 428-430) observes, the error attests to the novelty of Gabelentz’ coinage.

In his typology paper, Gabelentz (1894: 5) points out that similar grammatical traits appear to cluster across diverse languages for which none of the usual explanatory factors, such as genealogical relatedness or geographical proximity, can be invoked. He offers the example of the frequent occurrence – found in such languages as Basque, Tibetan, Greenlandic and those of Australia – of ergative-absolutive case marking alongside genitive modifiers tending to appear before the head noun and adjectival modifiers after the head. Conversely, languages known to be genealogically related frequently differ significantly from one another in their grammatical traits. Here he mentions how three language families – the ‘Indo-Chinese’, ‘Kolarisch’ (i.e. Munda languages) and ‘Malay’ (i.e. the subgroup within Austronesian) – which are characteristically polysyllabic and agglutinative have members that are isolating. The deep agreement in linguistic

structure in the absence of the traditional explanatory factors and disagreement in languages that ought to be similar suggest some other necessary connection between these traits.

In addition, Gabelentz (1894: 4) observes that languages are “free organic structures,” in which “all of their parts stand together in a necessary mutual configuration.” Here, as in his work on grammar-writing (see section 3 above), Gabelentz seems to presage the later core tenet of structuralism that each language is a self-contained synchronic system of mutually defining units. In order to capture and characterize the correlations among structural traits across languages, Gabelentz suggests a statistical approach that appears to anticipate Joseph Greenberg’s (1915–2001) notion of implication universals:

A goes with B in $\frac{3}{4}$ of cases, – B with A in perhaps $\frac{3}{5}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ of cases; the correlation is not necessary, but it is more frequent than we would want to attribute to chance alone. We may suppose that we are on the trail of two sympathetic nerves, which do not work together completely regularly, and now we would like to know the place and kind of their connection and the reason why this is sometimes disturbed.

(Gabelentz 1894: 5)

Gabelentz then proceeds to propose establishing a commission that would produce and distribute a questionnaire to exhaustively ask about the presence or absence of possible structural traits in languages, preferably in the form of a kind of dichotomous key, with either yes or no answers to questions. The commission would then compile the answers and produce a statistical summary of the kind described above. These insights of Gabelentz into language structure and the program he suggests are what lead many typologists to consider Gabelentz a “founding father of typology as we know it today,” as Plank (1991: 444) puts it.

As in his apparent development of grammaticalization *avant la lettre*, the elements of Gabelentz’ proposal for typology are all visible in earlier linguistic scholarship. The novelty lies in the particular configuration Gabelentz presents. There was already a long tradition of comparing the realization of grammatical categories across languages. Prominent predecessors who Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 507-508) cites favorably include Humboldt (1907[1827]) for his study of the dual, August Friedrich Pott (1802–1887; 1818-1882; 1847; 1868) for gender and number systems, Steinthal (1847) for the relative, and his father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz (1861b), for the passive. He mentions also Raoul de la Grasserie (1839–1914; 1888) and James Byrne (1820–1897; 1885) for their broad-ranging comparative studies (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 450-451, 508; cf. Plank 1991).

The conception of languages as “organic structures” was a commonplace among scholars who claimed inspiration from Humboldt (cf. Di Cesare in Humboldt 1998 [1836]: 57-66). Gabelentz’ specific suggestion for employing a statistical approach to capture the variability of these structures, however, is most probably influenced by William Dwight Whitney. Whitney observed the synchronic diversity in all speech communities and the variation that can exist even in the speech of a single speaker. In his *Sanskrit Grammar* (1896[1875-1878]) he tried to capture and describe the variation present at different stages in the history of Sanskrit through a statistical analysis of forms (cf. Silverstein 1971: xiv-xx, xxii-xxiii). Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 194-206) adopted a similar

position in arguing against the later dogmatism of the neogrammarians, who famously insisted on the exceptionless action of sound laws in language change (see Morpurgo Davies 1998: 251-255).

Contemporary dialectology was another field driving the awareness of the degree of variation within languages, even to the point of dissolving clear boundaries between related languages. The field was also home to large-scale state-sponsored surveys based around questionnaires, such as the German dialect project led by Georg Wenker (1852–1911; see Knoop et al. 1982), which may have inspired Gabelentz' proposal for a typology commission. Gabelentz himself had experience of state patronage for linguistic survey work: his *Handbuch zur Aufnahme fremder Sprachen* (Gabelentz 1892), a guide to collecting basic vocabularies and grammatical information of languages in German colonial territories, was commissioned by the Colonial Department of the German Foreign Office (see Kürschner 2009).

Despite its seemingly visionary features, the modernity of Gabelentz' proposal for typology is only possible to maintain on a very superficial and selective reading. The chief underlying factors to which he appeals to explain the structural similarities between languages are the “mental abilities” and “historical conditions” of their speakers (Gabelentz 1894: 4). He does not share the widespread belief of the structuralist era in the formal neutrality of languages (cf. Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 502). A glimpse of what Gabelentz thought these mental and historical factors to be and how they interact with linguistic structure can be found in a section of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* dedicated to the question of “language evaluation” (*Sprachwürderung*; Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 409-502). Here he carries out several concrete comparisons of structural traits across language groups and links them to the supposed mental and environmental conditions of their speakers. He attributes the inspiration for this undertaking and the parameters defining it to first and foremost Humboldt, but the influence of Lazarus and Steinthal's later *Völkerpsychologie* – mentioned in section 2 – is also clear (see McElvenny 2017).

Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 436-437) observes that “Malays” and “Semites” have different “racial” origins but their languages seem to share some structural properties. In the languages of both groups, so he claims, verb-subject word order predominates. This, he argues, is an expression of “lively sensuality,” since first the speaker names the impression they have received and then they name the cause of that impression. The sensuality is in turn evidence of receptivity and egotism, which explains the ease with which both Malays and Semites assimilate foreign thinking and other cultural material and make it their own, as well as their desire to travel and settle in new lands. It is these qualities that make Malays and Semites such successful merchants and students.

By contrast, Malays and “Ural-Altai peoples” are both of “Mongoloid type” and yet their languages are structurally quite different. The homeland of the Ural-Altai peoples in the steppes provides difficult living conditions and forces a nomadic lifestyle on its inhabitants, and “in such a school of life man is not raised to spirited initiative, but instead to a sustainable goal-conscious energy” (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 440). The “abundant tropical world” of the Malays, on the other hand, stimulates their sensuality and awakens their longing for travel and adventure: “The herdsman [i.e. Ural-Altai person] yields to the forces of nature, the seaman [i.e. Malay] takes up the struggle against them; the former is pressured by hardship, the latter is attracted by danger” (*loc. cit.*). This environmentally conditioned difference in temperament is then manifested in their languages in various ways. Just one example Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 441-443) offers is the way in which the

plodding Ural-Altaic speaker builds their speech up piece by piece: cause before phenomenon, subject first in the sentence; adnominal and adverbial attributes carefully placed before their heads. The sensual Malay is the opposite: verb first, other parts of the sentence later; heads first, followed by attributes.

To our modern eyes Gabelentz' characterizations of alleged national types look rather impressionistic and seem to rely on simplistic stereotypes. The purported links that he draws between these characteristics and linguistic structures also do not seem to rise above the level of just-so stories. Despite his pioneering proposals for typology, we see that Gabelentz' work was still very much embedded in the mindset of the nineteenth century. We are reminded once again, as in the case of the received grammaticalization narrative, of the dangers of presentist historiography.

6. Gabelentz, General Linguistics and Saussure

Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of Gabelentz' program is the renewed emphasis he places on "general linguistics," which he understands as the study of the human capacity for language in general rather than the narrow focus on the features of individual languages or specific linguistic processes. The last – and longest – part of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (Gabelentz 2016[1891]: 317-512) is devoted to general linguistics but, as is visible in the discussion in the preceding section of this article, broader questions on the human capacity for language are present throughout Gabelentz' work. When introducing general linguistics in this final part of *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, Gabelentz (2016[1891]: 317), referring to the earlier parts of the book, comments himself: "Indeed we have been in the middle of general linguistics for a long time."

Gabelentz was by no means the only or even the first scholar to conceive of general linguistics: questions about the fundamental principles of human language have been continuously pondered since antiquity. Linguistics in the late nineteenth century, however, had become an established academic discipline, which inevitably led to its fragmentation into a range of technical specializations. Gabelentz' contribution was to reject the totalizing tendencies of the more technically focused neogrammarians, who dominated linguistics at the time, and insist on including broader, more fundamental questions within the scope of scientific linguistics. Gabelentz offers the following picture of the state of linguistics at the end of the nineteenth century (cf. section 4):

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]: 12)

It is the broader selection of themes Gabelentz addresses in *Die Sprachwissenschaft* and their arrangement that prompts Morpurgo Davies (1998: 299-300), who also cites the quotation above, to

attribute an “inescapable air of modernity” to Gabelentz in her survey of late nineteenth-century theoretical works in linguistics (see also Elffers 2012).

But the indisputable status of Gabelentz as a transitional figure between the nineteenth and twentieth century has led some historians of linguistics to try to establish firmer connections between him and leading figures of the next generation. In the mid-twentieth century there erupted a debate about the possible influence Gabelentz may have exerted on Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), the figurehead – if not the founder – of structuralism. The debate involved several participants, but was fought most fiercely between Eugenio Coseriu (1921–2002) and E.F.K. Koerner (b. 1939). Coseriu’s (1967) core argument was to align Gabelentz’ terms *Sprachvermögen* (language faculty), *Einzelsprache* (individual language) and *Rede* (speech) with the now thoroughly established terms *langage*, *langue* and *parole* of Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1983[1916]). Coseriu also observed, as Morpurgo Davies does above, how Gabelentz’ circumscription of linguistics as a science, its internal subdivisions and its place among other sciences seems to be echoed in many ways by the now classical definitions provided later in the *Cours*. Against this position, Koerner (1978[1974]) argued that the views Gabelentz and Saussure appear to have in common were current in various forms in the contemporary scholarly climate and, in addition, that the available textual and biographical evidence makes it difficult to maintain a direct influence of Gabelentz on Saussure. The details of this largely fruitless debate, which ultimately descended into polemic, are traced in Scheerer (1980: 134-137), among other places. A recent, final contribution to the debate is Koerner (2008).

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