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ON LANGUAGE: ON THE DIVERSITY OF HUMAN LANGUAGE CONSTRUCTION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE MENTAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN SPECIES (1836)

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I

Plan of the Present Work:

Humboldt states his intention to devote the introduction to "general considerations, whose development will make better preparation for the transition to the facts and historical inquiries" (20). He contends that the "division of mankind into peoples and races, and the diversity of their languages and dialects, are indeed directly linked with each other, but are also connected with, and dependent upon, a third and higher phenomenon, the *growth of man's mental powers* into ever new and often more elevated forms" (21). The "highest aim of all spiritual endeavour, the ultimate idea which world history must strive to bring forth" (21) is the "revelation of man's mental powers, diverse in its degree and nature, over the course of millennia and throughout the world" (21). For "this uplifting or extension of inner being is the only thing that the individual . . . can regard as unshakeably his own, and from which, in a nation, great individualities unfaillingly continue to develop" (21). The "*comparative study of languages*" (21) (the "establishment of the manifold ways in which innumerable peoples resolve the task of language formation that is laid upon them as men" [21]) has no purpose if it does not serve to show that "language is connected with the shaping of the *nation's mental power*" (21). However, "insight into the true essence of a nation, and into the internal connection of a single tongue . . . depends wholly on consideration of the overall individuality of mind" (21). For

only through this, as nature has furnished it and circumstances have worked on it, is the character of the nation bonded together, on which alone depend the deeds, arrangements and thoughts which that nation produces, and in which lie the power and virtue that are again handed down to individuals.
(21)

Humboldt argues that language is the "organ of inner being . . . as it successively attains to inner knowledge and outward expression" (21). The "roots" (21) of language lie in the "national mentality" (21) as a result of which the "more aptly the latter reacts upon it, the more rich and regular its development" (21).

II

General Consideration of the Course of Man's Development

Here, Humboldt argues that the study of the "cultural history of mankind" (23) reveals that history is not simply a series of "*causes and effects*" (23) whereby one event leads to another. Some events are not caused in this way but are the result, rather, purely of the actions of individuals. Such actions are the manifestation of the "mental power" (23) unique to the individual in question and which "can neither be wholly penetrated in its nature, nor calculated beforehand in its effect" (23). All "*human action*" (23) Humboldt contends, is "at first *internal* – feeling, desire, thought, decision, speech and act. But as the internal makes contact with the world, it goes on working, and by means of the pattern

peculiar to it determines other action, within or without" (23).

Humboldt argues that language is "deeply entangled in the spiritual evolution of mankind" (24), accompanying the latter "at every stage of its local advance or retreat, and the state of culture at any time is also recognizable in it" (24). However, there comes an epoch when language does not merely accompany the "spiritual development" (24) of mankind but entirely takes its place. Language

arises from the depth of human nature which everywhere forbids us to recognise it as a true product and creation of peoples. It possess an autonomy that visibly declares itself to us, though inexplicable in its nature, and . . . is no production of activity, but an involuntary emanation of the mind, no work of nations, but a gift fallen to them by their inner destiny.

They make use of it without knowing how they have fashioned it. (24)

And yet, paradoxically, languages "for all that must always have evolved with and by way of the burgeoning of peoples, must have been spun out of their mental individuality" (24). Humboldt argues that each language is a hybrid affair, "arising in autonomy solely from itself and divinely free" (24) at the same time as they are "bound and dependent on the nations to which they belong" (24).

III

The Course of Man's Development [Continued]

Humboldt begins this chapter by offering a model of the historical development of mankind stripped of the idealism and the purposiveness which imbues Hegel's:

In every survey of *world-history* there is a *progress*. . . . But it is by no means my intention to set up a system of purposes, or process of perfection extending *ad infinitum*; on the contrary, I am to be found here on an entirely different path. Peoples and individuals proliferate vegetatively, as it were, like plants, spreading across the earth, and enjoyr their existence in happiness and activity. This life that dies away in every individual goes on undisturbedly, without regard to effects for the centuries that follow; nature's determination that everything which breathes shall complete its course to the last gasp, the purpose of beneficent ordering goodness, that every creature shall attain to enjoyment of its life, is carried out, and each new generation runs through the same circuit of joyous or painful existence, of successful or frustrated activity, but where *man* appears, he acts in a human way, combines gregariously, creates organisations, gives himself laws; and where this has occurred in a more imperfect fashion, supervening individuals or dynasties transplant thither what has succeeded better in other places With the rise of man, therefore, the seed of civilisation is also planted, and grows as his existence evolves. This humanisation we can perceive in advancing stages . . . that its further perfecting can hardly, in essence, be disturbed. (25)

He stresses that the "appearance of *human mental power* in its various forms is not connected with progress of time and the accumulation of data. Its origin can no more be explained than its effect can be calculated, and the highest in this kind is not just the latest to appear" (25). We must be careful, Humbolt suggests (in an obvious allusion to the German Idealists and Hegel in particular), if we wish to "peer here in into the products of *creative nature*, we must not foist ideas upon her, but take her as she presents herself. In all her creations she brings forth a certain number of forms expressing what has been brought to reality by each species, and suffices to complete its idea" (25). We must

“regard that which lives in spiritual and corporeal nature as the effect of an underlying force, developing according to conditions unknown to us” (25-26). The “independent and original *cause*” (26) is an “inner life-principle, freely developing in its fullness” (26), a point of view entirely different from what Humboldt terms the “purposive theory, since it does not proceed toward a set goal, but from an unfathomable cause” (26). Into this “cause-and-effect-governed path” (26) intrudes the “emergence of major *individuality* in persons and populations, which no really adequate derivation is able to explain” (26). This is what accounts for the “diverse shapings of human mental power” (26).

This also explains the “diversity” (26) of language as the “striving with which the power of speech that man is universally endowed with, favoured or hampered by the mental power inherent in peoples, breaks forth with greater or lesser success” (26). If “we look at languages genetically, as a *work of the mind* directed to a specific purpose” (26), the relative strength or weakness of particular languages is a function of several factors such as the “abundance of the mental power” (26) in question, or its “aptitude . . . to language-making” (26). Whatever the quality thereof, it remains true that the “*bringing-forth of language* is an *inner need* of human beings, not merely a communal necessity for maintaining intercourse, but a thing lying in their own nature, indispensable for the development of their mental powers and the attainment of a world-view, to which man can attain only by bringing his thinking to clarity and precision through communal thinking with others” (27).

IV

Effects of Exceptional Mental Power; Civilisation, Culture and Education

Here, Humboldt argues that the “*mental power* that intrudes, from its inner depth and fulness, into the course of world events, is the truly creative principle in the hidden and, as it were, secret evolution of mankind . . . in contrast to the overt sequence obviously linked by cause and effect” (29). “It is the outstanding peculiarity of the spirit, enlarging the concept of human intellectuality, and emerging in a manner unexpected and, in the ultimate depths of its appearance, inexplicable” (29). “They propagate life, because it is from full life that they proceed” (29) but in a mysterious manner: “its own procreation” (29) being “something inexplicable even to itself” (29). The “*Power* which truly makes man into man, and is thus the simple definition of his nature, is disclosed in its contact with the *world*, in what we may call the vegetative life of mankind, proceeding somewhat mechanically on a given path, in particular phenomena revealing itself and its diversified endeavours in new shapes that enlarge its concept” (30).

Language is also closely linked to the “*formation of character*” (31): the “totality of inner appearance, feeling and disposition, coupled with the externality it suffuses, must let it be perceived that . . . it also reveals the whole of human nature in an extended form” (31). It is language, “the intermediary, uniting the most diverse individualities through communication of outer exertion and inner perceptions, which stands in the closest and most active interplay with character” (31). Character “levels and unites the individual aspects of temperament and gives them, like plastic art, a shape to be grasped in its entirety” (31). Language is especially “fitted to present and promote this shaping, through the delicate harmony, often invisible in detail, but woven together in its whole wonderful symbolic web” (31).

Advances in the “evolution of mankind” (31) are “achieved only because an uncommon power has unexpectedly taken its flight thither. . . . All spiritual progress can only proceed from an internal emission of force, and to that extent has always a hidden, and because it is autonomous, an inexplicable basis” (31). By “neglecting the careful

separation here proposed of the calculable stepwise progress and the unpredictable, immediately creative advance of human mental power, we banish outright from world-history the effects of *genius*, which is no less displayed at particular moments in peoples than it is in individuals" (32). Civilisation and culture, Humboldt asserts, are not the cause but the effect of "forces to which their own existence is due" (32). He defines civilisation as the "humanisation of peoples in their outward institutions and customs, and the inner attitude pertaining thereto" (34), while culture "adds science and art to this refinement of the social order" (34). By "*cultivation* [Bildung], we mean by this something at the same time higher and more inward, namely the disposition that, from the knowledge and feeling of the entire mental and moral endeavour, pours out harmoniously upon temperament and character" (35). Civilisation, in short, "can come forth from *within* a people, and testifies . . . that uplifting of the spirit which cannot always be explained" (35). It is something which can also be "implanted from without" (35), as happens in the case of colonialism through which, Humboldt says, it is the "splendid privilege" (35) of the European to "carry civilisation into the remotest corners of the earth" (35) in the name of a "universal humanity" (35).

V

Conjoint Action of Individuals and Nations

Here, Humboldt turns his attention to how, in the "*mental evolution of mankind*" (37), "there is effected in each *particular generation* the development which contains the grounds of its progress at any time" (37). Each generation "stands in unbroken connection with time past and time to come" (37) at the same time that its "direction . . . is nevertheless a divergent one" (37) vis-a-vis the "web of world history" (37). Each individual is thus caught between two opposing tendencies, that of "*self-cultivation*" (37) and that of the "*shaping of the world*" (37). Each generation is also defined by the way in which it conceives of its relationship to the past and the future. Modern (i.e. nineteenth century) Europe has great reverence for classical antiquity from which it also seeks to distinguish itself. Humboldt questions, however, whether we ever really know past eras: "[I]ike clouds emerging from the mist, an age only takes on a circumscribed outline when seen from a distance" (39). Since "*languages*, or at least their elements . . . are transmitted from one age to another, and we can only speak of newly beginning languages by completely overstepping the bounds of our experience, the relation of the *past* to the *present* enters into the utmost depths of their formation" (40). Since language is a "mode of apprehending the whole way of thought and feeling, and this, presenting itself from a remote epoch to a people, cannot operate upon the latter without also becoming influential for their own tongue" (40). For this reason, modern languages would have taken a very different form depending on the identity of the past which has "worked so persistently and penetratingly" (40) on the present.

VI

Conjoint Action of Individuals and Nations [Continued]

Here, Humboldt stresses that the *individual man* is always connected with a whole, with that of his nation, of the race to which the latter belongs, and of the entire species. From whatever aspect one may look at it, his life is tied to *sociality*. . . . In the merely vegetative existence, as it were, of man on the soil, the individual's *need for assistance* drives him to combine with others, and calls for

understanding through *language* so that common undertakings may be possible. (41)

He argues that "*mental cultivation, even in the loneliest seclusion of temperament*" (41), is only possible through language which "must be directed to an external being that understands it. The articulate sound is torn from the breast, to awaken in another individual an echo returning to the ear. Man thereby discovers that around him there beings having the same inner needs" (41). In this way, "*totality*" (41) and "*individuality*" (41) are in a dialectical relationship with each other "since every individual bears within him the collective essence of man, though only on a single line of development" (41).

The "unity of *nations* and *races* . . . depends . . . primarily upon historical events, themselves largely due to the nature of the places men live in and travel to" (41). However, "every nation, quite apart from its external situation, can and must be regarded as a human *individuality*, which pursues an inner spiritual path of its own" (41). The "explanatory ground of our present stage of cultivation" (42) may be found in these "national spiritual individualities" (42). However, these individualising (or centrifugal) tendencies are counterbalanced by unifying (or centripetal) forces, civilisation and culture gradually removing the "glaring contrasts of peoples" (42). And yet this unity is in fact entirely dependent on "*diversity*" (42) for the former "can never be explained in its completeness, but is necessarily operative in its sharpest individuality" (42). The unique character of a given community "finds its clearest and completest expression in philosophy, poetry and art, and which streams out from thence over the entire mode of thought and disposition of the people" (42).

Every "significant activity" (42) of the individual belongs also to the collective as well. Languages "only emanate from the self-activity of all. In languages, therefore, since they always have a national form, *nations*, as such as are truly and immediately creative" (42). At the same time, languages "have grown up in inseparable association with man's inmost nature, and emanate automatically therefrom" (42), the "intellectual individuality of peoples" (42) being their "effect" (42). "The truth is that both [the individual and the collective dimensions of language use] proceed simultaneously and in mutual agreement from the inaccessible depths of the mind" (42). The "connection of the individual with his nation lies right at the centre from whence the total mental power determines all thinking, feeling, and willing" (43). For language is "related to everything therein, to the whole as to the individual" (43). At the same time, it is "not merely passive, receiving impressions, but follows from the infinite multiplicity of possible intellectual tendencies in a given individual, and modifies every external influence exerted upon it" (43). This is why Humboldt concludes that although languages are partly the "*work of nations*" (44), they are also necessarily the "self-creations of individuals, in that they can be produced solely in each individual, but only in such fashion that each presupposed the understanding of all" (44). Defining "language as a world-view or as a linkage of thoughts" (44), Humboldt suggests that language also necessarily rests on the "*collective power of man*" (44). In different cultures and epochs, this power "differs individually in degree" (44) due to the "preponderance either of external influence or of inner self-activity" (44). If "we pursue the sequence of languages comparatively, we make more or less easy headway in explaining the structure of one from another" (44). This is because just as "individuals, by the power of their particular nature, impart a new impulse to the human mind in a direction as yet unexplored, so nations can do this in language-making" (44). There is an undeniable connection between language-structure and the success of all other kinds of intellectual activity" (44). This connection "lies in the "animating breath which the formative power of language instils, in the act of altering the world, into thought, so that it diffuses harmoniously through all part of its domain" (44). On the national level, a

“word evolves most meaningfully and evidently from the world-view, reflects it most purely, and itself takes form so as to enter most readily and concretely into every vicissitude of thought” (44), while on the individual level it “must evoke the same power, in the same direction, with equal success in every individual” (44). The acquisition of language represents an “important epoch in man’s course of development” (44); it is the starting-point “for a more mentally abundant and imaginative cultivation” (45).

VII

Closer Consideration of Language

Humboldt argues that languages are the “first necessary stage in the primitive cultivation of mankind, from whence nations are first able to pursue this higher human tendency” (46) and find themselves “on to the road of poetic creation and speculative thought” (46). The “*mental individuality* of a people and the *shape of its language* are so intimately fused with one another” (46) to the point where they are like two sides of the same coin. As a result, though we “may separate intellectuality and language, no such division in fact exists” (46). Whatever the source of language, Humboldt concludes that language is the “outer appearance of the spirit of a people” (46): the “language is the spirit and the spirit their language” (46). How exactly they “actually conjoin with each other . . . remains inexplicably hidden from us” (46) but the “true determining ground” is located in the “mental power of nations” (46) whereas “language only attaches to it” (46). Humboldt concludes that the “structure of languages differs among mankind, because and insofar as the mental individuality of nations is itself different” (47). “If we look upon *languages* . . . as a basis for explaining successive *mental development*, we must indeed regard them as having arisen through intellectual individuality, but must seek the nature of this individuality in every case in its *structure*” (47).

VIII

Form of Languages

Here, Humboldt argues that language must be viewed not as a “dead *product*, but far more as a *producing*” (48). He contends, too, that we must focus less on language as a “designator of objects and instrument of understanding” (48) and “revert more carefully . . . to its origin, closely intertwined as it is with inner mental activity, and to its reciprocal influence on the latter” (48). His goal here, he reminds us, is that of “setting forth the individual ways in which the business of producing language is brought to completion among the variously divided, isolated and conjoined populations of mankind” (48). It is in this that “lies the very cause of the diversity of human language-structure, and likewise the influence of this upon the mind’s evolution” (48). He is of the view that, given the “infinity of details” (48), indeed the “bewildering chaos” (48) of “words, rules, analogies and exceptions” (48), with which the linguist is necessarily confronted, it is a difficult task to “search for the communal *sources* of individual peculiarities” (48), to draw together the “scattered features into the image of an *organic whole*” (49) and thereby construct a unified “image of man’s *mental power*” (48). The only way in order to “compare different languages fruitfully with one another, in regard to their characteristic structure” (48) is “carefully investigate the form of each, and in this way ascertain how each resolves the main questions with which all language-creation is confronted” (48).

Language, Humboldt points out, is both an “enduring thing” (49) and a “transitory” (49) one. “Even its maintenance by writing is just an incomplete, mummy-like preservation, only needed again in attempting thereby to picture the living utterance. In

itself it no product (*Ergon*), but an "activity (*Energeia*)" (49), not a fait accompli but a phenomenon always in process. Its "true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the every-repeated *mental labour* of making the *articulated* sound capable of expressing *thought*" (49).

Humboldt reminds us that he had earlier stresses that in studying language "we find ourselves plunged throughout . . . into a historical milieu, and that neither a nation nor a language . . . can be called *original*" (49). The reason for this is that each language has "already received from earlier generations material from a prehistory unknown to us" (50). For this reason, the "mental activity which . . . produces the expression of thought, is always directed at once upon something already *given*; it is not a purely creative, but a reshaping activity" (50). This mental "*labour operates in a constant and uniform way*" (50) because the "mental power which exerts it is the same, differing only within certain modest limits" (50). "The constant and uniform element in this mental labour of elevating articulated sound to an expression of thought . . . constitutes the *form* of language" (50).

This 'form' he defines as the "quite individual *urge* whereby a nation gives validity to thought and feeling in language" (50) which is in turn reduced to a "dead general concept" (50), that is, an "abstraction fashioned by science" (50). The "characteristic form of languages depends on every *single* one of their smallest *elements*" (50), "each of which is determined by that form" (50). The linguist must constantly move back and from the individual element to the whole of which it is part: since language is "always the mental exhalation of a nationally individual life, both factors must also enter there as well" (50). By form, Humboldt is referring not merely to the "so-called *grammatical form*. . . . The concept of the form of languages extends far beyond the rules of *word-order* and even beyond those of *word-formation*, insofar as we mean by these the application of certain general logical categories, of active and passive, substance, attribute, etc. to the roots and basic words" (51). Form is to be contrasted to "*matter*" (51) by which he means the "sound as such" (52) as well as the "totality of sense-impressions and spontaneous mental activities which precede the creation of the concept with the aid of language" (52). "Through exhibiting the form we must perceived the specific course which the language, and with it the nation it belongs to, has hit upon for the *expression of thought*" (52). It is through the form, that is, "particular *linguistic elements in mental unity*" (52), that a "nation makes the language bequeathed by its forbears into its own" (52). It is through the "identity and affinity of their *forms*" (52) that the "*identity and affinity of languages*" (52) can be traced and, thus, the "*genetic relationship* of nations" (53). Similar linguistic form is a function of several factors, including a "similar way of thinking and trend of ideas in the mental power that effects it, a likeness in the speech-organs and traditional habits of utterance, and . . . where many historically external influences coincide" (53).

IX

Nature and Constitution of Language

Here, Humboldt intends to explain how the "diversity of languages rests on their form" (55), how the latter is "intimately connected with the mental aptitudes of nations and the power that suffuses them at the moment of creation or new conception" (54). He zeroes in on the "*sound-form* and the *use* made of it to designate objects and connect thoughts" (54). The latter is "based on the requirements that *thinking* imposes on language, from which the *general laws* of language arise" (54). This tendency is the "same in all human beings" (54), depending on individuals' "mental endowments or subsequent developments" (54). By contrast, the sound-form is the "truly constitutive and guiding principle of the diversity of languages, both in itself, and in the assisting or obstructing power it presents

to the inner tendency of the language" (54). It is closely connected to the "collective outlook of the nation" (54) though the "nature and basis" (54) of this bond remains unclear. From these "two principles . . . there proceeds the *individual form* of each language" (54) which Linguistics must seek to analyse. Humboldt is interested in the "whole route" (54) taken by language "whereby proceeding from the mind, it reacts back upon the mind" (54) in turn.

With all this in mind, Humboldt describes language as the "formative organ of *thought*" (54). "*Intellectual activity*" (54), or thought, is a phenomenon that is "entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace" (54). However, it "becomes, through *sound*, externalised in speech and perceptible to the senses" (54). It is for this reason that "thought and language are . . . one and inseparable from each other" (54), "intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a *union* with the verbal sound" (54). Otherwise, thought cannot "achieve clarity, nor the representation become a concept" (55) and communication with others is impossible. It is through sound that what is innermost to man is vented and in turn communicated to others: sound caters to both the "active and the receptive sides of his nature" (56).

From a discussion of the "aptitude of sound to operations of the mind" (56) Humboldt turns his attention next to the "connection of *thought* and language" (56). In a famous statement on the constructive role played by language in the process of cognition, Humboldt argues that

Subjective activity fashions an *object* in thought. For no class of ideas can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of a thing already present. The activity of the senses must combine synthetically with the inner action of the mind, and from this combination the idea is ejected, becomes an object *vis-a-vis* the subjective power, and, perceived anew as such, returns back into the latter. But *language* is indispensable for this. For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. Thus the idea becomes transformed into real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account. Only language can do this; and without this transformation, occurring constantly with the help of language even in silence, into an objectivity that returns to the subject, the act of concept-formation, and with it all true thinking, is impossible. So quite regardless of communication between man and man, speech is a necessary condition for the thinking of the individual in solitary seclusion. (56)

"In appearance, however, language develops only *socially*, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others. For objectivity is heightened if the self-coined word is echoed from a stranger's mouth" (56). But "nothing is robbed from subjectivity . . . indeed it is strengthened, since the representation transformed into language is no longer the exclusive possession of a single subject. IN passing over to others, it joins the common stock of the entire race" (56). Although the cognitive basis of truth, of the unconditionally fixed, can lie for man only within himself, . . . he is bound to regard truth as something lying outside him; and one of the most powerful means of approaching it, of measuring his distance away from it, is social communication with others. All speaking . . . is an attachment of what is individually felt to the common nature of mankind. (57)

The same is true of the process of "*understanding*" (57), understanding and speaking being "but different effects of this power of speech" (57). Conversing "is never comparable with a transfer of material. In the understander, as in the speaker, the same

thing must be evolved from the inner power of each; and what the former receives is merely the harmoniously attuning stimulus" (57). Understanding is possible only because the "diversity of individuals" (57) harbours the "unity of human nature, fragmented only into separate individualities" (57). Humboldt considers in particular the "comprehension of words" (57) which "involves much more than the mere mutual evocation of the sound and the object indicated" (57). The "hearer gain[s] master over the spoken word, solely through the growth of that power of his own, developing in isolation within him" (58), the "same essence" (58) as that found in the speaker, "merely segregated individually and appropriately to each, so that a signal so fine, yet created from the very deepest and most intrinsic nature of that essence . . . is enough to stir both parties, by its transmission, in a matching way" (58).

Humboldt at this point returns to the epistemological issues addressed earlier, arguing in opposition to empiricist accounts of the mind:

The picture of language as designating merely *objects*, already perceived in themselves, is also disconfirmed by examination of what language engenders as its product. . . . Just as no concept is possible without language, so also there can be no object for the mind, since it is only through the concept . . . that anything acquires full being for consciousness. But the whole mode of *perceiving* things *subjectively* necessarily passes over into cultivation and the use of language. For the *word* arises from this very perceiving; it is a copy, not of the object in itself, but of the image thereof produced in consciousness. Since all objective perception is inevitably tinged with *subjectivity*, we may consider every human individual, even apart from language, as a unique aspect of the world-view. (59)

Each individual contributes to the world-view of the community of which he is part since "by an added meaning of its own the word constitutes itself an object for the mind, and superimposes a new character" (60). Humboldt suggests that the individual's perspective on the world is moulded by the specific "character" (60) of the "speech-sound" (60) in question leading to the fact that there "resides in every language a characteristic *world-view*" (60): as the

individual sound stands between man and the object, so the entire language steps in between him and the nature that operates, both inwardly and outwardly, upon him. He surrounds himself with a world of sounds, so as to take up and process within himself the world of objects. . . . Man lives primarily with objects, indeed . . . he actually does so exclusively, as language presents them to him. By the same act whereby he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. To learn a *foreign language* should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view . . . since language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind. But because we always carry over, more or less, our own world-view, and even our own language-view, this outcome is not purely and completely experience. (60)

Language, Humboldt stresses,

does not merely implant an indefinable multitude of *material elements* out of nature into the soul; it also supplies with that which confronts us from the totality as *form*. *Nature* unfolds before us a many-hued and, by all sensory impressions, a diverse manifold, suffused with a luminous clarity. Our

subsequent reflection discovers therein a *regularity* congenial to our mental form. Aside from the bodily existence of things, their outlines are clothed, like a magic intended for man alone, with external beauty, in which regularity and sensory material enter an alliance that still remains inexplicable to us, in that we are seized and carried away by it. All this we find again in analogous harmonies within language, and language is able to depict it. For in passing, by means of it, into a world of sounds, we do not abandon the world that really surrounds us. The regularity of language's own structure is akin to that of nature; and in thereby arousing man in the activity of his highest and most human powers, it also brings him closer, as such, to an understanding of the formal impress of nature, since, the latter, too, can after all be regarded simply as a development of mental powers.

"Through the rhythmical and musical form whose linkages are peculiar to sound, language enhances the impression of beauty in nature, transposing it into another sphere, but acts, even independently of this, through the mere cadence of speech upon the temper of the soul" (61).

Humboldt argues that what "is *uttered* at any time differs from *language*, as the body of its products" (61). The latter, "in its whole compass, contains everything that it has transformed into sounds" (61). In addition to "its already formed elements, language also consists, before all else, of methods for carrying forward the work of the mind, to which it prescribes the path and the form. The elements, once firmly fashioned, constitute, indeed, a relatively dead mass, but one which bears within itself the living seed of a never-ending determinability. At every single point and period, therefore, language, like nature itself, appears to man . . . as an inexhaustible storehouse, in which the mind can always discover something new to it, and feeling perceive what it has not yet felt in this way" (61). This is the source of the creativity of each "genuinely new and great talent" (61) to emerge in a given language before whom a "vista" (61) opens up on to an "infinite mass that still waits to be gradually unravelled" (61). But the future of a given language is balanced by the fact that each language also has a past, that is, it has "traversed through the experience of earlier generations and preserved a breath of this; and these generations have a national and family kinship to us in these same sounds of the mother-tongue, which serve to express our own feelings as well" (61). This "partly *fixed* and partly *fluid* content of language" (62) generates a "stock of words and a system of rules" (62) which grows over the hardens over the course of time into an "independent force" (62), whereby the "thought once embodied in language becomes an object for the soul, and to that extent exerts thereon an effect that is alien to it" (62). Up to this point, Humboldt has "primarily considered the object as having arisen from the subject, the effect having proceeded from that upon which it reacts" (62). Here, though, Humboldt is approaching the opposite extreme, that is, those thoughts and beliefs which were initially projected upon the world by a collective of individuals have congealed in and through language to the point where they have become the objective truth. These two opposing tendencies, language qua "objectively active and independent" (62) and language qua "subjectively passive and dependent" (62), language that "belongs to or is foreign to the soul" (62), coexist: "its 'dead' part must always be regenerated in thinking, come to life in speech and understanding, and hence must pass over entirely into the subject. But this act of regeneration consists, precisely, in likewise making an object of it; the thereby undergoes on each occasion the full impact of the individual, but this impact is already in itself governed by what language is doing and has done" (62). The "true solution of this opposition lies in the *unity of human nature*" (62) in which the "concepts of subject and object, of dependence and independence, are each merged into the other" (63). Humboldt

stresses that, given "how the current *generation* of a people is governed by all that their *language* has undergone, through all the preceding centuries, . . . it then becomes evident how small, in fact, is the *power of the individual* compared to the might of language. Only through the latter's uncommon plasticity, the possibility of assimilating its forms in very different ways without damage to general understanding, and through the dominion exercised by every living mind over its dead heritage, is the balance somewhat restored" (63). Though each person may feel that "he is nothing but an outflow of the whole of mankind" (63), it is also true that "every generation nevertheless produces a change in it, which only too often escapes notice" (63). Such change "does not always reside in the words and forms themselves, but at times only in their differently modified usage" (63). It is only "in the individual" (63) that "language receive[s] its ultimate determinacy" (63):

Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbour does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water through the entire language. Thus all understanding is at the same time a non-understanding, all occurrence in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence. The manner in which language is modified in every individual discloses, in contrast to its previously expounded *power*, a dominion of man over it. (63)

Man's power over language is a "purely dynamical" (63), "physiological efficacy" (63) whereas the influence of language on man lies in its "*regularity* . . . and its forms" (63). Man's "*freedom*" (63) to force language in novel directions is counterbalanced by the constraints which language places upon that freedom.