

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT OVERVIEW

Humboldt is one of the founders of the field of Linguistics as we know it today. His views were extremely influential on the study of language in the nineteenth century and were largely responsible for the subsequent development of linguistics as a distinct field of study.

Humboldt is one of the chief proponents of what some philosophers term today an *expressivist* model of language. According to the *referential* or *correspondence* model of language which predominated from the time of Plato (see his dialogue *Cratylus*) up to at least the Neo-classicists in the eighteenth century, signs are like mirrors in that their meaning derives from the objects they represent, imitate or depict. In the nineteenth century, an *expressivist* model of language emerged according to which language, functioning less like a mirror than a lamp, serves as a medium of self-expression. Through one's words, a human's innermost thoughts and feelings, that which is peculiar to the individual, are outwardly expressed. The actual form of the language used necessarily bears the peculiar imprint of these thoughts and feelings which originate and emanate from within the individual.

However, because the individual is inevitably part of a community of individuals, language is not an entirely solipsistic affair: it also expresses as such the collective beliefs of the community of which the individual is part as a result of which the point of view and, by extension, collective identity of this community also speaks, as it were, through the individual. There is, in short, a dialectical relationship between individual and community: the community necessarily impinges on the individual at the same time that without the individual, there would be no community to speak of. On a collective level, the precise form taken by specific languages is expressive of the contours of the identity of the people in question. (This is a view that is still very much with us even today here in the Caribbean, though recent research suggests that language may not work in this way at all.) Given the foregoing, Humboldt contended that the study of language must proceed along a comparative basis, that is, by acknowledging the differences in the language spoken by different cultures at any one time.

Humboldt also argued that although humans inherit and make use of pre-existing linguistic systems (and, thus certain ways of making sense of the world), they also in turn affect and change the systems which they inherit, causing languages to evolve over time. Language is, in short, never static but dynamic, constantly caught up in the throes of change as its users are able to some degree at least to force it into new directions. For this reason, he also advocated what subsequently linguists would come to call the *diachronic* emphasis in the field, that is, the study of language as it develops and changes over time by focusing on the etymology of words and changes in syntactic structures, etc.

The 1911 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica summarises Humboldt's model of language thus: he

first clearly laid down that the character and structure of a language expresses the inner life and knowledge of its speakers, and that languages must differ from one another in the same way and to the same degree as those who use them. Sounds do not become words until a meaning has been put into them, and this meaning embodies the thought of a community. What Humboldt terms the inner form of a language is just that mode of denoting the relations between the parts of a sentence which reflects the manner in which a particular body of men regards the world about them. It is the task of the morphology of speech to distinguish the various ways in which languages differ from each other as regards their inner form, and to classify and arrange them accordingly.