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WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT'S LINGUISTIC IMPORTANCE

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Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was the earliest major Western linguist to write extensively on general linguistics. Despite Humboldt's readily acknowledged place in the history of Linguistics, however, his ideas and their impact are not well-known to many contemporary linguists. The relationship of his thought to that of two major American scholars, Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), is admitted without often being explored. For example, the theory of linguistic relativity commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has very clear roots in the writings of Humboldt and might more accurately be called the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This paper will acquaint the reader with some of Humboldt's ideas and show how they echo through the works of Sapir and Whorf. Thus, the close connection between these three scholars will be explored.

Humboldt was a versatile man who became the master of several widely divergent fields outside of linguistics, not only as personal interests, but also as fields of original endeavor. He produced works of value in political science, art, history, classical studies, literature, and biology, as well as in linguistics. One of the outstanding thinkers of his time, Humboldt left his imprint not only on linguistics, but on many aspects of Western thought.

It was on a trip through the Pyrenees that Humboldt encountered his first non-Indo-European language, Basque. This contact sparked Humboldt's interest in linguistics and he went on to be the first outsider to the Basque community to write a piece on their language. Later, when Humboldt found himself in an influential administrative post in public life, he was able to found the University of Berlin (now in East Berlin and known as Humboldt University) and create there the first Chair of Comparative Linguistics, a post which Franz Bopp, the noted Indo-Europeanist, filled. Humboldt also created the first Chair of Romance Philology, at the University of Bonn.

After retiring from public life in 1819, Humboldt began to write intensively, devoting the rest of his life to intellectual pursuits and entering the period in which he produced works of lasting linguistic significance. In addition to writing on the classical languages of Greek and Latin, European languages such as

German, French, and Basque, Humboldt worked on Sanskrit, American Indian languages, Chinese, Japanese, and the Kawi dialects. These studies served as the basis of his comparative work. Humboldt also focused on topics of general linguistic interest, such as the origin of language and the relationship of language to thought, to the spirit of its speakers, and to the human race as a whole.

In Pre-Romantic speculation on the origin of language, there were two main schools of thought: the orthodox school, which envisioned the capacity for language, and often language itself, as a direct gift from God, and the enlightened school, which held that language was a creation of human reason. As R.L. Brown points out (Brown, 1967:passim), there was a striking similarity between these two views: each explanation imagines language developing after the existence of the human race; both schools of thought assume that intelligence and society pre-existed language. Both of these views had been rejected shortly before Humboldt's time, when scholars began to seek the solution to the question of language origin in the similarities between men and animals, attributing the inception of language to primitive forms of expression such as grunts or cries, which gradually developed into language. Johann Gottfried Herder, in his award-winning essay, asserted the inseparability of language and thought, believing that the two developed concurrently and that they were interdependent.

Humboldt subscribed to the Herder point of view, believing that the development of thought and language were concurrent and postulating two stages in language origin. First, there was a slow development of potential. This developing potential was followed by a second phase in which language suddenly and irrevocably assumed shape and form. This second phase was a complete fusion into an organic whole of language. In other words, Humboldt did not think that a few isolated meaningful words slowing accumulated nor that thought existed before language.

Thought and language were therefore linked together from the beginnings of both. Accordingly, Humboldt felt that language is both consequent to thought and yet secondary to it. He saw language as reflection built upon a pre-existing symbolism. Because intellect and language developed together, there can be no arbitrary distinction between the two. In the individual, thought is primary: language brings thought into the realm of the senses; language organizes perceptions by objectifying experience. And yet, thought converted

to language loses precision; it limits the expression of human nature at the same time it allows the communication of that nature to exist. Still, for the individual, language is the means of bridging the gap between the inner and outer worlds, transforming inner nature into finite nature. The bond between thought and language is permanent and indissoluble.

When Humboldt suggests that thinking is dependent on language, he means not only language in general, but also language in particular. In his time, differences between languages and cultures were considered to be a matter of the environment and heredity. Environment was a determining factor of the national character of a community. National character, as the term meant in connection with language, is generally equivalent to our notion of culture. Humboldt took this relationship one step further and considered language an imprint on the spirit of its speakers. Different world views are expressed by different languages. Humboldt writes:

> 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. For intellectuality and language permit and further only mutually agreeable forms. 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.
> (Humboldt, in Cowan, 1963: 277)

Humboldt's exploration of this topic becomes the kernel of what has become a crucial and controversial theory, the principle of linguistic relativity.

In the interplay between language and culture, the needs of the speakers are always satisfied. Thus, the environment does help to shape the connection between them. Humboldt says, "The need for a concept and its resultant amplification does precede the word for it, which is merely the expression of its perfected clarification." (Cowan, 1963: 265).

Just as Humboldt linked specific languages to specific cultures, he linked the universal occurrence of language phenomena to a universal human capacity, an innate "spiritual and intellectual predisposition," which is then molded by the language and culture of the environment. Humboldt states that language is a consequence of human nature, of mankind's innate capacity for it. He stresses that languages are intimately in-

tertwined in the innermost nature of mankind and that they spring forth from it.

It is not surprising, given the historical climate, that Humboldt interpreted language change as development toward a goal. He saw a natural hierarchy in the variety of language structures he encountered, a progression towards a state most expressive of human nature. Sanskrit is specifically mentioned as being at the apex of this development. In this, Humboldt was not unique, for such opinions were common at the time. What is unique about Humboldt is his steadfast refusal to envision this hierarchy as any kind of implicit or explicit judgment on the intrinsic value of a language. He firmly supported and upheld the genius and integrity of non-Indo-European languages. The "enlightened" notion that language was somehow created by a kind of joint venture on the part of the speakers had led to the impression that, by further agreement, language could be improved; some scholars attempted in all seriousness to improve vernacular languages. Humboldt resisted these repeated attempts, holding that language could not be changed by speaker attempt and taking a stand against the tendency to denounce dialectal variation.

Humboldt always looked at language as an organic whole. All aspects of language are part of this whole. Humboldt disapproved of mechanistic analyses, insisting that language be examined in actual use, saying that otherwise grammars and lexicons are merely dead objects.

After Humboldt's death in 1835, Heymann Steinthal was the first major figure to support Humboldt's views. Steinthal's interest had far-reaching consequences, for it acquainted Franz Boas, who met Steinthal while a student, with Humboldt's works. Boas also had contact with Humboldt's writings on American Indian languages. By advocating the analysis of languages to be strictly in their own terms, rather than in those of unrelated European languages, Boas clearly follows in the Humboldtian tradition.

Boas, of course, influenced Sapir, who also had contact with Humboldt through his own research. Sapir addresses many of the same concerns that Humboldt does. For example, although admitting that all theories on the origin of language are speculation, Sapir makes a statement that resembles the second phase in Humboldt's theory. Sapir considers the origin to have been a single event in the past. All content was originally limited to concrete references, and, at first, relationships were merely implied. Like Humboldt, Sapir concedes that thought requires language to organize and objectify it.

Sapir states that the stage of cultural development of a community has no relationship to the complexity or the expressiveness of its people's spoken language. He agrees with Humboldt that languages develop to meet the needs of their speakers, writing, "Language is felt to be a perfect symbolic system...for the handling of all references and meanings that a given culture is capable of... The content of every culture is expressible in its own language." (Sapir, in Mandelbaum, 1956: 6). So, there is an interplay between language and culture, but no direct bond.

According to Sapir, the human mind has a propensity for making relationships; if presented with apparently unrelated words, a person will attempt to manufacture a relationship. Grammar is the stabilized mode of patterned and patterning relationships in language. Sapir considers word order to be one of the primary ways of relating. While these concepts do not exactly correspond to those of either Humboldt or Whorf, they are generally equivalent.

Sapir also endorsed an innate human capacity for language. Speech is a universal human trait--all known cultures have a language and all normal humans learn to speak at least one language in their childhood. The ability to speak is the defining characteristic of mankind; the potential for language among humans is universal and not related to the environment.

The universality of this human potential is not unexploited by any culture; Sapir stresses that there are no primitive languages in a psychological sense. He concurs with Humboldt's view that each language has an inherent value and deplores the condescending manner in which non-Indo-European languages are sometimes explored.

As Humboldt did, Sapir viewed language as a wholeness with a stable structure. In fact, he writes that it is infinitely more difficult to destroy the essential patterns of a language than it is to destroy the language entirely. The aspects of a language which are most easily destroyed are those least essential to it and to its speakers.

Sapir always saw language in the wholeness of its actuality. He put the human squarely in the focal point of his discussions and stressed the fallacy inherent in mechanistic thought. He writes, "It is peculiarly important that linguists, who are often accused, and accused justly, of failure to look beyond the pretty patterns of their subject matter, should become aware of what their science may mean for the interpretation of human conduct in general." (Sapir, in Mandelbaum, 1956: 77). Like Humboldt, Sapir felt that

by taking the human out of the picture, linguists are left with the essentially dead matter of lexicons and grammars.

Sapir consistently saw language in its human context, as part of cultural behavior. He considered language a social force helping to unify the experience of members of a community and thus serving an orientational function. Language reduces an individual's experience into comprehensible and socially acceptable form. Sapir writes, "...we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation by habitual usage." (Sapir, in Mandelbaum, 1956, 69). Sapir echoes Humboldt in this relation of culture and language.

Not only Humboldt and Sapir make close connections between a language and the spirit and culture of its speakers. Whorf also endorsed a connection between the language of a community and their habitual way of organizing experience. Whorf clarifies his position by stating that "There are connections but not correlations or diagnostic correspondences between cultural norms and linguistic patterns." (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956: 159). Nevertheless, Whorf made strong statements about the link between thought and language and vigorously applied his principle of linguistic relativity to the data he examined.

Whorf considered that language has a "hidden metaphysics," meaning that the structure of a language makes implicit judgments about the nature of experience by the way in which natural continua, especially time and space, are treated. Each language organizes and manifests that experience in some way. These implicit judgments are a determining influence in the ways in which people react to their world by compelling them to habitually interpret experience by light of their language's individual system; these implicit judgments also serve to impose limits on the thought of monolingual individuals. Whorf may have even said that they limit those who speak languages related in the same stock, since he often grouped the European languages together conceptually. One overcomes this limitation by gaining a knowledge of a wide variety of languages, which serves to develop a sense of perspective in the individual. It would also, as Whorf says, "foster that humility which accompanies the true scientific spirit and thus forbid that arrogance of the mind which hinders real scientific curiosity and detachment." (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956: 219).

Whorf's writings, although more data-oriented than Humboldt's, are nevertheless rather vague and general,

which particularly plagues some of today's linguists. Whorf died at a rather young age, he was only 44, and he missed a great deal of the excitement and controversy his ideas aroused. He also missed the chance to defend himself from the many critics who sprung up after his death. Most of these critics question Whorf's linguistic relativity principle, but at least one questions his Hopi evidence, being quick to point out that Whorf's general observations are true enough but arguing that they are a result of the Hopi culture and not the Hopi language.

Whorf's linguistic ideas were influenced by his close acquaintanceship with Sapir, but they had an even closer natural affinity with those of Humboldt. Both Whorf and Humboldt preferred to look at mankind in the totality of experience; they refused to reduce language to mere data to be analyzed, insisting on keeping the context of language vivid. There was a similarity in their approach to language structure, in which each one saw the key to understanding humanity. They asked not only what was the stuff of language, but how did it relate to the inner person, to thought, to understanding, even to perception.

There were also striking similarities in their personal lives. Both men were highly educated, yet both eschewed academic careers. In addition to their intellectual pursuits, both men enjoyed successful careers in other fields: Humboldt was a well-known statesman, and Whorf worked for Hartford Fire Insurance.

And yet, a significant difference enters the picture. The two scholars developed different concepts of the relation of mankind to language. Humboldt, although allowing for the influence of language, did not consider it totally restrictive; moreover, he believed that languages were developing toward a goal of excellence. Whorf, of the other hand, saw language as a restriction to the ranging intellect of mankind. Far from seeing a positive direction in language development toward any one most expressive structure, Whorf felt that the inbuilt perspective of <u>any</u> language is a psychological limitation which must be overcome in order to best understand the nature of the world.

Perhaps these differences are due, at least in part, to the times in which each man lived. Humboldt lived in a time when there was still great hope that the rapidly expanding knowledge was moving toward an ever-improving state of the human condition. Whorf, on the other hand, wrote in a more jaded time, poised between two world wars and during a depression.

The philosophic unity of Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf has been examined. It will be interesting to look at

the comments of each of these three scholars on one specific topic, "words." Juxtaposing these quotes will reveal the extent of their unity while reflecting each author's individual biases.

Humboldt, in line with his views on the interconnection of language and thought, firmly held that the intellectual act of comprehending even a single word presupposed the intellectual framework for comprehending the whole of language, in "one intellectual instinct of the mind." In the following passage, which shows Humboldt's theoretical bent, we see the word with an almost Jungian associative flavor--it is a sign and a symbol, yet has an objective existence, working in the realm of the mind and of experience. Humboldt writes:

> If you utter the word WOLKE (cloud) you neither think of its definition nor do you see a single definite image of the natural phenomena. All its different concepts and images, all the sensations and feelings which have been joined to its perception, everything--finally--which is related in some fashion to it, within us or without us: all these may represent themselves to the mind simultaneously and yet run no danger of confusion because the single sound of the word fastens and secures them. But the sound does even more: it brings back sometimes this, sometimes that association and if, as in the case of WOLKE, the associative material is rich in itself...then the sound of the word attunes the soul in a manner befitting the object, partly through itself, partly through recollection and associative analogies. Thus a word reveals itself as an individual with a nature of its own which bears a resemblance to an object of art...
> (Humboldt, in Cowan, 1963: 247-48).

This is an interesting explanation of what a word is and how it works. Even more interesting is the similarity shown by Sapir's definition. This is what Sapir has to say on the subject in his book Language:

> The word 'house' is not a linguistic fact if by it is meant merely the acoustic effect produced on the ear by its constituent consonants and vowels, pronounced in a certain order; nor the motor processes and tactile feelings which make up the articulation of the word; nor the visual perception on the part of the hearer of this articulation (sic); nor the visual perception of the word 'house' on the written or printed page; nor the motor processes and tactile

> feelings which enter into the writing of the word; nor the memory of any or all of these experiences. It is only when these, and possibly still other, associated experiences are automatically associated with the image of a house that they begin to take on the nature of a symbol, a word, an element of language...Thus, the single impression which I have had of a particular house must be identified with all my other impressions of it. Further, my generalized memory or my 'notion' of this house must be merged with the notions that all other individuals who have seen the house have formed of it. The particular experience that we started with has now been widened so as to embrace all possible impressions or images that sentient beings have formed or may form of the house in question...This house and that house and thousands of other phenomena of like character are thought of as having enough in common, in spite of great and obvious differences of detail, to be classed under the same heading. In other words, the speech element 'house' is the symbol, first and foremost, not of a single perception, nor even of the notion of a particular object, but of a 'concept,' in other words, of a convenient capsule of thought that embraces thousands of distinct experiences and that is ready to take in thousands more.
> (Sapir, 1921: 11-13)

We can readily see that Sapir also stresses the associative quality of the word and its role in organizing experience into concepts, in a definition very similar to Humboldt's. This quote reflects Sapir's insistence on always focusing attention on the human speakers of a language. His comments refer to individual experience, in the act of perceiving the word aurally and visually, and by exploring the impression of images in the human. Sapir constantly reminds us that words exist only in the realm of human speakers.

We can also find similar ideas in Whorf's quote, although Whorf's primary emphasis is quite different. Unlike the two preceding quotes, this one stresses the way the context provides a crucial referent of meaning while still revealing a similarity in mentioning the myriad association inherent in a word. Just as Whorf's emphasis in linguistics in general was on the relativity of languages in expressing human experience, his thrust here is on the relativity of the referent in each utterance:

> Hence the meanings of specific words are less im-

> portant than we fondly fancy. Sentences, not words are the essence of speech... We are all mistaken in our common belief that any word has an 'exact meaning.'... That part of meaning which is in words, and which we may call 'reference,' is only relatively fixed. Reference of words is at the mercy of the sentences and grammatical patterns in which they occur... The word "Fido" said by a certain person at a certain time may refer to a specific thing, but the word 'dog' refers to a class with elastic limits ... The limits of such classes are different in different languages... The context or sentence pattern determines what sort of object the Polish word (or any word, in any language) refers to.
> (Whorf, in Carroll, 1956: 258-59)

When one considers the wide range of definitions of 'word' which has been offered by linguists, the similarity between these three views is astounding.

It is readily apparent that Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf present a unified trio in linguistic theory. We have seen that Humboldt originated the theory of linguistic relativity, a concept revived in this century by Sapir and Whorf. Humboldt's work has been an influencing factor on later work; the historical development of Humboldt's ideas has been traced, and it is safe to assume that his work will continue to have an impact on the progressive development of linguistic thought.

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