THE GERMAN LANGUAGE AND THE FORM OF THOUGHT

LUIGI GAGGERO

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TRULY UNDERSTANDING IT THROUGH ITS DEEP GRAMMAR

AD VERITATEM

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Contents

Introduction vii

1 THE STRUCTURE OF THE GERMAN SENTENCE: THE VERB AT ITS HEART 1

2 SUBJECT, OBJECT AND GRAMMATICAL CASE: GERMAN AS A LANGUAGE OF RELATIONS 9

3 THE MYSTICAL SUBJECT: WHEN THOUGHT PRECEDES THE PERSON 17

4 THE NATURE OF THE VERB AND THE STRUCTURE OF ACTION 21

5 INTERMEZZO — SOUND AS STRUCTURE: GERMAN AND MUSICAL FORM 29

6 SPEAKING BETWEEN THE LINES: MODAL PARTICLES AND THE KONJUNKTIV 33

7 CONCLUSION — GRAMMAR AS THE SHAPE OF THOUGHT . 37

1. Language as the logic of the world: Derichsweiler and Thomas Aquinas 38

2. The scientific concept and linguistic universalism as a form of alienation 40

3. Does German predispose us to phenomenology? 41

4. Verstehen and Erklären: two ways of inhabiting language? 43

Appendix 45

About the Author 59

Introduction

Some books exist without ever having been written. Others have been written, only to disappear before leaving their mark on the culture. This book grew out of the echo of a lost work: Christof Derichsweiler's German grammar[1], a revolutionary work, a masterpiece that was completed but never reached its readers.

That grammar offered not a list of rules but a *journey through the language*: an attempt to decipher the thought that takes shape within language itself, rather than outside it. German emerged not as a conventional code but as a living system in which sentence structure, the position of the verb, the forms of the articles, even the sound of the syllables, serve not to communicate something already thought, but to generate thought itself.

Derichsweiler did not seek to explain German from the outside. He allowed it to speak from within, discerning in its patterns of form and syntax an implicit metaphysics. For him, a language is not a way of describing the world but a way of conceiving it. German, more than many languages, reveals the tension between structure and movement, between grammatical stability and conceptual openness. Its sentences are built like interlocking structures; its separable verbs distribute meaning through time; its prefixes do not merely modify action but give it direction, like vectors of reality.

This is why Derichsweiler taught the language not through exercises or paradigms, but by analysing the internal tensions of the German sentence as one might study the structure of a fugue or a cathedral.

[1] Christof Derichsweiler (1870–1962), a distinguished scholar of German and a translator, taught German language and literature from 1896, first at the Faculty of Economics and Commerce in Naples and later at the Istituto Orientale. He was in contact with leading Italian intellectuals, as his correspondence with Benedetto Croce, among other evidence, attests.

German begins not with an acting subject but with a network of relations that precedes it; meaning does not assert itself immediately but develops through time, extending our anticipation to the very last word; the verb is not a self-contained act but a movement, a vector tracing the space of reality.

The manuscript that embodied this vision—more than two thousand pages of reflection and analysis—is now lost. Derichsweiler had sent it to the publisher Mondadori, but died unexpectedly before the publication process could be completed. His heirs, probably unaware of the work's value, made no attempt to recover it. After a time, the publisher pulped the unclaimed manuscript. As far as we know, no copy has survived.

What remains of that extraordinary work is chiefly the handwritten notes of Ernesto Gromi, who had the opportunity to read and study it at length. He never met Derichsweiler. During his six years as a prisoner of war in Camp 25 at Yol, India, in the Second World War, however, he shared the camp with a nephew of Derichsweiler's, to whom the author had arranged to send a copy. In that unlikely setting, among mountains and barbed wire, a silent but lasting encounter took place—without meetings, letters or conversation—between Derichsweiler's grammatical thought and the man who would pass on his teaching.

Gromi immediately recognised the extraordinary value of what he had read and took meticulous notes. Those notes, which he generously shared with his pupils—I had the honour of being one of them—became the basis of a method of teaching that never separated a rule from the reason for it, or a grammatical form from the way of thinking it makes possible.

The book you are holding seeks to present, as clearly as possible, some of the central—and, we believe, revolutionary—insights of Derichsweiler's teaching as Gromi passed it on to us. We have tried to bring these fragments together into a coherent vision, drawing connections, wherever possible, with phenomenology. This seems the ideal framework for such an approach to German, although, as far as we know, it was not explicitly articulated in the vast manuscript.[2]

[2] Derichsweiler also published *La lingua tedesca, insegnata e interpretata* [The German Language Taught and Interpreted] (Naples: Raffaele Pironti, 1941), which has been out of print for decades and is very difficult to find. It contains many of the ideas Gromi conveyed in his teaching and on which this book is based. In preparing the present text, I was able to consult it directly, using it to compare and check the material.

Derichsweiler's dream was to reveal German as no grammar had dared to do before: not as a set of rules to memorise, but as a living system, thought taking structural form, a reality brought into being in the very act of being spoken. At the end of his manuscript he wrote:

> 'When you have finished reading this book, you will have seen something that, even with all the grammars in the world at your disposal, you would never otherwise have seen: the German language.'

With this small contribution, we hope that his dream has not been entirely lost.

Luigi Gaggero, 24 March 2025