

Doing Humanities in Nineteenth-Century Germany

Edited by

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India vs America: the Science of Language in 19th-Century Germany

Jürgen Trabant

1 August 3rd 1804: the Birthdate of Modern Linguistics

On the 3rd of August 1804, two young men, 34 and 30 years old, debark from a sailing boat, called *La Favorite*, in the harbour of Bordeaux. *La Favorite* had sailed from Philadelphia to Bordeaux. The two young men were ‘cuivrés’, copper coloured, sunburnt, as the Parisian gossip had it that preceded their journey to Paris. ‘Cuivrés’ means that they had become a little bit like the countries and the people they had seen during their five years journey, i.e. ‘savage’. The two young men ‘cuivrés’ arrived in Paris on the 27th of August where they were awaited with impatience and celebrated by the city. They were famous: Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland. Another young man of the same age, 35 years old, was not so happy about this triumphant *entrée* into Paris. He was jealous of the success since he himself was preparing a huge media event, his coronation as the Emperor of the French. And here these two were receiving the attention of the public. Now, that arrival was not only a *coup médiatique*, it was a scientific event of the utmost importance, not only for the natural sciences: it was the beginning of the modern science of language.

Alexander von Humboldt, the older of the two young men, had collected during the journey in Middle America twelve books on the American languages. These books arrived with Alexander on the European soil on the 3rd of August, and that arrival changed the linguistic scholarship in Europe throughout.

This may seem very unlikely because these books concerned American languages nobody had ever heard of, with the exception perhaps of the ‘Mexican language’, i.e. Nahuatl. Here is the list of those books:

Bernardo de Lugo, gramatica de la lengua general del Nuevo Reyno de Granada o de la lengua de los Muzcas o Mozcas. Madrid, 1619.

Diego Gonzalez Holguin, Vocabulario de la lengua general de todo el Peru, llamada lengua Qquichuna o del Inca, conforme a la propiedad cortesana del Cuzco. Ciudad de los Reyes, 1608.

Gramatica de la lengua del Inca. Lima, 1753.

Al. de Molina, Vocabulario de la lengua Mexicana. Mexico, 1571.

Augustin de Vetancurt, Arte de la lengua Mexicana. Mexico, 1673.

Ant. Vasquez Gastelu y Raym. de Figueroa, arte de lengua Mexicana. Puebla de los Angeles, 1693.

L. de Neve y Molina, Reglas de ortografia, Diccionario y arte del idioma Othomi. Mexico, 1767.

Carlos de Tapia Zenteno, Noticia de la lengua Huasteca, con doctrina christiana. Mexico, 1767.

Fr. Antonio de los Reyes, Gramatica de la lengua Mixteca. Mexico, 1593.

Jose Zambrano Bonilla, cura de San Andres de Hucitlapan, arte de la lengua Totonaca, con una doctrina de la lengua de Naolingó, con algunas voces de la lengua de aquella sierra y de esta por aca, por Franc. Dominguez, cura de Xalpan. Puebla de los Angeles, 1752.

Jose de Ortega, Vocabulario della lengua Castellana y Cora. Mexico, 1732.

Fern. Ximenez, Gramatica de la lengua Caribe. (Manuscrit.)¹

The twelve books were grammars or dictionaries of nine American languages: Mozca, Quechua, Mexican (Nahuatl), Otomí, Huasteca, Mixteca, Totonaca, Cora, Caribe. How could they have such an impact?

We know through the testimony of his travel in *Relation historique* that Alexander had developed a genuine interest in the languages of the American peoples. He did not only collect books on those languages – some of them fairly old, the Mixtecan Grammar is from 1593! – but he collected also words and phrases of the languages of the people he encountered. Those were words and phrases useful for the communication with those people and for survival, not for linguistic curiosity only, and yet he wrote himself an important chapter on the language of the Chaymas.² The linguistic books were destined to his brother Wilhelm who in the meantime, i.e. in the time of Alexander's travel to America, had become a linguist. Wilhelm developed passionate curiosity for the Basque language travelling twice from Paris (where he lived from 1797 to 1801) to the Basque country. Through the encounter with the Basque language, Wilhelm found his vocation as a linguist. He started his scholarly work on Basque from whence he proceeded to the languages of the world. In Rome, where he lived as Prussian ambassador from 1802 to 1808, he collected information on the languages of the Americas, having an access to the linguistic archive of the Jesuit Lorenzo Hervás. In the summer

1 Alexander von Humboldt, *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* [1814–1825], 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Brockhaus, 1970), vol. 1, p. 504.

2 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, ch. 9, pp. 458–506.

1805, Alexander visits his brother in Rome, the American books in his baggage. But Wilhelm does not have time to study the books, and Alexander takes them back to Paris.

And this is where the first decisive action takes place: Friedrich Schlegel borrows the books from Alexander. He is writing a book on Sanskrit, a fashionable subject since the 'discovery' of the affinity of Sanskrit with Greek and Latin by William Jones (1786).³ Friedrich Schlegel is a fierce enemy of the French Revolution and of the Enlightenment which he considers as a kind of treason of the Greek renewal of Europe since the Renaissance, and he is thrilled by the idea that Sanskrit is the mother of all European languages (which it is not), and hence that India is the new mother of Europe. *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) is proposing an alternative to the enlightened treason of the European Mind. As the 'discovery' of Greek (and Greek philosophy) in the 15th century led to the Renaissance, Schlegel now introduces Sanskrit (and Indian philosophy) as a new foundation of Europe, the basis for a New Renaissance. Sanskrit is the language of that new origin. Having this in mind, Schlegel studies Humboldt's American books and explicitly thanks Humboldt as he mentions the corresponding languages.⁴ And in the grammar of these languages he finds an argument that strengthens his Eurocentric ideology. According to him, the American languages have a grammar that differs profoundly from the European grammatical type. They simply annex (*hinzufügen*) words indicating grammatical functions to lexemes, rather than having what he calls the lively grammar of the 'sanskritic', i.e. Indo-European languages: inflection (in Schlegel, a very specific one: the inner transformation of the lexical root).⁵

He assumes two fundamentally different types of language, 'two principal species of all languages'. These grammatically different languages actually belong to two genetically different kinds of people: the Americans and the Europeans are separated by the abyss of two different language origins, one out of *tierische Dumpfheit* and one out of *Besonnenheit*, animal dumbness vs. reflexion. This opposition is one of the major sources of linguistic racism.

3 William Jones, 'The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus' [1786], in Winfred P. Lehmann (ed.), *A Reader in Nineteenth Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), pp. 7–20.

4 Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier: Ein Beitrag zur Begründung der Alterthumskunde* [1808] (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1977), p. 46.

5 'Entweder werden die Nebenbestimmungen der Bedeutung durch innre Veränderung des Wurzellauts angezeigt, durch Flexion; oder aber jedesmal durch ein eignes hinzugefügtes Wort [...] und diese beiden einfachsten Fälle bezeichnen auch die beiden Hauptgattungen aller Sprache'. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

We do not have to ask whether Schlegel's grammatical analysis is correct or not, we will see that it will be corrected by the immediate successor of Schlegel, Franz Bopp. But what is revolutionary and really seminal is the fact that Schlegel proposes a new basis for linguistic studies: he has the ingenuous intuition that languages have to be compared not on the ground of lexical comparisons but on the ground of grammatical features, what he calls *innre Structur*. Here is Schlegel's famous sentence that the comparison of languages has to be based on grammar.

The decisive point that will elucidate everything, is the inner structure of the languages or comparative grammar which will give us totally new insights into the genealogy of languages, just as comparative anatomy will spread light on the superior natural history.⁶

The focus on grammar, or the inner structure, is the revolutionary move caused by Humboldt's American books. The older comparison of languages was based on the comparison of lexemes. Thus, for instance, Pallas's *Vocabularia totius orbis* juxtaposes lexemes meaning the same concept or thing. We can see by material likeness which words and hence which languages belong together, which languages are genealogically related. Here is an extract from the list of words for 'fire' (from the German translation of Pallas 1786/89, 1815):⁷

112. *Ogon* (Feuer)

1	Slavonisch	Ogn
2	Slavonisch-Ungrisch	Ogn
3	Illyrisch	Ogagn, Ognna
4	Böhmisch	Ogen
5	Serbisch	Ongn, Watra
6	Wendisch	Wojen

6 'Jener entscheidende Punkt aber, der hier alles aufhellen wird, ist die innre Structur der Sprachen oder die vergleichende Grammatik, welche uns ganz neue Aufschlüsse über die Genealogie der Sprachen auf ähnliche Weise geben wird, wie die vergleichende Anatomie über die höhere Naturgeschichte Licht verbreiten wird.' *Ibid.*, p. 28.

7 Peter Simon Pallas, *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparative*, 2 vols. (Sankt Petersburg: Schnoor, 1786/1789). German: Friedrich Adelung, *Catharinens der Großen Verdienste um die vergleichende Sprachkunde* (Sankt Petersburg: Drechsler, 1815 [reprint: Hamburg: Buske, 1976, ed. Harald Haarmann]), p. 86.

7	Sorabisch	Wohen
8	Polabisch	--- ---
9	Kaschubisch	--- ---
10	Polnisch	Ogen
11	Malorossisch	Ogon
12	Susdalisch	Dulik
13	Celtisch	Tan, Dar, Ufel, Fo
14	Bretagnisch	Tan, Afo
15	Baskisch	Ssua
16	Irish	Tene
17	Ersisch-Schottisch	Teine
18	Walisch	Tan, Ufel
19	Cornwallisch	Tan
20	Altgriechisch	Pür
21	Neugriechisch	Photia
22	Lateinisch	Ignis
23	Italienisch	Foco
24	Neapolitanisch	Fuoco
25	Spanisch	Fuego
26	Portugiesisch	Fógo
27	Romanisch und Alt-Französisch	Fek, Fū, Füs
28	Neu-Französisch	Feu
29	Wallisisch	Fü

Thus, we can assume that the *ogon*-languages or the *foco*-languages belong together. Schlegel does not reject lexical comparisons. In the second chapter of the first book 'On Language' he also compares 'roots', i.e. lexemes. William Jones demonstrated the affinity of Sanskrit with the other European languages through lexical comparisons. But Schlegel states that the decisive proof for the affinity of languages is grammar, the *innerste Struktur*.

Nobody before actually looked systematically at grammatical features for the comparison of languages. The conviction prevailed that the grammar was more or less the same everywhere (hence the success of the 'universal grammar' in the 17th and 18th centuries). And as far as semantics was concerned, it was generally assumed that concepts are universally more or less the same and that languages differ only in their 'words', i.e. through the different material designation of the (universal) concept, different *sounds*. Hence the identity of sounds indicated the genealogical closeness, as the example of 'fire' shows.

2 'India': Historical Linguistics

2.1 Bopp

Schlegel's discovery was extremely successful. After him, grammar became the focus of comparative language studies. Comparative grammar became the very centre of the successful German linguistics. Franz Bopp compared the system of conjugation (*Conjugationssystem*) of some European languages rather than lexemes. He compared for the first time the verbal grammar of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian and Germanic.⁸ Bopp's book is considered unanimously by the history of linguistics as the beginning of scientific linguistics. '*Enfin Bopp vint*', in 1816. The very influential histories of the new science celebrated 1816 and Bopp as the beginning of scientific linguistics.⁹ In more recent histories of linguistics 1816 fits in very nicely with another historical myth of the historiography of linguistics, namely that exactly hundred years later, in 1916, modern linguistics started with Saussure's *Cours*.¹⁰ And in a certain sense, the historians are right: Bopp was the beginning of the paradigm of historical comparative linguistics. But their historiographical decision reduces the new science to a very teleological single-track story. By shifting the beginning to 1804 I propose a different history, namely a history of two different linguistics: 'India' and 'America'.

Now, Bopp's grammatical approach systematically demonstrates the affinity of the Indo-European languages presaged by Jones and somehow enthusiastically – and grammatically – confirmed by Schlegel. From the *Conjugationssystem* on, but more so in his *Vergleichende Grammatik* (1833–1852), this proof will be Bopp's brilliant achievement. In *Grammatik*, Bopp adds Lithuanian and goes through all the chapters of grammar of the Indo-European languages in six volumes.¹¹ Bopp's further importance consists in the fact that he liberates comparative linguistics from its ideological burden, as he is not interested

8 Franz Bopp, *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Andreä, 1816).

9 Theodor Benfey, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft und orientalischen Philologie in Deutschland seit dem Anfange des 19. Jahrhunderts mit einem Rückblick auf die früheren Zeiten* (München: Cotta, 1869); Berthold Delbrück, *Einleitung in das Sprachstudium: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Methodik der vergleichenden Sprachforschung* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1880).

10 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* [1916], ed. by Tullio De Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1975).

11 Franz Bopp, *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Litthauischen, Gothischen und Deutschen*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Dümmler, 1833–1852).

in founding a New Indian Renaissance. *Conjugationssystem* still includes, as Schlegel's *Sprache und Weisheit*, the final chapter with an Indian text in translation, but unlike Schlegel, Bopp is not at all interested in this text and its content. Rather he is interested in language alone, or, as the *Cours de linguistique générale* will say one hundred years later, in 'la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même'.¹² He thus clearly separates linguistics from philology. Bopp has no problem refuting two fundamental assumptions of Schlegel, namely, that Sanskrit is the mother of the Indo-European languages and that there is a (racially grounded) abyss between *Anfügung* and inflection. Sanskrit is not the mother but one of the siblings of the Indo-European language family. And Bopp shows the way in which certain inflectional morphemes were historically generated by *Anfügung*. Consider the Latin forms of the perfect stem, which are clearly agglutinated (and then grammaticised) forms of *esse* (*canta* – *v* – *eram*, – *eras*, – *erat*, etc.), or the famous case of the Romance future – *cantare habeo* – where the forms of *habere*, first agglutinated to the infinitive, become inflectional morphemes (*chanter- ai*, –*as*, –*a*). Hence Schlegel's proto-racist assumption of two origins of mankind has no justification.

2.2 Genealogy

Schlegel says that the genealogy of languages must be based on the inner structure. Why does he mention 'genealogy'? He does so because at his time scholarly interest in languages was exclusively genealogical or historical. Language descriptions, grammars and vocabularies, were merely practical and pedagogical, rather than scholarly, enterprises. Linguistic erudition in Europe meant investigation of the origins. Gesner's *Mithridates* (1555), the first language encyclopaedia, collected and demonstrated specimens of different languages.¹³ Even though the title of the book spoke of 'differentiae linguarum', Gesner never forgot the common origin behind those Babelian differences. The differences of languages could be seen as tolerable only if their fundamental unity was acknowledged. The *harmonia linguarum* scholarship of the 17th century, building on the medieval Biblical assumptions, is about the common past. Behind all apparent differences there is one origin – Hebrew – considered as the language of Paradise from which all other languages descend. Leibniz's writings still offer a good example of this kind of scholarly approach. His only linguistic publication – *Brevis designatio* (1710) – is a study on *origines gentium*,

12 Saussure, *Cours*, p. 317.

13 Conrad Gesner, *Mithridates: De differentiis linguarum tum veterum tum quae hodie apud diuersas nationes in toto orbe terrarum in usu sunt* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1555).

the origins of nations by means of languages.¹⁴ Leibniz presupposes a *lingua adamica* (which for him is not Hebrew) from which all other languages derive by corruption and mixture (*corruptione et mixtura*). Such linguistic studies are supposed to serve history in its elucidation of the political past of the nations. These scholarly activities are enterprises in genealogy, the reconstruction of a common origin and parental ties. This is what scholars who deal with empirical linguistic facts do. And on the other side of linguistic erudition – the universalistic, or philosophical one – Philosophical Grammar explicitly wants to leave differences behind and demonstrate ‘*ce qui est commun à toutes les langues*’ (subtitle of Port-Royal *Grammaire*).¹⁵ This approach is not a historical reconstruction of Paradise but rather its philosophical construction. Yet structurally both are the same: a research into (genealogical or philosophical) unity beyond differences.

Linguistic diversity was the very trauma of Christianity, and as Arno Borst has shown in his impressive study,¹⁶ medieval linguistic reflexion was fixated on the linguistic punishment of Babel. The loss of the Latin unity after medieval times did not improve the situation but rather deepened that painful linguistic punishment. Thus linguistic scholarship began to look for unity in the past and found the solution in genealogy. Adhering to this learned tradition, and with the new Indian discoveries at hand, Schlegel dreamt of a Sanskritic unity behind the differences of the European languages (at the same time destroying the unity of mankind by excluding the Americans from a common human origin).

With Bopp and his followers, German comparative linguistics – a very successful enterprise – remains in the genealogical paradigm. Thus, in this regard, the new scientific linguistics did not invent anything new. It focused on research into the unity of the past taken to be the basis of togetherness in the present. This was very clearly Grimm’s program, whose *Deutsche Grammatik* (1822–1837) became the prototype of that kind of research. *Deutsche Grammatik* treats all Germanic languages as one family. Grimm demonstrates their fundamental togetherness in an admirably systematic way. He starts with *Buchstaben*, i.e. with historical phonetics, then goes through the grammatical

14 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, ‘Brevis designatio meditationum de Originibus Gentium, ductis potissimum ex indicio linguarum’, in *Miscellanea Berolinensia ad incrementum scientiarum* (Berlin: Johan. Christ. Papeonii, 1710), pp. 1–16.

15 Port-Royal [Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot], *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* [1660] (Paris: Paulet, 1969).

16 Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel. Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1957–1963).

categories and their morphemic realisations, then studies word-formation and ends with syntax (he does not go beyond simple sentence). All Germanic languages are examined in respect of each of these aspects in three periods of their evolution. Grimm famously discovers regularities of phonetic change, *Lautgesetze*, which unite the members of the family. The famous 'Grimm's law' shows that the consonants P, T, K in Greek, Latin and Sanskrit have become F, TH, CH in the Germanic languages, and that P, T, K in older Germanic become PF, Z, CH in German. These regular correspondences show the (slight) differences and demonstrate the (profound) unity of the languages concerned. In the same sense, Bopp's *Vergleichende Grammatik* demonstrates the unity of the Indo-European family. After Grimm, there will be historical grammars of other language families, such as the Romance¹⁷ or Slavic languages,¹⁸ demonstrating the fundamental unity and identity of those languages. Romance linguistics enjoys the comfortable certainty of having a real *Ursprache* from which these languages derive: spoken Latin. And the 'India' paradigm was, of course, not limited to the Indo-European languages but was extended e.g. to the Semitic languages whose relationship was known to scholars for a long time.¹⁹

The genealogical tendency towards the reconstruction of the past unity is most visible in the scholarly reconstruction of the Indo-European *Ursprache* by August Schleicher.²⁰ Since Sanskrit is not the mother of the Indo-European languages, and since there is no documented Indo-European *Ursprache*, linguistics reconstructs a hypothetical proto-language. The most touching document of this scientific dream is Schleicher's Indo-European Story of the Sheep and the Horses. He reconstructs our common European linguistic ancestor scientifically:

Avis akvasaas ka.

Avis, jasmin varnaa na aa ast, dadarka akvams, tam, vaagham garum
vaghantam, tam, bhaaram magham, tam, manum aaku bharantam.²¹

17 Friedrich Diez, *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen*, 3 vols. (Bonn: Weber, 1836–1844).

18 Franz Miklosich, *Vergleichende Grammatik der slavischen Sprachen*, 4 vols. (Wien: Braumüller, 1852–1875).

19 Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Reuter & Reichard, 1908–1913).

20 August Schleicher, *Compendium der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen* [1861] (Weimar: Böhlau, 1876).

21 August Schleicher, 'Eine Fabel in indogermanischer Ursprache', in *Beiträge zur vergleichenden Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der arischen, celtischen und slawischen Sprachen*, 5 (1868), p. 207.

Which would mean something like:

Sheep horses and.

Sheep, to-which wool not was, saw horses, that, wagon heavy driving,
that, burden big, that, men quick carrying.

Before I continue my narration of the triumphant historical paradigm and its end, I would like to come back to Alexander von Humboldt's books and their second revolutionary or foundational influence on linguistics, and to my second reason for positing 3rd August 1804 as the birthdate of modern linguistics. On the one hand, their influence is *indirect*, methodological, as they shift the attention of linguists from words to grammar. On the other hand, there is a *direct* reception of these books as texts on American languages. And this part of the history of linguistics has not been written properly because linguistic historiography has focussed on the triumphant historical school. The history of the historical school has been described in wonderful classical books, such as Benfey's *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft* (1869), and it has been repeated over and over. But these books do not grasp the dual birth of linguistics appropriately. The birth of linguistics was a birth of twins. Here is the other twin:

3 'America': Anthropological Linguistics

After Friedrich Schlegel, Humboldt lends his American books to Severin Vater. Severin Vater is the successor of Johann Christoph Adelung in the very ambitious project of the second *Mithridates* (after Gessner's 1555), a new encyclopaedia of knowledge about the languages of the world. Vater first mentions Alexander's books briefly in his first book on the languages of America,²² but then he really reads and uses them, taking from them the information on those languages for their presentation in *Mithridates* (where he also thanks Alexander for the generous loan).²³

Then, in autumn 1811, the books arrive at their real and final destination: Alexander von Humboldt brings them to his brother Wilhelm, then Prussian ambassador in Vienna. Alexander wants his brother to write the linguistic part

22 Johann Severin Vater, *Untersuchungen über Amerika's Bevölkerung aus dem alten Kontinente* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1810).

23 Johann Christoph Adelung and Johann Severin Vater, *Mithridates oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde mit dem Vater Unser als Sprachprobe in bey nahe fünfhundert Sprachen und Mundarten* [1806–1817], 4 parts (Hildesheim: Olms, 1970).

of the description of his scientific findings, the 30-volume *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent*. Wilhelm begins immediately to studying the American materials. He makes excerpts (in German), then synthesises his notes in French (because

(1690) who speaks about ‘a mist before our eyes’.²⁷ To this Leibniz responds with an appraisal of the popular and divergent semantics in natural languages. The meanings of words are surely not the best knowledge we can have of the world (*cognitio clara distincta adaequata*), but they are still knowledge, *cognitio clara confusa*, and as such are valuable creatures of the human mind.²⁸ Leibniz therefore proposes to collect the languages of the world in grammars and dictionaries. The languages show ‘the marvellous variety of the operations of the human mind’.²⁹ It is this Leibnizian idea of linguistic description as a science of the Human Mind, rather than the historical, genealogical motivation of the *Brevis designatio* (continued by historical linguistics), which is taken up by Humboldt.³⁰ Therefore, his anthropological comparative linguistics focuses clearly on meaning, on the cognitive part of language, and not on phonetics or the material side of language (as does the historical comparison).

3.2 *India vs. America*

Alexander’s American books launch the two linguistic paradigms of the 19th century, the historical and the anthropological comparative linguistics, the project India and the project America. The two projects diverge profoundly in their ideological foundations, their scope, in their very object.³¹ But both agree that linguistic comparison has to be grounded primarily on grammatical comparison, on the *innre Structur*. But the comparison does not exclude the study of the lexicon (consider Grimm’s *German Dictionary* and other historical dictionary projects).

The historical paradigm will become the successful, triumphant linguistic project of the 19th century, considered as the beginning of scientific linguistics and as one of the major contributions of the German science. It will find its institutional home in the universities. But in a certain way, it is not *Geisteswissenschaft*. In its most important developments it wants to be a natural science, starting with Bopp, who explicitly excludes the ‘mental’ element from scientific linguistics. Schleicher considers languages as organisms and therefore applies Darwin’s natural history to languages.³² The third generation, the

27 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), III.9.21.

28 Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais*, p. 290.

29 ‘la merveilleuse variété de ses opérations’. Ibid., p. 293.

30 Neither the histories of linguistics (Benfey) nor the Leibniz scholarship seem to grasp this revolutionary motivation for language studies in Leibniz.

31 As Saussure said, it is the point of view that creates the object. Saussure, *Cours*, p. 23.

32 Cf. August Schleicher, *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1863).

so-called Neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*), do not naturalise their object anymore but follow the research logic of the natural sciences.

The anthropological paradigm, on the other hand, has no real chance to flourish in the 19th century. It will first disappear somehow in the underground to become the project of the 20th century. Politically, the historical project corresponds nicely to the national project or to the European perspective (as in Schlegel), at least to the study of 'our' languages. The anthropological project, by contrast, is clearly a cosmopolitan one, its perspective is not the Nation but Mankind (*Weltgeschichte, Menschheit*). To quote two typical Humboldtian phrases – one from the beginning and the other from the end of his linguistic road – which situate linguistics within world history and humanity: 'Das Studium der Sprachen des Erdbodens ist also die Weltgeschichte der Gedanken und Empfindungen der Menschheit'.³³ Or: 'This revelation of man's mental powers, diverse in its degree and nature, over the course of millennia and throughout the world, is the highest aim of all spiritual endeavour, the ultimate idea, which world history must strive to bring forth clearly from itself'.³⁴

There is no more cosmopolitan discipline than this kind of linguistics, and no other discipline is more *Geisteswissenschaft* than this comparative study of languages as 'diverse revelations of the human mental power'.

3.3 Humboldt

Not only the politico-ideological presuppositions did not favour the project America; the institutional conditions were against it as well. Humboldt was not a professor, he did not form a school, had no disciples and published very little. There is no programmatic or paradigmatic book like Schlegel's *Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, Bopp's *Conjugationssystem*, or Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*. Of his rather revolutionary linguistic project only his Academic speeches, published in the Memoirs of the Berlin Academy, give notice. He published only one linguistic book on a very specific historical question – the

33 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols. (Berlin: Behr, 1903–1936), vol. 7, pp. 602–603.

34 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language*, trans. by Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.21. 'Diese in dem Laufe der Jahrtausende und in dem Umfange des Erdkreises, dem Grade und der Art nach, verschiedene Offenbarwerdung der menschlichen Geisteskraft ist das höchste Ziel aller geistigen Bewegung, die letzte Idee, welche die Weltgeschichte klar aus sich hervorgehen zu lassen streben muss'. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols. (Berlin: Behr, 1903–1936), vol. 7, p. 14.

former inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula³⁵ – which had nothing to do with his great project of the *vergleichendes Sprachstudium*.

Humboldt's ideas on the *vergleichendes Sprachstudium* are published in his first academic speech 'On the Comparative Study of Languages'.³⁶ The Papers of the Academy of Berlin are not a very popular editorial place, and this speech is the only text published during his life-time on the subject. His main (posthumous) work – the *Introduction to On the Kawi Language on the Island of Java*³⁷ – develops his philosophical ideas on language but is less clear on the ways of performing comparative studies of the languages of the world.

Therefore Humboldt's thought mostly figures as 'philosophy of language'. It is important to state, however, that his philosophy emerges from a genuine linguistic approach, i.e. it starts with an interest in specific languages. His encounter with the Basque language – that very strange language from the margins of Europe, with a grammar very different from the 'normal' European languages – marks the beginning of his travel through the languages of the world and into the depth of his linguistic philosophy. Humboldt's philosophy of language is not – as the philosophy of language was from the very beginning – situated in the context of a theory of knowledge, but rather in the (anthropological) perspective of the linguistic description of *languages*, which then develops into a theory of knowledge. It asks why it is philosophically necessary to deal with languages, and not what are the conditions for the truth of a sentence. The short and overall answer to this question is: because the languages are the ways in which the Human Mind produces thought – 'work of the spirit' (*Arbeit des Geistes*) – and because we want to know in what manner this is done, and in what manner the Human Mind works. Hence Humboldt's language philosophy is linguistics at the same time.

He has to show how the human mind creates thought in language. He does so by two moves: a critical and a constructive one. The critical moment consists in fighting the old and trivial conception of language as a sign for the communication of thought. This is Aristotle's millennia-old theory: the Human Mind creates thought, which is independent from language, and then language comes as a means (sign) to communicate what has been thought. Language thus is only sound (*phonè*). This is the philosophical enemy that Humboldt fights passionately (and he is usually not very passionate) throughout his

35 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Prüfung der Untersuchungen über die Ureinwohner Hispaniens vermittelt der Vaskischen Sprache* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1821).

36 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium'.

37 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Druckerei der Königl. Akademie, 1836–1839).

whole life. In the constructive move, he states that, on the contrary, language itself creates thought, that it is the 'formative organ of thought' (*das bildende Organ des Gedanken*),³⁸ that it is primarily *cognition*, not communication. Humboldt then describes the production of thought with the philosophical instruments of Kantian philosophy.³⁹ It is a synthesis of sensibility and intellect; language is a form of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). The formation of thought, however, is always done in the dimension of the other. We might also say that the formation of thought is a common activity of I and Thou: 'humans long [...] also simply for the production of thought, for a Thou corresponding to the I'.⁴⁰ Hence language is created in an 'inalterable dualism'.⁴¹ The 'work of the spirit', the production of thought in language, is always at the same time deeply 'political' since the human is a *zoon politikon*.

The third moment of this generation (*Erzeugen*) of thought leads to the motivation for Humboldt's specific linguistic project. Since humans are individuals, the linguistic creation of thought inevitably contains *diversity*. The linguistic production of thought is never the same for human beings. Therefore Humboldt can state that thought does not depend only on language 'as such' (*überhaupt*) but on determinate languages. And since languages are cognitive devices, they are not 'sounds and signs' (*Schälle und Zeichen*) but 'views of the world' (*Weltansichten*). Here we are back at Leibniz's marvellous variety of the operations of the Human Mind. These worldviews are the objects of linguistics. Nothing is more *Geisteswissenschaft* than Humboldtian linguistics.

Now, in his first academic speech where he only briefly alludes to the philosophical foundations which will be extensively elaborated in his posthumous *opus magnum*, Humboldt envisages two main kinds of linguistics studies, both intimately tied to this science of the human mind. The first task of the *vergleichendes Sprachstudium* is to describe all languages as individuals. It has to grasp the 'inner coherence'⁴² of a language and lay it out systematically in

38 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language*, p. 54; *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, p. 53.

39 The assumption that Humboldt was influenced by the French *Idéologues* as put forward by Hans Aarsleff, 'Guillaume de Humboldt et la pensée linguistique des Idéologues', in André Joly and Jean Stéfani (eds.), *La grammaire générale: Des modistes aux idéologues* (Villeneuve-d'Asque: P.U.L., 1977), pp. 217–241, has been proven completely erroneous, cf. Jürgen Trabant, *Traditionen Humboldts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), pp. 217–241. In Paris, Humboldt encountered the most important *Idéologues*, but he tried, in vain, to convince them of Kant's philosophy.

40 'der Mensch sehnt sich [...] auch zum Behuf seines blossen Denkens nach einem dem *Ich* entsprechenden *Du*'. Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ueber den Dualis', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, p. 26.

41 'unabänderlicher Dualismus'. *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

a 'monograph'. Here Humboldt clearly advocates a structural conception of languages as individuals. The collection of these studies would be the new *Mithridates*. The second kind of study should be a comparative study of linguistic categories in all languages of the world. The collection of these studies would be a new General, or Universal, Grammar that will integrate the knowledge on all languages of the world. That is, it will be based not on generalising speculations, but on empirical knowledge.⁴³

This is a very modern conception of the task of linguistics that puts description of individual languages at its very centre. And Humboldt actually starts implementing his own program: he tries to seize the individuality of the American languages on the basis of Alexander's American books. But he fails, with the exception of Nahuatl, of which he writes a grammar and dictionary, a 'monograph' which he does not publish, and which will be published only in 1994 and 2000.⁴⁴ With the instruments and material available at his time, Humboldt's *vergleichendes Sprachstudium* had to fail. It was a project of the future. His Academic speech 'On the Grammatical Structure of the Chinese Language' (1826)⁴⁵ can be read though as an attempt to grasp the very structural 'heart' – the 'grammatical structure' (*grammatischer Bau*) – of a language. But these were only first sketches of descriptive linguistics. In his monumental posthumous Kawi-Introduction, the project of linguistic description of the languages of the world remains vague.

3.4 *Humboldtian Linguistics*

Therefore, historical linguists are particularly unhappy with Humboldt. Benfey regrets that Humboldt's mind-set is 'not truly scientific',⁴⁶ and that therefore Humboldt is history.⁴⁷ Delbrück is 'clueless' in front of Humboldtian theories.⁴⁸ However, there is something like an underground 'Humboldtian' linguistic tradition, or a marginal linguistics at the borders of the very important linguistic

43 This opposition recurs today in the opposition of the World Atlas of Linguistic Structures as a (Humboldtian) empirically universal grammar and the philosophical Universal Grammar of the Chomskyan type.

44 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Mexicanische Grammatik*, ed. by Manfred Ringmacher (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1994); Johann Carl Eduard Buschmann and Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Wörterbuch der mexicanischen Sprache*, ed. by Manfred Ringmacher (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

45 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ueber den grammatischen Bau der Chinesischen Sprache', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, pp. 309–324.

46 'nicht die wahrhaft wissenschaftliche'. Benfey, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft*, p. 527.

47 'der Geschichte anheimgefallen'. *Ibid.*, p. 536.

48 'rathlos'. Delbrück, *Einleitung in das Sprachstudium*, p. 27.

Lehrstühle, those academic duchies in the proud German Academia of the 19th century.

The first one to mention is Humboldt's (and Alexander's) collaborator Eduard Buschmann. Buschmann edited and completed the *Kawi-Werk*, worked at the *Mexican Dictionary*,⁴⁹ and was himself an expert in American languages. The most important Humboldtian was certainly Heymann Steinthal. He published a book on Humboldt (1851) and later edited a very important collection of Humboldt's works.⁵⁰ Steinthal's Humboldtian heritage is most visible in his interest in non-European, in his case African languages, and in the connection he makes between language and thought. For Steinthal, language remains mainly a 'work of the spirit', and languages were interesting as *Weltansichten*. With Moritz Lazarus, he founded the *Journal for the Psychology of Nations and Linguistics* (*Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*). The not so happy term 'psychology of nations', open to misunderstanding and political abuse, makes it clear, however, that Steinthal's approach to language is a cognitive one which is clearly distinct from the phonetic and materialistic linguistic mainstream. Another example is Friedrich August Pott, who was an important Indo-Europeanist. Yet he focused on meaning (*Etymologische Forschungen*), produced an edition of Humboldtian writings,⁵¹ and studied non-European (African) or marginal (romani, *Zigeunerisch*) languages. Georg von der Gabelentz's *Sprachwissenschaft* (1901) is also very Humboldtian.⁵² And as a sinologist, he wrote a Chinese grammar in the style of a language 'monograph' that Humboldt had envisioned.⁵³

Humboldt's descriptive and structural intentions were taken up by the *Internationale Zeitschrift für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft* (1884–1890). This short-lived journal published in its first volume the chapter on 'Wörtervorrat' from Humboldt's *Grundzüge des allgemeinen Sprachtypus* which delineates a

49 Buschmann and Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Wörterbuch der mexicanischen Sprache*.

50 Heymann Steinthal, *Der Ursprung der Sprache im Zusammenhang mit den letzten Fragen des Wissens: Eine Darstellung der Ansicht Wilhelm von Humboldts verglichen mit denen Herders und Hamanns* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1851); Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Die sprachphilosophischen Schriften Wilhelm's von Humboldt*, ed. by Heymann Steinthal (Berlin: Dümmler, 1883/1884).

51 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, ed. by A.F. Pott (Berlin: Calvary, 1876–1880).

52 Georg von der Gabelentz, *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* [1901] (Tübingen: Narr, 1969).

53 Georg von der Gabelentz, *Chinesische Grammatik, mit Ausschluss des niederen Stils und der heutigen Umgangssprache* (Leipzig: Weigel, 1881).

semantic theory and thereby a program of the structural description of the lexicon of languages. The preface of the editor Techmer consists nearly entirely of a long Humboldt quote on *allgemeine Sprachkunde* in which Humboldt delineates the task of the description of the languages of the world. *Allgemeine Sprachkunde* has to deal with all languages, it deals with their diversity, and it focuses on the cognitive function of languages ('*Denkkraft, Empfindung und Sinnesart der Sprechenden*') as well as on the 'spiritual development of the mankind'.⁵⁴ This means that Techmer's *Internationale Zeitschrift für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft* explicitly takes up the Humboldtian program of the description of all the languages of the world, the adjective *allgemein* referring to the totality of the languages.

In the same volume there are contributions on Chinese, on the language of the old Turkic language of the Cumans, on sign language and on south Asian languages. The list of collaborators of Techmer's *Zeitschrift* comprises not only the stars of the historical school but, more interestingly, people like Lucien Adam, von der Gabelentz, August Friedrich Pott, Heymann Steinthal, Wilhelm Wundt who were critical of the naturalistic approach to language. Their approach was descriptive and structural, their main focus was on semantics, i.e. on the cognitive (or *Weltansichten*) aspect that included a strong consideration of the cultures of the linguistic communities, and finally the outreach of their linguistic and cultural perspectives was global rather than national or European.

Humboldt's own work on extra-European languages implied a close connection with the best world experts of these languages: Astarloa on Basque, Silvestre de Sacy on Arabic, Champollion on Old and Modern Egyptian. Humboldt discussed the structure and the *génie* of Chinese with Abel-Rémusat, North American languages with Duponceau and Pickering. The cosmopolitan orientation of this Humboldtian strain in the German linguistic scholarship was all the more remarkable as it was not linked to a colonial political enterprise. The *Ecole des langues orientales* in Paris (founded in 1795, today INALCO) was closely connected with the colonial enterprise of the French Empire, as was later

54 'Die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues aufzusuchen, sie in ihrer wesentlichen Beschaffenheit zu schildern, die scheinbar unendliche Mannigfaltigkeit, von richtig gewählten Standpunkten aus, auf eine einfachere Weise zu ordnen, den Quellen jener Verschiedenheit und vor Allem ihrem Einfluss auf die Denkkraft, Empfindung und Sinnesart der Sprechenden nachzugehen, und durch alle Umwandlungen der Geschichte hindurch dem Gange der geistigen Entwicklung der Menschheit an der Hand der tief in dieselbe verschlungenen und sie von Stufe zu Stufe begleitenden Sprache zu folgen, ist das wichtige und viel umfassende Geschäft der allgemeinen Sprachkunde'. Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ueber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, p. 111.

the *School of Oriental and African Studies* in London (founded in 1916). Humboldt, however, never had the intention of helping with ruling over America as he tried to write Amerindian grammars, and neither Pott nor Steinthal thought of assisting the administration of African colonies. Gabelentz did not educate officials for a German rule over China either. This does not mean that there was no German colonialism, but as far as I can see, the *allgemeines Sprachstudium* of the Humboldtian type was not linked to a political agenda but depended completely upon the Leibnizian curiosity about the marvellous variety of the operations of the human mind. It was the most genuine *Geisteswissenschaft* one can imagine.

3.5 *Typology*

Humboldt is supposed to be the ancestor of the typological classification of languages as opposed to the genealogy or history of languages. From the very beginning, however, both Humboldts fought against the Schlegelian bipartition of languages into two classes of languages – flectional and *hinzufügend* – and of human beings.⁵⁵ It is not typology that distinguishes the Humboldtian approach from the historical one, but, as have I tried to show, a series of oppositions, such as time vs. space, unity vs. diversity, phonetic vs. semantic (material vs. cognitive), and the focus an ‘structural coherence’. Humboldt himself was explicitly opposed to the classification of languages. He insisted that languages are ‘mental individuals’ (*geistige Individuen*), and that as such, they cannot be put into classes like the objects of the natural sciences which are neither individuals nor mental.

However, one of the outcomes of the Humboldtian linguistics was a linguistic typology. Humboldt distinguished between three (or four) fundamental procedures of sentence-formation in the languages of the world: inflection, isolation and agglutination (incorporation). He thereby designated three ways of indicating syntactic functions: language may indicate syntactic function just by the position of words in the sentence (isolation – Chinese), or by adding special morphemes to the lexemes (inflection – Greek, Sanskrit), or by incorporating the parts of the sentence into one ‘sentence-word’ (Mexican). These morpho-syntactic procedures prevail in some languages, but no language is ever completely dominated by one of those procedures. Nevertheless, Humboldt sometimes calls languages ‘inflectional’, ‘isolating’ or ‘agglutinating/incorporating’, and hence seems to form classes of languages. As a result his types

55 Cf. Jürgen Trabant, *Weltansichten: Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprach-Projekt* (München: Beck 2012), pp. 80–83.

of grammatical construction have been used for the classification of languages. And this 'typological' approach to languages has been considered as his most important contribution to linguistics. Thus, for instance, the very Humboldtian Steinthal explicitly developed a classification, inspired by Humboldt, distinguishing between 'principal types of linguistic structure'.⁵⁶ These morpho-syntactic characterisations were a way to introduce a second principle of order into the diversity of the human languages. As Indo-Europeanists quite successfully proved the existence of language *families*, and as genealogically-minded linguists tried to find language families also in the rest of the world (the genealogical order still being the most common order for human languages), the structural approach introduced another criterion for reducing complexity and grouping languages together. Both orders were also merged. Thus Schleicher, the most 'genealogical' linguist of the 19th century, did not only construct his famous pedigree of the Indo-European languages, but also distinguished also between isolating, agglutinating (*zusammenfügend*) and flecional languages, and put them in a historical succession: languages develop from isolation via agglutination to inflection (and then decline).⁵⁷

By the end of the century, however, typology turned out to be not so much a way of forming classes of languages beyond family affinities but rather a way of a structural characterisation of individual languages. This is how Franz Nikolaus Finck, for example, differentiated *Haupttypen des Sprachbaus*.⁵⁸ Today a kind of moderate typology reigns in linguistics. Certain structural features, such as word order – SPO or SOP – can be found in languages belonging to very different genealogical families. These features are then used to characterise languages. We say, 'the language X is a SOP language'. But typology does not believe anymore in establishing 'classes' of languages on the basis of such grammatical features.

4 The End of Historical Linguistics

Humboldtian linguistics is an oppositional one in the 19th century. The masters of linguistics in the 19th century are *Indogermanisten* or other linguists

56 Heymann Steinthal, *Charakteristik der hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbaues* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1860).

57 Schleicher, *Compendium*.

58 Franz Nikolaus Finck, *Die Haupttypen des Sprachbaus* [1909] (Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner, 1923).

following the same historic paradigm. They fill the Chairs. Benfey's history is their history.

Historical linguistics continues the traditional focus on the diachronic reconstruction of a past unity. Through Schlegel's encounter with Humboldt's American books it shifts to grammar (*innre Structur*) in comparative work and becomes scientific in Bopp's *Conjugationssystem*. Bopp then explicitly naturalises his object – language – and hereby reduces it to its material side, sound. He rejects the considerations of 'meaning' and cuts the connections of language with 'thought'. He is the symbolic figure for the foundation of linguistics as a real 'science', i.e. natural science. Foucault refers to Bopp when he states that now the essence of language is sound,⁵⁹ and indicates the radical paradigm shift from the 'classical' to the 'modern' conception of language. With language being naturalised, 'history' in reality is reduced to diachrony, or let us say, the typical linguistics of the 19th century is a 'natural history of the human'.⁶⁰

Therefore it fits very well in the Darwinian paradigm into which it is immediately integrated by August Schleicher, the most dominant figure of the 19th century linguistics. In his *Compendium* (1861) he constructs a famous pedigree of the evolution of the Indo-European languages and reconstructs the Indo-European proto-language. This is a wonderful construction based on the presupposition that languages develop according to natural laws. Schleicher's reconstructed Indo-European language interestingly resembles Chomsky's Universal Grammar in two regards: as a pure construction and as a construction of a unity beyond the empirical diversity of real languages. Schleicher resembles Chomsky also insofar as he was a progressive political thinker.

The immediate successors of August Schleicher, the so-called Neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*) did not consider language as a natural object anymore. Language was for them a human activity. But they still followed the research logic of natural sciences. This third generation (after Bopp and Schleicher) renovated the comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages. Brugmann/Delbrück's *Grundriss* (1886–1900) is the third monumental document of the triumphant linguistic science in Germany.⁶¹ Phonetic laws (*Lautgesetze*) become its shibboleth, and historical phonetics is certainly the most typical part of that linguistic science. And since natural laws do

59 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 298.

60 a 'naturgeschichte des menschen'. Schleicher, *Compendium*, p. 1.

61 Karl Brugmann and Berthold Delbrück, *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 5 vols. (Straßburg: Trübner, 1886–1900).

not permit any exceptions, the phonetic laws too are considered as natural laws that do not allow exceptions.

4.1 *Langues*

The massive dominance of German linguists – Leipzig of the 1870s and 1880s was the world capital of linguistics, something like the Chomskyan MIT in the 20th century – provoked various kinds of opposition. Of them, two were perhaps the most important, one coming from within, and the other from outside of linguistics.

Being at the very heart of this kind of linguistics, and in the context of the neogrammatical school, Ferdinand de Saussure, himself a famous Indo-Europeanist, felt the inadequacy of the naturalistic approach and developed an alternative. In his lessons on linguistics, delivered in Geneva in 1907–11 and posthumously published as *Cours de linguistique générale*, he criticised the naturalistic approach because it treated language as a ‘fourth reign of Nature’ (*quatrième règne de la nature*).⁶² He was looking for a different scientific home for the study of language and found it by making linguistics part of the social sciences, more precisely of ‘social psychology’. Second, the *Cours* shifted the attention of linguistics from diachrony to synchrony (the diachronic approach, however, remained an important part of linguistic science). Third, the primary object of linguistics became not that ever-changing sound mass of the old linguistics, but the coherent system of linguistic units he called *la langue*. And *la langue* is not primarily phonetics but the whole of linguistic units called ‘signs’ which are units of sound and thought (*pensée-son*). The *Cours* thus comes very close to – and is probably inspired by – Humboldt’s *allgemeine Sprachkunde*. Linguistic description has to grasp the ‘inner coherence’ of a language, a system of words and morphemes which are synthetic units of sound and thought. Thus, this opposition from within the dominant linguistic paradigm creates the new linguistic paradigm of the 20th century.

There were parallel movements towards a synchronic descriptive linguistics in the world – in Russia (Baudouin de Courtenay, Jakobson), in America (Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield), in Denmark (Hjelmslev) – that contributed to the development of the new paradigm. A genuine interest in the Amerindian languages and the languages of the world (and not only in their own language) motivated the American linguists. These studies referred quite often to Wilhelm von Humboldt as a predecessor of the synchronic descriptive linguistics. The shift from historical to descriptive linguistics was an international one.

62 Saussure, *Cours*, p. 17.

At the same time, the German (neogrammarian) linguists – with the exception of linguists dealing with non-European languages (e.g., Lepsius, Westermann, Meinhof) – were not very open to the changing linguistic scene and seemed walled in their historico-comparative paradigm until after the World War II. As an exception one might however mention the ‘neo-Humboldtian’ linguistics,⁶³ which was an attempt to focus on the German language as a structure with a special *Weltbild* (note the difference from Humboldt’s term *Weltansicht*), thus shifting the Humboldtian approach towards linguistic nationalism. This deviation seems to be Humboldt’s destiny also on the linguistic scene of the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe. Another aberration from Humboldtian intentions is the radicalisation of his structural intuitions on languages as ‘worldviews’ in the so-called ‘linguistic relativism’. Thus Benjamin Lee Whorf encloses different human language communities into their linguistic structures as mental prisons.⁶⁴ But Humboldt’s enthusiasm about *Weltansichten* was a celebration of diversity, openness to the languages of the world, and not a celebration of one worldview or the closure against the others, because it was always based on the conviction that the human mind is basically the same everywhere. To emphasise once more: Humboldt linguistics is *Weltgeschichte* and a cosmopolitan science of humanity (*Menschheit*).

4.2 *Parole*

The other opposition to the dominant neogrammarian German school and its naturalistic conception of language came from the outside: literary scholarship, philology (and from Romance linguistics which was, on the whole, less inclined to excursions into the natural sciences since its object was completely historical, from Latin to the Romance languages). The fundamental experience of Karl Vossler is the creative linguistic activity of an individual, the literary text. Yet Vossler does not open a completely new province of language studies as did Saussure’s synchronic linguistics, and he remains within the historical paradigm. He wants to transform diachrony into history, i.e. into real history, meaning the transformative activity of human beings. Against linguistics as a natural science, a science that considers language as a huge amount of sounds which are continuously changing through natural laws, Vossler introduces into linguistics human action, human intentions, and hence meaning. It is not so much about Latin *a* becoming *e* in French: *mar* – *mer*, *carum* – *cher*. It is not about the material transformation of the periphrasis *cantare habeo*

63 Leo Weisgerber, *Vom Weltbild der deutschen Sprache* (Düsseldorf: Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, 1950).

64 Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956).

into a flecional morpheme expressing the future *chanter-ai*, but it is about the semantic reasons of that process: why does a phrase expressing moral obligation – ‘I have to sing’ – become the form for the expression of future. It is about the semantic or expressive reasons for the rise of a ‘partitive article’ in French. It is about semantics, about meaning, and not about sounds. The reason for change is not a natural *Lautgesetz*, but an intentional ‘reason’, a semantic or expressive motivation. But such a linguistics of expressive intentions still remains within the historical paradigm. The main issue here is the historical transformation of a language. Vossler as a scientist does not write a grammar, but a history of the (literary) French language.⁶⁵

This rather radical return of linguistics to the individual linguistic activity is a very Humboldtian move. Humboldt wrote that language is an activity (*energeia*) and not a product (*ergon*) and that therefore the very essence of language can only be grasped in discourse: ‘It is precisely the highest and most refined aspect that cannot be discerned from these disparate elements, and can only be perceived or divined in *connected discourse*.’⁶⁶

With Vossler’s two books on the ‘idealistic’ approach to language linguistics returns to philology.⁶⁷ Humboldt – before the big divide of philology and linguistics in the 19th century – considered these two approaches to language as complementary. He proposed to call ‘linguistics’ ‘the *analysis of the language*, the examination of its connection with related languages, and the explanation of its structure (only attainable by this route)’ and to call ‘philology’ ‘the treatment of *literary monuments*’ and he remarked that they must be intimately united.⁶⁸ He insisted very much on the fact that discourse (*Rede, Gebrauch der Sprache*) is the very centre of his linguistic approach and the clue to its highest object, namely the ‘character’ of a language. Humboldt wrote a wonderful chapter on Greek and Latin poetry and prose in his *opus maximum*, but he never tried to do what Vossler did: to describe the ‘character’ of an individual language by writing its history.

65 Karl Vossler, *Frankreichs Kultur im Spiegel seiner Sprachentwicklung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1913).

66 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language*, p. 49. ‘Gerade das Höchste und Feinste lässt sich an jenen getrennten Elementen nicht erkennen und kann nur [...] in der verbundenen Rede wahrgenommen und geahndet werden.’ *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, p. 46.

67 Karl Vossler, *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1904); *Sprache als Schöpfung und Entwicklung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1905).

The linguists did not like Vossler's approach, and did not even acknowledge his work as linguistics. And Vossler himself withdrew into plain literary studies. His Humboldtian linguistics of discourse was later taken up by the Italian linguist Benvenuto Terracini who then suffered the same oblivion within linguistics.⁶⁹ I think, however, that these studies of languages as discourse or texts represent systematically the very core of Humboldt's linguistics.

4.3 *Insomma*

Even if this Humboldtian 'philological' opposition to the dominant German historical linguistics did not succeed in creating a paradigm shift, it reminded linguists of the fact that language is speech, action, *energeia*, 'the ever-repeated mental labour of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought'.⁷⁰ The slow dissolution of the historical school in the 20th century thus seems to be a twofold return to Humboldt: to the comparative study of the languages of the world through their structural description and to an energetic linguistics of speech ('lingüística del hablar'⁷¹). Benfey was premature when, in 1869, he dismissed Humboldt into 'history'.

69 Benvenuto Terracini, *Lingua libera e libertà linguistica: Introduzione alla linguistica storica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970).

70 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language*, p. 49. 'die sich ewig wiederholende Arbeit des Geistes, den articulirten Laut zum Ausdruck des Gedanken fähig zu machen'. *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, p. 46.

71 Eugenio Coseriu, *Teoría del lenguaje y lingüística general* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962), pp. 85–104.