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## Language and Speech as Open, Context-dependent Wholes. A view from Prague

### 1. Foundational texts and replies

We shall consider first a founding text at the very beginning of *Gestalt* theory: Christian von Ehrenfels' 1890 "Über Gestaltqualitäten", to explore, let us say, the *mind* of a pathfinder and its *context*.

"The starting point for what follows is a series of remarks and indications in Ernst Mach's book *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen* (1886)." (Ehrenfels 1890: 249; 1988: 82).

Even the Journal of Ehrenfels' publication leads us through a network of scholars worthy of attention. In the same issue of the *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* we find, together with the aforementioned Ehrenfelsian contribution, the fourth of seven articles published by Anton Marty (a pupil of Franz Brentano) "*Über Sprachreflex, Nativismus und absichtliche Sprachbildung*".

The editor of the *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* was Richard Avenarius (1843 – 1896). With *scientific philosophy*, he meant that philosophy „nicht nur formal, sondern ihrem Wesen nach, d.h. durch den **empirischen Charakter ihrer Objekte** Wissenschaft ist“ (Kirchner 1958-62, vol. 2: 248).

Such a context is established by several key passages in Ehrenfels' article: facts *and* psychic acts, objects *and* qualities are *related* to each other, unless an incompatibility (a further Gestalt quality) arises and becomes evident, as in the case of round and square. Alexius Meinong's impossible objects are not only revealed as such by an evident negative judgement, but already at the level of (re)presentations, (*Vorstellungen*). "The determinations resist becoming unified, as if one were to try to force two bodies into a container that had been constructed to take only one of them", Ehrenfels writes (1890: 277; 1988: 104).

Basically, Gestalt qualities belong to music as well as to painting, even though they can be overlooked when they slip away from consciousness. Examples are the givenness of both a melody or a 3D view.

We are in agreement with Lotze and at least not in conflict with Meinong (whom we have to thank for the most penetrating discussion of the pro-

blem of relations<sup>3</sup>) in conceiving the *relation as a movement* [Wandern] of *the mind's eye' from one compared fundament to the other*. A movement of this sort is *nothing other than a transference of the attention from one object to another*, i.e. it is a change which, when it is presented in a memory-image, can serve like any other change as the foundation for a temporal Gestalt quality. (Ehrenfels 1890: 274; 1988: 102)

Thus we can conclude that Gestalt qualities are given in consciousness simultaneously with their foundations, *without any activity of mind specifically directed towards them*. (Ehrenfels 1890: 287; 1988: 112)

For a given complex of presentational contents given in consciousness *only those Gestalt qualities are present whose foundations stand out noticeably from their surroundings*. (Ehrenfels 1890: 288; 1988: 113)

The theory of Gestalt qualities would perhaps be qualified *to bridge the gulf* between the various sensory regions, and indeed between the various categories of the presentable in general. The theory makes possible the *unification*, within a single framework, of what are superficially the most disparate of phenomena. (Ehrenfels 1890: 289; 1988: 114)

It is easy to recognize that Ehrenfels' whole subtle argumentative commitment is directed *contra* an atomistic pick up of sensations, *Empfindungen*, and *pro* a unified view of complex and changeable entities.

It is worth noticing that some of the mentioned authors share a same spatio-temporal context, i.e. Prague and its universities, along many decades, since 1880 up to 1945. We find Anton Marty at the German University, from 1880 to 1910; later on Christian von Ehrenfels, who joins the same University, in 1896, and will remain there until 1929. Vilém Mathesius, founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1926, will be a key-figure in the linguistic and literary area of the Prague Czech University from 1901 up to 1945, as well as in the structuralist movement.

Well-known is, on the other side, the strong connection between Prague and Vienna: just a simple mention of many relevant authors and scholars in our scientific and cultural space, such as Mach, Bühler, Wertheimer and his contacts: Masaryk, Kafka, Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Erich Arleth, Friedrich von Wieser and linguists of the Prague Circle such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy.

Let us now quote just Mach: «The tree **with** its hard, rough grey trunk, its many branches swayed by the wind, its smooth soft, shining leaves appears to us at first a single indivisible **whole**.» (Mach 1884: 40; Eng. trans. repr. 1959: 102).

But even if Ehrenfels observes, «Are not the cases in which someone sees the colours but not the picture, the trees but not the wood, the notes but not the music, so numerous as to be proverbial? » (Ehrenfels 1890: 285; 1988: 111) [...], he

himself replies: «If we are in a position to say nothing concerning any presentation of a shape or of a melody, nor to apply our intellect to it in anyway, this need not at all imply that we do not possess such a presentation. It might perfectly well be present in our consciousness, but in such a way that we are not able to direct our attention towards it and set it loose from its surroundings. » (ibid.)

## 2. Different accentures: *partes pro toto*, conjectural organisations

If we now turn to how **Anton Marty** reacts against this kind of unifying perspective, we can see that his own commitment is rather that of scaling back its novelty, reducing it to the subsistence (sum!) of relationships. Moreover, Marty wishes to leave aside the so-called *Mitempfindungen* of pleasure or displeasure, as not belonging to the knowledge level, but rather to that of interest.

He highlights:

- how – on the contrary – linguistic expressions are able to spare explicit completeness and simply identify *Nebenvortellungen* or *Hilfsvorstellungen* (auxiliary presentations) at work while suggesting richer psychic phenomena (as presentations, judgements, volitions or moods),
- or the possible alternatives to align words or word groups, to mean an articulated train of thoughts.

We allude here to the two kinds of *inner linguistic form* Marty disguises: the *figurative* and the *constructive*. Firstly, the **figurative**:

Wenn wir sagen: ich bin entsetzt, erschüttert, gefaßt, erbaut, niedergeschmettert; er ist in gehobener Stimmung, in Vorurteilen befangen, schwankend im Urteil, festen Willens; ich erwäge, begreife, *conjicio, symbollo, krino, he stood convicted, rests content*; er ist auf dem Holzwege, seine Ansicht hat weder Hand noch Fuß usw. usw., so dienen alle diese Ausdrücke, soweit sie Namen oder Äquivalente von solchen enthalten, dazu, gewisse psychische Zustände in uns und anderen und Eigenschaften solcher Bewußtseinsvorgänge zu bezeichnen. Doch neben den Vorstellungen dieser Gegenstände der Innenwelt, welche durch die in jenen Aussagen enthaltenen Namen erweckt werden, sind uns beim Aussprechen und Hören derselben häufig noch anderen Vorstellungen gegenwärtig, welche physische Phänomene zum Inhalt haben; ja diese werden zunächst durch die Worte erweckt. Aber sie bilden durchaus nicht deren Sinn. (Marty 1908: 134)

The **constructive** inner form:

*Keine Sprache drückt alles explizite aus, was wir mitteilen wollen; jede gleicht mehr oder weniger einem Stenogramm und einer Skizze.* Es ist immer ein gewisser, oft sogar ein großer, Unterschied einerseits zwischen dem, was der Sprechende denkt und fühlt und der verstehende Hörer ebenso zu

denken und zu fühlen hat, und andererseits zwischen dem, was davon *explizite* zum Ausdruck kommt. Die *Diskrepanz* ist in verschiedenen Sprachen und Sprechweisen vor allem eine graduell verschiedene. Jeder kennt die bezügliche Differenz zwischen den verschiedenen Stilarten innerhalb desselben Idioms z. B. die Eigentümlichkeit des Telegrammstils gegenüber dem Briefstil, des poetischen gegenüber dem didaktischen Stil usw. Während der eine sich auf Stich- oder Schlagworte beschränkt, gebraucht der andere umständlicheren Redeweisen, die möglichst wenig *der erratenden Konstruktion des Hörers* überlassen. (Marty 1908: 145-6)

It is not only a matter of *speech*; it is a matter of languages too (Raynaud 2010).

By *couché du soleil* we mean the same as *Sonnen Ausgang*, by *rainbow* we mean the same as *arcobaleno* or *arcoiris*. Components change, the result is more than their addition, sometimes even a subtraction (Mulligan 2020): (*le soleil ne va pas proprement à se coucher*).

What, then, is the term of comparison, the “whole”, which all these *Redeweisen* refer to? It is, I would say, not only the entire psychic act which is expressed and, simultaneously, suggested to the addressee (this is Marty’s position), but also the extralinguistic referents, either physical, or psychical, psychophysical and so on, spiritual and transcendent, micro- or macroscopic etc. In sentences, the whole train of thought can be segmented or distributed in many different ways, lexically, morphologically or syntactically shaped. Let us collect and compare, for example, the following expressions: *A buon intenditor poche parole*; *A nod is as good as a wink*; *Bon connaisseur quelques mots*; *Guter Kenner ein paar Worte*.

In any case, no language system expresses everything explicitly; and languages are open systems that are historical becoming entities.

Von keiner der historisch gegebenen Sprachen läßt sich sagen, daß sie auch nur im Bezug auf die fundamentalen, geschweige denn alle sekundären, Bedeutungsklassen ein lückenloses System von Zeichen aufweise. (Marty 1908: 53-4)

Moreover, in literature as well as in ordinary language, ellipsis is quite frequent: what has been left out by the speaker/writer has to be reacquired by the listener/reader. This drives us towards an intersubjective way of conceiving *Gestalten* as wholes.

It is **Vilém Mathesius**, forthcoming founder (1926) of the Prague Linguistic Circle as already said, dealing with English language and literature, who enquires into the spontaneous ability of listeners to grasp, infer, and integrate what is missing in an elliptical sentence, consisting of a missing word, *in omissione vocabuli, quod non dictum tamen cogitatur*. Language enquiries then require psychology – without being “absorbed” by it –, will aim to explain inferences, to infer implicit

from explicit. Verbless sentences confirm speakers' ability to balance between extreme conciseness and redundancy. Even subjectless sentences (in those language which allow them on a morphological, or on an oral articulation basis, as in French), are also intensively studied by Marty.

### 3. Means and ends, strategies vs. holism

Nonetheless, I do not want to overemphasise the different evaluation attributed by our authors to the relationship between parts and wholes: while *Gestalten* as wholes are appreciated by Ehrenfels, because of their unifying qualities, all kinds of linguistic devices apt to simplify, lighten, or shorten linguistic expressions are highly esteemed by Marty and by Mathesius (1911; see Raynaud 2013a), not just in themselves, but as indispensable tools for the sake of economic, agile, efficient, and cooperative communication. Nevertheless, all these sketchy trajectories are well acknowledged as functional means, for sure not just as ends in themselves.

Two different principles are then envisaged and should not mutually conflict: the Gestaltic principle of closure and the linguistic economy principle (à la Martinet), or *lex parsimoniae* (à la Bühler).

### 4. Gestalt and language

Although the most typical field in Gestalt psychology is vision, visual – or acoustic – perception, it is Ehrenfels himself in his 1890 paper who focuses specifically on language. Historic-natural languages need to vehiculate concepts, not just single presentations. The spontaneous capability of going beyond single items, retrieving similarities without requiring absolute identities, grants semantic elasticity to our linguistic symbols. Indexicals and other determinants, on the other hand, allow one to select, point out, and fix more or less definite referents. Speakers are always playing their games in-between singular and universal entities, single presentations and Gestalt qualities, of first or higher order. So, instead of an either-or relationship, we need a correlation of both levels. Ehrenfels has pointed out how spontaneously this “growing” designation capability takes place.

The concepts of change and duration are obtained only via abstraction from temporal Gestalt qualities. And every specification of these concepts, and thus *every verb in the strict sense* (with the partial exception only of ‘to be’ and ‘to have’ and of certain words signifying conditions conceived of as being temporally punctual), *designates a Gestalt quality of some type or other; as does every noun and adjective having reference to more than a single presentational element*. Thus Gestalt qualities comprise the greater part of the concepts with which we operate. (Ehrenfels 1890: 282; 1988: 108)

Classes, as well as individuals, have to be borne in mind at the same time and, depending on the circumstances, they will interplay in the hearer's or reader's mind.

The principle of similarity, however, goes far beyond the faculty of abstraction! If the *abstractive Relevanz* (made explicit by Trubetzkoy in his *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, TCLP 1939) explains how to capture phonemes from phonetically articulated voices, the principle of similarity gathers all kinds of diverse voices in which a similar imprint is recognisable and essential to make them intelligible, meaningful and still unique, *unverkennbar*.

A melody may certainly remind us of a similar melody, or a face recall another, similar face, and cases such as this are to be counted as amongst the most familiar phenomena of psychic life. However, then, one may wish to treat the law of association via similarity, it is certain that a fundamental difference of Gestalt qualities from other psychic elements reveals itself in it. Now just consider the significance of this law and of the presentational contents which underlie it!

Gestalt qualities are essentially distinguished from elementary presentations not only in relation to memory, but also in the fact of their free generation by the creative activity of imagination. (Ehrenfels 1890: 282-3; 1988: 109)

From a complementary standpoint, the contextual insertion of *Gestalten* into a singing or a talking voice shapes it such that it receives the stature of a complex, structured sign, bearing intellectual and volitional intentions, emotive colouring and interpersonal appeal.

Not simply as a continuous signal, but rather as an articulated phonic stream: not only from a phonetic/phonological perspective, but also from a prosodic one, from the viewpoint of so-called communicative dynamism.

Approximating phrasing in music, phrase structures in natural language reveal important organisational roles within the whole performance, even for the addressee's, let us say, stream of consciousness. Here, we should recall Aristotle's biological works, his definition of *arthron* with its explanatory power, to introduce Mathesius' *aktuální členění věty*, one of the classical names, in the Prague Linguistic Circle, of Functional Sentence Perspective, unhappily – in my opinion – translated into English in the *Dictionary of the Prague School of Linguistics* (2003) as *actual division of the sentence*, German *aktuelle Gliederung des Satzes*. Coined by Mathesius in 1939, this is the rich synthesis of a linguistic and philosophical tradition, partly rooted in Greek grammatical terminology – articulation –, partly in Brentano's and the Brentanian school's empirical psychology – the psychology and philosophy of act – (Raynaud 2012), in both cases traceable back to Aristotle. The intention is to account for the biological and driver metaphor of articulation,

effective in explaining sentence Communicative Dynamism – the theme-rheme movement –, which represents the core of functional syntax research. In addition, it supports a gestaltic concept of the sentence (see Raynaud 2013b).

5. Main questions: can *Gestalt* theory correct unilateral analyticity, intellectualism or mere constructivism?

After such a landscape inspection, from Prague and from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to WW2, at least one question remains still open: how strong can one judge in our present time the power of the *Gestalt* theory tradition to be, in counterbalancing analytical trends on the one hand, and the lack of cooperative work between the philosophical theory of knowledge and general psychology on the other? How often nowadays do we deal with concepts as basic units, without considering their main grounding into perceptions? Does Gestalt theory actually challenge the most recent versions of constructivism?

Hopefully, in the following debates hosted in this review, answers to some further questions would be welcome:

- Which is the relationship between form as Gestalt and meaning?
- How can we re-open the debate between the Gestalt School and the Milano-School, which was lively at least in Agostino Gemelli's time, [together with Arcangelo Galli, Giovanni Cossetti, Alberto Zama, Giorgio Zunini on one side (at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart) and at the State University, later with Bicocca too, with Cesare Musatti, Benussi's pupil, with his own pupils, [Guido Petter (in Milan only at the beginning), Enzo Funari, Dario Romano, Dario Varin] on the other side? In 1941 Cornelio Fabro put forward an interesting report on both affinities and dissimilarities between the Gestalt theory and the Milan school, in his book *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

While serving the areas of philosophy of language and general linguistics at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Milan, Aldo Frigerio, Paola Tenchini and myself are grateful to this Conference, to GTA and – not least – to Trieste University and its wonderful town for having been invited to re-open such a crucial and promising topic, to understand what – if ever – is still alive and what has been dismissed and why.

### **Abstract**

Since language is the collective focus of this series, the present paper follows both historiographical and theoretical perspectives.

The first deals with Prague as a Middle-European town, with a German and Czech University from 1882, where a philosopher, Anton Marty, from the Brentano school, focuses on language and semasiology in the framework of a psychology from an empirical standpoint. He cites Christian von Ehrenfels, and underscores the relational approach



to psychic dynamism but, crucially, he emphasises the oscillations between linguistic “sketches” and semantic comprehension. *Sprache ist eine Skizze*, listeners are lead through suggestions, *Nebenvorstellungen*, to grasp meanings, *Bedeutungen* which do not coincide with the mere addition of explicit, variable components.

Simultaneously, Vilém Mathesius, forthcoming founder (1926) of the Prague Linguistic Circle, dealing with English language and literature, enquires into the spontaneous ability of listeners to grasp, infer, integrate ellipsis in a sentence, consisting of a missing word, *in omissione vocabuli, quod non dictum tamen cogitatur*. Language enquiries will then require psychology, will aim to explain inferences, to infer implicit from explicit.

The effort to obtain the whole, via super- or even subsummativity processes, has been a special topic for Gestalt psychology. Context being the proper habitat for both language and mind, we follow the *fil rouge* which leads directly to Gestalt contributions and further developments, e.g., inferential semantics and pragmatics. In conversation, as in architecture, *less is more*. We strive to prove this.

**Keywords:** Given wholes in language, partes pro toto, ellipsis, articulation, central European context.

### Zusammenfassung

Da die Sprache der kollektive Fokus dieser Serie ist, hat der vorliegende Beitrag sowohl eine historiographische als auch eine theoretische Perspektive.

Er handelt von Prag als einer Mittel-Europäischen Stadt mit einer Deutschen und einer Tschechischen Universität seit 1882, wo sich ein Philosoph aus der Brentano Schule, Anton Marty, auf Sprache und Semasiologie im Rahmen einer Psychologie *vom empirischen Standpunkt* konzentriert. Marty zitiert Christian von Ehrenfels und unterstreicht einen relationalen Ansatz zur psychischen Dynamik, aber er betont die Schwankungen zwischen sprachlichen Skizzen und semantischer Verständigung. *Sprache ist eine Skizze*: Zuhörer sind durch *Suggestive* oder *Nebenvorstellungen* dazu geführt, Bedeutungen zu verstehen, die nicht mit der einfachen Summe der expliziten, variablen Komponenten zusammenfallen. In denselben Jahren untersucht Vilém Mathesius, zukünftiger (1926) Gründer des Prager Linguisten Kreises, der sich mit der englischen Sprache und Literatur befasst, die spontane Begabung der Zuhörer, eine Ellipse in einem Satz, d.h. ein fehlendes Wort, *omissio vocabuli, quod non dictum tamen cogitatur* zu begreifen, erschließen, ergänzen. Sprachliche Untersuchungen erfordern dann Psychologie, und zielen darauf ab, Inferenzen zu erklären, das Implizit aus Explizitem zu schließen.

Die Bemühung durch Über- oder sogar Subsummativitätsprozesse das Ganze zu erhalten war ein besonderes Thema der Gestaltpsychologie. Da der Kontext der richtige Lebensraum für beide Sprache und Geist ist, dann folgen wir dem roten Faden, der uns direkt zu Gestalt Beiträgen und weiteren Entwicklungen führt, z.B. zu inferentiellen Semantik und Pragmatik. Im Gespräch gilt wie in Architektur: *less is more*, weniger ist mehr. Wir sind bestrebt, das zu beweisen.

**Stichwörter:** Gegebene Ganzen in der Sprache, Teil statt Ganze, Ellipse, Gliederung, Mitteleuropäischer Kontext.



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