Wilfried Kürschner:


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Georg von der Gabelentz’ *Manual for Recording Foreign Languages* (1892) – Origins, Aims, Methods, Effects

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Abstract

The main works of Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) have had, and still have, a fruitful reception in Chinese (especially his *Chinese Grammar*, 1893) and general linguistics (especially his *Linguistics: Aims, Methods, Results*, 1891, 2nd ed. 1901). In contrast, his *Manual for Recording Foreign Languages*, which was commissioned by the Colonial Department of the German Foreign Office and was published in 1892, remained virtually unknown. The aim of this paper is to place this work into its context of origin (German and European colonial policy) and outline its range of contents (phonetics including transcription, vocabulary) plus Gabelentz’ ideas concerning the methods of recording data from indigenous languages. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the manual is examined (e.g., Schmidt 1900, 1901).

**Keywords:** colonial linguistics, Georg von der Gabelentz, history of linguistics, lexicology, linguistic fieldwork

1. Georg von der Gabelentz: A few remarks on his work and life

In the history of linguistics, Georg von der Gabelentz is not renowned for the booklet we are going to deal with in this article, but rather for two other works, namely, among sinologists for his *Chinese Grammar* (first published in 1881), and even more among general linguists for his textbook *Linguistics: Aims, Methods, Results* (1891). Because of the doctrines he laid down in the latter book, Gabelentz is seen by some as a forerunner of Ferdinand de Saussure in certain respects: he distinguishes, as Saussure did later, between langue (“Einzelsprache”), langage (“menschliches Sprachvermögen”) and parole (“Rede”: “Human language is the articulated expression of thought by sounds” [„Menschliche Sprache ist der gegliederte Ausdruck des Gedankens durch Laute“], 1891: 3). Furthermore, Gabelentz made a distinction between synchronical and diachronical study of language.

He lived from 1840 to 1893, working as a professor of linguistics first in Leipzig, having positive and negative contacts with the proponents of the Neogrammian school (“Junggrammatiker”) there and elsewhere in Germany. Later he moved to the University of Berlin, where he finished his famous book on linguistics mentioned above and where he published, just one year before his early death, his last work, namely the *Manual* under consideration.

2. The *Manual* in context

2.1. Word lists

The *Manual* is related to a category of linguistic aids Gabelentz calls “Collecta-
nea”. These are corpora of linguistic materials of different kinds collected more or less systematically. Their historical origins are word lists, also called vocabularies. Some of them became very famous, for instance the *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa* by Peter Simon Pallas, published in St. Petersburg in 1786–89. Another item is the word list contained in the *Catálogo de las lenguas de las naciones conocidas, y numeración división y clase de éstas según la diversidad de sus idiomas y dialectos* by Lorenzo Hervás, published in six volumes in Madrid from 1800 to 1805. Finally, Gabelentz’ father, Hans Conon von der Gabelentz, should be mentioned who in the first half of the nineteenth century published quite a number of grammars of diverse languages, relying on collectanea compiled by himself and others.

1.2 Germany’s colonial policy: Linguistic implications

As the title of the book indicates, the *Manual* was a commissioned book he worked out for the Colonial Department of the German Foreign Office. To my knowledge, no research has yet been made in the archives to find out how this commission came about, but it can safely be placed into the context of the German Empire’s efforts to establish itself as a colonial power beside the other European nations that had started their colonial policies decades, if not centuries before: Portugal, Spain, England, France, the Netherlands, even Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden, to name just the more important ones. Germany at that time was a “belated nation” in general, lagging behind the more advanced nations in many respects, including the conquest of overseas claims or “Schutzgebiete”, protectorates, as they were called. There were only a few German protectorates, namely in Africa: German Southwest Africa (now Namibia), the first colony acquired in 1883, German East Africa (acquired in 1884, now Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi), Cameroon, and Togo (now parts of Ghana and Togo – both of them acquired in 1884/85); in Asia: the Bay of Kiautschou (China, acquired in 1898); and finally, in the South Seas: German New Guinea (acquired in 1885), consisting of Emperor William’s Land and the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands (acquired in 1885), the Caroline, Marian and Palau Islands, and German Samoa (all of them acquired in 1899).

It was the Foreign Office’s task to take care of the administration of these protectorates, which was done by German military and civil servants. As we can figure out, these persons did not speak the languages of the occupied countries, which could easily run to a multitude of tribal languages including dialects. An interest in these languages most certainly was not an intrinsic one in learning them in order to communicate with the indigenous population. It was rather a scientific interest, as we are told in many contemporaneous sources, an interest in the vast multitude of human languages spoken on this globe, in addition powered in Germany by the search for “worldviews” incorporated in languages, an idea which goes back to Wilhelm von Humboldt. On the scientific side, there were, moreover, explorers interested in broadening geographical, biological and anthropological knowledge. In order to guide and assist scientific observations of these and other kinds on journeys, there was a special handbook edited by Georg von Neumayer which also contained a practical article by Carl Meinhof (1906). Thirdly, there was a more practical interest in language stemming from efforts to do Christian missionary work. German missionaries were eager to convert native people to Christendom not only in the German protectorates, but in many other places around the
world, too. Concerning language and languages, here we have a combination of colonial and missionary interests, with the missionary aspect being more practical, namely translating the Bible and catechistic literature like prayer books and hymn books, plus having the ability to speak and preach to people in their own language.

It is these three groups mentioned – colonial civil servants, missionaries and explorers („Kolonialbeamte, Missionare und Forschungsreisende“, p. 1) – that Gabelentz addresses in the introduction („Einleitung“) of the Manual, plus all other persons, as he writes, who while in distant countries have time and pleasure to promote their knowledge of language („die … Zeit und Lust haben, die Sprachenkunde zu fördern“, ibid.). This might evoke the image of the well-to-do voyageur with time and leisure enough to record linguistic data just like others collect plants or hunt for butterflies. Gabelentz compares these travellers to professional linguists who, alas, seldom have the opportunity to collect materials on the spot („Sprachforscher vom Fach kommen selten in die Lage, an Ort und Stelle Materialien sammeln zu können“, ibid.). With these travellers in mind, for whom the experience of collecting words, sentences and texts of different sorts can become a passion („… erleben, dass auch das Sammeln von Wörtern, Sätzen und allerlei Texten zur Passion werden kann“, ibid.), Gabelentz formulates the aim of the Manual: to make collecting easier for them and provide linguistic science with useful, reliable and, because of their uniformity, clear works („Dies Sammeln soll ihnen erleichtert, und der Wissenschaft sollen brauchbare, zuverlässige, dabei durch eine gewisse Uniformität übersichtliche Arbeiten zugefügt werden“, ibid.).

To be quite clear about it: the final destination of the lists Gabelentz hopes to be provided with, is the science of language. From his textbook, we can safely infer that mere collecting of data from different languages would not be considered an aim in itself, but rather it should be made practical by writing grammars and dictionaries of these languages. We will come back to this point later on.

2. Contents and organisation of the Manual

A few words on the physical character of the book. It is in landscape format with a length of 17.5 centimetres and a height of 11.5 centimetres, thus not too bulky. It is bound in moleskin, a kind of cotton, and at one side there is a case for a pencil. The number of pages is 272 (with pages 199–272 ruled) plus 16 pages in Roman numerals at the beginning filled with an alphabetical list referring the user to their place in the word lists themselves. The book is not too thick and can easily find a place in the traveller’s outfit.

2.1. Languages to be investigated

The object of Gabelentz’ interest is clearly confined to the languages spoken in the protectorates of the German Empire. What could be judged and presumed up to the time when the Manual was published –this happened, as pointed out above, in 1892, nine years after the acquisition of the first protectorate, German Southwest Africa – Gabelentz characterizes these languages as not too difficult („nicht besonders schwierige Sprachen“, p. 1). From his textbook and other works, we know that Gabelentz was highly interested in assessing the value of languages, what he calls the
determination of their value („Wertbestimmung der Sprachen“, 1891/1901, p. 387). Although, as has been noted, the traveller will be confronted with relatively easy languages, Gabelentz provides him with some practical hints concerning the method of elicitation of data, mainly words, and the recording of phonetic details. One example must suffice. Imagine, you want to elicit your informant’s equivalent for the word hand and hold out your hand to him. It might happen that his answer does not render hand in general but your hand because, as Gabelentz surmises, the savage cannot think of hand in abstract (p. 3). Alternatively, he could answer palm or flat of the hand, out-stretched hand or It is white. I just quoted from Gabelentz’ text where he calls indigenous people savages („Wilde“ in German, p. 3); one page later he equates the informants with children („Kinder“, p. 4). Their languages are “raw” („rohe Sprachen“, p. 4), they often lack words for general concepts like “brother” and can only name the elder brother, or the younger brother, that is the species, but not the genus („… nur Namen der Arten, aber keinen Namen der Gattung“). This should not be overestimated, I think, but it is in conformity with European thinking and talking about indigenous people at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Evidence for this can be taken from Gabelentz’ admonition to the data collector:

You should stick to the principle that each savage speaks his mother tongue correctly, at least as a rule more correctly than a European does. Where we think something is wrong, the mistake will probably be in our understanding. The people just think differently from us and through their language we want to find out how they think (Sonst aber halte man sich an den Satz, dass jeder Wilde seine Muttersprache richtig spricht, jedenfalls in der Regel richtiger als ein Europäer. Wo uns also etwas fehlerhaft vorkommt, da wird wahrscheinlich der Fehler in unserem Verständnisse liegen. Die Leute denken eben anders als wir, und durch ihre Sprache wollen wir erfahren, wie sie denken; p. 5).

2.2 Organisation and content of the data sheets

The contents of the data sheets and their arrangement go back to a former work by Georg von der Gabelentz and Adolf Bernhard Meyer, called “Contributions to the Knowledge of the Melanese, Micronese and Papuan Languages” (“Beiträge zur Kenntnis der melanesischen, mikronesischen und papuanischen Sprachen”), published in 1882, that is ten years before the Manual was published. The lists consist of words, sometimes of word combinations. They are arranged according to the parts of speech schema of traditional grammar, if appropriate with subgroups again following the traditional subdivisions. A somewhat less comprehensive scheme than the one used in the Manual can be found in the textbook where Gabelentz mentions that he had once tested its suitability („Ein Schema für ein solches Wörterbuch, dessen Bequemlichkeit ich erprobt habe [...]“, 1891, p. 177/178, 1901, p. 166/167).

The order of the word classes is not the traditional one but starts with pronouns with personal pronouns at the beginning. As can be seen from the appendix where the categories Gabelentz uses are given plus some examples, already here Gabelentz prepares the collector to ask for concepts not lexicalised in German nor in English: we do not have words for we two, we three, let alone we two: me and you in contrast to we two: me and him, etc. Pronouns are followed by nouns both concrete and abstract, ar-
ranged in the way of a thesaurus. That is, words are grouped together according to their semantic connections in, as we might say, word fields and word families. The noun list aptly starts with words having to do with God and Heaven, and it finishes, as many such lists do, with the embarrassing category general or miscellaneous (“Allgemeines”). Some of the groupings are rather astonishing. Have a look at number 271 to 275 in the appendix: The words *spirit, shadow, name, voice* and *word* are put at the end of the category *Other parts of the body, excretions!* The order of adjectives starts with the concept “large” etc. and finishes with “general or miscellaneous” just like the nouns do. Adverbs are subcategorized according to the traditional subgroups of adverbs of time, of place and so on. Conjunctions and prepositions do not show any known pattern. It is with verbs that the method of thesaurizing clearly comes to its limits. Starting with Verba dicendi, verbs of saying, known from Latin and other grammars, the list quickly comes to category F. “Other verbs (in alphabetical order)” from *abreißen* ‘tear off’ to *ziehen* ‘pull’. The typographical design of inserted ruled lines and whole ruled pages are meant to encourage the data collector to think of more and other concepts or to be more realistic, to think of German words and elicit the indigenous term for them, in this case verbs.

Gabelentz’ interest in these lists clearly concentrates on the lexical aspects. Grammar is not totally neglected, although for instance in the connection with possessive pronouns there is no hint to retrieve data on how possession as a concept that exceeds traditional word class boundaries is grammaticalised in the language under consideration. Concerning nouns, the ways of marking plurals or comparable concepts are not taken care for in the lists themselves but in the section on “How to use the word lists” („Anweisung zum Gebrauch des Wörterbuchs“, p. 19/20). There Gabelentz urges the explorer to add the plural forms, if appropriate. The same applies to different verb forms – the explorer is urged to busy himself in collecting them or else to demonstrate by examples (sentences) that verbs are invariant in the language under consideration. As to adjectives, Gabelentz asks for combinations of them with nouns, e.g., *the white stone, three high trees, the stone is white, the trees are high* („Auch bei den Adjektiven sollte man von Verbindungen mit Substantive anführen: „Der weisse Stein, drei hohe Bäume, der Stein ist weiss, die Bäume sind hoch” u. s. w.“, p. 20). Concerning auxiliaries (prepositions, postpositions, genitive or object particles, conjunctions etc.), Gabelentz again asks for examples by which their “meaning” can be explained This is necessary, he says, because these words in German are mostly indeterminate. („Die Bedeutung der Hülfswörter [Prä- und Postpositionen, etwaiger Genitiv- oder Objektspariken, Konjunktionen] muss nothwendigerweise durch Beispiele erläutert werden; denn die deutschen Wörter sind mehrheitheils viel zu unbestimmt. Füllt hier der Sammler den ihm gelassenen freien Raum fleissig aus, so arbeitet er einem wichtigen Theile der Grammatik vor“; p. 20). By doing this, the explorer helps to prepare an “important part of the grammar”, whose construction, as has been pointed out above, is beside the dictionary a vital aim of the linguist.

Thus we can say that a copy of the *Manual* filled with data from a certain language is not just a kind of nomenclature of a part of its vocabulary, but ideally a grammatically enriched and informed list. Moreover, Gabelentz describes the empty pages at the end of the book as places where sayings, proverbs and other sentences, if possible texts, stories, tales and songs can be written down, thus going far beyond the level of pure words („Die leeren Blätter am Ende des Wörterbuchs sind für gebräuchliche Redensarten und sonstige Sätze, womöglich auch für zusammenhängende Texte,
Erzählungen und Lieder aus dem Munde der Eingeborenen bestimmt“, ibid.).

3. Effectiveness of the Manual

As far as we know, Gabelentz’ Manual did not become very influential. It is referred to in a larger work by Father Wilhelm Schmidt, a member of the Societas Verbi Divini, better known as Steyler Missionare, a catholic order of brothers and priests. Father Schmidt wrote in 1901/1902 on the linguistic situation in the then German part of Papua-New Guinea, partially using Gabelentz’ word list to compare data from several languages and dialects. He mentions that the book is often used by civil servants and missionaries (Schmidt 1901, p. 357). He refers to the records of the languages of Tami, Jabim, Karkar and Kake-dong (Kai) made by filling out the book (p. 373). It cannot be ascertained if these have been used for dictionary or grammar construction. Maybe it is in libraries of monasteries that we could be lucky enough to find the original records or copies. However, we should not be surprised if these books were weeded out as simple consumer goods not worthy of archiving. There are only a few libraries in Germany and the rest of the world where copies of the Manual are still available, e.g., the German and the Austrian National Libraries and the British Library. In the Gabelentz archives in his native city of Altenburg, Thuringia there are two copies, one without any entries and the other one relatively completely filled with entries from the Basque language, probably from Georg von der Gabelentz’ own hand.

A quick look at the bibliographies in the newer surveys of the languages of the world or parts of it shows that Gabelentz’ book did not reach the attention of these authors. Thus, maybe it is not unfair to state that among Gabelentz’ works, the Manual stands in an isolated position. It does not achieve the width and depth of Gabelentz’ other work and can, I think, as a commissioned work safely be placed among his lesser achievements. Nevertheless, it aptly fits into the theme “Unity and Diversity of Languages” of the 18th International Congress of Linguists and helps us to gain a more complete and multiperspective picture of Gabelentz’ work as a whole.

References


Hervás, Lorenzo (1800–05): Catálogo de las lenguas de las naciones conocidas, y numeración división y clase de éstas según la diversidad de sus idiomas y dialectos. Madrid: Ranz.


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Appendix

Cover (length: 17.5 cm, height: 11.5 cm):

Handbuch zur Aufnahme fremder Sprachen.
Manual for Recording Foreign Languages

Im Auftrage der Kolonial-Abtheilung des Auswärtigen Amts
On behalf of the Colonial Department of the Foreign Office

verfasst von
written by

Georg von der Gabelentz

Die Sprache
The language ___

in ___
aufgenommen von
recorded by ___
im Jahre
in the year ___

Berlin 1892.
Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn
Königliche Hofbuchhandlung
Kochstraße 68–70.

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   Sie (mehreren) they (several)  

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...  

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...  

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   55. Tag day

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   Gehörgang auditory canal
   Ohrläppchen earlobe

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   Nacken nape of the neck
   Adamsapfel Adam’s apple
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277. Dach *roof*
278. Haus *house*

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294. Schiff *ship*
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538a. Von *(etwas her)* *from (from somewhere)*

538b. Genitiv *genetive*

541. Bei *(dicht bei, nahe bei) near (close)*

542. An *(der Seite von ...)* *(at (next to))*

VII. Verba. *Verbs* 155

A. Sagen, sprechen u. s. w. *Say, speak etc.*

543. Sprechen, reden, sagen *(speak, talk, say)*

544. Schreien *(shout)*

570a. Lügen *lie*

570b. Schelten, schimpfen *(vgl. 567 [Lästern], 747)* *scold, rail (cf. 567 [gossip], 747)*

570c. Betrügen, täuschen *(vgl. 748 [s. 570a bis c.]) cheat, deceive (cf. 748 [see 570a to c.]*

16
B. Denken u. s. w. Think etc.

571. Denken think
572. Gedenken remember
573. Träumen dream

... 604. Vergessen forget
605. Irren be wrong, be mistaken
606. Richten judge

C. Leben, Körperfunctionen. Life, body functions

607. Gebären give birth to
geboren werden be born
608. Können be able to
609. Wachsen grow
610. Leben live

... 620. Speien spit
620b. Seine Nothdurft verrichten relieve oneself
620c. Pissen piss
[zwei linierte Zeilen two ruled pages]
620d. Menstruiren menstruate

... 644. Berühren, betasten touch, feel
644b. Den Beischlaf vollziehen have sexual intercourse

D. Gehen, Kommen u. s. w. Go, come etc.

645. Gehen go
646. Kommen come

... 678. Tröpfeln trickle, dribble
679. Schwellen swell

E. Dasein, verweilen. Be there, stay

680. Sein be
681. Dasein (wo sein) be there (be somewhere)
682. Bleiben stay

... 690. Vergehen pass
691. Fehlen, nicht dasein be absent, not to be there
[linierte Seite ruled page]

F. Andere Verba (alphabetisch geordnet). Other verbs (in alphabetical order)

692. Abreissen, trennen tear off, separate
693. Abwischen wipe off

... 702. Ausstrecken stretch out
703. Bauen build
[linierte Seite ruled page]
704. Bedecken cover
bekleiden, anziehen dress, put on
einwickeln wrap up

711. Brechen, zerbrechen break
712. Brennen (intransitiv) burn (intransitive)
    (transitiv) burn (transitive)
    verbrennen burn
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
712b. Bringen bring
712c. Dienen serve
...

722. Giessen pour
723. Glänzen, scheinen glitter, shine
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
724. Graben dig
    begraben bury
725. Greifen take
726. Haben (Wie wird das ausgedrückt? Beispiele:) have (How is it expressed?
    Examples:)
...

729. Handeln, Handel treiben trade
730. Heben lift
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
731. Heirathen marry
732. Holen fetch
...

741. Kratzen scratch
742. Lärmen make a (lot of) noise
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
743. Lassen, verursachen let, cause
    [linierte Zeilen ruled lines]
744. Löschen put out, blow out
745. Löschen, erlösen untie, undo, release, rescue, save, redeem
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
746–748 s. 570a bis c. See 570a to c
749. Machen make
    [linierte Zeilen ruled lines]
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
750a. Mahlen mill
750b. Malen paint
...

759. Rösten roast
760. Rudern row
    [linierte Seite ruled page]
761. Säen sow
762. Sammeln collect
...

770. Stehlen steal
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<td>Strafen  <em>punish</em></td>
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<td>772.</td>
<td>Tätowiren  <em>tattoo</em></td>
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<td>773.</td>
<td>Tauschen  <em>exchange</em></td>
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<td>781.</td>
<td>Verderben, verwüsten  <em>spoil, devastate</em></td>
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<td>782.</td>
<td>Vereinigen  <em>unite</em></td>
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<td>783.</td>
<td>Vergelten  <em>retaliate</em></td>
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<td>784.</td>
<td>Verletzen  <em>hurt</em></td>
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<td>793.</td>
<td>Zerreissen  <em>tear up</em></td>
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<td>794.</td>
<td>Zerstreuen  <em>scatter</em></td>
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<td>795.</td>
<td>Ziehen  <em>pull</em></td>
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