



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

James McElvenny

Universität Potsdam, Institut für Romanistik, Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam, Germany

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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.

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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 play 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 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

E-mail address: james.mcelvenny@gmail.com.

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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.

linguistics, Gabelentz dismantles Steinthal's psychologicistic 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 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 Trabandt (chapter 8 of 2012; 1986) explains in his

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 Sprache werde; 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 [...]'.
 [The original text contains a significant typo: 'S p r a c h e w e r d e' should be 'Sprache werde'.]

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