

Editorial

Silvia Bonacchi & Maria Paola Tenchini

Gestalt approach and/in Language Studies

Notoriously, Gestalt theory never developed a comprehensive theory of language. Yet, from its very beginnings, reflection on language made a fundamental contribution to the articulation of several core Gestalt principles (for an overview, see Cattaruzza & Raynaud 2025). The principles of *proximity*, *similarity*, *continuity*, *closure*, and *figure–ground organization* — governed by the overarching principle of *Prägnanz* (*good figure* or the *law of simplicity*, Wertheimer 1922–1923) — were formulated in explicit opposition to elementaristic approaches that reduced wholes to the mere sum of their parts. This new holistic and groundbreaking approach was subsequently developed not only by the representatives of the Berliner School (the pupils of Carl Stumpf, such as Köhler, Koffka, and Wertheimer) and the Grazer School (the pupils of Meinong, including Witasek and Benussi), but also by a broader constellation of holistic tendencies in the cognitive sciences. Among these, the Würzburger School founded by Oskar Külpe exerted a decisive influence on Karl Bühler’s linguistic and psychological thinking.

This special issue brings together a set of multidisciplinary contributions that not only trace the legacy of Gestalt theory within language studies but also highlight the affinities between various linguistic traditions and Gestalt thinking. The aim is to identify shared conceptual frameworks, uncover convergences across historically distinct schools of thought, and critically assess some of their core assumptions.

The issue opens with Raynaud’s contribution on the intellectual milieu of Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century, a context crucial for the formation of figures such as Brentano and Ehrenfels, and later Marty and Mathesius. Verstegen and Coppola, each from a different angle, offer a wide-ranging perspective on the fertility of Gestalt thinking for understanding human expressive practices: Verstegen focuses on iconic forms of language, while Coppola investigates musical language as a privileged field for exploring Gestalt principles.

Subsequent contributions address different levels of linguistic analysis, examining their conceptual frameworks through a Gestalt-informed lens. From a pragmatic standpoint — language as a way of acting in the world — Tenchini offers a critical reflection within the speech act theory tradition, exploring how a single utterance may perform multiple illocutionary acts. Metz-Göckel, in turn, explores the

psychological and linguistic mechanisms of humor and explains the emergence of the comic effects in light of Gestalt principles. Sulich adopts a morphosyntactic perspective, analysing principles of compositionality in Sanskrit and showing how part–whole relationships shape the dynamics of meaning-making. The issue closes with Cigana’s retrospective examination of (post)structuralist approaches to wholes and parts presented as an alternative system to Gestalt thinking, and highlighting the epistemological potential of this framework through the concept of underdetermination.

This special issue is intended as an opportunity for exchange, dialogue, and reflection. We hope it will stimulate new interactions among scholars from different areas of language studies and encourage a deeper engagement with the Gestalt tradition, both historically and theoretically.

Quoted Literature

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