Philipp Wegener as a proto-speech act theorist

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1. Introduction.

Knowledge of the history of 19th and 20th-century linguistics outside the dominant, ‘official’ schools, such as Junggrammatiker and structuralism, is growing rapidly at the moment. Along with this growth the way these ‘outsiders’ are discussed is becoming more and more refined. The time when, for example, attention to what Noordegraaf calls ‘the other side of the 19th century’ -non-historical, logical or psychological linguistics- was remarkable in itself, has gone by¹, as has the time when recognition of the psychological ‘other side’ immediately led to the assumption of ‘predecessors’ of generative grammar, as in Blumenthal (1970). More detailed attention revealed huge differences in the ways in which linguistics was related to psychology. In the generative approach this relation is mainly a metatheoretical issue. The psychological component of linguistic concepts thus remains restricted to the ‘metatheoretical domain’ of these concepts.² For psychological linguists in the decades preceding and following the turn of the century, psychology was much more intimately related to linguistics.³ Psychological phenomena were relevant in the ‘empirical domain’ of linguistic concepts as well. For example, in Paul’s Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte the subject and predicate of a sentence were believed to correspond to two subsequent representations (‘Vorstellungen’) arising in the speaker’s mind, the subject being the first one, the predicate the second (Paul 1920:124).

Paul’s view is not representative of psychological linguistics as a whole, however. Further refinement in historiography has revealed a process within psychological linguistics, leading from a relatively naive view of the language-thought relationship to a more sophisticated view. Through this process, the idea that sentences and words directly mirror occurrences on what is called by Knobloch the ‘innere Bühne’, the ‘inner stage’ in the speaker’s head, was abandoned.⁴ From about the turn of the century it was gradually replaced by the more realistic assumption that words and sentences represent objective contents that the speaker intentionally wants to communicate to the listener. In particular,

¹ See Noordegraaf (1982).
² See Elffers (1991:ch.4) for the distinction of "domains" in concepts. Domains are clusters of features, which may develop independently.
³ Psychological linguistics was practised from about 1850 until about 1940.
the work of Alan Gardiner and Karl Bühler contributed to an increase in the sophistication of psychological linguistics.

Here we shall examine the position of Philipp Wegener in this drift towards a more sophisticated view. Wegener's 1885 *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen de Sprachlebens* is considered to be a pioneering work at the moment, for example by Knobloch (1988:sections 2.8, 3.5 and 4.6) and Nerlich (1992:81-86). Although Wegener was not paid much attention in his own time, his work would have been a main source of inspiration for Gardiner and Bühler. Let us see what his contribution was.\(^5\)

2. Wegener's communicative approach.

What was new in Wegener's work? No doubt is possible when we look at the new emphasis laid by him on the *communicative situation* in which language use takes place.\(^6\) This emphasis concerns two - in principle independent- issues. In the first place, it refers to the purposive character of language use, the fact that utterances embody an appeal to the listener. Secondly, it involves the dependence of utterances on their contexts and situations. Utterances are, in particular, adapted to the information the listener can derive from the context and situation. The listener, on the other hand, applies a principle reminiscent of Grice's cooperative principle: he assumes a minimum of relevance in the speaker's utterances and lets this assumption guide his interpretation (Wegener 1885:66-69).

What did these ideas of Wegener's replace? Paul's sentence conception, mentioned above, gives some indication. The view Wegener replaced is in fact an idea which is already present in the 17th-century Port Royal Grammar but is consistently sustained only in 19th-century psychological grammar: the idea that words and sentences represent occurrences in the speaker's mind. As Port Royal Grammar puts it, men need words 'pour marquer tout ce qui se passe dans leur esprit' and 'pour signifier leurs pensées'. However, Port Royal Grammar still made a casual transition, even within one paragraph, from 'leurs pensées' to 'les objets de leurs pensées'; a rational, but in principle inconsistent move.\(^7\)

Nineteenth-century psychological grammarians took the idea that words and sentences directly relate to occurrences on the 'inner stage' of our minds more seriously. Their view cannot be interpreted too literally. The words we speak are each thought to correspond to a representation arising at the moment of speech (in

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\(^5\) Wegener's *Untersuchungen* has been reprinted in 1991, with an extensive introduction by Clemens Knobloch (p.xi-li). In this introduction Wegener's relationship to Bühler is discussed on p.xxxix-xli).

\(^6\) Breal's work (for example Breal 1897), is another example of a communicative semantic approach (cf. Nerlich 1992:ch.3).

\(^7\) See Arnauld & Lancelot (1660:22 ff)
fact, of course, somewhat earlier). A sentence is conceived as signalling the fact that two (or possibly more) representations are connected. The precise character of this connection was an issue much discussed by 19th-century grammarians, logicians and psychologists.\(^8\)

In Knobloch (1988:ch.4) this consistent naive psychologism is described as 'das vorstellungspychologische Paradigma'.\(^9\) Knobloch convincingly shows how this approach was a hindrance to the rise of an adequate view of language, language use and language development. In relation to this issue he often mentions Wegener's *Grundfragen* as an important breakthrough of a much more sophisticated view and an essential contribution to the eventual 'dissolution' of the approach.

For many aspects of this process the view of Wegener as a turning-point in history is certainly correct.\(^10\) Gardiner's and Bühler's indebtedness to Wegener is also beyond doubt. Both Gardiner's *A theory of speech and language* (1932) and Bühler's *Sprachtheorie* (1934) pay extensive attention to Wegener as a source of inspiration. Gardiner even dedicated his book to Wegener.

There is, however, one aspect of the process, namely the changing view of the sentence, that appears to follow a slightly different pattern.

3. Sentences: from mirrors of thought to purposive acts.

We observed Paul's 'representation' conception of the sentence and its constituent parts, subject and predicate. This view was eventually abandoned in favour of what we would now call a 'speech act' conception of the sentence. According to this conception, sentences are not determined by the inner thought movements of the speaker, but by the speaker in relation to the listener and the content to be communicated.

It appears that the crucial role of the turning point in the development of this conception was played by Gardiner and Bühler, Wegener's position being an intermediate stage. We will look at this development in more detail now. When considering its final stage, our attention will be focussed mainly on Gardiner, because of his well-documented emulation of Wegener. In the final section we will briefly discuss Bühler's position.

\(^8\) In the 19th century these three disciplines were, at least partially, closely related. Both logic and linguistics adopted a psychological approach. Early psychology became only gradually emancipated from logic and philosophy.

\(^9\) I do not take over this term, because the suggestion of a paradigm in Kuhn's sense (not implied by Knobloch either) should be avoided.

\(^10\) In particular, Wegener's ideas about the workings of communication and the genesis of language (ontogenesis as well as phylogenesis) were innovative.
In the transition from 'sentences as reflections of thought processes' to 'sentences as speech acts' four phases can broadly be distinguished:

**Phase 1:** Subject and predicate both correspond to representations that are connected into a thought. Sentences are observable reflections of thoughts, just as turning red or pale are observable reflections of emotions. Linguists adhering to this view were, for example, Steinthal and Wundt.

**Phase 2:** Like phase 1, but now sentences are not conceived as 'natural' reflections of thought, but as signs that can be deliberately used as a means to evoke the thought in question in the mind of the listener as well. Linguists adhering to this view were, for example, Paul, Von der Gabelentz, Marty.

**Phase 3:** Like phase 2, but now the subject-representation constitutes the background against which the predicate is the new thought. This new thought is the content to be communicated to the listener. The background may be communicated as well, in various degrees of specification, depending on the similarities and differences between the speaker's and the listener's situation. Whether there is a subject, in the sentence, and how detailed its formulation is, thus depends on the information the listener needs in order to understand. This position is Wegener's. For him the subject, or 'exposition', functions as a framework for interpretation, presented on behalf of the listener.

**Phase 4:** Subject and predicate reflect the objective content of the sentence, not its genesis at the thought level. Speakers are therefore free to divide the entire content into subject and predicate in the way they want, although there are conventions (relating to, for example, content and style) for this division. This is Gardiner's position.

For the sake of clarity, let me give an example. To a phase 1 linguist, a sentence like 'This road is long' is a reflection of the fact that in the speaker's mind two representations (one corresponding to 'this road' and one to 'long') have been connected. To a phase 2 linguist, the speaker's mental events preceding the sentence are identical, but he utters the sentence only with the specific purpose of evoking the same mental events in the listener.

A phase 3 linguist also connects two mental representations, but he might only say 'Long!', for example when the communicative situation allows the road in question to be visible to the speaker and the listener. When this is not the case

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11 According to the "natural reflection" view, silence is, in fact, a phenomenon in need of explanation. Steinthal, indeed, asserts that we have to "learn" to integrate our impressions without speech (cf. Knobloch 1988:111).
the road is mentioned, but by various descriptions ('this road', 'the road we crossed yesterday', 'the road between A. and B.' etc.) depending on the communicative situation (including the relationship between the speaker and the listener). To a linguist representing phase 4, this adaptation to the communicative situation is also relevant, but for him there is no longer any relationship between sentences and the genesis of thoughts. The sentence represents a content that can be deliberately divided into a subject and a predicate. Instead of the original sentence, 'The length of this road is considerable' is a possible alternative.

Our four-phases model mirrors a complicated historical reality in a very general way. It abstracts from the following factors:

a) The adoption of a distinction between a grammatical subject and predicate and a logical/psychological subject and predicate (the latter concepts roughly correspond to 'topic' and 'comment'). Opinions of psychological linguists about this issue differ. Most, but not all of the linguists mentioned before divide the concepts along these lines. Where such a division is made, the four-phase model concerns the logical-psychological aspect of the concepts.¹²

b) The recognition of more than two main sentence members. At this point assumptions differ as well. From the point of view of the applicability of our model these differences are largely irrelevant, however, because psychological linguists generally make the assumption that all grammatical relationships are essentially subject-predicate relationships.

c) The psychological interpretations of the subject-predicate relation. In all phases, except phase 4, psychological linguists paid extensive attention to the question of what is really going on upon the 'inner stage' when subjects are connected to predicates. Opinions about the character of the connection (e.g. association, apperception) as well as its directionality (synthesis, analysis) differed widely. However, these differences are not relevant to our model.

d) Strict chronological sequence. Although the model refers to phases in real time, there are certainly deviations and overlaps. Linguists belonging to various phases may produce their main works simultaneously, or even in 'reversed' order. In conformity with Wegener's 'pioneer' position, for example, works of quite a few 'earlier' linguists (e.g. the typical phase-1 scholar Wundt) followed Wegener's work in time. It is also not the case that the naive psychology of representations entirely disappeared as soon as Gardiner came along. Knobloch (1988:298) observes that it has survived, at least partially, up to the present day.

Taking into account these abstractions, we arrive at the following general picture. There is a gradual process of abandonment of the view that sentences represent

¹² See Elffers (1991:Part II) for the historical development of this "redoubling" of subject and predicate.
occurrences on the ‘inner stage’ and simultaneously a process of relating more and more aspects of sentences to communicative choices made by the speaker. In phase 1 the sentence is purely an epiphenomenon of the achievement of a connection between two psychical representations. In phase 2 this connection of representations becomes an object of communicative interaction; there is a rudimentary concept of the speech-act. In phase 3 the speech-act concept is more dominantly present. Sentences are more loosely related to the ‘inner stage’: the subject, at least, gives solely the information that is necessary on behalf of the listener. In phase 4 any link with mental representations has disappeared. Communicative choice has become all-important. As Gardiner notes about the subject: ‘The subjects of statements are not imposed upon the speaker from outside, but are chosen by him arbitrarily’ (Gardiner 1951:282).

4. Wegener, Gardiner and the evolution of the speech act

We observed that Gardiner finally rejected the link between sentences and thought processes in a way not yet at issue in Wegener’s work. But Wegener ‘prepared the way’ for this rejection by strongly emphasizing the communicative purposes of language use. In Gardiner’s 1932 book, Wegener’s model of the sentence is even partially adopted, firstly as a correct description of language use in its earlier stages (ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically), and secondly as a correct description of a part of recent and adult sentences (like ‘Horrible - that play!’). But the very communicative approach learnt from Wegener, eventually led Gardiner to reject Wegener’s model as generally valid: ‘But if we select a random example among the sentences which occur by thousands in our books or daily newspapers, probably this will be found to have travelled very far from the model just discussed’ (Gardiner 1951:278).

Now it is always possible to discuss the respective contributions of the work of various scholars to a general development. In our four-phase development model one might, for example, defend the view that, although Gardiner brought about the eventual breakthrough, Wegener’s contribution is ‘more important’ because it functions as a general eye-opener, thereby making possible Gardiner’s innovation. Given the multifarious ambiguity of the term ‘importance’, however, such discussions are generally doomed to remain vague and inconclusive.13

We may, however, compare contributions in specific and interesting respects and thereby gain clarifying results. For example, the various phases of our model can be related to concrete syntactic practice in order to compare their substantial

13 In linguistic historiography, “important” may, for example, mean "valuable in the light of present linguistic insights", but also "causing many new linguistic developments". See Elffers (1991:section 3.1.3) for a discussion of six meanings of “importance”.
consequences for this practice. These may be positive, by allowing new insights and shifting obstacles, or negative, by creating such obstacles. Below I will make an attempt to compare Wegener’s and Gardiner’s work along these lines. First, however, some reservations about this type of comparison have to be discussed.

What linguists say about their practice and what they really do may widely diverge. Metatheories about the analysis of sentences only partially guide concrete syntactic investigations. In our phases 1-3 they even should be at variance, simply because the ‘inner stage’ that should be investigated does not exist. The idea of mental imagery proceeding in strict parallel to speech is entirely unrealistic. This assumption rested upon the well-known psychologist confusion, based upon the ambiguity of the meaning of ‘thought’ between ‘thought content’ and ‘thought process’ and upon an empiricist and sensualist theory of knowledge. But an empiricist attitude also led to its downfall. The rise of experimental ‘Erlebnispsychologie’ (the school of Würzburg) yielded the means to refute the parallelism of sentences and thoughts (but only after a stage of intensive attempts to empirically establish the real ‘actors’ on the ‘inner stage’).

In the meantime, linguistic practice continued under its old identity. Linguists investigated words and sentences, unaffected by their false ontological view. It can even be argued that, in a sense, psychological linguistics benefited from their false ontology: it reinforced an attitude of careful introspection. For example, 19th-century observations of non-correspondence between the grammatical and the psychological subject and predicate were almost exclusively made by linguists and philosophers with a strong psychological orientation. In this research the advantage of careful observations was often greater than the disadvantage of a false reconstruction of the observations. For example, the communicative prominence of the psychological predicate (the ‘comment’) was rightly observed, although it was thought to be prominence on the ‘inner stage’.

This situation could be less beneficial, however, with linguists being led astray in their practice by their metatheoretical assumptions. Naive (phase 1 and 2) psychological views of the subject-predicate relation sometimes yielded untenable syntactic descriptions. It is these cases that we will utilize in our comparison of Wegener’s and Gardiner’s innovations. They show the weaknesses of the language-thought parallelism in a substantial way. Our relevant question will be: are these weaknesses avoidable by Wegener’s more sophisticated metatheory, or, if not, by Gardiner’s? Against the background of the reservations mentioned above we have to put into perspective the cases themselves, however: they were of an incidental character, counterbalanced by a general practice that remained unaffected by metatheoretical reflection.

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14 See Knobloch (1988:chs 6 and 7).
15 A psychological metatheory was also in principle adopted by linguists belonging to the historical-linguistic mainstraim, who were not practically involved in psychological aspects of language.
5. Two historical cases.

We will firstly discuss the case of Paul's view of one-word sentences (Paul 1920:129-132). As was mentioned above, Paul presupposed that sentences always contain a subject and a predicate at the psychological level. The subject is the first of the two representations to be connected, the predicate the second. The exclamation 'Fire!' thus corresponds to two representations. How does Paul reconstruct these two members? Guided by his metatheory, Paul assumes different solutions for the speaker and for the listener. The speaker's first representation concerns the common situation of the speaker and the listener. This representation is the speaker's subject. Then he observes fire (the second representation) and exclaims 'Fire!' as an utterance of the second representation, the predicate. For the listener matters are different. He firstly hears 'Fire!' and thus acquires a fire representation. He reacts by looking at the common situation, thus forming a second representation. So for the listener 'Fire!' is the subject.

This view of Paul's leads to absurdities. The reverse observation processes of speaker and listener would -if realistic at all- of course occur in the production and comprehension of longer sentences as well. All sentence elements would stand for subject-predicate relationships with different directionalities for the speaker and the listener. Speakers' sentences would thus consist of an enumeration of predicates, while listeners' sentences would consist of an enumeration of subjects. As a consequence of this approach the concepts in question are doomed to remain inapplicable to the aim for which they were originally conceived: description of sentence elements in their mutual relationships, irrespective of the perspective of the speaker or the listener.

This example shows that a phase-2 point of view involves obstacles for syntactic description when taken seriously. Paul's exposition makes them explicit, but they are in principle implied in the work of any linguist proceeding in a similar way.

We now ask whether phase 3 already precludes these problems. The answer is affirmative. Considered from Wegener's point of view, 'Fire!' is always the predicate, the subject being the representation evoked by the communicative situation. This is not only the case for the speaker, but also for the listener. For him the situation he shares with the speaker is automatically the subject of sentences, unless the speaker specifies or corrects this presupposition by the exposition he presents. For the first problem Wegener thus really represents a turning-point.
Our second problem concerns phase-2 linguistic work written around 1920 by Ammann and Vossler. Both apply the concept of 'grammar' in a very broad sense, including many literary and stylistic phenomena. This approach was an important factor in their inclination to take very seriously the link between sentences and the psychical processes of the speaker that are regarded as their source (and thus in their very late adoption of the phase 2 point of view).

For informative statements their results do not differ from most earlier phase-2 descriptions: sentences are assumed to be rooted in neatly structured thought processes. The situation is different for sentences in poems and other contexts that can be assumed to relate to an 'inner stage' that is exclusively dominated by overwhelming and unanalyzable emotions.

Ammann and Vossler are both convinced that in such sentences subject-predicate structure is simply lacking. Consistently applying the sentence-thought parallelism, they assume that the sentences are grammatically unanalyzable. There is only, in Vossler's words, 'ein Ausbruch, in dem es schlechthin keine Subjekte noch Prädikate mehr gibt' (Vossler 1923:113). When made thus dependent on the emotional state of the speaker, subject and predicate become, as in the preceding case, inapplicable as tools for sentence analysis. In this case, too, the problem has been made visible by the authors in question, but others, when consistently applying the sentence-thought parallelism, would have attained similar results.

We ask again whether the phase 3 point of view can avoid the problem. In this case the answer is negative. The only phase that can avoid this problem is phase 4.Grammatical concepts are only protected against going astray in this way when all links with occurrences on the 'inner stage' (implying a chance for an 'Ausbruch') have been abandoned. Gardiner's move towards a deliberately chosen subject-predicate structure turns out to be necessary to attain this position.

The two historical cases yield the following conclusion: of the two cases of problematic language description due to naive psychological-linguistic metatheories, only one can be redressed by Wegener's phase 3 view of exposition and predicate. The other can only be redressed by Gardiner's phase 4 rejection of any link between the sentence and the 'inner stage'. Both Wegener and Gardiner thus in principle made their own relevant substantial contributions to linguistic practice.


My concluding remarks will concern Bühler. Although Bühler is often considered to be on a par with Gardiner (both relying upon Wegener's views), his
development proceeded differently. More explicitly and fundamentally than Gardiner, Bühler attacked naive psychologism in linguistics. Zewadowski's description of Bühler as 'the psychologist who depychologized linguistics' is not unjustified. Bühler argued extensively against Wundt's 'Ausdruckstheorie' and distinguished sharply between the objective content of sentences and their psychogenesis. His triadic 'Organon' model explicitly accounts for the speech act as essentially determined by the speaker's intentions towards the listener and by the objective content which he wants to communicate.

Like Gardiner, Bühler clearly shows his indebtedness to Wegener in his *Sprachtheorie*. But, unlike Gardiner, he appears to adopt Wegener's view of exposition and predicate uncritically. This seems to conflict with his general and evident position in phase 4. But we can explain this when we recognize the *selective* use he makes of Wegener's views. Bühler pays no attention at all to Wegener's sticking to the 'inner stage'. What remains to be considered is Wegener's plausible idea of the exposition as a framework for interpretation on behalf of the listener.

Bühler's position with respect to the four-phase model in his *Sprachtheorie* differs from Gardiner's position in his *A theory of speech and language* and this difference is relevant to their relationship to Wegener's work. We observed Gardiner's position half-way between phase 3 and phase 4 and his eventual transition to phase 4. Wegener appears to play a dual role in this transition: his general communicative approach offers an example to imitate, while his sentence conception offers an example to emulate.

In Bühler's *Sprachtheorie* the phases 1-3 are already radically overcome. When he discusses sentences and their subject-predicate structure, he appears to reinterpret Wegener's work as a fully-fledged phase 4 speech act theory, in order to appeal to its clear view of the situational aspects of language use.

Gardiner's *A theory of speech and language*, on the contrary, continued a development towards phase 4, building on Wegener's real historical position as a *proto*-speech act theorist.

References


17 See Zewadowski (1980).
18 Independent of Bühler, Gardiner developed a comparable view of the speech act as determined by the speaker, the listener and the "thing-meant".
19 For example, in his *Ausdruckstheorie* (1933) Bühler criticizes Wundt's naive psychological theory of the sentence. See for a general overview of Bühler's "Sprachaxiomatik" Vonk (1992).
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