



BRILL

*International Review of Pragmatics* 5 (2013) 117–127



brill.com/irp

**Review Article:**  
**Herder and Pragmatics: Review of Michael  
N. Forster's *After Herder: Philosophy of  
Language in the German Tradition***

**Robert J. Stainton**

The University of Western Ontario, Canada  
rstainto@uwo.ca

---

**Abstract**

This article reviews, very positively, Michael Forster's (2010) *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*. The review canvasses Herder's views on philosophy of language, as explained by Forster, with special emphasis on what Herder can teach contemporary pragmaticists. These key lessons are: i) that meaning is intimately related to sensation; ii) that thought is intimately related to language; iii) that meaning is intimately related to use. It ends with some reflections on empirical obstacles that Herder's views seem to face.

**Keywords**

Johann Herder; Michael Forster; meaning-as-use; language; thought and sensation

**1. Introduction**

Michael N. Forster's *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2010) is a terrific work, of interest not just to historians of philosophy and contemporary philosophers of language but also, as I hope to show, to pragmaticists. Clear and engaging, it canvasses ideas on language from several extraordinary but underappreciated German philosophers of the late 18th Century, including especially Hamann (1730–1788), Herder (1744–1803), and Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The volume, the first half of a pair, reproduces numerous important papers by

---

<sup>\*)</sup> I am grateful to Margaret Cameron and Klaus Jahn for discussion of Forster on Herder. Thanks also to Michael Forster, Benjamin Hill and David Matheson for comments on a draft. This work was funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Forster, supplemented by new material. It encompasses both accessible survey articles and in-depth scholarly pieces.<sup>1</sup> The book's objectives, in a nutshell, are two-fold: to set the historical record straight, especially regarding the role of Herder (it was Herder, says Forster, who was the innovator and prime mover of German philosophy of language of the period); and to demonstrate the continuing appeal of the positions developed.

Speaking for myself, I would add that the publication of *After Herder* reinforces a lesson that I myself have been stressing of late. The history of philosophy of language—unlike, say, the history of ethics or even the history of philosophy of mind—has been largely neglected. Perusing the literature and course syllabi, it is as if philosophies of language simply did not exist prior to Frege. This neglect is unfortunate because it is unfair to some great minds of the past. More importantly, as Forster's work illustrates, it is unfortunate because philosophy of language before the 20th Century was consistently and richly engaged with other fields, both within and outside philosophy: translation theory, aesthetics, literature and art, ethics and politics, anthropology, history, psychology, theology, ethology, and more. As a result, frequently it offered deeper answers to questions familiar to us, and posed deep questions about language that we nowadays mostly overlook.

My discussion of *After Herder* will be structured as follows. The focus throughout will be Herder. I begin by laying out three “planks” in his philosophy of language and mind, as described by Forster. Very roughly for now, these are: i) that meaning is intimately related to sensation; ii) that thought is intimately related to language; iii) that meaning is intimately related to use. I focus on them because they are of special interest to pragmatists, and because they illustrate so nicely the aforementioned richness of the history of philosophy of language. I then discuss another revolutionary theme in Herder, based on emerging empirical findings at the time, namely that languages vary massively across cultures. Taken together, these four tenets will be seen to have consequences for Herder's theory of interpretation. I end with the issue of the continuing appeal of his ideas by raising two concerns from the perspective of contemporary pragmatics and philosophy of language.

Before turning to all of that, I should mention an important matter that I will set to one side. This is the properly historical issue of whether Forster's depiction of 18th Century German philosophy of language generally, and of

<sup>1</sup>) Its sequel, 2011's *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* focusses on Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), von Humboldt (1767–1835) and Hegel (1770–1831).

Herder in particular, is fully accurate.<sup>2</sup> There is little question that Forster has the broad strokes right. And no question that, as Forster says, Herder was a philosopher of language of the first order. Did he, however, defend precisely the doctrines attributed to him by Forster? Were Herder's contributions always the first, and the best? Frankly, I am not competent to pass judgment on these intricacies—not only because, my interest in it notwithstanding, I am not a professional historian of philosophy, but because even those specializing in the period find them exceptionally taxing. Part of the reason was mentioned already: there was no clearly delineated sub-discipline “philosophy of language” in this period, thus scholars must reconstruct views on language from texts whose primary focus is often something else. (The contributions of Herder discussed below, for instance, are scattered across at least five major works: “On Diligence in Several Learned Languages” (1764), “Fragments on Recent German Literature” (1767–1768), “On Thomas Abbt's Writings” (1768), “Treatise on the Origin of Language” (1772) and “On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul” (1778). Most of these range across a number of philosophical subjects. And the one which is most directly focused on language, and the best known, namely the Treatise, seems not to be representative of Herder's mature views.) Another obstacle to interpretation, specific to Herder, is that he favoured the Scholastic “sic et non” style: giving reasons both for and against a position. This makes it doubly hard to know when Herder is studiously laying out a view as a foil, in order to critique it or extract some nugget of wisdom, and when the view is his own.

## 2. Three Philosophical “Planks”

Forster distils three philosophical “planks” about language and mind from Herder's many writings. They are mutually supporting. More than that, they are deeply interwoven. As Forster himself does, however, I will lay them out separately for the sake of clarity.

The first plank is (a) *that meaning essentially depends on perceptual and affective sensations*. Since it will play the smallest role in the sequel, I will merely echo Forster's point that Herder's is merely a quasi-Empiricist view. Unlike classical British Empiricists, he does not think that all meaning must ultimately trace to the sensorium. Instead, he allows “metaphorical extensions” of sense-based meanings to arrive at novel contents (: 72). Still, to

<sup>2</sup> For some reflections, see Rush (2011) and Vernon (2012).

ignore sensation is to ignore a crucial aspect of linguistic meaning. Herder also held that the dependence went in the other direction: our sensations also depend on our concepts (and beliefs and theories).

The second plank is (b) *that thought is essentially dependent upon and bounded by language*. That is, Forster's Herder (I'll just write "Herder" in what follows) rejected the standard Enlightenment picture according to which language merely encodes autonomous thought—i.e., that the main or exclusive role of language is to communicate, to externalize internal thoughts. Today, his is a familiar doctrine. At the time, it remained radical heterodoxy (though, as Forster explains, something of a counter paradigm had been emerging: e.g., Leibniz (1646–1716), Wolff (1679–1754), Rousseau (1712–1778) and Condillac (1715–1780) had all noted language-thought dependence). Herder also stressed something that is too often missed even today, namely that the thought-depends-on language doctrine comes in numerous flavours:

- Is the dependence on natural languages, or on symbol systems generally (including, e.g., gestures, natural signs, artworks)?
- Is the dependence on a particular spoken language, say Dutch or Latin, or on a universal human language?
- Are all aspects of thought dependent on language? Not just thinking, e.g., but all conceptualization? Even sensation?
- Is thought merely causally and hence contingently dependent on language, or is it necessarily dependent? Related to this, is the dependence merely an empirical discovery, or is it discovered *a priori* (say because language is constitutive of thought)?<sup>3</sup>

Admirably eschewing dogmatism, Herder seems to have moved among the strains of the main doctrine throughout his philosophical career. Though he wrote that "A people has no idea for which it has no word", he also toyed with milder variants. Echoing Süssmilch (1707–1767), and representative of his empirical arguments for dependence, are that the deaf and dumb lack reason insofar as they lack language, and that reason develops in step with one's grasp of language. Much deeper, and of lasting interest, was Herder's insis-

<sup>3</sup>) As Herder sees, taking thought to depend on natural language has some *prima facie* unpalatable consequences. It seems to imply that animals, unless taught language, lack thought. What's more, if even mere sensation requires having a natural language, then animals would be insentient. Still worse, God would lack thought. See Chapter 3 of *After Herder* for his attempts to deal with the issue.

tence that: i) not just empirically but conceptually, “characteristic marks”<sup>4</sup> are necessary conditions; ii) they are necessary conditions not merely for rational thought, but for all conceptualizations; iii) concepts are word usages, so that all conceptualization constitutively depends on spoken language.

The third plank is the radical idea (c) *that meaning is use*. Here too, the doctrine comes in several varieties, a point that is often neglected even today. There is the methodological dictum that, in trying to find what an expression means in a language, the key source of evidence (maybe the sole source) is how the word is actually used. For instance, in explanation of Herder’s position here, Forster writes: “to understand the changing nature of people’s moral concepts [when translating] one must closely scrutinize their changing word-usages” (: 66). Nowadays, this may strike one as a truism—though, for reasons addressed below, it shouldn’t. But it definitely would not have rung truistic then. There is also the metasemantic dictum that, to use current terminology, meaning supervenes largely (or even wholly) on usage. That is to say, the basic facts from which meaning facts emerge are facts about word usage. (Compare: that a given piece of green paper is worth five dollars is not a basic fact about the universe. Its having monetary worth at all, and its having that specific monetary worth, emerges from other facts: e.g., where the paper was printed and by whom; what the paper could be exchanged for; what laws were passed; and so on.) Again, as I will explain below, the metasemantic thesis deserves to be a controversial idea even now. It would have been especially so then, because it ruled out a metaphysical source of meaning-facts that many of Herder’s contemporaries took very seriously, namely a divinely-given Adamic language. The third variation on the meaning-is-use doctrine has it that to give the meaning of an expression just is to specify its usage. Rather than methodological or metaphysical, this is a properly semantic doctrine in the sense that it pertains to what meanings are. It stands in contrast, e.g., to the idea that meanings are Platonic abstracta, concrete referents, or inner ideas.

I will rehearse here just two Herderian arguments, both directed at the third variant. On the one hand, he argues by exclusion: meaning must be

<sup>4</sup>) I must mention here an interpretive puzzle. Forster’s text leaves the exact nature of “characteristic marks” unclear. Are they contents, or are they formatives that encode contents? Are they public signs, or are they merely occasioned by such signs? I cannot myself tell whether Herder is clear on the topic, and Forster fails to capture his views, or whether Forster provides all that can be recovered from Herder’s texts. (It may also be that, as elsewhere, Herder vacillated over time.)

usage because no other account of meanings succeeds. Meaning isn't reference, both because meaning involves general concepts, and because there are meaningful non-referring terms (: 69). As for taking meanings to be internal ideas, this leads to dualism. Related to this last point, Herder also argues for the meaning-is-use thesis by appeal to something like verificationism *avant la lettre*. Forster puts it this way: "in our ascriptions of an understanding of meanings or concepts to people the decisive criterion lies in their competence in word-usage" (: 309).

For ease of reference, we may think of (a)–(c) as "broadly philosophical planks". I now want to explore a thoroughly empirical idea from Herder. It, together with the foregoing, will yield important consequences for pragmatics.

Herder lived at a time when cross-cultural awareness was taking hold in Europe. Indeed, Forster suggests that Herder was one of the founders of what we'd now call comparative cultural anthropology. In particular, it was becoming ever more apparent that natural languages differed enormously across cultures. What's more, linguistic diversity could be found not just between languages, but among speakers of "the same language". Each of us uses our words in slightly different ways.

This realization, taken together with (a)–(c), has radical consequences. Putting things very roughly: If meaning and usage are one, and usages varies across cultures, then meanings do too. If thought depends on language, and languages vary across cultures, than thought does too. If sensation is tightly linked to meaning, and meaning varies across cultures, then sensation does too. This is all very quick, of course. But rather than dwell on the merits and details of these lines of thought, I want to focus on their import for a topic at the heart of linguistic pragmatics, namely the theory of interpretation.

### 3. A Consequence for Pragmatics: The Nature of Interpretation

The combination of the three "planks" with the thesis of "radical difference" (as Forster labels it on page 17) has striking implications for interpretation. There is some good news: because thought and language are so closely related, the interpreter is not faced with scepticism about whether her interlocutor is thinking. If he speaks, he thinks. Nor is she faced with scepticism about whether his thought differs massively, radically, from his speech. Plank (c) precludes the possibility that a speaker's words drastically mask some underlying, unobservable, meanings.

There is bad news too, however. Radical difference entails that the interpreter cannot assume that her target's thoughts and contents are like hers.

Nor can she even assume that his sensations are similar. The longstanding notion of universal concepts, and a universal sensorium, turns out to have been an illusion (: 215).

To come at the point another way, compare two approaches to translation, and Herder's stance on them. One approach has it that a good translation need only capture the content—in the sense of the statements made, the questions asked, etc. To do so, the translator attempts to recast the author's messages in terms that the reader will readily understand. To use Dryden's characterization, a good translator aims for "what the author would have written" had she written in, say, English (: 151). Forster contrasts this "Lax" approach to translation, in which the author is moved towards the reader, with the "Accommodating" approach. This is the one Herder favours. Accommodating involves "bending" the target language (i.e., that language one is translation into), modifying the usage of some of its words, to allow something closer to word-for-word translation. The advantages of this approach, for Herder, are two-fold. "Content" as he understands it simply cannot be separated from "form" in the way Dryden proposes, because meaning is use. Closely related to this, a good translation must give the reader the same experience, including even the quasi-musical phrasing, that a native speaker would have gotten, because sensation is part of meaning. In short, Herder's philosophy of language demands translation-cum-Accommodation. Notice, however, how exacting this is, both for the translator and for the reader of the translation. How very, very difficult. This, couched in terms of translation, is once again the bad news about linguistic interpretation, if Herder's larger philosophy is correct.

Acutely aware of this, Herder reflected deeply on how interpretation (including of a text in another language) nonetheless can succeed. The picture he arrived at is abductive. Interpreting a speaker is like framing and testing a scientific hypothesis. The process is challenging, and far from guaranteed to work: a spark of genius is required, and a bit of good luck. Related to this, the ability to "feel one's way in" is crucial: cold, calculating reason cannot do the trick all on its own. But, by drawing holistically on evidence of all kinds—the context, the speaker's psychology, the genre<sup>5</sup> that he is writing or speaking in—often we can and do divine the answer. ("Divination" is precisely Herder's word.)

<sup>5</sup>) Herder's work on genre is deeply insightful and ground breaking. For pragmatians, Forster's chapter on the topic makes the book a must-read. Sadly, given time and space constraints, I could either write on that, or on "the three planks". I opted for the latter.

#### 4. Two Challenges for Herder

Forster's first aim, recall, was to set the historical record straight. Though not myself steeped in the period, the book strikes me as a total success in this regard. Forster's second aim was to demonstrate the continuing appeal of the positions developed. As I have stressed, there are real successes here too. Indeed, it is not possible in these few pages to give a true sense of the richness of Herder's answers to our questions, nor the depth of the questions he raises that we tend to slight. Nonetheless, from the perspective of contemporary pragmatics and philosophy of language, there do seem to me to be crucial points at which Herder gets it wrong—or anyway, where his views face serious challenges. I end, briefly, with two. One pertains to Herder's meaning is use plank. The other is about his approach to interpretation.

On their strongest readings, the methodological and the metasemantic meaning-is-use theses are not without their controversies from a contemporary point of view. The development of linguistics over the last half century suggests that usage shouldn't be the only sort of evidence employed. Many other sources have been and should be tapped: from deficits, whether genetic or acquired; from brain scans of various sorts; from acquisition; from comparative morphosyntax; from ethology; and so on. In short, methodological holism of the sort that Herder rightly champions elsewhere has turned out to be appropriate in semantics and pragmatics too. Parallel to this, usage shouldn't be the only element of the supervenience base. Plausibly, for instance, causal links and social practices, not themselves features of an individual's present usage, help fix meaning/reference. However, I won't pursue these points further. Instead, my focus will be on the most original and radical reading of the thesis, the semantic one, according to which to give the meaning just is to give the use.

As will be familiar to contemporary philosophers of language and linguists, use is an interaction effect. For instance, borrowing an example from Sperber and Wilson (1986), given the right sort of context, and the right sort of mental states, a speaker might use "Peter Piper picked a peck of peppers" to show that his stutter has been cured. This usage has essentially nothing to do with its meaning, in any plausible sense of "meaning". Similarly, a person may discover that yelling this particular sentence scares away stray dogs especially effectively, and so may yell it nightly. Again, this feature of the individual's usage has no impact upon its meaning, even in her own mouth. To take some cases where meaning seems to have a role to play in usage, but only a partial role, suppose that Peter Piper was actually a notoriously cold-hearted person. A speaker must use "Peter Piper picked

a peck of peppers” to conversationally implicate that, like Peter, pepper-pickers in general are equally cold-hearted. Such a one-off use by a speaker does not change the meaning of the sentence. Could Herder have in mind that meaning is systematic use, so that the foregoing examples can be set aside? That seems a step in the right direction. But it has become a theme of pragmatics in the last 40 years or so that we *systematically* use expressions to mean things that the expressions do not mean. I am thinking here of Grice’s (1975) generalized conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, and also of pragmatic determinants of literal speech act content. To give examples of each: “John broke a finger” is systematically used to say that he broke his own finger, though what the sentence itself means is merely that there is a finger that he broke; “Are you finished with the paper?” is systematically used to request the paper, though this is not what the sentence itself means; and “It is raining” is systematically used to state that it is raining *here*, though, at least on many views, this is not what the sentence itself means. (I myself have urged, in a related vein, that we systematically use sub-sentential expressions like “Nice dress” and “From France” to state things, even though their meanings are merely predicative, not propositional. See Stainton, 2006.) Nor, of course, will it do to say that only those uses which correspond to meaning are the right ones, since this presupposes precisely what was to be explained.

Another challenge to the meaning-is-use thesis has to do with the relations between part meanings and whole meanings. Suppose, *pace* the foregoing, that we can identify those uses of expressions which genuinely correspond to their meaning. It is by no means sufficient to do this for a list of formatives. Rather, a semantics for a language needs to specify a function from forms (roughly, phonological structures and syntactic trees) to meanings (here, a sub-set of uses), and for an in principle unlimited set of expressions. The first difficulty is this: ever so many morphemes seemingly lack uses of their own. And even where morphemes do have a use, it remains to be seen in what sense that use comes to fix the use of wholes in which they appear: indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that we haven’t the least inkling of how to compute the use of complete expressions (granting that we can make sense of this) from the uses of their minimal components (granting that there are such things). Consider, as a simple example, the sentence “Loud cheers are not allowed in the hospital”. The words “the” and “in” contribute to its meaning, but don’t seem to have a use in isolation. The term “cheers” may seem to fare better, because it does have a use in isolation, namely to toast. But this usage is not what it contributes to the sentence’s meaning. The contrast with truth/reference-based semantics is

striking: following Frege, semanticists in that tradition know how to deploy functions—both to provide truth-theoretic meanings for otherwise troublesome parts, and to explain precisely how part-meanings combine.

One might sum up the foregoing concerns by noting that expression usage is not fixed compositionally, whereas meaning is. Actual usage isn't fixed compositionally because it is an interaction effect. As for "meaning-reflecting usage", assuming there is such a thing, we lack a positive account of what part uses are, and how they would algorithmically determine whole uses.

I said that I would end with two challenges from a contemporary perspective. The second pertains to Herder's pioneering theory of interpretation. Recall that he takes it to be abductive, similar to the framing and testing of scientific hypotheses. Thinking in terms of consequences for pragmatics, one may bring home his position this way. Herder took all interpretation to be of a piece. The same philological tools that apply to literary works, to translations of political speeches and philosophical treatises, and to Biblical hermeneutics,<sup>6</sup> apply to one's conversational partner at the pub. In particular, being committed to the unity of the human mind, Herder supposes that all interpretation involves the one, unified, cognitive organ. This makes quotidian interpretation look very difficult—science certainly is, literary scholarship certainly is. But, to raise my concern, is it really true that understanding in a service encounter (e.g., buying stamps or ordering a pizza) is this hard? Is it true that it is as holistic as scientific theorizing? Recent research on actual pragmatic processing suggests otherwise. Day-to-day interpretation appears to be modular: quick, comparatively automatic, restricted to certain kinds of information, etc. It is only when conversational exchanges goes awry that more holistic mechanisms kick in. (An interesting piece of evidence here comes from individuals with general cognitive impairments, whether mental retardation, dementia, Asperger Syndrome, etc. In contrast to what Herder's approach would seem to suggest, they do much better with ordinary online interpretation than with more sophisticated variants.) Thus, while Herder may be right about certain kinds of interpretation (including in particular translation of literary texts), it is now doubtful that his abductive theory, which employs a single unified mind, applies as widely as he supposed.

---

<sup>6</sup> Herder was a noted Bible scholar, who revolutionized the field by setting into practice the Spinozistic point that it was written by human beings, and hence could well contain falsehoods and inconsistencies. He also insisted that no special kind or degree of illumination was allowed in understanding sacred texts.

Robert J. Stainton / *International Review of Pragmatics* 5 (2013) 117–127 127

I conclude where I began. *After Herder* really is a terrific book. And, though he unsurprisingly fails to deal with certain constraints and evidence we now emphasize, Herder really was a visionary philosopher of language. His greatest aspiration, as Forster explains, was to make philosophy more relevant and useful to others. I only hope that this review, in drawing the attention of pragmaticians to Herder's tremendous oeuvre, contributes to that end.

### References

- Forster, Michael. 2011. *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rush, Fred. 2011. Review of Michael Forster *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* and *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Retrieved November 23, 2011 from <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/27469-after-herder-philosophy-of-language-in-the-german-tradition-and-german-philosophy-of-language/>
- Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. 1986. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stainton, Robert. 2006. *Words and Thoughts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vernon, Jim. 2012. Review of Michael Forster *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*. *Philosophy in Review* 32: 16–19.