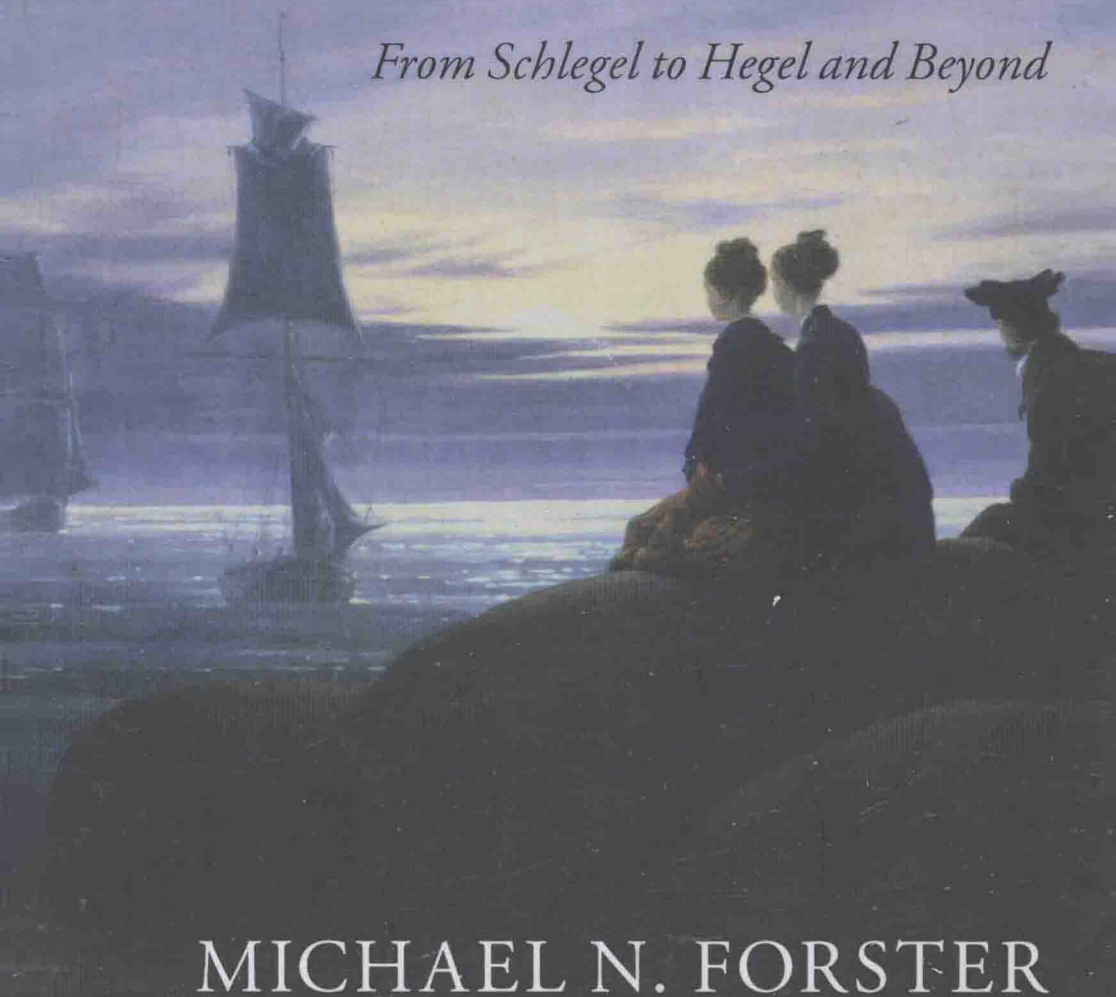


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GERMAN PHILOSOPHY of LANGUAGE

From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond



MICHAEL N. FORSTER

German Philosophy of Language

*From Schlegel to Hegel
and Beyond*

Michael N. Forster



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German Philosophy of Language

To the memory of Michael Frede (1940–2007)

Acknowledgments

Together with its companion volume *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*, this volume is dedicated to the memory of Michael Frede, who, shortly after retiring from the Chair in the History of Philosophy at Oxford University in 2005, died tragically while swimming in the sea near Delphi in the summer of 2007. Together with Raymond Geuss, Michael supervised my doctoral dissertation on Hegel's reception of ancient skepticism at Princeton University in the early 1980s. He was an intellectually inspiring and generous teacher, as well as a constant source of inspiration and support throughout the rest of his life.

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Several of the essays in this volume have been published before in some form. I would therefore like to thank the publishers and editors of the following essays for allowing me to re-publish them here: "Hegel and Some (Near-) Contemporaries: Narrow or Broad Expressivism?" *Das Interesse des Denkens: Hegel aus heutiger Sicht*, ed. K. Vieweg and W. Welsch (Wilhelm Fink, 2003); "Hegel and Hermeneutics," *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. F.C. Beiser (Cambridge University Press, 2009); "Language," *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. A.W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 2011); "Hermeneutics," *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. B. Leiter and M. Rosen (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Last but not least I would like to thank my family for their love, support, and patience: my wife Noha, my daughter Alya, and my parents Michael and Kathleen.

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The present volume is preceded by a companion volume *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* whose contents are:

Introduction

Part I: Herder

1. Johann Gottfried Herder
2. Herder's Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles
3. Gods, Animals, and Artists: Some Problem Cases in Herder's Philosophy of Language
4. Herder's Importance as a Philosopher
5. Herder on Genre
6. Herder and the Birth of Modern Anthropology
7. The Liberal Temper in Classical German Philosophy: Freedom of Thought and Expression

Part II: Hamann

8. Johann Georg Hamann
9. Hamann's Seminal Importance for the Philosophy of Language?

Part III: Schleiermacher

10. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher
11. Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions
12. Herder, Schleiermacher, and the Birth of Foreignizing Translation

Select Bibliography

Abbreviations

- DGS *Wilhelm Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1914–)
- FSSW *Friedrich Schleiermacher's sämtliche Werke* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1835–), references to division, volume, and page
- G *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, ed. U. Gaier et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–)
- KFSA *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. E. Behler et al. (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1958–)
- S *Johann Gottfried Herder Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan et al. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–)
- WHGS *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann et al. (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903–)

All references are to volume and page unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

In the Anglophone world the philosophy of language has for some time now enjoyed something like the status of “first philosophy,” having displaced in that central position such previous occupants as metaphysics and epistemology. But where did the philosophy of language begin? Michael Dummett claims that Frege is “the father of ‘linguistic philosophy,’”¹ and Anthony Kenny similarly maintains that “Frege gave philosophy its current linguistic turn.”² Assuming, as seems reasonable, that the expressions “linguistic philosophy” and “[philosophy’s] linguistic turn” here refer mainly to the two doctrines that (1) thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language, and (2) meaning consists in the use of words, then these historical claims are false. Long before Frege, a series of important German thinkers, including Herder, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hegel, had already espoused versions of these doctrines. And far from introducing them, Frege actually reacted *against* them, backing off the bold claim that thought is *essentially* dependent on and bounded by language and substituting for it the weaker claim that the dependence in question is only a contingent feature of the thought of human beings, as well as rejecting any equation of meaning with the use of words in favor of a Platonism about meaning, or “sense” (see Essay 8).³ The present volume and its companion volume *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* explore the *real* beginnings of modern philosophy of language, namely in the earlier German tradition just mentioned. One of their aims is thus to correct a mistake and fill a lacuna in Anglophone philosophy of language’s knowledge of its own origins, and hence in its self-understanding. In doing this, *After Herder* was mainly concerned with Herder, Hamann, and Schleiermacher. The present volume by contrast mainly focuses on Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hegel.

In addition to the controversial historical claim just stated, these volumes also make a number of further controversial historical claims. One of these is that it was *Herder* who played the most fundamental role within the earlier

German tradition in question. It seems to me that Coseriu sums up the situation pretty well in the following isolated aperçu:

Herder famously (or: as should be famous) stands at the beginning of classical German philosophy of language not only chronologically; he is at the same time the “main source,” so to speak, and the constant, even if only implicit, reference point of the philosophy of language. Fichte, Friedrich and A. W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Schelling, Hegel and Humboldt all take over, directly or indirectly, explicitly or tacitly, ideas of Herder’s. That many of these ideas often appear in these authors much more elaborated and better proven than in Herder himself should not be allowed to obscure the fact that they are already to be found in Herder at least in a seminal form and that Herder in many respects simply made the beginning.⁴

Accordingly, one of the things I attempt to do in *After Herder* and the present volume is in effect to provide a detailed vindication of this aperçu. In *After Herder* I was especially concerned to make a case that three important revolutions which occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century in the philosophy of language (now understood stricto sensu), the theory of interpretation (or “hermeneutics”), and the theory of translation were all deeply connected; that these revolutions were mainly the work, not of the philosophers who have tended to receive most of the credit for them, namely Hamann and Schleiermacher, but of Herder, who achieved them first and then passed them on to Hamann and Schleiermacher; and moreover, that his versions of them were to a great extent philosophically superior to theirs. The present volume continues the task of vindicating the claim of Herder’s fundamental role, but this time mainly in relation to Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hegel.

Another controversial historical claim made in these volumes is that, besides laying the foundations for modern philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and translation-theory, Herder also laid the foundations for such entire new disciplines (intimately related to those fields) as cultural anthropology and linguistics. The case of anthropology was mainly discussed in *After Herder*.⁵ The present volume mainly discusses the case of linguistics (see Essay 4).

Those are some of the more dramatic historical claims championed in these two volumes. However, the purpose of these volumes is not *only* historical, but also to a considerable extent systematic; they aim not only to set the historical record straight, but also to rescue and champion a tradition of thought about language which, in my opinion, gets many important things right that more recent philosophers of language have tended to get wrong. For example, *After Herder* in effect made a case that—in sharp contrast to recent Anglophone philosophers of language such as Quine and especially Davidson, who have erroneously sought to undercut or minimize the claim that radical intellectual diversity occurs across historical periods and cultures, and who have only

developed theories of “interpretation” and “translation” of a highly abstract and dubious sort, with little potential value for people actually engaged in such activities—Herder and his tradition correctly embraced that claim, and consequently undertook the task of thinking through its fundamental implications for the methodologies of interpretation and translation in ways which are both philosophically profound and of enormous relevance for actual practice. Similarly, the present volume sketches a case in defense of a thesis of the fundamental diversity of grammars which Herder and Schlegel originally developed against Chomsky’s more recent contrary thesis of a “universal grammar” (Essay 4). And it also sketches a case in defense of Herder and Schleiermacher’s insistence in their theories of interpretation on the need to avoid a pervasive pitfall of assimilating the interpreted Other’s viewpoint to one’s own against Gadamer’s recent championing of such assimilation (Essays 7 and 9).

Part of what is so interesting and admirable in this earlier German tradition as compared with more recent philosophy of language is thus its sheer philosophical *depth*, the fact that its ideas are often superior to those that later came to dominate philosophy of language in the twentieth century. This depth is not altogether surprising on reflection, for the following reason. To put it a bit pointedly, compared with most recent philosophers of language, the thinkers in this earlier tradition *knew a lot* about language. In particular, they all had an impressive knowledge, not only of their native German and other modern European languages, but also of ancient languages (for example, they all had good Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and several of them also knew Sanskrit), and in some cases culturally distant living languages as well (for example, Humboldt knew a number of these). Moreover, they were all deeply engaged in, and skilled at, the tasks of interpreting and translating texts, including not only texts in other modern European languages but also ones in historically-culturally distant languages. This intimate, skilled acquaintance with a broad range of languages and linguistic tasks could hardly but lend depth to their theoretical ideas about language.

In addition to sheer depth, another striking virtue of this earlier tradition’s ideas about language is their *breadth*, which contrasts sharply with the narrowness of most recent Anglophone philosophy of language. For example, in addition to such foundational questions in the philosophy of language as those concerning the relation between thought and language and the nature of meaning, these thinkers were also deeply interested in such further questions as the following: the extent of linguistic-conceptual variation across historical periods and cultures; the nature of interpretation, and how to accomplish it; the nature of translation, and how to accomplish it; the nature of expression in non-linguistic arts like sculpture, painting, and music, and how to interpret it; the

role of genre in both linguistic and non-linguistic art; a range of ethico-political questions concerning language; and many other fascinating questions as well.

One sometimes hears Anglophone philosophers today sounding the death-knell of philosophy of language as the central core of the discipline of philosophy. This is not too surprising given the largely misguided and severely impoverished stock of ideas that currently constitute philosophy of language in the Anglophone world. One of my more ambitious hopes for these two volumes is that they may help to revive philosophy of language in the Anglophone world by re-injecting into it some of the depth and breadth of the Herderian tradition.

Like the essays in *After Herder*, the essays in the present volume were in many cases originally written as discrete pieces rather than as parts of a whole, and I have attempted to preserve rather than to erase their original autonomy in putting them together here. Consequently, they do not form a continuous narrative, and they sometimes overlap.⁶ Nonetheless, by arranging them in a certain order and including introductory encyclopedia-style essays on each of the main thinkers covered, I have endeavored to produce something that at least approximates a continuous narrative. Consequently, an energetic reader might want to read through the essays in sequence from beginning to end. Alternatively, since each essay has sufficient autonomy to be read by itself, he or she might prefer to “dip” selectively according to interest.

The essays in these two volumes make no claim to exhaust the wealth of the tradition they explore. However, it is my plan to complement them with further essays in the future, and my hope that they may also encourage other philosophers to venture into this extraordinarily rich and underdeveloped territory.

Notes

1. M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 683.
2. A. Kenny, *Frege* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. viii.
3. This is not to deny that Frege made any important contributions to the philosophy of language. He did—for example, his clear sense/referent distinction.
4. E. Coseriu, “Zu Hegels Semantik,” *Kwartalnik neofilologiczny*, 24 (1977), p. 185 n. 8.
5. See *After Herder*, Essay 6.
6. For example, Essays 6 and 7 overlap, as do Essays 7 and 9.

PART I
Schlegel

1

Friedrich Schlegel

Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) was—together with his almost equally important, albeit less original, older brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845)—the main founder of German Romanticism. In addition, he made seminal contributions to hermeneutics, the theory of language, and general aesthetics (as well as other fields). In all of these areas—Romanticism, hermeneutics, the theory of language, and general aesthetics—he was strongly influenced by Herder. Friedrich Schlegel is an “ideas man” rather than a systematic thinker; he frequently changes his mind, and is sometimes inconsistent even at a particular period. But the brilliance and the influence of his ideas make him a thinker of great importance. This essay will give an overview of Schlegel’s thought under the following headings:

1. Intellectual Life
2. The Idea of Romanticism
3. Hermeneutics
4. Translation–Theory
5. General Aesthetics
6. Theory of Language
7. Epistemology and Metaphysics
8. Political Philosophy
9. The Later Schlegel

1. Intellectual Life

Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) was born in Hanover in 1772. His father, Johann Adolf Schlegel (1721–93), was a Protestant pastor and literary theorist, whose ideas are of some significance for his son’s development (for example, he held the interestingly radical view that the number of literary genres that were possible was infinite). Friedrich had several older siblings, but was closest to August Wilhelm, who supported and mentored him in his youth, and was his main intellectual ally thereafter.