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# Wilhelm von Humboldt's Reception in the Anglosphere, 1820-present

John E. Joseph  
University of Edinburgh

## 1 Introduction

If Wilhelm von Humboldt's writings had been assessed for international impact in a research assessment exercise, he would have had to hope that he was not being compared to his little brother. Such was Alexander's renown that dozens of New World species, geographical features and places are named after him, and he has recently been the hero of the wildly successful novel *Der Vermessung der Welt* (2005) by Daniel Kehlmann, with Wilhelm reduced to a background caricature. Alexander's recognition as the great scientific explorer of his day shows there was no *a priori* obstacle to an enthusiastic reception for Wilhelm's writings in North America or in a United Kingdom ruled by the House of Hanover and then Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, which embraced Friedrich Max Müller as its leading philologist.

Wilhelm suffered, among other things, from bad timing. His approach to languages, and the rhetoric in which he developed it, looked back to classical times rather than to the future. His last great work, published posthumously in 1836, pushed to their culmination the ideas that had marked the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than taking up the new comparative-historical method that had been developed since 1816 by Bopp, Grimm, Rask and other men with monosyllabic surnames not preceded by *von*. They took a more mechanical approach than the assiduous armchair diplomat-philosopher-linguist. The Baron aimed higher, at a synthesis between the thesis that was Kant's phenomenological critique of the Enlightenment project, and the antithesis that would later be called the "Counter-Enlightenment" (see Berlin 1973, which the term itself predates), the initial impetus for which came from J. G. Hamann (1730-1788). The analysis of languages was brought in by Hamann's student J. G. Herder (1744-1803), who hoped to reveal the range of human thought and expression embodied in the classical and modern European tongues. Humboldt broadened this to encompass every corner of the world, while deepening it to take in all the data he could muster.

Although Humboldt was a key figure in the transition from philology to linguistics (on which see Turner 2014), his work would not define the mainstream of future linguistic research in Germany, let alone the English-speaking world. In Latour's (1991) schema of modern thought as a forlorn attempt at polarization between Nature and Subject/Society, the emerging academic field of linguistics was striving to position itself at the Nature pole, though what exactly Nature means with regard to language has never been clear (see Joseph 2000). The Humboldt brothers have often been depicted as mirroring this polarization, with Alexander taking the natural sciences as his domain and Wilhelm the humanities. In some of his work Wilhelm is indeed focussed rather exclusively on Subject/Society, but his approach to language would be better described as a hybridized version in which the spirit of the language, a quasi-natural force, determines the intellectual energy that a society and the individual subjects within it can bring to bear in their cultural productions, which in turn influence the language's future spirit and structure.

That put his work out of step with the emerging linguistics, which his ghost has nevertheless always continued to haunt. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century his views re-emerged in the USA as part of a new

anthropological linguistics. In the UK, where philology held out much longer against the more modern linguistics, and German ideas became unfashionable for reasons that will be discussed in §3 below, Humboldt did not have a comparable resonance in anthropology.

The particular rhetorical structure on which Humboldt relied has long impeded a clear understanding of his views (see Joseph 1999, 2012). The method, taking inspiration from Plato's dialogues, was developed by Humboldt's teacher J. G. Fichte (1762-1814; see Fichte 1795). It entailed establishing a thesis and its antithesis, which might reflect a current debate or polemic, and then deriving from them a synthesis that represents a resolution and progress in understanding the issue. The problem this creates is that, when Humboldt makes the case for the thesis and the antithesis – views which he either does not hold or is striving to move beyond – he lays them out in “free indirect discourse”. They appear on the page in his voice, without regular sign-posting of the fact that he is ventriloquizing the views of others, leaving him defenceless against anyone lifting them out and attributing them to him directly. It represents poor scholarship by those who do that, but also risky authorship. Good writing strives to avert misunderstanding; Plato managed it with the theatrical device of different characters. But the Fichte-Humboldt dialectical structure opens a trap for being misunderstood and misrepresented. As a result, Humboldt's writings have had a convoluted reception over the last two centuries, since what was received was often not his actual views, but ones he was implicitly rejecting.

## 2 Reception during Humboldt's lifetime

Humboldt was by no means a marginal figure in the USA in his lifetime. He was elected to honorary membership of the American Antiquarian Society in 1820, and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1822, along with Alexander. That same year the first mention of him appeared in the *North American Review* (Anon. 1822: 134n., 143-144) for his widely-read article on Basque. Possibly this early recognition was not so much for Wilhelm's writings as for his role in founding the University of Berlin in 1809-10, an extraordinary achievement when Napoleon was closing all the universities he could in his expanding empire, in order to replace them with his single *Université Impériale*. The University of Berlin – now the Humboldt University of Berlin – was the first reversal of the anti-university tide in Europe since the start of the French Revolution. Its innovations, particularly in post-graduate training, laid the ground for how such training is conducted world-wide down to the present day.

The earliest attestation I have found of the word *linguistics* in English is in an 1837 review article in *The North American Review* which also refers to “the preface to the posthumous work of Alexander von Humboldt, ‘On the Kawi language’” (Anon. 1837: 380n.). Alexander did indeed write the preface to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836), but the review article has conflated the brothers. It goes on to say that “Among the most valued correspondents of Baron von Humboldt, we remark with pleasure the names of our distinguished countrymen, Messrs. Pickering and Duponceau”. Some national pride is in evidence here; but Humboldt's correspondence with John Pickering (1777-1846) and Peter Stephen Duponceau (1781-1844) is best remembered for how the two Americans upbraided him for his treatment of Native American languages. In the early 1820s Humboldt had intervened in a controversy in the Société Asiatique in Paris, when the linguist Eugène Burnouf proclaimed the superiority of Sanskrit by contrasting it with the supposed primitiveness of Chinese, provoking the

wrath of the Parisian Sinologists. Humboldt, a professional diplomat who had himself produced praises of the “incomparable” structure of Greek and Sanskrit, produced his book-length “Letter to Mr Abel-Rémusat on the genius of the Chinese language” (see Joseph 1999), in which he tried to please both sides by arguing that Chinese has the perfect structure for the expression of ideas, while Sanskrit has the ideal structure for the expression of thought (taking ideas as the isolated elements that are interwoven into thought).

In the course of praising Chinese, he contrasted it with Native American and South Pacific languages that he called wholly imperfect vehicles for any intellectual purpose. This provoked the protests from Pickering and Duponceau, and more diplomatic replies from Humboldt. He clarified that the “intellectual power” of a language, and by extension the people who speak it, is determined more by its purity within its type (isolating, agglutinating or inflecting) than by the type itself; so it was then a profound compliment for him to write that, despite whatever disadvantages inhere in their use of agglutination, “Those American languages which we know most perfectly have a great regularity and very few anomalies in their structure; their grammar at least offers no visible traces of mixture” (Humboldt 1827: 78, my translation).<sup>1</sup> But note the qualifiers and escape clauses: the ones we know most perfectly – perhaps because they alone are perfectly knowable? – have no *visible* traces of mixture, but that is not the same as having no mixture. For all his empiricist commitments, Humboldt remained a historical idealist for whom the spirit of the language can survive the vagaries of change over time, “since all ‘historical detail’ was ‘as accidental and arbitrary as the accident and arbitrariness which produce it’” (Bunzl 1996: 22-23, translating from Humboldt’s “Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie”, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 396-397).

### 3 Second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century

When Humboldt’s name is invoked in work on ethnography and language in the middle decades of the century, whether in British or American journals, it is often without specific ideas being cited (e.g. Prichard 1848: 315, 327), leading William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894) to call Humboldt “a man whom it is nowadays the fashion to praise highly, without understanding or even reading him” (Whitney 1872: 273). Sometimes the references are an appeal to his authority for the notion of the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a people, the national soul or genius; but this concept was by now out of fashion in linguistics, with the work that it performed transferred to the more neutral and mechanical (but ultimately no less metaphysical) notion of a “system”.

The first study of Humboldt in English was a 47-page book of 1866 by Leipzig-born George J. Adler (1821-1868), professor of German in the University of the City of New York until 1853, when he was committed to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, where he died 15 years later. Whatever his mental state, Adler’s book is perfectly lucid; its faults are essentially the same as those of the second study, produced almost 20 years later (1885) by the much more famous Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837-1899). Both portray Humboldt’s account of languages as an essentially evolutionary one.

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<sup>1</sup> “Celles des langues américaines que nous connaissons le plus parfaitement, possèdent une grande régularité et bien peu d’anomalies dans leur structure; leur grammaire, au moins, n’offre pas de traces visibles de mélange”.

The motive for reading and presenting Humboldt in this way is obvious. By 1866 Darwin's *Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, had already reached its fourth edition. Humboldt's work of decades earlier could be made to vibrate with current relevance if words such as *Bildung* and its derivatives were rendered in English as "evolution".<sup>2</sup> "The avowed purpose" of Humboldt (1836), Brinton wrote, "was to demonstrate the thesis that the *diversity of structure in languages is the necessary condition of the evolution of the human mind*" (1885: 7, italics in original). The word that Brinton translates as "evolution" is *Fortbildung* – not exactly a mistranslation, but unusual, and scientifically and culturally loaded. Bunzl's verdict on Brinton is harsh:

Brinton's interpretation of Humboldt, based in part on what seem to be clear misreadings, forced Humboldt into an evolutionary framework, neglecting his central concern for the unique contributions of individual languages and national characters to humanity at large. [...] Brinton consistently invoked Wilhelm von Humboldt in support of his "rather extreme racial determinism and evolutionary dogmatism" (Stocking 1992 [1974]: 87). (Bunzl 1996: 64n.)

Brinton's "misreadings", abetted by Humboldt's unsigned thesis-antithesis-synthesis argumentative structure, mattered particularly in these critical years of westward expansion, when his views on the cultural level and intellectual capacity of American Indians weighed heavily in the setting of government policy on relations with the native peoples. Brinton "believed that American tongues reflected earlier stages of human mental development. Brinton placed them on the bottom of the evolutionary ladder because, lacking the essential grammatical feature of inflection, they assembled all linguistic elements in unsystematic fashion" (Bunzl 1996: 64).

His judgment was shared by the other most influential ethnographer of the time, John Wesley Powell (1834-1902). But not everyone took this view. Horatio Hale (1817-1896), considerably older than Brinton or Powell but without their institutional stature, argued steadfastly that the complex classificatory systems of American Indian languages revealed a high intellectual capacity. Hale (1892) drew at length on Duponceau (1838) to argue for the richness and regularity of the American languages, and repeated Duponceau's regret that "a learned member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences", whom Hale identifies in a footnote as Humboldt, "assigns to them an inferior rank in the scale of languages, considered in the point of view of their capacity to aid the development of ideas" (Hale 1892: 449). Hale neglects to note how, in later writings, Humboldt modified his position – as indeed did Duponceau, who, like Pickering, came finally to a view of American Indian languages less imbued with the Romantic idealizing of Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), and more analytical than judgmental.

Whitney, the pre-eminent American linguist of the later 19<sup>th</sup>-century, ended his best-known book with a chapter running through the history of linguistics, in which he mentions Herder, Schlegel, Bopp, Grimm and others, but not Humboldt. Yet earlier in the book we read that

Every single language has thus its own peculiar framework of established distinctions, its shapes and forms of thought, into which, for the human being who learns that language as his "mother-tongue", is cast the content and product of the mind, his store of impressions, however acquired, his experience and knowledge of the world. This is what is sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> This despite the fact that the word *evolution* did not appear in *The Origin of Species* until the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of 1871. Previous editions had only a single occurrence of *evolved*, as the last word of the book.

called the “inner form” of language — the shape and cast of thought, as fitted to a certain body of expression. (Whitney 1875: 21-22)

This is pure Humboldt, yet Whitney provides no attribution, perhaps because of the textual politics of modern science and the economy of references to work redolent of a prior era. More surprising is that Whitney’s polemical sparring partner Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford, was not more overtly Humboldtian (see also Sutcliffe 2002). Müller had, like Humboldt, studied Sanskrit under Bopp, and moreover had personal links with Alexander in the early phase of his career. But Müller’s insistence that linguistics had to be a natural science rather than a historical one may have given him a sense of distance from Wilhelm. In addition, after the Franco-Prussian War and the creation of Germany as a unified state in 1871, Britain’s taste for German culture, so keen in the days of Coleridge and Carlyle and Prince Albert, became bitter with fear of a new rival imperial power.

Such tension was felt much less strongly in the USA, with its large communities of German émigrés, no overseas empire, and separated by an ocean from any threat of war in Europe. In 1876 The Johns Hopkins University, the first to have postgraduate training and doctorates in humanities disciplines on the German model, was founded in Baltimore, followed by Stanford University in 1885 and the University of Chicago in 1890. It would be in the USA that a Humboldtian tradition was embedded as the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, while in Britain the language-thought nexus was being reconceived in a way antithetical to Humboldt, with languages taken as the sources of metaphysical traps that prevent logical thinking.

#### **4 First half of 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In 1887 the young German physicist and geographer Franz Boas (1858-1942), who had done field research on the cultures and languages of the Pacific Northwest, settled in the USA. Appointed professor of anthropology at Columbia University in New York in 1899, Boas became the leading figure in American anthropology for the next three to four decades, as his students became the leaders in the field’s various sub-disciplines. Boas was a second-generation Humboldtian, trained in Germany within the *Völkerpsychologie* (national mind) paradigm established by Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) and Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899), who saw himself as Humboldt’s intellectual heir. The experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) ultimately emerged as *Völkerpsychologie*’s central academic figure. Steinthal and Wundt both focussed on language as the key to understanding the mind or spirit of a nation. Boas moved progressively away from using such terms, which sounded increasingly old-fashioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; but the general project of language as a way into understanding a tribe or people continued to inform his anthropological analysis and teaching. In Bunzl’s view (1996: 66), “Boas’ *Handbook of American Indian Languages* [1911] may be seen as the realization of Humboldt’s original project. Growing out of a similar understanding of the task of linguistics, Boas’ plan – as stated in the preface of the first volume of the *Handbook* – echoed Humboldt’s very closely. The project was to ‘emphasize’ the ‘analytical study of grammar,’ revealing the ‘psychological foundation’ of the ‘structure’ of American Indian languages”.

Boas rarely credited his general intellectual sources, and Humboldt is cited only once in his vast published output, in a little-known Spanish-language paper published in Mexico (Boas 1910: 227, noted by Mackert 1993: 332). Nevertheless,

Like Humboldt, who had coined the term, and Steinthal, who had made it the cornerstone of his linguistic project, Boas sought to base his analyses entirely upon the “inner form” of each language (1911: 81). But not only its analytical premises suggested the position of *The Handbook of American Indian Languages* in the Humboldtian tradition; Boas himself noted the immediate connection. In a letter to Robert Lowie, he remarked that his main achievement in the field of linguistics was the “presentation of languages on Steinthal’s principles, i.e., from their own, not an outsider’s point of view” (Lowie 1943: 184). (Bunzl 1996: 67)

*The Handbook* would furnish the methodological manual for the fieldwork conducted by Boas’s students, foremost among whom on the language side was Edward Sapir (1884-1939), but also for linguists not directly trained by Boas, notably Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949). It is the founding document of American “distributionalism”, a label which inevitably masks the differences between Sapir and Bloomfield, which had particularly to do with the place of psychology. Bloomfield, though initially a follower of Wundt, became a convert to behaviourism, in which anything “mental” was eliminated from scientific discourse on the grounds of not being directly observable. Sapir, though attracted to aspects of behaviourism, nevertheless stuck fundamentally to the Boasian programme of inferring thought processes from lexical and especially grammatical structure.

Koerner (1995) sketches out a Humboldtian tradition passed down from Steinthal to Boas to Sapir, which in Joseph (2002) I have qualified, while acknowledging that Sapir may have been “a ‘closet’ semi-Humboldtian”. His 1905 Columbia University master’s thesis on Herder (published as Sapir 1907) contains no discussion of the linguistic shaping of thought or related issues, and far from professing any intellectual bond with Herder, maintains a distance that at times borders on condescension. Whole sections of Sapir (1921) and (1933) are dedicated to denying the tenets of Humboldt (1836) concerning how the intellectual power of cultures is causally correlated with the typology of language structure. “Rightly understood”, writes Sapir (1921: 219), “such correlations are rubbish”. Thus when Sapir uses the Steinthalian metaphor of language as “a prepared road or groove” for thought (*ibid.*, p. 15), it is as part of a bigger argument, one directed in the first instance against the view that thought takes place independently of language, which is “but a garment” (*ibid.*), where his point is specifically that thought and language influence one another reciprocally rather than in one direction only.

Reading and reviewing Ogden & Richards (1923), Sapir encountered the British view of the deleterious effect of language on thought mentioned at the end of the last section. From that point on his writings on language begin to take the form familiar to us as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”.

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as

representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

[...] We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

[...] From this standpoint we may think of language as the *symbolic guide to culture* (Sapir 1929: 209-210 [1949:162])

Whorf, who became Sapir's protégé, would famously compare Hopi and other American languages with what he termed "Standard Average European" (or SAE), culminating in his formulation of the "linguistic relativity principle" (Whorf 1956 [1940]: 221): "Concepts of 'time' and 'matter' are not given in substantially the same form by experience to all men but depend upon the nature of the language or languages through the use of which they have developed" (Whorf 1956 [1941]: 158). In formulating the principle this way Whorf taps, again only in part, into the Humboldtian vein. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis became very widely known across fields far beyond linguistics, and represents the most significant latter-day extension of a Humboldtian tradition.

## 5 Second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century

In the 1950s Anglosphere, linguistics was dominated by the former students of Sapir and Bloomfield. R. E. Asher recalls (personal interview, Edinburgh, 27 Jan. 2013) that his teacher J. R. Firth, the pre-eminent British linguist of the decade, was bent on devising an approach that would be different from the ones emanating from the USA. That in itself indicates their dominance. Also determined to break the stranglehold of distributionalism – particularly the Bloomfieldian variety, with its behaviourist commitments, which overtook the anthropological approach after Sapir's death in 1939 – was the young Noam Chomsky. One of his strategies was to invoke linguists from further back in time, in order to suggest that his Bloomfieldian teachers had overthrown the great tradition of linguistics that he, Chomsky, was re-establishing (see Joseph 2010).

At the Ninth International Congress of Linguists in 1962, Chomsky gave a plenary address to an audience including not only all the main American figures but large numbers of linguists, both senior and junior, attending from Europe. As detailed in Joseph (2002), his paper was aimed at engaging the Europeans by aligning his own position with those of, first, Saussure, in the pre-print distributed to those attending the Congress (Chomsky 1962), and then Humboldt in the three published versions, each of which differs from the pre-print and from each other.<sup>3</sup> After initially criticizing Humboldt for failing to take account of "creativity" in language production (Chomsky 1962: 512; cf. 1964c: 22), Chomsky added several pages summarizing Humboldt's conception of language (1964a: 918-921), and stating that "one can distinguish two conflicting views regarding the essential nature of language in Nineteenth Century linguistic theory", namely, Humboldt's view of an underlying *Form* in language (*ibid.*), and Whitney's view of language as an inventory of elements (*ibid.*, p. 921). To Whitney's view Chomsky annexes Saussure and structural linguistics (pp. 921-922), while to

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<sup>3</sup> Of these, Chomsky (1964a) is closest to the (1962) version; (1964b) contains all of the (1964a) revisions plus a considerable amount of new material on the history of linguistics; and (1964c) reproduces (1964b) with some very minor adjustments.



Humboldt's he joins his own thought: "It is just this point of view concerning the essential nature of language that underlies and motivates recent work in generative grammar" (p. 920).

Chomsky (1964b and c) carry the search for a historical anchor back from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and what he calls a "Cartesian" linguistic tradition that reaches its apex with Humboldt, before being undone by Whitney, the Neogrammarians and Saussure.

Modern linguistics is much under the influence of Saussure's conception of *langue* as an inventory of elements (Saussure, 1916, 154, and elsewhere, frequently) and his preoccupation with systems of elements rather than the systems of rules which were the focus of attention in traditional grammar and in the general linguistics of Humboldt. (Chomsky 1964c: 23)

The distinction I am noting here is related to the *langue-parole* distinction of Saussure; but it is necessary to reject his concept of *langue* as merely a systematic inventory of items and to return rather to the Humboldtian conception of underlying competence as a system of generative processes. (Chomsky 1965: 4).

Humboldt as read and embraced by Chomsky is no less odd a figure than Brinton's evolutionist Humboldt. In Chomsky's view, there is only one human language, and the differences among what we usually call languages are trivial. For Humboldt, those differences are precisely what matter. Where Chomsky found intellectual kinship was above all in Humboldt's distinction between *energeia* and *ergon*, the conception of a language as a potential and a process, rather than a product, a store of words; and he took inspiration from Humboldt's recognition of how a language uses finite means to infinite ends. Yet Chomsky's conception of language as an attribute of the individual differs markedly from Humboldt, for whom *Individualität* is indeed the focus of linguistic enquiry, but the individuality of an entire people.

Chomsky's "biolinguistics", as he now calls it, is a linguistics of the Enlightenment that blithely brushes aside the Counter-Enlightenment critiques at the heart of Humboldt's writings. Yet such was Chomsky's success that his work, in conjunction with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – which has no interest for Chomsky, being about "trivial" differences – sparked off a wave of Anglophone Humboldt scholarship (e.g. Brown 1967, Miller 1968, Penn 1972) that culminated in the first translation into English of Humboldt (1836). This translation (by Buck & Raven, 1971) was much criticized for its anachronistic use of 20<sup>th</sup>-century structural linguistic terminology, meant to help modern linguists to see how Humboldt was relevant to their concerns.

Anthropological linguistics, pursuing the tradition established by Boas and Sapir, continued to explore links between language and thought. The work of Berlin & Kay (1969) on colour terms and perception across languages was particularly fruitful; much of what followed in its wake was cast in terms of testing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Beyond Chomsky and Sapir-Whorf, however, any resuscitation of a Humboldtian approach was stymied in a world struggling to come to terms with the revelations of wartime atrocities committed in the name of racial science, the vying of rival nations to develop weapons capable of destroying mankind, and other manifestations of *Volksgeist* that made all the grandiose assertions of cultural and intellectual superiority by Humboldt and his contemporaries ring hollow. Linguists, particularly in the USA, accepted as dogma that "all languages are equally complex" (see Joseph & Newmeyer 2012), and a *de facto* ban ensued on research that

would assess or measure, rather than simply describe, the sorts of differences that were at the heart of Humboldt's approach.

Humboldt's typological schema remained in use on the descriptive level, and even gained in importance. But his texts increasingly read as "racist", to use the term applied to them by Aarsleff in his 1988 preface to the second translation of Humboldt (1836) and picked up in work such as Harris & Taylor (1989). Again, it was easy enough to depict Humboldt in this way by cherry-picking statements from the antitheses in his writing and ignoring the syntheses. In the longer term, accurate reading has largely cleared the air: Bunzl (1996) argues against any notion that Humboldt believed in racial superiority, and for Walls (2009: 184), "It is important to note that Wilhelm could have treated languages as racial entities. He did not". In a signal event, Aarsleff's preface was withdrawn from the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Humboldt translation and replaced with a more careful one by Lososky. Around the same time, as discussed in Joseph & Newmeyer (2012), the *de facto* post-war ban on research into the complexity of languages was finally challenged and broken.

## 6 21<sup>st</sup> century

Recent years have seen a movement in philosophy, psychology and linguistics toward "embodied" cognition. The term means various things to various researchers (for a discussion see Joseph 2016), but perhaps its widest use is in conjunction with how the body gets reflected in language, particularly in metaphor. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and (1999) have been memory-places for such research, as has the work of Anna Wierzbicka, which, as Sériot (2004) points out, recapitulates certain aspects of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century German thought. While Lakoff & Johnson are concerned with language-specific metaphors as embodying cognitive frames, and as such are Humboldtian in orientation, Wierzbicka's interest is in "semantic primitives" (1972), later renamed "primes" (2014), held to be the same in all languages. This universality would seem to disalign Wierzbicka from Humboldt, but the rationale for determining the primes is to "give us a neutral, non-Eurocentric and non-Anglocentric metalanguage for comparing *ways of thinking embedded in different languages* across all different domains" (Wierzbicka 2014: 34, italics added). In this regard her work and that of her associates represents a phase of Humboldt's reception in linguistics.

Still more recently, a 2016 book by the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has attempted to revive and expand what he calls the "HHH" (Hamann-Herder-Humboldt) conception of language and thought for the present-day context, in order to complement the "HLC" (Hobbes-Locke-Condillac) conception that has dominated the analytical philosophy tradition within which Taylor and most other Anglophone philosophers work. The HLC "tried to understand language within the confines of the modern representational epistemology" (Taylor 2016: 4) that focusses on "ideas" as the atoms from which statements and propositions are compounded, and words as the building blocks for the construction of mind. The HHH, in contrast, takes a "holistic" approach in which "individual words can only be words within the context of an articulated language. Language is not something which could be built up one word at a time" (*ibid.*, pp. 18-19). Taylor takes up Humboldt's metaphor of a language as "an immense web in which every part stands in a more or less clearly recognizable connection with the others, and all with the whole" (*ibid.*, p. 20, citing Humboldt 1988 [1836]: 69), noting how this prefigures Saussure, and arguing further that Wittgenstein's conception of a language as a form of life is an application of this Humboldtian insight (p. 21). Taylor also draws

attention to “Humboldt’s often repeated point [...] that possessing a language is to be continuously involved in trying to extend its powers of articulation” (p. 177), an aspect of everyone’s linguistic experience that the HLC cannot account for, but that is fundamental to the HHH understanding of man as “the language animal”.

Aside from the translations of Humboldt (1836), this is the most significant development in the reception of Humboldt in the Anglosphere at least since Boas (1911) – and, unlike Boas’s, Taylor’s is an overt reception. Together with the work of Trabant, Underhill and others who figure in the present volume, it signals that, if Kehlmann’s novel allowed Alexander von Humboldt to own the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should not be surprised if the decades ahead turn out to be Wilhelm’s.

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