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HUMBOLDT: GRAMMATICAL FORM AND "*WELTANSICHT*"[1]

The context of Humboldt

It is commonly acknowledged that during the transition from the 18th to the 19th century there occurred a change of paradigms in the understanding of the relations between the mind, the object and language. The Cartesian dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is abolished by the introduction of a third being, named either *language* or *society*, which is seen as a condition for the possibility of the two Cartesian substances. Hacking[2] (1975 and 1988) describes this transformation as the step from the heyday of ideas to the subsequent heydays of meanings and sentences. Foucault[3] (1974) describes the transformation as the step from the episteme of representation to the episteme of man and history. Foucault characterizes the new historical episteme, which he sees as being introduced through the 1790's, by saying that the transcendentals become situated with the object[4]. In connection with Humboldt (whom he does not treat), the object that contains the transcendentals is language.

That the transcendentals are situated with language as an object implies that language is no longer transparent to the mind, as it was for John Locke and Descartes.[5] Both the

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1 I wish to thank Lecturer Nancy Lea Eik-Nes for the help she has given me with the English language. The number of quotations might seem somewhat large. But then, I want my interpretation of Humboldt to have a plausible foundation in his own words. On the one hand, what his own words are, is not an unproblematic question, as Di Cesare's note on the text shows (Di Cesare, Donatella, "Einleitung", in Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, Paderborn etc.: Verl. Ferdinand Schöningh, 1998, p. 129). *Textkritik* is itself a part of hermeneutics and hence a part of philosophical interpretation. On the other hand, of course, other interpretations might be made by building on other passages, as Chomsky's use of Humboldt has shown, or by interpreting my selection of Humboldt's words in other ways. The editors suggested that I should present all quotations in English translation. For the *Kawi-Einleitung* this was easy enough, as I had Heath's translation at hand. But when I started to translate the other passages, I experienced that I was not able to reach a satisfacory result in the time at hand. To give a translation between two foreign languages was too difficult. As Humboldt realized, a translation is always an interpretation. And that is of course also the case with Heath's translation. As his interpretation and the interpretation aimed at here are not always in accord, I did choose to disobey the editors, and hence to give Heath's translations and my own (which I would rather call paraphrases than translations) in the notes.

2 Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, and "Locke, Leibniz, Language and Hans Aarsleff", *Synthese*, 75 (1988), pp. 135-154.

3 Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, London, 1974.

4 Op. cit., p. 244.

5 Taylor, Charles, "Theories of Meaning" and "Language and Human Nature", in his *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers vol. I*, Cambridge UP, 1985; "Overcoming Epistemology" and "The Im-

M. Gustafsson and L. Hertzberg (eds.), The Practice of Language, 51-75.
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thinking subject's own thoughts and the objects of the external world appear for the subject through language as a universal medium. The opaqueness of language is due to its being a product not entirely under the control of the mind, as it was in Locke and Descartes; in contradistinction to this, from now on, language is seen as a condition for the possibility of the subject and its thoughts. The existence of language as a "third being", something independent of and a prior condition for the mind and its objects, implies, according to both Foucault and Charles Taylor, that the use of language as action and expression, not as the representation of objects and ideas presupposed to exist prior to language, comes to the center of attention, and is seen as the primary function of language. This means that language's own form, independently existing as something internal in language, is established as a new field of research, in comparative linguistics, founded at this time by Franz Bopp, Rasmus Rask, the brothers Grimm and the brothers Schlegel, and also by Wilhelm von Humboldt.[6]

This sets the frame for this reading of Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language. On the one hand, language is seen as something existing only in the practice of speech. As such, language has an entirely historical being, it has no essence in the shape of a definite universal (logical or grammatical) form. It is through and through a part of culture. On the other hand we find Humboldt's various concepts of language's universal form. Is it possible to reconcile these two different strands in his thinking?

"Weltansicht", language form and language practice

For Humboldt the world exists for us through language. The diversity of languages is not only a diversity of sounds, but a diversity of content as a function of the diversity of grammatical forms (*Vergleichende Sprachstudium,* IV 27, p. 20). In the history of mankind, language and thought are formed simultaneously and reciprocally.

> [. . .] ihre Sprache ist ihr Geist und ihr Geist ihre Sprache, man kann sich beide nie identisch genug denken. (*Kawi-Einleitung*, VII 42, p. 415)[a]

Language is a condition for the possibility of objects because it is the condition of the possibility of thoughts or concepts.

> Wie, ohne diese [Sprache], kein Begriff möglich ist, so kann es für die Seele auch kein Gegenstand seyn, da ja selbst jeder äussere nur vermittelst des Begriffes für sie vollendete Wesenheit erhält. (*Kawi-Einleitung*, VII 59, p. 433)[b]

This means that the worldview is conditioned by language. Since there are diverse languages, there is also a diversity of world-views.

> [. . .] so liegt in jeder Sprache eine eigenthümliche Weltansicht. (*Kawi-Einleitung*, VII 60, p. 434)[c]

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portance of Herder", in his *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

6 See Foucault, op. cit., chapters 8.IV and 8.V, and Michael Böhler, "Nachwort", in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Schriften zur Sprache*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973, p. 231.

In reality, Humboldt says, language does not exist as a system. Language only exists in the fragile moment of the speech act. When the speech act ends, language is gone with the wind.

> Die Sprache, in ihrem wirklichen Wesen aufgefasst, ist etwas beständig und in jedem Augenblicke Vorübergehendes. Selbst ihre Erhaltung durch die Schrift ist immer nur eine unvollständige, mumienartige Aufbewahrung, die es doch erst wieder bedarf, dass man dabei den lebendigen Vortrag zu versinnlichen sucht. Sie selbst ist kein Werk (*Ergon*), sondern eine Thätigkeit (*Energeia*). Ihre wahre Definition kann daher nur eine genetische seyn. Sie ist nehmlich die sich ewig wiederholende Arbeit des Geistes, den articulirten Laut zum Ausdruck des Gedanken fähig zu machen. Unmittelbar und streng genommen, ist dies die Definition des jedesmaligen Sprechens; aber im wahren und wesentlichen Sinne kann man auch nur gleichsam die Totalität dieses Sprechens als die Sprache ansehen. (*Kawi-Einletung*, VII 45-6, p. 418)[d]

The diversity of worldviews and thoughts is entirely a question of how different cultures perform their practices of language. There could not possibly be any timeless structure which determines the specific languages in such a view, unless one could give an interpretation in this direction of the formulation "language as the totality of speech", which closes this quotation.

Inflections, pronouns, verbs and ideas

According to Humboldt, the most profound and sublime thoughts are only to be had in the inflectional languages. Languages lacking the inflectional apparatus can then be seen to contain more primitive thoughts. But other passages of the text can be read as saying that languages without inflections force the language users to add the lacking grammatical forms in thought, as if the inflectional apparatus is always a precondition for meaningful thought. In these passages Humboldt appears as possibly renouncing the theory that language is a necessary precondition for thoughts.

Humboldt distinguishes between languages along a continuum from languages without formal elements, consisting of merely sequentially ordered words designating things, to the inflecting languages, containing real formal elements that do not borrow their meaning from things in the physical world. In between these extremes he finds the agglutinating languages, which form inflections by connecting otherwise separately existing words. The paradigm of a language nearly free from formal elements is Chinese. At the other end of this continuum we find Sanskrit and the ancient Greek language, in which the inflectional system, the use of suffixes modifying the root, and the rules for vowel-transformation, can be seen as expressing ideas of relations which can not be reduced to names of things.

> [. . .] und nun giebt es in ihr keine so leuchtenden, so die Ansicht des ganzen Sprachgebietes beherrschenden, als das Sanskrit und das Chinesische. Beide Sprachen stellen sich in ihrem grammatischen Bau dergestalt einander gegenüber, dass sie das ganze Feld unter sich theilen, und keine dritte in dieselbe Reihe treten kann. (*Verschiedenheiten*, VI 141, p. 179)[e]

In the *Entstehen* he outlines the formation of languages as a development from material picturing of the physical world, to the most advanced stage, that of the inflectional languages and these languages' constitution of their own domain of reality.

> Die Sprache bezeichenet ursprünglich Gegenstände, und überlässt das Hinzudenken der redeverknüpfenden Formen dem Verstehenden. (*Entstehen*, IV 305, p. 54)[f]

In languages without inflections, we have to add the grammatical forms in our thoughts. The inflectional languages are more advanced, because their relations are explicitly present in the expression.

> Die Formalität dringt endlich durch. [. . .] So geschieht auf der höchsten Stufe die grammatische Bezeichnung durch wahre Formen, durch Beugung, und rein grammatische Wörter. (*Entstehen*, IV 306, p. 55)[g]

Trabant argues in his commentary to his edition of Humboldt's linguistic papers that Humboldt by "Entstehen" (I would suggest "formation", "development", "establishing", "emergence" as attempted translations of this word) does not mean a temporal or historical evolution, but a transcendental constitution:

> „Entstehen" ist im Sinne der Kantischen „Ursprungs"-Problematik als ein *funktional*-genetischen „Entspringen-Aus", nicht als ein *zeitliches* „Anheben-Mit" zu verstehen (KdrV B1). Das „Entstehen" der grammatischen Formen ist daher der Versuch einer *idealen* Geschichte von Verfahren([. . .]), die in *allen* Sprachen vorkommen [. . .][7]

But certainly this transcendental formation of language must also take place through time. As languages are phenomena in space and time, they cannot have been formed except through a process in time. By pointing out that "Entstehen" can have both a temporal and a transcendental meaning, Trabant presents a problem: how are the empirical and the transcendental formation of languages connected? We will treat a related aspect of the relation of the transcendental to the empirical later, but I cannot promise any solution to the problem I see pointed out by Trabant. A very strong argument for Trabant's view, that what is at stake is *only* the systematically and foundationally first and original, is a passage from Humboldt's *Ortsadverbien*: "Ueberhaupt ist, meiner innersten Ueberzeugung nach, alles Bestimmen einer Zeitfolge in der Bildung der wesentlichen Bestandtheile der Rede ein Unding." (VI 307, p. 175)[h]

The development of languages has the most advanced use of grammatical forms as its *telos*. Later this theory of the *Entstehen grammatischer Formen* is modified, so as to explain that in English (and the Scandinavian languages), the inflectional apparatus is ground off. Here we also find indication that Humboldt conceives of the development of languages as *also* a temporal process, the more original being described as *younger* and the grinding off of inflections as taking place through time:

> Wie lässt sich aber die hier ausgeführte Behauptung, dass das fruchbare Lebensprinzip der Sprachen hauptsächlich auf ihrer Flexionsnatur beruht, mit der Thatsache vereinigen, dass der Reichthum an Flexionen immer im jugendlichsten Alter der Sprachen am grössten ist, im

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7 Trabant, Jürgen, "Nachwort" and "Anhang", in *ÜdS* (see "Works by Humboldt", below), p. 244.

> Laufe der Zeit aber allmählich abnimmt? [. . .] Das Abschleifen der Flexionen ist eine unläugbare Thatsache. (*Kawi-Einleitung*, VII 239, p. 637)[i]

The development of languages is in this later view not seen as striving to reach a *telos*, but as reaching a point of culmination, from where languages now wear off their inflections.

> Je mehr sich eine Sprache von ihrem *Ursprung* entfernt, desto mehr gewinnt sie, unter übrigens gleichen Umständen, an Form, so kann nun, um die Ansicht zu vervollständigen, hinzugesetzt werden: Je mehr sich eine Sprache von dem *Culminationspunkt* ihrer Grammatik entfernt, desto mehr verliert sie, unter übrigens gleichen Umständen, am Form. (*Verschiedenheiten* VI 221, p. 272n2)[j]

When these forms are worn away, we implicitly add the inflectional apparatus more or less subconsciously in our mind. This is possible, because near the culmination point, the mind has accustomed itself to thinking the grammatical relations through language. Grammatical language is a necessary means for establishing grammatical thoughts, but can afterwards be disposed of.

> Je gereifter sich der Geist fühlt, desto kühner wirkt er in eignen Verbindungen und desto zuversichtlicher wirft er die Brücken ab, welche die Sprache dem Verständnisse baut. (*Kawi-Einleitung*, VII 240, p. 638)[k]

It is not only Wittgenstein, but the entire English-speaking world that throws away the ladder of grammatical language after climbing it. In the *Entstehen,* languages lacking inflectional forms are regarded as closer to the "*Ursprung*"[8] and as having a greater need to add the grammatical relations in thought. This means that a Chinese should have the need to add in his thought the person and the *tempus* to his description of some action, as these things are not explicit in the Chinese language according to Humboldt. Tilman Borsche argues against this alleged necessity of adding in thought the part of the complete grammar lacking in a certain language by referring to the experience of Japanese learning German:

> So empfindet es beispielsweise – {. . .} – mancher Japaner als einen Mangel der deutschen Sprache, dass Flexion und Deklination ihn dazu nötigen, grammatische Verhältnisse wie Numerus, Genus, Tempus, Modus usw. in jedem Satz genau zu bestimmen.[9]

Be this as it may in Humboldt's mind at the time he wrote the *Entstehen*, in a later paper on the grammar of Chinese,[10] he decides that the lack of explicit forms in language means that these things are not added in thought either:

> Die Chinesen lassen sehr oft die genaue grammatische Form ihrer Wörter unbestimmt, sie sind aber auch nicht zu Bestimmungen derselben, welche der Begriff nicht fordert, gezwun-

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8 I take this to mean both historically *and* transcendentally, and not only in the latter sense, which is how Trabant seems to interpret it.

9 Tilman Borsche, *Sprachansichten: Der Begriff der menschlichen Rede in der Sprachphilosophie Wilhelm von Humboldts*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981, p. 303, with reference to experiences published in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*.

10 "Ueber den grammatischen Bau der Chinesischen Sprache" [1826].