Preface

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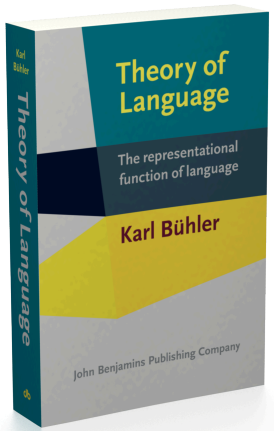

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Theory of Language: The representational function of language
Karl Bühler
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Preface

It is an ancient insight that tools and language are among the most human things about human beings: the *homo faber* uses specially chosen and formed things as his tools, and the *zoon politikon* employs language in intercourse with his fellows. A new and deeper interpretation of this simple wisdom has been facilitated by physical and psychological anthropology, and is now being developed. Among comparative anatomists Charles Bell, the genius who founded our knowledge of the structure of the central nervous system, was the first to complete a comparative theory of organs, and he crowned it with a biologically based theory of human expression. According to Bell, anatomy makes the human being dependent on tools and language; indeed, human anatomy is organized with a view to tools and language. Bell wrote in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but the maxim of his anthropology is not by any means obsolete; in my book *Ausdruckstheorie* [Theory of expression] (Bühler 1933a) I have reformulated and interpreted Bell's insight. If, beyond this, one takes up the impulses provided by the careful discussion of the special properties of the human body in Othenio Abel's book *Die Stellung des Menschen im Rahmen der Wirbeltiere* [The position of the human being among the vertebrates] (Abel 1931), one will return to the old wisdom. If the reader is a psychologist, the picture of the life of man's animal forebears drawn by Abel could serve as a basis to invent a modern myth on the decisive role of the tool and of language in anthropogenesis. This myth would take account of certain points of the essence of human language more correctly than does De Laguna's otherwise instructive book, *Speech, its Function and Development* (De Laguna 1927). But that is incidental to our purposes; I will recount the modern myth of the origin of language separately in the journal *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*. The question we pose to language in this book is not, "Where do you come from?" but, "What are you?"

Language is related to the tool; it, too, is one of the implements used in life, it is an *organon* like the material implement, the material inter-

mediary extraneous to the body; language is, like the tool, *a formed intermediary*. However, it is not material things that react to the linguistic intermediary, but rather the living beings with which we live. A thoughtful identification of the medial properties of the implement language must begin in the workshop and with the resources of those who know it best. It is philologists and linguists who have the most intimate knowledge of human languages. In the following pages, language will be inspected for structural laws in the linguists' workshop. If the portents do not deceive, comparative linguistics is receiving a new impetus; we are now heading towards a phase of universal comparison of human languages in which the vision of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his contemporaries will be realized on a higher level.

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The first point of an integral theory is the essential structural similarity of all known human languages that have been studied; it can be shown that it makes good sense to speak of "language" in the singular. We shall formulate four maxims on language that are valid for all languages. It seems to me that they should be not only broad enough, but also precise enough, and that they should fix a framework of identity into which all genuine differences can be systematically inscribed. This is the belief and hope I hold for the present book.

I feel a great urge to acknowledge that everything decisive that is to be set forth here was already prepared in the work of the great language researchers. It begins with the *deictic field* of language, which was known to the first Greeks and has been rediscovered by modern researchers such as Wegener, Brugmann and Gardiner; it also includes all the niceties of the *symbolic field*, which has always been the focus of grammatical analysis and has been clearly presented by modern historians in all branches of Indo-European. More than for others, the dictum in Goethe's *Tasso* is valid for this book: "I owe it all to you." Of course, the formulation of the four maxims had to be generalized and simplified in most points, often enough it had to be discovered afresh; it is this that the book claims as its own contribution and from which it derives its right to exist. The *field concept* suggested in the present book is a product of modern psychology; the reader who wishes to understand it on its own ground will follow its development in colour theory with regard to the phenomenon of contrast. In this context, students of Hering distinguished the 'inner field' (*Infeld*) and the 'surrounding field' (*Umfeld*). Continuing in this vein, we shall systematically determine the surrounding fields of language signs and extract a logically clean distinction between the deictic and the symbolic fields from

the wide variety of circumstances that contribute to the determination of the sense of the utterance wherever speech occurs. It is a new theory that [v] there are two fields in language and not only one, but it seems to me that this theory is consonant with an old philosophical insight. The two-field doctrine verifies for language Kant's proposition that concepts without intuition [or perceptual content] are empty and intuition [or perceptual content] without concepts blind; it shows how the two factors, which together form part of a complete account, are mobilized together by speech thought such that they are curiously but intelligibly intertwined. What Cassirer describes as two developmental phases of human language (at least in his account of representation) is a duality of factors that is irrevocably contained in every language phenomenon and which belongs to the entirety of language today just as much as it ever did. At least this is the case in the bulk of natural speech under the condition that one appropriately regards the boundary case of the sort of sentences constructed by pure logic and the boundary case of a symbolic language artificially purged of all perceptual content precisely as boundary cases, and not as the norm. There will be more to be said about this. For now, the *two-field theory* claims that the several modi of perceptual pointing and presenting are just as much a part of the essence of natural language as abstraction and the conceptual grasp of the world are, and that they are equally close to the essence of language.[1] That is the quintessence of the theory of language developed here.

This theory only pursues the philosophical problems that the approach involves and which it reopens to the extent required to treat the topic. I fully realize that the disjunctive questions of epistemology can be handled differently; the Scholastics often attempted to decide their ontological alternatives by appeal to linguistic phenomena. It is not our place to address ourselves to this matter; but part of the idea of a simple description of linguistic phenomena is that they must be permitted to protest in their own name whenever they are misused, whenever an attempt is made to extort a declaration from them that they could not offer on their own. The most simple and historically best known illustration of what I have in mind is one of those *material fallacies* which the theory of language can and must sum-

1. [The two fields are the deictic and the naming fields. Bühler speaks of "*perceptual* pointing" to stress the fact that indexicality is anchored in perception; naming is "conceptual" inasmuch as it refers to something that is generalized and not bound to the present situation.]

marily and systematically reject. I mean the material fallacy committed by radical nominalism, which at several points we shall repudiate in the name of the phenomena themselves. That is no great matter. It seems to me that the confrontation with the language theory set forth in Husserl's works will
[vi] be more serious. In my essay on the sentence (Bühler 1918b) I criticized the standpoint Husserl took in the *Logical Investigations*. That was in 1919 and hence before Husserl's theory was elaborated in his *Formal and Transcendental Logic*. In the present book I recognize the progress brought about by the construction of a world of monads in Husserl's newer works, but I must still insist that the organon model of language requires something more. Grammar, as it has been constructed for the past two thousand years, presupposes a sort of intersubjectivity of the implement language that cannot be achieved by a Diogenes in a Barrel nor by a monadic being. Grammar does not have the slightest reason to depart from the path prescribed by the matter itself; Plato, John Stuart Mill and modern logic are on the side of traditional language analysis in this point. The book itself will have to tell why I hold it to be right and indispensable.

Prophet to the right, prophet to the left, and the child of this world in the middle.[2] The theory of language must be the child of this world, that is, the simple tip of the empirical work of language researchers. If philosophy is the prophet to the right which language theory must repulse whenever it perceives the danger of *epistemologism*, that is, a declaration extorted from language in favour of one of the fundamental epistemological attitudes, it is only right and proper for it to demand the same respect for its independence from the prophet to the left. Psychology is the prophet to the left. My book *Die Krise der Psychologie* [The crisis of psychology] (Bühler 1927) handles the topic of what psychology and linguistics have to offer each other after psychology has reorganized its domestic affairs. In the present preface permit me to repeat briefly the point that the fact that both human and animal beings engage in intercourse using signs has become a central problem of comparative psychology. An appropriate treatment of it leads far beyond language, the most human thing about human beings. There is

2. [A remark by Goethe in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [Poetry and truth] describing the seating arrangement at a dinner in Koblenz when Goethe sat between Lavater and Basedow, both of whom talked to other members of the company about arcane theological points whilst Goethe preferred to enjoy the worldly pleasures of the meal.]

no animal community without the means of controlling the social behaviour of the members of the community; there is no community without *exchange of signs*, which among the animals is as ancient as *material exchange*. These means of control, which can be exactly observed, are the prehuman analogue of language. What I have in mind can be clearly determined in the highly developed community life of insects as an illustration. All that is required is that the two most instructive lines of research, for example Wheeler's book *Social Life among the Insects* (Wheeler 1923) and Karl von [vii] Frisch's book *Über die "Sprache" der Bienen* [The language of the bees] (Frisch 1923), should be appropriately juxtaposed. The first focuses on the exchange of material and on the phenomenon of trophallaxis, that is, mutual aid in feeding, the second on significative exchange. A highly organized material exchange between the members of an animal community would not even be possible without significative exchange. A biologically well-founded theory of language must go back this far and then undertake the final expansion of its horizon.

This last expansion of the horizon ensues from the recent insight of comparative psychology that every animal and human *action* whatever deserving of the name is controlled by *signals*. It is no empty claim but rather the simplest and clearest formulation of the remarkable findings made by Jennings if we say that within their exiguous and precisely delimitable action system and after a brief learning period even infusoria respond to well-defined irritations as if to signals and "act" successfully without renewed trial. This is the most primitive level of signal that we know. The sounds of human language are also signals in the mechanism of social intercourse. We shall discuss this in detail elsewhere.

That is the extent to which the observations must be extended to discover the biological roots of the significative exchange of the animals. The signals produced in the animal community then do not appear to us to be something strange and exotic, but rather to be the highest and richest actualization and development of potentials contained in the psychophysical system of every acting living creature. The concept 'psychophysical system' cannot be defined without *the feature of response to signals*.

Acknowledging this fact should not make one blind; rather, one should keep an eye open for the specific properties of human language. Let us consider in passing the use of signs for communication between us human beings and our familiar domestic companion, the dog. Is that language? The guidance provided by the human partner of *canis domesticus* and

understood by the dog, and what the dog himself produces to control his master are unquestionably among the highest and most differentiated things that we encounter among animals. The experts have never doubted that the dog's sounds and other communicative behaviour contain a highly
[viii] nuanced *expression*. Nevertheless, it is not the entirety of human language that is received by the psychophysical system of the dog, and what he produces is certainly not fully equivalent to language.

None of the four maxims about human language formulated in this book is fully realized in the "language" of the dog. Why not? Because canine communicative behaviour lacks, as does all other animal communicative behaviour that we know, the dominant function of human language signs, the *representational function*. Until the results of more exact studies are available, the question as to whether this is an absolute inability or whether it is only the enormous difference of degree that makes it so conspicuous can be left open. As strange as it may seem, in all of animal psychology there are no studies of this point that would satisfy modern standards. Of course, there was also no formulation of the structural laws of human language available that would have been precise and determinate enough to serve as a basis and a standard for experiments on animals. Hence, if this attempt to establish the specificity of human language so that comparisons between human and animal sign communication will not be subject to merely emotional judgement is successful, it will give a new impulse to the whole of comparative psychology.

Only few contemporary animal psychologists have an adequate knowledge of that astoundingly complex instrument, human language. The best course of instruction that could be recommended to them would not be in the laboratory for normal psychology; rather, they would have to do their studies with neurologists and psychiatrists, with those who are most intimately familiar with the central speech defects and speech disorders. I used to be a physician and worked in this field; that was before the decisive turn in the *theory of aphasia* due to the work of researchers such as Head, Gelb and Goldstein, Isserlin, Poetzl and others. Today it is one of my hopes that it will be possible to bring the quintessence of linguistic analysis of language into contact with the results of that completely different analysis or breakdown, the merciless decomposition of the human capacity of speech into its real components which pathologists study, so that the contact will be fruitful for both. It was the dictates of methodological purity and nothing else that made me refrain from consideration of modern theory of aphasia in

this book. There were similar reasons for abstaining from an attempt to systematically exploit the insights into the *make-up of language* that we derive from research on children. I myself have worked in the field and know that [ix] after the initial yield of the older researchers the full harvest is waiting for those who will be able to make reproducible recordings of childhood utterances at the decisive developmental phases.

Things are quite lively in language theory nowadays; several important language theoretical treatises have been published in the last few months since I completed this book, and I will review them elsewhere. There is, for example, the rich compendium by Julius Stenzel, *Philosophie der Sprache* [Philosophy of language], in the new *Handbuch der Philosophie* [Manual of philosophy] (Stenzel 1934), which I am supposed to review in the journal *Anthropos*; above all, there is the ambitious project undertaken by Ludwig Weisgerber on *Die Stellung der Sprache im Aufbau der Gesamtkultur* [The position of language in the organization of culture as a whole] (Weisgerber 1934), about which the journal *Kant-Studien* has requested a comprehensive report. Emil Winkler's instructive publication *Sprachtheoretische Studien* [Language-theoretical studies] (Winkler 1933) is already a year old. I cannot do much more than mention the reinterpretation, criticism and supplementation of Marty's thought contained in Ludwig Landgrebe's publication on *Nennfunktion und Wortbedeutung* [Naming function and word meaning] (Landgrebe 1934), in my opinion a proficient work. It is remarkable that the substance of maxim D in our list, which attributes to language the character of being a two-class system, is acknowledged and assessed there. The dogma of the lexicon and syntax, which I first presented to my colleagues at the conference on language in Hamburg in 1931 (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie 1932), is, as far as I can see, today generally recognized, and has restored the older view against the monistic formula advocated by Wundt's and Brugmann's contemporaries, who claimed that the sentence is the basic unit of language; we shall propound the older view in detail in this book. In passing, I should like to mention two newer collections in which the liveliness and variety of contemporary language-theoretical studies are made conspicuous. The one is in the fourth volume of the *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* (1930) and the other is in the Parisian *Journal de Psychologie* (1933). Just as I had hoped when preparing the conference on language in Hamburg, experts from various faculties are given a hearing there, and what they have to say indicates that a unified language theory may be developing. The ultimate aim of this book is to show that its

scientific home is sematology and to show how in a modern sense a general
[x] theory of signs can become reality in connection with the astonishingly multifacetted semiotic implement 'language'.

Looking back at the beginnings of the development from the conclusion, it seems to me that the system was founded in 1907 with the discovery of the 'syntactic schemata' in speech thought (see section 16: "A Critical Review") and in 1908 with the extraction of the representative function of language in my survey article on the processes of understanding (Bühler 1909). Because of my opposition to the sensualism current among psychologists at the time, the perceptual factor of pointing was still neglected. In Munich I was closely associated with Streitberg, and after I had once explained my ideas on the linguists' sentence problem to him in detail, he expertly picked up the decisive point and asked me to prepare an article for his journal; that is how my paper "Kritische Musterung der neueren Theorien des Satzes" [Critical review of the newer theories of the sentence] (Bühler 1918b), as well as the diagram of the full organon model of language, arose. All of my older publications on language were, like that one, casual writings for the occasion; for example, my contribution "Vom Wesen der Syntax" [On the essence of syntax] in the volume in honour of Vossler (Bühler 1922b), which contains the first sketch of axiom D on language as a two-class system, and my contribution to the volume in honour of Johannes von Kries, in which a first hint of the "principle of abstractive relevance" is tentatively formulated (Bühler 1923). I have already mentioned my book on the *Crisis* and the conference on language in Hamburg; Dempe has given a comprehensive report on these questions up to this point in the first part of his lucid book on the question *Was ist Sprache?* [What is language?] (Dempe 1930). I would now answer the question in his title as follows: language is what fulfils the four axioms. Dempe's defence of Husserl is probably adequately answered by my reformulation of the criticism. My publication on the *Axiomatization of the Language Sciences* (Bühler 1933b = 1982) contains a compact discussion of the four axioms of language. I have rewritten and reordered the axioms for this book and given them a more prospective formulation, that is, a formulation that anticipates the chapters that implement the plan; furthermore, the dichotomy "speech action and language structure" was elaborated to form the richer four-celled pattern in axiom C. So much about the origin of the book; as long as I have been able to think in a scientific manner, my interests have centred on language.

It regularly happens that one who works in the sciences is deeply indebted to people who are no longer able to receive the thanks owed them as living persons. But it probably rarely happens as today in the theory of language that one must skip centuries to answer the question, "Who is thy neighbour?" There is more than one point at which the theory of language now developing is forced to take recourse to the phase of philosophy at which the phenomenon of language was at the centre of cosmology. It is my conviction that modern resources should be used to pick up the problem of universals in language theory at that point where it came to a standstill (like the many unfinished cathedrals), unsolved by the waning powers of Scholastic speculation. The history of the concept of symbol takes us even further back and reveals a fateful coupling (a synchysis) of two ideas in Aristotle's conception. The sounds of language are indeed at once and in one breath ordering signs and indices. However, as ordering signs they do not at all depict the world that is being spoken about as it was imagined in the ancient conception of knowledge. In his formula defining the symbol, Aristotle coupled the expressive and the representative function of language signs too simply, and Scholastic philosophy, as far as I know it, was not able to make an adequate and precise distinction between the *connexio rerum*, upon which the index is based, and the *ordo rerum* of the naming signs of language. Seen from another perspective and put in terms of the theory of language: the correct distinction between deixis and the naming or conceptual grasp, a distinction that was drawn at the birth of grammar by the Greeks, was lost. Modern theory of language must make both mistakes good and unbiasedly come to terms with the medial properties of the implement language in their full multiplicity. The deictic field must again receive its due alongside the symbolic field, and the *expression* must be recognized in its specific structure in contrast to the representative function of language signs. The first point is, I hope, accomplished by this book; on the second point a new book will be necessary on the "expression in voice and language". [xi]

I feel a profound urge to thank my associates. Since the book is based on extensive linguistic studies, I should not have been able to write it without expert help. My assistant, Dr. Bruno Sonneck, was helpful at all stages of the development, and at some points was able to gain the help of many of his friends, young comparative linguists. For example, Dr. Locker worked with him on the verification of the idea of a new class of words, the prodemonstratives. Furthermore, I recall with gratitude the instructive dis- [xii]

cussions following my lectures in the summer of 1932, when Professor Kuryłowicz studied in our midst for a semester. Dr. Käthe Wolf conducted the renewed, extensive study of Husserl, and the research on expression, which has occupied us at my institute for several years, was also entrusted to her. I have been able to draw an oscillograph of a spoken syllable from a completely independent study in this research programme; Dr. Brenner has embarked upon a course of research with this study similar to the path followed by Gemelli and Pastori, who have had remarkable success with it (Gemelli and Pastori 1933). In addition to the analysis of phonetic word and sentence formation, Gemelli and Pastori's work brings "phonetic individualisms" to light (pages 194ff.); these are of greatest interest in Brenner's analyses in theory of expression.

There is no shortage of logicians of language in my circle; my colleague Brunswik, Dr. E. Frenkel and Professor Neumann took an active and cooperative interest in the completion of the principles set forth in this book. My colleague Eino Kaila also spent a semester with us on two occasions; he displayed a hearty interest in my theory of language and participated in the criticism of the principles when I first had the opportunity to present them to a small, selected circle. Last year, Professor E. Tolman introduced us to the experiments in animal psychology that led him to the same fundamental views as regards signals as are presented in the *Crisis* and here. I am deeply indebted to him. A young scholar of English, Dr. L. Perutz, was untiring in her willingness to give me expert help with the voluminous literature on the topics of Part IV; she also compiled the index together with Wolf and Sonneck. I feel deeply indebted to them all.