

von Humboldt, Wilhelm (1767–1835)

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Abstract

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was a Prussian politician and linguist as well as the founder of political liberalism and the University of Berlin. He founded an anthropological approach to the study of Man, and was also the founder of anthropological comparative linguistics. He studied Basque, Amerindian languages, Kavi, and Austronesian languages.

Wilhelm von Humboldt was a writer, politician, linguist, and language philosopher who developed key concepts in the theory of language and had a strong influence on synchronic and structural descriptive linguistics. He studied at the universities of Frankfurt an der Oder and Göttingen, and maintained lifelong friendships with Goethe and Schiller. He stayed in Paris from 1797 to 1801 and journeyed to Spain and the Basque Country. His subsequent positions included: ambassador to Rome 1802–08, reformer of the Prussian educational system, founder of the University of Berlin 1810, and minister. After resigning from office in 1819, Humboldt carried out linguistic research in Tegel during 1820–35, regularly presenting linguistic papers at the Berlin Academy. He laid down the principles of philosophically oriented anthropological research of the empirical cultural manifestations of humankind. After writing political and esthetic essays, Humboldt concentrated on language. On the basis of Kantian philosophy, he developed a philosophy of language known as the 'formative organ of thought.' He studied many languages, including Basque, Amerindian languages, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, and the Malayo-Polynesian languages to which his major work is devoted. He developed a huge program of descriptive structural linguistics with special emphasis on the 'characterization' of individual languages on the basis of their literature.

Politics

The resignation of Wilhelm von Humboldt, born 22 June 1767 at Potsdam, from his office as the Prussian Minister of Constitutional Affairs at the end of 1819 was a major catastrophe for the political future of Germany. For Humboldt himself it was an act of liberation and a step toward what he regarded as his real vocation, the study of languages, to which he dedicated the rest of his life. Chateaubriand, the French poet and politician, considered this strange scientific activity as the spleen of somebody who had to kill his time as a consequence of the loss of political influence. But it was in fact the achievement of a philosophical and anthropological quest that had started in Humboldt's youth. Studying the languages of the world was not at all something completely extraneous to his political work. The same motivation that would guide his linguistic work had also governed his political activities: it was a quest for the creative center of the human mind and for the achievement of

individual felicity and autonomy within the community with other individualities.

This is exactly what had created his political difficulties. At the end of his political career, Humboldt had elaborated a project for the constitutional transformation of Prussia: a proposal to establish a constitutional monarchy with a gradually developing representational system. The French Revolution, which he had welcomed as a decisive step in the history of humanity, had failed in Humboldt's eyes because of its rationalistic one-sidedness: the transformations of France had been governed too radically by abstract rational principles and had not taken into account historically grown entities. For Humboldt, the creation of the new should always be the result of a 'synthesis,' of a sympathetic union of two entities, which, creating a new entity by their union, maintain their identity (the alternative – and lesser – methods of uniting two entities are 'isolation' and 'incorporation,' the former being only the juxtaposition of the two, and the latter, the brutal destruction of their integrity through their unity). Humboldt proposed a 'synthesis' of the traditional prerogatives of the monarch and the interests of the economically active classes (with a consideration also for the traditional rights of the nobility), a 'marriage' that would have transformed Prussia eventually into something new, a constitutional monarchy – and that would have had a model function for the rest of Germany. Not only for the inner organization of Prussia but also for the whole of the area called 'Germany,' Humboldt projected a political structure according to the same principle of a 'synthetical' union: a confederation that would have left quite a lot of autonomy to its members but, nevertheless, would have given important political functions to the whole (like warfare, freedom of movement, and free trade within the union – very much like the United States).

But, in 1819, the times were not propitious anymore for reforms and for the creation of new political structures, as after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon, which was the beginning of so many happy reforms in Prussia, like the reform of the educational system, the renewal of the municipal administration, and the emancipation of the Jews. Now Napoleon was defeated and the old classes were striking back and were not willing to make any concessions to the bourgeoisie, to the memory of the 'people's war,' or to the experience of freedom and civil rights imported by the Napoleonic armies. Humboldt was the representative of liberal political reforms, and, as such, he had to disappear – in the time of Austria's Metternich, of Hardenberg, and a reactionary king in Prussia.

University and Bildung

But if Humboldt did not succeed in realizing his constitutional dreams, he seems to have had an overwhelming success with the establishment of the University of Berlin some years earlier. Humboldt is best and generally known for this activity, which in fact occupied him for little more than a year (from February 1809 to June 1810) and which was only a part of the reorganization of the whole Prussian educational system. Humboldt indeed made the decisive administrative step for the establishment of the University of Berlin. But what was established was only partially Humboldt's University. He planned the university as a state-independent, economically autonomous institution, with an independence that would guarantee the freedom of research and instruction. Therefore, Humboldt requested that the university should be given a donation of land as the economic basis of that autonomy. Instead, the Berlin University was from the very beginning a state establishment, which – it is true – set unprecedented standards by the quality of its new faculty, by new forms of teaching, and by the unity of research and teaching for professors as well as for students. The concept of the research university was successfully realized. As a state-dependent institution it would forge a well-trained loyal elite for the King of Prussia rather than free citizens of the realm of the spirit.

Humboldt's proposals for the establishment of the Berlin University and the other educational institutions became, however, seminal texts for a pedagogical theory whose central concept was that of *Bildung* (educational and cultural development). Following the convictions of German idealistic philosophy and the classical German poets (Schiller and Goethe), Humboldt wanted human individuals to be given every possible means to develop their physical and intellectual capacities. The educational institutions have to grant access to that formation of the human individual. The main aim of *Bildung* is not the acquisition of professional skills but the unfolding of the highest intellectual and artistic aspirations. Ancient Greece as the absolute summit of human development is the cultural reference of that educational program. The concept of *Bildung* certainly gave an ambitious aim to the educational institutions of Prussia and of Germany as a whole. This concept even served as a justification of otherwise unexplainable investments of the state in intellectual enterprises like the humanities, which have no practical ends. *Bildung* was an enormously successful concept as one of the central values of German identity, giving education a very high position in the value system of the nation. But just as Humboldt's University project was only partially realized in the Prussian University, the idea of *Bildung* – a generous and grandiose idea – did not so much create the (also politically) autonomous and free individuals Humboldt was thinking of, but had more of a compensatory function: consoling the German bourgeoisie for its nonparticipation in political power. Hence, all that wonderful *Bildung* did not prevent the German catastrophe.

Anthropology

The establishment of the University of Berlin and *Bildung* secured Humboldt's place in the pantheon of the German

nation. But his main activity and – in the long run – also his most successful intellectual achievement, was his linguistic and philosophical work. In this domain, however, Humboldt is not – as some historiographers tend to think – a founding father of the scientific project of historicocomparative linguistics that is linked to the names of Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm. Bopp and Grimm invented the principles for a historical reconstruction of the unity of Indo-European, Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and other languages and for the comparison of historically related languages. This was to be the successful – romantic – project of the mainstream linguistics of the nineteenth century. Humboldt is, on the contrary, the founder of an alternative linguistic project, which is more the summary of the linguistic ideas of the Enlightenment: the study of the diversity of the languages of the world. *Verschiedenheit*, or diversity, is the key term of Humboldtian linguistics, which was to flourish – at least in part – in the twentieth century, when the historicocomparative paradigm was relieved by synchronic descriptive linguistics.

Humboldt's linguistic project was integrated into a larger 'anthropological' project. 'Anthropology' in the eighteenth century was a term that designated the empirical study of human beings, as opposed to philosophy, which investigates the universal nature of the human race. Humboldt sketched a vast research program for the investigation of the cultural manifestations of humankind. Understanding the creativity of the human mind was the philosophical motive that gave Humboldt's anthropological project its special dynamics. Two events that occurred in his lifetime were decisive for this research into creativity: first, as for any young intellectual of his generation, was the French Revolution, the creation of a completely new, enlightened, political organization. Hence, one of his first publications was an article on the first French Constitution (1791) and for his friends he wrote a booklength political treatise 'On the limits of the activity of the state' (1792), which was printed only after his death and which became a founding document of political liberalism. The other revolutionary event in Humboldt's lifetime was Goethe. Here again, what fascinated the young intellectuals was the 'genius,' the mystery of an unprecedented creativity. Humboldt lived in Jena, as a friend of Schiller, in close contact with Goethe. He studied Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy was to become the framework of his own theoretical developments. Humboldt's work is centered on the Kantian concept of imagination, *Einbildungskraft*, the faculty of the human mind that is responsible for the creation of the new.

Since imagination as the mediation between the senses and the intellect had remained rather mysterious in Kant's philosophy, Humboldt set out to find its roots. He discovered them in the difference between the sexes. The opposition of the male and the female in nature is the very basis of every new creation, not only of physical generation (*Erzeugung*) but also of the most 'sublime creature' of the imagination: thought. The loving embrace of the female and the male generates new living beings in the physical as well as in the intellectual world. Kant was shocked by Humboldt's somewhat pre-Freudian interpretation of his philosophy. But despite Kant's criticism, sexual union, 'matrimony' (*Vermählung*), and love would be the structural model for everything Humboldt set out to investigate: art, politics, education, and language. Just as dialectics is the

fundamental figure of thought in Hegel, the erotic encounter is the basic structure of Humboldt's thought.

After his reflections on the anthropological roots of creativity, Humboldt wrote a book on Goethe (1798), which contains a very modern theory of esthetics: art is not only a creation of the artist's imagination but also a (language-like) communicative event between the producer of the work of art and the observers, the readers, the listeners who recreate the work of art in their act of reception and thereby accomplish the creative process.

Language

While still in Jena, Humboldt wrote his first reflections on language: 'On thinking and speaking' (1795–96), a short sketch that already contained the main features of his language theory. Humboldt's sojourn in France and in Spain (1797–1801) would be decisive for his making language the very center of his intellectual endeavors. In Paris, he discussed philosophical issues with the *Idéologues*, in whose philosophy language played a crucial role, and here and in his journey to the Basque Country, he encountered the Basque language whose profoundly divergent structural properties intrigued Humboldt. Later, his brother Alexander would bring linguistic material from America, and in Rome, Humboldt had access to the linguistic materials of the Jesuits (Lorenzo Hervás). For years, the Amerindian languages were Humboldt's empirical linguistic objects before he turned to the Malayo-Polynesian languages to which his main – posthumous – work *On the Kavi Language on the Island of Java* (1836–39) is devoted. The introductory volume of that book, *The Diversity of the Human Language-Structure*, completed before his death on 8 April 1835 in Tegel (near Berlin), is Humboldt's major work. With language, Humboldt arrived at the very heart of his general quest for the creation of the new by that mysterious Kantian faculty of *Einbildungskraft*.

Language is not just a means for the communication of thought; it is the very creation of thought. According to the Kantian system, the senses and the intellect create the concept through their synthesis. But for Humboldt, the concept is not created independently of the word: word and concept form an indissoluble synthetic unity; thought is created as sound. Language is the 'formative organ of thought' ('*das bildende Organ des Gedanken*,' 1903–36: VII, p. 53), 'labor of the mind' ('*Arbeit des Geistes*,' 1903–36: VII, p. 46). Like art, language (thought sound) also needs the dimension of the other: it must be heard and understood. Language as a cognitive activity reckons with the other, language is thought in the dimension of the other: *Mitdenken*, or cocognition. But surpassing art, language is a reciprocal creative activity: the hearer becomes the speaker, 'the word formed by me resounds from the mouth of the other' (1903–36: VII, p. 56). This ultimate reciprocity is the completion of the linguistic syntheses. The duality of I and thou is the 'fundamental type' of language.

Humboldt discovered that language is actually at the center of the Kantian system. Humboldt's language philosophy was a linguistic turn of transcendental philosophy. Since Bacon's discovery of the *idola fori*, European philosophy had become gradually aware of the fact that language is not just a device for

the communication of thought but first and foremost a cognitive activity. This insight finds a coherent post-Kantian formulation in Humboldt.

The second important moment of that philosophy of language is the insight that the formation of thought, the linguistic 'transformation of the world into the property of the mind' (1903–36: IV, p. 420), always proceeds according to the special ways of historically particular communities, that is, according to particular languages. There is no such thing as language in general, language comes in languages. Thought generated by language, hence, is not uniform and universal but historically and culturally fragmented in different 'worldviews' (*Weltansichten*). The task of language, the generation of thought, is universal, but that task is realized in thousands of different ways in the different languages of humankind.

Now the new – or Leibnizian – moment of that insight is its positive interpretation: from Bacon onward, philosophy has lamented over the particularity of worldviews in the different languages and wanted to get rid of those 'prejudices'; the semantics of natural languages is like 'a mist before our eyes' (Locke) that philosophical enlightenment must discard. Only Leibniz gave an optimistic twist to the discovery of the linguistically generated diversity of thought when he envisaged a study of all the languages of the world in order to know the 'marvelous variety of the operations of our mind.' Herder took that idea from Leibniz, and Humboldt not only integrated it into the Kantian framework but also developed a huge program of descriptive linguistics.

Comparative Study of Languages

All the languages of the world were to be described according to what Humboldt calls their 'inner coherence' (*innerer Zusammenhang*), their particular structure. The languages of the world had mostly been grasped according to the traditional categories of Greek and Latin grammar. But the structural properties of a language can only be captured through its own categories. Humboldt envisaged an encyclopedia of the languages of the world, a new *Mithridates*. He started a whole series of descriptive works on different languages of the world of which the *Mexican Grammar*, the *Mexican Dictionary*, as well as the *Meso-, South- and North-American Grammars* (Humboldt, 1994, 2000, 2009, 2011, 2013) have been published recently. A second kind of structural studies aimed at a revised form of general grammar (which was also based on the Greco-Latin grammar): comparative investigations of linguistic categories throughout the languages of the world. Humboldt's article on the dual (1827) is an example of that research. After the completion of these structural descriptions, research into the parental relationships of languages (genealogy) or into structural similarities among languages (typology, classification) can be undertaken.

What is often considered as Humboldt's main contribution to linguistics, the so-called Humboldtian 'typology,' is neither central to his linguistic aims nor did Humboldt propose typology as an alternative to the dominant linguistic school, that is, to the historicocomparative studies of languages. On the contrary, in his last book, his unfinished work on Kavi, Humboldt eventually envisaged a comparative study of the

Malayo-Polynesian languages, which would follow Grimm and Bopp's work on the Germanic and Indo-European languages. Humboldtian typology is a linguistic myth created by superficial readings of his texts. Humboldt was very skeptical about the classifications of the Schlegels, and he explicitly refuted the legitimization of classifying languages, since languages are individuals and should be described as such.

The summit or keystone of Humboldtian linguistics is therefore the investigation of the 'character' of languages. This is just the opposite of classification and typology, of grouping similar entities together. It is a tentative attempt to grasp the very individuality of each individual language. Humboldt was not sure whether 'characterization' was still a scientific task. But whatever it is, it has to be tackled since it is the ultimate aim of linguistics to see how the human mind uses the instruments it has created, to investigate the very end of language: speech and discourse. The – necessary – structural description of a language is only 'comparable to its dead skeleton' (1903–36: VI, p. 147), the life of a language is discourse (*verbundene Rede*), a life giving 'character' to that language. Therefore, only languages that have a multifaceted literature yield the possibility of being described as having characters.

Nearly two centuries after Humboldt's sketch of a huge linguistic program, it can be said that the structural description of human languages he envisaged was the main task and achievement of linguistics in the twentieth century. It is not by chance that Humboldt is present in the seminal theoreticians of modern linguistics (Saussure (*see* Saussure, Ferdinand de (1857–1913)), Bloomfield (*see* Bloomfield, Leonard (1887–1949)), and Hjelmslev). The nineteenth century was not very Humboldtian, with its emphasis on diachronical research as well as in its naturalistic research methods. Humboldt's 'keystone' of linguistics, the 'characterization' of languages, was attempted by some literary-minded linguists (e.g., Vossler), but was discredited by nationalistic and ideological interpretations of linguistic structures. Since the structural descriptions of the languages of the world have now virtually been completed, it is not astonishing that in actual linguistics typological attempts are again very important. The so-called Humboldtian typology is often quoted in that context. But it is – even more than the other famous Humboldtian invention, 'Humboldt's University' – rather a myth than a creature of the author. Without any foundation in Humboldt's work is also the widespread conviction that Humboldt discovered fundamental principles of Chomskyan linguistics, like the 'infinite use of finite means.' Humboldtian linguistics as a whole is in direct opposition to that kind of linguistic research: it is a hermeneutical research into the cultural diversity of human languages in historical communities, preferentially through (literary) discourse, and

not a naturalistic investigation of the structure of the universal human mind considered as a universal grammar.

See also: Continental Philosophy of Language; Education, History of; Educational Institutions, History of; Instructional Psychology; Language and Literature; Language and Thought: The Neo-Whorfian Hypothesis; Liberalism: Historical Aspects; Liberalism: Political Doctrine and Impact on Social Science; Linguistic Anthropology; Linguistic Turn and Discourse Analysis in History; Linguistic Typology; Linguistics: Overview.

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