



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Georg von der Gabelentz and the rise of general linguistics

Elffers, E.

**Publication date**  
2008

**Published in**  
Ontheven aan de tijd: linguïstisch-historische studies voor Jan Noordegraaf bij zijn zestigste verjaardag

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Elffers, E. (2008). Georg von der Gabelentz and the rise of general linguistics. In L. van Driel, & T. Janssen (Eds.), *Ontheven aan de tijd: linguïstisch-historische studies voor Jan Noordegraaf bij zijn zestigste verjaardag* (pp. 191-200). (Uitgaven / Stichting Neerlandistiek VU Amsterdam; No. 57). Stichting Neerlandistiek VU/Nodus Publikationen.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Georg von der Gabelentz and the rise of General Linguistics

Els Elffers\*

**Abstract:** Georg von der Gabelentz (1840-1893) wrote one of the first extensive introductions to General Linguistics: *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* (1891, 1901<sup>2</sup>). Although this book contains many surprisingly modern insights, it was never very influential, partly because it adopted a Humboldtian conceptual framework, which was soon to disappear from mainstream linguistics.

The idea, however, that the book's lack of success was, partly at least, due to a lack of coherence by combining, on the one hand, a natural science-like data-orientation and inductivism, and, on the other, an orientation toward the humanities, seems unfounded.

**Keywords:** G. von der Gabelentz, General Linguistics, language typology, linguistic relativism, 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy of science and humanities.

### 1. The rise of General Linguistics Questions about Gabelentz's position

The rise of General Linguistics (GL) as a separate branch of linguistics is a fascinating process. To the study of this process Jan Noordegraaf made a number of interesting contributions. Noordegraaf (1982), for instance, discusses the beginnings of ideas about GL in the Netherlands, in a section titled *From 'General Grammar' to general linguistics*.<sup>1</sup> Noordegraaf (1994) also deals with the institutional aspects of this process.

The former article mentions works of Hoogvliet (1860-1924) and Van Ginneken (1877-1945) as 'stepping stones'. The focus of the latter article is Reichling (1898-1986), the first GL professor at the University of Amsterdam.

---

\* Adres van de auteur: [E.H.C.Elffers@uva.nl](mailto:E.H.C.Elffers@uva.nl). Mozartkade 11, 1077 DJ Amsterdam.

<sup>1</sup> My translation, as in all German and Dutch citations that follow.

We meet Hoogvliet, Van Ginneken and Reichling again in Noordegraaf (2006). This time, their relationship to *Georg von der Gabelentz* (1840-1893) is emphasized. Hoogvliet praised Gabelentz's Chinese grammar. He also developed some rather 'modern' views on modal particles and interjections, views that may be based upon Gabelentz's similar views.<sup>2</sup> Van Ginneken praised Gabelentz as '*the polyglot of the second half of the 19th century, much greater than Indo-Germanists who are much more famous*' (Van Ginneken 1906: 522). Noordegraaf (2006) mentions some other important achievements of Gabelentz as well.<sup>3</sup> He also refers to the extremely positive evaluation of Gabelentz by Reichling in his inaugural speech, titled *What is General Linguistics?* (1947, reprinted in Reichling 1961).

Reichling's enthusiasm concerned Gabelentz's general conception of GL, which will be the central focus of this paper. Like Hoogvliet and Van Ginneken, Reichling praises Gabelentz's highly modern insights. He presents a quotation from Gabelentz's handbook *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* (*Linguistics, its aims, methods and contemporary results*, 1891, 1901<sup>2</sup>) and concludes that Saussure had 'an almost visionary predecessor' (Reichling 1961: 12). He was by no means the only one to draw this conclusion. Quite a few scholars have observed strong similarities between Gabelentz and Saussure, and many of Saussure's central principles and concepts appear to be foreshadowed in Gabelentz's book.

I will not go into these similarities, nor into the extended discussion about the question whether Saussure derived his ideas from Gabelentz.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, my central issue will be a very non-Saussurean aspect of Gabelentz's conception of GL. Morpurgo Davies (1975: 640) quite rightly remarks: 'Georg von der Gabelentz has both gained and suffered from the attempts to connect him with Saussure. They have rescued him from the almost complete obscurity into which he had fallen, but at the same time have called attention to some particular parts of his work rather than to others which are equally deserving.'

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Noordegraaf (2000) for more details.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. his early insights into information structure and word order phenomena. Gabelentz coined the terms 'psychological subject' and 'psychological predicate', and discussed word order phenomena in widely diverging languages in these terms (cf. Elffers 1991). Gabelentz also anticipated more recent ideas about strict V2 in German main sentences, cf. Noordegraaf (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Albrecht (2007<sup>3</sup>) for a recent summary of this discussion.

One of the ‘equally deserving’ parts is Gabelentz’s general view on how to proceed in GL research. In all early general books on GL, methodological positions had to be chosen. The first results differ widely.<sup>5</sup> Gabelentz’s view is intriguing because he regards GL as an empirical, inductive enterprise, which also includes an important philosophical component. In Gabelentz (1894: 7), an article published posthumously,<sup>6</sup> for example, he presents as his ideal ‘a truly general grammar, fully philosophical and yet truly inductive’. Gabelentz’s philosophical orientation is mainly Humboldtian. Thus, he largely adopts Humboldt’s conceptual apparatus of ‘Sprachgeist’ (narrowly related to ‘Volksgeist’), which works as a ‘Bildungsprinzip’ of ‘Sprachstoff’, thereby constituting ‘innere Sprachform’, so that languages embody the ‘Weltanschauung’ of their speakers (cf. e.g. Gabelentz 1901<sup>2</sup>: 63, 76).

This conceptual framework was already declining when Gabelentz wrote his *magnum opus*, and it certainly precipitated his fall into oblivion, in spite of his many modern insights. Hutton (1994: xiv) describes the work of Gabelentz as ‘the last gasp of Humboldtian tradition’. Hutton also emphasizes Gabelentz’s orientation to natural science. He has doubts about Gabelentz’s attempt to combine this with Humboldt’s humanistic philosophy: ‘he wanted to include the natural scientific point of view within linguistics, and reconcile it in some way with the more humanistic tradition. Hence the impression one gets of a certain lack of overall theoretical coherence [...]’. He regards this duality in Gabelentz’s work (‘its attempt to combine the dissection of language, its analysis into parts or hierarchies with a rhetorical commitment to language as a living, vibrant entity’) as one of the factors responsible for Gabelentz’s ultimate position in linguistic history as a minor figure (Hutton 1994: xi, xiv-xv).

In the following sections I will analyze Gabelentz’s methodology. How exactly did he conceive of this combined approach? Does this approach really lack coherence? We will start by considering Gabelentz’s GL research program in some more detail.

---

<sup>5</sup> Morpurgo Davies (1998: 297-298) envisages a typological project with respect to these early accounts of GL. As parameters she mentions e.g. definition of language, role assigned to history, concern for language universals. This project seems to me very promising; this article may, in fact, be regarded as a very partial exploration of a parameter dubbed ‘epistemological position of linguistics’.

<sup>6</sup> The term *Hypologie* in the title of the article should be read as *Typologie*. Due to his sudden death, Gabelentz was unable to correct the proofs.

## 2. Gabelentz's dual program of induction and speculation

Interestingly, the same passage that triggered Reichling's remark about Gabelentz as a 'visionary' also pays tribute to his humanistic-philosophical orientation to linguistics:

Every language is a system, of which all parts organically relate to and cooperate with each other. One has to suppose that no one of these parts may lack, or be different, without the whole being changed. But it also seems that, in the physiognomy of languages, certain features are more distinctive than others. We must trace these features, and investigate which other features regularly co-occur with the former ones. [...] The induction that I require may be extremely difficult, and if and as far as it will succeed, sharp philosophical thought will be required to recognize, behind the regularities, the laws, the active forces. But how gainful would it be if we could straightforwardly say to a language: you have this characteristic, consequently, you have those further characteristics, and that general character! – if, like the bold botanists have tried to do, we could construct the lime tree from the lime leaf. If I were allowed to baptize an unborn child, I would choose the name *typology*. I observe here a task for general linguistics, which can be fulfilled already with the means now available. It will earn fruits that do not yield to those of historical linguistics in maturity and will be superior in scientific significance. What was thus far said about spiritual relationship and similar features of non-related languages, will acquire a concrete form, and be presented in exact formulas; and subsequently, speculative thought should be added to these formulas, in order to interpret something observable as something necessary. (Gabelentz 1901<sup>2</sup>: 481)

These may be Gabelentz's most frequently quoted words.<sup>7</sup> They demonstrate his pre-Saussurean conception of languages as self-contained systems and of linguistics as not primarily a historical science. They also demonstrate his anticipation of implicational universals: from the 'more distinctive' features we predict the other features.<sup>8</sup>

As to the role of philosophy alongside induction, the above quotation already allows for a first observation: this role seems to be located at the highest explanatory level. 'Philosophy' and 'speculation' are appealed to in order to interpret the regularities observed in the data as the necessary results of laws.

---

<sup>7</sup> I follow Plank (1991) in his conclusion that this passage was written by Gabelentz himself, not by his nephew Albrecht Graf von Schulenburg, who edited the second edition of *Die Sprachwissenschaft* in 1901, after his uncle's death.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Morpurgo Davies (1998: 327). Although Gabelentz's GL program is broader than typology alone, language characterization and typology in the above sense lie at its very heart, so that these parts are a suitable basis for a characterization of his epistemological position. Gabelentz was primarily a polyglot, and he interpreted the 'generality' of GL mainly as 'covering all languages of the world'.

Gabelentz (1894) reveals more details about this enterprise. Induction and statistical procedures result in correlations (*Zusammentreffen*) of features. Correlations become real relationships (*Zusammenhänge*) when they are interpreted in terms of the national mentality of the people that speak the language. This mentality cannot be directly observed; it is assumed by the linguist in order to explain language features. Indirect support, however, is attained by studying ethnological and historical data. According to Gabelentz, this procedure necessarily appeals to ‘the investigator’s subjectivity, of which GL and its protagonists are accused so eagerly’, but this subjectivity is minimized, given the objectivity of the rest of the procedure (Gabelentz 1894: 7). Subjectivity is also mentioned in *Die Sprachwissenschaft*: in order to be able to guess the mentality of a people as it is mirrored in the language, the general linguist must appeal to his ability to empathize (Gabelentz 1901<sup>2</sup>: 16).

Here we can clearly recognize Gabelentz as a proponent of Humboldt’s relativistic program. And although Gabelentz’s chapter in *Die Sprachwissenschaft* about ‘language evaluation’ contains a considerable amount of criticism of the superficial, unscientific, inconsistent and prejudiced ways in which many scholars carry out this program,<sup>9</sup> the central features of his program are evidently Humboldtian in its explanatory appeal to national mentalities that can be ‘evaluated’. It is in the leap from language features (inductively established) to these explanations that philosophy/speculation/subjectivity comes in.

### 3. Gabelentz’s alleged ‘lack of theoretical coherence’

Does Gabelentz’s program suffer from incoherence? Of course, the notions in the ‘national character’ sphere he appeals to have long been abandoned, so that this aspect of his typological program is only of historical interest. But from a logical point of view, his program is better than many relativistic programs, even some more recent ones. Relativistic programs are often entirely circular; Gabelentz at least incorporates a search for language-independent arguments for his claims about national character.

---

<sup>9</sup> In Elffers (1996) I argue that it is mainly Gabelentz’s modern, Saussurean view of language that saves him from several types of untenable language-based conclusions about national mentalities.

The idea that Gabelentz's program lacks coherence seems to be caused by two assumptions, which are both incorrect, but widespread:

(i) *The gap between natural sciences and humanities.* A very common idea about 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual history is that this century saw the rise of the humanities as separate disciplines next to the natural sciences, differing from the latter in object (mind vs. matter), methods (idiographic vs. nomothetic) and aims (understanding vs. explanation). Germany is mentioned as the first country that developed and institutionalized the humanities along these lines. In this process, Humboldt is generally recognized as having played an important role.

This received view leaves no possibility for any form of methodological reconciliation between humanities and natural sciences. And indeed, 19<sup>th</sup>-century self-description exhibits this gap to a considerable degree. Linguistics, with its relationship to both categories, is no exception: it is either redefined as a natural science (e.g. Bopp) or as belonging to the humanities (e.g. Bernhardt), or it is divided into a scientific and a humanities part (e.g. Schleicher: *Glottik* vs. *Philologie*). Gabelentz's position is different. We already observed that he aims at a combination of methods without dividing linguistics into separate disciplines. Against the background of the received view, this implies a lack of coherence.

The received view, however, turns out to be incomplete. Recent research has revealed a more complicated situation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, combinations of natural science methodology (impartiality, objectivity, induction) and non-mechanistic explanation (vitalism, historical explanation) were common phenomena, especially in the life sciences and in history.<sup>10</sup> Recent re-analyses of Humboldt's work present him as a clear representative of this 'mixed' style of research. Rather than creating a 'counter-science' apart from the natural sciences, he tried to translate the principles of the natural sciences into history and linguistics (Reill 1994). Other examples can be observed in physiology. This discipline emphasized close description and inductive generalization; for explanation, it appealed to notions with an anti-mechanical, teleological character, rooted in e.g. Kantian schemes or Goethe's 'Urtyp'.

Gabelentz's position fits in with this 'mixed' style. We observed his appeal to induction as the only method to attain regularities and, at the same

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Veit-Brause (2001) for many historical examples.

time, his appeals to subjectivity and speculative philosophy when it comes to explanation. In his own words: 'It is true, the linguist's inductive method is identical to the natural scientist's. But we do not name the scientific worker after the instrument he uses, but after the material he is working at, – and this is very different indeed'. His conclusion is that language belongs to the spiritual life of a people and is dominated by the same forces that dominate religion, law etc.; these forces are far beyond the natural sciences (Gabelentz 1901<sup>2</sup>: 15-17).

Gabelentz was well informed about other disciplines besides linguistics. In his 1894 article, reference is made to Cuvier's (1769-1832) paleontology, in which, like in his GL program, a statistical clustering of features is also applied with classificatory aims. In both disciplines, the results enable the investigator to predict an entire animal/language from a few relevant features.

Plank (1991) elaborates on Gabelentz's relationship to Cuvier. Like Gabelentz, Cuvier proceeds by a purely inductive approach, which results in 'empirical laws'. When it comes to explanation, he deviates from the natural science approach, which reveals his 'mixed' style of research. He aims at explaining the laws in terms of functional requirements, in conformity with the Aristotelian idea of teleology.

Plank also discusses Byrne (1820-1897), who is referred to by Gabelentz as a great predecessor in typology. Byrne adopted a two-pronged approach: deduction of the causes which affect the structure of language from alleged psychological 'laws of nature' and attempts to support these hypothetical causes by empirical linguistic research, applying 'the inductive method of concomitant variations', assimilated from John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843) (Plank 199: 426).

In summary, there appears to be, alongside the distinctive research styles of fully-fledged natural sciences and humanities, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century 'mixed' research style, employed especially in history, linguistics and the life sciences. This style is data-oriented; it aims at inductively valid empirical generalizations. For explanation, however, it relies upon non-mechanical, philosophical concepts and forces. Gabelentz's research style belongs to this 'mixed' type.

(ii) *Epistemological homogeneity in philosophy of science.* In our post-Popperian era, we are very much accustomed to the idea that all concepts are theory-laden and that any element of the network-like entities that constitute



our theories is susceptible to correction. All elements are in some way rooted in observation as well as in our cognitive capacity to theory construction; there is only a gradual difference between ‘observational’ and ‘theoretical’ concepts. From this point of view, any scientific program acknowledging radically different sources for both types of concepts seems incoherent.

However, the 19th-century situation was different. Philosophy of science did not yet allow for epistemological homogeneity. Mill’s theory of induction was immensely popular, but did not cover the most abstract aspects of theory construction. As a result, there was much confusion about the status of unobservable theoretical entities that belong to the highest levels of explanation. In the humanities, the gap could be filled by traditional sources of knowledge like philosophical speculation. Investigators unwilling to do so resorted to the historical approach, which explained facts by earlier facts (as, in linguistics, Grimm), or they simply denied that they did anything beyond inductive generalization (as, in linguistics, the neo-grammarians).

In the natural sciences, the situation was exactly the same. Observed regularities were accounted for by appeal to induction over observed facts. Abstract laws and theoretical entities like atoms were attributed a different epistemological status, and were generally regarded as heuristic devices, convenient fictions, psychological aids, or quasi-mathematical tools. Investigators unwilling to do so, avoided such unwarranted entities altogether. An example is Brodie (1817-1880), who built a chemical system without atoms, basing himself upon Mill’s inductivism (cf. Harré 1972).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, epistemological heterogeneity was a common phenomenon. In the natural sciences as well as in the humanities, observations and inductive generalizations were accounted for in terms of Mill’s system, while the more abstract explanatory elements of theories had to be accounted for in a quite different way. Gabelentz’s dual foundation was not at all exceptional.

It thus seems justified to conclude that Gabelentz’s ‘mixed’ approach of induction and some type of philosophical explanation was rather common in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century humanities and life sciences. The alleged lack of coherence of this approach only exists in the eye of the present beholder, who believes there to be an unbridgeable gap between natural sciences and humanities, and a necessarily homogeneous epistemology.

#### 4. Disappearance of the 'mixed' style. Gabelentz's fate

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, both linguists and life scientists made a turn towards explanations more in line with the natural sciences. This did not occur because of an alleged lack of coherence between natural sciences and humanities, nor because of epistemological heterogeneity (which continued to exist for some time<sup>11</sup>), but mainly because of 'Kuhnian anomalies',<sup>12</sup> and the growing success of the natural sciences. The life sciences underwent a process of 'physicalization'; linguistics became more and more 'psychologized'. Notions like 'vital force' and 'Volksgeist' gave way to exclusively physical forces and exclusively individual mental mechanisms.

Gabelentz's GL work came to be largely forgotten; nevertheless, it was certainly saved from total oblivion by the many modern ideas it contains.

#### References

- Albrecht, Jörn (2007<sup>3</sup>). *Europäischer Strukturalismus: ein forschungsgeschichtlicher Überblick*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- Elffers, Els (1991). *The historiography of grammatical concepts. 19th and 20th-century changes in the subject-predicate conception and the problem of their historical reconstruction*. Amsterdam etc.: Rodopi.
- Elffers, Els (1996). The history of thought about language and thought. In: C. Cremers & M. den Dikken (eds.). *Linguistics in the Netherlands 1996*. Amsterdam etc.: Benjamins, 73-85.
- Gabelentz, Georg von der (1894). Hypologie der Sprachen. Eine neue Aufgabe der Linguistik. *Indogermanische Forschungen* 4, 1-7.
- Gabelentz, Georg von der (1901<sup>2</sup>). *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse*. (Reprint, with an introduction by E. Coseriu, 1984<sup>3</sup>). Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- Ginneken, Jac. van (1906). Review of Otto Jespersen *Growth and structure*

---

<sup>11</sup> Reichling (1947; 1961: 12) shows this in a succinct way. In his translation of Gabelentz's passage quoted on p.4 above, he deliberately changes the words 'philosophical' and 'speculative' into 'theoretical', claiming that this is what Gabelentz actually means. He clearly wants to avoid the suggestion of Humboldtianism, which Reichling rejects as non-linguistic (in order to defend this interpretation, he tries, rather unconvincingly, to downplay Gabelentz's tribute to Humboldt). He seems *not* to want to avoid epistemological heterogeneity, because, on the next page, he expresses his concurrence with a passage he quotes from Meillet, in which the most abstract linguistic laws are regarded as based upon *a priori* knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Veit-Brause (2001: 41), Elffers (1996).

- of the English language [...]. *Boekenschouw voor godsdienst, wetenschap en kunst* 1, 521-529.
- Harré, Rom (1972). History of philosophy of science. In: P. Edwards (ed.). *The encyclopedia of philosophy*. Vol. 6. New York etc.: MacMillan, 276-296.
- Hutton, Chris (1995). Introduction. In: G. von der Gabelentz, *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse*. (Reprint, with a new introduction by Chris Hutton). London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, v-xvii.
- Mill, John Stuart (1843). *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive, being a connected view of the principles of evidence and the method of scientific investigation*. London: Parker.
- Morpurgo Davies, Anna (1975). Language classification in the nineteenth century. In: T.A. Sebeok (ed.). *Current trends in linguistics, 13. Historiography of linguistics*. 2 Vols. The Hague etc.: Mouton, 607-716.
- Morpurgo Davies, Anna (1998). *Nineteenth-century linguistics*. Vol. IV of G. Lepschy (ed.). *History of Linguistics*. London etc.: Longman.
- Noordegraaf, Jan (1982). Algemene grammatica en logische analyse. Nederlandse grammatica in de jaren vijftig van de negentiende eeuw. *Voortgang* 3, 174-209.
- Noordegraaf, Jan (1994). Reichling revisited. Algemene taalwetenschap in Nederland, 1935-1960. *Voortgang* 14, 273-302.
- Noordegraaf, Jan (1997). Gabelentz, Paardekooper en de eenzinsdeelproef. In: *Voorlopig verleden. Taalkundige plaatsbepalingen, 1797-1960*. Münster: Nodus, 220-221.
- Noordegraaf, Jan (2000). Gabelentz en Hoogvliet over partikels. In: *Van Hemsterhuis tot Stutterheim. Over wetenschapsgeschiedenis*. Münster: Nodus, 198-201.
- Noordegraaf, Jan (2006). Hoogvliet, Gabelentz en het Sjineesch. In: J. Noordegraaf, F. Vonk & M. van der Wal (eds.). *Amicitia in Academia. Composities voor Els Elffers*. Amsterdam/Münster: Stichting Neerlandistiek VU/Nodus, 143-153.
- Plank, Frans (1991). Hypology, Typology: the Gabelentz Puzzle. *Folia Linguistica* 25, 421-458.
- Reichling, Anton (1961). Wat is Algemene Taalwetenschap? In: *Verzamelde studies over hedendaagse problemen der taalwetenschap*. Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 7-23.
- Reill, Peter H. (1994). Science and the construction of the cultural sciences in late Enlightenment Germany: the case of Wilhelm von Humboldt. *History and Theory* 33, 345-366.
- Veit-Brause, Irmline (2001). Scientists and the cultural politics of academic disciplines in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany: Emil De Bois-Reymond and the

controversy over the role of the cultural sciences. *History of the Human Sciences* 14, 31-56.