

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Ian Verstegen

Gestalt Psychology and Expressive Language: Before Arnheim

Today, there is robust research on the expressive (metaphoric and similitive) use of language from a Gestalt-theoretic point of view (Glicksohn & Goodblatt, 2022). However, it is clear that this was only made possible after an act of synthesis that considered affinities between primarily Berlin Gestalt psychology and later developments in linguistics (e.g. Jackendoff, Talmy, etc.). Looking to the past, it must be admitted that Berlin-based Gestalt theory lacked a properly linguistic theory. Nevertheless, writers of the second generation like Rudolf Arnheim or Solomon Asch wrote important things about metaphor. How did they regard language then?

To be sure, there is no shortage of reflection upon language by the first and second generations of Berlin Gestalt psychology, building on earlier pioneering work by their teacher Carl Stumpf (e.g., 1876, 1926). Wertheimer (1912) had used anthropological data of the Ewe language for number concepts (c.f. Ash, 1995, 122). Goldstein and Gelb (1925) made observation on aphasic disturbances with victims of World War I injuries. Hornbostel (1927) and Köhler (1929) demonstrated expressive qualities with word matching, including the famous *takete* and *Maluma* phenomenon. Later, Asch (1955, 1958) used language as a surrogate for experience, showing that the evidence of wide-spread existence of terms proved intermodal equivalences across cultures.

However, none of these studies dealt with important linguistic problems, like the question of grammaticality, or dealing with the question of how linear linguistic structure is formed from concepts. One contemporary did of course write extensively on language, Karl Bühler (1934; Innis, 1982), so it is important to contrast his achievement against that of the Berliners. Really, the contrast with Berlin is contained in the title of Arnheim's own remarkable "Psychological Notes on the Poetical Process," published in 1948. Psychology learns from poetics, Arnheim implies, but it is not (yet) a poetics or linguistics of the poem.

I shall argue that the Berliners did not really regard the deep questions of linguistics as part of their purview, and the treatment of language was in some senses not proper for psychology – at that time at least – because psychology was a "young science" (Köhler, 1929). However, this did not restrict them – as the case of Arnheim shows – from delving into the works of poets and writers for insights

into the mind via the creative use of language. Understanding how Berliners regarded language is important because it helps to articulate their relationship to contemporary developments like New Criticism and figures like I. A. Richards. The boundaries of Berlin Gestalt psychology become clearer depending on what they believed it was legitimate to accomplish.

In the following article, I will sketch out the status of language among the Berliners. After a discussion of the lack of a deep interrogation of language within Berlin Gestalt psychology, I pass on to three case studies: Fritz Heider, N. R. F. Maier, and finally Arnheim. I end by characterizing exactly how these psychologists, and Berlin theory in general, approached questions of expressive language.

Bühler and the Lack of a Berlin Gestalt Linguistics

When following the trail of Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka in the discussion of expressive language, it is natural to raise the name of Karl Bühler. Bühler is both an inheritor of Austrian philosophy and the “Gestalt problem” and authored a remarkable linguistic theory (Bühler, 1927, 1934; Innis, 1982). It has been shown that his work is strongly conversant with the mereological tradition descending from Brentano (Cattaruzza & Reynaud, 2025; for a bibliography, see Smith, 1988) and he was even closer theoretically to Carl Stumpf than his students (Köhler, Koffka) in Berlin (Mulligan, 1988; Fisette, 2016). This theory was purpose-built to describe all the intricacies of language.

Nevertheless, Bühler’s approach was considered hostile to the interests of Berlin gestalt theory. His theories differ significantly from theirs, and these differences are essential to how he and they approached language. Moreover, there were occasions for interaction between these major theorists. Some of the Vienna School of philosophy presented ideas in Bühler’s seminar that were highly criticized and stood as proxy, in some senses, to Berlin ideas (Toccafondi, 2004). Fritz Heider had frequented both the Berlin and Vienna laboratories. During the tense years of the 1920s and 1930s, the differences between the schools were highly articulated and clear to all participants.

One big difference was a consequence of Bühler’s fidelity to Austrian ideas, in particular the understanding of the act of perception as a judgment. This made it easier to model language – an inherently cognitive act – as another kind of judgment. Of course, Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka were focused on perception. The orientations might be contrasted as “top-down” and “bottom up.” Bühler’s overall approach is summarized by Mitchell Ash (2001):

Bühler’s positive response to the challenge of Gestalt theory was a biologically oriented version of Brentano’s intentional model of consciousness, which already harbored the kernel of his theory of language. Bühler

defined sensations as signs or cues of perceptual objects and thus gave them a function analogous to that of the signal concept in biology. In Bühler's conception, words function in the same manner in language. Consequently, there is no one-to-one relation between things and their representations or signs. Both in perception and in language, the goal-directed activity of an organism must be taken into account before meanings can be construed. According to Bühler, a doctrine of signification such as this is better suited to anchor the general category of meaning (*Sinn*) in psychological research and theory than the contention perpetually repeated by the Berlin school that meaning is simply given in (i.e., intrinsic in) experience (p. 455, c.f. Bühler, 1927, pp. 119, 124ff.).

Thus, Bühler begins from the point of view of language as evolved sign and thereby is able to handle its complexity naturally. He indeed pointed out the paucity of reflection on language by the Berlin thinkers and he argued that their physicalism chained them to low-level perception.

In truth, Berlin Gestalt psychology did operate essentially without a robust theory of *reference*, which means that it also operated without a robust theory of *signification*, where a sign-vehicle *stands for* an external object. However, the lack of a linguistic theory does not mean the Berlin position is entirely without merit. Perhaps the Berlin position can be summarized in Arnheim's (1966) critique of the "myth of the bleating lamb" (pp. 136-50). Arnheim insisted radically that perceptual determinants underlie language contrasting Humboldt's idea of the origin of language. For him, one cannot classify an animal until it has a name; its perceptual characteristics are indeterminate. For Arnheim, this is absurd. Therefore, in the absence of a formal theory of language Arnheim nevertheless affirmed that *whatever* the theory would be, it would be perception-based.

Essentially, the Berliners have no position on which theories might be the most promising – Behaviorist (Bloomfield), transformational (Chomsky) or whatever. In retrospect, the Gestaltists were adopting the attitude that J. J. Gibson would later hold: one must account for as many complex phenomena with lower-level mechanisms as possible before invoking special cognitive faculties. While for Gibson these were determinants of optical stimulation, for the Gestaltists they were perceptual factors. This – as I have suggested – is a Berlin affirmation of psychology as a "young science" (Köhler, 1929). The Berliners could charge that Bühler – like the psychophysicists – had forged ahead too fast without considering more elementary questions.

To return to Bühler, a Berliner might say that the perceptual features, and even deictic behavior linking behavior to signs, have to be embedded further into the behavioral complex. The notion of "fields" would be seen as promising, and the

functions of language (the “organon” theory of representation, expression, appeal, later adopted and further developed by Roman Jakobson) would be considered useful developments. But what the Berliners did not want was a “lazy” theory of denotation without a rich perceptual theory of the structuring of the perceptual and behavioral world.

Werner & Kaplan (1963) praised Bühler but significantly wrote, “Bühler overemphasizes the formal-logical character of language: the understanding of linguistic messages is not merely a matter of grasping the *formal* relationships between concepts but is also a manner of grasping the *content* carried by verbal forms. One important gap in Bühler’s analysis is, it seems to us, that the verbal concepts, the lexicon per se, has no systematic place in his treatment of language” (p. 55). More recently, Wolfgang Wildgen (2001) wrote that Bühler’s theory is “disconnected from motor-behaviour and in general from sensorimotor cognition,” concluding that “Bühler’s voluminous theory of language may be considered as a step backward which integrates a lot of philosophical and philological arguments but loses contact with experimental work in Gestalt psychology. The semiotics which could continue [Kurt] Lewin’s insights are *not* developed by Bühler” (p. 319).

It would take several decades for researchers to find the terrain adequate for a return to questions of language. In the 1970s work by students of Wolfgang Metzger, Fabio Metelli and Albert Michotte began to emerge that related perception to language (Ertel, 1977; Flores-D’Arcais, 1975; Levelt et al., 1976). This research took experience as fundamental to linguistic categories, *in spite of* the complexities of language. In addition, writers in the Gestalt tradition like Claire Golomb (1992), Alberto Argenton (1996) and Joseph Glicksohn and Chanita Goodblatt (2022) have successfully used theories of representation. Sometimes, this has occurred through the use of a sympathetic framework like Heinz Werner’s organismic-developmental theory of representation as found in *Symbol Formation* (Werner & Kaplan, 1963; c.f. Verstegen, 2014; 2021).

Only recently since the 1980s has a dynamic gestalt linguistics emerged that could do justice to the facts of experience within the formal organization of language (e.g., Wildgen, 1990). At that moment, a Berlin-inspired theory with a strong theory of reference, representation, signification and symbols was available. Today, “cognitive semiotics” combines Peirce’s theories of signification with Husserl’s phenomenology to create a rigorous phenomenology-based semiotics. It is in this context that a rapprochement with Bühler can occur. Having outlined one significant engagement with language, let me reinforce the alternative Berlin priority rooted in aesthetic experience. This is the situation surrounding art that the second generation of Berlin-trained psychologists found in the 1930s, after the founding figures of Wertheimer, Koffka and Köhler had established the general research platform.

Art: The Explanandum

The original Berlin Gestalt psychologists – Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, and to which we may add Kurt Lewin – regarded art as an important if not crucial phenomenon to be explained by any psychology. Each of the psychologists I will discuss below – Heider, Maier, and Arnheim – based their investigations on the overall orientation of Berlin gestalt psychology. The Gestaltists' love of music – participating in chamber music and Wertheimer improvising on the piano in the classroom – is legendary (Coppola, 2025). Nevertheless, although each of the founders of Gestalt psychology were sensitively attuned to the arts, none produced an extended study on a single art form.

In 1943, at the outset of his academic career and also the year of Wertheimer's death, Arnheim (1943) wrote a programmatic essay "Gestalt and Art." With the Gestalt orientation toward the "total situation" respecting spontaneous response, Arnheim wrote, "results a strong sympathy with, and an intimate understanding of, the artist. For through his eye and ears, the artist directly grasps the full meaning of nature's creations, and, by organizing sensory facts according to the laws of 'prägnanz,' unity, segregation, and balance, he reveals harmony and order or stigmatizes discord and disorder" (p. 71). Arnheim concludes that "the productive gestalt scientist has to be something of an artist" (p. 72).

A part of Arnheim's discussion shows that art is not merely enlightened by psychology but can in some way be superior psychology. This distinctive nature of literature had already been pointed out by Kurt Lewin (1936):

The most complete and concrete descriptions of situations are those which writers such as Dostoevski have given us. These descriptions have attained what the statistical characterizations have most notably lacked, a picture that shows in a definite way how the different facts in an individual's environment are related to each other and to the individual himself...If psychology is to make predictions about behavior, it must try to accomplish this same task by conceptual means (p. 13).

As we shall see, this is the route taken by Heider especially. He will use literature to obtain deep insights into human psychology. Maier instead will use works of fiction to demonstrate principles of thinking whereas Arnheim will use poetry to express basic ideas of the expression of experience. None of these investigations inquires into the basic features of literature or poetry. At least implicitly, it is not necessary for such a "young science."

Fritz Heider on the Psychological Environment in Proust

Turning now to the three case studies, the first is Fritz Heider's (1896-1983) "The Description of the Psychological Environment in the Work of Marcel Proust"

(1941/1959), which shows Heider's analysis of the work of a novelist, on the way to his mature theory of interpersonal relations (Heider, 1946, 1958). Originally trained in Graz by Alexius Meinong, Heider moved toward the Berlin position, especially after spending time in Berlin and then teaching as Kurt Koffka's colleague at Smith College in the 1930s.

Heavily influenced by Kurt Lewin, Heider was interested in phenomenology and basing social psychology on common sense principles. He always had an appreciation for literature. For this reason, it is interesting that he mentions Dostoyevsky and his penetrating analysis of the human mind but does not use it for an analysis. He seems to sense that Proust is a better candidate, because he focuses on "people and social atmospheres" and has the perhaps humbler task of describing "the subjective environment of that moment" (p. 85). Indeed, Heider says that "it is difficult to translate Dostoyevsky's insights into psychological terminology" yet "in Proust we find pages that seem to be written almost for the purpose of illustrating the laws that are found in psychological treatises" (p. 85).

Essentially, Proust follows the dictum deriving from descriptive psychology, as stated by Koffka (1935), to provide "as naive and full a description of direct experience as possible" (p. 73). That is, in undertaking his novelist task of *Remembrance of Things Past* [*À la recherche du temps perdu*] (Proust, 1928-1932) Proust essentially described his experience, which involves highlighting the working of the human mind to sharpen certain experiences, group others together, and give structure to that which does not have structure.

In Heider's analysis, he singles out several categories of analysis including "region, whole situation," "resuscitation of situations," "framework," "aspects" and "Proust's personality." Heider makes observations on developmental psychology, often citing Heinz Werner. I will ignore these, as well as reflections on the author's personality. Instead, the first categories form a robust set of principles that Proust uses as he performs the naïve psychology of nostalgia and memory. True to the idea of art mentioned above, Proust's artistic distillation of experience becomes a sort of perfected laboratory specimen for the psychologist to analyze.

Heider begins by showing how Proust explains sharply divided social spaces, reflecting "regions" in Lewin's psychology. They have a topological boundedness, both spatially and temporally. Proust recounts his melancholy of going to bed after dinner, and being separated from his mother. The adjacent spaces and times were mere distances and durations but experienced an impossible separations. Proust interestingly uses a perceptual example, when he looks up and sees a bird fly into a different zone in the sky and get lost. Of course, the bird has continued to fly on a continuous path, but its phenomenal character has been irrevocably changed.

Heider's next reflection on "resuscitation of situations" follows from the first, because a "situation of reinstatement of [an] old situation [is] produced by the environment which was...more or less the same as that of the original situation" (p. 92). Essentially, the organization of whole situations creates a structure that becomes the basis of memory. When Proust visits his grandmother's house months after she has died, he recounts, "The self that I then was, that had so long disappeared, was once again so close to me that I seemed still to hear the words that had just been spoken, albeit they were nothing more now than illusion, as a man who is half awake thinks he can still make out close at hand the sounds of his receding dream" (p. 92). Cognitive psychologists later relearned this fact from Gestalt psychology and called it "encoding specificity" (Tulving & Thomson, 1973).

These reflections lead Heider to the "framework," "the influence of the spatial and temporal" context of experience. Proust uses the example of falling asleep and then being disoriented upon waking up (p. 95). Falling asleep late one imagines one has just fallen asleep in the morning; in an armchair, one imagines hours have passed. Proust (1913) remarks that upon waking, "I could not be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence" and then "the memory, not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped myself" (p. 3). Heider properly links such feelings to the constitution of the ego.

For Heider, "aspects" are similar to "embeddedness," being the "mediation which determines the appearance of an object" (p. 97). Again, if a "relationship between person and real object" is interpreted "as a property of an object," we can see the discrepancy between aspects. Using spatial analogies of seeing a town from different angles, Proust (1919, part II) writes: "The good and bad qualities which a person presents to us, exposed to view on the surface of his or her face, rearrange themselves in a totally different order if we approach them from another angle" (p. 241). When Proust learns that M. de Charlus is homosexual, he experiences a sort of "gestalt switch:" "a revolution, in my unsealed eyes, had occurred in M. de Charlus, as complete, as immediate as if he had been touched by a magician's wand" (1921-23, Part I, p. 18).

These experiences add up to in effect teach the reader about the dissociation of experience from physical reality, what we could refer to (although Heider does not) as the "constancy hypothesis." "I realized," he wrote, "that it is not only the material works that is different from the aspect in which we see it; that all reality is perhaps equally dissimilar from what we think ourselves to be directly perceiving; that the trees, the sun and the sky would not be the same as what we see

if they were apprehended by creatures having eyes differently constituted from ours" 1920, part I, p. 82).

We can see that Heider is plumbing Proust's prose for penetrating analysis of the world of experience and in that sense not addressing the book *qua* literature. The idea – shared by Arnheim – that the clearest thinking would be exhibited in our works of art, especially fiction. Once again, then, Heider is "looking past" the linguistic form to get to the psychological truth that is found therein.

Norman Maier: A Psychological Approach to Literary Criticism

I next turn to a book, *A Psychological Approach to Literary Criticism* (Maier & Reninger, 1933), co-written by Norman R. F. Maier (1900-1977), a figure well-known in Gestalt circles. Maier was one of a number of Americans who visited Berlin and learned of the latest discoveries of Gestalt psychology first-hand. He seems to have been in Berlin from 1926-27 and engaged in experiments on reasoning and problem solving, which he continued in the United States (Raphelson, 1968).

Although his studies found hostile critics among American psychologists, they nevertheless were influential. Furthermore, Maier worked within the paradigm of "rat psychology" and so was able to introduce surprising results using the standard apparatus of simple organism and obstacle. His "nine dot" problem (Maier, 1930) and "two string" problem (Maier, 1931) are still referenced in the literature on problem solving. Maier (1932) next produced a theory of humor based on gestalt problem-solving and this led to his collaboration with Reninger. Maier continued to be influential in industrial psychology before his death.

Maier's exposition is rather generic. He simply rehearses the basics of his version of Gestalt psychology and applies it to literature. Taking for granted that the way the writer achieves literary ideas is akin to problem solving, he states – in line with his own direct research – that problem solutions are related to "direction" and "configuration." Direction is the orientation toward a problem and configuration or *Gestalt* is the reorganized whole that is achieved. Indeed, he writes, "in every problem there is a gap" (p. 42; c.f. Goodblatt & Glicksohn, 2002).

Again, as with Heider a few years later, there is no specifically linguistic theory attempted. Language, like sight, is based on "sensations coming from the sense organs [which] become organized, and consequently we experience groupings" (p. 46). The difference between seeing and hearing is that "the stimuli are placed temporally instead of spacially [sic]" (p. 51). Thus, although Maier has recourse to various texts of literary theory, he does not approach literature as a distinctive linguistic problem. Turning to "creativity," Maier insists that it is much more than mere imagery. Memories and impressions must be organized. Unfortunately,

Maier falls back on the “subjectivity” of the data of the writer and does not profit from the reform of the objective-subjective dimension undertaken by Köhler (1929) and others.

Maier follows this idea in his use of “denotative” and “connotative” words. The first words “indicate precisely and accurately definite elements in the configuration” while the second “suggest a meaning in addition to what we might term their primary meaning” (p. 89). Figurative language adds connotative elements not appropriate in denotative language, apparently creating a dichotomy that a consistent Gestalt approach would not necessarily support (p. 91). He seems to support the “Literal Meaning Theory” of language according to which metaphors cannot be true, against the view that metaphor merely covers more complex meanings. Again, compared to basic Gestalt commitments of the centrality of expressive qualities, Maier loses a chance to blur these two classes of language.

Maier argues that different emphases characterize the genres. He uses his theory to support two genre analyses, humor and tragedy. As for humor, Maier believes that it is a natural outgrowth of problem solving: “The principles of direction and configuration are the basis upon which we must erect our analysis of the humorous experience (p. 120). The joke resolves the proposed problem or dilemma in a way “which is very different from anything we had suspected” (p. 121). Maier argues that the resolution (we would call it a “punch line”) must “appear suddenly...the listener or reader having been unprepared for it” (p. 122). He comes up with a taxonomy of ways humor is constructed, including misleading ‘direction’, Incongruity in thought, Incongruity in percept, Story of exaggeration, Nonsense story, Story with a logical fallacy, and others. Maier’s theory was picked up by Schiller (1938) and has been valued by later researchers (Canestrari et al., 2018).

Turning to tragedy, for Maier “all great tragedy involves problems which arise from the conflict of forces” (p. 140). We attend to a tragedy because it can arouse “sympathy and the emotions” (p. 143) and “tragedy grips us because we are sympathetic by nature” (p. 145). The analysis is not deep and here Maier ends. We can see that Maier constructs his theory upon basic problem-solving principles that he had helped pioneer in a Gestalt vein. But this ensured that he was approaching literature as more or less general psychology. Although he takes occasional hints from literary theorists, he is mostly interested in a preliminary understanding of literature based on principles it shares with general psychology.

Arnheim on Metaphor

Finally, after having seen Heider’s and Maier’s approaches to literature, I want to draw attention to Rudolf Arnheim’s essay of 1948, “Psychological Notes on the Poetical Process.” Along with other scholars and poets (among them A. H. Auden,

a friend of Köhler at Swarthmore), Arnheim was invited to the special collection of the University of Buffalo to write a reflection on poet's drafts. In effect, this is Arnheim's first study of creativity, to be supplemented some years later by his monograph on Picasso's *Guernica* (1962). Along the way, he formulated a Gestalt theory of metaphor.

We know from his contemporary notebooks that Arnheim (1948/49) intended to write a general textbook on all the arts:

I will try to write "A Psychology of the Artistic Media – Shape, Color, Sound, Word," in which the various media will be treated together wherever possible. For instance: laws of grouping for shapes, colors, and sounds together; the same for expression. Rhythm for literary and musical meters. Montage for movies and literature. Etc (23 February 1948, Diary of Drafts, 1948-1949).

Of course, this project morphed into his *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954). Clearly Arnheim, who had written books on film and radio already, did not feel challenged by any theoretical limitations to write also about music or literature.

It can be seen from Arnheim's title that he is not operating on a technical linguistic level. He speaks quite generally about concreteness and abstractness and understand figurative language as a way of making the abstract tangible. Thus, Arnheim does not coordinate his discussion with other theories and absent is I. A. Richard's interactive theory of metaphor, which we know in hindsight to be quite similar (Goodblatt & Glicksohn, 2003). But this is consistent with our earlier discussion, where it was clear that Arnheim is really interested in basic categories of concreteness and physiognomic qualities.

As an example, he uses Shakespeare's line from *Romeo and Juliet*, regarding Romeo:

stabbed with a white wench's black eye

The conceit is that Romeo is in love, "already dead." Arnheim (1948) explains: "Shakespeare not only stresses the aggressiveness that stabbing and the white wench's black eye have in common but also imports into the love situation the atmosphere of murder" (p. 156-7). For Arnheim, words have no fixed meaning, and they perpetually modify each other in a field-like way.

When heterogeneous segments of reality are forced into one grammatical whole, a structural conflict results, which must be resolved...negatively, the reality-character of the components is toned down and...positively, the physiognomic qualities common to the components are vigorously underscored in each. Thus, by their combination, the components are

driven to become more abstract; but the abstracted qualities continue to draw life blood from the reality contexts in which they are presented (Arnheim, 1948, 155).

Richards (1936) had written that, “In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction” (c.f. Goodblatt & Glicksohn, 2003). What Arnheim describes fleshes out psychologically how this can happen.

Nowhere does Arnheim discuss the “vehicle” and “topic” of the metaphor. Instead, he proceeds intuitively armed with his background in Gestalt theory while he tests his own experiences with metaphors as they occur. In the Shakespeare example, the “vehicle” is the literal meaning “stabbed with a...eye.” The “topic” is the abstract concept the metaphor presents, in this case, love. The resulting metaphor is an emergent whole, a new meaning made possible by the new comprehensive context (Goodblatt & Glicksohn, 2002).

Arnheim is different from Heider and Maier in that he is specifically interested in the way poets express their content. He alone is interested in the ingenuity of the poetic imagery, and its resulting quality. But in no case does Arnheim treat language in any special way. Now like Heider, he looks through the mediality of the language to the basic, universal expressive content that the artist is able to achieve. As in the visual arts, the use of images of different abstractness and concreteness to control symbolism is a constant.

Conclusion

The findings of the Berlin Gestalt school were immediately applicable to visual art and reached their culmination in the works of Rudolf Arnheim. While the Gestaltists worked heavily on sound perception, lack of attention to language is striking. Indeed, there was no “gestalt linguistics” until the term began to be used in the 1990s (Petitot, Wildgen, Brandt). True, as we have seen, the Vienna psychologist Karl Bühler wrote on language. However, his orientation was opposed to Berlin in ways that actually divide along the question of the immediacy of images (Berlin) and the act of judgment of language (Vienna). One could make the larger point that the original Gestaltists never dealt with symbolism, signs and semiotics.

In the post-war years, Arnheim intended to write significantly on language but only produced his “Psychological Notes on the Poetical Process” (1948). Nevertheless, among Arnheim and his contemporaries there was a good deal of analysis of language in poetry and literature such that one can say that a significant, if minor, bibliography exists on such media. This paper reviewed discussions of language in

the Gestalt school and the scattered observations on authors by figures like Fritz Heider, N. R. F. Maier, and Arnheim to excavate this approach. The conclusion is that, while there was no robust approach to poetry or literature, a recognizable subcurrent existed and that approach reflected Berlin Gestalt priorities of culling basic insights and wisdom from accessible works rather than delve into the linguisticity of poetry or literature itself.

In Heider, Maier, and Arnheim there is never a question as to the applicability of Gestalt psychology to poetry or literature. In their different ways, each insisted on exploring literature or poetry in a manner inspired by general psychology: Heider by phenomenology and folk notions of our world, Maier by principles of problem-solving, and Arnheim by the basic expressive benefit of figurative language.

Summary

While the Gestaltists worked on music perception, lack of attention to poetic language is striking. Indeed, there was no “gestalt linguistics” until the term began to be used in the 1990s (Petitot, Wildgen, Brandt). True, the Vienna psychologist Karl Bühler wrote on language. However, his orientation was opposed to Berlin in ways that actually divide along the question of the immediacy of images (Berlin) and the act of judgment of language (Vienna). One could make the larger point that the original Gestaltists never dealt with symbolism, signs and semiotics.

In the post-war years, Arnheim intended to write significantly on language but only produced his “Abstract Language and the Metaphor” (1948). Nevertheless, there was a good deal of analysis of language in poetry and literature such that one can say that a significant, in minor, bibliography exists on such media. This paper reviews discussions of language in the Gestalt school and the scattered observations on authors by figures like N. R. F. Maier, Fritz Heider, and others. The conclusion is that these psychologists specifically chose not to delve too much into the specificity of language, retrieving from poetic works general principles, perhaps in light of psychology as a “young science.”

Keywords: Poetry, Literature, Metaphor, Gestalt Psychology, Karl Bühler, Karl Heider, N. R. F. Maier, Rudolf Arnheim

References

- Argenton, A. (1996). *Arte e cognizione. Introduzione alla psicologia dell'arte*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Arnheim, R. (1948). Psychological Notes on the Poetical Process. In *Poets at Work. Essays based on the Modern Poetry Collection at the Lockwood Memorial Library, Univ. of Buffalo*, edited by C. D. Abbott (pp. 123-162). New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Arnheim, R. (1948/49). *Diary of Drafts, 1948/49*. Archives of American Art, Washington DC.
- Arnheim, R. (1954). *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California.
- Arnheim, R. (1962). *Picasso's Guernica: The Genesis of a Painting*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Arnheim, R. (1966). *Toward a Psychology of Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Asch, S. E. (1955). On the use of metaphor in the description of persons. In H. Werner (Ed.), *On Expressive Language*. Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.

- Asch, S. E. (1958). The metaphor. A psychological inquiry. In R. Tagiuri & L. Petrullo (Eds.), *Person perception and interpersonal behavior* (pp. 86-94). Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Ash, M. (1995). *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ash, M. (2001). Egon Brunswik before and after Emigration: A Study in the History of Science. In *The Essential Brunswik: Beginnings, Explications, Applications*, eds. K. Hammond & T. Stewart (pp. 453-464). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bühler, K. (1927). *Die Krise der Psychologie*. Jena: Fischer.
- Bühler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Jena: Fischer.
- Canestrari, C., Branchini, E., Bianchi, I., Savardi, U., & Burro, R. (2018). Pleasures of the Mind: What Makes Jokes and Insight Problems Enjoyable. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1-21.
- Cattaruzza, S. & Reynaud, S. (2025). History of Gestalt Psychology and Language. In *Handbook of Gestalt Theoretic Psychology of Art*, ed W. Coppola (pp. 56-80). New York and London: Routledge.
- Coppola, W. (2025). Berlin, New York, Trieste – Laboratories of the Arts. In *Handbook of Gestalt Theoretic Psychology of Art*, ed W. Coppola (pp. 22-40). New York and London: Routledge.
- Ertel, S. (1977). Where Do the Subjects of Sentences Come From? In *Sentence Production* (pp. 141-167), Ed. Rosenberg, S. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Fisette, D. (2016). Phenomena and Mental Functions. Karl Bühler and Stumpf's Program in Psychology. *Brentano Studien* 14: 191-228.
- Flores-D'Arcais, G. (1975). Some Perceptual Determinants of Sentence Construction. In *Studies in Perception* (pp. 344-73), ed. G. Flores-D'Arcais. Milano: Martello.
- Gelb, A. & Goldstein, K. (1925). Über Farbennamenamnesie nebst Bemerkungen über das Wesen der amnestischen Aphasie überhaupt und die Beziehung zwischen Sprache und dem Verhalten zur Umwelt. *Psychologische Forschung*, 6, 127-186.
- Golomb, C. (1992). *The Child's Creation of a Pictorial World*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Goodblatt, C. & Glicksohn, J. (2002). Metaphor Comprehension as Problem Solving. *Style*, 36, 428-444.
- Goodblatt, C. & Glicksohn, J. (2003). From Practical Criticism to the practice of literary criticism. *Poetics Today*, 24, 207-236.
- Goodblatt, C., & Glicksohn, J. (2022). *The gestalts of mind and text*. London: Routledge.
- Heider, F. (1941/1959). The description of the psychological environment in the work of Marcel Proust. *Character and Personality*, 9, 295-314; reprinted in *On perception, event structure, and psychological environment*.
- Heider, F. (1946). Social perception and phenomenal causality. *Psychological Review* 51, 358-374.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Hornbostel, E. M. von. (1927). Laut und Sinn. In *Festschrift Meinhof: Sprachwissenschaft und andere Studien* (pp. 239-48). Hamburg: Kommissionsverlag von L. Friederichsen.
- Innis, R. (1982). *Karl Bühler: Semiotic Foundations of Language Theory*. New York and London: Plenum Press.
- Koffka, K. (1935). *The Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Köhler, W. (1929). *Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Liveright.
- Levelt, W. J. M., Schreuder, R. & Hoenkamp, E. (1976). Structure and Use of Verbs of Motion. In *Recent Advances in the Psychology of Language* (pp. 137-161), eds. Robin Campbell and Philip T. Smith. New York: Plenum Press.
- Lewin, K. (1936). *The Principles of Topological Psychology*. New York: McGraw, Hill.
- Maier, N. R. F. (1930). Reasoning in humans, I, on direction. *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 10, 115-43.
- _____. (1931). Reasoning in humans, II, The solution of a problem and its appearance in consciousness. *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 12, 181-94.
- _____. A Gestalt Theory of Humour. *British Journal of Psychology* 23 (1932) 69-74.
- _____. (1970). *Problem-solving and creativity in individuals and groups*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- _____, and Reninger, H. (1933). *A Psychological Approach to Literary Criticism*. New York: Appleton.
- _____, & Schneirla, T. C. (1935). *Principles of Animal Psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Mulligan, Kevin, "On structure: Bühler's linguistic and psychological examples," in Achim Eschbach (ed.), *Karl Bühler's Theory of Language* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1988), pp. 203-26.
- Proust, M. (1913/1928). *Swann's Way*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Modern Library, 1928.
- Proust, M. (1919/1925). Within a Budding Grove, parts I & II, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Modern Library.

- Proust, M. (1920/1925). *The Guermantes' Way*. parts I & II, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Modern Library.
- Proust, M. (1921-23/1927). *Cities of the Plain*, Parts I & II, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Modern Library.
- Proust, M. (1924/1929). *The Captive*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Boni.
- Proust, M. (1925/1930). *The Sweet Cheat Gone*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Boni.
- Proust, M. (1927/1932). *The Past Recaptured*, tr. F. A. Blossom. New York: Boni.
- Raphelson, A. C. (1968). *Psychology at the University of Michigan: 1852-1950*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan.
- Schiller, P. (1938). A configurational theory of puzzles and jokes. *Journal of General Psychology*, 18, 217–234.
- Smith, B. (ed.) (1988). *Foundations of Gestalt Theory*, München/Wien: Philosophia Verlag.
- Stumpf, C. (1876). Anton Marty [Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Sprache]. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, Neue Folge*, 68, 172-191.
- Stumpf, C. (1926). *Die Sprachlaute - experimentell-phonetische Untersuchungen*. Berlin: Springer.
- Toccafondi, F. (2004). Karl Bühler and neopositivism, Reasons for a nonconvergence. *Les Dossiers de Histoire Epistémologie Langage*. Retrieved 9-3-2007, from <http://shesl.org/index.php/dossiers> HYPERLINK "http://shesl.org/index.php/dossiers2-karl_buhler/"2 HYPERLINK "http://shesl.org/index.php/dossiers2-karl_buhler/".
- Tulving, E., & Thomson, D. M. (1973). Encoding specificity and retrieval processes in episodic memory. *Psychological Review*, 80, 352-373.
- Versteegen, I. (2014). Arnheim on Artistic Symbolization (with some Help from Argenton). *Ragionamenti percettivi: Saggi in onore di Alberto Argenton*. Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis Edizioni.
- Versteegen, I. (2022). Right for the Wrong Reason, Wrong for the Right Reason: Gibson and Arnheim on Picture Perception. *Public Journal of Semiotics* 9, 74-87.
- Werner, H. & Kaplan, B. (1963). *Symbol Formation: An Organismic Developmental Approach to Language and the Expression of Thought*. New York: John Wiley.
- Wertheimer, M. (1912). Über das Denken der Naturvölker: 1. Zahlen und Zahlgebilde. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 60, 321-378.
- Wildgen, W. 1990b. Basic principles of self-organization in language. In *Synergetics of Cognition* (pp. 415-426), eds. Herman Haken and Michael Stadler. Berlin: Springer.
- _____. (2001). Kurt Lewin and the Rise of 'Cognitive Sciences' in Germany: Cassirer, Bühler, Reichenbach. In *The Dawn of Cognitive Science: Early European Contributors*, ed. Liliana Albertazzi. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Ian Versteegen is Associate Director of the Visual Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania and Series Editor of "Studies and Research in the Psychology of Art" at Routledge.

He is the author, among other works, of *Arnheim, Gestalt and Media: An Ontological Theory* (2019); *Arnheim, Gestalt and Art: A Psychological Theory* (2005); *Cognitive Iconology: When and How Psychology Explains Images. Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* (2014).

E-mail: <verstege@sas.upenn.edu>

Orcid: 0000-0003-0815-4031