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The Philosophic Grammar of
American Languages, as Set Forth
by Wilhelm von Humboldt

Daniel Brinton
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Forth by Wilhelm von Humboldt**

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*The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as Set Forth by Wilhelm
von Humboldt / With the Translation of an Unpublished Memoir by Him on
the American Verb:*

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Содержание

The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages	4
§ 1. Introductory	4
§ 2. Humboldt's Studies in American Languages	8
§ 3. The Final Purpose of the Philosophy of Language	13
§ 4. Historical, Comparative and Philosophic Grammar	16
§ 5. Definition and Psychological Origin of Language	18
§ 6. Primitive Roots and Grammatical Categories	20
§ 7. Formal and Material Elements of Language	23
§ 8. The Development of Languages	25
§ 9. Internal Form of Languages	30
§ 10. Criteria of Rank in Languages	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

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**The Philosophic Grammar
of American Languages**

§ 1. Introductory

The foundations of the Philosophy of Language were laid by Wilhelm von Humboldt (b. June 22, 1767, d. April 8, 1835). The principles he advocated have frequently been misunderstood, and

some of them have been modified, or even controverted, by more extended research; but a careful survey of the tendencies of modern thought in this field will show that the philosophic scheme of the nature and growth of languages, which he set forth, is gradually reasserting its sway, after having been neglected and denied through the preponderance of the so-called naturalistic school during the last quarter of a century.

The time seems ripe, therefore, to bring the general principles of his philosophy to the knowledge of American scholars, especially as applied by himself to the analysis of American languages.

Any one at all acquainted with Humboldt's writings, and the literature to which they have given rise, will recognize that this is a serious task. I have felt it such, and have prepared myself for it not only by a careful perusal of his own published writings, but also by a comparison of the conflicting interpretations put upon them by Dr. Max Schasler,¹ Prof. H. Steinthal,² Prof. C. J. Adler,³ and others, as well as by obtaining a copy of an entirely

¹ *Die Elemente der Philosophischen Sprachwissenschaft Wilhelm von Humboldt's. In systematischer Entwicklung dargestellt und kritisch erläutert*, von Dr. Max Schasler, Berlin, 1847.

² *Die Sprachwissenschaft Wilhelm von Humboldt's und die Hegel'sche Philosophie*, von H. Steinthal, Dr., Berlin, 1848. The same eminent linguist treats especially of Humboldt's teachings in *Grammatik, Logik und Psychologie, ihre Principien und ihr Verhältniss zu einander*, pp. 123-135 (Berlin, 1855); in his well-known volume *Characteristik der Hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbaues*, pp. 20-70 (Berlin, 1860); in his recent oration *Ueber Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Berlin, 1883); and elsewhere.

³ *Wilhelm von Humboldt's Linguistical Studies*. By C. J. Adler, A.M. (New York,

unpublished memoir by Humboldt on the “American Verb,” a translation of which accompanies this paper. But my chief reliance in solving the obscurities of Humboldt’s presentation of his doctrines has been a close comparison of allied passages in his various essays, memoirs and letters. Of these I need scarcely say that I have attached the greatest weight to his latest and monumental work sometimes referred to as his “Introduction to the Kawi Language,” but whose proper title is “On Differences in Linguistic Structure, and their Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Race.”⁴

I would not have it understood that I am presenting a complete analysis of Humboldt’s linguistic philosophy. This is far beyond the scope of the present paper. It aims to set forth merely enough of his general theories to explain his applications of them to the languages of the American race.

What I have to present can best be characterized as a series of notes on Humboldt’s writings, indicating their bearing on the problems of American philology, introducing his theories to students of this branch, and serving as a preface to the hitherto unpublished essay by him on the American Verb, to which I have

1866). This is the only attempt, so far as I know, to present Humboldt’s philosophy of language to English readers. It is meritorious, but certainly in some passages Prof. Adler failed to catch Humboldt’s meaning.

⁴ *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*. Prof. Adler translates this “The Structural Differences of Human Speech and their Influence on the Intellectual Development of the Human Race.” The word *geistige*, however, includes emotional as well as intellectual things.

referred.

§ 2. Humboldt's Studies in American Languages

The American languages occupied Humboldt's attention earnestly and for many years. He was first led to their study by his brother Alexander, who presented him with the large linguistic collection he had amassed during his travels in South and North America.

While Prussian Minister in Rome (1802-08), he ransacked the library of the *Collegio Romano* for rare or unpublished works on American tongues; he obtained from the ex-Jesuit Forneri all the information the latter could give about the Yurari, a tongue spoken on the Meta river, New Granada;⁵ and he secured accurate copies of all the manuscript material on these idioms left by the diligent collector and linguist, the Abbé Hervas.

A few years later, in 1812, we find him writing to his friend Baron Alexander von Rennenkampff, then in St. Petersburg: "I have selected the American languages as the special subject of my investigations. They have the closest relationship of any with the tongues of north-eastern Asia; and I beg you therefore to obtain for me all the dictionaries and grammars of the latter

⁵ *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., Bd. vi, s. 271, note. I may say, once for all, that my references, unless otherwise stated, are to the edition of Humboldt's *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by his brother, Berlin, 1841-1852.

which you can.”⁶

It is probable from this extract that Humboldt was then studying these languages from that limited, ethnographic point of view, from which he wrote his essay on the Basque tongue, the announcement of which appeared, indeed, in that year, 1812, although the work itself was not issued until 1821.

Ten years more of study and reflection taught him a far loftier flight. He came to look upon each language as an organism, all its parts bearing harmonious relations to each other, and standing in a definite connection with the intellectual and emotional development of the nation speaking it. Each language again bears the relation to language in general that the species does to the genus, or the genus to the order, and by a comprehensive process of analysis he hoped to arrive at those fundamental laws of articulate speech which form the Philosophy of Language, and which, as they are also the laws of human thought, at a certain point coincide, he believed, with those of the Philosophy of History.

In the completion of this vast scheme, he continued to attach the utmost importance to the American languages. His illustrations were constantly drawn from them, and they were ever the subject of his earnest studies. He prized them as in certain respects the most valuable of all to the philosophic student of human speech.

⁶ *Aus Wilhelm von Humboldt's letzten Lebensjahren. Eine Mittheilung bisher unbekannter Briefe.* Von Theodor Distel, p. 19 (Leipzig, 1883).

Thus, in 1826, he announced before the Berlin Academy that he was preparing an exhaustive work on the "Organism of Language," for which he had selected the American languages exclusively, as best suited for this purpose. "The languages of a great continent," he writes, "peopled by numerous nationalities, probably never subject to foreign influence, offer for this branch of linguistic study specially favorable material. There are in America as many as thirty little known languages for which we have means of study, each of which is like a new natural species, besides many others whose data are less ample."⁷

In his memoir, read two years later, "On the Origin of Grammatical Forms, and their Influence on the Development of Ideas," he chose most of his examples from the idioms of the New World;⁸ and the year following, he read the monograph on the Verb in American languages, which is printed for the first time with the present essay.

In a later paper, he announced his special study of this group as still in preparation. It was, however, never completed. His earnest desire to reach the fundamental laws of language led him first into a long series of investigations into the systems of recorded speech, phonetic hieroglyphics and alphabetic writing, on which he read memoirs of great acuteness.

⁷ From his memoir *Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung*, Bd. iii, s. 249.

⁸ He draws examples from the Carib, Lule, Tupi, Mbaya, Huasteca, Nahuatl, Tamanaca, Abipone, and Mixteca; *Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung*, Bd. iii, ss. 269-306.

In one of these he again mentions his studies of the American tongues, and takes occasion to vindicate them from the current charge of being of a low grade in the linguistic scale. "It is certainly unjust," he writes, "to call the American languages rude or savage, although their structure is widely different from those perfectly formed."⁹

In 1828, there is a published letter from him making an appointment with the Abbé Thavenet, missionary to the Canadian Algonkins, then in Paris, "to enjoy the pleasure of conversing with him on his interesting studies of the Algonkin language."¹⁰ And a private letter tells us that in 1831 he applied himself with new zeal to mastering the intricacies of Mexican grammar.¹¹

About 1827, he found it indispensable to subject to a critical scrutiny the languages of the great island world of the Pacific and Indian oceans. This resulted at last in his selecting the Kawi language, a learned idiom of the island of Java, Malayan in origin but with marked traces of Hindu influence, as the point of departure for his generalizations. His conclusions were set forth in the introductory essay above referred to.

The avowed purpose of this essay was to demonstrate the

⁹ *Ueber die Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau*, Bd. vi, s. 526

¹⁰ This letter is printed in the memoir of Prof. E. Teza, *Intorno agli Studi del Thavenet sulla Lingua Algonchina*, in the *Annali delle Università toscane*, Tomo xviii (Pisa, 1880).

¹¹ Compare Prof. Adler's Essay, above mentioned, p. 11.

thesis that the *diversity of structure in languages is the necessary condition of the evolution of the human mind.*¹²

In the establishment of this thesis he begins with a profound analysis of the nature of speech in general, and then proceeds to define the reciprocal influences which thought exerts upon it, it upon thought.

Portions of this work are extremely obscure even to those who are most familiar with his theories and style. This arises partly from the difficulty of the subject; partly because his anxiety to avoid dogmatic statements led him into vagueness of expression; and partly because in some cases he was uncertain of his ground. In spite of these blemishes, this essay remains the most suggestive work ever written on the philosophy of language.

¹² This is found expressed nowhere else so clearly as at the beginning of § 13, where the author writes: "Der Zweck dieser Einleitung, die Sprachen, in der Verschiedenartigkeit ihres Baues, als die nothwendige Grundlage der Fortbildung des menschlichen Geistes darzustellen, und den wechsel seitigen Einfluss des Einen auf das Andre zu erörtern, hat mich genöthigt, in die Natur der Sprache überhaupt einzugehen." Bd. vi, s. 106.

§ 3. The Final Purpose of the Philosophy of Language

Humboldt has been accused of being a metaphysician, and a scientific idealist.

It is true that he believed in an ideal perfection of language, to wit: that form of expression which would correspond throughout to the highest and clearest thinking. But it is evident from this simple statement that he did not expect to find it in any known or possible tongue. He distinctly says, that this ideal is too hypothetical to be used otherwise than as a stimulus to investigation; but as such it is indispensable to the linguist in the pursuit of his loftiest task – the estimate of the efforts of man to realize perfection of expression.¹³

There is nothing teleological in his philosophy; he even declines to admit that either the historian or the linguist has a right to set up a theory of progress or evolution; the duty of both is confined to deriving the completed meaning from the facts before them.¹⁴ He merely insists that as the object of language is

¹³ “Der Idee der Sprachvollendung Dasein in der Wirklichkeit zu gewinnen.” *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, ss. 10 and 11. The objection which may be urged that a true philosophy of language must deal in universals and not confine itself to mere differentiations (particulars) is neatly met by Dr. Schasler, *Die Elemente der Philosophischen Sprachwissenschaft*, etc., p. 21, note.

¹⁴ In his remarkable essay “On the Mission of the Historian,” which Prof. Adler justly describes as “scarcely anything more than a preliminary to his linguistic researches,”

the expression of thought, certain forms of language are better adapted to this than others. What these are, why they are so, and how they react on the minds of the nations speaking them, are the questions he undertakes to answer, and which constitute the subject-matter with which the philosophy of language has to do.

Humboldt taught that in its highest sense this philosophy of language is one with the philosophy of history. The science of language misses its purpose unless it seeks its chief end in explaining the intellectual growth of the race.¹⁵

Each separate tongue is “a thought-world in tones” established between the minds of those who speak it and the objective world without.¹⁶ Each mirrors in itself the spirit of the nation to which it belongs. But it has also an earlier and independent origin; it is the product of the conceptions of antecedent generations, and thus exerts a formative and directive influence on the national mind, an influence, not slight, but more potent than that which the national mind exerts upon it.¹⁷

Humboldt writes: “Die Philosophie schreibt den Begebenheiten ein Ziel vor: dies Suchen nach Endursachen, man mag sie auch aus dem Wesen des Menschen und der Natur selbst ableiten wollen, stört und verfälscht alle freie Ansicht des eigenthümlichen Wirkens der Kräfte.” *Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers*, Bd. i, s. 13.

¹⁵ “Das Studium der verschiedenen Sprachen des Erdbodens verfehlt seine Bestimmung, wenn es nicht immer den Gang der geistigen Bildung im Auge behält, und darin seinen eigentlichen Zweck sucht.” *Ueber den Zusammenhang der Schrift mit der Sprache*, Bd. vi, s. 428.

¹⁶ “Eine Gedankenwelt an Töne geheftet.” *Ueber die Buchstabenschrift und ihre Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau*, Bd. vi, s. 530.

¹⁷ This cardinal point in Humboldt’s philosophy is very clearly set forth in his essay,

So also every word has a double character, the one derived from its origin, the other from its history. The former is single, the latter is manifold.¹⁸

Were the gigantic task possible to gather from every language the full record of every word and the complete explanation of each grammatical peculiarity, we should have an infallible, the only infallible and exhaustive, picture of human progress.

“Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers,” Bd. i, s. 23, and elsewhere.

¹⁸ See *Ueber die Buchstabenschrift*, etc., Bd. vi, s. 530.

§ 4. Historical, Comparative and Philosophic Grammar

The Science of Grammar has three branches, which differ more in the methods they pursue than in the ends at which they aim. These are Historic, Comparative and Philosophic Grammar. Historic Grammar occupies itself with tracing the forms of a language back in time to their earlier expression, and exhibits their development through the archaic specimens of the tongue. Comparative Grammar extends this investigation by including in the survey the similar development of a number of dialects of the same stock or character, and explains the laws of speech, which account for the similarities and diversities observed.

Both of these, it will be observed, begin with the language and its forms, and are confined to these. Philosophic Grammar, on the other hand, proceeds from the universal constructive principles of language, from the abstract formulæ of grammatical relations, and investigates their application in various languages. It looks upon articulate speech as the more or less faithful expression of certain logical procedures, and analyzes tongues in order to exhibit the success, be it greater or less, which attends this effort. The grammatical principles with which it deals are universals, they exist in all minds, although it often happens that they are not portrayed with corresponding clearness

in language.¹⁹

Philosophic Grammar, therefore, includes in its horizon all languages spoken by men; it essays to analyze their inmost nature with reference to the laws of thought; it weighs the relations they bear to the character and destiny of those who speak them; and it ascends to the psychological needs and impulses which first gave them existence.

It was grammar in this highest sense, it was the study of languages for such lofty purposes as these, with which Humboldt occupied himself with untiring zeal for the last fifteen years of his life, when he had laid aside the cares of the elevated and responsible political positions which he had long filled with distinguished credit.

¹⁹ “Les notions grammaticales resident bien plutôt dans l’esprit de celui qui parle que dans le matériel du langage.” Humboldt, *Lettre à M. Abel-Remusat Werke*, Bd. vii, s. 396. On the realms of the three varieties of grammar, see also Dr. M. Schasler, *Die Elemente der Philosophischen Sprachwissenschaft*, etc., s. 35, 36, and Friedrich Müller, *Grundriss der Sprachwissenschaft*, Band 1, ss. 8-10 (Wien, 1876). Schasler observes that a main object in philosophic grammar is an investigation of “die genetisch-qualitativen Unterschiede der Redetheile,” that is, of the fundamental psychological differences of the parts of speech, as, what is the ultimate distinction between noun and adjective, etc.?

§ 5. Definition and Psychological Origin of Language

Humboldt remarks that the first hundred pages or so of his celebrated “Introduction” are little more than an expansion of his definition of language. He gives this definition in its most condensed form as follows: “Language is the ever-recurring effort of the mind to make the articulate sound capable of expressing thought.”²⁰

According to this definition, language is not a dead thing, a completed product, but it is an ever-living, active function, an energy of the soul, which will perish only when intelligence itself, in its highest sense, is extinguished. As he expresses it, language is not an εργον, but an ενεργεια. It is the proof and the product of a mind *consciously* working to a definite end.

Hence, in Humboldt’s theory the psychological element of *self-consciousness* lies at the root of all linguistic expression. No mere physical difference between the lower animals and man explains the latter’s possession of articulate speech. His

²⁰ Steinthal does not like Humboldt’s expression “to make capable” (fähig zu machen). He objects that the “capacity” to express thought is already in the articulate sounds. But what Humboldt wishes to convey is precisely that this capacity is only derived from the ceaseless, energizing effort of the intellect. Steinthal, *Die Sprachwissenschaft Wilhelm von Humboldt’s*, s. 91, note. The words in the original are: “Die sich ewig wiederholende Arbeit des Geistes, den articulirten Laut zum Ausdruck des Gedanken fähig zu machen.”

self-consciousness alone is that trait which has rendered such a possession possible.²¹

The idea of Self necessarily implies the idea of Other. A thought is never separate, never isolated, but ever in relation to another thought, suggested by one, leading on to another. Hence, Humboldt says: “The mind can only be conceived as in action, and *as action*.”

As Prof. Adler, in his comments on Humboldt’s philosophy, admirably observes: “Man does not possess any such thing as an absolutely isolated individuality; the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ are the essential complements of each other, and would, in their last analysis, be found identical.”²²

On these two fundamental conceptions, those of Identity and Relation, or, as they may be expressed more correctly, those of Being and Action, Humboldt builds his doctrines concerning the primitive radicals of language and the fundamental categories of grammar.

²¹ “Nur die Stärke des Selbstbewusstseins nöthigt der körperlichen Natur die scharfe Theilung und feste Begrenzung der Laute ab, die wir Artikulation nennen.” *Ueber das Vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die Verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung*, Bd. iii, s. 244.

²² Ubi suprá, p. 17. Compare Humboldt’s words, “Im Ich aber ist von selbst auch das Du gegeben.” *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., Bd. vi, s. 115.

§ 6. Primitive Roots and Grammatical Categories

The roots of a language are classified by Humboldt as either *objective* or *subjective*, although he considers this far from an exhaustive scheme.²³

The objective roots are usually descriptive, and indicate an origin from a process of mental analysis. They bear the impress of those two attributes which characterize every thought, Being and Action. Every complete objective word must express these two notions. Upon them are founded the fundamental grammatical categories of the Noun and the Verb; or to speak more accurately, they lead to the distinction of nominal and verbal themes.

The characteristic of the Noun is that it expresses Being; of the Verb that it expresses Action. This distinction is far from absolute in the word itself; in many languages, especially in Chinese and some American languages, there is in the word no discrimination between its verbal and nominal forms; but the verbal or nominal *value* of the word is clearly fixed by other means.²⁴

²³ *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., Bd. vi, s. 116; and compare Dr. Schasler's discussion of this subject (which is one of the best parts of his book), *Die Elemente der Phil. Sprachwissenschaft*, etc., ss. 202-14.

²⁴ Expressed in detail by Humboldt in his *Lettre à M. Abel-Remusat sur la nature des formes grammaticales*, etc., Bd. vii, ss. 300-303.

Another class of objective root-words are the adjective words, or Determinatives. They are a later accession to the list, and by their addition bring the three chief grammatical categories, the Noun, the Verb and the Adjective, into correlation with the three logical categories of Substance, Action and Quality.

By the subjective roots, Humboldt meant the personal pronouns. To these he attributed great importance in the development of language, and especially of American languages. They carry with them the mark of sharp individuality, and express in its highest reality the notion of Being.

It is not easy to understand Humboldt's theory of the evolution of the personal pronouns. In his various essays he seems to offer conflicting statements. In one of his later papers, he argues that the origin of such subjective nominals is often, perhaps generally, locative. By comparing the personal pronouns with the adverbs of place in a series of languages, he showed that their demonstrative antedated their personal meaning.²⁵ With regard to their relative development, he says, in his celebrated "Introduction":

"The first person expresses the individuality of the speaker, who is in immediate contact with external nature, and must distinguish himself from it in his speech. But in the 'I' the 'Thou' is assumed; and from the antithesis thus formed is developed the

²⁵ *Ueber die Verwandtschaft der Ortsadverbia mit dem Pronomen in einigen Sprachen, in the Abhandlungen der hist. - phil. Classe der Berliner Akad. der Wiss. 1829.*

third person.”²⁶

But in his “Notice of the Japanese Grammar of Father Oyanguren,” published in 1826, he points out that infants begin by speaking of themselves in the third person, showing that this comes first in the order of knowledge. It is followed by the second person, which separates one object from others; but as it does so by putting it in conscious antithesis to the speaker, it finally develops the “I.”²⁷

The latter is unquestionably the correct statement so far as the history of language is concerned and the progress of knowledge. I can know myself only through knowing others.

The explanation which reconciles these theories is that the one refers to the order of thought, or logical precedence, the other to the order of expression. Professor Ferrier, in his “Institutes of Metaphysics,” has established with much acuteness the thesis that, “What is first in the order of nature is last in the order of knowledge,” and this is an instance of that philosophical principle.

²⁶ *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., Bd. vi, s. 115.

²⁷ *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. vii, ss. 392-6.

§ 7. Formal and Material Elements of Language

A fundamental distinction in philosophic grammar is that which divides the *formal* from the *material* element of speech. This division arises from the original double nature of each radical, as expressing both Being and Action.

On the one hand, Action involves Relation; it assumes an object and a subject, an agent, a direction of effort, a result of effort; usually also limitations of effort, time and space, and qualifications as to the manner of the effort. In other words, Action is capable of increase or decrease both in extension and intension.

On the other hand, Being is a conception of fixed conditions, and is capable of few or no modifications.

The *formal* elements of a language are those which express Action, or the relation of the ideas; they make up the affixes of conjugations and declensions, the inflections of words; they indicate the parts of speech, the so-called “grammatical categories,” found in developed tongues. The *material* elements are the roots or stems expressing the naked ideas, the conceptions of existence apart from relation.

Using the terms in this sense, Humboldt presents the following terse formula, as his definition of Inflection: “*Inflection is the expression of the category in contrast to the definition of the*

idea.”²⁸ Nothing could be more definitive and lucid than this concise phrase.

The inflectional or formal elements of language are usually derived from words expressing accessory ideas. Generally, they are worn down to single letters or a single syllable, and they usually may be traced back to auxiliary verbs and pronouns.

Often various accessories are found which are not required by the main proposition. This is a common fault in the narratives of ignorant men and in languages and dialects of a lower grade. It is seen in the multiplication of auxiliaries and qualifying particles observed in many American languages, where a vast number of needless accessories are brought into every sentence.

The nature of the relations expressed by inflections may be manifold, and it is one of the tasks of philosophic grammar to analyze and classify them with reference to the direction of mental action they imply.

It is evident that where these relations are varied and numerous, the language gains greatly in picturesqueness and force, and thus reacts with a more stimulating effect on the mind.

²⁸ His explanation of inflection is most fully given in his Introductory Essay, *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., § 14, *Gesammelte Werke*, s. 121, sqq. A sharp, but friendly criticism of this central point of his linguistic philosophy may be found in Steinthal, *Charakteristik der Hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbones*, ss. 58-61. Humboldt certainly appears not only obscure in parts but contradictory.

§ 8. The Development of Languages

Humboldt believed that in this respect languages could be divided into three classes, each representing a stage in progressive development.

In the first and lowest stage all the elements are material and significant, and there are no true formal parts of speech.

Next above this is where the elements of relation lose their independent significance *where so used*, but retain it elsewhere. The words are not yet fixed in grammatical categories. There is no distinction between verbs and nouns except in use. The plural conveys the idea of many, but the singular not strictly that of unity.

Highest of all is that condition of language where every word is subject to grammatical law and shows by its form what category it comes under; and where the relational or formal elements convey no hint of anything but this relation. Here, only, does language attain to that specialization of parts where each element subserves its own purpose and no other, and here only does it correspond with clear and connected thinking.

These expressions, however, must not be understood in a genetic sense, as if historically one linguistic class had preceded the other, and led up to it. Humboldt entertained no such view. He distinctly repudiated it. He did not believe in the evolution of languages. The differences of these classes are far more radical

than that of sounds and signs; they reach down to the fundamental notions of things. His teaching was that a language without a passive voice, or without a grammatical gender can never acquire one, and consequently it can never perfectly express the conceptions corresponding to these features.²⁹

In defining and appraising these inherent and inalienable qualities of languages lies the highest end and aim of linguistic science. This is its true philosophic character, its mission which lifts it above the mere collecting of words and formulating of rules.

If the higher languages did not develop from the lower, how did they arise? Humboldt answered this question fairly, so far as he was concerned. He said, he did not know. Individuals vary exceedingly in their talent for language, and so do nations. He was willing to call it an innate creative genius which endowed our Aryan forefathers with a richly inflected speech; but it was so contrary to the results of his prolonged and profound study of languages to believe, for instance, that a tongue like the Sanscrit could ever be developed from one like the Chinese, that he frankly said that he would rather accept at once the doctrine of those who attribute the different idioms of men to an immediate revelation from God.³⁰

²⁹ See these teachings clearly set forth in his Essay, *Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung*, Werke, Bd. iii, especially, s. 255 and s. 262.

³⁰ The eloquent and extraordinary passage in which these opinions are expressed is in his *Lettre à M. Abel-Remusat*, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. vii, ss. 336-7.

He fully recognized, however, a progress, an organic growth, in human speech, and he expressly names this as a special branch of linguistic investigation.³¹ He lays down that this growth may be from two sources, one the cultivation of a tongue within the nation by enriching its vocabulary, separating and classifying its elements, fixing its expressions, and thus adapting it to wider uses; the second, by forcible amalgamation with another tongue.

The latter exerts always a more profound and often a more beneficial influence. The organism of both tongues may be destroyed, but the dissolvent force is also an organic and vital one, and from the ruins of both constructs a speech of grander plans and with wider views. "The seemingly aimless and confused interminglings of primitive tribes sowed the seed for the flowers of speech and song which flourished in centuries long posterior."

The immediate causes of the improvement of a language through forcible admixture with another, are: that it is obliged to drop all unnecessary accessory elements in a proposition; that the relations of ideas must be expressed by conventional and not significant syllables; and that the limitations of thought imposed by the genius of the language are violently broken down, and the mind is thus given wider play for its faculties.

Such influences, however, do not act in accordance with fixed laws of growth. There are no such laws, which are of universal application. The development of the Mongolian or

³¹ *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. iii, ss. 248, 257.

Aryan tongues is not at all that of the American. The goal is one and the same, but the paths to it are infinite. For this reason each group or class of languages must be studied by itself, and its own peculiar developmental laws be ascertained by searching its history.³²

With reference to the growth of American languages, it was Humboldt's view that they manifest the utmost refractoriness both to external influence and to internal modifications. They reveal a marvellous tenacity of traditional words and forms, not only in dialects, but even in particular classes of the community, men having different expressions from women, the old from the young, the higher from the lower classes. These are maintained with scrupulous exactitude through generations, and except by the introduction of words, three centuries of daily commingling with the white race, have not at all altered the grammar and scarcely the phonetics of many of their languages.

Nor is this referable to the contrast between an Aryan and an American language. The same immiscibility is shown between themselves. "Even where many radically different languages are located closely together, as in Mexico, I have not found a single example where one exercised a constructive or formative influence on the other. But it is by the encounter of great and contrasted differences that languages gain strength, riches, and completeness. Only thus are the perceptive powers, the

³² This reasoning is developed in the essay, *Ueber das Vergleichende Sprachstudium*, etc., *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. iii, ss. 241-268; and see *ibid*, s. 270.

imagination and the feelings impelled to enrich and extend the means of expression, which, if left to the labors of the understanding alone, are liable to be but meagre and arid.”³³

³³ See the essay *Ueber die Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau*, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. vi, ss. 551-2.

§ 9. Internal Form of Languages

Besides the grammatical form of a language, Humboldt recognized another which he called its *internal form*. This is that subtle something not expressed in words, which even more than the formal parts of speech, reveals the linguistic genius of a nation. It may be defined as the impression which the language bears of the clearness of the conceptions of those speaking it, and of their native gift of speech. He illustrates it by instancing the absence of a developed mode in Sanscrit, and maintains that in the creators of that tongue the conception of modality was never truly felt and distinguished from tense. In this respect its inner form was greatly inferior to the Greek, in the mind of which nation the ideally perfect construction of the verb unfolded itself with far more clearness.

The study of this inner form of a language belongs to the highest realm of linguistic investigation, and is that which throws the most light on the national character and capacities.³⁴

³⁴ On this subtle point, which has been by no means the least difficult to his commentators, see Humboldt's Introduction *Ueber die Verschiedenheit*, etc., *Ges. Werke*, Bd. vi, ss. 45-6, 92-5, 254-5, by a careful comparison of which passages his real intent will become apparent.

§ 10. Criteria of Rank in Languages

Humboldt's one criterion of a language was its tendency to *quicken and stimulate mental action*. He maintained that this is secured just in proportion as the grammatical structure favors clear definition of the individual idea apart from its relations, in other words, as it separates the material from the inflectional elements of speech. Clear thinking, he argued, means progressive thinking. Therefore he assigned a lower position both to those tongues which inseparably connect the idea with its relations, as the American languages, and to those which, like the Chinese and in a less degree the modern English, have scarcely any formal elements at all, but depend upon the position of words (placement) to signify their relations.

But he greatly modified this unfavorable judgment by several extenuating considerations.

Thus he warns us that it is of importance to recognize fully "that grammatical principles dwell rather in the mind of the speaker than in the material and mechanism of his language."³⁵

This led him to establish a distinction between *explicit* grammar, where the relations are fully expressed in speech, and *implicit* grammar, where they are wholly or in part left to be understood by the mind.

He expressly and repeatedly states that an intelligent thinker,

³⁵ *Lettre à M. Abbe-Remusat, Ges. Werke*, Bd. vii, s. 396.

trained in the grammatical distinctions of a higher language, can express any thought he has in the grammar of any other tongue which he masters, no matter how rude it is. This adaptability lies in the nature of speech in general. A language is an instrument, the use of which depends entirely on the skill of him who handles it. It is doubtful whether such imported forms and thoughts appeal in any direct sense to those who are native to the tongue. But the fact remains that the forms of the most barbarous languages are such that they may be developed to admit the expression of any kind of idea.

But the meaning of this must not be misconstrued. If languages were merely dead instruments which we use to work with, then one would be as good as another to him who had learned it. But this is not the case. Speech is a living, physiological function, and, like any other function, is most invigorating and vitalizing when it works in the utmost harmony with the other functions. Its special relationship is to that brain-action which we call thinking; and entire harmony between the two is only present when the form, structure and sounds of speech correspond accurately to the logical procedure of thought. This he considered "an undeniable fact."

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