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VON HUMBOLDT'S CONCEPTION OF
LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY.

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SOME SOURCES AND ASPECTS OF WILHELM VON
HUMBOLDT'S CONCEPTION OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

BY

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THESIS

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY
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HUMBOLDT'S CONCEPTION OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE	21
III. ORGANIC METAPHORS OF LANGUAGE	42
IV. LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT	61
V. ENVIRONMENT, NATIONAL CHARACTER, AND LANGUAGE	80
VI. LANGUAGE AND PERCEPTION	101
VII. LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS	116
VIII. HUMBOLDT'S CONCEPTION OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY	132
BIBLIOGRAPHY	147
VITA	159

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Men have had some realization of the multiplicity of natural languages since time immemorial, and the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel is only the first of numerous recorded attempts to account for this phenomenon. Underlying such attempts at explanation are two possible and complementary approaches to the comparative study of languages. On the one hand, languages may be compared for the purpose of showing what it is that they have in common, immediately obvious differences in such matters as the sounds employed, or the form of translation equivalents, being ignored in the pursuit of what are considered to be more essential underlying similarities. On the other hand, languages may be contrasted for the purpose of demonstrating what it is that is uniquely characteristic of each one. These two approaches may be seen as the ends of a continuum with many possible intermediate positions. Both of the extreme positions on the continuum, and several intermediate ones, have been represented in the long history of speculation about the diversity of languages.

Recently, there have been signs of a renewed interest in exploring the similarities between languages. In an effort to establish what are the essential characteristics of human speech, Hockett has directed his attention to those "design features" of language which differentiate it

from other sorts of animal communication.¹ A similar orientation is found in recent discussions of the "universals" of language contained in a series of papers edited by Greenberg.²

This recent interest in the features common to all languages, however, may be seen as marking a reaction to a school of thought which has emphasized some suggested implications of differences between natural languages, to the relative neglect of their shared characteristics.

This latter school of thought has concentrated its discussions under the rubric of "linguistic relativity." In the United States, major proponents of the "linguistic relatively hypothesis" have been Sapir and Whorf; and recent proponents of linguistic relativity have commonly referred to the central suggestion shared by these two writers as the "Sapir-Whorf" hypothesis. Recent interest in this hypothesis, and particularly in the writings of Whorf, has stimulated a considerable volume of experimental work and theoretical speculation, which culminated in 1953 in a conference on various aspects of the problems raised by Whorf's work.³ Three years later, a new edition of Whorf's papers appeared,⁴ including some material not previously published.

¹See: Charles F. Hockett, "The Origin of Speech," Scientific American, CCIII (September, 1960), pp. 88-96.

²Joseph H. Greenberg (ed.), Universals of Language (Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1963).

³See: Harry Hoijer (ed.), Language in Culture / Proceedings of a Conference on the Interrelations of Language and Other Aspects of Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

⁴John B. Carroll (ed.), Language, Thought and Reality / Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf (New York: M. I. T. Press and John Wiley, 1956).

A central tenet of proponents of linguistic relativity is that there are establishable correlations between various aspects of linguistic behavior and various aspects of non-linguistic behavior, with the added suggestion, made particularly strongly by Whorf in certain passages, that linguistic behavior is in some sense the independent variable within a cultural context, upon which non-linguistic behavior is dependent.

Although it is common talk of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in fact the complex of ideas which goes under the name of linguistic relativity involves a whole range of hypotheses. Black, for example, has suggested that there are ten basic propositions contained in Whorf's work.⁵ Theoretical discussions of the version of the above ideas given by Whorf and his immediate predecessors have therefore necessarily been partly concerned with the task of separating the various parts of the complex, pointing out ambiguities and contradictions, and setting up classes of relationships between language and non-language events which can be further developed into classes of operational hypotheses.

Among linguists, Trager,⁶ and particularly Fishman,⁷ have attempted to bring order into the rather discursive writings of Whorf. Fishman suggests four levels of linguistic relativity, involving respectively simple differences in lexical structure between languages; the correlation of these differences with behavioral differences; differences between

⁵See: Max Black, "Linguistic Relativity: The Views of Benjamin Lee Whorf," Philosophical Review, LXVII (April, 1959), pp 228-238.

⁶See: George L. Trager, "The Systematization of the Whorf Hypothesis," Anthropological Linguistics, I (1959), pp. 31-35.

⁷See: Joshua A. Fishman, "A Systematization of the Whorfian Hypothesis," Behavioral Science, V (October, 1960), pp 323-339.

languages in syntactic structure; and the correlation of these latter differences with behavior.⁸ But perhaps too little stress is laid in such a presentation on the determining influence which Whorf, in some passages, held language to exercise over non-linguistic behavior.

Three major components of "the" linguistic relativity hypothesis will be distinguished here. These components can be briefly identified by the three following propositions: (1) there are differences between the structure of natural language A and natural language B;⁹ (2) these differences correlate with differences between the structure of behavior in culture A and that in culture B; (3) the structure of language A determines the structure of behavior in culture A, and so on, the term "structure" here being construed in a generously inclusive way, so as to take in, for example, lexical as well as syntactic patterns. These component propositions may be regarded as indicating three levels of linguistic relativity. In comparing various versions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, the third of these relationships, representing the highest level of a hierarchy, will be referred to as a "strong" form of linguistic relativity; either of the two other sorts of relationship are considered to constitute only a "weak" sort of linguistic relativity.

Now it must be further pointed out that any theorist who holds to a strong version of linguistic relativity is bound also to support a particular view about the nature of language as a set of social and

⁸Ibid.

⁹Today, this is hardly controversial; however, the writers of universal grammar discussed in Chapter VII would scarcely have agreed.

historical events. For if language is to be the independent variable in some sort of causal system involving both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, then language has to be seen as occupying a special status. Few writers on linguistic relativity have suggested that language exerted a determining influence in its very early stages; rather, in a hypothetical developmental period, language is commonly seen as the product of man's innate needs, or more frequently as the result of his reaction to a particular environmental situation; and in this period, therefore, language is clearly suggested to have been in some sense a dependent variable. To make the transition to the belief that language, at a later stage, becomes the independent variable, it has to be assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that language has some type of inner dynamic, whereby it grows along lines determined by its own, original structure, and in so doing develops a structure that is no longer congruent with the structure of the behavior in the attendant culture; or alternatively, or in addition, it has to be assumed that cultural behavior changes over time, whereas language changes more slowly, or not at all, and so to the same degree comes to be poorly fitted, in a congruential sense, to the patterns of attendant non-linguistic behavior. It is, of course, possible for these two models to be combined.

In discussions of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, reference occasionally has been made to earlier writers who are claimed to have put forward ideas similar to those of Sapir or Whorf. Greenberg, for example, mentions

. . . a European tradition, particularly strong in the German-speaking world, which can be traced back at least as far as Herder in the latter part of the

eighteenth century, but which first assumed central importance in the writings of Von Humboldt.¹⁰

Hoijer, drawing on Greenberg's paper, notes that "approaches somewhat similar to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis may be found among European writers," and that "Humboldt is mentioned as having a profound influence in this development."¹¹ There has therefore been some recognition given to the fact that the linguistic relativity hypothesis boasts historical antecedents.

However, not only has little detailed attention been paid to these earlier writers by recent exponents of linguistic relativity, but the continuity of thought from the former to Boas (who, without being a strong proponent of linguistic relativity, saw a close relationship between language and culture), Sapir, and Whorf has not been fully explored.

Greenberg does state that "the influence, direct and indirect, of Von Humboldt on the Continent has been a profound and continuing one," and he singles out Cassirer, Weisgerber, and Trier as the inheritors of Humboldt's legacy.¹² Hoijer mentions Bally, Granet, Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Sommerfelt, and Wittgenstein in his paper, but it is unclear whether he sees these writers as directly influenced by Humboldt.¹³ On the basis of eclectic listings such as these by Greenberg and Hoijer, it appears that there is little detailed knowledge among contemporary

¹⁰ Joseph H. Greenberg, "Concerning Inferences from Linguistic to Nonlinguistic Data," Language in Culture, p. 3.

¹¹ Harry Hoijer, "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," Language in Culture, p. 93; Hoijer, ibid., in fact speaks of "Alexander /sic/ von Humboldt."

¹² Greenberg, loc. cit.

¹³ Hoijer, loc. cit.

anthropologists in the United States of the influence of Humboldt on later writers, and that this lack of knowledge extends to the line of influence which comes down from Humboldt to Boas, Sapir, and Whorf.

No attempt will be made here even to sketch in the various ways in which the full legacy of Humboldt's thought has come down to the present day. However, the direct continuity from Humboldt to Boas and Sapir can be quickly indicated.

In Germany, the particular line of thought initiated by Humboldt was carried on notably by Steinthal.¹⁴ In 1847, twelve years after Humboldt's death, Steinthal wrote:

And so it seems to us that the one thing which needs to be done is for us to carry to perfection what [Humboldt] began, and to further explain the things which he sketched in ¹⁵

The following year, Steinthal published a monograph on the relation of Humboldt's ideas to Hegelian philosophy,¹⁶ and three years after that a further monograph on the origin of language,¹⁷ in which he devoted a

¹⁴On Humboldt and Steinthal, see: Douglas Ainslie (trans.), Benedetto Croce: Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic (second edition; London: Macmillan, 1922), Chapter XV, esp. p. 329; cf. Hans Oertel, Lectures on the Study of Language (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1902), pp. 61-66.

¹⁵Hermann Chajim Steinthal, De Pronomine Relativo Commentatio Philosophico-Philologica, cum Excursu de Nominativi Particula Adjecta est Tabula Lithographica Signa Sinica Continens (Berlin: 1847); quoted by Oertel, op. cit., p. 60, fn.

¹⁶H. Steinthal, Die Sprachwissenschaft Wilh. von Humboldt und die Hegel'sche Philosophie (Berlin: Ferd. Dummler, 1848).

¹⁷H. Steinthal, Der Ursprung der Sprache, im Zusammenhange mit den letzten Fragen alles Wissens. Eine Darstellung der Ansicht Wilhelm v. Humboldts, verglichen mit denen Herders und Hamanns (Berlin: Ferd. Dummler, 1851).

major section to Humboldt's ideas on the subject. In a book which appeared in 1855,¹⁸ Steinthal again paid tribute to the inspiration which he had drawn from Humboldt's views.¹⁹ Finally, in 1884, Steinthal edited Humboldt's major writings on general linguistics,²⁰ and added many pages of his own commentary by way of explication. As Oertel puts it, "the tendency of all [Steinthal's] linguistic work shows him as Humboldt's successor"21

It was to the influence of Steinthal that Boas attributed his own early interest in linguistics. Boas met Steinthal in his student years,²² and in a letter to Lowie, Boas said that one of the three achievements he claimed for himself was "a presentation of languages on Steinthal's principles, i.e., from their own, not an outsider's point of view."²³

¹⁸H. Steinthal, Grammatik, Logik und Psychologie, ihre Principien und ihre Verhältnisse zu einander (Berlin: 1855).

¹⁹Ibid., pp. xx, 123-135.

²⁰See: H. Steinthal (ed.), Die Sprachphilosophischen Werke Wilhelm's von Humboldt (Berlin: Ferd. Dummler, 1884).

²¹Oertel, op. cit., p. 60; the passages cited above comprise by no means a complete list of Steinthal's references to Humboldt; for some indication of Steinthal's own ideas, see: "Ueber Steinthals Sprachphilosophie," Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen, LI (1873), pp. 116-123.

²²Clyde Kluckhohn and Olaf Prufer, "Influences during the Formative Years," The Anthropology of Franz Boas / Essays on the Centennial of his Birth, Walter Goldschmidt, editor (American Anthropological Association, Memoir 89, October, 1959), p. 19.

²³The letter was dated 30 December 1937; the words are Lowie's, not Boas's; see: Robert H. Lowie, "The Progress of Science / Franz Boas, Anthropologist," Scientific Monthly, LVI (February, 1943), p. 184.

Boas paid tribute to Steinthal's influence too in his paper on the history of anthropology.²⁴ Although there is no reference to Humboldt in Boas's writings,²⁵ he was well acquainted with the work of Wilhelm's brother, Alexander,²⁶ and it does not seem unlikely that at some time he had read some of the elder brother's work on linguistics. Boas also owned a set of Herder's works in his early years.²⁷

Boas also came under Humboldtian influence in another way.²⁸ Humboldt's paper On the Verb in American Languages, which remained unpublished in his lifetime, was translated by Brinton in 1885.²⁹ Brinton wrote an introductory paper in which he outlined Humboldt's views and defended them against actual and potential detractors.³⁰ Brinton's presentation and defence of Humboldt were known to Boas, and

²⁴Franz Boas, "The History of Anthropology," Science, XX (NS; October, 1904), 513-524.

²⁵Kluckhohn and Prufer, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 5, 8.

²⁷Ibid., p. 10; for the importance of Herder, cf. post, 33-36. et passim.

²⁸See: Dell. H. Hymes, "On Typology of Cognitive Styles in Language," Anthropological Linguistics, III (1961), pp. 22-54, esp. p. 23.

²⁹No German publication of this essay has been discovered; for Brinton's translation, see: Daniel G. Brinton, "The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as Set Forth by William von Humboldt, with the Translation of an Unpublished Memoir by him on the American Verb," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, XXII (October, 1885), pp. 332-352.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 307-330.

Boas's discussion in the famous introduction to the volume on American Indian languages³¹ was partly directed to countering the Humboldt-Brinton presentation.³²

Sapir's knowledge of Humboldt was apparently direct. In an article based on his own master's thesis,³³ he discusses the arguments and evidence offered by Herder in his essay On the Origin of Language,³⁴ which had been published in 1772. Herder's work was of major importance in the development of Humboldt's ideas; and in the same paper, Sapir goes on to refer briefly to Humboldt's major work in general linguistics.³⁵

It would be superfluous here to offer any comments on the details of the relationship of Sapir to Boas; and Whorf's debt to Sapir, by whom he was "greatly impressed,"³⁶ has been ably described by Carroll.³⁷

³¹Franz Boas, "Introduction," Handbook of American Indian Languages, Franz Boas, editor (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911-1922), I, pp. 5-83.

³²But cf., for Boas's appreciation of Brinton: Robert H. Lowie, "Franz Boas, his Predecessors and Contemporaries," Science XC (February, 1943), p. 203.

³³Edward Sapir, "Herder's 'Ursprung der Sprache'," Modern Philology, V (July-April, 1907-1908), pp. 109-142.

³⁴Johann Gottfried von Herder, Abhandlung uber den Ursprung der Sprache welche den Konigl. Academie der Wissenschaften fur das Jahr 1770 gesetzten Preis erhalten hat (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voss, 1772); cf. post, pp. 33-40.

³⁵Sapir, op. cit., pp. 140-141.

³⁶Trager, op. cit., p. 31.

³⁷Carroll, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

In one of his earlier papers,³⁸ Whorf pays tribute to the work of Boas and Sapir,³⁹ and a paper written a year later⁴⁰ was composed at the direct request of Boas.⁴¹ In short, let it suffice to say here that there is no mystery about where at least some of the perspectives of Boas, Sapir, and Whorf came from; the line from Herder to Whorf is unbroken, though this is not to underrate the importance of intervening changes and revisions in the basic theses involved.

It has already been suggested that there has recently been a shift of interest away from language differences and towards language universals.⁴² This shift has served as a reminder that concentration on language differences and their implications is not necessarily the only point of view, and that such concentration may be the product and reflection of other intellectual interests which themselves have definite origins.⁴³

³⁸ Benjamin Lee Whorf, "A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities," Carroll, op. cit., pp. 65-86; Carroll dates the paper at circa 1936.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Grammatical Categories," Language, XXI (1945), pp. 1-11; Carroll, op. cit., pp. 87-101; the paper was written in 1937; cf. ibid., p. 87, fn.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Supra, p. 1.

⁴³ The writer is indebted to Professor Dell H. Hymes for pointing out that the main point of interest about the history of linguistic relativity lies in the reasons for its changing fortunes as an area of speculation over the last century and a half. (Personal communication.)

While it is the primary objective of this thesis to give a presentation of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity, an important secondary objective is to argue that the work of Humboldt in the field of what is now called linguistic relativity was original in so far as it represented a partial synthesis of various earlier theories, but that this synthesis was highly likely to have been produced at the time it was. Humboldt's work will consequently be presented as the culmination of various lines of development, rather than as a set of wholly new departures, a view which tends to be taken when Humboldt happens to be mentioned in contemporary discussions.⁴⁴ That this is not the only way to place Humboldt historically has, of course, often enough been stated before; his position at the culminating point of a tradition has been put forward by Fiesel, for example, in these terms:

With [Humboldt] ended the journey which Herder began, which the Romantics continued, the object of which was knowledge of the spirit [Geist] through the medium of language.⁴⁵

The radical nature of the revolution in theories of knowledge, of art, and of the nature and origin of language, which took place in the decades immediately preceding and following the year 1800 can, indeed, be grasped only when the changes are set against the background of what had gone before; while, although this intellectual revolution was a major one, it had its roots in the Enlightenment, so that the new theories

⁴⁴Cf., for example, Fishman, op. cit., p. 324.

⁴⁵Eva Fiesel, Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927), p. 215.

demonstrate a continuity from those which had immediately preceded. German Romanticism was a movement of considerable complexity, and no one change of sensibility or theory took place in complete isolation from any other. In following through the various intellectual traditions and revolutions which found some place in Humboldt's work, however, the various major lines will be taken up in order, both here and in following chapters, before some of their interrelationships are indicated.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, paralleling shifts in aesthetic theory, a new view of the origin of language developed. This view stressed the expressive and emotional roots of language, rather than the rational.⁴⁶ One result of this shift was that language came to be seen as intimately bound up with man's affective existence; language's close connection to the isolated and universally unvarying faculty of Reason was also weakened, and writers laid stress on language's own, intrinsic power.⁴⁷ The autonomous life of language was also emphasized by those who compared language to an organism, another metaphor that had its origins partly in aesthetic theory.⁴⁸ Although the expressive

⁴⁶The terms Reason, Rational, Rationalistic, Enlightened, and so forth, must be taken in what follows as a shorthand indication of the general intellectual perspective of pre-Romantic thought; the Rational/Romantic antithesis is central to the main argument, but no space is devoted to sketching in the ramifications of the complexes of ideas indicated by these useful pointers.

⁴⁷See Chapter II.

⁴⁸See Chapter III.

view of language de-emphasized the controlling power of the Reason, the latter decades of the eighteenth century also saw, partly as a reaction to Kantian philosophy, a closer identification made between thinking and speaking, and it was further implied that languages had a determining influence over different forms of thought.⁴⁹ Differences between languages were also increasingly emphasized due to the application of environmentalist thinking to the problem of the variety of languages; while closer identification of language and national character stemmed too from awakened nationalistic tendencies.⁵⁰ The part that language plays in cognition came to be stressed increasingly, the views of Herder and Kant strangely combining here to the same end, a relativistic approach in this area becoming important because of new knowledge about exotic language, and better knowledge of more familiar ones.⁵¹ But despite the general movement of thought towards cultural relativism, an older search for universals in language continued to be conducted, partly under the impetus of a continuing attempt to write universal grammars, partly under the impetus of efforts to apply neo-Kantian schemes to natural languages.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Chapter IV.

⁵⁰ See Chapter V. The term "national character," used by Humboldt and contemporary writers, is not to be understood in the more technical and restricted sense which it has acquired in more recent anthropological literature.

⁵¹ See Chapter VI.

⁵² See Chapter VII.

These lines of development found their focus and partial resolution in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was a full participant both in the second phase of German Romanticism, and in the debate over the Kantian revolution in philosophy.⁵³ The following chapters will attempt to show that the partial synthesis Humboldt achieved eventuated almost inevitably in a conception of linguistic relativity rather similar to that which is found in more recent writers. No extended discussion of Humboldt from this point of view has been discovered; and indeed this is perhaps not surprising, considering the scant attention paid in certain quarters, notably on this side of the Atlantic.

Humboldt, however, enjoyed considerable fame and eminence during his lifetime, not only as a philologist and scholar, but also as a statesman and man of affairs. Born in 1767, he was educated at the universities of Berlin, Gottingen and Jena, and moved in circles suited to his position as a member of the Prussian aristocracy and the son of a major in the Prussian army. He became a close friend of Goethe and Schiller, and had ample opportunities too for contact with other European scholars. He visited Paris for the first time just after the Revolution, and spent eight years in Rome, from 1802 to 1808, as Prussian diplomatic

⁵³See Chapter VIII; the standard biography of Humboldt remains R. Haym, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Lebensbild und Charakteristik (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1856); for the development of Humboldt's interest in linguistics, see: Wilhelm Lammers, Wilhelm von Humboldts Weg zur Sprachforschung 1785-1801 (Berlin: Junker and Dünhaupt, 1936); for balanced presentations of his theories of language, see: Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachphilosophie," Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung, XIV (1938), pp. 102-112; and Brinton, op. cit., still perhaps the best summary in English.

representative. His interest in language was aroused by his travels in Spain, which he first visited in 1789, although his work on the Basque language was not published until 1821. He was ambassador in Vienna in 1812, and attended the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818. A year later, in 1819, he virtually retired from public and political life, due to disagreements with other, more conservative members of the Prussian government, and spent much of the remainder of his life, up to his death in 1835, at his estate at Tegel, near Berlin. These years saw the publication of his major works on language, which culminated with his treatment of the ancient language of Java. This work, prefaced by the famous introduction entitled On the Variety of Human Language Structures and their Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind,⁵⁴ was published posthumously by Humboldt's younger brother, Alexander.

Some indication of the later neglect of Humboldt has already been given; and in fact very little has been published on Humboldt in English at any period. None of his major works on language has so far been translated in its entirety.⁵⁵ Apart from the recent anthology by Cowan,

⁵⁴See next fn.

⁵⁵Mr. John Viertel of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is currently engaged on a translation, with commentary, of Humboldt's last and most important work on language, Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts; contained in: Wilhelm von Humboldt, Über die Kawisprache auf der Insel Java (Berlin: 1836-1838), I, pp. i-ccccxxx; cf. the standard edition of Humboldt's writings: Leitzmann, *op. cit.*, VII, pp. 1-344; (personal communication); for Brinton's translation of a paper by Humboldt, see fn. 28, this chapter.

only scattered passages, in fact, have appeared in translation.⁵⁶ The only biography available in English has been Bauer's translation of Schlesier's life, which appeared as long ago as 1852.⁵⁷

Adler, writing in 1866, claimed that, apart from a brief review composed by himself,⁵⁸ his own monograph on Humboldt's theories of language⁵⁹ was the first to have appeared in English.⁶⁰ Adler no doubt found this neglect of Humboldt surprising, considering his own defence of Humboldt's importance:

It is true that more than one of his positions have been controverted, that he has been accused of inconsistency, of vagueness, and of mysticism, and that few of the more recent investigators are willing to accept him without qualification; but this does not destroy the intrinsic value of his contributions, and we apprehend but little contradiction in asserting that no works in this department can be produced more suggestive, and more worthy of attentive study.⁶¹

But Adler's piece apparently did little to stimulate the further investigation of Humboldt's ideas in the English-speaking world.

⁵⁶Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963).

⁵⁷See: Juliette Bauer (trans.), Klencke and Schlesier: Lives of the Brothers Humboldt, Alexander and William (London: Ingram, Cook, 1852).

⁵⁸This article has not been traced; Adler himself supplies no reference.

⁵⁹G. J. Adler, Wilhelm von Humboldt's Linguistical Studies (New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck, 1866).

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 3.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 5.

Whitney referred to Humboldt in 1872 as "a man whom it is nowadays the fashion to praise highly, without understanding or even reading him,"⁶² and as "that ingenious and profound, unclear and wholly unpractical thinker."⁶³ The neglect of Humboldt by the English-speaking world which Adler and Whitney noted did not diminish until very recent years. Brinton's paper of 1885⁶⁴ stands out as a lone sign of continuing interest, though for Brinton there was no doubt about Humboldt's importance; "the foundations of the Philosophy of Language," Brinton says, "were laid by William von Humboldt."⁶⁵

In his native country, and in continental Europe generally, Humboldt has fared better.⁶⁶ Summaries of his theories of language have appeared in French⁶⁷ and Spanish;⁶⁸ and the body of secondary literature in German is by now considerable, even if the count is strictly

⁶²William Dwight Whitney; quoted by August Friedrich Pott, Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Sprachwissenschaft (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1876), p. xxxvi.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Brinton, op. cit.; Adler's work was the only previous one in English known to Brinton; cf. Brinton, op. cit., p. 306, fn.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 306.

⁶⁶For some of the Humboldtian legacy, see: Leo Weisgerber, "Die Stellung der Sprache im Aufbau der Gesamtkultur," Wörter und Sachen, XV (1933), pp. 134-224; XVI (1934), pp. 97-236; cf. Harold Basilius, "Neo-Humboldtian Ethnolinguistics," Word, VIII (August, 1952), pp. 95-105.

⁶⁷See: Jean Gaudetroy-Demombynes, L'Oeuvre Linguistique de Humboldt (Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, 1931).

⁶⁸See: Jose Maria Valverde, Guillermo de Humboldt y la Filosofía del Lenguaje (Madrid: Gredoes, 1955).

limited to treatments of Humboldt as a linguist or linguistic philosopher. The number of discussions is perhaps justified in view of the problem of placing Humboldt accurately against the background of the thought of his times.

Previous commentators on Humboldt have belonged in the main to one of two camps: stress has been placed either on Humboldt's direct debt to Kant, or on his importance as a member of the German Romantic movement. Cassirer is representative of the first school. He notes, for example, the distinction Humboldt draws between matter and form, and the stress he places on the priority of form over matter, and traces these to the influence of Kant.⁶⁹ Fiesel, on the other hand, does not mention Kant in her study of the theories of German Romantic writers about language.⁷⁰ Heintel similarly emphasizes Humboldt's position as a neo-Romantic, and places him as the heir of Herder's legacy.⁷¹

It is the third objective of this thesis to show that neither of these emphases does justice to the range of Humboldt's ideas, and that the ambiguities and contradictions of his exposition of linguistic relativity taken as a whole have to be attributed to the fact that he never finally resolved for himself the conflicting theories of which he was the heir. To put the matter another way, it will be argued that

⁶⁹See: Ralph Manheim (trans.), Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume one: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 156-162; cf. post, pp. 101-104, for further discussion of Kant and Humboldt.

⁷⁰Fiesel, op. cit.

⁷¹Erich Heintel (ed.), Johann Gottfried Herder / Sprachphilosophische Schriften (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1960), p. xvii-xviii.

Humboldt has to be seen as a transitional figure. Nor is this latter view of Humboldt entirely new. Benfey, writing in the late 1860's, argued that Humboldt fell midway between the eighteenth century and its philosophical, subjective, aprioristic approach, and the nineteenth century with its predominantly historical and objective point of view.⁷² Bollnow, too, has given a brief, but well balanced summary of the various conflicting influences operating on Humboldt.⁷³ However, despite these treatments, no detailed study has been made of Humboldt's resolution of various conflicting traditions, nor of the ambiguities which any partial success in this undertaking might introduce into a presentation of linguistic relativity.

Central to Humboldt's conception of language were his views on its nature and origin; the opening chapter of the following presentation is therefore devoted to an examination of the major shift in theories of the origin of language which came about in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

⁷²See: Theodor Benfey, Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft und orientalischen Philologie in Deutschland seit dem Anfange des 19. Jahrhunderts mit einem Rückblick auf die früheren Zeiten (Munich: J. G. Cotta, 1869), p. 521.

⁷³Bollnow, op. cit., cf. Otto Funke, Studien zur Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (Berne: A. Francke, 1927), p. 49.

CHAPTER II

THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

The perennial problem of the origin of language¹ received renewed attention in the eighteenth century.² In the pre-Romantic period, two points of view were dominant: the orthodox doctrine, that language had been the gift of God to man, continued to be preached;³ and during the same period, thinkers of the Enlightenment argued that language had been the deliberate creation of human Reason.⁴ Despite the conflict between these points of view, they had in common the assumption that the human race, human intelligence, and human society had been in existence before the appearance of language. The problem of the origin of language was dissociated in both views from the problem of the origin of man's mental powers. Romantic theorists in Germany rejected both the orthodox and the Rationalistic approaches to the problem, and argued that the solution lay in the consideration of the condition of primitive

¹For a sketch of the history of the problem, see: Richard Albert Wilson, The Miraculous Birth of Language (London: J. M. Dent, 1941), esp. pp. 42-64.

²For eighteenth-century theories in France, see: Paul Kuehner, Theories on the Origin and Formation of Language in the Eighteenth Century in France (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1944).

³Cf. ibid., pp. 1-12, for what Kuehner terms the "traditional" theory.

⁴Cf. ibid., pp. 13-19, for the "conventional" theory.

man, of the similarities and differences between man and the animals, and of primitive forms of expression.

The contention, central to Romanticism in its literary manifestation, that poetry is or should be the expression of individual emotions, rather than a copy or reflection of reality or Nature, was paralleled in the work of writers on the origin of language by the suggestion that that origin was to be sought in the vocal expression of powerful emotions,⁵ rather than in the activity of a pre-existent Reason working within society. This latter view, which had been that of Locke, was reiterated by French theorists; later French writers paved the way for German expressive theories, which were also in debt to new aesthetic theorizing in England, as well as to a much older Classical tradition.

Locke, in the opening pages of the third book of his Essay,⁶ turns to discuss the origin of language. He bases his argument for a contract-theory view of the matter on the assumption that society was already in existence when the need for language was first felt, although at the start of his discussion he gives recognition to the accepted notion of the divine origin of language:

God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument and common tie of society. Man,

⁵Cf. ibid., pp. 20-48, for the "sensationalist" theory.

⁶Alexander Campbell Fraser (ed.), John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (New York: Dover Publications, 1959).

therefore, had by nature his organs so fashioned,
as to be fit to frame articulate sounds, which we
call words.⁷

A little later, however, Locke clearly suggests that language was the
creation of man himself:

The comfort and advantage of society not being
to be had without communication of thoughts, it
was necessary that man should find out some
external visible signs, whereof those invisible
ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might
be made known to others.⁸

Language, then, was the creation of men who were already rational and
social creatures. Language, indeed, was necessarily the creation of
men in society, since the meanings of words, being essentially arbitrary,
had to be agreed on by men.

Harris, whose Hermes was published in 1751,⁹ although not completely
sympathetic to Locke's view of language,¹⁰ also implies that language
had a social origin, and uses the same argument: since the meanings
of words are arbitrary, and since these meanings are shared by speakers
of the same language, such meanings must have been originally agreed

⁷Ibid., II, p. 3.

⁸Ibid., II, p. 8.

⁹James Harris, Hermes or a Philosophical Enquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (third edition; London: John Nourse and Paul Vaillant, 1771).

¹⁰Cf. ibid., p. 362, fn. (f); cf. also Otto Funke, Studien zur Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (Berne: A. Franke, 1927), p. 6.

upon by them. Comparing the significance of animal and human sounds, Harris notes that "whereas the Meaning of those Animal Sounds is derived from NATURE, that of Language is derived . . . from COMPACT."¹¹ The antithesis between "nature" and "compact," and the distinction between animal and man, readily enough assumed here, were to be effectively challenged in the sequel. As Kuehner puts it, theorists of the Rationalist persuasion, such as Locke and Harris,

are merely occupied in proving the logical relation between reason and language, which to them is sufficient evidence that man invented speech, almost spontaneously, to enable him to convey his ideas to others.¹²

But the sort of assumptions still implicit in Harris's work had already been challenged in England in a work published sixteen years previously. The theory that language had its origin in the expression of emotions was put forward by Blackwell in 1735 in his An Enquiry Into the Life and Writings of Homer.¹³ Blackwell was acquainted with the writings of Lucretius, who had long before put forward a similar theory.¹⁴ Blackwell suggests that early language was very much like song; language had its roots in the sounds occasioned by emotion, and these sounds were

¹¹Harris, op. cit., p. 314; emphasis in original, as in all other subsequent quotations where emphasis is shown.

¹²Kuehner, op. cit., p. 13.

¹³Thomas Blackwell, An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer (London: 1735); cf. M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), pp. 80-81; cf. post, fn. 38, this chapter.

¹⁴Cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 349, fn. 32; cf. Blackwell, op. cit., p. 41, fn.

later used deliberately to point to a similar situation:

UPON this Supposition, it will follow, that at first they uttered these Sounds in a much higher Note than we do our Words now; occasioned, perhaps, by their falling on them under some Passion, Fear, Wonder or Pain; and then using the same Sound, either when the Object or Accident recurred, or when they wanted to describe it by what they felt: Neither the Syllables, nor the Tone could be ascertained; but when they put several of these vocal marks together they wou'd seem to sing.¹⁵

Blackwell had considerable influence on Monboddo,¹⁶ whose Of the Origin and Progress of Language came out in 1773.¹⁷ In the fourth chapter of his third book, Monboddo announces his own version of the expressive theory, basing his argument partly on the assumption that primitive peoples are more given to unformed interjections than more civilized nations:

It is therefore inarticulate cries only that must have given rise to language; and, as every thing of art must be founded on nature, it appears at first sight very probable, that language should be nothing but an improvement or refinement upon the natural cries of the animal . . . the fact is, that all the

¹⁵Blackwell, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁶Cf. Lois Whitney, "Thomas Blackwell, A Disciple of Shaftsbury," Philological Quarterly, V (July, 1926), p. 196; cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 81; cf. also on Monboddo: H. Steinthal, Der Ursprung der Sprache im Zusammenhange mit den letzten Fragen alles Wissens. Eine Darstellung der Ansicht Wilhelm v. Humboldts verglichen mit denen Herders und Mamanns (Berlin: Ferd. Dummler, 1851), pp. 60-61.

¹⁷James Burnet Monboddo, Of the Origin and Progress of Language (second edition; Edinburgh and London: J. Balfour and T. Cadell, 1774-1792).

barbarous nations have cries, expressing different things, such as, cries of joy, grief, terror, surprise, and the like.¹⁸

Condillac¹⁹ was responsible for introducing similar views on the emotional origin of language into France.²⁰ Eleven years after the appearance of Blackwell's book, Condillac produced his Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge.²¹ In the opening pages of the first section of the second part of this work, Condillac presents a theory of the origin of language which is at the same time both a social theory, in the sense that the primitive situation he describes involved two individuals engaged in cooperative activity, and also an expressive theory.²² When two individuals lived together in a primitive social situation, each learned to associate a certain situation with the instinctive, emotional cries that that state of affairs elicited from the other:

When they lived together, they had occasion to give more exercise to these first operations, because their reciprocal interchange made them attach to the cries of each passion the perceptions of which they were the natural signs.²³

¹⁸Ibid., I, p. 475.

¹⁹For the views of Condillac and his group, cf. Kuehner, op. cit., pp. 23-35.

²⁰Abrams, op. cit., p. 81.

²¹Raymond Lenoir (ed.), Condillac: Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines / Ouvrage où l'on Réduit à un Seul Principe tout ce que Concerne l'Entendement (Paris: Armand Colin, 1924).

²²Cf. the summary given by Otto Jespersen, Language / Its Nature Development and Origin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p. 27.

²³Lenoir, op. cit., p. 113.

In the beginning, reaction to the surroundings involved usually both a vocal cry of emotion, and some sort of bodily activity:

They ordinarily accompanied [passionate cries] with some movement, with some gesture or some action, the expression of which was still more obvious to the senses.²⁴

Gradually, such instinctive cries and movements came under the control of the individual, and cries came to be produced voluntarily as warnings to the other, for "the more they familiarized themselves with these signs, the more they were in a position to remember them at will."²⁵ From recognizing the emotions that accompanied the cries of the other, one individual became able to use such cries to communicate what he had experienced:

At first both acquired a habit of recognizing from these signs the feelings which the other experienced at the time; then they made use of them to communicate to each other the feelings which they had had.²⁶

Expressive cries led on to the conscious development of language:

However, when these men had acquired the habit of connecting certain ideas to arbitrary signs, natural cries served them for a model in making for themselves a new language.²⁷

While Condillac, then, still stressed the social origins of language, he at the same time suggested that the cries that formed the earliest

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

sorts of language were at first natural and instinctive, to the same degree as the other sorts of reaction which events in the surrounding world produced. The voluntary use of sounds, and the voluntary assignment of uses to new sounds, came only later, in a second stage of the development of language.

The expressive theory put forward by Rousseau in his Essay on the Origin of Languages, written probably in 1753 or before,²⁸ laid little stress on the social origins of language, but was supported by a distinction between expressive and rational language. "Man did not begin by reasoning," Rousseau states, "but by feeling."²⁹ Rousseau is equally dogmatic about the instinctual drives which led to speech; "people claim that men invented speech in order to express their needs; but this opinion seems to me without foundation," he writes.³⁰ It was not bodily needs, but emotional needs, which elicited the cries which formed the basis of language; the oldest words and the oldest languages provide the evidence for such a belief:

It is neither hunger, nor thirst, but love, hate, pity, anger, which wrenched /from primitive men/ the first sounds . . . to move a young heart, to repulse an unjust aggressor, nature orders accents, cries, complaints: look at the oldest words invented, and at why the first

²⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Essai sur l'Origine des Langues;" J. J. Rousseau, Oeuvres Posthumes . . . ou, Recueil de Pièces Manuscrites; Pour Servir de Supplément aux Éditions Publiées pendant sa Vie (Geneva: 1781-1782), III, pp. 213-327; for the dating, see Kuehner, op. cit., p. 35, fn. 62.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 224.

³⁰ Ibid.

languages were song-like and passionate, before being simple and methodical.³¹

Rousseau attacked the problem again in his second Discourse,³² published in 1754, but here he is more interested in taking issue with Condillac, whose assumption that human society of some sort developed before language is called in question, as well as his optimism about primitive cooperativeness.³³ More positively, Rousseau suggests that language developed in situations in which exceptionally strong emotions were aroused:

The first language of man, the most universal language, the most filled with energy, and the only one which he needed before it was necessary to persuade men assembled together, is the cry of nature. As this cry was only brought forth by a sort of instinct on very needful occasions, to beg for help in great danger or for comfort for violent ills, it was not much used in the ordinary course of life, where more moderate feelings held sway.³⁴

Perhaps more important is Rousseau's presentation of the paradox involved in any scheme which gives genetic priority to either language or Reason:

If men had need of speech to learn to think, they had still greater need of knowing how to think in order to discover the art of speech.³⁵

³¹Ibid., p. 225.

³²Jean Jacques Rousseau, Discours sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes (1755); V. D. Musset-Pathay (ed.), J. J. Rousseau: Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: P. Dupont, 1823-1826), I, pp. 201-356.

³³Ibid., pp. 245-246; cf. Kuehner, op. cit., p. 23.

³⁴Musset-Pathay, op. cit., p. 248.

³⁵Ibid., p. 247-248.

The second Discourse was translated into German by Mendelssohn in 1757; the translator added an introduction in which he attacked Rousseau's answer to the problem.³⁶

Revolutionary as were the opinions of Blackwell and the French philosophes, similar opinions had already been put forward, and neglected, in Italy. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Vico had already proposed a similar thesis about the origin of language in his New Science, the first edition of which appeared in 1725.³⁷

Vico and his school were students of the Epicurean philosophy, and particularly of Lucretius's recension of Epicurean ideas on the evolution of man and society.³⁸ In the fifth book of his work On the Nature of Things,³⁹ Lucretius had advanced a theory about the origin of language which differed markedly from much later theories relying on notions of social contact or divine gift.⁴⁰ Lucretius attacks the idea that one

³⁶Robert T. Clark, Herder / His Life and Thought (Berkeley and Low Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p. 28.

³⁷Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (trans.), Giambattista Vico: The New Science (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

³⁸Abrams, op. cit., p. 79; the dissemination of Vichian ideas in northern Europe in the eighteenth century remains a problem area; Blackwell, despite the similarity of his ideas to Vico's, apparently did not know his work; cf. Robert T. Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," Studies in Philology, XLIV (October, 1947), p. 653.

³⁹William Ellery Leonard (trans.), Lucretius: On the Nature of Things (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957).

⁴⁰Cf. Ralph Manheim (trans.), Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume one: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 148; cf. also Abrams, op. cit., p. 79.

man gave names to things, which were then called by the same terms by his fellows. How could a man have any conception of language if language were not already in existence? he asks; and how could one man impose his meanings on others?⁴¹ Such notions are surely ridiculous, Lucretius answers. Noting that animals have different cries for different occasions, he goes on to argue that human language arose from instinctive sounds uttered in response to different objects:

Ergo, if divers moods
Compel the brutes, though speechless evermore,
To send forth divers sounds, O truly then
How much more likely twere that mortal men
In those days could with many a different sound
Denote each separate thing.⁴²

Human language, then, arose from the natural and instinctive cries of men; it did not spring into existence as a ready-made instrument of Reason, but was shaped over time: "And need and use did mould the names of things."⁴³ Language had its origin in the expression of emotional reactions, not in the operation of the intellect.

Echoes of Lucretius are clearly heard in Vico's own statement about the origin of language: "articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia. . . . Human words were formed next from interjections, which are sounds articulated under the impetus of violent passions."⁴⁴ He goes on to present a theory of the development of the parts of speech,

⁴¹Leonard, op. cit., p. 232-233.

⁴²Ibid., p. 234.

⁴³Ibid., p. 232.

⁴⁴Bergin and Fisch, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

which are held to have emerged in a particular order, with nouns and verbs emerging last of all. Vico, in short, presents a theory of the origin of language which is radically different from the dominant Enlightenment view: language is shown to be expressive in origin, and to have had an evolutionary history. Vico's speculations, and those of Blackwell, Monboddo, and the French philosophes, all had their impact on the cogitations of the Germans Hamann and Herder.

How far Hamann was influenced by Vico is still not clear;⁴⁵ of his debt to the formulations of Blackwell there is no doubt,⁴⁶ and he knew about Harris's book.⁴⁷ His mystical pronouncements do run most closely parallel to those of Vico. In one brief passage of his Crusades of a Philologist of 1762,⁴⁸ he exhibits the cluster of ideas that lie at the heart of the Romantic aesthetic revolution: the antiquity of song, the priority of song over prosaic language and the origin of the latter in the former, the expressive view of language and especially of primitive language:

Poetry is the mother tongue of mankind: in the same way that the garden is older than the ploughed field

⁴⁵Cf. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 150; but see now Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," pp. 645-646.

⁴⁶Cf. Whitney, op. cit., p. 197; for mentions of Blackwell, see: Friedrich Roth and G. A. Wiener (eds.), Johann Georg Hamann: Schriften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821-1843), II, 20, p. 258; IV, p. 310, fn.

⁴⁷The first German translation appeared only in 1788: Christian Gottfried Ewerbeck (trans.), Harris: Hermes oder philosophische Untersuchung über die allgemeine Grammatik (Halle: 1788); a French translation by Thurot appeared in 1796; cf. Funke, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁸Johann Georg Hamann, Kreuzzüge des Philologen (1762); Roth and Wiener, op. cit., II, pp. 103-342.

. . . song than declamation The repose of our most ancient progenitors was a slumber deeper than ours. . . . Their speech was sensation and passion.⁴⁹

Notwithstanding this and similar passages in Hamann's works, German Romantic theorizing about the origin of language reached its first full expression in Herder's prize essay On the Origin of Language, which was published in 1772;⁵⁰ although hints of the line that Herder adopted here had been contained in his piece Concerning Diligence in Several Learned Languages,⁵¹ which had appeared eight years previously.

The decision on the part of the Berlin Academy to hold the competition was immediately due to the publication of Michaelis's essay On the Influence of Opinions on Language, which had appeared two years before.⁵² More generally, it was felt that the time had come for a middle-of-the-road

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 258; trans. Croce; cf. Douglas Ainslie (trans.), Benedetto Croce: Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic (second edition; London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 251; cf. also James C. O'Flaherty, Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1952), p. 15; on Hamann generally in this connection, cf. Steinthal, op. cit., pp. 42-59, esp. p. 53.

⁵⁰Johann Gottfried von Herder, Abhandlung uber den Ursprung der Sprache welche den Konigl. Academie der Wissenschaften fur das Jahr 1770 gesetzten Preis erhalten hat (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voss, 1772); Bernhard Suphan (ed.), Herder: Sammtliche Werke (Berlin: Weidemann, 1877-1913), V. pp. 1-154; for Herder in this connection cf. Jespersen, op. cit., pp. 26-29; Steinthal, op. cit., pp. 27-41; and esp. Edward Sapir "Herder's 'Ursprung der Sprache'," Modern Philology, V (July-April, 1907-1908), pp. 109-142.

⁵¹Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Ueber den Fleiz in mehreren gelehrten Sprachen," Gelehrte Beytrage zu den Rigischen Anzeigen aufs Jahr 1764, No. 24; Suphan, op. cit., I, pp. 1-7; cf. Sapir, op. cit., p. 111, for Herder's earlier thoughts on the subject.

⁵²J. D. Michaelis, De l'Influence des Opinions sur le Langage (Bremen: 1762); cf. Clark, Herder, p. 130.

statement to be made that would steer carefully between the Rationalistic solution and the orthodox viewpoint of Sussmilch, who had argued for the divine origin of language in his essay of 1766 entitled Proof that the Origin of Language is Divine.⁵³ The eighteenth-century discussion of the problem had now been carried on for some time, and some order had to be produced among the large number of conflicting and partial solutions to the problem.⁵⁴ Herder's essay exhibits a continuity from Blackwell, whom Herder admired,⁵⁵ and from Condillac.⁵⁶ A debt to Michaelis's treatise is also apparent.⁵⁷ More important, perhaps, it is here that Herder makes use of Vico, although somewhat indirectly.⁵⁸ Mendelssohn's attack on Rousseau⁵⁹ also foreshadowed Herder's treatment.⁶⁰

⁵³Peter Sussmilch, Beweis dass der Ursprung der menschlichen Sprache göttlich sei (1766).

⁵⁴Cf. Clark, Herder, p. 130; cf. also Jean Gaudetroy-Demombynes, L'Oeuvre linguistique de Humboldt (Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, 1931), pp. 17-18.

⁵⁵Whitney, op. cit., pp. 196-197; for mentions of Blackwell, cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 398; XXXII, 60, pp. 98-99; cf. also Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," p. 653; a German version of Blackwell's book only appeared four years later: Voss (trans.), Thomas Blackwell: Untersuchung über Homers Leben und Schriften (Leipzig, 1776).

⁵⁶Cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 18.

⁵⁷Cf. Armin H. Koller, "Herder's Conception of Milieu," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXIII (1924), p. 232; cf. Suphan, op. cit., I, p. 529.

⁵⁸Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," esp. pp. 657, 662; Herder was familiar with Cesarotti's notes to an edition of Ossian, which drew on Vico; cf. Ainslie, op. cit., p. 235.

⁵⁹For mentions of Rousseau, cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 20.

⁶⁰Clark, Herder, p. 29.

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⁵⁵Whitney, op. cit., pp. 196-197; for mentions of Blackwell, cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 398; XXXII, 60, pp. 98-99; cf. also Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," p. 653; a German version of Blackwell's book only appeared four years later: Voss (trans.), Thomas Blackwell: Untersuchung über Homers Leben und Schriften (Leipzig, 1776).

⁵⁶Cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 18.

⁵⁷Cf. Armin H. Koller, "Herder's Conception of Milieu," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXIII (1924), p. 232; cf. Suphan, op. cit., I, p. 529.

⁵⁸Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico," esp. pp. 657, 662; Herder was familiar with Cesarotti's notes to an edition of Ossian, which drew on Vico; cf. Ainslie, op. cit., p. 235.

⁵⁹For mentions of Rousseau, cf. Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 20.

⁶⁰Clark, Herder, p. 29.

In the essay, which was written in a "spirit of the most irreverent irony,"⁶¹ Herder attempted to disprove the arguments of both rationalist and orthodox thinkers. Although the materials on various languages available to Herder were meagre in the extreme,⁶² from the contemporary standpoint he was more than successful in making his case. In the opening lines of the essay, Herder stresses the continuity between animal cries and human language:

Already as an animal man possesses language. All violent, and the most violent of the violent, the painful sensations of his body, all strong passions of his spirit, come forth immediately in cries, in tones, in wild, inarticulate sounds.⁶³

Herder's reflections on the question of language origins did not come to an abrupt end with the publication of the prize essay; his approval of Monboddo's book was shown in his own foreword to the German translation of 1784.⁶⁴ Nor did Herder's views on the origin of language remain unchanged; the fourth part of the Oldest Document of the Human Race,⁶⁵

⁶¹Ibid., p. 131.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 132-133.

⁶³Suphan, op. cit., V, p. 5.

⁶⁴E. A. Schmid (trans.), Des Lord Monboddo Werk von dem Ursprunge und Fortgange der Sprache . . . Mit einer Vorrede der herrn general Superintendenten Herder (Riga: 1784-1785); for Herder's Vorrede, see Suphan, op. cit., XV, pp. 179-188; an earlier translation of Monboddo has been published at Leipzig in 1776; Schmid translated only vols. 1-3 of the original 6 vols; cf. Clark, Herder, p. 304.

⁶⁵Johann Gottfried von Herder, Aelteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartnoch, 1774); Suphan, op. cit., VI, pp. 193-511.

published in 1774, has been called "the real revocation of the prize essay."⁶⁶ He here rather petulantly rejects his own evolutionary approach, and casts the problem back into the realm of the unknowable:

In spite of all efforts of philosophers to represent human language as an autonomous growth of human nature, of human powers and needs, the attempt will still remain a hypothesis. It either ends in a dead capacity for language, which can be known in a living way only from the results, and in which the eternal question remains: How did it become alive? Or man is left a plaything of chance, which is then imagined to teach him language
⁶⁷

But, despite this withdrawal, Herder still later echoed Hamann in a passage where he identifies primitive poetry and primitive language:

The first beginnings of human speech in tone, gesture, expression of sensations and thoughts by means of images and signs, can only have been a kind of crude poetry, and so it is among every savage nation in the world.⁶⁸

Furthermore, a "dead capacity for language" was taken as a given by Humboldt, although his own version of expressive theory is more dominant.

Humboldt was well acquainted with the works of his predecessors on the origin of language, and his own comments contain many echoes of their phrasing. He knew Harris's work on aesthetics intimately,⁶⁹ and was clearly acquainted with his Hermes also,⁷⁰ a German translation of

⁶⁶Clark, Herder, p. 213.

⁶⁷Suphan, op. cit., VII, pp. 30-31; trans. Clark; cf. Clark, Herder, p. 213.

⁶⁸Trans. Croce; cf. Ainslie, op. cit., p. 251.

⁶⁹See Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), VII, pp. 355-359.

⁷⁰Cf. ibid., p. 223, fn.; for the influence of Harris on Humboldt, see: Wilhelm Iamers, Wilhelm von Humboldts Weg zur Sprachforschung 1785-1801 (Berlin: Junker and Dünhaupt, 1936), p. 22.

which appeared in 1778.⁷¹ Although he mentions Condillac⁷² and Rousseau,⁷³ it is to Herder's essay that his own statements must principally be traced, despite the fact that it has been suggested that Humboldt went beyond Herder in this matter,⁷⁴ and even that Herder's views were of little importance in the development of Humboldt's presentation.⁷⁵ Steinthal, as usual somewhat grudging in his praise of Humboldt, complains that Humboldt dealt with the nature, rather than the origin of language:

Humboldt, while he fathomed the nature of language more deeply than all his predecessors, did not illuminate the question of its origin, but made it more complicated. But he identified the origin with the nature and changed the question of Whence into a question of What.⁷⁶

Although the criticism may be partly justified, the imputed confusion in Humboldt's analysis will be seen to have its importance.

Humboldt nowhere dealt with the origin of language as a separate problem; he rather took up the matter as a necessary part of the larger problem of accounting for the differences between languages. Scattered passages show that he took over current Romantic notions that the origin of language lay in song and the expression of emotions; Humboldt, like

⁷¹Cf. ante, fn. 47, this chapter.

⁷²Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 373.

⁷³Cf. Leitzmann, op. cit., I, pp. 75, 102, 110, 112; II, p. 49; III, p. 55; VII, p. 587.

⁷⁴R. Haym, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Lebensbild und Charakteristik (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1856), p. 494, and in general, pp. 492-500 on the origin of language question.

⁷⁵Sapir, op. cit., pp. 140-141; cf. Steinthal, op. cit., pp. 12, 73.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 10, and in general pp. 4-26.

his immediate Romantic predecessors, looks on language too as something intimately bound up with the nature of man. In his last major work on language he argues that language arose as a natural consequence of human nature; and it is clear that he still feels it necessary to reject the post-Lockean solution to the problem:

The production of language is an inner need of mankind, not merely an external vehicle for the maintenance of communication, but an indispensable one which lies in human nature ⁷⁷

Man's natural need to express himself, Humboldt suggests, found its first expression in song, and from song arose language. Expression through song was characteristic of primitive man; but man differs from the animals in going on to make the sounds he produces significant; man is the only reflective animal:

There doubtless never was a wild wandering horde in any of the earth's desolate places which did not already have its songs. For man, as an animal species, is a singing creature, though one who joins thoughts to tones.⁷⁸

Here the inheritance from Blackwell and Herder is apparent. Humboldt envisages language, even in its earliest stages, as having something of a life of its own, as growing by its own inner dynamic:

While speech and song flowed free, language formed itself in accordance with the measure of the inspiration and freedom and the strength of the spiritual energies involved.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 20; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 258.

⁷⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 61; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 295.

⁷⁹Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 17; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 255.

In another passage, Humboldt attacks even more directly those who suggest that language was the creation of man's rational faculties:

Language, I am fully convinced, must be looked on as being an immediate given in mankind. Taken as a work of man's reason, undertaken in clarity of consciousness, it is wholly inexplicable. Nor does it help to supply man with millenia upon millenia for the invention of language.⁸⁰

To the same degree, Humboldt argues that language was not the creation of an individual, and he thus carries on the Lucretian tradition; language rather arose instinctively and from the collectivity of men:

The existence of language proves, however, that there are also spiritual creations which by no means originate with any individual, to be handed on to other individuals, but which come forth out of the simultaneous, spontaneous activity of all.⁸¹

Humboldt links this argument to the contention that language is not the result of any sort of social compact; Harris's view and its like are ruled completely out of court:

One must free oneself of the notions that language . . . is a product of reflection and agreement, an agreed-upon code, as it were, or in fact that it is any work of man at all . . . not to mention the work of some individual.⁸²

Humboldt's position is usually in this way a negative rather than a positive one. He takes as a given some inner drive in man that resulted in expression through song and eventually through language;

⁸⁰Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 14; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 239.

⁸¹Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 38; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 273.

⁸²Leitzmann, op. cit., III, pp. 296-297; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 236.

and while he attacks those who argue that language was invented or produced by social agreement, his positive statement is essentially a paradox, somewhat reminiscent of that of Rousseau: "man is only man through language; to invent language, he would have to be man already."⁸³ Man became man through language; but the emergence of language was already fore-ordained in man's make-up: "language could not be invented or come upon if its archetype were not already present in the human mind."⁸⁴ On occasion, Humboldt demonstrates the continuity of his own thought from that of his eighteenth-century forerunners who espoused the expressive theory; he suggests that language is the expression of thoughts or sensations, and indeed in the following passage echoes the views not only of Condillac, but perhaps too of Locke: "Language is built up through speaking, and speaking is the expression of thought or sensation."⁸⁵ But if Humboldt's presentation is somewhat ill-organized, it at the same time manifests an eclectic use of expressive theory, and an equally firm rejection of Rationalistic answers.

For the importance of the development of the debate about the origin of language through the eighteenth century and particularly the Romantic period lay not so much in the details of the skirmishing as in the major

⁸³Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 15; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 240.

⁸⁴Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 14; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 239.

⁸⁵Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 166.

shift which it entailed in views of the nature of language. Just as Romantic theories of literary production stressed, in their extremest development, the uncontrolled outpouring of the artist's genius, so expressive theories of the origin of language entailed the view that language not only had been originally instinctual and involuntarily expressive, but also to some degree remained so, at least in the sense that language was held to be intimately related to the affectual side of human consciousness, and in so far as it was thus emotional in character, irrational and not under the control of Reason, or that part of the total personality concerned with the more logical processes of mentality. From a belief that language retained some of its involuntary nature by its close relation to the affective life of man, it was not a difficult transition to the point of view that language itself, rather than the affectual processes it expressed, was endowed with a life of its own little under the circumscription of the Rational powers of man. Such a view was furthered by the analogy drawn between language and a biological organism; the origin and importance of this comparison in Humboldt's work is taken up in the following chapter. Further, it was a fairly easy step from the belief that language was expressive of individual emotions to the belief that language was expressive of the collective characteristics of nations.

CHAPTER III

ORGANIC METAPHORS OF LANGUAGE

One possible principle on which to arrange a presentation of the major currents of German Romantic thought in the 1790's lies in the antithesis commonly set up during that period between the individual and the collectivity, the part and the whole. The tension between the two emphases implied here may be seen, for example, in the realm of aesthetics, where the expressive theories of the early Romantics (Frühromantiker) laid stress on the innate powers of the individual genius at the same time as the newly esteemed poetry of the people was traced to collective origins. A partial solution to such tensions was found in the metaphorical extension of organic terminology to describe not only works of art, but forms of social organization as well. In fact, in the latter decades of the eighteenth century in Germany, images of the organism were used in innumerable contexts.¹

Drawing on contemporary advances in biological observation made by men as the young Goethe, these organismic parallels were used, however, not only as a means of reconciling individualistic and collectivistic tendencies and aspirations, but also as a symbolic representation of the ferment of the age, which permeated all sectors of intellectual

¹Eugene N. Anderson, "German Romanticism as an Ideology of Cultural Crisis," Journal of the History of Ideas, II (June, 1941), 307, fn. 17, et passim; cf. Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," Journal of the History of Ideas, II, pp. 272-274, for political applications of organic metaphors.

and political life. If the times seemed to be moving according to their own dynamic, the growing organism, which seemingly draws its resources from within itself, furnished an analogue of adequate explanatory power. The cellular organism provided then not merely a way of reconciling the relationships of part to whole, but also a model of the mysterious way in which anything from a poem to an entire society organized is itself according to hidden laws of its own nature. As Benziger puts it:

As the eighteenth century closed and the nineteenth opened, the word organic was no ordinary word. It was bursting with cosmic suggestion, with intimations as to the structure of the universe. It had been little used in the days when the older thought of Descartes and Locke had reigned supreme But increasingly in the eighteenth century European investigators of nature devoted themselves to the study of the biological sciences.²

The Enlightenment had been determinedly mechanistic; the organicist reaction was therefore all the stronger.³ Furthermore, the teleological depiction of the organism fitted it nicely to serve as the symbol for that sense of striving characteristic of the period.⁴

The use of the biological metaphors which found so varied an application in the course of the German Romantic revolution commonly involved a distinction between the organic and the mechanical; an

²James Benziger, "Organic Unity, Leibnitz to Coleridge," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, LXVI (March, 1951), p. 33.

³Cf. Hans Oertel, Lectures on the Study of Language (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1902), p. 56.

⁴Cf. Lovejoy, op. cit., pp. 274-275.

organism was distinguished as an entity that changed from within outwards, a mechanism as something that is both initially constructed, and later altered, only through manipulation from without.

The use of organic metaphors in aesthetics had a long history in Germany in the pre-Romantic period; the organic images found in the critical writings of A. W. Schlegel may be traced back through Herder to Leibnitz.⁵ However, German aesthetic thought was as much in debt to English writers in this field as was the case with theories of the origin of language. Expressive theories of language⁶ and organic theories of artistic creation in fact both manifested a widespread faith in spontaneity.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century in England, organic metaphors began to appear in works of aesthetics.⁷ In his Conjectures on Original Composition, first published in 1759,⁸ Young draws a distinction between literary works that are mere imitations and works that are the natural products of genius, to the total advantage of the latter. Young implies that the productive activity of genius is a biological, rather than a mechanical process; and further that a work of genius is itself to be compared to a biological organism, whereas imitations are mere artifacts:

⁵Benziger, op. cit., p. 27; cf. M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 202.

⁶Cf. ante, Chapter II.

⁷Abrams, op. cit., pp. 198-201.

⁸Edith J. Morley (ed.), Edward Young: Conjectures on Original Composition (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Longman's Green, 1918).

These are the glorious fruits where genius prevails. The mind of a man of genius is a fertile and pleasant field . . . it enjoys a perpetual spring. Of that spring, Originals are the fairest flowers: Imitations are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom. . . .

An Original may be said to be of vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made: Imitations are often a sort of manufacture ⁹

In this passage three notions that were to have considerable later importance are already found in embryo: the process of creation is seen as similar to that of organic growth; the fully formed work of literary art is seen as itself similar to a plant; and the completed work is viewed as different in nature from something that has been deliberately constructed.

Young's book had an immediate and important effect in Germany.¹⁰ The first German translation appeared in 1760,¹¹ and two further editions had appeared by the end of 1761. A new German version appeared in 1787.¹² It was in fact in Germany that the application of organic figures of speech to both the creative process and the work of literary art was carried furthest in the last decades of the eighteenth century.¹³

⁹Ibid., pp. 6-7; cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 199.

¹⁰Cf. John Louis Kind, Edward Young in Germany (New York: Columbia University Press, 1906).

¹¹Hans Eric von Teuben (trans.), Young: Gedanken über die Original-Werke. In einem Schreiben . . . an dem /sic/ Verfasser des Grandison. Aus dem Englischen (Leipzig: J. S. H. Erben, 1760); cf. Kind, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

¹²Ibid., pp. 14-19.

¹³Cf. Abrams, op. cit., pp. 201-213.

Sulzer, who knew Young's work,¹⁴ put forward an organic view of literary production in his encyclopaedic General Theory of the Fine Arts, first published in the years 1771 to 1774.¹⁵ Here he presents the subliminal development of ideas in terms of the unnoticed growth of a plant:

It is a remarkable thing, belonging among other mysteries of psychology, that at times certain thoughts will not develop or let themselves be clearly grasped when we devote our full attention to them, yet long afterwards will present themselves in the greatest clarity of their own accord, when we are not in search of them, so that it seems as though in the interim they had grown unnoticed, like a plant, and now suddenly stood before us in their full development and bloom. Many a conception ripens gradually within us, and then, freeing itself as though of its own accord from the mass of obscure ideas, emerges suddenly into the light. Every artist must rely on such happy expressions of his genius . . . must await with patience the ripening of his thoughts.¹⁶

Organismic imagery played a major part in the phraseology of Herder's treatise On the Knowing and Feeling of the Human Soul, published in 1778,¹⁷ a work which "heralds the age of biologism."¹⁸ Goethe,

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 14-19.

¹⁵Johann Georg Sulzer, Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste in einzeln, nach alphabetischer Ordnung der Kunstwörter auf einander folgenden, Artikeln abgehandelt (second edition; Leipzig: Weidmann, 1792-1799).

¹⁶Ibid., II, pp. 93-94; cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁷Johann Gottfried von Herder, Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele / Bemerkungen und Träume (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartnoch, 1778); Bernhard Suphan (ed.), Herder: Sammtliche Werke (Berlin: Weidemann, 1877-1913), VIII, pp. 165-333.

¹⁸Abrams, op. cit., p. 204.

himself a professional biologist, made considerable use of organic images in his own critical writings.¹⁹

Despite these earlier uses of organismic imagery to describe the process and products of literary creation, however, it remained for Kant, in the third Critique, to place the whole discussion on a firmer, if much more intricate, footing. Although it might be said that Kant himself only used an organic description of the work of art in a metaphorical sense, yet his presentation was new in important ways, not only because he connected much more clearly than before the standards of aesthetic judgement to the ends and purposes of the organic entity,²⁰ but also because he stressed, in the second part of the work, a teleological view of the organism. Abrams describes Kant's presentation in these terms:

The phenomenal world in all its elements is mechanical, completely determined, a chain of causes and effects perceived in accordance with the invariant forms imposed on sense by the human understanding. But to make intelligible to ourselves the organic existence in this phenomenal world, we are constrained to view them, not as a system of efficient causes, but as 'natural purposes'; that is, as though organisms were things which develop towards ends which are inherent in the organism itself, and therefore not by means of a combination of parts to achieve a provisioned plan or design.²¹

In illustrating what he means by "natural purpose," Kant uses a description of the life of a tree, and here, like his predecessors, he makes a distinction between this sort of development and mere mechanically produced changes:

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 206-207.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 207-208.

²¹Ibid., p. 208.

A tree produces itself as an individual. This kind of effect we no doubt call growth; but it is quite different from any increase according to mechanical laws, and is to be reckoned as generation ²²

Kant goes on to say that the tree, as an organism, is made up of mutually dependent parts; for "each part of a tree generates itself in such a way that the maintenance of any one part depends reciprocally on the maintenance of the rest."²³ A little later Kant gives a more formal statement of the matter, and brings out clearly the defining characteristics of an organism: not only is it a cooperative collocation of parts; in addition, these parts, as they develop, organize themselves in certain specific ways which are determined by the nature of the organism:

In such a product of nature every part not only exists by means of the other parts, but is thought as existing for the sake of the others and the whole, that is as an (organic) instrument. Thus, however, it might be an artificial instrument, and so might be represented only as a purpose that is possible in general; but also its parts are all organs reciprocally producing each other. This can never be the case with artificial instruments (even for those of art). Only a product of such a kind can be called a natural purpose, and this because it is an organised and self-organising being.²⁴

Here the dependence of part on part is not viewed as a static relationship; one part entails the growth of another in the movement of the whole towards some end.

²²J. H. Bernhard (trans.), Kant: Kritik of Judgment (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 274.

²³Ibid., p. 275.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 277-278.

In the 1790's, organismic comparisons were employed increasingly in works of criticism. Organismic metaphors are found in F. Schlegel's aesthetic doctrines at least as early as 1798;²⁵ but it was when he turned to the analysis of language that Schlegel found a new and important application for these figurative descriptions.

Schlegel's treatise On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians, published in 1808,²⁶ had enormous influence on contemporary thought,²⁷ and on later approaches to the analysis of language. Drawing particularly on the researches of Hamilton,²⁸ Schlegel carries out, in the first part of the book, some of the detailed comparisons called for by Jones.²⁹ Not only did Schlegel here introduce the term "comparative grammar"; it was in this book that the notion of organic form was first seriously applied to language.³⁰

²⁵Abrams, op. cit., p. 208.

²⁶Friedrich von Schlegel, Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (Heidelberg: 1808); E. J. Millington (trans.), Frederick von Schlegel: The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849), pp. 425-526.

²⁷P. A. Verburg, "The Background to the Linguistic Conceptions of Bopp," Lingua, II (1949-1950), p. 444; cf. Eva Fiesel, Die Sprachphilosophie der deutsche Romantik (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927), p. 117.

²⁸Cf. Millington, op. cit., p. 425.

²⁹For the acknowledgement to Jones, see: ibid., pp. 425, 464-465, and fn., passim.

³⁰Cf. Ralph Manheim (trans.), Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume one: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 153.

For Schlegel, the study of comparative grammar, the branch of linguistics he named, is the same sort of pursuit as comparative anatomy:

The structure or comparative grammar of the language [sic] furnishes as certain a key to their general analogy, as the study of comparative anatomy has done to the loftiest branch of natural science.³¹

Although Schlegel compares individual languages to living organisms, not all language are seen as equally worthy of this sort of description; more particularly, inflectional languages are held to be more like organisms than affixing languages. In the following passage, the antithesis between organic development and mechanical change through means of externally applied forces emerges in the last sentence, harking back to the same distinction made in earlier aesthetic theory:

In the Indian and Greek languages each root is actually that which bears the signification, and thus seems like a living and productive germ. . . . Still, all words thus proceeding from the roots bear the stamp of affinity, all being connected in their simultaneous growth and development by community of origin. From this construction a language derives richness and fertility. . . . If may well be said that highly organized even in its origin, it soon becomes woven into a fine artistic tissue. . . . Those languages, on the contrary, in which the declensions are formed by supplementary particles . . . have no such bond of union: their roots present us with no living productive germ They have no internal connexion beyond the purely mechanical adaptation of particles and affixes.³²

Languages which do seem most like living organisms, notably Sanskrit,³³ share other characteristics with them; unlike a piece of mechanical

³¹Millington, op. cit., p. 439.

³²Ibid., p. 449.

³³Cf. Verburg, loc. cit.

apparatus, such languages develop through their own internal dynamics. This quality of language Schlegel traces back to the earliest history of the race:

The manner in which mankind attained such lofty perfection of reason and intelligence is a question of a different kind; but the same spirit . . . undoubtedly communicated itself to their language It [has] . . . a power to invent, discover, determine, and, by the use of varied declensions, transform the language into a living organization, ever advancing, and developing itself by its own internal strength and energy.³⁴

Schlegel adds a comment on one further defining characteristic of such an organic language, suggesting that a structure thus organically developed is especially resistant to change: "every language of grand principles, that is to say, highly organized and skilfully framed, possesses in itself an original element of stability and individuality . . ."³⁵ This sort of argument was to assume further importance in Humboldt's use of organismic parallels.

A. W. Schlegel, in his lectures On Dramatic Art and Literature, published between 1809 and 1811,³⁶ again drew a distinction between the mechanical and organic, and stressed that the organism developed according to its own inward dynamic rules:

³⁴Millington, op. cit., p. 455.

³⁵Ibid., p. 459.

³⁶August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur (Heidelberg: Mohr and Zimmer, 1809-1811); Eduard Bocking (ed.), August Wilhelm von Schlegel: Sämtliche Werke (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846-1847), V, VI; cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 213.

Form is mechanical when it is imparted to any material through an external force, merely as an accidental addition, without reference to its character. . . . Organic form, on the contrary, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and reaches its determination simultaneously with the fullest development of the seed. . . . In the fine arts, just as in the province of nature--the supreme artist--all genuine forms are organic ³⁷

The whole line of organicist thought in Germany from Herder to the Schlegels was reflected in the thinking of Humboldt. He was considerably indebted to F. Schlegel's book,³⁸ and there is, it has been suggested, a close similarity between Humboldt's and Kant's pictures of organic existence.³⁹ Goethe, too, had considerable influence on the development of Humboldt's thought; the term "morphology" had been introduced by Goethe,⁴⁰ and it was to his notion of organic types that Humboldt owed his own conception of linguistic types.⁴¹

³⁷ Bocking, op. cit., VI, p. 157; trans. Abrams; cf. Abrams, loc. cit.

³⁸ Fiesel, op. cit., p. 111; cf. Jean Gaudetroy-Demombynes, L'Oeuvre Linguistique de Humboldt (Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, 1931), p. 113.

³⁹ W. Streitberg, "Kant und die Sprachwissenschaft / Eine historische Skizze," Indogermanische Forschungen, XXVI (1909), p. 411-412.

⁴⁰ Ernst A. Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," Word, I (August, 1945), p. 105.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 115-116; cf. Julius Petersen, "Goethe und die deutsche Sprache," Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft, XVII (1931), pp. 21, 24.

Brinton made much of Humboldt's use of organic analogies in the latter's definitions of language. Although he feels that "there is nothing teleological in [Humboldt's] philosophy,"⁴² Brinton argues that "he fully recognized, however, a progress, an organic growth, in human speech, and he expressly names this as a special branch of linguistic investigation."⁴³ In short, "he came to look upon each language as an organism, all its parts bearing harmonious relations to each other"⁴⁴ And of course, Brinton notes, not only is each language seen as an organism, but all languages are connected in Humboldt's view in the same manner as the members of a biological family: "each language again bears the relation to language in general that the species does to the genus, or the genus to the order"⁴⁵

Humboldt relies most heavily on organic comparisons in the opening pages of his paper On Comparative Linguistics in Relation to the Different Periods of the Development of Language, published in 1822.⁴⁶ The use he

⁴² Daniel G. Brinton, "The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as Set Forth by William von Humboldt, with the Translation of an Unpublished Memoir by him on the American Verb," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, XXII (October, 1885), p. 311.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 318.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 308.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung," Abhandlungen der historisch-philologischen Klasse der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften aus den Jahren 1820-1821, 1822, pp. 239-260; Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), IV, pp. 1-34.

makes of these comparisons shows how closely dependent he is on the formulations of his predecessors. In describing how a language should be analysed, he rejects any atomistic approach, since "there are no single, separate facts of language. Each of its elements announces itself as a part of a whole."⁴⁷ Any language is built up of mutually dependent parts, and therefore demands to be described in this way:

But the dialect of even the least civilized nation is too noble a work of nature to be broken to pieces. . . . It is an organic whole and must be treated as such.⁴⁸

Not only is organismic terminology used to describe the present stage of a language, however; it is also applied to the development of language. Humboldt connects the organic nature of language to its collective origins, and implies that the difference between languages, like that between organic species, has to be accounted for in terms both of the common human ability to develop and use language, and also of the particular history of the national groupings of language users:

The organism of language springs from the general ability and need of men to speak, and comes from the whole nation; the culture of an individual depends on various plans and destinies, and depends for the most part on the individual character which arises little by little in the nation. The organism belongs to the physiology of intelligent men, the formation to the series of historical developments. The analysis of the variability of the organism leads to the measurement and investigation of the realm of speech and of the speech ability of men. . . .⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid., IV, p. 146; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 240.

⁴⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 10; trans. Oertel; cf. Oertel, op. cit., p. 45.

⁴⁹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 8-9.

It is in this discussion also that Humboldt gives one of his clearest statements about the two stages he proposes in the total history of language. He suggests that there was initially a developmental stage during which a language organized itself according to its own internal dynamic principles,⁵⁰ and then a point at which the structure of a language quite suddenly took final shape. After this point has been reached, it is suggested, there is no appreciable further development; and this is in large part due to the fact that it is at this time that a language assumes a completely organized structure, in which finally every part is fully dependent on every other part; Humboldt writes:

As our globe has gone through major revolutions, before it took on the final form of its seas, mountains, and rivers, but since then has changed little; so there is also in languages a point of full organisation, after which, according to the organic form, the firm shape changes no further.⁵¹

He develops the point a little more precisely just afterwards:

Language can however do no other than develop all at once, or if it has to be expressed more precisely, it must in the same moment come into possession of its final design, which makes it into a whole. A direct expression of an organic nature in this sensory and spiritual sense, it shares in that way the nature of all organic things, so that each part of it exists only through the other, and the whole only through the parts, and the whole manifests an all pervading power.⁵²

Once the point of full organisation has been reached, then the patterns of the language are determined for the future; the individual has

⁵⁰Cf. ante, pp. 5-6.

⁵¹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 2.

⁵²Ibid., IV, p. 3.

little ability to alter the language, for "everything that has once been expressed in words shapes that which has not, or prepares the way for it."⁵³ Humboldt's use of organic phraseology here is therefore novel and unusual, in that language only develops organically during its first period; and it is an important theoretical shift, since it entails the belief that the individual is powerless to change language once it has crystallized in this way.

In the 1820's and 1830's the description of language in biological terms became a commonplace. Becker's Organism of Language, which was published in 1827⁵⁴ and was dedicated to Humboldt,⁵⁵ was an attack on the application of rigid Kantian schemas to language.⁵⁶ Even so, the book has been described as the work of "one of the last logical grammarians,"⁵⁷ and it indeed divides rather uneasily into a detailed presentation of language as an organism, and a much more traditional treatment of German according to the canons of Classical grammar. In his foreword, Becker remarks:

⁵³Ibid., IV, p. 4.; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 241; cf. also Otto Jespersen, Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 19.

⁵⁴Karl Ferdinand Becker, Organism der Sprache als Einleitung zur deutschen Grammatik (Frankfurt am Main: L. Reinherz, 1827).

⁵⁵For mentions of Humboldt, see: ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁶Cf. Oertel, op. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁷Douglas Ainslie (trans.), Benedetto Croce: Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic (second edition; London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 329.

The author is, however, fairly aware also that in language, as in other organic things, the nature and meaning of a part can only be known truly and completely in the whole.⁵⁸

He also puts forward the by now standard argument that because of the close relationships between the various parts of a language, it can only have developed from within, and cannot have been mechanically put together:

Since there are in language no individual things in their own right, but rather each individual part is only a factor in a relation bound inwardly in an organic fashion; so all formation in language, as in all other organic things, occurs not through a process of putting together from outside, but rather through development from within.⁵⁹

However, the organic nature of language is a result of its being a human creation:

Indeed language is not by and of itself a self sufficient organism; as product of the human organism it has a design only within the sphere of this organism.⁶⁰

Since the development of an organism had been used earlier to describe the genesis of a work of art, it was hardly surprising that the use of organismic comparisons in the portrayal of language should have been used particularly in treatments of the origin of language. In a passage in his Philosophical Lectures, Especially on Language and Words, delivered in the winter of 1828 and 1829,⁶¹ F. Schlegel does

⁵⁸Becker, op. cit., p. viii.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 9.

⁶¹See: A. J. W. Morrison (trans.), Frederick von Schlegel: The Philosophy of Life, and Philosophy of Language (London: H. G. Bohn, 1847).

precisely this; and the argument gains added interest from the fact that he here compares the origin of language to that of a work of art, in this case a painting, and thus ties back the analysis of language by way of biological comparisons to the first use of parallels of this sort in aesthetic theory. Schlegel also clearly implies here that the ultimate purpose of language was implicit in its beginnings:

Now as regards the historical origin, not only of language in general, but also of its several extant dialects . . . there is one essential point towards a right understanding of the matter. We must not attempt to account for their origination and development merely by a mixture and derivation from many individual parts, but rather endeavour to set them before our minds as productions similar in nature to that of a poem or any other piece of art. For the latter are severally the result of a conception which from the very first was a whole;--they never could have been produced by any successive agglomeration of atomistic parts. . . . Commonly, indeed, men speak strangely enough of the origin of languages. They talk of the matter somewhat in the same fashion as it would be to say of a picture, that it had its origin in ochre, lake, ceruse, asphalt, and such like colouring substances Of these motley materials . . . one little particle after another is laid on the canvas . . . until at last a complete form and figure stands forth. . . . But in all this description it seems totally forgotten that unless the ideal conception--the picture as a whole--had from the very first been present . . . it would never have attained to such a realization. . . . Not piecemeal, therefore, and fragmentarily, did language arise.⁶²

Organic terminology pervaded early comparative linguistics. For example, on the opening page of his comparative grammar of 1833⁶³ Bopp

⁶²Ibid., pp. 401-402.

⁶³Franz Bopp, Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Gothischen und Deutschen (Berlin: 1833-1852).

wrote: "In this book I intend to give a comparative description of the organism of the languages named in the title" ⁶⁴ This continued use of biological parallels, and the particular and new way he himself had used this terminology, must have been much in Humboldt's mind when he composed his final and crowning work on general linguistics.

The importance of Humboldt's use of the organism as an analogue of language is twofold when looked at from the standpoint of his conception of linguistic relativity. It has already been suggested that a belief in a strong form of the linguistic relativity hypothesis entails the conception of language as in some sense developing autonomously. ⁶⁵ Humboldt's comparison of language to an organism clearly led him to such a view of the self-determining development of language. In addition, to see a language at a certain point in time as a highly organised structure means also to see it as peculiarly resistant to change: the corollary to seeing something as organic was to see it as something not formed and not changeable by any outside agency. To regard language as both growing through time according to patterns determined by its own internal nature, and as a finely structured organism at any stage in this process, led inevitably to seeing language as the independent variable in a situation involving speakers of a language and their cognitive and perceptual processes. But to see different languages as involving different sorts of thinking required a closer identification

⁶⁴ Ibid., I, p. 1; cf. Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, p. 163, fn.; cf. Also Verburg, op. cit., p. 445.

⁶⁵ Supra, pp. 4-5.

to be made between thinking and speaking than had been characteristic of philosophers of the Enlightenment. Developments in the way language and thought were progressively more closely identified form the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

In very crude terms, three sorts of relationships may be envisaged between language and thought, if for the purposes of discussion at least these are allowed to be hypostatized. The three sorts of relationships differ in the temporal sequence supposed to hold between some unit of language and some unit of thought with which it is associated. In the first case, the unit of thought precedes the unit of language; in the second case, the unit of language and the unit of thought are contemporaneous, the distinction between the two being merely that language (exemplified by a sequence of actual spoken words, say) is the outward manifestation of an inner process that accompanies and matches it at every point. In the third case, the temporal sequence of the first case is virtually reversed, in the sense that here the possibility of what may be thought is dependent upon, and supposedly posterior to, what is said, the language setting limits to what is thought. Very simply put, Romantic notions of language adhered to a viewpoint associated with the second of these cases, whereas the viewpoint of the Enlightenment was rather associated with the first. In some of his statements, Humboldt went beyond the Romantic position in putting forward a view close to the third case described; yet the Romantic reversal of Enlightened thinking was a necessary departure point for his own occasionally even more radical opinions.

For philosophers of the Enlightenment, in general, thinking and speaking were viewed as two distinct activities. Speech presupposed thought processes antecedent to it. Language was seen as the vehicle of thought, and was held to be necessary for the communication of thought from one individual to another; but the faculty of Reason was regarded as both genetically prior to language, and as the criterion of its state of perfection.

Since the time of Humboldt, the question of a supposedly intimate connection between thought and language has at least been a matter worth discussion, and it has been easy enough to suggest that this debate has been carried on in an unbroken continuity from the time of the Greeks; Muller, for example, finds no need to take cognizance of the fact that the faculty psychology of the eighteenth century could distinguish sharply between Reason and that useful means of social intercourse, language; he writes dogmatically enough:

For in Greek language is logos, but logos means also reason, and alogon was chosen as the name, and the most proper name, for brute. No animal thinks, and no animal speaks, except man. Language and thought are inseparable. Words without thought are dead sounds; thoughts without words are nothing. To think is to speak low; to speak is to think aloud. The word is the thought incarnate.¹

But in fact this sort of statement has only a deceptive ring of assurance; it is basically Romantic dogma. Locke wrote in his Essay that

¹Max Muller, Lectures on the Science of Language Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in April, May and June, 1861 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1875), pp. 383-384; Muller elsewhere refers to Humboldt as the "powerful patron" of "Comparative Philology;" cf. ibid., p. 167.

Language, being the great conduit, whereby men convey their discoveries, reasonings, and knowledge, from one to another, he that makes an ill use of it . . . does . . . break or stop the pipes whereby it is distributed to the public use and advantage of mankind.²

The stress which Locke places on the communicative function of language, coupled with his atomistic treatment of words, exemplifies a view that sees language as basically a social tool, secondary to Reason, words being but the arbitrarily selected tokens of simple and complex sensations.

Since language was in this way regarded by Locke and thinkers generally sympathetic to him as secondary to the power of Reason, it was possible to conceive of making language a better vehicle of thought.³ Leibnitz laid down general policies for such an improvement of German in his late seventeenth-century work, Unexpected Thoughts, Concerning the Employment and Improvement of the German Language;⁴ and programs for the improvement of language were part of the Enlightened plan of the Berlin school a century later. Writers of this period such as Nicolai stressed the need for precision in language.⁵

²Alexander Campbell Fraser (ed.), John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), II, p. 149.

³Cf. post, p. 88.

⁴Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der deutschen Sprache (1697); G. E. Guhrauer (ed.), Leibnitz: Deutsche Schriften (Berlin: Veit and Comp, 1838-1840), I, pp. 449-486.

⁵Robert T. Clark, Herder / His Life and Thought (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p. 22; and in general, ibid., pp. 17-30.

Hamann had little sympathy for such attempts to improve language. In his Miscellaneous Remarks Concerning Word Order in the French Language,⁶ published in 1760, which included an attack on efforts to improve the French language by rational methods, he wrote that "the purity of language diminishes its riches; a too strict correctness diminishes its strength and manhood."⁷ Herder was equally at odds with the similar plans of the Berlin group.⁸ In the fifth part of the first collection of his Fragments⁹ he attacked Sulzer's plan for the improvement of German.¹⁰

Important in their implications as such disagreements with the improvers of language were, however, Hamann and Herder launched a much more direct attack on the central tenets adhered to by Enlightened thinkers about Reason and language.¹¹ The nub of Hamann and Herder's argument was that language was not only itself the main evidence available about how the human mind worked, but that it was itself the medium of thought. One had therefore to proceed from the observation of

⁶Johann Georg Hamann, Vermischte Anmerkungen über die Wortfügung in der französischen Sprache (1760); Friedrich Roth and G. A. Wiener (eds.), Johann Georg Hamann: Schriften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821-1843), II, pp. 133-152.

⁷Ibid., II, pp. 151-152.

⁸Armin H. Koller, "Herder's Conception of Milieu," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXIII (1924), pp. 234-235.

⁹Johann Gottfried von Herder, Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur, erste Sammlung (1767); Bernhard Suphan (ed.), Herder: Sammtliche Werke (Berlin: Weidemann, 1877-1913), I, pp. 139-240.

¹⁰Ibid., I, pp. 159-162.

¹¹Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachphilosophie," Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung, XIV (1938), p. 103.

language to statements about intellectual powers, rather than working in the other direction. But although this reversal was revolutionary, the way for it had been prepared by an opinion central to Enlightened thought itself. Since man was Rational, he had naturally created his language according to rational principals,¹² and, despite the need to make improvements in language, language was to be viewed for this reason as properly a reflection of human Rationality, and therefore closely associated with its attendant faculty. This identification of language and Reason, which was characteristic of the later Enlightenment, may be traced back to the opening of the eighteenth century.

As far back as 1697, Leibnitz, in his treatise on the improvement of the German language,¹³ had suggested a close relation between language and thought.¹⁴ Utilizing the metaphor of the mirror that was then current in aesthetic theory, Leibnitz also suggests that Rational man has control over his language; for when man develops Reason, he goes to the admired Classical languages for models for his own speech:

It is well known that language is the mirror of the intellect, and that peoples, when they turn towards reason, also at the same time certainly take up the language for which the Greeks, Romans, and Arabians provide examples.¹⁵

¹²Cf. ante, p. 24.

¹³Cf. fn. 4, this chapter.

¹⁴Cf. P. A. Verburg, "The Background to the Linguistic Conceptions of Bopp," Lingua, II (1949-1950), p. 464.

¹⁵Guhrauer, op. cit., I, p. 449; cf. W. W. Chambers, "Language and Nationality in German Pre-Romantic and Romantic Thought," Modern Language Review, XLI (October, 1946), p. 383.

A little later in the same work, Leibnitz argues for an even stronger connection between thinking and speaking than implied here; language is used not only for communication with others, but also to aid us in our own thinking;

It is also the case in the matter of the use of language, to consider this matter particularly as well, that words are not only the signs of thoughts, but of things as well, and that we necessarily have signs, not only in order to convey our opinions to others, but also to help our own thoughts.¹⁶

Because language is in part a series of signs for objects, it permits a man to consider what is not present; when a man is engaged in thought,

He often for this reason contents himself not only with placing the word in place of the thing in outward speech, but also in thought and inward conversation with himself.¹⁷

But despite the apparently close identification made here by Leibnitz between language and mental processes, the underlying opinion, which was to be carried on by later Enlightened thinkers, was still that language was the creation of the human Reason, and although perhaps a necessary outward vehicle for its more complex operations, yet still essentially subordinate to it. Any closer identification of language and thought was dependent on a thoroughgoing attack on the Enlightened view of the primacy of Reason. Hamann based such an attack on his own idiosyncratic view of language.

¹⁶ Guhrauer, op. cit., I, p. 450.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Whereas for the Enlightenment language was the creation of Reason, Hamann reversed this position.¹⁸ His central tenet, as well as the Pietistic mysticism which produced it and continually informed it, was expressed when he wrote that "with me language is the mother of reason and revelation, its Alpha and Omega."¹⁹

Hamann had been influenced by the English poet and critic, Young, whose Conjectures, published in 1759,²⁰ was translated into German twice within two years of its first appearance, and became "a primary document in the Canon of the Storm and Stress,"²¹ Young's Night Thoughts,²² which had appeared between 1742 and 1745, were also well known to Hamann, as to German writers in general. Hamann expressed his debt to Young when he wrote of "language, the organon and criterion of reason, as Young puts it. Here lies pure reason and at the same time its critique."²³

¹⁸Cf. Clark, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

¹⁹Carl Hermann Gildmeister (ed.), Johann Georg Hamann. Briefwechsel mit Jacobi (Botha: F. A. Perthes, 1868), p. 122; trans. Cassirer; cf. Ralph Mannheim (trans.), Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms / Volume One: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 150.

²⁰Edith J. Morley (ed.), Edward Young: Conjectures on Original Composition (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Longman's, Green, 1918.)

²¹M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 202.

²²The Poetical Words of Edward Young (London: George Bell, 1906), I, pp. 1-298; for the influence of Young in Germany, see John Louis Kind, Edward Young in Germany (New York: Columbia University Press, 1906); for young and Hamann, ibid., pp. 28-40.

²³Roth and Wiener, op. cit., VII, p. 216; trans. Cassirer; cf. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 150.

A similar tribute is paid on the opening page of the essay on the French language,²⁴ where Hamann quotes approvingly Young's line "Speech, thought's canal! Speech, thought's criterion too!"²⁵ Hamann was also in debt to English thought when he argued with Berkeley that it is inadmissible to deduce the reality of abstract ideas from the existence of general nouns.²⁶

Hamann's central contribution to the problem of language cannot be better expressed than in the following summary by Berlin:

His greatest discovery is that language and thought are not two processes but one: that language (or other forms of expressive symbolism--religious worship, social habits and so on) conveys directly the innermost soul of individuals and societies; that we do not first form (or receive) "ideas" and then clothe them in words, but that to think is to use symbols--images or language--and that, therefore philosophers who think that they are studying concepts or ideas or categories of reality are in fact studying means of human expression--language--which is at once the vehicle of men's view of the universe and of themselves, and part and parcel of that world itself, which is not separable from the ways in which it is experienced or thought about.²⁷

There is no need to underline the sharp break here from the empiricism and sensationalism of Locke, whose theory of language must have been as well known in Hamann's Germany as the rest of his system.²⁸

²⁴Cf. fn. 6, this chapter.

²⁵Roth and Wiener, op. cit., II, p. 135; cf. Young, op. cit., I, p. 29. (Night Thoughts, Night II, l. 469.)

²⁶W. Streitberg, "Kant und die Sprachwissenschaft / Eine historische Skizze," Indogermanische Forschungen, XXVI (1909), p. 383.

²⁷Isaiah Berlin, The Age of Enlightenment / The 18th Century Philosophers (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), p. 273.

²⁸Cf. F. Andrew Brown, "German Interest in John Locke's Essay, 1688-1800," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, L, (October, 1951), pp. 466-482.

Hamann opened his attack on Enlightened thought with his Socratic Memorabilities, published in 1759;²⁹ five years later, he continued his attack with his Crusades of a Philologist.³⁰ Here he takes as his starting point the subject of the prize competition held by the Prussian Academy for an essay on the reciprocal influence of language and opinions.³¹

Although Hamann has often been under attack for the mystical obscurity of his style, there is little difficulty in seeing here that he makes a strong connection between perception and symbolic behavior, while lamenting the small amount of attention paid to this relation:

A relation and connection between the cognitive capabilities of our spirit, and the symbolic capabilities of its love, is a fairly familiar observation, the conditions and bounds of which, however, have still been little examined.³²

Hamann goes on to argue that there must therefore be some similarities between all languages, although in this way he at the same time implies that languages may differ, and their differences have cognitive implications:

²⁹Johann George Hamann, Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile (Amsterdam: 1759); Roth and Wiener, op. cit., II, pp. 1-50; cf. James C. O'Flaherty, Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1952), p. 42.

³⁰Johann Georg Hamann, Kreuzzüge des Philologen (1762); Roth and Wiener, op. cit., II, pp. 103-342.

³¹Ibid., II, p. 119.

³²Ibid., II, pp. 120-121.

There must for this reason be similarities underlying all human languages, which are grounded in the identical form of our nature, and similarities which are necessary in small spheres of society.³³

A little later, Hamann turns to stress the fact that the differences between languages parallel differences in ways of thought: "the lineaments [of a people's] language will also correspond to the direction of their sort of thinking."³⁴

Hamann contended that language developed prior to intellect, and argued not only that thought presupposes the existence of language, but that the latter is also the root of mistaken notions about the real nature of mental operations; in his Metacritique³⁵ he wrote:

No deduction is necessary to establish the genealogical priority of language and its heraldry over the seven sacred functions of logical propositions and conclusions. Not only the entire capacity to think rests on language . . . but language is also the center of the misunderstanding of reason with itself ³⁶

Philosophers err, Hamann argues, when they assume that the information provided by a particular language is usable as the basis for a universal system:

³³Ibid., II, p. 121.

³⁴Ibid., II, p. 123.

³⁵Johann Georg Hamann, Metacritik über den Purismus der reinen Vernunft; not published in Hamann's lifetime; Roth and Wiener, op. cit., VII, pp. 1-16; cf. post, fn. 46, this chapter.

³⁶Roth and Wiener, op. cit., VII, p. 9; trans. O'Flaherty; cf. O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 88.

Metaphysics misuses the word-signs and figures
of speech of our empirical knowledge as pure
hieroglyphs and types of ideal relations ³⁷

The discrepancy implied here between the structure of a particular language and the universal forms which might be the subject matter of a universal philosophy already entails a notion of linguistic relativity at the level of cognition. The claim that Hamann did have such a relativistic conception is borne out by his dictum that "our concepts of things are mutable by means of a new language."³⁸

Herder, who was under considerable Hamannian influence during the early stages of his career,³⁹ allied himself with Hamann's attack on the Enlightenment view of Reason and its relation to language.⁴⁰ Central to his outlook was an essentially relativistic approach; as Schutze succinctly puts it:

Herder displaced the traditional conception of an absolute, universal reason by that of individual spontaneity, as the primary factor of reality, as the source and standard of all experience, including the activities of reason. Reason is according to Herder derivative, a function of personality, and has to find its conclusive definition and criteria not in its own logic considered as absolute or "transcendental," but in the specific characters of spontaneous individuality.⁴¹

³⁷Roth and Wiener, op. cit., VII, p. 8; trans. O'Flaherty; cf. O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁸Gildemeister, op. cit., p. 494; trans. O'Flaherty; cf. O'Flaherty, op. cit., p. 50.

³⁹Cf. J. F. Haussmann, "Der Junge Herder und Hamann," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, VI, (1906-1907), pp. 606-648.

⁴⁰On Herder's break with the Enlightenment see in general Clark, op. cit., pp. 179-213.

⁴¹Martin Schutze, "The Fundamental Ideas of Herder's Thought," Modern Philology, XIX (May, 1922), p. 361.

And it was in the examination of language that Herder found much of his evidence for the variety of forms of thought and experience.

Herder's indebtedness to Hamann manifests itself most obviously in his own statements about language and thought. He strongly echoes Hamann when he writes: "Human language carries its thought forms in itself; we think especially when we think abstractly, only in and with language,"⁴² and in the ninth chapter of his major work on Ideas towards the Philosophy of the History of Mankind,⁴³ which began to appear in 1785, he, like Hamann, takes a relativistic position, and argues that different languages form the proper data for an investigation of the differing varieties of human intellectual and affectual life:

The finest attempts at the history and varied characteristics of human understanding and feeling would also be a philosophical comparison of languages, since on these themselves is the understanding and character of a people imprinted.⁴⁴

For all the incisiveness of these earlier statements, it was in his attack on Kant's first Critique that Herder arrived at his clearest statement of the relationship between language and thought;⁴⁵ drawing

⁴²Suphan, op. cit., XXII, p. 7; trans. Clark; cf. Clark, op. cit., p. 410.

⁴³Johann Gottfried von Herder, Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (Riga and Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartnoch, 1785-1792); Suphan, op. cit., XIII, pp. 1-439; XIV, pp. 1-493.

⁴⁴Quoted by Fiesel; cf. Eva Fiesel, Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927), p. 223.

⁴⁵For Herder's attack on Kant's epistemology, see Clark, op. cit., pp. 396-407; cf. Otto Michalsky, "Kant's Kritik der reinen Vernunft und Herder's Metakritik," Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, LXXXIV (1884), pp. 5-7.

heavily on Hamann,⁴⁶ Herder developed in his Metacritique of a Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1799,⁴⁷ an argument that had as its "chief result . . . the identification of thought with language."⁴⁸

Although he makes much use of Leibnitz in his onslaught on Kant,⁴⁹ Herder in fact goes much further than he in stressing that thought is impossible without language:

The human spirit thinks with words; it does not only utter its thoughts by means of language, but also in the same way symbolizes them to itself and arranges them. Language, says Leibnitz, is the mirror of human understanding, and, as man may boldly set it down, a book of discoveries of his ideas, a tool of his reason which is not only habitual but indispensable. By means of language we learned to think, through it we separate ideas and tie them together, often many at a time.⁵⁰

And Herder goes even further; not merely is language a necessary medium of thought, thought itself is nothing more than internalized language:

What is thinking called? Inward language, i.e., the signs that have been interiorized express themselves, talking is called thinking aloud.⁵¹

⁴⁶In the same year in which the first Critique appeared, Hamann had started work on his Metacritique, but ~~this was not~~ published until 1800. Herder had contributed ideas to this work, and his own Metacritique was based on the ms. of it which Hamann sent to him; cf. Clark, op. cit., p. 397; for Hamann and Kant, see Streitberg, op. cit., pp. 383-385.

⁴⁷J. G. Herder, Verstand und Erfahrung. Eine Metacritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartnoch, 1799); Suphan, op. cit., XXI, pp. 1-339.

⁴⁸Clark, op. cit., p. 405.

⁴⁹Cf. Streitberg, op. cit., p. 389.

⁵⁰Suphan, op. cit., XXI, p. 19.

⁵¹Ibid., XXI, p. 88.

Since language and thought are to this degree identical, language is itself the only means by which Reason may be analyzed; here too Herder echoes the cry of Hamann:

Language is the criterion of Reason, and as of every true science, so of the intellect. He who makes a tangle of language, suppose it were to happen even through the most clever sort of shrewdness, makes a tangle of science, makes a tangle of the reason of those people who listen to it. And this language is called critical, i.e., sufficiently definite and clear to be a criterion. Scarcely has the name critical been more misused than in the case of this critical language.⁵²

Herder's main line of attack on Kant has been called psychological, rather than philosophical. The Critique is misguided, Herder argues, because it relies on the outmoded faculty psychology of Wolff.⁵³ Far from there being a separate faculty which can be distinguished as the Reason, man's psychic activity has to be looked on as a whole. In brief, Cassirer is himself somewhat hampered by his own adulation of Kant when he says that Herder "applied the principles of Kant's critical philosophy to the study of human language."⁵⁴ Herder's comparative and inductive method could not be further from the aprioristic approach of Kant.

The traditional claim that Humboldt himself was a Kantian, even if of a Fichtean sort, is particularly in need of modification in the matter of the relationship between thought and language.⁵⁵ Here Humboldt

⁵²Ibid., XXI, p. 317.

⁵³Cf. Clark, op. cit., p. 399.

⁵⁴Ernst A. Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," Word, I (August, 1945), p. 116.

⁵⁵Cf. ante pp. 18-20 and post, pp. 101-104.

owed as much to the critics of Kant as to Kant himself. Although it may be true that "the line Hamann--Humboldt . . . is by no means straight,"⁵⁶ still the continuity of the central Hamannian tradition in Humboldt's work is clear. So far as the problem of the relationship of language and thought goes, Herder has to be seen as the mediator of Hamannian ideas to Humboldt and his successors.

Humboldt's earliest essay on language dealt with its relation to thought;⁵⁷ written some three years before the appearance of Herder's Metacritique, this piece is reminiscent of Locke as much as of Hamann and Herder. Humboldt begins by stating that the essence of thought lies in the power of "reflection," which consists in separating what is being thought now from what has been thought in the past. He goes on to argue that reflection of this sort depends on giving some sensible form to the ideas which are combined in the process of thinking, since thinking consists in the combination of ideas which have been disassociated from the subject; and that language provides the medium in which ideas are provided with a sensible vehicle:

Now the sensible denotation of the units to which certain parts of the thought are joined, so as to be set like parts against other parts of a larger whole, and like an object over against the subject, is called in the widest sense of the word: language.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Comment by Phillip Merlan; cf. Hamann News-Letter, I (May, 1955), p. 3.

⁵⁷Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über Denken und Sprechen"; Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), VII, pp. 581-583; Leitzmann estimates the date of composition to be 1795-1796.

⁵⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 581.

Since reflection demands in this way the objectification of the units with which it operates, language and reflectional thought must have been co-original; language marked the beginnings of human rationality:

Language began therefore immediately and at once with the first act of reflection, and just as mankind awoke to self-consciousness from the stupidity of desire, in which the subject consumed the object, so then is also the word as it were the first impulse which man gives himself, in order to stand still all of a sudden, to see and orient himself.⁵⁹

The sounds which are the external evidence of language therefore accompany the externalization of objects; the separation of object from subject makes possible, and in fact demands, the utterance of sound:

The signs of language are therefore necessarily sounds, and according to the secret analogy which exists between all human capabilities, man must, as soon as he clearly recognizes an object as separate from himself, also immediately utter the sound which has to signify the same thing.⁶⁰

At this early stage, then, Humboldt sees language as very closely consequent on thought, although secondary to it in the sense that the dissociation of object from subject antedates than sensible symbolization of the object necessary to subsequent reflection.

An extended discussion of the relationship between language and thought formed part of Humboldt's Letter to M. Abel-Rémusat, written in 1825 or 1826.⁶¹ As in his earliest treatment of the subject, Humboldt

⁵⁹Ibid., VII, pp. 581-582.

⁶⁰Ibid., VII, p. 582.

⁶¹Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Lettre à M. Abel-Rémusat, sur la Nature des Formes Grammaticales en Général et sur le Génie de la Langue Chinoise en Particulier," Journal Asiatique, IX (August, 1826), pp. 115-123 (parts only); Leitzmann, op. cit., V, pp. 254-308.

here again leans towards a close identification of the two; and he again suggests that they were co-original, and alludes to the "primitive agreement which exists between thought and language,"⁶² and implies that man "could not think without the help of speech."⁶³ But although it is true, Humboldt says, that language began at the same time as thought, and although one would be unable to think except through the medium of language, yet a distinction can be made between the activities of thinking and speaking, and indeed between the forms of thought and the forms of the language in which it is expressed. For Humboldt here presents language as the medium which carries thought after it has already been shaped. "My object," he writes, has been solely to show that man never ceases to make a distinction between thought and speech . . ."⁶⁴

Such a distinction can be made just because of the discrepancies which arise between what is thought and what it is subsequently possible to say. The conversion of thought into language may involve additions, or more probably subtractions. "Thought," Humboldt says, "is only the same in the form in which it was conceived by its author."⁶⁵ Thought has to be converted or transformed into language. Yet even though there may be losses of precision in these processes, the very fact that language is partially restrictive means that thought, too, is to the same extent trammelled. Humboldt concludes that "there is no doubt: thought, free

⁶²Ibid., V, p. 261.

⁶³Ibid., V, p. 290.

⁶⁴Ibid., V, p. 291.

⁶⁵Ibid., V, p. 288.

from the bonds of speech, would appear to us as more pure and more of a whole."⁶⁶ Although thought is to an extent independent of language, yet account still has to be taken of "the influence which languages exert on the spirit by means of a rich and varied grammatical structure."⁶⁷ There is, then, a reciprocal influence between thought and language; thought may have an effect on changing the structure of a language; yet it is inhibited in the attempt through the tendencies expressed in the language as it already exists.

It may be maintained therefore that Humboldt's views on the relationship between language and thought are closely parallel to the opinions of Hamann.⁶⁸ Humboldt echoes the tenor of Hamann's philosophy of language when he refers to the organization of sense experience through language, and writes:

Without this constant transformation and retransformation in which language plays a decisive part even in silence, no conceptualization and therefore no true thinking is possible.⁶⁹

Humboldt sees that language is the necessary accompaniment of thought because it allows inner mental processes to be objectified and thus made sensible:

⁶⁶ Ibid., V, p. 291.

⁶⁷ Ibid., V, p. 290.

⁶⁸ Cf. John Orr (trans.), Iorgu Iordan: An Introduction to Romance Linguistics / Its Schools and Scholars (London: Methuen, 1937), p. 113.

⁶⁹ Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 55; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist Without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 289.

Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, which is completely psychic, completely inward, and to a certain extent temporary and without trace, becomes in speech, by means of sound, outward and able to be apprehended by the senses.⁷⁰

It only remained for Humboldt to stress that the forms of language determine the forms of thought, and that languages differ demonstrably in structural form, for him to arrive at a statement of linguistic relativity at the level of the differential effects of language structures on mental processes: "thinking is not merely dependent on language in general, but, up to a certain degree, on each specific language."⁷¹ The anti-Enlightenment tradition running back through Herder to Hamann is here combined with the more recent results stemming from the inductive and comparative study of actual languages.

But there were other reasons for Humboldt to arrive at a position of this sort. Herder, besides his Hamannian emphasis on the identity of language and thought, was also himself heir and apostle of another comparativistic tradition, that accounted for differences between natural languages in terms of environment and national character. The debt which Humboldt owed to this parallel tradition of eighteenth-century thought will be taken up in the following chapter.

⁷⁰Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 53.

⁷¹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 21; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 245.

CHAPTER V

ENVIRONMENT, NATIONAL CHARACTER, AND LANGUAGE

In terms purely of the sorts of evidence adduced, theories of linguistic relativity might be placed in two classes. In the first class would fall those theories which put forward as evidence of the different effects of different languages only structural descriptions of the languages themselves and their formal differences, without any attempt to explain how such language differences arose in the first place. In the second class of theories would fall those which trace the different effects of different languages on perception, thought, and other activities to the cultural or other conditions which initially produced the structural differences in the languages under analysis. By the terms of a theory falling into this second class, languages have different effects just because the conditions which produced the various languages were themselves demonstrably different. Theories about the effects of the differences between languages which will be discussed in this chapter fall into the second of these classes.

Attempts to explain the multiplicity of languages go back at least to the Biblical account of the Tower of Babel. In the eighteenth century, a new approach to the problem developed from the more general attempt to explain the variety of human customs in terms of the environment. In the early phases of environmentalist thinking, the natural environment was put forward as the determining influence which had produced differences in national character. Later, differences between languages were similarly

attributed to environmental factors. The debate about language differences therefore came to be carried on in terms of the three variables of environment, national character, and language.

At least three sorts of relationship may be envisaged between these variables. In the first case, environment is viewed as shaping national character, and national character, in its turn, as shaping language. In the second case, both national character and language are considered to be shaped equally and directly by the environment. In the third case, language is seen as shaped by environment, and as shaping national character. This ordering of these three sorts of relationship corresponds roughly to the order in which the three viewpoints emerged. The belief that environment shaped language developed as a special illustration of the effect of environment on national character; at first regarded more as an aspect of national character, language then came to be viewed as being shaped directly by the environment. From this position it was a short step to seeing language as itself important as an influence on national character, although perhaps itself originally shaped by environment.

Only the last of these three positions can properly be regarded as a version of linguistic relativity, since only in this stage of the historical development was language seen as being the independent variable and national character the dependent variable. Contemporary theories of linguistic relativity suggest a relationship between culture and language. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, attempts were made to establish the corresponding relationship between national character and language.

Humboldt's own views on the relationship between environment, national character, and language can be traced to three sources that are partially separable for the purposes of analysis. In the first place, the identification of the speakers of the German language with the German nation sprang from the main tradition of environmentalist thought, that in one version saw the character and language of a nation as equally dependent on the influence of a common environment exerted over a long historical span. Second, the close identification of the German nation with speakers of the German language sprang from a specifically literary and aesthetic concern with the status of German literature in relation to English and particularly French literature.¹ Attempts to enhance the status of German literature by drawing attention to the literary potentialities of the German language inevitably involved the contention that the German language was the necessary expressive vehicle for what was best in the German genius. In its turn, this concern was one facet of a nascent German nationalism which was given new impetus by the defeat of Prussia at the hands of Napoleon in 1806.² The common Romantic identification of language and nationality was made particularly strongly in Germany, where language was "almost the only bond" of national sentiment.³

¹W. W. Chambers, "Language and Nationality in German Pre-Romantic and Romantic Thought," Modern Language Review, XLI (October, 1946), p. 382.

²R. F. Jones and G. H. Turnbull (trans.), Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation (Chicago and London: Open Court, 1922), p. xviii.

³Howard Becker and Harry Elmer Barnes, Social Thought from Lore to Science (New York: Dover, 1961), II, p. 488.

In the third place, Humboldt's views on the close interrelationship between national character and language had a still more personal source in his own early Classical studies. These three sources of Humboldt's views will be dealt with in this order, before an examination is made of his own contributions to the discussion.

Despite the specific political impetus given to the German national language movement in the opening decade of the nineteenth century, the identification of language and nationality, in the sense both of seeing the speakers of the same language as essentially constituting a nation, and also of believing that the members of a nation should speak the same language, goes back in Germany at least to the middle of the seventeenth century.⁴ Such a view was to gain added strength from environmentalist theory.

One of the first men to propose that differences in environment were the cause of differences between nations and human institutions was the sixteenth-century-French writer, Bodin; his theory had some influence in Germany.⁵ In the eighteenth century in France, theories about the influence of environment on men and institutions were developed further by Montesquieu and Buffon; Montesquieu stressed particularly the influence of climate.⁶ It was not long before writers in Germany turned to environmental factors to account for the variety of natural languages.

⁴Chambers, loc. cit.

⁵Armin P. Keller, "Herder's Conception of Milieu," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXIII (1924), p. 217.

⁶Ibid., p. 218.

Among the first to adopt a position of this sort was Gottsched.⁷ Gottsched adds to his list of the environmental factors which have an affect on language certain cultural activities. He also mentions the influence of other languages:

The condition of men, the variations of climate, of wind, of food, of drink, the remoteness of countries, the change of seasons, wars, victories, the movements of peoples, the procession of new crops, religions and sciences, the effects of foreign languages bring about the variability and forms of language.⁸

Despite the suggestiveness of this list, and the fact that it was "the first statement of the influence of environment: on language,"⁹ Gottsched did not pursue the matter in greater detail.

At about the same period as Gottsched was writing, Winckelmann put forward similar theories to account for the differences between languages. In his Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Words in Painting and Sculpture, published in 1755,¹⁰ he traced the differences between languages to differences in the organs of speech, and these in their turn to differences in climate.¹¹ Similar ideas were again expressed by Winckelmann in his

⁷Chambers, op. cit., p. 384.

⁸Quoted by Chambers, ibid.; Reichel argues that Gottsched influenced Humboldt's ideas about language; cf. Eugen Reichel, Gottsched (Berlin: Gottsched, 1908-1912), II, pp. 503, 508; Gottsched is also claimed to have anticipated the central conceptions of language held by Hamann and Herder; cf. Reichel, ibid., II, p. 520.

⁹Chambers, loc. cit.

¹⁰Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Gedancken uber die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Mahlerei und Bildhauer-Kunst (Friedrichstadt: 1755).

¹¹Koller, op. cit., p. 225.

History of the Art of Antiquity, published nine years later.¹²

Comparable opinions on the relationship between language and environment were held by Hamann, who was himself in debt for these ideas to Buffon and Montesquieu.¹³

It was symbolic of the times that in 1759 the Prussian Academy had offered a prize for an essay On the Influence of Opinions on Language and of Language on Opinions.¹⁴ Michaelis' prize-winning essay¹⁵ again took up the question of the relationship of environment and language, but dealt more particularly with the correspondences between language and national character. Herder referred to Michaelis' essay as "certainly a high-point among what the Germans philosophized about language."¹⁶

Despite the suggestive remarks of writers such as Gottsched, Winckelmann, and Michaelis, however, the first full statement of the relationships between environment, national character, and language is found in the writings of Herder himself.¹⁷ Herder was influenced in his

¹²Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Geschichte der Kunst der Alterthums (Dresden: 1764); cf. Koller, op. cit., p. 226.

¹³Koller, op. cit., p. 224.

¹⁴Chambers, loc. cit.

¹⁵Johann David Michaelis, De l'Influence des Opinions sur le Langage et du Langage sur les Opinions (Bremem: 1762).

¹⁶Bernhard Suphan (ed.), Herders sammtliche Werke (Berlin: Weidemann, 1877-1913), I, p. 529; cf. Koller, op. cit., p. 232. Michaelis is mentioned at least once by Humboldt; cf. Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), VII, p. 329.

¹⁷Koller, op. cit., p. 228.

environmentalist thinking by Kant, and through Kant by Buffon and Montesquieu,¹⁸ by Hamann, and by Winckelmann.¹⁹ At the age of twenty, five years after the publication of Michaelis' treatise, Herder wrote an essay Concerning Diligence in Several Learned Tongues,²⁰ in which he traced the differing qualities of languages to both climate and the customs of the nations who spoke them; he takes up the position of Winckelmann that climate has an effect on the organs of speech, and in this way upon the sounds of language. The statement loses in precision what it gains in forcefulness and imagery:

When the children of dust undertook that structure that menaced the clouds--the Tower of Babel--, then the pleasure--cup of confusion was poured out over them, their families and dialects were transplanted in divers regions of the earth; and there came into being a thousand languages according to the climate and the customs of a thousand nations. If the oriental burns here under a hot zenith, then his bellowing mouth also streams forth a fervid and impassioned language. There the Greek flourishes in the most voluptuous and mildest climate; his body is, as Pindar expresses it, suffused with grace, his organs of speech are fine, and among them, therefore, originated that fine Attic speech. The Romans had a more vigorous language. The martial Germans spoke still more stoutly; the sprightly Gaul invents a saltatory and softer speech; the Spaniard imparts to his a solemn appearance, even though it be only by mere sounds; the slothful African stammers brokenly and

¹⁸ Koller, op. cit., p. 221.

¹⁹ Koller, op. cit., p. 224.

²⁰ Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Ueber den Fleiz in mehreren gelehrten Sprachen," Gelehrte Beytrage zu den Rigischen Anzeigen aufs Jahr 1764, number 24; Suphan, op. cit., I, pp. 1-7; cf. Koller, op. cit., p. 229; cf. also Robert T. Clark, Herder / His Life and Thought (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1955), p. 54.

droopingly. . . . Thus transformed itself this plant--
human speech--according to the soil that nourished
it and the celestial air that drenched it: it became
a Proteus among the nations.²¹

It was in the collections of Fragments²² on contemporary German literature that Herder developed a fuller and less impressionistic theory of the importance of environment for language and its development. In the first collection of these essays, published in 1768, Herder describes the questions he is proposing to answer in these words:

How far has the natural manner of thinking of the Germans an influence on their language? And the language upon their literature? How much can be explained from the nature of their circumstances and organs of speech? How far may her wealth and poverty according to the testimonies of history have arisen from their manner of thinking and mode of life? How far also do the grammatical rules keep parallel with the laws of their manner of thinking? And how can the idioms be explained from their manner of thinking? What revolutions has the German language had to undergo in her vital parts?²³

In answering these questions, Herder presents the language of a nation as the repository of all that has happened to that nation throughout history, as the expression of the nation's deepest thoughts:

Every nation has its own storehouse of such ideas which have been turned into symbols, and this is its national language: a store which has existed through the centuries, which has suffered increases and decreases, like moonlight, which has experienced more revolutions and changes than a royal treasury under different successors ²⁴

²¹Suphan, op. cit., I, pp. 1-2.

²²Johann Gottfried von Herder, Fragmente ueber die neuere deutsche Literatur (1767-1768); Suphan, op. cit., I, pp. 139-531.

²³Suphan, ibid., I, pp. 148-149; quoted by Koller, op. cit., p. 323; trans. Koller.

²⁴Quoted by Heintel; cf. Erich Heintel (ed.), Johann Gottfried Herder Sprachphilosophische Schriften (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1960), p. 95.

Fichte, as part of his attempt to reconcile the views of Kant and Herder,²⁵ again took up the discussion of environment. In his treatment of the differences between the German and French nations, however, contained in the series of lectures published in 1808 as Addresses to the German Nation,²⁶ Fichte adds his own brand of nationalistic sentiment. He bases his argument in the fourth and fifth lectures on the fact that the Germans have spoken the same language from time immemorial, whereas the French people, for example, adopted a version of Latin:

The first and immediately obvious difference between the fortunes of the Germans and the other branches which grew from the same root is this . . . the former retained and developed the original language of the ancestral stock, whereas the latter adopted a foreign language and gradually reshaped it in a way of their own.²⁷

Rejecting here the contention that environment has much effect on national life, Fichte develops his argument by stressing the point that it is the long historical connection between language and national life that is the important thing:

More important [than environment] . . . and in my opinion the cause of a complete contrast between the Germans and the other peoples of Teutonic descent, is the second change, the change in language. Here . . . it is not a question of the special quality of the language retained by the one branch or adopted by the other; on the contrary, the importance lies solely in the fact that in the one case something native is retained, while in the other case something foreign is adopted . . . for men are formed by language far more than language is formed by men.²⁸

²⁵Clark, op. cit., p. 398.

²⁶Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Reden an die deutsche Nation (1808); cf. Chambers, op. cit., pp. 387-388.

²⁷Jones and Turnbull, op. cit., p. 54.

²⁸Ibid., p. 55.

Implicit here is the idea of an original congruence between language and national character; while the concluding statement, although acknowledging the mutual dependency between the users of a language and the language itself, is already a statement of the independence of language as against character, and a foreshadowing of the sort of position that Humboldt would adopt. Fichte, like Herder, sees the language of a people as the repository of the whole of its history; and in the case of a living language, such as German, he is able to suggest that "from the idea and its designation a keen eye . . . could not fail to reconstruct the whole history of the nation's culture."²⁹

On account of the European fame of the writer, the best known statement of the relationship between national character and language offered in the early nineteenth century was undoubtedly that of Madame de Staël. In the chapter of her treatise On Germany,³⁰ which appeared five years after Fichte's Addresses, where she too compares German and French, this time as languages suitable for polite conversation, she prefaces her remarks with some more general comments on the relationship between language and national character:

In studying the spirit and character of a language, we learn the philosophical history of the opinions, manners, and habits of nations; and the modifications which languages undergo must throw considerable light on the progress of thought The French, having been spoken more generally than any other European dialect, is at once polished by use and sharp-edged for effect. No language is more clear and rapid, none indicates more

²⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁰ Madame la Baronne de Staël-Holstein, De L'Allemagne (London: 1813).

lightly or explains more clearly what you wish to say. The German accomodates itself much less easily to the precision and rapidity of conversation.³¹

In a later chapter Madame de Staël identifies the sounds of a language with the nationality of its speakers. Learning to speak a foreign language, she writes, is far harder than to learn a musical melody; indeed, "a long succession of years, or the first impressions of childhood, can alone render us capable of imitating this pronunciation, which comprehends whatever is most subtle and undefinable in the imagination, and in national character."³² Developing her discussion of the sounds of language, she puts forward a view of the relationship between climate and the sounds of language which is reminiscent particularly of Winckelmann:

The air we breathe has much influence on the sounds we articulate: the diversity of soil and climate produces very different modes of pronouncing the same language. As we approach the sea-coast, we find the words become softer . . . but when we ascend towards the mountains, the accent becomes stronger . . .³³

Although Madame de Staël's book was rather a compilation of current opinions than an original exploration, the inclusion of this sort of statement demonstrates that environmentalist thinking of this somewhat naive sort was still alive; and yet despite attempts to show the dependence of national character and language on various aspects of the environment, it has to be added that the spirit (Geist) of a nation was

³¹O. W. Wright (trans.), Madame the Baroness de Staël-Holstein: Germany (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1860-1861), I, p. 90.

³²Ibid., I, p. 183.

³³Ibid., I, p. 184.

in the main taken by the German Romantic writers as a given which was essentially inexplicable.³⁴

Besides the application of environmentalist theory to the problem of language diversity, there was in Germany in the late eighteenth century a second reason for a close identification to be made between the German language and the German national character. For much of the century, German taste has been under considerable French influence; but with the development of a new interest in such things as German folk-tales, and particularly after the French Revolution, there was a strong reaction to this former French cultural dominance.³⁵ Efforts were made to revivify German literature, and these entailed efforts to develop the German language more fully as a literary medium. The national honor of Germany was seen as partially dependent on the healthy state of the German language; German was viewed as the symbol of German culture, and as its proper expression. In addition, attempts to improve the German language continued to be made by Enlightened thinkers.³⁶

In the eighteenth century, therefore, efforts to make improvements in the status of the German language drew strength from these two sources. On the one hand, writers in the spirit of the Enlightenment argued that German should be improved as a vehicle for human Rationality; on the other, pre-Romantic and Romantic writers, with their stress on the historical

³⁴Becker and Barnes, op. cit., II, p. 489.

³⁵Chambers, op. cit., p. 387.

³⁶Cf. ante, p. 63.

continuity of German literature, argued that the German language should be allowed to develop naturally as the proper expressive medium of the national literary character. In this area the Enlighteners and the Romantics at times found themselves in general agreement about ends, despite wide disagreement about means. But it was the Romantic writers who coupled this crusade most thoroughly with the identification of the national character with the national language.

Efforts to improve the German language had been made by the Language Societies (Sprachgesellschaften) in the seventeenth century; and in a work published just before the turn of the seventeenth century, Unexpected Thoughts, Concerning the Employment and Improvement of the German Language,³⁷ Leibnitz had laid down general policies directed towards the purification and betterment of German while identifying the German nation with its users. Herder, in the second half of the eighteenth century, similarly linked his praise of the German literary language to a nationalistic impulse.

Herder's views on the interrelationships of environment, national character, and language were widely diffused in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth; besides his own reader of Herder,³⁸ these ideas would have come to Humboldt from a number of directions. He may well have read the opinions of Winckelmann

³⁷ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der deutschen Sprache (1697).

³⁸ Cf. Robert Leroux, Guillaume de Humboldt / La Formation de sa Pensée jusqu'en 1794 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1932), pp. 216, 230, 254, 359, 384, 409, 410, 428.

and Gottsched on this topic as well.³⁹ He clearly approved of Fichte's Addresses;⁴⁰ and as a close friend he would naturally be among the first to read Madame de Staël's book.⁴¹

But long before his interest took a specifically linguistic turn, Humboldt had studied the Classical cultures through the medium of their languages, and such philological studies must also have led him towards an identification of language and nation; they may be seen as a third source of ideas later to be developed along relativistic lines. The famous Greek scholar, Wolf, who was one of Humboldt's early teachers,⁴² suggested in an essay published in 1807 that the philologist was really studying "the Biography of a Nation,"⁴³ and further argued that a language indicates the forms of national thought.⁴⁴ Humboldt's work in Greek philology contains similar statements. In his essay on The Study of Antiquity, composed in 1793,⁴⁵ Humboldt had discussed the Greek language

³⁹Humboldt refers to Winckelmann at least once; cf. Leitzmann, op. cit., II, p. 249; Humboldt mentions Gottsched in a discussion of Leibnitz; cf. Leitzmann, ibid., VII, p. 426.

⁴⁰The Addresses influenced Humboldt's educational thinking; he selected Fichte to be Professor of Philosophy at Berlin in 1810; cf. Jones and Turnbull, op. cit., p. xxi.

⁴¹Humboldt mentioned Mme. de Staël's book in a letter to his wife dated 7 November 1808; cf. Albert Leitzmann, "Wilhelm von Humboldt und Frau von Staël," Deutsche Rundschau, CLXXI (1917), p. 90.

⁴²Theodor Benfey, Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft (Munich: J. G. Cotta, 1869), p. 516; but cf. also Clark, op. cit., p. 377.

⁴³The phrase is Oertel's; cf. Hans Oertel, Lectures on the Study of Language (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1902), p. 10.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁵Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über das Studium des Altertums und des griechischen insbesondere" (1793); Leitzmann, op. cit., I, pp. 255-281; cf. Robert Leroux, op. cit., pp. 397-398.

as the reflection of the Greek character; at the conclusion of his analysis he writes:

Individual examples of the design of the formation of words, of inflexions and combinations, could demonstrate at this point the agreement of the language of the Greeks with their character.⁴⁶

Although Humboldt's point in this analysis is that the excellence of Greek lay just in the fact that it was uncontaminated by foreign elements, and thus had the greatest possible congruence with Greek culture, the method of investigation points forward to later comparative approaches.

Comparable problems had thus been in his mind for many years, when Humboldt set down his first major discussion of the relationship between national character and language in his essay On the National Character of Languages,⁴⁷ which was written in 1822. Humboldt here takes the position that the character and language of a nation exercise a mutual influence upon each other. In general, since man thinks and feels only through language, language has an effect on national character:

It is true, and on the whole the feeling of conviction about the matter already makes itself felt from one case, that the mere peculiarity of language exercises influence on the nature of nations ⁴⁸

Languages, Humboldt argues, are certainly not entirely shaped by national character, since "there also resides in every language an original character and type of effect."⁴⁹ But despite what is peculiar in this way

⁴⁶Leitzmann, op. cit., I, p. 266.

⁴⁷Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber den Nationalcharakter der Sprachen," [1822]; first published in the Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft, XIII (1882), pp. 211-232; Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, pp. 420-435.

⁴⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 430.

⁴⁹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 424.

to a particular language, it is wrong to suppose that the sensibilities of a people are shaped only by their language. There is a close identity between national character and language, but it may well be that language itself is only an expression of deeper lying factors:

The individuality of nations and ages is mixed so intimately with that of languages, that one would do wrong to attribute to the latter what completely or for the most part belongs to the first named circumstances and against which languages maintain themselves only on sufferance.⁵⁰

The characteristics of any language have therefore to be attributed to both the original peculiarity of the language and to the influence of national character; for "if one compares the nation with language, in the latter finally an original character is fused into a unity with a character received from the nation."⁵¹ At this point the debt to the Fichtean formulation is very apparent. Fichte had argued in his Addresses that there had been originally one common language that had been influenced subsequently by the physiological characteristics of the various peoples, as well as by their cultural experiences, to yield eventually the diversity of known languages:

The pure human language, in conjunction first with the speech-organs of the people when its first sound was uttered, and the product of these, in conjunction further with all the developments which this first sound in the given circumstances necessarily acquired--all this together gives as its final result the present language of the people.⁵²

⁵⁰Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 423.

⁵¹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 424.

⁵²Jones and Turnbull, op. cit., p. 57.

The historical stress given to the discussion by Fichte is just as prominent in Humboldt's presentation. The real difficulty in deciding just to what extent a language has influenced, and been influenced by, national character lies in the fact that the origins of both nations and languages are lost in the past. Neither nations nor languages have definite dates of origin, and it is therefore impossible to date the time at which nation and language began to influence each other:

Indeed here also one may not, at least historically, assume an equally definite point at which a nation received its language in the beginning, when the origin of nations themselves is only a passage in a continuing progression, and a starting point for a nation is just as little thinkable as one for a language.⁵³

In his later works, Humboldt expresses various views on the relationship between national character and language, and leaves his reader with the impression of unresolved ambiguities. In some passages, Humboldt's views about the closeness of the relationship between national character and language are extreme. In one place he suggests such a perfect correlation between the two that either language or national character is said to be fully determined if the other is known:

The spiritual characteristics and the linguistic structure of a people stand in a relationship of such indissoluble fusion that, given one, we should be able to derive the other from it entirely.⁵⁴

At another time, Humboldt takes an equally extreme position about the congruence between the two variables, though here he suggests that

⁵³Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 424.

⁵⁴Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 42; trans Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 277.

language is the dependent one:

Language is the external manifestation, as it were, of the spirit of a nation. Its language is its spirit and its spirit its language; one can hardly think of them as sufficiently identical.⁵⁵

In a further, undeniably ambiguous, development of this argument, any decision as to the genetic priority of national language or national character is avoided, while in the next breath language is even more clearly stated to be the dependent variable:

But without wishing to decide the priority of [language or national character] we must look upon the spiritual energy of a nation as the real explanatory principle and as the true cause of the differences to be found in various languages, because this spirit alone stands alive and independent in our world; its language but clings to it.⁵⁶

To argue that Humboldt here sees language and national character as equally dependent on the "spiritual energy" of the nation does not really resolve the ambiguity, as no clear distinction is drawn between "national character" and the "energy of a nation."

In discussion of the relationship of national character and language, then, Humboldt did not clearly assign to language independence of development or determining effects on the spiritual life of peoples. Both such a stand was taken by him when he stressed another aspect of language as a mark of nationality. The posited relationship between the various known natural languages and the characteristics of the

⁵⁵Leitzmann, loc. cit.; trans Cowan; cf. Cowan, loc. cit.

⁵⁶Leitzmann, loc. cit.; trans Cowan, ibid.

nations which spoke them was closely associated in the minds of German Romantic writers with a notion of the social nature of language: that is, language came to be looked on increasingly as a social fact; a particular language was viewed as the possession of a nation, rather than of an individual speaker; and this position was intimately associated with the belief that the origin of language was to be sought in the collective activity of men, rather than in the inventiveness of one individual.⁵⁷

Humboldt himself came to regard language as a social, rather than an individual possession; and in his own thinking, as in that of his predecessors, this view was tightly bound up with a belief in the collective origin of language. Thinking perhaps of the accepted Romantic notions of the collective origins of literature, notably of the Homeric epics,⁵⁸ Humboldt writes:

The existence of language proves, however, that there are also spiritual creations which by no means originate with any individual, to be handed on to other individuals, but which come forth out of the simultaneous, spontaneous activity of all.⁵⁹

Elsewhere he suggests that language provides "a vista into those times

⁵⁷Cf. ante, pp. 30-31, 39.

⁵⁸F. A. Wolf had put forward the theory that the Homeric poems were collective works; Grimm had argued for the collective origin of folk-tales; for a sketch of this viewpoint and its relation to linguistics, cf. Otto Jespersen, Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View (New edition; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁹Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 38; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 273.

when individuals for us are lost in collectivity."⁶⁰ This view of the collective origin of language is coupled with a view of the collective nature of language in its developed stage, and with a view of the nation as the basic grouping of language users: "language is, however, no untrammelled production of individual men, but always belongs to the entire nation."⁶¹ Such a view of the origins of language, coupled with the identification of language characteristics with a national collectivity, led Humboldt to argue that language, as a social fact and as the possession of a group, places restraints on the individual. "Every language," he says, "sets certain limits to the spirit of those who speak it; it assumes a certain direction and, by doing so, excludes many others."⁶²

Here lies the basis for a strong argument for linguistic relativity. A language is viewed as developing to some extent autonomously, and for that reason as the independent variable shaping the affectual life of its speakers. But statements like this have to be set against other statements by Humboldt in which he professes faith in characteristics common to all languages. Besides being the heir of an environmentalistic, and hence relativistic tradition, he was also in debt to predecessors who had held that natural languages shared characteristics just because of their quintessentially human nature. The origins and development of Humboldt's

⁶⁰Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 17; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 255.

⁶¹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 24.

⁶²Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 621; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 245.

views on language universals form the subject of a later chapter. It is time now, however, to turn to examine the origins of that close identification made by Humboldt between language and perception, which led on to a theory of the relations between the structures of different national languages and the world-views of their users.

CHAPTER VI

LANGUAGE AND PERCEPTION

It has become almost traditional to characterise Humboldt's philosophical point of view as devotedly Kantian. Cassirer's adherence to this position has already been noted;¹ and his comments comprise only one recent example of an over-simplified view of the matter which is in some need of re-examination. The use Humboldt made of the teleological arguments of the third Critique have already been dealt with;² and the continuity from Herder's attack on Kant's first Critique to the work of Humboldt has also been described above;³ but it is not sufficient merely to take note of this latter continuity and assume that Humboldt partially rejected Kant. Indeed, the "Copernican revolution" in epistemology formed a vital part of that synthesis of ideas which resulted in Humboldt's theory of linguistic relativity. What Humboldt did eventually take issue with was the use in the study of natural languages of the scheme of a priori categories which Kant proposed as of universal validity; for Kant's followers applied this scheme to the study of natural languages in a decidedly mechanical fashion. The core idea of the first Critique has therefore to be separated from later applications of its attendant apparatus if a clear judgment is to be reached on Humboldt's relationship to Kant.

¹Supra, p. 19.

²Supra, pp. 47-50, 51.

³Supra, p. 75.

A large part of the responsibility for the impression left by numerous commentators that Humboldt's work reflects Kant's theories at all points must be attributed to Haym, whose biography of Humboldt,⁴ first published in 1856, has remained the most detailed treatment up to the present day. Haym argues, for example, that Kant had a deeper influence on Humboldt than any of his other predecessors;⁵ that Kant's version of subjectivism deeply influenced Humboldt's individualistic ideal;⁶ and that Humboldt's teleological view of history owed more to Kant than to Herder.⁷ But this stress on the Kantian inheritance of Humboldt has to be viewed in the light of the extreme Kantian dedication of Haym himself; Clark's life of Herder⁸ is partly devoted to undoing the strict Kantian interpretation which he believes Haym foisted on his subject in this case,⁹ and similar reconsideration seems needed in the case of Humboldt.

⁴R. Haym, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Lebensbild und Charakteristik (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1856).

⁵Ibid., p. 446.

⁶Ibid., p. 452.

⁷Ibid., p. 553.

⁸Robert T. Clark, Herder / His Life and Thought (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955).

⁹Ibid., pp. 2-5.

Critics of Humboldt during the period between the publication of Haym's and Cassirer's views have frequently adopted a position similar to that of these two writers.¹⁰ Steinthal, for example, said that "Humboldt's view is a Kantianised form of Spinoza's philosophy";¹¹ and Streitberg implies that the spirit of Kant's thought became second nature to Humboldt.¹² In his assessment of the part that Kantian conceptions play in Humboldt's total output, however, Spranger argues that Humboldt's major debt to Kant is found in works written during the period from 1789 to 1798;¹³ and the end of this period falls well before the time when Humboldt turned seriously to linguistic pursuits. One has indeed to take note of changes in Humboldt's thinking over the years, and of the differing views of writers who influenced him at different periods of his career.

Statements such as Streitberg's are inadequate in that they fail to take into account the fact that Humboldt, in his later writings, moved very definitely away from the indiscriminate application of the Kantian

¹⁰Cf. Arturo Farinelli, Guillaume de Humboldt et l'Espagne (Paris: 1898), p. 194, fn. 1.

¹¹H. Steinthal (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Die Sprach-philosophischen Werke (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler, 1884), p. 14; cf. ibid., pp. 230-242, for Steinthal's major discussion of Kant's influence.

¹²W. Streitberg, "Kant und die Sprachwissenschaft / Eine historische Skizze," Indogermanische Forschungen, XXVI (1909), pp. 405-406.

¹³Eduard Springer, "W. v. Humboldt und Kant," Kant-Studien, XIII (1908), p. 63; cf. ibid., pp. 58, 128.

categories in the analysis of natural languages of whatever provenance;¹⁴ but they are justified in so far as they stress the continuity from the epistemological theory contained in the first Critique to the role that Humboldt assigns to language in cognition. The newness of Humboldt's position in this matter becomes apparent when it is set against earlier theories.

Since for the British Empiricists knowledge consisted merely of the impressions left by the stream of sensations impinging on the tabula rasa of the mind, and thought merely of the combination and comparison of such impressions, perception was seen as a purely passive affair. The grouping of sensations by the individual came about solely through their spatial or temporal contiguity, and definitely not by any active imposition of groupings by the mind on the exterior flux of things. Just as knowledge was in this way a matter of single or multiple atomic sensations, so words were merely the labels attached to these single or multiple sensations after they had impinged. Language, according to such theories, did not play any part in deciding how the sensations were grouped, and far less did it play any part in determining what sensations were allowed to impinge in the first place. Just as in the contract theory of the origin of language adhered to equally by the British Empiricists and the French Rationalists language was considered to have arisen after the emergence of society and Reason,¹⁵ so in their epistemological theories

¹⁴ Cf. post, chapter VII.

¹⁵ Supra, p. 21.

it played no important part, but was merely a means of transmitting knowledge that had already been acquired.

There was little difficulty about the status of words in the sensationalist philosophy of Locke, for example. On the opening page of the third book of the Essay,¹⁶ Locke speaks of words as "signs of internal conceptions"¹⁷ and "marks for the ideas within [the individual's] own mind."¹⁸ In Locke's theory, of course, "internal conceptions" and "ideas" are all to be traced back to sensations in the final analysis; and so are all words:

It may also lead us a little toward the original of all our notions and knowledge, if we remark how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas; and how those which are made use of to stand for actions and notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations . . . and I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas.¹⁹

Basically, then, Locke's conception of language is not so different from that of the logical atomists of more recent years.

Harris, indeed, in the discussion of semantics in his Hermes,²⁰

¹⁶Alexander Campbell Fraser (ed.), John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (new edition; New York: Dover Publications, 1959).

¹⁷Ibid., II, p. 3.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., II, pp. 4-5.

²⁰James Harris, Hermes or a Philosophical Enquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (third edition; London: John Nourse and Paul Vaillant, 1771); for the influence of Harris in Germany and on Humboldt, cf. ante, Chapter II, fn. 71.

first published in 1751, could write that "one may be tempted to call LANGUAGE a kind of PICTURE OF THE UNIVERSE,"²¹ but even he finds objection to this conception. It is interesting that in the passage in which Harris debates this view, the term "express" comes in:

There never was a Language, nor indeed can possibly be framed one, to express the Properties and real Essences of things, as a Mirrour exhibits their Figures and their Colours.²²

The shift from contract theories of the origin of language to expressive theories has already been described;²³ and it may at least be suggested that the active role which Humboldt assigned to the individual language-user in the process of cognition fitted in well enough with the stress laid by theories of the latter sort on the active role of the individual in the original expressive genesis of language, as well as in its continued shaping at later stages, particularly by poets; and Harris's dissatisfaction in this passage with the mirror analogy of language, when taken in the context of his whole book, seems to stem partly from the first stirrings of pre-Romantic expressive theory.

It is to the technical philosophy of Kant's first Critique,²⁴ however, the first edition of which was published when Humboldt was

²¹Ibid., pp. 329-330.

²²Ibid., p. 336.

²³Supra, Chapter II.

²⁴Norman Kemp Smith (trans.), Immanuel Kant: Critique of Pure Reason (revised edition; London: Macmillan, 1956); this translation is largely of the second (B) edition.

fourteen, that one has to turn for the genesis of his conception of the active role played by language in perception.

Although a commentator such as Weldon²⁵ may find it useful, and congruent with his own inclinations as a logical positivist, to deal with the first Critique as involving essentially the elucidation of linguistic problems,²⁶ Kant certainly does not deal directly with language; but his attempts to reconcile the legacies of Cartesian Rationalism and the Empiricism of Locke and Hume²⁷ clearly entailed the need for a re-assessment of the part played by language in the process of acquiring knowledge about what there is outside the self.

Despite the immense density of the Critique, in the preface to the second edition Kant says straightforwardly enough:

If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter a priori; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility. Since I cannot rest in these intuitions . . . either I must assume that the concepts, by means of which I obtain this determination, conform to the object, or else I assume that the objects, or what is the same thing, that the experience in which alone, as given objects, they can be known, conform to the concepts. In the former case, I am again in the same perplexity as to how I can know anything a priori in regard to the objects. In the latter case the outlook is more hopeful. For experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding; and understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being a priori. They find expression in a priori concepts to which all objects of experience necessarily conform, and with which they must agree.²⁸

²⁵See: T. D. Weldon, Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" (second edition; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

²⁶Cf. ibid., pp. 152-153.

²⁷For a statement of this standard formulation see: Clark, op. cit., p. 398.

²⁸Kemp Smith, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

It would be otiose here to go further into Kant's system, and rehearse the method whereby mathematics and the assumptions of its systems are used to arrive at the position maintained in this passage; for present purposes, it may be sufficient to suggest that Humboldt was to replace the Kantian faculty of Understanding by language²⁹ in his own version of epistemological theory; more specifically, languages came to be seen by Humboldt as the a priori frameworks of cognition.

The most important thing that Humboldt took from Kant was the argument that what is perceived is the result of an interaction between the human individual and the external world, between the subject and the object. What he added was, first, the notion that perception is structured by the active application of the framework of language to the flux of sensations, and, second, the idea that the frameworks of different languages differ. The active role assigned to language by Humboldt was in keeping with Romantic developments in aesthetic theory.

Humboldt's characteristically Romantic notions of language have been stressed above, and the parallelism between the Kantian revolution in epistemology and the new theories of Romantic writers about the perceptual processes³⁰ deserves mention. Well before Kant's time, the active role

²⁹Cf. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Wilhelm von Humboldt's Sprachphilosophie," Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung, XIV (1938), p. 109.

³⁰For these theories, see: M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), pp. 57-69; the Coleridgean formulations discussed here were, of course, heavily indebted to German models.

played by the mind in perception had been stressed by the Cambridge Neoplatonists,³¹ to whom Harris was indebted.³² Similar ideas are found in the works of Young.³³ In Germany, the aesthetics of Schelling, which were partly an attempt to reconcile some conflicts between the views of Herder and Kant,³⁴ offer a similar theory of the additions that the actively perceiving mind brings to the realm of pure sensations. Although Humboldt's statements about cognition are at times very closely dependent on Kantian formulations, the more diffuse influence of Romantic notions of the creative activity of the mind perhaps played some part in the development of his thinking.

One attempt to argue that language does not embody only the supposedly universal Kantian categories, but is also an expression of the individual's view of things, was made by Schelling in his System of Transcendental Idealism,³⁵ published in 1800. Schelling, whose work was known to Humboldt,³⁶ writes here:

³¹Ibid., p. 59; this Cambridge school drew heavily on Plotinus.

³²Cf. Otto Funke, Studien zur Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (Berne: A. Francke, 1927), pp. 6-7.

³³Abrams, op. cit., pp. 62-63; for the influence of Young in Germany, cf. ante, Chapter IV, fn. 22.

³⁴Clark, op. cit., p. 398.

³⁵Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, System des Transcendentalen Idealismus (Tübingen: 1800); cf. Emil L. Fackenheim, "Schelling's Philosophy of the Literary Arts," Philosophical Quarterly, IV (October, 1955), p. 311.

³⁶For mentions of Schelling by Humboldt, see: Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), VII, p. 201; XII, p. 605.

Language is an artistic medium superior to matter in that it is not purely particular. But neither is it, like thought, purely universal; and if it were it could not be an aesthetic medium at all. Language is at once particular act of speaking and universal content.³⁷

Although Schelling's aim here is apparently to assure the individual artist of his freedom of creative action, a secondary implication is that language, in some sense, occupies a middle position between the world of sensations and the active individual mind. Various statements by Humboldt contain very much the same opinion.

The suggestion that there is an intimate relation between language and cognition became a commonplace in German thought in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

F. Schlegel, for example, forwarded a theory about the role played by language in cognition in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Life,³⁸ published in 1828, twenty years after he had introduced the term "comparative grammar." In his third lecture, Schlegel's phraseology is partly reminiscent of that of Kant; however, there is still some hint of the belief that language, although an active product of the soul, merely labels what is already known.

Now, the soul furnishes the cognitive mind with language for the expression of its cognitions; and it is even the distinctive character of human knowledge, that it depends on language, which not only forms an essential constituent of it, but is also its indispensable organ. Language, however, the discursive, but at the same time also the

³⁷Trans. Fackenheim; cf. Fackenheim, op. cit., p. 318.

³⁸Carl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel, Philosophie des Lebens. In fünfzehn Vorlesungen gehalten . . . im Jahre 1827 (Vienna: 1828).

vividly figurative language of man, is entirely the product of the soul, which in its production first of all, and pre-eminently, manifests its fruitful and creative energy.³⁹

In a later passage, the presentation is complicated by the introduction of the faculty of Fancy, and there seems also here to be a harking back to older notions of universal, Rational grammar.

In this wonderful creation [i.e., language] the two constituent faculties of the soul--fancy and reason--play an equal and co-ordinate part. From the fancy it derives the whole of its figurative and ornamental portion To the reason, on the other hand, language owes its logical order, and its grammatical forms and laws of construction . . . [nowhere] will reason and fancy be found combining in such harmonious proportions, or working so thoroughly together, or contributing so equally to the common product, as in the wonderful production of language, and in language itself. And this is the case, not only with language in general, but also with all its species and noblest applications.⁴⁰

But here again, language is not presented as merely logical; the individual operates creatively through the Fancy.

Humboldt, without the encumbrance of this sort of aesthetic terminology, combined the central notion of Kantian epistemology with a comparative approach to languages, and as Hymes remarks, "pioneered in concern for the cognitive implications of language type."⁴¹

³⁹Trans. Morrison; cf. A. J. W. Morrison (trans.), Frederick von Schlegel: The Philosophy of Life, and Philosophy of Language (London: H. G. Bohn, 1847), p. 44.

⁴⁰Trans. Morrison; cf. ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁴¹Dell H. Hymes, "On Typology of Cognitive Styles in Language," Anthropological Linguistics, III (January, 1961), p. 23.

While Humboldt acknowledged that language is useful as a means of communication, in his more theoretical passages he in general lays greater stress on the contention that language is central to the process of perception. Without language, in fact, organized knowledge of the external world is impossible, even if cognition through the medium of a particular language is necessarily a particular organization of such knowledge, an organization which at the highest level constitutes a particular world-view.

Humboldt clearly rejects any sensationalist theory of epistemology, and any belief that the external world is composed of objects constituted as such in the absence of the perceiving individual. The theoretical debt to the Kantian distinction between the faculty of Sensibility and the faculty of Understanding is obvious in such a passage as the following from the paper entitled On Comparative Linguistics in Relation to the Various Periods of Language Development,⁴² published in 1822:

No kind of perception can be regarded as a merely receptive contemplation of an existing object. The activity of the senses must join the activity of the mind, and from this synthetic union the percept arises, becomes itself an object, as contrasted with the subjective force which created it, and, perceived by the senses, returns back to it. For this purpose speech is indispensable. For when the mental activity finds its outlet through the lips, its product returns through the ear ⁴³

⁴²Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung," Abhandlungen der historisch-philologischen Klasse der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften aus den Jahren 1820-1821 (1822), pp. 239-260; Albert Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, pp. 1-34.

⁴³Ibid., IV, p. 27; trans. Oertel; cf. Hans Oertel, Lectures on the Study of Language (New York: Charles Scribner's 1902), p. 65.

Humboldt links this epistemological argument on to the argument that languages differ not merely in matter but in form; language is our only means of objectifying the external world, but the way we achieve this differs according to the particular language which is used in operating upon what is external to the self:

The mutual interdependence of thought and word illuminates clearly the truth that languages are not really means for representing already known truths, but are rather instruments for discovering previously unrecognized ones. The differences between languages are not those of sounds and signs but those of differing world views . . . objective truth always rises from the entire energy of subjective individuality.⁴⁴

In another passage, Humboldt's debt to Kant is again very apparent, although he here implicitly takes issue with the suggestion that the table of categories of the first Critique is universally valid, in the sense of being reflected in all languages. However, Humboldt does admit that there are certain concepts of this universal nature, while stressing the particularity of most concepts used by the individual user of a particular language:

People have wishes . . . to replace the words of the various languages by universally valid signs But only a tiny part of that which is thinkable can be designated that way, because such symbols by their very nature fit only those concepts which can be produced by mere synthetic construction or are otherwise formed by rationality alone . . . everything depends on the individual way of looking at things of an individual human being whose language is an indispensable part of him.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 27; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 246.

⁴⁵Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 21; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 245.

Other passages in Humboldt's later writings echo the main point made in this paper. He stands close to Schelling's position when he says:

The sum of all words--language--is a universe which lies midway between the external, phenomenal one and our own inwardly active one.⁴⁶

Elsewhere a similar point is made; language is again seen as a realm intermediate between the individual and what is external to the individual in the contention that "man surrounds himself by a world of sounds in order to take into himself a world of objects and operate upon them."⁴⁷ On the other hand, it is suggested that there is a very close link between language and the external world as objectified through it, for "one must free oneself from the notion that language can be separated from that which it designates."⁴⁸ Here perhaps the influence of Schelling is apparent, for to Schelling it seemed impossible to separate the data of sensation from the addenda supplied by the creative Understanding.⁴⁹

In some early papers, Humboldt demonstrates that he shared with various disciples of Kant a belief that the categories in which the phenomenal world is cognized could be found codified in any and all natural languages; but as his thinking progressed, and as he came to lay increasing emphasis on the structural differences between languages,

⁴⁶Leitzmann, op. cit., III, p. 167; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 249.

⁴⁷Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 60; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 294.

⁴⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., III, p. 296, trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 236.

⁴⁹Cf. Abrams, op. cit., p. 62.

Humboldt rejected this position and adopted a comparative approach, which marked a rejection not only of these neo-Kantian suggestions, but also of a much older approach to language through the framework of universal grammar. This shift in Humboldt's orientation forms the subject matter of the next chapter.

CHAPTER VII

LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

One reason perhaps why commentators on Humboldt have been somewhat baffled in their attempts to present a neat summary of his conception of languages lies in the fact that this conception changed considerably during the period when he was writing on linguistics. Amongst other things, Humboldt's view of language universals changed considerably over the years: a rather pronounced belief in the existence of important language universals which is found mainly in papers written in the first two decades of the nineteenth century was later replaced by an emphasis on the fundamental differences between languages. Even so, traces of Humboldt's earlier position are still to be found in his later treatments of the problem.

Humboldt's earlier belief that there are important forms universally characteristic of all languages may be traced back to four separate sources. He was indebted to the French school of universal grammar for a belief in grammatical universals; he would have found in Harris a theory of lexical universals;¹ he discovered in works written under the influence of Kantian epistemology the doctrine that certain perceptual categories are reflected in all languages; and to the teleology of Kant's third Critique he was indebted for a belief that all languages share a common goal, and manifest various sorts of success in their attainment of it.

¹For the influence of Harris on Humboldt, cf. ante, chapter II, fn. 71.

The shift in Humboldt's orientation over the years may be partly explained by the increasing number of applications of a comparative approach to languages during the period; but account must also be taken of the comparative approach to societies and civilizations in general which had already developed in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, and had in fact been taken up by Humboldt in an early work. It is as though Humboldt took some time both to emancipate himself from older, Rationalistic approaches to grammar, and also fully to apply the comparative method to languages.

The work which doubtless had more influence than any other on later discussions of universal grammar was the French Port Royal grammar of Lancelot and Arnauld,² published in 1660. Numerous French works of the eighteenth century were based directly on the Port Royal grammar;³ and one of the last representatives of this tradition was Sacy, whose thinking shows little change from that of Lancelot and Arnauld.⁴ Sacy's Principles of General Grammar⁵ was first published in 1799. Found about

²Claude Lancelot and A. Arnauld, Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée Contenant les Fondemens de l'Art de Parler . . . les Raisons de ce qui est Commun à Toutes les Langues et des Principales Différences qui s'y Rencontrent. Et Plusieurs Remarques Nouvelles sur la Langue François (Paris: 1660); cf. Guy Harnois, Les Théories de Langage en France de 1660 à 1821 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1929), Chapter II; cf. also Douglas Ainslie (trans.), Benedetto Croce: Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic (second edition; London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 210.

³Harnois, op. cit., Chapter III; cf. Croce, op. cit., p. 254.

⁴Harnois, op. cit., pp. 29, 41; cf. P. W. Verburg, "The Background to the Linguistic Conceptions of Bopp," Lingua, II (1949-1950), p. 461.

⁵Antoine Isaac Sylvestre de Sacy, Principes de Grammaire Générale (1799).

1803, Sacy was one of a group of linguists studying Sanskrit in Paris; other members of this group were Bopp and F. Schlegel.⁶ In 1804, Sacy's book was translated into German,⁷ and in the following year a school text by Sacy⁸ appeared, which was also based on the canons of universal grammar. Humboldt was certainly familiar with Sacy's work,⁹ and it seems likely that it was from this source that he mainly drew for his own statements about universal grammar.

Harris's theory of lexical universals, presented in his Hermes,¹⁰ published in 1751, stems partly from his exposure to the Neoplatonism of Shaftesbury and the other members of the Cambridge school;¹¹ his position is also close to that of Locke in some respects.

After arguing that words cannot be regarded simply as Lockean tokens of ideas, since "between the Medium and themselves there is nothing

⁶Harnois, op. cit., p. 86.

⁷See: Antoine Isaac Sylvestre de Sacy, Grundsätzen der allgemeinen Sprachlehre, in einem allgemein fasslichen Vortrage (1804); cf. Verburg, op. cit., p. 462.

⁸Antoine Isaac Sylvestre de Sacy, Lehrbuch allgemeiner Grammatik, besonders für höhere Schulclassen mit Vergleichung älterer und neuerer Sprachen (1805).

⁹For mentions of Sacy by Humboldt, see: Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), IV, p. 311; V, p. 13; VI, p. 20; VII, p. 347; cf. Verburg, op. cit., p. 461.

¹⁰James Harris, Hermes or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (third edition; London: John Nourse and Paul Vaillant, 1771).

¹¹Otto Funke, Studien zur Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (Berne: A. Francke, 1927), pp. 5-6; cf. Ralph Manheim (trans.) Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume one: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 145.

CONNATURAL,"¹² Harris goes on to state that words "are symbols, and symbols of nothing else, except of GENERAL IDEAS."¹³ The implicit question is answered immediately:

--And what do we mean by GENERAL IDEAS? --We mean SUCH AS ARE COMMON TO MANY INDIVIDUALS: not only to Individuals which exist now, but which existed in ages past, and will exist in ages future; such for example, as the Ideas belonging to the words, Man, Lion, Cedar.¹⁴

Harris echoes Locke in saying that the apparent lexical differences between languages are only differences of matter and not of form:

Now it is of these COMPREHENSIVE and PERMANENT IDEAS, THE GENUINE PERCEPTIONS OF PURE MIND, that WORDS of all Languages, however different, are the SYMBOLS.¹⁵

Besides this neoplatonic theory of lexical universals, Harris also puts forward a theory of universal grammar, which follows in a long tradition of grammatical theorizing.

Although Renaissance grammarians owed their notions of universal grammatical categories to Greek and Roman writers who had originally arrived at their schemes inductively by a study of the Classical languages, the high esteem in which these languages were still held led them to regard such a scheme as of universal validity; and the relative ease with which modern European languages could be fitted into this scheme confirmed them in their belief about its universality. The original inductive source of the scheme tended to be forgotten, however,

¹²Harris, op. cit., p. 336.

¹³Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 341-342.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 372.

and later writers derived the categories of their grammars from supposedly universal characteristics of the human Reason, rather than appealing to the grammatical models offered by the Greek and Latin languages. Hermes continued the tradition of the Renaissance grammarians.¹⁶

Harris, who knew the Port Royal grammar, and refers to it approvingly as "an ingenious French Treatise,"¹⁷ speaks of "that Reasoning which is universal."¹⁸ He defines universal grammar as "that Grammar, which without regarding the several Idioms of particular Languages, only respects those Principles, that are essential to them all."¹⁹ Harris arrives at the parts of speech deductively from what are assumed to be universal mental processes; even the various moods of the verb are regarded as universal, and are derived from universal operations of the mind:

We have observed already that the Soul's leading powers are those of Perception and those of Volition We have observed also, that all Speech or Discourse is a publishing or exhibiting some part of our soul, either a certain Perception, or a certain Volition . . . hence I say the variety of MODES or MOODS.²⁰

The publication of Kant's first Critique led to a large number of works that attempted to solve the problems raised by the contrast

¹⁶Funke, op. cit., pp. 10, 33.

¹⁷Harris, op. cit., p. 80, fn. (k).

¹⁸Ibid., p. xiv.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 11.

²⁰Ibid., p. 140.

between the suggested universality of the categories in which man cognizes the external world, and the multiplicity of natural languages.²¹ The writers of these words tried in general to show that in fact all languages did manifest the supposedly universal Kantian categories, and the emphasis of these theorists was therefore once again on language universals.

Among the earlier attempts to demonstrate the presence of the Kantian categories in a natural language was that of Hermann, the Greek scholar,²² whose treatise On Needed Improvements in Greek Grammar²³ was published in 1801. Hermann comments on the high influence of Kant, and the results it had for the study of language, in these words:

For since through the most recent revolution in philosophy it came about that those who joined the sect of the Kantians tried to revolutionize the methodology of nearly all the arts and disciplines, it was easy to guess that there would be those who would begin to shape even Greek grammar to the plan of their philosophy. Which is just what happened.²⁴

Despite the carping note heard here, Hermann himself described language within the framework of the Kantian categories.²⁵

²¹Cf. Croce, op. cit., pp. 324-325.

²²Theodor Benfey, Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft und orientalischen Philologie in Deutschland seit dem Anfange des 19. Jahrhundert mit einem Ruckblick auf die früheren Zeiten (Munich: J. G. Cotta, 1869), p. 421; cf. Hans Oertel, Lectures on the Study of Language (New York: Charles Scribner's 1902), p. 26.

²³Gottfried Hermann, De Emendanda Graecae Grammaticae / Pars Prima (Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1801).

²⁴Ibid., p. 124.

²⁵W. Streitberg, "Kant und die Sprachwissenschaft / Eine historische Skizze," Indogermanische Forschungen, XXVI (1909), p. 404.

The widespread influence of Harris's work in Germany is shown in the work of Roth, another of the neo-Kantian grammarians, whose Antihermes²⁶ came out in 1795; twenty years later Roth published his textbook entitled Compendium of Pure and Universal Grammar.²⁷

But of those who applied the Kantian categories to natural languages, the most important for his influence on Humboldt was undoubtedly Bernhardt.²⁸ The latter was a pupil of Fichte, rather than of Kant directly;²⁹ the three volumes of his Grammar³⁰ were published between 1801 and 1805.

A fourth representative of the neo-Kantian school of grammarians was Vater, whose Sketch for a Universal Grammar³¹ appeared in 1801.

Humboldt's thinking about language universals was fed also from another Kantian source. The teleology of Kant's third Critique suggests

²⁶Georg Michael Roth, Antihermes oder philosophische Untersuchung über den reine Begriff der menschlichen Sprache und die allgemeine Sprachlehre (Frankfurt and Leipzig: 1795).

²⁷Georg Michael Roth, Grundriss der reinen allgemeinen Sprachlehre, zum Gebrauch für Akademien und obere Gymnasialklassen (1815).

²⁸Eva Fiesel, Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927), p. 65; cf. Benfey, op. cit., pp. 310-312.

²⁹Fiesel, op. cit., p. 65; cf. Streitberg, op. cit., p. 405.

³⁰August Ferdinand Bernhardt, Sprachlehre (1801-1805).

³¹Johann Severin Vater, Versuch einer allgemeinen Sprachlehre. Mit einer Einleitung über den Begriff und Ursprung der Sprache und einem Anhang über die Anwendung der allgemeinen Sprachlehre auf die Grammatik einzelner Sprachen und auf Pasigraphie (Halle: 1801).

a Platonic view of things, in which not only are all natural forms reflections of an archetype, but are also involved in an evolutionary process of which the final aim is the realisation of this archetype.³²

The widespread Enlightened belief that all languages are modelled on a plan dictated by universal Reason found its place in Humboldt's early thinking about language. As early as 1796 Humboldt had written to Wolf that he was looking in language for a unity underlying apparent diversity;³³ and as Brinton remarks: "It is true that [Humboldt] believed in an ideal perfection of language, to wit: that form of expression which would correspond throughout to the highest and clearest thinking."³⁴

Humboldt's first serious attempt to work out for himself a theory of grammar based on a deductive scheme derived partly from Kant is found in his contribution to the compendious Methridates,³⁵ which Vater was editing at the time.³⁶ Humboldt makes the following comment in this piece, which was written in 1811:

The fact that the Basque language possesses a particular declension for the occasion when the

³²Cf. ante, pp. 46-49.

³³Arturo Farinelli, Guillaume de Humboldt et l'Espagne (Paris: 1898), p. 193.

³⁴Daniel G. Brinton, "The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as Set Forth by William von Humboldt, with the Translation of an Unpublished Memoir by him on the American Verb," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, XXII (October, 1885), p. 310.

³⁵Johann Christoph Adelung, Mithridates, oder allgemeine Sprachkunde, mit dem Vater unser als Sprachprobe in bey nahe fünf hundert Sprachen und Mundarten (Berlin: Voss, 1806-1817).

³⁶Cf. Benfey, op. cit., p. 273; A. F. Pott, Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Sprachwissenschaft (Berlin: 1876), p. xxxix; and Streitberg, op. cit., p. 406.

subject is conceived in the active, appears to me also in respect to universal grammar not unimportant.³⁷

A normative approach is clearly enough implied here.

But Humboldt showed his greatest use of the notion of universal grammar in his paper On the Sanskrit Verb-Forms Using the Suffixes 'twa' and 'ya',³⁸ written in 1822, in which reference is made to both Hermann and Bernhardt.³⁹ In the opening words of this essay, Humboldt appears confident that a change of terminology is sufficient to accommodate exotic languages within the framework of universal grammar:

When one investigates the grammatical forms of various languages with respect to universal grammar, one runs slight danger of going astray, since one either judges these forms completely according to similar known languages, and labels them with the same names, without regard to incidental differences, or deals with them, as wholly separated in nature, outside of all connection with other languages.⁴⁰

Mentions of Kantian philosophy and universal grammar are still found in Humboldt's paper On the Relationship of Adverbs of Place to

³⁷Leitzmann, op. cit., III, pp. 256-257.

³⁸Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber die in der Sanskrit-Sprache durch die Suffixa twā and yā gebildeten Verbalformen," Indische Bibliothek, I (1823), pp. 433-473; II (1824), pp. 71-134: Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, pp. 360-417.

³⁹For mentions of Hermann, cf. ibid., IV, p. 384, 388, 391; for Bernhardt, cf. ibid., IV, pp. 388-391, 393, 396, 397.

⁴⁰Ibid., IV, p. 360.

the Pronouns in Several Languages,⁴¹ written in 1829; but they play little part in this closely argued and fully documented investigation. There is one reference to "the pure forms of conception, space and time,"⁴² but Humboldt makes a distinction between an approach to language from the standpoint of universal grammar, and a developmental approach:

Since now our universal grammars take care to start from logic, and pronouns find their place in them, in so far as they are an analysis of speech, in a different way from the way they do in a developmental treatment, which itself makes an attempt at an analysis of language.⁴³

Humboldt adds that the forms of universal grammar are only to be discovered in fully developed languages, and then only when these are looked at in a certain way:

The pure conceptions of our universal grammar are found always only in languages which have been completely formed, and even then only when they are viewed philosophically.⁴⁴

Universal grammar is clearly regarded, at this stage of the development of Humboldt's thinking, as of limited utility in the description of languages.

⁴¹Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber die Verwandschaft der Ortsadverbien mit dem Pronomen in einigen Sprachen," Abhandlungen der historisch-philologischen Klasse der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin aus dem Jahre 1829 (1832), pp. 1-26; Leitzmann, op. cit., VI, pp. 304-330; see ibid., p. 309, fn., for mention of Bernhardi; cf. R. Haym, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Lebensbild und Charakteristik (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1856), p. 447.

⁴²Leitzmann, op. cit., VI, p. 329.

⁴³Ibid., p. 305.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 306.

Although Humboldt's views clearly underwent a major change between the time of the articles written under the influence of Kant's disciples and the Port Royal grammarians,⁴⁵ his later works still contain a theory of language universals. While the argument that Humboldt never fully freed himself from the legacy of Port Royal⁴⁶ seems to put the matter too strongly, the latent, indirect influence of Kant is still found in his more mature statements.

For example, while arguing that language differences are not correlated with racial differences, Humboldt puts forward his view on the universality of one type of human characteristic:

However different man may be as to size, color, build, and facial features, his spiritual-intellectual disposition is the same.⁴⁷

Such a statement entails the belief that there are language universals that may be arrived at deductively:

For . . . there is a number of things which can be determined and defined a priori, and hence separated from all conditionalities of a given language.⁴⁸

And such universals derive from what is common to the whole of mankind: "for each language is an echo of the general nature of humanity."⁴⁹

⁴⁵Cf. Haym, op. cit., p. 436; Oertel, op. cit., p. 52.

⁴⁶See: Croce, op. cit., p. 330.

⁴⁷Leitzmann, op. cit., V, p. 196; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.), Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 237.

⁴⁸Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 22; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 245.

⁴⁹Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 27; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 251.

Several passages of the Letter to M. Abel-Rémusat,⁵⁰ first published in 1826, deal with language universals. Humboldt suggests at one stage that the forms of grammar are merely manifestations of forms of thought that are apparently regarded as universal:

It is therefore by the analysis of thought turned into words that one comes to deduce the grammatical forms of words. But this analysis does nothing but develop what is originally already in the spirit of the man endowed with the faculty of language; and to speak according to these forms, and to raise oneself to knowledge of them by reflection, are two completely different things. For man would not understand either himself, or others, if these forms were not like archetypes in his spirit ⁵¹

A little later, a belief in certain grammatical universals is stated even more clearly; and here it is also implied that the external world naturally arranges itself in certain categories, which the different parts of speech merely label:

Words place themselves naturally in the categories to which belong the things they represent. It is in this way that there exist in every language words of substantive signification, and of adjectival and verbal signification; and the ideas of these three grammatical forms are born very naturally from that fact.⁵²

But statement such as this have to be set against others of the same and later periods in which an almost diametrically opposite position is adopted; and the change which is discernible here has to be accounted

⁵⁰ Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Lettre à M. Abel-Rémusat, sur la Nature des Formes Grammaticales en Général et sur le Génie de la Langue Chinoise en Particulier," Journal Asiatique, IX (August, 1826), pp. 115-123 (parts only); Leitzmann, op. cit., V, pp. 254-308.

⁵¹ Ibid., V, p. 258.

⁵² Ibid., V, p. 259.

for in part, as already suggested, by Humboldt's membership in the first generation of comparative linguists.

If Humboldt's place in the early history of linguistics has been neglected, this may in part be due to the fact that he did not do any considerable amount of work in the Indo-European area of specialization.⁵³ Although the early history of comparative linguistics is so much connected with advances in the collection and analysis of data in this field, Humboldt was very much aware of these developments. The theoretical and empirical study of linguistic relativity, whether of a weak or strong variety, has to be seen as a branch of comparative linguistics, and Humboldt's theories and their development must be placed against the background of early comparative studies. But the comparative approach to languages itself had well established roots in German Romantic thought.

Doctrines of cultural relativism are found already well developed in Herder;⁵⁴ and Humboldt, in his Plan for a Comparative Anthropology,⁵⁵ written in 1795, assumes a similar position.⁵⁶ For Humboldt, comparative anthropology means specifically a treatment of the characteristic

⁵³Cf. Otto Jespersen, Language / Its Nature Development and Origin (new edition; New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p. 87.

⁵⁴Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," Journal of the History of Ideas, II (June, 1941), pp. 275-278.

⁵⁵Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie"; not published in Humboldt's lifetime; Leitzmann, op. cit., I, pp. 377-410; see: Wilhelm Lammers, Wilhelm von Humboldts Weg zur Sprachforschung 1785-1801 (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1936), pp. 45-50.

⁵⁶Robert Leroux, L'Anthropologie Comparée de Guillaume de Humboldt (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1958), p. 10.

psychological behavior patterns of various nations and various ages.⁵⁷ Language is barely mentioned here as one of those traits which need to be analysed in the process of establishing what such patterns are.⁵⁸ However, it has been suggested that this unpublished essay represents the earliest important statement by Humboldt of that interest in the comparative study of languages which was later to lead to much more detailed investigations, with the particular aim of discovering the world-views of different nations.⁵⁹ Meillet has argued that Humboldt should enjoy a place as one of the founders of comparative linguistics;⁶⁰ and the tenor of this early treatise supports this contention.

Certain passages show the development in Humboldt's thinking of a full dedication to empirical methods, and also of an awareness of the dangers of forcing data into a framework of paradigms arrived at inductively from other data, or deductively from such a priori philosophical systems as that of Kant. Awareness of the mistakes likely to arise from these latter types of approach is plain enough here:

Everyone adds to a foreign language his own grammatical opinions, and, if they are more complete and explicit, he projects them also upon the foreign tongue . . . and all grammar thus projected upon a language must be carefully distinguished from whatever grammar is contained in it naturally.⁶¹

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁸See: Leitzmann, op. cit., I, p. 399; cf. Leroux, op. cit., p. 24; Lammers, op. cit., p. 47.

⁵⁹Leroux, op. cit., p. 69, fn. (2).

⁶⁰A. Meillet, "Ce que la Linguistique Doit aux Savants Allemands," Scientia, XXX (April, 1923), p. 264.

⁶¹Leitzmann, op. cit., V, p. 311; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., p. 238.

A similar argument is elsewhere joined to the contention that completely faithful translation is an impossibility, a belief that was widespread in German Romantic thought.⁶² Grammar is seen as the most characteristic and inward part of a language:

There is a far greater number of concepts, and grammatical peculiarities as well, which are woven so indissolubly into the individuality of their language that they can neither be held by a thread of inner perception as hovering above all languages, nor translated from one language into another.⁶³

In the course of Humboldt's career as a linguist, a negative attitude to universal grammar was eventually replaced by a positive theory that not only are grammars of different languages structurally different, but that, since languages and thought are intimately connected, these differences are evidence of different ways of thinking and perceiving.

In the Essay on the Best Means of Ascertaining the Affinities of Oriental Languages,⁶⁴ written in 1828, there is no mention of universal grammar, and the different grammars of different languages are said to constitute the best available evidence of how different nations characteristically think:

Languages are the true images of the modes in which nations think and combine their ideas. The manner of this combination, represented by the grammar, is altogether as essential and characteristic as are the sounds

⁶²Fiesel, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶³Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 22; trans. Cowan; cf. Cowan, op. cit., pp. 245-246.

⁶⁴Wilhelm von Humboldt, "An Essay on the Best Means of Ascertaining the Affinities of Oriental Languages / Contained in a Letter Addressed to Sir Alexander Johnston, Knt., V. P. R. A. S.," Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, II (1829), pp. 213-221; Leitzmann, op. cit., VI, pp. 76-84.

applied to objects, that is to say, the words. The form of language being quite inherent in the intellectual faculties of nations, it is very natural that one generation should transmit theirs to that which follows it ⁶⁵

In his discussion in this paper of the usefulness of cognates in establishing genetic relationships between languages, Humboldt also implies that he possesses a firm belief in lexical universals, while arguing that words are borrowed much more easily than grammatical forms.

While it was only in the latter years of his career as a linguist that Humboldt freed himself from that normative approach to language that came down to him through various channels from the Enlightenment, he eventually went beyond those who concentrated on mere structural differences between languages, and saw in such differences the data he was seeking in his attempt to found that empirical science of comparative anthropology of which he had sketched in the outlines several years before he turned to the detailed study of languages.

The changes that Humboldt's conception of language universals underwent between the first and third decades of the nineteenth century constitute only one illustration of the sort of conflicts between different statements that may be discovered in his works when they are taken as a whole, without regard to the date of composition of various pieces. It is now time to bring together the threads of previous chapters, and to show how the changing theories described contributed to Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity, and what unresolved tensions their sometimes divergent tendencies left behind.

⁶⁵Ibid., VI, p. 80.

CHAPTER VIII

HUMBOLDT'S CONCEPTION OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

It would of course be wrong to suggest that Humboldt was the first to put forward a theory of linguistic relativity, at least if that term is interpreted in a loose way. The idea that there is some relation between national character and the national language had been current for a long time.

A crude comparative viewpoint is found in Harris's work, for example; Harris goes on from a statement that the characters of nations are reflected in the "genius" of their languages to an opinion that foreshadows nineteenth-century theories of comparative typology:

Nations, like single Men, have their peculiar Ideas,
... these peculiar Ideas become THE GENIUS OF THEIR
LANGUAGE ... the wisest Nations, having the most and
best Ideas, will consequently have the best and most
copious languages ¹

Statements by Herder and Hamann which much more accurately foreshadow those of Humboldt have already been mentioned.

Despite these earlier statements, however, Humboldt was the first to present a "strong" version of linguistic relativity, the first to combine ideas of comparative structuralism with ideas of the identity of language, perception, and thought, and the first to stress the resistance of the structures of languages to the efforts of individual speakers to

¹James Harris, Hermes or a Philosophical Enquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (third edition; London: John Nourse and Paul Vaillant, 1771), pp. 407-408.

change them. This concluding chapter will present a discussion of the various components of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity, and show how this conception was qualified in various ways.

The task of attempting to present a summary of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity is made harder than it might be not so much by the supposed difficulty of Humboldt's style, to which commentators have regularly called attention, as by the fact that the presentation itself, quite apart from matters of wording, contains some important logical contradictions. There are also few passages where Humboldt brings together the various threads running through his writings and presents a unified definition of language. However, there are certain passages of this sort.

For example, in the following definition, three important aspects of Humboldt's thought are brought together. Language is defined as arising from the objective reality of the external world, the subjective spirit of a nation (which is analogous at the level of the national collectivity to the creative activity, in cognition, of the faculty of Understanding of the individual), and the innate character of language itself, that arose as an organic whole and developed according to its own laws:

Language . . . is therefore the result of three
different combined effects, the real nature of
objects . . . the subjective character of nations
and the individuality of language ²

But Humboldt offers this type of summary only infrequently; more often, his views need to be pieced together by the conflation of widely separated

²Albert Leitzmann (ed.), Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), IV, pp. 25-26.

passages, and this process in its turn commonly reveals unresolved ambiguities.

Looking at Humboldt's total body of writings about language, there are two sorts of reason which may help to account for the ambiguities and occasional straight contradictions which become apparent on a close reading: (1) Humboldt never fully resolved the tensions inherent in the complex of authors and ideas on which he drew; and (2) his ideas changed during the course of time, so that a later work often contains statements opposite in their implications to those of earlier works. The shift in Humboldt's attitude towards universal grammar already described provides one example of this latter sort of explanation; in general, early opinions that were clearly superseded in later works will be left out of account in the following presentation.

The divergent tendencies in the various traditions of thought to which Humboldt was indebted for the bases of his own thinking may be indicated in terms of a series of paired and partly antithetical beliefs. At least three such pairs of ideas are important for an understanding of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity; these are: (1) a belief in the validity of deductive, theoretical thought, as against a belief in the importance of inductive, empirically based thought; (2) a belief that there are important universals characteristic of all nations and all ages, as against a belief that each nation and age shows important individual peculiarities; and (3) a belief in the power of the individual to shape the collectivity through his own actions, as against a belief in the power of the collectivity over the individual.

There are clearly some close connections between these three pairs of antitheses. For example, in the critical philosophy of Kant, a close connection exists between deductive, a priori methods of enquiry and a belief in the universality of such things as the categories of cognition. Similarly, an approach to cultural data that stresses the need for empirical research will also probably be committed to the working hypothesis that any nation or age will manifest characteristics peculiar to itself. These three sets of opposed beliefs deserve some further comment.

As Funke noted, there is a sharp contrast between Humboldt's empirically oriented and theoretical passages.³ At times Humboldt appears to be the complete empiricist, as when he says that "man must therefore . . . study every language as presented in its individual character . . ."⁴ At other times, Humboldt will carry on a speculative discussion which is only scantily supported by empirical data. Perhaps the fairest statement of Humboldt's methodological position is that of Streitberg, who suggests that "Humboldt, for all his empiricism, was a true son of the philosophical [eighteenth] century."⁵

The contrast in Humboldt's thinking between the search for universals and the detailed description of local variations stems from his transitional position between the Enlightenment and the Romantic age. While the year

³Otto Funke, Studien zur Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (Berne: A. Francke, 1927), p. 54.

⁴Leitzmann, op. cit., IV, p. 274.

⁵W. Streitberg, "Kant und die Sprachwissenschaft / Eine historische Skizze," Indogermanische Forschungen, XXVI (1909), p. 407.

1804 saw both the death of Kant and the return from the New World of Humboldt's younger brother, Alexander,⁶ with his store of ethnographic and linguistic data, the legacy of the eighteenth century was not quickly effaced. Humboldt's debt to the teleological views of history found both in Herder and Kant appears in his linguistic theorizing as a belief that, despite the differences between languages, all of them are involved in a more or less successful journey towards a common goal.

The contrasting emphases on the controlling power of the collectivity and the creative freedom of the individual have already been discussed as characteristic of the late eighteenth century in Germany. While German nationalistic aspirations and the move to write history in terms of national units each characterized by a distinctive collective spirit tended to stress the special formative role of the national collectivity on individual activity, an important line of thinking among those involved in the literary and aesthetic revolts associated with the whole Romantic movement centered round the argument that the individual should free his creative activity from the shackles of traditional precept, and allow free expression to his own individual genius.

In those passages in Humboldt's writings which, taken together, offer a theory of linguistic relativity as that complex of propositions has been defined above,⁷ the stress is on the empirical collection of

⁶For an account of Alexander von Humboldt's journeyings in the Americas, see: Juliette Bauer (trans.), Klencke and Schlesier: Lives of the Brothers Humboldt, Alexander and Wilhelm (London: Ingram, Cooke, 1852), Chapters III-V.

⁷Supra, pp. 3-5.

data, the individual characteristics of nations, and the subordination of the individual to the collectivity. In other passages, stress falls on the contrary set of beliefs, and the statements contained in these latter passages serve to qualify Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity in various ways.

The divergent directions of Humboldt's thought are responsible for the fact that he has been hailed by different later writers as a founding father of quite different traditions in general linguistics. Waterman, for example, in his brief history of linguistics,⁸ makes Humboldt one of the founders of structuralism, calling attention particularly to his organismic description of language; he comments that "the twentieth century may properly be called the age of descriptive linguistics-- 'descriptive' in the sense of Wilhelm von Humboldt's definition of the term: 'The analysis of language as an internally articulated organism.' This approach to language is today known as 'structural linguistics'"⁹ Mathesius deals with Humboldt in a similar fashion.¹⁰ Hall, on the other hand, in his attack on the "idealistic" school of Croce, Vossler, and their followers,¹¹ notes Croce's sympathetic handling of Humboldt and Steinthal,¹² and implies that the main stress of the latter

⁸John T. Waterman, Perspectives in Linguistics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁹Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰M. V. Mathesius, "La Place de la Linguistique Fonctionnelle et Structurale dans le Développement Général des Études Linguistiques," Actes du Deuxième Congrès International de Linguistes Genève 25-29 Aout 1931 (Paris: Adrien Maissonneuve, 1933), pp. 145-146.

¹¹Robert A. Hall, Idealism in Romance Linguistics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

¹²Ibid., p. 24.

two writers was on the creative role of the individual in the shaping of language. As indicated below, Humboldt's organismic version of structuralism and his statements about the creative function of the individual speaker, when compared within the framework of his conception of linguistic relativity, have to be seen as opposed rather than mutually supportive in their implications. Taken out of context, some remark can be found in Humboldt's writings to support any one of a wide range of views about the nature and function of language; a fair view of his conceptions comes only from an overall study of his output.

The essential components of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity may be stated in terms of three propositions: (1) the structure of a language has a determining influence on certain psychological processes of its users; (2) the structures of different natural languages are different; and (3) the structures of natural languages are stable, and cannot be changed by the efforts of individual speakers. Each of these three propositions calls for some further explanatory comment.

Humboldt deals with the determining effect of the structure of languages on psychological processes at two levels, although these are not always kept separate. Proposition (1) may in fact be re-written as two parallel propositions: (1a) the structure of a language has a determining influence on the perceptual processes of its users; and (1b) the structure of a language has a determining influence on the thought processes of its users. In Humboldt's conception, there are two levels of relativity, rather similar to the second and fourth levels distinguished by Fishman in Whorf's presentation.¹³

¹³See: Joshua A. Fishman, "A Systematization of the Whorfian Hypothesis," Behavioral Science, V (October, 1960), pp. 323-339.

For a belief in the close connection between language and cognition, Humboldt was indebted mainly to Kant's first Critique, and to a lesser extent to pre-Romantic and Romantic notions of the perceptual process. For a belief in the close connection between language and thought, he was indebted to the arguments of Hamann and Herder, especially as these were developed as a challenge to the methodology of Kant's first Critique.

Humboldt nowhere provides a full discussion of what he means by the structure of a language, and indeed he does not himself use this term to describe language. Humboldt's general conception of a language as a structure has to be deduced from those passages in which he describes a language in organismic terms, and from that conception of the leading characteristics of an organism which was usual at the time. Most importantly, an organism was seen as consisting of parts of which the functions were specifiable only in terms of their relationship to the whole.

Humboldt largely based his own organismic descriptions of language on those of F. Schlegel, and drew more generally on a widely diffused use of such imagery in German Romantic thought.

So far as the stability of fully developed languages is concerned, Humboldt adduces two main arguments to show why this is so. Proposition (3) above may be re-written in terms of two parallel propositions, each containing a supportive reason: (3a) the structures of natural languages are stable, because they have reached that point at which a language becomes a fully organized whole; and (3b) the structures of natural languages are stable, because the individual is powerless to change the habits of the national group to which he belongs.

Clearly, proposition (3a) is true only in the case of developed languages; but for all practical purposes, this for Humboldt means all languages, since he holds that the first period in the total history of any language has already ended for the languages of which we have knowledge. Proposition (3b) has already been discussed above in terms of the stress laid on the intrinsic power of the national collectivity as against its constituent individuals. Humboldt's position under this head is summed up by his reference to "the weakness of the individual against the power of language."¹⁴

The conception of developed languages as fully organized wholes seems to have been an original development by Humboldt of organismic thinking, although there are some hints of such a view in Kant's third Critique. Humboldt's view of the structural stability of fully developed languages stems from his theory that languages go through two stages in their history, the transition from the first to the second occurring when the process of self-organization, which begins with the first emergence of language, is completed.

The idea that the individual is powerless to change what belongs to the collectivity is one facet only of the more general belief, common in Germany in the decades before and after 1800, that the individual can realize himself only through membership of the national whole, and is powerless to alter the dynamic, evolutionary progress of that whole, which develops in ways not predictable from the behavior of the individuals which compose it. Further, Humboldt's conception of language as a collective

¹⁴Leitzmann, op. cit., VII, p. 64.

possession is to be related to the belief in the collective origins of language, which was itself parallel to Romantic theory about the collective origins of epic and popular literature.

In short, Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity is that all languages are objectified worlds of originally expressive behavior standing outside the individuals comprising national collectivities. These several national languages are conceived as structured wholes developed in the interaction between the phenomena of the external world, the deepest characteristics of nations, and the nature of languages themselves as self-organized entities. The languages serve therefore as media through which, and necessarily by which, the external world is perceived and thought about, the resulting different world-views being results of different language structures which are relatively stable and resistant to the efforts of individuals to change them.

To turn, however, from the various constituent components of Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity to other traits of his thinking which apparently contradict some of the ideas which come together in this conception is once more to be reminded of the divergencies in Humboldt's own thought, and the divergent traditions to which these are traceable.

Humboldt's views on the connections between thought and language, for example, are liable to appear confused and even contradictory unless it is remembered that he considered at different times different stages in the development of human intelligence and natural language. It would appear that Humboldt regarded thought and language as one and the same phenomenon in the very earliest stages of human society, but as becoming progressively differentiated as language developed to the degree of complexity characteristic of natural languages known to us. When

Humboldt wrote of the "primitive agreement which exists between thought and language,"¹⁵ he was thinking of the early stage of man's mental development; but this "primitive agreement" was not seen by Humboldt as characteristic of civilized man.

Various sorts of evidence are brought forward to show that thought and language are not one and the same, and that, more specifically, thought can transcend language and seek to extend it so as to accomodate new ideas more adequately. If man's thought could not range more widely than the forms of his language allowed, "how otherwise," asks Humboldt, "would he complain so often about the insufficiency of language, if ideas and feelings, as it were, did not go further than speech?"¹⁶ Humboldt here appears to be in debt both to Herder's idea that the human faculty of Reflection was intimately bound up with the origins of language, and also to the Enlightened belief in the faculty of Reason, which appeared in Kant in the guise of the faculty of Understanding.

Humboldt's belief in the validity of universal grammar and his sympathy with the school of neo-Kantian grammarians have been discussed above. But his adherence to these sorts of approaches to language waned progressively as he immersed himself more and more deeply in actual linguistic data. Few traces of these approaches remain in those later works in which his conception of linguistic relativity is presented.

The suggestion that the individual is powerless to change the form of a language through his own individual efforts has to be set against

¹⁵Ibid., V, p. 258.

¹⁶Ibid., V, p. 290-291.

the opposite suggestion, made by Humboldt in various places, that the individual plays a role in the development of even mature and fully organized languages. It is just because the civilized man is able to distinguish between thought and language that speaking is for him an individual creative activity, in which an effort is made to accommodate words to the pre-existing thought.

The most often quoted passage of Humboldt's most complete summary of his theories of language is in fact in part a statement that language is a constantly changing vehicle for expression, and that expressive activity is a constant struggle by the individual to adapt substance to content:

Language is not a work (ergon) but an activity (energeia). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repetitive work of the spirit to make articulated sounds capable of expressing thought.¹⁷

Seen as a fully organized whole, a language is clearly far more a "work" than an "activity." The activity would be that of the necessarily frustrated individual trying to make improvements from outside.

The ability of the individual to make his own changes in the rules, in language as much as in other things, has to be traced back to the cult of individual genius (Geniecult) of the early German Romantics, notably Hamann and Herder.¹⁸ Moreover, Humboldt's belief that the individual

¹⁷Ibid., VII, p. 46; trans. Cowan; cf. Marianne Cowan (trans.) Humanist without Portfolio / An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 280; for a discussion of the source of the "ergon--Energeia" distinction, see: Leo Weisgerber, "Zum Energeia Begriff in Humboldts Sprachbetrachtung," Wirkendes Wort, IV (September, 1954), pp. 374-377.

¹⁸For this development, see: John Louis Kind, Edward Young in Germany (New York: Columbia University Press, 1906), p. x.

does retain some freedom of creative action in the matter of language is not surprising in view of his political faith in the individual and his ability to work out for himself his own destiny.¹⁹

In view of the qualifying statements of the sort just discussed, Humboldt cannot be classified as a total relativist. For one thing, he holds that certain lexical and grammatical universals do exist; that there are qualifications to even a "weak" version of relativity; for another thing, the individual is able to at least attempt to change his language when he notices a discrepancy between what he can think and what his language allows him to say: a "strong" version of linguistic relativity is not presented without some arguments on the other side.

It is possible to bring order into Humboldt's ideas in a different way from that adopted above. Lammers has pointed out that Humboldt really carried on his studies at three levels, corresponding to the individual, the nation, and the whole of humanity.²⁰ So far as language is concerned, three levels might also be distinguished.²¹ Humboldt paid attention to the language behavior of the individual, and the ability of the individual to make innovations in language; he studied the languages of nations, and regarded these as organic wholes; and at the highest level he studied the language ability common to all men, and the universal

¹⁹Cf. Howard Becker and Harry Elmer Barnes, Social Thought from Lore to Science (New York: Dover, 1961), II, p. 608.

²⁰Wilhelm Lammers, Wilhelm von Humboldts Weg zur Sprachforschung 1785-1801 (Berlin: Junker and Dünhaupt, 1936), p. 58.

²¹The parallelism in the Saussurean scheme of "parole," "langue," and "langage" is clear enough; cf. Waterman, op. cit., pp. 61-68.

characteristics of language. The fact that the individual can introduce changes of a minor sort into the structure of his language does not mean that he is not powerless to make more fundamental innovations; and the fact that there are structures characteristic of different languages does not mean that there are not, equally certainly, various things true of all languages. When working with the two lowest of these levels of analysis, it is a question of the sorts and relative magnitudes of changes that may be introduced within one generation of individual speakers; when working with the two highest levels, it is a question of partitioning out language universals from each individual language, and thus demonstrating the uniqueness of the remaining portions. Thus this three-level analysis serves to render the qualifications introduced into Humboldt's conception of linguistic relativity less puzzling.

O'Flaherty, in his discussion of Hamann,²² has this to say of one of the traditions of linguistic philosophy which he singles out:

The . . . final group includes men like Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, and Cassirer, all of whom see in the togetherness of thought and language the most promising possibilities, and therefore neither search for an escape into a realm of a-lingual intuition nor wish to remold linguistic symbolism after the image of reason.²³

Fair as this is as an indication of Humboldt's central position, it has to be remembered that Humboldt was a comparative linguist as well as a linguistic philosopher, and it was this conjunction of interests that finally resulted in his presentation of a theory of linguistic relativity.

²²James C. O'Flaherty, Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann George Hamann (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1952).

²³Ibid., p. 35.

The neglect of Humboldt, especially by descriptive structuralists, is also partly perhaps to be traced to this joining of interests. Hymes accounts for the fading of interest in linguistic relativity after the time of Sapir by referring to "an ideology hostile to questions of meaning."²⁴ It may be suggested that the hostility of the same ideology, and particularly the reluctance of descriptive linguists to deal with meaning, has played a significant part in the neglect of Humboldt's work, in which was achieved, however, a synthesis of ideas that provided a major impetus for later thinkers about the relations between language and culture.

²⁴Dell H. Hymes, "On Typology of Cognitive Styles in Language," Anthropological Linguistics, III (January, 1961), p. 26.

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