Reinhart Koselleck’s metaphorical language: an application of historical semantics to one of its founding figures

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“Die Historie als Wissenschaft lebt im Unterschied zu anderen Wissenschaften nur von der Metaphorik.”

“In contrast to other modes of study, history as a discipline lives by metaphorical expression.”

Preliminary remarks

Anyone who reads Koselleck’s texts in the original German will be aware of two striking features in the ways he uses language: first, a frequent recourse to certain metaphorical expressions, and second, an extensive use of a limited number of rather peculiar words, or, contrariwise, of familiar words in an idiosyncratic way. Not a few of those idiosyncratic expressions, especially the verbs, are used by Koselleck in ways that lay bare the hidden metaphorical resonances they contain. Koselleck is certainly not alone in writing and thinking through images, but I think that his ways of using familiar words idiosyncratically or metaphorically have contributed to his originality among German historians and public intellectuals.

In the following sections I will highlight just a few examples of Koselleck’s idiosyncratic or metaphorical uses of words; and here I will concentrate on those which, in my view, convey a surplus of meaning as compared to the more abstract, academic terms one would normally expect in similar contexts. While some of Koselleck’s peculiar expressions are no more than linguistic curiosities, personal whims or fancies that could easily be replaced by more familiar terms without any loss of meaning, there are others, I would argue, that Koselleck apparently needed to express his most original concerns in a condensed, yet easy-to-understand fashion – easy-to-understand, that is, at least for readers who are able to grasp the multi-layered resonances contained in the German vocabulary.

This leads to a difficulty I encountered when writing this paper: the necessity to comment on a number of very special or even bizarre German words in another language: English, which often has no exact equivalents for them. I should therefore apologize to those who do not read German for using quite a lot of German quotations. I will try to translate them, or circumscribe their meanings, as best as I
can, but I cannot promise that I will always be able to convey the resonances they contain. At the same time, my experimental search for Koselleck’s peculiar terms and metaphors may also serve as a test case for evaluating the quality of existing translations of his articles into English.²

**Applying historical semantics to Koselleck: corpus and methodology**

Let me start with a few remarks on how I proceeded in order to apply historical semantics to one of its founding figures. What I did first was to read all the essays contained in the most recent English-language collection edited by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (*Sediments of Time*) in the original, German version in chronological order. Since the collection with one exception (the 1976 essay on *Fiktion und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit/Fiction and Historical Reality*) only represents the ‘late’ Koselleck of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, I added four earlier essays (more or less chosen at random) to complete the picture and cover Koselleck’s use of language and thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These additional texts are his well-known 1967 essay on the dissolution of the topos *historia magistra vitae*, his lectures *Wozu noch Historie? (Why History)* and *Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft (On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History)* published in 1971 and 1972, respectively, and his article on *Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte (Begriffsgeschichte and Social History)*, one of the early programmatic statements on conceptual history, also published in 1972. My following remarks, then, are based on a corpus of twenty articles by Koselleck covering the years from 1967 until 2006, the year of his death. A complete list of all twenty German-language articles in chronological order by first publication dates, including references to English translations, can be found in the appendix at the end of this contribution. References in the following sections will be by short title, year of original publication, and page number only.

As I went through those twenty articles, I started to establish and continuously augment a list of strange – idiosyncratic – words and expressions, most of them verbs, some nouns, and also some adverbs. Under each heading I noted down the quotations (complete sentences, sometimes several sentences) in which these words were used, again in chronological order. As a complement, I added another list (with quotes) collecting all non-specified ‘miscellaneous’ metaphorical expressions.
My first step, then, was what conceptual historians usually do for a start: collect as many instances as possible of the uses of certain words (or expressions or arguments) in texts: Belegstellen sammeln, as we call that step in German. This is a tedious and relatively unimaginative business, which is nowadays made much easier by the enormous increase of digitized, searchable source materials. But in this case, I had to do it in the traditional way, ‘by hand’.

Whether by machinery or by hand, this first step of extracting multiple quotations of certain types from texts, stupid as it may seem, has one crucial advantage: it has an ‘alienating’ or ‘distancing’ effect. As your collections of quotes grow in size, they somehow begin to acquire a life of their own; already in the course of the text-mining business one begins to discern a certain logic of usage patterns, and perhaps also of changes in those patterns over time. This is something one is likely to miss by just reading and trying to make sense of one individual text after the other. When Koselleck himself described the method of Begriffsgeschichte, he was well aware of the need to decontextualize individual instances of uses of terms, and his advice was to read those decontextualized instances in a row, in long series, in order to detect patterns and changes across time. This is what he called the “second phase” (der zweite Durchgang) which is needed to actually achieve a conceptual history:

“Indem die Begriffe im zweiten Durchgang einer Untersuchung aus ihrem situationsgebundenen Kontext gelöst werden, und ihre Bedeutungen durch die Abfolge der Zeiten hindurch verfolgt und dann einander zugeordnet werden, summieren sich die einzelnen historischen Begriffsanalysen zur Geschichte des Begriffs.”³

“Insofar as concepts, during this second phase of investigation, are detached from their situational context, and their meanings ordered according to the sequence of time and then ordered with respect to each other, the individual historical analyses of concepts assemble themselves into a history of the concept.”⁴

Before I start commenting on some of my findings I should admit, though, that I had recourse to a certain amount of intuition, based on my long experience of reading Koselleck, in identifying what I call his peculiar or ‘idiosyncratic’ expressions. In other words, using Hans-Georg Gadamer’s phrase, I started with a certain Vorverständnis (a previous understanding), but which was then indeed confirmed, and in part also modified in the course of the text-mining and collecting process just described.
A ‘hitlist’ of Koselleck’s peculiar or ‘idiosyncratic’ expressions

Having finished the collection of Koselleck’s ‘idiosyncratic’ German expressions throughout the twenty texts, I arranged them in form of a ‘hitlist’ ordered by total number of occurrences in the corpus. Here follows the hitlist. Numbers of occurrences in the corpus are in brackets and those expressions on which I will comment are marked in red. Readers of the blog are invited to comment on the items on the list, especially those not discussed below.

1. Handlungseinheit (44)
2. Schichten, Zeitschichten, Verwerfungen (and other geological metaphors) (36)
3. einlösen, einlösbar (34)
4. (sich) entziehen (33)
5. einholen, einholbar, uneinholbar (27)
6. ex post (27)
7. ableitbar, ableiten, abgeleitet (25)
8. vorgegeben, Vorgegebenheit [not counted: Vorgaben] (24)
9. Sachverhalt (23)
10. abrufbar, abrufen (18)
11. überholen, überholbar, unüberholbar (17)
12. vollstrecken (14)
13. überbieten, überbietbar, unüberbietbar (12)
14. zehren (von), verzehren, aufzehren (12)
15. hervortreiben (12)
16. aufgehen in (11)
17. (zugleich) mehr oder weniger (10)
18. gestaffelt, sich staffeln (7)
19. speisen, sich speisen aus, einspeisen (7)
20. Leib (6)
21. Zwangsalternative (5)
Nos. 13, 11, 5, and 3: Expressions referring to a temporal gap

It is interesting to see that there are strong semantic linkages, sometimes amounting to interchangeability, between several words, or groups of words, appearing at different ranks in the hitlist. Thus, no. 13 (überbieten, überhöftbar, unüberbietbar) [literally: to outbid, to surpass] is used in similar contexts as no. 11 (überholen, überhöftbar, unüberholbar) [literally: to overtake]. This word, in turn, serves as a complement to no. 5 on the list (einholen, einholbar, uneinholbar) [literally: to catch up with, but also: to pull in – a fisherman’s net for example]. The latter meaning, again, is closely related to, and in some instances more or less exchangeable with, no. 3 on the list (einlösen, einlösbar) [literally: to fulfil]. Taken together, these four verbs (überbieten, überhöftlen, einholen, einlösen) and their adverbial derivates (überbietbar, überhöftbar, einholbar, einlösbar), as well as their respective negations, share certain features. Three of them (überbieten, überhöftlen, einholen) have strong metaphorical resonances, pointing to competitive comparisons between, or the relative advance or backwardness of, historical agents across time and space. And all four of them, including einlösen, relate to a temporal gap that is, or is not, or can in fact never be, bridged by a historical agent. The German word einlösen literally means to fulfil or to realize: to fulfil a promise, a claim, an entitlement that was made at some time in the past and realized, or to be realized, now or at some time in the future. It is exactly in this sense that Koselleck uses the word einlösen in the majority of cases, and it is easy to see how this use relates to his general skepticism against any universalist ‘utopian’ claims established in the name of ‘history’ in the singular, that is, history conceived as a linear, teleological process that sets up unending demands or requirements that are impossible to fulfil (uneinlösbar).
Nos. 22 and 8: ‘Substrat’ and ‘Vorgegebenheit’

Substrat is a nowadays rarely used scientific term, derived from Walther von Wartburg’s diachronic linguistics of the 1930s and meaning a basic stratum of language (von Wartburg’s case is vulgar Latin) that is then ‘superseded’ by another language (in Wartburg’s case, Germanic languages) as Superstrat. Substrat is only used in Koselleck’s earlier essays of the late 1960s and early 1970s. And here, it appears in exactly those contexts where in the later essays Koselleck normally prefers words such as Vorgegebenheit, vorgegeben or Vorgabe, that is: no. 8 on my hitlist [literally: that which is ‘pregiven’]. Substrat, then, refers to what Koselleck later calls the ‘anthropological’, or ‘natural pregivens’ of human interchanges. One quote from the 1972 essay, “On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History,” may suffice here to show that interchangeability:

“In the past, the natural course of time served as the immediate substratum for possible histories. [...] All histories remained rooted in ‘nature,’ directly embedded in biological pregivens.”

It seems that Koselleck uses the technical term Substrat in a metaphorical way, in this case generalizing a finding from a scientific discipline (linguistics) and applying it to the course of possible histories in all sorts of circumstances. One more quote shows how the scientific term Substrat serves as an image to bring home his understanding of anthropological constants:

“Es gibt eine Menge ähnlicher Formalkriterien historischen Handelns und Erleidens, die gleichsam zeitlos quer zur Geschichte dazu dienen, Geschichte aufzuschlüsseln. Ich erinnere an ‘Herr und Knecht’, ‘Freund und Feind’ [...] oder an das anthropologische Substrat des politischen Generationswechsels.”

“There are many similar formal criteria concerning historical acting and suffering, which are basically ‘timeless’ across history and serve to unlock history. I am thinking of such criteria as ‘master and servant,’ ‘friend and foe’; [...] and the anthropological substratum for generational change in politics.”

It is easy to see that the technical term Substrat itself evokes metaphorical resonances. It builds on the same imagery of ‘layers’ and ‘sediments’ which is so prominent in all of Koselleck’s texts, especially those contained in the German-

**Nos. 18 and 2: ‘gestaffelt, sich staffeln’ and geological imagery (‘sediments,’ ‘tiers’)**

A similar point can be made for no. 18 on my list: *gestaffelt, sich staffeln*. The German word *staffeln* means something like scaling, staggering, grading, phasing, or tiering. It designates an activity of ordering, or ranging, physical bodies or artefacts, usually along a spatial or temporal-spatial scale. The activity of *staffeln* implies that physical or imagined artefacts which originate from different chronological times are co-present for a viewer, like in an archaeological cabinet or in a system of drawers. In Koselleck’s texts, the word often appears in connection with the adjective deep (*tief*). Here are two quotes to illustrate typical contexts in which the strange word *gestaffelt* appears in Koselleck’s works:

“Zu jeder Innen- und Außenrelation gehören mit ihrer räumlichen *Tiefenstaffelung* zugleich Grenzbestimmungen, kraft derer über das jeweilige Innen und Außen befunden wird.”

“Boundary distinctions also accompany each inside-outside relation, and its *spatial scale* and these determinations make each inside and outside space operational.”

“Wir fragen nach dem, was allen Menschen eigentümlich ist, was nur einigen Menschen eigentümlich ist oder was nur einem *einzelnem* Menschen eigentümlich ist. Dann *staffelt* sich die Diachronie *abschichtig* mit Überlappendungen, die quer zu den konventionellen Zeitaltern vielfache Zuordnungen freigeben, [...].”

“[… we may ask what is specific about all people, what is specific about only certain people, or what is specific about only one single person. Diachronicity would then *stagger itself in overlapping sediments*, which would then enable manifold associations that cut across the conventional historical epochs.”

You can see that *staffeln* appears in connection with many other of Koselleck’s typical watchwords such as *innen/außen* or the image of *Schichten* (*abschichtig*). The terms *Wiederholung* and again *Vorgaben* also appear frequently in the semantic surrounding of *staffeln, gestaffelt*. The words *gestaffelt*, or *Staffelung* (no. 18 on my hitlist) turn out to be just another variant of Koselleck’s manifold and much-commented-upon use of the geological imagery of sediments, layers, or tiers – which is no. 2 in my hitlist.
The ‘arsenal’ of language and no. 18 (gestaffelt)

Let me draw your attention to another quote in which the word *gestaffelt* appears, this time in Koselleck’s 1989 article *Sprachwandel und Ereignisgeschichte* and in connection with his favourite imagery for language itself, the imagery of an arsenal or storehouse:

“Jede synchron gesprochene Sprache, mit deren Arsenal argumentiert wurde, enthielt also diachron verschieden tief gestaffelte Vorgaben, die den Argumentationshaushalt ebensosehr erschlossen wie begrenzten.”\(^\text{13}\)

“Every synchronically spoken language whose arsenal was used to make arguments thus contained pregivens that were stratified at diachronically different depths making the content of the argumentation accessible while at the same time also limiting it.”\(^\text{14}\)

Besides the word *gestaffelt*, this quote contains two metaphorical expressions, both referring to language itself: *Arsenal* and *Haushalt*, armoury (of weapons), and (literally) household, but I think a translation like inventory or stock would actually render the meaning of *Haushalt* in this context. Here we have an example, by the way, in which the English translation, good as far as the essential message is concerned, hides the metaphorical dimension in Koselleck’s term *Argumentationshaushalt*. Besides *Arsenal* and *Haushalt* Koselleck also frequently uses the word *Speicher* (storehouse, reservoir, magazine) as a metaphor for language.

### A ‘hitlist’ of miscellaneous metaphorical expressions in Koselleck’s texts

As mentioned above, besides collecting Koselleck’s ‘idiosyncratic’ expressions, I also made another list of miscellaneous metaphorical expressions in the twenty texts of my corpus. Here is the ‘hitlist’ of the top five in that second list (number of occurrences in brackets and items commented upon in red):

1. *Haushalt*, *Speicher*, *Arsenal* (applied to language, arguments, experiences, emotions) (17)
2. *imprägnieren*, *einfärben* (applied to concepts and meanings) (13)
3. *Netz*, *Filter*, *Schleuse*, *Käfig*, *Fallstrick* (applied to experiences, uses of concepts) (9)
4. hinter xxx lauert die Gefahr, … (often applied to uses of certain concepts) (8)

5. ausmessen (applied to spaces of experience, of consciousness, of possibilities) (7)

No. 1 in this list refers to language itself which, in Koselleck’s metaphorical diction, is conceived as an armoury, a reservoir, an inventory of words, meanings, or arguments that have been articulated at some time in the past and are (more or less) re-usable in the present. Another of Koselleck’s favourite metaphors is no. 2 on this list: *imprägnieren* and *einfärben* [literally: to impregnate and to dye, usually a piece of textile or leather]. In Koselleck’s texts, the words *imprägnieren* or *einfärben* are used to describe the process by which a new, additional meaning is grafted onto an older, pre-existing meaning of a term and thereby transforms its use-value in a specific way. For the same process he sometimes uses the term *Kontamination*, or the verb *kontaminieren* [to contaminate], an image taken from the language of the nuclear industry. These examples point to another range of Koselleck’s imagery, this time not taken from the spatial and geological sphere, but from a manual, artisanal, industrial-technical, or scientific sphere, ranging from the textile industry to nuclear physics.

**No. 10 in the list of peculiar expressions: ‘abrufen’ and ‘abrufbar’**

Returning to my hitlist of peculiar expressions, I would like to draw your attention to no. 10: *abrufen* and (more frequently) *abrufbar*. These words, again, are always used in the context of Koselleck’s conception of language and language use. Translated literally, the word *abrufbar* means callable, but a better translation might be recoverable or, indeed, reusable. The image of ‘calling up’ again refers to Koselleck’s preferred image of language as a storehouse, or an armoury of meanings, arguments etc. One might also think of data storage in computers – an image Koselleck certainly had in mind and wanted to evoke when using the words *Speicher* and *abrufen* or *abrufbar*. Again, the idea of co-presence of diachronically diverse elements, in this case of language, is present in this cluster of metaphorical expressions.

**No. 1: ‘Handlungseinheit’**

Finally, before I conclude, a few words on no. 1 on my hitlist: *Handlungseinheit* [literally: action unit]. This is a strange word, typical for Koselleck. For once, it is
clearly not a metaphorical expression, but an abstract academic term, and a very artificial one at that. Where and why does he use it? Already the first quote in my collection of 44 instances points the way. It is from his 1971 essay Wozu noch Historie? (Why History?):

“Staat, Volk, Klassen, Jahrhundert, Rasse, Persönlichkeit sind Größen, die als substantielle Handlungseinheiten nur hypothetisch gebraucht werden sollten. Die gebotene Entsubstantialisierung solcher Begriffe führt aber zwangsläufig zu einer Verzeitlichung ihrer kategorialen Bedeutungen.”

“State, people, classes, centuries, race, person are categories that may only be introduced hypothetically as substantial units of action. Such concepts have to be desubstantialized, and this inevitably leads to a temporalization of their meanings as categories.”

For Koselleck, then, Handlungseinheit is the most abstract generic term for all units (personal as well as collective) to which historians tend to ascribe some form of ‘agency’ in the past. Starting already in the early 1970s, and possibly much earlier, Koselleck was – as the quote shows – extremely averse to speaking of, or writing about, Handlungseinheiten as if they were substantive identities across time. His claim is, that all Handlungseinheiten (classes, nations, races etc.) should be desubstantialized and historicized when we – historians – speak about them. For us, twenty-first-century scholars, who are all familiar with the basic lessons of the linguistic turn and learnt early on that classes, nations, or races are imagined or constructed entities, this insight may sound banal, but one has to remember that in the context of 1971, it was a provocation against social and political history as it was then practised – in Bielefeld and elsewhere in Europe; a social history in which ‘classes’ or ‘nation states’ appeared as agents irrespective of the fact that not even the terms to designate them were available at the respective times. Against this kind of history writing, Koselleck insisted on the rule that

“Ohne gemeinsame Begriffe gibt es keine Gesellschaft, vor allem keine politische Handlungseinheit.”

“Without common concepts there is no society, and above all no political field of action.”

Here, by the way, we have a case where the English translation is clearly wrong. Handlungseinheit is not a “field of action,” but the generic term for all sorts of collective actors.

Let’s hear Koselleck again:

#English / KOMPOSITA / Theory of History (Re)read
“Keine politische Handlungseinheit ist aktionsfähig ohne Sprache, ohne gemeinsame Begriffe, [...].”\(^{19}\)

“No political unit of action is possible without language, without common concepts, [...].”\(^{20}\)

Moreover, the term Handlungseinheit serves yet another function in Koselleck’s texts. He needed it to formulate his famous three basic dichotomies (innen/außen, oben/unten and früher/später), dichotomies that in his view underly all possible histories of human interactions or conflicts. One quote from his essay Historik und Hermeutik (1985/87) in which, for the first time, he tried to explicitly formulate those dichotomies in their most abstract form, may serve to illustrate this usage of the word Handlungseinheit:

Es gibt keine soziale oder politische Handlungseinheit, die sich nicht durch Ausgrenzung anderer Handlungseinheiten konstituiert. [...] Und dieselbe Innen- und Außenopposition taucht in allen Geschichten auf, auch wenn die Handlungseinheiten höher aggregiert sind als nur durch zwei Personen.\(^{21}\)

No social or political unit of action constitutes itself without excluding other units of action. [...] And the same inside-outside opposition arises in all histories, even when the units of action involve more than just two people.”\(^{22}\)

**Concluding remarks**

Koselleck’s early essay On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History (1972) contains one of his more elaborate explicit reasonings on the uses, and even inevitability, of metaphors and images in history writing; but on the other hand it also contains a warning. Let me therefore quote this passage at length:

“[…], daß sich die Historie, soweit sie es mit der Zeit zu tun hat, grundsätzlich ihre Begriffe aus dem räumlichen Bereich entlehnen muß. Wir leben von einer naturalen Metaphorik, und wir können dieser Metaphorik gar nicht entrinnen aus dem einfachen Grunde, weil die Zeit nicht anschaulich ist und auch nicht anschaulich gemacht werden kann. […] Die Historie als Wissenschaft lebt im Unterschied zu anderen Wissenschaften nur von der Metaphorik. Das ist gleichsam unsere anthropologische Prämisse, daß sich alles, was temporal formuliert sein will, an die sinnlichen Substrate der natürlichen Anschauung anlehnen muß. […] Dahinter lauert sogar die spezifische Gefahr, daß wir in unserer empirischen Forschung die Metaphorik so naiv hinnehmen, wie sie uns jeweils zufällt. Denn wir sind darauf angewiesen, von Anleihen aus dem Sprachgebrauch des Alltags oder anderer
Wissenschaftsbereiche zu leben. Die erborgte Terminologie und der Zwang zur
Metaphorik, weil die Zeit selber nicht anschaulich wird, bedarf also ständiger
methodischer Rückversicherungen, die auf eine Theorie der geschichtlichen Zeiten
verweisen.23

“[…] that history, insofar as it deals with time, must borrow its concepts from the
spatial realm as a matter of principle. We live by naturally metaphorical
expressions, and we are unable to escape from them, for the simple reason that
time is not manifest (anschaulich) and cannot be intuited (anschaulich gemacht
werden). […] In contrast to other modes of study, history as a discipline lives by
metaphorical expressions. This is our anthropological premise, as it were, for
everything that must be articulated in temporal terms is forced to rely on the
sensory bases of natural intuition. […] A specific danger lurks behind these
difficulties; namely, that our empirical research naively accepts metaphors as they
come to us. We must rely on borrowings from everyday linguistic usage or other
disciplines. The terminology borrowed and the necessity of using metaphorical
expressions – because time does not clearly manifest itself – requires constant
methodological safeguards that refer to a theory of historical time.”24

Here Koselleck justifies his own frequent use of spatial and other metaphorical
expressions taken from the realm of the ‘natural’ as an inescapable necessity,
because time cannot be visualized, cannot be made anschaulich. As he later
succinctly wrote in the first line of his introduction to Sediments of Time, “Whoever
speaks about time is dependent upon metaphors.”25 However, the longer passage
also contains a warning against the ‘naive’ use of such metaphors; therefore they
should, Koselleck says, always be supplemented by, or embedded in, theoretical
reflections on the history of temporal horizons or temporal regimes.

In order to achieve that dual goal, Koselleck used several linguistic strategies. On
the one hand, in addition to a wide range of images taken from geology and
‘natural’ spatial pregivens, he had recourse to metaphorical expressions taken
from different, non-natural, non-geological, but rather technical, artisanal,
industrial, or scientific realms: imprägnieren was one of them, the verb abrufen was
another. On the other hand, however, he made a conscious attempt to reduce his
ideas about possible histories to the most abstract, basic categories possible. The
term Handlungseinheit – consistently used throughout all the texts of the corpus –
was an important element in that strategy. Another element consisted in
Koselleck’s famous three basic (heuristic) dichotomies (oben/unten, innen/außen,
früher/später), only elaborated in its most concise form towards the end of his
career. More than his metaphorical expressions, these abstract formulations may turn out to be – perhaps – Koselleck's lasting legacy for future historical research.

Appendix: list of Koselleck's twenty articles used for my survey in chronological order


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Tags: historical semantics / history writing / metaphors


10 “Historik und Hermeneutik,” 1985/87 [2018], 47.


16 My own translation.


18 “Begriffsgeschichte and Social History,” 1972 [1985], 74.


20 “Fiction and Historical Reality,” 1976 [2018], 17.

#English / KOMPOSITA / Theory of History (Re)read 16
21 “Historik und Hermeneutik,” 1985/87 [2000], 104; see also ibid. at 110.
22 “Historik and Hermeneutics,” 1985/87 [2018], 47.
25 Zeitschichten, 9.