



2026

V.19

História da Historiografia

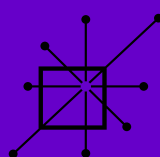
International Journal of Theory
and History of Historiography



ISSN 1983-9928



FAPEMIG



Sociedade Brasileira
de Teoria e História da
Historiografia



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Artigo Original

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The Renaissance Roots of the 'History of Concepts'

Artigo Original | História e Ficção





The Renaissance Roots of the 'History of Concepts'

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Abstract

With the subsidence of the wave of extreme tendency to 'discontinuity' and finding 'rupture' in different fields of human knowledge, we need to rethink the historical origins of many theoretical approaches. Neglecting the historical currents that have been effective in constructing theories leads to failure in understanding some of their significant features and implications. This article does not seek to anachronistically find Koselleck's 'history of concepts' in the Renaissance. Rather, it seeks the roots and continuities that have distinguished it from structuralist and pure linguistically oriented methodologies that mostly emerged after the contemporary linguistic turn. Thus, this question will be first answered as to why less attention has been paid to the historical roots of the 'history of concepts', despite its well-known relation to Gadamerian hermeneutics and Hegelian thinking. Then, the confluence of the two intellectual currents that contributed to constructing the 'history of concepts' will be addressed.

Palavras-chave

Gadamer; Koselleck; diachronic.

Introduction

In historiographical studies on the 'history of concepts' attention is often paid to its academic and ideological context in the twentieth century. But we also need to gain sufficient knowledge about the background of the confluence of the two intellectual currents involved in its formation: a current that began with the understanding of social and political transformations as historical processes, and, following that, the development of historical questioning. The other one, the culmination of which is called the 'linguistic turn', originated from the awareness of the fundamental role of language in human knowledge. It seems that a short way to find the manifestation of such a confluence of two currents is to consider their special integration in the thought of a thinker who is also credited with the initiation of the version of the 'history of concepts' that is the subject of this article: Hans-Georg Gadamer.

In Gadamer's thought, the historical and dialectical character of the Hegelian tradition is integrated with the crucial role of language. From his point of view, language and history together make the development of human knowledge possible and at the same time conditioned. The title of his essay, *History and language*, in response to Koselleck's *Zeitschichten*, should be considered as his emphasis that the main basis of the 'history of concepts' is also the fusion of these two elements (GADAMER, 2000, p. 119).

In the decades after World War II, in consequence of the decline of the supremacy of neopositivist progressivism in intellectual history, the tendency to explain the historical transformation in connection with conceptual change, without engaging with the presuppositions of empiricism and realism increased. In such a condition, Hegelian thinking could provide the appropriate foundations to respond to that need. And, due to the importance of concepts in Hegel's philosophy, taking a stance towards his approach to the progressive logic of conceptual transformation and its significance in social, political, religious, and aesthetic fields became a criterion for categorizing thinkers. However, on the other hand, any kind of teleologism, including Hegelianism, was considered as a 'problem' and seriously criticised (PIPPIN, 1997, p.18, 169; MEHRING, 2021, p. 348). Gadamer made the 'history of concepts' remarkable in such a context. In the 1950s, he set up a committee to investigate the history of philosophical concepts, and, when Erich Rothacker founded the 'Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte' in 1955, he agreed to cooperate as its first editor. Therefore, 'concepts' were considered subjects that were separately worthy of historical research, and Gadamer (1997, p. 18) expressed his famous statement that 'consciousness of the history of concepts becomes a duty of critical thinking'.

The crucial ontological integration of language and historical thinking in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics formed the basic principle of the 'history of concepts': the necessity of the diachronic study of concepts. Recognizing this principle as the main axis of the 'history of

concepts' sheds light on its original separation from the structuralist approaches of thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Roland Barthes, as well as from Michel Foucault's archeological theory of discontinuity. For Saussure, who considers language a total system and perfect at every moment, it does not matter, as Fredric Jameson puts it, 'what happens to have been altered in it a moment before' (HAWKES, 2003, p. 9). Jakobson considered even intergenerational linguistic transformations to be synchronic and stated that 'linguistic changes may be comprehended only in the light of synchronic analysis' (JAKOBSON and HALLE, 2002, p. 63).

Gadamer's hermeneutics, in which any understanding of events and texts is essentially historical and results from a dialectical questioning of tradition, is precisely opposed to such *ahistorical* or 'radically formalistic and antihistorical' theories - as Roland Barthes' theory was once described by David Couzens Hoy (1982, p. 133). By emphasising Droysen's decisive statement that 'continuity is the essence of history', Gadamer (1990, p. 213) underlined the diachronic dimension of language and interpretation in contrast with structuralists and those who believed in discontinuity. This clarifies why Rüdiger Bubner (2007, p. 223) assumes Koselleck's 'history of concepts' as one of the main branches of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Considering the above introductory arguments, it can be assumed that the 'history of concepts' must be rooted in the same intellectual currents from which Gadamer's linguistic-historical approach was also developed. Therefore, this article does not seek to anachronistically find Koselleck's thoughts or the 'history of concepts' in the Renaissance. Rather, it seeks the roots and continuities that have distinguished the 'history of concepts' from those structuralist linguistic methodologies mostly born out of the linguistic turn of the twentieth century. But before the research of those historical roots, we face this preparative question of why less attention has been paid to them, despite the well-known relation of 'history of concepts' to Gadamerian hermeneutics, which is itself linked to the Hegelian tradition, as well as to the tradition that has Vico, Humboldt, and Herder in its history. Thus, I will first briefly answer this question by raising three arguments, and, then, I will address the Renaissance roots of the mentioned currents, as the main part of the article's research.

(1) As it is known, Koselleck (2002, p. 5) focused on the period he called 'Sattelzeit' that spanned from the 1750s to the 1850s and saw it as the dividing line between the premodern usage of the language and our usage. However, regardless of its credibility, such a suggestion and an assumed dividing line should not be taken for granted as an absolute epistemological and methodological discontinuity. In other words, when the assumption of a theory is the transformation in the use of language in a definite period, it does not mean that the investigation of the epistemological and methodological roots of the theory itself in the previous periods is not necessary. Especially when one of the presuppositions of that theory is the necessity of [long-term] diachronic research, supposing a rupture in its philosophical and methodological foundations can sound somewhat paradoxical.

(2) Koselleck used to separate his approach from Hegel's philosophy, because, as Kari Palonen (2014, p.64) has pointed out, he was an adversary of Hegel's 'totalitarian' thought. On the other hand, Koselleck (2006, p. 10) himself acknowledged that he first found the term 'history of concepts' in Hegel. Now we must ask whether it was possible for Koselleck to remove the foundations of 'history of concepts' and insert it simply as a **term** into an already existing research programme; and whether that term had appeared in Hegel's own works suddenly and without any precedent. Indeed, this was not the case. Hegel (1989, p. 591; 1994, p.19) had first proposed the idea of 'begriffene Geschichte' (the history that is understood conceptually), in the last lines of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, then came up with the term 'history of concepts' in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. We learn from Hegel's statements that at that time, the interest of other scholars in such an approach to history had been increasing. Therefore, we can conclude that the required ground for such an idea and term had already been prepared.

(3) Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that previous versions of German conceptual historiography were akin to Koselleck's 'history of concepts' in that they also stemmed from the same mentioned intellectual currents. Rather, the commentators have preferred to emphasise the separation of Koselleck's 'history of concepts' from those versions by highlighting their shortcomings and deeming them outdated. For example, according to Wolfgang Rother (2010), Gustav Teichmüller's *Studies in the History of Concepts* is entirely ancient-oriented and anti-dynamic work, in which 'the systematic' is given primacy over 'the historical'. While it was from a historical and dynamic point of view that Teichmüller (1874, p. III-VIII) declared that 'a concept often becomes much clearer when it is considered in its later developmental forms'. Moreover, not only did he, like Gadamer, believe that philosophy is not separated from the history of concepts, but, relatively close to Koselleck — with clear methodological and political aspects — he considered the study of the history of concepts as revealing the 'motives of theories' and the 'dissolution of vain claims to power'. We can see such treatment not only regarding the nineteenth-century historiography of Teichmüller — whom some scholars consider as the predecessor of the Koselleckian conceptual history (GABRIEL, 2010, p. 17; POZZO and SGARBI, 2010, p. 7; TIETZE, 2021, p. 306) — but also regarding contemporary works such as Joachim Ritter's *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*. Jan-Werner Müller (2014, p. 77) stated: 'Ritter's approach remained much more in the tradition of trying to fix the essential meanings of philosophical terms'. While Manfred Sommer had pointed out that Ritter's idea of a conceptual dictionary was fundamentally Hegelian (Beck-Lassen, 2010, p.56). There is no need to argue that a 'Hegelian idea' may include everything but fixed meanings for concepts. Furthermore, Ritter (1964, p. 704) himself saw his approach in line with Gadamer and against Rudolf Eisler's *Dictionary of Philosophical Concepts*, which, he believed, held a neo-Kantian and positivist view and sought to show that concepts, methods, and questions that could not be

'scientific' were destined to fall back into past history.

I do not aim to deny the important differences between Koselleck's 'history of concepts' and other conceptual historiographies. My argument is that differences — and privileges — cannot be a justification for ignoring their common historical backgrounds that should be traced to the mentioned intellectual currents.¹ Koselleck himself implicitly confirmed this common aspect. He characterised the 'history of concepts' as a developing current that can be traced back to the eighteenth century, even before Hegel introduced the term. Then, he mentioned the work of Rudolf Eucken, the famous student of Teichmüller, to demonstrate the continuity and 'methodological inevitability' of the current. As he put it: 'Any translation into one's own present implies a history of concepts, methodological inevitability of which was already demonstrated by Rudolf Eucken in his *'Geschichte der philosophischen Terminologie'* (KOSELLECK, 2006, p. 10). This statement illustrates that Koselleck did not perceive any cleavage between his own and Eucken's 'history of concepts' as a historical current. With a similar interpretation, Gisela Schlüter (2023, p. XVIII) has considered the same statement as Koselleck's acknowledgment of the 'pioneering' role of Eucken, where she has explained how Eucken's work influenced the 'history of concepts' that was gradually emerging.

My purpose of these arguments is to demonstrate that the 'history of concepts' is not only a theory and method but also, as Koselleck saw it, a historical current that should not be considered detached from its history. Accordingly, the next section will explain why the article assumes that tracing the roots of the 'history of concepts' takes us back from Hegel to the fifteenth century when the fusion of linguistic conceptual study with historical consciousness occurred.

The seeds of the historical study of concepts in the fifteenth century

My discussion in this section consists of two arguments based on a summary of the results of two investigations. First, a study of Hegel's criticism of some philologists of his time. Second, research on the factors of the development of the 'history of concepts', inferring from the writings of Koselleck.

Close attention to Hegel's criticism of his contemporary philologists, who were also his colleagues in academia, can shed light on the background of the issue. His main complaint was that philologists neglected the 'whole' and the rational process of history behind the facts about

¹ Peter Tietze (2021, p. 306) in his study of Koselleck's thought, while acknowledging the differences, noted some similarities between the approaches of Teichmüller and Koselleck, such as the fundamental repeatability of conceptual layers in time, and their relation to Herder's ideas.

concepts.² In a letter, he condemned philology for having caught itself in a cobweb-spinning and was in danger of becoming a barren industry and a useless 'science' like heraldry (BUTLER and SEILER, 1984, p. 365). Therefore, when he introduced the term 'history of concepts', he meant the historical study of the concepts within the progressive process of reason in history as a whole. In other words, he was convinced that philology should transcend a mere lexical and linguistic study and involve historical consciousness and all the complex aspects of historical development. What he had in mind was actually a cultivated and systematized continuation and integration of what was begun by the thinkers of the fifteenth century.

Although significant intellectual changes had occurred since the beginning of the Renaissance with the works of thinkers such as Petrarch and Salutati, the methodological arguments were still not well developed and only reached their maturity in the fifteenth century.³ In that century, the understanding of the relationship between language and historical transformation was raised to a significantly higher level. The concept of 'historical change' became the touchstone of intellectual discussions, and Flavio Biondo highlighted the 'historical evolution of language' (CELENZA, 2018, p. 114). Also, he was one of the first historians to propose the periodisation of history in three stages: ancient, medieval, and modern; a periodisation without which, Koselleck (2002, p. 4) claimed five centuries later, it was impossible to have history as a discipline, and also a historiography of concepts.

The second argument is related to what can be deduced from Koselleck's works as the underlying factors of the 'history of concepts'. In this regard, four processual factors can be distinguished: (1) The process of the rising of philology and its transcending from being limited to the linguistic dimension; (2) abandoning the ideal of the absolute, unequivocal, and ahistorical definition of concepts (3) the process of temporalisation, historicisation, and politicisation of words and concepts; and (4) the process of transition from lexicography and descriptive conceptual historiography to an essentially critical methodology. Now, if we trace these factors, we will once again reach back to the fifteenth century. The initiations of the mentioned processes, as well as the integration of the study of concepts with historical consciousness, which Hegel sought, can be most clearly found in the works of Lorenzo Valla and Nicholas of Cusa, two influential thinkers of that century. The subsequent parts of the article will be devoted to a more detailed explanation of the issue.

2 For a more detailed discussion, see SEEBOHM, 2004, p. 49-50; and DESMOND, 2020, p. 35-36.

3 Lodi Nauta (2007, p. 193) has remarked that in the fifteenth century, with the appearance of works such as Paul of Venice's *Logica Parva*, broader discussions about words and concepts and various aspects of linguistic problems were developed in addition to logical issues. Also, see CELENZA, 2021, p. 9; and BRUCKER, 2007, p. 31.

Philology as the primary manifestation of the historicity of concepts

Before the intellectual transformations of the fifteenth century, philology was often formal and focused on vocabulary and classical writing style. What developed a capacity in philology and made it the root of the history of concepts was its transformation from a formal method to a historical and multidimensional knowledge of methodology. In the atmosphere of the fifteenth century, for scholars like Leonardo Bruni philology was no longer just an auxiliary tool, but the foundation of the theory of translation based on the determining role of the diachronic study of concepts (COPENHAVER, 2008, p. 90). Indeed, the development of the historical-linguistic consciousness in methodological knowledge was manifested in investigations of the historical origins of words in the framework of philology. It was also due to this fact that Dilthey (1996, p. 255) emphasised the connection of philology with 'the highest form of historical understanding' and its relationship with hermeneutics, in his elaboration on the *theory of method*.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003, p. 3) considers any imagination of philology to include the presupposition of historical consciousness. According to him, using philological skills needs to presuppose the differences between historical periods, which means the 'capacity of historicizing'. Gadamer (1990, p. 345), more radically, not only explained the relationship between philology and history in the hermeneutic approach but also declared, as a decisive point, that 'historical understanding turns out to be a kind of philology on a large scale'. István Fehér's (1999, p. 13) explanation of this declaration of Gadamer, at a conference at Humboldt University, clarifies the purpose of our arguments in this section. By analyzing the relationship between philology and hermeneutics in Gadamer's thought, he stated that what Gadamer called the 'history of concepts' was exactly the intertwining of philology and philosophy or philology and hermeneutics. However, the point that should not be overlooked is that the origin of such intertwining of philosophy and philology must be sought in the fifteenth century when the idea and object of philosophy had changed and were tied to historically oriented philology (TURNER, 2014, p. 38; VASOLI, 2008, P. 65). Gadamer's valuable work, besides its innovative aspects, was to revive and develop that entanglement considering Hegelian insights and achievements of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Methodological transformations regarding words, which appeared in philology, were central to fifteenth-century intellectual developments. Because they were not separate from the problem of 'meaning' and 'knowledge' as key points in the confrontation between humanism and scholastic intellectual and educational tradition, on which the understanding of thinking in the Renaissance is dependent. The transformation of the role of words and concepts was in fact both 'indicator' and 'factor' of the changes in thinkers' perceptions of 'meaning', 'knowledge', and 'truth'. In this sense, they are the origins of the 'history of concepts' and at the same time, they should be thematized

as research subjects for it. Because one of Koselleck's emphases was that concepts should be understood as both 'indicators' and 'factors' of socio-political transformations, and also as 'factors in the formation of consciousness' (KOSELLECK, 1974, p. XIV; KOSELLECK, 2002, p. 129).

The 'history of concepts' is recognized as a critical theory in historiography. Koselleck (1974, p. XX) described it, in contrast to simple lexicography, as not merely a history of words, events, ideas, and issues but, first of all, as a 'historical-critical' method to be fruitful for the historical and social sciences. In this respect too, it traces back to what Kristeller (1961, p. 15, 105) called 'philological criticism'. He elaborated on how Renaissance humanists combined historical and philological knowledge with their critical attitude, which led to a scholarly critical movement of examining texts and traditions. As Kristeller put it, humanists became the 'predecessors of modern historians' by employing 'philological criticism' in their historiography.

It does not need demonstration that when philology changed from a linguistic tool to a critical approach it naturally included a serious political aspect, due to the ideological significance of texts. Compared to neutral methodologies, the politicization of philology made it a relative of the 'history of concepts', which focuses on the interconnection of conceptual changes and socio-political transformations. Furthermore, the politicization of philology means the conscious politicization of concepts. Thus, the politicization of basic concepts, which Koselleck (1974, p. XVIII) considered an important feature of 'Sattelzeit', actually originated from the Renaissance era. In his research on the relationship between political transformations and semantic changes, Pim den Boer (1998, p. 21) has concluded that the Renaissance is as rich as the Enlightenment for its inclusion of 'semantic turning points' concerning 'politicization'. According to him, politicization at the semantic turning points that led to the extreme period of European politicization constituted a kind of 'proto-Sattelzeit' for the period that Koselleck considered decisive for the emergence of the contemporary political system and conceptual structure.

What was mentioned about the shift of philology from a tool for linguistic concerns to a multidimensional approach in the fifteenth century can be found most prominently in the work of Lorenzo Valla. For the first time in the middle of that century, Valla clarified the decisive role of language in various knowledge and demonstrated that no meaningful theorizing is possible without adequate knowledge of words and linguistically oriented methodologies. Moreover, the merging of historical consciousness, understanding of historical continuity, and critical spirit, with language, in a new conception of philology paved the way for the emergence of conceptual histories. This is why some scholars have considered Valla as the 'forerunner of modern historical method', and his methodology as the initiator of the development that found full expression in Vico (GINZBURG, 1999, p. 57; STRUEVER, 2015, p. 71). The impact of Valla's ideas on the understanding of the role of language in the development of knowledge is not an unrecognised subject (SEIGEL, 1968, p. 137;

GRAVELLE, 1982, p. 269) and I do not intend to repeat it. Rather, I will try to draw the lines that show the relationship of the transformations in which Valla was influential, with what are known as the components of the 'history of concepts'.

Lorenzo Valla and the functional shift of concepts

By comparison with the well-known linguistic turn of the twentieth century, which was associated with the ideas of thinkers such as Saussure and Wittgenstein, Ann Moss (2011, p. 9) points to a linguistic turn in the fifteenth century that, she rightly believes, 'is of major significance in the intellectual history of the Renaissance'. She considers Valla's turn towards classical Latin as an 'essential move in a potentially revolutionary shift of thought that invested in the linguistic practice of the early fifteenth century pedagogues with a crucial philosophical significance' (p. 36). The turn mentioned by Moss was accompanied by a decisive transformation in the role and significance of words and concepts in Valla's writings, the examination of which seems necessary for the aim of the article. However, my focus will be on the four categories of transformations that are most closely connected to the origins of the 'history of concepts'.

(1) Words, from passive tools to constructive factors

It was very influential that Lorenzo Valla considered words as constructive factors in thinking and communication, instead of assuming them as passive tools. Of course, acknowledging the constructive role of words does not mean confirming what Sarah Gravelle (1982, p. 286) called 'Valla's theory of linguistic determination of thought'. Although it is not within the scope of our research to prove or reject such a claim, it is only necessary to note that being 'constructive' is not the same as being 'determining'. That Valla did not see words merely as tools means that he did not see it possible to use the wrong words with the right thought and vice versa. Rather, he used to conclude a wrong thinking from a wrong speaking (GERL, 1982, p. 699). Also, from his point of view, words were not just tools for expressing social truths, because words form the basis of a common language which played a key role in the construction of those truths.⁴

We can analytically distinguish two shifts in the role of words in Valla's thought. The first shift, although still dependent on the instrumental role of language and words in the intellectual context of that time, was that words were no longer seen as mere tools to be used. Words, rather, possessed the potential and power that had to be discovered by utilizing historical and philological

4 For controversies about the relation of truth to language in Valla's theory see GRAVELLE, 1989, p. 333; and MONFASANI, 1989, p. 314.

knowledge. He noted in *Elegantiae* that being a true theologian depends on not being ignorant of 'virtutem vocabulorum' (VALLAE, 1541, p. 246). The second shift, which decisively went beyond the instrumental role of language, was Valla's recognition of the power of words to shape the minds and knowledge of human beings. Such an attitude led him to conclude that by revising the words of the language of daily life it would be possible to provoke significant changes in people's thoughts and social relations.

(2) *The development of the 'philological criticism'*

Valla's significantly more critical philology definitely contributed to the criticalisation of methodologies after him. It is not accidental that we can see that a scholar, in his study of the origins of critical historiography in the Renaissance and early modern times, deems the critical-historical philology in Valla's *Donation* as a grounding for the emergence of what Koselleck considered 'the inescapable methodological basis for history writing' (LANDER, 2010, p. 59). As mentioned, Kristeller had previously stated that humanists could be recognised as the 'predecessors of modern historians' because of the use of 'philological criticism' in their historiography. Elsewhere, he explained more specifically the combination of techniques of textual criticism with historical criticism in Valla's work (KRISTELLER, 1986, p. 18). What Kristeller called the critical attitude of humanists was actually a determining factor in the strategy of Valla's research programme, based on the application of philology and rhetoric. With the philological examination of metaphysical concepts such as matter, nature, spirit, and God in classical texts, he tried to show that the scholastics had gone astray in their understanding of those concepts (VALLA, 2012, p. 88ff). Considering the essentially critical nature of Valla's programme and philology, Glen Bowersock (2007, p. VII), in his introduction to *Donation*, described the methodology of Valla as 'the beginning of serious philological criticism'. We find a similar description in the introduction of *De Voluptate*, where Maristella Lorch (1997, p. 7) considered 'an acutely critical spirit' as the main characteristic of Valla's writings, in which everything is questioned using philological-historical investigations. Although criticism from various points of view was one of the characteristics of that era, what made Valla's criticism distinct and effective in underpinning the history of concepts was the key role he assumed for words and concepts in the methodology of humanities.

(3) *The politicisation of philology and words*

The politicization of words and philology resulted basically from Valla's awareness of the political function of language. Kristian Jensen (2004, p. 64) has explained that the political function of Latin 'as a language of power' is expressed in the introduction of *Latinae*. However, the critical aspect of Valla's philology also intensified its politicization. Actually, Valla's critical philology was not

separated from the relationship between knowledge, truth, and power. In his works, we can see the close connection of historical-critical philology with issues related to the church and political relations. As Salvatore Camporeale (2014, p. 26-27) remarks, philology, which was for Valla 'an argumentative procedure by means of which the truth or non-truth, the authenticity or inauthenticity, of a given thing can be proven', was directly relevant to the verification or falsification of ideological claims. The politicization of words became so challenging that the disagreement between two bishops and Valla on philological grounds led to his being summoned to the Neapolitan Inquisition. Valla's philological examinations of the texts, in line with his critical strategy, were involved in the ideological conflicts of his time and the struggles between the reformists and the Counter-Reformation movement in the following centuries. His critical philology seriously challenged the church's authority in the exclusive interpretation of the Bible (BLUM, 2010, p. 83-87). The concern of the church authorities about that critical-political philology becomes clearer by finding the name of his works on the list of prohibited books in the papacy system. There were at least the names of three of Valla's works – *De libero arbitrio*, *De voluptate*, and *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione declamatio* — on one of such lists which was called 'Tridentine Index' (GRENDLER, 2008, p. 47; VALLA, 2007, p. VIII).⁵ Given its critical and politicized philology, the inclusion of Donation in such an index within the realm of papal authority was not surprising. For, it was actually a political attack on the papal power framed in critical philology. Finally, the political philology of the works of scholars such as Valla and Erasmus and the prohibitions announced by the church against them caused other authors to become more sensitive to the politicization of words. They began to weigh their words and practice self-censorship after realizing that there was censorship and listing.

(4) Historicizing words and highlighting their pragmatic aspect

The combination of semantic research of concepts with the investigation of their pragmatic aspect is one of the features of Koselleck's 'history of concepts' and one of its advantages over the methods that focus only on the meaning of concepts. For him, pragmatic language and political language are somewhat equivalent, and his studies, in addition to semantic analysis, always 'reach out to the social-historical context' (KOSELLECK, 1995, p. 13). Carsten Dutt (2011, p. 40) is even convinced that Koselleck's 'central intention' in the history of concepts is 'not only historical semantic but also pragmatical history'. With these explanations, I intend to say that such a significant historical-pragmatic direction implied in the 'history of concepts' can also be traced in Valla's emphasis on the context and application of words. In most of his writings, like Donation

5 That index was a modified version of the Index of Paul IV (1559) published in 1564. Other indexes with some differences were published after that, such as the Index of Quiroga 1583, and Index Prohibitorius and Expurgatorius of Sixtus V -1590 (GREEN and KAROLIDES, 2005, p. 111, 167).

and *Elegantiae*, the main theme revolves around the appropriate and inappropriate uses (*usus et abusus*) of words in various historical contexts.⁶ Because of this emphasis on the difference in the applications of words in different times, scholars credit Valla as a humanist who had grasped the concept of ‘anachronism’ long before its word was coined in the seventeenth century (DE GRAZIA, 2010, p. 20).⁷ Due to the importance of the historicization of words and the pragmatic aspect of the investigation in Valla’s programme, Christopher Celenza (2004, p. 90) considers the criticality of Valla’s methodology to be fundamentally based on his attitude on the historicity of language and the radical dependence of meaning on the usage of words.⁸ It can be said that what Gumbrecht (2003, p. 56) called ‘philological historicization’ in the nineteenth century in Italy during the *Risorgimento* movement and other European lands, had originated from the historicization of words in Valla’s methodology. The historicization of words was also one of the grounds of an anti-essentialist understanding of words and concepts, which became crucial for the linguistic approaches of the twentieth century, as well as for the ‘history of concepts’.⁹

All the mentioned transformations of the role of words and concepts, including their temporalization, historicization, and politicization, were part and parcel of that current from which the roots of the history of concepts originated. All also contributed to the emergence of what Donald Kelly (1970, p. 20-21) called the ‘historical revolution’ of the fifteenth century, in which Valla’s work had a key role.

Nicholas of Cusa: conceptual dynamism in world history

Another thinker who played an important role in the confluence of historical consciousness and linguistic orientation, and, thus, in the formation of the current from which the ‘history of concepts’ originated, was Nicholas of Cusa. Understanding the many transformations of modern European thought requires reflection on Nicholas’ influential ideas. At a time when geometrical

6 Keith Percival (1988, p. 67) has elaborated on what Valla means by ‘usage’, and its importance in his methodology. See also MOSS, 2011, p. 40-42.

7 Also, Ginzburg (1999, p. 64) has considered Valla’s use of anachronism for historical analysis as a ‘real turning point’ which had a long-term impact on textual criticism after him.

8 In an email message to the author (April 29, 2023), Professor Celenza acknowledged that because Valla often historicised certain words in his works, especially in *Donation*, had certainly a role in the historicisation of concepts (my italics). In this sense, we can consider his philology as a precursor to the modern study of concepts without falling into the trap of anachronism.

9 Lodi Nauta (2009, p. 2-7) has noted the closeness of Valla’s approach to language and the anti-essentialist philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. According to him, Valla even considered the emergence of philosophical problems, where they did not already appear, as a result of taking words out of their original context and using them inappropriately.

and mathematical methods were overcoming the methodology of all human knowledge, Nicholas took a different approach to history, which, regardless of its theological content, had a long-lasting methodological impact; an approach that was revived later in the twentieth century by many scholars to prevent the dominance of scientism, by resorting to Cusanus-Hegelian thought. Recognising the importance of Nicholas, Gadamer (1987, p. 297), in an article in 1964 — also in the last part of *Truth and Method* — outlined his influence in the transition from medieval concepts to modern concepts, and establishing hermeneutics and modern science. Mirela Oliva (2016, p. 411), in her study of Gadamer's interpretation of Nicholas, has stated that what made Gadamer notice Nicholas' 'strategic importance for hermeneutics' was his 'concept formation' (*Begriffsbildung*) and the impact of his discussion of the 'vocabulum naturale' on the ontology of language.

The very fact that Gadamer acknowledged Nicholas' role in modern hermeneutics demonstrates his influence on the development of the 'history of concepts'. But rather than repeating Gadamer's explanation, I will address three points in Nicholas' ideas that may clarify more specifically his impact on the background of the 'history of concepts'.

(1) *Considering concepts as fluid and interpretable*

Although a well-demarcated definition of 'concept' is not found in his works, Nicholas used to consciously employ 'conceptus' and 'notio' in distinction with 'vocabulum'. However, this does not mean that he did not use the 'word' in the meaning of the 'concept'. 'Conceptus' is used in his texts to refer to mental representation and rational conception (CUSANO, 2017, 1378-1380/ XXIV; NICHOLAS, 1978, p. 90; NICHOLAS, 1979, p. 78, 120). It can be seen in Nicholas' epistemological discourses that, following Plato, the relationship between truth, concept, and word was important to him. He praised Plato because in his letters 'he wrote very elegantly that the truth takes precedence over words, statements or definitions of words, and sensible figures' (*elegantissime scribit veritatem vocabula, orationes seu vocabulorum diffinitiones atque sensibiles figurationes anteire*) (CUSANO, 2017, p. 1722/ XXXIII).¹⁰ Nevertheless, Nicholas did not find Plato's theory of innate ideas or a priori concepts in the soul and anamnesis/ recollection entirely convincing (NICOLAUS, 1983). His own theory, even if not completely separated 'concepts' from Plato's 'ideas', which were assumed to have eternal definitions and to exist independently of language and history, at least revealed their

¹⁰ In the following, Nicholas adds that Dionysius the Areopagite commanded to pay more attention to the 'intention' rather than the signification of the words, based on that mentioned statement of Plato. Nicholas uses the word 'intention'. In the Italian translation, 'intenzione' is correctly used as its equivalent. Jasper Hopkins has translated it to 'concept'. It is not incorrect and completely unusual, but, is not appropriate either. Especially considering that in another part of his translation, since he has taken 'definition' and 'concept' as the same in Nicholas' thought, he has translated 'definitio' to 'concept' too. Such a translation does not seem justifiable, given that both the terms 'definitio' and 'conceptus' are found in Nicholas' language and we witness the conscious employment of them in his texts.

fluidity and changeability. The challenge he raised against those who imagined language as sacred and heavenly can be taken as evidence of this claim. Contrary to the common belief of the Middle Ages, he stated that 'the words that man uses are neither precise nor angelic nor divine' (*vocabula illa humana, quibus utitur, non esse praecisa nec angelica nec divina*) (CUSANO, 2017, p. 1724/XXXIII). This reminds us of Koselleck's (2006, p. 100) emphasis that the definition of fundamental concepts should not be tied to timeless ideas. Furthermore, Nicholas' declaration that words are not 'precise' aligns his conception of 'word' with Koselleck's view of the 'concept'. Because, according to Koselleck (1995, p. 119), one of the main factors that differentiate the 'word' from the 'concept' is that the word is 'eindeutig'/ monosemic with a precise and clear meaning, while the concept is 'vieldeutig'/ polysemic — and *maybe* ambiguous — and *must* remain polysemic to be a concept.

(2) Conceptual change and dialectical process of historical transformation

Apart from the theological aspect of Nicholas' approach, the link he established between the concepts and the dialectical movement of world history affected the tradition of dialectical thought. By recognising a permanent tendency in Nicholas to place the world of concepts (*Begriffswelt*) alongside the real world, Kurt Flasch (1973, p. 339) declared that Cusanus with the '*logica intellectualis*' anticipated Hegel's dialectical logic. Through the writings of Giordano Bruno who was influenced by Nicholas, some of Cusanus' main theses found their way into Hegel's philosophy (HEGEL, 1990, p. 82). The dialectic of '*complicatio et explicatio*' (enfolding and unfolding) in Nicholas' thought provided a proper ground for the dynamics of concepts and their interconnection with the process of historical transformation; which was decisive for the rise of the Hegelian idea of history and the 'history of concepts'. Where Gadamer explained that the processual character of the Word was recognised for the first time in the Neoplatonic approach, he shed new light on the key role of 'word' and 'concept' in Nicholas' dialectic of '*complicatio et explicatio*'. According to Gadamer (1990, p. 438-441), 'it is the human spirit that simultaneously complicates and explicates... the unfolding into discursive multiplicity is not only the unfolding of the concepts but also extends into the verbal field'. In Gadamer's interpretation, the expression of concepts in words, which still retain their connection with *vocabulum naturale*, is actually the explication of the unity of Geist. After these explanations, Gadamer's discussion of the connection between Nicholas' and Humboldt's linguistic attitudes indicates the continuity of that trend that finally resulted in the 'history of concepts'.

Nicholas' legacy for conceptual historiography was the inclusion of concepts in world history as a progressive and teleological process. But, when Koselleck was theorising in the academic sphere of the second half of the twentieth century, the teleological character of Hegel's dialectic, which follows a somewhat Neoplatonic account of world history, was declining. Therefore, Koselleck's 'history of concepts' discarded the idea of a '*telos*' for history. Nevertheless, the remnants

of progressivism could still be detected in it. As some scholars have also pointed out, progressivism becomes more apparent when his discussion pertains to Prussian history (WIENFORT, 2021, p. 217). According to Kari Palonen (2014, p. 34), although Koselleck in 1980 considered progress to be 'old-fashioned' (altmodisch), he presented the primacy of expectations over experiences above all through 'the Sattelzeit paradigms of progress and acceleration'. This point reminds us of Karl Löwith's (1949, p. 19) remark about the relationship of modern historiography's concern with the unity of universal history and progress, with the Judeo-Christian philosophy of history and eschatology.

Nicholas facilitated the understanding of the diachronic dimension of concepts, which is precisely one of the characteristics that distinguishes the 'history of concepts' from structuralist approaches.

(3) *The principle of 'coincidentia oppositorum'*

One of the foundations of Nicholas' dialectic, and, of course, any dialectical approach, is dualities.¹¹ In contrast to narratives that explained processes in terms of a single concept and Aristotelian logic, Nicholas' theophilosophic interpretations were based on the coincidence of opposite conceptual pairs, or the principle of 'coincidentia oppositorum'. For example, as Louis Dupré and Nancy Hudson (2002, p. 470) put it, 'Nicholas often formulates the Creator/creation distinction in terms of Unitas/alteritas, complicatio/explicatio, and Non-aliud/aliud, rather than in the language of creation'. This understanding of a concept not only in terms of its literal meaning, but also by considering its opposite concept, and by recognising historical process based on such contrasting pair concepts, acquired a key role in the tradition to which the 'history of concepts' belongs. There is no need to repeat the well-known role of conceptual dualities in the philosophy of Hegel and Marx, and even in the dialectical thinking of contemporary thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Julia Kristeva. Hence, I will only briefly point out two types of dualities in Koselleck's methodology, which are related to Nicholas' way of thinking:

(I) Opposite conceptual pairs: To identify the conditions of the formation of the 'history of concepts', Koselleck (2006, p. 35) first describes the preconditions of history itself: 'in summary: earlier/later, inside/outside, above/below are three oppositional determinations without which there would be no history'. Also, he considers the duality of friend-enemy to be essential in the political field. It is right that the emphasis on the significance of the friend-enemy opposition in Koselleck's political attitude was taken from Carl Schmitt. But, the Hegelian origin of Schmitt's own thought should not

¹¹ Because of 'dia' in the morphological structure of 'dialectic', duality is always reproduced in dialectical approaches. This is one factor of turning 'dialectic' into 'lithoconcept' and its unintended effects on various discourses. See MOSSLEH, 2023, 69.

be ignored.¹² Jorge Dotti (1999, p. 98) has explained that Schmitt admired Marx because he, using Hegelian conceptual tools and the dialectical movement of history, managed to sum up the conflicts of history and propose ‘an existential friend-enemy... with no hope of a liberal reconciliation’. In addition to what Dotti mentioned, we can find the significance of the unity of dichotomies in Hegelian dialectic for Schmitt’s political thought in his own statements. Schmitt (2017, p. 64) declared that Hegel was the first to unite, ‘historically oriented’, such dualities as individual and superindividual reality, and *Volksgeist* and *Weltgeist*, in a dialectical synthesis. According to him, ‘the people — which in Hegel had been rationalised into the state — and history, the world spirit that develops itself dialectically, are united’. In a discussion that was reminiscent of the ‘Non-aliud/aliud’ in Nicholas’ thought, Schmitt argued that Hegel had recognised that the historical inadequacy of the rationalist philosophical system of his time ‘lay in the causal relationship between the ego and the non-ego’ (82). Moreover, Schmitt (2006, p. 99, 147) paid much attention to Hegel’s philosophy of right (1989, p. 406, 497), one of the pillars of which was to distinguish the internal state law (*innere Staatsrecht*) from the external state law (*äußere Staatsrecht*).

(II) Counter-Concepts (*Gegen-begriffe*): Paying attention to this point that the meaning and implications of a concept may/should be understood in terms of its counter-concept can also be traced in Valla’s work. For example, he has developed his semantic examination of the concept of ‘voluptas’ in *On Pleasure* partly in terms of its controversial relation with ‘honestas’. The Stoics had previously discussed ‘honestas’ and ‘voluptas’ as opposite concepts. Valla’s critical philology provided a new understanding of them, in which each was known in terms of the other and even negated the traditional supposed opposition between them (LORCH, 1977, p. 36-38; HOLBERTON, 2019, p. 69; FUBINI, 2003, p. 143ff). But Valla did not establish it as a methodological rule, and the emphasis on dichotomies in the dialectical tradition of Nicholas-Hegel had a greater impact on the Gadamerian-Koselleckian ‘history of concepts’. According to Koselleck (1995, p. 213), understanding the relationship between conceptual developments and socio-political transformations requires the identification of counter-concepts. However, he has noted that in political language, unlike the language of daily life, we often deal with asymmetrical counter-concepts. For example, to explain the function of counter-concepts in the history of the Enlightenment, he mentioned a ‘series of concepts and counter-concepts that characterize the literature of the Enlightenment thinkers and their opponents, such as reason and revelation, freedom and despotism, nature and civilization... decadence and progress, light and darkness’ (KOSELLECK, 1976, p. 83). To illustrate the importance of counter-concepts in Koselleck’s work, Niklas Olsen (2014, p. 66) stated that Koselleck through

12 Besides explaining Schmitt’s influence, Niklas Olsen (2014, p. 65) identifies some other conceptual pairs, for instance, master/slave and the geopolitical concepts such as ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ that he thinks Koselleck took from Hegel and Hobbes.

counter-concepts could 'integrate a variety of ever-contested social relations into the foundations of historical writing'.

Conclusion

The important shortcoming of the attitudes that underestimate the weight of the study of the historical origins of an approach, is that they would fail to properly distinguish the strengths and weaknesses of that approach caused by the implications of its roots. The extreme insistence on the idea of discontinuity, which was fashionable not so long ago, was an obstacle to recognizing the diachronic aspect of the concepts, just as it hindered the recognition of the characteristics inherited from the historical currents behind the theories. The researcher must recognise that the analysis of which theories requires examining their historical backgrounds. In this article, we found that the proper understanding of the 'history of concepts' could not be limited to the time of its appearance or even to the modern period. It originates not only from Gadamer's hermeneutics and Hegelian thought, but a significant part of its background traces back to the methodological developments of the fifteenth century, even more than it seems at first glance. At the end of this research, it might be more confidently stated that the integration of historical method and linguistic orientation that make up the essence of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Koselleck's 'history of concepts' is rooted in the confluence of historical consciousness and an older linguistic turn in Renaissance. Our study clarified that the temporalization, historicization, criticalisation, and politicization of concepts, the investigation of which constitutes the general structure of the 'history of concepts', could be seen in the intellectual and methodological transformations of the fifteenth century. However, the convergence of all those transformations within the framework of the theory and method of the 'history of concepts' was only possible after the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics.

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Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

No conflict of interest has been declared.

Ethics Committee approval

Not applicable.

Preprint

The article is not a preprint.

Disponibilidade de dados de pesquisa e outros materiais

Not applicable

Editores responsáveis

Rebeca Gontijo – Editor-in-Chief
Walderez Ramalho - Executive Editor

Direitos autorais

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Peer Review Dates

Submission date: 17/09/2024
Approved for publication: 04/12/2025

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