

Gerber, Gustav

b. 13 January 1820, Berlin, Germany

d. 21 October 1901, Berlin, Germany

Life and Work

In 1856 Gustav Gerber became the director of the new “Realgymnasium” of the Prussian town of Bromberg (nowadays Bydgoszcz, Poland). He had studied Classical languages in Berlin and Leipzig, having also taken courses in geography and history. After his retirement (1886) he devoted himself to philosophical and religious work which, however, led to only one book on the function of human emotion and the subjective world-view (1893). Functionalism also characterised his earlier linguistic and philosophical work (1871-73; 1884). Gerber considered language to be the object of aesthetics, philology, and philosophy, these three disciplines taking the artistic, the communicative and the cognitive dimension of language as their respective object of research. The artistic complexity of language was exhaustively described in his book on language viewed as art (1871-73). Speech is produced by the individual and in being uttered it becomes accessible to other human beings; in being understood it becomes the language of the human species. In addition to this genetic approach of language and the analysis of language in its pictorial shape (Bild) Gerber extensively described various stylistic aspects of language (figures of speech like metaphor, metonymy, etc.). In his analysis of language and thinking (1884) he criticized Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason for not having paid enough attention to the decisive role of the

empirical or pragmatic dimension of language. In Gerber's view it is only through speech that people gain access to the world of objects. Gerber's idea that the artistic status of language, in particular of roots, originally evoked a pictorial or indirect representation (knowledge) of the world did not make its way into linguistic circles - there hardly was a German linguist who reviewed Gerber's works. Gerber was "a language critical thinker" in the margins of German academic linguistics and philosophy. His writings on language and art, however, were popular, being frequently cited in philological circles because of their clear and orderly treatment of figures of speech. In developing the premisses of an analytical study of meaningful language elements, questioning the Kantian transcendental project and stressing the unity of speech and thought, Gerber's work shows affinities with that of Lazarus *Geiger and F. Max *Müller.

Major Works

(1871-1873) Die Sprache als Kunst, Bromberg: Mittler (2 vols.; 2nd ed., 1885, Berlin: Gaertner; reprint of 2nd ed., Hildesheim: Olms)

(1884) Die Sprache und das Erkennen, Berlin: R. Gaertner.

(1893) Das Ich als Grundlage unserer Weltanschauung, Berlin: R. Gaertner.

Further Reading

Cloeren, H. J. (1988), Language and Thought: German Approaches to Analytic Philosophy in the 18th and 19th Centuries, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Knobloch, Clemens (1988), Geschichte der psychologischen Sprachauffassung in

Deutschland von 1850 bis 1920, Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Schmidt, S. J. (1976), 'German Philosophy of Language in the late 19th Century', in:

H. Parret (ed.) History of Linguistic Thought and Contemporary Linguistics,

Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, pp. 658-684.

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