

References and transcript for Episode 4: Interview with Jürgen Trabant on Wilhelm von Humboldt

James McElvenny

Primary sources

Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1836), 'Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues', *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander von Humboldt, Berlin: Dümmler. archive.org
(English trans. *On Language. The diversity of human language structure and its influence on the mental development of mankind* [1988], trans. Peter Heath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1994), *Mexikanische Grammatik*, ed. Manfred Ringmacher, Paderborn: Schöningh.

Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1997), *Essays on Language*, trans. Theo Harden and D. Farrelly, Frankfurt am Main: Lang.

Humboldt, Wilhelm von (2012), *Baskische Wortstudien und Grammatik*, ed. Bernhard Hurch, Paderborn: Schöningh.

Secondary sources

Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt and Markus Messling (2017), 'Wilhelm von Humboldt', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/wilhelm-humboldt/>

Trabant, Jürgen (1986), *Apeliotes oder der Sinn der Sprache, Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachbild*, München: Wilhelm Fink. [Bayerische Staatsbibliothek](https://www.bsb-muenchen.de)
(French trans. *Humboldt ou le sens du langage* [1992], avec François Mortier et Jean-Luc Evard, Liège: Mardaga.)

Trabant, Jürgen (2012), *Weltansichten: Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachprojekt*, München: C.H. Beck.

Trabant, Jürgen (2015), Wilhelm von Humboldt Lectures, Université de Rouen.
<https://webtv.univ-rouen.fr/channels/#2015-wilhelm-von-humboldt-lectures>

Trabant, Jürgen (2020), 'Science of Language: India vs America: the Science of Language in 19th-Century Germany', *Doing Humanities in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Efraim Podoksik, 189–213, Leiden: Brill.

Transcript by Luca Dinu

JMc Hi. I'm James McElvenny, and you're listening to the History and Philosophy of the
00:10 Language Sciences Podcast, online at hiphilangsci.net. Today, we're joined by Jürgen
Trabant, Emeritus Professor of Romance Languages at the Free University of Berlin.
He'll be talking to us about Wilhelm von Humboldt, who we've encountered a couple
of times so far in this podcast series, most extensively in the previous episode. Jürgen
is the author of numerous works on Humboldt in several languages. You can find a
selection of his greatest hits listed up on the podcast website at hiphilangsci.net. So,
Jürgen, what would you say is the foundation of Humboldt's philosophy of language?
In the previous episode, we discussed briefly what you have called Humboldt's "anti-
semiotics". Could you tell us about what this is and how it fits into the philosophical
landscape of Humboldt's time?

JT I think, yeah, mentioning the anti-semiotics of Humboldt is very interesting, and it
01:09 goes to the very heart, to the very philosophical heart, of Humboldt's language
philosophy, because he was—in that point—he was anti-Aristotelean, because the
semiotic conception of language was for centuries linked to the European reception
of the *Interpretatione* of Aristotle. Aristotle had the idea that languages are pure
means of communication, hence signs, what he called signs. And he, Aristotle,
introduced the term "sign", *semeion*, into the history of language philosophy. And the
idea was that, "Here are the humans. They are everywhere the same, and they think
the same everywhere, and when their thoughts, they create ideas, their thoughts,
universally in the same way. And when they want to communicate those thoughts,
they use signs. They use sounds which are signs and which are completely arbitrary,"
or as Aristotle says, *kata syntheke*. And hence we have this idea that words and
languages are arbitrary signs, which is then taken up by Saussure of course—but in a
different way, by the way. And what not Humboldt only, but what the Europeans
together realize, in mainly in the 18th century, 17th, 18th century, that languages,
words are not signs in that way, but that languages create thought in a different way.
So this was a catastrophic insight, for instance, for the British philosophers, for Bacon,
for Locke, and they realized that the vulgar languages, or the languages of extra-
European people more so, that they created thought in a different way. So the
Europeans realized that it was difficult to say what the Christians wanted to
communicate in, let's say, Nahuatl or Otomi, so in American languages, and hence
they realized that the languages create different thought. And this is the idea
Humboldt takes up through Leibniz, mainly, and which he then transforms into his
language philosophy and which he transforms also into his linguistic project, because
what is his linguistic project and at the very centre is exactly inquiry into the diversity
of human thought. And this is why his title's also *Über die Verschiedenheit des
menschlichen Sprachbaues, On the Diversity of Human Language Construction*. So I
think the anti-semiotics is, yeah, leads us to the very centre of Humboldt's linguistic
philosophy.

JMc Okay, and in terms of the immediate context, the immediate philosophical context in
04:11 which he was working, do you think that Humboldt's thought, came out of a
particularly German tradition or that it was sort of pan-European?

JT I would say the discovery of the different languages being different thought, that was
04:24 pan-European, but it was everywhere, mainly in the British world as well as it was

seen as a catastrophic insight because it, of course, then communication's still more impossible than after the Tower of Babel. Now we have really different thought systems, and the German side of it that Leibniz transformed this idea, this insight, into a celebration of diversity. Leibniz said it's *la merveilleuse variété des opérations de notre esprit*, the marvellous variety of the operations of our spirit, of our mind, and this celebration of diversity is what Humboldt takes up. He was educated by, yes, Leibnizian philosophers. His teacher was a Leibnizian, and his first education, yes, was very much formed by this, yeah, by this Leibniz, Leibnizian joy of individualism, of diversity, of wealth also of being diverse. And then, of course, he became a Kantian, which is which is another story, but Kant then, in a certain way, is the general background for his construction of a philosophy of language, but the, I would say, the very idea of creating a new linguistics, yes, it's Leibniz, and it's Herder, and hence it is very German because it's this celebration, this joy of diversity, I think, which is which is the German contribution to the history of linguistics, I would say, and hence to linguistics, because only, I would say, only if you see that languages of the world are different worldviews, that they create different different semantics, different insights, then the research into those languages becomes a worthy thing. Otherwise, why would you research into languages which, if they are only means of communication?

JMc And do you think that—I mean, Hans Aarsleff has made the case that Humboldt's
06:47 time studying in Paris played an important role at least in turning his attention to language, if not in shaping his outlook, but do you think that plays a significant role at all in Humboldt's thinking?

JT No, we, I mean, would say, we, the German scholars, researched this for a couple of
07:04 time. Aarsleff invented this legend, and there, there have been DFG projects on his idea, and I think we we really found that this was not the case, I mean that Humboldt was not a German ideologist, *un idéologue allemand*, but that he, of course he was also already, he was 30 years old when he came to Paris, and he was a complete Kantian, and he tried to convince the French philosophers of his Kantian insights. And the idea that that Humboldt is a French philosopher is completely absurd, and I think this was proven by, yeah, by years of research into that idea. But what is certainly right is that Humboldt discovered in Paris, yes, his his linguistic interest, but not via *les idéologues*, but via his encounter with the Basque language, so he encountered this very strange—before that he was, he had already written about about language. But then he finds this very strange language, and his question, I think, is, how can you think which, such a strange language, which is completely different from what he knew from the Indo-European languages, from Hebrew, so these were the languages he knew, and then he goes into that strange language. He travels to the Basque language. He travels to his New World, in a certain way, yeah, and then he is fascinated by it, by languages, and he becomes a real linguist trying to get into the structure of languages. Then, as you know, his brother brings American languages, American grammars and dictionaries to Rome.

JMc So Alexander von Humboldt.

09:01

JT Alexander von Humboldt, yeah. He—this is also very important—Alexander brings
09:03 these twelve books, yeah, which I consider as the very first moment into real comparative descriptive linguistics, so he brings these books to Europe, and Schlegel

reads them first, and then after Schlegel, because Wilhelm doesn't have the time to read them, but when he has got the time in the twenties, he studies these books, and he tries to describe those American languages and their really different structural personality. So yes, and I think this is also very important, because I think Humboldt is really not a philosopher from the very beginning. He is a real linguist, and from his linguistics, he goes into philosophy, because then we have to consider his first formation. He, when he was young, he was looking for something: "What can I do?" And he was not a poet, and he discovered that he was not a philosopher, and philosophy was done by Kant, and he believed in Kant. Kant is his master and the master of Germany, but what he discovered and where he was really good at was anthropology, what's essentially called anthropology. What is anthropology? Anthropology is the description and the study of the concrete manifestations of humanity—not philosophy, not the universal, but the concrete, historical, particular, individual manifestations of humans. And this is what he starts first with. He goes to Paris in order to write a book on, yeah, an anthropological study of France. This is what his project is, and then he discovers languages, and he finds that in the very centre of the *anthropos*, of the human, we have language, language as the creation of thought. And I think this is very important, and then when he studies languages, he all, at the same time, he writes or he tries to develop his philosophy. May I add something to this idea? Because it's very interesting. If you look at what Humboldt really published, you can, he published very few things during his lifetime. He actually published practically some of his speeches at the Berlin Academy. We forget the book on the Basque because it's not very Humboldtian, but he publishes eight discourses at the Academy, but he presents I think something like 18 or 17 topics at the Academy here. So he is 50 years old, he has nothing published, and then he starts publishing stuff. And what does he publish? He publishes linguistics, linguistic descriptions, grammatical problems on Sanskrit and so on and so forth, on the American languages, and then, of course, at the end of his life, on the Pacific Austronesian languages, so what he presents, really, to the public is linguistic things, but what he does not publish, but what he is working at, is, are his philosophical, the philosophical part of it, because "I have to justify, why am I doing this? Why am I studying languages? And hence I have to develop a philosophy of language," which is published only when he is already dead. I mean, in the first volume of his main work on the Kawi-Sprache.

JMc Yeah. Okay, so that's that's a good connection to our next question, which is, how
12:47 would you say does Humboldt's concrete study of language, of human language and languages, particular languages, relate to his overall philosophy, in particular the distinction that Humboldt makes between the "construction" or the "organism" of a language and its "character"?

JT Yeah. Yeah. That is a very, very important and very, very, very great question. I think
13:13 this, we have to say first what this opposition is. Studying the construction or the structure, as he says in French, he calls *den Bau*, he calls it *structure*, *charpente*, in French, so it's the term "structure" which comes up here. And he says, yeah, we have to study the structures of the languages. He calls also these structures, he calls them also "organism". We have to do a systematic study of languages as structures. This is the first step, and then he says, yeah, but this is only the dead skeleton, *das tote Gerippe*, of languages, but languages are not a dead skeleton. Languages are spoken. They are really, they are action. They are *energeia*. They are activity, and hence, he

says, we have to continue. We have to continue to—to really see what languages are, we have to look at them in action, in speech, in the literature. And hence he adds to the description of the construction, he adds another chapter on the character. He says if we really want to to grasp the very individuality of languages, we have to look into literature, and hence he joined, and this is interesting, he joins linguistics, and he says so, *Linguistik*, to philology, *Philologie*. So for him, linguistics, structural linguistics, and the, yeah, the history of that language in its texts are two parts of language study. And hence what is so interesting, I think, in the 19th century, because this dichotomy in the 19th century is also very strong, so the philologists, so those are the Latinists, and so they are immediately against linguistics, because linguistics, all that, becomes a natural science, it becomes structural, it becomes very technical, and the philologists, they want to stay with their texts, of course. And Humboldt sees both together, and he wants them not to be separate, but two chapters, in a certain way, of language studies. But then, of course, in the 19th century, these things get, and are, separate. Steinthal is the perhaps the last one who tries, again, to think these two together. He has what he called *Stilistik*. *Stilistik* is actually the study of the character of languages. But in I would say in the history of linguistics, the 19th century is then not a century of character, but it comes up in the 20th century then and afterwards it so there are linguists who think, yeah, that language is something living, is an activity, and that we have to study the active usage of language, but I would say this comes then in the 20th century with people like Vossler or so, with so-called Idealism, and which is then considered by the linguists of the 19th century as non-linguistic.

JMc 16:51 And just a quick follow-up on what you said. So you were you were saying that sort of that Humboldt has these two compartments, the structural and the character, but is it not the case that Humboldt felt that the character was more important than the structure, like he calls it the *Schlussstein*, the keystone.

JT 17:08 Yeah. Yeah. It's the *Schlussstein*, but it's not, more importantly, it's the, yes, the final aim would be the description of the character, but he never succeeds in describing the character in his grammar on, in his Nahuatl grammar, which is the only grammar he really finished and he really nearly published also, which Manfred Ringmacher only published in the nineties. There, he has a chapter on the character, but the chapter is very weak because it does not have texts. It does not have Nahuatl texts, or very few, only translations, and hence he can't grasp the character. Hence this chapter on the character is rather deceptive, and when you look for what Humboldt is thinking of when he talks of character, he says, yeah, it's very, it's a beautiful chapter, yeah, and we have to study the literature and how the people talk, and then he has one footnote where he refers to a history of the Greek literature and says, yeah, something which we find there in that history of Greek prose, I think it's even, this might be a description of the character of the Greek language. And it's very hidden, but at the same time, it's also very true, because what is the description of an individual? The description or the scientific description of an individual is his or her story, her history or his history, so there is no definition of an individual, but in order to to say scientifically something on an individual, you have to write his or her history. And this, I think, is the wisdom of that footnote in Humboldt, but he himself, he never succeeds in writing such a description of character. He himself, yeah, he writes grammars, hence of the dead skeleton, and writes sketches of other American Indian languages. What is also important to know is that we only know this, we know

only the linguistic work of Humboldt, we know it only now, because this was the idea of Mueller-Vollmer when he saw the material which were not published, and he had the correct intuition that we have to join the linguistic descriptive stuff of Humboldt, and we have to publish it, because this was completely unpublished, to the philosophy, because he is known and seen as a philosopher of language, but he as I would like to repeat, he was a real linguist, yeah, and he tried to deal with linguistic structure, and perhaps, if I may add something also on the difficulty of this, the American languages of which he had some knowledge, came in grammars which were formed according to the Latin or Spanish grammar. So you had paradigms you see like *rosa, rosae, rosa, rosae*, etc., and of course, the Spanish then, or the Spanish priests who wrote those descriptions, they followed the Latin, European, Indo-European Spanish grammar, and hence we have descriptions which do not at all render the real character, of the real individual, even of the individual structure of those languages. So in a certain way, those descriptions even destroy the individuality of the American Indian languages, and Humboldt was very much aware of that problem. And what he tries, he tries to, in the Nahuatl Grammatik, he really tries to get through those, yeah, Indo-European descriptions of Nahuatl, for instance, and to show what categories, what grammatical categories are working in Nahuatl, what is the structure of that language.

JMc Yeah.

21:32

JT So I think this is really, but we did not know this of Humboldt. The Nahuatl Grammatik was not published until '94, and nobody knew Humboldt as a descriptive linguist.

JMc So linguists at the time were much more interested in the in this dead skeleton of the languages and took absolutely no interest in the character, and as you were saying yourself, Humboldt never really succeeded in developing his linguistics of character himself.

JT Yes. Yeah.

21:57

JMc Why do you think that might be?

22:04

JT This has also political reasons because because, of course, the German linguists, like Grimm and Bopp, they were also reconstructing the past of the nation, and of Europe, and hence they were, the Grimms dealt with the German, Germanic languages. I mean, they called their their grammar *Deutsche Grammatik*, but which is a Germanic grammar. It's a comparative grammar of the Germanic languages, not at all a German grammar. And here comes Bopp, and what does he do? He compares the Indo-European languages. He does not go beyond, and he even tries to to integrate non-Indo-European languages into the Indo-European family, like the Polynesian, for instance. He writes against Humboldt. He seems to, he really wants to, actively wants to integrate the Austronesian languages into the Indo-European family, and Humboldt's trying to show just the contrary. So I think yes, Germany, Europe were the aim, the final aim of historical linguistics, and the other guys who dealt with non-Indo-European languages, they were the minority. I mean, to us today, they are unknown, but I think they were a minority. They mostly they were

Orientalists, Sinologists, and so dealing with oriental languages, Chinese, Egyptian, but they were not at the very centre.

JMc 23:50 But a figure like Schleicher, for example, was at the very centre mid-century, mid-19th-century, and of course Schleicher developed his theory of morphology, which is essentially a kind of typology from a present-day perspective and does have pretensions to accounting for the structure of all languages.

JT 24:09 All languages. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Of course. This, but here, I would say, yes, here we have, do not have the European or German theme anymore, but here we have the scientific theme, so we have Darwinism, and of course the influence of natural sciences is very strong here, hence we have to create, like Darwin did for the species, we have to develop a tree for the development of all languages of mankind. Yes, that is true, and hence, yes, but morphology was always at the very centre. I mean, morphology, this is what what Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel, discovered when he said we have to look at the *Struktur*. He uses the term *Struktur, innere Struktur*, for the first time, and we have to look at the *Struktur* and not at the vocabulary for the comparison of languages. And this is what what what Bopp does immediately when he writes a *Konjugationssystem*. It's on *Konjugation*. It's not on semantics. It does not compare, as Pallas for instance did, words, lexicon, as the basis of his comparative approach, but he then already goes into *Konjugation*, and then, of course, the Grimms do, they go into *Deutsche Grammatik*. First, they write the *Deutsche Grammatik* before they go on to the *Wörterbuch*. Yeah. And then, of course, after the Grimms, everybody in Europe writes comparative grammars—grammar of the Romance languages, grammar of the Slavic languages, and so on and so forth—so this becomes a real, a huge success. After the Grimms, Bopp and then all the others do comparative grammars, and hence the focus is on, yes, on morphology, and hence they're, and morphology means also they're not dealing so very much with the meaning of those morphemes, but they're more with the form, with the material form of morphemes.

JMc 26:22 Yeah. That's very true. I mean, Schleicher says himself that he can't penetrate into the inner form of languages. He just sticks to the surface. Okay, and so this, this brings us to the last question, which is about Humboldt's term "inner form". So, I mean, this is probably one of the most iconic Humboldtian terms, "inner form", but Humboldt used the term only in passing himself, and later scholars, right up to the 20th century, have used it in myriad different senses. So why do you think this term has captured people's imaginations in the way that it has, and what do you think the significance of the term was for Humboldt himself?

JT 27:05 Yeah. Let's start with the with the with the first part. Yeah. It comes up in the *Kawi-Einleitung* after after writing some chapters on the external form, *äußere Form*, or the *Lautform*. He writes a chapter on inner form, *innere Sprachform*, and what does he, what is *innere Sprachform*? What does he talk about in this chapter? He talks about semantics of words, and he talks about semantics of grammatical categories, so this is *innere Form*. *Innere Form* is, just means the meaning, and then he goes on and talks about the conjunction of meaning and sound, so the next chapter after the chapter on *innere Sprachform* is about both going together. So, and I think the term *innere Sprachform*, by the readers of Humboldt, has been exaggerated, certainly, but, no, but no, but I think they they saw something really correct in the end, because this is the very centre. Once more, think of my first answer to your first question. I think

that going into semantics and into the meaning of categories of morphemes into the meaning, this is the inner form. This is inner form, so, and this is really what is the very centre of Humboldt's dealing with languages, because he wants to show *la merveilleuse variété des opérations de notre esprit*, yeah, the marvellous variety of variety of the operations of our mind. And mind is the inner form, so I think this this, even if the chapter is very short only on inner form, I think the readers of Humboldt were correct in focusing on this term, on yeah, because this is the very novelty, also, I think of his approach to look not on the variety of the sounds. This was clear, that languages are different sounds. This was clear from Aristotle on, and this material, materiality, was clear, from antiquity on, but and here comes Europe once more—Bacon, Locke, Leibniz, and Herder, Humboldt—and they see no, it's not only sound. It's the meaning. It's the mind. It's the inner form, and I think therefore, I think this yeah, the focus on inner form is really justified.

JMc Yeah. Okay. Although I guess, yeah, meaning and semantics, I guess that those are 29:50 potentially also sort of anachronistic terms, because, I mean, if you think of how semantics is done today, like truth-functional semantics, as an idea that there is something objective that exists, so it's, yeah, it's something much more mystical, even, perhaps, talking about the operations of the mind.

JT No, not so not so very much. No no, because for instance, in his first discourse at the 30:02 Academy, where he tries to find an answer, but he proposes, "So now we have to describe all the languages of the world. We have to do *vergleichendes Sprachstudium*, descriptive-comparative, descriptive *Linguistik*."

JMc No. Okay.
30:14

JT And then he asks, why do we, shall we do it, and then at the end, he comes, he talks 30:33 about semantics of words, and he says, "Yeah, of course, the words referring to to feelings, to interior operations of the mind, they differ more from language to language. Words for exterior objects, they differ less. However, they differ. They differ. Also, a sheep might be something different in the, let's say, in Nahuatl and in French or so." So I think there is this focus on the meaning, which he calls *Begriff*, by the way. He does not talk about *Bedeutung*. His term is *Begriff*, and *Begriff* here can be different in different languages.

JMc So you might call, you might render that as "concept" in English, do you think? Yeah.
31:20

JT Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I would say concept. But mind, that concept was like *Begriff*, 31:22 also, after Hegel and rationalism, so it's perhaps too rationalistic. *Begriff* is just, perhaps the better word is *Vorstellung*, because it's less rationalistic, because this is exactly what the mind does. The mind does create *Vorstellungen* in in—this is how Humboldt describes it. The mind, I mean the world goes through the senses into the mind, and the mind then creates *Vorstellungen*, *Begriff*, but which are immediately connected to sound, so they're never only conceptions, only *Begriffe*, only concepts. They're immediately words.

JMc So for our listeners that are, that might be trapped in English, as Anna Wierzbicka 32:11 would put it, we might go for, say, "representation" or "image" for *Vorstellung*, do you think?

JT Why not?

32:19

JMc Yeah. Why not?

32:20

JT No, but no yeah, well not because, image is also good because because the word, as 32:21 Humboldt says, is between image and sign. Sign is the completely arbitrary thing with the universal concept we had. Image is something concrete, which, yeah, which depicts the world, and the word is something in between. It's a special, it has a special structure, special position between sign and image, and hence, yeah, he said so. Sometimes the word can be an *Abbild*, an image, and sometimes it can also be used as a sign, but this is because it is in between, in between the sign and the image. And perhaps one word on this problem: right in the chapter on the *innere Form*, he adds that, yeah, we might compare the word, or the work of the mind creating a language, with the work of an artist. So that is exactly what he is thinking. He says the languages work like artists, you see, and hence they create images.

JMc Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Excellent. Well, thank you very much for this conversation.

33:40

JT Thank you very much for this, for the interesting questions.

33:46