The First Biolinguist?
A Forgotten (and Forgettable) Episode in
Thought about The Evolution of Human Language

Stephen R. Anderson
Yale University

1. Introduction

One of the stranger examples of thought about the evolution of language is provided by the work of Georg Schwidetzky (Figure 1 below), active primarily during the 1930s in Germany. His views and writing are essentially forgotten today, and indeed were largely ignored at the time apart from the modest success of Schwidetzky 1932a in Britain and a reaction from the German scientific authorities discussed below.

Section 1 traces Schwidetzky’s career and his attempts to break into the scientific circles of the Third Reich, and section 2 discusses the attempts he made at a reconstruction of human language from non-human primate origins. Section 3 deals with the career of Schwidetzky’s daughter Ilse, and section 4 concludes with a discussion of some relations between themes in Schwidetzky’s career and issues in current thinking about language and its evolution.

2. Schwidetzky’s Life

Georg Willi Alfred Schwidetski (the spelling was later changed to Schwidetzky) was born on 7 February, 1875 in Berlin. Schwidetzky’s first wife Susanne (Schroeder) was born in Danzig in 1900, and died in Breslau in 1911 of tuberculosis. They had two daughters, Ilse Erika Schwidetzky, (married name Rösing, born 6 September, 1907 in Lissa and died 18 March 1997, in Mainz) whose career will be discussed below, and Eva (born in 1905, died 1958), as well as one son, Walter (born in 1910, died in 1996). His second wife Meta (Conrad) was born in 1885; they had one son, Georg (born in 1917, died in 2003).

1 This paper originated as a presentation to a workshop on “Language Learning and Evolution” at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in May of 2001. I am grateful to the participants in that meeting and to Bert Vaux for comments. I have received important assistance in piecing together the life and work of Georg Schwidetzky from Profs. Clemens Knobloch, Gerd Simon, and Gregory Radick. Mark Liberman and Sharon Klein provided very useful comments and suggestions on an earlier version; Mark Liberman and Claire Bowern confirmed important data points in Schwidetzky’s career.

2 A measure of Schwidetzky’s obscurity is provided by the fact that there is no Wikipedia page devoted to him. Similarly, works on biologists and linguists under the Third Reich (e.g. Deichmann 1999; Hutton 1999) omit any mention of Schwidetzky, with the exception of Knobloch 2005. Some of the information about his life below is derived from the Wikipedia page for his daughter Ilse, and much more from Prof. Gerd Simon’s detailed chronology of Schwidetsky’s life at http://www.gerd-simon.de/ChrSchwidetski20180830.pdf which has been especially helpful.
Georg Schwidetzky studied law in Berlin and had a successful career in local politics which ended with World War I. The family moved to Leipzig, where Schwidetzky worked for Die Deutsche Bücherei, roughly equivalent to the Library of Congress. While in Leipzig, he also pursued some additional (non-degree) study in geology, psychology, anthropology and phonetics (he refers to Eduard Sievers, the foremost phonetician among the Neogrammarians and a Professor in Leipzig in the 1920s, as one of his teachers).

Partly as a result of his studies, Schwidetzky became interested in evolutionary issues, especially in the communicative behavior of animals and its potential relation to human language. He had already started visiting a number of zoos as early as 1918; indeed, all of his first-hand experience with the animals he would later discuss was with ones in zoos. As his views developed, he gave some general public lectures as well as a number of radio talks on related subjects.

Schwidetzky had wealthy relatives. One of these was his cousin Oscar O. R. Schwidetzky (1874–1963), the inventor of a number of (profitable) medical appliances including the Ace Bandage and the disposable syringe, described in later years as a philanthropist. He was originally president of a company importing surgical supplies to the US which merged in 1918 with Becton, Dickinson & Company, an important American manufacturer and for which Oscar Schwidetzky subsequently served as the director of research.

Schwidetzky explicitly acknowledges Oscar’s assistance: “We thank the men and women who have helped with their donations large and small, to call the Gesellschaft [see below] into being

---

3 In connection with a charitable donation of medical supplies, Oscar Schwidetzky observed in 1958 to the Newark Evening News that “We made plenty of money and can afford to do it.”
and bring it through the difficult years at the beginning. Among them, two men have distinguished themselves especially, my two cousins, the factory owners Oskar and Max Schwidetzky. They represent all the helpers in the hardest time on this wall of honor.” (Schwidetzky 1938c: 7; my translation) The “wall of honor” referred to here was a part of a display of works related to his Society’s project that was arranged for a visit in 1937 from the Reichsminister for Science, Culture and Education, with a view to donating the collection to the state and which was favorably received. Preparation of the display, which included prominent pictures of Oscar and Max Schwidetzky, was “made possible by the Oskar-Schwidetzky-Stiftung” (Schwidetzky 1938c: 3).

With his family’s support, Schwidetzky was able to indulge in his pastime, and he founded the “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Tier- und Ursprachen-Forschung zu Leipzig,” through which he published a series of works in the 1930s that will be the main focus of section 2 below. The society attracted a few members from the fringes of German academia, but also some scholars with international reputations, such as C. K. Ogden and the Africanist August Klingenheben, who published an article on clicks in the society’s series (Klingenheben 1937).

In 1933, Schwidetzky joined the Nazi party (Nr. 2 988 794). While an obvious step toward success in the Third Reich, such membership was not automatic: even apart from the necessity of proving that an applicant for the Nazi party was a full blooded German whose parents and grandparents were also pure Germans, other obstacles could arise. For example, Ilse Schwidetzky’s mentor Egon Freiherr von Eickstedt had his candidacy for party membership rejected as a result of calumnies directed at him by a resentful former assistant fired for incompetence. Von Eickstedt showed poor judgment in engaging a Jewish lawyer to pursue his case against his accuser, an established party member, and the episode was his undoing as regarded his relations with the party (Massin 1999: 24f.). His impeccable Aryan ancestry and clear adherence to Nazi opinions on racial matters allowed him to continue his career anyway, but after the war he (and his apologist Ilse Schwidetzky) tried to use his rejection for full membership in the party as the basis for claiming that he had been an opponent, not a supporter of the regime.

Despite Schwidetzky’s party membership, however, and his clear and loudly expressed sympathy for Nazi views on race and its relation to language, he was consistently unsuccessful in gathering official support for his society and its activities. He never achieved any significant academic connections, though not for want of trying. He did submit two papers to scientific meetings: the 3rd International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in Ghent, and the 3rd International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Copenhagen, both in 1938. In both cases, the proceedings of the congress do not include Schwidetzky’s paper and his name is not listed among the participants, so we must assume his papers were rejected.

His troubles within the Third Reich scientific community came to a head in 1939–40, when he attracted the hostility of Oskar Heinroth and (especially) Konrad Lorenz, influential biologists in the Nazi regime. When Heinroth pointed Schwidetzky’s work out to Lorenz, the latter wrote:

> Regarding the poor madman [Schwidetzky]: just as a sex killer is, so is a poor madman, who personally can do nothing about his deficit mutations [Ausfallsmutationen]. Since he however is enormously harmful for the people as a whole, one slaughters him justly! I have sent the whole Schwidetzky package to Greite, who is just now very busy with the authoritarian suppression of trash in biological literature. The manner and way Schwidetzky

---

4 These were printed as “Flugblätter” of Schwidetzky’s Society.
5 See Burkhardt (2005) and Radick (2007) for discussion of this event and its context in terms of other German biologists of the period.
derives us from hybrids out of hybrids (what an idea he has of the fertility of crossbreeds! Try once to cross the baboon and the gibbon!) is nothing short of propaganda for crossing human races, racial shame [Rassenschande] on the large scale. It will be forbidden immediately, as well as the whole Society for Primitive Language Research. The Ahnenerbe [a Nazi think tank between 1935 and 1945, part of the SS — SRA] will make short shrift of it.

[quoted from Burkhardt (2005: 261f.)]

Heinroth replied that “[t]he Schwidetzky thing will be forbidden on Greite’s orders, the ‘society’ will thus be disbanded.”

Schwidetzky’s mistake, on Lorenz and Heinroth’s view, was grounded in his notion of how species (and races) arise in evolution. Prior to the establishment of the “modern synthesis” in evolutionary theory, with its improved understanding of the molecular structure of the gene and of the grounding of evolutionary change in modifications of DNA structure, a variety of views existed on how new species come into existence. One of these was the idea that new species are the result of hybridization, cross-breeding between older species, and it is this picture that is at the heart of Schwidetzky’s account of human evolution, as depicted (correctly) by Lorenz. Fairly obviously, though, the notion of the Aryan race as one among others originating in the mixed inter-breeding of various species of apes was not one calculated to appeal to the leaders of the Reich.

What is remarkable about this episode is not the fact that Schwidetzky’s project was rejected and suppressed by other students of animal behavior: indeed, the biology underlying it was embarrassingly bad, and the linguistics if anything worse. These defects, however, were not the telling ones. What kept Schwidetzky out of the German academic establishment at the time was the conflict between his views on the origins of races and Nazi ideology. Even when it reaches an appropriate conclusion, science does not always proceed solely on intellectual grounds.

Lorenz’s action was apparently effective, because apart from a final collection of short articles to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Society (Schwidetzky 1939–41), no further work of Schwidetzky’s was to appear until after the dissolution of the Third Reich. He survived the war, but his Society did not. Apart from a few oral presentations and lectures (Schwidetzky 1946, 1948, the second of these published as Schwidetzky 1951), there was no further development of his ideas about language. He died in 1952.

3. Schwidetzky and the Reconstruction of Human Language

Some of the background for Schwidetzky’s project is provided by the larger context of research on the history of language in Germany in the years before World War II. An innovative part of the program of the Neogrammarians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the intention to treat the historical study of languages as a genuinely scientific matter: as Naturwissenschaft (natural science) rather than as Geisteswissenschaft (roughly, humanities). On the basis of elaborated theories of phonetics in the work of Eduard Sievers and others, it was hoped that sound change could be given a basis in observable phenomena of articulation and acoustics; the other major class of linguistic changes, analogy, was presumed to be studiable within the domain of associationist psychology.
German students of language in the 1920s and 30s came to reject this move as inadequate, and wanted to return historical linguistics to its earlier Romantic roots as *Geisteswissenschaft.* Schwidetzky, on the other hand, wanted to expand the remit of historical linguistics beyond the histories of individual languages and language families within human history to include the evolution of language from pre-human origins, and to do that would obviously require considerations from outside the purely human sciences. On Schwidetzky’s part, this was to be justified in part by a claimed need to appeal to racial history:

> Two principles shed light on the basic ideas of the renewed German nation. Our *Führer* has written one: every event in world history is determined by race. One of the standard bearers of the new science, Hans F. K. Günther, formulated the other: in the very beginning, each race arrived at its own particular form of language.

> These principles also outline the research goals of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Tier- und Ursprachenforschung.* The hitherto mistakenly neglected connection between race and language is to be clarified. Besides the human sciences, the natural sciences must also find their place in research on language.

[Schwidetzky 1934a: p. 1; my translation]

Schwidetzky’s assertion that research on the evolution of language belonged within biological science provided an implicit answer to the prohibition in the constitution of the *Société linguistique de Paris,* noted by Schwidetzky (1931: 25), of discussion of the origins of language (as well as the creation of universal languages such as Esperanto). While there is no recorded discussion of the motivation for these restrictions, it is reasonable to relate them to the professed goal of the Society: promoting the scientific study of language. In 1866 when this was written, the discussion of language origins (as well as talk of universal auxiliary languages) appeared to be a romantic and quite unscientific notion. Schwidetzky, in contrast, proposed to situate the evolution of language squarely within the sciences.

Schwidetzky’s position on language and its history were laid out in a series of publications of his *Gesellschaft,* starting with Schwidetzky 1931 and its English translation, Schwidetzky 1932a. The series continued with Klinghenheben1937; Lindner 1935; Schwidetzky 1932b,1934a,b, 1936a,b, 1937, 1938a,b,c, 1939–41. Schwidetzky (1946, 1948) provides a sort of final summation of his views.

Underlying Schwidetzky’s account of the history of language is his picture of the evolution of humans, which he traces at least as far back as fish and reptiles (but not including birds, an offshoot of the reptiles not ancestral to our species). The principal mechanism invoked in this development is intermixture of species or hybridization, the story that got him in trouble with Third Reich biologists such as Lorenz as discussed above. In particular, he posits at some point a division of monkeys into three groups (aligned in confused but supposedly significant ways with blood groups as these are found in modern man). These monkeys subsequently interbred so as to produce a variety of anthropoid apes, including chimpanzees, baboons, gibbons, gorillas, and orang utans.

---

6 For a much deeper discussion of these issues than space allows here, see Knobloch 2005, especially pp. 273–279 which deal with Schwidetzky in particular.

7 Apart from the final item, though, containing papers by him and others recognizing the tenth anniversary of the *Gesellschaft,* the series had somewhat degenerated by 1938. Numbers 10–12 are devoted to the somewhat incoherent description of a proposed combination educational institution and museum devoted to promoting his and the *Führer’s* ideas.
Various combinations of apes, in their turn, interbred and produced early versions of humankind. At least three such stocks arose: one involving gibbons and forming the original Europeans; one involving chimpanzees and gorillas, leading to Neanderthals and eventually Africans; and one involving orang utans, the source of Asian peoples. Each of these emerging stocks brought with it the vocalizations distinctive of its forebears, as the source of its language(s). In modern times, we do not find any of these in pure form, because subsequent borrowing and interbreeding has obscured many differences. The source of modern humanity, however, is to be sought in at least three distinct evolutionary sequences: a theory of human origins similar in some ways to the view that would later be articulated rather more seriously by Carleton S. Coon. 8

He argues that appropriate antecedents for the elements of modern languages can be found in the communication of related species. In this, he is firm in maintaining the continuity of communicative behavior over evolutionary time, from sounds made by fish and reptiles through ancestral primates up to the present day. He does recognize (and cites evidence) that human languages are learned while communication in all other species is innate, but this is apparently no obstacle.

Against this background, Schwidetzky attempts to construct a history of human language using a sort of unintentional parody of the traditional comparative method. He proceeds by attempting to compile, from his own observations and what he can find in the literature, a set of “dictionaries” of potentially relevant ancestral species: chimpanzees (Schwidetzky 1932b), lemurs and gibbons (Schwidetzky 1934b), orang utans (“Urpongonisch”, Schwidetzky 1936b), and gorillas (unpublished, though some notes and a sketch exist). He then extracts etymologies and comparison sets by seeking parallels among these with the lexicons of various modern languages.

His results emerge from stunning combinations of phonetic manipulation while allowing remarkably vague semantic relations to count as establishing cognates. A couple of examples: “The old German word for cave was huil. The il sound originates from the Mandrill’s indrawn lateral click modified by the influence of the breathed out barking sound. The syllable hu is remarkable in that it is uttered by modern immature chimpanzees before they fall asleep. Originally, then, cave meant something like a sleeping place.” (Schwidetzky 1932a: 127) Or the comparison set for “jealousy”: Chimpanzee nkak m ‘pleasure in stealing’, äm ‘jealousy’, mä, ngak ‘hunger’; Papuan neme ‘demand’; Hakka Chinese ngak ‘urge’; Fula njaga ‘beg for’; Annamite nai ‘ask for’; Swiss German ne.ngge ‘request’; Old Chinese njai; Bushman gu.ngaka, Gothic nim-an ‘take’; Greek nem-ein ‘share’, Eskimo ninge ‘share (of something)’, etc. (Schwidetzky 1932b: 84).

The overall point should be clear, even ignoring the sloppiness of Schwidetzky’s phonetics and semantics. By constructing an apparatus superficially similar to that of the traditional historical linguist, but grounded in the assumption that data from evolutionarily related species are just as relevant to comparison as data from (potentially) historically related human languages, he assimilates the history of languages to that of Language overall, and subsumes the whole under the natural sciences, more specifically biology. The weakness of this reasoning does not need stressing.

---

8 Coon (1962) and elsewhere. Schwidetzky’s theory, however, is polygenic in assuming the evolution of Homo sapiens from multiple distinct species, while Coon’s is merely polycentric in assuming descent of Homo sapiens from Homo erectus in several events at distinct times and places.
4. Ilse Schwidetzky

Of Schwidetzky’s children, the most impactful was his daughter Ilse (Figure 2), who was active in promoting views on racial matters congenial to the Nazi regime in the pre-war years and throughout the war, and who became a major figure in post-war German anthropology.9

Figure 2: Ilse Schwidetzky (from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ru/e/e7/Ilse_Schwidetzky.jpg.)

In the 1930s and into the early war years, Ilse Schwidetzky’s academic work was focused on the politically explosive question of the incorporation of Silesia into Germany. A component of the pre-WWI German Empire, Silesia was divided by the 1918 Treaty of Versailles, with Upper Silesia assigned to Poland. Schwidetzky’s 1934 dissertation on The Polish Electoral Movement in Upper Silesia revisited a 1921 plebiscite in the area in which a small majority of the population had actually voted for German rather than Polish nationality. As an assistant to von Eickstedt and together with him, she carried out an investigation of the racial makeup of the Silesian population which was intended to support its subsequent incorporation into Germany and the ethnic cleansing of non-“Nordic” elements here and in other eastern areas to which Germany was expanding. The circular, impressionistic methodology of this study drew enough objections from other anthropologists that it came to be gently suppressed, despite the support it appeared to provide for actions and policies that were carried out in any event.

During the war, she was an assistant in von Eickstedt’s Anthropological Institute in Breslau, where she pursued a variety of race-related questions. Although she later denied any association with racial purification matters, there is evidence that she and von Eickstedt performed “anthropological” parentage assessments on a number of individuals whose racial status as Jews was in question, reports with profound implications for those involved.

Her rather mendacious efforts to escape responsibility after the war were successful, and she went on to a successful career in her capacity as successor to von Eickstedt in Mainz as the leader

---

9 For background on Ilse Schwidetzky’s career and its context, see Lipphardt (2008); Massin (1999); Michelsen (2017), Morris-Reich (2013) and for a somewhat more sympathetic view, her obituary in Homo, Bernhard et al. 1997. Since her work was generally not focused on issues directly related to language, a detailed description and analysis would take us beyond the scope of the present paper.
of the Breslau–Mainz school of anthropology until her retirement in 1975, and was one of the most prominent female academics in West Germany up until her death in 1997. Her research as an anthropologist focused on the effort to promote racial theory, under the label of “population biology”, as a scientific (as opposed to purely political) discipline. Von Eickstedt’s Zeitschrift für Rassenkunde [Journal of Racial Studies] was re-founded in the late 1940s under the somewhat more benign title Homo: Journal of Comparative Human Biology, and upon his retirement she became its principal editor.

Somewhat remarkably, since their views on matters of race and language were so similar, Ilse Schwidetzky makes virtually no reference to her father in any of her work. This is particularly notable in relation to Schwidetzky 1973, a collection of (mostly translated) works on the evolution of language. In her introduction, Schwidetzky expresses views not unlike those of her father on the relation between human speech and primate vocalizations. The collection also includes a piece by the Polish linguist Roman Stopa (1973) suggesting primate origins for the clicks in Khoisan languages, reminiscent of the discussion in Schwidetzky (1937), though the latter work is nowhere mentioned. Indeed, the only mention of Georg Schwidetzky in this collection is in a discussion of the potential origins of natural language reduplication in primate vocal repetition, where the term “Kettenwort” ‘chain word’ bears a footnote with an unelaborated reference to Schwidetzky (1951).

Schwidetzky 1951 does represent the publication of her father’s 1948 summary lecture (Schwidetzky 1948) in a journal (Homo) of which she was an editor at the time, but this is the closest to a scientific connection between the two that appears to have occurred. Perhaps Ilse’s neglect of her father’s work was grounded in some family issues, or else it may have reflected a feeling on her part that his writings were not really grounded in much of what she considered real science.

5. Conclusion

It is quite unlikely that anyone would find any of Schwidetzky’s conclusions about the evolution of human language convincing or especially valuable today. There are, however, connections between various aspects of his story and issues still current in our field.

First, of course, is the reminder that the history of science is sometimes driven by history and ideology, and not by science. The rejection of Schwidetzky’s ideas by prominent Third Reich scientists was primarily on political grounds, not on the basis of its intellectual failings with regard both to biology and to linguistics. While obviously an extreme case in various regards, this episode should remind us that the success or failure of intellectual programs may depend heavily on factors other than their intrinsic scientific merit.

Other parts of the story have somewhat more direct contemporary echoes. A central claim underlying all of Schwidetzky’s work is the essential continuity between the communicative vocalizations of non-human animals, especially (but not limited to) primates and the speech of modern humans. Most work in modern linguistic theory, in contrast, rejects this point of view and sees the human language capacity as something unique and distinctive of our species, something that emerged in the evolution of Homo sapiens and whose essential properties are innovative rather than continuing the communicative capacities of our antecedents (Anderson 2013).

Discussions of the place of human language in the animal world, especially (but not exclusively) on the part of non-linguists, often take a somewhat different view, and attempt to connect preconceived notions of how language works with the behavior of other species, especially those close to us in evolutionary terms. Given the lack of sophistication in Schwidetzky’s background,
and perhaps more generally the lack of attention to the characteristic properties of synchronic linguistic systems in the intellectual milieu of 1930s Germany, it is not too surprising to find him taking the line he did on these matters, though there is less of an excuse for holding a similar position today.

A somewhat more interesting (if superficial) parallel is to be found in the fact that both Schwidetzky and many contemporary theorists characterize their inquiry as a matter of Biolinguistics. In modern usage, this terminology often seems grounded in a somewhat questionable line of reasoning. Although rarely put anywhere near as bluntly as this, the argument seems to go: human language is supported by a cognitive capacity that is unique to humans. Such a species-specific capacity must therefore be grounded in our distinctive biological nature. We are studying language: therefore we are studying human biology, even when we are just working on the syntax of a particular language.

With the exception of occasional invocations of supposed genetic bases for language such as FOXP2 (whose role, along with that of other genes implicated in cognitive and behavioral systems such as language, is rarely well understood\(^{10}\)), work in this vein rarely invokes anything recognizable as biology, and the term seems less than apt.

Whether one finds that characterization of contemporary “Biolinguistics” persuasive or not, it is important to note that the term is intended in present-day work to establish the biological character of synchronic theories of language. By calling his theoretical investigation a matter of Biolinguistik,\(^{11}\) Schwidetzky, in contrast, intended to focus on the biological nature of diachronic accounts of language. On his view, any serious inquiry into the origins of human language had to take into account comparisons with the communicative activity of other species, and the relations among species in terms of biological evolution.

His enterprise intended to incorporate the work of traditional historical and comparative linguistics (e.g. the reconstruction of proto-Indo-European) into the same project as the reconstruction of the sources of human language more generally, and to argue for the biological underpinnings of the historical study of human language in general.\(^{12}\) Most historical linguists would reject the identification of the histories of individual languages with the effort to understand the emergence of the language capacity in the history of our species. The insistence on relating this latter problem to genuinely biological factors, however, finds its continuation in work such as most of that presented at meetings such as the series of EvoLang conferences.

Overall, then, there is no reason to study Schwidetzky and his writing for the substance of what is to be found there. While he tries to cloak his “reconstructions” in the rhetorical form of serious comparative historical linguistics, he quite fails to appreciate or apply the scientific standards underlying that work. Similarly, his biological characterizations with regard to human origins are meant to look like serious biology, while lacking anything in the way of a scientific foundation.

His story provides, if anything, a cautionary tale in the literature of pseudo-science. There is a certain amount of interest in such strange byways in the history of our discipline, and this one is

\(^{10}\) For a general critique of attempts to invoke specific genes as explanatory mechanisms in cognition, see Fisher 2006. For the specific case of FOXP2, its complex expression and putative relation to language, see Konopka et al. 2009 and Fisher & Vernes 2015.

\(^{11}\) This word only appears in his post-war summary of his views (Schwidetzky 1948), but the insistence that his project was a part of biological science is present from his earliest writings.

\(^{12}\) A distinct line of thought assimilating linguistics, especially historical linguistics, to biology is the tendency dating back to Schleicher and 19th century philologists on the one hand, and Darwin on the other, to consider languages as organisms, subject to biological principles of development and evolution. Serious engagement with this conception of language would take us much too far afield for inclusion in the present paper.
not completely without contemporary resonance in addition to its amusement value. It is important to note, however, that Schwidetzky’s program was suppressed not only because it was bad science, but because it was inconsistent with ideas of a more political sort. In assessing the significance of developments in scientific fields, this is a possibility that must always be borne in mind.

REFERENCES


SUMMARY

In 1930s Germany, Georg Schwidetzky produced several works attempting to derive modern human languages by reconstruction from the vocalizations of non-human primates. This work was suppressed by other biologists under the Third Reich, not just because both the biology and the linguistics were ridiculously bad, but because Schwidetzky’s views on the origin of races were in conflict with Nazi ideology. While almost comically wrong-headed, there are nonetheless a few parallels between this project and some modern thought about the evolution of language. On the one hand, Schwidetzky stressed the need to think about the evolution of human language in terms of the biological evolution of our species, a branch of Naturwissenschaft, and not a purely humanistic activity, Geisteswissenschaft, as opinion among German linguists of the time saw it. Indeed, he was probably the first to characterize his agenda as the development of Biolinguistik. On the other hand, his attempt to maintain continuity between human language and the communicative vocalizations of non-humans fails to take into account the unique, species-specific character of human language.