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# Explorations in Linguistic Relativity

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## How relativistic are Humboldt's "Weltansichten"?

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### 1. Language and thought

#### 1.1. Language as cognition

"The diversity of languages is not a diversity of sounds and signs but a diversity of the views of the world" ('Ihre Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst' [Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 27]).<sup>1</sup> This famous statement appears in Humboldt's first academic discourse (1820) in which he sketches a huge program of linguistic research and where he very briefly outlines his philosophical conception of language. These considerations are the fruit of twenty-five years of reflexions and ruminations about language. And what Humboldt wants to do in this first public appearance as a linguist, is to lay the foundations of the "Sprachstudium", of linguistic investigation, as an autonomous science. He does this at a very prestigious place, at the Berlin Academy, where Leibniz and Herder before him had published seminal texts about language: Leibniz's "Brevis designatio" of 1710 and Herder's "Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache" of 1772 are present to Humboldt's mind – there are strong intertextual hints at those two texts<sup>2</sup> – when Humboldt takes up the subject and asks the question of what might be the relevance of studying languages, of why anybody should investigate the languages of the world. It is not self-evident that languages have to be studied. Europe had done without it for thousands of years. And other cultures of the world show no interest whatsoever in language, let alone languages (of the others). So, it is still important to say why the "Sprachstudium" might be important.

Therefore, first of all, Humboldt introduces language as a most important activity: it is the activity by which *thought* is produced. Language is, as we

would say today, *cognition*. Or, to be more precise – since cognition today refers to mental processes only – language is the *phonetico-mental production of thought*. It is a process within two realms at the same time, sound and thought, but it is not a dual process. Sound and thought are inseparable in this activity: sound is thought, and thought is sound. Therefore, Humboldt does not only call language production "cognition", but also a synthesis of "reflection" and "articulation".

*Es vereinigen sich also im Menschen zwei Gebiete, welche der Theilung bis auf eine übersehbare Zahl fester Elemente, der Verbindung dieser aber bis ins Unendliche fähig sind [...]. Der Mensch besitzt die Kraft, diese Gebiete zu theilen, geistig durch Reflexion, körperlich durch Articulation, und ihre Theile wieder zu verbinden, geistig durch die Synthesis des Verstandes, körperlich durch den Accent, welcher die Silben zum Worte, und die Worte zur Rede vereint.* (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 4).

[There are hence two spheres united in man which are capable of being divided into a finite number of distinct elements, but which can also have these recombined in an infinite number of permutations.(...) Man has the power to divide these spheres, mentally through reflection and physically through articulation, and also the power to recombine them, mentally through an intellectual synthesis, physically through an accentuation which unites syllables to form words and words to form speech. Humboldt 1997: 3-4].

This cognitive – or phonetico-cognitive – conception of language was not as self-evident at the beginning of the 19th century as it might seem to us today. Humboldt brings to the point an insight that had been slowly maturing in philosophy since Bacon, via Locke, Leibniz, Condillac, and Herder. Herder (1772) was certainly the most radical "cognitivist" in this series. In his primordial scene of the origin of language, thought and language coincide. *Language is thought*, in a sense very close to the Chomskyan concept of "internalized language".<sup>3</sup> Humboldt introduces this insight into the Kantian philosophical framework, which, by the introduction of language, is transformed rather radically. Humboldt represents the linguistic turn of transcendental philosophy.

The cognitive conception of language (which is at the same time a linguistic turn of philosophy) is not self-evident because the traditional and "normal" view of language was (and still is today) the conception of language as a *communicative* device. Also those philosophers who begin to see the cognitive impact of language – Locke, Condillac – still cling to the traditional view that language is first of all a means for communicating thoughts. Following Leibniz, Herder radicalized the intuitions of his predecessors when he saw cognition as the first function of language. Humboldt sanctions this

cognitive revolution when, in the famous words of his final work, he states that "language is the thought-producing organ" ('Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken', Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 53). It is rather difficult to really appreciate, to "taste" this sentence today since – in the light of the modern insights into the "language organ" – it seems so normal. But it was still quite revolutionary in its time. It is simultaneously a statement against the linguistic tradition and against philosophy. Against the linguistic tradition, it states that language is thinking, not communication. And against philosophy, it states that thinking is not only thinking, but that thinking is language, that we think in words – and not only in wordless "schemes" as Kant would still have it. Since language is the creation of thought Humboldt concludes in his first academic discourse "Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium":

Durch die gegenseitige Abhängigkeit des Gedankens, und des Wortes von einander leuchtet es klar ein, dass die Sprachen nicht eigentlich Mittel sind, die schon erkannte Wahrheit darzustellen, sondern weit mehr, die vorher unerkannte zu entdecken. (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 27).

[It is self-evident from the mutual interdependence of thought and word that languages are not so much the means to represent truth once established but rather means to discover truth previously unknown. Humboldt 1997: 18].

The traditional view of the relationship between language and thought held both well apart: There were mental activities on the one side, independent of language, and then language would come and designate or represent thought. And by representing thought, language would also communicate thought to others. Now, language does not "represent" something independent or non-linguistic, but language and thought mutually depend on each other ("gegenseitige Abhängigkeit"), they are one generative process: "Bildung der Gedanken". Therefore, language "discovers" the truth, since it is simply the creation of thought, or, in another famous formula, the recreation of the world into the property of the mind ("das allen gemeinschaftlich vorliegende Gebiet in das Eigenthum des Geistes umzuschaffen", Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 420).

In order to illustrate how Humboldt sees this creation of thought-language, I will quote the very clear and outspoken passage from Humboldt's main work *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*. It is a process Humboldt also calls the "Arbeit des Geistes", 'labor of the mind' (Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 46):

Subjective activity fashions an object in thought. For no class of presentations<sup>4</sup> can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of a thing already present. The activity of the senses must combine synthetically with the inner action of the mind, and from this combination the presentation is ejected, becomes an object vis-à-vis the subjective power, and, perceived anew as such, returns back into the latter. But language is indispensable for this. For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. Thus the presentation becomes transformed into real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account. Only language can do this; and without this transformation, occurring constantly with the help of language even in silence, into an objectivity that returns to the subject, the act of concept-formation, and with it all true thinking, is impossible. So quite regardless of communication between man and man, speech is a necessary condition for the thinking of the individual in solitary seclusion. In appearance, however, language develops only socially, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others. For objectivity is heightened if the self-coined word is echoed from a stranger's mouth. (Humboldt 1988: 56)<sup>5</sup>

It is a rather complicated activity which presupposes the two Kantian "Gemütskräfte", 'forces of the mind', namely sensibility and rationality, necessary to human understanding. What happens? An outside object affects sensibility which, together with rationality, creates a 'representation', "Vorstellung". That representation is not just an immaterial thing but it is also *sound from the very beginning*, because cognition has to become objective. The sound is perceived by the subject as an outside object; it is heard by the ears of the subject which perceives its own creation again as something objective. But this phonetico-mental creation of thought has to be further objectivised: it is perceived and understood by another human being and then produced again. Only when – as Humboldt puts it – my word re-sounds from the mouth of another person, the objectification of language (and thought) has come to an end.

### 1.2. Cognition as "Weltansichten"

The creation of thought-language is a universal task but it is not realized everywhere in the same way. The second step in Humboldt's presentation of language as thought – and the one we are particularly interested in – is the affirmation of the "relativity" of that universal labor of the mind. The "discovery of the truth", to take up the words of the first Academy discourse, is not the same all over the world.

"Das Denken ist aber nicht bloss abhängig von der Sprache überhaupt, sondern, bis auf einen gewissen Grad, auch von jeder einzelnen bestimmten." (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 21). [Thought, however, is not only dependent on language in general but also to a certain extent on each individual language. Humboldt 1997: 15]. Please note the phrase "bis auf einen gewissen Grad", 'to a certain extent', which will direct me towards one of the answers to the problem of the degree of relativity of the "Weltansichten".<sup>6</sup> But let us first come back to the idea that thought depends upon particular languages. After having stated the interdependence of thought and language, Humboldt continues:

Ihre Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst. Hierin ist der Grund, und der letzte Zweck aller Sprachuntersuchung enthalten. (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 27). [The differences between them are not those of sounds and signs but ultimately of interpretations of the world. It is here that the reason for, and the ultimate purpose of all investigations into language are to be found. Humboldt 1997: 18].

Because language is primarily a cognitive process, a discovery of truth, and because this process of discovery occurs according to individual historical languages and not in a universal and unified way ("Sprache überhaupt"), every language discovers its own truth: those truths are the "Weltansichten". The cognitive function of language and the historical or particular realization of that function create different views of the world. And hence – the conclusion is very important for the foundation of linguistics – the research of those views of the world is the finality of linguistics. Or put in different words: the discovery of the views of the world is the beginning of real linguistic research, because only if languages are regarded as creations of "views of the world" are they interesting scientific objects, not just indifferent phonetic objects but material for an investigation of the human mind.

### 1.3. The old tradition: Aristotle

The novelty and the consequences of these ideas – language is cognition, cognition is historically particular – become clearer when they are explicitly opposed to what they argue against, i.e. Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. The famous passage of *De interpretatione* on which all European language reflection depends runs as follows:

Words spoken are symbols or signs of the affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the

same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs [*semeia*], are the same for the whole of mankind, as are the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies [*homoiomata*]. (Aristotle 1962: 115, De int. 16a).

This means:

- (a) On the one side there is cognition. Cognition is universal and an iconic process, a depiction of the world (*homoiomata*), and it is independent of language.
- (b) On the other side we have language, exclusively conceived as sound, whose function is communication. Sound is not universal but manifests itself as historically particular sounds. Sounds represent thought, "kata syntheken" or "according to different traditions of linguistic communities", as symbols or signs (*semeia*). Language is independent of thought.
- (c) Hence, linguistic diversity – since this is what we are talking about – is only conceived as of a diversity of sounds (*phonai*).

This is what Humboldt alludes to when he rebuts the "Verschiedenheit von Schällen und Zeichen". To that communicative and semiotic conception of language Humboldt opposes:

- (a) Language is primarily cognitive, cognition that comes as sound, sound and thought belong together: articulation-reflection.
- (b) Just as sound differs from language to language, the immaterial or mental part of language differs as well from language to language and is not universal.
- (c) Language considered as a unity of sound and concept – Saussure coins that nice expression of language as "pensée-son" (sound-thought) – creates views of the world.

## 2. Relativity

We are now able to answer the question of how far or how deep Humboldt's diversity of languages – "Weltansichten" – really goes or of how relativistic they are. I will discuss six aspects of the question.

### 2.1. Universality and relativity

First, there is one very big limitation of the particularity of the "Weltansichten". Languages – according to Humboldt – have a lot in common. And Humboldt says so immediately after stating their particularity. In a very general way, they all have the same task, they all have to find a solution to the same problem, namely the formation of thought: "Gedankenbildung". Formation of thought is the common denominator. On the basis of that common task, there are, of course, common "things" in all languages. This is why he says, in the passage quoted above (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 21), that thought depends upon each determined language "bis auf einen gewissen Grad", to a certain degree. Not totally, but only to a certain degree! Therefore, Humboldt concedes that in the grammatical as well as in the lexical part of language there are a certain number of things which can be determined *a priori* and which can be separated from all the conditions of a particular language.

Denn in beiden [im grammatischen als auch im lexikalischen Teil der Sprache] giebt es eine Anzahl von Dingen, welche ganz *a priori* bestimmt, und von allen Bedingungen einer besondern Sprache getrennt werden können. (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 22).

[For in both there are a number of things which can be determined quite *a priori* and divorced from all the conditions of any particular language. Humboldt 1997: 15].

What are these things? Humboldt is alluding to the fact that, on the one side, there is *the outside world*, which is common to all humans and which is perceived through the senses of humans, who are all biologically alike, and that, on the other side, there is the *inside world*, "die innere Welt", which is also common to all humans. As Humboldt says in a Kantian way, the laws of thinking ("Denkgesetze") are identical for mankind since the inner world is inhabited by Kant's categories, to which Humboldt would add the categories of universal grammar. Humboldt does not destroy philosophical grammar (even if he is not very interested in it), he is only critical towards the existing universal grammars, because they are based on an unsatisfactory knowledge of languages. But he is convinced that there are universal categories of thought and language. For instance, he assumes that categories like "verb" or "personal pronoun" are universal categories. Hence, beyond the "vergleichendes Sprachstudium", which is the study of all empirically existing languages, there is a "philosophische Grammatik". Thus, these *a priori* "things" limit but do not eliminate diversity. Because, as Humboldt continues:

Dagegen giebt es eine weit grössere Menge von Begriffen, und auch grammatischen Eigenheiten, die [...] unlösbar in die Individualität ihrer Sprache verwebt sind. (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 22).

[On the other hand, there are far more concepts and grammatical peculiarities, which are (...) inseparably interwoven into the individuality of their language. Humboldt 1997: 15].

The place of that individuality has to be further determined.

## 2.2. Structure and character

### 2.2.1. The whole structure

Those "individual" concepts and grammatical peculiarities are the scope of and reason for the study of languages. Their *ensemble* constitutes the "Weltansicht" of each language. It is important to say – and that might be a difference between Humboldt's and Whorf's views – that research of the "Weltansicht" is not just pointing at one or several interesting characteristic features of a language. "Weltansicht" does not mean to pick out for instance the designation of time and show how different languages designate time differently. "Weltansicht" is something that is given by the *ensemble* of a language. It is the *language as a whole* that has to be taken into consideration. Humboldt's first methodological postulate of linguistic research is therefore a direct answer to his insight into the particular personality of each language. Looking for the way of how to grasp those individual "Weltansichten" he says that we have to study what he calls the "innerer Zusammenhang", the inner coherence of a language:

Die erste Regel ist daher, zuvörderst jede bekannte Sprache in ihrem inneren Zusammenhange zu studiren, alle darin aufzufindende Analogien zu verfolgen, und systematisch zu ordnen. (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 10).

[The first rule is above all else to study the structural coherence of every known language and to pursue and systematically order all analogical structures. Humboldt 1997: 8].

The main task of linguistics is a coherent presentation of the lexicon and the grammar of a language. A new method for this task has to be found, since the existing descriptions of languages are made from the standpoint of Latin, Greek or Spanish grammar. Humboldt asks for a presentation which follows the language's own structure and not the structure of traditional Latin or Greek grammar. Humboldt is postulating nothing less than structural descriptions of languages. Thus, we might say that a good structural descrip-

tion of a language is also a description of its "Weltansicht". Humboldt's conviction that languages are individual "Weltansichten" is not just a romantic and literary *aperçu* but it leads directly to the invention of structural linguistics. Humboldt develops descriptive instruments and tries himself to set up structural descriptions of languages.<sup>7</sup>

An often quoted example of what Humboldt wants linguists to do is *aveiridaco*. Humboldt criticizes that in the grammar of the Caribbean language that form is described as "esses", "if you were". This Latin pendant hides the structural characteristics of that form, which must be segmented and reduced to its own components: *a veiri daco*. It consists of three constituents, which mean "you – be – on that day". There is simply no such category as conjunctive in that language. Humboldt himself will try all his life to transform the linguistic information he can get hold of, and which is mostly based on traditional European Latin-Greek grammar, into structural insights.

### 2.2.2. Character

But studying languages as "Weltansichten" does not end with the structural descriptions of their lexicon and grammar. Humboldt even has doubts about whether the structural descriptions of languages yield satisfactory insights into the "Weltansichten". The study of languages does not end with their structural descriptions. It has to go on to a study of the *usage of that language in literature*, and only that literary usage will ultimately yield a good insight into the "Weltansicht" of that language. This is a crucial point in understanding Humboldt (and I think it is the main difference between Humboldt's position and nearly all other positions in linguistics I can think of), and it is an idea not very much liked by linguists, even by those favorable to Humboldt. But it is crucial since it points to the very heart of Humboldt's conception of language (and to a big misunderstanding in Chomsky's reading of Humboldt<sup>8</sup>). Language for Humboldt is not just the structure of an individual language – *langue* – as it is grasped in the lexicon and the grammar. Humboldt is very explicit about that: Grammar and lexicon are only "ein todtes Machwerk wissenschaftlicher Zergliederung", "a dead artifice of scientific analysis" (Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 46), or the "dead skeleton of language", "das todtte Gerippe": "Die Sprache liegt nur in der verbundenen Rede, Grammatik und Wörterbuch sind kaum ihrem todtten Gerippe vergleichbar". [Language lies only in connected discourse; grammar and lexicon are barely comparable to its dead skeleton.] (Humboldt 1903-36 VI: 147).

"Language" for Humboldt means discourse, speech, texts, and the better those texts are, the better this is for the "Weltansicht". The "Weltansicht" of a particular language can only be developed in a rich production of texts, and only in that ensemble of texts can the "Weltansicht" be really well grasped.

Therefore, Humboldt states that if we only have the structural description of a language, it is very difficult to say something about the "Geist", the spirit of the nation speaking that language. "Weltansichten" have to be studied in texts.

At the beginning of our century, a particular current of language studies in Germany called "neo-idealistic philology" tried to pick up that idea of a literary linguistics, a study of language which tried to combine linguistics with philology. The positivistic and scientific convictions of mainstream linguistics were completely against those endeavors so that they were actually discarded from serious linguistic research. Whatever one thinks about that enterprise, we have to keep in mind that, according to Humboldt's research program, the "Weltansichten" can best be studied in the development of literature. The structural description of languages is a necessary prerequisite and a first and necessary step but it is not the end of Humboldtian linguistic investigation. Hence, when Humboldt equates "language" and "Volksgeist", "spirit of a nation", we also have to keep in mind that he does not equate grammar and lexicon with that spirit, but the ensemble of texts written in that language. And that is something rather different.

### 2.3. *Lexicon and grammar*

Let us go back to the passage where Humboldt says that the individuality of a language is to be found in the lexical concepts ("Begriffe") as well as in the grammatical properties of a given language (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 21). The duality of lexicon and grammar in that quote allows the conclusion that "Weltansicht" is not only to be found in the lexicon but in every possible part of the language structure.

Here it may be stressed again that this seems so evident to us at the end of a century of linguistic descriptivism. But it was not evident in Humboldt's time. We might even say that until Friedrich Schlegel's discovery of grammar as the core of language and of comparative linguistics (due probably to the influence of Indian grammarians)<sup>9</sup>, the locus of linguistic diversity was almost exclusively the lexicon. In the French tradition of enlightenment discussion, syntax – more precisely word order – played a certain role. But the different world views were mainly considered to be located in the lexicon, as for instance in Condillac's famous illustration of the different "génies des langues" of French and Latin. Condillac (1746) compares the words for agriculture and states that the "idées accessoires" in those words – we would say the connotations – are different. For the Romans, agriculture and everything connected with it was something noble, for the French, descendants of the

military people of the Franks, agriculture is low and vulgar, and hence all the words connected with that realm have negative connotations.

For Humboldt the individuality is in the lexicon as well as in the grammar, and the different "Weltansichten" are semantically much deeper than just connotations. As far as the lexicon is concerned, there is in Humboldt a very clear understanding of the differences in lexical structure between languages.

#### 2.3.1. *Lexicon*

The task of language is to transform the world into the property of the mind. Humboldt describes quite vividly how languages perform this transformation in different ways. Each language approaches the world, as the ensemble of what can be thought, in a different way. "Das Erkennbare" – the thinkable – lies in the middle, between all languages, and they all approach that objective field in their subjective ways:

*Die Summe des Erkennbaren liegt, als das von dem menschlichen Geiste zu bearbeitende Feld, zwischen allen Sprachen, und unabhängig von ihnen, in der Mitte; der Mensch kann sich diesem rein objectiven Gebiet nicht anders, als nach seiner Erkennungs- und Empfindungsweise, also auf einem subjectiven Wege, nähern.* (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 27).

[The sum of what may be known as the field of activity of the human mind lies centrally between all languages and is independent of them. Man can only approach this realm of pure objective knowledge in accordance with his own ways of perceiving and feeling, i.e. subjectively. Humboldt 1997: 18].

And here Humboldt has this very structuralist image of languages cutting that common objective domain in different pieces: "schneiden das in ihrer Mitte liegende Gebiet, wenn man das durch sie bezeichnete Object so benennen kann, auf verschiedene Weise ein und ab" (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 29) [cut into or cut up the area they enclose in various ways (if one can thus describe the object denoted). Humboldt 1997: 19]. Hjelmslev's well known structuralist scheme illustrates exactly the same idea of a different design of a common surface.<sup>10</sup>

This appropriation of the objective world through the formation of "concepts" or words seems to have two parts, one less individual than the other, or one that seems to be more the place of the "Weltansicht" of that particular language than the other. Humboldt thinks that the designation of the *outside world*, of things, of animals, of plants etc., of things you can point at, differs less from language to language than the designation of "unsinnliche Gegenstände", of "immaterial objects". The designation of material objects is more or less the same in all languages, the signification is the material object itself,

the reference. The words for immaterial objects, on the other side, are creations of that language because languages cut the common objective domain in different pieces by creating different conceptual structures of the "immaterial" part of the world. And, therefore, that structuralist conception of the lexicon refers more properly to its immaterial part. The individuality of languages, "Weltansichten", can be found more easily in that part of the lexicon.

But this is not quite correct. Also the words for material objects which do not cut the field into different pieces have a subjective second layer of meaning beyond reference where the individuality of that language comes to the fore. Even if languages denote the same material object, they nevertheless "express an individual manner of representing that object".<sup>11</sup> This "manner of representing a material object" is not so much a different structural shaping of a space or a surface, but an individual conceptualization of a piece of that surface which can be structurally alike in other languages. Here Humboldt's famous elephant comes in. The elephant is conceived in Sanskrit in three different ways: "bald der zweimal Trinkende, bald der Zweizahnige, bald der mit einer Hand Versehene" (Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 89), "the one that drinks two times, the one with two teeth, the one that has one hand", which are three different concepts of the same object. If we stay within the domain of visual metaphors, I would say that while the words for immaterial objects form different designs on the surface, the words for material objects are differently colored in different languages (or even within one language), even if the design on the surface is the same.

And Humboldt goes even further in this respect. Even if there is no additional conceptualization at all, as in the case of the elephant, the simple fact that sound is different is also a difference in "Weltansicht". Concept and sound come together in the creation of the word, as we have seen above. Hence his other famous lexical example: Humboldt states more than once in his work that he who says *Pferd*, *equus*, or *hippos* does not say the same thing even if the animal designated is the same. Difference in sound is part of the difference in "Weltansicht"; sound is not just an arbitrary and indifferent outside appearance of the concept, but is an integral part of the concept.

### 2.3.2. Grammar

One of the new moments of Humboldt's conception of languages as "Weltansichten" is that grammar also is a locus for the individuality of languages. The error of old grammars was to press languages into the structural form of Latin and Greek grammar, a procedure that did not take into account the grammatical individuality of languages. Humboldt fights for structural descriptions of languages, for a grasping of "the inner coherence", "innerer Zusammenhang", of individual languages. But what is grammar an "Ansicht"

of, what does an individual grammar yield a view of? It is not the realm of outside objects and it is not the realm of immaterial objects, of feelings, evaluations, abstract virtues etc. Grammar incorporates views of the *laws of thinking*, and the different grammars, therefore, yield different views of the universal laws of thinking. For Humboldt, trained in Kantian philosophy, the universal laws of thinking are the categories to which he adds certain universal categories of speech, like the personal pronoun. Good structural descriptions of the grammatical "immanent structures" are investigations into the possibilities of the language-creating human mind which does not only face the world of the objects but also the world of the laws of thinking. Both worlds are universal: objectivity and the laws of thinking are the same for all human beings, but the human being can approach those domains only in a subjective way, and that is through the languages in their diversity and multiplicity.

The answers to the question of where the "Weltansicht" is located may be resumed in the following way: the "Weltansicht" is located in grammar as well as in the lexicon; it is in the structure, but even more in the "character" of a language, i.e. in discourses and texts.

At the same time, we have also answered one aspect of the question of how particular or individual and, hence, how relativistic those "Weltansichten" are. The task of forming language-thought – the labor of the mind, "die Arbeit des Geistes" – is universal; the disposition of man to do this work – "the sense of language", "Sprachsinn" – is universal; the world – the inner and the outer world – of which languages are views is universal. So many things are universal, that Humboldt declares in a very Chomskyan move: "one can make the statement that there is only one language in the human race" (Humboldt 1903-36 VI: 301). But that same sentence contains the affirmation that "every language, even every dialect is different".<sup>12</sup> The universal task is realized in particular and historically different ways.

### 2.4. *La merveilleuse variété: relativistic enthusiasm*

For Humboldt, linguistic diversity, particularity, individuality is a wonderful thing. It is not a punishment, as our culture has assumed since the Tower of Babel, dreaming its nostalgic dream of linguistic unity. Humboldt does not follow the tradition of Bacon and Locke, who considered the individual "views" sedimented in particular languages as "metaphysical garbage",<sup>13</sup> but he follows Leibniz, who celebrated linguistic diversity as a "merveilleuse variété des opérations de notre esprit" (Leibniz 1765: 293), as a cognitive wealth. Therefore, Humboldt states, in a very anti-Chomskyan move, that it



would be wonderful if the number of languages could be enhanced to the number of human beings on earth, since each language discovers something new. Diversity – and hence relativity of thought – is a blessing. Here we have Humboldt at his most relativistic. Everybody should have (and has) a particular language:

[...] *da der in der Welt sich offenbarende Geist durch keine gegebene Menge von Ansichten erschöpfend erkannt werden kann, sondern jede neue immer etwas Neues entdeckt, so wäre es vielmehr gut die verschiedenen Sprachen so sehr zu vervielfältigen, als es immer die Zahl der den Erdboden bewohnenden Menschen erlaubt.* (Humboldt 1903-36 III: 167f.)

[...] since the spirit that manifests itself in the world cannot be known exhaustively by any given set of views, but since each language always discovers something new, it would be good if it were possible to multiply the different languages as much as the number of inhabitants of the earth would allow.]

But, like all blessings, multiplicity also is a mixed one. The cognitive wealth is an obstacle to communication, without any doubt. Humboldt does not deny this fact. But he does not fall into resignation. He knows that every nation, every individual has its own language and that hence there will always be limits to communication. But language is never exclusively individual, since, for the creation of language, we always need the other. We create in the face of the other who tries to understand and who speaks to us and whom we try to understand. So, speaking itself is always transcending the border of the solipsist individual. But we have to face the fact of Humboldt's famous statement that all comprehension is always at the same time non-comprehension: "Alles Verstehen ist daher immer zugleich ein Nicht-Verstehen" (Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 64). The hindrance of communication is the price to pay for the cognitive wealth of languages. But cognitive wealth and diversity are also necessary conditions for communication, since if we all thought the same, why should there be communication, what would we communicate?

### 2.5. Relativity and perfection

This is the occasion to point to another limitation of the relativity of the Humboldtian "Weltansichten", i.e. to the ranking of languages in Humboldt, which is due to their different achievements in grammar formation. Greek and Sanskrit are considered superior to other languages because they achieve best in the creation of grammatical forms. Humboldt's relativism is no linguistic indifferentism. Indifferentism is what is mostly meant when people say

that things are relative. With Leibniz, Humboldt celebrates the wonderful variety of the human mind, but he thinks that some of the varieties do better than others. This, of course, is a consequence of his strong universalistic convictions. Only if you have a universal measure, you can say that *x* does better than *y*. And Humboldt's measures are his universalistic general grammatical convictions. Thus, for example, he knows from philosophical grammar what a verb is – or better – what a verb has to be. He knows what a grammatical form is or has to be. And, hence, only those languages which have "real" verbs in that sense or which have "real" grammatical forms in that sense approach the ideal.

But here too, we have to give a historical comment on that admittedly strange and outdated trait of Humboldt's thinking. The new element in his time and in his work was *not* that certain languages do better than others. Everybody in Europe thought that – generally speaking – European languages were superior to the languages of the so-called savages. It could be Latin or Greek, in France it was mostly French, or any other language, but it was common belief that our languages were better than those of the others. So the new idea in Humboldt is not that old-fashioned European conception of the superiority of certain languages. Humboldt's new message was rather that all languages of the human race were precious and worth studying: "Aber auch die Mundart der rohesten Nation ist ein zu edles Werk der Natur [...]. Sie ist ein organisches Wesen, und man muss sie, als solches, behandeln." (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 10) [But the dialect of even the most primitive nation is too noble a work of nature [...]. Language is an organic entity and must be treated as such. Humboldt 1997: 8].

Hence, the *relativistic* idea was new, and it also gave a new value to the traditional idea of the superiority of a particular language. Greek and Sanskrit were superior in a group of equally dignified other languages, they were "prima inter pares", they did better in one respect, but they did the same job as all the other languages: the formation of thought ("die Bildung des Gedanken").

That this idea of the equal dignity of all languages and dialects was a strange one to his contemporaries is proven by Chateaubriand, who – during a short stay in Berlin as a French ambassador – makes fun of the fact that Humboldt studies all those languages, even the dialects of lower classes and of wild peoples. But indeed, this is the new thing, this is the – also politically – important idea. And, if I understand Lakoff (1987: 330) and Lee (1996: 33) well, this attitude was also the political motive behind Whorf's insistence on linguistic relativity<sup>14</sup>, namely to show to the so-called civilized world that the languages of the other peoples are documents of what Leibniz would

have called the wonderful variety of the human mind: "la merveilleuse variété des opérations de notre esprit".

### 2.6. Determinism

The question of relativism is always also a question about determinism. How deterministic are the "Weltansichten"? How much do languages determine thought? If we take into consideration that there are already strong limitations of the relativity of languages – individual languages are also universal to a large extent – we have to give two answers: Humboldt's *Weltansichten* are *extremely* deterministic on the one side, and they are *not very* deterministic on the other.

Languages are deterministic in the following sense: they determine what Humboldt calls the "Volksgeist", "the spirit of the people". Or to be more precise: they determine the "Volksgeist" because they *are* the "Volksgeist". Since language is the production of thought – "die Arbeit des Geistes" – languages are the particular products of thought of particular nations.<sup>15</sup> Because language and the "spirit of a nation" are identical, the question of determination or determinism becomes absurd. There can only be determination if there are *two* items, one determining the other. Here, we do not have two items, we only have *one*. Hence, the question of determinism is simply annihilated.

But in another respect, the question of determinism is still valid – and Humboldt gives a very interesting answer. Does the language of the nation determine the mental activities of the individual? The answer is: yes but.

Yes: The individual inherits the language of the nation as "etwas Fremdes", an alien thing, something exterior to him (Humboldt 1903-36 IV: 27). Language is, as Humboldt says, a force ("Macht") that gets hold of the individual. It is a law ("Gesetzmäßigkeit") the individual has to obey. The language of the nation, that law, that force, that stranger is something like an invasion army: very deterministic.

But: Here comes the individual who is considered by Humboldt as the living center of the universe, the free subject. And the free subject fights. He/she opposes freedom ("Freiheit") to that law, he/she uses violence ("Gewalt") against that force. The speech of the individual is the eternal dialectic of individual violence against that collective force, a liberation activity. And it is exactly this fight which is at the very center of Humboldt's language conception: speech is the struggle of the free individual against any outside determination.

"Language" is primarily "speech"; language is the creative activity of the individual by which it overcomes the force of grammar and lexicon (which are only "dead skeletons"). Where is the deterministic moment? The individual needs the "nation", the speech community, which gives the comfort of rules. It gives the rules for that creation, but it never overrules the individual who is the real sovereign of language.

### 3. Final remark

Let me close this mainly historical *exposé* by adding one personal remark on the systematic problem we are discussing here, the relationship between particular languages and thinking. Most contributions to this volume discuss how and to what degree this relationship works, but some also seem to doubt that there is such a relationship. I cannot understand how there can be any doubt about the influence of language on our intellectual activities. Sometimes it seems to me that this can only be said and maintained by people who have never learnt and never spoken – I mean really spoken – another language.

Last year I had to give a talk in Paris on a topic which I had worked out in German as "Fremdheit der Sprache". When I had to turn this into French, I had to re-think what I wanted to say. Not only was it difficult to render the word *Fremdheit*, and hence the title of my talk, but also the adjectives *fremd* and *étranger* did not coincide. Notwithstanding that difficulty, I think I succeeded in communicating my topic – since topics are parts of what Humboldt calls the "objective domain in the middle, between all languages and independent of languages".<sup>16</sup> But I assure you that I had a lot of trouble keeping together in French that part of reality that is delineated differently in German. French and German have cut that realm of reality in different ways. There is a language-induced difference of *thought* at stake. Or how should we call that experience? Anyhow, I had to *think* twice to re-make it into French.

### Notes

1. My translation, cf. the somewhat different version in Humboldt (1997: 18)
2. Cf. Trabant (1990: 99ff.).
3. Cf. e.g. Chomsky (1991: 9) and Herder (1772/1978: 33).
4. Humboldt's term "Vorstellung", the normal German term for the classical philosophical term "representation", is translated here – for no visible reason – by the strange word "presentation".

5. In contrast to the somewhat dark English translation, the German text is very clear and runs as follows: "Subjective Tätigkeit bildet im Denken ein Object. Denn keine Gattung der Vorstellungen kann als ein bloss empfangendes Beschauen eines schon vorhandenen Gegenstandes betrachtet werden. Die Tätigkeit der Sinne muss sich mit der inneren Handlung des Geistes synthetisch verbinden, und aus dieser Verbindung reißt sich die Vorstellung los, wird, der subjectiven Kraft gegenüber, zum Object und kehrt, als solches auf neue wahrgenommen, in jene zurück. Hierzu aber ist die Sprache unentbehrlich. Denn indem in ihr das geistige Streben sich Bahn durch die Lippen bricht, kehrt das Erzeugniss desselben zum eignen Ohre zurück. Die Vorstellung wird also in wirkliche Objectivität hinübersetzt, ohne darum der Subjectivität entzogen zu werden. Dies vermag nur die Sprache: und ohne diese, wo Sprache mitwirkt, auch stillschweigend immer vorgehende Versetzung in zum Subject zurückkehrende Objectivität ist die Bildung des Begriffs, mithin alles wahre Denken unmöglich. Ohne daher irgend auf die Mittheilung zwischen Menschen und Menschen zu sehn, ist das Sprechen eine nothwendige Bedingung des Denkens des Einzelnen in abgeschlossener Einsamkeit. In der Erscheinung entwickelt sich jedoch die Sprache nur gesellschaftlich, und der Mensch versteht sich selbst nur, indem er die Verstehbarkeit seiner Worte an Andren versuchend geprüft hat. Denn die Objectivität wird gesteigert, wenn das selbstgebildete Wort aus fremdem Munde wiedertönt." (Humboldt 1903-36 VII: 55f.).
6. See below Section 'Universality and relativity'.
7. The descriptive part of Humboldt's work is largely unknown. It will be published in the edition of his linguistic work. The Mexican Grammar (Humboldt 1994) is the first volume of that edition.
8. Cf. Trabant (1998).
9. Cf. Schlegel (1808).
10. Cf. Hjelmslev (1963: 54).
11. Humboldt (1903-36 IV: 29): "da sie die bestimmte Art ihn vorzustellen ausdrücken".
12. "Ebenso als man behaupten kann, dass jede Sprache, ja jede Mundart verschieden ist, kann man, von einem andren Standpunkte aus, den Satz aufstellen, dass es im Menschengeschlecht nur Eine Sprache giebt und von jeher gegeben hat." (Humboldt 1903-36 VI: 301).
13. Cf. Joseph (1998).
14. For the discussion of the relativity principle cf. also Gipper (1972), Malotki (1983), Lucy (1992), Franzen (1995).
15. "Nation" in Humboldt simply means "linguistic community"; this is Humboldt's linguistic conception of the term "nation".
16. Cf. Humboldt (1903-36 IV: 27).

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